Letters from an Apologist

by aaronBursar

Summary

Eight months after killing his father, Kylo Ren is en route to murder his mother.

If only Han Solo's ghost would stop haunting his quarters like he owned the place.
That’s not what the hero’s journey is about. It’s not to deny reason. To the contrary, by overcoming the dark passions, the hero symbolizes our ability to control the irrational savage within us.

—Joseph Campbell, The Power of Myth

The ghosts have forsaken Kylo Ren.

It isn’t his grandfather who has done this— not Lord Vader, never Lord Vader. But the Dark Side is omnipresent, and it has seen the way his heart was a bomb with a traitor’s tick when he finally ended that fool Han Solo. Lord Vader must know, as Snoke does, that he is still only the darkness of the thunderclap. A precursor of screams before some violent outbreak of light.

When this happens, his master has told him to imagine a roomful of candles, take his naked fingerpads to the wicks, and feel the exquisite burn as he snuffs each of them out. He hardly has the patience to do it. But when he manages, it is not his darkness that makes the flames go cold, but their heat that chars his fingers.

It is why he asks Lord Vader for guidance, for his blessing and his battle cry. The embers of his lightsaber guttering out along the floor are his only answer. Because he is still weak. Because he is still not enough. Because there has been another name that his traitor soul responded to.

(He hears a voice shouting across a metal canyon, and it clashes with every nuance he has ever known. It is in his ear on that smuggler’s spaceship, coarse hands guiding his to the controls; it is in front of him as that furry beast of a Wookie settles him on its shoulders, threatening pain to anyone who makes him come to harm. It is behind him now, shot through with a desperation he has never heard before. It says one word. He turns around.)

(Why does he turn around?)

“You look like you could use some fresh air, kid.”

Kylo whirls, lightsaber out and arcing before he fully makes the spin. The air in his quarters crackles with gory ozone.

He lunges at the wall; the gash bleeds hissing sparks. Another plunge guts the metal tiling apart.

“She might want to go easy there.”

Screws ping against the floor. Kylo slams his lightsaber at the gaping hole in the wall, hilt first, clenching his teeth against the crash of metal on metal. He’s snorting, breaths pounding hot and wet
against his mask, fogging his visor into a smear of red.

And yet the vision persists.

“Get out,” Kylo spits. “Or I’ll kill you again.”

From his position on Kylo’s bed, Han Solo shrugs. “That’s the problem with murdering people,” he says, propping himself farther up against the pillow with the heel of his boot. His gangly legs are crossed at the ankle. “If they come back to haunt you ‘cause they’ve got a bone to pick, you’re stuck with ‘em. Can’t off the same guy twice.”

This Han is younger than Kylo remembers, thick hair and dark eyes, body lean. He has the aquiline gaze of a keen opportunist and the expression of a rascal, appraising Kylo as he would his damned ship, looking for parts that are broken, theorizing how they might be replaced.

A savage slice of Kylo’s lightsaber eviscerates the pillow Solo sits on. Scorched feathers flutter through the air. Through their browned, blistered haze, Han still lounges in the same spot, unperturbed.

“Get out.”

Han twirls a blackened feather between thumb and forefinger. “I’m your hallucination, kid. No can do.” He looks up abruptly, motion paused. “And stop doing that.”

“Stop doing what?”

“Making me look like I’m some Rodian bounty hunter under your bed,” Han says. He morphs briefly, flickers; muted candlelight atop a steam-clung mirror. Kylo sees a shock of silver hair, cheeks fraught with a constellation of creases, before forcing himself to stop. Before forcing the trick of the Light to stop.

“You appear to me precisely as you really are, Solo,” Kylo growls, looking down at the mattress to where Han still lies, raising his eyebrows complacently. As though he’s not intimidated by him. As though he isn’t impressed by Snoke’s most gifted apprentice, by the power Kylo now wields. “If you’ve come to convince me of anything, know I will not be swayed.”

Just as he was not swayed the first time the phantom of this accursed smuggler appeared in his quarters. Or the fifth.

But Han’s eyes find his with a marksman’s precision, even through Kylo’s mask. “I’m not here to convince you of anything.” He gestures vaguely around the room with a spiraling hand. “All of this? Is self-inflicted.”

“I would never inflict myself with you.”

Solo chuckles. “Believe it or not, there was a time, kid.”

Kylo bristles, lightsaber whirring to life in his hand—but then Solo’s face is drenched in crimson light again, bathed in snow and rust again, and he flicks the lightsaber off. “Don’t call me that.”

“Hey, don’t knock it—you and that name go back a long way.” The crinkles of Solo’s eyes soften, Adam’s apple bobbing. “Back when your mom and I didn’t know what you were going to be, that’s what we called you—since she wouldn’t let me name you Chewie. Which is frankly her loss.” He pauses on the beat, waiting for a smile behind the mask that will never come; a sign of life that is no longer there. Han Solo’s cheeks sallow in the savagery of the silence. In his pain, Kylo lets down
Solo takes a deep breath before speaking again. “Look, I’m not calling you Kylo, like one of your idiot underlings. I changed your diapers, for God’s sake.” Kylo’s fists clench as he takes a step forward, stomping into Solo’s personal space. But the man looks up at him with those Starkiller eyes, honest and daring, and Kylo’s visor suddenly feels more like a muzzle than a mask. “And, dammit, you’re still my son.”

There is a palm on Kylo’s cheek again, calloused and absolving; there is a body falling beneath his feet, silhouetted against a bloody dying star.

“You’re not even here.”

Solo clicks his tongue against his teeth. “Yes and no. True, I can’t do a fancy Force ghost, but if you spend enough time around Force users, some of it rubs off. I only exist in your brain, kid—but I’m real enough there.”

He’s projecting himself into Kylo’s mind. Prodding his way through his thoughts, like some filthy… scavenger. Anger wells hotly in his throat. This is the disturbance he has felt ever since taking Solo out on Starkiller Base, askew and terrible. Solo had not been eliminated on that day. He had merely shifted tactics, has been foraging through Kylo’s mind ever since.

Kylo wonders if it would take murdering a hundred Han Solos to begin to assuage the feeling.

“I command you to leave,” he snarls.

When he looks up, Han is gone.

“General Organa is joining the attack.”

Beside him, Hux is smirking in the precise shape of a lightsaber wound. Kylo rages to oblige him.

“General Organa has always been at the forefront of the Resistance,” Kylo says instead, managing not to strangle Hux by clenching the lightsaber at his hip instead.

“She is leading the ground assault,” Snoke replies. He regards Kylo with eyes like the glittering void of hyperspace, unamused and unknowable. “Personally.”

The room scintillates with dust, brief and golden and dying. Kylo lets his anger settle on each mote as it passes; lets Snoke coil his consciousness through each bone of Kylo’s ribcage, testing the poundage and resistance of his resolve.

He welcomes the invasion. It settles in his lungs with the dark, choking burn of a forest fire.

“Tell me, General Hux,” Snoke says suddenly, and the intoxicating suffocation of his probing snaps away. Kylo finds himself taking a shuddering breath. “Do military men of your rank frequent the battle in person?”

Hux eyes Kylo scornfully before answering. “No, sir.”

Kylo swallows a scoff. Hux’s father may have been an academy commandant, leaving his son to
claw to his current position, but Kylo’s birthright has always been to a general. He knows high-ranking military protocol better than Hux’s backwater dreams could dare.

And he knows Snoke knows the same.

The Supreme Leader somehow looks down at Kylo without moving, air swirling around him with sweet malice of intent. “Now why would General Organa set foot on the field, in this most decisive battle, if her death could mean the death of the Resistance?”

Through his gloves, Kylo’s nails bite into his palms. “I don’t know, Master.”

“I am sure that you do.”

Kylo is sure that he does.

Shafts of grisy light scythe from the projector behind Snoke, mottled blue and silver. They stop at Kylo’s feet, but do not touch.

“Yes your mother has come to kill you, Kylo Ren,” Snoke says, and Kylo counts himself one of the blessed. He prays she will press the blaster muzzle to his chest, grief and fury whittling down her choices to the trigger. Joy has come to Kylo Ren at last, and it is the feeling of Leia Organa, lover of the light, leader of a thousand suns, giving up on him.

Kylo’s grip on his lightsaber tightens. “Then I will kill her first.”

Snoke is probing through his mind again, presence like the searing cold of an interstellar plain. Kylo lets him enter without resistance. The heft of his master’s roots twine against the dark rivers of his veins, skating past the barren badlands he has so dutifully cultivated to ash. See the magma where family once stood. See his total devotion where there was once only confusion and loss.

The pressure of Snoke’s invasion suddenly stops. When he speaks, his voice is hard.

“I see that your father still lives.”

A stone drops into the well of Kylo’s being. He grits his teeth, waits for the upshot of water after the projectile launches itself to the bottom, and forgets to breathe.

“He does not, Master. The entire planet was annihilated where his body lay. Where I destroyed him.”

The room is abruptly tinged with the salt-tang of sweat on metal—scent of the fastest ship in the galaxy, smell of the endless afternoons of Dagobah, hands slipping against a steel saber’s grip.

—Don’t grind the clutch, kid.

—You lack patience, Ben. Again.

And again and again, an endless orbit around the suns of things ever beyond his grasp.

When Snoke speaks next, it is as though Kylo is not wearing a mask at all. “You killed his physical form, yet I still perceive him in you. He troubles you.”

“He is but an apparition,” Kylo shoots back. Beside him, Hux raises his eyebrows, suppressing a jeer. But even that weasel wouldn’t dare openly mock the Supreme Leader’s protégé. “A trick of the Light, Master. I will not succumb.”

“The very nature of this vision suggests that you are, Ren.”
“Even Vader was tempted by the Light.”

“And to the Light he ultimately fell.” Kylo nearly steps back at the force of the echo clanging against his feet. “Your grandfather yielded to the trickery of his deceitful son in his last moments, and died in disgrace. You are not here to emulate him, Ren—you are here to surpass him. Your birthright is to win the victory he ultimately failed to achieve.”

Never before had Kylo heard Snoke speak of his grandfather so harshly. He had always been couched in jarring descriptions of influence and authority, ability on the edge of Kylo’s known world.

He had always known that Lord Vader had been tempted by the Light. It was a comfort as much as an anathema—that Kylo’s weaknesses too could one day be sutured into strength. No one else in his family had ever struggled—born prodigies, all of them, Force users and princess warriors and even simply pilots who could make the Kessel Run in twelve parsecs. They had their decided places. Only his grandfather struggled as he did; knew what it meant to be too much of one or the other to be anything at all.

He swallows hard, breaths steaming behind his mask and ricocheting back as mist against his cheeks.

Lord Vader did not find his place in the Light. He died from it.

Kylo regards his master. “Let me kill General Organa with my bare hands. I will show you that I am fully devoted—”

“—If you must,” Snoke says languidly, waving away a twist in Kylo’s chest that Kylo does not care to analyse. “I have a mission that is yet more crucial.”

“Master?”

“Bring me the scavenger, Rey.”

“She is a champion for the Resistance—completely brainwashed by the Jedi.”

“—her power is great, Ren. There is a seed of anger yet within her, ignited when Han Solo died. It can be fed. If brought over, this scavenger can be the Dark Side’s greatest asset.”

Memories of the scavenger girl are a blurred potpourri of snow. A filthy slip of a girl, staggering against the sudden glare of his lightsaber to her neck on Takodana; a desert rat, pushing him out of her mind until she tumbled through to the other side, and found what he ought to have killed her for seeing. He remembers her scream tumbling from the steel cage of Starkiller when he felled Han Solo; the sharp lash of her saber on his face. She was strong with the Force indeed. With proper training she would easily subdue him. But if he were the one to raise her as an apprentice, bring her to Snoke as his trophy, then her glories would be his, and his weakness would not be revealed.

He knew what it was to be young and untrained.

“Let me teach her,” he lowers himself to beg. He can feel the desperation in his voice, and despises himself for it.

Snoke merely looks down at him, titanic and unrelenting. “You ask me, when you are yet untaught.”

Chapter End Notes
Notes on Force Ghosts:

"Eternal life…"

"The ultimate goal of the Sith, yet they can never achieve it; it comes only through the release of self, not the exaltation of self. It comes through compassion, not greed. Love is the answer to the darkness."
The final battle is to take place on Sullust.

Kylo Ren has concluded that he is going insane.

He has decided this not because of the choice of battleground —Sullust is the First Order’s main manufacturing center— but because Han Solo knows the location before he does.

“That place is a hellworld,” Solo says as Kylo’s opponent rushes him. Kylo slams his lightsaber into the other blade, parrying in a clatter of sparks. His fellow Knight of Ren whirls back on his heel, trying to catch Kylo’s side undefended. Kylo spins in the opposite direction.

“And how would you know?” Kylo grunts. He whistles his lightsaber at his opponent’s shoulder. His subordinate hisses, Kylo’s blade gashing past cloth into flesh.

This does not overly concern Kylo. A Knight who cannot handle plain combat on the training floor will be killed on the field, as it should be. Any wounds sustained must be converted to anger; from there to power. A clean catalytic converter.

Han Solo watches the exchange with cursory interest, hand resting lightly on the blaster at his hip.

(Listen, kid, I know your uncle says that laser swords are the coolest, but in a tight spot, this baby’s what’s gonna get you out of there.)

Han is standing dangerously close to the scuffle; a few steps farther and Kylo will plow his saber right through him.

Not that he hasn’t already.

“I’ve been there a couple times,” Han says after a beat. Kylo nearly forgets what the question was. He grunts; dodges a slice aimed at his chest and pushes back against Mayfar Ren’s saber. “Sullust’s where a lot of Alderaanians ended up after the Empire destroyed your mom’s planet. Your mother met up with a lot of problems when she tried to rescue the Alderaanian colony there— thought she was trying to turn them in to the Empire. They changed their minds after she helped fight for them though,” and Han pauses, running his fingers through his hair like a scoundrel; a scoundrel utterly in love with Princess Leia Organa. “—Anyway. Point is, she took me there a few times after her peace talks. Real nice planet. Completely on fire. Everyone lives underground. She even went with you once or twice.”

Kylo’s grip blunders. Mayfar dips low, their deadlocked lightsabers sliding apart. Kylo’s upper hand disappears.

“That isn’t what I meant,” Kylo grits, scrambling back for the offensive. He’s ninety percent sure he isn’t actually talking aloud, although Mayfar might not dare comment if he was.
Sullust. Alderaanian refugees. Organa rarely spoke of them to Kylo, though he could always tell when her thoughts were there. Her back would become lily-like, canting as if under too much morning dew; eyes brimming not with tears but stardust. Her fingers would card through his hair especially softly at that. It was through her gentleness that Kylo knew when she was grieving.

She never mentioned that his grandfather held her captive, made her watch, as her people disintegrated before her eyes. Kylo had learned that later, from Skywalker. Even Solo had never breathed a word about it.

Mayfar pounces at Kylo. Kylo has just enough presence of mind to block, wrist jolting at the impact. Beside him, just out of reach, Solo still watches.

“Then what did you mean?” the dead man says.

Kylo would huff if that didn’t mean expelling necessary oxygen. His lungs are already tight and heaving. “What in the hell—” he leaps a pace backward, daring Mayfar to follow— “makes you think it’s on Sullust?” Neither he nor General Hux have been given any information pertaining to the newest conflict with the Resistance; their intelligence agents aren’t finished scouting.

Mayfar buys his bluff; charges in; Kylo plunges low, gouging his blade across Mayfar’s ankles. He catches Mayfar’s saber on the upswing with his own, thrusting it out of the way as he rises.

Solo raises his eyebrows in weathered patience, as though perusing Kylo’s thoughts and finding them lacking. Given that he is composed of Kylo’s thoughts, Kylo is not surprised. He is a remarkable facsimile. “Quit being such an egotist. I told you— spend enough time around Force users, and you can wriggle your way into their brainpans,” Han says, far too close to the trajectory of Kylo’s blade, and when Kylo pulls the hilt up and out he nearly overshoots intentionally. “I was talking to your mother.”

Kylo’s lightsaber almost flies out of his hand.

“General Organa finds it acceptable to share battle plans with the enemy?” he recovers, panting. “She’s slipping.”

“She doesn’t know,” Han says. His eyebrows draw together, hands fidgeting. “She doesn’t know that I talk to you.”

That shocks Kylo. If Solo’s ghost were actually real and speaking to General Organa, he would assume that they would spend many a weak-willed night discussing the Light, and redemption, and all the misguided saints.

He can hear Mayfar drawing quick, desperate breaths through his mask as his stamina fails. Kylo growls behind clinched teeth. Time to end it. His own shoulders ache from the battle’s heavy clashes; he siphons his pain into propellant for the killing blow.

Moments later, Mayfar clatters to his knees, Kylo’s lightsaber pointed to his throat. Kylo slashes centimeters above his neck in imitation of a death deal, a ritual well established in the combat protocol of the Order. Let Mayfar stew in the shame of how his life was spared only by the choice of his victor. Let the humiliation be nourishment for a new day’s hatred.

Solo’s ghost follows him as Kylo strides into the fresher beside the training room, seemingly oblivious to dignity or shame. If Han Solo is so desperate that he will follow him into the shower, so be it. It’s not as if the imperial barracks from the days of his early defection to the Order had any more privacy.
“Organa doesn’t know that you speak to me?” Kylo says as he removes his mask, setting it with a clank on the counter beside the sink. His dark curls fall stiffly to frame his face, crusted with sweat and salt, and he ignores the way Solo’s expression bleats with melancholy affection. He strips off his gloves; they fall with a leather patter into the sink. “What am I, your dark little secret?”

Han frowns, leaning against the black-tiled wall opposite the vanity. His boots squeak against the floor in the sterile, rubbing-alcohol scented room. “It would only upset your mother, telling her. She’s been through enough, as it is.”

Kylo sneers, glad his face is unmasked for Solo to see. He twists on the tap. Cold water plashes tinnily against the steel sink. Cupping his hands, he splashes the icy water across his face, letting it seep down his neck and soak the collar of his shirt. Beads of moisture cling to the curls above his forehead, dripping steadily onto his clavicle.

He looks Han Solo straight in the eye.

“Has she given up on me?”

Solo’s mouth falls slightly. “What?”

“Has. General Organa. Given up on me?”

There is a sudden hardness in Han Solo’s eyes that wasn’t there before; an outlaw’s steely challenge. For the first time in a long time, Kylo understands the dangers of crossing a princess general of a lost planet and her rogue, insufferable knight. “Not a chance—and she’s coming for you, kid. Whether you like it or not.”

iv.

They are dispatched to Sullust, as promised.

“You don’t seem surprised,” Hux says as he readies his troops in the unloading bay, checking for secured guns, pulling down ruffled uniforms with prim fingers. Kylo briefly wishes Hux were Force-sensitive, just so that he could convey his disdain without the effort of speaking. His lip curls at Hux anyway, the gesture swallowed by his mask.

“Sullust is an obvious enough choice,” Kylo answers, casting a glance to survey his own Knights of Ren. They stand, jagged scraps of shadow at the far end of the bay, clustering behind a column of Stormtroopers ten phalanxes long. There are only thirteen in total, hand plucked by Snoke and himself to resurrect the Dark religions and act as the First Order’s black operations. “It was almost guaranteed that the Resistance would one day attempt to cut off Sullust from the Sanctuary Pipeline.”

Once a highly encrypted Imperial hyperspace route, the Sanctuary Pipeline had been responsible for shuttling Imperial military manufactures from Sullust to the farthest reaches of the Outer Rim in the days of the Empire. It still remains the Order’s main transport route, from its primary manufacture hub on Sullust to the rest of its territories; the Rebels had intercepted it during Organa’s and Solo’s time, in order to secret their fleet to Endor. The route was currently maintained through scandalously expensive technology—kept by the Order through a series of heavy encryptions, impossible for unauthorized ships to enter.

Hux harrumphs. “There are more Order routes than just Sanctuary, and far less encrypted.”
“Yes, there are many routes the Rebels could have chosen— and likely will, given opportunity,” Kylo says tersely. To his eternal displeasure, Hux makes no move away when he sweeps into his personal space. “But Sanctuary remains the most significant, and unpopulated entirely by surface civilians. The Resistance will do whatever it can to make a clean fight.”

“How very pure of them,” Hux says, leaning back only far enough to place his hand cat-like against the hangar wall. “But I suppose you’d know all about how they think— didn’t Mummy and Daddy get together at the Battle of Endor, nearly thirty years ago? How old are turning this year, again?”

Kylo grinds his fist, the Force surging within him. Hux splutters, the tips of his boots trailing the ground in a dull squeal. Gurgling echoes against the steel of the hangar. It is only when Kylo can distinctly see the bubbles in Hux’s spluttering spit that he lets him go.

“We’ll confer after the battle, General,” he growls, marching off to join his Knights.

He may or may not pay for that move later, he thinks as he stumps away. As a Knight of Ren, he isn’t part of the Order’s military hierarchy, but whether Snoke finds his antics an exemplary use of hatred or childishly destructive greatly depends on the outcome of his upcoming performance.

Abruptly, a shudder cuts through the ship, thrumming through his bones as the Finalizer readies to land. Behind him, his Knights are rearing on their heels, gloved hands to saber hilts. They have their orders. Find and eliminate the underground rebels. Annihilate any who near the Pipeline’s controls. Capture the Scavenger.

And Kylo’s personal directive: Eliminate Leia Organa.

Kylo is the first of his Knights to step onto the crackling, shimmering world of Sullust. The volcanic planet is shellacked with gleaming black obsidian, pulsing with plumes of ash and veins of fire. The smell of cinder sneaks into the weave of his robes, beneath his helmet and into his hair. The sun is not strong enough to reach past the cloud cover in more than a weak trickle. Perpetual sundown on the planet of indecision.

Kylo Ren feels right at home.

The Knights disperse at his command, lightsabers nearly invisible against the hellfire landscape. Behind his mask, Kylo bares his teeth, stalking towards the gaping hole fifty paces in front of him: a landing pad carved into the bedrock, leading to the buried tunnels of Sullust proper. They hadn’t landed there so as not to tip off the Resistance; now, Stormtroopers flood the chasm in an angry, white tide.

Whether he’s after the scavenger girl or General Organa is irrelevant. He knows where either of them are likely to be, or are heading towards.

The Sanctuary Pipeline Command Room.

Kylo picks through his memory of attack site schematics, rifling through city streets and canals as his boots crack over the glinting basalt, saber electrified and swinging in his grip. The charged thrum buzzes headily in his ears, landing pad yawning below him; he takes a running leap into the abyss. As he plummets, he thrusts his conscious out, yanks himself up, and lands without breaking stride on the helipad.

Violent thumps crash in the air. A Stormtrooper is hacking at an entryway door with a mace, flakes of rusted paint flying through the smog in a grimy rain. Kylo thrusts out his arm; the door implodes.
A gaggle of Sullustans face him on the other side, festooned with blasters. Kylo tears through them before they can finish their war cry, blood sizzling on his blade. He shicks the gore from his hilt and presses further into the corridor. The shale walls reek of sulfur and bile.

The Command Room is buried deep in the Admin Sector, an austere grid of steel and stone far away from the plate faults that fuel the surface volcanoes. All signals that grant permission to enter the encrypted Pipeline, all S-thread boosters that create and bolster Sanctuary against the strain of hyperspace, originate in that single room.

It's run primarily by First Order troops, Kylo knows, along with several Sullustan loyalists. If the Resistance had found a chink in its defenses, a Sullustan rat is behind it.

(FN-2187 is the one responsible for assisting the pilot Poe Dameron, Phasma says, voice crisp and uninflected behind her helmet. He showed no previous signs of nonconformity.

*Kylo stands, gathered with the Captain and General Hux aboard the bridge of The Finalizer. A rare facsimile of functionality, inspired by their shared failure that is FN-2187’s treason. One of their own, turning against a lifetime of child-soldiered loyalty, two-hundred thousand hours of predisposition for the Dark. Hux had trained him. Kylo had watched him refuse to fire. Phasma had scheduled remediation instead of immediate execution.*

*And Snoke’s lightning scorching through all three of their brainstems made their fourth failure.*)

Chapter End Notes

The Alderaan Enclave.
Even before blasting the Command Room door open, Kylo knows that General Organa is not in the room beyond. He has not felt for her Force signature in over a decade. Not since he was a boy febrile with Light-dreams, left brittle and bleached by their brilliance.

Don’t look directly at the sun, they told him, and were surprised when he turned his back completely.

But looking for her is like searching for a hydrogen line, tamping his finger on the pulse of the universe. Her presence comes easily; rests, like the hazy cloak of an atmosphere, in the deepest valleys of his consciousness.

She’s several levels above him, fighting her way to where he is.

Kylo curls his lip. Force energy wells in his chest like a great, gurgling sinkhole, and with it, he collapses the five-inch steel door in front of him into a shrieking twist of crumpled metal. The room seethes with clattering boots as he stomps over the threshold, the orange jumpsuits and earthy uniforms of Resistance fighters clashing against the cool grey of hundreds of computer terminals. It’s nothing more than a hole carved out of the planetary mantle— a ceiling, floor, and walls of polished basalt, rowed with computers and input consoles. He kicks the corpse of a white-carapaced Stormtrooper to make passage, lightsaber roaring.

Blaster fire shrills in his ears. Kylo raises his hand, clenches it; the shots halt in midair. He shoves them back in the direction of fire; three men clutching blasters crumple to the floor. There are around twenty Resistance fighters in the spacious control bunker, some hysterically plunking at console buttons for encryption keys, others merely shooting at screens and memory banks in a clutter of laser beams and sparks.

Though the Resistance officers are mostly true military stock, and their aerial fighters can occasionally give Hux apoplexy (the only thing Kylo would thank them for), Resistance fighters on the ground are rarely that trained. A ragtag revolution cannot afford to be picky in who it accepts. Cannot choose who is sent to die.

They are children with barely a few years’ blaster training, and General Organa has sent them to slaughter.

Crouching behind a computer terminal, an orange-clad fighter aims his laser-pistol forward. Kylo slaps the bolt down with the force of a premonition, darting forward to scythe his blade through the man’s chest. Five more rebels are hunkering down between the same rows of computers, caught attempting to find a place from which to snipe him. But the quarters are close, and Kylo’s saber is wider than the aisle is. He skewers them all in three clawed swipes. The air fireworks with the ripe tang of intestines.

The rest of the room falls soon after.

The Control Room has been secured, Kylo projects to his Knights. He can sense acutely where each
is, eddying whorls of darkened dust amidst the clean lines of the Force. *I need a team of three to guard it.*

He stands near the door as he waits for his backup, saber still blaring at his side. It is as close as he manages to meditation, the hum of his blade rippling in the pond of heady, unholy stillness that fills the rooms where his lightsaber rises and falls. Kylo isn’t inclined to introspection. But in times like this he has been commanded to feel, to taste the anger and the murder and to know that it is good. In his total lack of inhibition, he brushes against the power of all things. It is a shot straight to the head. A reminder, of why. A numbing agent, against—

*You know,* someone says.

But Han Solo isn’t in the room.

Mayfar Ren strides in a moment after, gloved hand still taut against the hilt of his disengaged lightsaber. “Master.”

Kylo lets out a breath. “Where are the reinforcements?”

Mayfar’s head gives a taut, deferential bow, barely visible from the obscurity of his hood and helmet. “Coming, Master.”

“Has the scavenger been captured?” he asks after. To what end, he doesn’t know. It takes only a quick skim of the Force, a dab of his hand against the water’s skin, to know that she has not. She’s fighting deep below him, what must be miles away in a transport shaft. They had pushed too hard into the windows of each other’s minds that day in the interrogation room. Now their glass is embedded in the other’s palms.

Mayfar gives the anticipated response. “No, Master.”

“And General Organa?” This answer requires less than the Force. It only needs knowledge of her. “No, Master.”

Kylo feels her, pattering in his mind, unbidden and unwelcome. A will-o-the-wisp like those that hazed over the marshes of Dagobah, violent-white in its serene intensity. Uninsistent that it be seen, and therefore impossible not to see.

“She’s coming,” Kylo says. His complete certainty does not adequately survive his mask’s vocoder. “Here. General Organa is planning on taking the Command Room herself.”

Mayfar merely nods, readying his lightsaber in hand. The called-for Knights filter into the room in the span of a minute, death-whispers of cloak and saber. The door meant to barricade the chamber lies decimated by Kylo’s blast; Kylo orders his men into a loose formation at every focal point in the room, ready for invasion from anywhere. General Organa is a foolish, backwards woman. But she is not an idiot, and Kylo does not necessarily discount miracles when it comes to her finding another way into the room besides its only door.

“The General is coming alone,” Kylo says again, voice cutting across the walls. A few Knights start at that; Kylo draws air sharply through his teeth to call them back to focus. “She is a Skywalker, despite her name. Her family is strong with the Force, and I can feel it emanating from her. You would be wise to hone your skills if you cannot do the same.”

He’s unsure why he said that. A brief, scaldingly sincere desire rushes through him that any Knight to feel her as crisply as he does lose a limb shortly after.
“She will be coming for the controls,” Kylo continues. “You will not let her at them. You will not kill her unless she tries something. There is information we must extract from her before we end her miserable life, given that she is undoubtedly the orchestrator of this paltry attack. She is a diplomat first and a military woman second— it is likely she will try to talk her way out before firing.”

*You talk as though you know her*, the Knight to Kylo’s right snarks in his mind.

“I talk as one who has studied my adversary,” Kylo snarls aloud, reeling towards the offender. “Or are you so incompetent that you think ‘knowing thy enemy’ is merely advice and not necessity?”

The Knight’s head bobs shallowly. “No, Master.”

He can feel her again, a thrumming finger tap against the iced lakes of his perceptions. General Organa is drawing nearer.

He senses that she’s stopped as he stands square-stanced in the open doorway. The General’s presence is close enough now for them all to feel her, a calm fury, making her way to the Command Room. But there is an undercurrent of something, like root laid beneath soil, that underscores the motion.

He’s the first to see her. He wonders if she will recognize him, a faceless villain in a line of faceless villains. In answer, a ginger, probing presence climbs the vertebrae of his spine and remains there.

They don’t make eye contact— cannot, through the chromium tint of his visor. That she can’t look him in the eye and see for herself the death of all she had hoped is more biting than spite, and he latches onto the feeling with ravenous teeth.

“You’ve come alone, General Organa,” he says.

She starts imperceptibly at the sound of his mangled, mechanical voice, but when he returns to savor her expression of betrayal, it’s already gone.

He was slightly taller than her then. He towers over her now, the crown of her head reaching inches below his chin. But her height makes no mark upon her stature, and when she looks directly into the faceplate of his mask, she is every bit a queen.

“I’m not alone. I have the entire might of the Resistance with me.”

Kylo scoffs. “And yet I see no one. There is no one,” he adds with cold conviction, because the Force tells him it is so. Fighting has erupted along the streets of the Admin Sector, the Resistance desperately vying to regain entry to the Command Room. The First Order has yet to capitulate their higher ground.

Organa merely tightens her lips, raising her chin higher. Gossamer wrinkles, ones that he does not remember being there before, accompany her eyes. “I have all the army I need.”

Kylo isn’t certain if this is a veiled invitation or not.

“You are suicidal, and you will submit to interrogation or die where you stand.”

A flash of anguish like shared memory skates across Organa’s face, and Kylo recalls old tales of Force bonds so deep that wounds were shared. Obviously not deep enough, just as it had never been deep enough— else she would have been dead eight months ago, and all his weaknesses severed.

Organa rights herself quickly, looking hard at him as she straightens.
“I see,” she says, and there is no hesitancy in her voice. “Then I’m sorry about this. Truly.”

Kylo has no time to ask what she means. In the hallway, someone throws off a Force cloaking technique with all the power of a Jedi command, Kylo roars his lightsaber to action, Organa chasmed and scarlet before it, and wishes for the fear in her face that doesn’t come.

Chaos reigns as Rey bursts into view.

vi.

They outnumber the rebels two-to-one.

It doesn’t feel like it.

Rey tears into the room like a sandstorm, brilliant and scintillating. Tendrils of stray hair whip across her cheeks as she thrusts her lightsaber in front of her, a dazzling emerald saberstaff that paints the room like a forest floor. She takes a deep, stabilizing breath before launching herself at the Knight beside Kylo, who hauls his saber to hers with a guttural cry. But double-bladed lightsabers are fast in the right hands; in close quarters, one careless Knight with a single-blade saber could find himself losing a hand.

Behind Kylo’s mask, a cauterized scar aches.

Damn Organa. She isn’t the priority here. By Snoke’s own orders, the scavenger is, and she’s fighting like a demon fresh from a hell Kylo would like to have come from. Skywalker wasted no time with her— what need did he have to waste time with her, a naturally gifted prodigy who so easily gravitated towards the Light?

“You!” Rey spits. Kylo lunges at her. She dodges by an inch. His saber plunges into the metal wall behind her—the next spin of her staff knocks his blade away. Beside him, Mayfar strikes to her sides, but can’t gain purchase amidst the furious twirl of her lightsaber. Her booted feet skid backwards. A metallic whuff. Her back, colliding with the wall.

Backed into a corner.

“Me,” Kylo growls. A din of shots pings behind him. Organa, fighting off two Knights with a blaster. She won’t last long. He turns his head roughly to the Knight fighting Rey beside him. “Go. Get Organa.” The weakness rises again. He rethinks, swallows hard. “And kill her.”

Rey’s eyes glint as she steals a panicked glance at the General, still standing feet-planted by the doorway. She’s been unable to make it much farther into the room, with three Knights of Ren upon her.

Rey is using the corner as a shield, saberstaff twisting in front of her so quickly that she’s momentarily untouchable on all three sides. In true Jedi fashion, she’s reverted to the defensive, playing the long game until Kylo’s offensive stabs leave him open, until her pointless wavering leaves her weak.

“You coward,” she spits. Oh, she could so easily fall to the Dark. So easily eclipse him. “Kill her yourself! Don’t just hire your lackeys to do your dirty work! Look her in the eyes and kill her, if you’re truly so far gone!”
She dodges a lash. Her ribs slam against the wall. The acrid scent of charred wool rises from his robes.

“How that woman dies is not my concern, as long as she’s dead,” Kylo hisses as they stalemate once again.

A flash of animal rage washes over Rey’s face, and suddenly she’s one step forward, two steps forward, saber slashing so close to Kylo’s face he can almost hear his mask’s enamel crackling. His body whirls into the defensive before he consciously registers it. The back of his eyelids are mottled with the afterimage of furious green light.

“This is terribly violent, coming from Skywalker’s Padawan,” he says as Rey swipes at his shoulder. “Far be it from me to condemn your hatred. Give in to it, Scavenger. You hate me. And if you kill me—”

Rey grunts as she ducks beneath Kylo’s stab, embers fluttering in her hair. “Don’t flatter yourself. I’m not doing this for you.” Her swing picks up speed. “Giving into hatred is a—”

“—path to the Dark Side, yes,” he taunts as he catches the blow. “Do tell me the tired line again. Has Luke Skywalker told you to parrot it?”

A laser blast erupts at the wall behind Rey, forcing them both to duck.

It hardly takes a prod of the Force for Kylo to know that the Organa is somewhere to his back, letting loose a volley of shots that are rapidly going wild, rebounding from wall to wall in the tightly enclosed room. At first, he imagines she’s going senile. Then, he sees her strategy. Against three Knights of Ren, her only option is to subdue them with a barrage of rapid-fire missiles, forcing them to deflect her blasts with their sabers instead of coming at her with them.

More fire pings around the room. Kylo nearly escapes a severed forearm. Either she’s losing concentration, or she’s hoping for a stray shot to catch one of the Knights by surprise.

But she can’t last forever.

Kylo and Rey both know it.

Organa pants, just under the edge of hearing. He imagines a single singed hair fluttering to the ground.

Sweat trickles down Kylo’s spine as he and Rey face another deadlock. He’s moving twice as fast as her, forced to stave off two blades for his one, breath coming ragged as if punched from his body.

The pair of them jolt at the exact same time.

“They’re going to kill her,” Rey says as she steals a look over his shoulder. Her voice is laced with abject urgency, abject fear. “They’re really going to kill her.”

Her lightsaber clicks abruptly off. A cheap and dangerous trick— and the gaping hole where her saber used to be causes Kylo to overbalance. She launches a panicked kick at his ribs.

He grunts, pain lancing through his chest. Rey dodges through the gap between his arm and the floor in a mad dash to reach Organa. Kylo slashes downward at her with his blade.
She shrieks, blood slicking her shoulder. But by the time Kylo rights himself, she’s slipped through, in an animal need to protect the woman behind her.

Kylo Ren has never truly hated Rey, despite his adversary’s beliefs. Not when she invaded his mind in the interrogation room. Not when she stole his grandfather’s saber in the snow. Not when she refused his offer to teach her, and scarred his face. She was one of the only Force users left in the galaxy who had the hope of levelling him. Who had the hope of beating him. He imagined her falling to the Dark Side, perfect in her whole corruption, where his own was so piecemeal. An apprentice worth training— and when the servant slayed the master, a death worth dying.

Now, she is filled with nothing but love and loyalty to Leia Organa, and Kylo despises her for the way he sees the General reaching back.

“Get off her!” Rey screams. Organa still stands by the doorway, the Knights in a semicircle around her, deflecting her furious fire. Rey dashes towards the nearest Knight, yelping under her breath as his saber slams against her own and she’s forced to parry with her bad shoulder.

“Rey!” Organa’s voice filters past the throng of Knights. “Forget about me! Get to the control panel!”

Rey’s shrill is hoarse. “I’m not going to—”

(Leave you, the boy's mother says, thin fingers threading through his wild hair. Not forever. Not for long.

A tall, robed figure stands behind them. All three of them share the same eyes. Only two of them share the same forced destiny.

You’re afraid of me, he says. She shakes her head, even as the cant of her eyelids betrays her. The wind ruffles his thick curls. Her own braid, always so perfect, stays in place.

I’m afraid of the lengths some people are going to go to take you for themselves, she replies in her diplomat’s way, firm and soft and truthful all at once.

You’re hiding me away, the boy says.

Like my own heart, she answers.)

Kylo sees the top of Organa's head between the shoulders of the Knights of Ren. And then, quite suddenly, she’s gone.

The Knights descend on her in a shadow swarm, lightsabers blazing like the bloody light of an eclipse. He hears her cry as her palms collide with the floor. She’s panting heavily, without crying out, refusing to yield. A Knight readies his saber to tear through her chest.

Distantly, he hears Rey scream.

Distantly, he feels Organa stiffen.

But the heat of his blade as he slaughters his Knights to get to the General is the most distant sensation of them all.

Chapter End Notes
Aaand the great Skywalker therapy session begins...
There’s a lightsaber in his back.

Kylo feels it vaguely, like the sting of alcohol after being surgically spliced apart.

“You...you...” someone splutters behind him, voice hazed behind the blur of a lightsaber. Copper-penny bright. Coruscanti, inexplicably, sanded roughly by years on Jakku.

Rey.

The world clicks into focus slowly. He’s on his hands and knees above someone, fallen as though to shield them with his body. Slick obsidian walls loom beside him. Fluorescent lights glare above him.

And below him, caged and alive beneath his protective tangle of his limbs, is General Leia Organa.

A guttural gurgle sounds between his teeth as Rey thrusts her lightsaber from his back. He isn’t coughing blood. She must have missed his lungs.

“Did you just save her?” Rey demands, though Kylo cannot see her face from behind, and couldn’t answer the question if he could.

He can only see Leia Organa.

The loose hair of her coronet braid whispers against the floor in an autumnal halo, the only crown she had ever worn or ever had need of wearing. She’s pushing slow, recovering breaths through her nose, eyes desperately scrabbling for purchase on something above her. Like trying to stay standing on an inverted pane of glass.

A second later, he realizes that she’s looking at his mask.

Looking for him.

His vision goes ragged before he blacks out.

Someone is stroking his pulse line with their thumb, smoothing the hollow of his wrist like a rosary. He cannot tell if they are praying for his life.

He lays with his back against a table, the cool metal biting through the weave of his cloak. The room is silent, save for the rustle of clothing against a chair; the vague space-shanty hum of a ship drawn skywards.

“Don’t move,” a soft, commanding voice says; hesitates, hitches a breath. “For the love of...please, Ben, just don’t move.”

He tries to lash out, but finds himself helpless. Manacles bite into his wrists and ankles. His eyes fly open. The face of Leia Organa peers down at him from a chair at his side, expression at once pained and unreadable.
“It’s the anaesthetics,” Leia supplies in a distant voice. Kylo recognizes it well. The tone was custom when Han Solo was away on a smuggling job, after a spat or otherwise, and she didn’t want anyone to pin her emotions on the subject. If she could ever place them herself. “Not paralysis from your injury. They had to put you under to heal you. Afterwards, we all decided it would be safer if we kept a small dosage in your system. It does something to Force sensitives, keeps them from contacting it more than marginally.”

Kylo takes a deep breath, hot air streaming through his nose. It blows across his face and dissipates.

“You’re afraid that I’m going to destroy you,” he says, voice alarmingly hoarse and unsteady. It has been years since he’s felt such a profound lack of physical pain, perhaps more. “You chained me up. You’re poisoning me.”

Leia looks at him somberly, more courageous now, and splays her slight, uncompromising fingers along the length of his forearm. It feels like someone holding him back. From what, he doesn’t know. “Because I’m afraid that you’re going to destroy yourself.”

Kylo growls. Amidst the waning anaesthetic, it comes keen and paltry. The light from the overhead incandescents is so bright he’s forced to squint.

“Where are we?” he manages to spit instead, craning his neck as far as his restraints allow.

Leia straightens, taking on the professional lilt Kylo is more accustomed to hearing from her, in these years since everything changed. It’s much easier for them both. “A spare room aboard my ship. I couldn’t manage to convince them to let you stay in the med bay.” She gestures to the contraption of steel and rough blankets that amount to his cot. It’s strongly reminiscent of the old interrogation tables on Starkiller, and he wonders, vaguely maliciously, if Rey would be amused. “We’ll transfer you to a proper bed once we get back to base.”

“A shackled bed,” Kylo snarls. Brilliant flecks shimmer behind his eyes at the motion. Grudgingly, he lowers his head back down to the table. “And from there to what? The firing squad?”

Leia’s face grows dark for a moment, the stars of her eyes and mouth the only thing grounding her expression from an otherwise fearful blankness. She is, ever so briefly, Darth Vader’s daughter. “That’s entirely your choice, Ben.”

Her hand is still on his arm. It’s so much smaller than he remembers. The pressure still as constant. When he tries to scoop into his carefully dug wells of hatred, there is only hallucination; a foreign sense of vertigo. The anaesthetics, surely. The Light, still keeping him muzzled. Quieted. Pared down into submissive silence.

It seems that it is not done trying to strip everything from him.

“That’s not my name,” he bites out. The ceiling stares back. "I'm not staying here. Nothing has changed.”

Leia says nothing. Her hand hesitates above Kylo’s face. The touch along his nerve-deadened scar is delicate and fleeting, like a sandpiper chasing seafoam.

It lingers long after her fingers leave.

Hours melt into days melt into the eternal desert gaze of the overhead lights.
He feels, rather than sees, Rey enter the room.

“Come to gawk?” he says. Someone had given him a thin pillow in one of his rare moments of unconsciousness, providing his gaze with a few inches of elevation against the table. Even so, he can hardly see her over the contours of his own body.

Rey pads towards him with a quiet born of sand dunes, presence louder in the Force than in the room, despite the anaesthetics. Her shoulder is wound with fresh bandages, stark white against the tan of her robes. He’d forgotten that he’d managed to score a mark on her, and wonders whether it will scar.

“No,” she answers, voice flattened into the flippant, distanced tone common to Jedi. It is likely to disguise the fact that she wants to deck him. He would welcome the punch; anything that came edged with pain, instead of this castrated, artificial numbness. “Come to guard.”

A chair creaks as she sits down beside his prison rig, three armspans away and clutching the hilt of her saberstaff. His own lightsaber’s whereabouts are unknown. As soon as they discover that it’s powered by a cracked kyber crystal, Kylo knows they will destroy it. As is the Jedi code for the discovery of any imperfections.

“They sent you to guard me?” His voice is tinny and cracked to his own ears; a side effect of his permanent state of hallucinatory dehydration.

And the Resistance said they didn’t torture prisoners of war.

Rey raises her eyebrows in challenge, the glint of phantom snow wisping in her hair. “Are you saying I’m not good enough for the great Kylo Ren? I seem to remember him offering to teach me, nearly a year ago.” Her grip shifts on her lightsaber, and Kylo flinches; but she’s merely pointing the inactivated hilt at him, talking as if scolding a child. “I beat you on Starkiller, and I’ll do it again.”

If he weren’t strapped to a table, he would have loomed over her.

“And my offer to teach you still stands.”

The cuffs clinking against his wrists, latching him to the table, are hardly a point in his persuasion. But she will fall eventually, like the culling of comets in their orbits. She will sicken of the Light’s deceit and denial. The Dark does not try to quash emotion; does not begrudge the man who wishes to make something of himself. It is cutting and it is ambitious, but it is honest in its intentions. He has never gotten a straight answer from a Jedi.

Even if he has only known one.

He turns his head to face Rey, who has since replaced her saber at the clip on her side. “And that isn’t what I meant.”

The scavenger purses her lips. “What is it that you meant, then?”

He refuses to break eye contact in a way he hopes will unsettle her. Rey merely blinks. “I was referring to the prudence of putting two hugely Force-sensitive individuals in close proximity when their shared history is...less than ideal.”

She hawks a scoff in the back of her throat. “You’d offer to train a student you despise?”
“Of course,” he says plainly, though he doesn’t.

Rey’s hands are tracing the divots of her lightsaber, clipped nails sketching the hilt with a knowing, engineer’s touch. Her absent expression says that she’s unaware of this.

“I suppose that follows,” she says, and it’s the closest Kylo’s ever heard to Rey agreeing with him. “The Dark is based on hatred, after all.”

She pauses for a moment in inspection of him, of his fall to his knees in the Command Room and the scar lancing his back as the proof of it. He would crush the side of the room inward and crash all the lights into darkness if only it meant blinding himself to the progression of her expressions: a flash of confused sympathy, like a starved desert root reaching out; then repugnance, then nothing.

So many people have reached out. He cut each one down where they stood.

But Rey isn’t grossly sentimental like Skywalker; or Solo and Organa. She knows where they both stand, and it’s on opposite ends of a divide cracked by the wrath of a dying planet.

Still, she stares at him.

“Don’t presume to know my thoughts, Scavenger,” he says darkly.

She crosses her arms. “And don’t presume to know mine.”

There is no persistent, weeding pressure to indicate that she’s attempting to rifle through his mind. Crushed under the weight of the med bay’s potent painkillers, he can feel the Force only dimly, and would be powerless to fight against her invasion if she gave one. That she doesn’t feels less like a courtesy and more like she wants nothing to do with him.

“Don’t call me that, either,” Rey says after the indeterminate seconds have fled. The prow of her inflection pushes sharply downward, as though Kylo is catching only the smoke of a train of thought that has passed through the hills in silence.

Kylo narrows his eyes. “Don’t call you what?”

“Scavenger’, as if that’s the only thing there is to know about me. My name is Rey.” Even without the press of mind reading, Kylo can still see the island she inhabits, alone but for the sea spray and the rusted scent of desolation. “Everyone calls me that as though it’s supposed to mean something. As though surviving every day of my life scrounging in the dirt makes me something else, something other than who I’ve always been. I survived. I lived.” She reaches to tear at her hair in frustration, but her fingers meet against the bound row of buns, and she sets her hands back down with a huff. Her chin is tilted at the floor in defiance. "That's more than my parents ever wanted."

It takes five breaths before the scavenger—Rey—seems to realize what she’s said. And who she’s said it to.

Her face blanches, sun-flecked freckles cast in fierce relief against the sudden whiteness of her cheeks. She frantically shakes her head, closing her eyes sharply. “I mean— that is to say—”

“I know,” he says.

(Don’t be afraid. I feel it too.)

Rey blinks. “What?”
He can’t sense anything under these stupefying painkillers. There is no Force. There is no Light. There are no broken ribs or mangled spines to draw strength and sustenance from. He reaches out to the Dark Side, tries to find the dusty interstellar clouds that block the starlight, and comes up equally short.

“Loving people you shouldn't,” he clarifies, uncertain of why he does. It will all come to nothing when he escapes from here, to return to his rightful place at Snoke’s side. “People who never loved you.”

Rey says nothing. Her throat works for a brief moment, eyes fluttering closed.

He does not see her on guard duty for the next two nights.

viii.

It has been nine days since his capture. The rotating sentries refuse to tell him anything, but he manages to get the date from Rey, who has since abdicated her official guard duty for reasons she does not tell and he does not ask. She has taken to replacing his appointed guards at random times, whether out of whimsy or vice.

He was released from his shackled bed on the fourth day, when dehydration rent coruscating patterns of hallucination behind his eyelids. Ties to the Force still cut by his daily injection of numbing narcotics had left Kylo unable to channel the impetus of his dying into some form of productive wrath; gave him nothing to focus on but the clarity of his organs shutting down.

But it seems that even spurned generals cannot move themselves to let his own body kill him.

A journey from Sullust to D’Qar takes only a few days. He has been here, trapped in a jury-rigged spaceship cell, for over a week. Two options present themselves, both leaving bloody scores in his knuckles as he pounds out his thoughts against the walls: either the Resistance is too fearful to move him, or General Organa is trying to bury him. Her dark, shameful conflict of interest.

The metal walls shudder as he drives his fist against them.

His prison is the same room as before, though he walks around unshackled. Any attempt to escape is blocked by the poisonous cocktail of Force-dulling drugs injected during his rare states of unconsciousness, making bioscanning locks nearly impossible to Force-finesse. He clenches his teeth, mostly out of habit, a futile effort to invoke real pain. It’s been over a dizzying week since he’s felt true agony. Even beating the stitches against his back have done nothing but earn contempt from the doctors who are ordered to suture him back up again.

There is a stirring behind him.

“Seems like Snoke’s not coming back for you anytime soon, kid,” a voice says. “Your mother hasn’t gotten a peep from the First Order.”

Kylo doesn’t have to turn around to know that it’s Solo, perched jauntily atop the medical table that
served both as Kylo’s prison and bed. Kylo has taken to spending nights on the floor to avoid the humiliation of sleeping there after being released from its restraints.

He doesn’t have time for this.

He has all the time in the world.

“Of course he isn’t,” Kylo replies. He turns on his heel, balling up his fists in his robes. “Master Snoke does not dabble in apprentices who cannot escape their captors. He does not humor weakness.”

It has been days since he last felt his master rooting through his brain, directing what to think and how to think it—a presence he’s felt, to varying degrees, since he was a child. The absence has left his mind running through the hinterlands, weed and bramble rioting in forbidden, stolen need. He tries to draw the thistles close, let their thorns bleed him, but his gloves have disappeared along with his mask and he cannot cinch them closed without running his fingers through to the sinew.

His ability to escape from the Resistance is a test of his ability, he gathers, that Snoke has decided to allow. Otherwise, he would be dead, or strung up on the floor in gripping agony.

The smuggler grunts noticeably as he shifts himself in his seat—age, and Kylo’s memory, having finally caught up to him. “I told you,” Solo says. There none of the smug smugglers’ cant in his voice, so common to memory. It is as unadorned as the base on which he died. “That when he used you up, he’d crush you.”

A vein pops in Kylo’s jaw.

Does Solo imagine that he doesn’t know that? That he was merely a misguided child pushed to the Dark Side, unaware of what it would demand and what it would cost him?

A Sith’s second chance is a slit throat. The foolish little idiot he had been had needed those margins of error.

He had felt everything strongly as a child. Every nuance, every shade. The old Jedi texts had called it an evil. Hypersensitivity to the world was attachment to the world; was a path to the Dark Side.

*Let it go, if it’s causing you pain,* Skywalker would tell him in his insufferable, mystic’s way, but Kylo knew the translation. Rip everything you are to pieces. Tear everything you love to shreds. The Dark Side has never asked that of him, he thinks.

But then Han Solo clears his throat.

“You okay there, kid? Need some water? I mean, not that I can *get* the water for you, being a ghost and all, but I can direct you to a tap—”

“Stop,” Kylo grits out. The room seethes beneath him. He’s trying not to collapse on the floor, trying not to burn a hole through the walls, trying not to hear anything behind his eardrums but the tick of twenty-nine years gone by and nothing at all to show for it.

In the corner of his eye, he sees Han eye him bewilderedly, reach out a hand for his shoulder.

“Just *stop,*” Kylo says, throwing off Han Solo’s arm. He stomps into the older man’s face, so close that he sees stubble and dried aftershave. “Stop trying to parent me. Stop trying to make up for lost time. Why is it that you’re only interested in the intricacies of fatherhood now that you’re *dead!*”
He exhales, the effort rattling through his lungs, his entire body shuddering.

Kylo isn’t sure if Solo speaks, or if it’s merely a whisper behind his eardrum.

“You know, when your mom told me she was pregnant with you, I remember the first thing I said,” he says. Kylo stiffens, tries to walk away, but the voice follows him wherever he turns and he’s left staring, shaking, at the face of Han Solo. “It probably wasn’t the best thing to have opened my big mouth with, but I did it anyway. I told her, ‘I’m not cut out to be a dad. I don’t have it in me.’ And your mother said the same. That she couldn’t be a mom, wasn’t soft enough or some bullshit. We were young, you know. Dumb.” His course-hewn lips curve into a fond, reminiscent smile, and he roughs a hand through his hair. “Well, I was. Your mom’s always been brilliant.”

Kylo opens his mouth to retort, but Han’s suddenly authoritative stare pins him down.

“I know your mom and I fought. And maybe it would have been better if we’d split up way back when, if we could just stand the thought of the other seeing someone else. But love’s like getting randomly searched when you’re making a smuggling run, kid. It just happens. I loved your mother. Still do. And we made the decision that we were going to stick it out with the whole kid deal. We tried to do what was best for you.”

“You. Tried.” Kylo repeats in stunned slowness. There is no such thing as trying. There is doing, or there is not doing. Kylo’s breathing too loudly to think much upon where he was first told such a thing.

Han lets out an exasperated sigh, wrinkles deepening as he breathes, and the rakish smell of aftershave gives way to the cold, absent scent of the tomb. He is so much older than Kylo’s involuntary reminiscences, and Kylo cannot name the age he trapped him in with any certainty.

“Yeah,” Solo says. His voice is ragged. “I tried. But I always ran from my problems, and your mom was the sort to put them in a sealed room and command a fleet to firebomb them…” He sighs deeply, as if remembering himself. “What I’m trying to say here is that I admit it. We weren’t perfect parents — hell, we weren’t perfect people. I ran away from it all when you turned to the Dark Side, and that’s on me. And I wish every day I’d done more to pull you back.”

“There’s no such thing as regret. Only wasting time on what can never come to pass,” Kylo growls. He realizes a second too late where the first quote came from, an old mantra of Skywalker’s when Kylo was still his Padawan, and slams his fist into the metal table—a deafening *crack* as he dislodges bone. Han Solo’s ghost hardly flutters as Kylo mauls his knuckles straight through him.

Kylo crashes the table into a wall with a deafening bang.

“Calm down, Ben,” Solo says, and the name from his lips is his undoing.

Kylo’s hands snap around his lapels. He’s in no state of mind to wonder how he’s making physical contact with a Force ghost his fist had just gone straight through, how it is he cudgels him against the wall and snarls rabidly in his face.

“Ben Solo is dead! I killed him because his beliefs were all crutches! Belief that his father would stop running away from Mom every time something got hard! That his mother would stop thinking he was one step away from the Dark Side every time he struggled with something she didn’t know how to set right, and decided the only thing she could do was ship him off to an uncle who just patted his hair, and said how *everything would be fine* if only he could control himself, and did nothing to stop what was going on inside him!”
The silence that follows is a sensation not unlike drowning.

“Oh, Ben,” Han says quietly. Solo’s hand is on his face again, a phantom mockery of the flesh-and-blood that Starkiller left behind. Kylo’s eyes go hot. He knows, in the passive way he might probe a stranger’s thoughts, that he’s crying. Han chuckles softly, sadly, and it’s the most absurd sound Kylo has ever heard. “This is one messed up universe, ain’t it, kid.”

Kylo flicks up his eyes, but Han Solo isn’t looking at him anymore. His gaze is levelled a distance behind them, to a place where cautious footsteps echo like seashells against a roiling shore.

Leia is standing at the door of the cell, hand half-outstretched, toward Han, toward her nameless son. She glides over so soundlessly that Kylo wonders if she is the ghost. She is the mother of a dead child, spouse of a dead husband, sovereign of a thousand fighters who are willing to die for her and do.

It makes her an honorary phantom, at least.

The General is silent, expression impassive as porcelain. Only her eyes shimmer, and Kylo has to turn away from his reflection there. Her hand on his chin forces him back, makes him look at her, as fingers thread through his hair in a ginger, insistent pull.

He knows at that moment that she has heard everything.

Kylo isn’t sure how long they stand there with her hands threading through his curls, Leia memorizing every detail of his scar-stricken face, while Kylo wants to forget everything of hers. But he can’t, any more than he can remove his own inherited jawline, the shared tick their mouths make if he ever were to smile, anymore.

Sometime in the distant future, she lets him go.

Her fingertipcs fall gently from his face, skating down his arm to come to a rest at his fingertips. He does not curl them up to touch her own.

“Your trial is in two days,” she says, and locks the door behind her.
The trial before the Resistance tribunal takes place in the room with the least moving parts. Kylo ought to feel a stirring of pride at how they still know him to be dangerous, despite being drugged and deprived of the Force. He ought to bask in their knowledge of his villages maimed and people eradicated, use their fear to fuel his occult perfection.

Instead, the tribunal is filled with faces he almost-knows, blurred mouths and stuffy jowls from meetings he was brought to when he was young. The eyes bearing down on him from the semi-circle of desks are dark with a specific type of revulsion. He is no faceless villain, here. He is acutely Ben Solo to the tune of a knifepoint, the fallen golden boy of Resistance flesh and blood. Those who loved General Organa were compelled to love her child, so long ago. In turning, he has played them all a fool.

They bring him before the tribunal without his saber or helm, chained at hand and ankle and nearly delirious from Force-tamping toxins.

Kylo Ren is used to being stared at. He is the focal point of every razed villager’s hatred, the unhinged apprentice every Stormtrooper learns to dread. Even Hux, who has never feared him, tries to skewer him with a glance.

But always, he had remained behind a mask.

Now, he is watched by those who know his surname better than his assumed name; who can see the way his jaw ticks as the General’s does, and know exactly what it means. His bare face is soft, childish, entirely disproportionate. It’s not the scarred mien of a hardened Sith Lord.

It’s the relic of a boyish corpse he can’t escape.

A stocky, well-built woman presides over the tribunal, dressed in modest beige and olive. Kylo finds
himself instinctually searching for General Organa, but she is nowhere nearby. Instead, she sits at the far end of the witness stands, next to Rey and Poe Dameron.

“Kylo Ren, assumed name of Ben Skywalker Organa Solo, more commonly called Ben Solo,” the woman intones. A deep roar of bloodlust rumbles through the audience at triple-crowned heroes’ name, now traded by Kylo for villainy. Kylo raises his chin at the room in defiance. Snoke had forbidden any mention of his birth name long ago. “You are Commander of the Knights of Ren, and among the highest-ranking officers of the First Order. A prolific user of the Dark Side of the Force, and Snoke’s right-hand apprentice. You have been brought here on five counts of planetary genocide, several thousand counts of civilian manslaughter— both by your hand and enabled by your orders, including the slaughters at the Jedi Academy, forty counts of torture, and…one count of patricide.”

Across the room, General Organa’s knuckles go pale.

“How do you plead to the crimes laid against you?”

“What the Jedi call ‘evil’ is part of every living being, Snoke says, and the child afraid of who he is in the dark has never heard anything sweeter. The Sith do not delude themselves, and they do not deny.”

“Guilty,” he says.

The inquisitor shifts towards him. “You admit to all wrongdoing?”

“I do.”

A seething hush falls over the crowd, like a deathly tendril of snow scraping along the floor. Organa closes her eyes and swallows, nodding once. Rey clenches her jaw. The fighter pilot he had tortured clears his throat beside FN-2187, who shuffles his feet in low scuffs against the floor.

Inevitably, he will be sentenced to death. The question is not if the tribunal believes this, but how much they want him to suffer before he does. Lethal injections are too painless. A hanging, also so. They might stand him in front of a firing squad, or perhaps Rey will strike him down. If Luke Skywalker is feeling particularly poetic, maybe he will behead his nephew himself.

He clears his throat.

This trial is a farce. He has no intentions of staying here.

“Your form has always been excellent. That’s never been my concern.
here. The issue is your mind—

How am I supposed to learn if you keep cutting your saber off before you hit me? The boy shouts. *His voice is crackled, puberty coming through over a radio transponder.* He clicks his jaw closed at the staticked sound. I can’t win if you don’t fight like you want to hurt me.

*The boy isn’t bleeding, no more than a few nicks. He wishes that he were.*

That’s because I don’t want to hurt you. *Luke Skywalker breathes low before beginning the next spar.* Never in a million years.)

“We shall now call in the witnesses,” the judge declares. The room hushes once more. A hundred eyes are peering at Kylo through the claws of skeletal trees.

Across the room, witnesses speak. The tempo rarely slows. Kylo takes in their faces cursorily, eyes ticking away whenever he lingers too long— angular noses and dark, wetted eyes; rounded cheeks and rough-sketched jawlines. In the end all pain generic; all suffering alike.

It has been a long time since he’s allowed such things to affect him. He’s better than that now.

He has to be.

FN-2187 is testifying, voice like the trail of a loosed deer, full of backtracking and guileless trampling through the woods of Kylo’s memories and his. Kylo curls his lip to see the traitor on the dias, sitting straight despite his injury, nearly fully recovered from the wound Kylo inflicted. The pilot’s jacket unapologetically hangs from his shoulders, Rey and Poe Dameron beside him.

As though the man could simply turn his back on the First Order. Could just walk away and leave it all behind.

The ex-Stormtrooper tells the room of Kylo Ren’s unstable fits of destruction, how he was given to Force-choking subordinates who displeased him and even totaling equipment that had not. He told them of Ren’s orders on Jakku to massacre an entire village of unarmed civilians. He told them how this had happened several times.

The court continues its line of questioning.

“Sanitation, yeah, I worked in sanitation,” FN-2187 answers, bobbling his head in some mewling show of bravado. “It wasn’t glamorous, obviously. But someone’s gotta do it.”

“And you claim this makes you particularly qualified to comment on Kylo Ren’s behavior while aboard the Finalizer?”

FN-2187’s throat bobs. “Sanitation— it’s cleaning things up, right? Making sure things are neat and orderly, tidy for the next round?*

The judge looks on obligingly. “Yes. And?”

FN-2187 shrugs, eyes suddenly pleading with a weight of horrified compassion, and Kylo knows precisely what he’s getting at. “I helped Poe Dameron escape from the Finalizer, yeah? Because I was one of the troopers assigned to escort him from the cell where Ren interrogated him.” He shifts his shoulders in his jacket, fingers making smoothing contact with the edges of the sleeves. “All I’m saying is that those rooms usually needed us afterwards.”
The traitor takes a deep breath, as though steeling himself. Abruptly, he stands up, despite the hands on his elbows to hold him back, shucking off his jacket and rolling up his shirt. Along his spine trails a shining, blooming scar.

“And I’d say this makes me pretty damn qualified.”

Kylo nods his head minutely at that.

Poe Dameron is next, corroborating FN-2181’s testimony of the village slaughter. An unnecessary gesture—the Resistance has the reports. This band of rebels is curious in that, resolute in their need to tear the cotton and splint off of every wrongdoing, let the infection burn off in the heat of the sun. To what end, Kylo cannot fathom. The injury will still have been there. History does not go away.

Dameron’s roguish hair is swept jauntily over his forehead, the clean planes of his jawline good-natured in the face of all odds. A true golden boy, whole and decent to the last. Kylo bites the inside of his cheek, tasting iron. No wonder Organa took such an immediate liking to him, made him commander of her best fighter squadron in a matter of months. He didn’t tower disproportionately over her at age twelve, wasn’t melancholy in that aggressively off-putting way that one party could not explain and the either couldn’t fathom.

Kylo knows, simply from looking at him, that he’s making Leia Organa proud.

Strained nonchalance echoes in Dameron’s expression when he gets to the matter of his torture. Kylo almost forgets to listen. “I’m not the first one he’s done it to, as my buddy Finn here pointed out, so I’m sure you know how it goes,” he says, smiling that down-home-kid-from-Yavin-4 smile. But then his expression falls a millimeter, a depth perception gone awry. He winks weakly. “But I’ve been told that I’m quite the screamer.”

The court comes to Rey, bandage tape still bright and condemning on her shoulder. She could have healed her wound with the Force, and possibly did. The dressing is merely there for the court’s benefit.

Luke Skywalker will have his work cut out for him, vivisecting her emotions for the cold Jedi creed. Anger cuts through him that she is allowing it to be so.

When she speaks, her voice is the warm detachment of a desert. Her condemnation is persistent, abrasive, sand scouring the walls of an AT-AT in small, devastating steps.

She describes Han Solo’s fall in explicit detail. Kylo wonders if she did so for him, or if she’s seeking her own form of closure.

General Organa is the last witness, the last everything. All vision tunnels to the point of her.

Kylo is lost in the mimicry of remembering how to breathe.

She doesn’t look at him as she speaks, eyes trained to the wall above the witness stands, impassive and impartial. She is the mother of a movement, not a wayward child. This is the General that Kylo has been steeling himself to face. The one his dreams have nearly worked up the courage to kill.
Then that General speaks. She is her own gravity well, voice meant for no one but him, and he can do nothing but fall into her resonance. He hates her as a comet despises the sun that will evaporate it into steam and dust, a lovely disaster for children to wish upon.

She spares nothing in her description of his crimes.

He cannot blame her. He’s left her nothing else of his to keep.

The judge turns her fingers towards General Organa as she finishes. “Have you anything else to say?”

The cavern of Leia’s throat flutters, eyes still resolute. Kylo can feel the premonition of her head shaking no. She is not a character witness, called in to plea for the life of a child who used to sulk in the corner of her cabinet meetings, and went on to destroy the planet they stood on.

In imitation of his stance on the bridge of his ship, watching as the Hosnian System burst into flame, Kylo braces himself for impact. How merciful for her to finally let him go.

“My son has committed unforgiveable acts,” Leia says. Always so brave. He can feel a reservoir within her— something deep, something vast, unbroken on the surface even as the stars unfold upon it. If he touches it, he may never dry his fingers. “They bear repeating as often as he is capable of hearing them, but at the moment, I think we have said all that can be said. I cannot plead for his life. I doubt that he can either.”

The effort to scramble up the precipice, to reach some sort of emotion, only causes Kylo to backslide into nothing. It is a remarkable sensation, a feeling of falling too close to weightlessness. It takes him against his will.

“That’s your final opinion on the subject?”

“My son’s fate has been his own choosing. He has been out of my care for many years, and I cannot make him want anything, even his own salvation. I will leave it to the jury to decide.” Leia clears her throat: a strange, quieter sound, putting Kylo in mind of being called inside as darkness descended from twilight. “We are in the business of examining facts. I can only provide one more for you to consider. When Rey and I were deep within the Administrative Sector, my son and his Knights were already there, guarding the command room. My son immediately gave chase to Rey. They fought as I staved off the remaining Knights— but eventually, I was overpowered. A Knight had his lightsaber to my chest when he was cut down. They were all cut down, by the person sitting in that chair.”

He looks down at his shaking wrists. The chains on Kylo’s hands are rattling.

“Maybe it means nothing, or maybe it means everything, but my son is the only reason I’m alive today to testify against him.” She takes a deep breath. “That’s all I have to say.”

In the end, he is given six months of observation. A grace period for the Resistance to decide what to do with him, before he is invariably condemned to death.

Or even worse, perhaps, to the rest of his life.
There’s a rock atop the sink in his cell’s fresher. It’s the most insulting piece of Mustafarian pumice he’s ever seen.

The offending stone is half the size of his palm, tan and pocked with tiny holes. Beside it, atop the faucet, is a steel dish. A sliver of plain-scented soap lingers there, pockmarked with crescents from the indentations of his nails.

Recognition for the stone comes to Kylo immediately.

It’s a shaving stone. The friction of its surface is enough to sandpaper away light stubble, with enough pressure and persistence. An overwhelmingly popular gift for sons on the cusp of puberty, so that clumsy fingers and hormone-riddled nerves didn’t leave them on the doorstep of a medbay, as so often happened with teenage boys and customary straight razors.

