Summary

Rey gets in over her head in an attempt to save her friend. Kylo Ren can do little else but get swept up along with her, because his trajectory has become tied with hers.
Chapter 1

She wanted to kill him. Standing there, with the lightsaber humming in her hand and the world shaking apart around them, she wanted him to die. She could do it – he was at her mercy. There would never be a better time. He deserved it.

But she hesitated. Why she did eluded her. Kylo Ren was writhing on the ground in pain, and as he managed to look her in the eye, it was like she could feel the burn across his face. Like she had done it to him, but also to herself. His eyes were wide and dark.

Maybe that feeling was what stayed her hand.

Then she had hesitated too long and the ground finalized her decision for her. They broke apart, separated by a yawning abyss between them.

Her face was still burning. Her eyes never left his.

*Murderer. Monster.*

Something in her pulled taught, like a thin elastic band, as she threw the words at him in her mind. She didn't care that he couldn't hear her, nothing mattered except that she hadn't done it. She should've killed him.

Even from across the chasm, she could see his expression darken. It felt like he was throwing waves of pure anger at her, and she stumbled back a step. It made her ill to look at him, to feel his anger compounded onto her own. It was painful.

And it brought her back to reality.

She thumbed off the lightsaber. He was on the ground, he couldn't really hurt her, and he was going to die there anyway. He didn't matter.

Finn mattered. She bolted back the way she had come, away from the edge and away from him.

With every step she took she felt that elastic band in her chest pull. It felt violent, like it was trying to tear her backwards into the abyss. Like it was some twisted product of the world around her. So she tried to ignore it.

It was easy, once Finn came into view. He was lying still as a statue in the snow. She fell to her knees beside him, dropping the lightsaber beside her. With a little trouble managed to turn him over. She wasn't sure if she should've done that because of the wound on his back – the wound that Kylo Ren had given him – but she wanted to give him room to breathe.

Another wave of anger and pain hit her, but it felt enough like her own that she didn't think anything of it. Tears sprung in her eyes, hot and stinging. She didn't know what to do. The trees were shaking, the snow blurred in her vision. The ground rumbled underneath her. After a moment she thought to check for a heartbeat, and found one, faint as it was.

*Not for long.*
We're going to die.

She didn't want to die. She didn't want Finn to die. Han…

Lights flooded her vision. The *Falcon* rose above the tree line in front of her, close enough that she knew that Chewie had seen them. That he had come for them.

Relief flooded her so strongly that she stopped hearing the world breaking apart around her. There was another tug on her chest, in her mind, but she firmly ignored it.

Chewie made a quick landing and ran out to help her get Finn inside the *Falcon*. He hesitated only a moment before he started to lift Finn in his arms.

“He did this?” His roar was dark and angry.

“Yes,” she nodded, certain of who the wookiee was talking about. She briefly wondered if Chewie would've left him alive, if it had been him. By the blaster wound the Chewie had given him, she was pretty sure she had her answer.

She took two steps towards the *Falcon* before she remembered to grab Luke Skywalker's lightsaber. It lay in the snow where she left it, small and unassuming in its power. The cold metal stung her fingers, but she didn't notice. Off in the distance, half hidden behind the quaking trees, was a figure. Despite the chaotic landscape, she knew it was a person. She felt it. In a moment of panic, she thought that it was Kylo Ren, miraculously uninjured and back to kill her.

But it wasn't. Somehow she knew that he was nowhere near her, somewhere even farther than where she had left him, and moving farther still. It was just a feeling that she had.

And despite her total inexperience with the force, she knew that Kylo Ren felt nothing like that.

It was like nothing she'd ever felt before. Her breath hitched and she clutched the lightsaber tightly in both hands, but she didn't activate it.

Chewie’s urgent roar tore her out of the moment. She whipped her head around just in time to see him carry Finn up the Falcon’s ramp. When she looked back at where she had seen the figure, all she saw was the world breaking apart. The person – or whatever it was – was gone.

“Rey!”

Without another thought, she turned and sprinted towards Chewie and Finn. Towards Safety.

She felt everything.

It was faint, but it was there. All of the death on Starkiller base as it exploded. The relief in the Resistance pilots’ minds as they headed back to base. Chewie's grief. Finn was like a soft thrum coming from the back of the ship; she didn't venture all of the way up to the cockpit once for fear that she'd lose that frail proof that he was still alive.

It was like the floodgates had been opened. It wasn't invasive or heavy on her mind, but she couldn't get away from it. She couldn't block out the death or grief, she couldn't focus on the life.

And she still felt him. Kylo Ren. The name was like acid in her mind, wrapped in anguish and rage. It beat on her in near-constant waves, oppressing her and making it harder to breathe.

There were moments, flashes where she thought she could feel his presence like he was right behind
her. It kept her on edge and from closing her eyes despite her exhaustion.

It was just that he sometimes felt so close.

It felt like she was imagining it.

She hoped that she was imagining it.

It wasn't a long trip back to D'Qar, but it felt like a lifetime. It felt like it had been years since she

hand stepped foot outside. She yearned to see the greenery once more, and for the new-found

belonging that she had with Finn, Poe, and the rest. She decidedly did not think of the person she

wouldn’t see ever again.

A wave of disgust hit her. Then she got angry.

It was like her mind had an unwanted spectator. She didn't know what was happening, or what any

of it meant, but she knew that it had something to do with the Force. And she knew that Kylo Ren

had to be behind it.

She tried to push it out of her mind – or block it, or do something. She still didn't know if Finn would

be okay, and she tried to focus on feeling that he was alive. It was all so strange and overwhelming.

When she tried, she could feel even more. The Force. It was both terrifying and comforting, but she

tried to focus on the comforting parts. The parts that allowed her to touch Finn’s life, and Chewie’s.

It reminded her that she wasn’t alone, and that she hadn't lost everything on that planet.

After a while, she forced herself to recline on one of the chairs in the Falcon’s common room. It was

too hard to be comfortable, but she had made do with much worse. The real problem was shutting

off her mind. She had left Luke Skywalker’s lightsaber in a small alcove next to Finn’s bunk, but she

could almost still feel the metal in her hands, humming with harnessed energy.

The muscles in her arms felt like jelly after the effort she had put into fighting Kylo Ren.

But she wasn't going to let herself think about that, she told herself. She was just going to lie back

and make her body relax. Don’t think at all, told herself. She forced herself to take steady, even

breaths. It might've been seconds or hours before she finally got her mind to shut off, but eventually

she managed it.

She dreamed of him. At first she didn't know what was happening. It was just a feeling, a shade that

colored her dream at the edges. The sense that there was someone other than herself in her head. It

was dark, there was nothing but her own heartbeat, which sounded loud and oddly out of time with

the fluttering in her chest. She thought that maybe it was just a nightmare, told herself that that's all it

was.

He emerged out of the darkness all at once, as if he had always been right in front of her. Everything

was in place, the dark robes, the mask. His lightsaber was clutched in his hand, but not activated.

You're still afraid of me.

His voice came out harsh through the modulator in his mask, hot with barely controlled rage. She

hadn't noticed before how much taller he was than her, but she stood her ground. Or maybe she was

frozen to the spot. A cool breeze blew against her like a whisper. She tilted her chin up.

You don't sound too convinced, she returned.

Anger rolled off of him in hot contrast to the soft breeze, which was starting to get even cooler.
Despite the darkness that surrounded them, and despite the overwhelming presence of the monster in front of her, she felt empowered. It felt like whatever darkness they were standing in belonged to her. He shifted on his feet and she knew that he felt it, too. His gloved hands bunched into fists.

*And you're in over your head. Do you even understand what you've done?*

A blast of wind hit Rey's face, colder than it had been before. Icy needles hit her exposed skin. The air suddenly felt wet.

Kylo Ren loomed over here, his dark robes flapping against his legs. If he noticed the changing atmosphere he didn’t let on.

*This is all your fault, he continued, his tone promising violence, you shouldn't be here.*

Something wet fluttered against her eyelids. She blinked it away.

*This is my dream, you get out.*

The ground underneath them rumbled. Other sounds had started coming to her, slow and far-off. She felt far too cold. For an irrational moment she had the distinct impression that she was underdressed.

*Idiot, he looked like he was practically steaming, his shoulders rising and falling with his breathing. His hood flapped against his dark mask. Stupid, idiot scavenger girl-*

Suddenly it was as if they had been thrust violently into a horrific reenactment. She heard the telltale *crack-crack* of Kylo Ren’s lightsaber seconds after she felt the weight of his lightsaber against her own. The environment clicked on place with a whirl, and she was back on Starkiller. Kylo Ren was bearing down on her with his lightsaber, and she was defending herself with Luke Skywalker’s lightsaber. She grit her teeth, digging her heels into the ground beneath her. She didn't bother to try and look away from the lightsabers, because she knew she’d only see the red and blue lights reflected on his mask.

It was all the same; the dark forest, the cold. Everything was breaking apart around them. And yet there was something nagging her, telling her that this wasn't how it had happened. The forest seemed so small, she was afraid to move too far in any direction. Kylo Ren didn't seem to notice.

And it was him. Something about him was wrong. He was a frenzy of heavy strikes, trying to kill her over and over again. The rage that rushed around them like a hurricane was his. The deadly intent.

*Was this a dream or a vision? It wasn't like she had had much experience with the latter. It felt real – solid, frigid – but it felt strange, too. The wind was too harsh, the forest too dark and vague. Fear and anger seemed to be tangible things around them.*

*And Kylo Ren was wearing his mask.*

She didn't know why she caught it, or why it mattered. But it did. He swung down hard with his saber, and she was only just able to block it. Their lightsabers locked, sparking with the power used to push against the other. To not give any ground.

*He was physically overpowering her. Her feet slid in the snow and she had to lean back to adjust her balance, giving up even more leverage. He pressed his advantage with an unspoken intent to kill.*

But she was in control of her dream once more; he just hadn't figured it out yet.
You’re still wearing your mask, she forced out between ragged breaths. He didn’t say anything, but she felt his confusion. She spread her lips in a grim smile. You didn’t wear your mask when we fought.

Just like that, his lightsaber went flying out of his hand as if her words had blasted it away. With a swift upwards swing she struck him on his mask, and he screamed. He fell and was all at once wounded on his arms and legs, with a new burn across his face. But he didn’t land in the snow.

He slammed against a metal table. The dark forest was ripped away at the impact. The air was suddenly dead still and dry. He was wearing a lot less than he had been, only his pants, which had been rolled up to the knee to expose the wounds on his legs. A single light illuminated him, narrowed the entire world down to him, the coldness of the table, and his pain. All of his wounds had been wrapped in bandages. There were more than she had thought, not that she had paid any particular attention before.

Her lightsaber was gone, and Rey felt decidedly out of control as she hovered on the edge of the light. Sweat coated his skin, which looked sickly pale in the light. White hot pain spiked from his wounds sporadically, practically sending her to her knees despite the fact that she didn't feel any of it herself.

She didn’t know what to do. Kylo Ren seemed to have forgotten that she existed, caught up in the throes of pain. He had apparently torn open his wounds with his writhing, because crimson spots started blooming on his bandages. Even the bandage covering half of his face appeared to turn pink. Bile rose in the back of her throat as she watched.

It wasn't natural pain, and she didn't need the Force to tell her that. Whatever it was that was torturing him, it didn't come from his wounds.

Good, she thought, clenching her fists as she stepped closer, the monster deserves it.

His eyes snapped open, dark lashes fluttering as he looked around for her. She moved closer to his head to avoid his gaze.

Scavenger. The word was spit at her like a weapon, and his contempt matched her own.

A fresh wave of pain hit, which he projected all around him. Rage and humiliation choked the air around her, and made it harder for her to breathe. She stumbled back as if putting some physical distance between them would ease her discomfort.

She stumbled into the shadows. They were heavy and all-encompassing, and they swallowed her up. The darkness became fingers, long and sharp, pressed into her shoulders. It wrapped around her ankles like a cloak, trapping her to the spot. The darkness became more and more solid, until she knew that she was in the grips of something malevolent. A cold whisper breathed across her neck. Almost like words.

Then all visions of Kylo Ren and darkness were gone. Rey bolted up straight, nearly falling out of the seat she had fallen asleep in. For a moment she didn't know where she was, and she looked around wildly. Her chest was heaving from the nightmare.

She was on the Falcon, she was okay.

She was safe.

Finn’s small, flickering light coming from the back of the ship gave her a small measure of relief. They were safe.
An distant echo of pain filled her mind only briefly, but the impression of Kylo Ren lasted like a bad taste in the back of her mouth. And it didn't go away.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so going to burn in hell for this - NOT because I think it's probably incest (I'm personally partial to the Kenobi-Rey theory), but because I started this while I'm in the middle of another project. But I just couldn't resist, these two characters are just so compelling, and Reylo is just so addictive. So here I am.

Still working on the particulars of the POV, so please be gracious as I try and figure out Rey's voice. Kylo will get a POV as well, but not until I feel I have a more solid handle on the two of them. Anyway, I've actually got an idea of where I'm going to go with this, which is exciting. I hope you've enjoyed the beginning!

A few more tags will be added later.
Rey hadn't gotten a good night’s sleep since Starkiller. Every night she would lie awake for as long as she could, exhausted and so tired she could cry. Finally, she'd succumb to the heaviness of her eyelids. And then she'd wake up screaming.

Some nights she'd manage to get a few precious hours in before she'd jerk herself awake, tears streaming down her face and her heart racing so fast she thought it would explode. Other nights it would take only minutes for her to wake herself up. Then she'd force herself out of bed, because a little sleep was better than no sleep. She wouldn't try again until the following night, and repeat it all again. Desperation kept her trying, but she wasn't holding out much hope.

It was always the same type of dream: Kylo Ren, in the dark and in scorching pain. The details varied. It was always dark, but sometimes she imagined that she could see dark stones beneath him, or the blinking of a panel. Sometimes he was by himself, and sometimes she felt a malevolent presence wrapped in the darkness. Those were the worst dreams, because she felt as if the presence could see her. It didn't make any sense, but she figured that dreams didn't have to make any sense. If it really was all a dream.

She didn't know when exactly she had first thought that maybe what she was seeing wasn't a dream – or at least, not totally. But she knew what had triggered the thought. Kylo Ren's wounds were always so real, so present in the dreams, and they were the wounds that he had gotten on Starkiller. They were healing, but sometimes his wounds would reopen in the dream, ripped open by his movements or the malevolent presence, and it would stay consistent in the next dream. The other wounds would be partially healed, but the reopened wound would be much worse, like it had just started to heal again.

If it was real, or some sort of vision, or anything more than a dream, she didn't want to know. She hated it, hated being forced to be audience to that level of pain. And Kylo Ren made it worse, because he projected his pain, humiliation, and rage in nauseating degrees, overwhelming her senses. It was enough to make her vomit every time. She hated him for it.

She hated him for taking yet another thing away from her.

When she was at the Resistance base on Q'Dar she could get away with her sleepless nights. There were far too many people, and even her friends were easy enough to avoid when she felt like it. It wasn't like she was running away from them, but how would she explain that she was having reoccurring nightmares about the monster who had killed his own father and had nearly killed Finn? She couldn't find the words for that. Besides, it wasn't like any of them could do anything about it. So she just avoided it all together.

However, after General Organa had sent her to find Luke Skywalker was an entirely different matter. After presenting his old lightsaber and telling him what had happened during his self-imposed exile, he had agreed to train her.

“At least some of the basics,” he said with a sad, knowing smile, “I don't want to send you back totally unprepared.”
She’d take any amount of training he was willing to offer, but she wished that someone had prepared her before she had been forced into a confrontation with his crazy nephew. Still, she was relieved to finally have some direction.

The relief ended almost as soon as training began. He taught her a lot about the basics of the Force, about what it was and how it existed in everything. He told her very little about the Jedi or Sith, but explained how the Jedi dedicated their lives to achieving peace and tranquility through the light side of the Force, and how the Sith craved power through the dark side. Everything he taught her was loaded with warnings. Not that she needed them; if falling to the dark side meant killing those she loved, she wanted no part of it.

He taught her to use his lightsaber, too. She spent hours learning to deflect blaster bolts and the basics of a few of the lightsaber forms. When she tried to return the lightsaber to him at the end of the first day, he had closed her hand around the hilt and smiled.

“This is yours, now.”

She frowned, “But why? Why is it mine?”

“Because the Force wills it,” he replied with a slight shrug. As if that explained everything.

She wasn't satisfied with his answer, but she nodded anyway. On the first day she hadn't known what he meant, but as the days went on she started to understand.

It just felt right to say it was her lightsaber. And it felt nice to have something to call hers.

The Force came naturally to her. Luke didn't mention it often, but she could see it in his eyes. She thought that maybe he was exaggerating a bit. But behind the genuine admiration she felt was a growing wariness. He had already started training her more than he said he would, but every day he'd get that look more and more. Pleased but wary, and always sad.

“He's scared of you.”

The thought was sudden and violent, and it didn't feel like herself at all. She shook it off as quickly as it came, forcefully pushing it out of her head.

Her eyes darted over to her teacher, nervous that she had somehow projected her thoughts to him, but he didn't reveal if he had. She immediately felt even more guilty; unlike a specific individual, Luke had never invaded the privacy of her mind. He let her keep her meager secrets with a respectful distance, always.

He caught her looking at her. With a glance at the darkening horizon, he indicted that she could deactivate her lightsaber. “I think that's enough for today. You should get some rest.”

She kept a bitter laugh pressed between her lips out of respect for him. It was a kind suggestion. “Ok,” she nodded, although it lacked enthusiasm.

The tone wasn't lost on him. “Rey, I've noticed that you haven't been sleeping well,” he mentioned as they started to head back to his hut. Every day he made them hike up to the highest tip of his small island before he began her training. It overlooked the ocean as far as the eye could see, and he claimed it was a nice physical representation of the Force. She didn't mind at all, but the climb always left her a little winded.

She looked over as they began their descent, waiting for him to continue. He didn't say anything else. “I've been having trouble sleeping,” she admitted after a moment.
“Nightmares?”

“How did you know?” She couldn’t help asking, carefully making her way down several loose rocks. “Did you use the Force?”

He chuckled, so quietly she almost didn’t hear it. It was the first time that he had done that around her. “No. I don’t need the Force to see the tiredness in your eyes, and I know you’ve been through some hard things recently. Everyone has nightmares after something like that.”

The that he was speaking of went unspoken, but they both knew what he meant. There was a far-off look in his eyes for a long moment, although he didn’t slow in his descent. His kind tone gave her courage to continue, albeit hesitantly.

“How bad can the nightmares get?” She swallowed, willing herself not to think about them. It was useless, of course, and the image of Kylo Ren reopening his wounds over and over soon bled into her mind.

Luke considered her question for a moment. “Pretty bad,” he answered honestly, “but it gets better.”

She huffed. “How long does it take?”

He gave her a sad smile. “There's no right answer for that. It takes time for people to come to terms with the things that have happened to them, and everyone has their own time.”

It wasn't the response she had been looking for. Discouraged, she didn't say anything else the rest of the way back to his hut. For the first time that she had stated having the nightmares, she wanted to tell someone about it. Maybe Luke could help. Maybe he knew why she they were so vivid – or maybe that vividness was normal, too. Maybe she was making it into something it wasn't, just because she didn't want to be completely honest about it.

But it wasn't normal. She knew it wasn't. No one was supposed to have horrifically real dreams about their enemy in pain, night after night, feeling it through the Force as if it was really happening.


His grey brows rose on his forehead. “Of course you can.”

She tried to give him a smile, but it came out weak and she couldn't hold it. “You said it's normal, but,” she breathed, “it doesn't feel normal. When I'm in them, I could swear it's real. I can feel it in the Force.”

“What do you feel?”

“Pain. A lot of pain. But it's not mine, it's—” the words fizzled out on her tongue. She’d never said Kylo Ren's out loud to him before. She'd never had to, and she didn’t want to. The pain and sadness in his eyes would only double. “-someone else's.”

Luke frowned, crossing his arms in thought. “Is it your friend’s pain you feel?”

Rey swallowed. He was most likely referring to Finn; she had spoken to Luke about his injuries once or twice. “No,” she shook her head. After a moment she added, “it's an enemy's.”

There was a spark of recognition in his tired eyes, and for the first time ever she felt him nudge her mind with his own, not probing, just feeling around the edges like he was looking for something. She
fought against the knee-jerk reaction to close off and guard her mind like she had been taught; she trusted him, and there was nothing malicious about his actions. Still, she held her breath.

“What happens in these dreams?” He asked after a while. He didn't withdraw from the edges of her mind, but hovered searchingly.

“It’s dark,” she felt the tension in her shoulders, hoped that she didn't look too defensive. “I never know where I am. It’s a little different, sometimes, but it's just the little things.”

He nodded. “What sort of differences?”

She resisted the urge to fiddle with the edge of her shirt. “The type of pain. Sometimes it's burning or searing, sometimes it's sharp like a blade. It changes.”

“But it's not your pain,”

“No, it's not.”

There were moments when she'd think about her dreams – or whatever they were – and it was like he was there again. Just like on the Falcon after she had left Starkiller. She'd feel his hot breath on her neck, and it felt like he was breathing out pure hatred and rage. Sometimes it scared her, but more often than not it just upset her. The wickedness of his presence, imagined or not, left her with a bad taste in her mouth. At first she had thought that it was just nerves, but since she had started training with Luke she had started to suspect that it was something more. Something terrifyingly real.

Luke looked like he thought so, too. He studied her with a grim expression, making the wrinkles on his face look like they were carved or of stone. “Whose pain is it?”

He already knew the answer to his question. She could see it in his eyes. But he apparently wanted her to say it, to have the name out there once and for all.

“It's Kylo Ren's.” Her voice came out only just above a whisper.

A beat passed between them. Rey didn't know how to interpret it; Luke's face remained blank, but she couldn't stop herself from fidgeting. She was sure she was projecting her feelings all around her. Perhaps that was why Luke never tried to read her; maybe she just projected whatever she thought anyway.

“When did you say this started?” He finally spoke once more, deep in thought but with a carefully neutral expression.

“Almost as soon as we escaped from Starkiller,” she answered.

He sighed and turned to enter his hut. “Then I fear your nightmares might hold a deeper significance.”

“A deeper significance?” She echoed, not at all liking where the conversation was heading.

“I cannot be sure yet, but it sounds as if you might be connecting to Kylo Ren's mind in your sleep. That would explain a lot of things.”

He held the door open for her before shutting it behind them, and she watched as he went about preparing their dinner as usual. “Connecting? But how can you know, I haven't told you that much about it.” She didn't want to be connecting to him, rejected that idea entirely, although there was a small voice in the back of her head that told her it made a little sense.
“To be honest,” he sighed, “it's something that I've sensed since you came here.”

She fought against the urge to get upset, telling herself she was just tired. “What did you sense?”

He thought for a moment. “Something of…Kylo Ren's tied to you. A thread in the Force. At first I
thought it meant that you were – or could be – like him,” he admitted, and it hurt more than she
expected, “but now I see. There must be some sort of link between the two of you, to let you
commune in your sleep.”

It was like he was talking about some recent discovery instead of her own mind, although she fought
against the accompanying irritation that arose with that thought. If what he was saying was right,
then her fears were being realized. They weren't just dreams, they weren't really even visions. She
was touching his mind, the mind of Kylo Ren, every time she tried to sleep.

That meant so much more than she had thought.

Questions raced through her mind. Was it one-way, or had he been able to get into her mind as well?
Did he even know about any of it? How was it possible that all of that pain was real? And most
importantly, how was she going to get rid of it?

“I'll need some time to come up with a solution to this,” Luke shook his head as if she had asked him
all of her questions out loud. For how wild her mind was running, she probably basically had.

He laid a hand on her shoulder. “Don't worry, Rey, we'll fix this. It doesn't appear to be a very strong
connection if you're only seeing him in your sleep, and that will make it easier.” She didn't mention
how she sometimes felt his presence outside of her dreams. “I will not lie; I'm not entirely well-
versed on all that Force bonds are, but I have old Jedi documents that will likely be able to help.”

Force bonds. As discouraging as it was that it would take time to research, those words were what
made her want to sit down and cry.

Force bonded to an unstable murderer, the one who she had fought, who had ripped apart her mind
in an attempt to find a map, who had killed his own father. A monster. Kylo Ren.

She sank down on her cot. Luke turned away, maybe sensing her need for some privacy. She was
vaguely aware of him continuing to cook their meal, but she had lost her appetite. With a deep
breath, she told herself not to cry. She felt alone in her head; if there was another presence there, she
couldn't tell, but that wasn't any relief to her.

Don't cry, she told herself, willed herself to be harder.

A single breath, almost like a laugh and equal parts amusement and irritation, passed through her
awareness.

She tried to project those feelings out to him, wherever he was in the galaxy, but didn't feel anything.
Maybe the bond was weak enough that they were only connected in her sleep. Or their sleep, she
didn't really know. The silence in her head was a small comfort.

“You should try and get some sleep,” Luke spoke up from the far side of his tiny hut. “After you eat,
of course.” He talked over and handed her a bowl of the same soup that they'd eaten every day since
she'd been there. It tasted like paste, slippery and clumpy. She only ever managed to eat half of it.

“Thanks,” she mumbled, taking the offered bowl from his hands.
He crouched in front of her, and even she could hear his knees pop. His joints always got worse as the day went on. “Rey, I know that this is hard, but to be able to help you on going to need to know the extent of your connection.”

She felt miserable. “How?”

“I'm going to monitor you tonight,” he decided. “When you connect through the Force, I'll be able to sense it, and sense how strong it is. And then we'll go from there.”

There was only really one thing she could do, because the other option was to refuse and never sleep again for the rest of her life. So she agreed.

“It's going to be okay,” He said again, patting her shoulder as he straightened up. She could hear his joints crack.

An image of Kylo Ren screaming passed in front of her eyes. He was always in pain whenever she slept, and if that was really some part of himself – then he had been tortured for a long time. Even she had to admire the endurance that it would take just to survive constant torture. She had only been experiencing it in her sleep, feeling the emotions that he projected like waves, and she felt like she was going crazy.

Or maybe he had gone crazy. She had no way of knowing; it wasn't like she'd ever had a chat with him.

Then she remembered her first vision, the time when she had been able to take control. Maybe she could do that again. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility. If she regained control, it was possible that she could cut things off on her side. That way she wouldn't even have to wait. Maybe it was simple as that.

She could feel his presence tickle in the corners of her awareness like a poison. *Or not.*

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, I'm following in just about everyone's footsteps as far as these first few chapters are concerned. But rest assured that although this has a fairly common beginning, I will be branching out into a much more unique storyline. I'm very excited to get into it. And sorry for the lack of Kylo in this chapter. He'll definitely be in the next chapter.

This chapter was entirely un-beta'd and posted at 2am, so I apologize if I made any major mistakes.

Hope you liked it, leave a comment/kudos to tell me what you think.
It was the first good nights sleep Kylo had gotten since Starkiller. Snoke’s punishment had gone on for a while – he had last track of how many days and nights his master had made him pay for his failures. Not only had he failed to protect the First Order’s ever-important super weapon, but he had lost the scavenger girl. Snoke had been infinitely more displeased with the latter.

He had dreamt of her, in some pain-induced delirium, the day Starkiller was destroyed. He had only a vague memory of troopers lifting him off of the ground and carrying him onto a shuttle. The next thing he truly remembered was kneeling in his master’s presence, and then the endless pain that followed.

But before that, he had seen her. The scavenger girl. Rey, he was certain her name was. He had seen it, back when he had tried to pry open her mind and instead had his pried open. The memory of that still smarted in his mind.

She had appeared before him, deceivingly real and entirely defiant. The expression on her face instantly drove him towards rage, and he wanted to kill her more than anything. But that was apparently against the rules of the dream, and his arm wouldn't respond to him. He just held his lightsaber, wishing that he could run her through, and was glued to the spot.

He felt a brush of the Force in her words, as if she were actually reaching out to him from wherever she was in the galaxy. It felt uncomfortably like he was in her space.

There wasn’t time to dwell on it. The delusion had become more of a memory after that, one that filled him with both apprehension and exhilaration. He had lost in the real play-out of their scene, and there was a part of him that was convinced that he would fail again here. But this was a dream, or at least close enough to one, and he shoved his memory of the event out of his mind, instead focusing on driving her to the ground. He felt closer to his full strength, and she gave ground relatively easily.

Until she said something absurd, something about his mask.

That was when he realized that it was really her. The scavenger girl, Rey. And if she was really there with him, then that meant that it was no dream.

It was a connection.

At first he had thought that that’s all it had been, a one-time connection. Even though he knew better.

Sometimes he still felt her presence, distant but solid. Grounded. He didn't know if she could feel him or not, and he didn't poke and prod the connection to find out. Mostly because he was too busy making amends to the Supreme Leader, but also because the thought that she existed somewhere in the universe infuriated him. She was a constant reminder of his failure on Starkiller, and if he was being honest, a part of him still smarted at her rejection of his offer to train her. As if Skywalker could do any better.

He knew she was with him, being fed tired old tales of the oh-so-noble Jedi and their fight to uphold the light side of the Force. A fight that the old man would task her with and then proceed to show her how to meditate, as if that was all she'd need to stand up against the universe.
But he wasn't going to think about Skywalker. It would only keep his mind awake and prevent him from getting any much-needed sleep. Lord Snoke had finally deemed his lesson over, Kylo's body sufficiently afflicted, and had sent his apprentice back to the Finalizer to rejoin in the First Order's efforts. General Hux had given his customary sneer when he had returned, and for once Kylo didn't have the energy for it. He went straight to his quarters and locked himself inside.

Rest was paramount, but he felt the familiar anger simmer under his skin, urging him towards violence. It had been too long since he had destroyed something. But it could wait. Everything could wait.

He closed his eyes and didn't dream.

Until she appeared out of the darkness.

Kylo Ren, she called out like the preliminary to a confrontation. She was wearing different clothes that she had been the last time he remembered seeing her, but she had the same flinty expression.

Immediately he felt his temper flare. What do you want? He scowled. Apparently for him, when one torture ended, another began.

There was a full moment of hesitation on her part. I want you to go.

Exhaustion pulled at his focus, but he willed himself not to give in to it. It's my head, he pointed out. I think I'll stay.

No, she started, but stopped abruptly. Something flashed in her eyes, and he could feel her confusion and growing apprehension as she took a half-step back. Her hand flew to where his grandfather's lightsaber hung from her belt. You're in my head, she insisted.

He narrowed his eyes at her from behind his mask, making sure to covey the contempt he felt through the Force. You really don't know anything. You're the one who connected to me; you came to me. We're in my head. He paused, tilted his head. Has that old fool taught you nothing?

Anger flared up against him like a sun. He was certain that she didn't know how clearly she was projecting her emotions to him, unless she didn't care that she was displaying her dark feelings so blatantly. And he didn't need to sense what he could see on her face.

She wrapped her hand around the hilt of his grandfather's lightsaber. He knows more than you ever will.

He immediately detached his lightsaber from his belt. More than you, anyway. Which isn't saying much.

I want you to sever this...connection.

He scoffed. Can't.

With one fluid motion, Rey pulled out and activated his grandfather’s lightsaber. Then I'll make you sever it.

His own lightsaber activated seconds after hers. The girl was demanding things she had no understanding of. A connection couldn't be severed by exercising it, which was exactly what they were doing. He was no expert on Force bonds, but he knew that it didn't matter if they were talking or fighting. Using the bond to communicate would only strengthen it. He was struck again by the knowledge that he should never have brought her to Starkiller base. If he hadn't, he would've at the
ve least been getting that good night’s sleep.

*If you want this severed*, he twirled his lightsaber in his hand and got ready to attack, *then stop using it.*

*I’m not using it*, she insisted hotly.

*You’re the one reaching out through it*, he reminded her, and she didn’t argue the point.

Their lightsabers were the only noise between them for a long time. She was shifting through so many different emotions that he couldn’t keep up with any of it. However, her resolve never wavered. He didn’t know if that made him more angry or just more tired.

*You’ve become my nightmares*, she whispered, but it sounded loud in his ear. *I don’t even care if this time is different. All I want is for you to go away.*

The first thing she said confused him, but that didn’t matter. His anger spiked immediately at the last part; did she think that he hadn’t been going through just as much suffering – more, even – than she had? It seemed obtuse, even for her. Or maybe he was giving her too much credit. Either way he had no inclination to enlighten her.

She made the first move. One second she was standing more than ten paces away, and the next she was right on him. It felt like she was trying to push her way into his mind by proximity alone. She struck out at him twice – a side-swipe followed by an up-handed swing. He blocked both easily enough, but became unbalanced when he misjudged her strength, which had increased since last they’d fought.

Their lightsabers locked. Something in the electric crackle of their blades drew her attention. An indecipherable look passed behind her eyes, and her sudden hesitation hit him with the force of a punch. She shoved him back a step, and used the small opening to retreat.

He took that as his cue to switch to offense. After only a second he was on her. He swung his blade down, and then up. With a few more heavy hits he had driven her back even further. It felt good to be hitting something, to be releasing some of his pent-up violence. He was still healing, but most of his strength had already returned, and he liked the look in her eye when she realized that.

But she had stopped fighting back. She parried each blow, but never tried to strike back. He even left her an opening once, just to see if she’d take it. She didn’t.

*Fight back*, he growled as he bore down on her with his full weight. *You’re the one who wanted this.*

At first she didn’t respond, and that only fueled his rage.

*I won’t attack you*, she finally bit back, like it was painful for her to admit. it sounded ridiculous, seeing as she was the one who had swung the first blow. He was close enough to see the sweat on her brow, wisps of her hair clinging to her neck.

*Then allow me.* He broke the lock and raised his blade, but before he could strike he found himself flung onto the dark, void ground several feet away. When he regained his senses he saw Rey with her arm outstretched, fingers splayed. He ignored the dull ache in his back and scrambled up. It surprised him that she had gained that much control already, but less than he would’ve thought. He hadn’t forgotten her strength in the interrogation room, a strength that had come naturally and instinctively.

But it apparently surprised her, too. Her eyes were wide as she looked up at him, and for a second he
forgot that she couldn't see his face. She looked so innocent in the ways of the Force, so inherently good, that it almost surprised him. Thinking better of his plan to rush in and attack her again, he stayed where he was. Decided to switch his tactics. But he didn't deactivate his lightsaber.

*Rey*, he started, her name passing uncomfortably through his mouth.

*No!*

She held up her hand as if to block his words. *You don’t get to call me by my name; you’re a monster, and I’ve suffered every day since Starkiller because of you.*

Taking a heaving breath she continued, *every night I’ve been sucked into the darkness, to watch you scream in agony.* Her gaze swept over the nothingness around them. He kept forgetting about it; it didn’t matter to him. But apparently she couldn’t stand it.

This was not what he wanted to be hearing. He had a very intimate understanding of the pain that he’d been suffering since his failure, he didn’t need her to tell him about it. What did she know of suffering? A scavenger girl who had had a couple of bad dreams about real pain had no right to act as if she had been through an ordeal.

Barely contained rage rolled off of him like thick fog. His grip tightened on his lightsaber. He opened his mouth to speak, but she cut him off by continuing.

*You did this. You tried to tear my mind apart, and you’ve left some part of you in me like some sort of poisonous thorn.* Tears were in her eyes but remained unshed. Her rage surrounded the air around them, adding to his own.

Exhaustion was written all over her face, and he hated her for it. Hated that it mirrored his own.

Neither spoke anymore for a long while. They just stood there, her eyes shining with blame and him still poised for a fight.

Then he made a decision. He straightened and deactivated his lightsaber. *No.*

Her surprise him him like a wave.

*What?*

He clipped his weapon back onto his belt. *I’m not going to fix this. It obviously gives you a great amount of pain to be bonded to a ‘monster’ such as me.*

She still had his grandfather’s weapon activated, but she held it limply at her side like she had forgotten that she still held it. Her gaze flickered across his mask, searching for Force knew what. He made sure not reveal anything in his posture. She didn’t seem to find what she was looking for.

*What did I ever do to you?*.

It would’ve been a fair question, if she had asked it several weeks ago. But she had physically wounded him, made a fool of him, and had caused his biggest failure to date. The scar on his face wasn’t anywhere near done healing.

*You’ve caused me a lot of trouble,* he struffled to keep his voice calm. It helped that she seemed to be losing her composure more and more with every word he said. *I think it’s only fair that I return the favor.*
Monster, she spat.

Scavenger, he returned.

The tears finally fell. Without another word she lifted her hand-

-Kylo hit the floor with a thud. It took him a moment to realize that he had rolled out of bed. His sheets were tangled around his ankles, and he yanked them off with more force than necessary.

His wounds felt hot and raw, probably from rubbing against the rough sheets. He was going to have a headache where he hit his head.

But he didn't care about that. Even from where he was, even awake, he could feel her. She was out there somewhere; he could feel her in the back of his mind like a half-forgotten thought that he had just started to remember. She was livid.

He shouldn't have done that. It was a stupid, irrational thing to do. That entire confrontation had done little more than strengthen their bond, and as much as her suffering was a comfort to him, he knew it was only going to hurt him in the long run to have a Force bond with someone like her. Someone so close to the light, despite all of her righteous anger.

It didn't matter anymore. Her presence was there, easier to reach than before. He would just have to make good on his unspoken promise to make it as torturous for her as possible.

He considered giving up on sleep and just getting up, but he refused to let that scrap of a girl intimidate him out of anything. So he lied back down on his hard bed and tried to force himself to sleep.

It never came.

Chapter End Notes

So apparently when I said it'd take "a while" to get into Kylo's POV chapters, I meant around chapter three. I swear I have no idea what I'm doing when I'm writing him; I rewrote this so many times, I just finally had to say "screw it!" And post it.

Please be gentle, but tell me what you thought of his POV. Feedback would be super awesome right about now! Also, I can't wait till we get to the chapters where they have actual, in quotations dialogue. These italics are killing me!

Comment/drop a kudos to tell me what you think!
Weeks passed into months. Luke had given up the pretense that he was simply teaching Rey some of the basics, and had begun to train her as a full padawan. She didn't know why the Jedi used such a weird name to call their apprentices, but she recognized that there was some honor attached to the title. At least as far as her master was concerned.

It was because of that night over a month ago. The night when she had first prodded the connection with Kylo Ren – after that Luke had stopped holding any of his teachings back.

The two of them shared some sort of Force bond, she could no longer deny it. And neither could Luke.

“He won't stop,” he had warned her. “He failed to catch you once, and this bond will just fuel him on. He never was one to take well to failure.”

“Well, he'll just have to learn to live with it.”

She didn't need Luke to tell her what she already knew; he had been haunting her ever since. The first thing that she had learned to do was put up walls. Sometimes his consciousness would crash against it like a wave. Sometimes she'd slip, and he'd find a crack in her defenses without really trying. Having an echo of his presence in her head was excruciating. He'd send her dark thoughts or images of violence every now and again, but mostly he was simply an unwanted fog in the back of her brain, all pulsing rage and corrupted with the dark side. It just motivated her to do better, to make her defenses ironclad.

Only once did she look for herself at the bond between them. His presence was like a thin, black wire wrapped around her mind, cutting into her.

She never pulled on the string.

Her master had searched through all of the Jedi documents he possessed in search of a way to help her detach herself from the monster, but to no avail. There just wasn’t anything about Force bonds in the writings that he had recovered.

But, he had promised that he wouldn't give up, and that he'd search for anything that might be of help to her. She tried to stay as positive as he was.

It was easier when she got to speak to her friends. Finn called every few days, and occasionally Poe would be there, too. She loved talking to them, loved hearing about the adventures that they were having. Tried to ignore the empty pit in her gut at the thought that she was missing out on all of it. Finn told her that he was jealous of her time with Luke, and she had laughed at that. Poe wanted to race her sometime, based solely on the fact that Finn had been talking up her flying abilities. She always denied it, but Poe insisted that he wouldn't be able to put his mind at ease until he knew once and for all who was the better pilot. It was most definitely him, but he seemed to like the idea of the competition. She had yet to agree to it.

The Resistance wasn't winning, not really, but it was definitely giving the First Order hell. She took comfort in that fact and relied upon it to ease the nagging feeling of guilt for sitting on an island on some far away planet while everyone else she knew was fighting evil. Fighting people like Kylo
The ocean was glowing shades of orange and red in the evening light. She was supposed to be meditating, clearing her mind and building up her mental walls, but the colors of the ocean as the sun went down never failed to distract her. The colors reminded her of the sunsets on Jakku, just about the only good memory she had from the place. It was the same and yet different, because it was the ocean and because the end of the day no longer carried the uncertainty of morning. It was just the sunset, and it was beautiful.

She could feel Kylo Ren's disapproval and condemnation of her sentiment through their bond.

You don't have to be so damn nosy, she shot at him. It was a beautiful sight and she wouldn't let him ruin it.

You project it at me, he sneered through the link. She half thought that he was lying, because she went out of her way not to exercise their link – she had learned her lesson. But he seemed to be legitimately unhappy to be receiving such images from her, so perhaps she had been projecting a little.

She slammed the communication shut and put up her mental walls. There was no way she was going to have a conversation with the enemy over anything.

The sun had almost finished its descent when she got a strange feeling in her chest, like it had skipped a few beats. Warning bells were going off in her head. It was the Force; she suddenly knew with great certainty that she was sensing something bad through the Force. The danger was so clear, she might as well have been there herself.

It was Finn.

Finn, Finn, Finn.

A thousand thoughts swirled in her head. Was he in danger right at that moment? Was he dead? Would she be able to tell the difference? Immediately she scrambled up, ignoring the jabs of the cold stone against her hands and legs, and started to run down the hill she had been trying to meditate on. Master Luke was down by his hut, his massive presence in the Force as warm and steady as always. She knew her own was running wild and frenzied in contrast.

“Master Luke,” she called when he came into view. He stopped the gardening that he had been doing and turned to her, although he did not look at all surprised.

She rushed down to him, gasping for breath. He must've felt it too; the danger Finn was in. He was a Jedi master, he must've felt it.

“Rey,” he stood up slowly, “are you alright?”

She shook her head “it's Finn,” she forced out in between breaths. “He's in danger, can't you feel it? I need to do something.”

Another one of Master Luke's far-off looks passed over his face, but only briefly, for which she was thankful. She hated it when she was having one conversation but he seemed to be having another, and she needed him in the moment with her.

“You've felt it through the Force?” He asked.

“Yes, Master. Something bad is happening to him, I know it.”
Her master nodded and stroked his beard. She tried very hard to stamp down the impatience swirling in her head. It wouldn't do her any good to get irritated at him. Still, she needed to help Finn as fast as she could. How could she do that while she was there with him?

He seemed to know exactly where her line of thought was going. “Rey, you cannot go rushing into the unknown head-first, even if it is to save your friend.” At her look, he continued, “I suggest you call him on the communicator, first, and check on him.”

“But if he's in danger—“

“Then he'll likely not answer.” He gestured towards the small shuttle Chewie had left there for her. It wasn't anything fancy, but it was functioning and capable of getting her back to the nearest Resistance base. And it was her only way of contacting her friends.

She was already halfway up the ramp before she realized that she had dashed over without another word. Out of all the times she, Finn, and Poe had talked, she had never called them before, so it took her a minute to fumble with it before she got the communicator working.

At first no one answered her call. The Force was still singing danger in her head, and for a moment she let the panic take ahold in her chest.

He's probably dead. In her frenzy to contact Finn she had forgotten to maintain her mental walls, and Kylo Ren's consciousness had oozed in without her even noticing.

Be quiet. She tried to call again, punching the buttons harder than she needed to. For all I know, you have something to do with this.

I could, he sounded smug, but she had enough sense left to realize that if he actually did have anything to do with it, he would've shown her in excruciating detail through their link.

She shook her head of that thought and tried to calm herself down. Calling upon the Force to find the spring of light wishing herself, she steadied her breathing and began to reach out to her friend. If she couldn't contact him the normal way, perhaps she could reach him through the Force. She hadn't tried it before, but it couldn't hurt to try.

Irritation spiked through their bond, a revulsion against the light she was drawing upon. With a swiftness that surprised her, he slammed the door shut on their connection. Their bond became blessedly silent.

The comm buzzed to life, startling her. There was no visual, but that didn't matter.

“Hello? Rey, is that you?” Poe's tired, beautiful voice came through. She was relieved that he, at least, was safe, but she was calling Finn directly. It should've been him to answer.

“Poe,” she breathed, trying to stamp down the panicky feeling that had taken root in her chest anew, “are you alright? Is Finn alright? Why didn't he answer?”

There was a few seconds delay before he answered. “Yeah, yeah. I'm fine, Finn’s fine. We're all fine here. Are you okay? You sound really freaked out.”

“I'm-“ It didn't make any sense. She could've sworn Finn was in trouble – she still felt that he was in trouble. “Are you sure he's okay?”

“Finn? He's okay, Rey. Promise. He had a close call with some questionable meat the other day, but-“
“Is he doing something?” She didn’t mean to be rude, but she really wasn’t in the mood for Poe’s lightheartedness – not when she felt doom so clearly in her chest.

There was silence over the other end of the line. “You know I can’t tell you about that over open channels. I’m sorry.”

She sighed, rubbed the back of her hand over her forehead. “Poe, please. Whatever he’s doing, or going to be doing, I feel like it’s going to go bad. Very bad. I can’t explain it, I just do.”

“‘Feel like,’ as in you ‘sense?’”

“Yes.”

She heard him sigh over the comm, but he still didn’t say anything for a long moment. Outside, the sun had gone down all of the way, and the only light visible was from her master’s small hut. He had probably already started dinner.

“Okay, here's the thing.” Poe finally replied, but it sounded like he was covering his mouth. “Our friend…may be going on a very important mission that could potentially become as dangerous as you’re predicting. And he may be prepping to leave now, as we speak. And it might take a while to complete said mission. That being said, it’s very important to all of our friends that he does complete this mission. That’s all I can tell you, Rey.”

Her response was immediate. “Then just wait until I get there.”

“What? No, you can’t-“

“Poe, I can’t let Finn go into this danger alone.” She gripped the edge of the console with white knuckles. She didn’t know if going would change anything, but it was better than sitting around with a warning ringing around in her chest and not doing anything. “Just wait, or give me a rendezvous point and ill meet you.”

He groaned. “You won’t take no for an answer, will you?”

“Definitely not.”

“Okay, okay, but I’ll have to clear it with General Organa.”

She nodded, forgetting for a moment that he couldn’t see the gesture. “Okay. Thank you, Poe.”

“I can never say no to a pretty face,”

She felt her ears flush at the compliment. Even though it wasn’t a serious comment, she still didn’t know how to react. When others had complimented her in the past there had always been ulterior motives. Coming from Poe she knew that there were none; and it was probably all just a joke, anyway.

The comm was silent for a good ten minutes before someone spoke. What she hadn’t expected was for that someone to be General Organa herself.

“Rey, are you still there?” The General’s voice sounded tired, but Rey imagined that that wasn’t so unusual when a person was in charge of the entire Resistance.

“Yes, General,” Rey swallowed.

“Good. Dameron’s told me that you wish to join Finn on his mission. Are you not still with Luke?”
“No—I mean yes, I'm still with him.” She had only met the General a few times, and she didn't immediately know what to say to her. The thought occurred to her that the woman might not want her to go. Her mind began to swirl with arguments to convince the General to let her accompany Finn on whatever it was he was doing.

The General was quiet for a beat. “And I'm guessing that he still won't return.”

Rey hesitated. “He says he doesn't want to talk about it.”

She heard the sigh through the comm. “I'll be having some words with him. And that's not the point of this call, anyhow. As I'm sure Dameron has told you, I can't give away where I'm sending Finn. But he told me that you've sensed something dangerous, and I don't want to send Finn in underprepared.” There was a pause. “I'm sending your shuttle the coordinates to a rendezvous point. Finn should be there within two standard rotations.”

“Thank you, General,” Rey breathed, deflating back into the pilot’s chair.

“This mission is of great importance, Rey, and I appreciate you wanting to help your friends. Finn will brief you when you meet up. May the Force be with you.”

Rey was barely able to choke out a return before Poe was back on the comm.

“Thanks, Rey,” he said, his tone more serious than it had been minutes before.

She blinked. “For what?”

“For looking out for Finn. That guy misses you.”

“I miss him,” she said, and she meant it. Finn had been her first real friend, the first person to ever come back for her. The thought that he could be walking into an unknown danger made her want to turn inside out in panic.

After she and Poe said their goodbyes, she returned to her master’s hut to find him meditating on the floor beside the small fireplace that he had built in the center. She suddenly didn't know what to say to him.

Surely he'd understand that she was only leaving to protect her friend — she could come right back and finish her training afterwards. Or maybe General Organa would manage to convince him to return to the Resistance, and they could continue her lessons there. It wasn't like she could never come back, never become a full-fledged Jedi.

“I understand the need to help your friends,” he said with his eyes still closed, as if he had sensed her thoughts, “more than you know.”

“It's Finn,” she explained, “he's going into danger, I can feel it. I can't let him go alone.”

He opened his eyes and fixed her with a reassuring gaze. “Do what you must, and don't worry; I will be ready to resume your training if you return.”

She chewed her lower lip. He noticed her hesitation.

“What's on your mind?” He asked.

The thought was there, swimming around in the front of her brain, but she was afraid to voice it. Finally, she decided to just spit it out. “I just thought that you still wouldn't want me to leave, that
you'd want me to master the Force more.”

To her surprise, he chuckled. “at first I didn't,” he answered honestly, “but as I meditated the Force revealed to me that your path is not to stay here, but to follow this feeling of danger to wherever it will take you.”

Confused, she furrowed her eyebrows. “I don't understand.”

“I don't full understand, either,” he shook his head and stood. “So much is shrouded and uncertain. But I know that you have a path to follow, and this is just one small stop along the way.”

There was a shadow in his gaze as he told her this, one that belied the comforting quality of his words. She itched to ask if he had seen something that she hadn't, but knew better than to ask. Either way he wouldn't tell her; the Force reveals to each in its own time, he always told her.

It didn't really matter. All the Force had given her was the feeling that Finn was in danger, so that was the feeling that she was going to follow.

Still, she couldn't help but ask, “Do you think I'm doing the right thing?”

He looked at her with kind eyes. “You are doing the only thing any of us can – follow the Force to wherever it will take you.”

The shuttle was colder than the Falcon, but that was because its thermal unit was busted. From the moment the shuttle left Ahch-to’s orbit, Rey had to wrap herself up in the emergency thermal blanket just to keep warm. Her breath crystallized in front of her, a sight that she'd only seen once before.

On Starkiller.

Kylo Ren hadn't bothered her once since he had shut her out. It was a blessing, but it also made her wary. Everything he did made her wary. She haphazardly searched her end of the bond, looking for some sign that he was still there at all. Perhaps he was just gone, she dared hope for only a moment. No such luck. The Ren-like cancer was still there, but he had erected a wall between them. He was actively blocking her out, that much was clear.

She wasn't tempted to reach past the wall, but she did give the bond a tug just to see what it would do. It was a small tug, not a lot of will behind it at all. She had never been the one to test the bond, to reach across it, and she didn't know what it would take. There was a responding tug to the bond, but only the kind that let her know that yes, he was still there, and no, he wasn't dead behind that wall.

Huh. Well, she wasn't fool enough to prod any further into something that she really didn't want to deal with anyway, so she let him be and tried to get some shut-eye.

She hadn't wasted any time with Master Luke, and had left within an hour of speaking with Poe and General Organa, so her inner-chrono told her it was the middle of the night. She didn't bother trying to find a more comfortable place to sleep – there were two fold-out bunk beds towards the back of the shuttle – but stayed where she was, curled up in the pilot’s chair. The cold bothered her a little, and she couldn't get to sleep until she had buried most of her face in the thermal blanket, as well.

Sleep eventually came to her, dark and dreamless.

She awoke to flashing warnings blinking across the control consoles. Bleary eyed, it took her a
moment to pull herself out of her sleep enough to realize what was happening. She shot up in her seat, forgetting the cold and the blanket.

That was impossible.

Outside the viewport, instead of the swirl of the blue and white lights of hyperspace travel, she was approaching a red planet. More specifically, she was entering the planet’s atmosphere.

For a moment she didn't know what to do; the complete insanity of the situation immobilized her. Then her hands flew to the controls in an attempt to correct her current flight path. She pulled back with all of her might, but still the shuttle continued its descent.

In a moment of desperation, she tried putting the Force behind her actions, but her attempts were deflected. Actively deflected. She reached out with her senses and gasped.

The ship was being pulled down with the Force.

But there was something else in the will that held the shuttle in its grasp, too. Something dark and organic, unlike anything she had ever felt before.

Of course, Kylo Ren chose that exact moment to lift the wall between them. His presence, dark and brooding, flooded the crevices of her head. He was definitely in some sort of mood, but she had no time to deal with it. She tried to push him back out of her head as much as she could, but couldn't devote much of her attention to it.

He must've noticed her state of mind, because she felt him push back, push deeper, rifling through her mind with his usual disregard for being gentle or respectful.

she'd care about that later. With a grunt, she tried to push past the hijacked control of the ship with the Force as she continued to pull back on the steering.

It started to feel like she was getting somewhere, regaining some control-

A shadow fell across the interior of the shuttle, and it stole her breath away. A chill crept down her spine that had nothing to do with the cold. With her hands still wrapped firmly around the steering controls, she willed herself to turn around. She had to force herself to continue breathing.

It was the figure from Starkiller, the one that she had seen between the trees. Even though she hadn't seen the dark figure clearly in the collapsing forest, she recognized it, knew as soon as she laid eyes on it – them. The figure was dark and imposing, like a nightmare come to life. They didn't look to be entirely real. At Starkiller she had thought that the nightmare figure was made out of shadows, but now she could see that that was wrong. In the small light of the shuttle she could see that the figure was wearing red. All red.

And when the nightmare spoke, it sounded distinctly female.

“So young,” the words were echoed in the Force, but it was dark and twisted. Rey felt like throwing up. “Always, they get younger. Come, child, let us see what you are.”

The nightmare approached, and she didn't even notice that the figure didn't touch the ground. She shot up in her seat, alarm singing in her head. There was literally nowhere to go. Her eyes flew all around, looking for something, anything, to aid in her escape. When she found nothing, she could to little more than lift her head in defiance.

“You don't scare me,” she said, willing her voice not to waver.
The nightmare figure hummed, but didn’t reply.

Long, pale fingers emerged from the red folds, reaching for her face. She tried to back away, but the nightmare woman had her in her grasp regardless. She turned her head from side to side wordlessly, as if she was appraising a slave. The thought made Rey angry, and fueled her defiance. Distantly, she could feel Kylo Ren's anger mixing in her mind as well.

The nightmare figure’s eyes widened, but only slightly. “Oh. Yes,” she smoothed her fingers over Rey’s forehead despite her defiant squirming. “Yes, I see.”

“Let go of me,” Rey bit out, equal parts furious and terrified.

Silver eyes seemed to dilate rapidly, seeing all of the way into her mind and past it. She could feel the nightmare feel around and violently tug on her and Kylo Ren's bond before returning the focus to her. It was worse than anything he had ever done to her; excruciating in a way that his mind probes hadn't been. It was like a white-hot claw tearing into every one of her thoughts, melting and searing them apart. It was brutal in its omnitude.

She couldn't take it, it was tearing her apart, she couldn't take it.

But then it stopped.

“Sleep,” the nightmare whispered, and she did.

Chapter End Notes

Well, we're back with Rey for this chapter. Sorry there wasn't a lot going on in the reylo area, this was basically a set-up for what's to come.

And on that note: here we go, dipping our toes into the actual plot. These first four chapters can be collectively seen as a 'prologue,' but from here on out were going to be getting into the real plot of this story. It's sort of separated into several arcs, but the shifts will be pretty clear when they come.

Anyway, as usual leave a comment/kudos to tell me what you thought!
As soon as he reopened the connection, Kylo was flooded with a thousand sensory details. Frustration, confusion, and fear hit him so fast it felt like a punch to the gut.

It was a fight to maintain his composure against her sudden onslaught of emotions. The crew’s usual urgency on the Finalizer’s bridge held an undercurrent that meant that they were readying for a battle, and he refused to stagger while in plain sight of every high-ranking personnel on the ship.

Rey was projecting wildly, her mind wide open, and he had never been one to let an opportunity pass him by. Pushing past the continuous rush of emotions she was sending over their connection, he took the opportunity to rifle through her mind. She tried to push him out, but the effort was weak and lasted only a moment. He didn’t go very deep, only picking over recent thoughts and memories.


They were foolish thoughts from a childish girl. His sneer was hidden by his mask, but he didn’t hide this thoughts through their bond.

There was no response from her end of the link, and no change from the emotions that she had been projecting the entire time. Her frustration solidified into something hot and defiant in his head, but the fear she felt threatened to take over. He felt it so strongly he got sick to his stomach, and had to resort to simple breathing exercises to control it.

Hux was saying something, but Kylo wasn't listening. There was too much going on in his head and he didn't feel very inclined to listen to the man’s incessant talking. And if he was speaking to him then it was likely to be some sort of criticism, anyway.

The general wouldn't leave.

“Ren.”

No response.

“Ren.”

The general was rewarded with a small incline of Kylo's mask – the only sign that he was even half listening.

“Ren.”

Finally Kylo looked over, swallowing the bile that rose in his throat over the bond. “What.” He bit out.

Hux huffed, wearing that signature frown of his that always made his cheeks look splotchy and red. “It would be helpful if you contributed to this battle strategy. You are, after all, the one who extracted the enemy’s plans.”

That condescending tone never failed to illicit a response. Anger washed over the other feelings in
his head, narrowing his focus and allowing him to return to the present.

“Shouldn’t you be capable of choosing an attack strategy for one space battle?” He kept his tone even as he continued to purify himself with his anger, felt it seep into his bones and bring him back to himself. “Even I wouldn't have thought that you were that incompetent. Perhaps you should be replaced.”

The general’s expression didn't move an inch. “Very clever. Are you here to be helpful or stand around uselessly?”

“I'm here to make sure you don't screw this up.”

Hux said something in return, but Kylo didn't hear it. All of the sudden, it felt like someone had reached into his brain and gave it a violent twist. It was only through pure reflex that he managed to lock his knees in order to stop himself from collapsing on the spot. The invasion of his mind felt both searing hot and frigid. It wasn't like anything he had felt before; the presence was almost as powerful as the Supreme Leader’s, but different. It felt organic.

He could hear Rey cry out as clearly as if she had been standing right there, and it occurred to him that he was feeling this through their bond. That this was being done to her.

And then, just as suddenly as it had started, it stopped. The bond went silent, an echo of pain like a ripple between them but otherwise void.

Kylo stumbled blindly out of the bridge, ignoring the looks of Hux and of the other commanding officers. Aftershocks of whatever had just happened twinged at him every now and again like a fried nerve-ending. He barely made it to his quarters before he collapsed next to the lone chair in the room, falling on his hands and knees.

No air. It felt like there wasn't enough air. After fumbling with his mask for an excruciating minute he managed to unlatch it, yanking it off his head and throwing it unceremoniously across the room. Steady. He had to steady his breathing.

He felt weak, and it was reviling.

He turned his anger towards her. *That girl.* It was her fault that he felt like his brain had been dipped in molten lava, his stomach filled with sludge and coated in ice. Just the thought almost sent him over, and he barely managed to stop himself from emptying his guts on the ebony flooring.

With a few more shaky breaths, he willed himself to regain control of his body. Breathe in, breathe out. In. Out. He forced himself to straighten into a meditation position. Calling upon the well of the dark side, he let the familiar darkness flood over him, submerged himself in the power that he always found there. It answered his call readily, and began to sweep away the fingerprints left by the foreign invader. Slowly but steadily he felt himself return to normal. He didn't know how long he sat in meditation, but the darkness didn't always answer his call with this level of ease, and he was going to savor it while it lasted.

*Kylo Ren, come to me.*

The Supreme Leader’s voice echoed with the same chill down his spine as it always did. He felt like it was always there, always a whisper on the back of his neck. Without hesitation he snapped himself out of meditation and climbed to his feet. He snatched up his mask and replaced it securely on his head.

He felt good. Angry, in control.
Almost as an afterthought, he threw up his walls within the bond. There was nothing coming from her side, but he didn't prod the connection before he replaced his mental defenses. Whatever she was going through, he was not going to share the experience any more than he already had.

The thought occurred to him on his way to the holographic chamber – what if she had died? Was that what it felt like when someone with a Force bond died? He had no experience with it, had never considered it before.

He pushed that thought – and all others that didn't have to do with his master – out of his head the second his boots connected with the walkway in the massive projection chamber. The image of the Supreme Leader was already active, looming like a giant and looking entirely too small to be contained in such a place. The sight sobered him, straightened his spine.

Alien eyes watched as he approached the rostrum and then stood at attention.

“Kylo Ren,” the Supreme Leader’s voice was at once booming and soft, much like when he spoke in Kylo's head, “you've been through an ordeal.”

Kylo dipped his head in respectful affirmation, but didn't say anything. He didn't wonder how his master knew, because he always knew everything about him.

The old Sith studied him, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together in what Kylo thought was an old habit.

“Tell me, do you know what you just experienced?”

He swallowed, “No.”

“Hm,” the Supreme Leader shifted in his chair, deliberating something in his head. He didn't seem inclined to illuminate Kylo on any of it. “I want you to leave – now, before General Hux begins the upcoming battle. Go to the planet Dathomir.”

“Dathomir?” He couldn't help asking. Of course he knew of it; it was remote, lots of forests and swamps. Largely uninhabited since the Clone Wars. When he was young he'd occasionally hear stories about a group of Force users who called themselves witches and would steal the living Force from a person’s bones. They were just tales meant to frighten younglings into obeying their parents. He wasn't aware of anything of actual value on the planet.

The Supreme Leader nodded. “The scavenger that you share a bond with has stumbled across something of great value; follow her and claim what she had found, then return it to me.”

Kylo stood stock still. After a beat, the Sith’s ruined mouth stretched out – the closest thing to a smile he ever gave. “You did not think that I was unaware of the bond struck between you and the girl, did you, my apprentice? Though – I wonder why do decided not to mention it.”

He bowed his head immediately. “I didn't think it had any consequence.”

His master leaned back in his throne, expressionless. “It does not matter; you know that nothing is hidden from me. Go, do as I bid.”

The towering image faded away even as he spoke his last words, leaving Kylo standing by himself in the vastly empty room.

All around her was twisted metal and fire. For an insane moment Rey thought that she was a part of
the environment, torn apart and burning. Then the moment passed, and she realized that she was still in the shuttle.

Or what was left of the shuttle.

Strips of the ship’s hull were strewn about in all directions, some protruding from the ground like twisted durasteel fingers. Small patches of fire flickered out of the corner of her eye, licking at anything flammable.

Her body was draped over the console, but she was more or less still in the pilot’s seat. The entire front viewport was shattered, the limbs of an old, gnarled tree reaching in through the cockpit. A million shards of transparisteel glittered like stars around her. Her arms were torn up with relatively minor cuts, but she knew that she should take inventory of the rest of her injuries. She winced as she moved; everything hurt.

Her head pulsed like she had been pounding it repeatedly against the console, which might not have been far off from the truth as far as she knew. She had gotten a sizable shard of transparisteel wedged in her left shoulder that she didn't notice until she started to sit up. Her entire body felt bruised, but besides that she seemed to be relatively fine.

The transparisteel came out easily enough, although it hurt like hell. Hissing her breath out through her teeth, she tossed the blood-covered shard to the ground and tried to regain her bearings.

The tail end of the shuttle was a good ten yards away, smoldering and half crushed from the impact. She supposed it was a good thing that she hadn't gone to sleep on one of the cots.

Being careful not to injure herself any further, she maneuvered out of the exposed cockpit and tried to put some distance between herself and the wreckage. To her relief, her legs seemed to be uninjured. Relative to the rest of her, anyway.

Her eyes widened as she took in the world around her. Everything was red – the sky, the ground, the gnarled trees around her. Crimson mist obscured everything past a certain point. It was like someone had painted everything the color of blood, and to her it seemed akin to some long-forgotten nightmare.

She staggered over to the nearest tree and leaned against its trunk, trying to orient herself.

What had happened? She couldn't quite remember. She had gotten the clearance to help Finn – the danger, the warning still swam in her senses – and had used the shuttle to fly to the rendezvous coordinates. She had fallen asleep, and then-

Nothing.

Surely she hadn't crashed in her sleep. No, she would never do that. Still, there was a gap in her memory between entering hyperspace and waking up on this hematic planet. Closing her eyes, she opened herself up to the Force, let it run through her and sift through her memories. She nearly gasped when she did.

Everything around her was saturated in the Force; she had never felt anything like it. Unlike Ahch-To, where the Force felt like a warm and lingering memory, here it oozed out of everything like sap, life so concentrated it was almost overwhelming. It was dark and corrupted, reaching out and encompassing everything like molasses.

It was the dark side, and it was everywhere – all around her, crushing her lungs with so much intensity it felt like she was drowning.
Her eyes flew open, desperate to see something other than the darkness, but all she saw was the color of blood and fire.

Scavenging what she could from the wreckage, Rey managed to put together a fairly decent survival pack. The on-board medkit was largely undamaged, which was a blessing, and she managed to fish out a mostly intact thermal blanket from one of the fold-down cots. She only had her one canteen full of water, which was going to be a problem, but she had about three days worth of rations, and she knew she could stretch those out into a week’s worth.

She crammed the rations in the bag containing the medkit and clipped the canteen to her belt. Her lightsaber hung securely on the other side, a comforting weight in her tumultuous situation. She wrapped the blanket around the bag’s strap and slung it over her good shoulder.

Her first priority had to be supplies, namely water. After that, shelter, and then a way off the crimson planet.

The communicator had been destroyed during the crash, but she didn't know who she would've called even if it hadn't been. The last thing she wanted to do was call for help from the Resistance – especially when she was the one who was supposed to be helping Finn. Master Luke had no way of contacting the outside world.

That more or less encompassed the entirety of everyone she knew.

No, even with the communicator she would've had to find her own way off-planet. She just wished that the shuttle hadn't been destroyed so completely.

Perhaps there was some sort of settlement near-by. It wouldn't be impossible; if Jakku was anything to go by, she knew that people could make settlements in even the most desolate locations.

She hesitated only a moment before opening herself back up to the life-flow of the planet. As dark as it was, she knew she'd be able to sense something if there was some sort of village or settlement within range. It was her first time attempting to reach out for other gatherings of life so she wasn't sure just how far that range would be, exactly, but she found that when she tried she could feel much farther than she thought.

Miles and miles – she didn't know how far, exactly, but it felt like half the planet – her senses extended, riding the waves of the Force as it flowed from one life form to another. They were all connected, and it allowed her senses to go on almost forever.

The planet’s Force essence was dark, but unlike her earlier experiences with the dark side, it felt non-threatening – just elemental. It didn't feel evil at all.

There were no villages as far as she could tell – no gatherings of people, nothing beyond the millions of simpler life forms that surrounded her. But there was something else. A wellspring of the Force, swirling with the dark side like a storm. And in that storm, in the eye and reaching outward, were a million little pinpricks of light. It was dark, but the light existed within that darkness in a perfect balance.

It was the biggest concentration of the Force that she had ever felt. And it was beautiful.

Readjusting the strap against her shoulder, she headed off in the direction of the wellspring. She had no idea what it was, but it was the only thing even remotely near her and one destination was as good as any in the seemingly never-ending forest. Dead trees and thick fog hindered her progress. The weak sun was getting lower in the sky, although the environment never seemed to change
shades; the darker it got, the more it seemed that the crimson landscape emitted its own strange sort of light, enough to both light her way and thoroughly unnerve her.

The sounds around her were foreign and menacing. On Jakku the nights had been largely empty of animals, at least as long as she stayed near her fallen AT-AT. Here, the noises were endless; every tree and shadow seemed to hide something crawling or slithering, and they made their presence known with terrifying screeches. Even without the tiny disturbances in the Force, it set her on edge.

She had no idea how long she hiked through the barren wilderness, her head swimming with the Force currents around her. The deeper she explored, the less concrete the world around her seemed. It felt like hours and it felt like minutes. If she really listened she occasionally thought that she could hear whispers around her, words so old that they had been forgotten. It was mesmerizing, the more she listened to it. Words just beyond her grasp – but they were talking to her. Whoever they were.

Words that entranced and beckoned, she almost started following the voices instead, nebulous as they were.

Then she'd step on a twig, or an animal would scurry past, and she'd snap out of it. It scared her, how the very planet seemed to be wooing her in – in towards what, she had no idea. She chafed at the constant dulling of her mind, but it didn't matter.

The voices, the Force, and her own curiosity were all pulling her towards the same center: the Force wellspring. The closer she got the more overwhelming it felt, but she trudged on.

She didn't know what she'd find when she got there, but all other priorities seemed to fade to the back of her mind. Water, food, shelter. Those things didn't matter, at least not as much as getting to her destination did. She'd tackle her other needs after she saw what the Force wanted her to see, after she went where she needed to go.

The voices urged her on.

Chapter End Notes

First, I just want to send a HUGE shout-out to the totally awesome people who have reviewed/left kudos. You guys are so cool, I dig you all so much!

A little bit of both POVs to make up for the lack of reylo. But! Starting this next chapter, there! Will! Be! Actual! Interaction! I mean, come on, they're going to be (some of) the only people on the planet; they'll have no one else besides each other to talk to, so it's okay to build up to the interactions, right?

And as far as the planet goes, you can find Dathomir on wookieepedia. Name-dropping it pretty much reveals who the woman with Rey was, but we'll be finding that out soon enough anyway.

Thanks for staying with me so far!
Out of the fog he emerged, dark like a shadow and looming with anger. The crimson of his lightsaber seemed to materialize out of the red fog around him, and it seemed right at home amongst the environment. There was hardly any light reflected off of the chrome on his visor, as if the glow from his saber didn't even reach it. Her breath caught at the sight.

She froze to the spot for a good three seconds before her brain caught up with her eyes. *Run*. But, no – no, she had beaten him once. She could do so again. Her hand fumbled for the hilt of her lightsaber. She activated it and held it in front of her like a shield.

The electric blue of her lightsaber hummed steadily, a comforting antipode to the world around her. Still, she gave ground as he advanced, careful not to trip over any protruding roots or rocks.

“What are you doing here?” She demanded, forcing her surprise to the back of her mind.

He didn't answer, but continued forward, giving his lightsaber a twirl that promised violence. Malevolence surrounded him like a shroud, but it felt off, somehow. It was more of a general hostility, and it didn't really feel like his brand of enmity at all.

He swung at her several times, but she blocked each attempt. His swing was stronger than she remembered, and he kept getting stronger with each swing. She gave up more ground, shuffling around in the dark environment.

It occurred to her to reach out through their bond, if only to ascertain what he was thinking. She felt *nothing*. Nothing at all. It was like they weren't connected, but more than that – the Force felt vacant. Like there was no one in front of her at all.

He was hatred, but he was void.

That's when it dawned on her, and that's when he raised his lightsaber overhead and swung down on her with such strength that she lost her footing and fell against the base of a tree.

She woke with a start, activating her lightsaber in a blind panic and scrambling up to her knees before she realized that she had been dreaming. With a sigh she collapsed back against the ground and deactivated her saber, clipping it back onto her belt.

She ran a hand over her face and let out a shaky breath.

It was this damned planet – it seemed comprised of nightmares, bleeding fear and darkness into everything. The tiny pinpricks of the light side seemed so far away she almost felt as if she had imagined them. They were nearly unreachable.

Hours had passed since she had started her hike into the blood-colored forest, and yet the wellspring of Force power seemed to be no closer than before. Despite the pull she felt towards it, she had already downed half of her canteen full of water and she knew her priorities would have to change. Besides the life forms constantly slithering around her she hadn't noticed one indication of vegetation or any other means of sustaining life. The entire forest seemed dead. She thought that maybe she could find some sort of body of water through the Force, but she didn't really know what to look for besides gatherings of life forms, which obviously didn't help her any.
Thirst was one of her longest-standing enemies, and she was no stranger to it, but she also knew that she wouldn't last long without more water. It felt strange to be able to relate such a place to Jakku, but survival was a universal language and she knew it well.

She had only intended to close her eyes for an hour or two and let herself recharge a little, but a quick glance at her chrono showed that she had been sleeping for the better part of five hours.

“Ah, hells,” she grumbled, pushing herself up off the ground. She straightened her medkit bag and rewrapped the thermal blanket around the strap before she set off again in the direction of the wellspring.

She didn't need to reach out to it in the Force to find the correct way to go, because it reached out towards her.

All at once she came upon it, one minute trudging through the endless crimson mist and around the dark twisted trees, and the next stumbling into some sort of clearing.

This was it – the tip of the wellspring.

The clearing seemed to be more an aversion to whatever power this place held than anything else; no life forms neared it, and even the trees' limbs were twisted away, as if in revulsion. All along the trees hung strange cocoons – large, still things that each held something not quite alive in the Force. Rey barely noticed it.

There, in the center of the clearing, was a structure like she had never seen before. It was enormous, nearly pushing into the forest, and towering endlessly above. The architecture was like nothing she had ever seen before – the entire structure was shaped like a box, but it sat well above-ground, held up by statues of women with their arms raised above their heads. Each of the statues were intricately carved, their faces severe and cold. It was dark under the structure, as if it was the yawning opening to a cave of some sort. The air around it felt cooler the closer she got. It was massive, and it was terrifying. But that wasn't even what transfixed her gaze.

At the center of the structure was a face – long and feminine, with delicate eyes and indentations probably meant to mark facial tattoos. What looked like spider legs extended from her face, three on each side. The mouth was hanging open, falling all of the way down to the end of the structure so that it looked like some sort of entrance. But it breathed. Rey could swear it was breathing, whispering for her to come closer.

If the planet seemed a nightmare to her, this place looked like the embodiment of horror.

She had absolutely no desire to go anywhere near that edifice.

The Force was bleeding out of it like an open wound. This was it – this was the edge of the wellspring in the Force. It wasn't the wellspring itself; she could feel it coming from deep within the structure, in the dark.

She took a half-step back. A chill ran down her spine like a finger.

“So you've finally found us,”

Rey spun around and activated her lightsaber in a flash, swallowing her startled cry like a rock in the back of her throat.

A ghoulish woman in red robes floated like an apparition not ten paces behind her. She looked like
she belonged on the environment around her: red and nightmarish. There was something unsettlingly familiar about the woman. Rey thought that perhaps the woman wasn't real – she didn't look quite solid around the edges, and she was floating.

The woman knitted her long, white hands together, and her expression somehow looked both warm and vulpine. There were dark echoes when she spoke, and Rey knew that she must've seen her before, because she knew the sound exactly. “Although it took you a remarkably short amount of time for one so wild and untrained.”

It smarted a bit, but she resisted the urge to retort the part about being totally untrained. An image of her master flashed in her mind, but she put it away before she could feel the familiar tug of loneliness. “Who are you?” She demanded, tightening her grip on her lightsaber.

The woman smiled, and it was terrifying. “I've been called different things by different people, but you may call me Mother Talzin.”

“Mother Talzin?” She echoed lamely.

“Yes,” she looked pleased to hear her name spoken, her pale eyes glowing, “and I'm very pleased to see you in person.”

Rey didn't reply; she knew all at once where she had seen the red woman. It was her – from the forest on Starkiller and from when she crashed. Her memories of the incident snapped back into place like a missing engine part. That woman had done something to her, had hurt her before she had crashed. Something in the Force; she could still feel the remnants of it in her head, as if it had left a scar.

Her muscles tensed, ready for a fight, and Mother Talzin noticed. “I am not here to harm you, my child,” as she spoke she started to descend towards Rey, who scrambled another couple of feet back. “I am here to guide you.”

“I have a teacher.”

“I have no skill with sabers and wars,” she answered evenly, and it almost sounded like an inside joke. Mother Talzin was much taller than her, and when she looked up it seemed as if she was looking lightyears above her, into some unknown blackness that Rey has no desire to glimpse. “You feel it, do you not? The power of this place.”

It wasn't really a question, but Rey still shook her head. “It feels wrong.”

Mother Talzin’s gaze returned to her. “It is complete; the living Force in its most natural state.”

“It's dark,” Rey pointed out, feeling somewhat like a petulant child.

“Yes,” Mother Talzin admitted easily, “and it's light, as well. Tell me, do you think that the Force sees itself as ‘dark’ and ‘light’?” she spoke as if she was asking a child, patient and waiting to teach.

Rey didn’t know how to respond it that. Truthfully, the answer was both yes and no. To her, whenever she used it, it just felt like the Force, neither light nor dark – just there. It was life itself. But in everything else – in the silent warmth of an old Jedi and the cold mask of a selfish monster – she felt very much like the Force was either light or dark. It couldn't be both, because how could the same Force that allowed Master Luke to connect with every living thing on his island be the same Force that Kylo Ren drew upon to fuel his murderous rage?

She had a feeling that there was more to Mother Talzin's question, but she was far too wary to
investigate further.

“I don't know.”

Mother Talzin hummed, seemingly content with that answer. “You are very honest, my child.” She took a breath, and seemed to become somewhat more corporeal. “Come – lower your weapon. I will not harm you, and I wish to show you something.”

Her grip on her lightsaber had already relaxed with out her realizing it, and she snapped it back up. For a moment she considered fighting. Or, given her previous experience with the woman, perhaps it would be smarter to run.

“Come,” The ghoulish woman urged lightly, her shadow voices sounding sluggish and wooing, “you are not afraid of me, remember?”

She did remember; she had said that on her shuttle. The only thing was, she was terrified. Of the dark wellspring yawning before her, the light fading away the closer she got. She was afraid of this Mother Talzin. With every fiber of her being she wished Luke was there; she didn't know what to do.

“Come,” Mother Talzin’s hand was outstretched towards her, welcoming. The voices continued to murmur around her, ancient words in forgotten tongues. She realized that those were the voices that she'd been hearing – the call that had beckoned her to them. She suddenly felt like she was a small animal that had wandered into a trap.

But the voices. The more she listened to them, the more she could almost make them out. Comfort – not in words exactly, but in intent – reached out to her, urged calm into her body and mind. She found herself entirely tempted to listen.

After another long moment she deactivated her lightsaber. “Okay, but don't try anything.”

“Child, you are completely safe with me.”

Yeah, said a voice in her head, both her own and someone else’s, said the predator to the baby animal.

But she followed her anyway.

Mother Talzin led them into the structure, between the intricate statues and into the darkness underneath. For several long moments it was so dark Rey couldn't even see the tip of her nose. She gripped her lightsaber tightly and considered activating it to provide even a meager amount of light, but she wasn't sure that she wanted to see what was around her.

The moment passed; there was a faint light ahead, green and earthy. It was the first light that she had seen in the past day and a half that wasn't red. The Force was pulsing out of the opening steadily, oozing around her in slow waves

It was the opening to a cave, or really the ending of a cave. It opened into a sprawling cavern, a place that she instinctually knew had to be a millennia old. Cone-like complexes were carved into the natural stone formations. They each somewhat resembled places of living, besides the fact that they all seemed to be centered around a circular area that looked to be reserved for some sort of religious practice. Rey's head started pounding when she looked at it, so she turned her gaze away.

Some sort of glowing liquid was the source of the soft green light, filling the bottom of the cavernous
space between each of the complexes. In some places it even fell like a waterfall, although she couldn't imagine where the liquid came from.

The Force was everywhere, flowing in and around her in a way that reminded her of breathing – but it was a dark power that surrounded her. It's very presence seemed to contradict this Mother Talzin’s supposed stance on the Force’s neutrality. She could no longer feel the bright specks of light that had seemed like stars to her, and she ached for them – for any little bit of light in this place. It made her nervous, but no less in awe of what she was seeing. The voices whispered a thousand years of history, calming her urge to run.

“What is this place?” Rey breathed.

Mother Talzin made a sweeping gesture. “This is the home of my clan – my sisters.”

“She broke her gaze from the sight. She had never been underground before, as far as she could remember. “You don't strike me as the type to have a lot of family. No offense.”

“I used to have many sisters, each forsaken from their original home.” That struck a cord in Rey, the thought of people being abandoned by their families. She wondered if Mother Talzin knew that.

“Why were they forsaken?” She couldn't help asking.

Mother Talzin took her time answering as she led Rey down a stone walkway that had been carved out of the side of the cavern, the stone worn smooth by the ages. Down they went, around the perimeter of the cavern, until they came to the bottom. Mother Talzin's scarlet robes flowed like water – blood – as she moved.

“The Force is powerful, but there is more than one way to tap into that power. We are not what you'd call traditional Force users. Many find our practices to be,” pale eyes shone in the shadows, accentuating the feeling of wrongness in Rey's chest. For once the voices were silent. Mother Talzin's lips stretched, “an abomination.”

There it was – the word was like a bucket of ice water on her mind. Immediately Rey halted, realizing that they were standing on the edge of the sacred center of the cavern. The voices had stopped talking, or at least had faded to the background. Her wariness returned to her tenfold. Everything was bathed in that strange green glow coming from the liquid, but beneath it she could feel the Force swirling, dark and devouring. She felt sick to her stomach with it.

She had to get away. Immediately, right now.

Leave. Leave.

She was down in the bowls of the wellspring, and it felt like she was drowning. Mother Talzin’s eyes bore into hers with some unidentifiable knowledge. Rey felt like she couldn't move, couldn’t look away. She managed to close her eyes for a moment, took a couple of deep breaths.

Then without another word she turned and bolted.

Drawing on as much of the Force as she could without actually drawing from the darkness around her, she propelled herself up the steps and towards the mouth of the cave as fast as she could.

She discovered a pool of power tucked away in the back of her head. She hadn't noticed it before, but she didn't question it – if it came from within her then she trusted it. Survivors always had to trust themselves.
Pulling upon it, she found that the pool was much larger than she had thought. It easily quickened her steps. Fear was nagging at her senses, but she pushed it to the back of her mind.

The pool of power quivered at her emotion, or because of its usage, she couldn't tell. It started to feel thicker, the power less easily accessed.

It was drying up. *Pulling away,* she realized.

Back to its source.

Her throat closed up.

*Kylo Ren.*

The knowledge that she was drawing upon some of his own power to escape Mother Talzin and her tainted Force made her stomach turn to durasteel, but she didn't stop pulling from it until she had gotten clear of the dark complex. He was taking it back, but not so fast that she couldn't use it for a few more moments. When she let go, his power snapped back across their bond like he had whipped it out of her hands.

A thousand thoughts flittered across her mind sent from his side of the bond, but she couldn't grasp most of them. Didn't want to try. Several were prominent: shock, irritation, curiosity.

She turned away from their bond, but didn't bother trying to shut it off.

Her mind was reeling with fear – of the wellspring, that Mother Talzin would follow her. Kylo Ren's sudden reappearance in her head made her uneasy. Her thoughts were like whirlwinds in her head, each vying for her attention. The fear and confusion propelled her feet forward, and she didn't stop running even after she was back under the blood red sky.

She needed to get off of this Force-forsaken planet more than ever. It wasn't just about saving Finn, not anymore.

And she had just used some of Kylo Ren's power – the dark, twisted power that he used to kill Han – to escape. How could she even do that? She was sure that she hadn't bed able to do that before.

Now that she had put some distance between her and the wellspring she could feel him. He was so *close,* close enough that the string that connected them felt more like an elastic band; it had thickness and it gave and pulled when she touched it.

The feeling was familiar. It was what she had felt back on Starkiller base.

When she reached the edge of the clearing she heard an unmistakable rumbling. A ship.

*His ship.*

The Upsilon-class shuttle flashed by overhead, onyx black against the red sky. On it she felt his Force signature like a solar flame, that burning presence that made her want to both *run* and *fight.*

This time shock colored her features as she tried to keep her eye on the shuttle through the trees. Keeping a visual on his shuttle wasn't all that important as his Force signature was an unmistakable beacon, but she still strained to see its blinking lights through the gnarled branches around her.

Mother Talzin was all but forgotten with the arrival of her enemy. What was he doing here? How did he find her – did he even come to find her?
She stopped short. If she could find him then-

There was an opportunity to finish their confrontation – to make him pay for Han.

There was a voice in her head – the one that had kept her alive all of her nineteen years – telling her that it was an extremely bad idea. That whichever way he went, she should go the opposite. There was no way that she could realistically hope to stand up to someone like him with real training. She hadn't even been trained two whole months; it would be suicide to challenge him when he was at full strength.

But her heart told her that this was the monster who had killed the only man who had seemed even remotely like a father to her, who had very nearly killed her first friend. He should never be allowed to hurt anyone ever again, she thought. He deserved justice.

Rising over both parts was the practical part of her brain – the scavenger. And it had zeroed in on one thing, the one all-important detail to the situation she was in: the ship.

If she could get to that ship, she could leave. Go help Finn and sleep well knowing that Kylo Ren had at the very least been abandoned on a planet with a crazy nightmare of a Force-wielder and no supplies. She technically wouldn't even need to confront him; he could die just as easily left without supplies in the wilderness. She didn't know if he had any particular skill-set in wilderness survival, but she sincerely doubted it. She hoped not, anyway.

She hadn't really even had a choice, but she felt the resolve in her chest as if she had decided anyway. Kylo Ren's appearance meant certain violence and possible death, but in her case it was also her only chance to escape.

When she started trudging through the forest towards where his presence was blazing like a flare, it felt as if she was giving in to an elastic pull.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, FOR REAL we're going to get interactions in the next chapter. Sorry, Mother Talzin took longer than I thought. On that note, any thoughts about that? Yay, nay? Snoke's still a major big bad in this story, but I wanted to add another one of my favs to the mix.

I've gotta say, I just love writing about Rey hating on Kylo with the knowledge that her feelings are going to be massively different later. It makes me excited as the writer.

P.S. Sorry that this is a little later than I wanted to get it up, you guys are AWESOME. seriously.
Kylo felt her coming from the moment he landed. The bond they shared was strengthened by their proximity, so much so that it surprised him. It was strong enough that she had been able to *draw power* from him.

He kept up his mental defenses just in case the damn girl tried that again. The last thing he needed was to confront her in a weakened state while she attacked him with his own power.

He had come prepared to search for her, but hadn't expected her Force signature to stand out against the massive currents of the Force that characterized Dathomir. As soon as he had broken into the atmosphere of the planet he could pinpoint her, could practically see her from where he was. Perhaps it was their bond, or perhaps it was the fact that everything in the Force felt magnified on this planet. Either way, it had been as easy as following a blazing flare right to her.

What had surprised him was where he found her. She was dead-center in a natural concentration of the Force, a swirling well of dark side power that he could feel even from his ship.

She was practically drowning in it, her fear shooting at him like electrical shocks. That's when she started pulling power from him.

He didn't even realize it at first. She was projecting so much, he didn't notice that she had reached across their bond, the tendrils of her mind latching onto his for strength. It just didn't seem like something she would do.

For a whole second after he realized what was happening he just sat there, immobilized by his shock. That she would – did she even *realize*?

A small jerk from his shuttle's controls snapped him out of it. He pulled back in his mind, wrenching his power away from her invasive hands. She didn't let it go, and for a moment he found himself struggling against her. Anger sparked through him; he wanted her the hell *out*.

She let go, and he slammed their connection shut so fast he could almost hear it ring in his head.

It took a while to regain control over his irritation, and for the feeling of her to recede from the front of his mind. Her residue was all in his brain, sticky like molasses. He resented her for it, because she made it just that much harder to focus.

He landed his command shuttle in a small clearing just barely big enough to fit, but he was pretty sure that he had still scraped up his ship. When he exited his shuttle it looked as if the dark, towering trees had reaching in around him, making the clearing even smaller.

He hated places like this. The places that twisted the Force and messed with people's minds. The dark side of the Force was incredibly strong there, but it was wrong and it didn't react in the way that the Force normally would. It was like putting an onyx and ink black side-by-side, the same but different. Planets like this practically had minds of their own – a sentience that generally spelled bad things for visitors. Dathomir was one of the last places he wanted to be, so of course that's where she was.

As he thought of her something tugged in his chest. Their bond. She was testing it, feeling how
much stronger it was with proximity. It was not going to be like the last time they had met, when she had tried to kill him and they were entirely unaware of any connection between them. And if it came to fighting her – definitely not. He had healed, and had his strength. If he knew Skywalker, then she had probably just learned a couple of meditation techniques.

The thought struck him anew – why was she even on this planet? It was a question that he had already asked, but now he really wondered. Especially in light of the fact that he had found her in a wellspring of the dark side. Skywalker wouldn't have sent her here.

Their bond tugged in his mind, thick and strong, and he knew that she was getting close. He didn't have to wait long; within half an hour he saw a flash of her grey ensemble between the gnarled trees. He knew that she saw him, too, because he could feel the now familiar spark of anger that he always caused in her.

She looked awful. Covered in grime from head-to-toe, she looked like she had just crawled out of a mud pit. Her hair was coming out of her buns, frizzy and wild around her face. From what he could see, half of her was covered in cuts and bruises. She looked like she had been fighting for her life. Her eyes, though, those were the same: equal parts determined and angry.

He wondered how she could do that – be so filled with anger and yet not in-touch with the dark side.

“What are you doing here?” she asked without preamble, as if she had just discovered him, as if they hadn't been able to feel each other the entire time. As if she hadn't just siphoned power from him. She still had his grandfather’s lightsaber, he noted.

“Not happy to see me?”

Her chest was heaving; he wondered if she had run the entire way. His master wanted something that the girl had supposedly found, but judging by how she looked he doubted that she had found much of anything. Then again, there was a voice in the back of his head reminding him that she was and always had been a scavenger, and not to underestimate her again.

“Obviously,” she spat, activating the lightsaber in her hands. Despite the fact that exhaustion was rolling off of her, she stood ready for a fight.

He followed her example, his lightsaber glowing an entirely different kind of red than the environment around him. “You look tired. Rough day?”

“I'll be fine,”

“Of course you will, now that you've stolen some of my power. Should I be flattered?”

Something changed in her face when he said the word ‘stolen,’ and she immediately got flustered and angry. “I haven't stolen anything of yours,” she insisted.

He raised his eyebrows behind his mask. “Oh really? Then what do you call what you did back there?”

“That I did back where?” Her tone was both irritated and tired, but she didn't let her guard drop.

What was he doing? His mission was to retrieve whatever it was that the girl had found, not get in to some ridiculous argument with her. He didn't want to keep talking about what she had done, didn't want to think about how easy it was for her or how hard it was for him to get her completely out. Judging by the look on her face, she wasn't to keen on it, either.
So he dropped it. “You've found something, haven't you?” He asked instead.

The change in topic surprised her. “Everything I've found here is,” she hesitated. He realized that she was looking for the words to describe it, “wrong.”

She had been inching to his left flank little by little; he wondered if she didn't think he'd notice. He gave the dark forest a cursory glance, felt the dark side surging around him. He took it in, tried to let it add to his power, but not very much. It didn't mix well, but he forced it to be under his control. Such a place was probably overwhelming to her.

If it threw her off, then it gave him a decided advantage. “I feel fine.”

“It's the dark side,” she pointed out as if she had to prove that she knew what it was, “of course you feel fine.”

His mask hid the roll of his eyes, but his contempt reached her even past the mental defenses that he was keeping up between them.

“All I need is whatever you found. Then I'll just leave you here to die.”

“You're not going to try to fight me again?” She taunted, and he felt his anger rise accordingly.

There was no way that he could resist. He shifted into a more aggressive stance. “This is going to end badly for you,” he promised.

“Didn't end so badly before,” she returned. He took a deep breath in through his nose. The Supreme Leader hadn't specified about what he wanted done with her, and Kylo interpreted that as ‘as you see fit.’ Without another second wasted on dialogue, he seized the opportunity to just kill the girl once and for all.

He made the first move. Crossing the distance between them in two large steps, he used the Force to knock out her feet as he swung at her in a sweeping downward slash. She fell, but caught herself with her hand. It was pure luck that she managed to block his strike, although the force behind it knocked her to the side. Using the momentum, she rolled with it and came up standing. If it was at all possible, she looked even more thoroughly caked in mud than before.

With a grunt of exertion she sliced at him three times, forcing him to take a half-step back. On the last swing he purposely shifted his weight to the side, unbalancing her and drawing her closer as a result. He was going to bring his saber down on her arm, sever it from her body, but before he could even swing at her she had elbowed him in the neck.

The shock of the impact made him stumble back a few steps, giving her vital room in which to move. The pain made him choke, and for a second he thought that she had crushed his windpipe, but after a moment could tell that she hadn't done any serious damage. He growled deep in his throat. He kept forgetting that she was a brawler at heart, that she didn't duel, she scrapped.

He spun his lightsaber in the shape of a sideways ‘v’ as she tried to press her advantage, effectively halting her in her tracks as she had to deflect both strikes. Her brow was furrowed and she was already panting from exhaustion. Whatever had happened to her before had winded her enough to rely on him to make up for lost energy, but she had no access to him now. He was stronger than her, and they both knew it.

She made another attempt to swing at him, but he batted it aside with ease. It wasn't exactly a satisfying fight, but he was still going to win, and that was more than enough consolation for him.
There was defiance in her eyes as she glared at his mask. He could admit that he respected her a little for looking at the face of inevitable defeat without fear. She didn't have to suffer, he decided. He'd end it quickly.

His grandfather's lightsaber hummed in sharp contrast to the rest of the world around them, the blue glow vibrant and alive against her face.

And then she bolted.

He stood in disbelief for a half-second, but it was enough to give her a fair head start. It took almost no time for her to be swallowed up by the red mist around them, but she made no attempt to be quiet and his grandfather's saber swung around like a beacon.

The forest was dark in the evening light, and the trees seemed to whisper as he rushed past them. He firmly ignored it and kept his eyes on the blue blade ahead of him, which was waving somewhat erratically as she ran.

He lost visual when she ran behind what Kylo could just make out as a tree. The reverse hiss echoed around them as she deactivated the lightsaber in her hand. He rushed around the large tree as he approached, his own lightsaber still flaring at his side, only to find her gone.

Swearing under his breath, he scanned the area around him, but without the glow of a lightsaber she was as good as invisible in the darkness and mist. He stretched out his senses like a blanket, looking for a sound or movement that would be distinctly hers, but the local wildlife was throwing him off. Everything had a weird Force signature, as if living on the planet had warped it irreparably.

It took him a moment longer than it should've to remember their bond. He lifted the wall just enough so that he could feel the brush of her consciousness against his. Frustrated, he realized that she was blocking his efforts to pry her location out of her.

He pushed harder, throwing his defenses away in favor of pushing into her mind, trying to see through her eyes.

Get out, get out, get out.

The words spun in her head like a shield, blocking his every attack. With a growl of frustration he sent a stab of pain over to her, his lips twitching in triumph as he felt her stumble through their connection. Over and over her sent her waves of pain both mentally and through his own memories. In a moment of momentum he reached into his memory of his master's punishment after his failure at Starkiller base. He felt it was a safe thing to show her only because they had already been linked by then. Even remembering the pain was almost enough to give him pause, and it had the same effect on her.

All at once his knees hit the ground, only they didn't – they were hers. He saw her hands grasping at the trunks of the looming trees, pulling herself back up. Her heartbeat thudded loudly in his ears. In her struggle to push past what he was sending to her, she let her guard drop enough that he could see through her eyes.

The ground, the trees. She was looking around wildly, and at first he thought that it was for him, but when she stumbled back to her feet and caught a glimpse of his shuttle between the trees, he realized his mistake.

The damn girl was going to steal his ship.

“Scavenger!” He roared, pulling out of their connection and running in the direction he knew his
shuttle to be. He was so stupid, he had gotten caught up in his head and had forgotten that she was running away from something. And he had just given her his shuttle.

No. That was not going to happen. He'd crash his own shuttle and kill them both before letting her strand him on this Force-forsaken planet. It wasn't that far of a run back to his ship, but but from what he could tell she had been-

A blast of purple energy hit him in his left shoulder, strong enough that it nearly knocked him off of his feet and knocked the breath out of him. Pain blossomed from the wound throughout his chest, and his bruised throat wanted to close up from the pain of taking deep breaths. Trying to regain the ability to breathe, he reached his hand up to detach his mask, but thought better of it when he saw four figures in front of him. They were each wielding some sort of bow, but the string appeared to be made out of purple energy.

He forced the air into his lungs and readied for a fight, ignoring the wound to his shoulder. They had obviously shot him with one of their weapons, as unconventional as they appeared. All four figures were feminine, wrapped up in scant scarlet robes. Two wore hoods and they all had their lower faces obscured in the same fabric of the rest of their ensembles. Their ghostly skin stood out even in the darkness.

The Force around them was strange, distorted. They were natives, then.

Grip tightening on his lightsaber, he was about to swing at the one closest to him when another one spoke.

“Come with us,” the words weren't distorted by the wrapping around the woman's face, but there was something about the quality that made her sound like a snake.

He didn't have time for this – the girl was getting away and every second wasted was a second closer to getting stranded on Dathomir for the foreseeable future. His shoulder was pulsing from the pain, and he used it to fuel his strength.

“No.”

One strike, two, three - every swing of his saber met air as the women flitted out of his reach, fast as Chlovi cats. His haste and frustration made him sloppy, and his wide swings left him exposed. It was entirely easier for them than it should've been, even with their superior numbers. They hit him twice in the back with bolts that materialized out of the same energy as when they drew their bows, as well as in his right thigh and once on the back of his main hand, forcing him to switch his lightsaber to his left despite the pain it shot through his shoulder. None of their hits were as strong as the first one had been, mostly superficial and more meant to stun, but they still burned.

His outcry of anger sounded nearly animalistic as he grabbed one of the women with the Force and pulled her towards him, carrying her all of the way onto his saber. The smell of cauterized flesh barely registered to him as he pulled his lightsaber out of her sternum with a sweep and let the mutilated body slump to the ground.

One down, but he didn't have time to fight the others. He was close enough that he could hear the engines start on his shuttle, could feel the rustling of the air around him as it prepared to take flight. The tips of its wings became visible through the trees.

Drawing on the Force around him, he shot a wave of pure Force power at the rest of the women, blowing them back a good few yards, and used the opening to run.
His mind roared with every curse he knew, and he sent do not go in a continuous stream through their connection. Racing towards his shuttle, he would've all but forgotten the three remaining red women if not for the bolts of energy that occasionally flew by his head. One nearly clipped his helmet, but he ducked his head in time.

All at once he broke into the clearing. His robes whipped around his legs as the shuttle’s thrusters kicked up the air around him, his hood flapping wildly behind him.

It wasn't taking off. The ramp was down and he didn’t sense her on board. Relief flooded him, but it quickly hardened into uncertainty, and then wariness. There was no doubt in his mind that she was planning on stealing his shuttle, and she had plenty of time to do so. Yet, he had come upon it empty. He still felt her nearby – he couldn't tell exactly where as she had firmly erected her mental defenses once more, but that little spark of her consciousness was so present in his mind that he knew she couldn't be far.

He didn't have time to search further, though, because the three red women emerged from the trees, their weapons drawn. He dropped into a fighting stance, but they didn't advance.

“I must admit, I had no idea that you’d come so quickly.”

Kylo jerked his head to see that another woman had emerged from the trees. She was different from the rest; she had a surplus of red robes and her pale face didn't look entirely human. The thing that gave him pause was her Force aura – she had a hurricane of Force power surrounding her, but kept in check by her own force of will. It was the same warped Force power as he'd been sensing ever since he landed, but she was in complete control of it.

“I don't know what you're talking about.” Whatever it was the girl had been running from, he felt fairly confident that these people were it. Perhaps that's why she had made herself scarce.

The ghoulish woman smiled and gave the other women a small nod, at which they all lowered their weapons. She was their leader, then.

“I am Mother Talzin,” she greeted him with a slow nod, “and this is my domain upon which you have landed. You must be here for Rey.”

He didn't say anything.

“Rest assured that she is well,” Talzin continued as if she was speaking of the weather. As if he should care about that information. “Although, you probably already know that, don't you?”

There was a long moment when he debated not replying, but he eventually bit out, “I don't know what you're talking about.”

Even though none of the women in front of them had their weapons raised, Kylo knew that he was sorely outmatched. It wasn't the three women with their speed and energy bows, it was this Mother Talzin in her flowing robes and glowing eyes. He had been in the presence of true power before – knew what it felt like – and he also knew that this woman’s power was nothing like his master’s.

She tilted her head, just a little, “Do you not? Was it not your bond that called you here, that allows you to feel her even now?”

He worked his jaw but kept his mouth shut. That this Talzin knew about their bond unnerved him; had the girl told her about it? It struck him as a disadvantage somehow.

“It's alright, young man. Me and my coven wish her no harm.”
Two things struck him at once; one, that this Talzin had apparently grossly misinterpreted his relationship with the scavenger, and two – she had just said *coven*. Just like the ridiculous stories. Dathomirian witches.

“You're witches?” He didn't know what that would mean, didn't know how he would account for that in battle. None of the stories had ever mentioned how the Dathomirian witches actually fought.

The term seemed to amuse Talzin. “In a way. We call ourselves the Nightsisters.”

His throat felt dry.

The bond flared up suddenly, surprising him in its intensity. Anxiety and determination. It was enough that he took his attention off Talzin and her ‘Nightsisters’ for a moment, but a moment was all the woman needed. In a move totally silent but for the rustling of her robes, Talzin was all at once right in front of him, her bony hand reaching for his head. He moved more out of reflex than anything, throwing himself to the side and swinging his saber in a large arc that wasn't very precise but was more meant to put some distance between them.

The other Nightsisters were already on the move, and Kylo reflected two energy bolts before twisting away from Talzin once more. He had to constantly stay on the move to avoid the women, and they were too fast for him to get in any solid hits. He noticed that one of the Nightsisters wasn't paying attention to him, instead firing off to her left. That was a mistake that he'd make her pay for.

Using the Force to fuel his swings was a bit like trying to force two magnets with the same polarity together; his darkness repelled off of their own in a strange and entirely frustrating way. So when he went for the third Nightsister he only put his own power behind his blows, which was still powerful, but gave her enough time to fire off her last shot before he struck her down.

But he didn't strike her down. As soon as the energy bolt was let loose, a shock of pain flared up in their bond, so close he almost thought that he had gotten shot. Rey's sudden grunt as she hit the ground threw him off just enough that he only gave the Nightsister a glancing strike on her arm and hip. He barely managed to deflect the bolts that the other Nightsisters shot at him immediately after.

Both his and Mother Talzin's focus shifted to the scavenger who was scrambling to her feet. Her expression hadn't changed from when he had first seen her; she looked tired and angry.

“You?” The name slipped out between his teeth before he could think better of it.

She only had eyes for Talzin, who looked pleased to see her in contrast. “Give me back my lightsaber,” she said.

Chapter End Notes

So. Much. Action. I hate it, I really, really do. It forces my mind to get way too technical in my writing. So sorry if it sucks, I just get fed up with it after a certain point, haha. That being said, ohmygosh! We've got reylo in the same scene, and it's not a dream sequence!

This chapter was getting a little long, so I cut it in half. Sorry if it seemed abrupt. Love
you guys!
“And where do you think you're going?”

The serpentine voice wasn't Mother Talzin's, but it sent chills down Rey's spine all the same. She spun around in the pilot’s chair to see two women standing on the open exit ramp of Kylo Ren's shuttle. Her hand was hovering over the exit controls, just about ready to shut the airlock and leave this forsaken planet behind her.

Her lightsaber was in her hand before she even stood. The women were undoubtably some of the sisters that Mother Talzin had spoken of, but they didn't appear to be nearly as powerful as she was; they were both armed with some sort energy bow and lacked Mother Talzin's ethereal quality. But the scarlet of their robes, the paleness of their faces – those were the same.

“I don't have any trouble with you,” she tried, unwilling to get into anything that might compromise the integrity of the shuttle.

“Nor we with you,” the one farther from her spoke, “but you cannot leave.”

Fat chance. Her heart was still thudding in her throat from her encounter with Kylo Ren, and she didn't know if it was from the adrenaline or a sort of phantom pain from where she had elbowed him. He had already been able to wrench from her what her intentions were, and she had no delusions that she had much time before he returned – at best, a few minutes, and at worst, possibly one.

The two of them must've read something on her face, because they both shifted to more aggressive stances, their weapons held out in front of them and sizzling with their purple energy. Rey didn't want to find out what getting shot with one would feel like. “Come with us,” the same woman as before spoke.

She had to resist the urge to activate her lightsaber.

One of the women shifted her aim a little to the right. “We will damage this craft if you do not,”

There was really no reason to believe that the woman wouldn't make good on that threat, and Rey wasn't willing to take the chance anyway. Not when she had never been taught how to deflect shots with her lightsaber, and didn't know if she'd be fast enough even if she did figure it out. It felt like agreeing to a cage, but she surrendered anyway. She didn't let go of her lightsaber when she lifted her hands. “Alright, fine.”

“Come on, then.”

Their bond gave an elastic pull as Kylo Ren halted not far off. The closeness made her swallow.

Making her way over to the exit ramp, Rey briefly considered trying to surprise the women, but decided against it. It was one thing to jump a person when all they saw was a skinny scavenger, practically drowning in the enormity of the desert; it was another thing entirely to jump a pair of women connected to the Force who were training their weapons on her like she was a dangerous animal. Despite the absolute absurdity of it, she felt a spark of pride in her chest at not being completely underestimated.
The whispering voices were very loud outside the shuttle, as if they were trying to be heard over the roaring engines. She tried her best to focus on the whirring noise of the engines and ignore the voices.

Mother Talzin was waiting for her at the bottom of the ramp, as unsettled and unworldly as ever. She couldn't read her expression, but there was a slightly pleased glint in her eye when she saw Rey.

“Rey, child. Why did you run away?” She sounded disappointed.

Rey gripped her weapon, which the women hadn't bothered trying to take away. “What do you want from me?”

Mother Talzin didn't answer; instead, she took a moment to study the shuttle from stem to stern. The Force shifted around them like a breath.

“Oh. I see. Your bond-mate is nearby.”

As if on cue, Kylo Ren's roar cut through the trees. It was angry and almost animalistic, and it made her jump. When she touched the bond the same feelings zapped her like a small shock. She immediately turned away from the bond.

Rey didn't look in the direction of the roar, but felt her hair stand on-end all the same. “How do you know about that?”

Mother Talzin smiled. “All things in time,” she promised, then opened her hand towards her as if to lead her away, “now come, child. There is much that I must tell you.”

“I'm not going anywhere with you,” Rey shifted a little to the right, trying to find an opening to run. Mother Talzin's alternate voice seemed to chuckle softly, although the woman herself seemed entirely composed.

“You have a destiny to fulfill, Rey. Only you can save us.”

“I don't want to save anybody.” She stuttered, not entirely sure how to rebuttal that.

The woman tilted her head slightly, a knowing look in her glowing eyes. “Ah, but is that not the very reason you came here? To save your friend?”

There was no way she could know about that – about Finn. And she knew about the bond, too. It didn't feel like anyone was reading her mind, but it occurred to her that perhaps that's what Mother Talzin had done to her before she had crashed her shuttle. Maybe she had raided her head for secrets, burned through her consciousness to see the very fabric she was made of. She wanted to scream at the thought, at being so violated.

Rey was terrified of this woman. And Mother Talzin could see it.

“Child, there are-“

She didn't stick around to hear the rest; she took off into the clearing. Within moments she heard the sounds of pursuit, but paid them no mind. Even when the energy bolts started whizzing by her, she just pushed herself forward.

“Rey!” Called both Mother Talzin and the whispering voice, but she ignored them, plunging between the trees into the dark mist.
One bolt clipped her in the hip, nearly causing her to go down, but she pushed through her stumble and kept on. Blood pounded in her ears, overwhelming the whispers of the forest. She thought in short bursts, mostly going off of instinct. Run. Turn. Dodge. Don’t look back.

Two bolts hit her right ankle in succession, and she went down. It was a pretty messy fall, but she managed to catch herself just before she smacked her face on the ground. Something in her wrist popped painfully, and she bit out a yelp as she rolled to her feet, lightsaber activated and held out in a defensive position.

Mother Talzin stood right in front of her, flanked on both sides by the two women archers. Rey had no idea how the woman could've run so fast in those heavy robes, but the slightly vaporous quality had returned so she thought that maybe she hadn't run. Maybe she had just floated.

She didn't know why she was thinking about it. “I won't be your prisoner,” she promised, “you can't make me come with you.”

“Prisoner?” The woman's ghoulish face contorted with some mixture of emotions akin to disappointment, confusion, and some other emotion that Rey couldn't identify. “No – you are our salvation.”

Nothing about that gave Rey any sort of comfort. The hair on the back of her neck stood on-end. Whether it was the Force or survivalist’s intuition didn't matter – she knew that whatever it was Mother Talzin wanted would end badly for her. Very badly. She wanted to run again, run as far away as physically possible from this planet and from the nightmare of a woman who called herself Mother.

If she could get back to the shuttle, she'd still have a chance. Even if she had to deal with Kylo Ren once more – better the devil you know.

But even without taking Mother Talzin into account, there were the two other women with her. Could she disarm or overpower them? Probably not. But maybe she could bypass them. Possibly. They seemed fast, but it was worth a shot.

Taking a step closer, Rey gathered up all the Force that she could, heedless to its twisted, corrupted nature. The Force was the Force, she told herself, and she’d do what she had to to survive. The look of Mother Talzin’s face told her that she could feel her drawing upon it. She looked pleased, which made Rey's stomach recoil even more.

It didn’t matter; she was just using it to get away. To survive. It didn't matter.

She breathed in through her nose, readying herself to force the women as far out of her way as she could, but Mother Talzin held up her palm, as if to stop her from speaking. Then she nodded as if she had achieved some great understanding.

“Your bond-mate is strong. My daughters call for me. Come,”

Rey's lightsaber wrenched out of her hand and flew straight into Mother Talzin's awaiting palm. She vaporized into the mist like smoke in the blink of an eye, too fast for protest.

Rey's chest felt twisted and broken, like a part of her heart had just been torn out. For a second she couldn't breathe.

My-

Without another word, the other two women started racing back towards the shuttle.
She bolted after the women, determination driving her every step. There was no way of knowing where Mother Talzin had gone, but that didn't mean that one of the sisters wouldn't know. She wasn't going to let them take her lightsaber.

Her emotions were making it harder to run, harder to breathe. Pushing them down required more energy than she had, so she tried to use them to fuel her steps. The run back to the clearing felt longer than it had when she was running away; the fear of having lost her lightsaber made everything seem slower, more pronounced.

What if she couldn't find it? She would be more or less helpless – alone on a strange planet, defending herself from a monster who was hunting her and a woman who wanted her for some unknown purpose. If she couldn't get it back-

She wasn't going to think about that. Shoving the thoughts to the back of her head as best she could, she burst into the clearing to see Kylo Ren fighting three more red sisters, as well as Mother Talzin.

Her heart gave a flip-flop at finding the robed woman again. She couldn't see her lightsaber, but she could feel it on her somewhere, calling to her. Even the whispering voices couldn't drown out that call.

With her attention entirely fixed, she missed the energy weapon aimed straight at her chest until a bolt hit her diaphragm. The shock of the impact knocked her off her feet, and she had trouble breathing through the burning sensation for a moment. Kylo Ren's consciousness came flooding back into her brain, the proximity and pain overriding her mental defenses. He was as furious as ever, and thoroughly confused. They pulsates over her with overwhelming intensity. For once, she thought, she could almost identify with his feelings.

As she quickly pushed herself up the fighting stopped, everyone's attention fixed on her. She ignored them all, staring down Mother Talzin with the fiercest look she could muster.

“Give me back my lightsaber,” she said.

Mother Talzin smiled, “Ah, but you won't need it.”

Rey opened her mouth to respond, but Mother Talzin continued before she could. “As you see, she is completely unharmed.” It was directed at Kylo Ren, to Rey's total confusion.

Thoughts were swirling around in his head, the blackness of his mind obscuring the specifics and making it too difficult for her to read most of them. But she knew that whatever it was Mother Talzin’s words had meant irritated him. The emotion just rolled off of him.

“I don't care if she's been harmed,” he replied, the vocal apparatus on his mask making his words sound flat and sharp. It belied the emotions she could feel over their bond.

The statement appeared to confuse Mother Talzin, who turned her gaze to him. He was still poised for a fight. “You do not?” She echoed. Despite her situation, Rey couldn't help but revel in the woman's confusion as much as she could.

Kylo Ren's mask turned towards Mother Talzin, the light from his lightsaber reflecting harshly on the chrome of his visor.

“I'd kill her myself.”
There were a lot of unspoken ‘ifs’ that he left unsaid, but she could hear them through their link anyway. *If I didn't need something from her. If it'd get me out of this hellhole. If I knew what I needed. If I knew that it wouldn't kill me, too.*

*If you even could,* she spitefully supplied.

His mask snapped back towards her. I could, he insisted, and it was only in-part the hot retort of a petulant child. The other part was stone cold fact. He most likely could kill her.

*Not ‘most likely.’*

“No,” Mother Talzin spoke with a strange certainty that unnerved both of them, their averseness mingling over their bond, “you wouldn't.”

She reached out and placed her hand on his head. He reacted with a jolt and tried to jerk away, but it was too late. She felt it coming through their bond; the pain Rey had experienced on her shuttle came pouring into her brain only a second after it started for him. Her knees hit the ground with a cry, and she collapsed on the ground, clutching her head in a futile attempt at blocking out some of the pain.

It didn't matter which of them she was touching – Mother Talzin had reached her claws into both of their minds. Their bond was electrified, pulled out and stretched over and over around fingers made of acid green flames. The flames licked at them, probing their minds and their limits unconcernedly.

Again coherent thought only came to her in erratic bursts, and she wasn't even sure if they were her thoughts or his.

One clear word broke through the blinding pain: *fight*. It felt like it was coming from her, but it was like she was hearing it from him, too. It repeated over and over, broken and distant.

*Fight, fight, fight. Fight it.*

She recalled the first time Kylo Ren had tried to pry her mind open. Mother Talzin's power was nothing like his, which was dark and warm with emotion compared to her acid green flames, but perhaps the concept was the same. Perhaps it was still a two-way street. Or maybe not, the pain was keeping her from finishing any of her thoughts.

There was nothing to do but try. Pulling the Force to her, she used it as a buffer between her and the pain. Traveling across their bond, she had to pause a moment to gather more strength as she felt a stronger push from Mother Talzin. The pain was so much worse on his end. Then she grabbed on to the connection to Mother Talzin's mind, wedged herself in between the fingers of pain and forced her way into her consciousness. It was extremely difficult, but when she finally broke through, she rode the currents of her mind to a center of light.

The pain vanished as if it had never been there in the first place. It took a moment to adjust, but when Rey finally released the tension in her limbs and opened her eyes, she was standing in the center of a storm.

Fog swirled around her, dark grey and thick, obscuring her view in all directions. Thunder and lightning cracked overhead, but the fog obscured most of that, too. Rey was lying on the ground in the same position that she had fallen. She slowly pushed herself up into her knees, taking in the darkness that surrounded her.

“You are so strong, Rey.”

Here the whispering voices almost overpowered Mother Talzin's, making her sound more
nightmarish than ever. She appeared out of the fog, the darkness turning to shades of red, green, and grey as her image materialized before her.

It looked like she was made out of the storm, or the storm was made out of her.

The eyes, though. Her eyes glowed a solid white, the dreadful constant at the center of her rippling image.

Rey pushed herself to her feet, tempted to back away from the image but not wanting to lose herself in the fog.

“Where are we?”

Mother Talzin's eyes were unblinking. “We're at the center of our combined consciousnesses. Yours, mine,” she moved to the side, the fog giving away to reveal Kylo Ren lying prostrate on the ground, “and his.”

The wind whipped a few loose strands around Rey's face and neck. “Is he dead?”

“No, but the pain that he's experiencing has made it impossible for him to meet us on the same level of consciousness.”

Rey didn’t respond. Somehow the sight of Kylo Ren on the ground scared her – if the person who had haunted her for months was helpless against Mother Talzin's power, how was she supposed to overcome it? Master Luke had told her that the light could overcome the dark, but this wasn't even on the same binary level. It wasn't dark or light, it was just power.

“Ah, but so much of it has been lost,” The apparitional woman replied as if Rey had spoken aloud. Rey couldn’t remember if she had. Mother Talzin moved closer to her, and Kylo Ren started to get swallowed up by the dark fog. “But Rey, you can change all of that.”

She was felt trapped standing between a storm and a nightmare, but she struggled not to show it. She lifted her chin in the way that used to get her into scraps with over scavengers back on Jakku. Somehow she knew it didn’t come off nearly as self-assured or proud as it usually did.

Mother Talzin loomed even closer, until it was just the two of them and Kylo Ren had disappeared entirely in the storm. “The Force has been weakened, bled dry as those like the former Emperor and his master before him have attempted to bend it to their will. Despite my best efforts, the Force has slipped away from the galaxy, gathering in places such as this in its weakness. The Spirits barely hear a whisper of the galaxy anymore, and so few can be touched by it.”

“I had almost given up,” she admitted, “but then the Force showed me a vision of you.”

Rey didn't like that one bit; in her experience, Force visions weren't a good thing, and she certainly didn't want a Force-user like Mother Talzin having visions about her. She didn't even want to know if Master Luke had ever had any vision about her.

The woman pulled back a little, taking her in. Rey struggled to keep her defiant gaze even as she grew so terrified she couldn't breathe.

“You are strong in the Force – stronger than I've seen in a long time.” Then she paused, “Years ago, there was an opportunity to revitalize the Force that I didn't seize, both because of pride and because I did not yet know the severity of the peril the Force faced. The most important Force-sensitive ever born – he could've stopped everything. But I let the opportunity pass us by.”
Rey opened her mouth, tried to force something out, but didn't know what to say. Honestly, she didn't want to say anything. She just wanted to leave.

“You cannot achieve what he could on your own, but the Force has provided. Tell me, do you know who your bond-mate is?”

The storm was the only sound between them for a long moment. Of course she knew who he was, she wanted to say, he was the monster who had killed his own father and spent most of his time trying to kill other people's fathers. But somehow it didn't feel like the answer Mother Talzin was looking for.

“No,” she crossed her arms and angled away from the other woman. “I don't want to hear anymore.”

Mother Talzin's lips stretched into a thin smile, and Rey backed up a step. She continued anyway. “He is the descendant of the very same great Force-user. He is your conduit.”

The fog behind Mother Talzin parted suddenly, allowing room for Kylo Ren, who was beginning to stir on the ground as if he was having a nightmare. The woman glanced behind her. “Ah. Just like the devil,” she muttered to herself, as if reciting some sort of old saying.

Rey had had enough. Enough of Mother Talzin and her words, and the whispering voices that were practically shouting in this place. She knew she had to take advantage of the moment of distraction, but indecision held her rooted to the spot. She didn't know what she could do in a place like this; getting out didn't seem nearly the same as getting in.

But the Force was still with her – she could feel it making up the very storm around her.

Taking a deep breath, she channeled as much power as she could from the storm around her through her arms, blasting Mother Talzin with enough force that she dissipated before her eyes, clearing the air far past where Kylo Ren was still lying on the ground.

Then she got hit on the head, and was knocked onto her back.

Her head felt like it was on fire, pulsing and throbbing so much that Rey worried it might explode. Above her the sky was once again red between the dark, barren branches that reached overhead, and it brought her back to the real world. Gingerly touching her forehead, she cringed when she realized that it had been burned. Had she been shot?

One of the sisters walked into her line of vision, energy bow pointed at her chest, but Rey wasn't conscious enough to pay her much mind. The burning was fading away, replaced with a warm blackness that pulled at the edges of her vision and called her to oblivion. In a strangely lucid moment she recognized that she was going to pass out.

Mother Talzin swept into her vision moments before she lost all her senses. Her crimson robes billowed around her, and she held a crossguard lightsaber hilt in her hands. She inspected it idly, running her fingers over its dark design. It was the only thing that she could focus on, the edges dull and sharp as her vision closed in around her.

“Dear child,” either Mother Talzin or the whispering voices said. There was more, but Rey had already fallen into unconsciousness.
Okay, first off just let me state that this is NOT a "Rey-is-another-chosen-one" story. I'm personally not a fan of that theory, and that's not where this is going. That being said, Mother Talzin reveals a lot in this chapter. I kind of worried over whether or not it was too soon for some of this info, but whatever. You guys can handle it.

Next chapter: can you guys say "forced team-up"?!
Chapter 9

Waking up was an entirely different kind of torture. There was no gentle reemergence from the
darkness of unconsciousness, no moment of blissful confusion. One second Kylo was out, and the
next he was torn back into his body, limbs burning and head feeling like it had been peeled open like
a melon. His eyes flew open, unfocused through the pain, his body rebelling against him.

Damn that Talzin and whatever she did to him. He'd make her pay for it.

He was lying face-first in the dirt. Humiliation bubbled up in his gut, followed quickly by outrage.
Breathing loudly through his nose for a good minute, he managed to get the pain radiating
throughout him under control. He rolled himself over onto his back, the burns from those energy
bows awakening painfully with the movement. Damn. He had forgotten about those.

His connection to the Force felt like it had been rubbed raw, and the power of the planet seemed
invasive to him as he stretched out his senses in an attempt to reestablish his surroundings.

The bond quivered in the back of his mind, resilient after everything. It was closed off a little – not
blocked, but contained. She was doing it, keeping her thoughts to herself. Still, it felt strong enough
that he knew she was close.

He pushed himself up into a sitting position. The first thing he noticed was that he was still in the
same clearing he had landed his shuttle in. The dirt had been disturbed around him where he had
fought the witches. Daylight burned through the sky, casting the reds in duller hues against the earth.

And there was an looming emptiness at his back. He twisted around, felt his stomach drop.

His shuttle was gone.

Where his Upsilon-class shuttle had been just a moment ago was nothing but a scattering of red mist
and the barren branches of trees. He dug his gloves into the dirt, blinking in disbelief.

What?

“She took your shuttle.”

He whipped his head around at the sound of the girl’s voice. She was leaning against a tree on the
edge of the clearing, her legs pulled up her chin and her arms wrapped around them. She had a
nasty-looking burn on her forehead.

“What?” He snapped, his confusion beginning to feed his already substantial irritation.

“She took our lightsabers, too.” She continued as if he hadn't spoken.

She might as well have dropped a space ship on him. He frantically searched himself for his weapon,
mentally throwing around every curse word he knew.

It wasn't there. He didn't have it – his lightsaber was gone.

“Don't bother,” she sounded irritable and tired, and he mostly ignored her, “I saw her take it.”
He halted in his efforts. “You saw her take it?” He growled, “then why the hell didn’t you do something to stop her?” He shouted. The lingering pain of his burns only fueled his frustration, sharpened his focus as he bore holes into her head from behind his mask. There a smudge of dirt on the corner of the left side of his visor that he didn't bother wiping off.

The girl scoffed. “I was too busy passing out after she gave me this,” she pointed to her forehead. She shifted so that her legs were extended a little more in front of her, but he could feel the tension radiating off of her entire body. She was prepared to bolt at any second.

“Besides,” she grumbled, “getting your lightsaber back wasn’t exactly my number-one priority.”

He barely heard her through the growing rage pounding through his head. The sound of his breathing was loud in his ears, his fingers shaking from the need to destroy something – anything.

Just to rip something open-

Distantly, he heard the scavenger say something else, but she was the least of his worries. He was on his feet before he even realized, pacing in wide strides around that stupid – fucking – empty clearing.

He had lost his lightsaber.

Talzin had his fucking lightsaber.

A twig snapped to his right, an animal jumping from one gnarled branch to another. He spun around and extended his arm towards it, snapping it up with the Force mid-jump.

“What are you-“

He crunched the life out of it with every ounce of strength he had, causing its body to collapse in on itself like a small implosion. Blood sprayed from the now unrecognizable pile of flesh, splattering the tree and ground. It was just a meat sack, a bike of flesh and bones that didn't help satiate his rage at all. He let it drop to the ground.

The wet squish sounded distant and quiet, but the girl’s shrill exclamation more than made up for it.

“What the hell was that?!” She demanded, on her feet with fists balled up, ready for a fight. He was inclined to give her one.

Her outrage and mistrust at his display only fueled his emotions. Reaching out with the Force, he wrapped his will around one of the tree trunks. It took all of the strength he had to uproot it, his control impaired by his state of mind, but he managed. With a growl of exertion he ripped it out of the dirt and flung it into the tree next to it.

The girl jumped at his display, disapproval and fear seeping into their bond, although she tried to keep the fear from him. At any other time it would've made him smug, but he had bigger problems than what some scrappy scavenger girl thought of him.

Problems like the fact that Talzin had his lightsaber.

How the hell was he even supposed to find her?

When he looked back at the girl she stood her ground, but he could feel how tense she was. Her back was pressed against the dark trunk behind her. “Are you finished?” She bit out angrily.

He didn't say anything, just started to turn away before he thought better of it. Spinning back towards
her, he jammed his finger in her direction. “You should've done something.”

Right before his eyes the girl transformed from scared to incensed, straightening her back and tilting her chin up a fraction. Their bond sparked with ire, but she refused him an answer and just stood there, silently glaring at him.

Her non-reaction nearly drove him to snap once more, but he just turned away, resuming his heavy-footed pacing around the clearing. He felt her eyes boring into his back, but he did his best to ignore it. He had to get himself under control and think clearly. As of that moment, he had no supplies, no transport or means of long-range communication, and no weapon. He stopped and glared at the empty space again. *And what the hell did she do to my ship?*

The sound of shuffling behind him turned his attention back to the girl. She slung a small medical bag over her shoulder, what looked to be the remainders of a thermal blanket wrapped around the strap.

“What are you doing?” His voice sounded flat even to his own ears. None of her thoughts were coming through their bond very coherently.

“None of your business,” she snapped, sending him a brief icy glare before turning in the general direction of the Force wellspring. Closing her eyes and taking in a deep breath, he felt her senses engulf him twice over. The first time was through their bond, and her efforts pin-pointed to a single objective: find Talzin. Then he felt it again from her physical body, sending out a pure, untapped power that almost surprised him. Both sensations hit him at once, a duality that threw him off a little, made him pause.

Kylo took a step closer. “You think you can find Talzin and make her return my – *Skywalker’s* – lightsaber to you.” It wasn't a question.

“It's my lightsaber,” she didn't turn towards him or open her eyes, but he could feel the glare through their connection. She lifted her hand towards the wellspring in concentration, and he couldn't help but wonder where she had picked up the habit.

He scoffed, crossed his arms. “You have no right to it.”

Her hand dropped limply to her side, and as she turned to him her gaze held her growing irritability. “Master Luke said—“

“I don't want to hear about him,” he spat.

“Why,” she challenged, “is it because he's *another* good man that you've done everything in your power to destroy?”

“It's because he's a weak fool who leads those who would follow him astray,” the reply was instantaneous, the fury in his gut writhing like a dragon.

“No, Master Luke follows the light side. Unlike you and yours, he would never intentionally lie to someone.”

He scoffed with the upmost contempt, the sound coming out weird and distorted through his mask. “You have no idea what you're talking about. You're an untrained child grasping for an understanding of things that are beyond you comprehension.”

There was a beat where she didn't say anything. A spike of self-consciousness hit him through their bond, which surprised him. The scavenger was insecure about her lack of understanding – despised
him a little for pointing it out. He breathed in the sparkling sense of superiority it gave him, savored the clench of her jaw as she felt it rolling off of him.

“I may be an untrained child, but I still managed to beat you.”

Violence was the only possible answer to the girl’s incessant ribbing, but he never got the chance to even flex his fingers.

Almost before the last words were out of her mouth, a deep, guttural roar tore through the air, coming from the general direction of the wellspring. The trees shuddered around them, the ground shifted under their feet. They both spun in the direction of the sound. Kylo's hand flew to his side, cursing when he remembered that he didn't have his lightsaber. Another roar reverberated around them.

“What was that?” The girl breathed, her uncertainty creeping across their bond.

He had no idea; every predatory animal he had ever heard of shifted through his mind as he tried to place the sound. A ways off – but much closer than he'd like – some avian creatures took to the sky, clearing the way for whatever was coming through the trees.

One thing was for sure – it was big.

And it was headed for them.

The scavenger’s hesitation and fear rang around in his head like a bell, practically shouting that she had no experience with any sort of predator that this might be. She was frozen to the spot, her attention fixed solely on whatever was beyond the dark line of trees.

He wasn't going to just stand there and wait to get eaten; there was nothing around them that could potentially either help him fight or hide, so his best bet was to run the opposite direction. With any luck the creature hadn't caught their scent, and he could simply leave the area of danger. Unless, of course, it had caught their scent. In that case, he'd have to out maneuver it somehow, but he didn't bother putting much thought into it. He'd cross that bridge when – and if – he got there.

When the predator – *rancor*, he realized – broke through the trees, it was all at once, like a small explosion. It was huge, larger than he heard they were supposed to be – ten meters tall at least. Granted, he hadn't ever had the displeasure of coming across one himself, so maybe they just seemed bigger in person. Its hide was black and blue in the red lighting around them, it's eyes glinting void at it looked straight at the two of them. The gaze was intelligent, the intent ravenous.

*I see you*, it seemed to say, *and I'm going to eat you.*

It roared at them, a dark, bloody-sounding roar that shook the loose rocks around them and made Kylo's stomach do a flip.

A long-forgotten memory of something Skywalker had once told him came to mind, unbidden and unexpected. He had once spoken of the ability to communicate with animals, to be able to calm them down or turn them away when they were becoming aggressive. He had said that it was mainly a Jedi skill, because it required a steady, calm will to execute correctly. He had never asked to be taught the ability, and Skywalker hadn’t offered.

It didn't matter anyway, because it sure as hell wouldn't have helped him in this situation.

*It wants to eat us*, the girl's voice was so clear he didn't know if she was thinking it or saying it. But she wasn't wrong.
He wanted to fight, to prove that he was still dangerous – still *deadly* – even without his lightsaber. But there was something about the beast – a sentience that he felt through the Force. It sharpened the rancor’s intent, and warned Kylo to be smart about this. For once, maybe he should pick his battles.

Both him and the girl took off at the same time, sprinting across the clearing to get as far away as possible. His longer legs carried him further, but she was quick on her feet, and mostly managed to keep up.

Neither of them spoke to each other, neither of them tried to trip the other up. Maybe, had things been different – if he had his lightsaber – he would’ve tried, but as it was neither of them were willing to get themselves killed in an attempt to get the other killed. Killing each other could wait until later, when it would be one against the other, instead of one against the other against a rancor.

The rancor followed them easily into the forest. The trees were huge, but the rancor followed their every turn, swatting away their reaching branches with ease.

The pain from Kylo’s burns was a distantneedling in the back of his head, but he knew that he couldn’t sprint forever – and they had to sprint to keep any sort of distance between them and the predator. He could feel the scavenger through their bond, feel her heaving breaths and tightening muscles on top of his own.

He tried to take in his environment, come up with a plan. Reaching out with the Force, he relied on it to supply the details he was moving too quickly to take in. Bent trees, sloping ground, twisted Force presence. There was nothing around him that could help-

There was something, something just over two kilometers away – a strange turn in the flow of the Force, a dip in the way it flowed across the land. It was some sort of land formation, he was certain of it. Exactly what it was eluded him, but he didn’t bother contemplating too hard, because no matter what they couldn’t dodge-and-weave through the forest forever.

Pragmatism drove his decision to let her in on his find; if it came down to it, it would be much easier to bring a rancor down with help – especially since he was unarmed – and he needed her alive besides. He couldn’t forget to retrieve the object the Supreme Leader wanted, even though it wasn’t exactly on his list of immediate priorities.

*It's a series of caves,* she said with absolute certainty when he directed her attention to what he found.

He didn't know how she could know when he couldn't even be sure, but he used the spark of irritation he felt to help fuel his power.

Caves wouldn't be as much help as he had hoped. Their only real choice was to misdirect the rancor or conceal their presence, neither of which would satisfy his growing need to kill the beast. Maybe if he could somehow trap it in one of the caves, collapse it around the rancor – but that could be difficult, depending on the layout of the caves. If the caves were connected, though, that could be-

*Stop trying to complicate things,* she snapped across their bond, her words fuzzy with exertion. *We don’t have to kill it.*

He considered ignoring her thoughts, but he was getting apathetic in his frustration, *I don't have time for your whimpering.*

A branch landed between them, thrown by the rancor. It drove them a ways apart for a few meters, and she didn't respond until they were near each other again.
We can't kill it.

He growled at the truth of that, but he didn't have much energy to waste on expressing his emotions. His outer robes were starting to weigh on him, but he couldn't do anything about that. Instead, he focused all of his energy on keeping his footing in the increasingly uneven ground beneath him.

The trees were changing, getting closer together. Thick, grey vines wrapped around many of them, and some of the branches even had some sort of dark, leafy growth on them. The dirt started sticking to his boots as if it had recently rained. It occurred to him that they were probably nearing a body of water.

