Like Young Gods

by diasterisms

Summary

“What do you think?” Luke asks his nephew. “She has potential.”

“She bit me, Master,” is Ben’s stiff response. “Any opinion I give would be biased.”

Or: Everyone is connected, even if, sometimes, it’s just by the skin of our teeth. Even in the midst of darkness, still, luminous beings are we.
Chapter Notes

This happened because warnerisms prompted me with a lovely bit of art. I set out to write the specified plot, but my brain took it in an entirely new direction. So, here, have a Young Jedi Knights AU! While the majority of settings, characters, and lore are pulled from the Expanded Universe, I'm playing pretty fast and loose with timelines and events in order to reconcile with the general canon as laid out in The Force Awakens. I extend my deepest apologies to Karen for not sticking to her prompt, and I hope that she won't be too disappointed by this outcome. Comments, suggestions, and constructive criticism would be greatly appreciated so I can deliver the multichapter that this ship deserves.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

She is wild when they find her on the dunes of Jakku, a tiny hurricane bringing a fellow scavenger thrice her size and age to a crouch with ferocious blows from the staff clutched in her fists. The man had assumed that the child who'd just unearthed an XX-9 turbolaser battery would be easy pickings, but she towers over him now, beating him senseless.

A hand drops on her shoulder. Thinking that the would-be thief brought his friends, Rey twists her neck and bites—hard—

There's a strangled yelp of surprise and pain as the hand is wrenched away. Teeth ringing, mouth tasting of salt and bare skin, Rey steps back and slants her staff in high guard, eyes narrowed at this new threat.

The boy is somewhere in his mid-teens, tall and pale, wearing a long-sleeved tunic and loose-fitting trousers of a dull wet-sandstone hue. A metal rod gleams from the leather belt cinched to his slim waist. He scowls at her as he rubs his injured hand.

"Ben," a laughter-tinged voice calls out, "sneaking up on people while they're still in attack mode will hardly get you into their good graces."

A man is approaching, dressed like his companion except for the color, a deep midnight black that drapes him from neck to toe. Another metal rod hangs at at his side. He navigates the uneven sands with ease, and Rey thinks she sees something of the desert-dweller in him.

"I apologize for my nephew," he says, grinning at her. "I devote so much time to his training that I
forget to hone his social skills."

"Master," the boy— Ben?— sulks, his voice cracked with adolescence and petulance.

The scavenger crumpled behind Rey chooses that exact moment to spring, reaching for her with a guttural snarl. Lightning-quick, Ben extends his hand, fingers splayed out, Rey's teeth-marks still ridged into the web between his thumb and forefinger. The scavenger is lifted several inches into the air, completely paralyzed, the veins on his forehead bulging in panic.

Rey feels it, then— a hum, something vast and weighty that touches off inner cords within her.

"Slowly, now," the man in black murmurs to his nephew, all trace of jest vanishing. "Release him. Don't get carried away."

A strange expression flares on Ben's narrow features. It looks like— curiosity?— hunger?— and he flicks his wrist, his hand slashing across some unseen throat. The scavenger's eyes roll into the back of his head, and he falls to the ground in a slump of limbs.

"Ben," sighs the boy's uncle, lips pursed, gaze hooded.

The boy's face clears, as if he's coming out of a trance. He stares at the limp scavenger, defiant and unflinching.

"What— what was that?" Rey demands, her heart pounding furiously in her chest. "Is he dead? Did you— how—?"

"He is merely unconscious." It's the man who replies, his tone calm and reassuring. "The Jedi do not kill in cold blood."

This is how Rey meets Luke Skywalker and his apprentice, Ben Solo.

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Her head spins with questions as she leads them into the home she has fashioned from a defunct AT-AT. The walker's collapsed interior is spacious enough for a girl of six, even with all the junk she has lying around, but, add a grown man and a teenager who is already taller than his uncle, and it seems ludicrously cramped.

The visitors sit down, shoulders hunched, long legs pulled in, and she scoots further away to observe them with eyes more intrigued than wary. She has heard of the Jedi, of course— there are a few wizened scavengers who still remember the Old Republic, and many traders come to Jakku bearing rumors of the Order being started up again by none other than the fabled hero of the Rebellion. But she never imagined that she would see him in the flesh, and she can't figure out why he would want to— as he so amiably put it— "have a chat" with her.

Luke doesn't seem to be in any hurry to explain. His placid gaze surveys the AT-AT with interest, while, beside him, his nephew is restless, fidgeting and shifting position every so often. In the gloom, Ben's features are softer, less sulky, but Rey can't shake the memory of how his brown eyes had glinted beneath the sunlight, first when he froze her assailant, and then when he'd relinquished whatever hold he'd had on him, leaving the scavenger groaning weakly as they walked away.

"That flight helmet," Luke says, gesturing to one of Rey's most prized possessions. "I used to wear something like that. I was an X-wing pilot, just like—" He squints at the name, emblazoned in Aurebesh.

"Raeh," she supplies. "Captain Dosmit Raeh."

"Of the Tierfon Yellow Aces." He nods, satisfied. "I know her. You'll be happy to hear that she was airlifted out after the Battle of Jakku. She's a colonel with the New Republic fleet now."

Rey is suddenly, burningly curious. She had found this helmet in the Graveyard a year ago, nestled amidst the wreckage of Imperial-class destroyers and Mon Calamari cruisers. Since then, she's often crafted elaborate daydreams of Captain Raeh— what she'd looked like, where she'd come from, what had made her decide to be a starpilot. Throughout days of harsh routine beneath the desert sun and nights of hunger pangs and relentless cold, Raeh had been her salvation, a welcome escape from reality.

She leans forward, ready to ply Luke with more inquiries about her beloved mystery figure, but, while she'd hesitated, he had already turned to his nephew. "What do you think? There is potential..."

"She bit me, Master," is Ben's stiff response. "Any opinion I give would be biased."
"Fair enough," Luke chuckles. His attention swivels back to Rey. "Tell me, Rey— how did you become so proficient with your staff?"

Her brow creases. She's never thought about that, honestly. "I... sort of just picked up the technique here and there. From observing others."

"No one taught you?"

"I learned on my own," she mumbles. Ben is watching her intently from the shadows; she feels self-conscious, crude. "There's no one out here who will fight for me. I have to do it myself."

She realizes too late how pathetic that must sound, but Luke doesn't show even the slightest hint of pitying her, and, for that, she is grateful. "What about languages?" he persists. "Any good with those?"

"I've communicated fine with everyone passing through Niima Outpost so far," she replies, a little more warily. "I mean, if you know Basic, Bocce, and Huttese, you're pretty much all set, aren't you?" This is an evasion— she has managed small talk in Kaleesh, Snivvian, and, once, the mellifluous tongue of an enigmatic group of coldly beautiful pirates from the Hapes Cluster. She can understand Binary and Shyriiwook as well. For her, language is like breathing, but she's experienced enough suspicious frowns to know that this is an uncommon talent— quite possibly even freakish.

Ben speaks up. "Revan once tore the Black Rakatan language out of the tribal leader's head." There's a lively current to his voice that wasn't there before.

"We should not look to those such as Revan for guidance on how to use the Force," Luke admonishes.

"The Force—" Rey knows the old stories. She remembers what she had felt on the dunes, the net that the dark-haired boy had cast, that had brushed against her, however briefly. "That's what you used to knock that man out."

"It's what you use, Rey," Luke says quickly. "to fight, to assimilate language. The Force is the energy that courses through all living things, binding the galaxy together. An old mentor once told me that it is what makes us luminous. Certain individuals are more attuned to it than others. I am. And so is Ben." His gaze turns piercing. "And so are you."
"I don't understand." But part of her already does. Part of her already knows why these offworlders have sought her out. Her fists clench.

"There is an academy on Yavin 4— a Praxeum," Luke continues. "It is a place where Force-sensitive individuals come together to hone their powers, to train to become Jedi. Sometimes, Ben and I travel the galaxy looking for new recruits. This time, our steps took us to the Western Reaches. This time, we found you."

A thick coil of emotion wound up tight in Rey's chest begins to unspool. A warm burst of happiness, a shivering thrill of excitement, a sweet and glorious hope— here is something better, something far greater than she can ever know bartering scrap for rations and marking off the days and avoiding the Sinking Fields and making up stories in her head—

"No," she whispers. "I can't."

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The AT-AT seems eerily silent with Luke and Ben gone. It's also smaller, somehow— as if Rey's world had been amplified for a moment by endless possibilities, only to shrink down to size once more.

Surrounded by her various knickknacks, by the flight helmet she salvaged and the pilot doll she made and the flowers in their sandy little pot that she tends, she hugs her knees to her chest and convinces herself that she's made the right choice. Her family will come back one day. She has to wait for them. She can't go zooming off to Yavin 4 to become a Jedi Knight...

Hot tears burn her eyes. She blinks, and the salty liquid drips down her cheeks, into her mouth. The wet jolt of it startles her into a good and proper cry. Such weakness is anathema to these wastelands, but Rey is six years old and alone and she figures that she's earned it.

The metallic daylight pouring into the walker is suddenly blocked out. Her head snaps up, and it's Ben, slouched in the tilted entrance, looking as if he can't decide whether to offer words of comfort or to flee.

Her cheeks flush with embarrassment at having been caught wailing like the foolish child that she still is, but it's too late to stop. "You shouldn't have come," she gasps out, in the midst of her ragged
sobs. "I was fine here. It's not the best life, but I was fine— but now— now I'll always wonder—"

"So stop wondering," he says brusquely, "and come with me. With us."

"I already told you—"

"That you have to stay for your family, yes." He hesitates. "Whoever you're waiting for, if they come back, do you think they'll be proud that you turned down a chance for greatness?"

"I don't want to be great!" She hates him for the word if, for the ugliness of it. "I just want—"

"To spend the rest of your life crawling around in this junkyard? To grow old scrubbing dirt off trinkets, only for wastes of space like Plutt to cheat you of what minuscule value they have?"

"Quit interrupting me," she hisses. But her annoyance with him has eclipsed the waves of her sorrow, and she doesn't feel like crying anymore. If anything, she feels like hitting him over the head with the nearest power wrench.

It's an improvement, of sorts.

Ben waits until she's wiped her face dry and composed herself before he switches tactics. "Rey." It's the first time he says her name, scratchy and awkward and quiet. "Master Luke told you to search your heart. You already know the truth— whoever left you here will not return."

"The Force can't tell the future!" she hisses, with rather more confidence than warranted. She doesn't know anything about it, after all. What if it can? Wouldn't you like to find out? whispers a traitorous inner voice.

"The Force can help you make a future, a future for yourself, one that's not determined by who stays and who leaves. That's a lot better than divination, wouldn't you agree?"

"My family will come back," she insists, because that's all she has left to pit against the heady pull of his words, all his arguments crumbling in the face of something that is a fact— it has to be. "They will. I have to be here when they do. That is my choice. Luke respected that, and so should you."
Ben's mouth tightens in a determined line. He squeezes forward, the tips of his unruly black hair almost brushing the ceiling. He is an odd boy, she thinks, so gangly and ill at ease.

And annoyingly stubborn.

"I'll tell you a story." He sits down, leaning the base of his spine against a box of tools. "When I was ten years old, I nearly unscrewed the head off of my mother's protocol droid. He was following me around, nagging me about something. I had just fought with my fa—" He catches himself, amends, "I was having a bad day, and I just wanted to be left alone. I looked at the droid, and all I could think of at that moment was how irritating he was, how it would serve him right to be blasted into shiny little pieces, and I—" A shudder runs through him. His eyes flash, that strangely hungry, haunted gleam. "There was so much power. It was like being drunk. Luckily, my parents stopped me just in time. As this was the latest in a series of... incidents, they decided to send me to my uncle's academy. So I could better understand what I was capable of. So I could learn restraint."

"Like the way you restrained yourself with that scavenger back there?" Rey asks, a bit nastily. She has a soft spot for droids.

He shrugs. "I slip up sometimes. That's why I continue training. That's why you need to train, Rey—a child growing up alone, with a talent like ours—it can be a terrible thing."

"I'm not going to go around ripping people's heads off, if that's what you mean," she sniffs.

"It was a droid," he corrects, testily.

"Look, why does this matter so much to you? I mean—we didn't exactly meet on the best of terms—"

"No, we didn't." He glances at his hand, and she has to suppress a smile. "But you are strong with the Force. Master Luke said so himself, and his word is not to be taken lightly. I would not like it if you were to throw away your gift." Before she can respond, he plunges forward, fierce and earnest and maybe just the slightest bit desperate. "Listen to me. I was the one who sensed you out there. Master Luke and I were exploring Pilgrim's Road, and I strayed from the path because I felt you. It was like you were calling to me. How can I ignore that?"

_That makes you the first_, she thinks, with a stab of wistfulness, sharp and surprising. _The first person_
"I guess I feel responsible for you, in a way," he continues. He's apparently decided that, if logic won't sway her, perhaps honesty might. "If you come to the academy, I'll help you with the exercises. I'll teach you what I've learned. You won't be alone."

"Really?" The word escapes before she can stop it.

He nods. "There are dozens of other kids there. Some older students, too. And the first batch of apprentices— the ones who are now full-fledged Jedi Knights— they drop in from time to time. It can be a busy place." He frowns a little, muttering, "Too busy, if you ask me. After a week there, you'll be begging to be left alone."

Rey longs to shut her eyes, to surround herself with the warm and happy dream. People her age, people like her. Mentors who would guide her steps. Not having to watch her back or wear her fingers to the bone just to survive. She wants it so badly that her throat aches.

_What would Dosmit Raeh do?_ she wonders, glancing at the flight helmet and the doll slumped beside it. You probably don't get to be a captain by shying away from advancement opportunities.

It occurs to her then that, if she left Jakku, she might actually get the chance to meet Raeh. There's an entire _galaxy_ out there, full of new worlds and walking legends. It can all be hers.

"My family sent me away because they recognized that I was meant for greater things," Ben tells her. His expression is solemn, laden with promise. "If whoever left you here really loves you, they'd want you to go."

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She replants the flowers in the shade of the AT-AT. Then she goes back inside to gather her meager belongings. She takes the helmet, the doll, the staff, and not much else.

Finally, she walks over to the slate where she keeps a tally of days. "I'm sorry," she murmurs, to the person who might be pointed to this walker in the future by the other scavengers that she's known. "Find me someday. Please."
In the empty space beneath the count, she scratches out, in Aurebesh, *Yavin 4*.

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Having decided to give her some privacy while she says farewell to her home, Ben Solo is waiting for her in the distance, casting a long, thin shadow on the smooth golden sand. His profile is angled at her as he stares at some indeterminable point in the burning horizon.

Rey hesitates. With the sun slanted against him like this, he looks vaguely unmade— an aloof silhouette instead of the boy who had begged her to come with him only minutes ago. What if this is all a trick? Some elaborate scam being run on naive orphans by criminals posing as Jedi?

But she already knows the answer. She knows it in her heart, with that same unerring instinct that has led her to valuable salvage and guided her weapon's strikes and slid her effortlessly into various offworld languages.

This is real.

Belatedly noticing her presence, Ben turns to face her, shading his eyes against the sun, his lips curved in what for him probably counts as a smile. Rey starts walking towards him, feeling lighter and lighter with every step.

Chapter End Notes

*Aurebesh* is the writing system used to transcribe *Galactic Basic*.

*Huttese* is the second most common language after Basic, while *Bocce* is an interplanetary trade language used primarily by spacers of the sort that would pass through Niima Outpost.

*Revan* played pivotal roles as both Jedi and Sith during the era of the Old Republic.

The *Hapan* pirates are a reference to *Tenel Ka Djo*, a central character in the series on which this AU is based.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Starting the week with an update! Many thanks go to my boss, who told me I didn't have to come in to work today, and, of course, to everyone who has received the first chapter so warmly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The ship that whisks Rey out of Jakku is a *Horizon*-class star yacht, luxurious and sleek, with ion engines and a military-grade hyperdrive motivator. Once they're all onboard, Luke is quick to explain that he doesn't own it. "The Jedi strive for simplicity in all things, but the Republic was kind enough to lend the *Shadow Sabre* to the academy."

"Of course, it helps when your sister is the Chief of State," Ben mutters in an undertone.

Luke deflects his nephew's sarcasm with another one of his mild smiles. "You know as well as I do that your mother doesn't play favorites. Just like everything else, the proposal to grant us this ship went straight to committee, and they decided that some means of transport would be conducive to fulfilling our role as galactic peacekeepers."

Rey surveys the data on the central targeting computer. "Why would peacekeepers need a pair of Corellian AG-1G laser cannons and two Dymek HM-8 concussion missile launchers?"

"Don't forget the retractable blaster cannon," Ben helpfully points out, with a sidelong glance at Rey that makes her feel like they are conspirators in mischief.

As far as feelings go, it is not unpleasant. She grins at him in response.

Luke's storm-blue eyes twinkle. "A diplomatic solution is always the first priority, but— alas— there are times when the circumstances require aggressive negotiations," he tells them with good humor. "Part of being a Jedi is discerning which of the two is the right call to make."
This is what flight feels like: better than Rey has dared to even dream.

The *Shadow Sabre* is a marvel of Sullustan engineering; it *glides*. She feels the hum of the repulsorlifts deep in her bones. Sand blurs into sky, into atmosphere, and then— space.

Just like that.

She spares a brief look back towards the pale globe of her desert home. It is only proper, after all, to say goodbye. Part of her thinks that she should entertain a trace of sadness— perhaps even nostalgia — but it had been a hard and lonely life amidst the dunes. Her first emotion is relief, soon followed by the twin waves of guilt and fear. What if her family is on their way right now? What if she had missed them by a day cycle, by a few hours—

To distract herself, she shifts her gaze to the transparisteel canopy stretched out overhead. A million stars glitter in the vast darkness, suspending the ship in a pulsing rain of silver light.

Rey forgets to breathe.

"It hit me like that, too, the first time I went offworld," Ben murmurs. He's watching her carefully, the constellations reflected in his eyes. "I felt like the look on your face."

"And then you sulked the entire trip because Chewie beat you at Dejarik," Luke recalls with a fond laugh.

Ben treats this comment as an affront to his dignity. "He cheated, Master."

Luke is still chuckling to himself as he nudges the ship into hyperspace.

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When the jungle moon of Yavin 4 looms into sight, it takes Rey a few seconds to identify its color.

She has seen green before— the rough and dusky scales of Rodian bounty hunters, the smooth and
leathery sheen of the Nautolans— but never a green like this, so rich and prisms, covering an entire world, tinted blue with ozone and centered like a crown jewel in a black nest of metallic stars.

"This is where Revan died." Ben adopts a dry, serious tone. Something of a scholar, this one. "Where Anakin Skywalker and Asajj Ventress dueled during the Clone Wars. Where the Rebel Alliance launched an attack on the first Death Star."

He's looking at his uncle as he utters this last bit. Luke shrugs in response to Rey's questioning glance. "As I told you back on Jakku, I used to be an X-wing pilot. Blowing up the Death Star was one of my early missions."

"And Anakin Skywalker is... a relative?" Rey guesses.

The two Jedi do not fidget in their seats, but they might as well have. There's a ripple of tension in the air.

"He was my father," Luke finally says. "Whatever else he was, he was that."

Ben falls into another one of his distant stares, a tight set to his jaw. Before Rey can pry any further, Luke instructs the ship's voice-activated autopilot system to initiate the landing sequence. There is a slight tilt and a series of elegant shudders in the mechanism, and then they make planetfall.

Yavin 4 is a sprawl of volcanoes, tropical forests, and oceans. This is where Rey gets her proper introduction to the color blue, velvety and deep. She hadn't imagined that this much water could exist in the galaxy, sparkling where the sun's rays graze its surface. If she weren't strapped into her seat, she'd have pressed her nose to the window in awe.

As the Shadow Sabre makes its descent, the blur of colors sharpens into emerald leaves and gnarled branches. Rey plucks the word from her mind: trees. Vast carpets of them, thick and tall. She longs to run through those glades, smell the damp and dew of them, feel the shade on her skin. She will. She soon will.

The ship dips low over the rainforest canopy, and then her wide eyes are filled with the sight of an ancient, towering ziggurat, its stone foundations turned the color of rust by weather and time.

"This is the Great Temple, originally built by the Massassi tribe to worship Naga Sadow, Lord of the
Sith," Ben tells her. "The Alliance converted it into a base during the Galactic Civil War, and, afterwards, Master Luke decided to set up shop here when Mon Mothma sanctioned his Praxeum project and recommended Yavin 4 as a location." At Rey's blank look, he continues, "Mon Mothma was the Chief of State before my mo— before Leia Organa."

Jakku is a backwater far beyond the reach of politics, but Rey has heard that name before, from wizened Tuanul settlers who speak it with reverence, from spacers either deriding or lauding some new policy, from Hutt clan members with long memories and bitter tongues. "She's a princess, isn't she? Does that make you a prince?" she teases.

Ben shoots her a long-suffering glance, as if this is a touchy subject. "It's a defunct title. The planet of Alderaan was destroyed by the Death Star. It's nothing but space dust now."

"To me, Ben, your mother will always be royalty," Luke chimes in. "When your father and I rescued her, she said—"

"I don't know who you are, or where you came from, but from now on, you do as I tell you, okay?" Ben recites. "Yes, Master, I've heard this many times."

Rey kind of wants to deck him. What she wouldn't give for stories like this! For a family history so firmly entrenched— he doesn't know how good he has it—

Luke reverts the ship to manual control and steers it first onto the landing pad, and then into the lowest level of the temple, a vast hangar bay. Rey squints at the two figures who seem to be waiting for them— a slender young woman in white robes and a little droid domed silver and blue.

"That's an Industrial Automaton R2-series astromech!" Rey gasps. "It's a classic. Of course, it lacks the piloting power and the software customizability of the R8, but it's still very adaptable and I hear that the personality matrix is particularly well-designed—"

Ben snorts. "'Well-designed' is not quite how I would describe Artoo's personality."

"You don't like droids very much, do you?"

He shrugs.
After disembarking the *Shadow Sabre*, Luke and Ben exchange greetings with their welcoming committee while Rey hangs back, carrying her small bundle of possessions, suddenly shy in the presence of the beautiful silver-haired woman.

"Rey," says Luke, gesturing at her to come closer, "this is Jedi Master Tionne Solusar, one of my first students. She now fills in for me here at the academy whenever I'm offworld. Tionne, this is Rey. We found her on Jakku."

"Jakku? A most lonely place, but there is much to learn there." Tionne smiles at Rey, her opalescent eyes radiating the same calm aura that Luke wears like a cloak. "Perhaps someday you would like to accompany me on one of my research journeys."

"Master Tionne has almost single-handedly restored the knowledge of the Old Jedi Order," Luke supplies with a hint of pride. "She travels the galaxy gathering songs, tapestries, story-chains, holocrons, and other artifacts." Obviously having picked up on Rey's interest in machinery and wanting to put her at ease, he points to another one of the hangar's occupants. "That's her ship, aptly named the *Lore Seeker*. It's a—"

"*Jemlaat*-class in-system sail yacht," Rey automatically reels off, studying the rounded orange hull. "It's propelled by tachyon streams and ultraviolet lasers, with a backup sublight drive."

"Good." Tionne's smile widens. "I hope you will enjoy my little field trips as much as Ben does."

"Ben was, in fact, the one who sensed Rey's Force presence in the desert," Luke informs her.

Tionne nods at the boy, who has so far been listening to the conversation with an impassive look on his face. "Your powers are growing, young Solo. Take care that you use them wisely."

There is a solemn gravity to her demeanor that wasn't there before. Ben stiffens, but manages to reply, "I will, Master."

The R2 unit emits a shrill, admonishing beep. With a laugh, Luke touches his fingers to the domed head. "I'm sorry we forgot you, Artoo. Rey, this is Artoo. He was my copilot during the war. Nowadays—" His eyes twinkle again—"he keeps the students in line when I'm not around."
Rey is more comfortable dealing with droids than with humans. She exchanges a few lines of small talk with Artoo, who clicks and whirs amiably at her.


Luke turns to Ben. "I need Tionne and Artoo to brief me on the other recruits' progress while we were gone. Why don't you show Rey around, get her settled in?" he suggests.

Rey follows Ben out of the hangar, quickening her pace to keep up with his long strides. "I thought Jedi training had to start when you were a kid. Tionne doesn't look much younger than Luke," she observes once they're beyond earshot.

"He had to rebuild the Order from scratch," Ben explains. "The inaugural class was composed of Force-sensitives that he met on his travels or were recommended to him by those who knew about his project. Kirana Ti of the Dathomir witches, former Mon Calamari ambassador Cilghal, a tibanna gas prospector from Bespin named Streen... The Jedi of the Old Republic Era would have disapproved, possibly, but it was such resistance to change and innovation that contributed to their demise in the first place." He darts an offhand glance at her over his shoulder. "That's Master Tionne and Master Luke, by the way. You're a trainee now— you must show them respect."

Rey makes a face behind his back, crossed eyes, wagging tongue. She's met a few teenagers before, but none had been this stuffy and serious.

Ben leads her to a grassy clearing in front of the temple. He raises a long arm, methodically pointing out each level of the pyramid to her as he speaks. "The topmost level is the Grand Audience Chamber, where we have our lessons. Directly below that are the living quarters, storage chambers, and meditation rooms. The ground level holds the Strategy Center— for meetings, communications, and computing— as well as the kitchens and mess halls."

She listens, but her attention soon wanders to the river that flows along the landing pad and the dense jungle stretching out beyond it. She eagerly darts to the waterline, but Ben's irate voice halts her in her tracks. "Where are you going?"

She stares at him in bewilderment. "Exploring, duh."

"You can't just traipse off on your own. You could get lost, or run into something that wants to eat you." He stomps one boot, impatiently. "Let's head inside. I'll show you to your room."
She obeys with a mutinous frown. It's starting to dawn on her that she won't be able to come and go as she pleases, and she wonders what she's gotten herself into.

The interior of the Great Temple is eerie and quiet. "Everyone's usually at morning lessons this time of day," Ben says as he and Rey ascend a flight of cracked, moss-covered stairs. "You'll meet them later, when we go down for lunch."

Her stomach growls at this mention of food, but the demands of curiosity far outweigh those of appetite. "What do you do at lessons?"

"A whole lot of meditating," he replies, his mouth a wry twist. "It also depends on how long you've been at the academy. New recruits focus on learning how to channel the Force—manipulating small objects, things like that. Once you get the hang of it—although knowledge of the Force is always perfectible," he self-consciously amends, as if this is something he doesn't agree with but has been drilled into him nonetheless, "—you get your own training lightsaber and move on to combat exercises." He taps the metal rod clipped to his belt. "However, Master Luke believes that violence is a Jedi's last resort and that the lightsaber should be used rarely, if at all."

She's unsure what to make of that. She's fought all her life; a powerful weapon is an advantage. "And what do you believe?"

Ben draws up his chin as if considering the question from a wider array of angles. For a moment, he looks older than his years. "I agree that you don't need the lightsaber if you have the Force," he says at last.

A memory: the scavenger frozen in mid-air, stunned and scared. Rey shudders.

They reach a long, dank hall lined with bedrooms and refresher units. He takes her to one of the rounded doorways at the very end, announcing, "This is yours."

It's not much. There are slits carved out in the walls, serving as windows that spill rays of sunlight tinged orange by the stone bricks. There's a low and narrow cot with a thin, bare mattress. And that's it.

To Rey, the place is a palace.
Ben clears his throat. "We'll retrieve a couple of sheets and pillows from storage. Also some glowpanels and corner-warmers— I can help you install those, if you like."

Her mouth drops open in shock. "You mean, I get more?"

The boy slides her a very strange look then. It's too profound to be pity. It teeters close to heartbreak, to someone discovering something new.

"Yes, Rey." His tone is gentle. "You get more."

They spend the rest of the morning fixing up her room. Once the bed is outfitted and the lighting and heat systems are operational, Ben declares the quarters "habitable." Rey, who'd lived in a walker for nearly half her childhood so far, agrees with sham solemnity.

Her stomach growls again. His lips twitch in amusement, and she concedes that perhaps he bears some resemblance to his uncle, after all.

They head down the stairs. It's lunchtime proper, and the ground level bustles with activity. She follows him into the mess hall assigned to the trainees, and nearly stops short at the sight that greets her there.

The large room is filled with wooden tables and a variety of seats designed to cater to the different anatomies of the Praxeum's students. Automated servers flit across the aisles, laden with food and drink from the kitchens. The air hums with spirited chatter, Basic's steady current shot through with the hisses, clicks, grunts, and syllables of other tongues.

"This reminds me of the Cantina on Jakku," Rey mutters, slightly horrified.

"Believe me, the Cantina would be better," Ben replies with feeling.
As they search for an empty table, a golden-haired boy who looks to be Ben's age shoulders into him. He's dressed in patterned robes of such a garish mix of colors that Rey thinks she's in danger of going blind.

A pair of imperious blue eyes study her with derision. "Did Master Luke add 'babysitting' to your list of duties, Solo?"

"Maybe you should add 'coming up with wittier insults' to yours," Ben snaps.

The blond snorts and walks away, pomp in his steps. "That's Raynar of the House of Thul," Ben curtly informs Rey. "There's your Alderaanian nobility. His parents were offworld at the time of the planet's destruction."

"Shouldn't he respect you more, then? Considering that you're—"

"It's a defunct title," he repeats.

They find an unoccupied spot, which is tragically not that far from Raynar and his friends. Rey ignores their sniggers and pointed looks, as she is captivated by a table of three reptilian Cha'a gathered around a nest filled with vibrating eggs. Once the pink-furred hatchlings emerge from the shells, the Cha'a fall upon them in a whirl of scaled limbs and sharp-toothed snouts.

"It's rude to stare," Ben admonishes Rey in a low voice.

She immediately ducks her head. Her quarterstaff is in her room, and those razor claws don't look like they ought to be messed with.

At another nearby table, two slender female Twi'leks help themselves to piles of cultivated mold and rycrit meat, their lekku gracefully skimming the back of plain, loose-fitting robes. It is the first time that Rey has seen this particular species in anything but scanty slave garments.

Next to the Twi'leks, a group of flap-faced beings with singular eyestalks, curved necks, and glossy brown skin converse in their mellifluous, stereophonic language over bowls of leafy greens and bright flowers. Rey remarks to Ben that she sometimes wishes she had the two mouths and four throats needed to speak Hammerhead, and he almost chokes on his soup.
"Don't call them that," he warns. "They're Ithorians. That other name's a slur."

To cover up her embarrassment, she changes the subject. "Is there anything to drink?"

Wordlessly, Ben plucks the last jug of fresh blumfruit juice from an automated tray trundling towards Raynar's table. Rey has never had anyone do anything for her before, even if it's just as simple an act as pouring juice. It's a lesson in awkward silence until her glass is full and Ben sets the jug down on the table.

"Hey, could you give us our juice?" Raynar calls from his chair, his raised voice turning several heads. "Next time, please ask before you just take it." He waves a hand and the jug rises into the air, slowly levitating in his direction.

Ben's eyes narrow. The jug stops, then starts to retrace its steps. With an aura of challenge, Raynar exerts more Force power and the jug moves towards him again.

Rey can only watch in disbelief as the two boys engage in a telekinetic tug-of-war over blumfruit juice in the middle of a crowded mess hall. Yes, this pointless display of machismo really does remind her of Jakku Cantina.

All of a sudden, a wild and wicked burst of temper curls across Ben's lips, baring his teeth in a snarl. He pushes. The jug abruptly zooms right into Raynar's face, soaking him from head to toe in the sticky red liquid. Sputtering, the blond leaps to his feet, an action mimicked by his friends. One of them extends a hand, and a dish of brown pudding in front of Rey is Force-catapulted onto Ben's robes.

Operating on pure instinct, Rey stands up, grabs her bowl of hot soup, and hurls it at the new attacker, hitting him square in the chest. He cries out, and another companion of his quickly retaliates with a platter of honeyed noodles. Rey ducks, and the noodles end up splattering the white fur of a nearby Talz. The ursine being howls a musical note of dismay before charging Raynar's table—knocking over all the other tables in its path.

Soon, most of the students have joined in the fray, some laughing, some genuinely outraged. The room blurs with Jedi-levitated chunks of food tossed from one group to the next. Playfully shrieking, the Twi'lek females send the Ithorians' salad bowls soaring into the Cha'a, who rise back-to-back in an automatic three-point attack formation, hissing and glaring.
As a bunch of fuzzy thread-worms that had been the repast of two blue avian creatures squirm down Rey's arms, she glimpses Artoo out of the corner of her eye, rolling into the mess hall. The droid lets out an electronic wail of alarm and beats a hasty, whirring retreat, but not before a tray of pastries makes contact with his domed head.

It's pandemonium. Rey giggles while dodging and launching counterattacks with whatever dish is within reach. She's having fun.

Ben surfaces in front of her, his pale cheeks stained purple with the innards of several overripe fruits. "Don't tell me you're actually enjoying yourself!" he yells over the tumult.

Rey smashes a plate of quivering gelatin into his hair.

"Stop!" A Force-enhanced voice booms throughout the large room, echoing off the walls.

Every single particle of flying food stills in the air; each drop of liquid hangs motionless above the tables. Silence drops like a heavy curtain, punctuated only by a few trainees' gasps.

Luke Skywalker is standing in the entrance, a stern expression on his face as he surveys the frozen scene.

"Uncle," Ben whispers, stricken.

Rey notes, Not "Master."

"Was this the best and most challenging way you could find to put your powers to use?" Luke asks his students, sounding angry and disappointed.

And sad.

Rey gulps as a hollow pang gnaws at her heart. This man had offered her an amazing new life, had snatched her out of drudgery and toil, and she'd repaid him by helping to instigate a food fight in his
beautiful temple.

Luke turns to leave— and that’s when she spots the smile curving along his lips. "Instead," he says, "perhaps you can use your Jedi skills to clean up this mess."

He gestures with his hand, and the entire canopy of suspended food and drink comes crashing down, splattering Rey, Ben, and the rest of the trainees in an avalanche of juice, noodles, soup, desserts, vegetables, sauces, meat, and fruit.

Through a haze of white frosting that coats her lashes, Rey blinks at the sight of Luke walking away, his shoulders shaking with quiet laughter.

"Having second thoughts yet?" Ben asks her later as they join the stream of recruits trudging to their quarters, all of them sticky and tired after cleaning the warzone.

"Are you kidding? I can live here." Rey grins up at him. His hair is plastered to his forehead with gelatin and berry juice, and her hair is dripping gravy onto her shoulders. "I can definitely live here."

Chapter End Notes

The name *Shadow Sabre* is an amalgamation of two ships owned by Mara Jade Skywalker, as my homage to another great character that no longer exists in the canon universe. I’ve decided to base its appearance on the *Jade Shadow* because, well, SoroSuub yachts are just so damn sexy.

*Asajj Ventress.*

*The Great Temple* on Yavin 4.

*Tionne Solusar,* Her ship would have looked something like this.

The mentioned first students of the Praxeum: *Kirana Ti, Cilghal,* and *Streen.*

*Raynar Thul.* The Draco Malfoy comparisons are inevitable. I was serious about this being Hogwarts with lightsabers.

The species mentioned in the mess hall scene: *Cha’a, Twi’lek, Ithorian, Talz.*

Believe it or not, the food fight really happens in *Heirs of the Force.* Luke Skywalker:
master troll.
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

This is the last of the baby Rey chapters, as the rest of the story will focus on her teens and twenties. This darling child was an absolute joy to write, though, and I loved discovering Yavin 4 through her eyes.

Thank you for the kudos and the comments! Hope y'all keep them coming!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Luke grants Rey the whole afternoon to get used to the place before the start of her formal training the next day, so she spends a few hours exploring the vast stone labyrinths of the Great Temple. While the rest of the students go about their usual lessons, either in the Grand Audience Chamber or out on the grassy courtyard, Rey wanders the inner cells, spending an inordinate amount of time in the kitchens and computing bays— she's never before seen such an extensive stock of food just lying around waiting to be prepared and eaten, or such an array of updated, fully functional technology.

The real prize, though, is the old Rebel War Room, a veritable treasure trove of disassembled machinery and spare parts that would fetch a fortune in credits from Unkar Plutt and his boys. Rey has already weighed her pockets with scrap before it occurs to her that she should probably ask someone if she can help herself to this collection.

Ben would know. She sets out to look for him after carefully piling her finds in the darkest, dustiest corner of the War Room, hidden from plain sight in case anyone else decides to go salvaging.

Nobody will, but old habits die hard.

The grounds are afire with the bright yellow beams of training lightsabers. Overseen by Tionne, five blindfolded recruits timidly track the spherical Marksman-H combat remotes hovering around them. At the other end of the courtyard, a group of older students spar with an ASP-19 battle droid, exchanging friendly insults as they attempt to cut their opponent down.

"Use your feet, Ganner," a female Bith burbles at a handsome black-haired boy who misses the opportunity to make a crucial lunge. "Fenner's Rocks move faster than you."

Ganner shoots the Blith an obscene gesture, then furtively whips his head 'round to make sure Tionne hasn't noticed.
Since Ben isn't there, Rey reluctantly tears herself away and continues upstairs. Lightsabers look *awesome*—she can't wait to start using one, although she suspects she'll have difficulty with a weapon that has only one lethal end.

In stark contrast to the noise and action of the courtyard, the Grand Chamber on the top level is a bastion of serenity. Neatly-arranged rows of students sit cross-legged on the floor, eyes closed, hands resting on their thighs. Rey chortles to see quite a few heads drooped, snoring peacefully. *Definitely* not meditation.

She scans the assembly for Ben, but finds no sign of him. She spots the turbolifts, however, and is about to take one down to the living quarters with an excited smile—she's never ridden one before—when the huge skylights catch her eye.

There is really *so much* to see and do, here in this place.

On Jakku, she'd never gone anywhere without her fibercord, and she'd automatically clipped it to her belt after washing off food fight debris in the refresher. She unreels it now and hurls the grappling hook at the moss-covered sill. With a click, the sharp durasteel points dig into a crack in the stone blocks. Rey grasps the length of the fibercord with both hands, tugs and tests to see if the hook holds, and then climbs up the wall using the same dexterity with which she'd once scaled the hulking, musty ruins of star destroyers.

With little effort, she hoists herself out the skylight and onto the broad, rough-hewn platform at the very top of the ziggurat. Humid jungle air clings to her face as the orange gas giant of Yavin stares down at her, casting the world in a faint gloss.

From here, she has an unobstructed panorama of the cleared landing pad, the courtyard blinking with yellow plasma loops, the rushing rivers that surround the temple, and the rainforests that endlessly stretch on into the horizon.

Green. So much green, everywhere she looks, from this great and joyous height. A tree sways in the distance and a flock of whisper birds erupt from the leaves, singing a chorus of melodious, low-pitched calls as their radiant feathers ripple in the daylight.

*My heart is full*, Rey thinks.
She finally sees Ben when she walks over to the other edge of the platform and peers below. He and Luke are standing just by the base of the temple, deep in what appears to be a serious conversation. The boy's arms are crossed, and, even from afar, it's obvious that he's sulking at whatever Luke is saying to him.

Driven by curiosity, Rey creeps down one of the steep flights of steps wreathing the sides of the ziggurat, stopping once she's a few feet from ground level. She ducks behind a ledge and pricks up her ears.

"— thought we agreed that you would stay away from Force-stun for the time being." Luke's tone is grave yet gentle.

"I didn't kill him!" Ben protests. "Besides, it's a Light-side technique—"

"But that control over another being," Luke counters, "that sense of domination, however brief— it can lure. It can tip the scales, if you are not careful. And you and I both know that we have to be more careful than most." He sighs. "This is why Han feared you coming to the academy, he thought it would bring you closer to the unsavory aspects of your heritage—"

"My father," Ben spits out, "fears the Force in general, because he can't comprehend it. He's as Force-sensitive as a clump of dirt."

"Which," Luke says, this time with a hint of reprimand, "does not make him any less of a father, in the same way that being Force-sensitive does not make you better than him or anyone else."

"I—" Ben pauses abruptly, and then calls out in an annoyed voice, "How did you get up there, Rey?"

She emerges from the ledge, confused. "There's no way you saw me."

"I didn't, I just sensed you," he snaps, like she should have already understood this. "Those steps are ancient and can give at any moment. Come down now."

"And here I thought Master Luke would be the one giving me orders," Rey grumbles under her breath.
Once she's skipped over to him and Luke, Ben demands, "Didn't anyone ever tell you that you shouldn't eavesdrop?"

Rey blinks. "No."

He regards her strangely for a moment. "You are a feral desert child," he says at last, with calm academic bluntness.

"How are you finding my academy so far?" Luke asks her.

"Oh, it's wonderful!" Rey gushes. "Actually, I noticed that there's lots of spare parts in the War Room, boxes of them, could I..." She trails off as the rest of the sentence plays out in her head, I just got here but can I take some of your stuff? She's afraid that he will think her presumptuous, on top of Ben already being tetchy at her for eavesdropping and calling the Hammerh— the Ithorians the only name she'd ever known them by. It's a sobering realization, that this new world comes with a set of unwritten rules. She will have to navigate as cautiously as if she were trawling the area around the Sinking Fields.

But Luke just smiles. "Take anything that catches your eye. Tinker, if you like," he urges. "The machinery down there is either broken or obsolete; I would be most interested to see how you recycle them. Ben can help you get the heavier stuff up to your room."

"I can?" Ben says wryly, raising an eyebrow.

"I believe in you," Luke jokes. He claps a conciliatory hand on his nephew's shoulder before retreating into the temple.

Rey looks at Ben, who looks at the river, his jaw clenched. She remembers the name that Luke had mentioned; she'd meant to ask Ben at some point, once she learned his last name, but there had been so many distractions.

Now, though—

"You're Han Solo's son," she breathes. "He's an underworld legend."
He doesn't say anything, but his expression sours even further.

"Your uncle is Luke Skywalker," she murmurs, staring at this tall and dark-eyed boy with the soft mouth and the unruly hair and the prickly temperament. "Your father is Han Solo. Your mother is Leia Organa."

What does it mean, to carry the weight of those names?

"And my grandfather," Ben adds, cold, harsh, biting, "is Darth Vader."

A chill blossoms down Rey's spine. The Tuanul villagers had told her stories of this man. Members of the Imperial Remnant, passing through Niima Outpost, had raised their cups to him. This name is synonymous with atrocity, with the Empire's dark glory, present as crackling static in the degraded missives stored on the salvaged memory banks of wrecks such as the *Ravager*, that infamous *Executor*-class dreadnought. *Lord Vader. In memory of.*

Even now, the ghastly echoes ripple through the heavy late afternoon air of the jungle moon.

"Anakin," Rey realizes. "Luke's— *Anakin Skywalker. He was a Sith—*"

"He was a Jedi, first," Ben pronounces somberly. "He fell."

"Why? How?"

"That is Master Luke's story to tell." But he looks defiant. "I shouldn't have... You will learn all of this eventually. The Dark Side and the Light, and the balance— you will learn. And you will understand why everyone is... wary of me."

"You told me your family sent you away because they recognized that you were meant for greater things." It sounds like an accusation, although she hadn't meant it like that. Had she?

"I never said anything about *good.*" Ben smirks. It's the cruelest she's ever seen him look. "Only
great."

A faint tremor runs through him. The shadow vanishes, replaced by youth. "My parents were hesitant. Even my uncle had his doubts. There is too much of Anakin in me, I know. Perhaps even too much of Vader. They watch me carefully— Tionne, Katarn, all of them. They think they're being subtle about it, but it's so obvious that they consider me a flight risk. They're just waiting for me to explode."

"Maybe—" Rey swallows the tense knot in her throat. "Maybe you should prove them wrong."

His gaze flickers to her in surprise. She thinks that his eyes soften.

"Maybe," he repeats, with a noncommittal shrug. "Now let's go move that scrap of yours."

"You'll help me?" she asks.

His lips tighten, primly. "On sufferance."

* 

The next morning, it takes Rey half an hour to decide that she does not like meditation.

"Again," Luke says firmly when he catches her fidgeting on the stone floor of the small, soundproofed room.

"Leg cramp," she mumbles.

"Because you are not observing the correct position. Align your spine. Relax your muscles. Open the channels that flow through the center of your being."

I have no idea what you're talking about, she broods, but she straightens her back, anyway, and does her best to mimic the pose of the man sitting serenely in front of her. They're doing some one-on-one training this morning, while his other students who are already familiar with the basics are on the
level above.

*If I reach out, will I be able to sense them, the way that Ben always senses me?* Rey screws her eyes shut and attempts to do... whatever it is that Ben does, picturing out the Grand Audience Chamber in her head, the unmoving rows of silent young Jedi...

"You look constipated, not at peace," observes Luke. "The goal of this exercise is to clear your mind in order to establish a deeper connection with the Force. Empty your thoughts, Rey. Set your worries aside. Try again."

She lasts a good five minutes before absentmindedly drumming her fingers on her thigh.

Luke is patient. "The aspect of Control is always an initiate's first lesson. Control is your ability to recognize the Force within yourself. Only when you have learned this can you move on to Sense, the aspect in which you recognize the Force in the galaxy outside of yourself. Finally, there is the aspect of Alter, your ability to modify and redistribute the energies of the Force. You will get there," he promises, "but, first, you must learn Control."

Rey opens her mouth to explain, but, to her surprise, Luke offers a reassuring nod. "I understand. I grew up on Tatooine. Only bones stay still in the desert."

"Yes," she croaks. On Jakku, inaction had meant death.

"Your circumstances are different now. Happier, I should like to think. Here, there is no one to run from, no deadly heat and hunger to escape." Luke nods once more, this time in encouragement. "Try again, young one."

Later that night, Ben pokes his head into her room. "How was your first day?"

Rey glances up from one of the boxes of old tech that he'd levitated for her, all the way from the ground level to the living quarters. "Boring," she answers truthfully.
"I'm afraid it's going to stay that way until your powers awaken."

She groans, her dreams of lightsaber combat and mind tricks put on hold for now. "You brought me here under false pretenses." And then, casually, "You weren't at dinner."

"I ate in my room."

"Oh." She busies herself with the scrap again, sorting out tiny gears and circuit panels and cyberfuses, dusty and rust-stained with age. She's never minded eating alone, but, in the time before, it had been in the privacy of the AT-AT. A while ago, she'd commandeered one end of a long table and dined in silence while everyone around her chattered gaily in their own little groups. Her nape had prickled; she'd felt like a target.

Self-conscious. The word she's looking for is self-conscious.

Tonight's the first time that Ben hasn't taken his meal with her since he and Luke brought her to the academy. Her bewilderment must show, because he proceeds to explain, "I usually eat in my room. I was just helping you get settled. But, this evening, I assumed that you would want to sit with your friends."

Friends? She hasn't made any. He's greatly overestimating her social skills. She doesn't know what to do with other people when she's not fighting or bargaining with them by the skin of her teeth. "Why don't you sit with your friends?" she challenges.

He shrugs. He's always doing that— one bony shoulder lifted up, fingers unclenching forward, as if in supplication.

"You must have some, surely." It strikes her as odd that the scion of such a famous family would be so isolated at a school run by his uncle.

Ben makes a droll show of looking around. "Oh, yes, my mistake, here they are."

Rey lets out a bark of laughter, caught off-guard by his dry, sarcastic wit.
He almost smiles— or, at least, she thinks he does. He bids her good night, and, as he turns to leave, she sees in his stiff, stooped posture a certain kind of loneliness, calling out to her own.

Rey lasts five day cycles before sneaking off. The Great Temple of Yavin 4 holds no more surprises, although there is always that sense of wonder, and even the treasure of the War Room isn’t enough to keep her occupied, not when there’s an entire world waiting for her beyond the windows, beckoning to her in streams of orange light.

Also, meditation is more than just kind of a drag. Luke has a somewhat lackadaisical approach to teaching— once she masters the art of sitting still enough not to embarrass herself in the Grand Audience Chamber with the rest of the class, she notices that he more or less leaves his students to their own devices, encouraging them to continue seeking inner peace throughout the day.

Ben can’t be bothered with her, either. When he’s not reading in his room or sparring in the courtyard, he is— gone. Rey has no idea where he vanishes off to, but, if he’s out strolling through the jungle despite explicitly forbidding her from doing so, then it’s really very unfair.

She ducks into her room to grab her staff, and then she’s off.

Rey amuses herself with the river to the east of the ziggurat for a while, poking at the crawlfish, aquatic gundarks, and armored eels that lurk just beneath the surface, giggling in unbridled delight every time the affronted animals snap and splash at her. So much water! She eventually finds a spot shallow enough to ford, stumbling at first but moving with increased confidence once her feet get used to the slipperiness of wet rocks and mud.

And then she’s scampering into the jungle, branches scratching at her clothes and the canopy of trees closing over her head.

Here the daylight filters through the leaves in a gray-green wash. The earth is soft and damp, crackling with twigs. Insects chitter away in the bushes below a grassy roof of lilting birdsong.

Rey can’t get enough. She runs her hands over the tree trunks, her eager fingers sussing out the difference in textures between rough bark and prickly moss. She traces the papery veins and sharp edges of low-hanging leaves, the graceful curl of vibrant petals, the smooth roundness of berries.

As she ventures deeper in, she ends up startling a herd of runyips grazing on mulch. The grumpy
creatures low threateningly at her; she backs away with a silly grin at their comical appearance and yet tremendous presence of mind for the present situation, reaching for her fibercord. She hauls herself up the nearest tree, safely out of reach in case the beasts decide to— stampede, or whatever it is they do.

*Higher, higher,* she happily urges herself as she leaps from branch to branch. *Air and sky.*

The Massassi trees are gnarled, ancient things, teeming with pot-bellied woolamanders and rapacious stintarils. They keep out of her way once she brandishes her staff at them, but it's not long before she hesitates in her ascent, registering the presence of huge, sinister-looking hives dangling several meters above her head.

Does she dare...?

Rey straddles a branch as she mulls over her options. While a bright sense of adventure is coaxing her onward, no one survives in the Jakku wastelands for long without listening to their instincts. Right now, hers are clamoring for her to retreat.

A flurry of movement draws her gaze to the forest floor. It's Ben, crashing through the undergrowth as the runyips flee before him, scared off by the yellow lightsaber gripped in his right hand.

With a wicked gleam in her eyes, Rey throws a large, pulpy fruit at his head.

He reacts with breathtaking speed. He's barely turned in the direction of the projectile when his hand whips up, Force-suspending the fruit in mid-air.

"Rey." He frowns. "I told you not to wander off on your own."

She casts around for a suitable excuse. "I thought that communing with nature would help me find inner peace?"

"The jungle is anything but peaceful." As if to emphasize his statement, the fruit zips away and splatters against a nearby rock with a flick of his wrist. A bit prone to dramatics, this Ben Solo. "Flesh-eating piranha beetles swarm in the treetops. I highly doubt that's the sort of communing you have in mind."
She darts a nervous glance at the hives.

"Get down from there," he huffs, irritated. "And— stop climbing things."

Feeling extremely put upon, Rey lowers herself to the ground in quick, lithe movements. "What are you doing out here?" she demands.

"This moon is home to a number of Massassi ruins," Ben replies mysteriously as he extinguishes the beam of his lightsaber. "I study them in my spare time, but now I'm on my way back to the Great Temple, and you will come with me."

"I don't see why you get to play explorer while I can't," she sniffs.

"I," he replies with a calm air of maddening superiority, "am older than you and almost a Jedi Knight. I can take care of myself."

The ground starts to shake.

Ben and Rey quickly correct their footing, legs braced, arms held out for balance. The tremors continue, the swift sound of rustling leaves and snapping branches suggesting that something enormous is headed their way. The jungle creatures fall silent.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Ben mumbles.

The monster that erupts from the green wall of the underbrush is the same size as a shuttlecraft, covered in shaggy, matted hair tangled with primordial moss. A cluster of twelve tentacles writhe from its massive triangular head, each one glistening with a round, unblinking eye. It zeroes in on Ben and Rey and bares curved tusks long and sharp enough to tear a hole through a sandcrawler.

Rey shifts into attack position, but, almost before she knows it, Ben grabs her by the collar and hauls her in the direction of the Great Temple at near-breakneck speed.
"What are you doing?" she yells. "There's two of us, we can—"

"In the name of— this is a training lightsaber, I'd barely tickle it!" he retorts. "Just— run!"

The behemoth chases them through the jungle, snapping and snarling. As they sprint past one of the relatively younger, more slender trees, Ben gestures with his hand and the trunk snaps into two with an almighty creak, its upper half crashing over the monster's head.

Rey almost falters. Ben himself looks surprised.

"I've got to remember how I did that," he pants.

The severed trunk slows their pursuer down. By the time it shrugs off the weight, Ben and Rey have managed to wade across the river. The monster leaps on its hind legs and follows them onto the landing pad in front of the ziggurat.

