To Kingdom Come

by diasterisms

Summary

"I remember everything!" he snarls, loud enough to make her flinch. "How you move—the way you breathe—" His words hitch on a strangled half-sob; he stares at her like a man caught in a waking dream as he skims the line of her jaw with his knuckles, stopping to touch the pad of his thumb to her bottom lip. "How your eyes met mine in the starlight," he continues through a broken, haunted rasp of a voice, "and I felt like the look on your face."

Or: What is alive must heal. What cannot heal must endure.
Chapter 1

Welcome to the sequel of Like Young Gods! When we last left Rey, she had just been knighted and was preparing, along with the remaining Jedi, to join the war against the First Order. This second phase of her story will take us through that conflict and, just as LYG was a narrative of Ben Solo's fall from grace, To Kingdom Come will track Kylo Ren's redemption... albeit, with a lot of blood, sweat, and tears along the way.

To give you a general idea of the plot: I will be mashing up The Force Awakens canon with several Expanded Universe events that take place during the Second Galactic Civil War and the Yuuzhan Vong War. Everything is projected to resolve within fifteen chapters, but there's always a distinct possibility that there will be more. The M rating is mostly for violence and deep-seated psychological issues, but *clears throat* certain situations will eventually come up.

I'm excited to embark on this new journey with you guys! Comments and suggestions would be very much appreciated. You may also contact me via Tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Artorias is burning.

Red flags stream in the air, stamped black with what seems like a stylized depiction of a sarlacc's gaping maw—or of a sun. Dozens of obsidian suns, then, exploding on blood-colored canvas over the inexorable snow-white tide of stormtrooper battalions as they march into the capital. The second sky of a Resurgent-class Star Destroyer casts the field of combat in its shadow, vomiting TIE/fo space superiority fighters, Atmospheric Assault Landers, and vicious, whirling droidekas whose glinting lasers mow down Artorian troops and civilians alike.

Valin. Left.

In response to the tug at the edges of his consciousness, Valin Horn's blue lightsaber slants at his flank just in time to catch a blaster bolt, which ricochets off the beam at an angle that sends it hurtling straight towards the person who had given the warning—who now holds up a hand and stops the projectile in mid-air, mere centimeters before impact.

Valin shrugs. Sorry.

His comrade rolls her hazel eyes and flicks the bolt at the nearest droideka, which clatters to the
ground in a burst of sparks and is immediately trampled on by a throng of panicked civilians rushing to get as far away as possible from the war zone that the marketplace has become.

A TIE swoops down low, its barrage of artillery forcing the two Jedi to separate. Valin's comrade ducks behind an overturned fruit stall, only to be lunged at by a male riot control stormtrooper wielding a Z6 baton. She blocks while still on her knees; her lightsaber hisses against the baton's plasma-resistant vanes.

Deciding to use the stormtrooper's momentum against him, she extinguishes her blade and he's suddenly pushing against something that is no longer there. He topples over, but she surges down and then forward, reigniting her weapon once the hilt jams into his stomach. He collapses against her, speared through the middle by a blaze of sapphire.

The Jedi shoves off the deadweight and gets to her feet, observing the smoke-veiled buildings, the laser-streaked sky, and the debris-strewn ground. She shakes her head slightly, blowing out a puff of air through her lips.

"This is not how I thought this day was going to go," mutters Rey.

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Four standard hours ago, she'd been cruising at sublight on the Moldy Crow with Valin and Kyle Katarn, when they picked up a distress signal from a nearby exploration vessel. However, by the time they reached the coordinates, the Pythea was already space dust, and the First Order fleet that it had so haplessly run into was sinking into the atmosphere of the blue-and-green globe of Artorias.

"One of my men— Dulac— turned out to be a double agent," the planet's king had explained to the three Jedi as his soldiers hurried to mount the palace's defenses. "He disabled our comm interlink, so we were unable to contact the Republic when the invasion began."

Rey had bitten back the snide voice in her head that said, *The Republic wouldn't have helped, anyway. No matter how you begged. Artorias is a small, strategically inconsequential world in the Outer Rim, with little to offer in the way of resources that can't be extracted from somewhere else.*

Her cynicism is unbecoming of a Jedi, which is no surprise considering that she'd gotten most of it from *him*. He'd been burgeoning into quite the political dissident, before he betrayed her and his
Any sign of them? Valin asks through the mental link forged by battle meditation.

Negative. Rey scrambles to help an old man stand up before the stampeding crowd can subject him to the same fate as that droideka. "His Majesty has sounded the retreat," she tells him over a cacophony of screams and explosions. "You have to get to the beach. Do you understand?"

The man's faded gray eyes widen at the sight of her brown cloak and the lightsaber cinched to her belt. "M-master Jedi," he stammers, touching a wizened hand to his forelock.

"Nah. Still just a Knight." It's always the old people, she reflects. The ones who remember Mace Windu, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Yoda, and the rest of them. She gently nudges the man in the direction of the shore. "Off you go. A Resistance ship is coming to evacuate you."

Rey. Valin broadcasts an image of the marketplace corner to the east. I found them.

She takes off, elbowing her way through the civilians, cutting down the enemy units in her path. When she finally spots Valin's head of shaggy chestnut hair, he's fending off six stormtroopers while two women draped in gems and silks cling to each other behind him.

Rey sends out a wave of Malacia that turns the stormtroopers' inner equilibrium against them. They fall on their hands and knees, the flow of their own blood and breath rendering them cripplingly nauseous.

("And it's not a Dark Side power because?" he'd quizzed her.

"The opponent is incapacitated with no damage to the body and no permanent side effects," she'd promptly replied.)

But she does hope, with a trace of vindictive relish, that the bucket-heads are retching inside their masks.
"Nice," Valin drawls. "That won't keep them down for long, though. We have to get out of here."

"Really? You don't want to do a bit of shopping first?" she quips, even as she turns to the younger of the two women. "Right, then. Follow me—"

Her heart leaps into her throat and she has to blink away a sudden well of tears, because the narrow, aristocratic face that stares back at her is so poignantly familiar. The blonde updo, the lips, the chin, and the smattering of freckles across the bridge of the nose are feminine, but the ocean-blue eyes are the same.

"Your Highness," Rey says to Kaye Galfridian, "I knew your brother." One year ago, I held him in my arms as he died.

"Where is my husband?" The older woman's terse question jolts Rey back to the present. "Is he safe?"

Valin nods. "King Caled is at the palace, Your Majesty. He instructed us to find you and bring you to the beach."

"Evacuation," murmurs Queen Nina. "All is lost, then."

"The royal family is the blood of Artorias. While you live, so does the nation." Valin's diplomatic reply is followed by a row of stalls disintegrating beneath another TIE strafing run. "Couldn't have asked for a better exit cue, myself. Let's go."

Kaye daintily bends down to retrieve a couple of blasters from the stormtroopers moaning on the ground. She tosses one to her stepmother, who catches it and grimaces even as she disengages the safety with ease. "I haven't shot anyone since my coronation."

"It's like learning to ride a speeder bike," Kaye says. "You never forget."

The group makes a run for it, the Jedi deflecting enemy lasers while the royals provide cover fire. However, it's not long before Rey stops in her tracks at the distinctive sound of a plasma beam flaring into existence a few meters away.
She turns around and sees a whirl of red light making quick work of a troop of Artorian soldiers, moving almost too fast for the naked eye to catch. The last man falls, and a slender, unmistakably female figure clad in black leather armor is standing still amidst a circle of dead bodies. The figure's mask shields her face from view, but it cuts off in a band around the forehead in order to grant full range of motion to the aquamarine-hued lekku rising into the air like serpents. There's no doubt as to who she is.

For a brief moment, Rey's vision goes *dim* with fury.

"Not worth it!" Valin's tugging at her arm, even though his own bitterness is stirring the currents of the Force. "We have orders from Master Katarn—"

"Then follow them." She wrenches free of his grip. "I'll meet you on the shore."

"Rey, stop!" he shouts, but she's already charging, lightsaber drawn and teeth bared in a snarl.

"So not how I thought this day was going to go," Valin sighs, before hurrying Kaye and Nina off to safety.

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There is an inferno roaring through Rey's bloodstream, a whirlwind of fire that emanates from her gut and pounds in her ears. She fears that she will burn up before she even *reaches* her target, but, no, the Twi'lek is turning to her against a backdrop of smoke and lasers and their lightsabers are clashing, scrape of blue on red.

"Where is he?" Rey screams over the intersected beams. "Where is he, Alema?"

"Not here." The black mask is expressionless, but there is a warped smile in Alema Rar's artificially-modulated voice. "The Knights of Ren *do* delegate, you know."

Rey kicks her in the stomach and she sprawls to the ground. "You fight dirty, little Jedi," she pants, clutching at her midriff.
"Naturally," Rey growls. "I lived on Jakku, remember?"

"I remember. And I also told you, once before, that scavenging is not much different from slavery," remarks the Twi'lek who had once danced in chains in the spice warrens of Kala'uun. "We have more in common than you think."

"I am nothing like you."

"Oh, I don't know," purrs Alema, leaping to her feet as lithe as a cat. "We share the same taste in men, after all."

It's bait. Rey knows that she's being baited. The opponent wants to rattle her composure to pave the way for a fatal misstep. It's the oldest trick in the holobook, and she shouldn't fall for it.

But what good is logic against a pain that cuts bone-deep, against a shadow that has been lurking in the bottom of her heart and is now rearing its ugly head, washing over her like black water?

She pounces. Alema meets her in the air, their blades slashing like two cyclones of light that have inadvertently collided, their bodies rotating after every blow in order to strike again. This is the Two Suns maneuver of the Ataru form of lightsaber combat, and Alema's surprise is palpable when they fall back to earth across from each other, both breathing heavily and sporting shallow cuts on their shoulders and thighs.

"I see someone has tired of Soresu."

Rey smirks. "You never forget your first love." To prove it, she sinks into the Resilience opening stance— right elbow pulled back to angle her blade forward, off-hand held up in challenge, one leg braced in front of the other.

("A most boring form," he'd sighed.

"You don't know what you're talking about," she'd retorted.)
"Come on, Alema," Rey taunts. "Form III versus Form IV on an open field, what do you say? Who knows— you might get lucky." She hardly recognizes the venomous anticipation in her own voice. Who is this girl bristling for a fight, so eager to draw blood?

She's counting on Alema's pride to override her common sense— Ataru works better in enclosed spaces and is such a kinetic style that it can't be sustained for long periods of time, whereas Soresu had been developed for wide battlefields like this flattened marketplace, and its defense-oriented moves are capable of drawing out a fight for hours— but, ironically, the Twi'lek seems to have learned prudence in the years since she defected from the Jedi Order.

"I will tell Lord Ren that you send your regards," she says in a measured tone, extinguishing her lightsaber and tapping it to her belt. "He'll be tickled to hear that his desert rat is all grown up."

Alema steps back and— disappears, insinuating herself into the chaos like a wisp of smoke. Rey's horribly tempted to weave through the crowd as well, track her down, end this, but the sound of a fresh explosion pierces the dark haze clouding her mind and lets clarity come seeping in.

*Personal isn't the same as important,* Luke Skywalker had told her once. *Not for a Jedi.* She can either get revenge on Alema or do her part in facilitating the evacuation process, and it shouldn't even be a choice.

Looking at the crumbling buildings, though, and at the tattered flags and the soot-stained faces running away from their homes and weeping over the dead...

*This* is personal, too. In the hallways of the past, a golden-haired prince is tangling with Sith hounds and Leviathans, is criss-crossing his blade in the Makashi salute, is telling her to let him go as the floor of a shattered temple runs slick with his blood. She owes it to the memory of Finn Galfridian to help his people.

*Its tapered silhouette dotted with spindly communications arrays and the cylindrical protrusions of sensor units, the EF76 Nebulon-B escort frigate looms over the pristine white shore like a giant gray hive— an illusion enhanced by the T-70 X-wing fighters swarming around it, prepared to repel any First Order units that might break through the Artorians' inland defenses.*

Despite its impressive size, the frigate is ancient— a relic left over from the days of the Rebel
Alliance. Kyle Katarn doesn't miss Rey's bemused expression when she hurries to his side as he oversees the civilians boarding the ramp.

"Have some respect, young Knight," he tells her wryly. "The Redemption is a war hero. She survived the Ison Corridor ambush, Eidoloni, Kothlis, and the Warspite's jump-and-drop attack on medical ships after the Battle of Brigia. And she limped it magnificently out of Endor, too."

"Yes, Master, she certainly looks very historical," Rey comments. "I'm half-convinced she'll fall apart if you blow on her hard enough."

Katarn shrugs one broad shoulder. "She was the only frigate that General Organa could send at such short notice."

"Did the royal family make it onboard all right?"

"Queen Nina and Princess Kaye, yes. King Caled has elected to stay behind with his troops. Currently, they are buying us time to finish evac; once we leave, His Majesty will retreat to the underwater shelter on the floor of the Great Sea and establish a resistance cell there."

Rey blinks. "He's crazy."

"He's Finn Galfridian's father." Katarn's battle-scarred features soften with a rueful smile. "It runs in the veins."

"We can't just leave them here—"

"There is nothing we can do, except hope that the Republic will come to its senses and deploy a liberation force to this system."

"The royal family is the blood of Artorias," Rey echoes Valin's words from the marketplace. "Caled has a duty to his people!"

"Yes— to reclaim their homeworld," Katarn says calmly, "while the blood of Artorias lives on his daughter. Now do you understand?"
Rey subsides with an irate glare at the *Redemption* and her X-wing escorts, for lack of anything else to glare at. She recognizes the markings of Black Squadron, but fails to see *Black One*. "Master, where's Poe?"

"Commander Dameron has been deployed elsewhere."

She waits patiently for the specifics, only to scowl upon realizing that the brown-bearded man standing next to her does not intend to divulge anymore information. It's frustrating how the Masters still tend to keep their own counsel even after everything that has happened, as if she and the other Knights were mere children waving glowing sticks around.

But she does not pursue this line of thought, because that way lies the darkness that *he* had succumbed to. *He has always been more prone to questioning this path than the rest of us,* Eryl Besa had told her once, during their first and last mission together, beneath the Corbos moon.

Eryl, who had died in the Siege, along with Finn Galfridian and so many others.

Rey does not have long to prod at this ever-present knot of grief, because soon the last wave of refugees has disappeared into the *Redemption*. Once the frigate's repulsorlifts are stirring up particles of sand and splashes of blue-green water, she and Katarn make their way further down the shore, where Valin is finishing up pre-flight checks on the *Moldy Crow*.

*Strapped to her seat in the passenger compartment as the HWK-290 light freighter slants into the air, Rey peers out the viewport and watches smoke rise from the city's rooftops, mushrooming into black clouds amidst the emerald swirl of surrounding forests, which are in turn encircled by membranes of white sand and sapphire seas.*

*Artorias is burning.* She's looking at the physical manifestation of what had once rendered this world's prince so helpless, the image that had been fed into his mind by a Dark Lord of the Sith.

"Exar Kun predicted this would happen," Rey mumbles under her breath. *Just like he predicted I would die in battle.*
Valin glances over from across the narrow aisle, where his lanky frame somehow manages to exude the impression of being *elegantly sprawled* despite the fact that he's buckled up just as tightly as Rey is, in preparation for the punch through atmosphere and into the black. "Don't think about it, kid," he advises. "Don't give that bastard the satisfaction. You defeated him, fair and square."

*It wasn't just me who struck the final blow, Rey wants to correct. I had help from—*

Something in her chest clenches, as if to forestall the brush of the name through her mind. According to Resistance intel, he has another name now, one that Alema had confirmed. It had fallen like a death-knell from the Twi'lek's masked lips, extinguishing the last spark of foolish hope that the events of this past year have been nothing more than a bad dream.

"Did you get her?" Valin suddenly asks.

"No," Rey admits.

He turns his gaze to the viewport, his sharp jaw clenching at the sight of the endless seas unfurled below him. He'd been on a mission in Wild Space when the attack on the Praxium took not only Eryl and Finn, but also Tekli, Ulaha Kore, and Ganner Rhysode; they'd followed in Numa Rar's footsteps and become one with the Force. Raynar Thul is still serving the terms of his banishment for killing Numa, while Alema and the man who now styles himself Kylo Ren have thrown in their lot with the First Order.

For all intents and purposes, Valin is the only one left out of the original Jedi Knights. Sometimes, Rey muses that, if they were keeping score, then he has lost much, much more than she has.

"Why isn't that SSD attacking?" he wonders out loud. "Surely its sensors must have detected us and the Resistance frigate even from the opposite end of the island."

"I suppose they're letting us get away so we can spread the word," Katarn grunts from the pilot seat. "This invasion is a—a flex of *muscle*, so to speak. They're probably counting on the Republic being unwilling to divert manpower from the Osarian-Rhommmamool conflict."

Rey snorts. "Of course those sleazy politicians on Hosnian Prime would want to focus on *that*. It's disrupting trade routes along the Corellian Run. Meanwhile, they get nothing if they liberate Artorias."
"Sure, it's a small planet, but it's also a foothold in the Outer Rim," says Katarn. "I'll swing by Dac on my way to Hosnian Prime— perhaps Master Cilghal can use her considerable diplomatic skills to persuade the Senate into taking action." He glances at Rey and Valin over his shoulder. "I'll drop the two of you off at home first, though."

*Ossus is not home, Rey thinks mutinously. Not like Yavin 4 was.*

But she says nothing. She keeps her own counsel as the Crow coasts through the skies and shudders into the atmosphere, before the view beyond the transparisteel fills with the silvery obsidian of realspace and then dissolves into starlines.

*"

There are times when Rey wishes that she had been awake for it— that she'd witnessed the exact moment Ben Solo embraced the darkness and let the stormtroopers ferry him into the black shuttle. Perhaps seeing that for herself would have made it easier for her to let him go.

Instead, she's stuck in her last memory of him as a Jedi— that soft haze of him kissing her forehead and murmuring words of love while the light of the setting sun enfolded them both in the temple on the jungle moon. She'd seen him again after that, of course— her vision of him in a chamber surrounded by blood-red Sith holocrons, and then the night that they had stared at each other amidst the monsoon and the ruins of the academy, when he in his helmed regalia had destroyed everything she held dear.

*That's who he is now, she tries to remind herself. Kylo Ren is no longer the boy you knew.*

But still she dreams of the valley where she died. Where he used Darth Vader's amulet to bring her back to life, surrounded by mining tech and the monstrous, electrocuted remains of the two Leviathans. She dreams of the way he said goodbye, with a tenderness that he had rarely shown her during the twelve years they grew up together.

Twelve years. She'd once thought they would have more time than that.

She also dreams of lightning and of rain, and of her own blade humming above her shoulder while she wept. *I name you the Sword of the Jedi,* Luke Skywalker had solemnly pronounced. *Yours is a restless life, and never shall you know peace, though you shall be blessed for the peace that you*
What kind of vows were those? It had sounded more like a punishment. But it's not like she can ask Luke for clarification— for he, too, has disappeared.

"Rey."

A raspy voice is saying her name and long, warm fingers are curved around her shoulder, gently shaking her awake. She opens her eyes to the sight of messy dark hair haloed by starlight, and a wild flare blazes through the sleep-fogged corridors of her mind.

"Ben?" she whispers. The name leaves her lips so plaintively, with so much hope.

Valin freezes.

Rey feels all the blood drain from her face once she realizes her mistake. Fully awake now, she straightens up in her seat while his hand drops back to his side. "We're about to make planetfall," he mumbles, and she is mortified by the pity that she hears in his voice.

She manages a brisk nod, and an even brisker tone. "Thanks for waking me up."

"No problem." He flashes her an uncertain smile before he returns to his seat.

The Crow is now fast advancing upon Ossus, which is in the middle of its day cycle. Gilded gold by twin suns, the planet still bears the scars left by the chemical and electrical storms that had swept through it when the Cron Cluster went supernova thousands of years ago— but it had rallied over time, with patches of lush greenery now breaking up the swirls of desolate, irradiated desert.

Life finds a way. All things heal, Rey tells herself as the ship makes its descent. She wishes that it wasn't so difficult to believe.
Battle of Artorias.

Resurgent-class Star Destroyer.

TIE/fo space superiority fighter.

Atmospheric Assault Lander.

Droideka.

The technique that Rey uses against the riot control stormtrooper with the Z6 baton is known as Trakata.

Kyle Katarn.

The Moldy Crow.

The Pythea.

In the EU, Dulac is a Yuuzhan Vong agent who disables Artorias' comm interlink. I have him as a human working for the First Order to suit the purposes of this story.

The Royal House of Galfridian: Caled, Nina, and Kave. I MISS YOU, FINN! I WILL AVENGE YOU!

Ben and Rey's conversation about Malacia takes place in Chapter 12 of LYG, while their conversation about Soresu takes place in Chapter 4.

This is Alema Rar's new outfit, except with a sufficiently Knights of Ren-ish mask.

Ataru.

EF76 Nebulon-B escort frigate.

T-70 X-wing fighter.

The Redemption. In the EU, she gets blown up, but canon has her surviving the Battle of Endor, so I'm going with that because I'm worryingly sentimental about the old Rebel Alliance fleet.

The Warspite. Its jump-and-drop attack is outlined in the Redemption scenario.

Ison Corridor ambush.

Battle of Eidoloni.

Battle of Kothlis.

Battle of Brigia.

Artorian safe haven.

Black Squadron.
The **Black One**.

"SSD" is slang for an Imperial Star Destroyer.

The **Osarian-Rhomamool conflict** and its disruption of **Corellian Run** hyperlane traffic is given as the reason that the Republic was distracted from the Yuuzhan Vong's first maneuvers of galactic invasion.

**Dac.**

**Cilghal.**

**Ossus.**

**Cron Cluster.**
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

The wonderful kimbianajones has made a gorgeous playlist for LYG. As long as we're on the subject of music, savingprimrose over on Tumblr has said that "Borrowed" by Jensen and the Flips reminds her of Ben and Rey in this AU, while wheniconsidereverythingthatgrows suggested "Which Witch" by Florence and the Machine and an anon put forth "Yes Girl" by Bea Miller. This sequel's title is from the song by Passion Pit, but I also get a lot of feels from "When You Were Mine" by Night Terrors of 1927 feat. Tegan and Sara. I think I'll make song recs a constant feature in my author's notes from now on.

Thank you so much for all the bookmarks, comments, and kudos so far. Please do keep 'em coming!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The Crow's engines whine upon being nudged into planetfall, the ship's raptor-head silhouette dropping like a stone from the gold-streaked clouds. Their teeth rattling amidst the shudders that bite through the hull, Rey and Valin exchange dubious glances which Katarn somehow manages to sense despite being preoccupied at the dashboard.

"When I first saw this old lady, I told the deck master, 'You've got to be joking,'" Katarn reminisces, "but she's served me well since." He pulls the Crow up from its dive, gliding over a lush canopy of the heart-shaped leaves that adorn the tops of Ossus' kingwoods. However, he is careful not to fly too low, as this world is home to brightly-colored arboreal frogs that have a habit of sticking to the undersides of ships—a multitude of tiny, bejeweled flight hazards.

Adega Besh and Adega Prime circle each other in the sky, burning orange spheres that spill high noon into the forested valleys below. The Jedi Order's sanctuary is an ancient stone complex of blocks and ziggurats overlooking one of these valleys, perched on a grassy mountain ridge next to a shimmering waterfall. In the days of the Old Republic, it had been a great library containing various documents and scrolls that held not only Jedi teachings, but also the ingenuity of thousands of sentient races from all across the galaxy—before being ransacked by Exar Kun and his acolytes during the same war that had seen the detonation of the Cron Cluster at the hands of Sith magic. Now, thousands of years later, it serves as the last bastion of what few Jedi remain after the Siege on Yavin 4.

Every time the Ossus complex looms into view on the approach, Rey always tries not to think about the day she first saw the Yavin 4 Praxeum unfold from the jungle that surrounded it. He had been fifteen years old and beside her in the Shadow Sabre's passenger compartment, telling her the history of the place in dry academic tones. Would he have lectured her on the Great Library's history, too, had he been there when she initially landed on this planet?
Stop it, she scolds herself, stop it, stop it, stop it, until the inside of her skull reverberates with those two words. If the past were a desert, her time with him would be the Sinking Fields— deceitful, treacherous quicksand, all too capable of swallowing her whole if she isn't careful where she treads. She'd beat the memories out of herself if she could; she would claw each word, smile, and touch out of the corners of her heart. Perhaps then her rage would be as finely honed and true as a lightsaber, instead of the pathetic, unsteady thing that keeps slipping from her grasp to leave sharp cuts in her soul.

Katarn eases the *Crow* onto the landing grid in front of the complex, between a T-65 X-wing and a *Jemlaat*- class in-system sail yacht. Valin perks up at the sight of the starfighter— it means that his father is here— but Rey eyes the *Lore Seeker* with a slight trace of apprehension. She never knows how to act around the recently-widowed Tionne Solusar these days.

Rey and Valin disembark and wait until Katarn has taken to the skies again before disappearing into the complex to find the Masters who are planet-bound. At present, the Jedi are making use of only two areas— the main pyramid and the small one-story habitation units clustered around it. They hardly need more space, considering that there is but a mere handful of them left.

Not that there had been many of them in the first place, even back during the good years. The New Jedi Order had practically just been starting out when it was betrayed.

Despite having been trained in stealth until it was second nature, Rey considers her and Valin's footsteps eerily loud as they walk down the stone hallways inside the ziggurat. There are no younglings chasing after Artoo in an attempt to levitate him, no apprentices laughing and groaning over bad puns, no Knights trading friendly insults with one another. The place offers the same basic layout as the Academy on Yavin 4, but it is marred by the emptiness of what once was.

Rey starts. Up ahead, a beam of sunlight hits the corner at an odd angle and she swears that she sees Seff Hellin, as if her thoughts have summoned him back to life. He's leaning against the wall, collapsed in mirth at one of those aforementioned bad puns of which he had been the primary instigator. She almost calls out his name, but he vanishes when she blinks.

"They come to me like that, too, sometimes," Valin says quietly. "Once, as I was plodding down the stairs, tired from velocity drills, I heard Ulaha telling me to get a move on."

"I don't understand." Rey's voice is thick through the lump in her throat. "Are they ghosts? Did they follow us here?"
He shrugs. "I think it's more accurate to say that we carried them with us— and that we continue to carry them, no matter where we walk. The Force means that no one is ever truly gone."

"That's worse than them being lost for good," she blurts out before she can help it.

He blinks down at her with long-lashed hazel eyes. For a moment, the expression on his face is the same one he and some of the other Knights used to wear right before they patted her on the head, back when she was still a child who would, much to their amusement, bristle at such a gesture. It's only lately— it's only upon looking back— that Rey recognizes this for the display of affection it had been. There is a part of her that yearns for it now.

But Valin's hands stay at his sides. You could hardly pat a twenty-year-old on the head, much less one who is the Sword of the Jedi. Instead, he flashes her a wan, sad smile. "I disagree. I think there is something to be said about those you loved living on inside of you. I hope you learn that eventually, kid."

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They track Corran Horn's Force signature to the council chamber on the second level. The Master beams as he envelops his taller son in a tight bear hug that lifts Valin off his feet. "You're too thin! Your mother's going to kill me for not looking after you properly."

"Lay off, Dad. And cut your hair," Valin retorts, smirking at Corran's gray-streaked brown locks that have been pulled back in a simple bun.

Corran's green eyes sparkle. "Oh, you're one to talk—"

Rey observes the bantering pair with no small wistfulness, noting the absence of the strain that had colored Ben's every interaction with Han Solo. It is possible, after all, for fathers and sons to be somewhat functional, and perhaps if Ben had known that, he would have stayed—

*Stop it!* her inner voice screams at her again.

Corran turns to her with an expression that is markedly more solemn than the one he had worn to greet Valin. "How are you, Rey?"
"Fine." She adds "Master" a heartbeat too late, overcome as she is by a sudden wave of resentment. Ever since the ill-fated Corbos mission— ever since the raw lash of her Force energy had nearly torn the *Shadow Sabre* apart when she rose from unconsciousness to find him gone— she has felt the Masters' eyes on her, gauging her warily. It's only gotten worse since the Siege, when she had encountered him as Kylo Ren for the first time. They try to be subtle about it, but—

("They watch me carefully— all of them," he'd said. "They're just waiting for me to explode."

"Maybe you should prove them wrong," she'd told him.)

And maybe she should take her own advice.

Rey has managed to school her nerves into a semblance of calm by the time another Master enters the room. She bows to Tionne Solusar, and then hastily bows to Corran when she realizes that she had forgotten to afford him the same respect. It is a belated gesture, but he returns it in kind, with a gravity that indicates his awareness of her own inner struggle.

"Apparently, your scouting mission turned out to be a lot more eventful than any of us expected," Tionne remarks to the two Knights.

"Eventful? Nah," Valin quips. "Full-scale planetary invasions are just another day in the life."

"You may debrief," Tionne says, moving to stand beside Corran. She still looks very much the same, with her long silver hair and startling opalescent eyes, but her steps are more ponderous than they had been a year ago, owing to the cybernetic leg that has replaced the one lost in combat against two Knights of Ren on Fondor— the same skirmish where she lost her husband, Kam, as well.

Rey and Valin take turns detailing the Battle of Artorias to the Masters, who listen with their usual serenity. There is, however, a faint tremor that runs through the Force when Rey mentions Alema.

"I wonder if that child knows how hard we searched for her when she disappeared," Tionne sighs.

"I doubt it would matter even if she does," Valin tersely declares— Valin, who, along with Finn
Galfridian, had done most of the searching. "She blames the Jedi for her sister's death. In a way, I can understand that, as someone who has a sister of my own."

"Jysella told me something similar a few years ago," Rey says to him. "That she might have gone the way of Alema, had you met Numa's fate."

"It is a bitter thing, when love turns to grief." For a moment, there is a faraway look in Tionne's eyes, before she regains her composure and focuses on more pressing matters. "What do you think, Corran? Will the Republic take action against the First Order? Artorias is a small planet, yes, but surely they will realize that this is a sign of things to come."

"It's hard to say," Corran mutters. "Their priority is cleaning up the Corellian Run, and I don't imagine that they'll be too eager to declare all-out war when they're so close to finalizing several lucrative trade agreements with the Trans-Hydian Borderlands. You know how easily spooked those investors are."

"Even so, the First Order is clearly violating the terms of the Galactic Concordance," Valin argues. "If that wasn't already glaringly obvious when they attacked Yavin 4—"

"There are those," Corran interrupts, "who write off the Siege as a mere Imperial vendetta against the Jedi. And I am certain that there are those who will write off the invasion of Artorias as well. Aside from the politicians who are bought and sold, the First Order also has sympathizers in the Core Worlds—people who genuinely believe that things were better during the days of the Empire."

"Not just the Core Worlds. The Colonies, too," Tionne corrects. "Although Kam and I weren't able to bring back definitive proof that Fondor has allied itself with the First Order, the fact that the Knights of Ren are allowed free reign on that planet speaks volumes."

"The situation is getting worse," Rey says. "I know we all agreed to give Master Luke time, but, now that we're losing ground, it's imperative that we find him before they do." The sentiment is not exactly noble. She's thinking about her vision from four years ago—the metal room, the man in the mask, Where is Skywalker? If she's being honest with herself, she wants to hurry that future along, come to it as soon as possible. She's impatient to confront Kylo Ren and make him pay.

"Are we even sure that the First Order is looking for Master Luke?" Valin asks.
Corran and Tionne exchange glances, heightening Rey's suspicions that the older Jedi know more than they're letting on. "Luke Skywalker is a symbol," Tionne says at last, in careful and measured tones. "His continued existence is a reminder of the Empire's downfall. The First Order will not want to risk the possibility that people might rally to him in the future."

"There is also the matter of personal attachment," Corran adds. "Historically, Sith trials have required the sacrifice of a loved one—a test, if you will, of the initiate's dedication. We've yet to confirm if Snoke is training Ben in the old ways, but it's smart to cover all our bases."

Valin turns to Rey. "That night," he murmurs, "when they attacked... You said that you stopped him just as he was about to execute Master Luke."

Rey nods. In her memory, a blaze of red light is shrieking over Luke's bowed head amidst stone and monsoon. She's rushing out of the ruins of the temple and slamming the assailant backwards with the Force. He's steadying himself and then she's staring at her own reflection in the depths of a polished obsidian helm. *I have seen you before,* she's thinking over the howl of wind and rain, *you're going to ask me where Skywalker is someday.*

And then he's walking away from her and she's recognizing that stooped posture with the unerring instinct of someone who has lived with it for twelve years, and she's whispering his name and he's stopping and—

— *he's not looking back*—

"Snoke might have tasked him to kill his uncle as part of his training," Tionne postulates. "Since you interrupted him before he could do so, he might be wanting to finish the job."

Rey's fists have clenched at her sides. "He won't," she vows. "We're going to get to Master Luke first."

"Leave that to us," Corran says far too quickly. "Do not forget that you have your own upcoming mission to concentrate on."

*A scavenger hunt is hardly as important as finding our missing Grand Master,* Rey very nearly snaps, but she holds her peace. She has skated on enough thin ice today.
Night brings the scent of Ecclessis figs, earthy and sweet, blown in through Rey's window by silvery cool wisps of wind. There must be a grove nearby, perhaps across the roaring falls that she can hear from her little habitation unit.

It's not the sound of the water that's keeping her awake, though. It's the scent of the figs, so heavy with nostalgia that it hurts to breathe in. It suffocates her as she curls up on her bunk, taking shallow gasps of air over the ache in her chest. It drowns her in memory.

"Remind me again why I'm doing this?" Ben huffed, trailing after her beneath the sun-dappled emerald roof of the Yavin 4 jungle.

"Because Ulaha warned you not to come back— on pain of death— without enough figs for her new recipe," Rey called over her shoulder.

"In almost two decades on this backwater moon, I've never seen her cook. Have you?"

"Sure, lots of times." Rey hid the lie behind a veneer of the breeziness that she was finding frighteningly easier and easier to adopt with each year that passed. She wondered if subterfuge was part of growing up, if all eighteen-year-olds felt the need for masks or if it was just her.

The truth of the matter was that Ulaha Kore, the pink-skinned Bith Jedi from the swamp world of Clak'dor VII, had pulled Rey aside and told her to "take Solo out for a walk before we end up strangling him." The Knights had just returned from offworld, were on downtime between missions, and Ben was in an even snippier mood than usual. However, the fresh air seemed to be doing him some good; the tense crackle of his Force signature had abated to an erratic low-frequency hum.

Eventually, the towering gray-green Massassi trees gave way to a tangle of wild figs, white-barked and ten meters tall, their long leaves shedding that distinctive spiced perfume. Rey stopped in her tracks and Ben made a show of pretending to walk right into her. His broad chest pressed into the notches of her spine as his large hands clasped the ridges of her shoulders, and every space below her heart erupted into a thousand fluttering wings.
"Get off," she whined, more out of an instinct left over from childhood than an actual desire for him to release her. But he did, nuzzling at her temple before lowering his hands back to his sides and stepping away.

She was blushing so fiercely that she didn't dare turn around to look at him. "What, did you miss me or something?"

"Perish the thought," he scoffed. "It was only three weeks."

She could hear the wry smile in his voice, though, and she couldn't quite help the ridiculous grin that spread across her face in return as she clambered up the tree. He'd never been very affectionate, but, as this had been their longest separation yet, he was obviously allowing himself a few rare liberties.

The next few minutes were spent with her nimble fingers plucking figs from the branches and dropping them into the unseen net of Ben's Force-grip. When her feet hit the ground once more, he was surrounded by a revolving constellation of the tear-shaped purple fruits. She snatched one from the air and polished it on her sleeve before taking a bite. It was summer-ripe, almost alcoholic, the softness of flesh pleasantly offset by the crunchy seeds. He was watching her carefully, oh, so carefully, his sullen features rendered gentle by the morning light and his brown eyes burnished with the olive gloss of the forest.

She offered the fig up to him; he bent down to nibble at it, his full lips brushing against her juice-stained fingertips. He chewed slowly, meditatively, his clean-shaven jaw moving into the curve of her palm. And it was always during moments like these that Rey felt like she was on the verge of some piercing revelation, her veins thrilling with the oddest mixture of hope and fear, am I ready for this, are we?

Ben kissed her fingers before he straightened up—or perhaps she'd only imagined it, ascribed false meaning to the slight turn of his head and the pulse of his lips on her skin. Somehow, though, she didn't think that she had.

This day was long months before Corbos. Before the glint of his grandfather's amulet and the valley of the Leviathans and the dark mines where he broke her heart. For now, the summer was sweet, and he was, maybe, hers.
On Ossus, the moonlight burns Rey's eyes. She rolls over and buries her nose in the pillow in a vain attempt to diminish the scent of the figs. Why did you do it? she asks him, wherever in the galaxy he is. How could all those years have meant so much to me and so little to you?

The Jedi Order's Horizon-class star yacht had been destroyed during the Siege along with every other vehicle in the hangar bay, but Corran's wife— Jysella and Valin's mother— is Mirax Terrik, the smuggler queen, who had used her guile and connections to acquire another ship for the Knights. Sunrise finds Rey on the landing grid, watching the Ebon Hawk descend. It's a Kuat Drive Yards Dynamic-class freighter, curved and pronged much like the Millennium Falcon and painted primarily white with red accents along the sides.

It is, of course, not the original Ebon Hawk, but Kuat Drive Yards had gotten rights to the design when they bought out Core Galaxy Systems. A good make never goes out of style.

Once she's on board, Rey heads in a beeline for the cockpit. "Hey, you," she says to the pilot.

"Hey, you," Jysella Horn responds in kind, looking up from the dashboard with a soft smile. She wears her hair short these days; bluntly-cut layers of reddish-brown locks fall just past her chin, emphasizing her delicate features. Gives the enemy less to grab during combat, she'd explained to Rey. "Valin commed me about what happened on Artorias. You did the right thing, letting Alema go."

"I really don't want to talk about it," Rey grunts, sliding into the co-pilot's seat. "What about you? Any progress with the Ysanna?"

Jysella had spent the past few days in one of Ossus' many valleys, trying to forge an alliance with the Force-sensitive race that eked out a hunter-gatherer existence on this world. However, judging from the way her brown eyes darken, she hadn't been successful. "Their loyalties are with Luke Skywalker, as he was the one who came to their rescue on Vjun. They will answer only to him."

Rey groans. "Terrific. This is why we should be helping the Resistance search for Master Luke. Instead, you and I are being ordered to go on a—"

"Scavenger hunt?" Jysella offers, a trace of her older brother's dry wit shining through. "I don't think that we're being deployed to Yavin 4 just to check if there's anything left to salvage from the
vaults. Knowing the Masters, they also want us to find closure, so that we can move on."

"How can I move on?" Rey demands. "I was there."

It's the wrong thing to say. Jysella immediately drops her gaze. The air in the cockpit grows heavy with pain and accusation.

This is why I have to control my temper, Rey thinks, stricken. I continue to hurt those who are left to me. Sometimes she feels as if she's outside of her body, watching herself go through unfamiliar forms.

* 

It's not until the Hawk has broken free of Ossus' gravitational pull that Rey finds the guts to apologize. She opens her mouth, but Jysella speaks first, still avoiding eye contact while she fiddles with the holographic galaxy map until it displays Yavin 4's coordinates. "Do you wish that I had been there, too? Would that have made things better?"

"No, of course not." The words leave Rey in a rush. "Sella, I'm sorry."

"It's okay." The prompt response is quiet but sincere. Jysella simply doesn't have it in her to hold a grudge for long. "Master Cilghal and I were in the middle of diplomatic talks on Nim Drovis when she received an urgent comm-link from General Organa. She then excused us both from the meeting, saying that she needed to talk to me outside. Once we were in the hallway, she told me to kneel, and she drew her lightsaber and bestowed my Knighthood. I was so confused. It wasn't until I got to my feet that she explained what had happened."

"Your ceremony went pretty well, given the circumstances," Rey mumbles. "I blubbered my way through mine."

Jysella acknowledges the conciliatory stab at humor with a tilt of her lips, but her next words are still somber. "I do wish that I had been there. I could have— done something—"

Rey quickly shakes her head. "Not a day goes by that I don't thank the Force that you were offworld. I'm glad you're with me now. I'm glad we're in this fight together— and that we will claim our vengeance side by side."
Jysella doesn't say anything until the *Hawk* nears the hyperspace corridor out of the Adega system. "It's not vengeance I seek."

Rey glances at her. "What, then?"

"Grace," Jysella replies.

It's Rey's turn to fall silent. They make the jump.

Chapter End Notes

*Kingwood.*

*Adega Besh* and *Adega Prime.*

*The Great Jedi Library.*

*The Ossus complex.*

Ben lectures Rey on the history of the Yavin 4 temple in *Chapter 2* of LYG.

*Corran Horn and his man-bun.*

*Tionne Solusar* actually does lose an arm and leg in the EU, but obviously under different circumstances.

*Fondor.*

*Ecclessis fig.*

*Clak'dor VII.*

*Mirax Terrik.*

*The Ebon Hawk.* I couldn't resist!

*Kuat Drive Yards.*

*The Ysanna.*
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

In this update, some pieces that have been hovering since the first chapter of LYG will finally click into place. I wrote most of this while staying at a cottage up in the mountains; it was rainy and gray and I was listening to the incredibly sad songs that you guys recommended. Probably why this turned out angrier than planned.

Thanks for reading and supporting this story. Don't be a stranger, let me know what you think so far!

Soundtrack:

1. This heart-wrenching 8tracks mix by lizziestark.
2. Pride - Abra (suggested by anon)
3. Don't Let Me Go - RAIGN (savingprimrose)
4. The City and the River - The Rescues (savingprimrose)
5. Dance On Our Graves - Paper Route (ReyloArt)
6. Youth - Daughter (ReyloArt)
7. Second Chances - Paper Route (jandjsalmon)
8. I Can't Get Next To You - Thee More Shallows (Abby)
9. Get Up - Barcelona (tyrantsandcreampuffs)
10. I Found - Amber Run (tyrantsandcreampuffs)
11. If I Get High - Nothing But Thieves (tyrantsandcreampuffs)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

How does one react when confronted with the ruins of home? Rey's last glimpse of the Jedi Praxeum had been through sheets of rain and transparisteel, palm pressed to the viewport of the Resistance ship that airlifted her and Luke out of Yavin's fourth moon. Now she's knee-deep in grass grown long without Artoo to trim it, and she's looking up at sky lit orange by the gas giant where the pyramid should be.

In her memory, he is fifteen, maybe sixteen, standing beside her with one scrawny arm extended to point at each level of the temple. "The Grand Audience Chamber," he's saying in the long-suffering tones of someone whose uncle has saddled him with babysitting duty. "The meditation rooms—the kitchens— where are you going?" Because this is the part, isn't it, where she runs off to the river, six years old and eager to explore this new world—

"Rey." Jysella touches her arm and they move forward. The day after the attack, the Masters had come here to recover and cremate the bodies, so most of the debris has already been moved out of the way. It doesn't take long for the two Knights to locate the staircase leading to the underground vaults that had housed the Jedi Order's prized relics. Either Kylo Ren or Alema would have known how to operate the Force-activated lock on the door, but it's swinging unsteadily off its hinges, no doubt affected by the same explosions that had caused the second level to collapse onto the ground
Holding glow-lamps aloft, Jysella and Rey cautiously navigate the wreckage of the vaults— the toppled pillars, the heaps of rubble. *I healed you here once,* Rey finds herself thinking, finds her thoughts drawn to a boy long gone. *Do you remember? You had just come back from Dathomir and you wouldn't let anyone touch your wound but me...*

"I don't think there's anything left." Jysella's soft voice echoes through the musty, dilapidated corridors. The First Order had taken all the holocrons and scrolls, while the Masters had salvaged what remaining artifacts were still in one piece after the attack and placed them in storage on Ossus. Jysella and Rey are here to check if some things had been overlooked in the rush of those horrible days post-Siege, but it's all so *empty.*

Beyond the glow-lamp's white halo, Rey sees Natua Wan and Yaqueel Saav'etu perched on a stone ledge that had fallen to the floor. Yaqueel, the ever cheerful Bothan, is whispering in Natua's ear while the stone-faced Falleen nods without much interest. It would be gossip, it was always gossip, Yaqueel chattering away and Natua tuning her out...

Rey shifts the angle of the glow-lamp, training its beam on the spot. Her friends' faint images vanish, but there's a gleam of something metallic catching the light, pinned under the ledge. While the stonework is ancient and massive, Jysella manages to levitate it by a few centimeters for the brief couple of seconds that Rey needs to summon the object into her palm. The ledge crashes back to the floor just as her fingers close around a—

— *lightsaber—*

Operating on sheer instinct, in automatic response to the demands of muscle memory, Rey thumbs the chrome emitter and flicks her wrist in an experimental outward slash. A blaze of pale Adegan blue cleaves the shadows. This weapon's slim hilt is skeletal in design, cut in brass and bronze with black ridges along the handgrip.

Jysella's eyes widen. "Is that—"

"Yes," Rey confirms. Of all the things that could have escaped the First Order's notice, of all the things that could have survived the Siege and the passage of time— "Obi-Wan's lightsaber."
Buoyed by the unexpected discovery, they continue searching the vaults for far longer than originally planned. It seems, however, that fortune has run dry; they find nothing else of note as their chronometers tick out the passage of one more hour, and then two.

"Guess that's it," Rey tells Jysella, absentmindedly drumming a forefinger on the second hilt that's now clipped to her belt. "We ought to head back to the ship—"

They freeze at the faint sound of ion engines humming through the world above and then sputtering into silence. The jungle teems with life as it always has, but now there are two bright flares of sentience moving amidst the currents of the Force, approaching the temple from the southern riverbank. The Jedi creep out of the vaults, taking care to stick close to the crumbling moss-stained walls that shield them from view. They stop once the footsteps draw nearer; Rey grips the hilt of her lightsaber and sees Jysella do the same out of the corner of her eye.

"So, this," booms an enterprising, sonorous voice, "is the Praxeum. Or what's left of it, anyway. We'll just have a quick look around, see if there isn't anything we can—"

"Stars," Rey mutters under her breath even as her blade-arm relaxes. "What are you doing here?" she demands briskly, striding out from behind the walls, Jysella following suit.

Only the barest hint of shock flickers across Lando Calrissian's face before he recovers with a suave grin, like the incorrigible con artist that he is. "Well, well, well," he drawls, "if it isn't Corran and Mirax's youngest, and—" His mischievous gaze darts from Jysella to Rey—"the Sword of the Jedi."

Over his shoulder, the stately silver lines of the Lady Luck gleam in the sunlight a few meters away. Rey would normally spare a derisive snort for the ostentatiousness of Lando's SoroSuub Personal Luxury Yacht 3000, but her attention is soon diverted to his companion, whom she doesn't know. A handsome man, roughly around her age, with deep-set eyes, dark skin, and close-cropped black hair. Military issue, she thinks— even though he's wearing civilian attire, his posture echoes that of the Resistance soldiers she's been working with this past year.

She frowns at the familiar-looking brown flight jacket clinging to his broad frame, and then frowns a little bit more when she notices that he's staring at her as if he's seeing a ghost. "Do I have something on my face?" she snaps.

"I— uh, no." He shakes his head. Quick, guarded movements. Definitely a military man.
"Where are my manners?" Lando chortles. "Jysella, Rey, this guy calls himself Finn. Met him at some dinky little cantina in Cratertown and offered him work at GemDiver." He points to the fiery orb of Yavin Prime in the sky, around which his space station is doubtless in orbit, mining for Corusca gems in the atmosphere of the gas giant.

Rey's past has caught up with her. It steals the breath from her lungs. She knows that Cratertown is a settlement, that the *dinky little cantina* is named Ergel's Bar, and that it serves only one drink that's called Knockback Nectar and tastes like sour spit and motor oil...

"Anything to get out of Jakku." Lando winks at Finn. "Right, kid?"

"Why did you want to leave Jakku?" Jysella asks. She's eyeing the jacket dubiously as well.

Finn looks— *trapped*, for a moment, glancing from Rey to Jysella and back again. Rey hones in on him, not reading his mind, exactly, but focusing on his presence in the Force until she brushes across nervousness, uncertainty, and the feeling of running into a dead end.

"Go on," Lando encourages, although his ever-present convivial smile has taken on a razor-sharp edge. "Tell the nice Jedi how you got in too deep with the Hutt Cartel—"

"But, first," Rey interrupts, losing what fragile hold she has on her patience, "tell us why you're wearing Poe Dameron's jacket."

"Dameron? The flyboy?" Lando peers at Finn with renewed interest. "Are you with the Resistance? Was *that* what you were hiding from me? You needn't have worried, kid— the General and I go way back. I'd pick her over the First Order any day of the week."

Finn clears his throat and squares his shoulders, only to visibly deflate when Rey and Jysella raise their eyebrows at him. "Okay, look, I know that you people can tell when someone's lying," he says with a hint of exasperation, "so how about I just come clean and spare us all a whole lot of time?"

"A wise choice," Rey says dryly, albeit with a small grin. Biting even when cornered— she can relate to that. She can respect someone for that.
Sadly, it takes but a few more minutes for the goodwill that this Finn has built with her to ebb. It's not even that he's a stormtrooper; it's more to do with the fact that—

"You left BB-8 on Jakku," she growls through clenched teeth. "You left a droid carrying the map to Luke Skywalker on a planet full of scavengers."

He has the gall to bristle. "Did you miss the part where Poe got swallowed up by the sand? You think maybe you can shed a few tears over that first?"

She waves a dismissive hand. "I don't know where he is, but he's not dead."

"How do you—" Finn blinks. "Oh, right. The Force."

"Rey. Jysella. You have to go." Lando's solemn, urgent tone is in stark contrast to his previous demeanor. "I don't like that droid's chances. You have to go now."

Before he's even finished speaking, the two Jedi are already hurrying off in the direction of the Ebon Hawk, on the landing grid in front of the temple. Rey catches the threads of a furious conversation between Finn and Lando behind her, but she pays it no mind. Every second spent dawdling is another second that BB-8 could be getting dismantled and sold for parts and the map falling into the wrong hands.

"Wait!" Finn catches up to her when she has one foot on the ramp, hot on Jysella's heels. "I'm going with you—"

Rey cocks her head, bewildered. "Why?"

"I just—" He fidgets, dropping his gaze. "I feel bad, all right? Let me help."

She senses that there's more to it than this. She senses that he'd made up his mind to abandon the war until he saw her, for whatever reason. She senses a feeling of regret that runs deeper— goes further— than the events of today.
But she can't afford the time to parse his motives. She nods at him and they board the *Hawk* together.

*"

It takes every single breathing exercise she knows to restrain herself from taking Kyle Katarn to task as soon as they make contact with the *Moldy Crow*. Even so, she has to momentarily shut her eyes at the blood-dark rage that surges within her when his face appears on the communications screen.

"Master Katarn." Her voice manages to betray no emotion as the *Hawk* punches up to the hyperlane along Yavin Prime. "Poe Dameron's droid is carrying the map to Master Luke's whereabouts, but it's been abandoned on Jakku. Jysella and I are heading there now to retrieve it."

"Stand down, Rey," Katarn orders her sternly. "We'll send someone else—"

"There's no time," Rey interrupts. "The *Finalizer* is still in orbit around that planet, and there is the scavenger element to contend with as well. Jysella and I are the nearest— from the Bypass, we'll nip up the Pinooran Spur to the Junction-Tierrel Loop and then ride the Hydian Way to the Western Reaches. This is the most efficient solution, Master. Even so, we might already be too late."

Katarn's brow wrinkles. She knows that he's doing the calculations in his head; the original *Hawk* had been the fastest ship in the galaxy during its time, and it stands to reason that the more advanced successor will prove its worth in this regard. "Very well. Fly home as soon as you acquire the target." He hesitates, and then, "How did you find out—"

But Rey interrupts him with a question of her own. "Why didn't you tell me about Poe's mission when I asked?"

"Given the circumstances, the Council felt it best to distance you from the search," Katarn replies. There is a hint of apology in his no-nonsense tone, but not much; he is still her superior, after all. "You have told us about your vision. We are attempting to prevent it."

"The future is set in stone." She's painfully aware of that now, after her death, after Artorias, even though Luke himself had tried to convince her of the opposite so many years ago.
"Perhaps 'prevent' was the wrong word," Katarn concedes. "'Delay,' then. We wish to delay your confrontation with Ben Solo until you have— gotten a better hold of yourself, so to speak." There are more tactful terms of phrase, but he is ultimately a former Imperial soldier and not a poet. "You carry much anger, Rey, sharpened by what you shared with Ben. We fear that you might do something you'll regret."

Jysella looks at her askance. Rey's cheeks flush hot. *It is a bitter thing, when love turns to grief,* Tionne had said, but it is so much worse coming to terms with the fact that her pitiful infatuation hadn't been a secret. She remembers the fever of those days, how other Jedi had warned her to be careful about getting tangled up in emotion, and how she would have thrown it all away for him, regardless. *I was a foolish child,* she thinks. *You tricked me, you tricked me—*

"Honor your vows," Katarn continues. "Honor those who died. When you face him again, it *has* to be in the Light, Rey. Do you understand?"

She bows, although her spine feels like it has been filled with lead. "Yes, Master."

Now that the most pressing issues have been dealt with, his eyes narrow at the sight of Finn over her shoulder. Before he can ask who he is, Rey ends the comm— admittedly, with no small vindictiveness. Let a Master stew about withheld information, for a change.

*!

The initial leg of the journey through hyperspace is conducted in silence, with both Jysella and Rey sliding wary glances at the former stormtrooper from time to time. But, once the *Hawk* eases into the Spur, Jysella breaks out the space rations, offering dehydrated protein bars from a blue container to the two other passengers. They eat sitting down, the cabin suffused with crunchy chewing noises over the tick of chronometers and the beep of sensors.

"I can't believe Lando took the *Lady Luck* to Jakku," muses Jysella. "I'm surprised he didn't get hijacked on the spot."

"Apparently, his personal fleet is thinning out," says Finn. "The First Order coddles pirates, you see. Like Kanjiklub and the Guavian Death Gang. It was a risk flying a luxury yacht, but he had no choice because he needed to close a black-market deal at Ergel's Bar as soon as possible, and he also had to show the client that he wasn't as down on his luck as a lot of businessmen are these days."
Rey snorts. "For an organization hell-bent on restoring rule of law to a chaotic galaxy, the First Order sure isn't picky about their alliances."

"The Supreme Leader— Snoke," Finn hastily corrects himself, as if belatedly remembering his new status as a defector, "says that the end justifies the means."

"And what do you believe?" Jysella asks him.

Finn shrugs. "Not sure about political ideologies and all that. I only know what I know— that I was taken from a family I'll never remember, and raised to do one thing. But, my first battle, I made a choice. I wasn't going to kill for the First Order."

It's a while before Rey speaks again. When she does, she barely recognizes her own voice. It's soft, tinged with something almost like wonder at the way the universe works. She hasn't sounded like this in a long, long time. "Jysella and I— we knew another Finn, once. He was a good man. One of the best."

And it feels as if a lost prince of Artorias is in this cabin with her, placing his hand on her shoulder, the weight so solid and reassuring that it could nearly be real amidst the starlines. You were strong in life, she had told him as he lay dying, and she'd rarely ever meant mere words so fiercely as she had in that particular moment. Your spirit will find its way to the halls of your fathers.

This man who shares his name, this man who ran for the Light— he smiles at her now, tentative, shy. "Like I said, I don't know what I really believe, but I also know something about coincidences. After Poe and I crashed, I wandered the Badlands for hours, thirsty and delirious, until I saw an old Imperial walker lying on its side. They told us that scavengers usually made bolt-holes out of wrecks like that, so I crawled in on the off-chance that I could be spared a drop of water. It was deserted, but someone had written Yavin 4 on the wall."

"Oh." Jysella's eyes widen in understanding. She turns to Rey, whose own eyes are already glassy and damp.

"When I met Lando in Cratertown and he mentioned that he was headed for the Yavin system, I took it as a sign," Finn continues. "I had no plan. No idea where to go. So I went on a leap of faith."

"That was me," Rey grates out. "That was my— my house. The Hellhound Two. I wrote that before
I left." She can still see it so clearly after all these years, her tiny fingers wrapped around a sharp point and scratching her destination on the wall, a hopeful message to a family who might come looking. *Find me someday. Please.*


Rey should probably be mortified by the drops of liquid warmth sliding down her cheeks, but she can't bring herself to care. *Not all tears are evil.* Hadn't she realized that long ago? How could she have forgotten?

But Finn suddenly tenses up. It's not awkwardness over the fact that she's crying— it's as if he's recalled something unpleasant. "Your Master Katarn, earlier during the comm— he mentioned Ben Solo?"

Jysella nods. She's the one who says it, because Rey can't. "You know him as Kylo Ren. He was a Jedi Knight back when Rey and I were still apprentices, but he was captured by the First Order during a mission. A year later, he led the Siege on the Praxeum."

Finn ducks his head. Something about the way he avoids Jysella's gaze makes Rey think that she is not the only one haunted by ghosts, but he's speaking again before she can pry further. "Yeah, I— I've heard about that. About his past, I mean. I was only a low-ranking stormtrooper, but word gets around on base. Most of the senior officers knew his— his grandfather? But his old name is taboo. Snoke won't allow anyone to say it."

*What's he like now?* Rey is horrified by how much she wants to ask. *Does he still have trouble sleeping, does he still hate it when people crack stupid jokes—*

Finn addresses his next question to her, obviously still thinking about the conversation with Katarn. "And he was your— um—?"

There are many ways that Rey can choose to respond. *He betrayed us. He killed my friends. He destroyed it all.* However, the emotional upheaval that she's been experiencing since Artorias has left her shattered. The revelations and remembrances have pierced through the shell that she's built around herself; light, old and faded, has come pouring out from between the cracks. She's back on Corbos, playfully kissing Ben's cheek as he carries her over the dead earth. She's back in the Grand Audience Chamber, distracting him while he tries to meditate. She's back beneath the trees, letting her first rain pool into her cupped palm while he watches. And she's back in the room in her mind, and he is so sad and gentle and it's farewell, *my little mad genius, I wanted to save some part of us.*
Unchanged by time.