How are we going to lose it? Her question was grudgingly asked, as unhappy with their collaboration as he was, but honest.

Working on it, he dismissed.

He felt her exasperation like a hammer, which she might've done on purpose. Their exhaustion seemed to be feeding off of the other's, and had it been any other time he would've thrown up his defenses against their bond so that her fatigue wouldn't add to his, but at that point it would've taken more energy than he was willing to expend.

The rancor made a swipe at him, but he was quick enough to misdirect it with a blow of the Force. He felt the tip of the claw brush his robes, but remained unscathed.

There!

Kylo snapped his attention to where the girl indicated – about fifty meters away was either a cliff or a very sharp hill. Beyond it he could see the sky.

They were practically right on top of the curve in the Force where the supposed caves were. It was like a blow to the gut as he realized that even if they were really caves, they were just as likely to be underground as above, just as likely to be useless.

She must've heard his thoughts, because she added, we've got to jump!

What? He felt the probability of death looming on both sides, began to look for an alternative.

They were only a few meters from the ledge – if he timed it right, perhaps he could turn without getting clawed to death in the process.

You've got to trust me, she threw out across their bond as if that was something that was even remotely – wildly – possible.

I'd sooner jump into a star, he retorted hotly.

Don't tempt me.

Everything beyond the ledge was a slightly off-kilter swirl of the Force, another one of many concentrations of the Force that existed on Dathomir. He couldn't tell what was beyond it, but for some reason the scavenger could. He'd examine that later, but that didn't change that fact that she was just as likely – highly likely, as a matter of fact – to lead them both to their death over that cliff.

Jump or die, she said as if he had any choice. At the last second, her fingers reached out and took a fistful of his sleeve, clamping on in a vice grip that he didn't have the time to try and get out of.
She dove over the cliff, dragging him with her in a tangle of limbs. The fall took less than a second – one moment they were in the air, and the next they were sinking.

It took a moment for him to respond to his new environment; his cloak felt like it weighed a ton, and the muscles in his legs were suddenly made out of durasteel. His mask was locked into place, but it was by no means airtight, so water rushed in, filling it to the brim and turning it into one more weight he had to carry.

Swimming up to the surface seemed like the worst torture that he'd had to endure since his punishment after Starkiller, but the will to live pushed him up until he broke the surface of the water. Despite the fact that he was above the water line, his mask didn't drain the water it held quickly, and he had to continue holding his breath until he had reached the edge of the water.

He dragged himself far enough out of the water that he wouldn't fall back into it. He tore off his mask and tossed it aside, coughing up water with shaky breaths. His chest shuttered and his muscles nearly gave out under him. He let himself collapse on his back, heaving sweet breaths of fresh air.

He pushed his hair out of his eyes, tilting his head enough that he could scan the edge of the cliff. The rancor was right where they'd left him, looking down at him with an eye that seemed to say, next time.

If Kylo had anything to say about it, the only ‘next time’ would be if he was rested and had his lightsaber back, and then he would kill it. The beast roared as if it could sense his murderous intent. Maybe it could.

Loud splashing drew his attention back down to the water, where the scavenger was clawing towards the edge of the water as if she didn't know how to swim.

She probably didn't.

He wasn't inclined to lift a finger to help her. She kept dipping under the surface, unable to stay afloat, making wet choking sounds every time she broke the surface. The lack of air, the growing panic tugged on their connection, but he tried to shut it out. He didn't want to share in the sensation of her drowning.

She went down under the surface once more. Kylo felt a shift in the Force right before she propelled herself up and towards the surface as if she had made something similar to a Force jump. It wasn't very strong, but it got her safely to the edge of the water. Her arrival sent a spray of water in his face, causing him to flinch.

“Scavenger,” he growled, wiping his face with his soaked gloves in a futile attempt to rid it of excess water.

She didn't bother responding as she slowly dragged herself all of the way out of the water, only allowing herself to collapse when not even the tips of her feet were clear. For a minute she just lied on her side, hacking up the water that was in her lungs.

Kylo glanced back up at where the rancor had been – gone. He didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but at the moment it felt like a very good thing.

“Kylo,”

He turned to the scavenger out of pure shock that she'd use his name. The look on her face was grim but satisfied – the look of someone who knew that a person owed them.
“You're welcome.”

He wished that she had drowned.

Chapter End Notes

I'd like to introduce my pet rancor, his name is Plot Device! This took a little bit longer to write, but it was actually pretty fun to write. I just really enjoy writing Kylo when he's unhappy.

Poor Rey, she can't swim and she's got this douchebag just watching her drown. Someone should push him back in the water.
The lake was one of the largest bodies of water that Rey had ever seen. It sparkled silver in the crimson sunlight, casting shards of light on the stone of the cliffs and the trees which branches hung over the edge of the water. All the organic life around the lake seemed to be more alive than anything she'd seen on the planet so far. The trees actually had leaves, and she could even see small animals drinking from the water.

It was beautiful.

She only had a moment to take it in, let the sight fill her eyes, before it disappeared. Then she fell and water engulfed her, so much darker beneath the surface than she could've imagined.

It was oppressive and discombobulating – terrifying. The water was freezing, her muscles filled with duraplast. The darkness seemed to have its own gravity, a murderous intent to pull her to the bottom of the lake.

She didn't know what to do – flailing her limbs around didn't help at all, but she couldn't get her body to cooperate. Panic flooded her brain, leaking in through her ears like the water.

There were several times where she managed to break the surface, mainly by pure force of will. She'd get half a breath of life-giving air before getting sucked back down by the water's gravity. She was going to drown at the bottom of a lake on some unknown planet; the though repeated over and over in her head. It seemed ironic that it would be water that killed her after she had lived most of her life in the desert, wishing for lakes such as these.

But she hadn't drowned yet. Gone was the fear of being chased by a monster, of not getting her lightsaber back – all replaced with her simple, furious need to survive.

She would not drown.

It came as pure instinct to her, using the Force to propel herself all of the way to the edge of the lake. The water was so thick it felt like she was being pushed straight through a sand dune, but she got to the edge. Her hands and legs got scraped by the rocky beach as she dragged herself out of the water, but she ignored it. The air around her was like a safety blanket, reassuring her that she wouldn't suffocate when she breathed. She couldn't get enough of it.

Kylo Ren had apparently already dragged himself out. He practically growled and flinched away from her, but she managed to ignore him in favor of collapsing on the beach.

Water came bubbling up out of her lungs, her body expelling every bit that she had accidentally inhaled or swallowed. It was a little painful to wretch it all up, but it was a good, familiar sort of pain – the pain that came with surviving.

While she coughed, she allowed herself a glance up at the man beside her, found his gaze trained to the cliff they had just jumped off. From her angle all she could see was the back of his head, his dark hair plastered to his neck. She was a little surprised that he had taken his mask off, didn't like it that he had. When he didn't have his mask on, she couldn't help wonder how a person with an actual face could do the things that he'd done. She hated it, because whenever she saw his face he was no longer simply an evil creature.
His face was just too human.

Their connection was closed off, but she could feel his apathy and ire projecting towards her like arrows. Sitting with his back turned to her seemed to be a deliberate slight.

She wanted to throttle him – she had just saved them both, and he had the nerve to resent her for it. She should've left him to be ripped apart by the beast. After everything he'd done, it was the least he deserved. What he deserved-

He deserved so much worse.

It was too late to change her actions, so she pushed the thought aside and tried to focus on the fact that it had been her to save them. Without her, he might've been killed.

He owed her.

Not that she really expected him to honor that.

She hesitated a second before she spoke, and forcing his name through her lips was like swallowing sand.

His outrage stuttered, halted as he spun towards her with raised eyebrows. The surprised look on his face embarrassed her, and she could feel her ears start to burn despite her shivering. Her eyes flew to the angry flesh of his scar, the one that she had given him. It was the first time she'd seen it in person since she had given to him.

“You're welcome,” she said, because she knew that he'd never acknowledge it, and she felt like giving him a hard time.

There was a pregnant pause between them. She found herself transfixed by his face as his expression lowered from surprise to one of complete disdain. He still had their connection firmly blocked, and for that she was thankful.

“You could've killed us,” was all he said.

“It's only because of me that we survived,” she retorted.

He regarded her for a moment. She had no idea what thoughts were going through his head, and she didn't want to know.

She stood up slowly, shaky on her tired legs. Her clothes were soaked and clung heavily to her frame. A soft breeze sent a shiver down her spine – she was struck again by how different the rest of the galaxy was from Jakku.

With a triumphant huff she pointed to the cliff-face. “There,” she couldn't help the upward twitch of her lips, “I told you it was a cave.”

“You said it was a series of caves,” he corrected flatly.

She ignored him and bent back down to the water, testing it. It seemed drinkable; the other animals could drink it, anyway, so she unclipped her canteen and filled it. Better than nothing.

When that was done she began to make her way to the cave. The rocky beach surrounding the lake merged into the cliff on one side, the water lapping lazily against the rock. The cave opened up into the cliff-face a good six or seven meters above water level, safe from the elements and – hopefully –
other predators like the one they had just escaped.

Despite her current situation, the call to explore was undeniable in Rey. Perhaps it was a sort of defense mechanism, to fall back to old habits of scavenging in a time when she felt like her life was taking a decided turn towards the uncontrollable. It felt good to indulge in it, just for a little while.

The beach got thinner and thinner, until she was scaling the rock to reach the cave. The rock was cool and a little slippery, edges worn down by a millennia. Her muscles shook a little as she started to climb, overworked from running and fighting, but she pushed on. Kylo Ren's eyes were like lasers on her back, but she did her best to continue ignoring him.

What are you doing, his voice in her head startled her enough that she almost lost her footing, but she managed to catch herself.

“Sod off,” she grumbled quietly.

Charming, a pause, then, Let me change my question: why are you wasting your time?

She rolled her eyes, and didn't bother replying until she reached the edge of the cave. “None of your business,” she huffed as she pulled herself up over the ledge into the relative safety of the cave.

Besides, what's it got to do with you? She added mentally.

It took a long time for him to respond, and she took the opportunity to stretch out her senses into the cave. It was a modest enough size at the mouth, but she could feel it open up much more a ways in, before splitting off in so many directions she couldn't tell where they all went.

She could feel where one of the caves opened into the side of a mountain, another one back into the forest. They were like underground passageways, each leading somewhere different. She got the feeling that some of them went on for half the planet.

It was a maze.

The place Mother Talzin had taken her to was underground. There had been other openings, other passages down to the center where Mother Talzin and her sisters lived. Surely one of the caves could lead her straight to them – and by extension, her lightsaber. All she had to do was find the right cave to follow.

Their bond was swirling with feelings of discomfort and bitterness when Kylo Ren's voice finally broke through her thoughts.

Talzin took something from both of us, he started, and even in her head it sounded like he was biting his words out, and neither of us did well against her on our own.

Are saying that you want to work together? She recoiled, her mind immediately flying to the time when he had offered to teach her. She didn't know why, but it felt nearly the same thing, and she had just about the same reaction.

No, his response was quick and sharp. I'm saying you're a fool if you think you can take your time in retrieving what you lost. She obviously wants something.

Rey remembered all too well her last encounter with Mother Talzin. She remembered her speaking of the Force’s weakening power, and of restoring it. Somehow Mother Talzin expected Rey to be able to do that, aided in some way by the enemy currently grumbling at her by the edge of the lake.
It didn’t matter all that much, because she wasn’t going to do anything for her.

You know what she wants, Kylo Ren's voice broke through her thoughts, surprise coloring his tone.

It doesn’t matter what she wants, she told him firmly.

He didn't answer. What would he do if he knew what she did? She didn't even know all that much, just enough to thoroughly unnerve her.

Her forehead stung as she frowned in concentration, burned skin wrinkling. She winced as she gingerly reached up and felt it. The air in the cave was cool and damp, which helped calm her inflamed skin, but it still brought tears to her eyes.

Kylo Ren's presence was still heavy in her mind, but without being particularly invasive for once. She got the feeling that he was more keeping tabs on what she was thinking, maybe waiting for more details on what Talzin had told her. He wasn't going to get any.

She pulled up her walls on their link, effectively shutting him out. The cave loomed before her, calling her to go deeper. In some ways the call was a natural part of who she was, the scavenger in her with a thirst for exploration and adventure. But there was something else, too – the planet’s Force was strong in these caves, flowing through the tunnel systems like arteries. It felt a little bit overwhelming, but it also made her theory that one would lead to Mother Talzin all that more likely. This seemed to be something she'd be interested in.

She took no more than three steps before she paused. As much as she didn't want to listen to him, that didn't make Kylo Ren wrong when he said that they hadn't been a match for Mother Talzin. The woman had let them go – for what reason, she didn't know yet, but that wasn't what mattered at the moment. If she went up against her again, there was no doubt that the ghoulish woman would win their confrontation. Maybe that was even what she wanted – single-combat to unlock the Force, somehow. It all just seemed so over her head.

Finn flashed before her eyes, warm and smiling. All she wanted to do was help her friend, and this was what she had gotten for it. The memory of Finn lying face-first in the snow, back smoldering, nearly brought tears to her eyes, but she forced them down. No matter what, he was on his own now. If something like that happened again she wouldn't be there to save him. She tried not to think about that. Finn was a warrior. A good man.

He would be okay on his own. He would.

She repeated that thought like a chant, used it to push her feet back to the mouth of the cave. Kylo Ren was standing relatively near to where she had left him. He held her medbag in his hands and was rummaging through it. She had forgotten about that, must've lost it in all of the excitement. A fire clenched in her gut at the sight of him going through her things. Those were her supplies, her things. He couldn't just steal them-

Don't insult me, she realized that she had projected her thoughts at him, but couldn't bring herself to care. He looked up at her, hands still on her bag, and just stared.

What? She snapped.

A spark of irritation flew across their link, and she registered his intention a second before he started to make to throw the bag back in the lake.

“No!” She was equal parts terrified and outraged. She wanted to throw him back in the lake.
Then what? His tone was short and irate, his posture still posed to toss the medbag.

The need to preserve her pride was so strong she considered turning around and walking back into the cave, regardless of what he did to her supplies. It was only that kind image of Finn that finally forced her to speak.

You were right, she bit out.

He stood silent and more than a little wary, waiting for her to elaborate.

What you said about Mother Talzin, you were right. We did horribly on our own.

A pause, then, Yes.

She wanted to pull her hair out – he was really making her spell it out for him. Well, what if we weren’t just… On our own the next time we saw her?

The surprise he felt was quickly contained, but not before some of it trickled over to her. There was that strange sort of elastic tug on their bond again.

You want to work together, he was struggling to sound even and detached, but Rey could hear the shift in his tone. He thought that he could use this, that an opportunity like this could work in his favor. But there was no chance in hell that she was going to let herself get taken advantage of.

No – not ‘work together,’ she corrected quickly, I just want us to not be trying to kill each other while we’re trying to fight Mother Talzin, too.

He scoffed, and she could see his shoulders shake from where she was. They both knew that working together was exactly what she meant. She watched as he crossed the few feet over to his discarded helmet and picked it up. He slung her bag over his shoulder before pushing his hair back with one hand and putting his mask back on.

Despite it all, the mask was a comfort, a wall between them that gave her an odd sense of relief even as far away as she was. It helped her not to flinch every time he looked at her.

Alright, he said, his mask turned towards her, let's not kill each other. For now.

She blinked then nodded, confident that he could see it. So that was it – a treaty of convenience between them. The knowledge that working with a monster like Kylo Ren wasn't a good idea was like an imploding star in her head, but she ignored it. For Finn – and to get off this nightmare planet – she was willing to do what she must, including work with him.

He doubtless had plans to manipulate the situation in his favor, but she was determined to not drop her guard for even a second. He had already told her directly that he had come to take something from her – even if she didn't know what that was, exactly – and she wasn't fool enough to believe that he wouldn't be just as happy to see her dead. Most likely by his hand. She wouldn't be able to count on him simply keeping his side of their…bargain, and she'd be prepared for when he broke it.

Things could work in her favor, too. If she was very careful about it, she could manage to at least take his shuttle, which doubtlessly held a few First Order secrets. At the most, she could have a chance to deliver one of the most wanted men in the Resistance to General Organa. For Han. He'd be tried and executed, justice finally done. She wondered how many lives she might've inadvertently saved if she had just killed him on Starkiller base and gotten it over with.

Still, monster or not, if not for him she'd be alone on this place. Not that that was any great comfort to
her, but she could admit it was something.

She was careful to keep her thoughts hidden from him, but he wasn't paying her much attention anyway.

*What are you doing?* She startled back a half-step when she noticed that he was climbing up to the cave himself.

He had to pause in his efforts to answer her. *Don't tell me you can't figure it out,* his tone was snippy and mocking, but she could hear the tiredness seeping in, too. His climbing technique was noticeably clumsy, even from her perspective. Then again, she couldn't imagine that Kylo Ren had many occasions to scale cliffs – or anything, really.

Despite the fact that the cave wasn't that high up, she was fairly certain that he only reached the cave entrance by sheer force of will alone. Anger surrounded him like a cloud as he pulled himself in, although for once it seemed internalized, wrapping around him like a shield. She didn't pry, didn't want to.

Backing up further into the cave, she gave him ample room to pull himself together. Room enough to react if he tried anything violent. He drew himself to his full height, and she began to feel like the mouth of the cave was getting smaller. His frame seemed to darken the entire opening, his still-wet robes absorbing the light like a sponge. All at once, she was back on Takodana, running from a nightmare in a mask, armed with only a small blaster. His shadow loomed over her the same way it had then, predatory and aware of its power.

But she had become more powerful, too. She had already faced that nightmare, had stripped it down to its vulnerable center and left it bleeding in the snow. Left it to die.

She was just as strong as him. Without a doubt, she knew it to be the truth. She drew her shoulders back and lifted her chin, taking a single step towards him.

He stared at her for a long time. She wondered if he could recognize their standing with each other – as equals – or if he still thought that she was his lesser in some way.

A maelstrom of emotions whipped through his mind, but the walls were still up on their bond – this time erected by him – and she could only read what he projected physically. His hands were balled into fists, his stance wide and sturdy. He was breathing heavily, although she was fairly certain that was because of he was just tired and had exerted himself scaling up to the cave. Overall, he looked ready for a fight, but she didn't think that she was going to get one. It was in the tilt of his mask, the way it was turned slightly away from her, as if he was suddenly unaware that she was there.

It occurred to her that it was weird that he was just standing there, frozen like a statue. Tentatively, she reached out through their bond, tried to reach over the wall into the darkness on his side. He wasn't actively maintaining the block, and she was able to wedge her way in through the cracks. She immediately wished she hadn't.

There was an terrible power suffocating him, one so strong she could almost feel it physically. He had withdrawn from their bond so deeply it felt like he was actually stretching it, like he might as well have been across the planet. Even then, she could feel the echo of that power asphyxiating him, imprisoning him.

Terror crept through her mind, the power creeping into her where she had brushed it with her mind. Frantically, she tried to withdraw, but the power had a mind of its own, and it followed her.
She recognized it then for what it was – the presence from her nightmares, the ones where she had watched Kylo Ren in pain, endlessly tortured. It was the shadow, the third presence she sometimes thought she felt. The realization that she hadn't been imagining it was so much worse than not knowing.

She thought that it had just been part of the nightmare, but it was real.

Was this his master? The one General Organa had called the Supreme Leader?

She wanted no part of it if. Whatever this thing was, it had a power over Kylo Ren that terrified her in its brutal intelligence. The presence was aware of her, it clung and fought her even as she tried to disentangle herself from the bond, to retreat back into her own mind and throw up her own defenses. When she finally broke entirely free it was nearly painful, and caused her to stumble back a step. Gasping for air, she threw up every mental barrier Master Luke had taught her.

It scared her, whatever was going on with him. It scared her because it felt so close to her, that terrifying darkness that she only knew through his nightmares. She wanted to snap him out of it, to make that presence go away, but she didn't know how.

She eyed her bag, which was still on his shoulder. “My bag,” she said, more quietly than she intended.

The sound of another person’s voice seemed to pull him out from under the oppressive presence all at once. His shoulders relaxed infinitesimally.

“What?” His voice was lower, thick with residual emotion. It took him a while to respond.

She pointed to his side, “You still have my bag.”

The medkit was off his shoulder in a second, and then he threw it at her with more force than was necessary. She caught it with a grunt.

“Thanks,” she grumbled, more out of habit than anything.

He didn't respond, just turned away from her. There was a heavy silence between them as she watched him try and get himself under control. They both knew that she had felt whatever it was that he had just been going through. She kept her mental defenses up, but she didn't need them to see his internal implosion. His shoulders shook, his hands kept clenching and unclenching. She could hear his breathing, shaky and deep, trying to stay under control. Whatever that presence had been – whomever it had truly been – it had obviously taken a toll on him.

She didn't know if that was going to make him less dangerous, or more.

Unexpectedly, he started unwrapping the tattered cloak he keep on his shoulders. She couldn't help but ask him what he was doing.

“Resting,” was all he said.

She blinked, still clutching her bag to her chest. “But I thought you said I was wasting time.”

“I know what I said,” he snapped, but it didn't have the usual bite.

Indecision held her to her spot. It wasn't too late to leave him, to simply walk further into the cave and leave their temporary cease-fire behind. The idea was exhausting, but maybe she could still take Mother Talzin if she could make it on her terms.
But no, she knew that wasn’t really an option. It would be stupid of her to try and continue on her own. Then again, it would also be stupid to get killed because she decided to take a nap in front of her enemy.

 Granted, an enemy that looked like he was about to pass out, but an enemy still.

He didn't seem to be nearly as conflicted as she was; he leaned against the cave wall, stretching his long legs out in front of him. There was a stiffness to him that implied how uncomfortable he was.

It took her a moment to realize that he was staring at her.

“ I'll know if you try and kill me,” he promised.

“The same goes for you,” she didn’t really know if she would know – suspected that she wouldn't – but she felt that she had to say something to warn him away. She watched warily as he once again removed his mask, inspecting it briefly before setting it on the ground next to him. His hair was still damp and plastered back against his head. It looked a little ridiculous, but he didn't seem to care.

When he leaned his head back and closed his eyes, he released a shaky sigh that he tried very hard to conceal.

She had no idea how long she stood there, waiting for him to do – something. Even when his breathing evened out and his side of their connection hummed with nothing more than a quiet discontentment, she didn't let her guard down.

Leaning against the opposite cave wall, she began shuffling through her bag, taking inventory to make sure he hadn't touched anything, or that she hadn't lost anything in the fall. The thermal blanket was gone, which was unfortunate. She could've used something to help keep herself warm. The three days’ rations were still there, which was definitely good, but everything in the bag was soaked.

 That figures, she sighed, glancing once more at Kylo Ren's sleeping form before sliding to the ground. She crossed her legs and placed her bag on her lap, cradled in her hands.

Sleep called to her, pulled at her eyelids and weighed down her limbs, but she pushed through it, because the enemy was not ten feet from her and someone needed to make sure that they didn't get eaten by some other wandering monster. She considered meditating, but knew that she'd just fall asleep if she tried. So instead she busied herself with stretching out her senses, trying to feel deeper into the cave system. When the patterns of the Force – tainted and dark as they were – started to lull her closer to sleep she stopped.

She stared at Kylo Ren's face as he slept. At his scar.

It wasn't finished healing. Another inch to the left, and she would've caught his eye. Would she have felt bad about that? No, but he probably wouldn't have stopped to make a deal with her if he had lost an eye. He resented her enough for his wounded pride as it was, and losing an eye would probably have put her firmly in the ‘kill-first-ask-questions-never’ category. Not that she was far off from that category anyway.

He really didn't look good. Angry scar, skin so pale it looked like it hadn't seen the sun in years. He was sweating in his sleep, fingers twitching with a scowl etched onto his face. It looked like he wasn't getting much rest, either. She wondered if he dreamed of the suffocating presence every night.

Her vision lost focus for a moment. She shook herself awake and repositioned herself against the cave wall, focused on the discomfort of the stone against her back to keep her alert.

 Don't fall asleep, don't fall asleep.
She laid out the entire contents of her bag, arranged them and then rearranged them before replacing them three different times in three different orders. Anything to make her mind function.

_You're not tired-

_There's a murder right there-

_Don't fall asleep._

Chapter End Notes

As a writer I want to ramble on about every chapter, but usually I try and scale it back. Today - because this chapter was MUCH longer than intended - you're going to get a (mini) ramble. Be happy!

This was basically the "never-ending scene." Holy cow, I seriously thought it'd never end. It got to the point where I put my foot down, slammed on the metaphorical brakes, and ended the chapter. So if the ending seems weird and abrupt, that's in part why.

Also, yay chapter ten! We're in the double-digits now, which is pretty exciting. It also marks a checkpoint in the story, if you will. For me, stories can be separated into a certain number of chapters for a number of things. For example, the main characters' storylines have to converge by chapter five, they have to be working towards the same goal by chapter ten, etcetera. We've just hit one of those marks! The next checkpoint: the "ok, your not awful" point in the relationship, to be met in - ?? - chapters. (Sorry, don't wanna reveal my hand too much!)

Lastly, im very nervous about this chapter. Like, extremely nervous. It's the chapter that half solidifies the reylo partnership, and it's like walking a tightrope trying to navigate the "I hate you but I'll work with you" thing.

Anyway, the rant is officially over! The next update will most likely be a return to my more moderate comments. Hope you guys are having an awesome day!
“Kylo Ren. Where are you?”

He was in darkness, inky and so thick he almost couldn't breathe. It was always this way when the Supreme Leader demanded his attention. Impossible to get used to, but bearable.

“Dathomir.”

“Still?” Came the smooth question, asked not because he wondered, but because Kylo had to explain himself.

“Yes,” his mask did nothing for him here; he had to keep a very tight reign on his emotions, lest they betray him the way they always did. “The girl is here, being chased by native Force users.”

The Supreme Leader regarded him for a moment, fingers gently kneading around the edges of his mind – not quite invasive, not yet.

“Dathomirian witches, as you know. Have you killed them?”

Was he supposed to? “No,” he hesitated only briefly, “they're led by a woman who calls herself Mother Talzin.”

There was silence for a long moment, and if not for the grip the Supreme Leader maintained on his mind Kylo would've thought that he had been left alone. “I have heard of this Mother Talzin.”

“She wants something with the girl,” Kylo had a feeling that that was significant somehow, that he was supposed to report it. “I don't know what it is, but they're hunting her.”

“Hunting her?”

Kylo nodded, or thought he did. “Not to kill her, or so they claim.”

The Supreme Leader was quiet once more. His hold over Kylo's mind tightened, started to probe the surface. “Then you have not retrieved the item I sent you to obtain,” it wasn't a question.

Kylo swallowed. “No.”

“Hm.”

All at once his mind was ripped open and laid bare, the events of the last couple of days replaying for his master in humiliating clarity. The ways he had been bested by the Nightsisters, Talzin, and even the scavenger were revealed to the Supreme Leader. It was more painful than necessary – a promise for the punishment to come. It didn't matter the he had been sent with little idea of what he was looking for, or that he had encountered Force-users that had been entirely unforeseen. All that mattered was that he had been given a mission, and he had failed to properly accomplish it.

“Kylo Ren,” he could barely hear the rasping voice through his pain, but the words were unmistakable, “you have become such a disappointment to me since Starkiller.”

“I need more time,” he ground out, pain blurring his awareness. “The girl...didn't have it.”
How can you be sure? You are as of yet unaware what 'it' is.”

Even through the torture, Kylo realized that he had been set up to fail – that the Supreme Leader had been testing him. Wanted his apprentice to prove his continued worth. Not only had he confirmed his master’s doubts about him, he had exceeded them. He let the shame boil up into hatred in his chest, let it fuel his agony.

The pain became unfocused from his head and spread throughout his body until every muscle, every bone, every fiber of his being shuttered in pain.

“As ever, your weakness causes you to fail.”

Tears sprung into his eyes, whether from loathing or pain he couldn't tell. They cut down his face like knives, a betrayal from his body. He cursed himself, he cursed his master. He cursed his father. He cursed-

The girl. Her touch bubbled in the back of his mind, hesitant and feather-light. He almost didn’t recognize it – recognize her – in the presence of the Supreme Leader, but she was there. He didn't reach out to her, didn't want to touch their connection. It didn't matter anyway; almost as soon as she brushed the darkness, she retreated, trying to pull away entirely. Likely terrified.

But the Supreme Leader had noticed her as well, so it was of course too late. He reached out and grasped her consciousness, pulling her back in effortlessly.

For a moment, Kylo was all but ignored. The pain wasn’t gone – not nearly – but it wasn't actively oppressive. Almost all of his master’s attention had been diverted towards the girl.

She fascinated his master, he realized.

Then she did something that shocked both of them, shocked him enough that he almost broke free of the Supreme Leader’s presence – she cut off the grasp his master had on her and retreated away entirely. It almost felt like their bond was entirely broken. Was it? Had she just broken off their connection for good?

The Supreme Leader hummed, and let her go. “She’s more powerful than I had assumed.” He paused dangerously, and the pain returned to Kylo two-fold. “Follow the girl. She has the item I want, or soon will. It is clear to me that this situation is becoming somewhat unpredictable.”

Kylo wasn't able to say anything through his anguish, but he would do as commanded.

His master considered something for a long moment, contemplated while his apprentice shuttered in agony, nearly collapsed in his weakness. Finally, he let go of the torturous hold he maintained on his apprentice.

“And Kylo Ren, when you bring me the item–I expect the girl to accompany it.”

Kylo awoke to the sound of soft humming. It was a tune he had never heard before, half-remembered and shakily sang. The voice singing it was feminine – the girl, he realized.

Cracking an eye open was just about all he could do for a moment. His muscles were stiff and still sore from his burns, not to mention the discomfort of sleeping on the hard ground. He had a massive kink in his neck.

The girl was sitting down cross-legged a ways away from him, hunched over on her elbows as she
dug through that damned beat-up medkit of hers. She was humming under her breath, repeating the same segment of the tune over and over as if she couldn't quite remember how the rest went. The sound immediately gave him a headache. Through their link he could sense a certain mellow, hazy quality to her mood. She apparently hadn't noticed that he was awake.

As soon as he began to move her attention snapped over to him, startled and alert. Her entire body stiffened, and he watched as her hand shifted to access her where her weapon would be more easily, saw her catch herself as she remembered it wasn't there. The mellowness he felt from her disappeared, replaced by the same wariness she had projected when he had first lied down to rest. He didn't have much patience for it.

“Relax,” he brought a hand up to rub the back of his neck. “You woke me up.”

A beat. “Oh,” but she didn't relax, “was I being too loud?” It didn't sound like she much cared either way.

He rolled his eyes in response. In truth it hadn't been her that had woken him up – the Supreme Leader’s presence wasn't one that a person just slept off. She, however, didn't need to know that. The pounding in his head was always a residual effect of his master contacting him, especially after he was reprimanded, but there was a strange sort of strain on his brain this time around. Like his cells had been scraped raw.

He ran a gloved hand over his face and through his hair, which had dried while he slept. His robes were still somewhat damp, but that didn't matter. Glancing over at the girl when he could feel she wasn't looking, he allowed himself a moment to study her as she finished whatever she was doing in her bag. Her presence – had that really been her when he had spoken to his master? There had been a moment where he had thought that maybe she had severed their bond, but he could feel it flowing strongly between them, likely amplified by their proximity, so that obviously hadn't happened. Unfortunately. He supposed it would help him keep tabs on her if she tried to run away, at least. The Supreme Leader had made it very clear that his plans were going to involve her to a much higher degree than before from this point out.

That was doomed to end in disaster.

His mask was right where he left it. It felt good to feel it's weight in his hands, like an anchor in a storm. The mask have him strength and power through its darkness and severity. It couldn't provide anonymity – it was too recognizable for that – but it allowed him privacy, which he was feeling a decided lack of. He replaced it on his head and locked it in place.

Moving wasn't bad, but he felt a twinge of irritation at how sore everything was. Entirely manageable, but consistent like a thorn in his side. When the scavenger saw that he was making to stand, she scrambled up in a second, sealing the medkit shut and slinging if over her shoulder.

Bloodshot eyes watched his every move. He briefly thought about asking if she even slept, but decided that he didn't really care. What he did care about was the endless scrutinization he was getting.

“What,” he threw at her, the voice apparatus in his mask making his word sound low even to his own ears.

Her eyebrow twitched and her mouth tightened into a line. For a moment he thought that she was going to give him a piece of her mind, which he could sense was filled with distaste for him. She didn't. All she did was pull out one of her ration bars and take a bite.
The sight of food – even as unappetizing as he knew ration bars to be – was enough for his stomach to clench in its emptiness, a sudden mortal reminder that he hadn't eaten in over twenty-four hours. All of his supplies had, of course, been on his shuttle, and weren't worth crying over now. Her eating seemed to him like a blatant slight, rubbing salt in the wound like a child saying ‘I've got it and you don't.’

He worked his jaw behind his mask, trying to keep his mouth shut. Force, he hated her. They stood there for a moment, her chewing her food and him just staring. Her eyebrows were pulled down a little lower on her head, there were dark half-moons under her eyes, and even in the relative darkness of the cave her skin looked grey. On top of it all were her eyes, which were glassy and bloodshot. She looked ready to cry at the drop of a hat, not that he thought she would. He hoped she wouldn't.

She obviously hadn't gotten much sleep. Even if he couldn't tell by her really very obvious physical indicators, the animosity he felt from her side of the bond felt unfocused, her attention blurry. She wasn't operating at one-hundred percent, and she couldn't hide it from him. She was trying to, but she couldn't.

Her efforts didn't much matter to him; she was still irritating and he was still hungry. With a roll of his eyes that she could only sense, he bent down and snatched up his discarded cloak from the ground.

Straightening up, he went rigid when he saw her arm outstretched. For a wild moment he thought she was pointing his grandfather's lightsaber at him, already finished with their temporary truce and ready for a fight. His hand flew to his side before he remembered that they had both lost their lightsabers. She reacted to his sudden shift in demeanor, muscles bunching in preparation to either fight or run, but she didn't drop her hand. His eyes flickered down.

She was holding a piece of her ration bar – not quite half, broken off and offered to him. She was giving him some of her food.

Only when she shuffled a little and pulled her hand back an inch did he realize that he'd just been standing there, staring at the small bit of food in her hand. What did she expect him to do, gratefully accept her patronizing offer of pity? He wanted to knock the food out of her hand, or tell her to choke on it. He didn't need her to feed him like some pet. He opened his mouth to tell her so.

Her eyes flashed and he knew that she could read his thoughts through their bond. Her already closed-off expression hardened as she straightened her back.

“You're too big for me to drag around if you pass out from hunger,” she said by way of explanation. Her tone was icy, but he still heard the inherent goodness behind it, some part of the girl that must've rebelled against the thought of letting someone die. He could feel it even now, squirming in the back of her brain. Perhaps that was what had stayed her hand on Starkiller when she could've killed him – a weakness that was apparently so much a part of her.

He resented her all the more for it.

“Im not going to pass out.”

She glowered at him, then dropped her hand. “Fine,” she stuffed the rest of her portion into her mouth, chewing like a barbarian that had never learned to eat around other people. He made a face and turned away, replacing his cloak over his shoulders. The cloak was more dry than the rest of his clothes, if not a little dirty, but it didn't help warm him much at all.
“Look, just—take it, okay?”

The small ration piece was a magnet between them, both pulling him in and repelling him. He didn't make a move towards it.

“Save it for later when I'm not looking, I don't care,” she groaned, “just take the damn thing.”

“Why should I?” He sneered, “why are you offering to share resources with an enemy?”

“Because I'm not like you. I've got to be better. No matter what sort of monster you are, I won't let someone die when I can save them.” There was a clarity to her eyes that was compelling, even to him.

His scoff was distorted by his mask. Still, he took it, stuffing it in a hidden slot on his belt. “You're a terrible liar, Scavenger.”

She took offense. “I am not.”

“Don't pretend it's anything more than pragmatism.” He wasn't in the mood for her and her supposed convictions. “It isn't.”

She groaned, their connection flooding with images of her throttling him, projected from her in somewhat disturbing detail. She pressed her lips into a straight line for a long moment before she spoke again.

“I think we should be able to find Mother Talzin by following the caves.”

“You know where she is?” He looked into the darkness of the cave. It was pitch black; without a light source, navigating the cave systems was going to be tedious. His mask provided him with visual-feeds to see through the darkness, but it was somewhat cumbersome and inferior to plain sight. He'd have to rely on the Force to make up for it, and he had no idea what the girl planned to do.

The girl shrugged. “She took me to where she lives. I wasn't there long, but it was in the center of a massive concentration of the Force. Whatever she wanted…well, I wasn't going to stay and find out. That's when I—”

She stopped abruptly as he looked back at her. They both knew what she meant – that's when she had siphoned some of his strength through heir bond. He still hasn't forgiven her for that. Sensing it as a sensitive subject for him – and possibly her as well – she dropped it.

“One of those caves has to lead us to her.”

As much as he was loathe to admit it, it made sense. As soon as he had entered the cave he had been able to sense just how extensive the tunnels went, far out of his range of awareness. If the girl had been there before, it was entirely possible that she could find her way back – provided she was competent enough to retrace her steps in the Force. He wasn't too excited to travel underground for any extended length of time, but it beat trudging through rancor-infested forests.

He kept his thoughts to himself, careful that she couldn't see his acquiescence. “Do you even know how to find such places?” His question was half-mocking, but he was also curious.

She arched her brow at him. “I can still sense it from here,” she paused. “I think it's because Mother Talzin wants me to find her again.”

“That's encouraging,” he deadpanned.
She shook her head, and he could feel just how uneasy she felt about it. “It's the only way to get my lightsaber back.” He bristled a little at her calling it ‘her’ lightsaber, but decided not to pick that fight.

Without another word, she adjusted the strap on her shoulder and gave him a brief glance before she made her way further into the cave. Apparently their conversation was over. He felt her stretch out with the Force, allowing it to guide her in the darkness. She looked somewhat clumsy, but managing. In another situation it might've been funny, but as it was he could barely keep himself from grumbling as he followed after her.

Simply walking next to his enemy felt strange, like trying to walk with an activated lightsaber hanging from his belt. Their bond was almost impossible to quiet from so close, and it flowed between them with a fluidity that he tried to ignore. He knew that she could feel his discomfort, and that it made him irritable. He, in turn, could feel her guardedness against him, the muscles coiled in case he should snap.

She *expected* him to snap.

*Are you scared?* He fell back a half-step, just enough to be noticeable, allowing his superior height to become intimidating, threatening, behind her. She didn't turn to keep her eye on him, but he could tell it was only by her force of will.

“No, I'm not,” she snapped.

He tilted his head, unable to stop himself from goading her. “You seem ready for a fight,” he observed.

She threw a glare at him. “That's because you're always looking for one. It's called self-preservation.”

“That's right. You're a *survivor.*” His tone was dark.

She spun around, righteous indignation pouring through their bond. “I don't know why you say that like it's an insult. You wouldn't survive a week on Jakku.”

That familiar fire was stoked in his gut, fueling his temper, and he welcomed its strength. “You have no idea what I'm capable of.”

Her look was very superior and bitter as she said, “I know *exactly* what you're capable of.”

An image of Han Solo was forced into his mind, a tiny, lifeless figure falling off of a catwalk, dead. *Murdered.* He saw himself from a great distance, the murder weapon blazing in his hand. Fury exploded in his chest as he tore her out of his mind, making sure that he did it as painfully as possible. She gasped with the sudden discomfort, but it wasn't at all satisfying.

*How dare she – a filthy, worthless scavenger.*

“If you don't want me to attack you right now, I suggest you don't try that again.” He growled, advancing until he towered over her, chest heaving. Wringing her neck was quickly becoming his highest priority, and he made sure to project his intent over their bond. He wanted to see her squirm.

But she didn't back down. “I won't let you kill me.”

It took a minute for him to regain control of his voice. “Then don't try that again,” he bit out between clenched teeth.
She didn't say anything for a long time, she just stood her ground, chin tilted up and her own fire raging behind her eyes. If not for the slight quivering of their bond, he would've thought her entirely unaffected by his outburst.

“Don't hide from what you've done, what you are.” She said finally.

He straightened, tilted his chin up. “I know what I am.”

**Murderer.** The thought whispered across his consciousness, the voice not his own, and he pushed her out of his mind just as forcefully as he had a moment ago. That time she didn't bother saying anything, just winced and started to back away from him. Her expression was stony, their link silent on both sides. After a few steps he began to trail after her, unwilling to let her get too far ahead of him. If she decided to bolt, he could still catch up with relative ease.

“It's this way,” she said, but it was low and hard to hear, like it pained her to say it.

He didn't say anything. Eventually she turned around so that her back was facing him. He only considered choking her for another minute before he dismissed the idea. The Supreme Leader’s orders swam in the forefront of his mind.

It got dimmer the farther they traveled, darker and darker until the shadows of the cave swallowed them whole.

The following hours followed the precedent they’d set in their first minutes of traveling together; there would be long stretches of cold silence, interrupted periodically by quick bursts of vicious antagonism. One argument would fuel the next, and the long minutes of silence were only broken by the strength of their animosity towards each other.

Kylo still had that ration piece tucked away in his belt, burning a hole through his pride. No less than ten times did he think about chucking it away, or throwing it at the back of the girl's head. Other times he considered being pragmatic and just eating it. But there was no way that he could remove his mask and stuff food in his mouth without her noticing, so he settled with just ignoring the damned thing.

The Supreme Leader hadn't instructed him to play nice in an attempt to reach his goals, but at first he had figured that it wouldn't hurt to try since she had already struck up a quasi-truce with him, anyway.

That had been a complete miscalculation on his part. He felt like he was two seconds away from choking her with his bare hands, and he had felt that way the entire time. The only thing that stayed his hand, kept him somewhat civil, was the nagging knowledge that they needed each other to confront Talzin. At the very least, the girl could act as a distraction while he retrieved his lightsaber and his shuttle, and then abandoned her to whatever plans the crazy woman in red had for her.

Except that was a dream, because he had to bring her to his master.

For her part, the scavenger seemed to be running on fumes. Occasionally she'd stumble over a rock or a protruding root that she should've easily avoided, even in the darkness. Sometimes she'd slow down or take a deep breath like she was winded. So far he had counted four yawns that she had tried to conceal from him. It didn't matter that they were enveloped in darkness; their link allowed him to feel it all so acutely it was almost as if it was his own exhaustion. He wanted to give her a hard time for not resting while she could, but didn't bother, mostly because it wasn't his problem. If she wanted to get herself killed because she was too foolish to take care of herself, he'd let her get to it. It was
just a nuisance to have her fatigue pressing upon him constantly.

They came across the first major split in the cave system, a fork in the path that went so far down both ways that he couldn't tell where either of them ended. As long as the girl could still feel where Talzin and his grandfather's lightsaber were it wasn't technically an issue, but he hated not truly knowing where he was going.

She frowned, considering both passages. “I think it's this way,” she pointed down the passage to their right.

“You think?” He scoffed, stretching out his own senses. He didn't share a connection with the woman like the girl did, but he could piggy-back off of it through their bond. There was an unusual pulsing coming from the right, a low him in the back of his head that made his hair stand on-end. Definitely Talzin.

“Stop that,” the girl hissed, shoving him out of her mind with more force than necessary, “don’t go crawling through my head.”

He tilted his head. “Why, do you have secrets to keep? Perhaps where Skywalker’s been hiding all these years.”

“He’s not hiding,” she insisted, backing up half a step and crossing her arms. Even through the visual read-outs on his mask, her eyes looked raw. “I have a right to my own mind, same as you.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “Relax. If I was searching for something, you wouldn't be able to hide it.”

Then she scoffed, and the noise surprised him a little. “That was before. I'm much stronger now.”

His scowl stretched into a smirk, one that she could sense of not see. “Don't we sound prideful. So quick to forget all your Jedi lessons?”

“You forgot them,” she shot back.

“No, I grew to see how worthless they were,” he shrugged.

She glared at him for a long moment. He could see where her thoughts were – she was thinking about the things that he'd done, comparing them to what Skywalker had taught her. “You're pathetic.”

“And you're tired. Are you really so eager to fight me when you can barely stand?”

That snapped her out of her confrontational mood, though not in the way he'd hoped. The thought flittered across the front of her mind, just close enough for him to pick it up. Ally. She had to keep him as an ally, at least for now.

Something akin to disappointment grew in his chest, the feeling of a fight denied, as he watched her brush past and start down the path to their right. A part of him itched to reach out, to wrench the conflict back into her. It wouldn't take much – likely all he’d need to do was lay a hand on her; there was no way she'd respond well. But he still needed her. Temporarily. He could practically feel the punishment he'd receive from the Supreme Leader if he failed to bring her in alive. Bringing her in willingly would be much easier, if he could somehow manage it.

It was all her fault – if she hadn't been so damned intriguing to his master, Kylo wouldn't have to stay his hand.
He just watched her for a long moment, until she turned back with a sour expression.

_Are you coming?_

A cutting wave of animosity was all she received in return. Still, he followed after her.

He wasn't very enthusiastic about the path they were taking. The pulsing that he had felt through the girl’s connection to Talzin was definitely coming from that direction, but there was something else, something about the tunnel itself that made him cautious. They had no idea what was down there, and the currents of the Force were flowing around them too strongly for him to be able to read any danger clearly. There was just too much _motion_ around them.

The girl stopped dead in her tracks so suddenly he almost bowled into her, managing to catch himself just in time. He was close enough that he could feel the heat radiating off of her, their bond thriving with a sort of warmth that felt decidedly torturous. A second later she put a step of distance between them, and he couldn't fault her for her discomfort.

“Did you hear that?” She whispered.

No, he hadn't. There was nothing to hear, not as far as he could tell. Reaching out in the Force didn't reveal anything, either.

Whatever it was, the girl seemed to be able to hear it, or at least sense it. It irked him that she seemed to be in tune with the planet on a completely different level than him, a student in the loosest sense who apparently had more aptitude for the currents of the Force on this planet than he did. It was dark power, he should've been so much stronger than her here – instead, their balance of power was the same as ever.

It took more than ten paces for him to hear it. A soft noise like white static floated on the edge of his awareness. The Force’s current made a whirlpool motion further down the tunnel – a cavern, perhaps. The sound was getting louder, definitely originating down the same way. It seemed to be eliciting a positive response from the girl, at any rate.

Her growing warmth bounced across their bond, tugging it in like an enthusiastic child. He was fairly certain that she wasn't aware that she was doing it, but he gave his own violent tug all the same. Her head snapped back to him briefly, a flare of irritation the only reward he got.

White static grew into a distant rushing sound, and then a pressing roar. A waterfall, by the sound of it.

His thought sparked something in her, and the girl rushed ahead, disappearing behind a curve in the tunnel. He didn't bother trying to keep up, as he could feel her come to a halt only a few steps later. Her heart lifted like a feather, and he clamped down on their bond so that her feelings wouldn't sweep him away, too.

“Scavenger,” he practically growled when she came back into his line of sight. If the tunnel hadn't ended there, he was sure that he would've had to chase her down.

Just beyond her thin figure was a cavernous opening in the tunnels, a drop-off that appeared to be wider than it was long. The ground below was half-filled with water, a small beach bordering a larger gathering of boulders. On the other side of that, Kylo could just barely make out the continuation of the tunnel system. But none of that demanded attention; the top of the cavern opened up to the red sky beyond, a huge waterfall cascading over the side in a violent descent, crashing upon dark rocks protruding out of the water. The sound was practically deafening so close. It was so large
that it framed the girl's figure, filling his entire view of the cavern until he came up next to her.

Even with their bond shut between them, he could feel her excitement.

“I've never seen one before,” she breathed, barely audible over the waterfall, then froze as she apparently remembered who she was talking to. Surely he wasn't expected to respond to that. He made a face behind his mask, once again reminded of just how little experience she had. Had she never even seen a holo of one before? It seemed impossible to him for a person to have so few experiences.

She cleared her throat, but the sound was lost to the roaring water. It struck him that Dathomir was a wetter planet than he had thought. More damp, more bodies of water. He sincerely hoped that he wasn't going to have to drudge through every single last one. So far, his chances weren't looking good.

A flash of movement caught his eye over by the cluster of rocks. His sudden alertness drew her attention, too, and she turned in the same direction.

Red.

*There are people down there,* she realized at the same time he did.

Down below, dashing from rock to rock, were people dressed in suspiciously familiar red. Force, did the entire *planet* only own red clothing? They looked tiny from their vantage point, but he was pretty sure that they were at least humanoid. He frowned. The red robes weren't very promising.

And they had definitely seen them.

A warning arched across his senses moments before a blast of Force energy flew towards them. It was a large, dull blast meant to knock them off their feet, but Kylo deflected it with relative ease, dispersing it into the currents around them. The girl did the same, although with considerably less strength and practice. He realized that she had only felt the warning so early was because he had unknowingly transmitted it across their bond.

“We have to get to the other side,” she pointed out needlessly, as if he wasn't already aware.

Annoyance spiked in his veins. He heard the implied *but there are people down there,* felt her desire to not let innocents die. As if they hadn't been the ones to fire at them first.

“Then we'll go through.”

“We can't kill people,” she sounded indignant and angry that he would even suggest it.

“Sure we can,” it was almost laughable.

“No-“

The next Force blast was much more concentrated, aimed at only one of them, and it hit the scavenger on her side. She flew back against the stone, the only warning he had for the next shot that was aimed at him. He just barely managed to deflect it, taking the opportunity to reach out through the Force and crush the neck of the person he had seen fire the blast. It felt good to be using his power, to bend the Force to his will, and it was entirely satisfying to watch the person’s head fall limp on their neck and crumple onto the ground.

Darkness flooded his veins as he looked over his shoulder at her. He didn't even try and stop the grin
that split his face. “You were saying?”

Chapter End Notes

Happy Valentine's Day guys! Consider this somewhat-longer chapter my box of chocolates for you all. Loved ones or not, you've got me and this story to hang out with! It took a while longer than usual, but I wanted to make this a bit lengthier for the holiday.

So the chapter summary: Snoke's devious, Kylo's a complete jerk, and poor Rey needs a nap. Also, cave hermits are never a good thing. Just saying.
He killed somebody. The action was like a shot to the gut when she felt it, her breath knocked out of her twice in a row. The kill, the rush of pure, satisfied bloodlust hit her through their connection almost as soon as she hit the ground. She couldn't catch her breath - couldn't breathe because of it. It was like snuffing out a light, only it wasn't a light – it was a living, breathing person.

Dead, because of him. And her.

Bile rose in her throat at the dark pleasure he radiated, looking back at her with an air of satisfaction.

“You were saying?”

She couldn't respond, was too busy trying to make her lungs work once more, but she made sure to radiate as much hatred and disgust as she could.

It wasn't hard to remember that the man standing next to her was a monster in that moment, a vile enemy whose only thoughts were of destruction. It helped that he was wearing his mask, but it was his actions that spoke volumes. Of course his first instinct was to kill – he already had so much blood on his hands, she was sure that one more person wouldn't make any difference at all.

But it would to her. She had literally saved his life, and she refused to be the second-hand murderer just because of that.

She would not let the blood of his guilt spread to her.

“Stop,” she commanded, “don't do that.”

It was the moments like these – the dark, visceral moments – that she could feel the bond between them the strongest. Maybe it was because their own connection had been forged through darkness and pain. His presence was like a cancer in her mind, and she reviled him with all her being.

There was awareness in his stance, a knowledge of what she was thinking. Good, she thought, let him. She wanted him to feel what his actions were to other people – how utterly monstrous it was to take another's life capriciously.

Nothing shifted in his stance, his mask an impenetrable slate. But she knew he felt it – whether or not he cared, she couldn't know. He looked back over the cavern, seemingly considering something.

“We should go meet them. These people you want to save.”

And then he climbed down over the edge and out of sight.

“Kylo-“ she shouted, or thought she did. All that she knew for sure was that he intended to kill those people, and that she would feel each and every one of their deaths as if she murdered them herself, just as she had felt the first one.

She scrambled to the edge of the tunnel, gazing down in horror as she saw that he had already climbed most of the way down the cavern wall. In a few more seconds he'd be close enough to simply drop into the water and swim to shore. She couldn't swim, and her earlier excursion into the lake had emphasized that fact. If he reached the water, then it would be too late.
Frantic for anything she could do to stop him, she picked up the biggest rock she could find and chuckled it at his big, stupid helmet. Her aim had always been good, and the rock made a dull *thunk* that was audible even over the roaring water. He froze in his descent and she suddenly felt foolish for not even thinking of using the Force. But what would she have done, pushed him into the water? That would've ended it just the same.

*Did you just throw a rock at me?* He demanded, turning his mask to glare up at her.

Chest heaving, she gave a swift yank on their bond, hoping that it would somehow stop him, or choke him, or do *something*.

*I won't let you kill innocent-*

They *attacked* us, scavenger, his long outer cloak fluttered behind him in the breeze kicked up by all the moving water, and she could see little beads of water collecting on his helmet. She herself could feel the tiny droplets on the small hairs on her arms, cool enough to make her shiver.

“You just want to kill something,” she spat, giving in to the need to yell at him.

His anger wafted up to her like heat from an oven, firm and searingly hot. She was surprised how quickly she was getting used to feeling it. It was like getting used to being in the desert sun all day, only much less pleasant than even that.

He said something – or might’ve – but her attention was ripped away when she felt the solid grip of the Force wrap around her legs, pulling her over the edge, so she didn't hear him.

She really needed to not fall off of any more cliffs.

She must've hit her head on something when she was pulled into the water, because she blacked out. It wasn't for long, judging by how she was in the water but hadn't drowned yet when she came-to, but there was a definite blank spot in her memory between falling and being dragged to the shore, which is where she found herself when she finally regained her senses.

It was hard – harder than it probably should've been – to focus her eyes on the world around her, perhaps because of her state of exhaustion. Her stomach did somersaults in her gut and she felt like emptying the contents of her stomach. She managed to hold it down, but only barely.

Hands were wrapped under her arms, pulling her up and out of the water, scraping her skin against the rough beach. Despite the discomfort, the grip was almost gentle, only hard enough so that they wouldn't lose their grip.

No one on the planet would touch her like that. She shook off the rest of her mental haze as best she could.

Jerking against the grip of the person holding her up, she tried to twist around to see who it was. The hands were bare, the arms and chest wrapped in crimson robes. One of the people that had been firing Force blasts at her and Kylo Ren, she realized.

Their bond gave a growingly familiar tug, one that she was fairly certain originated from her. She didn't know why she automatically reached out for him, searched to find where he was. He was still near-by, that must she could feel, but she couldn't quite pinpoint his location. Her eyes flew to where he had been scaling the cavern wall, but he wasn't there.

“Shh, hush now,” a male’s voice whispered, smooth like worn leather. She tilted her head back to
see sickly pale skin and eyes, same as all the other people she had encountered on this planet. The man smiled down at her, skin wrinkling around his mouth and eyes in a way that she was sure was supposed to look reassuring – but she had seen eyes like those before. They held a hunger – for what, she didn't know yet, but she was certain that she wasn't willing to give it.

Immediately she tried to stand, but it was awkward and the man still had a hold of her.

“It's alright,” the man soothed as he helped prop her up. To her great relief, he let his hands fall to his sides when he saw that she could stand on her own. He scrutinized her for a moment, his eyes flickering to the tunnel she had come from and then back to her. She shook the remaining grogginess from her mind and pushed her tiredness as far away as she could manage. He was only a little taller than her, and she was certain that she could take him if he tried anything. She had dealt with men larger than him before.

The man held his hands up in a show of peace. “It's okay, I'm not going to hurt you,” he said, “sorry for attacking you before, but you startled us. We don't usually get friendly visitors.”

She narrowed her eyes at him, trying to read his open face. The easy smile – a part of her was reminded of Poe and his natural charisma, but that didn't ease her mistrust. And she knew that he was nothing like Poe.

“You're Force-sensitive?” She asked, although it seemed like somewhat of a stupid question. Almost everything was strong in the Force here, so of course the people would be no exception. It just made her all the more aware of her lack of training.

He nodded, still smiling. “Yes, me and my family,” he gestured to the large rocks behind him, and when Rey shifted her attention she realized that they weren't rocks after all. They were huts carved into the stone, much in the same way Master Luke's had been, only with curved walls instead of straight. There were several open entrances, and people hiding just behind them. Four in all: two women, a man, and a boy who looked to be no older than ten. They all looked like the man with the same pale skin and eyes, and they were all dressed in red. Alone, Rey had no doubt that she could take the man. But with three more adults and her with no weapon – she had to give pause.

Rey swallowed and tried to smile. The three adults didn't look very friendly – in fact, one of the women looked openly hostile.

“Are you lost?” The man asked, drawing her attention back to him. “Most don't dare travel the caves.”

“Why not?” She asked.

The man grinned. “Too many ways to die.”

“Oh,” her eyes once again flickered to the man's family. She didn't quite know what to say. “I'm sorry to intrude, we were just passing through.”

“'We?'” The man tilted his head a little, still smiling.

“She means the pig,” the hostile woman spoke up suddenly, her voice carrying harshly through the loud cavern. Rey only just barely managed not to jump at the sound.

“Ah, that's right. The man who killed my brother-in-law.”

Rey sucked in a breath. Of all the things to do, Kylo Ren had to kill the man's brother-in-law and then leave her there to try and talk to them. She didn't know why she was surprised. The feeling of
his mind at the edge of her brain, their bond, burned. She hoped he felt it, too.

“Um,” she didn't know if apologizing would help or makes things worse, the words sticking in her throat. “Do you know where he is?”

The man glanced back at his family, a look of pity growing on her face. “He threatened to attack us and then left,” the man took a ragged breath, “we didn't know if you-well, I sensed you were different than him, and he had just left you to drown. So I pulled you out.”

She shouldn't have felt betrayed. She didn't. Kylo Ren was a part of the First Order, a war criminal, a murderer, and a monster. She already knew that he wanted to leave her to die—at least—so she really shouldn't have been surprised that he had. She herself had been wishing that he'd die only minutes ago. He had mentioned wanting something that she had, but maybe it hadn't been that important, or his master changed his mind. Maybe he had decided to take on Mother Talzin on his own—that certainly sounded like him.

Anger and something else she didn't want to dwell on rose in her chest. No wonder she couldn't pinpoint him—he was likely trying to mask his presence, put as much distance between them as possible.

There was a bitter taste in her mouth that reminded her of Jakku, of spitting sand and metallic water and sleeping alone. She tried to force herself to swallow it down. To not think about it.

“Are you alright?” The man was a little bit closer than before, his hand hovering near her arm. She took a step back before she even registered it.

“I'm sorry?” She shook her head.

“You seem sad. I'm sorry that your companion abandoned you.” The man's grin didn't match his words, it was too big. Too…present.

She flinched at the word. “No, he wasn't—we weren't companions, not really.”

The man nodded as if he understood. His Force aura was strange, not quite right, like meat that was just a day too old. She didn't want to talk to him anymore.

“My name is Peerc,” he said.

She pressed her lips together, not wanting to answer but also not wanting to escalate anything. Her eyes flickered to the others.

“I'm Rey.”

He put both his arms on her elbows then, as if greeting an old friend. “Welcome to our home, Rey. Please, would like to share our meal with us?”

Absolutely not, she thought as she shrugged his arms off as gently as she could. The last ten minutes had certainly taken a strange turn. They had been attacking her just a moment ago—now they wanted her to eat with them. It didn't feel right. She had to remember that she was unarmed, and that the odds were five-to-one. She had to play it smart, then get out of there.

Only afterwards would she let herself think of ways to finally kill Kylo Ren.

Besides, a meal was always welcome no matter where it came from. As long as there were no strings attached.
"No, I couldn't. I'm actually in-"

"I insist." Peerc once again grabbed her elbow, this time with a firmer grip as he steered her towards the rock dwelling. The less hostile woman whispered in the child's ear as they approached, and the boy made himself scarce. The man made no attempt to hide the fact that he was ogling her through her wet clothes.

"You look like you haven't eaten in weeks," the hostile one spoke, her sharp smile belying her stern tone as she gave her a once-over. Rey felt a little self-conscious about that, but just shrugged.

"Hush, Regnuh," the less stern one quietly snapped, then gave Rey a smile. "My name's Canni. Come, sit with us."

She led her into their dwelling. It was bigger on the inside than Rey had thought – there were two steps down when she entered, which made the room feel bigger. One room was carved into another, separated only by thick hanging rugs of dark greens and blues. Openings had been carved into the roof, the cavern still protecting them from the weather, and it let in much more light while making the room appear even larger. Thick ribbons and strings of colorful beads hung from the ceiling, catching the light. Jewel toned rugs and pillows littered the floor; it seemed that everywhere was meant for collapsing into comfort.

It was a very strange setup for a family living in the middle of a cave. And it was strange – as soon as she stepped into the hut, she could feel her touch on the Force weaken, the currents around her softening until they disappeared almost entirely. Like someone had plugged a drain – or unplugged it, rather – and the warm feeling of the Force all but left her.

She stood frozen in her tracks, unsure how to react. "It feels strange in here,"

"Yes," Canni nodded, moving past her to several containers that apparently held the food. Opening one up, she pulled out a large slab of meat and three different vegetables. One appeared to be a sort of mushroom, but she didn't recognize the others. "Our home was built on a 'blind spot' in the Force, of sorts. We chose this so that it would be more difficult to find us."

Her curiosity piqued, she couldn't help but ask, "why would anyone come looking for you?"

Regnuh appeared to her left, lounging on a gathering of pillows in the corner. "Because we're outcasts, girl."

"Others of our kind don't agree with our practices," Rey turned to see Peerc standing right behind her, still smiling, although with a bitter glint in his eye. She shuffled away from him a little.

"How are your practices different?" She asked, "I must admit, I don't know anything about this planet."

"We are actually hospitable, for one," Peerc said.

"And we use the Force in a much more traditional way than other clans," Canni added as she began to prepare the food. It was odd to watch someone actually prepare their food instead of getting it out of a dispenser or from ration portions. Rey couldn't take her eyes off of it.

"Our food is better," the other man sneered, having crossed the room to sit by Regnuh.

"Hush," Canni snapped, "we must be more modest."

Peerc gestured to one of the many gatherings of pillows. "Please sit, Rey. Be comfortable. Dinner
will be ready shortly.”

Rey did as she was bid, albeit slowly and stiffly. She wasn’t going to get comfortable there – she still didn't trust these people, and the distant echo of the Force was unnerving her. So she sat pin-straight with her legs crossed, ready to spring up at a moments notice.

Peerc settled in next to her, sprawled out on several long pillows. He didn't seem to notice her unease, or at least he gave no indication of knowing.

They asked her questions about who she was, where she was from. She kept it vague, but did tell them that she was a scavenger from Jakku. They weren't familiar with the planet, and she told them they weren't missing much. Beyond that, they asked her about Kylo Ren. Was he a scavenger, too? How long had they been traveling together? The first question nearly made her laugh at its absurdity, but she managed to keep a straight face. She told them that he was a soldier in a war, and that they had only been traveling together for convenience’s sake. That made them all smile.

“At least you weren't abandoned by a friend, then,” Peerc nodded.

Rey lifted a shoulder, “No, definitely not a friend.”

She was glad that they didn't mention the fact that he had killed one of their own, or that he had used the Force to do it. She wasn't a very good liar, and the less she had to make up about the two of them, the better. Still, it struck her as odd that they seemed so unfazed by the death of one of their own. She didn't know if that was suspicious or if they were just very internalized in their grief.

When Canni finished making dinner the other man helped her serve it. She passed out carved wooden bowls to everyone – which Rey inspected with fascination – and the man doled out a portion of a what looked to be some sort of stew to each of them.

“Thank you,” she said to Canni, who smiled and nodded. Regnuh barked out a laugh, but there wasn't any real humor in it. The man eyed her over his food, his pale eyes like lazers. He wasn't ogling her anymore, just…watching.

She shifted uncomfortably, muscles tensing under the scrutiny.

“Go ahead,” Peerc drew her attention back to him, “eat up. Canni is an amazing cook.”

The scavenger in Rey wanted to, wanted to dig right in and eat every last scrap of food that they gave her, suspicious or no. Another part of her didn't want to eat, and had no appetite anyway – that part of her couldn't shake the stares and smiles, rang out that something just wasn't right about these people. Another part of her reminded her that she was still outnumbered, and that she had watched Canni prepare it. There was no way they could've done something to the food that she wouldn't have noticed.

So she took a small bite, just big enough to satisfy their expectant looks. It was fairly good – warm, a little bit of sharpness to it. The meat tasted weird, but she hardly ever ate real meat.

“How do you like it?” Peerc asked with a grin.

“It's good,” she nodded, “I've never tasted anything like it.”

“The ingredients are local. It tastes different to most off-worlders,” Canni explained, her words blurring a little at the end.

“Oh.”
The colors around Rey state to bleed into each other, melting as if they were being held up to a fire. She blinked hard, but the colors continued to mix around her. The decorative beads and ribbons started to slither and swing on their own – laughing at her from above. None of it seemed real. Was she the only one seeing this stuff?

Next to her, Peerc laughed, and it sounded far away and distorted, as if she was listening to it through a cup. The faces around her started to change colors – Canni turned purple, the man was green, Regnuh became orange, and Peerc was blood red. Their eyes started to glow, searchlights all pinned on her, unblinking. They scared her, and she turned her eyes away.

In her hands, the bowl of stew bubbled and moved. It was thick and black; the vegetables were eyeballs blinking up at her, and the meat became pales fingers dripping blood into the food. The fingers reached up for her, wailing in pain.

She shrieked and dropped the food, flying to her feet. Or maybe she just flew. Her body didn't seem solid around her, and when she stood up it was like diving into a pool of dark colors. She didn't know where the door was, where was she had come in. The colors were laughing around her, shifting and bleeding against her skin as she tried to find the way to leave. It was the only word that came clearly through the haze, the only thing she could focus on.

Leave.

Leave-

Then she heard it – a whisper, a distant crack-crack that sounded like a memory. Familiar. It tugged on her chest, tied to her heart like an elastic string, pulling her forward. It was coming from behind the swirling green and blue, behind a million laughing beads. But she couldn't hear them anymore. All the other sounds faded, until it was just the pounding of her heart and the distant hum of energy, familiar and violent.

She had to go to it.

She tripped and she flew and she swam. Or maybe she never moved. Thorns dug into her wrists, but she didn't remember sticking her hands in any bushes. Molasses collected at her ankles.

The hum was never silent, just waiting for her to get there. How had she missed the hum before? Her stomach was trying to fly out of her throat, but she needed it so she didn't let it get out all of the way. Her stomach was essential for swallowing sand.

Colors ran over her as she entered the wall. She didn't think that she should be able to enter walls, but she did. And then she froze.

Everything moved on the other side. It was even worse than where she had been before; she could barely make out any of the colors at all. Nothing was real or solid, melting in the snow.

But there was something solid in the center.

A black heap of burning violence, anger thrumming in lack of a weapon.

Kylo.

She collapsed next to it, roots growing up around her legs so she couldn't stand back up. She didn't want to – she was scared. Her fear reached out to him, made his humming a little louder. No wonder he was so quiet – she hadn't opened up his door, yet.
Wrapping around him like an elastic band, she sank into dark clouds.

Chapter End Notes

Stay away from drugs, kids. And to answer your question: yes, Rey was definitely drugged. No, I didn't just lose my mind.

This one's a bit shorter, more of a set-up for the next chapter. I'm not really proud of it, but meh. Whatever.

On a side-note, sorry if something seems weirdly inconsistent from the last chapter to this. I tried to minimize that, but I was talking to my sister and I made a quick plot change. Nothing major, but it affects the next couple of chapters.

Love you guys!
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

a few warnings with this one, guys, just to be safe. This chapter has mentions of cannibalism and brief mentions of rape. Just a heads-up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Predictably, Kylo's day had gone from somewhat negative to singularly disastrous. He would've liked to have said that it was all the scavenger’s fault, but even he could admit that she didn't hold sole responsibility. As infuriating as she was with her insistence that he didn't kill people who had been attacking them, she couldn't have known that they were a bunch of insane murderers.

He could've prevented the whole situation if she just let him kill them, but it wasn't all her fault. Just mostly.

The first time he had woken up, it had been violently and with a splitting headache. He had been missing his mask, blood was dripping in his eye, and the girl’s body had been draped across him, all dead-weight but still warm. Not dead.

Two men had wrenches (sic) him to his feet as if his legs didn't work, and when he shoved them away and tried to stand on his own, he came to find that they almost didn't.

He had been drugged, that much was obvious. The world beneath his feet seemed to be made out of gelatin, and when they dragged him out of the hut the cavern walls seemed to be breathing. It was somewhat discombobulating, but he had tried to shake it using his rage to steady him. He tried to let the feeling steady him — and it had worked, to a degree.

Then one of the men had kicked him in the face, and he had completely blacked out.

The second time he woke up was different. He felt weird, out of sorts. It took him a moment to realize that he was hanging upside down. His outer robes fell around his face and obstructed his vision a little, but he could see that he was in a corner of the cavern that was fixed with several wooden beams, one of which he was hanging from. There was no one around him, but there was a large, flat slab of stone off to the side that appeared to be a table of sorts, and there were buckets everywhere. The stone and ground beneath him were dark with dried blood, which was decidedly not a good sign.

His legs felt cold and numb, all the blood having left them, but his arms were pulsing with heat. It was thick and wet, pooling past his gloved hands. He felt weakened and dizzy, but that was probably from hanging upside down.

Then he looked at his arms and saw that they were covered in blood. He followed the sight of his warm blood as it oozed from his veins, down his hand, and dripped into one of the buckets which had been positioned under him. It had already collected a significant amount of blood.

They were draining him of his blood.

Like an animal.
His mind faltered with dread, a reaction that he normally would've hated, but this time grabbed a hold of and tried to let it fuel his grasp on the Force.

Stopping the flow of blood was his first priority. He figured he could just wrap them tightly in some cloth, but he needed to get down first. Moving his head felt like a decidedly bad idea as it made his vision black out in spots and lose all sense of up and down, but he pushed through it. There was no way in the universe that he was going to let himself be drained of his blood by some Dathomirian cave-dwelling recluses.

It took him a moment to get a good look at the bindings holding his feet, but when he did he couldn't help but release a breathy laugh.

Ropes. They had bound his feet in simple *ropes*.

Pathetic.

The Force was sluggish under his command, distant in his weakened state and elusive because of the planet, but after a moment it still answered his call. Snapping the ropes was so easy he could've done it in his sleep, but his foggy brain hadn't thought all of the way through to the part where he'd drop. Gravity sucked him violently to the floor, crashing into the bucket that had held his blood. It got everywhere – on his clothes, face, and hair. He hit his head on the hard ground, which made his vision black out entirely.

Groaning, he rolled himself over onto his side. There was no time for him to lie there with a possible concussion – he had to stop himself from bleeding, and then he had to kill every last one of those damned hermits. The scavenger could rot in space if she didn't like it.

The scavenger.

He remembered feeling her weight on him. She had been with him at some point, although he was alone now. Maybe she had already been bled out – the thought gave him a twinge of apprehension. It would be unforgivable; the Supreme Leader would make sure that he knew the depths of his error if he let her die like that. Surely she was more powerful than that, he thought, but even he had been apprehended so he wasn't sure.

He reached out to her as he tore off two pieces of his outer robe and tied them as tightly as he could manage. Blood got into his mouth as he used his teeth to help pull his makeshift bandages tighter – a metallic, familiar taste that brought his mind back to countless days of training, of pain and being left to die. The memories hardened his resolve.

The scavenger didn't respond to his prodding. It was more difficult to reach her than normal – likely a result of whatever effect the cavern seemed to have on the Force – but she was close enough that he didn't have too much trouble. Her presence felt like a whisper, just barely there, but present enough. Irritation spiked as he realized that she wasn't conscious. He'd just have to retrieve her on his way out.

All of the noise he made falling apparently drew some attention. A woman rushed out of the stone dwelling, eyes wide and heart pounding. He could feel her fear and anger shooting towards him. His own anger at seeing one of the people who had apprehended him – *tried to bleed him dry* – outdid anything she was feeling.

Her mouth opened to scream, but he didn't allow it. Raising his hand, he grabbed her vocal chords with the Force and squeezed. Her building scream turned into a wet choking noise.
He wanted her to suffer— for them all to suffer— but he knew he had to be smart. His arms were going numb from the blood loss, and his head wasn’t faring much better. There was still something… off about him, something that told him he still had drugs running through his veins. It made him sluggish on top of being lightheaded and numb.

Their deaths would just have to be quick, then.

“Ahh, the pig is awake.”

A shift in the flow of the Force around him was his only warning before his grip on the woman was broken and he was flung back against the cavern wall.

One of the two men from before emerged from another one of the hut’s openings, both arms extended as he actively kept Kylo pinned to the wall with his power. It wasn’t anything particularly strong, but in his unsteady state Kylo couldn’t seem to focus enough to break free.

Another man came up behind the woman, checking her neck for damage. Kylo wished that he had just snapped it.

“You know, you’re much stronger than I thought,” the man holding him to the wall admitted with something akin to admiration. Kylo sneered. “It’s taken drugs, tricks, and actual blows to the head to keep you under. That’s very impressive.”

“That’s quite a compliment, coming from a dead man.” He was surprised that he was able to keep his voice calm; bloodlust was pumping through his veins, rushing in his ears. He could barely hear the man over it.

Kill, it said, kill the ones who humiliate you.

The voice always reminded him of the Supreme Leader. It gave him power.

Chuckling, the man tightened his hold on Kylo. “We don't usually do this. This—we usually afford them the mercy of death before we drain them. We’re not monsters, you see,” the man trailed off, looking over to the man and woman as they drew nearer. Then he turned his pale gaze towards Kylo.

“We're a family. We love each other. We look out for each other.”

Kylo let his rage carry his power, fueled by the man's ridiculous speech, and almost managed to break from the man's hold. But the woman caught it, and flung him back with her own power. Together, the man and woman were able to hold him securely to the wall.

The moment darkened the man’s eyes, his gaze turning bitter and cold.

“Look how arrogant you are,” the man's face twisted into a sneer, hatred seeping from him like ice, “you think you can come to our home and murder every last one of us, don’t you?”

It was a pathetic hatred, he thought, one fueled by fear and mourning for loved ones. That particular brand of hatred had been directed at him so many times he barely registered it anymore.

“If you're going to try and kill me,” he let his voice drop mockingly low, feigning boredom, “then why don't you just get on with it?”

No one said anything for a moment, and he almost wondered if they would actually try and kill him— snap his neck, or choke him, or bash his head repeatedly against the stone. For a moment his
traitorous mind actually wondered if he would be able to stop them in his current condition. He quickly pushed the twinge of worry aside, angry of its existence in the first place.

“You killed Durrem,” the woman spoke up suddenly, and spat at his feet.

“Regnuh,” the man hushed her with a look. When he turned back to Kylo, he had stretched his mouth into a large not-smile. Kylo nearly cringed. “You killed my brother-in-law. You’ll be made to pay for it by dying slowly. Maybe we’ll even cut off your legs and have our evening meal in front of you.”

Then Kylo did cringe.

Cannibals. That's why they had been bleeding him dry – why there seemed to be an entire area set up for it. They were cannibals.

It was almost unreal.

*Force*. There was no way he was going to be eaten by cannibals – especially for killing one of them. He'd be doing the galaxy a favor by killing all of them.

But they were weakening. Even from a distance, he could see the thin sheen of sweat on the man who must've been the leader's forehead. They were using much of their strength on him – to keep him there, to make sure he paid for their loss. They were letting sentimentality get in the way of their sense.

It was a mistake he'd be sure to kill them for.

He was done talking, but apparently they weren't. The leader approached him slowly, arms still raised in concentration. The Force that they drew on was dark, but corrupted – altered, and not whole. For the first time, Kylo saw that that might actually be a good thing for him. It provided a chink in their chain.

The man got within kicking distance of him, his sharp expression plastered to his face as he jerked his head in the direction of the others. “Durrem was going to be a father. Not only have you taken away my sister's husband, but her child’s father, as well. For this I can't make you suffer enough.”

Kylo couldn't help the laugh that broke from his lips. It was quiet but harsh, more of a breath, a scoff. “You'll forgive me if I don't care.”

For a split second the intent to kill shot from the man, and he only paused when the other man spoke up.

“We're going to kill your woman, too.” The man bellowed, his pale eyes flashing.

He was tempted to ignore the other man purely out of spite. It was infuriating that everyone on Dathomir seemed intent on misinterpreting his relationship with the scavenger girl. But the man's stance – his animosity – was too tempting to ignore.

So he turned his gaze to the other man, careful to keep his face neutral and superior.

“Go ahead,” he shrugged.

It wasn't a bluff – he knew that they wouldn't have time to kill her. They were about to be too busy dying themselves.
The other man looked surprised, but only briefly. “Maybe we'll be merciful to her — cut her throat. Nice and quick.”

“How generous,” he mocked.

“Or maybe,” the other man continued as if Kylo hadn't spoken, “maybe I'll tear her open, have some fun with her.” And just to clear up whether he meant literally or in a more carnal way, the man rubbed his crotch with a twisted smile on his face. Kylo couldn't help but react a little. The man in front of him sneered.

“You don't like that?” He asked as if he had caught Kylo in some secret.

No, he did not in fact like that. It was base and vulgar, and something that he had never allowed from anyone under his command.

He decided that he'd kill the other man first.

Another opportunity presented itself; the man's attention flickered away from keeping him pinned in a moment of misguided victory. He thought that he had found Kylo’s weakness, but it was the other way around.

The Force within him was whole – he drew on the darkness, on his fury at being trapped, the pain in his limbs. Shutting out the strangeness of the planet’s Force, he focused only on what he possessed within him. It finally clicked, the way to maintain control even in a corrupted current like the cave. Even on this damned planet.

It was just him, had to be. He could only rely on himself — which was nothing new, really, but felt reaffirmed.

It felt good to rely only on himself, his power. He felt in control.

It was surprisingly easy to break the hold that the man and woman had on him — like driving a durasteel wedge into cracked wood. He twisted their hold off of him, the backlash knocking them both back several feet. They landed on their backs, but Kylo landed on his feet.

He fell onto his hands and knees, trying to push past the remainder of the drugs and the blood loss. A wave of dizziness hit him, but he didn't let that stop him. Nothing would kill his momentum.

The other man started to react immediately, but Kylo was faster. Lifting his hand as well as he was able, he used the Force to twist the man's neck almost all of the way around, snapping it.

Movement drew his attention to the woman, who had scrambled back to her feet. With a swipe of his arm he sent her flying. She hit the stone hut, her head making a wet smack, and crumpled to the ground. Not yet dead, but he would fix that.

Pushing himself to his feet, he allowed himself a moment to regain his balance. But his moment to himself was cut short when another woman ran out of the hut.

The woman took one look at the bodies lying around him — family members, most likely — and screamed.

“I'll murder you!”

He was glad that there was someone else to kill.
The woman raised her hands, but he didn't give her time to do anything. He reached out with the Force and closed her airways, squeezed them so tightly that he could feel them pop. Releasing her, he let her scratch and claw at her throat, unable to breathe. Still, it was taking too long. He gave her a fierce shove with the Force, blasting her back into the water. She became doubly occupied with trying to swim while choking. He left her to it.

The man was getting up, but he didn't want him to die just yet – he was for last. So he knocked his head back with the Force, just strong enough to make the man black out.

In the distance, someone ran away. They were fast, disappearing into one of the tunnels in the blink of an eye; Kylo didn't even consider going after them.

His grasp on the Force was as strong as ever, but he could feel his body weakening. He had to wrap this up quickly.

The first woman was pushing herself up onto her hands and knees. He picked her up with the Force and threw her hard against one of the stones protruding from the hut. Her back cracked, and he let the body drop.

 Stretching out his senses, he could feel no one but himself, the man, and the scavenger. The rest were dead.

Walking over to the man slowly so as not to fall over, Kylo nudged the man awake with a sharp stab of the Force. Groaning, the man rubbed his head. It took him a moment to recognize that something dangerous was coming towards him with the intent to kill.

Colorless eyes shot daggers at him even through his obvious growing fear. Kylo was glad that the man recognized the looming certainty of his death.

“To answer your question,” Kylo gazed down at him, “yes, I can walk in here and murder you all.”

“Monster,” the man spat, taking in the carnage around him.

“See, that's funny. I've never been called a monster by a cannibal. I guess you'd know.” Kylo shrugged.

The man made to punch him in the groin, but he grabbed the man's arm and gave it a swift kick. The sound of breaking bones echoed against the roar of the waterfall. The man cried out, clutching his injured arm to his chest.

But Kylo didn't allow him a moment of reprieve. After delivering another kick to the head, he stepped on the man's neck. He hesitated just long enough that the man could look up at him and know that this was where he was going to die.

Then he killed him.

Almost immediately after the man was dead, he could feel his energy and adrenaline start to fade. Gazing down at his hands, he saw that his blood had been seeping through the cuts on his wrist. He clenched and unclenched his fists, feeling only a distant throbbing. His arms were still numb.

All at once his bond came alive, like it had been hibernating, waiting for him to quench his bloodlust. It gave a tug on his chest so strong it was almost violent. The connection moved to the forefront of his mind, demanding that he return to the girl. All he wanted to do was collapse, but he forced himself to move his feet towards the stone hut, pushed his way inside past heavy curtains.
It wasn't as dark inside as he would've thought, and he easily followed his connection to the girl to the corner of the dwelling, a small room tucked away in the corner. She lied on the ground, bound and unconscious, shoved in a corner.

She looked bad; her skin was grey, and the circles under her eyes practically looked like bruises. But he could tell that she hadn't been touched beyond being bound. They had even left her damn bag on her shoulder.

Crouching next to her, he began to untie her hands and feet. It was much harder than it should've been, his efforts clumsy and sluggish, and he got blood all over her wrists and ankles. He growled in frustration, feeling her side of the bond twitch in response. Finally, he got the bindings off.

Staying would've been the practical thing to do. Cannibals or not, the hermits had a home that would provide adequate shelter and more comfort than they'd had in a while. But it wouldn't be comfort, not truly, and he doubted that the scavenger would appreciate waking to four dead bodies. She'd like it even less that he was the one who had killed them – unless she made allowances for the fact that they were murdering cannibals, but he wasn't holding his breath.

If he was being honest with himself, he didn't want to stay there, either. The place made his skin crawl. He didn't want to touch any of the food that they had there, and if they had any weapons of worth they would used them to attack him. No, the place was worthless, and it unnerved him.

He wouldn't make it very far dragging the scavenger's unconscious body around, but he could at least put some distance between them and the cavern. The entrance to the rest of the tunnels was nearly-by.

Taking a page out of the girl’s book, he drew on her own strength to pick her up, to push him forward. It gave him what he needed to gather her in his arms and stumble out of the hut, to get them both out of there – away from the cavern and the dead lunatics they left behind.

Chapter End Notes

Believe it or not, this is actually a much-milder version of my original scene, which was much more graphic and violent. I also toned down the rape mention, because it made me overwhelmingly uncomfortable and sort of stole the spotlight.

So hopefully this wasn't too jarring. Kylo got his first anger-induced murder spree, although in this case I'd say he was pretty justified. I wouldn't take well to people trying to eat me, either.

Next chapter is a lot less action, more character (i.e. Reylo) development! Because you guys need a cookie after this.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She saw It over and over, playing like a looped holo. Only it was real and infinitely more terrifying. She knew it was real, felt down to her bones. She didn't know if it was because of the Force or some other inexplicable knowledge, but Rey knew with every fiber of her being that Finn was in trouble. Or he soon would be; it was hard to tell.

The specifics eluded her, and whatever details she did get were impermanent and fluid. Master Luke had spoken of the future always being in motion, and she thought that perhaps this is what he meant. Sometimes Finn was alone, sometimes he was not. Sometimes it almost looked as if he was back on D'Qar, but other times he looked to be on a spaceship. The scenery always changed, but the most significant thing didn't.

He was always screaming in pain.

The sound was enough to make her want to rip her ears off her head. It was a different sort of torture than she had ever known – to be helpless while her friend suffered, knowing that she could've done something. If she hadn't crashed. If she hadn't abandoned him.

It wasn't her fault that she was stranded, there were things that were out of her control. And yet, it still felt like she had abandoned him. He had gone back to Starkiller base just to save her, and she had abandoned him.

Just like she had been abandoned. Only worse.

She knew that she was having a vision – or at least, she knew that she wasn't dreaming. The visions’ purpose seemed to be to haunt her with her inability to help her friend, to do anything.

What she wouldn't have given to be able to ask her master about it, to have him give her some direction.

On and on they came, stopping only to change scenes and the ways in which Finn was being tortured. The first time she saw him, he was strapped to the same type of interrogation chair that she had been when she had been kidnapped by the First Order. When Kylo Ren had interrogated her, or tried to. Perhaps her thinking of him caused him to be there, or perhaps it was really him who would torture her friend. Regardless, she saw the swirl of his dark robes – only glimpses, really – as he circled Finn. He screamed, begged for the pain to stop, but Kylo Ren never made a sound. As if he was in slow-motion, he crossed behind the chair. She knew what was going to happen – Kylo Ren ran Finn through with his lightsaber from behind, the blade piercing through the chair and out his chest with a screaming electricity.

Rey cried out, but Finn was already dead. Kylo Ren's mask came into focus, and he was looking straight at her.

The scene changed, and Finn was crumpled on a slate grey floor, cold and hard. It was covered in blood, not all of it dry. He shivered, lips turned blue, and even in her vision Rey could feel his life force, knew that he didn't have long to live.

“Finn,” she sobbed, collapsing near him but unable to reach out.

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A boot flew out, seemingly through Rey, and kicked Finn hard in the gut. He grunted, blood spitting from his mouth, and Rey felt his pain as if it was her own. Gloved hands moved to push his head to the side and expose his neck before injecting him with a sickly green fluid in a syringe. Whatever it was, he screamed like it was acid to his veins. Maybe it was. He was kicked again and again as he writhed in pain, until he lied still and the vision changed once more.

It went on like that for an eternity. She saw him bleed to death in agony, saw his bones and will broken. One time he was tortured on display for what must've been the entirety of the First Order. Another time Kylo Ren choked him until his vocal chords popped and left him to drown even as he continued choking.

Every time he died. *Every time.*

No matter how much she cried, how loudly she screamed, she couldn't stop it. She was an unwilling witness to the death of her friend, and she couldn't stop it.

It felt like she was going insane.

Then – suddenly, as abrupt as a solar explosion – she was wrenched from the visions. She became aware of only an inky blackness surrounding her and the part of her brain that was tied to Kylo Ren.

It was him, she knew. It was their bond.

She was unable to awaken from whatever state she was in, but she felt him nearby. He was furious, reaching across their connection in a way that he never had before. It felt like he was bringing a part of her closer, trying to somehow pull her across their bond. She didn't know what he was trying to do, and it frightened her a little bit, but it didn't necessarily hurt and she found herself unable to fight against it.

The sensation of floating had become familiar to her over the last few hours, but the feeling changed as she felt him draw closer. It became heavier, more real, like she had regained her weight but was being held aloft by strings. It was a little uncomfortable.

Reality stayed at arms length, coming in and out in fuzzy waves. She was aware that she was moving, but it wasn't smooth. It was very dark; even in the moments her vision returned to her, all she could really see were dark shapes.

She wasn't comfortable or happy, but she wasn't having nightmarish visions of Finn, either, so she was content.

Until she was spilled onto the ground.

Pain shot through her like a one-two punch; first it was the dull ache of hitting the ground, then a sharp stabbing in her arms. It took her a moment to realize that the second pain wasn't hers, that it had come across the bond.

Kylo Ren's grunt was the final detail that brought her back fully into the present. Her head ached like it had just lived through an earthquake, but she couldn't tell if that one came from him or her.

She allowed herself a moment to blink up at the top of the tunnel, surprised at how much she could see. Had her eyes gotten so used to the dark? No – there were small streams of light coming down from the ceiling. Roots had grown into the tunnel, breaking small holes through to the surface. Some of the roots were stretched out before them, thick and low enough to sit on, but making the terrain much more difficult to traverse. The light increased as she turned her head, and she nearly gasped.
To her right was the end of the tunnel. It opened to the air in a tangle of rock and root, into what appeared to be a forest or a swamp. She couldn't really tell, but that hardly mattered to her. Rain was pouring down in sheets, and the little holes in the ceiling of the tunnel dripped with water. Fresh, precious air filled her lungs, the smell of rain still little foreign to her.

Kylo Ren's aggravated grunt pulled her out of her moment of relief.

Pushing herself up on her elbows, she let herself take him in for a moment as he pushed himself up off the ground. Her legs were tangled around his arm, which she found decidedly strange – and very alarming – but she had enough sense of mind to wait until he pushed himself back into a sitting position to curl her legs up away from him. She wasn't sure if it was just the grey light, but he looked even more pale than usual. Sickly, even. His scar looked dark purple across his face.

“What did you do?” Was the first thing that came to her mind.

It was apparently not the right thing to say. His glare raised the hairs on her neck, danger ringing around in her head like a siren, but she had the thought that it was just a knee-jerk reaction. He didn't make any move against her. “I just saved your life, scavenger.” She couldn't decide if he was being serious or just mocking her.

Confusion twisted her features. She almost expected the words ‘you owe me’ to spew from his mouth, some twisted parody of what she had told him not that long ago when she had saved their lives from the beast.

But he didn't say that – he didn't say much of anything. She felt more than saw his concentration as he tried to swallow his pain, to control it.

He was in a lot more pain than she remembered – wounded, which he hadn't been before. It was when he wiped some blood off his cheek with his sleeve that she realized that he didn't have his mask on.

“What happened?” She asked, her voice echoing strangely, “where's your mask?”

A cord pulled across their bond, sharp and violent. He was upset about his mask, or whatever had happened to it. Or maybe he was angry about what had happened in general. She scooted farther away from him.

“I left it,” he snapped, but it sounded more like he lost it. He started to climb up onto his feet, and she was shocked to see him visibly unsteady. His arm shot out and gripped the stone wall for support.

“Your ‘innocent cave dwellers’ turned out to be a family of cannibals,” his tone was somewhere between mocking and plain furious. The way he worked his jaw made her think that he had sensed her reaction to his state of injury. “They tried to kill and eat us—me in particular for killing one of them.”

All she could manage was a small “oh.”

His words jogged some of her memory – of falling into the water and being pulled out by the strange family, of sharing a meal with them. She hadn't gotten a good feeling from them. They had told her the Kylo had left her, but that obviously wasn't true – or maybe he had just come back. They had insisted that she eat with them. The stew they had fed her—

There had been meat in it.

She had eaten meat given to her by cannibals.
Nothing seemed more important than turning around and emptying the entire contents of her stomach to rid herself of whatever – whoever – she had eaten. The thought made her throw up even more.

Behind her, she could sense Kylo Ren's surprise at how suddenly she had begun emptying her stomach. Apprehension flashed like distant lightning.

“Scavenger—”

“I ate with them,” she managed to choke out between her rib-shaking wrenches. “I…they gave me food.”

The silence that stretched between them told her that he knew exactly what she was saying. Tears streamed down her cheeks, hot and shameful. She had never felt so foul in her entire life.

She shakily ran the back of her hand over her mouth when she was done. She was glad her back was to him, glad that he wouldn't be able to see the details of her face. He kept his distance from her, both physically and mentally, and for that she was thankful.

After another moment to compose herself, she asked “They managed to wound you?” Even with her shaky breath, she couldn't keep the disbelief out of her tone.

“They drugged us both,” he sounded offended.

She closed her eyes as she tried to settle her stomach. “But you killed them?”

At first he didn't answer; it was like he was holding his breath, the air turning tense between them. She glanced back at him over her shoulder, somewhat confused by his reaction.

Then he answered, his tone clipped and defensive. “All of them.”

When she had been little, no more than twelve or thirteen, a trader had come to Jakku whose species was known for cannibalizing others of their own species. She couldn't really remember much about what that trader had looked like, only that most people at Niima Outpost were unwilling to do business with them. Even Unkar Plutt had been uneasy about dealing with them. Rey herself hadn't fully understood the word ‘cannibal’, and so had traded with them herself. After the deal was done and the trader left, one of the other scavengers had told her that she was lucky – she could've been eaten. She had just scoffed at the idea.

Throughout the years, there had been stories of people starving for so long that they had resorted to eating the flesh off of a corpse, scavengers who couldn't help but take a bite out of their own arms in desperation. She had known that some of the stories had to have been true, but it hadn't affected her then. It had all just seemed so very far away from her, something that she never considered because it would never happen.

It was so different when-

No. She wouldn't think about that any more. She swallowed the feeling of bile rising in her throat, knowing that she didn't have much left in her stomach anyway.

“Okay,” She nodded slowly as she climbed to her feet. For a moment she was confused by how wobbly she felt, how open and pressing the Force was in her mind. It was like keeping her eyes wide open in a sandstorm. Then she remembered that Kylo Ren said that she had been drugged, and thought that it must've been the remainder of whatever substance it had been still floating around in her bloodstream. She wished she could get that out of her system with the rest of the contents of her stomach.
There was an odd shift in the man next to her. He was holding his arms to his chest in a way that was probably supposed to be intimidating, but it only served to remind her that he had been wounded.

“Oh, lovely,” she could hear the roll of his eyes, “only after getting drugged, wounded, and almost eaten does she allow me to defend us. Good to know.”

“No,” she snapped, her shakiness forgotten in her irritation, “only after it's been one-hundred percent confirmed that those people are a threat bent on killing us is it not totally monstrous for you to kill them in defense.”

He scoffed, anger rolling off of him in hot waves. It felt fuzzier than usual, less pointed, and she knew that he was feeling the effects of his wounds very strongly.

“You're a fool, scavenger. Or you've let Skywalker turn you into one. Do you really think that everyone will simply wait for you to make a moral judgment call before trying to kill you?”

His tone made her feel like she was a child; she felt her own temper rise in response. “You can't just go killing everyone you see.”

“You're a fool, scavenger. Or you've let Skywalker turn you into one. Do you really think that everyone will simply wait for you to make a moral judgment call before trying to kill you?”

His tone made her feel like she was a child; she felt her own temper rise in response. “You can't just go killing everyone you see.”

“The entire planet is trying to kill us,” he pointed out, rather needlessly, she thought, “I'm obviously going to be the only one capable of keeping us alive.”

“What do you want me to say, you were right and I was wrong?” She snapped, fists bunching at her hips.

“It would be nice,” he sneered, then moved past her before she could get another word in edge-wise, his hand still gripping the wall for support. He stumbled over to one of the large protruding roots and sat down facing the tunnel opening, hunching over in a way that told her he was done talking.

There were a thousand things that she wanted to say, but none of them were anywhere along the lines of ‘you were right.’

He had been right, though. As much as she hated to admit it, he had been right to go on the offensive with the cave dwellers. If it had been up to her, both she and Kylo Ren would've probably ended up in their stomachs by now. No matter what she thought, it was only thanks to him that they had gotten out of there alive.

Both of them.

His back was turned to her. Stepping closer, she saw him rip a strip off of his dark robe and unwrap another strip that he had tied around his hand. Her eyes widened a little at the sight of his wrists. She had no idea that he had been cut there, or that they were so deep, so messy. The phantom pain in her arms made more sense.

Sighing, she unslung her medkit from her shoulder and sat on another root close to him – but not too close. He pointedly didn't look at her. Unzipping the bag, she shuffled around until she found two bacta patches, still sealed right even after recent events.

She leaned over a little and placed them on the root next to him. Her eyes stayed glued to the bacta patches even as she felt him tense up, felt the wariness and confusion spike through their connection before he regardless snatched them up and began to apply them to his wounds. For a moment she just watched in silence as he removed the wrappings and pushed his sleeves up a little so as to adhere the bacta to his wrists.

She took a deep breath.
“Thank you,” her words were quiet, but she didn't think she could manage them any louder.

He froze up so completely she was fairly certain that he wasn't even breathing. She couldn't look him in the eye, so she just pushed on, keeping her eyes on his hands. “You didn't have to get me out of there, but you did. So,” she lifted her shoulder in a half-shrug, “thank you.”

She wanted to ask why he did it, why he weakened himself even further by carrying her out of there, but she was pretty sure that she wouldn't get an answer even if she worked up the nerve to ask. So she didn't.

For a long moment he didn't say anything. Discomfort rolled off him in waves, mingling with her own. He didn't want to talk about it – probably didn't even want to acknowledge what's he'd done for her. She didn't know if that was just something about him or if he had broken some sort of dark side rule by helping her. But it wasn't like she was very comfortable about thanking her enemy for saving her life, either.

After a few tense moments he started to continue dressing his wrists, but his limbs were tense and moved with a little too much force. Even as he finished and covered his wrists back up with his sleeves, she couldn't bring herself to look up from his hands. His gloves were coated and cracked with dried blood.

Her eyes flickered up to see him staring at her, his facial expression flickering between discomfort and something else entirely unreadable. She had no idea how to even begin to read his expressions, she realized.

Then he shifted, reached for something at his side. The sudden movement made her jump, gripping her bag just a little tighter. She almost stood up and put some distance between the two of them, but managed to keep herself seated. Then a sigh escaped her.

All he pulled out was the small piece of ration bar that she had given him earlier. He held it in his fingers for a long moment, unmoving, as she forced herself relax, his eyebrow arched like she had done something odd. She frowned and fought off the urge to point out that it wasn't so long ago that he had tried to kill her. It wasn't unnatural for her to be cautious, especially given his track record.

Her eyes flickered back to the ration, a little unsure of what his point was. When she looked back at him, he was giving her the same unreadable look as before, but it had more weight to it. Like it meant something. She just didn't know what it meant. She wondered what showed on her face, if he could read her at all.

Then he ate it.

She blinked.

He broke eye-contact, looking out at the rain with a scowl on his face. She thought it was possibly because of the taste, which was admittedly horrible. But he ate the whole piece.

It meant something, the fact that he ate it there in front of her. It was deliberate. She thought that maybe his actions said what he couldn't – or wouldn't. Maybe she was reading too much into it, but she didn't think she was.

Saying that she smiled would've been a lie, but it was at least the beginning of one that tugged at her mouth. The moment felt significant somehow, significant to them both. Their bond had gone quiet, hushed, but it was still there – present, strong – letting them be entirely in their own heads for once. She wondered if it felt as odd to him as it did to her. He didn't look at her again, so she similarly
turned her eyes away.

They stayed like that for a while, just sitting. They weren't enemies, they weren't allies, they just were.

It was a small thing.

But she took it for what it was.

Chapter End Notes

Ta-da. Reylo strength: 2%, we're getting there, guys! I wrote and rewrote the last part of this chapter so many times; I wanted reylo, but only as strong as it could be within the context of their relationship right now. It was torture. Lovely torture. But, seriously, I have no idea what I'm doing, so you its tell me what you think!

It was brought to my attention that I forgot to explain my (totally lame) symbolism behind the cannibals. Each of them sort of represented something different, akin to my own version of the deadly sins. Reepc is creep backwards (all the names are this level of lame, watch), and he is kind of representative of those creepy white-van types. Regnuh is hunger backwards, which is also what she represents: hunger and bloodlust. Cani is the simplest, because it's just short for cannibal and that's what she was, haha. The other man's name wasn't stated, but it's Tuls, an anagram for lust. He represented rape and the devaluing of a person to their worth as flesh in all senses of the word. So there, my (super lame) background to the cannibals.

Also, what on earth is going on with Finn?!
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

By the time Kylo and Rey ventured out into the swamp the rain had stopped, although it didn't help much. Everything was wet – the trees, the ground, the air. Kylo was beginning to think that he would never be dry again as long as he stayed on this Force-forsaken planet. Which he planned on leaving as soon as possible.

And it was cold. Nothing extreme, but the chill was enough to make it uncomfortable even for him in his heavy robes. He had lost his cape when he had lost his mask – something he didn't let himself dwell on, in an effort to maintain his calm – but it wouldn't have helped him much at that point, anyway. The scavenger was visibly shivering, and didn't even bother to try to hide it. She still had the grey wrappings around her arms, but that most likely did very little to help guard against the cold breeze. She kept her arms firmly crossed to her chest, her hands stuck under her arms.

Neither of them spoke to mention the weather, or the cold. They hadn't said a word to each other since she had given him the bacta patches from her medkit, and he was just fine with that. Their last conversation had been…well, decent. It left the two of them in a state of limbo – not exactly antagonistic towards each other, but nowhere near comfortable companions, either. The feeling put him on edge, made him combative. Anything he said would likely put their fragile thing kilometers back from where they were, maybe even worse than where they started. So in the interest of preserving cohabitation, he kept his mouth firmly wired shut.

He didn't pry into their connection, either. It was like being tied to her by a cord, but trying to ignore it. Not impossible, but not comfortable, either. For her part, he didn't sense her try to touch the bond, either.

Instead, he focused all of his attention on the environment around them, on keeping alert. They had allowed themselves to rest before they left the tunnel – for how long he couldn't say, but he was fairly certain that it had been at least most of a rotation. He felt a little better – or at least, he didn't feel like he was going to pass out from blood loss anymore. The girl still had circles under her eyes, but she seemed to be back to her usual self, more or less. What he thought was her usual self.

She had shared another ration bar with him when they had woken up, snapping it in two and tossing it to him with a flick of her wrist. The same irritation as last time coiled in his gut, but the hunger spoke louder, so he ate it. Then they shared some water from her canteen, which he didn't second-guess at all. Food was one thing, but dehydration was an entirely different matter. He could survive another ding in his pride for something so essential.

All of that made it much easier to keep his senses alert as they trudged through the swamp. It was easier, too, since he had learned to draw from within himself to find his center in corrupted swirl of the Force that was Dathomir. Even without the bond, he could sense that the girl wasn't as strongly grounded – she kept getting pulled to-and-fro with the energies around her. Several times her attention would drift off to the side like she had sensed something, but he never sensed anything. Then she'd snap out of it, seemingly unaware that she had drifted at all.

He was following her lead, since she was still the only one who could directly sense Talzin. It grated on his nerves, as he didn't have that much faith in her training, and she seemed to keep getting swept up in the flow of the Force around her. Every time it happened, he might as well have been the one leading her around. Her lack of focus infuriated him.
She was doing it again – her attention drifting and her pace slowing. It was the last straw, he decided. Finally breaking from his standoffish approach, he mentally snagged their bond and reached across, trying to tap into her connection to Talzin the same way that he had done before.

His attempts immediately snapped her out of her daze. “Hey,” she spun on him, “get out.” She grappled with him through their link, shoving him back on his side and slamming up her defenses so fast it made the connection shudder.

“What the hell do you think you're doing?” She demanded, posture poised for a fight.

“you've been letting yourself get distracted,” he raised his eyebrows, trying to maintain control of his temper. “I was simply trying to maintain progress while you demonstrated your lack of proper training.”

That made her mad. He could tell by how her cheeks turned red and she tore down the wall in their bond to shoot feelings of extreme animosity at him. “I'm not distracted. And for your information, Master Luke has been an excellent teacher.”

He didn't stop the roll of his eyes, or the small huff of hot air that crystallized in front of him. “Oh, yes, remind me to commend him on his lackluster skills as a Jedi master before I kill him.”

It was the wrong thing to say. Even before the words were out of his mouth, he knew it was the wrong thing to say. This was exactly why he had decided not to talk. But it felt good to antagonize her, to revel in the dark, churning anger in his chest, and he didn't really regret saying it.

She took a whole step away from him. Her facial expression held the same level of hostility that she was sending across their bond. “You're a murderer.”

“Yes, I am. Did you forget?” He was genuinely curious, because it almost looked like she had.

“No,” she spat, and he didn't pursue it further.

Without another word, she spun on her heels and marched away from him, back on the path to Talzin. He followed after her, but she wouldn't let him get within a few meters of her. Every time he drew near she'd speed up, doubling her efforts as she marched through the swamp. He watched as she stumbled once, thick swamp water splashing up to her waist as she moved uncaringly through the terrain.

It irritated him, and he found himself pushing himself to play catch-up over and over, if only to make her work even harder.

For a while they made good time despite their moods – or perhaps because of it. The red sky disappeared behind dark clouds, and Kylo knew that it was going to rain again. He frowned at that. The last thing he wanted was to be stuck in an actual downpour; besides, with the chill in the air one or both of them might become ill if they were caught in the rain for too long.

“Scavenger,” he called out, his tone a bit harsher than he had intended.

She purposefully ignored him, climbing over a giant root obstructing their path. She disappeared down the other side, and he swallowed a growl as he followed her.

“Scavenger,” he repeated with more bite as he dropped down behind her.

“What.” She snapped, marching around the side of a large puddle. It was impossible to tell how deep the puddle went – in a swamp it could be thin as a piece of flimsy or meters deep.
“It's going to rain, we should find shelter.”

She gave the sky a cursory glance before shrugging. “It looks fine to me,” she never stopped moving.

He tugged angrily on their bond in an attempt to get her to stop moving. “Ah, so the scavenger from Jakku is a precipitation expert, now?” He felt like strangling her, but kept his tone mocking.

“Since when do you suggest that we just hunker down and hide?” She glared over her shoulder at him, fully aware of the reaction she was going to get.

Like a coward, she might've said through their bond, or maybe he just heard it.

His jaw clenched so tightly he almost thought that it'd pop off, his breath hot and loud. “Obviously your survival skills don't extend past rolling around in the sand.”

She stumbled again and almost fell as she leaped across a tangle of roots at her feet, keeping the distance between them significant. When he approached, his legs were long enough to simply step over them. She stopped by the top of a hill and waited for him to get closer, which surprised him a little. Apparently she wanted this confrontation to be up close. She heaved a deep breath that he could see like faint whips of smoke from her mouth, her nose pink from the cold.

The words flew out of her mouth like fire. “Do you know what you are?”

He stopped short, thrown off by the change of topic. “A murderer and a monster, so you keep telling me,” he bit out, unable to keep the deep hostility from his voice. Not that he tried very hard.

She tucked her arms back across her chest, unintentionally taking some of the bite out of her response. “You're stuck-up.”

“Stuck-up?” He frowned.

“Yes.”

Before he could even open his mouth to reply, she bowled on, “You think that you've got all the answers. You look down on people who haven't had the exact upbringing you had, and make judgements based solely on your extremely biased point of view – as if you already have all of the information. You're an ass.”

He was sure his face looked just as dumbfounded as he felt. Out of all the things in the universe, she called him a stuck-up ass? His bewilderment quickly gave way to a fresh wave of infuriation. He felt it rise from his toes to the tips of his ears, spilling across their bond like a poisonous wave.

“And you, scavenger, are an idiot.” He wanted to leave it at that, to keep his mouth shut and come out the superior, but he just couldn't do it.

“You get a taste of the Force, get an old man to teach you a few tricks, and you think you know what you're talking about. But you don't.” He allowed himself a smile then, and dropped his voice a little. “Tell me, what's it been like for you since you've landed? Do you know how to adapt to the Force in a place like this, or have you been swept away with the power of it? Does Dathomir have a hold on you, little scavenger girl?”

He felt the punch coming, but not in time to avoid it. Her fist hit him square in the jaw, snapping his head back with enough power that he knew she must've backed it with the Force. He almost slammed into the tree behind him, but managed to catch himself on the rough bark.
The kinetic force of punching him was strong enough to knock her back, too. She stumbled backwards a few steps, arms waving in an attempt to balance herself. She must've gotten her foot caught or knocked into something, because one second she was on her feet, and the next she had disappeared over the top of the hill close to where they had been standing.

Shock, anger, confusion, and alarm all shot through his head before he registered enough to run over to the edge where she had disappeared. He tasted blood, and he brought up his hand to his mouth to thumb the split lip she had given him. The dirt and dried blood caked on to his glove burned the cut.

He spied her immediately; she had rolled down the hill, thoroughly drenching herself the murky swamp water. She was once again coated in mud. Foliage poked out of her clothes and hair, which looked awful. Despite his immense chagrin, he couldn't help the quirk of his lips as he watched her trying to pick herself back up. She nearly slipped once, cursing loudly, and that only served to get an amused huff out of him.

As he opened his mouth, she flung her finger up at him with as much authority as ever. She looked rather ridiculous. “Don't you dare say anything, Kylo Ren.”

He forced his expression back into one of irritated neutrality. He could already feel the bruise growing on his jaw. “I wasn't going to.”

Spotting her bag, which she had apparently lost in the tumble, she began to attempt climbing up to it, only to slide even further down the hill. She growled in frustration, and he felt it reverberate across their connection.

“You sound angry, scavenger,” he mockingly cautioned, beginning to descend after her. He nearly slipped in the mud once or twice himself, but managed to keep his feet the entire way down. He made sure to snatch up the girl’s bag on the way, tossing it to her when he got close.

She caught the bag without comment, although the daggers she was sending his way told him enough. He gently massaged his jaw with his fingers, the spark of pain and her sharp look sobering up most of his amusement. Still, he thought with a glance at the wrecked girl beside him, he felt better after she had just made such an obvious fool of herself.

“No more a fool than you,” she didn't regard him.

He frowned. “Get out of my head, scavenger.”

She looked at him then, a smirk on her lips that told him she was referencing something else when she said, “Stop projecting.”

He didn't understand it, and didn't try to.

They fell back into the somewhat uneasy silence they had held before, which he had no qualms with. The trip to Talzin's lair had a chance to go – relatively – smoothly, as long as they could both manage to keep their mouths shut. As long as she could control herself, he'd have no problems.

It just didn't seem very likely.

“So why did you come back?” Her voice cut through his thoughts, her tone tight as she maneuvered around a fallen tree.

He narrowed his eyes at the back of her head. “What are you talking about?” He tried for a neutral tone, but it came out too forceful.
It took her a second to respond, and when she did she kept her gaze firmly in front of her. He could feel the ghost of her determination through their bond. “In the cave. You left, but you came back. It couldn't have been to help me, so why did you?”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” he said honestly.

“When I woke up, they told me that you had left, gone on without me. I only woke up after you had come back again,” she finally threw him an exasperated look, “I was wondering why you did it.”

He didn't know whether to scoff, roll his eyes, or ask her if she knew how foolish she sounded. “That's not what happened.” Was all he said, disdain evident in his tone.

Another pause. “Then what did?”

The last thing he wanted to talk about was how a bunch of cave dwellers had knocked him over the head with a boulder big enough to send him flying into the water, before managing to knock him out with their combined powers in the Force, solely because he had suffered a concussion. He'd cut off his own arm with his lightsaber before he admitted to any of that.

“They apprehended me while you were still in the water,” he admitted through clenched teeth, but said nothing else.

She completely stopped in her tracks and looked at him with an expression somewhere between amusement and disbelief. “You mean a family of…hermits was able to take Kylo Ren prisoner?” It was obvious she found that funny; he wanted her to roll down another hill.

He almost pointed out that at least he hadn't been foolish enough to eat their food – that although he had been knocked unconscious, she hadn't even thought to put up a fight in the first place. But then he remembered her wrenching her guts on the ground, how she had faced away from him, tears in her voice as she told him – and, he didn't.

He didn't say anything.

The moment was gone in a beat, and his opportunity to throw something back at her closed as she turned back around with a shake of her head. Despite the horrific acts the cave dwellers had performed, he heard her as she jokingly thought that the Resistance should hire some hermits – apparently they were his weakness.

The bruise on his jaw felt like burning fire as he kept his mouth clamped shut, but he ignored it. It felt ridiculous for him to let her have this…whatever it was. Conversation. He shouldn't have let her win.

He opened his mouth to say something else, to cut her down or point out her ignorance, but as he took the breath to speak it started to rain.

It started to downpour.

He let out his breath, a smile stretching across his face. “Should I say I told you so, scavenger?”

She whipped around to glare at him, but he didn't feel any strength behind it. “It's not going to kill you to get rained on.” She insisted, trudging on despite the condition of the weather.

The rain turned the world into a swirling pool of foliage and mud, the wildlife around them coming alive with renewed vigor as they all scrambled to find shelter. It seemed that no one wanted to get caught out in the rain. The hills made it no better, causing flash floods in certain areas while turning others into unstable mud slides. It was torturous trying to make their way across the swamp; they
made horrible time.

He spotted a giant tree on one of the taller hills, bark twisting down and out into the soft ground around it, the roots spread out like a hand above ground. Its branches stretched out like spiders legs, each at least as thick as his waist. The foliage was thick and full, dark grey leaves sheltering the tree almost entirely from the rain.

“Scavenger,” he called out to her over the downpour. She looked back at him and nearly slipped in the mud as she turned in the direction he was pointing. Seeing the tree, she nodded and followed his lead as he diverted their path over towards it.

Using the Force to power his jump, he leaped up the last incline to land on one of the protruding roots. Immediately he felt a little better; at least he was out of the pelting rain. The scavenger climbed up after him the old fashioned way, a prominent frown marring her face. Whatever mud that the rain had washed off coated her anew as she pulled herself up next to where he was.

The chilled air became even colder as they stood there in their drenched clothes. Kylo pushed his hair away from his face as he watched the scavenger sit, folding her arms and bringing her legs up to her chest in an attempt to stay warm. It didn't seem to be working very well – she was shaking like a leaf.

“You should've worn warmer clothes,” he found himself saying.

Her eyes snapped up to him, the vexation she felt towards him projecting across their bond. Her lips were pressed together in a thin, purple line.

“I didn't plan on crashing,” she shattered sharply.

He scowled. “I meant after you left Jakku. The rest of the galaxy isn't nearly as hot as the desert.”

She shook her head softly and broke eye contact, turning her head to the side and leaning her cheek against her knee. “Everything's cold,” she muttered.

Watching for a moment as her breath crystallized in front of her, Kylo blinked and then turned away. He looked back over the swamp and waited for the rain to stop.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaand we're back to our regularly scheduled Kylo-is-a-jerk programming. It was nice while it lasted. This chapter was really 'meh' to me and has almost nothing in the way of plot, but character development is always fun, right? Plot picks back up next chapter, promise.

We. Are. Out. Of. The. Tunnels! (For now). Seriously, it was making *me* claustrophobic to have to keep writing them stumbling around underground. We're not completely done with the underground stuff, but for now: air!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The rain didn’t stop until well into the night, the clouds clearing to reveal the deep crimsons of the sky and the faint twinkling of stars visible through the thick atmosphere. The moon was low, only glimpses of silver through the trees. Rey might've found it beautiful, if it didn't look so ominous.

As it was, she wasn’t paying much attention to the sky, anyway. The temperature had dropped even further with the sun; she was so cold she could barely make her limbs function. Shudders wracked her frame, violent and constant. Even Kylo Ren's looked tense, his muscles bunched in an attempt to combat the cold. Still, he had it better than she did. With his thick clothing and gloves, the only exposed part of him was his face, which did look admittedly bad. His cheeks and nose were a stinging red from the cold, and his eyes were red-rimmed and bloodshot as if he had kept them open for hours without blinking. The skin of his scar looked a bright red against the paleness of the rest of his skin.

He had sat down in front of her after what seemed like forever, apparently resigned to the fact that it was going to keep raining. He had sat close enough to touch if she had stretched out her legs, but far enough to maintain their unspoken status-quo. And as soon as the weather had started to clear up he had been on his feet again, restless energy humming around him as he waited for the weather to allow travel.

“Let's go, scavenger,” he hopped down from beneath the covering of the tree before she had even pushed herself all of the way back up to her feet. It hurt to move her muscles through the cold.

She didn't want to go; she wanted to make camp and get warm. For the millionth time she thought about the thermal blanket she’d lost. What she wouldn't give for it.

“Coming,” she grumbled, following after him with as much grace and dignity she could muster in her half-frozen state.

Her fingers stung they were so cold. How long would it take for her to freeze solid? She never had to worry about that on Jakku – even the coldest nights had never been that cold. The threat of hypothermia had transformed from an abstract thing into a very real worry.

*Kylo Ren might know.* The thought flashed through her mind like someone else had spoken it. It surprised her, that she thought to ask him, but it made sense. He probably would know if she was in any danger from the temperature, and yet he had been the one to call her ignorant not long ago. All asking would do would be to give him something to point to of evidence of her stupidity. Her pride wouldn't allow that of her.

“I can sense it,” he said when she stepped up beside him, brushing her hands over her pants in an attempt to rid them of dirt.

“Mother Talzin?”

He shook his head. “The wellspring.”

She nodded. If she was being honest, she couldn't really differentiate between the feeling of Mother Talzin and the wellspring she lived in. It all felt like one whirling maelstrom of the dark side of the Force, a storm large enough that it spread its nebulous tendrils out for kilometers around, sucking
other life into it. The pull she felt towards it terrified her, and it terrified her even more that Kylo didn't seem to feel it, too.

The voices had been getting louder the closer they drew to the wellspring, just like last time. She still couldn't really understand them, couldn't make out the words, but she understood some of their meaning.

Dark things were whispered in her ear, horrors and promises and woes. Sometimes they were quiet and she could ignore them. Sometimes it felt like they were yelling from inside her own head. Whenever they'd start to get louder she'd glance at Kylo, just to be sure that he wasn't hearing them, too.

He never seemed to hear them.

She didn't know where the voices came from – if somehow Mother Talzin was responsible, or if it had something to do with the planet itself. Kylo had called it ‘Dathomir.’ She thought the name sounded ominous, but maybe that was only because she had first-hand experience with how dangerous the planet was.

And traveling at night didn't seem like a very smart thing to do on such a dangerous planet.

“I don't think it's a good idea to travel right now. It's hard to see anything.” She wasn't wrong; between the darkness and the perpetual red fog, it made for very poor visibility. The last thing she wanted to do was walk straight into the deep-end of the swamp.

“You did fine in the caves,” he pointed out.

He wasn't getting it, and she wasn't going to be any more direct about it.

“Never mind,” she forced out, rubbing her hands up and down her arms in an attempt to warm herself up. It was – like all of her other attempts – in vain.

They hadn't taken more than a few steps before the voices started to get louder once more. She shook her head, trying to shake the sound. She went through checklists in her mind – the most valuable parts of a hyperdrive engine, the names and races of all the traders she knew from Niima Outpost. She mentally recited the half-remembered lullaby from her childhood over and over.

None of it ever worked.

And still, the whispering.

She didn’t dare glance at Kylo for more than a moment, but she was unsurprised to see him unaffected. Whatever the voices were, they didn't transmit across their bond.

A rustling to her right drew her attention like a snap. It wasn't far off – closer than she might've expected. The voices were coming from behind the trees and foliage. Every rustle of the branches and leaves sent echoes like ripples.

They were growing louder; she could almost make out the meanings behind the words.

Mud splashed up around her exposed calves as she changed direction, moving towards the rustling with single-minded determination. Whispered sounds called to her, drew her in like gravity. All other thought beyond finding the voices left her mind. She'd find them, and then – she had no idea what she'd do.
More words circled in her head, their sounds dragging out and nearly indecipherable.

It was a siren call.

Terrifying, yet magnetic.

Someone was calling her name.

No, not her name-

She stumbled on a rock or some protruding root, only managing to catch herself on her hands and knees. The impact jarred her out of whatever spell she had been under.

“Scavenger,” Kylo Ren growled, and she realized that she hadn't tripped on a rock or root – he had knocked her legs out from under her with the Force. And then he used his power to hold her still as a statue, crossing over in front of her with a furious expression.

“You are almost more trouble than you're worth,” he sneered at her, a look that she found wholly unbecoming on him.

Let me go, she demanded, projecting through their bond because her mouth was frozen shut. Her fingers were going numb in the wet, frigid ground.

He regarded her for a moment longer, his presence hot and invasive in her mind – probably attempting to probe for whatever had her so fixated. She wished she knew herself, although she would be damned before she let Kylo have access to her thoughts. After she slammed her defenses back in place and cut off their connection, he backed off on his attempts to invade her mind and released the hold he had on her body.

Resentment flooded through her veins as she drew herself to her full height, which was a bit taller than most other human females she'd met, but still significantly shorter than his. He kept distance between them, perhaps remembering how she punched him the last time she got angry. She considered doing it again.

He would doubtless stop her in her tracks before she got close enough, but it was still a nice thought.

A small flare in the Force – more of a spark, really – from the direction of the voices drew both of their attention. It wasn't caused by the whispering words, but that was only a small relief.

“People. Six.” Kylo's tone turned low, potentially dangerous. She didn't know how he could tell – she sensed that they were life forms, sentient, but they all blurred together, a half-formed mass of life in the Force. She couldn't feel anything so specific.

“They feel dangerous,” she ventured.

He nodded. “They’re armed. Hunting party, most likely.”

“Hunting what?”

“Local wildlife,” he shrugged, his senses still stretched out, alert. They brushed past her like warm, dark silk. “People, maybe.”

Us, maybe, she frowned, although she kept that thought to herself. Neither of them spoke for a moment, just sensed the movements of the hunting party. They weren't moving, but they were close enough to make her hesitate. It seemed too much to hope that they wouldn't be openly hostile after
every other encounter they'd had so far had been nearly disastrous.

“We should probably keep moving,” she suggested quietly, trying not to make too much of a commotion as she backed towards the direction they should've been going.

He didn't move, his attention still fixed.

“Kylo,”

He looked over at her. She could see the idea flash behind his eyes before he even spoke. “We should intercept them.”

“Absolutely not,” she hissed, “do you not remember what happened last time we found people? These people haven't even attacked us.”

“They're armed–it's a safe bet that they'll be hostile.”

“Then why attack them,” she shook her head, exasperated, “we're unarmed.”

He gave her a look equal parts affronted and superior. “We have the Force.”

As much as that was true, he hadn't been wrong before when he had said she was out of her depth. She didn't know how to use the Force as a weapon in a time of crisis – her master had only taught her meditation techniques, and the only experience she had with the Force in actual combat had been the night she had given Kylo Ren his scar. If she had to rely upon the Force as her sole weapon, she wouldn't even know where to start.

But admitting to that would be admitting that he was right, so she didn't say anything.

Following his lead, she kept close as they quietly made their way towards the hunting party with as little noise as possible. Kylo pulled in on his energy, making his Force signature smaller and less noticeable. She didn't know how to do that, so she just tried to emulate what she felt him do and focus on being quiet.

The hunting party was downhill from them when they got a visual. Kylo had been right – it was a hunting party, one that had made camp for the night. There were five zabrak males, each dressed for the cold weather with thick jackets and vests. Rey glanced at their gear in envy, but that wasn't what caught her attention – each of the hunters had at least one vibroblade strapped to their belt or a nearby backpack, and they had long pikes with strange furs and feathers tied to the ends, each propped up near where the hunters sat or reclined. There were two crates in the corner of their camp, the top one opened to reveal a huge pile of furs.

Despite their somewhat relaxed state, not one of them looked the least bit friendly. They didn't seem to notice her and Kylo crouching between the trees on the hillside.

There are only five of them, she pointed out. It wasn't that she didn't trust in his senses, but if there was supposedly another one unaccounted for-

The sixth one's over there, Kylo nodded to the left, where the sixth one revealed himself after several moments. He had the carcass of some hoofed animal draped over his shoulders, carrying with ease what should've been a heavy burden.

If Rey had spotted this group of hunters on Jakku, she would've steered very clear. The feeling she got from them she didn't have to feel through the Force; this was a group of dangerous men unafraid to kill.
Of course, her eye didn't miss the supplies they flashed as they shuffled through their packs and moved around what was definitely their camp for the night. There was no fire, but they had cleared the area around them and had set up tarps between the trees to sleep on. Only half of them were lying down.

*Why are they hunting at night?* She studied the zabrak carrying the animal as he heaved it over his head and onto the ground, stirring those who had presumably been asleep. Their discontented rumblings were just loud enough to reach her ears.

*Some prey can only be found at night,* Kylo wasn't paying her much attention; he was taking mental stock of their weapons, their positions. Figuring out the ways in which he would kill them. The order in which to do so. She could see it in his head – he had already picked out kills one, two, and three. She didn't know if he was aware of how his hand flexed on the bark, preparing for a fight.

She swallowed, aware that she had about two second before he jumped into a fight.

Her hand flew out and gripped his forearm, surprising them both. His arm twitched with the sudden contact and the spark of pain he felt at her fingers pressing against the bandage on his wrist. For a moment he just stared at her death grip on his sleeve. Then he looked up at her.

*Don't just attack them.*

His lips stretched into a line, clearly unhappy. *Don't start this again, scavenger.*

She shook her head. *No,* she turned her gaze to the hunters, *there's six of them and two of us. You're wounded, and I'm...We're not at full strength.* She looked back at him.

*It's a minor wound,* he sounded rough even in her head, obviously insulted and still not getting it at all.

What was she supposed to do in a fight with only the Force as her weapon? She couldn't throw things or stop them in their tracks, and she sure as hell wasn't about to choke anyone.

She almost revealed her real fear to Kylo, just so that he'd *understand,* but he jerked his arm out of her grip and stood, jumping down to the edge on the hunters’ clearing before she had the time to build up her nerve.

*Kylo!*

The reaction was instantaneous; the hunters all froze in whatever they were doing, immediately aware of the intruder. One shouted something with his finger pointed at Kylo, but she couldn't tell if the zabrak was yelling to him or his peers. They went for their weapons.

Without a word, Kylo made the first kill. Extending his hand, he flung the hunter nearest to him into a tree several meters away hard enough that she could hear the skull crack from where she was still crouched. The hunter’s life force blinked out like a light.

He did the same to the next hunter, but a third was on him at that exact moment and distracted him, weakening his throw so that it just knocked the second hunter back a meter or two. The third zabrak managed to knock Kylo off his feet, but he tugged and brought the other man with him, using the momentum to cast the man to the side and roll back to his feet.

Another one of the hunters ran at him with a vibroblade. He grabbed thehunter’s hand before the swing connected and managed to divert the aim enough to give him an opening to punch him right in the jaw.
But the distraction cost him; the fifth hunter threw his pike, and managed to graze Kylo's shoulder deep enough that he cried out.

Cursing Kylo Ren and his insistence that everything turn into a blood bath, Rey stood and began to make her way down. He let the downward momentum carry her straight into the hunter who had thrown the pike. She aimed low, and managed to tackle him to the ground. Her awareness of what Kylo was doing dissipated in the reality that she had attacked an armed hunter when she herself was entirely unarmed.

The hunter didn't seem inclined to even go for his weapons; his large hands seemed intent on her neck. All of her energy was tunneled into not letting his hands wrap around her neck, not letting him crush her – just not dying.

He was much bigger than her, but she hadn't survived all those years by herself without getting herself out of scraps, some more dire than the one she found herself in.

She leaned her head forward and bit the hunter's hand as hard as she could, ignoring the bitter taste of dirt and blood on her tongue. The hunter jerked back just enough for her to pull her leg up to her chest and kick him in the groin with all her strength.

Rolling off of her with a cry, the hunter grasped in pain at his manhood. Rey didn't hesitate to press her advantage. She was on her feet in a flash, delivering a Force-powered kick to the hunter's head that snapped it back with a sick crack, knocking the zabrak entirely off the ground.

Dead, a soft voice whispered in her head.

Later, came the more urgent voice.

With shaky hands she unhooked the vibroblade that was still strapped to the body's belt. The weight was strange, but she hardly minded – it just felt good to hold a weapon again.

Kylo had his hands full wrestling two of the hunters, but the third remaining zabrak had turned his attention to her. Armed with his pike, he rushed her with a bloodthirsty cry, weapon aimed straight at her chest. Her heart stopped as she dodged the strike, stumbling away from both the hunter and the body. While she was completely familiar with her staff, she hadn't had many occasions in which she was the one with the shorter weapon and the other had the advantage of reach.

Extending the hand not holding the vibroblade, she used the Force to try and wrest the pike out of the hunter's grip. She didn't know what she was doing, but she tried to call upon the memory of Starkiller, what it felt like when she called her lightsaber to her hand for the first time.

To her great surprise, the pike flew straight out of the hunter's hand and into her open palm as if he had thrown it at her. By the look on his face, it surprised him, too.

Dropping the vibroblade, she used the pike in much the same way she would her staff. The balance was a little different with the added weight of the blade on one end, but she didn't need to adjust much. Her confidence soared, the mostly-familiar weight a condor in her hands. Within seconds she had swiped the hunter's feet out from under him, weapon poised at his chest.

“Don't move,” she commanded.

No sooner where the words out of her mouth did she get knocked off her feet by the Force. She landed on her side with a startled gasp, just barely managing to keep the wind from being knocked out of her. She lost her grip on the pike, and she didn't see where it landed.
The hunter was up with a vibroblade in-hand before she really knew what was happening. In a move she didn't think about, she called the pike back to her hand and swung it up, impaling the hunter right through the chest right before he could swing his weapon at her. Blood spurted from the hole she had created in his chest, dripping down the weapon and spilling warm life on her abdomen in a crimson stream.

Chest heaving, she held eye contact with the hunter until the last of his life faded from him. Suddenly her arms were shaking, and she couldn't hold the weight of the body anymore.

She barely managed to heave the weapon to the side and drag herself away from the second corpse she had made that day – in the last few minutes. Shakily pushing herself up to her feet, she stumbled over to where Kylo was kneeling, inspecting one of the bodies. Apparently he had taken care of the rest.

Her adrenalin was crashing; soon she'd need to sit or collapse. Possibly both. “Next time, try aiming your Force blasts better.”

He didn't react, didn't even look up from going through the hunter’s belongings. “Next time pay better attention to your surroundings,” he deadpanned as he started going through one of the backpacks.

“You are not my surroundings. I shouldn't have to pay attention so that the other guy on my side doesn't knock me out with the rest of them.”

He looked up, ready to say something, then blinked. “Are you hurt?” His eyes were on her stomach and hands, both of which were covering in blood.

She shook her head. “It's not mine.”

He nodded and grabbed the backpack he had been rustling through as he stood. “These guys had a lot of supplies,” he jerked his head over to the overstuffed bags littered around the ruined camp, “real meat, too. Looks edible.”

The reality that she had just killed two men to steal their supplies reminded her of the blood and grime she had gotten in her mouth. Wiping her mouth with the back of her hand, she realized too late that all she was doing was smearing more blood on her lips.

Kylo himself had blood splattered all over the left side of his jaw, but she didn't bother asking if it was his. It wasn't.

Her gaze wandered to the two zabraks she had killed; she couldn’t tear her eyes away. “What should we do with the bodies?”

A pause, then, “Drag them away from here, dump them in the swamp…Then we can rest here for a while.”

She nodded numbly, because what else was she going to do? Kylo had been the one to drag her into the conflict, but she didn't even have enough energy left to blame him. The voices, which had been blessedly quiet thought the whole ordeal, were practically screaming in her ear.

The two of them worked together to rid the camp of the bodies, and it wasn't lost on her that the first time they worked together without arguing was such a morbid task.

She didn't know what that meant.
Whispers made up for the silence between them, taunting her for her kills, for her weakness. For killing and not killing.

She tried to ignore them.

When it came to dispose of her kills, Kylo studied both the bodies like he thought he'd learn something. She held up the defenses in their bond, entirely unwilling to hear whatever he may have thought about it. After a moment he looked up at her.

“You are quite the survivor, scavenger.”

It was the first time he hadn’t used the word ‘survivor’ as an insult, but for the first time she took it as one.

The voices never called her a survivor – they called her something else.

She didn’t speak except to ask if he knew how to prepare the meat. He did, he said, but there was no way of preparing it with a fire, so he rustled around in another one of the backpacks until he produced a vial filled with a grey powder that was supposedly supposed to make raw meat alright to eat. It made the meat taste like ash, but she admitted didn’t have much experience with real meat – maybe it always tasted like that. It didn't matter; she forced herself to eat every bite.

Her companion sensed her mood and gave her distance, although she felt his sting of irritation that she was being so sullen, so quiet.

She had no idea what he wanted from her.

“Young the cut on your shoulder,” she said, just to say anything over the voices.

He didn’t say anything in response, but his eyes flickered over in acknowledgement. She watched as he gave an experimental roll of his shoulder, then shrugged.

“I'll live.”

She didn’t say anything to that. They eventually rested on the tarps the hunters had set up for themselves, wrapped up in the other tarps to keep warm. It didn't feel as good as she thought it would. His breathing evening out almost immediately. Hers lingered heavily in her chest; she had to keep reminding herself to breathe. She couldn’t bring herself to close her eyes. The deep reds of the sky filled her vision, the faint stars.

It was still dark out, and the voices thrived in the dark. The world around her felt shifty and unsettled, the shadows around her like peek-holes into a yawning abyss.

She had no idea how long she lay awake in the dark before she finally got to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

More action, more evidence of a slightly different relationship than before. At least now our guys have some supplies, right?

Poor Rey (I've been saying that this entire time, I swear) - she's dealing with a lot, and it's starting to get to her.
Love you guys! <3
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Kylo’s dreams had changed, she thought.

Before – he had always been in pain, always screaming, his mind closed off and suffocating through the torture. It had been horrific and constant, and Rey never slept well when their bond pulled her into his nightmares.