Kylo stands, arms braced against the sides of the sink, letting his shoulders ache to support his weight. The sink is a paltry, ascetic thing, hardly bigger than Kylo’s handspan. A drain set into the corner of the floor, coupled with a shower head and a moveable curtain bolted to the ceiling, is all that amounts to a shower. There’s no door, merely an entryway set into the cell wall adjacent to its bio-locked entrance, affording an illusion of privacy from the right angle. The ‘fresher isn’t much larger than a shipping crate, covered in a glossy ceramic tile intended for easy cleaning. With his elbows outstretched, Kylo can easily touch its opposing walls.

In his five days’ imprisonment in his new cell on D’Qar, Kylo hadn’t intended to shave at all, until the chafe of whiskers against his touch felt entirely too roguish, too familiar, and he had rushed to the sink with a resignation bordering on mania.

Now, he stands before the basin with a shaving stone and sliver of soap in hand, teeth clenched. He clinches his eyes shut, jaw ticking. “She’s treating me like a child…”

Behind him comes a low snort.

Han Solo is perched in the space delineated as the shower, bunched up so as not hit his knees against the sink. There’s hardly enough room for Kylo in the cramped space, and Solo is (was, had been) only two inches shorter than him. Why the ghost insists on maintaining corporeal form so as to wedge himself into a meter-and-a-half by meter-and-a-half bathroom with Kylo escapes the Knight of Ren’s present state of mind.

“Naturally, you would find this amusing.” Kylo frowns, hefting the shaving stone in an accusatory hand. His head snaps up to glare at the ex-smuggler. “They haven’t given me a razor because they think I’m going to slit my wrists.”

Solo blinks. “Well, are you?”

“And this is why you were such a pillar of support.”

“That doesn’t answer the question.”

Kylo places his free hand to his temple, digging his nails into skin. They’ve grown long in the absence of a paring knife, forcing him to tear them with his teeth, leaving his fingers a hodgepodge of dried blood and ragged edges. “No,” he grits. Dying in a Resistance cell would prove nothing to
Snoke except his own weakness. To end his life in this underground hovel would only serve to confirm the universe’s expectation of his failure at every turn. “I’m not.”

“Well then,” Solo shrugs, jutting his chin towards the shaving stone, his own grey whiskers trapped in an afterlife’s perpetual scruff. “I’m sure they’ll give you a real razor eventually.”

A gentle ache blooms as he hunches his shoulders, spine still tender from his lightsaber wound. Rey must be proud of her handiwork. “I’m not staying here long enough to become General Organa’s pet prisoner.”

Solo snickers humorlessly, a sound like hawking spit. “Oh yeah, ‘cause you’re just itching to be on Snoke’s leash instead.”

“I’m his second-in-command.”

“You’re his slave.”

The shaving stone drops into the sink with a crash. Kylo whips around to face Solo, expecting to find a grin of mockery and teeth. Instead, the man is gazing at him with tired matter-of-factness. His cavalier position against the wall seems less like intent and more like he’s using it to keep himself upright.

The fight in Kylo dies.

He balls his hands into fists, face downturned as he picks the fallen shaving stone from the sink.

“Must everything you say turn into an argument?” he says behind clenched teeth, leaning against the basin once more. The words skitter from the dull metal, swallowed by the drain.

Solo says nothing in response, and in the initial silence Kylo imagines the ghost has given him some peace. Dark tendrils of hair curtain his gaze as he flicks his eyes to where Han Solo had stood. To where Han Solo still stands, propped up and pained and willingly imprisoned beside his own killer.

Since Starkiller, Han has rarely left his side.

A watery smile breaks across the smuggler’s features. “You know, for a second there, you almost sounded like your mom.”

Kylo pins him with a venomous stare.

The moment dies.

The faucet comes undone with more violence than necessary. Kylo busies himself in the chaotic whirr of the water plashing against the basin, a white noise like the drone of a lightsaber, the steady thrum of a ship in hyperdrive. He’d spent long hours bent over the sink at his quarters on the Finalizer, watching the water run to nowhere; and he would stand, face dripping, as it chased all thought from mind.

Taking a breath, Kylo reaches for the soap. It crumbles into sodden pieces in his hand, smelling of nothing. He claims the largest piece, tossing the remains into the soap dish with a clink, and works it into a foam between his palms.

There is no mirror in the ‘fresher. There are no reflective surfaces at all in his cell, save for the dull shine of the sink and the discolored steel of his bedframe. It suits Kylo well enough. As a child, mirrors had told him nothing except his lop-sidedness, how he was by turns too pale or too dark,
ghostly ears pricking elvishly between black curls. Perhaps he still looks like that. Perhaps he doesn’t. It’s been too long since he’s groomed himself by anything other than touch.

He’s halfway through lathering his face with suds when Han Solo moves in his peripheral vision.

“I don’t think I ever taught you how to shave,” the ex-smuggler says, coming to stand casually beside the sink.

Kylo narrows his eyes at the seeming pointlessness of the comment, scraping the shaving stone against his jawline.

(Calloused hands, someone holding his chin; a dollop of cream, a razor. —Now you try. Just remember to hold it like this. Don’t want you to get nicked, your mom’d kill me.

The entire exercise is pointless to a child still baby-faced, who hasn’t yet touched puberty and won’t for several years. But the father insists it’s a bonding experience, muttering words the boy doesn’t follow about the sacred holy rite of all humanoid parents to their children.

But eight-year-old fingers are clumsy and unreliable, and despite best attempts, the boy comes away with a frenzy of fine cuts.

—Oh shit, kid, don’t say anything, I’ll get that patched up right away—

Frantic daubing of bacta and bandages. The boy spits a little as the bitter gel creeps into his mouth.

—Don’t tell your mother, okay? We’ll, uh, we’ll say you fell face-first into a hydrospanner. No, wait —)

Kylo cuts off the memory with a hiss. He’s rubbed his cheek raw.

“No,” he says. “You never did.”

Solo’s eyebrows rumple. “Huh. Then who did?”

“Shaving is such a difficult endeavor that I needed someone to teach me?”

“I’m just, you know, wondering,” Solo says, shoulders suddenly hiking up to his ears. He splays his hands out in an oddly placating gesture. “Since it apparently wasn’t me.”

Kylo takes a deep breath before resuming his shaving on the other side. The rasp of rock on stubble nearly drowns out his words. “The Wookie did.”

Solo’s eyebrows disappear into his hair. “Chewie did? I would’ve thought I’d be your Uncle Luke, or hell, maybe even Snoke on one of his better days—”

Kylo grabs another shard of soap and douses it in water, crushing it to a paste.

“The Wookie actually visited sometimes,” Kylo says with narrowed eyes. “When you were off getting imprisoned yet again by some loan shark or another, and you’d sent him away for bail. He checked on me occasionally. To see if I was still alive.”

His father had visited the Academy occasionally, but only sparingly. There was something, he always said, about Force sensitives in large numbers that gave him the creeps.

(No offense, kid. You know I love you and your mom and your uncle, despite your Force weirdness.
But we all know what a handful you three are. There’s just something about being able to move things with your mind that goes against the natural order of things, I dunno…)

Cupping his hands beneath the tap, Kylo slaps his face with a deluge of water, watching the grey suds swirl away.

Beside him, Han Solo’s throat trembles tautly. “You wanted me to visit you?” he scratches out.

The sound is quiet, blistered. Like nails against open skin.

The shaving stone slips from Kylo’s white-knuckled grip.

“What kind of question is that?”

No, he thinks, it’s better that Han Solo didn’t. Better that he hadn’t visited more than twice a year, with the sort of clockwork punctuality that spoke more of Leia than of him. Better that it was the General who had visited when she could, which wasn’t often, her face growing darker and darker each time at the sight of him. Better that the only things he had had in his scant temple room were the trinkets Solo would send him from far reaches of the galaxy, scrawled always with the same note: Hope you’re having fun, kid.

He ought to thank him, for making it so much easier to turn.

“I just— I always assumed…” Solo swallows thickly. The silence stretches into something unbearable before a humorless chuckle breaks it. “I wonder if I gave you anything at all besides a chip on your shoulder.”

Kylo bites his tongue, tastes blood. A rivulet of water trickles behind his ear like a whisper.

“Stop talking,” he says quietly, and resumes shaving without looking at Solo, staring at an invisible point above the sink. The raw scrub of the stone against his already reddened face is enough to take the edge off the namelessness roiling in him, and he loses himself in the familiarity of discomfort.

The Force-inhibiting injections have done their job well. It’s been three weeks since he’s called on the Dark Side, felt its cold and heady burn. He tries to reach it now, offers it the sweetmeats of Solo’s confessions, but the beast is elsewhere and has found a greater hunt.

He wonders if it would come back at all, if he were to cut himself open and feed it his entrails. Kylo turns to the door after a final towel-dry.

An ethereal, ghosting hand is on his face before he can get there.

“Hold on,” Han Solo says, cupping Kylo’s chin. He runs his thumb against the underside of Kylo’s jawbone, a thrumming vibration where his fingers linger. It is the first time Han has touched him since he pushed him off the bridge at Starkiller. Kylo is too taken aback to stop him. “You missed a spot.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay in updating- real life calls. I appreciate every hit, kudo, and comment, truly! Hopefully some more Han will make up for the absence.
Kylo resumes his forms on day six. There hasn’t been a rustle in his mind from the Supreme Leader since his capture; of that, Kylo is sure. Whether this is due to his daily Force-dulling injections, or because it’s Snoke’s own idea of a test, Kylo hasn’t decided. Being disconnected from his Master is like being sealed in a box of transparisteel, sunk to the bottom of a lunar ocean. There is only the waves and the echo of his own breathing, this unsettling reminder that he does breathe—even without Snoke’s permission, in a nest of his enemies, his own body betraying his loyalty.

Kylo steels himself and lets the clenching in his gut pass. His Master will forgive him these small seditions. Has to.

If he does not, there will be nowhere else to go.

He starts with Form VII—his preferred form, and the most demanding. Juyo is a style of furious grace, chaos and emotion kept at bay with barbed wire and razor-edge restraint. Crouching into the beginning kata, Kylo clasps his fist around an invisible saber hilt, circling his wrist in a tight spiral to warm up the muscles. An unnamed comfort settles around him as his body takes to the old promise of controlled destruction.

An anonymous opponent flashes in his mind’s eye, dark and featureless. Kylo launches himself at them with a growl, the cell’s glaring fluorescent lights cutting harsh shapes from his silhouette. He loses himself in thrusts and shouts, quick jabs and arching slashes.

He finishes the drill with his saber buried deep in his enemy’s throat, panting hard, as lightheadedness sparkles the edges of his vision.

Going through all fifty of the basic Juyo katas takes just under an hour and a half. The stances are mostly modified versions of older forms, honed with the user’s own aggression. To master it requires knowledge of all that came before it. It isn’t an amateur’s game.

Kylo is nearly breathless as he drags his long legs into Lotus position, trying and failing to come down gracefully to the floor. Long days of poor nutrition and dehydration leave him shaking, spots blossoming behind his eyelids. Oh yes, the Resistance feeds him and waters him through a slit in the wall, like a damned potted plant—one square of instant bread and an apple on the hour, every eight hours. But the caloric value of his paltry meals is only enough if he does nothing all day but sit. It’s hardly adequate to sustain intense training. This is, without a doubt, the intent.

The Resistance greatly underestimates his ability to survive on spite alone.

Kylo closes his eyes like a hand gently enveloping a knife, letting the warm seep of blood trickle through his fingers. Truth be told, Kylo wonders if he’s ever meditated a day in his life, beyond the superficial trances Skywalker wrangled him into as a Padawan, or the deep throes of the Dark Side that occasionally possess his dreams. He knows that Vader frequently meditated, but Kylo’s no good at concentration, introspection. It’s yet another way in which he continues to fail his family line. The
concept of burrowing so far into his being that he breaks through himself entirely is indefinably unsettling.

There’s simply nothing else in here for him to do.

A ripple in the air snaps Kylo’s eyes open. Han Solo has appeared, returned from whatever quest took his attentions away from Kylo at the beginning of his Juyo katas. His hair is slightly ruffled, mouth quirking in the vestige of a star-struck grin. Kylo blinks rapidly to clear away the sudden images of inappropriate General/Force-ghost relations, and frowns.

Han treads into the room as though walking on magma, hands pulled up in the universal gesture of ‘don’t shoot.’

“Oh, kriff— were you…meditating, or whatever it is you Force-types do?”

Kylo blinks languidly at him. “Clearly not anymore.”

“Well, whatever it was…didn’t mean to interrupt.”

Snorting, Kylo unknots himself from his cross-legged position, instead bracing himself on one knee. Han Solo was never one to apologize when it came to the so-called ‘hokey religions’. That he’s begun to try now is as unamusing as it is pathetic.

“It was just me. Sitting cross-legged. Not everything has to be about the Force.”

Han nods his head with a burst of exasperation. “You’re telling me.”

Kylo tilts his head slowly at Solo, who has resumed his normal position on the edge of Kylo’s bed. It doesn’t matter that he moves at night to allow Kylo space there. Kylo still sleeps on the floor. “That’s not to say nothing is about the Force, as much as you loved to deny its existence.”

“Well, that was before my son became the First Order’s favorite Sith Lord. Tends to widen your perspective.”

Kylo eyes Han narrowly.

“Why did you leave?” he asks suddenly, tone sharp.

Han furrows his brows. “Why did I leave when?”

“A few hours ago, when I was practicing my forms.”

“You seemed busy,” Han shrugs. “Didn’t want to disturb you.”

Bullshit.

“It makes you uncomfortable.”

“Maybe a little.”

Kylo isn’t sure what he had expected. Han had always merely tolerated the Force, viewing it as he would a good blaster—a tool he just wasn’t privy to use, not something that made up the core of one’s being. Luke was a great friend, if only he’d let loose on the Force mumbo-jumbo every once in a while; Leia was irresistible, as long as she didn’t try to mind-trick him into doing the dishes.

And Kylo, plagued by a chiaroscuro of Light and Dark since childhood, was utterly
“You’ve never tried to understand it,” Kylo says, looking up at Han from his position on the floor. Han opens his mouth, cocks his head, closes it again. The closest Kylo will ever get to an admission. “Maybe next time, try to stick around.”

Kylo does all seven forms over the next seven days, one per day. He goes in order: *Shii-Cho, Makashi, Soresu, Ataru, Djem-So, Niman, Juyo*. Each with fifty basic katas, give or take. Each with strengths and weaknesses. He hasn’t truly touched some, like Shii-Cho, since he was Skywalker’s apprentice. Others, like Makashi, are returning to familiar roots. He feels their foundations flexing through Juyo’s manic tension like the core of an old hunting bow.

The lightsaber forms simply *are*. No judgement is attached to each strike; there is merely the follow-through, or there is not. Darth Vader in the depths of his black glory and Luke Skywalker at the heights of his Light both favored Djem-So, and saw no blasphemy in it.

There’s an implication lurking there, if Kylo were enough of a philosopher to try. But he isn’t, and he doesn’t.

Han Solo watches his stances all the while.

“And that one is…?”

“Niman.”

“Funny, I could have sworn it was Juyo.”

“The forms are similar. Both build upon a base of those before it. But Niman is extremely balanced, some say overly so, whereas Juyo is entirely offensive.”

“Huh. I like the sound of that.”

“You would.”

“Wait, wait, wait. Do that one again.”

An imaginary saber, held waist-height by two hands. Quick, blocking moves. Stance shoulder-width apart.

“Kriffing kriff, that’s the dinky little move Luke did with that old man when I first picked him up on the Falcon. Right before he got his ass handed to him by a battle droid!”

“It’s Shii-Cho. Every Padawan starts off with it.”

More hoots. “That’s too good. You should’a seen him the first time, in his stupid little helmet with the blinders on. Looked like he was going off to do pod racing. Wait till I tell him I finally know what it’s called.”

A huff of annoyance. “Am I to continue, or are we quite finished for the day?”
“No, no, by all means.”

“See, the issue with how you’re holding it is that I could just aim my blaster at your foot, then shoot you in the chest when you slipped up. Then all your fancy ‘keep your saber at your core’ work would be for nothing.”

“Soresu assumes a level of competence in the opponent when defending against blaster bolts.”

“Well, never underestimate the power of persistent incompetence.”

“Oh, is that how you managed?”

“Every second of every day, kid.”

The days develop a pattern: wake up, do morning stretches, argue with Han Solo; shower, shave, argue with Han Solo; practice forms, meditate in an attempt to contact Snoke, fail, then argue with Han Solo some more. Kylo’s begun deflecting the barbs with all the ease of Soresu saber-to-blaster combat, anticipating the blows before they’re launched and tossing them back with equal ease. The old man does the same. The insults become routine, automatic. Han takes the bed when it becomes clear that Kylo won’t. He’s taken to propping himself up on the pillows that can’t actually support him and regaling a Kylo knee-deep in attempted meditation with the plot of lurid holovids he saw at a passel of godforsaken spaceports with Chewie back in the day.

“…and then I lost my pants at a game of strip pazaak with Lando, dunno if I was wearing underwear that time—”

“—For the love of all that is unholy, stop, or I will rip your esophagus out.”

A pause.

“So as I was saying, that same time I got Maz Kanata stripped down to her frilly boxer briefs...”

xi. (part ii)

It isn’t peace. But it isn’t pain, either.

xii.

Ten more days pass in purgatory.

Then, there is a knock at the door.

Kylo narrows his eyes, startled up from his position on the floor. He hadn’t even been trying to meditate this time; instead indulging in the utterly foreign and heretofore forbidden sensation of
absolutely nothing. The Supreme Leader will have his head for it. His travel companions as Snoke’s acolyte are suffering, pain, and hatred—always. The goal, his Master insisted, was to cultivate a soul so over-choked with weeds that he could pluck thistle and thorn at his leisure, and from there brew his poisons. Concentrating on nothing is dangerously close to forsaking one’s pain altogether. Kylo knows that.

And still, Kylo sits.

Another knock raps at the door.

"Coming," Kylo says asininely. Imprisoned as he is, he has no control over who enters his cell and when; it isn’t a secret that he’s here. But the visitor continues with his strange courtesy.

Kylo pads over to the cell door on bare feet. His black boots are the only part of his original clothing that he’s been allowed to keep; they’ve sat, unused, beside the cell entryway since they were returned to him. Loose, grey pants billow around his ankles, his long strides carrying him to the door. He straightens his long-sleeved shirt—the same scuddy, dishwater grey—out of perfunctory habit.

The stranger speaks the second Kylo reaches the door, as if seeing in him perfectly through four inches of durasteel.

Oh, so that’s what this is going to be.

"Are you in there?"

"Where else would I be."

"Of course."

A series of clicks sound. The door opens and closes again with a pneumatic hiss.


—He’s got one of those faces that just makes girls want to take him home to their mothers, Han Solo used to tease. Bet it drives them bonkers when they find out he’s a monk.

But Skywalker’s face is nothing like that now. His amber hair has faded to grey, full cheeks now hollowed.

Only his blue eyes are the same. Even so, they are a stranger’s.

“Ben,” Skywalker says softly, as though he’s only seen Kylo yesterday, just stopping by on his way to the market. But Kylo can see the undertow beneath his glassy sea, so deep it will never be spotted from shore. It threatens to rip Kylo’s feet right out from under him. “So nice to see you again. Hold this for a moment, would you?"

He thrusts a teapot into Kylo’s hands. The porcelain is so unexpectedly scalding that Kylo nearly drops it. He manages to keep his grip by focusing on the boiling heat branding into his palms, blinking rapidly as something wild and ugly crushes his throat.

Skywalker has already seated himself in the middle of the room, exactly across from Kylo’s customary spot. Bitterness wells behind Kylo’s tongue at how casually Skywalker reads him—now, when hindsight makes all Jedi infallible.

The Jedi Master pats the ground in front of him.
“Sit.”

“You’re not my master anymore, to have me at your beck and call—”

“No, I am not,” Skywalker agrees. His calm makes Kylo want to break something. He clutches tighter to the burning teapot. “But I am your uncle. Sit.”

“You’re not my—”

“—If you want to stand in the middle of the room clutching crockery until visitation hours are up, I can’t stop you. But I think tea tends to taste better sitting down. I don’t know, it could be preference. Maybe you’re onto something.”

The teapot nearly shatters as Kylo sets it down before Skywalker, following Luke’s lead in a tangle of angry limbs. A retractable tray, laden with two teacups and a dish of tea leaves, partitions the gap between them. Kylo had been too distracted by the teapot to notice Luke carrying it in.

Steam, clean and tasteless, wafts hazily in the air.

Skywalker uncaps the teapot with a china clink, spooning tea leaves into the boiling water without a word. Kylo looks away after the third measure of leaves, knowing Skywalker’s preference, before hearing a fourth spoonful fall into the water with a shick. Then a fifth.

It’s exactly how Kylo likes it. Used to like it.

Skywalker is the first to speak, when the minutes have passed and the tea is dark. The teacup echoes hollowly as he pours the first cup, outstretching his hand to Kylo. Kylo flares his nostrils and looks away.

“I hear you’ve been going through your forms.”

It isn’t what Kylo expects him to say. Maybe You’ve betrayed your blood and my life’s work, or How dare you have the audacity to live after what you’ve done, or even The council has moved your execution to tomorrow. But not, I hear you’ve been going through your forms.

“You heard,” Kylo says. It’s a deliberately pedantic, nitpicky move, but he latches onto it anyway, because the alternative is a civil conversation with Luke Skywalker. “Odd wording, there.”

Luke gives a wan, knowing smile, lips disappearing beneath the rim of his teacup. He gives an undignified boyish slurp. “Han told me.”

Every muscle in Kylo’s body seizes. “Han Solo is dead.”

Skywalker nods, and though his face is still light, it has taken the delicate shadows of an eclipse. “Yes, in that you are unfortunately right. And I must say, it is rather remarkable that a non-Force user such as him managed to project his consciousness into a ghost at all. Even I am completely dumbfounded as to how he did it, the old rascal.”

“The fool will do anything as soon as you tell him he can’t,” Kylo mumbles before he can stop himself. “Even cheat death.”

*Never tell me the odds.*

A low, rumbling laugh fills the empty cell. “That he will. It’s a trait he seems to have passed down.”

Kylo scowls. “Han Solo isn’t—”
“—your father?” Skywalker finishes, with all the air of an idle seamstress gossiping as she stitches. Kylo desperately wishes he had taken the offer of tea, so that he could hurl the teacup into Skywalker’s face. “Except that he is, just as Vader was mine. You’re a war criminal, Ben, this is no time for easy delusions. We must be serious.” His face suddenly twists in disgust. He splutters, coughing up the bitter dregs of the too-strong tea, beating at his sternum with his fist. “Very serious, apparently,” he finishes with the ghost of a laugh.

Kylo watches, emotionless.

“I see you’re not in the mood for talking. Then again, you never have been.” He takes another sip of tea, gaze settling balefully on Kylo like strange, winter sunlight. “A striking child, fiercely affectionate to his chosen circle, but always with that certain sadness…”

“We’re not here to discuss my childhood,” Kylo snaps, and shivers.

“You’re right. Forgive me,” Skywalker says, and the utter lunacy of those words coming from Luke to him nearly bowls him to the ground. He swallows, skin taught. So weak. “Tell me, am I correct in assuming that your preferred form is Juyo?”

“Naturally.” It’s a Sith style, from its chaos to its mind-frame. “You’re losing your edge if this is your idea of astute enemy insight.”

Skywalker clears his throat amenable, pouring himself another cup of tea. Again, he raises his eyebrows to offer Kylo his own, and again Kylo refuses. “Suit yourself. I admit coming to the conclusion that you prefer Juyo isn’t particularly brilliant. In this case, however, it wasn’t conjecture on my part. Your father told me.”

If Kylo had been drinking tea, he would have spat it up.

“I’ve never told him that.”

“He has eyes, Ben. He’s been watching you go through forms for the better part of three weeks, and he says it’s obvious which one you favor.”

Something whirls through Kylo’s abdomen, nameless and primal. He smothers it with both hands flying.

“So Solo’s become your spy, has he? Checking in to make sure I don’t kill myself before the Resistance has a chance to, or somehow burn the base down in the process?” His voice takes on a savage tint. “Why isn’t he here then, if we’re both able to see him? Too cowardly to admit he’s been communing with me?”

Another cup of tea. Kylo isn’t sure if this has been Skywalker’s third, or his fourth. “As I said, I’m not entirely sure how Han managed to become a Force ghost— especially when the skill is an extremely high-level Jedi accomplishment. Knowing Han, it was that luck he keeps talking about, finally come to collect his due.” He chuckles. “I do know, however, that his Force ghost is incomplete. Not only can it only be seen by Force Sensitives, but it is actually hosted in the mind of the Force Sensitive he’s in contact with, and only ones he knew in life. We serve as his projector, his lens. He is an independent entity, but ultimately, we are the ones who carry him with us.”

“So he’s a parasite.”

“Of sorts. What it means is that Han can only be seen by one person at a time, the one ‘projecting’ him. He figured that being here would only make this conversation more complicated, so he opted to spend some quality time with Leia instead.”
“Please, do not tell me that.” Solo had shared enough soul-scarring, prurient dime-holovid plots to last until the day Kylo died.

Skywalker’s mouth twists in wry understanding. “You’re right— I didn’t think. But back to the matter of Form Seven.”

“Juyo,” Kylo corrects.

Skywalker grins knowingly, the look of a Sarlacc that’s found someone in its trap. “Ah, but that isn’t what I said, was it?”

“Juyo is synonymous with Form Seven—”

“—except that it isn’t. Juyo is the original variant of Form Seven. The Sith variant.”

Kylo blinks. Form VII is a Sith form. It was forbidden from use to all but the highest Jedi masters, so great was the fear it would turn its practitioners to the Dark Side.

Skywalker is still smiling that punchable, holier-than-thou smile. “There is another variant, called Vaapad. It was developed by the Jedi Master Mace Windu, one of the finest knights of his age. It’s unlikely that you would have heard of it, given that I myself have never practiced it and Snoke almost certainly would not have told you. But I will say that the difference between Vaapad and Juyo is almost entirely philosophical. Uniquely, it’s a Jedi form that not only tolerates emotion, but necessitates it. It too demands passion, and an insatiable desire for victory. The only difference is that where Juyo allows the user to give in to his own savagery, Vaapad requires that he keep his demons on a leash. To be master of them, and to use them, but not to be used by them.”

The breath constricts in Kylo’s chest. In the tent of his ribs, something germinates, and he must crush it.

“You think a change in fighting style is enough to sway me to the Light? That I turned to the Dark because Uncle Dearest wouldn’t let me hit people the way I wanted to hit them? You’re more deluded than I thought.”

Skywalker’s eyes flash grey and melancholy, a storm brewing over the horizon of his features, hot and pregnant with thunder. “I am a doddering old man,” he says quietly, and for a moment he truly looks it. “But even I’m not that foolish. I can’t go back to undo my mistakes, just as you cannot undo yours. I was so…distracted, by the task of rebuilding the Jedi Order that I neglected many of the things about it that needed changing. I neglected you.” His words quiver. It’s like watching a mountain shudder. “Ben, I—”

Hot, jagged pain cuts across Kylo’s thighs. He’s incised his nails through the cloth of his pants, sliced them into his skin to the fingertip.

“Don’t,” he says tremulously, dangerously, and if he speaks any louder his voice will crack. “Don’t try to fix me, and for the Force’s sake don’t try to apologize to me! I don’t want your misplaced pity and I don’t want your misplaced mercy! There’s an illness in me, Uncle. A disease. It’s been there ever since I can remember, and you can call it Snoke all you want, blame him for taking your little boy away, but the darkness that let him in was mine and mine alone. I did it. I ordered those massacres, and I murdered my own father in cold blood to fuel my own ambition. Those are the works of a monster, Luke. I am one. Either let me go or shoot me down, but if you’ve ever cared about me once, don’t try to convince yourself that there’s good in me, because there’s none. Not a drop.”
Whatever Luke had intended to say died along with Kylo’s voice. His throat burns. No matter how many times he swallows, he cannot wash it away. He cannot wash any of this away.

And wasn’t that the point? Wasn’t that why he had killed Han Solo, on a bridge with two sides and two exits, two choices?

*It’s too late.*

That’s what he had said to Han, before plunging his saber into his heart. That’s what he believed. It was an act meant to be so ruthless, so irredeemable, that every time he felt that damnable pull he could point to it and know exactly where he stood. Know exactly where he could never return.

And now the universe places him in the lap of his mother and father and uncle again, in the heart of his weakness and treason again, and they’re reaching for him as though his hands aren’t already slicked with blood and too slippery to hold onto.

He can’t grab their hands. There’s nothing to come back to if he did, nothing except the knowledge that he betrayed everyone who ever loved him and lit their good faith on a pyre. He would have to sit with them in the remains of their kingdoms he burnt to the ground and tell them that it was all for nothing. Forgiveness does not extend that far. He does not want it to extend that far.

“Rey and I will be meditating tomorrow at eight,” Luke says quietly, and Kylo jerks up as though Skywalker has branded him. He nods at Kylo with softened eyes, ever so gently nudging his chin up, encouraging Kylo to follow his motion. Kylo doesn’t meet his eyes. “I’d like for you to come.”

“It’s not much my choice. I’m locked in here until the Resistance decides to execute me before as many witnesses as possible.”

Luke nods, breathing deeply. “I know. But even so, the choice is yours. In all my time as a Jedi, this is the truest thing I’ve learned. The choice is always yours.” He sniffs, a small reminiscent smile playing across his features like a summer moon. “And though I can’t guarantee what will happen to you at the end of your six months, I can say that the intention was never to let you sit here indefinitely. We can’t make the decision of your life or death based solely on how you act in a prison cell.”

Kylo furrows his eyebrows. “You’re letting me go?”

“No, of course not. Your mother would kill me,” Luke titters. It’s a kind laugh, as self-deprecating as it is teasing, and absolutely fatal. “But you will be put on a…parole, of sorts. Given more freedom about the base, responsibilities. As a test of character.”

“I could just as easily run away,” Kylo says darkly.

That dizzying look of pure amusement again, devoid of rancor or spite. It is so easy, for one treacherous second, to remember how things used to be. “You most certainly could not.” Luke gestures to the base of his neck, running two fingers down the pale skin there. Kylo mirrors Luke’s movement on his own without thinking, fingerpads trailing along a small, raised scar the size of a credit. *How had he never…?* The mirrors. There were no mirrors here, and he had never seen. “We took the liberty of installing a tracking device, right beneath your carotid artery. If you fail to check in with us on the days we let you out, the device will initiate a Force-cancelling wave so devastating that you’ll be rendered unconscious for a week. It can’t be tampered with the Force, either. And don’t try to scratch, claw, stab, or otherwise attempt to remove it. You’ll inevitably puncture the carotid, and bleed out.” At Kylo’s unbridled look of horror, Luke has the grace to look abashed. “Wasn’t my idea.”
“Was it the General's?’

“Of course. She just wants her boy back. And you know how your mother is about the things she wants.” Luke’s faint twist of amusement tautens into a thin line. “That, and, you’re Snoke’s right-hand man—the highest profile First Order prisoner possible, outside of the blasted creature himself. She’d sooner resign than let you escape. Either way, you’re stuck with us, kiddo.”

A stitch hitches in Kylo’s chest. Dehydration, probably. He should have drunk the tea.

Gathering up his supplies, Luke makes his way to the door, without a snag in his step to mark his age. Kylo’s forgotten how old he is. When he was young, Luke had always seemed so ageless, and after destroying the very foundations of Skywalker’s life, there had been no one to ask about such trivial things.

“You have the night to think over my offer. I’ll come tomorrow at eight, and you can tell me your decision then.” As he reaches the threshold, the door opens automatically, and Kylo muses distantly that he must have signalled Leia to send someone to fetch him now that his business was done. There had been no guards outside his door, when he had entered. Luke Skywalker had come into the cell of the Jedi Killer alone. “Oh, and Ben—” Luke turns as though at an afterthought, and Kylo only nods his head to indicate that he has heard him. Luke is midway out the door, leisurely folding his hand against the doorframe, as though Kylo couldn’t make a break for freedom at that very moment.

“Mace Windu, the master I told you invented Vaapad?”

Kylo blinks, waiting for Skywalker to go on.

“The Jedi obviously had doubts when it was founded. Why create such an obviously violent form, one that was so dangerously close to the Dark Side?” He looks at Kylo expectantly, as he did when Kylo was a Padawan, and he had taken it upon himself to teach the boy some bit of thorny rhetoric. Kylo doesn’t take the bait. Luke clears his throat and continues. “The answer is, of course, complex, and if the old Jedi still lived I’m sure they’d still be debating it. But what’s most important is the very first thing Windu said in its defence. To Old Ben, of all people.”

Old Ben. Rey’s grandfather. A familiar namesake. Yet another person whose expectations he had undoubtedly blown to bits, and the man had been dead before Kylo was born.

“Ben, listen to me,” Luke says sternly, and for a moment Kylo can almost feel his reprimanding hand on his cheek again, calling him back to focus before he slices off his arm with a training saber. “The Jedi Order hasn’t always been great at dealing with the darkness in people. Kriff, it’s been terrible. It drove you away that way, just as it drove generations of Jedi away, because it couldn’t accept that good people do bad things just as the reverse is true. There’s darkness in you, Ben. Of course there is. But there’s darkness in me too, just as there is in Rey and in every person who breathes in this galaxy. Choices, Ben. That’s all this comes down to.”


*I created Vaapad to answer my weakness: it channels my own darkness into a weapon of the light.*
"Fair knight," said King Pellinore. "I pray thee tell me thy name."

"That me regards," said Sir Grummore, using the proper formula.

"That is uncourteously said," said King Pellinore, "what? For no knight ne dreadeth for to speak his name openly, but for some reason of shame."

—TH White, The Once and Future King

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Luke comes precisely at eight. Kylo is still sprawled on the ground, head resting on a pillow he’d stolen from the cot when it became evident Han wasn’t returning for the night. The small hours were strangely ghostly without Solo’s empty yammerings: on hydrosplanners and hyperdrives, about that time he was nearly eaten by a Sarlacc and thank something-or-other that that didn’t happen, else you wouldn’t be here, kid.

Kylo has spent the latter half of his life steeped in military precision. He can’t help but notice the misplaced.

And Han Solo’s absence had been noticed.

Luke’s voice comes sleep-sanded and amused from an indistinct point above him. “My, and I thought my dedication to asceticism was commendable.”

Kylo peers at him down his nose. “Solo’s taken to commandeering the bed. I don’t want to be anywhere near the accursed thing.”

Skywalker snickers softly. “He’s a ghost, Ben. Kick him out. He probably deserves a good shove in the rear— Force knows Leia and I owe him a few.” At Kylo’s silence, Skywalker toes Kylo’s shin with his boot. “I still need your answer.”

The world gyroscopes into view as Kylo twists into standing, disorienting blurs of grey and white settling into their proper places: here the walls, the floor, the raspy cotton bedsheets. Luke Skywalker stands before him, clad in his brown and tan robes from yesterday. In his hands is a steaming silver flask.

Kylo closes his eyes and breathes slowly out; considering Luke Skywalker, considering himself. For a brief moment, he contemplates throttling Skywalker and making a break for the door, or simply telling him to screw off with this pretense of compassion, and come back with a shooting squad.

Kylo inhales, exhales. He bites the inside of his cheek for good measure.

“Yes. I’ll go with you. Now get me out of here.”
Skywalker’s mouth blooms into a small smile, and it’s like watching dawn break on a desert planet. “Good,” he says quietly, low and rumbling. “Good.” He extends the canteen towards Kylo, scent roasted and rich. “Caffa?”

Kylo quirks his eyebrows.

“You don’t drink caffa.”

Luke regards him plainly as he holds the canteen aloft in Kylo’s direction. “No, I don’t.”

For a moment, Kylo lets the offer hang between Luke’s wizened fingers, feeling more ridiculous with each second that Skywalker stands there, looking between them as though this is another test and Kylo is once again failing. He can’t stand that look on Skywalker’s face, as intolerable there as it is on Solo’s and Organa’s.

He stands there, deliberating.

It’s just a kriffing cup of caffa. It’s not an alliance. It’s not even a truce.

A bout of lightheadedness claims his next seconds, making his decision for him, and he swipes it from Luke’s grasp without a word.

Luke’s face flickers with a glimmer of approval as he returns his hands to his sides. “Drink up. You probably don’t want to be carrying that around with you all day.” Luke pauses, lilting his head contemplatively. “Although perhaps that could make a good exercise- keeping caffa cups levitated while going around one’s daily activities. It would certainly get some of the soldiers to look twice.”

Steam clings to Kylo’s cheeks as he holds the flask mid-way to his lips. “That’s worse than doing those damn handstands.” He scowls, taking a burning swig before involuntarily grimacing at the heat of it.

Skywalker snorts softly. “I always hated doing that too. Told Yoda it was a spectacular waste of time, when I was younger and much more inclined to mouth off. I’d have rather been lifting X-wings.”

Disbelief erupts in Kylo’s expression despite himself. “Then why—” he starts, before clamping his teeth shut on the question. The reasons behind Skywalker’s failed techniques are none of his concern. He takes another swill of caffa, glad for the excuse not to speak. Luke feels no compulsion to fill in the silence.

When Kylo finishes, Luke grunts softly, then turns to the door. Kylo sets the empty flask by the threshold for a service droid to retrieve in his absence.

Luke juts his chin at the pair of boots the Resistance had so generously returned to Kylo after ascertaining that they were not in fact bugged or rigged with explosives. “Shoes, maybe?”


Boots be damned. He doesn’t know where they’re going, but barefoot, he has the chance of coming back to the cell with bloodied footprints. It’s been so long since he’s been properly hurt. He needs, with a desperation that feels like suffocation, to come back to his senses.

Luke shrugs. “All right, then.” A pinging crescendo sounds as the cell door mechanism unlocks. “However, there is one more thing.”
Kylo’s jaw tenses as Luke rummages through his robes, a fracture line of pain scissoring behind his ears.

“Stun cuffs?” Kylo says.

Luke nods, as though this isn’t the most humiliating thing in the world. “Mhm. Mandalorian durasteel, top-shelf.” At Kylo’s poisonous glower, Luke shrugs lightly. “What can I say, Leia said to make sure you were bound at all times when outside your cell, until decided otherwise. Actually, I think that was a council decision. It goes without saying that you make people a little jittery.”

“You walked into my cell completely unarmed last night, when I was unrestrained. And had tea with me, for Force’s sake. And now your men are concerned for security?”


Kylo fights back the thorns clawing at his throat at the thought of the cuffs. The Resistance has already stripped him of his robes, trapped him in a cell the size of his old sitting room, and dug a transmitter into his neck so precisely that he’d kill himself if he tried to scour it out. And now they want Luke Skywalker to parade him about the Resistance base in chains. Snoke’s dragon, the Hero of the First Order, kept in line by a single old man and a twine of durasteel. What a perfect piece of propaganda.

Expectant eyes rest on Kylo’s face.

“Yes or no?”

Choices, again. Kylo hasn’t been given so many in years.

“Fine.”

Lukewarm durasteel cinches around his wrists a moment later, so snug he cannot twist them from their position. They’re tight enough to nearly impede circulation, but not quite.

“Right then,” Luke says, waving the door open. Kylo follows beside him as he moves into the hallway beyond, bare feet whiffling softly against the polished duracrete. That he’s been held underground —several hundred feet underground— is now evident. Rough-hewn stone walls scintillate with water droplets, intermittent drips sparkling in Kylo’s ears as he walks, punctuated by the indistinct buzz of fluorescent lamps. Only the floor is polished to a dull sheen, so cold that the heat of his feet leaves chilled condensation. He traces a ghostly trail like a bleeding deer.

Luke turns to Kylo as they approach a lift tube, pressing his handprint to a biolocked keypad. It chirps pleasantly, glowing green. “Now, as I mentioned before, you’ll be assigned a handler when leaving your quarters—”

“—Cell. It’s a cell.”

Luke tilts his head in strange approval as they step into the tube. “Cell,” he corrects. “Yes, quite. As I was saying, you are to be assigned a handler every time you are granted leave, and should you choose not to report to them at the decided time, your transmitter will be activated. It will —and I’m stressing this here, Ben— hurt. A lot. It’s not something you want to mess with.”

The bitterness behind Kylo’s gaze is entirely unrelated to the aftertaste on his tongue. The Resistance has him neatly cornered with this tracker, and they know it. He can’t remove the tracker short of decapitating himself, meaning that even if he managed to steal an X-wing, he can’t go anywhere near the First Order. Either he would succeed in escaping, and his tracker would lead the Resistance
directly to Snoke, or he would fail, and they would kill him.

They’ve got him pinned in quite the nasty little trap, and it burns.

“I’m fully aware of the Resistance’s ingenuity,” Kylo says flatly. Skywalker wisely does not press the subject.

The lift tube doors open into another hallway, completely buffed where the underground walls were ragged. Skywalker’s gait echoes with a sage’s unhurried confidence as he leads Kylo through a handful of turns. Tunnels, tube lifts, and doors spread out in the dim, damp grey.

Luke clears his throat as they traverse a particularly long stretch of ground. Kylo can’t tell if he’s stringing him along a pointlessly circuitous route, or if the meeting area truly is this far from his cell. They’ve been walking continuously for ten minutes, and the exertion is making Kylo lightheaded.

“They’ve got him pinned in quite the nasty little trap, and it burns.”

“The council advised against my being your handler, as I’m ‘too close to the issue’,” Luke says, “Which is crotchety old political jargon for ‘Leia, we know he’s your brother, but we don’t trust Luke as far we can shake a nest of viper wasps at him.’ I suppose that’s what happens when you go into hermitage for a decade and a half with a war on and a sister who needed you. The Resistance tends to hold grudges against that sort of thing.” He exhales a long-suffering, nostalgic sigh. “I don’t know how Leia survives those old coots.”

Mostly because she’s as stubborn as a bantha.

“In any case,” Skywalker says, remembering himself, “You’re to report to your handler by 1600 hours. I know you don’t have a chrono on you, but seeing as there’s no reason for you to leave her side in the first place—”

“Her side?”

His fall from grace makes a loud, mortifying thump as it hits the ground.

“Yes. Rey’s your handler for today.”

“And she isn’t ‘too close to the issue’?” Kylo runs furious fingers through his hair, his cuffs dragging both of hands along with them. A dark strand entwines itself in the metal contraption; he yanks his wrists down, and snaps the hair out with it.

Luke chuckles weakly, but there’s no real humor in it. “Arguably, but the council doesn’t doubt that she’ll activate your tracker, if necessary. Very much unlike your weak-willed uncle, they say.”

“She’ll activate the tracker even when it’s unnecessary.”

“All uses of the tracker will be logged, I assure you. She can’t torture you for her own amusement.” Skywalker is silent for a moment, contemplating. “You seem to also forget that she doesn’t want to.”

Kylo scoffs. “Because you’ve muzzled her. You didn’t see her when I fought her on Sullust. If my chest had imploded that very second, she would not have mourned me. The only reason she hasn’t murdered me already is because hatred of that magnitude is a clear shot to the Dark Side, and she’s too much the Jedi’s pet for that now.” Kylo clenches his fists at the potential, the waste. Like selling a kyber crystal to a pack of thieves. “She doesn’t want to torture me? Fine. But it’s only because her precious Code forbids it.”

They come abruptly before to a dead-end, where a durasteel ladder leads into the ceiling. “Tell me,” Luke says, eyes trailing up into the blackness. “Have you always agreed with Snoke’s orders? You were always so obstinate, I hardly believe that you follow him completely blindly. There must have
been something —many things, perhaps— that you balked at. Yet you’re here as an agent of Darkness because, despite your better urges” he pins Kylo with a penetrating look, and Kylo suddenly finds it hard to breathe “—yes, Ben, I know you have them— you valued your obedience over your conviction. Perhaps you should extend Rey the same courtesy, and believe her when she says which side she’s on.”

Luke nudges him to climb the ladder first, and Kylo struggles to make purchase with his hands bound in front of him.

(He had heard them as he had been told he would, from a mother who had once quietly answered what he had quietly asked: those millions of voices crying out in terror before being suddenly silenced.

The Hosnian System alights before the Finalizer, shimmering and screaming and terrible.

Nothing had prepared him for it. He doubts anything ever could.)

The grasses that cover the field are amber-green and waist high, clacking together in a percussion of dry rain. Navigating fifty-odd rungs while cuffed and under-fed leaves the field swimming briefly before Kylo’s eyes. He blinks to steady his vision before Skywalker can see him listing.

Though the grasses sway in a tall, indolent haze to the horizon, Kylo can tell immediately that Luke has led him to an abandoned bomb field. The metal porthole at their feet is the space’s only human concession, the base nowhere to be seen in the shuddering distance. They begin trekking through it, to a location only Skywalker can see.

The breeze makes harpstrings of Kylo’s curls, playing them gently into his face. He is plunged into a deeply discomfiting sense of nakedness at the emptiness of the field, the morning-white inscrutability of the skyline, the gunpowder-and-harvest scent of the wind. He can’t recall the last time he felt sunlight on his unmasked face. The warmth of it drips from his cheeks like the juice of a stolen peach, sweet with the sticky tack of future consequence.

Though Rey must be waiting for them, Kylo can’t sense her against the tall shiver of the grass. He scrabbles more desperately, only to feel the same empty recoil. He senses nothing.

The enormity of his helplessness to feel the Force’s pull —here, on a planet so full of quiet life that it tangles with it—is a blindside that leaves him seeing white. For nearly thirty years, he’s lived with his fingers on the pulse of the heavens. Its silence is like death. It’s every glory of creation and every breath he will ever breathe orphaning him all at once.

Kylo realizes that he’s stopped abruptly in the middle of the field when Skywalker’s steps reach his side.

“I can’t feel it.” Kylo’s voice is barely audible. In the cell, his disconnect from the Force had been easier to explain away —trapped in a tomb, so many miles underground— but here, he is beneath the open sky, trapped in a silence so profound he can hear his own blood rushing. “I really can’t—” He cuts himself off, swallowing.

Luke’s hand settles on his shoulder. When he speaks, it’s with the cadence of smaller, kinder days—Skywalker has a storyteller’s voice, less brash than Han’s, but no less compelling. “I was captured once, on Myrkr, looking for old Jedi lore. The locals didn’t take kindly to strangers snuffling about
their secrets. It took me a good two weeks to convince them of my just intentions.” He pauses, eyes sliding to Kylo’s. “Have you ever heard of the Ysalamiri, Ben?”

He knows that Kylo has; but that is the formula of Luke’s stories to his nephew, and that is how it will always be done.

“Of course,” Kylo says, fighting against the unnatural itching roiling beneath his skin. The reptiles are the bane and veneration of every Force-sensitive, capable of emitting Force-cancelling bubbles up to kilometers in diameter.

Luke hums quietly. “Truly, they’re beautiful creatures- but when you’re kept in a cell with three of them while the locals figure out if you mean to slice them up or not, you start forgetting that.”

Kylo blinks. He’s never heard this story before.

“It felt almost…like watching my aunt and uncle’s house burn down a second time. It was a very specific sensation. Like being abandoned by a parent, or a lover, because of some horrible personal failing. I couldn’t interact with my captors properly. I spoke either too quietly or too loudly, became too desperate or too distant, no matter how hard I tried to make myself behave. Something just wasn’t…clicking. I assumed it was my inability to connect with the Force. But as time drew on, I realized that it was me.”

Kylo looks at him.

Luke squeezes his hand on Kylo’s shoulder. “Being connected to the Force in such an intimate way means that most of us have no idea what our lives would look like without it. I was told that my ultimate goal was to be one with the Force, but somewhere along the way, I let it override my core personality. I was one with the Force all right, just like the universe- and no different than stardust.”

Kylo closes his eyes and reaches out; there is nothing but whiteness and air.

“In the end, I think Tatooine saved me. I had been a farmer all of my life, until Old Ben showed up. I only knew of the Force what my aunt and uncle had told me, which wasn’t much. Neither your mother nor I had been born with knowledge of the Force’s existence, or what it might mean for us. I had someone to go back to, when it was taken away from me.” Luke turns to Kylo, raising his mechanical hand so that he grips Kylo’s shoulders on either side. Kylo flinches. “Unfortunately, you were born into a less ignorant world. You were thrust into notions of the Force and choosing sides before you ever even showed signs of sensitivity. You never got to simply be. No one left you alone long enough.”

“Stop,” Kylo growls, because if he doesn’t his voice won’t carry at all. He rips Luke’s hands from his shoulders. “You’re excusing me again, Skywalker. I warned you against such a thing.”

“I’m not excusing you,” Skywalker says plainly, completely unruffled. “No one is doing that.”

“Then what are you doing?”

Luke sighs. “I know what it’s like being disconnected from the Force, Ben, and believe me when I say that however much it feels like you’re going to drop dead on the spot, it is entirely survivable. Once the injections stop, you will regain it- but getting it back won’t help you fill the loss you’ve just felt. That isn’t what that was.”

Kylo’s nails dig into his fists. Of course it was. What is he, without the Force? Snoke would devour him. His legacy—either legacy—would curse him.
And he would be nothing but a very foolish child who had made an incalculable mistake.

They find Rey in a flattened clearing at the edge of the bomb field, tinkering with hologram schematics. Her calloused, quick fingers swipe at the blue-hazed edges of an X-wing; on the blueprints depicting the internal engines, the light shifts to blaring red. A furrow forms between her eyebrows, as she twirls the model nearly too fast for Kylo to track.

At the sound of Luke clearing his throat, her head shoots up. Tendrils of hair cling to the nape of her neck.

“Master Luke.” She shuts the hologram off with a shrill whirr. “I was just running some diagnostics from the mechanics division- there seems to be something wrong with the new engines we’ve been importing, and since our training hasn’t technically started yet...”

“It’s all right, Rey,” Luke says in faint amusement. “I know you have other duties. Your dedication to either cause isn’t in doubt.”

Then Rey’s eyes settle on Kylo, and she shoots into standing position, hand hovering over her saber hilt. It glints, milky, in the cloudy daylight.

For a moment, her eyes widen, before better judgement narrows them. It occurs to Kylo that this is the first time Rey has seen him like this- barefoot, thick hair mussed from sleep, grey civilian clothes accentuating his long limbs and casting the embarrassing delicacy of his features into softer relief. He hardly looks the masked terror she had first seen on Takodana, or the unhinged madman he’d been in the forests of Starkiller.

He focuses on staying completely emotionless as she speaks.

“You came.”

“So I did,” Kylo says, voice sleeked with the veneer of civility he had once used with her in the interrogation room. He doubts that she’ll believe it, but slipping into a familiar role is its own comfort against the dizziness of the Force’s silence, and the heat of an estranged uncle beside him whom he had promised his master he would kill on first sight, and instead had tea with. He thinks of Luke’s hands on his shoulders —yes, Ben, I know you have them— and it’s so much harder to posture here, where everyone knows his real name. But he has to try. “Your master drives a hard bargain.”

Rey’s eyebrows arch into the territory of her forehead. “And what was that?”

“That it’s better than rotting in a prison cell.”

The line of Rey’s jaw sets. Kylo remembers being strapped to the table on their way to D’Qar, her face a shadow-play of sympathy and perplexion, washed away by the light of repugnance. He remembers the way her voice had slipped like a dune of sand around her newfound shackles of an inherited legacy, and how they had almost agreed on that point. He wonders why he had thought they would ever agree again.

“You’re here because the Resistance took mercy on you, but that compassion does not make us weak. Or stupid,” Rey says. Her hand hovers to her hip, a jury-rigged commlink fangled to the belt-loop carrying her lightsaber. Undoubtedly, it’s linked to his tracking device. “If you give me one reason to think that you’re endangering anyone here, Ben—”

“Ben?”
“I sure as hell am not calling you Kylo Ren,” she says, and he muses on if this is his uncle’s doing. But then, she never was one to respect his chosen personas. No one here does.

He launches a step in her direction, and her hand flies to the commlink. Kylo stops, reeling, teeth bared. “Then don’t call me anything.”

She inhales, eyes hard. “Fine. I can do that.”

From two paces away comes a batter of tepid applause. Kylo turns along with Rey to see Luke Skywalker clapping softly, the cloth of his robe whuffing at the movement. “Excellent. You two managed not to draw blood.” *Again.* “That’s an auspicious start.”

They settle into a bristled peace, the flurry of a snowstorm paused and glistening with the threat of resumption.

Rey, as it turns out, is just as bad at meditating as he is. After a lifetime where inactivity meant starvation, he supposes that doing nothing will never be in her nature. Kylo can see through the crack in his eyelids how her mouth quirks up and down as she attempts to center herself, eyebrows furrowing as though in the throes of a dream. He’s been on the receiving end of enough of Skywalker’s lectures to know what is expected of proper meditation, and how that is certainly *not* it. Rey was never made for the emotionless peace of the Jedi. The thought gives Kylo a measure of satisfaction.

The underbrush rustles as Kylo shifts in his cross-legged position, sharp angles of the grass digging into his ankles. Autumnal air plucks against the thin weave of his shirt, raising goosebumps: scent of metal and X-wing exhaust; damp dirt and fresh linen. The temptation to reach out to the Force is nearly unbearable, a physical ache. Kylo finds some modicum of old strength in fighting against the desire, in his need to believe that its absence isn’t permanent, in his terror of feeling that door slam in his face again.

For the first time since his capture, he thinks of the First Order. Hux is surely baying for his removal, working on another genocidal pet project that Kylo will once again fail to deflect. His Knights may be waiting for his return—he wonders what Snoke told them had happened, how he had explained the slaughter of three of their own at Kylo’s hand—or they may have already chosen a new leader, whom Kylo will have to butcher if (*when*) he returns to claim the position.

He thinks of Snoke’s voice, the one from childhood that had been so kind, until it wasn’t.

His sharp intake of breath surprises even himself.

Luke’s eyes fly open at the interruption, Rey’s following shortly after. They both immediately know that the noise came from him, and Kylo wants more than anything to be back underground, buried in a hole where no one can see this shame.

“It seems that both of you are disquieted, today.’” Luke says. Kylo is relieved to find that he hears no pity in his voice. Still, he keeps his eyes away. “It might serve us all to recite the Jedi Code, to recenter ourselves.”

Kylo’s lips curl. His legs strain with the desire to stomp up and run, sadistic tracker be damned.

“You’re under no obligation to join us,” Luke says, directing his comment at Kylo from where they all sit, equidistant from each other in a triangle. “But it would help if you did. It might even earn some points in your favor for cooperation.”
“Bribing the prisoner, are we?” Kylo says, and hates that it will probably work, because he can’t go back to the First Order if the Resistance decides that he’s better off dead.

“Your father’s rubbed off on me a little, it seems,” Luke says.

In his peripheral vision, Kylo sees Rey grimace.

Kylo closes his eyes as Rey and Luke begin, unwilling to look at either of them. His mouth shapes over the familiar syllables, and it feels like biting down on a cloth to hold in a scream.

*There is no emotion, there is peace.*

(He’s four when he feels the Force for the first time, like bathing in sunlight, like staring directly into the sun. He’s four and a half when he breaks his first vase. The voice made him do it, he says, and only his mother seems to believe him. Her face turns into something terrifying, like she’s ready to rip a man in half, and the only thing Ben knows is that he’s the one who made her look that way. The voice says it would be better if he didn’t tell her again. All it would do is upset her.

He breaks ten vases in the next year.)

*There is no ignorance, there is knowledge.*

(He’s six when he hears of Darth Vader, the Empire’s ultimate evil that still haunts the shadows of the New Republic’s dreams. Ben’s gut clenches in fear as he swipes through his mother’s nicked datapad, face glowing from the light of a monster swathed in black, a mask so deep there can’t be life within it at all. He’s only just begun to read his aubesh letters, but the voice interprets for him. It’s friendly, occasionally. Mostly when comforting Ben after a shattered plate, a spark of anger that the voice insists it’s okay to feel. Now, it reads patiently to him, sneering at the New Republic’s descriptions of Vader’s reign of murder and cruelty.

—He was a great man, Darth Vader. He brought stability to the galaxy. Order. He protected his cause at any cost.

—But the Empire hurt people. They destroyed my mom’s home. She still cries about it. Not aloud, but I can tell.

—Don’t be so naïve, boy. You think the Empire were the only ones who killed?

Ben swallows. In the morning, he doesn’t ask his mother about it.)

*There is no passion, there is serenity.*

(Luke’s mechanical hand is unrelenting on Ben’s shoulder as he yanks him away from the training field, so sharply that Ben nearly tumbles to the ground. His lightsaber deactivates, flying into Luke’s hand. The Padawan on her knees in front of Ben is shrieking, clutching her side, eyes glistening with betrayal. Crackled, cauterized skin shines between the gaps of her fingers and torn robe.

—What in the Force was that, Ben?

—I fought her. You told us to fight. And I won.

Luke runs his free hand raggedly through his hair. —You struck her when she was down! A Jedi never strikes an opponent when she’s down!

—But I won, Ben says, voice hardening this time, and in Luke’s eyes there’s something like fear.
Ben thinks of his grandfather, and storms away. 

There is no chaos, there is harmony.

(Ben is ten when he sees his first body: a senator, lolled over his desk, mouth dripping with foam, and Ben claps his hands over his ears as he screams and screams and screams. Leia finds him, half an hour later, curled into himself at the foot of the corpse. He nearly falls over himself in his attempt to reach her. She grabs onto him fiercely, pulling him to her chest, his breaths damp and short against the fabric of her tunic. Her arms are steady and unyielding, but Ben no longer believes they can protect him from everything.

—He’s dead, Mom. Ben wrenches his head from Leia’s side to look at her, eyes red and glistening. I was just going to get those forms from him like you told me to and I-

Leia pats his hair, twining a wild curl around her finger. —I know, pup, I know.

Ben’s heard the rumors of a new power amassing on the edge of the Outer Rim. His mother has nearly gotten herself thrown out of senate meetings for daring to suggest that they might be a credible threat; that the New Republic would suffer for ignoring them. Sometimes, he dreams that they steal him away. Sometimes, no one comes back to get him. —The people who killed Senator Malek, were they- do you think they were-

—No, Leia says, clicking her tongue at the corpse. He was killed by someone here, someone in the Senate. Either the person who killed him didn’t like him, or they wanted to send a message to someone who does.

—But isn’t the Senate supposed to be...good?

Leia laughs humorlessly, tousling his hair. —Democracy’s not perfect, Ben. There are bad people everywhere. All of us are just trying our hardest.

He thinks of the voice, of its whispers of glory and power and destiny, of the weakness of good people and the powerlessness of the Senate, and a wave of bitterness crushes his throat.)

There is no Death, there is the Force.

(Han Solo is taking him home. Han Solo is touching his cheek. Han Solo is blessing him, and Ben Solo is forever indebted.

His father is falling.

And has father kept falling- back into his life, into his dreams. He had been there in his quarters on the Finalizer, flippant and unapologetic; he had watched him training with his Knights, and warned him what he would face on Sullust. In his first cell aboard his mother’s command shuttle, he’d listened. In his new cell on D’Qar, he’d stayed.

Kylo Ren had murdered his father, declared his son dead.

And his father had stayed.)

Kylo tumbles out of the Jedi Code blearily, throat tight. For a moment, the white light engulfs his vision, and he imagines that he’s died.

But no, there’s Luke Skywalker and Rey, sitting before him in total silence. He realizes he’s been reciting the Code alone.
His muscles tense in preparation to pounce—for playing him for a fool, making him recite the incantations of the long dead—before he catches the look of pure, sad affection on Luke’s face, and he’s woken up in a strange, alien land where his anger cannot go.

“You still remember it,” Luke says softly. Rey hasn’t spoken a word. She stares, expression hardened, at the horizon.

“Of course I do,” Kylo snaps. “You never let us go a day without it.”

Rey speaks up, eyes moving from the distance to his shoulder.

“We use a different Code now,” she says. She clears her throat, as if to prompt Kylo’s memory so that she will not be forced to explain. “The old one.”

“The old one?”

Rey nods.

*Emotion, yet peace.*

*Ignorance, yet knowledge.*

*Passion, yet serenity.*

*Chaos, yet harmony.*

*Death, yet the Force.*

A thread pulls in his stomach and unravels. Kylo closes his eyes, and lets the caffeine crash take him.

Chapter End Notes

Kylo’s confusion over the Jedi Code brought to you by this tumblr post.
[D’Qar Base CCTV, Cell #21]

[0630 h: Morning meal dispatched with service droid. Prisoner unresponsive.]

[0730 h: Prisoner observed awakening. Appears to be talking to no one while pointing wildly at sleep-matted hair. Speculation based on close-up footage suggests, ‘Just because some of us don’t wake up looking like we’re going to seduce the last princess of Alderaan doesn’t mean I look like that walking carpet’ as possible sentence. Clarification requested.]

[0800 h: Luke Skywalker observed entering cell with cup of caffa. Prisoner observed accepting.]

[0805 h: Prisoner observed leaving cell with Luke Skywalker.]

[1632 h: Prisoner returned to cell.]

[1709 h: Prisoner observed undertaking elaborate gymnastics to seemingly no end. Inquiries into mental health dismissed by Master Skywalker, who assures us that these are ‘lightsaber forms.’ Further inquiries into the possibility of the prisoner having secretly procured a lightsaber met with ‘Stars, I hope not. We can’t have another Skywalker who’s missing a hand.’ Master Skywalker has assured us that this is a joke.]

[1817 h: Prisoner observed passing out after undertaking said elaborate gymnastics. We are informed by the biomedical tracking team that he is not dead. Requests for helping biomedical team with said observation denied.]

[2049 h: Prisoner appears to be in deep argument with space above cell bed over the legitimacy of using the parsec as a unit of speed.]

[2053 h: Prisoner appears to be losing said argument.]

[2400 h: Prisoner observed laying on ground. Despite repeated thrashing, it is believed he is attempting to sleep.]

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To: Leia Organa

From: Luke Skywalker

Re: Your son and giving him a big stick

Ben and Rey have managed not to kill each other for an impressive eighteen days. Think it might be time to allow them to spar. With wooden dowels, of course. Nothing that would get Colonel Mikshmi’s undergarments in a bunch.

To: Luke Skywalker
From: Leia Organa

Re: My son and why his uncle is a nerfherder

While I appreciate that my dear brother has finally considered coming to me for feedback after a fifteen year sabbatical on that front, I would like to remind him that he must go to the council in order for them to grant my son additional privileges and that said brother, despite his distaste for politics, will have to ‘suck it up.’

To: Leia Organa

From: Luke Skywalker

Re: Your dear brother, whom you love

A nerfherder? After all these years, really?

To: Luke Skywalker

From: Corellian Caffa, Inc.

Re: Your order has been shipped!

LUKE SKYWALKER, your order of FIFTY POUNDS of ORGANIC GARQI CAFFA has been sent!

To: Luke Skywalker

From: Leia Organa

Re: Jedi, counting, and whether they taught you arithmetic at farm school

FIFTY POUNDS???

To: Leia Organa

From: Luke Skywalker

Re: My moisture farming education was just fine, thanks

May have accidentally added an extra zero. Am currently procuring adequate storage space.
Patient #052577

Name: Solo, Ben

Sex: M

Summary: Patient brought in accompanied by older male relative, who claimed to be there at the time of the incident. Patient refused to speak, insisting he was fine, though initial tests confirmed presence of dizziness, ringing in the ears, slurred speech, and a delayed response to questioning. When asked what had happened, patient responded with, ‘I fail to see how that is any of your kriffing business.’ When pressed further, patient admitted to ‘being slammed bodily to the ground with a training staff by a certain Padawan out for his blood’ because it was ‘his fault for insulting her hairstyle’ and that he ‘probably should have seen it coming.’

Patient was discharged to his cell with mild concussion.

[Private comlink transmission detected.]

[23:14:07] Were you ever going to tell me about the threat against Ben’s life yesterday?

[23:14:15] My men and I handled it, and the perpetrator is now being court-martialled for obstruction of justice. It was no longer relevant.

[23:14:20] If someone is trying to end his life, I would hesitate to say it’s pretty kriffing relevant. But what do I know, he’s just my sister’s only child.

[23:14:40] And I’m his mother, as you say. And I say that we took care of it.

[23:14:50] Until the next person tries to kill him.

[23:15:02] There are more people on this base who want him dead than alive, Luke. We might be the ones ending his life, at the end of this. And I can’t in good conscience do a single thing to stop it.

[23:15:17]: You know that if anyone is sentencing Ben to death, it's going to be himself.

[23:15:28]: I know that. I know.

[23:15:35]: He’s started wearing shoes again. He refused before. When we meditate, he scoffs, but sits down. I think I almost caught him smiling at one of my jokes, a few days ago. Naturally he scowled as soon as he caught me looking.

[23:15:47] The fact that he doesn’t find your humor amusing just means that there’s some sense in him after all.

INVOICE FOR ORDER #121815-242367

SHIP TO: DOCTOR KALONIA, D’QAR MILITARY BASE
Your order of ten (10) packages of potentiasuppressant vaccines has been placed. The Chiewab Amalgamated Pharmaceuticals Company would like to remind the purchaser that potentiasuppressant is a Class II (2) neurotoxin whose prolonged use can lead to permanent damage to the nervous system and/or complete Force suppression in Force-sensitive individuals.

[D’Qar Base CCTV, Cell #21]

[0137 h: Prisoner observed waking up in the middle of the night, screaming.]

To: Leia Organa

From: Harianna Kalonia

Re: Continued Use of Potentiasuppressants

General,

While I naturally defer to the discretion of you and your council with regards to the prisoner, I feel it my duty as a doctor to inform you that he has been admitted to the medbay a total of three times since his initial mild concussion at the hands of Luke Skywalker’s apprentice, Rey. Although the particular type of potentiasuppressant given to him is mild, it is a neurotoxin nevertheless, which I fear may be adversely affecting him beyond simple Force suppression.

To: Harianna Kalonia

From: Leia Organa

Re: Continued Use of Potentiasuppressants

Major,

As always, I appreciate your respect of my discretion in this matter. Your concern has been noted.

[LUKE SKYWALKER, YOUR REQUEST FOR ADDITIONAL SUGAR RATIONS HAS BEEN GRANTED.]

[Private comlink transmission detected.]

[17:54:58] If he breaks any of my good china, tell him I'll task a spy with taking it out of the First Order’s funds.

[17:59:18] Just don’t give him sugar in his tea after nine. He’ll never be able to sleep.

To: Luke Skywalker

From: Council of Corrections

Re: Supplies

While the council admits that it did agree to provide prisoner Ben Solo with one (1) training dowel for the purposes of supervised sparring, it would also wish to remind esteemed Master Skywalker of the limited nature of Resistance supplies, and that any replacements for said dowel must regretfully be paid from personal funds.

[D’Qar Base CCTV, Cell #21]

[0304 h: Prisoner observed waking up in a fit. Closer inspection of footage suggests moisture on face, perhaps sweat or tears.]

[0306 h: Prisoner observed beating walls of cell with fists.]

[0313 h: Prisoner turns head, as though speaking to someone. After fierce argument with no discernible presence, prisoner places hands over face, and returns to bed.]

To: Leia Organa, Council of Corrections et al.

From: Luke Skywalker

Re: Mental health inquiries

While I’m touched by the council’s deep and most obviously genuine concern for my nephew’s health, I can assure the council that Ben is in perfect mental condition. As perfect as he ever was, anyway. I would like to pre-emptively put Dr. Kalonia at ease by saying that I’m confident this isn’t a result of her administration of the potentiasuppressants. She can rest well in that fact.

For the rest of the council who may be unconvinced, I would merely like to say that my nephew is a man of grave crimes and many sins. It is entirely possible that some ghosts have followed him home.
[PRISONER DATAPAD REQUEST FOR: THE HOSNIAN SYSTEM, A HISTORY]

[PRISONER DATAPAD REQUEST DENIED.]

[DATAPAD OVERRIDE REQUEST DETECTED: GENERAL LEIA ORGANA.]

[PRISONER DATAPAD REQUEST GRANTED.]

(I'm not sorry)

[Private comlink transmission detected.]

[23:23:00] Are you ever going to visit him again?

[The channel you are trying to reach is unavailable. Please try again later.]

[23:26:22] He thinks of you, you know. I can feel it on the surface of his mind, when we meditate. The thoughts that are brightest, warmest, hurt the most.

[The channel you are trying to reach is unavailable. Please try again later.]

[23:47:01] Leia?

[The channel you are trying to reach is unavailable. Please try again later.]
I am in blood stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, returning were as tedious as
go o'er.
—Macbeth, Act III Scene IV

There’s a knock at the door.

Kylo jolts awake, hand flying to his hip for a saber hilt that isn’t there, and hasn’t been for more days
than he’s kept track of. He blinks blearily. There’s no chronometer in his cell for him to check the
time, here where the stark fluorescent lights never dim. Whatever internal sense he might have had of
the sun’s rise and set has been decimated by the potentiasuppressants, but his inability to form a
coherent thought suggests that it’s early.

Very early.