Luke Skywalker emerges from the main doorway around which several trainees have huddled. "Get inside," he orders Ben and Rey once he reaches them.

"He doesn't even have his lightsaber!" Rey hisses as she and Ben join the other students.

Covered in sweat, breathing heavily, the boy leans one palm against the wall, while the other clutches around the stitch in his side. His brown eyes fix on his uncle, wide with fear. His expression is terrible to behold.

I don't want to, Rey finds herself thinking even in that moment, staring at Ben's pale, panicked face as he looks at Luke. I don't ever want to love somebody that much.

* 

A sandy-haired man wearing black Jedi robes stands beneath a gray sky, dwarfed by the hulking shape that looms over him, bigger than worlds. Twelve tentacles hover and bend in the air as twelve slitted eyes focus on this new target.
The man takes a step forward. The beast lowers its head as if to charge, swinging its tusks to and fro with such viciousness that the points seem to gouge deep scratches into the dusk itself.

Unperturbed, the man continues to approach, stopping only when he is within reach. The beast bellows in anger and in confusion.

A hand is raised, palm out.

"Go." The whisper echoes throughout the silence draped over the temple grounds. "There is nothing for you here."

And the beast subsides.

* *

Evening meditation finds Rey in a thoughtful mood— which is, it has to be said, a marked improvement over all her previous sessions thus far— but her eyes snap open when Ben folds himself into the empty spot beside her. He, too, appears more contemplative than usual.

It's still very much fresh in her mind, her brush with mortal danger, and the way Luke had sent the creature galloping back into the trees with nothing more than a few calm words.

"Do you think we'll be able to do that, too?" she asks Ben in an undertone, to avoid disturbing the other trainees gathered in the Grand Audience Chamber.

"No talking during meditation," Ben says from out of the corner of his mouth, his eyes firmly shut.

"But I just—"

Resignation creases his brow. "It is possible, if we work hard and discipline ourselves. Emphasis on discipline. Now, be quiet."
"You promised me greatness, Rey thinks. I can see that. It's going to happen. I am standing on the threshold of history.

But, today, she had been shown— greatness tempered by good. History has two doors, and, while Darth Vader's blood may flow in Ben Solo's veins, so does the blood of Luke Skywalker.

"Rey," Ben sighs, long-suffering, his eyes still closed, "I can't meditate with you staring at me."

Properly chastised, she reverts to the correct position, spine straight, muscles relaxed. Control. Sense. Alter. She takes a deep breath, finds the channels of her heart, and lets herself vanish into whatever is waiting inside.

Chapter End Notes

Jedi younglings practicing with Marksman-H combat remotes.

An ASP-19 battle droid, used for lightsaber training at the Jedi Praxeum.

An older Ganner Rhysode, although in my timeline he is roughly Ben's age.

The Bith. I should have looked for a more Jedi-y photo, but this was just too cute.

Creatures of Yavin 4: crawlfish, aquatic gundark, armored eel, runyip, woolamander, stintaril, piranha beetle. The monster that chases Ben and Rey actually appears in Heirs of the Force, and is subdued in a similar manner, but its species has not been named, as far as I know.

The Grand Audience Chamber.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Short(ish) update to timestamp the rest of the fic, as well as kick off the actual plot. Future installments will be much longer, I promise. Thank you to everyone who's reading this.

For the next couple of weeks or so, I'll be hunkering down to finish my Reylo Valentine Exchange story and another prompt fic that's been languishing in my drafts. But you'll find me still dicking around on Tumblr. Come say hi!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In the Goluud Corridor, somewhere off the Daragon Trail, something stirs.

It is a vast and nameless something—a consciousness, a slow and eternal thought—belonging to a body whose location is secret. It rustles with impatience.

_The boy should have come to me by now._

What could be keeping him? It doesn't know. It has sent its best nightmares, its deepest darkness, going straight for the throat. There had been a time, yes, there had been a time—it had been so close.

But, years ago, a... change. That young mind, always so laughably malleable—not shut, nothing so strong. More like partitioned off. It now feels as if it's scrabbling at a window, searching for a crack that must exist. Or trying to make one.

The boy is a young man now. They are behind schedule.

It shifts. Extends its reach to another ruin on that same jungle moon. Past a different stone labyrinth. Into another heart.

_Lord, awaken._
A shrill whistle from Artoo pierces the air, immediately followed by a chorus of grunts and rallying cries as the training field devolves into a flurry of running feet and waving arms. Two teams of apprentices, all in their teens, use long-handled rackets, stunblasters, and the Force to pass six crackling jet-balls back and forth.

Standing in the middle of the chaos, Rey squints against the brilliant sunlight in an attempt to decipher a strategy to the players' movements. As today's Skorch referee, it's her job to figure out each team's set of secret objectives and help attain an equal level of victory for both sides.

She hates this game.

Jysella Horn's stunblaster sends a jet-ball spinning straight at Bazel Warv, who swats at it with his racket. The jet-ball barrels toward a circular hoop at one end of the course, but it's intercepted at the last possible second by Yaqeel Saav'etu, stretching a furry hand above her head and racing down the length of the field with the jet-ball hovering over her like a satellite.

Intuition— a chill whisper across her nape— tells Rey that she must not let the Bothan score a goal for her team. She tackles Yaqeel, and they both go sprawling to the grass. With Yaqeel's Force-grip thrown off, the jet-ball drops and bounces off Rey's head.

Ugh.

"One!" Natua Wan shouts in triumph, kicking the jet-ball over to Seff Hellin, who makes a scooping motion with his fingers to balance it with the two other jet-balls currently in orbit around him. He then propels the three jet-balls through his team's goal in rapid succession.

"One?" Rey hisses, narrowing her eyes at Natua. And why had the Falleen passed to Seff, aren't they on opposite—

Still pinned beneath Rey, Yaqeel snorts. The reddish-brown hair covering her body stands on end, rippling lazily. After ten years, Rey is familiar enough with the Bothan's mood-sensitive fur to recognize the pattern for mischief.

In Skorch, it's not unheard of for both teams to gang up on the referee. Especially when Master Luke is busy overseeing blast deflection training on the other side of the temple.
Rey leaps to her feet to confront the players. "You kriffing—" But she's laughing too hard to finish the sentence.

Once Natua's team realizes that Rey has discovered their objective, their plays lose subtlety; they abandon any attempt at finesse. The game becomes a riotous free-for-all, Seff's team scrambling to make three more goals while Natua's team guns for the referee, trying to hit her with the five other jet-balls.

Rey's having none of it. According to the mechanics of Skorch, she has to ensure that both teams fulfill their objectives, but she can also arrange for complete losses on both sides. She ducks and weaves and dodges and deflects, sends jet-balls sailing to the far end of the course. Her fellow apprentices shriek in good-natured protest, the wind whips at her face as she races across the field, this anarchy reminds her of a long-ago food fight, and the sky is so blue—

"What are you doing?" Bazel demands in mock outrage, jogging alongside her. "Worst referee ever!"

Grinning, she's about to retort, but her attention is caught by a gleam of gold plunging from the clouds. She would know that shape anywhere, that drop of light— it's the *Lore Seeker*, making planetfall.

Rey skids to a halt, tracking the ship's progress. Unfortunately, this means that the players hot on her trail collide into her just as the other apprentices see their chance and hurl several jet-balls in her direction.

* The hangar bay is etched in clear mid-morning light and sharp, clean shadows. Rey clings to the entrance and impatiently watches the *Lore Seeker* discharge its passengers— a small group of young men and women and various humanoids wearing the brown cloaks of the Jedi Knights.

Finally, a tall, slim figure makes his way down the ship's ramp. Rey *runs*.

At twenty-five, Ben Solo has outgrown neither his gangly frame nor his pensive demeanor. He still prefers his hair unruly, falling in soft panels around his face, but somewhere along the way he had shed his sandstone robes in favor of darker hues. His eyes, though, remain the same, long-lashed and
intense and the color of brandy, and they now fix their usual solemn gaze on Rey as she dashes towards him.

"How was Vjun?" she asks, lifting her chin in that familiar angle so she can beam at him. By now, she's accepted the fact that she's never going to catch up to his height.

"Wet," he replies shortly, a veiled understatement of the Outer Rim planet's perennial acid rains. He frowns at her disheveled, grass-stained appearance, lingering on the bruise that blooms across her cheek. "What happened to you?"

"Skorch."

He sucks in a disapproving hiss of air through his teeth. "I hate that game."

"Yes, well." She wrinkles her nose. "You're not exactly a team player."

"Teamwork has got nothing to do with it. The one really being trained is the referee. Ulaha."

At the sound of her name, the Bith female wanders over to them. "What do you want, Solo?" Despite its blunt phrasing, the question is pleasant enough in the lilting, chirrupy accent, spoken with the ease of long-time acquaintance.

"Do something about—" Ben gestures vaguely at Rey. "This."

"The last time he tried to heal somebody, the wound ripped open and the patient nearly bled out," Ulaha Kore confides to Rey. "Granted, the patient was Raynar."

Long, pale pink fingers cradle Rey's bruised cheek, gently prodding the injury to learn its scope. After completing her assessment, Ulaha rests her other hand against her temple, closing her eyes. Rey surrenders herself to the energy that pours from the Bith, letting it sew up the shattered capillaries beneath her own skin. The pain recedes; in its place, that restfulness— that *peace*— that she has come to associate with the Force.

"There." Ulaha opens her eyes and takes a step back. "Good as new."
"Thank you," says Rey. "I hope your mission went well."

"Eh. Would've gone better if someone hadn't decided he could storm Bast Castle all by himself."

"It's not my fault," Ben grumbles. "The rest of you were moving too slowly."

"Because we didn't want to trigger the automated defense systems," Ulaha points out. "Remember those? Remember how you would've fallen into the turbolaser if Eryl hadn't had the presence of mind to levitate you?" But she relents, moving to clap Ben on the shoulder before thinking better of it. He dislikes casual touch. "Good man, though," she remarks to Rey. "Cut down a squad of ASP-38s before any of us could even lift a finger."

"Which does not negate the fact that he should have waited for my signal," a serene voice admonishes.

Rey bows to the silver-haired woman exiting the ship. "Master Tionne."

"Rey." The decade has added wrinkles to Tionne Solusar's brow, lending her a certain quiet dignity that suits her scholarly aura. "I still owe you a research trip, don't I? My missions have been getting more risky... Perhaps when you've crafted your lightsaber." She turns to Ben. "As for you, Jedi Knight Solo, I trust you have learned your lesson? Your recklessness on Vjun put the entire team in danger. Next time, I ask that you please respect the chain of command."

Ben's bow is guarded, offered more reluctantly than Rey's. "I apologize, Master."

Tionne's opalescent eyes soften. "It must have been difficult for you, being in that place," she murmurs. "Surrounded by all that he was. But take heart—you have grown strong. And grown up in the Light. Continue this path. Temper it with humility and with kindness. Make a legacy of your own."

Rey watches Ben's face. How it shifts from surprise, to wonder, to a tentative kind of resolution. He nods, lost for words, and then takes his leave of Tionne and Ulaha.

Rey follows him outside, to the river by the temple. She's dying for answers, practically jumping in
her skin, but she knows that he will only talk when he's good and ready. When it comes to learning patience, refereeing a Skorch game has got nothing on being friends with Ben.

Several pebbles rise from the ground, hovering at chest level. With index finger striking against thumb, he flicks them one by one across the water's surface, using the Force to correct each pebble's trajectory and elicit maximum skippage. This is a centering exercise for him, similar to how Rey telekinetically disassembles gadgets and puts them back together, screws twisting and wires snaking in the air. Little actions, small things, designed to help you focus, to help you find yourself—the you that exists amidst a maelstrom of emotions and senses.

After the tenth pebble sinks, she can hold back no longer. She asks, "What was Master Tionne talking about? 'Surrounded by all that he'— who's he?"

Ben doesn't answer right away. He skips another stone, and this one moves more slowly than the others had, bouncing into the diamond-tinted water and then arcing up again, leaving gentle ripples in its wake. Rey thinks of HoloNet nature documentaries—green fields, rainclouds, the clodhoppers of Naboo.

Finally, the pebble disappears beneath the current and he turns to her. It is a jolt, it always is, that expressive face revealing itself bit by bit, swaths of cheekbone, dark beauty spots. "Do you want to see?"

She leans forward, keening in anticipation. "You'll let me?"

He slides down onto the grass, crossing his legs. Meditation pose, almost, except he rests an elbow on his knee and props his chin on a curl of knuckles, quirking an eyebrow at her in silent challenge.

She sits across from him, reaches eager fingers to his temple, but he expertly ducks out of range. "No touching." He smirks. "Let's see what you learned while I was gone."

"You weren't gone that long," she mutters. Although it had felt a little like eternity, hadn't it, counting the day cycles until he returned—

Centering, before anything else. She closes her eyes.

For Rey, the first sense will always be sound. Jakku had been monotonous, scrape of metal,
sometimes the howl of desert wind, the bustle when she went into town, but mostly a ringing stillness, day in, day out. But Yavin 4 is alive, a song of running water and youthful cries, the birds in the trees, the rustle in the bushes, the hum that only the Force-touched can hear. She listens to Ben's steady breaths, the rhythm of his heart, how her own lungs and vessels whisper in response.

The next sense is touch. Jungle air warm and damp on her skin, the grass prickling through her robes, the sunlight thrumming against her shut eyelids. She feels around, blindly, hoping to snag on the loose threads of what she's looking for, but it's a blur, it's too far away—

*I'm here.* Ben's voice, smooth and deep. *I'm waiting. Find me.*

Several cloaked figures race down a long and narrow tunnel. Ganner Rhysode's face, momentarily illuminated by the flare of energy bolts as he looks over his shoulder. Waves of anger and regret, embedded into the very walls. A familiar pull.

"Here?" pants Eryl Besa over the wail of sirens, stopping at a sharp turn, her right sleeve blaster-singed. "I think there's something—"

"Cover me," Ben says brusquely, shoving past her.

"Solo!" It's Raynar. "Will you quit charging in alone—"

An enclosed courtyard. Acid rain hisses against the glass. The ruins of a massive statue carved from black stone. Gloved hands, dark helm.

A green lightsaber winks out. A young man sinks to his knees.

In memory of.

*Enough now,* Ben tells Rey. *Pull back. Let me go.*

But there's something else here. It's staring over the young man's shoulder, an awful shape. "Glory, glory," it seems to croon. "See how he was revered, how his legend thrives. Glory. Find me. The Stygian Caldera. The Daragon Trail. The midnight sky."
She panics. She has felt this before, once, when she was very young. In the humid jungle dawn, a boy screams, body twisting with nightmares. Further down, at the end of the corridor, a girl awakens, and screams with him.

_Rey._ Someone's voice, insistent, alarmed. _Stop. Get out._

But she no longer remembers how to run, only how to fight. The towers of Coruscant gleam in the sunset. Leia Organa soothes a sulking ten-year-old. "You have to learn. Your uncle will teach you. A child growing up alone, with a talent like yours, it can be a terrible thing. We will visit, we will try to visit—"

The boy looks away.

_Rey!_ A hoarse shout, echoing through the worlds, through the years. A feeling of being ripped apart, of splintering into two.

She gasps. Her eyes fly open.

Ben's on his feet, white-faced, outlined against river and trees and sky. "I don't think we'll be trying _that_ again anytime soon," he mumbles, extending a shaky hand to help her up.

Rey is almost tempted to apologize. She'd been upset, she'd delved too far. But she never got into the habit of saying sorry, wouldn't even know how to begin, so, instead, she meekly raises her own hand. His fingers close around her wrist, and he tugs her out of his shadow, and for a moment she's soaring up into those brown eyes.

*

As they make their way back to the temple, Rey is still slightly disoriented. She's walking on the soil of Yavin 4, but her feet are scurrying through the mazes of Darth Vader's fortress. _You are not there_, she tells herself firmly. Control, control. _You were never there._

"After he died," Ben says quietly, "Bast Castle became the stronghold of the Imperial Remnant. They built that statue in his honor."
"Who tore it down?"

"Master Luke. When he went there to rescue the Ysanna, back in the early days of the New Jedi Order."

"Oh," Rey breathes. "Oh, irony." And then she starts snickering.

Ben frowns, but it's the frown of someone who's battling the urge to laugh as well. "Speaking of Master Luke, I must bring him what we found."

"Which is?"

"A couple of interesting things. The holocron of Asli Krimsan, which is with Master Tionne, but she entrusted me to give Master Luke— this." Ben reaches for something clipped to his belt, and then tosses it at Rey.

It's a lightsaber, done up in bronze and black, with a throttle-style activator and a chrome emitter. It hits Rey's palm and she flicks her wrist, deftly twirling the hilt and igniting a blaze of sapphire.

"And I see we're sticking with Soresu," Ben sighs, noting the opening stance that she's automatically slipped into. "A most boring form."

"You don't know what you're talking about," she retorts as she snaps her little finger against the hilt, deflecting imaginary blaster bolts. "Besides, not all of us want to punish ourselves trying to learn Niman."

He steps back, giving her enough space to carry out the footwork, to put the blade through its paces. "As it happens, the creator of that lightsaber specialized in Soresu, too."

"Really?" She pauses, the blade slanted over her head in a single-handed grip. She extends her powers, coaxes history from the metal, ends up skimming the surface of some immeasurable sorrow. She recoils. "Who owned it?"
"Obi-Wan Kenobi," Ben replies. "Vader kept it, after their last battle."

Master Luke's starting to sprout a few gray hairs, Rey thinks with a fond ache as Luke Skywalker turns his face to her and Ben. He's standing by the windows of the Grand Audience Chamber, soaking up the morning sun. His nephew presents the retrieved lightsaber to him with both hands. Luke takes it, and his nostalgic smile shrugs off the weight of entire decades.

"Master," he murmurs. There is a lifetime of gratitude in that single word. He holds the hilt aloft. "We were pressed for time, when last I was on Vjun. I did not think to search for it there." He looks at Ben. "We named you after him, you know."

"I know." For once, Ben's response to an old family story is devoid of sarcasm. "My parents could not agree, so the decision fell to you."

Yet another name, Rey thinks, that you must carry.

"I think it was all our decision, in the end," Luke muses. "He was your mother's only hope."

He falls silent, then. Ben catches Rey's gaze and inclines his head in the direction of the turbolifts.

When they leave him, Luke's head is still bowed over the lightsaber in his hands. Sun continues to spill through the windows, enveloping him in radiance.

"Don't you have lessons?" Ben asks Rey as she follows him into the second level of the temple, where the living quarters are.

"Can't wait to get rid of me already?" she jokes. The truth is, she has to clean up first. She's still sort
of tracking dirt from the Skorch field everywhere.

"You are kind of annoying," he shoots back.

She elbows him in the ribs. "Moof-milker."

He tweaks one of the knots in her hair. "Brat."

*I missed you, Rey almost, very nearly says.*

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, okay, so I'm not entirely sure I understand Skorch, either. I plead artistic license.

Jedi Knights: Ulaha Kore and Eryl Besa. Jedi Apprentices: Jysella Horn, Bazel Warv, Yaqeel Saav'etu, Natua Wan, and Seff Hellin. I tried to align their ages as closely as I could to EU lore, but there's bound to be irregularities, so, for anyone who's familiar with the novels concerning the New Jedi Order, please be kind enough to consider this an entirely new timeline.

Bast Castle on Vjun. Here is the courtyard where Luke destroys the Vader statue during the mission to rescue the Ysanna in *Dark Empire II*.

Tionne actually does find Obi-Wan's lightsaber and the holocron of Asli Krimsan on Vjun! One of the apprentices who accompanies her on this mission is Anakin Solo, the youngest of Han and Leia's retconned children.

As for what the heck Ben and Rey are talking about as she tests Obi-Wan's lightsaber, there will be a much more in-depth explanation of the different combat forms in the succeeding installment. I'll provide links and references then, but, in the meantime, you can read a brief rundown on my blog.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Special shout-out to Rinso, who opened a discussion on lightsaber forms that helped me construct the first scene of this installment, and to math_camel, who called Skorch "exactly the kind of thing a bunch of meditating space hippies would come up with," earning a forever place in this fic's tags. And, to everyone, thank you so much for reading, for the comments, the bookmarks, and the kudos.

I have upped the chapter count to 15, because I realized that 10 chapters is in no way enough for the kind of story that I want to write. Also, I hope no one minds the appearance of an EU character who's also named Finn, but I needed him here. I doubt he will cross paths with our TFA cinnamon roll, so it shouldn't be too confusing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Someone's got a little crush," Alema Rar sings out.

Rey follows the Twi'lek Jedi's teasing gaze to Jysella, who's staring enraptured through a fringe of reddish-brown hair at the middle of the courtyard where Ben is sparring with her older brother, Valin. Now that the Knights have returned from Vjun, Luke had thought it instructive for the apprentices to watch their different combat styles in action.

Jysella blushes. "I do not."

"There's no shame in it." Alema giggles, causing the younger girl to cringe and shuffle her feet. "Solo's very easy on the eyes."

Jysella is spared from having to reply by Finn Galfridian, the golden-haired prince of Artorias. "Hey, Alema!" he calls, his hands held out at his sides, lightsaber flashing. "Are you going to hang around with the kids all day, or are you going to let me kick your ass?"

With a snarl rumbling loose in her throat, Alema leaps through the air in a perfectly-executed Ataru somersault. Her blade clashes against Finn's as he brings up his arm to block her strike, and she vaults away before finally allowing her feet to touch the ground. The blue-eyed man's chiseled face stretches into a lazy grin; he assumes a Makashi fencing position, feet set apart at a perpendicular angle, knees slightly bent, blade pointed towards Alema. The Twi'lek's gaze narrows as she slants her lightsaber in a two-handed grip. For a few seconds, they do nothing but size each other up across the distance between them, and then they charge at the same time in a whirl of blue light.
"Don't let Alema bother you," Rey tells Jysella in a low voice. "She's a bully, she's always enjoyed torturing the younger students."

"I like her sister better," Jysella softly confesses, as if it's a personal failing to prefer one twin over the other.

"Don't we all," Rey quips, glancing at the other end of the courtyard where Numa Rar is locked in a polite, mechanical duel with the diminutive Chadra-Fan, Tekli.

It's not long, though, before Rey's focus shifts to Ben. Alema's flirty declaration gnaws at the pit of her stomach for reasons she can't yet pinpoint, but she has to concede that the Twi'lek is not far off base. Ben does cut a striking figure in his dark-colored Jedi robes as he waltzes over the stones, switching between offense and defense with casual elegance.

*It's because he's so tall,* Rey decides. *And he has nice hair.* She can't begrudge Jysella or anyone else their infatuation, although it's a bit weird to think of Ben as— as anything other than Ben, really.

"My nephew seems to be leaning towards Djem So today." Luke's comment immediately draws the attention of the apprentices clustered at the edge of the dueling area. "Do any of you see it?"

Yaqeel speaks up. "Yes, Master. That—" She points as Ben switches from reverse to forward grip mid-spin, slashing at Valin in an uppercut that the other man has to arc backwards in order to avoid, "— is Djem So. However, *that,*" she continues when a Force-push from Ben's free hand suddenly blasts Valin off his feet, "is not."

Luke nods. "Jedi Knight Solo has decided to specialize in Niman, which, as we have previously discussed, is a combination of all the other forms and requires chaining Force powers into the combat sequences. This makes for some rather... *creative* fighting moves." He says this just as Valin launches himself at Ben, who sidesteps the blade while meeting it with his own, using the lock as leverage to swing his opponent away from him. "However, the fact that Niman is an amalgam means that it lacks a specific focus, rendering it— in some opinions— unsuitable for combat. Indeed, it is the preferred style of consulars, historians, and philosophers— those Jedi who, in general, devote their time to study and diplomacy."

"Then why did *Ben* choose it?" Seff demands, provoking a ripple of laughter from the apprentices who are all too familiar with Ben's surly ways.
"He likes the challenge," Rey blurts out. Always second nature to her, this rush to his defense. "For Niman to be truly effective, you have to gain some level of expertise in the other forms as well, don't you, Master Luke?"

"That's correct, Rey," Luke affirms. "Each form embodies an idea. For example, look at the Rar sisters— that's Ataru, movement. Meanwhile, the children of noble houses, such as Finn and Raynar, tend to gravitate towards the elegance of Makashi. Then there's Soresu, defense, and Djem So, power. A Niman adherent must understand all these ideas and learn when to apply them and when to improvise their own moves. It's the trickiest and most clever of the forms, it takes ten years to master..." He trails off, and then says, as if to himself, "Ben has always been one of my most ambitious students."

There's more to it than that, Rey thinks. "You don't need a lightsaber if you have the Force," she remembers a sullen teenager telling her years ago. Even now, as he spars with Valin, the way he keeps his off-hand ever at the ready— folded across his chest or held up in front of him— shows what skill he's more comfortable with. For Ben, the lightsaber is a mere prop; the Force is where true power lies.

But this is a private thing, a weakness that can be exploited, so, out loud, she just says, "Besides, he is a scholar. He knows almost as much history as Master Tionne does."

"All right, calm down!" Seff sticks his tongue out at her. "I was only joking."

She rolls her eyes and turns back to the duel. Ben has the initial advantage with his powerful, unpredictable swings, but there is a reason Valin Horn is the youngest Jedi Knight of the New Republic Era. Their blades strain against each other once more, green on blue, and then—

Blue vanishes—

Ben stumbles. Valin seizes this opening with relish, igniting his weapon in an overhead strike that his outbalanced opponent barely manages to parry.

"He switched it off," Rey mutters, perplexed. "Valin switched off his lightsaber in the middle of combat."

Jysella's palm has clapped over her mouth. "That's how our dad fights."

"It's dangerous," Jysella moans. "One wrong move—" She's forgotten Ben entirely; her wide, worried eyes are fixed solely on her brother.

Valin has found his rhythm, the beam of his lightsaber blinking in and out of existence, misdirecting Ben's strikes, forcing him into clumsy, last-minute counters as they drive each other back and forth across the courtyard. The deadly dance sweeps them into the path of other duelists, but every single Knight misses nary a beat, crossing blades with new opponents before effortlessly switching back to their original one.

It's amazing to watch. It's pure choreography. Jysella's chewing on her fingernails and Rey's breath has caught in her throat. Someday, she promises herself as Ben ducks below Ganner's swing to slash upwards at Eryl, who in turn uses her blade to direct Ben's weapon back to Ganner. They freeze in a three-point lock, exchanging smirks, before springing apart. I'll fight like this someday.

And then it happens: Valin and Ben run at each other, meeting briefly in the middle— and Valin's emitter switches on right as the hilt grazes Ben's arm.

There's an audible gasp from the audience. Rey hears a strangled cry, and realizes it came from her.

The two adversaries skid to a stop at opposite ends of the dueling area. Ben is breathing heavily, the fingers of his off-hand curling around the ugly-looking gash on his bicep.

He presses down. The world stills. His eyes blaze.

"No!" Rey and Jysella chorus as Ben whips up his off-hand. Valin is lifted into the air, his paralyzed body sailing right towards the waiting edge of Ben's green lightsaber. This is Niman's "draw closer" technique, there can be no recovery from this, this is the killmove—

A swift gesture from Luke throws off Ben's Force-pull and shoves Valin to safety. He sprawls to the ground, shaken but unharmed. The rest of the dueling Knights extinguish their blades as the Grand Master of the Jedi Order strides into their midst.
"Why?" Luke asks the younger man struggling to his feet. "Why would you incorporate Trakata in a non-lethal situation?"

Valin hangs his head. "I— I don't know what came over me, Master Luke," he stammers. "There was— an urge—"

Luke's frown deepens. "We'll go back to that. As for you—" His voice sharpens as he turns to Ben. "Your sparring partner could have died, all because you lost your temper. You used pain as fuel. I saw that, Ben. How many times must I caution you against the Dark Side?"

"He gets it from his grandfather." Raynar's snide whisper echoes in the silence.

Ben doesn't even hesitate. Raynar barely has a chance to leap away from the lightsaber's wild arc.

From her place beside Rey, Natua shakes her head as the two Knights go at it. "Something's not right. Raynar is an ass, but even he wouldn't dare interrupt a lecture."

"And my brother," Jysella insists with a hint of rare fierceness, "wouldn't use Trakata in a friendly match."

"And Ben would fight anyone, anytime," Rey adds, "but..." She pauses to consider the rest of the sentence. "No, never mind. He would fight anyone, anytime, period."

Luke himself seems bewildered as Ben and Raynar duel in front of him. Finally, he aims a rueful smile at the watching students.

"Some lessons have to be taught the hard way," he quips.

And then he ignites his own lightsaber, and wades into the fray.

It's not much of a contest. He's Luke Skywalker, after all.
Hovering at the entrance of the medbay, Rey bites her lip in order to suppress the giggle that's bubbling in her chest. Ben and Raynar are sitting up on separate cots, shirtless and shooting spiteful glares at each other while their fellow Knights heal them. Among other injuries, Ben has a split lip, courtesy of his uncle's elbow, and Raynar's sporting a dislocation from when Luke had flipped him over his shoulder.

"Way to go, boys," Ulaha drawls, the purple ring around Ben's left eye disappearing beneath her fingertips. "Thank you for the most entertaining... three minutes of my life."

"Hardly even two," Tekli corrects. The rodent-like Chadra-Fan has hopped onto Raynar's cot, her golden-furred brow wrinkled in concentration beside his shoulder.

Ben inclines his head towards his nemesis. "Raynar started it."

The blond sneers. "I was merely calling attention to the fact that you are a walking timebomb, Solo."

"You forget," Ben says silkily, "that there is only one Alderaanian noble in this room whose family allied with the Sith Empire."

An angry flush rises to Raynar's pale cheeks. "At least I am true nobility. Your mother was adopted."

"She," Ben grits out, "is the daughter of Padme Amidala."

"Who wasn't even a real queen, anyway—"

"This is getting tiresome," Eryl interrupts from where she's leaned against the wall next to Ganner, observing the proceedings with arms crossed. "You're not teenagers anymore, you know."

"It was tiresome even back when they were teenagers," chuckles Ganner. "At ease, House Thul and
House Organa. The power struggle happened long before your time. We are all Jedi here."

"Some of us more bunged up than others," Ulaha remarks, pausing to examine her patient again. "All right, Solo, you'll live to fight another day. The only thing left to deal with is your lip."

"Yeah, let's tape it shut," Eryl cracks. The other Knights laugh; the tension is diluted. Even Ben slants her an exasperated *Fine, I'll give you that one* look.

"Rey." Ulaha beckons her closer. "How's your Force Assist coming along?"

Rey hesitates. "I haven't had much practice yet."

"No time like the present." Ulaha steps aside to let the apprentice take her place in front of Ben.

She approaches him with a nervous flutter in her stomach. She can work the healing trance just fine on herself, but patching up somebody else is a different story. Also, he hasn't put his shirt back on, and Jysella would be bursting into flames right now if she were here.

Rey, however, is made of sterner stuff, so she very firmly does not spare a glance at... any of it. The broad shoulders, the slim hips, the lean muscles of his arms— nope, she is most definitely not looking. She's at an age where her body has started heating up, brimming with a host of bizarre new reactions; sweaty palms, tingling spine, pulses in unexpected places— she finds it all terribly suspicious, sometimes glaring at the stranger in the mirror who looks like an oblique version of herself.

He lifts his chin, presenting the blood on his bottom lip for her inspection. *Have you not been sleeping well?* she wants to ask, because there are gray circles under his eyes, noticeable even through the messy waves of dark, sweat-slick hair that have fallen across his forehead. She places her fingers at his lips; he swallows, and the action draws her gaze down his pale throat, to his collarbones sharp as shorelines in the sterile medbay light.

"Do it step by step," Ulaha advises, just like she herself was taught by the masters years ago. The other Knights are watching with interest. "Force in you, first, and then Force in him."

Control. Sense.
Rey reaches out, through the flesh, through the pain, to touch the Force. What is alive must heal. What cannot heal must endure.

Ben smiles. It's a quick, tentative flicker at the corner of his mouth. It's the same way he's always smiled at her, the one thing that hasn't changed over the years. It is its own kind of centering.

Alter.

"Not bad, kid!" Ganner crows once Rey has come back to herself. "Seamless. I was never that good at your age!"

Her hand drops to her side. The wound on Ben's lip has completely closed. Slowly, he brushes his knuckles over his mouth, wiping away the last drops of blood.

Tekli beams at Rey. "You will be a great Jedi."

"A good one," Ben emphasizes, quietly. He seems proud of her.

Several fuses spark above Rey's head. She waves a hand in front of her face to dispel the acrid tang of scorched wires, but she is eventually forced to retreat, the heavy wrench in her other hand clanging against metal as she shimmies her upper body out of the corroded intake pipe.

"What are you doing?" Tiu Zax cranes an iridescently-feathered head into the doorway, the question lifting her flute-like voice.

Rey points the wrench at the barrel-shaped machinery that had been salvaged from the War Room and is currently taking up half the space in her own quarters. "I'm optimizing this pump for hydropower generation. When I'm done, we can install it in the river and charge our batteries there. If
I can figure out a way to make it compatible with phased output jacks, we might even be able to divert power to the temple's lighting systems. Another possibility is protein skimmers, to extract algae from the water for food processing."

Most people's eyes would have glazed over by now, but the luminous indigo orbs set in Tiu's delicate face remain alight with interest. The highly-developed brains of the blue-skinned humanoids of Omwat predispose them to engineering and computer science, thus making Tiu one of the few apprentices who can keep up with Rey when she gets like this.

"Some might say that we already have enough permanent power cells left over from the Rebellion," Tiu remarks once the other girl runs out of breath.

Rey shrugs. "I just want to see if I can do it. So I won't have to wonder anymore."

"That is understandable, and admirable. Curiosity opens the door to progress." And then, in an apologetic tone, "But we have to get going if we want to make it back before nightfall."

"Yeah, I know. Just give me a second." Rey drops the wrench into her toolbox, and then holsters her fibercord and training lightsaber at her side before following the Omwati down the hallway. Once his students are old enough to practice common sense— and skilled enough to theoretically not get themselves killed— Luke likes to send them trekking through the jungle in pairs, to work on sensing and studying other lifeforms.

Rey enjoys these expeditions, on top of all her unsanctioned ones.

The landing pad outside the temple is full of younger initiates honing their levitation abilities. Luke paces among them, offering words of encouragement and suggestions to improve, while Artoo putters about, clearing weeds from the grid. It's not long before several of the children get the bright idea to join forces and lift him. He whistles dejectedly, his treads spinning in the air.

Just as Rey and Tiu pass by the floating droid, one child loses focus, setting off a chain reaction among the others. Artoo beeps in alarm as he plummets to the ground, but Rey suspends him once more with a casual flick of her fingers and sets him down slowly, never breaking her stride.

"Hang in there, Artoo," she calls over her shoulder.
Release me from this hell, the droid replies in Binary.

Ben, Ganner, and Finn Galfridian are talking at the edge of the landing pad. It appears serious—their voices are low, their expressions solemn. They fall silent once Rey and Tiu wander within earshot.

"Like we care, anyway," Rey sniffs, offended.

"Where are you going?" Ben asks.

"Trekking."

The three Knights exchange glances. Finally, Ganner says, "Don't go too far, all right?"

"We have already explored most of the surrounding jungle and studied the lifeforms therein," Tiu points out. "Master Luke would want us to learn something new."

"Don't go beyond the Palace of the Woolamander," Ben snaps, and it's clear to everyone that he's addressing the command to Rey.

She bristles. "That's hardly half an hour's walk, how pointless—"

"Please do as we suggest for now," Finn interrupts, soothingly. "There is something... We're not sure yet, but it's better to be safe than sorry."

"Perhaps if you were to tell us what it is?" Tiu hints.

"We're not sure," Finn repeats.

"You know, there's a running bet on who's going to be the next pair to accidentally lead a monster to the temple," Rey tells Ben.
His lip curls. "Sounds exactly like the kind of juvenile thing a bunch of kids would bet on."

She blinks at him, at the harsh slash of his brows. He's been cranky ever since he returned from the Bast Castle mission—well, crankier than usual, anyway. But, whatever. These guys aren't masters; she doesn't have to listen to them. She motions at Tiu, and they continue on towards the thick green treeline.

The two apprentices have barely gone five steps when Ben calls, "Rey" in an exasperated tone.

Rolling her eyes, she stomps back to him. "What now?"

Those long, slim fingers of his hook under her chin, tipping her face up gently. He swipes the pad of his thumb across her cheek, dark eyes narrowed in grave concentration as he rubs away the grease that had smeared on her skin when she crawled through the pipe.

What is it about this simple action that stutters her pulse? Why does this touch elicit an ache in her throat? Why does the look on his face make her feel, all of a sudden, lonelier than ever before?

*Since when have you been able to move me like this?*

After what seems like forever and also *too soon*, he lowers his hand. "Be careful out there."

*"

The underbrush rustles as several reptilian predator birds erupt squawking into flight, a whirl of leathery flaps and blood-stained beaks. Rey gingerly sidesteps the runyip carcass they had been feasting on, while, beside her, Tiu navigates the dew-damp foliage in graceful, darting movements.

"What do you think they're worried about?" the Omwati asks, referring to the three Jedi Knights. "The older ones have been on edge since that day in the courtyard, when Ben and Valin dueled."

"Maybe they're still jumpy from Vjun?" Rey hazards, brushing back loose strands of hair that the humidity of the jungle has plastered to her temples. "Although hardly their first mission, it was the most dangerous one yet."
Tiu comes to a halt, with a stillness that suggests eventual flight. The avian bent to her features is always more apparent when she's out here, in the midst of the wilderness, in the shadow of the Massassi trees. "There's a path up ahead, through those vines. But I sense... rage. And instinct. A thousand brittle lives, caught in a hungry swarm."

Rey creeps over to the wall of vines and squints through the gaps. Sure enough, a strip of cleared forest floor snakes through the gloom, blocked by a shattered, papery hive dislodged from its perch in the upper canopy. The air shimmers with clouds of tiny wings and clicking pincers.

"Alternate route?" Tiu suggests.

"No need." Rey concentrates, warping the energies around her and Tiu into a sense of distaste and disorientation. They push the vines aside and walk calmly past the toppled hive; the piranha beetles veer away from them, repelled by the imprint that Rey has cast.

As the winding path takes the two apprentices deeper into the woods, they start to step more quietly, shutting off as much of their Force presence as they can. By now they've gone way beyond the ruins of the Palace of the Woolamander, the arbitrary boundary that Ben had set. The jungle sounds grow more menacing, birdsong and rodent chatter giving way to wet growls and the occasional distant roar. The trees brim with watching eyes and waiting teeth.

Movement, to the right. Rey and Tiu drop as one into attack stance, hands poised over the hilts of their training lightsabers. A couple of shadowy figures burst from the raven-thorn thickets, and then __

Four blades hum in the air, blazing bright yellow in the grayish shade of the forest canopy.

"Oh, it's you guys." Seff's relief is palpable even though the beam of his lightsaber is locked with Rey's just one flinch away from his throat.

"We're a bit lost," Jysella explains, arms falling back from the overhead swing that she'd been about to land on Tiu, who in turn immediately relaxes her upward deflect. "Good thing you came this way."

One by one, the lightsabers are extinguished. Rey's is the last to switch off, and it's honestly a bit depressing to realize that the scavenger girl still exists, has also taken root in this green land.
"We should be heading back," Tiu ventures slowly. "It will be dark soon."

The foursome exchange measuring gazes. The spectre of evening meditation in the Grand Audience Chamber looms before them.

"Another hour?" Rey suggests. "Let's just see where this path leads?"

* * *

A slight tremor, beneath black earth. A tentative ripple, on silver water.

Nwûl tash. Dzwol shâsotkun.

He is vast and roaring and millennia old. His body had perished in fire and in chains long ago, the stones of his altar running slick with the blood of the Massassi as they sacrificed themselves, by the thousands, so that he would live forever.

Shâsotjontû châtsatul nu tyûk. Tyûkjontû châtsatul nu midwan.

He had slept.

Midwanjontû châtsatul nu asha.

But, then, a... call. A slow signal, from some distant star. He wakes to so many young and pliant minds within reach. Minds that had been like his, once. What is the word? Yes—Jidai.

Ashajontû kotswinot itsu nuyak.

He feels some of them now, coming towards him. Moving through the jungle in bright flares. Lord, says whatever it is that had roused him, Lord, here is my sacrifice. The stones tremble, and he waits.
Chapter End Notes


The Chadra-Fan.

The Omwati.

Lightsaber forms: Ataru, Makashi, Niman, Djem So.

Valin and Jysella's father, Corran Horn, uses the Trakata technique during the Yuuzhan Vong War.

Force healing.

The Palace of the Woolamander.

The words that our Mysterious Big Baddie (TM) is saying are from the Code of the Sith.
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay! I had to finish my Valentine exchange fic before deadline; do check it out when you have the chance.

We have some new tags. The Rey one is courtesy of Nina, and I would also like to give a shoutout to the wonderful Jordan for beta-reading last chapter's combat sequences.

Thank you, everyone, for the bookmarks, comments, and kudos! Would love to know what you think of this update.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"What does an Imperial star destroyer wear to a formal occasion?" Seff asks.

"I don't know," says Jysella.

"A bow TIE!" Seff hoots, before collapsing into gales of laughter.

Jysella groans. Tiu ignores the bad pun with quiet dignity. But Rey, who can sometimes be very annoyed with Seff, finds herself smiling as the stocky boy's mirth at his own joke forces him to lean against a tree trunk for support. Back on Jakku, she rarely saw people enjoy themselves—even now, after ten years at the Praxeum, the sight of it still feels like a gift.

The path ends in a dense row of whorled blueleaf shrubs a meter tall, tingeing the air with their distinctive spicy fragrance. The apprentices forge ahead, through a cluster of branches, and the foliage parts to reveal—

Open sky, first, Rey's gaze turned ever upwards with thoughts of flying. The gas giant of Yavin Prime hangs low in the purple horizon, a burning orange curve that peers over the treetops at the border of this sudden wide clearing that the jungle has opened into. The system's medium-sized sun is also about to set, and the red-gold paths of these twin lights intersect in glittering rays across the quicksilver surface of a disk of flat, mirror-still water.

In the middle of the lake is an island, and on top of the island is a temple, dominated by a massive pyramid split in half and carved from obsidian. Between the sharp spires, a polished black colossus looms over the water—a man with long hair swept back from his face, a sun tattoo on his forehead,
and padded robes in an ancient style. There is no mistaking these garments, or the barbed glyphs that adorn the pyramid and its surrounding pillars. This is a monument to a Dark Lord of the Sith, erected by the slave tribes of long ago.

"Another Massassi ruin!" Jysella exclaims. "I wonder if Master Luke knows about this yet."

"It is possible that he does not. Most of the rainforest is uncharted," says Tiu. "We might be the first to set eyes on this place in hundreds of years."

"Want to bet?" Rey quips, glimpsing a familiar flash of blond hair emerge from the black temple.

Adulthood has hollowed Raynar's cheeks and added wiry muscles to his slight frame, but it has dampened neither his enthusiasm for flashy outfits nor his self-sure, pompous stride. As the apprentices watch, he lowers his gaze and—

Seff's brow knits. "Is he using the Force?"

"Eyes on what's in front of you, Hellin," says Rey, although she herself has to shake free of the illusion. "He's looking down. There are stepping stones beneath the surface. He's not actually walking on water."

Raynar seems perturbed to find them waiting on the shore. "Isn't it past your bedtime?" His voice lacks its usual bite. There's a—vagueness, not just in the way he talks, but moves as well. Rey has the unsettling impression that she's watching a man walk out of a dream.

"What were you doing on that island?" she asks.

He flashes a thin smile. "Learning."

It's an innocent enough response, but the smile is strange. She squints at him, tries to discern, casts a net with the Force to see if anything peculiar will snag—

The sensation that hits her is akin to a door slamming shut in her face. "You should know better than to try that with a Jedi Knight," he scolds, with a trace of his typical haughtiness. "Now, be good little
apprentices and come along."

"But we haven't explored the ruins yet," Tiu protests.

"Trust me, you never want the sun to go down on you in a place like this. It's time to head back to the academy, all of you. Especially you." He's talking to Rey again. His voice drops to an exasperated mutter. "If Solo finds out I left you here just as it was getting dark, he'll never let me hear the end of it."

*

Night has fallen by the time they cross the river. The lights of the Great Temple send golden flares arcing into the star-studded sky as Ben storms across the landing pad, his pale face a war between fury and relief. Darkened by rainforest shadows, his eyes sweep the group for injuries; after ensuring that no one's dismembered or bleeding, he whirls to Rey and demands, "Where have you been?" in a tense snarl.

"I told you— trekking," she stubbornly repeats.

Tiu, Seff, and Jysella scamper into the safety of the temple's main entrance. Raynar makes to follow them, but Ben's arm lashes out to grab the shorter man's collar and haul him off his feet. "What were you thinking, keeping them out this late? The tuk'ata are on the move— we heard the howl earlier. What is wrong with you?"

"You've gone mad, Solo," Raynar croaks. "You are positively unhinged. I found the brats playing in the jungle, and I led them back here."

"I wish you'd all stop talking about me as if I were still a kid," Rey grumbles. "I'm sixteen."

"Exactly," Ben rasps. "A kid." He releases Raynar, who makes a show of adjusting his collar and shoots Rey an I told you so look of pure disgust before marching into the ziggurat.

"Okay, what is the matter with you?" Rey asks Ben once they're alone. "You've been perfectly horrible this past couple of weeks. And we haven't talked about that sparring session yet— you almost killed Valin! What's going on, Ben?"
He falls into another one of his awful, brooding silences. Beneath starlight, the bags under his eyes are more pronounced, gray crescent-shaped bruises marring his wan complexion. His jaw tightens and his brows draw together and he's always had the wildest face, it's never been able to keep anything locked up for long, you could practically see his thought process. He opens the hollow of his throat to the sky like a man waiting for the killmove.

Rey knows that sadness, that fear. She has seen him like this, once before. "It's the nightmares again, isn't it?"

Instead of answering, Ben resolutely turns his back to her and heads for the temple. She can't let him do that, can't let him walk away from this, so she hurries to outpace him and plants herself firmly in his path, forcing him to stop walking before he mows her over.

More howls pierce the tropical air. They sound distant, yet as high and vast as mountains. Rey's skin crawls. The tuk'ata packs of Yavin 4 have always kept to themselves, lurking in the caverns of the moon's volcanic regions. She's never even seen one in the flesh, but, tonight, something seems to have stirred them up.

"We have to get indoors now," Ben grits out. "Do not make me carry you over my shoulder."

"As if I'd let you," she retorts.

He grabs her wrist, but she wrenches free. "Just tell me." She hates her voice, the pitiful entreaty in it, ten years' worth of friendship battering against his walls. It's so difficult, sometimes, to be so afraid for somebody who won't let you help them. "Have the nightmares come back?"

"They never went away." His response is clipped and matter-of-fact enough that the gravity of it needs a few seconds to register. By the time it sinks in, he's already taken her arm, ushering her through the doors, into the Great Temple's soft radiance.

A memory:
When she Awakens, it hurts.

It's her twelfth night at the Praxeum, and she's dreaming of the desert. This would be nothing new, except that she has never been in this particular desert before. Two suns at their zenith bear down on an endless expanse of sandy dunes and rust-colored mesas. A brown-cloaked figure rises from the flatlands, tall and thin, hood pulled back to reveal a mass of copper-colored curls.

"Here I was a slave." He's talking to someone she can't see, someone whose presence is a vague flicker at the corner of her eye. "The Jedi took me, and I remained a slave." The world starts to shake, and his shadow changes, growing longer over the splitting sands, its bare head morphing into a ridged, triangular helm. "Through victory, my chains were broken. I embraced the darkness, and I was free."

The desert shatters into a million pieces. Rey is left floating, alone, in the black of outer space, the oxygen slowly being sucked out of her lungs. She can't move, can't breathe, so she tries to shout instead. No sound emerges. Her pulse is failing, her vision is a fading blur of shining constellations. There's no one to mourn her, no one to remember. She always knew she would die this way.

_The Light cannot save you from this._ The thought slips into her head, a vicious croon. _What good is power, if you don't know how to use it? I bring you deliverance. I bring you rebirth._

She lashes out, with a final burst of desperation, with the last shred of air left in her chest. She doesn't know how she does it, but she _shoves_ it all away—the thoughts, the stars, the void, everything, all of it. She tears her body from the vacuum, and the pain is a sharp, searing wound that consumes her soul.

"Rey?" A boy's narrow, ashen face turns to her, confused. "What are you doing in my dream?"

When she wakes up, she's already sobbing. The boxes of War Room salvage are hurling themselves across her chambers, their contents scattering through the air. The walls are trembling, the glow-panels are switching on and off, her head is _killing_ her. She screams and screams, and someone else is screaming, too, wails muffled by layers of stone and distance, and there are footsteps rushing down the corridor, and—

Someone is saying her name. It's one of the Twi'leks—Numa—the nicer sister. She approaches Rey cautiously, avoiding the hurricane of metal scrap that swirls around the bed. From the doorway, the blue-eyed boy everyone says is a prince—Finn Galfrian— is watching, ready to lend a hand in case it's needed.
"It's all right, you're fine," Numa murmurs. "It's just your powers manifesting. It hits some of us hard at first, but that's okay. Don't panic."

"Master Luke will be here soon," Finn adds. "He's seeing to Ben at the moment, but he'll be here any second."

"I can't make it stop!" Rey's terrified— the flickering lights, the floating objects, it's all coming from her, too much, too soon, why. "I can't—"

"Ride it out," Numa urges, bending down so that their faces are level. "You can do this. Ride it out, then let it go."

When Luke finally appears, Rey is rocking back and forth on the mattress, her knees drawn up to her chest, her head clutched in her small fists. The room is in disarray, the floor littered with tools and spare parts, one glow-panel wrenched off the wall.

"Rey," Luke says gently. He gestures, and a feeling of calm begins to wash over her. "That's the difficult part over with. These are the first steps. The path of the Jedi has opened before you."

Through her tears, she glimpses Ben peering over his uncle's shoulder. "It hurts," she whispers, and he flinches, looking stricken. "You didn't tell me it would hurt."

*

Now they are older, but the night is the same as it always was, a velvety press of shadows that is almost too thick for the single glow-panel to overcome. They're in one of the meditation rooms on the second level, sitting side by side on the floor, both of them keeping their gazes trained on the wall. Some things are easier said when you don't have to look at the person you're saying them to.

"I've always had those dreams. Every night, ever since I was a child." Ben speaks as if each word is being wrenched from his throat, dragged kicking and screaming into the light. "You came into your powers while you were sleeping— an unusual event. Your Force sensitivity was all over the place, and it latched on to the nearest, most potent thing that it could find. That's how you got hauled into the nightmare, I think. Our signals... crossed. And, because you were awakening, because you were so uncontrolled, so raw, you managed to do something that I could not. You kicked us both out of the dream. Not only that— you threw up a kind of barrier." He rubs a weary hand across his face "I
still dreamed. But they weren't as real. I felt— safer? Or, at least, not so alone." He looks at her then, flashes a wry, crooked smile. "Thanks for that, by the way. I wasn't kidding when I said you'd be a good Jedi."

"Don't get all mushy on me." Even though something in her sings at the compliment, at this gratitude so hard-won.

"But all of that changed after Vjun," he continues. "The nightmares have surged in strength. At first, I thought it was an aftershock from Bast Castle— from being confronted with Vader's legacy— but the other Knights have been experiencing... anomalies as well."

"Like Valin and Raynar?"

"Raynar has always been a fool," Ben dismisses, "but Valin— Trakata is one of the riskiest techniques. Even Corran Horn uses it only as a last resort, only when the options are either to kill or to die. Valin said, afterwards, that he can't be sure what made him do it. He admitted to being annoyed with me, but something made that annoyance... bigger. Transformed it into a raging desire to finish our duel once and for all. And it was the same on my end. When he scored that mark, I was — I've never felt it that strongly, the urge to draw blood. I heard someone, Rey. In my head. When I pressed on my wound. In my head it felt like someone was laughing." The sentence fades to a hoarse whisper; the shadows in the room are long and they hide his eyes. "That's not all. Rhysode and Galfrijian have reported seeing things. That's why I was speaking with them earlier. They say there's someone here with us, in the temple. A dark man. He talks to them late at night. He tells them things about themselves that no one else knows."

Rey glances around, uneasily. It must be her imagination, but the temperature has dropped. She realizes, with some surprise, that her hand is already on the hilt of her training lightsaber— as if it flew there of its own volition. "Master Luke would know what to do, wouldn't he?"

Ben makes a face that's so adolescent that, despite the urgency of the situation, she rolls her eyes. "Oh, come on. I get that you hotshot Jedi Knights think you're old enough to handle yourselves—"

"We are old enough to handle ourselves—"

"But clearly you can't, if you're all this close to murdering one another out in the open!" she snaps.