This was different.

It had been different since that first time in the cave, when she had glimpsed the sinister presence cloaking his thoughts – a presence dark and thick like oil, seeping into every crevice of his mind. Aphotic tendrils had reached out and grabbed her, tried to wrest her down into oblivion. It had been different than anything she had ever felt before, a different darkness than that of Kylo’s or Mother Talzin’s. She didn't quite know how define it, but she knew that it terrified her, and she could guess who it was.

Supreme Leader Snoke.

That's what they called him, the man-entity that ruled the First Order, the being so powerful with the dark side that he had corrupted Luke Skywalker’s star pupil from across the galaxy. Kylo Ren's master.

She knew that Snoke haunted his dreams; he had been there for every single night of suffering that Kylo had experienced since Starkiller. Even after that, she knew he still haunted his apprentice’s dreams. She hadn't been fully in one of his dreams since crashing on Dathomir, but she could still feel it along the edges of his mind. Whatever he dreamt, Snoke was an all-consuming presence within it.

It terrified her; she didn't know how it didn't terrify him, too.

He still had nightmares every night – she was beginning to think that he never slept well, even when he wasn't dreaming of torture. It was something they had in common, although she didn't dwell on that. She was just grateful that she didn't have to share his nightmares.

But this wasn't like that.

The dream that took him felt more like a memory. It was faint – she could barely sense it as it took ahold of his subconscious, pulling his mind in as he slept. In sleep his defenses couldn't be what they were while he was awake, and there was little else for her to do while she lied awake huddled on her grey tarp. The idea that he was having a normal dream made her curious.

She didn't know how to consciously enter a dream; every time they had shared one had been because they had both been asleep at the same time. So when she first reached across their bond, gently prodding alone the edges of his mind, all she could sense was the faint feeling of melancholy, of faded warmth. Then she pushed deeper, just enough to catch glimpses of images, nothing permanent. Nothing like actually sharing a dream.

He was dreaming of the familiar thrum of an old, beat-up hyperdrive, of looking through the viewport down at a green and blue planet below. He was put off, slightly revolted by something.
I'm never going to live in a swamp.

A laugh.

Okay, kiddo.

Her breath caught in her throat.

He was dreaming about Han.

The realization hit her like a punch to the gut. She pulled back from his mind like she had been burned, retreating as far away from their bond as she could.

She had no desire to know what memories he had of his father. Of Han Solo. All they did was remind her that in spite of all of the good memories he must've accumulated before he betrayed everyone, all the small moments and big moments and a life-time of being loved, he had killed his father.

He killed him, yet he dreamed of being a child and talking to his father like a normal boy with normal memories.

Did he dream of killing his father, too?

Maybe the answer was no, since she had never seen him dream about anything like that. The thought made her sick regardless. It made all the old distrust and anger bubble back to the surface like it had just been waiting for her to remember all of the things he'd done. As if she could ever forget them.

She couldn't even hear him breathing as he slept, but she could feel him, that presence in the Force that was so volatile it could only belong to him. In his sleep it was as calm as she had ever seen it, but it only was like a far-off storm – no less violent, but not so close. More of a promise of things to come.

Repositioning herself so that her back faced him, she squeezed her eyes shut and tried to shut out their bond as much as she could.

She tried to think of happier things – of good things. The warmth of Finn’s embrace. The first time she met Poe. Flying the Falcon. The first time she saw the green world of Takodana. Master Luke’s presence in the Force, his teachings. The feeling of the Force running through her veins, connected and pure. She had almost forgotten that, what it felt like to be filled with light side around her; the presence of the Force on this planet was so dark, she didn't want to even touch it.

It was like the planet – Dathomir, she reminded herself – was the embodiment of Mother Talzin. Or maybe it was the other way around.

Just the thought of her brought a chill to her spine, the memory of words a lump in her throat.

She wanted her to – achieve something. Something to do with the Force.

Something that Mother Talzin claimed she needed Kylo Ren for.

He was her conduit.

Or something.

Dwelling on the memory of her conversations with the woman did nothing to help lull her to sleep – it didn't even help take her mind off of Kylo. So she firmly returned the thoughts to the back of her
mind, closed off with a ‘do not think about’ sign.

A movement, or something like it, drew her attention back to reality. Turning so that she could look over her shoulder, she saw that Kylo was the same mass of dark hair wrapped in a tarp that he had been before. He hadn't moved once since settling in to sleep, not even a little, but there was something different. It was as if his storm had gotten a little bit closer.

In the darkness she watched for a long time, waiting for him to do…anything. She got the feeling that he was awake, that he was about to say or do something – but he never did.

When she concentrated, she could hear him breathing. It was like listening to the whisper of a breath. It was almost unbelievable that the man who murdered countless lives could be the same man who lied near her, small puffs of crystallized air wafting up from the curtain of his hair.

Not for the first time did she wish that he had kept his mask. She never contemplated his more human attributes when his face was hidden behind his mask.

She wondered if she would still be able to hear his breathing if he had been wearing the mask.

Her eyes drifted shut to the sound.

The scavenger was wracked with a nightmare. Kylo could feel it pushing on his mind, could feel her reaching out blindly across their bond for reality, or comfort, or something. He shut it all out, solidified his defenses so that all he felt was an echo of her push, just enough to know she was doing it.

He had no desire to get pulled into whatever nightmares a scavenger girl might have – and he had an inkling of what this particular scavenger girl would have a nightmare about, anyway. So he left her to it.

It barely split his concentration from his task. Sifting through all the supplies that the hunters had at their camp, he separated what they could use from what was useless or too cumbersome for them to carry. The vibroblades were definitely good. Most of the food was good, too. The animal pelts were largely useless to them since they had the tarps. There were a couple of cooking utensils in one bag, but he didn’t think it necessary enough to justify the extra weight it would bring.

Each of the hunters had personal belongings in their bags, which Kylo took turns going through and emptying. One had a long strand of string with at least twenty different types of canines dangling off of it; most likely a trophy of some sort. Another had a pair of macrobinoculars, which could come in handy, so he put that in the ‘very useful’ pile.

He had gone through almost everything by the time the girl started to stir, her nightmare dissipating in the light of day. The press on his mind disappeared in slow increments as she became aware of her surroundings. He doubted she knew what she had been doing.

She sat up slowly, cautiously, pulling the tarp more closely around her, eyes bloodshot and watchful.

“Good morning,” he offered when her gaze landed on him. She stared at him, but didn't say anything in return.

So that's how she was going to play it. Unclipping her canteen from his belt, he tossed it over to her with probably more force than was strictly necessary.

She caught it without a thought, letting the tarp fall unattended around her. A sharp look grew on her
"You stole my canteen."

"I refilled it," he corrected, jerking his head in the general direction of the meat he had lit a small chemical fire to prepare. "There's food over there, too, if you don't want to starve."

"You stole it." Her fingers clutched around the canteen, pale from the cold.

He narrowed his eyes at her. "Then I returned it."

Disdain rolled off of her in noxious waves. She was still in the same mood she had been when she had gone to sleep – worse, even. He wasn't unaware that she condemned his actions the previous day, but he thought the results had far outweighed whatever reservations she could possibly have had.

He watched as she rolled rather ungraciously out of her make-shift bed, straightening her grey vest with a little frustrated huff.

"What are you looking at," she challenged with a snap as she began to redo her hair.

He made no move to look away; if she wanted to get angry, let her.

She kept throwing him glances as she redid the first bun, then moved on to the second. For a moment he considered silently staring her down the entire time just to be antagonistic, but he dismissed the idea and looked back to the backpack in his hands.

There was a letter written on a piece of flimsy wedged in the bottom of one of the side pockets. It was folded down to half the size, and bent a little in the corner.

"What is that?" He turned to see that the girl's attention had caught on the note in his hand.

"A note, obviously."

"Is that flimsy?" She ignored him and took a couple of steps closer, the greedy look of discovery in her eye. It occurred to him that a scavenger probably didn't have many opportunities to come across pieces of flimsy.

She shouldn't have gotten herself excited, he thought, especially over something so mundane. Not bothering to answer her absurdly obvious question, he unfolded the flimsy to its full size, revealing notes scribbled in a cramped hand. It looked recently written.

"What's it say?" she was practically looming over his shoulder, concentrating on reading the note in his hand.

"A note, obviously."

"Can't you read?" He was ready to toss it at her, uncomfortable with her presence so close to his back, hovering over him like a shadow. A skinny, light-weight shadow, but at his back nonetheless. She crossed her arms. "Of course I can," she didn't sound as insulted as he expected her to at first. Still, she straightened and trudged over to where he had left the rest of the food he had prepared, arms crossed and chin held high.

He had insulted her after all. Turning his attention back to the note, he realized why she might've had difficulty. It was written in a hybrid of basic and traditional zabrak symbols – assuming that she had a competent grasp of written basic, she still wouldn't be able to read it. Of course, that was assuming she was at least somewhat competent at reading any language – he had no idea what formal education a scavenger would ever have access to, if any. He figured it was safer to just low-ball it.
Still, even he had some trouble making out the words. It seemed to be short-hand, just key words to jog the hunter’s memory. Probably useless. He was about to crumple it up and toss it aside when he recognized a few of the phrases.

‘Force users-
‘male/female, human-
‘unarmed-
That was impossible. He flipped the piece of flimsy over and riffled through the rest of the backpack, looking for something else – more. Throwing a brief glance over his shoulder at the scavenger, who was eating like it was the last time she ever would, he read over the note again. This time he picked up a few more words. More descriptions - there seemed to be a set of last-known coordinates, but he couldn't know where those were without a map.

Those hunters – they had been hunting regular game. He had seen them. But from the flimsy in his hand, it looked like they had also been hunting the two of them.

That didn't make any sense.

He felt his expression harden, suddenly sorry that he'd killed the hunters so quickly. Whoever it was that had told the zabrak hunters about him and the scavenger – they needed to know who it was. It didn't necessarily seem like something that Talzin would do – or, at least, he figured that she would've sent more of her witches instead of regular hunters – but if there was someone else trying to track them down, then he sure as hell was going to find out who it was.

If only he’d kept one of the hunters alive long enough to get the information out of him.

“What's wrong, what did it say?” He turned to see the scavenger staring at him with her usual amount of mettle.

Standing, he picked up the backpack and emptied the rest of its useless contents onto the ground before tossing it in her general direction. It landed right by her feet. “Looks like those hunters were tracking us.”

She stood as he stood, apparently unwilling to give him any sort of perceived advantage over her, although he personally didn’t see the point; he was still significantly taller than her when they were both standing. It was a natural advantage that he possessed, but he wasn't fool enough to think that it would make any difference if it came down to it; the scavenger was tough, and had proven herself to be the type to take on monsters bigger than her.

“That doesn't make any sense,” she frowned.

“No,” he agreed, “it doesn't.”

Neither said anything for a moment.

“I don't think Mother Talzin sent them,” she ventured.

He shook his head. “Neither do I.” Striding over to the backpack he had already stuffed with the most useful supplies, he snatched it up and nodded in the direction of the empty bag at her feet. “You might want to pack some supplies before we leave.”

The tarps were easy enough to take down; he rolled one up and stuffed it in the last bit of free space
in his backpack.

It felt good, not to have to rely on the girl for anything. To have his own way of surviving.

A slight tug in their bond pulled his attention back to her. The bag dangled from one hand, but she hadn't begun to fill it yet. There was this far-off look on her face, and he could feel as her senses stretched out to a single point not far away, somewhere over his shoulder. He turned and looked, tried to sense anything for himself, but there was nothing there.

A groan nearly escaped him. She was losing focus again.

“Scavenger, snap out of it.” He shifted his focus to probing along the edges of her mind, pushing just enough that she should feel his presence there. In the past, she had usually snapped out of it as soon as he went poking around on her side of their connection.

But it didn't seem to get through to her. She moved forward a step, and then another, still enthralled in a trance. He watched as the expression on her face turned agitated, dread seeping from her mind. He pushed harder, enough to skim her recent memories, but even then he got no reaction.

“Scavenger.”

She stumbled over one of the pelts he had discarded, but just continued on towards that empty point over his shoulder like she hadn't noticed. He stepped to the side as she passed, seemingly unaware that he still existed.

He had had enough. His hand shot out and grabbed her arm in a vice-grip, uncaring of the bruise he knew it'd leave.

"Rey," he practically growled, backing his words with more Force power than he usually ever used to force people to do his bidding. He spoke each word slowly and powerfully, willing the Force to influence her to obey his command. “Snap out of it.”

After a moment, she blinked several times, but then just tugged on his grip in an attempt to continue towards whatever it was that she saw.

“Scavenger–Rey.” He gave her a firm shake.

Frustrated, he pushed further into her mind, trying to find what it was that had her entranced. After a moment of hesitation, he made it as painful as he knew how, daring her to wake up from her stupor and defend herself against him.

She eventually obliged, although it took longer than it ever had before. He was tearing through her thoughts, her fears that staying on this planet for too long would somehow taint her, ruin her grasp on the Force and twist her into something dark beyond recognition. The crash had kept her from her friends – the traitor – and she was afraid that he would die without her. There was a mission-

She was terrified of Talzin, of what she wanted, and every time she thought about it, she thought that maybe-

His back connected with the cold, wet ground, practically knocking the air out of him. Blinking, it took him a minute to realize that the girl had blasted him back with the Force. The pain turned to anger like a slap on the face, a familiar snap of emotions that nearly came as a relief to him after what had just happened.

He was back on his feet in a flash, not at all satisfied with the fact that the girl looked to be back in
complete control of herself.

“Get away from me,” she warned, hand held out like she was prepared to hit him with another Force blast. She sounded half hysterical, frantic to protect the sanctity of her mind which he had already violated on multiple occasions.

He tilted his head to the side, too angry to be mocking. “You want me to let you wander face-first into the swamp, scavenger?”

“I wasn't-“

His hand shot out, slamming her back with a Force blast of his own. She smacked into the tree at her back with a gasp, surprise evident on her features. He held her there with his power, her feet dangling several inches off the ground. She fought against his hold, and he almost let her go, but in the end his power held fast. He stalked over to her, expression barely containing his rage.

“You are untrained,” he bit out between clenched teeth. Behind her furious expression he could see a thought flicker behind her eyes, the memory of when he had said something similar to her while they were fighting, of when he had offered to teach her while Starkiller base had imploded around them. But he had no intention of offering her aid this time around.

“Don't try and tell me what Skywalker has taught you, because the evidence is clear enough. As usual, he has woefully under-prepared his students. You're going to get yourself killed.”

She sneered at him. “If this is your way of telling me to be more careful, it's no wonder you're constantly alone. Your people skills are decidedly lacking.”

He didn't rise to the bait. “Whatever is going on in that scavenger-rat brain of yours isn't real. You need to focus on what is, learn to shut the rest out.”

Her scowl was the only answer he got, so he continued.

“Talzin’s power reaches all of the way out here. I can feel it,” he answered her unspoken question before she even thought to ask, “and I know that you can, too. If she’s trying to manipulate you, you need to learn to fight it. Otherwise you’ll become her puppet and be useless to me.” He still didn't know what exactly was influencing her – or, if it was Talzin, why – but he could guess.

The fight hadn't drained out of her, but she didn't look as inclined to argue, so he took that as a relatively good sign.

“Are you going to let me down?” Was all she said. After another moment he accommodated her, and she dropped back onto her feet.

Stepping away from her, he bent down and retrieved his backpack from the ground without another word.

“You probably bruised me,” she said.

He glanced at her as she rubbed her arm, a spiteful look still plastered on her face. He felt his lips tug into a frown.

“Pain is a lesson,” he recited, to which she scoffed.

“No,” she rolled her eyes as she snatched up her own bag and started stuffing it with some of the extra supplies he had left laying around, “teaching is a lesson. Pain is just pain.”
“Spoken like a child.”

She gave a hard shove on their bond, a displeasure strong enough to singe their connection and make him cringe.

“You're just twisted,” she snapped.

“And you're naïve,” he returned.

She shot him a glare that told him she had a lot more to say, but she apparently decided against saying anything else, so she just snapped her jaw shut and continued to stuff her bag. Neither of them said anything else until she had finished, slinging the bag over her shoulder along with her beat-up medkit. Crossing over to where he had laid out the hunters’ weapons, she picked up one of the pikes, testing out its weight in her hands.

“This’ll do,” she nodded to herself.

For himself, he grabbed a vibroblade and strapped it to the backpack that he had slung over his shoulder, easy-enough to access.

He was struck again how good it felt to regain his sense of independence, a measure of control. And it felt good to have a weapon again, even a crude one.

The feeling was short-lived. Behind the scavenger about a kilometer or so, a shift grabbed both of their attentions. More hunters.

“Is that-?” She glanced over at him, all business.

He nodded.

Shifting her grip on the pike, she hesitated a long moment before suggesting, “they could be from the same group.”

He waited a moment before answering. “Possibly. They feel different.”

For one, he sensed the same signature as Talzin’s witches in addition to the presence of the other hunters. If her witches were involved, then Talzin was unquestionably behind their quasi-hunting parties. But Kylo also knew that there was more than one clan of witches on the planet; maybe Talzin wasn't the only Dathomirian witch who wanted them – or the scavenger, he supposed.

They made themselves scarce, abandoning the hunters’ camp to the wilderness. The group of hunters and witches was on the move, closing in on their position at a casual pace, seemingly unaware of their existence.

His instincts told him to gather more information before jumping into a confrontation with them, but he was fairly certain that the scavenger wouldn't go for it. She was still angry about the first group of hunters, and he had killed them relatively quickly; if he was to keep one alive to extract information, he wasn't sure how she'd react.

We should spy on them, the scavenger suggested, surprising him enough that he stopped in his tracks. Maybe they'll reveal something.

If she was essentially giving him permission, he wasn't going to question it. He nodded, and they shifted their direction a bit so that they’d come close enough to observe the new group.
And if they didn't reveal anything on their own, then they'd just have to rely on his more proven methods, and the scavenger would just have to get over it.

He was careful to keep his thoughts shielded from her.

Chapter End Notes

This took a day or so later to post than I wanted, so sorry about that. It's a *little* bit longer, so there is that.

Well, our heroes are acquiring some fans. I'm sure that this whole next part will go super well and nothing bad will happen! And then pigs will fly!

I struggled with the right amount of typical Kylo-esque aggression and emotion in this chapter. Hopefully it seemed okay.
Kylo's end of their link was strangely quiet, his thoughts pulled in close, held at a distance. Rey was surprised to find that it struck her as odd. It put her on edge, because it could only mean that he was planning something that she wouldn't like.

She really had no desire to confront yet another group of 'could-very-possibly-be-hostiles,' even thought she was no longer unarmed. Maybe especially because she was armed.

The pike in her hands was the same one she had used to kill the two hunters; she could tell because the feathers tied to the end had been ripped off when she had speared the hunter’s chest. It was a sobering weight in her hands, a reminder of the first kills she'd ever made that hadn't been strictly necessary. They had been tying to kill her when she had killed them instead, but they hadn't been doing anything at all until Kylo had barreled into their camp in the first place.

She sighed, casting another look at the back of his head as they quietly made their way around to flank the new hunting party.

It was useless to point fingers.

Everything had become so unclear since she had crashed – she knew she was constantly losing focus because of the voices, and her grasp of the Force wasn't anywhere near stable while surrounded by the dark power of the planet. The last thing that she needed to do was add a moral dilemma on top of the rest of it, so she put it out of her mind.

She'd do what she needed to do in order to get off this planet, just as she'd always done what she had to, but no more than that. It was a fine line between doing what needed to be done and simply going off the deep end, and she wasn't going to let herself get lost in survival – especially when she'd been learning to be more sacrificial, to be a Jedi.

Besides, it wasn't like she could rely on Kylo to do the right thing, at least usually. It was up to her to maintain some semblance of morality between them.

To maintain the light.

But what did it matter – really – if she was a good representative of the light side when she was planning on stealing his shuttle and leaving him to fend off Mother Talzin on his own?

The thought hadn't occurred to her before.

Kylo was likely planning to do the same to her. Theirs was a partnership of convenience; she had no illusions that he would hesitate for a moment once he got his lightsaber back. His plan was undoubtedly to kill everyone, get to his shuttle, and then leave this Force-forsaken planet behind for good, returning to the First Order and his master. After obtaining the object she didn't have, of course, and probably over her dead body.

Would he kill me for it?

The answer wasn't as clear as she might've thought. Maybe – he was Kylo Ren, after all, and very prone to using violence to get what he wanted. Spending the last few cycles with him had more than
taught her that. Then again, when he had first shown up he had told her that he didn't have to kill her, that all he needed was that mysterious object and then he'd leave her alone. Even before that, on Starkiller, he could've killed her. But he didn't. He always tried to talk to her, convince her to submit. He didn't exactly reason with her, but it still spoke volumes that he wanted to talk.

Or maybe it didn't; she was once again confronted with just how little she knew about the man in front of her.

The more time she spent with him, the more complex and unknowable he seemed.

He stopped suddenly, and she almost ran into him in her distracted state.

What? She stretched her senses out, listening for whatever it was he might've picked up on. She followed Kylo's line of consciousness directly to the hunting party, his pointed focus practically pulling her along. Their connection tugged a bit.

They've stopped, he thought slowly, analytically.

Oh. She honestly hadn't been keeping close tabs on the group of hunters, didn't really want to. Each of their lives seemed to be a little pinprick of light to her, a light that Kylo would likely snuff out after they found them.

The group hadn't quite stopped, but they had slowed down almost completely. She was a little surprised to find that she could sense the tensions between the hunters, and she knew that they were debating which way to go.

A decision was apparently made, and like a snap they had changed directions and started heading straight for the two of them.

Kylo's shoulders tightened, the tension visible even from under his dark clothing.

We should get out of here, now, she insisted, her dread riding as she anticipated the next few moments playing out the exact same way that they had the previous two times – with him starting a fight and her dragged into it. Her fingers closed around the shaft of the pike in her hands – she was prepared to tackle him to the ground and knock him out if she needed. She didn't exactly want to, because then she'd be stuck lugging his limp body around until he woke up in an undoubtably foul mood, but she'd do it if he tried to simply murder people again.

Either she had projected her thoughts or he simply knew her well enough to know that she meant business; either way, he didn't do anything. But the look he gave her over his shoulder made her want to wring his neck.

For a longer time than they had to waste, he just stared down at her. His typical anger spiked, rolling through him with a poisonous warmth that traveled across their bond, but didn't singe as strongly as usual. She imagined from the way his eyes clouded over that he was trying to maintain a hold over his emotions, and she had enough sense to appreciate the gesture.

As she was about to suggest that they keep moving, a shot of purple energy flashed between the two of them, missing Kylo's shoulder and her face by inches as it dissipated into the ground like a tiny bolt of lightning.

Startled, they both sprang to their feet with just enough time to see one of Talzin's sisters standing up in a tree, energy bow poised to fire another shot, which she did. That one nearly hit Kylo, but he ducked out of the way just in time.
“What the-” Rey was cut off by a hunter rushing her, a vibroblade in gripped in each hand as he swung at her with full force. Bringing the pike up to block the dual strike, she gritted her teeth as the force of the blow drove the soles of her shoes into the ground.

She shoved the hunter back with a growl, spinning to dodge two consecutive energy bolts fired by a second sister standing by the base of the same tree where the first sister stood up in the twisted branches.

Kylo pulled the first sister down to the ground with the Force, one hand outstretched as he used the other to parry a blow from one of the hunters with his stolen vibroblade. Remembering her mistake from the last time they had fought together, she made sure to keep an awareness of him in the back of her mind.

It was hard, trying to keep track of another person while also keeping track of the multiple people trying to kill her. More than once she slipped up, her defenses cracking enough so that one of the hunters or sisters could land a lucky hit. Blood was running down her left arm from a deep cut on her bicep, and one of the energy bolts had hit her in the side of her right knee, nearly knocking her off her feet. The sisters weren't pulling any punches, not like the last time she had faced them. And their bolts were meant to sear through flesh, not just stun.

Her heart was thudding in her throat, apprehension growing in her gut. She didn't know why, but she had a bad feeling.

Another hunter with a pike nearly skewered her, but she managed to twist out of the way, reaching out and yanking the pike hard enough so that it threw the hunter off-balance. She didn't waste the opportunity, and kicked the zabrak’s back hard enough that he went tumbling face-first down a hill and out of the range of the battle.

A large shadow gee around her, and before she knew it Rey was picked up and thrown to the ground by the largest hunter there. Her back hit the ground with a wet ‘thud,’ and she gasped from the shock. After he had tossed her, the hunter then immediately switched his attention to Kylo as he swung his vibroblade at the hunter’s neck before throwing out his off-hand to send the huge hunter flying backward.

It was amazing, the way in which Kylo used his weapon. She didn't take the time to admire it, but she could appreciate that he was very skilled with a blade – any blade, apparently. He had had very good training, even if she could tell his form was a little sloppy. That was something to keep in mind for a time when she would have to fight him again – as long as he was in control of his emotions, his skill was vastly superior to hers.

There was no time to dwell on it – almost as soon as the huge hunter left her line of sight did a sister jump in, energy bow clipped to her back as she ran at Rey with a large ceremonial-looking knife.

She scrambled up to defend herself, but before she could swing her pike, a bolt hit her right between the shoulder blades. The force of the hit propelled her forward, right onto the advancing sister’s knife.

Her stomach offered little resistance to the blade, which sunk in to the hilt. Gasping, she managed to swing her pike up and hit the pale woman across the face before stumbling back, eyes wide as she stared at the twisted hilt protruding from her abdomen.

She was – there was a knife in her stomach. Shock quickly turned to pain as each breath shifted the blade. The pike slipped from her fingers, and the dull thud of it hitting the ground barely registered to her. She reached for the blade as if in a dream, slowly wrapping her fingers around the hilt as dark
blood seeped into her clothing.

Nothing was as pressing in her mind as getting the knife out of her, of extracting the foreign invader. She took a shaky breath and yanked it out with one swift stroke, a pained whimper escaping her.

A strange vibration filled her head, a twist that brought her attention back into focus, if only for a second. Still holding the knife, she looked up to see Kylo’s gaze pull over to her. She couldn’t read his expression – it was shut down and angry, focused on the fight, but there was something else behind his eyes, an awareness that she was being coated in her own blood, that she was holding the knife that had stabbed her in her hand. She could feel him reach across their bond, but little more. There was a heat in her gut that felt sharp and wet and painful, and she thought that maybe he could feel it, too.

And there was something else – something spreading from her gut into her limbs and organs. It felt thick and oily, mixing with her bloodstream in a way that made her want to vomit.

_Poison._

It wasn’t her that realized it, but Kylo.

She immediately dropped the knife with a soft ‘thunk’ on the ground.

_Oh._

Fear lanced her gut as if it had come from her wound, dark and thick as the poison racing through her veins.

_Poison_ – was she going to die?

The battle going on around her felt different, and she knew it was because of Kylo. He pulled back from their connection, but not entirely – she could feel the brush of his consciousness, but it didn’t help at all. He was angry and wounded, his emotions bleeding across their bond to mingle with her own growing fear and frustration.

She wanted to push him out, but couldn’t find the focus to do so. The world started spinning.

One of the hunters was stalking towards her, a pike in-hand. He looked ready to kill her.

When he got closer, he raised up his weapon, poised to swing.

Her mind went out like a light.

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When she woke, it was all at once and to the sound of shouting. Her eyes flew open, every muscle in her body tense and ready to bolt, but she instantly winced, remembering her wounds. Glancing down, she saw that her stomach had been wrapped in cloth bandages, the faintest tint of red peaking through on the left where she had gotten stabbed. The same went for the cut on her arm, although her burns had been left to the open air.

With a sigh, she let her head drop back against the bed’s pillow, staring up at what was most definitely a ceiling. Confusion colored her features as she took in the scenery around her. The ceiling, walls, and floor around her were all constructed of some sort of plaster, a room in what appeared to be a house. There was a closed door on the opposite side of the room and a small window above her head which offered a view of the crimson sky, pale in the day. She was lying on what appeared to be a bed, although it was really just a mat spread on the floor and a thin pillow.
under her head.

It was like waking up in luxury compared to where she had been waking up recently.

The shouting that had woken her up continued, coming from somewhere outside. Moving was painful, but the real problem was her arms, which she was unhappy to discover had been tied across her chest with some sort of cable.

She felt ill, and not just from the pain or the fact that she had been captured by the locals on this planet yet again. It was in her veins, in her organs – she felt off, sluggish and woozy. Her stomach was doing flips on top of the still-sharp pain from her wound, and she felt like she might throw up.

It was the poison, she thought. She was still being affected by the poison.

She had never been poisoned before; she had no idea what to expect, if things were going to get worse or better, or how long it would affect her. Would it kill her? Apprehension coiled in her gut, same as before and rebelling against the thought.

To go down fighting was one thing, but to go down because of a chemical in her veins…her throat felt like the desert, she was so parched.

Maybe dying of poison was like dying of infection. She had seen a couple of scavengers go that way, ones who had gotten wounded and had let it fester, or had cut themselves on a contaminated piece of salvage. It had always seemed like a grotesque way to die, festering and unable to fight back.

She had always thought that she wouldn't die like that, had promised herself that she'd fight until the sand took her.

But no – she wouldn't let herself think about it.

The shouting turned to sounds of a scuffle before another person shouted and things grew quiet. She didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing, but she knew that she needed to get the hell out of there.

For a moment her bond with Kylo flared, his anger and pain like a brief, white-hot flash in her mind before the connection closed, the mental string that connected them giving a tired pull on her brain.

She had nearly forgotten about him in all of her confusion, but he had resumed his place in the back of her head, that push of his mind against hers that she sometimes hated, but in this case was somewhat welcome.

His presence meant that she wasn't alone – yet, at least.

Testing her restraints, she found them to be infuriatingly secure. She also found that moving around too much sent shocks of pain through her gut. The small flecks of red on the bandages were already growing in size, her squirming causing her wound to reopen.

Her captors had taken all of her supplies from her, even her medkit, and looking for it wasn't exactly a priority, so she resolved to try to be gentle with herself. It already wasn't going too well, she thought as she sat up, pausing a moment as her stomach shot pain and wooziness to her head.

Kylo's presence in the back of her mind gave a shove, getting her attention. She gave a small tug on their link in response, unsure if he was trying to reach out for her or if it was just reflex. When she got no further response, his side of the bond dark and silent, she figured it must've been the latter.
She knew she couldn't leave without him – he hadn't left without her when they had come across the cave dwellers. In fact, as much as she didn't want to dwell on it, she knew that he had saved her. Kylo Ren had done that. No matter what else he had done, she would do no less than make sure that got out of there with her.

There were voices on the other side of the door, getting louder as they approached. Rey couldn't understand what they were saying, but she didn't plan on sticking around to find out. Ignoring the throbbing in her gut, she pushed herself up to her feet, swallowing the pain and bile that rose when she did so.

Until she found a way to get the shackles off of her arms, her only weapon would be the Force. She was confident that she'd be able to defend herself, but it still made her uncomfortable that she was bound.

She shook the thought aside as the door slid open to reveal one of Mother Talzin's sisters.

The woman held up her hand in a peaceful gesture. “Do not try to run, you are injured.”

“Let me go,” Rey shot back. The sister hadn't moved from the threshold, where she took up most of the space, but Rey was determined to be ready to bolt the moment she got the chance.

Maybe the sister knew that, because she didn't look like she was going anywhere. “Mother Talzin has ordered that you be brought back to her.”

Mother Talzin. The voices answered at the sound of her name, the whispers dulcet and inviting. Rey knew then, knew that the voices had been from the ghoulish woman all along. They had been calling her, telling her secrets of the planet and of the Force, but she hadn't wanted to listen. She still didn't. She thought that they were designed to lure her back to Mother Talzin, so she ignored them as best she could.

“If she wants me, then why did you poison me?” She bit out, trying not to sound breathless as a new wave of pain rippled across her abdomen at her prolonged standing.

“It won't kill you,” she sister assured her, “but it will keep you in a weakened state. We are not fool enough to keep a Jedi captive without such measures.”

It was the first time that anyone had ever called her that, and it felt wrong, like she hadn't earned it yet, but she didn't have the energy to contest it.

She swayed on her feet, determined to stay upright. “Where is…Kylo?”

The sister didn't move from where she stood, but she looked more alert, her pale eyes sweeping over Rey's form. “You should lie back down–the poison has weakened you, and you should not over exert yourself.”

She swallowed. “Where is he?”

“Jedi–”

“Just answer the bloody question,” she demanded, although it came out much more breathless than she had intended.

The woman regarded her for a moment. “He's being kept not far from here. His wounds have been tended, same as yours.”
“Take me to him.”

“No,” the sister snapped, “now lie back down before I force you to.”

Rey shook her head, which was a decidedly bad idea as it made the world spin a little. She would’ve back away, if she had trusted her legs to support her. “I’ll rest…when you take me to him.”

The sister was quiet for so long that Rey began to wonder if she had missed the answer in her haze of nausea and pain. But then she spoke, “Fine, Jedi. But then you rest. Mother Talzin won't be pleased if you haven't begun to heal yet when we take you to her.”

Then the sister snapped and moved out of the threshold, two more sisters entering the room and flanking Rey on both sides. Without a word, they both laid a hand on her elbows and roughly led her out of the room. For a moment she almost regretted insisting that they move her to where Kylo was; pain rocked her with every step, and the poison pooled in her veins in a way that made her feel like her insides were turning vile.

They took her outside, revealing an entire village comprised of houses like the one she had just come from. Zabraks that looked similar to the hunters they had faced milled about, all eyes turned on her and her escorts. She blinked heavily and frowned. Besides the women escorting her, there wasn't a woman in sight.

All of the zabraks – they were men.

She almost wanted to ask about it, but they brought her inside one of the larger houses and her attention was brought back to finding Kylo.

Their bond was practically humming as she neared where he was being kept. Descending down a flight of stone stairs which she could barely accomplish without doubling over in agony, they brought her to a closed door in the basement. There, three more sisters stood guard.

“Let us in, she wants to see him.” The sister who had originally spoken to her nodded to the guards, who exchanged looks.

“Sister, are you sure that’s wise?” One of them asked. Rey felt herself leaning almost entirely on the support of the two sisters holding her up; she was quite sure that her legs would collapse if they let go.

“She refuses to rest until she sees him, so open the door.”

One of them nodded and pressed a button, the door sliding open with a soft hiss.

It was dark in there; his room didn't have a window as hers did. There was a small construction light in the corner, although it wasn't on. Otherwise, the room looked largely the same as hers, even down to the mat and pillow where Kylo was resting.

She could barely see him, just his dark outline from where he lay on the ground, unmovign.

The sister mentioned that he had been wounded. Gathering her strength, she lurched out of the sisters’ grip and staggered over to him, dropping to her knees with a wince as the movement sent hot pain up through her abdomen. She knew that her bandages were turning fully red.

“Kylo?” She glanced over him, unable to really search for injuries with her arms bound. She could see that his left leg had been bandages above the knee, as well as his left hand, but that was all. When he didn't respond, she tugged on their bond a little.
“Kylo.”

He began to stir, the small jerk he gave back on their bond releasing a small breath that she hadn't been aware she was holding.

“Kylo, wake up,” she whispered, watching as his eyes blinked open, barely returned to the world. He looked up at her without expression, bleary in his first moments of consciousness.

“Are you okay?” She asked.

His expression grew confused. “Rey?”

“I told you not to call me that,” she responded, mostly out of reflex.

The light from the door lessened as one of the sisters stepped closer. “You've seen that he is well, it's time to go.”

She pointedly ignored the woman, keeping focused on Kylo as he came out of his bleary-eyed state, although he remained sluggish. His eyes cleared as he took in the dark environment around them and sat up. For her part, Rey felt like she was going to pass out – either from the pain or nausea, she couldn't tell.

“Where are we?” He demanded, his already-present frown deepening into a growl when he realized that he was bound just as she was.

“These are…Mother Talzin's people,” swallowing was almost painful, her mouth was so dry.

As if on cue, the two sisters who had escorted her came over and hooked their hands on her elbows, pulling her back up on her shaky legs.

That got his attention. “What are you doing?” He demanded, their bond twisting at his angry and dangerous tone. She could tell that he was feeling the effects of poison just as strongly as she was, but he still managed to sound forceful and intimidating.

“You cannot be allowed to stay together,” the sister from the doorway said, her red robes turned nearly black in the shadows. “Until Mother Talzin deems it time, you will stay separated.”

Rey didn't know what to do. She wanted to fight, but her body was barely responding as it was, and the two sisters supporting her arms were practically dragging her along. But if she allowed them to be separated, then she knew that it'd be much more difficult trying to escape.

She glanced over her shoulder at Kylo, who was glowering at them. Echoes of pain flashed across their bond as his awareness came more into focus, projected out to her from the wounds he must've sustained from the hunting party.

Their eyes met, and his seemed to say, save it.

Dread clawed at her gut on top of all the rest, but she pushed it down, steeling her mind as best she could.

Breaking eye contact, she turned and let herself be led out of the room, up the stairs and back outside. Each step caused a tug on her chest, like their connection was tied around her heart and lungs and was being stretched to its limit. She tried to ignore it.

She needed to focus, needed to think. It was hard, felt like her head was splitting open as she tried,
but she didn't let herself lose awareness. The entire walk back to her room she kept her eyes open, tried to sense what was around her. She thought that maybe the sisters could tell, judging by how they cast sideward glances at her, but she didn't care.

When they got back, they deposited her smoothly on the mat and examined her soiled bandages.

“Tell the doctor to redress her wounds,” one of them said, “the little fool’s reopened them.”

The sister standing nearest the threshold nodded and slipped out the door without a word.

“The poison is wearing off,” observed the third sister. Rey didn't move, just glared up at them. She figured it would be better to play it safe as long as she was poisoned, wounded, and outnumbered.

The one bent over her nodded. “Yes, I agree,” she reached behind her and pulled out the same type ceremonial knife that she had been stabbed with, “just another small cut, I think.”

Rey tried to move away, but it was useless. The sister caught her by the arm and dragged the sharp edge of the blade against the soft flesh of her neck, just enough to make a thin cut. She gasped, trying to maneuver herself into a position to kick the woman.

But the other sister crossed over and held her legs down, trapping her as the first continued to hold her down by her arms.

“Let…go,” she struggled, tears stinging her eyes at the pain it caused in her stomach. The urge to vomit rose in her throat, but it felt more suffocating than anything, and it hurt.

“Stop struggling, you little fool,” the sister holding her feet sneered. They seemed content to be there for as long as she tried to fight back.

It didn't last long. The pain and poison eventually overcame her mobility, and her struggles turned to painful gasps as blood actively soaked through her bandages and shirt.

“Just let the poison take its course,” spoke the sister holding her arms, her voice soft like she was lulling a child to sleep. “The more you struggle, the more painful it is. Rest.”

She didn't want to rest – she wanted to get out of there, off of the planet, out of the entire star system. She didn't want to be in pain, or to be poisoned. Most of all, she didn't want to see Mother Talzin again.

But she was trapped.

A hot tear escaped the corner of her eye, running down into her hair.

Chapter End Notes

This one's a little bit longer, just cuz I love you guys.

In summary, this chapter shows some positive development and poor Rey being a little overwhelmed. It's not my favorite chapter, and I both wrote it and read over it for mistakes while half-asleep, so I'm sorry if it's not as up-to-par as usual.

Fun fact: I actually didn't plan for Rey to get stabbed in this chapter (or the foreseeable future) but it's just what ended up happening, and I went with it. I know, I'm a sadist.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Kylo, wake up.”

He tried to, but his consciousness was proving a difficult thing to find, and an even harder thing to hold on to. Was someone talking to him? Was his master there to punish him for his recent failures? He hadn't brought him anything – not the object, not the girl, nothing. Surely his master's patience had run out by now.

But there was no pain. That alone prompted him to try and open his eyes.

The world was dark, but he could almost imagine that The Supreme Leader was crouched beside him, a shadow of his failure come down to haunt him. But that didn't feel right, because he was connected to the person next to him in a way entirely unlike his link to his master – he could feel it in his chest, familiar and strong.

“Are you okay?”

The figure’s voice, it was-

“Rey?”

He broke through his haze enough to realize that it was her bent over him, not his master, that he was lying on the ground, and that they were in a room blocked by at least three of Talzin's witches.

He couldn't quite pin the look on her face when she told him, “Don’t call me that.” As if what he called her mattered at that moment.

“You've seen that he is well, it's time to go.” One of the witches stepped forward, but Kylo didn't have enough energy to focus on her.

The scavenger’s gaze remained focused on him as he attempted to come to his senses. The more he woke up, the more he became aware that he was in pain – much more than he thought. There was a large gash in his leg above the knee, one that went bone-deep, and he had sliced his hand open deflecting a vibroblade. He had gotten the wound on his leg when he had gotten distracted by the blade sticking out of the scavenger's stomach. Both wounds felt like they were on fire, the telltale scorch of poison rushing through his veins. He struggled to keep his breathing under control.

It was the memory of getting wounded, of watching as the girl had been struck to the ground, that made him aware of the sudden change in scenery. He was on the floor of a room with no windows – walls, and ceilings, and witches serving as a cage.

She was still studying him with wide eyes and an expression of unease that reverberated across their bond.

“Where are we?” He asked her as he tried to sit up, only to find that his arms had been tied around his torso.

Shackled.
“These are…Mother Talzin’s people,” the scavenger nearly whispered. In a flash of irritation, he was caught between snapping that yes, he could see that these were her witches, or just trying to ignore her completely obvious remark. Her agitation was only setting him on edge, and the poison felt like it was slowly coating every one of his veins.

But before he could respond, two of the witches stepped forward and yanked the scavenger away from him.

“What are you doing?” He demanded. Pain and nausea shot across their bond like a scream, and he had to clamp his mouth shut to still the rising bile in his throat. It served to make him angry.

She was weak – very weak. Her shirt lifted up to reveal her bandaged stomach, already soaked through with blood.

They had treated her wound. But not well enough.

One of the witches – he couldn't tell which – spoke, her tone clipped. “You cannot be allowed to stay together. Until Mother Talzin deems it time, you will stay separated.”

He knew without looking that the scavenger wanted to put up a fight. Despite the disadvantage of her situation, determination shot at him over the cords of their connection. It twisted in his gut and made him flinch, causing pain to shoot up his leg into his lungs.

Rage simmered in his gut, trying to boil over, but he tried to keep it down, swallowed the pain to distract himself from it.

His eyes found hers. If she tried anything in her current state there was no question that she would be killed, either intentionally or simply from reopening her wounds. Then he would have nothing – no object and no girl to bring to The Supreme Leader.

She had to wait, or it would be disastrous for both of them.

Save it.

He didn't know if she saw the look in his eyes, but he could feel the responding tug on their bond as she disappeared from view behind the wall of scarlet-clad women. Each moment their link was pulled a little bit more, tugging on his chest like an elastic band, painless, but difficult to ignore.

He couldn't tell if he felt it so strongly because she was afraid, or if it was because he kept his mind on it, focusing on the small yanking that eventually began to grow more and more faint as she was led farther away.

The bond grew quiet; he didn't know if that was good or bad.

One of the witches lingered behind after the rest had left, shutting the door and cloaking the room in a darkness that felt thick with Dathomir’s energy.

For a long moment she didn't do anything. An acidic feeling started to bubble up in his chest – the poison, no doubt – and made him feel like he was being eaten alive from the inside. The pain distracted him from the witch’s presence.

“I wouldn't have expected one of the fabled Skywalker bloodline to be so easily subdued by poison,” her voice was soft like a snake’s in the darkness. She seemed entirely pleased by the turn of events.
Her words took root in the anger coiled in his gut, bleeding into the pain he felt from the poison. How the witch knew of his lineage confused him, and it left him even more angry at being put at more of a disadvantage. He didn't even try and shut it out; he just let all the rage deep in, building his strength for when he'd make his break for freedom. The number of bodies he left would be determined by how affected he was by the poison at the time.

“Do you think it's because you're the weak-link?” The witch hummed from her spot over by the door. Pushing through the pain and nausea he still felt from the scavenger, he jerked against his restraints and fought to get up, although he didn't get far before the witch had crossed the room and shoved him on his back with both hands – hard.

“You're not well, Sith. Perhaps it's because you've been pumped with twice the amount of poison than we used on your counterpart. She's very important to Mother Talzin,” she dug her long fingers into his shoulders hard enough to hurt, but he didn't give her the satisfaction of reacting.

She leaned down a fraction closer, dropping her voice almost to a whisper. “Do you know what you are? You're a murderer.”

“How observant,” he commented dryly, fighting to keep his voice even.

The witch spat in his face, and he couldn't help but flinch. “You killed my mate and you almost killed my sisters. I would like nothing more than to kill you right this moment, in the most excruciating way possible.”

While normally the witch’s display would've been a bit laughable, in his current state Kylo had the sense of mind to keep the worst of his comments to himself. He had to keep his mouth clamped shut for a long moment, working his jaw until he could swallow the rage of getting spit on.

“So what's stopping you, witch?” He snarled.

She leaned back a little, keeping her hands clawed near his neck. “Mother Talzin wants you as well, and it is not my place to question.” She paused, “although, she wasn't nearly as specific about what state you should be in.”

Her threat spurred him to action. Calling on the Force wasn't as easy as it should've been with the poison coursing through his veins – which was very likely the point – but he was stronger than their pathetic attempts at subduing him. Powered by both his pain and fury, he drew upon that dark well of power within himself and used it to fling the witch across the room like a rag doll.

The smack of the witch’s body against the wall was loud enough to draw two more witches into the room, both armed with energy bows. They shot him in succession, both bolts hitting him square in the chest, and stood poised to fire again as their fellow witch collected herself from the ground.

Spasms rocked his body for a moment as the energy coursed through his system. The shots had been meant to stun, but they caused just as much pain. He felt the use of his limbs leave him, left him at the mercy of the witches looming over him.

The first witch picked herself up off the floor and crossed the room back over to him with violence in her posture. Holding her head high, she just stared down at him for a moment before she gave him a swift kick in the gut. He grunted, and she smiled above him.

She made to kick him again, but he wouldn't be caught off guard twice. Fighting through the limpness he still felt in his arms and legs, he managed to twist aside just enough so that she didn't plant her boot as firmly into his side as intended. Simultaneously, he used the Force to wrench the
energy bows from the other two witches’ grasps. They went flying out of his line of sight, distracting them enough that he was able to send all three flying with another wave of power.

Pushing himself up into a sitting position was a bit awkward with his arms tied up, but he managed well enough. The witches were already getting back on their feet and pulling knives out of their belts.

He was ready for them, ready to kill them all and get the hell out of there, but a sudden wave of lightheadedness hit him like a durasteel wall. It was as if someone had popped an artery on his connection with the scavenger, the feeling bleeding into his consciousness. They had done something to her, poisoned her again or knocked her out. Her end of their connection went completely silent, the slight elasticity of his quick tug the only indication that she was still there. His anger dissipated like smoke, replaced by a vacuous numbing sensation that saturated his mind and left him unable to concentrate-

Unable to focus-

To think-

Pain coursed through his body, through his leg and stomach and head, shooting stars to his head that only served to remind him that he was awake. He couldn't make much sense out of anything beyond the pain and the numbness.

His mind remained with him, but only in fragments. He roared at the pain and cursed Talzin – cursed himself for his weakness. He thought of the scavenger, too, wondered if she was feeling the same things he was.

It occurred to him that a large part of his uselessness might've been due to bleed-over from their bond. That would've made things easy; it was a familiar thing to direct his anger at her. He wanted to.

But perhaps it was just wishful thinking, and his uselessness was purely evidence of his own wretched deficiency.

The more he thought about it, the more furious he became with himself. He tried to hold on to that feeling, let it help keep him somewhat grounded in his head. It gave him focus.

Until he fell to the ground.

The shock of hitting the hard dirt nearly drove the air out of his lungs, but it also served to pull him further out of his stupor than he had been since he had fallen into it.

For a moment he just blinked up at the red sky above him, wondering how long it had been since he’d been under a blue sky. Or just any sky besides Dathomir’s. A slew of foreign words spit by a large, looming zabrak broke his train of thought. The zabrak crouched down and none-too-gently hauled him up by his arms, letting his dark boots drag in the dirt.

Flashes of red clothing surrounded him, witches all poised to react if he tried to do anything, but he could only focus on the world behind them. He was being dragged through the center of a village, shell-colored houses built large and square, casting dark shadows in the evening. Trees were smattered about, dark and twisted as ever. In his semi-lucid state, the branches seemed to be dancing, their fingers pointing at him in a strangely accusatory manner.

Birds circled overhead, inky brushes in the sky. He couldn't decide why they were there. Then he looked down and saw it – the center of the town, he presumed.
It was a large open space right in the middle of the village, filled with enough male zabraks that Kylo thought the entire village must've been there. There were tall, dark poles erected in each corner of the clearing, death hanging off of each one. On the first two hung bleached bones, both a stark contrast to the dark of the pole and the red of the sky. A third corpse hung on the third, unrecognizably decayed with half of the flesh already rotted off. That one was a dark grey, and blended in with the foul planet in a way that didn't surprise Kylo in the slightest.

But the fourth – Kylo recognized the body on the fourth pole. Slightly smaller than the rest, the body was much more recently deceased, although the ashen skin made it look more akin to the bones than the rotted corpse. The pale eyes were still open.

Even in his half-delusional state, he could recognize that it was the cave dwelling boy, the one who had gotten away when he had murdered the rest of them.

The body looked several days old. He wondered how much longer he had lived after running from him in the cave.

He must've been staring, because the zabrak leaned in close to his ear and spit, “Don't leave survivors, and next time they won't give up your location. The flesh-eater served a purpose before we executed him.” The grin was audible in the zabrak’s tone, even if Kylo couldn't see his face. He scowled in response.

Getting his mouth to move felt like trying to rub sandpaper together, so he didn't try. He didn't have anything to say to the foul alien, anyway.

The scavenger was still silent on her side of the bond, caught in the thick haze that he was only beginning to come out of. But he could feel her physically close-by when he tried to sense her, likely in one of the surrounding houses. She couldn't be any use in her state, but he tried to locate her, anyway.

There was a collection of stones gathered in the middle of the village center, each perfectly proportionate to each other with a different symbol carved into each one. Runes of some sort, or perhaps hieroglyphs from an ancient language, although he had no idea what they were for. He felt the Force emanating off of them with intense, hot power, a connection that was forming to somewhere else.

Everyone was gathered around the arrangement, mostly zabrak males looking on with interest. Closer to the stones stood at least a dozen witches in their customary red, half of their faces concealed with masks and cowls. Their eyes tracked him without a word as he was dragged closer.

He got the distinct feeling that they had been waiting for him.

No sooner did the zabrak drag him over and roughly deposit him on the ground in front of the arrangement of stones did the air above it burst to life, green smoke materializing in the air at the center. He tried to back farther away, but the effects of the poison made him sluggish and he was still being affected by whatever they had done to the scavenger. The two witches closest to him grabbed each shoulder, holding him in place.

There was a strange push and pull of the Force around him, charging he air and warping the smoke into a distinct shape. Green turned to red, black, and white before his eyes, the smoke solidifying into a tall figure he was decidedly unhappy to see.

Mother Talzin looked down on him with her pale eyes, a small smile quirked at the corner of her lips.
“Ah, the bond-mate. Jedi killer. You don't look very well.”

For a moment he just stared. The figure that stood before him – she didn't feel like a projection of any kind, and she obviously wasn't a hologram. He reached out with his senses, and the swirling, corrupted power that answered told him that she was real.

Somehow she had just teleported through the Force. He didn't even know The Supreme Leader to ever accomplish that - didn't know it could be accomplished.

Pride bade that he sat up as straight as possible, poised to leap to his feet as fast as he could manage. His face hardened into a sneer, hiding most of the wooziness that he still felt.

“How did you do that?” He couldn't help but ask.

The woman’s ghoulilsh face stretched into something akin to a smile. “The Force is a limitless fountain of power, and can be manipulated to accomplish many things.” She floated to the ground and stepped outside of the circle, her scarlet robes cascading over the stones. “It has lost so much of its strength, but you and dear Rey are going to help restore all that's been lost.” She paused, tilted her head. “Perhaps more.”

He scoffed, suddenly thankful for the silence on the scavenger’s end of their bond. “The Force doesn't need to be fixed, and I won't help you.” He felt confident in saying, “neither will the scavenger.”

The laugh that escaped Talzin's lips was strange and shadowed by other voices, low and unnerving against hers. “I have been patient, young man, for a very long time. What you say and what will happen are two very different things.”

“An old woman with a corrupted control of the Force doesn't scare me,” he glowered up at her, poured every bit of seething hatred he felt into his expression.

“Then you are a fool who doesn't recognize true power when you see it,” Talzin replied.

Before he could say anything else, she reached out her hand and grasped his jaw in a vice grip, her long nails digging in hard enough to make him wince. With her other hand she caressed his face the way a mother might, brushing his hair away from his face with her long, spidery fingers. He growled up at her, but her expression remained one of distant benevolence.

“You've been blessed solely through your lineage, but Rey has been blessed with a potential far greater than one like you could ever dream. You should feel honored to be bonded to her.”

She punctuated her last words by pressing her thumb to his forehead, mentally tearing through his head with the same white-hot touch that he remembered. After shifting through his recent memories, she wrapped her fingers around his connection to the scavenger, wringing and pulling so hard it felt like she was going to somehow tear it out.

He wrenched his head out of her grip, looking up at her from under his brow, a scowl twisting his face as he tried to regain control of his breathing, furious that it sounded so shaky. There were no words for the animosity that he felt towards her, but he didn't let that distract him from giving the scavenger a subtle nudge over their connection.

She needed to get up – now.

Talzin let her hands fall to her sides, then looked to her left directly at one of the houses. “I'm eager to see her again. Judging by the new strength of your bond, the time may be upon us.”
Her gaze slid back over to him, and the sky seemed to darken as she said, “Come, Kylo Ren. You will have your part to play.”

Chapter End Notes

And thus Mother Talzin re-enters the picture. This should be fun.

Just a little background information: the village of zabraks that Kylo and Rey were taken to is a Nightbrother village. They're all-male settlements that sort of serve the Nightsisters. On Dathomir, males are seen as a bit lesser than women, and thus kept separate. Sort of interesting, actually, and totally canononical.
Rey’s heart leaped into her throat, her pulse igniting like an engine put into hyperdrive. The hair on
the back of her neck stood on-end. It didn't matter that she was barely awake to the world; she knew
that presence. She struggled against the black grip of unconsciousness, fought to regain control of her
body. It was as if she couldn't breathe. She needed to get up and defend herself, to get away, to do
something.

*You need to wake up.*

Her eyes flew open.

“Greetings, dear Rey.”

_She_ was there – standing in the doorway, her presence too big for the small room. It was like she
corrupted the Force around her, filling the small space to the brim with a broken darkness that Rey
would've known anywhere. It was suffocating, and there was nowhere to go to escape.

When she didn't respond, the red woman drew closer. “You are still recovering from your
apprehension, I see.”

“No thanks to your sisters.” She bit out between clenched teeth, still trying as hard as she could to
shake the lingering feeling of the poison.

An expression that looked something like a mixture of pride and fondness passed over Mother
Talzin's face. “It is because of your power that my sisters had to go to such great lengths to keep you
here until I arrived.”

Without waiting for any particular invitation, the woman lowered herself beside Rey and placed her
hand on her bandaged wound before Rey could react.

“Hey-“ Rey winced, a shock of pain shooting through her at the sudden pressure.

A shiver went across the back of her mind, a reminder of her and Kylo's bond. She didn't know if it
was an automatic response or if Kylo himself was responding to her pain. It occurred to her that she
should throw up her mental walls just in case.

Before she could think anything further, Mother Talzin's power snapped her attention back to her
stomach, which was glowing a sickening green under her hand. She felt the corruption coursing
through her, knitting her stomach back together with a power that terrified her.

It wasn't because of the power itself, but the implications it had about Mother Talzin's plans for her,
the ways in which she meant to _use_ her, that frightened Rey.

“Stop that,” she demanded, although it came out groggy and not demanding at all. She hated how
pathetic she sounded.

The woman next to her nodded and pulled back, although she suspected it was only because she was
finished. Rey could feel it under her blood-stained shirt and bandages, could feel that she had been
healed, good-as-new. And it wasn't just that – almost all traces of the poison had been siphoned out
of her system.

“Are you fit to walk?” Mother Talzin asked as she herself stood.

Rey had an inkling that she would be – whatever Mother Talzin had done to heal her had coursed through her entire body, restoring everything. She was pretty sure that even her half-healed burn on her forehead was gone.

She still felt a little weak, but that was it. “I think so,” she mumbled after a long moment.

“Very good,” the ghoulish woman nodded. She watched as Rey slowly pushed herself up onto her feet, shaky but standing. “I will remove your restraints.”

For a moment she just stared in surprised as Mother Talzin waved her hand and the arm restraints fell away. Was it a trap? Was Mother Talzin misguided enough to believe that she wouldn't run? Maybe there was something waiting for her outside in case she tried. It didn't matter, because she knew an opportunity when she saw one, and 'what-ifs’ weren't going to stop her from taking it.

She bolted for the door, but didn't even get that far before her head felt like it was being split in two with a lightsaber. Crying out, she dropped to the ground and clutched at her head.

“Running would be most unwise,” Mother Talzin advised, but Rey barely heard her over the searing agony.

After a few more agonizing moments the pain stopped, but she remained breathless on the ground. Kylo's touch on her mind felt harsher than he probably meant it to in her raw state of mind, but it wasn’t anything like what Mother Talzin had done. He felt close-by.

Scavenger. He either didn't notice or didn't care that his touch hurt.

Where are you? Was all she could manage.

Outside, she could practically hear the growl in his voice. That struck her as a minor relief, but it also didn't bode well for them. Mother Talzin had both her and her…catalyst, and appeared ready to do exactly whatever it was she had planned.

“Do not try to run, child,” Mother Talzin cut through her thoughts as she pushed herself back up on her feet.

She held her head high, let her face show her defiance, but didn't try to run again. “I won't help you do anything.” She promised.

The woman in red glided over to her and led her towards the front of the house without a word. Two of Mother Talzin’s sisters hovered by the door inside, but the entire village had gathered outside, with at least a dozen more sisters standing between them and her. Kylo was being held down on his knees by three sisters, a large zabrak looming behind him with what looked to be a permanent scowl.

It was nothing compared to the look on Kylo's face, which she thought was the most murderous expression she had ever seen.

Their eyes met, and she had to remind herself that his wrath wasn't directed towards her. Their connection hadn't gone quiet, it was just flooded with his furious and violent intent, so she no longer had any idea what he was actually thinking. It was overwhelming, and she was forced to pull back from their connection if only so she could keep her sanity. Taking a deep breath, she was forced to break eye contact as she was led by the arm towards the edge of town. Mother Talzin's fingers were
long and spidery as she laid a guiding hand on her back. Rey flinched out of her reach, but the woman just drew closer and replaced her hand. The entire village followed at a respectful distance, but Mother Talzin's sisters fell in all around her, including the three restraining Kylo. She noticed that they hadn't taken his restraints off.

“Where are you taking us?” She demanded as they entered the surrounding forest, hoping against hope that she wouldn't take her back to their underground lair, that she wouldn't have to return to that wellspring of darkness.

“To a point of convergence,” was the somewhat mysterious reply.

Even if it wasn't Mother Talzin's lair, it didn't sound like a place Rey wanted to go.

She glanced briefly over her shoulder. “Why haven't you removed his restraints?” She couldn't help but ask.

Mother Talzin didn't bother turning her attention towards Kylo, but she knew what she meant. “He is violent, and unlike you he would not be able to restrain himself from causing destruction if I let him free.”

She was careful not to let Kylo sense what Mother Talzin had said, or to project what she felt about it. The ghoulish woman wasn't entirely wrong – the last thing she needed was a Kylo Ren who was too angry to think clearly, or at all.

To be honest, she wondered if he was already at that point, or if he could get any angrier. It was strange and a little off-putting to think that even she was unsure of how deep his rage could go.

A push against the corners of her mind, harsher than it had to be, brought her gaze back over her shoulder. Kylo's glare bore into Mother Talzin's back, but his eyes flickered over to hers long enough that she could read him. He was in control, or at least enough not to do anything stupid.

You have no faith, scavenger.

Despite their situation, she had to resist the urge to scoff. She turned away. You don't inspire it.

He didn't retract the pressure from her mind. It was like keeping her hand just close enough to a flame that it got uncomfortably hot, but not yet searing in its intensity. She considered pushing him out of her head, but decided against it. Feeling him on the edges of her mind helped her know just how in control he was. Besides, she needed to keep her single ally on all of Dathomir as close as possible.

It was utterly surreal to her that Kylo Ren counted as her only ally.

She wondered how long that would last.

The distant roar of an engine startled her enough that she almost tripped over a root. The noise instantly captivated her attention, and she could feel their bond pull tight as Kylo did the same.

A ship – there were only a few possibilities about who it might be that would be piloting a ship around Dathomir, and she could think of only one good one. She was too entrenched in the misfortunes of the past several days to let herself get too hopeful, but still – a ship was a way off the planet, and she found that she didn't care about much else.

The pressure of Mother Talzin's boney hand against her shoulder blade broke her line of thought, and she realized that she had stopped walking.
“Come, child, we’re almost there,” she soothed, her gaze as pale and terrible as ever.

Rey barely heard her, her attention was still so fixed on the sound of the ship engine, which was getting decidedly louder. There was something familiar about the sound, something that told her she knew what kind of ship it was, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it. All that mattered was that it was headed their way.

She let herself be guided further into the trees, the rest of the village having turned back the way they came. It was just Mother Talzin and her sisters leading the two of them between the trees, but it still felt like a decidedly bad idea to try and make a break for it.

Almost as soon as they stepped into a clearing in the wood did the ship come into view. She couldn't keep the surprise off of her face as it descended to the ground about twenty meters in front of them.

It was an *Upsilon-class* shuttle.

*Kylo's* shuttle.

The rage was boiling over their connection before she could even spin around to look at him. It was like he was excreting molten lava in the Force. It hurt her enough that she mentally recoiled from their bond, throwing up her walls of defense to keep his anger out.

She had been wrong before – he could get much angrier.

She knew before he even did anything that any move that he made would be irrational and would only make things worse. He didn't seem to agree, or more likely didn't care. Even from a distance she could see his muscles bunch in preparation for whatever foolish thing he was about to do.

“Kylo-“

Mother Talzin's hands suddenly gripped the sides of her face in a viper-like snare. Startled, Rey's eyes flew to the ghoulish woman, whose gaze was for once fixed solely on Kylo.

“Do anything childish and I'll put you both in more pain than you can imagine.” Her tone was cool, calm. Rey didn't doubt her for a second.

Kylo's dark gaze darted from Mother Talzin, to her, to his shuttle, and then back to Mother Talzin. He looked no less poised to do something awful than he had a moment ago. Half of the sisters around him had their weapons drawn, each pointed at his chest or head. He shifted on his feet.

Whatever Mother Talzin would do to deter him from acting rashly obviously involved her, as well. They both knew from experience that the woman could reach across their bond, so perhaps that's what she was threatening to do. It didn't matter; all that mattered was that she didn't want to find out.

Out of all the beings in the galaxy, only Mother Talzin made her afraid of having her connection to the Force used against her – the nightmarish woman could turn the Force into a white-hot searing that made her shiver in memory. Resentment built up in her throat at the thought that she was only facing that danger because Kylo had to choose that moment to lose his mind.

“Don't do anything stupid, Kylo,” she pleaded with him, her expression half fearful and half warning.

He ignored her completely. “I can imagine quite a bit,” his attention was still fixed on Mother Talzin, his haughtiness almost entirely overcome by his sneer.
Rey wanted to roll her eyes into the back of her head. No, she decided, she wanted to kick Kylo in the head.

But Mother Talzin only hummed. “And yet you do nothing,” she called his bluff. “Make no mistake, Kylo Ren. I hold all the power here. You will do as you're told or face the consequences.”

Even Rey got angry at that, but she had the sense of mind not to project her feelings when the woman held her head in both hands. Instead, she buried her animosity under Kylo's, which provided ample cover. Mother Talzin turned her gaze back down at her.

“My poor, dear child. It is nothing short of a tragedy that it is you and it is him, that you must be made to suffer for his wrongdoings. You are precious to me, and I would see you doted on, until the end.” Her grip slackened just enough that Rey thought that she might let go, but then she clamped down even harder, clawing into her mind and across their bond. She trailed the same white-hot flame wherever she went, scorching enough that she cried out and collapsed onto her knees. Mother Talzin let her slip from her fingers.

The pain took much longer to let go of its hold on her – on them. It left them both on their hands and knees, gasping for breath.

This is…all…your fault, she sent the words like arrows over their link, her ire dripping from each one.

He was silent for long enough that she wondered if the pain and his anger was overloading their bond enough that he couldn't hear her. Finally, he responded in a snap. You would have us roll over and do what she says.

No, she sent him a glare, one that he returned. We need to play it smart, bide our time until we can make our escape.

Mother Talzin left her side as she started to push herself up, walking over to Kylo as he did the same. “Child, what you fail to understand is that I will hurt you, both of you, very badly if you try anything foolish. What must be done doesn't require you to have a sound body, just a sound spirit.”

The voices returned as she spoke, whispering all of the ways in which Mother Talzin could torture or maim them. Rey tried to send some of her fear over to Kylo, use it to caution him, but he paid her no mind. He only glared up at the woman in red as he stood, even his impressive height falling a bit shorter then hers.

But he didn't say anything. To Rey's great relief – and complete surprise – he didn't even open his mouth.

His lack of response seemed to satisfy Mother Talzin, who turned to usher Rey in the direction of Kylo's shuttle.

He caught her eye over Mother Talzin's shoulder, his face carved out of stone as he fixed her with a significant look.

I didn't get this far by being smart, his eyes looked darker than she had ever seen them. I got this far by being vicious.

The statement scared her – or maybe it was really just Mother Talzin. Too many emotions were flying through her head, none of them good, so she elected to ignore his remark.

Vicious, she thought. A fitting descriptive.
She had never been on Kylo's shuttle, or at least not that she could remember. The interior was dark and monochromatic, the same sterile shine to the walls and floors that she had seen on Starkiller. It was meant to intimidate, to lessen feelings of warmth or just being lived in – and it worked. It felt like stepping into a state-of-the-art tomb, a fortress of control.

It seemed very Kylo.

Only he looked like he belonged in the interior of the shuttle; the sisters in their red robes looked no more at home than she did in her tattered grey vest. Their paleness looked terrible against the dark shine of the bulkhead, the scarlet of their clothing slashing such a contrast it was almost hard to look at. Even Mother Talzin looked strange, a shifting dream against a diamond-hard backdrop.

Rey herself felt too alive, too made of imperfect flesh. She wondered how he did it – how he could live among the First Order and think – believe – that their way was best for the galaxy. Their supposed ‘order’ seemed to her to be completely devoid of life, something akin to the shuttle she stood in.

Mother Talzin led her to one of the passenger seats and gently pushed her into the seat.

“It will not be long now,” she promised, excitement and warmth a distant echo in her tone, before she took a seat closer to the cockpit. Rey stared after her, a little thrown off seeing the woman do something so banal as sit.

Kylo's boots fell loud and familiar on the grated floor, an unexpected reminder of her imprisonment on Starkiller strong enough to tear her attention away from what Mother Talzin was doing. Two of the sisters shoved him down onto the passenger seat across from her before moving to their own seats.

She wondered if she should say something to him. By the look on his face, she could guess that the answer might be ‘no,’ but they needed a plan, and they needed to stick together.

And she could admit to herself when she was drastically in over her head.

Kylo, she tried, not wanting anyone else to hear them. His gaze broke from glaring at Mother Talzin's back to give her a flat, simmering look.

He didn't say anything, but she held his attention.

We need a plan. She shifted in her seat, looking around for anything that might help. She had no idea what actually could help, but she was open to ideas. The shuttle rose from the ground with a decided lack of grace. Obviously Mother Talzin's sisters weren't used to piloting aircraft, which did nothing to ease her already twisted stomach.

Thank you for stating the obvious, he sneered, testing his restraints for what must've been the millionth time.

Her sympathy for the fact that he was bound had evaporated with his recent actions. Don't be moody just because they have your shuttle. I should be the one angry at you for being so rash.

The glare he gave her was somewhere between affronted and incredulous. Don't test me right now, scavenger.

Don't be such a pig, she wanted to spit at him, but managed to contain herself, I'm trying to work together.
He gave one last tug on his restraints before giving up. According to Talzin, you're the whole reason we're in this mess in the first place. His response was like a whip, the blame evident on his face and through their bond. She tried to mentally shove his negative feelings back at him, frustrated that he was spending so much energy trying to lay blame and divide them when they needed to work together.

They could be enemies later.

She straightened in her seat, tilting her head up in conviction. Well, I never asked for you to follow me here. In fact, I remember very clearly trying to sever our bond. She wouldn't let him forget that it was his fault that they were even able to be used by Mother Talzin in the first place; the woman herself had admitted that she needed both of them together. Guess that backfired.

Obviously, she could hear the scoff in his voice. Without another word he threw up his mental walls and blocked her out so abruptly she jerked back in surprise. Just like that, all of the emotions bleeding from him were gone, a curious echo across their suddenly exhausted bond. It confused her as to why he would do that, and made her more than a little angry.

“I think they mean to kill you,” his voice was low, barely loud enough to be heard over the soft hum of the engines, but to her he might as well have been shouting.

Her stomach twisted into nothing, her heart frozen in her chest. She suspected, of course, but to hear him give voice to those suspicions, for him to have the exact same thoughts, made her feel like she was turning inside out. She chewed on her lower lip, unsure of how to respond without giving away her fear.

The shuttle lurched as the sister piloting it took a turn a little too sharply, causing Kylo glare over at the cockpit. Despite the silence across their link, she could practically hear him snap ‘watch it,’ the words festering on the tip of his tongue. He kept his mouth shut, although he didn't take his eyes off the front of the shuttle.

No one spoke for the rest of the short flight. Rey found herself gripping her chair as the shuttle descended, careening to the ground so fast it felt more like a collision than a landing.

Mother Talzin was by her side in a moment, gently pulling her up and guiding her out of the shuttle before all the rest. She knew where she was even before she exited the ramp; she had been brought full-circle to the nightmarish structure that was the entrance to Mother Talzin's lair.

She stopped dead in her tracks, her heart leaping into her throat. She twisted around at the violent sound of Kylo being dragged down the shuttle’s ramp behind her. He paused briefly in his struggles as he took in their surroundings, his gaze finally finding hers with a stony expression.

Their connection reopened slowly, as if he was being careful about it. There was no rush of feelings, no words that he didn't want anyone else to hear, but she found that just being able to feel the push-pull of their bond was a comfort to her.

It was a distant, insignificant fact that she was comforted by Kylo Ren's presence; something like that hardly seemed to matter in comparison to Mother Talzin.

“Come, Rey,” the ghoulish woman bade her, the voices an unsettling undertone, “it's not much farther now.”

Rey tore her eyes away from Kylo to look at the towering structure, at the feminine figures holding it up and the face with a gaping mouth that served as the entrance to the well of her power. It both
beckoned and repulsed her. Nothing in her – not one atom – wanted to go back in there, but there was...a sort of magnetism to the place, an echo of something very old that beckoned her to come forward.

A part of her wanted to obey its lulling call – and that terrified her.

Their bond gave an elastic little twist, and she found herself wondering if Kylo could feel it too across their bond. He hadn't heard the voices before, but-

But it didn't matter. Mother Talzin took Rey's inaction as a ‘no,’ and she wasn't going to allow that. She glided over and placed her hand on her hair. Rey flinched, bracing for the inevitable mental agony, but it didn't come. Instead, all Mother Talzin did was gaze down at her in some twisted version of maternal pride. She pet her hair, tucking the loose strands around her face behind her ears.

“You're so young,” she said in a far-away tone. Rey didn't even want to know what she was thinking about. “Both of you. You haven't seen what the galaxy can be like when it's full of the Force. You were born in such a cursed, depraved era.”

The nightmarish woman turned her gaze to Kylo, who was watching the two of them intently. “All that's left are remnants of what was once great. You can't know what's truly missing.”

She looked back at Rey, who didn't bother trying to hide the skepticism and mistrust on her face. “That's why you can be forgiven for your offense.”

Then she touched Rey's forehead. Her world went black and she became void, Mother Talzin's words running around her empty head like barbed wire.

>All that's left are remnants.<p>

Chapter End Notes

Ugh, I am *so* sorry for the lateness of this chapter; work is really kicking my butt, and will continue to do so for the rest of this week. Because of that, the next update might be a day or two later as well, but after that we should be back to our regularly-scheduled programing.

Mostly a set-up chapter. The next one will have the final Big Reveal of Talzin's plans, so that's exciting. We're getting to the end of 'Act I' of this story, which is even more exciting, because I can't wait to get to where it leads!

Yes, I put a Han Solo reference in this chapter. So sue me.

(And let's send our prayers and good-wishes to Brussels)
In her first years on Jakku, Rey had night terrors. Huddled in any of the numerous nooks and crannies in Niima Outpost – and later in her AT-AT – she would be overcome by the sensation of drowning as she slept. It was always the same; the shifting dunes seemed to her to be hiding monsters slithering underneath the sand, come to swallow her whole. Try as she might, she'd trip and fall, unable to outrun what was all around her. First, the sand would swallow her feet, then her legs, all of the way up to her neck. Then she would cry out, cry for her mother's arms and for her father to come and save her.

She cried, and they never came.

Then the sand would roll in, up above her chin and ears, and swallow her whole. It spilled down her throat and burned her eyes, killing her with the sick sort of pleasure only a monster could take in killing. She'd awaken screaming at the top of her lungs as if she was proving that she could still fill her lungs with open air, and swinging her arms so wildly she often hurt herself.

The sand was the monster, and she was terrified of it.

It took her years to get over her fear, as irrational as it was. Sand to her was death and abandonment and loneliness, a daily reminder that survival was a constant fight. In fighting she overcame her fear, because there was nothing to do with fear besides fight it.

She tried to apply that lesson to Mother Talzin.

The trouble was, the only way to fight the woman in red was with the Force, and Mother Talzin had more control of the Force than she had ever seen – even in comparison to master Luke. Trying to fight against her power was like crashing a wave upon a cliff in an attempt to break it in two. In addition, she had her sisters with her constantly, a steadfast defense against any physical harm either Rey or Kylo might’ve managed to cause.

Mother Talzin wasn't just a matter of fear, she was a matter of ability, and Rey found herself unable to successfully resist the woman even when she tried to fight back – especially then. Master Luke could never have prepared her enough in the short time that they've been together.

There was a small, growing doubt in her gut – a gnawing fear that she wouldn't make it off the planet alive, that the last sky she'd ever see would be a blood red sky. The thought had been easy enough to ignore while running around with Kylo, but there seemed little else to think on while she floated in the darkness that Mother Talzin had plunged her into.
So she dwelled on it, and it solidified within her. Even when she started to return to the world, the doubt twisted her gut.

She awoke underground, in a cavern that she knew to be a part of Mother Talzin's lair. She didn't think that she had seen this particular area when she had first been given a 'tour,' but she recognized the power around her. Coating the ground like water was a green mist that seemed to be a physical manifestation of the Force. It made the air cold and sent prickles down her spine like fingers just ghosting over her skin. Only the raised stone flooring around her kept the mist from caressing her legs, for which she was thankful. She didn't want to touch it.

Everything was dark, but the mist gave off a cloyingly soft green glow that both sickened and soothed her. It didn't illuminate much, but she had decided days ago that she didn't want to see any more of Mother Talzin's lair than she already had anyway.

As she woke up, she became increasingly aware of her discomfort; her legs were severely cramped and she had lost all sensation in her arms. She had been propped up against one of two short stone pillars, her wrists bound to each of them, one arm stretched out awkwardly and one crunched by her side. Her entire body seemed to ache from being bound so uncomfortably, so she pushed herself to her feet if for nothing more than to regain blood circulation to her limbs. She had just enough slack on the chains that she could stand with her arms hanging almost comfortably by her sides. Her breath caught in her throat as she really took in her surroundings, let the objects around her solidify into a specific location.

It was a ritual circle.

All around her, each an equal distance from each other, flat stone pillars were erected. Upon each one was carved an ancient scene, prehistoric and faded enough that Rey could barely make any of them out. She felt the Force emanating from them in powerful waves, and it made her cautious in her regard of them.

But what scared her – what actually terrified her – was the sight of Kylo tied up the same way she was, chained to the other side of the same short pillars she was. He hadn't woken up yet. She didn't know why, but the sight of him made her old nightmares look like child's play in comparison.

Maybe because he was what she used to think fear looked like personified.

Or maybe it just made her feel horribly alone.

She struggled against her bindings with all of her strength. Before, she had told Kylo that she wanted to bide her time, but there was no time for that now; they needed to get away, or else she knew they'd die.

Time was up.

The suspicion that she should've listened to Kylo slithered across her mind, a traitorous thought that only made her angry, but she didn't have time to dwell on it so she shoved it out of her head.

Kylo needed to get up.

“Wake up,” she grunted, struggling with the fervor of a woman about to face execution. When he didn't respond to her verbal commands she tried kicking him, but even then he didn't respond. She stuffed down the nagging feeling of guilt for literally kicking the hell out of him while he was unconscious. In a different time, a different place, she might've allowed herself that guilt – even for Kylo Ren – but this wasn't that time. She needed him up.
“Come on, Kylo, please,” her blood was pounding in her ears, her heart bursting out of her chest. Nothing was more urgent than that he wake up so they could get out of there.

He – finally – started to stir. It didn't take long for him to pull himself out of unconsciousness, but she was practically bursting with impatience.

“We’ve got to get out of here. I think you were right–You’ve got to get up.” ‘I need your help,’ almost slipped out of her mouth, but her pride caught it like a net and she managed to hold it back.

After seeing the chains on his wrists, Kylo was on his feet so fast it startled her. “What is this?” He demanded with a growl, as if she knew any better than him.

“I don't know,” she huffed, yanking at her chains with all her might, “but we need to get out of here.”

“These chains are bound with he Force,” he said, “They're probably bound to that witch’s power.”

He gave a few swift tugs against his own chains, the frown on his face deepening into a scowl as he took in their surroundings.

Her eyes widened. “You mean they're impossible to break?”

He looked back at her, and there was a wild look behind his eyes, the only physical indication that he was just as on-edge as she was. Their bond was another story. “No, not impossible.”

“Well, can you break them or not?” She snapped, looking around to make sure that they were still alone.

“No, I can't,” he returned testily, “did you not just hear me say that they're bound to Talzin?”

“The Force can't just work that way, it's everywhere.” Even when their lives were threatened, talking about the aspects of the Force with him only angered and exasperated her.

The look on his face told her that he found her comment inane. “Yes, it can. Skywalker didn't teach you anything, did he?”

“Oh, I'm sorry that he didn't cover ‘twisted Force powers’ in our lessons,” she scoffed, angry with herself when she could feel her ears turn a light shade of pink, “I was too busy learning how to defend myself against you.”

She expected some sort of reaction to her comment, a rebuttal or an insult, but she didn’t get one. Instead, he regarded her for a long moment, eyes narrowed, studying her with some unknown thought.

“Are you alright?”

She blinked. “What?”

He made a small gesture towards her, just a twitch of his hand. “I can sense your turmoil,” he said by way of an explanation, his voice gruff and impersonal. But she could feel the undertone of genuine concern hidden in his tone, an echo across their bond.

She didn't know how to respond to that.

The look on his face told her that he almost regretted asking; their discomfort was compounded off of the other. But – still. She found herself grateful for the question.
“I want to get the hell out of here. But,” she admitted freely, though her next words nearly caught in her throat, “I'm afraid.”

She didn't know why she admitted that to him. Out of all the people she knew – people like Finn, Poe, and Chewie – he was one of the last ones she should've been revealing such a crippling weakness to. He hadn't earned it, didn't deserve it.

But it felt good to just say it, to admit out loud that she was afraid.

His physical reaction was strange, subtle. A shift in his shoulders, a small change on his face. That unreadable expression of his fell over his face, and she couldn't tell if that was good or bad. But their connection gave her a peek at his real reaction, the emotions that spiked when she pushed out her confession. It surprised her a little. He got violently angry, a roaring flame that wasn’t directed at her or himself. That was strange, too, she thought.

“Then use it to fight,” he said.

It was like a jolt to her system to hear those words, which sounded so much like herself from a time before the Force had had any real meaning in her life, spoken by him with the conviction that told her he believed it himself. She deflated, letting out a breath that she hadn't even realized she was holding.

She could do this. They could do this. He was Kylo Ren, one of the most powerful people she knew, and she hadn't survived so long on Jakku to simply lie down and die for an insane zealot. Mother Talzin wouldn't get what she wanted. They’d get out of there.

“Okay,” she nodded, her resolve hardening with every second, “but we don't have a lot of time, we need to get out of here before she realizes we’re awake.”

“It's too late for that, dear child.”

Both of them froze. Whereas before they had been alone, all at once they were surrounded as Mother Talzin's sisters started to emerge from the darkness and mist like ghosts clothed in blood. Mother Talzin herself appeared at the center of them, approaching over Kylo's right shoulder with the grace and terror of a nightmare. She smiled serenely, but her aura spiked excited corruption through the air. It made Rey want to gag.

“Let us go,” she demanded, although she knew it was pointless. The woman in red had no real sentient feelings, none that anyone could relate to.

“The time is upon us, my sisters,” she ignored the two of them as they struggled, turning instead to regard the ceiling, where there was a crack that exposed the blood-colored nighttime sky. The stars shine like faint pinpricks. Rey hadn't noticed the crack before.

The sisters took up stations in between the stone pillars, each holding a glowing orb the same color of the swirling mist. She could feel them, each one emanating Force power like mini nuclear reactors.

She exchanged a brief look with Kylo.

A thought passed between them, a half-formed plan that was likely to fail, but it was better than doing nothing. She felt more than saw as he closed his eyes and started concentrating on their chains, trying to override Mother Talzin's control.

Rey snapped her attention back to the woman as she accepted a carved stone bowl from one of the sisters.
“What are you going to do?” She needed to keep Mother Talzin's attention, but it was her pounding heart that wrenched the question from her lips.

The tall woman didn't pause as she circled around the ritual area, white and green smoke curling up from the bowl and leaving a heavy trail behind her. “Don't trouble yourself, child. It is nearly done.”

Rey fought against her chains. “You tell me what the hell is going on here,” she nearly didn't recognize her own voice, she was so scared. She felt Kylo's emotions react to hers, his irritation spiking at his less than successful progress on their bindings. It was a confusing mix of anger, fear, and adrenaline between them.

Mother Talzin looked at Rey for a long moment, not pausing until she had completed walking the circumference of the ritual circle, the smoke trailed all of the way around them. Handing the bowl off to one of her sisters, she nodded.

“Very well, Rey. You have the right to know,” she approached them at the center of the circle; Rey felt all of her muscles tense as Kylo redoubled his efforts, scowling down at the shackles on his wrists.

Rey squared her shoulders and raised her chin, trying to communicate her defiance with the hardest glare she could muster and maintain control of her full attention.

Mother Talzin stopped just within arms reach, looking solely at her. “The Force needs us, child,” she spoke with conviction, “it needs our help in restoring it. But you're the only one who can give it what it needs.” She reached up to stroke Rey's cheek like a proud parent. Rey was suddenly glad that she had nothing to compare it to. “You have so much power, and none of it has been tainted by the Jedi or Sith.”

That sparked a bright anger in Rey, and she let it bleed into her tone as she snatched her face out of Mother Talzin's grip. “I'm training to be a Jedi.”

“Your master has barely begun to brush the surface of his true teachings,” the ghoulish woman scoffed, letting her hand fall back to her side. “You are still pure. Still perfect.”

Then she turned her attention to Kylo, who immediately broke his concentration from the shackles with a growl. Rey sensed his intention a nanosecond before he crushed the windpipes of two of the sisters, catching the powerful orbs with his power before they could drop to the floor and shooting them straight at Mother Talzin. It happened so fast Rey might've missed it if she blinked, but Mother Talzin seemed to be prepared for that sort of outburst. She halted them with her own power, not a meter from her face. Keeping them suspended, the woman neared Kylo with a blank look.

“Witch,” he snailed.

“But you are not a Skywalker,” she continued as if nothing had happened. “That family plays a unique role for the Force, and have a direct link to its power in ways neither you nor I could ever achieve.”

She reached up and tapped his forehead with index and middle finger. Rey felt his mind go out like a light. He dropped gracelessly, the thud loud and awful as he hit the ground.

“What did you do to him?” Rey struggled wildly against the chains.

“Don't worry, your bond-mate is nearly as important as you,” Mother Talzin stepped back from them as two more sisters plucked the orbs out of the air and took up the stations left abandoned by their dead sisters.
"He will serve as a conduit and the catalyst that will allow the Force to draw upon your power. It will be a jumpstart, in a way. But your body must be purified first."

Mother Talzin's eyes stared to glow, a pale and terrible light. Around them, Talzin's sisters started to chant, and the orbs grew brighter. "I'm sorry, dear Rey. Your physical body will not survive it. Remember that your sacrifice is an honor, and you shall be remembered as the one who revived the Force."

Rey didn't want her sorry – she didn't want to die.

"Please, you don't have to do this," she tried, but Mother Talzin had already begun chanting with the rest of her sisters, and no longer seemed to be aware of her.

The idea that she was powerful enough to super charge the Force was ridiculous. Absolutely and totally insane. But she would think about that later, if she survived this.

She was going to survive it.

She just didn't know what to do to stop her.

Kylo was still on the ground, entirely unaware of what was about to befall them. If she was going to have any chance of getting out of this alive, she knew that she'd need his help. She tried to ignore the annoying fact that she had just woken him up, and attempted to do so again.

She tried calling to him, pulling on their bond, anything to get through to him, but she could feel the hold that Mother Talzin had on his mind; she was keeping him under, blacked out and useless. But Rey had proven adept in breaking through mental barriers before, and what good was their bond if it didn't make it easier to connect to him?

There wasn't time to be gentle as she followed the cords of their link, wedging into his mind through the cracks they made in Mother Talzin's hold of him. After a long moment of struggling, she burst into his mind all at once, breaking down a part of the wall imposed on his mind with a particularly violent burst. She was sure that it would've been painful had he been awake.

She didn't know where to go to find him, or how deep to go, so she sifted through his more recent memories at random. The animosity towards Dathomir, the hatred of its people. Self-hatred for allowing himself to be injured and apprehended. Regret over having lost his mask.

She was there, too, in the forefront of his thoughts, but before she could examine them she was sucked into a different part of his mind so fast it gave her whiplash.

All at once, she had broken through to some dark corner of his brain, a chamber that sucked her in like an undertow. She recognized it immediately, and the massive presence contained within.

She had found the place in his mind where his master dwelled. The place she had barely escaped from the last time she had gotten curious.

And he was there.

Frightening and astronomic, Supreme Leader Snoke's attention caught onto her like a hook so suddenly she gasped.

Scavenger girl.

She didn't know how he could communicate with her so clearly when Kylo wasn't conscious and
Snoke was presumably an entire galaxy away. She hoped. She didn't care how he did it; it suddenly became paramount to get away from this place in Kylo's mind, to shut the door and cut off all communication to the First Order's Supreme Leader.

But Kylo's monstrous master didn't seem to want to let her go. The tentacles of his mind hooked into her just like last time, scraping at her mind painfully as she tried to wrestle her consciousness away. She didn't have any success at all.

Snoke's insistent press on her mind halted when he sensed Mother Talzin's presence. A great rage rose from Kylo's master, so strong Rey thought that her mind was going to get boiled alive.

Power magnified from the little corner of Kylo's mind, a thick, oily power that expelled Rey from his mind with so much force that it physically made her stumble. She nearly gagged on the feeling of the residual power coursing through her veins.

Kylo cried out as he came back to consciousness, Snoke's power having cut off Mother Talzin's hold on his mind. Snoke used him as a conduit for his own display of power, a wave of malevolent energy that shot out in all directions and shattered the orbs that Talzin's sisters were holding.

It caused a massive explosion.

It was less of a physical blast than a thing of unseen energy. So much Force power was released that it shorted out everything else, all Force power in the cavern, and maybe even beyond. The chains around her and Kylo's wrists simply became thin pieces of metal, easily taken off. The weapons wielded by the sisters were all but useless sticks, the energy which powered them gone.

But it still hurt. Like spraying boiling acid on her body, it hurt.

Rey was nearly flung back, but the chains kept her in place, stopping her movement so harshly it tore the skin around her wrists. She didn't even try to hold back the pained sob as she slumped to the ground.

“No!” Mother Talzin's scream was barely audible over the explosion, her voice nearly overtaken by the deeper, darker undertones it held.

Kylo had already torn off his restraints, looming to his full height with a terrible expression on his face. He didn't look at Rey, but she felt the somewhat tentative prod on the outskirts of her mind, trying to sense of she was alright.

The pain she felt automatically made her want to shove him back, but she swallowed the impulse and sent a quick reassurance instead. His attention turned to Mother Talzin, who was kneeling on the ground, arms raised in an attempt to gather what little she could of the remaining energy from the shattered orbs.

He pointed his finger at her – a threat. His voice boomed off the walls. “Return the lightsabers to us.”

The woman ignored him. Rey tore off her own shackles and sprang to her feet, ignoring the aches that rocked through her body.

Kylo's patience – what little of it he had – had been depleted long ago, and the revival provided by his master had filled him with a dark, awful sort of energy. It was only an echo of Snoke's touch, but he felt stronger than ever, revived in full the same way she had been in the hunters’ village. She didn't like it, didn't trust it one bit.

He hit Mother Talzin with a blast so strong it knocked her back despite the fact that the woman was
able to throw up a shield in time to block it. Rey could feel the darkness within him burgeon with use. Their bond twisted in her chest like someone had flipped it inside out, open and raw, pulled taut with his expanding power. She recoiled from the feeling, throwing up her defenses to block out almost all traces of him in her head.

“Tell me, witch,” he spat, hand extended as he snapped the neck of the sister nearest to Mother Talzin as she started moaned on the ground with but a flick of his wrist.

“You,” Rey thought that she saw tears streaked down the ghoulish woman’s face, lost in the chalk-white of her cheeks, “you and your fool master destroyed everything. You cannot possibly comprehend.”

Kylo just hit her another blast of power, one that sent her careening into one of the underground streams of water.

“Where are they?” He demanded with a snarl.

He had lost all semblance of control. Rey stood immobilized for a moment, unsure of what to do.

He had become Kylo Ren again, a dark monster who served an even darker master. It was impossible to deny his connection to the Supreme Leader when Kylo was still drawing on his power. It reminded her of all he was— all he had done. She was appalled that she had ever forgotten it.

She wished, not for the first time, that he had been wearing his mask. To make things easier.

Especially when he snapped his gaze back towards her like he had heard her thoughts as clearly as if she had shouted them. Because the look that passed over his face was something akin to confusion and, dare she say it, hurt.

Her frown only deepened.

Then his gaze shifted over her shoulder, and the look was gone.

She spun on her heels to see at least half a dozen of Mother Talzin's sisters sprinting towards them. They each brandished a weapon, all except for the two in the middle, who both held an object in one hand, something small and cylindrical. It almost looked like-

The sisters grabbed a hold of her with the Force and yanked her forward, straight into them. Fighting through her initial surprise and leaning into it, she used the momentum to roll right past them and spring to her feet in one fluid motion. Turning back around to face them, she saw that they had cut her off from Kylo, who was in a confrontation with Mother Talzin.

The two sisters in the middle stepped forward, pointing the objects in their hands straight at her. The flaming snap-hiss was a shock to her system as a blue and a green blade materialized in front of her.

She stood no chance unarmed against a lightsaber, let alone two.

Still, she had an absurd moment where she felt the novelty of the moment—she had only ever seen her lightsaber and Kylo’s. It was an amazing testament to Mother Talzin's claims that Force users used to be much more abundant in the galaxy.

A testament that had a very real possibility of killing her.

There were only two options: run or stay and fight. Her eyes immediately flew to Kylo on the other side of the cavern. As much darkness as she felt emanating from him, she wasn't somebody who
would just abandon anyone. It didn't sit right with her – her entire being rebelled against the idea. But she had no way to defend herself against two lightsabers. She'd die for sure.

Go.

The command was harsh but flung across their bond in a way that she knew most of his attention was focused on the nightmare Mother Talzin was probably proving herself to be. She wasn't even aware that she had dropped her guard against his presence back down.

There was a wet blast from Kylo's direction, but the sisters obscured most of her view and she couldn't see what had happened.

She hated her choices. She really did.

It rankled her to obey him, to abandon him to someone like Mother Talzin.

Because he wasn't her enemy.

Not anymore.

Or, at least, not now.

The thought came to her like a small revelation, and it only served to make her even more reluctant to leave him. Because she didn't abandon allies.

Damnit, scavenger just, go. I'll catch up.

She glowered at the sisters as they advanced. Then she broke.

Don't die, she ordered. Her conscience wouldn't be able to take it if he died.

The irony of her potentially feeling guilty over the death of Kylo Ren didn't escape her.

She backed up several steps, eying the passage in which the sisters had entered. More trouble could potentially await her down there – more sisters or even just a maze of tunnels – but it was the closest way out of there, and beggars couldn't be choosers.

I Don't plan on it.

Casting one last look past the wall of sisters and their lightsabers, she turned and bolted towards the exit.

It felt like swallowing sand.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Easter, to those of you who celebrate it!

So there we have it, the Big Reveal. Many of you were able to guess (or come very close to guessing) what Talzin's plan is, so it might not be a *huge* surprise, but it's good to have it out there.

And what about that progress, am I right? Rey got over a huge hurdle, relationship-wise,
that will speed up the reylo a *little*. Exciting!

I love you guys, thank you so much for being so patient and generally amazing!
He didn't know why he did it.

Well – he did, actually. He just didn't know why it mattered.

She had been unwilling to leave him, had gone as far as to call it abandonment. It wasn’t, not by a long shot. Not when they were severely outnumbered and she was surrounded by enemies. Even he could forgive her for running in their situation. And he needed her alive.

But the stupid girl had almost stayed.

He was careful not to misinterpret her unwillingness to leave as loyalty – he was still the only one on the planet who was technically on ‘her side,’ after all. As far as she knew, it was in her best interests to stay with him.

She was just foolish enough to stay in the face of two lightsabers.

It didn't mean anything – besides that he had seriously overestimated her common sense.

The sentiment behind it didn't touch him.

And yet, he found himself tell her to go, to leave him alone with half a dozen Nightsisters and a furious Mother Talzin. Unarmed, she would only get in his way and likely get herself killed. So he told her to just go.

Then he had felt it, a brief spark sent unchecked across their bond.

He wasn't her enemy. It was more of a feeling than anything articulated into a clear thought, but he understood the meaning as if she'd screamed it. He doubted she knew that she was projecting so strongly. Her feelings only served to harden her resolve against running. The frustration it caused him almost got him killed in a moment of distraction.

Don't die, she had said.

If he had had the time, he would've been astonished by the turn of events, that the scavenger Rey was telling him not to die. The scar on his face itched when he thought about it. It was almost funny, in a morbid way.

He hadn't wanted her to die for a long time, but her sentiment felt different. It felt sincere, like he had earned a sort of respect from her that he hadn't possessed before. It didn't really change anything.

Except that it made him tell her to get out of there.

Like an idiot, because two in a fight was always better than one, and he had absolutely no desire to confront the entirety of Talzin's witches on his own.

The constant little tug in his chest resounded with every step she took, an annoyance that he couldn't totally shake. He wasn't worried about finding her again. Their link was pulled taut but elastic; he'd have no trouble following it straight to her. He suspected that it'd be the same even from halfway across the galaxy. But splitting their strength was a bad move. He knew that even as her felt her
leave the cavern.

And yet he had told her to go.

His own weaknesses amazed him; killed over a moment of sentiment for a slip of a girl that he was supposed to deliver to the Supreme Leader.

The scavenger.

Pathetic.

A sentiment that was both his master’s and his own. The overwhelming presence swam at the back of his mind, half directing his limbs as he made short work of any Nightsisters that got in his way. A part of him chaffed at practically being a puppet, but the Supreme Leader's presence could not be ignored or overcome.

And the Supreme Leader was angry. Angry at his failure to retrieve the object, at the fact that he had to save them from all of the way across the galaxy, and even his current fixation on the scavenger.

The familiar rise of self-loathing was a welcome change to fixating on his master's anger, or an analysis of anything that the scavenger was thinking. He couldn't afford such distractions, especially not when it was likely to get him killed.

He still needed to find his lightsaber, as well as his grandfather's.

Everyone's attention had turned to him in the scavenger’s absence, but he kept his eyes locked on Talzin. The Supreme Leader's attention was a pounding headache behind his eyes.

“You stupid, stupid boy,” she brushed her sleeves off with a sneer. “I should kill you where you stand.” She paused, taunting. “Do you think that would make your master angry?”

Even across the galaxy, the shiver of a laugh that crept through his mind unnerved him.

Kylo was very aware of the situation he was in. Alone, mostly unarmed, up against over a half-dozen furious witches. And their wrath was directed solely at him. All he had was his own power, as he could feel his master start to withdraw from his mind until he was just and observer. The pounding headache didn't go away.

“Go ahead and try,” he didn't stop himself from mocking her, because he knew she was bluffing and chances were that he wasn't going to make it very long, anyway. Mocking her was a petty sort of bitterness, but it was enough to agitate some of the Nightsisters who had just seen their comrades die.

A few of the women made to attack him, but Talzin stopped them with a sharp wave. “No, we still need him alive,” she snapped.

Drawing once more from his own wellspring of the Force, he tried to use his power to wrench the two sisters armed with lightsabers into each other's blades, but their reflexes were fast enough so that they managed to twist in such a way as to avoid slicing each other open. Their grip on their weapons loosened as a result, however, just enough so that he could snatch them out of their hands with the Force. They sped towards him like a bullet, but Talzin was just as quick.

Extending her hand, she hijacked his control over one of the lightsabers, diverting it into her own grip. But she didn't seize control of both, and the other lightsaber flew firmly into his hand.

Green blade, sturdy handle. The hilt was lighter than his, a slightly different balance. It was
decidedly Jedi-made. It would have to do.

Without wasting time, he rushed the cluster of Nightsisters. They parted like a wave in the face of the green blade. His strokes were brutal and wide, not designed to be accurate or careful, but to create a path for himself. He caught one with in the neck, turning away before she even hit the ground.

Then Talzin was there, blocking the green blade in his hand with the blue lightsaber she had hijacked. White sparks flew between them, casting her face in harsh shadows as she bore down on him.

“Clumsy and crude,” she observed, having regained her infuriating air of superiority, “perhaps I shouldn't have expected more.”

He scowled, but was exerting too much of his strength into the lightsaber lock to reply.

There was an exit behind Talzin, a passageway too small to see until he got closer. He sensed nothing but darkness down that way, the kind that belonged uniquely to Dathomirian witches. It led down the opposite way that the scavenger had run, but he was all of the way on the other side of the cavern now, and the way back was still blocked by the Nightsisters.

It was his chance to get out of there – he could find her again once he made it to the surface.

Unless she didn't make it to the surface.

He dismissed the thought almost immediately. She was a self-proclaimed survivor, and she was smart.

The biggest problem was that Talzin still blocked the way. That, and the fact that he still didn't have his lightsaber – he wasn't going to leave without it. He'd pry it from Talzin's cold, dead fingers, except that he could sense that she didn't have it on her person.

He'd just have to find it and grab it on his way out.

As well as the object that his master wanted. Damn, he'd forgotten about that.

But his master was still with him, a stern pressure behind his eyes that spurred him on, warned him not to fail. Failure would result with the same outcome as it had on Starkiller, only worse. If he failed, the Supreme Leader would be the one to give him a new set of scars.

If he lived.

Shifting his weight to the side, he managed to break the lock and reverse positions with Talzin, putting his back to the passageway entrance. She seemed to immediately know what his plan was.

She reached out her hand, but Kylo was already moving. Using the last remnants of the Supreme Leader's power still lingering within him, he blasted Talzin and the Nightsisters with enough Force power to send them flying.

It didn't matter where they landed. Spinning on his heels, Kylo bolted for the entrance to the passageway, not hesitating a moment before plunging himself into the darkness.

The passageway was dark and winding, a corridor illuminated periodically by sconces carved into small alcoves. He had to deactivate the lightsaber in his hand due to the narrowness of the walls, which rose to a point high over his head. Whatever natural cave formations the planet had, this area was obviously deliberately constructed.
A tidal wave of furious bloodlust rolled through the Force from back where he had come, and it only pushed him harder. The Nightsisters were still in pursuit, and definitely out for blood. They weren't just going to let him slip away without paying for ruining their plans.

Their battle cries carried down the passageway, echoes of violence that he couldn't help but respond to with chagrin.

But he could feel that Talzin wasn't with them.

It occurred to him that the witch would most likely be going after the scavenger – of course she would. Kylo was just a secondary piece in her twisted game, it was the scavenger that she wanted, had always wanted.

Which meant that there was no reason why he shouldn't thin out the number of his pursuers.

Skidding to a halt, he spun around to face down where the Nightsisters were pursuing him. The passageway was narrow enough that he'd only face one at a time, and the ground had turned into an incline, so he had the added advantage of the high ground.

The green lightsaber cast the stone around him in an unnatural glow not unlike the mist from the cavern.

He didn't have to wait but a few moments before the first Nightsister appeared around the corner, blue lightsaber pointed straight at him.

It was almost ridiculous how easy it was going to be.

The space was entirely too narrow to swing a lightsaber with any real momentum, but the Nightsister was obviously taking care to do as little excess damage to the walls and floor as possible. Kylo didn't care one bit.

Knocking the tip of the blade aside as she rushed him, he added a little flourish to his responding stab and swipe that cut into the walls around them and sent sparks flying into their faces. The Nightsister was forced to back up a step, right into the waiting line of witches at her back. It threw her off-balance for a whole second, one that Kylo used to his advantage.

She tried to swing at him again, but he got in too close for someone untrained in lightsabers to be effective. In an arching sweep that cut into the passageway with so many sparks it even took him a moment to be able to see what he'd done, he cut off the tip of the witch's left foot, her lightsaber-wielding arm at the elbow, and the entire right side of her head. It left a stinking trail of flesh, cauterized instantly. The body hit the floor with a thud.

He snatched the blue lightsaber out of the air before it even hit the ground, calling it into his free hand and clipping it to his belt. There wasn't enough room for a second lightsaber, but he wasn't foolish enough to leave it for the next Nightsister to snatch up.

As it was, the Nightsisters proved to be nothing compared to his fury-fueled strength. Not with their long-range bows and knives easily rendered useless against a lightsaber. He cut them down at their knees and their chests and their heads, sent limbs flying and guts slipping through even the cauterized holes. Blood didn't fly, not with a lightsaber, but the sparks made up for it. Each jab and swing cut into the passageway like butter, destruction to match the mutilated bodies at his feet.

Dark power pumped through his veins, matching the adrenaline he felt at wielding a lightsaber once again. It wasn't his, but he felt better with one in-hand. He felt dangerous again.
It seemed like only second before they were dead, nothing more than mangled flesh piled on the ground. He deactivated the green saber and secured it next to the blue one on his belt.

Pushing his hair back from his face, he reached out across their bond to locate the scavenger.

Her defenses were up, which confused him because it seemed entirely counter-productive in their situation. Stamping down on the flash of annoyance it inspired, he poked around the edges of her mind, trying to gain entrance and figure out where she was.

He got not response.

A feeling of disquiet bloomed in his mind. Surely she wouldn't shut him out if Talzin had reached her; he knew by experience that she was completely inept at maintaining focus on her defenses in the face of imminent danger.

Maybe she had taken the chance to run. To leave him to die while she got away. They knew where Talzin had landed his shuttle; she could get out of there and kill two birds with one stone.

She wouldn't have to worry about himself or Talzin again. They'd kill each other, or even if it was just him, their link would die with him. Scavengers were survivors, first and foremost.

It made sense.

How could she do anything else, the Supreme Leader's thought almost sounded like his own.

Resentment boiled in his gut, tightened his chest. Of course she'd run, and he was stupid enough to give her permission like some blind-

But then her defenses dropped and she was there, reaching across their bond in the same way he had been only moments before. She only recoiled a little when she brushed against the dark kernel of his already evaporating anger. He paid careful attention that she didn't come near the throbbing presence of his master.

Where are you? She demanded, urgent yet undeniably cautious. Are you okay? Did you get away from Mother Talzin?

He deflated infinitesimally. I'm in a side passageway. I'm fine. Talzin's gone, I killed the Nightsisters.

The silence that stretched across their bond was momentary, but the small tremor he felt in their connection couldn't have been imagined. He just couldn't figure out if it was disapproval or something else.

I found our lightsabers.

She said it like it was good news. He wasn't so sure. It all depended on whether or not she gave him his lightsaber willingly – and there was still the matter of his grandfather's lightsaber.

You'll have to take it from her, the whisper came.

He tried to ignore it. Where are you? He asked instead. I'll come find you.

We should make our way above ground, she suggested. He picked up on her meaning immediately.

His shuttle. But did that mean that she'd be willing to leave with him?

He'd have to take her to Snoke.
The Supreme Leader was a demanding thought in his head commanding Kylo to bring him the girl. He rubbed the side of his head to try and alleviate some of the ache if caused, although he knew it was useless.

*Good idea*, he turned and once again began to run down the passageway the direction he had originally been going. Going up was bound to eventually lead to the exit, or at least close enough. He'd cut through the stone if he had to – there was no way in the galaxy he was going to stay in Talzin's lair any longer than he had to.

But he was leaving without the object.

Surely the Supreme Leader would forgive him if he simply brought the scavenger instead. He carefully kept the thought in his own corner of his mind.

He needed more time to think about it; at the very least, he needed the chance to catch his breath and regroup.

His connection to the scavenger hummed and pulsed, a curious twist between his ribs. It felt like his chest was being tugged down the passageway by a chord.

They were getting closer to each other, then.

After a sharp turn, the passageway opened up into a hallway at least three times in size, with twisted pillars and doors lining the walls. Talzin had an entire compound down there. He knew it was only a matter of time before he ran into more of her Nightsisters, although he wasn't worried about that. Not with two lightsabers at his hip and the confidence that came from having already killed so many.

He followed the feeling in his chest that he knew was leading him to the scavenger. He had no idea whether or not she had gotten away yet, but it just felt like the right way to go.

His steps echoed loudly off of the stone walls, the only companion to the sound of his breathing as he ran. It was empty wherever he went, whether by design or some Force-given luck. He didn't question it. Their luck had been decidedly down since being stranded on the planet, so he'd take whatever mercy the universe was willing to give him.

*I found the exit*, the scavenger whispered across their link, *it's unguarded.*

That either spoke of Talzin's incompetence, or it didn't bode well for them. *Be careful*, he snapped as if she had already done something reckless, because he knew she was about to.

When she didn't reply, he gave her a mental push. *Scavenger.*

*Relax*, she bit off, *it wasn't guarded the last time, either.*

Last time. He remembered the last time she had been there – or, at least, he remembered when she had drawn on his power to get out of there. He had been furious at the time. Now, though, he didn't blame her.

*Don't do anything rash.*

He could practically hear her scoff, *you're one to talk.*

He didn't bother replying.

At the end of the hall stood Mother Talzin, her scarlet robes spilling out around her as she floated
about a meter above ground. The expression on her face was terrifying.

“Kylo Ren,” her voice thundered off of the walls around them, darker voices echoing her words with a vehemence that made him pause. “You will submit, and you will bring Rey back.”

He unclipped the green lightsaber from his belt and activated it.

The ghoul of a woman sneered. “Very well, I shall make you submit. You are but a pawn, boy, and I will open your eyes to that truth.”

He could feel the scavenger poking around the outskirts of his mind, her attention caught by his sudden silence. He pushed her out and closed up his defenses. If Talzin wanted to fight, then he didn't need her distracting him. He needed control. Reaching within his inner well of darkness, he was pleased to find the ghost of the Supreme Leader's touch, a heavy darkness that solidified his own resolve. He drew it around himself like a cloak. The pressure behind his eyes was still there, but his master seemed content to watch.

Talzin tilted her head as she studied him. “What a strange, dependent thing you are,” she muttered, almost as if to herself.

Kylo snarled. “You know nothing, witch.”

“You're entirely too transparent, Kylo Ren. Submit, before you find yourself in over your head once more.”

“Unlikely,” he spun the green lightsaber in preparation for the fight, the anticipation for violence bubbling through his veins. He called upon the memory of every bad thing that had happened to him since he had landed – all of it connected to the woman in front of him.

Rage coiled in his gut. He almost didn't feel the elastic pull on his chest.

Talzin seemed all too ready to meet his aggression with her own. Holding her arms out in front of her, she clasped her hands together and whispered something Kylo didn't pick up. He felt the power gathering around her, so much so that it almost didn't surprise him when a sword materialized out of the air right in her hands. It was long and thin and looked like it was made from the same green ichor she used in everything else. The edges didn't look entirely solid, much like Talzin herself, but he had no doubt that the weapon would stand up to the lightsaber in his hand, or that it could kill him.

Determined to remain unimpressed with her display, he shifted into an aggressive stance. The Supreme Leader's aching presence hardened his resolve.

“I still need you alive,” she admitted with a hiss, “but for your insolence I will maim you, destroy your body and mind. You will lose, and you will be nothing but a husk.”

He sneered. “Either way, the scavenger will still be out of your reach,” he threw at her, because he knew that she was who Talzin really wanted. It was honestly foolish of her to try and stop him when the scavenger was supposedly far more important and the one who was currently nearer to his shuttle. She could've been off-planet by the time Talzin was done confronting him.

“She won't leave you,” the witch said like it was a certainty.

Kylo's couldn't help the slight shift in his scowl.

“Whatever you say.”
“You don't believe me?” Talzin tilted her head to the side, brandishing her weapon. “Very well. I shall prove it to you. After I've mutilated you, of course.”

He didn’t have a chance to respond as she flew towards him with a twirl, her sickly green blade poised to kill.

Chapter End Notes

I'm going to bed at 5:30am my time so that you guys can have this chapter. I hope you all know how much I love you.

Kylo's back in business (even if it's not with his lightsaber)! He's also under a lot of mental strain in this chapter, poor(ish) guy. I absolutely hate headaches.

Also, if you guys want to follow me on tumblr, my username is joydollie. It's my personal account, mostly SW (reylo, let's be real). I also occasionally post previews for the upcoming chapters, as well as posts for new updates. Come hang out, we'll have a party or something!
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It didn't take long for the passageway that led out of the cavern to turn into a series of antechambers, each with access to multiple rooms beyond it. All of the rooms were either connected to each other or ended up being dead-ends, with no discernible rhyme or reason. It was just as Rey had feared – a labyrinth.

Her frustration mounted as she came across yet another dead-end and had to turn around. It was dark, the only light coming from small light fixtures filled with green flames that hung from the ceiling.

Everything around her emitted a tiny pulse in the Force, a little ripple of darkness that was enough to completely throw off her senses. The more she tried to sense anything beyond it, the more acutely she felt the dark, so eventually she stopped trying. She had no choice but to wander around blindly, trying to remember which corridors she had taken and which directions she had turned before.

She had absolutely no idea where she was going.

Aside from the disruption of her senses, she was at the heart of the wellspring of Force power. Every breath she took filled her with a darkness that unnerved her. The tiny pinpricks of light she had sometimes felt emanating from the wellspring had disappeared ages ago, it seemed. She was wandering around the lair of a nightmare – and she had left Kylo with the nightmare herself.

She couldn't help but prod their connection continuously as she ran, just little tugs to make sure that he was still on the other end.

To make sure that she hadn't doomed him by leaving.

She reminded herself that he was Kylo Ren, people weren't afraid of him for nothing. She knew first-hand how relentless he could be, how hard it was to take him down. And he wouldn't have told her to go if he couldn't handle the situation.

Except, when had she ever known him to be humble enough to admit when he needed help? Especially from her.

The thought made her angry, but she tried to push it down. Thinking of him was only distracting her, she needed to be able to think clearly if she was going to make it out of there.

And he was still steeped in the hideous power from his master. It pervaded everything she felt from him, turning his darkness into something infinitely more unsettling it crept over the tendrils of their bond with a sticky attention that she tried to not let frighten her.

She snapped their connection shut, cutting off all feeling from him except that he was still there.

In all the time she was wandering the halls, she didn't come across a single one of Talzin's sisters. She didn't know if that was because they were all focusing on Kylo, or if that many of them had already been killed. She didn't dwell on it.

There was a sudden shift in the air, a singular aura that pushed through the shifting of the Force around her. It was a presence not unlike Mother Talzin's, only it was darker, if that was even possible
– and much older.

It came from the antechamber to her left, which turned into a single hallway beyond – the end of the labyrinth of rooms. Rey felt like she could’ve wept in relief, except for the fact that the old presence she sensed was coming from the same direction.

The old presence, and something else-

Her _lightsaber_.

Nothing else mattered in comparison to the prospect of recovering her stolen blade. The faint chords of its call made her heart harden in determination. There was a bit of hope there, too, but she tried not to let herself get distracted by it.

Sprinting down the hall, she followed her senses towards her lightsaber. It was close-by, she could _feel_ it, she-

Passed it.

Halting in confusion, she spun in all directions, trying to figure out what she did wrong. It was right _there_, back about five paces, but the hallway was empty – not a door, not an alcove, nothing.

_Not even a bloody crack._

It didn't make any sense. She could sense her lightsaber clearly, it was on the same level as she was, and it was practically right in front of her.

Only it wasn't.

It made no _sense_.

She huffed in frustration, feeling along the walls for – well, _anything_. Something that would reveal a hidden door or open a compartment in the stone. Anything to turn up her lightsaber.

The old presence surrounded her, too, only it was much larger and far more nebulous. She could sense that the person emanating it was close-by as well, perhaps just as close as her lightsaber. If they were the one in possession of it, then that wouldn't bode well for her. Especially since she was still totally unarmed aside from her grasp of the Force, which didn't comfort her much.

As she slid her palms over the walls, she found a spot warmer than the rest. Roaming her hands around, she found that the spot was at least a meter wide and reached all of the way to the ground.

If that didn't indicate a secret passage, she didn't know what did.

Stepping back, she tried to see anything that might be a hidden access. There was nothing.

She tried everything she could think of – she felt around the edges and shoved at it with all of her might. Eventually, she resorted to kicking and pounding her fists against the stone.

“Open, damn it,” she grunted, ignoring the stinging in her hands.

What was she supposed to do? It wasn't like she had ever had any specific lessons in how to open up a _wall_ with the Force, or-

The _Force_.


It was so obvious, she wanted to kick herself. Of course a hidden doorway in Mother Talzin's lair would require the Force to open it. Rey didn't have much experience with actually opening anything with the Force, but Master Luke had taught her a little about moving objects, and she figured that it was mostly the same thing.

She stepped back against the opposite wall and raised her hands towards the warm spot. Focusing her energy, she tried to feel along the edges with the Force to try and find the correct way to open it.

As far as she could tell, it was just a solid wall. Then she nearly gasped. She could sense a small antechamber on the other side of the wall, connected to the hallway by the very wall in front of her. The Force signatures of the old one and her lightsaber were both within, as well as another signature that she knew to be Kylo's lightsaber.

If she could just figure out how to get past the wall, she'd be able to recover both their lightsabers. The only access in or out of the room just beyond was this spot in the wall, she was sure of it.

Except that it wasn't even an access at all.

Then suddenly she felt the old presence brush against her mind, a lazy nudge of acknowledgement. She froze.

The wall started to shake, and then move away. It just – disappeared into itself.

She was left standing at the entryway to the small chamber in the wall, a circular room carved from the stone that was smaller than the main hold on the Falcon. Natural grooves in the walls served as shelves on which sat various little jars and figurines.

On one of the grooves lay their lightsabers.

They were right next to the only person in the room – a wizened old woman who looked like she had sat on her bench so long she had half-decayed. In front of her sat a large cauldron with little thin wisps of smoke wafting out. She had perhaps once looked similar to Mother Talzin, but age – and perhaps the corruption of the planet – had obviously taken its toll. She appeared as if she had just woken from a nap.

The old woman looked at her with pale, watery eyes. She seemed to recognize her instantly. “Are you the one to restore the Force?”

Despite herself, Rey was taken aback. “No,” she shook her head. She found she didn't quite know what to say to the woman. “I've just come for those weapons.”

She pointed at the lightsabers, but the woman didn't turn to look. She shook like a leaf. “Buzz, buzz, buzz. No, you need to go back.”

“I will not,” Rey retorted, finally stepping over the threshold into the antechamber. She couldn't shake the feeling that the stone would close behind her at any moment and trap her forever.

She tried to push the fear out of her head. “Give me the lightsabers.”

“I will not,” she old woman mocked her with her own words, growing visibly angry at Rey's refusal. She extended her hand, and Rey felt the Force gathering around her, around her throat, her head, and her mind. She didn't know what was about to happen, but she knew she didn't want to find out.

The wizened witch made a sour expression. “Annoying little Force snack.”
Throwing out her own hand, Rey called her lightsaber to her. It flew into her palm without hesitation. Almost as a second thought, she called Kylo’s lightsaber to her other hand. After a moment, it flew into her hand as well.

That surprised her a little.

Just then, she felt the brush of Kylo’s consciousness, a searching tug on their bond. His mind pushed against hers, but she didn’t let him in. She had more pressing matters at the moment, despite the relieved breath she couldn’t help but let escape that he was still alive.

“No,” She rickety old woman used the Force to seize control over her right arm, the arm holding her lightsaber. “Give those back.”

“They don’t belong to you,” Rey grunted, fighting against the witch’s power with all her might. Somewhat surprisingly, she was able to break out of it. The woman’s abilities were weaker than Kylo's.

She activated her lightsaber with a small flourish, bringing it up to a defensive position.

With a great cry of frustration, the old woman turned to the cauldron of lazy smoke sitting in front of her. Waving her hands over it, it began to stir of its own accord, turning thick and green as it rose into the air. A putrid smell reached Rey's nose.

“Stop that,” she demanded, hiding her face in the crook of her left elbow, although the woman ignored her.

The old woman muttered to herself, chanting something like an old incantation or prayer as she agitated the smoke. The more it bled into the air, the more it felt like Rey was breathing in acid. It burned her throat and lungs, and her eyes watered so much she could barely see.

She covered her mouth. “I’m warning you,” she started coughing, but still the woman didn't respond.

The stinging turned to outright pain, nearly sending Rey to her knees. Every breath was excruciating, and yet suffocating wasn't an option. Blindly reaching out with the hand still holding Kylo's lightsaber, she grabbed on to the natural grooves in the walls to steady herself.

The smoke was going to incapacitate her; she’d be knocked out and Mother Talzin's sisters would be able to drag her back to the ritual circle. Kylo was alive, but perhaps he had already been apprehended. Then all they’d need was her.

Or perhaps the old woman simply meant to kill her.

It was certainly painful enough. Fear blossomed in her chest as the thought occurred to her – this could kill her.

Gathering her strength, she blasted the old woman back against the stone wall as hard as she could. The wizened old woman hit the wall with a wet smack, a fleshy thud that froze Rey in her tracks. Almost immediately the smoke dissipated, but the fresh air she gulped tasted stale, her pain disappearing to the back of her mind.

Did she just—?

The slumped figure on the ground was her answer.

Unmoving. Dead.
Was she supposed to feel more? She only felt numb. The entire planet made her feel numb; she didn’t imagine she’d care if they all dropped dead.

She was grateful that Master Luke wasn’t around to read her thoughts. Kylo, too, for that matter.

*Kylo.*

The danger passed, she reopened their connection to find him steeped in his old anger. Only it felt different – *desolate* somehow. She shivered when she felt it and pulled back, but not entirely. She could tell he made an effort to calm down.

*Where are you? Are you okay? Did you get away from Mother Talzin?* She asked without really thinking.

*I’m in a side passageway,* he sounded calmer with each word. She supposed that was a good sign. *I’m fine. Talzin’s gone. I killed the Nightsisters.*

She didn’t know why he told her. It wasn’t like she couldn’t deduce that from the facts that he had escaped recapture and that he was himself. She could hear it in his voice – a small challenge, daring her to raise any objections.

He couldn’t know that she had just killed a person.

So, *I found our lightsabers,* was what she said instead.

There was only a moment’s pause. *Where are you? I’ll come find you.*

The last thing she wanted to do was stay up in that small antechamber – or even in the vicinity – until he came to find her. She couldn’t help but bristle under the implications of it – him coming to get her like she was a child. Besides, they didn’t have the time to be running around. *We should make our way above ground,* she suggested.

It took several moments for her to feel his response.

*Good idea.*

There was something about him, something distant and closed off – like she was only seeing half of him. The other part was being kept cloaked as if under a shadow. She didn’t really want to know what it was he was hiding, didn’t know if she’d be able to push past his defenses even if she tried.

So she didn’t.

Getting out of the small chamber as fast as she could was her most pressing matter. She was pretty sure that it had been the old woman who had opened the way, and with her death Rey had no idea if the access would stay open, or if the wall would solidify back into place, entombing her. And she had no intention of finding out.

But something caught her eye - on one of the grooves sat a strange, twisted formation that appeared to be made of some sort of obsidian metal. Five spirals reached up to the ceiling, long and sharp. It almost looked like a hand.

Unlike the rest of the objects in the room, it appeared to be entirely decorative . A single ring sat on the index ‘finger’ that looked to be made from the same metal as the hand, if not a bit more polished. The band twisted around the finger in much of the same way the finger itself did. At the center of the ring was a large green stone. It shimmered in the dim light. When she stepped closer she thought she
could see the color swirl, almost as if it was made from smoke.

Nothing else in the small room was half as interesting as the ring before her. At first, she didn't even try and restrain herself from reaching out to it.

She didn't know what it was or what it would do. It belonged to Mother Talzin and her kind, and therefore she really shouldn't even want to touch it. Then again, she thought with a glance at the lightsabers clenched in her hands, Mother Talzin did take things that weren't hers to keep. She clipped her and Kylo's lightsabers to her belt.

Rey was a scavenger – she was just salvaging something from a woman who wouldn't need it anymore.

She shuddered at how callous she sounded, even to herself. But then she pushed the thought aside and snatched the ring up off the hand.

There was no time to inspect it – she practically leaped out of there and back into the hallway. It was still abandoned; she no longer felt the influence of the old woman's presence, but the air still felt thick with dark corruption and it still threw off her senses.

Bolting down the hallway, she took comfort in the weight of the lightsabers against her hip with every step. Back in action, there was only one thought that she let occupy her mind.

The exit. Exit, exit, exit.

Unlike last time she had been there, there were no steps for her to retrace, so she just had to go with her gut instinct whenever she came to a crossroads in the corridors. It almost felt like she was picking at random, but she tried to let the Force guide her split-second decisions. Her senses were so confused in her head she was fairly sure it wasn't working, but still she knew which way to go. There didn't seem to be any rhyme or reason to the directions, just an inkling that this was the way.

She felt half insane until the hallways and corridors turned into a long, natural staircase not unlike the one that had first led her down there all those days ago.

This was it, she could sense it.

And Kylo was close – or at least closer than he had been – so she pressed on with only a little twinge of guilt at leaving without him. He was free and mobile, and he'd find her soon enough.

The elastic pull in her chest was proof.

Incredibly, unbelievably, the stairs led up into the cave that she knew led to the gaping mouth of the nightmarish compound – the exit.

She told Kylo immediately. I found the exit, it's unguarded.

Be careful, came the instant reply, which she ignored. She was almost out – they were almost out. By some stroke of luck the way out was unguarded, and she wasn't about to hesitate on the threshold.

The unhappy push of his mind told her that he didn't agree. Scavenger.

Relax, she snapped, it wasn't guarded the last time, either.

Don't do anything rash.

It was the most laughable thing she'd heard all day. You're one to talk.
He didn't answer, but for the moment she didn't care. Bursting out from the mouth of the cave, from under the oppressive power of the wellspring that Mother Talzin used as her home, Rey nearly wept with joy. A blood red sky had never looked so beautiful to her.

**Freedom.**

Her near-blinding relief was cut short by the abrupt shift in her and Kylo's bond. Suddenly his silence was worrying. Feeling a strange mixture of elation, worry, and guilt, she reached across their bond and pressed on his mind in the same way he did to hers. He was irritating her a little, so she didn't bother being overly gentle, but it didn't matter anyway. He threw up his walls and solidified his defenses so fast Rey nearly halted entirely.

She reached out to him, tugged on their shared cord, but he had shut himself firmly out of her reach. It was confusing and irritating, but it scared her more.

Why would he shut her out? Her mind created several different likely scenarios, none more so than that he had come face-to-face with the matron witch.

She was so wrapped up in her thoughts she almost didn't see the *Epsilon*-class shuttle nestled between the trees. Mother Talzin had just left it out in the open, obviously convinced that no one would have cause to use it.

Her legs were carrying her towards it before she even realized what was happening. It wasn't until the sound of her soft-soled boots thudding against the exit ramp reached her ears that she even thought to stop, to not just run on board and take off, leaving everything and everyone behind – leaving Kylo behind.

She looked over her shoulder as if she expected to see him right there, looming over her with a scowl etched into his face. One made even worse because of their connection. He was still closed off from her so he didn't know what had just gone through her head. She wondered if it would even matter if he did.

Would he be hurt if she decided to leave him?

*More like livid,* she told herself.

The question didn't bear dwelling on. She shook her head and entered, making a bee-line for the cockpit. The shuttle was too stark to be luxury, but you'd never be able to tell by the controls. Everything was the latest and greatest. Rey felt her eyes go wide as saucers as she stepped up to the pilot’s seat, her hand on the threshold.

There were faint scuffs every now and again, marks and mars on various surfaces – the only evidence that this was Kylo Ren's shuttle.

She ignored it and went straight for the communicator.

This could be her only chance; she hailed the Resistance, fearful that it'd give General Organa the false hope that her son was trying to talk, or that they would think it's a trap and not answer at all, or a million other things. Maybe she was on the other side of the galaxy, too far to make contact.

Eventually the Resistance answered her hails. It took some convincing, but she was able to persuade them that it was really her, that she had crash-landed and had only hijacked the communications system on a First Order shuttle. She almost didn't mention that it was Kylo's, although she was sure they knew it.
Surprisingly, they put her on with General Organa.

“Rey,” there was no visual, but the was no mistaking the relief in the General’s voice. Rey hadn't expected that, but she felt incredibly touched. “Rey, tell me where you are.”

“I'm not entirely sure, General,” Rey stumbled over her words, unable to conceal her surprise, “but I think it's a planet called Dathomir.” She would be lying if she didn't admit to the rush of warmth she felt at hearing the woman's voice.

There was a half-beat pause. “I know of it. You're saying that Kylo Ren followed you there?” Rey knew in that moment that it was the General she was speaking to, not the woman who had lost her husband and son.

It made things both easier and more difficult; she really didn’t want to talk about him. “I think so. He's here now.”

“With you?”

“No,” the total silence she was getting from his side of their link was really starting to gnaw at her. It felt like she had a sand rat chewing at her brain. “I don't know where he is right now. He doesn't know I'm on his ship.”

She didn't know why she mentioned the last part; it seemed fairly obvious. But she felt like she needed to say it. Establish that they weren't working together.

Well – they were.

Just not like that.

There was another pause on the General’s side. “I'm sending someone to get you, but be careful,” there was a slight change in her tone, a shift towards fondness, “Finn has been worried sick.”

Her stomach dropped. “You're not sending Finn, are you?”

The visions, nightmares, whatever they were came back to her instantly. She was suddenly sure, positive with every fiber of her being that if Finn came to rescue her then he would be in danger. Real, terrible danger – and all for her.

It was exactly the opposite of why she had left Ahch-To.

Somehow she knew that Master Luke would've told her to stop and think, to meditate. But Rey was a doer.

The General’s tone turned urgent. “Yes, I have. Is something wrong? Is Kylo Ren there?”

As if on cue, Rey felt a shock run through her system, an electric bolt of pain that managed to slip across the bond. She only felt it for a moment before the it was pulled back across the cords of their bond, once again locked behind Kylo's impenetrable defenses.

He was in danger.

The bastard was in danger and he was trying to hide it from her.

She didn't know whether to direct her anger at herself for not noticing, or at him for trying to hide it in the first place.
The General said something else, but she barely heard it. There was too much going on in her head. The most important things had boiled down to not letting Finn come to try and help her, and not letting Kylo get killed. But at the moment she could only act on one of those things.

“General, I have to go,” she couldn't keep the agitated edge from her tone, “please don't send Finn.”

Without waiting for a reply, she cut the communication and ran out of the shuttle. She only hesitated a moment at the sight of the grotesque, looming structure before she sprinted back the way she had come, back towards the gaping maw of an entrance to Mother Talzin’s lair.

She tried to press on his mind, to force their connection to reopen, but all she could get was a bleed-through of anger and pain. Again and again she tried to tug on their bond, to slip past his defenses as she ran, but to no avail.

It didn't matter – she could follow their bond straight to him without even thinking. But it made her furious that he was trying so hard to block her out.

They were-

She had abandoned him once already. It didn't matter what he thought about it – she didn't let allies die. And like it or not, that included him.

It just wasn't in her.

A thought, distant and small and more of an idea than anything else, breathed across the back of her mind.

But what if he died?

Chapter End Notes

I've spent the last 24-hrs trying to post this, which is a long and weird story that I won't bore you with. But it's a little longer, just to say 'sorry it's a day late.'

And so we get Rey's side of things. The old woman is loosely based off of a (very) brief character in the Clone Wars tv show. And Leia makes a reappearance (sort of)! So now the Resistance is on its way to save Rey, and Rey's on her way to save Kylo. Absolutely nothing can go wrong.

I'm actually *super* excited to write parts of the next chapter, so stay tuned for that!
Talzin’s attacks were vicious and unrelenting.

Almost immediately, she forced Kylo on the defensive. Her robes didn’t appear to encumber her at all as she slashed and weaved, a deadly dance that Kylo found himself hard-pressed to keep up with. It seemed to him that he only gave ground, pushed nearer to the edge of the hall with each blow he blocked.

It was infuriating.

Everything was making him angry – Talzin and her damned green sword, the constant barrage of the scavenger’s mind against his defenses, even the pressure of his master’s presence in his head.

He was angry that he didn’t have his own weapon in his hands, angry that it probably wouldn't make much of a difference.

He couldn't remember a time when he had worked harder to just keep up.

It was – terrifying.

And that only served to make him even more enraged..

She swung her sword in a wide arch that he managed to catch with the lightsaber in his hand just long enough to throw off its aim. It left her open for a split-second – an opportunity he would not waste.

He twisted his lightsaber up; the strike was at an odd angle, but he managed to graze one of the folds in her scarlet robes.

It seemed to surprised her that he had nearly gotten a hit in. Her pale eyes flashed to her singed clothes before hardening with a sneer.

“Damn boy,” she switched hands on her blade, changing the angle of her attacks. She almost cut into his right side twice, but he parried each blow.

Until she reached out and grabbed his wrist, stopping his blow mid-swing, and made to strike at his arm.

He jerked back far enough to avoid getting his arm amputated, but not far enough.

Her sword cut through the hilt of the lightsaber gripped in his hand like butter. It came apart with a spark bright enough to blind him and singe his gloves, and he just barely managed to not lose his fingers in the process.

Dropping the remains of the weapon, he wrenched out of Talzin's grip to scramble back to avoid being bisected by her sword. The lightsaber clipped to his belt flew into his hands just in time to block the follow-up strike, the blue and green blades sparking with energy.

“Your master has abandoned you to your fate, boy,” she sneered down at him.
His only response was to shove her back with a growl. She let him, and he pressed the opportunity to attack. The blue blade felt even lighter in his hands than the green one had, weaker somehow, but his blows didn't require the finesse of knowing one's weapon. He just struck, too angry and tired to stick to forms. It was sloppy, but it was strong – strong enough that he was able to throw off her balance and nearly knock her off her feet. If it hadn't been for her grasp of the Force steadying her, she would've tripped over her robes.

A nasty sort of triumph swelled in his chest.

She continues to sneer at him.

“You're not strong,” she spat as she blocked one of his blows, “you're weak.”

“Shut up,” he bore down on her with both hands gripping the lightsaber.

She didn't. “None of your strength is your own,” she parried one hit, then spun to the side, her weapon sweeping up as she moved. He barely managed to block it. “Your so-called strength comes from the scraps of your master, the blood passed down by your family, even the pity of a scavenger.”

He could feel the white-hot scrape of her mind against his, pushing to gain access. It broke his concentration to keep his defenses of against her; to compensate, he had to drop his defenses against the scavenger.