"Good to me," Rey finally whispers. "He was good to me."

Finn begs off for a quick nap once they're traversing the Hydian Way, muttering about how he hasn't slept since before he was deployed to Tuanul. Jysella and Rey stay in the cockpit, watching the dashboard blink and the starlines go by.

"I hope we find Master Luke soon," Jysella ventures. "He spoke to me before he left, you know."

Rey starts. The last time she saw Luke, he'd been in a bacta tank, recovering from injuries sustained during the Siege. She'd only found out from Leia that he'd climbed into an X-wing practically the moment he woke up.

"I saw him on the landing pad," Jysella continues. "I ran to him and clutched at his robes and begged him not to leave us. But he said— he said that it was for the best. That the remaining Jedi would be hunted to the ends of the galaxy, should he stay with us. And that he needed to... replenish his connection to the Force." She drags a weary hand over her face. "After Corbos— no, even before that— after Exar Kun— could you feel it, even then? He wasn't the same man. Numa died because he told her not to kill Raynar. I know that Alema and Ben never stopped blaming him for it. Maybe he blames himself, too."

*It always goes back to Numa Rar,* Rey thinks. The first death. The Jedi Order's first crisis of faith. *There are things I should have done differently,* she remembers Luke telling her in the monsoon days before the Siege. *I failed him— my sister's child— my poor boy—*

"I didn't tell you back then because you were already so distraught," Jysella admits. "I was afraid you would be mad at me for not stopping him."

Jysella Horn, who walks the Jedi Path in the footsteps of her father, her brother, and her great-grandfather. Who has never wanted to hurt anyone all her life. Rey has to smile a little at that.
"I'm not mad at you," she says. "It's not your fault Master Luke decided to pull a Yoda."

They start laughing. It hadn't really been that funny, but, sometimes, you just needed to laugh—to remind yourself that you still could. That's how Finn finds them when he dashes out of the bunks at the commotion—the two Knights are doubled over in their seats, clutching at their stomachs, shoulders shaking in mirth.

"Are you girls all right?" he asks warily.

"No," Rey hiccups, and laughs even harder.

* * *

"Lord Ren." Aboard the Finalizer, Lieutenant Dopheld Mitaka—who had tragically drawn the shortest straw when the officers were debating which unlucky sod among them would divulge the news—approaches the masked figure with trepidation. His voice quivers slightly when he speaks. "The signal from the commandeered TIE has gone dark. We assume that it went down in the Sinking Fields. There's no word yet on the status of the two fugitives or the droid."

He braces himself for the inevitable explosion, but, much to his surprise, the masked figure remains silent, staring out the viewport beyond which the pale orb of Jakku glows in the blackness of space.

Mitaka wonders what the man is thinking beneath that formidable blank helm.

"Continue the search," Kylo Ren says at last. "Send out two separate squads—one to the Teedo settlements, one to Niima Outpost. All tech ends up in either of those places eventually."

It strikes Mitaka as peculiar that the Master of the Knights of Ren would state so esoteric a fact with such confidence, but perhaps he had extensively studied the ways of Jakku prior to this mission. He contemplates asking where the Teedo settlements are, but wisely decides that he values his airways too much.

"If you do not find anything before sunset, I will personally—" Kylo's sentence grinds to an abrupt halt. There is a sudden sharp hitch through his heart, as if someone has slipped a knife between his ribs. He had felt it a night cycle ago as well, the air in his quarters bearing the faint scent of sweet
Ecclessis figs and high summer. It's now a stray wisp of someone else's thoughts that stops him cold— *You tricked me.*

"Sir?" Mitaka carefully prods. "Are you all right?"

Kylo's eyes shut behind the mask. He breathes it out slowly, that familiar ache. "I would find it dreadfully inconvenient to have to return to Jakku myself, Lieutenant," he growls. "Ensure that it will not be necessary."

Mitaka salutes and hurries away. He doesn't look back, but, if he had, he would have seen Kylo Ren bring a gloved hand to his chest and press against it, in a vain attempt to reach the pain that's been buried there deep.

Chapter End Notes

Ayyy, dearest readers, never underestimate the effect that your reviews have on me! The last scene is wholly Kbourne2012's idea in [this thread](https://community.starwars.com/t5/lyg-the-force-awakens_origami-thunder/td-p/12518846), and I also dedicate it to [hegelstriad](https://community.starwars.com/t5/lyg-the-force-awakens_origami-thunder/td-p/12518846) who asked for a little Kylo POV.

Why did Lando and Finn make planetfall on Yavin 4 in the first place? Stay tuned.

Ben gives Rey an overview of the Praxeum's layout in Chapter 2 of LYG. Tionne and the Knights retrieve Obi-Wan's lightsaber in Chapter 4. Lando and GemDiver Station are mentioned in Chapter 8. Rey heals Ben in the vaults in Chapter 12. The conversation with Luke is found in Chapter 19. And, if you guys remember, bb Rey wrote "Yavin 4" on the wall of the walker in Chapter 1.

**Adegan crystal.**

**The Lady Luck.**

**Cratertown.**

**Ergel's Bar.**

**Knockback Nectar.**

I am a teensy bit unsatisfied with the Hawk's route that I mapped out. I don't know what hyperlanes serve the Western Reaches in particular, so I just extrapolated from the fact that the *Hydian Way* passes through the entire galaxy, meeting at some point the *Junction-Tierrel Loop*, which is connected by the *Pinooran Spur* to the *Yavin Bypass*. If anyone can think of a faster route, let me know! (Yes, my friends, these are the issues that keep me up at night).

I also wanted to retain the canon TFA theme of Finn keeping a secret from Rey. In this AU, it's that he was one of the stormtroopers deployed to Corbos in LYG.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Thank you, readers, for all the bookmarks, comments, kudos, and views! Every single one means a lot, and your insights and song recs in particular are enhancing this fic in ways I never could have managed on my own. I really want to post Chapter 5 before I leave for my Thailand vacation next week. You know what to do to motivate me ;)

This installment was a lot of fun to write. I hope that you enjoy it, too! Just a head's up that, since using it/its throws me off stylistically, I will be referring to BB-8 as he/him/his, as the Wookiepedia page denotes "masculine programming."

Soundtrack:

1. Good To You - Marianas Trench feat. Jessica Lee (suggested by jandjsalmon)
2. Who Knew - P!nk (flamingcabbage)
3. Faded - Alan Walker (ReyloArt)
4. Fearful Odds - M83 (DauntlessSubconscious)
5. Beautiful Crime - Tamer (DauntlessSubconscious)
6. Memories - Within Temptation (meritmut)
7. Let It Die - Phantasma (meritmut)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Leia Organa's private office in the Resistance base on D'Qar lacks the frivolities that had adorned similar chambers during her political career. There's no use prettying up a place that's five-hundred-and-forty-eight times more likely to come under attack, as C-3PO is so fond of reminding her; most of her non-essential personal effects are stored on a star yacht named the Alderaan in honor of a long-lost homeworld. The only decoration in her office as of the moment is a staticky blue palm-sized image of Lando Calrissian sprouting up from the holoprojector on her desk.

"You truly won't send reinforcements to that backwater?" he asks.

"I defer to Kyle Katarn's call for a stealth operation," Leia replies. "He is the Jedi Battlemaster, after all."

"Stealth didn't do your boy Dameron any favors."

"Poe's used to extricating himself from disastrous situations. He'll be fine." Leia's expression darkens as she mulls over the other piece of news that Lando had passed along. "So, my son has killed Lor San Tekka and ordered the massacre of an entire village."
"Don't tell me you're surprised."

It's not that Lando is a cruel man; he has simply relied on his sharp tongue for so long that it has become his first, most instinctual line of defense. Leia tries to remember that, tries to remember that Lando had loved Ben as if he were his own child, but it's hard going.

"We've been over this." She glares at the hologram. "Snoke's manipulated him from the very beginning. Reached out to him ever since he was a boy. I'm not saying that he's innocent—just that there's an element of coercion. There is still Light in Ben. I know it."

"I want to believe that, Leia," Lando says gravely. "I really do."

"He turned to the Dark Side to save someone else, didn't he? What's so evil about that?" She kneads at her left temple, feeling the low, dull haze of an imminent migraine. "How was Rey?"

"Honestly, she looks like hell. Paler than a sick Echani and you can't see her eyes for the bags under them." Lando shakes his head. "You're all asking too much of that girl."

"That girl is a Jedi Knight," Leia tersely reminds him.

He knows how to pick his battles. With the discerning gaze of a former politician and Rebel spy, she spots the exact moment when he forces himself to relax and change the subject, a deceptively easygoing mildness creeping into his tone. "That kid Finn and I had a deal—labor in exchange for passage to the Outer Rim—but I let him go with Rey," he drawls. "He said he owed her."

Leia's brow creases. "It's highly unlikely that they would have met before."

"That's what I thought, but, apparently, there is some sort of debt. Perhaps he meant it in a general sense—stormtroopers have caused the Jedi a lot of grief, after all." Lando shrugs. "Or perhaps I'm just getting soft in my old age."

"I guess it's never too late even for scoundrels to grow a heart."
"My dear." Lando clucks his tongue. "Has your opinion of me not thawed over the decades? After all we have been through together?"

"That depends." Leia smirks. "What were you doing on Yavin 4?"

"Oh, you know..." A flickering holographic arm stretches out in a vague, expansive gesture. "Just visiting. For old times' sake."

"That's funny. I distinctly remember Luke telling me that you flew out to the Praxeum a grand total of seven times in the whole thirty years or so that it was in operation. He said that too many Force-sensitives in one place creeped you out. Come to think of it, Han had felt the same way, hadn't he? It's the eyes, her now-estranged husband had grumbled once. All those kids with such old eyes. It's not natural. "I want the truth, Lando."

He sighs. "There might be a rumor going around the black market, about some mystery man willing to pay a fortune in credits for the Eye of the Sun. However, I searched what remains of the vaults quite thoroughly after the kids left. I found nothing."

"The Eye of the Sun," Leia repeats, filing the information away to be examined later. "I don't know what that is. Even so, if it's a Jedi artifact, it belongs to the Jedi."

"No, General." Lando grins, shark-like. "It belongs to whoever has the deepest pockets."

* *

Quiet and agile in the manner of all smuggler vessels worth their salt, the Ebon Hawk dips low beneath the Finalizer's radars while its countermeasures package hums away, scrambling any identifying electronic signatures. They slice into Jakku's atmosphere without issue, helped along by the Immersion veil that Jysella has woven around the ship; anyone peering through the destroyer's viewports will see only the glittering starry wastes of the Western Reaches. It's a handy concealment art, accessed through the White Current of the Force, but they have to move fast because it's taxing to sustain.

Luckily, the Hawk had been built for speed.

While Rey wasn't exactly holding her breath for an overwhelming wave of childhood nostalgia in
the first place, she's somewhat taken aback by the feeling of sheer triumph that grips her as they cruise over the rolling dunes. You tried your best, she thinks, looking out at this sorry land and realizing how much she has changed since she left it, but I survived.

The air is dry and still, and faintly electric. Unkar Plutt knows what it means, these sparks on the back of his tongue, these prickles blooming up his fingers. A storm is coming, one of those sky-darkening roils of wind and sand that can bring business to a halt for days.

Mood soured worse than usual, he sits behind the barred window of the Concession Stand and inventories what bits of scrap have been brought to him this afternoon. He doesn't look up at the muttering that begins to drift through Niima Outpost; whoever's just come striding in can damn well wait for his attention to be tossed their way. He's already behind schedule— not to mention on edge— because of the stormtroopers who'd turned the place upside down earlier.

"Boss." One of his hired thugs has sidled to the corner of the window. "We've got trouble."

Unkar does look up then. A slight figure is standing before him in a drab brown cloak, the hood pulled low enough to reveal only the tip of a nose, the swell of pink lips, and the curve of a feminine chin. He opens his mouth to demand what about this shabbily-dressed girl could possibly mean trouble, but, much to his irritation, the thug has fled. It's getting more and more difficult to find reliable help these days.

A hot, short-lived gust of wind blows through town; canvas flaps rustle, weathervanes spin, metal odds and ends chime. The wind also lifts the figure's cloak away from her side long enough for sunlight to glint off the silvery device attached to her belt.

Kriff, Unkar thinks, but he manages a belligerent grunt all the same. "What do you want, Jedi?"

"Information." The voice that emerges from beneath the hood is cold and smooth, like the point of an ice spike being trailed along his spine. "Any droids come through recently? BB unit. Orange and white."

That matches the description of the droid that the First Order had been looking for. He might as well get something out of this. There had been too many blasters earlier, but now... "I may have an inkling. What's it worth to you?"
"Your life."

Unkar narrows his eyes. "Listen here, girl," he spits out, "maybe you can act as high and mighty as you like there in the Core, but it's me who calls the shots around this joint. So, the way I see it, we can either cut a deal, or you can bugger off."

The figure's lips curve upwards, baring small white teeth. It is not a nice smile; it is wide and gleeful, near feral. "I am so glad we have to do this the hard way."

And then slim saber-callused fingers are pulling back the brown hood, and Unkar Plutt is gazing into the hazel eyes of the past.

"You!" He steps away from the window, stopping only when his back hits the wall.

"Me," Rey confirms, extending one arm towards him.

The Crolute race is born in water. Their thoughts run deep but unguarded, easy to fish out. Unkar freezes, caught in the grip of panic as memories are ruthlessly stolen from him. The surface ones first, the ones that had floated up when he saw her face—

"It took five day cycles for you to send your thugs out to my AT-AT," she hisses over the pathetic whimpers that are burbling from his throat. "I hadn't shown up to barter and you wanted to teach me a lesson. You were so furious. It was cutting into your profits. They saw Yavin 4 written on the wall, but you dismissed it as a child's fancy— what's this?" She tilts her head, strange light flaring in the agate of her irises. "You thought I had died? That the sand now blows over my bones somewhere in the ravines?" Her mouth twists. "The Jedi took me, Plutt. And now I have returned to you."

Sharp burning claws rake through his mind. The pain is too much; he screams. Two thugs come running over to help him, but Rey stretches her free hand in their direction; they are lifted off their feet, suspended in mid-air and clutching at their throats.

Rey takes Unkar's images of the stormtroopers marching into Niima Outpost and asking about a droid and two fugitives. She takes the way he shook his head, and how very obsequiously he'd offered to put the word out as he tried not to quiver before their array of weapons. And she takes Crul, too, covered in salt-heavy seas, with its lightning storms and silver rains; he has often
entertained the idea of going back, one day...

Beyond the haze of pain clouding his senses, Unkar is vaguely aware of damp, guttural sobs that it takes him a while to realize are coming from him.

"How strange," Rey murmurs, "that a brute can dream of homeworld."

When she lets him go, he is a shivering mess behind the barred window keeping him safe and separated from the junk rats that he lords over. She releases his thugs as well, and they fall onto the sand gasping for breath. Through the barrier of metal grilles and bitter tears, Unkar thinks that she looks stricken. She turns on her heel and leaves the Outpost, as swiftly and silently as she arrived.

"Plutt hasn't gotten his grubby hands on BB-8 yet," Rey announces as she boards the Hawk, docked half a kilometer away from town. "Looks like we'll have to make for the Teedo lairs, after all." She plops into the co-pilot's seat, willing her heartrate to return to normal, dragging her mind away from the thick shadows that cling to it. She hadn't been prepared for the anger that consumed her upon seeing Unkar again. It had all come rushing back—his cruelty, his mercenary nature. Our childhood never really leaves us, she remembers thinking, once, when Ben had been sulking about Han Solo. We can grow up, but the things we carry remain.

Belatedly, she notices that Jysella is shooting her a pensive glance. "What's wrong?"

"Master Kirana Ti commed while you were gone. Master Streen is now one with the Force."

"Who killed him?" Rey snaps. It's just another thing for which she has to take the First Order to task.

"No one, Rey," Jysella says quietly. "He died in his sleep."

Streen, the former tibanna gas prospector from Bespin, had been the most elderly of Luke's first students, already gray-haired when Rey was still a child. Shame lances through her sorrow; she has dishonored his memory by receiving the news of his death with such rage.
But they cannot dwell. There is work to be done. Streen had been a grave, conscientious man in life; he would not like it if they were to be remiss in their duty on his account.

The lairs are a labyrinth of caves chiseled into the rock shelves south of the Starship Graveyard. When they get there, several Teedos are hanging around outside, tending to their luggabeasts and making use of the last daylight hours to examine their salvaged loot.

Leaving Jysella to watch the Hawk in case the little reptilian scavengers attempt to dismantle it on the spot, Finn and Rey make their way to the main entrance—a otherwise unassuming crack of rock marked by a lizard-like skull totem. The guards automatically cross their spears—fashioned from crude metal blades and bits of twine—to prevent passage.

"Hey—!" Finn starts, but Rey silences him with a sharp glare.

The guards' faces are concealed by the requisite goggles and masks that keep out the worst of the sand, but Rey can sense their beady eyes flickering over her. For a moment, she entertains the crazy notion that they will recognize her after all this time.

Finally, one of them speaks up, in the chittering tongue that she recalls from her childhood. "Has been long years since your kind walked this way, Knight of the Republic."

She relaxes a bit at that. She remembers the Teedos as unpleasant, jumpy riffraff, but perhaps their previous dealings with Jedi will ensure their cooperation. True enough, after she describes BB-8, they send a runner into the cave mouth, and it's not long before he reappears, dragging behind him a netful of spherical orange-and-white astromech droid.

"We were going to bring him to Plutt after the god subsides," the other guard explains to Rey.

She glances towards the horizon, noting for the first time the black clouds that edge it. Ah, yes. She had forgotten what it meant, this strange tingling in her nerves. A storm is coming—one of those vicious cyclones that the Teedos believe to be the breath of R'iia.

BB-8 chirps happily upon seeing her. Although they've met only a handful of times before, Rey supposes that even a barely familiar face comes as a relief in the droid's present circumstances.
"Release him," she says to the Teedos.

They shake their heads. "What will you give us in exchange?" asks the first guard.

She should have known it wouldn't be that easy. This is Jakku, after all. "Go back to the ship," she tells Finn in a low voice. "Ask Jysella if we have any tech to spare."

He blinks at her. "Can't you—I don't know—threaten them first? To save time?"

She grimaces, thinking back on what had happened earlier in Niima Outpost. "Honestly? I've done enough intimidating today."

No sooner has Finn left her side and disappeared up the Hawk’s ramp when the Force suddenly twists in warning.

Rey lunges forward, throwing her body against the rock shelf just as the screech of P-s6 twin ion engines fills the air and the world explodes into dust and laser bolts. The Teedos scramble to their caves, but not before several of them are mowed down by TIE fighters and stormtroopers jumping out from gunboats that hover above the sand.

Take off! Rey yells at Jysella through a hastily-established mental link. They can't afford to lose the ship; it's their only way off this planet. Go! I'll meet you at Kelvin Ravine—

The Hawk vanishes, draped once more in the White Current. Rey wastes no time in prying BB-8's net from the limp grasp of the Teedo who had died holding on to the ropes, and then it's a mad dash over the dunes, weaving from side to side to avoid the lasers while trying to untangle the droid as he beeps sorrowfully beside her.

"BB-8, listen to me. We're going to lose them in the Starship Graveyard," she pants. "If we get separated, find the Inflictor wreckage and go inside. Imperial-class Star Destroyer, you can't miss it. Wait for me there, all right?"

Affirmative, the droid manages to respond.
She loosens the last of the knots and he tumbles from the net, rolling once he hits the sand. He outpaces her easily; it's almost unfair. She glances over her shoulder just in time to see one TIE shot straight out of the sky by stutter-fire that appears as if from nowhere.

*Been target practicing, Sella?*

*Finn's manning the gunner, not me.*

The *Hawk* downs two more TIE fighters and five stormtroopers before the veil of Force Immersion starts to dissipate, glimpses of red-and-white-painted durasteel shimmering against the clear sky. Reacting quickly, Jysella pulls up from the field of combat after one last reminder to meet at the Ravine—and now Rey and BB-8 are truly on their own.

They keep running.

"Why doesn't Rey just do the invisibility thing?" Finn asks.

"Different Jedi have different strengths," replies Jysella. "Rey's abilities are more... offense-oriented." She chews on her bottom lip. "She and Ben had that in common, actually."

Finn jerks his head at a black silhouette beyond the viewport. "Speaking of—"

She stares at the *Upsilon*-class command shuttle as it descends from the atmosphere. "That's him?"

"Yes."

The past watches her warily from across a chasm. Jysella Horn has her own memories of Ben Solo, too. She makes her decision, waiting until the shuttle has lowered to an altitude that is, at the very least, survivable. And then she says, "Fire."
"Don't fire."

The shuttle's gunman has already locked the girl in his sights when the rasped command makes him freeze, his hand hovering on the trigger.

"Get on the TIE frequency. Tell them to stand down," Kylo Ren continues.

The pilot exchanges a look with the gunman, but also does as he is bid. It's impossible to gauge their masked commander's line of sight, but he seems to be gazing fixedly down at the girl running beneath them, her brown cloak swirling over the golden sands.

Cannon-fire slams into the shuttle. The screens light up with warnings of engine failure.

"Where the hell did that come from?" the pilot blurts out even as he automatically reverts to manual landing controls.

Peering to starboard, Kylo notices a red-and-white prong flickering in and out of sight as it shoots up into the cloud cover. Beneath the mask, his lip curls.

*

It takes approximately three standard minutes for Rey to lose sight of BB-8 once they reach the Starship Graveyard. Blaster bolts clip the ground between them, causing the droid to screech and dart into a maze of crash-landed CR90 corvettes, the passageways too small for Rey to squeeze through.

"Dameron, we really need to talk about your little buddy's programming," she grumbles under her breath.

The Graveyard's layout hasn't changed; she knows these ruins like the back of her hand. However, there are simply too many enemy units in pursuit and, eventually, ten stormtroopers corner her against a dilapidated GR-75 medium transport, her back pressed against the rusty sun-warmed metal as she faces down an array of emitter nozzles.
She frowns in concentration. There is something...

"Where's the droid, Jedi?" barks one stormtrooper.

Blade-hand poised on saber-hilt, Rey listens intently. Yes, behind the ship's hatch on her right, there is a familiar rustle of scraping and pecking sounds, pattering against the durasteel like dozens of heartbeats.

"I asked you a question."

"Sorry," Rey quips, "my mind was somewhere else—"

In one swift motion, she draws her lightsaber and pivots on her heel, dragging the sapphire blade along the hatch. The steelpeckers are already antsy because of the oncoming storm; they do not welcome the beam of light that slices into their nest, and they make quick work of what remains of the hatch, bursting from the ship in a stream of black feathers, sharp claws, and iron beaks.

Rey doesn't stick around to watch the stormtroopers grapple with the cawing, mad-eyed birds that set about to tearing them to pieces. She breaks into another run, this time skirting along the prow of an MC140 *Scythe*-class battle cruiser. The wind picks up, blowing loose strands of hair across her forehead. The sunlight fades as abruptly as if an ocean of shadow has been spilled over the bone-dry wasteland.

She remembers this, too, how quickly the *X'us'R'iiia* descends. She had counted on it, hoping to duck into the nearest wreck once the cyclone hits, leaving her pursuers to the mercy of the elements, but now it's almost upon them all and she has yet to find sanctuary.

Gasping through the burn in her lungs, she rounds the corner of the half-submerged battleship. Her feet kick up sprays of sand as she skids to a halt, before she can collide into the tall hooded figure that suddenly looms against a tarnished copper sky. A vague and distorted reflection of her own face stares back at her, wide-eyed, from an obsidian helm.

"Rey," he breathes.
The Alderaan.

Holoprocessor.

The Echani.

The Eye of the Sun is mentioned in Chapter 12 of LYG. Kirana Ti and Streen are first mentioned in Chapter 2. Rey muses about how "our childhood never really leaves us" in Chapter 8.

Reference to a countermeasures package.

Force Immersion.

White Current.

Concession Stand.

The Crolute of Crul.

In the absence of canon information, I took a few creative liberties with Teedo culture. However, the weather storms of Jakku being the breath of their god, R'iia, is canon.

Luggabeast.

P-s6 twin ion engine.

Kelvin Ravine.

The Inflictor.

Upsilon-class command shuttle.

CR90 corvette.

GR-75 medium transport.

Steelpecker.

MC140 Scythe-class battle cruiser.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

I am so happy that I was able to update before my trip, as that cliffhanger would have gnawed like a toothache the whole time. Thank you, everyone, for your comments, they were a huge help! I would love it if you'll let me know what you think of this latest installment as well.

Soundtrack:

1. Hold Back The River - James Bay ("Tried to keep you close to me, but life got in between. Hold back the river, let me look in your eyes, hold back the river so I can stop for a minute and be by your side.")
2. On The Wire - Air Traffic Controller ("I was a child, young and mild, you were a liar, brave and wild. I was a fighter, naive, re-inspired. I can feel the tension, I can almost hear the angels' choir.")
3. Paint My Mind - Lydia ("So paint my mind and paint my soul, point your little mouth 'til you see my ghost. So pour it out, watch the sky, run your little mouth, darling, I do mind.")
4. Wind & Anchor - The National Parks ("Don't leave me like this, I belong to you.")
5. Silhouette - Aquilo ("Devils on your shoulder, strangers in your hair, as if you don't remember, as if you can't forget. It's only been a moment, it's only been a lifetime, but tonight you're a stranger, some silhouette.")
6. Shoelaces - The Submarines ("And now you're out there on your own, these tangled lines all come undone, tell me how it feels letting go. You try your luck in your best suit, tied to a broken parachute. It's the hole in my heart that you fell through.")
7. By Night - Puzzle Muteson ("Is there a part I haven't found under these rocks we've lifted, has weight been stripped, a part I need to touch under the sheets so thin, like eyelid skin. You'll hear him now, he left before the day had woke.")

The ever-perfect paige has also made this kickass mix for TKC, while DauntlessSubconscious recommended Mark Fowler's Interstellar Piano Suite and flamingcabbage just HAD to bring Harry Potter feels into this with Lily's Theme Extended.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In his memories she was always moving, fingers drumming restlessly on her kneecaps or legs taking her through jungle green and stone mazes as fast as she could go. Even when she stood still, her mouth would be shooting off a mile a minute—Ben, what do you think of this, Ben, you'll never guess what happened, Ben, stop being such a grouch—or her clever mind would be whirling away behind those huge rainforest eyes. She moved constantly in his dreams as well, either running or falling, his fingers brushing for a fleeting moment across her wrist or the back of her robes before she was gone. In his dreams, he never caught her, no matter what.

When he sees her racing over the dunes, so small below the viewport, his first thought is that she
wears her hair the same way. His second thought is that this cannot be real, this feels more like a vision of heart's longing, and he has to ball his gloved hands into fists to stop himself from reaching out to her retreating back, like he always does in that corner of his mind that he keeps secret from Snoke.

It still doesn't feel real after impact, as he clambers out of the wreckage of his shuttle and stalks to the Graveyard. There is no Kylo Ren, there is only a shoddy assemblage of steel bones and hollow veins, nudged along by the currents of time and space, operating on autopilot or, perhaps, memory. *Didn't I always know where you were, didn't I always follow wherever you went—*

He doesn't snap out of his trance-like state until they're face-to-face and her name leaves his lips in an exhalation of filtered soundwaves. She stands in front of him beneath the hulking metal tower of the Scythe-class, older and thinner, delicate chin tilted up and soft lips parted. She isn't moving. He doesn't know what to do.

*There is a stillness to the desert that lingers deep in the spine of the land. Bodies and starships stay where they fall, preserved for the ages by an arid climate; columns of dust stirred up by speeders and caravans remain hanging in the air until vanquished by an occasional breeze. On a clear day, so goes the old joke, you can see last week. Time ceases all linearity in a place where the horizon never changes. Anakin Skywalker and his son had known that— separated as they were by the chapters of history, they had both stood beneath Tatooine's twin suns and daydreamed in future tense.

Rey of Jakku knows that as well. And perhaps Rey of Yavin 4 had forgotten for a while, but it all comes rushing back now, past and present colliding in the badlands where time spreads thin and flat but has nowhere to go. A boy's hand shades his eyes from daylight's glare as a girl walks toward him with an armful of earthly possessions and her heart in her throat, *come with me, I promise you greatness, I promise that you will never be alone.* Fourteen years later, against the same horizon, the Master of the Knights of Ren and the Sword of the Jedi stare at each other, both statue-still below a darkening sky, the edges of their cloaks shifting in the gust of a wind that blows harder with each moment that passes them by, *how could you, you tricked me, didn't it mean anything at all?*

It's the appearance of several stormtroopers that jolts her out of her reverie. She has been trained for this, how to deal with multiple opponents at once, but all of that goes flying out the window, her world narrowed down to him and him alone. She flings up her off-hand; a torn shred of starfighter wing is lifted from the dune and sent sailing on the currents of the Force, knocking him off his feet.
The stormtroopers make to rush at her, but they are stopped in their tracks by his brusque command. "Stand down." No sooner has he uttered this, when the turret of a nearby freighter cracks in half, forcing him to roll away before he is crushed beneath it.

"I won't go easy on you," he'd warned her in the star-dusted courtyard, their lightsabers ablaze.

"You won't have to," she'd replied with a smirk. "I learned from the best.")

Rey advances. Debris rises through the air in a whirlwind of metal, pummeling Kylo Ren as he scrabbles backward on his hands and knees. "What was the point?" she screams at him over the howl of the rising wind. "You found me in the desert—" Jagged shrapnel cuts at his arms— "you introduced me to a new home, a new family—" Blunt durasteel panels slam into his torso— "what was the point of all that—" A triangular static discharge vane glances off his side, eliciting a sharp hiss— "if you were just going to take it away?" Like a parting shot, the rusty barrel of a sensor unit catches him upside the head, making him reel.

"Sir!" one stormtrooper cries in alarm, raising his blaster.

"I said, stand down," Kylo growls, somehow managing to sound formidable despite the fact that his figure lies twisted and bleeding on the sand, propped up on one elbow while the gauntlet of his other arm is crossed over his sternum to ward off the next projectile.

Rey is no longer thinking coherently. If she were, she would have noticed that the sky is now completely overcast and that the gale is brewing all around them as lightning flares in the distance. But her attention is focused on the man whom she towers over, her senses dulled by this awful burning in her chest and behind her eyes. She wants to lash out at him some more, hurl curses— e chu ta— dopa maskey-kung—

("You're such a potty-mouth, sweets patogga," he'd drawled, glancing at her over his shoulder, profile caught in a slant of sunlight.)

She kicks him. This is her mistake. She has forgotten the way he fights, how he thinks nothing of using his opponent's limbs as crutches. He grabs her ankle in his large hands and surges to his feet, sweeping her off-balance. She braces herself for the pain, for whatever pain he still has left to give her, but it doesn't come. Her back never hits the ground.

Instead, he gathers her into his arms and hurls them both through the narrow entrance of a
dreadnought's shattered viewport just as the X'us'R'iia unleashes its whips on the Graveyard, flooding the land in darkness and sound and fury.

* 

She was seven years old when he taught her how to swim, and it happened entirely by accident. Leaves crunched and twigs snapped under her boots as she gave chase to the simian-like woolamander who had grabbed her quarterstaff while she rested in the shade of a Massassi tree—who was now darting through the branches above her in flashes of blue and gold fur.

The mischievous creature tired of their game once they reached the waterline that separated the jungle from the Great Temple of Yavin 4; it flung her quarterstaff into the river and disappeared up the higher canopy, and Rey dove in without a second thought. She had constructed that weapon herself and she was loath to lose it to the deeps. It didn't even occur to her that she was making a terrible mistake until her hands closed around the quarterstaff and the cold water in turn closed in over her head. The current dragged her body along and beneath, filling her lungs as she kicked in vain.

In this memory—in this sweet old life—Ben Solo was still a couple of years away from taking his vows as a Jedi Knight. He and the other apprentices were practicing hand-to-hand combat by the river bank; later on, Ganner Rhysode would tell Rey that they had all turned at the sound of the splash and Ben was the first one in the water, before the rest of them could even blink.

He hauled her up to the surface by the collar of her robes, before slinging her arm around his neck and grunting in annoyance as the quarterstaff that she was holding slapped against the base of his skull. He wrestled the weapon from her and tossed it onto the shore, leaving her hands free to fist into his wet garments while she sputtered all the way to the shallows, clinging to him in fright. She was not easily frightened, but the near-drowning had rattled her—the rushing dark of the river, the abrupt strength of the undertow.

Ben shoved her none too gently onto the muddy river bank, because this was in the time before he learned gentleness, before Rey managed to coax such a thing out of him. He was furious, she could tell, his brandy-colored eyes narrowed and tendrils of black hair plastered to his forehead, dripping all over the pair of large ears that he would never quite grow into. But he stayed silent until she had coughed out the last of the water from her lungs, and then he snapped, "Take your boots off and get back in."

Her jaw dropped open. "Why?"
"Oh, sorry, I didn't know you'd prefer to get carried out to sea the next time you find yourself in this situation," he muttered, already in the process of tugging off his own boots. "I have lessons, so hurry up."

"Don't want to," she sulked, his belligerence sharpening her injured pride.

"Brat." He smirked a little, chucking her under the chin. "Come on." The sun-dappled currents were reflected on the angles of his pale face. "I won't always be around."

He would reiterate this in a few more years, trying to dissuade her from returning to the black temple on the silver lake. "But you'll be with me," she was going to joke, and he would appear startled at first, and then uneasy, telling her not to get used to it. *I might not always be around.* There would be no trace of jest to it this time, as they got closer and closer to the Corbos mission and to the destiny that waited for him on the other end.

Perhaps he had been trying to warn her, after all, in his own way. Perhaps he had tried to prepare her so that, when it finally happened, it would hurt less.

But it didn't.

*@

They're older now—so much older, more than a decade has passed, *how*—and she feels like she is drowning again, but this time he is not her salvation. She's drowning in *him* as he presses her up against a durasteel wall, the heat of his body both alien and familiar, smooth hard leather stretched out over those same old places where coarse-spun Jedi robes should be, the tattered rhythm of his breathing a harsh artificial rasp in her ear.

He smells different, too, like metal and smoke instead of linen and rain and warm skin, but everything else, *oh*, everything else. The span of his shoulders. The slow rise and fall of his chest. The lean cradle of his hips, caging her in. The way her nerve endings flare and spark and *sing* at each point of contact.

If any small part of her has entertained the notion that it might be someone else behind the mask, all those doubts are now laid to rest. Her body remembers. There is no other person in the galaxy who feels like this when they are this close.
It's still the same, and that, perhaps, is the greatest betrayal.

"Let go of me," Rey hisses.

He gives no indication of having heard her. The daylight pouring in through the dreadnought's viewports is musty and thin, flickering amidst the sandstorm's waves like dozens of faulty holoprojectors; it glints off the fine silvery bands on his helmet in frenetic pulses as he lowers his head so that the cool obsidian metal grazes her temple. His gloved hands are hooked at the sides of her upper arms at first, but soon they're moving— thick leather-clad fingers cupping her cheek, skimming the hollow of her throat, trailing down the ladder of her ribs. Intent, searching touches, and she almost lets herself believe that he's checking for injuries even though he's the one she'd beaten practically half to death with tons of scrap metal.

But that is a preposterous thought and, in any case, it's not long before his clinical grip turns into something else— turns clumsy and desperate, as if he can't decide which part of her he wants to touch first, which part he wants to touch the most. His thumbs dig bruises into the insides of her wrists and the spurs of her hips, his breath emerging more ragged than before. He brings his hands back to her face, the left resting at her jaw while the right tucks loose strands of hair behind her ear with shaking fingers.

Rey has no idea what game he's playing at. She only knows that the lump in her throat is dangerous, as are the shivers down her spine and the instinct to lean into his touch. The body remembers. The body is a traitor, even when the heart tries not to be.

She shoves him away with what feels like the last vestiges of strength. He steps back, a strange sound tearing loose from his throat— something like a strangled whimper of protest, or a sob. She represses the urge to hug herself, feeling cold and empty at the loss of him, and then she cautiously edges further down the slanted hallway of the ship, her gaze fixed on his hulking silhouette in the half-light. Never take your eyes off the enemy. Never turn your back.

She knows this ruin. It's called the Ravager, and she has taken refuge in its gutted underbelly many a weather storm past. It's an Executor-class star destroyer, nineteen thousand meters long and armed to the teeth— or it had been, anyway, before it crash-landed on Jakku. They're standing somewhere in the aft end, by the trapezoid command tower with its geodesic communication and deflection domes.

The way the ship is tilted, he's above her and already she regrets giving him the higher ground. He watches her silently across the downward slant of the distance between them, his head bowed. Thunder groans, low and muffled, from out in the world beyond. Wind scrabbles at the walls.
"You killed Lor San Tekka," Rey blurts out, her words echoing through the Ravager's innards. "He was a good man."

"You met him but once." Through the voice modulator, Kylo's reply is an icy rasp that pricks at her nape. "I knew him longer. It is my burden to bear."

She remembers Lor from perhaps nine years ago, when he passed by Yavin 4 to entrust a handful of relics and scrolls to Tionne. A kindly, dignified scholar, he had regaled her and the other students with wistfully-couched tales of the Old Jedi. "Of course, young Solo already knows all of this," he'd broken off to say, smiling at Ben, who had fidgeted and ducked his head and mumbled something noncommittal, the way he always used to do whenever he found himself the center of attention.

"Lor was Master Tionne's friend. She'll never forgive you."

It is a silly remark, in hindsight; Kylo pounces on it almost immediately. "I imagine there are a great many things that Tionne Solusar will never forgive me for."

"Including her husband's death!" Rey snarls. "Did you know that? Did you know that Master Kam is dead?" Of course he would, but she needs to hear him say it. "Your Knights killed him before the one with the blasters shot Master Tionne's arm and leg to pieces. Did you know that?"

"Yes."

"You were her favorite student," Rey continues bitterly, stung by the stark coldness of his response. "The Masters weren't supposed to have favorites, but you were hers, anyway. Because you loved history. Because you were so hungry to learn. Where is he now, that sullen boy with his nose buried in holobooks, with such an odd fire in his eyes? She sees no trace of him in this skeletal Darksider looming on the incline. She has heard chilling stories about his ferocity in combat from the Resistance soldiers who survived such skirmishes— he has yet to cross blades with any of the Jedi, although Kyp Durron saw him once, briefly, on a soot-stained and blood-soaked battlefield in the Outer Rim.

"You are mistaken. Tionne did not care for me. None of the Masters did." Kylo's voice echoes as hers had, but it is a quiet voice, a machine-voice treading shafts of tremulous daylight. "They were jealous because I was stronger than all of them. They sought to dampen that strength with convenient platitudes about duty and control."
"I break nothing but the platitudes that have suppressed me all these years," Raynar Thul sneers at Luke Skywalker in Rey's memory, sickly and sallow and entranced by the Dark Man. "This Order of yours would treat my abilities as a burden, instead of the gift that they truly are. No longer for me are the ways of old, slow to act, afraid to conquer."

"That's Snoke talking," she argues. "Those are the same lies Exar Kun fed to Raynar." Don't you remember? "He's turned you against us so he can use your abilities for his own gain."

"Is that not what the Republic did?" he asks. "Was I not their weapon as well, trained since childhood to vanquish their foes?"

"To keep the peace!" She bristles. "To keep the galaxy safe—"

"The galaxy was safer and more peaceful in the days of the Empire. All systems were united under one ruler, one code of law. Compared to the anarchy and corruption that plagues us now, there was social progress, a lower crime rate—"

"Because people lived in fear! Palpatine was a madman who used brute tactics on those who dared defy him." Her frustration curdles thick in her throat, rendering speech difficult. "What do you think your parents fought for? Your uncle—"

"— is a foolish man," he interrupts bluntly, "out of touch with political realities and hampered by his narrow-minded view of the Force." He cocks his head at her. "Why do you think Alema and I —"

She slams him into the wall with a telekinetic push. He grunts in surprise and in pain, another bruise added to the collection of injuries she had heaped upon him out in the Graveyard. You dare say her name, she seethes to herself, and then she feels the brush of his consciousness probe hers, bewildered as he is by the violence of her reaction. Too late she throws up the barriers; he takes the images from her mind before she can shut him out— Alema in the midst of Artorias burning, flash of blue and red, "We have the same taste in men, after all."

He's silent for a while, posture tense and strained as if one false move will mean the end of him. She lifts her chin in defiance even though sheer humiliation has reddened her cheeks. To have been hurt by the Twi'lek's remark— to have been jealous—

"I will not fall for your tricks," he startles her by saying at last, the artificial voice rougher now,
more static-tinged. He looks away, his mask in profile, tilted up to the dust-flecked viewports above them. "I already know that..."

"That what?" she demands when he trails off. "What do you think you already know?"

"That you did not feel the same," he whispers.

An awful hollow sensation gnaws at the pit of her stomach. She's hit by a wave of numbness, the kind that enshrouds the body when pain would be too intense, too unsurvivable. "Have you lost your mind?"

"It's all right, you know." He sounds almost magnanimous. "I understand. You were humoring me. Because you wanted me to stay. The Masters probably told you to do it, and you trusted in their so-called wisdom. I do not begrudge you that."

("I should have left a long time ago," he'd muttered hoarsely, both of them on their knees as the world fell apart.

"Your place is here," she'd said, tears in her eyes. "With the Order. With me.")

Rey has experienced for herself how the truth can be twisted, how everything good can be turned rotten. A Sith Lord had whispered in her ear, too, once. "You're remembering it wrong. The Dark Side always lies—you said so yourself."

"I was mistaken." He glances at her, he must have, faint light catches on the helm as it moves in her direction. "You died in battle, did you not?"

And suddenly Rey can't do it anymore, can't stay here and keep on breathing splinters of the past, can't listen to how cruelly the man who now calls himself Kylo Ren has been brainwashed, how their time together has been tainted by yet another madman in the space of the two years that they have been apart. She can no longer bear to be reminded of how Ben Solo had fallen. How it had been so that he could save her.

How it had been all her fault.
She starts edging backwards, her sights still fixed on his unmoving silhouette. One hand reaches behind her, grasping around blindly for the corner that she knows she must eventually bump into. Once she reaches it, she turns on her heel and flees deeper into the bowels of the ship. The weight of his masked stare is heavy on her nape until she disappears from view, and even then she feels a stab of disquieting exhilaration, a half-crazed relief— that, this time, he is the one watching her walk away.

Chapter End Notes

In this update, we have begun to delve into the kind of conditioning that Snoke exposed Ben to in this universe. I will be discussing that further as the story progresses, but hopefully this makes clear why I spent so much time on how the Dark Side corrupts during LYG's Exar Kun arc.

The confrontation in the Graveyard was heavily inspired by rachel_greatest's meta in this thread, and I never would've gotten an insight into Kylo Ren's canon political views without the TFA novel excerpt that DauntlessSubconscious so graciously shared with me.

The scenes that Rey is remembering while she's beating Kylo up (lol) are from Chapter 13 of LYG. "I might not always be around" is from Chapter 6. There's a reference to Ben being Tionne's favorite student in Chapter 16, and, yes, I like to think that Tionne Solusar and Lor San Tekka would have gotten along famously in this AU, as they are both history nerds. The memories of Raynar and "Your place is here" are from Chapter 9, while, in Chapter 10, Ben tries to convince Rey (and himself) that Exar Kun lied when he told her she would die in battle.

Reference for the Galactic Empire's form of governance.

The Ravager.

On the blaster-wielding Knight of Ren: we will be introduced to Kylo's Minions (TM) and their different fighting styles in later chapters. I'm looking forward to the opportunity to explore how Darksiders can use something other than lightsabers in combat!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Sawatdee ka, my friends! I had a blast in Thailand and the food was out of this world. Thank you for the bookmarks, comments, and kudos that reduced my stress levels while in transit. We're back to our (not so) regularly-scheduled updating now, hurray!

While I continue to adore the song recs that you guys have been sending in, the usual soundtrack list will have to wait until the next update because I am actually scrambling to post this before I leave for work :) Though I did loop "Dead Hearts" by Stars and The Postal Service's cover of "Against All Odds" while writing this chapter.

Dedicated to Kee, with my hopes that all is well <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Night falls through the Jakku storm in patches of black, gradually, gradually, until the world is draped in a veil spun from sand and darkness, alleviated by the occasional burst of lightning that shines a jagged silver on hulking starship remnants and stormtrooper corpses tossed about and battered by the cyclone.

In Kelvin Ravine, where the rock shelves act as breakers that keep out the worst of the winds, Finn and Jysella sit in the cockpit of the Ebon Hawk, listening to dust particles rain on the transparisteel viewports. "I can't reach her," says Jysella. "Her mind is in turmoil. She's panicking."

Finn slaps the dashboard in frustration, earning him a startled, wounded look from the Jedi Knight. "Sorry," he mutters, abashed, his hand dropping back to his side. "It's just that— shouldn't we go look for her, then? I mean, I know it's suicide to fly under these conditions, but we have to at least try—"

"I do not believe she is in any immediate danger," Jysella soothes him. "I'd sense it if she were. She knows this land better than we do, so, for now, we should stay put— or else she might end up rescuing us."

When her attempt at levity is met only by a blank stare, she sighs. "You're very concerned about Rey's well-being," she remarks, picking at a loose thread in her sleeve.

"Aren't you?" he retorts.
"I've known her since we were children," Jysella reminds him with a gentle smile. "You've just met her."

No, I've seen her before. I walked past her as she lay on the ground two years ago. Finn remembers the red Corbos valley, the girl covered in electrical burns, so pale and still that he'd written her off as K.I.A. Back in the green jungle of Yavin 4, he'd thought that he was looking at a ghost, that his sins had come back to haunt him the same way they did every time he laid eyes on Kylo Ren. The tall, masked figure struck fear among First Order troops, but all Finn ever felt was guilt— and the phantom weight of an unconscious Jedi Knight's arm around his shoulders as he and his comrades carried him into the black shuttle.

Yes, the former stormtrooper designated FN-2187 remembers that day. The sun high in the tarnished sky, the smell of smoke wafting from the fallen Leviathans. Marching, at Alema Rar's nod, towards the two human bodies in a crumbled heap amidst dry earth and charred scales. The mission objective clutching in one hand the amulet that Finn had been instructed to make sure one of the Sith hounds swallowed a few day cycles ago, but his other hand— oh, his other hand was holding on to the girl's, as if for dear life, so tightly that Finn had had to bend down and untangle their intertwined fingers before hauling the target away. For some reason, it was that image that stayed with him most in the couple of years since then— those two hands being separated in a valley of dust on a harsh and unforgiving world.

Ben Solo had stirred while onboard the shuttle, en route to base. Finn remembers that, too. "Rey," the other man had whispered, eyes closed, voice dream-soft with longing. "Rey. Sweetheart." And that was how Finn knew the girl's name long before Lando Calrissian introduced her to him. Before he realized that he would never truly be free of his past until he paid that one huge debt. When he clambered into the AT-AT and saw Yavin 4 etched on the wall in a childish scrawl, he'd been looking at his chance for absolution, although he hadn't known it at the time.

"I want to help," he says at last, shaking himself back to the present, where Jysella waits for his response. "Any way I can. I sided with the wrong people and I need to make amends. One way to do that is to help you and Rey on this mission." It's the truth, but it's also vague enough to be a lie. When he's finally ready to tell someone everything, the girl called Rey deserves to be the first to hear those words. He owes her that much.

"Well, thank you," Jysella says, her tone wry in a manner that makes it clear that she knows there's more to Finn's story— but also patient, like she's perfectly content to give him time to be more forthcoming. "Perhaps you can also help by telling me what was done to Ben. To turn him into... what he is now."

Finn's brow knits as he pieces together what little information he'd been privy to with his low rank. "I was on the base where they brought him after Corbos," he carefully narrates, suppressing another stab of guilt. He's definitely lying by omission now. "About a week later, though, he was
transferred to— well, none of the officers would have said, even if I thought to ask— but it was most probably Snoke's location. It's a floating fortress, only High Command and the Knights of Ren know its coordinates at any given time."

"That's smart," Jysella murmurs. "No wonder we haven't been able to track Snoke down."

"The rest is only gossip," Finn continues. "I heard that he was in lock-up for a little over a year. If that's true, whatever was done to him in that span of time couldn't have been pretty— I overheard one general say that the screaming 'back at H.Q.' was starting to get on her nerves, and who else could she have been talking about, right? The next time I saw him, he was already wearing the mask, and rumor had it that he'd defeated every other Knight of Ren in single combat and was now their master."

Jysella has a faraway expression on her face. "He used to scream in his sleep when he was younger. It would wake everyone in the temple up. He had terrible nightmares but, when Rey came into her powers, she was able to do—" She waves a vague hand— "something. I don't know the particulars, but she constructed some kind of barrier that kept Ben's nightmares in check. For years. We— that is, the other Jedi and I— always assumed that was why he was so fond of her. It wasn't until we were all a little older that we realized it went deeper than that."

Finn can't imagine Kylo Ren acting fondly towards anyone or anything. Jysella must pick up on his confusion, because she goes on to tell him, "You had to have been there." She sounds sad. Nostalgic. "He was morose and bad-tempered— a total grouch. In hindsight, it's obvious that he was unhappy with the Jedi Order even back then. But she... lit up whenever he was around, and some of that light would fall on him. The way he looked at her—" Jysella shakes her head. "I don't think I've ever seen anyone else look at another person like that."

* *

Inside the ruins of the dreadnought, while the storm howls on, Rey walks familiar paths in the gloom, her way guided by memory and the glow-lamp in her hand. The wind has changed direction; it's now blowing sand into the Ravager, forcing her to scramble further up port side as swirls of fine grains nip at her heels. Her thoughts are a tangled mess— she's trying to make sense of the conversation from earlier, even as her feet pad through winding metal tunnels in a quest for air and something like sky.

"The Dark Side feeds on what is already there," Ben had told her once. What had been there, before Corbos, before Snoke? She rifles through the past until she finds a pale and sullen teenager arguing with his uncle. Authoritarianism versus democracy, a tired old debate that she'd cared little for.
"Palpatine made his mistakes, yes, but the system of government is sound," Ben had snapped, impassioned and so, so young. "One just, efficient dictator is better than a thousand feckless politicians."

"You do not know what it was like back then," Luke had admonished. "The mere fact that you can criticize the government without repercussion— I could never have done that when I was your age. You take freedom for granted because you've yet to do without."

"I walk the Jedi Path." There had been a taut, bitter edge to Ben's voice. "What do I know of freedom?"

Yes, there'd been no love lost between Ben Solo and the Republic. Rey can see how Snoke would have made use of that, crooned sweet promises of institutional reform in his ear. She even suspects that, deep down, his view of the Senate is tainted by how it had taken up most of his mother's time. Our childhood never really leaves us. The things we carry remain.

There is also one thing that Rey carries. Not from her childhood, but from the day she died. She's taken refuge in her anger for so long, used it to blot out everything else, but, here and now, trapped in these desolate chambers with memories of him that aren't years old for once, with the sensation of his leather-clad fingers still digging ghostly imprints into her skin, she can no longer escape the guilt that she's kept locked away. It catches up to her as she staggers through the dust and the dark, clawing at her throat, finally pushing her to her knees. The glow-lamp clatters to the floor, the sound it makes soon joined by horrible, ragged dry heaves that feel like they're being ripped out from the soul itself.

Scenes from the red valley play over and over again in her mind. Her right hand jamming the last power cable into the Leviathan's hide, her left stretched out in the direction of the thermoelectric generator. The flip of the switch. The spark of the currents. The pain, star-bright.

"Go back," Rey whispers, her forehead pressed almost to the floor with how tightly she's curled into herself. "Let me change it. Let me do it differently." She has no idea whom she's talking to—perhaps the Force, perhaps R'ìia, perhaps all of time and space. "I'll move faster. I'll go before the current hits. I'll save him before he saves me." She rocks back and forth, trying to ease the ache that's spread from the pit of her stomach to the corners of her heart to the marrow of her bones. "I'll do it right this time. He'll come home with me. Nothing will be lost."

She stays like that until the brunt of the feeling has passed. Sometimes there is no comfort to be found anywhere and you have to take each breath as it comes. But she was Rey of the wastelands long before she became the Sword of the Jedi, she has been through worse than this. Eventually, she gets to her feet. Eventually, she keeps walking.
Eventually, she sees him again.

Their separate sand-driven paths have led them to the same place—a machined superstructure covering the arrowhead-shaped hull, where bridges and control panels and towers spread out before them like a silent city in the dark. Rey operates on battle instincts, lightsaber hilt within reach, Kylo Ren in her sights as she edges closer to an array of turrets that will lend her preferred combat style footholds should he choose to draw. Several muffled claps of thunder roll through the cavernous stillness.

"You... spoke of this once." There's a meditative inflection in Kylo's distant voice. Rey wonders if his brow is creased behind the mask, the way it always used to be whenever he sounded like that. "What the Teedos believe about the weather storm."

"Did I?" she snaps, acidly and guarded.

Beyond the white halo of her glow-lamp, she catches the slow nod of his head. "You told me it was the breath of their god."

"I told you many things." She steps to the left without removing her gaze from him. Two meters away, he mirrors her movements, rendering it impossible for either of them to charge from the side and catch the other unaware. How different it is from the way she used to think nothing of running up to him and wrapping both her arms around one of his own, dragging him to wherever she wanted to go. It's the stark contrast between then and now and how deeply it wounds that causes her to drop all pretense. "I told you everything."

"You were lonely. I was convenient."

It's the way he says it, cutting and dismissive, that rankles. "Convenient?" she all but shouts. "You were impossible! You were moody and unpleasant and you sulked whenever someone tried to reach out to you. I held my breath around you half the time. Being your friend was like flying through an asteroid field." She has made such a comparison before, hasn't she? Yes—rocky landscape, soft smiles, butterfly kisses, you're my asteroid field. Their last full day together. The last good day. "It didn't have to be that difficult. I didn't have to put up with any of it. But I did, anyway!" She glares at him, noting that he has gone still again, fists clenched at his sides. "Believe me, nothing about you was convenient, but it didn't matter to me. When it came to you, I took the bad along with the good, I always did—"
And you made me feel lonely, too, she almost gets carried away enough to add, even when you were right there. You made me want things I wasn't capable of putting into words. She remembers being sixteen and bewildered, being seventeen and yearning, being eighteen and near-delirious. All of that had been for him, hadn't it? I was too young to understand back then, but now I know what it all meant. What I felt was real, and I'm not going to let you take that away—

However, something prevents her from uttering those words out loud. She'd been testing the waters, having gotten a better handle on the extent of the Darksider conditioning that he was subjected to, but her pride is cut to ribbons. She won't beg. She can't. What would be the point? Her friends are dead, her home is destroyed because of him. There's no going back from that.

"Well?" she demands instead. "Why aren't you saying anything? Loth-cat got your tongue?"

"I hardly think you need assistance tearing my character to shreds," he curtly replies. "You're doing such a fine job on your own."

It's muscle memory, plain and simple, that causes Rey to make a face at him, the way she always used to do when he was being sarcastic. Kylo's breath hitches in his throat. He looks away, as if the sight of her has suddenly become too much to bear.

The conversation, such as it is, ends on that tense note. Wind and sand batter the shipwreck from the outside while, within it, Kylo Ren and Rey continue to move deeper into the durasteel labyrinth, in wary tandem, in parallel lines. Sometimes he disappears behind the parapets but she hears the heavy fall of his boots and the rustle of his cowl. Her own footsteps are lithe, inaudible, but the glow-lamp still blazes in her hand and she must exist to him as nightlight, as a bright flare bobbing down the dilapidated aisles. Her gaze shifts upward and all her ghosts are perched on the rafters and watching with mournful eyes. There's Eryl Besa, legs dangling over a ledge, leaning down and forward. Sitting behind her is Ganner Rhysode, reclined against the wall with his arms crossed. More silhouettes, the further in Rey goes, such that she's walking beneath a roof of phantoms, wrapped in the glow of academy days.

She swallows. "Do you..."

"Yes." The metallic voice unfurls quiet and solemn through the gloom. "I see them."

She shouldn't be surprised that he immediately understood what she was getting at even though she'd trailed off; she had once told him everything, after all, and he had once known her better than anyone else. But it still comes as a jolt. She stares at his hunched figure hovering just past the field of blazing lamplight. "Had I known that this was what waited for us, I would have treated you
better, before the end." The last time they were alone together in the dark like this, he'd tried to convince her that the hopeful promise that was starting to blossom between them existed only in her mind. That she had confused friendship for love and that he, in his turn, was not in love with her. He'd been lying, desperately trying to keep them both on the Jedi Path, but—

You never actually said it back, she thinks. Even after you snatched me from the Netherworld and we were in that room where you told me goodbye, you never said that you loved me, too. But she'd felt it, it had been all around them in that vague dream-place, hadn't it, and he'd apologized for not being able to let go of his passion and his fear because it would have been easier for both of them if he could have.

Something has changed; now he does not seem to have any compunctions about admitting what he'd felt, but he thinks it hadn't been real on her end. Even if she can convince him of the truth, what then? She looks once more at the ghosts on the rafters. "They came here for you," she says thickly. "They died because of you."

"It was necessary. They were in the way of my birthright. I am destined to restore order to the galaxy. To finish what Anakin Skywalker started."

She recoils. "You spent your whole life trying not to be like him. You fought so hard—"

"The Supreme Leader has shown me the error of my ways," he interrupts. "My grandfather could not abide by the Jedi Code because he had already lived in slavery and saw no difference. His new masters were complicit in the weak political will that lay at the heart of the administration. They saw the rot and did nothing." His tone sharpens with a sudden burst of wrath. "We were puppets. It was even there in our vows. I dub thee Jedi, Knight of the Republic."

"That still doesn't excuse what Anakin did," Rey hisses. "What you did. They were my friends."

"Mine, too." They've both stopped walking. He's not looking at her; the mask is tilted up, blank stare trained on the high ledges where the silhouettes of the dead flicker at the borders of vision. "But we all made our choices."