"That was just the one time, with me and Valin," he sighs. "Your penchant for exaggeration—"
"Is nothing compared to yours. Like whenever Alema switches HoloNet channels and you treat it as a declaration of war—" She catches herself; bickering is fun, but they have more important matters to deal with right now. "Look, your opinion of Raynar is distorting the facts. He's a suck-up, isn't he? He would never goad you about Darth Vader in front of Master Luke, of all people. Whatever's affecting you and the other Knights, it's gotten to him, too."

Ben frowns at the tense expression on her face. "You're getting all... glare-y. You know something."

_ I know that you know me too well, _ she thinks, with a hint of ruefulness. "Only that he's been messing around Massassi ruins in the jungle."

"Show me."

Rey hesitates. There are things in her head that she'd rather not let Ben see— specifically stray little thoughts about him that she hasn't quite sorted out yet. If he were to stumble across them while searching through her memories, well, it would be downright embarrassing. They'd probably never be able to look each other in the eye ever again.

"I could take you there," she ventures. "Tomorrow morning?"

"Or you could just show me now," he counters.

"I—" What is going on, her cheeks feel warm—

He blinks. "Why are you blushing?"

She slants away from him, ducking her head as she furiously tries to get her erstwhile blood vessels under control. He angles his body in her direction and follows her, leaning forward with a quizzical look on his face. When she can retreat no further without tilting her cross-legged position off-balance, she cranes her neck to the side, turning her profile from his penetrating stare.

"You're hiding something from me." He sounds incredulous. "There is actually something going on, in that whirligig little mind of yours, that you don't want to tell me about."
Rey decides that silence is the better part of valor.

"Well, fine," Ben sniffs at last. "I guess you're old enough to have your own secrets now."

"I don't need your permission to be old enough!" she retorts. She swivels to meet his gaze, forgetting how close their faces are, and, okay, tactical error, because—

— It's all long lashes, dusting their shadows on the tops of his pale cheeks, it's all brandy-brown eyes and constellations of tiny moles, it's all sulky lips and—

"I wasn't giving you permission," he mutters. "I was just... coming to terms." He withdraws, straightening his spine once more in the basic meditation pose that is second nature to all of Luke's students by the time they reach Knighthood.

"Coming to terms with what?" She has no idea, really, why her mouth has gone dry.

"Time," he answers, with such a wealth of regret, colored by rare affection, that her heart clenches at the simple word. Before she can respond, though, he shifts to the previous topic. "I don't like the idea of you going back to those ruins."

"But you'll be with me," she sweetly points out, and she's only half-joking.

He seems startled, and then uneasy. "Don't get used to it." He rises to his feet, holds out a hand to help her up, as he never fails to do. "I might not always be around."

* 

They set off at dawn the next day. The academy grounds are empty save for Bazel, Natua, and Yaqeel, who are practicing their acrobatics. Consequently, their eyes light up when they spot Ben's tall figure striding over the dew-damp grass, Rey at his side.

"Knight Solo, please stand still!" Yaqeel cries.
"I think not." Despite his frigid response, Ben halts in his tracks and looks sufficiently grumpy and harried as Bazel takes a running jump towards him.

The ground shakes beneath the Ramoan's large feet. With uncanny, Force-assisted grace, his bulk launches into the air and flips effortlessly over Ben's head, before landing on the grass with another heavy thud.

"Nice." Rey grins at Bazel as he lumbers towards her.

"Thank you." Ramoan snouts and tusks make it difficult for the species to speak Basic, but Bazel had persevered in his usual earnest manner until he could successfully grunt out the syllables. "Are you going for a walk?"

"Yes, it's lovely weather." Somewhat inane, but she can't divulge the reason for this trek without sowing panic among her fellow students— or, worse, intriguing them enough to tag along. Besides, the weather is lovely, with the clear pink sky and the early morning mists cooling the tropical air.

"Hi, Rey!" Although Yaqeel's breathless from her own somersault, her mood-sensitive Bothan fur prickles with cheer. "Tiu told me all about you using a Force imprint to repel those nasty piranha beetles yesterday. You have to show me how you did it. Let's be trek partners next time."

"Quit using me for my powers," Rey somewhat tentatively jokes, relaxing when Yaqeel and Bazel laugh. Forget Force imprints, she thinks, pleased with herself. I have gotten the hang of Bantering.

The three apprentices watch the reptilian Natua complete her flip over Ben. She then joins them, nodding at Rey with a slight trace of the hauteur that all Falleen possess in abundance. It's a species trait that Rey has learned not to take personally by now.

After some more small talk, she extricates herself from the group and waves goodbye over her shoulder as she goes to Ben, who's waiting for her with barely concealed impatience. He's idly tapping the hilt of his lightsaber, brown cloak parted to reveal the black Jedi apparel underneath. The darker colors suit him, although she kind of misses his old apprentice robes because they had not contrasted so dramatically with his pale skin and accentuated his lanky build. They'd made him look... safer.

"Aren't you going to let me practice my flips on you, too?" she teases.
"Please don't," he sighs, ever the long-suffering Knight besieged by impudent apprentices.

He keeps glancing at her while they head to the river. Finally, she asks, "What is it?"

"I am glad you have made friends." He sounds almost wistful.

"You have friends, too," she points out, before she can evaluate her sentence. Over the years, the Praxeum's Knights have developed the sort of camaraderie that can only come from growing up together and risking life and limb together, but Rey knows for a fact that Ben still prefers eating alone in his room and spending his free time on the HoloNet or with his nose buried in books. "Well, you have me, anyway," she amends.

"How fortunate," he deadpans.

"Don't make me push you into the river."

*

The sun has fully risen, leaching its waxen rays into the forest canopy by the time they reach the Palace of the Woolamander. True to its name, the decrepit temple is littered with a troop of the animals, their fur gleaming bright blue and gold against the undergrowth. At Ben and Rey's approach, the males howl, baggy throat pouches vibrating, and the females brandish their powerful front claws. Ben raises a hand, and the woolamanders gradually retreat, scampering over the toppled stone pillars before disappearing up the trees.

"Several minds at once," Rey notes. "You're getting really good at that."

Ben shrugs. "They're only semi-sentient. It's easier."

"Do you have to send out fear, though? Calming would be just as effective." Not to mention... kinder.
"I'm not good at calm. Are we nearly there?"

"Um, no."

He shoots her an exasperated look. "I told you not go beyond these ruins yesterday."

"Since when have I ever listened to you?"

This earns her an eyeroll, which soon narrows into an impatient glare. "Rey, you're *dawdling.*"

"In a minute," she snaps. She's at the building's crumbling entrance, inspecting the black Massassi glyphs carved onto the tan stone above the door. "I kind of miss this place." She'd barely spared it a passing glance during her trek with Tiu, but the mellow light of early morning has put her in a nostalgic mood. These were the first ruins she'd discovered— well, not so much *discovered* as followed Ben to.

"I saw my first rainfall here," she continues, in something like wonder at how ten years have passed so quickly. "Remember?"

*

A memory:

It's her second month on Yavin 4. She's practicing her tracking skills— or, at least, that's what she tells herself as she creeps down the path that Ben has trod through the jungle.

She hears him blundering about up ahead. Stealthily, she peeps around one of the large pink flowers that grow in these parts, just in time to catch him in the act of turning to her with a scowl.

"Will you quit following me?" he snaps, fifteen years old and indignant.

"I'm bored," she complains. Her gaze falls on the ruins behind him and she charges forward, practically shoving him aside. "What is this place?"
His annoyance succumbs to his penchant for academic lectures. "This is the Palace of the Woolamander," he tells her in a grudging tone. "Discovered by the Sullustan naturalist, Dr'uun Unh, during the—" He stops, a droplet of water glistening on his cheek.

"I know you're passionate about history and all that," Rey says slowly, "but you don't have to cry—"

"It's rain," he murmurs.

From above the trees comes a sound like the clatter of rusty turbines. She looks up, startled, reaching for her staff.

"Thunder," he explains.

And, when the water falls, it *sings*. A steady dripping rhythm over the broad leaves, a cool wet susurrus down the trunks, low gurgles into damp earth, a thin drumbeat on vine-encased stone pillars. She extends her hands, lets the water pool into her cupped palms. More droplets streak her face, spatter on her arms, on the tips of her boots. *Wash it all away*, she thinks, her awed gaze tilted to the forest canopy as the rain comes pouring down.

*

"Do you remember?" she repeats now, smiling at Ben.

"Yes." His voice comes out all scratched, oddly gentle. He watches her like he's looking across a span of years— she knows that, because it's the same way she's looking at him. His features are soft in the emerald light. "Yes, I remember."

Chapter End Notes

Seff Hellin's TIE pun is actually a Jacen Solo (TM) original.

*Blueleaf.*

*Tuk'ata.*
The words uttered by dream-Anakin are a riff off the Sith code transcribed in Chapter 5.

Ramoan.

Bothan.

Falleen.

I imagine Ben wearing something similar to Anakin’s robes, because reasons.

Dr’uun Unh of Sullust.
A ripple of silvery water laps at Rey's boot as she tiptoes onto the first stepping stone, distorting the reflection of the cloudless sky overhead. Ben is in the lead, navigating the slippery path with care, and it's not until they're halfway to the island that he breaks the ponderous silence that had settled over him the moment they pushed into the clearing.

"See how you have to look down, or else risk falling into the lake? This ensures that you approach the temple with your head bowed," he explains. "Asserting dominance whenever possible, in whatever manner was available to them— this was typical of the ancient Sith. They wanted to be worshipped as gods. Many of them got their wish."

"Sounds like a lovely bunch." Her joke falls flat; there's no room for it amidst all this predatory stillness, in front of these black ruins.

The island is formed from cratered mounds of dark volcanic rock, riddled with splotches of green and orange lichen. "It's so quiet," Rey comments as she steps ashore. "No birds, not even insects— it's like everything's..." She trails off, because her sentence had been about to end in "staying as far away as possible." The eerie atmosphere is already thick enough without her giving voice to it.

Saving the statue for last, she wanders around the jagged obsidian pyramid and its surrounding pillars. It's frustrating that she can't decipher the millenia-old words that have been carved into the angular black glass, but a part of her is also relieved. She doesn't think she'll like what this script of hooks and barbs has to say.
"The architecture was designed as a funnel to concentrate the Force," Ben murmurs absentmindedly, almost as if he's talking to himself. "This was a place of power. A focal point, for rituals." He stares up at the colossus with none of the usual studious intensity that he bestows on historical ruins. In fact, he looks kind of— sad and resigned.

Like he's always known he was meant to come here. The thought drags slow, frozen claws across Rey's heart. Like he's fought for so long for his path to not end up here. But it did, anyway.

She follows his gaze to the statue. The Sith Lord sneers down at them, dark and triumphant. She doesn't like this place— there's a certain wrongness to everything, even to the way the daylight falls. "Ben, I know you figured it out the moment we got here, so, where are we?"

"This is the Isle of Kun," he rasps. "And we are in the Temple of Exar Kun."

It's only a name, Rey tells herself, but, even so, she can't help the shiver that crawls down her spine. Memory comes to her in flashes, bits of old history lessons, Tionne Solusar's calm voice echoing through the Grand Audience Chamber, holocrons sparkling as they unveil their secret images to a roomful of fascinated eyes. Exar Kun, the arrogant young Jedi who had trained under Master Vodo-Siosk Baas on the grasslands of Dantooine. Whose burning interest in forbidden Sith teachings lured him to the ancient tombs of Korriban, where he awoke cataclysmic, whirling energies that brought an entire temple down on his head. There, on that merciless red planet, with his bones broken underneath piles of rubble, he had surrendered to the Dark Side, in exchange for another chance at life.

Exar Kun, who had founded the Brotherhood of the Sith and fought against the Jedi in the Shadow Crusade. Who had perished here, in the jungles of Yavin 4.

"It was the final endgame of the war," Ben mutters. "Aleema Keto was dead. Ulic Qel-Droma had switched sides and was leading thousands upon thousands of Jedi, in thousands upon thousands of ships, to Kun's base. Kun knew that he could not stand up to the combined might of the entire Order, so he bargained with the darkness once more." He gestures at the ruins around them. "He gathered all his slaves here. As the Jedi fleet filled the skies, Kun chained himself to an altar and commanded every single Massassi on this moon to sacrifice themselves, so that their deaths could fuel the ritual that would make his spirit live on long after his physical body was gone."

"That's horrible," Rey bursts out. "Why would he—"

"Wouldn't you?" Ben asks quietly. His face is still tilted up to the colossus, as if engaged in some form of unearthly communion. "If all was lost, and you were desperate, and you only wanted to
survive, wouldn't you take whatever was offered, whatever hope—"

"This is not hope." Rey's harsh voice rings out across the silver water, scrapes against the black stones. "Don't lecture me about survival. I lived on Jakku. I know what hope is. What Exar Kun did— that was forgetting what makes us human. There's a difference, Ben!"

He mulls over her words, but, before she can figure out if they've reached him, he abruptly switches course. "So you saw Raynar here. And he said he was... learning?"

She nods. "He could've meant that he was studying the inscriptions, the architecture..."

"Something tells you differently, though."

"He acted like he was coming out of a trance," she admits. "I'm not sure. But, to me, he felt— off."

"Always trust your instincts." Ben's gaze shifts to the entrance of the temple, a wedge-shaped opening from which a draft of cold wind emerges like the breath of a slumbering beast. "And what are your instincts saying now?"

"That we should leave."

"Good. Now, go back the way we came. Move fast, stay alert—"

"Hang on." Her brow knits. "You can't mean to go in there by yourself."

"I'll be fine," he says brusquely. "I have to find out what Raynar was up to."

"If it's a matter of duty, then I'm going with you."

"Sith ruins can be dangerous. You're not trained enough. You haven't even made a lightsaber yet."
"You're right." She smirks. "Which is why I should stick with somebody who has one of his own, don't you think?"

For a second, Ben looks furious at having been tripped up by his own logic, but he rallies. "You already know the path to the Great Temple. You've been exploring those parts of the jungle almost all your life. You're more prepared to face what's out there than what's in here."

She plants her feet firmly in the volcanic soil. "I'm not leaving you."

"Yes, you are," he growls. "Go back to the academy."

They glare at each other, until he finally makes a frustrated noise deep in his throat. "Follow my lead, all right? I am not even remotely joking about this. If I tell you to run, you run. Got it?"

"Got it," she confirms.

He shoots her an unhappy look, and then she's trailing after him as he ducks his head through the entrance and takes a step into the waiting darkness.

* *

Two minds, both young and humming with power. He contemplates his choice. The girl has a certain hardness, and a deep-rooted independence that can be channeled. But the boy sparks like a conduit—so much anger, and fear. So many soft places amidst the thorny knots.

*That one used to be mine, Lord. Make him remember.*

* *

The shadows are nearly a living thing inside the Temple of Exar Kun. They seep into Rey's throat, curdled and thick. Just when she starts to believe that daylight had been a distant dream, that night is the only truth she's ever known, her eyes adjust to catch faint shimmers within the walls. Streaks of lightning, trapped among black glass slabs.
"Corusca gems," Ben says in her ear. He's come to a stop, left arm thrown in front of her, almost reaching around her waist as he angles his body into hers like a shield. His right hand ignites his lightsaber, a beam of emerald slanting up across his chest, casting his features in soft relief.

"Stay close to me," he murmurs.

Rey stifles a yawn. Odd— although, well, they have been hiking since sunrise.

She gets drowsier and drowsier with every step that they take. In an effort to stay awake, she studies the walls, notes the sparkling gems and the tendrils of green moss and more of those cruel glyphs. Another yawn escapes from her mouth. She feels the first vague stirrings of panic, because this sleepiness isn't natural, something's pressing down—

Her fingers clutch at Ben's sleeve. He stiffens, caught off-guard as usual by physical touch. "Rey?"

"I..." She can fight it no longer. She sinks to the floor. He says her name again, this time in alarm, extinguishing his lightsaber and, in the same swift movement, cradling her fall in his arms, managing to slip his hand behind her head before it slams against the stone.

The last thing she sees before she closes her eyes is his face, bowed so close, so close to hers. His expression— that terror, that heartache— reminds her of another day from years ago. He'd looked like this when Luke confronted the beast on the landing pad.

*Who would've thought*, she muses in a daze, with the last dregs of fading consciousness. *Who would've thought you would love me this much?*

A dream of sunlight, and wild winds. Sand scatters in fine golden strands over an Imperial walker already half-buried.

Someone whispers, "Why didn't you wait for me?"
Rey wakes with a start, shooting bolt upright in... bed?

The fog of sleep dissipates. She’s in her room at the Praxeum, the blood-red rays of late afternoon forming thin bars on the neatly-stacked containers of spare parts, electronic circuit loops, and gears taken from dismantled droids and control systems that occupy an entire wall. *How did I get here? Is Ben all right?* She scrambles to her feet, skirts around the corroded pumping machinery that’s her current work-in-progress, and dashes out into the hallway.

In her haste, she nearly collides into Tiu, who greets her with, “Oh, good, you’re up. We were getting worried—"

"Where’s Ben?"

"That’s not very Jedi of you."

Rey bites back a frustrated scream. The Omwati apprentice means well, with the added bonus of also being right. *Control.* She calms her erratic pulse and reaches out, trawling for Ben’s signature until she finds it—in his own quarters, at the other end of the hallway.

As she races to him, she feels as if she’s trying to outrun the dream, taste of sand in her mouth, wide desert skies. Several rooms are open, allowing her glimpses of the occupants from out of the corner of her eye. Younglings gather around story boards, enraptured as their favorite tales take on the shape of flickering holograms. Apprentices her age munch on snacks pilfered from the kitchens while giggling and gossiping, some sprawled on their friend’s bed, others sitting on the floor. *This is my life,* she reminds herself, quickening her pace. *This is what’s real.*

The wing housing the Jedi Knights is quiet compared to the rest of the second level. Most of the doors are shut; the few that aren’t, reveal people meditating with holocrons, writing at their desks, or simply absorbed in silent contemplation. Rey skids to a halt outside Ben's room and sends a nudge through the Force, an announcement of her presence. In response, the door swings open, as if pushed by the wind, but, knowing Ben, he’d probably just casually flicked his fingers in its direction without looking up from whatever he’s doing— and, yes, she’s right, she strides into his quarters and he’s slouched on the bed, leaning his back against the headboard, ankles crossed, squinting down at a holobook on his lap.
This is why you have such bad posture, Rey thinks fondly, before she remembers the reason she's here. "What happened to me?"

He refuses to meet her gaze. "I surmise that there were residual dark energies that knocked you out. Perhaps even a natural cause—a drop in air pressure, a sulfur buildup, a chemical secreted by the moss... There are many possibilities."

"How come you weren't affected, then?"

He shrugs. "Who knows?"

The thing about Ben Solo is that he is a terrible liar. That face can't hide anything, and right now it is a portrait of studied, suspicious blankness, except for—yes, there, the twitch under his left eye.

"What happened after I fell asleep?"

"I carried you."

She blinks. "All the way?"

"Did you want me to leave you there?" he asks, a bit too nastily, in her opinion.

"No, but—" It's a several-hour hike over steep terrain, through dense foliage and humid air. She doesn't know what to do with this, so she focuses on something else entirely. "What was inside the ruins? What did you find?"

"There was nothing in there but the dust of ages," he mumbles.

You're lying to me, she wants to snap, but his stubborn, guarded expression cautions her against needling him. Besides, she has a smattering of faint half-images, half-sensations, lurking just slightly beyond reach. She thinks that they might be from the black temple. All she has to do is gather herself, sort them out, make sense of them.
It's probably the first time in her life that she's actually looking forward to evening meditation.

Night drapes silver veils over the ancient Massassi stonework of the Praxeum. Rey steps out of the turbolift and into the shadowed, echoing hall of the Grand Audience Chamber, walking on noiseless feet through streams of starlight to join the silhouettes arranged in precise rows on the floor. As she slips into a cross-legged position beside Jysella, the other girl turns to her with a soft smile, and for a moment Rey is struck by how much that face has changed over the years, winnowed and sharpened into something like beauty in the evening gloom. She wonders if she herself has been similarly transformed by time, and if other people have noticed.

"What kept you?" Jysella asks, in a whisper so as not to disturb the meditating students.

"Ben made me see Ulaha for a checkup." He had been concerned that whatever induced her sleep-state might have had lingering effects.

"Feeling better now?"

"Much." Actually, she feels uneasy and tired, but she's never seen the point of complaining about these things.

Someone clears their throat. Rey and Jysella take the hint and stop talking, closing their eyes and aligning their bodies in the correct stance. Rey curls her tongue to the roof of her mouth, lets the Force run in a wheel from the top of her head, spilling down through her spine, through the marrow of her thighbones, out the pressure points in the soles of her feet. The mists flowing through the gaps in her memory solidify, somewhat—shining black walls, cisterns of cold, clear water, a boy standing guard over her crumpled frame with an emerald green lightsaber blazing in his hand.

Almost as soon as it appears, the image starts to fade. She tightens her grip on it. She'd been unconscious, but she had been there. That is what she must remember.

The boy is talking to someone she cannot see, someone hidden deep in the recesses of the temple. "What did you do to her?" His voice is hoarse and strained. Even like this, she sees the fear, how it moves through him. "Leave her out of this."
I already have. The answer comes in a cruel, imperious tone, painted over with the fallen grandeur of dying stars. It is only us now. She will not wake until sunset. A pause, and then, You are... afraid, but not surprised. You knew. No matter how hard you tried to deny it, deep in your heart you knew that your destiny lay in a tomb like this. Perhaps I was not the one waiting.

"Get out of my head."

Something laughs, unseen. Why should I? It is so much like mine.

Rey's mind suddenly bursts into static. What follows is a series of disjointed, distorted images, like a tangle of HoloNet feeds on the blip. Sometimes it's not even the Temple of Exar Kun. Sometimes it's the towers of Coruscant, or the cockpit of a ship that she recognizes as the Millennium Falcon, or the courtyard of Bast Castle where the remnants of a Dark Lord loom over a Knight on his knees. Various threads of conversation run into one another, like signals crossing.

"When Arca Jeth died on Deneba, many found themselves disillusioned with the passive way of the Jedi—"

"C'mon, kid, burn sky until we see lines—"

"Glory. Find me—"

"Ben, you have to go. You have to learn—"

"Skywalker holds you back—"

"Wonoksh Qyãšik nun—"

"Rey!"

Her eyes wrench open. Several starlit faces are turned to her in puzzlement and concern.

"You were fidgeting," says Jysella. "Sort of thrashing about. Muttering under your breath."
"I bet you fell asleep and had a bad dream," Seff informs her with the sage nod of one who is not new to using meditation as a convenient excuse to nap.

Rey stares at him. Despite his light tone, there are dark bags under his eyes. "What do you know about bad dreams?"

"Been having them all week," he grumbles.

"Same here," Yaqeel pipes up. "Started right after Alema began screaming in her sleep." The Bothan's room is next to the Twi'lek's. "Hey, you guys don't think there's some sort of— virus going around, do you? Something that causes nightmares?"

"A mood can be like a virus, especially with so many Force-sensitive individuals under one roof," Tiu muses. "A strong emotion can sweep through a crowd, transmitting a collective— madness? A mass hysteria. There have been studies—"

She is interrupted by several exasperated groans from the younger students sitting up front. A peevish voice calls out, "If your meditation isn't taking, you don't have to spoil it for the rest of us, you know."

"What a bunch of beek-monkeys." Seff springs to his feet. "Let's raid the kitchens."

"Dinner was only an hour ago," Natua points out, but she follows his lead, anyway, and so do Bazel, Yaqeel, Tiu, and Jysella.

But it's not long before they stop walking and, as one, look at Rey. She returns their gaze blankly.

Tiu cocks her head. "Are you not joining us?"

_They're waiting for me._ Strange how revelation can come so suddenly, like this, after so many years. She stands up, unable to suppress the smile on her face, and walks over to these people whom she has grown up with. These people who are her friends.
On the second level of the Great Temple, several glow-panels in the young Jedi's rooms hum late into the humid jungle night, as if to hold the shadows at bay. But there are strange fluctuations in the power cells that cause them to flicker, and it is the things that the soul finds lurking—there in the gray area between light and darkness—that are perhaps the most horrific of all.

"I dreamed that we were back in the caves of Kala'uun," Numa Rar whispers, shaking in her sister's arms. "We were dancing while they laughed and tugged at our chains. The air smelled like ryll, and sickness, and I knew that we would never be able to scrub away the stench."

"That was another life," Alema hisses, holding her body tense as steel to avoid echoing the other Twi'lek's shudders. "We are not there anymore. Daeshara'cor saved us. Remember?"

"Maybe this is the dream," says Numa, her green eyes dull and hollow. "Maybe I will wake to find myself in the underground city, having never left. Maybe you will be there with me."

In another room, Finn Galfridian sits at his desk, clenching his fists as he fights the urge to turn around. Someone is looking at him; he feels it at the point just above his nape. *Young prince,* croons a voice that seems to be leaking out from the walls, *prince who abandoned his people. Your homeworld will burn. I have seen it. Fire and ash, and you, too weak to do anything, too weak to help anyone.*

A few doors away, Ben Solo is wracked by silent spasms in his sleep. By now, he has grown so used to nightmares that he no longer screams. The only sign of his distress is the trembling furniture, the books and personal effects rising in the air. Sometimes his eyes flutter open, and, in the brief moment before they close, there is a glint of red light.

And, in one of the workrooms, Raynar Thul hunches over the new lightsaber that he's making, this one outfitted with three gems that had flaked off the walls of the black temple and dropped at his feet. He was meant to have them. Most lightsabers had only a single jewel to focus the energy from the power cell into a tight beam, but he is not an ordinary person. He understands that now. He deserves a strong weapon because he is the strongest of all the Jedi. The Dark Man had told him so.

"Warv, watch out!"
Despite Rey's warning, Bazel is too slow to deflect the blaster bolt that surges his way. Although the power settings of the remote droids have been lowered to match the weak energy beams of the training lightsabers, the bolt still elicits a grunt of pain from the Ramoan as it clips his arm.

"Look alive, Warv!" Seff shouts, his own blade shooting up in front of him just in time for a bolt to bounce off it harmlessly.

"I am not myself this morning," Bazel mumbles, hanging his head. "I can't concentrate because I didn't sleep well."

"Actually, I can think of another reason," Yaqeel comments, with a resentful glance at the audience on the sidelines.

Today, Luke has led the apprentices to a wide clearing that lies west of the Praxeum. Some time ago, lightning had struck this particular spot, prompting a brief yet intense fire that the jungle's dampness had quickly smothered, leaving a matted maze of weeds and flowers to reclaim the charred and crumbly soil. This is the preferred spot for blast deflection training that involves hovering remotes instead of stationary laser cannons, because the isolation from academy grounds greatly decreases the chances of bystanders getting caught in the crossfire.

Several Knights have elected to watch this morning's session. They're gathered in a half-circle at the edge of the clearing, most of them sporting the condescending amusement typical of former students observing a new generation spectacularly fail at the same lessons that they themselves have already passed.

"Use your feet, Hellin!" Ganner hoots at Seff, and Rey remembers Ulaha telling him those words while they sparred with an ASP-19 battle droid in the courtyard, ten years ago.

There's a startled cry from Jysella as a blaster bolt singes the ends of her long reddish-brown hair. "Not like that, sis!" Valin calls out, hazel eyes sparkling. "You have to strike not where the blasts are, but where they're going to be."

"That is the single most unhelpful piece of advice that anyone has ever given me," Jysella sniffs.

Rey has to concede that Valin has a point. For this kind of exercise, one has to channel the Force to predict the fluttering remotes' erratic movements. A laser beam shoots directly at her, and she swipes
at it with her lightsaber; in the process of doing so, she collides with Tiu, who'd had to sidestep another blast.

Valin and Alema snicker. Rey's cheeks heat up with embarrassment. It's all in good fun, of course, even the Knights rib one another from time to time, but she can't help feeling foolish, especially with Ben around to bear witness to her mistake.

She glances at him. He's perched on a tree trunk, arms crossed, long legs stretched out, and he's frowning at Valin and Alema. "As I recall, it took the two of you _weeks_ to master this exercise," he says icily.

"Oh, like you're so good, Solo?" Alema snipes. "Maybe you ought to show these kids how it's done, then."

Ben gestures with his hand, and the remotes freeze in mid-air. The apprentices turn to Luke, but he's merely watching the proceedings with a contemplative expression. Everyone's gazes then swivel to Ben as he pushes off from the tree trunk and strides into the center of the clearing. The apprentices extinguish their lightsabers and hastily dart away, but, before Rey can join them, Ben stops her with an eyebrow quirked in challenge.

She grins back. Oh, it is so _on._

Before she can reignite her weapon, however, Valin says, "Rey, use this."

Bewildered, she catches the lightsaber that he tosses and holsters her own. Her unspoken question is answered when Alema shuts her eyes and concentrates, and the frozen remotes vibrate as their power settings are cranked up to maximum.

When the Twi'lek opens her eyes again, there is a mischievous glint in them. "I figured we should raise the stakes a bit."

Rey looks at Luke again, but he seems to be waiting for something from her. She realizes that he trusts in her abilities enough to give her this chance to test herself, but, if she doesn't feel prepared, he will put a stop to it.

"Ready?" Ben asks, in a voice meant for her ears alone.
She makes her decision. "Born ready."

He smirks, and snaps his fingers. The remotes spring to life, and fire.

Chapter End Notes

And a wild Exar Kun appears. Kudos to Rinso for guessing right! Here is the Temple, and some more links relevant to Kun's history: Vodo-Siosk Baas, Dantooine, Korriban, the Brotherhood of the Sith, the Shadow Crusade, Aleema Keto, Ulic Qel-Droma, Arca Jeth, and the Conclave at Deneba.

Massassi script is actually a simplified version of Sith, so it would look something like this.

A Corusca gem.

Rey uses a technique known as Silent Meditation. Just a little homage to my low-key fave, Master Yoda.

Alema and Numa Rar were slave dancers in the ryll dens of Kala'uun before Daeshara'cor found them and brought them to the Praxeum.

What the Dark Man says to Finn Galfridian is a reference to the fate of his homeworld during the Yuuzhan Vong War.

Readers familiar with the events of Jedi Academy will know that Raynar is sort of taking the role of Gantoris by making that OP lightsaber.

A remote droid.
Eight remote droids circle around Ben and Rey, whirring through the air like scarlet-and-chrome-shelled insects. They unleash a barrage of lasers that takes all of Rey's skill—her sharpest reflexes—to dodge and parry. The increase in power setting is glaringly obvious; the bolts *sizzle*. She feels the heat sparking off of them as they fly past her, lending a renewed urgency to her movements. These shots are *lethal*.

Lately she's been dabbling in the Ataru form of lightsaber combat, but it's no good in a flat, open space like this, for an exercise that's so focused on defense. She falls back on Soresu— the tight, coiled motions, the steady, shuffling footing. One remote drops a few paces directly in front of her and fires ten blasts in rapid succession; she advances in a series of quick spins, weapon held parallel to the ground, off-hand stretched forward. The bolts *clang* as they bounce off the sapphire blade, skittering into the jungle's undergrowth.

Beside her, Ben's deflections are more casual—almost languid, his strikes generated mostly from the wrist. If she were focusing less on her own affairs, she would find it maddening how much of his body he contorts into a target zone, how much of himself he leaves wide open and unguarded. But, in true Niman fashion, he compensates with prodigious use of the Force—stopping the blasts in midair, flicking the remotes away, manipulating several lasers at once to collide in a multi-point explosion of sound and light.

One bolt ricochets off the beam of his lightsaber and zips in her direction. She—

— *flows with the Force*, lets it guide her, shifting her blade sideways just enough to catch the bolt, to send it slanting upwards into the treetops—

Her fellow apprentices cheer. Even the watching Knights look grudgingly impressed. But Luke—Luke *beams*, and Rey would have puffed with pride were she not in that trance-like Soresu state that mutes everything else but movement and the Force.

The whirlwind attack pattern of the remotes soon coaxes Ben and Rey into standing back-to-back in
the center of the clearing. Lasers pelt them from all sides; their feet waltz in perfect rhythm— almost heel-to-heel—as they redirect the blasts in a seesaw of sapphire and emerald beams. A remote on her left fires too soon after the one on her right to give her sufficient time to recover. As if sensing her predicament, Ben whirls around; she instinctively ducks beneath his wild deflecting slash and slides around him to block the shots of the droids that he had turned his back to.

Adapting to the situation, the remotes' targeting systems start aiming for the spots where the two Jedi's bodies are pressed together, forcing them to spring apart and land on opposite ends of the clearing. *Circle of shelter,* Rey thinks as several of the spheres surround her and fire mercilessly. *Eye of the storm,* she chants as she slips deeper into the Force, using it to predict which direction each bolt will come from, which bolt to dodge or catch first. It's a moving kind of meditation, which means she opens herself to whatever channels are running through the length of space and time. Which means revelation, and visions.

For a split second, the jungle disappears. She's strapped down in a cold metal room, somewhere. A masked, skeletal figure dressed in black looms over her and asks in a raspy, artificial voice, "Where is Skywalker?"

Startled, she jerks free of the trance. Movement at the corner of her eye elicits an automatic response— her arm lashes out. A blue blade hums against green, and she and Ben freeze, staring into each other's eyes as their weapons lock, their evasive footwork having brought them within striking distance of each other.

Sound returns— distant birdsong, the ragged edges of Ben's breathing, a smattering of applause from their audience, the beeps as the remotes power down. The world sharpens into focus once more—the tangle of branches and leaves, the burned-out soil, the morning sky, the flecks of gold in Ben’s dark irises.

He flashes her a lopsided grin. "Not bad."

She wrinkles her nose at him. They switch off their lightsabers and she tosses hers back to Valin, while Luke concludes the exercise by summoning the remotes into his pack. As they troop back to the academy, Rey scurries to her master's side and tells him in low tones about what she had just seen.

He frowns. "Since the circle of shelter maneuver is executed while in a meditative state, prolonged use can open a Force-adept's mind to visions of the future," he says slowly, "but we ever only get bits and pieces. I must confess that I do not yet understand what you saw. However, when you become a Jedi Knight, you will encounter many difficulties, meet many foes. This confrontation waits for you, somewhere down the line."
"He was looking for you, Master," she says uneasily.

"Story of my life," Luke sighs. "I hate to think that you might possibly be harmed on my account, but—" He smiles at her reassuringly. "You fought well today. Keep at it. I have no doubt that you will be able to face whatever comes. In the meantime, I shall try to meditate on this future that you have glimpsed— perhaps we might be able to find a way to stop it from ever happening."

In front of them, Ben suddenly stops walking and looks up at the sky with a harsh scowl. Rey follows his gaze. Plunging from the clouds is a blunt-nosed oval silhouette that she has seen a few times over the years— a YT-1300 Corellian light freighter that's her favorite ship in the galaxy, captained by one of her favorite people.

Ben refuses to share her views, which is all the more tragic considering his relationship to the man. "Master," he grumbles, "you didn't tell me he was coming here."

Luke shrugs. His blue eyes twinkle. "I wanted it to be a surprise."

* *

By the time they reach the Great Temple, the Millennium Falcon has already docked on the landing pad, the duralloy-plated hull ticking as it cools and the low drone of the Girodyne sublight drive tapering off into silence. When Han Solo bounds down the ship's ramp, Luke, Ben, and Rey are there to greet him, although Ben hangs back, looking as if he'd rather be anywhere but here.

Like Luke, Han has gray strands streaking through his hair, as well as more wrinkles than he'd sported on his rugged features the last time he visited the Praxeum six years ago. But the decades fall off the two men as they hug warmly, with Han then trapping Luke in a headlock while both of them chuckle.

Heroes of the galaxy, Rey thinks, with a wry grin.

"I was coming from Nam Chorios when I commed you," Han tells Luke once they've untangled themselves from each other. "Leia's spies were right— the Imperial Remnant was trying to take over the Meridian sector. Relatively painless skirmish, though. Your Jedi handled themselves well— your boy Kyp, especially."
"Master Durron was there?" Rey prays that her fascinated tone goes unnoticed. The youngest Jedi Master of the New Republic is something of a legend at the academy; the students regale themselves with tales of his daring and gush over his chiseled good looks.

Han nods. "Flew the Sundance like a dream. Then he did that... mumbo-jumbo mind trick thing on the sentient tsil crystals powering Moff Getelles' needle fighters. The battle was practically over after that." He nudges Luke in jest. "You're a pretty decent teacher, farmboy. Who'd've thought?"

"Your unshakable faith in me is a comfort, as always," Luke deadpans.

Han acknowledges the quip with a short laugh, and then his expression grows more solemn. "Well, I say it was the Imperial Remnant, and that's what the Republic's officially putting out, but Getelles cracked during interrogation and he mentioned something... The takeover attempt might've had more to do with that other splinter faction, the one that Leia's been getting disturbing reports about."

"I see." Luke rubs his chin. "We'll have to discuss that later, maybe try to get a hold of Leia if she's not too busy—"

"Yeah, good luck with that," Han snorts. "Between arguing against demilitarization policies and improving trade relations with the Trans-Hydian Borderlands, I doubt Her Worshipness even has time to breathe." He turns to Rey and pretends to do a double-take. "Well, kid, look at you! Broken any hearts yet?"

"None worth mentioning," she primly replies.

Han's weather-beaten face splits into a roguish grin. "Seems like only yesterday when you were this tiny little gap-toothed brat climbing all over my ship."

By contrast, his reunion with Ben is—awkward. The two men regard each other warily for several tense moments, until Han pokes an outstretched hand into the distance between them. Ben stares at the offer for a heartbeat too long, and then closes his own fingers around it in a perfunctory handshake that ends almost the second it begins.

"Good to see you, son," Han grunts.
"Father," Ben acknowledges stiffly. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

Rey rolls her eyes. He's just set a whole new record for fastest descent into sarcasm.

"Just wanted to drop in and say hi," Han mumbles, sounding harried and defensive. "I needed to come out to this system, anyway—to help Lando set up his new operation."

"What's Lando's scam now?" Luke asks. "No, wait, let me guess. He's... starting a space station casino and you're bringing him a shipload of sabacc cards."

"No," Ben mutters. "He's opening a Nerf ranch and wants Father to help him build a corral."

"Not even close." Han points to the great orange sphere of the planet Yavin hanging in the sky overhead. "He's mining for Corusca gems deep in the atmosphere of the gas giant."

"Pity, that was going to be my next guess," Ben snarks.

A large, hairy form ambles down the Falcon's ramp. A roar thunders through the air as Chewbacca of Kashyyyk proclaims his greeting to the jungle moon.

Ben draws himself up to his fullest height, squaring his shoulders and bracing his feet firmly on the ground. "Don't even think about it," he warns, but, despite his attempt to look formidable, Chewbacca charges toward him and scoops him up into his huge, heavily-furred arms.

"Chewie, no," Ben protests as the Wookie tosses him into the air, admittedly with more effort than had been required ten years ago. "I am not a child anymore—" But his surlieness falters when Chewbacca catches him on the way down. A strange sound emerges from his throat—a strangled, raspy exhale.

Rey's heart clenches. Ben only ever laughs when it's startled out of him, and, for a moment—just for a moment, so fleeting that she'd have missed it if she'd blinked—he seems to sort of bury his face into Chewbacca's shoulder as the Wookie ruffles his messy hair. Han and Luke are smiling at the scene, with such rare, unguarded tenderness that Rey wonders if they're seeing a dark-eyed little boy instead of the tall, broad-shouldered Jedi Knight standing in front of them. *You are so loved,* she thinks as Ben extricates himself from Chewbacca's grasp. *Please let that be enough.* Her vision of the Temple of Exar Kun floats before her, a chill foreboding. She has to tell Luke. Ben won't like it,
but—

Chewbacca turns to her. *We have a gift for you,* he grunts in Shyriiwook. *We found it in a junkyard in Fresia*—

"Hey, I found it," Han barks. "You just helped me steal—" He catches Ben's glower and corrects himself, "carry it back to the ship."

Rey follows Chewbacca into the *Falcon.* As always, she can't help running her gaze over every nook and cranny of the unkempt interior corridors littered with all sorts of mechanical gear. She knows from previous inspections that there are cargo sections hidden beneath the deck-plates, generators "liberated" from various yards that provide warship-grade shielding, powerful Carbanti signal-augmented sensor jammers, and a host of other illicit modifications crafted from parts obtained on the black market. It's a smuggler's vessel, in every sense of the word.

The main cargo bay smells like speeder fuel, machined metal, and space rations. There is a cloth-covered pile in the corner, secured by straps and webbing. Chewbacca works the fastenings loose and the cloth slides away to reveal—

— a dismantled T-23 skyhopper, with a battered blue hull and scarred trihedral wings.

*What do you think?* Chewbacca asks Rey. *Can you get this thing airborne again?*

"That E-16/x ion drive appears serviceable," she muses, indicating the engine mounted between the wings. "Of course, the onboard computer probably needs a system overhaul, and the exterior can do with a bit of body work, but it should be easy to put everything together and fix her up."

*Good,* says Chewbacca, proudly. *She's all yours.*

"You have the most ridiculous grin on your face," Ben remarks as he helps Rey levitate the airspeeder's components into the hangar. Han and Luke have disappeared into the temple, while Chewbacca has stayed behind on the *Falcon* to run long-overdue checks on the navigation computer and life support system.
"It's an awesome gift," Rey insists. "It's vintage."

"You," he says, "are weird."

Well, maybe if you didn't act like every present your father ever gave you was beneath your dignity, he'd have brought you something this time around, too.

Rey blinks. Where had that come from? Such a mean little thought, with no intention except to wound when said out loud. She's no stranger to her own inner nastiness, but she's always assumed that Ben and his strained relationship with his parents were exempt from it. To compensate, she says, "It was nice of Han to visit. He misses you a lot, yeah?"

Ben rolls his eyes. "Want to bet my mother guilt-tripped him into it?"

"Ben." She stops walking, dropping the T-23's cockpit onto the metal floor of the hangar.

"What?" The rear passenger compartment that he'd been levitating falls down as well, with a hefty thump. "You heard him. He's en route to another crackpot moneymaking scheme. I'm just a pitstop along the way."

She looks at his resentful glare, at the belligerent jut of his bottom lip. Our childhood never really leaves us, she realizes. We can grow up, but the things we carry remain. "Forget I ever mentioned it," she sighs out loud.

"Yes, instead of speculating on the negligible depth of my father's emotional attachment to me, perhaps you should just stick to swooning over Kyp Durron."

"I beg your pardon!" Rey squawks.

Ben turns away, but not before she catches the smirk playing at the corner of his mouth. He's teasing her. She's absolutely mortified. The blood rushes to her face in warm waves. "You— you great big gob of bantha pooodoo!" she sputters at his retreating back as he walks out of the hangar to retrieve the last of the skyhopper's components.
"Such language," he calls over his shoulder. "You and Master Durron would be perfect for each other."

"Switch off," she fumes.

Later, when it's time for Han and Chewbacca to leave, Rey helps them conduct preflight checks on the Falcon. Any excuse to hang around the ship, really. She's inspecting the exterior vents for anything that might have roosted there within the past few hours, when Han moseys up to her, wiping his hands on a grease-stained rag.

"Seen Ben around?" he casually inquires. "He disappeared after lunch." And what a tense meal it had been, father and son in one corner of the mess hall, picking at their food in silence.

"He probably went up to the living quarters," says Rey.

"Figures," Han grumps. "That boy never leaves his room. There was this one time he visited us on Coruscant—he must've been around seventeen or so—Leia and I practically had to drag him out of the palace. We took him to the tauntaun stables in the polar ice caps up north."

"Tauntaun riding," Rey echoes blankly. "Ben."

"Yeah, he hated it." Han crumples the rag into a ball and tosses it through the open doorway of the Falcon. "I told Leia it was a bad idea, but— well, I get it, she was trying to make up for lost time. She was Minister when Ben was born, and then Mon Mothma took ill and she had to assume more responsibilities even before she officially became Chief of State. Not like we had much chance to take Ben on family outings. And he left us so early, too..." He trails off, looking wistful in the orange afternoon light.

The thing is, Rey actually remembers Ben coming back from the visit that Han mentioned. Yes, he had been seventeen, dour and miserable, stomping into the Great Temple with a blazing desire to rid the galaxy of the tauntaun menace. It had been hilarious at the time, but not now— not with Han Solo, infamous smuggler and Rebellion general, looking so old and so defeated.
"I could get Ben for you," she offers, and she's already preparing to reach out through the Force, when Han shakes his head.

"Probably best like this. I'm always overstaying my welcome with that kid. Always saying the wrong thing." He coughs. "Chewie and I will try to visit again before we jump off-system, but, if that doesn't pan out, who knows—the next time I see you, you might already be a Jedi Knight."

A familiar thrill of excitement rushes through her veins, but it's colored by the dread left over from her vision of the metal room and her dark captor. There is something terrible in store for her, and, despite Luke's assurances, she doesn't know if she'll ever be prepared for it. How does one fight a creature in a mask?

She remains at the edge of the landing pad as the Millennium Falcon pushes off from the ground with a whine of repulsorlifts and then clears the treeline before angling up into the sky. She feels around for Ben, and senses a strange mixture of longing and regret. Tactfully drawing back, she wonders what he's doing now, if he's standing at the window of his room, watching his father sail away.

A memory:

Han's previous visit to Yavin 4, six years ago, is also the first time Rey sees Leia Organa, gracefully alighting from the Falcon in regal white robes with a golden 3PO unit protocol droid by her side. Rey and the rest of the students are clustered outside the ziggurat as a makeshift welcoming committee; she cranes her neck between Bazel and Natua to peer eagerly at Ben's mother. Now she knows where he gets his commanding demeanor from, although Leia's charm seems to have completely passed her son by.

"Ben is cloistered right now, reflecting on the path he will take," Luke tells his sister as they embrace. "You'll see him at the ceremony."

"I hope he's in a better mood than he was during our last comm," Leia quips. "Although, in his defense, this one—" She inclines her head in Han's direction as he bounds up to them—"was baiting him."

"I never bait him, Leia," Han protests. "If anything, he baits me."
"Today your son takes his vows as a Jedi Knight. This is a happy occasion," Luke reminds the couple. "Let's not spoil it."

More ships arrive, dotting the sky and then coasting down onto the landing pad one after the other. The students whisper excitedly among themselves as each passenger disembarks—some of them family members who have been invited to witness the ritual, others Jedi Masters who will be participating in it. Raynar's mother, Lady Aryn Dro Thul of the lost planet of Alderaan, stops in front of Leia and sinks into an elaborate, traditional curtsy. The green-skinned Twi'lek Daeshara'cor, the wizened old Streen, and Cilghal of Mon Cala bow to Luke, followed shortly by Kirana Ti, who is dressed in the reptilian leather armor of Dathomir. From her place beside Rey, Jysella breaks formation to rush into the waiting arms of her father, Corran Horn.

Luke has painstakingly reconstructed the Knighting Ceremony from ancient texts that survived the Empire's purge. "The Force speaks through us," he solemnly recites, his voice echoing through the Grand Audience Chamber. "Through our actions, the Force proclaims itself and what is real. Today, we are here to acknowledge what the Force has proclaimed."

He then calls on each candidate one by one, and the audience watches from a respectful distance as the Masters formally induct them into the Jedi ranks. Instead of joining the other students, Rey has scaled the pyramid and is now perched on the ledge of a skylight; from here, she has a clear view of Ben as he takes Eryl Besa's place inside the circle of Masters.

If he's nervous, he doesn't show it, although his face seems paler than usual. He kneels down; all around him, the Masters ignite their lightsabers in a vertical salute. The differently-colored beams blaze amidst the shadows of the vast stone hall, streaking Ben Solo in jeweled shards of emerald, sapphire, amethyst, topaz, and silver.

Luke steps forward. His nephew gazes up at him and, for the first time, a flicker of uncertainty shades those dark eyes. How young he looks, Rey thinks. She darts a glance at his parents; Leia has both hands folded across her heart, while Han has shoved his into his pockets, but they're watching carefully, oh, so carefully, not even daring to blink.

Luke is silent for a moment as he taps into the Force, letting it guide the personalized message that he gives each candidate. "All your life you have looked away," he finally murmurs, "to the future, to the past. But you must remember, you who are of my blood, that the present moment is also just as important. I have had to learn this lesson the hard way. Like you, I used to dwell on my dreams. But a Jedi desires neither power nor glory, and you, who are so strong in the Force, must bear in mind that it should never be used to destroy. Your path will be a difficult one, burdened as you are by the weight of all our names, but remember that our family has always come back to the Light. Always." He lowers his blade onto Ben's shoulders, first the left, then the right. "By the will of the Force, I dub thee Jedi, Knight of the Republic."
Ben rises to his feet. It was a boy who had knelt in the middle of the room, within a ring of light; it is a Knight who stands and departs the chamber in the customary silence, to remain in seclusion for a few more hours as he reflects on what has been said to him. Rey thinks that he hovers at the exit, head almost turning as if to search for his parents, or for her, but it seems as if he has already taken Luke's words to heart. He does not look back.

Now Rey wanders the halls of the Great Temple, fixed on Luke's signature which is emanating from a meditation room on the second level. Ascending the staircase, she runs into Alema, who's walking to the ground floor.

"Hello, little Jedi," drawls the Twi'lek. "You're going the wrong way. Solo just went downstairs."

"I'm not looking for Ben." Defensiveness sharpens Rey's response.

Alema snorts. "Well, there's a surprise."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"For as long as I can remember, you've always followed him around. Like a second shadow. It's actually kind of cute," Alema says flippantly. "He was the one who found you, wasn't he? On Jakku? Stands to reason that you should be so devoted."

Rey narrows her eyes. "What's your point?"

"We are always beholden to our rescuers. Like you, my sister and I were plucked from the wastelands. Scavenging is a kind of slavery, isn't it? So was dancing. There, in the ryll dens." Alema's voice sours. "Sometimes I wonder if Daeshara'cor knew about the dangers of the life she brought on us. With every mission that Numa and I escape by the skin of our teeth, I wonder that."

"If not for her, you would still be on Ryloth," Rey points out.
"Possibly. Of course, who is to say that we could not have broken free on our own? If not for her, I wouldn't be dancing to the commands of the Republic, my powers tugged along by politicians' strings."

The Twi'lek is giving off the same strange aura that had come from Raynar on the edge of the lake, her green eyes glazed over. Rey is suddenly very afraid; she takes a few steps back, almost without knowing it. All around her, the stones roar with silence.

"You have experienced your dangers, too, have you not?" Alema murmurs. "I saw Solo carry you across the river, into the temple. You were so still in his arms, and he was so exhausted, practically crawling after he'd dragged you all that way. A few of the apprentices saw, but he told them that you had merely fainted from the heat. Of course they believed him, but he couldn't fool me. He warned me not to tell Master Luke about it, that he could handle it himself."

"Why did you listen to him?" Rey demands.

"Because I understand where he's coming from, and so should you." It's almost a growl. "The Masters hold us back. They think we are still children who can't fight or think for ourselves, even though we are stronger than they can ever imagine."

"Alema, listen to what you're saying!" Rey bursts out in frustration. "Surely you realize that something isn't right. Something's found its way in, it's warping people's minds, we have to tell Master Luke—"

"This is disappointing," Alema says coldly. "I never had you pegged for a tattletale."

"I'm not—"

"Solo will never forgive you." The words slam into Rey's soul, awakening a bright sliver of pain. "Neither will any of us," Alema continues. "if you go behind our backs. This is our challenge, and we will face it on our own terms." She flashes Rey a tight smile as she brushes past her. "Just something to think about."

Rey is left alone on the staircase, reeling from this unexpected confrontation. And then she hears it—not a physical voice, more of a disembodied thought that's not her own.
She is right. Deep in your heart, you know that she is right.

There is a prickle on her nape. Some primal instinct is shouting at her not to look, you must never look, when you are alone in an ancient stairwell where the shadows are so thick even though it's daytime, you must never look behind you—

Rey turns around.

The Dark Man sneers at her.

Chapter End Notes

For the purposes of this AU, I have condensed the plot of the Expanded Universe novel *Planet of Twilight* into the "relatively painless skirmish" that Han mentions. The gist remains the same: Moff Tol Getelles tries to take over the Meridian sector, and Kyp Durron flies a light scoutship, the *Sundance*, during the battle of Nam Chorios. However, in the EU, it is actually Luke who appeals to the *tsil* crystals that power the needle fighters.

The Trans-Hydian Borderlands.

Lando Calrissian's *GemDiver Station*.

*Sabacc*.

The *Nerf*.

A T-23 skyhopper.

The planet of *Fresia*.