She flooded his mind with icy determination, bursting across their bond like she had been waiting – and he knew that she had.

She was much closer than he thought.

He didn't have time for that realization to surprise him.

“Darth Vader used his own strength—fought with his own strength,” he tried to block her out, but the effort cost him.

Talzin swept down and then up, too fast for Kylo to deflect but one strike. The upward swing caught him in his left shoulder, tearing along his bicep and nearly up to his neck. It was like she was injecting him with fire, the green flames licking at his clothes and flesh.

He pulled back with a cry, dropping his left hand from the lightsaber so that he was only gripping it in one hand, a weak blade with only half his strength.

She spun at him again, clashing her blade against his with the intention of rendering his other arm useless as well. He forced her back with a snarl, using the Force to put some distance between them.

“You are but a pathetic imitation of true greatness,” her voice boomed across the hallway, echoing off the pillars around them.

“You know nothing,” he bit back.

The Supreme Leader’s stab of impatience pounded against the back of his eyes. His headache was splitting, one more distraction to add to the list as he tried to banish everything from his mind but him and the witch.

It was pathetic – he was pathetic. He should've been able to put up more of a fight, should've been able to hold his own. He couldn't focus enough on their fight, kept getting distracted by the most ridiculous-
Both he and Talzin turned to see the scavenger, who had just appeared at the other end of the large hall, activate her lightsaber. She looked winded, like she had run the entire way there. He could feel that she was afraid, too – but she didn't show it. He could see his lightsaber clipped to her belt.

Talzin stood in between them, right in the center of the hallway of pillars, a smile growing on her face. She turned to look back at Kylo.

“See? She has returned for you.”

The scavenger answered before he could. “Just let us leave,” she demanded, breathless and on-edge. He wanted to throttle her – for coming back, for proving Talzin right, for fucking trying to save him. It chaffed his pride and filled him with an uncomfortable feeling he had no intention of trying to name.

And it got his master's attention.

All at once, the Supreme Leader’s presence came flooding back, filling every cavity of his head until it felt like he was leaking that oppressive darkness. From across the room he could see the scavenger flinch, her eyes finding his with a steely glint that spoke of just how unhappy she was – specifically, with him. She recoiled from their bond so completely their connection became nothing more than a whisper in his head, one that the Supreme Leader practically drowned out.

He was intrigued that she had returned and was trying to reach out to her through Kylo, who had little say in the matter.

Talzin looked as if she had all but forgotten him on the face of her true desire. “Rey, child, please. Come with me.”

“No,” she shook her head, “not a chance. We're getting the hell out of here and we're never coming back.”

His wounded shoulder had gone numb as a result of the power coursing through his veins. He called on the Supreme Leader’s power to throw Talzin out of the way. She collided with the edge of one of the pillars before flying into the stone wall hard enough to kill any normal living being.

Of course, she wasn't normal.

Almost immediately, the woman started to get up, but with the added power coursing through his veins, Kylo was able to slip past her mental defenses and incapacitate her. She slumped to the ground, unconscious.

Even with his master's added power, he didn't know how long it would last, so he quickly crossed the hall to where the scavenger was, still half-poised for a fight. Her surprised gaze flickered over his mangled shoulder before she fixed him with a sharp glare.

“You're an idiot, do you know that?” this close, the waves of her anger overpowered even the demanding presence of his master.

She was repulsed by him, by the presence of his master. For the moment he couldn't find it in him to care.

“Yell at me later, scavenger.” He snapped, already pushing past her down the way she came. She
didn't need to be told twice.

He followed her lead down the hall, keeping the blue lightsaber activated as he ran. The scavenger deactivated hers when they came to a flight of stairs that had been naturally eroded into the stone. He could feel her excitement mounting – this was obviously the way out.

They wasted no more time in the belly of the wellspring. Emerging from the darkness of the cave above was entirely anticlimactic. It was just as she had said – no traps, no witches, nothing.

Maybe they really had thinned out their numbers – perhaps even entirely.

And he could see his shuttle, hidden just behind a cluster of the dark, twisting trees. He could leave this Force-forsaken planet in a matter of minutes once he got on board. But that would have to wait until he got what he wanted.

“Scavenger,” he stopped by the edge of Talzin’s structure’s clearing, finally deactivating the stolen lightsaber in his grip.

She slowed to a stop as well, and fixed him with an impatient look that spoke of how anxious she was. “Come on, we can't stop yet.”

“My lightsaber.”

Confusion washed over her features for a moment before she apparently remembered that she still possessed his weapon. She unclipped it without hesitation, but paused.

She's going to try and keep it from you, the Supreme Leader's voice crept through his skull like molasses. The projected thought nearly touched their bond, but he managed to contain it, pull his master back from the threads connected to her consciousness. Just so that she'd feel better – so that he'd return his lightsaber.

It occurred to him that he could snatch his weapon back with the Force, taking it from her hand so quickly she wouldn't know what had happened.

Somehow he knew that that was the last thing he should do, so he didn't. He let her hold his weapon.

But he thought about it.

“Do you know what I thought when I first got out of there?” She kept her eyes fixed on his lightsaber as she gripped it, her knuckles white on the hilt.

He frowned. “No.”

She considered him then, looking like she didn't really want to admit to what she was about to say. “I thought to myself ‘you're free, Rey. Take the shuttle and get off this stinking planet.’” She paused, “I didn't even have to think about it, really–I was just going to save myself…But I didn't.”

Was she expecting him to say something? Chagrin coiled in his gut at her confession – she had almost left. Truly left. He didn't even want to think about what would happen to him if he returned totally empty-handed to the Supreme Leader.

The splitting headache behind his eyes promised nothing good.

“Why are you telling me this?” He demanded, although it came out much more exhausted than he had intended. He kept his eyes trained on her and his weapon.
“I don’t know,” she answered honestly. His muscles tensed as the took two steps closer to him, stopping right on the edge of his personal space.

_If she’s going to try and kill you, this will be the moment._

The Supreme Leader’s words were both a mockery and a warning.

“I guess I’m just telling you that I _chose_ to go back.” His lightsaber was extended between them, and he could recognize it for what it was.

A peace offering of sorts. A show of trust.

He tossed the stolen blade to the ground and took his lightsaber. It felt _good_ to hold it in his hands again. He felt something shift back into place, a piece of his soul returned to him. He clipped it securely on his belt.

“Even if you were an ass for trying to block me out,” what she gave him wasn’t quite a smile, but more of a warming in her expression. A look that he hadn’t been privy to, until then.

A new expression, one not given to enemies.

He wondered if she ever realized the significance of her actions.

She turned and started to make her way over to his shuttle like she didn’t even have to think twice before going with him. The shuttle’s ramp was lowered; she had obviously not bothered to close it before going to get him.

A question festered in his head, one he didn’t want to ask. But if he didn’t then the question would mean _more_, and the curiosity was gnawing away at him.

“Why did you do it?”

They stopped a good ten paces away from his shuttle. He felt the flare-up of her emotions as she unintentionally projected them across their bond. Confusion, uncertainty, apprehension. It inspired a vicious feeling from his master, one that he tried to ignore as best he could. He wanted his mind to be his own for that moment.

She turned back to him. “What do you mean?”

“You said you chose to go back for me. _Why_?”

She didn’t say anything.

“Am I not your enemy?” His tone came out more forceful than he’d intended, but she only squared her shoulders in response.

“Am I yours?” She threw right back at him.

Her vehemence surprised him, her blatant uncertainty even more so. “We’ve been trapped here together, fought off an entire town of crazy Force-users together, but is that the only reason why you haven’t tried to kill me again? Because you needed a partner to survive this long against someone like Mother Talzin?”

The anger he felt was just a knee-jerk response, but he didn’t fight it. “I haven’t been trying to kill you, scavenger-“
“Not recently, no.”

“I'm not going to-“ he growled, ran a hand through his hair, took a moment to try and control himself. “Yes, we're enemies. I serve the Supreme Leader and you still work for the Resistance. Is that what you want me to say?”

She crossed her arms with a huff. “That's not what I meant. I'm saying--when you look at me, just you, do you see an enemy?”

Looking her over with her aggressive stance, the defiant look in her eye, and his grandfather’s lightsaber resting against her hip – he knew the answer was no.

He didn't.

But he couldn't find it within himself to admit it.

It was safer not to.

Her arms dropped to her sides, although the strong look in her eyes remained unchanged. She seemed to deflate a little. “I know you haven't changed. I don't know if you can,” she admitted, “but I wasn't going to leave you behind to die. I don't think I could.”

Silence stretched out between them, thick and uncomfortable. She shouldn't have said that – he believed with every fiber of his being that she should've kept her mouth shut. What were confessions like that going to do for them? Any feelings that she – they – she might have that went beyond their natural feelings of animosity towards each other would only complicate things. He didn't need to see her as anything more than the girl his master wanted.

And yet he felt like he needed to say something.

“My name is Rey.”

She said it like he had offended her, but he heard the edge of sincerity – or maybe he felt it. The cords of their bond seemed to wrap around his chest, pulling so tightly it felt like it was going to cut his skin to ribbons.

She was giving him permission to use her name. it was more than a peace-offering, more than a show of trust. It was a full-blown cease-fire, a permanent end to their status as mortal enemies. An admission of something – more.

It was so small.

She didn't know what she was saying.

“Rey,” he stepped closer, headless of the way she still tensed at his proximity. “You can't do this.”

If she did, then it wouldn't change anything. He'd still have to deliver her to the Supreme Leader, whose presence remained a lingering headache. She'd still succumb to the First Order, the dark side, and his master. It wouldn't change a damn thing – except how he felt about it.

And he couldn't afford to feel anything about it.

She tilted her chin up. “Do what?” She demanded, as if she didn't know what he was talking about.
“You can’t just make us not enemies.”

From the look on her face he almost expected her to demand ‘why not,’ but she just shook her head and placed her hands on her hips.

“Then try and kill me, and we’ll be enemies again.”

He jerked back as if she’d struck him. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he snapped, and turned away.

The pounding behind his eyes spread to the rest of his brain as the Supreme Leader once more overtook his consciousness, pulling him deep into that dark part of his mind reserved only for him.

Kylo was in no state to be able to put up any of his normal walls to contain his conversation, and the scavenger – Rey – got sucked in with him.

He knew the Supreme Leader sensed it, wanted it.

*Kylo Ren. Now is the time—the girl has the object, I can feel it. Bring them to me.*

He could feel Rey freeze, mentally holding her breath as she heard what it was his master wanted him to do, exactly what the Supreme Leader wanted her to hear. For some reason he wanted her to know he wanted her.

It wasn’t Kylo’s place to question.

*I will,* he said, because he *would,* but his second of hesitation surprised him. It displeased his master. It made Rey furious.

She felt betrayed; she was still putting it together that he had had a reason to be less antagonistic towards her. He’d had a reason to save her. She started thrashing against the confines the Supreme Leader kept them in, the dark part of Kylo’s mind that served as a cage.

His master held them there effortlessly.

*I know your weaknesses, Kylo Ren,* the Supreme Leader said. ‘Don’t make this one of them,’ was the warning.

Then he let them both go and retreated from Kylo’s mind entirely. It was just him and Rey once more, standing next to each other in a dead, crimson forest.

She had already closed off their link, retreating so far into her defenses it felt like his mind echoed, empty and cut off. He clenched his fists and tried to prepare himself for her reaction, whatever that might be.

When he finally turned back to face her, she had backed away at least six or seven paces, away from both him and his shuttle’s ramp.

She looked about ready to bolt.

Gone was the girl of a few seconds ago, the one who had told him to call her Rey – she was once more the scavenger, the girl who was facing her enemy. “You—you’re supposed to take me to that monster?” She demanded, equal parts frightened and enraged, and he didn’t need to read her mind to see it.

Something bitter awoke in him, and he couldn’t help himself.
“I thought I was the monster.”

She activated his grandfather’s lightsaber. After a moment he did the same, mostly because he wasn’t sure if she actually planned on attacking him or not.

“You’re not going to take me back with you,” her eyes were filled with her typical determination, but with a cold glint that he hadn’t seen before. He wondered if he had been the one to cause it.

“Rey, just—”

“Don’t call me that.”

His words stuck in his throat as she watched her. He had hurt her, that he knew. But he had warned her, hadn’t he? He had told her that they couldn’t be anything but enemies. It was the girl’s own stupidity that made her believe otherwise.

It wasn’t his fault.

She looked like she was trying to decide whether to say something else or just attack him. On some level he hoped for the latter; they’d had enough words.

The Force blast caught him off-guard, although it shouldn’t have. He was knocked flat on his back, managing to keep his lightsaber extended to avoid injuring himself. It still winded him.

Not willing to start another fight with a disadvantage, he scrambled to his feet, as ready as he could be.

But she wasn’t there.

He spun around, looking for any sight of her.

She wasn't anywhere.

Chapter End Notes

So, feelings-alert, am I right?

Can you believe this early update? Because I can't. I just got on a roll last night and ended up writing >3,000 words. So I'm sorry if this all seems rushed, I just wanted to get this out to you guys!

We are seriously *so* close to the end of Act I. I'm festering in excitement. ;)
Chapter 25

Rey ran for days – or maybe it was just hours.

The sun went down as she ran, and when it started to peek over the horizon once more she still hadn't stopped. Her lungs were on fire, her leg muscles gelatin, but she forced her body to push past it.

Stopping would be worse than going on.

It felt like the first time she had gone wandering through the dark, twisted forest – only it was worse.

The first time she had been haunted by visions and voices, heeding the call to a darkness that ended up being Mother Talzin – but she hadn't actually found any of it yet. All she'd had were the voices and phantoms of an old enemy she couldn't quite call an enemy anymore.

Back then, Kylo Ren had seemed to be a nightmare.

She hadn't met the true nightmare yet.

Everything was different – and yet nothing had changed.

She was still running from him, still alone, lost on a planet full of darkness. And yet none of it felt the same. Too much had happened.

The pounding of her boots against the dirt and the harsh scraping of her breath were her only companions through the inert forest, but she couldn't shake the feeling that someone was on her heels, breathing down her neck. It pushed her harder, made her skin prickle with dread.

But it wasn't Kylo.

She knew that he was exactly where she had left him, because each step she took drew the cords of their bond tighter, an uncomfortable tether that seemed to have less give than ever. Was it significant that the growing distance between the two of them seemed so painful? She honestly didn't know what to think of any of it.

She should've known that he'd been planning something – he was Kylo Ren, everything she knew about him pointed to the likelihood that he was working towards his own devious ends.

And he served Snoke – loyally.

Surprise shouldn't have come into it.

Betrayal shouldn't have.

She felt pathetic that she felt both, strongly and in equal measure. It was laughable that she had started to feel like he was actually on her side, like theirs was a relationship forged from anything other than desperation and necessity.

But still…
A part of her said that he didn't want to do it. She couldn't point to why, exactly, but that part of her just knew that there was something in him telling him not to do it.

The much bigger part of her remembered that he had still agreed to do it, and hadn't even been surprised by the prospect of it. Conflicted or not, actions mattered more than intentions.

Had he been conflicted about his father?

She didn't want to know the answer, afraid it wouldn't bode well for her.

It was humiliating, and it was infuriating. Her eyes burned as she darted between the gnarled trees, but she didn't cry. She wouldn't let herself cry. Not over what had happened.

Not over how he had hurt her.

Admitting that to herself only made it worse.

It felt like she'd lost something. It was the same bone-deep ache in her chest, the same tightness in her lungs and fear in her gut. It felt like the times back on Jakku when things had been stolen from her, or when she lost something to the sand. She had either been too small, too weak, or not clever enough, and she had lost scrap, portions, or even basic luxuries. She had felt each loss to the pit of her stomach. This was like that.

Only their developing relationship – whatever it was – felt too important to compare it to the salvage she had lost back then; things that hadn't had any real impact of her life in the long-run.

To be something to Kylo that wasn't an adversary was more than a novel concept – it was one of those things that could've changed everything. Probably not for the better – or at least, not entirely – but it would've made things different.

Or maybe it wouldn't have, and she was being overly dramatic. She was just surprised at how much she wanted it.

Before she had learned that he planned on delivering her to his terror of a master, that is.

For a moment, she let herself wonder what someone like the Supreme Leader could possibly want with her. She stopped herself almost immediately; it didn't bear dwelling on, because the last person to be overly interested in her was Mother Talzin-

Who was most definitely out and about by then.

A jolt of worry shot through her system before she had a chance to rein it in. Kylo's shuttle was right outside her compound, if she-

No. Kylo was his own problem, she wouldn't waste any more time worrying over him.

But he still hasn't moved far from the wellspring. Even with their connection closed off, she knew almost exactly where he was. She slowed her pace to a jog as the terrain became more slanted, but wouldn't let herself stop.

He wouldn't remain immobile forever. She knew with absolute certainty that he would kick himself into gear at any moment and start trying to tear down her defenses. Because now she was all that stood in his way; once he got her, he'd have his hands on everything his master wanted, he'd have his ship, and his lightsaber. There'd be nothing to stop him from leaving – dragging her along, of course.
Her jaw set. There was no way she'd let him take her anywhere. No way in hell.

When she felt him begin to move, begin to pursue her, it only noticed her to push forward and keep going. The closer he drew, the faster she ran. She wouldn't be able to keep up the pace forever, but she didn't need forever.

A deep, familiar vibration in the air around her pulled her attention to the sky. The whirring, mechanical noise was faint, far beyond what she could see, but she'd know that sound anywhere.

It was a ship – and by the sound of its engines, not a very large one.

There were only a few possible people who would be flying around her area; she knew it wasn't Kylo, because she could still sense him as he moved through the forest a ways behind her. It could've been the First Order, come to collect their favorite bastard, but she didn't think so. The engines she heard didn't sound like the ones the First Order used on their shuttles or small spacecraft, and she doubted that Kylo would've told ground-soldiers to rescue him when he was the most stubborn, prideful, arrogant man she had ever known, and he had his own shuttle besides.

There was the possibility that it was the Resistance. Even though she had spoken to the general herself, it seemed unlikely that they'd get to her so quickly, especially since she couldn't imagine that she was very high on their list of priorities. The simple truth was that she was just one girl; the general had to take care of thousands and lead the entire Resistance all on her own. Rey wasn't going to get her hopes up by overestimating her importance.

As the sound of the engine got closer, she slowed to a full stop. Gripping the ebony trunk of the nearest tree, she waited with her neck craned to the sky.

She knew that Kylo sensed the small lull in her urgency. Wasting no time, he started to press down upon her mind in an attempt to gain access, to try and reopen their connection.

That wasn't going to happen.

His frustration was palpable and mounting, even without an open connection between them. Just the strain from the effort it took to keep him totally out of her head made her hands shake, and sweat bead at the base of her neck. Sometimes she forgot how strong he was, how forceful he could be when he wanted to.

What did he think he'd accomplish if she lowered her defenses? Could he possibly use his power to knock her out over such a long distance? Or would he try and reason with her?

Would he try?

The idea was like a pit in her stomach. She thought she'd rather he use violent force – that was something she knew how to understand between them.

But a part of her almost wanted to let her defenses drop, if only so that he'd know what he did – so she could make him see. She knew it was foolish; as soon as she let him in, it would almost certainly be her who regretted it.

And even if – by some insane, Force-given miracle – he didn't try to do anything, even if he just listened, it was ridiculous to think that he'd actually care. He had refused to answer her when she had pressed him on how he saw her – maybe that was because his views hadn't changed at all, and he still only saw her as the enemy. He did, after all, carry her mark on his face as proof of such.

But it didn't have to be like that. That man was the child of two of the most influential people in her
life, surely there had to be something of them in him. Something good. No matter how buried, how monstrous he became, surely he had to have a part of him that was still his parents’ son.

Was it even worth trying to find?

She wasn’t so sure.

A small ship zoomed overhead, close enough that it nearly blocked her entire view of the blood red sky before blasting onwards. The energy from the engines kicked up the air around her, snapping her grey vest in the wind and whipping her stray hair around her face.

It was the Resistance.

Hope sprang in her chest, and – oddly – apprehension.

There was a feeling, something familiar that tickled the back of her mind. It felt like a warm blanket in the deep of space, a smile thrown over the shoulder, the certainty of family – something almost akin to what she imagined home would be.

She started running in the direction the shuttle had flown.

It was Finn.

For the love of the Force, it was Finn.

Her heart dropped and soared all at once, stuck somewhere in the middle, tied up and bursting in her throat.

“No, no, no,” had the general not listened to her?

She managed a groan as she ran. He had probably insisted on leading the charge, such as it was. She could only hope that he came alone, and that he didn't want to stay long. The life force aboard the small Resistance shuttle was clear and pure, untouched by Dathomir's corruption and easy for her to sense. It was like a breath of fresh air.

Still, even through the panic that gripped her chest at the prospect of her visions about Finn coming true, she was practically bursting with happiness that he had come for her – that it was him.

A part of her wanted to kick herself for feeling so relieved to know Finn was there when his presence could only mean that he was in serious, mortal danger – maybe not at that moment, but she knew he would be. She knew her visions weren't wrong.

Her visions, Kylo, Finn – she could feel everything spiraling out of her control.

Kylo started assaulting her defenses with a fervor that worried her; he was inevitably going to be angry, but maybe he had seen the ship, too. He could follow it just as easily as she could.

She wouldn't let him hurt Finn.

It took most of her concentration to try and keep Kylo out, and she had to slow down considerably. Once, she tripped on a protruding root and nearly dropped her defenses, but she managed to hold them securely in place.

She didn't want to think about it anymore – think about him – not when she was so close to getting off the planet for good.
She had to focus on keeping Finn safe.

This place didn't have to spell disaster for her and Finn. If she could manage to minimize the time he was on the surface to the barest minimum, she could protect them until they left. Then they'd get back to the Resistance. All she had to do was find a way to contact her friend to let him know where she was, then they'd be gone.

Kylo could return to his master, and Mother Talzin could stay in her dark hole and never crawl back out again.

It was about to be over; if she could make it just a little further.

Still, she couldn't shake the feeling that something bad was about to happen – that something was about to go wrong.

It made her more than anxious.

She could still hear the ship off in the distance, passing by left and right as she ran. Finn was probably scanning for life forms, an overwhelming venture even if he knew to just scan the forest. She had no idea what all the different sorts of creatures might be who lived in the forest, but she specifically remembered a large, roaring monster chasing her and Kylo off a cliff, and knew that she didn't want to know.

As far as she could tell, there was no way to reach out to Finn, no way to tell him where she was. And even if she managed it there was no way for her to know where he should land. That would just have to be his problem.

It wouldn't matter if she couldn't even tell him where she was.

But the answer was so obvious she almost laughed.

Stopping in her tracks, she waited until the ship circled back into her sights before she pulled out her lightsaber and activated it, waving it in the air like a beacon. By the way the ship veered slightly towards her, she knew that she'd been spotted.

She brought her arm up to cover her nose and mouth as the ship whipped by overhead again. Unlike before, she could see the ship almost constantly as it flew around, using her for a center point as Finn most likely looked for a place to land. This was it.

She couldn't help the flutter in her stomach even as a part of her wanted to scream for Finn to get the hell out of there, to turn around and fly back to the Resistance – back to where he'd be safe.

But he wouldn't be safe, not there or anywhere. Not truly. Thinking so only made her naïve – almost as naïve as trying to reach out to an enemy.

She tucked the thought away as she saw the shuttle start to descend. Wasting no time, she shut off her lightsaber and sprinted towards it.

It touched down in a small, uneven clearing, at the top of a hill that almost looked too steep to be stable, but apparently Finn had managed it. From how he handled the ship, she was almost certain he had gotten some flying lessons from Poe in her absence.

The ramp was only just being lowered as she burst into the clearing, huffing her way up the hill. It
seemed to take forever for her to make it to the top, and for the boarding ramp to lower enough so that someone could jump out.

Then she saw him. He looked whole and safe, and he was still wearing that same old jacket.

“Finn!”

His reaction was immediate and the best thing she'd ever seen. A grin broke across his face as he dropped to the ground and broke out in a run.

“Rey!”

They printed towards each other so fast that their hug was more of a collision. It hurt a little, but Rey didn't mind. She wrapped her arms around her friend as tightly as she could manage, and the crushing feeling of him doing the same made her smile.

She wanted to weep with joy.

“I'm so happy to see you,” she admitted freely, pressing her cheek into his shoulder.

“I thought I'd never see you again,” he sounded both stressed and relieved as he held her. “I didn't hear about what had happened until after I got back, and-“

She pulled back a little. “Got back from your mission?”

He nodded. “Yeah, I heard that you had disappeared after you told everyone you were going to help me.” He pulled her back in, his tone turning stern, “you could've gotten hurt.”

“But I didn't.”

Selfishly, she thought it felt really good to be worried over.

Something changed in Finn’s posture; he stiffened and pulled back, holding her at arm's length as he looked her up and down.

“The General said that Kylo Ren followed you. Are you okay, did he hurt you?” He seemed to fixate on every bump and bruise on her face and arms, frowning as he took her in. She was sure she looked awful.

She was struck by the similarities between that moment and the first time she had run from Kylo. Finn always seemed to find her as she ran away from him, because he always came for her.

But it was different.

“No, he didn't hurt me,” she gently shrugged her friend’s hands off her.

Finn’s attention snapped to the dark trees around them. “Did he follow you here? Will he come after you?”

A frown tugged at her lips. “No, Finn. I–he's not here.”

She found herself not wanting to talk about Kylo at all. Even just the sound of his name churned up strong feelings of loss and humiliation in her chest, a strange and unpleasant mix.

And it wasn't like he had physically hurt her, he just-
The pull of their bond snapped taut in her chest, nearly knocking the wind out of her. Their connection was still firmly shut, but she knew that he was getting closer. Her chest seemed to contract more and more with every moment he drew nearer to her.

She wasn't surprised that he was so close; it wasn't like there were many ships flying around, and their bond still felt like a clear thread between them, leading directly to one another.

But he was supposed to bring her to Snoke, and Finn was a hated traitor in his eyes. Any confrontation was bound to be disastrous.

She tugged on the sleeve on Finn's jacket, urging him back towards his ship.

"Come on, Finn, we should go."

He frowned at her as he allowed himself to be led. "What, do you sense something? Is he coming?"

"Yes, and we have to leave right now." Her heart felt like it was going to beat out of her chest. He was so much closer, it wouldn't be long.

"But you beat him last time, didn't you?" Finn stopped and grabbed her arm. There was a glint of determination in his eyes. "Rey, we can finish this--get rid of Ren and go home. You've gotten better, and so have I. We can do this. Think of how many lives we could save."

She wanted to ask him how he could be thinking of saving lives when he talking about taking one--and not just any life. It felt like he was asking her to jump out an airlock in the middle of hyperspace travel. Like swallowing a gallon of acid, or selling herself to Unkar Plutt. It just felt wrong.

He – they were bonded to each other. What would happen if he died? If it was her who killed him?

Her hand gripped the hilt of her lightsaber as if she thought someone would steal it and finish the deed themselves.

She wasn't sure what her expression looked like, but whatever it was made Finn give her a funny look. "Rey, what's wrong?"

"The general-" she tried weakly, unsure of what she could say. What she should say.

"What about her?" He looked confused.

Each word felt like passing sandpaper through her throat. "He's her son-"

"Who killed her husband, Rey. He killed Han." The fire in his eyes surprised her a little.

She had no response. Of course she knew that, she wanted to snap, she had to remind herself of that fact every day. But she had saved his life, and he'd saved hers.

She turned her head as if she was about to shake her head no, but lost her nerve. Finn let go of her arm.

"Don't you want to get rid of him?" He asked.

"He deserves justice, Finn, not death."

Fin scoffed, and it's harshness surprised Rey. "His death would be justice, Rey." He looked confused and more hurt than angry.
Kylo was almost there, she could sense him even without their bond. All she wanted to do was leave and never return. She didn't want to see him ever again, either, but...

Despite it all, she didn't want to kill him.

It was an absolute certainty that solidified in her chest as she thought it.

She would not kill him.

“No, Finn, I-“

Her lightsaber was humming in her hand before she even fully realized what she was doing as she spun around to face downhill the opposite side of the clearing.

Kylo Ren broke away from the trees, chest heaving. He looked like he had been running for a long time, his dark hair plastered to his forehead and his cheeks flushed pink as he took in the sight before him. Even from at least six meters away, he looked no less tall and menacing as ever. His expression was deep and unreadable as he stared up at her, with her lightsaber in-hand and activated. His own weapon was hanging securely from his belt.

His eyes slid over her shoulder to where she knew Finn to be and hardened. Finn's gun was out and pointed straight at him. He reached for his lightsaber, but didn't activate it.

“Rey,” he started after a moment, turning his attention back to her. “I don't want to fight you.”

“Like hell you don't,” Finn yelled, but she cut him off.

“I don't want to fight you, either,” she swallowed and took a deep breath, deciding to try. “You don't have to do this. I'll give you what Snoke wants, what you came here for. I don't care about that. But I won't let you take me to him.”

Beside her, She sensed rather than saw Finn's incredulous look. “What the hell is going on? Rey?”

But she didn't answer.

Kylo's attention was fixed solely on her.

“Those nights after Starkiller,” he said suddenly, taking a half-step forward. Finn gripped his weapon tighter. “The dreams. Do you remember them?”

“Of course,” she nearly scoffed, because how could she forget?

“If I don't give my master what he wants, it's going to happen over again. Maybe worse. Please.”

He was pleading with her. She didn't know if she or Finn was more shocked. Then it made her angry. “Well then you serve a monster,” she yelled down at him what she'd said before, her voice cracking embarrassingly.

Something shifted on his face, a hardening she still couldn't feel across their bond. It was such a strange sensation to see and talk to him without feeling really connected to him beyond the actual cords of their bond. It was unnerving.

“You want me to suffer, then.”

He was hurt by her words, and was cloaking himself in anger to hide it. She wished she didn't know that so certainly.
“That's not what I said,” she insisted. A thought occurred to her. “You don't have to return to him.”

He didn't even consider it. “That's impossible.”

“No, it's not,” she shot back, “Kylo, you-“

“What are you doing?” Finn hissed at her, his tone somewhere between panicked and irritated. She glanced over to see him holding his blaster rifle in a vice grip as he aimed at Kylo. He didn't look away from him once.

“Finn,” she started, but if was his turn to interrupt her.

“She's not going anywhere with you, Ren,” he bellowed, finger flexing on the trigger.

Downhill, Kylo sneered up at him, all traces of softness gone. “You don't really have a say in it, traitor.”

That was apparently enough conversation for Finn. He fired three shots in succession, all aimed for Kylo's head and chest.

Kylo's hand shot out, freezing the first shot dead in the air just long enough for the second to collide with it, creating a small, white explosion of energy and giving him enough time to activate his lightsaber to deflect the last shot, which ricocheted into the trees.

“Finn!” Rey shouted, knowing that this would only end poorly for him.

Not wasting a second, Kylo bounded up the hill like he hadn't already been running to catch up to her, deflecting shots from Finn as he advanced. Rey's heart stopped. Kylo would kill him, or maybe somehow Finn would manage to kill Kylo. Either way, it terrified her.

When he got close enough to raise his lightsaber above his head, his violent gaze locked on her friend, she blocked the blow with her own blue blade.

His dark eyes widened momentarily as he looked over at her.

How could he have possibly been surprised?

“I won't let you kill him,” she grunted out, her arms shaking from the effort of fighting against the force of his blow. “You'll have to kill me first.”

Finn scrambled out of the way, but Kylo only pressed down harder.

“I thought you said we weren't enemies,” he spat, like he was trying to prove something.

She stared him in the eye, grimacing as she readjusted her grip on her lightsaber. It wasn't the time to be beating around the bush, she decided. “I don't want to be.”

“And yet you jump at the chance to fight me.”

He pulled back from their lightsaber lock, turning so that he could circumvent her to get the Finn, who looked like he had been trying to get a clear shot without her in it. Scared stiff at the prospect of the two of them fully confronting each other, she reached out and grabbed a fist-full of Kylo's belt. She yanked with all of her might, throwing her weight so that it threw him off balance and turned him a part of the way back around to her.

He regained his footing quickly, knocking her hand away as he held his lightsaber out in front of
“You're twisting everything,” she gasped. She was exhausted, physically and mentally, and it was all because of the man in front of her. She tried to hold on to that blame, that anger, to keep her mind solidified against him.

To make her not care.

His face might as well have been made from stone, except for his eyes. “Maybe. But it's better this way.”

Her eyes burned, and that only made her angry. “Then force me to come with you and make this easier on both of us. I'm sure the Supreme Leader won't mind if you bring me in a little worse for wear.”

“I can't,” he practically shouted, startling her into bringing her weapon up. He looked livid. “I couldn't-” but he stopped.

After a long moment, she lowered her weapon to her side, hesitant.

He jabbed his finger in her direction. “This is your fault,” he deflated a little and let his hand drop. She watched as he rubbed his gloved hand over his eyes, and then back through his hair. With a deep breath he straightened, composed and distant. His expression became purposefully neutral.

She could almost hate him for how furious she was that he did that – shut himself off.

“I should never have exercised the connection between us,” his tone was clipped, “but it doesn't change anything. You need to come with me, Rey.”

It felt tragic to look at him. “I won't.”

A pause, then. “I know.”

Then he flung his hand out, but it wasn't at her. Instead, it was Finn who went flying back towards the trees, lying still on the ground when he dropped. Rey cried out, instantly turning to go after him, but found she couldn't move. Kylo had frozen her with the Force, half-turned and held captive by his power. Struggling against his hold was no use; if anything, it felt even stronger than the first time.

She tracked him with her eyes as he walked down the hill to her prone friend. Tears streamed freely down her cheeks as she thought, this is it, he's going to kill Finn.

But when he neared him, Kylo deactivated and clipped his lightsaber to his belt. She watched in astonishment as he bent down and hefted Finn's body up and over his shoulder.

He turned back towards her, and his scar stood out against the paleness of his skin. “You or him, Rey.”

For a long moment he just looked at her, his thoughts entirely unknown to her.

“I'm sorry.”

Then he turned and started marching through the forest, back the way he had appeared. He disappeared from view almost immediately, but she stood frozen for what seemed to be a million years.

If her mouth could've been hanging open, it would have.
Her mind was blank.

She couldn't let herself think.

Not about *him*.

All she could focus on was *save Finn*. Whatever else there was – everything that Kylo had just said and done – would have to wait. She’d make it wait. She'd feel angry, or betrayed, or devastated *later*. It would all have to wait until later.

After Finn was safe once again.

After she had burned a new hole in Kylo's face – or... maybe not.

Just – *later*.

When his power finally released her it was suddenly and all at once. She nearly dropped to her knees from the shock of standing on her own weight again, but managed to merely stumble a few steps. Then she was sprinting – down the hill, away from the ship, and through the forest.

She knew where he was going anyway, but all she had to do was follow the tug of her bond.

It was as if everything, even moments like this – maybe even *especially* moments like this – wrapped their bond tighter around each other and pulled it tighter. She could feel the cords wrapping around her rib cage even as she ran, burying deeper into her heart and lungs.

It had infected her organs.

And she knew he felt it, too.

The cords felt sharp as wires, the elastic tug suffocating. She hoped it hurt him just as much as it hurt her, and even more.

Despite its proximity, the aura of the wellspring was just a distant song in the back of her head as she spotted a glimpse of the dark hull of Kylo's shuttle. The wind kicked up around her as the engines came online. She felt a sinking put in her stomach.

She *couldn't* be too late.

But she was.

She broke through the line of trees just in time to see the shuttle clear the trees, its wings extending into their customary c-shape.

“Kylo!” She yelled, but even she could barely hear her own voice about the shuttle’s engines.

The shuttle blasted out of sight, snapping their bond to a tight pull. But the pain she felt at losing Finn was infinitely worse.

*Finn.*

All she had ever wanted to do was help protect him, and now-

She collapsed to her knees, the world going blurry with her tears, which she finally allowed to roll down her her face.
“I hate you, Kylo Ren.” She pounded the hard ground once, twice, the hot tears dripping from her cheeks.

She did.

She did.

Over and over, she told herself that she hated him for doing this, that he was evil and what he had done was evil. Unforgivable.

The small tug on their bond was almost too much to bear.

Stumbling to her feet, she turned and ran from the wellspring as fast as she could. With each step she tried to fester on her hatred of him, solidify it in her heart. By the time she returned to where Finn’s ship still sat primed to launch, she was too exhausted to try to hold on to it anymore.

What she felt for Kylo…she felt numb.

Numb and entirely sick of thinking of him.

She felt terrified for Finn – she told herself to focus on that.

Even as she stumbled on board and sat at the pilot’s seat, she told herself to focus on Finn.

He needed her.

He loved her.

He would never hurt her.

The ship rose above the ground as she gripped the controls. At last her feet left the nightmare of Dathomir, of Mother Talzin and her insane talk of revitalizing the Force. Her and Kylo’s truce was left behind as well, the fragile peace between her and an enemy who had to work together. Who found they could work together.

It was better to leave it behind with all the rest, better not to dwell on impossible things.

Although the tugging connection in her chest and the closed-off link in her mind whispered something else.

Chapter End Notes

And thus we move to Act II (and more importantly, off-planet). Also, this isn't the last we're going to see of Talzin, not by a long-shot.

Sorry this chapter took so long, I wanted to take my time and make it right, but I ended up just getting annoyed so I'm sorry if it's not up to par or anything. It is what it is.

Finn! I was so excited to write him, even if it was just for a moment. Hopefully I did him justice, he's such a cinnamon roll and I love him so much.

Kylo...just, Kylo. There are no words. It's going to take some insane groveling to make up for this one.
Taking the traitor was possibly one of the stupidest things he'd ever done.

It was a slow, bitter revelation, one that took him a while to admit to himself as he sat slumped in the cockpit of his shuttle, but there it was.

It was a foolish move, and it probably had made things worse. In more ways than one.

He hadn't touched him. As much as he wanted to make the man tied up in the back of his shuttle suffer for all the trouble he'd caused him, that wasn't the point. He doubted Rey would take kindly to finding her ally in a pool of his own blood; she'd hardly go with him if he traded a corpse.

Although, it wasn't likely she'd go with him peacefully at all. Not now.

He had locked the traitor in the back of his shuttle with a pair of sturdy restraints and tried to ignore him as best he could. It wasn't very easy, because as soon as he woke up, the traitor started projecting his feelings uncontrollably. Fear, anger, confusion – a determination that echoed that of a certain scavenger's. Kylo pushed the palms of his hands into his eyes in a frustrated attempt to block it out.

He had to focus on his next move.

If he went straight to the Supreme Leader with the traitor in-tow, he was certain that Rey would follow him. It was a fairly messy plan, one that his master would probably turn his nose up at, but it would do the job. He could deliver the girl and the object together, and then dispose of the traitor once Rey was firmly in his master’s control.

And yet, when he thought about it, there was something undeniably repulsive about that plan. It was a solid plan – it would work.

There just had to be a different option. A plan that was just... different.

Perhaps he could set up an exchange before he returned. That one was more risky, because if Rey contacted the Resistance about it then it could turn into a trap, but it wasn't an insanely bad idea. He'd just have to control the exchange. Choose where it happened. She'd inevitably try and fight him, so he'd have to choose a place where her options were limited. A populated area, maybe. One mostly under the First Order’s control, but not so much so that she wouldn't be able to get there.

An urban planet would make it harder for him to sense whether or not she came alone, but he'd still have the advantage. Unless she was somehow familiar with cities – which he highly doubted – the environment would most likely throw her off, and light side users tended to abstain from conflict in populated areas. She didn't have the control for a confrontation like that.

That was, of course, assuming that she'd trade her life for the life of her friend. Which she would. There wasn't a doubt in his mind that she would.

She was just too damn caring, too willing to put her neck on the line for someone else – someone who didn't deserve it.

Anger blossomed in his gut at the thought, strange and unexpected.
Taking the traitor had most likely solidified himself forever on her bad side. There was no way she saw him as anything but an enemy now.

Back to being the creature.

The *monster*.

He had to forcibly unclench his hands from the arms of the pilot chair so that he could search the nav computer. That line of thought was ridiculous and sentimental, so he forced it out of his mind.

First he needed to find a suitable planet. After that he would contact her and give her his terms. Then he'd make the trade, and-

Bring her to the Supreme Leader.

That was the end goal. He wondered what his master would do to her. She'd just had a powerful Force-wielder try to kill her in an insane attempt to ‘revitalize’ the Force, or some nonsense. While he doubted the Supreme Leader's intentions were anything so…*grandiose* in regards to her, he did wonder at the sudden interest Snoke had taken.

Surely he didn’t want a new apprentice. But if he did, would it be in addition to himself? Or would her first trial be to rid him of his old student, the one who had failed to protect his most precious weapon or even bring him Skywalker.

Rey was incredibly powerful – he couldn't deny that. The fact that she had cut off their connection almost completely with so little training spoke volumes.

Maybe the Supreme Leader had finally grown tired of his weakness.

He slammed his fists against the controls with a growl. Flying out of the pilot’s chair, he started to pace around the small cockpit like a caged animal. The cockpit was so small that he barely had room to take one step in any direction, and he was forced to be hunched over so that he wouldn't hit his head. It only served to rile him up more.

There were too many unknowns, too many options and uncertainties.

That *damn* girl had done nothing but cause him problems.

He had no idea what to do – well, he knew what he *should* do.

He just didn't really want to do it.

It was *all her fault*.

If she hadn't – been *herself*, then he wouldn't have to go to such great lengths to obey his master. He wouldn't have run from her like some *coward*, he wouldn't have a rotten traitor tied up in the back of his shuttle, and he wouldn't be so damned conflicted.

Damn it.

*Fuck*.

He stormed out of the cockpit, his boots echoing loudly as he quickly crossed to the back of the shuttle where the traitor sat, restrained in a seat especially fitted for such things. His shuttle had been modified to be able to transport prisoners, but lacked the precision tools generally used for interrogations. He found himself disappointed about that.
The traitor sat slumped in his restraints, but straightened when he saw Kylo thunder up to him. Beyond the blow to the back of his head and the uncontrolled look in his eye, he looked no worse for wear.

Kylo aimed to fix that.

“I won't tell you anything, Ren.” The traitor spat as soon as he drew near. Kylo felt like ripping the man’s mouth off.

“I don't need you to.”

He grabbed a fist-full of the ridiculous orange jacket he wore and gave him a solid punch right under the eye. The traitor's head snapped violently to the side. A few flecks of blood splattered down his shirt and on Kylo's glove. It hurt the bones in his hand to punch him in the skull, but he tried to relish the feeling.

It centered him, focused his mind.

And it felt damned good to do damage to this man – this traitor – who had given up everything for-

Well, he didn't know what he had given it up for.

Did he give it up for Rey?

He scowled and hit him twice more, just because he could.

The traitor fought against his restraints, but it was no use. He took the abuse with little more than a grunt, and when he looked up at him it was with a raw strength that he hadn't seen from him before. Blood pooled under his eye, nose, and lips from where the skin had broken, and he could see blood in his teeth.

It felt good to know that he had been the one to cause it. But then he blinked, and for a moment he could see what she would – a defenseless boy, beaten and bloody.

A good person.

Her friend.

It was enough to give him pause, just for a moment.

Then the traitor spit on him. A wad of mostly blood hit him on the corner of his jaw, and all at once the man before him became a waste of space – one who had dared spit at him.

He jerked back with a growl, releasing the traitor to wipe at his face with the back of his hand. He would make him pay for that.

“You're an animal, Ren. Rey's too smart for you, she won't fall into whatever trap you're planning.” The man's words were brave, but he could sense the twinge of fear behind his façade. Of cowardice. He felt his jaw clench as he got back in his face, loomed over him.

“You claim to know her so well,” he forced out between clenched teeth, determined not to just kill him right there, not when he needed him alive, “FN-2187.” He spoke the name like a curse.

The traitor didn't break eye contact for even a moment. “Better than you ever will.”

At that his eyebrows rose a little and he leaned back. He found himself wanting to spew that he
knew Rey on a deeper level than one such as he could ever imagine, and that anything she ever did for the man was out of her own misguided sense of kindness. He didn't mean anything – he was nothing.

But the echo of their closed connection stopped him short, and the feelings of the cords of their bond wrapped around his ribs kept his mouth shut entirely.

He felt tied up and empty as he stared at the man, working his jaw.

He didn't want to talk about Rey anymore.

Instead, he wiped his bloodied glove on the traitor’s shirt and took a step back. Surprised flickered across the man’s face, and then suspicion. Kylo didn't really care.

He straightened and tried to slip back into the role of knight. He reined himself in, got himself tightly under control.

What he wouldn't have given for his mask.

“You might know something of use to the First Order,” he kept his tone even and clipped, emotionless, “so I'll be back. Until then, get comfortable,” he gave the walls around him a cursory glance, “you're not going anywhere.”

With that he promptly left his prisoner and stormed back to the front of the shuttle. He shut the door to the cockpit and promptly sank into the pilot's seat. It felt a little bit like hiding.

No sooner than he had sat down, his shuttle was hailed by the Finalizer. It was long-distance, nowhere near the outer-rim system he was in. Kylo stared at the flashing alert for a long moment, considering just not answering. But he knew the sooner he faced the music, the better, so at the very last moment he answered the hail, his frown practically carved into his face.

He wasn't surprised that it was Hux's repulsive voice on the other end.

“Ren,” the communication was audio-feed only, for which Kylo could only be thankful. The last thing he wanted to see was Hux’s sneeringly smug face that inevitably went with that tone. “You've been gone for so long, I'd almost given you up for dead.”

Kylo sneered. “Your luck isn't that good.”

“Obviously,” drawled the reply. “Am I to assume you haven't failed the Supreme Leader, then?”

He doubted that the general knew the extent of what Kylo had been tasked with – less than what he knew, anyway. Still, he felt his hackles rise as the thinly-veiled implication of incompetence. His fingers clamped around the edge of the control dash in a death grip.

“I don't care what you assume. Force business isn't your business.” He grit out.

The reply was instantaneous. “Yes, the Supreme Leader only tells me what is relevant to the entirety of the First Order. By all means, continue running around chasing dead legends like a headless gizga.”

Kylo didn't miss the implication. “What has happened with the First Order?” He demanded.

“Oh, has the Supreme Leader not told you?” He could practically see the redhead’s smirk, “I would have assumed if he had thought it relevant to you-“
“Hux, I'm in no mood for games,” Kylo snapped, wishing for one moment that they were speaking in person, if only so that he could personally strangle the bastard. “Tell me what's changed.”

The was only a half-second pause. “We've begun an all-out assault of the core worlds.”

“What?” Was all he could say.

“War, Ren. True, glorious war. With the Starkiller gone, the Supreme Leader thought it most prudent to make a swift show of strength, to show the galaxy that we have not run with our tail between our legs.”

“Why wasn't I made aware of this?” He demanded. It wasn't that he cared for the fate of the New Republic or the Resistance – no, the feeling wasn't so nebulous. It was small, a precise pinprick in his chest. He cared only about one or two things. People. He wouldn't let himself dwell on it.

Everyone had already chosen a side.

It was too late to care about it.

“Let me think. Oh, that's right, you had disappeared while following your ‘Force business’ around, hadn't you?” The sneer was a visceral thing in the general’s tone, “it's not my job to keep you informed of what the First Order is doing. One would think that you'd at least attempt to keep up yourself.”

Kylo growled, already entirely sick of talking to the redhead. “What are your coordinates.”

After a few long moments of silence, a little ‘ding’ on his console informed him that he'd received the specifications of the Finalizer's location.

He blinked when he read them.

“I really don't have the time to wait around, so if you're going to come aboard then I suggest you get moving.”

Kylo barely heard him.

They were in the Corellian system.

Corellia.

Just seeing the planet’s name flash on his screen made his mouth run dry. Suddenly he felt as if it was both too hot and too cold at once, his collar suffocating in a way he didn't usually find it. He had the sudden urge to rip his shuttle apart piece-by-piece, just pull out his lightsaber and do as much damage as possible.

Out of all the places in the galaxy, why did it have to be-

“Ren,” Hux’s snappish tone only pulled him half-way out of his haze, but it was enough. He ran his hand over his mouth in an attempt to compose himself. “Will you be joining us or can I end this marvelously stimulating conversation?”

“I'll be there in the next standard day,” he began inputting the coordinates into the nav computer, his tone tightly controlled, “prepare for my arrival.”

“With bated breath,” was Hux’s only reply. Kylo wasted no time in cutting the transmission as he prepared for the jump to hyperspace.
Corellia.

He hadn't been there in – well, in over two decades. He didn't have many memories of it, just flashes, really. Impressions.

A dead boy and his father. A balcony overlooking the city. The smell of engine oil and flowers. The boy’s mother’s hair tumbling down her back, loose and soft as silk.

A collection of dead things belonging to a dead child.

Meaningless.

He didn't want to think about any of that anymore.

Corellia. It could work as an acceptable place to meet Rey – the scavenger. Unless they were conducting a full-scale invasion of the planet itself – which wasn't likely, seeing as even the First Order would need their shipyards intact – it met all of his criteria. It was a core world, so technically aligned with the New Republic, and it was vastly urbanized. Rey would have no trouble getting there, once she knew where to go. And with the First Order in the system it would be relatively easy to transfer her directly somewhere under their control once he had her in custody.

Unless they were staging an invasion of the planet. Its shipyards would be vastly important to any galactic navy hoping for wide-scale conquest, which the First Order obviously was, so it was undoubtedly an important target. But it had aligned with the Empire before the rise of the New Republic, so surely such measures weren't needed.

He'd seen what desolated cities looked like; something in him rebelled at seeing it again, even on that planet.

Maybe especially so.

None of that mattered. Hux's plans for military conquest on the planet only mattered if they interfered with any of his plans.

All that mattered was bringing Rey and that ridiculous object to Snoke.

First he had to regroup with the First Order and set up his trap. It wouldn't take him more than two standard days to travel to the core worlds – more than enough time for her to find her own people and resupply before she came after him.

But what if she didn't?

The thought made him pause as he reclined further into his seat. He was working on the assumption that she'd come racing to save the traitor from him – a monster – but what if she allowed someone to talk her into taking a safer, slower course of action? Or what if she was forbidden from following him? He knew enough about her to know that she wouldn't let that stop her, but what if they incapacitated her? Surely the General wouldn't let such a promising Force-user go rushing off to face Kylo Ren just because a grunt had been taken. Surely the Resistance would want her for more important missions.

The more he thought about it, the more anxious he became that Rey wouldn't follow him. He might've just thrown away his one real chance to get her to come with him – one way or another. If that was it, then he'd throw away his only chance to complete the mission the Supreme Leader had given him.
He'd be doomed to punishment – *severe* punishment.

He might not ever see her again.

The thought was ridiculous, but it passed his mind before he could check himself. It wasn't as if they're weren't still bonded – no matter how closed off she had made herself, he could still sense her. He knew how to find her.

And it wasn't as if he cared about seeing her *personally*.

His brain just felt raw from everything that had happened. His focus was skewed because he had psyched himself out before taking the traitor. Before it had become abundantly, painfully clear to him that he'd rather add ten more steps in between obtaining her and delivering her to Snoke than actually engage in a duel with her.

He was too tired not to admit to himself that she could’ve won.

Or what if he did?

Neither option appealed to him in the slightest. Admitting that was like swallowing a boulder, but there it was.

He didn't want to fight her.

‘*I know your weaknesses,*’ the Supreme Leader had said. It seemed that he had foreseen his exact predicament.

So it was a test. A weakness to a woman he *loathed*. Mostly. And he had done it to himself. Of course he had, he was obviously incapable of doing something to the Supreme Leader's total satisfaction – so of *course* he would fail him in this.

Leaning his elbows on the arms of the pilot's chair, he hunched forward and ran his hands through his hair.

He just needed the strength to overcome his weakness. To nip it at the bud.

If Rey was one such... *weakness*, then the best thing he could do would be to complete the Supreme Leader's bidding as quickly as possible. There could be no room for hesitation next time.

He straightened with resolve, his hands clenching the edges of the arm rests.

This was nothing more than another test, as facing Han Solo had been. That one he had failed – he didn't know how, but he had failed, because otherwise even thinking the name wouldn't create such a gaping *hole* in his chest.

It wouldn't be like that this time.

He wouldn't allow his weakness to lead to another failure.

So she would come with him willingly, or he would *make* her.

Chapter End Notes
And thus we kick off Act II by hitting the 100,000 word mark! Holy crap, I never thought we'd get here.

Kylo struggles with all of his feelings and makes things seem more complicated than they are, what's new. But get excited guys, because the reylo will be increasing exponentially from here-on. All I'm saying is:

Act I: foundations
Act II: romance
Act III: (spoiler!)

So, yeah. It's very exciting. Or, at least, I'm excited. So you should be, too.

Also, a *very* lovely reader named Olivia_Mockingbird wrote a short little fic based off of this one. I'm so flattered and you should totally check it out if you want, although I warn you that it's very sad (in a good way)!
“You look awful, Ren.”

Hux stood at the front of a precession of officers who were all either engrossed in a datapad in their hands or were barking orders into personal comms. They all looked the same to Kylo – pesky imitations of the ultimate bane of his existence. It was like Hux had multiplied in his absence, filling the ship with mini-hims.

It gave him the sensation of being greeted by a swarm of insects.

Kylo didn’t care what the general thought about his appearance, but he wasn't wrong. He had been trudging through the jungle for days - he'd lost his mask, cowl, and torn up both his outer robe and gloves. His hair was ratty and plastered to his head, and he was caked in dirt. But it was still a harebrained comment.

“Why would you possibly think that I care about your opinion, general?” He stormed down his shuttle’s ramp in a barely-contained fury. Without his mask he was particularly vulnerable, and he wanted to keep their interactions as short-lived as possible.

He had left the traitor on his shuttle. FN-2187’s records had been in constant circulation amongst the troops when he had first defected, and the last thing he needed was someone giving him a hard time about the nature of his imprisonment. The traitor wasn't there to answer for his crimes against the First Order, he was only bait.

If he was made aware of the traitor’s presence, then he had no doubt that Hux would turn the whole thing into one massive headache for him.

Hux didn’t react at all, beyond to check his personal chrono. “You're late. You said you'd arrive within a standard day.”

“You're not my keeper,” Kylo snapped, brushing past him. He'd command a trooper to retrieve the traitor once he was left alone.

Hux scoffed as he fell into step beside him. “Well, someone obviously should be.”

“Don't you have a glorious war to plan?” He tried to not let all of his emotions play out on his face, but he couldn't help his frown, which practically cemented into his skin. Troopers and officers alike parted for them like the sea, each averting their eyes as their superiors passed them by. Kylo found it irritated him to be around so many people, in particular Hux’s herd which followed close-behind.

The general nodded. “Yes, but unfortunately you're a part of it.”

“No,” was the immediate reply, “I'm not going to fight your war for you.” If Hux was able to command him like a simple soldier, he knew he would likely want Kylo sent to the worst battles, fighting on the front-lines until he finally ran out of luck and took a stray shot to the chest, or got shrapnel imbedded in his neck, or any one of a million other deaths.

“I want the Knights of Ren,” Hux continued on as if he hadn't heard him speak at all. “Contact them and bid them come here.”
Kylo drew to a stop and turned to give him his full attention. “The Supreme Leader said nothing to me about recalling them from their missions,” he paused. “This wouldn't happen to be a personal request, would it?”

He watched as the redhead’s face grew to match his hair, but his expression hardly twitched. Kylo had always found his composed pompousness to be overwhelmingly repulsive.

“You and your knights are a part of the First Order, are you not?” He demanded.

“We serve Supreme Leader Snoke.”

The man nodded. “Precisely why you shouldn't be allowed to continue traipsing around after relics when it comes time to go to war. We must all pull our own weight, Ren.”

Kylo fixed him with a deadpan stare. “Well, until the Supreme Leader commands otherwise, we’ll do as we please.”

He took off without another word, stomping down the corridors without a backward glance.

“We're not finished with this, Ren.” The redhead called after him. It was a small mercy that he didn't follow.

The Finalizer was the closest thing to home he had known in over a decade. It wasn't a comfort to him, he didn't feel any respite or a sense of security when he came on board. But it was familiar.

What was familiar to Rey, he wondered.

As soon as he was far enough away that he knew Hux wouldn't hear him, he grabbed the first officer he saw. A lieutenant shivered in his grip, a man with the look of someone who hadn't seen the sun in years. It was a common look among the officers. He looked up at him as if he was staring at the face of death, and then averted his eyes.

“You,” he didn't like the look of the man before him; he looked too young and too scared to be competent. But he wanted the traitor moved before Hux had a chance to discover him. “In the back of my shuttle is a prisoner. Round up a few troopers and deliver him to the lower brig. No one is to hear about this.”

He leaned down a little, threatening enough to be sure that the man understood the severity of his situation. “Do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.” The man nodded and offered a quick salute as he released him. “Right away, sir.”

“Come tell me when it's done,” he added before continuing towards his quarters without another word.

His quarters were exactly the way he had left them. No one dared to venture into his rooms unless bidden, and they’d be sorely disappointed if they did. While it was much bigger than most of the other quarters, it contained little more than the essentials. His room held no secrets beyond the concealed alcove where he kept the remains of his grandfather's helmet.

His entire life was comprised of little more than his mask and his weapon – he had nothing to hide, nothing else of value.

The greatest value he saw in his room was the chance for privacy, for a few moments to center himself against the walking headache that was Hux, or from the whirlwind his life had become.
As the door slid shut behind him, he felt a nearly overwhelming wave of solitude hit him. This was the first time he had been alone – truly alone – in weeks.

No people, no real sense of the connection – just solitude.

Unclipping his lightsaber from his belt, he placed it on the desk nestled in the far corner. It made him a little uneasy to let his weapon out of his grasp after he'd spent so long without it, but he shook his head of the ridiculous notion that anyone would try and steal it while he was still there.

He sank down heavily in the single chair in his room, reaching up to unfasten his collar. He removed what he could sitting down, exhausted from – well, from everything. Everything with Rey in particular.

Reaching out, he was met with the same wall of emptiness Rey had turned their connection into. He didn't expect her to have lowered her defenses, but he was a little surprised at how strongly she continued to cut him off. She was far enough away that she had become nothing more than an echo of a tug in his lungs.

He tried to not let that worry him.

Using the ‘fresher was a luxury he had taken for granted before. Getting himself cleaned up made him feel better than he thought it would, but he didn't linger. There were much more important things to do. His hair was still damp when he left the ‘fresher. He pushed it back away from his face as he crossed over to the storage closet where he kept his clothing. At the bottom was an old, beat-up locker that contained two identical replacements for his old mask.

Slipping the mask over his head, he was surprised at his sigh of relief. He had been without its protection for too long.

No sooner had his mask locked in place did the door ping, indicating that there was someone requesting entry. His lightsaber was back in his grasp and clipped to his belt in a second, securely at his side.

He crossed over and pushed the button to unlock his door. As expected, the lieutenant stood on the other side, a trooper standing behind him. The officer started, as if he hadn't actually expected him to come to the door.

“Ah, Lord Ren. I've done as you asked.” The man sounded frightened, but to his credit managed to give his report without stammering. “He's in the lower brig, cell three-three-one.”

“Good,” Kylo nodded, “now leave.”

Both men promptly did so. He watched them until they rounded the corner and disappeared from sight before he went to check on the traitor.

The walk down to the lower brig seemed to go by much faster now that he was himself once more. He swept through the halls, secure in the fear he invoked among the passers-by.

This was what he was used to.

He thrived as an object of fear. Once more encased in his usual ensemble, it was easy to believe that that was all there was.

Kylo Ren.
A creature in a mask.

He didn't need anything else.

He didn't need to be anything else.

His fists clenched at his sides as he stepped out of the turbolift onto the brig. While the upper levels of the brig were used to house the more important prisoners, the lower levels were used mostly for the non-essential prisoners: pirates, smugglers, defectors, and the like. No one important enough to garner the attention of any of the higher-ups. Hux wouldn’t spare a moment for any of the prisoners on that level, which made it a relatively safe place to keep the traitor.

As long as the guards kept their mouths shut, and he would see that they did.

It was the first thing he did when he rounded the corner to the cell control room. From there one could access the different levels by two separate sets of stairs. There were three troopers stationed at various consoles, and he knew that there would be more troops patrolling the rows of cells on both levels. A captain approached him immediately.

“Are you the provost?”

The officer nodded. “Yes, sir. Is there a particular prisoner you wish to interrogate? I wasn't made aware of any interrogations, but we can prep a room for you shortly.”

“That won't be necessary,” Kylo looked over the soldiers in the room, “I had a prisoner transferred here recently.”

“Ah, yes,” the provost nodded, moving to one of the consoles. “He was put on the lower level in cell three-three-one. Would you like access to the cell?”

“Yes,” Kylo said. He watched as the officer typed a few things into the console. The other troopers in the room were keeping their eyes firmly diverted, he noticed.

The provost straightened. “There you are, sir. You'll be able to access the cell now.”

Kylo stepped up to the man, making sure that he drew the attention of the entire room. “Neither you nor your men will spread the word of this prisoner. If I hear anything, I won't hesitate to come back down here and stop any information leak.”

There was no point in disguising his threat; the more terrified they were, the less likely it was that word would spread to anyone it shouldn't.

The men didn't look likely to take his word for granted. The provost swallowed visibly before nodding, “Of course, sir. You don't have to worry about that.”

“I hope not.”

He swept past them all and descended to the lower brig, his boots falling heavily on the metal grating beneath his feet. The doors to the cells were made of thick durasteel that isolated each cell from the rest of the brig. Kylo could sense that more than half of the cells contained life, but there was only one in particular that he was interested in.

Cell three-three-one was located towards the end of the aisle, the second-to-last cell on the right. He could sense the traitor inside.
It couldn't be like last time; he had be calm, stay in control.

He was in control.

The door slid open with a press of a control panel. Feelings of animosity bombarded him like a wave, as if the cell had just been containing it all.

“Welcome back on board the Finalizer,” Kylo descended down the two steps into the cell. The traitor sat hunched on a metal bench attached to the far wall. “I can promise you that your stay won't be very comfortable.”

“You can't intimate me, Ren,” despite the feelings emanating from the man, FN-2187 sounded more resigned than anything else.

“I don't have to,” Kylo stood in the center of the small cell, the top of his head nearly brushing the ceiling. “You'd be defenseless if I wanted something.”

The man's shoulders shook as if in a scoff. “So you don't?”

“Don't what?”

“Want something,” the traitor leaned forward, “I find that hard to believe.”

Kylo sneered behind his mask. “Not from you.”

The traitor looked as if Kylo had just made some sort of slip-up. “You want Rey,” he said with absolute certainty, “well, you're not going to get her.”

The traitor's words infuriated Kylo. It only took one long stride to loom directly in front the man, towering over him with clenched fists and a posture made for violence, before he remembered that he needed to stay in control.

“You don't think that she'll come for you?” He bit out between clenched teeth, his tone somewhere between mocking and threatening.

FN-2187 blinked up at him, some sort of realization dawning on his face, and worry behind that.

“If she does, she'll just beat you again. Same as last time, right?” He nodded towards Kylo’s face, as if he could see the scar stretching across his right side even through all the fabric and mask.

For a few heavy breaths Kylo just stood there, a looming, expressionless mask – but then he straightened. “I don't know,” he shrugged, switching tactics, “she's been through a lot recently. She might need some time to recover.”

He didn't believe it for a second; Rey's strength was never in question for him. But it seemed to give the traitor pause, and that was what he wanted.

“And you saw her on Dathomir,” he added, pressing the small advantage. “She didn't seem all that eager to fight me.”

He almost hesitated as he said it, because he wasn't sure what it was he was really saying. She hadn't put her all into confronting him, that he knew without a shadow of a doubt. He remembered what she had said to him before Snoke had made her turn against him – of course he did. But even then, when she knew with absolute certainty that he was there to deliver her to his master, she told him that she didn't want to fight him. She tried to talk to him.
As if there was a chance.

FN-2187 said something he didn't hear, wrenching him out of his thoughts. He snapped his attention back to the man, who seemed to realize that he hadn't listened to what he said.

“Why did she do that?” He repeated, eyes narrowed as he stared up at him. “Why did she try and talk to you?”

He stared down at him for a long moment. “Maybe she thought she could reason with me.”

“She hates you,” the traitor spat, as if what Kylo had suggested was totally insane.

Kylo's ire boiled in his chest. “Maybe her feelings have changed,” he suggested, although he knew that she likely hated him. Again.

The traitor shook his head and leaned back. “You're a monster, Ren. A murderer. Rey knows that.”

It was a struggle not to pull out his lightsaber and hack the traitor and the cell to pieces right there. His fists shook at his sides they were clenched so tightly, his breathing hot and loud in his ears.

He didn't know why he felt the sudden urge to reach out across their bond in hopes that just maybe-

But he was alone.

Of course he was, did he really just expect her to forgive him and-

He didn't need her to forgive him.

What he had done was necessary. He had done it-

For her.

He had done it for her. So that he wouldn't have to hurt her – no more than he had to. He took no pleasure from it.

It was all her fault – if she hadn't tried to reach out to him, to make him not hate her, then they would've just fought. He would've brought her to the Supreme Leader without a second thought. It would've been simple.

It wouldn't have been so damn complicated.

He managed to take a step back, suddenly claustrophobic in the small space. “Has she ever been to a core world before? Would she have difficulty getting there?” He felt like a fool as soon as the words were out of his mouth.


“Would the Resistance hinder her if she tried to come for you?” He demanded.

The traitor obviously didn't expect the question. “I already told you,” he sounded cautious, “you won't get anything out of me.”

It wasn't worth searching his mind for, not quite. But the impulse was still there. “Answer the question, traitor.”

He studied him for a moment. Kylo didn't know what he expected to find – it was nothing more than
his mask that stared back. After a long moment, he asked, “Are you worried?”

His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides, the only unrestrained sign of his discomfort. He was once more glad for the privacy of his mask.

“I require her to be able to reach you,” he spoke carefully, suddenly aware that the man seated in front of him seemed to be having another conversation on a level Kylo was unaware of. It irritated him greatly.

The man shrugged after a moment, evidently letting go of whatever he thought, and made himself more comfortable on the bench. “Don't you worry, Ren. She'll show up to kick your ass.”

Kylo tilted his head with an unseen scowl. “You're not as much of a coward as you used to be,” he observed.

“No,” the traitor looked him straight in the eye, “that tends to happen when you've watched people you love get murdered and kidnapped.”

Kylo didn't say anything.

“And I've already survived a fight against you,” he added with a half-shrug. “You're not as infallible as you think.”

There it was again, the urge to rip him in half. But it was easier to rein in his violent impulses that time – he was done talking to this traitor, the man who claimed to know Rey so well.

“I'll show you just how wrong you are,” he promised, turning to leave.

“What, not ready for a fight?” Came the reply.

“I need you alive,” he admitted without bothering to look over his shoulder, “unfortunately.” He stepped up out of the cell and pressed the panel on the wall, locking the cell door shut behind him.

Two conversations with the traitor were two too many. All he wanted to do was sleep. He had a little while before he had to go down planet-side.

The troopers were silent as he ascended back to the cell control room. He felt the fear hovering like a cloud over everything, and was glad for it.

“Inform me personally of any changes with the prisoner,” he told the provost as he made his way to the turbolift.

“Very well,” the officer nodded, looking only a little nervous. “Since he seems to be of some importance, would you like him moved to a higher-security cell?”

“No,” he said flatly, eager to get back to the solitude of his room, eager for some rest, “change nothing.”

The captain was silent as the turbolift doors opened. “May I ask who the prisoner is?”

Kylo stepped into the lift and turned back to face him.

“You can ask,” he said, right before the door slid shut.
At first he didn't realize he was sleeping. When he looked up and saw a dark blue sky above him – twilight, with a hint of green – he thought that he had just forgotten where he was when he fell asleep.

Everything else seemed to be the dream – the Finalizer, the prisoner, his dark, empty room. It all seemed like a bad dream.

And he felt warm. Not physically, it was the sort of warmth that came from connection, from the solid, absolute certainty that he wasn't alone.

That was what finally made him realize.

He was dreaming.

It wasn't real.

He sat up, suddenly unsure of where he was. It was hard to focus; the things around him felt more like shadows, strokes of color instead of solid objects. But he could tell he was sitting in the grass, at the top of what appeared to be a rocky hill. In all directions beyond he saw a shifting darkness – the sea.

Recognition dawned on him then. And ocean, an island.

Rey.

He spun around, looking for any sight of her. He could feel her – this was her place. Whatever dream he was in, it was hers.

Wind kicked up around him, sharp and cold, as he began to wander around. The world shifted into focus with each step, allowing him to see things he hadn't before: a jacket discarded on the ground, his grandfather's lightsaber. He didn't check, but he had the feeling that he was unarmed as well.

Everything felt sad. It was if it was in the very air, and he was breathing it in.

Sad – and angry.

“Rey,” he called out, unsure of what to do or where to go. He had the distinct feeling that he was trespassing, that he should leave – make himself wake up, tear himself out of the dream somehow.

But he could feel it here – their bond. She couldn't keep him out in this place.

And he wanted to talk to her.

“Rey,” he called again, called her to him.

He got stabbed with a lightsaber right in the center of his back, staggering forward from the force of it. The smell of burning flesh reached his nostrils, making him want to gag, only-

There was nothing. No gaping hole in his chest, no melting flesh. He spun around to see Rey lower her hand.

She had punched him, right in the center of his back.

It had just been her hand – she hadn't stabbed him. But as he rubbed his fist over the spot where he could still feel the burning blade of a lightsaber, the smell of his own destroyed flesh never left his senses. He struggled to breathe, gasping for air like a drowning man.
“You bastard,” she spit, tears streaming down her cheeks as she punched him again, hitting him in his left shoulder. He grunted as he felt his flesh catch on fire there, as well.

Everywhere she touched burned.

Off in the distance a darkness rolled in across the sky – rain, maybe, or the beginning of a nightmare.

She slapped him, her hand clawing at his scar. That time it felt different – as if his entire scar, running from his shoulder up to his face, had just been scorched into his skin.

It felt like she had sliced him open with her lightsaber all over again.

“Stop,” he cried out, collapsing on his knees from the pain. It wasn't real – he could see that she hadn't stabbed him, hadn't scarred him again – but it felt like he had been carved open by fire. The chill of the wind only exacerbated his pain, wrenching a pathetic groan out of him.

He could do nothing but try and hold himself together enough to not crumble to the ground.

She stood mercilessly over him, watching with a hard expression as his frame shook in agony.

“How could you, Kylo?” She demanded right as a loud ‘crack’ boomed around them – the promise of a storm.

He couldn't answer.

She kicked him hard in the gut, and he collapsed on his back with a gasp, tears escaping down his face as it felt like he was being sheared in two.

They matched each other in that, at least, their faces blotchy and running with tears.

“I trusted you,” she bit out, her anger reaching out like fingers in his perceived wounds, twisting in the imaginary burns so that he could no longer restrain his sobs.

His mind knew nothing but pain – his and hers.

She was suddenly on her knees beside him, no less a pillar of strength than before. When she gripped the edge of his shirt, it felt like flames were licking at his skin.

“Rey,” he gasped, eyes wide.

“No,” she gave him a shake, “you listen to me. Do you know what you've done?” She demanded. The fire in her eyes matched the feeling she inflicted.

“Do you?”

For a long moment he just gaped up at her, tears blurring his vision. Or maybe it was the dream, and he was losing touch with everything around him. But he still felt it all – the pain, the wind, the feeling of her hands bunched in his clothing.

And her face was clear as day.

“I hurt you.”

The wind stopped dead around them, the sky above frozen in place. The only sound was their breathing.
She screwed her eyes shut and gave him another, softer shake. “Say it again,” she nearly whispered.

“I hurt you,” he choked out. His tears were flowing freely, and he didn't know if it because of his pain, her pain, or a combination of both.

And then she started crying anew. A great sob shook her frame, and she dropped her hold on him to cover her face in her hands. He fell back with a grunt.

“I'm so stupid,” her voice was so muffled he could barely hear her, “such an idiot.” She said it over and over to herself, like a mantra of self-loathing.

He didn't say anything, mesmerized by the sight of her crying over him. Not for him, but because of him.

He was-

This was all-

Rain started to fall around them in fat droplets. As he watched her it went from a light drizzle to pouring down rain. It felt like a god-send. Each droplet that fell against him washed some of the pain away, speck by speck, until he was just left lying on the ground next to a crying girl.

But his scar still hummed.

She jerked away as he slowly pushed himself up on his elbows, grateful that the rain washed his tears away, too.

A small mercy.

It felt like he was sitting on shifting sand as she moved away, a strange effect of the dream that made him wish she'd stayed closer.

“Rey-“ the word caught in his throat. What was he supposed to say? What could he say?

“Nothing's been done to him,” was what he eventually settled on, although it still cost him.

She blinked up at him through the rain, her eyes rimmed red. He wondered if they looked that tired in real life. “What?”

He pushed himself up the rest of the way. “Your-“ he took a deep breath through his nostrils, “FN-2187. Your…friend. He's okay. That's not–I didn't take him to kill him.”

The look on her face told him that she didn't believe him. He tried not to take offense to that. “Then why? Why take him?”

“For you.”

She looked shocked, and he quickly added, “So that you'd follow me.”

A spike of anger rose between them like a wave, and the rain let up a bit. He pressed his lips together, still feeling like he was sitting on shifting sand.

A look of understanding passed over her face, and then it hardened. “I'm still not going to go with you, Kylo.”

“Then you'll never get him back,” he said simply.
She leaned forward a bit, leaning her fists against the ground. “Why are you doing this?” She asked.

The question confused him. “Because the Supreme Leader wills it.”

Silence, and then, “Do you want to do it?”

The way she was looking at him shifted, as if the answer mattered to her. His nostrils flared. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Whether or not I want it doesn’t matter. Whether or not you get your friend back doesn’t matter. In the end, you’ll only end up in one place, which is bowing before him.”

“You sound like a slave,” she snapped, crossing her arms and slipping back into an angry expression, “I’d rather die than live as a slave. Especially to someone like Snoke.”

“Then you’re a fool,” he snapped. Then he sighed, “Rey, be smart about this. When the Supreme Leader decides he wants something, he gets it.”

He thought he saw her expression soften, but he wasn't sure.

“Like how he got you.”

Jerking back, he tried to school his face into as neutral an expression as he could manage, but he knew she could sense his sudden change in attitude.

“What do you know about that,” he couldn’t tell if it came out more like a question, demand, or statement.

She leaned forward once more, looking somehow half determined and half unsure. “Not much,” she admitted, “but I know that you’ve been under Snoke's oppression for a long time. I know that he's in your head almost constantly, and that he hurts you.” She paused, entirely sure of herself now, “He’s a monster, Kylo, you have to see that.”

Silence stretched between them. The rain had stopped at some point, but he only noticed it when there was nothing else to hear.

She looked so determined.

Why did she always look so determined around him?

He knew with absolute certainty that he didn't want to have this conversation, that talking about him was – well, a dead end. He didn't regret most of the things he had done. She was only trying because between him and the Supreme Leader, she obviously had declared him the lesser of two evils. The easier one to sway.

He tried, but he found he couldn't be mad about it.

“Corellia,” he said.

She blinked. “Huh?”

He rubbed his right shoulder absentmindedly, the humming of his scar a strange and constant sensation. “It's the planet I'm on, or will be soon. I know you could follow me,” he gestured between them, referring to their bond, “but this makes things easy.”

“What about Finn?” She demanded. “Is he with you? Is he safe?”
“You can keep him safe by meeting me there,” he promised.

She didn't look happy. “Kylo-“

He stood, cutting her off. It had turned dark all around them, the island falling away until it was just
the little patch of the dream where they existed. It wasn't a comforting void, but he tried not to pay
any attention to it.

Gazing down at her, he had the sudden urge to tell her what he had realized before – that he hadn't
done it to hurt her. That he was trying to…not hurt her.

“I'm sorry.”

The words were harder to say than they had been the first time, maybe because she was looking him
in the eye. Because he knew she'd actually hear them.

Her hazel gaze was clear and steady despite her obvious exhaustion. “Not enough to not do it.”

He wanted to tell her that she'd be okay – that in the long-run, the traitor would be returned to the
Resistance and she'd be better off.

But he couldn't.

Looking in her eyes, he didn't even let himself think what he knew to be the truth. She wasn't like
him, it wouldn't happen to her the same as it had to him. Submitting to his master would destroy
her and everything that made her who she was.

In the long-run his master was going to kill her.

And Kylo would be the one to deliver her to him.

Chapter End Notes

I feel like this is a very weird and choppy chapter, and if you got that same feeling I'm
so sorry. What actually happened was that I was going to put the dream sequence in the
*next* chapter, but ended up not doing that because of how I want the next chapter to
play out. So the dream got tacked on here.

I feel really weird about this chapter overall. Maybe that's because I'm posting it at 4am,
or maybe it really *is* weird. I should probably have waited until I was totally rested to
post it, just so I could be sure of my judgement, but whatever.

Here you guys go, I love you and I hope this chapter wasn't crap!
Chapter 28

Rey woke with a start.

For a wild, terrifying moment she had no idea of where she was, no sense of her surroundings. All she could feel was a cold wind chilling her bones, rain stinging her cheeks. All she could see was a man towering over her, dark and violent and entirely harmless to her.

All she could hear were his words.

*I'm sorry*.

She didn't know how long she stayed half in the dream, but it was the soft sounds of life beyond her door that finally pulled her back to reality. Her dream was wrest from her senses like a hood being lifted off her head, and the real world became solid once more.

She was tangled in the sheets of the single cot she had been afforded at the Resistance base on D'Qar. Just beyond her door its members worked even through the night.

She was with the Resistance.

She was safe.

Sagging back against her pillow, she was more than a little mortified to realize that she had been crying. Her pillow had wet spots, and when she brought her hand up to touch her cheek, she found it warm and wet.

As if her tears had triggered it, she felt a shock across their bond, a harsh pluck of a cord that she knew meant Kylo was awake, too. But it was more than that – for a few seconds, she had dropped her defenses and left their bond wide open. A flood of emotions washed over her – confusion, anger, guilt – all the feelings that she had come to think of as constants from him. She found that she had fallen across their bond so deeply she could almost tangibly feel him beside her.

For a moment she almost got swept up in it, his torrent of feelings that destroyed so much.

But then the moment passed, and she came back to herself, snatching her consciousness back to her side of their bond.

He noticed it a second after she did, that she had let her defenses down in her sleep. But it was too late; she slammed her defenses shut once more, horrified that she had left it open in the first place. Her breathing echoed loudly in the shadows of her room.

Squeezing her eyes shut, she turned on her side and clutched at her pillow. She did nothing but listen to the sound of her own breathing, trying to force herself to calm down.

It was no use. It was as if she still had remnants of his emotions in the back of her head, too keyed-up to let her go back to sleep. Her shock turned to frustration.

He never gave her a moment of *peace*.

When she closed her eyes, all she she saw was him fall under her blows, his dark eyes filled with
tears. Her knuckles tingled as if she had actually punched him.

It unnerved her that she still felt so connected to him, even when she'd firmly blocked their mental link. Like a string protruding from her chest to his, she felt the bond connecting them even across the galaxy.

It didn't used to be like that.

Didn't used to feel like that.

She shifted onto her other side, giving up on sleep to try to slip into a meditative state instead. After what felt like hours, she could feel herself start to drift, all thoughts of dark men fading into a murky unconsciousness. A sense of unfeeling overtook her.

But just before she lost all consciousness, in the blackest shadows of the ‘fresher, she could've sworn that she heard the breath of a familiar whisper.

Rey did nothing for two days.

General Organa had been away on some ‘diplomatic recruitment’ mission, as Poe called it, when she had first gotten back. Without her guidance or a way to contact Master Luke, Rey's first instinct had been to jump in a ship and chase Kylo until she caught up with him and got Finn back. Poe had only just managed to convince her to wait until the general returned before she did anything.

She needed to talk to her first, Poe had advised, to see what course of action General Organa thought best.

So she had waited.

And then she'd had the dream.

He'd told her where to find him. She found that that made her terrified.

It was a trap – one that he had more or less openly admitted to setting. Walking into it – even knowingly – could very likely be the death of her.

She knew she would do it.

*For Finn,* of course she would.

But there was a wild beating of her heart at the thought of willingly going to her own death, of being taken to a being who had no real form in her mind, but existed to her as a poison that had eaten away at hundreds of thousands of minds. At Kylo's mind. As much as she hated herself for it, she found the prospect of facing that on her own nearly paralyzing. So she waited for the general to get back.

No one on the base really knew what to do with her. She hadn't been around for very long the first time, and the lightsaber at her hip gave a lot of people pause. Mostly it was just in awe, but sometimes – sometimes they stepped back, as if they were afraid that she'd whip it out and kill them all.

She wondered how much Kylo Ren was to blame for that.

Mostly she stuck around Poe as he maintained his X-wing or did various little errands around the
base. He seemed grateful for the company. For all of his friendliness and easy-going charms, she could see the tension in his shoulders, staccato jerk of his hands as he worked.

He was just as worried as she was about Finn. It was a strange relief to know that she wasn't the only one.

“You wanna help?”

Poe was giving her a little smile from where he worked on the underbelly of his X-wing. It was just some basic maintenance, but a well-maintained fighter could mean the difference between life and death in an emergency.

She unfolded her legs from the crate she had perched on and accepted his offer without a second thought.

Working on things was simple, therapeutic. Parts had a designated function and a specific alignment. Things made sense. They didn't have exceptions, they were predictable. She knew machines. They were dependable.

Poe was silent beside her for a while as he double checked the fuel lines. She couldn't tell if she wished for him to strike up a conversation or if she was just happy for the companionship.

The knot in her chest tying her across the galaxy was silent, too, but that was her choice.

After a while, she noticed that Poe had stopped working. “Do you mind me asking something?” He asked when she gave him a quizzical look.

“No,” the look on his face made her a bit hesitant. She could tell that he'd been wanting to say something for a while, but figured it couldn't be good if it had taken him that long to work up to it. And she had a feeling she knew what he was going to ask, anyway.

“What happened after you crashed? I mean, you were gone a while. Were you running from the First Order the whole time?”

She almost physically recoiled, but managed to keep herself grounded with her hands still stuck in the inner workings of his X-wing. She looked away, studying the wires in her hands instead.

“No,” she wasn't quite sure of what to say, what she wanted to say. Mostly, she just didn't want to talk about it. “The First Order wasn't there. It was just-” she broke off with a weak shrug.

“Kylo Ren,” Poe finished for her. She nodded.

“You managed to stay away from him for a long time, that's really amazing.” She could tell he was trying tread carefully, trying to encourage her to say more.

A breathy scoff bubbled out of her. “I didn't.” She finally looked back at him, and his openly worried expression was the only thing that made her continue. “It just…wasn't like that. We didn't fight for most of the time.”

“You didn't?”

“We couldn't,” she corrected herself hastily, confused by her need to explain herself, to assure him of all of the ways in which Kylo Ren was still a monster to her. As if he could see-

“There was a woman there,” she lowered her voice so that she was sure he was the only one who
heard. “She was a Force-user.”

He frowned at her. “Like Luke Skywalker?”

Rey shook her head immediately. “No, nothing like him. She was terrifying.” She took a breath, “and she was trying to kill us. Both of us.”

Poe was silent for a long time as he appraised her. Finally, he asked, “So you worked together?”

Rey's heart was climbing into her throat, like the time she had been caught red-handed stealing an extra portion from one of the other scavengers. She couldn’t shake the feeling that she had just revealed that she'd done something wrong.

She pulled her hands out of the X-wing and looked down at her fingers, already splattered with grease and oil. In her dream, those hands had sent Kylo to his knees in pain. She closed her hands into fists.

“We used each other to survive, that's all.” Her voice came out quieter than she had intended.

“Are you sure that's all?”

The question surprised her, and she snapped her gaze up to meet Poe's. He was looking at her with a careful sort of neutrality, not unfriendly, just – cautious.

She dropped her hands to her sides. “Poe, I-“

Her words were cut off by the sound of a shuttle making its landing approach on the Tarmac. Immediately people started hurrying past, the pace of everything around them picking up like someone had turned on a light. Even if Rey hadn't been able to sense the aura of sad strength that she knew belonged to the general, there was only one person who caused such a commotion on the base when they arrived.

Their conversation forgotten, at least momentarily, Poe turned back towards her and jerked his head in the direction of the airstrip.

“Go ahead, I know the general will want to talk to you as soon as possible. I'll finish up here.”

Rey nodded, pausing only to wipe her hands on her pant legs before she ran outside to greet General Organa.

To greet the woman who had once-

Who had once been Kylo Ren’s mother. When he had had a different name.

The thought nearly made her falter in her step.

The general was too short to see over the cluster of people surrounding her, but that in and of itself told her where the older woman was. She didn't know whether or not she should approach them or just wait for the general to have a spare moment, but the collection of lesser generals, analysts and advisors parted ways as soon as she drew nearer, so she just continued forward.

And then she stood in front of a short woman with the weight of the galaxy on her shoulders. She had always seemed a marvel to Rey.

“Rey,” the general smiled and reached out to grasp her arms in a warm greeting that Rey gratefully returned. “I'm so glad to see you safe.”
Rey nodded, “Thank you, general.”

General Organa’s expression darkened, then, a somber hardness that Rey knew meant that she was going to get down to the point. “I need you to tell me about everything that happened. Can you do that?”

“Yes, general,” her reply was instantaneous, although she honestly wasn't sure. If she could barely admit what had happened with Poe, how much less could she admit to the mother of the man she’d spent days surviving with, fighting with – fighting against – all that had happened.

She still couldn’t shake the feeling that she had done something wrong. Like she had betrayed them.

She hadn't discovered any of his weaknesses.

All she could see was a pair of exposed, bloody wrists as he pressed bacta patches to them. His scowl at a fowl-tasting ration bar. The look on his face when she had come back to help him.

She didn't know anything – nothing that would help the Resistance.

But she still followed the general inside, answering questions as they walked, relaying the beginning of her story.

She didn't mention any of those details.

“And now he wants you to trade your life.”

General Organa’s office was far from what most would call extravagant – not that Rey had much experience with that. It was a large, well-organized space, but constantly filled with so many people and so many consoles and datapads that it always felt cramped.

Rey stood crammed in between two Resistance officers as she told her story. She didn't want to tell it in front of so many people, but the general thought that it was important, so she did. All she told them were the facts: she'd been stranded with Kylo Ren, they'd fought off a Force-user named Mother Talzin, and he'd kidnapped Finn so that she'd follow. She left out the difficult things – the important things – but apparently the story was more significant than she realized. Or at least the ending; none of them appeared to understand the parts about Mother Talzin very well, and they didn't seem to want to dwell on it.

But the part about Kylo wanting to set up and exchange clearly excited them. She could feel the anticipation thick in the room, and it confused her. She didn't like it.

“Yes,” she answered the general, her arms crossed to her chest so that she didn't brush up against anyone.

“This is a magnificent opportunity,” Admiral Statura spoke up from where he stood to General Organa’s right, “if we could find a way to use this trap against Kylo Ren, the Resistance could gain a massive advantage.”

Her reaction surprised her.

Working with the Resistance to take down Kylo was her best chance at getting Finn back. She knew that. Without them, she'd be going in alone, relying solely on Kylo's word that she wouldn't be killed
on sight, and that Finn would be returned to them alive.

But something in her rebelled at the idea that they wanted to turn it into a trap for Kylo.

Would they try to capture him so that they could make him reveal First Order secrets?

Or would they simply try and kill him, end the threat he posed right then and there?

His familial ties wouldn't be enough to save him. Either way, she knew that it'd likely end in his death. He was too stubborn for it not to.

Something tightened in her chest, a suffocating feeling that felt like something was trying to dislodge her lungs from around her heart. It almost felt like the string of their bond was trying to strangle her, only it wasn't that. The feeling came from herself. It was her own internal, personal reaction.

She opened her mouth to say something, to object somehow, but she didn't know what to say. It felt like she would be revealing a dark secret somehow, to voice a protest. What would that mean that she didn't want them to kill him? He was Kylo Ren, murderer of countless innocent people – of his own father – the only thing to do was kill him.

And if she said anything else, they might’ve thought that she was compromised on Dathomir. That he had influenced her somehow. The thought unsettled her, not because she was afraid that she had been compromised, but because of the possibility that they would think it.

A part of her mind wanted to defend her thoughts, to insist that she'd done nothing wrong. But the larger part was afraid that she had.

She didn't want him to die.

That was the truth, and it scared her. What it meant scared her.

She was saved from having to say anything when Admiral Ackbar spoke up, sounding somewhat skeptical. “And what sort of trap would you be suggesting, Admiral? Kylo Ren is no easy prey.”

“And this is doubtless a trap of his own,” another officer spoke up.

“He cannot simply be motivated by bringing one person to Snoke,” the officer to her left suggested, “there must be more to it than that, something else that the First Order wants.”

“No,” General Organa spoke up, drawing everyone's attention to her. Rey was surprised to find her steady gaze on her. “He's never been a liar,” her eyes flashed with a pained, far-off look that was gone in a moment, “if he says he just wants Rey, then that's what he means.”

All eyes on the room turned towards Rey, who found that she didn't like the attention at all. It was if they were studying her, trying to evaluate what could be so important about her that Kylo Ren of all people would be after her. It felt very much like the assessing glances some of the more wealthy traders used to give her at Niima Outpost when she'd offer to do some minor work in exchange for parts or provisions. I was a look that said, ‘I don't think you're good enough.’

“She's not the last of the Jedi,” Admiral Statura pointed out thoughtfully, as if he was thinking something through.


“No, he already tried that.”
“And he's apparently claiming that it's not him who wants her, but Snoke.”

“Then it's possible that he doesn't know why she's significant, either,” Admiral Ackbar stroked his chin.

All their talk was setting Rey on-edge. Their words felt oppressive, boxing her in and leaving her no room to breathe. They had seemingly forgotten that she was still there, and she wasn't sure if that relieved her or just made her angry.

After all, Kylo wanted her, not them. Shouldn't she have been a part of the discussion? Her own opinion taken into consideration, even if it felt traitorous in her own head?

General Organa listened to them a moment longer before she crossed her arms. “I find it unlikely that either of them consider Rey to hold some great importance to the First Order as a whole,” she arched an eyebrow, “and we don't have time to debate it in circles.”

Admiral Statura nodded. “Yes, you're right. We should focus on what we can do here.”

The officer to Rey's right shifted on his feet. “Are we considering laying out a trap for Kylo Ren?”

“We should,” the officer to her left spoke up, “this is too good an opportunity to pass up.”

“If for nothing else than to find out why the First Order is on Corellia,” Admiral Ackbar added. “We can't deny that they've been moving closer to the Core, and that can't be good.”

“But–he wouldn't know anything,” it took Rey a moment for her to realize that it was she who had spoken. At their blank gazes, she added somewhat hesitantly, “I mean. Uh, he was stranded on Dathomir same as I was. He wouldn't be up-to-date on their plans.”

“He's had plenty of time to get caught up,” Admiral Statura pointed out, “and Corellia is too essential a target for us to take chances. I agree with Ackbar, the First Order is getting too comfortable in Core space.”

“This is the best opportunity that's presented itself in a long time,” one of the officers in the corner said.

The general consensus was shifting down a path that Rey desperately didn't want to go. Sacrificing herself to save Finn was something she was prepared to do – planned to do. Finn was her best friend, and she'd been the one to get him into this whole mess. But letting the Resistance try and trap Kylo through her-

She wasn't going to let that happen.

No matter what he'd done, no matter how he had hurt her, she wasn't the same as him. She wasn't like that.

He'd saved her life, and she'd saved his – that meant something. It had to.

There had to be a better way. A way to make him see.

But he'd never be convinced of anything if she let them capture him; they'd question him and she wasn't fool enough to think that they would be morally objected to torture when it came to him. No matter who he used to be to General Organa, his actions had more than condemned him.

And she'd probably be kept away from him.
Unless he escaped – which he probably would, because she had faith in his strength if nothing else – in which case he’d more than likely end up killing people she cared about. She was absolutely certain about that, actually. Then he would’ve destroyed everything between them, and she’d have to kill him.

There was no right answer, she realized. No matter what happened, someone was going to get hurt. But she did have some control over who would be hurt.

She wouldn't let it be Finn – and she wouldn't let it be Kylo. Or anyone else she cared about.

That only left her.

―But we have to do this. Before he kills anyone else,‖ Admiral Ackbar was saying to the general, who was keeping perfectly still. Her movements were absolutely controlled as she turned to Admiral Statura.

‖It won't be difficult to get our men to Corellia,‖ the man nodded, ‖it's still technically under the New Republic’s control, despite any recent political speeches.‖

They were talking about logistics, Rey realized. They had already decided their course of action.

She started inching towards the door as quietly as possible. It wasn't hard; they'd mentally dismissed her a long time ago, and were discussing the details among themselves. This moment – right now – was the time to move if she planned on doing anything. Before they had a moment to solidify their plan and remember that they still needed her. Every moment she was there was a moment wasted.

She didn't want to betray the Resistance, and she told herself that she wasn't. But this wasn't about the Resistance. It was between her, Finn, and Kylo. Really her and Kylo. Not them. Dealing with it on her own wasn't going to hinder the Resistance’s fight against the First Order.

The general’s eyes found hers long before she made it out of the room. She knowingly held her gaze for a few long moments, as if to say ‘I see you, I know what you're going to do.’ And then she dipped her head in the smallest, minuscule nod.

A blessing.

Rey let out a shaky breath and gave a nod of her own. Then she didn't waste another moment. Moving silently past the rest of the officers, she slipped out of General Organa's office.

Finn’s ship had been moved since she had brought it in. It would've been her first choice of transportation to steal if only because she knew that no one else had been using it. But it was gone, so she's just have to find something else.

She stopped by her room only briefly to stuff a few personal items she'd need into a small pack. She only had what the Resistance had given her, so she didn't want to take more than she needed, just a change of clothes and a few hygienic products. It wasn't nearly enough to fill the pack, which hung mostly empty as she left the room.

The hangar wasn't far from the room they had given her. Most people were in the mess having their evening meal, so the large space was mostly empty, with only a few pilots or mechanics here and there. It was the closest she'd get to perfect timing.
She froze. This was where she'd have to choose a ride. Her heart called out to the rows of X-wings, yearning to take one up and see how they flew, not just in the simulators but really. If she hadn't needed space for a passenger, she would've.

“Rey? What are you doing?”

Her head snapped to the side to see Poe approaching her with a warm but confused look on his face. He was wiping his hands off with a dirty rag.

“Oh,” she forced her expression into a neutral smile, “nothing. I wasn't doing anything. Are you just finishing up?”

His eyes flashed to the pack slung over her shoulder. “Yeah, I was about to go eat. Are you going somewhere?”

She crossed her arms. “Nope.”

He stared at her for a moment.

“Rey, has anyone ever told you that you're a bad liar?” He cocked his eyebrow.

A frown spread on her face, but she just tilted her chin up and didn't say anything.

Poe sighed and stuffed his rag in his back pants pocket. “What are you going to do?” He asked, sounding resigned.

For a moment she considered just continuing to feign ignorance, but knew that it was no use. Tugging on the strap of her pack, she admitted, “I'm going to save Finn.”

...And-

He regarded her for a long moment, a very serious look on his face. Then he nodded, “Count me in.”

She blinked.

“Really?”

“Of course. Finn's my friend, too,” he spoke with conviction, “I don't know why you're going alone, but you shouldn't and you can tell me the story on the way. You probably don't need me, but I want to go.”

For a moment she almost wanted to cry. Good people like Poe, like Finn, they deserved so much more than what they got. A smile broke across her face.

“Okay,” she nodded. “Do you have any suggestions?” She gestured towards the rows of ships sitting in the hangar.

He spared them only a brief glance. “Yeah, I do,” he smiled, then patted her on the shoulder. “Come on, let's go save our friend.”

She nodded gladly.

She followed his lead as he started to make his way across the hangar, walking like they had somewhere to be – which they did. But a sound – something between a breath and a voice – made Rey stumble in her step. The hairs on her neck stood on-end as she spun around, trying to find the source of the noise.
It was familiar, almost. Something that she’d heard before. It made her stomach drop.

But she didn't hear it again.

After a moment, she turned back around and jogged to catch up to Poe.

When she slept, she dreamed that she was in half a spaceship as it floated through the blackness of space. The edges were frayed and sparking, as if it had been torn in two.

There was nothing – no other presence but her own. As she gazed out into the void, she wondered where the other half of the ship had gone.

She tried calling out, but no one answered.

It felt terrifyingly empty.

Chapter End Notes

Have I ever mentioned how awesome you guys are? Because you are. Like, wow, you guys are amazing! Thank you for being you.

And thus the Resistance makes its first 'official' appearance. And Leia! And Poe!

Sorry this chapter took so long. What happened was that I wrote a whole chunk of it, and then threw it out because it wasn't going where it apparently needed to go. So, yeah. For example, Poe wasn't supposed to be going with Rey, but he is now, so that's something.

Also, a *tiny* bit of foreshadowing here.

On to the next chapter!
“Master of the Knight of Ren. Why do you continually prove yourself to be a failure?”

It was the first time since he had left for Dathomir that Kylo stood in audience with his master, who was projected through a hologram at least three meters tall to the Finalizer’s private communications chamber dedicated solely to contacting the leader of the First Order.

He had forgotten what it felt like to feel his physical form when his master spoke to him, to have to keep himself still and under control.

It was... different.

“Supreme Leader, I have a plan—“

“How is your plan to let the scavenger into your reach only to let her escape yet again?” The leader of the First Order cut him off, sounding unimpressed. “Is it to succumb to your pathetic weakness for her once more?”

He tried to keep his breathing even, standing still as a statue.

“I don’t have a weakness for her,” he insisted.

A sneer grew at the side of the hologram’s twisted mouth. Kylo swallowed. “This is an old conversation, is it not? You remain stubborn in your ways, Kylo Ren, determined to fail me at every turn.”

Kylo’s response was immediate and without hesitation. “All I wish to do is serve you.”

“How?” His master snapped, and suddenly it felt as if his body was being flayed alive and burned from the inside out. He doubled over in pain, his knees hitting the metal deck hard. Pain overtook his mind, blotting out everything but Snoke and pure agony.

You are the weakest link in your family, Snoke’s voice hissed through his head, I am the only one who can make you strong—strong enough to deserve your lineage. And yet you’d sabotage your single chance at worth by falling to a simple scavenger, again and again.

Perhaps you’ve forgotten what true power feels like, the hologram flickered, allow me to remind you.

And then Kylo screamed.

It went on for hours, days, weeks, it didn’t matter. Time was meaningless; it just never seemed to end.

When it finally did end, he was left a quaking, bloody mess on his hands and knees. He didn’t even remember clawing at his arms, tearing his skin through two layers of fabric. Blood slowly oozed down his forearms and splattered on the floor, tiny crimson pricks.

“I grow impatient, Kylo Ren.” The Supreme Leader spoke in the manner of someone long suffering, a disappointed father. “Will you get the girl for me?”
He only hesitated a moment. “Yes.”

“And the object?”

“Yes.”

The hologram leaned back, comfortable. “Good,” he nodded, “remember my lesson. You are nothing–I am the only one who can show you the way.”

He nodded, still down on his hands and knees. He couldn’t tear his eyes away from the sight of his own blood. He didn’t want his master to see the weakness in his eyes. “Yes.”

“And the scavenger?” The Supreme Leader asked again.

“I will bring her to you,” Kylo promised.

That apparently wasn't good enough. “What is her worth?” His master snapped.

Kylo finally pushed himself up onto his haunches, straightening enough to look up at the Supreme Leader. “Only what you give her.”

For a long moment the hologram was silent, the Supreme Leader just regarded Kylo with a cool expression. He felt him in his head, riffling through all of his thoughts for a sign of – something. Her.

Weakness.

It wasn't pleasant, but he managed not to flinch, even when Snoke ripped his presence out of his head with more force than was necessary.

“Go,” the Supreme Leader said, “I tire of you.”

The hologram flickered off, leaving Kylo alone in the communications chamber. It was always dark, but the loss of the light from the hologram almost made Kylo feel blinded.

He allowed himself a minute to steady his breathing and calm himself down.

He shouldn't have delayed; he should've just apprehended her and gotten it over with. She had caused this, the reprimand from his master. Because of her, he was weak. She was the cause of all of it.

Except that he found he didn't want to blame her.

Instead, he reached cautiously across heir bond. If he could just feel the brush of her mind, know hat she was still there for just a second-

But their bond was silent, and he was left on his own, kneeling with bloody arms in a dark room.

Corellia’s skyscrapers glistened with the day’s last remaining light, beacons of red and orange fire in Kylo's periphery. Many people considered Coronet City to be a beautiful place, a capital of industry and progress that had retained a certain scenic beauty that other major cities in the Core had lost. It had all of the luxuries comparable to the endless city of Coruscant, only with the added beauty of rolling hills and snow-capped mountains in the far-off distance.
It was all very picturesque, in its own streamlined way.

That picturesque gleam just gave Kylo a headache.

Hux had tried to insist that some of his officers accompany him down to the surface, but Kylo had flat out refused. Just the thought of being crammed in the same shuttle with a handful of those mini-Huxes made his hair stand on-end. The general himself wasn't due to make a trip to the surface for another three standard days, so he wanted to send a few officers ahead of him to finish preparations. Kylo had told him to send them in his own damn shuttle, and had left it at that.

He needed those short few days without Hux or anyone connected to him; without him, he would have a significantly easier time setting preparing for a certain scavenger.

His jaw clenched at the memory of Snoke’s punishment, at all the agony inflicted because of her. He hadn't seen her since the dream where she had brought him to his knees like some pathetic fool.

Where he had seen just how much he had hurt her – how much he could hurt her.

He hadn't meant to, not like that-

It didn't matter. Shutting down that line of thought, he stalked down the ramp of the generic shuttle he'd been forced to use for the sake of secrecy. His own shuttle was far too recognizable to be flying in and out of one of the galaxy's most important New Republic cities. He kept his eyes locked firmly ahead of him, on the pointless fountain in the center of the airpad and a sleek building just beyond with the letters ‘S’ and ‘I’ protruding from the side.

The city threw him off-kilter just by being there, and thinking of her only served to make it worse. He knew that he'd have to focus solely on what he was doing while he was there: he couldn't let himself get swept up in his weaknesses.

She was coming to him. He could feel it, feel their bond start to relax infinitesimally as every second brought them closer together. He found himself dwelling on it, constantly aware of the feeling within his chest, as if someone had gripped his heart and was only just starting to release it. He felt bound to it.

It made him furious that he had become so twisted up in her – angry because his master saw it so clearly, angry because it hadn't been like that before, and angry because he seemed to be far more dependent on the feeling than she was.

He felt pathetic.

And yet-

He didn't have much time before she arrived – only about a full standard cycle, he guessed. He needed to pick a place for them to have their confrontation, a place that would meet all of his criteria while maintaining easy access to the shuttle. He knew if he brought the traitor to her he'd lose all chance of getting her to come with him; he'd have to bring her to FN-2187 instead. That way she would already be in his custody. Releasing the traitor was a simple matter once he got her on-board the Finalizer; he'd simply have the man dropped off planet-side, and then hopefully never see him again.

He wasn't going to kill him.

At first that had been the plan. But she had given him a look of total disbelief when he told her that he wouldn't hurt the traitor. Just the thought of that look – when she had given him a look of
something so close to trust before – made him go rigid, his hands clenching into fists at his sides.

He wouldn't do that to her.

He had hurt her and she had had to shake it out of him. Even as he promised that no harm would come to FN-2187 if she just came to him, he had been lying. He'd already laid hands on the traitor, and the man's bruised face was the evidence.

There was no right answer when it came to her, he decided. No matter what he did, no matter how far he tried to bend, he still ended up hurting her. Hurting because of her.

Maybe not wanting to fight her had been cowardice.

But still – he didn't regret not harming her, not like that.

“Lord Ren, welcome to Startask Industries,” a short, well-groomed man led the welcoming precession that greeted Kylo as he approached the building. Startask Industries was a company that mostly served as a front for the First Order’s operations on the planet; they dealt with everything from political bribes to the transportation of raw materials. Kylo hadn't ever heard of the company until right before he’d left the Finalizer, as Hux had deemed it necessary that he be told, as if he was the one who decided what he knew.

Kylo hated it all already. He hated being on this stinking planet, he hated the fact that the First Order had a public face that he had to deal with, he hated that he'd been out of the action for so long and was yet still trying to find more ways to avoid a fight, and he hated that Rey was still blocking him out.

He wanted to destroy something, and he had no patience for a greeting committee.

“My name is Tarc Lan, and it's a great pleasure to-“

“You know why I'm here, cut to the chase,” he didn't even slow as he swept past the well-groomed man, who immediately scrambled to walk with him.

“Ah, yes. Well actually, I'm afraid I wasn't given much information as to the nature of your visit, Lord Ren.” The man was trying to sound cool and confident, but Kylo could feel the man's fear rolling off of him in cloying waves.

It only caused his contempt for the man to grow. “Are you kept informed about the local Resistance movements?” He snapped.

“The Resistance?” The man sounded as if the question was more odd than anything else, “Not exactly, sir.”

Kylo stopped in his tracks, finally turning his gaze to Lan. “Are you incompetent?”

The question obviously greatly offended the man, who gathered to his full and unimpressive height and puffed his chest out. “With all due respect, the New Republic is a much greater concern for us this deep into the Core. If they were to discover-“

“I don't care about your political squabbles. The Resistance is a bigger threat than the New Republic could ever hope to be.” Kylo stepped into the man's personal space, looming over him so that he had to crane his head to look Kylo in the mask. “Thanks to you, their presence here has likely flourished unchecked.”
He didn't need this. The last thing he wanted to deal with was incompetent management. But he decided he'd leave that to Hux, who he knew didn't like it any more than he did.

Lan kept opening and closing his mouth, as if he could possibly have anything intelligent to say.

“Lord Ren-“

Kylo cut him off, straightening. “Unfortunately for you, General Hux is due to visit. You'll have to save your pathetic excuses for him.”

He turned and swept down the hall, ignoring the thick air of tension that had swept over Startask’s entire greeting committee. What he needed was a fully-enclosed speeder so that he could travel to and from Startask’s compound without being recognized. It ate at his patience to take such precautions, but secrecy was still essential for the First Order on Corellia – at least for the moment – and due to Lan’s total ineptitude he had no idea how much Resistance activity was in the area. He was trying to lure Rey to him, not the entire Resistance.

If she had any sense, she'd bring them despite his warnings.

But a part of him – a disgustingly soft, bleeding part larger than he cared to admit – hoped that she'd trust him enough to come alone.

It was part of the weakness that the Supreme Leader had evidently failed to rid him of.

Lan was saying something, Kylo realized, struggling to keep up with his long gait as he strode through the reception halls of the industrial compound. The décor was sleek and stereotypical for a major corporation, about as forgettable as the man beside him.

“...what it is you desire from Startask, and we'll make it happen for you. After all, we Corellians are a dependable people.”

He slowed to a stop, turning to give him the blank face of his mask. A sudden urge to run the man through with his lightsaber struck him, to just slice him to pieces. He just barely bothered to contain himself.

“Corellians are dependable,” he repeated slowly, not attempting to hide the sheer contempt from his voice, “are they also arrogant, weak, and foolish?”

His deadpan tone seemed to freeze the shorter man, who just stared up at him. He let him fester in his deepening fear and confusion for another moment before he added in a clipped tone, “I need a speeder, enclosed, for my personal use.”

The man's mouth opened a few seconds before any real words came out. “O-of course, Lord Ren. If you'll please just wait here, I'll get the authorization key for one of our company speeders and escort you to the airpad myself.”

He wanted to tell the man to just give him the authorization key and leave, but he didn't have a datapad on him. Lan disappeared around the corner with the pace of someone trying not to look like they were running away. It made him look ridiculous, although that wasn't hard. He returned only a moment later with a small datapad in his hands.

“The airpad is that way,” the man pointed, letting Kylo lead the way, “the Western entrance leads directly to it.”

Kylo turned without another word. The sooner he got to a speeder, the sooner he would get away
from Lan and his pathetic attempts at corporate charm.

Plus, the sooner he prepared for Rey, the better. He could still feel his tether to her relaxing more and more with each passing moment. That feeling like anticipation started to grow in his chest once more, but he stamped it back down.

She was still angry at him. He reached out across their bond as if to prove it to himself, brushing up against the apparently impenetrable wall of her defenses.

It didn't surprise him anymore, but he felt more and more upset every time he was met with silence on her end.

He didn't know why he still tried.

But it wasn't like this was going to last forever; eventually, she would have to drop her defenses. Their connection – it wasn't something that she could just turn off for an undefined amount of time.

She couldn't stop it.

Not unless she killed him.

The airpad was filled with luxurious speeders of all shapes and sizes, all of them a sleek black color. At least he wouldn't be flying something bright yellow.

“This one to the right, if you please, Lord Ren,” Lan gestured toward a LUX-3 landspeeder parked to the side. It looked practical enough, and the top was covered in tinted transparisteel, which was the important thing.

“Is it to your liking?” The shorter man asked.

“It'll do.”

The man sounded a little relieved. “Alright, very good. I'll just authorize you–there. Feel free to use it for the remainder of your visit, as a gesture from us at Startask Industries.”

Kylo just turned back to look at the man, who looked like he had more than gotten the hint.

“Please, contact me if you need anything,” he said as he started to walk backwards.

“The Resistance,” Kylo said. “Put your men to use and get me information actually worth something.”

The man didn't stop in his slow retreat. “Yes, Lord Ren. Absolutely. I'll get you an intelligence report immediately.”

Kylo didn't bother watching him go. He climbed into the driver's seat and started up the speeder. He already had an idea of where he wanted to confront her, but he wanted to scope it out. Just in case.

Perhaps that was the first thing she’d do once she saw him again – try and kill him.

Would she want to do it? She had been devastated in the dream, and he was the one who had done that to her. It would make sense if she wanted him to pay.

But she hadn't fought him – truly fought him – for a long time. She was always trying to talk to him, to convince him of her naïve worldview. She didn't act like she wanted to kill him.
She was beginning to act as if she wanted to-

That line of thought made him distinctly uncomfortable and irritated, so he quickly shut it down.

And even worse was the thought of what he was sure the Resistance would make her do. He was beyond certain that even if she personally didn't want to kill him, they would want her to. They might even possess the means to make her do so.

Rage boiled in his gut at the thought – her, the slave to some self-proclaimed saviors-

*You sound like a slave.*

His grip tightened on the steering, his leather gloves squeaking under the pressure.

Unrealistically, moronically, he reached out to her one more time, just to be sure that she hadn't chosen that moment to let down her defenses. Even though he knew without a shadow of a doubt that he'd know when she did, because there was a small crevice carved into his brain where a part of her had occupied. It wasn't like the dark box his master had made of his subconscious – it was just an indentation, a tiny crater where now only she fit.

But there was nothing.

*Of course,* he thought. He hadn't been expecting anything different.

He just wished.

He told her his thoughts when he dreamed, that she wouldn't be able to keep up her defenses forever.

They were both lying side-by-side on their backs in one of the tunnel systems like on Dathomir. Stars were scattered across the ceiling, a detail that Kylo hadn't noticed before but somehow seemed a little off, a little *not right.*

She didn't say anything for a long time. He found himself itching to move closer, to see if she was still there, but in the dream he couldn't move.

“You don't have the right,” she finally said, “to act sad about this. This is *your* fault.”

His master’s warning came back to him, the accusation that he always fell when it came to her.

He swallowed. “Do you still not want to be enemies?”

Again, she was silent. He began to think that she might not answer, and he was partly grateful for it.

Then she whispered, “I don't want to be your enemy, Kylo.”

He squeezed his eyes shut, but the stars still shone like little pinpricks behind his eyelids. It was a stupid question, and one he shouldn't have asked. It only made things worse.

“I want to see you,” the admission felt like swallowing a rock.

“You will,” she said, but it sounded ominous. Finally he was able to turn his head, and he found her already looking at him. The circles under her eyes were worse than before, and he frowned.

After a moment, her eyebrows pulled down low, her eyes flickering across his face. “Your ears are bleeding.”
Confused, he brought his hand up to brush up against his ear, only to find blood flowing freely from it. He was bleeding from his other ear, too. Crimson covered his bare hands, and he stared at them.

*It wasn't every day that he washed his hands in his own blood, instead of that of small children.*

He froze, confused at the thought that didn't quite sound like him.

A small gasp brought his attention back to her as she started to reach out to him. “And your arms—what happened to your arms?”

Blood streaked down his forearms as well, his skin and sleeves torn like ribbons.

“I did that,” he said.

She looked horrified. “You did?”

He nodded, then shook his head, trying to regain control of his thoughts. He felt as if he was on top of a giant mouth, and it was getting ready to open up and swallow him whole.

“You should move,” he told her, urgency coloring his tone.

But she just looked angry and confused. “What?”

He tried to push her away, but she just grabbed ahold of his bloodied wrists and held herself closer. “Kylo,” she struggled against him as he tried to wrest his limbs back to himself, to shove her away, “what's wrong?”

He didn't have a chance to answer before the mouth beneath him started opening, it's sharp teeth dragging against his legs and back. He gasped in pain as it tore his skin apart.

But she didn't seem to feel anything – she didn't seem to see anything. There was no mouth under her.

It was just him.

He looked down to see that the back of the mouth opened up into an abyss filled with a yawning emptiness. Then it became him who was holding onto her.

*It's going to eat me,* he thought, or maybe he said.

He started getting dragged down between the rows of teeth. “I want to see you,” he said again, because he felt like he wasn't going to get to.

She was just going to leave the cave and he'd be swallowed by the floor.

“You will,” she repeated, and it sounded more like a promise. “Kylo, you need to wake up. If this is a nightmare, you need to wake up.”

But he understood. He wasn't getting pulled down into a nightmare, he was getting dragged down into the black box of his mind where his master dwelled.

Snoke wasn't done with his lesson.

“Kylo—“

His hands were too bloody. He slipped out of Rey's grip, and then he was gone.
Well, Kylo's starting to get on some hot water.

Dreams play a slightly larger part in the upcoming events, but I'm going to try and keep it down to a minimum because this isn't a fic about shared dreaming, haha. It's just that the way that their bond works; to make up for a lack of physical closeness, their bond throws them together in dreams.

Holy cow. It's already May. I've been writing this thing for almost four months! And you guys have stuck with me! You're all amazing.
“What’s on your mind?”

The question startled her. Rey jerked upright in the copilot seat, tearing herself out of her thoughts. Poe watched her from where he sat in the pilot’s seat.

She knew from her experience with sims that Neimoidian escort shuttles were a no-brainer to fly. Poe could most likely fly them in his sleep, even with the awful shape the shuttle they had stolen was in. It was practically half scrap and older than the New Republic, which she was sure was why they had stolen it; no one would miss the pile of junk.

There was a glint in his eye that she was petty sure was a sign of agitation and sheer boredom. His eyebrow quirked at her reaction. “Sorry, didn’t mean to startle you.”

She blinked. “No, you’re fine. I was just daydreaming, I guess.”

“About anything in particular?”

She had been thinking about Kylo – about the dreams, what he had done to both her and Finn, and what he had promised Snoke he would do. She was thinking about how he was waiting for her on the Core world of Corellia, waiting to make a trade that would likely get her killed.

He didn’t want to hurt her. She felt it – knew it in her heart to be the truth.

Yet he was going to deliver her to his master, whom she knew would kill her for standing against him. There was no way that Kylo didn’t know. His compliance was absolute, regardless of whatever else he’d said.

He claimed that what he wanted didn't matter.

Then there were the dreams. She hated them, in some ways, because she couldn't keep him out of them. He was always there, their souls sewn together in moments of unconsciousness. His was an unshakable presence that reminded her too much of their time on Dathomir, when she had had no one but him.

In the dreams, it was still like that.

Only it was different, because their minds bled together too much for her to ignore how warped everything around him was becoming. She couldn't ignore the pain that Snoke inflicted, and she knew it was that monster that did it. She felt like Kylo was trapped, too – like she was going to Corellia to save Finn, but she was also going to help him, too.

It was complicated, except for the fact that it wasn't.

He reached out to her in the dreams. She wondered if he realized just how much.

She was still angry, but-

A part of her yearned to reach back.
“No, not really.”

He gave her a look, but didn't outright contradict her. “Thinking about Finn?” Was all he asked.

Guilt churned in her gut. Of course she was thinking about Finn, but Kylo had told her that if she came to him, nothing bad would happen to her friend. She felt insanely foolish for even thinking that she trusted him – trusted his word – but she did. There was just no way she could admit it to Poe out loud.

So she just gave a weak nod. At her noncommittal response, Poe sighed.

“I just hate to think of what they're doing to him. My stay wasn't so pleasant, but I've got a feeling that it was a vacation compared to how they treat ‘traitors’ like him.”

Rey frowned. She had never asked about when he had been captured on Jakku, back when she'd still been a scavenger and the ‘First Order’ and ‘Resistance’ had been words for far-off stories. Finn had mentioned Poe's capture during one of their holocalls, but she had never gotten the first-hand account. At first, it had been because she didn't want to hear about something that was probably so similar to her own experience as a captive of the First Order, but – faced with the opportunity, she found that she didn't want to know what Kylo had done.

How merciless had he been?

She knew the answer, really.

But she'd never ignored what he'd done before, and she wasn't about to let herself start.

So she swallowed and asked, “What did he do to you? Kylo Ren, I mean.”

The question seemed to surprise him a little. He frowned, taking his time to respond as he ran a hand through his hair. Rey felt her heart lodge itself in her throat at the gesture, although not because of Poe.

“At first, it wasn't him who interrogated me,” Poe admitted. “They stuck to the usual–sharp, blunt, hot, cold, and loud. You know. Your five basic torture groups.” He lifted a shoulder in a smooth half-shrug, but Rey knew better. She saw how his hands gripped each other so tightly his knuckles turned white.

Instantly, she felt horrible for asking.

“If you don't want to talk about it-”

“It's fine,” he shook his head, “talking things through is important. It's therapeutic, or so I'm told.”

She didn't say anything, just waited as he leaned forward in his chair.

“I wasn't very cooperative,” he said with a small chuckle, although it was little more than a breath, “and eventually they must've called him in, because one minute I was being interrogated and the next I was face-to-face with Kylo Ren.”

Rey forced herself to breathe as he fell silent, a frown etched into his face. She felt furious that Kylo had tortured one friend and kidnapped another. He'd killed the first man to ever really feel like a father to her and broke the heart of the strongest woman she knew.

He hurt everything she loved, it seemed.
It was as if he couldn't help himself.

“He was pissed off, I could tell–kind of snarky. Spent all of two seconds talking to me before he tore through my head with his powers.” Poe rubbed his forehead as if simply the memory was enough to conjure a headache. “It felt like he was physically ripping my brain apart. I didn't even really know what he was doing, only that it hurt.”

He leaned back in his chair, letting go of the tension in his limbs with a sigh. Then he looked away from her, studying the shuttle’s controls with a blank look that made Rey’s heart go out to him. “He got the information from me. Like I had told him myself.”

“I'm sorry,” she said softly, at a loss for how to respond. It wasn't as if she was responsible for Kylo's actions – she hadn't even known him then – but she still felt like she should say it, if only because she knew that no one else ever would. She had been wrong; it didn't sound anything like her experience, and that made her feel even worse.

His gaze shifted back towards hers, and the smile that grew on Poe's face was warm and kind. “You're a good person, Rey.”

She didn't feel like a good person. But she tried to return the smile.

“You never told me what it was like,” he shifted gears so suddenly it startled her, although his tone was the same, “being stranded with him.”

She leaned back a little, pressing her lips into a thin line. Nothing had changed from the time when he had asked her in the hanger the other day; she still didn't want to talk about that. But he had opened up about being literally tortured, so she figured she could do nothing else but oblige.

“What do you want to know?” She asked carefully.

Poe thought for a minute, running his hand over his jaw. She got the feeling that he was trying to decide which questions to ask instead of actually being at a loss for anything to say. It made her all the more uneasy.

“Anything you're willing to tell me, I guess,” he said finally.

She didn't even know what to say, where to start. “We-“ she hesitated, deliberating, “our lightsabers were stolen, and then we got chased around by a giant monster. After that is when we stopped trying to kill each other. Or, that's when I stopped trying to kill him, anyway.”

He was listening intently. “How many times did he try to kill you?”


“Did you guys ever…interact?”

She frowned at how intent he seemed. “What do you mean?”

He shrugged, “I mean, did you ever try and talk to him? Or him to you? He never found Luke Skywalker, did he try and get his location out of you again? Or anything at all, really. Did you talk?”

There was something about what he was asking – or maybe how he was asking. “Are you getting at something in particular?”

For a moment he didn't respond. He just studied her with that same neutral look that she was quickly
coming to suspect meant he was thinking something that he didn't want her to know.

“You get defensive every time someone talks to you about him,” was all he said.

She kept her jaw wired shut for a moment, and she couldn't seem to open it. “What?” She finally choked out.

Of course she knew what. It was probably just as she'd feared; Poe thought that she'd been corrupted, that Kylo had turned her to his side in some way, that she'd grown to view him as something other than an enemy-

But she had.

Force help her, she didn't think of him as an enemy at all.

It wasn't a realization so much as a resignation.

He mattered to her.

She just wished that no one else had to know. The thought sat in her chest like a heavy stone, a great betrayal to everyone she loved. Finn, Poe – Han. All of the people Kylo had hurt or killed. He was still a monster to them, a man with a coal black heart and ice in his veins. And yet there she was, harboring feelings of…well, she didn't know what, exactly.

She was terrified for him. She was still furious at him.

But mostly she just felt an undeniable need to see him – to let him explain himself in person. To make him explain himself.

It was just – how could she explain any of that to Poe?

“No, I don’t.”

Poe's eyebrows rose on his forehead. “Actually, yeah, you do, Rey. Don't get me wrong, I'm not accusing you of anything,” he said quickly when she opened her mouth to defend herself, “but it just strikes me as…I don't know, odd.”

She was thankful that Poe wasn't Force sensitive, because otherwise she was sure he'd be able to sense her thundering heartbeat. “Poe, you sound like you're accusing me of something,” she tried to keep her tone calm, her voice level.

For a moment he just stared. “Well,” he sighed, running his hand down his face, “actually, maybe I am. Sort of.”

Her heart stopped dead in her chest.

“Maybe you don't really know what you're doing,” he continued.

The sputtering continued in her chest, her pulse so loud in her ears that she almost didn't hear him. “Of course I know what I'm doing,” she insisted, crossing her arms. She was starting to get confused as to where he was going with his line of thought; it was obviously about whatever her feelings for Kylo were, but he was being infuriatingly vague about it.

Poe dropped his hand and straightened in his seat, becoming Poe the Resistance Pilot instead of Poe Her Friend. She felt her own posture stiffen in response.
“Kylo Ren is known to have very strong mental abilities—you and I both know that. It's entirely possible that he was able to alter your mind at some point when you were marooned. Even just a small thought, if he did it right, would shift your view of him and start to twist your mind. You wouldn't even know it happened.”

Rey couldn't stop her jaw from dropping. That was—

“Ridiculous,” she snapped, angry all at once. The panic in her chest solidified in an instant, making her incensed. She made to stand up, then reconsidered it. “I am not Kylo’s pawn.”

Then she added as an afterthought, “And how do you know so much about that, anyway?”

His gaze was steady, professional. “I had motivation to look into it.”

Her indignation was dampened somewhat by his words, but he was still being absurd. It was like what she had been afraid of; he thought that her time with Kylo had corrupted her. Although she was surprised at how easy it was to turn her mortification into anger. She pushed herself out of the copilot’s seat with a huff, moving around it to stand in front of him.

“There is no way in the galaxy that Kylo managed to—implant some nice thoughts about himself in my head.” She rested her fists on her hips, “that's crazy.”

“It's not impossible.”

“Don't you think that I'd know if someone was messing around in my head?” She demanded with a scoff.

Poe never broke her gaze. “So what—are you admitting to me that your feelings about him have just changed on their own?”

She crossed her arms to hide the sudden discomfort she felt clawing in her lungs. “I don't know what you're talking about,” she insisted.

Groaning, Poe let his Resistance façade fall and he once more became her friend as he slumped back against his seat, rubbing his eyes with his fingers. “Kylo Ren is a monster, Rey. Whatever he was before is gone. He's no longer capable of any goodness.”

““I know that—“ she spoke up quickly, more eager to agree with him than concerned if she actually believed his words. Which she did, in theory.

He'd done awful things, and he'd purposely killed whoever it was he used to be as a boy. But—

“Do you?” He sighed and shook his head. “I've been in this fight a lot longer than you have, Rey. I've seen what he can do. He's a destroyer.”

Something flickered in her chest – she felt her tether to him as clearly as she ever did, pulling her onwards to where he was. That alone – she knew he felt the absence of their mental connection as strongly as she did. She knew that he missed it.

Any person who was just a destroyer wouldn't care about that.

But she couldn't bring herself to talk to Pos about their connection – not then, when she was sure anything she said would make it look like something Kylo had done.

He was admittedly the one most responsible for their bond. It just seemed like eons ago, and she no
longer begrudged him for it. Out of all the things he'd done to hurt her, she wasn't angry that he had solidified their bond.

“His mother doesn't seem to have given up on him,” she pointed out.

Poe's expression turned sad. “I know. But whatever he's done, he's General Organa's only son. No matter the truth, I don't think she'll ever give up on him.” He reached out and laid his hand on her arm. “Rey, I just don't want you to become another casualty in the wake of dead people that Kylo Ren leaves behind him everywhere he goes.”

What was she supposed to say to that? His admission drained the last of her anger like sand through her fingers. But there was nothing that she could say or do to comfort him; almost as if to emphasize her point, she felt a tiny jolt run across her and Kylo's bond. She felt those every now and again, when he tried to reach across their closed connection.

She was almost surprised at how often it was.

At her silence, Poe let his hand drop. “We already lost Finn, and now I've got this feeling that you plan on jumping head-first into the ranchor's den. I don't want to lose you, too.”

“We haven't lost Finn yet,” she insisted, reaching down and giving Poe's hand a quick squeeze. “We'll get him back, I promise.”

“At the cost of you?” Moving to sit back down in her seat, she could feel the weight of his eyes on her.

She hesitated, glancing over at him. “I don't plan on dying.” It was the truth – or most of it, anyway. She didn't plan on dying before she got Finn back to safety, before she tried to talk to Kylo in person. But Snoke was another matter; if she was going to be forced before him, she would take the opportunity to try and take him out.

_Do or die trying._

But she wasn't going to tell Poe that – or anyone, really – so she just tried to assure him with a small smile. “Let's save our friend and worry about Kylo Ren later.”

Poe snorted humorlessly, but turned to face the shuttle's controls once more. “I don't think that plan will work out very well. After all, he's the bastard who _took_ our friend.”

She didn't say anything to that.

The night before, she had dreamed that Kylo was eaten by the ground. That night, Rey found that she couldn't sleep. Poe slept in the bunk directly below her, out like a light as soon as his head hit his pillow. She envied him. She was unable to close her eyes long enough to let her body rest, her limbs restless and her head pounding.

It was because of Kylo – she knew it was, in more ways than one.

That last dream they had shared had been a nightmare. But it hasn't started out that way. She could imagine the stars in the cave as clearly as if she was still looking at them.

He had told her that he wanted to see her again.

Well, of course he did – he needed to fulfill his promise to Snoke. It didn't mean anything. But then
he'd said it *again*, right before the ground had opened up and swallowed him whole.

It was *terrifying*, because it hadn't just been a nightmare. It had been *him* being eaten alive. She didn't know any other way to explain it; it just felt very *real* to her.

She wondered what he was doing.

Then she wanted to laugh at herself, because she knew what he was doing. He was waiting on Corellia, waiting to take her to his master, probably making any finishing touches in his inevitable trap. Planning, lurking. Trying to get back inside her head.

She didn't want to think about it anymore, she just wanted to *sleep*.

But of course, she couldn't.

Climbing down from her bunk without waking Poe was a bit tricky since she had to place her foot on the edge of his bed, but she managed. He didn't even stir, for which she was grateful.

She thought maybe the rolling blues and whites of hyperspace travel might calm her nerves enough to sleep, so she made her way back to the cockpit and slumped down into the copilot’s chair. The colors streamed by outside the viewport, soundless except for the soft thrum of the shuttle’s engine.

It was beautiful.

But it didn't help her sleep.

She knew what it was, deep down, that kept her awake. Or rather, she had an idea.

It was her and Kylo's bond. The effort it took to keep it locked tight was growing more difficult after so long, but that wasn't the problem. The problem was that it almost *hurt*. Blocking his mind for so long was starting to feel like twisting her own teeth out of her mouth. It felt unnatural, like she was forcibly trying to stop the sand from shifting.

Did it feel the same for him, she wondered, or was she only doing it to herself?

She leaned her head back and kept very still, trying to focus on her breathing, on calming her reaction to keeping Kylo out. For a moment, it worked.

And then it didn't.

It wouldn't be long until they reached Corellia, only a few more hours. Then she'd have to confront him again. She needed to be at full strength when she did so, not in pain and drained of all her energy. She wouldn't stand a chance, even if he did just want to talk. Finn was *counting* on her.

So after a long moment of deliberation, she did something incredibly stupid – she relaxed her defenses.

Little by little, she tore down the wall she had erected between their minds, trying to be as subtle as possible. She knew it'd be no use, that as soon as he realized that she was no longer keeping him out he'd bombard her senses, but she still tried to be as mentally quiet as possible.

When she had dropped them fully, the relief was immediate. She couldn't help the shaky sigh that escaped her, and for a moment she allowed herself to just sit there and *feel* their connection as it had been, strong and steady and more reassuring than she remembered.

More than she wanted to admit.
But there was no rush of Kylo's consciousness, no sudden push into her mind. He was still there, but he wasn't invasive or even overly present.

Oh.

He was asleep, she realized.

For once luck was on her side. She suspected that their shared dreaming was an irrevocable side effect of the bond, during which she wouldn't be able to keep her defenses up anyway, but if she could just allow herself a minute to just sit without having to worry then she was sure she could handle anything a dream could throw at her. Kylo, too, for that matter.

So she just sat back and listened across their bond, hovering on the outskirts of his thoughts so as not to wake him. It wasn't invasive, just curious.

There was a static to his mind that gave her the impression that his sleep was fitful, although his thoughts were never clear enough to pull him entirely out of his sleep – not enough to notice her.

It felt a little like she was prying, but she didn't let herself feel bad about it. It was nothing compared to what he probably did regularly. Besides, he didn't seem agitated by her presence, and she felt…

Well, it was nice to be a ‘them’ instead of ‘her’ again for a few moments – even if Kylo wasn't fully aware.

If she'd been less exhausted, she might've let herself feel humiliated by the thought, or even repulsed, but at the moment she couldn't bring herself to care. She was tired, and he was pleasantly unobtrusive when he was asleep. His soul mixing with hers was comfortable, almost familiar.

Not quite warm, but – safe.

She almost snorted to herself at the absurdity of that thought, closing her eyes as she tucked her legs up into the seat and got comfortable.

It was like being lulled to sleep by listening to someone's heartbeat.

She fell asleep in moments.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so this chapter was going to include what will be the first scene of the next chapter, but it worked out better that I ended it here.

Positive development, am I right?

I wanted to give you guys a *nice* moment for once, as a thank you for being amazing. Although now I guess you'll have to wait until the next chapter for the rest of it... (sorry!). Just let this be a promise that you'll like it. Hopefully, you'll like it a lot. ;)

And Happy Mother's Day (eve) for the awesome moms out there!
He was caught in a storm.

All around him whipped water and snow and crystal-thin hail. It snapped at Kylo's robes and tore through his hair, plastering wet strands to his face. The hail sliced through his skin with a thousand flimsy-thin little cuts, although each felt like he was being cut clean through. Fingers like frozen knives raked down his back and around his head, *digging* into each scar and tearing them open.

It was so dark, he couldn't see anything.

Blood poured down into his eyes, and it *burned* like acid.

The Supreme Leader's presence clamped down onto his shoulder as he inflicted the torment, a looming shadow that ensured he would learn his lesson.

Snoke's lessons always went on for days – sometimes longer. In his dreams they continued wherever he was – *inescapable*.

It was like the months immediately following Starkiller all over again.

He wasn't allowed to cry out in pain, wasn't allowed to utter a single sound. If he did, then his master would punish him and the lesson would be set back and last longer.

So he bit his tongue to keep quiet.

It seemed like his last dream with Rey had been eons ago. Could it have only been the night before? He couldn't be sure; it was too hard to focus.

The only thing he could focus on was the pain; it was all-consuming and made him *weak*, which was the whole point.