"You never had a choice. You were taken from us!" She ignites her lightsaber, the fiery sapphire beam shining in the dark and mingling with the white circle of the glow-lamp in her other hand. She doesn't assume her usual offense position; she extends her arm toward him instead, holding the blade out like an offering, pointed to the roof. "I needed a focusing crystal, remember? You asked Han to get me one of those fancy Corusca gems. You told him not to tell me—"
"I am not at all surprised that a smuggler reneged on his word."

"That's not the point!" she snaps. "What matters is that the crystal is the heart of the blade, and—and this is yours—" She falters, blinking back tears of frustration. I carry your heart, she wants to say, here with me. I carry it in battle. I carry you. But she's too unnerved by the smooth inhuman planes of the black mask that gazes at her, veiled in a wash of azure light. This man is not Ben Solo. She's lost him forever. "All of it was real. And now all of it is gone because you listened to Snoke."

"I do not expect forgiveness, be it yours or anyone else's," Kylo says in those distorted, echoing tones. "I accepted the consequences of my sacrifice a long time ago."

"So that's all they were to you?" she jeers, the words cruel and ugly on her tongue. "Finn and Eryl and Ulaha and the rest of them? Even the children? Just collateral damage in the creation of your new world?"

"For the record," he says with a hint of petulance, as if she has happened upon some sour old grudge, "the children were not supposed to be harmed. They were young enough, their minds malleable—they could still have been liberated from Jedi programming. The same goes for your fellow apprentices. But my Knights lost control and were punished accordingly afterwards."

"That makes me feel so much better." She can be sarcastic, too. She learned it from him. "You told me four years ago that you were sick of martyrs."

("Don't talk to me about heroes," he'd spat out. "My family walks in their footsteps."

"Another grievous misconception on my part," he tells her now, wrapped in shadows in this city of ghosts and metal. "When the old ways are set in stone, creation must be an act of violence. If I am to be as great as Darth Vader, I must accept this."

"Greatness?" She peers at him through the haze of blade-light. "Whatever happened to being good?"

("You will be a great Jedi," Tekli had beamed at Rey after her first successful Force Assist, the cut on Ben's lip seamlessly stitched up in the medbay."
"A good one," Ben had emphasized, and Rey had thought then that he seemed proud of her.

"Who decides what is good? The Republic? The Jedi Council? Are they really so infallible?" Kylo takes a step toward her and she automatically inches away, her hand switching to a defense-ready grip. "Shall I tell you," he rasps, "what I think is good? Being able to save you. Plunging into the Netherworld and dragging you back with me. What I did was forbidden, but, here and now, you are alive. In that respect, the Dark Side has done more for me than the Light ever did."

"I never asked to be resurrected!" Rey shouts and it echoes, too. "Had I known beforehand that you were going to use Dark Transfer and that this would be the price, I would have told you not to bring me back. I never wanted to lose you this way."

"Of course not. None of you wanted me to defect. My skill with the Force makes me a valuable asset in a time of war." He says it with such mournful resignation that it pierces her heart. "Therein lies the difference between you and me. I knew from the moment I facilitated the Transfer with Grandfather's amulet that I would not be able to return to you— that, the next time I saw you, we would be on opposite sides. But that was all right. I decided I could lose you like that, as long as I didn't lose you on that day." He shrugs. "All in the past tense. We were younger then. And foolish. Now we must face the facts. The First Order will come for me once the storm abates. I would advise you to be long gone before they make planetfall. I am willing to look the other way as soon as the weather clears, but you will leave the droid behind."

"Fat chance." She angles her blade-point towards him. "That droid is coming with me."

"Rey," Kylo sighs. "I do not wish to fight you. Out of... respect for our years together, I will do everything in my power to avoid harming a single hair on your head. Accept my terms."

"Please, Ben Solo would have added. Corbos, Corbos again in her mind, his resigned gaze fixed on the pale sunrise as he tells her, Go now. Please.

Rey squeezes her eyes shut to avoid the burst of temporary blindness that switching off the glow-lamp will induce. Once she has pocketed the device and opened her eyes again, it's with her night vision intact and the beam of her lightsaber whirling as she pounces.

A scarlet blade shrieks into existence, its jagged crossguard cutting through the sudden darkness in unsteady twin flares. Red light meets blue, the colors melting into each other and illuminating Kylo Ren's mask. Again, for a brief moment, Rey glimpses the outline of her cheek, the bared curve of
her clenched teeth— foggy, scattered bits and pieces of her own face, staring back at her from the depths of all that obsidian black.

Chapter End Notes

No lore references that haven't already been made in LYG, but Ben tells Rey that "the Dark Side feeds on what is already there" and "go now, please" in Chapter 16. She thinks "You're my asteroid field" in Chapter 15. The conversation about heroes and the bit where Han tells Rey that Ben asked him to procure a Corusca gem for her is in Chapter 11, and that medbay scene is from Chapter 5.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Yikes! I'm sorry this installment took so long; I was called out of town at the last minute for a five-day conference and I've been swamped at the office since I got back. The upshot is that I got to envision the duel scene while sitting on the beach, watching the sun rise over the Pacific while listening to Nessun Dorma. It was very Dramatique (TM).

Thank you, from the bottom of my heart, to everyone who has been reading this story and recommending it to their friends, sending in their music, and leaving such wonderful comments. You all inspire me. Special shoutout to the awesome Rinso for inspiring last chapter's Finn POV, soratori42 for re-imagining the LYG opening in Aurebesh (it's so cool!!!), and lulzapalooza for this beautiful Ben/Rey portrait.

Soundtrack:

1. Ditmas - Mumford & Sons (suggested by Ellie)
2. True Love Waits - Radiohead (Katherine)
3. Electrical Storm - U2 (DauntlessSubconscious)
4. Ease - Troye Sivan feat. Broods (ReyloArt)
5. Til Kingdom Come - Coldplay (guibass)
6. Unchained Melody - The Righteous Brothers (Thatlizx)
7. Closer - Cape Cub (rachelgreatest)
8. When You Thought You'd Never Stand Out - Copeland (Corin)
9. Deep End - Ruelle (Corin)
10. You Are A Memory - Message To Bears (Corin)
11. Heart Heart Head - Meg Myers (below_the_starry_clusters_bright)
12. The Shadowlands - Ryan Adams (Kbourne2012)
13. Young God - Halsey (Kbourne2012)
14. Black Black Heart - David Usher (Lina_Light)
15. Monsoon - Tokio Hotel (hegelstriad)

Will save the rest of the suggestions for the next update! Until then, I'd love to know what you think of this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You asked Han to get me one of those fancy Corusca gems. You told him not to tell me," she says, and—

—and the way he remembers it, he was twenty-five years old, a mess of nerves and heartbreak. Exar Kun's shade had been banished but the whispers continued in a voice he had known since childhood. I will never let you go. The dreams returned in ferocious waves that crashed over him and dragged him under until he woke up gasping for breath, thrashing in sweat-soaked sheets. We are behind schedule. You should have come to me by now. Even during the day, as he went through the motions of academy routine, doubt consumed him and the darkness lapped at the borders of his
mind, hollowing out his surroundings, sharpening other people's expressions, no matter how benign. *Numa Rar died because Luke Skywalker feared what she could become. Are you going to wait for him to kill you, too?*

One afternoon, he was in his room at the Praxeum when he heard the whine of speeder bikes signaling the apprentices' return from their expedition to Yavin 4's volcanic heartland. Rey barged in a few minutes later, dramatically collapsing onto his bed with cheeks pink and hair askew, courtesy of the fresh tropical breezes that rustled throughout the jungle moon.

He eyed her warily from his desk. She lay flat on her back and glowered at the ceiling, her arms crossed. Sulking. Rey was sulking. Bouts of moodiness were to be expected at her age but Ben wondered, with a trace of panic, if perhaps all his undesirable traits were rubbing off on her. No one could claim that he was a good role model.

"I take it you weren't able to find a suitable focusing crystal," he remarked.

"Tiu did," she grumbled. "Lovely chunk of volcanic glass just sitting there on the dried lava bed like it was waiting for her."

He bit back a smile. He was certain, at least, that he hadn't influenced her to be so competitive—she'd burst into his life like that. "It seems your scavenging skills have waned from disuse."

A pillow shot towards him, propelled by telekinesis. He slipped into the Force as well and wrangled the projectile from her grip, redirecting it to hit her in the face.

"*Ben!*" she sputtered, leaping off the mattress and hurling herself at him in one fluid motion. He stood up and sidestepped her, placing his hands on her shoulders to keep her at a firm distance. She wasn't a child anymore, there was no denying it; even he, with none of his mother's deftness at social conduct, understood that meant their impromptu wrestling matches had to be consigned to the past.

"Attend to your lessons," he said, giving her a gentle push in the direction of the doorway. She turned her nose up at him and marched out, and it was only when she was gone that he realized her presence had calmed the turmoil that had been raging within him these past few weeks after Numa died. It returned in full but he was able to ignore it for the most part. He had a crystal to obtain. That was nice. It gave him a sense of purpose, anyway.
Ben headed down to the Strategy Center, where the main communications bay was mercifully deserted. He was still embarrassed, though, casting furtive glances around the room before hunching over the controls and tapping into the *Millennium Falcon*’s frequency.

Han Solo squinted at him from the screen. "Ben?" He couldn't have sounded any more surprised had it been Jabba the Hutt making contact from the afterlife. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is fine," Ben mumbled. "I have a— favor—" He nearly choked on the word— "to ask."

Han blinked, raking a hand through his graying hair. That gesture was familiar to Ben, it was the same thing he did whenever he was nervous or uncertain, and dread pulsed through him as he wondered if time would turn him into his father, if that was the fate of all sons. He stumbled through his request, feeling more and more foolish with every word that left his mouth. What did he think he was doing? It had seemed like a good idea at first, a way to make her happy after everything that had happened, but—

— Look at you trying to claw your way into the Light, pathetic creature that you are, as if you could make anyone happy, as if you do not destroy all that you touch—

"You are in the habit of giving her little gifts when you visit from time to time," Ben stiffly concluded. "Let this be one of them."

"I’d hardly call a Corusca gem a little gift," Han quipped. "Why don't you want her to know you had a hand in this?"

Ben couldn't find the words to explain. That it wasn't about getting credit, or Rey feeling beholden to him. That making sure she learned of his involvement would be an act of selfishness, an act of expecting something in return. That the crystal was the heart of the blade, and hers had to be untainted. These were things that his father would not understand.

"If you are disinclined—" he started to snap, but Han cut across him with a bark of laughter, that old familiar laugh that always sounded like it was at Ben's expense.

"Take it easy, son. 'Course I'll help." Han's expression softened. "Rey's a good kid. Be careful with her, all right?"
"I don’t know what you mean," Ben grunted, because this was a couple of years before the fever claimed him, before she grew up enough for him to allow himself to fall in love. And, even then, what he felt would be a sick thing, shameful in its impurity, and it would destroy them both.

Han shook his head, an affectionate smirk playing at the corner of his lips as he ended the comm. It would be another week yet before Rey came bounding up to Ben in the Grand Audience Chamber, *hey, guess what*, and he’d turn to her just in time for blue light to flood into his eyes—

— the way it’s doing *now*, four years on, after the horror, after the burning, after it all. The interior of the starship is too dark for Kylo Ren to see anything but sapphire and crimson and the pieces of her so briefly illuminated as she moves. It's nothing like the friendly sparring sessions of days past; Rey's strikes are wild and lethally-aimed, the raw power of each blow causing him to grit his teeth as he blocks again and again, as she drives him backwards until he hits the wall. He manages to duck beneath the arc of her next slash; plasma scours durasteel, sparks rain down over his head. He twists away and she follows, visible only as a whirlwind of blue light that's everywhere at once, fiercer than R'iia, more relentless than any storm that ever was or will be.

She feints left and he falls for it, leaving himself wide open for her strike instead of guarding against it as was his intent. The edge of her blade sweeps along his bicep—*siim*, he automatically catalogues even while pain shoots through his arm, one of the nine marks of contact that's designed to incapacitate rather than kill. Of course she would still fight like a Jedi even in the depths of rage and grief. He had never before known anyone so strong in the Light, so determined to believe in better things, *please be kind to me, we have all the time in the world to figure it out, I love you*—

He has to remind himself once more that none of it had been real, that the Jedi Order had manipulated a young girl’s heart to suit their own purposes. *They knew it was the only way to make you stay.* The momentary lapse in focus costs him another gash from Rey's blade, this time on his thigh, and—

— with the pain comes the *Dark*—

*Even though she can't see it, his off-hand must have swept out because the Force knocks into her, the skid of her soles across the dusty floor marking new distance between her and the beams of red light. Kylo had been sticking to defensive moves prior to this Force-shove; now, a twisted sort of anticipation curls low in her abdomen. She recognizes Niman, Form VI, Ben Solo's preferred combat style that he had bullheadedly honed to fatal perfection in his years as a Jedi Knight.*
Yes, she thinks. *I remember this. Fight me like this. Give me all you've got and I will return it tenfold.*

Before she can charge at him again, his hollow voice scrapes through the silent city. "Stay away." He sounds like he's begging. "I cannot control—"

She feels it, too, the slow build of bloodlust, the stirring of that treacherous kind of madness in battle that most Lightsiders are taught to curb. It rolls off of him in waves, hangs thick in the air, heady and almost sensuous. She can taste it on her tongue. It's electric, like the storm raging in the world outside.

"Don't try to control it, then," she taunts, angling her body to the side and bracing one leg behind her in preparation for Saber Swarm. "Show me what you left me for."

*Saber Swarm.* He puts a name to the technique the moment her blue light ricochets towards him. He had seen her practice it often enough in the time before. Her old life as a scavenger had inculcated the patience needed for Soresu but, as she progressed in her apprenticeship by leaps and bounds, he watched her gradually leave Form III behind in favor of Ataru's vicious acrobatics. It would seem that she has mastered the style while they were apart; dozens of sapphire beams dance around him, glittering in the blackness of the ruined starship. He coaches his body into the motions of block and parry and counter and dodge, although he might as well have been defending against a hurricane, circumventing one slash only to run into the edge of another. With each blow that marks his skin, with each blade-lock that rings through his teeth, the Dark surges into that space behind his eyes, rising higher and higher, demanding subjugation, crying out for victory at any cost.

*Wonoksh Qyāsik nun.*

It's all blue and red and shadows as far as he can see, until their weapons cross once more and her face is lit up for him in a wash of jewel-toned light, the colors bleeding into each other so that the bow of her lips and the curve of her chin are stained amethyst like the wicked fire of that alluringly powerful lightsaber that she threw into the river as he murmured Jedi words in her ear so long ago. *There is no emotion, there is peace. I know you know this. Come on. There is no chaos, there is harmony. Say it with me. Stay with me.*

*There is no death, there is the Force.*
"I don't want to hurt you," Kylo whispers.

Rey's hazel eyes flash. "It's a bit late for that."

She disengages from their blade-lock by pushing all her weight into it and then vaulting over his head, landing behind him and jamming her lightsaber hilt into the back of his helm. Staggering, he whips around to face her, the fleeting echo of disorientation bringing with it a surfeit of remembrance, distant images of the Rar sisters fighting like this, always up in the air, their feet never seeming to touch the ground. He'd sparred with them often enough to figure out Ataru's weak points, and so he switches up the angle of his attack, shifting his position relative to Rey so that she's forced to counter by stabbing forward instead of slashing sideways, sacrificing her momentum. This buys him a half-second while she reverses, time enough for him to telekinetically shove her away again even as something in his blood roars for her nearness, for the look in her eyes. He hears her growl in frustration, and then—

— and then he is frozen, he is lifted off his feet, he is sent sailing straight into that blaze of Corusca blue—

_Do you like this?_ he can almost hear her ask, can see the defiant triumph of her sapphire-lit snarl looming closer and closer. _I learned it from you._

Another memory. Another night, another life. Using the Force to draw her to him from across the courtyard on Yavin 4. The stars a silver wreath around them, his bare fingers curved at her throat, her waist nestled in the crook of his other arm. They were out of breath from the friendly duel that had gotten out of hand and she was all dilated pupils and parted lips in front of him, gasping his name, _Ben_, as he tried so hard not to rock against her, to feel the friction, to lose himself in her sinews and her skin and the forbidden.

_Solah._

Kylo manages to wrench himself out of Rey's Force-pull when the tip of her blade is only a hair's breadth from his chest. His lightsaber clatters to the floor as he grabs her by the shoulders. Slam of bodies, loss of balance. They fall, both of them, her own weapon rolling extinguished from her grip, the world plunged into solid blackness.

"Get off of me!" she shouts, attempting to push herself up on her elbows, only for him to flatten himself completely on top of her, pinning her down. The shocking sensation of being pressed against her after all this time heightens the adrenaline of combat that's currently a haze in his mind. _Nwûl tash. Dzwol shâsotkun._ She squirms beneath him, all warmth and softness and everything he
lost. His body remembers. His hands move of their own accord. The darkness crashes through his
veins, heated by a fever that never left.

_Solah._

Rey had kept her gaze trained on the plasma beams for so long that the abrupt loss of them blinds
her. Her other senses kick into overdrive, the way they usually do in that brief span of time after
she has closed her eyes and before she has allowed her consciousness to slip into the meditation
trance— although she _highly_ doubts that the position she's in is conducive to any kind of
meditating whatsoever.

Sound, first and foremost. The low groan of the weather storm, muffled through thick sheets of
metal, is offset by the thunder of her own heart as it beats frantically within her ribcage. Running
underneath it is the smoky thread, the static-crisp chill of Kylo Ren's breathing scrambled through
the voice modulator and splintering in her ear. So impossibly close, and touch is the second sense,
the thing that she in her weakness has ached for most of all. His frame covering hers, long and lean,
his hips between her splayed thighs, their limbs clumsily intertwined.

She has dreamed them like this before— shy, girlish fantasies, in the safety of her bedroom. She
remembers being seventeen, giggling to herself and blushing into a pillow as she let her
imagination run wild, equal parts mortified and excited by all manner of hypothetical indecencies
that she would inflict on poor, beleaguered Ben. Whenever she thought about _him_ doing the
inflicting, she'd blush even harder, and, _oh_, the simple, bittersweet longing of her teenage years.
What she wouldn't give to have it all back.

Instead, reality is this: the grime-coated floor, the old destroyer, the wrath of R'iia. His chest to
hers and, yet, tides of spilled blood and countless betrayals between them. She reaches out one
hand in a desperate bid to summon her lightsaber from whichever shadowy corner it has rolled off
into. He must have picked up on the movement and deciphered the reason behind it because he
fumbles for her wrist, clamping it in the vise-like grip of his leather-clad fingers and pinning it to
the floor by her head. He leans into her as he does so, the smooth, cold surface of his mask grazing
her temple, and she—

— arches her spine, a plaintive little whimper of sound clawed out of her throat— to think that his
face is so close to hers again, after all this time, and that, if it weren't for the mask, they would be
skin to skin—
Realization mingles with sensation, with the stretch in the muscles of her arm and the pressure of his fingers digging into her wristbone, with the crackling energy left over from battle, with the weight of her memories, with the tantalizing veneer of secret promise that pours into all rooms when the lights go out. She is dizzy, she is lost, craning her neck to rub her cheek against his through the mask, reckless and dazed.

_I miss you._ Rey can't stop the thought from surfacing, from lashing through the currents of the Force. _I miss you. I miss you. Maker, how I miss you._

Kylo releases her wrist as quickly as if it were on fire. It doesn't take long for her to discover where his hand went; she hears the hiss of a release being activated, the thud of something heavy and metallic dropping to the floor. She cries out, startled, when he buries his bare face in her neck. The plane of his forehead, the tip of his nose, the fringe of his eyelashes— she feels each point of contact as keenly as if it were a lightning bolt. She lifts her arms with the vague idea of punching him or of gouging her nails into his newly-exposed flesh, but, instead, she runs frenzied hands through his hair. It's just as soft and thick as she remembers, gliding between her fingers in silky waves, over and over again.

His own hands aren't idle; they clutch at her robes, they _squeeze_, they wander down her body as if relearning every angle and every curve, a series of graceless touches there in the long, deep dark. And, all the while, he's practically rubbing his face into the side of her neck, his breath hot and his sighs broken against her skin.

Rey hates this. Hates how she twists and squirms into Kylo's palms, into his mouth, wanting only to be closer. _Closer_. She hates how her hips cant to meet his own haphazard thrusts, how the barrier of their clothes is almost too much to bear. She hates how he scrapes his teeth at her jawline and she finds herself matching that fervent greed in the way she grasps fistfuls of his hair and tugs, eliciting a stifled whine from him that strikes off inner chords within her.

She hates how she wants _more_.

It's as if they're trapped within a smaller, barely contained hurricane that's of their own making. The Force is a maelstrom of clashing energy whirling around them, through them, between them. Under cover of darkness, urged on by spirals of heat bursting from the bruised and battered corners of her heart, she drops her hands from his hair to his broad shoulders, one palm stroking the rough material of his cowl while the other dives beneath it. In the absence of sight, she uses her fingertips to map him out from memory, pulling at his tunic, pressing down where it covers the ridges of his spine and the muscles of his back. It's so—

— _good_. That's the word; she no longer has the wherewithal to find others. It's so good to hold him like this again. And it's painful, too, because a distant, rational part of her knows that she can only
have this now and never again.

Her sobs take her by surprise. She turns her head slightly to muffle them into his sweat-damp hair. He's crying as well— more quietly than she is, but crying nonetheless, the hot wetness of his tears seeping onto her neck as he continues to rock every inch of himself against her. His Force signature loops in warped, jagged knots that she feels like another lump in her throat.

When he raises his head from her neck, the sound that she makes is very nearly a garbled wail of protest. *Not yet. Don't let me go yet—*

(— I just want a little more time,* she'd silently begged as they clung to each other on that precarious ledge atop Corbos' northern cliffs, both of them fearful and anxious after she'd almost fallen off.)*

He sucks in a sharp hiss of air, as if she'd stabbed him in the gut. His thumb drifts across her cheek briefly, in silent reassurance, before he settles down again, this time resting his own cheek on her chest, ear pressed to her wildly beating heart. Her night vision is slow to return, she can only glimpse vague outlines of him in all this gloom, but his weight is warm and heavy on top of her, his breath harsh and ragged in the folds of her tunic.

*Boy made of darkness,* she thinks, or remembers thinking, during that starlit duel so long ago. She stares up at an unseen roof with tears in her eyes. *I yield.*

* *

There is another voice inside his head, one that is not Snoke's. Kylo Ren rarely hears it, for the Supreme Leader's benevolent presence blots out everything else on most days, but it's speaking to him now over the sound of Rey's heart. It urges him to remember. It conjures brittle images of the Corbos valley in his mind.

*This is why you did it. So that the one you love could live. You did not fall from grace on that day. Everyone writes their own destiny, and you wrote yours so that you could hear this heart again. This is the only destiny that matters. He is tricking you.*

Kylo does not know whom the voice belongs to. At any rate, it's just another phantom now, of no import compared to who is in his arms. His hand slides into the curve of her waist as if it was always meant to rest there, as if neither time nor long night could prevent it. Even though she is
hidden from sight by the shadows, the heat of her skin and the drumbeat of that little heart fill his world until it doesn't seem possible that there could have been anything else that came before.

*A life of dreams and whispers,* he thinks numbly, tightening his grip on her, *and the only real thing left is you.*

*#

In the command center of the *Finalizer,* General Armitage Hux watches a holographic simulation of the weather storm play out in swirls of red, yellow, and green over a glowing blue chart, numbers flashing to indicate statistics such as atmospheric pressure and wind speed.

"Updraft levels are weakening, sir," announces one of his men. "Decay is projected to occur in a couple of standard hours. At sunrise."

Hux nods. They had long since lost contact with everyone who made planetfall, but the last transmission had been received from the Starship Graveyard. He opens his mouth to order more troops sent down to the coordinates once the storm clears, but he is interrupted before he even begins by three pairs of footsteps striding into the room.

"We heard you misplaced our master," drawls a voice that manages to sound dulcet and feminine even through the static-tinged scramble of a voice modulator.

Hux fights the urge to roll his eyes. He'd expected this confrontation ever since the *Judgement* requested— no, *demanded*— permission to dock twenty-eight minutes ago, but the fact that it's actually happening is still irksome. "Lord Ren insisted on personally overseeing the droid's retrieval," he explains, turning to face the newcomers with his usual stony expression. "As I control neither him nor the weather, I can hardly be held accountable."

He can *feel* the lopsided, shark-like grins beneath the three blank obsidian masks that gaze back at him. He doesn't have the time to deal with these depraved lunatics, he really doesn't. At least Alema isn't among them, too busy putting the final touches on the invasion of Artorias— after Kylo Ren, she is the one that Hux can't stand the most.

"We *also* heard," continues the first speaker, "that one of your stormtroopers turned traitor." She is tall and slim in her black leather armor, and strange, intangible shapes shift in the air around her, materializing and vanishing and materializing again every time Hux blinks. He tells himself that
it's a mere trick of the dim light, but there's a part of him that knows better. Her name is Tamith
Kai, and it is whispered about that she is a witch.

"An unfortunate circumstance," Hux stiffly replies. "FN-2187 will be captured and dealt with."

There's a snort from the male Knight standing next to Tamith, a broadsword strapped to his back
and a couple of sinister-looking horns adorning his helmet. "So you know where he is, do you?"

Hux suffers the question in frosty silence. "Didn't think so," Kueller pronounces triumphantly.

Gritting his teeth, the general fantasizes about early retirement even as he steers to the original
topic. "We will dispatch an extraction team for Lord Ren as soon as weather conditions are
favorable." \textit{If there's anything left to extract.}

The other female Knight apart from Tamith cocks her head at him. "Why wouldn't there be? Of
\textit{course} Lord Ren is alive. It's just a storm."

Hux's skin crawls at the casual probe into his most private thoughts, but he again chooses to take
refuge in silence, which, while uncharacteristic, is the best strategy to adopt around these
Darksiders. Especially the one who just spoke. Tahiri Veila's petite frame would be hard-pressed to
cut an intimidating figure, but she's the most trigger-happy of the lot of them—\textit{literally}. Hux
knows that she has quite the collection of blasters tucked away underneath her black cloak.

"We shall be joining your little extraction team," Tamith haughtily informs him. "We have not seen
our master in weeks, and are anxious to be reunited with him as soon as possible."

"Plus," Kueller says, "another thing we heard while listening in on your military frequency is that
there's a \textit{Jedi} down there." He says it with such predatory glee that it sends chills down Hux's
spine.

\textbf{Chapter End Notes}

\textit{Tiu Zax}'s use of a volcanic crystal for her lightsaber is based on \textit{Tenel Ka Djo} doing
the same for her \textit{first one}.

The flashback to Han and Ben's conversation is dedicated to the lovely Quentanilien,
who wrote some really cute meta for that scene here.

Shiim of the Marks of Contact.

In case anyone needs a refresher on Niman the way Ben uses it, Chapter 5 of LYG went more in-depth into this combat style. "Solah" is, of course, a callback to Ben and Rey's duel in Chapter 13. And Rey thinks "Don't let me go yet" in Chapter 17.

"Nwûl tash. Dzwol shâsotkun" means "Peace is a lie. There is only passion," while "Wonoksh Qyâsik nun" means "The Force shall free me." The lines are from the Code of the Sith.

Tamith Kai.

Kueller.

Tahiri Veila.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

In case you missed it, I updated Like Young Gods with a mini flashback sequence so that I could add the link to this story. Also, the fiercely talented lulzapalooza continues to bless us with wonderful art, not only of the "Stay close to me" scene from Chapter 17 of LYG, but also THAT scene from our current WIP's previous chapter (hoshiakari referred to it as "amorous cuddling" while Katherine threw all chill to the wind and declared "I HAVE WAITED SO LONG TO SEE THEM AWKWARDLY DRYHUMP"). Seriously, friends, your comments are always the best part of my day. Thank you so much, and please keep them coming!

Soundtrack:

1. **Wait** - M83 (suggested by DauntlessSubconscious)
2. **Slow Burn** - Telepathic Teddy Bear (Corin)
3. **Leave This Behind** - Lovelier Other (Corin)
4. **We Have It All** - Pim Stones (Corin)
5. **Run** - Wyvern Lingo (Corin)
6. **Thistle and Weeds** - Mumford and Sons (below_the_starry_clusters_bright)
7. **Fuck You** - Placebo (below_the_starry_clusters_bright)
8. **Blue Caravan** - Vienna Teng (rubybullets)
9. **Isle of Flightless Birds** - Twenty One Pilots (solikerez)
10. **Tonight** - Lykke Li (amratis)
11. **Take Me Home** - Jess Glynne (amratis)
12. **Possibility** - Lykke Li (amratis)
13. **When The Darkness Comes** - Colbie Caillat (amratis)
14. **Demons** - Imagine Dragons (amratis)
15. **Songbird** - Fleetwood Mac (Kbourne2012)
16. **One** - U2 feat. Mary J. Blige (Kbourne2012)
17. **If I Never Knew You** - Jon Secada feat. Shanice (Kbourne2012)
18. **She Don't Love You** - Eric Paslay (TheJGatsbyKid)

tyransandscreampuffs also brought Tadhana by Up Dharma Down to my attention and it is so beautiful and perfect for Ben/Rey. The lyrics are in Filipino, but I really want to share the following lines and so here's an attempt at translating them: *Ikaw ang hantungan at bilang kanlungan mo, ako ang sasagip sa 'yo. Ang bagyo ng tadhana ay dinadala ako sa init ng bisig mo* (You are my ending point and I am your refuge, I will be the one who saves you. The storm of fate is bringing me to the warmth of your embrace). And, if you are trash like meritmut and me, you will listen to It's All Coming Back To Me Now and have A Moment... like we did.

**One last thing.** There are eight Knights of Ren in this AU. I have a slot for one more EU character and I'm at a bit of a loss, so feel free to send me your suggestions in the comments or via Tumblr. Let the first and only cycle of America's Next Top Knight of Ren begin!

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Sand and shadows, sweat and metal. Breath and thunder, wind and heartbeat, and the Force, always the Force, a ceaseless hum through it all.

Rey can't think clearly enough to track the precise sequence of events but, somehow, Kylo's lips have moved upwards again to latch on to her neck, leaving a blossoming trail of teeth-shaped bruises watered by the tears that he'd left there earlier. It's a far cry from gentle, he's sloppy and it hurts, and it's not how Ben would have kissed her in the time before, probably, but—

— if the Dark Side were a tangible thing, it would manifest now in the form of black flames, wrapping around their bodies, engulfing them both—

This is what they warned us about, she realizes. The Light is anchored to one's sense of self, how it perseveres despite a power that in older days had caused its bearers to be worshipped as gods. Inside her is an inferno stirring the blood in her veins until it flows hot and rich, sweeping away who she is and leaving something more primal in its place. The last time she'd come close to this sensation had been when she stole Corran Horn's X-wing and laid waste to the Temple of Exar Kun.

It's a feeling that's too wild to be sorrow. Too fierce to be joy.

The next snap of Kylo's lean hips against hers hits a spot through her clothing that sends a jolt of pleasure coursing through her system like a shockwave. Rey gasps and scrabbles frantically at his broad shoulders, half-lidded eyes flying wide open. What was that, what was—

Kylo puffs out a breathless, disbelieving noise into the crook of her neck, caught somewhere between a laugh and a groan. He blindly reaches down to hook one hand under her knee and push it up towards her chest, allowing him a new angle at which he can thrust at that spot between her legs once more. The second gasp torn from her throat spikes to a strangled, shuddering moan when he swirls his hips, sliding the full, hard length of him against her. Oh. She digs her fingernails into the taut musculature of his upper arms as his tongue licks a wet, languid stripe up the side of her neck, and then they're moving together in a rhythm that's as glorious as it is obscene, a rhythm that manages to both relieve and sharpen the ache. This is what I was taught to fear.

And it is terrifying. There are all these hollow places opening up beneath her skin where a strange, violent energy comes seeping through. There's an animal caged inside her, grasping at her heart with sharp and greedy claws. Higher. Always. More. He's panting in her ear now, her spine is arching, they're both hurtling towards some nebulous point of no return. It's hands all over, his and hers, fingers fumbling and palms running in mad sweeps across breastbones and backsides and the insides of thighs, and then—
— somewhere between the heat of their bodies, their fingers brush. And tangle together. Like instinct. Like muscle memory.

*

The first time she reached out to hold his hand, it was a couple of years ago— closer to three now, perhaps, and he and Ganner Rhysode had just returned from their mission to Cularin, where they found the Eye of the Sun beneath the ch'hala Heart Tree's roots. Stepping off the Shadow Sabre's ramp, arguing with Ganner over who was going to debrief with Luke because he was never in the mood to talk to his uncle these days, when—

"You're back!"

She popped out of nowhere and barreled into his side, all coltish limbs and scent of wildflowers with an underlying tang of machinery grease. He tensed up, his treacherous heart skipping a beat and his breath catching in his throat as she wrapped both her slender arms around his left one and attempted to haul him in the direction of the river. It wasn't working, of course; he was too tall, too broad to be bodily dragged away by some slip of a girl, but damn if she didn't try her best.

"You know that hydropump I've been working on for ages," Rey babbled, "well, I installed it while you were gone, we're charging our batteries with it now, come and see—"

Ganner observed the proceedings with amused blue eyes. "Guess I'm off to debriefing, then," he sighed dramatically.

"I guess you are," Ben muttered. He fished the Eye of the Sun out of his pocket— no small feat, given that he was using the arm a Rey-shaped undertow was attached to— and tossed it to Ganner. As far as relics went, it wasn't very impressive— nothing more than a chunk of gray rock— and the other Jedi Knight caught it easily in his upturned palms.

"See ya, Rey," Ganner drawled. "Later, Solo."

When his comrade had disappeared into the Great Temple, Ben finally allowed Rey to lead him away. She dimpled up at him, beaming with an excitement that bordered on childish, her huge eyes more green than brown as they reflected the surrounding jungle in the brilliant mid-morning light.
Still just a kid, Ben thought mournfully, scowling at her for good measure.

Blinking, she scowled back. "On the other hand, if you have something better to do—"

"Maybe I do," he retorted.

She let go of his arm at once, too proud to miss a beat. "Fine."

"Fine," he echoed over the cold emptiness in his chest, the tendrils of dark, bitter, illogical rage that stirred behind his eyes.

Despite the flippant demeanor she affected, she turned away with a dejected slump in her shoulders, when she'd been bright and happy only moments before. He wasn't surprised; he could always be counted on to have this dampening effect on people. His early years rose before him in a flash of images—stately rooms on Coruscant, Leia Organa pinching the bridge of her nose to stave off a migraine, Han Solo shaking his head in defeat and stalking out the door. Ben had been a difficult child and adulthood had done him no favors, either. You destroy all that you touch.

His hand shot out to grab hold of Rey's sleeve before she could step beyond reach. There were countless apologies on the tip of his tongue but he couldn't bring himself to give voice to any of them, so, instead, he just stared at her nape peeking above the collar of her apprentice robes, wondering how it would feel against his lips, wondering if she would shiver and flush if he kissed her there.

She didn't look at him but she did ask, in a soft voice that nevertheless carried a hint of warning, "Are you done being a jerk?"

"Yes," he mumbled. I'm sorry.

She tugged her sleeve out of his grip and, after a moment's hesitation, laced her fingers through the gaps in his. Her hand felt so impossibly small cradled in his own that something poignant clenched low in the pit of his stomach, a flicker of tenderness, a burst of panic, how can I protect you—

"Come with me," she ordered, silhouetted in the blazing radiance of day, sweet and stubborn and too good for him.
"Yes, dearest." He’d meant to tease her, to make her laugh as atonement for his earlier cruelty, but he did it wrong, as always. The words didn't sound like a joke when they left his mouth. His voice emerged too low, too gentle, too content.

She glanced at him over her shoulder, biting her lower lip as it curved into a reluctant smile. And then she was pulling him towards the shining riverbanks and he was helpless to do anything but follow her, as he always had, as he hoped he always would.

*

Here and now, in the wreckage of the starship, Rey finds herself squeezing Kylo's gloved fingers so hard that her own joints wince in protest. Despite the relative innocence of the gesture, a fresh wave of longing sweeps through her, more piercing and more urgent, like white-hot light straining against a hazy net of shadows. How long has it been since she last held this hand? How long has she been denied such a simple, quiet joy?

He wrenches himself off of her with a snarled curse that she can't quite make out over the blood pounding in her ears. He could have reeled off the First Order's master plan and she wouldn't have thought to listen, too caught up in the feeling. However, reality comes crashing back almost as soon as their bodies separate, almost as soon as his hand slips away from hers and she's holding on to nothing but empty air. Her eyes have had enough time to adjust to this machined night; she can see him better now, but still only as a sharp profile, a cloaked silhouette, a gleam of star-bright eyes, a flash of teeth.

He retrieves his helm at the same time that she pulls herself into a sitting position and scoots further away. She extends one hand and her lightsaber flies into her palm just as his mask clicks into place. He's on his knees now, that much she can garner from the shape of him in the gloom.

"I tore you from my heart a long time ago," he hisses, icy and guttural, and it brings such a profound sense of loss to realize that she never heard him speak without the modulator. That she has been robbed of the chance to hear his rich, deep voice after two awful years. "I will not let you do this to me again." He says it like a vow, and then his next words are nearly a whisper, as if he's talking to himself. "I won't be able to survive it..."

The desire in Rey's veins gradually ebbs, replaced by a chill that is blessed for the numbness it grants. She has made a terrible, terrible mistake. She will compartmentalize it, save it for later, but she has to get out of here now.
They surge to their feet at the same time, Kylo recovering his lightsaber with the fluid ease of the telekinetic summon that she'd used. Rey cocks her head, listening intently— the wind has slowed, the thunder coming in more sporadic bursts. The X'us'R'ìia is ebbing. She has to find BB-8 and rendezvous with the Ebon Hawk before Kylo's backup arrives, but, first, she has to shake him off her tail.

Rey dives deep into herself, seeking out the connections that had been obscured by the delirium of physical proximity. What is passion, after all? What are memories? She is a Jedi Knight. The Dark has no power over her.

Control. Sense.

Her off-hand moves.

Alter.

For him the world explodes in Force-flash, a diamantine conflagration of unnatural light so intense that it stabs at his skull. He turns away, already knowing that it's too late to stop her from running, that she will be gone once the blaze has dissipated.

True enough, when darkness and silence come rushing back, it's as if she'd never been there at all. It could have been just any other dream.

Another hour is spent in a frantic dash, her feet taking her through the mazes of the Ravager until she finds a familiar exit— one of those portholes in the side of the ship that she'd often squeezed through when she was a child. The sky is visible as patches of deep indigo through swirls of sand shadowed black. Still not ideal weather conditions, but she figures she can risk it, what with the First Order circling overhead in preparation for the right moment to land. And there's no guarantee that they'll wait for the storm to completely die down, either.

You can do this, she tells herself. You lived here and you survived. Time for a rematch.
Gritting her teeth, she hurls herself out into the breath of R'ilia.

* 

The droid waits quietly inside the Inflictor, rotund body tucked into the mouth of a cabin the doors of which had been pried open long ago. BB-8 is not in the best of moods; after fleeing Tuanul, he had wandered the desert until the [Lifeform: TEEDO; Classification: SENTIENT ORGANIC]'s nets closed over him. He's got sand lodged in his circuits and the crackling static of the storm is starting to wreak havoc on his motherboard.

When BB-8's motion sensors detect someone clambering into the ship, his stealth protocol kicks in, warning him to keep absolutely still and not make a sound— however, he does swap to the tool-bay disk containing the arc welder, the closest thing that he has to a weapon.

A face looms out of the darkness, colored smoky green by the night mode filter on his visual scans. [Lifeform: HUMAN; Classification: SENTIENT ORGANIC; Name: REY; Status: ALLY].

"Yes, yes, I'm glad to see you, too," the Jedi mutters over BB-8's excited gurgle of 27th generation droidspeak. "Now let's get out of here."

* 

Rey weaves an energy barrier around her and BB-8 as they head for Kelvin Ravine, using the Force to keep the churning sand away from their bodies. It's a task that requires utmost concentration, along with putting one foot in front of the other guided by the glow-lamp embedded in one of BB-8's tool-bay disks, a singular ray of white light in the dim almost-dawn.

In a way, she's glad of it. It means that she's too preoccupied to dwell on what happened between her and Kylo Ren in the starship— how he'd felt like Ben Solo in her arms once more.

And even before that. The stray thought flashes through her mind, whispered by an inner voice that never lies. When you were dueling— the movement, the thrill of it— for a moment it felt like you were fighting with Ben.
It is bitter work, plodding through the roaring darkness, the sand shifting beneath her boots and the wind whipping at her cloak, the occasional strong gust nearly knocking her to the ground. Every once in a while, she has to look back to ascertain that he isn't following her. She hopes that he wasn't foolish enough to venture out into the storm by himself; he lacks her knowledge of this land and, anyway, he'd never had much of an internal compass—

Her eyes narrow when she realizes that she's actually concerned about his well-being, and, with grim resolution, she clamps down on this train of thought before it can go any further.

The last specks of the Starship Graveyard have disappeared when her strength begins to wane, sapped by dehydration and sleeplessness; the Force barrier thins, eliciting a shrill shriek from BB-8 as sand particles scatter across his inoxium plating.

_This is not one of my better ideas_, Rey grumbles to herself. True, it had been her only option, but, somehow, that just makes things _worse_. She's _miserable_. The prospect of simply curling up on the ground and closing her eyes starts to hold a certain morbid appeal—she can sleep forever that way, leave this life's pain behind, let the sand and the darkness gnaw at her bones until there's nothing left.

_Would you look at that._ She directs the wry quip to the image of Kylo that she holds in her mind. _Apparently, I learned melodrama from you, too._

She doesn't even realize that she's stopped walking until she feels a slight pressure at the back of her knees—BB-8 is attempting to nudge her forward, beeping piteously. Rey blinks down at the droid, surprised by the sudden wave of resentment that comes with remembering that she has a duty to the Jedi Order and to the Resistance. _Why do I have to do this, why must I be the one who endures—_

But that's not completely right, is it? She never _had_ to do anything. She is here now because of a series of choices that began the day Ben Solo sensed her Force signature across the dunes.

BB-8 rolls into her again. _The map_, he chirps. _The mission. Skywalker._

"I know," Rey says quietly.
By the time they reach the downward slope that leads to Kelvin Ravine, the sky has lightened and the wind has almost completely stopped, no small mercy because Rey finds herself unable to maintain the protective barrier around her and BB-8 for one second more. However, it also means that they have to hurry; First Order troops are almost certainly about to make planetfall.

She edges down into the ravine, so tired that she loses her footing and lands in an ungainly heap at the bottom of the slope. "I'm fine," she grunts at BB-8 as he hovers at her side. If he had hands, he'd be wringing them. "Go, go!" She shoves him none too gently towards the rock shelf under which she spies the Hawk, and then she—

— tries to follow, but her muscles won't cooperate. Now that she's down, exhaustion has caught up with her and she can't stand. She can't—

"Hey." It's Finn, the former stormtrooper, standing over her with one hand proffered. For a moment Rey just gazes blankly at him, at those strong features that would have been imperious had they not been softened by compassionate dark eyes. The sun is rising over his shoulder, rays of pale gold blurring him at the edges, this stranger who shares a name with one she had loved.

"Come on," he urges in a husky, soothing voice that she thinks will stay with her. "Almost there."

She reaches out to take his hand and, maybe it's only an effect of her dazed weariness, but it feels like she's reaching across a span of years, across an endless array of what-ifs. A girl writes Yavin 4 on the wall of an Imperial walker. A lost boy stumbles inside and takes a leap of faith.

This is the Force. Rey knows it without question. Odd how the most piercing moments of clarity can come when you're at the end of your rope. It brought us together. I was meant to find you in whatever life.

Her fingers close around Finn's wrist. He tugs her up. He helps her stand.

Flanked by a complement of TIE fighters and assault landers, the Guardian-class corvette noses into the atmosphere of Jakku with the kind of reckless abandon that can only mean that Tahiri Veila is in the pilot seat. Standing behind her while using the Force to maintain her balance, Tamith Kai acknowledges that the Judgement's design is not as sleek as she and her fellow Knights would have preferred— possibly why Lord Ren had favored his now-defunct shuttle for getting
around—but at least it's quick and tough and it hits hard.

"Which Jedi is down there, do you think?" Kueller asks. They rarely bother with their masks when in private and, without his, Kueller's rough-hewn features are twisted in anticipation. "I'm hoping for Durron."

"The reports said the Jedi was a woman," Tamith Kai reminds him, her tone dripping with acid. "Honestly, Kueller. I'm glad we have Irek to dispel the all-brawn-and-no-brains stereotype, because you certainly can't."

"Well, Irek's not here right now," Kueller grunts. "You're stuck with me, witch."

Tamith Kai flashes him a saccharine smile. "Did you really mean 'witch' or—" She cuts off mid-sentence, her gaze veering to the transparisteel panels on port side, which are now displaying a vast panorama of clear air above golden sand. Her violet eyes flash with a hint of scarlet, as if they've trapped shards of the rising sun's light. "Oh, they think they're so clever."

"They?" Tahiri—who is much, much quicker on the uptake than Kueller—prompts.

Tamith Kai nods as she breaks through the veil of Force Immersion draped over a red-and-white Dynamic-class freighter currently hurtling towards the clouds. "Two Jedi, at least. In the mood for some target practice, my dear?"

Tahiri pouts. "I can't see them."

"Very well. I'll handle it for now, but you have to work on your counterstealth abilities." The older woman straps herself into the gunner; strange rune-like patterns shimmer in the air around her as she waits for the right moment to fire.

* *

"What the hell?" Finn cries over the barrage of alarms. "I thought they weren't able to see us!"

"They shouldn't be." Jysella frowns as another laser blast slams into the Hawk's prow, causing the
shields to wince. "My Immersion net is still holding, why—" 

Rey extends her Force sensitivity towards the enemy cruiser, drawing back once she catches an impression of a distorted static haze and black flames. "Darksiders," she announces. "Sella—"

"Way ahead of you, captain." Jysella swiftly gets to her feet so that Rey can take the controls. Even if the TIE sensors can't detect them, the Guardian corvette is still a formidable opponent and a dogfight would consume precious time. The Hawk groans as Rey coaxes it towards the atmosphere, a third smattering of lasers clipping its wings.

"She's locking on to us," Finn announces, eyeing the corvette's movements on the radar screen. "Get lines, Rey, get lines!"

"What does it look like I'm doing!" Rey bursts out, knuckles clenching around the yoke. "Sella, set hyperspace coordinates to the Ileenium system. Finn, man the rear cannons, see if you can get some shots in—"

Finn and Jysella do as they're bid. Distantly, Rey is aware of BB-8 chattering away behind her, and she yells at the droid to brace himself as she pulls the Hawk into another abrupt climb. Higher, higher, she repeats like a mantra as pale cotton-wisp clouds start to fall away to reveal shivering neon layers of ozone. Burn sky until you see lines.

"Damn it!" Kueller growls when the world beyond the frontal viewport momentarily splinters into red light and yellow sparks. "They're returning fire!"

"Yes, I know," Tahiri drawls, sounding bored. "I was there." Using the mental link she has established with Tamith Kai in order to get a visual, she sweeps the Judgement beneath the freighter's plane of flight in order to give Tamith Kai a clear shot. It's not long before the soaring turbolaser blast collides with—

— another one that hurtles down straight to meet it head-on, effectively stopping its trajectory in a searing explosion.
"Nice shooting," Jysella and Rey automatically chorus.

Finn beams. "I have my moments."

Tamith Kai sucks in a frustrated breath when she senses the freighter leaving Jakku's atmosphere. "Fall back. They're in space already."

Tahiri glances at her. "We can still—"

"Forget it. The Hydian Way is too close to this planet. They'll have made the jump by the time we go black."

"If you say so." Tahiri reverses, then points the Judgement's prow in the direction of the Starship Graveyard once more. "Do you think they have the droid?"


Kueller glares moodily out the viewport as the hulking silhouettes of shipwrecks draw nearer. "Lord Ren isn't going to be happy about this." But he does cheer up a little when he notices that their TIE and AAL escorts are giving them a wider berth than usual. Of course, to those pilots, it would have seemed as if the Judgement had just suddenly veered off the path to go shoot at random points in the sky, further cementing the Knights' reputations as fearsome lunatics.

But it's for the best. Kueller prefers it that way—and so does Kylo Ren, he knows. He remembers the early days, the visage of the Supreme Leader crooning in the smoky half-light, they will never love you, so you must make certain of their fear. And, out of all of them, no one had looked more resolute upon hearing those words than the tall, solemn young man who was Darth Vader's heir.

Chapter End Notes

Cularin.
Ch’hala tree.

Rey learns about the Control, Sense, and Alter aspects of Force power in Chapter 3 of LYG. Her hydropump project is first mentioned in Chapter 5 as taking up most of the space in her room; it's installed in the river and fully functional by Chapter 12.

Force-flash.

Force barrier.

Tool-bay disk.

Arc welder.

Inoxium.

Guardian-class light cruiser.

Slang terms (unsourced but I'm like 99% sure this is accurate):
"get lines" = make the jump into hyperspace
"burn sky until you see lines" = fly until you reach hyperspace
"go black" = exit a planet's atmosphere

Irek Ismaren.
Happy September, everyone! Thank you so much for continuing to support this fic.
I've extended the chapter count because there's no way this mess can be resolved in 15.
Literally no one is surprised.

This might be the last update for a while, as I am off to Munich on Saturday. I'm
spending a week there and in Vienna, but I'll try to get some writing done during my
free time so that I can post a new installment ASAP. Meanwhile, I'd love to know your
thoughts on this latest chapter!

Soundtrack:

1. [this amazing playlist](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLJgJ1wq8M2zLEjUWfFQx4SsJQORHh4yfX) by thebattleofchaeronea
2. [Only Love Can Hurt Like This - Paloma Faith](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YDq06t57rA) (suggested by lunagreene)
3. [We Will Wake - Seasfire](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YDq06t57rA) (Mahpeyker)
4. [Clear - Twenty One Pilots](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YDq06t57rA) (Mahpeyker)
5. [Feral Hearts - Kerli](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YDq06t57rA) (Mahpeyker)
6. [Come Crashing - Digital Daggers](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YDq06t57rA) (Mahpeyker)
7. [Somebody That I Used To Know - Gotye](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YDq06t57rA) (nightangelerik)
8. [Wish That You Were Here - Florence + the Machine](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YDq06t57rA) (flamingcabbage)
9. [Old Days - Ingrid Michaelson](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YDq06t57rA) (flamingcabbage)
10. [Destroy Everything You Touch - Ladytron](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YDq06t57rA) (Katherine)
11. [Psycho Killer - Talking Heads](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YDq06t57rA) (Katherine)
12. [O'Children - Nick Cave](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YDq06t57rA) (DauntlessSubconscious)
13. [Libertango - Astor Piazzolla](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YDq06t57rA) (DauntlessSubconscious)
14. [Prodigal - OneRepublic](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YDq06t57rA) (nemo)
15. [Kettering - The Antlers](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1YDq06t57rA) (nemo)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There is a tranquility to hyperspace that comes rolling in with the hypnotic silver glide of the
starlines. The various sounds that a ship makes coalesce into a soothing rhythm of hums and beeps
and droid brain chatter as you squeeze through the vast arterial labyrinths between dimensions—
leaving, in your wake, ripples across space and time. A blue-shaded, isolated voyage that's akin to
having your finger pressed to the pulse of an otherwise scattered universe, and that feeling—
coupled with the relief of escape— lessens the invisible weight on Rey's shoulders as she leans
back in the pilot seat.

Finn's standing up, one hip resting against the edge of the dashboard. "So, why'd you girls switch?"
he asks, his curious gaze darting from Rey to Jysella.

"Rey's better in tight situations. She's our ace pilot," explains the latter. "My brother used to call her
'flygirl' when we were kids. I think he was predicting the future."
"Nah," says Rey. "I just had a phase where I never went anywhere without that old flight helmet. Valin was enabling me."

"Regardless, you did get us out of there." Finn smiles at her, a flash of white teeth on his dark face. "I think you might give Poe a run for his money."

Rey affects a mock shudder. "That is not a compliment. Dameron's insane." She stands up and hands the ship's controls back to Jysella, intending to make wise use of the free time she has before they jump back to realspace around D'Qar. Hot shower first, followed by a nap. It sounds divine. In her mind she's already in her bunk, scrubbed clean and drifting off.

She brushes loose strands of hair away from her neck. Her triple buns have been knocked askew by stray wind and certain... events, and, even without the benefit of a mirror, she suspects that what's on her head now bears more resemblance to a bird's nest than actual human hair.

"Rey—" Finn's normal baritone climbs a pitch higher while Jysella does a double-take, accidentally nosing the ship to an upward slant.

Rey cocks her head, puzzled. "What's wrong?"

Finn's courage fails him. He shoots Jysella a look that might as well have been a distress signal for all the panic it contains, and she in turn gulps, her disbelieving stare fixed not on Rey's face, but on a point a little lower.

"Your, um, your neck..." Jysella trails off.

"What about my—" Rey's hand flies to cup her neck, her thumb scraping against a particularly tender spot that makes her wince. Kriff. "I can explain," she blurts out, frantically rifling through an array of possible excuses. "Mynocks. Dozens of them. An entire nest. They jumped me—"

"Something jumped you, all right," Finn mutters, "but, Rey, mynocks live in space. They're allergic to helium."

"Jakku mynocks are different," Rey airily informs him. "They've adapted to live in Type I
atmosphere planets. I can't believe you didn't know that, Finn."

She leaves the cockpit with as much dignity as she can muster, breaking into a run once she's out of
sight. There's a mirror hanging on the wall of the sleeping quarters of the ship and it is only her
palm clapped over her mouth that muffles the indignant screech when she spies her reflection
within the confines of the rounded glass. Her neck is a war zone, dotted with angry-looking bite
marks from her jawline to the base of her throat. They criss-cross her skin like a rain of flower
petals, whorls of scarlet and plum against a pale gold field.

He did this to her. The brute! She runs shaking fingers over each bruise, staring at her reflection as
she does so and barely able to recognize herself all messy-haired and glassy-eyed and flushed like
this. She looks like someone returning from a secret tryst— if the tryst had involved a weather
storm and a lightsaber duel.

An underlying well of sadness blossoms beneath her outrage. *It shouldn’t have happened this way.*
Suddenly she feels disconnected from her body, the Force flickering as a mental picture grabs hold
of her imagination and refuses to let go— Ben Solo is in this room, dressed in nondescript dark
robes that bear similarity to his old Jedi attire, an irreverent smirk on his lips as he prods at her
neck and laughingly begs forgiveness for manhandling her while she pouts and glares at him, the
love bites disappearing beneath the gentle movements of his fingers.

It isn't real, she knows. For one thing, Ben had never been able to get the hang of Force healing.
Whose phantom hands are these, then, gliding over her skin? Whose voice is that, pitched to a low,
affectionate murmur? She remembers the year after Corbos and before the Siege, how she would
take refuge in daydreams of the two of them together, daydreams so intense that she was always
more than a little disoriented whenever she snapped out of them and he was still gone. Her old,
foolish penchant for longing has returned with a vengeance, no doubt triggered by their fleeting,
disastrous reunion on Jakku.

The doors hiss open; Jysella steps into the room. "I switched to autopilot and left Finn to keep an
eye on things. I thought that maybe you'd want to talk."

"Not particularly," Rey grunts, turning away from the mirror to face the other Jedi Knight. "Can
you just help me heal these?"

"Of course."

Rey sits on the bottom bunk and Jysella stands over her, inspecting the marks with a solemn gaze
and clinical fingers. "He bit you. I mean, I've heard about that, but..."
"Yeah." Rey's violent blush is reflected on her comrade's face. During their years at the Praxem, they learned how to fight, how to fly, and how to commune with the Force, but it occurs to her now that there is a host of other experiences they all missed out on.

"Did it feel—"

"Jysella!" Rey yelps.

The other girl ducks her head. "Sorry."

"We did talk," Rey says, desperate to change the subject, "and it was horrible. He's changed so much, Sella. He thinks that the First Order has the right of it, that we were using him for his powers, that it's his destiny to follow in his grandfather's footsteps."

"They locked him up for a year, according to Finn," Jysella tells her. "They tortured him. We know how the Dark Side corrupts. Exar Kun showed us, didn't he? Snoke must have used those techniques on Ben as well. Day in, day out. It's the only explanation."

Something inside Rey withers at the thought of Ben alone and in pain. He had been so strong in all the time that she'd known him. So brave. She feels a cold emptiness slowly rising to the back of her throat, a stark contrast to the serene healing energy that Jysella is coaxing through injured blood vessels. "He thinks—" She pauses and takes a deep breath, wondering if she can bear to let the weight of her next words fill the room. "He thinks I didn't love him back."

Jysella's expression remains impassive but the slight tremor of her fingers against Rey's neck betrays her surprise. "I'm beginning to understand now," she says after a while. "For Ben to become Kylo Ren, Snoke had to take away the one thing that was anchoring him to the Light."

"It wasn't— we weren't each other's anchors," Rey protests. "I used to think that we were, but I look back and I see that he and I drove each other to do reckless things. When I was with him, I couldn't be a Jedi. He made me not want to be one." This epiphany doesn't feel new; rather, it feels like something she's always known, buried for years and unearthed by what happened in the ruins of the Ravager. "He fell because of me. He was afraid to lose me, and that fear led him to the Dark Side. I led him there, she silently corrects as that familiar, paralyzing guilt comes rushing in. It's my fault.
Jysella's hands drop back to her side and she straightens up. "I don't have the answers, Rey. I can only tell you what I remember. There was this one afternoon at the temple, and I swear I didn't mean to spy on you or anything like that, but— I was taking the stairs to the second level and there you both were, outside his room."

"What were we doing?" Rey asks guardedly.

"Ben was about to leave for Dathomir," Jysella prompts. "He had a mission to find and destroy the Infinity Gate."