The knock sounds again, terse and commanding despite its lightness; a knuckled rap in contrast with
Luke’s back-of-the-hand taps. Kylo stumbles into standing, carding his fingers through his hair to
erase any evidence of slumber. As though the Resistance aren’t aware of every time he shaves and
spits and turns around. But he refuses to let them see any more than that, won’t allow them to look
into his eyes and see someone startled up in the middle of the night by dreams he can’t remember
upon waking.

More thumping, echoing and quick, sounds from beyond the door. A commandant’s knock. Perhaps
they’ve decided to end this early.

“Yes, yes,” Kylo says, voice rough from sleep, wondering why the Resistance insists on pretending
that he has any power over who enters his cell and how. Pawing his overgrown bangs from his eyes,
he clears his throat. The Resistance hasn’t let him near so much as a butter knife since his
incarceration. One day he’ll have to tie his hair back.

There isn’t a one day.

He has to remind himself of that.

At the sound of his voice, the knocking abruptly stops. Kylo’s feet stop moving too, two armspans
away from the door, as the lock disengages.

Behind it stands Leia Organa.

Despite it being what Kylo can only assume is the early hours of the morning, the General is clad in
the same vest and collared shirt he last saw her in during his trial. Kylo wonders before he can stop
himself if it’s because she never sleeps now, or that she simply refuses to let anyone know that she does. A leader can’t be so weak, so human. There was a time when he can remember her clad in nightgowns, white like the pulled lines of hyperspace, like safety in distance from the claws that catch.

But that was a long time ago, now. She’s probably thrown those nightgowns away.

When Leia enters the room, Kylo steps back as though burned. She doesn’t fight it. For a moment, her eyes flash from the soles of his bare feet to the crest of his moppish hair, taking in his full height, and Kylo knows that she’s thinking of Han; will always look at him and see both the victim and his killer.

He thinks he wouldn’t stop her if she tore him apart.

“We’ve caught a spy.”

The steely tone in her voice makes him look up.

“What?”

Leia folds her arms together, drawing her lips into a taut line, impartiality only belied by the stiffness of her hands against her forearms. It’s a masterful performance, but Kylo knows that trick. She was the one he’d inherited it from.

“We caught a First Order spy within one of our other bases,” Leia says; more slowly this time, voice even-keeled despite the sea he knows she sails. The cords in Kylo’s chest loosen at her clinical tone. In the courtroom, in the spaces between his sins, she had called him her son; in his prison cell, where the shadows stunt at his feet like weeds, she has granted him reprieve from the title. He finds himself once again in awe of General Organa’s damning mercy. “We believe he might have made off with time-sensitive, crucial information. It’s imperative that we know what he’s already told the First Order before we make our next move. We can’t wait any longer.”

There were Alderaanian string-games his mother had taught him when he was young, patterns like *akk dog’s cradle* and *bantha’s tusk*. The trick was to keep the string steady as you wove it between your fingers, passing it from knuckle to knuckle with the quiet confidence that the mess that it looked was not the result it would be, that a pattern would unfold in your palms because you would make it so. But a single mistake would cost the whole design, and your hands would be bound together by the tangles of your own making. The knots he made had always been too tight to unwind again. His mother never had any choice but to cut them apart completely.

Cold air bites against his teeth as he bares them in a laughless smile.

“My apologies, General,” he says, voice a desert mirage, so hot it runs cold and just as tenuous. Shoving up his sleeve reveals a cluster of red-and-white injection marks below his shoulder. “If you wanted your political enemies kept alive so you could use them for your own purposes, perhaps you shouldn’t have had your medical lackeys repeatedly drug them. My methods are useless to you.”

Leia bows her head almost imperceptibly. “I’m not asking you to interrogate the spy directly.”

“Excuse me?”

Her shoulders rise and fall, a steady breath pulsing through her body. “I’m asking Rey to do it, and she has agreed. But I want you to help her. Despite what she said she did to you on Starkiller, she has very little experience deliberately searching someone’s mind—”
Kylo can’t help the way his eyes widen. He stomps a step forward before he’s realized it.

“—You’re asking Rey? You would sacrifice her for this?”

“We’ve all made sacrifices, Ben,” Leia says, and in her voice he hears that million-voiced scream like a single soul weeping; hears Han’s hushed, wet gurgle as Kylo’s lightsaber slides just below his heart. Then a much quieter sob, too familiar, choked in the folds of her senate silk, held in the arms of a spitfire rebel terrified to admit that she does not know how to fix this and she’s not even sure how to try.

He clenches his fists to keep them from shaking.

“You were there for the testimonies against me. You would have me teach Rey how to do that too?”

He isn’t sure if that would bother him. It shouldn’t, and so he decides that it doesn’t.

“Ben, if that intel is leaked, it could cost hundreds, if not thousands of lives—” Leia stops herself short, outstretching her hand towards him as though on instinct. The dark savagery of his expression forces her to pull away. Her arm hovers limply in the air, elbow crooked. Fingers still stretching towards him. Always towards him.

Kylo crushes his arms against his chest to keep himself from doing something that would damn him more than an execution ever could.

Something like reaching back.

“It could cost thousands of your lives, you mean,” he says, keeping his snarl and two armspans between them. “And what about the hundreds of First Order soldiers who were aboard Starkiller when Han Solo blew it up? Did you rejoice when they were annihilated in the name of your Resistance? Your New Republic?”

That the Stormtroopers under his command were all child soldiers had never bothered him before, but he knows it will rankle the General, and he tells himself that’s enough. With the First Order comes the implicit notion of algorithms, of constant analysis in which usefulness is quantifiable and cosmic worth tangible.

Stormtroopers are needed fodder, their childhood necessary sacrifice. The First Order has never had problems with beginning its work early. He thinks of his own hands around a newly minted cross-guarded blade. Yes, the First Order has no problem starting young.

Leia looks at him.

“This isn’t like those Senate meetings I used to take you to,” she says, voice an iced river underscored below with a current of pleading. “I can’t sign a bill to make this better. I’m asking you because mental extraction is the most humane way to get what we need.”

“Isn’t it like those senate meetings, though?” Kylo says, quiet and hard, as memory scores gashes in the dips of his temples. Senator Malek, an unbridled terror on the Senate floor, who had once caught Ben sneaking in to listen to his filibustering and had trundled him up to the podium with one wrist caught in his hand. Senator Malek, who had caught Ben hiding from his tutor behind a statue in the atrium, and had pressed his reddened face to Ben’s nose to warn him about the dangers of becoming a leech on society. Senator Malek, always so terrifying until the bills were signed and the politics ended, when he pressed paper squares of caramel into Ben’s hands with a wink and a chuffing laugh. Kylo wasn’t sure if he had ever liked the man—he remembers that his mother had once called him a ‘karking son of a bantha’ when the senate was in session, but then later found them in her
office exchanging drinks—but he hadn’t hated him. He had always imagined Senator Malek arguing his way out of the afterlife. People like that weren’t supposed to die. People like his mother, people like the New Republic, weren’t supposed to kill them. “That’s your democracy.”

Leia is silent, face impassively blank, the sensation of watching her like missing the last step on a staircase in the dark, and becoming suddenly aware of the unseen deepness of the world.

“I’m fully aware that whatever we create after this war will eventually fall apart,” she says. “It happened when I was nineteen. It’s happening now. And it will happen again.”

“So you admit it.” He thinks of Hux’s rousing speeches, his own soliloquies; Snoke’s steady, bone-deep reminders of humanity’s attempts to rule itself ending in ashes. “Humans have no idea how to act in their own best interests. Someone must guide them.”

Leia laughs, an echoic, partially absent thing. If the overhead fluorescence wasn’t so relentless, her shadow would bleed into his. “I admit that we are remarkably self-sabotaging creatures. Some New Republic senators truly might serve their constituents better by being thrown out of an airlock.” Kylo raises his eyebrows in surprise at her concession, before she puts up a finger to silence him. “But just because our best methods are flawed, doesn’t mean that I look at a regime that kidnaps children and conquers planets under martial law as an equal solution. That’s insanity.”

“As you said,” Kylo says, tightening his grip against his ribs. “That’s war.”

“And this”—Leia looks up at him, the thin stem of her neck pale in the lamplight—“is what I’m asking of you. I’m trying to give you a chance. For the love of the stars, Ben, there’s nothing else I can do for you. Not when I still look at you and see—” her voice chokes off. Her hands are shaking, curled into fists. He’s done this to her. Everything he’s done these past years, he’s done to her.

He thinks of Rey, of teaching her to steal into her victims’ minds with a punch so swift death isn’t felt until it’s inched up to the lungs. He thinks of her tantalizingly combustible anger, spiked deep with coal veins that if tapped might burn for centuries, and how he might feed from her power.

But mostly, he thinks of his mother.

“Do not take my cooperation as repentance,” Kylo says.

“Ben—”

“Don’t.” His voices shakes for a half-note, and he pinches his nails into his palms to recenter himself. “Just don’t.”

Leia nods, mouth thinning. He flicks his eyes from hers before he can lose all his resolve. “I’ll bring her in.”

It’s 0130 hours, according to the chrono on Rey’s comlink. Leia has given them until noon to train, cancelling their obligations to Luke for the day.

They stare at each other, Kylo positioned opposite the door; Rey standing, stiff arms at her sides, by the threshold. She is fully clothed despite the hour. Though her hand isn’t near her saber, her feet are shoulder-width apart in preparation to spring.

It seems she’s taking to the sudden cease-fire just as well as he is.
Folding his arms uncomfortably, Kylo pushes himself from the wall he’d been leaning on, ignoring the heat creeping up his neck as Rey’s gaze flits magpie-like from corner to corner of his bare cell. He knows what she’ll see. It’s scant little to memorize. A bed, a fresher, and the faint patterns in the floor his bare feet have made after hours of lightsaber katas in the same position, every day.

There’s nothing of worth here for her to collect.

“Not what you expected?” he says, in perhaps the most civil tone he’s directed at her thus far. It’s self-preservation in its entirety. He’s still not wholly sure it succeeds. She startles imperceptibly, eyebrows drawn together as though spotting a sandstorm on the horizon, trying to scry if it’s heading her way.

Rey shakes her head. “No,” she admits. Simply from the way she squints, Kylo can tell she didn’t anticipate it to be so brightly lit, or so normally furnished. Perhaps she imagined that he was chained to a cave after his sessions with her and Luke, left shivering in the wet dark. At the way her shoulders ease the more she looks about the room, the more he wishes he had been.

Monsters, he knows, do not typically keep cots and shaving stones.

She looks up at him. “Well. Are we going to start?”

Kylo shakes his head, untangling an arm from where it’s folded against his chest, to gesture about the room. “Be my guest.”

After a second of shifting her weight from foot to foot, Rey nods, cloth boots gliding soundlessly across the tile. Halfway between the cell door and the bed, she pauses. Deliberating.

He’d caught glimpses of her mind during her interrogation. The banshee-rattle of night storms clawing metal walls. Nights too clotted with sand for stars. Small hands, clutching a sand-stuffed doll, pressing a pilot’s helmet into her hair as she willed the desolation away.

And never once a proper bed.

“Take the cot, if you like,” Kylo says stiffly from behind her. Rey starts, elbows locked as though she’s been caught contemplating something heinous. “I don’t sleep in it, if you’re worried about that.”

Her lips purse. “Where do you sleep?”

“On the ground.”

And he’ll be damned if he tells her why.

She straightens her spine for a moment, contemplating, before the mattress springs creak gingerly under her weight. For being a tall woman, Kylo doubts she weighs more than the General does. Bone, muscle, and willpower rarely tip perceptible scales.

Sitting cross-legged on the bed, Rey tears her shoes from her feet before settling her hands on her knees, tossing her boots in an ungainly pile by the foot of the cot. Kylo’s mouth must have opened more than he thought at her display, because she answers, “I’m not going to sit on someone’s bed with my dirty boots. Even yours.”

“So the scavenger has manners after all.”

Rey’s hand shoots dangerously towards one of the boots she’d tossed, and for a moment Kylo fears
she’s going to summon the Force to smack him with it.

Then her eyebrow shoots into her hairline.

“Were you trying to be funny?”

Kylo looks on indifferently.

“Well, don’t be,” Rey says. Her aggression, shifted into the passive, is like the difference between high noon and sunrise. Kylo isn’t sure what to do with that, and so he falls down into a sitting position on the floor before the cot, folding his arms around his long legs. Despite her elevation, it puts him at eye-level with her torso.

After a minute of tense silence, he finally speaks.

“Why did you agree to this?”

Rey shrugs flippantly. “By accident, really. I found BB-8, then Finn found me, and there were explosions—”

“—not ‘this’, generally,” Kylo says, scanning her face as she scowls. Her knuckles rise and fall as she plays a nameless tune against her kneecaps. She’d used a similar evasive tactic before in the interrogation room on Starkiller, when he had questioned her about the astromech carrying the map to his uncle. It’s a BB unit with a selenium drive and thermal hyperscan vindicator, internal propulsion system, optics corrected to… “I meant, why did you agree to interrogate this spy? You know as well as I do that the sort of technique required is hardly associated with the Light.”

The tapping stops. “Mind tricks have been used by the Jedi and Sith alike.”

“This is considerably more invasive than a mind trick.”

“I’m not going to go tramping through his mind unrestrained, like you do.”

“You’re so certain?”

“If I’m not, people are going to die.”

“People are going to die anyway.”

Rey’s clenched fingers leave crushed whirlpools in the untouched fabric of the sheets. “If they had someone else interrogate the spy, no one would have batted an eye. We’d say they’re doing what they have to do. But the moment I volunteer, I’m suddenly careening towards depravity.”

“You’re Force-sensitive,” Kylo says, as though it explains everything, and it does. “You have power most can hardly conceive. You have the ability to destroy more with a single well-meaning error than most conquerors can with an entire empire behind them. So yes, people are right to be afraid.”

And that had been the problem, hadn’t it? Children with powers too big for them, whose successes were not their own and whose failures were omens of the sinister.

Rey shakes her head. “Like you said, I’m Force-sensitive.” Wisps of just-grown hairs cling to her temples. “Not a god.”

Kylo chuckles humorlessly. “If there is a god, we’re the closest things it has to chosen ones.”
Rey’s chronometer reads 0207 hours. Despite her outward calm, the hollow of her throat ebbs and swells.

“Right,” she nods. “Should we start?”

Kylo eyes her dubiously from his position on the floor. “I’m not about to let you rummage through my mind without teaching you the basic principles first.”

She eyes him in scathing disbelief. “What?”

Kylo scoffs, gesturing once again to his pock-marked upper arm. “Don’t pretend you’re unaware of what the Resistance has done to me.”

Rey recovers from her startlement quickly, nodding her chin as she looks down at him. “Good. Having you in there once was enough.”

“Oh, come now. I went easy on you.”

He still can’t answer the question of why.

“I’m touched.”

Kylo sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose as he closes his eyes to stave off a whirl of dizziness. The heaviness of Rey’s discomfort brings him back to focus, and he drops his hand back to his lap in mimicry of a clumsy Force trick. As though he could make her forget his little human weaknesses.

“What?“

Kylo glances up. Rey’s looking at him with eyes slightly narrowed, brows knit together in a way that reminds him oddly of her grandfather, in the vague memories of him Luke had sometimes shared, though Obi-Wan had long since died.

—That’s why you two share the same name, Luke’s voice says, all desert primrose, dewy with a future then-Kylo had not yet inflicted. My father’s brother in all but blood. My first teacher. Leia’s only hope. He brought out the best in people. Just like you’re the best of us.

Kylo cinches his grip on his knees as he tries to outlive the wave of manic pain that swells over him, rushing with salt and downed sailors. But it takes him, roughly and without gentleness, towards a swell he’s terrified might lead to shore.

“I’m tired,” he says, and means it. Rey simply looks at him, eyes unreadable. She’s far better at that than him. He’s always felt too much, too obviously, to Han’s discomfort and Luke’s consternation. It’s why a mask had suited him.

Springs squeak faintly as Rey adjusts her perch on his —Han’s— mattress. “Then don’t sleep on the ground,” she says.

There aren’t many memories to choose from.

Rather, there are too many of them, glittering and broken and patterned with fingerprints and blood.

“Some basic principles,” Kylo says, peering at Rey sharply over his folded arms, which are balanced atop his knees. Rey sits dutifully atop the mattress, hands holding her crossed feet, teeth biting her bottom lip in a way he’s beginning to understand means she’s earnestly paying attention. The fact
that she’s not explicitly trying to kill him, or send him to the medbay, makes it oddly difficult to concentrate. He flickers for a moment with indulgent pride — you need a teacher; do you see, Rey, what you missed— before dousing himself in the reality of the task. She’s not here for him or his tutelage. She’s here to complete a goal, and unlike him, she’s not petulant enough to refuse help from an enemy she has no fear of.

And he, in his own fascination with her power, can’t stop himself.

If anything, he’s helping the First Order by culling their weakest members like this, making lessons out of their failures. This spy knew what he was getting into. If all goes well, Snoke will thank him for laying the seeds of Rey’s corruption. It’s not a betrayal of the Order. It’s just not.

Kylo looks at Rey levelly before speaking again. “One. You can’t know what your target himself doesn’t know.” Rey raises an eyebrow, unimpressed. “I’m aware that this sounds obvious. It is not. Mind probing is essentially a more concentrated version of Force-empathy. Surface thoughts are easy to sense, but in order to acquire deeper information, the target has to give a certain level of permission.”

Rey eyes him skeptically.

“I didn’t say the permission had to be willingly granted.” Kylo’s voice is low. “Although it goes more smoothly when it is, and in that case the target may feel nothing at all. But if they refuse to give you access, there are ways to…persuade permission. Such as pain.”

“I’m not going to torture him.”

Kylo merely raises his eyebrows. “We’ll see.”

He can picture her, eyes hard, leaving him to writhe like Poe Dameron had in his own custody. It wouldn’t be a large leap for her. In fact, he imagines such a thing might be her first instinct.

He can just as easily see her mercy, expression fire-bright, a burning antiseptic men would clean their swords and sutures by; refusing, like some noble, god-called anchorite, the pull of her own dark.

Kylo can’t decide which bothers him more.

“As I was saying,” he finally says.

“Yes. As you were saying.”

He ignores her tone. “The easiest way to find what you want is to explicitly ask for it.” I know you’ve seen the map. “Whether your target answers you is immaterial. The important thing is that your target, unless they are particularly skilled — and oftentimes not even then — is now thinking about what you want. Whether they outright give you what you’re looking for, or try to hide it deeper, doesn’t matter. The trace of the thought is still there. It’s tangible within the Force, and it’s something you can track.”

Rey furrows her eyebrows, rocking back and forth slightly on her haunches. “I had wondered why you waited for me to wake up,” she says, referring to the interrogation room. “I thought it would have made more logical sense for you to take what I’d seen of the map while I was sleeping. But you needed me awake, so that my own mind could take you to the information you wanted.”

Thorny pride wells in some part of him, despite himself. She’s an admirably quick study, as he knew she would be. “Yes. Mind probes work best on those who are conscious. It is possible to do it with someone who isn’t, but the average sapient being has too much information in their minds for you to
reasonably sift through it all. It’s a wild bantha chase. Pointless, and a waste of your time.”

She bites her lip again, the skin of her mouth chapped, as though she’s still unused to drinking enough water. “What happens if the target is ‘exceptionally skilled’, then?”

Kylo sighs. “If your target happens to be good —and I mean really good, to the extent where I doubt anyone not strong in the Force, or extensively trained, could pull it off— they may misdirect you. It’s possible for Force users to construct mental blocks around information they don’t want seen. Although this is still dangerous, because even if your interrogator doesn’t breach the block, it still alerts them to the fact that there’s something there. It’s also possible to create mental blocks around decoy information, and leave what you truly want hidden tucked away somewhere else, unprotected, where it doesn’t raise suspicion. It’s a calculated risk. But the surest way to keep information safe is to convince yourself that you don’t have it.”

“That’s possible?”

“It’s a form of mind trick against the self, though it’s extremely difficult to do with perfect accuracy. I suppose it could also be done by having someone else mind trick you, but regardless, it’s rarely a clean swipe. Mind tricks are not perfect, and can be broken out of, or take incompletely. They are only effective on the weak-minded, and someone that desperate to protect something is rarely that.”

Rey is quiet for a moment, contemplating. “How did I do it, then?”

Kylo frowns. “Do what?”

“How did I break into your mind, and find…” She pauses. Kylo’s never seen her pause at anything. “What I found.”

*You’re afraid you’ll never be as strong as Darth Vader.*

Kylo sucks in a breath. “Like I said, I took a calculated risk. And failed.” It’s a struggle to keep his voice detached. “Snoke was rather…persistent, in being granted free access to all of his apprentices’ thoughts.”

“Meaning you hid something from him. Deliberately.”

His voice is bitter. “Snoke didn’t need to be burdened with my own inadequacies.”

The corners of Rey’s mouth fold up.

Kylo interjects as Rey raises her hand towards him, face smoothed in concentration.

“Don’t even think about trying to use this to your advantage.”

From atop her perch, Rey’s expression cants into the hint of a wolfish grin. “I wouldn’t dream of it.”

“I mean it,” Kylo says, forcing his increasingly erratic breathing to slow as the reality of Rey’s task sinks in. Even the potential of corrupting Rey isn’t worth an errant swipe into his mind. Without his own connection to the Force, he can’t fully guarantee what she’ll find. “I warn you that my mental blocks are extensive.”

An exasperated sigh. “Then *what* is the purpose of this? Why teach me to probe someone’s mind if you’re just going to shut me out?”
Kylo glares at her. “Because unless that spy happens to be a Knight of Ren, he’s not Force-sensitive. In which case, he has no mental blocks for you to concern yourself with.”

“Are you saying that the Knights of Ren are the only Force-sensitives in the entire First Order?”

“Yes. I am saying that.”

*The easier to control them, if Snoke can manage their numbers.*

A strange tinkling sound fills the room, clear and self-effacing. In a manic second, Kylo thinks it might be laughter. But that can’t be right.

“Well, thank the stars for that,” Rey says.

Kylo clears his throat. “If you’re done asking questions that will get you nowhere, I’ll begin by providing you with a few questions.”

Rey glowers, before drawing her face back into that foreign, sincere studiousness that unbalances him once again. “I’m the one interrogating you, here.”

Kylo smiles without mirth at her choice of wording, looking up at Rey over the shelf of his arms, still balanced on his knees. “Yes, you are. Congratulations.”

Rey nods her sharp assent, face gaunt and breathtakingly predatory in its eagerness. Kylo takes a deep breath. It will be all right. His defences are strong enough to handle a simple, untrained romp — miraculously without ill intent on her part. They had kept Snoke at bay this long, away from his brightest failures.

There’s so little he can ask her. So little that’s safe.

Eventually, he settles on what hurts the least, though a scar still lances from it, a moon-white mat of messily healed tissue on his abdomen.

“What is the name of Chewbacca’s wife?”

Rey looks up, nonplussed. “Chewie has a wife?”

“You tell me.”

“All right then,” she says, in such a normal voice that it throws Kylo into imagining the ungraspable idea of not having to either turn her or kill her. Impossible.

She reaches out a hand towards him, closing her eyes in the same raptured focus she had held in the forests of Starkiller, where their sabers had made steam of the snow and cast their silhouettes in violet. Her fingers are sturdy, salvage-calloused as they press towards him.

Instead of self-transcendence, what Kylo sees is remarkable self-possession.

Her presence rushes in his mind then, inexperienced as it had been in Starkiller, hot intent taking the place of her old manic clumsiness. Self-preservation urges him to shut her out. A cold, thumping chill reminds him that without the Force, he can’t even if he wanted to.

(—What’s a wife, Uncle Chewie?

A loping Wookie sidles up beside him at the Falcon’s Dejarik table, where the boy is playing holochess against himself. It’s a delicate undertaking, requiring patience and ruthlessness, a certain
level of willful forgetting to craft strategies his opponent knows as soon as he does. As it stands, the boy is winning.

And also losing.

The Wookie chortles in Shyriiwook, a ululating forest-song that the boy can only mimic the barest shavings of. His father laughs hysterically whenever the boy tries, but the Wookie assures the boy that his father means it in good spirit.

—Why do you ask, Beloved One?

—Stop calling me that, the boy grits irascibly. It’s sappy and gross.

The Wookie gently pats the boy’s head. It isn’t lost on the boy that one swipe of the Wookie’s paw could behead him, yet he’s never seen the furry beast reach out to him with anything other than a gentleness of one of his own.

—I will stop calling you Beloved when you stop being my Beloved One, the Wookie answers matter-of-factly. Han’s cursing echoes from beyond the hold. Somewhere, a hydrospanner clatters to the ground. The Wookie chortles. Twice loved, twice lucky. It is a saying among my people.

The boy scowls, pushing against the Wookie weakly, but the Wookie merely chuckles, enormous paws enveloping him. —Uncle Chewie! You’re blocking the game! I can’t see!

—It seems like you’re losing, Beloved.

—No, I’m winning!

More soft laughter. It reminds the boy of the shadows of a forest planet he’s never seen but knows somehow, in the stories his uncle tells him in the dim nights of hyperspace. Once, when his father threatened to abandon him on the Wookie’s home planet, after a bout of screaming that threatened the future of one of his mother’s trade deals, the boy had told his father to do it. His uncle would take care of him there. He’d manage just fine in the trees and the rain, the great wooden cities his uncle’s people had built. The Wookies would grow used to his lack of fur soon enough.

—So you are. But I do believe you asked me a question, Beloved.

The boy sighs. He doesn’t mind the nickname, not really, though he’s growing older now and therefore must pretend that he does. The voice assures him that the Wookie is a superstitious animal who would not hesitate to kill him if only he knew about him what the voice did.

The boy isn’t sure what the voice knows, exactly. But every time another glass shatters and his father and mother are left picking glass out of their fingers, he feels that he’s closer to understanding. He’s learning not to doubt the voice. It is his only friend.

—Yeah, the boy says, shaking away the thoughts. He can’t afford to think them here, with his father so close, near the cockpit. It only makes his father sad, makes him angry, makes him run an exasperated hand through his hair with a desperate, ‘How am I supposed to help you, kid? For the love of anything, just tell me what’s wrong!’ And then the boy will go very quiet and shake his head. Nothing. Nothing is wrong. It’s just how he is. What’s a wife?

The Wookie leans back, far-off water droplets pattering in his dark eyes. —A wife is someone you swear to spend the rest of your life with. Because she is everything you are not, and yet everything you are.
—Like a life debt?

_The Wookie hums softly, carding his claws through the boy’s wild hair. Maybe they’re more related than the boy thought._ —Yes, you could say that.

_The boy looks up at the Wookie in horror._ —Does that make you my dad’s wife?

_A burst of raucous laughter._ —No, Beloved, it does not. Your father’s wife is your mother. And my wife is named—)

“—Malla,” Rey finishes. Her voice is raw.

It’s dark again, and he’s standing on an oscillator bridge with no railing, one body upon it when there should have been two. And the light is red again, where Chewbacca’s screams clang against the metal that is his life-debt’s tomb, and his bowcaster strikes Kylo with a pain that matches his own so acutely, he initially hardly feels it. He is private in his horror and his grief for that mad second when he imagines himself alone. He allows himself the shock. The moment of waiting. The treasonous need for his father to come back.

But he is not alone. There is the girl. The traitor. The—

_I will stop calling you Beloved when you stop being my Beloved One._

A searing, phantom pain lances up his abdomen. The warrior Wookie, best of his tribe, had shot at Kylo nearly point blank.

And the Wookie had missed.

He can feel Rey’s consciousness against his thoughts as the floor bucks beneath him. The look of mutual pain on her face, so dangerously close to empathy, makes him want to tear his cell to shreds.

“Get out,” he says sharply.

“I—”

“Get. Out.”

He rises to his feet, lunging at Rey. Her mind is too choked by the stupor of his thoughts to react in time. With a grunt, she thrashes against him, reaching for the tracker activator, but Kylo already has his hands manacled around her wrists and is dragging her to the door.

“He can feel her wrist-bones shifting under his clinching grip. At her grunt of pain, he lets her go. “You’re well prepared. The session is over.”

Conflict gleams in her eyes, that unwilling understanding, before pride sets the line of her jaw. “If you touch me like that again, I will rip your arm off.”

Kylo smiles wickedly. “See? That wasn’t so hard.”

But there’s no satisfaction in his victory. The lock clicks open. A guard Kylo doesn’t recognize ushers Rey out.

When the door closes again, Kylo sinks to the floor and sobs.
This week on Keeping Up With the Skywalkers...
Chapter Notes

Nothing is given to men, and the little they can conquer is paid for with unjust deaths. But man’s greatness lies elsewhere. It lies in his decision to be stronger than his condition. And if his condition is unjust, he has only one way of overcoming it, which is to be just himself.

—Albert Camus; Resistance, Rebellion, and Death

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

xvi.

He stays until time becomes abstract again, under the lights’ soundless sea. Kylo twines his lank arms around his knees, pressing them into his chest as his back arches against the cell door. His breaths fall short, and there’s a comfort in that; a comfort of lacking. Like drawing to like.

He calls out to the Force, knowing there will be no answer. There’s been no sign of Snoke, either, and that is its own terror. Kylo cannot even begin to tally how many days he would have to live entirely in his own mind to make up for those spent with the voice and its company. He doesn’t dare imagine the kind of man who might emerge from it. As he is, he doubts he would even survive it.

“Wanna talk about it?”

Kylo starts at the voice, heart pounding against his ribcage. He doesn’t have the strength to turn around. Or perhaps it takes all of his strength not to.

Han Solo grunts, standing in front of him, seating himself against the door next to Kylo. He outstretches his legs as he presses his back against it, unruffled and unexpectant. The gesture brings back memories almost too painful for Kylo to contemplate, flashes of a younger self finding a cramped, private sort of solace in one of the Falcon’s smuggling compartments; the tops of his father’s boots walking past his hiding hole, stopping, then crouching down.

—Hey Chewie, d’you remember the Mandalorians ordering a smallish looking kid along with their vibroblades? Sort of a funny lookin’ one, I’d say.

At Kylo’s sudden grimace, Han shrugs, turning his head to face the far wall.

“Figured you wouldn’t. Worth a shot, though.”

Kylo tightens his encircling grip around his legs, keeping his eyes fixed on the floor.

“You should leave,” Kylo says. He chances a look at Han, who is still gazing at the wall as though Kylo is not there. A soft-treading hunter, unwilling to spook the creature he came into the woods to find.

Han snorts softly. Its gentleness pounds like a blaster shot. “Already tired of my company?”

“You have better options.” Kylo’s death-grip on his knees pales his knuckles the color of sun-
bleached bone. “Your wife, your brother-in-law. Perhaps even the scavenger you so graciously offered to take in as your co-pilot.”

And maybe she’d be the child he’d always wanted. Quick with a blaster, tough, resourceful. A girl after his father’s own heart if there ever was one.

Han raises his eyebrows. “Yeah, well, none of them are you.”

“I’m not—” Kylo bites out, then gives up. He buries himself deeper into his tangle of limbs. “Whatever obligation you think you have towards me, you don’t. I absolve you.”

“Hate to break it to you, but being your dad is sort of a lifetime position.”

“You’re dead. You’ve paid your dues.” Kylo takes a deep, shuddering breath. The heat of it presses back against his skin. “The General sent you on a mission doomed to end in failure. It did. You’re done now. You don’t have to spend any more time with the man who murdered you.”

“Maybe so.” Han pauses, and Kylo’s body stiffens. “But at the moment, I’m a little busy with my son.”

“How can you still—”

Han cuts him off with a neatly placed gesture.

“I used to think you were;” he says, voice soft again in a way that had been so foreign to him, until he’d died. “A monster, I mean. Mostly, I went to Starkiller as a favor to your mother, so that when I couldn’t bring you back, maybe she’d let it go. Accept that whatever it was that’d made you snap had taken you away from us forever.” Against his will, Kylo flinches. “But on that bridge… I saw my kid. For the first time in so many years, I saw my kid.” A rough, sentimental smile, and Han raises his eyes to look at Kylo’s. Kylo darts his gaze away. “I didn’t know what I was going to get, when you took off that mask. An adult I didn’t recognize, maybe; some full-grown Dark Lord that I had to believe was my son. But instead it was like someone had pressed fast-forward on a holovid of all the years I’d missed, and there you were, right in front of me.”

A stitch hitches in Kylo’s chest. It hadn’t been like that with him. The Han Solo he’d remembered, the Han Solo he’d hunted, had been copper-haired and broad-backed; fair target and fair game. There had been so much grey when Kylo had turned around to the sound of his father calling his name; such alien, resigned grief.

Beside him, Han chuckles, the corner of his mouth pulled up in a wistful grin. “You finally grew into your face. I was wondering when that was going to happen.”

“It never happened,” Kylo says. Han snorts softly.

“Well, okay, you’re still a little big around the ears. And maybe the nose. But the height definitely helps. Plus the longish dark hair. Makes you look sort of dangerously pretty.” Kylo nearly chokes on his own spit. Han laughs outright. “Ah, so that’s what it takes to get Mister Dark Lord to blush.”

Kylo hunches his shoulders to cheek-level to keep himself from swatting his hair over the heat rising in his ears. He swallows, trying to come up with a response that doesn’t make him sound like a complete idiot. Around Han Solo, this is typically a losing enterprise.

“I simply wasn’t… expecting that combination of adjectives,” Kylo settles for. It’s not his smoothest recovery.
Han grins, rolling and easy, the same he’d use when pulling Kylo up by the armpits from his hiding-holes in the Falcon. For a moment, Kylo can pretend that he’s there, curled up on the stairs leading to the cockpit, Chewie in the co-pilot seat, grasping hyperspace and infinity.

“When you were real little, people were always stopping your mom and me to stare at you. You always had something a little fey about you. Otherworldly.” Han Solo shrugs. “Guess they knew something about you we didn’t.”

“And I suppose you never had this issue as a child.”

“Me? Nah. I was always more your conventional, straight-jawed type. Trustworthy. Likeable, you know?”

Kylo rolls his eyes. “Please. Tell me again how likeable those three death gangs found you in the Anoat System.”

Han nods, settling more deeply along the wall beside Kylo. “Well, if you insist…”

Midway through the second act, Kylo falls asleep.

Kylo wakes to being hurled face-first into the ground.

“Kriff,” someone says behind him. Kylo groans into his teeth, palms flat beside his ears from where he’d thrown them to save his nose from cracking against the floor.

Another muffled curse, then a booted toe prodding against his ribs. From his head’s upside-down position somewhere underneath his elbow, he can see Rey standing in the doorway. A white-knuckled hand is clutched against the door she’d so violently thrown open, which Kylo had been obliviously sleeping against.

“Karking kriff,” Rey swears again, stepping into the room. The door slams shut behind her. Her startled eyes and hard mouth suggest two entirely different emotions at the sight of him, neither of which Kylo wishes to analyze. He collects himself on shaking hands —when was the last time he’d eaten?— and raises himself to a kneeling position, glowering at her.

“I thought I told you that your lesson was over.”

“I’m not here for a lesson.” Rey tosses a bundle at him with a curt flick of her wrist. Picking at it reveals the outline of clothes: socks, a grey shirt, black cargo pants; a dark green military jacket. At the sight of his skeptical expression, Rey juts her chin at the pile, shifting idly from foot to foot. “They’re for you.”

“So I gathered.”

Rey clears her throat, looking for a moment on the verge of an argument. A small shake of her head seems to clear her intent. “The General wants you to come with me to the interrogation. She thought you might appreciate a wardrobe change.”

“She’d prefer that I not look like such a decrepit ingrate in front of a hostile agent, rather.”

He can’t precisely fault the General for this strategic act of kindness. Kylo is no stranger to projection. Above all, do not waste the power of what the enemy imagines you to be.
What _will_ this spy imagine him to be?

A member of the Resistance. No apprentice of Snoke’s, no son of the General’s. Anonymous. Faceless, because he will be forced to bear his face.

It’s enough to make him want to burst into laughing disbelief.

“Something funny?”

Kylo shakes his head, clenching the clothes in a tight fist as the last dregs of laughter drift away. “Not at all.”

“Well, then.” Rey jerks her head at the fresher. “Are you going to get dressed?”

Scowling, Kylo rises to his feet. Rey stares up at him with glinting eyes, looking towards him but not quite at him, boring a hole at a point in his forehead. “I don’t need you to mother me,” he says.

“No.” Her shoulders tauten. “You’d rather throw the mother you _do_ have away and pretend like you never knew her.”

Kylo barrels at her then. Crackling agony brings him to his knees. His gaze shoots up to see Rey standing above him, tracker activator curled in one hand. He clutches one arm around his chest, howling a high-pitched whine into his fist at the sensation of his ribs being plucked out one by one. Rey has the grace to widen her eyes as Kylo cranes his neck to look at her, words breathy and shaking through his teeth.

“If you think that what happened yesterday makes you suddenly an expert on what I do and do not feel, then you are _sorely_ in need of another lesson.”

Rey’s boots scuffle against the floor as she takes a reluctant step towards him, hand halfway between help and her lightsaber hilt. “I didn’t—”

“You _didn’t_?”

An uncertain exhale. “I didn’t… realize how painful that would be.”

Kylo narrows his eyes, a tight stitch lancing through his lungs with each ragged breath. “Careful,” he huffs. “That sounds dangerously close to an apology.”

“It is what it is. A peace offering, I guess.” Rey shakes her head, expression drawn. “We have to provide a unified front for this. I don’t want to fight you right now. We can’t afford to be fighting right now.”

Kylo muses once again on the desert time-table of her practicality; its dune-flower counter-intuition. Petals fisted closed in the heated day, only to open late at night, with its perfume least expected.

“No,” Kylo says, “I suppose we can’t.”

Gritting his teeth, Kylo pushes himself off the ground, sucking in sharply with pain. Rey backs up a step as he rises to his full height, his fingers gripping the roll of clothing like a steadying line. He points to the corner of the cell nearest the door, the tip of his finger swimming in binary before his eyes. “Stand there.”

Even without the Force, he can sense Rey’s rocky stubbornness rise and fall in her chest in light of the treaty she’s just made with him. Great. They’ve both committed to doing things they regret.
“Why?”

Kylo rolls his eyes, then feels the ground keel under him. Bad idea. “The fresher in this cell doesn’t have a door. Unless you want to watch me undress, I’m suggesting you wait in that corner.”

Rey’s face twists into an entirely gratifying expression of disgust. She folds her arms, twisting on the balls of her feet to face the wall, shoulders raised in tension. It’s delicious, watching her unbalanced for once.

“Fine.” Rey’s voice comes muffled from the wall. “Don’t take too long.”

Kylo hardly has time to process how she’d just willingly left her back open to him.

Turning on his heel without answering, Kylo picks his way into the fresher, floor shimmering as the effects of the tracker-stunning dissipate. It must have been a low-level shock, if the highest setting is meant to incapacitate him for a week. The ground careens beneath him as he forces one foot in front of the other.

He stumbles into the fresher with his hand gripped on the doorframe, breathing deeply to clear the cottony ache from inside his skull. He gets dressed as quickly as he can, a habit born of military asceticism and Snoke’s unignorable, capricious audiences. His skin, raw and sensitized from the shock, scratches unbearably against the roughness of the clothes. Kylo pauses midway through buttoning his pants. Roughness.

The clothes are new. And in his size.

The glittering, omnipresent pain of fresh cloth against his skin steadies him all the way out of the fresher.

Rey blinks as Kylo exits the fresher, fiddling with the collar of his jacket. After so many weeks of thin shirts and even thinner pants, the military-style trousers and thick jacket encase him in the exoskeleton of a stranger.

She recovers her discomfort quickly as Kylo brushes past her towards the door, picking up the discarded pair of boots that have sat in the corner of his cell since the day the Resistance captured him. Their black leather is Kylo’s only visible concession to his life with the First Order, trapped in this room of white and grey.

And now he’s about to interrogate a First Order spy. With Rey. After the General of the Resistance asked him to, because she wanted to give him a chance.

It doesn’t mean anything. It can’t mean anything. He’s doing what it takes to survive, until the day he can finally go home.

Home.

The bed squeals as Kylo throws his weight atop it, slipping on his socks and tucking his pants into his boots. The well-worn soles of the old shoes still fit against the curvature of his feet, in spite of these past uncountable days.

Kylo realizes that he’s lost it when he stops at the threshold with Rey beside him, waiting for the clink of cuffs against his wrists.
“No cuffs this time. We wouldn’t exactly be able to explain them,” she says. Rey looks up at him, daring him to abuse this generosity, to turn an undeserved act of kindness into something monstrous, just as he’s done with all the others.

“Don’t worry,” he says flatly. “I’ll be on my best behavior.”

The tension of Rey’s fingers just above her saber-hip tell Kylo that she doesn’t quite believe him. He doesn’t, either. But the memory of his knees slamming into the ground, of the tracker's bone-jarring devastation, is enough motivation, for now.

“I don’t trust your best behavior,” Rey says, without malice.

“Neither do I.”

The interrogation room is a two-room contraption, joined by a single wall made of a one-way observational mirror. Inside one room, the prisoner is handcuffed to a table; inside the observation room, General Organa stands waiting. Beside her is a woman that Kylo doesn’t recognize— dark skinned with girlish features, and taller than Kylo by a full inch.

“Rey,” General Organa says as she and Kylo enter the observational room— a close, dark chamber, illuminated only by the light filtering in through the transparisteel mirror from the interrogation chamber. Her eyes catch Kylo, standing with his hands shoved into fists at the sides of his jacket, and she bobs her head towards him in greeting. “Ben.”

Kylo nods at her, but says nothing.

The woman beside Leia raises two appraising eyebrows at Kylo, taking a long-legged stride towards him. “Ben Solo,” she says. Her voice has the lilt of someone from the Mid-Rim, roughed into a tone of easy authority. “So nice to see you outside of those cuffs.”

She offers a long-fingered hand to Kylo, the points of her fingertips blunted with closely trimmed nails. Kylo is slapped face-first with the sensation of being back beside his mother at those long Senate meetings at age eight or nine, introduced to row after row of dignitaries whose names he could never all remember and which his mother somehow never forgot.

—You don’t have to smile, Ben, but try to shake their hands. Nod and repeat their names after they say them. Acknowledge them. Whether friend or foe, that’s a crucial step.

Except he doesn’t know this woman’s name, and he’s not about to ask.

“Quite,” Kylo settles for. He stares at the proffered hand in front of him. Behind the woman, the General is eyeing him sharply. Kylo takes the woman’s hand and shakes it once before letting go.

At the stutter of silence, the woman tuts. “It seems I’ve forgotten myself. Colonel Mikshmi, head of intelligence operations.”

“Colonel Mikshmi,” Kylo echoes. Beside him, Rey dips her head in acknowledgement.

Mikshmi nods, inclining her head towards Leia before her attention falls on Kylo again. “Now, I’m not sure how much the General has told you about our current captive—”

“—Very little,” Kylo says. The Colonel presses her lips together, an oddly austere gesture in that childish face, as behind her the General’s expression hardens. Belatedly, Kylo realizes that he’s just
interrupted an officer who technically outranks him. If he acknowledged the Resistance’s authority. If he were part of the Resistance. If he had a rank here that could be superseded. None of which he does. He forges on, twining his hands behind his back in his old, customary habit, as the floor grows steadier below him. “Simply that you’ve apprehended a spy who you believe has already passed on mission-sensitive information to the First Order, and that you feel uncomfortable proceeding until you ascertain just what he told them.”

Mikshmi nods. “That about covers all the salient details.”

“You’ve nothing more specific?” Kylo says. “Simply that the spy took some information? Mind probes aren’t foolproof, Colonel, and Rey is going to need—”

“—Rey,” Mikshmi interrupts in turn, grinning slightly at the comeuppance, “Has been given all of the relevant information.”

Kylo has spent long enough around politicians and military men to know a dismissal when he hears one. He hadn’t expected their trust, and, now that it hasn’t been given, is glad that he hasn’t earned it.

For once, someone isn’t looking at him unconditionally, and Kylo doesn’t ache for what he isn’t forced to reject.

Mikshmi turns to Rey, expression softening into tempered encouragement. “Are you ready then, my dear?”

Before Rey can respond, Leia takes a step forward, clasping her slight fingers atop Rey’s elbows. Kylo is forced to step aside to stay out of the General’s personal space. “I have faith in you, Rey.”

Swallowing a shaky smile, Rey nods. She shifts, planting her feet shoulder-width apart, raising her face to look approvingly at Colonel Mikshmi. At Mikshmi’s assent, Rey walks out of the observation room, head held high.

A hand catches Kylo’s forearm as he turns to follow her.

“You too,” Leia says.

Rey strides into the room with a confidence Kylo can sense is part muscle memory, part will. He remembers how she had been when he’d caught her in the woods of Takodana, feral-eyed, half-spooked with ghosts. And still, blasting at the shadows to kill anyone who tried to touch her.

Kylo had always simply been better at the latter. He fixes his expression into his best bid at deadened severity, face set, unseeing. Without the mask to school his features, he’s unsure how well he succeeds.

Rey’s position in front of Kylo blocks the prisoner from sight; unusual, given Kylo’s height. The Force flits disobediently at the edges of his vision, flickering like bright phosphenes in the back of his eyes. The day’s potentiasuppressant had been forgotten amidst the chaos of Rey’s training, leaving Kylo to linger in the in-between.

He can sense the interrogation room’s occupant only dimly, like looking at patterns of sunlight through closed eyelids. An artist’s rough-shod sketch of a scene viewed only once. Kylo reaches out for more, feels the slap of the Force’s greater absence, holds back a scream. What he discerns is enough to know that the occupant is human, male, and an errant heart-beat away from cardiac arrest.
Rey moves to take a seat across the table from the prisoner, clearing the way for Kylo to see him properly.

The spy is a boy no older than fourteen.

Fifteen, perhaps, if Kylo is generous. His locks of wavy hair frame his jawline like a trellis of climbing ivy, strawberry-wheat over dark eyes. There’s an ineffable wrongness about his features, as though placed on his face at a slant angle, his cuffed-together wrists clanking madly against the loop of durasteel bolting them to the table.

Kylo stops midway through the room.

Had he been this thin, this terrified, when Snoke had already curled his claws into the fearful-boy shaped part of his heart?

Fifteen.

“You’re just a child,” Kylo says from across the room. At the table, where the boy is chained, he can see Rey’s shoulders tense. Ever the consummate professional, she doesn’t turn around.

A violent tremble spasms through the boy. Through it all, he doesn’t say a word. His brazen stare fixates onto Kylo like a gyroscope, unrelenting and steady, as though a single lapse in attention will have him shot down on the spot.

The child bears the hunted, fierce look typical for the children of First Order officers. More specifically, Kylo thinks, of one belonging to the Order’s Youth League. Membership, with its days full of political theory and Imperial history, its meetings on how best to prime a blaster and report disloyalty in friends and family, were not optional to the progeny of the higher-up. The boy has the fresh look of the newly promoted. A member of the Junior Leagues, Kylo guesses, maybe not even fully part of the Youth Leagues; although Kylo doesn't know much more about the workings of the indoctrination of the Order's children.

Forcing his breath through his nose, Kylo takes a seat beside Rey, facing the boy with barely his armspan between them. The boy doesn’t flinch, despite wild eyes.

“How old are you?” Kylo says tersely. Rey furrows her eyebrows. To his surprise, she says nothing, flashing the child a wan, encouraging smile.

The boy doesn’t return it, as Kylo expected. Resistance spies always snarked and snapped in Kylo’s custody, those devil-may-care vagabonds full of spark and hope. First Order agents are never like that. They prowl their cells in silence.

“I know you’re not supposed to speak.” Kylo’s voice is flat conviction. The boy eyes him warily, jaw tight as he struggles to keep himself still. “For every word you say, someone dies. Maybe a fighter in the Order’s fleet, completely by accident. Maybe someone you know, completely intentionally. You have no way of telling.”

The boy’s eyes widen. Rey steals a glance at Kylo, her hand subtly tensing atop the table, but Kylo shakes his head. He won’t have someone else’s voice inside the boy’s head. Not yet.

“You can tell us,” Rey says, voice all kindness, sun-softened steel. She nudges her hand closer to the boy’s, who jerks his away. “We’re not here to hurt you. We’re here to save lives.”
Hatred glistens in the boy’s expression, an alcohol of fear turned sour, heady and destructive. Kylo recognizes it well. He knows it, is its travelling companion.

“I would rather die,” the boy finally says aloud. A perfectly executed response, until the last syllable gives a pubescent crack. The boy swallows, wincing as though disgusted with himself, with his youth. Once again, Kylo remembers.

“It seems then, that you’re in luck,” Kylo says. A weight settles, heavy and intractable, against his ribcage. He knows those lines, this room, this boy, as much as he could know anything about himself. “Because the First Order already considered you dead, from the moment you were caught.”

The boy flashes with loathing again, nearly bearing his teeth, before some form of self-restraint sews his lips shut. Kylo leans in further against the table. Rey clenches her jaw, but doesn’t comment. Raised in a desert waste as she was, Kylo doesn’t doubt she understands the necessity of his threats. They aren’t idle ones.

“If you are quite lucky, they will leave you here to rot or die, depending on the whim of your captors. If you are very unlucky, they will send someone to silence you first. But I assure you that they are not coming back for you. You expect a hero’s welcome. You will not receive one.”

The boy quivers again, image shifting like a body at the bottom of a river.

“I would rather die,” the boy says again. He’s been prepared for this eventuality. Told it loudly and frankly.

—Seems like Snoke’s not coming back for you anytime soon, kid. Your mother hasn’t gotten a peep from the First Order.

—Of course he isn’t. Master Snoke does not dabble in apprentices who cannot escape their captors. He does not humor weakness.

When Kylo looks at the boy again, he almost forgets that his hair is reddish-gold, and not black; that his eyes are ebony, and not brown.

“Tell me,” Kylo says, and his voice is hushed now, more implication than word. “Who was it?”

The boy narrows his eyes, wrists turning in the cuffs to allow his fingers to fiddle with the metal. “What?”

“You can’t be much more than fifteen. An officer’s child, I would undoubtedly wager. So tell me—was it your father who told you the great and glorious things you would do for the Order, if only you signed on for this mission, or your mother? Was it a teacher, schoolmate, friend?”

“I would rather—”

“—If you tell me that propagandized line again, my colleague here shall be forced to do something rather drastic.”

The sudden low intensity in Kylo’s voice, that paradoxical hot-cold pain of clutching a hand to a piece of burning metal, gives the boy pause. The clinking of his cuffs against the metal loop bolted to the table is the tinny timpani of a heartbeat.

“For the ideals of civilization which the First Order is sworn to uphold, I give my service,” the boy rattles automatically. The mantra of the Youth League, then. “For Supreme Leader Snoke, I give my life. We follow in the footsteps of the General and the Jedi Killer.”
Kylo’s hands clench upon the table.

He thinks of the girl he had burned during practice at the Academy all those years ago, the sapling of righteous anger in his gut, his uncle’s growing horror that perhaps there was something about him that couldn’t be fixed. He thinks of the betrayal in her eyes, and the confusion; her Jedi determination to banish the pain instead of make peace with it. He thinks of his spitting red saber lopping her head from her body all those months later, the ugly lop-sidedness of the cut from the shaking of his sword hand. It had gotten easier, through the night. But then, she had only been his second kill.

His first had been Ben Solo.

“The Supreme Leader, the General, and the Jedi Killer,” Kylo says slowly, as though the names are foreign to him, as though he is not one-third of this unholy trinity. “What is it about them that would make you give your life?”

Beside him, Rey starts. Kylo ignores her. If he considers her for more than a moment, he’ll lose his nerve to accomplish whatever it is he’s trying to achieve. The First Order often sends agents to spy on its own members, gauging dedication from their moments of honesty, and culling those who failed the test. It’s what he’s doing now, Kylo tells himself. It is not because, if he squints, the boy’s hair stops looking so very light, and his eyes so very dark.

“The General is a brilliant tactician,” the boy says. His face is set in perfect military precision, marred by the sudden shining of his eyes. His tongue darts out, licking his bottom lip.

Kylo palms his hands flat on the table. He thinks of Hux’s preening speeches, the covetous hunger in his eyes at the sight of Snoke’s throne. The Hosnian System screams.

“The General is an egotist.”

The boy eyes him in just fury.

“The Jedi Killer is a hero.”

Bodies, no older than his own. Many younger. His uncle’s anguish when he returns, to find their bones scattered across that holy space. His mother’s agony. His father’s despair.

“The Jedi Killer is a traitor.”

The boy does not continue. Kylo raises his eyebrow. “And the Supreme Leader?”

—Snoke is using you for your power. When he gets what he wants, he’ll crush you.

The voice is in his mind at four, at six; and he is maybe eight or nine before he understands that it exists outside of him. That it isn’t an invention of his own need— at first, desperation for friendship; then, understanding; and when none of those remedied his conflict, he settled for the vindication thereof. He would never beat with his uncle’s bleeding heart. He would never bring galactic senates to heel. He would never be that silvertongue who won a Corellian freighter on brandy and charm alone.

He was good at hurting things. His grandfather had been, too. There was a poetic gravity to Vader’s fall to the Dark that was to be respected. He’d become a monster, a tyrant, all without meaning to. But at least, if it was inevitable, he’d also become something great.
The thought had cradled Kylo as his father tweezed slivers of clari-crystalline from his palms for the third time that week however many years ago, earned after he had hurled a glass at the holoprojector playing live feed of Leia Organa’s senate filibuster. The commentator had questioned her relevancy as heir to a royal house that no longer existed.

—Not again, Ben. You’ve got to stop being so sensitive. Those windbags have no idea what they’re talking about. They never do.

And a voice, soft and comforting: I will never tell you not to feel. You were right to throw that glass. You were right to hate those who threatened what was yours.

As his father’s death flashes before him again —and will, he’s sure, until someone strikes him down — Kylo thinks how in the end, he himself had been the only one to threaten what was his.

And Kylo is right to hate himself for it.

“The Supreme Leader is wise,” the boy finally answers. Kylo hears himself repeat the mantra, voice half-hollow from the echo of the oscillator bridge, eight months and a thousand light years away.

—He’ll crush you. You know it’s true.

And Kylo did. Still does. But that is the way of all power, and Kylo cannot say that he wasn’t warned.

—I’t’s too late.

Loss. So much loss. Bring that which you love into your fold; cherish it, then kill it. Mourn the acts your hands have wrought. Let grief be your bedmate. No one said ambition was an easy thing.

Kylo thinks of Snoke, whispering in his dreams. He thinks of freshly-stolen children, gazing, terrified, at the Stormtroopers they will soon become. He thinks of the boy in front of him, willing to die for a hologram who does not even know his name.

“The Supreme Leader,” Kylo says, and once the words are out of his mouth he can hardly believe he’s done it, “is a thief.”

From his side, Rey breathes in sharply. Kylo doesn’t dare look at her as he waits to be struck down.

Because Kylo has always known this about Snoke, the Master who had saved him from himself. Snoke could be as cruel as he could be kind. He did not love. Kylo did not mind it. He craved only his Master’s guidance, and if he felt pain, at least it was for a purpose.

But his Mother’s pain, his uncle’s. His father’s last, beatific look.

That pain was for nothing at all.

Force save him, he feels it again. The pull to the Light.

Kylo gets up from his chair so quickly that the boy flinches, closing his eyes as though expecting to be hit. He whirls on Rey, who is still seated, hands propped on her chair in preparation to vault to her feet.

“I’m about to do something we’ll all regret,” Kylo says through clenched, polite teeth.

Nodding, Rey stands up, hand poised over the tracker activator. For once, Kylo is grateful.
The door opens before Rey has the chance to knock on it. Behind it isn’t Colonel Mikshmi, as Kylo had expected, but General Organa.

“Cuff him,” she says to Rey. Her voice is not unkind.

Kylo holds out his hands before Rey has the chance to extract the cuffs from the folds of her robes, sighing a rattling breath through his teeth as the cold durasteel clinches around his wrists in something perversely like comfort. He destroys everything he touches. It is his nature; that has been made abundantly clear.

It horrifies him, as the thought settles around him, that right now, he doesn’t want to.

When he looks about the hallway again, Rey is gone, retreated back into that mirrored room where the boy who is not dark haired sits waiting. Kylo’s mother is patting his cheeks with her palm, entire arm outstretched to reach so high. The shadows of the hallway lights stretch out, shallow and bitter.

“Don’t touch me,” Kylo says, threat clumsy and slipshod. Leia shakes her head.

“Not going to happen.”

“I’ll hurt you,” he says. Not a threat, this time. An inevitability. Leia’s eyes flash with longing. A look that says, You already have. A touch that goes on, And I don’t care.

She has never loved anything that did not leave her suffering for it.

Leia’s throat trembles as she reaches up both hands to cup his face. The worn pad of her thumb ghosts along his silvery scar. She traces it, methodically, to where it hooks around the corner of his lip.

There are things he still believes that his mother does not. Deeds done that he knows were necessary. He does not belong to the Resistance. He would return to the First Order even now.

He cannot be made whole, or better.

Leia coos softly, stroking his hair, petting his face. Kylo isn’t sure what she’s saying, and possibly neither does she.

At that moment, he thinks, it doesn’t matter.

Chapter End Notes

I cannot believe I started off this fic thinking Ben's full redemption would come about in ten chapters...about that...
Honesty is difficult. It is easier to hide in the crowd and to drown one’s own guilt in that of the human race, easier to hide from oneself than to become open in honesty before God.

—Soren Kierkegaard, Three Discourses on Imagined Occasions

They stand in the hallway for an age.

The collar of Leia’s shirt is rucked up. She smells of plain soap, and apple blossoms. A lock of hair has escaped from her immaculate crown braid, clinging to the nape of her neck.

If she doesn’t tuck it back in soon, Kylo thinks the world might end.

Her hand drops from his face. It hovers, a breath’s breadth from his skin as she lowers her fingers along his cheek, his arm, until it is back at her side. She looks at him, and suddenly Kylo is standing beside her with twenty-nine years and all their roles reversed. He’s never been the strong one, between them. She must be so very, very weak, if she cannot walk away from him now.

She doesn’t. Merely stands there, in her quiet ebb and swell. If Kylo tried, he could pick out her Force signature. She’s close enough, luminous enough, for that small thing. White threads like rootwork, spanning out from the point of a seed. The strength of blossoms, of roots upending concrete. He spends a moment carding through the hazy threadwork of it all, her universe-binding presence. A gentle touch he isn’t used to wielding. He thinks he’d die if she sensed him there. A magpie, so like his Master, covetous of all bright and shiny objects, and it is the natural order of the world that he may only find them by thievery or vice.

And yet, Leia does not move. She’s still standing, as close as she was when she had touched him, so that her neck strains to look at him. Anyone could walk down the hallway and see. Despite the trial, not everyone on the base knows who he is. Who he was, he corrects quickly, because the past tense had been a smuggler’s son and knew all about price and worth. There is no fair trade for this moment. The General of the Resistance can’t be stumbled upon so near the cracking whip of the First Order, reaching out to him with favor in her palms. She must be allowed to kill him in peace. He won’t let anyone see her like this. And still, she will not budge.

Kylo does the only thing he can. He moves around her, so that his broad back shields her from the open question of the hall, and though the hold is awkward with his cuffs, pulls her close. Her voice catches in a soft cry of surprise. Kylo tells himself he doesn’t hear it. She’s too short for Kylo to rest his chin atop her head, and has been since he was twelve. But she makes do, as she always does, and rests her cheek against his chest. Siphoning his heartbeat.
“I didn’t expect the famed Resistance General to be this foolish,” he says, to the open air. Breastbone heavy with the weight of her.

She does not shift against his hold. Kylo tastes Yavin 4 on her breath, her presence and then the sudden lack of it as she leaves him at the Academy. Last touch, last embrace. Last moment of sanity.

“I have sometimes been very foolish,” she says quietly.

The world ends.

They don’t let go.

Still, they come apart.

Leia can sense footsteps echoing in the halls above. Kylo can sense her sensing them; a strange, recursive eavesdropping, his own tenuous Force connection compelling him to feed from hers. And she, the one who had made it so.

His chest is cold where her body had warmed it.

“It seems time to return me to my cell, General,” Kylo says. Leia’s face grows grave at the title. She bows her head in acceptance of its weight.

“Yes.” The stray lock at the back of her braid flutters. Kylo’s fingers itch to tuck it away. “I’ll take you.”

Kylo’s breath hitches as he backs a step up, footfall loud against the hallway’s emptiness. “You’re not my handler. You don’t have the Council’s permission to move me.”

A shimmering challenge lights in her eyes, wry and self-aware. “Kriff the Council. If being a General won’t let me accompany my prisoners wherever I damn please, I’m quitting.”

Something strange bleats from Kylo’s throat. Leia starts, looking at him with surprised eyes, then a cautious smile. She moves to take his elbow in her hand, before Kylo jerks his arm away.

The smile fades.

“Come along, then.”

She starts down the corridor, heading in the direction opposite to which Kylo had come.

“We’re going the wrong way,” Kylo says.

Leia clucks. “No, we’re not.”

The hallway grows wider as Leia leads Kylo past rows of doors identical to the one he and Rey had entered. The interrogation block, he surmises. He’d visited many military bases with his mother as a child; had even memorized most of their schematics. But D’Qar Base had been built after his defection. Kylo wonders vaguely if the General had demanded that this be done on purpose, for fear of what her son would still remember.

He follows her past an intersection, where she pauses for a moment, jerking her thumb down the hall.
“The officer’s quarters are down that way,” she says, as though that isn’t the most stupid of things to inform a high-level prisoner of. “I managed to drag Luke there with me, even though he claims that Jedi should be non-military.” Her mouth curves around a private smile. “I think he forgets who was practically weaned on political history, and it wasn’t his sorry farmer behind. Anakin Skywalker and Obi-Wan were both generals, for pity’s sake.” Kylo’s ears prick up at her reference to Darth Vader. Anakin Skywalker. Not father. Not the man who gave her life, whose very blood flows through her, and by extension through him. He’d only ever heard her call him Vader, and sometimes his given name—or, if she were in a discussion with Luke, perhaps our biological father. Never the simple one-word title. She denied the heritage that made her strong. And so, her son had been fated to take up the mantle.

(In a dark, distant desert, an old man stands unafraid. He looks at Kylo, swathed in the glory of his higher calling, and is unimpressed. No, the expression is more damning than that.

It’s pity.

—Something far worse has happened to you.

He remembers Lor San Tekka, among the few who could call his mother ‘Princess’ without penalty of deep displeasure. An Alderaanian refugee, off-planet when it had crumbled into a flash of asteroids. He’d sworn fealty the first time he’d met her face to face, to her strength and grace, their twinned grief in light of the unimaginable.

And then, shortly after, he’d done the same to her child.

—I know where you come from. Before you called yourself Kylo Ren.

Firelight on Sor Lan Tekka’s face, so steeped with lines. Everyone growing up and growing older, while Kylo stayed behind.

—The First Order rose from the Dark Side. You did not.

He’d lopped off Lor San Tekka’s head then. Saw it roll, to lay coated in a glittering sheen as sand clung to the blood of it, coagulating the moment of dying. But not before he’d said one last thing, in a voice cutting with certainty despite its keening, beneath those too-distant stars.

—You may try, but you cannot deny the truth that is your family.)

Beside him, Leia still walks, close enough to touch. Her errant curl is back in place, slipped inside her plait once more. Kylo thinks he may be one of the few in all the galaxy to know what she looks like with her hair down. Among the only to have seen it, swaying thickly to her hips as she stood barefoot in a white gown in their house on Chandrila, without any titles except the ones that Han and he had given her.

—C’mere, your Worshipfulness.

—Moooom!

And Han would pick her up, giggling as she kicked at him in mock anger, twirling her through their house with his forehead against her lips. The lurid light of the Chandrilan stars would stream through the windows, made hazy by the weave of the curtains. Ben would watch the racket in his head fade away; watch his parents, so easily given to sniping and storming and leaving, fill once more with their burn-up, burn-out love.

His family was so poorly given to peace. But when it was. Oh, when it was.
He thinks that they’re still walking. Or maybe everything is moving around him, and he’s just standing still.

They arrive at the end of a narrow hallway, before a grey, unmarked door. The space would be trivial among a corridor filled with so many of the same, were it not for the black bioscanner bolted beside the doorframe, fresh paint and spackle clinging to the surrounding wall as though the frame were recently reinstalled.

Leia comes to a stop, standing primly on her booted feet, inclining her head towards the hallway.

“Welcome to the barracks,” she says.

Kylo blinks. Leia’s face crumples in that controlled fall once again.

“What did you say?”

“Your new cell,” she says, inclining her chin towards the door. “You’ve been promoted on good behavior.”

Kylo bristles. “Good behavior?”

“We were never going to lock you up forever, Ben.” The court’s declaration rings in the air between them. To be placed under observational arrest for six months, thereafter to be permanently sentenced. No, the Resistance cannot lock him up forever. Soon, he will either be before a firing squad, or someone else entirely.

Either way, he will be dead.

The bioscanner chirrups as Leia places her slight hand against it, the door sliding open with a tacky creak.

“The Council has had this room ready for a while now,” she says, pausing to look at him from her hollow in the darkness of the barrack. Her slight hand reaches for the wall panel, and abruptly she is washed in light. “We were waiting for you to let us use it.”

Waiting for you to let us.

“I would have done unspeakable things to the people in that room if I hadn’t been restrained,” Kylo says, voice hard. The cuffs chafe against his wrists. He digs them tighter. Above Leia, his shadow looms. “The only thing preventing me was that I was physically tied down.”

But Leia does not relent.

“And you let us. You held up your hands and waited for those cuffs to snap.”

“I was acting in self-preservation. You’d shoot me down the instant you thought that I’d hurt someone.”
Leia’s knowing look is flagrant, a blatant insistence.

“So why didn’t I?”

She knows more about him than he does, is reading the sordid history of his soul in a foreign script he is too incompetent to master, and has placed his book in the designated pile. He’s always been so easily cached by people who are not himself. Son of Leia Organa and Han Solo. A diplomat-prince or a cunning rogue, then. Nephew of Luke Skywalker. Our next hope for the Jedi, so it must be. Grandchild of Anakin Skywalker. No telling what that might entail.

Last (adopted) descendent of the Royal Family of Alderaan.

Last (blood) descendant of Queen Padme of Naboo.

Force-sensitive.

Padawan.

Traitor.

Apprentice.

Master of the Knights of Ren.

Prisoner.

Traitor, again.

If there was ever a boy beneath those titles, Kylo knows he’s never met him.

“There’s a kitchen,” Leia says, pointing towards his left away from the door. Kylo turns his head minutely to see, refusing to move from his post by the entryway. Drab, grey countertops make way to the dull gleam of a small sink, beside which is a small stove and food synthesizer. White cabinets, fuming from new paint, sit above the cooking alcove. Leia catches his glance and tightens her lips matter-of-factly. “No knives,” she adds. “Or forks, for that matter. There are spoons and chopsticks, though. Your uncle fought very hard to get the Council to let you have the utensils here that you do — so please don’t recount to me the ways you could gouge out a man’s heart with a potato peeler, or I’ll be legally required to report it.”

Kylo is halfway through formulating a scowling response when Leia catches him with a faint, teasing smile so fine that it disappears with his blinking.

It’s the thinnest knife with which Kylo has ever been struck.

The barrack is filled with little else. To the right of the kitchenette, in the center of the room, is a round table and four chairs. At the far right end sits a thin-cushioned lounger. Beyond that, a dark doorway opens into a small nook large enough to hold a narrow bed and a squat set of drawers. The asceticism reminds Kylo of his quarters in the First Order, smaller though they are, threadbare and homespun.

What catches Kylo’s attention most is the window.

He walks over to it, and pulls the draperies apart. The curtains are thin— cheap, because the Resistance cannot afford to be frivolous; pale yellow, because they cannot help but be dreamers.
He’s seen the sunlight many times since his incarceration. Every day, in fact, when he spars and meditates with Rey and Luke in that abandoned bomb field at the edge of the world. But there’s something different about this. An implication, baked into the glass. A forest rises in the distance, over a grassy field, alight with autumnal leaves.

“There’s an energy field just beyond the transparisteel,” Leia supplies from behind, voice quiet and thoughtful. Kylo hadn’t even heard her approach. “We fought for that one too. The rest of the Council wanted the window boarded up.”

He thumbs his fingers through the course muslin of the curtains.

“Then why didn’t you let them?”

Leia hums. “We didn’t want to make it too easy for you.”

“Easy for me?”

“Mm.”

Sunlight filters in through the glass, persistent in its presence, and there is room for shadows, perhaps; and ghosts.

But not darkness.

A knock sounds at the door.

Leia is the first to come back to her senses. Kylo remains immobile, motionless by the window. From the opened doorway comes the voice of a plainspoken alto.

“You requested that these be brought here, General?”

Leia’s voice, lower and plainer still.

“Yes, Major. Thank you.”