That he be made to *know* his weakness, so that he know how to *eradicate* it.

Those had been the Supreme Leader's words when he had first appeared in his mind that night, hijacking all possibility of him getting a good night's rest.

He didn't feel Rey there at all.

With her still actively lessening their bond as much as she could, his master’s presence was all-consuming, blocking out all feeling of her. That was also the point.

The lesson would continue until she was delivered to him; until then, it couldn't fully be learned.

He saw the point to it, and then again he didn't.

But he endured it anyway – how could he do anything else?

It went on, and he tried to *learn* what he was being taught.

Until – there was something, an awareness in the corner of Kylo's senses that grew with every
passing second. It was a brightness, a sense of – *warmth*.

It was Rey.

Immediately and without a doubt, he knew it was her.

She was there, bleeding into his dream with the agonizing slowness of a leaky faucet. His master didn't seem to notice her, focused as he was on disciplining Kylo.

It was probably only because Snoke wasn't paying any attention that she was able to take him so thoroughly by surprise. All at once, the small droplets of her consciousness turned into a *tsunami* that swept over everything and wrenched his master out of his dream. It eradicated everything around him and replaced it with a content nothingness that he didn't know what to do with.

He wasn't quite dreaming, but he couldn't manage to wake up, either. It was a strange, content limbo he floated in.

She was there, a companion to his mind once more. It felt like it used to, before she had done her best to cut herself off from him. Only – it almost felt better, *stronger*.

Their bond felt warm and intact, and he couldn't help but reach across it. He just wanted to know that she was still *there*, that he could still see into her mind like before. After what felt like *so long*, it was all he could do to restrain himself from rushing violently across their bond.

But then there was light.

All thought left him. The light pulled him out of his strange haze softly, like slowly beginning to recognize the chords of a song. He felt warm and secure, lazily gathering his thoughts as he came back into awareness.

Had he fallen asleep?

He could've sworn he was sleeping. Everything was hazy.

The sheets he was lying on were soft and warm as he turned on his back, blinking blearily up at the ceiling. Morning light streamed in through the shades, a warmth that fell softly on the room and illuminated tiny dust particles floating in the air. The sheets around him were the color of the sand.

The room was bright and lived-in. A blanket hung half-way off the bed. The door to the ‘fresher was open, blocked by a pair of women’s boots. Just beyond it, he could barely make out the soft glint of his mask on the ‘fresher counter. There was a large chair by the window with an old leather jacket draped over the back.

It was – *peaceful* was the only word for it.

It reminded him of his mother’s apartment in some distant, half-remembered way. The warmth, maybe.

But it wasn't real.

He knew that when he sat up and looked out the window to see *nothing* – there was just the light, a warm glow with no discernible source.

He was still dreaming.

It had just turned into a – *good* seemed too strong a word. Perhaps a *content* dream.
There was a woman sitting cross-legged at the end of the bed with her back to him, her walnut-colored hair hanging loose around her shoulders. She didn't seem to be aware of him, her attention focused on something in her hands.

He wasn't surprised to see her, but he was surprised to see her like that – with her hair down.

He'd never seen her with her hair down before.

“Rey?”

She startled and twisted around to look at him, her eyes no less tired than they'd been since the last time he saw her. He got the impression that she'd been there a while longer than he had.

“Kylo,” she sighed, deflating a little.

This dream was different than the others. It felt more real, somehow, like a distant memory – or a caricature of one. Only that couldn't be true, because he'd never woken up in a place like this, in a place like home with a woman at the end of the bed. With Rey.

“I think this is your dream,” she offered off-handedly. There was a sadness to her tone that he didn't understand.

He didn't say anything.

She studied him for a long moment. Her eyes swept over his face as if she was searching for something, although he had no idea what that could've been.

“Where were you?” She finally asked. The question surprised him. “When I got here–it was storming outside until just a minute ago.”

He frowned, unsure of where she was going. “Storming?”

“Yeah,” she nodded, “it was raining and there was hail, I think.” She shrugged, “I've never been in a hail storm before.”

“It's not storming now,” he pointed out, somewhat lamely as impatience colored his tone. He knew what the storm had been.

He just decidedly didn't want to talk about it. She had decided that she didn't care – or didn't care enough – about his punishment back on Dathomir, and he didn't want to dredge it back up.

Her jaw ticked as she worked over what she was going to say. Kylo took the opportunity to swing his legs over the side of the bed and pull his boots on. He was mostly clothed, with only his cowl and outer robe missing. They were strewn on the other side of the bed, as if he had just decided to take a nap in his dream.

As ridiculous as that sounded.

“It just stopped,” she turned away from him a little, staring at some spot on the floor.

He grunted in acknowledgement and started to push himself up off the bed. Her hand darted out before he could react and gripped his wrist. He was always surprised at how strong she was.

His gaze snapped up to hers to find a resolute set to her brow. That never boded well for him.

“Is this real?”
Is what real, was on the top of his tongue, because surely she could feel the slightly weightless quality the world around them had, same as all of their dreams. But when she showed him what she held in her other hand, the words turned to ash in his mouth.

“Where did you get that?” He demanded, snatching the small holopicture out of her hand. She let it go.

It was over a decade old, back when he'd been called by a different name. He'd still been training with Skywalker at the time. They'd both gone to visit the general during one of the few times Han Solo had stuck around for more than five minutes after he'd returned from whatever the hell he always did without his family. It was outside the general’s old apartment, the one that she'd had when she had still been an active member of the New Republic.

Skywalker and Han Solo were both smiling. The general looked happy. He looked…not miserable.

He didn't remember that day, but he knew the picture. The general told him once that she kept it in her office.

He clenched it in his hand as if he could break it.

“It's a beautiful picture,” Rey snapped him out of his thoughts.

He hated it.

“It's old,” was all he said, tossing the holopicture on the bed. He didn't realize that she hadn't let go of his wrist until she let go to pick the picture up.

He had to resist the urge to rip the picture out of her hands as she continued to study it. Nothing good had come from those old lies. She took a deep breath and glanced up at him.

“Where was this?” She asked, and it gave him the impression that she was trying to be careful. Trying not to make him angry. It was considerate of her.

Still, he momentarily considered not answering. “Outside the general’s apartment.”

She hummed in response, then chewed her lower lip. “How old were you?”

“Eighteen, I think.”

There was a small shift in her expression as she looked back down at the shadow him, a softening of her mouth that made Kylo shift on his feet and hate that version of him even more. His legs were still pressed up against the bed.

“You almost looked happy,” she said.

He scoffed. “That boy was a fool.”

She didn't respond. For what seemed like an eternity, she just sat on the bed and stared at the snapshot of his past life, the life he hated. But he didn't stop her.

“I always wanted this,” she sighed, then frowned because of course he already knew; he had seen it when he had kidnapped her and taken her to Starkiller. When they had gotten into each other's heads. In hindsight, he suspected that that was when their bond had first been formed.

He didn't respond to her comment, mostly because he didn't know what to say.
“These flowers are the same as those over there,” she said suddenly, pointing over at the chair by the window. Next to it was a table with a small vase and flower with red petals. He hadn't noticed it before.

“I love flowers,” she admitted uncomfortably, *hesitantly*, as if it was some great big secret. “They're almost nonexistent on Jakku, but I found one, once. I tried to keep it alive as long as I could, but there was a sandstorm and,” she shrugged, “well, I couldn't waste resources on a flower.”

A part of him – a very large, confused part – was wondering why she was telling him this.

Then he thought that maybe it was an offering, something of her past to try and make it even between them. He could recognize how sad it was that her opinion on flowers could qualify as something personal, that she had no greater memories of significance.

He swallowed, glancing briefly at the flower in the vase.

“Ladalums.”

She stilled, blinking up at him in mild confusion. “What?”

“Ladalums. That's what they're called,” he said.

Her eyebrows hiked up on her forehead. “It's prettier than its name.”

He couldn't stop the twitch of his mouth at her comment. “They were native to Alderaan.”

She froze.

“Oh.”

He nearly scoffed, instantly irritated by her change in demeanor. “It wasn't my home planet,” he pointed out.

“No,” she lifted her shoulder in what wasn't quite a shrug, “but it was your-“

The glare he gave her was probably harsher than he intended, but she didn't back down. Not that he really expected her to.

“It was your mother's home, wasn't it?” Her voice hitched almost imperceptibly on the word ‘home.’ Kylo nearly missed it, but he knew her – knew what it meant to her.

He considered her for a moment, the consciously neutral set of her brows. “When she was young,” he admitted.

“Did she tell you about it?”

“They were a planet of diplomats and pacifists.” He didn't hold back the sneed from his expression.

Rey kept her carefully neutral expression, although he could feel her disapproval of his opinion burning through her eyes clear as day. “You don't approve?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Obviously not. Diplomacy hasn't been able to solve the galaxy's problems for a long time. Talking about it is pointless.”

“I don't know,” she had a stubborn set to her jaw, “a friend told me that talking things out is supposed to help. Sometimes.”
He just scoffed.

“Like with us,” she pressed on, surprising him enough to listen. “You and I, we can talk things out.”

He knew immediately where she was going with that. “No, we can't.”

She frowned. “I want to. I want to talk to you, Kylo.”

“Why?” He demanded, leaning a little so that he was towering over her. She had to crane her neck to keep eye contact. “So you can save your precious Finn from my clutches?”

She wasn't intimidated in the slightest. “No, that's not it.”

“Isn't it, though?”

“No,” she snapped, her back going rigid, “it's not. I'm choosing – to trust you.”

He physically recoiled, whether from shock or just the weight of her words, he couldn't tell. Neither of them said anything for a moment, perhaps both shocked that she would admit to something like that. Then she took advantage of his silence and continued, “Yeah, Kylo. I trust you. You told me he's safe with you, and I’m choosing to believe it.”

His face twisted up in an expression somewhere between awe and disbelief, his chest light and heavy and filled to the brim with too many emotions to pin down. He couldn't stop his traitorous voice from cracking under the weight of it. “Then why haven't you come to me sooner?” He demanded, although what he was really asking was, ‘why have you been running away from me?’

Her response was immediate. “It's not you,” she insisted, somewhat angrily, “it's your ‘Supreme Leader.’ I'm not running from you, I'm running from him.”

Kylo didn't know what to say for a moment.

“He won't-“

“What, hurt me?” She scoffed, although he could see the thread of very real terror behind it. “Can you honestly say that?” She pressed, “Do you believe it?”

No, he didn't.

He shut his mouth.

The room around him started to blur around the edges and tip like a ship in atmo. He sat down heavily next to her, hit with a sudden wave of vertigo. She had to shift a little as his weight dipped the bedding so that she didn't lean into him.

“You're coming anyway,” he pointed out, confused and angry and – and worried. He wanted to hit something, and curled his hands into fists to try and restrain the urge.

“I am,” she nodded, then hesitated. “I want to talk.”

“We are talking.”

“No, talk. When we see each other for real, I want to talk to you. Will you let me?”

He wanted to say ‘no,’ demand that she put out whatever impossible spark of hope she might harbor for him. She had no chance of persuading him to change what must be done, and he couldn't even if
he wanted to.

And he did.

Sitting next to Rey, with her hair spilling loosely around her face, he knew that he wanted to change things.

He would excuse his duty to Snoke, put them on the same side. Give her a reason to believe-

It didn't matter. He couldn't.

And yet he found himself dipping his chin in a small nod. “We'll talk,” he promised, and then found that he meant it.

He had hurt her, so how could he not give her this?

Her face relaxed into what might've been a smile, but the room was spinning faster, blurring everything together, and she faded into it in a second. He knew what was happening. Their dream, it was ending.

He was waking up.

When he opened his eyes, it was to a dark, empty room.

She was there, on Corellia.

He felt it almost as soon as he had woken up – that elastic push-pull of their bond. It had both relaxed and gotten tighter in his chest, a sensation he didn't bother trying to ignore any longer.

There was no plan for seeing her, not anymore.

He still planned to meet her in a populated area, but it had become less about wanting to avoid a physical confrontation and more because it was the closest thing to neutral ground. He wouldn't take her to the Finalizer, he had decided. Not this time. If she just wanted to talk, as she claimed, then they would.

They would just talk.

Weakness.

The word hissed through his brain over and over, sounding suspiciously like his master and nearly as present as their bond. It was an ugly truth to face later.

First, he had to face her.

He hadn't bothered – hadn't wanted – to stay on the planet itself, so instead he had simply returned to the Finalizer to rest each night. His personal quarters were there, and it was much easier to keep an eye on the traitor from onboard the ship. The other reasons were buried too deep to bear examination.

It only occurred to him to check on FN-2187 on his way off the Finalizer because of what Rey had said.

I trust you.
So he made a quick detour on his way to the shuttle to take him planet-side. He stormed down the corridor to get to the brig; every second he wasted was a second that she could slip through his fingers. The ship’s personnel seemed to sense his mood, because he was given a wider berth than usual. He felt the familiar spark of satisfaction from eliciting that reaction, but mostly he just didn't have time for any of it.

The provost looked only a little surprised to see him there, and let him into the traitor’s cell immediately.

The man was sleeping curled up on the cell’s metal bench, looking completely miserable but generally no worse for wear. His face was still bruised from Kylo's fists, but he wasn't going to do anything about that now. He could've had bacta applied to the wounds, but he couldn't bring himself to do it, regardless of what Rey would think. He liked seeing the marks that proved he was still better than the traitor.

“Ren,” FN-2187 groaned as he cracked open his eyes, “you've sure got a weird sleep schedule.”

He pushed himself up, cracking his neck in a small show of defiance, a way of saying ‘I'm comfortable and I'm not afraid of you.’

Kylo clenched his fists at his side, willing himself to remember who was the one in chains, and who wasn't.

He didn't really have anything to say to the traitor; the entire point of his venture was to keep his word to Rey. He seemed well enough, he decided. The facial bruising was acceptable and he looked like he was being fed.

He was going to leave the traitor, but he couldn't help sneering, “You look comfortable.”

“Oh yeah,” the man scoffed, “you haven't exactly lived up to your promise that I’d go through hell.”

“Plan’s changed,” he said simply, because he absolutely was not going to admit that Rey had changed his mind.

“Finally figured out that Rey's not stupid enough to fall for any of your tricks?”

Violence boiled in his gut and spread to his limbs, begging for release. It was extremely tempting. “Maybe you've just become irrelevant,” he suggested through clenched teeth, his vocal apparatus making the words sound even darker than his tone. “Rey,” he swallowed, “might’ve realized how worthless you are compared to her.”

FN-2187’s eyes narrowed, and he stood up. Kylo's hand twitched, ready to go for his lightsaber, but the man didn't make a move towards him. He just stood there and slowly looked him up and down. It was irritating, but not enough to do anything about it.

“Tell me, Ren,” the man's tone was low and suspicious, as if he suspected something insidious in Kylo's intent. “Is Rey more important to you or the First Order?”

“She is to be brought to the Supreme Leader,” Kylo snapped immediately.

“How?”

“He desires her,” was the only answer he could give, although it wasn't the traitor’s place to know why the Supreme Leader wished anything.
The traitor tilted his head back a little, clearly skeptical – and revolted. “Snoke does? Or you?”

Something in Kylo reared back at the accusation – an instinctual reaction that shot adrenaline through his veins and blood pounding behind his ears. His fists clenched and his mouth became a hard, firm line behind his mask. Word or no, he almost pulled out his lightsaber and struck the traitor down right then and there.

Then there was a single moment of blind panic where he thought that perhaps his master had heard the traitor’s question, that the fact that someone would even *ask* that was proof enough that-

What, he *desired* her?

He forced himself to breathe.

Of course he did.

He desired to have her in his grasp, to take her to Snoke. He desired that she would see the futility of her resistance and willingly *join* him. If she did that, then there would be no reason for his master to deconstruct her so fully, to *destroy* her.

But it was more than that.

He desired that she live. That, even if she never truly believed in the First Order’s cause, she would see that everything he-

His silence was apparently answer enough for the traitor, who’s face hardened into the fiercest expression Kylo’d ever seen on him.

“Yeah, that's what I thought,” the man's tone belied the raging storm on his face, “well, guess what, Ren. You won't ever have her. You don't *get* to have her-“

Kylo's rage boiled over.

His hand flew out without a thought, and the traitor went flying against the opposite wall of the cell. He quickly followed after, reaching to clutch at the man's throat where he had fallen against the metal bench.

“You think you know her so well, don't you?” He spit, and leaned in close, “that you're the only one she cares about? That you know her on a level that no one else does? That you're *special*? You're not.” He squeezed tighter, using his power to keep the traitor completely frozen under his grasp. But even then, the defiance was unmistakable in the man's eyes.

His own breaths came out in loud rasps that echoed in his ears. “She and I—we’re *connected* through the Force. Bound together forever. I know her on a deeper level than you ever *could*.”

He began to squeeze even tighter, to finally *rid* himself of the traitor who thought that Rey-

And then he realized what he was doing – what he had *said* – and released the traitor like he had been burned. Staggering back, he let go of his mental hold of the man's body, as well.

The traitor rolled to the floor with a dull *thud*, gulping air through his lungs as he glared up at him. Kylo could feel the hatred radiating off of him, the disgust and the anger and the desire to see him *die*.

He shouldn't have said that. For Rey's sake, he shouldn't have *done* that.
But he couldn’t quite regret it.

“You're a liar, Ren,” the traitor choked out when he could get air enough to speak. He pushed himself up to his feet with the steadiness that he’d apparently developed since last facing him in battle. “Rey would never let you anywhere near her.”

He wanted to scoff at how little the man knew.

“And if you try anything—“

“You'll what?” Kylo cut him off with a sneer. He raised his hand and the traitor slammed back against the wall again, only that time he made sure that it was only firmly enough to rattle him. “You seem to have forgotten which one of us is in chains, traitor.”

He watched as the man hissed in pain. “You can't intimidate me, Ren.” FN-2187 looked up at him with a cold, dark promise.

“You’ll get what's coming to you.”

The man wasn’t a prophet; he didn't have a connection to the Force and he was woefully unaware of just how much had transpired between him and Rey. And yet, when the traitor spoke the words, a shiver ran up Kylo's spine, a breath of fear for – something.

Someone.

He forced himself to ignore it. Without another word, he stomped out of the cell, closing it quickly behind him.

Allowing himself a single shaky breath to calm himself, he turned and stormed back the way he’d come. The provost was still at his post, and it looked like the guards were about to serve the prisoners their early-morning meals. On a whim, he stopped the ones headed towards the lower cell block.

“The prisoner in cell three-three-one doesn't get his meals today,” he snapped.

The guards nodded, “Yes, sir,” and hurried on their way.

He didn't bother watching them begin their rounds, and instead headed back towards the turbolift. The provost stood when he passed.

“Sir, if I may. About the prisoner—“

Kylo didn't stop. “Is there an issue?”

“Not precisely, however—“

As soon as the turbolift opened, Kylo wasted no time stepping in. “Then I'm uninterested. And occupied.”

The provost looked decidedly displeased as the lift door slid shut.

He shouldn't have checked on the traitor. If he was trying to keep his promise that the man would remain unharmed as long as Rey kept her word and came to him – not that he doubted she would – then he was doing a horrible job of it.

It was just – so hard not to take his rage out on him. The hatred was so easy, and the man reciprocated it almost as strongly.
He acted as if Kylo wasn't fit to even breathe the same air as Rey, that he was incapable of understanding her on any level, that she would never seem him worthy enough to simply converse with. That she would never try to help him – regardless of the fact that he didn't need it. He felt the storm cloud of his wrath cover him like a shroud as he made his way to the hangar.

A traitor's opinion of him didn't matter.

It made fury coil in his gut, but – it didn't matter.

He couldn't know.

What was between him and her-

He swore under his breath as he saw general Hux and his swarming entourage waiting by the shuttle that was going to take him down to the planet.

“Ah, Ren. At last you’ve arrived,” the general’s clipped tone told Kylo that he was irritated. “Did you get lost on the way over?”

“What are you doing here?” He demanded, not bothering to lessen his violent aura. One of the mini-Huxes took a half-step back.

Hux himself looked unimpressed. “I thought it time I make my visit down to Coronet City, to see how everything is progressing. I assume you’ve been entirely useless in that regard.”

“I'm not your project manager,” Kylo deadpanned.

The redhead narrowed his eyes. “Then what, pray-tell, have you been doing down there?”

“Not your concern,” Kylo brushed past the general, starting to head up the shuttle's ramp. To his chagrin, the general and his entourage began to follow.

He stopped at the top of the ramp and crossed his arms. “What do you think you're doing?” Hux and his men brushed right past him, although the lesser officers have him as much space as possible.

“I believe I already explained that to you,” Hux said with a haughty tone that sounded like he was talking to an ignorant child.

Kylo wanted nothing more than to kick Hux and his out of the shuttle, or – better yet – just use his own, but it wouldn’t be worth it. Rey was a pulsating beacon down below, and growing closer with each passing moment he got closer to Corellia’s surface. Every second he spent fighting Hux was a waste of his time.

It felt like he had a cord running directly from his ribs down to the planet, and it was all he could do to not fixate solely on it.

He wanted to throw Hux out – preferably into space.

But he didn't.

Instead, he stalked over and sat apart from the rest of them, who had mostly kept to one side of the shuttle anyway, and gave the pilot the signal to take off.

On the way down, he gave a little tug on their bond, a question. She had replaced some of her mental
barriers, but there was no stopping their feelings of the other - especially when they were so close.

After a moment, he felt her responding tug.

He swallowed and willed the damn shuttle to fly faster.

Chapter End Notes

Will you guys forgive me for this being late since its a bit longer than usual? Or how about because of that reylo scene, huh?

Well guys, it's happening. Kylo and Rey will actually *see* each other again soon. Are you as excited as Kylo?

I hope that Finn doesn't come off as ooc or anything. I mean, he's not really in the wrong here. He sees that this 'evil guy' has some pretty strong feelings for his bff, and reacts negatively. So hopefully he doesn't appear vilified, or anything.

Also, chapter was *exactly* 5,000 words long, which was sort of weird.

I love you guys, sorry for the extra wait!
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was dark on Corellia when Rey and Poe landed. The planet’s sun had yet to glimpse the skyline of the capital city, the name of which Poe had told her twice already. She couldn’t help it; the name just wasn't memorable to her, and she had much more pressing issues besides.

What *was* memorable was the city itself.

She couldn't help the small gasp that escaped her when they approached the city. If Takodana had been a world of green and Dathomir a world of red, then this was a world of chrome. Buildings taller than she had ever seen rose to the sky around them as they entered the city, pillars of reflective transparisteel and lights that kept the city illuminated even in the darkness. Raised rails curved between the buildings, carrying speeding trains from one place to the other like shooting stars. The city seemed to be made of all lights and buildings and the pulsing life-force of a million people milling about below. It was so much, and it disappeared out of view far too quickly as Poe started to set their shuttle down.

They docked at the spaceport like everyone else, just two more travelers in an ocean of faces coming and going. She practically stumbled out of the shuttle, eager to take in the new sights and sounds around her.

It was somewhat surprising to find that the spaceport was filled with people even while it was dark; then again, maybe that was normal. There were so many people of all different shapes and sizes, some of them species Rey had never even seen before, and all with different clothes, languages, and destinations. Rey tried to take in as much of it as she could, but it was all overwhelming – and more than a little intimidating.

She couldn't remember ever being around so many people before; not even the Resistance base could compare to the throngs of people around her, moving to-and-fro.

And this was where Kylo was. Even with their bond, she wondered how she could ever pick him out from the masses.

Perhaps that was one of the reasons why he was there.

Or maybe he just liked the planet; she has no way of knowing.

Poe chuckled when he followed down the ramp after her, breaking her concentration from the massive world in which she found herself. She tried to glare at him for being laughed at, but couldn't quite manage it.

“Is this your first time on a Core world?” He asked with a pleasant tilt to his mouth.

A breathy laugh escaped her as she gave up all pretense of being annoyed. “I've never even been to a city before,” she admitted.

“Really?” His eyebrows hiked up on his forehead, “well then, after this is all over I'm going to treat you and Finn to a night on the town. My treat.”

She tried to smile at him, although the thought of Finn dampened her mood significantly. “Sounds
fun.”

He saw right through it. Giving her shoulder a small squeeze, he said, “We're going to get him back, Rey. Who better to rescue him than us?”

The thought that they shouldn't have to rescue him sat like a stone in her gut. Things could've been different in a million ways. If Finn hadn't been the one to try and save her, if Kylo had fought her instead of running, if she had just done something to stop him from taking her best friend-

None of those possibilities mattered.

Kylo had kidnapped Finn, and Rey was going to get Finn back.

She just hoped that Kylo wouldn't make things any worse than they had to be.

She almost snorted at the thought. Of course he was going to make things difficult – he was, after all, himself.

“So what's the game plan?” Poe continued, letting his hand drop back to his side. Crossing his arms, he surveyed the crowds around them with the sharpness of someone used to looking for trouble. He had slipped back into being Poe the Resistance Pilot.

“Get Finn back,” she replied simply.

He looked back at her. “Of course, but we can't just go in there with flags waving and guns blazing—we need a plan.”

Well, her plan had two steps, as far as she saw it. The first was to see – and more importantly, talk – to Kylo. The second was to get Finn back. She was otherwise a little bit fuzzy on the details of what she planned to do, and by that she meant that she hadn't been able to figure anything else out at all.

It was just – she couldn't figure out a way to get her best friend back without compromising herself, Kylo, or both of them to an extreme degree.

It would all have to come down to prioritizing. Herself, Kylo, and Finn. She already knew that she came up at the bottom of that list. She just – she didn't know who came in at the top. Which was crazy, because of course Finn was most important. He was her best friend.

But Kylo-

The only way it would work out for both of them was if she gave herself up. If she got Finn back, and then surrendered and allowed Kylo to take her to Snoke. Finn would go back to the Resistance and Kylo would no longer be facing his master’s wrath.

She remembered all too clearly remnants of the dream he had been pulled out of when she had first fallen asleep.

It was just like the months after Starkiller – only it was worse, because she had the means to end it.

In the end, she really didn't have a choice.

Giving herself up was the only way they'd both be safe, or as safe as she could make them.

There were a million ways that things could change or just go wrong, but she couldn't let herself think about that. All she could do was the next thing.
She was just fairly certain that the next thing wasn't something the Poe was going to want to do – or rather, he probably wouldn't want to let her do. So she was going to have to do the only thing she could think of.

She was going to have to find a way to ditch him.

Temporarily, of course. She didn't want Finn to have to be alone if she got him back. When she got him back. Poe would have to be close enough near-by so he could pick him up and get them both out of there, but not so close that he could stop her from doing what needed to be done.

“Okay,” she muttered, trying to figure out how exactly she was going to lose him, “I don't know where I'm supposed to meet–uh, Ren.”

The look Poe gave her was a bit skeptical. “Well then, no offense, but how are we supposed to figure that out? Coronet City isn't exactly some backwater town.”

Coronet City. Right. “I'm thinking,” she insisted. Truthfully, she could feel exactly the direction to go, the path that would lead her straight to Kylo. Their bond was practically buzzing in her chest, a feeling of anticipation and pure magnetism that had her heart thundering in her ears.

But Poe wouldn't understand that.

It wasn't his fault and she didn't resent him for it – it was just the truth.

“Okay, well, while you think about it, I'm going to register at the front desk.”

She frowned. “Register what?”

“Our ship,” Poe still looked a little put-out, but his mouth spread into a patient smile, “whenever you dock at a spaceport, you have to register. It's so they know who's coming and going.”

“Isn't that dangerous for people like us?” She asked in a shushed tone, although the people bustling around them weren't paying them any mind. As far as she could tell.

He shrugged, “It can be. We'll just have to keep a low profile.”

She wondered if Kylo had some way of monitoring the comings-and-goings of places like this. Or, rather, maybe the First Order did; she was almost certain that Kylo wouldn't care about anyone landing at the spaceport.

Just her, she supposed. But he could feel where she was already.

Poe walked off, unknowingly giving her the perfect chance to slip away from him unnoticed. Guilt bubbled up from her gut to her throat as she watched him disappear into the crowd before starting to make her way out of the spaceport. She'd have to pass somewhat closely by him on her way out, but she was fairly confident she could do it. Poe wasn't Force-sensitive, after all, and he would be preoccupied.

She didn't know where she was going, but all she had to do was follow the signs. As she had expected, it took her right past the front desk where Poe was conversing with a Rodian attendant. She slipped past him with no problem, hidden behind a family who looked like they had just returned from a vacation.

Emerging from the relative closer of the spaceport, Rey was confronted with just how out of her element she was. She couldn't help but grind to a halt – to the annoyance of the traffic around her –
as she was assaulted with all of the things she had only glimpsed at on the shuttle. The buildings were so tall they would've disappeared into the darkness of the sky if not for the fact that they were littered with tiny pinpricks of light running up their sides. They seemed to blend into the stars.

If she had thought that the crowds were slightly claustrophobic inside the spaceport, they were absolutely suffocating on the streets. Beings went every-which-way, consumed in their own lives. It seemed impossible to her that so many people would be out and about in the dark, and yet there they were.

And the noises. They assaulted her from all sides – speeders, sirens, laughter, the rush of the train car as it whipped past on the overhead rails. Everything around her seemed to be making some sort of noise, a metallic cacophony that made her want to cover her ears.

People shoved by her, mindless of the woman who had frozen at her first sight of civilization. It sparked a sharp irritation in her, which at least served to get her moving again. Stumbling along with the crowds, she tried to gain her bearings and actually figure out what she was doing.

The fact that she was a roaring idiot had never been more clear to her.

This was a bad idea, circled in her head like a drain, but it was too late to turn back.

She had to focus on the pull to Kylo, try to block out all other sensory input. It was harder than it ever had been before, solely because there was just so much to block out.

He wasn't going anywhere. She could feel that wherever he was in this jungle of metal and noise, he was waiting for her.

It was just a matter of getting to him.

She found that it wasn't that difficult to move around, as long as she got in the right flow of people. Following the crowd seemed to be working for the moment – when they stopped, she stopped; when they went, she went. Twice she almost got clipped by a passing land speeder, but overall she thought that she was adapting fairly quickly.

It was just another planet with its own set of rules for survival – and if nothing else, she was a survivor. It was just a matter of learning the rules.

The night made everything look strange. Artificial lights threw all sorts of colors on the street, making her feel like she was walking through a half-dream. It unnerved her, but there was an element of excitement to it, as well.

Everything cast shadows – the people, the buildings, the trains. It made everything around her seem dangerous. And it threw off her senses, because even the dark was teeming with lifeforms. She wondered if it was any different during the day.

Something caught her eye in the depths of one of the shadows cast between a pair of sky-risers. She didn't know what it was - couldn't even see anything, really – but she found herself slowing, her attention transfixed.

For a moment, she forgot why she was there.

There was something in the darkness, something – else. It reached her ears like a saccharine lullaby, lulling her senses until it was just her and – it was a voice. Multiple voices, when she listened. Great, and dark, and comforting.
She didn't notice that she had staggered into a light-post until she realized that it was the only thing holding her up. People ebbed around her like a river of flesh, a blur of colors that made her stomach do flips. Her knees felt weak and started to buckle under the pressure of her weight as the voices grew louder.

The sickeningly-sweet resonance started to sour in her ears, turning sharp and painful. She gritted her teeth in an attempt to block it out.

The longer she listened to it, the more she knew-

Talzin.

It was Mother Talzin.

She was trying to get into her head, more forcefully than usual but perhaps weakened over their great distance, because after only a moment Rey was able to shove the voices out of her head, at least for the the time being.

Breathing deeply, she took a moment to gather herself and make sure that the voices wouldn't immediately return. She hadn't thought that Mother Talzin’s reach extended beyond Dathomir, but obviously she'd been wrong.

She couldn't tell what the voices had been whispering, but either she still wanted her to complete her insane ritual-

Or she had decided that she'd just kill her for running away and foiling her plans.

Either way, if her reach extended all of the way to the Core, then that meant that neither she nor Kylo were safe. The fear that gripped her heart was enough to propel her up and down the street. She had to remind herself to breathe, that she was still trying to gain her bearings in the over crowded city. The only thought going through her mind was to get to Kylo. For Finn, for himself, for Talzin – she had to get to him.

And she wasn't going to let herself overthink what she was about to do.

She dropped her walls like a curtain, uncaring of whether or not Kylo took immediate advantage. His forceful presence would've been welcome in comparison to the looming possibility of Mother Talzin trying to claw her way in. Maybe if he was there, it wouldn't be as easy for Talzin to pull at her with her whispers and voices.

She didn't know how it would help, but it was worth a shot.

Kylo's consciousness swept over her exactly the way she thought it would, abrupt and overbearing as if he had burst into her mind like a rupturing dam. His feelings bled over, as well – agitation, annoyance, impatience, and concern.

She couldn't help the breath that shook its way out of her. He was concerned about her – actively worried, actually. She was surprised at how much.

And it only got worse as he sighed back into the full strength of their bond.

Rey?

She was still headed in the right direction, she knew that. But she couldn't help but give a frantic little tug on their bond.
Mother Talzin, was all she could manage to project to him at first. She couldn't deal with her, not then, when Finn still desperately needed her help and she was on a planet she didn't know.

Shit.

She couldn't tell if the thought was his or hers.

For a brief moment she considered finding a public comm station and contacting Poe, but dismissed the thought almost immediately. Members of the Resistance – including Poe, to some degree – had practically brushed off all mentions of Mother Talzin in favor of what truly mattered to them: the fight against the First Order, and how her experiences could aid it. She didn't blame them, not really.

But when it came to Mother Talzin, there was only one person who understood, only one who could be any real help.

There was only Kylo.

He was still her enemy, and yet it seemed he was her only real ally. She was beginning to think that things would never truly change between them.

It surprised her how sad that thought was.

He pulled on their bond, a strong tug that was more violent than anything – but she could tell that he meant for it to be reassuring. His emotions were starting to run haywire, but she could tell that he barely made an effort to contain it. It made Rey nearly sick to her stomach to feel even the ripples of the strength of what he was feeling.

Calm down, she shot at him, rubbing her temples as she tried to not get run over by the crowds around her. His response was immediate.

I'm coming to you. Stay where you are.

She had no qualms about that. He presumably knew the place better than she did, and it was too difficult to try and navigate the crowded streets while fighting off the press of Mother Talzin's mind. Ducking out of the main flow of people, she leaned against the corner of one of the sky-risers as she tried to steady herself.

It was getting worse. At first there was only a trickle of Mother Talzin's nightmarish influence, a soft brush that was easy enough to keep at bay. Then it become more of a push, more of a fight as Talzin seemed to redouble her efforts with each failed attempt at invading Rey’s mind.

She knew she was starting to fail when she heard an echo of the woman's voice.

Child, you can't fight me.

“Watch me,” she muttered under her breath, and pushed the intrusion out with a fresh wave of power. It took so much power it was starting to hurt, but it was more than worth it.

Kylo hovered anxiously on the edge of her thoughts, a tense hum that only served to agitate her. It was fairly irritating, but she tried to ignore it.

She didn't have focus to waste on him.

But she could tell that he was getting closer.

Much closer.
At first she couldn’t really focus on finding him because she had to fight off another push from Talzin. Breathing deeply through her nose, she tried to muster a sense of calm and strength in the way that she imagined Master Luke would’ve told her to. It worked, after a moment, but it was hard – hard to focus, hard to maintain. Especially with Kylo’s raging emotions on the outskirts of her brain. Still, she tried to keep her eyes alert as she scanned the crowd.

*Rey.*

She saw him.

Even through the river of people, he was unmistakable. The sight of Kylo without his mask, the angry slash of his scar running down his face, was – *ridiculously* – the most relieving thing she’d seen in days.

The artificial lighting cast strange shadows over his features and illuminated him in bright shades of blue and yellow. He looked entirely unnatural in that place in a way that made her deflate a little. She had to remind herself that Mother Talzin wasn't their only problem; he still had Finn, and she couldn't just run to him like he was a much-needed shelter from the scorching desert sun.

He stalked towards her with his usual lumbering gait, unsophisticated and rushed as he shoved his way through the throngs of people. She didn't move for a long moment, just watching as he approached. If she moved, she might've run towards him or just collapsed, and neither option was attractive to her.

When he got closer she pushed herself off the wall of the building, but only let herself take a couple of steps, stopping at the edge of the crowd.

She held her breath, and grabbed at him as soon as he was within reach.

She nearly started when he reached out in response and gripped her elbow, his movements sharp and halted as if he had just barely stopped himself from pulling her to him entirely. She didn't stop him as he stepped up close to her, blocking out most of her view of the street.

The look on his face transfixed her.

No one had ever looked at her like that before. His face was so expressive, she doubted anyone else could manage to emote a feeling so strongly.

It was – there was hesitation, rage, worry, and an overpowering relief that she felt transmitted to her very bones.

There was something else, as well, something that seemed foreign on his face, like he didn't quite know how to express it. Didn't quite know what is was he was *trying* to express.

She realized that she hadn't let go of him, her fingers still curled into the folds of his outer robe. She immediately let go.

He didn't let go. His gloved fingers kept her elbow in a vice-grip, his other hand clenched tightly at his side.

“Rey,” he started.

And then Mother Talzin’s whispers returned tenfold, taking advantage of her moment of distraction to break through her defenses. Like lightning striking the sand, everywhere she touched in her head seemed to scorch itself solid. Her brain turned into a screaming storm as the woman tore into her
mind.

She couldn't help but cry out in pain.

Mother Talzin’s voice cut through the blinding haze of agony. Rey, Rey, Rey, she hissed, and it echoed in Rey’s head like the vibrations off of a vibroblade, I've found you, young one.

She felt hot tears roll down her cheeks, and a trickle of wetness in her ears. It distantly registered to her that this was almost exactly like the first time she had come across Mother Talzin – only it was worse, more painful in a way that told her that the woman wanted to punish her.

Kylo shook her, or maybe he said something, but she was in far too much pain to comprehend it.

*If you think you can fight your destiny*

Rey collapsed in Kylo's arms.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry this chapter took an extra day (again), but my cat died on Monday and I just couldn't motivate myself to write.

I think it's really important for me to point out here that Rey isn't just falling into Kylo's arms so that the 'big, brave man' can help save her. Talzin is her 'personal' bad guy in the same way that Snoke is Kylo's, and they'll eventually have to overcome them in their ways. They just aren't at that point yet. I don't know if that makes any sense, but on the off-chance this chapter came off as too 'fainty,' I want to make it clear that Kylo can't do a thing for her, haha.

So they've reunited - sort of. we'll see if next time they get to an actual conversation. ;)
This was it.

This was his chance.

This, this, this.

Rey slumped against his chest, totally unconscious in Kylo’s arms. He had to move quickly to stop her from falling to the ground, awkwardly looping one arm under hers and shifting his grip on her other arm from her elbow to her back. It looked like a ridiculous half-embrace.

Her head naturally tucked into his shoulder as he moved, giving him a mouthful of her hair for his efforts. Keeping his mouth firmly shut, he started to maneuver himself so that he could gently lower her to the ground. The only thing keeping his heart from flying out of his chest at the fact that she had just collapsed into his arms was the fact that she was still breathing – it was shuttered and disturbed, but it was steady. Whatever the hell Talzin had just done, at least Rey seemed physically okay.

Mentally was another matter. There was no way that the witch had anything pleasant planned for her.

A million thoughts raced across his mind, accompanied by the rushing blood he could hear thunder behind his ears.

Mother Talzin.

She was the cause of this. Somehow she'd been able to reach Rey over half a galaxy and do something to her. The only other being he knew of that could do that was his master, which wasn't a comforting thought. He tightened the arm that he kept looped around Rey's shoulders, keeping her close to him.

It was a perfect opportunity.

He couldn't help but think it.

It was.

She had quite literally just fallen into his arms. It didn't have to be a repeat of the last time – he could deliver her safely to the Finalizer without having to subdue her or promising her something that he knew in his heart to be a lie. His own pathetic, revolting weakness wouldn't have to hinder him.

A simpler solution to his problem couldn't have presented itself.

He could take her to the Supreme Leader without a fight. Or, at least, he could take her to where she'd have no chance of escaping when she woke up and inevitably did put up a fight. He could even still let the traitor go, to prove that it wasn't him who wanted to hurt her. It could all be so simple.

Except that she would wake up a prisoner, waiting to be taken to the most powerful being in the
galaxy – a being that she had explicitly called a monster.

She'd called him a monster, too, but – he could sense that it was different.

Although he couldn't help the thought that maybe he'd become a monster again in her eyes if he took advantage of this opportunity. Despite everything that happened with the traitor, she'd still just wanted to talk to him, and when she'd sensed Mother Talzin again, she'd reached out to him.

Not anyone in the Resistance, not Skywalker – him.

If he betrayed her trust like that, he knew it'd be for the final time. He wouldn't get any more chances to be in her good graces.

He'd be doing his duty to the Supreme Leader, but-

He'd lose her.

It felt ridiculous to think. The sense of loss that bubbled up in his chest was completely unfounded and disproportionate to what it should've been. It shouldn't have been anything. There shouldn't have even been a question in his mind when it came to choosing between a scavenger and his own master.

It should've been simple.

It used to be simple.

He used to know.

But holding her prone form against him, shielding her from the chaos of the Force-forsaken world around them that he hated, he realized that he didn't know.

When it came down to the two of them, he knew that he was still loyal to his master. He still wanted to serve him. But he was loyal to her, too, and taking her to Snoke would only get her killed.

It was pathetic and weak, and he hated-

He wouldn't abandon her to Snoke or Talzin. In the end, he knew that she would end up before his master, but he wouldn't take her unknowingly. He couldn't. And the witch had done far too much to her, tortured and haunted her for far too long. If he did nothing else for her in his life, he swore right then that he'd help the woman in his arms kill that witch for what she'd done.

What Talzin had done – he didn't know what she'd just done to her, exactly, but he knew that Rey had been in pain before she'd passed out. Maybe she was still in pain. He had no way of knowing.

He felt his face darken with a fury that he didn't even try to justify. Tucking his free arm under her knees, he scooped her up bridal-style and carefully stood up.

The first time he had carried her seemed like a million years ago. Back then he had let her head roll back and her arms fall where they may. She'd been an enemy, and he hadn't gone out of his way to make her comfortable. This time he made sure that her head stayed tucked into his shoulder, and that she was secure against him.

The difference in his demeanor was glaringly obvious to him, pathetic and humiliating in a way that churned the already-present rage swirling in his gut.

He didn't know where to take her.
There were only so many options – his speeder, the Finalizer, someplace private or public – and none of them struck him as very appealing. He didn't know how she'd gotten there, if she had flown her own ship or not. He didn't want to make it easier for her to leave, anyway.

They weren't on the good side of town; no one even bothered to look twice as he carried an unconscious woman in his arms. It was a small advantage.

There were flashing signs everywhere, advertising this establishment or that, casting their artificial glows in the populace. But there was one that caught his eye, down on the end of the block. It was small and yellow, flashing basic letters advertising ‘vacancy.’

He could take her to a hotel. At that point, it seemed like the only viable option. Much as the people around him, he was fairly certain that no one would care if he got a room with an unconscious woman slung over his arms. And if they did, then he'd make them not have a problem with it.

He didn't like it, but it would be safer than staying on the streets. The feeling of Rey's weight in his arms solidified his decision.

His scowl only grew.

For a single, terrifying moment Rey thought that she was somehow back on Dathomir. It was the same blood red sky that loomed above her, the familiar dark, twisted trees that reached towards her like shadow skeletons, waiting to tear her to shreds. Everything was dark and red.

Panic rose in her chest. How could she possibly be back? The last thing she remembered was being lost in a crowd, and her grudging relief when she finally saw-

*Kylo.*

He wasn't there, she realized with a strange pit in her stomach. He had just been there, so why wasn't he-

The wind started to pick up around her, churning the crimson mist around her like a storm. It obscured most of the world, but the figure that started to emerge from the darkness of the mist was unmistakable.

Mother Talzin.

It was then that she knew.

Everything around her – it was meant to terrify her.

But then all it did was solidify her defiance. She lifted her chin and straightened her spine.

It wasn't real, it wasn't real, it wasn't real.

“Did you think that escaping me was a simple matter of geography?” The question was both mocking and full of pity, as if reprimanding a foolish child for their antics.

“You might be able to get into my mind, but you can't make me go back.” Rey shot back, her hands balling into fists. She would not appear weak before this woman – not again. She would be strong and get herself out of this nightmare.
Mother Talzin arched her brow, and the effect was severe. “Indeed? Are you such a pillar of strength that you’re able to fend off all outside influence?” She scoffed, “I think not.”

The way she spoke to her had changed. It felt strangely liberating, to have the woman's tone sound absent of her customary ‘motherly’ wisdom. It meant that she saw Rey as more of a threat and less of a child. Or, at least, she hoped it did.

“I got away from you once,” she pointed out.

“Yes,” Talzin practically sneered, “and you did remarkable damage on your way out. My home in ruins—my sisters, gone. You and your boy have nearly caused catastrophe.”

By her ‘boy,’ Rey knew she meant Kylo. He would've been furious if he had heard it.

“You tried to kill us.”

“No!” The woman in red roared, and the wind kicked up around them, spinning around as if they were in the eye of a sandstorm. Almost everything was obscured to Rey and Talzin, and she couldn't help but wonder if that meant the vision was losing strength. She wouldn’t waste any time taking advantage of it if it did.

“I've been trying to save the Force. Everything I've done has been in service to the spirits,” Talzin’s words thundered over the wind, strong and steady with conviction. She reached out to Rey as if welcoming her with open arms. “Child—your mind is closed. Without sacrifice, there can be no power.”

Rey's eyes burned from the mist and wind, as well as a swelling of emotion in her chest that felt suspiciously akin to desperation. “But why do we have to be the ones to pay it?”

“Everything precious has a price.”

She tightened her fists. “Well I refuse to pay it—and so does Kylo. People shouldn't have to die some ridiculous ritual to preserve anything.”

At the mention of Kylo, Talzin’s pale eyes darkened. “Your bond mate slaughtered many of my sisters, but that is where the Force is giving. It will still allow him to participate in reviving the Spirits, there at your side.”

“Is that supposed to be better?” Rey scoffed, trying to back away as much as she could. If she could find the metaphorical edge of the vision, she could find a way to break out of Talzin’s hold on her mind. The Force was still in her grasp, but distant, as if she could just barely brush it with the tips of her fingers. Something snagged at her senses, but it wasn't simply the Force. It was her and Kylo's bond, the threads between them distant and thin in her mind, but still very much present.

She clung to them.

“It should be a comfort,” Mother Talzin insisted. “You've grown closer—it can only bring you peace to know that you'll never have to bear the burden of living without the other.”

For a moment Rey couldn't even formulate a cohesive response to that insane statement.

“I just want you to leave us alone,” was all she could say.

Talzin’s mouth stretched into a thin smile. “And should I ignore all that you've stolen from me? My home, my sisters, my ring. You would have me forgive your debt and linger as I watch the galaxy
disintegrate around me?”

Rey had nearly forgotten about the ring. “If I gave your ring back would you leave us alone?” It was a long shot – there was really no way Talzin would take that deal – but she had to try.

The woman laughed, and it sounded as unnatural as ever. “You're so consumed with living–do you not wish to keep it for yourself?”

“I don't even know what it does,” Rey snapped.

“It's just as well that you don't know,” Talzin dismissed her, “I'll simply retrieve it when I retrieve you.”

Retrieval. It occurred to Rey that Mother Talzin wasn't necessarily bound to Dathomir. She had no evidence of that at all, actually; for all she knew, Talzin may have had her own ship hidden away the entire time. It was a terrifying realization.

She stumbled as far back against the winds as she could manage, struggling not to let her mask of defiance slip. Her and Kylo's bond seemed closer, stronger somehow when she got closer to the edge. “It won't matter if you come for me–I won't go with you.”

“Ah,” Talzin’s eye crinkled in the corners, her lips stretched out across her face, “but that's what you said to the Skywalker boy, is it not? It appears you changed your mind on that subject, as well.”

Rey clamped her mouth shut, glaring as hard as she knew how.

It was almost funny, when she took a moment to think about it. Two powerful beings wanted her – and she was certain to die if she met either one. It was all very comical, only in a way that didn't make her want to laugh at all.

“Perhaps I'll find a way to complete the ritual without him,” the woman in red said, suddenly thoughtful.

Rey wasn't about to trust a word out of Talzin's mouth. She narrowed her eyes, “You'd find a way to leave him out of this? Unharmed?”

Talzin regarded her.

“No. I'd kill the creature.”

The words felt like a punch to the chest, but she barely had time to register them. Her breath was knocked out of her at the same time as she felt herself pulled back into the swirling mist by a strong, elastic string tied to her ribs. By their bond.

Back she fell, sucked down, down, down into and past the ground – right out of Talzin’s constructed vision.

She knew who it was that pulled her out. Of course she did.

She startled awake before she could really consider the relief that blossomed in her chest at the knowledge. Before she could think about what that relief meant.

Nothing made sense – she awoke on her back on a lumpy bed, and there were walls all around her. She was in a small room, with only a small window to her left. The light that made it through the cracks in the shutters did little to illuminate the room, which looked like it hadn't been properly
cleaned in years.

The only thing that made any sense to her brain was Kylo, who was seated next to her on the edge of the bed and looming haltingly, hovering as if he was about to hold her down but had decided against it. Unsure of his intentions in her half-awake state, she tensed and tried to scramble away from him. He seemed very dark in the shadows of the room she found herself in.

A dark look passed over his face, and he withdrew from her immediately.

“Rey,” his voice was low, something that almost passed for soothing for him, “it's okay. You're… okay.”

At the sound of his voice she deflated, coming fully to her senses. With a sigh, she relaxed back on the bed where she had been, which was close enough to Kylo to touch. Her leg brushed his hip, but he shifted slightly so that they weren't touching.

“Force,” she muttered under her breath, reaching up to rub her eyes with the palms of her hands. There was a residual ache behind her eyes, a cramp from having her mind forcibly torn open. Adrenaline was still pumping through her veins, making her hands flutter unsteadily even as she pressed them to her face.

Silence stretched between them.

It had been him who had torn her out of her own head. His presence – their bond – had been unmistakable. And he'd taken her somewhere, somewhere obviously private. It felt infinitely more safe than the streets did.

A strange feeling welled in her chest, a sudden and insane assurance that she could rely on him. It wasn't even a revelation, just an affirmation of a truth that had festered deep in her chest some time before. It was – relief. It felt safe to have him next to her in the wake of Talzin's threats.

She wondered if he could possibly know what it meant to her that he had simply helped her, that he was there when she woke up. He could've done any number of things; he could've left her, or taken advantage of the situation and-

He could've captured her for the First Order – for Snoke. She would have no way of knowing; she'd just wake up in chains – again. The realization hit her like a meteorite. The thought felt so monumental that she could barely stand to think it, for fear of the sheer amount of hope it breathed into her heart.

He could've taken her anywhere.

Instead she'd just woken up in what she was pretty sure was a dingy hotel room. And he was still right by her side.

She rubbed her palms into her eyes even harder, afraid of what they'd show if she let him see her expression. Because she could feel his heavy gaze on her.

Despite all the rest that he'd done – despite taking Finn, haunting her dreams, and pulling her half-way across the galaxy – he hadn't done it.

He'd had the opportunity-

But he hadn't done it.
He hadn’t taken her to Snoke.

He’d taken her – to safety.

She knew that he felt at least some of her train of thought – their connection was once again open, and she hadn’t been making an effort not to project at all. But she could feel the unease, the simmering anger, that radiated off of him even without their bond. He might as well have been screaming at the top of his lungs, ‘I don’t want to talk about it.’

And despite wanting answers, she was only too happy to oblige.

If she said anything – if she asked the question out loud – then she would have to examine the answer on both sides. And she wasn’t sure that she wanted to do that yet. Or ever.

So she didn’t ask, didn’t give voice to any of what she was thinking. Instead, she let her hands drop and forced herself to look him in the eyes. His expression was severe.

Neither of them were going to mention it – and there was a small relief in that, too.

She slipped her fingers around his forearm, slowly and deliberately so that he knew the touch meant something. It was the ghost of an answer to the question neither of them wanted to ask.

“Thanks.”

He studied her for a moment, his frown only deepening when he looked down at her hand on his arm. Anger still simmered under the surface of his thoughts, but not directed at her.

After a moment he slowly, slowly reached over and wrapped his other hand around hers. The cool leather of his gloves made her fingers twitch. He gripped her hand so tightly it hurt, as if he had been afraid to startle her away and was now afraid that she’d withdraw if he let go.

It struck her somehow as desperate.

She didn’t pull away.

Rey used her free hand to push herself into a sitting position, which brought her and Kylo within conspirators’ distance. He straightened as she drew closer, and let go of her hand after one last elongated moment.

She winced as her headache made a comeback with her movement. “How long was I–”

“Three hours. Talzin did this to you.”

He said it so forcefully, she wasn’t sure if that last part was a question or a statement. But she answered it as if it had been a question anyway.

“Yes. She said she’s coming here,” once the words started, she couldn’t stop the rest from tumbling out. She told him everything she could remember about the conversation, from the moment she was sucked into her own head to the moment he had helped tear her away. His expression only grew darker as she spoke, but he only interrupted once.

“The ring,” he cut her off as soon as she mentioned it, “do you still have it?”

She nodded. “Yeah, actually, I do. I’ve kept it in here,” reaching for her pack, she dug around until she found the small band and pulled it out.
“You need to give that to me.” He said as soon as he saw it. She noticed that his posture was suddenly stiff.

She remembered that she'd promised she would, back on Dathomir. She hadn't changed her mind; the ring meant nothing to her, and she didn't want it if Talzin did. Immediately dropping it into his outstretched hand, she watched silently as he examined it. It might've looked somewhat humorous to watch him inspect such a small piece of jewelry so closely, had it not been for his expression. He frowned at it as if it was something unexplainably significant.

Which it was, for him.

She'd seen the evidence that Snoke was actively hurting Kylo. With their bond shut tight, she'd managed to avoid sharing any of his darker dreams, those that she assumed must've been like the dreams he used to have during the first days of their connection. It made her furious to think that his master would punish him like that over – over a ring.

And because of her, whispered her dark thoughts.

The jewelry didn't seem special to her at all, except for the fact that it was causing Kylo to be tortured.

He closed his fist around it and shot her a glare. “Stop that. You're projecting.”

“Good,” she crossed her arms. “You should hear my thoughts again and again, as many times as it takes for you to understand that you should leave Snoke.”

“And go where?” He practically snarled, “We've had this conversation before.”

She didn't say anything.

He shoved the ring in the hidden pocket on his belt, but didn’t say anything else about it.

There was a point to meeting him, she reminded herself. And if he was going to be difficult, then she would get to it. “You have to release Finn,” she straightened her spine and lifted her chin.

He stood up in a flash, his demeanor all at once guarded and closed-off from her once more. It only made her even more furious.

“you're an idiot if you think that I would just release him. As if the ring will be enough to placate the Supreme Leader.”

“Well, have you tried asking him?” She snapped.

He jabbed a finger in her direction. “Don't you dare make fun of the Supreme Leader. You don't know anything about it–”

“Oh don't I?” She smacked his hand away and stood up as well, placing her hands on her hips. “Tell me, then, Kylo–those nights I spent watching you get tortured, what could I not have understood about that?”

His face twisted into a sneer. “Mastery of the dark side only comes through pain,” he insisted. “Without sacrifice, there can be no power.”

Her breath caught. “You sound just like Talzin.”

She could tell that she had greatly insulted him. He snapped his mouth shut and leaned back, his
expression smoothing out into a careful blankness that couldn’t hide the emotion in his eyes. For a long moment he didn’t say anything, even though he was working his jaw constantly. His leather-clad hands balled into fists.

“Get out of here, Rey.”

That wasn't at all what she had expected him to say. She expected him to lash out, to say something to contradict her accusation.

“What?”

He pointed towards the door. “Leave. Go back to the Resistance.”

“Why in the galaxy would I leave without Finn?” She scoffed, “You know me better than that, Kylo Ren.”

He took a step back from her, putting as much distance between them as he could in the cramped room. He had a terrible look on his face, one that was reminiscent of the look he’d had on Dathomir when he'd blamed her for being unable to fight her anymore. She wondered what twisted thought was going through his mind at that moment.

“There is no way this can end well for either of us,” he snapped, his voice sounding too loud for the space between them, “it’s a foolish thought and you should give it up, Rey. Go home.”

Her reply was immediate. “I have no home. My home is the people I care for,” it hurt to explain that, to say it out loud, but she knew it to be the truth. “You're right, it's not going to end well for me–But that doesn't mean that it had to end poorly for Finn or you. You just have to trust me.”

The look on his face was entirely unreadable, but she felt his shock ripple across their bond. Even in the warm light of day he looked far too pale, she thought.

She opened her mouth to say – something. She wasn't entirely sure what more there was to say that they hadn't already said a million times. But before she could even make a sound, he moved.

He was out the door before she could register what was happening.

He left.

He-

He left.

Ran away.

She made to follow him only to hear the ever familiar crack-crack of his lightsaber on the other side of the door, followed by the screaming whine of searing wires and metal, and then the vacuum-like sound of his weapon shutting off once more. It was all very quick.

Surely he hadn’t-

But of course he did. The door panel wasn't responding. The bastard had locked her in that dingy little room, as if that would do anything but slow her down for more than a few moments. But maybe that was all he needed.

“Kylo!” she pounded on the door, able to sense as he got further and further away from her, “come back here!”
But of course he didn't.

Chapter End Notes

A lovely and beautiful reader has made an equally beautiful piece of fanart for this fic! Check it out!

You guys are the best. Seriously, I don't know what I've done to deserve such amazing readers, but the support I received in the last chapter has been amazing. You guys have really brightened my days.

And I reward you with some minor angst, haha. But hey! Double POV, that's special, right?
Kylo was halfway to the industrial district, barely breathing and trying to convince himself that he hadn't just run away, when he felt the cold brush of his master against his mind. It didn't invade, but it lingered. The familiar pressure of a headache blossomed behind his eyes. His hands tightened around the speeder's steering until he couldn't feel them fluttering.

Nothing was going his way today.

A moment later, a small light started blinking on the speeder's dash, signaling that he was being hailed on the comm. He played with the idea of ignoring it – who could it be other than someone he didn't want to talk to – but he sensed that the brush of his master against mind was connected. Forcing his fingers to detach from the steering, he reached over into the passenger seat and one-handedly replaced his mask on his head.

As soon as he hit the button to accept the call, Hux's grating voice filled the speeder's cabin.

"Ren, where the hell are you?" The general snapped.

All of Kylo's lingering uncertainties and conflicted thoughts evaporated at the sound of that voice. His grip on the steering turned steely.

"What is it, general?" He kept his tone clipped, determined not to rise to the bait of Hux's insufferable tone.

"You were supposed to be here over an hour ago. The Supreme Leader won't let me proceed without your miserable presence."

He had remembered that he was only supposed to be gone for so long; they'd both been present for the holocall when the Supreme Leader had told them to tour Startask’s progress together. Neither had been happy about it, but it wasn't their place to question. Kylo had only hoped that they could get it over with quickly.

But when Rey had been unconscious in his arms, and when he had deposited her on the hotel’s bed as gently as he could manage, keeping his time schedule had been the least of the things on his mind. He'd stayed with her until she woke up.

There was no way that he would've just left her side.

Damn Hux and his time-table. He could wait.

"Well, I'm on my way now," was all he said. The feeling of his master’s dark presence abated, but only infinitesimally, as if he had grown bored.

The scoff came in clearly over the comm. "I don't know what you've been doing, but I expect to see you within the quarter hour."

"Expect what you want," he reached over and cut the call. It would take closer to a half-hour for him to return to Startask, but for Hux’s sake he took the longer, less direct route. With the morning traffic, he'd get there in closer to an hour.
The witch's ring sat heavily in his pocket, a burning little object that meant *something* to his master. He didn't know whether or not he should feel excited about its acquisition or not; he'd hadn't, after all, completed his master’s mission.

But it was enough for him to reach out to the other presence, to let the Supreme Leader know that he wished to speak with him. It was only because Snoke’s power was already so close that Kylo could do so. It occurred to him that perhaps that was why the Supreme Leader had made himself so available. Perhaps he already knew of its acquisition – and how he'd come into possession of it.

If he knew that, then Kylo had no excuse. He'd let the girl go and had simply taken the ring when he should've been able to deliver both.

His weakness would be inexcusable.

At his reaching, his master sunk his dark power deeper into Kylo's mind. He could feel the Supreme Leader’s skepticism, and that he was growing impatient. It made the hair on the back of Kylo's neck stand on-end, and had to will himself not to break out into a cold sweat.

*You are right to be uneasy in the wake of your continued disappointments,* the Supreme Leader's serpentine tone echoed from that dark part of Kylo's mind that he had cut out for him. With the words came the familiar tentacle-like reach of the Supreme Leader's full attention, and Kylo had to scramble to keep him away from the part of his brain that had become so completely *Rey.*

He let his master peruse his thoughts, trying his best to seem unaffected at the invasion. It was as if Snoke knew where he’d been, what his mind had become so thoroughly *occupied* with – or maybe he just suspected, and was looking for proof. Kylo honestly didn't know the extent of his master’s mental powers, not truly.

He was looking, though; the Supreme Leader was sifting through his brain with *purpose.*

*You have something for me,* wasn't a question or a realization.

*Yes.*

There was a spike of – some kind of emotion, something not altogether displeased, which was more than enough to assure Kylo that he wasn't about to receive any punishment. His skin stopped crawling.

*The ring.*

Kylo didn't have to respond. Immediately, Snoke's presence in his head got more excited than he'd felt it in years. Whatever the ring was to his master, whatever it *did,* Kylo suddenly understood that it was precious. The desire to know what power the tiny object in his pocket held settled like a stone in his mind.

Something so small – for it to be so important, it must've been very powerful.

He railroaded that line of thought almost immediately, hyperaware of the Supreme Leader's continued presence in his mind, but his master seemed to have lost interest in examining his thoughts. Instead, he pressed down on Kylo's consciousness enough that it caused his headache to become splitting. As his vision got momentarily spotty, he was thankful that he was already stopped at a traffic light.

Snoke's voice was smooth, but there was a new urgency to it that Kylo could barely catch through his growing migraine. *Finish the inspection with General Hux, then come to me and personally*
deliver the report and the object.

The Supreme Leader pulled out of Kylo’s head all at once, leaving a trail of black emptiness as he went. Kylo couldn't help the small gasp that was wretched out of him at the sudden loss in mental pressure.

It was a relief to have his master out of his head – a traitorous thought that slipped through his brain before he could stop it.

And then it hit him.

Inspection, and then delivery.

The Supreme Leader was calling him away from Corellia, something that would've normally brightened his mood considerably. It still did. He wanted to leave this stink-hole of a planet more than anything, but-

What, was he going to take Rey with him?

To the Supreme Leader?

Something in his chest revolted at the thought.

She had asked – demanded, really – that he trust her. Trust that she wasn't going to let anything bad happen to him, that she was going to protect him just the same as she was going to protect FN-2187. That he counted in the people she cared about, despite the things he'd done that could've – should've – changed her mind.

He understood all of that through their bond; she just couldn't help projecting her thoughts about him, it seemed. Nothing new there.

But then-

Then he'd heard the whisper of her plan, her true plan, across the edges of their bond. A plan that she'd decided on her own, kept secret because she was afraid that someone might stop her. In her mind, that ‘someone’ appeared as ‘Poe Dameron,’ ‘Finn,’ or ‘the General.’

It didn't appear as him.

It should've.

Her plan – her stupid, idiotic plan – was to go with him. She wanted to make him release the traitor, and then she'd go with him, just like he wanted. Had wanted. Still wanted. But when he would take her to his master, her plan was to kill him.

To kill Snoke.

As if that was a thing that could be done.

He could've acted as if he hadn't read her intentions; he could've made the deal, released the traitor like she wanted, and taken her to his master, where she'd find out just how ignorant her plan was. She would go along with it, because she would think that he was unknowingly going along with her plan.

He could've.
But that thought hadn't even occurred to him until he had gotten to his speeder.

The only thought he'd had-

She couldn't do it.

He wouldn't allow it.

The only thought that had passed through his mind was that she would die. It was like a vulture circling above his heart.

And he came so close – so close – to doing something, to reaching out and telling her that she was the biggest fool in the galaxy, to wrapping his arms around her and physically stopping her from getting herself killed, that it scared him stiff.

It was pathetic; he was afraid for her, and he was afraid of being afraid. But that thought didn't occur to him until later, either.

Running hadn't been his brightest idea by far. He could admit that. Trying to lock her in the room had been even worse.

It was becoming a near-reflexive thing to reach out and give a tug on their bond, just to make sure that she was still there.

Just to be sure.

He was a little surprised that she gave a responding tug a few moments later, although he was not at all surprised that hers was an angry, almost violent tug. He knew it most likely had taken her all of two second to bust out of that hotel room, but he felt the same little breath of relief that he always felt when she responded.

All the same, he mentally kept his distance.

Or he tried to. In a sharp contrast to only hours ago when she had been the one to keep the walls up between them, Rey's mind kept hovering at his end of their bond, trying again and again to gain access. With her sharp attempts at entry she obviously didn't care about being gentle, but she wasn't overly invasive and for the most part he had no problem keeping her out.

It was just that she obviously wanted to continue their conversation, and he did not. Absolutely not.

In fact, he was trying to push her and all the thoughts that came with her to the very back of his mind. He had a job to do; he had to help secure the future of the First Order, and he had to do his master’s bidding. He didn't have time to dwell on her, because if nothing else he knew that thinking of Rey would consume him – one way or another.

No, it was better not to go there.

He couldn't go there. If he did, then he'd have to go all the way, and following that trail would only lead to pointless suffering and death, likely for both of them. So he was keeping them both safe, in a way, by not allowing them to follow their conversation to conclusion.

Because he knew what was at the end of that conversation. He had known since she'd collapsed into his arms, and maybe even a little before then. Even left unsaid, unthought, he felt the truth of it burning in his bones. And the conclusion he came to was the same even without a direct acknowledgement.
He wasn't going to let Rey get herself killed – either by Talzin or the Supreme Leader.

The war wasn't going to kill her; she would never die while on some pointless mission for General Organa, in a fight that she had no real part of. She wouldn't die for some antiquated notions of the Force, guided by an old fool. That option seemed the worst of them all.

He wouldn't let her.

His gloves tightened on the steering of his speeder, the movement of the fabric audible under the strain. His breathing echoed in his ears.

He wouldn't let her.

---

Hux was waiting for him down on one of the lower levels of Startask’s building. His posture was as rigid as ever, the look on his face inexorable. He didn't move a muscle as Kylo came into view, and let the icy contempt of his tone carry his point. He was surrounded by his usual entourage, most of whom tensed up as soon as they laid eyes on him, and that did nothing to help abate Kylo's already black mood.

“Ren,” was all Hux said.

“General.”

“Let's get this over with.”

For once, he and Hux were of the same mind; Kylo wanted for nothing more than to get on with it. The sooner they started, the sooner it was over. The General beckoned the same short man that had greeted Kylo when he'd first landed with a flick of his wrist. Lane, or Lang, or something.

“Mr. Lan, we are ready to begin the inspection.” Even as he said it, Hux began to stride towards a small turbolift at the end of the hall. His mini-hims were only a half-step behind.

The man managed to look excited at the prospect, although any being in service to the First Order with half a brain would've known that this was a crucial moment. This was one of the largest projects that the First Order had ever commissioned, and it was critical that the instructions had been followed to their entirety. If anything was wrong, if production had been compromised or altered in any way, Startask would find itself in a very unfortunate situation. At the sidelong look that Lan shot him, Kylo knew that he knew that that was why he was there – a promise of just how bad of a situation in which the company could find itself if they failed to satisfy.

That meant that he had very little to do as long as everything went smoothly. A torturous way to spend the rest of his day when all he wanted to do was either return to the Supreme Leader, or talk to Rey again. He wanted to do both, but wasn't willing to dwell on figuring out which one he wanted more.

The turbolift was small enough that they could barely stand shoulder-to-shoulder with Hux without brushing against the other. Everyone else was crammed in at their backs. His scowl deepened behind his mask.

They descended for almost a whole minute, faster and farther than he'd expected. The entire ride was tense and silent, with the general frowning to his left and the short man breathing like a rancor behind his back. The harsh overhead lighting irritated him even through his mask’s visor. One of the officers
coughed in his hand.

Finally the lift slowed and stopped, the durasteel door whooshing open to reveal a catwalk that opened up to a sweeping view of the First Order’s commission.

The manufacturing yard would’ve been gaping and cavernous, going on for kilometers, if not for the entire fleet of star destroyers that occupied the space. They filled the underground yard, covering so much space that only a few were visible from their vantage point.

Kylo couldn't help the look of surprise that crossed his face, although of course no one saw it.

All of the star destroyers he could see were Resurgent-Class, same as the Finalizer. He knew that Kuat-Entralla Engineering had been their previous manufacturer, but with the reveal and subsequent destruction of Starkiller base, many had withdrawn their support. It made sense that the First Order would’ve looked to other sources of production.

But the sea of metal and power before him, the entire fleet that looked as if it was just waiting to be finally breathed to life with crews, was unexpected. It perhaps shouldn't have been, but it was.

It made Hux’s ‘glorious war’ real.

A part of his heart swelled at the thought. With the addition of a fleet of this size, First Order was more than formidable; they would be able to finally prove to any non-believers that they were the strongest force in the galaxy. They could crush the Resistance. Finally they could bring order and control to the galaxy – they could do what they were meant to.

It meant the completion of their manifest destiny, something Hux spent countless hours giving speeches on.

It also made it infinitely more dangerous for Rey to be with the Resistance.

He'd told her to go home, but her home was about to become a war zone. General Organa would never be fool enough to leave an asset as valuable as a Force user out of her fight against the First Order. She would manipulate her – or, just as likely, Rey would volunteer – to fight on the front lines. To fight in the worst of the battles, where more people died than not and neither side truly won.

She was strong, but not strong enough to stand against the entire might of the First Order.

And even if she was-

Even Force users caught stray shots.

War, thundered across his brain.

Rey, whispered his frozen lungs.

The contrary feelings twisted his chest in knots. He could barely register anything else, let alone force himself to breathe.

Lan crossed in front of them as they exited the lift, a proud glow to his face that no longer seemed to be mostly for show. He swept his arm out with a grandiose flourish, as if presenting the group of them with the view.

“General Hux, Lord Ren, may I present to you the First Order’s new fleet.”

Hux said something beside him, but Kylo didn't hear it. All he saw was a massive fleet –
accomplishing their final goal and *killing* the one person he-

His hands tightened to fists at his sides.

A datapad was shoved in his face by the very stupid man, who had apparently decided that he cared about any of the specs. He'd take what details he needed as well as Hux’s report to the Supreme Leader, but the little man’s interruption of his thoughts nearly sent him flying into a rage.

“Get that out of my face,” he snarled. Lan complied so quickly that he almost fumbled the datapad before tucking it back in his jacket pocket.

“Ren has no idea what specifics the Supreme Leader expects, I'm sure,” Hux interjected snidely, apparently unable to let an opportunity to insult pass him by. He and the rest of his buzzing little posse each held datapads in their hands, ready to give the inspection.

Kylo's gaze snapped to the redhead, his tone unchanged. “Or perhaps I was given a more important job than *ship inspection*.”

He felt the apprehension and pure fear rolling off of the Startask man, underscored by the officers’ own uneasiness. He didn't care.

Hux’s expression twitched, but despite his reddening face he maintained his composure. After a moment, he turned his attention back to the businessman. “Well? We have a schedule to keep, let’s get on with this.”

The shorter man snapped to attention. “Yes. Yes, of course,” he nodded, a single vein prominent on his forehead. He gestured to the side, “If you'll follow me, we’ll make our way around. I'm sure that you'll be pleased with our progress.”

Kylo followed after the general and their guide, but tuned them out. His palms were sweaty under his gloves. Was that from excitement or dread? He had no answer. It was all moving so fast, so far out of his control that he knew he'd never had any control at all.

The ring in his pocket. The Supreme Leader. War. *Rey.*

She was still being haunted by Talzin, and he wasn't fool enough to think that his master would give her up simply because he brought him the ring he desired. As much as he *hated*, *loathed*, *seethed* to admit it, the only place she had any chance of being safe from them was with General Organa and her Resistance. Skywalker would be less than help – the fool would probably send her to her death by sending her to *confront* them. There was only the Resistance.

Except that the Resistance was about to be engaged in war, and she would no longer be safe anywhere.

There was another option – one that she'd never agree to, one that he wasn't sure he even wanted to think. It could be disastrous. It could be the death of him. I could keep her *safe*.

*She could come with him.*

Not to be brought to his master, but to stay with *him*. By his side. It felt insane to think. She was so strong, if she had the might of the First Order *behind* her instead of opposed to her, she would never be in danger. Even if she never believed in their cause – in *his* cause – she'd never have to rest uneasily again. Together they could *kill* Talzin, and if he could prove how useful she was by his side, perhaps Snoke would be inclined to leave her where she was. With him.
Once thought, he couldn't seem to stop himself from imagining it – from wanting it.

He wanted it so badly, just the picture of it in his head made his heart stutter in his chest.

Almost more than anything he could remember ever wanting, he wanted that. Even more than-

No. She would never agree to it. He knew her too well to delude himself into thinking she would. He wouldn't let himself dwell on his foolish fantasies. Couldn't.

He dropped the thin walls between their bond anyway. He had to warn her. At the very least, he had to see her one last time before he left. To try and get her to listen.

The feeling of a wind knocking into him from behind hit him as soon as their bond flowed between them, a strange sensation of pulling at both his limbs and his power. It was almost the same as when she'd stolen some of his power, back when their bond was new and he'd only just started searching for her, but it wasn't quite the same. She wasn't pulling from his physical power. He didn't feel any weaker.

She was pulling on him for emotional strength.

He blinked.

Did she know that she was doing it?

Immediately, he swept over their bond, reaching over to her mind and pushing gently, asking for entrance. She didn't give it to him, but she didn't push him away, either. He hovered anxiously on the outskirts of her thoughts.

She was distressed. Greatly so.

It took every ounce of admittedly limited self-control he possessed not to storm out of the inspection, to just leave Hux and his officers and go to her.

No, don't come.

Her voice in his head startled him. He hadn't been aware that he'd projected his desire.

"Is there something wrong, Lord Ren?" Lan’s question pulled him back to reality. Both he and Hux were a good ten paces away, the other officers even farther away than that, obviously waiting on him to continue. The general’s eyebrow was arched in bored annoyance, but the shorter businessman looked slightly nervous.

"If so, please share," Hux added, "I'd love to hear your expert opinion on star destroyer design."

Kylo breathed in through his nose, flexing his hands at his sides. It took him a moment to truly register what they had said.

"This is a waste of my time."

"Did you find something that has displeased you?"

"If so, please share," Hux added, "I'd love to hear your expert opinion on star destroyer design."

Kylo breathed in through his nose, flexing his hands at his sides. It took him a moment to truly register what they had said.

"This is a waste of my time."

"Did the Supreme Leader tell you that?" Hux drawled. He turned back to Lan, "Continue with the inspection."

The man looked nervously between the general and Kylo, who was fuming as he stalked up to them, and gave a hesitant nod. "Of course."
Normally Kylo would’ve said something else, tried to cut Hux down to size in return, but he was far to occupied. He wasted no time in turning his attention back to Rey as soon as they continued. She seemed calmer, but only relatively.

*I need to see you—to talk to you.*

There was silence from her end for a moment. He felt like she always paused before answering him.

*I already tried to talk to you, came her sharp reply, and you ran away. And locked me in a dirty hotel room.*

He chaffed under the accusation, but tried not to show it. It was, after all, not wrong.

*Rey.*

She hesitated again, even longer than the first time.

*Okay,* she conceded, and he let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding, *on one condition.*

He frowned. *Which is?* As long as she didn't ask for something unreasonable, he knew he'd do it. He'd probably do it even if she did ask for something unreasonable. The thought made him hesitate.

For a moment he became afraid that she'd ask for the traitor.

*We finish our conversation.*

Chapter End Notes

If you found a reference in this chapter - or if you found *two* - I admit to nothing. ;) if you found more, then I’m a magician who doesn't know what she's doing (which is actually sort of true).

So, the plot thickens. Kylo freaks out at the implications and Rey's still kinda pissed. Hux is a douche, but a very well-composed douche. Great posture.

It's really weird, but I feel like this story is spiralling out of my control as we approach the romance, which we *are*. I mean, it's coming faster than expected. I've never written a full-romance, so we'll see what happens, haha.
“I can't believe that you left me here to go off on your own—in a city where you're a total stranger, on a planet you've never even been on before.”

To say that Poe was upset was putting it mildly.

“And to go in search of Kylo Ren of all people! Did we not establish that he probably had an ulterior motive in wanting to see you again? Did I imagine that conversation?”

She could tell that he was trying to hold himself together, to not fly off the handle, but she didn’t get the feeling that he was trying that hard.

“Poe,” Rey started, shifting on her feet.

“No, don't ‘Poe’ me, Rey,” he held up his hand to cut her off. “You messed up and I have the right to be angry about it.”

She huffed, crossing her arms. “If you would just listen—”

“To what?” Poe scoffed, “Do you even realize how worried I was? I thought that we'd do this together—that's why I came along in the first place.” He shook his head at her. “I didn't want you to have to do this alone, but apparently that was your plan all along.” He leaned back and crossed his arms, “It was, wasn't it?”

No, she wanted to say. Her plan had been to make the trade for Finn and already be on her way to kill Snoke. Finn would've gone to the spaceport, and he and Poe would've been on their way back to the Resistance. None of that had worked, obviously.

Mostly because of Kylo.

“I wanted to talk to him,” at her friend’s flippant scoff, she quickly added, “Poe, hear me out. He said he would talk with me if I came alone—”

“And you believed him?” Was the incredulous response.

She frowned, her posture stiffening. “Yeah, I did. And do I look like I just came from a fight?”

“You look like shit,” Poe pointed out.

Well, she had to concede to that. It had taken her over an hour to find her way back to the spaceport, where she'd found Poe restlessly pacing back and forth in front of their borrowed ship. The entire time she'd been on-edge, wary of any flash of scarlet in her periphery as she navigated the streets, any foreign nudge against her mind.

Besides Kylo’s presence – he had kept mentally at a distance since he had run away – she remained alone in her head.

But by the time she'd wandered back into the spaceport she'd felt like she had just escaped an ongoing sandstorm. She knew she looked just as bad.
“Not the kind of shit that comes from getting in a fight,” she countered.

Poe groaned and ran his hands down his face and then through his hair, sending curls in strange directions. “Okay, so you found him and he—miraculously—kept his word. Why did he let you go? What about Finn? You didn't do anything stupid, did you? Anything else?”

She tried not to chafe too badly at his tone. Still, it wasn't as if she'd done anything entirely stupid—ill-advised, maybe, but not stupid.

Meeting with Kylo, trusting Kylo— that hadn't been stupid.

Her standing there was proof of her faith being well-placed. Or, at least, not wrong.

“I didn't do anything but go there and come back,” she insisted, finding herself unwilling to rehash her and Kylo's conversation. The simple answer to Poe's question was that Kylo had run away. Every time she tried to reach over their bond to prod at him, he closed himself off. Whatever had made him run was unknown to her, but she found that it irritated her that he was keeping his distance. It unsettled her nearly as much. “I didn't have a chance to try and get Finn back,” was all she could say.

“Then what were you doing for all those hours you were gone? Were you really lost for so long?” Poe's expression was still angry, but it started to soften with worry.

Rey sighed, “No, I—sort of had a run-in with Mother Talzin.”

He frowned. “You mean the Force user from Dathomir?”

She nodded, running her fingers over the wrappings in her arms. “Yes. I can't really explain it, but,” she pressed her lips together, “Kylo helped me.”

The pilot didn't say anything for a long moment. It started to unnerve her, the way he narrowed his eyes at her as if he was looking for something in particular. He blinked, and seemed to find it. His face became very carefully blank. She knew that look.

“You care about him.”

The words took a moment to register to her brain, but her heart instantly froze in her chest.

“No, I—”

“You have feelings for him,” Poe turned and walked away from her, covering his eyes with his hand and letting out a groan. When he turned back, his blank façade had dropped completely. He looked aghast.

“Rey, you can't have feelings for a monster. I thought you understood what he is—what he's done.”

She had the strangest sensation of her breath getting all twisted up in a knot and catching in her throat. She tried to swallow, but that only made things worse. “Poe, I swear I don't—”

She had to say something, make him believe that she was still on his side—still on the Resistance’s side—still a good person.

Her feelings—

Kylo—
It didn't matter. She had to show Poe that it didn't matter.

“You know, there was a moment on the way here when I thought–but I dismissed it, because surely,” he was pacing back and forth, not even looking her in the eye. As if he couldn't.

Tears welled in her eyes, angry and stubborn and refusing to be blinked away. She would not cry over this. She didn't even know which part was making her want to cry, but the overwhelming swell of emotion in her chest made her furious.

It wasn't as if she was stupid, she wanted to yell.

Kylo – he wasn't a good person. She knew that. She did. He'd done things, horrible things, sometimes to her personally. He hurt nearly everyone he knew. He was too angry and dark, and that wasn't going to change. But-

But she cared about him. For better or worse, he mattered to her – more than she could bring herself to admit out loud.

It wasn't right or wrong to her.

It just was.

Her feelings didn't change who she was; they didn't change what she stood for and believed in.

“Alright, fine,” she lurched forward and grabbed the sleeve of Poe's jacket before he could turn away again, stopping him in his tracks.

He stared at her.

With a shaky breath, she let go of his sleeve. “I admit it. I care about him.”

He gently retracted his arm as soon as she let go, but before he could say anything she pushed on, “It doesn't change anything. I'm still me, I'm still Rey. I just want to help him-”

“Do you understand what you're saying?” Poe shook his head incredulously, backing away from her once more, “You're saying that you've developed feelings for Kylo Ren, the man who kidnapped and tortured both of us. The man who killed Han Solo, who destroyed all hope of the Jedi ever returning. He hunted Luke Skywalker for years, broke General Organa’s heart over and over without remorse. He's killed a lot of people in cold-blood, and he is the lackey of the biggest threat to the galaxy since the Emperor. You yourself have called him a monster, and he is. He hasn't changed.”

Her anger surprised her. “I know what I said before,” she snapped, “and I know what he's done.”

Almost as if just speaking of Kylo had summoned him, she felt him reach over their bond, or maybe she pulled him across. She wasn't really aware of what she was doing through their bond, only that one moment she was alone, and the next he was there.

A wave of strength swept over her and she let it, almost like a reflex that she couldn't restrain. She drew from him, drew that feeling closer, only it wasn't the same as before. It was as if his essence was being wrapped around her like a blanket. After a moment she came to her senses and tried to push it away, but was surprised to find that he didn't try to stop her one way or the other. Instead, he began to nudge his way around the outskirts of her mind. It was a somewhat stiff attempt, unusually gentle for him. He was asking permission, which he didn't normally do.

Her knee-jerk reaction was to shove him completely out of her head; she was in no mood to deal
with him nosing around while she was having a conversation with Poe – especially during this conversation with Poe. Her initial reaction to him scared her, and she wanted it gone.

But she also didn't want to feel like she was drowning in accusations of a supposed wrongdoing, so she let him stay, although she could feel how restless it made him.

He was anxious for her.

She tried to ignore it.

Poe stopped pacing, but came no closer to her. His voice was suddenly calm. “I really don't think you do, Rey.”

“You're treating me like a child,” she said coldly, determined to come across as level-headed as possible. Her hands stayed tightly clenched at her sides. “He’s a brute.”

“I know what he is,” she snapped, suddenly thankful that the hangar they were in was mostly empty at that time of the morning.

He shook his head, “You can't, not fully.”

“Yes, I can,” she insisted. Her next words flew out of her mouth before she could even think to check them. “We have a bond in the Force, Poe. Our minds, our spirits, I don't know—they're connected. You want to know what happened on Dathomir? What I'm not telling you? That's what happened. It happened even before then, actually. That's part of the reason why Talzin wanted us so badly—because we're bonded.”

His expression became blank once more, and she knew that she'd lost him. “Bonded.”

She shouldn't have said it—she knew she shouldn't have. What would he think? Would he tell anyone? Would anyone try to fix it? There was no way to undo it, she assured herself. At least, she didn't think there was.

She had the insane feeling that she’d just betrayed something special, precious.

She took a half-step back.

Kylo's presence gave a rough little nudge, reminding her that he was still there. With it came a wave of some half-formed intention.

He wanted to come to her. He felt her distress, and he wanted to come-

She almost couldn't breathe at the prospect. That was the last thing she needed.

No, don't come.

She felt a wave of surprise ripple over their bond, and then he pulled away. Hopefully he'd listen to her. She needed someone to.

Poe suddenly looked exhausted. He slumped his shoulders and ran his hands down his face for what seemed like the hundredth time. “I need some time to process this,” he said from behind his palms.
All she could do was nod. She had so much to say, assurances and excuses and a million other things, but she knew better than to try and tell him then. He'd had enough.

Her friend passed by her without so much of a glance, leaving her by the ship’s ramp as he wandered off towards the city and crowds. She lost sight of him as soon as he rounded the corner out of the hangar.

Plopping down on the ramp, she brought her knees up to her chest and crossed her arms over them. She buried her face in the crook of her elbow.

Everything was a disaster.

Finn, Poe, Kylo.

Maybe she was an idiot. The thought was punctuated by a Kylo giving a tug on their bond.

_I need to see you—to talk to you._

She didn't know whether or not she wanted to talk to him. He was, after all, the whole reason for her predicament. It was all his fault.

Or maybe she was just trying to shirk the blame.

So she answered him, if for no other reason than the knowledge that it wasn't truly his fault for her _exact_ situation. He'd never tried to make her care about him, that was all her own apparent lack of judgement. Her fault.

_I tried to talk to you, and you ran away._ She returned testily, _And locked me in a dirty hotel room._

There was a moment's hesitation.

_Rey._ It sounded like ‘please.’

She found that she couldn't say no. Didn't necessarily want to. She still needed to get Finn back, and Kylo sounded – stressed. Worried.

That made her worried, too.

_Okay, under one condition._

_Which is?_

She took a steadying breath, lifting her head and distantly watching as a group of travelers passed by to one of the public transport ships.

The words were right there, waiting to be thought. A part of her didn't want to say it, just wanted to demand that he release Finn instead and avoid the matter entirely. But she was done running.

Their conversation needed to run to its conclusion. Even if it killed her – as she half-suspected that it might – she needed to know how it ended.

_How-

She still couldn't fully think it.

But what did she have to lose anymore?
We finish our conversation.

He hesitated for a long moment before finally sending a nudge of agreement. Surely he knew what she did. Talking about it – about why he couldn't harm her, why she trusted him, why he hadn't brought her to Snoke – why they both clung to their bond and he held her hand like he might die if she let go, it could only lead to places that neither of them were prepared to go.

But a wave of solidly broke over her, a remnant of the strength she'd unintentionally drawn from Kylo earlier.

If he was willing to have that conversation, the no matter the consequences she would go through with it.

It was what she wanted. If she reminded herself of that enough times, maybe the gut-wrenching fear that pulled at her chest would go away.

She didn't know how long she sat there, absentmindedly watching people mill about as she lost herself in thought, but eventually Poe came back. His expression looked no better than when he'd left, but he seemed somehow more composed – resolute – as if he had come to some sort of internal conclusion. She just hoped that that conclusion wasn't ‘Rey's turned evil.’

She silently watched him as he approached, unsure of whether or not to say anything. Was he still angry? His emotions seemed closed up inside of him, unavailable to her.

He stopped at the bottom of the ramp, his arms hanging stiffly at his sides.

“Rey,” he said.

She breathed in, unsure of his tone, “Poe.”

“You're not going to be happy with what I've done,” he continued, and she understood that she was once more talking to Poe the Resistance Pilot whose loyalty was to the Resistance, and not the man who was first and foremost her friend, “but I don't regret doing it.”

Her breath caught. “What did you do?”

He pressed his lips into a line, but his gaze didn't waver. “I called the Resistance and told them everything.”

It took a moment for her to be able to respond. “Everything?” She prayed that he didn't mean what she thought he meant. She slowly pushed herself up to her feet. Being on the ramp made her just above his eye level, but standing over him didn't make her feel better at all.

“I told the General about your meeting, the bond, how you feel–everything.”

The feeling that shot through her limbs, making her dizzy and unsure, felt like a noxious mix of both humiliation and betrayal. She wasn't sure which feeling was stronger.

Kylo was reaching into her mind before she even realized that she'd pulled on their bond, half-frantic and completely unsure of what to do. In a strange reversal, she felt like the only thing allowing her to breath was the cord that tied them to each other. It gave a little elastic pull, reminding her to breathe.

His worry spiked, and it was almost as suffocating as her own.

She tried to push him away, but he hovered at the edge of her consciousness.
Rey, his voice echoed over and over, not one to be easily tuned out. He was worried and she wasn’t answering him.

“Why did you do that?” She managed to ask, because it was the only clear thought that rang out in her head.

Poe’s reply was firm, but not unkind. “Because I don't think that you can do this without letting your personal feelings get in the way. The Resistance will take it from here.”

She grew angry, then. It was everything that she’d been afraid of – the sudden dismissal and mistrust, her loyalties being questioned – but now that it had all happened, she only felt angry about it. “How long until they get here?”

The look on his face told her her answer well enough. “I'm sorry, Rey, but I don't think I should tell you.”

“It's not like I'm going to tell him,” she put her hands on her hips, unable to keep the bitterness and hurt from her tone.

He shook his head. “It's not like that,” he sighed. “But if you and Kylo Ren share some sort of Force bond, then it's possible that you could compromise the Resistance without meaning to. I'm sorry, but it's a necessary precaution.”

There was no way that he knew how Force bonds worked – she didn't even know, not really. Chances were that he'd been advised to keep information from her, perhaps even by General Organa herself. It all made an awful sort of sense; if her mind had been invaded by an enemy like Kylo Ren, they couldn't be too careful. A lot of people could die if she was wrong, if he had actually turned her or brainwashed her.

But she wasn’t wrong and Kylo hadn’t done anything to her.

And neither had she – it wasn’t a crime to care about somebody. Unless that somebody was on the opposite side of a war, apparently.

She gave a sharp shrug, “What am I supposed to do, then?”

Poe didn’t look like he had any answers to give her. He rubbed the back of his neck, returning a little to the man who was her friend, but not enough. “I don't know,” he admitted, “we're not supposed to make any moves until the Resistance team contacts us.”

Contacts you, she wanted to say.

“And after? Am I supposed to twiddle my thumbs while you-?” She trailed off, realizing that she wasn't really sure what the Resistance’s plan was without her.

He hesitated before speaking, but only briefly. “It's kind of a long-shot, but we’re going to proceed with the original plan.”

Her expression hardened. “The original plan.”

Poe sighed and stepped up the ramp to her, “Rey, I'll admit that even I'm not entirely happy about it, but the General was outvoted, and it's the best chance we've had to obtain a high-ranking member of the First Order.”

She didn't say anything.
“I know you have…complicated feelings about this, but by not helping us you are choosing Kylo Ren over Finn – an enemy over your friend. Can't you see that?” He pleaded, hands open.

She didn't know what she could see anymore. All she knew was that she had lost Finn and she was about to possibly lose Kylo. They weren't mutually exclusive and the variables didn't matter – those two people did. Even Poe mattered, despite the clawing feelings of betrayal that tore through her chest as his actions.

He was only doing what he believed in.

Well, so would she.

She stepped around him, down off of the ship ramp. The hangar was getting busier as the morning wore on, with more and more travelers passing by. By that alone she could hazard a guess that the city would be getting even more crowded, as well. She dreaded going back out on the streets.

“Where are you going?”

Rey stopped and turned back towards the Resistance fighter.

“I'm going to talk to the enemy.”

She could tell he didn't like that answer one bit. He worked his jaw for a moment. “What do you plan on doing?”

She lifted her chin.

“What I have to.”

Chapter End Notes

An update after only two days?! What can it mean? It means that I'm getting inspiration, which - I'm going to be honest - is only bad news bears for you guys. My inspiration has a positive correlation to the bad events in this story. So inspiration pretty much means that bad things are on the horizon. ;)

But also good things!! Like you know what. I'm just...totally freaking nervous. Okay guys, be gentle, please. We're getting close to big things. Ugh, ok stress. I'm out!
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hux stopped Kylo on his way to the speeder pad, a datapad in his hand and the usual scowl plastered on his face.

“Did you think to take a leisurely drive before attending to the Supreme Leader’s bidding?” He sneered. Kylo would’ve brushed right past him if the man hadn't stepped directly in his way.

He had no time for this.

“Move.”

The general didn't look inclined to listen to his command. “This is a copy of my full report,” he held the datapad out between them, “in addition to Startask’s most up-to-date spec files, as were Leader Snoke's orders.”

Kylo could tell by Hux's sneer that the general thought that he was being punished in some way by having to play the role of messenger. He probably thought that Kylo had done something wrong, and was on his way to receive the appropriate punishment. The general was completely unaware of the ring that was tucked into Kylo's belt, and was therefore ignorant of his true purpose in being ordered to personally report to their leader. Normally, it would've given Kylo a sense of superiority that Hux was so ignorant of the situation. Normally, he would've been itching to rub it in the man's face, but this time he didn't see the appeal.

All he wanted was to see Rey. He had to talk to her.

He didn't take the datapad. “Leave it for me. I'll be back soon.”

“You plan to make the Supreme Leader wait?” Hux's eyebrow arched, and the corners of his lips pulled down in one of his more classic looks of displeasure. “Are you really so arrogant?”

“I've got something I need to do,” was all he said before trying to move past the redhead. Hux shifted to that he was still in his way.

“You're a fool, Ren. You have orders from the Supreme Leader himself to take these reports directly to him.” He looked affronted, as if Kylo was disobeying orders given by Hux himself.

Kylo didn’t need Hux to remind him of what the Supreme Leader had ordered him to do; his fingers tingled with the knowledge that he was ignoring them even just for a moment so that he could see her. He was going to follow his orders, of course – of course – but he was going to see her first and that – it meant something. There was a very real possibility that he'd pay for it later.

“I'm aware of where the orders came from, General,” he sneered.

“There's something going on with you,” the other man narrowed his eyes, “ever since you returned to the Finalizer.”

Kylo swallowed, a sharp edge to his tone. “Is there?”

“It’s obviously got nothing to do with the Supreme Leader, or else you wouldn't be ignoring his
direct orders,” the general muttered, half to himself.

Kylo clenched his hands.

Hux regarded him for a long moment, scrutinizing him. Kylo was thankful for his mask, and for the fact that Hux was entirely deaf to the Force, because he was having trouble keeping himself under control. He felt nervous, as if there was something that he was hiding – and he felt enraged that the general could make him feel that way.

“Fine,” Hux finally conceded, “delay your return as long as you dare. I certainly have no intention of doing anything to keep you out of trouble.”

Kylo moved to take a step, but the general stopped him with the datapad in his hands. “Oh, and rest assured that I will discover what it is you're hiding, Ren.”

He paused and lifted the corner of his mouth in what wasn't a smile. “Nothing traitorous, I hope.”

Kylo knocked the datapad away from him, but didn't say anything; he shoved past the redhead and headed straight for his speeder. Hux was the least of his worries. His stomach twisted in knots at the knowledge that as soon as he left the landing pad he was officially wasting time on a direct order. He should've been headed back to the Finalizer so that he could make the trip to his master.

But he had made his decision, and even with the rolling, knotting fear in his gut at delaying his return to Snoke, it wasn't nearly enough to change his mind. He needed to see Rey one last time before he left – just what he thought he was going to accomplish he didn't know. He just knew that she wouldn't agree to what he wanted he to do.

Still – he had to warn her about it.

He ignored the small voice in his head that pointed out that he could do that without seeing her again. As soon as the speeder left the ground he called to her. Where are you?

I don't know, was all she said.

He couldn't quite read her tone. Her side of their bond was quiet, her thoughts closed off to him in a way that only aggravated his anxiety. His fingers flexed around the steering.

I'll come to you.

He half expected her to tell him no. She seemed nearly as on-edge as he was, like a bird poised to fly away at any moment.

But to his surprise, he felt her agree. I'm in some sort of park.

A park. There were only a few parks in Coronet City, and most of them were in the business and government districts. He changed lanes, heading towards where he suspected she might be. The traffic was even worse during the evening than it had been in the morning. It had worked to his advantage when he'd returned to Hux, but it was different when he was trying to get to Rey. It was infuriating, mostly because he needed every moment left in the day that he could get.

The inspection had taken nearly the entire day, and the sun hung low on the other side of the skyline. The buildings started to shimmer burning reds and yellows, the elevated trains reflecting the sun like speeding fireballs. It was beautiful, and he hated it all the more.
All he wanted to do was get off the stinking pit of a planet. He yearned to be back on the Finalizer.

He wondered what Rey thought about Corellia.

He imagined her face when she's first stepped out onto the busy streets. Did she find the city beautiful?

She found ladalums beautiful, he reminded himself with a huff. She probably saw beauty in most of what he hated.

That seemed like her.

By the time he found the park she was in, the sun was half-way gone over the horizon, barely visible through the buildings. The lateness of the day turned the shadows dark and gray, but the tops of the sky-risers still clung to the flame-like reflection of the dying sunlight.

He nearly forgot to remove his mask before he left the speeder. Halting only briefly to rip it off and toss it in the passenger seat, he hopped out and entered the park.

There weren't many people there during that time of day. If he had gotten there an hour before it most likely would've been more than twice as busy, filled with couples and families of various sizes. But most people left when the shadows started to overtake the paths, when the grass started to lose its color to the darkness and the trees became a little more ominous than pretty.

Following the pull of their bond led him to her almost immediately, sitting against a tree close to the bank of the artificially-made river that snaked through the park. She reached out and dipped the tips of her fingers in the water as he watched. She seemed deep in thought, a small frown tugging at her mouth.

If he'd been having any second thoughts about seeing her again before he obeyed his orders, they dissipated like smoke in the back of his brain as soon as he laid eyes on her.

He didn't hide his approach or try to not disturb her. This close to each other, with their bond wrapped around them with a clear and pulsing ‘we are together,’ there wasn't really a point.

She looked up when he came within reaching distance.

Even in the shadows of the late day, he could see that her hazel eyes were rimmed with red, her eyelashes clumped together. Whatever he had planned to say, whatever words had been on the tip of his tongue, flew out of his head. He immediately dropped to a crouch in front of her.

“What's wrong?” His tone was harsher than he'd meant it to be, louder and more snappish. He tried to soften his expression, which he knew looked too severe, but wasn't particularly successful.

“Nothing,” she returned testily, quickly passing the palm of her hand under her eyes.

His fists clenched briefly. “Something’s been wrong all day,” he pushed. “I've felt it.”

She glared at him. “Oh, did you start to feel that before or after you ran away?”

He blinked. It was surprising how angry she sounded about it, but he couldn't help the irritation that bubbled up in his throat.

“I left because of you,” he snapped.

“You're blaming me now?” She leaned back, turning her body away from him by a fraction. It
already wasn't going well; he didn't know why he'd expected anything else.

He hadn't expected anything good. Not really.

But, he'd hoped-

Sighing, Kylo ran a gloved hand through his hair. “No,” he bit out, “that's not what I meant.”

She didn't say anything, but seemed to be waiting for him to continue. There was a nervous energy to her that was putting him even more on-edge. He tried to block it out, but it was more or less useless when they were so close and she was projecting it so strongly.

After a moment of working it over in his head, he added, “I need to tell you something.”

Her eyebrows furrowed. “You do?”

“Yes, and I need you to listen to me.” He leaned in closer, just barely, “The First Order is about to declare war on the Resistance. All-out war. It's going to happen soon, and I think it's going to be an ambush.” He didn't have any information indicating the last part to be true, but he knew Hux and he knew the strategies that he favored. The general would take out as much of the Resistance as he could with as little warning as possible.

Rey's eyes widened and she turned back towards him. “But Starkiller was destroyed,” she said.

“Starkiller wasn't the beginning and end of the First Order’s power,” he pointed out, “we still have an entire fleet–more, now. It's going to happen soon.”

It was treason. Telling her that – any of that – was unquestionably treason to the First Order. He knew the weight of what he was saying, but he wasn't saying it to help the Resistance. He betrayed the First Order – like a coward, like a traitor – because of her.

It was only about Rey.

She opened her mouth to say something, then paused and closed it, narrowing her eyes at him. “You're telling me this for a reason, aren't you?”

This was the part where he'd have to tell her what he wanted. It was foolish and it would only make her angry, but he wanted it enough that he couldn't bring himself to not suggest it.

He had to make the offer.

“It's not going to be safe with the Resistance anymore,” he said. “When they're at war, they're going to make you fight,” he paused, “make you kill people.”

He could see the refusal bubbling up on the tip of her tongue, so he pushed on before she could say anything. “You've never seen war before, Rey. It's a nightmare. It's bigger than you or me, and there's no way of stopping it.”

“Kylo-”

“I know what you planned to do.”

She snapped her mouth shut.

“I don't know what you're talking about,” she said.
“You planned on making the trade,” he couldn't stop his hands from clenching as he spoke, couldn't stop the scowl that grew on his mouth. “You were going to go with me as long as I gave you the traitor. I was going to take you to the Supreme Leader and you planned on going quietly—but only because your plan was to kill him.”

Rey didn't say anything, she only lifted her chin and stared him in the eye. He found that her silence chafed.

“Well?” He snapped, “That was the plan, wasn't it?”

“You went digging through my head,” she accused, but her tone was low and just as hurt as it was angry. He knew immediately that he needed to correct her.

“No,” he countered hastily, “you projected it to me, the whole thing. In the hotel room.”

His words gave her pause. Suddenly, a look of understanding passed over her features.

“That's why you ran,” she said.

He leaned back, all at once struck with the feeling that he'd revealed more than he should have.

“It's an idiotic plan,” was all he could say.

She leaned closer as he leaned away, apparently not content to let him distance himself. “Maybe. But I don't have any other options. I have to try. For everyone I love, I have to kill Snoke.”

Kylo found that he couldn't swallow. It felt like he had just swallowed a mouthful of sand. He didn't know if the churning anxiety he felt was from the thought of her trying to kill his master, or from the thought of what his master would do to her to pay back the attempt.

“You don't have to,” he insisted.

“Yes, I do.”

“No,” he snapped, a little surprised at his own vehemence. Taking a moment to calm down, he added, “you don't.”

He took a breath before he reached out, gently taking her hand in his. He studied the bend of her fingers, the callouses borne from a lifetime of having to fight for every minute of survival. Her hand looked paler than usual next to the leather of his gloves. He supposed that she hadn't gotten nearly as much sun recently as she was used to. There was a freckle on the side of her pinky finger. He wrapped both of his hands around hers and brought it close to his chest.

He kept his eyes fixed on her hand in his.

“You could stay with me.”

She looked at him as if he had just grown a second head, but after a moment he felt her fingers close around his. She shook her head, just barely.

“No, Kylo, I-” she paused, “why would I?”

He pressed his lips together in a line. “Because you want to.”

His words were a shot in the dark; he didn't know if she actually did. He didn't know if she felt the same need to see him as he did to see her. He didn't know if she let him hold her hand because she
wanted to hold his, too, or if it was simply out of pity. He didn't know.

All he knew was that he wanted her – he wanted her with him.

He wanted it so much that he had to restrain himself from simply grabbing her and dragging her back to the Finalizer with him.

Her feelings – her true feelings about him – were a mystery.

It was the most emotionally vulnerable that he'd willingly made himself in front of another person in as long as he could remember. He despised it, but not for her sake.

“They think I'm a traitor.”

He blinked. “What?”

She shook her head, shifting the tiniest bit closer to him still. “The Resistance found out about the bond. About our-” she took a deep breath, lifting her shoulder in a jittery sort of half-shrug, “they think that I'm some sort of–unwilling traitor, and they suspect you've gotten into my mind and twisted my thoughts against them.”

Her eyes were clear when she spoke, filled only with a sort of righteous indignation. He realized that that must've been what she had been so upset about. His grip on her hand tightened. Fury twisted in his gut at the thought that Rey, the woman who refused to do anything that wasn't ‘right’ – the strongest person he knew – was suspected by the very people she had given her loyalty to. They didn't deserve it. “Do you think that?”

“No,” her reply was immediate, “I think they're being ridiculous.”

He deflated, realizing with some embarrassment that he had been holding his breath. “They're all fools,” he spit.

She shook her head, “They're only doing what they think is right,” she said.

He didn't agree, but he kept his mouth shut. The last thing he wanted was to upset her – not in this moment, when every word he spoke was crucial. Then he remembered that she still hadn't answered his offer; as she looked at the ground he forced himself to voice his realization.

“You're rejecting me,” He tried to keep his voice level, his tone even, but there was an edge to it that he couldn't help.

He needed to stay calm, he needed to-

“Rejecting you?” Her spine straightened.

It took him a moment to respond. Taking a shaky breath, he forced his grip on her hand to grow slack, made himself pry his fingers from hers one-by-one until her hand was fully hers once more. He had to let go. Otherwise he thought he might crush it.

“You don't want to come with me,” he said with a fatalistic sort of certainty.

Rey's eyebrows furrowed, her gaze fixed solely on him. “You said it yourself, if I go with you then I'll only try to kill Snoke.” The way she said it was somewhere between a question and an accusation, as if she was confused on how to respond to him.

He couldn't stand to keep her gaze, and instead looked down at the river. A strange pressure on his
forced his attention back.

Her hand was pressed into his chest, her fingers splayed out over his heart. He hadn't noticed that she hadn't retracted her hand. He clenched his hands to keep from placing one of them over hers, or from touching her at all.

He exhaled.

“I wouldn't take you to him.”

The words just slipped out of him.

Her fingers stiffened against his chest. He raised his eyes to see that she had frozen completely. She barely looked like she was breathing.

He'd already said the worst of it, he thought, he might as well say the rest.

“And I'd return FN-2187 to you.” If he was being honest, he knew he'd do that even if she didn't go with him. He tried not let let her shock insult him, because he knew it was ridiculous to expect that she wouldn't think lowly of him after what he'd done.

Tears blossomed in her eyes anew, and for a moment he thought that he had somehow upset her. He had no idea what to do. Should he give her some space? If he was upsetting her-

“I'm happy, Kylo,” she shook her head as if she had heard his thoughts. Which she probably had.

Her lips stretched into a smile larger than any she'd ever given him before. In fact, he was positive that she'd never looked at him like that at all. It was-

She was beautiful, he realized.

He found himself smiling back, just a little.

But then a cloud passed over her face and cast a shadow on their bond – a thought that bubbled up in her and shattered the fragile mood between them like glass.

The hand resting against his chest slid up to lightly grip the collar of his outer robe. His entire body tensed at the motion, at the element of danger behind it. He didn't know if it was so that he wouldn't move away, or so that he wouldn't move closer.

“The Resistance is planning to capture you,” she breathed, “they were going to try and use me as bait, but I wouldn't do it. I don't know exactly what they're planning now, but, Kylo-”

“When did you find out about this?” He tried to keep his voice calm so that she knew the fury coiling in his gut like a dragon wasn't directed at her, but he couldn't help it. A snarl twisted his face almost against his will.

There were two thoughts that shot through his mind. The first was the certainty that he would kill anyone in the Resistance who dared to try and take him captive, and the second – the second was that Rey had refused to help them.

It didn't mean that she had given up on all of her ideals, but-

But she was there, telling him about it – warning him.

She had refused to help them.
He dropped from his crouch to his knees, leaned over and gripped her shoulders in his hands. She startled at the movement, snapping back and grasping his wrists in her hands, putting enough pressure to let him know that he was one wrong move away from getting thrown off of her.

Even sitting he was so much bigger than her, covering her like a shadow. There was a moment where he saw himself through her eyes – the severity of his expression, the unconscious violence in his grip. His hold on her started to tighten, but he forced himself to relax when he felt her own grip tightening in response.

He opened his mouth to say something to put her at ease, but didn't know what he could say.

“Come with me,” was what he settled on, because it was all he could think of.

She didn't look very inclined to agree.

“I can keep you safe,” he pushed on, trying to get the words out before she decided to speak, before sense returned to him, “the Resistance has turned its back on you, and Talzin wants to kill you. Snoke doesn't have to have you—I won't take you to him. If you stay with me then nothing will ever touch you again.”

Rey looked at him like she couldn't believe what she was hearing. “I don't need protecting, I can take care of myself. And the Resistance hasn't abandoned me,” she insisted.

“Haven't they? They called you a traitor, didn't they?”

She pulled his hands off of her shoulders. “It's pointless to argue about this. You need to go somewhere safe, and—”

“Safe?” He laughed, but it was more of a bitter huff, “I'm not the one in overwhelming danger, here…If you come with me now then I'll take you to your friend. You can free him yourself.”

He didn't want to sound like he was pleading, but he honestly didn't know if he succeeded. He just—needed her to go with him. But even so, his pride would only allow him to go so far.

“Why do you suddenly want me to go with you so badly? Does it really matter that much?”

“Yes.”

She narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

He didn't even have to think about his response, although he knew that she wouldn't react well to it. “Because I need you with me to make sure you're safe.”

“I already told you—I don't need a keeper, Kylo.”

Rey crossed her arms and leaned back just enough that he knew that he had angered and insulted her, and her feelings spiked through their bond. Anything more he said on that would only solidify her opinion against his; he needed to switch tactics.

He needed to get to the point.

“I've been called away by the Supreme Leader. He wants me to deliver Talzin's ring to him.” He sighed, running one hand through his dark hair, “I should've already left, been on my ship and on my way to him, but I wanted to see you first.”

He didn't say that he didn't want to endure the slow torture of their bond stretching over the stars. He
didn't say that he hated the idea of abandoning her to Talzin and the Resistance. And he didn't say
that he wasn't sure that they’d ever meet again as anything other than adversaries if he left and she
got sucked into a war.

For a moment he hated them – both of them. The First Order and the Resistance. He hated that
everything was so far out of his control that he felt like he was running marathons just to keep up. He
even hated Rey a little – just a little – for not making things any easier on him.

If she would just see things his way-

“You're leaving?” She frowned.

“Yes.”

She fell deep into thought, her gaze wandering down somewhere over his right shoulder. Kylo felt a
twinge of impatience at her non-answer, but tried to stuff it back down before she could sense it.

Then there was something, a thread of feeling that uncoiled from within her. It was irresistible to
reach out try and touch it – but it was just beyond his reach no matter how far he pursued it, trying to
pin down just what the feeling was. Then she clamped down on the feeling – whatever it was – and
it disappeared as fast as it had come.

Her gaze snapped up to him, filled with the same determination that he'd come to expect from her.
“If,” she paused and took a breath, “if you return Finn. After that–and only after–I'll go. I'll go with
you.”

It took a moment for her words to truly register to him. He couldn't stop himself; he smiled at her. He
hated his smile, because he knew it looked too much like the smile of a man now dead. By the way
her breath caught he knew she saw the resemblance, too, but he was too pleased to let his
unfortunate looks dampen his mood.

She reached up and lightly touched just above the line of his jaw, a hesitant little brush that made his
entire body go rigid. Apparently emboldened by his stillness, she reached up further and ran her
fingers through the ends of his hair once, twice, before she slid her hand down to rest on the crook of
his neck and shoulder. He could only feel the pressure of her hand through his clothes, but he
imagined that her skin burned him all the same.

“You are just as important to me as Finn,” her words were almost a whisper, but her tone was steady.
It sounded like a confession.

He couldn’t resist reaching up and clasping her smaller hand in his.

“I won't let anything happen to you,” he promised. It was the only way he knew how to respond.

The only way he could.

“I'm not agreeing to this so that you can protect me,” she frowned.

“I know,” he gently dislodged her hand as he stood up, but didn't let go. The frown on her face
became even more pronounced and he could sense that she didn't trust his answer. She was probably
right not to.

He helped her to her feet just because he could, and because – to his astonishment – she let him.
Letting go of her hand again had to be a reflex, it had to, so it was and he did. He ignored the
lingering warmth in his palm.

The sun had slipped over the horizon while they had been talking, turning the park into a land of grays and black. The pathways were illuminated by soft artificial lighting, but it only served to make the rest of the park seem darker. They stood off on the darkness, but he turned to make his way up to the path.

“I’ll try to bring him to you,” he promised when the light shone on them both and he knew he wouldn’t be leaving her in some dark corner of the park.

She nodded and crossed her arms, already getting back to business. “Do you want me to meet you somewhere?”

There weren’t many places where he felt comfortable meeting her, mostly for her sake. Obviously the Startask building wasn’t an option, and he wasn’t going to waltz up to wherever the Resistance was hiding. He also didn’t want to be seen lugging a prisoner all around the city.

“Where are you staying?” He asked.

“Poe and I have been sticking around the starport.”

“This isn’t far from there,” he pointed out, coming to a decision. “We’ll meet back here. It shouldn’t take longer than twelve hours.”

He started to turn to leave, because he was losing precious time that he already didn’t have. There was another, smaller, part of him that was afraid that he’d do something ridiculous – something else – if he stood next to her for too long while she was looking at him like that. Like she could count on him, like he could count on her.

To have someone on his side that was just on his side, there solely for him and not for his power or because they shared the same goals – it was already threatening to turn him inside-out.

She was just going to go with him, simply because she cared.

It was terrifying.

And it was like coming across a fresh spring in the middle of a desert.

She stopped him with a hand on his arm.

Turning back, he could see what looked like a thousand thoughts running through her head. They were there in the bond, too, but she kept the particulars distant from him.

“Be careful,” she told him.

He shook his head. “Worry more about yourself.”

She looked like she wanted to argue, but seemed to sense the concern behind his words. With a single nod, her hand slipped from his arm.
Okay. So I'm pretty sure this is the part where you guys lose all faith in me as a writer. I just - a part of me thinks that this is too much too fast, and the other part is very angry because we're pretty far behind schedule as far as my original plan for romance is going. I hope it doesn't suck, but please be honest.

Man, this chapter just sort of seems like the calm before the storm. Plot things are about to get plotty.

I actually had this ready to post last night, but I chickened out and wanted to wait until the morning. It didn't really help, so for better or worse, you guys got the chapter.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Kylo spent the return trip to the Finalizer in a haze, his mind occupied with thoughts of traitors and loyalty. It wasn't a long trip – the men were, after all, expecting him. They had been expecting him several hours ago, in fact, and the wait had apparently put everyone on-edge.

He sensed it as soon as he stepped off of the shuttle in the ship’s hangar; there was an undercurrent of tension threading through the minds of the crew as they bustled around, and a low thrum of excitement that baffled him. He paused at the bottom of the shuttle’s ramp.

The crew was never excited to make the trip to the Supreme Leader – not like this.

It had to be something else.

Looking around, he saw that the hangar was strangely devoid of its usual personnel, although most of the crew that was there was going about their normal business. Whatever was causing the unusual mixture of emotions that filled his senses was obviously not enough to cause anyone to break from their routines.

He didn't have time for this.

He spotted Hux’s temporary shuttle on the opposite side of the hangar. The pilot was just finishing up the refueling, so obviously it had been there for a while.

If Hux was there, he would undoubtedly want to know why Kylo had returned to the Finalizer only to want to get right back off again. Especially if he caught him with a known traitor in-tow. That would only end in disaster, for both Hux and Kylo.

Most of the crew wouldn't dare question him, but Hux would be another matter. The only solution was to not run into him.

However, the question remained of why Hux was on the Finalizer; he wasn't supposed to return to the ship. He was supposed to be with his officers, planning for the First Order’s attack on the Resistance forces. He had no reason to be there.

Then he strode into the corridor, and his questions were answered.

Most of the crew was gathered around large visuals stationed periodically on each wall, all of which were broadcasting Hux as he gave another one of his long-winded speeches. Only this was different, because instead of standing on the bridge, where he usually broadcasted from, he was in a small room-

A cell.

And he knew who it was, the man in restraints kneeling in front of the general. Hux was holding a blaster to his head.

The bastard had found FN-2187.

And he was about to execute him.
Kylo wasted no time; he bolted down the corridor to the brig’s turbolift. Most of the personnel saw him coming from far enough away that they had time to throw themselves out of his way, but one or two weren’t fast enough. The slow ones got lifted up and flung into the bulkhead with a sweep of his arm.

He had to get to them.

If he didn’t, if Rey lost her friend-

He threw up his mental walls so that she wouldn't feel the alarm ringing through his head. The last thing he wanted to do was worry her.

He'd promised to bring the traitor to her, and he'd do it.

Whatever it took.

Whatever it fucking took.

Fuck.

He needed FN-2187. He needed him alive. Without him, Rey would never go anywhere with him.

If he couldn’t keep his promise-

By the time he finally reached the turbolift there were two officers already occupying it, but one glance at his murderous gait and they vacated the lift to him as quickly as they were able. He jammed the button for the brig level over and over, as if he could make it go any faster by pressing it incessantly.

He was halfway out of the turbolift before the door had even opened all of the way. In the control room the soldiers were all posted to their regular stations, but Hux’s broadcast had transfixed them, as well. A few were peering down at the lower cell block, likely hoping for a first-hand glimpse of the execution.

All gazes snapped up to him as he swept past. They didn't say anything, but he felt their fear spike in the air around him.

It only added fuel to his already boiling rage.

None of them made a move, and he didn’t have time to waste on them, anyway. He stormed down to the lower cell block. At the very end, right in front of the traitor’s cell, stood three stormtroopers and the provost.

“Lord Ren-” the provost moved to stand more directly in Kylo's path – a brave, stupid move. He physically shoved past the officer, knocking the man aside with adrenaline-filled ease.

He was going to kill all of these men – but First he had to reach FN-2287. He had to stop the execution, save his only chance of Rey willingly being with him.

He was going to kill Hux first.

The cell door was open, a camera droid hovering in the threshold. Hux was still giving his speech, apparently undisturbed by the ruckus Kylo was causing out in the hallway.

“-learn that no one can live in defiance of the First Order forever. Let this be-“
Kylo sent the droid spinning out of his way and stormed into the cell. He didn't notice that his lightsaber was already in his hand until he saw the two guards flanking the general shrink away and bring their weapons half-up before they remembered who was in front of them. He wasn't technically a hostile. He blasted them back against the opposite walls anyway.

FN-2187 was down on his knees, blood streaming from a new cut over his right eye and his arm twisted at an unnatural angle. He stared up at him with a vacancy that told Kylo the man had been drugged. Hux stood behind him, one hand clutching the neck of the traitor’s jacket and the other clutching a small blaster. His eyes narrowed as if he had been expecting Kylo do something exactly like this.

Maybe he had.

“Ren,” the general’s tone was frigid, “have you come to watch justice be done?”

Kylo activated his lightsaber. “Release the prisoner to me.”

“No, I don't think I will.”

With a roar, Kylo swung his lightsaber in a large arc, a barely-contained warning that melted a chunk off of the durasteel wall. “Give him to me now.”

Hux looked at him like he was crazy. “Have you completely lost you mind? This trooper–this traitor–was being held here in secret, apparently under your orders.”

It didn't matter who the weak link in the chain was, if it had been that first officer, or the provost, or one of the guards who had told Hux about FN-2187 – Kylo was going to kill anyone he could remember ever saw him with the traitor.

“Are not going to try and defend your traitorous actions?” The redhead continued with a flourish that made Kylo glance over his shoulder. The camera droid had returned and was still transmitting, a tiny red light just above the lens blinking condemningly at him.

Kylo understood the situation immediately.

Hux meant to make him out to be a traitor in front of the whole crew. Possibly the entirety of the First Order.

“Is there a reason that you've sheltered a traitor, denying justice to the men he's killed and going against the wishes of the Supreme Leader himself? Have you nothing to say?”

Kylo had the sensation of the world turning on its kilter. He almost wondered at how he managed to keeping standing with his feet apart, as if he was ready to commit great acts of violence.

And he was.

Hux’s little speech – it meant disaster for him. Possibly death. The crew of the Finalizer was watching as he physically threatened their general, a man the troops were – somehow, unbelievably – loyal to. He was the First Order’s figurehead. They wanted FN-2187 dead, and their general was about to deliver the punishment. They wanted it. Kylo Ren was the one who had apparently been withholding them that right by keeping the traitor hidden. Because he, too, was a traitor, obviously. Apparently.

There was no doubt – no doubt – that his master would hear of this. He was quite possibly aware of it as it was happening. And while Kylo knew that the life of one deserter meant less than nothing to
him, he also knew that he was in very dangerous waters. Any action that he took against Hux would make him an actual traitor, and the general wouldn't hesitate to treat him as one.

And Snoke would know why; he'd know exactly what it was that made Kylo act that way.

Rey.

In saving the man before him, in preserving his one chance to be with Rey – a concept still so new to him, that she'd ever possibly choose to be with him – he would brand himself a traitor to the First Order.

There would be no hiding it.

No lying.

He had to choose in that moment whether he was going to give in to his weakness, that wretched weakness that his master continuously punished him for – or prove his strength by remaining loyal and watching as his chance to be with Rey get cut down.

His grip on his lightsaber tightened.

The red light continued to blink.

At Kylo's silence, Hux's mouth twisted up in a sneer that was both smug and disgusted.

"I thought not."

The general lifted the blaster in his hand and pressed it to the back of FN-2187’s head.

He squeezed the trigger.

Kylo made his decision.

Lifting his free hand, he froze both Hux's hand and the energy about to be released from the blaster. Clogging the energy in the weapon was apparently too much pressure; the blaster exploded in the general’s hand, bloodying his arm and knocking FN-2187 face-first on the floor.

Kylo moved simultaneously, swinging his lightsaber in an arc that would've caught Hux in the chest and arm had the man not been knocked back by the small blast. The tip of his blade only grazed his bicep.

Hux cried out as he hit the wall.

Spinning around, he swung his lightsaber right through the camera droid, scattering it in pieces on the floor. But the damage was already done.

By then the two troopers had decided that he was definitely a traitor, and lifted their blaster rifles to attack.

The cell felt almost sticky with their fear as they did so.

Blocking a shot from the trooper on the left, who had gotten his bearings first, he instead turned to the one on the right and swung his lightsaber in a reverse of the same move that had been meant for Hux. The trooper fell in two piles of smoldering remains.

All three troopers from the hall crowded the cell’s threshold and opened fire. Each hot blast he
deflected made the hair on the back of Kylo's neck stand on-end; it had been a very long time since he'd defended against so many people shooting at him at once. It wasn't particularly difficult, but it required his full attention and his focus was refusing to cooperate.

He threw out his hand and grasped the trooper in the corner with the Force, flinging him into his fellow soldiers and giving him time to rush forward and slice through their armor in random, uncontrolled slashes. He didn't care, except for that they died.

The provost was no longer there, but he could see troopers scrambling around up in the control room.

Then he returned his attention to Hux. The general’s right arm was covered in crimson blood and was clutched to his chest. His hair was a mess. It was the most disheveled he'd ever seen the man look.

“You're a traitor, Ren,” the general spat.

Kylo didn't bother responding. He lifted his saber with the sole intent of running the redhead through.

But an armored hand around his wrist stopped him. He looked over his shoulder to see a chrome helmet staring back at him. Captain Phasma, one of Hux’s favorites.

She kneed him in his side, keeping her hold on his arm so that she could twist it enough to follow it up with a blow to the head so solid it wrenched him out of her grip. He nearly got knocked to the ground, but managed to throw his hand out and save himself the humiliation.

Still, it took him a moment to catch his breath.

He hadn't expected her to be that strong.

But he didn't have time to dwell on it. With a growl, he swung his lightsaber at her legs, barely remembering to be mindful of FN-2187, who was still face-first on the floor. Blood oozed from the back of his head.

The captain jumped back to avoid the blow, grabbing Hux with one hand and practically flinging him behind her.

“General, you need to get out of here.”

Hux didn't need to be told twice. The two of them were out of the cell before Kylo had fully regained his footing. Captain Phasma immediately started making her way down the hallway.

He made brief eye contact with the general, who took the time to give him one last sneer before he followed the captain.

All he wanted to do was rush out into the hall and cut Hux to a thousand pieces. There was no reason to hold back now. He got halfway out of the cell before he remembered what he was doing. What had to be his priority.

He'd committed treason for this worthless man – for Rey – and he'd be damned if he left him behind.

He returned to the fallen man’s side, deactivating his weapon and clipping it to his belt as he examined Rey's friend.
FN-2187 didn't look good at all. Head wounds were deceptive bleeders, but the explosion from the blaster had torn it up pretty bad. Rolling him over on his back, Kylo saw that the man was at least still half-awake, although the drugs had done their job; the man blinked slowly at him, as if trying to remember who he was.

“ Weird face,” the man breathed, only barely above a whisper. Kylo vaguely wondered what he was seeing as he looked up at his mask.

“Shut up,” Kylo muttered as he moved to pick him up.

The man was heavier than he looked—much heavier. Grunting under the weight, Kylo just barely managed to sling him over his shoulders as if he were some sort of large game. He pushed himself up to his feet with a huff. There was no way he'd be able to use his lightsaber like this; he'd just have to rely on the Force.

Not anything he wasn't used to, but he could sense more troops gathering up at the control room. Hux wasn't there any longer, but he could sense that the captain had stayed with her men.

They had him trapped.

He was forced to pause and weigh his options. He could just set FN-2187 down and fight the troops, but he wasn't entirely sure about how well he'd fare against over twenty stormtroopers, four with heavy firearms, and two flametroopers, not to mention the hidden turrets that had no doubt been activated. It was the most obvious route. Possibly the only one.

But there was another option. It was more of a memory than an idea, an old story about rescues and alternate ways one could escape a prison block. It involved willingly diving into trash compactors.

He shoved the memory aside. That wasn't going to happen.

The gentle nudge of Rey's mind nearly startled him; he thought he'd been vigilant in keeping their bond closed tight, but she'd managed to creep in past his defenses while he'd been occupied. A second nudge pressed upon his mind.

She was worried.

He almost pushed her away, because he couldn't afford her as a distraction, but a thought occurred to him before he did anything. Instead of pushing her away, he drew her consciousness closer and let himself draw strength from her. It was easier than he thought it'd be, to thread his consciousness with hers—like simply opening a faucet.

They didn't say anything over their bond—he didn't ask permission and she didn't give it. She just offered, and he took.

Rey opened herself up to him mentally, allowing him access to almost every well of power she possessed. It was nearly overwhelming how strong she was, although he wasn't surprised at it. Still, he took care not to pull on all the power offered to him; he'd only use what he needed.

Dropping FN-2187 back to the floor, Kylo stepped out into the hall and activated his lightsaber.

He was immediately pressed back with waves of heavy blaster fire. He had to keep his lightsaber constantly moving, blocking blow after blow after blow. Most of the shots were absorbed by his blade, but some ricocheted into the walls or ceiling. One or two headed back the way they'd came, causing a few of the troopers to duck.
Kylo's arms strained against the near-constant force of the energy being shot at him, but he still started to advance. One step, then another, then another. He steadily gained on them, his own strength backed by Rey's. One of the shots ricocheted back and hit a trooper in the head. The other troopers’ fear spiked as if Kylo had done it on purpose.

They were all afraid of him. He could feel it. But they were first and foremost soldiers who followed orders, so they stood their ground. A few actually radiated anger.

Captain Phasma made a motion for the flametroopers to advance. He had gotten in range of their flame throwers.

Kylo swore under his breath.

The streams of flame that burst out around him were both easy and difficult to evade. They were both as thin as a tail, but he was in a straight hallway. He didn't have many options on how to avoid them.

He threw himself to the left and pressed up against one of the cell doors. It was indented just enough that he narrowly avoided catching on fire, although the flames came close enough to him that it singed his clothes.

Closing his eyes, he reached out with the Force and grabbed the two flametroopers, wrenching them around so that their flames poured over their own men instead. He kept them in place just like that, their fingers frozen on their weapons so that they couldn't turn them off.

Screams echoed across the brig. The air became hot through his robes, and smoke started to fill the air.

Stepping out of his hiding place, he ran up to the two flametroopers and cut them down with two quick strikes of his lightsaber. He released his hold on them as they fell. Their weapons finally shut off, but the damage was done.

Up ahead, the entire corridor was framed in fire. All of the troopers had retreated to the other end of the control room, but he knew that many of them had been burned. A few bodies burned on the ground, the white plasteel of their armor turning dark as it bubbled and curled in the heat.

Two turrets stood unaffected at the top of the corridor and opened fire as soon as he revealed himself. He steadily advanced as he deflected the shots. Throwing out his arm, he tried the same trick that he’d tried on Hux's blaster. The turret on the left exploded.

Kylo grabbed ahold of a piece of shrapnel with his power and embedded it in the opposite turret with a flick of his wrist. The turret’s barrel sunk to the ground.

Bounding past the flames and up into the control room, he was surprised to see how much damage he'd done with the flamethrowers. At least half of the troops were burned enough that they were groaning on the floor, although most of them still had enough sense to point their weapon at him. For a moment no one shot at him.

A shrill alarm sounded around them, accompanied by a blinking red light that was almost completely drowned out by the burning light cast from the flames.

“Surrender, Ren.” The captain’s voice was clipped but fully controlled. She stood to the right sans her usual cape. She aimed her rifle at his chest. “Lay down your weapon an you won't be harmed.”

“Doubtful.”
He spun his lightsaber to build up enough momentum to swing clean through the two closest troopers to his left. He didn't pause to see where he struck them, but he knew they went down. Captain Phasma and the rest of her men opened fire as soon as they saw him strike, but it was easy enough to block or evade. Half of them seemed to only be aiming in his general direction.

He didn't feel even a bit winded as he darted from trooper-to-trooper, cutting them down as he went. The ones who were already on the ground were even easier. Limbs and heads rolled on the ground, their smoldering edges filling the room with the acrid smell of burnt flesh so strong that he could smell it even through the filters on his mask.

It seemed like only moments before he stood among the mutilated remains of troopers whose only crime had been serving the First Order, even when it meant going up against Kylo Ren and his lightsaber. Maybe it was one of them who had told Hux about FN-2187, one of them who had forced his hand and forced him to choose.

Well, he'd made his choice.

They all deserved what they got.

Captain Phasma said nothing as the troops fell around her. She fired at him continuously, even shrugging off a shot he deflected into her shoulder. Then her head tilted infinitesimally, as if she was listening to her helmet’s comm, and Kylo felt a small wave of satisfaction roll off of her.

That could only be bad news for him.

“What did you do?” He snarled, rushing forward and swinging his blade up and around, cutting her rifle in two and catching her in her right forearm. She cried out and staggered back.

He reached out and grabbed the collar of her chest plate, holding his lightsaber up threateningly. Orange fire and the red plasma from his blade reflected off of the chrome or her armor. She looked like some strange mirage of all the destruction he'd caused.

“You won't make it out of here alive,” she gasped, a threat that he was inclined to take seriously. He knew the protocols for an enemy on the ship; every moment he wasted here was a moment that Hux could solidify the defenses.

Getting to the hangar had to be his top priority.

“Neither will you,” he promised. Lifting his blade to cut her head clean off, he would have missed the flash of movement out of the corner of his eye had it not been for the reflection in Phasma’s armor. He looked just in time to see her flick the safety off of a thermal detonator.

He shoved her away as hard as he could-

Then he was blown to pieces.

Or-

Or at least it felt like it.

The world spun around him, red and burning. It rang in his ears like a siren. He couldn't feel his left arm – or most of the rest of him. That was a bad sign, because he should definitely have been feeling something.

Shock. He felt shock.
It took him a moment to recognize who the voice was, even longer to recognize the urgency behind it.

Rey- was all he managed, somewhat confused as to why she sounded so concerned. She was all over their bond, reaching out and flooding his thoughts. Trying to see what he saw. He pushed her out, his mind crowded and far too hazy to process anything to do with her.

He needed to get up. It took him a moment, but he remembered that he needed to get up.

He managed to stagger to his feet, which was good because it meant that whatever injuries he'd just sustained, he was still mobile. Mobile was good. His arm wasn't so good; his clothes were too dark to make a very accurate assessment, but he had lost most use of it – it just hung limply at his side, dripping crimson on the deck.

His lightsaber lay a few feet away, deactivated. He called it to his outstretched hand as he tried to locate the captain. Something was off about the visuals in his visor and his visor was cracked, but he didn't have time to do anything about it.

Phasma was an unmistakable figure, even with the new scorch marks that completely marred the chrome of her armor. She was alive, he noted, but barely. The armor must've taken the worst of the damage.

Rey was still a frantic press on his mind, but his thoughts were too fuzzy to deal with hers as well, so he kept their mental connection shut. So instead she sent him another wave of her strength, and he gladly took it. It became easier to lean his weight on his left side, and he could breathe without feeling like his ribs might collapse, although his left arm remained mostly inert.