In the YJK novel *The Lost Ones*, it is mentioned that an enterprising Bothan stable manager had transported a few tauntauns to the ice caps of Coruscant, intending to offer tauntaun riding as an activity for winter sports enthusiasts. Not a good idea, as the beasts became stubborn and surly at having been taken away from their homeworld.

Aryn Dro Thul.

The *Knighting Ceremony* and the *circle*. Luke's words to Ben are a reference to what Yoda says in *The Empire Strikes Back*: "This one a long time have I watched. All his life has he looked away... to the future, to the horizon. Never his mind on where he was. Hmm? What he was doing. Hmph! Adventure. Heh! Excitement. Heh! A Jedi craves not these things. You are reckless!" It's one of my favorite quotes and I needed to include it here.
Chapter Notes

In this chapter, I incorporate some EU-based headcanons about Ben's childhood that I first put forth in my *Morning in the Burned House* oneshot. Here, I also set out to provide a more in-depth look at how the Dark Side twists and corrupts. This is the fic’s longest installment yet, as I’m hoping to wrap up the Exar Kun arc in the next chapter or so. Feedback would be absolutely lovely.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He is there, but not quite—like an after-image, in the brief glint of time before the hologram blinks out of existence. If she tries to concentrate on one aspect of him—on the cruel slant of his mouth, or the drape of his black robes, or the bridge of his aquiline nose—he seems to dissolve into the walls. She must see him as he means to be seen, in all his tall, imposing grandeur, something greater and far more terrible than human. His physical body had been engulfed in the fires of long ago; he is here now because she knows that he is here. Such is the way of all our ghosts.

*Do you know who I am?*

"You are Exar Kun," she says.

He nods, satisfied. *I am Lord of the Sith. I was god of this moon. I have returned.*

Rey tries to send a spark of urgency into the Force—a distress signal, loud enough to be heard by all within range, like Luke. *Especially* Luke. But it's as if her head slams at high velocity into a wall of Mandalorian iron. She *flinches* from the white-hot pain.

*Calling for help so soon?* taunts the Dark Man. *There was a girl, once, who fought like a hurricane on the sweeping desert. She would never have hidden in the folds of her master's cloak. The path of the Jedi has weakened you.*

A warm breeze streams through the air, from somewhere far away, from across a span of years. It carries grains of golden sand that dance before Rey's eyes. Mesmerized, she turns her head to follow the glimmering trail, and suddenly the Great Temple disappears and she's looking deep into the shadowed innards of a *Venator-* class Star Destroyer, a corroded hunk of twisted metal and silence. A slight figure dressed in rags hauls herself up the slanted turbolaser turret on a length of fibercord. Sometimes her skinny arms give way and she slips, the friction of the rope burning through her tiny
fists, but she always steadies her footing and continues to climb. Onward and upward, the best scrap
waits above, a few more bartered credits, a few more borrowed days.

"They're coming," Rey whispers through the knot of unshed tears that prickles her throat, so tense
and thick that she can almost taste the salt, the bile. Looking at her old self like this— she had been
so small. "You won't have to endure this for much longer. They will be with you soon."

But did the Jedi really save you? Exar Kun sounds casual and polite, as if he is posing an inquiry on
the state of the weather. Look at that child. The hunger, the determination. How she ascends because
she knows there is no one to catch her. Is that not so admirable a thing? The Jedi took you, and now
here you are, fighting back tears. You have grown soft, you who were once never afraid.

What he is saying is wrong. He's taking the events and distorting them, snatching vague bits of truth
and putting them together the wrong way. She tries to remind herself of that, but the darkness inside
the wrecked starship seems to be leaking into her mind as well, obliterating rational thought. Her past
self, her child-self, continues to scale the tower, exhausted but defiant. Yes, she had been strong like
this, once. She had never hesitated. No one had told her what to do. No one had told her how to feel.
She had survived, all on her own.

Why did you not tell Skywalker, when you first realized what was happening? presses Exar Kun.
Why did you not go to him, the moment you knew? Because a part of you is still that glorious child,
your tiny heart chugging like a motor, the blood in your veins a battlecry. You do not need him. All
you have learned from him is how to second-guess yourself, how to be afraid of your own might. I
could show you another way. The voice that is not a voice— the voice that exists only in her head—
smoothens into a sinuous croon. I could show you your true potential. I could show you freedom. I
could show you... so much power.

"A Jedi does not desire power," she says.

He laughs. I see that this new Order is still preaching the same old lies. Of course you desire power,
Rey of the wastelands. Is that not why you left Jakku? You were lured by the promise of greater
things.

It spasms through her again, the guilt, that dream. Why didn't you wait for me? She'd been selfish,
she'd thought only of herself, of escape...

The child in this vision has clambered onto the top of the turret. Instead of immediately rooting for
salvage, she scoots onto the ledge and does nothing but look around for a moment, as if pausing to
take measure of these metal ruins. "I would have gone back," Rey mumbles. "I wanted, so much, to
Your ambition outweighed your loyalty, Exar Kun tells her. You stayed here because you wanted to be the greatest of them all. Combat with real lightsabers, not these pathetic training beams. Mind tricks. Maelstrom. Stasis field. Spear of midnight black. Why have you not yet been taught these things? Your master leads you on the path of cowardice. It was for nothing that you sacrificed the chance to reunite with your family. But that can change. Your legend can still be writ.

The light shifts as the desert planet rotates on its axis. Waxy radiance filters through the destroyer, falling on the child's face. She looks up.

Rey concentrates on that light, on the decade-old memory of what she had been feeling that day inside the Venator-class wreckage. "That is not what happened," she grits out, pushing away the shadows, pushing away the reach of the Sith Lord. "Or it is not only what happened. I left because I wanted to be a Jedi, yes, but also because—I didn't want to be alone anymore." With tremendous effort, with the last bit of fight in her, she looks away from the vision. Lets the child go. "And I'm not! I'm not alone!"

She comes crashing back into the real world. Into the stone corridors of the Great Temple where she had grown up. The faces of her friends flash before her. Tiu, Jysella, Bazel, Seff, Yaqueel, Natua. Skorch games and sparring and mealtimes and jungle treks. The older ones, comforting her the night she Awakened, calling out encouragement as she used the Force to heal, pushing her to test her own limits. Numa, Eryl, Ganner, Uラー, Tekli, Finn Galfridian, Valin, Alema, and even Raynar, splattered in the debris of that food fight in the mess hall. The Masters, Luke Skywalker and Tionne Solusar and all of them, sheltering her in their wisdom and their strength. The younger kids, walking into the temple for the first time with awed eyes and reminding her so much of herself. I felt like the look on your face.

"The girl on Jakku feared nothing because she had no one," she growls at Exar Kun. "If I am afraid now, it is because I have so much more to lose."

And you will lose him, your young man, your first friend, if you go running to Skywalker, he warns. He is starting to thin at the edges, his image fading as his grasp on her weakens. You yourself know the hunger in his heart. He will not forgive you for this treachery.

"I wasn't finished," she snaps. She's saved Ben's memory for last, because it is the one she holds closest, the one that is most dear. It is the final bit of light she needs to pull herself out of this darkness. "Someone who helped me fix up my room, someone who saw the rain with me, someone who carried me through the jungle—someone like that—will forgive me for anything!"
She practically shouts these last words. The Dark Man vanishes, and she’s left staring at a blank wall.

But not for long. Rey charges up the stairs and down the hallway of the second level, and into the room where Luke is sitting on the floor in the standard meditation pose.

"Master," she pants, and he opens his eyes. "I have something to tell you."

* *

Defeated for now, the shade howls through the Praxeum, wildly lashing out, furiously latching on to whoever else is within reach. The girl had been strong in the Light. He had not expected that, in one so young. Even now, her echoes sear through him.

*She will pay, Lord,* says the distant voice, that star-voice. *For now, there are others.*

In the grass-edged courtyard of the ziggurat, Alema Rar weaves through footwork exercises with her sister and a few of the other Knights. She slides forward on one bent knee, her other leg stretching out behind her, and then she—

—is dancing in the cave warrens of Kala'uun, her chained ankles clinking together, the slug-like silhouettes of Hutt gangsters leering at her with purple tongues and avaricious yellow eyes—

A few meters away, wrapped in quiet contemplation at the edge of the river, Finn Galfridian peers at the water's surface and recoils from a vision of Artorias burning, his people screaming, *you can stop this, you can, you can save them if you do as I say—*

Inside the Great Temple, in the workroom where he has taken up residence, Raynar Thul holds up the curved handle of his new lightsaber, inspecting it for flaws. There are none. He has done his job perfectly. He has built a weapon fit for the son of a noble house. He pushes the activator button and the blade emerges with a hiss, a pale amethyst-fringed blade that glows white at the core, with rainbow colors rippling up and down the beam. The chain of three jewels has focused the power cell's energy into a living fire, a brilliant serpent capable of cutting down anything in its path. *All shall tremble.*

And, in the forest where he has gone in a vain attempt to find peace of mind, Ben Solo sits on a fallen pillar amidst the ruins of the Palace of the Woolamander, his face buried in his hands. The
grayish light seeping through the canopy slants over him. Twenty years of nightmares, boy. Don't you want to make them stop? Embrace your destiny, and find relief. Finish what your grandfather started. You always knew you were meant for this. Why fight it any longer?

Luke bows his head as Rey comes to the end of her tale. His fists clench where they are resting on his knees.

"I sensed that something was amiss," he says softly, "but I couldn't grasp the full scale of it. I was preoccupied with the increasing Remnant activity in other sectors, and the Knights' frustrations with one another were not new to me. I thought they were merely shaken up after Vjun, and that they would recover in time... Why did I think that? Why have I slept so soundly all these nights, never once feeling the terror gripping those under my care?" He looks up, his expression grave. "I see now that it was the Dark Side casting a cloud over everything, even my own perceptions. And I worry that this evil has found Ben again."

"Again?" Rey asks.

"When he was a boy, his powers tended to manifest in ways that leaned towards the Dark Side of the Force," says Luke. "Insidious little destructions. Sendings of pain and fear. I do not blame him for it, those were stressful times... He was born during the final days of the Thrawn Campaign, you know. A child of war. As Force-sensitive as he is, he must have picked up on all that chaos even from inside his mother's womb. And, can you imagine, Rey, the eyes of an entire galaxy fixed on him before he could so much as walk—"


"And named for Obi-Wan Kenobi," Luke adds. "Perhaps that was unfair, on our part. Perhaps we erred in making a symbol out of a child— but I digress." He clears his throat. "When he was five years old, Leia took him with her on her tour of the New Republic's remote member worlds. They were on the planet of Munto Codru when he was abducted—"

Rey starts. "I didn't know that. Ben never told me about that."

"I doubt he would be eager to share it. That was his first real memory. The trauma of such an event
blocked out everything that happened before. The kidnappers," Luke continues, "were Imperial fanatics, calling themselves the Empire Reborn. They had this mad notion of grooming him to be Vader's successor. Han, Leia, Chewie, and I stormed their worldcraft and rescued him, he couldn't have spent more than a day cycle in their clutches, but it was long enough for his powers to Awaken. When we found him in the inner sanctum, one of the kidnappers was already dead. Strangled."

For a moment, the Jedi Master's serene composure drops, and Rey catches a flicker of regret. And fear. "Of course the boy would be so strong in the Force. Of course all the panic he felt, at such a young age, would be channeled into the Dark Side before he even knew what that was... It was also from the Empire Reborn that he learned the name Vader. Lord Vader. We had wanted to wait until he was a little older to explain—" Luke heaves a tired sigh. "When he was safely back on Coruscant, he started having those nightmares of his, and his Force abilities could no longer be ignored. It took another five years, though, before Han and Leia sent him to me. It was a difficult decision. They didn't want to lose sight of him again."

"He didn't want to leave them, either," Rey guesses. "Not when his first real memory was of him being taken from them."

Luke nods. "And because we were all nervous that his—predilection to the Dark Side would be nurtured if he was exposed to further training. But I did my best— I like to think that I did my best. And now he is a Jedi Knight."

He says this last bit with something that sounds almost like wonder, and, despite the gravity of the situation, the corner of Rey's mouth softens. "You're proud of him."

Luke offers a small, somewhat bashful smile. "Unseemly, isn't it, for a Master to feel such a thing as pride in another person's individual accomplishments? But he was my nephew before he ever was my apprentice. Yes, I'm proud of him. And I believe, as well, that your part in this whole thing was not insignificant."

Rey blinks. "Me?"

"Ben was a very lonely child, even here at the Praxeum," Luke reflects. "He never had much empathy, he didn't get along with his fellow apprentices... but being the one who sensed you on Jakku— it gave him a feeling of responsibility for somebody else that he never would have had otherwise. In a way, you forced him to care. And I think that's been good for him."

"For me, too," Rey says quietly, fiercely. "He's been good for me, too."
"The Old Jedi Order frowned on personal attachments. In this, I am of the opinion that they were mistaken," says Luke. "A long time ago, in the swamps of Dagobah, I had a vision that Han and Leia were in pain. I left to help them, although Masters Yoda and Obi-Wan warned me from doing so because my training was not yet complete. Reckless? Yes. A mistake? Possibly. I lost my hand. I learned that Darth Vader was my father before I was prepared to deal with such information. But... if I could do it all over again, I wouldn't change a thing." He holds his mechno-arm up to the light and studies it for a long, ponderous while. "I don't regret leaving to save Han and Leia. Master Yoda told me that I should sacrifice them, if I truly honored what they were fighting for. Instead, I decided to honor them, and who they were to me."

Lowering his mechno-arm, he turns solemn blue eyes to Rey. "No true communion with the Force can be achieved if we refuse to acknowledge how it connects us to others," he concludes. "That is what gives us our strength. That is what helped you vanquish the Dark Man just now, and that is what we must draw upon to defeat him for good."

"How, Master?" asks Rey. "How do we fight a ghost?"

"I must speak with the Knights. I believe that Exar Kun affected them first because they are more attuned to the Force. The Sith never could resist power, or stop themselves from trying to harness it —"

Luke is interrupted by the sound of frantic footsteps echoing through the hall. Seff appears in the doorway of the meditation room, sweat-stained dirty blond hair clinging to a face splotched red with exertion. "Master," he gasps out. "Couldn't reach you through the Force— something was blocking — had to run—"


The boy inhales a huge gulp of air. "It's Raynar, Master. He's gone mad."

Flashes. Rey registers the scene in flashes as she, Seff, and Luke sprint out the main doors of the Great Temple. Ganner and Ulaha, sprawled on the grass, the slight rise and fall of their chests the only indication that they are still alive. Jysella kneeling beside her brother Valin, agitatedly trying to heal the slash across his torso. Tekli leaning against the pyramid wall for support, nursing her injured thigh, shouting, "Get the kids inside!" Bazel, Natua, and Yaqeel scrambling to do her bidding,
ushering the screaming, panicked children into the temple.

In the middle of the courtyard, Ben, Eryl, and the Rar sisters are engaged in battle with Raynar—who, despite the odds, seems to be *winning*. In theory, his preferred Makashi style should not be able to withstand multiple opponents coming at him from several directions all at once, but his new curved-hilt lightsaber screams with vicious energy, overpowering the beams of his fellow Knights, and he moves with unusual swiftness and strength that do not appear to be entirely his own.

— In fact, as Rey focuses her gaze on him, she thinks she can see the Dark Man just over his shoulder, urging him onward—

"What's going on?" she demands as she and Seff hurry over to Tiu, who hovers at the edge of the courtyard beside Finn Galfridian, who is frozen as still as a statue.

"Raynar strode out of the temple raving about how he was the best Jedi of all, how he deserves to lead the Order," Tiu replies. "The other Knights tried to talk him down, but he attacked them— Rey, that new lightsaber of his, it's not normal, he's drunk with the power of it—"

But Raynar doesn't *seem* drunk. He fights with a cold, calculating ruthlessness. With purpose. It's Ben and Alema who are having a hard time controlling themselves, their footwork sluggish, their swings sloppy and too wide, displaying none of the finesse that they have developed from years of training. It's as if something's holding them back, as if they're struggling with their own ferocious inner battles.

"Finn," Rey whispers to the prince of Artorias, "you're also a Makashi user, you know how to get past Raynar's defenses, why aren't you *helping*—"

"This must happen." Finn's voice is wooden, his blue eyes dull as he passively observes the clash of light. "I must let it happen, that my homeworld might never be destroyed."

"He's been like that ever since the fight started," Tiu confides to Rey in an undertone. "Ulaha told me to watch him in case he goes berserk, too."

Luke advances into the courtyard. "Fall back!" he commands Ben and the others. "Let me handle this—" However, before he can reach the field of combat, a wall of shimmering dark energy blocks his path. It's some kind of barrier, separating him from the Knights.
And it's not originating from Raynar, but he smirks all the same. "Do you see how Skywalker tries to interfere, as always?" he croaks at his opponents. There's a strange echoing quality to his speech— as if someone else is speaking in tandem with him. "He does not believe in you. He has never believed in you. He does not want you to grow strong."

"Thul, will you get your head out of your ass!" Eryl snaps as she lunges at him in a forward jab. Sidestepping, he comes in from behind her blade, swatting it away with his own, sending her sprawling with a well-placed foot to her back.

Numa chooses this moment to leap at him; their beams intersect, and then she slides the tip of her weapon to the ground and vaults over the saber lock, crashing down hard on his left. He manages to parry again, but her added momentum causes him to stumble, leaving him wide open for Alema's slash. Ducking, he grabs her off-wrist and flips her over his shoulder. Unnatural strength. Alema lands next to Ben, but, instead of launching an offensive of his own, he has sunk to one knee, his lips parted, moving, somewhat, as he looks up at some unseen figure towering over him.

Leaving Tiu in charge of Finn, Rey dashes to Luke's side, tugging Seff along by the arm. Their master is holding his palms up to the barrier, trying to collapse it with Force energy of his own. Rey and Seff flank him, mirroring his stance. Centering herself, Rey lets the Force wheel through her, spilling out through her fingers in waves of crackling light.

*Meanwhile, the recent tussle has brought Raynar closer to Valin and Jysella. He approaches the two siblings, his white-amethyst beam extended at his side.

"'Sella," Valin moans, "get out of here. Run."

Jysella shakes her head, her wide brown eyes fixed on Raynar as she crouches protectively over her brother. The blond man's lip curls. "Why do you help him?" he scoffs. "Your father loves him more, you know. He is the favorite child, named after Hal Horn himself. What hope do you have, little Jysella, of besting that? You are descended from Master Nejaa Halcyon; you deserve more than a life spent in someone else's shadow."

And, in all her years to come, Rey will never forget this, will never forget Jysella's face in this moment— that soft, shy face, how it remains unmarred by even the slightest hint of doubt, how instead it tenses into defiance and steel. The white-amethyst blade screams down over Valin, and his sister's eyes blaze—
It's as if a bomb explodes from within Jysella herself, an outpouring of Force energy—a brilliant, blinding detonation—that catches Raynar off-guard, knocking him off his feet.

"Now!" Luke cries, and Rey gives it her all, feels Seff and their master do the same. The dark barrier crumbles like wisps of sand before a mighty wind.

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Rey runs to Ben, falls to her knees in front of him. He stares at her without a trace of recognition, the blankness in his gaze sending a palpable chill through her heart. "Ben!" she shouts, gripping him by the shoulders, shaking him. He does not respond, continues to mouth indecipherable words to himself, his body swaying limply in her grasp.

"You have never looked at me like this," she reminds him with desperate fierceness. "You have always seen me, you have always sensed me. See me now. Sense me now. Snap out of it. Please." Her voice catches. "Come back."

*/

A few paces away, Raynar has recovered from Jysella's blast, picking up his extinguished lightsaber from where it had rolled onto the ground. This time, it's Luke who faces him, holding a palm up to the other Knights in a silent yet unmistakable command to stand down. He steps toward his possessed student with caution, the same way he had approached the behemoth on the landing pad ten years ago. "Raynar, this has gone far enough," he says calmly. "That new blade of yours goes against everything I have taught you. The lightsaber is intended to protect and to keep the peace. Not to dominate, not to destroy. You break your vows, Knight."

"I break nothing but the platitudes that have suppressed me all these years," drawls Raynar. "I was always your smartest apprentice, the most skilled... But this Order of yours would have me treat my abilities as a burden, instead of the gift that they truly are. No longer for me are the ways of old, slow to act, afraid to conquer. I have seen a new path—one that will grant the Jedi the respect and authority we so richly deserve."

"The Jedi do not thrive on the subjugation of other beings," counters Luke. "I know who speaks to you—this Dark Man of yours. In life, he was a Lord of the Sith. In death, still he seeks to poison the Light. His name is Exar Kun—"
"And I," hisses the younger man, "am Raynar of the House of Thul. Leadership is my birthright." He presses the activator, and again that incandescent core of amethyst-fringed white heat splits the air with a scalding, bone-vibrating thrum. "After I cut you down, I shall take your place as the Grand Master and remake the Order into how it should be. All shall tremble."


"Then you have already lost." Raynar assumes his sideways opening stance, holding his blade vertical in front of his face before swinging the tip downwards in a rapid X-shaped pattern through the air— the Makashi salute.

Luke slides his dominant leg backwards and pulls out his own lightsaber, which ignites in a yellow-green stream as he arcs it diagonally over his shoulder-blade. The two opponents assess each other for a while, and then Luke steps into his attack, bringing his weapon down on Raynar in an overhead strike.

It is a strike meant to do nothing more than start the duel. The Knight guards against it with ease, using the added maneuverability of his curved hilt to wrench Luke's beam from its offense position. He then charges at Luke in a flurry of intricate bladework, their lightsabers colliding time and time again in multi-colored flashes. Luke fights only defensively, blocking and parrying, never once taking the lead as he backs toward the jungle's edge, and this seems to agitate Raynar further. His stabs and slashes become more erratic.

"Fight me, Skywalker," he growls, and it's not Raynar's voice anymore, it is deeper and uglier and ancient, pitched with hatred. "Where is Rogue Leader, where is Rancor-Slayer, where is the boy who destroyed the Death Star?"

"He will not surface for the likes of you, Exar Kun," Luke says quietly.

He has been steadily moving the battle away from the other students. However, a strangled cry suddenly tears loose from Alema's throat, and she streaks forward. "Sister, stop!" calls Numa. "Master Luke told us to fall back—"

"I have no more masters!" Alema screams. "I am not a slave anymore."

And, instead of helping Luke, she attacks him. Surprised, he dodges at the last second— her strike
meets Raynar's blade instead. "Good," chuckles the blond Knight as he and the Twi'lek stare at each other over their intersecting beams. "That's the way. Shrug off your chains, dancer."

As one, they turn on Luke.

Eryl and Numa race to Luke's aid, running past Rey and Ben, who are still on their knees facing each other in the middle of the courtyard, beneath the giant red-gold eye of Yavin.

"Your friends are in danger," she switches from entreaty to warning. "Your uncle is in danger. Pick up your sword. Help them."

"I should have left a long time ago," he mutters hoarsely. "We are... behind schedule. I should have left ten years ago."

Rey doesn't know what he's talking about, she knows only one irrevocable truth. "Your place is here. With the Order. With me." Hot tears sting her eyes, tears of frustration, tears of fright. "With me, Ben."

And, because she can no longer bear to meet that cold, blank gaze, she throws her arms around his neck, holding him close as she buries her face in his chest. Wills the Force into him, whatever Light she can, pouring it into the press of their two bodies. Setting a decade of growing up together to rage against the gathering darkness that surrounds them all.

"You promised me greatness." Her lips move against the slow beat of his heart. "You promised you would teach me all you know. You promised I would never be alone. You promised me."

It seems to last forever, his silence, his stillness, as lightsabers whirl and shriek in the distance.

Until, finally—

She feels the shift of his arm, and then the slight pressure of his hand as it closes over her shoulder, squeezing for a brief moment before it drifts up. He drags his palm across her cheek, curls his fingers
into her hair. He says her name.

It was a boy who had knelt on the battlefield, trapped in a waking dream. It is a Knight who stands.

Chapter End Notes

A *Venator*-class Star Destroyer.
The *Thrawn Campaign*.
The *Empire Reborn*.
The kidnapping on *Munto Codru*.
A curved-hilt lightsaber, preferred by Makashi adherents, i.e. *Count Dooku*.
And here's Dooku again, in the opening stance that Raynar uses.
As a *Djem So* adherent, Luke mirrors his father's opening stance.
The *Ataru* move that Numa Rar uses is the Contentious Leap. (Dooku makes the best faces.)
*Hal Horn.*
*Nejaa Halyon.*
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Hello, dearest readers! It took me a while to get this out because this is the turning-point chapter, and I had to think very carefully about how to approach certain events. If you'll notice, we even have a new summary now, to reflect the more serious tone that this fic has slowly started assuming since Part 4. I continue to be overwhelmed by the support that this AU has received, and your feedback on this update would be invaluable in helping me structure the arc of the last five installments.

P.S. Spot the Doctor Who reference!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two sisters.

For Numa and Alema Rar, it will always boil down to this. Two sisters, moving as a mirror image of the other, in whatever life. They once danced beneath the earth, limbs shackled there in the spice and the darkness, and they dance now, on an open field of green, spinning and slicing at each other in coils of light. To watch an Ataru duel is to watch a hurricane of blades, sometimes whirling too fast even for the trained eye to catch, and to watch two sisters fight is to know that the world has been brought to the sharp and deadly edge of some precipice from which a vast drop hangs into a nameless void.

"Get out of my way!" Alema snarls over the shriek of intersected beams as she and Numa collide against each other, before vaulting apart in perfectly synchronized motions.

"You shall not harm Master Luke and our friends," Numa says calmly. "Nor me." Her green eyes are stained blue by blade-light. "I know you won't, sister."

Together, Luke and Eryl drive Raynar back, almost to the rushing silvery-white waterline of the river that separates academy from rainforest. Luke and Eryl are both Form V adherents; his rapid-fire, wide-angle Djem So swings line up neatly with the fluid counters of the Shien variant that she employs, ceding them ground against their opponent, trapping him in the blocks and blade-locks that a Makashi user generally tries to avoid. However, it's not long before Raynar's precise thrusts and slashes give way to a more impulsive, deceptively casual style that breaks through his adversaries' combined offense, forcing them to fall away from him in opposite directions.
Eryl has been fighting more aggressively than Luke; her breath emerges in ragged puffs and beads of perspiration spike her close-cropped red hair as she observes Raynar with wary eyes like jade flints. "Been studying Niman in your spare time, have you, Thul?" she calls out, with acidic sarcasm.

"Studying?" Raynar sneers, in that uncanny, echoing voice of his. "I broke Baas' quarterstaff on Dantooine. I cut down the beasts of Dxun. I do not need to study the Way of the Rancor— I am its master." He makes a quick, pushing motion with his off-hand; Eryl is propelled off her feet and pitched into the river, sinking deep beneath the currents with an almighty splash.

Raynar's open palm then swivels toward Luke; bolts of dark energy lash from his fingertips, like black cracks in the Force, striking the Jedi Master from all sides. Luke cries out in pain, dropping his lightsaber as his body twists and spasms and finally crumples to the ground.

Beside Raynar, a tall figure in black robes flickers in and out of sight, mimicking his position. More tendrils of dark energy spark through the air, taking on the shape of fanged vipers, wrapping around Luke in crackling, shadowy coils.

*I*

"I taught you how to swim, didn't I?" Ben murmurs the words as if he's not sure if that part of his life had been real or nothing more than a dream.

Still on her knees, Rey looks up at his pale face and nods.

"Get Besa out of the water," he says. "I'll deal with Thul."

Before stepping forward, he extends a hand to help her to her feet. And that's how Rey knows— with the sweetest, most piercing relief— that Ben Solo has returned to himself, and to her.

*I*

"You have felt something like this before," Raynar whispers as he and the Dark Man drive long icicles of frozen poison into Luke's veins. "His name was Palpatine. Do you remember him? Do you remember the lightning? Why don't you call upon it now? It is the only ranged attack available to
you at this point."

Luke shakes his head, even as he continues to writhe from the searing pain.

"Always too afraid," Raynar muses. "Always too hesitant to stray from the path that two doddering old fools drilled into your head, because you know no other way. You were very lucky, once. But there is no Anakin Skywalker to save you this time."

"Will the grandson do?"

Raynar has barely turned his face to the direction of the soft, hoarse voice when a Force-push from Ben slams into him. The black serpent-like tentacles disappear, as does the image of the Dark Man. Raynar staggers backwards, still reeling from the invisible blow. Ben advances, deftly spinning the hilt of his lightsaber at his side, as if limbering up his wrist for the imminent duel.

"Solo," Raynar spits out, sounding more like himself.

Ben smirks. "Welcome back."

It's still a Niman opening stance that Raynar assumes— two-handed low guard, hilt at waist-height, feet closely spaced— but, once Ben charges at him and emerald clashes against amethyst, slivers of Makashi begin to slip through the cracks that an old childhood enmity has brought forth. Strangely enough, it's as if his dislike for Ben is so central to Raynar's identity that it's now forcing him to remember who he was before. Torn between the two styles, between what his instincts are saying and what the Dark Man is whispering in his ear, he slashes clumsily, dodges too late, exposing his arms and thighs to glancing blows that leave shallow cuts. He attacks Ben from the right with an overhead strike; instead of turning to face him, Ben takes a step to the left and slants his lightsaber in front of his profile to block Raynar's own blade.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Raynar snarls through the gap between the crossed beams.

"Raynar," Ben drawls, his smirk widening, "I have waited for this day for years." And now he turns, pivoting on his right foot so that his left kicks the blond Knight's legs out from under him.

A curved-hilt lightsaber is extinguished, and falls to the grass.
The river is dark and cold and no place for someone from Jakku. It presses in on Rey in heavy sheets, fighting her descent as if it recognizes her as an intruder and is doing its best to toss her out.

Her hand closes around Eryl's wrist. She hauls the unconscious Knight up through the dimpled brown depths, inhaling a greedy gulp of air once her head breaks the surface. Slinging Eryl's arm over her shoulder, she paddles back to shore, kicking against the current the way Ben had taught her long ago. Water stings her eyes and rushes into her lungs; Eryl is deadweight, hampering her movements, she won't make it, they will both be washed away—

*Desert rats don't drown.*

With a final burst of strength, Rey drags herself and Eryl through the last stretch of river, over the rocky shallows. Seff splashes forward, taking Eryl in his arms as Rey collapses onto the grass-covered slope, coughing and sputtering.

"How are the others?" she gasps out.

"Ganner, Ulaha, and Valin are badly injured. Tekli and Jysella are trying to heal them now," Seff replies. "But it's like... they can't use the Force properly. Something keeps shoving them away. And Tiu's still trying to get through to Finn."

Rey swallows down her nervousness. "All right. Take care of Eryl. I'll go see to Master Luke."

She can sense Seff's relief. Although he undoubtedly wants to help his master, Luke's prone form is lying too close to Ben and Raynar, while Numa and Alema are engaged in vicious, whirling combat not even three meters away.

Leaving Seff and Eryl by the river bank, Rey runs to Luke's side, the air cold against her wet clothes, pebbles digging into her bare soles. She'd kicked off her boots before diving into the water and forgotten to put them back on, but it's too late for that now—

Luke is clinging to consciousness by a thread, his blue eyes clouded and unfocused. "It's fine, you're
fine," Rey soothes, channeling how Numa had reassured her the night she Awakened. Gentleness, that's the trick, you have to be gentle, you have to let people know that they aren't alone. "Listen to my voice, Master. Stay with us. We need you."

His lips move in the shape of her name, but no sound emerges. Every once in a while, a convulsion shudders throughout his whole body; his chest heaves in sharp bursts, as if he's trying in vain to expel whatever poison has been poured into him. Resting a hand on his brow, willing herself not to be unnerved by how clammy his skin is, she attempts Force Assist. It doesn't take. There's a barrier between her and the connection that she used to so easily slip into.

Her gaze drifts to Ben. He's towering over a disarmed Raynar, who struggles to stand— only for Ben to smash the hilt of his weapon into his face. With a strangled cry, Raynar drops into a crouch, clutching his nose as bright red drops of blood trickle down his chin.

Ben switches to forward grip again. A blaze of emerald comes slashing down, and Rey hears a gurgle of deep, rich laughter, from somewhere in the back of her mind—

The beam freezes only a couple of centimeters from Raynar's nape, as if Ben has caught himself in the nick of time.

_Kill him, young Solo._

The Dark Man has appeared again, looking over Ben's shoulder. He seems almost solid now, the croon of his sinuous voice echoing through the air. _Too long has he been a thorn in your side. He has mocked you and your heritage for years. Because of his actions, your uncle is dying. Why shouldn't you be rid of his presence, once and for all?_

"The Jedi do not kill in cold blood," Ben mumbles.

Exar Kun laughs again. _You are no Jedi, boy. Anger, hate, passion— these are the things that have driven you all your life. You gain your strength from them. Haven't they served you well?_

The blade trembles precariously over Raynar's nape.

_Have you forgotten the worldcraft? Have you forgotten that it was the Dark Side that saved you, when your own family could not?_
Ben’s jaw clenches. For a moment, Rey sees in his expression a shadow of the terror that must have gripped a five-year-old boy as he was cast among strangers, waiting for a rescue that came too late. *He's wrong, he's using the memory wrong, he's rotting it in your mind,* she wants to shout, but her heart has caught in her throat. It's all happening too fast; she can do nothing but watch as Ben—

— whirls around, his lightsaber swinging in a wild, wide arc, slicing through the image of the Dark Man, which fizzes and cracks around the emerald ray of light before disappearing like wisps of smoke from a blown-out flame—

A blur of metal glints in the air as Raynar summons his lightsaber back into his waiting palm. He lurches to his feet, his nose bent at an unnatural angle, the lower half of his face smeared with blood. He hacks at Ben just as the other Knight comes to the end of his spin. Ben instinctively whips up his off-hand, immobilizing his opponent in a Force-stun— which lasts only for a second, Raynar shrugging off the paralysis with ease and slashing again, missing Ben by a hair's breadth.

"Niman." Raynar's usual pompous voice is accented once more by the slow, dark tones of Exar Kun. "I told you before, did I not? You have a mind like mine. You dream my dreams. Such ambition must not be wasted. Such skill with the Force—"

"Shut up," Ben hisses, savagely. "Raynar, if you don't get this bastard out of your head— I swear, *I will beat him out of you.*"

In response, Raynar lunges in a new attack. Amethyst heat clashes with emerald, soon bobbing in orbit around twin points of sapphire as their footwork sweeps them into the Rar sisters' circle of combat. Ben and Numa accidentally back into each other, but, without missing a beat, he links his arm with hers to prevent himself from stumbling, she automatically bends her knees to support his weight, and then they both—

— flow with the momentum, swinging each other around, switching places on the battlefield—

Ben's lightsaber meets Alema's, while Numa's blade sings against Raynar's.

All four Knights freeze, staring at their respective new opponents through the glow of blade-light.

And then it begins again, in earnest.
With her gaze trained on the combatants, Rey doesn't notice Luke's hand moving until she feels his ice-cold fingers tighten around hers.

"Master?" She bows her head over him, trying to read his thoughts, trying to decipher the expression on his face.

He presses their intertwined fingers to his chest. His heartbeat thuds into her skin, spastic, dangerously slow. But it's there. This is what he wants her to concentrate on, despite the barrier currently suppressing her ability to touch the Force in others.

"What is alive must heal," he croaks.

Rey nods. The hum builds up within her, guided along by his own waning strength. Everyone is connected, even if, sometimes, it's just by the skin of our teeth. Deep in the soul, everyone recognizes the spark in others— because it calls out to our own, because we all want to survive.

Even in the midst of darkness, still, luminous beings are we.

The barrier shifts aside.

As Ben duels with her sister, Numa advances on Raynar in a tight Saber Swarm, slashing her blade diagonally from left to right, right to left, so quickly that it appears as if numerous sapphire beams are attacking from all sides. To watch Ataru versus Niman is to watch a tornado pass over a mighty sea, waves rippling around whirlwinds. The Twi'lek's kinetic style has drained her endurance after such prolonged combat, but she moves with renewed ferocity now that she is not facing someone she loves— moves too fast for Raynar to pin her down with Force-based maneuvers. He can do nothing but block and parry and give up ground, until, at last—

— his arm flings out to the side in a misjudged strike, his elbow pulling back, leaving him wide open, and she zeroes in for the killmove—
"Numa," Luke says hoarsely, closing his eyes. Rey has healed him enough to speak, enough for him to be capable of sending out a glimmer of warning into the Force. *It's still Raynar in there.*

Mercy, when you can.

Judgement, only if you must.

Isn't that what it means to be a Jedi?

Numa hesitates, blade poised above her head. Her gaze slides to her master— a look so full of unflinching trust that it's almost haunting—

— she lowers her arm—

— and Raynar, with a crazed, desperate light in his eyes, thrusts forward, plunging the shrieking white-amethyst beam of his weapon through her chest.

It must have happened only in a matter of seconds, but Rey swears that the moment goes on forever. She swears that she will take it to her grave, every bit of it, every single blade of grass, every speck of blue in the sky. Every shuddering molecule of air that Numa Rar swallows with her last breath.
Alema whirls around to face the scene as the waves of her sister's death rock through the Force, turning her back on Ben and falling to her knees, screaming in raw anguish.

Farther away, Tekli freezes beside Jysella in horror, while, in his own sister's arms, Valin Horn bolts upright, eyes wide, the sudden movement splitting his wound anew, but the pain is nothing compared to the abrupt, gaping tear in his soul.

Even Ganner Rhysode, Ulaha Kore, and Eryl Besa, who are all still unconscious, twitch in the nets of their dark dreams, sensing the loss of one of their own.

Finn Galfridian's eyes see what his mind cannot. Before he's even aware of it, he's running across the courtyard, over the grass, away from a burning homeworld, to a fallen comrade's side.

* 

Blade-light disappears as the curved hilt slips from Raynar's grasp. Numa falls with it, and it is a sickening sound, the dull thud of a corpse on prickly green grass and soft brown earth. He stares at his hands, at her body peeking through the gaps between his trembling fingers as she lies there crumpled at his feet. "No, no, no," he mumbles, sluggish, fever-bright, meeting Ben Solo's thunderous gaze as the dark-haired Knight strides towards him, "I didn't mean for—"

Ben doesn't bother with the Force or with his lightsaber; he punches Raynar square across the jaw. The crack of bone reverberates through jungle air gone still. "Then what did you mean to happen?" he roars. "Tell me, was this all a game to you? Was it?" His fists continue pummeling Raynar as if to punctuate every word, hitting eyes, hitting already broken nose, hitting ribs, hitting whatever is within reach. "Waving around your shiny new sword— did you think that no one would get hurt? That no one would—" He chokes on the word "die," raining more blows on Raynar's head. Viscous blood spatters through the air before watering the ground in crimson streaks.

"Solo, stop." Finn throws himself onto Ben, weakly clutching at his shoulders, pushing him back. "Numa wouldn't—"

"How dare you say her name," Ben growls, and the prince of Artorias flinches. "How dare you— when you just stood there and did nothing—"

Raynar suddenly twists away from them, hands pressed to his temples. "Get out of my head!" he
screams, lowering his face to the soil, blood and tears mixed in dripping rivulets. "Get out!"

Dark energy erupts from his shuddering form, like plumes of thick smoke. The onyx silhouette of Exar Kun appears, tall and opaque, filling the world, draping it in his black robes beneath the fierce red-gold eye of Yavin.

In this manifestation, the Sith Lord looks like he has been molded from lava stone— as if the colossus that looms over his island has come to life and found its way to the Praxium. He has a chiseled, aristocratic face, with high cheekbones, haughty eyes, and a thin mouth. The pulsing tattoo of a black sun burns from his forehead.

At first, he seems mildly annoyed at having been forced out of Raynar's mind, but it's not long before a triumphant smirk gilds his lips as he gazes down at the broken Knights, at the shell-shocked apprentices, and at their barely conscious master. "There was... no need for this," he sighs, his voice no longer a mere echo of Raynar's or a chill whisper across the heart. "Truly, there wasn't. If you had all just listened to me sooner... But there is still a chance." He spreads out his obsidian arms, as if in benevolent welcome. "Join me now. Form a new Brotherhood with me. Then you shall not share the Twi'lek's fate."

It's the way he says it. The Twi'lek. As if Numa had never mattered. As if she had never been real.

Rey stands up, her vision clouded over by primal wrath, narrowing to focus solely on the silhouette of Exar Kun. Without taking her eyes off of him, she summons whatever weapon is within reach. A curved hilt flies into her palm.

Someone is shouting her name as she approaches the Sith Lord. She thinks it might be Ben, but she can't be sure over the blood pounding in her ears. Kun's obsidian visage is smiling at her. It's just the two of them now. He is hers. She will destroy.

She angles her body into the Ataru opening stance, right leg slide back, knees bent, slanted two-handed grip— although she has to adjust the alignment of her wrists to her elbows in order to compensate for a curve in the handle that she isn't accustomed to. Logically, she knows that this will impede her fighting style, but she doesn't care anymore. She doesn't care about anything except cutting down her enemy.

Rey ignites the lightsaber, and the tremendous, crackling energy that jolts out from the chain of three jewels shivers down her arms. This blade had been designed to kill. She's never felt anything like it before, such raw possibility, such wildness. In her hands she wields the power to decide who lives and who dies.
"Yes," says Exar Kun, "I see that you are beginning to understand. Only the Dark Side can turn a scavenger into a god. Only this. The end of weakness. The end of grief. The end of worlds. Give in."

Strong arms wrap around her from behind. A pair of hands close over her wrists, rendering them immobile. Her back is pressed into a broad chest, someone's heartbeat sending shockwaves against her spine. She struggles to free herself from the iron embrace, but—

"Rey."

She has never heard Ben's voice sound like this. So sad, and yet so gentle. As he bends his head to murmur words meant for her alone, his breath ghosts over the spot where her ear meets her jaw. His lips trace the vows onto her skin. "There is no emotion, there is only peace." She tries to kick him away, but he nearly lifts her off her feet, pulling her up slack against him, tightening his grip. "There is no ignorance, there is knowledge," he continues. "There is no passion, there is serenity. Rey—" His thumbs trace soothing circles over the bones of her wrists. "I know you know this. Come on. There is no chaos, there is harmony—"

She leans back into him, lets his solid warmth and his voice pull her out of the red rage, lets his heart by her spine weigh her down so she doesn't drift away on the seas of her mourning. My rock, she thinks, my anchor. She raises her eyes to the orange sphere of Yavin hanging overhead, breathes in air and light. "There is no death," she finishes, in a whisper, extinguishing the amethyst blade, "there is the Force."

Ben lets her go. She hurls the lightsaber into the river. It sails through the air in a perfect arc, before vanishing, for good, beneath the waves.

Exar Kun is angry. Rey sees it on his features— and, now that she has come back to her senses, she can sense his desperation as well. "Join me," he repeats, more urgently now, shoving dreams of glory into her head. She grits her teeth against the images, against palaces built in her honor and entire planets at her feet. "I bear the sun of Marka Ragnos. I can give you my mark, as well— the two of you," he says to her and Ben. "I can give you power, immeasurable. You will be gods."

"I'd rather be human," Rey bites out, glaring at him. "You do not have any power that I don't already possess. That's why you need us. You turn our weaknesses against us because you have no strength of your own. You died thousands of years ago, Exar Kun. You are nothing more than a memory. A ghost."
He has concentrated all his remaining energies into maintaining this colossal form. The barrier has collapsed. The Force welcomes her home. She reaches out, and suddenly knows the minds of her comrades as well as she knows her own, as if they are all connected by invisible humming strings, as if they are standing next to her even though they're scattered all over the academy grounds.

*This is what we need to do,* says Ben.

There's a flicker of doubt, from Seff. *But some of us are only apprentices, we haven't trained—*

*Yes, you have,* Ben snaps. *You've been training for this all your life.*

Even though her back is turned to the mouth of the Great Temple, Rey senses Bazel Varv, Yaqeel Saav'etu, and Natua Wan emerge from the main doors, tentatively edging into the courtyard to join the fight. She can see them— or, rather, the glow of their presence in the Force, entering the stream where Ben blazes like a firebrand.

*Now,* he says.

The Dark Lord of the Sith turns his imperious face from one side to the other, glancing around in confusion as a nebulous fog of blue energy begins to envelop him. He attempts to step back, but it's too late— the pillar of radiance thrums with white-hot heat, trapping him within its borders, beaming all the way up to the sky itself. He cries out as he is gradually severed from the Force.

*You have felt something like this before,* Ben Solo tells him solemnly. *Do you remember the wall of light cast down over the Yavin moon? Their names were Nomi Sunrider, Tott Doneeta, Sylvar, Oss Wilum, and Thon. Their names were Jidai.*

Exar Kun recognizes his own turn of phrase— from when he had taunted Luke Skywalker— being used against him. He offers a bitter laugh. *What did I tell you, boy? Mind like mine. Mind like mine.*

There is Light everywhere he looks, pouring out from the Knights, from the apprentices. He gathers what dwindling threads of power are left to him, turns his attention to Rey. *Little scavenger,* he sneers in her head. *You will not forget this— how you threw away your chance at greatness.* Fueled only by malice, he delves into the future, into visions of fire and blood. *You will die in battle, Rey of*
Ben presses the cool metal hilt of a lightsaber into Rey’s palm. It’s Numa’s. She looks at him. He nods.

Together, they ignite their blades and run at Exar Kun. His eyes widen at the abrupt charge, and he uses the remaining vestiges of his power to sear into Rey’s mind the image of an Imperial walker half-buried in sand. Don’t you know that they came looking for you, not long after you left? The Jedi took you away from your family.

Rey doesn’t break her stride, because Ben is there, at the corner of her eye, running beside her, always with her, his pale features cast into sharp relief by blade-light. "I have a new family now," she says. "And—" She thinks of Numa—"you took one of them away from me!"

As one, she and Ben strike at the towering silhouette, their beams crossing in the middle of his body, intersecting in a conflagration of lightning as bright as the sun. Darkness floods out of Kun’s shade in tiny fragments that scatter around the circle. More lich energy, seeking a weak heart in which to hide —

Luke struggles to his feet. Although he himself is on the brink of collapse, he manages to call upon the Force to stir the jungle air into a mighty wind, tightening in a swirling knot around the shadowy splinters, and then blasting them over the river, into the dense, vast treeline. The remnants of Exar Kun vanish with a final scream.

Rey’s sword-arm drops to her side, the blade of light winking out. Ben mirrors her actions. They stare at the waters that churn and burble before them, glassy and deep, moving ever onwards to a greater sea.

"He told me I would die in battle," Rey says, blankly.

Ben flinches. "He lied." His tone is resolute. "The Dark Side always lies."

Chapter End Notes
I love Numa Rar. If I ever push through with my plan to release a series of loose, minor-character-centric drabbles set in this universe, you can bet that there will definitely be one focused on her past and her dynamic with Alema.

Yes, Exar Kun is a Niman adherent. *The* Niman adherent, in fact. This is partly why I chose Form VI for Ben, because of the parallels.

*Dxun.*

The passage that Ben says to Rey to calm her down, which she finishes for him, is the *Jedi Code.*

*Here* is a scene from the *Jedi Academy* series that inspired this fic, wherein Kun is trapped by the students in a *Wall of Light.*

The technique used by the Knights and apprentices to communicate with one another is a form of *Battle Meditation.*

*Marka Ragnos.*

*Nomi Sunrider.*

*Tott Doneeta.*

*Sylvar.*

*Oss Wilum.*

*Thon.*
This chapter deals with the aftermath of the Exar Kun arc and sets the foundations for the major changes that we will encounter in the next update. This is also where we say goodbye to sixteen-year-old Rey, as there'll be a time skip of around two or three years after this.

Thank you so much for reading this far along and for all the comments, bookmarks, and kudos! Would love to know what you think of this installment.

Dusk falls on the jungle moon, in cool little breezes. The giant eye of Yavin hangs low over the rust-colored stonework of the ancient pyramid, its unblinking gaze suspending the world in hazy veils of reddish gold. Faint white stars tremble on the horizon, crowning the fiery rim of the system's smaller setting sun. River water laps at grassy banks while scaled fins pulse beneath its surface. The trees stir with whisper birds gone home to roost.

Amidst all these undisrupted patterns of nature and celestial orbit, the gash in Ulaha's side closes beneath Rey's fingers. "Wasn't too long ago when I was the one patching you up," comments the Bith Jedi, and Rey can only nod and agree that, yes, it hadn't been that long ago, at all.

Ganner's on his feet, grimacing as he experimentally stretches the once-broken arm that the combined efforts of Tekli and Jysella have repaired. Eryl is still by the shore, coughing the last of the water out of her lungs, helped along by Seff's awkward pats on her back. Valin's injuries are far more extensive; Bazel and Natua carry his limp form between them, into the ground level of the temple, where he will spend the night dreaming in the medbay's bacta tank. Tiu and Yaqeel have also gone indoors, to check on the younger initiates and to send out messages to the Jedi Masters in other systems.

Rey is exhausted. And hollow. Victory, she thinks, shivering as the jungle air cools on her river-damp clothes and skin, shouldn't feel like this.

A cloak is draped over her shoulders. It's warm, and it smells like Ben. His hand hovers hesitantly at the point between her shoulder-blades, curling like the question mark of an unfinished sentence, before drifting back to his side. She longs to burrow into the folds of the material and stay forever in its soft cocoon, she longs for him to— hold her, or— she doesn't know. She's never craved physical touch as badly as she does in this moment; she could scream with the grief of wanting it so much.
Instead, she settles for tightening Ben's cloak around herself, clutching its edges over her heart. They make their way to Luke, who has just emerged from his healing trance and is now standing, head bowed, over Alema as she cradles Numa's body in her arms. It's jarring, the sight of tears running down the usually proud Twi'lek's fine-boned cheeks—tears that drip onto Numa's face as well, leaking just below her sightless green eyes so that it appears as if both sisters are crying.

Mirror images, in whatever life. On whatever shore.

"Master, please..." Alema's voice is cracked and reedy, barely louder than a whisper. "There is a way to bring her back—the transfer—the red light—"

"Did Exar Kun tell you that?" Luke snaps. "Were you **still** letting him into your mind even after your twin fell, Alema?"

Rey blinks at his uncharacteristic harshness. Even Luke himself is surprised, stiffening once the words leave his mouth. The silence that descends is as sharp as the edge of a knife, but the expression on his lined, weathered face speaks volumes to Rey—her master is grieving, too.

"I apologize for losing my temper," Luke finally says. His tone is gentle, yet resigned to the knowledge that he's left a scar that even the Force can't heal. "But, to respect life, we must respect death as well. That is what separates us from people like Exar Kun."

Alema turns away, but not before Rey spots the sudden flare of malevolence that distorts her features. Luke then edges toward Raynar, who is on his hands and knees on the ground, rocking back and forth under Finn Galfridian's wary gaze.

Without a single word, Ben stalks off in the direction of the Great Temple. Rey hesitates only a for a moment before following him. "Where are you going?" she demands, jogging to keep pace with his long, swift strides, but he doesn't answer. She stops once she draws level with the Knights and apprentices clustered at the courtyard, watching his retreating back disappear into the pyramid's dark mouth.

"Rey," says Jysella, looking up from her examination of Ganner's other bruises, "is Numa really—"

"We felt her die." It's Tekli who answers, as Ganner and Ulaha nod in confirmation. "It's this—link—that we have with one another, you know, automatically checking one another's location and stats. We probably couldn't turn it off even if we tried. It's second nature to us, from coordinating on
"And from growing up together," Ganner adds, quietly. "I think... I think she was the first person I ever spoke to, when I first came here. That was so long ago. I've known her forever—" He falters to a stop, punctuating his sentence with a ragged intake of breath, before continuing. "I can't believe she's—"

"There is no death," murmurs Ulaha, "there is the Force."

Ganner stares at her in disbelief. "How can you say that now?"

"Why shouldn't I say it?" the Bith calmly replies. "Numa sacrificed herself in service to our Code, to our vows as Jedi Knights. I choose to honor her this way."

As Ganner bristles, like he's gearing up for a fight, Jysella suddenly grabs Rey's arm, dragging her into the temple. "We have to give them some privacy to talk," she says. "One of their own killed one of their own. It's nobody else's business but theirs."

When they're indoors, Jysella heads to the medbay to check on Valin, while Rey goes upstairs in search of Ben. She doesn't even need to use the Force; she knows that he'll have shut himself up in his room, the way he always does when he's perturbed about something. She pauses outside his door, biting her lip, amplifying her signature until it touches his, and then she's—

— pulled headlong into a feverish miasma of rage and sorrow and rot, flooding her veins—

Rey charges into the room just as Ben hurls a chair at the wall. It ricochets toward her, but she automatically whips up a hand to suspend it in mid-flight. They stare at each other, the Knight and the apprentice. The chair drops, teetering precariously on two of its legs before settling on the floor with a final resounding thud.