Rey's eyes widen slightly and then she nods. It never fails to stun her, the selective nature of memory— how some moments from her past are defined in crisp, solid images, while others are nothing more than a blur of warmth and the echoes of sensation. The afternoon that Jysella is referring to is one of the latter but, as her friend continues speaking, it all comes back to Rey, the scene springing to life in the recycled air of the starship, painted from a different angle, laid out in someone else's words.

* *

Rey was eighteen years old and— actually kind of worried, although she tried her best not to make it so obvious. She'd learned from Tekli that Ben had been assigned to a dangerous reconnaissance mission on savage old Dathomir, a world of rancors and witches. He had no backup except Master Kirana Ti, whom he would covertly meet up with only once he got there.

If Rey heard one more joke about a solo mission, she was going to scream.

The light of afternoon was a syrupy wash over Massassi stonework as she hovered out in the hallway, watching Ben leave his room. She didn't know what to do with her hands, so she clasped them behind her back while he ran one of his over the utility belt cinched at his waist, checking for lightsaber and comm-link. His other hand was toying with the strap of a nondescript travel bag slung over one shoulder, containing a few packs of emergency rations, a length of rope, and a change of clothes.

He raised a quizzical eyebrow, probably wondering why she was hanging around when her fellow apprentices were knee-deep in centering exercises in the Grand Audience Chamber. She stared back, at a loss for words. There were so many things that she wanted to say but she had no idea what they were— couldn't even begin to form a coherent sentence out of the wisps of trepidation cluttering her mind. She'd always had issues with people leaving. It was something left over from her abandonment on Jakku, the anxious clench in her stomach, the nagging fear that she would
never see someone again. Master Luke had helped her work through it over the years, but this time felt different. This time felt like there was more at stake.

Finally, Ben cleared his throat. "I shouldn't be gone long." His voice was gruff and he wasn't quite looking at her. "Try not to get into any trouble."

"I'll try," Rey drawled, stressing the last word like a challenge.

Unfortunately, he didn't take the bait. He must have been in a hurry because, instead of engaging in their usual banter, he merely rolled his eyes and walked away. No, she thought in a flare of panic, this isn't how I want to say goodbye—

"Hey," she blurted out. It rang through the quiet corridor.

Ben stopped in his tracks, then turned back to her, the look on his face a curious mix of puzzlement and resignation. Rey marched over to him and, before she could lose her courage, placed her hands on each side of his neck, her pulse racing at how warm skin edged into well-worn linen tunic against her palms. Her fingers sank into the soft dark hair curling at his ears as she tugged him down, and he went willingly enough despite the crease in his brow. She scrunched up her nose and pressed the tip of it to his, nuzzling from side to side in quick, affectionate strokes.

His hand flew to the curve of her waist and stayed there. Rey grinned, not only at the added contact, but also at the silliness of her own mischievous gesture. Ben was smiling, too, in that crooked, reluctant way of his.

"Come back," she breathlessly ordered against the corner of his mouth.

"If I feel like it," he murmured, resting his forehead against hers and taking the lead in rubbing their noses together, swaying into her as their lips veered so tantalizingly close. The flippant remark would have stung had it come from anyone else, but this was Ben in the time before broken promises, and his actions told a different story as his hand drifted from her waist to the small of her back, gently pushing her closer to him. She giggled and kissed his cheek, wishing that they could have more moments like this, careful and sweet and private and not letting their tempers get the better of them. But perhaps it was the rarity that made it something to be treasured.

"I have to go," he sighed against her temple, following the words with a chaste, hurried kiss to the same spot. "Rey, I— I have to. I'll see you when I get back, all right?"
"Yes, of course, I'm not going anywhere," she assured him. Where did it come from, the need to soothe each other like this? His thumb traced haphazard circles on the jut of her hip and she couldn't stop smiling as he leaned into her and she stood almost on tiptoe to make up for their height difference. And, even then, there was already a part of her that knew this was no longer as innocent as either of them wanted to believe, or perhaps hope. She was standing on a precipice, unsure if the leap would give her wings or broken bones.

But how could she bring herself to care, when the Force thrummed all around them in skeins of silver through the veil of that golden afternoon, when Ben's long lashes were fluttering over her half-closed eyelids and she could feel the curve of his half-smile at the edge of her own? Whatever she was feeling, at least he felt it, too.

* 

"That's what I saw from the second-floor landing," Jysella's telling her now. "The two of you holding each other with these ridiculous grins on your faces. I went back the way I came because I didn't think you'd appreciate the interruption, but what I saw carried no darkness. You have to believe that. The Light was all around you that day."

* 

Starkiller Base shifts beneath his feet, ice plates creaking out of sync with the broil of the thermal oscillator. It's discordant, tuneless; it grates at his nerves.

When he senses a familiar Force signature blinking through the private wing that houses the Knights of Ren whenever they're planetbound, he stalks out of his quarters, all too eager for confrontation. The svelte lekku-bearing figure in black robes hardly has time to dodge the wild slash of his lightsaber, jumping to the side at the last possible second so that the scarlet blade shrieks along the wall instead.

"Nice. Another damage report for Hux to sign off on. You'll give him carpal tunnel syndrome yet." Alema Rar's bored jade eyes idly study the deep dark scar on the metal before wandering to Kylo's face. Like her, he is unmasked, and a smirk tilts her lips as she observes his narrowed glare and the muscle ticking along his jaw. "Did you want to lead the Artorias invasion? Sorry about that. Leader Snoke needed someone who wouldn't make a mess of things."

Rage clouds his vision. He pulls it to him, lets the flames blanket his core and burn away
everything else. "How could you let her believe that you and I—" His mouth snaps shut. He can't even say it. Can't even begin to comprehend such a thing.

Understanding dawns on Alema's cruelly immaculate features. "So the Jedi that you ran into on Jakku was Rey. I imagine that must have been an awkward reunion."

"Alema," Kylo growls, even less tolerant of her games than usual. "What were you thinking, damn it?"

"I was thinking that I would exploit the vulnerabilities of my opponent. I was also thinking that you wouldn't mind because the girl shouldn't matter to you anymore," the Twi'lek dryly remarks. "That there is no place for her in this, your second life. It seems that I thought wrong."

He catches the hint of warning behind her careful words. He is being too obvious, showing too much weakness. It is not the ideal state of mind with which to walk into the presence of the Supreme Leader, as he knows he soon must.

"It's your turn to debrief with Leader Snoke," Alema continues, right on cue. "Don't keep him waiting."

He nods curtly and brushes past her, but her hand shoots out to latch on to his sleeve. "Wear your armor, Lord Ren."

Kylo shrugs off Alema's grip, cursing to himself. He'd almost forgotten because of his inner turmoil. He'd almost marched over to the communications bay with this bare face of his that can be so easily read. He turns back to Alema, noting the resolute, defiant set of her chin in the dim light. Watching out for each other, he thinks somewhat bitterly. We learned that from the Jedi.

But they are no longer Jedi.

"You are so much stronger now that you have embraced who you truly are," she says. "I know, however, that there is still a part of you that resents me for the role I played in bringing you to him. To your destiny."

"You don't know quite as much as you think you do."
"Is that a fact?" she retorts, smiling brightly and knife-sharp. "I know what was going through your mind the day we attacked the Praxeum on Yavin 4. I know that things didn't proceed as you'd hoped. You were foolish to believe that you could pull it off, but I heard that you issued the kill order in Tuanul. Perhaps you've learned your lesson, after all."

"This conversation is over," he coolly replies. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

"I'm right, aren't I?" she challenges as he walks back to his quarters to retrieve the black helm. The doors slide shut behind him too late to muffle the rest of her words. "Despite Leader Snoke's orders, you were targeting Skywalker, and Skywalker alone. That was your doomed, massively idiotic plan, wasn't it? That no one else would die?"

* 

"We're going to die!" Finn moans as the hull of the Ebon Hawk shudders and smoke leaks out of the dashboard.

"Well, panicking isn't going to help matters," Rey snaps, squinting at the hologram that she'd pulled up from the ship's droid brain—an exploded schematic of the hyperdrive, parts of which were blinking urgent red. "That goes for you, too," she tells BB-8, who's been darting uselessly among the other passengers' legs ever since it became apparent that something was wrong with the ship. "The hyperdrive's overheating. The First Order must have damaged the transpacitor when they shot at us."

"Can you fix it?" Finn demands.

Rey shakes her head. "Not before the whole thing blows. Our best option is to jump back to realspace while we still can. Even then, we'd be stranded at sublight."

Jysella's consulting another hologram that shows the shimmering mass shadows of the planets lining the Hydian Way. "We're along the Tashtor sector. It's mostly dirtballs, but if we can make it here—" She points to a nearby globe—"we'll be able to purchase what we need for repairs. Or, worst case scenario, find another means of transport to D'Qar."

"At least there'll definitely be people there," Rey agrees, "even if most of them are scum." Hurrying over to the navicomp, she recalibrates the coordinates, keying in their new destination.
Valin first calls Rey "flygirl" during a flashback in Chapter 13 of LYG. Ben is shown returning from the Dathomir mission in Chapter 12.

Credit for the mynock idea goes to Katherine. Thanks, you brilliant person, you!

Type I atmosphere.

An example of a hyperdrive's exploded schematic.

Transpacitor.

Mass shadow.

Tashtar sector.

"Dirtball" is slang for a planet one doesn't care much for; in this case, planets with no resources or strategic value for our protagonists.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

So I returned from Europe at the start of a hectic work week with a bad case of jet lag and an Oktoberfest hangover. It wasn't until a few days ago that I mustered the energy to write. My sincere apologies for the long delay, and I hope that this installment makes up for it. Unfortunately, the usual playlist and fandom-related announcements will have to wait because it's past midnight over here and your poor author is very sleepy :)

As I am already way behind schedule on this fic, I will try my best to post Chapter 11 before I leave for Taipei in, like, five days. Please motivate me either here or on my Tumblr!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Over the HoloNet, Snoke is a tower of gray robes and leathery skin and cunning eyes on an austere throne. It is an illusion learned from Sheev Palpatine, the artful configuration of devices to project an image that fills the viewer's world. Kylo Ren stands in a pool of static light in the deep dark cold of the communications bay and remembers a temple on a mirror-still lake, stepping stones hidden beneath silver water so that whoever approaches Exar Kun's monolith must do so with head bowed.

("This was typical of the ancient Sith," he had told her. "They wanted to be worshipped as gods.")

These days he knows better, knows that the old ones had been wrong. One bows to kings and masters who are greater and more powerful but still mortal. True worship means looking up, because the gods are in the sky.

His time with the First Order has taught Kylo the skill of listening while a part of him remains distant and thinks in tangents. A necessary survival tactic, else a scream be ripped from his chest with him not really understanding why. As such, while Hux and Snoke converse, we must assume that the droid is now in the hands of the Jedi, we are running out of time, Kylo mentally traces the phantoms of his Jakku wounds, the shallow cuts left by her lightsaber and the gashes from the junkyard debris she'd hurled at him that had been healed since then. He would normally let himself scar as a reminder— live to tell the tale— but those particular memories would have been too much of a burden. I tore you from my heart a long time ago. Yet he can feel the echoes of her every strike, threading through his consciousness like faint radio chatter underneath Hux's nasal, obsequious tones offset by Snoke's gurgling croon.

The weapon, it is ready, Hux is saying, and then Snoke is telling him to oversee the preparations, and Kylo can only listen as more shreds of a former life fall away with each word. Shreds that he
hadn't even realized still remained.

Finally, Hux marches out of the room, leaving Kylo alone with Snoke's endless eyes peering down at him in the dim light. He braces himself not a moment too late— the Supreme Leader slides into his mind from systems away. He surrenders bits and pieces of the duel in the starship, the Force-flash that had made him lose sight of his quarry, but everything else is fiercely guarded with a power that doesn't feel like it's entirely his, too subtle to be detected by anyone save himself. Sometimes Kylo suspects there's somebody else living in his head, somebody who isn't Snoke. He does not know whether to be grateful to this entity or to fear them.

"My beloved student." The hologram is speaking now, velvety and rich as if savoring each word. "You have come so far. I am proud that you refused to let the old lies hold any sway. But now that girl has run off with the map to Skywalker and you must follow." Long, gargantuan fingers move idly, tapping the great stone armrest. "I worry that continued exposure to her might diminish the progress we have made."

"There is nothing that could turn me from this path. No one, no memory," Kylo replies. And he does mean it, here and now. He won't allow her to slip past his defenses again.

"I hope so, for your sake." The cracked, papery line of Snoke's mouth tightens. "Should she continue to be an obstacle, you might need to take more... permanent measures."

"No," Kylo says before he can help it. The walls of the communications bay tremble slightly. "She is a pawn, like I once was. You told me so yourself. You promised that I would never have to—" 

"Of course, of course," Snoke hurries to soothe him, although a flicker of displeasure radiates through the Force. "You owe her life to the Dark Side, and the Dark Side will never take it away as long as you continue to not regret your actions on Corbos. I was merely outlining the worst-case scenario, which you must strive to prevent by retrieving the droid as soon as possible." He pauses, a thousand constellations shining in the black voids of his eyes. "However, a life does need to be taken. The ultimate act of selflessness is required for you to ascend to your full potential. I sense that turning point coming sooner than you think. Even you, master of the Knights of Ren, have never faced such a test."

Then what was the Siege? What was Yavin 4? Kylo is stunned by how much he longs to demand. I took down the academy's shields, I felt them all die. Was that not enough?

But he already knows it wasn't. He might have purged misguided loyalties from his soul then, but he had killed no one by his own hand. What he says out loud instead is, "By the grace of your
training, I will not be seduced.” By no one and nothing. No light, no memory.

"We shall see," Snoke hums. "We shall see."

* 

Takodana unfurls beyond the transparisteel, a world of lush forests and forever lakes. Finn is glued to the viewport like an excitable puppy while Rey is busy studying the data magnified on the holoprojector, filling the cabin in pulsing star charts and coordinates.

"I'm not familiar with this system," she says at last, frustration coloring her every word. "Look. This map is incomplete. It doesn't show any of the main hyperroutes—"

"We've got incoming on port side." Jysella gestures to the radar screen as the Hawk coasts down to glide over an expanse of sunlit blue water. "Just one, though. Probably not hostile."

A silvery disc-shaped YT-1300 freighter veers up from the treeline and drops, holding in close beside the Hawk and effortlessly matching its speed. All of Rey's tension melts into a pool of crushing relief; she hurries over to the cockpit and accesses the other ship's transceiver frequency, exclaiming, "Where have you been?" the second she makes contact.

"Kid?" Han Solo's delighted voice emanates from the speakers in that smoke-scratched yet boyish lilt that she hasn't heard in ages. They're communicating through audio feed alone, so he goes on to ask, "Who's with you?"

"Jysella and a couple of other passengers." Finn's presence would take too long to explain and she's not comfortable announcing BB-8's over a connection that can be easily sliced into.

"Hey there, Red." Han uses the affectionate nickname referencing the color of Jysella's hair. "What say we dock and catch up?"

"Race you," Rey challenges impishly.

Han snorts. "This is the ship that made the Kessel Run in—"
"Twelve parsecs, I know," Rey finishes with a laugh. "Well, this is the second-gen of the ship that broke through the Taris Blockade."

Without further ado, both vehicles hurtle forward and, oh, what a sight, the *Ebon Hawk* and the *Millennium Falcon* side by side with thrusters ablaze, reflections shimmering in the water. Finn and Jysella cheer Rey on while BB-8 throws in some encouraging beeps, and it's all air and lightness, forests blurring at the periphery of Rey's vision as the green shore rushes to meet them. It's one for the holobooks. It's one mad, good thing to hold up against the bad years. It's—

*

"A tie!" Han declares after they've docked, clambering out of the *Falcon* with Chewbacca ambling along after him. "Pretty decent flying there, kid."

"You weren't so bad yourself," Rey teases. Despite her jovial tone, she bites her lip when she notices the new wrinkles lining Han's brow and how his hair has completely gone to gray. Leia is also like this, old before her time, the shadow of a lost son in her eyes.

Han stares at her, his grin fading at the corners, a little of Rey's concern echoed by his own expression. She stiffens, wondering if he will remark on her pallor or the weight she's lost, the same sad changes in herself that she sees in the mirror, but in the end he merely reaches out to give her shoulder an awkward pat.

"Ah, well," is all he says, gruff manner underscored by a certain rueful fondness, before turning his attention to the rest of the *Hawk'*s crew.

*

Despite the assortment of scrap and contraband proliferating its cargo holds at any given time, there is no spare transpacitor onboard the *Falcon*. It's not long before they head in the direction of Maz Kanata's castle on foot, leaving Chewbacca behind to guard the two freighters. The Wookie had been glad to see Jysella and Rey, he'd ruffled the tops of their heads with his huge hairy hands in a playful manner that suggested he still thought of them as the younglings who used to climb all over him begging to be carried on his shoulders. He didn't pick them up and toss them in the air, though— such a gesture had been reserved for Ben, even long past the time Ben started considering himself too old for it.
The azure waters of Lake Nymeve lap gently at the banks as they walk. It's always summer on Takodana, the air clear and pure and the golden daylight shining in Finn's eyes as he leans closer to Rey while BB-8, Han, and Jysella trail after them. "That's the Han Solo?" he attempts to confirm. "The Rebellion general?"

"No, the smuggler," Rey quips. She raises her voice then, calling over her shoulder, "What brings you here, Han?"

"Just wrapped up a job hauling rathtars for King Prana—"

"In the Falcon?" Finn interrupts with disbelief.

"Nah, I used to have a much bigger ship," Han says wryly. "Baleen-class heavy freighter. A fine old model, if a bit clunky. But the deal went sour and Chewie and I had to make a quick getaway, leaving the Eravana behind on Prana's homeworld. Actually, I used to have a much bigger crew, too."

"What happened to them?" Jysella asks.

"I can guess," Finn mutters. "Rathtars are nasty business. Ever heard of the Trillia Massacre? Hardly worth it."

"Thanks for the input, Hindsight," Han grunts. "Anyway, yeah, I have leads on another Baleen-class up for grabs, but Chewie and I figured we'd drop by Maz's first and see if we could hustle ourselves a new crew. Anytime you two get tired of waving laser swords around," he tells Jysella and Rey, "come see me. You're Mirax's daughter, Red, it's in your blood. And I need someone who can fly like you, Rey."

"Tempting," Rey jokes although there is a part of her that means it, the part that had lived on tales of Han Solo's daring escapades before she ever met him. "Why not just stick to the Falcon, though? As you said, it's better for quick getaways when you're in a tight spot."

"Chewie and I have plans to expand our enterprise. The rathtars were supposed to be the start of it. Also—" Han coughs. "The Falcon, she's not clean. What with the First Order popping up everywhere these days, the less I use her for jobs, the better."
You don't want your son to recognize you so easily, Rey thinks. You don't know what he'll do should you see each other again. What you will do.

She falls back until she's level with Han, letting BB-8, Finn, and Jysella walk on ahead. "We told you that we escaped from the First Order on Jakku," she says in a low voice. "What we left out was that he was with them. We saw him."

"Did you talk to him?" Han asks sharply.

Rey delves into a condensed version of the storm's events, of course skipping the parts that she wouldn't ever tell either of Ben's parents in a hundred years. Not even under bleakest torture. Once she's done, they're halfway to Maz's castle, the spires looming against the sky, and Han has a grave, faraway look on his face.

His hand trembles when he runs it over his haggard features, as if trying to wipe away years of exhaustion. "I was never in favor of it, you know, sending him off to become a Jedi," he mumbles. "I was afraid he'd end up an old kook like Ben Kenobi or so young and burdened like Luke. Yeah, Luke's a legend and all that, savior of the galaxy, whatever, but when I first met him he was just some goofy farmboy from Tatooine." Han shakes his head and laughs, a short, deprecating sound. "Kriff. You should've seen him back then. Stars in his eyes. That didn't last long, though. The years passed and..." He trails off and Rey thinks, Battle scars. All the senior officers of the Resistance have them. How tired they must feel, to still be fighting what is at its core the same war.

"Anyway," Han says, "maybe it wasn't very noble of me, but I didn't want that kind of life for my son. That's where Leia and I started falling apart. I'm not saying it was all her fault. She understands the Force better than I can ever hope to, and with things happening the way they did—you know about Munto Codru, right?"

"Yes." Luke had told Rey about it the day they fought Exar Kun. "Ben was five years old when the Empire Reborn kidnapped him. They took him to their worldcraft, planning to raise him as Darth Vader's heir. You rescued him—you, Chewie, Leia, and Master Luke."

"I replay it in my mind from time to time." Judging from Han's tone, he's no longer in this glittering emerald-green, lake-water present. For him it's twenty-five years ago because the things we carry remain. "I close my eyes and I'm back there, breaking down the door of the room where they're holding him prisoner. Ben's on the floor, kneeling over a dead body. The man looks like he's been strangled— eyeballs bulging, tongue out. And I think, No way my kid could've done this, the lowlife probably fought with his cohorts, happens all the time."
"It was Ben who did it," says Rey. "That was how he came into his powers. Angry and terrified and alone." Sometimes she thinks that's why Ben couldn't completely relinquish the Dark even as a Jedi Knight; it had been what saved him back then. And, no matter how loathe she is to admit it, it had been what saved her, too. Here and now, you are alive, Kylo Ren had told her in the Graveyard of Giants. In that respect, the Dark Side has done more for me than the Light ever did.

"Everything in the room that isn't nailed down is... floating," Han continues. "Knives, blasters, dismantled droids— I run forward to scoop Ben up. He looks at me and he doesn't seem to recognize me. There's this kind of weird light in his eyes, it's wild and old, and one of those blasters swivels in mid-air and shoots—" He folds one hand into the shape of a gun, thumb pulled up, forefinger tapping the crease on his brow. "Would've gotten me if I hadn't ducked. It's all on me, of course— he's frightened out of his wits and I startled him. But in that moment— in that moment I'm scared of my own son. And you know something, Rey? That fear never quite went away. Maker help me, but that kid continued to creep me out as he grew older. I hid it as best as I could but that's the thing about you Force-sensitives, isn't it?" He sighs. "You know how everyone feels."

"Is that why you rarely visited?" Rey carefully asks. In her memory she is eighteen and there are tears glistening on Ben's cheeks in the moonlight, why did they send me away?

Han appears startled at first, and then thoughtful. "I'd like to say no. I'd like to believe that I'm the kind of person who doesn't run from what scares me. When I look back on those years, I was leaping from one adventure to the next, thinking that I'd always have time to visit my son later. Kept putting it off until later became too late." He swallows, looking pained. "But, yeah, maybe that other thing was part of it as well. Who knows? You can keep retracing the past, keep trying to see where you went wrong, but you won't get a definite answer. It's a mug's game, kid. An exercise in grief."

Even though Maz Kanata nearly yells Han Solo's name when he strides into her watering hole, she holds her peace upon catching sight of the two slim, hooded figures in his party. Jedi business generally requires a more discreet touch. She sets her tray of empty cups down at the bar and meaningfully heads to an alcove in the corner, away from zealous ears. Han follows without missing a beat, as do the two Jedi, but the boy lags behind, gaping at the crowd of various organic and mechanical lifeforms conducting shady business deals or drinking themselves to oblivion or listening to the band— or in some cases a combination of all three.

Maz squints at the approaching newcomers. There is... something else. A certain shifting in the air currents. A smooth taste at the back of her tongue. "What have you got there?" she asks the shorter of the Jedi once they join her at the table. "Must be something important if you're using the Force
to conceal it."

The girl raises her head, the brown hood sliding back from her face as she blinks. Maz smiles, pleasantly surprised. "Mirax’s eyes. You're her youngest, then? Jysella, isn't it?"

Jysella nods. "There's a droid with us. The First Order is looking for it."

"Him," the other Jedi automatically corrects. "He's got masculine programming."

The beginnings of a hearty chuckle fade in Maz's throat when she focuses her attention on the second speaker. Oh, this one—it's as if she's the eye of the storm, the Force radiating from her in tense, tumultuous spirals, energy signature a defiant and wary hum beneath. Maz has met enough Jedi in her lifetime to know that they all walk the earth lightly, but she's never before encountered one in whom destiny resonates like the chime of a glass bell. Who gives the impression of a universe—perhaps even this one—at a crossroads, alarming in the sense that it can go either way.

No, Maz realizes, that's wrong, I have felt this before. A dark and solemn gaze peering at her from underneath a mop of brown-black curls, Han saying, No need to be shy, Ben, Maz is a good friend of mine—

Han is making the introductions now, too. "Maz, this is Rey and this is Finn. Their ship's transpacitor blew. Don't suppose you'd have a spare lying around? They need to get the droid to Leia."

"Just the droid?" Maz asks archly. "What about you?"

Han fidgets in his seat. "Leia doesn't want to see me."

"That's not true," Rey bursts out. "The General needs you now more than ever. We all do."

"I agree," says Maz. "It's time to go home, Han. It's time to join the fight." Out of the corner of her eye, she notices that the boy called Finn has clenched his fists, jaw tight as if he's biting back a stream of contentious words. "Through the ages I've seen evil take many forms. The Sith. The Empire." The memories come rushing in as she speaks, a field of red lightsabers clashing against green and blue, starships tearing through the skies with cannons ablaze, the occasional disguised stranger seeking sanctuary at her watering hole in the months following Order 66—dead Jedi
walking, they used to call them back then. There had been firefights between Imperial and Rebel operatives, there had been that hushed, anxious dawn when rumors started trickling in that Darth Vader had slain the Emperor and no one knew what to do, what was going to happen next. "Today, it is the First Order. Their shadow is spreading across the galaxy. We must face them. All of us."

Finn suddenly slams an open palm onto the table's wooden surface, making everyone start. "That's not a good idea."

He's been running on autopilot ever since Jakku, going through the motions fueled by pure battle instincts and adrenaline. Now that they're actually sitting still, though— now that they've all had a chance to catch their breath— the fear returns, overriding Finn's sense of duty to that long-ago girl on Corbos. He didn't escape from the Finalizer just to drop himself back into this mess. He's a deserter who aided and abetted the Resistance— when the First Order catches up with him, he'll be lucky to get shot on sight and nothing more.

And it's the way Jysella and Rey react to Maz's little speech, all stoic and determined— these girls who can't be any older than him, calmly accepting certain death without question— that grates at his nerves, launches bile up his throat. The world is still sand and night sky, still on fire, every time he blinks, civilians in humble robes mowed down by blaster bolts, this is what you have been trained to do.

"The First Order is unstoppable." He's talking to everyone, but to Rey most of all. "Nobody can stand against them. Not the Resistance, not the Republic, not even the Jedi. That should've been clear from the moment they destroyed the academy on Yavin 4. What's the use in fighting?"

The cantina's wizened proprietor hauls herself onto the table and clambers toward him, sliding her goggles over her eyes and adjusting the lenses, subjecting him to a magnified, penetrating stare. Finn instinctively leans away. "What's she doing?" he asks Han in an undertone.

"I don't know but it's not good," mumbles Han.

"I have lived long enough to see the same eyes in different people," Maz says. "Years ago I met a girl with eyes like yours. Heartbroken. Disillusioned. Bearing the weight of old sins. I will tell you what I told her then: how can you repay your debt if you leave it behind?"
"What debt?" Finn hisses even as a prickle of sweat blooms on his nape.

"The one that you've built up in your mind," Maz replies. "You think it's your fault. You've tried to make amends. But every step you take draws you deeper in and now you want nothing more than to run."

"You don't know a thing about me. You don't know the First Order like I do," Finn says stonily. "They'll slaughter us. We all need to run."

Maz returns to her seat with pursed lips. "I'll have Emmie search our storerooms for a transpacitor," she tells Han, Jysella, and Rey. Catching Finn's gaze again, she points to a couple of customers at a nearby table. "Those two over there are willing to trade work for passage to the Outer Rim. There, you can—"

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"— disappear," the girl in Maz's memory said years ago, huddled over a tankard at this very same table, after Maz had asked her what she wanted to do. "Find me a ship, Kanata. I need to go."

"You can't just abandon this fight," Maz protested.

The girl's mouth twisted into a humorless smirk. "That's what I do best— leaving." She had blue eyes and snow-white markings on skin the color of sunset. "I left him. I left them all."

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"Finn!" Rey's on her feet, blocking his path. "What are you doing? You said you wanted to help us —"

"I can't help you if you insist on sacrificing yourself." His voice is gritty with frustration, the look on his face earnest and pleading. "Aren't you just like me, Rey? They took you when you were young, raised you to wield that lightsaber for them. What they didn't teach you was that you're your own person, free to make your own choices. That's what I'm doing now. I've had it with all these bigger pictures, all these great causes, this whole damn war. I'm never going back."
It's panic that's making him talk like this. Rey can sense it in him, the fear, so cloying and thick. But he's put her on the defensive and she's too tired to soothe, to understand. "You don't know a thing about me, either!" she snaps. "I have seen people make choices." In her mind Numa Rar lowers the blade, looks to Luke. "I have made choices of my own." Monster. Generator. The surge of electric currents, my own terms, my own ending. "And, all those times, even if it was never easy, it was always the right thing to do. That is what the Jedi Order taught me."

"Well, good for you, being a hero and all," Finn says hotly, "but I'm nothing like that. I'm a stormtrooper, in case you've forgotten—"

"An ex-stormtrooper—"

"I was there!" Several heads turn towards them at Finn's agitated exclamation, various streams of chatter abruptly cutting off. "I was there," he repeats more softly, "all right? I was on Corbos. I saw you there. I walked past you lying on the ground when I went to drag Ben Solo into the First Order ship. I was the one who pried your hands apart. It's haunted me every day since then and I'm more sorry than words can express. I wish I could take it back but I can't." His shoulders droop. "So don't have any illusions about me. That's what I did. That's who I am."

Rey takes a step back. She has to. Otherwise, she was going to hit him with the hand that's already rising from her side—make him feel at least a fraction of the pain that he has caused. Her rage is a terrible thing, raw and fierce and dark red, so overwhelming that for a moment she finds it physically impossible to breathe. And even then, the masters are in her head, cautious and restraining. Why should she despise him for this and not for the attack on Tuanul that had resulted in the deaths of helpless innocents? Why should personal be the same as important?

I want freedom, Rey thinks numbly, staring at Finn. I want freedom to hate.

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Still seated at the table, Jysella details the specifications of the hyperdrive transpacitor to Emmie, the castle's ancient ME-8D9 protocol droid whom Maz had called over. As she speaks, though, she soon notices that the bronzium-plated head is swiveling to the right, yellow sensor blinking.

Puzzled, Jysella follows Emmie's line of sight. To her horror, BB-8 has rolled out from under the table and is trailing after Rey, effectively slipping from Force Immersion range.
"We really need to talk about this droid's programming," Jysella sighs as she crooks her little finger to telekinetically summon BB-8 back to her.

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And, across the room, Bazine Netal excuses herself to make a call.

Chapter End Notes

As the destruction of Luke's Jedi Order happened much later in this alternate timeline, let's all just pretend that Han was still off looking for Ben instead of being in the circumstances that led to the Falcon getting stolen. Butterfly effect and all that.

Fans of Clone Wars and Rebels will know who the mystery girl is :) A little surprise cameo for you nerds *cough* I'm looking at you, meritmut and TheJGatsbyKid <3

Ben lectures Rey on the nature of Exar Kun's temple in Chapter 7 of LYG. Luke tells her about Ben's kidnapping as a child in Chapter 9.

Nymeve Lake.

The Eravana.

Emmie.

Bazine Netal.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

I have a flight to catch so I’ll keep this short. Darlings, never underestimate the power of your bookmarks, comments, kudos, and fanart (in related news, aknightfornawt is the best and if you follow me on Tumblr you’ll soon see why). Your enthusiasm for this story fuels my own, which is why I spent most of today feverishly typing away at a laptop while surrounded by half-packed bags. I hope you like this update! It's my birthday on the 9th, consider leaving reviews as presents, maybe? ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Finn turns away, giving Rey one last despondent glance over his shoulder. She watches him go and thinks about everyone who had ever left, thinks about how it had been the Jakku scavenger child peering out from her eighteen-year-old eyes in those Corbos mines after Ben said, *I am not in love with you.* This, here and now in Takodana, is not that kind of heartbreak but still she retreats into the vestiges of her past self. It is a necessary protection, a numbing at the root. That girl had needed no one and nothing, had forged no connections that would eventually be severed. Even Luke Skywalker had left her, too.

She doesn't know how long she stands there staring at nothing while the band plays through the discordant flow of a myriad conversations, mingling with the creak of wood and the clink of tankards to form a vast web of noise that is distant in all its meaninglessness even as it enfolds her. When she at last reaches out for the skeins of the Force to clear her mind, it is with a grim resignation that feels like both duty and defeat. *There is no emotion, there is—*

— a slithering darkness, the slow staccato drip of water on stone, black wings, old words—

Rey blinks.

The sounds in the tavern have suddenly diminished to nothing more than a faint, monotonous hum — as if several layers of silence have been draped over the room in thick and heavy veils. And, yet, a whispering, a thread of crackling energy that seems to be coming from—

— downstairs—?

Rey moves without consciously meaning to. Before she's aware of it, her feet are taking her through a side door and down a winding flight of steps. It beckons in a siren's song that cannot be
"An informant has spotted the droid on Takodana, in the castle of the pirate queen," Hux announces to the five masked figures lurking in the Finalizer’s command bay. "We're sending a battalion out there now. I must return to Starkiller Base to officiate weapon launch; the Supreme Leader has ordered that your unit take command of the retrieval due to Jedi presence on-site."

Behind their black helms, the Knights of Ren exchange glances in that way of theirs that never fails to make Hux feel as if he is the butt of some private joke. "Yes," Kylo finally drawls, "we know."

"In that case," Hux snaps, "there was hardly sufficient reason to seek me out."

Alema tilts her head. "We just wanted to see if you knew," she says with false sweetness.

Hux's brow knits in annoyance. "This childish display is costing us precious time. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have a—"

"Superweapon to launch, yes, we know," Kueller interrupts, waving a dismissive iron-plated hand in the air. "Your pet project. It's not like you ever talk about anything else. Were you the one who named it, by the way? Because it's an inspired choice. Really funny."

"Couldn't have been him," Tamith Kai remarks. "Hux doesn't have a sense of humor."

The general turns to Kylo with a glare. "You would do well to keep your subordinates in line, Ren."

"I'll just tell them to steal away a valuable prisoner on one of our TIE fighters," Kylo says dryly before striding out of the room, followed by his Knights.
Rey has stepped into a battlefield.

All around her tall trees shake in the shockwaves of what seems like a dozen explosions blooming in the silver green of the forest, the long grass carpeted with bodies upon bodies that are being carelessly trampled by flocks of combatants. The summer air glints with plasma loops in various jeweled colors, hums with Force energy both Light and Dark, swirls with robes in shades of brown and black.

*I'm still on Takodana,* Rey thinks, spying Lake Nymeve shining in faraway gaps in the treeline. *The question is, when am I?*

A woman stops in front of her, looks through her. Rey gasps. She knows those blue eyes and that cloud of golden hair from holocrons detailing the history of the Jedi Order. She knows the distinctive orange glow of that lightsaber from the Solari crystal that focuses Jysella's own blade, which can be wielded only by one who remains pure of heart.

"Shaela Nuur," Rey whispers, doing the calculations in her head. This Knight had died on Korriban in 3993 BBY, which means that this vision is taking place during—

— the Great Sith War—

"Here they come!" Shaela barks to several Jedi that have fallen into position behind her.

Rey whirls around. And perhaps there is a part of her that already knows whom she's going to see, but that doesn't stop every drop of blood in her veins from turning as cold as ice at the sight.

In life he is tall and hulking of stature, with dark hair swept back from a regal face and a tattoo of a black sun etched into his high forehead. His gray eyes are piercing, his sneer vicious. *I could show you freedom,* he had told her once. *I could show you so much power.*

Followed by his acolytes, Exar Kun charges toward Shaela and the other Jedi. Charges straight at Rey. Even though this is merely an echo of the past, she braces herself for the collision, watches her first ghost, her first darkness, come to her from across the span of thousands of years. Kun draws his lightsaber and—

— two blades—?
Yes, two blades, one pulsing at each end of the hilt. A saberstaff. He looms over her, a maelstrom of fury and bloodlust, twin beams slashing through the air and—

The forest fades away. Rey blinks and she's back in Maz's castle, standing in a wide cellar made of stone. It reminds her of the Praxeum's vaults back on Yavin 4, also underground, also cool and dry and dark. It had been unnerving to see Kun like that—as a memory of flesh and blood instead of the obsidian colossus that towered over the silver lake or the wraith that haunted the hallways of the Great Temple. *The Dark Man*, they had called him.

Rey is still caught in the Force-generated trance. She takes a few more steps and soon she realizes that someone is walking with her, matching her cautious pace. A broad figure flickering in and out of sight at the corner of her eye, dressed in ancient robes.

"I wanted to live forever." It is a young man's voice, petulant, somewhat bewildered by the way things turned out.

"You didn't," she reminds him with a trace of vindictiveness. "I killed you."

Exar Kun nods gravely. "Perhaps that is why I dream of you." He sighs. "Long years did I sleep, there in the stone and the lakewater. And then he woke me up." Rey thinks at first that he means Raynar, who had taken to visiting Kun's temple at around the time that the Knights and the apprentices started having bad dreams, but the Sith Lord moodily continues, "That distant voice. That star-voice. I see now that I was being manipulated along with the rest of you." Extending a long black-clad arm, he points to the far end of the cellar. "I was not the one who called you here, Jedi. Keep walking."

Slouched down in one of the metal chairs on the bridge of the *Finalizer*, Tahiri lifts her masked head and peers through the slitted visor at the gaunt and lonesome figure staring out the viewport a few meters away. "Is Lord Ren all right?"

"He's never all right," Tamith Kai declares from the chair beside Tahiri, crossing her slim legs. "I had assumed, however, that he would be looking forward to the fireworks at the very least." At Kueller's chuckle, the Dathomiri witch purses her lips. "Still hung up on the weapon's name? It's getting old."
"I can't help it," Kueller protests. "I just think about his Force ghost rolling in his grave and it gets me every time."

"There was no grave," says Tamith Kai. "Not for one such as him."

Alema joins Kylo at the viewport, her helm tucked in the crook of one slender arm. For several long moments the two of them merely stand side by side, saying nothing as they watch the craggy globe of Starkiller Base gleam in the silver light of its satellites.

"He was your grandfather's apprentice," Alema finally mutters. "A terrible one, by all accounts. A traitor. But he saved your mother's life when she was young and, consequently, you owe him yours."

"I do not owe anyone anything," Kylo says flatly. "Starkiller was a fool who made the wrong choices. It is poetic justice that this weapon be named after him."

*His birth name was Galen Marek,* Kylo remembers Leia Organa telling him in a long-lost childhood bedroom on Coruscant. *You know the emblem painted on all the old flags and X-wings—the Alliance starbird? That is the family crest of the House of Marek. After he gave his life so that I and the other would-be leaders of the Rebellion could escape, we chose that symbol to rally behind—in honor of his sacrifice.*

"Did we ever learn why he did it?" Alema asks, jolting Kylo back to the present. "Why he betrayed the Empire?"

Kylo shrugs.

"There was a woman involved, wasn't there?" she continues. "Rumor has it that he fell in love."

Kylo turns his gaze from the viewport to Alema's bare face. She's already looking at him, her eyes as hard and sharp as jade flints in the ship's low light, her lips curved into a smile that would have been beautiful had it not contained some warped, lopsided quality. *You and I grew up together,* he thinks with an exhaustion that he can't immediately trace to any particular source. That smile of hers has changed little over the years—Numa had been the nice sister while Alema's teeth had always been bared.
"Where are you going with this?" he demands. "Do you hold my loyalties suspect because I ran into her on Jakku? Do you think I would betray the Supreme Leader because of that?"

"Of course not, Lord Ren," Alema smoothly replies. "I was just recalling that there was a time when you would have done anything for her."

"That time has long since passed," he says in a terse, cold tone. "I am not that boy anymore. I will not make Marek's mistakes."

"Glad to hear it," she purrs.

Rey is on her knees, head bowed over the case that she has just opened as she regards the lightsaber nestled inside it with wary curiosity. This was the origin point of the hum that she'd heard upstairs; now it vibrates with a shrill resonance as if commanding her to pick it up. As a Jedi, she can recognize the will of the Force in whatever incarnation, but still she hesitates. While there is nothing physically remarkable about the lightsaber other than the ridged hand grip— whoever this belonged to must have specialized in Form V— the energy emanating from it is a strange shifting blend of Light and Dark. It's a weapon caught in some in-between place that she can't quite trust.

You did not walk with Exar Kun's ghost just to turn back now, she chides herself. Taking a deep breath, she reaches out and closes her hand around the hilt. The images come swirling in, bright and fast like dozens of starships rushing at her from all sides. She sees the Clone Wars era first, assigns names to some faces with the help of Tionne's history lessons drilled into her brain— Asajj Ventress of the Nightsisters tangled in live electrical wires in the Underlevels of Coruscant, it is too dark, isn't it, do not pretend you are what you are not, Count Dooku on the Dune Sea, a Togruta girl glancing over one scrawny shoulder, Snips, come on, swordmaster Cin Drallig crumpling to the ground during Operation Knightfall as the Jedi Temple burns—

— Luke Skywalker in the cockpit of the Millennium Falcon, younger than Rey has ever seen him, blue light reflected on the angles of his earnest sun-burned face as a spherical remote droid flits about—

— A woman, brown-eyed and petite and bathed in the daylight streaming into what appears to be an office, the look on her face torn between exasperation and fondness. Someone is calling her Padme, someone is pressing the lightsaber into her hand—
Rey's mind is in the serene, hazy state usually adopted by those who have been trained to receive Force visions; however, she stares at the woman who can't see her and remembers all the old stories, a lump rising in her throat. *Your children will grow to be as brave and kind as you,* she wishes that she could tell her. *Your grandson will tilt his chin in that same stubborn, imperious way—*

All of a sudden the nature of the vision changes. Now Rey is in a snow-covered forest, tree trunks and branches whipping all around her like jagged cracks of black lightning in the gloom of a moonless night. Kylo Ren lurches from the shadows and her heart skips a beat and she—

— is in Ben Solo's arms, on a stone balcony overlooking a shimmering waterfall. He's murmuring gentle words in her ear as she buries her face in his chest. *Oh, this is too cruel,* Rey thinks numbly even as she breathes in his warm scent. *This never happened. And yet...*

Someone is shouting. The words grate but are indistinct. Rey's in the bowels of a ship, all sparking wires and smoke, squinting at a man on the opposite end of a narrow platform. He sports a riotous mass of copper-colored curls and a vertical scar at the corner of his right eye.

*Help me save him,* the man seems to be saying. *That future can still be yours—*

The world explodes, then, in a burst of red light. Rey cries out, overwhelmed by the startling conflagration of heat and radiance. The lightsaber clatters to the floor as she topples backwards—

— into Jysella—

"Rey!" The other Jedi has her hands on Rey's shoulders, is shaking her while Maz observes the scene with an enigmatic expression on her wrinkled features and BB-8 gurgles an inquiry in droidspeak. "Are you all right? We've been looking everywhere for you. We found a suitable transpacitor. It's time to leave."

Still dazed, Rey clutches blindly at Jysella's arm. She doesn't know where to begin so she starts at the beginning. "I saw him," she croaks. "I saw Exar Kun."

Jysella tenses. "What? *Here?*" She glances around wildly, her normally calm facade betraying a flutter of some instinctive deep-rooted panic. There are certain childhood traumas that cannot be extinguished by time.
Maz speaks up. "This castle was built over an ancient battleground. Here the Knights of the Old Republic clashed with Exar Kun's Brotherhood of the Sith. What you saw, Rey, were the echoes. It's been known to happen when a Force user finds themselves in a place with lots of residual energy."

"He spoke to me." Rey gulps. "He said that he dreams of me."

"You were the one who struck the final blow four years ago," Jysella reminds her. "You and Ben. I do not doubt that Kun remembers you both, there in the Netherworld."

With every second that passes in realspace, Rey is losing more and more of her grasp on the last series of visions. She strains her senses but it's like trying to piece together a vague dream after waking. *Compartmentalization*, she suspects. Her mind is locking it away, keeping it safe for when it would most be needed. A Jedi develops such a skill as a defense mechanism against an entire galaxy of stimuli, full of living organisms growing and dying and souls moving in steady flares through the nets of time.

Maz picks up the lightsaber. "This was Luke's and his father's before him. And now it calls to you."

"How did you get that?" Rey whispers. She retains enough from the trance to distinguish the remnants of her master's signature; this is the blade that Obi-Wan Kenobi had given him, the one that he lost on Cloud City along with his hand.

"A good story," says Maz, "for another time. But for now you have an important map to deliver to the Resistance." She holds out the lightsaber. "Take this. Take this and go."

Rey shakes her head. *Help me save him*, someone is pleading, the faint memory clutching at her heart with a sorrow so immense and unimaginable that she automatically shies away from it. "Jysella, you take it. I can't touch that thing again."

*#

When she, BB-8, Han, and Jysella make to exit the castle grounds with the replacement transpacitor, Rey looks around for any sign of Finn. Her senses tell her that he's still planet-bound but she can't find him amidst the throng of spacers loading supplies into their ships, arguing with
one another, and attempting to close last-minute deals.

*It's for the best,* she consoles herself. She doesn't know if she can forgive him and, anyway, it's better to be the one who leaves first. She should have already known that by now.

*There's an audio pickup onboard the Finalizer that transmits Hux's speech interlaced with bursts of static. Today is the end of the Republic— the end of a regime that acquiesces to disorder—*

The words suffuse the interior of the cabin but Kylo is barely listening. Starlight seeps into his eyes through the black helm, millions of icy spheres revolving slowly in the vast depths of space. He reminds himself that he is strong enough to face this. That his grandfather had shown him how.

*This fierce machine which you have built— upon which we stand—*

"My, but Hux likes the sound of his own voice," Alema mumbles. It lacks the usual caustic bite. She's holding herself taut as steel beside Kylo, fists clenched, bracing for the fallout just like he is. They learned this at the academy that they helped tear down— how the Force can take as much as it can give. The price of knowing how everyone feels is knowing how *everyone* feels.

*All remaining systems— will bow to the First Order—*

Chapter End Notes

Hux versus the room is dedicated to flamingcabbage who asked for it ages ago <3

As the Wiki page for Maz Kanata's castle doesn't specify the combatants of that ancient battle, I plead creative license.

Shaela Nuur.

The Solari crystal is first mentioned in Chapter 12 of LYG.

The Great Sith War.

The lightsaber of Exar "surprise, bitch, I bet you thought you'd seen the last of me"
Kun.

Galen Marek.

Asajj Ventress and the duel in the Coruscant Underlevels.

The Dune Sea.

Snips.

Cin Drallig.

Operation Knightfall.

The scene with Padme Amidala takes place during the "Hostage Crisis" episode of Clone Wars.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

I return from Taipei one year older, rejuvenated by the hot springs of Beitou, and absolutely stuffed to the gills with xiaolongbao a.k.a the food of the freaking gods. Thank you all for the birthday wishes and, of course, for continuing to support this story. aknightfornawt has #devastated once again with her beautiful art (look at the quiet longing in that pose!) and jennity-blogs has recorded the first chapter of LYG in a voice that's basically champagne and chocolate in audio format, so, yeah, you're both fantastic and deserve all the love.

This latest chapter references a childhood flashback that wasn't in the original version of LYG, having been appended just in August. Please read it here to avoid getting confused. Sorry for the hassle! It's only a little snippet, less than 600 words, so it shouldn't take too long.

Soundtrack:

1. The Mess I Made - Parachute (suggested by meritmut)
2. In My Head - Loreen (meritmut)
3. Running Up That Hill - Kate Bush (anon)
4. Warrior - Aurora (anon)
5. Draw Your Swords - Angus and Julia Stone (anon)
6. Don't Take Your Love Away From Me - Vast (nemo)
7. Heroes - Peter Gabriel (nemo)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

A sun dies in the Unknown Regions, its heat converted to trails of phantom energy that escape from Starkiller Base's core like comets. The red of these lights is a furious golden-tinged scarlet hue, blazing against the cosmic black, tearing fiery paths through hyperspace. Glinting off the smooth, unreadable planes of Kylo Ren's obsidian helm as he watches from the Finalizer's bridge. Reflecting in Rey's eyes as she looks up from the forests of Takodana.

Time stands still in the desert but in the endless reaches of the galaxy it unfurls in all directions and shivers and circles back in on itself. It stops in the grip of black holes, accelerates along the hyperlanes, stretches on forever in the debris from explosions that occurred thousands of years ago. Everything happening all at once. The totality of a sentient experience of time can be summed up thus: people live on in the stories that they tell their children. The galaxy recognizes ripples in the great chain of being, can sense when it stirs anew.

In 0 BBY, Obi-Wan Kenobi says, I felt a great disturbance in the Force. Decades later, Starkiller Base delivers its payload to the planets in the Hosnian system, glittering conflagrations of heat and light, the red bleeding everywhere, billions of voices crying out in terror and—
In the Jedi sanctuary on Ossus, Tionne Solusar bolts upright in bed, shaken by echoes of destruction. A few habitation units over, Valin Horn screams.

While carefully initiating the manual docking procedure at a far-flung Republic outpost, Kyle Katarn loses focus as a splitting pain pierces the base of his skull, nearly ramming the *Moldy Crow* into the space station's satellite dish. *Sir, is everything all right?* blares the control tower but he's unable to respond at first, can't even hear the question over the voices perishing in his head.

In the mountain caves of a crimson-hued swampland planet in the Quelli sector, the witches of Dathomir frown at whatever they see in their mysterious black fires. On the Omwati homeworld along the Sanrafisix Corridor, where honeycomb cities rise from windswept savannas, those who keep with Force tradition murmur their hymns of mourning.

On the *Finalizer*, Tahiri Veila, youngest of the Knights of Ren, is shaking, coiled in her seat like a caged animal. "Why can I feel it?" she hisses, touching her fingers to the cold surface of a mask underneath which moisture leaks from the corner of her eye. "Take it away, make it stop—"

Billions of glowing points in the vast web of energy binding the galaxy together abruptly blink out of existence, that singular brief moment of pain as the inferno engulfs multiplied billions of times over until the Force reels with the sheer magnitude of such a loss.

Rey stands still on the shore of Lake Nymeve, the shockwave tearing at her soul while, beside her, Jysella is nearly doubled over, covering her ears in a futile attempt to vanquish the reverberating cries that only the Force-touched can hear. For her part, Rey's gaze remains fixed on the blue sky and the wisps of smoke and ash trailing down from it, and all she can think about in this moment is Kylo Ren—not as she last saw him but as the boy on the rooftop in the sunset haze of her past, *if there is one thing I could take out of a burning house, it would be the fire*. For some reason it is this particular memory that chooses to resurface above all others, it is this image of him that clings to the darkness behind her eyelids as the death of the entire Hosnian system crashes through her like an avalanche. *What have you done?*

The aftershock has worn off by the time the *Judgement* hurtles toward Takodana, accompanied by a squad of TIE fighters, but it has left a bleak emptiness in its place. Safely ensconced behind the doors of his private cabin, Kylo sags to the floor. Starlines flicker outside the lone viewport, a ticking silver-laden rhythm that tugs fretfully at the knots in his composure. The Force is seesawing, off-balance; he had not expected it to be this bad. He had not expected the guilt to run so deep. If only he had retrieved the droid sooner, if only he had not let *her* get under his skin...
He is restless and exhausted all at once, as if he hasn't slept in days and is running purely on the leftovers of adrenaline which, in the swirling sped-up time-drag of hyperspace, is stretching thin to take on the guise of despair. His mind wanders. And suddenly she is there with him.

Kylo is no stranger to these daydreams. He usually tries to curb them once they start; today, however, he is too tired—too weak—to do anything except let it unfold, lose himself in the false solace that it offers. She's on the floor, too, curled up in the space between his legs and leaning against him. It's almost a physical sensation, the weight of her body pressed to his and the warmth of her in his arms. His gloved fingers twitch, curling around a phantom shoulder. In this fantasy her sighs are content and he's not wearing his mask.

He's telling her something. The ship's engines drown out the sound of her laughing at whatever it was he said, her head tilting back to rest on his chest as her slight form shakes with mirth. It is the height of folly but his own lips quirk into a rueful grin. He likes the dreams where he makes her happy.

Somewhere out there in realspace, news of the Hosnian system's destruction is flying back and forth across the galaxy. People are glued to the HoloNet in shock and disbelief, flags are being lowered to half-mast, Republic soldiers stationed in other systems are grimly saluting their dead, civilian comm-links are frantic with pitiful hope and heartsick love, tell me you made it out of there, tell me you left before the explosions hit. But here in this room that exists in a dimension not bound by standard time, here, at least, the man who used to be Ben Solo is somewhere isolated, somewhere safe. She's running her fingers through his hair, messing it up the way she always used to do, and she's tracing the line of his jaw with those soft, light kisses of hers that were so rarely given, that never failed to melt his heart. You can sleep now, she murmurs into his skin, you can sleep now, it's okay, and he closes his eyes and allows himself to believe it. Just for a moment. Just for one single moment out of time.

"Kid, no." Han grabs Rey's arm as she attempts to run back to the castle—or what remains of the castle, anyway. Piles of rubble smolder under a sky screaming with the TIE fighters that made planetfall scant minutes ago. "You and Jysella have to get BB-8 out of here."

"Maz and Finn—" Rey starts to protest but Han gives her a gentle shake.

"You have a mission, Sword of the Jedi," he gravely reminds her. "I'll find Maz and Finn. Now go."
With Jysella and BB-8 following close behind, Rey weaves through a labyrinth of tree trunks and bushes and moss-coated boulders, heading quickly in the direction of the clearing where they landed the Hawk and the Falcon and praying that they won't get there only to find the ships blasted to smithereens. There is a certain precise methodology to how the Jedi Knights run, years of stealth training kicking in to evade the stormtroopers that have fanned out to patrol the woods. Rey ducks behind boulders, flattens herself against tree trunks, avoids fallen twigs and brittle leaves that would otherwise be audibly snapped underfoot. It could almost be academy days again, engaging in a more rigorous variant of hide-and-seek with her fellow apprentices in the jungles of Yavin 4. And perhaps it's that memory— or perhaps it's the way the summer light casts shadows as it moves through the leaves— but she sees her friends running along beside her, Seff and Bazel and Yaqeel and Natua darting amidst the bramble and forever frozen in youth. She can't afford to be distracted by them now but it's somewhat a comfort to think that they are there with her in flickering bits and pieces, yes, like this, let me have this, let me have your ghosts—

She slams into a wall. Or, more accurately, what feels like a wall. The forest in front of her is the same tangle of brown and green that it always was but she can't take another step forward, and Jysella and BB-8 have stopped in their tracks as well. Something solid yet invisible is blocking the way.

Rey's hand drops to her lightsaber hilt as she turns around and scans the undergrowth. "Show yourself," she says in a quiet tone that is at odds with the venom in her eyes.

It's not one but four masked, armored figures that materialize a few paces away, stepping out from whatever pockets of Force energy had been keeping them hidden. Rey and Jysella instinctively draw further apart— the trick when dealing with superior numbers is to not get surrounded— the latter using one foot to nudge BB-8 into a position of relative safety behind her.

"Jysella." Alema Rar's voice through the scrambler is a delighted croon, as if relishing every syllable of the name. "I can't believe they actually made you a Jedi Knight, although I suppose that beggars can't be choosers."

"Hello, Alema," Jysella says politely, ignoring the taunt with a coolness that's such a far cry from how she'd flushed and sputtered at the Twi'lek's jibes when they were younger. "Who are your new friends?"

"How rude of me. This is Kueller." Alema points at the biggest of her companions, a hulking mass of a man whose horned helmet resembles the ceremonial death masks of the Hendanyn. "Tamith
Kai." The woman is tall and curvaceous, with spiked pauldrons and smooth leather gloves. She doesn't seem to be carrying any weapons but there are strange runes shifting in the air around her, vanishing every time Rey tries to focus on them. "And our little Tahiri. Tionne Solusar knows her well, I'm sure." The last and slightest of the figures is dressed like a Mandalorian bounty hunter but her hair is unbound, spilling from the helmet in a sleek, fine curtain so blonde that it's almost white. There are blasters slung low on each of her narrow hips; this is without a doubt the Knight of Ren who had mercilessly amputated Tionne and killed her husband on Fondor.

Alema clucks her tongue. "I see your eyes, Rey. I can feel your desire for vengeance. Rather unbecoming for a Jedi, don't you think?"

"Well, you would know," Rey mutters before she ignites her blade. The sapphire blue light sings in the forest green.

It's Kueller who charges first, swinging the heavy-looking broadsword that had been strapped to his back. Rey jumps out of the weapon's path but Kueller rebounds with startling speed; he must be using the Force to compensate for the broadsword's weight and size. She blocks in the nick of time, sparks crackling at the point where her blade meets his.

_Oh, great_, Rey seethes, belatedly noticing the broadsword's distinctive obsidian sheen. It was made out of beskar, one of the few lightsaber-resistant materials in the galaxy. _As if my life wasn't hard enough._

Her nape prickles. Pushing up into the blade-lock, she manages to shift the angle of the intersected weapons so that her plasma beam deflects the blaster bolt that Tahiri had aimed her way. It bounces towards Jysella, who flicks out her off-hand in the midst of her duel with Alema to send it zipping in Tamith Kai's direction. The bolt—

— _disappears_, bit by bit, swallowed by some whirling, unseen black hole—

_Witch_, Rey realizes, some distant part of her mind shrieking an alarm. _Nightsister_. Both hands are wrapped around her lightsaber hilt but she opens one palm slightly, enough to knock Kueller backwards with an energy blast. A swift wave of her fingers causes one of the massive tree branches up above to snap in half and fall across his chest, effectively pinning him to the ground.