Had it been any other time, had he been any less injured than he was, he would've crossed over to the captain and finished the job himself. But he only had so much energy – so much adrenaline keeping him going – and he wasn't going to waste it killing a woman who was already at death's door. So he trudged past her.

He tried to push through his injuries as much as he could, but he knew he was now on borrowed time. Even with Rey's power added to his, there was only so long that anyone could go on while losing blood, and he saw the trail that he left in his wake.

He had to move fast.

FN-2187 was exactly where he'd left him, and although he seemed to be slightly more aware of his surroundings, he was obviously still totally immobile. His wounds didn't look too good, either.

"Wha-“ his dark eyes widened as Kylo came into view. “Ren?”

He sounded thoroughly unhappy to see him.

“What have you done?”

Kylo let out a huff of air, bitter and dry. If only the man knew what he was asking.

Also, carrying FN-2187 was going to be hell.

“I'm saving your life,” he replied, although he wasn't sure if the other man really heard it. “Can you stand?”
The man looked down at his own legs and seemed to consider his question for a maddening length of time. “I…might.”

“Try.”

He reached down with his good arm and tried to help FB-2187 as much as he could, although it was mostly just him tugging on his arm. Slowly – far, far too slowly – the man managed to push himself up onto his feet. His skin was grey and he looked like he wanted to vomit, but he did it.

They must've been a ridiculous sight.

Kylo was hit with a wave of pain, and tried to resist the urge to double over. He breathed in through his nose and exhaled through the mouth. The rage that coiled in his gut only made things worse.

He was going to live to regret this.

Or maybe he wasn't.

“Come on,” he made himself straighten, “we've got to go.”

Chapter End Notes

Holy crap, it's actually been a week since I last updated. I'm so sorry, I promise I'm not dead. What actually happened was that I sort of hit a creative wall after I posted the last chapter, so I took a few days to rejuvenate. I pretty much just ignored my story, which is why I'm abysmally late with replying to your comments. I'm so sorry about that as well, by the way. I'm going to try and get back to everybody who commented on the last chapter, but sadly I really can't promise anything.

But guys! You! Are! The! Best! Seriously, the support I received after the last chapter was amazing. You guys are so amazing and kind, and I'm so lucky to have people like you reading my story, so thank you!

This chapter was going to go all of the way through Kylo and Finn's escape, but it was getting a little long and I'd already made you guys wait for longer than usual, so I cut it in half. The next chapter will more-or-less pick up where we left off.

Love you guys, and again, you're the best!
The turbolift was locked down.

Of course it was.

It was a simple matter of cutting open a hole into the lift shaft – or, it *would've* been a simple matter, had it not been for Kylo’s injuries. He managed to cut the hole well enough, but doing so one-handed was awkward and required twice as much strength. He used his absolute frustration at their situation to power him through it.

He finished cutting with a grunt, and blew the hole open with a Force blast. Now it was just a matter of how they were going to get to the hangar level.

Then, of course, he had to think about how he was going to get them into the hangar in one piece. And then he’d have to steal a ship before evading the *Finalizer’s* outer defenses, which was going to require a much more skilled pilot than he was.

He didn't let himself dwell on it.

They just needed to go up first.

Next to him, FN-2187 looked only half aware that he was standing next to Kylo Ren with an activated lightsaber.

“Any ideas?” He asked, because why the hell not.

The man's reply was sluggish, his shoulder lifting in a weak half-shrug. “Barely standing. Not much… help.”

It was about what he expected. Gingerly placing a hand on the still-warm edge of the hole he'd cut, Kylo leaned out into the shaft and tried to see if anything would give him any ideas. It hurt like hell to even just lean over like that, which wasn't a good sign.

He could see the turbolift unmoving far above, locked down at the highest level. The lift shaft itself was somewhat spacious, with panels and pipe outcroppings dotting the durasteel walls. There was a ladder bolted to the wall next to the door that ran all of the way up and down the shaft, likely for maintenance. It would be a reach, but he was fairly certain they could make it.

He winced as he leaned back out.

“There's a maintenance ladder. We're going to climb.”

The expression on the other man's face told him just how against that plan he was, but Kylo didn't care. He didn't care if he didn't like it, or if he fought him the entire way, or if he wanted to run and *hide* – Kylo was going to make good on his promise to Rey.

FN-2187's feelings didn't factor into that.

“What's your… game,” the other man narrowed his eyes at him. His word came out slowly and slurred, but Kylo could tell that his mind was working well enough. Well enough to question his
motives, anyway, which was something that he didn't have time for.

So he didn't answer – and what would he have said if he did? I'm doing this for Rey wasn't a sentence that he was prepared to utter. Especially to him. He'd exposed his weakness to too many people already, and he wasn't very inclined to hear another speech about how unworthy he was. Anger simmered under his skin at the thought, but he tried to suppress it.

Instead, he focused on getting them out of there; he was working on borrowed time, every moment wasted was a moment that he got closer to passing out from blood loss. And he had no doubt that FN-2187 would leave him behind if that happened.

No doubt.

He started to carefully climb out into the open shaft, but FN-2187 stopped him.

“I don't…think I…can.” He shook his head. Almost as if to emphasize his point, his legs started to give out and he slowly started to slide down the wall his shoulder was pressed up against.

Kylo didn't bother restraining the growl of frustration that bubbled up out of him. “You will, or you'll die. The only way we have a chance is if we can reach the hangar.”

The man didn't say anything. The wound in the back of his head was still bleeding, and even if it wasn't his most immediate concern, Kylo knew that blood loss could become a problem.

It already was a problem.

And he had other problems, too. The visor on his mask was cracked, and he knew that the smart thing to do would be to take it off. Then again, he was certain that the only reason he didn't have any major head injury from the thermal detonator was because of its duraplast plating, so he kept it on.

Using the existing burns and tears caused by the thermal detonator, he was able to tear part of his outer robe into several shreds using only his good hand. He wound a strip around his wounded arm, pulling it as tight as he was able. He wrapped another around his thigh. There were other wounds, but they weren't bleeding as much – or, at least, they didn't seem to be.

He reached down and tugged FN-2187 up as much as he was able, shoving him towards the hole.

“Wha-stop,” the other man started to struggle as if he thought that Kylo was about to toss him to his death.

It was tempting.

“You stop,” Kylo grunted, unable to stop him from wrenching his hand away.

FN-2187 braced his hands against the door and glared at him. “Why are you…doing all of this?”

Kylo exhaled through his nose. “Does it matter?” He demanded.

For a moment the ex-stormtrooper said nothing. “Not yet, I guess.”

Kylo wanted to growl in frustration. He restrained himself from saying anything more, instead nudging his way past The ex-stormtrooper and starting to climb out into the turbolift shaft himself.

He glanced back over his shoulder as he reached out with his good hand and grabbed the ladder.

“I'll keep ahold on you,” he told him before beginning to climb. He didn't wait for an answer,
because he knew that Rey's friend wouldn't be happy about him keeping him from falling to his
death with the Force.

It wasn't like he wanted to do it, either – and that wasn't even counting the fact that his injuries were
making it difficult to enough to hold up a grown man.

It would just be so much simpler to let him drop.

That would, of course, defeat the entire point, but it was a nice thought.

Climbing the ladder one-handed was more difficult than he had anticipated. He had to lean in as
close to the rungs as possible just so he wouldn't lose his balance. His injured arm was tucked in tight
against his torso, but a cold tingle had started to creep it's way up from his fingers, and each time he
pulled himself up a rung he seemed to discover new pains in his legs and back.

His mental grip on FN-2187 wavered only whenever the man would make like he was going to fall,
which felt like every couple of seconds. Kylo was practically holding up the man's entire weight in
addition to his own.

He hated this. He hated him.

Hated being this weak.

It took them longer than it should have to reach the next level, but they finally did. Kylo climbed
high enough that he was able to sort of shimmy onto the edge of the closed door, but he kept his
hand wrapped tightly around the ladder.

Cutting a hole in the door was out of the question; there was no way he'd be able to use his lightsaber
without letting go of the ladder and unbalancing himself. Instead, he reached out with the Force,
feeling around the door for the mechanism that would open it. It was more difficult than it should've
been, mostly because his focus was occupied by trying to keep Rey's friend from plummeting to his
death, but he found it.

The door slid open.

The alarm was much louder in the corridors, a blaring shrill accompanied by flashing red lights, but
Kylo barely noticed. What he did notice was the obvious lack of stormtroopers – or anyone for that
matter. It was like they weren't looking for him on that level at all, as if they had all congregated
somewhere else. He wasn't wrong; he could sense a massive cluster of life-forms up on the hangar
level.

Hux knew that there was only one place he'd try to go. Apparently the general wasn't going to waste
time looking for them and had decided to simply block their exit.

He could sense roughly a hundred little flames of life waiting for them – at least.

It took FN-2187 a long time to pull himself up the ladder enough that he could follow him into the
corridor, but Kylo didn't bother to help him. His head has started pounding, probably because of the
blood loss. His eyes wanted to lose focus every minute or so.

“What are you doing?” FN-2187's question forced him back to the present. Kylo had to try not to
look unsteady on his feet. The man next to him seemed to be getting better with every passing
moment.

“Change of plans,” he decided after a moment, “we're not going to the hangar.”
The other man narrowed his eyes, reaching out his hand to the wall to steady himself. “We're not?”

“No,” was all he said before he started to make his way down the corridor, his lumbering gait even more pronounced with his wounds. They still needed to go up a level to get to the escape pods, but he knew they'd had to specifically shut down the turbolift to the brig. Most of the lifts didn't shut down even when the alarms went off because of the fact that it would leave too many members of the crew stranded.

If he had any luck in the Force, then Hux and his cronies wouldn't figure out that he had managed to escape their trap for some time. As far as they knew, he and FN-2187 were still festering in the brig.

*Hux must find it fitting.*

He took the second turn they came to, sorting through his mental layout of the ship. “There are escape pods on this level,” he explained, “if we can get to one, then we can get down to the planet.”

Rey’s friend scoffed beside him. “An *escape pod*? Are you trying to get us killed?”

“Nearly every trooper on this ship is waiting to ambush us on the way to the hangar,” Kylo snapped, “we don't stand a chance if we go that way.”

The other man was silent for a second. “So you do realize when you're outmatched.” He almost sounded smug, but his tone was too bitter for that.

Kylo stopped and looked back at him. Sweat had started to collect on his neck and he felt a little like puking. And the fact that the other man looked like he felt significantly better only made it worse. They shouldn't stop, he knew, but he couldn't resist the bait.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

FN-2187 looked pretty calm, all things considered, although the dried blood on his face ruined it a little. “It means,” he bit out, “I don't trust you at all.”

It meant more than that – he knew it did – but he had neither the time nor endurance to press for more. He worked his jaw, physically biting back his remark. It was easier to turn around and start walking when he kept his mind on the fact that he was doing this for Rey. The man beside him didn't matter.

It was for Rey. *For Rey.*

Neither of them talked for a long time as they made their way through the corridors, sneaking by as much as they could, although to some degree they both knew it was futile. All it would take was someone glancing at the right monitor at the right time to spot them and alert the general to the fact that the two of them weren't heading to the hangar at all.

Kylo used the Force to knock several members of the crew unconscious, but before long it became too difficult to focus enough to do that anymore even with Rey’s added strength, so instead he just started killing any crew members they came across. The disapproval that radiated from the ex-stormtrooper was palpable, but Kylo still couldn't have cared less.

They were almost to the escape pods. Kylo had gotten them this far, and he would get them the rest of the way. The manner in which he did so shouldn't matter.

Rey probably would've disagreed – but she wasn't there.
Still, he made sure that she didn't know what he was using her power to do. He wanted to keep her out of it as much as possible.

She'd only worry – or get angry at him.

FN-2187 eventually broke the silence between them, “You said we’re close to a planet...Which one?”

“Corellia.”

“What's the First Order doing at Corellia?” He asked as if Kylo had personally been the one to direct them into the heart of New Republic territory. He winced as pain shot up his side. Looking down, he saw the his robes were slick all down his left side.

He may have betrayed the First Order, but that didn't mean that he was just going to spew all of their plans to an actual traitor. FN-2187 had no right to any of his knowledge – and neither did anyone else in the Resistance. The only one he was willing to give information to was Rey.

Not the Resistance – just her.

Not that the First Order was going to make a distinction.

The Supreme Leader wasn't likely to see his side of things, either.

In fact, it was very possible that Snoke would kill him for this.

The pure, cold panic that flooded his veins at just the thought of how his master was going to react was nearly enough to freeze him in his tracks, but he couldn't let himself think about that yet. He had to survive escaping the Finalizer before he could worry about surviving Snoke's wrath.

One disaster at a time.

Every single visual screen on board was flashing pictures of himself and FN-2187, warning the crew that Kylo Ren had gone rogue and was at large on the ship. They strongly cautioned about facing him head-on. It was vaguely satisfying that he was such a terrifying thing to be wandering around the ship, but it also just meant that the two soldiers guarding the escaped pods opened fire as soon as they laid eyes on them.

They barely dove out of the way in time. Kylo almost took two shots in the shoulder, but he reached out with his power and stopped both shots dead in their tracks. Using the Force was more taxing than he remembered it being just a few minutes ago. His breathing was labored as he sent the shots back the way they'd come, hitting the two soldiers in the chest.

One got hit in the center of the chest and crumpled to the floor, but the other was only grazed on the collarbone. He staggered back a step, more stunned than wounded, and gathered himself quickly.

Then FN-2187 bowled into him, and they both went down.

Kylo blinked, then bounded forward and activated his lightsaber. The blood loss hit him all at once as he moved, throwing his balance way off and nearly toppling him to the ground. He grit his teeth and forced his legs not to give out.

The ex-stormtrooper rolled off of the soldier just in time for Kylo to strike him down. It was the sloppiest swing he'd ever done, but the trooper was dead and that was all that mattered.
He deactivated his lightsaber before he really did collapse.

The room was blurring around the edges, tilting like the ship had made a hard turn to port. Sweat plastered his hair to his head behind his mask, and yet he couldn't stop shivering. He felt like dumping the contents of his stomach onto the floor. For a moment he wondered if he was actually about to vomit.

He was in bad shape.

_Really_ bad shape.

FN-2187 was saying something, but all Kylo could focus on was his breathing, on just staying conscious. It took nearly all of his concentration.

He was going to leave Kylo behind. He could see it, even though his vision was still blurred. The other man had pushed himself back to his feet and was in the process of unlocking the nearest escape pod. Using a second pod was out of the question – there was no way that Hux wouldn't catch on if he saw two pods jettison, and the odds of the second pod not getting blasted out of space weren't good. And he needed to be with the man to deliver him to Rey.

FN-2187 didn't have a reason to take Kylo with him – but he would not let himself get left behind.

He pulled more strength from Rey. It didn't help as much as it had before, which was another bad sign.

Pushing himself up to his feet took an excruciatingly long moment, but with several deep breaths he managed it. The other man only noticed when Kylo leaned heavily against the edge of the escape pod.

“You're not getting rid of me,” he felt compelled to say.

FN-2187 acted like he didn't hear him. The escape pod opened up, nearly throwing Kylo off balance. He made up for it by climbing in as quickly as he was able and taking the ‘pilot’s’ seat, such as it was. The controls were extremely minimal – only the control to release from the ship and a gauge for the limited propulsion.

It struck him that this really had been an abysmally bad idea.

Still better than the alternative, though.

He hoped.

With a quick glance over his shoulder to make sure that FN-2187 had followed him inside, he jammed the button to seal them in and jettisoned them out into space before he had another moment to think about it.

All at once, they were spiraling in the vast emptiness, _vulnerable_. He adjusted their trajectory just enough to angle them towards Corellia. The planet loomed large and safe in the viewport, both close and impossibly far in their exposed state.

For several long moments, nothing happened.

The _Finalizer_ was silent, seemingly unaware and undisturbed at their escape. Kylo wondered how long that would last.
He wondered if he could stay conscious long enough to find out.

“It's Rey.”

Kylo swallowed, a wave of vertigo hitting him hard. The planet’s colors started to swirl before he looked back at the man next to him. Things started to look darker.

“That's why you're helping me, isn't it?” FN-2187’s expression was hard to read, but it was even harder to focus on. His tone was deceptively neutral.

Kylo didn't say anything – and that was only in part because he felt like he was about to pass out.

The man looked as if his silence was all he needed to know, as if Kylo had somehow answered some deep question that FN-2187 didn't want to voice aloud. He regarded Kylo for a long moment, his gaze having regained much of its sharpness as the drugs in his system presumably wore off. Kylo, in contrast, started to feel the steady flow of blood as it slowly ran in cooling rivulets down his limbs. Now that he was sitting still, he could feel it all – the pulsing of torn flesh, the blood draining from him like he was a leaky faucet.

He'd already lost a lot of blood.

Too much blood.

And he was cold.

Fear crept into his mind, a shadow that mixed in with his wounds like ink. Each drop of blood was replaced with a drop of fear.

He was tired – far too tired to try and keep Rey’s thoughts out of his head anymore. He let her back in, sinking into their bond once more as he tried to stay conscious. She was there immediately, her consciousness wrapping around him like she was trying to keep him warm by pure will alone. Her worry shone on him like a floodlight, and it somehow kept him focused.

She gave a little tug on their bond.

*Are you okay?* She asked over and over.

He knew the answer to that question was abundantly obvious, so he didn't say anything. He just gave a little tug in return.

“I haven't changed my mind, you know,” FN-2187’s tone became quiet in the space between them, still undeniably fierce but seemingly farther and farther off as Kylo began to once more his focus. “I don't care what you do.”

The sneer that twisted Kylo's mouth wasn't really heartfelt. “I'm not doing this for you.”

All he had to do was keep it together – stay *awake* – until they could make it planet-side. Then it wouldn't matter if FN-2187 left him, because at least the man would be free like he'd promised and neither of them would be in the hands of the First Order. And-

Rey would come to him.

He didn't know if that was his knowledge or her promise. But with or without possession of her friend, he knew that she would find him. The only question was whether she'd find him, or just his corpse.
“I know.”

Kylo snapped his gaze back to FN-2187, although it was somewhat difficult. The man regarded him calmly, his gaze dropping to the blood that had dripped to the floor by his boots. Then he met his gaze once more. His face seemed to blur a little at the edges, although his frown was pronounced enough.

“How hopefully it won't matter much either way,” he said.

The implication was clear. “You'd like that, wouldn't you.”

It wasn't a question.

FN-2187 looked out the viewport briefly. His tone was very serious. “Yes,” he admitted, then paused. “I'm hoping that you bleed out before we reach the ground.”

Kylo blinked sluggishly behind his mask. “It won't be long,” he said, although he didn't know if he was referring to the fast-approaching planet or to his slipping consciousness.

Rey was saying something over their bond. The man beside him said something, as well – but he didn't hear either of them.

All he could focus on was flexing his fingers and the harsh scrape of his breathing in his ears.

Chapter End Notes

It was my birthday yesterday (summer solstice, yay), so as a present from me to you, I give you guys a late chapter! Whooooo

This is obviously horrendously late, so I'm sorry about that. It's just that I found this chapter a drag to write - but unfortunately necessary.

Before anyone points out that 'hey, Finn and Kylo would totally have gotten caught at some point in there,' I assure you that their escape was intentional on the First Order's part. More on that later, but for now just accept that they made it out, haha.

Finally, I didn't do any research on wounds or blood loss for this chapter. I went with whatever general knowledge that I remember, so if there are any glaring inaccuracies I apologize.
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

Rey knew long before she felt Kylo lose consciousness that he wouldn’t make it to where they had agreed to meet. He tried to keep her shut out of his thoughts, but she knew enough. He was wounded and in pain, drawing more from her than he ever had before. She was pretty sure that he and Finn had made it to an escape pod, but that meant that he and Finn couldn’t meet her at the park.

The exact meeting place didn’t matter at all, she couldn’t care less where she met him. If she had to wade through the entirety of Coronet City’s thick crowds during the busiest time of day to get to him and Finn, she would.

She would find a way.

That wasn’t the point.

The point was that she had no idea if Finn was safe, or how close Kylo was to-

No.

With him unconscious, she had no way of directly communicating with them, but she didn’t need their bond to know where to go. High up above the sky-riser buildings, hurtling past the city like a comet, was their tiny escape pod. It appeared to be undamaged, although it was hard to tell at the speed it was going. She felt him onboard, their bond snapping almost violently as it relaxed with their sudden proximity and then pulled taught as they disappeared over the city’s horizon. She didn’t see where the pod went.

She had to get out to them before the Resistance did, or the First Order, or – anyone, really.

She just had to get there first.

And that was the problem. How far out of the city had they crashed? Were they outside the city at all? She had no means of transportation, and no way of buying a ride, either.

She forced herself to stop, take a breath. She had to think. The solution presented itself almost immediately.

Land speeders lined the sides of the street. It would be nothing for her to hotwire one of them. The only problem would be navigating the streets, but she was fairly certain that she could figure it out.

She hated to do it.

She really did – but she could feel that Kylo was practically dying, and on top of that she had no way of knowing how Finn was doing. Not to mention the fact that they’d probably had a rough landing – or were about to – judging from how they’d blasted in and out of view.

At first she was nervous that someone would see her suspiciously poking around in a speeder and call the authorities, but no one seemed to pay her any mind. She pulled off a small panel by the steering in the closest open-top speeder she could find, exposing a few of the wires. It was really just a simple matter of bypassing the system so that she didn't need any sort of key to start the engine. She'd never dealt with a personal speeder of that standard of quality before, but the design wasn’t
significantly different from older models that she had come across.

It took her only moments.

She had no idea how to navigate the speeder lanes, but she knew that the city was based on a grid pattern, so she was fairly confident that she could get somewhere. She strapped herself in and gracelessly drove the speeder out into the traffic, heading in the direction she knew Kylo and Finn to be.

She nearly caused no less than three collisions as soon as she entered the endless stream of traffic. Cursing under her breath, she swerved to avoid disaster as best she could.

The traffic lanes were confusing; they turned into and bisected each other, sometimes turning off in places that she didn't expect. She got turned around twice, and both times had almost gotten herself killed trying to get turned back around.

Piloting a speeder in the city was, in a word – hellish.

Regardless, despite the numerous setbacks, she managed to make her way out of the center of the city, towards the pull of her and Kylo's bond. It was her guiding thread as she finally started to emerge from the most dense part of the city.

Exiting the city wasn't like walking from one room to another, where there was a clearly defined threshold and an abrupt change of scenery. It was more of a gradual decline, with the buildings getting a little less towering after a while, and then shorter still. They were still large, still looming, but they no longer reached up as far into the sky.

Smoke billowed up behind one of the buildings in the distance. Rey knew instinctually that it was them. They hadn't even gotten all of the way out of the city.

Was it better that they'd crashed in a populated area? Would that make things easier or more difficult for her to help them?

Her heart felt like a bird in her chest, fluttering against the hard cage of her ribs. She knew where it would fly, if it could. The sensation was nearly suffocating.

She was so close, all she needed to do-

There was a cold shiver, like fingers down her spine. All of her thoughts came to a violent stop.

No, she shook her head. Not now.

She couldn't breathe.

Little Rey.

Mother Talzin.

It was – Talzin was there, and she had come to drag her back to Dathomir, to her death.

And she was close by – Rey could sense it.

Rey's knuckles turned white on the speeder’s steering, and her breathing became heavy and ragged. Her gaze fluttered every-which-way, trying to spot a flash of pale skin or red robes – anything that would give up where the woman was.
Talzin couldn't have picked a worse time to try again to ruin Rey's life.

And then – out of nowhere – her stolen speeder made a sharp turn to the left, tearing her out of traffic and down towards the ground. Rey jerked back on the controls, but they were unresponsive. She had just enough time to register Talzin's presence before she crashed into a small plaza.

The impact did little damage as far as she could tell, but it jarred her enough that she couldn't be sure. She fumbled with the release on the safety restraints for a few moments before she managed to free herself. Stumbling out of the vehicle, she immediately started to look around for any sign of the woman in red, who had doubtlessly caused her accident.

A fountain spurted water in the center of the plaza, which was surrounded by businesses and people milling about in very practical clothing. There was nothing out of the ordinary at all – besides, of course, herself.

Several people approached her, asking if she was alright. She tried to quickly reassure them, before warning them that they should leave. They all looked at her as if she had suffered massive head trauma, then continued on their way. No one heeded her warnings, or seemed to care very much at all once she had assured them that she hadn't been harmed.

Then the air above the fountain quivered and distorted, turning a vile shade of green that she knew only too well. Mother Talzin materialized above the water, a floating new centerpiece in the plaza that made several people cry out. Only then did people started to listen to Rey's advice. They cleared out from the area, staying as far away from the floating woman in scarlet robes as they could. One didn't need the Force to be able to tell that that woman was bad news.

But Talzin seemed unconcerned with them all; her focus was fixed solely on Rey.

At first Rey stood still, momentarily frozen to the spot.

This was it.

Talzin had come for her.

She made herself step forward, determined not to let herself shy away from this confrontation.

She pulled out her lightsaber and held it in front of her, thumbing the activation button. It grounded her a little. “You're not taking me with you,” she said without preamble.

Talzin’s eyebrow arched, but otherwise her expression remained impassive. “Hello, child.”

She looked absolutely ready to take Rey by force.

But Rey wasn't about to just go quietly into the night.

She didn't have time for this. Every second wasted here was a second that Kylo was bleeding out, unconscious, and who knew what sort of shape Finn was in. Terror – terror for them and what sort of state they might be in – gripped her heart in its frozen grasp, but she tried to shove it aside as best she could.

She needed to get to them.

Damn Mother Talzin and her nightmarish control of the Force. She seemed smaller somehow, when she wasn't surrounded by the crimson shades of her own planet.
It made her seem vulnerable – *beatable*.

Her thoughts must've shown on her face, or perhaps Talzin could read minds without the other person knowing, it didn't matter.

As quick as a blink, she appeared right in front of Rey, reaching into her personal space to grip her on either side of her head. Pain blossomed from her fingers into Rey's skull; it felt as if she was searing her brain in two.

It was *sharp* and it *burned*. Try as she might, Rey couldn't restrain the cry of pain that tore from her lips as the agony only grew worse as the seconds ticked on.

She could barely *think* straight, but she knew she wouldn't be able to take this for long. Her body would give out, and then she'd be at the mercy of this woman of nightmares.

Her hand trembled around the hilt of her lightsaber, trying to regain the strength to fight against the pain.

Her knees started to buckle – if she didn't fight back now, it'd be over.

Kylo might die without her.

She tightened her grip on her lightsaber, then swung up with all of her might. Talzin wrenched away from her with a gasp, barely managing to avoid being bisected.

The look on her face told her that she hadn't expected Rey to be able to fight through the pain.

Rey was a little surprised, too.

But she wasn't going to waste time dwelling on it; Talzin had left herself open in her shock, a small, brief window that Rey immediately exploited. Closing the distance between them with a few quick steps, she swung her lightsaber first at the woman's legs, then at her torso.

Talzin leaped out of the way, expertly avoiding both strikes.

Rey's inexperience was a glaring difference between them. She'd never tried to fight someone so experienced – Master Luke didn't count, and she'd only sparred with him long enough to know that she *shouldn't* – and she had the sinking fear that she projected that fact to Talzin with every move she made. It was in her strikes, which were clumsier than perhaps they should've been. It was in the way in which she gripped her lightsaber so tightly her knuckles turned white. It shined in her eyes, which were too wide, and her breathing, which was a little too frantic.

Her only *real* experiences in fighting were the times she'd fought Kylo – which was a little ironic.

But fighting Mother Talzin wasn't anything like fighting Kylo.

The woman raised her pale, spindly hand, fingers splayed out, and knocked her back with a wave of the Force. Rey managed not to cut herself with her weapon as she tumbled away, but only barely. The ground scraped at her hands and knees as she barely managed to catch herself, tearing holes in her skin.

Even after she knocked Rey back, Talzin kept her hand outstretched. A green mist materialized around her fingers and started to swirl, solidifying into a long blade of her own. It looked distorted at the edges, as if it wasn't fully *there*.
It was the same blade that she'd seen her use before, when Kylo had fought her.

She thought, *I need to get the hell out of here.*

“You will come with me, child,” Talzin spoke it like a promise, “I have thus far been patient, but my patience has run out. You will not get away from me.”

Something in Rey broke at that, snapped in two and spilled something that solidified into pure, hard resolve in the pit of her chest. She was *sick* of being haunted by the pale woman.

“She’s laughin’,” she spat, pushing herself back up to her feet. “I’m not afraid of you anymore, and I won’t let you do anything to me, or anyone else.”

The sound of Talzin’s laughter sent chills down her spine.

“Oh, you foolish, *ridiculous* child. You don’t have a say in the matter.”

Rey thought two things at that moment. The first was the unsettling knowledge that she wouldn’t be able to stand up to Talzin long if their confrontation became a full-on fight – she still remembered having to save Kylo from her, even when he'd been bathed in Snoke’s perverse power. The second was that Talzin still needed her alive.

No matter what, she wouldn’t kill her yet – she didn't think.

That was her only advantage, but all it meant was that she wouldn't deal a killing blow – not that she wouldn't maim her a little. Rey gripped her lightsaber a little tighter.

She didn't have time for this.

The thought was like a mantra in her head.

Kylo and Finn – they didn't have much time, so neither did she. She could just barely make out smoke peaking up above the buildings to her right, thick and black as so close. All she wanted to do was rush past the nightmarish woman and go to them, help them, but if she did that then Mother Talzin would follow her.

She didn't have a single doubt about that.

And Rey wouldn’t let her find Kylo again.

Talzin rushed forward first, breaking Rey of her thoughts.

She was surprisingly strong. With a series of moves that looked more like dance steps than moves meant to hurt or do damage, she pushed Rey back. She had to retreat so fast she almost lost her footing, and she scrambled to block each blow.

Mother Talzin pressed her advantage, gaining ground as Rey was too overwhelmed to do anything other than try to block or dodge every blow.

A cold sweat creeped across her neck. She was *terrified*, but for once it wasn’t because of the Force witch who called herself ‘Mother.’

No, she didn’t think that she’d ever be scared of that woman again.

Even as she barely managed to sidestep a strike that would've amputated her leg, she knew that her fear of Talzin had run out.
For Talzin, she felt only rage.

The terror she felt came from a soft tug, a pull on the place in her mind where Kylo resided. It was weak, so faint that she almost didn't feel it with all of the adrenaline pumping through her system.

Something was happening to him, or-

Talzin’s blade cut into her left forearm, the green flames licking at her skin as it sliced the skin open. Rey cried out and swung her lightsaber at the woman's face, causing her to block for once.

Rey pressed the small shift in balance, striking as hard and fast as she knew how. The blue blade crashed against the green fire again and again, driving Talzin back one step, and then another.

But the woman in red seemed to predict her next move, a sweep from the right, and spun out of the way. The swing threw Rey off balance just enough to create an opening for Talzin to make another swipe at her legs, but Rey was just a tiny bit faster.

She jabbed her lightsaber at Talzin's sword arm, and caught her under her wrist. The sight and smell of cauterizing flesh was the most humanizing thing she'd ever seen happen to the ghoulish woman.

Talzin screamed in pain, and the sound was a nearly paralyzing thing – shrill, and not very human at all.

Rey didn’t see Talzin's left hand reach out until she had clawed a grip on her face, nails biting into her cheek and scalp. Her thumb pressed in right under Rey’s eye, drawing blood.

Like she was crying crimson tears.

Mother Talzin used the Force to hold her in place, much like Kylo had the first time he found her. She had been petrified then, confused and completely naïve about the Force. Now she knew how to struggle against the hold, how to fight. She tried as best she knew how, but wasn't able to fully break free from the woman's hold.

“The universe has hated you, child,” Talzin leaned in close, her face contorted in something between pain and a strange sort of pride. “But the Force granted you a great honor.”

She paused, “Most days I hate you for it.” The admission made Rey's skin crawl.

“Hate me all you want,” Rey bit out, barely able to speak through her paralysis, “it's no honor to me.”

Talzin dug her nails in deeper, but Rey refused to cry out. Instead, she fixed the woman the deepest, most sincere glare she could muster.

She hated Mother Talzin.

The woman let her blade disintegrate in her hand before she placed it on Rey's face as well, digging in and drawing more blood. Her cauterized flesh was right next to Rey's nose, and it smelled putrid.

“You are nothing but what the Force has made you,” she said. “And you will serve your purpose.”

“Go to hell.”

She didn't respond to that. Rey could feel her power reaching into her skull once more, putting her right back in the situation she'd been in earlier.
Panic started to rise in her chest, and then something else.

Certainty.

She would not succumb to this; she would not fail Kylo and Finn, and she would not fail herself.

That knowledge – that promise to herself – touched a part of her spirit, an extra reserve of strength that she didn't know she had. As soon as she felt it, recognized it, she drew it around her like a cloak. Talzin recognized the new power almost immediately, but not quickly enough to do anything about it.

With all of her new-found strength, Rey broke Talzin's hold on her and hit her with a blast that sent her flying – past the water fountain, out of the plaza, and all of the way down the next block. She hit the corner of a passing speeder and then a building, creating a crash that caught two more speeders in the accident.

All traces of scarlet disappeared behind the dust and rubble kicked up from the crash.

Rey didn't even pause to feel guilty about causing so much destruction – she just turned and sprinted the opposite direction.

Pedestrians gathered to investigate what had caused all of the ruckus, but she pushed through them. Her means of transportation was gone, but she could go the rest of the way on foot. She didn't care if she had to find a way to literally fly – she was going to get to that escape pod.

The crash site was four blocks down, and she sprinted the entire way. Her arm was pounding and was still bleeding a little, but she ignored it. A small cut didn't matter.

Finn mattered.

Kylo mattered.

She could still feel the tugging on their bond, a weak sensation that both stole her breath and drove her forward.

Finally – finally – she rounded the corner to reveal the crash site. It had been sectioned off by the city police force, with yellow holotape set up along the perimeter to designate the restricted area.

The pod was smoking, but otherwise it looked mostly intact. But-

It had been opened. No one was there.

That tug – it was because he was getting farther away. But it was so weak, she hadn't been able to tell.

She couldn't swallow; her throat felt like sand.

She was too late.

A police droid approached her. “Ma’am, this area is restricted for your safety. Please proceed out of the restricted area,” it said in a stern tone.

She hadn't even noticed that she'd crossed the line. Every part in her wanted to go check it out, just to make sure that there wasn't – some sort of clue, she supposed.

Too late.
“What happened to the people in the escape pod?” She barely found her voice to ask.

“Ma’am, please proceed out-“

Rey quickly stepped back out of bounds, if only so that the droid might possibly talk to her. She repeated her question, trying to keep her tone calm. She was sure that Talzin would know to come there – the billowing stack of black smoke wasn’t exactly inconspicuous.

“Those wounded as a result of the crash were taken by the emergency medic response team. They will be taken to the local hospital.”

She didn’t know if that was good news or bad, Kylo being who he was, but she was relieved that he’d most likely be stabilized. She could still-

They could still-

“Where is the hospital?” She demanded.

The droid pointed to its right, her left, and rattled off some simple directions before walking away. She didn't even listen, a frown etching itself on her face. Dread rose in her like a wave of bile and washed around her heart.

The direction of the hospital wasn't the same as where Kylo's tug was coming from. In fact, it was the exact opposite.

Something in her, something instinctual, knew. Maybe she sensed it, or maybe it was just her gut, but she had a sinking suspicion that she knew where he was being taken.

Back to where she'd come – where they'd come.

Maybe she was wrong, but she didn't think she was.

Their bond pulled just a little bit tighter.

Chapter End Notes

Has anyone seen Kylo? Rey seems to have lost him.

I'm excited for the next couple of chapters, because I want to write what happens, but I really wanna make sure I get it right.

Talzin's back, and still in the game. We all missed her, didn't we?
When Kylo regained consciousness, it was to excruciating pain, and the sensation of landing hard on something.

His chest and arm felt like they were on fire, and his head throbbed so badly he wondered if it had been split in two. Then he remembered that he'd been on a crashing escape pod.

Something pinched his wrist, but he barely felt it. He was already fading back out of awareness, dragged down into the depths of cold, weightless unconsciousness. He could've struggled to stay awake, but in his delirium he found himself entirely apathetic to his situation.

Sleep was good.

Less painful.

Except it wasn't, not really.

He dreamed about Corellia’s cities falling to the ground, crushed beneath the weight of war, and the entire planet being incinerated by the all-powerful will of the Supreme Leader. He dreamed of the Resistance cutting off his arms and legs, and demanding to know why he would try to kill Hux. He dreamed that FN-2187 became the emperor, then declared him a traitor. He dreamed that he tried to kill an old man on a catwalk, but he couldn't pull the blade back out of his chest. The old man held it there and clawed at his shoulders, crying blood.

*We want you to come home.*

Only no one would let him, because he killed most of them and people didn't forgive. The emperor who used to be a stormtrooper executed him with his grandfather’s weapon.

*Traitor, traitor, traitor.*

They all chanted in his dreams, they all screamed at him in pain and betrayal. And in his guilt and humiliation, he dreamed that he rose back up without his head and killed them all. Lightsaber in-hand, he cut down every single last person he knew.

Until he came to his master.

*Snokes.*

The Supreme Leader looked down on him the way another man had, pleading for the return of his son – *we want you to come home* – but the expression looked twisted up on the Supreme Leader's face.

It looked – *wrong*, somehow.

Kylo dropped his lightsaber.

Snokes reached out.

*Why have you betrayed me? Am I not your father?*
He had no words for him, no excuses, except – *have I not always betrayed my father?*

The answer seemed to change nothing. Snoke couldn't die at Kylo's hand, he was too powerful – too absolute. Even in his dreams.

Instead, it would be *him*. He was the only one who could *pay* for what he'd done, for betraying the only one who had never let him down – not as a father, and not as a master.

And he had *betrayed* him.

*For what?*

Kylo saw a flash of hair out of his periphery. Hands reached out for him as he turned to look, wrapping around his shoulders like a lover would. Chestnut hair tumbled down around her shoulders like before, in that other dream, and she was smiling up at him close-lipped. He couldn't quite seem to focus on her face.

*All for a little cunt.*

The words jarred him from her arms. Her fingers turned to claws as they left his neck. He stumbled back as her skin started to peel away, revealing her for what she truly was. Sharp, ebony spikes and oozing grey pores became her skin. Her eyes turned to hot coals and her mouth dropped blood.

She was a *monster*.

He had betrayed Snoke – the Supreme Leader, his master, his *father* – for a monster.

*You have to kill it.*

He had to kill it.

Then he had to *beg* for forgiveness.

He'd made a terrible mistake, he'd-

Voices startled him out of the dream, ripped him out of the nightmare and slammed him back into his body. His pain returned to him in rolling waves, grounding him in the fact that he was *awake*. What he'd just seen wasn't real.

It had all been just a dream.

It wasn't real.

“-with injuries like that, he'll be out for a while,” one of them was saying, the voice far-off, as if he was listening through a bottle.

“Yeah, well, I'm keeping the sedative dosage up, anyway. The last thing we need is *Kylo Ren* waking up before we can put him in a real cell.”

There was a pause. “You think a cell will be enough to hold him?”

“The type of cell they've made up for him back at the base, yeah.”

Kylo tried to get up and prove just how wrong they were – how *dead* they were – to try and restrain him, but his body didn't seem to want to respond to his commands. His limbs felt like they were being held down by layers of duraplast, and yet at the same time he felt like he was floating in an
ocean. He couldn't even find the strength to open his eyes.

It was the sedative, most likely.

His mind registered the thought, but the more he thought about it, the less it meant to him. That dream-like sort of weightlessness returned to him and overcame his thoughts, dragging him back down into the darkness of his mind.

Unconsciousness felt good, he thought.

And yet, there was a nagging little voice in the back of his head that told him to fight it. *The dreams aren't good,* it said.

He slipped back into them anyway.

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Their bond led Rey back to the spaceport. A part of her was relieved, because she doubted very much that the First Order would take Kylo and Finn to a public spaceport for transport, prisoner or no. But another feeling twisted and writhed in her gut, a nagging little reminder that whispered in her ear that the Resistance was looking for Kylo, too.

And it wasn't because they wanted to help him.

Something in her chest clenched at the thought of Kylo strapped to an interrogation table, pumped to the brim with drugs and on the verge of a brutal, blank death.

She would *not* let that happen to him.

The only good thing about any of it was that if the Resistance had Kylo, then they most likely had Finn, too. If the Resistance had Finn, then he was finally *safe.*

That would be one less thing to worry about, at least.

Rey gave small little tugs on her side of the bond, following its strings through the thick crowds. She'd hated going through the entrance and walkways before because they felt like choke points. Now she barely noticed, her mind was entirely focused on getting to Kylo.

She knew that she had very little time.

He wasn't in the hangar that held the ship she and Poe had arrived on, although the ship was still there; her senses led her right past the gate to that hangar, all of the way down to a set of larger hangars at the end of the walkway.

The signs said that those were the hangars reserved for companies that rented a regular space. They were off-limits to the casual traveler past a certain point. Rey ignored the signs.

A large cargo ship was docked in one of the hangars, presumably the vessel that usually used the space. What Rey assumed was the shipping company’s name was printed on the side in huge, faded print. She’d never heard of the company before, but that wasn't saying much.

Her senses were almost entirely overwhelmed with so many different people around, but she could tell that there were more than a half-dozen life forms on that ship.

One of them was Kylo.
After a moment, she recognized a few others – *Finn.*

And Poe.

They were all there, onboard that ship. It was definitely Resistance, then. No doubt.

There were some workers milling about, a few droids here and there, but for the most part the hangar was largely empty in comparison to the other sections of the spaceport.

No one stood at the bottom of the extended loading ramp, but Rey noticed that one or two of the workers in mechanics’ uniforms never strayed very far from the ship. She had a feeling that they were guarding it, but trying to not look conspicuous about it.

Well, she'd had to sneak past scavenging groups or other undesirables countless times back on Jakku; sneaking past a few undercover Resistance fighters wouldn't be too hard. Hopefully.

And she would be *sneaking,* not fighting. She might've been on the outs with the Resistance at the moment, but they were still good people. They still fought for good things, as far as she was concerned. Finn and Poe were still with them.

She was going to avoid as much confrontation as she could manage.

She had to wait an excruciatingly long time before she saw a chance to sneak past the guards. A worker bumped into a droid, sending his tool kit scattering across the floor. The crash echoed across the hangar – as did the worker’s Huttese curses – and drew the attention of the Resistance guards. Not pausing to waste a second, Rey darted past them up the ramp and onto the ship.

Onboard the ship looked surprisingly authentic for a cargo vessel. The layout was a little bit altered from what Rey remembered from most old schematics, but if anyone ever came aboard, they'd be presented with something that looked entirely legitimate. Which was the point, she supposed.

There were two Resistance fighters, a bothan and a human, standing around in the main hold. Rey stayed in the shadows as she approached, trying to figure out how she was going to get past them.

The human seemed twitchy.

“All I'm saying is that the sooner we get out of here, the sooner we can get him in a real cell.”

The bothan started to head out of the main hold, down one of the side corridors, to Rey's great relief.

“We're leaving soon.”

“We should've already *left,*” the human said, following the bothan. They both disappeared from sight, but Rey waited until she could not longer hear their footsteps echoing until she crossed the threshold into the main hold.

There were three corridors for her to choose from, not including the one the two Resistance fighters had just gone down. She closed her eyes and reached for Kylo. She didn't even have to tug on their bond to feel him, he was so close.

She snuck down the corridor to the left.

Several times she froze dead in her tracks, eyes wide and alert as she heard voices, or the echo of footsteps on the durasteel grating on the floor. At one point, she knew there was only a wall between her and Poe. A part of her wanted to go and talk to him, try and clear the air.
But she didn't. She continued on until she came to what was supposed to be the infirmary. The door was closed, and outside of it stood two more members of the Resistance, both holding their weapons close to their chest and looking like they were firmly in a ‘shoot first, ask questions later’ sort of mood. They kept glancing over their shoulder at the closed door.

Kylo was there, just beyond the door.

She didn't let herself think about anything else.

All she had to do was get past those two guards.

She didn't know what to do. She doubted they'd leave their post even if she made a noise to draw them away, and she didn't want to directly confront them. That would only end in disaster for everyone.

Kylo had knocked her out, once, using the Force. Back on Takodana, before…everything. He'd just found her, and then-

The next thing she remembered was waking up in restraints in Starkiller base. What he'd done hadn't hurt her, it'd just – put her to sleep, or something like it.

Maybe she could do the same here.

Surely it couldn’t be that difficult.

Reaching out in the Force, she nudged the mind of the closest guard, trying to gain entrance without hurting him. She knew what to do, how to probe a mind, but she didn't know how to essentially…turn the lights off. It took some gentle digging around.

And the guard started to notice. He began to blink heavily, and look around as if he heard something.

“Something’s up,” he told his fellow guard.

Rey swore under her breath.

But then – she found it. Like a tiny chord attached to a specific part of the brain, she gave a pull, and the guard crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

“Hey!” The other guard cried out, before she quickly did the same to him, too. He fell heavily, much louder than the first guard had been.

She waited a few long, nerve-wracking moments before she did anything – waiting for someone to have heard something, or for one of the guards to wake up.

Nothing happened.

Urgency eventually won out, and she quickly stepped over the guards to the closed door. It was locked from the outside, fitted with a modified lock that was significantly stronger than anything that a cargo ship should've required, especially for a simple infirmary.

It required a passcode, but Rey just popped open the top and crossed wires until the lock turned green.

Simple.

The door slid open to reveal an infirmary big enough for only two beds, one of which was occupied
by a large man in head-to-toe black. He was hooked up to a machine by a single IV in his wrist.

Rey exhaled.

Kylo looked bad. His face was mostly fine, but his arm was wrapped in bacta from his shoulder down to his elbow, in addition to small bacta patches that dotted his arms. His torso had been wrapped as well, but no one had bothered to remove any of his clothes to make sure that he was properly bandaged, or that there weren't any additional wounds that were hidden by the dark robes.

Most likely, no one cared enough to go to the trouble.

Her feet carried her to him seemingly of their own volition. One glance at the machine told her that whatever was in the IV was keeping him sedated, so she removed it as gently as she could.

She covered his wrist with her fingers, both to put pressure where the IV used to be, and because-

“Kylo,” her voice shook in a near-whisper, only loud enough so that he could hear it. She didn't trust her voice, didn't trust it not to say too much – to him in particular.

It seemed like forever before he gave any sort of response. His dark lashes fluttered, the muscles of his entire body coiling up as if preparing for a fight. His eyes flew open, looking for some hostile or threat. But after a moment he seemed to recognize her, recognized her presence next to him and how their bond had wrapped around them the way it had started doing when they were near each other. He immediately reached up to grasp her with his one good arm, unintentionally tearing his wrist out of her grasp. His hand twisted into the back of her vest, and she let herself get pulled just a hair closer to him. He didn't relax, but he seemed a little less on-edge.

“Rey,” he breathed, as if she was the first good thing he'd seen all day.

Maybe she was.

He looked at her in a way she'd never seen before. It was very grim and intense, but there was an underlying feeling that was unexplainable to her. She'd never seen that feeling on anyone before.

Her eyes started to sting just looking at him. She sighed in relief as she ran her hand through his hair, brushing the dark strands away from his face. His skin was much paler than usual and his eyes were bloodshot; he needed rest. A long rest. Senselessly, she felt a little guilty for waking him.

“I was looking everywhere for you,” she admitted.

He pressed his lips together briefly, obviously a little confused. “Sorry.”

She shook her head and threw her arms around him before she overthought anything. She hugged him tightly as she dared with his injuries, her face pressed into the crook of his neck. He let go of her vest, but only so that he could reciprocate the embrace, holding her close to his chest. She felt him sigh against her neck.

“You brought Finn back,” she muttered, although her words were lost in his robes. “Thank you.”

She hesitated for a long moment, then turned her head just enough so that she could plant a barely-there kiss on the corner of his jaw. She could feel every one of his muscles tense under her, the shock that rippled across their bond at that small act of intimacy. Her face burned hot as she buried it back in his neck, unwilling to see his expression.

Maybe she shouldn't have done that.
It was a ridiculous thing to do. *Stupid* and *emotional*.

She shouldn't have-

Then he pulled her so close she almost thought he was trying to absorb her into his chest. He held her so tightly against his chest she could tell it caused him pain, but he didn't let go. He turned his head so that his lips rested against her hair. He didn't kiss her, but she swore she could feel his lips burning through her scalp regardless.

“Kylo-“ she didn't want to struggle too hard for fear of agitating his injuries – which he seemed to be doing on his own, anyway – but she didn't want to do any more damage to him than had already been done.

He grunted into her hair, his grip still not letting up for a moment. “Rey, stop.”

“I don't want to hurt you.”

“I'm already hurt,” he pointed out wryly.

“You know what I mean.”

He didn't say anything for a moment. Then an awareness shot through his mind, and he started to pull back. His hand slid off of her back, leaving a strange burning sensation in its wake.

She tried not to shiver at the loss of contact.

She let him go. Something in his posture had changed, and his face had hardened into his usual scowl. His attention was fixed over her shoulder.

“I thought I'd find you here.”

She winced, cursing herself for getting so wrapped up in finding Kylo that she dropped her guard. *Finn*.

Rey turned around to see her friend leaning against the doorway to the infirmary, his arms crossed as he kept his gaze fixed on Kylo's. The two of them looked like they were having some sort of showdown. The animosity between them was palpable.

Her embarrassment evaporated when she took in the sight of him, with his swollen eye and bruised cheek.

“Finn,” she left Kylo's side and went over to him, “are you alright?”

He spared her a smile as he walked in and shut the door behind him, but it looked tight and a little more like a grimace. “I’m fine, Rey.” He pulled her into a bear hug that she didn't hesitate to return. “Just a few bumps and bruises, no thanks to him.”

The resentment was unmistakable, but Rey pointedly ignored it. There was just – *so much* between the three of them, so much hurt and wrong, she wouldn't even know how to begin to address any of it. It seemed better not to touch on it at all.

She pulled back enough to throw a questioning look over her shoulder. Kylo was sat a little straighter than before, watching them keenly. A scowl stretched across his face, hard and cold. “What happened, how did you get away?”
Kylo didn't seem inclined to answer, so she turned her gaze back around to her friend.

She held back from mentioning that their scowls almost matched.

“I was about to get executed,” Finn admitted with a sigh, “but then they decided that killing Ren was more important, I guess.” He shrugged. “I don’t remember it very well. I was drugged, then took a hit to the head.”

He turned his head and pointed to a bacta patch that had been adhered to the base of his skull.

_Oh, please._

Rey was fairly certain that Kylo hadn't meant to project his scoff across their bond. A frown threatened to pull at the corner of her lips.

“And who was it that got you out?” He spoke up, not even trying to disguise the sneer in his tone, or the look he leveled at him, one eyebrow arching in an expression that could be interpreted as nothing other than challenging.

Why did he always have to make things so damned difficult?

“You want a gold star?” Finn asked, clearly unimpressed – although he was still taking Kylo’s bait. “Good Job, Ren, you were the reason I was in that situation in the first place.”

Kylo’s eyes hardened even further, his expression dark as a rain cloud.

“Both of you, stop it,” she snapped quietly, turning her attention back to her friend. She reached out and laid a hand on his sleeve. The contact seemed to make him come back to himself, and a good portion of his hostility dropped from his countenance.

Displeasure bled across their bond, and Kylo didn't even try and contain it. He just let his feelings ooze over their connection. Rey tried to block it out as best she could.

“Finn, I need your help.”

With Kylo injured like he was, there was only one way she could thunk of to get Kylo and herself out of there without a major confrontation with Poe or any of the other members of the Resistance that had come. Finn wouldn't like it – Kylo would _hate_ it – but she had to try. The last thing she wanted was to cause any more harm than had already been done.

Finn was safe.

She didn't have to worry about that any longer.

She would make sure that the Resistance knew as much as she could give them, and then she'd help Kylo.

Finn looked willing to hear her out. She noticed that he turned them around so that he was standing in between Kylo and herself. “What is it, Rey?”

She could see Kylo glowering over Finn's shoulder.

_Let me handle this_, she insisted.

She got no answer.
“The First Order has a new fleet that they've been building in secret, and they're going to use it to attack the Resistance.” Her friend blinked, obviously taken aback, but she continued, “I was told that the fleet’s nearly completed, so there might not be much time. You have to warn General Organa.”

“Yeah, of course,” Finn nodded, already starting to move past her. She snatched his arm before he could go too far.

“There's more.”

He paused. “Okay.”

Rey took a deep breath and decidedly did not look over in Kylo's direction. “The only reason we have this information is because of Kylo,” she said carefully.

Finn's gaze flickered over to Kylo, whose mental protests she had to actively block. He still hasn't said anything, but she had a pretty good idea of what his expression would be if she glanced over.

*Please trust me.*

Something in Finn's gaze shuttered. “Rey–”

She didn't let him continue. “And while we can all agree that it was his fault to begin with, he's the only reason you’re here right now, safe, instead of a captive of the First Order.”

“You mean executed.”

She pressed her lips together. “They'll torture him,” she said, “you know they will.”

“Maybe that's just what he deserves.” There was no pity in Finn's gaze. He was angry, but not at her.

“You weren't worth saving,” Kylo spat, his patience to let her deal with the situation apparently running out.

“Then why did you?” Finn demanded, spreading his hands.

A tight-lipped scowl was the only answer he got from Kylo.

It had been for her. She knew that. Finn might’ve suspected it. But she wasn't sure if Finn *knowing* would help or hurt her case, and Kylo obviously didn't want him to know.

“Rey,” he grabbed her hands, his voice dropping low, “you need to let this–whatever it is–this *thing* with Ren go. He's manipulating you somehow.”

She was getting really sick of people saying that. Kylo opened his mouth, but she answered before whatever that particular disaster was could be unleashed.

“Finn, I need you to listen to me.” She held his hands tighter. “Kylo's never been able to manipulate me, not once. I know it's insane, but–” she closed her eyes briefly and dropped her voice to a near-whisper. She didn't *want* to say anything, but the stakes were higher than her feelings, so she did. “I really do care for him.”

Shock rippled across the room, echoed in both men, but she was too embarrassed to examine either reaction too closely. So instead, she pushed on, “I need you to help me get him out of here. I know he's done horrible things—I know—but he gave us invaluable intel that can help the Resistance, and he helped save you. If those things aren't enough, then please, just–do it for me. Because I'm your friend and you know me-“
Finn held up his hand, letting go of hers and effectively silencing her.

“What the hell?” He breathed, although it sounded more to himself. He turned and took a step away from her, rubbing his hands over his face.

Rey looked over at Kylo, who looked very grim. He had stopped projecting his thoughts, but she found herself uncomfortable in the sudden silence between them. Her gaze drifted over his wounds, down to his fists, which were clenched tightly at his sides.

The look he gave her made her avert her eyes.

“He’s a monster, Rey,” Finn's said, turning back around.

She didn't say anything.

“I think you're making the biggest mistake of your life by helping him,” a pause, and then, “but for you, I'll help. Once. And I'm only getting him off this ship, then he's on his own.”

He wouldn't be, but she didn't correct him. With a sigh of relief that ran deeper than she'd thought, she threw her arms around her friend.

“Thank you,” she said, “thank you.”

“This is wrong,” is all he said in reply, and gently pulled away. His gaze stayed decidedly fixed on hers. “Let's get this over with before I change my mind.”

She nodded. “Right.”

The most difficult part was actually getting Kylo up. The sedatives were still in his system, and he was no longer running on adrenaline to push through his wounds. He weighted a ton, and Rey told him so. Finn grunted in agreement.

Once they got him on his feet, Finn let go and left the infirmary to try and clear a path to the ship’s exit.

For several minutes, that left Rey struggling to hold Kylo's weight up as much as she could, and trying very hard to ignore the loaded silence between them. She very much kept to her side of their connection.

Then he leaned his forehead on her hair and exhaled. His breath was hot on her ear. He didn't say anything, although she got the feeling he wanted to. She took the gesture for what it was and tightened her grip on his arm just a fraction. It was all she could bring herself to do.

Finn reappeared several moments later, looking even more unhappy than he had been before he left. His frown deepened still when he took in their postures.

“I went to Poe and told him that you just contacted me, and that you'd stumbled into a trap set by the First Order. He took most of the team and left. I volunteered to stay behind on guard duty.”

Rey tried not to feel guilty; even after their falling out, Poe was willing to put himself on the line when she called for help. She wished that Finn had come up with some other story. “Okay, let's go.”

The two guards outside the infirmary were still out cold where they'd fallen when they passed by. She had no idea how long the Force trick would keep them asleep, but she didn't let herself worry about it. She felt Kylo's interest spike when he saw them.
Where'd you learn that? He asked, although he already knew.

She didn't respond.

They made their way across the ship and down the ramp with as little trouble as Rey could hope for, besides the fact that helping a very tall, practically ten-ton man down a loading ramp was a little more difficult than she had anticipated.

Finn stopped at the bottom of the ramp.

“Rey, you need to think about this,” he implored one more time. “Please.”

Kylo stiffened next to her. Rey just looked Finn in the eye.

“I’m not going to let anything happen to him,” she said, and found that it was a promise.

She felt Kylo’s gaze on her, but she couldn't bring herself to return it.

“This is a mistake,” Finn shook his head.

Rey took a breath. “Make sure they listen to you about the secret fleet.”

Her friend didn't look happy at all, but he nodded and let it drop. “Yeah, I will.”

“Good.”

Finn opened his mouth to say something else, but she had a feeling she knew what it was, and she didn't have an answer. So without another word, she turned and started helping Kylo as far away from the ship and the Resistance as possible.

It wasn't like she had chosen Kylo over her friend, but she had a sense that something was about to change – or maybe it already had. Tears burned behind her eyes, but she only let herself look back once.

Finn still stood at the bottom of the ramp, silently watching them go.

Chapter End Notes

You know, I've recently just really gotten to this awesome place where I'm sort of at peace with my writing. It is what it is, and that's actually been a great motivator for me. So I'm pretty happy with this chapter. And it's longer than usual, whoo!

How about that reylo, huh? ;)

Also, happy 4th of July to my American readers!
“I don't know where to go.”

Kylo almost laughed at the admission, because he hadn't really expected her to. He hadn't expected Rey to come find him, either, or for her to convince FN-2187 to help get him off of that Resistance ship. He hadn't expected her to admit-

“Kylo?” She jostled him a little, as if she was afraid he'd started to lose consciousness. It wasn't out of the realm of possibility.

He merely grunted in response as he tried to get his bearings. They had just come from the Coronet City’s major spaceport. It wasn't nearly far enough away from the Startask building as he'd like, but even being on the opposite side of the city wouldn't do them much good if the First Order decided to search for them on the ground.

Then again, that idiot Lan hadn't set up the most secure network of resources; maybe they'd have a chance purely because of his incompetence.

It was disgustingly ironic.

“We need to find you a place to rest,” Rey decided, drawing his attention back to her.

“We don't have time,” he insisted, starting to try to pull away, to stand on his own and regain some sense of control.

She wouldn't let him go; Her grip on his forearm tightened and she fisted her other hand into his belt. “Don't do that,” she snapped, “don't pretend that you're fine when I'm helping you walk.”

It was an infuriating truth, but he wasn't angry at her.

It was a very dangerous time for him to be weak.

“Besides,” she glanced up at him, “I'm tired, too.”

He frowned. The sedatives made his grasp of the Force seem somewhat farther away, but it came readily enough when he focused. He was suddenly aware of the fact that she was just barely keeping herself together emotionally, and he was fairly certain it was about more than just leaving FN-2187 back at the spaceport.

“Something happened.” It wasn't a question.

She took a deep breath, then gazed up at him with an intensity that surprised him a little. “I fought Talzin,” she said.

It was his turn for his grip to tighten. “When?” He demanded, forcing them to stop in the middle of the walkway. The flow of people just moved around them. “Why didn't you mention that sooner?”

Stretching out his senses was useless; the masses shifted around them like a river, each life a little spark that bled into the others around it. Tiny and insignificant, and entirely impossible to pinpoint a single life because of how many there were.
Although, he imagined that he wouldn't be able to miss Talzin if the witch decided to show up.

“Hey, I was a bit preoccupied,” she defended herself with a sharp look. “Besides, I beat her.”

“You defeated her?”

Rey pressed her lips together and shrugged, unintentionally nudging him a little. “Yeah. For the moment, anyway.”

“For the moment,” he deadpanned.

Thing were just always looking up for them, weren't they? He almost wished that Rey wasn't there, that she hadn't been wrapped up in any of it, that it had been someone else – someone he didn't care about. But he was too selfish; he despised the thought of anyone else being in her place.

“Why is no one staring at us?” She asked suddenly.

He glanced around them, at the people who came from the same planet that Han Solo had. Nothing was out of the ordinary, and he hated them all for it. Normal people living normal lives, getting rich and fat off of the efforts of smugglers and politicians.

The sight of a visibly injured man getting half-dragged through the streets by a woman didn't disturb them in the slightest.

Rey must've known why. She was no stranger to the way the galaxy worked. He suspected that that wasn't really what she was asking.

But he didn't know what she was really asking, so he didn't answer. She didn't ask again.

“I hate being back here again,” Rey grumbled from under his arm.

Kylo could feel the tiniest flutter in her frame; no matter how strong she was, he knew that helping him around for so long was taking its toll, and it had been from the start. He tried to hold as much of his own weight as he physically could, which was infuriatingly less than he should've been able to, and made sure to lock the spike of discomfort that shot through him far back in his mind so that she couldn’t sense it.

His frame was significantly bigger than hers – he was sure he looked ridiculous half-draped over her, stumbling around like a drunk.

“This is the only place that I know that the First Order and the Resistance are both completely unaware of,” he reminded her.

Kylo had taken them back to the dingy little hotel where he'd stayed with her when she'd been plagued by visions of the witch. It was farther away from the spaceport than he realized, which was good, but it meant that Rey had had to put up with helping him across a long stretch of the city. It was really a marvel that she was only just starting to show physical signs of tiring.

“Are you sure? Didn’t the First Order know where you were when you were with me?”

No, he wanted to say, they didn't. When it came to her, he'd never told anyone anything at all – not even his master, not willingly. But saying that felt revealing in a way he didn't think he was ready for. Even though she herself had said-
“No. They didn't know.”

“How do you know?”

“Because if they knew, they would've already gutted this place in search for me. I see a distinct lack of bodies.”

When she didn't say anything, he glanced over to see her jaw tightly set, her eyes fixed ahead. Her silence was telling, and she started to retreat from their bond back into herself.

He'd upset her.

A twinge in his chest prompted him to say something, to fix it, but he didn't know what he would say, and she didn't give him a chance to try. Without another word, she helped him into the lobby, where a clerk sat behind a window that looked like it had never been cleaned. The clerk was a Twi’lek with dull green skin, possibly middle-aged, who revealed rows of blackened teeth when he grinned at Rey. Definitely a spice user.

“Welcome-”

“We need a room,” Kylo cut him off, his tone snappish and irritable. The clerk didn't seem to notice.

In fact, he ignored him entirely. His bloodshot eyes were entirely for Rey, and for her figure.

“What can I do for a creature such as yourself?” What the clerk tried to project as charm instead oozed as untrustworthiness. Rey looked about as impressed as Kylo felt.

“You can rent us a room.”

The clerk nodded, pursing his lips as he gave Kylo a once-over. It was – laughable – to be sized up by some low-life spice user as if he was the only thing getting between the Twi’lek and getting laid by the most beautiful stranger he'd ever seen. As if that would ever happen, as if Rey would ever give someone like that the time of day.

At Rey's sharp intake of breath, he noticed that he had started to crush her shoulder in his grip. Kylo forced himself to relax and let go.

But as the clerk’s eye met his, he didn't bother to restrain the sneer that spread across his lips, just barely disguised as a smile.

An understanding passed between them about which one of them was the killer and which one was less than the dirt on the ground. It was satisfying to see the understanding dawn on the Twi’lek’s face. The clerk looked quickly away, scrolling through his datapad.

“Ah,” the Twi’lek cleared his throat, “here we are. Room for two, perfect for the couple.”

Neither of them corrected him as the clerk slid a keycard across the counter. Rey went to pick it up, and the clerk snatched his hand away, eyes flickering over to Kylo.

She noticed. He pointedly ignored the look she sent him.

“How are you going to pay for the room?” The clerk asked as if he'd only just remembered.

Rey went still beside him, but Kylo just pulled a few credits out of the hidden pocket on his belt and tossed them across the counter. It was more than enough for what they needed for the room.
“Keep the change,” he offered tonelessly.

It was possible that they'd have a better use for the extra credits later, but Kylo didn't worry about it. He'd only paid because Rey was there; if she hadn't been, he would've simply used the Force to get what he wanted.

The clerk seemed to understand that that could've gone a lot worse for him. He snatched up the credits and disappeared from the window without speaking another word.

The turbolift was out of service and looked like it had been for several years, so Rey started to lead Kylo up the stairs. It was irritating, but only a mild inconvenience. He tried very hard to only put a little weight on her as they climbed.

“What did you do?” She hissed at him as they rounded the corner to the second set of stairs.

He kept his face impassive. “I don't know what you mean.”

“I'm perfectly capable of fending off a few lewd stares without you interfering,” she snapped at him.

He scowled, about to retort by insisting that he wasn't trying to interfere. The Twi'lek was nothing that would make him upset on her behalf, he was about to say, nothing that would make him want to defend her. But he stopped himself.

“He was repulsive,” was all he said instead.

She glanced up at him, frowning still, then looked away. Her grip on him shifted. She seemed a little uncomfortable. “It's not your job.”

His mouth sunk into a frown and he fell silent. He had no right to get insulted by her comment, to get angry about it. No reason at all.

But he had to remind himself.

The room that the clerk had rented them was only slightly larger than the one Kylo had rented the last time he'd brought Rey there. The bed still took up most of the room, but it was a bigger bed and this room had two windows. Graffiti covered the outside of one of them. Everything smelled stale, like an old ration bar left in the sun.

But all Kylo could see was the bed.

He extracted himself from Rey’s grip and collapsed across the rickety mattress as carefully as he could manage so as to not to rip open any of his injuries. He lied flat on his back, his feet still firmly on the ground, and closed his eyes. The shaky breath that stole from his lips as he deflated was embarrassing and involuntary.

He felt the mattress dip as she sat down, close enough that their thighs touched. She seemed so light on the mattress next to him, like she was still half-starved and too underweight to disturb the mattress very much.

Neither of them said anything for a long time. Keeping his eyes closed, Kylo just listened to the sound of her breathing, barely a whisper next to the cacophony of city sounds that bled through the windows. Their bond was silent but strong, wrapped around them like a barrier between them and everyone else. Compared to how strongly he felt Rey beside him, the millions of lives around them felt like little more than a smoke screen. He could almost pretend it was just the two of them in the whole galaxy.
“I've made a mess of everything.”

Rey sounded like she was on the verge of tears. Kylo opened his eyes to stare at her back, but didn't say anything. He didn't know if he was supposed to talk at all.

After a moment, she leaned her elbows on her knees and buried her face in her hands. Small tremors shook her frame.

What was he supposed to say? “No, you haven't,” he said, because that was the truth.

Things were quickly spiraling towards the disastrous, but she hadn't caused any of it. Everything that happened, happened to her, not because of her. If anything, it was-

He clenched and unclenched his good hand, keeping it firmly on his stomach.

She wasn't responsible for the state of things.

None of it was her fault.

Ifs he had to have a fault, then her only fault had been to – to care for him.

Slowly – Force, it took him ages – he lifted his good hand and reached out to her. Hesitantly, he ran the back of his fingers down her back. A sigh escaped her at his touch, so he repeated the motion. The caress.

One of her hands dropped from her face to brush his pants, gripping his knee like it was the only thing allowing her to breathe. For a long time, he just gently ran his fingers down her back and she just held on to him. He lost track of how long they stayed like that.

He thought she might have been crying before, but no tears had fallen when she finally twisted around to look at him. He stillled, but let his hand stay where it was on her back.

It was a small selfishness, but she didn't seem bothered by it.

“Kylo, everything's all mixed up,” her voice was steady, although she barely spoke above a whisper. “The Resistance thinks I've been…compromised. I might've just lost my only two friends in the whole galaxy.” She paused, her eyes sweeping over his bandages. “You got hurt.”

He looked her in the eye and knew that he needed to say something. Not because he wanted to keep her there – although he did – but because she needed to hear it. He could recognize that, that she had gone out on a limb and she needed him to reciprocate, even if it was just the two of them.

A part of him felt like she should have already known. Another part was in awe that he had to say it at all. Another part still was almost too cowardice to even breathe it.

He willed himself to say the damned words.

“I’d do it again. I'd do–in a heartbeat, I'd do it again.”

He didn't know how to convey the depth with which he meant that. This was the woman he'd betrayed the First Order for – betrayed the Supreme leader for – but he didn't know how to say how much any of that meant. It just – it meant something, and he hoped that she knew it. He hoped she knew what he was really saying.

Anything, he was saying.
She looked at him like she believed him, and he found that that was enough.

A moment passed between them, a recognition that they were arriving at the threshold of something significant. Neither moved – they didn't say anything, they didn't even breathe. They seemed to balance on the precipice of a revelation for an eternity.

Then Rey lied down on her side, practically curled up against him, and tipped them over the edge.

“I meant what I said to Finn,” she breathed, “when I said that I care for you. I do. And I don't care who knows. You're-”

She cut herself off, the words stuck somewhere in her head. Instead of saying anything else, she lifted her hand and lightly traced her fingers down his cheeks, his nose, the bottom of his lips. It looked both like she was studying him intently, and like she had gone somewhere very far away. There was a preciousness to her expression in that moment, and it made her seem every bit as vulnerable as he felt.

He watched her eyelashes flutter.

The words came out of him before he even knew what he was doing.

“When you said that it wasn't my place to defend you–I want it to be.”

Her gaze snapped back up to his eyes and she furrowed her brows. Her fingers lingered by his lips.

“What?”

He worked his jaw for a moment before he continued, “I want you to be safe, to be–with me. I think about it all the time.” The words just spilled out of him, raw and quiet and agonizingly sincere.

She stared up at him, wide-eyed, and said nothing.

He pressed on, a little more forcefully than he meant to, “You're the strongest person I've ever met. You're everything-”

He took a breath. He couldn't say it. As much as he wanted to, he didn't want to more. He couldn't come back from it. He could come back from any of what he'd just said, but that would've been worst of all. He didn't even let himself think the words. It would've been impossible to unthink – impossible to unsay.

So he closed his mouth.

Rey had taken a step over the threshold, but Kylo had gone barreling past it. It occurred to him that he may have made a terrible mistake. Perhaps she hadn't meant it in the same way he did, perhaps his pathetic feelings had no place with her.

She brushed a few strands of his hair behind his ear and pressed her whole hand against his cheek. It managed to drag his attention back to her.

Her gaze was very somber, as if she knew exactly how much this moment between them mattered. “Kylo-”

He wanted to kiss her.

The traitorous thought came from the depths of nowhere. He nearly lost his breath with the sudden force of it.
He couldn't move.

Couldn't breathe.

A small part of him rebelled against the thought. Romantic feelings – they were a weakness. Perhaps one of the greatest weaknesses. To even indulge in the thought would be like rolling over and baring his stomach to a blade.

But the larger part just wanted.

Would she let him?

It wouldn't end well.

If he did-

If it wouldn't end well for either of them.

If he tried-

She shifted a little, and he realized that he had pushed himself up on his elbow. She'd let her hand drop, but every part of her still felt close to him. He hovered over her, carefully moving his injured hand up to brush her shoulder. It hurt a little as he bent it, but he was mostly just glad that he was regaining use of it.

He wanted-

He wanted to kiss her.

And she looked like she knew it.

Neither of them made a move. She placed her hand on his chest the same way she had in the park, fingers splayed over his heart. He was pretty sure she could feel the hard thumping of his heart, which was running races despite the fact that he was fairly certain that he hadn't taken a breath for a solid twenty seconds.

Then something shifted in her gaze, and she rolled her eyes. “Oh, for Force’s sake,” she grumbled, pushing herself up on her elbows. Kylo leaned back a little to give her more room.

“What?” He frowned.

“You, Kylo Ren, are one of the most rash people I know,” she huffed, “and the one time I actually want you to do something, you're just going to sit there?”

He didn't know whether to be insulted or just confused. “I don't know what you're talking about.”

Then Rey kissed him.

It wasn't a very deep or long kiss, mostly just a chaste press of her lips against his. It felt purposeful, like she was proving a point, but it was also a question.

She let out a shaky breath as they separated. He just stared, trying to make sure that he hadn't just imagined that.

Anticipation and uncertainty buzzed around his head, but he wasn't sure if it was his or hers. She looked at him like she wasn't sure that he had wanted that. Like she wasn't sure.
She started to pull her hand away, but he moved closer and she kept her hand where it was.

He kissed her the second time. This time it was deeper, more forceful and more urgent. An answer to her question. She sighed into his mouth, reaching up to thread her hands through his hair.

Kylo's mind went completely blank, all of his inner protests silenced.

There was only her.

Her lips, her smell, the little sighs she made against his mouth, and the soft scrape of her fingers in his hair-

Her, her, *her*.

Her and-

The darkness from the blackest corner of his mind began to bleed into his brain, bursting through his mental barriers and reaching through his thoughts like tentacles.

It was the Supreme Leader.

He jerked back from her, breaking the kiss. All at once, he was consumed by the effort of trying to lock off the part of his mind that was *there* in that moment, kissing Rey, from the Supreme Leader. Snoke was trying to tear him away from the moment and drag him back into that corner of Kylo's mind reserved just for his master.

No doubt to finally begin to deliver his punishment for betraying him.

His palms started to sweat as he squeezed his eyes shut, physically shaking with the effort to just *stay there* – stay in reality with Rey, outside of the place where the Supreme Leader could hurt him most.

Fear shot through his body like adrenaline.

“What's wrong? Kylo?” He barely heard Rey's concerned tone, barely felt her brush his hair out of his face and clutch his good arm. Try as he might to fight it, her presence beside him was becoming nothing more than a whisper of a breath on his neck. He was *losing*-

Fading-

*Shit.*

“Rey-” he said, or maybe he just thought that he said it. Pain spilled through his brain like acid. The tentacles of his master’s power took hold. He knew he'd lose the fight soon, and that his master wouldn't let his grip on Kylo's mind go for a long time.

If he even let him go alive.

His and Rey's bond was all around him, and yet it felt just out of reach. The parts of his chest tied to hers tugged in a frantic, staccato pattern, as if both ends were searching for the other but couldn't find the other. He couldn't connect to Rey's mind, and he couldn't even focus enough to really try.

This time, the Supreme Leader was actively keeping her back.

Snoke was funneling Kylo's senses down to himself and the pain he inflicted. The dark tendrils of the Supreme Leader's power sunk further into him and sucked him in like quicksand. His awareness of the world turned off like a light.
He was dragged down into his own subconsciousness, down to where Supreme Leader Snoke was waiting for him.

Chapter End Notes

So. Yeah. At least now you guys know why it took me so long to update. This was the first kiss scene I've written...ever, really.

It feels weird to be nervous that anyone thinks if this is too fast after >160,000 words of development, so I've decided that I'm not nervous about it, haha. Believe me when I say that this is one of the only places I could actually fit in a kiss in before things get bad. I actually played with the idea of not letting them kiss before stuff happened, but I didn't wanna kill you guys.

Anyway, I love you guys, you're the best, seriously.
The pain stopped as soon as he stopped struggling. When Kylo knew that he had lost the fight and he just let go, allowing the darkness to wash around him as he sunk deeper into his own mind, the sensation was no longer agonizing. It was just...cold.

Only a little unpleasant.

A little familiar, even.

He was as alone as ever, stripped to his core as he was brought before his master in the one place in his mind where only Snoke lived.

The Supreme Leader had carved a spot for himself in the back of Kylo's head, and was ever-present in that darkness. There was nothing that Kylo could hide from him there.

“Kylo Ren. Why have you not come to me?”

His master's voice was cool, deceptively neutral as he drew his consciousness in, like he was simply asking out of mild curiosity. As if he still believed without a shadow of a doubt that Kylo was going to return to him. As if there was mercy for those who disobeyed his commands.

A part of him wanted to beg for his master's forgiveness and promise that he'd return – Kylo hadn't wanted to betray him, after all, it was only Hux and his men who had gotten in his way. He was still loyal to the Supreme Leader himself, he could make it up to him, he could-

But that was a fantasy. In attacking Hux, in allowing the First Order’s plans to fall into the hands of the Resistance, in keeping the ring in his pocket, in keeping his master away from Rey – everything he’d done had made him a traitor.

He knew it before.

A weak and spineless traitor, throwing your potential away.

Surrounded by the presence of his master, Kylo could no longer pretend to be anything other than what he was.

Weak.

Foolish.

Traitor.

What could he say to the Supreme Leader? What could Kylo say that his master didn't already know?

But Snoke appeared patient. He spoke as if he'd just been struck by a fond memory. “I remember the first time I helped you connect to your power, to your potential. Do you remember, Kylo Ren?”

He did. It had been years ago – so long, a millennia – but he would never forget it. Another one of Skywalker’s students had been about to ruin Kylo’s – no, a dead boy’s – perfect sparring record. It
was the only thing the boy’d had; he’d always been apart in everything, but he could beat them. When the other children had to quit whispering behind his back and face him, he could always make them hurt.

It was – payback wasn’t the word he’d used.

He’d used the word fair.

Except for the one time he’d almost lost. It was the first time Snoke had come to his aid in a fight. With the smallest of whispers, he showed the boy how to bend the Force to his will.

And he had used that power to shove the other boy off a cliff. Skywalker had been more horrified than impressed.

The other boy had lived. Barely.

And the dead boy had gotten his first taste of what truly winning felt like.

“Yes.”

“I remember the potential I felt in you then, the raw power—enough to surpass the greatest of Force users someday, with my training.” The supreme Leader’s power tightened around him like a vice as he continued, “I feel it in you even now, although you've opened a wound in yourself.” There was a lengthy pause. “Can you sense it?”

Kylo felt like he couldn't breathe. He wondered if it was all in his head or if he was actually suffocating.

What would happen to him if he started to die?

The Supreme Leader’s patience apparently started to wear thing with Kylo's non-answer. “You are weak and hopeless without me,” his voice was both caring and a sneer, a warning. “I have shown you the road to power. I have been the one with you all of your years, a friend when you had none. I have been the one to guide you, the only one who never tried to hold you back. I have taught you all that you know.”

Snoke's voice was so close it seemed to embrace him. “I have been your father, and you are my son. And yet you betray me like this?”

Kylo knew that he needed to speak – to say something.

“I never wanted to betray you,” was all he could manage. It was woefully inadequate, as far as answers went.

“And yet you have betrayed me.”

“No, I-”

“Kylo Ren, the animal.” The words tore through his mind like barbs tearing through skin. Snoke's voice withdrew from him a little, but the Supreme Leader’s power tightened around him even further.

“So be it.”

The words were resigned, bitter – final.
A sentencing.

Kylo knew that things were about to get infinitely worse for him. Then – insanely – some of the fear in his chest settled at the thought, because at least he knew. It was a cold comfort.

He’d finally reached the limits of the Supreme Leader’s benevolence.

Maybe it was just that he knew what to expect. He would no doubt be subjected to excruciating torture, lasting however long Snoke deemed his betrayal worthy of, followed by an equally painful and slow death. Maybe he’d instruct one of the Knights of Ren to do it, or maybe he’d finish it himself.

Perhaps that was always the way it was going to end for him.

“You still have my ring in your possession,” The Supreme Leader sounded neutral once more, a change of subject that almost completely threw Kylo. He wondered why his master would bring that up now; was the ring somehow a part of his punishment?

“Do you know what that ring is called?”

Kylo was silent for a long time. He could barely breathe. Finally, he croaked out, “No.”

“The Dathomirian witches call it the Talisman of Age.” His master’s power began to relax, but only by a hair’s breadth. He was still axiomatically in control. “I am coming to deliver your punishment personally. I am telling you this because I want you to know. I want you to think of what is coming for you when you rut with your scavenger whore.”

The words made Kylo shake with rage, but he was helpless. And that only made it worse.

“I want you to savor it all, because her loose little cunt has cost you,” the Supreme Leader paused, seemingly lost in the moment. Softly, as if to himself, he finished, “everything.”

And then the Supreme Leader retreated from his mind altogether, languidly slashing across every inch of Kylo’s mind as he went. One last preview of the agony to come.

Despite the pain, all Kylo felt was sick.

Sick – and furious.

Coming back into consciousness felt like at last breaking through an iced-over lake. It was cold and sharp, but after one last great effort he could finally breathe, and he did so greedily.

His body was tensed as if already bracing for the punishment that had been promised to him. He felt so stiff he thought he might break in two. Everything seemed to be dangerous around him, he couldn’t readily recognize anything. Small pressures fluttered against his arms and back, a confusing and alarming slide of presses that-

Hands. The pressures on his back were a pair of hands.

“Kylo.”

It was Rey.

It was like her name was the final piece in his brain; all at once he knew that he was back in the dingy hotel room, back in his body with all of the aches and pains of his healing limbs. Hardly anything pleasant assaulted his senses, but he barely noticed. He deflated almost against his will, his
muscles letting go of some of their tension at the sound of her voice, and at the memory of what they had been doing moments before.

And yet, that only made it worse. His master’s words wouldn't leave his head.

“I want you to know.”

Snoke-

“Come on, Kylo, wake up.” The tone in Rey's voice almost surprised him; her fingers ran down his back, holding him close to her chest in a vice grip of her own, although hers felt much smaller and infinitely more kind. He felt her face pressed into his shoulder, muffling everything she said.

He forced himself to stop his line of thought.

She snapped to attention the moment he started to move. “Kylo,” she breathed, briefly holding him even tighter before letting him pull away. Sitting up, he scrubbed his hand down his face and through his hair as he tentatively poked around his own head, pulling up his barriers and resealing his defenses. He only barely brushed against their bond, throwing up just enough of a defense to send the message that he wanted to be alone in his own head.

He was never alone in his own damn head.

The weight of Rey's hand on his shoulder slowly drew his attention back to her. By the look on her face, he must not have looked very well.

“It was Snoke, wasn’t it?” The question was sharp low, quietly spoken as if she thought someone might overhear. Her brows were practically pulled into one as her gaze swept over him, nostrils flaring with a frown pulling at her lips.

They both knew the answer. He looked away.

Her grip on his shoulder only tightened. “You have to get away from him,” she said.

“You think I don't know that?” He snapped, extracting himself out of her grip. He wanted to pace, to storm, to just – destroy something. The lingering rage from his talk with Snoke shook through his hands, added to the anger of being so useless in his wounded state.

“Don't do that,” she straightened, crossing her arms over her chest. “I'm with you, remember? I want to help.”

“Well, you shouldn't,” he said before he thought better of it. Something like pain rippled between them, and he turn back to see her looking away from him, arms still crossed. Her cheeks looked a little blotchy.

“You were–I don't know, gone–for a long time,” she looked back at him, and it was with such passion that he kept his mouth shut, “it was like you had died, but you hadn’t. You were right there in my arms, I could feel your heartbeat. But you weren't there. I didn't know what to do.”

Kylo realized that she had been crying.

She had been crying over him.

The rage bled out of his system, replaced only a moment later with icy fear. Snoke’s words about Rey came back to him like a nightmare only just recalled.
He was reaching for her before he really knew what he was doing. He brushed his hand against her cheek, just a light touch, then made himself drop his hand. She still didn't seem happy, but she obviously wanted him to say something.

“You need to let me help you,” she insisted.

They just stared at each other for a long moment.

“Snoke’s coming to punish me,” he spoke suddenly, “He wants to do it himself.”

Rey blinked, then sprung to her feet, sending such strong waves of feelings across their bond that he had to actively focus to keep them out. “Then we need to leave right now. Does he know where you are, who you’ve been with?”

Yes, he thought as he gazed up at her beautiful face, yes, he knows.

His master – Snoke – had called her a cunt and a whore. Whereas before she'd intrigued him, Kylo’s actions had apparently succeeded in turning that curiosity cold. There was no way that he didn’t plan on using her to add to Kylo’s punishment in some way. It was possible that he planned to kill her.

Or worse.

But he couldn't even think of worse without bile rising in his throat and pure, seething hatred pouring through his veins. He tried not to let her sense it.

“Yes,” he bit out.

“Then he knows you were with Finn and Poe—the Resistance is preparing for the First Order’s fleet, but they’re not prepared for Snoke to come here.” She spoke quickly, absentmindedly running her hands over her hair. He didn't correct her assumption that Snoke would wreak havoc on the Resistance – he undeniably would.

But the Resistance wasn't the thing he'd destroy to punish Kylo.

He reached out and grabbed Rey's hand, drawing her closer to him.

“We have to let someone know that the Snoke is on his way,” she told him, “is there any way you're wrong?”

“No.”

A sigh, “Okay,” she nodded, straightening, “so we need to warn Finn or Poe, and we need to get you out of here.”

He stared up at her, at that same look of boundless determination in the face of adversity that he'd come to admire. When he thought about it, he was fairly certain that he admired nearly everything about her.

“There's no point in running.”

Her eyebrows pulled low. “What are you talking about?” Crouching down, she gripped his knee with her free hand as she gazed up at him. “Kylo, don't give up before you've tried. I won't let you.”

“I'm not giving up,” he insisted, his irritation spiking. Of course he wasn't giving up.

She ignored his tone, her gaze never wavering. “I won't leave you, Kylo. I promise.”
Looking at her, he knew that those words meant even more to her than they did to him. He still remembered what he'd seen in her head all of those months ago, in the interrogation room on Starkiller base. He knew what a promise to stay was to her, and that she meant what she said.

She was more important to him than anyone in the galaxy, he thought. The girl who should hate him. She was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen.

She'd just promised to never leave him, but-

That would get her killed.

No.

No.

She was – everything. More important than anything. She was his, screamed the most secret part of him. More than she was anyone else’s. His to care for, his to protect.

Even if she didn't want him to.

He wouldn't let her die for him – and she would, if she stayed with him. Snoke would find a way to destroy her, that was as certain to him as gravity. Even if she wasn't with him – wasn't his reason – his master would probably still find her and butcher her, just to prove a point.

Kylo would protect her from that.

He would not let that happen.

More than she could possibly know, she was–

Kylo brought her hand to his lips and planted a firm kiss on the inside of her palm. Her fingers twitched.

He hoped she knew what he was saying.

“Contact the Resistance. If we leave fast enough, then maybe,” he shrugged, “maybe we can draw him somewhere else.”

She would go for it. She always took every opportunity to help those fools she considered to be her friends. They didn't deserve her or her – any part of her, really – but-

But without him, they would most certainly accept her back.

Even though they thought she'd been compromised by him, corrupted, all she'd have to do would be to tell them what they wanted to hear. If she told them that they'd been right, that he'd – done something, somehow – he knew they'd be only too happy to believe it. She'd get welcomed back, the poor girl who had somehow overcome Kylo Ren's – whatever.

Then she'd get roped into fighting their war. It was inevitable if she went back. But it was still preferable to the Supreme Leader getting ahold of her.

It took a conscious effort not to let his face twist into a sneer at the thought.

He gathered and solidified his mental defenses, making sure that she didn't catch any of his thoughts. She was too keyed-up to notice the change.
Still, she wasn't obtuse. She narrowed her eyes at him. “You're okay with that? Even with what we just went through to get away from them?”

“No, I'm not okay with it,” he scowled, letting go of her hand to twirl a few loose strands of her hair around his gloved finger. He wished that she'd let her hair down. “But you'd contact them even if I didn't want you to.”

Her lips tilted in the beginnings of a smile. He did his best to return it.

Something in him knew that that moment would most likely be the only moment with her that he had. That when he said goodbye, it was going to be forever. He'd probably be dead long before he got the chance to see her again.

He'd…chosen his fate, he supposed.

It wouldn't be hers.

There didn't seem to be any point in restraining his touches when this was the only time he'd get to be that close to her. For a moment, he let himself dwell on all that he wanted, a plethora of ridiculous little things that came to his mind as easy as breathing, once he let himself think about it.

He wanted to hold her hand next to his heart, to feel her fingers brush his skin without his robes. He wanted to kiss her collarbone and the spot behind her ear where he knew her pulse to be. He wanted to wrap his arms around her hips, claiming his. And he wanted her to admit to it. He wanted to see her hair down outside of their dreams, just once. Just so he could run his fingers through it.

Snoke thought that this, what they had, was perverse and wrong and weak. He thought that it was something to be extracted from the veins like a poison.

Well – maybe it was.

But it wasn't wrong because of Rey.

And Snoke calling her-

“What are you thinking?” Her question broke him of his thoughts, shattered them in his head, and he was grateful for it.

She studied him, gently probing along the edges of their bond, but he didn't let her in. That only made her brows furrow deeper.

He pressed his lips together and let her hair fall from his fingers. “Nothing.”

“Do you really expect me to believe that?” She asked.

“Do you trust me?” He asked instead.

Rey blinked, then closed her mouth. Did she trust him? He had closed himself off to her thoughts when he'd closed her of to his; he had no way of knowing.

She cared for him.

She’d kissed him.

But did she trust him?
Did he want her to?

If she did, then that trust would only be broken. He knew himself too well to fool himself into thinking otherwise. He was planning to break it even as he anticipated her answer, once she left to speak to the Resistance.

If she trusted him, then that meant he was about to abandon her.

But if she didn't?

“I trust you,” she nodded, “you know I do.”

And as selfish as he was, he couldn't deny the satisfaction he felt at her words, or the small breath that escaped his lips. Even knowing that he was about to betray that trust, he was happy that he had it.

Just for a minute, Rey trusted him.

He caught her lips in a kiss, brief but deep, threading his fingers through her hair. In it he poured all of his gratitude for her words, and for her trust. It was the only way he could say it – the only way he wanted to say it.

But it was an apology, too.

He felt the brush of her fingers against his jaw as he pulled away, although he didn't go far.

When they kissed, it was like their bond flared, the final piece of the puzzle of energy that bound them together clicking into place. It scared him, how he could practically feel as the bond’s cord tied to her wrap so tightly around his heart it seemed to imbed itself in his organ.

It was the closest he’d felt to anyone in his life.

She ran her tongue across her bottom lip. He couldn't seem to take his eyes off of it.

“Rey-”

They both sensed it at the same time – death. A lot of death. Screaming, searing, excruciating, hundreds of little flames all going out at once.

“Is that-”

A soft boom answered Rey's half-spoken question. Their attention snapped towards the windows, where the sound of sirens echoed into the room. The feeling of death sparked around them like little abyssal flares, some near and some far. They were out of time, then.

Kylo stood, reluctantly dislodging himself from her. “We need to get out of here.”

She nodded, springing to her feet as well.

He needed to get Rey to safety. That came first. After that – after that, he'd find some way to save her from Snoke. It didn't matter if he died in the process. He felt like he'd been constantly on the verge of death since he'd met her; she was bound to kill him eventually.

And he'd choose his death over hers any day.

But there was no time to think about that. The ferocity of her grip on his hand drew his gaze back to
“Can you walk okay?” She asked.

Testing the weight on his leg for a moment, he nodded. The bacta had been doing its job for the better part of the day. Although he still had some pretty bad aches, all of his smaller wounds were healed, and many of his larger ones were well on their way. His only real concern was his arm, which was still fairly weak. “I'll be fine.”

As long as he didn't get himself into a shitstorm, he didn't add.

He had a knack for that.

“You're sure?” The worry in her tone only set him on edge. He didn't need her to be worrying about him when things could get a lot worse for her.

“Yes.”

“Okay,” she nodded, “then let's get out of here.”

Outside, another boom caused the lights to flicker, and the sirens got louder.

Chapter End Notes

First off, I'm so sorry that I wasn't able to get around to responding to everyone's reviews this time. I only had limited time, and I figured that you guys would rather I work on the next chapter than reply to the reviews, haha.

So yeah, Snoke's coming and he's got a plan. Which is more than can be said for Kylo, tbh. That guy has no clue what he's doing.

And thus the reylo break (if it could even be called that) comes to an end. Plot continues next!

Also, you guys are awesome. End of story.

[EDIT] I was wondering, what first drew you guys to this story? This is pure curiosity, I'd love to hear your thoughts! :)}
“Where is my lightsaber?”

Rey didn't hear the question. All around her people were scrambling, running, screaming through the streets as star destroyers filled the sky above them. Cannon fire rained down in careless bursts, ripping through anything in their path. A cluster of tie fighters and bombers screamed past overhead, on their way to spread more destruction somewhere else.

One of the tie bombers dropped a bomb several blocks down. Rey could see the explosion bloom over the buildings from where she stood.

“Rey,” Kylo's grip on her shoulder pulled her back to reality, to the fact that the two of them were standing outside the hotel, surrounded by countless innocents fleeing for their lives. “Where is my lightsaber?”

She blinked up at him. *Lightsaber?*

His lightsaber.

Her lightsaber was safely tucked away in her pack. But his – she hadn't really thought about it.

“Don't you have it?” Her eyes flickered down to his belt clip, which was currently sans lightsaber. Well, that answered that question.

“No,” he looked very much like he was trying not to erupt, “I *don't* have it. What did your friends do with it?”

“Nothing,” she snapped, automatically defensive. A woman knocked into Rey’s shoulder in her haste to get away from the destruction. It felt ridiculous to be arguing when the First Order was literally looming over their heads. “Finn would've given it to me if he had it.”

Kylo narrowed his eyes. “I doubt that.”

“He had no reason to keep it, he wouldn't do that,” she insisted, although she wasn't totally sure herself. It was admittedly possible that Finn had kept Kylo's weapon, or had even simply forgotten to mention it when he helped them. But she didn't believe he would do that – not when he had helped them, not when he told Rey that he trusted her.

Finn wouldn't have done that.

But there was just too much going on around her for her to focus enough to articulate that to Kylo, who didn't seem very inclined to take her word for Finn’s character anyway.

“Maybe you lost it in the crash?” She suggested instead.

Kylo pulled her closer by her forearm, dragging her a little ways away from the crowd. A hard scowl grew on his face. “I didn't.”

Rey knew that her impatience showed on her face. She didn't have the *time or focus* to think about where Kylo might have lost his lightsaber. The First Order was *attacking the city.*
As if to punctuate the thought, several shots from the closest star destroyer whizzed by overhead, passing out of sight behind the hotel. The sound of an explosion followed almost immediately after.

She needed to find a way to help, to do something.

She needed to make sure that Finn and Poe were alright.

Kylo was apparently done arguing with her. He dropped his hand and closed his eyes. She felt his power fluctuate between the two of them, and then expand further.

“What are you doing?”

“Trying to find my lightsaber,” he said like it should've been obvious, keeping his eyes shut. Her eyes flickered to his lips, but she quickly reprimanded herself.

She waited for him for what seemed like several excruciatingly long minutes as the city continued to be bombarded with fire from above. A blast hit so close that it shattered all of the windows in the hotel, sending glass scattering into the streets. Rey grabbed Kylo's arms, shielding him from the debris a little.

He eyes snapped open.

“I found it.”

She looked up at him, then at the sky, then back to him. “Do we have time?” She didn't specify what they needed time for. She suspected it wouldn't be the same thing he had in mind.

“I'll make time.”

A Corellian starfighter flashed by overhead with a tie fighter hot on its tail. Rey swallowed.

“Kylo-”

Another tie bomber screamed down the street, close enough that Rey thought her ears would start bleeding. She watched as it dropped a bomb not even two blocks away, close enough to shower them both in dust and rubble and shaking the ground beneath their feet.

Kylo lost his footing and stumbled into a fleeing Corellian, nearly bowling them both off their feet. Rey fell to her knees, only catching herself with her hands before she hit her head. She could feel the hard ground tear open the skin of her palms.

The blast had whipped some of her hair out of her buns, but she didn't bother trying to restrain the wild strands as she turned to look over her shoulder at the destruction. What before had been just another stretch of road lined by tall buildings was a new crater spanning almost the entire block.

She could feel dozens of lives blink out of existence.

It felt like being burned with ice.

A pair of large hands yanked her to her feet, but she barely noticed. Her eyes stayed fixed on the crater.

“Are you alright? Rey?”

She turned her head towards him, but it took longer to tear her eyes away. “What?”
Kylo gave her a little shake, just enough to jar her back to reality. His brows were pulled low as he studied her features, when swept over the rest of her. “Are you alright?”

“Yeah,” she dismissed the question with a shake of her head. Prying herself free of his grip, she stumbled towards the edge of the newly made crater. She only had to shove one or two people out of the way; the streets were emptying more quickly than they should have been, considering the throngs of people that lived there. Rey tried not to think about what that meant.

When she drew nearer to the crater, she wanted to vomit. Lives used to exist there – but now, there was nothing but air.

Air and a great, looming view of the sky. Or, more accurately, what filled the sky.

Her breath caught in her throat at the sight.

This was it. This – the new fleet that Kylo said the First Order had. The sky seemed overtaken with star destroyers for as far as she could see. Some were so far off they looked to be no larger than children’s toys, but others were so close they seemed to overshadow the city. They were each raining fire and death, wherever they were.

Rey glanced over her shoulder as she sensed Kylo come up behind her. He was far from calm, but his presence in the Force steadied her. Their bond flowed strongly between them, their own personal eye in the storm.

“This is bad.” His eyes swept over the scenery with a grim sort of blankness. She wondered if he’d seen anything like it before. Would he have even batted an eyelash if he had been a part of the attack? “We’ll need to distance ourselves from the city before we can safely leave the planet.”

“What about your lightsaber?” Her throat suddenly felt like sandpaper.

“We’ll get it on the way out of the city.”

Two things occurred to her at once, but she only bothered with voicing the first. “I can't just leave without knowing my friends are safe.”

His gaze cut to hers, his brows furrowed and his lips pressed into a straight line. Several star fighters flew a little too close overhead.

“We don't have time for that,” he insisted, “not if we want to make it out of the city before Supreme Leader Snoke arrives.”

It was a hopelessly lose-lose situation. If she made them detour so that she could make sure Finn and Poe were safe, then there was a possibility that they could still be in the city when Snoke arrived. She knew that that would not only spell disaster for the two of them, but also for many innocents. If Snoke was only after Kylo – and possibly her, she reminded herself – then the best course of action would be to lead him away from anyone who might become collateral damage.

But if she didn't make sure her friends were alright-

A building several blocks over exploded as fire from one of a star destroyer’s cannons tore it to shreds. The heat from the blast caused Rey's hair to stand on-end.

“If we have time to look for your bloody lightsaber then we have time to check on them before we leave,” she argued, raising her voice over the scream of a tie fighter as it flashed overhead, guns blazing. Corellia’s militia was putting up a fight, at least in the air.
He shook his head and pointed out across the destruction. “That way is the way we need to go to get out of the city. The Spaceport is in the wrong direction.”

Scoffing, she placed her hands on her hips. “From the edge of the city or your lightsaber?”

He jammed his finger up at the nearest star destroyer. “Do you see that? We don't have time to be running all around the city.”

Kylo wasn't wrong – Rey knew that they had to prioritize.

Their priorities were just different.

“I can't abandon them, Kylo–I won't.”

Kylo's hand shot out to grip her bicep so tightly it hurt, like he was afraid that she'd try to run away at any moment. For a long moment he just stared at her, his gaze hot and angry, but also afraid. She could feel his fear vibrating across their bond.

“You're not abandoning them,” he bit out, shouting over another explosion, “you're not. Don't you see that leaving them will help keep them safe? Supreme Leader Snoke is on his way as we speak, and if–”

He suddenly cut himself off with a shudder, closing himself off from their bond with a struggle that even she felt.

A cold fear spread through her, down to her fingers and toes.

“Kylo,” she reached up and grasped him by the arms.

If Snoke was there, if Kylo was trying to shield her from Snoke’s presence in his head-

“I'm fine,” he squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. His grip on her arm hurt, but he didn't let up. “It's not–I'm fine.”

“Are you sure?” She demanded, unsure of what she should do.

She wanted to scream, she was being pulled in so many directions. Finn and Poe, the Resistance, the First order, Snoke – Kylo. There was just – too much going on.

Prioritize. She had to prioritize.

Finn and Poe were a priority, but so was Kylo – and he was right there, in front of her. She felt him in her hands. She didn’t know if she could do anything for anyone else at the moment, but she could do something for the man standing before her.

She'd already given her promise that she wouldn't leave him, and she wouldn't.

She would just have to trust that her friends could take care of themselves. At least until she found a way to contact them and make sure that they were safe.

Because she would not leave Kylo.

She'd promised.

“I'm sure,” he snapped, straightening. His mind was entirely closed off to her. She tried not to let that worry her as much as it did.
He reached up and grabbed her other bicep so that they were both holding onto each other, although his grip felt more and more like a vice. She winced.

If he noticed, he didn't say anything – nor did his grip loosen up any. She saw his Adam's apple dip as he swallowed. “Rey. You're the only thing that matters to me on this whole damned planet. I won't let you get hurt.”

He said it as if she was actively trying to get herself killed. She had had enough of it. “Kylo, you need to get ahold of yourself. I don't need protecting.”

He scowled, although it somehow looked mostly incredulous. “You can't fight off everything.”

“The hell I can't,” she tugged hard against his hold, twisting her grip on his sleeves to try and dislodge his arms. It worked on his weaker arm, although he just grabbed her arm again. She jerked her chin at his scar. “I gave you that, didn't I? I'm just as strong as you are—if not stronger.”

“It's not about that,” he insisted, growling over the noise of another building crumbling to the ground. It wouldn't be safe for them to stand around much longer.

“I know how strong you are,” he shouted, “I know that you can take care of yourself. But this is Snoke. No one can take him—he'll kill you, and he'll make it worse because you're strong. I can’t-”

With shaky breath, Kylo leaned over and pressed his face in the crook of her neck. His breath was hot and sticky against her skin. He still held onto her like she might run away.

She couldn't decide if she should push him away or comfort him. “You're the only thing in this galaxy worth saving,” he exhaled onto her skin. “For you, I'd-”

“Kylo, let go of me.”

She spoke the words softly, but firmly. After a moment his fingers flexed, relaxing his grip, before dropping from her arms completely. She breathed a sigh of relief that her arms were finally free of his crushing grip, but didn't hesitate to reach up and wrap her arms around his broad shoulders. He immediately reciprocated the embrace.

“I know you're scared,” she spoke into his hair, which smelled strongly of sweat and ash, “I'm scared, too. But you have to believe we'll make it. We will.”

He didn't say anything, but his arms tightened around her, so she was pretty sure he was listening. Rey held him like that for a minute more, steeling herself for what was to come even as she allowed Kylo what small reprieve her arms could offer. She didn't know how many more of those either of them would get, not with the entire galaxy going insane around them.

She could see another explosion in the distance, followed half a second later by a low boom that unsettled some of the rubble around them. The sound of the explosion seemed to bring Kylo back to his senses. He backed out of their embrace and straightened up to his full height. His eyes were red-rimmed, but he seemed to have otherwise composed himself.

She let her arms drop from his shoulders.

“We shouldn't stay here. We're only asking for trouble standing around out in the open.” Even before he had finished speaking, up above a Corellian starfighter spiraled out of control as it got hit with a
shot from a passing tie fighter. The starfighter blazed over their heads, crashing into a nearby building and sending flames scattering onto the streets.

With every explosion it seemed like her skin lit on fire just from feeling the heat of the blasts, although she was fairly certain that she hadn't actually been burned. Kylo turned immediately and dragged Rey away from the wreckage.

He let go of her only after they had gotten over a block clear of the wreckage. She followed his lead through the burning, twisted streets. Hardly anything was recognizable to her amidst all of the destruction – not that she knew many of the city’s landmarks to begin with. But Kylo ran like he knew the city, knew it well enough that even though it had been half blown to hell he still had a clear grasp of where they were, where they were going. She wondered how it was he knew the city so well.

Kylo was undoubtedly heading towards the pull of his weapon, but this time Rey didn't argue.

Around them, people screamed and ran. Rey didn't know where they could go, and she suspected that neither did they. How many of those people would be dead within the next few hours?

The thought made her sick to her stomach.

“Stop it,” Kylo bit out, throwing her no more than a scowling glance.

A woman ran outside of a building, covered in dust and holding an infant close to her chest. A child clung to her, blood streaming down their face.

Rey's heart stuck in her throat. “I can't.”

He didn't respond, didn't offer any comfort at all. She didn't expect him to. But he didn't scoff at her either, and she knew that there was a time when he would have.

Ahead, the road was blocked. One of the skyscrapers had been blown to smithereens, leaving a mountain of rubble blocking the street. There was no way of getting around it unless they wanted to take their chances climbing over the rubble.

Kylo growled in frustration when he saw it, practically skidding to a halt. He paced back and forth, his limp adding to his already strong gait. Rey could feel his frustration, his indecision. He glanced back at her.

“We've got to get around,” he practically demanded it of her, as if she could snap her fingers and make it so.

She shrugged, helpless and more than a little frustrated herself.

“Well, I don't know what to do. I don't even know where we’re going.”

He worked his jaw, but the sound of cannon fire raining from the star destroyer above them distracted him from responding. He spared one glance at the sky, clenching his hands into fists.

At first, it looked like they would have to backtrack. The remains of the skyscraper blocked off most of the streets around them, but-

“There,” she pointed up at one of the nearby skyscrapers – one still intact, if only mostly. It had a skywalk about halfway up the side, connecting it to a building on the other side of the rubble. Neither building was unscathed, but they didn't look entirely dangerous, either.
No less safe than the wreckage on Jakku, at any rate.

Kylo didn’t seem to consider the danger too great, either; he spared her a brief nod and started to make his way to the building. She was right on his heels, but still saw the exposed electrical wire far before he did. In fact, he didn’t react to it at all until she grabbed his arm and yanked him back just before it dropped right where he would've been.

“Careful,” she snapped, but let go as soon as she realized that she had grabbed his wounded arm.

He huffed, his arm twitching, but threw a “Thanks,” over his shoulder anyway. Then he continued on as if he hadn't just almost been electrocuted to death.

He was growing frantic. With his mind still firmly closed off to her, she couldn't read his thoughts, but she didn't need to. They both knew that Snoke was getting closer by the moment. His reactions were a testament to just how close the leader of the First Order actually was.

She couldn't let it affect her; she had to keep a clear head.

Especially if she had to be the one to watch both of their backs.

When she focused, Rey could sense dozens of people still in the building. She was tempted to call out to them, to see if anyone needed help – or at the very least to tell them to get the hell out of there – but she knew that they had much bigger things to worry about, and in any case, she wouldn't separate herself from Kylo.

So she followed him into the stairwell, and then led the way as his still-healing injuries forced him to slow down on the stairs. Rage and impatience bled off of him like a river, but she ignored it.

She had counted the skywalk to be twelve levels up. Half of the stairwell wall had been blown apart, exposing the stairs to the rest of the city and making them a little treacherous in some places, but not impassable. It took them longer to get up there than it would’ve if she had been by herself, but she still thought that they made fairly good time.

“This one,” she said needlessly, not waiting for Kylo before she left the stairwell. The entire level looked to be occupied by starkly-decorated offices and waiting areas, each separated by glass walls which were almost all shattered.

It didn't take them long to find the skywalk, which still looked more or less intact, even from the inside. She tried not to imagine a starfighter crashing right through it at any moment.

She didn't notice that she had physically hesitated until he stopped as well.

“It won’t take long,” he said.

Shaking her head, she forced herself to move forward. “Yeah,” she agreed, “we’ll make it quick.”

The two of them began to hurry down the skywalk. Its walls were made almost entirely of transparisteel, which would've given it a fascinating view of the city before. But the view had become one of twisted durasteel and fire, and made it Rey feel particularly exposed. It wasn't the height – it was the vulnerability. She kept her eyes trained in front of her.

“Hey!”

She almost didn't hear it. Someone was calling out to her.
She skidded to a stop without a thought, turning to see a zabrak woman leaning against the skywalk’s entrance, clutching her side. Blood covered her hands and hip, dripping down her leg.

“Pl-please,” the woman shouted, her expression so frightened that Rey thought she could see the whites of her eyes from where she stood, “my partner, she’s stuck. I need help.”

“Rey,” Kylo’s voice snapped at her, already farther down the skywalk. He had gotten most of the way across before he’d noticed that she had stopped. He looked about ready to drag her across himself.

Rey whipped her head towards him, and then back towards the woman.

“Don't worry-” she started to call out, but he interrupted her.

“Rey, we don't have time,” he shouted, taking a step back towards her.

The woman staggered forward, still leaning her weight on the walls of the skywalk. She was leaving a trail of blood. “No, you can't leave yet. Please help us!”

Rey didn't even look back. “Kylo, we have to do something.”

Kylo called out to her again, but she didn't listen. She couldn't just leave someone who was actively calling for her help. She would never have turned and left anyone to just die – not when she knew so intimately what it felt like to need help and yet be alone.

She started to run towards the woman, Kylo started to run after her-

A blast in the building on one of the levels beneath them shook the skywalk so violently that both Rey and the woman were knocked to their feet. The building groaned like it was heaving its last breath, and then started to tilt.

It was like being inside of some sort of behemoth creature as it died.

And then it felt like she was standing on a mountain as it crumbled. Only worse.

“Rey!”

Metal streamed around her as it wrenched apart, tearing the skywalk in two as the building they had just come from collapsed. Rey rolled gracelessly as the skywalk twisted with the building, and all of the sudden the transparisteel walls became floors.

For a moment, she got that weightless feeling that she always felt when she would slide down her rope while scavenging, or when she pulled a ship into a nosedive while still in a planet’s atmosphere. Only it wasn't the same, because this time she would die at the end of it.

But she didn't.

She slammed into the transparisteel again as the building stopped its descent with a great shudder and an even greater groan. For several long moments she couldn't breathe – couldn't think. The only thing that went through her mind was:

Am I dead?

Then the pain started to come to her, and she had her answer.

Rey.
She'd never heard him sound so desperate. Kylo’s consciousness reached across their bond with such a frenzied fear it nearly overwhelmed her. It made her head hurt, but mostly she was just relieved that he was still there.

*Rey, Rey, Rey.*

*I'm okay,* she managed, trying to take stock of any potential injuries as she pushed herself up with unsteady limbs. Nothing seemed broken, which was a small miracle.

The zabrak woman apparently hadn't been so lucky; Rey could see her arm lying not far from her, nearly crushed into a pulp.

The rest of her was nowhere to be seen.

Rey bent over and promptly emptied the contents of her stomach. The motion sent aches through her abdomen and back.

A million thoughts swirled in her brain, half of them Kylo's, but all of them vague and a little confused. It occurred to her that she most likely had a concussion.

But Kylo's intent was clear – *I'm coming.*

She just felt like lying down and letting herself die, but that wasn't an option.

*No,* she turned to look out the new hole in the skywalk. It looked like the building had caught on another building, breaking its fall. Or, at least, that's what she guessed by how the remains of the skywalk were stuck at a strange vertical angle.

It would definitely be dangerous for her to try to get down, but she had to one way or another. She could do it.

Maybe.

*No, I'll-*

And then that all ceased to matter. The building, her pain, the dead woman – all of it, everything, forgotten.

Darkness descended upon Rey's senses like wet sand, inky black and thick and absolute. It was familiar and entirely worse than she remembered – like a nightmare just recalled.

She could barely breathe.

The presence filled her senses completely, reaching through Kylo's mind to wrap around her mind with a tentacle-like grip.

It was-

*Supreme Leader.*

*Snoke.*

He was there.

They were out of time.
A very physical chapter (literally speaking). Not much to say here, mostly because we're getting to a very exciting part for me and I don't want to spoil anything. Also, we're nearing the end of act II!
Chapter 44

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fear gripped Rey’s heart like a snake. She could feel Kylo’s heart echo her own, stuttering in conjunction to hers. She had to remind herself to breathe.

“Kylo,” she breathed.

Priorities – she had to keep her mind on priorities.

You need to find your lightsaber.

Their bond pulled in an angry little twist in her chest. After I get to you, he insisted.

She could feel him actively trying to keep Snoke out of his head. It unnerved her that he was already struggling with it.

We don’t have time for that now. Choosing where to step was like trying to navigate a minefield without a map, and made Rey's sloping descent back from the newly torn-open edge of the skywalk and back into the building a fairly slow-going venture. She almost lost her footing more than once, but each time she managed to catch herself before she tumbled head-first down the rubble. It didn't help that the majority of her focus was on her connection with Kylo.

You need your lightsaber.

They both knew that she was right.

I’ll catch up to you, she added after a brief pause, trying to make herself seem as confident as she could manage. It didn't work at all, since he could sense the fear vibrating through her just as clearly as she could sense it in him.

She wished they had never tried to cross the damned skywalk. She wished that she hadn’t stopped.

He’ll come after you first. His anger would’ve been sufficient to hide his concern from her before, but now it was all she heard – all she felt. He was terrified for her, and it only made her feel worse for him.

Well, I’ve got my lightsaber. She carefully made her way down the wall, which was slanted in a way that allowed her to mostly slide, although she had to be mindful of the debris. In a way, it was similar to her scavenging days back on Jakku. Whenever she had found a new place, she had always needed to take her time, sacrificing speed in order to get a feel for the new landscape, making sure that she wouldn’t kill herself trying to retrieve anything like a simple battery.

So in some ways it was largely the same concept, besides the fact that the only thing she was trying to leave the building with was her life.

He didn’t like her answer at all. A shot of panic ran down her spine, although it wasn't her own. She knew that Kylo was remembering her original plan to try and kill Snoke herself.

A lightsaber won’t be enough, he contended. She could feel his mind full of frantic defenses against Snoke, distracting him. Please, Rey. Don’t do anything foolish.
Pausing in her attempts to navigate the collapsed building, she sighed.

*I'll be careful, Kylo.*

They were mostly just words to soothe his shot nerves, but she found that she meant them. The idea of somehow not ever seeing him again-

She wouldn't shy away from anything that came her way looking for a fight, and if she came across people in need, she would help them if she could. But she'd be smart about it.

And – she could feel his affection pouring over their bond, like, like-

Rey had never felt so valued in her entire life.

She understood, in that moment, that it was *them.*

*Him* and *her.*

She was all he had.

And he-

*Hurry up and find your lightsaber,* was all she knew to tell him. That, and, *Be careful.* They seemed to be very common words with which to tell him how much she cared for him, but it was the best she could do at the moment.

After a long pause, the only response she got from him was a short *You, too.*

It was good enough.

She resumed carefully making her way down to the unnaturally made junction from one building to the other. The walls looked about ready to collapse further into the other building, but from what she could see the other building was holding up much better. It was right-side up, at least.

Steady waves of Kylo's emotions rolled over her as she continued to make her way to safety. There were no words, there were just feelings. Sensations. Even as she got to the bottom floor of the building and back out onto the streets, she felt his frustration just as strongly as her own relief.

She almost brought his attention to it several times, but in the end she didn't.

It felt – *good,* somehow, to just simply be connected to him.

After a while, he seemed to realize how much he was projecting, because he started to rein in his emotions. She didn't think that he was doing a very good job at it.

Every step Rey took seemed to be haunted by the looming shadow of Snoke's presence in the Force. It wasn't coming from across her and Kylo's bond, either – the creature was reaching out in the Force to her himself. She felt like she was trying to outrun phantoms.

She knew that Kylo’s state of mind was starting to deteriorate the longer it took for them to get out of the city, the longer Snoke was so close to catching them that she felt a cold sweat from trying to avoid his inky presence. What she felt was ten times worse for him; Snoke had carved out his own place in Kylo’s head decades ago. More than anything, she could feel him poking and prodding Kylo's mind, torturously trying to gain entrance as Kylo tried desperately to keep him out. She didn't know how she could help, so she just tried to lend him as much of her strength as she could spare.
Even the way that he pulled on their bond told her how much he needed it.

It was nearly overwhelming to feel Snoke’s presence on top of all of the death and destruction around her. It was worse that she could feel it through Kylo, too, but it was a little better when she put up her mental defenses so that she couldn't sense nearly as much around her. On one hand, she knew she was handicapping herself by not allowing her senses to spread out to capacity, a willing blindness. But on the other hand, she had no desire to feel the people dying everywhere – people she couldn't do anything for, who were suffering for no more than the ambitions of madmen who wanted to rule the galaxy.

Maybe that made her selfish, or weak, but it was the only way she could make herself keep going.

The only way she could keep herself together enough to try and keep Kylo together.

Force, she was terrified.

And **angry**.

It pushed her harder, kept her going as fast as she could towards Kylo.

A part of her – a secret part, hidden far away in her chest and mostly overshadowed by her nerves – almost **wanted** Snoke to come for her. Wanted him to appear before her like the monster that she knew him to be.

She wanted to see Kylo again, wanted to kiss him and make good on her promise to not leave him – but with each step, with every moment she spent wading through the death, destruction, and chaos, she decided that ending Snoke's terror was infinitely more important than what she wanted.

If she got the chance to confront him, to **kill** him, then she could potentially save billions of lives. Perhaps even trillions.

All of those people living out their lives, like the people of Corellia had been – she could save them.

She could save **Kylo**.

And even if he was the only person whose life was saved by Snoke's death, it would be **worth** it. In a heartbeat, she'd die to stop that bastard.

To **kill** the bastard.

Her righteous anger stayed with her as she made her way through the crumbled streets of Coronet City. Unlike Kylo, she had no internal map of the city, so she just made a guess with each turn she took, simply following in the general direction their bond. She could feel as he kept moving farther away, still following the call of his lightsaber. It felt like she was losing ground on him instead of gaining any, but he never felt too far away.

She was so focused on blocking every out that she almost missed the change in the air around her. Spinning around, she spotted a small blip in the sky. It turned into a shuttle as it drew nearer.

And then – she could sense him on board.

**Him.**

**Snoke** – he was there, on that shuttle. It was heading straight towards her, ignoring the firefights going on around it. As if Snoke was using his power to deflect all potential danger, not even one
stray shot neared the shuttle. There might as well have not been anything else in the sky.

The shuttle raced towards her, descending from the upper atmosphere with a scream not unlike the tie fighters’. It almost sounded like a bird of prey, come to devour her whole. There was nowhere she could go, nowhere that he couldn't sense.

And he could sense her. She felt his cool acknowledgement pass over her like a shadow.

He knew exactly where she was.

And he was coming for her. Just like Kylo said.

Fear licked her heart with its icy tongue, nearly stopping the organ in her chest, but she forced herself to breathe – to stay calm. She closed herself off from the bond, unwilling to let Kylo distract her and unwilling to unnerve him more than he already was. Fumbling through her bag without taking her eyes away from that shuttle for even a second, she pulled her lightsaber out and activated it. The familiar blue thrum was drowned out by the cacophony around her, but she could still feel it's steady power in her hand. With it came a measure of calm.

_Do or die._

She'd get her chance to do one or the other, it seemed.

Every passing second was like getting bathed in a cold darkness, inky and stronger the closer Snoke got. Another few seconds, and-

Rey ducked suddenly as the shuttle fired a cluster of shots aimed in her general direction. The shots didn't come close enough to seriously threaten her, but they sent a message. Straightening, she sent her defiance up to Snoke with as much strength as she could muster. Her pounding heart was inconsequential.

She wasn't afraid of him.

The shuttle was so close. Her palms were already sweaty, and she got the irrational fear that her lightsaber would just slip out of her hand before she could do anything. She shook herself of the ridiculous thought and gripped her weapon tighter.

It happened so fast that it didn't even register to her for a moment.

Snoke’s shuttle flew right over her.

It didn't land, it didn't even slow down. Besides the short burst of fire it had shot her way, it was as if she didn't even exist. She turned and watched, dumbstruck, as the shuttle continued its flight path far past her. Going in the same direction she had been.

That's when she knew.

Kylo had been wrong.

Snoke may have wanted to torture her in order to punish Kylo, but that obviously wasn't his plan at that moment. His student – his _slave_ – had been the one to betray him, so the slave would be the one to pay.

She knew from experience – slaves always paid.

_Kylo_, she opened herself back up to their bond with more panic than she thought she'd ever felt for
another person in her life. *Kylo, he's coming for you.*

Their bond pulled taut between them, that same elastic cord that tied her soul to his stretched from one rib to another. It was just about the only thing that kept her grounded as she followed its pull. Her feet carried her so quickly through the streets that she half felt like she was flying, even despite all the rubble and debris.

Her heart pounded in her throat like it was about to leap out of her mouth. She could barely swallow it down.

*Kylo, Kylo-

She felt the cord wrapped around each and every one of her ribs, a real and tangible thing. In that moment, she swore she could actually feel it. It pulled at her entire chest. Then his mind pressed against hers in the strangest way, as if that alone could in some way mimic physical closeness.

Like a caress.

*I know. He's here.* Stay away, Rey.

And then, before she could respond or offer him strength or anything, he cut her off. He threw up his walls and clamped down on his defenses, and she couldn't feel a thing.

And just like everything else, it only made her run faster.

Clouds had rolled in since the attack had started – dark, suffocating clouds that lit up with each exploding star fighter and reflected the glow of the fires still burning on the ground. By the time Kylo reached the escape pod’s crash site, it looked like the sky was burning.

Maybe it would complete the image and rain blood. The thought was a passing insanity, but it seemed to fit with the rest of the horrors around him.

Apparently, he and FN-2187 had crashed on the edge of a street bridge. He thanked the Force that the local authorities hadn't found the time to move the wreckage before the First Order’s attack had begun; for once, CorSec’s general ineptitude had worked in his favor.

He could feel his lightsaber somewhere in that twisted pile of metal and wires. Every step towards it made the sensation all the more clear.

Just like how every step further away from Rey made his chest ache. It felt like a betrayal to both her and himself that he had left her in the half-torn down building, left her to somehow make her own way down the collapsing building and back to him.

No matter what he planned to do once they got to safety – he wasn’t going to leave her until then. That's what he had promised himself, but of course he had already broken that promise.

She was keeping up behind him, though. She had gotten out of that building a while ago, and he could sense their stretched bond start to relax with every step she gained. The plan was to grab his lightsaber and quickly back-track to her.

He climbed in the escape pod, careful not to bang his already mostly-healed wounds around. Despite the destroyed exterior, the inside was still largely intact. There was some dried blood on the seats –
especially the one he had sat in – and there was a hole torn through the metal base, but besides that, nothing appeared to be significantly damaged.

A tiny sense of triumph pricked a hole in his dark countenance. He could sense how close his lightsaber was-

*There.* In the back.

Scrambling towards the other side of the pod, he found his lightsaber crammed between two pieces of durasteel that jutted out near the floor. It must've gotten loose during the crash and rolled to the back of the pod without either him or FN-2187 noticing.

But it didn't matter how it got there. What mattered was that he had *found* it.

He called it to his hand and it came readily, once again at home in his grip.

*Finally.*

It felt right; he felt more like himself – less *helpless* – once he had his weapon in his hands. It was no less a part of him than his arm.

And then that pinprick of triumph was snuffed out.

*My apprentice.*

He nearly dropped his lightsaber. His heart sank like durasteel in water, his breath stolen from his chest. All of the sudden, the dark press against his mind lifted, only to double down in the air all around him.

*Shit.*

Scrambling back out of the escape pod, his eyes flew immediately to an incoming shuttle that was making a bee-line to the bridge. His master was on it.

The Supreme Leader was there to personally deliver punishment.

*Shit.*

It wasn’t like he didn't know that it was going to happen, but he'd thought-

No, he'd expected this.

He'd just *hoped* that he'd have more time. He thumbed the activation switch on his lightsaber.

At least Rey wasn't with him.

But then she called out to him, her pull on their bond desperate and afraid. She sounded closer to panic than he was sure he'd ever heard from her. It was-

*I know, he's here.* Stay away, Rey. He tried to put as much force into his command as he could, because he knew she wouldn't listen. She never listened, especially when it came to those she cared about. For a moment, he couldn't resist being as close to her as he could, even if it was just through their bond.

*Force,* he needed her to stay away.
Kylo shut down their connection as the shuttle drew close enough that he could see the outline of the pilots’ helmets in the cockpit. He spared a moment to be grateful that he'd had the time to find his lightsaber. Dying with a weapon in his hands was far preferable to being taken down unarmed.

Snoke's plan wouldn't be to kill him on the spot - he'd want to bring him back to his temple and prolong his punishment. But Kylo would make him change those plans.

He wouldn't be taken alive.

The shuttle sat down right in the middle of the bridge, blocking the way forward. Kylo wouldn't have been going anywhere else without Rey, anyway, but it still felt like they were cutting him off from something. He waited for what seemed like an eternity for the shuttle ramp to extend, boots rooted firmly to the ground.

He wasn't done healing, but it wouldn't have made a difference if he was.

He wasn't going to run.

And the Supreme Leader knew it.

At last, the shuttle's ramp came down. When it did, it felt like someone had opened an abyss in the Force and darkness had come spilling out. Even after all the time he had spent training with the darkness – in the darkness – Kylo could barely stand in the weight of the dark power that his master excreted.

Then – then he saw Snoke.

His long, dark robes did nothing to disguise his withered figure, tall and pale as a skeleton. His scarred face seemed even more ghastly in person.

It has been so long since Kylo had stood face-to-face with him.

He'd almost forgotten.

Only when he had descended the ramp did he speak, his voice hoarse and cold.

“Kylo Ren. The fallen apprentice.”

Kylo swallowed and tried to prepare for – anything. He had no idea what his master might do.

“Ah, but I'm no longer your master, am I?” The Supreme Leader sneered, effortlessly reading his mind and making no move at all. “Why don't you call me by my name?”

Kylo didn’t say anything. He was going to need to act soon. His hand clenched tightly around the hilt of his spitting lightsaber.

His silence didn't seem to bother his master, who looked like he hadn't really been looking for a direct answer, anyway. “I've thought about your punishment a great deal,” he continued, his tone calm and benevolent, “and I've decided against my original plan.”

As if to punctuate his words, he held up his hand, freezing Kylo's limbs in place with a small stretch of his power.

Panic ripped through his heart, shredding it to pieces when the Supreme Leader stepped closer.

He couldn't move-
“I won’t abandon you, my son. Not even to your own foolishness.”

Kylo fell to his knees, compelled by his master’s power. Snoke cupped his face with both of his hands, turning his face up to him.

Eyes wide, Kylo stared up at him. They were the picture of a repentant son and a forgiving father.

“I will cleanse you of your disease,” Snoke promised.

It took all of Kylo's power to push against his master’s mental invasion. He felt lightheaded and was in agony all over. Hot tears pricked at the corners of his eyes.

“You will be Kylo Ren again.”

It was a promise.

Then his defenses broke, weak and brittle under the continued onslaught, and his master was everywhere. The tears ran down his cheeks, fat and hot. They ran down onto Snoke’s fingers.

And then he destroyed him.

Close by – but not nearly close enough – Rey collapsed in the middle of the street, clutching her head in agony. It was like nothing she'd ever felt before – like no pain or mental invasion she had ever endured.

It felt like someone was tearing her soul in two.

The realization hit her even through her agony. The pain wasn't in her mind. There was nothing crawling through her thoughts, or sifting through memories uninvited. She wasn't being attacked.

She was being torn apart.

Kylo-

Her eyes flew open, wide and unfocused. Her cheeks were stained with tears.

Snoke.

She could barely stay conscious enough to think the words.

He was going to-

Something snapped in her chest, something so entwined with her heart that she almost couldn't tell the difference. A cord, plucked out of her chest.

A final, elastic snap.
And then she was alone.

Chapter End Notes

...*cough*...

I know, I'm awful that I made you guys wait so long for what ended up being pretty much just a chapter of normal length. I offer no excuse.

Also, I've been falling behind on a lot some of the reviews. I've been trying to keep up with it because I love talking to you guys, but unfortunately due to my schedule I sometimes have to choose between writing this or replying to the (very lovely!) reviews. I'll try and get to as many as I can, but sadly I can offer no promises.

So. How about that chapter ending, huh?
Rey knew all about loss.

Such a tiny word for such a devastating moment. Event. Feeling. Her earliest memory was being left behind as her family's ship turned into a tiny metallic blip in the sky, and then finally being swallowed by the light of the desert sun. Whatever life – whatever love – she'd had before Jakku – she'd lost it all in that moment. Her very first memory of her family was losing them.

Her first loss, her abandonment. The one that had overshadowed almost all others. It changed the way she saw everything.

In one of her earlier years, she'd found a small patch of green growing out of the remains of the coolant system in one of the gutted old starships in the Graveyard. There had been one tiny, pink-grey flower that had poked up above it all. Tiny, but beautiful.

Rey remembered thinking that it was the most beautiful things she'd ever seen.

Of course she took it with her. How could she not? On the way back to her gutted AT-AT she treated it like it was worth more than all of the water on the entire stinking planet.

But then all she did was sit around and wait for it to die. She couldn't help it.

Her younger self had thought that this, this had to be worse – knowing that she was going to lose something and not be able to do anything about it. The knowing only made things even more heartbreaking. Better to lose things all at once.

No warning.

Just gone.

That was better, her younger self had decided, than waiting for the same exact thing to happen anyway.

She had been wrong.

Rey's fingers scraped against the pavement, digging into the unforgiving ground with enough force to tear her skin to shreds. The pads of her fingers turned red, then her nails, then her knuckles.

She stared at her fingers as they clawed into the ground, but her eyes didn't see the blood. Her fingers didn't feel any pain.

The sound of her breathing echoed in her ears. All of the other noises faded until it was just her scraping breath and her heartbeat. The dull thump of her heart beat ceaselessly against her ribs, like an animal smashing its head against a cage, trying to get out.
Had it always felt so painfully confined?

Had her heart always been so-

It just hurt.

Kylo.

She brought a shaky hand to her chest. Her ribs felt like they were still where they were supposed to be, and she couldn't ignore the fact that her heart was still beating within the confines of her chest. The rational part of her brain told her that there was no way that her heart was actually trying to crack her ribs open. That some – *organ* – tied to Kylo hadn't actually, *physically* been ripped off of her.

But the rational part of her brain seemed to be only a distant echo in her head, it's voice too small to make any sense to her.

Kylo. He was-

Was she in shock? She felt numb all over.

She only realized that she was crying when she couldn't breathe. Her chest seized with hiccups, and her vision blurred with tears. She felt like she was drowning. Her body hurt all over, but nothing had happened to it.

It felt *wrong*.

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

*Kylo.*

Nothing. Where he – where he *used to be* had become nothing more than dark matter, an empty void in the back of her brain. He had carved a place for himself in her head, he had – *belonged*, for lack of a better word.

No. Belonged was exactly the word.

And now he was gone.

Snoke had done this. There wasn't a doubt in her mind about that.

But he wasn't – he hadn't *died*. She had to take several deep, steadying breaths to calm herself enough to stretch out her senses, but she knew that he was still alive. After a few excruciatingly long moments, she could sense him. The feeling was distant, no more than yet another blip of life among millions, but he was there.

It felt like trying to see underwater.

Still, the relief that he wasn't dead was overwhelming.

But with Snoke there-

She had to get to him.

Pushing herself back to her feet – when had she fallen to her knees? – Rey staggered forward. She was in pain, but suspected it was all in her head, so she made herself push through it. Everything
tilted around her, a nightmare-like swirl that completely threw her off balance as she ran. She felt like she was going to-

Bile rose in her throat, and she only barely managed to lean over enough so as to not vomit on herself. Nothing was right in her body. It was as if Kylo had taken every bit of equilibrium out of her with him when he had been torn from her.

It didn't seem real.

It didn't seem possible – hadn’t she been told that it was impossible to sever a Force bond? Hadn’t Master Luke mentioned that? Or Kylo?

She supposed it didn't matter.

She hadn’t been far from Kylo when she'd collapsed, so it didn't take her long to catch up. And like she had expected, following him led her back to the escape pod’s crash site. It looked largely the same as the last time she'd been there, besides the utter destruction surrounding it, and the shuttle which had landed in the center of the bridge.

But Snoke's shuttle, the destroyed city around them – it barely registered to her. Hardly anything did. None of it mattered.

All she saw was Kylo-

*Kneeling* before Snoke. And Snoke rested his hands on Kylo’s shoulders in the way a parent might do when speaking to a child. Kylo held his lightsaber in his hand, deactivated.

She couldn't breathe.

Something was wrong.

Neither of them appeared to notice her. She stepped forward, but something, some animal instinct, stopped her.

“*Kylo!*”

Snoke looked up at her then, and she realized what Kylo had been talking about when he told her that she underestimated him. Just being in his presence – seeing his twisted face and soulless eyes – was enough to nearly freeze her to her spot. Not to mention his Force presence, which felt ten times more oppressive in person.

Darkness surrounded him, and it was complete.

Snoke's hands fell away from Kylo, and Rey thought that he was getting ready to attack, but he only took several steps back. A smug look twisted his already gnarled face, and Rey suddenly understood very clearly just how much he loathed her.