"How can he be so cold?" Ben hisses, his fists clenching at his sides. "Numa is dead, and he had the gall to scold Alema— as if she were nothing more than an errant child—"
"He's our master, our leader," Rey argues. *Didn't you see the look on his face?* "He has to keep it together for the rest of us—"

"*It was his fault!*" Ben yells, in a voice that's always been too soft to suit yelling, lashing clumsily at the walls like a whip yielded by an inexperienced yet desperate combatant. "*If she hadn't hesitated—if he hadn't stayed her hand—*"

"*It was mercy that stayed Numa's hand—*"

"And look where it got her! Look what happened when she didn't press her advantage!*" He kicks his bed frame so hard that she's vaguely surprised that the entire structure doesn't collapse. "Raynar killed her!"

"Would you rather she have killed him?" Rey asks. "Would you rather she have lived with that?"

Ben sinks to the floor. He's so tall that it takes a while, like a pillar gradually shattering brick by brick. He drags a hand across his face, and she's never seen him look this **broken**, she's never seen his dark eyes so full of helplessness, so devoid of hope. "She's the first—" A sob hitches in his throat. "She's the first one whose death has ever— meant something—"

All deaths mean something, Rey would have said, if she hadn't been able to tell that he's remembering the worldcraft, watching a man choke and writhe as his airway is slowly constricted by the tendrils of a boy's fear and hatred. "Numa died in the Light," she says, instead. "She was a Jedi Knight until the very end. Because of her, we were able to find the strength to defeat Exar Kun." As she speaks, she's aware of the mutiny that surges inside her, because, yes, it had been unfair. The concept of sacrifice seems meaningless in the face of all the years that have been lost— but she has to be like Luke, she has to be strong, she has to keep it together for both of them. "Raynar couldn't have come back from the Dark Side if he hadn't—" She stops. She can't even say it. She can't reduce the blade in Numa's chest to a mere means to an end. "She... she died a hero." The words tremble in the air, lacking conviction.

He tenses. "You think I haven't heard that before?" His voice is a low, ugly snarl. "Galen Marek. The Martyrs of Bothawui. Bria Tharen. The casualties of Operation Domino." He counts the names on his shaking fingers. "Arvel Crynyd. Raymus Antilles. Red Squadron. Obi-Wan Kenobi." He glares at her, wounded and recalcitrant. "I have been fed these stories all my life. Daring suicide missions, valiant last stands, noble sacrifices. People who died for a— a greater cause," he spits out, contempt dripping from his lips. "Who never lived to see the dawn break— don't talk to me about heroes. My family walks in their footsteps. I know all of their legends. But Numa Rar was real!"
He subsides with a deep, jagged breath, bowing his head as he slumps against the bed frame. And Rey thinks that, perhaps, if he were closer to the other Knights, if he felt comfortable enough to mourn with them— perhaps, then, this would be easier for him.

But he only has her. Here, in his room, they only have each other.

She sits beside him and tentatively leans her head against his shoulder. She almost expects him to shrug her off— he doesn't, but he remains statue-still. "Ben," she says in an aching whisper, too tired, too tired to cling to her pride, "please be kind to me." Because I will die in battle, someday. Because I lost her, too.

It happens like a slow surrender, the listing of his head, the press of his cheek to her temple, the brush of his soft dark hair against the corner of her eye. More, she wants to say, more, hold me, I need to know that we're both still alive. But she is sixteen years old and not as fearless as she once thought, so, instead, she has to take what she can get, and it's only this, the warmth of his shoulder moving against hers with every rise and fall of his chest.

Rey looks at his hands, at the bruises and scrapes on his knuckles. She remembers those fists beating Raynar into a bloody pulp, and she remembers that palm, curling so gently at the side of her face. She runs her fingers over his, wills the Force through the broken skin. Ben lets her do it, watching, as if entranced, as the grayish-yellow smears fade and the red dries up. They continue sitting side by side, leaning into each other while the Light moves through them both.

* 

The funeral takes place the next morning, just shortly before dawn. On the emerald green field stretched outside the Great Temple, surrounded by dark foam-capped rivers rushing past, Numa's body— wrapped from head to toe in snow-colored gauze— lies atop a cremation pyre around which the Jedi Order gathers. Several Masters have made planetfall in the night, wearing white robes. Ben and the other Knights are in white, too, except for Alema, who stands at the foot of the pyre in a gray robe with a hood pulled low over her head.

Rey and her fellow apprentices hang back, with Artoo and the younger children. It's easy to trace the steps of the Jedi Path like this; while most of the students are sniffing, the Knights are quiet— although there are more than a few tears trickling down their faces— and the Masters are completely dry-eyed, albeit solemn.

There is no emotion, there is peace, Rey chants to herself, but, under these circumstances, the Code brings nothing but the most pallid and fleeting modicum of comfort. Why shouldn't we weep? Why
shouldn't we show that she was important to us? she silently asks, looking at the Masters and wondering if this is the future that she truly wants, always stern, always insulated from the more immediate aspects of human nature by layers of philosophy. Will I be happy going through life so unmoved?

Despite this, she can't bring herself to cry. Yesterday's events float around her like an unsettling mere dream. There's a numbness in the pit of her stomach that radiates to the tips of her fingers, all the way to the top of her skull. Numa is gone, but it doesn't feel real. Why?

Luke takes his place at the head of the pyre, opposite Alema. The robed silhouettes of Master and Knight stand frozen, separated by a wooden structure carrying the body of a dead student, a dead sister.

"We will, in time, also pass on." Luke's voice rings strong and clear through the shadow-veiled rainforest dawn. "We are made of light, but the body is a temporary vessel. No matter what paths are walked, all must eventually find themselves here. I ask for a moment of silence— to remember, and to move on."

Daeshara'cor is the first of the Masters to step forward, light a torch, and touch it to the pyre. "I wonder if she knew about the dangers of the life she brought on us, Alema's snide voice remarks in Rey's ear, a disturbing memory from— oh, only yesterday. Not even twenty-four hours ago.

The other Masters follow suit, and then the Knights. Flames lap and sputter at the base of the pyre, rising until Numa's shrouded body vanishes amidst molten waves. As thick gray plumes of smoke fill the air, the Knights ignite their lightsabers and perform a sweeping, perfectly synchronized salute for their fallen comrade, jewel-toned blades of blue and green flashing and criss-crossing around the scarlet glow of the fire. Rey realizes that they've fanned out in their usual strike team formation— the one that she's seen them practice countless times over the years— so that Numa's funeral pyre is right where she'd be standing if she were about to enter combat at their side. They've even left Raynar's space for him, and Rey imagines that he's watching from the window of the second-level room where he's being detained, and she also imagines that he's going through the motions of the salute despite having no weapon, and she wants so badly for that to be true. The Knights' faces appear heartbreakingly young and oddly defiant, cast in blade-light and woodsmoke and early morning mist. This is their last mission with Numa. They're sending her off in style.

* *

When the lightsabers have been extinguished and the Knights have fallen back into the audience, Luke solemnly proclaims, with his eyes fixed on the pyre, "All these years you have fulfilled your duties with strength, grace, and honor, and we will remember. Only one duty remains. Go onward and break trail so that we may someday follow." The flames jump higher, shedding heat and light
and ash. "Now, my student—" And here, his voice softens, with a hint of tenderness, "now, you are one with the Force."

Alema took off her hood to join the salute, but she hasn't bothered to pull it back on. Her bare face is impassive as the fire takes the one that looks exactly like it. She watches, along with the others, as her sister burns through the dawn like the heart of some fractured star.

* 

Later that afternoon, the Knights and apprentices troop into the Grand Audience Chamber, where the Masters are waiting for them in a silent row silhouetted against the sunlight. Rey sits between Tiu and Jysella, with Bazel, Natua, Seff, and Yaqeel behind them, while the Knights huddle in an almost combative half-circle, as if it's them against the world— although Ben hangs back at the edge, as usual.

"I realize," says Luke, "that there are those of you who blame me for what has happened. If I hadn't stopped Numa, she would still be alive." He's addressing all of them, but his gaze lingers on Alema and his nephew. "As you progress along the Jedi Path, you will face many, many situations where you must make difficult choices. Numa was in such a situation yesterday, and she chose to follow the Light— as did I. If I hadn't stopped her, then it is Raynar who would be dead. And that would be no better." He holds up a placating hand as some of the Knights stir among themselves. "It won't. It is not up to us to decide who lives and who dies— it is not up to us to price one life as having more worth than the other. That way lies the darkness. If there is blame in your hearts, if there is any anger, then, please, seek me out after this. Let us commune and heal together."

"We blame ourselves, Master," Tekli says, earnestly. "We should have come forward once we started feeling Exar Kun's influence. But we were proud. We thought we could handle it ourselves."

"None here begrudge you that," gurgles Cilghal, the Mon Calamari Jedi from the watery world of Dac, indicating with a webbed hand herself and the rest of the Masters standing behind Luke. "The desire to prove oneself, to be independent— such is the provenance of young blood. We remember, though it has been some time. The Sith Lord used it against you, and the cost was dear. Let this be a lesson to guide your future endeavors. Trust in the bonds. Trust in the Order. Trust in the Force."

Alema speaks up. "What happens to Raynar now?" The question ends on a sharp note, just the slightest bit disrespectful.

"I will take him with me when I leave," replies the elderly Streen. "He will spend a year with me on Bespin, and then a year with Master Kirana Ti on Dathomir. Afterwards, we will decide if he is to
continue this penance— this pilgrimage— or return to the Yavin system and wield a lightsaber once more."

The Knights exchange glances. Luke says, "We understand. You think that this is not enough. But it is our hope that some time away from this place will allow him to heal— and allow you to forgive. We must do this, for, if we do not, then Exar Kun will have won."

"One more thing," adds Corran Horn. "We discussed this in our conclave earlier; we believe that the awakening of Exar Kun was not an isolated incident. It is strange that a mere shade could have been so strong. Combined with the recent takeover attempt of the Meridian sector, the reappearance of the Jensarai on Courkrus, and the reports of Imperial activity that we have been receiving from the Core Worlds, we surmise that some great danger lies ahead. The future is clouded to us, which means that the Dark Side is at work once more. We would do well to be on our guard. Knights, please be prepared for frequent active duty in the months to come. And, apprentices—" He pauses, with a small smile. "Well, I'll let Master Skywalker give you the news himself."

Rey feels Tiu and Jysella shift at her flanks as they both lean forward. She tenses, a curl of anticipation within her. Could it be—?

"Your prowess on the field of battle yesterday— how you healed the Knights and took care of the children and followed orders and acted quickly— how you cast the Wall of Light, how Jysella fended off Raynar with the Force, how Rey struck the final blow on Kun— all of this has shown me that you are more than ready to take the next step," Luke tells his apprentices. "It is time to build your lightsabers."

And Rey had thought that, when this day finally came, she would be nothing but glad. She hadn't expected to meet this news with bittersweetness. She hadn't expected to think, So, that's it, then, as the world continues unchanged even while the remnants of Numa's funeral pyre still litter the temple grounds. So life goes on.

* 

The grief crashes over Rey in searing waves. It comes in the night as she lies in bed, staring at the ceiling, unable to sleep. She jumps to her feet and she is made of knots, her chest and her stomach and her throat all straining with invisible masses that leak salt and bile onto her tongue. She runs down to the ground level, stumbling on stairs and colliding with walls and pillars, each scrape, each bump jarring her with a pain that is, at this point, almost welcome. Her eyes are still dry. Why are her eyes still dry? Is she so heartless that she can't shed even a few tears?
She makes her way through the hangar, using the Force to switch on glow-panels with every step. At first, she has some half-baked idea to start working on the skyhopper that Han and Chewie gave her. To keep her mind and her hands busy. But her gaze falls, instead, on Corran Horn's T-65 X-wing.

He's staying at the Praxeum for a bit to spend some time with Jysella and Valin, and Rey figures that, if the Order expects her to forgive Raynar for killing Numa, then they can damn well forgive her for using his starfighter without permission. She's only ever run simulations, she's never actually flown one before, but since when has that ever stopped her, and the astromech droid is nowhere to be found, probably powered down for the night, but she's not going black anyway, so she doesn't need it for hyperspace calculations—

Heart pounding, Rey straps herself into the cockpit. Controls hum beneath her fingers. She steers the X-wing out of the hangar, onto the landing pad, and then, with a crimson burst of fusial thrust engines—she's off, soaring over the treetops, into the night, the rush in her veins too fierce to be joy, too wild to be sorrow.

* *

The mirror-water of the lake, now silver and black in the starlight, shimmers with the X-wing's reflection as Rey glides over its surface. Once the Isle of Kun is in her sights, she doesn't even hesitate.

The massive obsidian statue of the Sith Lord bursts into pieces, shattered by the onslaught of proton torpedos. Its fragments rain down, some crashing over the temple, some plummeting into the depths of the lake. Rey then switches to laser cannons, set to stutter fire so that multiple beams collide into the pillars in a swift, relentless barrage. She pulls up, dives, fires, pulls up again, in sweeping back-and-forth loops around the island. With each strafing run, the Temple of Exar Kun continues to disintegrate, the etched Massassi writings melting away in the heat.

And the tears come at last, staining Rey's cheeks, sobs wracking through her with an intensity that increases alongside each laser blast. The first friend who died, she thinks, as the cannons send a final stream of energy into the ruins. The first friend I have lost.

* *

When she flies back to the academy, nothing but a pile of smoking rubble remains on the island. There is nothing to indicate that a temple had stood there for thousands of years, dedicated to one who had been worshipped so ardently, and feared so well.
Approaching the Praxium grounds, Rey thinks that at first she sees—Numa, for a brief and glorious moment, shimmering beneath the X-wing’s foils in the starlight.

But, no, of course it's Alema, watching dispassionately as Rey emerges from the hangar. "What were you doing with Master Horn's pointer?"

Rey shrugs. She's not ready to share it yet, her private goodbye, her own form of salute.

Alema's gaze flickers to the dark trees. "I know you all wish it had been me instead," she says in wooden tones. "She was the nice one, after all."

"Nobody thinks that," Rey says. "We share your grief."

"Master Cilghal said that we have to trust them," Alema continues, as if she hasn't heard Rey. "Trust in the Masters. But it was Numa's trust that got her killed in the first place."

"Alema." Rey swallows. "We have to go on. For Numa's sake. We have to continue fighting for the greater good—"

"My sister," Alema rasps, before turning away to discourage further conversation, "was the only good thing left in this world."

* * *

The Millennium Falcon returns to Yavin 4 on a clear, sunny day, when the apprentices have embarked on the weeks-long series of meditations and scavenger hunts for parts that are necessary to construct their own lightsabers. Out on the landing pad, Han Solo presses a satchel into Rey's palm. "I don't know, this might be cheating," he remarks. "But I don't feel too guilty about it. Do you?"

Rey peers inside the satchel. A brilliant sapphire-toned Coruscum gem blazes within the folds of cloth,
casting splinters of radiance onto her face, reflecting the daylight so brightly that it seems as if there's a furnace within the crystal itself, burning through its diamantine prisms.

"Nicked that from Lando's mining station up on the gas giant when he wasn't looking," Han confesses mischievously. "It's all right, though, the scum owes me a ton of credits, anyway."

"I..." Rey fidgets, pleased and touched by such an invaluable gift, but not having the slightest clue on how to express her gratitude. "Thank you. You really shouldn't have—"

Han rubs his chin, appearing deep in thought. At last, he leans forward and says, in a lower voice, "I'll tell you something, kid. This wasn't my idea. The Hutt Cartel knows more about honest work than I do about these crazy laser swords of yours. Ben asked me to get this for you, but he told me not to say anything." He winks at her. "So, that's our little secret, all right?"

* *

Ben regards her with a look of utmost suspicion when their paths cross in the hallway of the ground level. "Why are you smiling at me like that?"

"Nothing," Rey hums. She notices that he's on his way out. "Where are you off to?"

He avoids her eyes. "Just wanted to say goodbye to Father and his walking carpet," he grunts.

* *

Rey sits cross-legged on the floor in the middle of the workroom that she's claimed for herself, the various components for her lightsaber spread out around her—most of them salvaged from the War Room. She removes the Corusca gem from its satchel and cups it reverently in her palms.

_The crystal is the heart of the blade._

A metal cylinder rises into the air, soon followed by a Diatium power cell, an insulator, and several knobs and buttons and tiny screws and thin wires.
The heart is the crystal of the Jedi.

Soon, the Corusca gem floats up from Rey's hands to join the odds and ends that orbit around her. It hits a slant of sunlight, and the subsequent glow fills the room.

The Jedi is the crystal of the Force.

Rey closes her eyes, collecting everything she has learned these past few weeks about lightsaber assembly, focusing it all in her mind. Metal clinks together. Wires twist and knobs turn.

The Force is the blade of the heart.

She sees it, then— how to slot everything into its proper place, how to adjust the lenses, how to construct a weapon that will be her constant companion in the years to come.

All are intertwined: the crystal, the blade, the Jedi.

Her eyes flutter open. She's ready to begin.

You are one.

Chapter End Notes

The transfer method that Alema proposes as a way to resurrect Numa will be discussed later on in the story, but the curious can read about it here for now.

Galen Marek.

The Martyrs.

Bria Tharen (hi, Quentanilien!).

Operation Domino.

Arvel Crynyd.
Raymus Antilles (no relation to Wedge).

Everyone in Red Squadron, except for Luke and Wedge, was KIA in the Battle of Yavin.

I used the funeral of Mara Jade as reference for the cremation scene, but the eulogy that Luke gives is a mix of what Yoda says for the Jedi Temple bombing victims during the Clone Wars, and what Izal Waz says at the funeral of Kenth Hamner.

In the EU, the Jensaarai ambush Corran Horn on the planet of Courkrus.

Dac.

Bespin.

Dathomir.

"Going black" is pilot slang for heading from a planet's atmosphere into space.

"Pointer" is slang for a T-65 X-wing starfighter.

The Hutt Cartel.

The traditional Jedi lightsaber ceremony. Rey's last scene in this chapter would be something similar to this.
Chapter 12

I LIVE. Okay, so I was on a business trip last weekend and I actually started working on this chapter while at the airport, but I wasn't able to finish it until today because I am On Vacation (which entails a lot of sleeping, catching up with family and hometown friends, etc. But mostly sleeping). Thank you for your patience.

Writing an older Rey (and, consequently, more intense Ben/Rey scenes) turned out to be a fascinating process. Here, I also start to nudge the plot deeper into canon territory, and, credit where credit's due, there's a *Song of Achilles* reference in the first scene.

Comments, suggestions, and constructive criticism would be much appreciated.

With a soft click, a Force-activated lock unlatches as if nudged open by invisible fingers, and a heavy iron door swings inward on ponderous hinges. The stillness of the Great Temple's subterranean level is broken by a slim, athletic figure striding into the labyrinthine network of stone vaults that houses the Jedi Order's prized artifacts. Twi'lek story-chains glitter in the light of the wooden torch that the figure holds aloft, dangling from pegs fastened to the eastern wall. A suit of full-body metal armor dating back to the time of the Pius Dea Crusades, complete with horned helmet, shrouds a nearby mannequin, which in turn stands guard in front of a row of padlocked glass cases. Their respective contents blaze for a fleeting moment as the torchlight falls over them, before being plunged into shadow once more: the Circlet of Saresh, Thame Cerulian's token embossed with the winged insignia, several scrolls, a nondescript chunk of rock called the Eye of the Sun, the lightsaber of Obi-Wan Kenobi. Further down the hall, Revan's mask lies in state on a wooden pedestal, its characteristic Mandalorian streaks of red paint resembling bloodstains in the gloom.

The figure spares only a cursory glance at these relics, gravitating instead to a circular alcove where the shelves are lined with a number of crystal-lattice devices in a vast array of different colors and polyhedral shapes. Setting the torch in a metal holder jutting out from the wall, the figure—now a few inches taller than it had been two years ago—peruses the glimmering collection.

Finally, a narrow, leanly-muscled arm is extended, palm up. From its place on the middle shelf, a pearly white cube rises into the air and floats toward the figure, stopping when it hovers directly above the stretch of saber-callused fingers. A low hum gurgles through the airwaves nestled inside the chamber; for several seconds, the cube and its summoner are connected by a veil of blue energy that flickers and pulsates and then is gone.

The figure steps back, widening its distance from the cube, which unleashes a beam of silvery light that tapers into the translucent image of a plump, black-haired woman wearing a red gown. The projection stutters as the artificial intelligence matrix whirs into life. A pair of smoky topaz eyes blink, and a cool, smooth tone announces, "I am Master Asli Krimsan. For over two hundred years, I..."
guided many young Jedi in their voyages to Knighthood. I have stored my teachings and experiences in this holocron, to continue assisting those who will walk in the Light after I am gone. The Force granted me long life. I am made of memories."

"Speak, then," says Rey.

The process of meditating with holocron gatekeepers has always demanded her full attention. It's not until she's switched off the device and levitated it back onto the shelf that she detects a familiar presence standing behind her. A smile curves her lips. "How did you know I was down here?"

"I always know where you are," Ben solemnly replies.

She turns around. Her smile vanishes. "You're bleeding!"

"And, as usual, you manage to make it sound like it's my fault," he huffs. "Yes, Rey, I am bleeding. Nightsister daggers tend to have that effect."

She grabs the torch from the wall, shining it closer to the wound in his side. "So you just arrived from Dathomir? Why didn't you get someone to heal this first, before skulking around in the vaults?"

"Why do you think I came looking for you?" he retorts. "You're the 'someone.'"

"What could I possibly have done to deserve such a high honor," she deadpans, shoving the torch into his hand. "Hold this."

Ben obediently tilts the flame over her head, pulling his elbow back so that he doesn't burn her eyebrows off. She examines the wound, at first only by sight, and then with touch, her fingers tracing the torn edges of his Jedi robes. "Did you see Raynar?"

She catches his slight, hesitant nod at the corner of her eye. "He was with Master Kirana Ti when she briefed me upon planetfall. Didn't say a word, though."
"Maybe he's taken a vow of silence."

Ben snorts. "Good."

Another detail prods at her brain, demanding attention. "Your mission was to stop the Remnant from opening the Infinity Gate, not have it out with the Nightsisters."

"I enjoy how you're so quick to imply that I go around looking for fights," he says, dryly, "but there was no Imperial presence at the ruins of the Star Temple. I believe that, when they found the Infinity Gate's control chamber completely demolished, they abandoned the plan to harness it as a superweapon. However, the Remnant was recruiting Nightsisters to its cause, and Master Kirana and I stumbled upon the training camp."

"We should send word to Coru— to Hosnian Prime," Rey amends, belatedly remembering that the Republic has moved its seat of government to a new host planet. "If the Remnant is marshaling Darksider witches—"

"It's taken care of," Ben mutters. "The camp has been destroyed, the recruits have scattered. And General Vit, who was in command of the project, is dead."

She pauses in her ministrations. "Who killed him?"

His silence is answer enough. It makes her tense. The Knights have been racking up body counts left and right for the past couple of years, but she doesn't think she'll ever get used to it, the uneasy little flutter in her stomach and the chill down her spine, every time she hears of one of them doing so. Especially when it's Ben. She feels the simmering slow boil of his resentment, which she'll wonder about later, but what she's worried about now is the lack of remorse. Or perhaps he's learned to bury it too deep for anyone to find.

The wound is a jagged slash that starts from the bottom half of his ribcage and ends above his hipbone. By sheer luck, it skirts away from his vital organs, but it can't be particularly comfortable, either, and she wishes that he could've just swallowed his pride and let Master Kirana heal him before he left Dathomir, instead of bleeding out across several different star systems.

Ben's relationship with the Masters, though, has been strained as of late.
Rey slips her hand inside the tear in his tunic, palm closing over wet blood and warm skin. Ben sucks in a harsh hiss of air through clenched teeth, and she eases up on the pressure even as her fingers continue to probe. Lately, touching him like this has become, for some reason, a strange and unsettling thing. She doesn't know how or when it happened, how it crept up on her, the air fraught with forbidden meaning, every nerve ending alight like the points of a new constellation that she doesn't have a name for. She thinks it might be because he's always offworld now, always risking life and limb in far-flung sectors of the galaxy, and her senses are greedily drinking him in to prepare for the day when he might not—

No. He comes back. That's been the unspoken rule ever since the day she knelt in front of him and begged him to stand. He comes back each and every single time.

She brushes the fear aside and taps into the Force. A flurry of images: the Shadow Sabre racing through hyperspace, starlines dissolving beyond the transparisteel canopy as the red-tinted globe of Dathomir swirls into view; a gray-haired man in Imperial uniform, sprawled on the ground and issuing garbled threats with his dying breath, "Something is coming, boy, far greater than your Order, far more powerful than Skywalker himself—"; a Nightsister rising, a dagger finding its mark—

Rey cries out as the blade digs into her own skin, almost scraping against bone. Ben's flat stomach tenses beneath her fingertips; his free hand jerks as if to reach for her, before he catches himself—

And then, an older memory, unbidden and accidental— Luke and Ben arguing several months ago. "What was the point of her death?" the younger man shouts. "Why did you stop her from killing Raynar if we were going to end up killing people anyway—"

A brief flare of panic causes Rey to jolt out of the bond. She gazes up into Ben's dark eyes as the shadowy vaults echo all around them. The torchlight casts a red-gold veil over one half of his disgruntled expression.

"You did not tell me you were going to do that," he chides her.

"I learned it from Master Cilghal," she says. "To take away pain, you must first understand where it came from. But—" because this isn't the first time she lost her way while in his head— "you have got to learn how to shield yourself from me."

He stares at her for a long, long time. Something in his face shifts, and then softens. "You're right."
The words come out all soft, with a hoarse and ragged edge. "I must learn how to shield myself from you." He touches her wrist, too lightly, for far too short a time. "Do it, then. Take my pain away."

The wound slowly begins to close. She nudges his body along, telling it what it needs to do as he holds a crown of fire over her head. She has to focus on the injury, but she can't stop herself from glancing at him once every so often, and their gazes meet each time, like bodies colliding in a lightsaber duel in this world of stone and darkness and all things past. His eyes never leave her face.

Her hand drifts lower, sewing up his skin inch by inch. He's holding himself so rigidly, as if afraid to move, and does she imagine it, the sudden tattered irregularity of his breathing, the slow and nervous bob of his Adam's apple in the torchlight? And is she also imagining the way the Force hums through them both, a little crazily, like a barometer needle spinning with the advent of a Jakku sandstorm?

Her fingers curl at the sharp jut of his hip. He does move, then, a fleeting spasm of surprise, an instinctive—straining—into her touch. Hunger, Rey thinks, although she doesn't know why.

The last stretch of wound vanishes, leaving behind tender new skin. But her hand remains where it is. Glued there, her palm a curve over the plane of his abdomen, the tips of her fingers pressing into his bones. The Force almost a song now, some odd and intimate melody. The world narrowed down to only the two of them. To only this.

It's Ben who breaks the spell. Very gently, he pries off her grip, his fingers lacing through the gaps between hers, lingering—and then falling away. He looks kind of sad again—although, honestly, sadness is never far from his face, how could it be anything but, with those pensive brown eyes and that sulky mouth—and she hardly has time to get her bearings before he's turning around and heading for the main door of the vaults.

But his steps are slow and measured; she catches up to him easily enough. "I see you were meditating with the Krimsan holocron," he says in a calm, academic tone. "Have you learned anything of interest?"

"Malacia," Rey promptly replies, seeking refuge in this new topic. "How to turn an opponent's equilibrium against them by focusing on the inner motions of their body—respiration, digestion, blood flow—to induce a sense of nausea."

"And it is not a Dark Side power because?"
"The opponent is incapacitated with no damage to the body, and no permanent side effects." She waits for his nod of approval, before continuing, a little more hesitantly, "I found two other recordings on the device. One was Count Dooku telling a story about how, when he was still a youngling, Yoda asked him to move a potted plant..."

"The telekinesis lecture," Ben supplies. "Yes, I've listened to that one." His pace becomes just the slightest bit more brisk— as if Anakin Skywalker and all his ghosts are looking over his shoulder once more. "Dooku thought that the reason he couldn't move the plant immediately was the weight— or that he erroneously considered it an inanimate object instead of a living thing connected to the Force— but Yoda remarked afterwards that it was actually the fact that he was struggling to deal with how he fit in with the Jedi."

That hadn't been in the recording, but Rey is by now used to Ben spouting off-the-cuff bits of esoteric trivia. "Well, we all know how he resolved that issue," she mumbles, earning a smirk from him.

"What I took away from that lecture," he adds, "is that your conviction determines your strength."

"So you're saying that belief counts more than raw power?" she can't help but tease. "That's a rather optimistic perspective, especially coming from you."

"No." As usual, the joke misses him by a mile. "Belief supplements power. Telekinesis, as with most other Force skills, is all about certainty. And centering. Dooku said in his lecture that burdens are only as heavy as one imagines— that, with the Force, any weight can be lifted."

A memory occurs to her. "That day, when we were younger— the monster and the tree—"

"Force Rend," says Ben. "I'd only ever read about it, but it was my absolute conviction that, if I didn't pull it off, we were going to die."

Rey laughs. "I'm glad you pulled it off."

They continue walking in companionable silence, through the hall full of relics, until they come to Revan's helmet. Ben stops in front of the pedestal, and the look on his face reminds Rey of when he had stared up at the visage of Exar Kun. You sympathize with them, all these fallen Jedi, she thinks. You understand.
"Why did Revan wear a mask?" she asks. "Darth Vader needed breathing apparatus, but Revan—"

"Without the mask, he looked more human," Ben murmurs, his eyes fixed on the cold, blank helm. "It was easier to remember that he was just a man, with all the weaknesses and vulnerabilities that implied. With the mask, however, he was an icon, a symbol. He was the shaper of history, an individual defined by his actions rather than his thoughts, feelings, and beliefs."

"But he _was_ human," she argues. "That's the problem with the Sith. In their quest for power, they all forget."

"Sometimes I think it's the Jedi who forget. It is a very human thing, to desire power. To want some measure of control over a chaotic universe. What is _inhuman_ is— detachment. We are made of passion, are we not?"

"No, Ben." She says this fiercely, because he is giving voice to those tiny, treacherous thoughts that she herself has had. "We are made of light."

His gaze drifts to her. A rueful, almost tender smile plays at the corner of his lips. "Some of us more so than others."

* *

They take the stairs up to the ground level, Ben extinguishing the torch with a snap of his fingers and returning it to the holder above the flight of steps. A low drone draws them outside, where the boxy silhouette of a Corellian HWK-290 light freighter is hovering over the landing pad as Luke looks on, his cloak and the surrounding grass stirred by repulsorlift blasts.

Ben and Rey automatically flank their master, waiting for the _Moldy Crow_ to settle on the ground and discharge its passengers. Finn Galfridian and Ulaha Kore emerge, supporting between them a semi-conscious Ganner Rhysode, whose robes are stained with drying blood.

"Bacta tank for this one," Finn cheerfully remarks as they hobble past Luke, Ben, and Rey. "Told him to stick to strafing runs and leave the dogfights to Rogue Squadron, but would he listen? No."

"Crash-landed on Tyan in a blaze of glory," Ulaha sighs. "Maybe we should've left him there to teach him a lesson."
With generous swathes of blood caking his bruised face, Ganner merely bestows a dazed grin on the world at large.

Once the trio has disappeared into the mouth of the Great Temple, Rey turns her attention back to the Moldy Crow. Its tall, broad-shouldered captain strides down the ramp, nodding at her and Ben, bowing to Luke.

"I apologize for returning one of your students in pieces, Master," says Kyle Katarn. He then reflects for a moment, before adding, "Again."

"You were also my student, once, and you, too, endured your fair share of scrapes," Luke quips. "How goes the Orinda campaign?"

"Bad," says Katarn, all traces of jest fading from his rugged features. "We've confirmed that the Remnant has absorbed the Pentastar Alignment and is making use of their forces and ordnance. The Republic sent the Lusankya to counter Pellaeon's Reaper, and the two destroyers faced off in Darkon and Traval-Pacor. Republic victory, both times, but Orocco was a stalemate, and we've just flown in from the Tyan system, where Phennir's 181st halted General Antilles' drive up the Entralla Route."

"Is Wedge all right?" Luke asks, sharply enough to earn him a surprised glance from Rey.

"He's fine. Just holed up in the Mid Rim, waiting for the Republic to send him the Endurance and her fleet of E-wings." Katarn scratches at his sparse beard, looking haggard and bleary-eyed. "Never thought I'd live to see Dreadnoughts in action again. I have to tell you, Master, I don't like where any of this is going. Pellaeon has something up his sleeve, for sure."

To Ben, he says, "Knight Solo. I checked in on Kirana earlier; she said you did a good job on Dathomir."

"Master Kirana is gracious," Ben replies, in the smooth yet wooden tones of one who has been coached on the proper way to respond to compliments.

"So we can definitely rule out the Remnant using the Infinity Gate, then?" Luke asks, and it's only now that Rey realizes that Ben hadn't reported to Luke for debriefing.
Ben nods, avoiding his uncle's eyes. "The Star Temple is in a state of total ruin. Nothing remains of the Infinity Gate's control chamber."

"Well, that's one bit of good news, at least," Katarn muses. "I wouldn't relax yet, though. Knowing the Remnant, they'll just continue the hunt for a new superweapon."

Not long after Luke, Ben, and Katarn retreat inside the temple to discuss further Jedi involvement in the Orinda campaign, Rey spies two figures fording the river. It's Seff Hellin and Jysella Horn, sweat-stained and flushed-cheeked from a jungle trek.

Seff groans when he sees the Moldy Crow on the landing pad. "Please tell me Battlemaster Katarn isn't going to put us through velocities this afternoon. I haven't recovered from last month's daily sessions yet."

"I think he has weightier matters on his mind, to be honest," says Rey. "But he did tell me that we're going to make up for lost time once Master Luke decides to pull him out of the Entralla Route."

"So, not for a while, then," says Seff. "Not until the Imperial Remnant withdraws from the Mid Rim."

"It might be sooner than that," says Rey. "Master Luke has always stressed that we are keepers of the peace, not soldiers."

"But we've got Jedi on the front lines," Jysella points out. "My dad's flying missions with his old squadron, and Valin's in the Ojoster sector, helping Republic forces liberate Pallaxides. It's like the Clone Wars all over again."

Not exactly, Rey thinks. These are border skirmishes. Minor displays of power. At least with the Clone Wars, you knew where you were.

"I gotta hit the 'resher," Seff announces, "but, before I go— Rey, what do you call the person who brings a rancor its dinner?"
"Ugh. What?"

"The appetizer!" he yells over his shoulder as he saunters into the temple.

Rey shakes her head in disbelief. "You'd assume that he'd have outgrown those jokes by now."

"Not a chance," says Jysella.

The two girls fall into step towards the river south of the pyramid, where Rey's pump is merrily churning away, converting the rushing currents into hydropower. Tiu Zax is curled up on the grassy banks beside it, charging her datapad. She nods at Rey and Jysella, but seems otherwise preoccupied, so they elect to sit a little further off, to avoid disturbing her.

Jysella heaves a sigh of relief as she plops down on the ground, wiping sweat from her forehead. She's recently taken to wearing her long reddish-brown hair in a simple braid, which she now unravels, her nimble fingers combing through the tangles before draping the entire burnished mass over one shoulder, to skim past her collarbone in loose waves. "I saw the Shadow Sabre make planetfall. Ben's back from Dathomir, then?"

"Yeah." Rey stretches, leaning against a sun-warmed boulder. "One of the Nightsisters carved him up pretty good, but he'll survive."

Jysella smiles. "I used to have such a crush on him. Remember?"

Rey shifts uneasily. "Well, you and I never talked about that, so—"

"It was just one of those typical little things. He's handsome, he's older, and he's got that smoldering, mysterious vibe—"

"Ben?" Rey blurts out, a horrified giggle pushing past her throat.

Jysella's smile turns into an embarrassed grin. "I'm over it now, though."
"Why?"

"'Smoldering' and 'mysterious' start to wear thin when you realize they're basically just code for 'jerk-ass.'"

"He's not!" Rey protests. "I mean, he's a bit prickly, but he can also be gentle, and he's so weird about all that history stuff that it's sort of endearing, and he's actually really funny..." She trails off, because Jysella is slanting her an amused, knowing, vaguely sympathetic look, and Rey is—

— not an idiot, but neither is she ready to accept what that look means. It spreads before her like a chasm waiting to be plunged into. A point of no return.

"I don't want to talk about it," she grunts, and Jysella acquiesces in her usual easygoing manner, shrugging the topic away to focus on her hair. She uses the Force to nudge it back into its braid, her hands folded on her lap, mahogany tresses entwining as if of their own accord.

Rey watches idly, contemplates trying out a new hairstyle as well. But she won't. These three loops are all that her mother left her with, or the woman that she has a faint memory of as her mother, anyway.

*Why didn't you wait for me?* The dream comes back, bringing a quick flash of pain. She knows better now, knows that it had only been one of Exar Kun's illusions, but the guilt is still there. Scabbed over, yes, but it throbs every once in a while.

She squints up at the bright, sunlit sky, tinted orange as usual by Yavin Prime. Jysella follows her gaze and, after a while, murmurs, "Alema's out there somewhere."

"Master Luke's been trying to get a fix on her signature ever since she disappeared, but she's shut herself off," says Rey. "Wherever she is, she doesn't want to be found."

"Do you think she'll come back?"

"I doubt it." Eleven months ago, the Knights had flown to Ylesia to stop the Besadii Hutts from reviving the Cult of the One and the All. While the mission had been a success, Alema Rar never made it to the rendezvous point. Her comrades spent two extra day cycles on the tropical planet to search for her, to no avail. "She's not dead— Ben and the others would have felt her die— but— do
you remember how strangely she was acting before they went to Ylesia?"

Jysella nods. "She wouldn't talk to anyone, except to pick a fight. She wasn't following orders during missions, according to the Masters."

"I think she decided that the way of the Jedi wasn't for her," Rey admits. "And, the thing is, I can— understand?— why she would feel like that. After Numa."

"Yeah," Jysella says, quietly. "I get it, too. Kind of. If I ever lost Valin like that, I'd probably..."

"Nah, you wouldn't." Rey thinks about the expression on Jysella's face when Exar Kun, in the guise of Raynar, had confronted her with her own demons. How it had never faltered. Not even for the briefest of moments. "You were born to be a Jedi." She gestures at the lightsaber cinched to the other girl's belt. "That blade of yours proves it."

The core of Jysella's weapon had also been a gift, like Rey's; during his travels, Corran Horn had chanced upon the Solari crystal that gave the plasma beam an orange hue and could only function if wielded by a Lightsider. Rey had been in awe, at first— and maybe a little envious, because the color was so pretty— but then she found out that Jysella would have to always stay pure of heart in order to use it. And then— for some reason— she'd thought, Better her than me.

"Alema, though, was born a slave," Jysella remarks. "'I have no more masters'— didn't she say that, two years ago? For me, I walk the Jedi Path in the footsteps of my father, my brother, and my great-grandfather. So, of course, I equate it with goodness. With duty. But it might not be that way for other people, especially those who had hard lives prior to joining the Order— for whom becoming a Jedi is a means of escape. The thing is, you're trading one set of hardships for another, aren't you? You still have to call people 'Master.' I mean—" She hesitates. "Darth Vader was a slave, too, wasn't he?"

"I embraced the darkness, and I was free," Ben's desert-dream of Anakin whispers in Rey's mind. "You're saying there's something inherently wrong with the concept of Jedi itself?"

"I'm saying there are cracks," Jysella corrects. "And, sometimes, people can slip through."
Rey isn't sure what rouses her that night—a shiver of unease, perhaps, or the pang of a wayward shout that only she can hear. Whatever it is, all she knows is that she's suddenly awake and restless and stumbling out of her room, stumbling down the long, dark hallway of the second level, tracing an invisible, thorny path that leads her straight to Ben's door.

He's asleep, but dreaming. The pale contours of his bare torso gleam in the starlight, tangling with the blanket as he tosses and turns, muttering frantically under his breath. Why haven't they gone? Rey thinks as she hovers at the threshold of his room, blinking, bleary-eyed. She'd expected him to find some measure of relief after vanquishing Exar Kun, but the nightmares always return in full force during and shortly after periods of high stress—and there have been a lot of those lately, with all the missions he's been going on.

"Ben." She falls to her knees at his bedside, pokes a finger into the taut, unyielding steel of his bicep. The left half of his profile is turned to her, a chiseled arrangement of sullen, aristocratic features caught in nets of silver and black. His closed eyelids are fluttering wildly, each frenetic beat fanning the fringe of his sooty lashes over the tops of beauty-marked cheekbones. "Ben, wake up."

"Wonoksh Qyásik nun," he hisses.

She pokes him again, more urgently this time. He wakes up with a gasp, with a long, slow intake of breath that arches his spine, the blanket peeling from his waist to reveal the smooth convex of pelvis over the band of his loose trousers. He glances around, disoriented, before his eyes finally lock on to hers.

"Rey," he grates out, like he's afraid that she might not be real, and then he's rolling over to one side, away from her, the shift moving his face through a still patch of stardust, illuminating the tears spangled in his lashes until he has completely turned to the wall and she's staring at his shoulder-blades and the notches of his spine, spread like distant shorelines in the darkness. "I dreamed of my father," he mumbles. "He was—beating me—his fists—his voice—I—"

"Han Solo has never lain a hand on you in anger." Rey keeps her tone calm and strong against the race of her heart. "That was not a true thing, what you saw, what you felt. Your parents love you—"

"Then why did they send me away?" Ben demands, sounding for all the world like a child again, plaintive and confused. "Why didn't they save me from the Empire Reborn—why did I have to be the one—"

"His nightmares are fallout," Luke had told Rey once, when she was younger and couldn't understand why Ben kept screaming in the night, in the years before he got so used to the grotesque
images in his head that he no longer screamed. "Lingering trauma from the abduction. From the time he spent on that worldcraft. And, well, maybe..." He'd paused for a while. "I think Han and Leia might have had a hand in it, too, even if that was not their intent. They fought with each other a lot—I've witnessed for myself how loud they can be, how deeply their words can cut. It's feasible that they might have inadvertently scared Ben. He was always a very sensitive child. I'm not saying they're the cause, but they did not improve the situation, either."

"Your head must be a terrible place," Rey thinks now, staring numbly at this boy curled in on himself, haunted, weeping. Touch is an anchor, she's learned that so well, so she reaches a hand into the space between them and rubs his back, slow and soothing strokes, callused fingers on smooth skin. At last his breathing evens out, at last his muscles relax, and then he's sitting up, shivering slightly at her hand sliding down his spine before dropping to the mattress, and then he's gazing at her with a strange look on his face.

"What?" she asks, a bit defensively.

"Nothing." Ben clears his throat. "I, uh. Your hair."

She'd unraveled the knots before going to bed; her hair spills past her shoulders, framing her face. It must look a fright, tousled and unkempt, stray strands sticking out in all directions. His dark eyes are wide, as if he's seeing her for the first time. It's only pride that stops her from patting down the whole mess into a semblance of order.

"Well, I have to let it down some of the time," she snaps.

"It— looks all right, like that," he murmurs, still dazed. Perhaps even still half-asleep. "You should __" 

"No," she bites out, against a sudden flush of pleasure. A compliment? From Ben Solo? She never thought this day would come. "They might not recognize me, if I do it different." He's the first person she's ever admitted that to. Oh, well, she figures he's earned it.

His expression softens. It's like a little bit more light has come pouring into whatever he carries, that twisted knot of shadows and childhood ghosts. "Get your blade," he growls. "Meet me outside."

"Sparring?" The beginnings of a wicked smirk tilt Rey's lips. "Now?"
"Yes." He's already on his feet, pulling on his tunic. "I need to move." He summons his lightsaber from the nightstand and shoots her a wry glance. "I need you to move me."

Chapter End Notes

Twi'lek story-chain.

Some examples of Jedi armor.

The Circlet of Saresh.

The token of Thame Cerulian.

The Eye of the Sun.

Revan's mask. Ben's spiel about the artifact is actually a quote from Meetra Surik.

Asli Krimsan's holocron.

In the Expanded Universe, the Imperial Remnant investigates the ruined Star Temple on Dathomir to see if they can still harness the power of the Infinity Gate. Upon finding no trace left of the Star Chamber, the Remnant concentrates instead on recruiting the Nightsisters for Project Nightsaber, headed by General Vit.

Malacia.

The Moldy Crow.

KYLE MOTHERFUCKING KATARN. (Sorry, I just love him so much).

Assisted by Tur Phennir's 181st Imperial Fighter Wing, Commander Gilad Pellaeon wages the Orinda campaign along the Entralla Route after the Remnant absorbs the splinter faction known as the Pentastar Alignment of Powers.

The Lusankya.

The Reaper.

The Endurance.

The E-wing escort starfighter.

ROGUE MOTHERFUCKING SQUADRON. (Sorry).

The Pius Dea Crusades.

Battle of Darkon.

Battle of Traval-Pacor.

Battle of Orocco.

Pallaxides in the Ojoster sector.
The Battlemaster is the premier lightsaber combat instructor of the Order.

During the Rebellion Era, the Besadii Hutt Clan established The Cult of the One and the All on the planet of Ylesia.

Solari crystal.
I have once again extended the projected chapter count of this fic because certain developments took up way more screen time than I expected. I have an outline, I promise, but the Reylo cannot be contained!!!

For those who worry that the plot points cannot be satisfactorily resolved in only five more updates, I guess it's time to make my Big Announcement (TM). This story was originally going to be THIRTY chapters long, because I had planned to follow Rey all the way to her twenties. Now, I'm still going to do that, but, for stylistic reasons, I've made the decision to tackle that phase of her life in, drumroll, a FOLLOW-UP to Like Young Gods. So, this fic is henceforth officially a prequel to the events of an AU version of Episode VII. Yay! Or nay? I am SORRY.

Please let me know what you think of this chapter! Happy April!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Nightsong on Yavin 4 is a glassy chorus of birds and insects interspersed with the occasional thunder of a distant predatory roar, underlain with the steady rush of rivers and the frequent gusts of a chill wind that blows Ben's dark hair across his face as he assumes his opening stance, the beam of his lightsaber an emerald blaze in the shadows of the courtyard.

Gauging his mood, Rey decides on Soresu form. He wants a long fight that will sap his endurance and knock him into blessedly dreamless slumber. She can give him that. Her blade ignites with a silky, resonant hum, sapphire blue, the color of this moon's oceans, focused into a tight cutting edge with the crystal that she isn't supposed to know he gave her. They size each other up beneath the starlight, both of them grinning like wolves hungry for the kill.

"I won't go easy on you," he warns.

"You won't have to," she replies, with an impudent spark in her eye. "I learned from the best."

A memory:
She's eight years old and done with centering exercises. You can only try to find yourself so many times in one day, especially when you're not even entirely sure what you're looking for— when your feet still tread rich loam as if it were shifting sand. It's a lazy, golden afternoon, perfect for slacking off. Rey's curled up on a thick branch in the feathery green depths of one of the Massassi trees, Dosmit Raeh's flight helmet plopped on her head. Her tiny hands grasp imaginary throttles and flick switches and buttons made out of thin air. In her mind, she steers an X-wing through glittering starry wastes, planets rotating all around her, a million suns blinking past the viewport. A stuttering, high-pitched sound emerges from the corner of her mouth— a child's approximation of laser cannon fire.

Eventually, she becomes aware of voices and footsteps not so far away. Concentrating, she happily seizes Ben's presence moving in a bright blur through the Force. She climbs down from the tree, running once her feet hit the ground, and it's not long before she's pushing past raven-thorn thickets, into a clearing where Ben, Valin, and the Rar sisters are engaged in velocity drills. In this memory, they are still apprentices a few months away from building their own lightsabers. The field of combat pulses with yellow training beams.

Rey squats at the edge of the clearing, watching as Numa's rapid attack sequence finally becomes too much for Valin and he cries out, "Solah!" which means I yield. Numa accepts his surrender graciously, and they both flop down on the grass beside Rey, their robes damp with sweat.

"That's some sweet-looking gear, flygirl," Valin teases, and it's only then that Rey realizes she forgot to take the helmet off.

"Where did you get that?" Numa politely asks Rey, shooting Valin a quelling glance, and then listening with what seems like genuine interest to a story about the Graveyard of Giants and the treasures that lay beneath hot and lonely dunes.

Rey trails off in the midst of her chatter, because her gaze has fallen on Valin's lightsaber that he'd carelessly tossed to the ground. Before anyone can stop her, she picks it up and thumbs the activator button, gasping in delight as a yellow plasma beam shivers into existence.

"Careful with that!" Ben spits out, blocking Alema's strike with a one-handed grip but otherwise turning his face to glare in Rey's direction. "A lightsaber is not a toy." He smoothly steps away from the blade-lock and stalks over to her, apparently oblivious to Alema rolling her eyes behind his back. He looms over Rey, tall and lanky and just fresh out of seventeen, teeth gritted in annoyance. "Turn that off."

Rey's mouth drops open to protest, but Valin does it for her. "Let the kid live a little, Solo," he drawls, the lips that are so much like Jysella's sliding into a mischievous smirk. "Their class has been practicing the basics with wooden swords for a month. I'm sure she can handle herself."
"Yeah, Ben," Rey adds, doing her best to match his glare through the helmet's visor.

His features crease over the internal battle that he wages with himself, until he puffs out an exasperated breath. "On your feet, then. Slowly!" he barks as she hastens to comply, the blade seesawing precariously close to her nose. Despite the low power setting, there are still vibrations washing off the plasma loop that reverberate through the metal hilt, causing it to jerk abruptly, violently, whenever her fingers relax their grip.

"Focus," Ben tells her. "Keep the blade energy in check. Use the Force to rein it in and maintain your center of gravity." Then, as they face each other across the clearing, he snaps, "And take off that gear. You look ridiculous."

The thing is, she probably does—the helmet's several sizes too big. But her pride has been injured, and so she tightens her lips and shakes her head. Rocked by the motion, the visor slips further down her nose, partly obscuring her line of sight.

"Rey." Ben laughs, a rusty, startled sound. "C'mon."

And, yes, discarding the helmet would be the practical thing to do, but she can tell that it amuses him, the sweet and raspy thrill of his unexpected scrape of laughter still echoing in her ears. She rarely sees him like this, brown eyes crinkled, flash of white teeth, younger in the Yavin sun than he has ever allowed himself to be. It feels like a gift, and so she keeps the helmet on as she grips the lightsaber in the Shii-Cho opening stance, both hands wrapped around the hilt, the yellow beam held vertically in front of her body.

Ben slips into a two-handed guard as well, except that he angles the hilt over his face, the blade a humming downward slant across his chest, pointing to the ground. In this memory, he is covered in gold, they all are, Numa and Alema and Valin watching from the sidelines, the future stretched out before them, as yet unknown and, so, rich with possibility.

"Come at me," Ben says, quietly, and Rey—

— charges forward now, ten years later, beneath the night sky, her footwork swift and sure over the courtyard. Ben meets her in the middle, green singing against blue, and then she falls back, into
defensive mode, drawing out his wild attack sequences, parrying his blows with ease. He chases her to the edge of the courtyard, and it still hasn't completely left him, the nightmare, the fever— the gleam in his eyes is predatory, suffused with some kind of dark, burning promise that tips her into that strange halfway point between fear and exhilaration. She can do this forever, can fight him like this forever, sliding around the hugeness of him, heat and hardness, emerald and sapphire, wind and starlight. At one point, she uses his momentum against him, dodging at the last possible second so that he crashes through empty air, stumbling— but he in turn uses her to right himself, off-hand shooting out to grab hers. Their fingers lace together, bursts of electric shock, and then she's slashing at him and he's blocking, and their bodies are curled into each other now, still holding hands, faces separated only by two intersecting strips of light.

*Ben*, she thinks, staring up into his eyes stained green and blue, *Ben, what are you doing to me?* There's a lump in her throat, a tight coil in her belly, and a fire in her bloodstream that she doesn't understand. She thinks that some of the desperate confusion must show on her face, because, suddenly, he blinks the fog from his expression. He squeezes her hand, contrite, reassuring, and then he's letting her twist away from him, letting her put distance between them once more.

Rey decides that it's high time she takes the offensive. She launches herself at him in a series of ferocious, sweeping strikes, driving him backwards— only, she's more aware of him now, every inch of his frame ghosting against hers, his parted mouth illuminated in sapphire, the sculpted line of his jaw ablaze with emerald, the rest of him plunged into shadow, boy made of darkness, she wants, she needs—

She turns her face to him just as they collide again. Her lips graze the shell of his ear and a strangled half-groan, half-whine tears loose from his throat. Something inside her clenches, but it's too late to stay like this, they're both on combat autopilot, the rote sequences of their training making them leap apart. Their gazes meet across this new space between them; they're panting roughly, his shoulders slouched, her left knee bent. "Had enough yet?" she calls out, managing to toss in a cocky smirk at the end of her sentence. "Say 'Solah.'"