Rey turns to confront Tamith Kai. They ran simulations on mixed unit tactics at the Praxeum and, more often than not, the most effective strategy was to take out the magic users first. The woman holds up her hands as Rey approaches— it would have looked like a gesture of surrender, had it not been for the wickedly sharp daggers that materialize out of thin air in each palm, the shadowy
Rey has never battled a dual-wielder before and it takes her approximately thirty seconds into the fight to decide that she does not like it. She has to move twice as fast because Tamith Kai has perfected the art of blocking with one dagger while striking with the other and, on top of it all, Tahiri is on the outskirts of the field of combat, firing away with her blasters with movements that are somehow lazy and lightning-fast at the same time, compelling both Rey and Jysella to maneuver around their respective opponents in a manner that sacrifices opportunities for offense.

"Disable the target!" Tamith Kai snaps, and Tahiri immediately aims one blaster at BB-8—

— only to miss when Jysella Force-pushes the droid deeper into the woods, yelling at him to *run*.

BB-8 disappears into the undergrowth—towards the ships, Rey hopes—and Tahiri attempts to follow but is thwarted when the two Jedi Knights leap to position themselves in front of her, barring the path. There is an almighty crash as Kueller finally manages to wrestle the tree branch off of him; he rises to his feet and joins his comrades in the half-circle formation that now flanks Jysella and Rey.

"Any bright ideas?" Jysella asks Rey in a low voice, the orange beam of her lightsaber slanted in front of her.

"Working on it," Rey replies in kind. She does have one trick up her sleeve but she's hesitant to use it, hesitant to add to the endless devastation that has marked today's events.

Bushes rustle. Twigs snap.

Kylo Ren strides into the clearing, brusquely shouldering Kueller and Tamith Kai aside as he pushes past them. Rey stiffens while, beside her, Jysella draws a sharp intake of breath. In his hooded black regalia he is otherworldly in the emerald shadows of all these trees, observing the two girls from the inscrutable chromium-lined visor.

Rey stares at him. It seems impossible that this is the same man who held her in his arms on Jakku. There is no trace of softness in his lean frame; he looks every inch the forbidding right hand of Snoke who has littered many a battlefield with Resistance corpses.
He also doesn't appear to be gazing directly at her. His masked visage faces her, yes, but she doesn't feel the weight of his eyes. It's as if he's fixed on a point beyond her shoulder, only giving the impression of close scrutiny.

Jysella's eyes are darting from Rey to Kylo and back again, while Alema's head is tilted in wary interest. In that moment all four of them are their own isolated system, forming the points of a constellation bound by the threads of a common history—a shared past that had grown its roots in a forest much like this one.

In that moment the ghosts look on.

"Sorry but I find this extremely unfair," Seff Hellin complained, tearing the sleeve of his robes loose from the raven-thorn thicket it had snagged on. "Each team should've been composed of both Knights and apprentices. For, y'know, balance."

"They haven't caught us yet," Jysella diplomatically pointed out.

"Yet," Seff glumly echoed.

Glaring at the two of them, Rey put a finger to her lips in the universal gesture for shut up. She was sixteen years old and tired and sweaty from traipsing through the humid tropical heat of the Yavin 4 jungle, evading the Jedi Knights that were also roving about, and all her efforts to dampen her Force presence and move as quietly as possible would be wasted if she got caught before the time limit of three hours was up.

Walking ahead of her companions, she consulted her chronometer—only fifteen minutes to go. She, Jysella, and Seff could hold on until then...

"Hey—"

"Aww, man—"
Rey quickly ducked behind the nearest Massassi tree just as she heard Alema proclaim, "Gotcha" in a bored voice. Peering around the trunk, she saw the Twi'lek with arms outstretched, using the Force to suspend both Jysella and Seff a few centimeters off the ground.

"That's six down, one to go," Alema said, indicating that Bazel Warv, Natua Wan, Yaqeel Saav'etu, and Tiu Zax had also been apprehended. "Where's Rey?"

"We'll never tell!" Seff shouted as he kicked his legs in the air.

Alema rolled her eyes but Rey didn't stick around to hear her response, opting instead to make a run for a denser section of foliage—

— only to find herself being walked backwards into the same tree trunk by a smirking Ben Solo.

"I— where did you come from?" Rey demanded, slapping his arm half-heartedly. "How did you even—" The sentence cut off when her back hit the trunk, the contact surprising her enough to temporarily rob her of speech.

"You need to work on your stealth abilities," Ben informed her in such a superior tone of voice that it set her teeth on edge. "I could sense you from a mile off."

He made to step away from her but, for some reason, her hand fisted in his sleeve, forcing his arm to remain where it was, braced on the rough bark beside her head. She had no idea what possessed her to do it. Her body was a stranger lately, filled with urges that she couldn't quite understand.

Ben's confused frown softened as he peered down at her face, blinking as if something had taken him by surprise. "It really must be summer," he mumbled. "All your freckles have come out."

"Stop trying to count them, or we'll be here the whole day," Rey admonished.

"Yes, Solo, leave the poor kid alone," Alema drawled as she marched past them with Jysella and Seff lagging behind, hanging their heads in defeat. She glanced at Rey's hand on Ben's sleeve and... Or not.
then added, long-suffering and under her breath, "Or maybe it should be the other way around."

When Kylo Ren speaks at last, it's addressed to his Knights. "I ordered you to establish a perimeter in these woods to trap the droid, not pick a fight with Lightsiders."

"The droid was with them," growls Kueller. "But it ran off."

A tinge of annoyance creeps into the metallic rasp of Kylo's voice modulator. "Well? Go and catch it."

"Shouldn't we finish these two off first, my lord?" Tamith Kai ventures. "It would be a wasted opportunity, otherwise."

Rey immediately sinks into opening stance. She does feel Kylo's eyes on her then, drawn by the movement, and his hand flies to his own lightsaber. Instead of attacking her and Jysella, though, he turns around to face the other Knights of Ren, the serrated edges of the ignited blade pointed at them in an upward slant. It's not a combat-ready position but it carries a hint of threat. "I will handle these Jedi," he intones. "The rest of you will look for the droid."

"Lord Ren?" Tahiri sounds puzzled. "There's no reason we can't help you. It shouldn't take very long. We have the numbers."

"I will handle them," Kylo tersely repeats. "Go. That is an order."

His subordinates don't like it. Rey can tell from the sudden belligerence of their postures, and she's heard enough horror stories about these Darksiders to know that they absolutely detest having their playthings taken away. It's only Alema who displays no visible reaction, statue-still and crimson blade lowered at her side.

"Fine," Tahiri sulks, "but allow me to level the playing field for you a bit."

And she raises her blaster and shoots Jysella.
This is the part where Rey snaps, where all her restraint is thrown to the wind and a shout of primal rage is torn from her throat. She has taken everything that these two miserable years have hurled at her—perhaps not always with the calm fortitude befitting a Jedi—but she has been able to endure them so far without completely succumbing to the vicious roil of her emotions. However, this is the final straw. After all that has happened, she cannot and will not lose Jysella Horn.

Rey steps in front of her injured comrade, who has sunk to the ground and is clutching the wound at her side. Unlike lightsabers, blaster bolts don't cauterize; blood seeps onto Jysella's pale fingers and waters the earth in splashes of red. And red is all that Rey can see, every single molecule of air in the vicinity shivering and vibrating against one another, producing sparks as Kylo and his Knights slowly back away from the raw energy that lashes out from her slim form.

"Rey," Jysella utters in a pained gasp, "please, don't—"

But Rey is too far gone. At this point, she can't stop it even if she tried. Even if she wanted to. The sparks blossom in bright tendrils of red-gold flames that rapidly leak onto grass and climb up low-hanging branches and spread in all directions. It is high summer on Takodana and that means everything is kindling.

The Darksiders retreat, scrambling to get as far away from the blaze as they can—except for Kylo. He stays rooted to the spot, staring at her as if transfixed while the flames swirl around them and the air thickens with smoke and ash. Rey's eyes are narrowed at him and her chest is heaving, the veins in her body opening up to become conduits for the fierce, terrible power that roars through her heart, her lungs, everywhere, seeping from bone itself and razing the forest to the ground. She's distantly aware of the scorching heat licking at her skin, of millennia-old trees toppling down as nothing more than piles of cinders, of the acrid scent of incinerated leaves filling her nostrils, but it all seems to be of secondary importance compared to the man in front of her and the fury and bitterness within her, so lovely and dark and deep—

Isn't this what you wanted? she silently goads him. For everything to burn? And she knows with a certain white-hot clarity that, if he were to reach out now and pull her to him, she would not fight it, she would stay entwined with him until the inferno consumed them both and left behind only a grotesque afterimage of doomed lovers. If there is one thing that you could save from the fire—

The wall of flames separating them rises higher, obscuring Kylo Ren from view. In her madness Rey nearly darts forward, nearly plunges through the fatal, flickering veil in order to keep him in her sights, but it's Jysella who stops her, tugging at her clothes with shaking yet insistent hands, using the last vestiges of strength to drag her away.
"That's one hell of a pilot!" Finn whoops admiringly as the black X-wing pulls up from its dive and zips past him.

A hand drops on his shoulder. Still in attack mode, Finn whirls around already jabbing with the riot baton that he'd liberated from one of his fallen comrades, but Han Solo manages to sidestep the blow. "Ease up there, Hindsight," he grunts. "It's only me and Chewie." Standing behind him with a massive bowcaster, the Wookie issues a congenial roar of acknowledgement.

Finn sighs in relief. "Thought you'd have left with the Jedi by now."

"I came back to check on Maz. And on you." Han pauses. "Rey wanted me to."

"Rey?" Finn says softly. His heart clenches. This is important. The universe is trying to tell him something.

Before he can dwell on the matter, however, the wind picks up, carrying the unmistakable tang of smoke to the battlefield that used to be Maz Kanata's castle. As one, Chewbacca, Han, and Finn turn their gazes to the woods. Birds erupt from the trees, shrieking in panic on the crests of angry black fumes. It's not long before the fire becomes visible, swallowing the green foliage in streams of scarlet and gold.

"I have a bad feeling about this," Han mutters.

Chapter End Notes

Quelli sector.

Witches of Dathomir.

Sanrafsix Corridor.

Omwati Force tradition is first mentioned in Chapter 19 of LYG.

Hendanyn death mask.

Mandalorian armor.
Beskar.

Creative license is employed regarding the extent and capabilities of Nightsister magic.

Raven-thorn.

The Force power that Rey uses is known as pyrokinesis.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Lord, this chapter was difficult to write. In my opinion, there's nothing too drawn-out or excessive but, just to be safe, I might as well warn you guys for a torture scene and Darksiders being creepy fucks. Comments and suggestions would be greatly appreciated!

Soundtrack:

1. The Water Beneath You - The Naked & Famous
2. Shine - Night Terrors of 1927
4. Return - Strange Names
5. Muscle Memory - Lights (suggested by AzAngel1)
6. Arsonist's Lullaby - Hozier (nemo)
7. No Bravery - James Blunt (nemo)
8. Run To You - Pentatonix (solikerez)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Out of breath and covered in soot from head to toe, Rey stumbles upon a creek bordering the eastern edge of the burning forest. Here the flames have yet to encroach, and she gulps in a much-needed burst of fresh air as she wades into the blessedly cool, knee-deep water.

Forcing her mind clear, she attempts to get a fix on Jysella's location. They had gotten separated during the frantic dash through the inferno, what with all those colossal trees crashing to the ground and the fire choking off most available routes, and now she can glean nothing but an impression of blankness from the other girl. Not dead, she consoles herself, I would have felt her die. Unconscious, maybe. As she bends down to scrub her face clean, flush out the ash that's clumped her eyelashes, and coax droplets of water onto her parched tongue, she mentally prepares to dive into the blaze once more, comb through the woods in search of her fellow Jedi Knight and BB-8.

Footsteps. Movement.

Rey hurls her lightsaber at the dark, horned figure that has lurched out of the treeline, using the Force to telekinetically activate the blade in mid-air. Her weapon catches Kueller off-guard with its whirling sapphire beam; it slices into his upper arm before veering back to Rey's hand.

"You're going to pay for that," Kueller promises menacingly. He looks the worse for wear,
breathing as heavily as she is, his cloak ashen and tattered.

Rey sports burns of her own on her arms and legs but, ignoring the pain, she goes on the offensive, water splashing at her ankles as she charges and—

It happens too suddenly for her to fight it off. Smoke-like chains composed of glimmering black runes wrap around her waist, her wrists, her thighs. They yank her upwards until the toes of her boots are barely skimming the creek's surface; when she struggles, they constrict like hungry serpents, tight enough to cut off circulation, rendering her immobile.

"The first rule of battle," someone who can only be Tamith Kai calls from the opposite bank, "is to watch your back." Rey can't see her yet but her voice is unfiltered, strident like bronze. She's taken off her mask, possibly in order to mitigate the heat of the fire.

"I don't need lessons from you," Rey spits out.

"And yet you're the one at my mercy."

Rey hears a pair of boots splashing into the creek, the sound drawing nearer and nearer as seconds pass, and then she's being smiled at by a pale, angular face with striking features and iridescent violet eyes, framed by a wild mass of wavy black hair.

"So, where's the droid?" asks Tamith Kai.

Rey lifts her chin. It's one of the few parts of her body that she can move at the moment. "I don't know and, even if I did, I wouldn't tell you."

"There's no need for you to talk at all." The Nightsister extends one gloved hand, fingers splayed, and Rey knows what's coming. She kicks up her mental shields.

But the witches of Dathomir weave the Force in patterns different from those of the Jedi or the Sith. Instead of the direct mind-probe that Rey is expecting— that she's braced herself for— Tamith Kai's consciousness washes over hers like insidious smoke, curling around the corners and drifting into cracks that would never have been discovered by anyone else. Simple defense won't work here, Rey realizes that too late. She shoves the invasive presence out of her mind but not before Tamith Kai has seized the information that she wants.
"You've seen the map," Tamith Kai muses. She glances at Kueller. "An X-wing squadron flew overhead earlier. The Resistance is here. Let's pull the division out instead of calling for reinforcements. We have what we need."

Kueller nods. He hefts up his broadsword and uses the hilt to bludgeon the base of Rey's skull. The last thing that she sees are treetops soaring straight into the sky like stately towers, nothing at all like the gnarled, twisted Massassi trees of Yavin 4. *These are not my forests,* she thinks right before she blacks out.

---

Somewhere else, Jysella wakes up.

Han's leaning over her, brow wrinkled in concern. "Kriff, Red, for a while there we thought you were a goner."

She tries to pull herself into a sitting position, but Finn pins her shoulder to the ground with one firm hand while the other presses her discarded cloak against the wound in her stomach. "Don't move. I've stopped the bleeding for now but there aren't any med droids—*I said don't move!*" he cries in alarm when she gently nudges the hand on her stomach out of the way, replacing it with her own.

The wound closes. It's not her best work due to her weakened state but she can always slap a bacta patch on it later. "How did I get here?" she asks, taking in the castle ruins.

"We found you by the lake," Finn explains and Jysella frowns because she distinctly remembers fainting in the middle of the woods, not long after she got separated from Rey.

Her mind swims. She's lost too much blood. She reaches out to Rey before she fades from consciousness again. Blue sky. Tall trees. Pillars of smoke rising in the distance. The sound of water burbling over stone. Kueller and a woman with violet eyes. And then nothing.

"They've taken her," Jysella gasps. "They've taken Rey."
Alema Rar nimbly vaults over charring logs, slips past falling branches, and springs from molten-hot boulders until she spies Lake Nymeve through a gap between the burning trees. She makes a run for it, only to stop short at the sight of a limp figure on the ground, surrounded by a circle of flames gradually closing in.

She coughs. Smoke is starting to drift inside her mask, starting to suffocate her. Quickly she levitates Kylo Ren above the fire and feels someone watch her do it. No— several someones. They've gathered at her back, Tekli and Ulaha Kore and Finn Galfridian and Ganner Rhysode and Eryl Besa, silent as usual, gazes solemn and— this is the part that irritates Alema most— bearing more sorrow than actual reproach.

She doesn't pay any attention to them. They're not whom she wants to see.

Her current task is trickier than expected because she has to concentrate on lifting Kylo and on using smaller-scale pyrokinesis of her own to bend the flames away from that pesky cloak of his that trails downward. Plus, her strength is waning and it's too hot and there's too much smoke—

She almost drops him into the fire. Her breath hitches and her pulse skips. Dead Jedi Knights flicker at the edges of her vision and suddenly—

— she's an apprentice again, they all are, they're all in the Grand Audience Chamber and someone is speaking in wise, serene tones— "With the Force, any weight can be lifted"—

Kylo slams into her, dead to the world and heavy and more trouble than he's worth after all is said and done. Alema slings his arm over her shoulders and, gritting her teeth, begins the long, arduous stagger out of the woods. The ghosts keep pace with her and her burden, assembling themselves into their old attack formation with her in her usual spot—

"I don't need your help," Alema snarls at them. "I never have."

A while later, Chewbacca returns from scouting the borders of the forest not only with the news that the First Order seems to have withdrawn its troops, but also with a slightly singed, somewhat
sheepish-looking BB-8 in tow.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't the most important ball in the galaxy," Han deadpans, prompting an indignant beep from the subject in question.

Han looks up, sighing at the sight of a Resistance transport gliding its way to them. He already knows who's on board— he's not Force-sensitive but he's got a sixth sense when it comes to certain people. "You know what, kid?" he muses to Finn, who's cradling an unconscious Jysella in his arms. The old smuggler is lost in the memory of other days as the ship draws near, blurring against the sunset. "It always comes back to droids. Damnedest thing, really."

Rey's all too familiar with the metal room that she's opened her eyes in. She had the vision when she was sixteen and she's replayed it countless times in her mind since then. Here it all is now, the sleek walls, the austere lines, the bluish-white lighting, her wrists and ankles strapped by ice-cold durasteel restraints to an exceedingly uncomfortable interrogation rack. Everything just as she'd foreseen— with one crucial difference.

It's not Kylo Ren looming over her. It's Kueller.

Bathed in the sterile light of the soulless chamber, the crude planes and skeletal angles of the Knight's horned helm gleam otherworldly and nightmarish. Rey can feel him leering at her from behind the obsidian black visage.

"Lord Ren's the one who usually handles interrogations but he's indisposed at the moment." Kueller's voice is oily and guttural; it sends chills down her spine. "Bit banged up from the fire you started. So, for the moment, you and I are stuck with each other."

His hand moves without warning. A fist gauntleted in iron slams into the side of Rey's face hard enough to twist her neck and make her ears ring, the breathtaking pain a sharp layer over the dull ache at her nape where he'd hit her earlier to knock her out of commission.

"Bet you weren't expecting that, were you?" Kueller sneers. "Everyone else prefers mind games. Where's the fun in that? Me, I'm not too fussed about getting my hands dirty first."
Rey says nothing. She has dealt with men like him before. Men who savored brute strength for the hurt that it could cause others. She once lived at their mercy when she was a child.

"Gonna give up the map, girl?" Kueller asks, drawing his arm back in preparation for another blow. "Gonna let me into that pretty little mind?"

She remains silent. The next punch is aimed at her mouth, loosening a tooth. Blood pools onto her tongue, warm and salty and metallic. She spits out a glob of it and he laughs, tells her that they both know there's more where that came from.

The reason Force users prefer the mental probe technique is that it's much more effective. Objectively, Rey knows that Kueller is just wasting his time—she gets the impression that he's not the brightest lightsaber in the galaxy. He has no idea how much she is capable of enduring. What are injuries of mere flesh and bone to someone who has already died once, who has crossed into the Netherworld and been brought back? She would muster a contemptuous snort for his antics if only they weren't so kriffing painful.

The best way to deal with physical torture is to block out as much of it as possible—retreat inside the self, hone the mind on a single fine point. Rey does this now as the blows rain down one after the other. She trawls for a memory that she can wear like armor. And, when she finds it, it's her memory of Ben Solo and the day he said goodbye.

She resists at first, too proud to accept the comfort that it offers. But what was it that Alema had said in the Takodana forest? Beggars can't be choosers.

Rey succumbs. Opens that door in her mind, walks into the secret room that looks exactly like the one she had grown up in on Yavin 4. She's eighteen years old and the sun is setting and Ben's lips are soft and warm as he kisses her cheeks, her forehead, and the tip of her nose. She's clinging to his neck and his arms are around her, impossibly gentle. I'll find you again, she's promising him so fiercely, the kind of promise that only innocence can make. Across another river. In another life.

Yes, this is a safe place, where her hopes have yet to shatter, where they are still as immortal and unchanged by time as young gods. She wields the tenderness of this moment, holds it up to the brutality of everything that happened after and what's happening now. She's bleeding and her bones are cracking and the pain is making her see stars but she's somewhere else. This is the place where none of it matters. This is the place where she is loved.
When Kylo emerges from his chambers still slightly groggy from the bacta immersion that had smoothed away the burns sustained on Takodana, three of his Knights are waiting for him out in the hallway. He observes them through bleary eyes from behind his mask; Tamith Kai, Alema, and Tahiri appear unscathed, although perhaps they had bacta to thank for that as well.

"Before you get mad," Tahiri preempts, "allow me to state for the record that I acted out of genuine concern for your well-being. Neutralizing the opponent before the battle is joined— you taught me that, Lord Ren. I had no way of knowing that the girl with the buns would react in such a manner and that she was powerful enough to raze an entire forest to the ground."

"Her name is Rey," Alema pipes up. "She and her buns have always been a pain in the ass."

"It's all right, though," Tamith Kai says quickly, possibly misinterpreting the way Kylo's fists clench at his sides. "Kueller's extracting Luke Skywalker's location from her even as we speak."

Kylo stops breathing. He literally stops, the air snatched from his lungs for a dizzying, fateful second. "She's here?" he growls, praying that he'd misunderstood or that this was all some sick joke...

Tamith Kai nods in satisfaction. Her next words sound as if they are coming from a great distance, all the way there on the other end of a future that Kylo had never wanted, a future he had tried so hard not to bring about. "We caught her east of ground zero. I peered into her mind and saw the map. Kueller's been interrogating her for the past hour and a half— she's bound to crack soon."

* *

Torture, Rey thinks wryly, must be thirsty work.

Kueller had left a few minutes ago to fetch himself a glass of water, leaving her alone in the room with a stormtrooper that he'd called in. She laments that the burly Knight had managed to scrape enough brain cells together to order a cloth gag tied around the lower half of her face, a protocol that the First Order has no doubt established specifically for Jedi captives. The stormtrooper isn't even looking at her, sticking to the opposite wall as if she has a contagious disease and he's trying to stay as far away as possible.

The door slides open. Rey braces herself for the return of Kueller's odious presence, for the pain to
begin anew, but it's Kylo Ren who barges inside with all the simmering fury of a thunderstorm about to break.

"Out," he snarls, grabbing the stormtrooper by the arm. "No one comes in. Understand?"

"Y— yes, Lord Ren," stutters the hapless man before he is unceremoniously shoved out of the room.

As soon as the door shuts, Kylo trains the blank visor of his obsidian mask towards Rey. She must present a sorry sight with her face all black and blue and streaked with blood, but she glares at him as fiercely as she can manage through red-smeared lashes. She won't allow anyone to see her broken, or weeping, or helpless. She destroyed that girl a long time ago.

A low sputtering sound fills the room. It takes her a couple of seconds to determine that it's coming from none other than him, as if he's alternating between choking back sobs and sucking in air through his teeth. He sags to his knees in front of her, bowing his head like he can no longer bear the sight, shoulders hunched in on himself to ward off the advance of some immeasurable ache.

Rey watches, bemused, as Kylo brings one gloved fist to his chest and strikes repeatedly where his heart is, each dull thump reverberating through the interrogation chamber and mingling with the hoarse, grief-stricken cries that are being ripped from his throat and growing louder and more ragged as the moments tick by.

"You have no right," she wants to tell him through the gag over her mouth. However, Kueller's overzealous hands had done a number on her larynx as well; what emerges from her muffled lips is nothing more but a stilted scrape of a voice, the last two words slurred into each other. Night, it sounds like she's croaking. Night.

Kylo surges to his feet with an animalistic roar of pure fury, igniting his lightsaber and, in the same continuous stroke, carving a deep sidelong gash along the wall. Rey blinks, blood dripping into her eyes and adding to the red haze lighting up the chamber. It seems that an eternity passes like this, him screaming and wildly slashing at the wall while she looks on, numb and dazed. What has become of us?

But at last he stops, chest heaving, and turns back to her.

No, she panics as he approaches, no, I have a head wound, I'm not strong enough to fight him—
He stretches out his arm. She can't stop herself from flinching and he immediately jerks away with a savage curse. It takes a long, long while for him to square his shoulders in determination, to reach for her again. She squeezes her eyes shut and steels herself for the mental onslaught and—

— feels warm, worn leather cradle her injured cheek, feels the Force pour in through the fissures in her skin—

Rey's eyes fly open. Kylo is bent over her in more concentration than would be needed by skin-to-skin contact, but there's no mistaking what he's doing. Her pain ebbs, gradually vanishing into the ether, his light, gentle touches tracing around her eyes, the bridge of her nose, her brow, the column of her throat. He unties the gag, carelessly tossing it aside, and taps his fingers to the cuts in her lips. Yes, she had done something like this for him once before, the Force moving through her and into him in the Academy's medbay.

When his hand drops back to his side, she murmurs, "You've learned how to heal."

"The Jedi Order's mistake is in insisting that all good things only come from the Light. Once I embraced my true affinity under the Supreme Leader's guidance, I discovered that the darkness can nurture as well." Kylo hesitates. And then, "This was not what I wanted for you. I tried so hard to stop it from happening."

"Really? Because from where I'm standing, it sure looks like you didn't try hard enough," Rey snaps.

"I think we both know by now that the future is set in stone," he continues, unperturbed. "You are here because you did your duty, as I must do mine. You've seen for yourself that the other Knights are far less lenient than I am. Things will be easier for you if you just tell me—" He takes a step back and inhales deeply like he's gathering the words from a hidden place where they've always been waiting. "Where is Skywalker?"

Of all the emotions that Rey had been expecting to course through her when her vision from four years ago finally became reality, she had not counted on this strange, sweeping relief. It's as if a weight has been lifted off her chest. There. Over and done with. At last. At last. Her life has been geared towards this particular moment and, now that it has passed her by, the freedom of having no fixed point is exhilarating— so much so that she feels drunk off of it.

"You know what's funny?" Her tone is placid, almost conversational. She's buying time to shore up
her defenses for the battle of wills that must soon follow. "I don't remember telling you about my vision. I know I told you but it eludes me where we were, what we were doing. I took those days for granted. I've forgotten more than I have kept."

"You are wasting my time," Kylo replies, cold and brusque.

"No," Rey hisses, narrowing her eyes at him. "You wasted mine. Twelve years together, and for what? So that you could murder those I loved, so that you could destroy an entire solar system? So that you could wear that stupid mask?"

"Desist," he warns when she struggles against her restraints in a vain attempt to lash out at him. "You'll hurt yourself."

"Take off your mask!" Her voice bounces off the durasteel walls, quivering with a wrath that grows stronger as she continues to stare into that infuriatingly blank helm. In this moment, with his hood pulled up, he reminds her of Revan. "I hate that thing! I hate it! Look me in the eye, you bastard!"

("Without the mask, he looked more human," he had told her long ago down in the Academy vaults. "It was easier to remember that he was just a man, with all the weaknesses and vulnerabilities that implied. With the mask, however, he was an icon, a symbol. He was the shaper of history.")

And the darkness blooms inside her once more. Her wrists are bound to the rack but that doesn't stop the Force from flaring into the space between her and Kylo Ren in crackling rivulets. She shoves pain into his head and sees how it ripples through him from the way his lean frame shakes, from the way his hand flies to the side of his mask. She knows it must feel like a drill is being taken to his skull. She doesn't care.

"Take off your mask," she repeats, "or I'll take your head off. I swear I will."

"All right," he rasps in strained surrender. "All right."

Time slows to a crawl, it seems. He fumbles for the helm's releases. She falls back against the interrogation rack, exhausted, the Force retracting its claws. There's a dull metallic thud as the mask is set down but it sounds like it's coming to her from across a great distance. Rey's barely aware of it or of anything else in the room because he is straightening up, he is gazing right at her, and she is looking at Ben Solo's face for the first time in two long years.
The move that Rey uses on Kueller in the Takodana forest is *Saber Throw* from Battlefront.

Ben and Rey's discussion about Revan and his mask takes place in Chapter 12 of LYG.
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Starting the month with a new chapter only five days after my last update, yay! Behold the power of your enthusiastic reviews, friends. I'm seriously on a roll here and I hope I can keep this up. Will you help me?

Okay, perhaps that was a cruel reference in light of where we are now in the canon timeline...

I love you, guys. Have an awesome November! <3

Back then, Rey had never quite been able to accept that not everyone found Ben as handsome as she did. She didn't speak to Eryl for days when the latter remarked that Solo could probably lift off if he flapped his ears hard enough, and she almost took Seff's eye out when he cracked a joke about Ben's overly large nose. Rey loved that nose, how it flushed pink and spread across his face whenever she managed to make him laugh; in later years she would love it even more for the affectionate little nudges at her cheek, her hairline, and the back of her head. And she loved his ears, too— he grew his hair long to cover them but, when they were visible, they took away from the serious set of his features and made him look just this side of goofy, possibly even a bit sweet.

One morning, some few weeks after the Corbos mission, Rey sat with Ganner Rhysode by the river as he idly shuffled through old holos on his datapad. He paused at one of Ben scowling at the lens as per usual and sighed, "Force, I miss that ugly mug."

"He isn't—" Rey started to protest before a familiar old trepidation made her clamp her lips together. Even with him gone and the space he left filled with should haves and what ifs, she was still afraid of wearing her heart on her sleeve.

Ganner shot her a sideways glance. "I think," he said at last, carefully, "that the rest of us saw him one way and you saw him another. I think that it was different for you. Because... well, you know."

"Don't use the past tense." Rey despised how plaintive she sounded but there was no help for it, for the fracture in her spirit that grew with every was and used to and remember when. "Please don't."

Ganner appeared stricken. "You're right. I am sorry." He let the next few minutes pass in silence, and then he told her with his usual irreverent charm, "So long as you don't think he's better-looking than I am—"
Rey flicked her wrist. Propelled by the Force, droplets of river water launched through the air and splashed into Ganner's blue, blue eyes. He ducked his head, grinning, wide and joyous, and Rey would forever remember this moment as the first time the shadow was lifted, however briefly, after the First Order took Ben away.

"No one loves anybody just because they're beautiful," Ganner said when she let her hand fall back to her lap and the river calmed once more. Ganner, who would be dead in a year's time. "It's the other way around. People are beautiful because you love them."

Rey is thinking of that day here in the metal room underneath all these blue-white lights. Kylo Ren has drawn himself up to his full height and is staring at her with an imperiousness that she recognizes from the time before as the only armor he used to wear. Memory comes crashing back, all of it, a different person superimposed over who is standing before her now. She knows this face. She knows the way locks of brown-black hair fall across that high forehead and a deep crease appears between those dark, sweeping brows when he's bowed over a holobook. She knows that those sullen, generous lips curve into his father's lopsided smile and that the line of that sculpted jaw tightens with a defiance that is wholly his mother's. She's learned by kriffing heart every beauty spot sprinkled on that pale but easily flushed complexion.

Most of all, she knows those eyes. How they're the color of brandy when the sun hits. How they once glinted with flecks of red in the Corbos moonlight. How they assess any given room with a wary gaze and miss nothing. How they used to soften for her and her alone.

In this, the present time, those eyes are unnervingly cool, although there are dark circles beneath them. His cheekbones seem more pronounced; has he lost weight, or is it merely an illusion of that high collar, continued further down a body rendered skeletal by those black robes? Either way, he looks like shit—green around the gills, as Jedi Master Cilghal of the Mon Calamari would say.

And yet—

And yet Rey is thinking about what Ganner Rhysode said because, if it were true, then it stands to reason that people are no longer beautiful once your love for them has faded. She buried her love for Ben Solo the day he led the First Order to Yavin 4, but now her pulse is racing and her eyes are hungry for every inch of his face and it's not even purely a physical response to someone attractive, it's more like the lilt inside her chest when she looked out her window and saw dawn break over the rainforest for the first time, golden light slowly spilling across a sleepy, shadowed world. Here, us, now. She tracks the constellation of his features and feels the exhausted relief of one who has
returned, after a long voyage, to familiar shores. *This, always, you.*

Of course, Kylo ruins the moment as soon as he opens his mouth. He probably always will, in whatever life. "Like what you see?" His tone is too sarcastic, too self-deprecating for any trace of conceit, and she recalls with a sharp pang the jokes from their Academy days.

"It's nothing I haven't seen before," she says, trying to sound steady, trying to sound strong. He takes one step closer and she belatedly notices that his hair still covers his ears and, Force, what is this, why is the mere sight of him unmasked enough to lower her guard and make her forget all that he has done? It still hangs in the air between them but she's tempted— oh, she's so tempted— to push those grievances aside and cover every inch of his face in kisses. In fact, she almost reaches out, come what may, but then her wrists jerk against the metal restraints and— right, she's bound to a torture rack in an interrogation chamber. Thanks in no small part to him.

*Focus, Rey. Before you become a traitor to your own cause.*

She decides that silence will be her ally as it was with Kueller. She lets it stretch on for interminable ages as Kylo telekinetically summons the discarded cloth gag into his palm and uses it to wipe the blood from her skin, his hand moving with painstaking slowness, his leather-clad knuckles grazing her cheek. By the time he's done, by the time he lets the red-stained cloth slip from his fingers, she's breathing a little more heavily than before, sick to her stomach with longing and memories and fear.

"The map—" Kylo stops to clear his throat. He looks just as unsettled as she is, the muscle in his jaw working fretfully, his eyes drifting over her features at the same time that hers are drinking him in. But they both know their duty, don't they? "Let me take it from your mind," he begins again. "It won't hurt if you don't resist."

"That's a load of bantha fodder. You don't care if I get hurt or not," she bitterly accuses him. "You heal the marks that your subordinate left, you say you don't want this to happen, but at the end of the day I'm still tied to this rack, aren't I? I'm not a prop you can use to assuage your guilty conscience."

She has struck a nerve; she sees it in the way something in his eyes shifts, how the corner of his mouth twists and falters. His face is still an open book after all these years and she's thrown for a loop by the stray and random musing that perhaps his mask is for her sake, after all. For the sake of those who once knew him.

"I'll get you out of here," he abruptly offers. "Give me the map and I will see you safely away on
one of our shuttles. The Supreme Leader will understand."

She gapes at him. "Do you honestly expect me to believe that? Snoke wants all the Jedi dead."

"No, listen to me—" In his haste to explain, he narrows the distance between them, clutching at her shoulders and bringing his face dangerously close to hers. "Luke Skywalker ushered in an age of chaos when he brought down the Empire and he will continue to be a symbol of that chaos for as long as he draws breath. There is no place for him in this new world—"

"And what about me?" Rey demands. "What about the rest of us who won't bow to the First Order? Where is our place? Snoke won't allow me to walk out of here alive. You know this and I know this. Quit deluding yourself."

Kylo falls silent. Rey turns her head to the side as best as she can within the metal confines, unable to bear this new nearness— if he were to move forward just a fraction, their noses would touch. From the periphery of her vision she watches the sweep of his long lashes as his eyes devour her face.

"And even if your precious Supreme Leader were to grant me freedom in exchange for information," she continues, "do you really think I'd sacrifice Master Luke to save my own skin?" Don't you know me at all?

"You would die for him, then?" Kylo exhales against her temple. She fights the urge to close her eyes.

"I would die for those I love." Her voice cracks. "I died for you once. Don't you remember?" He stiffens and she presses her advantage, wrapping that fateful day around them like a cloak. "In the valley with the red rocks, under the hot sun. The Leviathan had thrown you off its back and was about to seize you in its jaws. I flipped the switch before it could."

"Stop," he mumbles, unconsciously leaning into her. "Don't—" She senses his inner turmoil, how his mind is reeling. Could it be that he truly doesn't remember? Perhaps her death and his fall were such huge turning points that the events that transpired before them seem insignificant in comparison. Perhaps everything had happened so fast that he missed the connection between how close he'd been to becoming monster bait and her decision to activate the thermoelectric generator — or perhaps he had shut it out, refused to dwell on it. There's a term for that, isn't there— yes, flashburn, when a Force-sensitive's mind instinctively deletes certain moments of high emotional trauma that would otherwise leave horrendous scars on the soul.
"Please," she urges him. "You were there. The cliffs, the bones, the fight of our lives. You told me it was a terrible plan— 'the absolute worst plan in galactic history.' That was the last thing you ever said to me in that life." She's trembling in her restraints. She doesn't like thinking about that day, either, but she has to push forward, she has to make him understand. "Everyone was screaming. The Leviathan was thrashing about and I was doing my best to hold on while I hooked the last cable in. Eryl was standing by the lever, she was the one who was supposed to pull it, but I couldn't — I couldn't let her choose between you and me. No one should have to make a choice like that, I thought, and so I—"

"Stop," he repeats but there's no vehemence to it, no trace of command. He says it like an act of surrender, he says it with his lips hovering tentatively at the point where her ear meets the line of her jaw. Kiss me there, she wants to beg. Your lips, my skin, how it should be, how it should always have been.

"I did it for you," she perseveres, forcing through the lump in her throat all the words that need to be said. "How can you even think that I never loved you?" Part of her hates that she has to play this card, as if she's demanding something in return for a choice that she made all on her own, but she can't think of any other way to reach him. "I did it to save you and you saved me right back. That's how it was between us, wasn't it? So just—"

She stops cold. She has no idea how to finish that sentence. So just—what? Rey would be the first to admit that most of the intricacies of politics are beyond her grasp but she's got enough sense to know that, after what happened to the Praxeum and Tuanul and the Hosnian system, Kylo Ren will almost definitely be tried as a war criminal when all this is over. Even if he is pardoned, what then? What of the ghosts he left in his wake, the betrayal so keenly felt by the remaining Jedi? Raynar had been relieved of his lightsaber and banished to the Outer Rim until further notice for killing Numa, but Kylo's sins are on a far grander scale. There's no going back, Rey thinks, despair engulfing her, thick and suffocating like quicksand. We will always walk with the dead.

While she hesitates, a change comes over him. Slowly, so slowly. He cocks his head as if listening to a voice that only he can hear. When he backs away from her it is with clumsy, faltering steps and a haunted expression.

"We may dispense with the pleasantries now," he rasps, sounding dazed, his dark eyes glittering feverishly. "My offer still stands. Will you take it?"

"You already know I won't," Rey whispers.

Kylo nods. He stretches one long, black-clad arm into the space between them, his fingers splayed
out, the look on his face resolute. "So be it, Jedi."

The first attempt to push into her mind is like hitting a brick wall, as he had expected it would be. But he is just as stubborn as she is and the Dark Side has made him strong, and he gradually chips away at her defenses, taking what bits and pieces spill through the cracks, until—

"An ocean?" Kylo frowns. He feels Rey's panic as she tries to wrestle the memory from him. He tightens his grip, refusing to let go. Here is—

— sunlight, blue water, the grassy plateau at the edge of the jungle, and he's sitting beside her, their faces tipped to the sky—

"It was eleven years to the day we brought you to Yavin 4," Kylo recalls out loud. "You woke me up at an ungodly hour because you wanted to see the ocean. You were seventeen." He watches his younger self smile at her. Happy. He looks happy. Had it really been like this back then?

She makes one of her usual sarcastic quips— a second nature that he fears she learned from him. He's too at peace to respond in kind so he just murmurs, "Whatever you say, sweetheart." She blushes and slaps his shoulder, and, laughing, he grabs her wrist and presses the back of her hand to his lips.

"Ben!" she shrieks, drawing out the single syllable of his name, giggling as he playfully nips at the delicate skin between her knuckles—

"No," Kylo hisses. "That is not what happened."

"What?" Rey stares at him, wide-eyed, from the interrogation rack. "What are you talking about?"

"You snatched your hand back. You called me disgusting."

"I did not!" she yells. "How dare you—"
Infuriated that she would try to deceive him this way, he discards the memory and resumes his search for the more pertinent one, but—

—a flurry of months spent in space, the rust-bucket interior of the Millennium Falcon, Rey and his father poring over holographic maps as they sail from one system to another—

"You looked for me?" Kylo can't stop himself from blurting out in shock.

"Of course we did." Rey sounds tearful amidst the cold metal and blue light of the present. "But the Masters made me go back, they said I was neglecting my training—"

He shakes his head. "No. This didn't happen. I was alone. I've always been alone."

"What, you think I put a false memory there to trick you?" she snaps. And then her features tense in realization, he feels the gears in her mind whirring and clicking as if putting two and two together. "Is that what Snoke—"

Without warning, before he can shift to defensive mode, she pounces. Into his memories, into the corridors of his ruined heart.

* 

Rey rifles through the years, watching the sun rise and set on Yavin 4, watching herself grow up through Ben Solo's eyes.

"Y'know," Eryl Besa is smirking just as Ben is about to turn the corner to join her and the other students, "if Solo flapped his ears hard enough he could probably lift off—"

Rey laughs along with the rest, cruel and malicious. Ben pales, retreats down the corridor before anyone notices that he's there, that he's overheard—

"No!" she cries, horrified. "It wasn't like that. I—" She shows him her own memory of that day,
reversing the clock to let him see that Eryl had said it in a fit of pique, that she was cross because Ben had attacked her when her back was turned during sparring, because this was the time when they were still hot-headed apprentices, before maturity took root—

"It doesn't matter," Kylo says tersely. "She meant it. I've heard similar things all my life."

Rey switches tactics. "I didn't laugh. I would never have laughed—"

"Oh?" He sneers. "I think we both know how repulsive you thought I was."

*And in the forest, beneath the fig trees, he jokingly walks right into her and tries to nuzzle at her temple, because it's summer, because he'd missed her so much it was pathetic—*

"Get off!" She shrinks away, annoyed, casting a contemptuous glance at him over her shoulder as his hands drop limply to his sides.

"I didn't say it like that. It didn't happen like that," Rey protests numbly. But she's helpless to do anything except watch as a past that's so radically different from what she remembers unfurls before her eyes. She sees all the subtle alterations, all the words taken in a different context, all his insecurities and loneliness magnified. She sees hatred twist the faces of his fellow Jedi Knights where she knows it had only been frustration with his surliness and his aversion to teamwork. She hears the chill in Leia Organa's comms where she knows that the General had only ever spoken to her son with fondness. Most of all she sees a warped, distant stranger in the guise of her own self treating with mere grudging tolerance a gangly, awkward man who was hopelessly in love with her.

"You're remembering it all wrong," she grates out.

"Am I?" Kylo's tone is neutral but he's carefully watching her face as if fascinated by her reaction.

"Yes."

*At wits' end, Rey reaches for Corbos.*

*Moonlight spills over the barren plains, over the mangled corpses of the Sith hounds. She falls flat on her back, her body veering a whisper away from the arc of his green lightsaber. The red gleam fades from his eyes as he realizes what he's very nearly done. He sinks to his knees, still clutching his grandfather's amulet in one hand, while the other wraps around her leg and he weeps, utterly*
"This is where I tell you I love you," Rey says, because, surely, something like that couldn't be changed, surely the fierce devotion that she had felt then couldn't be eclipsed by the darkness—

"Don't touch me!" she screams, recoiling from him. "You monster—"

Rey hears herself screaming in the present time, too. She's vaguely aware of sharp jolts of pain as she struggles against her restraints. "That wasn't what happened!" The walls creak with the force of her ire, prompting Kylo to cast a mildly concerned glance around the shuddering room, its foundations rocking at the core. "I'll kill him!" There will be nothing left of Snoke when she's done. Not even ashes. "That— was— mine!"

With that last word, the metal cuffs around her wrists and ankles disintegrate as easily as if they were stalks of pollen in the breeze. Kylo slowly backs away as Rey's feet hit the floor, as she advances upon him with her teeth bared. The interrogation chamber's glow-panels flicker on and off. In the mood she's in, she's going to bring this entire godforsaken base down on his head.

The door opens with a hiss. The stormtrooper from earlier is tossed through the entrance, the crumpled heap of his unconscious body gently nudged out of the way by one boot-clad foot as a tall, lanky figure with shaggy brown hair strides into the room, dressed in Jedi robes and wielding a blue lightsaber.

"One rescue mission coming right up," Valin Horn announces brightly. His gaze darts from Kylo to Rey and locks on to her, the corner of his lips tilting into a smirk. "Although," he muses, "something tells me you were doing just fine on your own."

Chapter End Notes

**Flashburn.**

The ability that Rey uses to destroy the restraints is an offshoot of **telekinesis** known as Force Repulse.

Kylo and Rey are reliving the events of Chapter 16 and Chapter 18 of LYG. The ocean scene is mentioned as a flashback in Chapter 19.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

I'd just like to take a moment to thank everyone who left comments on the last chapter and inspired me to update again so soon. All the new bookmarks and kudos are much appreciated, too.

A lot of you have pointed out that it's amazing how Kylo still has feelings for Rey despite those altered memories. It's a testament to Ben's devotion and stubbornness, all right, and I'm gradually moving the pieces into place for Rey to come to a bit of an epiphany about that. I also want to share in particular something that infinitelystrangemachine said: "What kills me the most is that, in a way, Ben had ALWAYS tried to behave that way - as if Rey didn't actually love him, not really. He always was so self-deprecating and self-doubting in those terms. In a way, he'd already started the process himself years ago. I can only imagine how hard it must be to literally alter whole years of someone's reality, but in Ben's case, it probably wasn't as hard as it could have been." This is an important issue that I started building up in LYG and will continue to address here in TKC.

If you'll notice, we have a new tag, thanks to a comment that Jinga made a while back. I figured we could do with a bit of humor around here xD Lastly, I've upped the projected chapter count to 23 because, as usual, this fic has gone above and beyond my original outline and I honestly think it's all the better for it.

Please let me know what you think of this latest chapter. Aside from much-needed motivation, reader reactions will also help me gauge how best to play the next sequence of events. See you all again hopefully very soon!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"You," Kylo spits out, glaring daggers at Valin.

"Me," agrees the other man with a calm that no one else in the room is feeling— except perhaps for the unconscious stormtrooper lying on the floor. "Long time, Solo."

"That's not my name anymore."

"Yeah." Valin's derisive snort speaks volumes about just how little he cares for his former comrade's new alias. "I heard." He unclips a familiar lightsaber from his utility belt and tosses it to Rey, who catches it and, with a deft spin of her wrist, thumbs the emitter in the same seamless movement.
She allows herself to spare a flicker of relief for Jysella—who must have survived the Takodana inferno and entrusted this weapon to her brother—before aligning her limbs into the Ataru opening stance, holding the hilt with both hands to the right side of her body. On her left, Valin slides one foot back, raising his lightsaber above his head so that the beam is angled behind him in adherence to the Shien variant of Form V. In front of them, red light shrieks into existence as Kylo adopts Niman's two-handed low guard, his feet closely spaced. There is no tableau stranger or more fraught than this, three blazing plasma loops forming the points of a triangle connected by the invisible lines of the years.

However, instead of carefully sizing up his two opponents, Kylo's dark gaze is fixed on Rey, on the lightsaber that she wields. "Where the hell did you get that?"

He's addressing Valin but Rey knows better, doesn't she? Energy sings into her fingers, pulsing from the vibrations of the metal-encased power cell. Help me save him. She grits her teeth.

"I believe the question should be, where the hell did you get that?" Valin corrects, eyeing the scarlet crossguard blade. "No offense but it looks like it's going to short out any minute now."

"I'm certain you meant at least some offense," Kylo grumbles.

"You know me too well."

"Boys." Rey blinks from one to the other. "Is this really the time?"

Kylo sniffs. "He started it."

"She's right, though," says Valin. "We're not in school anymore and, speaking of time, we don't have much left."

He runs at Kylo in what at first appears to be an attacking sweep, but it's a feint as only Valin Horn can feint, nimbly pulling to the side a scant half-second before blade-lock and using the Force to send the unconscious stormtrooper's body crashing into Kylo Ren. Taking advantage of his opponent's momentary distraction, Valin then slices his off-hand through the air, knocking the other man out cold with a Force Stun so powerful that even Rey winces from its echoes.

"I can't believe he fell for that," Valin remarks, shooting a look of disbelief at the black-clad figure
now sprawled at his feet. "He must be, like, extremely unhinged. What did you do to him?"

Before Rey can answer, Valin grabs her by the elbow and ushers her out of the room and down the hallway. "Wait," she protests even as she scurries along to match his pace. "Valin, wait. Snoke did something to him. Altered his memories. We should—"

"Rey," Valin interrupts, suddenly serious, "I wasn't kidding when I said that we don't have much time. My Force Stun won't keep that asshole down for long and, right now, we're on the superweapon that obliterated the Hosnian system. It's called Starkiller Base and its next target is D'Qar."

Rey switches mental gears. Tries to ignore the disquieting stab of guilt, how it for some reason feels like the worst thing she's ever done. Valin talks her through the plan to destroy the base's thermal oscillator as they hurry down the corridors to rendezvous with the rest of the ground team — which apparently consists of Chewbacca, Han Solo, and Finn, who were tasked to lower the shield generators while Valin searched for Rey. Along the way they nearly run into a group of stormtroopers on patrol but Valin is quick to cast the Immersion veil that his sister is so good at weaving. They slip by undetected, although Rey notices that there are a couple of stormtroopers who shiver and glance around suspiciously as they pass.

*Force-sensitives*, she thinks with a hitch in her chest. It's not impossible that the First Order would screen their child recruits for the gift but sometimes there's only a trace amount of it or it manifests late in life— in the case of these two, it's probably been dampened by years and years of rigorous military conditioning, never to bloom except in rare whispers of intuition that flicker and fade and then are gone. You could go your whole life not knowing.

When they meet up with Finn, Han, and Chewbacca by the hangars, there's no time for words because the alarms have started to blare.

Outside the durasteel labyrinths of its facilities, Starkiller Base is a frozen wasteland. The bitter cold cuts into Rey's bones, alleviated slightly when Finn drapes Poe Dameron's beat-up jacket over her shoulders, providing an extra scrap of insulation for the base of her neck that's left bare by her Jedi robes.

"Thanks," she manages in a clipped tone. Logic would tell her that there isn't anything to forgive, that he had only been following orders that day on Corbos— and he has, for whatever reasons of his own, decided to abandon flight and join this mission. But surely she can hold on to her rage for
a little while longer. That slow-burning ember in the back of her mind, raw and visceral, it's all she has left.

They make their way to the *Millennium Falcon* while TIE fighters and X-wings light up the skies, laser fire and exploding metal towers like blinking beacons amidst the swirling snows. Even as they stumble over the ice-laden plains, Rey counts enemy units and the amount of structural damage and the time they have left, feels Valin doing the same beside her. With Starkiller Base's shields lowered, the thermal oscillator should be blowing up by now but the X-wings are vastly outgunned

It's Han who says it. "We have to help them."

They retrieve two cloth sacks full of charges from the *Falcon*’s cargo hold and divide it among themselves. Rey is not about to ask why Han and Chewbacca are carting around military-grade explosives; however, as they make the trek to the oscillator, her fingers graze the lightsaber hilt at her belt and—

— the Force flows—

Rey stops walking. She puts a hand on Han's arm, effectively halting him in his tracks as well. She hears herself say, in a calm and distant voice beneath the howl of the blizzard, "Your son waits for you."

Han stares at her without any hint of surprise whatsoever. It's the quiet resignation in his brown eyes that jolts Rey a little back into herself, allows glimmers of her own consciousness to stream into the trance. "Tell him what you told me on Takodana. Tell him everything." She thinks that she's smiling a bit, but it feels like a sad, rueful sort of smile as her hand drifts up from his arm to his brow, smoothing her fingers over the lines there. A benediction carried across the span of years. "It doesn't matter whose fault it is anymore. Sometimes it is all we can do to stand tall—in this life, and the life after."

The Force soars away from her then, scattering on the crests of the icy wind. She's wholly herself but she still has one foot in the trance when she whispers, over the nameless dread casting a shadow on her heart as she looks up at Han Solo's rugged, careworn face, "I will miss you."
Finn, Rey, and Valin wait for Han and Chewbacca to disappear into the base's subterranean complex before they set out for the part of the oscillator that protrudes aboveground. "What happened just now?" Valin asks Rey solemnly. "Why did you sound like you were saying goodbye?"

"I don't know," she replies, although there's a part of her that already does. "I don't know what it meant."

"If you ask me," Finn blurts out, "I think it means that we have to set the charges as quickly as possible so we can go back in and help Han and Chewie."

He looks exceedingly ill at ease, fear and anxiety and stress rolling off of him in waves. This is a boy out of his element, thrown into a world that he doesn't understand. But his shoulders are squared and his jaw is taut with determination, and Rey feels herself start to thaw. Everyone around her has been so tired these days, acting out of grim duty, drawing strength from begrudging inner reservoirs— it's been too long since she was last presented with such stubborn optimism.

Valin scratches his chin. "There's something about this kid," he mutters.

"Stop calling everyone only a few years younger than you 'kid,'" Rey admonishes. Although he and Ben had been Knighted at the same time, Valin is twenty-five, his parents having brought him to the Praxeum at an earlier age than most. "I swear, that's such a terrible habit you picked up from Rhysode and Galfridian and the rest of them."

They've reached the turret and are about to start climbing when she suddenly freezes, the hair on her nape prickling as her fingers still around the smooth, ice-cold metal rungs.

"We've got company, yeah?" Valin deadpans.

"Yeah," Rey confirms with a sigh.

The two Jedi Knights whirl around, lightsabers ablaze. Finn is the last to realize what's going on but he's quick to turn, hoisting a blaster above his hip. Standing a few feet away are Tamith Kai, Kueller, and Tahiri Veila, their black armor a stark contrast to the blinding whiteness. Only Kueller
wears his mask, as if the other two had been forced to leave their quarters in a rush once the Resistance's attack began.

"Which one of you knocked Lord Ren out?" Tahiri demands. Her natural voice is a silvery drawl, suiting the pale, ethereally beautiful features crowned by that sheet of fine white-blonde hair. She looks no older than Rey is but her smoky green eyes are hard and cruel.

"That would be me," says Valin. "Which one of you shot my sister?"

A small smile plays along Tahiri's delicate pink lips. "That would be me."

Despite his tendency to mouth off, Valin is a Jedi through and through. He doesn't charge at Tahiri like Rey would have done in his place; instead, he merely shifts his weight a little, getting a feel for the snow-covered ground, before pointing his blade towards the Knights of Ren.

For her part, Rey wants nothing more than to dispatch Kueller's soul to the Netherworld as slowly and as painfully as possible. The desire for vengeance stirs within her, warm and familiar like an old friend. But she learns from her mistakes and so she takes her cue from Valin, assessing the situation as she readies her own blade. "That one's a Nightsister," she informs him under her breath as she inclines her head in Tamith Kai's direction.

Valin nods. "All right. Cover us, Finn."

Rey and Valin are a blur of robes and light as they rush at Tamith Kai while Finn reels off a barrage of lasers in Kueller and Tahiri's direction, cutting them off from the blistering skirmish of blades. It's Ataru as Rey has never used it before, faster than lightning racing across the skies, savage as a whirlwind, because she has to finish this as quickly as possible, Finn can't hold his own against two Knights of Ren for long. Tamith Kai fights like a cornered rat, hissing and spitting, her curved daggers of pure shadow energy crackling against the Jedi's plasma beams, but it's not long before she's overwhelmed by Valin's fluid Shien-style deflections running counter to Rey's aggressive strikes.

Eventually, Rey scores a long, deep gash along the witch's spine and doesn't bother to stick around to watch her topple into the snow, immediately leaping to Finn's aid instead. At this point, he has ducked behind the oscillator to avoid Tahiri's own blasters and Kueller is almost upon him, raising the massive, sinister broadsword above his head, but Rey Force-shoves the Knight before he can land a blow.
"Didn't your mother ever teach you to pick on somebody your own size?" she jeers.

"You weren't this cocky when I was beating your face in a while ago," Kueller snarls, the broadsword singing through the air as he sweeps it right at her.

Kylo Ren's head is throbbing. It's not an aftereffect of the Stun; rather, he feels as if he is being split into two by that little walk down memory lane. He hadn't fought back against Rey's mind probe because sheer vindictiveness had egged him on to let her relive the ruin she wrought on his former self— however, her reaction had been disconcerting, to say the least.

Doubt gnaws at him in nagging little whispers. He sees it every time she blinks, the way her bottom lip had quivered, the unshed tears of pure frustration glazing her luminous eyes. She'd never been that good of an actress, had she? Even in the time before, she'd always been so transparent around him. And the power she called on to disintegrate the solid metal restraints—that could only have sprung from a well of anger and despair that can't be manufactured.

He's been vaguely aware for a long time now that there are gaps in his memory. Kylo had chalked it up to the psychological aftermath of the year he'd spent in isolation under the Supreme Leader's harsh but necessary training that had allowed him to fully channel the Dark Side— now, he's not so sure. He can't quite reconcile his unrequited yearning for Rey with the soft kisses that he remembers in his weak moments, the stray snatches of conversation in her low, sweet tones, you promised, I love—

He punches the wall, startling Alema as she trawls the corridor with him in search of the escaped Jedi. "What the hell?"

"Let's split up," Kylo says, voice brusque through the mask. "You take the north wing. I'll head on down to the oscillator."

He barely notices when she nods and walks away. He's still brooding, deep in thought.

Perhaps...

No, he sternly tells himself. The Supreme Leader has bestowed you with knowledge and strength.
You will not get wrapped up in the Jedi Order's mind games again. No more.

There is another reason he sent Alema away. Han Solo is here somewhere on this planet. While he'd sensed the man's presence the moment he regained consciousness, he can't get a clear fix on his location— the Force is cloudier than it has ever been for him. Still, this must be the turning point that the Supreme Leader had foreseen. Kylo had always assumed it would be Luke Skywalker but he supposes that his father will do. And he wants it done in private.

"The ultimate test of selflessness," Snoke had crooned. "Whether you're ready to face unending emotional pain, true agony, to gain the power to create peace and order for billions of strangers... That is the sacrifice. To be vilified by others, by people you know and care for, to do your duty for the good of the galaxy. It is easy to be a clean-cut hero slaying monsters, Kylo Ren. There's always a little bit of vanity in it. There can be no room for vanity or pride in being despised."