It was – *terrifying* to be the focus of that kind of hatred.

A chill ran down her spine.

Kylo stayed where he was, knees on the ground and arms hanging limply at his sides. His dark hair rustled in with a small breeze, but that was the only movement she saw. He might as well have been a statue.

Something was wrong.
Rey took another step forward, this one tentative, as she tried to reach out to him with her senses. This close to him, she could sense him much more clearly, although she had the sensation of trying to gain entrance into a house which she used to have the key to but had lost. It was even worse, somehow, that she still felt no connection to him even when he was right there before her. There was just—nothing. Fresh tears burned at the corner of her eyes.

Oh.

It was such a small, simple realization. She almost didn't even actively notice that she'd thought it.

“Ky-”

He—finally—moved. She watched as he slowly pushed himself to his feet, his movements a little stiff but still tightly controlled. His injuries must've made it uncomfortable to be kneeling for so long.

When he got to his feet, he just stood there. He didn't try to kill Snoke, he didn't try to run away, he didn't even turn to look at her. He just—stood there.

Something was wrong.

And Snoke was still smiling.

Kylo turned around.

Rey couldn't breathe. She felt like throwing up again.

She took a half-step back.

He regarded her with his dark, bloodshot eyes, taking her in with a wide-eyed fury that she hadn't seen since—since Starkiller. His fist visibly tightened around his lightsaber, and his chest expanded as he took a deep breath. His dark robes flapped around his legs, and his hair blew freely around his face.

It was all so horrifyingly familiar.

She heard the crack-crack of his lightsaber over all the destruction around her. It was like lightning to her ears. Suddenly the sound of her heartbeat cut off in her chest.

“Kylo,” she choked out. Something was very, very wrong with him. He was looking at her as if—

“Scavenger,” he spat.

Her eyes widened.

“I'm going to kill you.”

She had no time to react to his words before he charged at her, and this time she could fully feel the intent to kill. It was only thanks to her reflexes that she managed to activate her lightsaber and block his blow.

Both skill and finesse seemed entirely absent in his strikes, but he struck at an intensity that had Rey stumbling back almost immediately. He wasted no time in pressing his advantage, following after each inch of ground she gave.

Reaching out with his off-hand—the injured one—he grabbed her forearm in an attempt to disrupt her blocks. That nearly threw her off balance, but she compensated by using both hands to wield her
weapon as she blocked. She couldn't manage to shake his grip, so she just awkwardly made do with both hands.

She hadn't swung at him once.

Her mind was reeling too much to catch up to the rest of her, but not even her instincts inclined her to hurt him. Not after everything.

“Kylo—talk to me,” she grunted out, “what's wrong with you?”

His grip was crushing, and he shifted just a hair closer as he bore down on her with all of his weight.

“Don't act like you don't know,” he snarled in her face. This close up, she could see how splotchy his cheeks were. He'd been crying.

Her heart twisted a little in its broken cage.

“Please,” her gaze flickered from their locked blades back to his wild eyes, which were so unlike the eyes she had come to know, and yet exactly the same. “What did Snoke do to you?”

Instead of answering, he pulled back, nearly sending her tumbling with the sudden lack of resistance. He didn't let go of her forearm, using her momentum against her as he swung her around to the ground. She landed hard enough to get the breath knocked out of her.

In a moment of clarity, Rey stared up at him as he raised his lightsaber. He was going to run her through.

He was going to kill her.

Kylo's mind was like a static of darkness and chaos; she'd never felt anything like it. Whatever Snoke had done to their bond, he'd also done something to Kylo's mind, too.

Her heart broke for him, and for herself.

It felt like the whole galaxy had imploded.

Rey planted a swift kick to Kylo's gut, throwing him off balance and allowing her enough slack to finally twist out of his grip and roll back to her feet. She risked a glance at Snoke, who had started to full-on grin. He hadn't moved an inch.

I'm going to kill you, she thought.

He looked at her as if he'd heard.

Kylo growled, snapping Rey’s attention back to him, his eyes flashing murder as he charged at her.

She didn't know what to do. There was no way she could truly fight Kylo – she wouldn't. But she couldn't just leave him there with Snoke, who undoubtedly had horrible things in store for him.

But if Snoke had done something to make Kylo believe that he had to kill her – he wouldn't stop until he killed her. She knew him too well to believe otherwise. Damn stubborn ass.

She needed to come up with a plan.

It was just very difficult to think of one when she was constantly trying to keep herself alive as she fended off Kylo as best she could without harming him, either.
Despite everything – all of the fear and loss and devastation running through her veins – she felt a spike of disappointment. He should’ve been better than this. It was irrational, she knew. She also knew that she could never understand the full extent of Kylo’s history with Snoke, but she realized that she had underestimated Snoke’s hold over him.

Could Snoke do that to anyone’s mind? Or was it just Kylo, who had surrendered himself so long ago?

Kylo’s saber caught her in the shoulder. It was only a glancing wound, but it was more than enough to snap her back to the present.

She could smell her own flesh as it burned.

For his part, Kylo barely even flinched. There was nothing but sneering triumph on his face, the joy of scoring a hit on an enemy. The promise of more pain to come.

Tears pricked at Rey’s eyes, although she wasn’t sure if they were from the pain in her shoulder or from seeing that gaze directed at her. With a half-strangled cry, she threw out her free hand and sent a blast of Force power at him, knocking him clear off his feet. He tumbled gracelessly, but managed not to injure himself with his own lightsaber.

“Kylo, don’t do this,” she pleaded, angry at herself and him and Snoke most of all. “I don’t want to hurt you!”

That was the wrong thing to say. He was up in a flash, his mental walls slammed shut as his face contorted with rage.

"I find that hard to believe,” He shouted, practically growled.

“I don’t know what he did to you, but you have to fight it,” she pressed on angrily, ignoring his words.

“I’m not falling for your tricks again,” he swore, as if she was a liar.

She shook her head, furious and confused and desperate all at once. “No! I’ve never tricked you,” she insisted, unsure of what Snoke had made him think. It didn’t matter. If he was willing to listen – if she could make him listen – even just for a moment-

“Says the seductress,” Snoke spoke up for the first time, his voice booming over the destruction. Kylo immediately gave him his full attention. “Don’t listen to her Kylo Ren, or she’ll never stop whispering lies in your ear.”

Rey understood, then, what at least part of Snoke’s lies were.

“No, Kylo,” she let go of trying to keep her cool, taking a step forward despite herself. He kept his gaze fixed on his master. “Nothing that’s happened between us has been a lie.”

After a long moment, he finally looked at her, although his face still held a sneer.

She took a breath, trying to hold herself together. This wasn’t how she wanted to say what she knew she needed to. “You were the first person I-”

“Kill her and at last be free of her influence, Kylo Ren,” Snoke interrupted, waving her words off as if they meant less than nothing – and to him they did. Hearing his slippery voice spitting such blatant lies made her blood boil.
But Kylo didn't seem very inclined to listen to her, either. Spinning his blade in his hand, he once more gave her his full attention. Only this time, it was as he started to advance. Rey was barely fast enough to bring her lightsaber up in time to block his downward strikes, three in quick succession.

He had raw physical power on his side, but she was faster. And he was wounded. Still – she didn't take advantage of that fact until she had to.

His lightsaber grazed her again, that this time in the arm. It burned up her entire bicep in a quick flash that only registered moments after it had happened. Her flesh stunk as it melted beneath the heat of his blade, and she couldn't help the cry that escaped her lips.

The burn threw her off balance enough that she nearly stumbled to the ground, but she managed to catch herself. Kylo pressed the wide opening she gave him, aiming for her exposed chest, but she knew that he would. She knocked his strike to the side with a minor shove of the Force just strong enough to throw off his aim. It left his left arm exposed.

Without hesitation, Rey reached up and dug into the biggest wound on his arm. He cried out in pain, but before he could actually swing at her again, she kicked the side of his wounded knee. He jerked to his knees with a cry.

Rey let her grip on his arm get dislodged, then leaped back a few paces.

She decidedly did not look down to see his blood on her fingers.

All she could look at were his eyes.

They-

Kylo climbed to his feet, his jaw clamped shut against whatever pain she knew he felt. The echo that used to be their bond still screamed across her head with its own sort of pain. Could he feel its absence the way she did, or had Snoke deadened him to that, too?

She felt sick again.

The angry lightsaber in Kylo’s hand spit fire as he reached out his hand-

His head suddenly snapped to the side, his attention fixed somewhere off in the distance. Rey didn't take the opening in his defenses, and couldn't help but follow his gaze.

“Supreme Leader,” Kylo called, but was cut off by three Resistance fighters as they flew into view.

Bombs tore through the air towards them. They hit closer and closer, before one hit Snoke’s shuttle, obliterating it before their eyes. Rey and Kylo were far enough away that they weren't caught in the blast, but the force of the explosion still knocked Rey off her feet. Her arms scraped open against the ruined pavement below her, and she cried out as she tore open her already-burned arm. She felt her lightsaber slip from her fingers in the tumble, but she could little to stop it.

Pain coursed through her as she stilled. She could feel small bits of gravel stuck in her forearms and knees as she started to push herself up enough so that she could see.

The shuttle had been reduced to nothing more than a raging fireball that had been scattered in all directions. She couldn't see if Snoke had been caught in the blast, but judging by how his ever-present darkness was still suffocating the air, she doubted he was dead. Disappointed filled her, but the feeling was quickly replaced by another, more urgent thought.
Where was Kylo? She couldn't see him.

Scrambling back up to her feet, she bit the inside of her mouth so that she wouldn't whimper in pain.

“Kylo,” she called out, her voice catching from the pain. Stretching out her senses, she desperately tried to feel him. Her senses were repelled with an angry shove. It wasn't more than a few moments later that Kylo revealed himself with a grunt, knocking a piece of the crumpled road off of him and he climbed back to his feet.

Relief flooded her, numbing the pain she felt as she took a step towards him. His black gaze stopped her in her tracks.

She lifted her chin high to hide just how far her heart dropped. But the effect was likely a little lost due to how banged up she was.

“Supreme Leader,” Kylo called out, shifting his focus away from her. He drew near, and then brushed by her as if she didn't matter at all, as if they hadn't just been fighting a few moments ago. As if he knew Rey wouldn't hurt him.

She tried to reach out to him, to stop him from going back to his monstrous master, but he was already too far away, and her fingers only found the air.

Almost immediately, the flames parted as if they too were repelled by Snoke's very presence. He stepped out of the blaze no worse for wear, although his face looked decidedly more angry and impatient.

"Stop wasting time, Kylo Ren. We have no more business here,” he snapped.

Kylo dipped his head. “Yes, Supreme Leader.”

Rey felt that same strange, dark static in the air, and it was enough that she nearly called out to Kylo one more time. She couldn’t just let him go with Snoke.

She couldn't-

Her train of thought cut off as she noticed that the Resistance fighters had turned to take another pass. Another fighter appeared at their side.

They seemed awfully concentrated on their area. Perhaps they knew who was standing there on the bridge, stealing the mind of a man who could've been-

Something good.

Snoke noticed the fighters, too. He threw out his hand, and two of the fighters crashed into each other, spiraling down in a blaze of sparks and metal that crashed too far back to do them any harm. He was about to do it again and eliminate the danger entirely, but Rey couldn't let that happen.

Not if it meant that the bombs might kill him. Even if it took her and Kylo with him.

Throwing out her own hands, she sent the strongest wave of the Force that she could manage. It took them both by surprise, knocking Kylo clean off of his feet for the second time. He landed by the edge of the flames. Snoke, however, was quick enough that he managed to counteract it with a shield of his power. And yet – she could see that his feet slid back against the force of her power.

She had pushed him back.
Rey didn't have the time to be shocked, or to worry that she had sent Kylo into the fire. The distraction gave the remaining fighters the time they needed to get close enough to drop more bombs. Rey dropped her attack and instead tried to shield herself, but she wasn't fast enough.

The ground fell from her feet – or she flew from it. For a brief moment all she knew was the sky, dark and red and blossoming with explosions. The world turned to fire around her.

Was this her last moment?

Was she about to die?

Her body found the ground once more, but her world had gone dark before she realized it.

Chapter End Notes

So I'm back. I apologize for the long wait, but I just needed a break from the Internet. I just didn't know it until I knew it, you know? It was great, and I was able to mostly work out the rest of the plot, so that was an added bonus. Anyway, I'm back, and I came with some more pain for you guys!

Now, I don't usually do this, but I realize that some of you guys have been with me for a very long time, and I don't want to cause anyone any undue stress. Therefore, I am going to reassure you guys that this does actually have a happy ending. I wouldn't lead you guys down a rabbit hole without telling you if there were, like, a million knives at the bottom. ;) But no pain, no gain, you know?

One final note: I'm absolutely still finishing this, but the rate of updates is going to have to scale back. I'm aiming for weekly updates. Thanks so much for sticking with me guys, you're all the best. We're nearly in the home stretch after this!
“Kylo Ren.”

The Supreme Leader’s command cut across the roaring flames, pulling at Kylo's brain with the sharp and immediate need to obey. Dull pain shot across his shoulders and down his legs as he slowly pushed himself to his feet, dislodging the pieces of debris that had settled on him. Crumbling around him were the remains of the bridge they’d been standing on before the Resistance fighters had rained hell down on everything.

With a grunt, he forced himself to his full height as he fought his way out of the rubble. It was everywhere, blocking him from returning to his master. The pounding in his head wouldn't stop until he-

Rey-

Kylo froze in his tracks.

The scavenger was sprawled out on a chunk of debris no more than three or four meters away, prone and immobile, and looking worse than he had ever seen her. Blood ran down her leg and from a cut hidden somewhere in her hairline. Her arms were burned from his saber, and they looked even nastier than the cuts. Spot covered her, making her look half-dead already.

His throat closed up.

The sight awoke something in his brain, a sudden breathless need to go over and-

“Kylo Ren,” the Supreme Leader’s voice was like a shot through his stuttering thoughts, slicing them into incoherent pieces. It was as if his thoughts were being scattered into static, and the static burned his brain until he let go of whatever he had been trying to think.

Immediately, he turned away from the scavenger and made his way back to his master.

If she bled out on her own, then he wouldn't have to waste the energy killing her.

His master stood off towards the edge of the rubble, looking no worse for wear on his part. The edge of his dark robes were covered in soot, but besides that he looked as if he had simply been taking a stroll through the park. Kylo knew that he looked much worse than his master, probably only a littler better than the scavenger.

His legs felt more and more like lead as he returned to the Supreme Leader, as if his body was fighting him with every step.

Something felt wrong.

Wrong, wrong, wrong.

The Supreme Leader watched him with his icy, all-knowing eyes. He should – wouldn't – tell his master about the fact that the scavenger was still alive in the rubble. His master would want to know.

And yet, his jaw seemed to be clamped shut.
“Kneel,” his master commanded.

Kylo did so.

Despite the sense of urgency Kylo felt emanating from him, for a moment the Supreme Leader said and did nothing. He allowed them to simply exist as master and apprentice.

Kylo's muscles shook the longer he knelt, his limbs tired and wounded – worse than they had been before, since he'd nearly gotten incinerated by the Resistance’s bombs. He knew his master was allowing him to wallow in the sensation.

“At last, you have what I sent you to retrieve. Give it to me.”

The demand made Kylo blink. He chanced a look up to find his master’s spindly hand stretched out and waiting. Kylo's frown deepened.

“The ring,” the Supreme Leader snapped, “give it to me.”

Something floated in the back of Kylo’s thoughts – that same static as before. It gave him pause, but only for a moment. Then he swallowed and shoved the prickly sensation from his mind. Reaching into his pocket, he fished out the small bauble and dropped it into the Supreme Leader’s awaiting palm.

His master’s fingers closed around it like a spider’s legs curling shut.

“At last,” the Supreme Leader breathed.

Behind them, another section of the bridge gave way, spilling more debris and kicking up another thick layer of dust around them. Kylo pressed the crook of his elbow to his nose and mouth to try and minimize the amount of dust and ash that he breathed in. His master bid him to rise as he did the same.

It was still going on, Kylo realized. The city was still under attack – still dangerous. His gaze started to travel back to where-

The sharp pain in his head brought his attention back to the Supreme Leader, who was studying his closed hand as if he could see the ring clearly.

“Come, Kylo Ren. We have what we need.”

The object – the ring.

He'd finally done what he'd set off to do. He'd finally completed his master’s mission.

Finally.

And yet – a part of him, some distant, dark whisper of his brain, told him that he had just done something horrible. It told him to snatch the ring back. To take his lightsaber and cut his master's hand clean off his body, and then to cleave the Supreme Leader in two. To slice him to ribbons while he had the chance and watch as his pale head rolled to the floor like some revolting bruised fruit.

To turn and run back to Rey, to kiss her hard and make sure she-

Agony coursed through his mind, cutting off his line of thought. The pain shot from his head and down his limbs, sending him stumbling back down to his knees. It was only when he stretched out his hand to the ground to steady himself that he noticed that his lightsaber was clutched firmly in his
hand.

“Kylo Ren,” his master’s voice slithered through his senses, past even the sharp haze of pain, “you will remember whom you serve.”

Hot tears fell from his eyes as Kylo squeezed them shut against the onslaught. Whatever he had been thinking before was gone – all coherent thought was gone, replaced only with the painful static and the Supreme Leader’s voice.

It felt wrong. His head didn’t used to be like that.

“Do you remember?”

“I remember,” he choked out.

Another long moment passed before the pain faded all at once, leaving him trembling on the ground. His limbs felt like they would give way at any moment, and his stomach rolled sickeningly in his gut.

His master laid a pale hand on his shoulder, his fingers digging into his skin with a strength that was hidden with his age and frailty. “Get up, Kylo Ren,” he commanded, “I need to meditate. Your vengeance can wait.”

His vengeance – the memories flooded his mind’s eye. The scavenger used her new-found powers to seduce him, and then tried to get him to turn against the only person who had truly ever been there for him. She tried to make him betray the Supreme-

Was that right?

He remembered the look on her face as he had tried to kill her. She didn't seem-

Static teared at the corners of his thoughts. Of course that was right. He was obviously still recovering from her deceit. His blood boiled at the thought that he had ever been so weak as to fall for her supposed charms.

He cursed the traitorous memory of her fingers curling through his hair, the soft brush of her lips against his, the flutter of her lashes on his cheek-

-Or the memory of the frailty of her wrist in his grasp, the sense of triumph and vengeance when he threw her to the ground, the cry of pain that burst from her lips as he seared her flesh.

“Yes, Supreme Leader,” Kylo nodded and rose back to his feet as steadily as he could. His discomfort was the only thing that got his mind off of the scavenger.

It was – more than difficult to keep her from his thoughts. One second, he couldn't wait to throttle her, to hold her life in his hands and slowly squeeze it out – and then the next second, all he wanted to do was make sure she was all right. All he wanted was to hear her voice and see her smile at him again.

Each thought revolted him as much as it appealed to him.

But the static was there, narrowing his mind down to one coherent thought:

*I need to follow my master.*

So he did. The Supreme Leader hadn't waited for him, but Kylo hadn't expected him to.
He cast one last glance in the direction of the scavenger, who he could sense was still unconscious. Her presence felt strangely distant, unlike he remembered. It hadn't occurred to him before, back when he'd first laid eyes on her; his rage had taken ahold of him then, finding it nearly unbearable to hear her continue to try and spin her lies when he had finally seen the truth. But when he stopped to think about it-

Why did she feel so distant?

He decided quickly that it didn't matter. Next time, he'd be ready to drive his lightsaber through her heart and repay her once and for all. Just – not then. He'd let her go that time.

Kylo turned to catch up to his master.

The Finalizer was still engaged in the siege of Coronet City, but after Kylo managed to secure another shuttle for the Supreme Leader and himself, his master instructed him to bypass the star destroyer altogether.

“My personal ship is in orbit,” he instructed, “take us there.”

Kylo had only ever been on the Supreme Leader’s personal starship, the Jettatura, twice before. It's halls were so permeated with darkness that he had found himself constantly out of breath, and he had been glad when he'd left and been able to breathe easily again. Much like his master’s temple, the Jettatura was filled to the brim with the Supreme Leader’s presence and power.

He wasn't eager to go aboard, but he realized that the best thing for him in the wake of his failure of loyalty was to meditate in the certainty of his master’s power. After his weakness in succumbing to the scavenger’s tricks, he needed to return to fully submit himself to his master.

As soon as they were on board, the Supreme Leader turned to him. Kylo braced himself for the punishment that was certain to come, but all his master said was, “You should meditate on your failings. Go to the shrine and do not leave until I summon you.”

Kylo had protested the very first time he'd been ordered to meditate at the shrine his master kept onboard his ship. This time he was wiser and simply nodded.

“Yes, Supreme Leader.”

With that, his master swept away, leaving him alone in the hangar. Kylo wasted no time heading for the small meditation chamber located at the very bottom level of the ship. The shrine was for an old dark-sider relic that had been recovered from one of the moons of Onderon. It was used to learn to touch darkness through pain; whenever someone meditated using it, it was as if they were being slowly tortured. He had a distinct memory of feeling like his skin was being set on fire.

It wasn't something that he wanted to experience again.

The darkness was already pressing down on his lungs, and his injuries burned by the time he reached the door to the meditation chamber. It only made him angry that he had to add to his discomfort.

He understood why his master told him to.

But he was still infuriated.
Everything – his injuries, the smoldering planet beneath him, the fucking scavenger – made his blood boil. He didn't want to do this.

He didn't want-

A sharp spike of static through his mind cut his train of thought off.

It didn't matter what he wanted – what mattered was what the Supreme Leader wished. He would do whatever was ordered of him. Still, when he arrived at the shrine, he worked his jaw for a moment longer than he should have before he reached out to the door panel and unlocked the door.

At some point Rey started to dream.

It was dark – so dark that she didn't realize that she was dreaming for a long time. She was simply aware. The blackness felt murky to her, like she was floating in a vast pool of physical nothingness.

She was completely alone; she couldn't feel anyone or anything. Even her connection to the Force seemed a far ways off.

The isolation felt like the beginnings of a nightmare, a solitude that pulled at her edges like it was trying to pull her down through the darkness – to death or to despair. One was about as good as the other.

An ache blossomed in her heart that she'd come to know intimately in only a short while.

She missed Kylo.

Even just thinking it seemed to her like giving in to a part of that despair. The feeling of being without echoed so strongly within her chest she felt like someone had literally dug out her organs.

Rey felt as she actually started to sink, as if the sheer weight of her feelings had physically manifested themselves around her ankles. She tried to fight against it, kicking out like she was trying shake the weightiness off of her, or like she was trying to swim. Only she couldn't swim.

She couldn't swim.

The darkness around her had become cold and wet, stinging her eyes as she opened them to try and find something-

Light. There was light up above, faint and grey but magnificent all the same. She began kicking her legs and waving her arms in some half-instinctual attempt at going towards the light.

It felt as if the light was getting farther and farther away, and that all of her attempts to reach it were terrifyingly futile. But then something pulled at her, some invisible magnet dragged her up towards the top, and she let it.

She broke free of the dark water, gasping for air as she frantically tried to stay afloat. It was somewhat easier to do in the dream than it had been in reality, but she still found herself bobbing underneath the surface several times.

Then all of the sudden the water was shallow, and she found herself sitting hip-deep in a frigid pool at the center of what appeared to be a cave. Or, maybe it wasn't a cave. The walls seemed too perfect, too intentional, the space too spherical.
Soft light from the water reflected on the slate walls, illuminating the stone with a dead, unreal sort of light. The water stilled around her so that she got the sense that she was disturbing a scene that was supposed to be entirely still.

Around her was an eerie silence; even when she disturbed the pool, the water made no sound. It was as if everything around her was simply a shadow, a projection of someplace that was too smooth, too grey to be real.

She could feel two presences in the emptiness of the cave. One was great and old and painful, an entity that felt as if it was a storm that raged continuously, twisting and pounding against Rey's mind in a way that almost instantly gave her a head ache.

A pain grew behind her eyes the more she sensed the entity, and a sharp pain stabbed her in the chest as she took a deep breath. The entity seemed to make up the room itself.

The other presence was-

“Kylo,” Rey's gaze fixed on the dark shape sitting in the pool a couple of meters away. He was hunched over, hands clutching his knees and his spine rigid, seemingly unaware of her presence. She couldn't see his face, could barely make out the wave of his hair as it fell down around his face, but she felt the pain rolling off of him like a wall.

He seemed to be – wallowing in it.

She pushed herself to her knees, and then to her feet, but each step she took felt like a thousand needle pricks on her feet. But it was just a dream – she hoped it was just a dream – so she pushed through it. Just long enough to reach him.

Rey collapsed by his side, splashing water up her arms and on his legs. The water was frigid, but he didn't seem to notice. He seemed consumed in his pain.

“Kylo,” she choked out, hoping against hope that in their subconscious he would be more himself. A little more – free.

But there was no reaction from him no matter how many times she called his name.

Unable to help herself, she reached out and grasped his shoulder, touching her other hand to his chest. She gave him a little shake and then a rough one, but still he remained unresponsive.

It wasn't fair. It wasn't fair.

“Come on, Kylo, damn it,” she pleaded, half furious and half terrified.

She could feel it – they were connected in the dream, close enough to what it had been before Snoke had gotten ahold of him that a flame of hope hope hope sparked in her heart. He needed to respond to her. He needed-

Kylo jerked so violently that it dislodged Rey's hand from his shoulder. She still couldn't see much of his face in the darkness even up close, although he was obviously agitated. He acted as if she startled him out of a deep slumber, but his brain hadn't caught up to him yet.

Rey snapped back out of reflex, but his hand shot out and snatched her wrist, yanking her other hand away from his chest.

There was something very violent about him, a violence mixed with agony that almost made her
scared for herself, but made her petrified for him.

He was no different. Even here, he was under the influence of-

“Rey,” he sounded guarded, as if he was unsure of whether or not it was really her. As if he was afraid to hope it was, and yet terrified that it might be.

Rey couldn’t restrain the sigh that escaped her lips. It was more of a sob, really.

She leaned towards him. “Are you–can you-”

He let go of her wrist and pulled her to him with such force that she nearly thought he was attacking her. His arms wrapped around her so tightly it made her want to cry. A part of her was afraid that this was really all just in her head – that her dream had supplied her with a fake Kylo, little more than a pathetic delusion of what she wanted more than anything.

But she still couldn’t restrain herself. Hesitantly, she wrapped her arms around his solid chest, reciprocating the embrace. She felt the shaky breath that left his body as she pressed herself closer to him, and that was what convinced her.

It was him.

“Rey,” he whispered into her hair, “Rey, Rey.”

She squeezed her eyes shut against the tears, but it was no use. The pool seemed to recede a little around them.

“Are you okay?” She choked out that stupid, ridiculous question, because she couldn’t think of what else to say.

I missed you. You scared me. Please don’t leave me again. I don’t know what I’d do-

His arms tightened around her, if that was even possible. She thought that the way he pressed his face into her hair was a sort of kiss, and she placed her own on the fabric over his collar bone.

It didn’t matter where she kissed him; all that mattered was that she got to touch him at all.

Kylo didn’t seem to be nearly as content. He drew back only far enough that he had access to her lips, and kissed her with the same sort of desperate violence with which he embraced her. His kiss was all push and take, like he was trying to demand something that he was actually begging for.

I missed you.

You scared me.

Please don’t leave me again.

I don’t know what I’d do if I lost you forever.

They were the only thoughts swirling through her mind, and yet they were his thoughts, too. She forgot which one of them had thought the words first.

And then another thought occurred to her, the same little whisper of certainty that had occurred to her on Corellia.

She couldn’t say it.
She could barely-

Kylo broke the kiss like he had been burned. He snapped his head back, chest heaving, and hastily wiped the back of his hand across his mouth, as if to purge himself of her. His hand was shaking.

Everything seemed to get impossibly dark, focusing the world down to just the two of them. Shocked, Rey just blinked at him with her mouth hanging open as he shook his head vehemently. She was immediately terrified that he had once again fallen under Snoke’s control.

“No, damn it, that's wrong,” he mumbled to himself, fisting his hands in his hair, “or–no.”

Rey breathed, “You're in pain.”

His dark eyes snapped up to meet hers. She didn't know if he meant to look as hateful as he did, because his next words were impossibly soft.

“You're not real.”

She reached out and cupped his cheek with her hand. “I'm real,” she raised her other hand to his face as well, making him look her in the eye. “Kylo, I'm real. You have to believe me, I'm here-”

He squeezed his eyes shut, grunting as a pain she couldn't see seized his body. All she could do was run her fingers through his hair, helpless. Tears pricked at her eyes at seeing him like that – angry, furious tears that ran hot and made her blood boil.

She would kill Snoke for doing this to him.

For making her unable to help him.

Kylo's hands moved to grasp her shoulders, nearly crushing her bones between his fingers. The world was shifting around them in a revolving blur that frightened Rey as it started to take the shapes and forms of something that seemed real – a room, a single pedestal that seemed to settle in the emerging room just over her shoulder.

He was waking up, she thought.

She didn't want him to wake up.

“Stay with me,” she pleaded, “please don't wake up.”

He opened his eyes, although he was obviously still in pain. “Rey, I'm sorry-”

She kissed him again, hard and fast and poorly-aimed. He returned it as best he could.

“I'm going to get you away from him,” she promised. “He can't have you anymore.”

He cupped the back of her neck with his hand, swallowing back some of the pain that she could only feel the echoes of. “Rey,” he started.

“No,” she gave him a shake, her voice full of tears and her throat closed up. She could feel the dream slipping from her fingers. “You’re supposed to be with me, and I'm supposed to be with you.”

He let out a shaky breath. “I want to be with you.”

The dream was almost gone. Rey could barely see anything as Kylo started to wake up, or maybe she was the one waking up. His pain increased as he went, and he seemed to lose his focus on her.
“I promise,” she felt her fingers lose their grip on him. He became nothing more than a shadow.

And then the dream ended.

When Rey woke up, it was to the soft thrum of the hyperdrive as it spun the stars past the viewport in a white-blue blur. Her head had slipped out of the palm of her hand, jarring her awake.

She felt shaken from the dream, full of hope and despair, and entirely out of breath.

That was the most sleep she’d gotten in two standard days.

Since Corellia.

Her body was stiff and aching from her still-healing bruises. She’d woken up half-buried in rubble, with several deep gashes and burns from Kylo's lightsaber. The good thing, she had reminded herself at the time, was that she had woken up at all. Picking herself out of the rubble hadn't been fun, but neither had limping to the nearest emergency evacuation area.

The world had turned eerily quiet by the time she’d gotten somewhere safer, the sky nearly black with smoke. Whatever had happened, she'd missed the rest of the attack. She was almost afraid to learn what had happened, but she took the lack of stormtroopers marching around as a good sign.

It hadn’t been impossible to try and reach out to Finn and Poe, but she knew better than to try. She was fairly certain she'd know if anything had happened to either of them, so she'd let it be.

Besides, she had no desire to endanger their lives by distracting them if they were already involved in helping the planet’s militia. And if she told them what had happened-

Well, that wouldn’t do any of them any good, either.

There had still been so much chaos, no one had noticed when she’s taken a small shuttle that had taken some exterior damage at some point during the attack. The heating systems were almost nonfunctional and she'd basically had to pry the ramp open far enough so that she could squeeze in, but she had found it more than serviceable.

She felt bad about stealing the shuttle, but she still took it anyway.

Then she'd run away. Or, at least – she felt like she was running away.

All in all, she had been very lucky to get off that planet alive. She had no delusions about that. Snoke could’ve killed her at any point if he’d wanted to.

Which, well, he did – but he obviously wanted it to be Kylo who killed her.

And that-

Her wounds were less than nothing to her. All they were were reminders of what that monster had done to Kylo.

For what felt like the millionth time, the urge to stretch out her senses and try to touch his mind struck her; and for the millionth time, she tried. Trying to sense one person all of the way across the galaxy was something she had never tried before - she'd never had to. For her, Kylo had always been there, hovering in the back of her mind and pulling at her senses no matter how far apart they were. It had
always been more of an effort to keep him out than to try and find him.

Now there was nothing.

She hadn't appreciated how difficult it was to actually feel someone so far away. She hadn't realized how strong their bond had been, even before-

Rey closed her eyes against the memory of his lips against hers, the soft ghost of his hair against her skin. The way he looked at her, like she was the most precious person in the universe.

No one had ever looked at her like that before.

She should've kissed him sooner. As soon as she'd seen him on the Resistance ship, wounded so badly that it hurt her to even remember, she should've run over and kissed him. Maybe even before that. When he'd promised to return Finn and she'd promised to run away with him – she should've kissed him then.

She should've had more time to kiss him.

*They* should've had more time.

Her heart squeezed so painfully in her chest that it knocked the breath out of her. Her eyes stung behind her eyelids, but she refused to let herself cry again.

It didn't matter.

Snoke had Kylo in a snare, one that she was certain was far more painful than anything she had experienced. Wallowing did neither of them any good.

She'd made him a promise.

She had to find a way to save him.

The only thing she could think of was to go to Master Luke. He had to know what to do – he *had* to.

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Chapter End Notes

I wasn't going to include Kylo's POV for some time, but as I thought about it I realized that I wanted to give you guys an insight into what's going on in his head. I think it's important to understand that he's still *Kylo*, and in many ways is still operating of his own volition. It's just the important things (like Rey) that Snoke has screwed up. Hopefully I've displayed that well.

And so we're on to act iii of the story! This act brings a lot of thing around full-circle, so there will be a return to a lot of what was seen or set up in the beginning of the story.

As a side note: 'jettatura' is another word for the evil eye.

Thanks for staying with me, guys. Each and every one of you is the literal best and I love you!
Rey touched her stolen shuttle down on one of the lower outcroppings of Luke's island in the aftermath of a storm. Rain water pooled in the recesses between the natural stone formations, and the dirt was so wet that the mud suction-cupped to her boots as she stepped down onto the ground, as if even that – even the very *ground beneath her feet* – was trying to work against her.

The salt was heavy in the air after the rain, a scent that would never become familiar to her no matter how many times she smelled it. Angry, grey waves roared against the edges of the island. The sky was only a few shades lighter than the ocean itself, but patches of a dull gold were starting to peak through.

The storm had ended some time ago, it seemed, and the morning was starting to peak through.

Rey wanted to cry from the sheer *relief* of being back there, back in the place where she'd been given her first official lessons in the Force. Master Luke had taught her about the light side there – she'd learned how *everywhere* the Force was, and how it tied the whole universe together. It was the place where her eyes had first been truly opened to the largeness of the galaxy; that place represented something *good* to her.

And Master Luke was there.

She could already feel his calming presence in the Force, whole and steady, a presence so big that she could feel it from anywhere on the island. He would probably be in the middle of his morning meditations, or perhaps he was eating breakfast.

It took longer to climb up the stone steps than usual, as she had to be careful of slipping on the wet rock, but Rey tried not to mind. She used the time to mentally steady herself, although that seemed largely impossible.

What was she going to say to him? *Help me, Kylo Ren has turned evil?* That would hardly seem to be news to Luke.

For all he knew – for all anyone knew – Kylo hadn't changed at all.

How was she going to get Luke to see that Kylo *had* changed? That Snoke had *done* something to him?

That he had *taken* Kylo from her right as she realized that she even *wanted* him?

She got angrier the longer the trek to the top took, but she was twice as terrified. Her fear had become a near-constant buzz in the back of her mind – what if something else was being done to Kylo? What if Kylo was committing some unforgivable crime even as she sat there, worrying about him?

She didn't know anything besides the fact that she needed *help*.

When she finally reached the top of the island where Luke’s hut sat nested in the side of a hill, she found him outside, sitting on one of the long stones he used as a makeshift bench. He sat with his spine straight and eyes closed, resting the backs of his hands on his knees, palms turned up towards
It was such a normal moment, something that she'd gotten used to seeing every day for months. For a moment she stopped and just let herself take the scene in. It seemed suddenly as if the sight of Luke sitting in front of his hut was one of the best memories she had.

It was nice to come face-to-face with a good memory. It was a rare feeling.

She tried to hold onto it.

Then Luke's eyes opened, and his eyes crinkled with a warmth that made Rey want to cry.

"Welcome back," he said as if he had been expecting her. She knew he'd been able to sense her since she'd landed on the island. Maybe even before that.

"Master Luke," Rey's shoulders sagged. She couldn't restrain the smile that tugged at her lips, small as it was. There were so many thoughts racing around in her head, but all she could manage was, "I'm sorry it's taken me so long to return."

He nodded, as unconcerned as if she'd just been a few minutes late to dinner. "Did you save your friend?"

*Finn.* It was a testament to how overwhelmed her brain was that the question surprised her. Had she done anything to help him at all? Everything that had happened to him had been because of her. This had all started because of her, because she had insisted on trying to be a hero.

Finn wouldn't have ever been a captive of the First Order, and Kylo-

She looked down at her feet and shook her head. "No. All I did was put him in danger."

Luke nodded, looking neither surprised nor displeased. "What matters is that you cared enough to try."

She pressed her lips together and squeezed her eyes shut against the sudden onslaught of tears. That was the problem, wasn't it – that she *cared.*

"Rey?" She heard the concern in his voice as he stood from his seat. "Is everything alright?"

With a hasty rub of her hand over her eyes, she squared her shoulders and tilted her chin up, trying to give him a picture of surety. He drew near, the lines on his face cut deep with worry. She couldn't stand to look him in the eye.

"Master Luke," she croaked, her voice no louder than a whisper and half-covered by the wind, "I think I did something awful."

There was something in his gaze, silently knowing look that made her think that he already knew what she was going to say. But she didn't think that he would be angry at her for it. Or, at least – she hoped that he wouldn't be angry about it.

He didn't say anything, he just waited for her to continue.

She wrung her hands together, taking a shaky breath. She passed a hand over her hair, pushing back a few strands that had blown loose. The wind started to pick up around her, like it was a friend trying to give her some measure of privacy – or trying to stop her from revealing a shameful secret.
“It's—"

She couldn't say it. How could she say it?

_Kylo Ren._

_Kylo._

_Kylo._

“My nephew.”

There was no doubt in Luke's eyes. He knew. Of course he knew.

Rey deflated, though from relief or despair she couldn't tell. She felt a million years old.

“Please, Master Luke, he needs our help. I don't—know what to do.”

He looked her straight in the eye. “You care for him.” It wasn't a question.

She swallowed, then lifted her chin. “Yes.”

“How strong are your feelings?”

If it had been anyone else asking her, she would've scoffed, or gotten angry, or just ignored them entirely. She would've shied away from the question. But it was master Luke who asked. She needed his help, and he was her teacher. He deserved a honest answer.

So she took another deep breath and told him, “I would do anything to save him.”

Luke raised a brow, like he saw right through her words.

Anything to save him, she'd said.

Anything for him, she'd meant.

She'd meant-

That thought, that old revelation from Corellia, got stuck in her brain, pulled from where it lurked continuously at the edges of her subconscious. It was becoming the thought – _the thought_ – in her head, but she couldn’t allow it to form into a full statement, a real _thought_. Not yet.

She couldn't let herself say it, not even in her own mind.

But even still her brain sang – _I care._

_I care, I care, I-_  

“Please help me. I don't know what to do.”

A shadow passed over Luke's face, a sadness that spoke of decades of pain, of a history that Rey knew admittedly very little of. In that moment, he looked simultaneously like one of the oldest people she'd ever seen, and one of the youngest.

He'd known Kylo for Kylo's entire life. He knew what his nephew had been – before. Back when he was that boy she'd seen in the picture, sullen and not yet grown into his body. Luke had seen him grow dark and twisted. He had to live with the knowledge that his own _nephew_ had brought down
his entire new order of Jedi. And then – Kylo had killed his own father.

Luke had seen Kylo become Kylo. And maybe that's all Luke would remember – maybe in his mind, Kylo had fallen too far, too far-

Maybe he wouldn't help her.

Luke reached out and put his hand on her shoulder as if to halt her train of thought, giving it a brief squeeze. He looked very solemn, like he had given her request a lot of thought and had decided not to-

“Of course I'll help,” he said, steady as ever.

Rey didn't know what to say.

Luke let his hand drop and turned away, heading back to his hut.

“For your sake.”

Rey wasn't sure if he'd actually said that last part, or if she'd just heard it on the wind.

Luke had been gone for hours. He had left to meditate alone, gone to the highest peak of his small island.

Rey felt like she'd been sitting outside his hut for a millennia.

Just waiting.

She couldn't resist the urge to try and reach out to Kylo, but she stopped herself before she reached too far. If he was awake, then she had to admit that finding him would likely be the same as telling Snoke where she was – where Luke was. She couldn't risk it. Wouldn't risk it. Odds were that she wouldn't be able to reach him, anyway. Not so far out from each other.

The sun was already beginning to set, so she got up and went inside. It occurred to her that master Luke would probably be hungry by the time he returned, so she decided to attempt to make him something to eat. He always served the same stew for every meal, and she'd watched him many times. She wasn't really well-versed in actual cooking outside of ration packets, but she could try. There wasn't much else for her to do, and it was better than letting herself just sit there twiddling her thumbs.

She knew where the herbs he collected were, as well as the vegetables that he grew in his garden. The ingredients always looked so much better before he boiled them down into a unappetizing brown mush, but she didn't know if they were edible otherwise.

Rey cut herself twice trying to slice the vegetables into edible-sized pieces. She swore, pressing her thumb to her mouth to staunch the bleeding while she looked for the first aid kit.

After the third cut, she just kept the kit open next to her.

The distraction was of no use. She couldn't take her mind off of Luke’s silence as she'd told him about the events that had transpired over the last few months. She'd told him everything – nearly everything – and he hadn't said a word. He'd just listened, and then told her that he would have to meditate on what she had just told him. Then he had left her there.
How was she supposed to feel about that?

Master Luke was her last and only chance to get some help in getting Kylo back. He had agreed to help her, but maybe he'd changed his mind when she'd told him about everything. Maybe that's why he had gone off to meditate alone.

If Luke didn't help, if he'd changed his mind when he'd heard the whole story, then she didn't know what she'd do.

She'd have to come up with something.

She just wished that she could read his stoicism at all.

Luke's soft sigh was the only thing that alerted her to his presence. She spun around to see him watching her work, bandaged fingers and all, with a slightly bemused expression.

“Are you making dinner?”

Rey’s ears grew hot from embarrassment. She nodded, then shrugged, then shook her head, then half-nodded again. “I was…trying to,” she admitted. “I don't think I'm very good at it.”

Luke's eyes crinkled in the way they always did in lieu of a smile, warm and lined with crows feet. It was a kind expression, and yet it always struck her as a bit sad. She didn't know if she'd ever seen him truly smile.

There could have been a million reasons for that, but some part of her knew that it hadn't been that way for him until – well, after everything that Kylo had done. When she'd first come to Luke, her hunch just used to make her even more furious with Kylo Ren. The thought that he had done so much evil that he'd permanently taken away the happiness of one of the kindest people she'd ever known had made her almost violently angry. To her, it had been just one more example of how monstrous Kylo Ren was.

But now, the thought just made her sad.

Terribly, terribly sad.

“You haven't done half-bad with chopping up the vegetables,” Luke nodded. “You might be better than you think.”

“Doubtful,” Rey said with a rueful tilt of her lips. She rubbed at the small bandages on her fingers. “I wanted to have it ready for you by the time you got back.”

For a moment, Luke didn't say anything. He just gave her that look that always made her feel like he could see right down to her very soul.

“Well, we'll just finish it together,” he decided. Pulling the pot out of the corner he stored it in, Luke started taking handfuls of the vegetables that she had cut up and dropped them into the pot. Rey grabbed the herbs and dropped a few in there as well before adding water to the mix.

They worked in a comfortable silence, but Rey kept glancing over at Luke so often that she was sure that he had noticed. But he never met her gaze, and kept his focus on what they were doing.

She wasn't trying to rush him, but he'd been gone meditating most of the day. She just – she needed to know.
She’d been trying to think of her options if he decided to change his mind and not help her, but the only thing she could think to do was to march right up to Snoke and kill him once and for all. But to do that she’d need to figure out how to get past the entirety of the First Order without getting herself killed. And then she’d need to figure out a way of killing Snoke before he killed her, or before he made Kylo try to kill her. But before all of that she had to figure out how to find Snoke – or at least where the First Order’s headquarters actually were.

She couldn’t deny it – if master Luke declined to help, she was in trouble. There were no other good options.

Whatever he had decided to do on the other side of the island, he kept it to himself the entire time it took to finish cooking their meal, and even throughout eating. He was polite; he served Rey her portion and told her that she really wasn’t that bad at cooking from scratch – a blatant lie, because she could see how her poorly-chopped vegetables hadn’t cooked very well at all – but he never spoke a word about helping her.

Maybe that was her answer in and of itself.

“Don't get that look on your face.”

Rey snapped her head up, still cradling her bowl of stew in her hands. Most of the time, she would have been done eating by then, her bowl finished and licked clean. Master Luke had never seemed to mind, and he had never asked why she always ate every scrap of food that she was given. She suspected that he didn't have to.

This time, however, the food in her bowl had gone largely untouched.

“What look?” She frowned.

“Like you've decided that everything is hopeless,” he told her, “that you expect me to turn you away.”

Her ears grew hot once more. “I'm sorry,” she shifted on her makeshift seat, briefly glancing down at the food in her hands.

She thought about saying something else, but he continued, “Meditation is easy in a place such as this. The Force is very close. I've been able to sense my nephew for years as he's fallen further and further away from the light. Even now I can feel him.”

“But he's probably half-way across the galaxy,” Rey pointed out.


Rey tried not to let herself feel jealous. It was ridiculous.

Luke looked as if she had somehow missed the point, but his eyes remained kind. “We’ll go to him. But if all you've said is true, then we’ll need to subdue him first in order to try and free the shackles around his mind.”

“Subdue him.” She echoed. In her mind, she could already envision the fight that would ensue between the three of them. Master Luke and herself against Kylo Ren, them trying to help him even as he tried to kill them both.

She didn't like that idea one bit.
“We’re going to need help,” master Luke said as if reading her thoughts. Maybe she had been projecting.

“General Organa,” she guessed, because who else would be willing to help subdue Kylo instead of killing him? Who else would have held out hope?

Luke nodded. “Yes. My sister will be willing to help, especially after you tell her what you told me. After we have him, we will have to take him somewhere very strong in the Force,” he leaned back and rubbed his beard. “I’ve never tried to free someone from such control before,” he admitted, “but I’ve been told that such things require enough power to override the control, and I don't think I'll have enough on my own.”

“Okay,” Rey breathed, relief and fear and anxiousness sweeping in her half-dead heart like a flood. Her emotions threatened to overwhelm her, but she wouldn't let them. Not yet, not when there was so much to do. “Where should we go?”

For a moment master Luke didn't respond. “I won't bring him back here. We need a star map.”

“There's one on the shuttle,” she said.

“Yes, that's good,” he nodded, “we can use the comm to call my sister as well. She'll help us decide where best to lure him out.”

She pressed her lips together, “But won't Snoke make him stay by his side?”

Luke actually chuckled then, although there was no joy in it. “When he hears that I've come out of hiding? He'll come.”

The kernel of dread that sat in her gut sprouted in a breath. It seemed like a very bad idea to lure Kylo out by using master Luke as bait. Someone was bound to get hurt, really hurt – and who was she supposed to defend when push came to shove?

Could she really bring herself to completely turn against Kylo if it meant saving Luke's life?

She would have to.

But-

Or, if things went according to Luke's plan, then she wouldn't have to choose at all. She begged the Force that things would go according to the plan.

All she wanted to do was see Kylo again – all she wanted was for him to be free.

“Rey,” Luke sighed, standing up from his stone seat. He scraped out the last of the stew from the pot and deposited it in Rey's bowl, filling the already-full bowl to the brim. It was a clear sign, and yet she couldn't bring herself to eat more than a few bites.

Luke sat down right next to her, gently placing his hand over hers. There was a deep sadness in his eyes as he said, “Don't give up, Rey. Despair is easy, but if you love someone–you don't give up on them.”

He gave her hand a squeeze and stood, grabbing the pot off of his stove. He left her to clean it out outside.

She sat, motionless.
If you love someone, he'd said.

If you-

If-

She clamped her eyes shut against the wave of tears, yet they still came. It was all she could do to strangle the sound of her crying as best she could, as her sobs wracked her frame. It felt like her world was shaking apart. She clutched the bowl in her hands as if her life depended on it.

Tears fell into her food. She didn't notice.

Chapter End Notes

Luke's back! It's only taken him about 45 chapters, if I'm remembering correctly. And (thankfully) he seems to be the Man With The Plan.

It was interesting, though, because the more I've tried to look into what Luke's been up to post-RotJ, the more I've realized that we have no idea. So my characterization of him is essentially a shot in the dark.

Actual cooking sucks. I try to do it as little as possible.

You guys are the best, and really the only thing that keeps me writing this monster sometimes!
Leia did not look happy.

Rey didn't know how to exactly place the look that the general wore on her face. The small, flickering comm screen onboard the shuttle showed very little detail and the connection was a little spotty. The general’s face was distinctly stretched into a frown, but not much else was clear.

She listened in silence as Luke had Rey recounted the recents events for the second time that day. It was harder than it had been when she explained it to Luke; she started and stopped at least a dozen times, rethinking her words and trying to not make herself sound like a soft-willed idiot. She had no idea whether or not she succeeded, but she had the feeling that the general was able to see straight through her words. Just what the general saw, however, Rey couldn't be sure.

When Rey finished, the general didn't say anything for a long while.

Rey glanced over at master Luke, who took that as the cue to start explaining their plan. That, the general didn't listen to for very long.

“That's a foolhardy move,” she cut him off with a sigh and a barely-visible wave of her hand. “Do you really think that my son would come alone if he sensed your presence? He'd bring an entire company of soldiers with him to ensure your capture.”

*Or death,* was what she didn't say.

“He will come alone,” Luke spoke with a certainty that confused Rey. By the fuzzy twist of the general’s expression, it confused her, too.

“What makes you so certain?” She asked.

“Because,” he glanced over at Rey, “I will reach out to him before he gets too close and warn him that I will disappear if he doesn't come alone.”

General Organa spoke what both women were thinking, “That's not a good plan.”

“It'll work,” master Luke assured his sister.

“Well then, what if he does come by himself?” The general demanded, “He will want to fight you to the death.”

Rey swallowed and shifted a little in her seat.

“Rey and I will subdue him for transport,” he said, as if it was going to be the simplest thing in the world, and the general was reacting to nothing.

General Organa sighed, and they both watched as she rubbed her hand over her eyes. She turned her attention back to them, and then specifically to Rey.

“Will you be able to do that?” She asked. For a moment her voice was almost indecipherable from the poor connection, but Rey understood most of it. “-be able to hurt my son to save him?”
Rey’s stomach dropped. Her throat felt so dry that she had to clear her throat before speaking. “I will do what I have to, if it means saving him.”

She had already hurt him. He had hurt her. It wasn’t – what she wanted, but she meant it when she said that she’d do what she had to. She’d have to, because under Snoke’s influence Kylo would kill her – or Luke – if she let him.

But she wouldn't let him.

For a long time, no one said anything. Rey shifted in her seat, increasingly uncomfortable and getting the distinct feeling that both master Luke and General Organa had an embarrassingly clear grasp of the depth of her feelings for Kylo.

Then the general’s gaze shifted back to Luke. “I still think that this is a bad plan.”


“And you know that the Resistance can't officially be a part of this.”

“I didn't expect them to.”

After a moment, the general sighed. “What would you need from me?”

“It'll be extremely difficult to keep Kylo Ren subdued long enough to transport him off-planet using only the Force,” he explained, “I would like a ship that's been retrofitted to transport medical patients so that we may simply keep him sedated until need-be.”

“I can do that,” she nodded, although she still sounded unhappy. “What else?”

Luke rubbed his beard and leaned back in his seat, “Snoke isn't going to take Kylo Ren’s disappearance lying down. Even without direct involvement from the Resistance, it's certain that he will tie it to you. I just want you to be prepared for whatever retaliation he'll have in store.”

“We’ll be ready,” she promised.

“I would like to set the trap on Tatooine,” he continued.

“Tatooine?” Rey asked automatically.


Master Luke made a movement that wasn't quite a shrug. “I know the terrain, and it will be easy for us to take advantage of–if he comes and he's not alone, it'll be relatively easy to fall back. And besides,” he added, “it's our father’s home planet. He'll find it poetic.”

A part of Rey hated that – talking about taking Kylo down as if he was-

Well, a threat. And he was a threat. He had never stopped being a threat, at least not to the Resistance, or to Luke.

Even if they fixed him, she realized, he would still hate master Luke. He would still hate his mother. They weren't going to benefit from helping her at all. She had lost Kylo to Snoke, but they had lost Kylo long before that. They had lost him to Snoke of his own volition.

She was the only one who was going to get him back after this.
They could only be helping her out of love for him. Because the general was his mother, and Luke was his uncle, the man who had trained him.

Or maybe, she let herself think – just for a moment, she let the thought cross her mind – they were doing it for her, too. For both Kylo and her.

Because they both seemed to know.

And they didn't seem unhappy about it in the slightest. They had just – accepted it. It wasn't even an issue.

The look on the general’s face – unclear as the image was – visibly softened. “Luke,” she trailed off, as if she didn't really know what she wanted to say.

He seemed to understand whatever it was that she couldn't say. “I know,” he said.

Rey suddenly felt as if she should leave. The moment that passed between the siblings seemed private, and she felt like an intruder.

But then the moment passed. The general seemed to accept her brother’s answer, and turned her gaze towards Rey. “Take care of yourself, Rey,” she paused, “what you've told me has given me hope for my son. I can't thank you enough for that.”

With one final glance at Luke, the general cut off the communication.

Rey's heart constricted in her chest as she stared at the dark screen. Not for the first time, she wished that she had had a mother like the general. And not for the first time, she wondered how Kylo could ever have grown to hate her the way he did.

Luke started tapping some keys to the terminal. “Leia sent us rendezvous coordinates for the ship she's going to lend us,” he said.

She snapped her gaze up, the question bubbling up from her lips before she thought better of it. “Will we have to hurt him, do you think?”

The silent moments that ticked between them was enough of an answer.


Something about the way that he said it confused her. “Depends on what?”

Her teacher looked her in the eye. “There is more than one way to hurt a person. I'm certain that my nephew won't make this easy on either of us.”

Rey didn't say anything.

What could she say? All she felt was the icy grip of dread as it coiled in her gut, its iron weight in her stomach making her feel sick.

This was Kylo Ren. She'd be fooling herself if she thought that subduing him would be easy. He was going to be difficult to catch.

But that wasn't the part that worried her.
Tatooine was about a three-cycle flight away, but Rey’s stolen shuttle didn't have nearly enough gas to make it the entire way. Luke contacted the general about it right before they left Ahch-To and informed her that they would have to make a stop at one of the nearest refueling stations.

It might cause a delay, he'd said, but no more than a few hours. Both he and General Organa acted like it was a minor thing, an almost inconsequential foot-note.

But a delay meant more time.

And Rey didn't know if the extra time made her feel better or worse.

Almost as soon as they had lifted off, Rey had made her way to the back of the shuttle and had collapsed in one of the chairs. She had been dead to the world since then, deep asleep despite the uncomfortable duraplast chairs. There were no dreams – of Kylo or otherwise – and that was a small mercy.

It felt like she hadn't slept for eons.

Or maybe she was just tired of being so aware, even in her dreams. Total unconsciousness was a nice reprieve.

And yet-

When she started to wake up, her mind stretched towards Kylo’s – towards the emptiness where he used to be – more out of habit than anything else. A reflex. It wasn't until she felt the total absence of him in her head that she remembered herself, that she pulled her senses back and forced herself the rest of the way into wakefulness.

It was an embarrassing reliance, one that she hadn't even realized she had until she didn't have it.

It had been different, before – back when she'd shut herself off from their bond. He had constantly been trying to reconnect, he had still been there. Their bond was something that she had to actively fight against, and letting herself back into it had been like a breath of fresh air to starving lungs. Even though his presence had always been tumultuous and overbearing, it had still been a relief to allow their bond back in.

Force, she missed him.

Whether or not it was wrong or weak or pathetic – it didn't matter.

She missed him.

She missed him.

She missed him.

She was going to get him back. It seemed that she had to remind herself of that fact every other minute, but she believed it. With every fiber of her being, she believed it.

Rey chose to believe it.

When Luke made his way towards the back, she hadn't been awake for very long. His eyebrows rose at the sight of her, curled up on one of the chairs, her arms crossed over her knees. He took a step closer and sat across from her.

“We've just docked at the refueling station,” he told her.
Nodding, she rearranged herself so that her legs were crossed. “Okay.”

“We should meditate on which planet would be most suitable for our needs after we have Kylo Ren in custody,” he continued.

_In custody._ Rey thought that that was a very blunt way of putting it. Or maybe she was just being over-sensitive about it. She couldn't trust her feelings.

“I've been thinking about that,” she sighed, because she had, but she hadn't liked the answer she'd come up with. A thought had crossed her mind while she had been curled up in that chair, but she didn't like the idea – not at all. She wasn't sure that she should even say anything.


She figured she might as well say it. “Back when we had been stranded on that planet, on Dathomir,” she started, “I only sensed anything off-planet a few times. I couldn't sense you at all, and I only sensed Kylo because of, well, our-bond.”

Her cheeks and ears felt like they were on fire, but master Luke gave no indication that he noticed, and she was grateful for that. She cleared her throat. “Snoke spoke to him several times there. He–trapped Kylo in his mind, somehow, and one time he gave Kylo all of this,” she tried to search for the right words, “extra darkness.”

Rey took a breath, “But it was nothing like the presence that I felt on Corellia. There, Snoke was,” she broke off, suppressing a shudder.

Luke caught on quickly. “You're saying that you think the planet might have diluted Snoke's power, somehow?” It almost sounded crazy, but he seemed to take the suggestion seriously as he began to stroke his beard. “Or, at least, weakened his connection to Kylo Ren?”

“It's only a theory,” she spoke quickly, rising to her feet. She'd taken her boots off to get more comfortable, leaving her feet exposed to the cold durasteel grating. Her toes were freezing. “I was just thinking about everything, and the thought occurred to me.”

“Dathomir is very strong with the Force,” he nodded to himself and stood as well, “it would be a viable candidate.”

A sinking pit settled in her stomach. She shouldn't have said anything. “But Dathomir is strong in the dark side of the Force,” she added, in the hopes that that would deter the idea.

“We might need dark power to counteract Snoke,” Luke admitted.

“We will?”

“We _might,_” he emphasized, shaking his head. “We just don't know, yet. I've never had to free someone from this kind of mind control before.”

Rey tried not to let her emotions project through the Force, although she couldn't entirely keep them from playing out on her face. “So you have no idea what you're going to do?”

She thought he could _help_ her.

“I've been advised.” He was entirely calm in the face of her agitation, perhaps even slightly amused. Well, it wasn't amusing to her.
“By who?” She tried not to scoff.

“By masters wiser than you or I,” Luke didn't seem overly concerned with assuring her of his expertise. He did, however, reach over and give her a pat on the arm and that warm not-smile expression of his.

“My nephew is very lucky to have you looking out for him,” he spoke with a sincerity that disarmed her. “I wonder if he'll ever realize just how lucky he is.”

Rey’s ears started heating up again. “Don't be ridiculous,” she shook her head.

He studied her for a long moment, not saying a word. He always seemed to do that to her – to see right through her very being and ask questions that he looked like he already knew the answer to.

But that time he didn't ask her a question. Instead, he just fixed her with a knowing look and turned to head back towards the front of the shuttle. She followed him as soon as she pulled on her boots.

“I'm going to see how much this refueling job is going to cost us,” he informed her with a glance as he turned towards the airlock.

That was strange, she thought, because she was certain that prices were always haggled out before the customer ever got a drop of fuel. But maybe that was just how it was on Jakku.

“Alright,” she nodded.

It wasn’t very long after that they finished refueling, but Luke insisted on sticking around a bit longer. When she asked him why, he said that he hadn't been satisfied with what they had been charged. He added something about growing up bartering with Jawas, but it didn't seem very relevant to her.

Getting to Tatooine was a little higher on her list of priorities than getting the absolute best deal for fuel, she'd told him.

“Just wait,” he said, his face a serene mask.

Rey felt about ready to scream. At first she alternated between sitting in the copilot’s seat and pacing the length of the shuttle, but before long she lost the rest of her patience. She stopped down the ramp to demand that they leave, that they go so that they could set their plan in motion. It wasn't like they had an unlimited amount of time.

She remembered the pain he had been in when they'd last shared a dream. She could only imagine what else he was going through, what else he was putting others through.

Luke wasn't even on the refueling platform. With a huff, she reached out and tried to sense him. He wasn't far away, but he wasn't where he should've been, either.

He seemed to realize that she was looking for him, and emerged from inside the station not a minute later.

“Are we finished?” She asked as soon as he was within earshot.

“Yes, I'm finished,” Luke nodded. Rey immediately started to return to the shuttle, but he made no move towards the ship ramp.

It took her several seconds to notice that she was alone in the shuttle. Turning around and descending
halfway back down the ramp, she tried not to frown too deeply. “Are we ready?”

“Were not going anywhere, Rey.”

She blinked. “What do you mean?” Apprehension took hold in her chest, although she wasn't totally sure what it was from. A cold shiver crept from her neck to her toes.

“Master Luke, what do you mean?”

“Can't you feel it?” He asked, briefly closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. “My nephew is on his way here.”

Rey's heart felt like it dropped down past her feet, past the stolen shuttle, down into space. Her lungs felt like they were trying to squeeze their way out of her throat. *This shouldn't be happening.*

“This shouldn't be happening–not yet, not here,” she gasped. Was the air getting more difficult to breathe? Her hand traveled up to the base of her neck. Her lightsaber was in her pack – she'd have to grab her pack. “There are people on this station, why didn't we leave sooner?”

Luke looked as calm as ever as he took several steps closer. “I've given warning, the station is being evacuated as we speak.”

She didn't hear any alarms, but looking around, she didn't see anyone around, either. They seemed to be the only ship docked for refueling.

“We were supposed to warn him to come alone-”

“It's too late for that,” Luke shook his head. “We must prepare to have a very large fight on our hands.”

Rey couldn't *breathe.* Fear struck her in the gut, twisting her insides until all she wanted to do was run and hide. She wanted-

She wanted Kylo.

She had to – to tell him what his uncle had said, tell him all that Luke had made her realize.

She had to tell Kylo how she felt.

But if she ever was going to get the chance, she was going to have to do this. She was going to have to accept that what they were about to do was going to put two of the most important people in her life in a lot of danger. Luke could get hurt. Kylo could get hurt. She could.

Or one of them could die.

It wasn't something that she let herself dwell on, but it was a possibility. If he was bringing First Order forces with him, then their fight was going to get a whole lot harder.

Especially if-

“Is Snoke coming? Can you feel him?”

Master Luke shook his head. “Thankfully, no. He's not coming with Kylo Ren, as far as I can tell.” Then something flashed in his eyes, a look that instantly put Rey on edge, as if that was any more possible.
“Rey, I need to know that you're up for this. That you're ready.”

Ready? Of course she wasn't ready – she didn't want to fight Kylo, not again. She'd barely made it through their last battle.

But she couldn't do that. She couldn't let her feelings stop her from what needed to be done – and she would do what needed to be done. If getting Kylo away from that monster Snoke meant fighting him when he wanted to kill her, then she would do it.

Because if-

She wouldn't give up.

Resolve settled deep in her gut, and she used the certainty that she would do what needed to be done to expel the fear that tried to freeze her lungs. Kylo was counting on her – he would never be free without her.

No more despair.

“I'm ready,” she said, and she meant it.

“Good,” Luke seemed to understand her as he always did. He shed his outer cloak and unhooked his lightsaber. It occurred to her that she'd never seen him truly use it.

His head snapped to the side at the same time that Rey felt it – the rumbling chaos of a far-off sandstorm with the precision of a durasteel welder. A buzz in the back of her head, a prick that ran down her spine.

It was the First Order – a lot of them, just as General Organa had said. She exchanged a glance with Luke.

Kylo was nearly there.

Chapter End Notes

So things seem to be going exactly according to plan, huh?

It's weird, because Rey actually is unaware of about half of what goes on in this chapter.

I know I've mentioned it before, but if you guys wanna keep up with my progress or if you just wanna say hi, check out my Tumblr.
The bridge of the *Jettatura* was smaller than the *Finalizer’s*, but the First Order was as of yet unaware of Kylo's return to the fold. He wouldn't have been a welcome sight if he simply showed up as if nothing had happened. It gave him a sick amount of pleasure to imagine how red-faced Hux would've gotten, but for the moment he had to content himself to haunting his master’s ship.

Not even the entire ship, really. He had been mostly confined to either the shrine or his quarters, both of which held their own sort of torture.

The shrine – there was only pain at the shrine, pain to learn from, pain to gain strength from. There was just so much of it.

Every cycle he meditated at that shrine, wallowing in all the different types of agony it offered. Sharp, dull, burning, freezing, *terrifying*. He'd stay there until he couldn't take it anymore. Then he'd stumble back to his quarters to collapse onto his cot. But that wasn't any better, because his dreams only offered a different sort of pain.

Some nights he dreamt that he was standing on a catwalk surrounded by fire and he had just killed the man he had once called father. They were brief dreams where he just stood there, having already committed the deed.

He always snapped awake, crying and angry – at the man for walking out on that catwalk in the first place, and at himself for agonizing over it. For being unable to let it *go*.

Those dreams – he had had those dreams for a long time. It was nothing new, nothing he couldn’t handle.

But sometimes he dreamed of other things. Worse things.

Sometimes he dreamed that he was wringing the scavenger’s pretty neck between his hands, her slender fingers clawing at his sleeves as he squeezed the life out of her.

Other times he was chasing her through the snow, his lightsaber blazing like fire in his hand as he tried to get close enough to impale her.

In the end of those dreams, he always killed her.

Those dreams left him shaking, out of breath, *terrified*, although he couldn't quite say why.

While he was deeming it always felt *euphoric*, a long-awaited victory to see the light leave the scavenger’s eyes.

And yet – as soon as he woke up it always felt like someone had been trying to kill *him*.

Occasionally he threw up after those dreams, although he told himself that it was only after the particularly taxing days, the days when he spent extra time at the shrine. He told himself that it had nothing to do with those dreams.

Those dreams – they were nightmares.
But his worst nightmares – the very worst – were the ones where he didn't kill her. The nightmares where he didn't even try.

In those worst nightmares, she kissed him. She reached up and ran her fingers through his hair and stared up at him like he was the most precious thing she'd ever seen.

Like there was no one else but the two of them in the whole galaxy.

_I do care_, she'd say, and then she would kiss him.

He always woke himself from those dreams wracked with sobs, his hands clutching his sheets and his lungs all squeezed out. The static would return to his mind only in those moments, loud and grating against his mind as if his thoughts were trying to tear themselves to pieces for even having those sorts of dreams.

Kylo hated those dreams.

Nightmares.

Hated them more than anything. He hated them because-

They disgusted him, just as he knew they disgusted the Supreme Leader. He knew they were just the lingering effects of his weakness, an endless torture that cost him sleep and what little patience he had.

The more tired he got, the more intense he seemed to dream. He needed rest, a chance to catch his breath and refortify his mind.

So he decided to leave the shrine behind for a day.

The crew on the bridge of the _Jettatura_ were used to being cloaked in dark power, and to being around others with that same taint. Still, they seemed to sense his foul mood in particular, as everyone gave him a wide berth as he entered, and no one said anything to him.

Not that he minded.

Kylo forced his mind not to form any distinct thoughts as he approached the bridge’s viewport; he forced himself to simply gaze out at the stars, keeping himself still and silent. It was the first reprieve he had allowed himself since boarding his master’s personal ship, and he refused to squander it with thought. Especially since his thoughts seemed to only bring him agony.

It felt-

No.

It wasn't painful, and that was enough.

That was until Skywalker crept into his head like a serpent, shattering his mental reprieve.

Kylo went stiff as a board, throwing up his mental walls as best he could. He was very good at protecting his mind – he had always excelled with the mental application of the Force – and yet it was already too late. He was too slow.

Skywalker brushed against his mind.

*Kylo Ren.*
The call was soft yet painfully, undeniably there. And it was persistent when at first Kylo did his best to force the old hermit out of his head.

I know you're looking for me, the old man’s thoughts slithered.

Get out of my head, Kylo demanded, although he felt the pull of Skywalker’s words even as he tried to expel him.

The old man-

Kylo could sense him. Skywalker was out of hiding – he was somewhere in known space.

Only the scavenger could've managed that, he was sure of it.

If he concentrated, then Kylo was certain that he'd be able to find Skywalker and put a definite and final end to the lives of both the man who had failed their family’s legacy and the boy that had been called Ben. Even just thinking the name made him nearly breathless with hate.

I'm not going anywhere, Skywalker promised, likely able to guess exactly what Kylo planned. I have Rey with me, and we wish to talk to you.

Kylo didn't restrain the sneer that twisted his mouth.

Ah. So this is another trap to try and twist me against the Supreme Leader.

It wasn't ideal, but the connection that Skywalker had opened between them gave Kylo a direct pathway with which to track the old man; it wouldn't be long until he'd know exactly where to find him if he could manage to concentrate past his growing rage.

For a moment there was no reply. And then, Rey does care about you.

As if no one could comprehend that he was finally out from under the scavenger’s control-

The sharp static narrowed his mind, gave him focus.

You won't be able to hide behind her, Kylo promised, promptly spinning on his heals and sweeping off of the bridge. Several stormtroopers had to scramble out of his path on his way out, but he didn't care.

It was almost unbelievably lucky that he'd get an opportunity to finish both Skywalker and the scavenger off.

It was also almost certainly a trap.

He was sure that the two of them had come up with some ludicrous plan where they'd overcome and kill him for being unable to fall for the scavenger's tricks anymore. Or maybe the scavenger was going to help Skywalker as he tried to convince Kylo of – something.

To come back to the light.

To pretend to be a dead boy again.

It didn't matter. He wasn't going to listen to any of it. Skywalker was just the same as Solo, preaching empty lies and trying to drag him back to a life that was no longer his.

And the scavenger was their willing puppet, doing their every bidding.
Whatever you think she's done, it's a lie. Snoke's manipulating you.

Kylo clenched his fists and had to hold his breath to physically stop himself from answering, even if it was just in his head. Skywalker didn't push him, but he didn't pull back very far from the connection, either, allowing Kylo to narrow down the area in which he sensed the old man.

That alone was proof enough that it was a trap.

But it was a trap that he couldn't afford not to spring. Not if he wanted to finally – finally – be able to confront Skywalker.

And he wanted to spring it. Just to see-

Just to see.

Kylo could feel the old man somewhere in space, fixed and steady. Wherever he was, he wasn't moving.

Was he waiting for him?

Adrenaline shot through Kylo's veins like he was high on spice. While he wasn't totally sure of where Skywalker was, Kylo knew that he would be able to find Skywalker if he got in a ship and just started flying. Without a shadow of a doubt, he knew that he'd be able to find Skywalker.

And if he could find him – then he could kill him.

Both of them.

Skywalker and the scavenger.

Kylo's hands itched with anticipation, as well as another feeling that he couldn't quite put his finger on. It was there, at the edge of his thoughts, an unwelcome companion to the far-off static edging in on his consciousness.

It felt like-

Fear.

No, he decided. No, it wasn't fear. Fear didn't have any place in his mind. He was resolute, finally presented with the opportunity to destroy the darkness of the past and avenge the sanctity of his own mind.

He wasn't afraid.

It was just-

It was the dreams. All of those dreams he'd been having. They must've unnerved him more than he'd thought.

Skywalker was still hovering on the edges of his mind. It was somewhat uncomfortable to keep another consciousness so close – nothing like it had been with her, back when he'd been under the influence of her lies – but he endured it just so that he could be sure that he didn't lose track of the old man.

He had to tell the Supreme Leader about this.
The Supreme Leader *had to give him leave to tie up loose ends*. Kylo was sure that he would.

His legs carried him down the corridors of the *Jettatura* like he was wading through water. The darkness the resided on the ship weighed everything down, but it didn't lessen his urgency. His master's ship had been designed to be as uncomfortable as possible; the point, he imagined, was that nothing worthwhile is gained without pain.

Or maybe the Supreme Leader simply liked to sense the discomfort of his crew, the slow torture that gave every crew member Kylo passed a corpse-like pallor.

Kylo had the nagging suspicion that he'd started to look about the same after all the time he'd spent there.

The Supreme Leader’s personal chambers were constructed to look more akin to a temple than any sort of personal rooms. Force relics were displayed on small pedestals lining the room, each emitting their own brand of the dark side. Their powers were mostly unknown to him, but their corruption was undeniable. The relics were the the result of years and years of hunting, and Kylo had retrieved one or two of them himself.

Snoke’s dark power hung heavy all around – clinging to the walls, and to Kylo's lungs, and to the Force. It covered everything in its oily depths, nearly crushing in its weight.

It nearly stole his breath away to enter, the air felt so thick.

The Supreme Leader was going from relic to relic when he entered, silently stretching his hand out over each and every one, and then passing each one by with a small shake of his head. As he moved from one relic to the next he remained seemingly unaware of his apprentice, but Kylo knew better.

It was as if he was looking for something.

Kylo just stood there, trying not to burst from the urgency of what he wanted. When his master finally decided to acknowledge him, he stopped whatever it was that he was doing. He looked impatient.

“Kylo Ren. What is it?”

Kylo inclined his head. “Supreme Leader, I've just sensed Skywalker–he's returned to known space.”

“Has he?” His master’s gnarled face made his expression more unreadable than usual. “How do you know this?”

“He has attempted to contact me.”

The Supreme Leader’s frown was unmistakable. “Did he succeed?”

“I can sense him,” Kylo said by way of an answer, because he could sense him. He was more than certain that he needed to face Skywalker and the Scavenger. His master had to see that, too. “I could follow my senses right to him, and then I can end this.”

The Supreme Leader studied him for a moment. Without breaking eye contact, he asked, “The ring that you were sent to retrieve from Dathomir–do you know what it does?”

The abrupt change in subject nearly brought Kylo up short. He frowned.
“No, Supreme Leader.”

His master seemed to have expected that answer. “It’s a very old and very powerful ring, one that was created a long time ago by a cult of witches who called themselves Nightsisters. They constructed it by using the Force—solely by using the Force.”

Reaching into the folds of his dark robes, the Supreme Leader produced the ring in question.

Kylo couldn’t help but stare at it. It still felt hard to believe that that ring had caused him so much trouble over the past months. If he hadn’t been sent to retrieve it-

“These witches have learned to use the Force in ways that are unique to their culture. To truly be able to grasp its power, I must understand the Force in the same way that they do.” After a moment, the Supreme Leader shook his head. “The trouble is—”

He slipped the ring on his hand, the metal heavy and dark against his ashen skin.

And then-

The air seemed to shimmer around his master, changing—something about the man. Kylo blinked furiously, thinking that he must have been seeing something.

He was seeing something.

How else could he explain that all at once the Supreme Leader’s gnarled scars had healed themselves so that his face was whole and undamaged? That the person Kylo knew to be his master suddenly looked upright and young?

It was as if time had turned back on itself.

And it made the Supreme Leader look powerful.

But Kylo felt the power it took. The Force bent and rippled around the Supreme Leader, like the ring had somehow opened up an ocean. The power it used felt distinctly similar to Talzin’s. If he hadn’t seen for himself that it was just the ring’s energy, then he might’ve thought that the witch had shown her face once more.

So that was why the ring was so powerful.

It had somehow made the Supreme Leader young again.

That explained why his master wanted it so much.

And yet—it didn’t.

Did his master want to be young again? Young forever?

The thought felt like like a sinking stone in his gut. He had the feeling that that was a bad idea, that he didn’t want that.

Not at all.

If Supreme Leader Snoke never died, then-

Almost all at once, the power stopped flowing, a wave instead of an ocean, and his master returned to normal. His face once more became gnarled, his skin rough and sickly, his posture incredibly bent
and aged.
The ring suddenly felt like nothing.

“Understanding only gets you so far.”

His master gazed down at the ring on his hand, sliding it off and holding it in his palm. “I need more power to be able to prolong the ring’s abilities, but the right type of power. *Raw* power, but compatible. Do you understand?”

Kylo swallowed, a small moment of hesitation.

“No.”

It was the safest answer.

But it was not the correct answer. Disappointment rolled across the room, so pungent that it almost smelled. His master’s tolerance for his presence was wearing visibly – and dangerously – thin.

“I'm occupied with things greater than your understanding, Kylo Ren,” he snapped suddenly. “I will not allow you to leave the *Jettatura* until I give the order, and my orders will be to find the missing piece to *this* puzzle,” he indicated the ring, “not to chase after insignificant ghosts or *harlets*.”

Kylo's nostril’s flared. “But-”

“I do not care what you think, or what you want. You're *mine*—I'm the one who has raised you, taught you, and forgiven you. You owe me the loyalty of a son. Is that so impossible for you?”

For a split second he thought that his master was being ironic; after all, was it not-

But the flat expression on the Supreme Leader’s face told him enough.

A sudden, intense flare of *hatred* boiled through Kylo's veins. After all those years, he was closer than he'd ever been to finally destroying the last Jedi. Skywalker was finally within his grasp.

And the scavenger-

The static hovered at the back of his mind. He would kill *her*, too.

Except that his master didn't care, and wasn't going to let him.

All he wanted him to do was sit and continue to wallow in the perpetual tortures carried onboard. He wanted him in pain until he decided to let him loose like some mutt.

It was all he could do not to let the hatred overwhelm him. To not let it boil over and project to the Supreme Leader in sharp waves.

It took a long time until either spoke.

Kylo's hands clenched into fists, the leather creaking with the strain.

“No, Supreme Leader,” he bit out.

There was no way in *hells* he was going to let this opportunity pass him by.

But he couldn't face Skywalker and the scavenger alone. As much as he didn't want to admit it,
between he two of them, he knew he’d be outmatched. The Jettatura had over three companies stationed on it at any given time; he would just borrow one and overwhelm Skywalker and the scavenger with bodies. His master wouldn't miss them.

It wasn't how he'd always envisioned it, but he was past caring about how he got Skywalker.

He was careful to keep his thoughts closed off from his master, and let his anger shield his deeper thoughts. The Supreme Leader pried into his mind as he always did, but not far enough to claw his way past his shields. After a few grueling moments of letting him sift through Kylo’s thoughts, his master let his power drop and turned away.

The Supreme Leader hadn't realized his plan.

Hadn't seen his disobedience.

He waited for the static to return, but it didn't. He wasn't quite sure why he had expected it to.

“Leave me,” Kylo was dismissed with a bored flick of the wrist, “and return to the shrine. Stay there until I say otherwise.”

Kylo nodded, a show of respect. “Yes, Supreme Leader.”

He turned to leave.

“Oh, and one more thing.”

Kylo froze. Slowly, he turned back around to face his master, trying to school his face into something resembling indifference. It was moments like those that he hated not wearing his mask.

He swallowed, and waited for his master to continue.

“Once I find the answer to my problem, I will turn my attention to carrying out the consequences to your actions. That is a promise.”

The Supreme Leader didn't bother looking at him. He turned and started to head back into the recesses of his chambers, a total darkness where only he ever ventured.

Kylo didn't linger a moment longer in the Supreme Leader’s chambers before he spun on his heel and hurried out.

When he got a ways down the corridor, he forced himself to stop and take a breath. He knew what his master was really saying; he knew that he'd yet to face any true consequences for his disloyalty and weakness.

Don't get comfortable.

He put the warning from his mind. What he was about to do would likely – certainly – increase his punishment ten-fold. Maybe it would dry up the last well of patience that his master held towards him.

He could very possibly die for what he was about to do.

It didn't matter. He felt half-dead already, waiting in some dark limbo for the real punishment to start, and haunted by his dreams past the point of torture.

And he felt – drawn to them, to a confrontation with them.
To finally locate Skywalker-
And to see the scavenger.
To kill him.
To kill them.
To-
He had to go. His lungs felt like they were being pulled through his ribcage, towards the direction he sensed the two of them, somewhere across the stars. Something in his chest *pulled* and *twisted*, from either anticipation or apprehension. Maybe both.

It was – it was the scavenger.

He needed to see-

The static scattered his thoughts like a hammer-blow to the skull. He drew up short, the breath nearly knocked out of him, but he pushed through it enough to continue walking.

It didn't matter how much pain it caused him.

He *would* go confront them.

As if Skywalker had heard his thoughts, his presence flared back into Kylo's brain, just a little more present than before and ten times as infuriating.

It was as if he was trying to say, *I'm here, I'm still waiting.*

The words followed Kylo like a taunt, snapping at his heels as he walked. He picked up his pace.

Chapter End Notes

I was actually going to have this chapter continue into the confrontation, but this ended up being chapter-length, so I cut it in two. But an almost entirely Kylo chapter isn't bad, right?

Well, the ring's power is revealed. Although it doesn't quite work the way Snoke wants it to. And it sure looks like Luke's plan doesn't exactly line up with he decided on with Rey, does it? The next chapter is the confrontation, so we'll see what happens then.

I absolutely love you guys, please take care of yourselves!
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

She wasn't ready to see him.

Rey had told herself that she was prepared, she had told Luke she was prepared – but she wasn't. Not really. She hadn't prepared herself enough, not to see the coldness in Kylo’s eyes and know what Snoke had done something – had *hurt* him in some way – to make him like that.

They were supposed to have more time.

She should've prepared herself before this. She thought that she *was* prepared-

But it was too late.

Kylo’s ship dropped out of hyperspace so close to the refueling station that for a moment it almost looked like it was going to ram the station. It was a reckless move that either spoke of his arrogance or carelessness. Maybe both.

The ship made a hard turn and swung around, making its way to the other side of the station. Both she and Luke watched as it latched on to the farthest dock from them. The ramp was already beginning to lower before the ship had even settled.

Rey glanced over at Luke for some sort of direction, her lightsaber clutched firmly in her palm.

From that distance, she didn't even have to stretch out her senses to feel the emotional storm that surrounded Kylo. Turmoil covered him like a shroud, spiking like electricity in the air around them.

Luke activated his lightsaber, the green blade snapping to life with a nauseating sort of finality. The energy cast his robes in a sickening green tint, and made his skin look paler than usual.

The sight made Rey nervous.

She thumbed the ignition of her own lightsaber. The blade hummed a hot blue, ready for violence in her hand. She swallowed.

“He will try and weaken us by forcing us to expend out energy on the troops,” Luke predicted with a calmness that she didn't feel. A part of her wanted to point out that she'd fought him before – *won* against him before – but she knew that her nerves were just making her snippy, so she kept her mouth shut about it.

“I'll focus on the troops and draw their attention,” Luke turned his gaze back to the First Order ship, which had already bled tens of troops onto the station. She knew they had only moments until they were in range of their blasters. “You do everything in your power to subdue Kylo Ren. I will help you when I can.”

After a beat, he added, “May the Force be with you.”

Rey barely managed to nod, choking out a quick “You, too.”

And then the stormtroopers started firing at them. Master Luke snapped into action like he had just reattached some loose wire in his brain.
For a moment, all Rey could do was stare.

She'd never seen anyone ever fight like that.

There was a fluidity to his movements that seemed to both conserve his energy and make him too fast for anyone to pin down. He deflected several shots back at the stormtroopers with just a flick of his wrist. Twisting around one of the troopers, he let the trooper take three shots to the chest that had been meant for him before he moved back around and swung his lightsaber at the stormtroopers that had fired the shots, melting their weapons in two and maiming their arms.

It was incredible.

And it was terrifying. She'd never seen Luke in action before; it wasn't as if she'd expected him not to kill the troopers, but she supposed she hadn't expected him to start killing them so efficiently.

None of that mattered, anyway. Rey's gaze snapped to the dark figure that lumbered down the ramp. Even from so far away, her eyes were immediately drawn to him.

Faced with the reality of him being there, so close and within reach of being able to help him, solidified her resolve. Her apprehension evaporated from her mind like vapor, replaced by a steely set of her shoulders.

This was the reason they were here. He was the reason.

She was going to help him.

Kylo Ren halted. It was too far to really see his eyes, but she knew that he was looking at her. His storm became directed at her.

His lightsaber was spitting fire in his hand, but there was a hesitation to his stance that was impossible to miss.

A moment – a second – passed between them.

For a split second, it almost seemed like he was reaching out to her through the Force.

But then the moment passed, and he started to advance.

Blaster fire tore her attention away. A handful of troopers had noticed her even amid the chaos master Luke was causing and had opened fire. Rey managed to deflect most of the shots that came near her, but her efforts were clumsy and she felt instantly agitated. Deflecting blaster fire had never been something that she'd focused on during her training with Luke, never something that she had been much good at. And it showed.

She took a blaster bolt to the shoulder, a glancing shot that did more superficial damage than anything. It still burned like hells, though.

Trying to shake off the pain, she threw out her hand and sent four of the nearest stormtroopers flying.

There were so many of them, killing a few seemed inevitable. And yet-

Rey still remembered what it was like to kill that hunter back on Dathomir. She remembered rolling around in the swamp and grappling for some way to not die.

It had been about survival, then. That's what she told herself.
Kill or die.

She didn't want it to be the same with the stormtroopers. It wasn't the same, not when she had the
Force and her lightsaber and Luke Skywalker at her back.

So unless that's what it became – kill or die – she wouldn't kill anyone else. That's not why she was
there.

She had to focus on Kylo.

Using the opening she had created for herself, Rey bolted through the cluster of white armor,
dodging blaster fire and the occasional swing of an arm or leg. She was faster than the soldiers by
far, and most of their attention was still narrowed in on Luke, who was already making a huge dent
in their numbers. It made it considerably easier for her to make her way through the troops.

The smell of burned flesh and armor was everywhere, filling her lungs and making her want to gag.
It was nowhere near as bad as Corellia, but she could still feel the death around her.

All of the stormtroopers felt a little dead, a little less than alive. Nothing like how Finn felt.

But she didn't have time to think about that.

Focus on Kylo, she told herself. Go towards the storm.

She could sense that Kylo had gone inside the station hub, so that's where she headed. None of the
stormtroopers had ventured anywhere besides the platforms, so once she broke free of the cluster of
them she easily slipped inside.

Everything was abandoned inside the hub; it was just a bunch of equipment and terminals, with piles
of crates and a few chairs pushed into corners every now and again. Large monitors loomed
overhead, cycling through a bunch of official-looking data and casting the area in blue shadows.

The room made her nervous. It was too silent, too abandoned when it was obviously supposed to be
a place of activity. She continued further in anyway. Kylo was close, she could feel it.

And she heard it. His lightsaber hummed angrily a ways down, drawing her in like a beacon. She
followed the sound slowly, her lightsaber at the ready. There was no way of knowing what she was
walking towards. She saw the red-orange glow that his weapon cast around a corner, and took a final
few steps closer.

Then she saw him.

He was hunched over one of the terminals, his lightsaber kept low at his side. With his free hand he
was clutching the edge of the panel, his chest heaving as if-

As if he was having some sort of panic attack. Rey could feel the anguish rolling off of him, as well
as physical pain. A harsh static seemed to fill the air around him.

It was just the same as it had been back on Corellia, when he'd first been – taken. Imprisoned.
Whatever technique Snoke had used on Kylo obviously caused him a great deal of pain.

Things seemed to only have gotten worse with time – significantly worse.

And yet – he appeared to be fighting it.

Her heart bled for him.
She exhaled, unsure of what exactly she should do.

“Kylo,” she started, hesitant.

His head snapped up and he spun around, looking at her wide-eyes like he was surprised to see her. As if he hadn't expected to find her there at all – or at least like he hadn't expected her to find him.

The look lasted only a moment before he reined himself in. Drawing himself to his full height, she could feel the walls shut in around him, watched as his face became a closed-off mask of contempt. He spun his lightsaber in his hand and stepped away from the terminal, giving her his full attention.

It only occurred to her then that he still wasn't wearing his helmet. *Good, she thought, I don't ever want to see that blasted thing again.*

It kept him human without it.

She *needed* him to still be human.

“Talk to me, Kylo,” she pleaded, although she stayed ready to defend herself.

He was too pale, *sickly,* and up close she could tell that his eyes were bloodshot. The bags under his eyes were so dark they looked like bruises. Yet he had lost none of his intensity – he never lost his intensity. He looked half ready to attack already when he sneered, “So you can try to use your tricks on me again? I don't think so.”

Rey’s sympathy was temporarily replaced by a spike of irritation.

“Do you seriously believe that I'd have the training to do that?” She scoffed. “We both know I've only had a few months of actual training–it doesn't make any sense that I would be able to use mind tricks on you.”

She was slowly losing her composure, but she *had* to convince him. He *had* to believe her. If she could manage to avoid fighting him at all-

*It didn't make sense,* he had to see that.

He blinked. She was glad to see the confusion in his eyes, the hesitation.

Then he shook his head and that hesitation was gone.

Kylo was on her in a flash, his lightsaber baring down on her. She brought her own lightsaber up in time to block his blow, but the strength behind it pushed her back a whole two steps.

She had to be careful; the environment around her was strange, and she didn't want to end up backing herself into a corner.

He wasted no time in pressing his advantage. Each strike drove her back another half step, towards one of the terminals. Ducking away from one of his blows, she managed to redirect them so that she wouldn't end up with her back against the terminal. She moved down the length of the hub, Kylo hot on her heels.

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She was letting him keep the advantage, but it was mostly because she didn't know how to try and gain it without trying to seriously hurt him. And trying to gain the advantage would be dangerous on its own, considering his blows felt like he was trying to kill her.

Because he was, she reminded herself.
She'd never fought him when he'd been seriously trying to kill her, she realized. The thought scared her enough that she barely managed to lock blades with him on his next swing.

He leaned down on her, using his superior height to his advantage. She refused to ever be scared of him personally, but she still felt a spark of fear shoot down her spine at the possibility of being struck down.

This time, if she made one bad move, made one miscalculation – it was very possible that she could die.

Kylo wouldn't hesitate to kill her.

She had to keep trying to talk to him.

“Please,” she grunted, her arms shaking. She searched his eyes even as sparks flew between them. They made his eyes look on fire with white light. “Kylo.”

She had no idea what she was doing.

But then something halted in his gaze. His anger receded, replaced by the same confusion from before and – something else. Something that she thought looked familiar.

Rey opened her mouth, her heart skipped a beat.

She felt it.

That tug-

Whatever softness Kylo’s eyes held in that moment disappeared like a light being sniffed out, and the feeling in Rey's chest disappeared so quickly that she was almost unsure that she'd even felt it in the first place.

“Shut up,” he snapped, as if she had just given him long, drawn-out speech. Then he broke their saber lock with a great shove that nearly knocked Rey off her feet.

He thought to take advantage of her opening, but she used her backwards momentum to dodge his next sweeping strike. He took another large step towards her and swung again, but she was able to parry that one. Another step backwards, and they were halfway out of the hub and onto one of the platforms. Only the tail end of Kylo's ship was visible from where hey were.

Her heart was pounding in her ears. It wasn't working.

She would have to fight harder.

The next time he struck at her, she twisted her saber around in a move that she'd seen Luke perform, twisting his lightsaber around with hers in an arc that was meant to tear his weapon from his hand. Kylo managed to keep his grip, although doing so threw him off-balance.

It gave her just enough of an opening to plant her elbow in his face.

He went down with a cry of surprise, barely catching himself with his left hand before he fell flat on his face. She didn't press her opening further except to put some distance between the two of them. She backed out further onto the platform, the only direction that wasn't blocked by him.

Kylo scrambled to his feet with a grunt. He wiped away the blood that trickled from his nose with the back of his gloved hand, which only served to smear it across his cheek and make him look
exceptionally violent.

“You.”

“Nephew.”

Both of them spun around to see Luke approaching them from inside the hub. There was a look on his face that Rey had never seen before. There was a fatigue in his eyes that wasn't physical – it spoke of loss and of great mourning.

It was like someone returning to a grave.

Rey hadn’t considered it – what it would be like for Luke to see his nephew for the first time in years. She suddenly felt a monstrous sort of guilt bubble up in her chest.

She shouldn't have asked him to do this.

It should've just been her. Even with the stormtroopers, she would've found a way. She should've found a way.

But it was too late.

“Skywalker,” Kylo spat, trying to exude a sneering sort of disinterest that only made him seem petty and young. He suddenly seemed very young to her.

Almost like when Han-

She shouldn't have made Luke come.

“It's been a long time,” Luke spoke, calm as ever despite everything. “You've let yourself fall farther than I'd hoped.”

“I don't want to hear it, old man,” he barked. Rey glanced over and saw his grip tighten around his lightsaber. She was almost entirely forgotten by his side; the real object of his hate was standing right before him for the first time in years.

Something had been done to him to make him hate her – but he really, truly hated his uncle. Luke Skywalker was actually an enemy in his eyes.

“I'm going to kill you now.”

Rey’s eyes widened. “Kylo, no-”

“We will all do what we must,” Luke said, raising his lightsaber. Rey felt sick.

Kylo didn't respond; he was on Luke almost before she could blink, bringing his blazing saber down in a diagonal sweep. Luke blocked the blow with ease, then swung at his nephew with a blow of his own.

Rey was only a half-step behind Kylo, trying to add her strength to Luke’s.

She had never fought alongside another lightsaber-wielder. It was – exhilarating wasn't quite the word, but it as the only one she could think of.

Between the two of them, Kylo was driven back. Each swing he took was blocked by one, and countered by the other. He could barely keep up on the offensive, and quickly slipped into a more
defensive style – or lack-there-of – as they continued to push him.

He was getting sloppy and angry.

He was losing.

They had him right where they wanted him.

But she didn't know how they were going to subdue him. She had figured out out how to make people sleep like what Kylo used to do, but she would have to stay still and focus and she couldn't-

Kylo landed a lucky blow to Rey’s arm, right where she had caught the blaster bolt. It was a deep, searing cut to her left bicep that felt like she was getting her arm sawed off with a plasma cutter.

She cried out, barely able to stop herself from screaming. She couldn't help it – she dropped her guard, her world narrowing down to the cut on her arm. She stumbled back half a step and tried to just breathe through the pain.

She could barely move her arm, everything felt on fire.

There it was – that fatal mistake.

And yet-

It took her several moments to notice that she hadn't been hit by a killing blow. And it took yet another moment after that to realize that it wasn't because Luke had shielded her, it was because Kylo had backed off. He hadn't swung his weapon at all.

She glanced up at Kylo. He looked at her with this expression-

Horror.

Like he was shocked that he had actually hit her, like he couldn't believe that he was the one who had put her in pain like that.

But when their eyes met, his expression closed up. He attacked the two of them again, but it was too late. She had seen his the look on his face.

She had seen it.

And she knew that Luke had, too.

Kylo attacked furiously, as if he had something to prove. He focused on Luke, who had no trouble keeping up with his blows, although he was starting to get winded. He had just fought off tens and tens of stormtroopers; it had tired him, and Rey could sense that he was reaching the end of his rope.

Which meant that Kylo could sense it, too.

Rey tried to get into the fight as much as she could with one arm still burning, trying to draw Kylo's focus away from his uncle. He couldn't keep dividing his attention forever; sooner rather than later the two of them would tire him out.

She just had to make sure that master Luke didn't tire out first.

Kylo realized his situation, she knew he did. He swung his lightsaber in a wide arc that forced Rey and Luke to back a half-step away from him, and then he threw out his hand.
Both Luke and Rey went tumbling back, it wasn't the strongest push of the Force she'd felt, but it was enough to knock her off her feet.

She only landed on her back further down the platform.

Luke got knocked over the edge.

Rey's heart stopped.

“Luke!”

She scrambled to her feet as fast as she could and stumbled towards the edge of the platform-

Only the blocked by Kylo, who’s two-handed blow she had to stop and block. Keeping up her defense with one hand wasn't easy, but she managed to shove him back with a cry. She followed up with a sloppy swing at him, trying to push him back enough to allow her to look.

To see if-

She managed to give herself enough time to glance over the edge, trying to find him in the second that she had.

Her heart was thundering in her ears, practically drowning out her thoughts. There was more than one level to the refueling station, maybe-

She couldn't see anything. And she couldn't sense anything – no death in the Force, no disturbance that told her that Kylo had managed to kill yet another member of his family.

She came closer to hating him in that moment than she had in a long time.

But if she didn't feel it, then Luke wasn't dead.

He wasn't.

She would've felt it – she knew she would have.

The deadly arc of Kylo's weapon forced her to snap her attention away from the lower platforms. Rey ducked out of his reach, retreating further back on the platform and well away from the edge; closer to the hub was safer. He followed behind her like a oversized shadow, striking at her constantly.

She swung up at him, and he twisted his lightsaber in a parrying move that locked it with hers.

“Skywalker’s abandoned you,” he sneered, as if Luke had simply run away. As if he hadn't been the one to just knock him over the edge. The blood from his nose had rolled down to his upper lip. He didn't look like he noticed. “Although I'm not surprised,” he swung at her legs, but she easily side-stepped it, “He abandons everyone.”

The urge to defend master Luke twisted like hot fire in her lungs, as did the urge to stretch out and try to sense if he was alright, but she stuffed the urges down.

Instead, she shook her head, “I haven't abandoned you,” she snapped. She twirled her saber against his in another attempt to disarm him, but he recognized the move from before and unhooked his weapon from hers.

Breathing heavily, she continued, “Kylo, I'm here because I-“
“Shut up.”

He swung his blade from the left, and then from the right, his blows enunciating his words. But she was going to talk to him, and she would be damned if she let him stop her.

And she was angry.

“No,” she snapped. “What you and I have—your feelings, my feelings—they’ve always been real.”

She grunted as she parried a particularly strong downward swing. He was almost—panicked—as he swung at her, as if he was trying to stop her from speaking at any cost.

It only urged her on.

The image of Luke disappearing over the edge of the platform urged her on.

And her stupid, irrational hope urged her on.

“You big—”

She fought through the pain in her arm and swung at him with a two-handed grip, putting him on the defensive for once.

“Dumb—”

She took a half-step forward, moving her lightsaber in an upwards arc that he barely managed to block.

“Oaf.”

He stepped out of the way of her next strike, and then she knocked away his returning swing.

“You no-good circuit-sucking mynock—”

What little eloquence she possessed had apparently flown out the window, and she found herself resorting to flinging insults at him. The words just kept coming in between each of her swings, accompanied by an infuriating burning behind her eyes. She didn't even know which part she was crying about.

“You gigantic, worm-ridden slobbering hutt. You—”

“That’s enough,” Kylo growled, striking at her twice with blows so hard she lost more than half the ground she’d gained. He advanced on her and struck again, but she ducked around him and landed a solid blow to his side with her elbow.

“Bantha-fodder—”

He couldn't stop the insults any more than she could.

“Nerve-burner—”

An outright cry of rage ripped from Kylo’s throat as he threw out his hand and blasted her with another wall of the Force. She tumbled back like a rag doll, scraping and skittering across the grated flooring like a sack of fern potatoes.

She managed to use the momentum to roll half-way to her feet, her lightsaber—mercifully—still
clutched in her hand. Anger bubbled up in her chest as she regained her footing.

Everything hurt and she was pretty sure that she had ripped open her elbow, but she didn't care.

“You make me so furious,” she shouted. “Did I not tell you that serving Snoke would make you like a slave? Look what he's done to you.”

Without another word, he lifted his lightsaber so that it was pointed at her. She kept hers firmly at her side, decidedly useless.

He looked enraged, and confused, and in pain.

It deflated her anger all at once.

She suddenly felt tired. Very, very tired. All she wanted was for Kylo to get out from under Snoke’s thumb. If he decided that he didn’t want her – it didn't matter.

She just didn't want him to be in so much pain.

Rey threw the words at him like a punch to the gut, one dirty final move. The tired last resort.

“Kylo, I love you.”

She felt sick for having said it – sick from the sheer relief of having finally said the words, of letting the thought become a real, tangible thing. Sick with fear that he would laugh, or that this – her most secret, most inner thought – would have no effect. That it would mean nothing to him.

But if was like she had blasted him in the head.

A muscle in his jaw twitched. He blinked.

She was still breathing heavily, although it felt more from the strange weight of her words than anything else. She didn't move a muscle, and neither did he.

They both just – stood there.

If words could literally suffocate, then Rey had a feeling that hers would've sucked all of the air right out of the station already.

She didn't allow any spark of – of hope – to flicker in her chest. Couldn't afford it, not until she knew how he'd react.

His mind was like a storm again, more agonizing static than anything. It was Snoke's handiwork fighting against his mind, she was almost certain of it.

It reignited a small flame of fury in her chest.

He squeezed his eyes shut, clutching his head with his free hand as he fought against the damage to his free-will.

Rey tried not to dare hope, but she couldn't help it.

She couldn't breathe.

All she could do was stare.
The stinging behind her eyes had become fully realized, and tear rolled down her got cheeks. She ignored it.

Then his eyes snapped open-

And she knew.

He had lost the battle.

She had lost.

“Liar,” he spit, although he sounded choked-up, like he was about to start crying. “I'm going to kill you.”

He advanced on her with a wide arc that was only to build up momentum for the second strike. She barely brought up her lightsaber quick enough to awkwardly bat away the first strike, and then used the brief moment between hits to-

Her lightsaber flew out of her hand.

Her lightsaber flew out of her hand.

It took less than a second for her to notice, and yet her mind couldn't fully register it.

What?

Kylo was mid-swing.

Kylo was mid-swing.

She was going to die – right this instant, only a moment after she declared passionate feelings for the man in front of her, he was going to strike her down. In another moment, if she'd had time to think about it, she might've found it funny. Or ironic, at the very least.

As it was, she barely had time to grasp the fact that her hands were holding nothing.

She saw the blazing red fill her vision, felt it's heat practically melt her hair.

She was going to die.

Rey was dead.

Only she wasn't.

Kylo's spitting saber burned tiny holes into her vest and on her shoulder, but Rey didn't feel them at all. It didn't even register.

What registered-

He stood there, arms shaking as if his lightsaber weighted a ton to hold steady by her shoulder. Sweat plastered his hair to his forehead and his expression was caught somewhere between fury and fear. Tears welled in his dark eyes.

He hadn't killed her.

Kylo hadn't-
“Rey,” he gasped, the words wrenched from some inner well of feelings. This was _him_, she could hear it.

“Rey, I can't—”

It was an apology. He couldn't hold onto himself, couldn't stop himself from falling back under Snoke’s direct control.

It didn't matter.

He hadn't killed her.

He managed to stop—

“I love you,” she blurted a second time, because she wanted to say it when he was fully himself, and she wanted him to know that she _meant_ it. Her words weren't just weapons — she meant it.

She meant it.

He squeezed his eyes shut as the tears in his eyes finally spilled over.

And then Kylo collapsed on top of her.

Rey cried out in surprise, narrowly missing his lightsaber before it hit the floor and automatically cut off.

“Kylo,” she grappled with his body, trying to keep herself standing and soften his fall. All she ended up doing was getting twisted up in his limbs as he brought them both down. She gasped, nearly crushed by his torso.

How had she forgotten how much he weighed?

Yet, she only tightened her arms around him.

Luke appeared in her vision only a moment later.


Relief swelled in her chest along with the dread and hope and despair that were already present. She felt so full of emotion that she didn't know if her body could hold it all in.

He approached her and knelt down to help her back up. He had her lightsaber in his hand.

“Are you alright?”

She honestly didn't know the answer herself. She couldn't take her eyes off of her lightsaber.

Had he been the one—

Her throat felt parched, and her eyes felt too wet. Nothing was making any sense to her. Their plan had worked, or at least the important part had. She – they – had him, and that was the essential thing.

But she still wondered if Luke had _known_—

Rey checked and double-checked Kylo’s pulse to make sure that he was _okay_, that he was still breathing. Only after she was satisfied did she detangle herself from his limbs and accept Luke's
offered assistance.

“I’m alright,” she nodded quietly, keeping her gaze locked firmly on Kylo’s prone form. A little knot twisted in her chest at how he looked, sprawled out and seemingly tortured even when fully unconscious.

She bent down and picked up his lightsaber, clutching the hilt in her hands. “How long will he be out?”

“Not long enough,” Luke admitted. “We’ve got to get him onboard and get going.”

Rey clipped his lightsaber to her belt.

Luke extended her lightsaber to her. When she raised her eyes to his, he sighed, “I am sorry that I put you in danger. But I had a feeling—”

He paused. “I knew that my nephew wouldn’t hurt you. So I took a calculated risk.”

A part of Rey was furious. She had really thought that she’d been about to die. Her hands were still shaking from it.

But the other part was too tired to care, and was just so relieved that master Luke wasn't dead.

She decided to deal with it later.

It wasn't a betrayal, an abandonment. And yet-

She'd deal with it later. They had Kylo – that was all that mattered.

“You did what you thought you had to,” was all she could think to say as she took her lightsaber back in her hands and clipped it next to Kylo’s.

Luke seemed to accept her answer, or, at least, he seemed to accept that he wasn't going to get any more of an answer.

He bent down to help her heft Kylo up between the two of them. Rey had to be careful to avoid the wound in her bicep, but the two of them managed to lift him easily enough for an exhausted man and a wounded female.

With a look of contemplation, he said, “You believed that he was going to kill you.”

Rey couldn't tell if it was a question or a statement, and his expression revealed nothing. Her gaze strayed down to Kylo, whose dark hair obstructed his face.

She wished none of this had happened.

“Maybe. I don't know what I thought,” she admitted.

He could've killed her. Most of her had expected him to.

Her grip tightened on Kylo's arm. “Why did you think that he wouldn't?” She couldn't bring herself to lift her gaze.

“Because you love him,” he said simply. “I don't think he could ever kill you.”

She didn't say anything to that.
What could she say?

Together, the two of them managed to drag Kylo's body all of the way across the station, although his dead weight was so heavy that it almost felt more like they were trying to drag a broken-down speeder.

They passed by the remains of the First Order stormtroopers on their way back. Rey kept her eyes firmly averted.

Getting Kylo up the ramp of their ship was a whole other challenge, albeit a quicker one than transporting him across the station.

By the time they'd gotten him onboard, both she and master Luke had worked up a sweat that had nothing to do with the ordeals they had just faced.

“I don't remember him being this heavy when he was thirteen,” Luke grunted.

Rey only huffed in response.

“Let's put him on a bed,” he decided, turning towards the back of the shuttle.

They took him to the tiny sleeping area and strapped him down to one of the bunks as best they could. It wouldn't keep him for more than a second if he woke up, but it would keep him from rolling onto the floor.

Luke immediately turned and headed towards the cockpit, only pausing to give her a quick squeeze of her uninsured shoulder.

Rey lingered.

Kneeling down beside the bunk, she pressed her hand over Kylo’s heart, just to reassure herself of its steady beat. She reached up and gently brushed his hair away from his face, studying the lines of his face, of his brow and nose and jaw, the trace of his lips and the sweep of his dark lashes against his cheek. The smattering of beauty spots that she never used to think about.

The scar.

Every detail of his face, exactly the way she remembered it.

She tried to stamp down the nagging fear that she'd never get to study it again.

It twisted her heart up like a worn rag; her ribs felt like they constricted her lungs. A pure, absolute yearning for the man before her swept her up like a current, stealing her breath away.

She tried to reach across to him – tried to feel a remnant of their bond, anything that still connected him to her and her to him.

It had been there before and during their battle. She'd felt it.

“Rey,” Luke called from the front of the ship, jarring her concentration away.

“I'm coming,” she called, pushing herself to her feet.

With one last, lingering look, she pressed her fingers to her lips and gingerly touched her fingers to his temple. He remained unmoving.
Then she left him.

Luke was already strapped into the pilot seat and in the process of disengaging them from the station when Rey slipped into the copilot seat with a medkit in her hands. She'd grabbed it from storage on her way.

She glanced over at master Luke, worry creasing her brow when she glanced at a streak of crimson peaking out from his robes.

“Master Luke-”

“It's nothing,” he shook his head as if he already knew what she was going to say, “I got a little banged up when I took that tumble. It's nothing serious.”

She didn't say anything, unsure of whether or not she should just accept his word. In the end, she simply nodded and began to tend to her own wound. If he needed treatment, he would get it. He wasn't reckless like that.

“Where are we going?” She asked when she glanced up and saw that he'd already punched coordinates into the navcomputer.

He glanced at her. “Dathomir.”

Rey’s stomach dropped. She halted her application of bacta.

“What?”

“Your suggestion before was good,” he explained coolly, “and we don't have very much time to debate this. It'll be extremely difficult to keep him unconscious for longer than absolutely necessary.”

She had prepared herself to go back to that place. Not really.

“But why Dathomir?”

“Because we already know that it has an effect on Snoke and Kylo,” Like waited until they had jumped to hyperspace before he turned more fully towards her. “Because I think in this case, fighting fire with fire might be the thing that works. Because if we take him someplace else and it doesn't have the same effect, then we will have lost our chance. Do you want to take that chance?”

He already knew her answer.

Of course she didn't.

She'd already told him that she'd do anything.

“No,” she sighed, leaning back in her seat.

Dathomir. It was like willingly walking back into a nightmare. Mother Talzin would doubtless be there, and very possibly still sore over their last confrontation. She wasn't afraid of her anymore, but apprehension still rolled in her gut like an oversized worm. The woman wasn't someone to be taken lightly.

And the fact remained that Rey hadn't beaten Mother Talzin on Dathomir. She hadn't beaten the woman in the well of her own power.

What if they got there and she was stronger than she had been before? What if she managed to
overcome herself and Luke? What if all three of them died?

But what if she wasn't stronger? What if they managed to help Kylo?

Wasn't the risk worth it?

She glanced down at her fingers, the ones that had last brushed against his temple. Slowly, she curled her fingers into a fist.

It was worth it.

*It was worth it.*

Chapter End Notes

Well, this mammoth of a chapter ended up being twice as long as the usual chapter. I'm sorry if there are any strange errors; I pretty much reached the point where I couldn't look at this chapter anymore. Hopefully it was worth the wait.

To sum up this chapter: Confessions! Angst! Dathomir! *Chapter 50!*

Thank you guys for being so patient with me. I can't tell you how much I appreciate and admire you for it.
Rey stayed with Kylo as much as she could.

Not long after they had made the jump to hyperspace, he had started fighting his way back to consciousness. Master Luke had sat by his bunk and had had to actively keep him under with the Force for well over a standard hour. Rey had stayed up in the cockpit for safety reasons and because – well, she didn't like watching Kylo be forced into unconsciousness. She just didn't.

Luke returned to the cockpit with a weary expression, and slumped down in his seat in a way that reminded Rey of his age.

“He’s gotten stronger,” he sighed, stroking his hand over his beard. “It's going to be difficult to keep him unconscious until we get to Dathomir.”

Rey only frowned. After a moment, she stood from the copilot’s seat. “I'll watch him,” she offered, because it wasn't like they were pretending that she didn't care.

It was a relief not to hide her feelings.

Luke nodded. “Perhaps having someone meditating near him will keep him more subdued,” he suggested. “But if it doesn't, come get me as soon as he starts to wake up again.”

She hadn’t planned on meditating, exactly, but she nodded.

“I will.”

Kylo was more-or-less how she'd left him. His body was a little too large for the bunk, and as she stepped closer she found herself wondering if he always had that problem on starships. He was just so tall.

It was an idle, passing thought that distracted her from the twisting pain in her chest at seeing him like that.

She sat down cross-legged in the middle of the floor. He was just out of arms reach there, although if she really tried she could probably brush his arm with the tips of her fingers.

Rey rested her elbows on her knees and her chin in the palm of her hand.

“Oh, Kylo,” she sighed quietly, “why do you have to be so difficult?”

His fingers didn't even twitch.

But she felt him fight back in the Force, wrestling for awareness. She wished she could give it to him.

Rubbing her hand over her eyes, Rey straightened her back so that she was in a more traditional meditation pose. She tried her best to sink into a meditating trance and to impart calming feelings to Kylo.

Luke had been right; Kylo was restless almost the entire journey, and very nearly woke up more than
once. Rey suspected that trying to impart the serenity of meditation onto him didn't actually help anything at all, but she couldn't be sure so she continued to do it anyway.

But perhaps it wasn't the meditation itself that wasn't working. She was still very much in training; what if she just hadn't perfected the art of meditation enough for it to be of any use?

Or – maybe it was just her.

Maybe she was causing his restlessness.

After all, it was his thoughts around her that had been altered – there was a possibility that even just sensing her presence was agitating him.

She opened her eyes with a sigh.

Even in unconciousness he frowned, his dark brows pulled low. After a while he started to flinch every now and again, as if he was in some sort of pain.

Scooting closer, she lifted herself up to her knees and studied him.

His nose was bruised and swollen from where she'd hit him. A thin line of dried blood ran from his nose to the corner of his mouth. The bruising made the sickly pallor of his skin stand out even more, and his hair lay in sweaty clumps around his face.

He quite honestly looked like hell.

Rey very, very gently felt around Kylo's nose, making sure that she hadn't broken it. He twitched when she touched it, but didn't react beyond that, and the cartilage felt fine.

Or, at least, she thought it did.

She wanted to try and clean the blood off of his face a little. She remembered that there were some disinfectant wipes in the medkit she had used, so she momentarily left his side to grab them. It had been replaced on the storage shelf she'd first gotten it from.

It didn't look like anyone had used it after her, she noted. Master Luke didn't seem to have touched it, despite the wound she'd seen.

Concern flared in her gut, but she shoved it down and told herself she'd ask him later. Replacing the medkit, she returned to Kylo's side with two wipes.

Tearing open the clear wrapping, she folded the disinfectant wipe around her finger. Being as gentle as possible, she slowly began to wipe his blood away.

She felt the soft huffs of his breath on her wrist as she worked.

His skin had been stained by the blood a little, but she managed to get most of it off.

He looked – well, not better, but less bloody, anyway.

With a huff, she leaned back. It had all been simpler when it had just been her, when he had been an invading, highly-unwanted presence.

Back when all she wanted was to get rid of him.

It seemed so long ago.
And yet – she was glad that there was someone in Kylo's corner. She was glad that it was her.

She had to try and do something.

She couldn't just sit there being useless.

Placing her hand on his shoulder, Rey closed her eyes and emptied her mind as well as she could. Stretching out her senses, she tried to delicately pry her way into his head without disturbing him. She used her hand on him as an anchor, both mentally and physically.

She wasn't trying to dig down into his innermost thoughts, she was just trying to go deep enough so that she could get past the haze of violent static that surrounded him. It wasn't easy; unlike before when she'd tried to see into his head while he slept, Snoke’s influence had only added to Kylo’s natural affinity for mental defenses. It was like trying to swim to the bottom of a great pool of molasses, or trying to dig her way to the bottom of a sand dune.

It was more than difficult – his mental walls felt nearly impenetrable.

Rey didn't know how long she sat there by his bunk, trying to gingerly whittle her way past his defenses enough to break through to him. It must've been a while, though, because she didn't truly even notice when he started to once more rise from the depths of unconsciousness.

Luke put his hand on her shoulder, jarring her out of her concentration. She snapped her gaze up to him, wide-eyed, and blinked.

A groan pulled her attention back to Kylo, whose muscles were tensing as if he was already starting to wake up. Rey pushed herself up and stepped away to make room as Luke sat on the edge of the bunk. Sighing, he placed his hand on Kylo’s forearm. He closed his eyes and began nudging Kylo’s mind back down into the oblivion of a deep sleep.

He stayed like that even after Kylo had stilled and just started to meditate next to him. Rey hovered for a few minutes, but she hated to just stand there as Luke actually did something, so she returned to the cockpit in case they needed someone at the controls.

She sank into the copilot's seat with a small sigh.

It was agonizingly silent to sit there by herself, watching as the stars bled over the viewport like a river.

Just her and the stars, hurtling towards one final obstacle.

And after that-

Well, it was still too early to think about after.

When Luke returned to the front of the ship, he looked nearly haggard. The dark stain on his robes had grown, and not all of it was dried.

Rey frowned, unable to take her eyes off of it. She remembered the untouched medkit.

“Are you sure you're okay?”

He knew what she was talking about, but he just waved her concern away. “Yes, I'm alright,” he nodded as he sat behind the controls. “It's nothing to worry about.”

Before, she had simply accepted his answer. But she had spent too long just sitting and worrying; she
couldn't let him sit there if he was seriously wounded. Especially if it was an abdominal wound.

“I don't think-”

He looked her in the eye. “Rey, I'm fine.”

She didn't know if she believed him. He was, after all, Kylo's blood relative. It seemed entirely plausible to her that he would conceal the extent of his injuries in an attempt to ease her worry. It was the kind of stupid thing that Kylo would do, if only for pride.

She didn't even feel that bad comparing the two of them in that instance.

“You never used the medkit,” she pointed out, “you said that it was a minor injury.”

“Yes, and it is minor.” Luke raised his eyebrow.

“But-”

“Rey. I'm not some young hot-shot who thinks he can take more than he can,” he sighed, running his hand over his eyes. “Now either you trust me in this or you don't, but I've dealt with my wound—which was minor.”

After a beat, Rey nodded, turning her attention back out towards the swirling blue stars. “Right. Sorry.”

She heard him sigh again. “I do appreciate the concern, though.”

She looked back at him.

He had that not-quite-a-smile expression on his face. “It's nice to know that someone cares about an old man like me.”

Rey smiled at him.

“Speaking of which,” Luke muttered, leaning over and pressing a few keys on the communicator.

After a moment of silence, he frowned, the lines like craters etched into his face. “I can't seem to raise Leia on any frequency.”

A matching frown grew on Rey's face, as well. She glanced over at the communicator controls. “Is it being blocked?” She guessed.

He shook his head. “No, I don't think so. It's more like all the lines are busy.”

“So why don't you try again later?”

“I don't want her to think that something happened to us when we don't show up at the rendezvous point,” Luke sighed. “Maybe I can contact the ship she's sending directly.”

Rey watched as he changed the frequency. It was inconvenient that they didn't have the ship General Organa had sent, but at that point she wasn't really worried about it. It was far more important that they actually arrived at Dathomir without any incidents.

Her eyes wandered towards the back. She stood up out of the copilot’s seat.

“Can you read me?” Luke called over the comm.
Rey didn't wait to hear the answer. A part of her felt ridiculous for feeling the need to just – wait beside Kylo. Waiting for disaster or some other sign of hope, she didn't really know.

They had spent so little time together. She'd lost him nearly as soon as she'd found him.

It seemed insane to wish to go back to the days when they were stranded on Dathomir together. Without Mother Talzin or any of the horrors that had happened, of course – she just wanted to feel like it was them again, to not have to worry about Snoke twisting his mind until he broke.

She missed their bond terribly.

She sank down next to Kylo's bunk, tucking her knees up against her chest. He was still frowning in his sleep, but she didn't sense any internal struggle from him. He was there, but he wasn't, and – the echo of their bond felt like a void in her head. It was nearly devastating to see him there and to feel-

She couldn't feel anything.

“Kylo Ren, you big, dumb bantha,” she murmured, crossing her arms over her knees and resting her chin on them. “This is all your fault. You're not even a nice person.”

She kept her eyes on the bulkhead in front of her.

It was worse every time she looked at him – it squeezed her heart and made her ribs feel like they were imploding in on themselves. Even just the thought of it made her shut her eyes against the burning behind them.

“Why did it have to be you?” She whispered. Opening her eyes, she couldn't stop herself from looking at him.

She felt sick with worry, for master Luke, for herself, and most of all for Kylo.

Rey reached out and touched his hand. She rubbed her face on her forearm, trying to wipe away any evidence of tears.

She felt exhausted.

She slipped her hand further into his, holding onto it like she was afraid he'd blow away.

Leaning her head against the side of his arm, Rey closed her eyes and tried to block out the rest of the galaxy.

Rey had never actually landed on Dathomir before. It was somehow worse than she'd imagined, a slow and willing descent into a strange nucleus in the Force that turned swamps into nightmares and whispered voices in between gnarled branches.

She never thought that she'd compare a landing to a crash and end up wishing for the crash.

She forced herself to look out the viewport as they searched for a good landing spot. She had already overcome this place, she told herself.

It held no power. It didn't.

Dathomir was no different than Jakku – to be respected, but not feared. It was just a place.
She wasn't afraid.

She wasn't afraid.

“Rey,” Luke's voice cut through her thoughts, jolting her focus away from the dark mists below them. His brows were pulled low over his eyes. “Are you alright?”

“Yes,” she answered automatically.

His eyebrow arched. “Are you sure?”

She couldn't resist a glance back towards the bunk area. Kylo knew. He had gone through it all with her.

She wished that he was awake.

“I just want to get this over with as quickly as possible,” she answered truthfully.

Luke nodded and turned his attention back to flying.

“I don’t understand,” he mused, “I can sense a center of Force power near here, but I can't seem to find it.”

It was the wellspring, Mother Talzin's home. Rey could sense it as clear as day, and yet all she saw were the tops of trees and a few far-off mountains. She kept thinking that it would come into view at any second, but the scenery never changed.

She glanced over at him. “What's that mean?”

He frowned. “It means that this place we’re trying to find is extremely well-hidden.” After a moment, he added, “I think we’ll have to try our luck ground-side.”

He flew the shuttle towards the nearest large clearing and landed with an ease that spoke of years in a pilot’s seat.

“Are you ready?” He asked, already moving to go get Kylo.

She got up to follow him, her hand moving naturally to her lightsaber. Even on the shuttle, she could feel the oppressive force of the planet sinking into her, from her head to her toes. It put her even more on edge than she had been.

“I have to be,” she said, just above a whisper. She didn't think that Luke even heard her.

They grabbed Kylo and headed for the loading ramp. Luke released the seals and they waited for the ramp to lower. It felt like it took hours, and yet it felt like it took no more than a second.

And then Rey stood gazing out at a crimson forest.

Face-to-face with Dathomir and all it's dark power.

Stepping off the shuttle was strangely anticlimactic. One minute she stood on the ramp, and the next, her boots had hit the dirt.

And at first it was just dirt.

They stood still for a moment – she suspected that Luke could sense that she needed a minute – and
just took in the environment around them. Fog covered the trees in a shroud of crimson, and the forest itself was unnaturally quiet. Far off, Rey could've sworn that she heard the roar of a enormous beast.

Rey breathed out through her nose.

Then the breath of a whisper answered, and the planet became *Dathomir* again. The air turned poisonous, the sun unreliable, and the ground treacherous. And *red* – everywhere, everything was *red*.

It was like she'd never left.

“This place looks a little familiar,” she said.

It did – or, maybe it didn't. Something about it *seemed* familiar. But how could it? Everything around them was just dead trees and red fog, no different than anywhere else she'd seen.

It was the whispers – *they* seemed familiar.

She remembered them.

They were coming from afar, rising from the fog and between the trees somewhere off to the right. Whispering words that felt barely formed, they called her-

Kylo stirred, wrenching her attention back to the present. Rey glanced at Luke, who watched him carefully until he stopped moving.

Rey deflated, letting go of the breath she'd been holding. Her fingers tightened around Kylo's arm.

“We should get going,” Luke suggested. “I don't think he's going to be under much longer.”

He didn't seem to have heard the voices. *Not even him.* But of course he hadn't – Kylo hadn't, either.

It was unnerving.

“Yeah,” she nodded.

The wellspring was close. It had been close since before they landed, but it ended up being even closer than she'd thought. It hadn't been visible from the air, but it didn't even take them a whole hour of torturously slow hiking while dragging an immobile giant between them before they came upon it.

The dark complex stood out higher than the trees, its carved stone and screaming mouth clearly visible from a ways off. Rey had the suspicion that there was a reason no one could see it from the air.

Maybe it was Talzin, or maybe it was just the planet itself. The Force seemed to have a lot of secrets on *Dathomir*, and it hid them well.

Luke paused when they broke out into the clearing around the complex.

Rey looked over at him.

“This place,” he breathed. For a long time he didn't say anything.

He turned his gaze towards her, and for a moment she thought that maybe he could hear the voices,
too. The whispers were louder the closer they got to the wellspring, loud enough that they were practically screaming in her ears. Maybe they had gotten loud enough for Luke to hear them.

“I've never felt any place so strong in the Force.”

Rey felt the power of that place, too – the swirling darkness with pinpricks of light like half-dead stars that had been caught up in a thick abyss. It made her shudder.

“Can you,” she swallowed, “can you hear anything?”

The frown he gave her was her answer.

“Never mind,” she shook her head.

They took several more steps – and then the trees started to shudder around them.

The fog seemed to get thicker.

The sky grew darker.

A twisted Force spilled from the mouth of the complex like a broken dam, washing over them in a tide of dark power that Rey recognized instantly. She snapped her attention towards the wellspring’s entrance, towards the yawning darkness within.

“Master Luke-”

She could barely breathe.

“Yes, I feel it,” he nodded. He already clutched his lightsaber in his free hand.

The whispers were so frenzied they were practically screeching, bouncing off of the fog and the darkness. She tried to block them out, but it was nearly impossible.

She could've sworn that she saw a flash of red in the darkness.

“It's Mother Talzin.”

As if simply speaking her name was some sort of siren call, scarlet robes materialized out of the mouth of the wellspring. Skeleton-white skin peaked out from behind the folds of her robes, framing pale eyes that Rey knew she'd never forget.

Mother Talzin did not look happy to see them.

“Child.”

Rey had forgotten that other, darker layer to her voice, as if she spoke for a monster that hovered just out of sight, hidden somewhere in the shadows of her robes.

Mother Talzin’s ghostly gaze fixed upon Kylo. “The boy is troubled,” she noted, looking nowhere near surprised.

Rey’s grip on Kylo tightened. It was all she could do not to turn so that he was at least part-way shielded from the woman’s gaze. She didn't want Mother Talzin focused on him while he couldn’t defend himself.

“You know what's wrong with him?” She narrowed her eyes.
Mother Talzin looked only mildly interested. “The boy is under the influence of powers greater than his own, it would seem.” Then her attention slid over to Luke, and a dark interest sparked in her eyes.

“You are a Skywalker.”

Luke only nodded.

“I am.”

She came closer, crossing the clearing until she was only several meters away from them. Rey took a half-step back, but Luke stood his ground. Kylo started to stir between them once more.

“And you are the chosen one’s son.”

Rey’s brows furrowed. She blinked, looking over at Luke.

He didn’t answer.

Mother Talzin tilted her head. “You may very well be what I need,” she briefly turned her attention back to Rey, “in the absence of other options. Close enough to the chosen one to make a difference, surely.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Rey spit before Luke even had a chance to respond.

The woman’s brows hiked up on her pale forehead. “My, child, you’ve certainly changed.”

Rey lifted her chin, hardening her jaw. “I’m not afraid of you anymore.”

“Are you not?”

“We need access to this wellspring,” Luke spoke up, drawing Mother Talzin’s attention back to him.

“To save the boy.”

“Yes,” Rey said hotly.

Mother Talzin ignored her. “If you save him, then I require him and the girl for a sacrifice.” She spoke as if they were simply bargaining over food portions.

“Impossible,” he shook his head.

Rey’s heart hammered in her chest, trying to burst up out of her throat. Her blood was pumping so fast it nearly made her dizzy. She tried to take another step back with Kylo, who was starting to stir with more fervor, but Luke held his ground.

“Then I require you as a sacrifice,” Talzin said.

“Also impossible.”

Her lips slowly spread into a sharp, thin-lipped smile. “Then you cannot access this sacred place,” she said.

“Perhaps you should be willing to compromise,” he suggested.

For a moment, she didn’t respond. Then she said, “Or perhaps I should stop trying to bargain with
Rey activated her lightsaber. Luke activated his a half-second later.

Kylo started to lift his head, just a little.

“Master Luke, Kylo—” Rey warned. She could feel his muscles start to tense up underneath her grip.

“I know.”

*Shit,* she breathed. *Please, please stay asleep a little while longer.*

Luke dropped his hand from Kylo's side, leaving Rey with the task of supporting his entire weight. She gasped at the sudden change, trying desperately to keep Kylo upright with only one arm.

He glanced back at her. “Continue on with my nephew. I'll catch up with you.”

“No,” Mother Talzin snapped, materializing her sickeningly electric blade put out thin air. “You shall go no further unless I will it.”

Luke held his lightsaber up. “Rey, go.”

Rey didn't know what to do.

He was *injured-*

Kylo was *waking up-*

“But—”

“*Go.*”

Mother Talzin swung her blade at Rey, but Luke stepped in between them, blocking the blow with solid precision. He drove her back with an upward sweep of his blade, and pressed his advantage to drive her back.

Indecision kept Rey rooted to the spot. She couldn't just—*abandon* master Luke to fight Mother Talzin alone. She *couldn't.* If she made sure that Kylo was out of the way—

His arm tightened around her neck, and his back muscles tensed. He was waking up.

They didn't have anymore *time.*

It was now or never.

“Damn it,” she swore under her breath, “damn it.”

She switched off her lightsaber and clipped it to her belt. She grabbed Kylo's wrist around her neck, trying her best to heft his weight along with her as she made her way towards the entrance of the wellspring.

The sounds of Luke’s lightsaber seemed to sear blazing strikes of guilt into her back every time she heard him swing it. She squeezed her eyes shut against it, and tried to put it out of her head.

He'd told her to go.

He'd told her he'd be right behind her.
Mother Talzin couldn't beat him.

*He was already wounded.*

Rey was just about ready to turn around and jump into the fight, but Kylo let out a mumbled breath beside her. It drew her attention to him, and made her remember why they were *there.*

*I made a promise.*

*Kylo.*

They made it to the mouth of the complex, as difficult as it was to single-handedly drag his still mostly limp body by herself. And as the darkness of the wellspring swallowed them up, she didn't let herself look back.

Chapter End Notes

I've plotted the rest of this thing out set-by-step (which is somewhat usual for me) and after his chapter there should be only six more left, including the epilogue. So! We are nearing the end, people!

I'm so excited, and yet I'm kind of sad. This thing has been my pastime for nearly a year.
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The shadows felt thick like water, washing over them as they pushed further underground. The hair on Rey's arms stood on-end and a chill crept over her even as she struggled to drag Kylo along.

She felt like vomiting, she felt like screaming, she felt like she could barely breathe.

The darkness – it was making her weak, sapping her strength until she felt like her bones were made of jelly. It hadn't been like that the last time they had been there. She had no idea why she felt the wellspring’s effects so strongly the second time around. Maybe she just hadn't noticed before.

Maybe the wellspring didn't want them there, either. Maybe Mother Talzin hadn't just been blocking them for her own reasons. Maybe she really did know what the – spirits – of the Force wanted, or didn't want.

It was an unnerving thought.

And yet she kept on. She had to.

They never came across anyone; whereas before, Mother Talzin’s lair had been filled with her fellow witches, this time around the halls were eerily silent. Many of them had died, but she'd assumed that some would have still survived.

She wasn't upset to be proven wrong.

The further down they went, the more Rey felt like she knew where she was going. Their time in the wellspring hadn't been enough for her to memorize the layout, and it wasn't like she had exactly put much effort into knowing her way around, but she found that she just knew which ways to go, which turns to take.

And where else would she go but to the very heart of the complex, back to the exact place where Mother Talzin had tried to sacrifice them to the Force. That was the concentrated center of power – even with the currents of darkness that flowed around them, she could tell that.

By the time she managed to drag Kylo down far enough to make it to the central cavern – so close to the sacrificial pillars – he was starting to lift his head up enough to see what was going on around him, aware enough to realize that he was moving, or at least that something was happening. His eyes opened, bleary and unfocused.

“Shit,” she whispered.

He didn't seem to realize where he was, or who was holding him up – yet.

She had to do something.

The obvious thing was to try and knock him out using her own power, and it was really her only option besides. Her efforts were clumsy and not nearly focused enough, but she managed to push his consciousness back down far enough that he stopped squirming in her hold.
It allowed her enough time to get to the center without him trying to kill her, anyway.

The last few steps were excruciating; it was like she had used up the last ounce of her strength trying to keep him unconscious.

Each breath was a fight against Kylo’s baring weight, painful as her ribs struggled to expand. “Come on,” she grunted, cursing as he started to slip from her grasp. Her arms were so tired that she couldn’t even manage to lift him back up, and she resorted to half-dragging him the last couple of feet.

Up above her, she could feel Luke’s conflict with Mother Talzin. It was—

*Violent.*

And *terrifying.*

There wasn’t much time.

Kylo’s weight finally became too much. Rey set him down as gently as possible, although it was more like she dropped him as close to the ground as she could. There still didn’t seem to be anyone there, so she supposed that they were safe. At least for the moment.

Sinking to her knees beside him, Rey closed her eyes and tried to reach into Kylo’s mind again. Almost immediately, she was met with the same nearly-impenetrable resistance as before. It was even more difficult to try and pry into his mind than it had been the last time she’d tried. She knew it was at least in part because so much of her strength had been sapped from her by the wellspring.