He straightens up, and she's not prepared for it, for his off-hand stretching before him, for the Force wrapping around her. She squeals in terribly undignified surprise as she's lifted off the ground and sent soaring towards him and his green light.

Just when she thinks she's going to slam into him, Ben angles his body slightly to the side and freezes her in place, the fingers of his off-hand barely grazing her throat, his blade-arm curved around her waist, the heat of his lightsaber crackling against her spine, her own weapon one clean slash away from his neck. For the first time *ever*, she's as tall as he is, her feet dangling in the air, the tips of their noses almost brushing...

He leans in closer, his palm honing in around her throat, so near she can feel the heat of his fingertips on her skin. His sweat-slick hair presses into her temple. "Solah," he murmurs in her ear. *I yield.* His
breath forming those two syllables slides into her, shivers all the way down her neck, all the way down to the base of her spine, all the way down to parts of her that *throb* and *ache* and—

"Ben." She's powerless to stop the gasp of his name from her lips. He jerks against her, sharply, his hips rocking into hers, and her eyes nearly flutter shut, the sky that she sees over his shoulder splintering silver and black.

"Sorry," he's mumbling now, lost in the depths of some mad haze, his head bowed into her neck, turned to the side so that his voice is muffled by the spot below her jaw and every brush of his mouth sends a stab of bright, keen pain through her system, "sorry, we can't, I shouldn't have—"

And then he's stepping away from her and letting her go, the soles of her boots landing gently on the ground as the telekinetic grip dissipates. Avoiding her eyes, he extinguishes his lightsaber and she numbly follows suit, trailing after him as he returns to the temple, not a word spoken between them, the night wind blowing cold against the sweat on their backs.

On the rocky plateau of a harsh, cratered world in the Esstran sector, a slim, red-haired man wearing a black military uniform and an expression of vague distaste watches a blue-skinned female Twi'lek raise an amulet in the air, dangling it over the shear drop. The bauble is a very pretty, sinister-looking thing, transparent crystal panels held together in a diamond shape by a frame of silver metal, its inner core glowing with some restless, reddish-violet energy. Frankly, the man considers this enterprise a waste of time and resources, but he is careful not to let the complete thought form in his head. The Supreme Leader reads minds, and this blasted Twi'lek probably can, too. Better safe than sorry.

After exactly five minutes— the man knows this because he's always keeping count, always ticking off time— the Twi'lek lowers her arm, a look of satisfaction shading her features. "There, it's done," she announces. "They're awake."

"You are certain?" the man inquires, imperiously.

As if in response to his question, a guttural roar from a far-off cavern fills the air. "Yes, I'm absolutely certain," the Twi'lek purrs, flashing him a sweet smile with a razor-sharp edge. She shoulders past him on her way back to the sleek obsidian shuttle, tossing the amulet at one of the stormtroopers guarding the ramp. It lands in the palm of his gauntlet with a metallic click.
"Feed that to the hounds," she orders. "Chuck it over their heads and one of them will jump up to swallow it, the stupid things."

The stormtrooper hesitates, no doubt thinking of the powerful jaws and the rows of long, long teeth that lurk in the cargo hold.

"You heard her," the red-haired man snaps, following the Twi'lek up the ship's ramp. "Get to it, FN-2187."

Breakfast the next morning finds Rey staring blankly into the depths of her bowl of cereal, preoccupied with that starlit duel that had ended on such a charged note. Her silence is in stark contrast to the animated chatter of her friends, although they aren't as noisy compared to the other tables in the mess hall. They're the Praxeum's oldest students now, and it shows, amidst the shrieking children and the boisterous fifteen, sixteen-year-olds.

Yaqeel Saav'etu and Natua Wan are explaining the lecture on mind trick ethics that they had listened to while meditating with the Krimsan holocron. "Imagine you are on a mission that requires you to discreetly infiltrate a secured building," Natua is saying. "Despite your efforts at stealth, you are sighted by an armed guard. This is the perfect opportunity to use Affect Mind, is it not? But, with so many different approaches before you, what do you choose?"

"Fear," grunts Bazel Warv. "Project a feeling of dread that will cause the guard to run away."

"What if you strike such fear in him that he dies on the spot?" counters Yaqeel. "Or attempts to escape over the edge of a cliff?"

"Hypnosis, then," says Tiu. "Make him let you pass, or make him forget he ever saw you."

"That might cost him his job or his life," Natua points out. "He might not be menacing by nature—just an employee trying to provide for himself and his loved ones."

"I'd cast an illusion so that he'll see me as some small, unthreatening creature," Seff ventures. "A rat or something, so he won't mind me while I scurry inside the building."
"Then again, he might be a cruel man," says Yaqeel, obviously enjoying this. "It might be his hobby to shoot small, unthreatening creatures. Bang, you're dead."

"What's the correct approach, then?" Bazel demands.

A hint of amusement crosses Natua's reptilian features. "Why, to be stealthier in the first place, of course."

Seff's palm smacks against his forehead. "I hate the Jedi Code."

"Well, someone must have cast an illusion," Yaqeel suddenly remarks, looking at the door with wide eyes, "because I could swear that Ben Solo has just decided to have breakfast with us lesser mortals, instead of eating in his room."

Rey barely even has time to entertain the hare-brained notion of diving under the table before a shadow falls over her cereal. She peers into the bowl with renewed intensity, even as a hot flush creeps up her neck and her heart thunders in the shocked quiet that has descended on her friends.

"We need to talk," Ben announces, without preamble.

No, go away, Rey thinks furiously at him. Trust this man to make a scene!

But he won't be deterred. "Rey."

She shakes her head.

And then he says, so gentle, so strained, so hers, "Please."

Flashes. Rey registers the scene in flashes, brief glimmering bursts of sight and sound too disjointed
to coalesce into a complete picture of this moment by the window, in the deserted hallway. Green moss growing through the cracks in the stone walls. Muffled conversations emanating from the mess hall. Rays of sunlight spilling onto her arms in a brilliant wash, coating the floor in chiaroscuro. Ben’s breath above her head, keeping time with the rise and fall of his chest beneath her eyes that can’t bear to meet his.

"About last night." He clears his throat. "It was an aberration. Entirely my fault. I still had one foot in the nightmare, in the darkness. And it emerged during our fight because of, um, the adrenaline rush —"

She knows she should be grateful. This is the way out of the chasm, the way back to what's normal. Instead, she finds herself almost hating him, his logical tone, his cool dismissal of the storm that had swept through them both. "What about me?" she challenges, raising her chin, glaring up at his face. "I wasn't having bad dreams."

A wave of emotion slams into her, coming from him, plucking the theremin fields of the Force around them. Relief? It seems like relief— a stray thought— a silent question as loud as a gasp— you felt it, too?—

Ben's fists clench at his sides. "Rey." His voice is tense and distant, as if it's requiring great effort for him to speak. He's looking past her, probably at the patterns of moss on the wall, what else is there to look at? "You are very young. It is natural to be curious about— biological processes—"

She gapes at him. She can't believe the words that are coming out of his mouth. He's turning a deep shade of red, and, stars, so is she, her cheeks are on fire, "— as the human body matures, it experiences particular urges—", she wants the floor to crack open and swallow her whole, anything but this, anything but the knifing sex talk from Ben Solo, "— however, you are still very young," he repeats, "so it is easy for you to get carried away by your hormones—"

She can't take it anymore. Her lower lip trembles.

"— it is the combination of these hormones and your tender age that can make bad ideas hold a certain appeal, and, therefore— why are you laughing?"

She's braced one hand on the window-ledge for support, while the other hand clutches at her stomach. "I'm sorry," she gasps between peals of mirth, her shoulders shaking "I'm sorry, I'm just so — embarrassed for the two of us, it must be my tender age—" And she's off again, collapsing against the wall, cackling her heart out.
He scowls at her, visibly affronted, but the intimidating effect is ruined by the blush that has yet to recede from his cheeks. *You're my best friend,* Rey thinks, overcome by a sudden rush of fondness so poignant and profound that it makes her chest ache and her eyes water. Not all pain is bad. Not all tears are evil. She understands that now. She doesn't know why she'd been so scared last night and so nervous this morning; they've got each other's backs, they always will, no matter what. "I'm fine," she says, once she's composed herself, flashing him a soft, warm smile. "We're fine, it's okay. We're good." *We have all the time in the world to figure it out.*

"Good," he echoes, a little stiffly, but at least his fists unclench.

"Hug?" she offers, holding out her arms to him.

He looks— *tempted,* for a moment, and then he leans in and her breath catches and he—

— chucks her under the chin—

"No, brat," he rasps, his smirk so perilously close to her lips.

* "E chu ta!" she yells at him as he walks away, in a language left over from the sun-baked days at Niima Outpost.

"You're such a potty-mouth, *sweets patogga,*" he chides, slanting her a languid glance over his shoulder, and it's simply *ridiculous,* but her blush returns in full force. She thinks she's fuming as she stomps back to the mess hall, except that Jysella asks her why she's grinning from ear to ear.

* Two day cycles later, the Orinda campaign ends on a bitter note for the Republic. Gathered at the main communications bay in the Strategy Center on the ground level of the Great Temple, Luke, Ben, and Rey— as well as the older apprentices and the Knights who aren't offworld— watch in stunned disbelief as Artoo relays a simulation of the last battle, cobbled together from vidfeeds transmitted by the *Moldy Crow* and various astromech droids. In grainy bluish-white, Gilad
Pellaeon's *Reaper* and the *Lusankya* commanded by General Wedge Antilles exchange broadsides above the planet of Orinda, while the *Endurance* hangs back. "Admiral Bell wanted to delay launching the E-wings until the *Reaper's* defenses were reduced," Katarn explains over comm-link as he races back to the Core, "but, as you can see—"

Seven forbidding silhouettes shimmer into life— another Star Dreadnought, the *Dominion*, uncloaks over the field of battle, accompanied by six Immobilizer 418 cruisers that trap the Republic fleet in gravity wells. The Remnant opens fire, and the *Endurance* shatters into pieces with her fighters still in their hangars, while the *Lusankya*—

"Wedge," Luke mutters tersely, his blue eyes reflecting the explosions of smoke and light, "get out of there, Wedge, get lines—"

Rogue Squadron regroups, diving into a concentrated attack formation and punching a hole in the Interdictor screen. The *Lusankya* limps away, with the X-wings providing cover, before finally disappearing into hyperspace. The simulation blinks out, leaving only gloom and silence.

"*They had another Dreadnought,*" Ben growls. "Why didn't we know this? Why didn't Republic intelligence pick up a trace—"

"I could sense something was off when Pellaeon conceded Obredaan and retreated to Orinda." Katarn's voice sounds tired, even over the crackle of static. "We pursued him, anyway. We thought the *Reaper* was the last remaining Imperial SSD. I have to debrief at Hosnian Prime— I'll keep you updated. Stand by."

No sooner has he cut the link when a new one lights up the HoloNet screen, blinking red with an urgent message coursed through a private, encrypted channel. Rey finds herself looking at the face of Leia Organa. Her hair is gray now, swept back in a less elaborately braided style, but her eyes remain the same as they always were, dark and piercing and so much like her son's. Rey doesn't miss it, either, the way Ben instinctively takes a half-step towards the image of his mother, before catching himself and freezing in place.

"General." Luke nods at his twin. "We have just received word of the Republic's defeat at Orinda—"

"Believe me, that is the least of my concerns," Leia snorts. "Pellaeon got what he wanted, he got the Entralla Route and a new base of operations and bragging rights, but it won't go any further than that. The Remnant will stay put in the Mid Rim. They don't have the resources to make a push for the Core— especially now that they can no longer catch us off-guard with Dreadnoughts appearing out of nowhere. No one's listening to me, of course, but, Luke— the real threat lurks in the
"I have been dispatching Jedi to the Unknown Regions ever since your initial reports," Luke tells her gravely, "and, each time, they have returned empty-handed, with nothing but rumors to suggest that this First Order of yours is violating the terms of the Galactic Concordance."

"They're planning something," Leia insists. "They're using the Remnant's activities as a smokescreen, waiting for the right time to strike."

"I do not doubt your instincts, and I will continue to assist in your efforts to find irrefutable proof," says Luke. "But, Leia, you must tread carefully. They've already shuffled you to the sidelines for being an alarmist."

"It is oddly freeing to work from the sidelines," quips the former Chief of State and, now, the general of the military organization known as the Resistance. "Leave the politics to me, Master Jedi. I can handle myself. Although, I do need your help with another matter."

A map unfolds onscreen, at first encompassing an entire sector, before zooming in on a single system, and then a planet. Alphanumeric grid coordinates glow beside it. "Corbos," Leia announces, "in the Esstran sector. Very rich in mineral ore, but otherwise uninhabited. However, the Republic established an experimental mining outpost in one of its craters a few months back. Seven-hundred-ninety-three miners and their families are stationed there now. An hour ago, this message was broadcasted to Republic channels—"

There's a sharp click, followed by the thready hiss of an audiofeed being piped into the comm-link. A man's desperate voice fills the room. "T-this is Corbos Mining Colony," he sputters. "We are under attack, some sort of... creature, destroying our entire city—we have no weapons against—" He breaks on a sob, but, before the audio dissolves into static, he manages to choke out, "Send help, please!"

After the chilling transmission ends, Leia's solemn tones filter through the HoloNet once more. "Republic forces are on full-scale alert after Orinda, with strict orders not to leave their posts. Chancellor Villecham considers this a low-priority situation, especially with the liberation of the Ojoster sector still underway. Most of my own squadrons are in deep cover in Wild Space and the Unknown Regions. We need the Jedi."

"All right," says Luke. "I'll send a strike team to Corbos within the hour."
"Seven-hundred-ninety-three families, Luke," Leia repeats, somberly. "We must not fail them."

Before the General ends the comm, she requests a moment alone with Ben. As she troops out of the bay, along with everyone else, Rey can't help glancing over her shoulder—at his stooped, messy-haired silhouette outlined against flickering HoloNet light, the static-tinged face of his mother giving him a tentative, hopeful smile, from a system far, far away.

Chapter End Notes

The flashback scene is based on this wonderful art helpfully pointed out to me by thenameismaynard over on Tumblr.

Shii-Cho, or Form I, is the first of the seven forms of lightsaber combat that all younglings start off with.

Velocities.

Sith amulet.

The mind trick discussion is based on this lecture by Jedi Master Yarael Poof.

E chu ta! is a Huttese insult, canonically too offensive to be translated into Basic. Sweets patogga, on the other hand, is Huttese for "sweety pie." DON'T LOOK AT ME, I AM TRASH.

The Battle of Obredaan.

The Battle of Orinda.

The Dominion.

Immobilizer 418 cruiser.

Gravity wells.

Areta Bell.

Corbos in the Esstran sector. However, these are very spoilery links as I will be following the Expanded Universe plot related to them almost exactly, so click at your own peril.

Chancellor Lanever Villecham.

Wild Space.

The Unknown Regions.
"SSD" is starfighter pilot slang for Super Star Destroyer, while "get lines" means to disengage from combat and make the jump into hyperspace.

Solah! a.k.a DIASTERISMS YOU'RE GOING TO HELL.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Glad everyone's excited about the sequel! This is a bit of a talky chapter because I needed to air out some issues and establish particular character motivations before diving back into the action. If you've spotted any loopholes so far, or require clarification on certain matters, now is the time to ask, so I can find a way to resolve it by story's end.

As always, I'm so grateful for every kudos, bookmark, and, especially, every review. Your insights have helped me add so many dimensions to this fic, and your words of encouragement have given me so much motivation to write, that I can honestly consider this a group effort, lol. Keep 'em coming! Four more chapters, friends!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

"Good talk?" Rey asks Ben as they lean against the wall, standing a little apart from the other Knights and apprentices who are also waiting in the hallway for Luke and Tionne Solusar to finish their private discussion inside one of the meeting rooms. Tionne was the only Jedi Master who'd been close enough to answer Luke's summons at such short notice— her ship had been coming up the Pinooran Spur on her way from the planet of Betshish, when she received Artoo's transmission and immediately veered off into the Yavin Bypass.

Ben slouches, jamming his hands into his pockets and muttering something noncommittal under his breath.

"Yeah, that sounds fascinating." Rey keeps her sarcasm light and casual, to disguise just how curious she is about the nature of Ben and Leia's comms— which, while never frequent to begin with, have become more and more sporadic in the years since Leia formed the Resistance.

Ben stares off into space for a while, a frown tugging at his lips. "She asked me if I'd heard from my father," he admits, grudgingly.

Rey is suddenly very, very sorry that she'd pressed the subject, instead of keeping Organa-Solo family dynamics safe in her mental catalogue where it's filed under Danger! Do Not Touch. What she knows, or has gleaned from offhand remarks and pointed changes in topic during the two years since Exar Kun, is that the epic, sweeping, galaxy-conquering romance of Han and Leia has crashed and burned like a capital ship finally succumbing to Trench Run Disease. What she knows is that it might have something to do with the wanderlust that is never far from Han's eyes and the rock-solid sense of duty that lines Leia's features. What she knows is that Ben loves his mother very much and blames his father for everything.
"She could have married a prince, you know," Ben continues, darkly. "Isolder of the Hapes Consortium— he was in love with her. Lando told me about that, once."

"If she'd married him, you wouldn't be here, then," Rey points out, but he keeps on talking as if he hasn't heard her.

"Instead, she got saddled with some common smuggler—"

"Why, you snob!" Rey bursts out. "I'm so— listen to yourself, you sound like Raynar! Are you going to end up like him, too?"

They are cutting and brutal, the things that we say in anger. She is too proud and stubborn to clap a hand over her mouth, no matter how badly she wants to erase the lingering shape of the sentence, to turn back time so that she never gave voice to it at all. She feels the rage flare within him and braces herself for the fallout as Raynar Thul and Numa Rar watch from across a span of years.

But to follow the path of the Light means that you have to observe how it moves through your opponent as well. You have to slip inside someone else's skin despite the hurt and try to track the roads that led them to this moment when they deal you the blow. "While the armed guard may prove to be an obstacle, he is also a living being," the Krimsan holocron had said. "Any course will leave a wake. Makes you wish you had been more stealthy, yes?"

And that's how all that Ben has learned at the academy kicks in— he doesn't say it out loud, but he lowers his shields and lets her sense the clouds part and the understanding filter through. She came from Jakku; she was a scavenger in a former life. There are realms where smugglers are glamorous, are revered. For scavengers and slaves, there is only filth, only contempt, only hunger and exhaustion and the grime that clings to your soul.

Rey senses the moment Ben comprehends that and lets his anger abate. She resolves to govern her temper better, in the future. If Ben can do it, has finally learned how to do it, then she has no excuse.

A door creaks open, as if nudged by an invisible hand. Exchanging tentative glances, the Knights and apprentices push off from the various pillars and spots on the wall that they have been holding up, and walk into the presence of the Masters.
"The greatest risk of this mission is that the strike team will be going in blind," Luke says from the front of the room. "The miner's distress call mentioned some kind of creature, but, to the best of our knowledge, Corbos has no recorded indigenous species. However, as Master Tionne has informed me, people have tried to settle on the planet time and time again, and, in every single case, the colony was wiped out."

"Vanished into thin air," Tionne adds. "All these failed attempts predate the Battle of Yavin, and it remains a mystery until now."

"Then why did the New Republic send those miners there, if they knew something was off?" Rey finds herself wondering out loud.

"Perhaps they thought the threat was long past," murmurs Tionne. "Or their archives hold none of the pertinent data. I was only able to learn about the enigma surrounding Corbos when I chanced upon some spacer journals a few years ago. It is one of those backwater little planets—"

"But very rich in mineral ore, right?" Ben interrupts, curtly. "And I suppose a lucrative mining industry would be irresistible to the Trans-Hydian Borderlands who are still waffling on opening up trade relations with us."

"Ben," Luke says, but it's Rey who takes up the gauntlet. "It's unfair," she insists. "Those miners only wanted to make a living, and the Republic took full advantage of that and stationed them on some chunk of rock that's obviously dangerous— where were the guards? Or, at the very least, the weapons so they could defend themselves—"

Luke raises a hand. Rey subsides, with a mutinous glower at the tips of her boots. "We can criticize government policy at another time," he says, "but, for now, we have to be part of the solution. The strike team will be commanded by Master Tionne, and it will be composed of three Knights— Ben, Eryl, and Finn—"

"Sorry, Master," Ganner interrupts, with a slight frown, "but what about—"

"You," says Luke, "have just recovered from wounds sustained on Tyan. I'm sending you to the Tenupe system, to help Master Cilghal settle a dispute between the Killiks and the Chiss Ascendancy before it erupts into a full-scale invasion. This will be an excellent opportunity to practice your skill as a diplomat. No bladework, just negotiation. Bazel, Seff, and Yaqeel will go with you."
The three apprentices perk up. Yaqeel's mood-sensitive fur practically bristles with excitement. Rey easily deciphers Luke's play here—he's chosen the students who tend to be indelicate with their words, the ones who would benefit most from watching peace talks in action—but, even so, she feels a stab of jealousy. They're going offworld.

"Jysella," Luke continues, "I know you haven't seen your brother in a while, so I hope this will be welcome news; tomorrow, Ulaha will take you, Natua, and Tiu with her to the Ojoster sector, to rendezvous with Valin, Tekli, and Masters Kam and Daeshara'cor. Apprentices won't be expected to engage in combat, but your healing abilities are sorely needed on the battlefield."

Rey opens her mouth to mimic Ganner and demand, "What about me?" but, before she can speak, Luke's placid gaze meets hers. "And you, Rey, will join the strike team on Corbos."

"No!"

The protest comes from Ben, a harsh exclamation rolled between teeth and tongue. All eyes in the meeting room snap to him, surprised, bewildered. He swallows, looks for a moment as if he regrets his outburst, but then his expression hardens. "You said it yourself, Master," he tells Luke. "We don't know what's waiting for us there. As of the moment, we must assume that it is too dangerous for an apprentice."

"Hey!" Rey shouts.

"I will not be a babysitter," Ben snarls, "least of all for some naive child who will only get underfoot —"

See where he's coming from, her training urges her. He's remembering what happened two years ago. The Sith Lord said you will die in battle. Ben's afraid for you. But it doesn't take; her temper rises, a hopeless lash against the prophecy that's been hanging over her head ever since she was sixteen, the future that she's been trying so hard not to think about, along with her vision of that masked figure. Where is Skywalker?

"Funny," she spits at Ben, "seems to me like I was the one doing the babysitting a couple of years ago." You have always seen me. You have always sensed me. Take up your sword. Come back.

An almost tangible flinch jolts through the room, a group of Force-sensitives so attuned to one
another recoiling from a shared pain. Ben and Rey are exchanging heated glances now, the air around them heavy with the weight of betrayal. *You and I are both terrible people,* she thinks. *Since when have we been able to hurt each other like this?*

It's Tionne who breaks the silence, Tionne who clears her throat. "Knight Solo," she says, "we understand your reservations, but Rey cannot stay on Yavin 4 forever. In any case, the decision has already been made."

"You do not understand my reservations," Ben retorts, his tone so rude that Tionne blinks, and then he storms out of the room.

Rey wills herself into some semblance of composure, resisting the urge to fidget with her hands as she and Luke face each other. They're alone now, Tionne having ushered out the other Knights and apprentices to prepare for their respective missions. *I didn't tell him,* Rey realizes all of a sudden as she looks at her master. *He doesn't know about Exar Kun's prophecy. I never told anyone except Ben.*

Luke heaves a sigh. "That boy," he reflects, "does not know how to love without fear. Maybe he got that from me. Or from—" He rubs the bridge of his nose, weary and somewhat defeated. "I've half a mind to pull him out of active duty for a while. His behavior has been getting more erratic. Shortened fuse, recklessness on missions, openly antagonizing the Masters— he's acting like—"

"Alema." Rey has to be the one to say it, because Luke won't. "He's acting the way Alema was before she left."

Luke nods. "But if I don't let him go to Corbos, especially with you on the strike team, his resentment might fester, adding to a pile of already undesirable emotions." He hesitates. "We told you, once, to trust in us. That should work both ways, I think. We must also trust in your abilities, and in your strength to stay true to all that you have learned here. I should let him go, then— actually, I rather thought that he'd have liked the chance to embark on a mission with you—"

Nothing for it, then. Rey blows out a breath, and then uses the next one to tell Luke about Exar Kun's prophecy. He regards her solemnly for a moment, and asks, "Why didn't you say anything before?"
"I was so angry, after Numa," Rey whispers, looking back on those days, finally admitting the things that she herself hadn't been aware of until now. "I didn't want anyone to pity me, or to treat me differently." And then, as the months passed and turned into years, it had just sort of... fallen to the wayside, like some petty errand you can't be bothered with. *Things to do today: die.*

"Divination is never straightforward," Luke muses. "Dark Side prophecies, in particular, are often given to incite agony. I will tell you something, Rey. Or, better yet—" He opens his mind to her, an invitation, "— let me show you."

*A dream. Or a generational memory. Or something that a dead father's spirit passes on to his son, to prevent him from making the same old mistakes.*

Anakin Skywalker wanders the fiery volcanic caverns beneath the earth of Mortis. He is young and handsome, and a Jedi Knight in the time of the Clone Wars. "Know yourself," hisses the Fanged God. "Know what you will become." Images rise from plumes of black smoke, surrounding him. Anakin sees it all—waves of lightning, Order 66, "you were my brother," the destruction of Alderaan. He falls to his knees in anguish, crying out as the pain splits his head, as an obsidian-black helm looms over him and fills this world beneath the world.

The god offers him the darkness, to prevent this future from happening. He accepts. He is young and terrified and in love. He does not know how to love without fear.

*Later on," says Luke, "the progenitor of the Fanged God had to erase those visions from Anakin's mind, to break the hold of the Dark Side on him. But we know that it all came to pass, anyway. What if he hadn't given in to his despair? What if he had refused the offer, and, consequently, retained his memory of what he saw on Mortis, so that he could use it to guide his steps? No future is set in stone, but, by failing to hold that one up to the Light, he was unable to change it... Rey, if you don't accept this mission because of Exar Kun's prophecy, where will it end? Will you allow yourself to be paralyzed by your fear?" His features are as calm as always, but there is steel in his voice. Sometimes she forgets that her patient, easygoing master is the same man who brought down an empire at the age of twenty-three. "Or will you go forth as a Jedi?"*
In her chambers on the second level, Rey gathers the things that she will need for Corbos. She takes her lightsaber, her fibercord, and not much else. She frowns at her weapon before clipping it to her belt, wonders if it would be possible to modify it or construct a new one altogether. Her conversation with Luke had driven home the unsettling realization that she had not been at complete peace in the weeks following Numa's death and the defeat of Exar Kun. She built this lightsaber and she's trained with it for two years— it feels like an extension of her arm, yes, but not in the way that her old quarterstaff had.

Before she ducks out the doorway, she glances at the pilot doll on her nightstand. *I'll be back,* she thinks at it, and immediately feels foolish for doing so.

Finn Galfridian runs into her in the corridor, also about to head downstairs. "All right, kid?" he asks, with his usual charming smile. "Looks like you finally got your research trip with Master Tionne. Just stick with us, it'll be fine. We won't let anything happen to you."

There's something about the way he promises that. The determination. The hardness. A far cry from the happy-go-lucky aristocrat she first met. "You're so different now," Rey tells him, almost wistfully.

She feels him tap into her emotions, just a little— a man peering into a window to catch a glimpse of what's inside. "I am done losing people," he says at last. "The tragedy of two years ago, that was partly because of my own inaction. I succumbed to the Sith Lord because I dreamed of Artorias burning."

"You were paralyzed by fear," she murmurs.

"Indeed. In those moments, I shamed the legacy of my forefathers. I forgot that I am descended from warriors. I failed Numa and Alema. And Raynar." They reach the staircase; he steps aside to let her pass first, and, as she descends, she remembers the food fight in the mess hall, how Finn had been the first one to come to Raynar's defense and Force-shove pudding onto Ben's robes. She delves further, searches for Numa and Alema in this scenario, finds them giggling and shrieking and flinging salad everywhere. So long ago, now.

"Where do you think Alema is?" she asks.

"Six months ago, I was on Takodana," the prince replies. "I hoped that Maz Kanata might know something, she gets all sorts of spacers coming in and out at her tavern, but all she could tell me was that she'd heard of some Twi'lek sniffing around Ashas Ree, asking about Dark transfer."
"The transfer," Alema had said, cradling her sister's limp body in her arms. "The red light."

"It's an offshoot of healing," Finn explains, "accessible only through, well, obviously, the Dark Side of the Force. It can bring people back to life, or so I've heard."

"Even without their physical body?" The smoke from Numa's pyre, wreathing through the dawn...

"I find that doubtful. But Alema was already a bit of a nerve burner before she left, anyway. Wherever she is now, I hope— well, I hope for the best." He changes the topic when their feet hit the first-floor landing. "Oh, and Rey— perhaps you could very kindly hint to Solo to go easy on Master Luke. He hasn't been the same since Exar Kun, either, and his nephew being more of a jerk-ass than usual is just stirring up the mynock's nest."

She raises an eyebrow. "Why do I have to be the one to keep Ben in line?"

"Because," Finn says, with another smile, this one softer, more fond, "Solo would do anything for you."

*

The other apprentices are waiting for Rey on the landing pad. They surround her, they wish her luck and clear skies. They tell her May the Force be with you, and see you soon. She returns these proclamations, extorts everyone to come back safe from their respective voyages. They laugh and nod and grin at one another. Their eyes are bright with the future.

*

Instead of Tionne's Lore Seeker, it's the Shadow Sabre that the strike team piles into on the basis of superior firepower. Just a precaution— the Esstran sector is home to the old Sith Worlds, after all. It's the kind of space that would attract any Darksiders coming out of the woodwork, emboldened by the recent Imperial resurgence.

Ben turns away as Rey enters the yacht. She can't stop herself from making a face at him behind his back, in a fit of childish pique. He still doesn't so much as glance in her direction while they wrap up
preflight checks and coast over the trees before arcing into the sky, but—

— as the *Shadow Sabre* punches through the atmosphere of Yavin 4 and into the black, Rey remembers another journey, going the other way. Her eyes instinctively whip to Ben, the cabin walls shuddering around them, vibrations ringing through her teeth, and he's—

— already staring at her, beneath a net of constellations, silver pulses raining over the transparisteel canopy and tangling in his hair, expression soft with memory and fierce with wonder—

How to describe it, this heady rush, this sensation of the two of them being bigger than worlds as the ship pulls horizontal over the jungle moon? *Greatness,* she thinks, holding his gaze, steady and sure, her heartbeat a drum through the sublight. *You promised me greatness. It's here, in whatever lies between us.*

His lips curve in a faint, reluctant smile. Their thoughts run together, and she doesn't know which of them promises it first, she doesn't know where she ends and where he begins, she only knows that she feels like the look on his face, she feels like her hand is reaching out to his across the space between them and together they are touching the divine—*you and I, we are unchanged by time*—

* *

Once the *Shadow Sabre* has made the jump, Tionne hands the controls over to Eryl. " Normally, we'd have to take the Hydian Way out of the Gordian Reach, but we're on a tight schedule," Eryl explains to a curious Rey. "We can get to Corbos quicker if we punch up a hyperlane that directly connects the Yavin Bypass to the Daragon Trail."

Rey bites her lip. "I don't think such a route would be on the navicomp."

Eryl taps the side of her head. "It's called instinctive astrogation. Before I came to the academy, I was using this ability to win space races with my dad. I'll teach you how to do it someday." Her jade eyes suddenly light up. "And— here we are." The ship rocks as she steers it into an uncharted hyperlane, Eryl Besa, Jedi Knight, always absolutely certain of where in the galaxy she is, and where she's going.

* *
They're somewhere along the Daragon Trail now, the canopy a blur of starlines, chronometers ticking and sensors humming around the cockpit. Rey settles back in her seat with a slight frown, wondering why the name of this route is so familiar. Of course, she's heard of it before, seen it on maps, but, no, there's something else—

Trying to trace the roots of her eerie sense of deja vu, she only encounters a stubborn little knot of blankness. Before she can probe further, she's distracted by the sound of Finn Galfridian's voice. "How's Master Kam doing, Master Tionne?"

"He is well." Tionne radiates a beacon of that serene, warm light that she often does when she talks about her solemn, much older husband. "Although I have to caution him to take it easy, what with those ancient bones of his."

"Master Kam's not that old," Finn chortles.

"It's a running joke between him and me," Tionne clarifies. And then she muses, as if to herself, "I actually have not seen him since the start of the Pallaxides liberation, but we use our Force-bond to keep in touch."

"Don't you miss him, though?" says Eryl. "His physical presence?"

"It would be selfish to let personal feelings interfere with one's sense of duty," Tionne smoothly replies. "When Master Luke founded this new Jedi Order, he rejected the prohibition against marriage, for he felt that love was an important part of the Light Side, and it was, after all, a forbidden marriage that brought about the downfall of the Old Republic and the Old Jedi Order."

Although Rey tries so hard not to, she ends up glancing at Ben, as does everyone else. He's slunk low in his seat, arms folded across his chest, staring impassively out the viewport. Do you ever think about what your grandparents were like? she wants to ask him. I know Anakin Skywalker haunts you, but do you ever wonder about Padme Amidala, and what the two of them could have felt so strongly that they defied an entire galaxy for it?

"However," Tionne continues, "any love that two Jedi choose to share must be tempered by our Code. We must think in terms far higher than the fleeting thrill of romance and the primordial pathways of desire. The love between two Jedi must be used to channel a deeper connection with the Light Side of the Force. In so doing, we avoid becoming slaves to our passions."
A muscle ticks along Ben's sharp, pale jaw. "What is love without passion?" he asks, quietly, and the echoes of their duel stir in Rey like a sweeping, insistent hymn. His mouth on her skin, his whispered, starlit surrender, the fire in his dark eyes.

"We are not creatures of passion, Knight Solo," Tionne patiently reminds him. "We serve a nobler cause."

For a second, Ben looks like he's about to argue, but then Eryl leaps the yacht out of hyperspace. The starlines crystallize into the glowing, milky spirals of the Stygian Caldera as the Esstran sector unfolds before them, and the dashboard lights up with the harsh beep of an incoming comm.

Eryl flicks a switch, and a languid, slightly husky male voice fills the cabin. "Ahoy, Shadow Sabre." It's Kyp Durron. "I'm headed out from the Radama Void mission. I can meet you on Corbos, if you'll have me."

"Of course, Master Durron," says Tionne, with a smile. "Your skills will be of great help."

"Astral!" says Kyp. "Race you there, then."

"We don't actually have to race him," Finn tells Eryl after Kyp has ended the transmission.

Eryl smirks, one hand already hovering over the thruster controls. "Brace yourselves, folks."

It's a wild, wild ride, full of abrupt reverses and perilous turns and rough bursts of speed. Tionne merely endures with a long-suffering, slightly disapproving expression on her face, while Finn shouts at Eryl and Ben looks like he wants to throw up. Rey, though, laughs and laughs in delight through it all, her eyes glued to the viewport and the corners of her mouth aching from smiling so much, as Eryl pulls them into a heartstopping dive and a million stars soar up to meet them.

Chapter End Notes

I DEDICATE THIS KYP DURRON CAMEO TO BITTERSNAKE.

Map of the Pinooran Spur and the Yavin Bypass.

Betshish.
Large capital starships are said to suffer from "Trench Run Disease'' when they are vulnerable to this tactic.

Isolder of the Hapes Consortium.

In the EU, the Chiss seize Tenupe from the Killiks during the Swarm War. Obviously, I've modified that plot a bit to suit the purposes of this fic.

Kam Solusar.

You can actually watch Anakin's dream sequence in the Ghosts of Mortis episode of the Clone Wars TV series. YES, IT ACTUALLY HAPPENED IN CANON. DON'T TOUCH ME. *cries forever*

The Fanged God.

Ashas Ree.

The Hydian Way.

Map of the Gordian Reach.

Map of the Daragon Trail.

The Stygian Caldera.

The Sith Worlds.

Instinctive astrogation.

"Navicomp" is slang for navigation computer.

The Radama Void.
Chapter 15

This chapter took ages because I was suddenly inspired to work on Shatterpoint and, also, I kept second-guessing myself here because Ben and Rey would NOT stop acting like a lovesick young couple on vacation. I want to VOMIT. I hope you all like shameless fluff and moral dilemmas because that's practically all that this update is. Also: Kyp "Human Disaster" Durron.

Anyway, we have some more new tags, thanks to petalics and Jinga in the comments section, and we are so very near the end of this story that I almost can't believe it. Thank you for sticking around and for all the support, and please let me know what you think of this latest installment!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The black shuttle clings to the base of the rock shelf like a piece of night, shielded from aerial view by the curved overhang. Its passengers have disembarked to stretch their cramped muscles— save for the Twi'lek, who has one foot dangling off the ramp while the upper half of her body remains indolently sprawled against the ship's interior. She's more at home in dim, enclosed spaces. She never broke out of the habit.

Her slender blue neck cranes towards the sky. The red-haired man and the stormtrooper escorts follow the pierce of her green eyes. A silvery speck drops from distant orange clouds.

"He had better be onboard," the red-haired man spits out. Four day cycles. They've wasted four day cycles on this dirtball, waiting around for the final puzzle piece to click into place.

"He is," drawls the Twi'lek. "Leader Snoke felt his presence in this system not an hour ago." She relishes the way her tongue moves leader around, it is a word that implies she is free to judge someone and deem them worthy of being followed. It is a word that means choice, instead of blind subservience.

"Perhaps you should check, Madame Rar."

"If I open my connection to them, they will sense me, too. The Force always works both ways." Alema stretches, cat-like. "Not that you would understand, General Hux."
He sneers at her. He can't believe all this trouble they're going through to retrieve some prized wonder child—but, again, he is careful not to let the whole of the thought rise to the surface.

"We have to cloak now," Alema tells Hux once the silvery speck has vanished behind a rim of jagged mountains. She sounds almost bored. "Order your men to release the hounds."

Corbos is markedly unimpressive, as far as planets go. There's not a blade of grass or a drop of water to be found—only rock, as far as the eye can see, muted striations of red and gray and brown beneath a tarnished copper sun. The air is dry and dusty, and it mingles with Ben's annoyed huff of breath as he joins Rey at the bottom of the Shadow Sabre's ramp. "By the Force, this place is worse than Jakku."

She blinks. "Did you just say 'by the Force'?"

"I cannot imagine what possible objection you would have to that."

"Only old people say that, Ben!" she scoffs, turning her nose up at him.

"Ah, but, Rey—" Suddenly, he's grinning over her like a shark, a rare hint of mischief introducing a cunning, golden gleam into his brown eyes. "I am so much older than you. In fact, by virtue of age, I am your better."

"What you are," she retorts, "is ancient. Did you stow your walking-stick? Shall I fetch it for you?"

"I'd much rather have you carry me on your back," he murmurs, velvety, teasing.

She's still shaking her head at the ridiculous mental image by the time the Sundance joins them. It's a scout ship, a speedy little Pathfinder-class that doesn't so much as fly as insinuate itself through the air. It glides low over the planet's arid surface and nearly rams into the docked Shadow Sabre, listing hard to starboard at the last second.

With several bemused Jedi looking on, Kyp Durron lands his ship and disembarks. "Don't gloat,
Knight Besa," he warns, wagging a finger at Eryl. "I had to cut across the Stygian Caldera and you know what a karking breakwater that place is."

"Perhaps you should not have challenged her to a race, then," Tionne points out.

"Nice to see you, too," Kyp shoots back, but the smile that he aims at Tionne is genuine. "Were you able to confirm the sentience of the Betshish swamp natives?"

"Yes. They have a language of their own, as well as cultural customs, and they were already using pre-industrial technology by the time of the Empire," Tionne replies. "How was Ord Radama?"

"Blue milk run," says Kyp, which means it had been an uneventful mission. "The Devlikks are still bitter about having been largely left out of the New Republic's postwar rehabilitation efforts, but we got their new hospital up and going before I left. That's some improvement, at least."

"Look at you, community organizer," Tionne quips.

The warmth and ease of their camaraderie is familiar to Rey. This is the same connection she has with Jysella and the other apprentices, the same connection she has noticed among the Knights. Tionne and Kyp might be Jedi Masters now, their discussions more serious, but the way they talk to each other is suffused with old academy days, that bond forged from walking the first steps of the path side by side.

Soon the strike team heads in the direction of the mining city's coordinates, brown cloaks billowing over hard ground. Rey knows unforgiving places; she feels this land deep in her bones. Her heart scales the barren cliffs, all the way up to the molten skies.

With Tionne leading the group, Kyp is happy to fall back and chat with the younger Jedi. "How's tricks, Solo?" He claps a companionable hand on Ben's shoulder, which the Knight automatically shrugs off. "Tell your old man he still owes me a round, huh?"

"Tell him yourself, Master," Ben all but snarls. "I haven't seen him in months."

Kyp's grin falters as he blinks at Ben in confusion. Rey attempts to deflect the awkwardness of the moment by blurting out, "You drink, Master Durron?"
"Only to practice," Kyp says, eagerly turning to her with a hint of gratitude. "I like to test the limits of how much control over the self I can retain while intoxicated."

"Hah," Tionne says, very lightly, from up front.

Rey, meanwhile, is still babbling away, unnerved by how Ben's scowl has darkened for some reason, despite the change in subject. "I noticed you've kept the Sundance 's original shield generator," she tells Kyp. "That model has a tendency to overload, you know, so most pilots usually replace it with the more stable Chempat Defender."

He winks at her. "It's called living dangerously."

"Oh," is all that she can manage, a stilted little bleat of sound, because Kyp really is very handsome, with roguish features and twinkling brown eyes—

Ben quickens his pace, shouldering past Finn and Eryl to draw level with Tionne in a few long strides. Bewildered, Rey reaches out to give him a mental nudge, but, instead, she slams into his own shields, which flinch at her approach as if he'd hastily thrown them up.

To be honest, she finds herself a little annoyed. They had just made up from their earlier spat— if forgiveness can really be cours ed through a single shared look— and now he seems determined to throw some new drama her way. She thinks of all those flight simulations that had her navigating the Halo in Q-16 or, worse, the Anoat Belt in K-18— how some stupid chunk of space rock would inevitably come hurtling through the viewport no matter how careful or how clever she was. She doesn't know what this strange thing she and Ben seem to have stumbled into is, but it's only common sense to assume that it shouldn't remind her of an asteroid field.

Right?

All of a sudden, she misses Jysella, who would know what to say, who would know how to talk her through it.

Kyp is shaking his head ruefully as he keeps pace with Rey. "Han Solo is my hero," he tells her, in a quiet voice. "He and Chewbacca were incarcerated with me in the spice mines of Kessel, and we busted out in a cart and flew a stolen shuttle into the Maw."
Rey smirks. "Sounds like Han."

"He's a good guy. The best," Kyp insists. "He was the one who brought me to Luke. I'll always be grateful for that. I'll never understand why he has such a strained relationship with Ben."

"Maybe it's different for fathers and sons, Master," Rey tentatively ventures.

"Yeah. Maybe."

They reach Corbos Mining City, and all thoughts of Ben and his issues evaporate from Rey's mind, because she is peering at a scene of chilling devastation. Located at the bottom of a vast crater, the domed barracks have been shattered, as if a meteor had come soaring down from space and hit dead center. Torn power cables spin idly in the hot wind, some of them still sparking with electric currents. At first, it appears as if the ruins have been here for decades, covered as they are by streaks of rust, but—no, those dull red splashes of color, they're bloodstains, caked on the walls and the pipes.

What happened here?

The Jedi lower themselves down the slopes of the crater and then fan out amidst the ripped and twisted hunks of metal, searching for signs of life. But there are none—just an overwhelming sensation of pain and loss, so thick that it constricts Rey's throat. There are no bodies to be found, but the back of her neck prickles as hundreds of sorrowful gazes watch her from behind broken windows, silently begging for help, silently begging to be saved from whatever horrible fate had engulfed them on this desolate planet in the middle of nowhere.

"Clear," Finn Galfridian announces, emerging from one half-collapsed structure.

"Clear," echoes Eryl, poking her head out of another bleak, tilted doorway, while Ben mumbles the same sentiment from atop a pile of debris and toppled posts that could have so easily concealed an injured survivor from view. But there are none. Save for the Jedi, this crater is devoid of all living energy.

Tionne and Kyp busy themselves at a mainframe that has been wrenched off its hinges amidst a pile of rubble. Rey dashes over to help, using the Force to wire one of the treacherously sizzling, snaking power cables into the computer's circuits, giving them the jolt they need to boot up. At first glance, the flickering screen provides no clues—just a bunch of perfunctory logs on weather conditions,
daily activities, and the quality of the minerals extracted— but Tionne's sharp eyes, so used to trawling endless archives, soon zero in on an entry dated one night cycle before the distress call.

"They dug up the fossil of some huge creature in the cliffs to the north, and then headed back to the city to take shelter from an oncoming storm," she says. "That's interesting. I assume the specimen they found was prehistoric and therefore passed out of record because it was buried deep underground—"
mining city, where the barren plain is dotted by a single grayish boulder jutting out from the reddish soil. She clambers on top of it, her feet balancing on the uneven surface with ease, and she scans the horizon, seeing nothing but sky and earth. She once thought that Jakku was the most desolate place in the galaxy, but at least there had been settlements there, and Teedos crossing the dunes on their shambling luggabeasts, and flocks of steelpeckers dotting the air. Here on Corbos, there is... nothing.

Ben is standing beside the boulder. Rey tilts her head at him from her perch, relishing the sensation of having the advantage in height, for once. Over the years, she's become something of an expert in the different types of Ben Solo scowls— there's the Rey-get-lost-I'm-trying-to-meditate scowl, and the one that is reserved for his father, and the Seff-your-jokes-are-beneath-my-dignity scowl, and the one that he aims at her whenever she says or does something outlandish, like she's a puzzle that he can't quite figure out. This one, though— this sunset-tinted purse of lips, this particular set of creases on his brow— this is the petulant scowl, for the times when he can't get his way, also shaded a little bit by the Han exclusive.

Rey takes a deep breath. "The next time you're upset about your father—" and she's trying to keep her voice non-confrontational, she really is— "I would appreciate it if you didn't take it out on me."

"You shouldn't even be here," he says, bitterly.

"Because of Exar Kun's prophecy?" she scoffs. "Everyone dies, Ben."

Not you. His thought spasms into her head as well, so violently is it thrown out, like another kind of instinct. Never you.

She stares at him, at the heat in his eyes and the defiant expression on his face. These are not Jedi things. This is— dangerous. "I told you what Exar Kun said to me because I trust you," she finally says. "In turn, you have to trust me. You have to trust that I can take care of myself, that I will always give as good as I get. There was a reason you found me on Jakku, and I would like to believe that it wasn't so you could keep me locked in a cage for the rest of my life."

"Neither was it so you could make calf eyes at Kyp Durron," he growls.

Her jaw drops open. The tips of his ears flush red and his fists clench at his sides, but otherwise he doesn't fall all over himself trying to take it back, choosing instead to seek refuge in an obstinate kind of silence. And, oh, this is so different from two years ago, when he'd teased her about having a crush on Kyp as he sauntered out of the hangar bay— logically, she should be offended by this flicker of possessiveness, but it's a strange and heady thing, to inspire such an emotion in a man. It appeals to her vanity. It makes her feel powerful.
"Ben," she coos, drawing out the single syllable of his name, all innocent singsong, "are you jealous?"

"Switch off, Rey."

"You're jealous," she breathes, absolutely delighted.

He turns away, but not before she glimpses the wounded, vulnerable look that shades his features. All of a sudden, she feels ashamed of herself, feels so crushingly unworthy of whatever it is, this devotion between them. This is Ben. She doesn't need to play games with him, and, besides, she suspects there's some sort of rulebook that the two of them missed out on while training to be Jedi on an isolated jungle moon.

"Don't be mad, please?" she attempts to charm.

"I'm not mad, you're just an idiot," he retorts, already walking back to the crater.

Before he can get very far, though, she launches herself at him, propelling her body off the top of the boulder with absolute confidence that he'll catch her. And he does—or, more accurately, she catches him, her chest landing squarely on his back, her arms flinging around his neck. He grunts and staggers a little, surprised by the sudden weight, but it's not long before his arms hook under her knees, wrapping her thighs more securely around his waist even as he mutters, "Get off, brat."

"You get off," she happily sighs into his nape, the ends of his dark hair tickling her nose. He smells like linen and warm skin and, just, Ben, that rain-edged musk that's so uniquely his, that scent she sometimes catches phantom traces of, even when he's not around. "Do you remember when you used to carry me like this? When I was too tired after training or too sleepy after evening meditation to walk back to my room?"

There hadn't been a lot of that—she'd been frighteningly self-reliant as a child, and he'd been too snappish and closed-off to indulge most of her whims—but he nods, anyway. "More like you just wanted to take advantage of my superior height and see above everyone else's heads, for once."

"I'll have you know, I'm actually taller than the average human female," she bristles.
He makes a noise of disbelief in the back of his throat. "You're tiny."

"Am not. You're just oversized, you— tree!" She attempts to dig her knee into his ribs; he retaliates by pinching her thigh. Rey squeals and wriggles higher up Ben's torso, inadvertently slinging one arm over his eyes as she scrabbles for leverage while her other hand clamps over his mouth. "Rey. I can't see." He's grinning reluctantly against her fingers, every brush of his lips sending shockwaves that reverberate all the way to her stomach, and she's giggling into the spot behind his right ear as he stumbles forward with her curled around his back. Eventually, she drops her arm from his eyes to slant across his chest, because she doesn't want him to trip over a rock and send them both sprawling to the ground or somesuch, but the hand pressed to his mouth stays where it is.

"Ben, stop being such a grouch," she chides— cajoles, even. "And don't be jealous. You know you're the only piggyback ride for me."

He nips at her fingertips playfully, eliciting another squeal from her. Overcome by a sudden rush of affection, she leans over his shoulder and darts a quick kiss on his cheek. His grin softens beneath her palm, and she hides a smile of her own against his jaw. She can't ever remember feeling this giddy before, they're away from home together, flushed and intertwined beneath the sunset, burning through the desert landscape like young gods. It's almost a kind of delirium, mildly alarming in its own right, but Rey embraces it without the slightest hesitation because madness and greatness are the two doorways of history. You're my asteroid field, she thinks, pressing another kiss to Ben's jaw, this one slower and more fierce.

He turns his head so that his nose brushes against hers, nuzzling, and her hand falls from his mouth to rest somewhere along his collarbone as she peppers mischievous little kisses on the side of his face. "Rey," he murmurs, probably without even meaning to, and her toes curl at the sound of her name so deep and husky like that. He's definitely walking a bit more unsteadily now, and she would be afraid that they'd topple over if he weren't so strong, so determined to protect her, always has been. There are all these crazy, reckless, half-formed thoughts bouncing around in the Force and she can't tell if they're coming from him or from herself, so beautiful, so mine, and she feels powerful and wonderful and wicked and beloved as she bites his earlobe and he laughs and groans all at once, death of me, my darling, my only—

By the time they reach the mining city, she's giggling in his ear and he's compulsively palming her thighs. He deposits her gently at the edge of the crater, but, the moment her feet hit the ground, she finds that she's not quite ready to let go of him yet. She stands on tiptoe, her arms around his neck, her sternum pressed to his spine, her face buried in the point between his shoulder-blades. "Ben," she breathes, she whines, maybe, and he's suddenly hissing as if in pain, and grabbing her wrist and scraping his teeth across her knuckles, sending splinters of delicious heat through her belly, and—
And they can't stay like that, of course. They spring apart when they notice Eryl a few paces away, having just returned from her own perimeter check. She has the grace to not say anything, but her thoughtful gaze lingers on them both before she shrugs, smiles, and lowers herself down the side of the crater. Ben and Rey follow in silence.

Night falls abruptly on Corbos, with a snap of sharp, dark jaws. The stars are faint blurs over the horizon, the moon nothing more than a crescent-shaped silhouette behind ominous black clouds. At the bottom of the crater, in the midst of the metal ruins, the Jedi huddle around a disc-shaped halo lamp that sheds white light on the angles of their faces and the folds of their robes. Dinner is veg-meat, which Rey hasn't eaten since Jakku; she has to force it down her throat, dry and crumbly along with so many sour memories.

The conversation is aimless, lilt of calm voices and the occasional chuckle. Tionne and Kyp have turned in early, and Ben's leaning against the tank treads of an overturned 11-17 mining droid too far gone for even Rey to fix, and his head is tipped back and he's watching with languid, half-lidded eyes as Finn and Eryl talk about something or other. Rey's barely listening; she's huddled beside Ben, her knees pressed to her chest, drifting in and out of sleep. The last time she'd been in a bone-dry place like this, she was clawing survival out of the ground; now she feels safe, wrapped in the presence of found family, her head pillowed on Ben's shoulder.