The long years, they drag behind him. The future, it beckons.

He's on the bridge when he hears a gruff and strident voice ringing out through the darkness and the mists.

"Ben!"

Kylo Ren stops walking. He gives a little nod, to himself and to whatever he's laying to rest. He turns around.

* *

Tahiri has holstered her blasters in favor of crossing blades with Valin, who's now quirking an eyebrow at her over their intersected beams of red and blue that hiss and sputter with each snowflake drifting into contact. "Nice lightsaber. You make that yourself? Your boss could use a few tips."

She kicks his legs out from under him but he manages to right himself almost instantaneously and block her overhead strike. "You don't talk like a Jedi," she mutters, pouting at the sight of his lazy grin.

"We come in all kinds, pateesa."
"Oh, for the love of—" A few meters away, Rey wrenches her blade loose from Kueller's armored shoulder as the black Knight howls in pain. "Valin, stop flirting and kick her ass!"

"I'm just getting warmed up!" Valin retorts, arching his torso away from Tahiri's next slash and then stepping into his own attack before she has time to correct her angle. This earns him a nick on his opponent's wrist and a virulent jade-eyed glare.

"At least you're a better fighter than your sister is," Tahiri sneers.

It seems for a moment that the whirling snows around them twist in unnatural ways against the wind but there's no discernible change in Valin's expression. "Yeah, no, that's not going to work." They lock blades again but, this time, he switches off his emitter. Suddenly putting all her weight against a plasma beam that is no longer there, Tahiri stumbles, allowing him to come up from behind and put her out of commission by ramming the hilt of his lightsaber into the back of her skull. There's a sickening crack of bone as she falls forward into the snow, next to an equally still Tamith Kai.

"Nice try, though," Valin continues, although Tahiri can no longer hear him.

Meanwhile, Rey is starting to concede that she might be in trouble. The combined onslaught of her lightsaber and Finn's blaster has ensured that Kueller is now covered in cuts and bruises, but he's proving impossible to take down.

"This guy's a kriffing tank," Finn's disbelieving tone echoes her own thoughts after he narrowly dodges the blaster bolt that Kueller had deflected back to him using telekinesis.

Even when Valin wades into the fray, it's not much help; Kueller has the body mass and plated armor needed to withstand attacks from all sides while methodically concentrating on one opponent. Aside from that, Rey's unused to the grip of the lightsaber that she's wielding— and, true enough, it flies out of her hand after a particularly forceful Disarming Slash from Kueller. He elbows her hard; she staggers backwards across the snow, unable to do anything but watch in horror as he rounds on Valin.

And then there's the sound of a plasma beam humming into existence, and Rey is turning her head
and her eyes are widening at the sight of Finn holding Luke Skywalker's old saber in his hands, his solemn, boyish face cast in blue light.

Kylo has taken off his mask. He watches his father approach, grayer and somehow smaller than he remembers. Of course, he'd already been taller than Han Solo by the time he hit his late teens, but there is a diminished quality to the old man. Look at you, Kylo thinks with no small bitterness. Infamous smuggler, war hero, and now? Is this what will become of me as well?

No, my student, murmurs the Supreme Leader. The Force shall carry your years. You will never look as defeated as this fool does.

"Snoke is using you for your powers," Han says. "When he gets what he wants, he'll crush you. You know it's true."

Kylo's fists clench at the sickening, disgraceful lies. Typical Han Solo, trying to talk his way out of a difficult situation. He will not fall for it. He will not make his mother's mistakes.

For some reason, the memory he saw in Rey's mind flashes before him, there on the narrow bridge. Did you really look for me?" He has no idea why he would ask that, why his voice would sound so tremulous, so much like a child's. It occurs to him that he is afraid. He has had time to steel himself for the act that he is about to commit, but, now that it is almost upon him, he is afraid.

Han stops just within arm's reach, the lines on his face softening. "'Course I did. Damn near tore the whole galaxy apart. I only quit when—" Even though he catches himself before he can complete the sentence, Kylo knows what he meant. And Han must know that he knows because he continues, in a more agitated tone, "I mean, jeez, son, can you blame me? You broke our hearts. The day after the Siege, that was when Leia recalled the last of the search parties. Then and only then."

I could have been saved, Kylo thinks. They were looking for me, I wasn't alone, I could have been rescued—

More lies, Snoke hisses. Remember the worldcraft and the Empire Reborn. Remember that they didn't bother to rescue you until after your powers had awakened and you could finally be of use to them. You saved yourself as a boy; you saved yourself as a young man in the fires of my trial. You
Kylo knows the correct response to this. *And you, Supreme Leader,* he adds, and he feels Snoke's pride in him from systems away, so warm and comforting that it takes him a second to register that Han is speaking again.

"But, yeah, I guess when it's like this, it really doesn't matter whose fault it is anymore... Listen, Ben, I'm here on orders. Your mother's. And Rey's." He scratches the back of his head, flashing a tiny, lopsided smile. "Women, huh?" When his son merely stares at him, dumbfounded that he could have the audacity to crack jokes under the present circumstances, his hand drops to his side and he sighs. "Look, I wasn't there for you while you were growing up. I regret that. I couldn't understand the Force and you were— such an intense kid, y'know? Studious. So much like Leia," he adds with a trace of fondness. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry. You deserved a better father. I'm sorry."

There is a lump in Kylo's throat that he doesn't understand. "It's too late," he finds himself saying, the world starting to blur. *Tears?* he wonders. *Why?*

"No, it's not," Han insists, taking one step closer. "Come home. We miss you." And then, like the sneaky bastard that he is, saving the best card for last, "*Rey* misses you."

Kylo starts to shake his head. "She doesn't—"

"*Listen* to me." Han grabs him by the upper arms, gives him a gentle shake. How could there still be strength in those withered hands, callused from a lifetime of gunfights and starlines? "She cried for days after the First Order took you away. I'm serious. She wouldn't stop, wouldn't leave her room to eat. Made herself sick. Does that really surprise you? A heart like that, too big for the world—"

_You promised I would never be alone_, someone pleads from the depths of Kylo Ren's memory, adding a sharper layer to the shaky, hesitant guilt that he already feels upon imagining Rey sobbing into her pillow and starving herself.

"I always knew, son," says Han. "Even when she was still just a kid and you wouldn't look at her twice. The way she'd hang around even during your worst sulks— absolutely devoted. And the last time I saw the two of you together— well, I may just be your dumb old man but I knew that you'd finally started to feel the same. Don't you remember?"
Don't you remember?

Three months before his Dathomir mission—perhaps four. Ben and his father standing in the shade cast by the Millennium Falcon while an eighteen-year-old Rey puttered about at the cockpit.

"She has three droid brains," Ben heard her gush. He couldn't see her but he could picture the amazement on that face, how it would light her up from within.

Han let out a bark of laughter. "That she does, kid," he called back. "Three separate personalities. Gets rough when I'm in a tight spot and they start arguing among themselves."

Rey giggled, a dulcet lilt of sound that seemed to curl through the humid jungle air. Han rubbed his chin, caught Ben's eye. "Remind me again how I got talked into letting her mess around with my ship."

Ben shrugged. From previous experience, there was nothing else to be done except give Rey what she wanted once she got that determined gleam in her eye.

Han cleared his throat. "So—I gotta get going but, uh, how's your mother? Talk to Leia lately?"

"No," Ben mumbled. The last comm had been weeks ago.

"Busy as always, I guess," Han mused, deflating a little. "Not that she doesn't have reason to be. Those Imperial fanatics are up to something, for sure."

Ben was spared from having to respond by Rey emerging from the Falcon. She skipped down the ramp and made her way over to his side, dimpling up at him with a film of grease smeared on her cheek. "Mmm," he hummed in mild annoyance, automatically reaching out to wipe the stain away. She rolled her eyes but let him do it. His thumb lingered at the corner of her smile.

They barely noticed that Han had started walking up the Falcon’s ramp, shaking his head, but Ben did hear Chewbacca growl an indistinct question from inside the freighter, followed by his father's
wry quip— "Well, I guess they had to grow up some time—"

*I*

"I am being torn apart," Kylo Ren says.

*I*

Rey observes Finn square off against Kueller with something like amazement. Proficiency with weapons is an expected trait for a former stormtrooper but to wield a lightsaber so deftly, to maintain control over the plasma loop's grinding inertia—

"I know what you're thinking," Valin pants. He's flat on his back beside her now, Kueller having sent him soaring with another powerful swing. "And we'll get back to that if we make it out of here alive, maybe have the masters examine him— right now, though, we need to finish this."

She nods, her gaze falling on the discarded bag of explosives.

Rey waits until Kueller's back is turned to her before she gets to her feet. Catching her movement over his opponent's shoulder, Finn must have either correctly deciphered the look on her face or tapped into some latent intuition, because he scrambles backwards to put as much distance between him and Kueller as possible.

*I*

"That's right, run away," the Knight of Ren scoffs at the retreating man.

"Actually—" a dry, feminine voice draws his attention— "he has the right idea."

Kueller belatedly notices that five pyro denton charges have been lifted into the air and are now circling him like wasps, humming with barely contained energy. For a moment he simply stands there as if suspended in treacherous, invisible nets, his panicked gaze darting from each floating charge to the girl that he had tortured in the interrogation chamber. She looks just as serene as she had back then, although now it's particles of snow tracking across her cheeks instead of blood.
"You wouldn't," he growls.

"Of course I would." Her eyes blaze. "I am the Sword of the Jedi."

The charges move in for the kill, all five of them slamming into Kueller and detonating at the same time. The explosions rip his armor apart, sear into the flesh and blood beneath. It is agony. It is an end. The last thing that he sees is the girl, watching him calmly through the haze of smoke as the Force unfurls from her slim figure and lashes through the frost-tinged air like the beat of mighty wings.

Chapter End Notes

It's been a long time since I went full nerd on fighting styles, so, as a refresher: Shien opening stance, Ataru opening stance (Obi-Wan was a Form IV practitioner before switching to Soresu), and Niman opening stance. Kueller's Disarming Slash is a Shii-Cho move. The technique that Valin uses on Tahiri is Trakata, which he first uses in Chapter 5 of LYG. Incidentally, that Valin/Tahiri face-off is dedicated to Rinso, whose comment about wanting to see him kick her butt for shooting his sister inspired that scene.

Rey says "You promised" in Chapter 9 of LYG, when she's trying to snap Ben out of Exar Kun's trance.

What Snoke says to Kylo about the sacrifice is lifted from Lumiya's spiel to Jacen Solo as he was undergoing his Sith training.

"Pateesa" is Huttese for "sweetheart," most often said with sarcasm.

The Force ability that Rey uses to set off the pyro denton explosives is known as Combustion.

I myself tend to get bogged down by the angst in this fic, knowing that I still have a while to go before I can write the happy ending. I sometimes forget how Ben and Rey were each other's "safehouses" and how that old dynamic will be a crucial element in his redemption and their reconciliation. That last flashback is dedicated to solikerez, whose touching meta reminded me ;)
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Still so hashtag blessed by the response to this fic. Thank you, darlings, you keep me young and writing! I love the Valin Horn fanclub that seems to have sprung up (because same, guys... same) and I see that the S.S. Valin/Tahiri (VALHIRI) is sailing, which, while not in my original outline, just might be the bit of lighthearted, murderous flirtation that we need to balance out this universe's Ben/Rey pain train. Speaking of Ben and Rey, I'm immensely touched by how invested all of you are in their love story and its happy ending. We'll get there, fam, never fear!

I can't chat long because it's Monday over here and I have to bring my sister to school before heading to the office. This means that our soundtrack that I already forgot to include last update will have to wait until the next one, but please do keep sending those song recs in. I also want to say that, while I realize this is just a silly ol' fanfic, I wrote this chapter as a sort of reminder to myself and to whoever might be reading that There's some good in the world, Mr. Frodo, and it's worth fighting for. Much love to you all from my side of the globe :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What happens next happens in the span of two minutes, although whenever Rey looks back in the years to come it will seem to stretch on for so much longer than that. She climbs up the oscillator's turret with Finn and Valin, setting the charges as they go and glancing down every once in a while to make sure that Tahiri and Tamith Kai are still out for the count. She's the first to the top, the first to peer into several leagues of air and darkness spread below her feet.

Yet there is light here, too: a red haze filtered through the shift of smoke, pulsating as Starkiller Base feasts on a doomed sun. It outlines the two figures standing on the bridge, their hands joined around a lightsaber hilt.

Rey's heart stops cold at the scene. She connects it to the trance from earlier and knows beyond the shadow of a doubt what is about to happen, knows that it is the will of the Force. I will miss you.

Kylo adjusts his grip on the hilt. Even from here, Rey can see that his hand is shaking. She wants to scream at Han to move, to get out of the way, but her tongue is deadweight, her limbs are frozen, that same old hopelessness closing in. She thinks about Anakin Skywalker, who saw Darth Vader in a vision beneath Mortis. She thinks about Raynar Thul, who as a child had glimpsed the amethyst blade that he would one day construct and plunge into Numa Rar's chest, I think that's why he didn't fight it so much when it happened, because he'd already seen it, because he always knew he was meant for it. She thinks about the masked figure in the metal room and how he haunted her for years until it all finally became reality. She thinks about Artorias burning. But most of all she thinks about how the last thing she ever heard before the electric currents hit was Exar
Kun's cold, triumphant rasp: *I told you that you would die in battle.*

("*Can the Force tell the future?*"

"*Sometimes there's only one way the story can end.*)"

All of this happens in a second, maybe less: A scarlet blade shrieks to life. Kylo's pensive brown eyes never leave his father's face. And Rey—

— sees the future before it unfolds, and thinks, *No.* The epiphany slices across her mind with all the brilliance of a solar flare. Too much has been lost. More still will be taken. But not this. Not if she can help it.

("*I'd rather make my own ending.*)")

*†*

Chewbacca's bowcaster thrums in his hands and fires of its own accord, eliciting a startled grunt from the Wookie.

A blinding pain suddenly explodes in Kylo Ren's side. The blade meant for his father's heart plunges into Han Solo's shoulder instead, carving a crooked path downwards as Kylo falls to his knees. *I've been shot,* he realizes, perhaps a bit stupidly, one hand clutched over the wound.

Han's body is sent flying backwards, over the bridge, into Chewbacca's arms.

Kylo looks up. Rey is still looking down. Their eyes meet.

All of this happens in two seconds, maybe three. But time is frozen for them both. It doesn't start again until Chewbacca detonates the charges.

†
"Go!" Rey yells at Finn and Valin as they tear away from the crumbling structure. "Find Chewie and see if—" Her voice catches—"if you can do something for Han—"

"What about you?" Finn demands.

"He's going to go after me," Rey says, shuddering at her memory of the furious, deranged look on Kylo's face. "He wants the map and this lightsaber. I'll distract him while you get Han to the ship."

"No," argues Finn, "we came here for you, we're not leaving you behind—"

"Oh, don't worry, I really will kill you if you leave me behind!" Rey snaps. To Valin, she says, "Find me in the forest, all right?"

Valin hesitates. "Rey..."

"I have to do this," she interrupts in a tone that brooks no further argument. "I need to do this. It can't be anyone else but me."

* 

The Force means that there are people to whom others exist as points of light moving in the dark veils of space and time. The Force means that Rey is stumbling through the false night, beneath the barren trees, when Han Solo's light wavers and then blinks out.

"No!" Her cry of pure anguish is met with the faint rumbles of several distant earthquakes as Poe Dameron's lasers find their target and the subterranean levels of Starkiller Base begin to burn. Too late. I was too late. When she senses Kylo's presence behind her, she almost doesn't turn around. She entertains the thought of running— just running and letting him chase her and never looking back until the planet implodes and they fall into eternal chasms and are swallowed whole by darkness and by fire. At least that way it will all be over. At least that way it ends.

The lightsaber hilt throbs at her side.
She spins on her heel to glare at him and, if she thought he looked like shit before, he's so much worse now. Strands of hair cling to his forehead, slick with sweat and snow. His already pale complexion has been leech'd of all color save the sickly gray pallor that stains the edges of his cheekbones and the skin under his sunken eyes. The void in the Force where Han Solo used to be is written all over his face.

"We're not done yet," he croaks through chapped, bleeding lips. His eyes are glazed over even as they stare at her, unblinking. "Give me the map and that lightsaber." His energy signature is a twisted, frenetic thing, reaching greedily for her despite the fact that he hasn't budged an inch from where he stands.

"You killed your father," she hisses, horror and disbelief clawing at her chest.

"The map," Kylo repeats as if he hasn't heard her. His smooth, deep voice is wooden and dull. He sounds like he's in shock. "That lightsaber— it belongs to me."

"Come and get it, then!" she yells, igniting the blade.

This is something that Rey will never admit to anyone else, not even to the silent ghosts that walk in her steps: a small, bruised part of her nurses the fragile hope that Kylo Ren won't lunge. Against her will she's thinking about how he told the stormtroopers on Jakku to stand down, how reluctant he'd been to take the offensive in the Ravager and on Takodana, how carefully he'd healed her wounds in the interrogation room. She doesn't realize until this moment in the snow how hesitantly — how tremulously— she's been entertaining the notion that perhaps Ben Solo is still somewhere in the seams of that forbidding black regalia and, when the scarlet crossguard lightsaber singes the air, she feels like she's lost him all over again.

The initial clash of blades is swift and vicious on Kylo's end, Rey's teeth ringing with the brute strength that he channels into each blow; she herself moves as if dazed, trapped in the autopilot of block and dodge and parry. Without even thinking about it, she's falling back into Soresu Form, letting him take the lead in this strange dark dance through the frozen woods. Too much, she thinks again. War demands sacrifice but this feels like too much.

When he corners her against a tree trunk, the solid heat of his body presses against hers and his lightsaber's quillon comes within a hair's breath of digging into her shoulder. But she can't muster any sense of urgency or panic— just a melancholy, bone-deep exhaustion as she peers up at his narrow, imperious features in the glow of blade-light. She wonders if she's going into shock as well.
Hold me, she nearly says. I need someone to hold me. Maybe I even need it to be you.

She'd asked something similar of him before, hadn't she? Yes— they had been in his room, Numa Rar's death still fresh and sharp in the air between them. She remembers him lashing out, trying to draw her into an argument. *Ben,* she'd said, grief overcoming her pride, *please be kind to me.* Yes, that was her at sixteen and, oh, how she'd loved him even then.

Fury swells anew in her heart. It is what drives her to finally fight back, to push into the blade-lock with a sudden burst of adrenaline. They spring apart just as a faint tremor rocks the earth beneath their feet. She watches him watch her across the space between them, his expression as resolute as it was in the interrogation chamber— but now there is something in his eyes, something wild and distant, as if he's not really looking at her but at a nebulous future glory that only he can see.

He lowers his arm to opening stance, the crossguard revolving on a wrist spin. It's a flourish that she recognizes from their academy days; seeing it now tugs at her heartstrings, where her memories of him are so irrevocably entangled. Those same memories are what come crashing back as she leaps forward, as they duel with the cold biting into everything and scarlet and sapphire seesawing through the shadows, through frostfall. There was Ben teasing her in the hangar bay, wiping grease-stains from her cheek in the courtyard, shielding her in the temple of Exar Kun. Here is Kylo Ren snarling and pouncing, all mad eyes and predatory gait.

His attacks grow sloppier and sloppier with every second that passes, swings too wide and footwork almost nonexistent. She gleans the faint, eerie impression that something is taking him apart from the inside and, in the liminal moment between his haphazard parry and countering thrust, she manages to get in a shallow slash across his upper arm. He twists away from her and, somehow, she doesn't think it's the pain that's making him cry out like that, that hoarse, desperate scream that ends in clenched teeth and a rough exhale.

"It's over," she tells him. "This whole base is going to blow. You should get out while you still can."

"Not," he rasps, "until I take what's mine."

Kylo straightens up, pounding a gloved fist into the bowcaster wound in his side. Rey watches blood drip onto the snow in inky patches, thinks that, yes, she knows this, too. Pain as fuel, and Luke's stern admonition against it.

She plants her feet more firmly in the icy ground, bracing herself for the surge of power that harnessing the Dark Side will no doubt give him. In this, she is not wrong; he launches an offense
sequence that is vicious and relentless, driving her backwards as the two of them kick up flurries of silver white, the fierce arcs of their blades scraping at tree bark and chopping off low-hanging branches that litter the snow in their wake. When they finally stop, it's because she's teetering on the edge of a precipice, so close, so close to falling.

The intersected lightsabers bleed into each other, casting a muddled purple glow over Kylo's face. Rey stares into his eyes, at the blaze that is reflected there and mirrored, she's sure, in her own pupils. Night air blows cold against her spine and she wonders if this is it, her second death, going over the edge at his hands.

"Yield," he whispers, shaking. "Please."

("Had enough yet? Say 'Solah.'")

"What happens if I don't?" she asks, matching his tone.

("Solah.")

He doesn't respond. It's there between them, that other cliff, that cruel red day. On Corbos, she'd slipped and—

("Don't you dare let go." He had sounded angry and yet he looked terrified beyond belief as his fingers gripped her by the wrist while she dangled over the sheer drop.)

But that's no longer who he is. As if to prove it, he leans more of his weight against her, causing the heel of her boot to skid a precarious few centimeters closer to the ledge. She fears that he is truly capable of killing her in his present state of mind, and it is this fear that sharpens the current of brooding, restless energy prowling through her system, that has been there since Artorias, steadily being nourished by one harrowing event after another.

("You really are going to break your neck, brat," he'd grumbled.

"Nah," she'd teased. "You'll never let me fall.")
She forces their blade-lock to the side, her beam scraping against his in a cloud of deadly sparks, and then takes the offensive. Back they go, retracing their steps through the woods. If he is a predator, then she is the storm all around him, laying siege to his defenses, blowing through his ripostes and leaving his form in shreds as she enumerates marks of contact in her head. *Cho Mok*—cut to the thigh. He loses his footing, drops on one knee in the snow for a scant half-second before lunging at her again, but she's ready for him. *Cho Sun*—slash along the weapon arm. Whatever focus the Dark gave him seems to be slowly fading away while she has never understood those old Sith words as well as she does now. *Through passion, I gain strength.* Anger, fear, hatred—if you let yourself feel any of these hard enough, you can move *mountains.*

When Kylo falls once more, Rey is a creature of instinct, the Skywalker lightsaber pulsing a sonorous hymn as she brings it down over his head. *Through strength, I gain power.* He evades and wraps his off-hand around her arm for leverage, tugging her to him at the same time that he pulls himself up. His lips graze her cheek, his breath hot and harsh on her skin. She reels back, her startled eyes meeting his for a brief moment before she slashes at him from the side. They're too close together and there's no time for him to angle away from her, so he catches her wrist in one gloved hand to stop its violent trajectory, squeezing so tightly that the blood drains from her fingers. There's a flash of red at the corner of her eye; she mirrors his tactic, gripping his own wrist and forcing the point of his lightsaber down to the ground. *Through power, I gain victory.* It is the clumsiest kind of grappling match, the two of them straining against the other's hold, chest to chest and his pelvis digging into her abdomen, their thighs in parallel lines and their blades a broken slant of scarlet and sapphire.

("*I need to move.*")

He's trembling. So is she. He bows his head, pressing his lips to her shoulder. She shuts her eyes against the poignant sight of snowflakes tangled in his lashes, hides her face in his soft, soft hair that smells like winter and like smoke as she exerts more pressure on his arm. *Through victory, my chains are broken.*

("*I need you to move me.*")

His lightsaber short-circuits, red disappearing into white. His grip on her wrist goes slack and she automatically lashes out, her blade slicing from his brow to his cheek. The Dark is a howling thing inside her, all around her, as she towers over him and raises her arms for that last strike. He blinks up at her, flat on his back in the snow, and she takes one look at the horrid gash that she has carved into that face, once so beloved, and she—

— bursts into tears.

*The Force shall free me.*
Rey extinguishes the lightsaber and taps it to her belt before falling on her knees beside him. "Ben," she sobs, and it is the first time she has called him by this name since they met again on Jakku. "Ben, Ben, I'm sorry." The words spill out in a rush along with these awful burning tears and the guilt that she's held like a sword over her heart for so, so long. "I should have come up with a different plan, I should have moved faster, I was so stupid—" The earth groans as a new chasm opens in the distance; from far away, it sounds like a Leviathan's roar. "It was my fault. They took you and it was all because of me— I'm so sorry—"

Kylo doesn't say anything, merely gazes at her with those wide dark eyes and she can't bear it, she flings her arms around his neck and throws herself across his broad chest, weeping into his collar. "Come back with me," she begs, even though it was her own actions that led him to this place where he has killed his father. "I don't care anymore. I don't. We'll figure it out together like we always have. Please, Ben, let's just go home." It doesn't matter that her words are garbled and desperate or that the temple where they grew up lies in ruins. In her weariness she knows only that here and now in the snow and holding him is the most rooted she's felt after everything that has happened. My rock, my anchor, she thinks, just like she thought on the day they fought Exar Kun and he brought her back from the brink of darkness. My friend, my family, my first love—

Her arms tighten around him. She feels his pulse rattle below hers, tachycardic and uneven, and the reality of it— of his heartbeat, finally, at last— makes her cry even harder. She's eighteen years old once more, the world slow and cold after Corbos, afraid that she will never see him again. "Please." She kisses his temple, his jaw, her lips wet and salt-streaked from her own tears. "I just want to go home, Ben. I don't care, I've gone past caring. Come with me. Ben, come back to me—"

The sentence collapses on another sob when he stirs, clamping one arm around her waist while the other snakes upwards to cup her nape with one large hand. "I can't," he grates out, still in that hoarse, dull voice. He doesn't seem to mind that her knee pokes into the bowcaster wound or that loose strands of her hair sting the deep slash across his face as he rocks her back and forth. "It's too late."

It's too late. He had told Han Solo that on the bridge, thinking about dead Jedi Knights and blood on the sand and the Hosnian system disintegrating into red light and space dust. He tells Rey the same thing now, only there's another sin to add to all the others, the look on his father's face when the blade ran him through. The Supreme Leader had promised that this act would make him strong, that it would be the final blow to all the lingering attachments that stood between him and his destiny. Yet he has never felt more drained than he does now, and Rey is kissing the side of his face, compulsively tangling her fingers in his hair, sobbing in his arms. There is none of the grasping urgency that characterized their encounter on Jakku— just gentleness, such gentleness, how long has it been since anyone touched him like this—
"Listen to me." He turns his head to murmur the quiet command in her ear. He's not entirely sure where it's coming from— he should have been fully cemented in the Dark by now, but for some reason there is Light, it is peeking through the cracks, it is dredging up something long forgotten, something that his mind had locked away to spare him. "It wasn't your fault. I lost my footing on the Leviathan. Because of me, you ran out of time."

Who speaks? he wonders. These are not his words. They belong to someone else, a boy he had destroyed for being too much like his own father. Dead father, dead now. The First Order is zeroing in on their location, he feels their presence moving through the trees and knows that Rey has to get out of here. It takes no small effort to extricate himself from her grip but he manages it, pulling away so that he can look at her face, his fingers tilting her chin up so that their eyes might meet. Her nose is red, her hair is a scraggly mess, her bottom lip is quivering, and her cheeks are wet with tears that shine in the half-light. My beautiful girl, he—or someone that he used to be—thinks, flashing her a wan, crooked smile. My strong, beautiful girl.

The earth shakes again and he sees his chance. He has to time it just right. "It wasn't your fault," he repeats, ignoring how the wound in his side groans in protest as he leans forward, his fingers still hooked under her chin. "I made a choice that day, and I'd do it all over again. Anything for you. My friend, my family—" He bends down, sees her watery eyes widen as his own start to drift shut. "My first and last love," he whispers, brushing his lips over hers in the barest ghost of a kiss. "Until we meet again, cyar'ika."

He pushes her away from him at the exact moment that the ground splits apart between them. Snow and trees fall into this new abyss and Kylo Ren sags back on his elbows, dizzy from blood loss. He hears Rey calling a name that isn't his as he looks up at the night sky, waiting for gravity and momentum to carry her to the other side.

* 

It is survival instinct that has Rey jumping to her feet in a mad scramble to outrun the steady collapse of the earth. It is the echo of Kylo's words in her ear and the lingering sensation of his mouth on hers that has her looking back just in time to see a host of dark figures emerge from the trees and flock around him. It is common sense that has her disappearing into the woods before she is spotted, plunging through the shadows and the slush for what feels like ages upon ages, until she is caught in the blinding white-hot glare of the Millennium Falcon's navigation lights.

* 

She has only a vague recollection of clambering onboard the ship, of falling into Valin's arms and
the familiar warmth of him eliciting a fresh wave of tears. "Hush, it's all right," she hears him say when she comes back to herself, smoothing a hand over her hair the way he used to console Jysella when they were younger. "I had to put Han under to slow the damage but he's— ouch, what was that for— I'm sorry I scared you, Rey, stop hitting me—"

She dreams.

After Chewbacca made the jump into hyperspace, Rey had gone to the medbay to confirm with her own eyes that Han was alive— although you wouldn't think it to look at him, stretched out pale and still on the gurney with all biological functions suspended and a gaping stab wound that started from his shoulder and then pooled down to his chest.

"While the blade narrowly missed his heart, it pretty much tore up everything else," Valin had explained. "Lungs, ribs... It was beyond my capacity to repair, so I made the call to put him in stasis— at least for now."

Rey had shivered, staring at Han's corpse-like visage. No movement, not so much as a single eyelid twitch. Morichro was the eeriest of the Force powers, the ability to shift someone into the realm between dead and not quite, but the important thing, for her, was that Han would live— that Ben Solo had not killed his father. Only then had she finally crawled into a bunk and allowed herself to fall asleep.

And now she dreams.

She recognizes this place from her first death. There is the river, the green leaves, the orange blossoms. All shrouded in a fine gray mist. She recognizes, too, the tall, copper-haired man standing on the shore with his back turned to her.

"He called me cyar'ika," she tells him, still somewhat unable to believe it.

"It is an old Mando'a word." The voice is solemn, resonant. "It means 'beloved.'"

"I know that," Rey snaps.
The man laughs. A rough, stilted sound, so rarely used. So much like Ben's. "Another brunette with a temper, I see. Must be a family weakness."

Rey narrows her eyes at him. "Back on Takodana, you stopped me from recognizing you in my vision. And then you made me forget all about it."

"I did."

"Okay," she breathes out her annoyance, willing all she has learned from communicating with oblique, uncooperative holocron gatekeepers to come to the fore. "Why?"

"Because it had to be your decision," says Anakin Skywalker. "The Force guides our steps, but how much of that is the Force, how much is us? You would have spent your whole life wondering. You had to realize on your own that you still want to save him."

"Snoke's going to do it all over again," she says bitterly. "Whatever—progress—was made on Starkiller Base, he's going to twist it, turn it into something ugly. If not erase it altogether."

"I do not deny that. But at least now you know. Just as there is a part of Ben that will always know." Anakin sighs. "This Supreme Leader as he styles himself— he speaks in my voice sometimes. I can only do so much, can only keep so many memories safe from the rot, but you are the Sword of the Jedi and you will wield my lightsaber in battle and you will bring my grandson home. Or drag him home kicking and screaming, which is more likely," he adds with a hint of grumpiness that nearly makes her smile for how much it reminds her of someone else.

"Wait," Rey says when this dream of the Netherworld begins to fade, as her mind slowly starts to climb towards waking. She has one more question. "Why me? That is— why would you reach out to me, specifically—"

Anakin doesn't turn around but Rey can hear the wistful smile in his tone when he replies. "Long ago, I met someone with eyes like yours. They say she was the reason I fell but she was the first person I looked for after the pain, after the burning, after it all. She was my connection to goodness, and it was the son she bore me who brought me back to the Light. When my time came, I went without fear. Because I knew she was waiting for me."
Rey wakes up.

Finn is dozing in a chair beside her bunk, his head hanging at an awkward angle and his brow a mess of worry lines. He stirs when she does. "Hey," he tentatively greets.

She stares at him. Her dream of the Netherworld has jogged another memory. The bad years are coming, Numa Rar had said. I already know that you're strong enough to face them. I ask only that you remember how to be kind. Rey had forgotten that, as she had forgotten so much else.

Finn scratches the back of his head. "Are you all right?"

("It's not vengeance I seek."

"What, then?")

"I will be," Rey says. "Thanks."

("Grace.")

Chapter End Notes

Rinso was the first ever reviewer who asked me if I could pretty please not kill Han in this AU. This was a while back (in fact, I think it was as far back as the LYG days) and it made me contemplate what would happen if Han lived, how that would change the angle of Kylo Ren's redemption... and, so, voila :) The bit about Ben and Rey both blaming themselves for what happened while fighting the Leviathan was inspired by this comment by lizzpercush. Kbourne2012 also mentioned about really needing them to "cuddle or something" so here's some snow cuddles for you, bb! Such as it is xD

The conversation about Raynar foreseeing the amethyst lightsaber and whether the Force can tell the future takes place between Rey and Eryl in Chapter 17 of LYG. This is also the chapter where Rey loses her footing on the cliff, while Numa Rar asks her to be kind in Chapter 18, "You'll never let me fall" is from Chapter 20, and "I need you to move me" is from Ben and Rey's sparring session in Chapter 12.

Mando'a.
Moricrho.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

I'm very excited to bring you this chapter because, not only does it tie up some more loose ends from LYG, but it also moves us out of the canon timeline. The next installment will kick off the Sword of the Jedi series' last major arc after a plot interlude of several months. I'm looking forward to writing intergalactic warfare, starship battles, and, of course, redemption :) As more themes have been expanded and more ideas continue to occur to me, it's becoming a long shot that we can wrap in 23 installments. I'll try my best to keep it at 30 or below, though. Thank you so much for all the wonderful reviews, and I do hope that you enjoy this new chapter!

Soundtrack (I had to split this into two parts because I've missed several updates and the list was getting unwieldy; if your song rec isn't here, it will be in Chapter 18 for sure):

1. Nitesky - Robert Koch feat. John LaMonica (suggested by nemo)
2. Mourning Doves - Mikky Ekko (nemo)
3. Please Don't Go - Barcelona (nemo)
4. Suckerpunch - Delain (meritmut)
5. Can You Hear Me - Poets of the Fall (meritmut)
6. One Love - Marianas Trench (jandjsalmon)
7. Hurts Like Hell - Fleurie (Kendra)
8. Echo - Jason Walker (Kendra)
9. Ghost (Room 93 version) - Halsey (ReyloArt)
10. Mammoth / Pace Is the Trick - Interpol (Katherine)
11. Je te pardonne - Maitre Gims feat. Sia (ViolaTheForceWhisperer)
12. Hold On We're Going Home - Vancouver Sleep Clinic feat. GXNXVS (AzAngel11)
13. Here To Mars - Coheed and Cambria (ReyloRobyn2011)
14. Stand By Me - Tracy Chapman (B)
15. Palms - Allman Brown feat. Liz Lawrence (anon)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rey suspects that, for as long as she lives, she will never again see anything as incandescent as the look on Leia Organa's face when they wheel a comatose Han out of the Falcon and explain what happened—that the rend that weakened her knees in the command center had not been so final and cruel a thing, that the grim spectre of loss had stayed its hand for once. Rey witnessed the dying gasps of Han and Leia's marriage through Ben's thunderous silences and acid-laced remarks; she thinks she might be seeing another beginning unfold as the General presses a kiss to her estranged husband's pale forehead right there in front of everyone on the airstrip. Ben had used to kiss Rey like that, sometimes, rarely, and she realizes that had already been love as he'd understood it, actions learned from watching his parents through the years.

She hears Poe calling Finn's name a split second before the Resistance pilot bounds up to them and the two men grin and clasp each other by the arms while BB-8 weaves excitedly between their
legs. A blur of red hair and Jedi robes collides into Valin, who wastes no time in lifting Jysella off her feet and spinning her around as they both laugh in relief.

Surrounded by all these reunions, Rey's own smile starts to ache at the corners, her lips burning with the faint echoes of sensation. Until we meet again, cyar’ika.

However, she doesn't have long to wallow in self-pity—soon Jysella has latched onto Rey and pulled her into the hug as well. Rey allows herself to savor the moment, the comforting warmth of her dearest friends, before she draws back and asks, "How's the Hawk? Did she make it out all right—"

The Horn siblings groan in tandem. Valin clucks his tongue. "Typical."

"Yes, Rey, the ship's fine," Jysella assures her. "Everything in top condition, including Obi-Wan's lightsaber that you put in the storage locker."

"Lightsaber."

"Damn." Rey's hand flies to her utility belt in an automatic yet futile search for a hilt more familiar than that of the Skywalker blade. "My—"

Valin's brow creases in sympathy. "Probably went down along with Starkiller Base, in wherever they kept it after disarming you, kid. Sorry."

"It doesn't matter." Rey shakes her head, struck by the guilt of mourning something that, in the grand scheme of things, is appallingly trivial compared to what has been lost these past few days and what there is still to be grateful for. "There are more important things to..."

She trails off. A reedy figure of medium height is approaching them with a tread that seems lighter than air, her skin a soft turquoise color and her eyes shaded a starry indigo, daylight tangling into the iridescent feathers that crown the delicate bones of her head. Like Jysella and Valin, Tiu Zax had not been planetbound at the time of the Siege. Unlike Jysella and Valin, however, Rey's only seen her once or twice since then, as she has been studying the Force tradition on her homeworld and serving as the Jedi's eyes and ears along the Sanrafsix Corridor.

The Omwati do not respond to human cues for affection. Instead, Tiu greets Rey in the formal Jedi
manner—bowing slightly at the waist, the hands folded in front of her hidden from view by the wide sleeves of her robes. It is a gesture that Rey returns in kind.

"We've got a lot of catching up to do, my friend," Rey says once they've both straightened up.

The avian characteristics of Tiu's morphology have become pronounced in adulthood. She cocks her head like a sparrow observing something unusual from its perch; when she speaks, it is in a lilt that calls to mind the whisper birds of Yavin 4. "I think your life has been rather more interesting than mine as of late."

* *

As Tiu's presence signified, the entirety of the Jedi Order has converged upon D'Qar following the Hosnian system's destruction. Rey debriefs in a room full of her Masters and fellow Knights, although her gaze keeps flickering to a shock of blond hair hanging back in a dark corner far from the crowd.

"I say we move now," hisses a dusky-scaled reptilian Barabel, her red eyes flashing. "Strike while the First Order is weakened."

"We are weakened, too, Master Sebatyne," Kyle Katarn reminds her. "The loss of the Republic fleet has dealt us a bad blow."

"Bad, perhaps, but not crippling," argues Saba Sebatyne. "We still have the warships stationed at the borders, as well as the Resistance's own navy and our allied planets."

"Master Sebatyne is right," Kyp Durron drawls from where he's leaning against a console panel, arms crossed. "Kashyyyk, Dac, and Coruscant will stand with us for sure. So will most of the Inner Rim systems."

"I would thank Master Durron to refrain from speaking on behalf of my homeworld," Cilghal wryly admonishes, "but, yes, Dac has always fought against evil and will continue to do so."

"Before anything else," says Corran Horn, "we must confirm the status of the First Order's remaining ordnance so that we'll know what we're up against. I propose doing recon of the Unknown Regions—"
Tionne Solusar clears her throat. "I believe there is a fundamental misunderstanding as to the
nature of this gathering. This is not a council of war but a conclave of Jedi. If you'll notice, there
are no military officers present—"

"You sure about that?" Kyp challenges, his brown eyes settling on Katarn. "I'm looking at one right
now."

"I put that life behind me a long time ago," Katarn replies in a calm voice. "Now I serve the Light,
as do we all. It is not our role to determine the next step— that decision is in General Organa's
hands. I counsel prudence."

"Prudence is what doomed the Republic!" growls Saba. "Had those senators acted to shut down the
First Order before it was fully mobilized, all of them would still be alive instead of cosmic debris!"

"The Republic still lives, Saba," says Kirana Ti, "and we are its peacekeepers, not its soldiers.
While I do not deny that we have been taking on a more active role these past few years, it is time
perhaps to review the extent of our involvement. What we're looking at is the possibility of another
civil war."

"In that case, our only concern should be which side we stand on!" snaps Kyp. "Force, the way
some of you talk, it's as if the First Order didn't slaughter our Knights and apprentices last year."

"The Jedi's path shall not be guided by vengeance," Tionne sternly declares. "Master Skywalker
would say the same if he were here."

"Well, then, where is he?" Daeshara'cor, the green-skinned Twi'lek who has been relatively quiet
thus far, bursts out. "I am sorry to say this but Master Skywalker has left us in the lurch. We need
his guidance now more than ever."

Given how she and Finn met, Rey should be used to coincidences by now. However, there is a part
of her that can't help but think that the Force really does work in mysterious ways—or, at the very
least, has a good sense of dramatic timing—because, at that exact moment, C-3PO pokes his head
into the room and tells everyone to come quick, R2-D2 has woken up, the map has been restored.
As the Jedi file out into the narrow metal hallway leading to the Resistance base's command center, Rey finds herself *accidentally-on-purpose* drifting into the blond man's orbit. That is to say, she wants to stay as far away from him as possible but, when the motions of the silent throng push her nearer, she allows it with an air of challenge, almost reckless. And finally they are walking side by side, and she is the closest to Raynar Thul than she's ever been in four years. A lifetime ago.

It takes only a cursory glance to ascertain that he is not the same spoiled, arrogant bully that she remembers from Yavin 4. The ostentatious, brightly-colored robes are gone, replaced by deep and somber brown. His face has a pinched quality to it, milky white skin giving the impression that it's been stretched too thin over bone and vein and whatever else lies within one who stared too long into the abyss before finally turning away. It's his ocean-blue eyes, though, that have changed the most— they seem ancient, faded at the edges. If Kylo Ren on Starkiller Base had appeared to be gazing over her shoulder at intangible future glories, then Raynar Thul here and now on D'Qar looks like one who has already seen all of it come to pass.

He stiffly inclines his head in her direction. "Sword of the Jedi." It's strange that it's the voice that has managed to stay the same— Alderaanian accent, imperious drawl. "Allow me to express my belated condolences."

He's talking about the Siege on the Praxem. Rey exhales as she ponders her next move. What else is left to be done after the ache of everything? Perhaps we take what we can get. "They were your friends, too, Raynar," she says.

And that, for some reason, feels like enough for now.

* Kylo Ren had spent most of the voyage drifting in and out of consciousness, bleeding through the strips of sterile gauze that Alema plastered over the wound in his side after he rebuffed all attempts at Force healing. He needs the pain to keep him grounded. When he is finally ushered into Snoke's presence, he has no idea what system they're in, which planet they orbit. He knows only that Snoke is furious with him, a cold gray wrath that permeates the vast, echoing hall.

"Kylo Ren." Something stirs in the shadows before which he has prostrated himself— out of respect, certainly, but also because he can no longer stand upright. "You have passed the trial; Han Solo is dead and you may now go forth unencumbered. But Starkiller Base has been destroyed and you do not even have the map to show for it. The Resistance is doubtless on its way to Luke Skywalker even as we speak."
"I will gladly bear the punishment, Supreme Leader," Kylo mumbles into the hard ground, from between curled-up arms. "I ask for guidance, not mercy."

"As well you should. Despite my best efforts, she continues to trick you— that lowly scavenger."

"She is the Sword of the Jedi," whispers Kylo Ren. He had glimpsed the Knighting while trawling through her memories in the interrogation room.

"I am aware. I looked out through Kueller's eyes in his last moments, before she tore his body apart. Interesting, is it not, that they speak so highly of light and peace but do not hesitate to channel the darkness when it comes to saving their own skins? What a comfort to know that you and I are above such pretense. Truth is our armor and our triumph."

Kylo should say something to affirm Snoke's statement. He knows this, he knows. But he's thinking of Rey's broken nose, the swelling in her left eye, the blood and spit on the floor. He's remembering the murderous rage and overwhelming regret that had numbed him to his fingertips, how his initial reaction had been to think, Kueller is a dead man before it hit him that it was his own actions that led her here. He'd had a moment of double vision then— of the summer sun bringing out Rey's freckles as she smiled up at him, so sweet and shy and—

("— absolutely devoted. The last time I saw the two of you together, I knew that you'd finally started to feel the same—")

A sharp, splitting pain lances through Kylo's skull, connecting with the ever-present throb of the lightsaber wound on his face. He has stayed silent too long; Snoke is displeased. "Two Memory Walks and a hundred lashes daily until I deem it sufficient. You may not heal yourself. Consider this the last stage of your training. If I am pleased with the results, you shall be formally recognized as my heir. To rule after me when I have become one with the Force."

Kylo is on the edge of delirium, gone feverish with pain. "Break trail so that I may follow," he says without knowing why. Where has he heard those words before? A silver dawn, a golden pyre, a field of blue and green light... The image fades away before he can hold on to it, and now he's left wondering about the regimen that Snoke has just prescribed. If it will drag on for a year, just like last time. If it will hurt as much.

The Supreme Leader is quiet for a while. When next he speaks, his voice has softened into something almost conciliatory. Soothing. "I sense your fear, my boy. Do not worry. The Jedi
would have you lock such an emotion away but *I* have given you the tools to harness it, to turn it into *strength*. I believe in you. Now, are you ready?"

*I want to go home*, someone who is not Kylo Ren thinks in the coldness of that chamber. But there is no longer any home to go back to. There is no longer any one in their right mind who would welcome him with open arms. He is alone.

"Are you ready?" Snoke repeats with a hint of impatience.

Kylo offers a listless nod, the uninjured side of his face still pressed to the floor. And then the pain begins anew.

*The Millennium Falcon* dips below Ahch-To's cloud cover on a damp, windy afternoon. From space, the planet had seemed entirely covered in water but closer scrutiny reveals a plethora of rock formations strewn throughout the blue velvet seas. Rey takes the ship low, the blasts from its repulsorlifts eliciting white-capped waves and Rey's gaze glued to the viewport as the islands rise all around her like silent sentinels holding up the sky. Some are made of coral, with palm trees and sandy beaches and little coves; others had broken off from the mainland centuries ago, their jagged shores teeming with mangrove forests. There are also islands that had formed from the sedimentation of limestone and clay, their bare cliff faces lined with alternating bands of ochre and pale gold, and islands that the great volcanoes had spat out, dense carpets of emerald foliage draped over uneven fire-carved slopes.

Rey wishes that she had someone to share this sight with. After entrusting the *Falcon* to her, Chewbacca had accompanied Kyle Katarn to begin the maze of negotiations that would hopefully result in the Wookies entering the fray at the Resistance's side, while Jysella had gone with Cilghal to Dac to jumpstart similar talks with the Mon Calamari. The other Jedi have missions of their own, and Finn is busy divulging all he knows about the First Order's armaments and tactics to Leia's High Command. Rey has Artoo but he doesn't really count— for all the human-like complexities afforded to them by various protocols and subprograms, droids still lack the imagination required to be awed by the natural world.

Sometimes, though, Rey *wonders*. C-3PO thanks the Maker, which means that there is some concept of religion lodged in those circuits, and there were rumors back then, weren't there, of rogue GNK knockoffs forming some sort of cult, going from door to door to ask for funding...

Tearing her gaze from the islands, Rey studies Artoo as he patiently waits by the dashboard,
uttering the occasional beep. He'd gone dormant after Luke left but, apparently, BB-8 had triggered an activation sequence that led to him waking up just as Rey arrived on D'Qar and he'd parsed the map with data about the old Jedi Temples, retrieved from the Death Star's memory banks so, so long ago.

"Artoo," Rey says, "who is the Maker?"

11,584 HoloNet results found for "maker," "creator," Artoo replies after a few moments of frantic whirring, "the Father," "progenitor," "god-king..."

"I meant your Maker," she hastily corrects.

Industrial Automaton in Rordis City, Nubia—

"No," Rey tries again, "the Maker that C-3PO is always talking about."

The astromech droid pauses, dredging up the requested information from his hard drive. Skywalker, it beeps at last. Anakin Skywalker.

"Oh, never mind," Rey grumbles. And then she adds, "Thank you, anyway."

In her memory, a younger Ben Solo snorts and rolls his eyes, endlessly amused by her compulsion to be polite to droids when she has to actively remember to do the same around organics. Before she can dwell on it further, her attention is caught by the faint, familiar spark of a Force signature she hasn't sensed in ages, and she steers the ship towards its source—a island that eerily resembles the bifurcated pyramidal structure that had been Exar Kun's temple before Rey destroyed it in a blaze of X-wing cannons. It is mostly gray rock with sparse patches of grass upon which flocks of birds congregate, only to take to the air in a whirl of feathers when the Falcon nears. Upon disembarking, Rey and Artoo stare at the steep, terraced shelf carved into one side of the mountain.

"You'll have to stay here," Rey tells the droid, who emits a disappointed beep. "Sorry, Artoo."

Her heart is in her throat as she begins the long climb. The salt-laced wind is brisk and invigorating at first but, by the time she's halfway to the peak, it's blowing cold against the perspiration that beads her temples and her spine. The muscles in her thighs are burning and her lungs feel like
they're on the brink of collapse, and yet she plows on. The Force is strong on this planet, it moves through the air in rich currents that she can practically taste on her tongue, and from it she draws endurance for the grueling, monotonous ascent.

The terrain flattens out at one-hundred-and-eighty meters above sea level. As soon as Rey hauls herself up the last couple of steps, she sees a cloaked, hooded figure standing at cliff's edge, facing the ocean, silhouetted against it and the sky.

("The Force is the energy that courses through all living things, binding the galaxy together. It is what makes us luminous.")

She approaches him, her legs still shaking from the climb. He turns around slowly, cybernetic hand lingering on the hood as he slips it down. She stops in her tracks. They regard each other with caution and sorrow and the weight of years, the uncertain silence between them amplifying the roar of the waves, the lonely cries of faraway gulls, and the hum of the Force.

("There is an academy on Yavin 4— a Praxeum. Sometimes, Ben and I travel the galaxy looking for new recruits. This time, our steps took us to the Western Reaches.")

The wind stings her eyes. She blinks, and suddenly the world blurs.

("This time, we found you.")

"Master." Rey can't decide whether she wants to laugh or cry, so she does both. "I really, really want to hit you right now."


Memory Walk— otherwise known as Torture by Chagrin— is the most sinister and exquisite of Dark Side punishments. Ben Solo had read about it in primary sources so old they were written on paper, either sealed up in scrolls or bound into books. Developed by Rokur Gepta, the last Sorcerer of Tund, the technique entailed mentally probing the subject's mind and causing them to relive their worst memories, from the ones that were merely embarrassing to the ones that had broken the
heart. Kylo Ren knows that it's for his own good, of course— Gepta had discovered that all subjects, after an appropriate recovery period, displayed higher intelligence and efficiency, and the ones who were Force-sensitive became better conduits of the Dark Side. That Snoke would choose to tax himself in administering such a treatment is a mark of honor, a sign that Kylo is accepted, valued, prioritized above all others.

And yet—

The jarring contrast between his and Rey's versions of the past has called forth another snippet from the insatiable quest for knowledge that had characterized his youth. It was also possible, wasn't it, to make the subject's memories even worse—

The thought disappears before he can take it to any sort of conclusion. He is six years old on Coruscant; the latest in a long line of nannies has just quit and the palace droids have somehow managed to develop self-preservation protocols that make them extremely skittish around a child who likes to conduct experiments on how far he can telekinetically manipulate their inner wiring. Leia has no choice but to take him with her to committee, not even bothering to hide her annoyance as she drags him through the hall by his wrist— he is small, so small, he has to break into an awkward half-run to keep up with her pace— and sits him down in an antechamber with terse instructions to stay put. He does as he is bid, slouching in his chair and feet swinging a few inches off the floor after his mother leaves. He scratches at his mop of black curls, fidgets with the pair of dice on a string that he keeps on his person at all times. To this day, he still hasn't figured out whether there'd been an audio feed piped into the room, or if the walls had been too thin, or if the senators' voices had been too loud. He hears them gossiping as they wait for order to be called. Such an odd-looking child, shame, really, his mother is so beautiful—

Do you think they're grooming him for politics, it's in his blood, after all—

I have heard that he displays some talent with the Force, perhaps he will join Skywalker's Jedi on that dreadful little moon—

Or become a smuggler like his father— the scandal—!

Goodness gracious, and to think that Leia could have married Prince Isolder—

This, Kylo remembers, is where it begins— the shame, the resentment, the tips of his too-large ears flushing red. These senators are all dead now, they had perished in Starkiller Base's attack on the Hosnian system. He has exacted his vengeance on them. And on Han Solo.
Scenes fade and shift and blur into one another. He endures his life all over again. Getting shipped off to Yavin 4 by parents tired of dealing with their moody, unwanted son. Snapped at by fellow apprentices for interrupting their sleep whenever his nightmares make him scream. Constantly scrutinized by the older Jedi who know that Darth Vader's blood runs in his veins. Losing his first sparring session to Raynar Thul as his uncle looks on in derision, such a disappointment, not worthy of my legacy. Eating lunch alone in his room while everyone else gathers in the mess hall and talks about him behind his back, strange boy, unbearable, I have no idea what he goes on about half the time, evil child, loser, creep. Someone else's voice in his head, telling him to come away, to come to a place where loneliness will not matter, where he will be cared for and understood and trained to realize his full potential. Glory. Find me. The Stygian Caldera. The Daragon Trail. The midnight sky.

"You see now where you went wrong?" Snoke asks. "All those years of grief could have been avoided, had you only heeded my call sooner. Why didn't you?"

Rey had happened. Ben Solo found her on Jakku and, for the first time in his life, he had a friend, someone to look after, someone who saw past his flaws and was content to hang around him anyway—

"No," hums Snoke, sounding amused. "That's wrong. She thought you were a monster, didn't she?"

Yes. Of course. Ben is fifteen years old, nearly sixteen, and Rey is much younger still, out there on the swirling dunes. The other scavenger who had tried to hurt her is frozen in the air, his eyes wide and the purple veins on his forehead throbbing. Ben is staring at his paralyzed victim with a curious expression, so this is what the Force can do, so this is how to hold someone else's life in your hands, while Rey is staring at him in horror.

"She could never have loved you," Snoke continues, as if this is not a thing that Kylo Ren already knows, has always known. "Her affinity with the Light is too strong. She never wanted any of your darkness."

Kylo nods. "Yes, Supreme Leader." In the hallway of his memories, Rey barges into his room after Numa's death. He's trashing the place in the depths of anger and mourning; a chair ricochets towards her and she reacts quickly, magnificently, suspending the errant piece of furniture mid-flight. The disgust is on her face is apparent, mirroring his own opinion of himself at how close he'd come to hurting her.

"The Jedi made her into a weapon. A weapon they used against you."
"Yes. They did."

"And yet," Snoke sneers, "you wasted no time in making a fool of yourself the moment you reunited."

The nature of the Walk changes. Now it feels like hundreds of electric bolts are sinking their thorny hooks into Kylo's skin. There he is in the bowels of the *Ravager*, writhing against her, panting like some overgrown beast. Stupid and pathetic, falling for it all over again. He attempts to recoil from the scene but Snoke won't let him, holding him there with the mental equivalent of sharp talons. Humiliated, panicked, wanting only to escape, he does what Rey did with the memory of Eryl Besa, turns the clock back—

"All of it was real. And now all of it is gone."

Snoke growls in displeasure. "I see that even now the Jedi attempt to derail our progress. Much more work needs to be done."

In realspace, a tendril of Dark energy slices across Kylo's back. He bears it with nothing more than a muffled grunt; Snoke likes to add one lash for every scream and, in any case, it doesn't hurt as much as it did when he'd first experienced it. He is stronger now. The Supreme Leader has made him so.

*

Rey is officially sick of crying. Before the chain of events that started on Artorias, the last time she'd carried on like this had been the day of the Siege, when she'd sobbed her way through her Knighting ceremony. That was a year ago. The past few days, however, have reduced her to a weepy mess and it doesn't seem like it's going to stop anytime soon.

To his credit, Luke waits until she's finished furiously scrubbing at her face with the sleeve of her robes. He opens his mouth to speak but she beats him to it. "Why did you leave?" she bursts out. "We needed you. I needed you. But you just—" She makes a frustrated gesture that encompasses him and this sprawling archipelago planet. "You just—went away—"

Luke gestures to the temple ruins. "Would you like to sit down? I will tell you everything."
Her master's hair has faded to gray. It hangs about his face, which in turn is wrinkled and sunburned, rubbed raw by wind and salt. As he folds himself into meditation pose across from her on an ancient stone platform, his movements contain a trace of stiffness. It's only been a year since he left, but now she sees the things that went unnoticed back when they were constantly in each other's presence. Crow's feet, smile lines, a slight sag to the skin around the cheeks, a certain diminishing.

Luke Skywalker is old.

"I was not in a very good place after Numa's death," he begins, and Rey startles a bit at that because she had been expecting him to say the attack on the Praxeum. "I kept replaying it in my mind, wondering if things could have gone differently. On that courtyard, in the heat of the moment, when I stopped her from killing Raynar, I was certain that I was doing the right thing. But as time passed, I felt her absence keenly, every day, and suddenly— suddenly, I wasn't so sure anymore. I got to thinking that I feared the Dark Side too much and she had died in service to my principles." He holds up a hand to forestall Rey's argument. "No. I am not telling you all this in a bid to be comforted. You asked me why I left, and I am trying to describe my state of mind as best as I can so that I can give you the answer you deserve."

Rey holds her peace. Luke stares out at the water below. "It was not the first time someone had died because of me. Padme Amidala drew her last breath to give me my first. I convinced Owen Lars to purchase R2-D2 from the Jawas, and I was not there to protect him and Beru when the Imperials tracked Artoo to our homestead on Tatooine. Master Obi-Wan dueled Vader so that I would have time to escape. And Vader himself died to save me from the Emperor. My entire life— this legend—" His lip curls— "has been built on the sacrifices of others. And all that old guilt, it came crashing back when Numa Rar fell in battle at my command."