But the wellspring’s power was why she was there.

Rey used the wellspring to strengthen her own power. Kylo’s mental defenses held for a moment, but then shattered like transparisteel.

And then—

It was like falling into the ocean.

There was no time to react. His consciousness sucked her in like quicksand. Blackness flooded her vision, sweeping across her like frigid water.

She slumped across Kylo’s chest.

Rey’s vision took a long time to adjust.

Faint pinpricks of light flickered down, bleeding through the cracks of the unknown darkness that enshrouded her in thin whisp-like ribbons. She felt – something – from the light, some magnetic pull
that tugged weakly at her heart.

A whisper of something achingly familiar.

The lights seemed to lead the way towards—well, towards nothing. But it was the only thing that Rey could see, so she followed them. It felt right somehow.

In the blackness, moving was less of a physical thing and more of a feeling.

The thin lights blinked on above her, then they blinked off. There was no way to go back; each step she took was swallowed by the darkness as she passed by.

She could only go on.

And on.

And-

The lights flickered and grew dim. She could barely see them anymore. The soft pull in her heart quieted. She tried to stamp down the fear that grew blossomed in her chest, and reached for the nearest strands of light.

They were so faint, she could barely see—

Scavenger.

The voice was barely a whisper, brought to her by a strange cool breeze.

For a brief moment, she thought it was Kylo—

Scavenger.

But she wasn't sure.

The voice came from the right, reaching out to her. The light around her snuffed out completely, once again cloaking her in darkness. The voice became her only companion.

What other option did that give her but to follow it?

Scavenger.

She took one step, and then another, and then another. Each step seemed to ground herself in her own body a little more. The ground manifested underneath her feet, then it grew strange, uneven. A breeze swelled around her, silent and chilling.

Rey could feel fear growing in the darkness, and rage. An oppressive regret. The feelings were familiar, like a bad dream or a memory.

The breeze kept getting colder.

Scavenger.

“Kylo?” She whispered.

There was no answer.

She held her hand out in front of her as she edged forward, feeling for something, anything in the
dark, trying not to run into anything unawares.

Her fingers brushed against something rough.

She froze in her tracks.

Bark.

A tree.

She slowly felt her way around it, continuing towards the voice. After a moment, she came across another tree. And then another.

Scavenger. It's just-

Rey felt her way in between the trees. She was in a forest. The ground shifted under her again, still uneven but with more give. Her boots made soft crunches on the ground.

Snow.

The breeze suddenly turned frigid and changed direction once, and then again. It snapped at her clothes and hair, pushing and pulling her along.

A shiver ran down her spine, only in-part because of the cold.

She had a feeling that she knew where she was.

“Kylo?” She called out, her tone stronger that time so as to raise her voice over the wind.

Did you honestly think-

There was a second voice that didn't sound like Kylo. The realization stopped her in her tracks, but the wind pushed her forward. She didn't know if following along with it would lead her further or closer to him.

“Kylo!” She shouted.

You're a-

It – it sounded like her.

Rey started to move faster, as fast as she could manage in the dark.

“Kylo!”

Was it light that she could see up ahead, or was that just her own imagination?

Why did you-

A flash of white in front of her face startled her. She blinked, confused, as she saw another, and then another. All around her, tiny pale flakes appeared in her vision, swirling in and out of focus. When she looked down, she could see the footprints that had marred the snow.

She could see the snow.

She could see the outlines of the trees.
Rey started running.

“Kylo!”

Then I'll go-

She screamed his name at the top of her lungs.

*You mean something to-

“Kylo!”

“You.”

She spun around, and the entire scene clicked into place. Rey was exactly where she knew she'd be – in the middle of the forest on Starkiller. Only, in front of her, the scene had already played out.

And it had played out differently.

There she stood, no more than four or five meters away, some shadow version of herself that was half-memory, half-mirage. The other Rey stood tall and menacing, looming over a very familiar dark form sprawled out in the snow.

She held her blazing blue lightsaber to his neck with a sneer. The flickering shadows made her face appear harsh and monstrous.

There was blood everywhere.

Rey had an awful feeling that she knew what was going to happen.

“No, *don't-*” she called out.

The other Rey moved her lightsaber from Kylo's neck and instead pressed it into his collarbone. He *screamed* as the white-hot blade pierced his bone, burning his flesh in a move that was purely out of the desire to see him in pain.

A smile grew wide on her face. She twisted the lightsaber in deeper.

Rey took off sprinting towards the two figures, trying to *stop* the shadow version of her, but every step she took seemed to sink her deeper into the ground.

Her feet barely moved, but she kept trying to push herself onwards.

She had to get to him-

She had to-

The other Rey’s gaze snapped up to her, as if she had suddenly become aware of her presence. Her face twisted into a mask of pure hatred, the shadows nearly obscuring her eyes completely.

And that's when Rey felt it.

The darkness that bled from that gaze, the rapacious tendrils of power that stretched towards her like warped fingers – she *knew* that presence.

Who else would she find in the dark recesses of Kylo's mind?
“Snoke,” she spit.

Her shadow version of herself – the mask of her face that Snoke wore – pulled her lightsaber out of Kylo’s collarbone, only to slowly push it into the other.

Kylo cried out in agony.

“Stop!” Rey demanded.

Snoke’s lips twisted into a snarl. “Why should I? You've ruined him–I should just kill him.”

Kylo’s screams cut between them, tearing at Rey’s senses. She couldn't help the tears that sprang to her eyes, furious and terrified.

She could smell his flesh as it burned.

Her lightsaber was suddenly blazing in her hand.

“Let him go now.”

Snoke's expression grew furious, and the wind picked up around them, much faster than it had ever really been. Starkiller was imploding behind them, but it seemed frozen in time, no more than a backdrop to their scene.

It was a strange, dark stage.

He yanked the lightsaber out of Kylo’s chest, leaving him gasping into the snow as he took a step closer to her. Darkness spread from his feet into the snow with every step he took. “He's mine,” he snapped, jabbing a finger in her direction, “he belongs to me.”

She brought up her lightsaber in an aggressive stance.

“Like hell he does.”

Snoke shed her face entirely as she attacked her. It was a strange attack that washed over her, more of a mental wave than a physical strike. She found herself having to fight back more with her mind than with her physical strength.

And when she struck at him, it was the same. She swung her blade, and yet it was mental attack.

She beat him back, but he came at her again and again, each time stronger than the last. It wasn't really him, she thought – or at least not all of him – but she recognized that his power was very real.

This was the power that had trapped Kylo’s mind.

If she was able to destroy Snoke in this battle, then she was fairly certain she could free Kylo of his influence.

She hoped.

Snoke stretched out his hand. She tensed, ready to be sent flying back – but for a moment, nothing happened.

And then an entire tree struck her from behind.

Rey went flying with a cry, the trunk of the tree scraping up her back as it rolled over her and onto
the snow. She slammed her head on the ground, the impact knocking the breath from her lungs.

It felt like all the skin had been torn off her back. She could barely breathe, both from the impact and from the sheer pain. Large dark spots swam in her vision, and the coldness of the snow burned her skin.

Before she could even roll over, he was standing over her, still clutching a lightsaber that looked just like hers, only didn't. It appeared to be bleeding into the air.

“Do me a favor,” he sneered, “and just die.”

He lifted his blade-

And ran it right through her abdomen.

Her stomach and intestines were eradicated in a single moment. The scream that tore from her lips was half a sob. Tears burst from her eyes and obscured her vision until all she could see was the light of the saber and the shadows of his face.

She could – she could smell her own flesh. She watched as it burned around the blade.

Fear choked her as Snoke jerked his weapon out of her gut.

Pain swam through all of her senses, blurring her thoughts into a jumbled, frantic mess.

If this was a dream – could she die?

If she died here, then would that be it?

Was she really going to die?

She could smell her flesh.

In some half-instinctual, half-delirious moment, Rey tried to grasp at a cord that she hadn't been able to feel since-

The logical part of her brain knew it wasn't there, but she was past reason. She tried desperately to pull on her and Kylo's bond, to tug on something that still connected her to him.

There had to be something.

She was certain she'd nearly felt it before, back on the station; their bond had to still be there. Even if it was just an echo.

“K-Kylo,” she gasped, no more than a whimpered plea. She tried to look back at where she knew he was still lying in the snow, but she could barely focus enough to move.

There was a gaping hole in her abdomen.

Snoke laughed over her. She barely heard it.

Hot tears rolled down her face, melting the snow.

“Kylo-”

Snoke lifted his lightsaber again, intent on running her through again, or maybe just ending it once-
and-for-all.

Her fingers twitched in the snow. She couldn't feel them.

And then—something snagged in her chest, an elastic snap that stole her breath and practically pulled her heart from her chest.

It was like she had found a cord buried under the snow.

She felt—

A bright red blade burst from Snoke’s chest, spitting and furious as it eradicated his heart with one single blow. A look of shock crossed his features, contorting his face in the shadows.

Looking down, his gaze met Rey’s.

And then he dissipated into the air as if he had been nothing but a shadow all along.

Kylo was left standing behind where Snoke had been, lightsaber in-hand as he stared at the space where Snoke used to be. The wind snapped at his dark hair and robes, making him appear slightly wild.

He appeared as he should’ve been, not as he had been when she’d found him being tortured, broken and dying in the snow. All of the injuries he’d had before were gone, the true ones long-since healed and the wounds inflicted by Snoke disappeared as if they had never happened at all. His scar was no longer glowing from newly burnt flesh, but had healed and faded a little with time.

He looked down at her.

“Rey.”

And it was like her name unlocked some last secret piece to an unknown puzzle. The Force spilled from him like some invisible floodgates had opened, washing over them both.

She felt her own power, but she felt his, and she wasn't exactly sure where one ended and the other began.

It was like she had taken a lost piece of her soul and clicked it back into place.

It was like she'd found him again.

The-

“The bond.”

She wasn’t even sure which of them had said it. It didn't matter.

Rey could feel it again.

She could feel it again.

Their bond.

Kylo was once more connected to her, and – and she was his.

Her heart felt like it was just starting to beat again for the first time since Corellia. The call of her
heart stretched out to his, and she could feel a piece of her organ nestled within his own. It was the same for her.

She wanted to kiss him more than anything.

And she was crying. She smiled up at him through her tears, but neither of them could move. She could feel it, the haziness tugging at the corners of her senses. Either the vision was ending, or she was dying. Maybe both.

She was still mortally wounded.

Kylo struggled against it, worry and fear bleeding over their bond like sweet poison.

*Rey*

Then the darkness encroached back over them and overtook her consciousness.

---

Kylo awoke all at once, gulping in a deep breath as if he hadn't been able to breathe for years.

And it had been *years*.

Snoke – he was *gone* from his head.

He could feel it.

*Or* – he *couldn't* feel it.

Snoke was *gone*.

It was almost unbelievable. He didn't – he didn't even know what to think about that. But-

*Rey*-

She was a terrifyingly dead weight on top of him, sprawled out over his chest. He wrapped his arms around her, clutching her to his chest as he pushed himself up.

“Rey,” he croaked, his voice scratchy from disuse.

She lay in his arm, lifeless. She looked *pale*.

“*Rey.*”

Panic tore at his senses as he gently shook her, trying to get her to *wake up*. It felt like he couldn't breathe, like his fear had closed his throat. He didn't know what to *do*-

He froze.

There was movement-

She was *breathing*.

He could feel her chest rise and fall with each small breath. It was far too weak to give him any true sense of relief, but she was *alive* and that was all that really mattered.
Each breath she took strengthened their bond. He could feel it – feel her – slowly filling the void in the back of his head, returning to place where she had come to belong.

It was a fucking miracle.

And it was all thanks to Rey.

After a long moment of just listening to her, of making sure that she was alive, Kylo reached up and ran the pad of his thumb across her cheek and over her brow, trying gently to smooth away the sadness she wore on her face. It was such a foreign look on her, he wanted it gone.

He didn't want her to be sad.

He needed her to not be sad.

“Rey,” he pleaded. Then, after a moment of silence, he hardened his tone into something considerably more commanding. “Wake up.”

The only response he got was a push from her mind, not very strong but definitely there.

Kylo deflated, unable to help the small twitch of his lips as he tightened his hold on her. If she was aware enough to be irritated, then she would be okay.

He would make her okay.

For the first time since he'd woken up, he took in his surroundings. Everything was dark, but they were obviously underground. He wouldn't have known where, exactly, if it weren't for the glowing green ichor that bled from the cavern walls like a waterfall and filled unnatural pools of power around them. Carved pillars surrounded them, which the design he remembered clearly. It was all distinctive in the worst possible way.

And he could feel it – the twisted darkness that tried endlessly to claw at his senses and pick at his nerves.

They were back on Dathomir.

And not just Dathomir – they were in the heart of Talzin’s fucking lair.

He needed to get up.

Standing was a little difficult without letting go of the woman in his arms, but he refused to do so. There was absolutely no way he was letting her go, even for a moment. He forced himself to his feet, shifting his grip so that he could carry her against his chest.

Rey didn't even stir as he adjusted his hold on her.

It was infuriating not to be able to demand answers from Rey about why they were back. He tried to ignore the issue for the moment, but it was nearly impossible. Had Talzin captured her and brought them there? Had she captured him?

Why were they there?

Some of the specifics of his last memories were a bit fuzzy, but it started to come back quickly enough when he focused. The refueling station, disobeying Snoke’s orders. Skywalker showing up – and Rey.
He looked down at the woman in his arms.

She had told him that she loved him.

She had told him *twice*.

And he had only hurt her.

He cradled her to his chest as gently as he could manage, but he knew his grip on her was still too forceful. He couldn't help it. After all she had done for him, after what she’d said-

He had hurt her – *again*.

She curled further into his chest, clutching at his outer robe like she needed the anchor. Her breaths were coming out with more urgency, and he could feel across their bond as she tried to claw her way back to consciousness.

A strange ripple in the Force snapped his attention away from her.

He closed his eyes, stretching out his senses to try and-

It was coming from the surface.

It felt like-

“Skywalker.” It came out as a question, but he shouldn’t really have been surprised. Skywalker had been there when they’d beaten him – somehow. It made sense that he’d be with her.

He would doubtlessly come for Rey. If he wanted to, Kylo knew he could use her as bait.

He wouldn't let anything happen to her.

But he could use the opportunity to finally kill Skywalker.

Rey stirred in his arms. He could feel her rage and fear seeping from her like an open wound.

He frowned.

Then he took a breath.

Dealing with Skywalker could *wait*.

He had to get her out of there; he could feel Talzin’s presence close-by, and there was no way either of them were in any sort of shape to fight her. They both needed time to recover.

Rey came first.

Moving his legs felt like trying to get two durasteel pillars to move on their own. The last remnant of adrenaline was still pumping through his system, but that was fading. In its wake was a bone-deep tiredness that he hadn't noticed before. Even carrying Rey became strenuous as he reached the edge of the cavern.

It didn't matter – he would push through it.

He wouldn't stop until they were both out of there.

But it slowed him down.
Kylo didn't see or sense anyone else in the lair the entire way out. It was suspicious, and it only set him even more on-edge. All he wanted to do was leave.

Rey started stirring with more frequency by the time he could see the exit. He shifted his grip with a huff, keeping her pressed close against his chest.

He considered trying to comfort her – to tell her that they would be safe soon – but only briefly. He wouldn't give her any promises that he wasn't sure he could deliver on. And on Dathomir, that went doubly-so.

Talzin was up ahead – he could sense her.

“Kylo,” Rey mumbled, growing agitated in his arms. He saw her eyelashes flutter, but she didn't seem to be entirely back to reality yet.

“I'm here,” he promised.

She finally managed to open her eyes just as he carried her out of Talzin's lair. The planet’s unnerving red sky awaited them, partially blocked behind the gnarled branches of trees that looked more like shadow bones than living things. The crimson sky, the thick fog, the looming trees – it was as if he’d never left.

*Force*, he had never wanted to see that planet again.

A loud crash drew his attention to the right.

There – no more than fifteen or twenty meters away, Skywalker was fighting Talzin.

And by the looks of things, he was struggling.

Trees had been cut down by burning blades. Scorch marks and half-craters in the ground spoke of great blasts of power. A chunk of the outer complex had crumbled not too far off from where Skywalker stood.

Skywalker himself had switched to using his left hand, his right arm hanging uselessly by his side. Talzin’s eyes were wide and more crazed than he'd ever seen.

Talzin swung her weapon at Skywalker in a graceful arc that gave Kylo the impression that she was every well-versed in battling with a blade.

Skywalker managed to block her blow, his form sturdy but lacking the flare of the woman he was fighting. Throwing her off, he swiped at her twice from the ground-up, searing a few more scorch marks into the ground.

She dodged both blows, backing up enough that she could sent a massive wave of the Force roaring in his direction. He stretched out his own hand, meeting her power with his own.

For a split second, Kylo didn't know what to expect. And then – Skywalker’s power didn't break, but he just barely managed to save himself from getting blasted into the trees by redirecting her power around either side of him.

It was obvious – Talzin was winning that fight.

A soft tug on his outer robe tore his attention away from Skywalker and Talzin.

Rey looked up at him with that same fire in her eyes – the determination that was so undeniably a
part of who she was. It was beautiful.

But she was still very tired, and very weak. He could sense it, but more importantly, he could see the pure exhaustion in her eyes. She could barely get the words out, “We have to help.”

Kylo could see it all play out in his head. If they joined in that fight, Rey would be useless. Not only that, but in her state she would make him useless, too, because he would only spend his time trying to protect her. Talzin would exploit that, and one – or both – of them would die. Skywalker would also get cut down, likely trying to do the exact same thing that Kylo would be doing.

He would end up dead, and so would she – or worse.

He wouldn't let that happen.

“No.”

It took her several moments to process his answer, but when she did, a frown pulled firmly at her lips. She began to try and push herself away from him, to try to stand and fight.

She was still so weak – he just tightened his grip. There was no way in hells he was going to let her do what she wanted.

He was not going let her get herself killed.

“Rey, stop,” he grunted.

She just ignored him in favor of trying to roll out of his arms. As if that was going to happen.

Skywalker and Talzin had moved closer as they fought, her with her ghoulish green blade and him with his lightsaber. In the process of blocking one of Skywalker’s blows, her attention was drawn to them.

There was a shift in the air as she made eye-contact with Kylo.

Talzin would kill them.

Stretching out her hand, he could feel the energy build-up in the air around them as she prepared to hit them with a blast of her power.

Kylo swore under his breath.

The concentration cost her; in the moment it took for her to gather her power, Skywalker brought his blade down in a sweeping arc that sliced into her wrist. She managed to dodge far enough out of the way that he wasn’t able to completely amputate the appendage, but she still lost half of her wrist. She was fast – Skywalker’s move had been aiming to amputate both of her hands.

Talzin cried out and retreated a bit, cradling her wounded hand to her chest. Her weapon evaporated from her other hand as she cried.

Skywalker didn’t use the moment to press his advantage; he instead turned his gaze towards Kylo. There was no discernible expression on his face – only the hard determination of someone in a losing battle.

Kylo stared back.

The old man’s gaze flickered from him down to Rey and then back to him. He could see clearly
what kind of state she was in.

A look passed between them – a moment of understanding.

Kylo held himself straighter.

Talzin started spitting something in a dark, unknown language, throwing curses that he was perfectly content not to know. The words appeared to help her recover, and she summoned her weapon again.

Kylo's prediction of the battle was about to play out if he didn't do something.

Skywalker didn't do anything. He sent a nudge in the Force, as good as telling them to go, get out of here, get to safety. He turned to Talzin even as he sent it.

A part of Kylo nearly made him want to stop. It was Skywalker – he shouldn’t have been the one to do this. To save them. Everything in Kylo raged against it.

He shouldn't have needed his help.

Especially not to save Rey.

Especially since he-

Since it was Skywalker. He was the last-

Kylo turned and ran the opposite direction.

Rey started to struggle weakly in his arms, pushing against him. She wanted to go back, he knew she did, but he wouldn't let her.

“Wait,” the words were barely formed on her lips. “Luke, we have to help-”

He put her to sleep with his power, cutting off all thought of going back. She slumped into his arms, unconscious.

It wasn't what he wanted to do.

But he wasn't going to let her get herself killed. Not for an old man who had already chosen to sacrifice himself for her.

He could feel it when it happened.

It only pushed him harder.

Each step was a battle against his own weakness, each breath a sharp pain. He had no idea where their ship was, or if they even had a ship. All he could do was keeping fighting, keep running.

So he did.

He took them further into the woods, in between the dark trees and away from the death he sensed at the wellspring.

Chapter End Notes
Guys...I'm sorry. Really, truly sorry. I really agonized over not wanting to post this chapter. But this was literally in The Plan for...a long time. All I can really say is that I promise it wasn't for shock-factor.

This was an emotional rollercoaster of a chapter, so to make up for it the next chapter is pretty much all romance.

I love you guys!
Kylo kept going as long as he could.

Rey wasn't heavy – she'd never been heavy – but he was exhausted enough that it felt like he was trying to carry a load of durasteel through the forest. The muscles in his arms spasmed as he shifted his hold on her, and his legs didn't move nearly quick enough. He almost dropped her more than once.

There was no sign of anyone following them, but he didn't stop.

He went on until he felt like he was about to collapse, and then he went further.

He went on until he felt her muscles start to tense in his grip. It was only when she started to wake up that he let himself stop.

It was more like a train wreck.

He stumbled onto his knees when he tried to kneel to put her down. He only just barely managed to hold himself up enough to stop himself from falling flat on his face and crushing her.

She woke up like she had to fight for it.

“Rey?” He kept his arms around her shoulders, clutching her to him. His voice was hoarse, strained and scratched. It felt like he hadn't used it in a very long time. “Rey?”

“I'm-” in her confused state she struggled to push away, but her efforts were weak. “I'm up, I'm-”

His brows pulled low over his forehead. “Rey.”

Recognition sparked in her eyes as she began to come back to reality. “Kylo?” She breathed, her tone half full of hope, and half of doubt.

His throat felt tight.

“Yes.”

Her arms were suddenly around him, clinging to his shoulders with a shaking desperation that startled him. Her excitement almost knocked him onto his back. She buried her face in his neck, her shoulders shaking in something that wasn’t quite sobs or laughter.

“I can't believe it,” she mumbled against him. He tightened his arms around her.

Pulling back far enough to look at him, she swept her gaze over his face. Whatever she saw there made her frown. Uncertainty spiked through their bond, and he couldn’t quite bring himself to comfort her. Then she noticed where they were.

“What happened? Where are we?” Her eyes were wide as she took in the trees around them.

She started to try and push herself up, so he helped her. Rey had regained enough of her strength to stand – and hopefully walk – but for Kylo, pushing himself back up to his feet was difficult. His
muscles ached in protest.

At his initial silence, she started to really look around them. A look of dread slowly crept onto her face. She clung to his arms with as much strength as she had, her grip quickly turning urgent.

Her gaze was clear, but he could feel the maelstrom that grew in her head. “Kylo, what happened?”

“I took you away from Talzin,” was what he said, because he didn't really know much else. As far as he was concerned, she should've had more information than she did.

“Where's Luke?”

He looked at her.

Her hands slid from his arms, like some part of her knew what he was about to say.

He didn't want to think about Skywalker. And he didn't want to have to tell her.

“He's dead.”

It occurred to him that maybe he shouldn't have been so blunt. Maybe he should've tried to soften the blow for her, tried to ease her into the knowledge that the man she'd looked up to as a teacher had been cut down.

He'd never been the coddling type. But the expression on her face-

She blinked at him, once, and then again. Her eyes slowly grew wide like she was asking – pleading, begging – him to be lying. He could see the moment she remembered to breathe.

It was like listening to glass shatter into a million pieces.

He – Force, he didn't know what to do. How to make it better. And there was that pit in his stomach, the awful knowledge that there was nothing he could do.

“That's not possible.”

If he hadn't been watching her, waiting for any reaction, he wouldn't have heard her. He had the strange sensation that she was like an unsteady pile of rocks; even the tiniest shove would topple her over.

Kylo might as well have cut open her chest with his lightsaber. He hurt so badly for her he felt like he was going to vomit.

She shook her head violently, stumbling away from him until her back hit the trunk of a tree. Tears were threatening to spill over into her cheeks.

“It's not—it's not possible.”

What could he say?

There wasn't-

He didn't know what he was supposed to say.

His fists clenched at his sides. The look on her face hadn't changed – he could feel as she stretched out with her senses, and he knew when she brushed against the shadow of Skywalker’s presence. He
knew the moment she felt his death.

It was the push that toppled her.

Rey crumbled to the ground with a pained whimper that he had never heard before. It sounded closer to a wounded animal than a person. The sound was like a punch to the gut.

But the tears were worse.

The tears were-

Kylo was on his knees beside her before he registered anything else. She leaned forward on her hands and knees, wrenching like she might empty the contents of her stomach, but it was just the tears that wracked her frame. For the first time since he'd known her, Kylo was afraid that she might not be strong enough to bear the pain.

That thought – terrified him.

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her against his chest. She resisted at first, pushing against the cage of his arms.

“You, you,” she hiccuped, the words barely intelligible, “you should've done something. You hated him, you should've done something.”

He tried not to react. She thought he had let Skywalker die, that much was obvious. It hadn't occurred to him that she would think that. He didn't know why it surprised him, or why the assumption hurt.

Kylo didn't let her go.

“He sacrificed himself,” he insisted, because it was the truth. She was still sobbing, and she was still fighting against his embrace, but she was listening. He knew she was. “Talzin was there, we wouldn't have made it. He-”

Kylo closed his eyes against a deep well of feeling that he had no intention of acknowledging.

“He sacrificed himself.”

Slowly, like a glacier melting in the summer, she stopped fighting him. Her jabs gave way to sobs. She sunk against him like a mini collapse, reaching up to cling to his robes. She heaved against him like she couldn't breathe, like it was absolutely hopeless.

“Kylo,” she choked out, a broken plea – to make it not real, to somehow make it so everything was undone. She sobbed his name again, and again.

It was as impossible as asking him to stop the planet from spinning.

He didn't know what to do.

Looking down at the top of her head, at her warm-colored hair, he sighed. Words of comfort had never been his strong point.

It wasn't okay, and he didn't want to tell her that it was. Empty words were just that.

There was nothing he could say that would truly comfort her.
“I’m here,” he whispered. And then he said it again.

“I’m here.”

He said it like a promise. It was all he could say. He had no idea – whether it would help her or not. But it was all he could offer.

Rey’s grip on his robes tightened and she leaned further into him. He reciprocated by tightening his arms around her. He placed a kiss on her hair.

“I’m here, Rey. I’m here.”

Kylo held her the entire time she sobbed. It felt like he was trying to protect her from the galaxy.

If only he could.

Slowly – very, very slowly Rey's world solidified beneath her again. When she felt like she could, she shakily pushed herself to her feet.

Kylo said something, but she didn't hear him. He said it again, and she caught the last bit.

“–the direct way.”

She still couldn't bring herself to respond.

Luke-

She could feel Kylo’s mind brush against hers, not really pushing for entry, but just there. He had been hovering around the outskirts of her mind like that ever since she’d woken up, like he had to continuously remind himself that she was still right there, that their bond still flowed between them. She understood.

He stared at her like he wanted to say something.

She spoke before he could.

“I’m going to kill her.”

Whatever had been on his mind evaporated. “What?” He frowned. The worry etched into his face was unmistakable.

She took a steadying breath. “Mother Talzin. I'm not going to go around–I'm going to go back exactly the way we came, and I'm going to kill her.”

The grief she felt twisted in her gut. First it had been Han, then she'd nearly lost Finn, then Kylo. And now Luke–

She didn't know if she could take any more losses. Killing Talzin – it would be retribution. It would be justice.

It wouldn't be revenge.

She told herself it wouldn't, if only so that it felt less like giving in.
Kylo stepped closer to her. She had the distinct feeling that he saw right through her, even without reading her thoughts.

She tilted her chin up to meet his gaze. “Will you help me?”

At that point, all she wanted was to be with him. But she couldn't leave this place without repaying that monstrous woman for what she had done.

Rey was going to kill her.

“You know I will.”

She let go of a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

“But, Rey.” He grabbed her arm, the grip very nearly crushing. He opened his mouth to continue, but paused. She watched him wrestle with something, and felt his indecision across their bond.

Finally, he said, “Let me do it.”

Her reaction was an immediate no. No, no, no. He had hated his uncle, he shouldn't be the one to deliver the final blow. She had loved Luke, he'd been her teacher far after he'd been his, the justice was hers-

But she saw the thoughts swirling in his mind – the worry, a strange anxiety that twisted in his gut when he thought of her cutting down someone in cold blood. Even if that someone was Mother Talzin. He feared that if she did, then she'd – he didn't know what she'd do.

He was trying to protect her.

The realization deflated the anger that rose in her chest. She didn't want to argue with him.

So after a long moment, she nodded.

“Okay.”

She made sure to hide the fact that she had no intention of letting him be the one to cut her down. That she still planned on it being her.

He seemed satisfied by her answer, and he released his grip on her arm.

“Good.”

Something passed over his face. Without warning, he leaned down and kissed her firmly on the mouth.

At first she stood frozen in shock. Then she recovered, resting her hand on his shoulder and tilting her head up to deepen the kiss. When he broke away, a shaky breath escaped him.

“What was that for?” She asked, her own voice coming out more like a breathy whisper. Heat blossomed across her cheeks.

He brushed the back of his fingers across her cheek, a slow little caress. His gaze seemed intent on her lips as he shrugged. “I just felt like it.”

She ran the pad of her thumb over his shoulder in tiny little circles. It felt good to touch him just because she could. Through the fabric of his shirt, she could feel as tension pulled across his
His mind pressed heavily against hers, mentally mimicking the way that he stepped closer so that they were nearly pressed flush against each other. She had to crane her neck to keep eye contact.

“I wanted to tell you,” his voice was low, thick with emotion that he tried to hide, “to talk to you. About back on the station.”

She'd told him she loved him.

He'd almost killed her.

Her breath caught, but she wasn't sure if it was from apprehension, or-

She squared her shoulders. “What about it?”

Whatever it was he wanted to say, he seemed to be struggling to find the words. He pressed his lips together and worked his jaw, and she tried not to get nervous the longer he took.

“I don't expect anything,” she blurted.

He blinked. She barreled on, “What I said back on the station–I don't expect anything from you.” It all came out like one jumbled mess. She'd never felt so, so – nerve-rackingly mortified before. The idea that he might think she expected him to reciprocate in some way, or to owe her-

Her face felt like it was on fire.

“What I mean to say is, you don't owe me. I don't– want you to feel some sort of obligation-”

Then Kylo kissed her again, effectively shutting her up. He held her so close, their lungs nearly seemed to be the same. The bond pulsed around them, wrapping them in the surety of each other’s presence.

Despite everything – despite everything – Rey felt safe. She felt very nearly-

He deepened the kiss, cupping the back of her neck with his hand as he wrapped his other arm across her back. She leaned up on her tiptoes so that he wouldn't have to reach down as far. She reached up and cupped his face in her hands as if she was afraid he'd vanish.

And after all that they'd been through, a part of her really was afraid.

He sighed into her mouth as she shifted her hips just a little closer, his grip on her hardening. She didn't really have a clue what she was doing outside of what she'd seen in the holos, but being with him seemed so natural, she just did what felt good.

He wanted her.

She could feel his need both physically and mentally. It surprised her – terrified her – the idea that anyone at all could desire her like he did. But it excited her, too.

She was desired.

And she desired him, too.

It was all she wanted as he held her. She let her world narrow down to him – his lips, his hands, the warmth of his body, his want. She felt sucked in like a vortex, swirling around the feeling of him and...
They were in the middle of a forest. A dangerous forest. On Dathomir.

Reality cut into her like a dull blade, wrenching her out of the moment. She broke the kiss like she was shattering crystal, but she couldn't bring herself to pull out of his arms.

They took a moment to regain their breath, and to bring their focus back to the world around them. Kylo's pupils were blown as he stared down at her. His lips looked swollen.

She averted her eyes, heat creeping down her neck.

They couldn't stay there; they needed to start heading back towards the wellspring, towards Talzin and then through Talzin. She was about to make herself pull out of his arms and say so when he tightened his grip.

“I feel the same way.”

He looked a little hesitant, but the set of his brow was firm and he tilted his jaw stubbornly. He was a bit flushed, but his gaze transfixed her with its seriousness.

Oh.

“What you said back on the station,” he said, “it's the same for me. I feel the same.”

He wasn't brave enough to outright say it. A distant part of her was certain that he hadn't said those words in years. That it had been even longer since he'd meant them. But then he opened his thoughts up to her and let her feel what he felt.

She didn't need him to say anything.

A grin broke across her face so large she nearly thought she'd crack her cheeks.

She reached up and gave him one more kiss. It was close-lipped and gentle, just a soft brush of her lips against his. It said I love you, too.

They didn't make it much farther before they needed to rest. Both of them had been drained in the last few hours – or, at least, what Rey assumed was the last few hours. She had no idea how much time had actually passed.

Which was part of the point, actually.

Kylo started hanging back a little, and when she turned to say something to him, the look on his face was absolutely murderous. It confused her, but only for a moment.

Of course his mask for exhaustion was to act aggressive. He wore the promise of violence like a cloak, as if he thought to fool her so that she wouldn't see the tiredness in his gaze. She would've rolled her eyes if she'd had more energy.

“I need to rest,” she finally said, even more for his sake than for her own.

It took him a little longer than usual to respond. “Then sit.” He kept walking.
“No,” she tried not to snap, “I need to sleep. I'm too tired–and you are, too. There's no way we can fight Talzin like this. We need to rest before we do anything.”

For a moment it looked like he was going to argue with her, or at least use a sharp tone. But instead he just deflated a little. “We should find somewhere to rest, then,” he nodded.

She was beyond relieved that he didn't put up a fight.

He took the lead again, scanning left and right for a place that would be suitable enough to take their temporary shelter in. She didn't really mind where they stopped – she would have honestly been fine with the forest floor – but she didn't say anything to him as he searched. If he wanted something a little safer, then that was fine. Smarter than just lying out in the open.

If was easy not to care about safety when she was tired, which meant it was all the more important. She followed his lead and tried to keep her own eyes open.

If only he had run in the direction of the shuttle. It was a little unfair of her to be disappointed, because how could he have possibly known where they had landed, but she couldn't help the thought. The shuttle had bunks. And food.

They currently had neither.

A twinge in her chest nearly stole her breath away, a sudden pang of despair when she thought of how more had come in that shuttle than were going to leave in it. Master Luke had-

She clamped her eyes shut as if that could chase away the thought of her teacher, or the tears that rose like a tide. Breathing became a torturous affair, something that she had to force herself to do.

Physical pain to go with the emotional.

_In, out._

_In, out._

_In-_ 

A pair of hands pressed heavily on her shoulders, and Kylo was suddenly there. “Rey.”

Her chest and throat felt too full of emotion, like there was so much it was trying to come up. She tried to swallow it back down. Opening her eyes, she silently took in his expression for a minute.

“There will be time for you to mourn later,” he assured her, “but until we get off this planet you need to just–put it away.”

Anger flared in her at the suggestion that she put away her thoughts of Luke when he hadn’t even been dead for a whole day, but it was only a brief spark. She knew he was right; mourning before they got off-planet was too dangerous.

She nodded.

He raised his eyebrows in question, his hands still on her shoulders.

“Allright,” she agreed.

Kill Talzin, get off of Dathomir, then mourn. In that order. She could do it.
They walked a ways further after that. Neither of them spoke to each other, although it was because they couldn't afford to waste the energy. They spent what little they had on the look-out and on keeping their footing.

Kylo’s exhaustion crept across their bond like a leaky faucet, just enough to add to her own. She knew that he was keeping most of it from her, and she hoped that she was managing to do the same, although she couldn’t be sure.

Rey’s eyes were so tired that her vision started to blur – sharp trees became stretching shadows, and she could’ve sworn that she saw something out of the corner of her eye more than once. She didn’t know if it was her exhaustion, if she was going crazy, or if it was just the damned planet messing with her senses. It was all hazy, and far too much to think about in her state of mind.

She just wanted to sleep.

Kylo stopped in front of a small cluster of trees. It wouldn't do much for them, but it could offer a limited protection for their backs.

“Here.”

She wanted to argue that if they were just going to end up on the forest floor anyway then they should’ve stopped ages ago, but mostly she just wanted to collapse. Without a word, she walked over to the cluster and practically did. The barren ground was hard and cold, but she barely felt it. She was vaguely aware of Kylo lying down beside her, a dark, warm presence that radiated more heat than she would’ve thought. She only stayed awake long enough to scoot closer, curling on her side towards him in part because she wanted to keep warm, and in part – well, because she just wanted to.

She barely felt his hand rest heavily on her side before she was out.

Rey’s dreams were hazy and dark, vague nightmares that filled with her with dread and unease. And when she woke up, it was as if she was simply moving from nightmare to another.

Except in her other dreams she hadn't had Kylo lying on top of her.

He was only really half-way on her, his face tucked into the crook of her neck and his hand wrapped around her hip. His breath was warm, little huffs of air on her collarbone. His weight – even when he wasn't all of the way on top of her – was nearly crushing.

Not that she minded.

The air was chilled and the sky was the same blood crimson that it always was. There was no way of telling how much time had passed.

One of her arms was trapped under him, so she reached up with her free arm and slowly, softly ran her fingers through his hair. For a moment, she just let herself feel crushed by him. She liked the feeling of him near.

Kylo stirred. Almost immediately, he became aware of what he was doing – he snapped his head back and pushed himself up onto his elbows, releasing her ribs from his weight.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, his voice still thick with sleep.

Brushing some of his bangs out of his face, she quirked the corners of her lips in a small smile. “It's okay. I kind of like being crushed by you.”
The look he gave her sent a shiver down her spine. She suddenly realized that he had never taken his hand off of her hip.

When he kissed her, his lips were searing.

His tongue pressed against her lips, and she gave him entrance. He explored her mouth without preamble, depending the kiss even further. It made Rey's head spin. They broke apart only when they needed air, and then came together again.

Using his hand on her hip as leverage, Kylo pulled her closer to him. He kept himself propped up on one arm and dug his fingers into her hip with the other. She tangled one hand in his hair, wrapping the other around his broad back and clinging to him like he might blow away. As if that was possible for a man as large as him.

It was nice to not have to think, to simply enjoy the growing friction between them.

He pressed down more heavily on her, his want evident against the outside of her hip. Desire pooled in her gut, a foreign but pleasant heat that spurred her on and made her squirm around for an awkward moment so that she could re-situate her legs on either side of his hips. It allowed her to roll her hips up against him.

A low growl escaped the back of his throat, one that she felt reverberate across his chest. It scared her a bit – her, him, what she knew they were about to do – but she felt the same question in him, the same hesitant inexperience, and she let that steady her.

He broke away from her lips and started to move down past the line of her jaw, biting and sucking on her neck in between kisses. She leaned her head back to give him better access.

Keeping one hand tangled in his hair, she reached down with the other to try and find some way to get his belt off. She fumbled around with it for a while, groaning in frustration when she couldn't figure it out.

Why did he have to wear so many damned clothes?

Meanwhile, Kylo had already worked off her own belt and had her shirt hiked up over her breast wrapping. His hands were moving down the planes of her stomach, towards the fastening of her pants. His touch left trails of liquid fire in her skin.

“Kylo,” she breathed, “your…belt.”

She got no response other than a slight pain as he bit into her shoulder. He sunk his hands past the band of her pants and started to push both them and her undergarments down over her hips.

All she wanted was him. But-

“K-Kylo.”

He hummed distractedly into her skin.

“Belt.”

She gave his belt one swift tug to demonstrate her point. With a deep huff he extracted his hands from her pants and quickly undid the unusual buckle that held his belt together. She took the opportunity to shed her shirt the rest of the way, but he was back on her before she could get to anything else.
Her pants were down her hips in a flash. It took her a moment of struggling to kick them the rest of the way off, mostly because she was distracted by trying to undo his pants as well. His erection brushed against her hand, eliciting a sharp hiss from him.

Her first instinct was to apologize, but she figured that there was nothing to apologize for when he bucked into her hand, seemingly involuntarily. His muscles shook as he tried to hold himself still after that, practically panting as he pressed his face into her collar.

“Fuck,” he growled into her skin.

She liked how his lips felt against her when he cursed. She liked it even more that she put him just as on-edge as he put her.

If they were going to spiral out of control together, she was okay with that.

Finally freed of the confines of her pants, she wrapped her legs around the backs of his thighs, pulling him closer once more. She rolled her hips, rubbing against his erection through his pants. She could feel the wetness between her legs, the need that already had her panting, and it wasn't enough.

She didn't need him to control himself. She knew that that was what he was trying to do, but she didn't need him to – she didn't want him to.

What she wanted was him inside her.

Maybe she said something, maybe she projected it across the bond, or maybe he just caught on, because his hands flew to his pants, pushed her hands aside, and undid them faster than she ever could have. She pulled everything down to his knees, freeing him from the confines of his pants. He still had on both his under and over robes, but she wasn’t aware of them enough to care.

Curiosity overtook her, and she couldn't help but run her fingers across the length of him, which was both hard and soft at the same time. The sudden reality that they-

That they-

Two of his fingers rubbed roughly across her most sensitive spot, once, then twice, tearing her attention away from her apprehension. She twitched from the sudden sensation, a noise somewhere between a yelp and a whimper escaping her throat.

“Fuck,” he choked out. He rubbed his fingers across her several more times before he pulled her even closer.

His erection pressed against her opening, but he didn't push inside her yet. He sucked in a ragged breath, clearly waiting for her final consent.

“Kylo,” she gasped.

He didn't need anything else.

There was a quick sharp pain that broke through the haze of her pleasure, one that she hadn't been expecting. She gasped. He held himself still as she adjusted to the feeling of him inside her, the pain only ebbing slowly. She could feel his struggle to do so. After a moment, she gave him a squeeze to let him know that he could keep going.

He moved against her slowly, easing her back into the moment, the shared heat between them. It didn't take long.
Rolling her hips in tandem with his thrusts, they clung to each other as they found their pace. She tried not to gasp each time he rocked against her, filling her up in a way that she didn't even know was possible until that moment.

Electricity built up between them, a charge of power and emotion and something that felt to right she couldn't quite name it.

She wrapped her legs around his back, deepening the angle just enough to surprise her.

The pace became quicker, Kylo’s thrusts more erratic. Conscious thought fled from her mind until it was just them, them, them-

He started to near the edge of his pleasure. Reaching down between them, he rubbed his fingers across her clit in rough circles that had her spiraling after him when it came, her orgasm hitting her like a white-hot wave of mindless pleasure.

She arched into him, letting herself slip into pure sensation.

In that moment, she couldn't tell where she ended and he began; they were them, arching and crying out in pleasure.

It took a long time for Rey to come back to her senses. When she did, Kylo was collapsed on top of her again, his arms crushing her to him and his chest rising and falling in tandem with hers.

“Are you alright?” He asked after some length.

She nodded, not entirely sure that her voice would work.

He tightened his embrace, planting a firm kiss on her shoulder before rolling off of her and allowing her to breathe more deeply. She hadn't noticed that he hadn't slid out of her until then.

For a while they just both lay there, catching their breath. She passed her hand over her hair, shakily brushing a few strands out of her face. She was distantly aware of Kylo righting himself, even down to his stupid belt. She couldn't bother herself with finding her pants yet.

Everything felt distant, all of her emotions felt detached from her body. All she knew was that she had just done something irrevocable with him. Something that went far beyond what they had just done together.

It was like finding home.

She turned her head to find him looking at her already. His eyes were very dark. He reached out for her, the tips of his fingers brushing against her side.

“Come here.”

It was a command that she followed willingly, after she retrieved her pants. He leaned back against one of the trees, and she curled up against him in between his legs. He wrapped the iron cage of his arms around her when she leaned her head on his shoulder.

They stayed like that for a long time.

She didn't want to move, or to think. It was so much better to just sit there and soak in their connection. The rise and fall of his chest and the sound of his heartbeat almost lulled her to sleep.

Her thoughts drifted.
“Do you remember,” she looked up at him and trailed off, furrowing her brows.

When she didn’t say anything after a moment, he prompted, “What?”

She blinked up at him. His eyebrows drew together as he studied her.

“I was just thinking,” she admitted. “Do you remember, back on Corellia? We were going to leave together.”

“Of course I remember.”

“Where would we have gone?” She felt a little stupid asking about it. It didn’t matter, not really.

But he took the question seriously. “I don’t know,” he spoke honestly, “I never got to that part of the plan.”

“Well, where would you want to go?”

He shrugged a little, a frown pulling at his lips. She wondered which planets he had gotten the chance to visit in his life. “Where would you like to go?”

She didn’t know of any planets in particular that were known to be beautiful or good vacation spots or anything like that. Mostly, she was just attracted to the worlds that were totally unlike Jakku. So – pretty much most of them. It all seemed exotic to her in one way or another.

“Everywhere.”

He huffed, leaning over to plant a firm kiss on her shoulder. “Okay, then we’ll go everywhere.”

“But I have conditions,” she poked him. “No deserts.”

He solemnly shook his head. “No deserts.”

“And no frozen temperatures.”

“Or swamps,” he added.

She couldn’t help but smile. “Right. And I don’t want to just fly by—I want to actually land on each planet long enough to say I’ve really seen it.”

“Okay.”

Then she hesitated, but only for a moment. Might as well go all of the way.

“And I want you to seduce me,” she said. “Everywhere we go.”

“Seduce you?” He echoed.

“Yes,” she nodded.

He looked like he was trying not to laugh. It was a new expression on him, one that she hadn’t seen before. She decided that she liked it. “How would you like to be seduced?” He asked.

She couldn’t help the blush that spread across her face and ears, but she held her head high and tried to sound confident.

“Oh, I’m not picky,” she shrugged, “I just want you to use your imagination. Whatever’s in your
head.”

He looked at her.

“You're in my head.”

An awareness struck her of just how much he meant what he said. She felt the evidence of how profoundly they had changed each other – how they had carved themselves into the fabric of their beings, how they had become irreplaceable in each other's lives. She saw it through their bond, and through his words, and through his eyes.

He told her that he loved her with that look.

She hoped that he could read the same in hers.

“Kylo Ren,” she whispered, almost more of a sigh, as she reached up and ran the pads of her fingers down his cheek, unconsciously tracing his scar. How differently she used to look at that scar, at his face. She used to see something entirely different – or, more accurately, just less.

How things had changed between them.

She wanted to commit his face to memory just the way it was now, the color of his lips, the way he looked at her, the softness of his hair. Just in case.

“You're the best thing that's ever happened to me.”

Her heart skipped a beat at his words. “Are you sure?” She whispered.

A frown settled onto his face. He studied her, his dark eyes narrowing as if she had said something that both aggravated and worried him. She could feel him reach across their bond, trying to figure out just what it was that she was feeling.

It was too difficult to explain that part of her brain that told her not to expect anything from people; how could she tell him that she couldn't help but doubt his words, even if he thought he meant them? There was no possible way that she could be the best thing that had ever happened to him, not when-

But she wanted to believe him. More than anything, she wanted to believe him.

“Yes,” he said simply.

“Promise?”

Instead of answering, he leaned up and captured her lips with his own in a deep kiss. He kissed her and kissed her until she had to break away for air, and then he kissed her again.

When he finally broke away for a second time, he cupped her cheeks with both of his hands. It was more gentle than usual his usual naturally heavy-handed touch, more of a caress. He ran his thumb across the soft skin of her cheek.

The way he looked at her – she decided she did believe him.

“I love you.” The words were firm, the romance almost nonexistent in his tone – but he meant them with everything he had. She knew it, because he projected his thoughts over their bond. It was almost overwhelming, the intensity with which he felt. But he didn’t have to let her see into his head.
She smiled. She couldn’t stop the burning behind her eyes, or the way her vision blurred from unshed tears. “I love you, too.”

“I’m going to take you to every beautiful world in the galaxy, and I’m going to make love to you on every last one of them.”

A laugh bubbled out of her.

“And you’ll be happy,” he promised. “I’ll make you happy.”

She believed him about that, too.

“You, too,” she promised. She reached up and kissed his cheek, just a soft brush of her lips. “I’ll make you happy, too.”

He smiled at her.

“Okay.”

Rey wanted nothing more than for them to continue to talk, to lay together and to be together, but their current situation pressed against her mind. They still had to confront Mother Talzin. They still needed to get back to the shuttle.

She felt well enough now that she had rested. They needed to go back and face Talzin.

“Kylo-” she started, moving to get up, but her voice broke off.

Out of nowhere, she felt it.

Him.

“Snoke,” she snarled. Or maybe he did.

The dark, tentacle-like tendrils of Snoke’s power stretched across to them even there, even after his hold over Kylo had been cut. It felt like a putrid breeze, frigid and sweeping over them like ink.

They scrambled to their feet just in time to see a First Order ship exit hyperspace in the upper atmosphere.

Snoke was on it.

He had followed them to Dathomir.

Chapter End Notes

It’s a few hours late, but I hope you guys have had very happy holidays! Consider this my Christmas present to you all, with much love.

The reasons this took so long are because I participated in the reylo secret santa this year, and also I’ve been on vacation with my family, so nothing at all was being done for a while. I should be on a more regular updating schedule for these last few chapters, although they will most likely take a little longer to post simply because everything is coming to a head and the chapters will probably be a bit longer than usual. But the last
chapters will come, I promise.

Well. It took 200,000+ words, but we got to the romance. I'm super uncomfortable with writing blatant romance like this, but I've put you guys through a lot, so I wanted to make it at least a little worth it. Hopefully it was. I will settle for not eye-gougingly bad, too.

You guys are the best of the best - just a little while longer, and we can put this year behind us.
Kylo and Rey stared up at the Jetatura as it loomed over them, half-obscured by the crimson sky. Then they exchanged a look. He swallowed, she pressed her lips together. She unclipped his lightsaber from her belt – he hadn’t even noticed that she had it, had been too wrapped up in being with her to even think about it – and handed it him.

“I kept it safe,” she said. He noticed how quickly she dropped it in his hand, and the discomfort that crept trickled across their bond. If Dark side objects still made her uneasy, then that was a good sign as far as he was concerned. It meant she wasn’t as consumed with revenge as he thought.

He nodded and hooked it to his belt.

Without another word, they broke out into a run.

Three shuttles dispatched from Snoke’s ship. They flew by overhead, roaring towards the only place they would possibly go, the one place powerful enough to attract the Supreme Leader. Snoke was onboard one of them; there was no mistaking the Supreme Leader’s cold power. Just being that close to him sent a sharp shiver down Kylo’s spine.

“Kylo-” Rey’s tone was on-edge, impatient.

He didn’t slow down. “I know.”

“I won’t let him get to her first.”

It was like she had taken his gut and twisted it in two. He skid to a stop and rounded on her.

She nearly bowled into him.

He struggled to keep his calm, to not simply explode in her face. He could barely keep his tone even, his chest heaving from exertion. “No. Our priority is leaving.”

She huffed. “I’m not letting that monstrous woman get away with-”

Kylo snatched her biceps in a grip that he didn’t try to soften. “Rey. The Supreme–Snoke is here.”

There was a stubborn set to her jaw. She heard him, but she wasn’t listening. “If we get to her before he does-”

He wanted to shake some sense into her. “We won’t.”

“What if-”

“Rey,” he nearly shouted, “let it go.”

“No,” she wrenched herself out of his grip. “Mother Talzin–that woman–she killed Luke. She killed him Kylo!”

He jabbed his finger in the direction of Talzin’s lair. “Do you not understand that Supreme Leader Snoke is going to the same exact place? What, do you think he’s going to wait for you to exact your
revenge before he tries to kill us?”

Fat tears rolled down her cheeks as he spoke, but he didn't let up. The situation was too dangerous for him to allow himself to feel guilty. “If it was just that witch, then I'd be right beside you. You know I would. But you'll never survive the both of them.”

Anger twisted her expression, projected across their bond like blaster shots to his chest.

“Only if you leave me.” The words were a challenge, a snarling mask to cover up her very real fear.

She was losing control of her emotions. Her terror and rage were growing in her mind like parasites, dark and unchecked. She was all over the place.

He understood what that felt like.

But it terrified him to watch her go through it.

He didn't know what to do besides get back in her face. It wouldn't work, but he didn't think that he'd be able to restrain himself. He wouldn't if it proved to be the only way to get her to listen.

But he wouldn't rise to her bait, either. Forcing himself to unclench his fists, he tried very hard to regain a measure of calm. “I know you, Rey. You don't want revenge.”

“You don't know what I want.”

The words were angry, a careless comeback. He knew she didn't mean them. But they still stung, a little.

“Yes,” he stepped closer, close enough so that he could fit her against him, if he wanted. “I do.”

Her cheeks flushed a little at his words, but this time not from anger. She squeezed her eyes shut.

“Please,” she practically whispered, “don't try to talk me out of this.”

“I'll kill her for you,” he promised. Plead. “But later.” All he wanted was to get them to safety. Get her to safety. He went on, because saying it couldn't hurt. “Skywalker wouldn't want you to get revenge.”

They both knew that was true. Skywalker was many things, but he'd never been vengeful. Not as far as Kylo ever knew.

A spike of that familiar, revolting cold power rippled across the Force, carried on the limbs of the dead, gnarled trees past them and into the fog. Kylo felt a little lightheaded as it passed over them.

Snoke had reached the wellspring.

He closed his eyes in an attempt to steady himself.

“Kylo.” Rey's hand on his arm snapped his eyes open. Finally, the haze of rage and vengeance had dissipated from her eyes. They weren't gone, but she didn't look about ready to knock him out and go charging off to face Talzin, at least. Instead, she looked worried. Very worried.

“We have to go.” He left no room for argument.

Mercifully, she nodded.
“Do you think they know where we are?”

“Possibly,” he hated to admit. Perhaps Talzin wasn't exactly aware of where they were – or maybe she always knew, that witch kept finding new ways to surprise him. Snoke knew where they were, or at least the general area. There was doubt in his mind about that.

“Then let’s not stay here any longer.”

He nodded.

Rey gave his arm a quick squeeze and then dropped her hand. They took off in the direction running parallel to the wellspring.

Hopefully they could circumvent it. And hopefully Talzin and Snoke occupied each other long enough that they wouldn't notice them. Then they could leave and travel far enough away that Rey could get enough distance to cool down and change her mind about getting vengeance for an old man who didn't have many years left in him, anyway. Skywalker wasn't worth it. She was.

That was his best-case scenario. He wasn't getting his expectations up, but he could hope.

The wellspring was to their right, always to their right. The power that usually emanated from it was changing, becoming cold and vile. Not quite the type of power he knew to be his master’s, but more like it than it had been. He had to constantly remind himself to focus, to not allow himself to feel sick at being confronted with nearly the same power that had been ripped from his mind not long ago.

He focused on breathing instead. On the sound that Rey made as she ran next to him. He tried not to let his unsteadiness make its way across their bond.

“It’s not much farther to the shuttle,” Rey huffed. It was more work for her to keep up with his longer stride, but he didn't dare slow down.

Not with Snoke so near by.

Not when an appearance from Talzin would tear Rey’s goodness to shreds.

No, they had to get to the shuttle as quickly as possible.

But someone stumbled into their path.

Kylo narrowly managed to avoid them, but Rey wasn't so lucky. She collided with them and they both fell.

Rey yelped, and she hit the ground with a dull thud that he felt ripple across their bond. He immediately spun around to see her entangled with some – thing.

It almost looked like a Dathomirian witch, but its skin was a dark molten purple-black, clinging to bone-like limbs. It was clothed in rotted red robes that stuck to the skin in places like they had rotted together. Its eyes shone a ghastly green.

A Nightsister – if Nightsisters were monsters.

It entangled its bony limbs around Rey despite her very swift kicks to its gut. It didn't flinch, didn't react at all except to try and claw at her face.

“Kylo,” she grunted, but he was already there, wrenching the creature off of her and throwing it as far away as he could. He stalked after it and sliced it in two with his lightsaber before it had the
chance to get up again.

“Are you alright?” He turned and offered her his hand, clipping his saber back onto his belt.

She nodded, “Yeah,” and took his hand.

Dusting herself off, she peered closer at the dismembered creature. “What in the galaxy was that thing?”

“Nothing good,” he frowned. He held her hand for a moment longer before he let go, just because he could. “We need to keep moving.”

She gave an absent noise of agreement, although her focus remained on the carcass. She stepped closer, almost as if she was actually going to try and touch the thing.

“Rey.”

“Hold on,” waving him off, she stopped and closed her eyes. He could feel her stretch out her senses, not in a wide sweep, but in a specific direction.

Talzin’s direction.

Her mind started to drift, again – again – lured to the center of the wellspring’s vortex. As always. It seemed nearly impossible and highly infuriating to him that the planet still affected her so strongly.

There was so much twisted darkness around them he could barely keep straight which came from the Supreme Leader, which was from Talzin, and which was just Dathomir itself. Lifeforms moved frantically all around them, skittering away from the wellspring like they knew something he didn’t, although he could guess well enough.

Stepping closer, he grabbed her arm, fully intending to shake her out of it.

“Rey-”

Her eyes snapped open.

“It's the dead.”

He didn't know what she was saying, but he didn't let go of her. Something told him that she would bolt if he did. And he was right; she started tugging against his grip, trying to move in the direction that they did not want to go.

“Kylo, let go of me,” she grunted. She managed to wrench her arm free of his grip, but he just grabbed her other arm.

“You're going the wrong way.” They were doing nothing but wasting time. He wouldn't let her follow her impulse to try her foolhardy plan to get revenge. He wasn’t going to let that happen.

She twisted around in a move he'd never seen before – something she had picked up on Jakku, maybe – and wrapped her leg around his. With a single swift kick, she pulled his leg out from under him and knocked him onto his back. His grip dislodged from her arm as he fell.

Rey took off towards the wellspring at a sprint.

The fall did little more than surprise him, but it cost him valuable time. He should've seen that coming.
Fuck.

Kylo scrambled to his feet as fast as he could and took off after her. His gait was significantly longer than hers, and it wasn't like he didn't know exactly where she was going. Surely he could catch up before she actually made it.

Surely.

Fuck.

Fear swam through his mind, clouding everything but the vision of her breaking through the clearing around Talzin’s lair only to be killed. The Supreme Leader was there, too – she was going to get herself killed.

He used that thought to push him harder.

It didn't matter how he stopped her. He would save her life even if she spent the rest of it hating him.

There she was. A small relief swelled in his chest, although he wouldn't be able to truly feel it until they were off of this damned planet. She was fast, faster than he remembered. Even still, he gained on her, each stride bringing him closer-

But not close enough.

Rey broke through the clearing around the wellspring, her lightsaber already in her hand and activated.

Kylo was only a moment behind her.

They both drew up short.

“Force,” Rey gasped.

There were – more of those monsters. Everywhere. The long line of organic pods that hung from the trees surrounding Talzin’s complex were all torn open like broken cocoons, and all around the creatures snarled, clawing and biting at no less than thirty stormtroopers. Kylo saw one of the last cocoons break open and yet another monster come slithering out, dropping to the ground and immediately stumbling it's way towards the nearest trooper. They shrieked like ghouls.

And they all had those glowing green eyes.

He swallowed.

Talzin’s power was terrifying in its own right. He didn't think even the Supreme Leader could raise the dead.

Kylo's weapon was in his hand in a flash.

A shiver blew down his spine like the brush of dead fingers. Snoke wasn't far.

Something akin to hesitation passed over Rey’s face as she felt his reaction to his old master. Finally breaking free from her dazed focus, she frowned up at him and reached out her free hand to grip his free hand.

“We need to leave,” he bit out from between clenched teeth. Stop being an idiot, he wanted to say, but he had enough sense of mind to hold his tongue. For the moment. No one had noticed them yet,
but someone was bound to when they were each holding activated lightsabers.

She shook her head and looked back over the battle. “If she's distracted, then-”

He gave her hand a tug. “No.”

With a look of hardening resolve – that determination, that same damned determination that she always had – she pulled her hand away from him. Reaching for her pack, she said, “I've got a datapad with the ship coordinates on it. You can go-”

“No.” He snarled.

She lifted her chin. “Then help me fight.”

It didn't matter if he helped or not – they didn't stand a chance, not against the both of them.

“We can't win.”

For a moment she didn't say anything.

“We can,” she quietly insisted. “If we play it smart, we can.”

His expression told her what he thought about that.

She pursed her lips at him. “If she's busy using all of this power, then she'll be much easier to kill than if she had her full attention on us.”

“And what about Snoke?” He snapped. “He won't be nearly so preoccupied.”

That made her stop and truly hesitate. Even if Talzin's focus was totally consumed with controlling her dead, they had just gotten away from Snoke. He had just gotten away from Snoke. It was a decidedly suicidal plan to go towards him.

The Supreme Leader was not forgiving.

“Do you really want to keep running?” Her gaze was steady, but he could feel her question herself. Unease flowed both ways across their bond, both his and hers.

Of course he didn't want to run.

Of course he wanted to kill both of them.

“No.” It was a quiet admission, and it didn't change a thing. He couldn't let her go on with this. She was going to get herself killed.

Just the thought of that made his chest feel hollowed out of his chest.

No. That would not happen.

There was only one thing he could do. She was going to hate it – maybe even hate him for it. A pit of dread settled in his gut at that, at the thought that she might ever hate him again. But it didn't matter. What mattered was that she lived to hate him at all.

He raised his hand to sink her mind into unconsciousness-

Several of the troopers spotted them and opened fire. The shots were easy enough to block, but the
commotion drew the attention of Talzin’s monsters, too. A few broke off from their horrific attack on the stormtroopers and rushed at them, clawing at the air like they were going to rip them to shreds.

It wasn't safe to knock her out while they were getting attacked by both stormtroopers and Talzin’s creatures; he would have to wait until they killed enough so that they could back out of the clearing. But when he glanced over after killing a few, Rey was already a ways away from him, steadily fighting her way along the outskirts towards the entrance to the wellspring.

That damned, foolish, stubborn woman was still heading straight for Talzin.

“Rey,” he shouted.

He pulled at her across their bond, furiously urging her to come back, but he barely got even a nudge of acknowledgement in return. She was doing it again, he realized; she had slipped back into one of those trances she fell into whenever they were near the wellspring. Either that, or she was willfully ignoring him. But he didn't think she was.

Cursing under his breath, he struck down another monster and sent two stormtroopers flying with a swift flick of his hand. Holding his own wasn't difficult except for the sheer numbers. As long as the troopers and Talzin's creatures continued to be occupied by each other, he wasn't worried – except for the fact that they were slowing him down considerably. For each monster or trooper he struck down, another blocked his way just beyond.

He was falling farther and farther behind Rey.

Kylo growled in frustration. “Rey!”

One of Talzin's monsters got a lucky hit in due to his distraction, a long swipe of its claw-like fingers across the side of his head. Grunting more from surprise than pain, he whirled his blade around and hacked the creature clean in two.

There wasn't time for this.

He didn't have time.

Rey-

He only caught a glimpse of her – one last, solid glimpse of the gray of her jacket, of the brown of her hair – before she stepped into the yawning mouth of Talzin's complex. The shadow of the lair swallowed her whole and she disappeared from view.

It was like watching her walk into an abyss.

It was like having his breath forcibly stolen from his body.

Rey, Rey, Rey, he called out to her. The cords of their bond tugged against his chest, trying to steal his heart out from under his ribs.

And then it twisted.

A furious chill swept over him from her side of the bond, an inky black presence that Kylo knew far too well.

She had gone into Talzin's lair and walked straight into Snoke himself. He could practically feel the ghost of her lips against the shell of his ear like it was she who snarled the name herself.
“Snoke.”

Terror took hold of Kylo's heart. He no longer saw who he was killing or what he was killing. All he saw were useless things in his way. He swung his blade in large, messy arcs, uncaring of form. Everything in front of him died just the same.

He was frantic, he knew. He had lost control, and all he could see was red. But he didn't care.

He had to get to Rey- 

He had to help her- 

Kylo shouted in fury, cutting his way through anything in front of him.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, guys, we're approaching the 1-year anniversary of Collision of Stars! I honestly can't believe that I've stuck with this for so long, or that you guys have. You guys are the absolute best. We only have two more chapters and the epilogue, so there's not much left. One last push.

I'm pretty sure that is the last Kylo-POV chapter, which is sadder than I thought it would be. I started this story terrified to write him, but I love writing him.
The last thing Rey wanted to do was leave Kylo's side. The last thing – even if it meant that she couldn't get justice for what Talzin had done.

The last thing.

But the voices – they pulled her.


It was impossible to ignore them. Impossible not to just – follow them. And when the stormtroopers started firing and the monsters started coming, she found herself so far away from him that she would've lost sight of him entirely if it hadn't been for his angry red blade flashing in her periphery.

She shouldn't have done that. She shouldn't have drifted away.

She should turn back.

Just a bit further, the voices said. She tried to bat them away.

With each step she took that took her farther from Kylo, she told herself, she insisted – I should turn back.

But the voices pulled at her feet, and every time she had the chance she took another step farther away.

The voices told her – somehow, with their wordless meaning – that Talzin would be entirely defenseless when she found her. That if she could just make it to her, she could end it. She could stop Mother Talzin from ever chasing them again. She could give Luke justice.

Justice.

Even still – Kylo was right. She should turn back. She should just-

But the entrance to the wellspring loomed before her. She stood right in front of it.

She hadn't been aware that she had made it that far.

Closer still, whispered the voices, go on.

They led her back down into the yawning darkness of the wellspring, down into the depths of the place she'd only just escaped. Once more, she told herself – or the voices did – then she'd leave this place for good. Once she took care of Talzin, then she and Kylo could leave Dathomir forever.

Thinking of him brought her attention to their bond, to the hurt, worry, and all-consuming rage that hummed loudly from his side of their connection.

He didn't want her to go. And she had just – left him outside while she waltzed in the absolute worst possible direction. Straight into the rancor’s maw.
She had left him to fend for himself against Talzin's monsters, and the stormtroopers, and anything else that was out there. They still didn't know where Snoke was; if he were to show his face, if he were to try and take Kylo back, she wouldn't be there to help fight him off.

He had just broken free of Snoke's grasp, and what did she do? She basically brought him back to the the old bastard herself. If he had to confront Snoke again, it would be her fault.

All for a chance at revenge, she was endangering the man she loved.

She might as well have abandoned him in a den of vipers.

Justice-

The voices went suddenly silent in her head, their whispers cut off like they had been strangled. Rey strangled them.

And when they tried to breathe again, she strangled them again.

She would not allow them to manipulate her anymore – she was done letting her mind be twisted by this damned place and its power.

She was done listening to them.

She strangled them a third time, and then after a moment, a fourth. And she would keep strangling the voices until they were far enough gone from this damned planet that she would never have to hear them again.

Kylo – what she needed to do was get back to Kylo. Leave Dathomir. Go anywhere else.

Guilt crushed her. This whole thing was her fault.

Turning around to leave – to get back to Kylo, Kylo Kylo – she halted in her tracks. Her breath hitched.

The way back was just gone.

Gone like she had just come through a stone wall. Like the way into the wellspring had never existed.

Her heart stuttered in her chest.

Frantically taking in her surroundings, she noted that the hallway she stood in extend to both the left and right, as well as in front of her. They looked the same as the corridors she'd found the last time she'd had to escape Talzin's lair, only it was all a little different, a different section of the tunnels. She didn't know where she was.

She didn't know how to get out.

Picking a direction at random seemed her only choice. Even trying to pull on her and Kylo's bond didn't work. It just felt like he was above her, far enough that the elastic strings that tied them together pulled a little uncomfortably, but twisted up in a way that didn't help her orient herself at all. He was up above, but that's all she got.

Kylo, she tried to call out, but she could feel the walls of the wellspring push back. It deflected her call back at her, distorted and useless. The voices tried to rise up once more, but she shut them down without a second thought.
“Fine,” she grumbled to no one in particular, “I've found my way out of this place before.”

The halls were each different, but endless. She didn't think she passed by the same spot twice, but each long hallway took dozens of twists and turns, so she couldn't be sure. Her mind was buzzing too much to be able to focus.

She came across one of the larger hallways, a long straight-shot that she could see open up into a larger room with naturally-formed pillars at the far end. Hope sparked in her chest; maybe that was a good sign, maybe she was closer to the surface.

She started to bolt down the corridor – only to come to a grinding halt.

Her breath caught in her throat. Her hair stood on-end.

She knew that presence-

Rey whipped around to see the Supreme Leader of the First Order behind her, standing there as if he had been behind her the entire time. As if he had been waiting for her to notice him. She swallowed.

**Snoke**-

The expression on his face was what one might wear when regarding an insect, or a speck of dirt on their boot. It was designed to make her feel small and insignificant – but she could feel the cold fury rolling off of him like a foul stench.

He was decidedly *not* happy to see her.

The feeling was mutual.

“Well. If it isn't Kylo Ren's little *cunt.*” He arched his brow, twisting his already grotesque face just that much more.

Rey recoiled at his words, equal parts shocked and furious.

“Do you feel accomplished for having seduced that boy? Do you feel that you can keep him?”

“Kylo doesn't *belong* to you,” she snarled, her lightsaber already out and activated, “he's not your slave. Not anymore.”

The laugh that tore from Snoke’s lips was grating and harsh and entirely out of place. His lips stretched back to reveal a row of sharp teeth protruding from black gums. He was revolting to look at.

And his laugh didn't sound good.

“He's been mine ever since he was an infant,” he spit. Jabbing a skeletal finger in her direction, he roared, “it is simply you who has led him astray—*temporarily.*”

“He broke *free* of you!”

“You did that,” he flung out his hand and she went flying backwards. She had barely hit the floor when another blast of power knocked her back even further. She skidded across the ground, scraping her up her skin with each. “You stole him from me!”

Rey heaved on the ground, struggling to regain her breath after having it knocked out of her. She needed to move, but Snoke apparently wanted to keep talking, which was good. It allowed her a
moment to scramble to her feet.

“I'm going to kill you in front of him,” he promised, his voice suddenly eerily calm. He tilted his head and sneered, his scarred face becoming truly grotesque. “I'm going to cut you into a million pieces right in front of him, and then I'll make him burn the rest. He'll come back to me when he sees what his rebellion has done.”

A shiver shot up her spine, sharp as a knife.

And Rey knew that Kylo felt it. He knew that she had found his old slave master.

She wanted him to come – desperately – but she didn't want him to have to face Snoke, either. She wasn't foolish enough to try and tell him not to come, but she tried to project the urge to be careful. Although she didn't know if he got the message, because his side of their connection was quickly becoming a singular blaze of violence and rage.

This was all her fault. She had done this, by pursuing her feelings of hatred. She should've listened to master Luke’s teaching; if she had, she wouldn't have put Kylo or herself in danger.

If they died, it was on her.

She shifted her white-knuckled grip on her lightsaber, the only thing in between her and the monstrous leader of the First Order. She didn't even know if it would do her any good, since it depended on her getting close and Snoke didn't seem very inclined to let her. Still, she didn't see a weapon of any kind on him, so if she did manage to get closer, maybe she could land a hit.

Maybe.

“You're not going to trap Kylo under your control ever again,” she swore. “Even if you kill me, you won't.”

Snoke jabbed his finger in her direction. “I created Kylo Ren, girl. You spread your legs and you think you have him? He is mine to possess and mine to destroy.”

Her cheeks burned and her voice echoed off the walls. “He is no one's.”

The pale monster scoffed and stretched out his hand.

“I think I'll kill you with your own blade,” he spoke coldly, as if he was deciding as mundane as which robe to wear.

Power wrapped around the hilt of her blade, trying to wrench it from her grasp. It was sharp and strong, but she wasn't going to just let Snoke steal her lightsaber. Like hells she was.

Digging her feet into the ground, she threw her weight into pulling back against his invisible grip. It was like wrestling with an invisible giant. She didn't dare let one hand go of her lightsaber for fear that it would slip from her grasp, but she mustered her mental strength and pushed back with all of her own power. She didn't want to steal from Kylo's strength, but she felt it behind her all the same, a reassuring presence, dark and humming.

She felt like a wave breaking against a cliff side. It just made her push harder.

He would not take this from her.

He would not.
With something akin to a growl, Snoke let up on his pull. All of the sudden she was over-balanced, and she stumbled back, unable to catch herself before she fell.

When she scrambled back up, Snoke's expression had changed.

"Kylo Ren was right," he said, as if he hadn't quite believed him before. "You are powerful."

She didn't feel powerful. She felt exhausted – which was a bad sign, considering that she hadn't even swung her blade, yet.

But she tried not to show it.

He reached into the folds of his robe and Rey was certain that he was about to pull out a lightsaber. But all he pulled out was – a ring.

_The_ ring. That damned thing that Kylo had originally been sent to find.

She still didn't know what it did, but she had a sinking feeling that it was bad. If it was important enough that Snoke carried it on his person, it had to be.

"I need more power for this," he slipped it on his finger. Rey nearly thought she was crazy, or that Dathomir was giving her another insane delusion, because Snoke was suddenly _not_ the old, twisted being that she knew him to be. Suddenly he was-

He was _young._

And he looked _powerful._

Rey’s breath caught in her throat.

Then Snoke became old again, the horrific vision gone. She blinked just to be sure that she was seeing straight. That she wasn't just having nightmarish visions.

Snoke nodded as if she had said something. Maybe her expression was enough. "Powerful but weak, the same as Kylo Ren." He paused, glancing down at the small piece of jewelry on his finger. "I came here to make it more powerful. I was going to use the power of this wellspring," he looked up, "but now I have a better idea."

She had a bad feeling.

Taking several steps back, she held her lightsaber up higher. "Stay back," she warned.

But Snoke had stopped listening. He nodded to himself. "Yes. And if you're not enough, I still have a whole planet."

Snoke’s power gathered around her; she didn't have time to react.

She was slammed to the ground with the Force, held there only by her neck, which felt like it was being choked by an durasteel collar. Gasping for air, Rey clawed at her neck with her free hand as if she could find _some way_ to open her airways. Panic pulled at the corner of her mind, but she tried not to give in.

Her connection to Kylo flared white-hot, tugging her ribs and making her all the more breathless. She couldn't focus on it beyond feeling it's strength.

The need for air spurred her on. She writhed and kicked on the ground, trying anything – _anything_ –
to be able to breathe again. Hot tears streamed down her temples and she could feel her face turning red, then purple.

Black spots started to fill her vision at the same time that Snoke stepped into her line of sight. In her weakened state it was nothing for him to wrench her lightsaber away from her; she didn't know what happened to it, only that it was no longer in her hand.

When her struggles began to weaken, Snoke kneeled beside her. Pressing his skeletal hand against her chest, fingers splayed, he said, “Even now, you’re stronger than I thought.”

She barely heard him.

She barely heard anything – the world had all but blacked out for her, and she was only vaguely aware of the dark tendrils of Snoke’s power as they wrapped around her.

It was like he was sucking the soul from her body.

The fight all but left her, her strength drained to its end. She stopped struggling.

Death crept up on her like a shadow trying to swallow her whole, and she didn't have enough left in her to fight it. It pulled against her, stealing her soul away from her body, but something else tugged at her, too. Something equally dark but entirely more warm, something strong enough that she couldn't quite leave her body. Not yet.

The coldness of death kept pulling at her – then it loosened its grip. The warm darkness pulled harder.

It tugged her back.

And then she could breathe again.

All at once her chest opened up, and sweet, sweet air filled her lungs. She drank it in greedily, unable to help the coughs that wracked her frame. Her vision came back after a moment of lying on the ground, as did her hearing.

She felt her and Kylo's connection sing.

“Kylo,” she gasped, her voice hoarse. He was there, he had pushed Snoke away from her and was keeping him at a distance. Darkness sprang from his deepest recesses. She could feel it fuel him even as it rushed over their bond like a waterfall. Their bond coiled between them and gave her the strength to stagger to her feet.

She reached out her hand and called her lightsaber back to her. She didn't know what Snoke had done with it, but after a moment it answered her call just the same. The weight of the weapon felt good in her hand. It felt like the power to do something.

Rey wasted no time before joining the fight.

Snoke hadn't pulled out a weapon; each strike Kylo made he deflected with his hand. He seemed to shield himself with the Force. Kylo wasn't discouraged by the defense; he just hacked away at his old master as if he had all the energy reserves in the world.

She ran around Snoke's flank and struck at him as well. Their combined strength made Snoke retreat a couple of steps.
Snoke kept trying to talk to Kylo.

“Your offenses have been great,” he said, as if he could appeal to some other nature in Kylo, “but you aren't beyond hope. You can still cut out the cancer inside you.”

Kylo swung his blade in a vertical arc that pressed Snoke closer to Rey's own diagonal blow. He managed to deflect both of them, but it nearly sent him off-balance.

“I have,” Kylo growled.

He suddenly changed tactics and landed a solid hit with his knee to Snoke's side. The monstrous man doubled over, throwing out both hands and slamming them with a Force blast that knocked them both off their feet.

Snoke straightened, and Rey could see by the look on his face that he was done with the tactic of appealing to his version of Kylo's ‘better nature.’

“Very well,” he sneered, hitting Kylo with another blast of the Force that knocked him clear across the hall. “You will face the consequences of your willfulness.”

Stretching out his other hand, he froze Rey to the spot.

It was like being encased in hardened molasses.

Her eyes went wide.

Shit.

Snoke looked her in her eye. “I will cut out the cancer myself.”

They both knew what he was about to do.

“Stay away from her,” Kylo snarled, springing to his feet only to be hit by another wave of Snoke's power. This time he managed to keep his footing, but it still kept him far enough away that he couldn't do anything.

Rey struggled against Snoke's hold, but to no avail. No matter how much she fought, he didn't seem to have to expend much of his own energy to hold her there.

Shit.

They had to change tactics.

She hated the idea that came to mind, but it was the only one she had. Their one shot.

Shit.

She pulled at their bond to get Kylo’s attention. His mind was swimming in red – in panic and hatred and darkness – but she cut through it. He gave a quick tug in response, rough and very much there. He reached across to her as if it was a physical thing.

We need to let him close, she quickly told him, he will try and power his ring with my life force.

The pure rage alone that rose up in him told her that he was listening.

I'll kill him, was all he thought, over and over and over. I'll kill him.
Snoke was already in front of her.

Rey gave another sharp tug on their bond, trying to regain his attention. *He'll be distracted.*

“Your life is meaningless except for this,” the Supreme Leader of the First Order sneered at her. “And even this is unsure.”

She would've lifted her chin if she could. Or spat on him.

He put the hand wearing the ring to her forehead, pressing his pointer and index fingers to the space between her brows. His fingers were cold and clammy as a corpse. *Repulsive.*

Then he tried to suck the life out of her again, much in the same way that he had just moments ago when she'd been choking on the ground. Only this time, she felt everything he was doing.

It felt like he peeled her open to reveal a thousand different strings inside her – her connection to the Force, her very *life*. And it felt like he began to pluck them all out, one by one, and feed them into the little bauble on his finger.

*Agonizing* was the only word for it.

And then, as soon as it had started – it stopped.

Heat blossomed near the center of her chest. It was an electric, dangerous heat, spitting close enough to her sternum that for a moment she thought that Snoke had a lightsaber after all and had run her though with it. But she knew that energy.

She looked down and swallowed. There was a lightsaber – Kylo's lightsaber – spitting so close to her skin.

But it was protruding from Snoke's chest.

The power keeping her rooted to the spot cut off suddenly, and she scrambled away from him. She very nearly lifted her own lightsaber to simply *end* it, but she saw Kylo's face as he stabbed his old master, she saw the stony set of his brow and the snarl that twisted his mouth. His eyes blazed with the reflection of his blade.

This moment was his.

This was his demon to slay.

So she didn't make the move to strike Snoke down – but she stayed close-by, just in case Kylo needed her. Because this demon wasn't dead yet.

Snoke seemed to be in a state of shock. He stared at the lightsaber protruding from his chest with something akin to confusion. He lifted his hand as if he was going to touch it, but stopped himself.

“Kylo Ren,” he breathed.

Kylo twisted his blade in further. Rey didn’t know how he could possibly still be alive.

But Snoke wasn't finished yet. With a blast of energy so thick that it was almost visible, he blasted everything away from him with enough force that it made the very walls around them quake. Rey went flying down the hall and didn't hit the ground again until a pillar stopped her. She had been knocked all of the way into the room where the corridor opened up into some sort of greater hall.
She hit the ground with a thud. Pain blossomed from her back, and she spent a good few moments heaving and hacking, trying to regain her breath. Each time her chest expanded she could feel a sharp pain in her left ribs. She didn't have to investigate it to know that she had broken at least one of them; she'd had enough broken ribs in her lifetime to know what they felt like.

The part of her mind that was always with Kylo lit up with a quick spark of pain, too. The strings of their connection quivered in response, trying to coil towards each other. He was hurt. Maybe not too badly, but wounded all the same. It was hard to tell.

Using the pillar to push herself up, she winced as the movement aggravated her wounded ribs.

If Snoke was still so powerful even after what should've been a mortal wound, then Kylo was in danger and she had to help him-

But it wasn't Kylo whom Snoke had followed.

He didn't say anything as he staggered towards her, clutching the hole in his chest with one hand. The Force swirled around him like a black maelstrom. It must've been what was keeping him up – keeping him alive – when by all logic he should've already been dead.

The stalactites above her head started to sway unnaturally. The very walls around her were still rumbling with the aftershock of Snoke's power.

“Die, bitch,” he snarled at her, spewing dark blood from his mouth.

Three of the stalactites broke off at once, arcing towards her. Rey barely dove out of the way in time.

But he had seen that move coming. She had to keep moving as two more stalactites shot towards her, and then two more. Then he switched it up and started to hurl large chunks of rock in her direction. Everywhere she moved, he shot projectiles as her.

It was destabilizing the walls around them even more. Rey found herself terrified that at any moment the ceiling could collapse and kill them all.

Or trap them there, which could be arguably worse.

Snoke got one solid hit in; he anticipated where she'd run next and managed to hit her square in her chest with one of his flying pieces of rock. Rey took the hit with a grunt and then a cry as she hit the ground. She could feel her ribs cracking further, spreading fire all throughout her chest.

The next stalactite that flew at her was too quick for her to dodge. All she could do was throw out her hands and try to hijack it with her own power-

It was like stopping a speeder in a net.

But she did it.

The jagged rock hovered above her, stopped dead in its tracks. Her power didn't waver, despite the push she felt against her.

Huffing through the pain in her side, she turned the stalactite so that it was pointed towards Snoke – then she blasted it towards him. He stared at it in disbelief for a whole moment before he dodged it.

Just barely.

But the movement knocked him off his feet. He hit the ground with a groan, as apparently some of
the feeling in his wound caught up to him. It allowed Rey a moment to gingerly push herself to her feet. Each breath pushed against her ribs and sent dark shocks of pain across her chest. Some of her pain crept across her and Kylo's bond, she couldn't help it.

The reflexive tug in her heart told her that he felt what she did, and it darkened her guilt.

She had only taken a few steps towards Snoke's prone form when Kylo finally reappeared. He held his right arm close to his chest, and she could feel the twinges of pain that emitted from it. She thought that maybe it was broken, or at least cut deep enough to be rendered more-or-less useless. Blood flowed freely from a cut hidden somewhere in his hair line, but that only served to make the thunderous expression on his face look all the more severe.

His lightsaber sparked and blazed in his left hand. There was a singular intent in his grip, a singular intent in his gaze.

They exchanged a brief look. His eyes swept over her form head-to-toe, relief and worry and fury shining like a storm in his eyes. Her heart sputtered at seeing him wounded again – he always seemed to get wounded around her, and this time it was entirely her fault – but she was relieved to see him standing, at least.

She gave him a nod and he turned his attention back towards Snoke. His mind narrowed in on itself, tunneling to one purpose. She could feel him close himself off to her, if only for this moment. It wasn't personal. He needed to do this – she understood.

Rey tried to keep a straight face, but every breath made her want to cringe in pain. Her lightsaber hummed at her side, ready for the worst, but she stayed where she was. She didn't want to move around if she didn’t have to.

“Kylo Ren,” Snoke gasped from the ground, still clutching his wound with one hand as he used the other to push himself up. Kylo didn't let him get far; he strode over and gave him a swift kick to the chest, knocking him back to the ground with a thud.

Before he could move to get up again, Kylo jammed his lightsaber into Snoke's shoulder.

“Is this my weakness for her you feel?” Kylo shouted over Snoke's cry, twisting the lightsaber in deeper. Blood dripped off his chin. He pulled the blade out and jammed it in again in the exact same spot, only at a different angle. “Or is this the strength only you could give me?”

Snoke pushed him away with the Force, but he was too weak to do anything more than make Kylo stumble back a step. He was back on his old master in a second.

With one swift stroke, he cut off the Supreme Leader’s hand. He listened to his screams for only a moment before he cut off the rest of the arm.

Snoke's shrieks filled the cave, bouncing off the walls around them. They rang in Rey's ears. She swallowed and willed herself not to look away.

Kylo looked wild.

He stepped on Snoke’s wounded shoulder, grinding the heel of his boot into the burned flesh. The smell of it finally reach Rey's nose, and she had to hold her breath to keep herself from gagging.

The air seemed to shimmer around them, the Force seemed to shake. Snoke didn’t have long left.
For what seemed like an eternity, Kylo watched his old master squirm. He listened to his cries. She couldn't see his eyes, but she knew that this was why he had momentarily cut himself off from her.

She knew that he was enjoying this, reveling in it.

In giving back just a little of what he had been given.

Rey just stared.

He stabbed Snoke three more times, once in each thigh and then once in the abdomen. The power that Snoke used to keep himself alive was keeping him alive even through the torture, and Kylo was taking advantage of it.

Then, after the Supreme Leader’s screams had practically torn her eardrums to shreds, Kylo leaned forward. His sneer was bloody.

"I tire of you."

And then he relieved Snoke of his head.

The power that he'd had, all of that cold, inky darkness, released from his body like an explosion. One last burst of power, violent enough that everything rumbled around them. The walls of the cave started to groan. For a moment the power suffocated the air, drowning them in Snoke's shadow even after he was dead – but then the walls of the cave started to absorb it even as they continued to groan.

His power became the wellspring’s power. The wellspring sucked up the residual power like a sponge, drying the air of every last bit of Snoke's presence until there was nothing left. It blotted out the last bit of light – those tiny pinpricks of stars that Rey had found beautiful when she'd first crashed on Dathomir. Before she had known what this place was.

The walls stopped groaning and everything finally settling down.

There was no noise besides the humming of their lightsabers. The screaming had stopped.

Snoke was dead.

Snoke was dead.

Kylo turned to look at her, and their connection flooded open between them. The relief and freedom and lingering rage he felt washed across her thoughts. And – there was hesitation, too. She couldn’t figure out what for.

“Are you alright?” He asked.

She deflated, wincing at the stab of pain from her ribs, and deactivated her lightsaber. “Yeah,” she nodded, “are you?”

He looked down at the body and then back at her. Putting away his own lightsaber, he said, “I've never been better.”

An apology for putting them in that situation, for putting him in danger and getting him hurt, burst from her. “I'm sorry, this was all my fault. I should never have-”

“Rey,” he cut her off, “stop.”

She exhaled, then nodded. She reached out to him with one of her arms, an invitation.
He stepped over the body and came towards her open arm. They sank into each other. He was mindful of her ribs, holding onto her as if she was glass. She made sure to be careful of his injured arm. She pressed herself as close to him as she could manage, with his bloodied hair and his dirtied clothes. She reached up and ran her fingers through the ends of his dark hair as he leaned down to press his face into her neck. His muscles slackened in her embrace.

“I love you,” she said, because she sensed that he needed to hear it. He pressed a kiss to the side of her neck in response.

“You’re hurt because of me,” she said after a moment. She couldn’t help herself. “I was an idiot and I almost got us both killed.”

She felt him shake his head. “Make it up to me later,” was all he said.

She pressed her lips into his shoulder, too tired to blush but unable to stop the small twitch of her lips. She sighed. “Okay.”

They stood with arms wrapped around each other for – a long time. She didn’t keep track of exactly how long.

She just focused on them.

On being alive.

Something in the air changed, shifted. The wellspring’s power flexed. Kylo lifted his head from her shoulder.

“Do you feel that?” He asked.

She nodded, letting her arms slide down to the front of his chest. “Yeah.”

No sooner than she had spoken, the first of Talzin's creatures appeared. Then more appeared. Then more. Some of them – some of them were the stormtroopers they had passed by on their way in.

And some of them looked as if they had been bisected with a lightsaber and had pulled themselves back together.

“What in the galaxy,” Rey breathed. She pulled out her lightsaber.

Kylo's own lightsaber was already spitting in his grip. “This isn't possible.”

“Obviously, it is.” Although she couldn't quite believe it herself. Glancing up at him, she asked, “What do we do?”

The wellspring rumbled around them, still unstable from their confrontation with Snoke. Another reason why they needed to get the hell out of there.

Kylo's lips pressed into a hard line, his brows pulled low over his eyes. “We should fight, or we should leave.”

Talzin was still there. Rey would most likely never have another shot at getting justice for master Luke’s death if they left.

But Kylo had already gotten hurt.

So Rey shook her head. “I don't think I want to fight them.” Her ribs were on fire; she needed a
bacta treatment, and so did he.

“Agreed.”

But the way they had come from was blocked by the creatures, who started to run towards them. They cut down the fastest ones that managed to reach them first as they backed away. It wasn't more than a few moments before the fallen bodies started to pull themselves back together.

“Did they do that before?” She asked, wide-eyed.

Kylo didn't bother answering. Neither of them knew if there was another way out of there, but neither of them felt very much like getting swarmed by self-repairing monsters.

All their eyes glowed a sickly green.

Whatever Talzin had done to those bodies made Rey sick.

They didn't have time to dwell on it; they turned and ran away from the creatures before they could get overwhelmed. They went deeper into the wellspring – they didn't have much of a choice.

Chapter End Notes

And there we have it, Snoke it finally gone. This ended up longer than I thought it was going to be, and yet it still feels a little...anticlimactic? I don't know, we still have one chapter to go in the story proper.

Anyway, my nervousness has pretty much tripled now that we're at the end. I'm just glad I've made it this far!
The pain built up in Rey’s chest the more they ran.

Each breath she took felt like she was breathing in shards of glass. And on top of that, the air felt so thick that she had to fight for each painful breath.

It was the wellspring, the newly complete darkness to it. It turned the air thick as molasses with power and made it difficult to breathe. Everything was darker, heavier, and it made the corridors all the more difficult to navigate. The further they ran down the dark, twisting hallways, the more Rey became convinced they were being corralled.

Judging by the glower on his face, Kylo suspected the same.

It wouldn’t be long before the corridors spit them out into the central chamber. She sensed that they were nearing the center – nearing the heart of the wellspring.

But of course Talzin would drive them there.

“Rey,” Kylo huffed, drawing her attention to a split in the hallway. It was too painful to try and respond with anything more than a grunt.

They made a sharp turn to the left, and her momentum nearly sent her straight into the wall. He gave her a swift yank on the arm to keep her with him.

“Your ribs-” he started.

She shook her head, barely managing a breathy, “I’m fine.”

He didn’t say anything in return, but he pushed over their connection a little, sending his strength over the cords of their bond like a shortcut to her heart. It helped with the pain, just a little.

It was enough.

Mother Talzin’s creatures scratched and wailed behind them as they ran. Rey knew that if she took a second to turn around and look, she would be haunted by the sight of the should-have-been-dead bodies trying to kill them.

Everything touched by Talzin’s power turned monstrous. Rey’s heart burned with hatred.

They broke into the main cavern somewhere near the base, close enough to one of the flowing streams of glowing green ichor that some of it splashed up onto her boots and calves. In another situation she would’ve been worried that the ichor was poisonous, or that it would have some sort of adverse effect on her skin, but as it was she barely even noticed it.

What she did notice – what they both noticed – was Talzin.

Right where they knew she’d be.

She stood in the center of the pillars erected around the ritual site, her robes flowing around her as if there was a strong wind that only she could feel. Her arms were outstretched, but – she had lost one
of her hands. Rey blinked. It must've happened when master Luke-

Talzin’s eyes glowed an electric green, just the same as her monsters. She turned to face them and the glow receded, leaving her eyes the same unsettling white as ever.

She did not look happy.

Despite the nightmarish woman before them, something compelled Rey to glance over her shoulder. The creatures – they had stopped. They stood by the end of the corridor, lurking silently with their terrifying eyes. Yet not a single one entered the cavern. They just – stood there.

She didn't realize that she had faltered in her step until she felt Kylo's hand on her arm. He had stopped, as well.

Talzin greeted them before either of them had a chance to catch their breath. The wellspring rumbled around them, still unsettled but holding together. For the moment.

“You fools, you–children,” she snarled, her voice echoing off the cavern walls. “Do you realize what you have done by releasing the power of that creature into this wellspring? The damage the two of you have caused?”

Rey could barely stand to listen to her voice, it made her so livid. She tried to step forwards only to be held back by the hand Kylo had on her arm. Trying absently to free herself from his grip, she spat, “I hope this place gets destroyed.”

The woman scoffed. “Well, you are well on your way to accomplishing that, I assure you. That creature’s darkness has completely destabilized this place. The power is all wrong, too unbalanced.” She paused and stared at them as if there was something uncanny about the two of them. As if she had finally come to some bitter realization.

“You would wound the Force rather than bend to the will of the Spirits.”

“Fuck your spirits,” Kylo snapped. He let go of Rey to activate his lightsaber. Rey quickly armed herself as well.

“You're going to die,” she promised, willing her voice to sound steady, “for killing Master Luke. And for trying to kill us.”

It felt good to wallow in the spark of darkness in her chest, to give in the her feelings of hatred. She had never done that before – she had never needed to, since discovering her powers.

She knew that Kylo could feel it across their bond, but he only acknowledged it with a quick glance, and with a small press of his mind. He didn't press far. To him, it was nothing to be ashamed of, she was sure.

But Master Luke wouldn’t have liked it. So she promised herself that she would only use it for this one retribution.

Just this once.

Talzin lifted her hands in the air, materializing a dagger in her one remaining hand. It was large, curved, and looked like it was made of the same material as her other conjured weapons. She glided out of the ritual circle towards them.

“The destructiveness of youth,” Talzin spat, as if she was reciting some well-known proverb. “But I
shall repay your destruction. Then the Spirits will be satisfied.”

Kylo scoffed.

Mother Talzin was on them in a flash, brandishing her dagger with more skill and finesse than Rey had expected. She immediately separated the two of them, spinning around to block an attack from one, and then the other.

Kylo nearly landed a hit to where her legs presumably were under all those robes, but she moved too quickly for him. She moved too quickly for either of them.

A swipe here, a stab there. It was difficult to try and predict where the woman would strike next.

Despite the fact that they outnumbered her, Rey eventually found herself falling on the defensive.

She had to duck when Talzin tricked Kylo into swinging his saber a little too close to her. He swore under his breath as his momentum carried him through the swing, and she felt his relief when she managed to avoid it. Talzin used his momentary distraction to hit him with a blast of the Force, throwing him back far enough that he almost fell in one of the pools of ichor.

Rey swung her lightsaber, but Talzin twisted out of her way. Then she flicked her wrist, and Kylo’s lightsaber was wrenched from his grip before he could even get up.

She didn’t see where it went.

Rey barely had enough time to give a tug over their bond to try and see if he was okay before Talzin was on her again. She nearly stumbled over a few pieces of rubble that had fallen from the cavern ceiling as she tried to keep some distance between the two of them. Over and over, she struck with her dagger, moving so quickly that Rey could barely keep up.

One hit connected with her forearm-

And another with her shoulder-

Trying to break up the quick succession of blows, she struck out blindly with her lightsaber. Purely by chance, she aimed straight for Talzin’s remaining wrist. Her move surprised the woman enough that she had to wrench her hand away at an odd angle, and she momentarily lost her grasp on her dagger.

Now was Rey’s chance. Bringing her saber down in the hardest swing she could manage-

Mother Talzin grabbed ahold of Rey’s lightsaber hilt, stopping the blow dead in its tracks. Wide-eyed, Rey tried to wrench it away from her, but the ghoulish woman held on with a durasteel grip.

“Let. Go.” Rey grunted through clenched teeth.

Talzin said nothing; she only squeezed her grip harder, and harder still. Rey cried out as she crushed her fingers between the her hand and the hilt. It occurred to her that Talzin planned on tightening her grip until the lightsaber broke.

The pain became enough that Rey started to pull her hand back automatically, if only to save her bones from being broken. After a moment, she managed to wriggle her hand away from Talzin’s death grip, but it was too late for the weapon itself.

The blade flickered then disappeared when Talzin started chanting something. Her hand glowed as
she bent the metal and cracked the lens. The hilt sparked, then gave way under her unnatural
strength. Even the crystal cracked, and the it sounded like thunder to her ears.

Her heart stopped in her chest.

Rey cried out. “Stop!”

But it was already done. Talzin had broken her lightsaber in two.

It felt like someone had broken her lungs. It felt like she had been crippled.

Letting the pieces fall to the ground, Talzin’s dagger rematerialized in her hand as she swung to
strike Rey once more. She was too close for Rey to be able to fully react, less than an arm’s length
away.

But suddenly Kylo was there, both hands wrapped around Mother Talzin’s arm as he wedged
himself in between Rey and the blade. Practically growling, he stopped her in her tracks with sheer
physical power.

Rey froze, stunned, but only for a second.

Talzin quickly shifted her focus to Kylo, tilting her aim just slightly so that she was trying to stab him
instead. She pressed against him so hard that both her arms and his were shaking.

Rey wasted no time in trying to help Kylo. She went to wrestle Talzin's wrist away from him, but
Talzin blasted them both with a wall of the Force that knocked her off her feet and sent him skidding
to his knees. He barely managed to keep the dagger away from his chest.

The nightmare woman used the opportunity to press harder against Kylo, and it started to work. His
arms started to weaken – Rey could feel it across their bond. His anger and pain in his arm buzzed
like static over their bond.

Scrambling to her feet, she rushed over to add her strength to his.

But that was exactly what Mother Talzin wanted.

As soon as Rey got close enough to lay her hands on the woman, Talzin closed her eyes and chanted
a strange phrase. The darker voice rumbled under her own. Almost instantly, Rey felt her legs
weaken. She felt her head lighten.

Talzin's wrist slipped from her fingers.

Then she hit the ground.

Only she didn’t-

She wasn’t in the wellspring anymore. She was suddenly outside, surrounded by nothing but fog and
standing in the eye of some sort of raging storm. Wind whipped the fog around her and snapped at
her clothes. The sky hung a dark red above, but it was quickly filling with dark clouds. Flashes of
purple lightning were the only sources of light, but they barely illuminated anything.

The maelstrom that surrounded her was all at once loud and soft, as if she was only hearing an echo
of its true sound.

As if it was no more than a dream, or a memory.
She recognized this place.

Talzin's had pulled her to this place before. Or somewhere similar, at least.

For the briefest of moments Rey thought she saw a dark figure crumpled on the ground. Her heart froze in her chest, a useless weight between her lungs as she spun towards the figure.

“Kylo-” she gasped, but when she turned to look he wasn't there.

Last time he had been, she remembered. He had lay unconscious on the ground, nearly swallowed whole by Talzin’s fog. She suddenly remembered it all so clearly. But not this time. This time it was just her mind, too frantic from adrenaline to differentiate memory from – whatever this was.

It was like reliving an old nightmare.

Only it was worse, because outside of Talzin’s mind games they were still fighting for their lives. The witch was about to stab Kylo, and without Rey to help him-

“I've underestimated you, child.”

The voice was ear-splitting, like a sharp note, and underscored by a darker, much more terrifying voice. She never wanted to hear that woman speak again.

The hatred Rey felt bubbled up like acid in her throat. She felt like she could vomit fire.

Talzin appeared in front of her, the swirling mists parting to reveal the flowing crimson of her robes, the ashen pallor of her skin. Her eyes glowed white and otherworldly, as unnerving as always.

She looked just the same as the first time she ever saw her.

“Damn right you have,” Rey threw at her, wishing with every fiber of her being that she had her lightsaber in this vision. Or any weapon, really. “Let me out of this place.”

The woman sneered. She had never seen her sneer like that before. It made her look even more monstrous that ever – if that was even possible. “The young always fight. You, girl, are like all the rest–blind to the larger picture, and apathetic to the needs of the Spirits.”

Rey stubbornly ignored her. “Let. Me. Out.”

Talzin’s laugh sent a shiver down her spine. She had never heard anything less humorous.

“You fool-girl, Rey.” She drew nearer, her spidery fingers outstretched towards Rey. Only then did she realize that Talzin still had both her hands. Perhaps she was indulging in some vanity by pretending that she hadn’t lost one of them.

Somehow that thought grounded her, gave her the smallest measure of reassurance.

“But you can't kill me.” It was more bluster than real confidence, because she was certain that the woman was trying to kill them in the real world, but her words had an effect on the woman. Her eyes narrowed and her nostrils flared. But she continued her advance.

“You've done more damage to the balance of Force than I would've thought possible,” she spat, all traces of her unsettling maternal calm gone, replaced with a bitter fury. “By killing that creature in this place of power you have…ruined everything beyond the point of repair.”

Rey backed away one step, then another, but found it increasingly difficult to move. It was as if she
was actually in a dream. Her heart started pounding, her mind frantically pulling, reaching out to Kylo-

Talzin drew herself up, towering over Rey as she stood suspended above her. “For that I will kill you. True balance can no longer be achieved from this place, but perhaps the sacrifice of your life will be enough to stabilize this wellspring alone.”

She charged at Rey, her skeletal fingers stretched out like claws. A scream ripped from her throat, echoing across the fog like a dying varactyl. The dark, twisted voice rang out in a continuous undercurrent.

The hair on the back of Rey's neck stood on-end at the sound.

She barely had enough time to react, to do anything at all. Moving on instinct, she threw up her arms in front of her as if she was about to physically stop Talzin with her bare hands. She focused on throwing up her mental walls, on trying to shove Talzin out, or getting out herself.

All of the sudden, a clear, shimmering wall materialized in between the two of them. Talzin nearly ran into the wall before she stopped herself.

Rey stared with wide eyes as Mother Talzin screeched once more and pounded on the translucent wall. It felt like a mental shove against her thoughts.

"Rey!" The ghoul of a woman snarled, pounding again and again against the wall. Rey stumbled back a few steps, putting more distance between them.

She couldn't believe it – her mental defenses were physically manifesting before her. And despite the continuous push she felt against it, her barrier was strong enough to keep Talzin away.

She hadn't been able to do that before. The first time-

It had been a long time since the first time Talzin had tried this. And Rey had grown stronger, less afraid – and livid.

Because of what this monster had done to Master Luke-

Because of what could possibly be happening to Kylo-

“You can't keep me away forever, Rey.” Talzin had regained some measure of control over herself, but her white eyes seemed to glow more hotly than ever before. She kept her hand pressed to the barrier, a tiny pressure that Rey felt in the back of her mind.

“This is my domain.” She paused and became even more calm. “I can feel you getting weaker, child. Every moment you fight, you prolong all of our suffering.”

“Go space yourself,” Rey snapped.

Mother Talzin started to press both hands against the shimmering wall. She started pounding on it again and Rey grunted, wincing against the assault in her head.

She kept pounding, pounding, pounding-

Then she snarled and threw her entire body against the wall. She dissolved against it like a blood mist.

Rey was left alone, breathing heavily as she watched the last wisps of Talzin become nothing at all.
That was too easy.

Far too easy.

She had to be planning something. Rey no longer felt the hard push of a mental assault, but that didn't mean anything; that nightmare of a woman was bound to have more than one trick up her sleeve, especially in this place.

There was nothing to do but stay ready.

The fog swirled around her, swept up in the continuous storm that thundered up above. But there was something -- something to her right. It looked like a figure.

The figure approached her slowly. Rey narrowed her eyes, trying to see who it was through the dark grey fog.

She gasped, the wind suddenly knocked out of her. Her heart stuttered in her chest. Her knees suddenly felt weak beneath her, and for a moment she was afraid that she would collapse.

None of this was real. She was in Talzin's mental trap -- and that's what this was: a trap. It wasn't real. It wasn't real. It wasn't--

"Rey," Luke called out to her.

He came close enough to stand right in front of her shimmering barrier. His eyes were very bloodshot and blue, and they looked terribly sad. And he was bleeding. Right where his heart was, a steady stream of crimson stained his robes, traveling down his tunic and dripping on the ground.

Even with the sound of the wind and her own heartbeat thundering in her ears, she could hear the blood as it dripped.

Drip.

Drip.

He looked like he was in pain. "Why?"

Rey's throats felt suddenly parched. She couldn't help but answer. "Why what?"

"Why did you let me die?"

Tears stung her eyes, threatening to fall down her cheeks. Even though she knew -- this couldn't be real, it wasn't, Luke was dead -- she couldn't help but look at him and see the real thing, Master Luke.

That blood -- was that how he died?

Did he bleed out of his heart?

It was impossible to stop the tears from escaping.

"I didn't mean to," her voice turned rough. "I didn't--"

Her raised his hand, silencing her. "You failed me. I put all of my hopes in you, and you failed me. Did you really think that there was no other way? That that man who used to be my nephew didn't use the opportunity to abandon me to die?"

She shook her head furiously. "It wasn't like that. Kylo isn't to blame."
Luke pressed his hands against her barrier, and to her surprise, it moved. He continued to press it further with each word. “Your faith in him allowed me to be put in the position to die. Out of all my students, only you betrayed me to the same level he did—”

But he would never have said that to her. More than anything, she knew that he would never have said that. Not him.

It broke her suspension of disbelief, and she was once again simply trapped in Talzin’s mind games, facing nothing more than an illusion.

It wasn't real.

She straightened her shoulders.

“No.”

The wall rippled, then halted. Luke couldn't move it any further.

“No,” she said again, with equal parts conviction and vehemence. “It's not Kylo's fault that you died. He didn't kill you—Talzin did.”

The false Luke’s expression hardened, and suddenly he looked much less like the Jedi master she used to know and love. Suddenly he looked like a puppet, just an imitation of life. He continued to try and press against her defenses, but he couldn't get anywhere. Her tears were already drying.

Raising her voice, she shouted to the fog and the storm, “You won't make me weak.”

As she spoke Luke dissolved much in the same way that Talzin had. But he left the trail of blood on the ground.

The blood led back to Mother Talzin, who materialized in front of her once more. Her robes flapped around her like a dog snapping at her heels.

Her sneer was mocking. “Very clever of you, Rey, to see through such a simple illusion. But your boy,” she trailed off as the sound of the storm turned into the echo of a cry. The echo of Kylo's cry.

“The danger he is in is very real. Do you think you'll survive long enough to see him die?” Her eyes glowed an awful white. “Or maybe I'll draw his death out. A price to pay for his blood, for his devotion towards you.”

“Don't you lay a finger on him!” All at once, it was as if Kylo was dying right next to her. His cries of agony echoed off the fog and rattled between her ears like broken glass. Fury and terror stole her breath out of her lungs as she frantically tried to pull on their bond.

The strings were there, she could tell that she was still so close to him—

Yet she was trapped in this mental cage of Talzin's making. She was useless to help.

Mother Talzin immediately took advantage of her near-panic. With more strength than ever, she pushed against Rey's mental wall. It moved, it shrunk, it fell towards her, nearly broken with the strength of Talzin’s assault and Rey's own inner turmoil.

Kylo, Kylo-

No. She had to focus, she had to keep her defenses up. If she didn't, then she wouldn’t be able to-
She threw out her hands to physically push against her barrier, which had been pushed back to less than an arm’s length away. The pressure in her mind was excruciating as she fought against Talzin's assault. Rey’s arms felt so very tired and her muscles shook under the effort. Her feet slid back in the grey dirt.

Talzin gained ground. Her mouth cracked into a wide, awful grin that looked like it split her face from ear-to-ear.

“This is the end of your fight, young one. This is inevitable.”

But she could still hear Kylo’s voice. She could hear his pain.

And she wouldn't leave him. Never.

She promised.

Rey dug her boots into the ground, and she stopped sliding. With a grunt, she shifted her position so that she could put all of her weight behind her arms. Her muscles still shook, they still felt like melted jelly, but she gave no more ground.

She huffed, and took a step. The wall moved back towards Mother Talzin. She took another step. The barrier shimmered as if it was under a great strain – which it was.

Talzin seemed to be in disbelief.

“How could—”

The mental bombardment Rey felt between her ears was like experiencing a sudden change in altitude. Her ears popped and she could hear her blood rushing through her head. But she didn't focus in the pain and discomfort; she focused on gaining ground, on pushing Talzin back.

And she was.

She pushed the wall all the way back to where it had been – and farther.

Mother Talzin kept losing ground.

Rey’s arms stopped shaking.

She looked up, straight into the eyes of the monster who had killed Luke, who had tried numerous times to kill Kylo and herself. The monster who had haunted her for months.

She used to be so afraid.

“Get the hell out of my head.”

Then, with one last push, Rey broke free of Mother Talzin's illusion.

All of the sudden, she fell forward on her face. The ground was cold and hard, ancient stone with faint etchings of some faded pattern. She cried out as the impact hurt her already broken ribs. But the pain almost felt good, because it was real. She was back in her body.

She had broken free.

Pushing herself up as fast as her wounds would allow, she spotted Talzin leaning against one of the ornately carved stone pillars. She was breathing heavily, as if she had just run a marathon. Rey felt
out of breath, too, but she couldn't afford to waste another moment.

Talzin had to die.

This was her chance.

What was left of her lightsaber was scattered somewhere on the ground, broken and useless. But Kylo's wasn't.

She felt it on the other side of the cavern. It was faint, just a tiny glimmer of him, but it was enough to focus on. Taking an unsteady step towards the woman, Rey called his lightsaber to her open palm.

It answered her call as if it knew her.

Talzin's eyes snapped open when Rey thumbed the ignition switch.

Her colorless eyes which had before reflected the green of the ichor now reflected the burning hot red of Kylo's blade. It spit and sputtered in her hand, eager for movement, for damage.

Rey didn't let it unnerve her. Not this time.

“If you destroy me, you’ll destroy the balance of the planet,” Talzin – pleaded – as she started to push herself up, using the pillar for support. “The Force will scar-”

She’d had enough of Talzin’s bullshit. Talzin's eyes narrowed as she realized that her words would get her nowhere, and she started to chant the first syllables of some sort of incantation.

Rey clutched Kylo's lightsaber in a white-knuckled grip as she paused right in front of her, but only for a moment. “This is for everything you've ever done to Kylo, to me-”

She took a breath.

“This is for Luke.”

When she swung Kylo's saber, it felt like he was somehow swinging it with her. She impaled Talzin right in her heart.

The blade went all of the way through and into the pillar behind her.

For a moment, Mother Talzin didn't move. She would've seemed to be a statue, if not for the way her mouth fell open. She didn't cry, didn't scream – didn't make a single sound.

Rey pulled the lightsaber out of her chest. She backed up a step, then two – but she kept her eyes on the nightmare woman, who stared back at her. The expression on her face was strange, like it was the first time she had ever laid eyes on Rey.

Then Talzin screamed-

And her flesh started to crack, as if she was nothing more than energy wrapped in flesh.

She exploded in a flash of brilliant green light. It blinded Rey and knocked her off her feet. She landed several feet away, scraping her arms and jarring her wounds yet again. Her breath got knocked out of her. For a moment she couldn't move, the agony of her broken ribs pushing against the flesh of her sides was too much.

Their bond gave a small twist in response, more of a quiver than anything else. It seemed to awaken
a new pain in her chest, something sharp and hot and deep. There was a strange pulse to it, like the pain was alive.

Like it had a heartbeat all its own.

It wasn't her pain she was feeling; she knew that immediately. It was Kylo's.

It suddenly became very important – essential – to sit up and find where he was, even if she still couldn't breathe. She needed to see what Talzin had done.

Just then, the walls of the cavern started to shake around them; without Mother Talzin's power holding the wellspring together, it started to collapse in earnest. Rey heard an entire tunnel collapse somewhere far too close for her liking, but she ignored it.

The danger of being crushed to death by earth and stone and power became very real. But she couldn't focus on that.

She had to find Kylo-

A sharp breath escaped her when she spotted him.

He was farther from her than she thought. She scratched her palms on the ground as she scrambled towards him, careless of all pain and the danger around them.

Kylo's moans nearly stopped her heart in its cage, broken as it already was. The dagger – Talzin had managed to stab him, she had plunged it right into his gut-

The dagger dissolved right as she collapsed by his side, disappearing into a green mist as if it had never existed at all. All it left was the wound. Blood soaked his abdomen just above where his belt ended, the color entirely absorbed by his dark robes. The only red she could see was where the dagger had pierced his flesh. She couldn't see how deep the stab wound went, but it was wide, and it was bleeding profusely.

"Rey." Kylo's gloves were coated in his blood, but his grip still felt like iron. He reached over and grabbed her arm as if he needed to keep her there with him. "Are you-"

Their bond wrapped around them, thick and warm and alive – but it was strange. His side of their connection pulsed, as if it was mimicking the blood flowing from his body. It felt wrong.

The phantom pain in her chest throbbed in tantrum.

"Don't talk," she grunted, pressing both hands to his wound. He cried out from the touch, tears pooling at the corners of his eyes. She felt the sting of tears behind her own eyes, but she refused to cry. She couldn't cry – not until she got them out of this.

Not until she saved Kylo's life.

Nearby, a large part of the cavern ceiling crashed to the ground, spraying them both with debris from the stone.

"We have to go." Without thinking too much, she reactivated his lightsaber. The violence of the blade was nearly drowned out by the sounds of the crumbling wellspring.

Kylo barely seemed to register the fact that she was holding his lightsaber over him. And that was terrifying, because he should have-
She bit her lip, fighting against another wave of tears. “I'm sorry,” she pleaded. “I'm sorry.”

Bringing the blade close to his gut, she used one of the lightsaber’s side vents to cauterize the wound. The flesh bubbled and blackened and burned, dark whisps of smoke rising from the blood and clothing as it smoldered to his skin. The smell nearly made her gag.

He screamed as she destroyed his flesh to saved him.

The feeling spiked across their bond, quick as lightning, but she barely noticed anything beyond the fact that she was causing him so much pain. She couldn't see through her tears, which rolled down her cheeks in thick, hot streaks. There was no stopping them.

It was over in just a few moments, but those moments felt like an eternity. She deactivated his lightsaber and clipped it to her belt with shaky hands.

“Kylo,” she whispered – sobbed, really – gathering him against her as gently as she could. For a moment, the collapsing wellspring meant nothing to her. “I'm sorry. Please don't die.”

For several long seconds he didn't respond beyond his harsh breathing.

But then he lifted his hand to her arm. His blood got on her arm wrappings. “Not…going to die. Won't…leave.”

The sob that wracked her frame hurt her broken ribs, but she didn't care. She planted a firm kiss on the top of his head, then another just so that she could breathe him in.

Force, she loved him.

The pillars around the ritual site started tipping over on their sides. It rattled the ground underneath them even further.

“We…need to go.” Kylo said.

Rey nodded. They could get him some actual medical treatment on the shuttle, and she had no intention of dying in the very place she had finally managed to defeat Talzin.

No way in the galaxy.

He squeezed her arm briefly then started to sit up more fully. A whimper escaped him as he bent his abdomen, but he didn't stop moving. The adrenaline pumping through Rey’s veins helped her get to her feet with relatively minor pain, but she knew that that wouldn't last forever.

They needed to leave.

She helped Kylo as much as she could, but had to pause when they were both standing.

“Which way did we come in?” She asked. With everything shaking around them, the rock and stone crumbling and the glowing green ichor spilling over the edges of everything, nothing looked the way it had before. And one of the tunnels had already collapsed; if the way to the surface was already blocked, then they were in big trouble.

Big trouble.

“That way,” he pointed to one of the nearby passages with a wince. It only took her a moment to see why.
The bodies of nightsisters and storm troopers alike crowded the entrance to the cavern, crumpled and lifeless now that Talzin's power was no longer animating them. They were no longer monsters, but corpses.

That was the way they had come in.

They didn't waste another second.

Kylo paused only a few feet from the corridor, however, and outstretched his hand. Rey was about to tell him to keep moving, but then the remains of her lightsaber flew into his palm. He quickly tucked them into his belt pocket.

Moving as quickly as they could in the state they were in wasn't as fast as she wished. The rumbling they had felt inside the open cavern was even worse in the smaller passages, and there were several times that they had to move some larger boulder out of the way. The walls around them shivered, the ground underneath their feet started to crumble, and the ceiling continuously rained dirt and rocks on their heads.

It was terrifying. A part of her was really starting to believe that they were going to be buried under the earth.

Dathomir was the last place she wanted to die.

Kylo seemed to be beyond thinking about dying. He made no attempt to shield his thoughts, which were focused solely on pushing through his pain.

On top of his recently closed stab wound, his arm was still injured, and he accidentally jammed it against a collapsed wall in the corridor. He sucked in a sharp breath through his teeth and practically growled at her to not stop moving when she looked to see if he was alright.

They were getting closer to the entrance. With every step, every breath, she could feel them getting closer to the end.

Then-

“There it is,” she gasped, the pain against her lungs growing sharper as she spoke. Kylo didn't respond, but she could feel the slight pull of relief in him, too.

Neither of them lessened their pace. There wasn't much time left, the tunnels were collapsing entirely not far behind them-

But then the entrance opened up before them, and they exited into the clearing around the wellspring. Almost as soon as they were out, the entrance collapsed behind them. The yawning mouth which had opened so unnervingly wide to let visitors in crumbled to the ground, closing off the passage forever.

Making it back to the shuttle was – difficult.

Rey's adrenaline dropped quickly after they were out of the wellspring. It only took several minutes for her to feel the full force of the pain in her ribs, as well as every other cut and bruise she had gained since they had gone in there. Each breath felt like she was dragging a piece of sharp metal against her lungs.
But she wasn't the one with the worst injuries.

Kylo started to keep to his side of their bond, and she knew it was because of the pain. He kept his injured arm cradled close to his chest, using it to cover his cauterized stab wound from the open air as best he could. A trickle of blood ran down from the side of his temple, but it wasn't enough that she worried about a serious head wound. He was limping, and he moved so slowly.

She helped him as best she could, although she could do little more than keep his uninjured arm around her shoulders just in case he stumbled.

It would've been better if she knew how to heal, or how to minimize the pain in some way. Master Luke had mentioned that there were techniques, but she hadn't gotten far enough in her training to learn any of them.

But she would. She decided to make a point of learning them.

They had the time now. Once they got back to the shuttle, once they both got some medical attention – they had all the time in the world.

Rey found herself smiling, a little.

Then she found herself smiling in earnest.

“We did it.”

It took Kylo a moment to realize that she had spoken. “What?” He grunted, sounding a little breathless.

She turned her grin towards him. “Kylo, we did it. They're both dead—both of them.”

His expression was still twisted up in pain and he never stopped focusing on simply walking, but something softened around his mouth. Something close to a smile. A fire roared behind his eyes.

“Yes,” he nodded.

She nearly laughed, even though she knew it would be agonizing. She shifted her grip on the arm slung over her shoulder from his wrist to his hand, threading their fingers together. His glove was still bloodied and he squeezed her hand so tightly that it almost hurt. Almost.

It felt so good to just have him with her.

“I want…to kiss you,” he told her, his tone a mix of pain, forcefulness, and a much deeper emotion that she treasured. If they hadn't been injured, she would've wanted to do more than kiss him. She let that emotion float over their bond, just because she wanted him to know.

But she shook her head. “I need to get you back to the shuttle. You're too wounded to kiss.”

His lips twitched. “Hardly.” Though his breathless tone and pained wince belied his response.

It didn't take them very much longer to reach the shuttle, although their progress got steadily slower as they went. Kylo, for all of his mulishness, needed more and more help to walk. Eventually, she was the one supporting most of his weight, despite the fact that the added pressure only aggravated her wounded ribs. That didn't matter; what mattered was the fact that blood had started weeping from his stomach again. He had most likely torn his burned skin open.

His breathing was loud and laborious, and the sound only made her heart hammer in her chest. Fear
that they wouldn't make it clawed at the back of her mind until she caught her first glimpse of the ship's plating through the trees. Even when they broke into the small clearing, she was afraid they wouldn't make it.

He had lost so much blood.

Climbing the boarding ramp as quickly as she could, she guided the two of them towards the back of the ship. Rey eased him down onto the same bunk she had deposited him on before as gently as she could manage. Kylo grunted, swearing under his breath as he laid back.

“Sorry,” It hurt her ribs a lot to speak, let alone bend over to help him.

“S’fine,” he breathed, turning his attention to his stab wound. The half-dried blood on his robes had been soaked anew, and the wound looked twice as bad now that it was burned and ripped.

“I'm losing too much blood.” He sounded too distant, detached from something that should've been extremely worrying to him.

She pushed back against the worry that was very quickly trying to panic in her head. She didn't have time to panic – she had to do something. Stop the flow of blood, disinfect and reclose the wound-

Stopping him from losing more blood came first.

The medkit was exactly where she'd left it. The supplies weren't dwindled that badly from when she had used it before, but that wasn't the problem. The problem was that no measly medkit would be equipped to handle a large abdominal stab wound.

What she would've given for a bacta tank.

Kylo obediently lifted his hand off his wound so she could examine it. Rey wasted no time in ripping his robes a bit further to give her better access. She didn't let herself hesitate before she used all the disinfectant they had to clean the area. Kylo’s entire body clenched, his stomach muscles contracting against the burning from the chemicals.

She quickly grabbed the small heat plate that could more efficiently recauterize the flesh. All she needed it to do was hold him together until they could get him some real medical treatment.

And herself, too. Everything around her ribs hurt, and tiny little bacta patches wouldn't help that at all.

Kylo's hand shot out, stopping her from pressing the heat plate to his skin. “No.”

“I have to-”

“No,” he glowered, but seemed to lose the energy to hold the expression. He let his head fall back against the small pillow. “The bacta…should be enough. Not to bleed out.”

She hesitated. “Are you sure?”

He nodded slightly, just a movement of his head against the pillow. His eyes were closed.

He wasn't wrong; it could work. But there was also a chance it wouldn't be enough, and she didn't want to take that chance. Not with him. And he was exactly the sort of man to take this kind of stupid risk just because of his own stubbornness.

“Rey.” His tone was a bit testy, even through his discomfort. She hadn't even realized that she had
been projecting. “It'll be enough.”

She squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed her hand down her face. She sighed. Then she did as he said.

It took all the patches they had in the medkit, but his stomach stopped bleeding for the most part. She stitched his skin together in what was a very messy sewing job, but she didn't care if it looked pretty and she knew he wouldn't care, either. Finally, she bandaged his entire abdomen, using all of the large bandages provided. It looked a little overdone, but she wasn't about to take any chances.

Her ribs were really bothering her, but it was nothing that she hadn't dealt with before. She had dealt with it while scavenging on Jakku, and she could deal with it then. The pain couldn't have been less important to her.

She ran the backs of her fingers lightly down Kylo's cheek, brushing some of his sweat-soaked hair out of his face. He sighed and opened his eyes. Slowly, he reached up and wrapped his hand around hers, keeping her hand pressed to his cheek.

He studied her with tired eyes, a soft expression on his face. “You’re beautiful.”

A huff of laughter escaped her, more of a breath than anything. She looked just as dirty and tired as he did, and probably just as bloody. “Now I really know you've lost too much blood.”

For a long moment he just studied her, his gaze as intense as ever. “You are.” He turned his head to plant a kiss against her fingers.

Rey couldn't help the heat that rose to her cheeks. Gently prying her hand from his grip, she told him, “Nevermind that, just rest. I'm going to get us the hell away from here.”

Kylo let her go with a small frown, but nodded. “Good.”

“I'll be back.”

Hurrying to the cockpit, Rey began the start up sequence as quickly as she could. Bringing up the star map, she tried to find the closest planet or station with a halfway decent medical facility. It didn't matter who controlled it, she decided. They could deal with that when they got there.

Then it hit her.

The transport that general Organa was supposed to send – Luke had never gotten in touch with it. It had specifically been outfitted for medical use, and it wasn't directly associated with the Resistance. If she could only contact it-

Her hail was received almost instantly, to her great relief and surprise. The small comm screen flickered to life, it's grainy picture filled with a familiar face.

“Chewie,” she gasped, a grin already blossoming on her face. The relief she felt at seeing such a friendly face made her chest swell. “You're the pilot general Organa sent to meet us?”

The wookie’s roar was a welcome sound.

All the sudden her muscles felt like jelly. “Well, I’m glad she did. Did Luke ever get through to you? Are you still on Tatooine?”

Chewie shook his head no and told her that he had been contacted by the general, who told him that she had sensed her brother’s death on Dathomir. She had ordered him to go there and find them.
Tears stung at the back of Rey's eyes when Chewie told her that. Guilt mixed in with her relief and weighed down her heart.

“A monster killed him,” she could barely get the words out. “A horrible, monstrous woman who wanted to kill both me and Kylo. But we killed her. She's dead.”

There was a pause on the other side of the comm, then Chewie asked a question.

Rey smiled a little at that. “Yes. I've got him back.”

Chewie told her that he was less than a standard day away. She told him to hurry, because both of them were injured. He asked for her coordinates, which she promptly gave him, and promised that he would be there soon. He told her he'd check in with them in a few hours.

It felt like a miracle.

It was a miracle.

They had rid themselves of both Snoke and Talzin. They were free.

Rey didn't stay up in the cockpit for very long before she returned to Kylo, just until she felt like her legs were strong enough to hold her weight. Sitting down after so long, feeling that bone-deep relief, and having the knowledge that nothing was after them was enough to make her want to sleep for a hundred years.

He was still awake, the stubborn man that he was. She knew he had been waiting for her to come back.

“I thought I told you to rest,” she reprimanded him softly, drawing close enough to take his hand in hers. He tucked her hand against his chest, right over his heart.

“I’m stubborn.”

She thought that his eyes were the most beautiful shade of brown she had ever seen. A feeling of warmth spread across her chest. Warmth and belonging and-

And didn't she owe him a kiss?

She didn't stop the smile that blossomed across her face. She was sure that her feelings were plain for him to see, even without their bond, and she was glad of it.

“So I've noticed,” she whispered.

He smiled back, just a little.

Then she bent down and kissed him.

Chapter End Notes

Well, guys, all that's left is the epilogue. Look for that in the next day or two, because it won't take long for me to post it.

This was by far the longest chapter in this story. There is so much I could say about this
chapter, but I don't want to write a 5k-word author's note. Hopefully I did the final confrontation with Talzin justice, although I'd love to hear your thoughts on that. This chapter has taken too long to post and I find myself drowning in nostalgia, I can't believe there is literally only one more chapter.

I'm so sorry I haven't been able to get back to most of you on your reviews of the last chapter. I will *definitely* be answering every review I get for both this chapter and the epilogue.

Man, I'm just so grateful to you guys, you're all the best! I'll post the epilogue soon.
The Archeon Nebula filled the viewport of their ship, casting everything in a deep golden hue.

Rey had turned off as many of the auxiliary lights as she could so that the light from outside was the only thing illuminating the interior of the cockpit. She liked staring at it, at the space dust and the particles that sparkled with light from the nearest stars.

It was like staring out at an eternal dawn.

On the control dash in front of her were scattered the pieces of her lightsaber hilt. A few of the components were old, the ones they had managed to salvage after Kylo had saved its remains back on Dathomir, and some were new. Over the months she had been working little-by-little on trying to fit the pieces back together, on reconstructing the lightsaber that had come to mean so much to her. It was slow-going, both because lightsaber parts were rare, and because she had never constructed a lightsaber before.

Kylo had refused to help her. He said it was because she was the one who needed to do it on her own, but she wasn’t really sure that he would know how to help if he even wanted to. His wasn’t the most well-constructed weapon she’d ever seen, after all.

She had spent well over an hour curled up in the pilot’s chair, trying to work out how to fit the pieces of her lightsaber together. Every time she thought she’d almost gotten it, something just didn’t fit. It was as if she was trying to construct something from memory, only the more she focused on it, the less she remembered.

She was so fixated on her task that she didn’t even sense when Kylo came into the cockpit. A pair of large hands pressed down on her shoulders, gently pulling from her concentration.

“What are you doing?” Came the low timber of his voice, so close that it tickled as he bent down and pressed his lips to the shell of her ear.

She huffed, trying to act like he was disturbing her, although they both knew better. She couldn’t help but relax into his touch. Putting the pieces of the hilt back down on the control dash, she reached up and took one of the hands resting on her shoulders, threaded her fingers with his. “I can’t figure it out,” she admitted. “It shouldn’t be this complicated.”

Kylo’s smirk was in his tone. “You’re supposed to meditate. I believe I’ve mentioned that once or twice. Besides, we haven’t found you a new crystal yet. It won’t be complete until then.”

“I know,” she sighed, twisting around in her seat so that she could look up at him. She lifted her shoulders in a small shrug. “I just want my lightsaber back.”

He looked like he wanted to say something, but for a moment he didn’t. His lips twitched. Then he said, “Is that where you want to go next, then? To find a crystal?”

“If I say yes, does that mean we’re going to go to a planet with some sort of horrible, inhospitable climate?” She asked flatly.
He shook his head, letting his hands drop from her shoulders as he moved away. He kept her hand in his a moment longer before he let go. Sitting down in the copilot chair, he leaned over and pulled up the navigation chart. Then he studied it silently for several minutes, his brows furrowed in concentration.

He was going to need to cut his hair soon, she noted. But she liked how it looked in the light of the nebula, how the golden hues brought out the tiniest hint of chestnut in his waves of his hair. It made his skin appear warmer, too. Almost like it glowed.

Kylo looked very handsome to her then.

Standing up out of the pilot’s chair, she awkwardly leaned over the partisan in between their seats and took his face in her hands. Guiding his attention away from the screen, she placed a long, lingering kiss on his mouth. She kissed him again before she pulled away, this time on his scar; the softest brush of lips against skin.

He exhaled against her skin, then gave her a slightly confused frown. “What was that for?”

A smile tugged at her lips and she shrugged.

“Just felt like it, I guess.”

Their bond wrapped around them like a blanket, familiar and comforting, beating in tandem with their hearts.

How had she ever gone without it, she wondered.

It felt very much like home.

Kylo covered one of her hands with his, turning his head to place a single kiss on the inside of her palm. Her fingers twitched at the feeling of his breath against her skin. Then he threaded his fingers in her hair and pulled her closer for another kiss. This time it was hard and open-mouthed and insistent, and felt very much like Kylo. When he deepened the kiss she had to grab onto his shoulders so that she wouldn’t lose her balance.

When they finally broke away from each other, gasping for air and clinging to each other so tightly it almost hurt, something sparked in Kylo’s expression.

“Adega.”

Rey blinked. “Adega?”

He nodded. “That’s where we’ll go.”

She made a face, still pulling her mind out of the kiss. “I’ve never heard of it.”

“You’ll like it,” he promised, all at once letting go of her to punch in a new set of coordinates. “It has a mild climate. More importantly, it has kyber crystals. Or it did, last I heard.”

Anticipation fluttered in the base of Rey’s gut, mixing with her desire – but there was also a little skepticism. She sat back in her seat as well, and started preparing for the jump to hyperspace. “Last you heard? What if we can’t find any?”

The corner of his mouth lifted into a lopsided smirk. It must’ve been something of a family trait, she thought privately. It was endearing. He probably hated it.
“Then we’ll go to Illum.”

“I hate the cold,” she pointed out needlessly.

He didn’t quite laugh – but almost.

“You’ll live.”

The coordinates were set, and after a few more moments the systems had been primed. All that was left was to punch the control for the hyperdrive and they'd be on their way.

Rey looked once more out at the nebula, with its golden arms and the dust reflecting light against the blackness of space. Then she turned and looked at how that light played across Kylo’s face. For a moment she imagined she could see tiny flecks of amber in his eyes, brought out by the light of the stars. What color did her eyes seem, she wondered.

She caught his eye and they exchanged a look. Their bond gave a tug, like a little heartbeat between them.

Rey smiled.

Then she punched it.

Chapter End Notes

And that's the end.

I just want to thank you guys so much for reading, for leaving such beautiful reviews, and for just sticking with me through all of this. It's been such a fun ride - and crazy, too, because it ended up being so much longer than I had expected! This story has been such a big part of this past year for me, it's almost surreal to think that it's ended. I hope you guys have had as much fun as I have, because it's been an amazing experience for me to be able to share this with you all.

I'm actually very sad to say goodbye to A Collision of Stars, but I'm proud of myself for finishing this mammoth of a story. For any of you wondering, this is most definitely not going to be the end of my time writing reylo. I will be back with more stories!

Thank you all again for reading, I couldn't have done it without you.

Until next time. <3

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