The visitor hesitates at the door. Then, “How is he?”

Discomfort at the thought of being looked at unaware turns Kylo around. A shoulder-length bob of brown hair, limned in grey, peers out from beyond the threshold of the room.

Kylo clears his throat. “Hello, Doctor Kalonia.”

Kalonia smiles tersely. “Hello, Young Solo. So very nice to see you when you’re not passed out in some manner in my medbay.”

Kylo inclines his head, threading his hands before him as well as he can with the cuffs between them. “I’ve had an off day.”

“Careful, there,” she says, raising an arch brow. “Any more bang-ups, and the Resistance might decide it can’t pay the cost to keep you.”

Leia casts Kalonia a scandalized look, but Kylo merely nods in acknowledgement. On a base filled with so many officers who knew him to some degree from childhood, Kalonia is one of the rare few
who had been enlisted to the Resistance well after Kylo’s defection. She knows nothing of him personally; holds no personal sense of betrayal for his turn. All she has is a general animosity for everything he stands for, a dedication to preserving all life regardless, and a dry bedside humor that does not make Kylo hate her.

Besides, there was only so many times he could show up concussed beyond comprehension at her doorstep before a certain amount of personal dignity was permanently lost.

Kalonia purses her lips in a private smile, before turning to once again face Leia, placing a small metal box in the General’s outstretched hands.

“Would you like me to do it, General?”

Leia frowns, gazing down at the box intently. “That’s all right, Major. I’ve already put you quite out of your way as it is.”

“As you wish,” Kalonia says.

She is gone with a sharp dip of her head.

One of the stools beside the table creaks as Leia steadies herself upon it, setting the box upon the table with a metal-and-glass clatter. Her fingers reach out to tap the seat beside her.

“Sit down, will you?” Leia says, so casually that for a moment they are back at their kitchen table on Chandrila, she smoothing his unruly mop of hair with a fine comb, catching overly long strands between two fingers to snip between a pair of scissors. She’d had remarkably fine precision for it, despite growing up without need to do such things herself.

(—Some children on Alderaan would fill their dolls with this.
—Their hair?
—Yes. They were very poor.
—But you weren’t poor.
—No, I wasn’t.
—You were a princess.
—Yes, I was.)

Inside the box is a single syringe of potenti-suppressant.

Leia looks at the contents, then at him.

“You missed it today,” she says simply, in that far-away voice that he hates, that he needs. Something to ground him, remind him. Her eyes trace him as though waiting for him to either collapse or lash out; a delicate fear that is so different from that between enemy combatants, and so much more unacceptable.

(The grey stone of the Academy on Yavin 4 rises up to meet him, as the Falcon jettisons away.)
—What did I say? They’re all afraid of you. Your own mother fears you. And now, she has cast you out.

He is alone in his room at the Temple, kneeling by the windowpane. The tea which his uncle brought him is rapidly going cold. Tendrils of steam curl through the chill air, spiced with honey and cardamom. It’s poor incense for prayers he’s yet to say, but he has nothing else.

—Who will save you, boy? Who will bargain for your wretched soul?)

Beside him, Leia picks up the syringe with all the reverence of an addict. It catches the light imperfectly, clear serum caged in clear transparisteel, scattering diadems upon their faces. She sets it down again.

He cannot pull up his sleeves with the cuffs binding his wrists, leaving Leia to find a new injection site. She purses her lips, peeling back the collar of his shirt until one pale collarbone lays bare, trailing up naked skin until she finds the base of his neck. Kylo lets her do it. A soft gasp escapes from her at the sight of his bare skin, patchworked in a spiderwork of gossamer scars. He hopes it disgusts her. Reminds her, as he needs reminding.

Her fingers play an unbearable sonata against the hollow of his throat. He wishes she would press harder.

“—Is this why you told Kalonia to let you administer it, this time?” Kylo says; quietly, roughly. She starts at Kylo’s voice, startled out of some mental space where had he even the power, he would not go. “Are you trying assuage your guilt for always letting others be the ones to put me down? Or is this simply your repentance at the universe at large for having birthed me?”

The touch on his collarbone tautens. Just one more push, just a little more pressure, and maybe she’ll break through to the bone.

“Don’t say that,” she says, voice taut. But her fingers tremble. “You don’t ever get to say that.”

Kylo’s throat tightens. The late-day light streams through the window, crystallizing them in amber. Maybe a future historian will unearth them, and make sense of what he sees.

“What should I say?” Kylo says. He wants to push her hands away, and ruin something. Someone’s belongings, someone’s life. “That if I’d never been born, you might have been happy?”

It’s as though he’s slapped her.

“You are my happiness,” she says, and her voice is choked. Her fingers splay against his collarbones; so near his heart. Not quite touching. Never quite there. “You’re my boy.”

A suffocating sound rumbles deep in his throat.

“I killed your husband,” he tries to shout. His voice cracks into a whisper, a hiss. "I cannot be your happiness.”

Her face grows pale. “You did,” she says softly. “You took away the only man I’d ever loved. You did.”

He can feel her pulse points through her fingertips, slow in its sorrow, deep in its grief. It was always Leia who stayed behind. Leia, who did not run, who did not cower, but left the wellspring of her heartache in her innermost secret place, where she could visit its still waters and choose when to be consumed.
Such a quiet sufferer, she. Such a gift.

“I don’t know if I can forgive you for that,” she says quietly. It washes over Kylo like a balm. “I am… trying.”


Leia smiles weakly, cups his cheek in her free hand. He hasn’t been touched so often since he was a small boy. “My pup,” she says. “That isn’t how forgiveness works.”

“You left me,” he says, voice strangled, so much that boy at the Temple window, pressing his palms to the glass, the steam of his uncle’s tea and the Falcon’s hyperspace trail twinning their white paths skyward. He hates himself for it.

“I did.” Her head is bowed. She looks up at him, fingers cusping the hollow behind the shell of his ear, another pulse point that she cannot quite grasp. “But what could I have done?” she cries. “You were so haunted, Ben. Tortured, by something inside your head, something I couldn’t reach. I would have torn apart the galaxy if had known who was doing that to you. I would have killed. When the nightmares came, what was I to do but hold you? And when that wasn’t enough, what was I to do but to try to save you?”

“You could have kept me by your side.”

Leia’s eyes widen. His eyes grow hot, and he turns his face away.

It’s a long time before they speak.

“Do you think you can ever forgive me?”

Kylo jerks his head up.

“If I hadn’t sent you away… if I’d let Luke train you at home, somehow…” She looks up at him, hands clasped together on the table, face fraught with darkness. “If I’d… listened more, tried better to understand what Snoke was doing to you…”

Kylo scoops up both her hands in his. He can’t recall the last time he’d tried to be comforting, and knows he is no good at it now. “It would have happened anyway,” he says, voice quiet. A foreign, unfamiliar sound. “It was… inevitable.”

Something in her jaw quickens. “Do you really believe that?”

His fingers tighten around hers, so deceptively thin. He could break all five in his palm. The very thought steels his answer. “I do.” She crumples, closing her eyes as though in preparation to speak, but Kylo cuts her off. “Don’t ask about forgiveness again,” he says, and curls his fingers under her palm. Something cold catches against his touch. A wedding band, still worn. “For me, or for you.”

Leia nods, swallowing heavily. Wordlessly, she returns to the box on the table. Kylo had nearly forgotten it was there.

He closes his eyes as she plunges the needle down and in.

xviii.

It’s raining.
Days on D’Qar are growing shorter with the approach of winter, but Kylo leaves the curtains open at all hours just the same. An old habit from his days on the Finalizer, perhaps, with its transparisteel window as thick as a man’s hand, with no cloth to cover the stars. Colors count the time, without the presence of a chronometer: the white thistleweed-sap of early morning, honey-milk of midday, autumnal wheat of the late noon. He’s given up counting the days. There is only each one as it comes, and his death each time closer.

Snoke has still not spoken to him. His Master knows what such an absence will do to him.

It’s his greatest punishment yet.

A storm is coming over D’Qar, thick as the night turns just shy of midnight; the first Kylo can remember here, in his scant few days aboveground. Fat droplets of water bat against his windowpane, to be vaporized in hissing steam by the energy field just beyond the glass, the fog created by the field a near-impenetrable cloak of white. He takes comfort in the aimless static; imagines his own lightsaber thrumming through the sheeting rain, steaming white on red.

Someone knocks on the door.

Kylo says nothing, waiting for the visitor to identify themselves. It’s become routine amongst Leia and Luke, and even with Colonel Mikshmi and Kalonia — thus everyone who has reason to visit him — to state their intentions at the door before coming in. A civilized farce, in its entirety. But a habit, nonetheless.

“Yes?” Kylo says, pushing himself up from his cross-legged position on the lounger. The cell has been oddly quiet this evening, without Han, though Kylo had known the absence was coming.

(—Your mom and I have a date this evening, he’d said, followed by a gesture Kylo would rather not repeat.
—You’re disgusting.)

The door swings open as soon as Kylo nears the threshold. Rey, hair hastily done up, arms bare without armwraps, is standing in the doorway with an urgency of expression he’s never seen on her. Kylo raises a cautious eyebrow.

“Yes?”

“It’s raining.” Her voice is tight, revenant. Her eyes, wider than he’s ever seen them, reflect half the light in the room.

“Yes. It is.”

Rey shakes her head, jaw clicking as though swallowing through some bitter root. There’s a scavenger insistence in the vaulted way she stands, the bright-eyed hunger of one who had traversed the desert and will not come back emptyhanded.

“It’s raining,” she repeats, more insistently. Her shoulders rise and fall in one deep breath.

She looks almost girlish in the doorway, in her casual disarray. One boot is rucked halfway up her shin. A long tail of hair, slipped out of her lowest bun, trails over her neck and across her shoulder. Even on Starkiller, Kylo can’t recall ever seeing her in such a state of unglorified chaos, as though some vital need were being pulled out of her, compelling her by life and limb to follow.
A crack of wind brings a burst of water against the windowpane. Rey immediately darts her gaze up to look past his shoulder, wonderment in her eyes at the hazed view past his window.

She shifts her weight from foot to foot, waiting for him to answer. She tries to conceal it; fails. Kylo can see, even without the Force, the tally marks inscribed on the back of the request. He wonders if she ever lost count of them; if that AT-AT will always feel like home, forever tainting the word for her.

He knows, then, why she’s come to his doorstep; half-enchanted and half-choked by the prospect of rain.

“Your friends are all out, aren’t they?” he says, voice carefully neutral. A tone similar to that he’d initially used on Starkiller— except this time, he has no idea what he’s trying to gain from her.

Rey frowns at the accusation, but doesn’t deny it.

“Go find the General, then, or Luke,” Kylo says. “I’m sure they’d be happy to accompany you.”

“They’re busy, or asleep.” She frowns. “It’s nearly midnight.”

His eyebrow shoots into his hairline. “Should I be offended or flattered that you’ve even considered me among your last resort?”

Rey grits her teeth, looking on the verge of an argument. Her control, so masterfully intuitive in a way Kylo can only imagine, pulls her from its brink.

“I’m trying to be nice.” So very Jedi-like of her. No, Kylo corrects. So very like his uncle.

“I didn’t ask you to be nice.”

He has the barest notion of her time growing up on that backwater planet, gleaned from offhanded comments between her and Luke during their training hours. It was in the way she still eyed full water canteens with suspicion and held her hand beneath her mouth when she ate, to catch the crumbs. Innocent touches to her shoulder were often met by a hand at her saber hip, unless they came from someone she knew. There is still very much an animal in her, unbroken to companionship.

Even she has her vices.

“This isn’t an authorized outing, is it,” Kylo says, instead of anything else.

She shakes her head, completely unperturbed. “No, it isn’t.”

“I’m rather impressed. And here I thought you might have fallen for the old Jedi horror stories of rule bending being a path to the Dark Side.”

Her nose wrinkles. “No philosophy talk,” she says, suddenly forceful. “For one kriffling day, I don’t want to have visions of becoming the mother of all evil if I so much as breathe with the wrong intentions.”

He very nearly snorts at that. “You make it sound like you don’t want to kill me.”

She crosses her arms. “If I wanted to kill you, you’d be dead.”

In his drugged state, he can’t much argue with that.
She takes him to a field just beyond the base—the field, as it happens, that his barrack cell overlooks. He can still see the light left on inside his window, casting dim sulfur-yellow upon a square of grass. It’s strange, seeing the sky without the bind of cuffs to tether him to the ground; silent, outside the pounding rain. Moonlight trickles through the deluge in a suggestion of silver, but beyond it is anonymous darkness.

Goosebumps hackle on Kylo’s arms as frigid rain sheets down upon him, exquisitely painful, chilling to the point of freezing thought. Kylo watches Rey’s rain-sketch outline in the field further off, sees the dull red blink of a Resistance radio tower in the distance, and decides to welcome the numbness.

She’s simply standing there, so still against the torrential mirage that she seems almost trapped in a shadow-box, a paper cut-out against moving parts. Her back is to him, sodden buns bedraggled and rain-heavy against her neck. Wind snaps at her cloak. She hasn’t so much as looked at him since they got out here; her entire attention stolen, like a changeling’s child, by a cloudburst.

There is a softness to her strength, like the marrow of a bone. A bright excitement at the world and its turning.

Her palms turn up to the rain, and Kylo wonders how much he’d have to pay to find something equal to the palmful of water caught in her hand.

She finds him, when the rain has died, laying down on his back in the grass. For a moment, he imagines that she’s going to kick him, before she flops unceremoniously down beside him.

“You didn’t stab me in the back,” she says. Her voice is still half-sheened with marvel, soft with the memory of rain. “Thanks for that.”

Against the tall grass, he can hardly make out her silhouette.

“There wasn’t much to work with,” he answers.

The grass rustles as she shifts.

“Still.”

They lapse into silence. Above them, an X-Wing veers past to dock at the hangar, a crimson streak of chest-thrumming sound.

He’s toweling off his hair when Rey knocks at the door to his cell for the second time that night, a plastic bag clutched between her hands. The patter of water dripping from her drenched robes kettledrum-beats against the floor. She steps inside, thick durasteel swinging shut behind her, and Kylo backs up a step to give her room.

“It’s yours,” she says, without preamble. "I forgot to give it to you before."

Kylo blinks.

Rey swallows as if to steady herself, then presses her eyes closed, hard. “Han told me that this used
to belong to you,” she says when she opens them. Kylo's hand clenches against the doorframe. “He wanted you to have it back. It was in...a smuggling compartment, in the Falcon.”

He knows which one it is without being told. The one farthest back, near the hyperdrive, large enough to fit his angular and awkward body until adolescent growth-spurts committed treason against him, leaving him with nowhere else to hide.

It doesn’t surprise him that his father’s ghost speaks to Rey. To be sure, he should have expected it. He can still hear the grief nested in her throat when she speaks of him— or even sometimes simply to Kylo, reminded by the things he cannot see in himself.

She mourns him as though he were an old friend, imagining her grief comparable to his mother’s. To his uncle’s. To his. Some scavenger, who had known Han Solo for all of three days before he’d plunged his lightsaber through the final product of all their misunderstandings.

In three days, she’d already won his father’s heart.

She hands him the plastic satchel. Kylo takes it without a word.

Without turning back to look at her, Kylo moves past Rey to sit on the lounger against the far wall. Rey follows, looking slightly discomfited, crossing her arms over her chest.

“What is it?” she asks. Kylo looks up.

“You didn’t look?”

She huffs. “I was a scavenger, not a thief. It didn’t belong to me.”

Kylo can’t muster the wherewithal to respond. He already knows what’s inside the bag. Opening it is merely ceremony.

The small square is bound in leather, no bigger than Kylo’s palm.

“It’s a book of poetry,” he says, forcing himself to speak without inflection, and inhales. The pages smell of must and ink, the pressure of his own misbegotten thumbprints against the spine.


Kylo nods. Such an exceptionally rare thing, paper, in a world of holopads and flimsiplasts. He’d tried so hard to be good with it; had kept it dry and clean in that plastic satchel, away from the Falcon’s grease and the grub of strangers’ fingers. That was back when he’d wanted to be a senator, he thinks; had thought himself a scholar.

He knows what he’ll find when he opens the front cover, can trace the raised bumps of careful, swooping pen against the page.

A note, addressed from a member of Princess Leia’s royal court and survivor of its genocide, on the occasion of the birth of her son.

To the young Prince Ben Organa, beloved of his mother, and of her people.

And just below it, in his own aggressive, block hand:

PROPERTY OF BEN SOLO

KEEP OUT!!
He nearly slams the book shut at the quill-cutting pain.

There had been a time when he’d memorized whole sonnets from between the pages of the book, mantra-chants to magic away the dark. It had helped, sometimes, in taming the wild beasts in the badlands of his chest. The words are all gone from him now.

No need, now that the beasts had won.

One page, corner folded to keep place, remains. The ink is faded, yellowed from time and a child’s repeated touch. He can see, in his peripheral vision, Rey craning in to see the worn lettering, though he knows she cannot read it. The text spreads, looping and elegant, beneath the shadows of his fingers. Alderaanian High Script, an Alderaanian form of High Galactic, rare in his mother’s time to all but the planet’s nobility. Leia had learned to read it even before Aurebesh. And so, in her time, she’d taught him.

He doesn’t read it aloud. Rey doesn’t ask him to.

The bottom stanza of the poem is underlined: first in pencil, then in black ink, then in red. Each stroke line is darker, more frenetic than the last, until the red nearly pushes through the paper.

What, my boy, you are not weeping? You should save your eyes for sight;
You will need them, mine observer, yet for many another night.

I can dimly comprehend it, that I might have been more kind:
Might have cherished you more wisely, as the one I leave behind.

The last couplet is circled. He still knows it all by heart.

Though my soul may set in darkness, it will rise in perfect light—
I have loved the stars too fondly to be fearful of the night.

Chapter End Notes

The poem featured at the end of the chapter is a smattering of re-mixed lines from Sarah Williams’ incomparable *The Old Astronomer to His Pupil*.

And, since I’ve seen mentions of it in the comments, I’d like to just reiterate that this is in fact a gen fic. Full disclosure that I am a dirty Reylo shipper IRL, but for the purposes of this story everything is 100% platonic because I am the Captain of the SS Platonic Relationships are Important Too, Yo.

I'm in such awe by the outpouring of love and intelligence I've gotten in the comments. I officially declare you all The Best Readers.
Farewell, thou child of my right hand, and joy;
My sin was too much hope of thee, lov'd boy.
—Ben Johnson, On My First Son

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

When Luke Skywalker enters Kylo’s cell again, he’s holding a knife.

It’s half as long as Kylo’s forearm, the durasteel blade blunt and unpolished. Even so, Kylo takes an instinctive step back. In a deft spin of silver, Luke arcs the knife through the air, snatching the blade between thumb and forefinger so that the handle is now facing Kylo.

(A cross-guarded hilt weighs in his mind’s eye, half-way pointed between Han’s chest and his.)

Kylo narrows his eyes at Luke, breathing shallow to mask the sudden tightness in his chest. “What am I meant to do with this?”

Luke shrugs. There’s no blood between the clench of his fingers, no red running down the face of the blade, despite his uncle’s precarious touch. Only a dim blush on the metal, smudged pale-dark, pale-dark, of Kylo’s face and hair reflected there.


“Take it?”

His uncle smiles, though the expression does not meet his eyes. In the ripening late-day sunlight, a shadow spreads along the floor. Kylo imagines that it must be his. But then its dust-grain mottled darkness slips around Luke’s ankles, and he realizes that his uncle, too, can block the light.

His uncle, too, has not forgotten.

Luke had come into Kylo’s cell that first day with soft words and sweet teas, an unrepentant gentleness that was Luke’s best known cruelty. He had been open-palmed when Kylo had expected fists, soft-spoken when Kylo begged for fire. So weak, Kylo had thought. Look at how you’ve come undone. Look at the veins you have opened for the damned. Watch the drip-drip as your kindness ends your life.

But now Kylo knows that it was not kindness that had stayed Luke’s hand. It was not his uncle’s weakness that had spared Kylo’s life.

Neither of them has spoken of the Academy. Never once have they mentioned the Younglings, and Kylo does not want to know how Luke buried them, how he told their families that a third of his
heart had committed the slaughter, or if he even said anything at all. On those first cold nights, as his
defection lay heavy around him, Kylo had imagined that Luke had disappeared to gather for war. His
uncle would return at the helm of an army, to smite Snoke and his nephew down. There would be no
mercy towards his kin. Could be none. Kylo didn’t want any. He was not Luke Skywalker’s nephew
any longer.

It was years before Kylo stopped training with the specter of Luke Skywalker’s ghost ahead of him;
years before he stopped imagining every kill as his uncle, to stay his beating heart. He had to be
stronger when Skywalker finally arrived. He could only imagine how his life would end if he wasn’t.

A specter of retribution is what became of the man with the sandy hair and cornflower eyes. In time,
Kylo had nearly forgot that he knew him at all.

And then, Luke Skywalker had never arrived.

Where is your army, coward? Kylo had shouted, though any bond he had once had with the man
was cold. Where is your hellfire?

His uncle’s smiles, poised at the tipping point between boulder and sea. His softness, born of the
winds that had rubbed him raw. His kindness that burned, every touch deliberate.

And Luke knew it.

This was the army.

This was the hellfire.

The tip of the blade is pointed directly towards Luke’s heart.

“Put that away,” Kylo says, throat heavy with spit and swallowed breath. His mind goes back, as it
always does, to Snoke. Ozone scents in Kylo’s nostrils, electric, popping in the spaces where his
bones have not already snapped. He knows what Snoke says about compassion, that Jedi paralytic
that ended his grandfather’s life, that had crippled his mother’s and uncle’s greatness before it had
even begun.

But this is not compassion, he decides. This is blood. This is claim.

This is selfish, because his father’s ghost still follows him and he cannot stop the fields from burning.

Luke’s hold on the knife does not waver.

“Take it,” he says again.

Kylo inhales sharply. He imagines grabbing the knife and running his uncle through, no cauterized
cut for the taking of his conscience. He imagines red, no saber to be found to light it. There is no fall
from a bridge to hide the body.

His dreams could come down to this moment. Luke Skywalker, at his mercy.

He thinks of his uncle, of fifteen years of exile spent not with the retribution of cavalcades but of
grief so cutting that Luke had thought he might never return from it, and Kylo realizes that he’s had
Luke at his mercy all along.

“No,” Kylo says, because it’s still only two steps from taking a knife to burying it in a ribcage. He
cannot guarantee that he wouldn’t. He cannot guarantee that there would be no release in it, before
the horror caught up to what he’d done. It’s how he is. Vases break. People break. It takes so little effort.

Luke’s throat barely moves as he swallows. “I want you to take it,” he says, an undercurrent of hardness to his voice. Here the vengeance. Here the sword. Luke had never forced Kylo into anything before this; not his decision to join him and Rey at the bombfield, not his choice to accompany Rey to the interrogation. That was his uncle. This is the Master. “I want you to show me that you can.”

Kylo’s jaw clicks. “Why?”

“Because you fear it,” Luke says, voice echoing like it had on that green and dripping day on Dagobah, a seventeen-year-old memory crystallized in Kylo’s clouding breaths.

You bring only what you take there with you, his uncle had said of the Dark Side Cave, as though that were a comfort and not the very thing the-boy-who-was-not-yet-Kylo-Ren had dreaded most of all. The Dark had called to him there, as he was told it would. But he recognized it, knew it. Finally, there was a name to the raft that carried him across the whitewater of his anger and his doubt. The Dark. That’s what it was, what he was, and he had cried out at the naming.

A monster had appeared to him then, a respirator of metal and grating breath. Death stood at his left hand, a red saber at his right. Grandfather? the boy had whispered, though he knew that it was not. He had seen enough holovids for that.

An animal thrum sounded as the creature ignited its lightsaber, blade so hot that it was like devouring a star.

Will you kill me? the boy had asked. Will I kill you?

Yes, the beast had said, its mechanical voice so deep that the boy fell straight to the bottom.

It was years later that Kylo recognized the mask as his own.

Luke is staring at him when Kylo resurfaces, knife still poised between his fingers.

“Have you ever had true control, Ben?” he asks. The blade glows yellow in the waning light. Cutting candlelight.

“I am control,” Kylo answers. The answer feels steady, feels sure, by how many times he’s told himself. “I am the Master of the Knights of Ren. The Supreme Leader’s apprentice. Thousands of Stormtroopers have fought to the death on my command. Thousands of other men have died on it.”

“That’s not what I asked,” Luke says. “Your grandfather killed far more than you ever have. He, too, was the apprentice of a great Dark Lord. Yet he was a slave all his life.”

“Grandfather won his freedom in a pod race,” Kylo corrects automatically, but Luke only looks on unperturbed.

“And who owned him after that? The Jedi Council. And then, Darth Sidious.” Luke’s eyes glaze over for a moment, tinged heady with the memory of electricity. “In all his life, my father committed one free act: saving the life of his son.”

“And then he died,” Kylo cannot help but bite back. He had died, leaving the galaxy under the rule of a Republic just as corrupted as the last. “Do you mean to tell me that Grandfather was a pawn? That he didn’t know what he was doing, just as I didn’t? That our choices were not our own?”
“They could be nothing but your own. That does not mean that they have not owned you.”

Kylo moves to speak, but Luke’s voice is unyielding. Behind them, the curtains flutter, though there is no wind.

“Who are your masters, Ben? The legacy that bore you? The anger that made you? The Dark Lord that owns you now?"

“Snoke doesn’t own me,” Kylo half-hisses.


Snoke had been there during his father’s frequent leavings, the Falcon’s exhaust at his heels. He’d been there when Kylo had broken his hand punching a wall, his mother too embroiled in a trade deal to see him until it was already patched up. He’d been there, Kylo wants to say, when you told me that my anger made me dangerous. He’d told me that it was okay. That I was okay. That I was destined to be more than a puppet for the Light’s paltry parlor games.

But Snoke doesn’t own him.

Everything that Kylo had been fighting for was so that he could own himself.

From before the time of the Empire, the Sith had clung to the Rule of Two. It was the Dark Side’s holiest rite. One Master to embody power, and an apprentice to covet it. In this, the most sacred balance. In this, the true control. Sculpt the hands that will one day end you. Craft the weapon of your own demise. Now, you have dominated death— for you have chosen its time and place, known its face as a vengeful son. Only when you are no longer strong enough to stop it shall your student strike you down. This is justice. This is the divine right of kings.

And so the son kills the father. And so the son assumes the throne.

(He had killed a father once, and it had cost more than metaphor. Where was the throne, on that bridge so dark and deep? Where was the holy end?)

Sand falls through his fingers, grain by grain.

One.

(Ben can always tell which parent wins the argument by which one claims his wrist first.

I’m sorry you had to hear that, his mother will say. Never, I’m sorry that it happened, which is the sort of brutal honesty Ben respects and has learned from her. Her rage is like a drug, heady and dominating, though it is not directed at him. It may not leave her body for days after ingestion. In this, they are alike. In this, they understand each other, and Ben thinks that this is what sometimes frightens his father the most about them. He’s always been his mother’s child, comforted by anger, at home in places of power. Even so, he carries his father’s name.

Ben turns to the door of his parents’ bedroom, where his father is already shucking on a pair of boots, clipping his blaster to his side. Han’s motions slow for a moment as he catches Ben’s eyes.

—Hey, kid, his father says, mouth cragging into a tight smile. Wanna go see Nar Shaddaa?

Leia’s hand tightens around Ben’s arm.

—Absolutely not, Han! she shouts. If you’re going to run away to that den of thieves, just go. But
our son stays.

She does not specify how long Han will be gone. All the grand china in their Coruscant apartment could not buy the answer.

—All right, Han says. The apple of his throat bobs. All right. He turns to Ben, patting his hair. Leia’s fierce grip on Ben does not abate, and Han pointedly does not look at her. I’ve just got to cool down for a bit, is all. Got some work for me out in the Mid Rim to take care of. Back before you know it, ‘kay?

And because Ben Solo is a senator’s son, he nods his head and answers, Okay.

Leia Organa says nothing at all.

He is powerless to stop his father from striding out of the room, air eddying with cold from the sudden speed of the man’s motion. He is powerless to the slam of the door.

Not for the first time, Ben clenches his fists and imagines destroying the Falcon’s hyperdrive beyond repair.)

Two.

(He sees his mother only rarely now, between her Senate meetings and trade discussions, though she tries to make time to see him for dinner, and holocall him when she cannot. He is ten, and it has been two years ago now that he begged his mother to take him with her whenever she left for those meetings, terrified of what opened within him at her absence. It has been two years ago now since she’d agreed.

He sits in an empty senatorial office on Hosnian Prime, the only place his mother had known to put him while she debates new threats gathering on the Outer Rim. His tutor sits at the opposite end of the table. Very few of them last long. There are almost always incidents.

But his mother pays exceptionally well.

—And Emperor Palpatine died in the year…? his tutor quizzes, placing a meaty hand to his jowl. This tutor has lasted longer than most; an entire six months, by Ben’s reckoning. It might have to do with this tutor’s keenness for Imperial history, a subject with which Ben himself has grown obsessed.

Ben hardly looks up from his own datapad as his tutor speaks. He’s meant to be following along with Palpatine’s Empire, A History, a book his tutor is overly fond of. What his tutor does not know is that Ben had already memorized the entire text a year ago.

Ben flicks his finger to turn the page of his own reading material, an ancient Sith essay entitled The Rule of Two. It’s hard to understand in parts, the philosophy brutally instinctual in its tenets yet ungraspable in its finesse. He squints his eyes as though to parse the text, when his tutor interrupts.

—Master Solo?

Ben quietly shakes his head. —Four years after the Battle of Yavin, he rattles off. The same year as the Battle of Endor.

And Ben should know. He himself had been born the exact same year.

—Yes, precisely, his tutor says. And who else died that same year?
Ben’s lungs tighten against his ribs. —My grandfather.

Already, his grandfather feels more present than his mother does sometimes. A warm, sharp sorrow cries out that he did not know him. They are already, so he is told, so much alike.

The tutor shakes his head. —Your grandfather, Darth Vader.

Ben clicks his datapad off, a wolf awakening in the den of his ribs. —Yes.

His tutor folds his hands upon the table. —I would not be so ready to associate myself with that monster, Master Solo.

—Darth Vader is my grandfather, Ben says, a note of hardness in his voice. Whether you like it or not.

The tutor stiffens. —Have these lessons taught you nothing?

Yes, they had. His grandfather had brought whole galaxies to heel. His grandfather had brought billions of people under the rule of the Empire, where strength was currency and the weak had no room for confusion. Everything in its set order, everyone with their known places. A harsh paradise. A necessary heaven.

Force and stars, what he would give for it.

—Then am I a monster, too? Ben snarls. His chair cracks to the floor as Ben rockets upward, hands fisted against the table. What about my mother? My uncle?

—Perhaps, his tutor says. Ben recoils. Do you think I’m unaware of why your mother pays so handsomely for my services? Why none of my predecessors have lasted more than a few months?

Monster, monster, says a voice, and this one is his, hot and pure.

Ben clenches his fist. A crash sounds. His tutor is on his knees, gasping for breath. Ben does not let go until the man has stopped breathing.

—Permanent brain damage, his mother will tell him later, in a whisper fierce with possessive fear. Fear of him, Ben thinks. Fear for him, he no longer allows himself to wonder. He has lost his grip of syntax, and burned the dictionary of his mother’s embrace. —Oxygen deprivation. He might never wake up. Do you understand, Ben? Do you know what you did?

He doesn’t know what he did, Ben wants to say. But he understands it, somehow, all the same.)

Three.

(His father is screaming at his mother in the kitchen again, and she is screaming right back, their voices so loud that the thickness of his palms against his ears has no hope of blotting it out. Ben clinches his eyes together, fisting his hands to his temples. He presses his body into the corner of his bedroom, the dark of his room overwhelming. His tutor’s face splutters behind his eyelids, everywhere he goes.

It had felt so good, to watch his tutor’s mouth choke shut.

Ben gasps, and pretends he hasn’t heard himself.

So that’s it? comes his father’s shout. A boot slams. The floor of the apartment shakes, and Ben’s whole world with it. We’re just shipping him off? Our kid’s a nutcase, so let’s just cross our fingers
and hope that Luke can fix him?

—He’s not a nutcase, Han! His mother’s voice. Shriil and unshakeable. Ben’s heart stops beating. Stop acting like he’s insane!

—I will when he does! What’s wrong with him, Leia? Why is he like this?

A pause. Ben considers stealing his father’s ship and running, just so that he will not hear the answer.

His mother does anyway.

—He’s troubled. He always has been. It’s too hard to explain.

—Well, I can explain it. I always said that he had too much Vader in him-

—this is not about Anakin Skywalker! This is about Ben! Your son!

—If he’s my goddamn son, then why can’t I fix him? Why am I just…sitting here like an idiot while my kid goes fucking crazy?

—This is bigger than us, Han. You have to believe me. I knew you wouldn’t understand-

—’Cause I’m just the smuggler that knocked up the princess, right? That’s what everyone in your Senate says, and you know it. It’s not like I understand the ‘ways of the Force’ or whatever it is that’s making our kid go fucking nuts-

—Oh, stop it, Han! This is exactly why I couldn’t tell you-

—Fine! Just send him away, then! You always did know best, right?

Ben hadn’t lasted another week.)

Kylo is still holding the knife when Leia comes into the room, a basket in the crook of her elbow. He doesn’t register the tufts of green peeping out from beyond the woven lid, doesn’t see the white of a cloth fluttering beneath a cluster of chives. His blade is buried in her chest before Kylo can process what he’s done. She’s spluttering, bleeding out, and Kylo is halfway through shouting I told you so and What else could you have ever expected of me when he realizes that she’s there, and she’s whole, and he’s still gripping the knife in a white-knuckled hand.

His mother is looking at him.

“Easy, Ben,” she says, voice halfway soothing, halfway steel. An inherited memory sparks in her eyes, of a saber hilt offered in the dark, and her jawline shudders for the second it takes her to set her teeth. Kylo sees it, as he’s always seen her small, unintended honesties. Sometimes, they were all he had of her. “You’re clenching that thing like you’re about to carve someone up.”

Kylo pushes out a hot breath. “You can’t know that I won’t.”

Leia tilts her head minutely, an incline Kylo cannot climb. He scrabbles from its planed surface, no bottom to catch him. “All right then,” she says, and looks straight at him. “Will you?”

Her gaze is so intense that Kylo bucks a step back. He says nothing, because if he speaks he cannot guarantee a human response. Destruction is too base an instinct for description. In him, it is bone-set.
Leia closes her eyes, nods. Her gaze settles back on him a moment later, heavy yet ephemeral, a suggestion of snow.

She takes a step towards him.

Then another.

Soon, she is beside him, caught by the shimmering fishnets of the knife’s reflection. His wrist twitches. The weight burns. Kylo nearly throws the blade across the room. He hopes it collides against the window, hopes the smash is beautiful and deafening.

“How do you know how to use it?” Leia says.

Kylo narrows his eyes.

“What?”

Letting out a slow breath, Leia indicates the knife. “Do you know how to use it?”

He is the knife, he wants to say. He is the blade that cuts and the iron that forged it. She should know how much his sharp edges go for, as the one who sold him off.

Instead, he says nothing. Leia is gesturing now, an armspan and a half between herself and the extent of Kylo’s reach. He palms his consciousness around her calculated distance, feeds the sickly hope of this small ember. She does not fully trust him, after all, and it’s a comfort he knows she does not mean. Her unbroken, unrequited trust would break something irreparable within him.

Or maybe build it.

“It’s a cooking knife,” Leia says, in answer to a question that was not asked. She looks at him slowly. The knife rises and falls in the minutiae of Kylo’s breathing.

“We’re making dinner,” Luke says, when neither Leia nor Kylo give a response. “We’d like you to help.”

Luke and Leia move into the kitchen before Kylo has the chance to stop them. He stands, still clutching the knife, echoing on a frequency of nostalgia that has never existed. There was no cooking, growing up in his apartment on Coruscant. His mother, grown up in a palace of chefs, was useless in the kitchen; his father even more so. Only the ghost of dough, clung beneath his fingernails, remains: remnants of folk dishes his mother had learned desperately to make, in the wake of her planet’s absence. Alderaanian sweet breads, taken with milk and cream. Biscuits. Jarred jelly preserves, glistening in their glass cages, alight against the back illumination of the windowsill.

Kylo takes in the soft rustle of his uncle unpacking the vegetables his mother had brought in, a basketful of necromancy for the childhood that never was. Anger simmers softly behind his eardrums. The knife flickers.

“You never struck me as domestic, General,” Kylo grits. Luke grimaces at the title, but this time, Leia doesn’t flinch.

“Lie, says the waft of yeast and sweetmeats from their Coruscanti kitchen. Lie, says the clip-clip of his hand-trimmed hair wreathing the floor. Lie, says the curve of his hand on the knife, when the General of the Resistance and Luke Skywalker are a wrist’s flick from its homing, and he has not yet
moved to strike.

Kylo sucks in a deep breath. His hand does not move.

“It’s a proper education,” is all Leia says. “We could both stand to learn.”

*Together,* is the word that makes and unmakes him, she too cowardly to say it and he too spiteful to try. The misguidedness of the sentiment is enough to make the knife buck perilously in Kylo’s grip. He fingers the blade for a full measure before allowing himself to speak.

“I don’t expect I’ll be around long enough for it to matter,” he says.

And there it is. The truth, cold and bright in its knife-light reflection, sliced with a blade so fine that he can remember nothing of the cut. Only this, the moment of bleeding.

The Sith never taught an afterlife, but Kylo knows better. His uncle often communed with ghosts. Kylo Ren had tried, begging at his grandfather’s altar for a shade that never came. Instead, the phantom of his father sits with him in the nighttime quiet of his cell, playing Pazaak with him on imaginary cards, sharing stories of the planets child-Ben had begged to visit which adult-Kylo never will. The universe, in all of its kismet cruelty, has given him that. Its concepts of equivalence are not his, nor are they anyone’s.

*There is no Death, there is the Force.* It’s perhaps the only tenet of the Jedi Code that Kylo still, instinctually, believes. He has never welcomed the concept of Death as an old friend. He has never, precisely, wanted to die.

But if the First Order doesn’t retrieve him from here, if the Resistance decides tomorrow that he is to be executed the following dawn, Kylo doesn’t think he would stop them.

He’s gone so long in his lapsed mental place that he hardly catches Leia looking at him with one hand clenched.

“You’re not going to die,” Leia says.

It’s not an old recipe. There is no rhyme to the meal at all.

Kylo finds himself strangely grateful for that. He can cut things when someone asks him to. He can chop them into little pieces; make them rawer, rougher, smaller, until the constituent resembles nothing of the whole and there is nothing to be done of the mess he’s made but throw it away or consume it. A knife is not a lightsaber, he thinks. But it is close in the worst possible way.

His mother is grating ginger. His uncle is dicing carrots. Kylo himself is chopping cucumbers, his motions sure and brutally final, a *thok-thok-thok* so loud that he has caught his mother pausing her work several times, just to hear the violence of it. He slams the tattoo louder every time he knows her attention is caught.

The room is incensed in spice, humming softly with the rhythm of their motion. His fingers are sopping and sticky as he moves onto peeling his third cucumber with the edge of his knife, juice collecting in the divots of his knuckles. Tacky blood oozes slightly from the roughed flesh there, remnants of nights slamming his fists against the walls, the backs of his hands calloused with criss-crosses of silver from where idle scars never fully healed. A careless nick from his own saber crossguard, here. There, from a bone that had shattered through the skin. Now, in the aftermath of Rey’s slash to his face, he doesn’t believe there’s a single unscarred plane on his body.
The urge to shove gloves on his hands is overwhelming.

He cries out before he can register the sharp pain arcing across the pad of his thumb, thick warmth runneling from his finger down his forearm.

“Ben!” his mother cries, as though suddenly a girl again, twenty-three and so fierce in the senate chamber, so ungainly and new to motherhood. She rushes towards him with a clatter of dropped utensils. Her hands are on his before he can shove her away, holding his cut up to the light.

He’s sliced his thumb clean through to the bone.

“Force,” Luke swears lightly, moving towards Kylo. When Luke motions to see the injury himself, Leia shoots him a look so feral that for a mad moment Kylo fears for how close she is to his discarded knife.

“It’s fine,” Kylo says when his voice comes back to him. Leia is still fiddling with his injured hand. Blood weeps from the open wound, dribbling into the cusp of his palm. It mingles from Kylo’s fingers to hers until their hands are tacky, the seam between their palms monochrome and indistinguishable.

Leia prods at his injury, eyes wide in accusation. “What happened?”

“It’s nothing,” Kylo hisses, and pulls his hand away. Leia’s hands hover in the air, suddenly bereft, and instead of looking at them Kylo cups his free palm under his wounded thumb to catch the blood, making his way over to the sink.

The water whorls pink as Kylo rinses off his hand, a once comforting color now incomprehensible. He hasn’t cut himself accidentally since he was a child.

“Your mother or I can heal that,” Luke says from behind him, peering over his side as the water begins to run clear. Exposed bone glimmers against the meat of Kylo’s thumb, china-white and bright within him, untouched by blood or blade. Kylo’s throat grows heavy, and he pushes his uncle away.

“No. Let it alone. It will heal eventually.”

Dark Siders don’t heal with the Force. They can’t, in fact; the repair only functional so long as the user remains focused on it, fueled by the pain of their own wound. This wasn’t a weakness of the Dark, Kylo has insisted. Rather, it was fate. If you could not overcome your own injuries, you did not deserve to survive.

Beside him, Luke sucks in a breath. Kylo doesn’t have the energy to force him away a second time. He feels twelve years old again, returning to his uncle split-lipped after a spar turned physical, the older Jedi’s hands appraising and ginger even as his voice hardened with cautious reproach. The memory comes easy. Kylo curses his body’s betrayal.

“It’s going to at least need stitches,” Luke says.

Reaching for a roll of tape on the other counter, Kylo tears a measure off with his teeth, wrapping his thumb until his touch comes away clean. “Then get me a needle and thread, if you’re so inclined,” he says, returning to his cutting board. “Later.”

The rest of the cucumber disintegrates beneath his blade.
They are gathered at the only table in Kylo’s cell, a dish of tossed salad between them. Kylo has no
memory to draw from in the quiet click of their chopsticks against ceramic plates, ice clinking against
glass in a plain room on an even plainer planet. Ben Solo had known state dinners and protocols of
silence, had spoken the language of awkward suppers with his father on those frequent days when
his mother’s meetings ran late. Kylo Ren had taken his meals alone.

They’re pretending at house here, sitting together like a family that had never meant to hurt each
other. And they have no right to play it.

Kylo stabs a chopstick into a cube of cucumber, nearly choking on it as he swallows it whole.

As the silence becomes oppressive, Luke speaks up, smiling wanly. “My apologies if it’s rather
plain. It was hard enough smuggling a knife in for Ben, I didn’t want to set off too many alarms by
stealing the good food.”

Leia raises an eyebrow, twirling a shred of ginger above her plate. “Lots of salads in exile, I take it?”


Kylo’s head snaps up at the reference to his uncle’s place of exile. He had wiped out entire villages
for aiding those who might have had the answer to that question.

Even with his uncle returned to him, it had never occurred to Kylo that he might simply ask.

Kylo freezes. A chopstick clatters out of his grip.

In his mind, there is a rocky outcropping, cragged above the sea. White spray, feathering skywards.
Tufts of grass, clashing softly in the salt-tanged wind.

I see it. I see the island.

He had said that to Rey on the day he’d broken into her mind, assuming that it had been the fantasy
of a water-starved girl desperate for a lullaby, one final sleep.

His teeth clench at his own foolishness.

“You were on an island,” Kylo says to Luke, voice trembling with belated conviction. “Somewhere.
A grey sea, a grey sky. Not a single soul but you.”

Luke’s mechanical hand halts midway between mouth and plate.

“Yes,” he says slowly, and Kylo wonders when it was those years ago that Luke had discovered
how his nephew had been appointed his executioner. “How did you know?”

“I saw it. In Rey’s mind, on Starkiller,” Kylo replies, words sticky and clumped in his throat. He had
searched for his uncle in underground caves encrusted with kyber crystals, had hunted him in
temples and on mountaintops. Never once had he imagined a single, hopeless isle, caught in the sea-
game of oblivion. “But I hadn’t realized.”

Leia blinks slowly at the reference to Rey’s abduction and interrogation at Kylo’s hand. Luke takes a
single, steadying breath.

The ginger burns as it slides down Kylo’s throat. He imagines Luke’s body, crumpled next to Leia’s;
the crushing, screaming emptiness that had resounded after that moment on the bridge in a deafening,
threefold echo. This is selfishness. This is self-preservation.
And when Snoke doesn’t kill him, he dares more.

“Where was it? The island?”

There is a distance in Luke’s eyes as he looks up, sea-glassed and trained for a horizon Kylo cannot fathom. Too late, Kylo understands the silence. To tell the right hand of the First Order the location of his exile would be to hand him another knife, and Luke has already seen where that led. To Kylo, bleeding on his mother’s hands, staining the white tile floor.

But then Luke looks up.

“Ahch-To,” his uncle says. He does not look at Kylo as he does. “The site of the—”

“—First Jedi Temple.” A chopstick nearly snaps in Kylo’s clenched fist. How could he have been so stupid? How could he not have known his uncle would go there, to the spring of where it had all gone wrong?

(He had known, a voice inside him whispers, quiet and nearly inaudible. It’s the weight of sunlight against old glass. He’d known that the obliterated ruins of the First Temple were there, but had decried the planet a ruined wreck. He’d told Snoke as much. And everything he’d told Snoke must be the truth.)

Luke nods, bitter melancholy in the space between teeth and tongue. “The Temple there is all but grasses now. But ghosts like such things, I’ve learned.”

The table rocks as Leia slams her glass a little too forcefully down. “Were you ever going to come back?”


Kylo stiffens. There is a resonance in his chest, clean and unrelenting.

“So you do admit it,” he all but growls. Luke starts up at the sudden enmity in his tone. “You hid because you knew what you’d done. You knew how you’d sinned. And there are some things you can never come back from.”

Luke’s face cracks. He reaches out to take Kylo’s hand.

“Ben—”

Kylo yanks his hand away so violently that he nearly throws himself out of his chair.

“Don’t ‘Ben’ me!” he snarls. “I’m not your Ben! Stop trying to bring that boy back from the dead!”

Kylo Ren had given Ben Solo a swift and brutal burial the day he had brought the Academy down, a mausoleum if it couldn’t be a tomb.

There is nothing for him in that old name now. He could not go back to it if he wanted to.


“He isn’t dead,” Luke says. Something in Kylo cries out at the admittance, a violence he hadn’t known to anticipate. My son is alive. “I see him more in you every day.”
Kylo swallows, and looks away. “You see what you want to see.”

Luke tries to smile. The curve of his mouth overturns, lost in the in-between. “So do you.”

They are silent for a few moments. Then, Luke speaks again.

“Can I ask you something, Ben?”

Kylo wants to shout about the dangers of calling out for dead men. He wants to scream about raising the spirits of ghosts he may not want to find.

When Kylo does not answer, Luke goes on.

“The name, ‘Kylo Ren.’ How did you get it?”

Kylo swallows for a moment, reaching for another bite of food to forestall the decision of responding. His chopsticks clack against empty porcelain.

“I was given it,” Kylo says. “Just before—” The word catches. He forces it out. “—just before I helped slaughter the students.”

The tightening of Luke’s fingers on the table is the only indication that his uncle has heard him.

“By Snoke?”

“Yes,” Kylo says, more acidly than intended. It’s typical Sith ritual, the Master bestowing the disciple with his new name, his new baptism.

“What does it mean?”


(—Cast aside the name of your weakness. You are no more to speak it aloud, a hologram says. He is so much larger than the boy thought possible, and so much smaller. The voice had promised him the universe. It cannot even give itself a body. —Arise, Kylo Ren, Master of the Knights of Ren.)

“‘Holy one,’” Kylo says. A reminder, that from the Skywalker line would come the Chosen One, and if it could not be his grandfather, then he would have to suffice. “Or ‘Master.’ It’s Old Sith.”

Luke frowns.

“‘Son of my right hand,’” he says.

Something constricts in Kylo’s chest.

“Your birth name,” Luke clarifies, waving his hand at Kylo as though to emphasize the point. “It means, ‘son of my right hand.’ The most trusted son. The most beloved.”

“Well,” Kylo says. His voice is suddenly thick. "You obviously chose wrong."


"No,” he says. "I don't think we did."


The name 'Benjamin' means 'son of my right hand' (or 'son of the south'), whereas the truncation 'Ben' just means 'son'. Obviously, 'Kylo' is not a real-world name, so I treated it as a sort of corruption of 'Kyrie', which is Greek for 'lord'. The closest real-world equivalent would be 'Kyle', which is a Gaelic name meaning 'straight' or 'narrow', as in a geographic channel.
Chapter Notes

But what I’ve done, he thought; that’s become alien to me. In fact everything about me has become unnatural; I’ve become an unnatural self.

—Phillip K Dick, Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

xx.

When he stumbles over to the sink, he is sweating. Perspiration beads cold on his face and neck, darkening the collar of his grey shirt and catching in the blink of his eyelashes.

There is a bird pounding upon his breastbone. He wants to plunge his hand into the cityscape of his chest and crush it, where the grey feathers clot his heartbeat.

He does not recall the dream that woke him.

Dreams no longer follow him into consciousness. He remembers not them but their aftertaste, the thick bitterness coating his tongue upon waking on the couch, teeth unbrushed and hair undone, covering his face like a veil. The number of times Kylo has fallen asleep in his day-clothes is an even tie with the times he has not.

The cell’s only bed, just as in the previous, is reserved for Han Solo.

(Ghosts don’t sleep. And even if they did, I still wouldn’t want to take it. This is getting ridiculous, B —)

But Kylo does not care if it is.

He is a member of a religious holy Order. There are some rituals that cannot be explained, or known. They can only be done.

It is four in the morning.

It is four in the morning, and Kylo is awake, pouring tap water from the sink into a glass.

It is four in the morning, and there is no chronometer in Kylo’s cell to tell the time. But Kylo rarely closes the curtains now, and a sharp, bright star is peering through the window, wheeling across an arc that Kylo cannot name but knows. He spreads his pointer and little fingers apart: thirty degrees declination. Three hours, until sunrise.

Reflexively, Kylo shifts his fingers, in the way all children are taught to use their hands to tell the
distance between the stars. His little finger is one degree held up against the sky; all three of his middle fingers make five. His fist, ten degrees; twenty-five, with his thumb and little finger wide.

He tips the glass over and starts again.

(The sky moves fifteen degrees every hour on this planet, one of his tutors had said. He cannot remember her name. She was an aged woman, grey hair sheeting down her back like a calm pond of water, or the back of a coin; the only one of his tutors who would stay late, on the nights when his mother didn’t come home and his father never stepped foot over the threshold. Her hand would be cold and paper-dry against his as she pulled him out onto the balcony, pointing out the stars that survived against the metropolitan glow. He never saw her smile.

But then again, she never flinched away.

—And this one, Master Solo?

—Forty-one degrees ascension, Ben would say, spreading his fingers in the requisite shape, and when he held them to the sky to check their latitude it was like playing piano on the universe. Three hours and eight minutes declination.

There is comfort in the cold mathematics of his hands, raised against the cosmos. Overhead, the thick swath of the galaxy rises like a band of lace.

But poetry and parallax cannot save him from the dark, when they are ink and void itself.)

The tap rushes as he curves his hands beneath it. His palms arc in, cordiform, like cupping his hands around the ears of the intangible.

His palms near their fullness, trembling as the weight of the water builds. He pitches their contents into his face, cheeks stinging from the sharp slap. It drips from the tips of his hair, the hollows of his eyes, his nose, his chin. The collar of his shirt is dark with damp. But it’s not enough.

Kylo raises a shaking arm to his forehead, pressing the crook of his wrist to his temple.

It comes away scalding.

He shoves a glass under the tap, breathing heavily as it fills. The floor is frigid beneath his feet; painfully hard, as though the skin on the bottom of his heels has been peeled back to press his bones against the tile.

He tosses the water into his face with a crack. The second follows after. Kylo snorts like a river animal surfacing for air before filling the glass again and again, water blinding his vision again and again, and when it is done he is sopping to the bone and choking on his own ablution.

He tumbles to the ground, the glass with him.

There is water all over the floor. Puddling, in long silver lakes, from where Kylo crushes the rickets of his spine against the cabinets below the sink. He slams his palms into the ground to steady himself, heels jammed against the tile. Bracing for impact. Lancing pain spirals through his hands, the water pink beneath his fingers, his feets.

He closes his eyes, breathing hard and sharp.
Awareness comes slowly. A ghostly pressure, against his temples. It sweeps a low arc across the
crown of his head, as though to gather his hair away from his face. Kylo shifts. The feeling leaves.

Only to return again.

The voice that comes to him is rough-spun, like leather and cotton; aftershave and sweat. He can’t
hear the syllable that it makes. Simple. Like soap, like goodness. Like yesterdays.

The voice barks the word a second time. Desperate now. It clangs and echoes across a chasm of
boundless depth. Kylo remembers standing above such a thing once, tight-walking on a thread of
moonlight. Someone else had met him there. And then the sky had fallen.

He wonders if the sound it made was the same as his father calling his name.

He comes to with the feeling of hands clamping down on his shoulders. Not flesh and blood but air
and ether, implication rather than action. Someone is shaking him, pressing nails into the dips of his
shoulders. Someone is shouting for him to wake up.

That’s all he’s ever wanted to do, he tries to say. He killed his own father for the end of a dream.

“Ben!”

Kylo starts, head slamming against the cupboard. A constellation of pain crushes through his palm as
he slams a hand to the ground to steady himself. Shattered glass squeals between his flesh and the
tile. Blood trembles on the water.

“Seven hells,” his father breathes, kneeling beside him. Kylo hadn’t even sensed him come up.
“Seven hells, Ben. You scared me.”

It’s okay, Kylo thinks. I scare everyone.

Reality patterns itself around him slowly, harsh and bright-tinged. Kylo grimaces against the sudden
onslaught of light, so bright he can almost hear it, a theremin-sharp note like the end of all things. He
thinks of the theory of infinite universes.

Somewhere, out there, he is a worse monster.

Somewhere, out there, he might even be a good man.

Somewhere, dimly, his father is running his hand across his jawline, as though no time has passed
and the stars are no witness, and this is the worst universe of all.

“What happened, Ben?”

Kylo watches Han’s words break softly in the atmosphere, streaking down in their embering ghosts.
Light breaks softly upon the water spilled across the kitchen tiles, caught on the shards of glass like
delirious stars. A heaviness settles against Kylo’s chest, infinite weight against unstoppable force.
Neither wins.

Neither ever has.

“I don’t know,” Kylo says.

Battle blooms on Han’s features for a moment, fire under ice-blue eyes. He clenches his teeth, jaw
clicking. Kylo had forgotten what it felt like to not be the only wolf in the room.

“It’s those goddamn injections,” Han growls. “What’s the name of that doctor? Carlonia?”

“Kalonia,” Kylo says dimly, then takes a deep breath to stave off the wooziness.

A canine tooth shines beneath Han’s curled lip. “Yeah. Her. Didn’t she karking tell Leia what those things would do to you?”

Kylo nods, a sloppy up-down motion too sophisticated for his line of sight to keep up with. The floor bucks beneath him. “That doesn’t mean the General listened.”

Han makes to get to his feet, snarling. “I’m gonna give Leia a piece of my mind—”

A wild hand suddenly stops him.

“—Don’t.”

Han starts, looking from Kylo’s outstretched grasp to his face, and back again.

“Don’t what?” Han asks.

Kylo does not answer, his heart pounding a one-two, two-four beat. He presses down, wanting to break through the breastbone, in search of one piece of pain that makes sense. One part of agony for his own, implicit design.

Han catches his wrists before he can. Though Han’s fingers hold no weight, Kylo’s hand stops as though slammed against a physical barrier. Han narrows his eyes at him, manic desperation in his eyes. Kylo opens his mouth to speak. His tongue floats hazily away.

“Cut that out,” Han barks. Something more than instinct listens. Kylo stops, forcing a deep breath out. Han’s image merges and doubles in his vision like the path of a shadow in the Tatooine suns.

Han catches him by the wrists again, forcing him to look into the deep frenzy of his eyes. Kylo heaves another breath.

Han’s looking at him again, moving his hands to Kylo’s ribs this time. A dead man can’t feel for the pulse of another. Yet Han tries. Yet Han does, and Kylo’s chest crumples inexplicably at this intimate futility.

“When are you gonna stop hurting yourself?” Han asks.

Never, Kylo wants to say. He is not a fine candle to burn in the dark. He might have been, once. But unattended flames throw the shadows of arsonists across the walls. He is too at home with matches now.

His lack of response brings Han up short.

With a grunt, Han sinks further on his knees, hands trailing up Kylo’s shoulders to the radiating heat of Kylo’s cheeks, smoothing the pads of his fingers around Kylo’s eyes. It is the feeling of everything Kylo is not allowed to want. He pulls away by a rabid inch, scooting his heels against the clinking mire of sopping glass. His back clangs against the cabinet a moment later.

“Come on,” Han says. “Let’s get this mess cleaned up.”

Kylo looks out at the floodplain of bloody glass at his feet, shimmering sharp and terrible.
“It doesn’t matter,” he says. “You can’t fix it.”

He had only needed Han’s help once, for that one brave, horrific act—*will you help me*, he had said, and at that moment Kylo could have been talking to his father and the Force and himself all at once.

“I know I can’t. Problem with being a ghost,” Han says, holding up ephemeral hands. For a moment, Kylo feels peace. If only the rest of his family could give up on him so quietly, so surely. Maybe then the Light would quiet. Maybe then the Dark would cease. But then Han Solo speaks again. “You have to do it.”

A wet pain causes Kylo to look down. The tape on his thumb, crudely wound around his knife cut from the evening before, has lost its adhesion in the dampness. Kylo peels the makeshift bandage off, staring at the re-opened wound.

“C’mon, Ben. Up and at ‘em,” Han says. He rises to his feet, spritely despite his phantom’s age, and extends a hand in Kylo’s direction.

Kylo makes no motion to follow. Around him, the water has grown cold.

“I’m not twelve anymore,” he says, and his voice is flat as a skipped stone. It’s easier here, in this liminal space, where the night is no counselor and the dawn has not yet risen. Not honesty but simplicity; not revelation but survival. “You can’t trick me into cleaning my room with offers of sweets.”

The glass makes no sound as Han settles back down beside him.

“You’re right,” Han says. “Guess I’m fresh out of chocolates.”

Kylo snorts an anemic laugh. Han grins all the brighter. What Kylo would have given to make his father smile like that in the before-time, when the currency of his approval was enough. Before a great galactic cruelty had revealed to all involved that Kylo would never be that grandchild, that nephew. That son.

“I never thought I’d see you smile again,” Han says, lifting a pale hand to Kylo’s face. His touch does not linger above the scar. Instead, Kylo feels the flat of Han’s index finger rest against his chin, nudging his face into the light. “It was always so hard to get one out of you.”

“There wasn’t much to smile about,” Kylo says, truth soft and sharp as starlight.

Han’s hand falls.

“Did we really fail you so much?” Han asks quietly. “Did you know how much we…how much we…”

Han looks like he doesn’t want to hear the answer. Kylo had once been so ravenous for this moment. Now, he isn’t sure he wants to give it.

He thinks of his mother, absent for another night as she debated in the Senate. He thinks of how he would wake in the middle of the night to the flats of her knuckles on his cheek, soft and silent as a vision.

He thinks of his father shaking the walls of their apartment with his comings and goings. The secret treasures his father smuggled; Kylo’s own lingering feeling that he would never understand his father
quite like the touch of forbidden gold. He thinks of his father’s fingers wrapped around his own, teaching him how to prime a blaster; the way he had panicked and shot wide, the blast arcing in the air like a renegade flare.

He thinks of his uncle’s hand cinching his wrist, pulling him away from a copse of trees glowing lowly in the yellow twilight, sparks burning from their heartwood. Kylo had destroyed them with his saber in a fit of rage he could not explain and would not apologize for, and Luke had only looked at him, deeply, quietly, in a despair that felt no directionality. He thinks of his uncle making him tea that night, the two of them drinking little and speaking less; nodding off, only to wake up, his uncle unmoved by his side.

“I knew,” Kylo says. His father’s gaze is upon him, heavy and soft all at once, like the feeling of falling on the cusp of sleep. His voice breaks, to scatter amongst the glass splinters at his feet. “I know.”

But that feeling could not bring mothers and fathers back from their long, selfish absences, leaving their child to call for them from atop the staircase loft. It could not compete with good intentions paved in hell. It couldn’t fight against a voice calling in the dark.

Love could not make men out of monsters.

“I thought you hated us,” Han says. “I thought—”

“—I did,” Kylo answers. Swallows. “I didn't.”

He would never have imagined it possible to love someone so much that the hatred ran even more deeply, ever fiercer; in tandem, like the ever-turning motor of a starcraft.

Han is looking at him now as though he is made of answers and moonlight.

Neither are ever quite knowable, in the end.

“You know that—you know that we still—” Han starts and stops, voice low to keep it from cracking. For a moment, Kylo can feel his father’s breath on his cheek. But it is only rust and stardust.

A convulsive chill rips through Kylo. He trembles, squeezing his knees to his chest. He traces his wounded thumb idly through the water beneath him, watching it feather into sanguine curls, make beauty of his bleeding.

“It doesn’t matter,” Kylo says. It’s as close as he can manage to I know without going to a place he knows the rest of him cannot follow. “It wasn’t enough. It’s not enough.”

“You know, I think it knows that. It’s why it has to change everything it touches,” Han says, and sighs, running a hand through his hair, peppery-bronze and still thick as a goat’s. Kylo knows, instinctually, that this is how his father looked the night he discovered that Kylo had left him. “It’s rude, isn’t it? The way it makes you a better man? The way you never asked for it to, the way it doesn’t care?”

“Is that a threat?” Kylo says, but the taste of the poisoned wine is on his tongue, burning gently all the way down.

“Nah, Ben,” Han answers, moving close. “It just is.”
His mother and uncle find him as dawn rises silver in the sky. He is asleep against the cabinets, damp as a swamp-rat, skin wrinkled and ghostly pale against the water.

Fingers are pressing against the dip of his shoulder, shaking him tentatively.

“Ben?” a voice calls, like the one that had once read him fairy tales, like the one that had never really stopped.

He awakes to the sight of his mother’s face, pressed so close to his that their breaths mingle. His first, asinine thought is to tell her that she’ll ruin her dress, crouching so near to this pond of bloody glass. But she is not here in her dresses of white. No Senate and no Senate’s son can remind her now.

Luke saves them both from having to contemplate that notion.

“What happened here?” he says. He stands across the kitchen from them both, arms folded, perched safely upon the dry land.

“The potentiasuppresants,” Leia all but growls. She raises a hand to Kylo’s cheek, then his forehead, a solid presence that is startling after the dream-light touch of Han’s spectral hand. Kylo makes a weak attempt to paw her touch away, but Leia does not relent and so Kylo does not try again. “Han told me.”

Luke sighs, breath rattling like a vast desert wind going out. “I thought we had more time.”

“We all did,” Leia says, so quietly that Kylo can feel it, pulsing like an eddying ripple through her fingertips. “We have to convince the Council to—”

“—No.”

Leia and Luke both turn to Kylo then, Leia’s face twisted in disbelief where Luke’s is only bereaved. It is only then that Kylo realizes he’d spoken. He doesn’t even know what he meant to say.


“In order to keep you from feeling the Force…those potentiasuppressants are a poison, Ben. We knew from the beginning. But we felt we had little choice.” They hadn’t had, Kylo knew. He would have torn the planet to pieces in those early days, had he been able to. Without the potentiasuppressants now, he’s still not sure he wouldn’t. “Most people can survive your level of dosage, without any serious adverse effects…for six months.”

Six months.

The logic of it all falls neatly into place, elegant and brutal. Either he would live, or the Resistance has been killing him all along.

He is standing at the bottom of the cataracts of this revelation, and the anger he knows he is supposed to feel foams as whitewater at his feet. It is springtime here, on the mount, in the dell, though outside he knows it is winter on D’Qar, the weather coming on milky and mild. He knows that the Resistance never meant for him to live despite their lip service to monitoring his behavior before the final verdict—but he had, until now, always imagined that he was biding his time. Waiting for rescue, waiting for a command. Waiting for the moment before the click of the blaster to sever his executioner’s head from his body, to escape back to the First Order and the life that, one way or
another, he’s worthy of.

But there’s none of that now. He truly is to die. Finality flows through his veins, heavy and heady as promise.

For the first time, the scant distance from here to where he will go is certain and safe and final.

“Just wait,” Kylo says without inflection. “The full six months. I’m sure it can’t be long now.”

“I won’t stand by and watch you die,” Leia says. “Not like this.”

The light from the window grows glinting and sharp-edged. Kylo winces at the lancing brightness of it, but behind his eyelids there is no refuge in darkness.

“And when the Resistance executes me?” Kylo says quietly, abstractly, as though the answer does not concern him at all. “What will you do then?”

Leia swallows, her silence like hung stars.

“I’ve heard stories, of men living, after their whole hearts have been cut from their bodies,” she finally answers. “I suppose I will find out if it can be done.”

He is outside in the bomb field when Rey finds him, bundled in a thick wool coat despite the mellowness of the season. D’Qar has little axial tilt, the blur of the seasons made distinguishable only by periods of dry and rain. It is the dry season now, the grasses of the field brown and desiccated, a still-frame drawn in faded ink.

Luke Skywalker is not with him, sitting cross-legged instead near the entrance to the base. Kylo is not technically unsupervised, and Luke had turned his back quietly as Kylo exploited this loophole. Kylo has been walking for half an hour now; straight, as though to touch the horizon. But at every step the ground turns beneath him, and he is no further than when he began.

“What are you doing out here?” comes Rey’s voice from behind. Kylo doesn’t turn around. It is no particular surprise that she should be here. It is her training field, after all.

“Looking for the end of the world,” Kylo says. A low wind is carrying in from the east, rustling the grass like the purr of a great beast. “I thought I’d find the edge and see. Heads or tails whether I jump.”

“Heads you do,” Rey says without hesitation.

Kylo is halfway to sniping back when Rey pulls a credit from the pocket of her coat, tossing it into the air with a flourish. It flickers overhead in an arc of flashing bronze, landing neatly on her palm. She curls her fingers around it, flipping it onto the back of her other hand.

“Tails,” she says. In her hazel eyes there is only the iron-grey of the sky. “Looks like you’ll have to live.”

“You cheated,” Kylo says simply. Rey has the grace to flush, jaw tightening in indignation. Even muffled as it is to him, Rey exudes the Force so strongly that it was no effort to sense how she had fudged the coin’s landing. The subtlety and quickness of such a trick requires a level of comfort with the Force that many sensitives never achieve. And still, she languishes here, on an obscure planet in the Outer Rim, as though she could not make the whole galaxy her queen. “I am obligated to do no
“Why are you suddenly so eager to die?” Rey says. She takes two steps forward, underbrush crackling softly beneath her like the suggestion of a forest fire. The odd hardness to her tone is enough flint to spark the flame.

Kylo meets her stride in a single step, narrowing his eyes. His hand tenses, instinctively reaching for his lightsaber hilt, even now after so many months without. He doubts there will come a day when its absence will feel anything less than an amputation.

“Why are you suddenly so eager to see me live?”

Rey steps back then, some of the ferocity of her gaze fading away. Replacing it is an expression of mixed frustration and nostalgia, so potent that he can hear her jaw clicking.

“If you die, what happens?” she says. He can hear soft clicking as she paws the lightsaber hilt at her hip with the nails of her free hand.

“Nothing, I expect.”

If he came back to life as a Force ghost, Kylo would be very surprised indeed. Or perhaps not, considering the hands his existence has dealt him.

The clinking at Rey’s side stops.

“The Resistance gets their villain, and the First Order gets their martyr. Everything is neatly solved,” Rey says. She sounds musing, almost; wise, in a way Kylo never imagined her to be before. In that moment, he imagines that she must have died every night in that AT-AT and arisen anew each morning, to have lived so many lives in so few years. “Except for you.”

“I’ll be dead,” Kylo says flatly. “I imagine a great deal of people will view that as a perfectly acceptable solution.”

“But it isn’t,” Rey bites back fiercely. “The rest of us don’t get the luxury of a court-mandated execution. We don’t get to take the easy way out.”

He sees in her, then, what he had gleaned so long ago from her memories: the desert-wraith scavenger, more dreams than girl, trudging through sand with her passel of parts, not all gained without spit and blood. Rey had known hardship before the kind touch of anyone’s hand. He would have known this even without peering into her mind. It was in the lithe way she carried herself, wiry and strong and always skeptical of anything that survived longer than a sand dune’s relentless turning. Never once had he thought that Rey also imagined herself in the context of her own suffering. That curse had been reserved for him.