"I didn't know," Rey mumbles, shame-faced. "None of us noticed—" But that's not entirely right, is it? "Perhaps you could very kindly hint to Solo to go easy on Master Luke," Finn Galfridian had told her on that long-ago day before they left for Corbos. "He hasn't been the same since Exar Kun, and his nephew being more of a jerk-ass than usual is just stirring up the mynock's nest."

"I had to keep it together, of course," Luke continues. "I had an academy to run. Then again, I wasn't even a particularly good teacher, was I? When Alema turned to me in desperation and in grief, cradling her sister's body in her arms, the first thing I did was snap at her."

("Master, please," Alema had whispered, "there is a way to bring her back— the transfer— the red
“Did Exar Kun tell you that?” Luke's harshness had surprised Rey as well. “Were you still letting him into your mind even after your twin fell, Alema?”

Perhaps that was where her disillusionment with the Jedi Order began,” Luke says now. “Those careless words that I spoke in a fit of temper, they planted a seed that grew into what ultimately drove her to follow Snoke. I have already told you, Rey, that I blame myself for what happened to Ben. The truth is, I blame myself for Alema, too, and for Raynar. Perhaps if I'd implemented more structured teaching methods or been less morally absolute or... I don't know.” He offers a vague, helpless shrug. "The inaugural class— Corran, Tionne, Cilghal, all of them— they came to me as full-fledged adults. I do not know what possessed me to believe I had the capacity to raise children properly. The fact that most of you turned out as well as you did is a testament to your individual characters, not mine—"

“You did your best,” Rey insists. "You gave us a good life. You kept us safe—" He shoots her a mild yet quelling glance, and she bites her lip against the rest of her words. Right. That's not the point of this.

“When Ben betrayed us, something in me just... snapped. I barely even remember getting into that X-wing— or, more accurately, I wasn't thinking clearly, still on a bacta high. I knew only that my connection to the Force had become tarnished over the years and I had to find a way to make it whole again. I am nothing without the Force. Such is the life I have carved for myself— the life that I had to carve for myself so I could pass on the way of the Jedi to a new generation. And it was also the survival of the Jedi that I was thinking of when I left— I wanted to divide the First Order's attention. So that the rest of you would not suffer too much, would not have to fight as hard. For Snoke to truly succeed, I must perish. Because I am the one who destroyed the Death Star, I am the doom of Vader and Palpatine. My name has become one with rebellion.” Luke shudders. "Such is the life I have carved for myself,” he repeats in a lower, more haunted tone of voice, before he shakes himself free of the demons that plague him. "And now, Rey, it is time to discuss our next move. I have learned some things here on Ahch-To that I believe will help us destroy Snoke—"

("Personal isn't the same as important. Not for a Jedi.")

("When I first met him, he was just some goofy farmboy from Tatooine. You should've seen him. Stars in his eyes.")

("Luke Skywalker ushered in an age of chaos when he brought down the Empire and he will continue to be a symbol of that chaos for as long as he draws breath—")
"Master, wait," she interrupts. "There are some things that I have to tell you, too. About Ben. About me. But first—" She breaks out of meditation pose and gets to her feet, keeping her eyes on Luke until she bows her head, bending at the waist. A gesture of deepest respect, and perhaps it is the first time in her life that she has ever meant it so fiercely. "It was an honor to be your student. You are the greatest man I know."

Chapter End Notes

_Tiu Zax_ first appears in _Chapter 5_ of LYG.

_Saba Sebatyne._

_Barabel._

_Memory Walk._

When Kylo says, "Break trail so that I may follow," he is subconsciously echoing Luke's eulogy for Numa in _Chapter 11_ of LYG. That is also the chapter where Luke snaps at Alema and where Rey nearly gets hit by a chair when she walks in on Ben's tantrum.


_GNK power droid._

_Cult of the Power Droids_ a.k.a my favorite bit of Star Wars lore lmao

_Industrial Automaton._

The memory of Ben Force-stunning the scavenger and Luke's recruitment speech to Rey is in _Chapter 1_ of LYG, while Snoke's "glory, find me" quote is first mentioned in _Chapter 4_ and Luke's "these are the first steps" is in _Chapter 6_. Finn Galfridian (I MISS HIM) asks Rey to tell Ben to be nicer to his uncle in _Chapter 14_.

_Rokur Gepta._

_Sorcerers of Tund._

Kylo's POV of the dry-humping scene was inspired by Emmyjean's meta and is dedicated to Kendra, who wanted a glimpse into what was going on in his mind at the time. I, too, love that scene very much and I plan to revisit it xD

I leave it to the reader to interpret which parts of the Memory Walk are true and which parts have been tampered with by Snoke.
A new installment so soon? YES. Even though real life is super hectic right now, all the amazing comments last chapter inspired me to update as quickly as possible. Thank you, dearest readers! No soundtrack today as I have to get ready for work, but: "Little Talks" by Of Monsters and Men. Listen to it and let's be sad together.

It's six months after the fall of Starkiller Base and Leia Organa is glaring daggers at a hologram of Sien Sovv, who is glaring back just as viciously. If looks could kill, there would be two bodies dropping to the floor right about now—one in the command center of the Resistance base on D'Qar, and the other in the headquarters of the Galactic Alliance Defense Force on Coruscant.

"I'm telling you, Commander," Leia grits out, "we must put a stop to the invasion of the New Territories. Otherwise, the First Order is going to sweep through the Outer Rim before making a hook-shaped turn to Coruscant."

The gray-skinned Sullustan's dewflaps quiver with irritation. "You have the gift of prophecy now, General? My forces are stretched thin enough as it is, especially with Fey'lya insisting we build a perimeter along the Bothan sector. I can't afford to send troops to the northern quadrant based on a hunch."

"So pull out of the Bothan sector—"

"And risk losing Fey'lya's cooperation?" Sien thunders. "Lose the Bothawui Shipyards? Their assault cruisers are the only reason I have not yet pitched myself out of an airlock in despair, madam!"

Leia struggles not to roll her eyes but it's hard going. "Borsk Fey'lya would not dare jeopardize the Galactic Alliance—his people would roast him alive. There is no love lost between them and the Imperialists. Remember the Martyrs, Commander." She switches tactics. "Sien, please. The New Territories have always been fiercely loyal to the Republic. They need our help."

"I am sorry, Leia." Sien's expression is resolute. "Efficiency dictates that we focus our limited ordnance on protecting the major hyperlanes leading to the Colonies and the Core. Implementing this strategy, we can engage the First Order from a position of strength, on a battlefield of our own..."
choosing."

When the comm ends, Leia stares disbelievingly at the empty space where Sien's hologram used to be. "That pompous little man!" she seethes. "A 'hunch'? I've spent half a decade gathering intel on the First Order and studying their movements—"

"Commander Sien's reputation for tactical engagement is unparalleled but he is not a strategist," Luke Skywalker observes. "He is merely adopting the same principle that led to our decisive victory at Endor while neglecting to account for all the commerce raiding and pinpoint strikes that served us well back then."

"I'm certainly not going to wait around until he comes to his senses," Leia snorts. "We need to make a stand at the northern quadrant— slow the First Order's advance while we build up our forces." The two siblings exit the room but she keeps muttering, almost to herself, "If we can amass even just a couple of Star Destroyers for a counterattack at, say, Helska IV..."

"Leia," Luke sighs. "When the Galactic Alliance was formed after the destruction of the Hosnian system, you promised to work with them. Naturally, that would involve not commandeering their SSDs right out from under Sien's nose."

"Oh, what do you know?" Leia grumbles in the frustrated, sulky tone that she uses whenever her brother is in the right and she's none too pleased about it. She has no obligation to guard her temper around Luke; he is an adequate foil for her less-than-diplomatic side, weathering it with an ethereal serenity that, while sometimes maddening, is more often than not exactly what she needs.

She's in a complaining mood today, though. "The Galactic Alliance," she repeats with a note of censure as their steps take them through a winding maze of dimly-lit metal corridors. "A fine name for a military government."

"There are almost no veteran politicians left," Luke reminds her. "In any case, it's only a temporary measure. Commander Sien, Commodore Brand, and the rest of them are good men."

"They're soldiers. Soldiers who suddenly have executive power over hundreds of systems."

"The Republic will get back on its feet." Luke pats her hand reassuringly. "You're going to see to it that it does."
They're both quiet when they enter the medbay, the doors parting before them with a hiss. Han Solo lies in stasis, hooked up to intravenous drips that pump nutrients into his veins and machines monitoring heart-rate and brain activity that eerily show the same flat green line, with slight twitches that are too few and far between. He had not emerged from his coma even when Valin Horn lifted the *morichro* trance— in fact, his vitals had immediately started destabilizing, leaving Valin no choice but to put him back under. No one knows when he's going to regain consciousness — or if he's ever going to.

"Poor Han," Leia murmurs. "Missing all the action. Again."


She smiles. "Remember when he woke up and found out you had become a Jedi Knight? He accused you of having delusions of grandeur."

"He didn't seem to mind my delusions when I was saving us from that Sarlaac." Despite his mildly affronted tone, Luke's blue eyes twinkle. "I'll also never forget him pointing that blaster in Lando's direction, telling him not to worry because he could 'see a lot better now.'"

"Lando told me afterwards that his entire life flashed before his eyes right at that instant."

The twins allow themselves a soft, warm moment of nostalgia, gazing down fondly at the pale, still member of their little Rebel triumvirate. But it's not long before they have to shift their attention to weightier issues. "Speaking of Lando," Luke says, "when is his next check-in?"

"Tonight," Leia replies. "I hope he's made some progress."

"In my experience, there's nothing that Lando Calrissian can't find, especially with Mirax Terrik loaning him her own vast network of underworld connections," Luke muses. "It's a matter of getting to it before Snoke does. We must assume that he— or, more likely, some lackey of his— is the mystery buyer that Lando heard about several months ago. I could kick myself, really. We had the Eye of the Sun in our vaults for the longest time. We just didn't know what it was capable of."

"Luke, don't blame yourself. In the days following the Siege, an ancient chunk of rock would have also been the farthest thing from my mind."
"Still."

Yes, Leia thinks. Still. Once the fate of the galaxy is in your hands, taking the fall for every little thing becomes a habit. She is all too familiar with that.

"Ben was the one who retrieved it from Cularin. Him and Ganner Rhysode," says Luke. "I'm certain that's how Snoke became aware of its existence."

Leia bites her lip. Oh, it cuts deep, this old betrayal, like a scar that will never mend. What makes it even worse is that, from what Rey had told her, Ben feels as if he had been the one betrayed—which, in reality, isn't too far off the mark. There were so many things Leia should have done differently, back when her son was still growing up.

"It's not too late." Luke reads the tangle of her thoughts as effortlessly as only a brother can. "Do you recall what I said to him at his Knighting?"

"'Our family has always come back to the Light,'" Leia intones and, even after all these years, the skin on her arms breaks out in a multitude of goosebumps. "It was the Force speaking through you on that day, Luke, and I've been holding on to it like you wouldn't believe. Sometimes, though, that future seems so out of reach. Particularly after..." She gestures at Han, unable to bring herself to say the words.

Luke nods. "Snoke is very clever. I wouldn't be surprised if he set it all up as some sort of test—destroying the academy, killing Han— in order to cement Ben's allegiance to him. He had to realize that, at some point, Ben and Rey would meet again and she would challenge those altered memories. Therefore, he had to weave a net of sins from which there is no escape. I would wager that it is hopelessness now, more than anything, that keeps this construct called Kylo Ren in the Supreme Leader's thrall."

"We should get a message to him," Leia whispers. "Find a way to let him know that his father lives. That all is not lost..."

"We must leave that to Rey. She alone can judge when would be the right time to tell him. If his state of mind is as volatile as she said, we have no idea how he'll react to the news— whether it will drive him deeper into darkness, or let the Light through. Better that it comes from her directly. She has always been his..." Luke pauses, searching for the right word. "His neutralizer."
"It's a silly thought on my part," Leia volunteers with a self-deprecating laugh, "but, along with so many things, I regret that I wasn't around to— to watch my son fall in love."

Luke grimaces, startling another laugh from her. "As his uncle, believe me, the second-hand embarrassment was nigh unbearable. He flirts like Han."

"Oh, stars." Leia shudders in mock horror. "I can imagine."

"In hindsight, the other Masters and I did not handle that as well as we should have," says Luke. "I built the New Jedi Order from scratch and there were many precepts that I failed to contextualize. I lifted the prohibition against romantic attachment but I did not... integrate such a change with the existing Code. It was a non-issue at first— Corran was already married, with children of his own, when he came to me, and Tionne and Kam Solusar fell in love much later on, after they were proclaimed Masters. I did not account for young love, the all-consuming nature of it, and the older Jedi followed my lead. We were more concerned with how passion belongs to the Dark Side when we should have emphasized that the other aspects— selflessness, devotion, loyalty— are all anchors to the Light. It is no small wonder that Ben felt trapped— that what should have been a joyous thing only added to his sense of isolation and acceptance of the downfall that Snoke conditioned him to believe was inevitable." Luke clears his throat, regarding Leia somberly. "I have already shared these thoughts with Rey on Ahch-To. I also told her that I sometimes wish that she and Ben had been born closer in years. That would have made it a little easier."

"Han's a decade older than I am," Leia points out before realizing that her tumultuous relationship with Han might not be the best argument for a large age gap.

"The two of you didn't grow up together," counters Luke. "I can see how Ben might have also felt guilty because of that, on top of everything else. However—" And here the expression on his face softens— "Rey's response put me in my place. She said that, yes, if she'd been born earlier or if he'd been born later, it might have indeed been easier— but it wouldn't have been theirs."

Leia beams. "She's really going to bring him back, isn't she?"

Luke chuckles. "To tell you the truth, I feel sorry for anyone who tries to stop her."

Preoccupied with firing at the Resistance soldiers that stand between them and the refugee camps
of Dantooine, the stormtroopers don't notice their own empty Atmospheric Assault Lander flying through the air until it's on top of them. Only the few who look up, wondering why the sun has suddenly been blocked out, manage to scramble out of the way of the 17.83-meter-long vehicle before it crashes into their battalion, grinding a hapless one-third of their number into dust.

Kyp Durron whistles long and slow as he glances at Rey. "Okay, that's got to be some sort of record. Even Master Luke only managed to lift an X-wing—" He stops mid-sentence because Rey is no longer beside him; he finds himself staring, dumbfounded, at the frenzied blur of brown robes and sapphire light that has hurtled forward into the melee, cutting down all the stormtroopers in her path.

"Master, are we charging now?" Valin Horn asks, perplexed. "Did you give the signal?"

"No, I didn't give the signal," Kyp sighs, igniting his own blade. "But we're definitely charging now."

As the months passed, the sweeping grasslands of Dantooine have become home to civilians fleeing the invasion of Artorias, Dubrillion, Destrillion, and other northern quadrant worlds. Far removed from most galactic traffic, the planet lacked the industrial settlements that would have made it a strategic conquest, but it seems that the First Order is more concerned with sending a message to all Republic systems—although in truth the Republic exists nowadays in name only, propped up by the interim wartime coalition government on Coruscant.

Rey collides with Lieutenant Finn of the Resistance somewhere in the middle of the battlefield, the two of them effortlessly sliding around each other with her lightsaber deflecting blaster bolts meant for him and his EL-16FHE rifle waylaying the stormtroopers that shoot at her. "Status report!" Rey yells over the deafening roar of several Concussion grenade launchers going off at once.

"Our eastern flank got hit hard by their pincer move!" Finn yells back. "Do you mind—?"

"On it!" She claps a fortifying hand on his shoulder, her fingers digging into the well-worn leather of Poe Dameron's flight jacket, before tearing herself away. East, she sends out into the telepathic link formed by battle meditation with Saba, Valin, Kyp, and Tiu. Jysella is elsewhere because, few though their numbers might be, the Jedi Order has an unspoken rule: the Horn siblings do not fight on the same battlefield. It is a kindness, one of the few that the war can allow.
By the time Rey gets to the collapsing Resistance perimeter, Saba Sebatyne is already there with her green lightsaber flashing and blaster bolts ricocheting uselessly off her tough, scaled skin. The aggressive and territorial Barabels are fearsome in combat— in fact, it's only Saba's position as a Jedi Master that's saving the stormtroopers from getting their arms brutally ripped off. Eventually joined by Valin, Kyp, and Tiu, Rey does her part in holding off the First Order advance until a couple of X-wings barrel from the stratosphere in an ungainly dive, scattering in pieces all over the grass, and she lifts her gaze to what had shot them down.

It's another rapid-deployment transport, several times bulkier and more massive than the AALs, cannons sticking out like spikes as it descends. Rey hears Finn cursing in the distance, shouting at his men to fall back and prepare the EMP Launchers, and it doesn't take long for her to figure out why— a horde of strangely-shaped, vaguely humanoid figures marches down the transport's ramp, their metallic appendages glinting in the afternoon sun.

"We might be in trouble," Valin concedes.

* Kaye Galfridian, heir to the Artorian throne and member of the Resistance, props herself up on her elbows and grimaces at the crude, gushing mess of a wound that a Z6 baton had left on her thigh. The grass beneath her is soaked through with red but there are other soldiers even more grievously injured than she is, here in the makeshift triage area at the edge of the battlefield. She's more or less resigned to bleeding out before one of the overworked med droids can tend to her, so it comes as a surprise when a blond man in Jedi robes drops to his knees at her side. It's more surprising still when she realizes who he is.

"Lord Thul," a lifetime of courtly etiquette prompts her to say. His father died three years ago; the title has passed on to him in absentia.

"Your Highness," Raynar drawls, his calm ocean-blue eyes fixated on the wound on her thigh as he pours healing energy into it, mending flesh and muscle and vein.

The last time she saw him, she'd been a child visiting Yavin 4. At the age of thirteen, he'd been like most other scions of noble houses— conceited and standoffish, with a mean streak a mile wide. The same traits that Finn Galfridian outgrew as he ventured further along the Jedi Path before ultimately carrying her heart to the halls of their fathers. She knows, of course, about Numa Rar's murder and Raynar's subsequent exile; her gaze strays to the markedly bare band around his waist. "No lightsaber?"
"As the Masters have not cleared me for active combat, I may not yet wield a blade."

"This is a battlefield."

He flashes her a tight-lipped, enigmatic smile that vanishes as quickly as it had appeared. "I have the Force."

Before Kaye can press the issue, she spies the huge transport ship that's landed in front of the camps and is now dislodging its grotesque, twisted passengers. "What the hell are those?"

Raynar studies the creatures for several moments, a terse clench to his pale jaw. "Technobeasts," he says at last. "Sithspawn mutants, created by infecting living organisms with a virus called the nanogene spore that grows metallic tumors over their bodies and lobotomizes their frontal lobe, rendering them incapable of higher thought."

"Evil cyborgs?" Kaye groans. "Just when I assumed that this day couldn't get any worse."

* 

They look like they're in pain, Rey thinks once she's pushed her way to the front ranks of the Resistance and gotten a closer look at the technobeasts. Bits of flesh poke out at random places in their cyberkinetic frames; they move slowly, as if lumbering through immense agony, and those who have retained discernible facial features seem horrified at what they have become. The nanogene spore was created via a combination of Sith alchemy and mechu-deru, a Dark Side technique that bestows an intuitive understanding of mechanical systems. It's obscure technology predating the Great Sith War, and the First Order has somehow gotten their hands on it.

Despite their clumsiness, the technobeasts are heavily armed with skewers, saws, and jagged blades extending from their elbows. They're relentless, too, overwhelming the Resistance troops in vicious, never-ending swarms. Quite a few are brought down by the ion blasts from the electromagnetic pulse launchers that Finn and his men are firing but it's not enough, there's too many of them and more keep emerging from the transport.

Rey wants to help. She wants to protect every single life around her before it can flicker out forever in the nets of the Force. But if there is one thing that she has learned from the old war stories, from the ghosts that linger in the eyes of Luke Skywalker and Leia Organa and Han Solo, it's that saving the galaxy means you can't save everyone. If she can eliminate the person controlling the
technobeasts, she can put a stop to this assault once and for all.

There.

A gigantic, hulking figure has appeared at the top of the transport’s ramp. At first Rey thinks that Kueller somehow survived the pyro denton charges on Starkiller Base but, no, this new Knight of Ren is even taller, with more muscle mass. He steps out from the shadows of the ship, revealing himself to be some sort of mechanical hybrid as well. Plates of black armor have been surgically installed all over his body, with a row of sharp spikes jutting out from his shoulders. His face is bare, and the look that he trains on the sweeping battlefield is one of intense concentration, ice-colored eyes sparkling with red light.

"That’s Irek Ismaren," Kyp mutters. "They say he's got a subelectronic converter in his brain that allows him to manipulate droids and computer systems with the Force."

"We need to take him out." Rey scans the throng until she catches Finn's eye. *Grab an EMP launcher and follow me*, she tells him through the mental link that they've been practicing ever since she returned from Ahch-To, and then she's running, narrowing the distance between her and Irek.

A blast of Force energy knocks her off her feet, sends her sprawling to the grass. She rolls to a half-crouched position and holds up her hands just in time to freeze the two blaster bolts that Tahiri Veila has aimed at her and then send them hurtling through the chests of a couple of technobeasts that have started to converge on her from opposite directions.

"Go, go," Valin urges, stepping in front of Rey to confront Tahiri as she stalks towards them. "I'll handle Gunslinger over here."

"Oh, I'm sure you want to handle her, all right," Rey grumbles before leaping to her feet and continuing her trajectory, Irek Ismaren in her sights.

She's almost there. Almost. But then a blaze of scarlet permeates the edges of her vision and she's automatically whirling to the side and locking blades with Kylo Ren, there in the Dantooine grasslands, in the middle of a battlefield, surrounded by explosions and the screams of the dying.

"Hey." Rey's tone is manic, almost cheerful as she blinks up at the cold, inscrutable planes of his mask. "Long time no see."
Kylo stiffens, exerting more pressure on their intersected lightsabers. "Are you making fun of me?" he hisses.

"No, Ben." No, sweetheart, is what she really wants to say, shocking herself with how easily the endearment hovers on the tip of her tongue.

("What I find amazing," Luke had said on Ahch-To after she told him everything, "is that, despite the emotional trauma that he's undergone, despite the pain of all those false memories, he still loves you. That is something Snoke could not take away. Then again—" And here he had smiled—"my nephew has always been very stubborn.")

With a snarl, Kylo pushes free of their blade-lock, allowing Rey a mere half-second to narrowly dodge his next slash. She takes a few cautious steps backwards, only to realize that five technobeasts have zeroed in on her position, trapping her inside a circle of foes. Her heart sinks even as she assumes a defensive form, securing her lightsaber in a two-handed grip. She had already known that the next time she saw Kylo, he would not be the man who had kissed her in the snow on a collapsing Starkiller Base—Snoke would have made sure of that. But she hadn't been prepared for how much it would hurt.

Despite lowering his crossguard into opening stance, Kylo makes no move to attack. Instead, he cocks his head at her and she can sense his puzzled frown underneath the black helm. He's definitely wondering why the hilt of the heirloom looks longer, why she's holding it differently.

("Do you think it could work?" Rey had asked Tiu five weeks ago, showing the Omwati her hastily-sketched diagram.

"I don't see why not," Tiu had replied. "It would be practical, too, considering its similarities to your childhood weapon. You might want to tweak the modulation circuitry, though, to patch up the differences in focusing power between Ilum and Adegan crystals...")

Spurred on by a sudden desire to goad her opponent, Rey shifts the angle of her elbows, twirling her wrists to give him a better view. She thumbs the second throttle-style activation stud. Another sapphire blade flares into existence, humming in tandem with the first, the two energy beams pulsating right down to the joint where the lightsabers of Anakin Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi have been welded together to form the hilt of a saberstaff.

The smirk that Rey aims at Kylo Ren then is one of challenge. One that she learned from him, back
In the end, Rey had spent nearly forty-eight standard hours on Ahch-To with Luke, meditating, training, and, most of all, engaging in lengthy, brutally honest conversations that scraped their voices raw and taxed them to the limits of their emotional and spiritual tethers. The past had been scrutinized and picked apart, *this is where I went wrong, this is where you went wrong, this is why it's not too late and we must go on,* until, finally, Luke had decreed that it was time to leave.

During the mostly quiet jump back to D'Qar, as starlines shimmered beyond the *Falcon* 's transparisteel viewports, Rey had emerged from the 'fresher and stepped into the main cabin— and into yet another one of those strange fantasies of hers, so solid and crushingly real like the one she'd had on the *Ebon Hawk,* after Jakku.

She saw herself in the pilot seat— or, more precisely, *Ben* was in the pilot seat and she was nestled in his lap, one arm curled around his neck while she giggled and playfully batted at his wandering hand as it tried to creep beneath her tunic. *You're insatiable,* she admonished, and he flushed, burying his crooked, embarrassed grin into her shoulder, mumbling something lost and lovelorn against her sleeve.

*What is this?* Rey had stared at the scene, transfixed, a lump in her throat and the yearning so thick that it was an almost tangible ache pressing down on her chest. *I want it so much, why can't this be real—*

"Rey?" Luke called from the back of the cabin, where he was talking to Artoo. "Are you all right?"

She'd told him then about the daydreams, and he had rubbed his chin, deep in thought. "Do you get them only when you're in hyperspace?"

After a moment's pause, Rey nodded. "I hadn't taken it into consideration before but, yes, the ones that feel like they're actually happening, I get them only at lightspeed."

"Hyperspace is an alternate dimension," Luke had said at last. "We already know that it is coterminous with realspace in that each point *here* is associated with a unique point *there.* Hence the consistency of directions and the occurrence of mass shadows of celestial bodies at the same location that they inhabit in realspace. When we enter lightspeed, we are actually skirting the
borders between universes, and those borders can thin— especially when the traveler is strong in the Force, and able to sense hidden pathways through space and time."

"So what I'm seeing is the future?" Oh, how small her voice had been. Too small for the hope that it tried to keep contained.

"There are many possibilities," Luke had said, warning her in his own way to be cautious in her optimism. "Perhaps they're visions of the future. Perhaps they're simply just that— daydreams—that your mind creates as a temporary escape mechanism. Or perhaps..." He sighed, old and tired beyond his years. "Perhaps there are worlds where it all happened differently. Perhaps these are dreams of what you might have had."

Chapter End Notes

Sien Sovv.

Sullustan.

The name "Galactic Alliance" is taken from the EU but its nature is completely different in this fic.

New Territories.

Borsk Fey'lya.

Bothan Assault Cruiser.

The Martyrs.

Helska IV.

Ben's Knighting ceremony is detailed in Chapter 8 of LYG.

Events in this chapter are based on the Battle of Dantooine.

Dubrillion.

Destrillion.

Electromagnetic pulse launcher.

It is my headcanon that, on Artorias, instead of saying that a loved one has died, people say "he/she carried my heart to the halls of our fathers."

Technobeast.

Nanogene spore.

Sith alchemy.
Rey's new cobbled-together weapon is inspired by the schematics of Darth Maul's saberstaff.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

This update is spectacularly delayed because, aside from work-related matters and my body realizing it needs to catch up on all the sleep it's forfeited this year, I am nitpicky to the point of self-destruction. The only reason I'm posting this chapter now is because I'm sick of rewriting it. Thank you, everyone, for your patience! I hope you're all having a great December so far!

Soundtrack:
1. Silver Springs - Fleetwood Mac (suggested by Kbourne2012)
2. So Cold - Ben Cocks (Kendra)
3. Still Here - Digital Daggers (Kendra)
4. Where's My Love - SYML (Kendra)
5. Let It All Go - Birdy feat. Rhodes (Kendra)
6. In My Veins - Andrew Belle (Kendra)
7. Saturn - Sleeping At Last (Kendra)
8. Never Alone - Barlow Girl (Kendra)
9. How It Ends - Devotchka (lossofblood)
10. Without the Lights - Elliot Moss (lossofblood)
12. For Everything A Reason - Carina Round (wolfstars)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There is a part of Rey that will probably always be at least a little embarrassed by how deeply she mourned the loss of her first lightsaber. Luke had assured her that this was a normal reaction, as the lightsaber was the extension of a Jedi's arm and soul, but she has a feeling that her master will be singing a different tune if he ever finds out that, after they got back from Ahch-To, she had literally spent one whole afternoon wallowing in misery behind closed doors. She still remembers piecing the weapon together, how carefully she had worked, the thrill that ran through her veins when she ignited the beam for the first time. Yes, it hadn't been perfect— she'd crafted it back when she was still in turmoil over Numa's death and Exar Kun's prophecy— but the focusing crystal had been a gift from Ben, however indirectly given, which had rendered it priceless in her eyes.

The war wouldn't wait and so she made do with the Skywalker blade, adjusting her stance to compensate for the difference in grip and relying on Force powers more than usual in the post-Starkiller Base skirmishes. And then there came a day when Jysella, backed into a corner and hopelessly outnumbered, repelled a group of stormtroopers with the same energy blast that had thrown a possessed Raynar off his feet when he attempted to kill Valin all those years ago, and Rey had thought of Exar Kun— and what he had wielded in that ancient battle on Takodana. It might have only been her imagination but, as she got to work on cobbling the two lightsabers together, she had felt Kun there with her, peering over her shoulder with that mournful, defiant sneer. Perhaps I was wrong and you were the one most like me, after all, she'd very nearly heard him say. Your young man and I dreamed the same dreams but you carry my viciousness. When she ignited the twin blades of the saberstaff for the first time, he'd sighed and quietly gone away.
Here and now on the grasslands of Dantooine, the five technobeasts come at her from all sides in a maelstrom of savage fury and gnashing metal claws. *Hive-mind*, Rey thinks, remembering the piranha beetles of Yavin 4. *Hunger*. The virus has made it possible for First Order scientists to graft a variety of weapons onto the infected limbs; there are serrated blades and crude hacksaws and deadly scythes that she must avoid at all costs, with every last bit of skill and instinct honed by fourteen years of training as a Jedi. And yet it almost catches even her own self off-guard, how quickly and easily she cuts down three of her foes in a couple of fell swoops. The saberstaff bestows a faster rate of attack, allows her to slash from any angle, gives her an extra blade to parry with and more hilt from which to derive momentum. Its similarity to her old quarterstaff also lets her channel the feral desperation of that Jakku scavenger child who had learned to injure others so that she could survive. This is muscle memory. This is how she had always been meant to fight.

It is Obi-Wan's blade that lopes the fourth technobeast's head clean off its shoulders. It is Anakin's that rises on the upswing to block the jagged scarlet beam that lashes out at Rey when she turns on her heel.

"You ruined it," Kylo Ren growls.

"If by 'ruined' you mean 'improved,'" Rey agrees congenially and, even as she bats his weapon to the side and springs away from his next strike, she can't help the rush of affection and relief that wells through her bloodstream at how seriously aggrieved he is by the fact that she messed around with his grandfather's lightsaber, an important historical artifact. Ben Solo's in there, he's still in there, and she has to find the right moment to tell him that *Han's alive, come home, we love you*.

However, when their blades clash again, she has to concede that it might be easier said than done. Thanks to the mind probe that had gone both ways, she knows how Snoke framed murder in terms of sacrifice, how Kylo believed that it would take him one step closer to his destiny. If he finds out that he has failed his test after all, it might unhinge him further, render him more volatile in an attempt to rectify the situation. She's brimming with impatience to drag him back to the Light but she also has to navigate, very carefully, the psychological minefield that is in his head.

The fifth technobeast lunges at her just as she's parrying another one of Kylo's strikes. Using her leverage and a fair bit of the Force, she thrusts the intersected beams of red and blue straight through the creature's heart before pushing her other blade at Kylo. With the lethal end of his lightsaber still buried in the technobeast's chest, he has no other option but to duck as best as he can as she swings the three of them around. She grazes the line of his shoulder at the same time that his crossguard skates across her ribs, and it hurts like hell and, much to her own chagrin, a cry bursts past her lips. She *thinks* that he swears under his breath but she can't be sure, they're both spiraling away from each other and trying to gather their bearings.
"Are you—" he starts to say and then stops himself, and yet the rest of the question hangs tentatively in the air. *Are you all right?*

*You couldn't possibly hurt me any more than you already have,* Rey thinks, her confidence flagging, the pain in her side a stern, sharp warning that he is still in the enemy's camp. "I like you much better when you're kissing me." She doesn't know if she means it as a plea or a taunt.

"That was a *mistake,*" he snaps. As if to prove it, he charges at her once more.

She blocks with relative ease; his overhead strike is not as powerful as it *should* have been. "Which one?" she dares to ask, right to his— *stupid, blank, masked*— face. "Jakku? Starkiller Base?" And in a lower, deadlier tone of voice, "Yavin 4?"

He sends her reeling backwards with a Force-push. She doesn't even wait for both feet to hit the ground before she sweeps her arm out and telekinetically sends him hurtling into a gaggle of stormtroopers, and she would have taken another run at him right then and there had Finn and Kyp not emerged from the melee, the latter grabbing hold of her sleeve.

"Lovers' quarrel later, eliminating the cyborg menace now!" Kyp barks. He and Finn both look the worse for wear, as if they've fought their way through a veritable ocean of hostiles to get to her location. Which, in all fairness, they probably had.

Even though he's focusing on the battlefield as he coordinates the technobeasts' attack patterns, Irek manages to sense the first ion blast from the EMP Launcher. It is a ball of crackling white-hot energy and he redirects it with a flick of his wrist, sends it spinning back the way it came— which means that Rey, Kyp, and Finn have to dive to the ground in separate directions to avoid getting fried to a crisp. The patch of grass they'd been standing on is not as lucky; Rey is looking at the scorched black crater as she struggles to stand up. She'd clapped one hand over her side as she raced that final stretch to the transport but the newly-healed skin is tender, feels like it can rip open at the slightest movement. Finn takes another shot, hardly missing a beat— this time, Irek summons the nearest technobeast to leap in front of him, and there's a fierce, bewildered snarl as the ion blast hits the hunched creature in the face, effectively depowering the circuits that have been laced through its brain.

With the ease of three people who have been working together under stressful, dangerous conditions for an extended amount of time, Rey, Kyp, and Finn wordlessly adopt a new plan. The two Jedi switch to diversionary tactics, attacking Irek from opposite flanks while the Resistance
lieutenant lines up the EMP Launcher for a clear shot. Blades of blue meet red as a spindly arm-like contraption clutching a lightsaber emerges on each side of Irek's cybernetic frame. What is it with these people and dual wielding? Rey grouses, spinning to avoid Irek's strike. She brings the other end of her saberstaff down on his spine, only to be blocked by yet another weaponized arm popping out from a vent along his armored torso.

On Irek's right, Kyp has been met with basically the same problem. "You're joking, right?" he huffs at the cyborg. "No one needs four lightsabers."

"If you ask me, Master, I think he's compensating for something," Rey says.

"Don't you Jedi ever switch off?" sneers Irek. His voice is deep, unexpectedly silky for a man currently blocking the sun from Rey's line of sight. Because his own hands are free to use the Force, he punches Kyp square across the jaw and elbows Rey in the spleen, hard enough that she staggers backwards into a formation of technobeasts that have completely surrounded several Resistance soldiers. Eyes flashing, she helps her comrades dispatch the creatures, the sapphire beams of her saberstaff neatly slicing them in half.

The last foe has just collapsed at her feet when she spots Kylo looming in the distance, his lightsaber shrieking like a firebrand through the sun-dappled air. Rey feels the weight of his gaze on her and so she stares back as the Resistance soldiers take aim. He raises his off-hand and is for a heart-stopping moment the center of a shivering red constellation, energy bolts frozen all around him, tinting his hooded black silhouette in a rain of crimson light.

My asteroid field.

Time starts again when Kylo flicks his wrist, redirecting the blaster fire to Resistance flanks. Rey extinguishes one blade and falls into the tight clockwork motions of Soresu Form, and for a while there is nothing but laser ricocheting off plasma, nothing but instinct and sweat dripping into her eyes. She reactivates the other end of her saberstaff— effectively switching to Ataru— once he closes the distance between them, careening into her with all the force of a ton of bricks. This round is more violent than the last, the two of them relying on everything they've ever learned about the other from years of sparring, but he is at a disadvantage because he's never fought her like this before, with two blades to keep track of and the increase in whirling, athletic movements that she must employ in order to maintain the element of surprise. Block, slash, parry, spin, feint, thrust, over the grass and amidst the smoke, forward and backward across the field of combat, pushing their way through bodies and blind to everything else but each other. Rey's pretty sure she comes a few alarming centimeters short of skewering Resistance soldiers once or twice and she definitely sees Kylo Force-push stormtroopers aside to clear his path to her; it's reminiscent of battling the Sith hounds and the Leviathans on Corbos, how seeking each other out had been just another kind of reflex. In a twisted sort of way, nothing's really changed at all.
It happens when she slides to her knees in order to duck beneath one of his wild, wide swings. He goes in for an overhead strike as she rears up to slash at him, and they dodge at the same time by stepping closer to each other. The crook of her blade-arm drapes over his shoulder, one end of the saberstaff high in the air while the other hums in a diagonal slant across his back. His blade-arm curves around her waist, pressing her flush against him as the heat radiating from the scarlet crossguard scorches her hip. They're frozen together like that, absolutely statue-still as the battle rages on all around them. His chest is heaving, the muscles along his scapula tense against her clenched knuckles, the black helm slightly bowed as if the eyes behind it are transfixed on her face. One false move will bring them into contact with the cutting edges of the other's weapon but she decides to risk it, anyway, clinging to him just a little bit tighter. His wrist pushes at her hip in response as he leans into the clumsy embrace. She sighs, and his heart skips a beat.

Muscle memory.

In the skies above, Resistance squadrons have formed a blockade to prevent more First Order units from landing on the battlefield. A TIE fighter is shot down, trailing smoke behind it like a comet as it streaks towards the plains. Rey sees it first, lifts her off-hand to stop it in its trajectory. She has no hope of overcoming the staggering momentum on her own but it's not long before Kylo joins her, their arms stretched out to the side in parallel lines even as they continue holding on to each other. Metal groans as the TIE is suspended in the nets of the Force, only a few meters away from slamming into them with a crack in the viewport and no flicker of life inside, which means that the pilot is dead. Gritting her teeth, Rey pushes back harder, trying to school the whirling mess of her mind into something more serene. Kylo is beside her, surrounding her, so warm and strong and his power heightening hers as the Force flows through them both. It will never fail to surprise her how easily she fits into him, how his chest is a natural resting place for the hollow of her cheek, how his arm is snug around her waist like their bodies were made for each other. She thinks, then, about her vision of them by the waterfall, about those daydreams she gets amidst the starlines. She thinks about a future worth fighting for.

And she wrestles the TIE from his grip and hurls it at Irek Ismaren.

Sprawled on the grass and nursing a couple of broken ribs in the shadow of a cyborg who's armed to the teeth and preparing to deal the final blow, Kyp Durron is convinced that he's a goner—at least, until Irek turns around, distracted by the TIE's rapid approach.

"Now!" Kyp yells at Finn.
Relinquishing her telekinetic hold on the ship, Rey is hit by a sudden wave of overwhelming exhaustion. She's taxed herself too much in such a short span of time. Her knees buckle and she would have fallen had Kylo not automatically steadied her, his off-hand joining the one at her waist as she collapses against him and the beams of their lightsabers vanish.

*Rest now?* she wonders in a daze, her lips brushing the side of his mask. *Can we rest now, Ben?*

*While the ion blast from Finn's EMP Launcher knocks Irek out of the TIE's path, it also discharges several bolts of energy into his chest, wreaking havoc on the complex array of circuits intertwined there. He collapses onto the transport's ramp as the TIE finally hits the ground, sliding forward through the melee and scouring deep gouges into grass and earth.*

The technobeasts falter. Robbed of the central system that controls them, they descend into a mass confusion that quickly allows Resistance troops to gain the upper hand. With the First Order's ground troops depleted and no air support incoming, the tide of battle changes.

*Rey is only dimly aware of any of it. The brunt of her concentration is trained on the silent war between fury and concern that she senses raging inside Kylo Ren. People ebb and flow around them like the river they raced across in their childhood, like all the rivers she promised to ford so she could find him again. *In another life.* She thinks that this could be it, this could be the moment he comes back to her if she'd just open her mouth to speak, but, no, he's letting her go, the space between them widening once more.*

*Don't leave me.* Her fingers curl limply at the smooth plane of metal where his cheek would be. *You're always leaving me.*

He turns his face so that, if he weren't wearing the mask, his lips would brush the inside of her wrist. He holds the position for long enough that he surely must be attempting to kiss her there, surely the sound that he makes is a groan of frustration because he can't... Before she comes to any sort of conclusion about it, he's walking away, his gait purposeful and swift. Tahiri Veila soon joins him, blasters raised to cover their retreat as they disappear into the transport with Irek's
unconscious form in tow. The remaining First Order troops follow suit; a cheer rises up from Resistance ranks when all those bulky AALs and their more fortified counterparts take to the air, perhaps to be shot down by the X-wings, perhaps to escape.

It is sunset on Dantooine. The Jedi move quietly amidst the ranks of the wounded, pausing once in a while to offer words of comfort or to heal what med droids and bacta patches cannot. Everyone exists as a silhouette drenched in red-gold light, their shadows long like rivulets of spilled ink on the dry grass.

"Rey. Help me."

Tiu Zax is kneeling on the ground next to an auburn-haired soldier whose legs have been hacked off by the technobeasts. It takes a mere glance to discern that there's no hope for him— in fact, Rey's surprised that he's still clinging to life by a thread, blood gurgling from his mouth as he tries to speak. She mirrors Tiu's position on the other side of the man and takes his hand in hers, squeezing his fingers gently and suffusing the remnants of his consciousness with whatever soft calming energy she can. How many times has she done this since the war started, how many times has she sat with the mortally wounded and walked with them until she can no longer follow? Luminous beings are we. No one should go into the dark alone.

Tiu passes a soothing hand over the soldier's pale brow. "Death is before me today, like going forth into a garden after sickness," she murmurs in her silvery, birdlike voice. "Like the odor of myrrh, like sitting under a sail in a good wind." His gray eyes widen as if he is being told a secret that only he can understand. Tiu nods at him encouragingly. "Death is before me today," she finishes, "like the home that a man longs to see after years spent as a captive."

After the soldier's head has lolled back onto the grass and his light in the Force has gone out, the two Jedi stand up. "Where is that from?" Rey asks Tiu. "What you said to him?"

"In developing their own Force tradition, my people have arrived at certain perspectives that do not necessarily tie into what you and I learned on Yavin 4," Tiu replies. "For example, the Jedi Code says There is no death' because we are shades of the Force, part of an energy larger than ourselves, and therefore the end of our existence in these forms is not to be overly mourned. On Omwat, they have taken a— shall we say, a more compassionate approach to things? A higher purpose is very well and all, but sometimes people need...

"Kindness," says Rey, who had learned this long ago. You were strong in life. Your spirit will find
Tiu nods. And then she adds in a lower tone of voice as they walk towards the ships, "On Omwat, they study the Force as a single entity— a vast cosmic power that does not adhere to alignments and treats all beings equally. They believe that there is no Dark Side— and no Light, either."

Rey's brow creases. "That's impossible. It's precisely that distinction that guides how we act, how we treat others, how we use our gifts. You might as well say there's no good and no evil."

"False equivalence, perhaps?" Tiu suggests. "If you look at the Qotsisajak, there's nothing in there about 'evil,' per se. Passion, strength, victory, freedom— are these not merely aspects of sentient nature, sentient desires?"

"We do not desire," Rey says flatly. "To desire is to prioritize your own needs over the greater good. If the Masters could hear you now—" She stops, stricken. She sounds like someone. "You see how easy it is to suddenly question what's been drilled into you almost all your life? You see what we have to guard against? Please be careful." She sounds like Eryl Besa.

"I am not agreeing with the Code of the Sith," Tiu says, seeming half-exasperated and half-amused. "Mace Windu was correct when he wrote that the Dark Side burns bright but quickly burns out. However, time away from the Jedi Order has shown me that there is more than one interpretation of what the Force is and how it should be used. There is merit in considering these interpretations if we want to fine-tune our own philosophy. Think of the Jedi as a single organism. In order to move forward, we must adapt." She turns her delicate, blue-skinned face to the setting sun. "Change with the times. Learn from our mistakes."

* * *

Deep in the Unknown Regions, a floating fortress lumbers through the cosmic wastes. Larger than the first Death Star, it appears from a distance as a translucent sphere with two cylindrical poles and a set of curious cone-like structures positioned along the spin axis. The Killik species built it long ago using ore smelted from asteroids and called it Qolaraloq, the World Puller, before it was stolen from them and renamed Centerpoint Station by its current inhabitants.

The hollow interior of the sphere is a carefully-organized assemblage of living areas, strategy centers, mess halls, and isolation chambers. There are other rooms, too— here is the medbay where some of the sharpest minds in the galaxy are hunched over the cavity of Irek Ismaren's chest, rewiring his circuits; here is the vast training area dotted with revolving platforms where Alema Rar and Tahiri Veila spar with a slim, dark-haired boy wielding an electrostaff made from phrik.
metal, his green eyes twinkling with mischief; here is the dimly-lit chamber where Tamith Kai sprinkles blood from her wrist onto the altar of the Fanged God. And, finally, here is the cabin where a mangled, ashen helm lies in state on a black pedestal while a masked figure sits before it, shoulders shaking, head bowed.

"I feel it again," Kylo rasps. "The pull to the Light. I fear that something has gone wrong. Was the sacrifice not enough? What more is required?" He touches his cheek, an echo of someone else's tender gesture on a battle-torn plain, only to angrily snatch his gloved hand back once he realizes what he's doing. "Help me, Grandfather. In my mind he dies over and over again. In my mind the snow and her eyes. I will finish what you started but I need you to show me again the power of the darkness—" The sentence grinds to an abrupt halt. It is usually at a point like this when Darth Vader speaks soothing doctrine in his ear, spins promises of glorious destiny and a galaxy reborn. Fine balm, indeed, after a frustrating failure or one of Snoke's cruel yet necessary punishments.

But this time there is only silence, as if this newfound proximity to the Light is interfering with his special connection to Vader. "Show me," he tries again, "and I will let nothing stand in our way."

A beat. And then—

I will keep you safe.

It's his grandfather's voice as Kylo has never heard it before. Solemn, clearer, and more real somehow, as if a switch in frequencies has brushed away the static veil that he hadn't even noticed was there. He waits, hardly daring to breathe, but nothing else is said. Silence falls once more.

* 

Once the Millennium Falcon pulled out of Dantooine's orbit, Rey had set the navicomp coordinates to D'Qar. However, an urgent communiqué from Leia meant that she'd had to exit the Raioballo sector via the Hydian Way, crossing over from there to the Perlemian Trade Route and then jumping back into realspace when she hit the Adega system. "I wonder why the General wanted to meet us here," she remarks as the gold-lit globe of Ossus looms into view. "Must be highly confidential if she didn't want people at the Resistance base catching wind of it."

"Probably has something to do with Lando," Valin opines. This is where he gives his progress reports, after all. Comms can be sliced so the General isn't taking any chances."
"She commed Rey just now," Finn points out.

"The *Falcon*'s anti-slicing tech is state-of-the-art," says Rey. "It would have to be, wouldn't it, considering what she got up to in her heyday." She pats the dashboard, prompting an exchange of enigmatic but not entirely unsurprised looks between Finn and Valin. "What?"

Valin shakes his head, darting her a fond grin. "Never change, kid."

Once they've made planetfall, Finn immediately stations himself by the viewport, peering down with interest at the forested valleys glowing in the twin light of Adega Besh and Adega Prime. "So this is Jedi headquarters."

"Yours, too, if you ever get around to joining us," Valin says with a casual shrug. He immediately winces— his shoulder is still feeling the aftershocks of having been dislocated by Tahiri earlier.

Rey watches Finn carefully. He's ducked his head, avoiding eye contact the way he does when the conversation has been steered into uncertain waters. "The Resistance needs me as a soldier, not as a Jedi," he mumbles. "But after the war, who knows?"

*While the presence of the *Lady Luck* on the Sanctuary's landing pad signifies that Valin had been right about Lando, Rey's attention is drawn to two other ships— the *Ebon Hawk*, which means that Jysella has also been summoned, and *Black One*, Poe Dameron's X-wing."

"There he is, the man of the hour!" Poe beams at Finn once the *Falcon* has landed and discharged its passengers. "Nice work taking out that cyborg."

"Yeah?" Finn hugs Poe, looking happier and more boyish than he had on the way over. "You didn't do so bad with the blockade, yourself."

"I'm gonna vomit," Valin leans down to mutter in Rey's ear as he walks past her towards the entrance of the pyramid. She sniggers; it's become a running joke these past few months, how Finn and Poe fight like holy terrors on the battlefield and then trip all over themselves to compliment each other afterwards.
"Any idea why we're here?" Rey asks Poe.

"Nah, but I can't wait to find out." Poe has an arm around Finn's shoulders; he beckons to Rey with his free hand. "Come along, Madame Jedi."

She rolls her eyes at the nickname and falls into step with the two of them. Together, they disappear into the Sanctuary.

Chapter End Notes

Tiu's hymn to the dying soldier is from "The Sound of Her Wings" by Neil Gaiman.

There's a dearth of lore regarding the Force tradition of the Omwati so I once again plead creative license. The philosophy they espouse is similar to the concept of the Unifying Force.

"Qotsisajak" is the Sith name for their Code.

Rey expresses doubt about her first lightsaber in Chapter 14 of LYG. The referenced conversation with Eryl Besa takes place in Chapter 15.

Mace Windu writes "[The Dark Side] burns bright but it quickly burns out" on page 13 of the Book of Sith.

Killik.

Centerpoint Station.

Phrik.

Electrostaff.

More information about the Nightsisters' relationship with the Fanged God may be found in "Wild Power" by Mother Talzin.

Raioballo sector.

Perlemian Trade Route.

Adega system.

Slicing.
Chapter 20

I LIVE.

During the holidays I was busy writing a couple of one-shots for the Reylo Fanfiction Anthology's new year event. You can read them here and here, and please do check out the rest of the collection, there's some topnotch stuff!

"Sword of the Jedi" now has more great fanart by lilly-white and rebelelise1776, as well as this pretty edit by reylorobyn2011.

I hope this chapter makes up for the long wait. The last pieces of the final arc are clicking into place and I'll do my best to write more quickly so we can wrap before my personal tentative deadline of March. For updates on how TKC is coming along, you can consult the fic tag on my Tumblr and, yeah, feel free to message me there! Soundtrack will resume next installment because I had a long day at work and I'm about to fall asleep into my keyboard xD Happy New Year!

P.S. ROGUE ONE SPOILERS AHEAD

P.P.S. Thank you, Carrie <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's Leia whom Rey spots first, her profile outlined against the falls as she stands on the balcony speaking quietly to Luke, whose head is bowed towards his twin sister in careful attention. At Rey, Valin, Finn, and Poe's approach, the General turns to face them with a welcoming smile and Rey is for a moment brought up short by just how beautiful Leia Organa is, how her regal features wear the years like grace, how her brown eyes are soft in Ossus' golden daylight. Rey thinks that she would be lucky to age with such resilience— to have fought so hard and lost so much and still be able to smile like that.

And, when Leia looks down to fiddle with the holoprojector, oh. The tilt of her head, the way her long lashes sweep the tops of her cheeks— Rey missed it before but now she doesn't understand how she could have. It's Ben all the way through, with pensive expression and lips just the slightest bit parted. He looks more like his father but he has his mother's air.

"Did you really throw a TIE fighter at Irek Ismaren?" Jysella asks from out of the corner of her mouth as Rey sidles up beside her.

"I mean, I did, but it was Finn who took him down." Rey darts a fond glance at the Resistance lieutenant, who's exchanging greetings with Lando. She's warmed up to him considerably over the past few months; despite their rocky start and his involvement in the Corbos affair, she can't just
discount how he had kept her from completely succumbing to the darkness after Artorias, how he had stormed Starkiller Base to rescue her. It doesn't hurt that the two of them work eerily well together, too.

Luke takes the floor once everyone is settled. "I am certain you're all wondering why you've been summoned here straight from the battlefield. I know you must be tired but this is an urgent matter. First of all, allow us—" And here he gestures from himself to Leia to Lando— "to apologize for keeping you out of the loop as to the nature of Lando's progress reports. We did not want to risk compromising sensitive information due to the fact that he has been searching for something that we believe will be a game-changer in the war against Snoke." His placid blue eyes shift to Jysella, Rey, and Valin. "Do you recall the Eye of the Sun from your academy days?"

"I think so, Master," Valin replies. "That little piece of rock Solo and Rhysode picked up on Cularin?"

Luke nods. "We learned of the Eye's existence thanks to Tionne Solusar's extensive reconstruction of the Jedi Order's history but knowledge of its specific properties and how to activate them were lost to time. It languished in the Praxeum's vaults below our feet and was subsequently forgotten in the chaos following the Siege... However, the ruins of the temple on Ahch-To are replete with carvings from the Old Republic era, and there was one in particular that caught my attention."

Walking over to the holoprojector, he pulls up a series of grainy images— close-up shots of what had been chiseled by some ancient sculptor into the rough, weathered stone. Leaning in for a closer look, Rey's able to make out several Jedi Masters huddled in a circle with their arms stretched in front of them, lines of power rippling from their open palms to the small orb that floats in their midst.

*No, not an orb,* she corrects herself. *It's the Eye.*

The next panel depicts those same Masters in a great, sweeping battle versus what could only be an army of Sith, with lightwhips and saberstaffs and tuk'ata at their flanks. It seems that the Jedi have the upper hand, their leader holding the Eye aloft while the Sith recoil as if a wave of invisible energy is tearing through their formation. There is something different about the Eye now— an etching of a sun has appeared on its previously blank surface, almost covering the entire rock in swirling, stylized rays.

For some reason, Rey finds herself thinking of the black sun emblazoned on Exar Kun's forehead, burned there by the phantom of Marka Ragnos. She shivers.
Luke indicates a cluster of globe-shaped, tentacled creatures avidly watching the battle from the sidelines. "These are Bouncers, a species endemic to the planet Ruusan in the Teraab sector. Tionne has surmised from their presence—as well as the Sith armor style—that these carvings depict events from the Ruusan Campaign."

"The last stage of the New Sith Wars," says Jysella. "It resulted in victory for the Jedi after thousands of years of conflict."

"Yes," says Luke. "All evidence points to the Old Jedi Order creating the Eye of the Sun as a countermeasure against Skere Kaan's Brotherhood of Darkness. It is possible that an artifact so heavily imbued with Light Side energy can be used to destroy Snoke."

"It's possible," Valin echoes with a hint of doubt, "but that's an enormous leap of faith, Master. No offense."

Lando speaks up. "This is where an upstanding citizen such as myself comes in. Earlier this year, word spread around the black market that someone was willing to pay asking price for a Jedi relic called the Eye of the Sun. Finn, when you accompanied me to Yavin 4, it was that particular object I sought on the off-chance that it might have been overlooked when the Jedi transferred all surviving artifacts here to Ossus." He must realize how callous this sounds because he flashes a sheepish grin at the four Jedi present. "It wasn't until a short while after the Hosnian system's obliteration that my sources were able to trace the offer back to a group of staunch Imperialists with links to the First Order's intelligence network. They're most likely as desperate as we are if they would resort to such a method."

"We must now assume that Snoke knows about the Eye's survival into modern times and what it is capable of," Leia adds. "And we need to get to it before he does. Fortunately, we do have a lead... Lando, show them the message."

"Yes, ma'am." Lando taps at the holoprojector's controls and another image flickers to life, rendered in shades of staticky blue, translucent against the waterfalls and forests beyond the temple balcony.

Rey is not impressed. "That's a womp rat," she deadpans as the creature in the holo rears up on its hind legs, sniffing the air with a pointed snout.

"It's shrouded," Lando corrects. "Whoever sent this used an image disguiser to overlay a pre-rendered template on their physical appearance. Watch."
The womp rat cocks its head and stares straight into the lens, long whiskers twitching. It's eerie, the way the little mouth drops open and a distorted voice, filtered through who knew how many layers of scrambling, announces, "I found it. It's with me."

"That message," Lando explains once the holo has vanished from sight, "was relayed to the Lady Luck five standard hours ago. I've been putting out feelers for months, through various channels, but the sender was smart enough to bypass my middle men and contact me directly."

"Could be a trap," Poe remarks, "or an attempt to distract us with a wild goose chase."

"I thought so, too, at first," Leia admits. "However, what you just saw was the decrypted holo. In its original form, it was transmitted in a code developed by Cassian Andor during his early days as a Fulcrum agent for the Alliance. We retired that code shortly after the Battle of Yavin without it ever being compromised, so I think it's safe to say that our mysterious womp rat is a former Rebel who wants to make sure that the Eye ends up in the right hands."

"That still leaves us with the question as to how they got the Eye in the first place," Finn points out, "and how they found out what it can do."

"I'll make sure to ask them," Rey says briskly. "So, where are we headed?"

"That's the part you might not like." Leia hits another switch and a star map unfolds in their midst, hyperlanes outlined in pale green and alphanumerical grid coordinates glowing red. She points to a blinking globe along one route marked Path of the Houses that connects twelve planets before branching off at the northern end into another lane labeled Way of Schesa. "The message was beamed from Sarvchi."

Rey, Jysella, Finn, Valin, and Poe let out a collective groan.

"General, that's Chiss Space," Finn protests. "We're not allowed there."

"Neither is the First Order," Leia says calmly, "which strengthens the case for this not being a trap."
Sarvchi is the lone Ascendancy planet that has a significant human population, so you shouldn't have a difficult time blending in." She turns to Rey. "How's your Cheunh?"

"I know Minnisiat— the trade language," Rey says slowly. "I think that'll do, but it's still going to be complicated, General."

"No kidding," Poe mumbles as he studies the area around the target world. "Look here— there are two firepoints orbiting Sarvchi alone, not to mention the other few hundred or so patrolling the entire sector."

"Jysella, could you sustain an Immersion cloak from the moment you leap back to realspace within Chiss borders until you make planetfall on Sarvchi?" Luke asks.

The redhead Jedi Knight pales but manages a determined nod. "I'll do my best, Master."

"The exact source coordinates correspond to a pretty remote region of that world," says Leia. "Swamplands and marshes, mostly. I doubt any patrols will come through but Jysella should stay with the ship just in case."