She comes awake enough to register Finn's proud, wistful smile as he speaks of his homeworld. "My people believe in life after death," he tells them. "They say that, for those who were courageous until the very end, for those who die with honor, there is a whale-bone bridge over rushing waters, shrouded in mist. Across the bridge is a great stone longhouse, so tall as to nearly touch the clouds."

"What's inside?" asks Eryl.

"Glory," the prince of Artorias replies.

*Glory,* croons an awful voice in Rey's memories. *Find me.* But it fades again before she can pinpoint the exact moment in her life when she heard it. She shivers; Ben curves an arm around her waist, tucking her into his side. She shifts her head from his shoulder to his chest, burrowing into his warmth, and there's this part of her that's strung out like a live wire, practically daring either Finn or Eryl to comment— but, then again, why would they? She and Ben have always been close. There is still innocence in this gesture, shaded though it is by some vague promise that she's half-convincing exists entirely in her head alone.
"The ancestors are there, inside the longhouse," Finn continues. "All the heroes of legend, laughing, singing, and drinking mead in the torch-lit hall. An eternal feast, an eternal state of valor, waiting for those who lived bravely and died well." He heaves an almost imperceptible sigh, and it is now— it is truly only now— that Rey understands what his commitment to the Jedi Path has cost Finn Galfridian. "Perhaps I will not be able to have that. I chose the way of the peacekeeper, the philosopher— not the warrior. And the Jedi become one with the Force when our time comes. No whale-bone bridge, no high and echoing hall. But, still, it is a good dream."

#

A while later, Eryl shimmies up the crater wall to take first watch, while Finn also rises to his feet, about to head inside the barracks that they've designated as sleeping quarters for the night. "Staying up, Solo?" he asks.

Rey is distantly aware of the muscles of Ben's arm shifting around her as he shrugs. She's only marginally awake now, lulled by the crackle of the halo lamp, her eyes all but closed.

"Look at her. Not a care in the galaxy." Finn sounds amused. "Stars, I miss being eighteen."

"I don't." Ben's chest rumbles pleasantly beneath Rey's cheek as he speaks.

"No surprise. You were born old," Finn chuckles, his footsteps already fading away.

And soon it's just Rey and Ben, in the lamplight and the metal and the dust. She breathes him in drowsily, her fingers tracing idle patterns on his chest, while he rests his chin on top of her head and lightly strokes her arm through her sleeve. She tries to remember if they ever did things like this before, and then she wonders how they could have fallen into it so easily, as if it were just another kind of sparring. Her hand wanders down, hungry to learn more about these angles of his that she's lately become so fascinated by, but, the moment she grazes the plane of his stomach, his breath hitches and he catches her hand with his, lacing their fingers together with stern finality.

Rey doesn't mind. She likes this, too, the wrist to wrist, the largeness of Ben's hand cradling hers. "I remember those nights when we both couldn't sleep," she murmurs into his chest, nostalgia stirred by all this open space and the star-strewn sky. "You'd come to my room and we'd talk, about everything. Why did we stop doing that?"

"Because you were growing up, Rey," he says, gently. "I couldn't keep sneaking into your room at
night. It would have been, y’know, sketchy.”

"Yeah." She swallows. "Yeah, I know." And then she adds, a little more bravely this time, "I'm grown up now, though." Her voice quivers with hope, although she's not really sure what she's hoping for.

He doesn't say anything. She feels the soft brush of his lips on her temple, and, eventually, she falls asleep.

★

Someone's shaking her awake. "Ben?" she mumbles, groggily.

"He took the watch." It's Eryl. "Come on, kid, you can't stay out here the whole night."

Still blinking away the fog of sleep, Rey lets Eryl tug her by the arm towards the barracks. However, the Knight pauses at the doorway and then studies Rey for a long moment, holding the halo lamp up to her face.

"What?" Rey asks.

"It's just—" Eryl hesitates, flashing her an uncertain smile. "You got really pretty. As you grew older, I mean. Anyone would— but, then again, you and Solo go deeper than that, don't you? What you have goes beyond the physical."

Rey shrugs. There had been a similar conversation with Alema, on a flight of stone stairs, in the days of Exar Kun. It's the same sullen kind of rebellion she felt then that lowers her gaze to the blood-spattered ground, to avoid Eryl's eyes.

"I worry, Rey," the Knight finally admits. "I worry about what you and Solo are capable of doing to each other. You're so young, and he is— struggling. With the Code. Before we left, Master Luke told me that part of the reason I was assigned to this strike team was so I could watch out for his nephew. Originally, I was supposed to join the Pallaxides mission."
"Struggling," Rey echoes, because she doesn't trust herself to say anything else.

"He has always been more prone to questioning this path than the rest of us. Even back when we were apprentices, he never really— fit in? It got worse after Numa. He blames Master Luke—blames the Code— for what he thinks is a senseless death. And now there is this— now there's you and him." The lamplight shifts as Eryl shrugs. "It all comes back to emotion, do you understand? Despite all his training, Solo is impulsive. Reckless. If anything were to happen to you, or to his family, he'd tear the galaxy apart. I don't doubt that he would. He's not cut out to love somebody with gloves on."

"Well, maybe no one is!" Rey bursts out. She thinks of how none of the Masters had wept at Numa's funeral, of how it had been so easy to go back to business as usual a mere few hours after, and she thinks of starlight and blade-light and the look on Ben's face. "Maybe it's the Code that's wrong, not us—"

Eryl stares at her. "You see?" she whispers. "You see how easy it is to suddenly question what's been drilled into you almost all your life? You see what we have to guard against?" Her free hand reaches out to tuck a stray strand of hair behind Rey's ear, and the gesture is so sisterly that it causes a lump to form in Rey's throat. "Please be careful."

*%

The crescent moon shines down through a gap in the cloud cover, spilling silver dust on the swift-moving figures that thunder across the barren dunes like a frieze of shadows, snapping and snarling at the air. Their pace increases once they spot the ruins of the mining city and sense the lifeforms within it. They are vicious, and starving, and bred only to kill. Throats are tossed up to the night sky. Fangs are bared. The howl goes up.

Chapter End Notes

*Pathfinder-class scout ship.* I actually have no idea what the Sundance's make is, so I chose one I liked. *jazz hands*

The Devlikk species of Ord Radama.

"Defender" deflector shield generator.

The Halo.

The Hoth asteroid field, also known as the Anoat Asteroid Belt.

The Spice Mines of Kessel.
The Maw.

Corbos Mining City.

Halo lamp.

An 11-17-series mining droid.

Not much information is provided on the culture of Artorias (that I can remember), so I built on the idea of a medieval warrior society. The afterlife that Finn Galfridian describes is lifted from Sovngarde in TES. This is the bridge, and this is the Hall of Valor.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Finally, some action! And, also, the pains of young love. Who remembers that, huh, folks? *smacks my high school self upside the head*

The last threads of this plot are coming together. It's actually the next update that's going to be a doozy, but I figured I should ease us into it, first. It's been a wild ride, and I can't thank you all enough. Your thoughts on this latest installment would be much appreciated, and would really help me figure out the tone and theme of the penultimate chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It is difficult for Rey to go back to sleep. The barracks are collapsed in such a manner that they slope like a funnel half-buried on its side, ending abruptly in a jagged wall of metallic rubble where more space should have stretched out. There are no mattresses on the bunks, only stale sheets and flat slabs that barely count as pillows. As she tosses and turns in the darkness, the rickety bed-frame rattles like it's seconds away from collapsing as well.

There is a morbid quality to it, resting your head where the vanished once lay. Rey thinks about those miners, about those seven-hundred-ninety-three families that had been tossed defenseless onto this dirtball and summarily abandoned by the Republic even after they called for help. She had been like them once, just trying to make the best of it. Blood and sweat and tears. She hopes that they're still alive— or, at least, that some of them are. The lack of bodies means that there's a chance. A slim one, but a chance, nonetheless.

However, it is the conversation with Eryl that bothers her most, even now. It is a shameful thing, to have her personal problems weigh on her more than the fate of the miners. The Jedi are not supposed to be selfish.

As the minutes pass, Rey drifts off into a fitful, restless slumber, punctuated by that kind of light, not-quite-there dream that runs through the mind like an afterthought. She's crossing the whale-bone bridge, tendrils of mist and shadow snaking all around her, the roar of water filling the world beneath her feet so inexorably that it's almost as if she walks on the sound alone. And then the great oaken doors are parting before her, and she is in Finn Galfridian's afterlife, surrounded by his ancestors. She can't make out their individual faces, but, yes, they are laughing, and singing, and raising their cups.

"My heart is full of fear," she tells them, in her dream.
A clear, solemn voice rises from the burble of indistinct chatter and sputtering torches. Says to her, "We are not judged by the doubts we have in life, nor the regrets we carry. What matters is how we die."

It all slips too easily from her grasp. She is jolted awake by a cacophony of high-pitched, feral howls, and then movement, in the dark, as the other Jedi scramble to their feet. They have all heard this before— you couldn't grow up on Yavin 4 and not hear it, this distant call from volcanic caverns echoing through meters and meters of forest until it crept in through the windows of your room and you fought the urge to huddle under the covers because you knew— deep in your soul, you always knew— that, in the end, everyone is prey.

"Why didn't Solo warn us?" Kyp demands. "He should've been able to see them coming from far-off, it's all flatland here— Rey! Wait!"

But she can't wait. Nothing in the galaxy would have made her stay put at the mention of Ben and the stark reminder that he's out there alone. Rey charges out of the barracks, stumbling over exposed pipes and broken-down tech, crawling, clawing her way up the crater, her panic a tight, bursting knot in her throat, everything she has learned about prudence and situation assessment forgotten in the blink of an eye— not like this— I can't lose him like this—

It's all shadows, at first. Against waxen rays of moonlight, a hulking, four-legged shape launches itself at Ben Solo's silhouette. Rey leaps as well, igniting her lightsaber in mid-air and cutting a vicious, whirling path across the beast's spine. She lands in a half-crouch on the dusty soil and hears the death throes behind her, but, before she can look back, another set of fangs lashes out from the darkness and she rolls to the side to dodge, coming in on the new opponent's flank and plunging her sapphire blade into its shoulder. It twists away, alive but wounded, and she hisses in pain as its thick, spiked tail catches her arm in a glancing blow.

Ben grabs her by the collar, hauling her towards him with a sharp tug that nearly chokes off her airway. They press against each other, back to back, the same formation in which they had faced the remote droids in the jungle clearing a couple of years ago. Nineteen tuk'ata circle them, two-meter-tall bodies a grotesque cross between canine and reptilian, slithering through waves of moonlight, all horns and malice and three-inch claws. Their eyes glow red in the silvery gloom, narrowed hungrily at Ben and Rey, snarls and slobber dripping from their powerful jaws.

"Why didn't you call for backup?" Rey asks in an undertone.

"Yes, this seems like the perfect time to discuss operational procedure," Ben retorts dryly.
The tuk'ata with the injured shoulder tilts its great horned head. "Jen'jidai," it growls in a language long gone. It sounds like a question. It sounds like it's talking to Ben.

The Knight flicks a hand through the air, almost impatiently. The beast is cleaved in half by some mighty, invisible axe, leathery skin and blood and soft organs peeling away from pearl-white bone, spilling onto the ground in inky wet spatters. What startles Rey is the ease with which this act is committed, the lack of hesitation, and how she recognizes the principle behind it. Force Rend.

Enraged, the eighteen remaining tuk'ata choose this moment to pounce.

The sudden, rushing onslaught of fangs is met by several beams of light as the rest of the strike team enter the fray. Out of the corner of Rey's eye, Kyp weaves through enemy ranks, his quick, strategic slashes leaving shallow cuts while Eryl mops up behind him, landing fatal blows on the incapacitated Sith hounds. Finn engages one tuk'ata in an intricate duel of sustained bladework and wild, grasping claws; another beast rears up behind him, only to slump to the ground when Eryl's lightsaber hews through its belly as she runs past. A little further away, three tuk'ata corner Tionne at the edge of the crater; with the hilt of her weapon in a two-handed grip at waist-height, the blade shimmering in a vertical line in front of her serene features, the Jedi Master closes her eyes and flows with the Force, anticipating each attack, countering with deft blows of her own.

As for Rey, she maintains the Soresu circle of protection, sidestepping each lunge, the beam of her lightsaber swinging at every opening she can find, her body in clockwork motion, her blade creating a constantly-moving barrier that proves impossible to breach. Ben hovers at the edges, as if he were her satellite, spinning and hacking furiously amidst the assailants, trying to get as many as he can before they reach her.

Two tuk'ata dive at Rey at the same time, from opposite directions; gritting her teeth, she slides beneath one of them, scraping her knees on the rocky soil, the smooth skin of the beast's belly mere centimeters from her face as it slams into its comrade's bulk. The hound's shadow falls from her head, and starlight pierces her eyes, and she rights herself and severs the spiked tail on the upswing, before spinning once more to drive her blade into the neck of yet another tuk'ata that attempts to go for her throat.

"Solo!" Finn's shouting. "Get over here!" He and Eryl have assembled themselves and are waiting for Ben to complete the Knights' standard three-point attack formation.

But Ben disregards this order, seeming loath to leave Rey's side. Finn and Eryl's frustration and disbelief flicker through the Force, before a renewed offense from the tuk'ata has them breaking apart. Go, Rey tries to nudge Ben, you Knights always fight better as a team, but he brushes her thought aside as if it were nothing more than an annoying fly.
And then she's not thinking anymore, operating on sheer instinct alone, letting the Force tell her what to do as she hurls herself through masses of scales and teeth, tails whipping at her ankles, roars pounding in her ears, blade-light burning her vision.

It's not long before her careful, concentrated footwork gives way to the somersaults and wild waltzes of the Ataru form; the frenzy takes hold like a wave of water closing in over her head and washing caution away. Rey pulls her blade out of a dying tuk'ata's throat, and then advances on the next one in a series of diagonal slashes, weaving in and out of range of claws and fangs, gradually increasing the speed of her strikes until the enemy has no choice but to fall back, to give up ground. All of a sudden, she is intensely grateful for those grueling, repetitive velocity drills that Kyle Katarn had put her and the other apprentices through; while her physical body remains in the here and now of Corbos, there is a part of her that's charging through a Yavin clearing, smell of leaves and moss, sweat of training, mind your flank, pull your elbow up, again, Rey, return to opening stance, do it again. The tuk'ata screams as her lightsaber slices across its ribs, and she lets her arm continue the full range of the swing to score a searing mark on another snarling hound's cheek.

It recoils only for a split-second before pouncing on her, but then it stills in mid-air, an emerald-green blade jutting out of its chest, the tip a hair's breadth away from Rey's sternum. The monster falls and Ben's face rises over it, pale and terrible against a halo of stars overhead, looking slightly unhinged. Rey stares at him, mouth parted in surprise, and, for a moment, they are frozen together like that, gazes locked above a corpse.

Another Sith hound comes bounding up to them. Ben Force-stuns it in mid-leap; it hangs there, paralyzed a meter off the ground, its red eyes fixed on the Knight, the dark pupils reflecting emerald fire as the blade swings down. It's a deep slash that splits the tuk'ata's belly wide open; amidst the steam of guts cooling in the air, something diamond-shaped spills out, glinting silver as it drops at Ben's feet.

A vague warning buzzes in Rey's head. "Wait—" she starts to say, but she's too late, Ben's already bending down to pick up the object, squinting at it intently in the moonlight.

It rests in his palm, an amulet of sorts, stained with blood and digestive juices, pulsing with strange amethyst-hued energy. He bows his head over it, at first with bewilderment, and then with slow-dawning recognition, and then with an expression that Rey has seen before, one that clenches around her heart as the years fall away and memory comes shining through. The black island on the mirror-still lake. The visage of a Sith Lord sneering down. A young Jedi Knight looking up, so sad, so resigned. Like you always knew you were meant to come here. Like you fought for so long to not end up here.

"A little while longer." It seems for all the world like he's talking to the amulet. His voice is the way
Rey imagines heartbreak would sound like. "Just let me stay for a little bit more."

"Ben?" Rey whispers, suddenly confused, suddenly frightened, but he doesn't respond.

There are two Sith hounds left, battling with the other Jedi. However, when Ben finally raises his head, the creatures still, craning their necks as if listening to some call that only they can hear. And then they're springing towards Ben, and Rey is already poised to rush to his defense, when—

— the tuk'ata skid to a stop in front of him, and—

— lower their horns to the ground, forelimbs folding back, as if in obeisance—

"'Ari," one grunts, in that chill and ancient tongue.

Rey gasps as the Force wraps around her and Tionne pulls. Almost before she knows it, she's dragged to where the other Jedi have grouped together, and Finn and Eryl are digging their hands into her shoulders, planting her firmly to the spot. It's the moonlight— Rey thinks that it must be the moonlight— which lends the scene an eerie, sinister quality, shining a feverish glint into Ben's wide eyes. He looks so remote like this, towering over the hounds in that familiar stooped posture, the mysterious trinket cupped in his palm.

"It can't be..." mutters Tionne. "That is the amulet of Skere Kaan. The one that was fitted inside the right-hand gauntlet of— Darth Vader—"

"That's impossible!" Kyp snaps. "Why is it here? How could it have—"

"It came for me," says Ben. His low tone is emotionless and hollow, but his face— Rey's never seen anyone look so defeated. So lost, and so alone. As if he'd been running all his life and had finally hit a dead end. "It was meant for me."

Within the walls of the cloaked black shuttle, Alema Rar asks, Now?
Not yet, child, croons a distant star-voice. He must suffer a little bit more. He made me wait too long.


*

Ben growls a command at the tuk'ata, in what sounds like the same language that the beasts use. It's not Ben's voice, it's cold and awful and ragged with malice.

The Sith hounds don't even hesitate. They attack each other in a whirl of claws and fangs, each doing its best to rip the other apart. Rey and the rest of the Jedi can only watch in horror as blood gushes out from throats and tails twist together like snakes in a swift, lethal dance.

Ben observes the scene dispassionately, not moving a single muscle as the surviving beast staggers away from the gored abdomen of its partner to prostrate itself at his feet once more. "Asha," the creature hisses, with a trace of relish. It's panting heavily, half a ribcage already exposed to the air.

Ben's lips curve in a mocking smirk. He raises his lightsaber over his head and deals the killing blow, plunging a blaze of shrieking emerald straight into the last tuk'ata's skull.


*

Somewhere in the Goluud Corridor, somewhere along the Daragon Trail, something laughs. And leans forward, in anticipation.


*

As the hound's death throes fade, the logical part of Rey's brain screams at her to stay put. There is a kind of danger emanating from Ben— some nervous, crackling energy that deepens the shadows wrapped around him like a cloak— but she doesn't care. She doesn't care about anything except getting to him before it's too late.

Too late for what?
Rey shrugs off Finn and Eryl with a strength that she hadn't even known she possessed, and she runs to Ben like she's never run before, her heart in her throat, the stars in her eyes. A memory, then: her feet carrying her towards him as he disembarks from the *Lore Seeker*, so handsome and so tall in the mid-morning light pouring into the hangar bay, and he's turning to her with that usual solemn expression of his like she's the only thing left in the world, even though there's grass in her hair and mud from the Skorch field on her robes—

He turns to her now, in the dark desert, teeth bared in a snarl. The edge of his blade slashes toward her. Her steps falter, but she can't even stop, it's too late to stop, momentum veering her neck into striking distance—

Through a haze of green light filling the world, Rey sees the exact moment that a glimmer of sanity returns to Ben's eyes. His off-hand whips up, and the Force *slams* her to the ground so that his lightsaber swings at nothing but the empty air where her neck had been only half a second ago. She feels the heat of the plasma beam graze the skin on her throat, and then she lands, *hard*, on her back, her knees bent at an awkward angle, the wind knocked out of her.

*Ben almost killed me,* she thinks, numbly, her gaze fixed on the night sky with its faint stars and its slender crescent moon.

When she manages, at last, to prop herself up on her elbows, it's to the sight of his pale, stricken features looming above her, contorted in terror. He looks like he wants to vomit. He extinguishes his lightsaber and sinks to the ground as weakly as if he can no longer bear the weight of what he had very nearly done. Those broad shoulders of his that she adores so much, they're shaking. Heavy, garbled noises are wrenched loose from his throat—tremulous, gasping intakes of breath interspersed with harsh and bitter sobs.

Clenching the Sith amulet tightly in one fist, he wraps his other hand around her leg and pulls closer to her, resting his forehead against her knee. Although she can't see his face like this, she feels the wet sting of his tears dampening her clothes, and soon she's watching moonlight move through his messy hair as he presses fierce, desperate kisses to the spot below her knee.

As if in apology, or in prayer.

"I love you," Rey says to the broken man bowed before her under the Corbos stars, and to the Knight who had rolled his eyes at her antics beneath the Yavin sun, and to the boy smiling tentatively at her across the Jakku sands as she walked towards him and her future. It's all she can think to say. There's nothing left.
Ben flinches, and sobs even harder.

Soft voices. Everyone is speaking in soft voices as if gathered around a deathbed instead of a halo lamp. They've returned to the ruined city at the bottom of the crater, which, for a while, had hummed with the Force as they set about the task of healing wounds and bruises. Now, though, they're discussing what happened—or, well, most of them are. Ben sits a little apart from the group, gray-faced and silent and refusing to meet anyone's eyes.

"I find it highly unlikely that an entire pack of tuk'ata could have made this planet their home," Tionne declares. "There is no food source."

"Except miners," says Eryl.

Kyp shakes his head. "There'd be bodies, at least. The hounds don't swallow people whole."

"Maybe they dragged them off somewhere," Finn suggests.

"If that were the case, we'd have spotted blood trails during perimeter check," Rey points out, "or tracks of some sort."

"Unless they were washed away by the storm," Tionne muses. "The winds and rains here can be very strong, quite capable of completely rearranging the landscape. However, in the absence of definitive proof, we must rely on our instincts, and mine are telling me that those tuk'ata could not have caused such massive devastation... No, whatever did all of this—" She waves a hand to indicate the shattered buildings and destroyed tech—"is still out there."

"But that just brings us back to the question of why there were even tuk'ata here in the first place," says Kyp. "With the Vader amulet, no less— that's too much of a coincidence—" He breaks off, darting a furtive glance at Ben.

"Could they have been brought here, not too long ago?" wonders Eryl. "This used to be Sith space. Perhaps Darksiders introduced the species?"
"Then where are those Darksiders now?" Finn asks, ominously.

"Dawn's two hours away," Tionne remarks, consulting her chrono. "We'll make for the northern cliffs at first light. Hopefully, what we find there will help us get to the bottom of this once and for all. In the meantime, Knight Solo—" She rises to her feet and goes to him. "Ben," she says, in a gentler tone of voice, and he *does* look up at that, his gaze so dark, almost plaintive. "Meditate with me," she continues. "Let us search our hearts together, that we might find the peace we need to carry our burdens."

And this is how Rey remembers that— although the Masters are not supposed to show partiality— Ben had always been, in a way, Tionne's favorite student. She'd encouraged his interest in history and lore, and he, in turn, had never looked more intense than when he was hanging on to every word of her lectures, and more excited than when he was about to join her on those research trips. It's a good memory, one that seeps in like light through cracks in the darkness. Ben's slow, tentative nod is that of a boy hungry for hope.

* *

Like so much else on this planet, dawn is a sharp, dry thing. The spill of faint sun into shadowed air fills Rey with longing for Yavin 4, its lilt of jungle birds, its dew-stained leaves. She walks quietly with the other Jedi through last night's battlefield, taking great care to avoid any part of her brushing against the mangled corpses of the Sith hounds. They have gone stiff in the gray daylight, claws opened to the sky, tongues lolled out. They seem smaller, somehow, in death, and she waits for the remorse, but it doesn't come.

Finn misinterprets her measured silence. "You did well, and you did what had to be done," he reassures her. "The first battle is always the hardest, kid."

But *it wasn't hard at all*, Rey thinks, and maybe some part of her had even *enjoyed* it— the frenzy, the movement. These are not Jedi thoughts.

Once they leave the established perimeter behind, Rey draws closer to Ben. She has this half-formed idea of talking to him, although she's not exactly sure what it is that she wants to say. *It's all right, I forgive you?* But he hadn't *asked* for her forgiveness— in fact, they haven't spoken since her dazed, moonlit confession. She's so tempted to use the Force to gauge his mood; however, that feels like cheating, in a way it never had before. There are some things that need to be said out loud.

He stiffens at her approach. "Rey." The way he says her name fills her with dread— it's too calm, too far-off. *Too much like Luke.* "Stick close to the Masters. I have to maintain formation with Besa
and Galfridian, in case we're ambushed on our way to the cliffs."

He's speaking in a low voice, so as not to attract the attention of the rest of the strike team. She follows his lead, but her brow wrinkles in consternation. "Why can't I just stay with you?"

"Because you and I distract each other," he answers all too readily, all too clipped, like it's something he's been rehearsing. "I tried to take on an entire pack of Sith hounds because I didn't want you to engage. You, in turn, disobeyed a direct order from Master Durron, and charged in to help me with no plan in mind. And then I left Besa and Galfridian in the lurch so I could guard your flank; you and I got cut off from the team, and we both suffered for it. We can't do that anymore, Rey. The Code exists for a reason. When we're around each other, we forget all about duty, and the greater good."

She almost stops walking, she's so stunned. She feels a hot surge of emotion towards him that, for once, has got nothing to do with his wry smile or the way he teases or how his hands feel on her skin — and everything to do with the horrible, logical words that are coming out of his mouth, and his callous disregard of what she told him on the battlefield, the heart that she opened up beneath the night sky. How easy it is to hate someone. How often we fail to realize that there are two sides to passion.

"Master Tionne," Ben continues, "has impressed upon me the inappropriateness of our conduct ever since we made planetfall. Prior to the tuk'ata attack, we were not approaching this mission with the gravity it deserves. Seven-hundred-ninety-three miners and their families, Rey, and we barely spared them a thought, because—" He catches himself, exhales a frustrated breath.

She silently finishes his sentence. Because we were happy. Because she was several star systems away from the academy's routines and its walls and she was alive against a vast horizon and he was there with her, and what is so wrong with happiness, what is so wrong with feeling on top of the world, like you can do anything, like the galaxy is yours—

Please be careful, Eryl had said.

It's the guilt. Rey knows that it's her own guilt that's spurring her to take refuge in the rebellious thoughts that are currently swirling around in her head. She knows that there is a path, and that she is straying from it. But it's still burning so brightly within her, that brief stretch of time lifted up and laughing and raining kisses, and those soft and quiet hours half-asleep in his arms. How dare he ruin it— how dare anyone ruin it—

"You're afraid," she accuses him, bitterly. "You're afraid because of what that amulet almost made
"The Dark Side feeds on what is already there," Ben replies. He hasn't so much as glanced her way the whole time, his eyes fixed on that faint sunrise. "Believe me, I was not being forced to do anything."

And, in Rey's memory, Raynar Thul sneers, *You are a walking timebomb, Solo.*

"Go, now," Ben tells her. And then he adds, "Please."

Her first instinct is to storm away, but she figures that she might as well salvage what little dignity she can from the situation. She lifts her chin and returns to Tionne and Kyp with all the serenity that she can muster, and she doesn't look back— mostly because she's afraid that Ben won't be watching her go.

They keep walking. The arid red landscape continues unabated, the sun now high enough for their shadows to bloom on the parched earth. And it is to Rey's very great displeasure that, with every step she takes, she finds herself grudgingly coming to terms with the circumstances. She wants to continue being furious, wants to continue feeling like the universe is out to get her, but years of training have instilled the habit of checking her own thoughts, of holding her emotions up to the light. She might not particularly like being a Jedi at this moment, but she did sign up to be one, and she's on an actual *mission*. If she wants people to stop treating her like a kid, she has to quit acting immature. It's an uncomfortable truth, but a truth, nonetheless.

As if sensing the gradual softening of her resentment, Tionne slants Rey a sideways smile. "It hit me like that, too, at first," she confides.

Rey blinks. "What did, Master?"

"Being in love," says Tionne. "I thought I would die from it, the feeling. Patience always comes later. So much of youth is in the fire of the bloodstream."

Kyp agrees with a wry, self-deprecating nod, and Rey is suddenly grateful that neither of the Masters chastised her and put her on the defensive— that they trusted her enough to let her figure it out on
her own. "I'm sorry," she says to them both, and it comes out a little bit stilted, a little bit pained, because she still doesn't know how to apologize— but maybe, just maybe, growing up means learning how to.

Soon her gaze wanders to Ben. He's moving in sync with Finn and Eryl, in swift and purposeful strides over the desert sands, the three of them communicating with one another through glances and gestures. He's finally learned to follow the rhythm of teamwork, even if he's awkward in it, even if he's sometimes half a beat too late.

"Will Ben be all right?" Rey asks Tionne.

The silver-haired Jedi looks thoughtful as she considers her answer. "He was responsive during meditation— more responsive than I expected him to be. He is still confused about some things, but he was earnest enough to relinquish the amulet to me, at the very least." She pats the pocket of her robes. "Sith artifacts amplify the Dark Side of the Force; they make it possible to access certain abilities that would normally be closed off to an adherent of the Light. This particular amulet resonated so strongly with him because it used to belong to his grandfather... However, the fact that he managed to snap out of its influence is a good sign."

"Do you remember when he was still an apprentice, Tionne?" Kyp chimes in. "This surly, hotheaded teenager, all ears and elbows and wit so sharp it was a wonder he didn't cut himself."

"He was always a heated subject during conclave," Tionne muses. "It got so bad that Streen would hobble into every meeting with the question—"

"What did that brat do now?" Kyp demands in a passable imitation of the elderly Streen's creaky voice. He chuckles for a bit, and then he sighs. "All of us, we watched him so anxiously. Maybe that was unfair. We were thinking of Darth Vader, not him."

"The galaxy has always watched him," says Tionne. "Ever since he was born. What a bloodline— Amidala, Skywalker, Organa, Solo— those names are immortal."

"Yeah," says Kyp, shaking his head ruefully as he looks over at Ben. "And that's why I've always felt kind of sorry for that kid."
At last, they come to the northern cliffs. Rey stares up at these jagged spires of red and gray rock that slash out of the earth, pointing to the copper sky. There is something sinister and off-putting about them— like she's seen them before— no, it's not that. What she's feeling right now isn't deja vu. She's never been here, but it's as if part of her always knew she was meant to come. This place looks like fate. This place looks like her reckoning.

She's gone cold all of a sudden. My heart, she thinks, is full of fear.

Chapter End Notes

The scene of Rey in the hall of Finn's ancestors is based on A Dream of Sovngarde.

There are a lot of inconsistencies as to how tuk'ata have been depicted in the EU, but I went with this and this.

Jen'jidai is Sith for "Dark Jedi," while 'Ari is "Lord," and Asha, "victory."

Force Rend.

Skere Kaan.

The glove of Darth Vader.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

I AM THE WORST. I know I promised that there were only two installments left to this madness, but I had to break this chapter up because it would have been a 10k+ monstrosity otherwise and my OCD couldn't handle straying from the per-chapter word count. I AM VERY SORRY. However, rest assured that my entire weekend will be spent writing the next part, and it will be up as soon as possible.

I also apologize for taking so long to update. Work has been crazy. I hope that this installment kind of makes up for the wait(???). Don't be a stranger, let me know what you think so far!

A lovely person on Tumblr made fanart of the piggyback ride and it is perfect, I'm still squeeing!!! Thank you, troubledfurry!!!

P.S. BELATED HAPPY STAR WARS DAY! Here's how I celebrated.

The miners had carved a crude, winding path along the side of one cliff, which the Jedi now traverse. Tionne and Kyp are in the vanguard, while Finn Galfridian, Ben, and Eryl bring up the rear. Sandwiched securely in the middle, between the Masters and the Knights, Rey imagines how this trail was made, people and their droids hacking chunks out of the earth and pushing debris aside as sandcrawlers chugged along behind them. They'd have lugged up the generators and the crust-piercers, too, tons of metal straining against rope, caravan wheels spinning, sometimes slipping. The sun would have been too hot, the air too dusty. Choked lungs and sweat-plastered clothes.

Rey knows all about bitter work. There are times when she looks down at her hands and can't believe that they used to claw through dead wires and scrub transistors spotless and pull burning gears from the dunes, day in, day out. There are times when she eats more than her fill in the mess hall and laughs loud against the memory of a child forcing herself to sleep through hunger pangs. She wonders what she would have become if Luke and Ben hadn't found her—or if they had found her much later. Would she still have gone offworld with them?

Perhaps not. Jakku had bred sheer determination, a gritted-teeth kind of stubbornness; she thinks that she'd have eventually reached a point when she would have held on to the idea of her family's return too long to let it go. A point when she would have clung to the waiting, because it was all she knew. She still has her doubts about whether the Force can tell the future, but her training has allowed her to know herself and, consequently, all the different ways she would move through time. If the Jedi had come to her when she was a little bit older, a little bit harder— a little bit more used to the loneliness— she would probably have never gone offworld with them in the first place.
There's a fusioncutter discarded along the path. Without breaking her stride, Rey summons it into her palm using the Force. *And I never would have had all this*, she continues musing, the hum of power within her vast and comforting, this ability so natural to her that it feels as effortless as drawing breath. She runs a scavenger's practiced eye over the industrial tool—SoroSuub Corporation F-187 model, Clone Wars era, with an adjustable beam—before she tosses it aside, something she would never have done in an old life. It would only weigh her down now, and, besides, she doesn't need to barter scrap for food and protection anymore.

"Hey, Solo," she hears Eryl say, in the overly bright tone of a person who's determined to cheer someone else up, "what goes *ha-ha-ha-thump*?"

Ben doesn't answer.

"A droid laughing its head off!" Eryl cracks.

In front of Rey, Tionne pauses, before apparently deciding that it's beneath her dignity to acknowledge the pun and moving onwards. Kyp's shoulders seize as if he's trying to stifle a burst of horrified mirth. Rey herself groans, a sound mirrored by Finn.

"I am going to push you off this cliff, Besa," Ben hisses.

"I only heard it from Seff," Eryl protests.

"When we return to Yavin 4, I'm going to push *him* off a cliff, too."

Rey can't help but giggle. Although Ben's walking behind her, she can picture the look on his face, the comical, stunned outrage as Eryl grins at him with impudence. *And this*, she thinks, fondly. *I would have missed all this.*

There is scant opportunity for humor in the hours that follow. It's still an arduous uphill trek despite the presence of a road; Rey is ashamed to realize that she's wheezing slightly, her heart a frenetic hammer in her chest, unused to the steepness and the altitude. The Knights don't seem to be faring any better, judging from the strained silence they have fallen into, interspersed only with audible, ragged puffs of breath.
Meanwhile, Tionne and Kyp are serenely strolling up the cliff as if it were mere flatland. *Must be a Jedi Master thing,* Rey grumbles to herself. She knows that Luke often taps into the Force to stave off energy expenditure—*alas, the perils of old age,* he’d quip, with a twinkle in his eye— but she hasn’t gotten the hang of it yet.

All of a sudden, Tionne and Kyp come to an abrupt halt. With eerie synchronicity, their heads jerk to the left and upwards, where the rock wall slopes to a higher peak. Following their gaze, Rey sees only earth and sky at first, but then—

— something *moves*—

She doesn’t get a good look at it; it's just a dim, gargantuan shadow that blocks out the sun for a few heartstopping seconds as it rears over the distant ledge that looms high above the path, before lurching out of sight. Its ponderous steps shudder through layers of rock and earth, triggering an avalanche of loose stones that barrels down the slope, directly towards the Jedi.

Rey holds up her palms, along with the rest of the strike team. The projectiles freeze in mid-air, suspended on the currents of the Force in treacherous patterns reminiscent of an asteroid field. The next few minutes are spent telekinetically shoving the stones up the slope, where they roll onto the peak, or flicking them off the ledge, where they disintegrate on the ground below. However, disturbed by the vibrations, a large chunk of rock gives way, breaking off from the cliffside too suddenly for any of the preoccupied Jedi to catch it.

Rey skitters backwards just in time to avoid getting crushed under the rock when it slams into where she stood a second ago, but the resulting aftershock throws her off-balance. Her foot *slips* and she's—

— falling, eyes wide, mouth parted in surprise, rush of air and sky—

Large, saber-callused fingers clamp around hers in an almost bone-crushing grip. She dangles from the ledge, her legs swaying over the sheer drop, staring at Ben’s pale face as he lies sprawled on his stomach, having flung himself bodily across the path to latch on to her hand.

"Don't you *dare* let go," he snaps.

"Wouldn't dream of it," she says, lightheaded.
Finn scrambles to Ben's side to help haul Rey back onto solid ground, while the other Jedi mop up the rest of the avalanche. Rey is pulled over the ledge, and then she's crashing into Ben's chest, throwing one arm around his neck and burying her face in the hollow of his throat. He squeezes her against him as she sits in his lap and their hearts beat wild, furious rhythms through the thunder of stone beneath a pitiless red sky. Neither of them say a word. There is nothing about this moment that can be shaped within the constraints of spoken language, her lips to his collarbone, his arms wrapped so tight around her that she can barely breathe.

Once the avalanche has been taken care of, Finn nudges Ben, probably in an effort to get him to let go of Rey and stand up. Ben starts to shake his head; Rey feels the movement, his soft hair brushing across her temple, the side of his face still pressed to hers. She tightens her grip on him, a gut reaction, no, don't let me go yet, I just want a little more time—

He comes to his senses first. In this life that they have chosen, there are things they cannot keep. He shifts her off his lap, all resolute mouth and aching gentleness, and then he gets to his feet. She gazes at him from the ground, mute and beseeching, asking for something she cannot name, but he avoids her eyes even as he extends a hand to help her stand, like always. He's looking everywhere but at her face, and that's how his gaze falls to the finger-shaped bruises on her wrist when her hand finds his outstretched one.

"It's all right," she tries to assure him.

"No, it's not," he says, quietly. He pulls her up and then releases her, stepping back almost immediately. The space between them reels with loss.

* 

"What was that thing?" Kyp demands. "Had to be as tall as an AT-AT."

"I sensed its mind. It is... old," Tionne replies, with a frown. "No. That is the wrong word. Ancient. Steeped in darkness, like the tuk'ata."

"That's wonderful," drawls Kyp. "And here I was worried that we wouldn't meet our Sithspawn quota for this mission."

The path curves to the right, snaking between a couple of jagged rock outcrops before widening into
a dust-streaked caldera. Tionne and Kyp stop in their tracks again; Rey peers around them, and stifles a gasp of awe when she sees the fossil.

"No lifeforms, Master," Eryl reports to Tionne. "Whatever that thing up on the peak was, it didn't follow us here."

"Good," says Tionne. "That buys us more time to study this."

Judging from the charred fuses littering the site, the miners had pumped several carefully-controlled skeins of medium-grade explosives through the soil in order to get at the lush mineral ores that lay beneath the surface. However, the detonations had also uncovered an enormous ribcage and a long tail, dotted with massive vertebrae that spring like faded white islets from an ocean of rust-colored earth. Rey walks with the other Jedi beneath the roof of bones, each spiked pillar of ribcage at least ten meters tall. She finds herself remembering other ruins, the gutted metal bellies of starships in a land as harsh as this one. The years melt away and she's small again, walking through dark and musty control rooms falling apart from disuse—except, this time, it's all an expanse of fossil, chipped and weathered by the elements.

Ben is standing at the other end of the ribcage, beside a half-buried hipbone almost as wide as a sail yacht. Rey approaches him slowly, a light breeze stirring their robes and their hair as they regard each other across the vast, skeletal tunnel. His face twists uncertainly for a moment, before he hides it by turning his head to talk to Finn and Eryl, who are inspecting the tailbone and debating how tall the creature must have stood in life.

Once Rey closes the distance between her and Ben, she hears Kyp say, somewhere to her left, "You thinking what I'm thinking, Tionne?"

"Yes." Tionne is consulting a datapad, her opalescent gaze flickering from the screen to the fossil, and then back again. "It matches the records from the Hundred-Year Darkness, as well as the Lost Tribe's accounts of the Siege of Tahv."

"What is it?" Rey asks.

"Leviathan," Ben grates out. "An ancient species bioengineered by Dark Jedi after the Second Great Schism. Created to roam the battlefields as living superweapons."

"They're big and they're mean," adds Kyp. "Even just one of them would be capable of reducing an
entire city to smithereens and devouring the inhabitants whole."

Finn darts a glance at the far-off peak. "So that thing earlier was—?"

"Highly likely," says Tionne. "They can hibernate underground for millennia, which could be the reason previous expeditions failed to detect them via thermal scans."

"The miners must have woken it up," Eryl ventures. "With their blasts."

Tionne nods, but Rey doesn't miss the slight hesitation that preceded the act. "You believe differently, Master?" she asks.

"The presence of a surviving Leviathan on Corbos explains what happened to the miners, but it does not explain why there were Sith hounds here," says the silver-haired woman. Her hand drifts to her pocket, fingers tracing the lump formed by the amulet of Kaan. "It is, of course, entirely possible that the tuk'ata were underground as well, surfacing because they were disturbed by the mining activity. There are accounts of them living for centuries in Sith tombs, with neither food nor water."

"They couldn't have been here for centuries, though," Finn points out. "Not if one of them swallowed that amulet after Vader's demise."

"True," Tionne concedes. "I advise caution until we know exactly what we are dealing with."

"Sure, Master," says Eryl. "You want to tell Solo that?"

Ben is already storming off to the edge of the caldera. Tionne's lips purse, but she and the other Jedi follow him. This particular cliff that they're standing on overlooks a wide valley strewn with rock pinnacles and crooked gullies that run through the earth like streaks of shadowed lightning, bordered by the black mouths of several caves that lead into the surrounding escarpments. From this height, Rey spots the miners' abandoned vehicles—a couple of digger crawlers, with their giant treads and ample cargo holds, and several AEA-5OO prospecting craft. It's eerie to see them powered down like this, bereft of purpose. It reminds her of the Starship Graveyard.

It takes the strike team the better part of a half-hour to make their way down the slope. The valley is nestled within the Corbos highlands, a hundred meters above ground level. Rey supposes that it's not too far off the mark to assume that this entire collection of cliffs and outcrops was once a single
landform before being ripped apart by meteorites or earthquakes and then thousands of years of erosion.

"Volcano," Ben grunts out. He's walking behind her, as per their original formation. "And stop thinking so loudly."

"Stop listening," she retorts, making a face that he can't see.

"Stop making faces," he warns her. "I know you are."

"Stop rolling your eyes," she commands in return, because she can feel him doing so behind her back. It's their usual bickering, but threaded through with a sharp, sour edge. She is still grateful to fall into it, however— into this pattern between them that had been hammered out during her childhood and never went away. She's not quite sure what the two of them are now, but at least he's still an ass, at least some things have stayed the same. It's strangely comforting. You and I, unchanged by time.

*

Now that they've arrived at a logical conclusion as to the nature of the beast that destroyed the mining city, the Jedi aren't holding out much hope for finding survivors anymore. None of them say it aloud, but Rey feels it in the air, how Force sensitivity is gradually being retracted from probing for signs of life and channeled into other areas to prepare for the battle that everyone's certain is about to happen.

"Can the Force tell the future?" she asks Eryl as they stand side by side in the valley, surrounded by towers of rock and the metal of craft at rest.

"Don't know, kid." Eryl shrugs, one shoulder lifting against the sandcrawler that she's leaning against. "I've never been able to. It flows differently for everyone. Being able to detect where a blaster bolt will hit, sensing an explosion before it happens— that's all par for the course, but actual visions? Not on my end." She frowns. "Actually, out of all of us Knights, it was Raynar who had that gift. The lightsaber he made when he was being controlled by Exar Kun— he told me about that once, when we were children. He fell into a trance during afternoon meditation, saw a blaze of amethyst light being held in his hands. He didn't have any idea what it meant. That's the thing about being able to divine the future; you only know what will happen, not how it's going to. But I think that's partly why..." She tugs at her ear, nervously. Her voice lowers. "Why he didn't fight it so much. When it happened. Because he'd already seen it. Because he always knew he was meant for it."
Rey thinks about Anakin Skywalker, on his knees in the caverns of Mortis, recoiling from a destiny that he couldn't bear to face. She thinks about the look in Ben Solo's eyes when he cradled his grandfather's amulet in the moonlight. So sad, so resigned. *I might not always be around.*

She shudders. And she thinks about her own vision, too, from a couple of years ago. The metal room. The masked figure. The cold rasp of a voice modulator. *Where is Skywalker?*

"But, as for this," Eryl continues, nodding to indicate their surroundings, "any moment now, that Leviathan— if it truly *is* a Leviathan— will come to us, because we're in its hunting grounds. Sometimes you don't need the Force to tell the future. Sometimes you already know that there's only one way the story can end."

"I'd rather make my own ending," Rey grumbles, defiantly.

"Of course you would." Eryl flashes her the ghost of a smile. "You wouldn't be you, otherwise."

*

Eventually, the mountains move.

Or, more precisely, a silhouette rears up from the peaks above the valley, unfolding itself on its haunches with a mighty roar, so rough-hewn in shape that, at first, it seems as if a new hill is being born from the fissures of the earth.

The Jedi's hands drop to their lightsaber hilts as the Leviathan thunders down the slope, each step prompting little quakes that lift fine veils of dust off the soil. Despite the presence of four limbs, it is a serpentine thing, bigger than the two sandcrawlers combined. Its reptilian skin is tinged a dusky purple. It has two sets of glowing crimson eyes embedded in a flat, round face, and long tentacles that surround a gaping maw filled with rows of long, long teeth.

"*Stars,* that's ugly," Kyp breathes.

Once it has loped into the valley— moving impossibly fast for its size— the Leviathan roars again, its eyes blazing like fire. The sound threatens to split Rey's skull, and it does something else, too— it
warps the currents of the Force around her, twisting the channels into dark, unrecognizable knots. She hears screams in the air, thinks that they come from the other Jedi or herself, but the cacophony is too loud, too helpless and terrified.

"The creature is interfering with our Sense ability," Tionne informs Rey through gritted teeth, as if she herself is caught in the throes of a massive headache. "What we're hearing— those are the screams of its victims."

Seven-hundred-ninety-three miners and their families. Rey's eyes narrow at the Leviathan as she feels anger and the desire for vengeance stirring deep within her.

"Keep close to me. Let instinct be your guide," Tionne continues. "Remember, we trained you for this. You are ready for this."

Rey nods as the Leviathan lurches nearer, filling the world. "Yes, Master."

But, in order for her to fight to the best of her ability, she has to clamp down on the instinct to look after Ben. As she and the other Jedi engage, Rey tries to stay in formation, Tionne and Kyp flanking her while they weave among the great scaly towers of the Sithspawn's legs, slashing at its hide with their lightsabers. Rey tries not to let her gaze flicker to Ben, who is moving in seamless rhythm with Finn and Eryl as they dodge the enormous, snapping jaws and each thick, lashing tentacle.

It's not working. Her head keeps swiveling in Ben's direction, unbidden, until, finally, Kyp has to tackle her out of the path of the Leviathan's sweeping tail. He grabs her by the shoulders and shouts, "Focus!"

Duly chastened now, cheeks burning, Rey— shuts Ben out. Whittles the galaxy down to nothing but the beast. I can do this, I've got this, she chants to herself. There will be time for everything else later. She shrugs Kyp off and charges back into the fray, positioning herself at Tionne's side once more. The beast raises one clawed foot, turning sideways to snarl at Kyp, and Rey seizes the opening, diving beneath the creature and running a slash along its underbelly, pushing as deep as the blade can go. When she rolls out the other side, into open air and red sunlight, she sees Finn Galfridian hoisting himself up the Leviathan's shoulder, plunging his lightsaber clean through the ropy skin around the neck.
"You're crazy, Your Highness!" Eryl yells, laughing. The Sithspawn shakes Finn off with a bellow of pain, and the prince of Artorias would have hit his head on a nearby rock if Eryl hadn't immediately rushed to cushion his fall with her own body. None of them can use the Force at their leisure—the Leviathan's dark energies are cutting off the pathways, in much the same manner that Exar Kun once had. However, after sustaining so many wounds, its movements are clumsier now, its steps heavier and more ponderous. The sandcrawlers remain rooted to the spot, having been built to withstand even the fiercest desert storms, but the AEA-500s are not as sturdy. They go flying.

Rey dodges each prospecting craft as it sails off the ground, dislodged by the resounding impact of the Leviathan's footsteps. Durasteel hulls whirl over her head before crashing back to earth. Eventually, her path pulls her into Ben's orbit. He's breathing heavily after having managed to lope off one tentacle, which he kicks away from him with a snort of disgust.

"Hi," Rey blurts out, blinking up at him.

"No talking during battle," he grunts. She remembers him when he was fifteen, telling her, "No talking during meditation," and she wrinkles her nose at him. She can't help it.

The Leviathan's tail comes slamming down on them. They spring apart to avoid it, but the blow splits the ground, cracking open one of the mine shafts that the workers had installed. Soil and metal beams give way under Rey's feet. She hears the other Jedi calling her name and Ben's in alarm, as the two of them fall beneath the earth.

* 

She lands hard, flat on her back, with a groan that echoes through the shadows and the silence.

Beams of filtered gray daylight rake across Ben's figure as he scrambles over the debris to crouch at her side. His hands are on her then, in the gloom, checking for broken bones, his fingers trailing down her neck, her ribs. She catches his gaze, notes how soft it is with concern as he stares into her eyes, as he smooths careful touches down her body with a tenderness that she's pretty sure no one ever thought him capable of, and, oh, Force, this has to be love, even if he didn't say it back last night. You can't look at someone like this and not love them—

"You're fine," he declares at last. He helps her to her feet, one hand holding hers while the other gently spans the small of her back, but no sooner has she stood up and secured her lightsaber at her side when he tears himself away from her as if she were on fire.
He frowns up at the shattered columns that slant several meters above them. "Get out your—" he starts to say, but she's already removing her fibercord from her utility belt.

She's barely begun unwinding it, however, when the makeshift roof collapses with a groan. Earth and metal come raining down. Reacting with lightning swiftness, Rey grabs Ben's sleeve and tugs him out of harm's way with all her strength. He crashes into her, and, for a moment, it's all a cloud of dust and a rattle of stones and loose soil, his hands on her waist, her hands gripping at his sleeves, her face hidden in his chest, her leg braced behind her to support them both. Darkness engulfs them, musty and thick.

"Guess we can't climb up." Her words are muffled into his robes.

"I suppose not," he replies, tersely. "We'll have to continue along this tunnel and find another egress."

She nods, allows herself to breathe in his scent just for a moment, just for another one of those stolen little slivers of time that are all she can get in this life they've chosen, and then she—

— is not stepping away, because the instant that she tries to widen the space between them, he pulls her back to him with a hitch of breath, his fingers tight around her waist. Oh, but she'd give anything for the slightest hint of illumination right now, she wants to see his face, his eyes, and she wonders if it will always be like this, finding each other briefly amidst adrenaline and sweat and the roar of battle, colliding into each other with relief so palpable in the air, *you're alive, we're alive, we get one more day—*

He bends down. At first, she thinks that he's going to whisper something in her ear, but his lips find her neck instead. "Stay close to me," he rasps in a broken voice against her skin.

And she remembers him telling her that before, in another kind of darkness, in the temple of a long-gone Sith Lord. They'd both been younger, and it *had* to have been love, even back then, and—

"Always," she says fiercely, closing her eyes. Just one more moment. Just a little more time. "Always, Ben."

Chapter End Notes
Sandcrawler, of which the digger crawler is a variant.

Autonomic crust-piercer.

An F-187 fusioncutter.

The droid joke is, once again, a Jacen Solo original.

Leviathan.

Hundred-Year Darkness.

Second Great Schism.

Lost Tribe of the Sith.

Siege of Tahv.

AEA-500 prospecting craft.

I have this headcanon that no one really acknowledges Finn Galfridian's royal title because the Jedi are supposed to lead simple lives and stuff, but Eryl calls him "Your Highness" sometimes when she's teasing.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

So troubledfurry has finished drawing the piggyback ride and it is wonderful and good and amazing. SHE is wonderful and good and amazing. I am hashtag blessed.

Penultimate chapter, folks. See you all on the other side.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He regrets it. She can tell.

As they move further through the mines beneath the earth, Ben sinks into a silence that grows more sullen with every step he takes. His Force signature is a ragged, prickly thing that almost seems to hiss at Rey whenever she brushes her consciousness against his. She knows, with a sick roil in her gut, that he's chastising himself for his moment of weakness, for holding her too close instead of continuing this new staying away thing that he's trying out. He's made her jump through some rather harrowing emotional hoops in the span of forty-eight hours, and she's starting to get cross because of that.