“It’s not my decision to make,” Kylo says, as the world bends hazy around him. The sky seems to curve then, convex where it had once been flat and listless, and Kylo finds himself standing at the bottom of a bell jar, looking up.

“You’ve hurt so many people,” Rey says coldly. Kylo understands, clear as this fine, brisk day, that she is saying none of this for him. So selfless, even now, in her moment of deepest threat. “If you die, then you’ll never get to make it up to them.”

“If I live, I won’t either.”

Her gaze grows serious as a bolt of lightning.
"At least you can try."

In the end, Rey doesn’t draw her lightsaber. Kylo doesn’t bare his teeth. They stand without speaking at the edge of the bomb field, strange and solitary creatures each. Snoke will never have her, Kylo knows. It is not that there is no darkness in her. There is, as absolute as an eclipse. Somehow, it only makes the light visible behind it even more blinding.

Kylo is fen, and fog, and bosky grey days, and thinks perhaps that is his why he has never understood the great astronomical events beyond his atmosphere.

They are interrupted by a frenetic beeping at Rey’s side. Her commlink, vibrating frantically.

Casting a glance at Kylo, Rey picks up the link, turning on her heel so that her back is to him. A preternatural quietness flutters over her just then; Rey, using the Force to mute her conversation. But the shield she’s using takes incompletely, and Kylo hears four words that he knew one day he would hear again.

They’re building another Starkiller.

Chapter End Notes

YES HELLO I AM ALIVE AND SO SORRY FOR THE HIDEOUS TARDINESS OF THIS UPDATE. Finals week was an...experience. My ass has been soundly kicked by Javanese phonemic analysis, lemme say.

I have to confess, that some of the lateness of this update wasn't just because of end-of-semester craziness. The new canon book Bloodlines was released in the interim between updates, and it has, to put things lightly, blown some pretty big components of this fic's Ben-backstory soundly apart. It was pretty soul-crushing to deal with, not gonna lie. But I'm determined to finish this story, with no short credit to all of your encouraging comments and feedback. You guys are the best. Really really.

The star that Ben references in the little flashback, at 40 degrees RA and 03h 08m declination, is in reference to an actual star, Algol— also known as the Demon Star. It's a neat little star in the constellation Perseus, so-called because it's a variable star and an eclipsing binary (actually three stars, but the third star is farther out), whose luminosity periodically waxes and wanes as two of its stars eclipse each other. Mythologically it's heavily associated with death and violence, especially beheading (due to Perseus' slaying of Medusa), and is considered one of the unluckiest stars in the sky. Sort of sadly prophetic for Ben, eh?

The 'rust and stardust' Kylo references is a shameless metaphor steal from Humbert's "Wanted" poem in Lolita.

Thank you all again for every hit, kudo, and comment. We're getting close, guys. To what? Well...
"But who will find him if he's lost? Who will find the little boy?"

"Goodness will find the little boy. It always has. It will again."

— Cormac McCarthy, The Road

They want you to come too,” Rey finally says. She does not mention what her conversation was about, and does not have to. Her eyes trail slowly to the sun, a comfort without consolation. The sky, leafed in cloudcover, weaves a single dome of silver.

There had been light, on the day that the Hosnian System winked out; illumination, of the kind Kylo had never meant to see. He had watched the Starkiller firing from a distance, huddled on the bridge of the Finalizer like a vengeful amnesiac who had once known this sin with special intimacy, had seen its sorrows and called it mother. Terrified that he would remember. Terrified that he wouldn’t.

There is no sound now. There is no silence. There is only the sunlight, filtering down from the eaves of the heavens like a great and dry benediction.

Kylo closes his eyes against the brilliance.

The imprint of light still lingers.

The Resistance command room is smaller than Kylo had imagined: a cavernous enclave hewn of stone, where consoles lined against the walls glow garish as a reverie. Everywhere loiters the primeval scent of salt and damp, as a world unmade, as a future undone. It is slapdash, roughhewn, wild as a beating heart.

Kylo tightens his jacket around his chest to stifle the sound of his own heart’s pounding, erratic and plains-savage as an unbroken animal. But the coarse fabric of the collar suddenly feels too much like worn leather, like aftershave and an easy laugh and two rough hands who used to pick him up until his world shrunk to the plane of a single man’s chest, and Kylo moves his touch away.

Beside him, Rey takes a deep breath. She juts her chin against her chest as if in preparation to headbutt the door down, hand resting instinctually on her lightsaber hilt. Kylo has no such comfort. He settles his hands in the pockets of his jacket, nails incising crescent moons into the calloused meat of the heel his palm. The silverline scar bisecting Kylo’s face blisters like a cloudbank breaking.

Bile rises in his throat. He grips the insides of his pockets to keep the floor from keeling, the potentiasuppressants keening the edge of every touch. Another Starkiller. Another system to cry out
in terror, to fill the horrendous emptiness with their sudden silence. What sacrifice would it demand of him this time? His mother? His uncle?

Himself?

Rey pushes the door to the war room open before Kylo can process the event. His feet freeze leaden in the doorway. There is no helm and cloak to cover him now, but it would be a grave mistake to think that this means there are no masks to wear.

Leia is standing in the middle of the command room, face illuminated in the sharp green light of a hologram. His gaze falls to her before he knows what he’s looking at, inexorable as a guiding star. But she is not his mother in this place, and he knows better than to not seek higher ground. Here, she is a natural phenomenon.

She is flanked by a handful of officers, all alight in that eerie, harsh jade. At her right is Colonel Mikshmi; to her left, Admiral Ackbar and Luke. It is like looking at them through a lens of lake water, images refracted, enlarged; made wrong as the world is focused to its brightest, most unnatural point. Amidst the subterranean dim of the room, every color flares. Kylo bites the inside of his bottom lip so hard he tastes iron.

And then he sees, standing beside a crisply uniformed FN-2187, Poe Dameron.

The pilot is perched with his hands against the projection rails surrounding the hologram, incandescent in his orange flight suit, hair tousled and faintly gleaming in the alpine projector light. Kylo hasn’t seen him since the trial, since the torture.

Since they were children together.

Before, back when his mother tried hold his stitchings together in those late nights, when the dreams came calling to collect. Before quite suddenly, she hadn’t, and had sent him away to a far-off moon, to watch a foreign planet’s turning.

Things fall apart.

Shara Bey, Poe Dameron’s mother, had been an ace pilot for the Rebellion, wayward friend of Luke Skywalker’s and among the most trusted officers under Leia Organa. Luke had even given the Damerons part of the old Force-sensitive tree that had once bloomed within the Jedi Temple on Coruscant, before the purge of Order 66. They had planted it in the garden beside their house on Yavin 4, by the lakeside. Ben could sometimes see it from beyond the academy windows, arcing its intricate branches to the sky as if to shatter the firmament, a million rain-clear pieces of sky falling down, down, down.

They hadn’t been good friends, he and Poe Dameron. Kylo would hazard to say that they had only been acquaintances. He had seen him occasionally during the semifrequent base tours his mother made as part of her senatorial duties; tours which, Kylo now appreciates, had never had so innocent a purpose. They were military brats each, Poe ebullient and charming where Ben was quiet and angry and tender. Even then, Poe had idolized Leia Organa; had tried many times to wriggle between the doors to her office or the windows to her sitting room. Many times he had attempted to talk to the General’s strange, heavy-eyed son. Ben would often try to ignore him, a thing which Poe’s personality did not naturally allow. And so they had talked, had sneak ed around the base smudge-faced with pilfered mess hall brownies, had argued over the merits of TIE-fighters versus X-wings.

A simple knowing. A trinket of easier times, necessarily pawned off when the costs of adulthood gave their dues.
But then Ben had been moved to Yavin 4, where his uncle’s academy was kept, and though this was Poe’s homeworld, Ben found that he saw him less. Less, because Poe was three years his senior, and the age difference had begun to show. Less, because Ben so often stayed within the Academy walls, waiting for a ship he was beginning to understand would never come.

He remembers the day they had met once again regardless, perched atop the Force tree in the Damerons’ garden: twenty feet above the ground, the empty air against their toes like the clear waters of infinitude. It was high noon, the sun too lofty for shadows; Poe eighteen and about to take his pilot’s exam, Ben fifteen and about to make his first lightsaber. They had argued then, as the hot perfume of Shara Bey’s honeysuckle rose vaporous around them, if any good thing could go on to be endless.

(— ‘Course it can, Ben. You and me, we’re gonna live forever. What was that thing your dad’s always saying? ‘Never tell me the odds’?

—What about it?

—Well, there you go. I say I’m gonna live forever, so that’s what I’ll do. Just me and my X-wing, up and up and up.)

And then they had argued, about if they would ever see each other again, if fate would be so benevolent or so cruel, and Ben had snarled that he hoped they never would. They would not be infinity. They could not be, so close to Luke’s impending absence, to Snoke’s final planned attack on the Academy. Ben Solo was to die cleanly, and Poe Dameron was not allowed to interfere, to remind him of his mother and father and uncle and future.

Leaving behind this life wasn’t supposed to hurt.

All right, then, Poe had said, and Ben had turned his face away from the broken gleam in Poe’s eye; the grim, trembling set of his jaw. See you around, Ben.

Poe had broken his ankle, bounding from the great height of the tree. He had wailed out in a sharp, mewling cry. Ben had pretended not to hear it, lingering above him from that incomprehensible altitude. Poe had been Ben Solo’s acquaintance, his nearly-not-quite-never friend. But Ben was very nearly not Ben Solo anymore.

The thought wasn’t supposed to leave Ben as breathless as it did. Like the moment of freefall after his fingers had slipped from a branch, when no reason for jumping could be justification enough and only with inevitable impact could come understanding.

But then he had adjusted his grip on the tree, and leapt. He could sense Poe’s presence as he made his way all the way back to the Academy, huddled on the ground, watching him go.

Just as Poe Dameron is watching him now.

Kylo can see the way Dameron’s tan fingers tighten just-so against the handrail, grasping for reasons Kylo cannot give him and would not even try. He remembers the way Poe had shrieked that day in the interrogation room, eyes unseeing and white as a blind man’s, and for a moment in the midst of his sightless cries Kylo had thought of branches holding up the sky, and broken ankles, and honeysuckle.

It did not matter if he could not tell if the images were his own. There was no way that Poe could recognize him in that dark room, when he could hardly recognize himself.

So he had thought.
His mother’s voice, sharp and ponderous as an avalanche, brings him back to the present.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” she says, clapping her hands together before resting them on the rail surrounding the hologram. She does not even look at Kylo as he shuffles forward, next to Rey and across from Poe by necessity of space. The eyes of every officer in the room are upon him, staring at his uncuffed wrists. Oh, he can clean up well. He can even polish his teeth.

With a small flourish, Leia points to the hologram in front of the officers, watching with dark, glittering eyes as the image swirls into a model of the Outer Rim. The sector illuminated in bright red is one that Kylo is cursorily, but not intimately, familiar with. He recalls vague whisperings of large amounts ore being mined in such a sector, so far out in the rim that it placed it nearly in the Unknown Regions.

“This is the confirmed location of the new Starkiller Base,” Leia says, and in her voice Kylo hears the echo of her homeworld, and of Han. He wonders if in his own voice, she will always hear the same thing. “The intelligence has been brought to us by several spies posted within the ranks of their new construction project. In theory, it is much like the previous Starkiller, though its shields cannot be breached even at light speed, as was successfully demonstrated with our” —her voice catches— “previous attempt.”

For a moment, Kylo feels his father’s presence beside him. When he reaches out, it is gone. Ghosts upon ghosts, here in the underground, trapped in the afterlife of memory.

“Have your spies bring down the shields, then,” Ackbar says.

Leia shakes her head.

“None of them are ranked high enough to do so without arousing suspicion, if it’s even possible. I’ve been told”—she turns to FN-2187, who smiles at her, and Kylo grinds his teeth—“That jobs are extremely regimented within the First Order, even more so than in a standard military. It may be impossible for our spies to step that out of line before it’s too late. Keep in mind that last time, the shields were only brought down through special coercion of a member of the Order’s top command structure. We may or may not be able count on such luck again.”

Leia’s eyes fall to Kylo’s then, heavy with accusatory knowing. Kylo locks his jaw, occupied in the act of staring impassively outward.

He knows why she’s brought him here to listen to this. He will not relent. That is a step too far, in a direction too unfathomable.

“And what’s their current target?”

Dameron’s voice, always so guileless. Kylo tries not to listen.

“We don’t know for certain,” Leia says, voice steady with calcified grief, righteous justice. Kylo tightens his grip along the handrail, knuckles blooming white, watching finally from the other side as the house wheel roulettes with the lives of millions. And the dealer always wins. “We suspect the Halla Sector. It seems that the intention is to pare down the systems surrounding the Core Worlds, then strike there.”

“But what’s the point? Why won’t they just attack us here?” Dameron cries out, slamming his fist against the hologram rail. The reverberation clangs through Kylo’s bones. “What’s there to kriffing rule if you’ve blown all your subjects to smithereens?”

Kylo’s voice rings out before he allows himself the shock of comprehending that he’s spoken. This
isn’t traitorous. This is fact. And the Resistance must be made to understand it.

“Because this is a strategic location, and the First Order wants these planets to themselves. So long as they believe they can win unimpeded even with your existence here, they will allow it,” Kylo says, voice hard. Each face in the room turns to him, a position he is not unused to. Every cell in his blood sings with a heritage of power, and he stands with his weight pressed against the rail, bloodred as a dawn breaking. “The First Order’s motive isn’t something so common as to rule. It wants to recreate. The New Republic failed to protect its people from chaos. And so the entire system has to be destroyed and rebuilt anew.”

He would go back to the First Order even at this very hour, even if the New Republic Senate somehow stopped being populated with sycophants and cowards, if it somehow could bring about the control that preceded peace. It is a terrifying thought that it is not the glory of the First Order or of himself that sustains this decision.

It’s that he simply has nowhere else he knows where to go.

“That’s still insane,” Dameron shoots back, feralness to the arc of his shoulders. Kylo has only seen such a look once before, when Poe had been strapped to the interrogation chair, desperate to protect those who couldn’t protect themselves. “What are you gonna recreate if there’s nothing there but empty space and asteroids? What about all those people, the ones who just had the rotten luck of being born in the wrong system? Just screw them, right?”

Kylo clenches his hands against the guardrail as Dameron’s sentence hits home, is home. It is not Yavin 4 on a clear spring day, the tulips in Shara Bey’s garden coming in thick like a lullabye. It is farther than that, back in a darkened room, where a boy born of pilots’ blood lies creeping in the hallway beside General Organa’s private office on a base now decommissioned, stopped by a crack of light in an opening doorway as the General’s son stares out at him, unamused.

Across the handrail, Dameron gives Kylo a look as though he cannot quite accept what he is seeing, and it is somehow worse to know that even Poe Dameron had expected better of him, that even children with foolish sky-dreams had looked at him once and pretended to see something functional and whole.

That was everyone’s first mistake.

“Casualties are unavoidable,” Kylo says, as though he has convinced himself.

Dameron bristles. Against the emerald shadows of the hologram, branches lace their way into the clouds, someone far below him squealing as their weight could not take their fall.

“No,” Dameron growls. He jabs a finger in the air, down towards his feet. “Some casualties are unavoidable, and I don’t even like saying that. But this? This isn’t one of them. This is murder, and you’re just gonna let it happen!”

Kylo’s grip clamps vice-like against the rail.

“What makes you think I have the power to stop anything?” Kylo shoots back. A lie. “I’ve been here for months, rotting in your damned prison cells! Any information of relevance I once had is long gone, because your incompetent leadership couldn’t be bothered to interrogate me!”

Dameron’s face blooms bright red, eyes manic. For a moment, Kylo fears that Dameron will leap over the rail, bursting through a hologram of planets with a fist clenched at Kylo’s face. Kylo wouldn’t have stopped him. Physical pain is always easier to staunch.
But Dameron is, in all ways, the son Kylo’s parents should have had and would have been proud of having, and so Dameron does neither of those things.

“I cannot believe you,” Dameron says. “After everything the General’s done for you, after everything the Council’s done for you to keep you from being shot down on the spot, how can you just stand there and spit on every single damn person who’s ever tried to help you—”

“—are we still talking about the possible destruction of the Halla Sector, Dameron, or have we moved on to venting your personal issues with me?”

Dameron’s jaw clenches shut. Kylo’s nostrils flare. The command room, once so crowded with personnel, shrinks to the width of a single afternoon.

His family have been too kind to him, in their bid to make him see. He has tried to tell them so. Once, he had wanted their softness, but he cannot accept it now. Time has cooled what once was warm, and he himself is no comfort, no gentleness.

(Perhaps he still does want, in the corners of a secret space where another name comes calling. He always wants.)

But Dameron now is not being kind. He is being honest, and Kylo cannot blame Dameron for himself as he can his mother, father, uncle. He cannot turn the frequency of accusation back at Dameron, cannot accuse him of not seeing or not hearing or not being there. And sometimes when the wind blows off the bomb field, he knows the essential hollowness of even this.

He can blame Dameron for jumping from that tree. If he stretches it, he can even blame him for the broken ankle. But he cannot blame him for being the one to walk away from something that was not friendship, and hadn’t ever been.

But none of this matters. Six months. He is nearly there.

“Dameron,” Leia’s voice finally barks. Poe’s neck snaps to look at her, flushed and properly chastised. “That’s enough.”

Poe bows his head. “My apologies, General.”

But the General is not done.

“And you,” she says, pinning Kylo with a stare half-maternal, half-military, and therefore everything Kylo has ever known about her wrapped up all at once. He is reminded against his will of the time he and Dameron had stolen into an X-wing hangar in the dead of night, to clamber about in the cockpits and pretend at being giants. But Leia had caught them, furious and incandescent in her worry. Poe had told him later that it felt like looking into the face of the sun. Privately, Ben had agreed. “I’ll speak with you in a moment.”

Kylo clenches his teeth. “Am I being dismissed?” he grits out, because this is his plan and he should want this. The Resistance must see the nature of what he really is, exposed on this bare floodplain of his potential and refusal. They know what must be done with him. He must lead them there, for he is a commander of men, and this, his final reckoning.

“Yes,” the General says, not unkindly. But they both know that his very presence is a distraction here, at this moment, and she cannot afford Poe Dameron’s focus simply in the hope that Kylo will suddenly buckle. “Wait outside.” She turns to her side, tilting her head towards her brother, flanked beside her with Admiral Ackbar between them. “Luke, go with him.”
“Of course,” he says, dipping his head.

The entire command watches them go.

“Walk with me,” Luke says, as soon as the door to the room has closed.

They walk without speaking, the hallway empty in its spilled sodium light. Luke’s face is entirely bereft of expression. Kylo doubts his is the same. They pass foreign doors and alien hallways; a door to a mess that Kylo has not yet seen. Luke walks sedately beside him, efficiently leading him across corners and hallways with such casual precision that soon Kylo realizes his intent. In his uncle’s grace and cruelty, he is directing their path so that they will not be seen.

The final door clicks open. They are standing in the midst of an open hangar.

At the smell of engine oil and metal, Kylo nearly vomits, staring out at the open expanse of tarmac before him. The space is empty, silvery-grey and spotted with grease, and it smells like the Falcon, like Kessel Runs, like Han.

He thinks it is only Luke’s hand grasping his elbow that keeps him from bolting straight out of the room.

“How did you bring me here?” Kylo says, voice gasping where he means for it to be hard-edged. He bites his lip until it bleeds for his frailty in this, as he is in all things.

The pressure of Luke’s fingers against his arm does not abate, though Luke does not answer. Instead, his uncle looks outwards, where a sliver of sunlight pours through the launch bay doors, pregnant with lazy late-autumn gold.

“You did well in there,” Luke says. It is not what Kylo wanted to hear. Luke’s hand falls away from Kylo’s shoulder, leaving a strange imprint of emptiness in its wake. “You kept your head.”

Kylo is wordless as the entire world shifts on its axis. He does not speak. Far up and away, the X-wings spiraling their drill maneuvers murmur like a chant.

Luke clears his throat again.

“I don’t think you can blame Dameron for acting as he did,” Luke says, threading his hands behind his back. He turns a quarter-circle towards Kylo, facing him on the diagonal. The harsh light of the hangar casts his face in a frieze of wrinkles, long-settled despair he can make peace with but cannot hide. “You hurt him.”


For the map to you are the words he does not speak, yet somehow says. He knows by the quiet shame in Luke’s eyes that Luke has heard him. For a brief second, Kylo indulges in the thought that Luke understands what it means to watch the sky crumble under the weight of all your manifold intentions.

“You were his friend,” Luke says.

“I was not,” Kylo answers, and takes a deep, savage breath. Beneath him, a tree branch is breaking.

“Poe seems to think so. He blamed himself, after you…left.” Something within Kylo stutters to
watch his uncle pause so, the specters of children in his view. Sometimes, Kylo can hear them calling 
too. Never to him. Never ever to him. “He said that you two had gotten into an argument the last 
time you’d talked, and that you’d been agitated, more than usual. Like something was bothering you. 
But he knew that you’d never say anything to him if he forced you to talk, so he didn’t push.”

(—So who talks first? You talk first?)

“He’s a fool,” Kylo says. The hangar lights scatter spots of tarnished brilliance across his vision. “He 
couldn’t have stopped me any more than you could have.”

When Luke’s hand reaches out to grab Kylo’s arm this time, Kylo suspects it is not so that Luke can 
steady him, but so that Luke can steady himself.

“We’re all a web, Ben,” Luke says, and Kylo sees it, sees not the island but the meadow in the midst 
of the Academy training fields, where Luke’s voice had wafted soft as summer across tales of daring 
and device. “We hold each other up. And sometimes, when someone lets go…we fall.”

“You cannot be serious,” Kylo says. Anger surges through his throat. “None of it is my fault now? 
After everything?”

And this is what he wanted, he thinks, so many months and moons ago. He had wanted Luke 
Skywalker to bleed for what he had failed to do for him. He had wanted Leia Organa to cry, because 
You’re a good boy, Ben, I believe that was no medicine for the sicknesses of her long absences when 
she left him to fight the monsters on his own.

He thinks of his uncle, stealing into his cell after hours simply to sit with him in the quiet late-night 
starlight, saying nothing because nothing needed to be said. He thinks of his mother, fighting for him 
even when he cannot see her, because every fought-for sugar ration pushed under his cell door is a 
love letter to a child she still somehow thinks exists in him.

He wants to rip the both of them apart. He wants to destroy them as he had once promised to. And 
then, he wants to wail out that five-letter word that he thinks none of them will ever hear from him 
before he is executed. The execution has to be enough.

“It’s everyone’s,” Luke almost whispers. “We’re all responsible for each other. That’s why we must 
all be kind.”

“I can’t be kind,” Kylo says, and breathes. He can almost hear the echo settle gently on the floor. “I 
was never capable.”

Luke’s eyes flit up to Kylo’s then, soft and blinding as the distant lightning of revelation. “Is that 
why you think you fell, Ben? Because you couldn’t be kind?”

“You make it sound so simple,” Kylo says, bitterness instead of hatred, and that is something he will 
not analyze.

“I never said it was.” Luke sighs, expression fine and feathery as a bird taking flight. “You’re an 
idealist, just like us, though I know you like to deny it. Ever since you were a child, you’d always 
felt—more, than everyone around you. You loved more. Dreamed for more. Had a prickly, open 
heart.” Luke chuckles. Kylo’s whole world shakes with it. “And when people failed you, when the 
world failed you, for not being what you knew it could—because we were always going to fail you, 
and I wish I could say that sometime in the future I never will again— it hurt more for you. Was 
nearly unbearable. And so you called it weakness.”

“No,” Luke says. In this moment, Kylo sees him as Vader must once have, standing by the illumination of the light with which he refused to take his father’s life. And in this, Kylo has already failed. But Luke’s foolish optimism is a temptation and a sin far beyond the pull of any side of the Force. Kylo hates how for entire seconds at a time, Luke can make him hope, too. “It’s a gift. The Jedi were right in many things, but they were wrong in this. Passion can end worlds. But it can also save them. And I’m sorry for every moment I or any of my Padawan teachings let you think that your softness was your enemy. Anakin Skywalker’s love for his wife is what brought him to his knees. But it was also love that stayed my own hand, that gave Vader a second chance to do right by his children, when he thought even his very name was lost to him.”

“And then Vader died,” Kylo says coldly, watching Luke’s grip falter as the imagery of an execution hits where he knew it would. After everything, he still knows well how to hurt the only people who care.

“Yes, he did,” Luke says, as the sky filled with flight rumbles about them. “And then Anakin Skywalker came home.”

Chapter End Notes

SORRY FOR ANOTHER UNGODLY WAIT MY LOVELIES. (At least it wasn't a month? Eh? Eh?) I'm trying my hardest not to make this a habit. I was on a cruise last week, which I blame for my lack of any and all productivity.

The beginning author's note quote is provided, as mentioned, from The Road, which is a really depressingly beautiful book that I finished rather recently and whose quote I could not leave alone. I definitely recommend it if you haven't read it. The writing style is a little idiosyncratic but McCarthy's imagery is to die for.

Once again, I'm so in love with all of you and the wonderful comments/replies you guys provide. These are some grade-A discussions with some grade-A people. Thanks again for every comment, kudo, view, &c &c; you know the drill!
here is the deepest secret nobody knows
(here is the root of the root and the bud of the bud
and the sky of the sky of a tree called life;which grows
higher than soul can hope or mind can hide)
and this is the wonder that’s keeping the stars apart

i carry your heart(i carry it in my heart)

—e. e. cummings, [i carry your heart with me (i carry it in]

See the end of the chapter for more notes

xxii.

Luke and Kylo sit together on a bench propped against the far wall of the hangar, little else to do but wait until Leia calls them back. Luke has always had a preternaturally close mental connection with his twin sister, born with her as he was beneath the same ribbed sky. But he had never been within her as Kylo had; had never been carried just below her heart, to know her as his own native soil.

But Kylo is a passing traveler now, fatherless without fatherland, expatriate of his mother’s cause and kingdom. A presence settles in his chest at the notion. Kylo twines his fingers in silence, trying to figure out its shape. If not to tame it, then to know the nature of the thing which is to kill him.

Kylo wonders then who will hear Leia first, and if in the end, the answer will mean anything at all.

A faint rustling sounds beside him, skin against sackcloth, but Kylo pays his uncle’s rummagings no mind. If the both of them were to angle their legs outwards, their knees would touch.

“Hungry?” Luke’s voice says, coming drowsy and dreamlike through the drone of the X-wings above.

Luke extends his hand out to Kylo, something caught in the palm of his hand. Kylo blinks, remembering himself.

“No,” he says, “I’m not.”

From across the bench, Luke looks at him knowingly, and it is like peering through a spyglass from its reverse end, making distant what ought to be close. Slowly, Luke unfolds his fingers to reveal a palmful of dark berries. The deep violet color dapples shadows in the thicket of Kylo’s reminiscence.

“Candleberries,” Kylo says, then falls silent at how he had accidentally spoken so longingly, and so soft. He isn’t meant for that any more, unfit for those Padawan memories of tossing berries like these up in the courtyard air under the pretense of practicing Force control, plucking them with his teeth from where they hovered overhead in a stormcloud of ripe, syrupy stars.
“Mm,” Luke hums, holding the handful out to Kylo once more. When Kylo does not respond, Luke plucks a particularly fat one between thumb and forefinger of his mechanical hand, making to toss it at his nephew. “Catch.”

“I can’t,” Kylo says flatly, tugging up his sleeve in a now-familiar gesture of teeth-bared helplessness. He had enjoyed, once, watching his mother’s eyes grow heavy at the constellated sight; so many needled scars, absolute white against the blood-flush of his skin. Now there is only the soreness of the wounds against the press of his sleeve’s rough cloth; the weight of Luke’s sad eyes. He doesn’t need to bare his teeth to show them his true nature, anymore.

There’s only one last thing he has to do.

From his seat across the bench from Kylo, Luke looks on at him, oblivious.

“You don’t need the Force to catch berries, you know,” his uncle says, and heaves one in the air, catching it perfectly between his teeth. Kylo watches his uncle’s mouth stain red.

The forests of Yavin 4 were often thick with candleberry bushes. His uncle had frequently taken his Padawans into the forests beyond the Academy limits, until every child under his care could identify each medicinal herb and hidden root vegetable on that moon, every fruit and fungi. Kylo had never had the patience for it himself. But what he remembers more than that is sitting in the yard with his uncle in the spaces between meditation and sparring practice, tossing berries between them under the pretext of practicing reflex.

“There’s one ship missing here,” Luke says after a pause. Kylo doesn’t respond, clenching his hands against the underside of the bench for lack of anything else to grip. The pull of his tendons straining against flesh is almost enough to distract him from the open-endedness of Luke’s statement. For as long as Kylo can remember, his uncle had always been like that. It had driven him mad, as a Padawan, the way Luke’s sentences seemed to always be tests for which he had not prepared and was undoubtedly failing.

“There seems to be several,” Kylo deadpans. A puddle of oil scintillates against the tarmac.

From the corner of his eye, he can see Luke looking askance, expression at once wistful and mourning.

“Chewie has it,” Luke says, tapping a finger against the metal of their shared bench. Kylo feels the decisive ping like a blaster-bolt through bone. “He left, a short while ago. To see his family, on Kashyyyk.”

At the mention of Chewbacca, Kylo’s side burns.

“I thought you’d given it to Rey,” Kylo snaps, digging his palms ever-deeper into the seam of the underside of the bench. He presses the heels of his boots into the duracrete tarmac, bracing for the impact of his graceless bitterness.

It ought not to matter to him how easily Rey had occupied the empty place in his family’s life where a foolish child-shaped absence once had been: his grandfather’s saber, his father’s ship, his uncle’s tutelage, his mother’s affection—all to her, as if it had never belonged anywhere else. It shouldn’t matter to him either how easily Dameron and FN-2187 have won his mother’s right-hand trust.

(It doesn’t matter, it doesn’t, it doesn’t, it doesn’t—)

(—It can’t.)
He has not kept the time in anything other than hours since his capture. He imagines, in a flicker of emotionless clarity, that this was likely the intention. But it cannot be long now.

He wonders briefly what name will be written on his gravestone, when they bury him: if they bury him, if they don’t crucify his body first or shoot him still-living out of an airlock, his death projected across the holonets with General Organa’s solemn words of approval, while his mother mourns in private—maybe.

He wonders briefly why the answer to this question suddenly bothers him.

“Rey?” Luke muses, as though the thought had only just occurred to him. Kylo had half-forgotten that Luke had been there at all. “No, she doesn’t have the Falcon. She has her own flyer. The Condor.”

Kylo grits his teeth even as he exhales.

“She didn’t want it? I would have assumed…”

His voice trails off, unfinished. He isn’t sure what he assumes anymore.

Luke takes a deep breath, juice-stained fingers inscribing an invisible coda on the bench. Even so, his touch is unmarked upon the metal.

“Leia offered it to her, after she returned with me to D’Qar. She flew it to find me mostly because there was no other choice on such short notice, but...I don’t think she ever saw it as her own.” He draws a deep breath. It is as if the fields beyond the tarmac all bow to the weight of his sorrow at once. “It’s still Han’s, I think. To everyone. All of us, we all need more time.”

And all there is now is time, now that Han Solo is dead.

“In any case,” Kylo says, quietly, though there is nothing in the universe that might matter more. “I’m sure it went to the Wookie anyway.”

Luke’s throat rattles in a quiet, doubtful murmur. “There’s no way of knowing,” he says, then pauses, blue-veined hands closing around the hasp of his cloak. “Your father never left a will.”

No, he wouldn’t have expected Han Solo to. Han Solo did not do things as pedestrian as die, and did not plan for such things either.

Even now, after he had, Han Solo still could not quite manage it properly.

“Then just ask him,” Kylo says, voice so thin-sharp that he dares not see what a single impact might do to its blade. “The old man is still certainly around enough.”

At that, Luke smiles; a bittersweet, crescent-moon of a thing. “We did. He left it with Chewie, for the time being. But Chewie said that he didn’t want to keep it. Not without Han.”

There are other people who had loved Han, Kylo remembers now. Even now, it is so hard to imagine, despite the shudder in his mother’s mouth on nights when the stars are strewn thick and gaudy, the tic in his uncle’s fingers as he primes a ship that is not the Falcon for launch.

He thinks of Rey, absurdly, the way her face had twisted in unspeakable anguish as he had pushed Han Solo’s body from the bridge, the strange shrilling of grief that had come from FN-2187, and cannot imagine why.
But none were flesh of Han Solo’s flesh. Not like he is. Not like he was. It was the only thing that made the ritual sacred, elevated it beyond mere murder into sacrifice, into duty.

Kylo wonders now who told him that, and why he had ever quite believed it.

“He’ll come back,” Luke says, voice distant and overwhelmingly present all at once. Kylo cannot tell if it is meant to be a comfort. For a moment, Kylo imagines that Luke is talking about Han Solo, until he realizes that he’s referring to the Wookie.

Kylo can only hope that he’ll be gone before the Wookie does.

xxiii.

The General is alone in the command room when she calls Kylo in, a good two hours after she had originally dismissed him. The ripening afternoon light chases long shadows against Kylo’s feet in the hangar as Luke leads him away, back through the labyrinthine tunnels of a base Kylo tries his hardest not to memorize.

“Leave us,” she tells Luke after Kylo is brought in, and Luke obediently bobs his head in farewell before slipping out the door. Kylo finds himself shuddering, though the air is so mild he cannot feel it at all.

Leia says nothing to him as he enters. He can see her, still perched around the circular rail in the middle of the room, encircled holoprojector now disengaged, her fingers clenched around the maple finish in a just-so clinch of predatory claws. Only the backlight of the surrounding intelligence consoles, placed around the perimeter of the space, illuminate her. She is foreign in the half-shadow.

It’s enough to make Kylo pause.

“I said come in,” she says, though she hadn’t said so previously, and both she and Kylo knows this is so. But it is an off-cut stone in a mosaic of small discomforts— the lights dimmed low, the room abandoned, the single, military-shorn silhouette of one woman in the distance— set expertly into place.

Suddenly Kylo wonders if he would not be misplaced in calling this an interrogation.

Leia leads him to a small table with a curt flick of her chin, the desk hastily, it seemed, cleared of documents and flimsiplats.

There is only one chair.

Kylo knows precisely how this will go. It had been his specialty, in the First Order, once upon a time.

“Sit,” Leia says, as Kylo knew she would. A coldness lingers in the flinty way her eyes gleam in the murk, the now sudden implacable set of her jaw against teeth. Kylo finds himself obeying by the weight of her presence alone. The thought burns, bright enough to draw blood, that she had persuaded him with a mind trick to comply. The mental, and more crucially, the subtle, had always been his mother’s Force specialty. But her face as he looks up at it is marble-smoothed and suddenly frightfully impassive, hair braided without a single strand out of place in a wrought crown of solid iron.
He knows without a doubt that no mind trick was needed, here.

“I know that you’re hiding something,” Leia says, voice ringing with certainty. A distant part of Kylo notes shrewdly that she has not taken a seat herself, has instead remained standing, hands propped palms-down on the table to vault herself slightly higher than her natural height. The set-up of this makeshift scene is remarkably similar in its bare bones to those of his own previous interrogations. Kylo knew what the Resistance and First Order alike thought of his methods— that it was nothing more than mental brute force, pounding down the doors of the unconscious until whatever was desired could be scooped out of the skull with a pawed hand.

They were wrong.

There was an art. There was a process.

Across from him, Leia’s presence looms ten feet tall.

“And what makes you think I do?” Kylo answers, voice carefully levelled, though he knows this is not allowed. He is sitting in the chair. He does not ask the questions. If this had been his own interrogation, his victim would already be writhing against that cold metal pallet for such a presumption.

But because this is General Leia Organa, she merely meets his even gaze, and answers.

“Because I know you. Better than you think I do.”

Many months ago he would have tried to deny this. Kylo is not quite so foolish now.

Everyone, it seems, knows him better than he has ever known himself.

“Oh?” Kylo says, spine straightening. Even sitting, he matches Leia’s standing height almost exactly. “Do tell.”

This does nothing to shift the equilibrium of the room.

“You’re not asking the questions,” Leia says, voice thrumming with barely-constrained power. Even so, there is no Force trick.

This is purely her.

“And you’re not getting the answers,” Kylo bites back. He slaps his own hands upon the table from where he’d had them in his lap, an echoic, deafening bang. Leia does not flinch.

She has never, he thinks distantly, flinched from him.

“I saw your expression,” Leia says finally, though not so much from relenting as it is a fighter moving subtly back before hurting the dealing punch. Kylo presses his hands against the table, his own pulse beating against the lacquer. A swipe of hot condensation gleams on the surface from where he’d shifted his fingers before, smeared there from the heat of his hands. “You’re a terrible liar, Ben. You always have been. Except when it comes to yourself.”

Kylo bites his tongue, wishing for his mask, wishing for his cloaks, wishing for his lightsaber that bit and sparked and snapped. Anything to couch the blow of the General of the Resistance finally treating her top prisoner as she always should have had, instead of with those despairing, tender glances, meant not to draw blood but because he was of her blood.
Has she given up on me? he had asked his father once in a ‘fresher on board the Finalizer, growl lost somewhere between the sweat and steam.

—Not a chance, kid, his father had answered.

But now, it seems, she had.

Kylo takes a steadying breath, and feels no victory at all.

Leia continues.

"What you told Dameron was right. We never questioned you, after you came. Half of the base wanted you strung up and tortured until you said something useful, but Luke and I made them back off. You were so indoctrinated when you came, Ben, that it could hardly be argued that you were in your right mind. We were the ones who pled for a six-month sentence, to give you enough time to recover, if only for that.” Her next words are soft, quiet as a kill shot. “But it seems we can’t afford that anymore.”

“I know nothing,” Kylo bites back, and this is true. Nothing that he knows or once knew matters now. If it ever did.

Except for the one fact he knows she’s trying to pull from him. He’ll die, before he lets her get it.

This has been, in fact, his plan.

“I don’t believe that for a moment,” Leia says sharply. Kylo nearly flinches at the familiarity of the tone, pedestrian as if she were chastising him for breaking another vase, mouthing off against another tutor, glowering at another politician. But there is no long-suffering softness to accompany the words, no Just don’t do that next time, Ben matched with a hand smoothing the scowl from his face.

There is no next time, and both of them know it.

“Even if I did have the information, you won’t get it from me,” Kylo says, pressing his weight against his forearms, leaning in closely. Leia doesn’t mimic his movement. She remains precisely where she is, imperious as a temple.

Kylo supposes that he cannot be entirely certain of the General’s success, should she choose to use force against him. Leia, though strong in the Force, is still, has always been, untrained. Kylo’s mental shields are too good for her to penetrate with any improvised mind probes of her own devising. He’d lived under Snoke far too long for less.

“You haven’t even been gone from the First Order for six months,” Leia says. Behind her, a console light blinks, like a pulsar. “The Death Star alone took years to construct. As did its successor. As did Starkiller. You cannot tell me that you knew nothing of this. Just as you wouldn’t dare tell me that you have nothing of value to give us that might save billions of lives.”

And, as a matter of fact, he does.

He thinks, in this moment, that General Leia Organa has grossly overestimated him. He had never formally served as part of the First Order’s military. He had been outside it, the personal enactor of Snoke’s will, made to cut through the Order’s hierarchical bureaucracy to whatever end his master desired. Though his rank was equivalent to that of a General, though he fought often on raids the Supreme Leader deemed too important to lose, he was not a General, and was not —most importantly, or maybe it didn’t matter at all— responsible for either Starkiller’s construction.
He had been there for the officer meetings, when Hux had prattled on endlessly about ore imports, sector security, blueprints and projected dates, but none of that was anything more than a particularly well-placed spy could have provided.

What mattered was the stray thought he had picked up from Hux, on a day when Kylo had wanted nothing more than to tear into the General’s brain and destroy it from the inside. He had just barely refrained, spurred mostly by the fantastic pain he knew Snoke would inflict had Kylo dispatched of the Supreme Leader’s prime general. But not before he had plucked away the single thought Hux had been entertaining at the time.

The codes for the new Starkiller’s energy shields.

Leia’s gaze is resolute before him.

Then, Kylo hedges farther, and everything falls apart.

“You’ll have to kill me first.”

Leia’s eyes blow wide. It is like watching a universe explode, beginning and ending in a single blink. Replacing it is a luminous anger so bright that even the veins in her temple are chained with stars.

“I see now,” the General says in sudden epiphany. Her voice is beyond emotion. It is pure Light, so blinding it can only be seen in the afterimage, so white-hot that it is the coldest thing Kylo has ever felt. Never before had he been afraid of the Light. He had thought it weak, a neutered version of the Dark in all its power.

He was wrong.

“You would doom an entire sector to death all to fulfill your guilty crusade, is that it? Enable something this atrocious and you’re guaranteed the shooting squad?” the General continues. Not a question, despite its shape, but a statement; the certainty of a steel trap clapping closed. “You might deserve, death, Ben” —and Kylo realizes that he had never been heartless, no, had only left his heart with his mother, and now not even she can bear to spare the space within her for such a misshapen, foolish thing— “But those people don’t.”

“I can’t,” Kylo says, and rises, full height in all its coiled muscle and delirious suppressant-sickness. He cannot betray the First Order so. He might have once destroyed his life, but never with this level of precision, never with this depth of clarity.

It is as Rey had once said, when she had stolen into his mind and found the truth of all his truths, the certainty of all his certainties.

He isn’t strong enough.

Leia looks at him for a single breath. In it, Kylo watches whole galaxies live and die.

“I have never been more disgusted with you,” the General says, voice scalding to the touch, and her gaze, when it reaches him, is of a complete stranger’s. He is perfectly Kylo Ren in this moment. No one’s son, no one’s nephew, no one’s prodigal anything, and no one is here to tell him he is beloved or hoped upon—the love and hope he had spat upon, and now in its absence he is nothing. “Get out of my sight.”

On some unseen cue, Luke Skywalker comes to lead him away. Kylo Ren does not put up a single fight.
He does not sleep that night. Or any of the nights thereafter.

“Ben, look—” says Han Solo’s ghost, that night and every night since.

But Ben Solo isn’t here. He had been, Kylo knows now (too late, too late, everything always too late), closer than Kylo had ever realized. But not any more.

As if in answer to his life-long prayer, the prisoner’s final request and solace, Kylo Ren feels nothing at all.

“Leave me,” he says to Han Solo.

Han Solo does.

And Kylo Ren is left completely alone.

Luke Skywalker does not come to see him anymore. His training has been postponed; not, as Kylo Ren discovers, because of Luke Skywalker, but on direct orders from General Organa.

No one is allowed to see anymore. He is not permitted to leave his cell.

He sits on the couch in the corner of the room, watching the clouds scud across their great emptiness, and reopens the old wound on his thumb to bleed.

On Day 17 of his isolation (for he has counted, one mark for every day scraped with a raw nail into the duracrete brick of his walls, and he thinks that this is the first in a long while that he has not thought of Rey in bitterness, but sickening solidarity), General Leia Organa herself comes to fetch him.

“Get up,” she orders, still emotionless, still impersonal, from where she has found Kylo sprawled, breathing shallowly, on the couch. He winces at the shatterglass-sharpness of her voice. It is very close now. The end of everything.

“Get. Up.” General Organa booms again, stomping over to his nest of thin blankets with a booted plod. He grits his eyes shut, trying to block out the noise. There is no strength in this pain. There is only pain, true pain, unadulterated and raw as his body is drugged and shut down. Kylo wonders why he had ever worshipped at its altar.

Kylo tries to speak; finds he cannot. A flicker of incomprehensible meaning may or may not have passed across the General’s whipcord-set expression. At this point Kylo is sure of very little of his senses.

One of her hands shoots out as she stands above him, pulling back with Kylo’s wrist manacled in her grasp like a war prize. Even now Kylo thinks she is gripping him more securely than she is suffocatingly, but the distinction makes no difference to his overexposed nerves.

He groans, biting back an uglier scream.

“It’s time,” the General says simply. Kylo’s stomach drops in an emotion without name before she has the sense to clarify. “We’ve received reports that the second Starkiller is online.”
She pulls on his arm, not torturously but steadily, enough to brand her intent and the inescapability of its fulfillment. Kylo pulls himself to a sitting position, slept-in clothes rumpled, disheveled hair fanning into his eyes. It has grown well past both his shoulders and his sense of propriety now, enough to pull into a ponytail if he were so inclined, or had enough string to tie it up with.

He doubts he’ll get that much. The Resistance wouldn’t want to come in on the day of his execution to find that he’s hanged himself.

“You have one more chance,” the General says, quietly, impossibly steady. He can see Alderaan in her eyes.

Kylo takes a deep breath, meeting her gaze dead-on.

“No,” he says, voice just as low. Equally irrevocable.

The General’s face grows completely void.

“Then you’re going to watch,” she says. “You’re going to come to the command room with me to watch the murder of fourteen-point-five billion people. And you’re going to know, as every single one of those lives goes out, that had it not been for your own selfishness, you might have stopped it.”

Kylo cannot stand. He cannot breathe. A thousand Hosnian Systems shimmer and explode before him, each his own Alderaan, his own sin, the same woman furious and trembling at the end of it all.

Perhaps he is like Darth Vader, at long last.

“Get moving,” the General says.

He does.

(interlude).

The command room is packed with personnel when the General makes her way to the door. Kylo hardly notices it, enraptured in the act of breathing, of forcing each leg to move forward and back at the appropriate timing, near-impossible calculations now that the potentiasuppressant has begun to ravage fully. He presses his hand out to prop himself against the doorway as they reach the threshold. The General tugs him inside. He stumbles. Again, her face twitches in its impossible way, and again Kylo Ren cannot divine it. Does not attempt to.

She leads him to the central ring surrounding the holoprojector. In an alternate universe untinged with the molten-lead kaleidoscopics of potentiasuppressant, he might have felt shame at how he fell upon rather than walked up to the railing. As he is, he can only gasp and grip. He can make out Luke Skywalker’s wan face through the haze; Colonel Mikshmi, Admiral Ackbar, Lieutenant Connix, Admiral Statura. More people, whose names he would not know even had the circumstances been clearer, whose faces he is unlikely even now to forget.

He’d always had a knack for that, remembering faces. He cannot say it’s served him well.

Absent, he notices, are Rey, Poe Dameron, and FN-2187.

The answer for why comes a moment later, their voices crackling the audio feed as the entire
command room listens for an update on their pilots.

Kylo turns his bleary attention to the hologram before him, a firework of fluttering red dots moving over a sphere of green. The pilots, he can only surmise, flying above the second Starkiller.

“We’ve been unable to pierce the shields,” the General says, voice low, just for him, only for him. Kylo watches as one red dot flares out of existence on the holo. Then two. Then three. An entire fleet disappears in the span of two heartbeats. Kylo wonders if the General’s poignant comment was intentional; if she knows about the specifics of the information he is hoarding, if it’s only a pointed guess. If it matters, at this point. If anything does.

“Black and Red Squadrons have been trying to manually pierce the shields for an hour now,” the General continues. Her attention snaps to Admiral Ackbar. “How many men have we lost?”

“Forty ships, General,” comes the response.

Kylo tightens his hold on the projection rail, breathing in, breathing out.

“General!” comes Poe Dameron’s voice, popping over the audio feed. Beyond the holoprojector’s cocoon of light prowls a nothingness that is almost physical. Kylo clinches his eyes shut. Instead of sightlessness comes an unbearable acuity. Leia Organa’s heart pumping beside him. The cold chill of a bead of sweat plashing to the floor. “The ship’s gettin’ some real hot readings out here. Looks like the atmosphere’s heating up. I think…” A beat. A breath. The rail is slick where Kylo clinches his fists around it. “I think they’re getting ready to fire.”

Kylo opens his eyes, chances a look at General Leia Organa. She is incomprehensible in this moment, not woman but icon, surviving saint. No human could survive losing so much.

And yet.

She will survive after this, as she did after Alderaan, and the Hosnian System after that. Kylo is sure of it. It is like asking if the sun will rise.

Somehow, this does nothing to ease the burning in his chest.

“General, I’m starting to worry,” comes Poe’s voice, disjointed and disembodied, the way it did on the day Kylo had left him by the Force tree, clutching his broken ankle, his voice more and more distorted the farther Kylo had forced himself away. Kylo grits his teeth and tries to ride the pain, listening to each voice that comes with almost religious attention, sieving away everything else into darkness.

“What do you mean, Dameron?” The General’s voice. Tight. Controlled. Infinitely concerned with this single life.

“Well, y’see, General, it’s just that I don’t have anything interesting to give out at my funeral. ‘cept the lifetime supply of caramels I won in that contest once, ‘spose you could give those out to everyone at the wake—”

“Stop kidding around, Dameron.” The pain lessens, for a fraction, at the General’s voice. Kylo heaves a breath, feels a droplet of sweat track down the slant of his chin.

“I’m not. It’s—” Poe goes silent for a moment. To collect himself, perhaps. Or maybe there’s simply nothing to say. “It’s not looking good.”

“How long do you say?”
“I’d give it—I’d give it maybe three minutes. At the most.” Another pause, pregnant with awestruck wonder; even here, at the end of the world. "The sun’s almost gone.”

At every word, more red dots fall.

Beside him, the General’s spine straightens. “Then we’ve got three minutes to do this right. Make it count, Dameron. And remember what you told us last time.”

A rare laugh, breathy and threadbare. “Yes, ma’am.”

The audio cuts out.

What had Poe Dameron said, in the skies above the first Starkiller base, as Kylo had lain below, blood crusted in the ice and sleet? A simple, primal part of Kylo had wanted to die there. An even more instinctual self had simply wanted to follow Han Solo home.

And then Kylo hears it, soft as a whisper on the snow.

"As long as there’s light, we’ve got a chance.”

He looks up. The General is looking at him and through him, as if he is the sum of all her chances, as if he is her only, last, and greatest hope. Her lips are barely parted from where she had been speaking.

“Looks like we’re not gettin’ past the shields,” Dameron’s voice. Cracking now. “I’d give it about two minutes!”


Kylo takes a deep breath, closing his eyes once more. Locks his knees, to keep his whole body from falling.

The General is frozen before him, single hair undone. And it is everything undone, as he stands there, as he falls, a thousand well-meaning touches, a thousand nights of her and only her as his comfort and his touchstone beneath the deaf-mute stars.

Han Solo. Watching, waiting. The moment of decision that ought to have lasted forever.

—I know what I have to do, but I don’t know if I have the strength to do it.

The Hosnian System, in all its horrifying glory. His mother, sitting at the windowsill, face absent, reflection blank. A single hand, pressed to the glass, as she studies her own fingerprints left there. Wading, through the white space as she sometimes did, when a melody played too softly, when a lakeside breeze brushed just right, and reminded her of Alderaan.

His mother. His uncle. His father. And anyone who had ever cared, in their small touches, their small ways. Maz, goggled eyes peering into his, holding his chin as his lip trembled in fear of what she would see there, telling him not to be afraid. Lando, clapping his hand on his shoulder, laughing as they popped clay pigeons in the backyard with a pair of old blasters, his father waist-deep in another ship repair. Chewie, warbling in his strangely even-tempered way, every time he won at Dejarik. Rey even, incandescent on the first Starkiller, her courage as she spared his life when everything in her called her to kill him.

Forgive me.
Forgive me.

Forgive me—

“One minute!”

“Echo-echo-alpha-delta-nine-nine-five!” he chokes out. “Echo-echo-alpha-delta-nine-nine-five!”

For a moment, the only sound in that small, close room is the clicking of anonymous console keys as the Starkiller shield code is transmitted to all rebels who are there to listen. The silence is so thick that he can hear his own heart beating.

But he doesn’t have one, he remembers. He had given it away for safekeeping— when the voice had come, when it had made him cut it out. And then he had, and then he had lied, had said that he’d buried it where he could not recall its resting place.

With a cry, he falls to his knees.

With a cry, someone follows him there.

And Leia Organa is holding him, arms firm and soft and shivering, as he loses all sense of anything but her.

“Mom—”

And he can feel his mother, burying her face into his back; the gentle, wet warmth of her cheeks, the tremulous murmur of her fingers. She cinches them around his waist, pulling him close.

Tight enough to never lose him again.

And he is ten years old again, sweating off the edge of another nightmare, not knowing where his voice ended and the other one began.

Look at me, then, his mother had said to him then, many times before and many times since. I’m real. I’m here.

(I’m real. I’m here.)

“You have to let them kill me,” he whispers. “Please. Please let them.”

(In the background, the audio feed cheers. Someone is shouting.

Time to go home, boys.)

An animal cry sounds from his mother’s throat. She pulls herself around to face him, eyes red-rimmed and gleaming. His own face, wan and wild-curled, reflects silver in her pupils, and he nearly does not recognize himself.

“My baby.” She slides her hands atop his, until he flips them, enormous palms engulfing hers up to the pulse point. “My baby,” she repeats. “You're home. And I am never sending you away again.”

He keens, low and sharp, as an ancient beast is fed at last, and satisfied.

“You can’t,” he says again, leaning down half in supplication, half so that he can reach her. His mother raises herself to meet him, pressing her forehead against his. “You know what I’ve done. You’ve said it yourself. And even if you could change it, I—” he pauses, inhales, collects a ragged
breath. “I want to go, Mom.” A whisper, now. “Please, just let me go.”

He feels, rather than sees, the fierce shake of his mother’s head.

“No,” she says, voice sure. Her eyes flicker up with him, warm as a sunrise, as every sunrise, on every possible world. “I won't let you.”

“I—"

“Do you know how long it’s been?” she says instead. Her hands shift where he still holds them, eclipsed in his grip. “How many days you’ve been in custody?”

“Six months, now,” he says, voice muted through tears and bile, and Leia shakes her head again.

“Six months and six days,” she answers. He blinks. The world trembles. Or perhaps it’s just him, moving the whole earth with him. “The council extended it. To just after the Starkiller fired, whenever that might be. We knew it would be soon, that we needed your help. We’d hoped that you might.”

“I almost didn’t. The last minute. The very last minute.”

Leia looks at him, smile watery. “You’re just like your father, sometimes,” she says, pulling her hand from his grip to stroke at his face, setting a wild, dark curl into place from where it had fallen. "But he always came through, in the end. Every time."

He isn’t like his father, he thinks. Not in any way that matters. He could never be so ultimately selfless in his final act, but he does not tell his mother so. Lets her think, lets her dream. He is, and has long been, nearly empty of all but these smallest kindnesses, and now, even as he lives, he thinks it might be killing him.

His mother stills suddenly, eyes abruptly wide, as if reminded of something vital.

“Ben?”

She says the name quietly, uncommonly uncertain even as she speaks it. She had never once hesitated, for all these months, for all these moments. Immediately, he understands. She’s giving him what he had always wanted, all of those years ago.

A choice.

There’s a stray lock of hair, feathering up in a wisp behind her ear. He raises his hand to her face, tucking it away, letting his touch linger there and all his soundless words besides.

“I’m here, Mom. I’m here,” says Ben.

Chapter End Notes

Finally, Ben. For f--k’s sake. Only took you 70,000 (!!!) words.

Opening poem, obviously, is [i carry your heart with me (i carry it in] by e. e. cummings, although it’s just the last stanza. Typically not the biggest fan of Cummings, but we all have exceptions.
"You know that thing Julian used to say," said Francis.

"Which thing?"

"About a Hindu saint being able to slay a thousand on the battlefield and it not being a sin unless he felt remorse."

I had heard Julian say this, but had never understood what he meant.

—Donna Tartt, The Secret History

See the end of the chapter for more notes

xxiv.

He awakens to a room colored entirely in absence.

There is no sound but the thin keening of a single, shrill note; no sensation but a single solar-flare of pain.

His entire body is burning.

He screams, flinging his body forwards, only to find that he cannot move either.

A hand clamps around his mouth. He shrieks louder, the offending palm sparrow-thin and tasting of metal. The fingers shove down harder as he thrashes against his restraints, nose smashed under the assailant’s palm.

With a growl, he chomps his teeth into the attacker’s fingers.

The ensuing cry of pain, pitched high as the strange hand lets him go, is altogether familiar.

Ben —and this name is not painless either, but it is a different sort of pain, and Ben thinks the question might always have been not how to be free of it but how to choose the kind he could best live with, the kind he could not live without— freezes, breathing hard. There’s blood in his mouth now of the sort that isn’t his, a sweet-metal coppery tang mingling with the familiar heavy-bitterness of his own, from where he sees he’d bitten his tongue.

The silhouette in front of him stands backlit before a pair of floor-length windows, clutching her hand.

“What the hell was that!” Rey shouts, face illuminated into focus as she strides past the windows, back into his personal space. Ben becomes suddenly aware of the clinical scent of antiseptic, the rough chafe of spun cotton, the dull give below him of a thin hospital mattress. A medical droid, polished to a faint chrome, sits in the corner of the small room, turned off. He can see, beyond the
place in his peripheral vision where Rey stands fuming, the faint gleam of a security pad bolted to a
door across the cubicle. Out of the room’s four walls, the two to his left and his right are made
almost entirely of paneled glass, spanning from floor to ceiling. One looks out into the hallway of the
medbay, the other onto the fields of D’Qar.

Beside him, Rey gives an aggravated snort of pain.

“You bit me!”

“You were trying to kill me,” Ben snaps, attempting to launch himself into a sitting position before
his restraints yank him back. He collapses against the mattress with a winded thud.

“I wasn’t trying to kill you,” Rey says.

“Then get out,” Ben hisses.

Rey’s expression flashes somber for a millisecond, the line of her mouth flattening. For a moment,
Ben does not comprehend the sudden contemplative set of her eyes. But then there is a quiet
quickstep as she backs one foot away, and he cannot help but wonder how much she was told, how
much anyone was told, of what he’d whispered to his mother on the floor of the command room,
shivering and wanting to die.

She pities him. And Ben can do nothing but let her pity him, because if he was not a pathetic creature
before to her he certainly must be one to her now. The sensation chafes in one of the rare tender
spots he has never in his entire life attempted to suppress, as Kylo Ren or otherwise. He would take
death over pity.

Of course, at this point, he has no idea which one of these the Resistance has decided he’s merited
more.

Ben grits his teeth as his body is seized by a sudden shiver, riding out the scorching sensation of
weevils boring a burning trail down his forearms. The bedframe gives a metal shriek as he bucks
against it, unable to claw his flesh apart for the cuffs on his wrists. He bites down a primal, snorting
sob, choking on his own frustration.

When he looks up, Rey is standing at his bedside again, holding a tightly coiled towel. White, as
everything else in this dreamscape where he is, impossibly, somehow awake.

He doesn’t need her explanation to know the towel’s intended use. Rey doesn’t attempt to give one.
A solidarity he is wholly uncomfortable with passes between them, without a single thought trading
headspace. He knows that she has endured a great deal of pain in her young life— a younger life
than his, at any rate, and yet so unbearably comparable, if not in quantity of pain than in acuity.

Wordlessly, she passes the towel down to him, and wordlessly, he bites down. The tremors do not
cease, but he focuses on the pressure of his teeth on the cloth. It is not a better medicant than biting
off his own tongue, but a thought persists despite it all that if he were to do something like that, it
might make his mother cry. He wants with a wanting he has not reserved even for his own life not to
make his mother cry, anymore.

He will, he knows. But this is irrelevant.

“You were screaming,” Rey says, a great deal more levelly now, voice not precisely softer but
heavier, so that the words sink to the bottom pebble-sure in this fishbowl-room of white light and
window glass. “I didn’t want you to wake everyone up.”
She says this without inflection, as though such a thing were inconsequential to her. But Ben has always had an acute eye, despite what he knows most think of him. She is not eyeing the door as though she is being kept in this room with him, but as if something is being kept out.

He nearly asks where he is, spitting out the towel in preparation to speak, though he already knows the answer, or supposes that he does. This is not his cell, nor the command room, nor an interrogation chamber. There are a limited amount of other places it could be. Then, resigning himself to the pointlessness of Rey’s response, he gives his real question.

“Is this how it’s to be done, then?”

His voice is raw and cracked as palm-smashed glass. He hates how it sounds—has always hated how it sounds. He can’t recall a part of his body whose shape he didn’t somehow come to resent. He worries what he would do if he did.

Rey’s look of genuine confusion would concern him, if he couldn’t take comfort in perhaps the ambiguity of the question.

Her bloodied hand is cradled limply to her chest, held there by her other palm. He’d bitten through the tender knot of the back of her middle knuckle, he sees, though the blood now has begun to clot. He doesn’t feel guilt at having done it; isn’t sure how guilt of that sort feels anymore, as the result of a single action instead of the cumulative act of existing. But the familiar adrenaline-high of inflicted pain is also curiously absent, and that is something to analyze, maybe, or to forget.

Ben lets out another breath, digging his nails into his fists for lack of the towel to sink his teeth into. Someone has nearly cut them down to the quick in his unconsciousness, leaving him uselessly declawed. Slithering agony spirals up his bones unabated.

“A lethal injection. Is that how the Resistance is to execute me?” he says, voice low, not out of fear of the answer but in an attempt to keep it from cracking, weak from disuse.

It’s a far more civil end than he deserves, and honestly more than what he would have liked. He’d always imagined his end as something brutal and punch-drunk; the short, violent finish reserved for great men and great monsters. He can’t imagine himself slipping quietly off into the warm-water darkness; can’t picture himself fading away so gently, never having once in his entire life been so himself.

Maybe his mother requested it. The wife of the murdered husband executing his executioner; the mother of the broken son putting him down in the only act of mercy he thinks he might ever accept.

But then Rey looks at him horrified, and Ben is no longer sure he has understood.

“You’re not being executed,” Rey says. Her voice is not triumphant, despite what she’d growled to him in the bomb field during the time he’d last seen her, daring him to live. Instead, she merely sounds floored, and frustrated, as if she cannot decide if it is more pathetic that he should want to die so badly or that he should be so incapable of accepting life. He supposes that Rey, survivor Rey who had spat in his face in the interrogation room before she even knew he had a face to spit on, would never understand.

The news of his imminent survival does not hit Ben as he’d thought it might. There is no drop of his stomach or flare in his veins; no surge of anger now that he is poisonous and calcined and incapable of mustering so much when he wants so little. To die is beyond the bare minimum, and he cannot even be granted that.
The Resistance has not finished punishing him. They’ve moved on to a newer, cleverer tack, and
Ben can only curse himself for being so foolish as to beg his mother out loud, where so many
officers had heard him.

“And when was this decided?” Ben asks, for lack of something else to say, though he does not care
if Rey answers him truthfully or in fact answers him at all. He wonders briefly how long he’d been
unconscious, before remembering that he is no longer living on backwards-counting time. For a
moment, he is grateful for the cuffs chaining him to the bed, as the sensation comes suddenly that he
is falling.

There’s a rude squeal as Rey pulls up a chair to his bedside, which had lain previously unnoticed in
the corner of the room. Her hair, he notices, is no longer triple-knotted but plaited in a long tail down
her back, as though done hastily or without enough ties to spare for a more elaborate style. She still
hasn’t healed her hand.

“Four days ago,” Rey says, and Ben splutters. Rey’s hand flutters to her saber, strangely non-
aggressively, a nervous tic in a person uninclined to make them. Though she faces him as she speaks,
hers eyes are focused on a point on his forehead. “Do you remember what happened, after?”

“No,” Ben says, and he doesn’t; not beyond the slideshow-flicker of his uncle and another officer
pulling him up off the ground, the brief sensation of weightlessness before his eyelids sealed shut and
all other feeling ceased.

“You collapsed. Or so I was told. I wasn’t there, obviously, but the General—” (and here she
stutters, just so slightly, as if suddenly noticing that his hair is not actually black but a very dark
brown, and his eyes also) “—The General said that you passed out, after…what happened in the
command room.” Ben cannot be sure if she means the way he had screamed out the codes or had
screamed for his mother afterwards, and does not ask. She clears her throat, abnormally loud in the
still room. “Whatever you did in there, it saved your life.”

Ben cannot be moved to be grateful for that.

“The General didn’t tell you?” he says instead, hands balling into impotent fists at his sides. He is
dressed in a thin grey shirt and loose trousers, overwhelmingly similar to what he had worn when
he’d been first brought into custody, and had still been kept underground. It bothers him perhaps less
than he’d have guessed, that someone must have dressed him in the interim between command room
and medbay, and seen all of his manifold scars. He thinks he might have still been in his teens when
he’d stopped counting them, himself.

Rey frowns at his use of the impersonal title of *General*. But Ben will not apologize for not referring
to Leia as his mother within Rey’s earshot. He has only just won the title back, and it is private;
sacred. He will not share it with anyone else.

“She said that you were the one who gave us the shield codes,” Rey says.

Ben takes a deep breath. There were religions, he knew, in the wildlands of the Outer Rim, that
believed speaking a thing aloud made it true.

If Ben were not already aware of his status as a consummate liar (*Your son is gone. He was weak
and foolish like his father, so I destroyed him*), he might have believed that in the next seconds he
was saying something significant.

“I did.”
Rey’s eyes track the motion of a passing nurse outside the glass window facing the rest of the medbay. The hollows beneath her eyes are dark, as though someone had taken a smudge to them with the heel of their thumb. She hasn’t been sleeping. Ben wonders why she would lose it on his account.

“Oh,” she says, simply, as though that is all there is to say on the subject.

Ben is pretty sure it is.

A tinny beeping permeates the room from the vital monitor next to Ben’s bed. The doctors are free to ignore his stuttering heart. He certainly does.

“Why are you here?” Ben asks, by way of ignoring the question he knows she really wants answered. What a convenient coincidence, Ben muses. He wants it answered too.

Rey presses her lips into a thin line, still refusing to look at him directly. It’s a strange sensation, being ignored so casually by someone, after years of being watched with the fear of a caged animal.

“To guard you,” she says, and Ben is reminded of the first time she had been sent to do so, just after his slaughter of his fellow Knights so that he could inexplicably save his mother—not so inexplicable, really, but he had tried so hard at the time not to think about that. He had been strapped to a table in his mother’s shuttle, just as he was strapped to a hospital bed now. He wonders, in a way that might have been wry had the situations not always been so deadly serious, what it was about the two of them and meeting while tied to inclined surfaces. “There have been six attempts on your life so far.”

Ben snorts. Rey startles at the motion.

“What?” she asks.

And Ben laughs again, an anemic, hollowed thing. It is funny, really, as few things have been in his life so far. “You should have let them.”

Rey opens her mouth, looking indignant.

“Not all of us have a free ticket to your pity party,” she says lightly, which surprises Ben if only in its implication that she does not, in fact, pity him. “The council said that you’re to live.” She fingers the hilt of her lightsaber again, a decisive rat-a-tat. “So. That’s what you’re going to do.”

“In exchange for what?” Ben asks. He rattles his wrists against his clear restraints by way of gesture, trying not to scream again as the itching-burning-itching claws its way back up his spine. “I know I’m not a free man.”

“That’s not why you’re—” Rey says, before catching herself, setting her jaw as if clicking the proper parts of her sentence back in place. “You’re on parole, now. That’s what they said. The rest of your sentence conditional upon your conduct until the end of the war.” She clears her throat, fidgeting slightly in her subtle, trained-eye way. A conservation of energy, that had Ben been a more appraising man, might have even been called elegant. “And you’ve also been placed under a legal guardianship of sorts, with someone who agreed to make sure you fulfill the terms of your parole.”

“Which are?”

“I’m not sure,” Rey says, which is in itself a small revelation. Ben had been beginning to wonder if she had ever been unsure a day in her life. “The council can’t seem to decide what to do with you.”
Ben snuffle-snorts again. No one, in his entire life, has ever known what to do with him. He doesn’t know what sort of colossal game the universe would be pulling if they’d begun to do so now.

At the sound of his snicker, Rey looks at him askance, expression puzzling. When Ben declines to say anything, she sighs.

“You’ve been assigned work as an intelligence officer. Eight hours a day. Then you train with Master Luke. Four hours a day. The remaining four hours are your own.” She speaks perfunctorily, tallying the times as her right-hand index finger pushes down the fingers on her left hand one by one. Ben’s mind glimmers faintly with the sensation of endless sand, diamond-bright and sharp as a cutting edge; a hand snatching portions; a doll. But that cannot be right. He pushes the images away.

Eight, four, four. Sixteen hours a day, meticulously planned, leaving exactly eight hours to sleep.

Ben resolves himself to offer the person who made his schedule a place in the First Order, after all of this is done. Their flair for soulless exactitude has certainly earned it.

But then again, Ben himself has no place in the First Order anymore. He thinks of the cold, recycled air of the Finalizer, and can’t muster the strength to be sorry.

He can’t muster the strength to feel anything right now, and Ben thinks that this might be okay, too.

“And my guardian?” Ben hazards to ask, but he knows, as sure as he is aware that it is coming on the deepest part of the dry season on D’Qar, and in a few months after that, there will be rain.

“Your mother,” Rey says, expression inscrutable. She casts a glance at the vital monitor at his bedside, where Ben can just barely make out an austere-looking SOLO, BEN inscribed in the corner of the read-outs, followed by his date of birth in Aurebesh. He feels strangely naked that Rey should now know his birthday; that it is plastered here, for anyone to see.

“Oh,” Ben says.

It is not what he had wanted to say, but still, somehow, the only way he knows how to say it.

And then he laughs, tinny and choked and a little manic, until he’s lost the hang of what little control he’d possessed, and he’s giggling and screaming and rapping his bound wrists against the bed, trying to claw through his own skin.

“Stop it,” Rey says, though her eyes are wider than before, hand just a little closer to her saber. If she had thought him a monster before, now she must think him mad.

He isn’t, though. For the first time in years —perhaps even his whole life— he is completely, horribly, lucid.

His sharp bark of laughter makes Rey jump in her seat.

“What’s so funny?” Rey says, voice fletched with trepidation. Ben watches the arrow nock, arc, fly through the air, come to a halt just before him like the blaster bolts he had so often caught and held, in that life of his so long ago.

“Nothing has changed,” Ben says, soft and a little incredulous. “After everything I did to get away from it, I ended up right back here.”

And it hurts, in an exquisite pain that’s like watching the shattercrack of a mirror spread slowly outwards from a closed hand.
Because nothing has changed, no.

Nothing save the blood on his hands.

Rey smooths the tips of her fingers against the tawny fabric of her pants, licking her lips as though steeling herself to say something she’d rather not. She’s still refusing to look at him, something Ben cannot blame her for.

There’s a crack on the ceiling, so small that Ben thinks the maintenance droid must have missed it on its rounds. He wonders which of his scars it looks most like.

“Maybe that means more than you think,” Rey says.

Ben quirks up an eyebrow, body wracking with sudden, uncontrollable tremors. “I never would have thought you a believer in fate.”

“I don’t think I am,” she says, then stops herself again, staring inscrutably out the window. The silhouette of a sparrow from the woods beyond the window flits momentarily over Rey’s face in a brush of shape and shadow.

Ben looks at her, incredulous.

“Don’t tell me you think it was the Force.”

Rey shoots her answer back so quickly that Ben cannot be sure if this is what she had originally meant to say, or if it was only her being contrary. “And why not?”

“The Force is not my ally,” Ben says, which is honestly more than he’d ever thought should be expected from the higher power of the universe. (For my ally is the Force, and a powerful ally it is, his uncle had once told Ben, as he said an old master had once told him. Life creates it, makes it grow. Its energy surrounds us and binds us. Luminous beings are we, not this crude matter.) “It’s tossed around and played favorites with me ever since I was a boy.”

And yet still he misses it, with all the need of a severed hand. Somehow, lying here amidst his body’s frenzied burning, he feels closer to it than he has in six months.

But he knows this is just wishful thinking.

Rey opens her mouth as if to say something. Closes it, then opens it again.

“You think the Force is out to get you?” she says, an odd intensity to her tone. “Is that it, then?”

Her robes rustle faintly as she leans forward just an inch, gaze intent as if she really wants the answer. Maybe she does. He is reminded abruptly that Rey has only known she was Force-sensitive for a little over a year and a half, had thought his own uncle was a myth just as long ago. It has not been part of her conscious world for her whole life, as it has been for him.

He looks at her, arms sun-dappled and pulsing with strong, lean muscle as he lies drug-ravaged and strapped to a bed, and wonders if she is not the better for it.

“A hundred trillion life forms in the galaxy, and the Force stacks the odds for everyone’s best? ” Ben shakes his head, grunting and clanking his wrists against his restraints perfunctorily, though he knows the cuffs will not give. The brief flurry of distraction alleviates the unbearable crawling in his skin for a precious couple of seconds, before the torture resumes. He suspects the only reason he’s capable of sustaining a conversation through the torment is because Snoke has done far worse to him.
before. “Someone has to lose. I made my own luck,” he says, and grows quiet, hating how much he sounds like his father in this moment. “That’s all.”

He had thought at one time that he was the Chosen One, there to fulfill the prophecy that his grandfather had forfeited through traitorous sentiment.

He thinks of the gentle pressure of his mother’s forehead against his, and all else fades away.

“There was this man named Unkar Plutt, on Jakku,” Ben hears Rey say. Her voice is quiet, so faint that he thinks Rey may be talking to herself. But then she looks up at him, a slow and deliberate raise of her chin, the weight of recollection heavy on her brow. “He was… the only person at Niima Outpost who would pay for what we scavenged. He’d send us on dangerous salvage missions a lot, and pay us maybe twice his normal going rate for the trouble. Which was significant, coming from someone who changed his prices so that you were always just above starvation. I lived there for almost fifteen years, and I don’t think I ever managed to save a single cent.”

Her face has gone distant as she speaks, blank as the mirrored surface of a salt flat, as though she is retelling the event not through experience but facsimile. Ben wonders why she’s telling him this; he is a paltry secret keeper, hands too red-slick for keepsakes or the trust of anyone besides. But her voice ploughs on, distant and steady as a line of footsteps in the wilderness, and Ben thinks that maybe in his life that fate never decreed but simply made incidental, there is no particular reason that anything happens to him at all.

“One time, I was recruited by Plutt on a mission to a Star Destroyer, with six other scavengers. The ship had allegedly been carrying political prisoners when it went down. Plutt was convinced there were millions of credits worth of confiscated personal effects on board. And out of the seven of us who went on that mission, I was the only one who came back.”

Rey raises her hand then, a deliberate, fealty-like gesture, to some eye of providence Ben Solo has not yet seen. Ben can see the faint, white scars that adorn her hand from the spaces between her fingers all the way down below the sleeve of her robe. One glows dimly against the window-streaming sunlight, a half-circle like the crenellated edge of a credit coin. It spans the webbing between her right thumb and index finger like the currency-tribute for some unseen god.

“All I remember was falling. Solid ground beneath me, then nothing. The whole ship just coming apart in pieces. And when I came to, everyone else was dead, crushed by girders and steel and fallen debris. Those scavengers were all older than me, had survived for longer than me by a long shot. They should have made it out of there. But it was just me. It’s only ever me.”

She flexes the thin half-moon scar on her right hand, where it catches the light like the silver luminescence of a fishtail.

“There was a three-meter circle around me, at the place where I’d fallen. No debris at all. The only thing that got me was a piece of wiring, right here, between my thumb and pointer finger. I remember not being able to believe what had happened to me, how lucky I’d been. I thought about the circle in the ground. The single scratch. I even started to wonder if some higher power had done it, had protected me for some reason, even if at the time I couldn’t name what.”

Her voice trails off, silent as she gives her contradictory vigil, eyes still transfixed to some celestial point just above his face. A look that is not a look for a man who is not a man.

“Why are you telling me this?” Ben asks, though he has an inkling that he knows, in the creeping and intrusive way in which he senses most truths, by their kind but never their nature. Rey has picked up his uncle’s sense of riddles, or perhaps this has always been her way, and she is just that
much more suited to Luke Skywalker than his own nephew has ever been.

Rey shrugs her shoulders, pursing her lips. “To this day, I’m not sure if it was me acting through the Force or the Force acting through me. Or if it really was just luck. And I’m not sure it even matters. I’m not sure that’s the point.”

Ben carefully does not ask her what she considers the point to be. It will inevitably have to do with survival and purpose and goodness, those tawdry catchphrases that somehow still have meaning to her, after fifteen years of abandonment in the agnostic wasteland. Perhaps once they might have had meaning for him, in the once-upon when little boys were as safe in their minds as they were in their beds. Though Ben knows that this is not quite right. Snoke did not make him into anything that was not already within himself.

Maybe, if he plunged his hand into the picket-garden of his ribcage, he would find the bad seed that started it all.

He begins trembling again, an uncontrollable quake that shakes the frame of the bed to its foundations, and gives a feral scream as the restraints against his ankles and wrists refuse to give way.

“You’re having withdrawals,” Rey says, staring dully down at the restraints. She gives a tug at one of the clear cuffs at Ben’s wrist, and their purpose clicks suddenly into place. “The doctors wanted to make sure you didn’t tear off your skin. Or take any other ‘extreme measures’.”

She says the last words as though quoting them from a source who suspected he might. Distantly Ben wonders how many people in fact knew of that night days-weeks-months ago when the potentiasuppressant had run heavy and wild through his system, and he’d wound up on the ground, collapsed amidst a starfield of bloody glass and ghosts.

“Itching, shaking, sweating, insomnia, and nausea,” Rey rattles off, and pauses, as though scrutinizing his vitals. Perhaps she’s surprised that he was in fact born with a heart. Sometimes he is too. It has proven to be such an inconvenient, maladjusted thing. “They’re giving you two weeks, until it’s fully out of your system. Doctor Kalonia says you burned off some of it, sleeping these past four days. But she also said it gets worse at night.”

Potentiasuppressant.

Withdrawal.

The words come to him before their meaning does, a handful of trailing comets whose illumination only comes at the end of their dusty tails.

The Force.

He’s getting it back.

He can already feel it, he realizes, pooling at the tips of his fingers. It is like dipping a hand into a puddle of melted candle wax, watching as the runoff cools and hardens into a second skin.

He ought to be happy. He ought to feel strong. The Force is his birthright, his dominion, his house and home when human error made only emptiness of his parents’ arms.

Instead, he only thinks of the power that has torn him apart since he was a small child. The things he’s done, to try to quiet it. Stars, the things he’s done.
And now, it’s going to start all over again.

Rey makes to stand, fingers closing around the hilt of her lightsaber.

“Your hand,” Ben says lamely. Rey stops, for just a second. She looks at him as though trying to discern the secret cipher of what he had meant to say, but Ben isn’t sure himself, and so they both are wordless.

The bite on her middle finger is mostly scabbed over now. She regards it with a dim interest, lifting the injury into the light.

“I can heal it,” she says, and walks away, back to her post by the door.

They say nothing else. Ben doesn’t try to. There is nothing save the whirring of his pulse from the vitals monitor, trilling in its soprano sing-song for all to hear that he is only made of blood and bone and faulty intentions, *human-human-human* after all.

Ben closes his eyes and tries to sleep, wishing it would quiet.

Chapter End Notes

A semi-timely update?? What?? I think the muse just got a little unstuck following Ben’s breakdown. Writing melancholic, lost and confused Ben Solo is my jam. He's a real fun guy to be around late at night on Microsoft Word.

Thanks all for the support once again. It's what makes writing this worthwhile.
You can be good for the mere sake of goodness. You cannot be bad for the mere sake of badness. You can do a kind action when you are not feeling kind and when it gives you no pleasure, simply because kindness is right; but no one ever did a cruel action simply because cruelty is wrong— only because cruelty is pleasant or useful to him. In other words, badness cannot succeed even in being bad in the same way in which goodness is good. Goodness is, so to speak, itself; badness is only spoiled goodness. And there must be something good first before it can be spoiled.

—C. S. Lewis, Mere Christianity

He dreams of wolves.

Timberwolves, his mind supplies, though he has never seen one in person and has witnessed even less in his dreams. He’s standing barefoot on a wintry floodplain, watching them circle in the snow. The night is crisp as a pane of glass, cold and dark as a premonition. His bones ache with it, and he crushes his arms to his chest. The chill will not be exorcised.

Above him, the sky is crusted so heavy with stars that is like being underwater, staring upwards at a sheet of ice.

His mother had told him the stories of the timberwolves that haunted the mountain woods of Alderaan— great alpine beasts whose bite was like a forest fire, their fur smelling of sap and smoke as they stole misbehaving children away.

(—Is he going to take me away, Mama? Ben says. His mother goes stiff at his side.

—Who is, baby?

—The wolf in my head. Is he going to take me away? Because I’ve been bad?

Her hand pauses from its descent in his curls, frozen against the curvature of his face.

—No, baby. No.

—How do you know?

They had been sitting in the corner of his bed, Ben held in a protective cage between his mother’s arms and knees. His mother slides him onto the mattress at that, tickling him so fiercely that he can only squeal between spasms of gasping laughter for her to stop. Eventually she does, leaning above him on her elbows. The thick plait of her braid hangs loosely off her shoulder, and she smiles at him. Ben would have been comforted were it not for the wildland burning there in her eyes.
—I’ll tell you a thing about wolves, his mother says, and shifts back on the mattress to sit on her haunches. She pulls Ben up by the armpits, fixing the rumples in his clothes with quick fingers as she goes. Ben thrusts his tongue at her; she jabs out her own in response. The big, bad papa wolves aren’t the ones you have to be afraid of. She cups her hands over his shoulders, leaning in until their noses are a cross-eyed inch apart. It’s the mama wolves you have to watch out for. And if anyone tries to hurt our babies... She stops for a moment, drawing out the pause until the space between their beating breaths is almost visceral. Then she lunges, tackling Ben onto the bed until they both collapse in giggling growls. We eat them!

—But you’re not a wolf; Ben says once his mother’s renewed tickling subsides. She curls around him with her knees against his back, and Ben hopes that one day he’ll be even taller than her. You’re a person.

—No, I’m not, his mother says, punctuating the statement with a fierce bite. Her teeth click inches away from Ben’s nose. Ben laughs at that, and his mother grins, nuzzling her face to his forehead. I’m the biggest, baddest mama wolf there is.)

They’re massive creatures, bigger than him by half. Their paws outspan his palms by inches. The largest is a female that Ben thinks might be twice his size on its hind legs, so pale against the winter landscape that she is reduced to a notion in his peripheral vision, more impression than animal. Only her tawny-gold eyes remain, staring at him, gaze unceasing, glowing with their cold candlelight.

And yet, the wolves still circle. Perhaps it has been minutes. Perhaps it has been days.

It is then that Ben hears a guttural scream, echoing from behind.

It is then that Ben sees a spatter of blood arc across the snow, vivid and unmistakable.

And so the stray pup comes back into the fold, someone says. The sound comes from everywhere and nowhere all at once. It is the banshee whistle of the wind off the mountains in the distance; it is the groans of the icy ground. Ben halts dead at the sound of it, feels dread ratchet up his spine like the nocking of a bowstring.

It is not a voice. It is the voice.

He cannot even shout as a grey wolf trots into view with a dismembered arm in its jaws.

The limb is clothed in tattered sackcloth, still steaming from the end where Ben can see gored shards of bone. Something gleams in the hand's grip, short and polished. The fingers twitch for a moment, spasmic, before going slack, and the silver cylinder falls, dropping to the snow with the sharpness of a bone resetting. Ben recoils as though struck by a grenade.

His uncle’s original lightsaber.

His uncle’s other arm.

Is this what you want? the voice hisses, and it gongs in Ben’s head like a klaxon. For them to protect your sorry soul, because you are too weak to protect yourself?

Another wolf, brown this time, fur dark and deep as a secret promise. It turns around, a growl thrumming deep in its belly, the valley resounding with the sound.

Hanging between the wolf’s teeth is his mother’s head.

Ben claps his hands to his mouth, breaths gulping and thick against his palm. He clatters to the
ground on his knees.

*Or would you prefer it like this? For those you love to die for you, because you are too selfish to cut your pain off at the source, and end it all yourself?*

And another wolf is striding towards him. There is an intent and a destiny in that pitiless, starry gaze. In its teeth is a torso clad in the remains of a leather jacket, a white shirt cross-hatched in spattered red.

There, where the heart should be, is a bloody, singed hole that gapes clean through to the other side.

*But you’ve already done that. Haven’t you, Kylo Ren?*

The voice cackles thin and reedy as Ben doubles over, clapping his hands to the ground on either side of his face, forehead pressing flat into the snow. He moans, deep into the ground, low enough to shake the earth from its moorings.

A single wolf stops, cocks its head at Ben’s stooped form. Howls a note in mimicry that is the harmony of every dark place of the soul. A thousand wolves raise their voices in chorus, Ben with them, until he is skybound, rattling the stars at their heavenly cages till they fall like downed birds at his feet.

*You imagine your family again,* the voice says from above, from within, and Ben shudders as the presence slips neatly into place behind his ears as though it never left. *A loving mother. A merciful uncle. You imagine them near you.*

The voice burrows deeper. Ben is terrified by the comfort he feels. So long it has been, since something has filled that precise void.

*Is this all you think it takes? Shield codes and a few trite words wept into your mother’s sleeve, and all is forgiven?*

Ben clenches his teeth, but all that comes when he tries to correct the voice is a splitting pain lancing from ear to ear. He does not dream of forgiveness. He hardly has the right to think it.

*They will never forgive you, boy. They will never understand the ultimate sacrifice that was the purpose of your crimes. They will only ever see Han Solo’s murderer. The dictator who enabled the Hosnian Holocaust, and a thousand smaller deaths besides.*

*I know,* Ben wants to shout, wants to whisper. *I know.*

But he cannot speak a word.

The dark spaces of his mind twitch up in a smile as the voice senses the thought regardless, and feeds.

*You may have been born to the Light, but you are consecrated to the Dark,* the voice says, and Ben shoves his knuckles into his teeth, biting down, suckling his own blood so that he cannot recall the smell and taste of anyone else’s. *They will never pardon you. They will never understand. But I do. I understand you, Kylo Ren. I have always understood. I was there when your mother abandoned you for her ambitions in the Senate. I was there when your idiot father left you time and time again. I was there when your uncle could not help you, when the darkness in you called out for its reckoning, and no one, no one, but I was afraid. I brought you into my trust. I gave you purpose. I gave you power. I made you, Kylo Ren.*
Ben shoves his fist in his mouth, nodding slowly, knowing only that he agrees, knowing only that if he agrees the pain will eventually stop. It always has, before. For a little while.

*I took you in when your own family sent you away. How easily you gave up their name. Eagerly. Willingly. Desperate to shed that which chained you. Have I not given you new life? Have I not asked for so little in return? You are mine, Kylo Ren, and you will learn the value of the ties that bind us.*

A feral roar surges through the air, wild and gnashing its teeth.

It’s the white wolf. The one bigger than any of the others. The one so devastatingly beautiful that Ben thinks he might die of simply looking.

*He is mine,* the wolf growls, and moves closer, every motion of her muscles taut with intention. *Mine to me.*

She is standing so close that Ben could reach out and touch her snout, could pass his hand above their heads and feel her clouded breath like a canopy of smoke and solace.

*You cannot have him. You will not touch him.*

The wolf snarls again, all spit and gleaming teeth, and though his throat is bared to her, Ben feels a comfort unlike any he has ever known.

*Be gone from here,* the she-wolf shouts. She is looking right at him, straight through him, but instinctively Ben knows that it is not him she is addressing. *He is not the little boy he was when you first got your claws into him. And I am not the same foolish girl.* The wolf’s voice goes rigid. Ben is seized with the unbearable urge to prostrate himself at her feet. *I will destroy you. Utterly, and wholly. I promise you that.*

The voice laughs.

*You think so, my dear?*

The forest rumbles, and suddenly it is coming down all at once. The stars and the snow and the mountains and the trees give a shattering groan, and he is falling, tumbling, grasping for the glimmer of candlelight eyes—

Ben throws himself awake with a sucking, drowning gulp. The bed squeals as his restraints snap him back, a sickening thud against the mattress. His desperate rattling shakes the entire bedframe. *Off,* he needs to get these cuffs *offoffoffoffoffoff—*

It is only then that Ben realizes the heavy weight of someone else atop him, gripping his wrists tight on either side.

He starts, fearing that he is seeing a ghost.

But Ben’s knowledge of phantoms is almost expert now, and he knows the more he stares at her that this figure is too solid to be such a thing, too real in the way she leans over him with both arms braced on either side of his body, their noses almost touching. She is clasping herself so closely to him that Ben can make out nothing of her features, her caged embrace reducing her to a single contact of warmth and shape, quiet shadow.
He breathes in, sharply, ragged and raw like a clouded breath escaping on the snow. Ben almost cries out again at the winter-fierce pain of it; at the way the wolves claw at him still.

The stars are still hanging from that river-clear night. Ben forces down a swallow of panic, and counts them down from a hundred.

(His mother’s head, beneath those stars, slack-jawed and glassy eyed.)

Restart.

Count down from a thousand.

When he finishes, the warm press atop his chest pulls back, and he is left with the scent of durasteel metal, and of apple blossoms.

He can see his mother faintly through the muted corona of the streaming window light, her face impossibly pale, running with sweat that has gathered, jewel-like, at her chin.

She’s seated in a chair by his bedside, so short that she must prop her booted feet on the rung attached to its bottom in order to lean into him at all. Ben watches the bird-like flexion of her fingers as she raps her knuckles against his sheets. Two inches from touching him, but never quite.

As he stares into her fear-pale face, it occurs to Ben that maybe she doesn’t know how, now.

She had wanted her son back all these months and years; had prayed at the altar of every god who might have believed. She had kept faith, when Ben-as-Kylo-Ren had in her custody hissed and sparked and snapped, that all it would take was a breakthrough, a final removal of the second mask Kylo Ren had maintained beneath his first, to restore her son to her as he was.

But that boy had never existed.

And Ben is sorry, with the disjointed sympathy of reading an obituary for a man he might have liked but never knew, that he cannot give him to her.

Ben heaves out a breath in a low, pathetic whine, because any more complex thoughts are ones that he cannot fathom. It had always been like this as a child, the milder Force-terrors leaving him dumb, the more horrendous striking him blind. Many had left him curled helplessly in bed for entire days, wracked with tension migraines so severe his parents could do nothing but close the blinds and leave him in darkness.

At the sound of his straining, his mother’s touch comes to him almost immediately. Beneath the hospital lights flits the pressure of their interlinking hands.

He chances a look at her then, at her face of gentle devastation.

“I’m here,” she says, voice tense with conviction. And there were so many times when she hadn’t been.

Leia swallows, throat bobbing, before falling silent. Ben looks away at the wet glimmer in her eyes. He is useful with so little, and good with even less, but at least he can spare her the dignity of not having a place to weep alone.

“She has—it— have they always been like this?” comes a new voice, pared bare and low. Ben starts at the sight of his uncle, sitting in another chair opposite his mother, eyes wide in that way of his he had after Ben pummeled fellow learners to the ground in fits of beautiful, incandescent violence; after
Ben, in his later years, could be traced by his trail of crushed china underfoot, souvenirs of those tea-time talks with his uncle gone awry.

“Yes,” Ben says, and the current of his bitterness lifts below him, so that he almost floats away. It is a strange anger, soft like muscle memory. It lingers below his fingers like the poison of a nettle once touched, and never left behind. The Ben-who-had-not-been-Ben of a month ago would have cut off the offending hand. The-Ben-who-currently-is worries the venom with his teeth, and does nothing.


And Ben knows that Luke is being honest. Ben had always been careful as he was with few other things when it came to concealing his terrors from Luke Skywalker.

His mother had told his uncle about his terrors when Ben had first arrived at the Academy. Ben knew it from the cautious way Luke would sit down with him during evening meditation, motions always slow as though calming a wounded animal. Ben had resented Luke for it, even as his basest, most selfish instinct clawed at his uncle not to go. But though Luke knew of the nature of his nephew’s nightmares, he had never been inside Ben’s head to see them for himself. That had been his mother’s prerogative, and with her gone and Ben himself older, Ben had managed to conceal all but the worst from his uncle’s view. Maybe then, his uncle would not look at him with those melancholic eyes, as though Ben were no longer human but tragedy and sorrow given marrow, given flesh.

The silence in the medbay room stretches out, so far and wide that it is its own untraversable sea.

Finally, Luke looks up. Ben nearly has to turn his face away at the incising pain of his earnestness, like staring improperly at the underpinnings of a machine that was not meant to be unmade, or seen wanting.

“For—for how long? Has it been?” Luke says, even quieter. Ben cannot help but begrudge him for it.

“I don’t know,” he replies, which is close enough to the truth. He knows that he had been young, incalculably young, when it began. Years easily counted on a single hand. He turns his gaze to look at his uncle and mother in turn, expression blank. “But you knew that.”

“You never let me see,” Luke says, but with his eyes averted he is halfway talking to himself. His gaze is blue and distant. Ben swallows. His mother grips his hand tighter. “How bad it was. I had an inkling, because of what your mother told me. I knew that he…was speaking to you. That I couldn’t find a way to stop it. But I’d never known. The voices. The images. How it really was.”

“You weren’t meant to,” Ben says. “That was mine to know.”

His burden to carry. His great, unshakeable sin. Perhaps the Force takes neither time nor space into its confidence, and saw it necessary from the moment Ben Solo was born to punish him for the crimes he’d not yet committed.

The sheets rasp unbearably against his skin. Ben shifts against his cuffs, wanting escape. It is unconscionable, under his uncle’s compassionate stare. Unthinkable, to be holding hands with his mother once more. They’d failed him once, when as a child he’d cried out. They could do it again.

And he could do the same to them.

“He will come again,” Luke says. Ben’s whole body rings. His mother’s breath hitches, tensing as if to throw a punch.
“I know.”

“Would you go back to him, if you could?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ben says, a tone crueler than necessary and more than he knows is deserved. But it’s a difficult thing, letting go of these sutures that have bound him to his bitterness for more than half his life. Without them comes the unravelling, the exposure of his wounds to an antiseptic that must burn to the point of greater pain before it can ever heal.

He waits, watching Luke’s jaw work quietly, still boyish after so many years of saltwater turning rust of his regret. It’s too much to expect for Luke to storm out of the room, simply because Ben has chosen again to bare his teeth in spite. Even less likely that Leia would follow him. He wishes that they would. Maybe then, his uncle’s question would follow too.

“Yes, it does,” Luke says, and Leia’s hand twines so hard with Ben’s that Ben can feel the downbeat of her pulse. Ben looks away, at the windows, at the ceiling. Anywhere but the eyes he knows would still insist upon his goodness if Ben had destroyed the very foundations of the world. “More than anything.”

It does, Ben knows. But just this once, such certainty brings no comfort.

“He’ll never let me go.”

The words are quiet, almost silent. Ben hadn’t meant to say them aloud. A distant part of him goes rigid at the admission—that-is-not-an-admission, awaiting the inevitable snap of lightning across his back.

It doesn’t come.

Something strangely heavy presses down upon Ben’s chest instead, like the presupposition of drowning.

“Leave me,” Ben says, trying to lace the words with as much venom as before. But it is a poor poison, weak to sunlight, flaking inert as it bleeds into something deeper, darker, stiller. “Let me be.”

“Not now. Not this time.” Luke’s hands are curled so taut with hands on his knees that Ben imagines any moment he might stand up and pace the room. “You no longer have the liberty of choosing when to face your demons. Your demon now has come to you.”

“Snoke isn’t my demon,” Ben says. The defense of his old master is so quick it’s nearly reflex. Let no one say that Snoke did not train him well.

“Then who is?”

“I am. I did this to myself.”

He wonders if this is how his mother had seen him on Sullust, this view from upside-down. On the day he’d destroyed his own life’s work, because in the end he could not destroy her.

(Though you could destroy your father, comes a-voice-that-is-not-the-Voice. He is starting to see, now, the faulty perception from which all other errors propagated. His uncle had often said to him that guilt was an emotion, back when Ben was the only name he answered to. But this is not so. It is not the cliff side, nor the drop, nor the shattered agony of lying broken on the rocks below. It is the act of staring up at the sky, and seeing just how far you’ve fallen. Not a moment in time, but a trajectory.)
“You were a child,” comes Luke’s voice. “Ben. Do you understand me?”

“There’s nothing to understand,” Ben says, voice hard so that he doesn’t choke on something far more brittle. “Snoke didn’t come to me because I was some helpless boy. He came to me because he saw what I could do. He knew what I would become. There’s nothing that he made me do that wasn’t already inside myself.”

In rare form, Luke looks like he might punch a wall.

“And who is it that you think you would have become, without him?”

Ben Solo. Ben nearly says, maybe of the sort who could accept the name without the terrifying suspicion that it might be more false than his assumed one had ever been.

There was a simplicity to it, an unassuming lilt to the way that single given-name syllable ran. It made it nearly forgettable, in the soft, vaporous way of dreams. It was not a name that made people think of great horrors or great goodness, even if some recalled the memory of a well-meaning old man who had died for a cause not fully understood. And that was enough. For years, that had sometimes been enough.

Even now, it makes him think of fresh laundry off the line, and peaches; picket fences on Yavin 4 and lemonade and the first bright star at sunset.

Ben Solos did not murder fathers and massacre children, or leave star pilots gasping in pain at the raise of their hand. That was why he had sought so quickly to leave it behind, knowing the terrible animal inside of him did not match his soft face and soft name. An ugly asymmetry he sought finally to mend. And it had worked, for a time.

(—Ben!
—Han Solo.)

Until it hadn’t.

And maybe that’s what scares Ben the most. The notion that he will never deserve this name again.

His uncle leaves shortly after that. Ben rather suspects it is because there is so little left to say.

He follows Luke’s Force signature into the hallway, its presence like a lit match amongst the murky smoke of so many non-Sensitive. It flickers out of his senses a few meters before the medbay doors.

Something clinks at his side.

“Here,” his mother says. A silver key dangles in her hand, keyring bound around her pointer finger. She twirls it idly, looking at him with a mix of benevolence and self-deprecating pride that would feel more appropriate if she’d unlocked some prisoner’s chains on the Death Star.

“Go on,” she says, gesturing to the room’s ‘fresher with a jut of her chin. Her hand descends into his hair to ruffle it with no small amount affectionate violence, as though no time has passed at all. It sticks up in an electric storm of curls, roughed and undignified.

“Mom,” Ben bites out. A syllable of pure instinct. The hand in his hair freezes.

He looks up, at his mother’s moon-thin smile and spitfire eyes, and knows he must be breaking her
“Okay,” is all he can manage to say to that. “Okay.”

When he returns, a savory-smelling carafe sits on his bedside vanity, steaming beside two cups and a ladle. His bedsheets are smoothed out, the corners tucked neatly in. The pillowcase is a bleached shade of white he rather suspects it wasn’t before. It smells vaguely of disinfectant, and lemons.

And his mother, sitting amidst it all, is on the edge of his bed with a pair of scissors.

He looks at her without speaking, toweling the ends of his dripping hair. It’s already an effort to stand unsupported, the potentialsuppressant withdrawals now having moved to bouts of extreme fatigue and dizziness, as well as the omnipresent urge to throw up when moving too fast.

“They’re for you,” Leia says, implacable even as she sits primly upon the bed, booted ankles crossed. “To cut your hair. If you want. You don’t have to. I just thought you might—” She breaks off, though Ben knows the rest of the sentence that she had meant to say. He’s kept his hair the same way for nearly his whole life.

It’s grown well beyond his shoulders now, an ugly in-between length neither short enough to look proper nor long enough to seem intentional. He’d considered putting it up, when he’d been locked in that underground cell and it had first gone past his collarbones.

He thinks of the cell now; those aching, restless nights sleeping on the floor in fear of a phantom. His father, pleading with a child who was more a ghost than he was.

“No,” he says, and sits down on the bed beside her. The mattress angles perilously at his added weight. His mother tumbles just a little closer beside him. “Cut it off.”

His mother nods, smoothing her fingers through his damp hair. The motion makes him shudder. She grabs a fistful of hair between two fingers, pulling it straight a handful of inches above his shoulders before she begins to snip. The small gesture of remembrance nearly takes his breath away.

And it is a strange thing, to hear the tinny clipping of the scissors’ edge behind him, and feel nothing. An odd emptiness, as something dead and frayed is hacked off and cut away without any pain at all.

“You always did have such beautiful hair,” Leia says, finally, and though his back is to her, he imagines that she smiles. “People would come up to me, even when you were little, and just ask if they could touch it.”

Ben remembers nothing of this. But he supposes that there is much he doesn’t remember of his mother’s stories, willfully or otherwise.

“I imagine our hair is the one great thing us Skywalkers have,” his mother goes on, in a tone that might have been joking, or not. If Ben weren’t concentrating entirely on remaining still, he thinks he might have taken a moment to stare in that inclusive us. The Skywalkers had never included his mother before. It was always the Skywalker boys who got in trouble, Luke with his good-natured wit and Ben with his nature that was neither good nor witty, that other dark scion that started it all unnamed but implied just around the corner. “I like to think it’s the galaxy’s one consolation prize to us. A small gift. To make up for everything else it would do to us. And everything we’d do to it.”

She’s rambling, though Ben knows she is not given to it. Her voice is enough to take the edge off the dream-waking pain that is to exist in this moment. Ben knows she knows this, too.
So he plays along, listening to the *snip-snip* of the scissors, trying to count the seconds between each cut.

“It seems hardly fair.”

“Maybe not,” she says, pausing to muss her fingers through her handiwork, surveying where she’d missed. “But it is something. A small thing.”

“And when did you decide to join us?” Ben says, going rigid because his mother is behind him with scissors in his hair, precluding a chance of lashing out. He doesn’t have to wonder what it says about him, that this restraining impulse is not to prevent the scissors from going into his neck, but to make sure that the cut is not uneven. “The rest of the Skywalkers, I mean?”

The snipping stops. Behind him, he can hear his mother intake a sharp breath. Ben does not turn to look at her. He is not sure if it’s easier this way.

“When you left,” comes his mother’s voice.

The clip of the falling hair resumes again, sounding like raindrops or maybe fingertips, drumming against a pane of glass.

It's a moment before she speaks.

“I never thought I could be at peace with my father,” his mother says quietly. Her hands are motionless against his hair, clutching it as though grappling a rope. And Ben hates himself incandescently, for understanding her more perfectly in this moment than he ever has before. “And truthfully, I never tried.”

Ben trails his eyes silently to the ceiling, where the gossamer trail of a spider lay, curled in the corner of the room. He hopes the service droids don’t find it. They’ll kill it, with all the ceremony of polishing a window.

His mother clears her throat, and Ben feels rather than hears the shears in her hand drop from her fingers to the bed.

“He tortured me. He nearly killed your father. He cut off my brother’s hand.” She is almost empty as she says this. Devoid of every emotion but the indignant rage of helplessness. “He destroyed my home planet, Ben. Everyone I ever loved. My mother, my father, the—the—the maids who used to braid my hair and the cooks who used to make little trades with me, one slice of lemon meringue for every song I sung them. All of them. Gone. And me, an orphan, a million times over.”

And Ben knows. She’s told the story many times. It has always grown different with each retelling. He supposes that’s how it is with grief, changing its face the moment one begins to understand it.

His mother’s free hand, which had held the scissors as the other clutched his hair, rises up to splay across his back. Between his shoulder blades, in the space where, had he been a better creature, there might have been wings.

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“After—after Luke told me that we were siblings, after I truly understood all that meant, I—I used to dream about him. About Anakin Skywalker. Horrible dreams. He’d kill me every time. And I used to have these fits of paranoia, where I’d wonder if he knew. If he’d known the whole time, who I was to him, and had just been too much of a sadist or a coward to admit it. If he’d murdered Alderaan, just to get rid of the only other person who I could call father in my life. He came to me as a Force ghost only twice. Once, right after your father and I were married, on Endor. The other when you were born. I remember exactly what I said to him, yelled at him both those times. *Fuck off. Fuck*
off, and don’t you go near my family again.”

They are so alike, his mother and he, with their father-shaped hurts and their planets pounded to dust. For many years he had resented her deeply, for her refusal to lay claim to her lineage of power, for her weakness in taking what was rightfully hers. Denying Darth Vader was more than just foolishness. It was bordering on sacrilege, like denying the parentage of a god.

But now, quite suddenly, he wonders if what she feels towards Anakin Skywalker is anything akin to what he felt towards Han Solo, and stars, stars, he could drop dead at wondering how his mother never fell to the Dark Side with this much incendiary resentment inside her. He could die this very moment for feeling like he ever had the right.

“But then you fell,” his mother says, fisting her hand in his shirt as though to make sure he’s still with her. And because he is a fickle creature, prone to arrogance and self-destruction, he can’t be sure he always will be. But for this one moment, as the sun is shining golden through the window, and their shadows are gaping and long, Ben wants to tell what he told her down on his knees on that command room floor. *I’m here, I’m here, I’m here.* “And then suddenly, it mattered. It mattered more than the entire world. It mattered more than my pride, or my anger, or the way I couldn’t look at old holos of Darth Vader without either wanting to break something or scream. I went to Luke, in those weeks before he went missing. I asked him all I could.” She laughs, humorless and a little like a breathless cry. “I think he might have gotten sick of me, shooting him all these questions when I could have read the damn holobooks myself. But I wanted to get it from him. It felt more private that way. Less sinful. Like I was just asking my brother about a father I’d never met, because he’d been away for a very long while.”

“And what did you discover?” Ben asks.

Leia sighs. The room quietens. Ben’s heart stops.

“I’d already known the story. Luke had tried to tell me, after the war ended. After Endor. He’d always been the bookworm between us; I think he’d read up everything he could about our birth parents by the time he’d wrapped his mind around their names. But I’d only let him give me the bare facts of what he’d found. Like reading a history book. I had to know, so that I could come to terms with what had come before me. But I couldn’t allow it to be personally significant. Not to me.”

And Ben knows how Leia still refers to herself as Bail and Breha’s daughter, because she still is, even if she has brought Padme as a second mother into her life. He knows how Alderaani strangers with no knowledge of her adoption would sometimes say how beautiful it was that she had her parents’ eyes.

His mother, too, knows denial of family.

He looks at her, feeling the press of her presence in this small room, and wonders if it ever for one moment brought her peace.

“And then what happened?” he chances to ask, like a fairy tale, like a story.

*And then the bad guys were defeated and the good guys lived happily ever after,* she won’t say, because here he is, alive, and here she is, so angry and so sad.

“Luke told me. How…Anakin had looked, in his last moments before he died. Let me see the memory, in fact. And I remember thinking how, for that single moment, he might have been a man I could forgive. And what a shame it was that his life was full of so few of those moments, the ones I could see worthy of forgiving.”
Her hands find his shoulders, spinning him gently until he’s facing her, propped on the hospital bed with one leg on the floor and the other folded at the knee. Ben doesn’t want to look at her, unsure of what he would do if she excused him or damned him or simply said nothing.

“But the Light,” Leia says, unbearably softly, as if the Light were here with them right now, as easily frightened away as a deer. “I saw it with him. There, in that very second, when he died. No matter what he had done. No matter if I never forgive him, or anyone does. It was something internal, a decision made and a self-promise kept, and if the whole world was out to kill him, then at least he’d have a lantern to run by.” She goes silent again, hands inert in the curvature between Ben's neck and the thick planes of his shoulders. “Your father used to say that there was too much Vader in you. And for the only time in my life, I hoped like a fool that what he had said was true.”

She looks up at his face then, locking her shoulders so that she can gaze at him arm’s length. Her watery smile is Ben Solo’s end of days.

“There,” she says, and fluffs his hair. His newly shorn locks erupt in a dark mane about his face. “You look like a prince.”

“I’m not a prince,” Ben says.

He cannot ignore the pain in his mother’s eyes, but neither can he sate it. He knows that she wants him to remember the flatbread and the mountains, the pilfered sweetmeats whose recipes he can still remember and the Alderaanian High Script he can never forget. But he is not a worthy vessel for Alderaan.

He is not even a worthy vessel for himself.

To his surprise, Leia does not press him, though the sorrow in the line of her lips still lingers. Instead, she rises up, pressing her open palms against his chest, as if reading the secret literature of his breathing.

“I want—” she says, then cuts herself off. She breathes a full moment, pulling herself together in her princess-general-politician way. “I want to know you again, Ben. I do. I really do.”

He eclipses both her hands with a single palm. Pulls her touch away from him, to a safe distance where it cannot hurt her.

“You didn’t know me. You never did.”

She might have known him, in pieces, like looking at a shattered vase and trying to divine its shape from debris left behind. In an auction, they would never have given her full price.

“Then help me. Help me know. If it’s the only thing in this damn galaxy I can do right, I want it to be this.”

And it’s too much, suddenly, to be here, amidst this pageantry of a loving family he realizes he has always had. They had hurt him. Not because they hadn't loved him, but because they had.

Ben knows this, because he had done the same.

“I don’t even know,” he snaps.

“Oh, Ben.” His mother’s hands on his hair again, smoothing the strands over his ears to conceal the feature she knows he so ardently dislikes. “Oh, Ben.”
Beneath the spaces of her breaths, she sounds as though she's whispering.

You are mine to me.

The carafe by his bedside trembles.

Chapter End Notes

Late chapter is abominably late but not quite a month late. Yay?

Hugs and insane gratitude to everyone. I love you all.
Falling, I still didn’t know why I had done it. But at the moment of choice I had found I couldn’t walk away.

—Ann Leckie, Ancillary Justice

The base is not quiet, even at four am.

Ben stands still as a gravestone in the empty hallway. Casting up, casting out.

In a room three doors behind his own, two men are playing pazaak. In the hangar, a woman pads across the tarmac in her socks, snatching an imagined moment in the cockpit of an X-wing she was never meant to fly. A mouthful of chocolate is swallowed by a stolen kiss, somewhere near the kitchens.

Enough potentiasuppressant lingers in his system to limit his Force abilities to this. He can do nothing but throw out his nets and let the base rush through him; a fisherman of poor standing and poorer skill besides. Doctor Kalonia, in her last diagnostic before the Resistance declared him fit to leave the medbay, had assured him that his sensitivity would reappear in full by the end of the week.

Ben could only assume that Kalonia’s pale, benign expression as she said this meant she’d intended the words to be a comfort.

The Force does not return to him as he imagined it would: a brutal jaw-punch; a crushing blow. Instead, it is coming back to him slowly, like being lowered into the sea by degrees. He breathes the salt. Tastes the foam. Feels the bottomless depth of the world below him; the uncertainty of treading water and the lure that is to drown.

And it feels like grasping sunlight, or maybe taming wind. Something delicate and powerful, benevolent when the world was not and maybe could not be. The Force, moving through him instead of being harnessed by him, when it had been a turning wheel for his rage and for his power. He’d forgotten that the Force had felt like this. Could feel like this.

Across the base, a nameless woman bolts awake, and Ben has to grind his teeth against the tide of her fear pulsing through the still night air.

Yes.

These are the parts of the Force’s gift that he remembers.

But Ben is not here to feel that woman’s anguish, just as he does not stand in the hallway to sense the taller man in the room behind him win at pazaak, or the blush of the two lovers caught kissing behind
the pastry stacks by the routine kitchen check of a maintenance droid.

He is here because he cannot sleep, and has not for close to sixty hours. He does not want to.

The dreams are back.

Or perhaps not back, as though to imply that there was ever a moment he had truly lived without them. But six months had made it easy to forget the shape of them, the texture. The particular fear that was four-in-the-morning on the tongue, blinds pulled tight enough to silence the stars, but never the voices.

He must have woken the entire medbay twice with his screaming. He would rather die than wake up the rest of the base, now that the Resistance has moved him back to his quarters and taken the lock from his door. A gesture of good faith, they had called it; though with the tracking device still in his neck, Ben knows that goodness and faith are not mutually inclusive.

He should be angry at this, at being kept in this newer, airier prison to be paraded as the Resistance’s captive pet. He dredges deep in search for a match to start the fire of it all, scouring low in the pits of his belly. But what he finds is only an instinctual anger, hot like a mirror left in the sun. Reflective, but not generative. It frightens him to think that it might one day cool, into a pane of glass and silver.

It is such a different feeling, to be kept for once in a prison he can actually see. To be called a prisoner, and to know it, instead of being told that he is not, so that he will never have to worry about being set free.

So he walks: past the hallway where his own quarters lie, across crossways and empty spaces, navigating by the touch of the Force alone. The base spreads across his vision like a pond. Ben closes his eyes, prodding the surface of that mental water with a gentleness long out of practice; lets his fingertips bleat against the edges of its architecture until he finds one of the base’s unguarded exits. He strides towards it in rapid time, assassin-quiet without the clack of dark boots or the roar of his saber to announce his presence.

Outside, it smells like dried grass and metal. The moon hangs low in the sky, so small that Ben can blot it out with his thumb. In the distance, where the rolling hills make metaphor of the dark sky’s turning, comes the chittering of creatures for which Ben knows no name.

It is easy enough to find the emergency ladder attached to the side of the outside wall of hangar, a series of bolted rungs stretching upwards three stories to the roof. Ben nearly passes out at the exertion of hauling himself up, having been stuck in a medbay bed for the past week. Clenching his teeth, he lets his frustration at his helplessness and fear of falling mingle, and heaves himself up without allowing himself the luxury of shortness of breath.

The metal roof is frigid as he props himself atop it, an ungainly tangle of limbs and thin cloth. He hasn’t bothered to change out of the ashen grey outfit the medbay had insisted on; hasn’t cared for the pretense of shoes or gloves or any of the accoutrement for which his past self would have rather killed than be seen without. It is useless here, beneath the judgement of the cloudless sky. Let the Resistance talk about the apprentice Dark lord found perching on the roof, barefoot and clad in the garb of a peasant at best or an invalid at worst. Let them say that Kylo Ren has gone finally mad. Let them gossip that General Organa’s son never stood a chance against the coin-flip that was the Skywalkers’ lot.

The Resistance already hates him. If his mother and her intelligence officers have their way, the First Order soon will also. His master has already called for him again, and Ben is not so deluded as he once was to think that Snoke will be merciful.
Snoke.

Ben has to clench his teeth to staunch the shiver that rips through his spine, though the air is still and the night mild.

Would you go back to him, if you could? his uncle had said, and it had been wholly the wrong question, like asking if the rain ever mourned whom it drowned. It isn’t a matter of guilt, or even of belief. It is one of nature. Rain falls.

So does he.

Snoke will come for him eventually, as he always does. And in the end, Ben knows he is not a good enough man to dare think he has a reason to stay.

Kylo Ren, comes a voice. Above him beats the glittering of a thousand watchful eyes.

The shock is too searing for Ben to make a sound. He can feel Snoke, scrabbling at the edges of his brain like a manic animal. Ben digs his fingers into the corrugated tin of the roof, clenching his eyes shut to keep himself from crying out.

Let him in, says another voice, so unrecognizable to Ben that it can only be his own. Ben allows himself to imagine it; lets himself be swept away by the effortlessness of the fall. The pain abates, for a fleeting second, as he contemplates. Ben presses onwards, greedy for its relief. It would be as easy as a dreamless sleep.

He thinks of returning to Snoke’s side once more, to again haunt those dark corridors and dark places. To bow, beneath the deep-sea weight of an empty hologram, for his master’s coarse inspection. Even now he can feel Snoke’s chill hand leafing through his mind: finding flaw, finding shame. Finding the apple-blossom and iron smell of his mother’s presence; the pattering snip of his cut hair fluttering into her lap.

Snoke will rip out every reminiscence Ben has of his uncle sharing his sugar rations for tea. He will destroy every recollection of the ghost of his father’s voice. He will make his mother’s touch ugly in his memory again. The sunlight from the window in his quarters will grow cold.

Snoke will take all of them, Ben knows, every memory, because Snoke has always owned Ben’s mind more than Ben himself ever had. Ben cannot even fault him for it. It had not taken long for Ben to be made to understand that even the most promising of sharp-toothed beasts must be kept on a leash so that they did not destroy themselves.

The memories are paltry possessions, faded and brittle, bleached pale from the asperous rays of the sun. Maybe their color would have lasted, had he kept them away from the light. Maybe he would never have known they were there.

They are not worth much, these images of hands holding out caffea, half-smiles beneath greying crown braids and the raucous sway of bombfield grasses. But for the first time in a very long time, they are something that feels significant. Weighted. Owned by himself.

The possessiveness that razes through him then surprises even Ben.

Get out, Ben hisses. Get out.

White-hot pain bolts through him as soon as he says the words. Ben lets out a cry, feels the warm seep of blood on his palms from where he’d clench the edge of the corrugated roof to keep from hurtling over.
His vision flares, and then goes white.

(Kid.
Wake up.
Kid.
Kid.
Come on, you’re starting to scare me—)

The sky is clear and empty when he comes to.

It strikes him then: what he’d said, what he’d done, how he’d forced Snoke away in a whirl of righteous anger unlike anything he’d kindled before. It’s impossible to think that he had really meant to. Impossible to think that he had pushed back.

Why had he done that?
How dared he do that?

A burst of pain flares behind Ben’s eyelids. Not Snoke, this time, but the memory of him. The world closes in to a single black point. Ben yelps, curling deeper into himself as though to stanch the wound his whole body has become. But he can’t think, he can’t breathe, and if someone is shouting at him as he claps his hands over his ears and kneels, it is lost to the wildlands and the stars.

He shouldn’t have done that. He shouldn’t have done that.
He shouldn’t have done that.

He hears the shout again, frantic as a scream from a burning building. Ben does not care, and does not want to see. He clenches his eyes tighter, gritting his hands against his ears so that all other sound is drowned by the hollow ocean call of his palms.

Two hands against his forearms stop him short.

“One times three,” a familiar voice says, and it’s something like a command, something like a plea. The hands are on his wrists now, chill and strangely insubstantial. Ben sucks in a breath; focuses on their dull, constant weight. Around him swims a screen of blackness he has neither the courage nor strength to penetrate.

“One times three,” the voice says again.

Ben takes a gulp of air, then counts the seconds.

One.
Two.
Three.
“Six,” he says, and breathes out.

The presence beside him hums low. The touch on his wrists does not abate.

“Three times four,” it says.

In the darkness surrounding him, there might have been stars. He can see nothing else; sense nothing else but this expanse of blankness into which his mind has fled in panic and left his body somewhere else. Ben counts out three, then three again, then three twice more.

“Twelve.”

Another approving murmur.

“Four times five.”

Breathe. In. Out. Four plus four plus four plus four plus four plus four.

“Twenty.”

The figure stops for a moment, silent. In the space between words, Ben counts to one hundred, then backwards to zero again.

“What’s your name?” the voice asks.

“That depends,” Ben says.

The figure grunts.

“It really doesn’t.”

Ben thinks of all of those nights, restless aboard the *Finalizer*, frantic to silence the part of him that ensured his sleep was uneasy. He thinks of kneeling before his grandfather’s altar, begging to be rid of the Light. The bridge, and his father atop it: his own terror that something within him would untie itself, shake loose; rise against him and act as his own worst betrayer in this, his most defining and important act.

Yet here he is. Sitting on a roof atop a Resistance base, not even trying to run.

“Ben,” he says after a long pause of silence. The stars that exist only in this mental space flicker all around him. Like candles, maybe, or a reflection off the water. “My name is Ben.”

“You don’t sound very certain,” the figure says.

“I’m not,” Ben replies.

In the end, Kylo Ren had gone so quietly that Ben Solo had not even seen him go.

Perhaps it was because he never had.

He imagines how other people would expect him to respond, if they were to ask him why he’d gone back to the name of the boy he had once declared dead, and all of his sad-eyed, angry-mouthed vice.
They’d want stories of a black-masked villain finally seeing the Light; tales of a prodigal son who had always, deep down, known he was better than this. Maybe, if this had all been a fairy tale, they might have even been right.

But this is not a story from long, long ago or a galaxy far, far away, and his motives are not that noble. If there is a reason for anything he’s doing now, Ben thinks it is probably as simple as not wanting to see his mother cry.

The pieces of his mind that had been shielding him from reality peel away. Ben shivers, the chill of the roof biting through his thin clothes once again, stray X-wings blurring in a whirring caw overhead as they practice their maneuvers in the predawn dark. In the far distance, if he squints through his hands where he holds them to his face, he can see the grey-wreathed hills that mark the edge of his known world.

The figure from his starred vision is still here.

Ben should have known.

He really should have known.

“Hey there, kid,” the man says. “Welcome back.”

Han Solo is kneeling beside him, in the almost-never-darkness of the hour before sunrise.

“You should have left,” Ben says, through the spaces between his fingers. His elbows are still propped at his knees, palms completely covering his face. It is a paltry substitute for his old masks of metal and deep, growling voices, this one made of only flesh and blood and the shivering cold of his breath besides. But it will have to do. It will have to. “I told you to leave. In my room, weeks ago.”

His father’s hands curl against Ben’s wrists, close enough to take his pulse, which leaps away from Han’s touch like a wild animal. It quivers so hard Ben is sure that even his father can feel it, bare inches and an afterlife away.

“Oh, Ben,” Han says, pulling Ben’s hands away from his face. Ben’s heart almost stops to let him do it. At this moment, he wishes that it would. “What good has leaving ever done?”

(Nothing, Ben wants to say, but that would not be entirely true.

For it is only those who leave who can eventually come back.)

“That voice in your head,” Han says after a moment, and when he speaks he does not look at Ben. Ben looks away as well. “That was Snoke?”

“Yes,” Ben says, the heat of the snarl surprising even himself. If he is angry at his father for asking something so obvious, that is understandable. If he is angry at Snoke for attempting to reclaim what was already forfeited to him long ago, that is unfathomable. “But you already knew that.”

Han shifts in Ben’s peripheral vision. It would only take the smallest tilt of the head for Ben to look at him.

He does not look at him.

“I didn’t,” Han says, and his voice is perfectly serious. Ben thinks he might have only heard such a voice twice in his life. Once, when his parents left him at the Academy. Twice, when his father called out to him on the bridge.
And now.

The anger that seethes within him is simmering, familiar, almost customary now that he is not using it to fuel anything but the single act itself. He is used to being angry at Han Solo.

“What do you mean you didn’t know?”

“Your mother only told me, when—” his father stops, collecting himself. Ben is filled with the roaring urge to surge up on his knees and shake his father’s shoulders, to force those stuttering and terrible words out. It had been so much easier in the First Order, where at least he could be hurt by the things that were meant to hurt him. “When she asked me to bring you home. We had a meeting, on the base. And then she’d told me. Told me that Snoke had been with you. Since the very beginning.”

Ben swings his legs over the edge of the roof, contemplating jumping, not knowing if the quiet thrill that rushes through him is from the thought that he might leap, or simply from knowing that he could.

“Yes,” Ben says; quietly, so that maybe his father will not hear and he won’t have to suffer the pity in his eyes. But he knows that answer will hurt his father, and that gives him the courage he needs. “That’s true.”

His father sucks in a sharp breath. Ben could curse him for it. It is easier, he supposes, than any other alternative.

“Seven hells,” Han says, as though in awe of the majesty of the universe, or perhaps just in awe of its ability to make such callous mincemeat of his son. “How old were you?”

Ben grinds his jaw, letting his teeth clack together. Listens for the cavernous sound of the echo wending its way up bone.

“Since I was old enough to talk. I don’t know. Maybe before.” He pauses, breathes in-out in one low note. But not long enough for his father to interrupt him. Not enough for him to know his father’s sadness, his grief, his unmerited and altogether too-late concern for a child who had asked him for help and then denied him, only to have the gall to look at his ghost and ask again. “It is…difficult. To know. The thoughts all bleed together. His and mine.”

(Or perhaps they had always been his. Perhaps, once again, he is using Snoke as an excuse to claim he might have been a better man.)

His father tenses, looking for all the world like a man about to punch out the stars and the sky and every offending moon in it, and Ben could laugh if he were capable of that any more, if this wasn’t so very like Han Solo to jump to quick words and violence and miss the point entirely.

(But that was not something that Ben had inherited from Han; no, it had always been something he had gotten from Darth Vader.)

“But if he was threatening you, Ben, then why didn’t you—”

“It wasn’t like that,” Ben snaps, because it hadn’t been, not at first. His father, of course, would not understand, and maybe this is why he is continuing with this conversation at all. It is a way to still be hurt by Han Solo. To still make him hurt. And if beneath it all there is also a cry for something Ben’s pride is not willing to ask for, there is also the comfort in knowing that his father will not recognize it for what it is.

Han clenches his fists, jaw working beneath the rough coat of stubble he’d been wearing when he’d
died. He had been clean-shaven, when Ben was very young. But that had been a long time ago.

“Then what was it like?” Han asks. Too late. Far too late.

But then again, so is Ben.

(There was a drug that bounty hunters favored, called by a name Han Solo would know. It could be easily slipped into drinks. While you were sitting down, the effects were so mild that they seemed only an effect of intoxication. It was only when you tried to stand that your vision would grow spotted, and only when you tried to run that your legs would fail entirely.)

"Like Renatyl," is all Ben says. From the way his father sucks in a breath, the comparison is not inapt. “Slowly first, then all at once.”

He is not sure he would describe the rest to his father, even if he could.

(—You frighten them because of your power / —You frighten them because deep down you know you will never be good / —You frighten them because they have never seen you, the real you, not like I have—)

“Mom knew. Uncle knew,” Ben spits to Han, words tight with the intent to slap. For although it is not quite true —his mother had known, but not enough to help him, and his uncle had somehow been aware of even less— it is true enough, and Ben finds it is the honesties made by halves that hurt the most. “But you didn’t?”

(If he’s my goddamn son, then why can’t I fix him? his father had said to his mother, on the night before they had sent him away. Why am I just…sitting here like an idiot while my kid goes fucking crazy?

And that had been the last time in a lifetime-string of last times, said every time Ben broke another vase, punched another wall, screamed at another politician or simply shouted at himself when he had wrongly assumed that nobody else was there to see.)

“Is that what you thought of me?” Ben says, and this time he is looking at his father, really looking, voice loud and scathing enough to force his father to look back. In the distance by the barracks, a light flickers on. Ben doesn’t care if anyone is listening. “All this time? It never occurred to you that maybe that wasn’t all me?”

It was all him, a part of him knows. Ben has the right to think such things. They are the truths that live within him, after all, beasts that have made home and haven of his barren ribs.

His father had every right to think the same. Could not possibly have helped it. What Ben has done, what he has become, is every proof that his father was right.

That must be why it hurts so much.

There is blood in his mouth from where his teeth have come down upon his tongue, but he has more than enough of it to spare. What courses through his veins is adequate to fill the bodies of six ten-year-old children at least.

Six ghosts, perhaps, of the boys he could have been.

“When exactly did you decide I was a lost cause? Was it before or after I learned to walk?” Ben bites out, and this time Han looks properly chastened.
“I—” Han stutters, stumbles, but at Ben’s venomous glare he restarts. “I just wanted to help you. I knew you needed help, at least.”

Ben gives a hawking, ascetic scoff so rough it could curl paint from an iron siding. Han winces. If Ben does not gain any strength from the motion, neither does he regret making his father’s face contort so.

“Help,” Ben says. “Because you knew someone had decided to take up residence in your child’s mind, or because you thought I was just that far gone?”

He doesn’t know where it’s coming from, this sudden urge to defend some pathetic notion of goodness within himself. All the goodness he has ever begged or borrowed has always been fragmentary, not a state of being but simply a series of moments he has stolen from the lives of those who are not him. They are mirror shards of other people, lost in the process of reflection. With him, they cut just as easily as they reflect the light.

Maybe it’s because it is finally evident that his father had never once believed him to be capable of any better, and Ben’s goal has never been anything less than to upset his father’s expectations.

Beside him, his father’s face crumples, darkness welling within the creases of his weathered brow. Ben has never seen him look this incensed, or this helpless. Ben can see, just for a moment, the livid crook of his own mouth stitched upon Han Solo’s.

“What else was I supposed to think?” Han says. “That some monster had it out for my goddamn kid? Who thinks like that? Who wants to think like that, about their only child?”

“So it was better to think that your son was born evil incarnate?” Ben shouts. He slams his fist into the strip of tin roofing beside him, a thundering, cacophonous boom.

“You’re Vader’s grandson,” Han says. “I know there are things you couldn’t help—”

“—your wife is Vader’s daughter. Your best friend is Vader’s son. Are they just ticking time bombs, too? Monsters putting on people faces until the day they finally snap? Or was that only ever just me?”

“Ben—”

“Don’t—” Ben snaps, and for once it is not the name that bothers him but the man who sits there saying it. “Don’t call me that, if you never once believed it.”

His family had never called him by his other name, no matter when he’d seethed and spat that their boy was gone. At the time, Ben had tried to convince himself that it had nothing to do with the way the name they did call him by would twist the unspeakable in his stomach, thrum a hollow note of longing like a pan-pipe through his bones.

But it hadn’t been that, of course, not really; as if anything Ben Solo ever did could be explained by surface intention.

He is reminded of the times he had ridden on the Falcon as a boy, beating his palms against the clear transparisteel windows of the hold until he thought the glass might burst. His mother had been furious when she’d found him at it hours later, sweeping him up in a tangle of arms and worried chastisement about the dangers of what could have happened if he’d broken through the glass. How he could have been sucked into space.

In his sweep of six-year-old vocabulary, Ben had never been able to quite articulate what he had
been doing, shoving his palms against that windowpane as though to break through to the stars. Twenty-four years later, he thinks he finally might.

It had never been that he had wanted to destroy the glass.

He’d simply wanted to see if anyone on the other side would be there to answer back.

“I did believe it,” Han says, quietly, then swallows. “I did.” He pushes himself up on his knees, fluid without the phantom ache of age. Ben flinches away on instinct. His father pauses for a moment, considering, before going after him. His hand resting heavy on Ben’s shoulder. “I do.”

A sob escapes Ben’s throat, hot and silent. His father’s steady touch does not allow him to pull away.

“I don’t have the Force, Ben. I’m not gifted, like you. When you were a kid, lifting Artoo before you could talk, breaking windows with a breath like effortlessly controlling that much power was the kind of strength you had on an off-day, I remember thinking, my god, I’m no match for this kid. He’s going to get tired of me one day, when I’m an old man still smuggling for petty thieves and he’s a hero out there saving the world. And there’s nothing more I can do for him than to just get out of his goddamn way.”

Han’s face ages entire decades in the ensuing fifteen seconds. Ben thinks he might have, too. But he would be a fool to think that simply by growing older, he might also be a little more wise.

“I didn’t want you to get out of my way,” Ben chokes. “I didn’t want another person who was in awe of my powers, or scared of them. I wanted my father. I wanted my dad.”

Han makes an animal noise at that like a halfway choking-chuckle, in the winnowing light of the golden-grey dawn. Ben could scream at him, if he were not all too well familiar with the feeling. There had been men, waking up strapped to the pallet of Kylo Ren’s torture table, who had in one solemn sweep looked from their restraints to Kylo’s masked face and down again before breaking out into uncontrollable laughter. Going to their deaths smiling, because the alternative was completely unbearable.

And now, the same. For his father and him both.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my god this is so late mea culpa mea culpa. I am still alive, guys. And updating slowly. This one was mostly a combination of real life, real life school, writer’s block, and the fact that I think I re-wrote this chapter easily four or five times.

This chapter is dedicated to the amazing and lovely Briwookie, who put up with my ramblings about this chapter IRL for easily probably an hour, effectively breaking through a huge chunk of my writer's block and giving me the courage to think that the direction I want this story to go in is not entirely idiotic. Your steadfast support on this fic has really meant a lot to me. You’ve put up with entirely way too much stupidity on my end (you know exactly what I mean) and I appreciate every minute of it.

Thanks to each and every one of you who are still sticking around. Your amazing, lovely comments, thoughtful input, and general presences has made writing this one of my spare time's great pleasures.
I like the way [Fritz] Perls conceived the neurotic structure as a thick edifice built up of four layers. The first two layers are the everyday layers, the role-playing layers. Many people live out their lives never getting underneath them. The third layer covers our feeling of being empty and lost, the very feeling that we try to banish in building up our character defenses. Underneath this layer is the fourth—the layer of our true and basic animal anxieties, the terror that we carry around in our secret heart. Only when we explode this fourth layer, says Perls, do we get to the layer of what we might call our “authentic self”: what we really are without sham, without disguise, without defenses against fear.

—Ernest Becker, The Denial of Death

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

They sit together in the bomb field, Han Solo and he. If Ben were to outstretch his left arm to its farthest reach, he could touch his father’s shoulder with the very tip of his longest finger.

They don’t speak.

There’s a lifetime that needs to be said, Ben knows, but Han’s lifetime has run out, and Ben’s is already third-wasted. Perhaps, in another life, in a fresh start, there would have been time to say it all. The exchange rate between heartbeats and letters never sent is probably more than Ben can afford. To pay, or to lose.

The sun rises.

Luke and Rey appear on the horizon an hour after Ben descends from the roof.

It is a five-minute walk from where they stand to the unmarked place where Ben now sits, cross-legged among the grasses of the bomb field. The rising sun makes elegant darkness of his cross-legged silhouette: shadow-play of who-could-have-been, chiaroscuro of what-never-was. And it is a deception Ben is not sure he can abide, the way his dim outline is all soft hair and slanted nose with neither scar nor ugly iniquity. A rare darkness, that instead of making him look more cruel, only serves to make him seem more kind.

Ben perches up, knuckle-propped, on his haunches. The illusion shatters into more manageable pieces.
This is how they find him, half-suppliant in the dirt, like a villain about to be executed, or a man about to be knighted. Ben has found himself in the position of both. It does not matter overly much which one they make of him now.

They’re saying something above him, Rey shifting her stance sand-dune slowly as Luke drones on in his voice like sunsets and sleep. Ben isn’t paying attention, since they have not addressed him specifically, and his particular arrogance is not one of assuming that others wish him in their presence when he has not been called.

A metal flash sparkles abruptly in his peripheral vision before thumping to the ground.

Ben looks up, startled, position of fealty suddenly broken. Luke nudges his chin downwards, gesturing to the grass where the fallen object lies.

It’s the hilt of a lightsaber.

The hilt of his lightsaber.

It is only when he notices how far Luke’s arm is reaching that Ben registers the distance he’d flung himself back from Luke’s touch.

Luke reaches down for the glint of silver between them, stopping at a crouch by Ben’s side.

“Ben,” his uncle says. Ben can feel Rey suck in a breath, watching Luke pick up the cross-guard, placing the hilt in the alms-bowl of Ben’s silence. “I do believe this belongs to you. The Council has given you permission to have it again, so long I keep it when we’re not training.”

One flick would turn the saber into a line of pure brilliance. Ben does not miss how Luke holds it so that the hilt is angled towards Ben, and the emitter towards himself.

“Take it,” Ben says, and shudders back. “Away from me.”

Ben had never been one to count the number who had fallen by his blade. It was a habit that was at first ideological, then practical. But he had never quite forgotten their faces, or the way they had glowed red in his sparking saberlight.

“This weapon has been used for great evil,” Luke says, and Ben nods, no longer in the business of attempting to deny it. He had never quite tried, either, even as a servant of the Dark. Back then there had been distinctions between petty villainy and a martyr sulling his soul for greater purpose.

Back then, Ben wonders what he had been thinking.


“But I think…it can still be used for good.”

“No. It can’t.”

Luke cocks his head, still holding the blade aloft between them. Beyond its silver framing, Rey’s blurred outline stands perfectly still.

Ben cannot blame her for what she is doing, stance taut as though caught between terror and some need to believe. He knows what happened the last time a family member and he held his lightsaber between them. And so does she.

“What makes you say that?” Luke says to Ben, sanguine as the teacher he once was.
“You said it yourself. You were the one who taught it to me. Sith artifacts cannot be reclaimed to the Light. That’s why the Jedi Shadows were sent to destroy them, in the time of the Old Republic.”

Perhaps it might have been amusing at a time, how this was the one Jedi tenet which Ben Solo still holds true. When he looks at the chalice that is his own life, when he peers into its waters and tries to understand when they once were clear, he understands why. Even a single drop of ink will muddy the whole glass.

And then there is no fixing it.

Luke stares at him, gaze transfixed.

“Are you a Sith, then?”

Ben breathes in, then out, prepared for a speech of technicalities. Knights of Ren were not Sith, though the Sith were their gods and icons. Knights did not believe in the Rule of Two, that old Sith adage allowing only a single master and apprentice at a time. They did not bar those who wished to test their mettle. Theirs was a fellowship in which all were welcome to attempt passage, but only the strongest would survive.

Ben exhales low in remembrance.

Villages, razed. Children, maimed. But these were the side effects, not the cause. That was reserved for the quieter, deeper rites of blood and ash; those tokens of sad devotion to Kylo Ren’s ancient religion. There is beauty to those sacraments even here, even now.

The Dark could be far gentler than the Light, though Ben knows that few would believe it so. The Dark sees the great gashing wound you’ve made of yourself and cradles your fingers into your palm, croons sweet as sorghum that it’s okay, okay, okay. Above all, it comforts first the breaks and lesions already within yourself. Only later, when the fracture is healed but not quite set, does it begin making demands of your pain to afford the same relief. Only in the end do you realize that the Dark never once told you that it did not want to see you hurt again. Never once did it say that once you reached your higher aim, your pain would abate.

You had only assumed.

Ben closes his eyes, lets his breath rattle through his lungs.

“No,” he says. “I never was.”

“A Knight of Ren?”

“Not that, either.” His voice cracks. “Not anymore.”

He should feel guilt for this; some level of remorse. It should feel like more than just the antiseptic sting of alcohol on a wound. He had been their Master for years, after all, had trained them in sparring and bloodletting; the rush of taking life and dealing consequence.