*What did you expect?* questions her snide inner voice. *He's Ben Solo. Moody and complicated and—*

— trying so hard, and so dear to her—

They're hurrying side by side down the shored-up tunnel, the glowlamp in Rey's hand punching a beam of yellow light through the gloom. Earlier, they'd still been able to sense the battle raging in the world above, every tremor raining dust and pebbles over their heads and causing the mine's foundations to shake, but now all is still and silent, except for their two figures and the soft patter of their footsteps.

Eventually, they pause at a fork in the underground road; Rey shines the glowlamp right, and then left, where the blaze slants across Ben's face and she gasps. He looks *terrible*. His complexion is sallow in the harsh glare, the skin under his eyes bruised. And Rey is something of an expert in the different types of Ben Solo scowls, and she knows *this* one, too. It's what he wears when he argues with Luke, when he rails against the Code. It's what he wore on the day Numa died. It's the scowl of a man who no longer has any idea what he's doing, who has already lifted one foot out of a former life. In the cool darkness of the silent mines, the glowlamp is blinding, it fades him at the edges, blurring, a boy about to disappear.
"Ben," she murmurs, suddenly so, so afraid, "talk to me, please." Tell me what's going on in that head of yours. Tell me where the hurt came from, and how it could have run so deep. Tell me anything.

At first, she thinks that he won't, thinks that his mouth tightens over words he will never say, but then he's squaring his shoulders, standing taller, like a knight about to go to war.

And he turns his face away.

"Last night," he says, to the wall, and her heart drops because she already knows that she won't like what's going to happen, not when he's carefully hiding his expression from her like this, "when you told me you love me." His fists clench at his sides. "I believe you are mistaken as to the nature of that love. We have always been—" He pauses, searches for the right term. "Close. You think of me as your family. And perhaps— perhaps it is the same for me. I can understand why a girl who has no one else would get confused. Why you would build it up in your mind. I confess that I may have— indulged you, a little. The Jedi Path is a lonely one." His voice catches, sounds almost wistful for a second. "Now, however, we must confront the truth. We are— important to each other, yes, but surely you see how you took all the different roles I have played in your life and coalesced them into an image of me that is... inaccurate, that is something more than what I actually am to you. Those first few years, I was the boy who saved you from the desert. And then I became the friend you shared all your secrets with. A decade passed, and I turned into your comrade—we sparred together, we fought side by side. But I can't be your..." He trails off, lets the idea falter into silence. "I am too old for you," he says at last, in a measured tone. "And I have broken the Code enough, as it is. I would not like it if you— if you were to feel that you have to do the same."

"Face me," Rey snarls. She will not cry, she will not beg— even as her neck still burns where his lips had pressed only a few minutes ago, even as he takes a sledgehammer to every tiny crack in her soul— but she will demand that he look her in the eye. "Face me, and say that all over again, so I know it's true."

Ben doesn't turn around. "Eventually, you will come to terms with this. Eventually, you will see that I am right. When you grow up a little bit more."

"You carried me through the forest!" she shouts. "I wield the crystal you asked your father for. You brought me back from the darkness— we brought each other back— twelve years, Ben!" Humiliating, how her voice fractures dangerously close to a sob. "Nearly all my life!"

"It was a dream," he whispers. "You are my friend. You are my family. But, Rey, I am not in love with you."
“Why are you lying?” she bursts out. It echoes down the mines.

"I am not in love with you," he repeats, more firmly, as if she hadn't said anything at all. "Although — I may have given you the impression that I was. I apologize for that."

And, oh, this is heartbreak. It has to be. That soft place inside her chest feels like it's splitting into two. Part of her is a child again, hot sand searing through the soles of her shoes, tiny hand extended helplessly to the skies as a ship glides away, come back. And it's all sand in her mind, then, fine grains sifting through the shadows in slow motion, slipping from her grasp like all the things that she once believed she could keep, as she stares numbly at the back of the one person who she never thought would hurt her this way.

And yet. And yet she knows that what he's saying isn't real, because he can't even bear to look at her. If she reaches out through the Force, finds his thoughts—

No, she realizes, with an abrupt, steely determination. She's too wounded by this, she's practically choking on air. Trying to understand someone can only go so far. There are times when forgiveness has to be earned. There are times when some things have to be said out loud.

Rey shuts her eyes briefly, to center herself. And she's only marginally surprised by whom she finds waiting there inside. A six-year-old child stands alone, in the Graveyard of Giants, wearing rags and goggles, clutching a quarterstaff in one hand and a scavenger's net in the other, quietly watching her from the past.

When she opens her eyes, it's Rey of the wastelands looking out. She has to be strong. What cannot heal must endure.

"I apologize, as well, for making assumptions," she tells Ben, stiffly. And she thinks that he flinches, but she doesn't allow herself to dwell on that. Perhaps it was only a trick of the light.

They move through the mines like ghosts, not exchanging a single word between them. At last, the carefully-installed artificial foundations give way to an unexplored section of the tunnel. Rey taps into the Force, free to do so now that she is far away from the Leviathan. She probes whether it's safe to go forward. She senses—
She runs, Ben hot on her heels. The hope that there are survivors eclipses everything else, including
the intuition whispering that the minds she has touched are not even remotely humanoid, until—

She stops short. The cave floor is littered with sharp stalagmites, as well as strange dome-like
structures as high as her waist. They're bone-white but translucent, pulsating with a faint greenish
glow from within. There are dark, serpentine shapes curled up within each dome, twitching slightly.

"Larvae," Ben grunts.

Rey doesn't even think about it. She ignites her lightsaber, and soon that bright sapphire beam is
humming through the air as she weaves amidst the Leviathan's nest, destroying the eggs and stabbing
at the creatures within. She channels her rage into this act, *I'm not in love with you, I'm not in love
with you* echoing in her ears, and, when it is done, she is sweat-stained and snarling, facing Ben
across a field of splintered shells and silent corpses, green amniotic fluid leaking onto her boots. He is
looking at her with something like awe, something like sorrow, his wide eyes reflecting the blue of
her blade-light.

"You did not save me from the desert," she hisses. "I *chose* to go with you. All my life, I have done
everything on my own terms. You are *not* going to take that away from me."

Slowly, he nods. Like a man making his peace with the passage of time.

* 

After that, the ground slopes upwards. Her steps quicken, soon leaving him in the dust even though
his legs are longer. *Flashes*, she thinks, *I'll only ever be able to have flashes*, primordial roar of stone
and shadows clinging to her robes and Ben following her out of the underworld, the two of them
tilted up on the steep incline, hurling themselves against gravity, racing towards a spill of red
daylight.

* 

When she makes it back to the open, arid air of the valley, the screaming in her head returns with a
vengeance, the Force distorting around her like muddled, melting glass. She pauses to take measure
of the situation; the Leviathan is flagging, but the Jedi aren't faring any better. In the twenty or so minutes that she and Ben have been gone, Tionne's leg has been broken and a good-sized chunk of flesh has been gnawed out of Finn's side. Kyp and Eryl are holding their own, keeping the Leviathan distracted from their injured comrades, buying Rey enough opportunity to hurry over to Finn and rip his sleeve into makeshift bandages.

"I don't think the one-sleeved tunic is in season, kid," the prince of Artorias mumbles weakly, his usually golden complexion turned an ashen gray color.

"You can worry about fashion later, when you're not losing blood by the bucketful," Rey chides, staunching his wound with the torn cloth and then taking his hand and placing it on the crimson-soaked mess to hold it in place. "Keep pressure on it."

Ben strides over to where Tionne is leaning heavily against a boulder, her features twisted in a pained grimace. "Master," Rey hears him tell her, "you know what has to be done."

Rey's gaze snaps to them, bewildered. Tionne's silver-hued eyes are searching Ben's face carefully.

"You are strong enough, Knight Solo?" she asks.

"I have to be," Ben replies, voice thick.

"Just once," Tionne says, makes it sound like a command. "Just one last time."

"Yes," Ben promises.

She reaches into her pocket. Soon, the amulet that had once belonged to Darth Vader falls into Ben's open palm.

Rey is frozen in place beside Finn as Ben walks by. He doesn't look at her. His name catches in her throat, but she can't force it out through the knot of dread that's lodged there tight. She can do nothing as he approaches the field of combat.
"Fall back!" he snaps at Kyp and Eryl, and whatever they see on his face makes them subside.

Ben holds the amulet aloft. The Leviathan whirls in his direction, growling. The sun's rays slant over the red land.

Darksider energy is an insidious thing. It curls like smoke, sparks like currents, perceptible only to those who know the Force. It swirls around Ben Solo like black water, flowing from the amulet clutched in his hand.

The Leviathan shambles closer to him, its mien more wary than hostile. All Sithspawn respond to the same kind of power that created them; they fear and revere their lords in equal measure. But the subservience that came so easily to the tuk'ata does not happen here— the Leviathan crouches, as if seconds away from pouncing, its eyes narrowed into glowing red slits. Its fanged maw gapes open, tentacles slithering into the air. It hisses at Ben, a sound so high and grating that even Rey, who's watching from a relatively safe distance, swears that it scrapes along her spine.

Ben doesn't move from his spot, but he blinks, a bead of sweat dripping down his temple. As if it senses his hesitance, the Leviathan paws the ground, snorting damp clouds of breath, preparing to attack.

"It's not working," Kyp says to Eryl. "We have to get him out of there."

When Ben sees them inch towards him despite the ever-growing threat, a new sense of urgency seems to lance through his system, urging his posture ramrod-straight. The darkness around him deepens. The amulet shimmers with violet heat. And— even through the screams of dead miners, even through the unearthly sounds of the Leviathan— there is this one still moment when Rey hears Ben in the Force, overcoming the barriers as if his presence has suddenly been amplified by a surge of power.

_Grandfather_, he begs, _teach me._
The Leviathan lunges at Ben. Rey's on her feet before she knows it, about to run to his side, come what may.

It is then that the scene before her horrified eyes explodes in a blaze—

— of lightning—

Such a massive beast, the Leviathan. When it topples to the ground, charred and twisted and unrecognizable and lifeless, the valley shakes.

* *

Time, the Supreme Leader croons to Alema Rar, from his unassailable fortress worlds away.

"Time," Alema says to Hux inside the shuttle, unfolding herself from the cabin seat with a languorous stretch.

Hux nods. Instructs the pilot to set a course for the northern cliffs.

* *

The Jedi approach Ben cautiously, skirting around the mangled, smoking remains. Tionne is being supported by Kyp and Eryl, and Finn heals himself as he walks, the Force welcoming him back with open arms now that the Sithspawn is dead. But it's Rey who gets to Ben first, stopping a few paces away from him, warily eyeing the dark energy that's draped over his form like a cloak. He's down on one knee, his head bowed over the beast's own.

It's Eryl who breaks the tense silence. "Solo? You in there?"

"Yes," Ben mumbles.
Relief washes over Rey in waves, strong enough to make her forget what occurred in the mines. She takes one step closer, only to freeze again when Ben looks up, looks right at her, and those warm brown eyes of his are cold now, and tinged with a vague scarlet light, turning them the color of old blood. There is no recognition in those eyes. He doesn't see her. Not in the way that he always has, before.

Tionne draws a sharp intake of breath. "Ben. Let go of the amulet. You promised me."

"It's not over yet," he says, in a hoarse voice that doesn't sound like his own. "I can sense it now. It's coming."

"What are you talking about, Solo?" Kyp demands.

Ben flashes a wan, humorless smirk. "There is another one."

* *

For a Leviathan to make its nest, it must have a mate.

For a Jedi strike team to be *kriff* out of luck, there must be two Leviathans.

* *

They hear it before they see it, the snuffling, guttural roars that emerge from deep places where fire and rock intertwine. The air fills with sounds like thunder.

"Can't catch a break," Kyp groans.

"Solo, do you think you can—" Finn starts to ask, but Tionne cuts him off with a stern glare.

"No," she says. "He's done for today. All right, Ben?"
Ben tilts his head, as if considering her words. His movements are stilted, jerky, as if he has to pit his muscles against the weight of his own mind. "One more... display like that," he admits, in a heavy tone, "might tip me over the edge. I can hear him. He's— calling me—"

Tionne frowns. "I was unaware that the Leviathans had the gift of language. They're classified as semi-sentient."

Ben doesn't answer.

There is a ravine at the edge of the valley. It is from this place that the second Leviathan clambers out, its claws raking long scratches into the earth. It's bigger than its mate, angrier, and Rey feels a shadow cross over her heart, a presentiment of doom. The screaming in her head starts again, ripping her away from the Force.

And, in all her life to come, she won't ever be able to fully recall most of that last battle in the dry Corbos valley. The moments bear down upon her with the swiftness of strafing runs. She operates on pure instinct alone, moving seamlessly with Kyp, Finn, and Eryl, while Tionne attempts the healing trance from the sidelines, attempts to punch through the Leviathan's Force-block and heal her broken leg. It's not long, either, before a blaze of emerald light sweeps through the air as Ben joins them in combat, and then he and Rey are fighting side by side, running like they once had through the Yavin 4 jungle, charging at the beast as they once had Exar Kun, guarding each other's flanks as they once had against droids, against Sith hounds, against all odds. The world is nothing but high sun and blade-light and the Leviathan, all dusky scales and vicious fangs and crimson eyes, the parched earth and the rock towers trembling with every step.

The Jedi manage to drive the monster back towards the edge of the ravine, but it's too enormous to be felled by lightsaber cuts, no matter how numerous. Everyone is gradually getting exhausted, their movements sloppier, their reaction times slower. They have to finish this now. Rey has just scored a blow along one of the hind limbs, when that damnable tail sideswipes her with bruising force. She lands on her knees, and—

— ouch, what the—

She hisses in surprise and pain as an electric shock jolts through her, and she jerks her hand away from the cables that she'd inadvertently brushed her fingers against.
Cables?

Rey looks down.

In this section of the valley is a seam of power cables that the miners have piped into the mine shafts, presumably for the machines underground. Her gaze follows the winding river of thick black cords, all the way to a huge thermoelectric generator that has been lodged in one of the crevices along the escarpment, to take advantage of the heat from the volcanic soil.

Rey remembers the lightning that had burned the first Leviathan from the inside. She has an idea.

"This is a terrible plan," Ben mutters. "Without a doubt, the absolute worst plan in galactic history."

"You like it," Rey quips.

They're sneaking up on the Leviathan while Finn, Kyp, and Eryl keep it occupied—Eryl has strapped herself into the cockpit of one of the AEA-500s and is pumping the thick hide with blasts from the forward-mounted triple-beam lasers, the speeder buzzing around the monster's bulk like an annoying fly. After flicking off the generator's switch, Ben and Rey had wrestled armfuls of power cables out of the mine shafts, as much as they could carry, and they're now approaching the Leviathan from behind.

"Follow my lead," Rey says to Ben, and he nods. She eyes the reptilian tail that's slashing broadly across the surface of the earth, and waits for just the right moment to leap onto it. And it takes some effort, but she keeps her balance and is soon running along the Leviathan's spine, with Ben close behind her as scaled skin and muscles churn in a shifting ocean below their feet.

"Don't let it get too far, these cables don't go on forever!" Rey warns the Jedi on the ground.

"Easier said than done, kid!" Kyp retorts, but he and Finn advance while Eryl takes the AEA-500 into a low glide along the side, backing the Leviathan up.
It is bitter work for Ben and Rey, carving at the hide with their lightsabers and hooking the cables into the wounds, sinking them deep into tendons and nerves while the Sithspawn's back seesaws and shudders. It can't register this new source of pain yet, too distracted by the offensive in front of it, but Rey knows that they don't have long. Eventually, she shoves two of her last four cables above the brainstem just as the Leviathan swats Eryl's speeder out of the air. The red-haired Knight extracts herself from the wreckage with admirable haste, and then makes a dash for the generator, in order to hit the switch at Rey's signal.

The Leviathan suddenly tenses, sensing the two Jedi on its back. It rears up with an enraged bellow; the world tilts. Rey latches on to one of the rough ridges of the skin, but Ben is thrown off. He lands on the ground on his back, groaning, and the Leviathan bears down upon him, ignoring Kyp and Finn as it opens its fanged maw to seize this new prey.

"Rey!" Eryl yells. "Jump! Now!"

But Rey's not done yet— she has to deliver as much voltage as she can in order to fry this thing's brain. Her last two cables ought to do it. She makes another cut with her lightsaber, shoves one cord in. The Leviathan's fangs are about to close in on Ben's prone form, and—

— and Rey knows, with a chill, stark certainty, that she has no more time left.

"Hit the switch!" she orders Eryl, furiously making another incision, but, the instant the words leave her mouth, she realizes what she's asking the Knight to do. Choose between her and Ben.

Exar Kun's dark visage grins at her, in the back of her mind.

*My own terms,* Rey thinks. *My own ending.*

Gritting her teeth, summoning all the power that she possesses, all the training of twelve long years, she crashes through the Leviathan's barriers and makes an opening, the way Luke had taught her to on the day they fought Kun. She extends one hand in the direction of the generator, and touches the Force.

The switch flips. The generator whirs to life. Electric currents surge through the cables in brilliant, lethal sparks.
"Stars, this is going to hurt," Rey mumbles, as she hooks the last cable in.

When the pain comes, it pours through her veins in a conflagration of white heat, blanking her vision. It wells up beneath her bones like a tide of dust. Her back arches. There is screaming, still, but it's no longer in her head. Her name is echoing under the tarnished sky, Rey, no, please—

Her heart stops, and it's over. Before she fades into nothing, she hears a cool voice rasp, triumphantly, I told you that you would die in battle.

The Leviathan's wild cries soar through the land as it spasms and twists savagely within the tangle of live power cables. Bolts of pure electricity light up the valley, the acrid scent of char suffusing the air. The Jedi stumble back to avoid getting crushed by the beast in its death throes, averting their gazes from the blinding maelstrom of sparks.

The Sithspawn sways unsteadily for a few more seconds, and then it falls to the ground. Rey's body falls with it.

Ben is the first to reach her, crawling to where she lies broken on the ground. The Knight cradles her in his arms, swipes the pad of his thumb across her cooling cheek, stares numbly into her sightless eyes. Twelve years flicker like raindrops catching daylight, and, at last, he understands. At last, he recognizes the machinations of his own destiny, and what had been waiting for him all along.

Bowing his head so that his hair almost completely shields both their faces from view, he presses the Sith amulet to her chest, traps the crystal there between his shaking fingers and her silent heart. There is none of the fear that he'd been expecting— instead, there is relief, because, for the first time in years, he feels no doubt, no conflict. For the first time in years, he finally knows what he's doing. He's never been more certain in his actions than he is now.
The other Jedi try to rush to his side, but a blast of energy knocks them off their feet, hurling them backwards. A wall of shadow crackles and splinters in the air around him and Rey, impenetrable. He closes his eyes as the darkness surges through him, as he holds on to the only girl he's ever loved. Anakin Skywalker watches from the other side. Bit by bit, his chains are broken. Bit by bit, Ben Solo falls, and is set free.

* 

Rey is dreaming. She must be. A dream made of green leaves and orange blossoms, with sunlight razing a river's surface in a scattering of bright diamonds, suspended in a fine gray mist.

Someone turns to her. Slender form, smooth blue skin, Jedi robes.

"Where am I?" Rey asks. "What are you doing here?"

"I did what Master Luke requested," Numa Rar says, softly. "I broke trail so that the rest of you could follow."

"I did not think I would see you again."

Numa smiles. "Everyone meets again, someday." She reaches out both hands to clasp Rey by the shoulders. "Listen to me, girl who is not my sister, but my sister, anyway—you don't have long here in the Netherworld. Things are falling into place. He will pay the price to save you. There was never any doubt that he would. The bad years are coming. I already know that you're strong enough to face them. I ask only that you remember how to be kind."

Earth and water fade away, and now Rey is—

* 

— in her room at the Praxeum. Ben is there with her, sitting at the edge of her bed while she stands with her back to the wall. It's late afternoon, or something like it, the sun red-orange through the windows, the air rich with the scent of moss and the distant cries of jungle birds.
He's all jiggling knees and nervous fingers twisting together. He's not looking at her yet; his brandy-colored eyes are trained on the empty spot that had once been occupied by that corroded, salvaged metal project of hers that is now merrily churning in the currents of the temple river.

"You know," he says, in a conversational tone of voice, "I didn't think you could get that pump up and running. But you did. Blew me away. You were always so crazy to me. Always larger than life. My little mad genius." He exhales, slow and tremulous, as if he's breathing out a splinter caught in his heart. "I wasn't very nice to you, was I, all these years..."

"No," Rey agrees, evenly. "But you were—" She swallows. "Good. You were good to me, Ben."

"I pushed you away because of what happened last night, with the Sith hounds. I thought I would die from the guilt of it, the grief. I was already being consumed by this darkness, and I did not want it to claim you, as well. I thought that, by distancing myself, I could... I could save some part of us. Had I known that this is how it would be," he murmurs, as if in a daze, "that this is what waited for us down the line, I would have— been more gentle. Would have treated you better, before the end."

"Meaning?" Her haze of a self remembers a jumble of images, lightning and monster and valley, and a pain that had felt like dying, but she can't form a clear picture of it. There is only this room. There is only him.

Ben stands up. He closes the distance between them in long strides, and then he leans down, his hand on her waist. He presses a tender, reverent kiss to her right cheek, and then to the left. "I apologize." He breathes the words against her jawline. "I did not know how to love without passion. Without fear. Perhaps now you will be better off, Jedi." He drops another light kiss on the tip of her nose. "Thank you for the time you gave me. For the years we had together. It was more than I deserved."

"This isn't goodbye," Rey says, without having any idea why she says it— or maybe she does. Maybe she's only fooling herself, if you could fool yourself in dreams. "I'll find you again. Across another river. In another life."

Ben sighs, the sound so wistful, so full of longing and regret. The hand that's not on her waist comes up to her cheek, fingers splaying along her face, ghosting across every freckle, as if memorizing the feel of her, as if that memory will be all that he can take with him when he goes. His lips drift to her forehead, and he kisses her there, so sweet, so slow. She closes her eyes. The sunset thrums against her shut lids. The light burns through everything.
The sleek midnight-black shuttle descends into the valley as Ben sags to the ground, unconscious, and the shadow wall fizzles out. The main doors open, with a hiss of hydraulics, and Alema Rar strides down the ramp, followed by several stormtroopers. She passes an uncaring glance over the dead Leviathan, before nodding in Ben's direction. In response to her unspoken command, the stormtroopers haul him back to the ship.

Pushing herself up on her elbows, Eryl Besa locks eyes with the Twi'lek, and pales like she is seeing a ghost. Soon she and Finn Galfridian are getting up, are running, hands on their lightsaber hilts—

Alema holds out one palm. Another Force barrier materializes, blocking the Knights' path. The Twi'lek's lips curve in a smile, triumphant and lopsided through the shimmering waves of translucent darkness, and then she disappears into the shuttle once more.

Rey wakes up to starlines streaming past the transparisteel windows in the medbay of the Shadow Sabre. She's strapped down in a metal gurney, dressed in loose white robes and plastered with bacta patches from nearly head to toe. The only other person in the room is Kyp, who's leaning against the wall and staring at her solemnly, arms crossed.

She tries to talk, but no sound emerges. Her throat is a raw, cracked mess. She breathes in, out, waits a while, nudges the Force along with mulish determination. Heal me, heal this, let me speak.

Finally, she rasps, "Ben?"

Kyp shakes his head. "They took him, kid," he says, in a dour tone. "I'm sorry. We—"

Rey screams. She bolts upright on the gurney, the restraints snapping as if they were mere threads. The ship's walls start to tremble, and everything in the medbay that isn't nailed or weighed down goes flying. Amidst the crash of furniture, amidst the warp of metal, her scream is still the loudest sound of all, dragged out from somewhere in the pit of her stomach, dragged through the slow beat of her heart. She hears footsteps as Finn and Eryl rush into the medbay, feels hands on her body as they help Kyp push her down and jab a needle into her arm. While she doesn't stop screaming, she doesn't fight the sedative, either, as it floods through her system. Instead, she chases it, chases the feeling of oblivion, screams and gasps and sob her way back into the dark, wanting only to return to the bedroom in her mind, where the air is soft with sunset, where Ben is holding her in his arms. She gladly trades consciousness for it, because there, in that safe place, he is with her, he is kissing her,
and they are clinging to youth and glory and all the old dreams. There, they are unchanged by time.

Chapter End Notes

Remember, there is one more chapter, and then a sequel!

I would like to believe that I put all of the necessary foreshadowing in place. It is my hope that this feels like it happened organically, and for a good reason. I'm in the midst of constructing a longer message for all of you dear readers, in which I explain the writing process that led to this turn of events. That message will be appended to the very last installment of this fic, which I have tentatively scheduled to be up by next week.

Believe me, this chapter was very hard to write. I would sincerely appreciate any feedback, any thoughts that will help me craft the finale.

The Netherworld of the Force.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

The brilliant aknightfornawt has drawn a lovely fanart for this fic. I CRY. Thank you, darling!

"Goddammit Alema" is now a tag, credit to the wonderful Rinso, who has been with me since the very beginning.

After five months (I think), here is the last chapter. I hope you're all ready for one last ride on the pain train, but I promise that I will do my best to make the sequel absolutely 100% worth it. Don't forget to read my message at the end! I love you, guys.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A year passes, in silver and in green.

The Republic snatches Orinda back from the Remnant. This marks a significant decrease in Imperial activity, although General Organa's spies whisper of the Moff's submitting to the First Order and disappearing into the Unknown Regions. General Organa's spies are everywhere at this point, combing through far-flung star systems and splicing into databases for any hint of Ben Solo's whereabouts. But it seems that not a trace remains.

One day, a black T-70 X-wing dips into Yavin 4's atmosphere, coasting low over the treetops on the wisps of the monsoon. Rain spatters down from a mop of dark curls as a Resistance pilot ducks his head into the main hallway of the pyramid's ground level, nodding solemnly at Luke, his flight helmet tucked under his arm.

"Lead looked promising for a while there, Master Skywalker," he says, "but the trail went cold at Lehon. Figured I'd slingshot 'round the Gordian Reach and give you the news myself."

Standing behind Luke, Rey listens quietly, observing the pilot with the measured gaze of her masters that she has learned so well. He'd introduced himself to her as Poe Dameron, all raindrop-tangled lashes and lopsided half-smile. Before taking his leave, he blurts out, "I hope we find him soon."

"That was just the one time," Poe corrects, apologetic at seeming to have lain claim on a history to which he has no right. "I must've been six years old or so, and my parents took me to Coruscant to visit General Organa—although she was still Chief of State back then."

"You played Dejarik," Luke says. "It was a close match, as I recall, but, in the end—"

"Ben beat me with the Kintan strider death gambit," Poe finishes, with a chuckle. "Never saw it coming."

"He learned that from me," Luke muses, wistfully.

After they send Poe off, Rey retreats further down the shadowed hallway, planning to spend the rest of this dreary afternoon meditating with the holocrons in the underground vaults, but she is stopped in her tracks by the sound of her name from Luke's lips. She turns to face him. She does not exactly mean for her chin to lift in automatic defiance, but it does, anyway.

"You are still angry with me," Luke sighs.

"I could have found him by now," Rey snaps. "One more pair of eyes might have done the trick. If you hadn't pulled me out—"

"You were neglecting your training, young one," Luke interrupts. "Five months you spent flying search missions with me and Han, with the other Knights, and I let you do it because you needed to. I only put my foot down because it was time for you to stop placing your life on hold."

"You neglected your training, too, once," she retorts. "You told me about that, Master. You left the Dagobah swamps to rescue Han and Leia. You said you had no regrets."

"Back then, there was no one else who could save them," he calmly replies. "It was all on me. I was the last Jedi. Circumstances are different now. Ben wouldn't want you to falter on your journey to Knighthood."

"And how do you know that?" she challenges, cruelly. "You've never been able to tell what he wanted, even though he is blood of your blood. He was so ready to leave, and—" She breaks off, regretting the harsh words when Luke steps closer to her, moves into a patch of gray daylight that emphasizes the haggard lines on his face.
"Rey, please. I love him, too." He looks as if he has aged twenty years. "I would like nothing more than to see him again. But, over the years, I have made many mistakes. There are things that I should have done differently, with regards to Ben and— others." He doesn't need to mention Raynar and the Rar sisters; their names are there, their gazes accusing in the Force, in the cold air. "I have, perhaps, not been the best teacher. Now I understand why Han and Leia used to get so frustrated with themselves whenever Ben was in one of his moods— you always try to trace the line backwards, try to see the point where you went wrong... However, given your conversation with Numa in the Netherworld— and that vision of yours from two, no, three years ago— a great evil is coming. You must be prepared to face it, and you can't do that if you continue searching for Ben instead of devoting your time to studying advanced techniques and rooting yourself more deeply in the Light. Personal isn't the same as important. Not for a Jedi."

Maybe I don't want to be a Jedi, Rey thinks mutinously, but she holds her tongue because of the ruin that she sees in her master's blue eyes, the wreckage left there by Numa's death, compounded by Alema's betrayal and Ben's fate. Finn Galfridian had been right; Luke truly hasn't been the same since Exar Kun. That day has haunted his every step. She can still feel compassion, even with the hole in her heart.

She bows to Luke and walks away without another word, not trusting her voice to conceal her inner turmoil. Communion with the holocron gatekeepers will be impossible in her current state of mind, so, instead, she takes the turbolift up to the Grand Audience Chamber, where her friends are sitting on the great stone steps, chatting idly, while the younger students practice levitating the various leaves and twigs that they gathered from the jungle before the rain set in. Starting small, as Rey once had.

Bazel, Seff, Yaquel, and Natua fall silent when she reaches them. She feels the weight of several other gazes on the back of her neck, most of them curious, some downright apprehensive. Everyone's walked on eggshells around her since the Corbos mission. They whisper among themselves about the girl who returned from the dead. Who was brought back to life with Dark transfer. A line has been drawn in the sand between her and the rest of the students— after all, how do you treat someone who has seen the other side? What could you say to her that she doesn't already know?

"Heard anything from Jysella yet?" Rey asks, sitting down next to Yaquel.

The Bothan shakes her head. "Not since she made planetfall on Nim Drovis with Master Cilghal, but I wouldn't worry— negotiations must be crazy tense, considering that they're trying to stop a war that's been going on for generations. Tiu commed an hour ago, though. Said she was settling in well." The Omwati had returned to her home planet, to spend a couple of months studying the Force tradition that had blossomed there, separate from the Jedi Order.
"How are you, Rey?" Bazel asks in his kind, gruff, voice, and Rey is very nearly undone.

She takes a deep breath to steady herself before answering. She can't hide behind platitudes of peace and duty, but neither can she ignore her training. "There is sorrow," she admits at last, over the patter of the light drizzle, "but there is also hope."

"As there should be," says Natua, which is a bit of a surprise. The haughty Falleen species tends to look down on emotion, and Rey is defensive at first, thinking that she's being pitied, but she glances at Natua's elegant reptilian features and sees only understanding.

Seff leaps to his feet. "Shall we spar?" he asks, with a brave, determined smile, and Rey immediately takes him up on his offer with a little laugh of her own. The audience watches in fascination as the two apprentices cross blades all along the length of the room. Raindrops drum on stone ledges and flashes of lightning streak the metallic sky as Rey loses herself in the movements that have become routine. Slash, block, riposte. She waltzes to the rhythm of the plasma beams as she and Seff put each other through their paces, eyes aglow with the thrill of the fight. She imagines Ben murmuring in her ear, *feint to the left, break through his guard, mind your flank,* he's saying in that deep and gentle voice that she remembers so well and yearns for. *Fall back to opening stance, step into your attack. Yes, just like that, kid. Just like I taught you, sweetheart.*

"Aww, Rey," Seff suddenly mumbles, lowering his weapon.

She blinks. Warm tears spill down her cheeks. "It's fine," she says, gripping the hilt of her lightsaber more tightly. "Come on. Hit me with your best shot."

That night, she dreams of Ben. This would be nothing new if not for the fact that it feels more solid, and colder, and more real, and they are somewhere they've never been before. At least, not together. The chamber is plunged mostly in shadow, but there are several pyramid-shaped crystal-lattice devices scattered across the revolving platforms, all of them gleaming red like firelit blood. Ben sits on the central platform in the meditation position. His eyes are open, vacant. He is dressed in black from neck to toe.

Rey knows what's going on in this room. She feels it in the scarlet-hued air— the same thing that Exar Kun had done. Childhood memories being twisted and all the old fears being amplified, until the rot blooms from inside out and the darkness sneaks up on you in the guise of all that you once loved.
This isn't a dream. This is what's happening, right now, and she takes a step towards Ben and his gaze snaps to her and, for a moment, his pale features seize in something like panic, something like longing, and he—

— shoves her out—

She wakes up sweating on unbearably warm sheets, her mind hazed over with another memory, of something that Ben had told her once: I must learn to shield myself from you.

It looks like he finally has.

She goes to Luke and shows him the vision. He winces, pulling himself away from it with a sharp gasp. "Those red devices, they were Sith holocrons," he tells her, heavily. "Wherever he is, if he is meditating with them, if he is able to access them, it could mean that his fall is... complete."

"It's not," Rey insists, fiercely. "We're going to get him back."

Luke stares out the window, where the jungle night is sullen, rendered black and humid by the echoes of monsoon. "I think I understand now," he whispers, brow creased. "His nightmares. What Tionne said about someone calling him on Corbos. The words he spoke to the amulet, when I looked into your mind after you came back. I see it all now. The veil has been lifted from my eyes by the same entity that cast it, because their plan has succeeded at last... Nearly all his life, he was being called. That's why he thought the darkness was his destiny— that belief was hammered into him from a very young age. And I— I sent him to it, I marched him into the jaws— I had my misgivings, but I did it, anyway—" He bows his head. Rey's never seen him look this defeated before. The serene facade cracks, letting out exhausted slivers of grief, of love so helpless and so doomed. "I failed him. My sister's child, my poor, sad boy—"

"Master, please." Rey cringes, alarmed, and it's ridiculous that this is the one thing she can't handle—that, between dying and Ben disappearing, seeing Luke Skywalker cry will be the one thing that will truly break her. "If there is any fault to be had, it is mine. I was reckless. If only I'd acted more quickly, or come up with a different plan—" Of course she has thought all these things, but saying them out loud is painful, like breathing in shards of glass. "I was the reason he fell—"
Luke shakes his head. "No, Rey." His voice is firm, but gentle. "You were the reason he stayed so long."

A week goes by, and then it's one of those rare days when everybody's planet-bound at the same time, with the exception of Tiu and Jysella— and Valin, who is in deep cover in Wild Space. After the initial round of reunions and debriefing with the Knights, Rey tears herself away and guns out of the hangar on the T-23 skyhopper that Han and Chewie gave her three years ago. As happy as she is to see Finn, Eryl, Ganner, Tekli, and Ulaha again, the desire for solace scrapes at her nerves; she flies for hours, steering the speeder through kilometers of dense green jungle, sloping ever upwards until the gnarled veil of the Massassi trees gives way to plateau and open sky. She disembarks and, for several long moments, does nothing but look out over the ocean that spreads below her feet, a carpet of deepest azure that stretches on forever, into the tranquil horizon.

A memory:

It's eleven years to the day since Rey arrived on Yavin 4. She's buzzing, still eternally grateful after all this time, even after all that has happened. Ben makes grumpy noises at her when she charges into his room and attempts to drag him off the bed, his face buried in his pillow.

"Come out with me," she wheedles, tugging at his bare arm. "Let's take the T-23 for a spin, yes?"

"I'm on downtime," he protests, his voice a low mumble, scratchy with sleep.

"Exactly! That means relaxing by the ocean."

"No, it means sleeping in," he corrects, but it must be a day for miracles as well, because he kicks her out of his room to wait in the hangar bay while he hits the 'resher.

The journey through the rainforest is punctuated by the whine of the ion engine, Ben's long legs crammed into the passenger compartment behind the pilot's seat. She takes him to a plateau that she discovered last month while he'd been offworld, and the breeze is cool and salt-tinged as they climb out of the speeder and sit back on the prickly, dew-damp grass. Despite his initial crankiness, Ben's
features have a softer bent to them now, in this clear air, at this great height. Rey cocks her head, dimpling up at him, and he quirks his lips in response, the look in his brown eyes indulgent, almost fond.

She should have remembered it better, what they talked about that day. She should have seized every word and held it close to her soul. If only she'd known that they had so little time left. As it is, the memory is vague in her mind, cradled between treeline and horizon, slant of golden sunbeams over blue water, Ben's dark hair tossing in the breeze, the sky so pure above them. She remembers being seventeen years old and teasing him about something or the other, and he's leaning back, long lashes fringed bronze by the mellow light of day, lazily murmuring, "Whatever you say, sweetheart." Her cheeks heat up a little at the endearment, how casually it is bestowed, and her slap to his shoulder prompts that raspy, startled laugh that she loves so much. He grabs the offending hand and presses the back of it to his mouth, hiding his crooked grin against her knuckles, his thumb tracing idle patterns on her wristbone.

Looking back, Rey thinks that this is when it happened, this is when she took her first step towards the point of no return. It doesn't strike her like a bolt of lightning, no, nothing as dramatic as that. It comes to her sweet and slow, a gentle change of tide, her eyes full of ocean and Ben's languid drawl in her ear. She doesn't know it's love yet— she will only truly realize that a year later, when he's bowed before her beneath the Corbos moon. Right now, it's all just warm, dripping happiness, his lips to her fingers, shyly hopeful smiles on both their faces, and, oh, it's you, it's always been you.

*  

The truth is, there is a part of her that can't even believe he's really gone. Sometimes she zones out in the crowded mess hall, staring at the door as if he'll walk through it at any moment. Sometimes she hears him, or catches a trace of his scent, and then she blinks and expects him to be there when she opens her eyes, he has to be, surely she can bring him back with the sheer force of her want alone—

But of course she can't. She can't rearrange the universe like that. It's a bitter lesson to learn, at nineteen.

*  

She stays on the plateau until sundown. By this time, the rains have set in again, dotting the waves a shade darker and crowning the horizon in a wreath of stormclouds. Rey has already strapped herself into the T-23 when—

— the sky shakes—
Terror, sharp and thick, knots in her chest as a fleet of warships uncloaks over Yavin 4. Black TIE fighters scream down from the atmosphere, bobbing around the streamlined silhouettes of Subjugator-class heavy cruisers, Dimel assault vessels, and DX-9 stormtrooper transports. She already knows, with piercing clarity, that they're headed for the Great Temple. She sends a shrill alarm through the Force, gets nothing in return save for a general sense of panic as the academy marshals its defenses.

Rey goads her T-23 to maximum speed, thrusters groaning as she hurtles through the forest, the rain coming down in droves and the wind howling against transparisteel. But she's too far off. She's not even halfway to the temple when the trees start rocking with the echoes of distant explosions. The first death hits her like a punch to the gut, followed by another, followed by several more. She's sobbing, slapping the dashboard, kicking uselessly at the walls of the T-23, begging it to go faster. By the time she reaches her destination, it's already early evening, it's already almost over.

* *

The topmost level of the pyramid is gone, crumbled into the second floor in eerily uniform points of impact. The shield generators on either side of the main building have been blasted into pieces— as if someone knew where they were, knew precisely where to aim— and Rey is—

— still not an idiot, still has her wits about her even when it feels like her entire being is shattered, still has thirteen years of training guiding her path, and so—

She approaches stealthily, from the south, careful to duck out of sight from the stormtroopers fanning through the rain-slicked grounds. Planning to get a better lay of the battlefield from a higher vantage point, she slips in through the back door leading into the ground level, weaves up a flight of stairs. The living quarters are dark and choked with dust, but she uses the Force to enhance her night vision, and—

— and there are corpses sprawled all over heaps of toppled stone, but she shuts out their faces for now. Later, there will be time to grieve later, there is no emotion, there is peace.

She's about to round a corner that hadn't been there before— that had, in fact, been created by a pile of debris oozing across the hallway. However, sensing movement up ahead, she crouches behind the rubble, switching off her Force signature as she squints into the gloom and listens as best as she can.

There are two masked figures standing just outside the doorway of Yaqeel's room, but they aren't
stormtroopers, judging from the stylized black armor. One wields a broadsword, the other a quarterstaff gleaming with tiny crimson panels.

"Lord Ren specifically ordered that the apprentices be taken alive. These ones could still have been turned to our cause," Broadsword scolds through a crackly, voice-modulated growl, pointing a gauntlet-clad finger at two limp bodies on the floor.

"The Ramoan cut me," hisses Quarterstaff. "And his Falleen friend proved just as annoying. What was I to do?"

Control slips from Rey's grasp. Her vision blurs red, and she's seconds away from igniting her lightsaber when the two figures suddenly lift their heads—as if hearing someone call to them over the pounding rain—and march downstairs with ponderous steps.

Rey doesn't follow, no matter how much she wants to take them to task. She edges forward, determinedly skirting around Bazel and Natua without so much as glancing at them. If she sees their faces, she will be undone.

Surprisingly enough, her own bedroom is still intact. She peers through the window, and the scene out on the grounds below is one of total devastation. Nothing but wreckage and bodies. Nothing left to save. The stormtroopers are already starting to swarm back to their transport ships.

Lightning flashes at the mouth of the temple. A cybernetic hand clutches at a droid's domed head, stained in a sickly golden glow by the flickering fires.


Rey charges downstairs.

* * *

She nearly trips over Finn Galfridian's sprawled form on her way out. He's clinging to life, but barely, blood streaming in a diagonal slash from his breastbone to his hip. She falls to her knees beside him, cradles his head in her lap. There's too much damage, but she knows there's a way to get around that, doesn't she, the transfer, the red light—
"N—no," the prince of Artorias manages to gasp, as if reading her mind. "It's all right. Lose me like this. Let me go."

Rey gazes into blue eyes that are fast clouding over. He looks too young beneath the bloodstains on his face. He looks too afraid. Because he's about to go somewhere he never wanted—or, perhaps, wanted less.

And, yes, for a Jedi, there is no death, there is the Force, but—

There is also a whale-bone bridge. There is also a boy's profound longing for his homeland. There is also kindness. Numa Rar had told her so.

"Finn," Rey says now, her heartbeat steady, her tone urgent but certain. "Finn, listen to me. You were strong in life. Your spirit will find its way to the halls of your fathers."

He can no longer speak, but his mouth softens with gratitude. Bit by bit, his features relax into something like serenity. Something like acceptance. He closes his eyes, and he goes forth.

Luke Skywalker's lightsaber lies broken on the wet earth. He is severely wounded, pale from blood loss. A scarlet blaze shrieks through the air, aiming for his bowed, hooded head—

Extending a hand as she runs out of the temple, Rey slams the Force into the assailant. Heavy boots rake damp tracks into the soil, accompanied by a grunt of surprise that's undoubtedly masculine despite the voice modulator. This new masked figure staggers backward, before recovering and—

— not attacking—

The monsoon is a vicious, violent howl all around them, torrents of water soaking Rey to the bone as she and the figure stare at each other. Lightning glints off a cold black helm, and that strange crossguard blade flares and screams in the rain, the sound so thready and high-pitched that it sets Rey's teeth on edge. She has seen this man before, in a metal room somewhere. Seven similarly-garbed figures assemble at his back, Broadsword and Quarterstaff among them—as well as a slender
silhouette in light armor with the distinctive Twi'lek lekku skimming along her spine.

Rey thinks it's Alema, but she can deal with that later. Igniting her lightsaber, she grips the hilt with both hands, slants it into a balanced, vertical guard held at the right side of her body. I can do this, she chants to herself, I can die again, can't be as bad as the first time—

The leader takes a step forward. Hoping to gain at least some advantage over eight opponents, Rey briefly uses one hand to send a heap of debris flying in his direction. His unnerving scarlet blade slashes through one rock, while his off-hand automatically sends the others scattering, and there is something familiar about that fighting form, there is a rhythm to his movements that cries out for her attention—

Behind her, Luke summons the last vestiges of strength to pound a fist into the earth. A barrier springs up, a shimmering wall of energy that hums in the air beneath the downpour. It's flimsy protection at most, something that several Darksiders can easily overcome, but Rey knows that her master must have already alerted the Resistance, must be buying time until they get here.

It seems that the leader of the masked figures is no fool, either. He mutters something to his subordinates that Rey can't make out over the rain and wind, and they immediately turn to head for the waiting ships. He extinguishes his lightsaber and stalks after them. Rey studies his retreating back, that hunched, loping gait, the way those shoulders stoop because—

— he's always been too tall, too awkward in his own skin—

"Ben?" she whispers.

The sound carries, or, perhaps, the thought behind it. He freezes in his tracks, and, for a moment, the shields that had been concealing his Force signature come crashing down. It's only for a moment, but it's long enough for her to see that she is not wrong.

She almost believes that he's going to turn around. Time stretches on forever, caught in the space between them, pitched silver and black by the night and the storm.

But, eventually, he keeps on walking. Her legs collapse from under her. She watches him go.

He doesn't look back.
"Rey," Luke grates out, when the last of the ships have disappeared. "Your blade. Please."

She's crying when she presses her lightsaber into his metal palm. Her mouth tastes like salt and ash as it parts in whatever glimmer of confusion she can still muster through the shock.

Luke thumbs the activator button, and he places the sapphire beam over her left shoulder first, and then the right. *I'm being knighted*, she numbly realizes, here in the ruins of her home, surrounded by the bodies of all those she has loved. "I name you the Sword of the Jedi," Luke whispers, solemn and dazed with the Force as it moves through him and guides his words. "You are like tempered steel, purposeful and razor-keen. Always you shall be in the front rank, a burning brand to your enemies, a brilliant fire to your friends." A sob wrenches loose from her throat. A tear slides down his cheek, as if in response. "Yours is a restless life, and never shall you know peace—" Another burst of lightning cracks into existence, but he continues speaking calmly over the thunder that follows and the rain that never left— "though you shall be blessed for the peace that you bring others. Take comfort in the fact that, though you stand tall and alone, others take shelter in the shadow that you cast."

The blade winks out. He slumps forward; Artoo whirrs and clicks in alarm. Rey holds her unconscious master in her arms, and she doesn't know how long she stays there, but, eventually, the storm slows to a faint drizzle. The Resistance fleet must be getting close by now. She lifts her gaze to the darkened sky and waits for the sound of wings.

*  

Five day cycles pass. Rey walks with General Leia Organa down an illuminated metal corridor on a planet named D'Qar. Her brown cloak flutters behind her with every step.

The two women pause at a set of thick doors. Rey feels the Force thrumming from the other side, reaching out to her.

"I'll leave you to it, then," Leia says. Like her twin, she appears to have aged several years. "But please come see me afterwards. Let me know what you plan to do about— Ben—"

"He calls himself Kylo Ren now," Rey says, coolly. That was the information that the Resistance's
intelligence networks had finally managed to snag, now that the First Order has emerged from the Unknown Regions following their preemptive strike on the Jedi academy.

Leia flinches, but she leaves without another word. Rey beckons at the doors, and steps through them once they hiss open.

Compared to the hallway, the meeting chamber is dimly-lit. Several robed, hooded figures are gathered around a table already blinking with holographic maps and illustrated strategies. As one, they turn their heads to her when she enters the conclave.

Kyle Katarn, Battlemaster, is the first to speak. "Sword of the Jedi." He extends his hand, makes a space for her between him and Kirana Ti. "Welcome."

Rey closes her eyes and takes a deep breath as she prepares to join the council of war. The Force flows through her heart, welling up within the chasms like a hurricane.

Chapter End Notes

Dearest friends,

When I started outlining this story, I had the following goals in mind: to build the EU New Jedi Order in the context of the canon universe; to track Rey's progress from scavenger to apprentice to Knight; to fill in the gaps of Ben Solo's fall to the Dark Side; and to construct an epic star-crossed romance that will eventually triumph against all odds. I believe that I have succeeded in the first three, and laid the foundations for the fourth.

However, I was not expecting such a warm, wonderful reaction to the world that I made and to the character dynamics that I fleshed out. I was not expecting that I myself would get so attached. The stories in your head really do take a life of their own once you write them down, hence, the jump of the chapter count from 10, to 15, to 18, and finally to 19 (but, as I said, this was originally going to be 30ish chapters before I decided to follow the canon timeline in a sequel instead). I almost chickened out several times as I neared the end of this fic; I cannot express to all of you how tempted I was to keep Ben Solo in the Light and make him live happily ever after with Rey, along with everyone else. But that was not the story I had my heart set on telling, and, if I had changed the plot, all the foreshadowing in the previous chapters would have gone to waste. I did not make this choice lightly; in fact, I panicked to several close friends about it (interestingly enough, none of them wanted me to deviate from my original outline). In the end, I decided to stick to the themes that I wished to portray.

So, this is where I leave you, but not for long, as I already outlined everything months ago. What you can expect from the sequel: a shorter chapter count, but with a word
count per chapter of maybe 7k; intense battles and space politics all across the galaxy (remember, there is a Jedi Order still, and the First Order will have to contend with that); usage of advanced Force techniques; lots of GRAY morality (*wink wink*); a redemption arc for Kylo Ren; and, of course, a happy ending. I am swearing that to all of you now.

From the bottom of my heart, thank you for every single view, comment, bookmark, and kudos. I have tremendously enjoyed our discussions that enriched this story, I have loved the fanart and the squealing on Tumblr, and I do hope you will let me know what you think of this last chapter and what you would like the sequel to include.

I will see all of you again soon :)

Love,
diasterisms / kylorenvevo

Lehon.
Kintan strider death gambit.
"Personal isn't the same as important" is from Terry Pratchett's Discworld series.
Subjugator-class heavy cruiser.
Dimel assault ship.
Delta-class DX-9 stormtrooper transport.
What Rey says to Finn Galfridian is an LOTR reference (Gandalf says this to Theoden re: his son).
In the EU, the Sword of the Jedi is a title bestowed to Jaina Solo by Luke Skywalker on the occasion of her knighting.
They are children still, looking out over the dense emerald jungle beneath the red-gold swell of the gas giant. She's perched at the very edge of the broad viewing platform on top of the ziggurat—the same platform she'd discovered by climbing out through a skylight on her first day here. The day of the food fight, the day of new things. Her feet dangle off the ledge, swinging playfully through hazy late afternoon air as the courtyard and the rivers blur far, far below.

"You're going to break your little neck," Ben mutters.

Rey makes a face at him. She's not the one leaning, arms crossed, against an ancient stone parapet that looks like it can give way at any moment, but she refrains from pointing this out. The sky's a soft, deep azure and the whisper birds are sending out their low, melodic thrills; it's simply too peaceful to ruin with petty bickering. She's known him for half a year by now, long enough to understand that his surliness is nothing personal—or, at least, that she shouldn't take it as such, not if she wants to live a long and stress-free life.

Besides, she has something else on her mind. "Ben, what's the first thing you'd take out of your house if it were on fire?"

He blinks at her, annoyed. "Is this another one of Seff's cringe-inducing puns?"

"No," Rey says patiently. "It's just that— Jysella, Tiu, and I were talking earlier—"

"Look at you," he interrupts with a smirk, "actually managing conversation with your fellow initiates."

"Oh, you're one to talk," she retorts, trying to scowl but chortling instead. They wouldn't be up on this rooftop, just the two of them, if they knew how to make other friends. "Anyway, it's sort of a personality test, according to Tiu. It's a way to figure out your priorities." Rey had answered, My quarterstaff. Jysella had answered, My family— which had made Rey feel an odd combination of poignancy and regret, that she didn't have a family to immediately think about rescuing.

Ben absentmindedly fiddles with the cuff of his sleeve. He's sixteen years old, too tall, too pale, with a scratch on his left cheek that he'd gotten earlier, from diving face-first to avoid a training droid's
laser blast. He doesn't seem like he's giving her question any serious thought, which irks her. "Well?" she demands. "What's the first thing you'd take out of your burning house?"

He regards her for a moment, all haughty dark eyes set in a mismatched array of sharp features that he hasn't quite grown into yet. Then he looks away, towards the horizon. "The fire," he says at last, voice scratchy and solemn.

Something in Rey's chest gives an almost painful twinge. She masks it with pique that she hadn't thought of such an answer first. "You think you're so smart," she seethes.

Ben snickers. She scrunches her nose at him, and then follows his gaze to the distant line of green trees and purple mountains, where the Yavin system's sun is about to set. She leans forward, just a little, and he makes an irritated noise in the back of his throat. "You really are going to break your neck, brat."

"Nah," she hums, teasing him. "You'll never let me fall."

He doesn't argue. They continue to sit there, on top of the world, surrounded by all this sleepy, mellow light. Rey thinks that, in this moment, she doesn't ever want to go back down.

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TO KINGDOM COME

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