Not in years, Ben thinks, had he ever seen their faces.

“Well then,” Luke says, hefting Ben’s lightsaber between them. “I fail to see how this is still an artifact of the Dark.”

“Changing something’s name doesn’t alter what it is,” Ben snaps. “It doesn’t work like that.”
Luke Skywalker stares at him for a long moment.

“No, it doesn’t. It never has.”

Luke exhales, lowing and long. The cross-guard is placed with perfect deference at Ben’s feet. Then, Luke reaches into his robes, face blank in reverent concentration. Like the shined plain of an empty communion bowl, now picked clean.

Held in his uncle’s hand is another saber. Silver, like Ben’s own, like Rey’s; like the humming green one that Luke uses now and has for thirty years. But the saber Luke holds is none of these.

It’s Anakin Skywalker’s.

The saber is chill-white in Ben’s memory. He remembers the shock of seeing its hilt in FN-2187’s grip, curled between the traitor’s dark hands, as though it had never found a better master. And when Ben had subdued the traitor, carved a line of burning black down his spine, the saber still had not answered to him. His vision had been so blurred at the edges by then, darkened by blood loss and unacknowledged regret, that he had thought he might be imagining his impotence. Until it flew past his face, bright like a knife, into the scavenger’s hands.

Mostly, Ben remembers how in the end, the Crown Prince of Alderaan, Regent of Darkness, turncoat royalty of the Rebels and inheritor of the First Order’s throne, left the battle empty-handed, lucky to have his life.

A sudden weight bears down upon his wrist.

“Rey tells me you tried to reclaim it, on Starkiller,” Luke says, curling Ben’s fingers around the Skywalker saber.

“Yes,” Ben answers. “That’s true.”

Memories flicker beneath the metal surface of the hilt, skimming the calloused meat of his palm. Like koi, fins barely surfacing the water. There is power here, if he wants it. Visions beyond the telling.

Ben closes his eyes again, letting his breaths tumble down his chest.

He had not been lying to FN-2187 when he’d said the saber belonged to him. It had, for a time. The visions had been terrible the first time he’d first touched it. When pressed, Ben could never articulate what he’d seen. A mask, of black and silver. Gloved hands doing unintelligible, unspeakable things. A field, and a mound of stones atop it. Daisies.

The visions are quiet now, held within the saber like a bouquet of blossoms in Ben’s hand.

“Did you want the saber because it was Anakin Skywalker’s, or because it was Darth Vader’s?” Luke asks, perfectly calm; an intellectual question. Ben envies his uncle’s ability to ask such a thing, as though the only consequence of the answer were a tick mark in some mental column of curiosities.

The heat of Ben’s hands seeps from his fingers to the metal. The hilt warms, just so slightly, at his touch.

This saber had known him once.

It still does.

“Neither,” Ben says. “It was mine.”
They were childhood sweethearts, this lightsaber and he. There will always be that sticky-sweetness between them, a blood pact made in honey. But the summer has faded into fallen leaves and spice; the premonition of ghosts and skeletal things. Now they stand on either side of this path diverged in a narrow wood, familiarity overlaid by strangeness.

He had not thought of why the saber had been so important to him on Starkiller, as he had stood bleeding and grieving, murderous in the snow. There had been no ideology or pretense in his demand to get it back. Only a bright-bright crush in his chest, and then a bright-bright anger. Watching his lover move on without him, knowing that he had been the one to leave. At least he will always have its kiss, gleaming pale across his cheek.

_That lightsaber—it belongs to me._

Ben rises to his feet in a sweep of motion so abrupt that it surprises both Luke and himself. Rey startled back from where she had moved closer to him to eavesdrop, clenching her jaw at being caught out. Ben clamps down his teeth to match her anger, startled when his own inclination goes no further.

He stills, thumb hovering over the ignition switch, held back by the pressure of the unspoken. For a moment, Ben imagines that he might be waiting for Luke’s permission to set the blue-white blade alight. The reflex of past Padawan days still clings to him enough for that. But that is an act of submission to his uncle that his pride still will not allow.

It had never been Darth Vader’s lightsaber. Darth Vader had constructed his own, discarding the old trappings, the dead ephemera, shortly after his turn to the Dark. For so long, Anakin Skywalker and Darth Vader had not been the same person, because Ben had once drawn the same fast lines around the names he’d called himself. _Kylo Ren_ had never owned this saber. _Kylo Ren_ had never touched it.

Why, then, had he reached for it? Why, then, had he wanted it again to be his?

(He knows. Gods and stars, he does.)

Taking a deep breath, Ben switches it on.

The saber ignites like a stream of water. Pure, weightless light.

Ben moves into the first kata.

Luke rises to his feet, stepping back to give him room. Rey follows. In Ben’s peripheral vision, he can see her hand alight on her own saber, still clipped to her hip. The weight of her stare is as heavy as a stone in her hand.

Up. Down. A single half-turn here. A feint to the left there, then a felling swoop right. Simplicity falls upon him like a sleeping draught, and he cuts through the dreamtime like a soothsayer.

Anakin Skywalker’s saber is patient in his hands, empathetic as a reflection across water. Like dueling with a mirror.

He’d forgotten what it felt to hold a saber that didn’t fight. His own cross-guard blade had always been a draught animal, kicking back against him with a real and visceral weight. Always recalcitrant, never willing. With its unstable crystal, it could do no less, but Ben had never minded. Every moment of its use was one of conquest of superior power, superior strength. If he could subdue it,
then he could bring anything to heel.

He comes out of the last kata like being pulled from out of a river, memory and longing dripping from his hair into the new-wrought silence.

The blade keens quietly as he flicks it off.

“Take it, Ben,” Luke says. “It was yours, once. You could—”

“I couldn’t,” Ben says, not hearing the end of the offer; knowing the end result would be the same. “You know I can’t.”

Maybe he can return to the home he was raised in, to sit on the windowsill where his family lit a candle for him every night. But he will never know what it is to sleep in his boyhood room again.

Ben leans down, picking up his cross-guarded blade from the grass. It would be easier to deny it. Easier to part and parcel every wicked thing this weapon had done to a man called Kylo Ren, who shared Ben’s face but not his name and therefore could be tried for the crimes this new Ben Solo could deny he had committed. Ben could wear robes of tan again, could smile in his crooked misused way and try to answer when his name was called without that telling millisecond of delay.

It would be easier, yes.

And look where easier had got him.

The cross-guarded saber is still chill in his hands.

Beside them, Rey sucks in a sharp breath. Ben had nearly forgotten she was there. She had heard his thoughts, is hearing them. Her own mind projects images, volatile-bright. Ben’s gloved hands beside Han’s bare ones, holding this self-same saber between them. Pendulum-anticipation in her stomach. Curiosity giving way to intrigue, to a hope so flimsy-foreign it feels like an inch of desert rain. And then a red light—

“Enough,” Ben barks, reeling back.

For a moment, Ben catches a fleeting flash of remorse in her face; some odd mixture of horror and shame. It is subsumed by indignant anger just as quickly. Ben would have smiled at that, before. Now there is only the creeping sensation of watching another bright, brilliant thing discover how much sweeter it is to be caught in the hunter’s trap with teeth bared.

“Get out of my head,” Rey snaps.

“I wasn’t in your head,” Ben growls back, bearing down on her with the six inches he has between them. It is with a certain gratification that he sees Rey take a half-step back. “You were projecting. Anyone with more Force sensitivity than a vegetable probably heard you. You’re lucky the General didn’t—”

Suddenly he can’t continue. If this girl has made his mother relive that moment, even accidentally, he will not be able to stop himself from hurting her. Even if she is a bright, brilliant thing.

At the tail end of this notion is the distant awareness that he should not be thinking this. He ought to be better. He ought to be kind. He ought to be any number of adjectives his mother used when hoping for him at night. If he were a bad person in the way most bad people are, perhaps he would consider it. But Ben has never in his life stolen candy, or pilfered coins, or dealt in smuggled goods and apathy. He is above such things, far above, into the realms of massacre and genocide, and he
does not deserve clean mercy, like the snapping of a crocus blossom from its branch.

His family wish him to be whole. He knows he cannot be. Even so, there had been days when the light slatting through his medbay window had made him think of flying, and time travel, and the thought that for his family, he could try. If it were just his mother and his uncle and his anger, Ben even sometimes thinks he might manage it for entire hours at a time.

But they are not the only ones who have suffered at his hands. In the ultimate calculation, they may not even have monopoly on the worst. He must do the arithmetic with the due diligence of a scholar or a salesman, pitting his return value against the actual fact of the thing that is to be returned. For a crowd who have lost husbands, mothers, sisters to the hands that are still his no matter how thick the gloves he had worn at the time, a monster-turned-not-a-monster is no consolation at all.

And when the nights are so still he can hear his own thoughts skittering across the floor like the seedpods of some wild flower, Ben can very nearly say that he is okay with that.

“I’m sorry,” Rey says.

Ben has to blink to make sure that he’s heard her. She merely stares back, daring him to ask her again, as though it would be no particular shame but rather a source of strength to do it.

“Don’t apologize,” Ben answers back, trying to sound austere; only managing to sound breathless. “Least of all to me.”

And this is not an attempt to be compassionate, or benevolent, or to soothe Rey in the aftermath of some small and accidental wrongdoing. It’s only fact, in the barest terms possible.

Rey grows perfectly still all the same, looking at him as though scrutinizing a stranger. Then, very slowly, the tension leaves her shoulders.

“All right,” she says, and hefts her lightsaber up. Her head cants up to meet his gaze in something like a truce. There have been a lot of truces between them, as of late. Ben doesn't know what to think about that. “Let’s fight.”

Igniting his saber is like lighting a house on fire. Ben is nearly blinded by the smoke and embers of it, sweltering white and choking dark in his memory. This is not power like his grandfather’s saber, hope and destruction furled tight like a seed. This is an entirely outward burning.

He’s fought with Rey before, during his time as the Resistance’s prisoner. Luke had somehow managed to get the Council to approve of the use of wooden dowels for the task. Rey won by a small margin of majority, given that she had the advantage of the Force and not being heavily medicated at the time.

She watches him from the opposite end of sparring circle, itself only a foot-trampled patch of grass. Ben returns the look as best he can. The crisp morning sunlight bleeds pink at the light shedding from his blade.

"On your mark," Luke says, but Rey is already charging. Ben lunges forward, slamming their sabers together with a deafening crack.

Rey starts at the unholy sound. In her second of shock, Ben crowds her, heat rippling in waves from
their locked blades. Her eyes flash. A millisecond of fear, that he might turn back into the monster he once was. Then, anger; at herself or him, Ben cannot tell. And finally, unmistakable determination.

Rey shoves Ben’s blade away with a guttural snarl. Ben falls back a half-step, spinning to catch her from behind. A blur of grey and tan answers his feint; Rey, meeting his clash of blades before he’d hardly had the chance to think it. Instinctively, Ben imagines that his uncle had very little to do with the swordswoman Rey has become. Not even Uncle Luke can tame her. He doubts anybody can.

Another lock. Ben grunts, shoving all of his strength against her saber, and against Ben’s superior physical strength Rey is forced to step back. For a moment, Ben is nonplussed at how easily she had retreated. She could have used the Force to attempt to shove him back, or to augment her own defense—

**Ah.**

Even now, Rey is still more wildling than Jedi Knight, and Ben smiles to know it. It is the way that he will beat her.

Ben presses in, meeting her parries blade for blade until he loses track of time. The Force whorls heavy around them. He can feel Rey tracking his movements through the Force, watching its unseen eddies for his every premeditated pull-back and follow-through.

Her moves are as short as his, brutal without his customary flourishes. A swift economy of movement. Ben instantly recognizes it as the habit of one whose every fight has left her battling for her life.

She imagines that he will wish to end this duel cruelly. Ben doesn’t have to guess. Her mind sparks with the premonition of it, thoughts unguarded and open in the electric softening of battle. His saber, just barely missing her ribs. His foot, cracking into her breastbone. Ben, twining his hand into the long tail of her braid. The burning smell of hair. This is how she thinks Ben will try to end it. Were they sparring a few meager months ago, Ben is almost certain that she would have been right.

It is how he knows she will not anticipate this.

With a grunt, Ben launches himself at Rey, slicing towards her side. She leaps out of the way, concentration yanked away for a split second. Ben takes a deep breath; feels the Force pool within him. And pulls.

Rey’s saber flies out of her grasp, landing thirty feet beside them.

For a moment, they are both silent, watching the blade gutter embers into the grass. The light dies with a soft, shuddering *shick*.

“Sun djem,” Ben says, without inflection: the combat term for disarming an opponent. He slashes his blade a handful of inches from Rey’s chin, like he would have for any Knight of Ren upon declaring himself victor of their duel, like he had as a matter of fact done to Rey after freezing her to the Takodana forest floor.

Rey’s eyes skitter from her Force-flung saber to Ben and back again.

“I…I didn’t expect that,” Rey says, stilted and oddly quiet, making no move to call her saber back. Ben doesn’t comment. He knows, at the very least, what it looks like to punish oneself for failure. He will not begrudge her for it.

Exhaling, Ben thumbs his own saber off, tossing it in the grass. The blade retreats into the hilt like
the dying whine of an animal.

“I know,” he says. “That’s why I did it.”

And there is nothing Ben Solo knows more than the killing potency of mercy.

Chapter End Notes

Long time no see, guys. As always, love and hugs, and thank you all for your patience and support. This semester has been killer.
I began to understand that suffering and disappointments and melancholy are there not to vex us or cheapen us or deprive us of our dignity but to mature and transfigure us.

—Herman Hesse, Peter Camenzind

xxix.

Luke is called away while Rey’s saber still lies on the ground. Ben watches his uncle stop, stiffen, then cock his head in that way of his he has, when communing with those not present—whether absent or dead.

“Leia,” is all Luke says in way of explanation. His eyes flick from Rey, to Ben, then back to the empty equilibrium between them. “I think you two can handle yourselves, for an hour or so.”

Then his uncle disappears beyond the horizon, beneath the susurrus ebb and swell of the wind.

Rey says nothing, and Ben is content to let her keep the silence.

He cannot play the villain with her now. Rey has seen too much accidental honesty to ever completely believe that again. If only he had been a little wiser, perhaps he would have realized the difference between fear of a wolf and fear of a diseased man long ago.

_Smack._

Ben looks up. Rey is standing in the same position she was before, saber again in her hand. It’s humming in the next instant, purring and alive against the milky quiet of the mid-morning clouds. Ben’s thumb flies to toggle his own saber, adrenaline thick and sweet after the high of their fight of ten minutes ago.

But Rey does not fight him.

Instead, she lifts the saber to her line of sight, frowning in appraisal at the shaft of plasma nearest the emitter.

“There,” she says. Her finger darts to a seemingly arbitrary point, a centimeter or so up the blade. Ben doesn’t respond, squinting at the double-bladed saber despite himself. It would not surprise him that if even when alone with her, Rey had not meant the comment for him. But then Rey looks up, raising her eyebrows just-slightly in his direction. “There’s a ding.”

She walks towards him, hilt aloft, propelled by the careful blankness of Ben’s expression. In the next moment, she raises her saber’s right-hand blade at his eye-level.

“A ding,” Rey repeats. The same assessing finger rises up at the same location above the blade emitter. This close up, Ben can see that Rey is right. A small dent blares against the otherwise smooth planes of the plasma blade, shedding sylvan sparks against the knuckles of Rey’s hand.
“There.”

“One of your focusing crystals,” Ben says. An inexplicable pang lances through him. He powers past it before his mind can tell him why. “Misaligned, probably. Or cracked.”

(—Looks like a problem with the motivator, huh, kid? Wanna see if we can fix her up before your mom throws a fit?)

“Yeah,” Rey says, an unexpected cease-fire. But Ben is re-learning how to be a senator’s son, and he will take what little diplomacy she gives. “I’ve been thinking the same thing. Haven’t had the chance to check since it acted up this morning.”

Silence descends, palpable and cloying as the pulped flesh of a fruit. There is so little for him to say to her, untampered by his customary threats or cynicism. He doesn’t particularly wish for Rey to say something in return.

Rey’s throat bobs a should-shouldn’t-should against the tautness of her skin. Ben watches as she gives in, curiosity bearing wings against a chrysalis shell of better judgement.

“I didn’t know you knew things like that,” she says.

Ben narrows his eyes.

“What? Lightsabers?”

The tug of Rey’s perception flickers to his own lightsaber, lying not ten meters away from their feet. He can’t blame her misconception. His saber is a malcontent, malicious thing.

Ben takes a deep breath, and holds it in.

“I meant doing repairs. Fixing things,” Rey says.

“I was taught enough. Contrary to popular belief.”

There had been enough of those long, lazy hyperspace days in his father’s keep; enough memories borne beside his uncle’s clever-quick hands, buried deep in X-wings, holocrons, memory cores. He can fix a failing motivator with more finesse than a layman; can wield a hydrospanner as well as any passable deckhand. He is not the mechanic that his father and grandfather were, or that he imagines his uncle must still be. But still, he has been taught how to recognize what is broken. He has been educated in the theory that all things can be fixed.

If only he could be a machine. Then perhaps there could be some remedy for this malfunction of the human heart.

(He is told by certain sources that the only known cure is time, and solitude, and the guesswork mercy of a mother’s hand.)

“Come on, then,” Rey says.

“Excuse me?”

“Your lightsaber.” Rey nudges her chin in its direction. “It needs to be fixed. So does mine. I have some supplies in my quarters.”

“It doesn’t need to be fixed,” Ben snaps, voice explosive in this still cocoon of grey skies and
clacking grasses. He crowds Rey before he realizes that he’s doing it, one thunderous step that puts her forehead level with his chin. Rey merely looks up, eyes level with concentrated intent. She raises her hand, his saber rushing into her other palm with a meaty clank.

It growls livid as she toggles it on. Crimson light flakes between them.

“This blade is unstable. You can’t possibly be unaware of that,” she says.

“I’m aware,” Ben grits, fighting the childish urge to kick her feet out from under her and snatch his saber back. Never mind that Rey could pummel him into the ground just as easily.

“Then you also must know that it’s only matter of time until it explodes.”

“All the better for the Council, since they’ve decided not to execute me,” Ben says. “Such an event must make their paperwork much easier to file.”

Rey snorts in frustration. His lightsaber crackles in her grip, made scintillating by the conduit of her anger. Ben watches as her arm shifts backwards, upwards. For a moment he is half-convinced in her intent to cut his chest in two.

Instead, she flicks the saber off, and hurls the still-warm hilt at his chest.

Ben ducks, pulling the saber out of the air with the split-second of premonition the Force affords. The caught hilt rings tinnily in his grasp, vibrating with all the Force power with which Rey had either intentionally or accidentally imbued it. Rey’s shocked expression tells Ben that it was probably the latter. She may have even assumed he would catch it, though Ben cannot imagine why she would put her faith in him for anything.

He cannot trust himself right now, with this saber or the process of handling himself with dignity. With a raise of his hand, he punts the warped cross-guard so far against the crust of the horizon that it glimmers like a comet before tumbling into the distant grass.

“Was one scar not enough for you?” Ben hisses, voice dripping with put-upon indignation in a way he is acutely aware makes him sound like his father. “What did I do this time?”

There is a moment of asymptotic silence.

Rey’s Force signature is quiet and staccato. Ben recognizes it as the pulse of a person coming back to themselves slowly, gathering their lost pieces like fragments of a broken jar. He knows what it is, to be lost to one’s anger. The most honest part of himself knows he has no business faulting her for it.

But Ben has never been particularly honest with himself.

“I know what you’re trying to do,” Rey says, and her voice is surprisingly quiet. It is apology enough. She had already asked his apology once today, after accidentally witnessing his memories. To make her ask twice would be a cruelty that even Ben does not have practice inflicting. “It doesn’t make you a martyr. It doesn’t make you absolved. And you need to stop it.”

“Stop it?”

“Stop trying to get yourself killed.”

“I’ve never tried to—”

“No, you haven’t,” Rey accedes. It does not feel like a compromise at all. “You’ve just tried getting
everyone else to do it for you. Don’t pretend that isn’t why you’ve acted surly and unreasonable at every turn while you’ve been in custody here. Your family wanted you back so badly that they put up with it, so you kept acting out like a child hoping someone would finally punish you. And now that that hasn’t worked, you’re hoping that your lightsaber will take you with it. Because you’re all out of other options.”

This is it. This is too much. She’d read Ben’s mind once; had taken all his pretentions and tossed them on their head. She doesn’t get to do so a second time, without being in his mind at all.

“That lightsaber is all that I have. It will not be taken from me.”

The energy around them sucks in for a moment, like the pressure differential before a deluge of heavy rain.

But it’s not a storm.

It’s just Rey.

“Oh, come off it. You’re not very good at it, you know. This scary bad guy act.”

Of all the things she could have said, Ben could not have expected this.

“Excuse me?”

“You’re afraid,” Rey says, and her voice is an echo from another life. For a moment, Ben shudders back to that interrogation room, where she had seen through him with more clarity than he had even dared to see himself. “But that’s no excuse. We all are.”

xxx.

In Rey’s quarters, everything is watery and green.

A string of glass jars lay glistening on the windowsill, a constellation of caught stars. A riot of green blossoms from them—beans curve like crescent moons in their raw pods; in others, onions, carrots, peppers. In one jar floats the beginnings of a potato plant, pale roots sprouting from a handful of tuberous eyes.

In the corner of the room, nearest the window, Ben can make out a small workbench, glistening dimly with tools, somehow kept for her own private use. As the last young hope of the living Jedi, Ben imagines there is little the Resistance would wish to deny her. And Ben can see, despite the clutter of plants and hydrospanners by the windowsill, that there is little for which Rey asks.

Standing here feels like an intrusion, even after Rey ushers Ben inside. She had convinced him to follow her only on the very valid and inconvenient argument that his Council-mandated Jedi training time would not end for another two and a half hours. Therefore, he was obligated to follow Rey in the absence of his uncle.

There is a hairpin orderliness to her quarters, despite the shivaree of trinkets that line every conceivable space. A careful catalogue of what the sand at any time could sweep away.

He takes up sentry in the corner of the room as Rey brushes past him, collecting tools from the
workbench in the sweep of her arms. In the next second, she seats herself lotus-position on the
ground, an array of screwdrivers and needle-nosed pliers scattered by her feet.

“There aren’t any chairs,” Rey says by way of belated explanation. “You can take the bed, if you
want. Then we’d be even.”

Ben is not altogether surprised that Rey remembers that night when his mother had come to him in
his underground cell, begging him to help Rey tease the thoughts from a freshly caught child spy.

(“I’m not going to sit on someone’s bed with my dirty boots. Even yours.”

“So the scavenger has manners after all.”)

She is a creature of debt and credit, and ledgers made for life. But Ben has no business being her tax
collector.

He sits down across from her without a word.

Rey tosses Ben his lightsaber as soon as he sits down. She’d taken it when they’d made the trek
across the bomb field to her quarters, calling it back with a particularly annoyed flick of her wrist
from its kilometer-long distance away. Neither had pretended that allowing Ben public access to a
lightsaber would be anything other than a disaster.

Privately, Ben had not pretended that allowing himself any access to a lightsaber would end in
anything other than the same.

Rey says nothing as she works, unscrewing her saber casing with an adroit and patient hand. The
saber’s innards glimmer dully in the green-filtered daylight, as it drips through the vases on the
windowsill. She arrays the stabilizing crystals and diantium power cells on the ground with all the
solemnity of an embalmer.

Held to the light, the focusing crystal gleams like a caught star in Rey’s hand.

“It must be misaligned, then,” Rey says, after appraising the crystal and finding no fault, voice
hushed and distracted as though talking to herself. Memories catch in his hair, of a girl holding whole
conversations with herself to stave off the crush of a vast and empty sky. Ben must shake his head to
clear away the sudden cloud of loneliness. “That’s easy enough to fix.”

Ben holds himself perfectly still to anchor his heels against the abrupt sweep of envy.

Rey looks up.

“Your lightsaber,” she says, still seated amidst her glittering hoard. “Can I see it?”

The metal is frigid against his palm. He had almost never noticed it before, through the thickness of
the gloves he used to wear; had rarely felt its heft and weight except as the necessary carrying of an
organ outside his body. It’s a heavy, slipshod thing, crude parts and frayed wires made manifest by a
crystal so cracked it was a wonder Ben had managed to make it work at all.

Ugly, possessive wings rise behind him, curl around him; look after his saber with covetous
protection.

Ben lifts his hand anyway, rebelliously contrary by habit even to himself. Rey takes it from his hand
without fanfare.
He watches her as she examines it, a mechanic’s deft touch grafted onto a Padawan’s keen fingers. Her expression is unreadable.

“I’m going to take it apart,” she says. It is not a question. The avaricious raptor in his chest balks at the suggestion. Yet, the old childhood impulse that had propelled him to pick apart his scabs before they’d healed, and worry bruises before they’d set, still nestles as a destructive impetus inside him. There will always be the need to see the viscera of everything he loves ripped apart.

There is no other way he could trust it had ever been whole in the first place.

It had been a saber made in piecemeal; half in the Light, and half in the Dark. It had barely changed from its original white after Ben had chosen it, as the companion crystals of the Jedi did. Instead, it had vibrated in his palm like the gentle settling of a nervous heart.

Creating his saber had been the first task his new Master had set upon him, in those close and claustrophobic days after his defection. For days upon weeks, he had labored in the hot dark. The crystal had fought him then as it fought him now. All things imbued with the Living Force would struggle against those who sought to conquer them. Only through strength could power be certain. Only through power could the new Kylo Ren be delivered from himself.

In the end, that blue-white crystal had been brought to heel. Kylo Ren had watched it crack. Had watched it bleed. And finally, he had watched it fade to red.

“This design,” Rey says, when his saber has been dismantled, and the parts of their weapons lie mingling and useless to their purpose upon the floor. “I’ve never seen anyone use it except you.”

Ben looks at her mutely.

All conversational convention is dust between his fingers. Ben does not know how to do this, without a bargaining chip of fear or family history. He is not sure he wishes to. He had never been a child of easy companionship, if this is indeed what Rey is offering; if indeed she has a single reason why she should. Perhaps she wishes to study her enemy, beaten and threadbare where he had once been so cocksure and so very, very wrong.

Or perhaps she realizes that Ben is no fit enemy for anyone but himself. Perhaps she wishes to understand, like any good mechanic, the nature of his life’s spectacular systems failure.

“No. I don’t imagine you would have,” Ben says. “It’s an old design, taken from the Scourge of Malachor.”

“Malachor?”

Ben stills for a moment, blinking.

It is so easy to forget, despite Rey’s cutthroat cunning in battle and in mechanics, the fundamental ignorances that still inform her world. She had never been a creature of tutors, as he had been; of useless facts and figures.

—And a subtended angle of one arcsecond here indicates what, Master Solo?

—A distance of one parsec.

—Correct. I understand that your father had something to do with a twelve parsec record, did he not?)
"It’s a world in the Outer Rim,” Ben says, voice suddenly tight. “Most famous in Jedi lore as being the site of the Scourge of Malachor. The Sith had a temple there. Rather, it was a temple that doubled as a battle station, as well as a superweapon.”

To Ben’s surprise, Rey raises an eyebrow. There is an accompanying slant to her gaze that might indicate amusement, if it were sketched upon her face in a different time and place, and with a different person.

He does not deal well with kindness. He has been taught how to recognize fair trade, the son of a smuggler and nephew of a farmboy, and the ledger of his life has dealt in far few mercies.

“What is it with Dark Siders and weapons meant to extinguish all life?” she says. If Ben did not know better (if Ben did not know himself better), he would say that beneath her carefully curious neutrality was almost the sly nod of a joke.

“I see you still know very little about the Dark Side,” Ben says. The lack of vitriol in his tone surprises even himself. But he cannot blame his uncle for not educating his Padawan in the ways of their opposing philosophy.

Luke Skywalker had already seen the terror that one fallen Padawan could do.

“I already said no to the Dark Side once,” Rey says.

Ben snorts. "There are some who may say that I have now been distinctly disqualified.”

“You say that like it’s no longer a bad thing.”

“Is it?” Ben replies, a genuine question, if only because he does not pretend to have the answer. He does not pretend to know much of anything these days, save for the way that the sun keeps on rising. “I’ll tell you this about the Dark Side. My uncle is wrong not to teach you about it.” Ben takes a breath, staving off a sweep of vertigo that he no longer can blame on potential suppressant. “Do you actually know what a Dark Sider’s end goal is? Do you understand their philosophy?”

There is an almost inaudible clink as Rey sets her power cell down.

“They want…to have everything in the galaxy under their control,” Rey says. “And they’ll kill anyone who gets in their way to do it.”

Ben does not get the impression that she is repeating anything she had been taught to say, yet her words are in no way new, or surprising. Ben knows, from personal experience entwined with hers, that she has not been given much reason to think otherwise. Least of all from him.

“And you would be right,” Ben says, staving off Rey’s shock with a look to indicate that he has not finished speaking. “In that most people think so.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’m not ignorant of what the galaxy think of the Sith. They assume that those who follow the Dark Side are evil. That they consider themselves evil. That they worship evil, or even consider such a concept valid. This is a fundamental misunderstanding. And it will cost you the war.”

Rey looks at him.

“Do you want us to win the war?”
No, he means to say. He knows how it will turn out if they do. There will be democracy for a scant few years, benevolent and cooperative and well-intentioned. There will be the façade of fellow-feeling; and beneath it all, the rot of backroom deals and mysteriously disappearing senators. Ben had seen the way his mother had suffered, as one of the rare New Republic politicians who was scathingly honest without regard for reelection; a policy-maker who could not be bought. They had laughed her out of the Senate, for claiming that the growing group of fringe radicals in the Outer Rim might eventually become a serious threat.

(They had taken his mother from him, when the nights were huge and he was small, and nightmares would cling between his fingers like the yolk of a great, cracked egg. Threepio would sit beside him, reciting Old Republic histories, a substitute for Leia Organa’s bedtime stories when she was off on a late-night filibuster. Sometimes, the droid would tell him of his mother’s exploits on the Death Star and in Cloud City; on Endor and Hoth.)

(In the end, the house still smelled like an empty home.)

“I don’t know,” Ben says quietly. “But...I owe it to the General.”

It is the truth. It is the truth clear and burning as the Shesharillian vodka his father used to smuggle and insist to his mother that he never drank. The kind of vodka his father had sent him in an unmarked box when he’d been studying at Luke’s academy, the year he turned thirteen.

(Now you’re a man, kid, the note had said, and Ben had known his father had meant it without any irony whatsoever. I’ll be there for the next one. Promise.

He hadn’t, of course.

But Ben hadn’t expected him to.)

Rey’s lips tighten into a white line, melancholy and bitterness and a sliver of something indefinable caught between them, all at once.

“You mean you owe it to your mother,” she says.

Ben’s breath hitches.

“Yes.”

They are silent for a series of moments. Ben supposes that this is all a life is, in the end.

“Power,” he says, reaching down for his saber’s cracked crystal, lying amongst the scattered viscera of what once had been his most coveted dream. When he was a boy, the crystal had eclipsed half of his palm. Now, it is as small as a seed in his hand. “That is a Dark Sider’s ultimate aim. A Dark Sider doesn’t believe in good. Neither do they believe in evil. They’re considered limiting concepts, invented by the Light side to prevent them from reaching their true potential. The Jedi believe that ultimate strength is found in becoming one with the Force, and sensitive to its needs. Dark Siders believe that the Force is a tool to achieve ultimate strength. The only currency that matters to them is power. It’s why they kill, many and often. It’s why the apprentice always murders the master, to take up the mantle for themselves. And it is, to answer your previous question, why they build superweapons capable of destroying civilizations. It’s a show of superior power. And they believe it will get them closer to their god.”

He waits, for Rey to tell him of her repugnance, or of her disgust. Ben himself still finds himself agreeing with many points of their philosophy, though he is now a traitor to it in all meaningful senses of the word.
He wonders how it was never apparent to him that it was all worthless, if to adhere to it meant had no power over himself.

“It’s like Jakku,” Rey says, an epiphanic whisper. “An entire religion of people, all living on Jakku.”

Foreign recollection floods him: the dusty press of an outpost whose ramshackle wooden sign says *Niima*, where credits were few and hunger much. Women, emerging from fistfights with bloodied faces in the square, over a canteen of animal-trough water. Faceless scavengers, standing over the bodies of those less strong and therefore less fortunate, their bodies picked of everything but their clothes. And often, that as well. Rey—and it could only be her, for no one else had so much strength, and so much hope, in such a desperate place—attending the funeral of a baby born stillborn, though there was no cremation and no burial. The child on the way in the mother's already pregnant belly already sold, promised to a slaver in order to feed the rest.

Ben falls out of the last memory with a sharp intake of breath.

“I can’t live in a galaxy like that,” Rey says, and she is looking straight at him, horrified and unrepentant. “I only just escaped it. I won’t go back to it again.”

Maybe that’s why Rey had never fallen to the Dark Side, Ben thinks, when she had stood above him in the forests of Starkiller, teeth clenched and soul afire. She had been living it for nineteen years, without any of its trappings or its promises of glory. She had seen it unadulterated, and had paid it in kind with a scar on his face and pea plants on the windowsill.

“You never finished your story,” Rey finally says, after the stillness had come to rest around them once again, with only the click of a screwdriver to disturb it. “About the Scourge of Malachor.”

“It’s not a story,” Ben replies. "It's history."

“I think all history is. Given time.”

And maybe Ben could refute that, if he knew he was not destined to be one. A cautionary tale to tell children, about a beast who hid beneath their beds at night (about a monster in a black mask, or perhaps just a man with black hair and black eyes), to make sure they’d always be good.

Ben almost smiles at that.

“The Jedi attacked the Sith temple,” he says. “They activated the superweapon, in their attempt to eliminate it. And every living being on the planet turned to stone. The Jedi forbid all travel to the planet soon after. I don’t even think my uncle’s been there.”

The casing for his lightsaber lies between them on the floor. Rey picks it up, fingering the edge of the topmost emitter with the pad of her thumb.

“Your crossguards are for taking excess pressure off the fractures in your crystal,” she says, voice half-way pitched to fascination in the way universal to mechanics and pilots. “Aren’t they?”

“Yes,” Ben says. “Despite popular opinion that my lightsaber is the product of my being too stupid to make one that properly functions.”

He is only halfway joking. He’d heard how people whispered, both within the First Order and the Resistance. With the Force returned to him, it was almost impossible not to inadvertently sojourn into others’ minds and hear their surface thoughts.

But Rey does not laugh. Instead, she looks perfectly serious.
“They don’t know anything.” She sets down his hilt casing, picking up a needle-nose plier along with her own. “Can I ask a question?”

“You haven’t already?”

Rey frowns.

“If your crystal was cracked, why didn’t you get another one? Instead of poring over ancient lightsaber designs with the hopes of finding one that would accommodate the damage?”

Ben cocks his head, narrowing his eyes.

“The crystal chooses the Force-user. You don’t get another one. Surely you know that.”

“But if the crystal was cracked when you picked it in the caves—”

“It wasn’t.”

The tintinnabulation of Rey’s tinkering stops.

“What?”

“It cracked later. When I bled it.”

“Bled it?”

“You know that kyber crystals are naturally white before they’re harvested. It’s the Force’s will and particular connection with any particular Jedi that turns each crystal a specific color. But kyber crystals do not naturally turn red. They have to be bled in order to do that, by the Dark Sider who wishes to use them. The Knights of Ren teach that the bleeding of a kyber crystal is a test of your devotion to the Dark Side; that they will turn red only to a chosen few. To those who are more powerful than them.”

Rey lets his words settle for a moment before responding.

“Do you still believe that?”

“I don’t know what I believe.”

The feeling comes over them both that they have both said enough, shared too much, though Ben suspects that the thread of their conversation is far from over. He is satisfied to fall silent, watching the silver-green light cascade through the window.

xxx.

He should have known it was coming, after seventy-two hours without sleep.

—Kylo Ren...

“Ben?”

That was odd. The voice didn’t sound like his mother’s, or his father’s, or uncle’s. And yet it had
called him by his—
—*Kylo Ren*…
—name.
“Ben!”

xxxii.

(Fade to black.)

Chapter End Notes

Happy late Thanksgiving, accompanied by late chapter update! And if you're not American, I hope you all ate well regardless.

The concept of kyber crystals 'bleeding' is a concept taken from the New Canon. According to it, kyber crystals are naturally attuned to the Light Side, and must be 'bled' by a Dark Side user in order to bring them into service of the Dark. Make of it what you will. For my purposes, I think the metaphor fits very well with the sort of story I'm trying to tell and so I am adapting this part of the New Canon. (There's more to 'bleeding' crystal lore as well, if you're interested in checking it out. Just as, if you couldn't tell, there will be more of this kyber crystal and LS/DS conversation with Ben and Rey later. The metaphor train keeps chugging.)

Much love and thanks to everyone for sticking with me on this monster project even as real life occasionally gets in the way. It's been eleven months since I began writing it (December 24, 2015, according to my Word document), which is really just mind-boggling. This fic is a huge labor of love, and it has been made only better by you all.
xxxiii. & xxxiv.

Chapter Notes

I am the only one who can come to my rescue. I am the only one who can help me now. But I don’t know how to help myself. It must follow then that I don’t want to help myself. That I want to completely drain myself of all hope, which will leave me safe and dry with nothing to lose. The point where it can only get better, if I allowed it to get better.

—Carrie Fisher, The Princess Diarist

See the end of the chapter for more notes

xxxiii.

He is followed into consciousness by the electric scent of ghosts. Everywhere is warm light, like butter or honey, enveloping him in the gentle curve of a burnished copper kettle.

All around him erupts a sharp, keening hiss.

Ben launches himself upwards at the sound. Blankets tangle around him, a laundry-powder scented noose.

The cry scythes through the air again.

Ben’s body goes rigid, heart pulsing between his teeth. The room careens around him, bright and unsharpened. There is the bed, the workbench, the plants. Rey’s staff, her lightsaber; his. A canteen on the windowsill, a holophoto on the workbench.

And Rey.

Her body is curled on the bed beside him, propped against the wall like a stuffed cotton rag stanching a wound. She clenches her teeth, waves of agony sheeting from her— and then Ben understands.

He’d never seen what it looked like for Snoke to possess someone, from the outside.

Rey tenses in her Force-dreaming fit, eyes clenched tight. Panting hard. And against his mind, a dull, frenetic pounding. The heel of some corybantic hand, shoving against a mental door as thick as a man’s palmspan.

Ben scrambles to his knees. The drumbeat in his head thrums the downbeat of his pulse. Against Ben’s skull, the pressure is nearly unbearable. He can’t do anything against it. He never could.

—Kylo Ren…

—Kylo Ren…

—Kylo Ren…

But Ben has been over six months imprisoned on a planet where he must every day face his mother’s
hope and sorrow; must every day face his father’s regret and mercy; must every day face himself.

He is used to bearing, by now, unbearable things.

Get out, he whispers, a chant, a shibboleth, because he cannot be held accountable for the things he whispers in the dark. Get out. Get out.

Beside him, Rey swallows, an audible wet gulp. Her crumpled body lies unmoving. The Force pulls even closer to her, the air trembling with it, like scalding heat rising from a stove.

Get out.

A sharp, quick quill of pain yanks away from the base of his spine. Ben gasps. The air is so thick with stillness that he thinks he could pluck his single, gasping note out from the clear-cold air.

Rey wakes in a horrible choking silence. The sound-that-is-not-sound reminds Ben of the stories his father often told him, of smugglers who had been caught and ejected into the void of space. She trains an unfocused, wild eye on him, face pale and wet.

Lightheadedness cottons Ben’s vision.

He collapses into the bed just as Rey springs from it.

She comes back with the steel canteen from the windowsill, plopping on the mattress parallel to Ben. Ben watches as she props herself against the seam where wall meets bed, feet dangling above the floor. From this angle, Ben must shift his chin up to look at her, a forced perspective in miniature.

There is no sound between the two of them for a long time, save the heavy slosh of Rey’s canteen. Rey downs the contents in one gulp, two gulps, three. There is a certain fascination in watching her meticulous methodology; in witnessing the way she wipes her mouth on her wrist after each swallow and then licks the dampened skin there, to catch every last drop of moisture. The feral, disjointed look in her eyes glows low in the beery light. Her gaze is trained on the wall, a white and wide sweep with no focus or direction. She has made no attempt to wipe the crystallizing sweat from her face. Ben is familiar with the practice, of the need to keep all evidence close of the fact that one’s body is still bleeding and breathing. A small votive to be offered, in the aftermath of Snoke’s intrusions.

Ben rattles an exhale, fighting the tightening in his chest. Rey startles beside him at the sound, as though surprised to see him there.

“Sit up,” she says, holding up the water canteen with an accompanying half-empty slosh. Then, more quietly, “Sit up. Please.”

Ben tenses, waiting for a familiar kickback of contrariness; some urge to snipe at Rey over expecting him to take orders from her. Instead there is only an echoic emptiness. He remains on his back, staring up at the ceiling. There are no spiders here, like there had been in his room in the medbay. No cracks to counterpart to constellations, or cicatrices.

This was the second time he’d pushed his Master out. Knowingly. Willingly. And the sky had not come down.

He wishes that it would.

Another indecipherable grunt from Rey. Her hand comes down against the mattress, patting it with three thick thwaps. Ben groans as the sensation thunders through his skull.
“Come on. You have to sit up.”

The canteen dangles above his face. Ben squints at it, an action he immediately regrets when pain stabs behind his eyelids.

“Drinking water won’t help,” he says.

“Drinking water always helps.”

The effort to shuffle onto his elbows without keeling into the sheets almost convinces Ben to abandon the effort. Sheer stubbornness sees his way through. Rey scoots over a few inches to the side, mattress creaking, until they are both trussed up against the wall in parallel. Rey lets out a jittering breath, handing him the canteen without looking. Ben takes it without doing the same.

Luke had told Ben once of the sacred water rituals of Tatooine. Ben remembers listening, if only so that he might better understand his grandfather. The recollections are scant and diamantine, sharp points of memory against the backdrop of what his time with the First Order had forced him to forget. Water, sprinkled at the bride’s feet at weddings and on child’s lips at christenings; cups poured and toasted with auspiciously met strangers, to ensure favor with one another in times of need. Ben wonders if Jakku has similar rites.

Maybe it is the purview of all desert worlds to offer water in place of hope.

The water is lukewarm and metallic, with a staleness that suggests that Rey has been hoarding it in her nook on the windowsill for several weeks. Some long-buried remnant of his mother’s etiquette lessons balks at Ben for downing the entire second half of the bottle without so much as a word of thanks. The much more recent remnant of his mind that remembers Snoke’s clawing hand inside of it finishes the canteen with one final swig. The weight of the steel container is distraction enough from the memory of Snoke’s voice.

Rey, it seems, does not want to be distracted.

“I don’t feel like we fought him off. I feel like he let us go.” Her voice is distant, but not small, as though she is shouting from across a great distance. Ben presses his fingers to the bridge of his nose, casting up a Force net of prickly silence. Rey does not take the hint. She turns to him, eyes darkened with uncertainty. He has never seen her like this before, not even as a whole planet collapsed beneath them. “Didn’t he?”

Ben wishes for all the galaxy that he could be anywhere but here. Certainly not discussing this, and certainly not discussing it with Rey. She had flayed him open, his accidental vivisectionist, and catalogued every rib in his chest; every vertebra of his spine. He should not reward her with permission for paths she has already trespassed in order to walk.

He angles down his chin to look at her properly. She is staring straight ahead, gaze once again transfixed on the wall, inhaling from her nose and exhaling from her mouth in measured, deep draughts. Ben recognizes the motion. He’d used it many times himself as a child, when the voice had made it clear that he had displeased it, and Ben had been desperate not to cry out; not to faint. When Ben had become Snoke’s apprentice, he had unlearned his traitorous body’s instinct for keeping secrets from his master.

“Yes,” he finally answers, having discovered by degrees that the truth is a sharper knife than falsehood. He is beginning to become frightfully proficient at it. “He always does, for a little while. It doesn’t last. He’s teasing us, or testing.”
Rey’s throat warbles. She heaves a swallow. Her fingers drum against the mattress, positioned in the demilitarized zone of sheets between them. Ben wonders if she’s counting, like he often does, or keeping some form of metrical time.

“It’s a lullabye, from Jakku,” Rey says, in answer to his unspoken question. He is growing used to her knack for it, and isn’t sure if it is an ability granted to her by the Force or her own cleverness. “An old woman taught it to me. She used to sit across from me at Niima Outpost, when we cleaned finds before we tried to sell them. I’m not sure why she did. She probably just wanted somebody to talk to.”

The quiet, open air fills with the scraps of a refrain. Rey’s voice is clear and unembellished, notes clinking into place like keys upon a keyring. It’s in a language Ben doesn’t recognize, all sibilants and open vowels. Words rush over him like hot sand.

Then Rey taps her index and middle finger against the bed, one-two.

“It’s in an old Jakkunian native language. Nobody speaks it anymore. I don’t know all of the translation.”

There is some she still remembers, though. She tells Ben so.

She tells him about home, and hope, and how it springs eternal. She tells him how she used to sing those words in the dark after every nightmare, just to make sure that she was awake, because in her dreams she could never hold a tune.

“And are you dreaming now?” Ben asks.

“I don’t think so,” she replies. She hums the bar to a melody Ben doesn’t know, voice clean and elegant as a theorem. “No, I’m not.”

Her gaze trails to a holophoto propped in the corner of her workbench. At this distance, Ben can make out the blurred image of Rey propped in the air in front of an X-wing, lifted on the shoulders of a grinning FN-2187 and Poe Dameron.

“Poe thinks it’s cute,” Rey continues. “He calls me a songbird whenever he catches me. I’ve never told him the real reason. I don’t want to take away something that makes him smile. And Finn doesn’t talk about it to me, even though I know he notices. I know that he recites stories to himself, instead.”

“Why are you telling me, then?” Ben asks, counting each exhale as he holds it, deep in his belly. The thick clouds inside his skull have yet to abate. He occupies himself with attempting to interpret their shapes. It’s a game he hasn’t entertained since he was a child.

One breath. Two breaths.

“Because you understand,” Rey says.

Thr—

“—What?”

“You count, don’t you? I’ve heard you do it before.”

Abruptly, Ben remembers the rooftop this morning: the sulfurous yellow square of light that had flickered on as he’d argued with his father, in the distance by the barracks.
“It was you,” Ben says, suddenly horrified. “How much did you hear?”

To her credit, Rey’s face reddens slightly. But she doesn’t look away.

“Only your half of the conversation. And—a little, before. When you were going over numbers. The Force woke me up. It was...twisted somewhere. When I followed the traces, it was coming from around you.” She doesn’t need to say what they both already know, about Snoke being there with him, vandalizing his mind in the shell-colored light of the near dawn. “The counting. Were you the one who taught yourself that?”

Ben shakes his head, hating the Force; hating Rey for being gifted enough in its use to sense his lies immediately.

There is a certain comfort, at least, in how much the truth hurts.

“My fath—” He stops. Swallows. The wound is too tender, too raw, and Ben isn’t even sure that it is healing. “Han Solo taught me.”

It had not been intentional, the first time his father had held him steadily by the upper arms, weaving times tables by turns from his delirium and the recycled air of a ship’s cabin. They’d been on the Falcon —Han in the pilot’s chair, and Ben in the seat beside him, seven years old or so; maybe eight — when a shapeless clot of darkness had clocked Ben on the temples in a sparkling knockout punch. When he’d came to, it was to his father’s low, drawling voice reciting a string of prime numbers in sequence like a litany. His father had later explained that it was a common spacer’s trick, in order to prevent madness on long space voyages carried out alone. In the years following his defection, Ben had forgotten all about it, desperate to forget anything that reminded him of Han Solo.

Rey looks a little devastated at his answer.

They don’t speak.

After a length of time, Rey tips slightly on her side, rummaging under her pillow with the absentminded ease of practice. When her hand emerges, it’s filled with the shine of ration packets. She tosses one to Ben, whose frazzled mind is not up for the task of combining visual with motor input. It flies past his face in a crinkled whizz, overshooting to land on the workbench.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have— sorry,” Rey says.

Ben shakes his head, calling the packet back with a grip on the Force that is discomfitingly shaky. Inside are two pale, tasteless wafers. Ben breaks the rations into smaller pieces between thumb and forefinger, allowing the rote and restless animal inside of him to be distracted by the motion. It’s a cheap tactic, and will last only so long before the creature scents deceit.

Ben will take what he can get.

The wafers taste like pulped paper, bland and safe, without risk of memories. Ben eats them slowly, in order to make the forgetfulness last.

It is easy enough to reconstruct what had happened: to know why Snoke’s voice had felt so distant in his mind during this latest attack, and why it had been so easy to shut him out. This time, Ben had not been the only Force user in the room. Certainly, he had not been the most whole.

A shock of undiluted hatred blurs Ben’s vision. Snoke had called to him as a child, with honeyed words of legacy and destiny and worthiness; with vinegar of his parents’ treachery and apathy and deceit. Ben —no, Kylo Ren; Snoke had never, not even when Ben was a child, addressed him by his
given name, always child, always boy, always Young Solo—was special, was irreplaceable, was chosen.

He had assumed under Snoke’s tutelage that it was the Force who had chosen him.

Of course, it hadn’t been. It had been Snoke.

And now that Ben is no longer his attack dog, answering to the name Snoke had given to him, Snoke has decided to choose again.

Ben clenches his fists, breath rattling through his teeth. Every jar on Rey’s windowsill shudders, pea pods and tomato vines and potato roots trembling all at once. A crystalline cacophony like windows shattering, in a house on a hill made of glass.

A bright crash splinters the air.

“—Ben,” comes Rey’s voice, hard and steady from in front of him. Behind her, Ben can see the glimmering, wet outline of a jar of marigolds smashed upon the floor.

The rest of the jars are still shaking. Rey makes no attempt to stop them with her own abilities, or to fight Ben against his own. She merely stares at him, jaw set.

So many people have expected things from him. He cannot think of a single person who has benefitted from this supposition.

(There had been an old Jedi master in the swamps of a planet often overlooked, who had trained his namesake who had trained his uncle who had trained him. He had said something important, about trying and the lack thereof. Had Ben been a better student at the Academy, perhaps he might have remembered what exactly that had been.)

Ben takes a deep breath, inhaling slowly. The jars fall still, one by one.

Rey turns to look at the marigolds, lying strewn in a sunny starburst against the duracrete floor. Her shoulders straighten. The room fills with the wet scent of damp roots, and rot.

“Help me clean it up,” Rey says.

Rey returns ten minutes later, carrying two pairs of workman’s gloves and a paper bag. Ben is sitting, cross-legged beneath the windowsill, counting motes of dust as they flicker past the streams of the colored light.

“Here,” Rey says, lowering down to her haunches so that she can hand a pair of gloves to Ben. “They might be a little small. Couldn’t find too many ones readily available for stealing from unguarded workbenches. At least not ones that also might fit your size.”

He can remember the creak of his old gloves; the raw smell of hide long faded into the sterile gunpowder scent of space. He can remember how easy everything was, when his own skin did not have to touch his consequences.

Ben looks across at the gloves in Rey’s hands, then up at Rey.

“No,” he says.

Rey furrows her brows. Ben meets her scrutiny with the bullish stare he’d perfected over two
decades before.

Finally, she relents.

“Blood is hard to get out of duracrete,” Rey says, crouching down on the floor across from him. A shattered lagoon of jar fragments and marigold stems glitters between them. “Don’t cut yourself.”

Ben frowns sourly at her.

“I can handle broken glass.”

“I didn’t say I thought you’d do it by accident.”

And there is nothing Ben can say to that.

He doesn’t know how to explain to Rey how he is almost-quite-entirely-confident that the Resistance is not going to find his crumpled body in his quarters after a shot from a stolen blaster or a slash from a broken vase. It’s simply that, were a disgruntled soldier to aim such a blast at him, Ben is also almost-quite-entirely-confident that he would not raise a hand to stop it.

He grabs a shard of glass from the floor, only remembering not to seize it against the full meat of his palm when he thinks of how much more terrible that strange pitying non-pity would be, if he bled all over Rey’s bare floor.

And the image of his mother’s face, if she’d found a red mark there, is something Ben won’t contemplate.

They work together in neutral silence, dropping clinking pieces of glass into the paper bag Rey had brought and propped against the wall. The smallest, most harmless pieces leave a glittering dust on Ben’s fingers, as though he had dipped his hand in a languid river of stars.

Rey hands Ben an oil-streaked rag from her workbench after the pieces are all collected, before moving to fold and tape up the bag. Ben begins to sop up the spilt water without comment. It’s easy compliance in exchange for the hope that Rey will not ask him about what happened.

She doesn’t, initially, letting Ben work as she sits on her heels, having pushed the sealed bag of glass aside from the both of them. The sodden marigolds still lay in the water, surrounded by a halo of fallen petals. Rey gathers the stems in her hands so that Ben can drag the rag over the space they had occupied. Held up to the light, Ben can see thin projections of roots spindling from the bottom of each one.

“They’re clippings. Poe has a bush in his room,” Rey says. “He takes care of those flowers religiously. I think he let me take a few stems after he’d caught me staring at it in his quarters for the fifteenth time. He says the plant was a gift from his mom.”

“His mother is dead,” Ben says.

“What?”

“Shara Bey,” Ben says. His chest feels suddenly tight. “Poe Dameron’s mother. She died when he was eight years old. I was…my parents took me to the funeral.”

There’s a stain on the floor, from what looks like a minor spill of droid lubricant. Ben grits his teeth and scours it with enough force that his arms ache.
“You were friends with him,” Rey says.

“No. Yes. I wasn’t…I didn’t make friends very easily as a child. Certainly Dameron would no longer be interested in claiming such a designation, if it were ever such a thing.”

“You were friends with him,” Rey repeats. Ben looks up, annoyed, only to find that Rey’s gaze is occupied elsewhere, with the holo on her workbench. “That’s what Poe said.”

Ben mashes his eyes together; takes a deep breath. Rey takes the rag from his grip when he nearly scrubs a hole through the duracrete.

“Do you want to talk about what happened?”

Ben glares at her, though he can feel his eyes burning. He looks away, clenching his jaw.

“No.”

“I didn’t mean with Snoke, before. Or Poe. I meant with the marigolds.”

Ben snorts.

“You’re not my interrogator, nor my confessor.”

To his surprise, Rey pops up on her knees.

“No, but I’d like to think I’m at least your—” She pauses, restarting where the words come apart, ineffective or perhaps ill-conceived. “You broke one of my flower pots. An explanation for why is the least you can give me.”

And Ben could refute that clean piece of logic in one fell swoop if he mentioned that a galaxy with any sense of tit-for-tat would not have kept him around this long except as a mounted head. But Rey had shared water with him, and broken bread. She had sung a desert song with no translation but hope and loneliness.

Ben will not owe her more than he already does.

“Snoke.”

Rey’s eyes widen. Her mental shields slam upwards; a sharp suction in the Force. “Again?”

“No. A memory.”

Not quite a memory though. A realization.

What exactly had Ben imagined would have happened had he been successful in his mission on Sullust, delivering Rey trundled up at the feet of his master? Had he thought Snoke would have allowed Ben to keep Rey as an apprentice? Oh yes, Ben had been Master of the Knights of Ren. Snoke had allowed him to play with his toy soldiers; had even allowed Ben to kill with them, for him. But Snoke would never have allowed Ben sovereignty over another Force user whose abilities rivalled Ben's own. Whose abilities might surpass his own.

Who might then have been commanded to take his place.

He had been strung along so masterfully. And worst of all, he had known it. He had imagined himself to be a knowing pawn, using Snoke just as Snoke was using him.
He really was such a fool.

“—Ben.”

Rey is kneeling beside him, gripping his arm so hard that her knuckles are bleached white. The jars on the windowsill clang like klaxon bells, colored light streaming through them in turbid whorls. She holds out her free hand, inhaling steadily. Every movement in the room comes to rest.

“Ben,” Rey says, the fourth time she’d used his given name within the hour. It discomfits Ben to think of when she had begun thinking of him as such. Mostly, it’s because Ben isn’t sure what he could have done to convince Rey of the existence of a person Ben is just getting acquainted with himself. “Tell me what happened.”

“It’s nothing,” Ben grits out.

“I can’t be nothing. I don’t believe that.”

(When he gets what he wants, he’ll crush you.)

And it hadn’t even taken Snoke’s satisfaction, before Snoke had decided to shore up his odds. It was not enough for him to have corrupted Luke’s old hope for the Jedi. It wasn’t enough that Snoke had held the Skywalker legacy on a leash, collaring Ben in such a way that Ben had worn his mask and muzzle gladly, imagining it a crown.

“Snoke,” Ben says, to the resounding stillness of the room. “It’s always Snoke.”

He pauses, because he doesn’t know what he wants, which is commendable for its consistency at least. He wants it to stop hurting. He wants to undo all he’s done. He wants to have slapped his father on that bridge, hard enough to have left a mark. And then, he wants to have taken his hand and gone home.

He can still feel Rey’s grip on his forearm as she tracks his thoughts. They slip across the open conduit of the Force like photos slid across a glass table.

"We're going to have to work on our shielding," Rey says. "Against him."

"I know."

"It’s okay too, you know," she says. “Finding out the life you’ve been living was a lie.”

Ben scoffs. Rey doesn’t dignify the gesture with a response.

“I waited fifteen years for a family who was never coming back. I did things on Jakku to survive that I can never erase, because of that. I chose a lie, and I chose to stay for it. I chose the consequences. But not all of them have been bad, you know. I wouldn’t be half the person I am today, if I had never been forced to be that person on Jakku. I wouldn’t know how to hot-wire a speeder, for sure. Or pilot ships.”

“You escaped, though. From Jakku.”

“And you didn’t stay with the First Order,” Rey shoots back. “I only got off Jakku because I was forced to. Same as you. Because a TIE fighter tried to kill me and a man I’d just met for a droid carrying a map to something I didn’t understand. Because a smuggler met me and offered me a job, and then a lightsaber called to me and I ran away from them both. Because some crazy man in a mask decided to kidnap me—” she casts a dry, half-amused look at Ben, who can’t even muster the
wherewithal to respond— “And then I had to save myself. And I was so, so scared. Every minute.”

Ben snorts. “No, you weren’t.”

“Fooled you,” Rey says. “Now fool me.”

There’s a knock at his quarters, two weeks later. Ben pads over to the door on bare feet, mussing a towel through his just-showered hair.

Training with his uncle and Rey had ended only twenty minutes ago, at noon. In an hour, he will be expected to leave again, to work with the intelligence officers until 2100 hours. A perfectly orchestrated schedule— for a tyrant, or a toddler. Ben supposes that he ought to be resentful for it. He is sure that somewhere, in the untested deep of his unconscious, he is. But it is mercifully difficult to think of much, when he isn’t given the time.

He opens the door. Leia Organa stands before him, holding a basket.

Her eyes widen at the sight of him standing there, taking in the length of his height with a cautious sweep. His mother has often gazed at him like that since his capture on Sullust. As though he was something she had been told she was allowed to look at, but not to keep.

She smiles at him. Ben knows he cannot keep that, either.

“Look at you,” Leia says softly. “So handsome.”

He is wearing new clothes today. He suspects that they are another gift from his mother. They had been placed on his bed the day before without note or acknowledgement, but the brown canvas trousers and off-white collared tunic are sized too perfectly to be anything other than the work of a woman who had borne his flesh beneath her heart.

Ben knows he isn’t handsome. As a child, he had been called striking, or odd, depending on the generosity of the speaker. As an adult, he had not allowed anyone to see his face. But he does not correct his mother, because he has disappointed her on levels he is only now beginning to understand, and she has bought him clothes. She deserves, more than anyone, the gift of a beautiful child.

“I’ve cleared your schedule for the next few hours,” Leia says, craning her neck to up at him. It is at times like this, when Ben clears an easy two feet above her shoulders, that he wonders at the impossible strength required of her to have pushed his enormous body from her own. “Have a picnic with me?”

Ben blinks at her blankly. His mother must have cottoned on to the fact that there is very little Ben is in a position to deny her. He had expected this realization to take the form of mandated increased hours with the intelligence officers, or in training with his uncle and Rey. Not with a wicker basket crooked into the fold of his mother’s elbow; with red-and-white checkered blankets; with ants.

His family had not been given to many outings for their own sake. His mother was too often working; his father was too often gone. There had been the rare stellar alignments, when his parents had taken him to Coronet City, to Òetrago, to Vurdon Ka, for no other reason than because they
were there to spend time on. More often than not, they had gone to Endor, or Hoth, or Dantooine, so that his mother could inspect the bases there.

“Ben?” Leia says, raising his eyebrows. Ben realizes belatedly that she’s waiting for an answer; for some confirmation of his desire to go with her or his wish not to. The concept is still an unwieldy novelty.

“Um.” Then, upon realizing the alternative—eight unbroken hours holed up in a three-meter-by-three-meter room with nothing but a datapad of alleged leaks acquired by First Order moles or civilian informants, requiring his confirmation as plausible or nonsense—“Okay.”

Leia raises an eyebrow at him, looking down from the crown of his damp halo of hair to his feet.

“Shoes, Ben.”

He has memories of similar comments directed to him by his mother as a child— instructing him not to forget his coat, his socks, his mittens. His reaction at the time had typically been to race through her legs, during the scant years when he was short enough to do so, escaping to the outer world blissfully untouched by his mother’s mandates.

He’s too tall for such things now. It feels, inexplicably, like growing up.

He returns to his mother clad in the same boots he had worn that day on Sullust, the only pair that he still owns. The thick heels of the soles place Ben another inch and half taller than Leia. She holds out her own hand, a half-completed promise in the space between them whose distance is still too great for Ben to cross, fraught as it is with monsters and regret.

But when his mother reaches out to grasp him by the elbow, Ben does not pull away.

They walk past the fluorescent starkness of the dormitory sector, then the labyrinthine grey of the hallways, and finally out past the hangar, where the honeyed grasses of D’Qar give way to forested hills and an unknown horizon.

When they leave the field behind, the forest is full of flowers.

A breeze picks up, tousling the hem of Ben’s tunic. From beside him, he hears his mother laugh. The sound echoes beneath the canopy, quiet and ringing. A church bell for a congregation of one. Ben can’t remember the last time he’d heard his mother sound like that: without sorrow beneath her tongue; without tragedy behind her teeth.

Ben looks down at her, and Leia reaches up. She pulls a petal away from his hair: then another, and another. The crushed sweetness lingers on her fingertips like sugar water, and all around them is a haze of blossoms, floating on the sunlight.

Ben had forgotten, in the throes of winter, the necessity of spring.

They find a spot above a shallow brook, atop an outcropping of stone. Leia lays out a blanket before setting the basket to the side. He knows what will come next, from experience with tens of political dinners: the silverware, set with a grave dignity more appropriate for a last meal than finger sandwiches; the drinks, poured without a drop spilled; his mother, and her aquiline gaze on his every lapsed elbow on the table or mouth wiped on a sleeve.
But Leia does none of these things.

“I’ve been talking with the intelligence officers,” she says instead. “They say you’re doing exemplary work.”

“It’s only been two weeks,” Ben says, looking away. The air is thick with the scent of sap, and loam, and against the horizon, the base is nowhere to be seen.

“Two weeks in which you’ve impressed them,” his mother says. “Of course, there are still the people who don’t trust you. Your habit of shooting daggers at anyone who exchanges more than three words with you certainly doesn’t help. But you’re thorough, uncompromising, and exacting. And that’s not me saying that about you, Ben. That’s them.”

Ben stills.

He is aware of what most others think of him, beyond the typical descriptors of monster, or murderer, or maniac. As a commander, he had been ruthless and resolute, unforgiving of error and ungenerous with second chances. He had been even less lenient towards himself.

There had been an ardor within him these past fourteen days, kindled by a clean-burning candle in his belly, unfamiliar and sweet. The great majority of rebels in intelligence kept away from him, in keeping with the First Order officers who had once done the same.

And yet.

His mother being the one to ask had been the first mistake, Ben supposes. No underling would insult their superior’s son to her face, no matter who that son was. Whatever the Resistance said was a consequence of how much they respected his mother.

Not him.

“There’s been discussion of…a mission that’s to take place sometime in the upcoming months. They need intelligence to organize it,” his mother continues. “I’m putting your name in.”

“What?”

Leia smiles at him, wistful and wry. The Force flows around him, gentle and undulating, and they are floating atop it in a sailboat, upon their own private sea.

“I felt you in the Force before you were born, you know. I used to tell your father that it felt like I had a goldfish, swimming in my belly. And I could sense that you’d be a fighter. That you’d be strong. You are…amazingly intelligent, Ben. Driven. Tenacious. I watched Snoke take everything from you. I watched him steal your sweetness, and your fire. And now, I’m watching you take it back.” His mother pauses, sidling closer to his side. She smells of soap, and fresh sunlight, and she does not hesitate before taking his hand between her own. “I’m so, so proud of you. I haven’t said it enough.”

His mother comes against him completely then, shaking her head fiercely. He thinks he could be lost forever in his mother’s great expanse, a voyager of a mercy he can hardly understand.

He will disappoint her. He will hurt her. This streak of goodness cannot possibly last.

But Ben will be damned if he’s selfless enough to pull away.
"This goes beyond that. This is something separate from her. It isn't a physical feeling. It is all around her. It suffuses her like the perfume from a jungle of flowers. As such, she is suddenly aware of her child's mind and spirit: She senses pluck and wit and steel blood and a keen mind and by the blood of Alderaan is this one going to be a fighter!"

For Carrie.
So, this is my latest attempt at self-recovery, and
I’m looking for a good way to describe the emptiness.

Listen, I’m sorry for the chirping,
I’m sorry for drowning the bird
And resuscitating the bird
Just to kill the bird again,
I’m sorry that it’s still beating its wings,
That this always ends in beating

But listen...On those days I’m learning how to love again.
Okay?

—Sean Glatch, from Canary

His mother is still leaning against his side. If Ben listens very carefully, he can hear the ticking of Leia Organa’s unassailable quartz-and-clockwork heart.

Eventually, his mother shifts, reaching into their waylaid picnic basket. Ben removes his arm from her shoulders before she has the chance to push it away.

She places two triangles in his hands, after a moment of rummaging. They are soft, wrapped in wax paper and a sort of care Ben thought he would never see again. Ben knows what they are immediately; does not even have to peel back the paper.

Banana and peanut butter sandwiches. With a dollop of marshmallow fluff, for good behavior.

A lump forms in Ben’s throat.

“I’m not a child anymore, Mom,” he says, hating himself for the ugly teenagery crack in his voice; hating how this is the most genuine lie he’s ever told. He thinks he will probably always be that boy waiting at the windowsill for the light of his parents’ ship coming in, even as his mother sits here, right beside him.

“I know,” Leia says, sorrow-soft, and smiles, with the private sort of sadness she has reserved, like a family heirloom, just for him. “You’ll have to forgive me.”

“What is there for me to—”

He must stop when the words fall apart. The crisp spring air blows through the weave of his tunic, sharp with the scent of mint and pine; the thicker sap of wasted chances.
“I missed so much,” his mother says, reaching out to take his hand. She has never been one for touch, has Leia Organa, and yet she is reaching for him. Has reached for him. Again, and again, and again. “Even when I had you. And especially” — a quieting breath — “after.”

After, she says, so diplomatically, as though Ben had merely gone away on an errand or a long journey, always to return.

His anger tastes like metal. Carefully, Ben takes the blade, and sinks it deep into himself.

“After,” Ben says, with a sudden heat, “was not your fault.”

Now that the spring has made him honest, Ben would wager that a great deal of before might not have been hers either. Perhaps she had tried the best she could. Perhaps she had meant well in sending him away. Perhaps, without Leia Organa (without Anakin Skywalker), Ben Skywalker-Organa-Solo might never have attracted the attention of a creature called Snoke; might have lived his days as a thief or a scholar on Hosnian Prime, to be obliterated anonymously into stardust.

(—And do you recall the law of parsimony, Master Solo?

Ben flicks his head up to answer his tutor, clicking his holobook off. A History of Palpatine’s Empire, Second Ed, flickers into blackness.

—In the event of competing hypotheses, the simplest explanation is often the most correct.)

Ah, yes.

Then perhaps he has no one to blame but himself.

“Even so,” comes his mother’s response. “That’s no excuse. For not tearing down the galaxy to find you.”

Her voice is steady, and soft, unfurling around him like the sweet-sharpness of a citrus peel. Not the General’s voice, or the Princess’s.

His mother’s.

And so Ben clings to it, selfishly, because he is good for nothing more than selfishness. If he were a good man, he would let her go.

He does not let her go.

She is tracing her thumb along the ebb and swell of his knuckles, smoothing the callouses there. The heel of her thumb halts against the knuckle of his middle finger, and its ugly, ill-mended break. He’s shattered it so often and so violently — punching the walls of his room on the Finalizer, so that the rivets shuddered with the screams he could not make, for fear that someone would hear him — that he doubts that it will ever really heal.

His mother stares at it. Transfixed, if Ben were forced to guess, at this frank reminder of the things his hands have done.

Then Leia flips his hand over, palm-up, splaying her own palm-print against the shadow of his. She settles so that they are aligned, wrist-to-wrist, the bracelet-line wrinkles below the heels of their hands touching.

His hand easily dwarfs hers, two to one.
“I don’t know when you got so big,” she says, and it’s almost to herself.

“Sometime around thirteen,” comes the drawling, wry response.

And he had shot up like a recalcitrant weed in the years after that, until his Padawan classmates and visiting guests alike had practically taken his height and looming bigness as some deliberate front against them.

Leia smiles. Ben stiffens for a moment, caught in the magnanimous strangeness of being its cause.

But then she stills.

“So many years, I missed,” she says, flatly.

“Yes.”

The hand gripping Ben’s tightens for a moment.

“I would like to...hear about it, sometime. That is, if you’d like to tell someone. If that someone would even be me.”

“I...”

The words crumple between his fingers again, a potpourri of fluttering white. His mother looks at him, expectantly, waiting for words Ben doesn’t have the capacity to say.

“I’m sorry,” Leia says, and Ben wants to drop dead again at hearing those words again from her. But these words will not allow for death; would pull him headfirst from the grave. “I didn’t listen to you, when you were young. But if you’ll have me, when you’re ready...I’d like to start listening now.”

“Yes,” Ben chokes out, a shuddering whisper. Not now, or today, but someday. “Okay.”

“There’s more to why I brought you here,” Leia says, when their banana-and-peanut-butter sandwiches are done. The wax paper wrappings lay crumpled up, wadded into planetesimals at their feet. Ben swipes the back of his hand over his mouth to brush off the last of the stray crumbs, before licking the stickiness off from between his fingers.

The blatant breach of table manners is worth it, for his mother’s familiar look of well-bred distress. When it becomes clear that Ben will not repent for it, Leia rolls her eyes, turning again to the matter of the picnic basket.

What she pulls out does not help Ben understand.

A plant clipping, wrapped in a wet rag. A ring of keys. And a bottle full to the brim with clear liquid, a label stamped over the glass in silver Aurebesh script.

He recognizes the bottle first.

“Shesharilian vodka,” he says, at the same time his mother gripes softly,

“Han. I should have known.”

Ben turns to her in surprise.
“He said you’d understand,” Leia said, with an unintentional crypticness that can only mean his father’s ghost had been even less forthcoming with her. It has been weeks since his phantom has visited Ben—two, almost three, by Ben’s count.

Ben tells himself that he’s not counting.

“He shipped me a bottle once, when I was at the Academy,” Ben says, grabbing the flask from off the blanket. Leia casts him a scandalized look, of the sort of retrograde panic whose twin had been found in her expression every time Han Solo’s dubiously safe adventures with his son had belatedly come to light. Even sealed, the liquor smells blackout-sharp, like rocket fuel striated with cherries.

“Your father sent you liquor—”

“—It was a gift,” Ben cuts in, and he must be drunk, somehow, for how quickly he’d come to his father’s defense. “For my thirteenth birthday.”

Maybe he should tell her that he’d only managed half of a single, blistering mouthful, before spluttering the rest of the shot onto his boots. He’d hidden the remains of the bottle beneath his cot after that—instead of pouring it out into the bushes.

The only time he’d ever been tempted to touch it again had been the night before he’d slaughtered the students at the Academy.

It had been his father’s broken, ineffectual attempt at an olive branch, and wholly ill-conceived. But now it is Ben’s turn to make his own broken, ineffectual olive branches, and it is so much harder than he’d ever given his father credit for.

There’s a note attached to the bottle, written in his mother’s neat hand, but not her voice.

Save a glass for me, kid.

Ben swallows.

“There’s also this,” Leia says, after moment of stillness, gesturing to the flower cuttings that had lain beside the vodka and the keys. They firework with red and gold blooms, each blossom as small as an ember. “They’re Jebwa flowers, I’ve been told. A gift from Rey.”

Ben pauses. Forces himself to push through the next question.

“And the keys?”

A beat.

“A gift from your uncle, and me.”

“I don’t—I don’t understand,” Ben says, because the only explanation has not applied to him for fifteen years, and probably never will again.

Leia gives another small smile, looking—of all things—slightly embarrassed. Ben marvels to see it there, on his mother’s indefatigable face.

“You know how it is. We try to be frugal, but…equipment is always damaged. There’s a graveyard a few miles off from the base, where we retire old speeders and fighters for parts.”

Ben stills, eyeing the keys with sudden comprehension, their glare suddenly too keen, too bright.
“The speeder’s in terrible shape,” Leia says immediately, so that Ben will have less reason to tell her that he cannot keep it. Ben hates his mother’s masterful play even as he admires her for it. She, of all people, is the only one with permission to know him so predictably. “It will have to be fixed up. Months, possibly, of work. But you can use whatever parts you find in the graveyard to get it running again, and if you do…the Council’s agreed to let you keep it. You can’t run it off-planet of course, but…”

“You mean you persuaded the Council to let me keep it,” Ben says hoarsely.

His mother nods, biting her lip, and it makes her look twenty years younger.

He had been nine, he thinks, or ten, the year he’d asked his mother for a speeder, because his legs couldn’t run faster than his demons, but maybe a repulsorlift engine might. And Mother had said No, don’t be silly, what if you got hurt, to which Ben had not had the words to reply that at least it would hurt differently than this fear that moved in lockstep with his shadow.

No, he isn’t a child anymore. But his mother had not been given the kindness of that forewarning. He had left her as a boy and returned to her as a villain, and she is doing the best that she can to make up the difference.

“You remembered,” Ben says quietly.

(Of course I did,” Leia answers, and Ben hears it like the echo of some last safe place: Of course, of course, of course.

She rises up on her knees and hugs him again; so careless with her touch, so spendthrift with her faith. Ben cannot help but bring his arms around her, because she does not deserve this mess of a wretched, ungrateful son; because if he thinks too hard, even this reason will fall apart.

“It’s a couple of weeks late, I know,” Leia says, into his hair. “But you weren’t…yourself, when it happened, and then you were in the medbay— and then you were so busy with Intelligence that they wouldn’t let me take you away from them until now.”

And he shouldn’t dare ask, except there is a bottle of Shesharilian vodka gleaming beside him in the sunlight, beside a posy of flowers burning colorful as a summer dream. There is a clutch of keys his mother had fought to give him, because she is trying so hard and so beautifully, where Ben has only imperfectly stumbled into grace.

He asks.

“Happy birthday, Ben,” his mother says in answer.

xxxvi. (part ii)

It is night, and his family have finally gone from his quarters.

The air still smells of sugar, and magnesium: remnants of the cake he had under some form of duress baked with Rey, and the sparklers they had all lit afterwards, dimming the room so that the shadows of their faces bubbled with light.

(Rey had not managed to quite get the trick the first time, or the fifth, and so Ben had been forced to
gently pry the sparkler from her fingers and strike it quickly against the wall, like snapping a neck, or cutting a lily from its stem. He’d handed it back to her with one palm cupped around it, so that its dandelion-frenzy of white light would not go out. Her hand had flinched, just barely, at the biting glow of the crackling sparks. Until Ben had shown her his palm that had been guarding the flame, and she had finally believed that they would not burn her.

He wondered where his mother could have gotten them. More accurately, he wondered what favors she had pulled, and how she had possibly justified it. Somehow, the sparklers had found their way to the secretive and desolate military outpost of D’Qar—and three months out of season for the appropriate holiday, no less, when entire planets of people would hold them to the sky, in memory of how one lone candle was enough to hold back the dark.

Galactic Concordance Day.

The day the Empire had surrendered to the Republic and signed its treaty, forbidding torture and weapons of mass destruction; forbidding death. The day when life and love had won— at least, until next time.

The day on which Ben had been born.

In the corner, the open window had bled blue-black darkness into the room from the fine, moonless night. The energy field installed just beyond it to prevent Ben's escape had since been taken down, and the spring air tumbled through the casement, chill and clean. Luke stood by the windowsill, sedately holding three ignited sparklers like a posy of crackling daisies. His mother stood beside her brother, holding her pair alight like a flare.

The one Ben held was not as bright as the others; a chemical defect, he was sure, of the amount of oxidizer, or of the charcoal.

But oddly, it burned the longest of all.)

The Jebwa clippings are perched on the windowsill, newly potted in the container Rey had brought to his quarters at the onset of evening. He suspects it had once been a jar of pickles, or possibly jam preserves. The label had been soundly torn off, only faint adhesive marks still smudging the glass—but Rey had not been willing to tell him how long she had worked to scrub the jar so clean.

Ben rummages through the kitchen cabinets for a glass, filling it with a hasty rush of tapwater. The flowers, he had learned from his sojourns on the holonet that afternoon—on the personal datapad his mother had pushed into his hands without looking in his direction, so that he would not be blocked by the extensive firewalls in place on his own— grew best with regular watering, and partial sunlight.

He will likely kill it in less than a month.

He tips the glass’s contents onto the roots regardless, watching until the last of the water disappears as a dark stain on the soil.

(“Did you know?” he had asked Rey, beneath his breath, so that his mother and uncle would not hear.

He had been whisking the eggs for the cake, Rey stirring powdered sugar in a bowl for the frosting. Unnecessary, Ben had been sure to grouse about the latter, but Rey had never tasted frosting before, and Ben’s mother had not been about to waste the sugar she had so painstakingly and so mysteriously smuggled onto D’Qar.
Rey’s eyebrows pulled into a not-quite frown of puzzlement. There was a splash of flour on her nose from where she had unwittingly swiped a powdery hand. A larger splash cut a swath from her forehead to the crown of her hair, from when Ben had tossed a fistful of flour at her in retaliation for her unprovoked strike on him, the evidence of which now dusted Ben’s curls in premature grey.

“Know what?”

“About the Jebwa flowers,” he had said, “being from Corellia.”

Rey blinked, tilting her head. A smattering of flour fluttered onto her shoulders. Ben couldn’t be sure if it would be rude to tell her so, or when he had started caring about such paltry things as politeness.

“What’s on Corellia?” she asked, oblivious, and her ignorance was a blunt harpoon in his gut. No, nothing could ever be easy for him. Not even this.

Especially not this.

“Have you—” Ben had started; had crashed his whisk against the bowl in a racketing thunder as the words and the yolks fell apart. “The Falcon. Have you ever paid attention to its designation?”

(Sir, we were unable to recover the droid from Jakku. It escaped capture aboard a stolen—)

“It’s a YT-1300 light freighter,” Rey responded, almost automatically, and Ben had expected nothing less from her keen, engineering mind.

But still, she was missing it. The critical piece.

“…from Corellia,” he finished.

He could feel the moment Rey understood what he had said. The Force pulled in around them like a shivering skin of gooseflesh.

More importantly, he could feel the moment Rey understood what he had not said.

“Oh.” The clinking of her spoon against the bowl’s ceramic beat a piercing, unbroken note. Her icing was watery now; she had been stirring it for too long, and at the moment seemed uninclined to stop. “Have you—”

“No,” Ben had said, too quickly and too sharp, but Rey had barely flinched. The eggs in his own bowl were frothing and wild, an inadvertent finely whipped meringue. His mother hadn’t the culinary eye to immediately pick out from half a room away where Ben had gone wrong, a helplessness his entire family shared. But it would soon be obvious enough. He was never one to make small mistakes.

His father had told Ben he’d take him there, one day. But.

But.

There are no shot glasses in his quarters. Ben must settle for the smallest regular ones he has. The clank as he sets the glasses down beside the bottle of Shesharilian vodka rings obscenely in the nighttime hush.

A cool draught wafts the windows from where he has not yet closed them, making pale yellow ghosts of the curtains. Ben lets out a deep, lowing breath, settling down into one of two chairs arranged about the table before prying the cap from the vodka.
The liquor smells of gunpowder and moonlight and nauseating nostalgia, and the sick, sentimental boy Ben can no longer pretend he isn’t pours two glasses before Ben can leap up to wring his neck.

He waits, unsure of whether he wishes to be wrong.

There is no moon tonight, and the stars burn all the clearer for it. Somewhere, up there, is the ghost of Alderaan, three decades dead and yet still shining for the planets too far away to have had time to receive its last light. D’Qar, Ben had checked, was four hundred light years away from the site of Alderaan’s resting place. Four hundred years before D’Qar would even see the light of the Death Star touch the last home of the Princess of Alderaan.

Somewhere up there, on a planet far away, Hosnian Prime still shines, too.

And Ben can pretend that there is still time.

“Hey, kid,” says a sudden voice, shuffling into the seat beside him. “It’s getting harder to— well, never mind. But I said I’d come. So…I came.”

“Yes,” Ben says, blinking up at Han Solo’s translucent ghost. “You did.”

xxxvii.

Ben arrives in the war room early on the day of the first debriefing for the mission, as had never been his habit in the First Order. Tardiness had driven Hux apoplectic, which had been its own reward. The deliberately-bled satisfaction of the other officers’ terror and loathing, as his masked apparition swept through the room, had more than made up the rest.

He takes up his roost at the circular railing surrounding the main holo projector, in the spot nearest the door. The projector is in idle mode, a map of the galaxy thrown up in a net of emerald. The overhead lights have not yet been turned on, leaving only the yellowish glow of the secondary ones, and their vast alluvial plains of shadow.

Unbidden, Ben’s eyes trail to the ground.

There, only twenty feet from where he stands now, is the spot where he’d screamed out the shield codes for the second Starkiller; where his mother had held him, shaking—to the place where, on his knees, he had both ended and saved his own life.

A light flickers on overhead.

Ben tenses, glancing up, squinting at the sudden brightness.

Poe Dameron’s eyes stare back.

Ben can feel the rabbit-thumping uptick of the pilot’s pulse; can feel the exact moment when the pilot decides that this does not matter. Were it not for the Force, Ben would have thought the surrogate son of the Resistance had not noticed him at all.

It appears that Poe Dameron is almost as a good a pretender as he is.

Ben watches as Dameron approaches the rail, crossing the distance from the door to the spot opposite Ben in a series of short, easy strides. Warbling in step with him is an orange-and-white droid, idly
looping figure-eights through Dameron’s feet.

Not a droid, Ben thinks, through the uncanny sharpness of a memory, stolen from Poe Dameron’s. The droid.

*BeeBee-Ate*, if Rey’s occasional stories of its antics were anything to go by. He had tortured for this droid. Had kidnapped Rey for this droid.

The droid looks at him, cocking its head.

Ben blinks, waiting for it to recoil in a blur of tabby-colored motion, once it recognizes who he is and what he’s done. Ben would expect nothing less; would demand it, of a machine’s unassailable logic.

Instead, the droid merely peers at him, cooing at him in the sort of nonsense binary curiously customary to astromechs. Artoo had done much the same when Ben was small.

*BeeBee-Ate* rolls over to him, nudging Ben in the shin.

Ben stiffens. The droid chirrups, softly, and bumps his leg again. Closer up, Ben can see the curved white line of its antenna, bent out of shape at an almost ninety-degree angle.

The astromech thumps Ben a third time.

This is Dameron’s problem. Dameron should be paying attention to his *kriffing* droid, because Ben certainly has no right to be around it—

“Thank you all for coming,” booms the flute-timbred voice of Colonel Mikshmi. Ben snaps his head up to find the head of intelligence striding into the room beside Ben’s mother and uncle, a gaggle of rebels in tow. At the very end of the line is Rey, cheekbones smudged with engine grease, and beside her, FN-2187. He is wearing the jacket that Ben had nearly slaughtered him in, for a crime of treason that Ben has now committed, tenfold.

Ben must pack the memory hard, like snow, until it is safe to walk on.

Rey nods when she catches sight of Ben, flickering her fingers at him in her most war room-appropriate approximation of a wave. But Ben will not curse her with his association in front of the whole base, and so he merely stares on, straight ahead.

Rey narrows her eyes, slighted stubbornness filling the Force between them with the pullback-tension of a rubber band.

In the next second, she is standing beside him, mouth canted flat in a dare of defiance. Ben scowls, until he realizes that the defiance is not directed at him, and then all expression leaves him.

A moment later, FN-2187 takes up sentry on Rey’s opposite side, casting Ben a sharp, suspicious glare. Ben would be impressed at the man’s bravery if Ben had not already seen it firsthand, and hated him for it.

“Now then, I believe we’re all here to discuss a new mission,” Colonel Mikshmi continues, as the vague chatter of the room grows hush. Ben grips the railing, its sharp edges biting into his palms in a centering discomfort.

Mikshmi’s pause grows long, until the distance from it to her conclusion brings Ben vertigo.

“We need a team to go back to Jakku.”
...has it been two months since an update? Yikes. Thanks for sticking with me.

...aaand thanks to the new Empire's End novel, we finally have a canonical birth planet and birth date for Ben Solo—Galactic Concordance Day, on Chandrila. The fact that I was already writing scenes involving Ben's birthday when this information came out was an odd coincidence that I couldn't pass up playing up a little. I can't think of a more appropriately symbolic and hopeful date for canon to put the day of Ben's birth. The oncoming canon redemption arc is real, y'all.

Majority of the sparkler scene, predictably, written to Flares by the Script, which has been on my writing playlist for this fic since forever.
Mr. Head stood very still and felt the action of mercy touch him again but this time he knew that there were no words in the world that could name it. He understood that it grew out of agony, which is not denied to any man and which is given in strange ways to children. He understood it was all a man could carry into death to give his Maker and he suddenly burned with shame that he had so little of it to take with him. He stood appalled, judging himself with the thoroughness of God, while the action of mercy covered his pride like a flame and consumed it.

—Flannery O’Connor, from A Good Man is Hard to Find and Other Stories

The Kelvin Ravine is like standing on the edge of the world.

Ben perches against the lip of the cliff, rocking his heels. Below, at the base of the ravine, their ship, the Condor, lies in the memory of a riverbed. Now the river is nothing but a swath of sandstone, and the fossilized curls of ferns like half-penitent hands.

This high up, their destination of Tuanul is a bruised smudge on the horizon. What Lor San Tekka might have left there that could be of any benefit to the Resistance is anyone’s guess.

They will find nothing. Resistance Intelligence has not admitted as much, but Ben is not them, and Ben had been there, watching the village raze to the ground. They have brought Ben to this place because he was once a child whom Lor San Tekka had known, before Ben had pretended otherwise in a masquerade that had cost Lor San Tekka his life. Rey is here, as a Jakku native, to act as a scout and Ben’s if-necessary executioner. FN-2187 was also brought along, impeccable as he is with blasters and light artillery; Poe Dameron, as a pilot bar none. Both have run missions to this planet before, and Poe Dameron, in all of his years of espionage, has only been caught once.

In another life, Ben supposes he would have been proud to be Poe Dameron’s only exception.

“Brooding again?” Rey says, coming up to stand beside him. Ben had hardly heard her approach; but then, he’d hardly needed to. Her Force signature here is a stark, bone-white thing, focused to burning sharpness beneath Jakku’s death-empty skies.

Ben scowls at her perfunctorily.

“The term ‘brooding’ originally referred to the act of mother hens incubating their young. So, unless I am female, a chicken, or both, I suggest selecting a better metaphor.”

“Ass,” Rey says, and Ben rolls his eyes.

She’s trying to distract him. She might even have succeeded, had she chosen a target less adept at mind reading and misanthropy.
“I’d estimate Tuanul at twenty klicks from here,” she says, bringing a hand up in front of her, thumbing the horizon in estimation of parallax. “Fourish hours’ walk, maybe. It will be in the dark, but that’s better for us. Cooler, at least.”

Behind, Poe Dameron and FN-2187 are still making their way up the cliff face. They had sent Rey ahead to scout, and therefore Ben as well, so that he would not be close enough to either’s backs to run them through with his saber. He’d been given permission to wield it for the purposes of the mission.

Ben trains his eyes on the horizon; works his mouth before speaking. “Did you ever think you’d come back?”

She grows quiet a moment, a ghost in Ben’s peripheral vision. The shape of her face is limned in the last red heartbeat of sunset.

“When I first left, it was all I could think of. And then after Starkiller, I said, Never again.” She pauses. “Did you?”

“To Jakku?” Ben asks; pretends he does not hear the double meaning from a girl who had once thought of Jakku in the same breadth of thought as home. The shard of honesty clasped in his fist brings a pain the same quality as fear. “No. Never.”

Rey hums softly, a low, non-committal sound. When she turns to look at him, she is more negative space than girl, fraught by the night’s dark, moonless halo.

“But here we both are.”

To the south, at Ben’s right hand, the Goazon Badlands stretches its sweep of sand all the way to the horizon. Farther on, according to the map of Rey’s remembered voice, lies the Graveyard of Ships, where Rey had gutted Star Destroyers; and beyond that, Niima Outpost.

To the north, the Sacred Villages burn softly with distant lamplight. And on the farthest edge of the villages’ scattered brightness, a gap of darkness where Tuanul once stood.

Ben closes his eyes, counting down from ten.

Ten like the countdown he had silently marked after ordering the Stormtroopers to fire; nine like a ragged-cloth huddle of worshippers and innocents, orange-brilliant against the flames. Eight—

“—Ben.”

He looks to Rey. Rey is looking at him, fingering his name like a coin. There is fire behind his eyelids along with the metallic tang of mask-filtered smoke in his throat, and—

“Ben,” she says again—and there is Rey, pushing the warm-penny press of his name into his palm.

Ben takes it from her only after a suspended moment, when Jakku seems to tilt and he feels himself falling upward, into the delicate sharpness of the stars. There’s a breast pocket on either side of his leather jacket, empty and warmed only by his pulse. He takes the name and places it there, in the left pocket just above his heart.

Ben fingers the hilt of the saber where it hangs in his belt, finding comfort in the kaleidoscopic warm-cold of the metal as the day transmutes into night.

Rey watches him do so. She doesn’t flinch away.
He waits, for her to ask some unanswerable thing. If he is okay, like a breakfast of only stale toast or caffè sweetened with only a packet of creamer. But Rey does not ask, and it occurs to Ben that perhaps she does not know what okay means, herself.

Ben’s hand goes to his saber again, unclipping it so that he can spin it between his fingers. He does not ignite it, but imagines that he might. It’s comfort in a place he ought not to find it.

Maybe knowing this in itself is a start.

“You keep calling me Ben,” he says, when the timbre of his own heart quiets to a more manageable terror. His voice, echoing from the base of the canyon, is clean and sharp and part ethereal, as though half-made or half-undone. Ben wonders what part of himself is down there, calling for her. Calling for anyone.

He stands there in the chasm between asking and answer, fearing her pity, fearing the inevitable—that this piecemeal Ben Solo is a joke and an eidolon, whose name is no better than a courtesy title for the dead.

Six months ago —two months ago— he would never have thought that this would terrify him so.

“It’s your name,” Rey says. Certain, like the motion of the heavens.

So long it’s been, since he’s felt such mathematical faith in himself; since he believed the addition of his broken parts would sum to anything more than monster, than murderous snake, than Kylo Ren.

In the grace of the gloaming sun, Ben gives himself a moment to wish that they would.

He has allowed himself to think of himself Ben, because now he knows that he will never know better. He will never know better than the boy he once was —chiaroscuro, melancholy-hearted Ben Solo, with his hot-dark affection that scalded everything it touched like boiling sugar. Ben Solo who thought he was afraid of the light because it cast such long shadows; who believed he could become something other than himself, without realizing that this then would become himself too.

Rey is squinting at him. Though in the falling nighttime, she might only be trying to make out his face.

“I…” Ben starts; stops. The stars hardly flicker here, from his vantage point so high up in an atmosphere so thin. “I might be— selfish enough. To want that. But that doesn’t mean anyone else has to be dragged down with me.”

His family, too, must be forgiven in that regard. They cannot be expected to know better either.

“You’re selfish? What about Snoke?”

Ben thinks of his old master; of his marrow-dark eyes and the mirror-shattering pain of his hands in his head. He opens his mouth to speak, to say that Snoke had done nothing to him. He had tempted Ben, but he had not made him do anything. That had been Ben’s own doing.

The words do not come out.

It’s black, too black to make out the landscape. Ben feels its vast, empty promise like a hand over a pond of dark water.

It is Rey who finally breaks the silence.
“Do you think we’ll find what we’re looking for there, in Tuanul?”

“No,” Ben answers. If Lor San Tekka had left something vital in Tuanul, it certainly would not be in a place Ben could find it. And if it were, Ben had already ordered his Stormtroopers to burn the entire village where Lor San Tekka hid it to the ground.

“What an optimist.”

“Optimism is for fools.”

“You’re a fool,” Rey says, without unkindness, and quietly walks away.

They call it the Pilgrim’s Road. The old happabore trail is made walkable by generations of footsteps, and it runs across the Goazon Badlands from the Sacred Villages to the Kelvin Ravine like a scar.

It is a place out of time. Ben can feel it all around him, the past-present-future trod of an entire collective of believers.

(In living memory, Rey had never seen this road used for more than vagabonds and thieves.)

Dameron and FN-2187 plod along behind Ben. Rey follows right beside. Their tread is profane in the wild-holy silence, unfurling like the flayed-open circumference of the prayer wheels he’d seen in holophotos from Jedha’s Holy City.

All gone, now.

A knifing wind has begun to whistle in the west. Ben rucks up the collar of his jacket to fend off the cold. The lamps of Sacred Villages still glow in the distance, seeming hardly closer now than when they started.

(“Bloggin bird oil,” Rey had said, in answer to how the villagers made fire on a planet with neither wood nor matchsticks. Ben had hardly marked the torches on Tuanul the first time he’d come, there to burn their kingdom down. The oil, Rey had said, was inexpensive to burn and to acquire, and Ben had found himself greedy for such an easy, cheap light.)

They walk.

They walk without stopping, without hesitation. Rey consults neither map nor local, guiding the group ever-onwards towards the soft illumination of the villages. There is something inevitable about walking here that is like tracing a fingertip down a notch carved in bone.

He thinks of the holy men come before him here. The murderers, traitors, and thieves. They are all here, in the netted marrow of this place, revenants of faiths departed or never held.

Maybe they didn’t all believe. Maybe it was enough faith to simply walk the path.

Ben comes to a dead stop at the outskirts of Tuanul, grasped by a gravity that is closer, deeper,
thicker.

He swallows, willing his heart to beat.

There’s a fumbling by his side. Ben turns with an edge of mania to see Poe Dameron and FN-2187 groping for flashlights, kept lashed to their belts as Rey and he keep their lightsabers. After two bright, scything clicks, twin white beams cut clinical lines against the autopsied corpse of Tuanul.

In the square, where Ben had ordered every man, woman, and child rounded up, the remnants of the villagers’ huts are a polyptych of ashes. Nestled in the sand are violet-red-gold bits of cloth—a child’s skirt, perhaps, or a man’s sash—and hard glimpses of ivory that do not catch the starlight. And sand, everywhere sand.

The desert, too, is trying to forget.

It is doing a better job than Ben.

He had been standing—not here, but—there, a stone’s throw away from where he is now. And the firelight had been blazing, had been all-consuming, had been yellow-red like the Jebwa flowers Rey had given him as a gift.

Now—darkness.

The flashlights sweep past again in their post-mortem of the village, scalpel-thin and uncaring. A sense of cold wrongness falls upon Ben; fills him until he is so heavy with it that he can hardly move.

“Kill the flashlights,” Ben grits out.

Dameron grows rigid behind him. His signature, hazy with memory a moment ago, sharpens.

(Kill them all.)

“Why would we do that?”

Ben half-turns to face him. Dameron’s temples glisten with cold sweat. His face, wan, netted in shadows, is drawn the way it had been, when—

(So who talks first? You talk first? I talk first?)

“Because—” Ben says, struggling the words out beneath the weight of the numbers he’s cotton-stuffed inside of his mind, to stifle the noise and the blood (One thousand, nine-hundred ninety-nine, nine-hundred ninety-eight—).

“—Because it will draw attention to us,” Rey finishes for him, coming up between Dameron and himself, a bundle of scouted, metallic pipes in her hands made nondescript in the dimness. Over her shoulder, FN-2187 stands with his back to all three of them, stock-still in the lockjaw of memory. He is staring at a spot in the sand, flexing his fingers over and over. “Scavengers notice things like flashlights. If anyone spots the lights, it will make them wonder what we’re looking for here, and if there’s anything worthwhile to take for themselves.”

Dameron turns to Rey, eyes very carefully skipping over the place where Ben stands.

“Okay, so we can’t afford that kind of attention. Then what do we do? Rummage around in the dark?”

Rey hefts the metal bundle in her hand. The pieces low with a cowbell-like clinking.
“We can use these. They’re torches, the ones that didn’t get burned with the rest of the village. Fire looks more natural. Like we live here, have a home and a means to protect ourselves.” She gestures over her shoulder, where a leather pouch is festooned diagonally across her back. “And I found some bloggin oil to light them with. It looks like a lot of things survived the flames, out at the edge. Not everything here is gone.”

Unbidden, Ben looks out, across the potpourri of tattered cloth and ivory bone and blackened sand, to the outskirts of Tuanul where some oil to light the lamps remained, beyond the purview of destruction.

Lor San Tekka’s tent is midway through the village, half-charred and sagging into the sand. The four of them stake the lamps equidistantly around the hut in silence.

When they finish, Rey stands in front of the mouth of the hut, unstrapping the pouch of oil from her back. She moves to fill the first lamp, movement lithe and matter-of-fact. Ben steps forward, compelled by something at once within and without himself that flutters under his pulse like a dove.

“I’ll do it.”

Rey hesitates for only a moment. And then the oil is in his hands, and he is making his way down the long and ever-turning circle, pouring it into the lamps until the desert darkness is heavy with the clean-sweet scent.

When it is done, and he is standing back among Rey and Poe Dameron and FN-2187, he unclips the lightsaber from his belt and lets his hesitation linger for only a moment. The blade ignites, terrible and roaring in the stillness, pooling bloody light upon the ground.

Fear crystallizes in the shadows behind him: Rey’s, mostly overcome now, moving only with sudden movement, sudden savagery. FN-2187’s, twinned in lockstep with the courage necessary every day to overcome it. And Poe Dameron’s, flaring with the memory of the last time he had seen this blade; with Lor San Tekka’s eyes glowing in its horrible firelight, before everything went dark.

He had been standing— no, not here— he adjusts his bearings a few feet to the left—

—Here.

He had been standing here.

(i know where you come from before you called yourself kylo ren the first order rose from the dark side you did not you may try but you cannot deny the truth that is your family)

(you’re so right)

(you’re so right)

(you’re so right)

And he knows now (remembers; it is memory, this back-tracking process, like refining shadows from candlelight) that he had not killed Lor San Tekka in cold blood. He had killed him with burning blood, bright blood, blood scarlet-hot with hate for Lor San Tekka’s open-palmed, benevolent sadness at the shrouded mockery that Kylo Ren had tried to become, and which Ben Solo only
imperfectly became. And Ben (Kylo Ren) (Ben—at the end of it all, with his wicked hands and thick-beating heart and a mother who held his hand a week ago and told him she was proud of him) had despised Lor San Tekka for it; had hefted his firebrand sword a full armspan above his head and cloven the old man’s kindly sorrow in two along with his spine.

He had killed him, Ben realizes suddenly, trying to kill himself.

Ben’s legs stutter. He does not allow himself to fall.

He walks the length of the circle of lamps, setting each aflame with a tap from the blade of his lightsaber, like setting a sword upon the incumbent shoulders of a knight.

When he stands back, Jakku burns with soft, vigilled candlelight.

xxxviii.

Lor San Tekka’s tent smells of cardamom spice and leather. The scent is well-worn and warmly dark, like the inside of a cup of tea.

Lor San Tekka had been a short man. Or rather, he had been an average man, and Ben an irresponsibly tall one, so that Ben must stoop like a penitent cripple just to get through the tent doorflap. Dameron, always shorter and lither and more gifted at personhood, enters behind him after a mere gentlemanly incline of his head.

The doorflap closes.

Ben Solo and Poe Dameron stand alone in the close-wrought dimness.

Dameron does not immediately turn on the flashlight. Ben is consumed by the heart-beating silence; the time-turning rasp of the sand. They are still for an anonymous moment where nothing inside the tent has changed.

Then Dameron clicks on the light.

He swings the beam in a low arc around the tent’s perimeter, exposing woven-mat rugs on the ground, pulverized with dust and footprints. In the far corner is a pallet of stuffed rags. In the rough-hewn netting hanging from the walls glows the dim gleam of glass baubles and devices which Ben can only vaguely name. Shadowed brooms of dried herbs trail from the ceiling, shedding motes of gold dust into the light.

The flashlight finishes its circuit, coming to a stop at Ben’s feet. Poe Dameron’s face is dim guesswork in the shadows, but there is no mistaking the broken-glass brightness of his eyes.

Dameron opens his mouth partway, stiffens; reconsiders. Ben thinks of twelve different methods of catching the punch Dameron is likely to throw at him, knowing he won’t choose any.

“I don’t even know what we’re looking for,” Dameron finally says, with the carefully controlled casualness he had worn on Jakku, shoved on his knees before Kylo Ren’s feet. Behind Dameron’s square-jawed poise had been a man whose Force signature was terrified. “Do you?”

They do not make eye contact.
“No,” Ben says. And he does not. Lor San Tekka, like his mother and her Resistance, had run an economy of hope and hearsay. He cannot imagine what might be a sign from him—a line from some half-forgotten couplet, written in code and buried beneath the sand. A red prayer ribbon tied around a signpost, now burnt up. Or nothing, because in the end the Force had not delivered him.

In the half-light, Ben can just make out Dameron’s bitter smile.

“The General thought you would,” he says. “Argued with a lot of people over letting you come. She talked up a storm about you. For you. Because that’s what everything’s always come down to, hasn’t it? Everything in this blasted war? One way or another it’s always come down to the General’s son.”

Anger wells up in a defensive place that Ben had thought calcified long ago.

“You can’t blame her for that.”

“I don’t. Never did.”

“Good,” Ben says, and his voice is stronger than he thought it would be. “Leave her out of this.”

Dameron’s mouth narrows. Ben does not owe Dameron as much as some—as his mother, who had lashed together all her hopes in order to build a raft over her grief; as his uncle, his father—but he owes him more than enough to meet his gaze as unflinchingly as he can.

“Why are you really here?” Dameron says.

Ben grits his teeth, pretending that he has an answer that isn’t as maudlin as heartache.

“You know why. The General asked me to.”

“That’s not a reason. That’s the official excuse. You and I both know that no one on this damn base has any real power to force you to do anything you don’t want to. We had to drug you to the point where you nearly died just so you wouldn’t take us all with you when you snapped.”

“Are you saying you want me to be more difficult, Dameron?”

“I’m saying that I want to know what made Snoke’s favorite lapdog-lackey suddenly decide he’d rather be General Organa’s obedient son.”

Ben hawks an acidic laugh.

“I’m barely qualified to be her son. Were it not for the accident of my birth, we both know she’d prefer you in every conceivable way.”

Dameron’s entire body stiffens as though slammed by an unexpected blow. Oh yes, honesty is the far more cutting weapon. Ben wonders why he hadn’t begun using it sooner.

Before Dameron can say something else, Ben turns away.

His mother, as always, has placed too much faith in him.

He doesn’t know what he’s meant to find here. There had been no certainty that they would find anything, only a hunch that a man who had been the Resistance’s loyal informant and unwitting martyr might have necessarily left his unfinished work behind. Save for his uncle, Ben had been most in contact with Lor San Tekka over the years of the man’s acquaintance with the Skywalkers, and he and Dameron had been the ones to see him last. This was the reasoning Leia had wielded like
a cudgel in order to allow Ben this mission. As with everything Leia set her mind to, it was granted.

Ben had known Lor San Tekka as a child, and later a teenager, on the long trips during his Academy years when Ben had accompanied his uncle across the galaxy in search of rare Jedi artifacts. Lor San Tekka rarely met with either of them in person, except over cups of tea. He preferred to leave them with letters, or holos and bits of cryptic code. The last of these was always left unsolved. It was safer, Lor San Tekka had always said, against those who might wish to use the artifacts for ill. The dead drops he left them in were almost always marked with a sign...

...Impossible.

Lor San Tekka had not planned this, could not have planned this. Ben had cut him down with mere minutes’ forewarning.

Still, it’s the only lead he has.

He circles the tent, searching, inspecting. Dameron presses back in his wake. Everything is as it seems to be— the pallet, the baubles, the feathery shafts of herbs.

Ben narrows his eyes.

“That hanging right there,” he says to Dameron, indicating a dried broom of leaves hanging off to the right side of tent, above glistening jars of preserves. “Turn your light on it.”

Dameron gives Ben a lingering look, but complies.

“Zhenhua plant,” Ben says quietly. “Those aren’t native to Jakku.”

The circle of light trained on the herbs grows. Ben stiffens as Dameron’s voice comes from directly behind him.

“How do you know?”

Ben takes a slow, rattling inhale. He clenches his fists, willing calm, and turns a half-circle on the heels of his boots.

“Are you familiar with skirtopanol?”

Dameron takes a half step back. The circle of light trembles.

“The Imperial torture drug? The one that makes you so sensitive all over that just sitting on an interrogation chair’s like being set on fire?”

Ben nods.

“It’s also a truth serum,” Ben says, and the world tilts below him by degrees. It seems Lor San Tekka had never lost his knack for symbols. It was a vital skill, Ben supposed, for a man who lived among them. “Before it was chemically synthesized, it was derived from the zhenhua plant.”

“Why— Why would Lor San Tekka keep skirtopanol?”

Ben closes his eyes and swallows.

“Because,” he says, “we need to start digging.”
Buried two feet beneath the packed earth, under the frond of the plant used to tell the truth, is a single steel box.

Dameron grunts as he unearths it, tossing aside the flat stone he had used for his crude shovel. Ben lets his stone, twin to Dameron’s, clatter to his side. Dameron hoists the box up, setting it between the two of them with a dull clang.

He scrabbles against the sides of the box, palm-lines encrusted with clay. There is no lock, and no discernable means to open it.

“Voice password,” Dameron muses. “We’re karked.”

Ben squints into the darkness. There were ways to get around voice activation locks, though they likely didn’t have the equipment here.

(And there you have it, kid, his father had said, after levering open the third voice-locked candy jar. Don’t let anyone say that you can’t.)

But the zhenhua plant.

Lor San Tekka, priest-explorer. Lor San Tekka, survivor of the Alderaanian genocide, who had lost his life to that royal house’s final heir, who had sworn fealty to his mother and her son, when Ben was too young to understand what this meant. Lor San Tekka, for whom Leia Organa was always a princess, and a queen. Lor San Tekka, who had worshipped a Church that believed in the Jedi, and the Skywalkers as their most fallible, perfect heirs.

He had left this box in the desert, knowing someone would come back for it. Surely not Ben. But his uncle, or his mother. They would return.

Lor San Tekka had believed in hope. That was why he’d given Poe Dameron the map. But he had also believed in the woman who had given her life for the Rebellion, and had kept giving, because that was easier than admitting how much had been taken from her.

Ben stills, letting the quiet of the tent settle over him. The thin warmth of the flashlight falls on his skin like rice paper.

It’s possible that this guess is wrong. It is even likely. He does not know how many tries the box will allow him before shutting down, if he’s lucky, or bursting into flames if he is not. Ben does not believe in much.

But Lor San Tekka did.

Ben Solo leans in. He speaks four words quietly. The box clicks open.

Poe Dameron startles beside him.

“What did you say?”

Ben does not answer.

He half-turns away, carding through the box, inside of which is a small holoprojector.

Ben clicks it on, coordinates leeching into the air in liquid-blue light. Ben wishes, stupidly, for BeeBee-Ate. The droid had become rather famous due to the hunt for him a year and a half ago, and so had remained on the ship so as to avoid recognition.
Poe swipes a hand over tired eyes.

“We’re gonna have to go back to the ship and get BeeBee-Ate for that to make much sense,” he says. “He’s the one with the coordinate maps of this place.”

Ben does not give any indication that he has heard him. He stands up, exiting the tent for the frigid desert night.

*Vincit qui se vincit*, he had said. The motto of the House of Organa.

*He conquers who conquers himself.*

xxxix.

It is 0530 hours when Ben awakes. He casts an eye out of the tentflap to track the wheeling of a bright red star which had caught his eye at dusk: eight hours’ distance away from where it had been when Ben had last marked it.

Ben has slept fitfully for half an hour.

On the opposite end of the tent, Rey is fast asleep, curled in on herself like a cactus flower. FN-2187 and Poe Dameron sleep on either side of her, both held in soldierly attention. The Force comes easy and clear on this planet, untangled as it is by so little other life. Ben curls his fingers loosely against his palm; reaches out to mentally tap Rey’s shoulder.

Rey’s eyes fly open in the rosy half-dark.

Ben inclines his head to the outside of the tent. He makes his way towards it, grabbing a plum-black swath of cloth from off of a hook near the doorflap. Rey follows, movements immediately purposeful despite the hour and the bleariness of unfinished dreams.

The air is brisk when Ben exits the human-close heat of the tent. His jacket is still inside. He bites down at the cold, determined not to shiver, letting his focus fuel his wakefulness.

When they come to a stop, a safe distance from the tent and eavesdroppers, Rey turns to face him, crossing her arms against the cold.

“What’s wrong?”

Her voice is hoarse and sleep-soaked. It is the green-colored hour before dawn.

“Nothing,” Ben says.

“Where are we?”

“Nowhere.”

“*Ben.*”

Ben heaves a deep breath; lets the heaviness of the hour steady his pulse.
“How do you bury your dead, on Jakku?”

Rey’s bird-keen eyes go wide.

“Answer the question,” Ben says. “Please.”

“We bury them,” Rey says after a moment, the taut muscles in her throat trembling from her swallow. “As deep as we can. Which isn’t far. And then cover that with stones, as big as we can find.”

Ben clutches the cloth he’d brought with him from the tent. The fabric is coarse against his calloused grip.

They are standing in what Ben thinks is a graveyard. He is growing increasingly confident in his guess. Stones, as big as Ben’s palm, are lodged into the hard-packed dirt, inscribed with names and endearments and cryptic marks of the faithful. Ben had wondered, upon discovering the site last night, why such seeming gravestones would have no seeming graves.

He looks out, to where the graveyard faces the lip of the Kelvin Ravine before the sharp drop-off to the desert floor. Flashes of foreign memory glide before him, the guiding feathers of a foreign yet familiar bird. Ashes, scattered to the wind. Stones, fixed within the earth. Unfinal farewells, for a people who believed that the Force carried them after death, even though they were not sensitive to it.

(The vodka he had shared with his father last week still burns on his tongue.)

There is still a bit of bloggin oil left. Ben pulls out the mostly deflated sack from his deepest pocket, kept safe there from last twilight. The sun is coming up from over the horizon now, a champagne-colored glow.

Rey’s eyes fall on the cloth in his hand as the light deepens, burnishing in recognition that has not yet consciously clicked into place.

He watches for the moment when he knows she understands.

She had likely seen the cloak Ben holds from where it had still been hung up in Lor San Tekka’s tent. Possibly she had seen it from Ben’s memories of taking it from there, as she graciously handled all of his projected recollections: soundlessly, without crying out, or lashing her secondhand pain with his.

The cloak in Ben’s hand is not the cloak San Tekka had been wearing when he died. That cloak was lost, as Ben had not managed to find even the old man’s skeleton. There had only been an indentation in the Force where the body had last lain, like a tidal pool.

Ben walks out to the end of the ravine, gesturing at Rey to follow. Their long, slanting shadows glisten with inchoate daybreak.

“Are there any funeral rites, on Jakku?” he asks, as they stand at the cliff’s edge.

“Yes.”

“Do you know them?”

“Yes.”
“Will you do them?”

“Yes,” she says, a third and final time.

Ben sets the cloak down; pours the oil. The air fills with a thick, clear scent. When the oil is all poured out, he unclips his lightsaber and ignites the flame.

It hums.

Gently, he tips it onto the pyre. In less than a second, the cloak is in flames.

Rey dips her head, clasping her hands in front of her. The words of the Jakkunian last rites flow from her mouth like rasping sand, like fire, like glass. Ben cannot understand a single word, yet he knows each one.

When she is done, the silence turns to him.

There are Alderaanian grave-hymns that Ben remembers, for his mother had sung them at every anniversary that marked another year of the lost Alderaan. He does not know them well enough to sing them now.

Ben does not know much of the Church of the Force to which Lor San Tekka had belonged, besides what he had read in preparation to destroy them. He knows none of their ancient texts, and even less of the other sects of believers who worshipped the Force in ways unimaginable to a once-Padawan, once-Knight-of-Ren, now nothing.

But he remembers the words he’d once heard by a travelling preacher, claiming to be a guardian-priest of a force that seemed beyond the Force’s divining. It is not the same as the church Lor San Tekka had worshipped. But it is something.

It might even be enough.

Ben thinks of Lor San Tekka, who did not go into death afraid, even as his killer was terrified. Lor San Tekka, who had died because of mercy, who had died with mercy.

Ben closes his eyes and lets the words come.

“I fear nothing, for all is as the Force wills it. I am one with the Force, and the Force is with me.”

The liquid dawn breaks above his head like juice from a ripe peach. A wind picks up, carrying the ashes of the cloak to the bottom of the canyon.

There is a stone, as big as Ben’s palm, beside his feet. He bends down to pick it up.

Ben turns with it in hand, walking towards the graveyard.

Chapter End Notes

ROAD TRIP.

Skirtopanol doesn't have any canon source listed for how it's synthesized or derived. *Zhenhua*是 one of the Chinese words for truth (as in, to speak the truth).
Vincit qui se vincit is also notably the motto written in stained glass in the prologue to the 1991 animated Beauty and the Beast. I didn't chose it because of that reference, but it's definitely not a bad character parallel.

This chapter didn't come out the way I thought it would. Finals and a bajillion drafts and other life things later, I just needed to get it out. It will probably get tweaked some in the oncoming days. Thank you everyone who reads and comments, especially those of you who commented during the dry spell of non-updates and kept me going through the ugliest writer's block.
“If you ever loved anything in your life, try to remember it. If you ever betrayed anything, pretend for a moment that you have been forgiven. If you ever feared anything, pretend for an instant that those days are gone and will never return. Buy the lie and hold to it for as long as you can. Press your familiar, whatever its name, to your breast and stroke it till it purrs.”

—Roger Zelazny, Creatures of Light and Darkness

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

xl.

Stashed in the cargo hold of The Condor are two X-34 Landspeeders. Luke had laughed, chin into chest, watching them being loaded on board. Ben hadn’t had the wherewithal to ask why.

Outside, the noontime daylight is white as unconsciousness. FN-2187 and Poe Dameron stand outside the shade of the hold, loading supplies onto their speeder. Inside, Ben and Rey are doing the same. Desert heat presses in from the blinding square of the open gangplank like a scalding hand clapped against Ben’s mouth.

They ought to reach the place indicated on Lor San Tekka’s coordinate map by nightfall.

“You fight you for who gets to pilot,” says Rey easily, knuckling Ben on the shoulder as she passes. Ben follows her as she lopes to the speeder, both of their arms laden with supplies.

A small storage space is carved into the floor behind the speeder’s twin passenger seats. Rey is placing twenty liters of water inside, lined in four precise rows of five.

“Please,” Ben says, unloading his packets of rations—a sort of paltry powdered bread that had made Rey shudder, and then refuse to explain why. “The fuselage would never survive.”

Rey bunches her mouth into a small, satisfied twist, clasping her hands to her hips like a queen observing her kingdom. “You’re right. It would never.”

She cocks her head at Ben, contemplative. There is a moment’s sensation of being watched through multiple panes of glass; of having the fidelity of one reflection compared to another.

Rey darts her hand into the pocket of her tunic. In the next second, she thrusts her arm out and forward. A silver shimmer arcs through the air; lands with a jingling smack in Ben’s palm. He unclasps his grip.

The keys to the speeder are second-hand warm in his fingers.

“You want first shift?” Rey says. “It’s probably at least six hours to our first stop. I’m guessing we can swap pilots every few hours or so.”

There is so much sand on this godforsaken planet. In his boots, in his pockets, beneath his tongue.
“You put a lot of faith in someone whose piloting skills you’ve never seen.”

Rey looks at him; tries to smile. But her mind is full of the milkweed glow of ghosts.

“I have it on good authority that you’re not a bad pilot yourself. Pretty good, in fact.”

“He’s an incorrigible liar, you know,” Ben says, or thinks he does. “I wouldn’t believe everything he tells you.”

Rey bites her lip, looking pained.

The emotion is gone as soon as it arrives, tucked neatly behind her survivor’s mouth and teeth. But it flashes still, behind Ben’s eyelids, a brilliant silhouette of light that is the afterimage of darkness.

Rey misses Han Solo. Has always missed him. Has never stopped.

“I understand now,” Ben says. Quietly, tautly.

Rey stills, her other hand on her hip.

“What do you understand?”

“Guarding me when I was going through withdrawals. Repairing our lightsabers. The Jebwa plant. Making sure I don’t off myself, and not letting Snoke just finish the damn job and kill me instead—”

“I don’t pity you, if that’s what you meant to say,” Rey says, a shining snarl in her voice, but in her eyes is an expression close to panic, or—outrage. That empathetic anger, not at someone but for them. “I’ve never pitied you.”

“But you pity Han Solo. The father you never had”—Rey flinches, and old motion, a familiar one—“and now that you couldn’t save him, you’re—what? Trying to make up the difference by preserving the life of his worthless son? Give him flowers, the keys to a speeder, basic decency? Anything to justify why he lived while his father died?”

“I don’t pity you,” she says again. Her teeth are two bright, perfect lines. “And I don’t pity Han. He died for someone he loved, someone he believed in more than his own life. You think I pity that? I would have given anything for that when I was a little girl. Anything to know that I wouldn’t end up some meaningless corpse in the desert, with no one to miss me, no one to—to—”

She breaks off, face flustered and furious, so that it will not tremble, will not break.

“Almost killed you, on Starkiller,” Rey says quietly.

“I know,” Ben replies. “I was there.”

“But I didn’t. Kill you, I mean.”

“Clearly.”

“I wanted to.”

“I sensed that, too.”

A circlet of sweat glistens on Rey’s brow; glistens on his. Time passes like an interval of space, a
physical effort of inches.

He has never asked her why she spared him that night. Even now, he can find little reason for why he has spared himself. Something about his mother, in tears; his uncle’s sunken, faithful face. Something about his father, and a life being paid by life.

But Rey owed him none of those compunctions.

“I wanted to kill you,” she repeats, and her memory fills the room like colored light. He is hewn open below her, face cloven in two by lightsaber and last touch; mewling, pathetic, clutching his chest. In the nighttime, the spill of his black hair is as dark as blood. And beyond him—the chasm, the crossed line, the greater darkness. “But Han—Han had just died. For you. And you—you were terrible, and horrible, and—and you were his son. I couldn’t compete with that. Han Solo couldn’t save me from that.”

“You didn’t need to compete with that. You won.”

He had seen his father in Rey’s memories—offering to pay her poorly, to let her stay on the junkyard ship she’d found, with the little mileage of miracles it had left. Han Solo had meant nothing to Kylo Ren, and so Kylo Ren could not hate her for it.

Yet he had, with a secret, heartsick flame, because he has always been Ben Solo, and Ben Solo has been a liar all along.

“He was your father,” Rey says.

And for a moment, in her certainty, in her agony, Ben believes her.

“Yes,” Ben says. His voice gutters like spilled oil, spilled light. “He was.”

And for a moment—in his certainty, in his agony—Ben believes himself.

He looks at Rey, who looks at him, and the sweat glinting between their footprints is an unmeltable, immortal snow.

“Do you hate me for it?” says Ben. “For taking him from you?”

“Do you hate me?” Rey answers. “For wanting to think he was someone who could be taken from me?”

Ben hitches a breath. His voice catches; burrs on the ugly resentment still cockling his heart—at Rey, the protégé, the welcomed child, who had claimed no home and no legacy and so had won both from nothing.

Not, not nothing: from the family Ben had cursed and denied and still could not escape. And in return, Snoke had promised him—what? Not peace from his pain, but rather a new quality of pain—a useful pain, a blade-edged one, sharp enough to cut out the heart that had hurt him so.

(His father’s? Or his own?)

“I didn’t know him long,” Rey says, like she is spitting up a knife, and there is an edge of cynicism to her voice. Ben marvels at its wrongness there.

She doesn’t look at him. She doesn’t have to.

No, she had not known Han Solo long. A handful of hours, and some of those taken captive by his
only son. She had not known the shape that the man’s promises made when they arrived, swaddled and stillborn. She had not known the man and all of his comings and goings and leavings (—his staying, at the very end. Ben had not imagined, as a child, that he would be at his father’s side until the very moment he died).

And Ben has never been inclined to sharing, neither as man or boy or wraith. But grief is a candle, is a memory on fire. Maybe with enough light, he could see his father’s face in flesh one last time.

“He meant something to you,” says Ben Solo, because Han Solo had meant something to him too. “You are allowed to mourn him.”

The shuddering sound Rey makes is almost obscene in the stillness. Trembles roll through her, quiet and small, the shivering of one who had grown up knowing it was better to cry in silence than to be heard.

Ben cannot hope to halt a storm. But he is taller than her, and broader, and maybe he can be a windbreak against the larger hailstones of sorrow.

He is a faithless son, and worthless too. Perhaps, in some first and final act of decency, he can lift Rey up as the child his father ought to have had, and bow quietly out, in burning silence.

“He was your father. Not mine,” Rey says, says finally, as though in defiance of his thoughts. Something in her seems to shift, to still, as she says so. Suddenly, Ben realizes that she has more ghosts than his own family’s to exorcise. “Han Solo died for you.”

“I killed him.”

“You did. Your own father, Ben Solo. And I watched.”

Ben mashes his eyes closed, takes a breath like a guttering flame.

“Yes,” he says, and the burden settles upon him with the great commission of an ox’s yolk. “Are you going to ask me why?”

“There was a time when I would have,” Rey answers.

“And now?”

Rey raises her grief-old eyes to his.

“Could you give me an answer, if I did?”

Because he hadn't hated Han Solo.

Because he had loved him.

“No,” Ben says. “I—I can’t.”

A line of hot damp trails down his cheek. His father’s hand is not there to wipe it away.

“He meant something to you,” Rey echoes, and her eyes are red and glittering too. “You are allowed to mourn him.”

Ben says nothing, because there is nothing left to say. The air fills with a wet keening, like a homesick dove, like a homeward bound raven, and Ben realizes that the sound is coming from him.
They stand there, the Force threading together their whetted, shared pain—Ben’s deep, and Rey’s wide, so that together it is full and complete.

xli.

It is past dusk when the woman approaches.

Old Meru’s is the last stop on the Pilgrim’s Road before the Sinking Fields—and from there, the Observatory on the Plaintive Hand Plateau, and the end of their journey. Old Meru’s has been around longer than the memory of the living—a series of interconnected shacks, lavished with rugs and curtains and censers spilling over with sweet-bitter flames. Ben is convinced it is held together by memory alone.

It is close inside the bar in Old Meru’s, and dark, like the interior of a cupped palm. Ben sits, flexing his hands atop the bar table, trying to wring out the press-press of the bar patrons’ thoughts. There are twenty-seven sentients here, besides Rey, the pilot, the traitor, and himself. Ben would know. He has counted the sloppy press of every one of their Force signatures himself.

(—that’s nearly an Idiot’s Array, that is, the bastard’s cheating/swear to the Senate’s ass and the stars-blasted Force if this mooof-milker doesn’t show up—what a fine specimen right there wonder if she’ll—)

Ben shakes his head, trying to push the noise out. The slosh of twenty-seven drunk-melted thoughts slops against his skull.

It hasn’t been like this when he was young, and the world a constant slapdash of color and sound. It had scraped him into a raw, wild thing, then—easily angered, easily bruised. A special malady, Snoke had said, of little boys born with weak hearts.

But then Snoke had come, and had saved him, and put him in a mask where all was safe, black silence.

Footsteps sound beside the table. Rey, returning with their drinks.

“Here we are,” she says, plunking four canteens atop the table. She passes one to Ben, then slides two across the hardwood to Dameron and FN-2187, where they sit opposite Ben. Ben raises an eyebrow at the canteens’ precise trajectory, and the subtle Force push likely responsible for it. Rey stiffens, then sticks out her tongue imperceptibly.

Ben rolls his eyes.

“What is it?” FN-2187 says, fingering the lip of his mug. His expression settles in the pale middle space between disgust and disbelief.

“Knockback Nectar,” Rey replies, sidling into the seat beside Ben. The lamp of bloggin bird oil at the center of their table quivers at the motion, dragging languid streaks of light across Ben’s palms. “Imported.”

Beside FN-2187, Poe Dameron grimaces, looking at Rey. “You used to drink this stuff?”

Rey shakes her head. “Couldn’t afford it.”

Ben fingers the canteen in his hands, letting the motion distract him from the tension migraine of so
many strangers’ thoughts. He had not realized, until now, how isolated he had been on D’Qar, or how far his control had slipped. He had not been pained by the Force signature of strangers since the day he’d stopped caring about them.

The Knockback Nectar is unctuous and slimy, brown as brackish bilge water. Flecks of white foam bob atop the surface. It smells of engine oil, and explosive death, and all of those things his father had loved.

Ben shoves back the Knockback Nectar with a stuttered inhale.

Rey is there immediately, a curl of the Force between them like a question mark. FN-2187 and Poe Dameron tense across the table in tandem. Ben clenches his teeth, refusing to meet their eyes.

“I don’t—” Ben says, and thinks of that night with his father half a month ago, that most recent last time in his undeserved, ever-after of last times. He clenches his jaw, looking down, looking away—from the scent of the Nectar, from the weight of the stares. There is a face half-reflected beneath him on the table, black-and-white in the dim light like a daguerreotype. One eye is cut through by the murky whorl of a knot of wood. The jaw is smuggler-strong, the hair thick. For a moment, Ben allows himself to believe it is a resurrection.

Ben reaches out to it—helplessly, hopelessly. The reflection is cold beneath his touch.

“I don’t drink,” Ben finally says to the table. He raises his eyes, knowing they are red; knowing he will put his knuckles through the jaw of the first man to say so.

Rey looks at him, tilting her head. She has seen him drink, though the First Order had forbidden it. There had been beer at his birthday—cheap, Resistance-distilled stuff; and then the cleaner, brighter champagne his mother had saved from the base’s last celebration. Ben had only drunk as much beer as his uncle had offered for politeness’ sake, and as much champagne as would satisfy his mother’s toasts. Rey had called him a princely prude for it, in the easy way of insults Ben was beginning to realize they had.

His father, that last-last night. The knife-bright, impersonal light of Ben’s quarters; the star-bright, sentimental light of Han’s ghost. Han had not been able to drink with Ben; had groused softly about the perils of an undead constitution. Had made Ben pour him a glass all the same.

And as Ben raised that second shot to his lips—like a toast, like a eulogy, like a communion—he had known he would never drink with someone else again.

“Oh,” Rey says, her eyes dilated and distant, and Ben knows that she had seen. And there is anger at being seen, swiftly replaced by the grace of it.

Rey swipes the mug of Knockback Nectar from him without a second word.

“You want water instead?”

“No,” Ben says. “I’m fine.”

Rey pulls a face.

Ben pulls one back.

“Ugh,” Rey snaps, snatching Ben’s mug before downing the entire thing in one teary-eyed pull. FN-2187 and Dameron stare at her, agape.
Without a word, Rey reaches for the canteen at her side, pouring the now-empty mug full to the brim with water. She shoves the mug back to Ben, cheeks pink.

“Here,” she says. And that is that.

Across the table, Poe Dameron gives a low whistle. FN-2187 is still frozen in a rictus of disgusted shock. When he thaws, he bangs his palm in an appreciative tattoo against the wood.

“Damn, Rey,” says Dameron, just as FN-2187 asks, “Is that a Force thing?”

Rey smiles, just slightly, into her shirt. “I have no idea.”

Ben cants his head at her. “It is.” He takes a sip of Rey’s canteen water. The taste is stale and lukewarm, metallic like pennies or tongue-bitten blood. Rey had carried it on her hip all day, through the heat and the sweat and the hours. “Poison detoxification,” he says, after swallowing. He squints at Rey. Her Force signature is still as clear as a slat of sunlight. “You must be doing it subconsciously.”

Rey blinks at him for a moment, fingering the rim of her own Nectar.

“Oh,” she says. “Like with the piloting.”

Ben nods, taking another sip. “Yes. You seem to have a knack for using techniques you don’t formally understand with great alacrity. Like with piloting ships,” he says, raising an eyebrow. “Or with telling Stormtroopers to remove certain restraints and leave the cell with the door open.”

A bleat of embarrassed panic, sharp and red, bursts through Rey’s Force signature. Ben hides the satisfied, wolfish glint of his teeth behind his mug of secondhand water.

“How did— how did you—”

“I have spies everywhere,” Ben says, relishing Rey’s special look of anguish. Finally, he relents. “JB-007. The trooper you mind-tricked. People don’t remember what they did under a mind trick, typically. But the memory is still there, beneath the surface.”

A new Force signature flares across Ben’s mind, cold and loamy, like deep soil. FN-2187 is staring at him, jaw set in a taut line. His signature upticks when Ben’s eyes meet his. The traitor’s hands are trembling, just slightly, his fingers splayed against the table.

“Did you torture the trooper for it?” FN-2187 says. His voice is steady, flat, edged in his hand like a flint stone. Ben can feel the titanic effort it is demanding of him to speak against a former superior officer, and to do so boldly. Yet FN-2187 has mastered this tension; has used it to catapult him to courage. “How’d you kill him after that, Ren? Slowly? Did you make an example out of him?”

(Ren—)

(Ren—)

(Ren—)

——Even you, Master of the Knights of Ren, have never faced such a test——)

“No,” Ben grits out. Too late, he realizes he had not meant JB-007’s execution. His traitorous heart thumps a triple-time beat. He must recover quickly. “I didn’t kill him.”

He had not even tortured him. Information as unobstructed as a recent memory could be gleaned
with an easy swipe of the hand. And he hadn't sent him to reconditioning after that—had for a millisecond blacked out with the memory of Snoke’s hand swiping through his skull; a bright bleating of pain— but rather sent the Trooper back to his post no wiser of the mind trick or its consequences.

FN-2187’s mouth opens, just slightly, before he catches himself.

“I don’t believe you.”

“You don’t have to,” Ben says. He bares his teeth. “I have never in my life asked permission of a Stormtrooper. I have no intentions of starting now.”

“I’m not a Stormtrooper anymore. Never again. And don’t you ever forget it, Ren.”

Ben clenches his fist. The Knockback Nectar slops in their mugs, buffeted by an invisible wind. It sloshes onto FN-2187’s hands, from where they’re clasped around his mug, knuckles dusky-pale and tight.

“How convenient,” Ben growls. He lurches a centimeter up from his chair. “That you find the uncomfortable parts of your past so easy to disclaim.”

FN-2187’s eyes widen. His hands clench around his drink.

“You’re one to talk, Kylo Ren. Or should I say—”

“—you,” a new voice breathes.

The woman is as old as Ben’s mother, if not older, and her bearing is straight with solemnity of purpose. Her eyes are bright in the sharp planes of her cheeks, like a book of astrology. Ben can see, through a patina of sun-leathered cracks, a face that had once been made for pines.

“I know you,” the woman says, with the familiarity of the desperate. Her hand catches on the cotton of Ben’s sleeve. Ben stills, unable to move, unable to look away.

“You must be mistaken,” Ben says, because he is still in the business of knowing himself.

The woman shakes her head, glass beads tinkling at the ends of her braids— yellow-clear, like borrowed time, like old light. Ben is struck by the absurd notion that he has seen their pattern before.

“I know you,” the woman says again. Her voice is clotted with an emotion Ben dares not name. “You’re the grandchild of the Hero With No Fear. The Last Jedi’s nephew. Princess Leia’s and General Solo’s son.” She fists her hand tighter into Ben’s sleeve, knuckles brushing his arm through the cloth. “You’re Ben Skywalker Organa Solo.”

(Rise, Kylo Ren, Snoke had once told him, and the boy-who-had-once-been-Ben had risen to his feet, a ghost of himself. I do not allow you to speak the name of that weak boy again.

Yet the boy would not die, and Snoke did not forgive him for it.

And so the man-who-had-once-been-a-boy-who-had-once-been-Ben had taken his helm and his sword and his soldiers; had killed for the master who had lived curled up in his skull like a snake.

Yet the boy would not die, and Snoke did not forgive him for it.

And so he had been dragged, not home, but to a place closer to it, and his mother and uncle and father’s ghost had not had the magic to transmute his body back to itself. But they had given him
thread, and time, and a place where his master could not go.

Yet the boy did not die, and the boy is a man and a murderer and a twice-turncoated traitor, and the boy is him.

And Ben is trying to ask himself forgiveness for it.)

“Yes,” says Ben instead, and the hurt sings sweet and sharp and clean, like a broken bone setting into place. “I am.”

The hand in his sleeve trembles. The woman works her mouth, face teeming with so much expression that it blends into a kind of white light.

He ought to have lied, because the Resistance surely cannot afford to lose their cover now; because the First Order must surely have informants here. He ought to have, because his legacy has been nothing but a burden and a knife in his back, and if Kylo Ren had been a monster, at least no one had expected anything different.

(What a silly, foolish boy he is, to finally expect something different.)

“Where were you? Where did you go?” the woman finally cries, launching her free hand at Ben’s other sleeve. She wrenches him to her, a sort of hard, desperate yank that has FN-2187 and Dameron reaching for their blasters and Rey for her saber, for what Ben knows must be entirely different reasons.

“Hey—hey—hey—” Dameron says, motioning out of his seat. Ben pins him with a murderous glare.

“Let her alone,” says Ben, in a tone so hard he surprises himself.

Dameron pales a little, frozen half-stood beside the table.

The woman blinks. Her throat bobs, anger warring with hope in her expression, hands fisted in his shirt to the knuckles. Ben turns back to her, to the glint of the beads in her hair like eyes, to the weight of her fists in his tunic like two thick-beating hearts.

She is waiting for something Ben does not know how to give.

“Do I know you?” he asks, more ritual than question. The woman’s intricate braids burn like a polished saber in the lamplight. Ben realizes that he knows how to make every turn and tuck of them by heart.

The woman nods; swallows. She raises a steady hand to his chest, though Ben can see how the bones of her forearm tremble, and keeps her fingers there for the span of a three-thumped beat.

Even if he wanted to, he could not pull away.

“You are my prince,” she says, like a solemn vow, pressing the pulse of her fingers to his breast. “Just as your mother was my princess. And if there were any justice to be found in time, she would have been my queen.”

She is looking at him with hope clung to her face like sunlight cleaves to a windowsill, and Ben must close the curtains gently, so that they both may make it in time for the funeral.

“Alderaan is gone,” Ben says. “There’s nothing left.”

“I am left. I survived, and I came here, to a planet so lost in the Reaches that no Death Star would
ever think to find it,” the woman says, and her voice is like his mother’s. His mother, who had
carried the weight of two billion and called it a blessing, while Ben had not even been able to
shoulder his own ghost. “Your mother is left. And so are you.”

“Then we are nothing but exiles.”

“Yes,” the woman says. “And we have outlived the Empire.”

Gently, Ben pries the woman’s hands from his sleeves. They are long-fingered and square-palmed,
fitting easily together in the grip of Ben’s single fist.

“And the First Order?” Ben says, and what surprises him is not the bitterness in his voice, but how
he had anticipated it there.

“Will pass,” the woman says. “Kylo Ren is dead. And you are here.”

Ben’s grip on the woman’s hand stutters.

“You think him dead, without a body to prove it?”

“You think he lives?”

Ben swallows, throat suddenly heavy. Lamplight plashes against the woman’s face, bleeding her
shadow on the floor.

“If he does,” Ben says, and swears he can see himself, a wraith of mask and shape beneath the dusky
smoke of the cantina censers, “one of us will not survive.”

“But you’re Luke Skywalker’s nephew. You’re the new Chosen One.”

And Ben Solo laughs, sharp and mean and heartsick.

“I’m not the Chosen One,” he says. “I never was.”

The woman smiles, a brittle thing, and does not ask for more.

xlii.

They reach Lor San Tekka’s coordinates by nightfall. The Plaintive Hands Plateau stretches out to
the horizon on either side, cupping black skyfulls of stars.

Emperor Palpatine’s Observatory looms, a dark stain against the moon-glittering sand.
(Luke laughs because his landspeeder in ANH was an X-34.)

SO THIS FINALLY HAPPENED. Just in time for TLJ to totally wreck me. Figured it was long enough without an update, and if I kept turning it over in my head it would just never be uploaded. Plot will resume next chapter.

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