"Normally we would avoid sending the two of you on the same mission." Luke is regarding the Horn siblings solemnly. "But both your respective skillsets are needed in this delicate matter. In fact, the General and I selected this team on the basis that you are our best infiltrators who can also hold their own in a fight."

"Although," Leia cuts in, "we cannot stress enough that combat should be engaged only when all other options have been exhausted and, even then, not a single drop of Chiss blood is to be spilled. The Ascendancy has declared themselves neutral in this war between the Galactic Alliance and the First Order and has stated that any operations pertaining to such within their territory will be viewed as an act of aggression. Go in, find the Eye, and get out as quickly and as quietly as possible."

"So, you know, no pressure," Lando jokes.

Rey leaves her room tugging fretfully at the wraps on her arms and then at the gray vest over her
white shirt. It feels wrong to embark on a mission wearing civilian attire but Jedi robes would raise more than a few eyebrows in Chiss Space. She crosses paths with a similarly dressed Jysella out in the corridor and the two girls burst into laughter at the sight of each other's clothes.

"We look like smugglers," Jysella observes, brown eyes twinkling.

"Exciting, isn't it?" Rey says dryly. "Is everyone all set?"

"Yes, but the General would like to have a word with you before we go. The others and I will be waiting in the ship."

Rey tracks Leia's Force presence to the balcony where they'd had their meeting earlier. The holoprojector has been put away and the older woman rests one hand on the balustrade as she stares at the falls, spun by sunlight into a never-ending cascade of gold and diamonds. Rey thinks about her vision in the cellar on Takodana, the one where she and Ben held each other in a place of stone and water and sky. Had it been here? The details are fuzzy; what she remembers is the feeling, how it had tugged at her very soul to see something like that.

"Rey." Leia studies her with a bemused half-smile. "I realize we've been working together for nearly two years now, but part of me isn't used to you all grown up. In my mind you're still that precocious little girl tagging along after Ben on Yavin 4."

Rey ducks her head, embarrassed, having no idea what to say. Leia reaches out to tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear. "You've become a remarkable young woman. Beautiful, too— the Jedi probably don't tell you that enough."

Rey exhales a laugh. "No, General. There is no room for vanity within the Order."

"I imagine there isn't room for a lot of things," Leia scoffs. "Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you."

"Thank you?" Rey echoes, puzzled.

"For loving my impossible son," Leia clarifies. "For being his friend all those years, and for wanting to bring him back just as badly as I do." She shakes her head, self-deprecating, wry. "This is the part where Han would be telling me not to 'get all mushy' but there really are some things
that need to be said out loud. Including this: Good luck on your mission." Her eyes are warm, the eyes of one who has suffered countless heartbreaks but never once ran out of the capacity to give. The eyes of one who was raised on hope even in the darkest of times. "May the Force be with you."

Poe can't hide his excitement at being afforded the chance to fly the *Ebon Hawk*—his huge grin is endearing, as is the way he's practically vibrating in the pilot seat, olive-toned face aglow. "Buckle up, team," he says while he and Rey run through the last of the preflight checks. "We're pressed for time so I'll be taking her as fast as she can go. The plan is to make the jump into the Phalanx Route as soon as we hit Wild Space and then head on up the Vaagari Corridor from the junction at Cormit, veering off into the Path of the Houses once we reach the Csilla intersection."

Rey frowns, studying the navicomp that's being fed a stream of data calculations by BB-8. "That's quite a trip. I don't think I've ever been in hyperspace that long before."

"There's a first time for everything," Poe replies. "Just don't zone out watching the starlines or you'll get the rapture."

"Isn't that a myth?"

"I've seen it happen once or twice."

Rey concedes. No one can really argue about flying with Poe Dameron and come out on top. "What am I supposed to look at, then?" she jokes.

"Your dashing pilot?" he suggests with a lazy grin.

"Yeah, right."

In hindsight, she really should have heeded Poe's warning and focused on something, *anything*, that wasn't the blue-black tunnel of hyperspace with its whirling kaleidoscope of light. Rey has often
found these moving patterns soothing, almost hypnotic, but her leftover exhaustion from the battle on Dantooine combined with the stasis of letting someone else take the wheel ensures that she allows herself to drift off to the sight of the starlines in a way that she never has before. The cosmic pulse thrums through her skull in steady, magnetic beats, each one a hymn to a galaxy so vast that spacefarers had needed to carve paths in another dimension just to traverse it. And to think that this is only one galaxy out of thousands, millions, who knew? Some say there is no end to the universe, and it scares her. Evidence of the rapture— a term coined to describe a state of insanity in hyperspace— is purely anecdotal but isn't this how madness starts, when the stars are sinking their claws into your heart, when you are confronted by yourself and the silence, when your worst fears are amplified? The lights race on, each mass shadow that they pass blinking in and out of existence, the swirling veil bleeding into her eyes until she feels like she is hurtling forward beyond the transparisteel viewport to meet it, until it is all that she sees. Her mind widens, straining at its borders to encompass the universe, but it is not enough, she is too small, too insignificant, too alone. She can taste her nausea, it's creeping up the back of her tongue with every violent shift in the prism. She can feel her dread, a hard knot in her throat that won't let her speak or cry out.

Rey panics.

In a desperate attempt to escape the tangle of light and void, her consciousness surges past all the shields that a Jedi must maintain, roaring through the celestial wastes on currents of raw, unbridled Force energy. It's as if a pair of dark wings, bigger than worlds, has unfurled from her chest to touch every constellation ever charted and those yet to be discovered. The child on Jakku seeks solace. The wild thing in her keens for its anchor. The years burn like the heart of a star.

She's in a room, somewhere. Curled up beneath blankets, one inch from the edge of a bed meant for two. It's early morning, it must be, gray dawn peeking in through the window-slats. A pair of strong arms wrap around her midsection, dragging her bodily across the mattress until her spine is pressed to a broad, bare chest and someone buries his face in the crook of her neck.

"Stop stealing the covers," Ben mumbles drowsily.

She stares at the dark, nondescript wall. "This is what you dream of? Us, like this?"

His lips curve into a smirk against her skin. "I don't think you're ready for the other kind of dream I have about you, cyar'ika."

She is no stranger to the darkness behind his closed eyes. The last time this happened had been more than a decade ago, the Force surfacing within her and spiraling outwards to twine their dreams together. It's the same thing that's happening now, even if the people on each side of the connection are older and different and didn't grow into what they'd hoped to become.
"Where are you off to?" Ben asks, and it's the way he asks it, languid and content and warm with sleep and yearning— it lowers Rey's guard. It makes her want to not be alone anymore.

"Sarvchi," she tells him.

Kylo Ren wakes up.

When Rey comes back to herself, the first thing she sees is Finn's face hovering over hers, brow knitted in concern. Beyond the line of his shoulder are Jysella and Valin wearing similar expressions. They've spun her chair around in order to get a better look at her, and she can hear Poe rattling off suggestions from the pilot seat.

"Honestly the most effective way to snap them out of it is to hit them hard upside the head, but we could try laying her down in a dark room first, put a cold compress over her eyes—"

"She's recovering, I think. Her pupils are starting to focus." Finn squints at her. "Rey, are you all right? Status report?"

She groans. Her skull is throbbing and there's a strange metallic aftertaste stuck to the roof of her mouth. "I feel like shit. What happened?"

"Like I said— the rapture," Poe replies. "I should've kept tabs on you after everyone else dozed off but I was busy dodging First Order gravity wells. Sorry. No harm done, yes?"

Rey grimaces. "Actually..."

She tells them what has just occurred, blurring as much detail as she can. Suffice to say that her and Kylo's signals crossed and he now knows where they're going— perhaps even why they're going
there. After all, there are very few reasons for Resistance affiliates to be heading into Chiss Space.

"Okay, so it's not the ideal situation," Valin admits, "but it's also not a total disaster. The Ascendancy is just as likely to declare war on the First Order if they put one toe out of line. They're awfully shirty about sovereignty and jurisdiction, you know? I have a feeling that, if Snoke does deploy a team to Sarvchi on the basis of Solo's info, it will be under the same terms of absolute discretion on which we're operating."

"And we have the advantage," Jysella adds, "because, aside from knowing our womp rat's exact coordinates, we're also reasonably certain that they're a former Rebel agent. They used Cassian Andor's code and all."


"Oh, the guy's a legend," gushes Poe. "One of the finest Intelligence officers the Alliance ever had. Went down on Scarif after transmitting the plans of the first Death Star."

Finn's dark eyes widen in recognition. "I've heard about that, sort of? Back at stormtrooper barracks, it was used as a cautionary tale because they all died and— and one of them was a defector, wasn't he?"

*Just like me.* The unspoken words hang in the air.

Rey nods. "His name was Bodhi Rook," she says gently. "He was an Imperial cargo pilot, and he was the one who brought Galen Erso's last message to the Rebellion. He turned his back on the Empire and, in doing so, helped save the galaxy. We'll probably never know why he did it—"

"No." Finn shakes his head, smiling. It's a sad smile, but it brandishes its sorrow like a badge of honor. "I know why."

*The planet orbited by Centerpoint Station has just entered its day cycle when Armitage Hux bows before Snoke's presence in the vast audience chamber. "Supreme Leader, I apologize for the delay in relaying this information. I have just learned of an unauthorized shuttle launch two standard...*
"After Poe Dameron and FN-2187's escape, General, I have a difficult time comprehending why your men once again allowed an unauthorized ship to leave the hangar bay," Snoke interrupts in barbed yet silken tones. "Is this becoming a habit?"

Hux's pale cheeks flush. "The pilot was Ren. I am aware that he and the other Knights have special clearance and that is why the officer-in-charge did not stop him. However, in light of his recent failures, I thought—"

"That you now hold sway over his actions?" Snoke asks with the curiously patient tone of one who is setting a trap. "That you would seek to understand his motives, which are ultimately mine as well, and make him accountable to you like a common soldier? You, who are untouched by the Force?"

With the unerring sense of self-preservation that has served him well in cutthroat First Order politics, Hux keeps his mouth shut. In the sudden silence that falls over the room, he detects a hint of something odd in Snoke's demeanor. It takes him a while to identify it as surprise.

"Did Ren say where he was going?" Snoke asks, confirming Hux's suspicions.

"No, Supreme Leader."

The figure in the shadows appears to brood for a while. And then a colossal, wrinkled hand rises, waving Hux off. "Very well. You are dismissed. I will be in audience with some of the other Knights for the next half hour or so. See to it that we are not disturbed."

Chapter End Notes

Bouncer.
Ruusan.
Ruusan Campaign.
New Sith Wars.
Skere Kaan.
Brotherhood of Darkness.

Holographic image disguiser.

Map of the Chiss Ascendancy.

Cheunh.

Minnisiat.

Firepoint.

Hyper-rapture.
Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

It is becoming increasingly difficult to balance my professional life and my writing. I sound like a broken record but, really, thank you so much for your continued patience. I hope that you'll let me know what you think of this chapter; I'm planning to work on the next one over the weekend and I could use the motivation!

Soundtrack:

1. I'm Not Over - Carolina Liar (suggested by AzAngel1)
2. Lonely In Your Nightmare - Duran Duran (Katherine)
3. Small Red Boy - Andrew Jackson Jihad (again_please)
4. Just One Yesterday - Fall Out Boy feat. Foxes (icantouchthestars)
5. Better Man - Little Big Town (Katiiedid)

The latest CHVRCHES album is also this verse's Ben and Rey all the way. I particularly recommend Make Them Gold, High Enough To Carry You Over, Warning Call, Afterglow, and Down Side Of Me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Firepoints drift through Chiss Space in slow yet purposeful orbits, a host of asteroids installed with radar systems and particle megamaser cannons prepared to shoot down any unauthorized ships encroaching Ascendancy locales. Rey has counted five of them ever since the Hawk leapt out from the Path of the Houses— the hyperlane connecting the homeworlds of the Chiss Ruling Families— and began its crawl towards Sarvchi.

The cockpit is silent yet fraught with unease, Rey, Valin, Finn, and Poe hardly daring to breathe as they inch from one firepoint to the next. Jysella is standing up, palm flat against the wall, eyes flashing silvery white and energy spiraling outwards from her petite frame to blank the ship's physical mass and its electronic signals. Rey can't even imagine the amount of concentration this must require— hurling a starship at enemy forces is mere telekinesis, but rendering it wholly intangible means channeling inner reserves that demand more than raw power, demand all that you had to give. Jysella's strength is visibly flagging by the time they ease between the two firepoints revolving around the blue globe of Sarvchi, but she presses on, slipping deeper into the trance, the recycled air in the cabin thinning as more energy is shed.

"We've got incoming."

At Finn's low, urgent tone, Rey's gaze darts from Jysella to the viewport. Her heart drops into her stomach. An angular-edged, rough-hewn Aristocra cruiser has emerged from the planet's atmosphere and is headed straight for them, surrounded by a bevy of Nssis- class Clawcraft. The
diplomatic ship and its military escort have no idea that there's another vessel in their path; the *Hawk* can't pull up or go low without colliding into one of the firepoints, and swerving to the side is untenable once two rows of Clawcraft swiftly spread out in a V-formation before the cruiser.

Valin swears under his breath. "We're going to crash."

"No, we're not." Poe reverts to full manual control— and grins. "Hang on tight."

Everyone straps in with the exception of Jysella, who cannot and must not be disturbed for even a split second lest the Immersion cloak falter. Valin reaches out with the Force to keep his sister anchored, and then there is the almighty groan of levers being pulled and thrusters abruptly cut, and the world tilts—

— *sideways—*

Rey blinks. Poe has maneuvered the *Hawk* into a perfect ninety-degree angle from its original axis, the tip of the Chiss cruiser's wing a hair-raising mere couple of centimeters from grazing its underbelly as it slides past. The move is capped off with a barrel roll to avoid the next swarm of Clawcraft, followed by a drastic *plunge* to fall safely below the rear guard's plane of flight. For a brief moment the *Nsis*-class starfighters are suspended in Rey's vision, silver light glinting off their ivory hulls, curved wings flaring outwards from ball-shaped cockpits like elegant, ghostly fins.

"What I wouldn't give to fly one of those things," Poe remarks as he rights the *Hawk* and they reassume their trajectory away from the firepoints, away from the fleet.

Rey exhales a shaky burst of relieved yet disbelieving laughter. "Dameron, you're insane."

"So I've heard," he japes.

Finn, meanwhile, is looking a bit gray at the edges. "I'm going to vomit."

"Already did," Valin says weakly. "Had to swallow it— have we got any mouthwash on board?"
It's raining when they make planetfall on Sarvchi—a heavy, tempestuous rain that drums on the freighter's hull and spatters the viewports in a thick, rippling film that blurs the world outside. Not that there would be much to see in the first place—it is late afternoon, and fog-shrouded, and overcast.

"I gotta take her down," Poe announces. "It's zero visibility out there. Even *I'm* not that good."

"Probably just as well," says Valin. "I don't think Jysella can keep this up for much longer."

Rey squints at the vague, shadowy landscape beyond the waterlogged transparisteel panels. "We'll dock here," she decides. "We're near enough to our womp rat's coordinates that we can proceed on foot."


She is submerged in the White Current, which flows around her like a stream and whittles away at her memories until even her name is gone. There is no need for names. Not here. *I am part of something greater than myself,* she thinks. *I am one with the Force, the Force is with me.*

Someone reaches for her. It's her first instinct to shy away but she hesitates. It feels like someone she loves.

*Sister. Come back.*

* Rey watches Jysella claw her way out of the trance, shaking in Valin's arms. Her eyes, when she opens them, are unfocused, her red hair scattered around her pale face like wisps of flame. It is the most unearthly and unfamiliar that Rey has ever seen Jysella look, and she thinks about something Luke had told her once, when she was very young: *It is in the way of peace that true sacrifice lies.*
Finn opens the cabin doors, the temperature dropping several degrees as an ice-cold wind blows into the ship and scatters a fine mist of errant raindrops at his feet. "Two options!" He has to yell to make himself heard over the downpour. "We head out there now or wait for this mess to let up a little!"

"We can't afford to wait!" Rey argues. "General Organa warned us not to remain planetbound for even a second longer than necessary and, besides, this storm is the perfect cover— no one will be wandering around—"

"Except for us, apparently," Finn sighs. "Let's get going, then."

"I have to stay with my sister." Valin is regarding Jysella with a trace of fear— and for good reason. Her eyes are open, she's breathing, but everything else about her has become unresponsive and still. Catatonic. She looks catatonic. "She channeled the Current for too long, she needs to be eased back into realspace... We can't just leave her like this."

*You made me leave Ben!* Rey wants to scream at him. *On Starkiller Base, I wanted to help him but you told me we had to go. If I have to be unselfish, then so do you—*

And she almost can't believe it, that she is the kind of person who would ever think these thoughts, that the war has turned her into this. Wasn't she the one who said that sometimes people needed kindness instead of duty? Isn't Jysella so very dear to her, too?

"Yes," Rey forces out at last, offering Valin a brisk nod. "Stay with her. You can catch up to us once she's well enough to be left in charge of the ship."

"BB-8 will protect you guys. Sorry, buddy," Poe says to the dejected-seeming droid. "It's all swampland from here. I don't think you'd be able to manage."

A patch of gurgling wet mud sucks at Kylo's left boot; he pulls too hard and ends up losing his balance, managing to rest his weight against a damp, ancient tree trunk before he can hit the ground— although it is only ground in the flimsiest sense of the word, flooded and slippery and treacherous. He has been wading through it instead of walking on it for the better part of an hour.
Why did you come here? someone asks. Kylo knows that the voice is only in his head but he can't stop himself from shining the glow-lamp at his drenched surroundings in search of the speaker, the beam of artificial light flickering dimly amidst thick sheets of water cascading from the branches overhead and blocking out the sky. What do you seek?

"The Eye of the Sun," he rasps, his words swallowed by the howling wind and the pouring rain. "I will find it and bring it to the Supreme Leader. I will not fail in this, as I have in so much else."

A noble intention. Although one would think you'd have told him where you were going if that truly were the case.

"I—" Lightning flashes, for a brief moment silhouetting the twisted gnarltrees in white heat. Kylo draws his hood further over his face, a vain attempt to prevent more water from dripping into his eyes. "He might have tried to stop me, send someone else—" It's no secret that Snoke has been displeased with him ever since Jakku, recently compounded by the defeat on Dantooine, but the excuse sounds feeble even to his own ears.

"Sarvchi," Rey had said, and he had gone. Just like that.

There's a sigh. And then the voice says, as if addressing a presence other than Kylo, Stubborn, isn't he?

*He gets that from your side of the family,* replies somebody else, replies the wind and the rain and the reeds.

Kylo wonders if he went insane without noticing, at some point down the line. When Alema Rar went AWOL on Ylesia all those years ago, she'd trekked through dense woods like these for days and what came out the other side to gaze upon open skies had been something different, something not completely there. He has already shared one fate with her; perhaps this one has sunk barbs into his soul as well. He tries to shove the voices aside, tries to concentrate on the Force once more for any hint of Rey's presence on this dark, storm-tossed planet. She'd have her shields up, of course, but—

("How did you know I was down here?" she'd asked him amidst the holocron shelves, in the vaults of their youth.)
"I always know where you are," he’d replied.

Smooth, unseen hands cradle his face, cool and unfailingly gentle. *Blood of my blood.* It's the second voice, the one he has never heard before but sounds so familiar still. *Not long. Not long, now.*

Kylo recoils from the phantom touch. *Who are you?* he wants to ask. *Go away,* he wants to say. But what comes out is, "I am afraid."

*But not alone,* promises the first voice. *That was what I failed to see back then. Never alone. Keep walking.*

Although she would never admit it to Finn, Rey's starting to concede that perhaps they *should* have waited out the rain, after all. She can barely see him and Poe whenever she glances over her shoulder as they slog through the swamp in single file, drenched to the bone and shivering despite the cloaks they shrugged on before leaving the *Hawk.* A wave of revulsion washes over her when the muck under her feet gives way to grimy wetness, submerging her to the knee for what seems like the hundredth time today.

"This is seriously disgusting!" Poe shouts. "I've been through worse but this is *gross*—"

"Will you keep it down!" Rey snaps. "We're infiltrating!"

"I highly doubt there's anyone around to hear, Madame Jedi. If they can even hear us over *this.*" He does have a point— the roaring storm fills the senses until it's the only real sound left in the world.

"How much farther?" asks Finn.

Rey consults the handheld tracker blinking with the message's coordinates. "Four kilometers. We just need to keep walking north."

"You mean *swimming* north, because—"
The rest of Finn's sentence cuts off in a startled cry.

Rey turns around.

The slugs that inhabit the swamps of Sarvchi are over ten meters long, with pearly flesh and round orange eyes that glow like foglights in the gloom. One has risen from the murky waters on Finn's left, peering down at him curiously for a moment before opening its mouth to reveal thousands upon thousands of jagged teeth. It pounces, and Rey, operating on pure instinct, hurries to tackle Finn out of harm's way. The two of them splash into the shallows and she loses her grip on the tracker in the process, simultaneously pushing Finn to his feet while her free hand roots around frantically in the mud for the device. The slug resurfaces for its next onslaught, met with blaster fire from Poe, who is a capable marksman in his own right— however, the beast's skin is thick, its vital organs few and far between, and it advances on Rey undeterred, leaving her no choice except to abandon her search for the tracker and leap to defend herself. The sapphire blades of her saberstaff hiss in the rain as she slices it across the slug's throat, slime speckling her face, the soggy ground giving way when she lands. Swamp water closes in over her head, rushing into her nostrils and her mouth. She stands up, coughing and sputtering, to see that Finn has joined Poe in opening fire. His blaster bolt finds its mark; one luminous, dinner-plate-sized eye explodes in a mess of vitreous liquid. Half-blind now, the enormous gastropod slithers back to the deeps, screaming in agony.

Poe darts a lazy, relieved grin at his companions. "That went pretty well."

"I dropped the tracker," Rey moans. "Help me look for it—"

However, their reprieve doesn't last long— a cacophony of damp burbling sounds makes the trio freeze. More huge, hulking shapes rear up from the mist-laced waters like shifting islands, attracted by the commotion. There are ten slugs all in all, each one almost the length of an X-wing, each one voracious and predatory, glowing orange eyes lighting up the mists as they fix on this new food source.

"I think it's time to run," Finn says.

Thunder rumbles above the treetops. The rain comes pouring down harder.
Whenever she looks back on those frenzied, lightning-streaked moments, Rey will never be able to pinpoint exactly *when* she gets separated from Finn and Poe. All she knows is that they're fleeing through the gnarlrees, scrambling over protruding roots and patches of earth, and suddenly she realizes that she's lost sight of them both. She attempts to retrace her steps but there are five slugs on her tail— clumsy on dry land but quick and agile in the water, and there's definitely more of the latter in this storm-flooded terrain.

Another flash of lightning directs her attention to a hollow formed by one gnarlree's massive, crooked roots, big enough for her to squeeze through but too small for the slugs. She makes a dive for it. A pair of monstrous jaws snaps shut a hair's breadth from her ankle as she wedges herself into the wooden cavern, dirty water pooling at her shins. The slugs' leathery bodies drape over the entrance, deepening the darkness, filling the world with hisses and rattles and the foul smell of mucus.

Rey closes her eyes. She's adopted the standard meditation pose because old habits are hard to break. She's noticed that about herself and the other Jedi— sitting on floor or ground automatically means crossing the legs together, palms upturned on bent knees. She slides her consciousness into the Force and it feels like coming home, it always has. The predators writhe and wail above her and the typhoon wreaks havoc on the swamplands but she is not afraid. *There is no emotion, there is peace. There is no ignorance, there is knowledge. There is no passion, there is serenity. There is no chaos, there is harmony...*

She has no idea how long she stays there. It could have been minutes, it could have been hours, the passage of time lost to the trance. Eventually, though, she senses another presence moving through the woods, obscured by the more immediate proximity of the slugs but undeniably human. It feels like someone she loves.

"There is no loneliness," Rey whispers. "There is the Light."

The world outside the cave burns red.

She listens with hammering heart to the shriek of a shattered kyber crystal mingling with rain's silver rhythms and the sonorous bass of thunder. She feels each damp thing die in the nets of the Force or flee, terror-struck. The Dark Side is tempting for a reason, that reason being the power that comes at the cost of the self. For a man to fight monsters, he must become something of a monster as well.
The skirmish rages for the better part of seven minutes, maybe eight. She wraps her cloak tighter around herself, waiting, waiting, and then a scarlet crossguard pierces the roof of her temporary shelter, hacking away at the bark and the mud. It's a struggle not to flinch whenever the jagged blade strikes alarmingly close to where she sits, but the Ben Solo she had known would never have hurt her, and if she were to show her fear of him now then Snoke will have won.

The last of the gnarltree's roots give way in a burst of splinters. Icy wind and diamond-sharp rain hit her face anew. Kylo looms above her, chest heaving, teeth bared in a snarl, lightsaber blazing at his side. His wet hair clings to his face, shielding most of his features from view, but Rey can spot shards of gold in his eyes as dark energy curls around him, lashing out at her with tendrils both beckoning and electric.

"Where is it?" he brusquely demands and, oh, that voice—despite its deep timbre, it's always been too soft to suit yelling, hasn't it? It is a melancholy bedroom voice, so at odds with this gaunt, forbidding figure veiled in lightning and in fog.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Rey says.

"It is evident that you possess a rather low opinion of my mental acuity whenever you're concerned." His bitter sneer makes bile rise up her throat. "A Jedi violating neutral Chiss Space at a time like this—you could give me three guesses but I suspect all it will take is one."

"You talk too much, Ben."

Rey's barely surged to her feet when Kylo grabs her left arm with his off-hand, hauling her towards him. She is absolutely having none of that—her saberstaff flares to life. He is quick to block, and soon they're glaring at each other over the blades crossed at their throats.

"Where," he snaps, "is the Eye?"

"I don't know!" It's her turn to shout, she's tired and frustrated and freezing her butt off. "I lost my tracker!"

"You're lying—"
"I've never lied to you about anything that ever mattered, you kriffing jerkass—"

And then she hears it, cutting through the thrash of branches, the whir of gale and downpour—the drone of several small engines steadily approaching. There's no time to duck out of sight, no time to do anything but extinguish and hide the dead giveaways that are their lightsabers before a group of speeders breaks through the undergrowth, gliding past them one by one. The Chiss are a tall, fine-boned species with blue skin and red eyes that shoot enquiring looks at the two humans on foot in this abysmal weather, surrounded by gigantic, steaming slug corpses. A few slow down to check if assistance is needed, allowing Rey glimpses of the simple tunics beneath their rain gear. Farmers, perhaps, or miners.

"We're fine," she calls out in the dense, agglutinative tones of Minnisiat, giving Kylo a subtle warning nudge so that he will relax his grip on her arm. "Just foraging."

Although Sarvchi is one of the more open Ascendancy worlds, the highly insular Chiss prefer not to deal with humans any longer than necessary—and, besides, these riders are probably in a rush to get somewhere warm and dry. They take their leave without a word, although Rey's heart sinks when she notices one darting them a suspicious glance over his shoulder as he disappears into the gloom. Leia had mentioned that patrols did not normally venture this far out but there is still a chance that the riders will alert the authorities.

"We have to get out of here," Rey tells Kylo. Surely he understands what is at stake just as much as she does; he would never have come here barefaced and in plainclothes otherwise.

He nods, tugging at her arm to drag her east at the same time that she starts trying to haul him in the opposite direction. "May I remind you that you are my prisoner?" he hisses. "We're going this way."

"What the— no, you're my prisoner," she fumes, "and I say we're going— hey!" He lifts her off her feet and tosses her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. "Put me down, you big oaf!" she demands, legs flailing wildly against his chest and fists pounding on his back. He ignores her, and he is bigger and stronger than she is but she's determined not to make it easy for him, struggling with all her might within his iron grip and calling him every name in the holobook.

"Still such a potty-mouth," he mutters as he carries her through the swamp.

Chapter End Notes
Maser.

This is the Chaf Envoy, which is how I imagine other Chiss diplomatic cruisers would look.

Nsisis-class Clawcraft. My favorite SW starfighter :)

Gnarltree.

Swamp slug.
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

The plot was supposed to advance a lot farther in this installment than it actually did, but Kylo and Rey just wanted to perv on each other and who am I to deny them? Anyway, I figured that we all deserve this after so much slow burn. Please let me know what you think! I need to hit all the right notes in the next update, and comments and suggestions would be very much appreciated.

Soundtrack:
1. House of Memories - Panic! At The Disco (suggested by cassianandorvevo)
2. We Will Meet Again - VAST (Sgr_A)
3. Take On Me - Hidden Citizens (AzAngel1)
4. Heal - Ellie Goulding (AzAngel1)
5. Burning House - EZA feat. Aaron Krause ("Had a dream about a burning house, you were stuck inside, I couldn't get you out. Lay beside you and pulled you close, and the two of us went up in smoke.")
6. Where's Your Heart Gone - Golden Youth ("In the morning time, when I see your eyes, be my ocean faith, no one can replace you. I feel that haze roll in when I touch your skin. You may not want me, I still belong to you.")
7. Already Changed - The Narrative ("When the fire's out, when your heart cools down, you'll be all right, I'll be your light. We can run, we can take new names, in the darkness it all feels the same.")
8. Let It All Go - Birdy feat. Rhodes ("I don't know why we need to break so hard, but if we're strong enough to let it in, we're strong enough to let it go.")
9. Baby - Anna of the North ("You came in like a thunderstorm, electric shivers shooting through my bones, you make my heart start beating in my chest, baby, hold tight.")
10. Nothing Left to Lose - Kari Kimmel ("I got all the time in the world and every night to think of you, and empty seems to last forever but I guess I got nothing left to lose.")

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It's an awkward picture they make, with him negotiating a storm-lashed terrain that alternates between reeds and roots and knee-deep water as she squirms and does her utmost best to knock him flat. Late afternoon has succumbed to early evening, unnoticed, indiscernible save for the tick of Galactic Standard on the chronometer around her wrist and a gradual deepening to the already weighty shadows, and yet—

— and yet—

Somewhere else in Rey's mind, the daylight is green and brilliant, mild spring rain dripping down from broad, glossy leaves. The air smells like earth and like newness and like Ben as he crowds her
up against a Massassi tree trunk in the Yavin 4 jungle, using his long, lean frame to shield her from
the drizzle that caught them by surprise on their way back to the Praxeum. She's eighteen and
laughing, one hand on his damp cheek, and he's smirking down at her with this look that he gets
sometimes, like a banked fire brimming with the promise of danger, and she just— she wants—

"Stop that," Kylo Ren growls, here and now on Sarvchi.

At first, she thinks that her memories are spilling over into the Force around them and brushing
across the surface of his mind— however, the way his gloved fingers dig warningly into the back
of her thigh soon clues her in. He means for her to stop struggling. She refuses to give him the
satisfaction, twisting and turning harder, yanking at his hair for good measure and causing him to
lose his balance. He rights himself at the last possible second, saving them both from another dip in
swamp water, and he must be absolutely incensed because— once he's got her firmly settled over
his shoulder again—

"Did you just spank me?" It had been nothing more than a light, ineffectual slap to her derriere, not
hard enough to sting, but Rey's suddenly blushing more furiously than she's ever had in her entire
life. And that is saying something where this man who used to be Ben Solo is concerned.

His own embarrassment suffuses the air. She suspects that, if she were able to look at his face right
now, the tips of his ears would be bright red. This entire situation is ridiculous— but it also feels as
if something about him is slowly changing, slowly cracking apart. "You were being a brat," he
grunts in sulky self-defense as he starts walking again, sounding so much like Ben in that moment
that her heart gives a reluctant twinge.

"Do you even know where you're going?" she accuses.

"No, but neither would you have if we'd gone your way."

She'll give him that, at least.

Rain continues to sluice from the matted tangle of branches overhead as he stumbles and teeters
through a world of darkness and mire, impeded by Rey's attempts to bolt for it every chance she
gets. She's not as light as her slender frame would have her appear; she's one-point-seven meters of
wiry muscle and coltish limbs. But it does seem to him that she's lost weight since the time he—
— bore her over the desolate plains of Corbos on his back, her soft lips littering one side of his face with playful, affectionate kisses—

— carried her through the Yavin 4 jungle after Exar Kun rendered her unconscious, walking for hours on end with the limp, beloved burden in his arms—

"Have you not been eating?" he blurts out before he can help himself. The only saving grace is that his voice had been pitched too low for her to hear in all this downpour. There is no pause to her squirming, no indication that she realizes he said anything in the first place. He already knows the answer to that question, though, doesn't he—

("She cried for days after the First Order took you away. She wouldn't stop, wouldn't leave her room to eat. Made herself sick.")

There's a lump in Kylo's throat for some reason. He tries to swallow it down but it sticks in the same way that Yavin 4 clings to this other forest, sunlight and emerald leaves and tropical heat superimposed over relentless sheets of water and gray branches creaking in the ice-bitten wind. His steps are slow and plodding but somewhere else, oh, somewhere else, he's younger and he runs. He runs with Rey. The nameless, shaggy-coated beast from long ago is snapping at their heels and if they can just clear this last stretch of summer-warmed undergrowth, then they'll reach the river, the temple, and Luke—

She stops struggling, her energy apparently drained. He allows her to slide down a little, shifts her in his arms until he's cradling her to his chest. Her own arms loop around his neck; she hides her face in the column of his throat, her lips a searing imprint on his pulse point even through the drenched fabric that covers it. They're both cold and tired, they're both—

— running, running still, hearts fit to burst, and now the raven-thorn thickets and blueleaf shrubs are being pushed aside to unveil grassy rolling banks and a ribbon of clear rushing water speckled with the radiance of the sun—

("This isn't goodbye. I'll find you again. Across another river. In another life.")

The memory comes out of nowhere, blindsiding him. It's not real. It can't be. No one has ever loved him that much.
He takes one more shaky step, followed by another. Her arms tighten around him. He doesn't know what he's doing anymore. He knows only that he can't let her go.

*

Two figures move through the swamplands, wrapped up in each other. The domed silhouette of a humble mud-carved dwelling unfolds from the reeds at the base of one gnarltree, manmade and already half-reclaimed by nature. He hesitates for a while, and then carries her inside.

But time is not linear. Somewhere else, two children cross a river with sighs of relief and a summer's day in their eyes, hurtling forward as fast as their feet can bear them, to the waiting doors of sanctuary.

*

With her teeth chattering and her cloak clinging like uncomfortable second skin, Rey is feeling thoroughly sorry for herself by the time Kylo steps over the threshold of the mud hut. The interior is pitch-black; she can only hear his voice, can only feel the rumble of his chest as he says, "I will release you now if you promise not to run."

"We're back to trusting each other, then?" she huffs, aware that her barbed tone is at odds with the way she's snuggled against him, her body drawn to the heat generated by his own.

"I trust your common sense. There is nowhere else for you to go. Not in this weather." The hand that's hooked under her bent knees traces gloved fingers on the side of her leg in a compulsive, haphazard pattern. "Do you promise?" It's a plea and a warning rolled into one.

She offers a reluctant nod before realizing that he can't see it in this gloom. "I won't run," she says out loud, and it sounds more like a grudge than an assurance, but it must be good enough for him because he lowers her onto her feet with— and this is important— the kind of clumsy, oh so careful gentleness that she grew to associate with him during their years at the Jedi Academy. Like he doesn't know what to do with his hands, like he is afraid he will break her.

They're slow to separate, his fingers curved around her waist, her fists bunched into the shoulders of his tunic. Either she surges up on her toes or he bends down, because their foreheads press together as they quietly breathe each other in. Stolen moments, illicit and self-destructive, is this all that they will ever have?
It's a particularly loud crack of thunder that jars them to their senses. He jumps back as if scalded, and the abrupt loss of his warmth sends a shiver through her frame anew. It's the kind of shiver that emanates from the pit of one's stomach, brought on not just by cold but also by paralyzing grief. To distract herself from it, Rey fishes out the small, disc-shaped glow-lamp from its waterproof case on her utility belt and shines it at her immediate surroundings. Kylo follows suit, the next few minutes spent in silence, acquiring visuals bit by bit, in swatches of white light.

The place has been fashioned from earth and scrap metal and reeds. It's a halfway house— no signs of permanent inhabitation but well-stocked with firewood and cisterns of rainwater collected from an intricate series of ducts woven through the wattle-and-durasteel roof. The people of this region, who depend on the swamps and marshes for their livelihood, have learned how to help one another in the face of perennial storms and floods so far from the great cities— Rey knows that there are dozens of huts like this scattered throughout the forest, and she can only hope that Finn and Poe have found similar shelter.

She still can't bring herself to look directly at Kylo. She's not prepared. His thoughts must run along a similar vein, for he squats at the crude hearth and bangs spark-rocks together and uses the Force to fan the embers with such intense, single-minded concentration that one would think it's the only thing in the whole galaxy that matters. Turning her back to him, she strips off her cloak, and the soggy fabric hits the dry floor just as the dwelling is suffused in a rush of heat and a lively golden glow.

Extinguishing her lamp now that she has firelight to see by, Rey searches for food. Unlike kindling and fresh water, the crates shoved into one corner beneath a couple of tattered old blankets yield paltry amounts of dried meat, nuts, and berries. She eats only until the edge has been taken off her appetite, as rustling sounds behind her indicate that Kylo is divesting himself of his equally drenched outer layers. It would have been almost intimate, had it been any other time and any other place. Perhaps had they been different people entirely.

"How did you even get here without bringing the wrath of the Ascendancy down on your head?" she asks.

"I went up the Rago Run," is his toneless answer. "Through the Utegetu Nebula and out the Murgo Choke."

She whirls around to narrow her eyes at the black-clad figure hunched by the fire. "That's impossible. The Choke is located between two binary systems— no ship can stay in hyperspace there."
"So most people believe. But if you pull to the left at a specific point in the jump, you can skirt past the stars' gravity wells— just barely— and creep along the Path of the Houses before making planetfall at one of the firepoints' blind spots." He thrusts a poker into the flames, coaxing them higher. "It is one of the galaxy's more well-kept secrets. My fa— Han Solo showed me how to do it when I accompanied him on a smuggling run. I was eleven years old." He pauses, as if considering something. "I hadn't met you yet."

"I think like that, too," she finds herself saying. "I define time that way. You split my life in halves. Into a before you, and an after you."

He visibly flinches, and the urge to reveal the truth about his father is so, so strong. But she's on a mission that will probably determine the outcome of the war, deep in neutral territory that's one wrong move away from turning hostile. She has to be careful.

Kylo lifts his head, his intense, solemn gaze pinning her immobile. Rey gasps.

The scar bisects his pale, angular face in a diagonal carnelian line that slashes from the corner of his eye to his cheekbone, startlingly conspicuous now that there is more light and he's pushed his wet hair out of his eyes. Here it is, the evidence of her darkness, carved into the jagged mark left by his grandfather's blade. This was not what I wanted for you. His own words from the interrogation room on Starkiller Base come back to haunt her. A boy made of pensive half-smiles beneath the Yavin trees watches her from across a span of years. This is not what she had meant for either of them to become.

A dozen apologies rise to the tip of Rey's tongue, all unsaid, all swallowed down and vanishing into the ether at Kylo's surprised expression as he studies her from head to toe. She's suddenly conscious of her bedraggled appearance— there are no mirrors where she can check her reflection but she must look as disgusting as she feels, covered in mud, the buns in her hair knocked askew.

However, before she can shrink back into the shadows of the hut, there's a gradual shift to his features that makes her tense for an entirely different reason. It's amazement and frustration and loneliness and yearning, dawning in a slow bloom across his scarred, handsome face. Confused, she glances down at herself, at the rain-soaked tank top and leggings that cling to her form, at the gray vest that bares her upper arms. It occurs to her that he has never before seen her in anything that wasn't serviceable Jedi robes or the loose tunics of sleep. His dark eyes are burning. Her mouth goes dry.

She sneezes.
It's a tiny sneeze, barely audible, but it does an acceptable job of breaking the spell and giving her a reason to tear her gaze from his. "I'm going to wash up," she announces, heading to the cisterns in the farthest corner of the room. "Don't look."

"Wouldn't dream of it," he snaps.

Oh, but he does. As she unwinds the wraps from her arms, his stare is an electrified whisper along her nape. In an effort to curb the prickling sensation, she removes her hair ties, letting the damp chestnut mass fall past her shoulders like a shield. He mutters something under his breath— it sounds like a curse, although she can't be sure— before she feels the distance between them widening, hears his heavy footsteps moving towards the opposite end of the hut, where there are also cisterns constantly being replenished by the trickle of the rain.

Kriff, she's a hypocrite; she darts a glance at him just as he's pulling his tunic up over his head. Firelight casts a burnished gloss over the sinews of his back but something else catches her attention— for he is scarred there as well. The broad expanse of pale skin is criss-crossed in angry lines, some old and fading, others so fresh that they look like they still hurt. It's as if a beast has been at him, has raked at his flesh with long, razor-sharp claws.

"Ben," Rey whispers, horrified. "What did they do to you?"

He stiffens but does not turn around. "Stop calling me that. And it is nothing. Pain is instructive. I kept your mark as well."

"There are other ways to channel the Force," she argues, her voice shaking. "You know that."

"None that ever allowed me to access my full potential," he says quietly, bending down to remove his boots. "None that taught me how to overcome."

And Rey remembers crushing Unkar Plutt's will with a mere stretch of her fingers, remembers the Takodana woods transformed into a blistering ocean of fire and durasteel restraints disintegrating into pieces with only the prod of her mind, remembers the power that flowed through her in the depths of her suffering. Pain has made her strong, too, hasn't it? It's always whenever she gives in that she's able to touch the spine of the Force and bend it to her desires.

The what if lingers in the air, furtive and tantalizing. Her hands tremble when she dunks them into the cistern, the clear, arctic contents numbing her veins. She works quickly, furiously, scrubbing
face and neck and arms until her skin is raw and pink and free of grime. The splashing sounds that she makes are echoed across the hut as Kylo rinses off as well. Even though there's a storm raging outside, it's oddly quiet within these ramshackle walls, all firelight and water and breathing, the flicker of his shadow at the corner of her eye.

She has to get out of these wet clothes before she freezes to death. Rey glances over her shoulder again, hesitating; Kylo has retrieved a blanket from the crates, as well as a round purple Jogan fruit — one of the few species that can thrive on swampland— which he's now tentatively nibbling on as he sits cross-legged by the fire, the blanket draped over his bare shoulders.

*I'm being practical,* Rey very firmly chants to herself as she removes her vest. She then telekinetically summons the other blanket and uses the Force to keep it unfurled and hanging in the air, a makeshift curtain while she strips down to her chest wraps and panties. Goosebumps ripple all across her exposed skin, and it's not solely due to the cold— the weight of his stare bores holes into the flimsy barrier between them. She wonders how translucent the blanket is, if he can see her silhouette peel the leggings down her thighs. Her heart is hammering so loudly that it's audible over the thunder and the rain, or maybe that's his heart she hears, the rush of blood, the ragged and frenetic beats. Her face is beet-red by the time she wraps the blanket around her body, and she runs through a simple breathing exercise to calm herself before she finally turns around.

He knows that he should look away. Nothing good can come from this, from Rey padding towards him on bare feet, with hair down and limbs gleaming in the firelight. It's too reminiscent of all the obscene fantasies that he had about her in his last year as a Jedi, the dreams from which he woke hard and aching and a traitor to his vows. The blanket ends at her knees, billowing with every step to afford him glimpses of her slim thighs, and he's never actually seen this much leg on her before, shapely and golden and looking so, so smooth to the touch. She shouldn't have grown up to be so beautiful. How could he have known? She'd caught him off-guard, left him defenseless against something he never expected he'd have to watch out for in the first place.

That familiar old mixture of anger and regret leaves a sour taste in his mouth, clashing with the sweetness of the Jogan fruit. He *does* look away then, taking meticulous little bites out of his meager supper and chewing as slowly as he can to draw out the process of doing *anything* that isn't ogling her as she hangs her clothes over the roughly-hewn mantelpiece to dry, next to his shirt and cloak and arm-guards. Soon, however, he feels her eyes on him, turns to see the trace of a smile on her lips."

"*What?*" he demands, and perhaps there's a part of him that regrets the sharpness of his tone.

"*I just—*" She shrugs. "*You still eat the same way. You know— so prim and proper.*" Her voice
catches on a note of rueful amusement. "So like a prince."

"It's a defunct title," he automatically replies, because this—the banter, the collision of wits—this, too, is muscle memory.

She's shooting him these odd little glances, tentative yet soft with fondness, glances that he can't help but return as she carefully sits down, scooting closer to the hearth and running her fingers through her hair, letting it dry by the amber heat of the flames. And, yes, he used to dream this, too, or scenes similar to it—a life together, quiet nights together, a future that, even then, he knew he could never have.

Kylo's blanket slips to the floor as he stands up and walks over to the doorway, chucking the Jogan fruit's core out of the hut to be reclaimed by the swamp. He hovers at the threshold for a while, letting the glacial breeze and the spray of rain lash at his skin in the hopes that it will clear his head. He peers at the woods, twisted into stranger shapes by shadow and lightning, and he thinks about the warmth that waits for him if he would only just go back inside.

Rey drapes her hair over one shoulder, wringing out what few water droplets have remained tangled up in it. She stares into the fire, the hypnotic veil of red and gold shifting over wood and embers, the curl of smoke wafting into the air. She listens to the crackle of logs, to the patter of rain on the rooftop, and, finally, to the tread of Kylo's bare feet as he closes the space between them.

He sinks to his knees behind her, a tower caught in a slow collapse. She's not proud of it but she starts shaking. It has nothing to do with the cold. It's nervous little tremors that ripple from the pit of her stomach, each one an earthquake, each one running counter to her wild, ragged pulse. The more daring Resistance soldiers tease her sometimes—twenty years old and never been kissed, they'd say, clucking their tongues, and, of course not, of course not, she would think, fists clenched at her sides, I was waiting for him. But these past few months have changed her, she now knows how it feels to have his mouth suck bruises into her neck, to have his hands move hungrily down her body, to have him bring her to the verge of—something. Something mysterious and electrified and greater than the self. Something not even the Jedi Masters' carefully prepared diagrams and clinical lectures could have prepared her for.

One large palm rests on the round of her shoulder. Her breath hitches. It's the first time she has felt his bare touch since Corbos; the sensation blows through her like a shockwave. He leans forward, pressing a chaste kiss to the spot behind her left ear and she jolts, the blanket slipping lower down her torso. In a burst of panic, she attempts to hitch it up again, clutching one end tighter to her chest, but then his soft, warm lips find the first notch of her spine and her mind goes curiously,
frighteningly blank.

"Ben," she manages to say, "Ben, what are you doing?"

"I don't know," he mumbles into her skin, sounding feverish and lost and broken as he trails more lingering kisses down her nape and along the tops of her shoulder-blades. "I don't know, Rey."

She closes her eyes. "That makes two of us."

Chapter End Notes

In case anyone needs to refresh their memory, Rey ribs Ben about being a prince in Chapter 2 of Like Young Gods, and they run from the monster in Chapter 3.

The shelter they stumble into is based on Yoda's hut on Dagobah.

I pored over so many maps trying to figure out a logical yet secret route that Kylo could take into Chiss Space, and I eventually decided on this. Logan fruit.
Chapter Notes

So, the AMAZING Priya365 has compiled this fic’s soundtrack into a Spotify playlist, earning my eternal adoration. This update is for you, darling, and also for ReyloRobyn2011 and Kbourne2012 who have been constantly encouraging me on Tumblr as my prudish self wails, "Am I going too far?!!" I'd also like to highlight this excerpt from rubybullets’ latest comment: "All the obscene fantasies that he had about her in his last year as a Jedi, the dreams from which he woke hard and aching and a traitor to his vows. " - Poor Ben must have screaming internally on Corbos when Rey was trailing her hand down his chest to stomach and curled up to him being all "but I'm old enough now." Because, lol. Poor Ben, indeed.

Hope this installment makes up for the cliffhanger I left you with last time. Thank you so much for all the wonderful AO3 reviews and Tumblr asks. I'm currently going through a rough patch and every word from you darling readers inspires me to keep on writing. I think I can post again by this coming weekend, and I'd love to know your thoughts on this chapter as I work on the next one.

I'm still taking note of everyone's recs but, in order to set the proper mood for this update, I listened to these four songs in particular, and I suggest listening to them while you read:

1. The Fear You Won't Fall - Joshua Radin
2. Follow You Down - LIGHTS
3. Jason Forbach’s cover of "Touch Me" from Spring Awakening, which I can't find on YouTube but is on Spotify
4. Four Walls - Broods (I somehow managed to time writing the last line of this chapter with the final strains of this song and, let me tell you, it was a transcendent experience)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And it is absolutely ridiculous— it is the height of absurdity— that his father’s voice should come to him now.

"All right, kid, listen up," Han Solo had said as he tinkered with the Falcon’s engine while a fourteen-year-old Ben looked on, unimpressed. "You're approaching that age when— well, you know. Things happen. Even though you're on your way to becoming one of 'em monks, it's better that I tell you a few things— just in case, you see."

"We do have sex education at the Praxeum," Ben had frostily replied.
Han had coughed. "Yeah but that's— that's the theory part of it. What I'm talking about is, uh, the actual..." He floundered for a bit, waving his wrench around. Ben had to step back to avoid getting accidentally bludgeoned. "Now, some girls— not all, but some— and especially if it's the first time— they can get spooked—"

"Spooked," Ben had deadpanned, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, obviously, I don't mean you should force yourself on anyone. No means no, Ben." Han's expression hardened for a moment, the way it did whenever he was serious about something. "Remember that. But sometimes, even if you both want to take the next step, girls can get nervous. What I'm trying to say is— be gentle, you know? Figure out what she likes, take your time with her. Be respectful. Okay!" He suddenly clapped his palms together, the loud crack resounding through the ship. "I'm done embarrassing you for today."

"I think you embarrassed yourself, to be honest," Ben had sniped, and gotten a cleaning rag chucked at his head for all his trouble.

Snatches of that brief, long-ago conversation drift through Kylo Ren's mind as rain trickles onto stone, as the wind howls, as his shadow and Rey's move in the blaze of the flickering fire. She is shaking like a leaf, covered in goosebumps. He smooths his hands down her slender arms in what he hopes is a soothing gesture. "Cold?" he asks, and the voice is not his, it belongs to a boy long gone, but he is too exhausted for shields. Perhaps he can pretend, just for one night, that all is not yet lost.

She offers a slight nod, even though it's obvious that she needs warmth and reassurance in equal measure. He wraps his arms around her midsection then, as slowly and as tenderly as he can, conscious of how his frame practically engulfs hers. It sparks something primal within him, something that's heightened when the blanket falls to her waist to reveal a lithe torso covered only by the wraps that bind her breasts. He lowers his lips to the curve of her neck, and she—

— recoils—

She's thinking about Jakku, it's there in the air around them, the night he set his teeth to her skin under cover of darkness as another storm raged on. It is strange how self-loathing can be a physical thing, how it can hollow out the pit of his stomach, make him go temporarily numb. "Let me try again," he blurts out— begs, almost. "I'll do it better this time. It won't hurt. I'll never hurt you again..."

Oh, the impossible, desperate things we promise one another.
Rey doesn't tell Kylo no, not exactly, but neither does she relax, still so unbearably skittish, like a frightened doe. He's not used to seeing her like this. It breaks his heart, sort of—he's already gone about this all wrong, started out of order, messed her up like he'd always known he would.

Determined to make amends, he switches tactics, kissing her temple instead as he gropes for her hand. He laces their fingers together and it's such a fragile, half-remembered sensation that the beast roaring through his veins is momentarily subdued. Brushing his thumb over her knuckles, tracing the bony ridges and the delicate skin between, he thinks about how he has watched this hand learn to use the Force, how it has sparred with him and fought by his side, how it has healed his cuts and bruises and cradled his face. He thinks about how nipping at it had once been a mannerism, a playful little gesture he'd loved doing because she'd react so cutely, squealing in pretend indignation but never tugging away—

Never?

No, that's wrong, she'd snatched her hand back that day on the plateau, she'd—

Almost before he knows what he is doing, Kylo brings Rey's hand to his lips. He kisses her knuckles first, and then the inside of her wrist. She doesn't pull away. This is what his body remembers. His previous suspicions about the nature of the Memory Walk blare like sirens in the corners of his mind but, before he can dwell on them, Rey tentatively leans back against his chest. She shifts their clasped hands so that she can take the lead, kissing her way from the mound of his palm to the tips of his fingers with the poignant dedication of one relearning old haunts. His free hand drifts up her side, skimming the curve of one breast before cupping the base of her throat. A shiver of dark, sinister excitement pulses through the Force and he can't tell if it's coming from her or from him but she's latched on to his other arm with both hands now, her fingers running over the bones of his wrist, peppering veins and muscle with light kisses that gradually increase in urgency, pace soaring like a lyre climbing notes. Emboldened, he nuzzles at her hair, breathes in the scent of rain and flowers, same shampoo, same thrill, same everything, you're everything, you are, you are.

She sighs when his lips return to that first spot behind her ear. She melts when he moves to mouth at her jawline and then lower, lower still, her neck arching as he kisses down the slope of it, each kiss a delicate apology for the bruises he'd once left behind. She reaches back to tug at his hair; abruptly bereft of something to hold on to, his hand that's not at her throat fumbles at her breast, palming it through the thin layers of cloth. Part of him is still her childhood friend, still that awkward wreck of a man who'd developed a penchant for cold showers right around the time he started noticing the sway of her hips; that part freezes up, waiting for her to punch him.

But she doesn't. Instead, a husky whimper spills from her parted mouth and half-lidded hazel eyes sweep into his line of sight as she cranes her neck to kiss his cheek, all the while straining, pushing
up into his touch. He collapses onto the floor in a sitting position and she twists around, straddling his lap, her thighs bracketing his hips.

And, just like that, they're face to face.

The haze of desire doesn't abate but now it's pierced through with a spark of fierce joy. Their hands fly to each other's faces, mapping out familiar contours. Her eyes are wide and luminescent, tinted amber by the flames; her lips are silky beneath his fingertips. He kisses her forehead and she traces his scar—the mark that he had kept thinking it would remind him of his moment of weakness, but, every time he looked at his reflection, he was reminded only of her and of snow and of how it had felt like surrender, not defeat.

"Does it hurt?" she asks.

He shakes his head, dipping forward to rub his nose against hers in the process. Her lips twitch as if she's trying to curb her laughter, and he suddenly wants nothing more than to hear her laugh again after all these years. *Later*, he tells himself—fools himself, maybe. *There will be time later.*

His hand slides possessively to the small of her back, guiding her closer to him. Their lips meet, finally, at last, as rain drips down from the dark heavens and fire turns the world to gold.

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On D'Qar, the Resistance's command center is a frenzied hive of activity. Amidst shrill alarms and static-tinged communiques, people scurry in and out of the room, tap away at keyboards, bark commands into transceivers, and keep their eyes glued to the flashing screens. At the center of it all, Leia Organa studies a holographic map of the northern quadrant, mouth set in a tight, grim line.

"What do we know so far, Lieutenant?" she asks the blonde officer standing beside her.

Kaydel Ko Connix peruses her datapad. "At 1500 GST the First Order launched a coordinated mass attack along the Braxant Run. They quickly overwhelmed Galactic Alliance patrols, although a few ships made it to hyperspace and regrouped with the main fleet stationed at Coruscant. Ten sectors made their allegiance known once the attacks began; the First Order insignia now flies over the worlds in Meerian, Lahara, Weneen, Oricho, Atrivis, Cassander, Relgim, Noonian, Albarrio, and Obtrexta. The rest are putting up a fight but it's not looking good, General. We also have visual on six Knights of Ren, all from different battlefields."
"I told Sien this would happen," Leia grumbles, narrowing her eyes at the red spheres indicating fallen planets, which are quickly growing in number as more updates stream in. It doesn't take long for her to determine the pattern, the direction of the attacks. "They're gunning for the Core. The only way they'll be able to pull this off is if they keep up their momentum, not stopping until they reach Coruscant. It's a risky move but they know we're short on resources... I'm willing to bet that more and more worlds along the invasion route have been compromised and will turn on the Republic once they're given the signal."

"General Organa!" Tabala Zo calls out from her post at one of the communication bays. "Commodore Brand is requesting backup to hold the Shipwrights' Trace, he thinks that's where the First Order is going to advance."

"If the Jedi's intel is correct, then Fondor and the rest of the Tapani sector have already defected," Leia argues as she storms over to the bay to give Turk Brand a piece of her mind. "We'd be walking into a trap. Better to reinforce Duro instead—"

On red-veiled Dathomir, a Galactic Alliance captain nervously eyes the rancors looming behind his troops, their enormous jaws snapping at the air as they buck against durasteel harnesses, calming only when their riders tug at the reins every once in a while. The riders are women outfitted in reptilian leather armor, faces painted in the varying colors and symbols of the six witch clans, each one looking every inch as deadly as their hulking, monstrous steeds.

"The enemy is in front of us, captain," a serene voice admonishes.

Reddening slightly in embarrassment, the officer inclines his head towards the black-haired woman who had spoken. A lightsaber is clipped to her belt but her face is painted, too. "Yes, Master Kirana. I apologize."

"My sisters do not look or think as you do. They don't even fight the same way," says Kirana Ti, who had been born into the Singing Mountain Clan before ultimately choosing another path under Luke Skywalker. "But they do hold one rule above all else." Dark shapes blossom on the horizon, a burly mass of stormtroopers, assault vehicles, and Nightsisters led by Tamith Kai. "Never concede to evil."

*
On the rocky slopes of Garqi, at the edges of the agriworld's shimmering purple fields, a group of Resistance soldiers corners a gray-bearded man dressed in loose black robes, hood pulled low over his features. He stands statue-still, hands clasped together as if engaged in silent communion.

The soldiers raise their blasters, preparing to fire. The man smiles.

Lightning explodes from his palms. He flicks his wrists, directing the brunt of the virulent, electric spirals onto his foes, not letting up until they all lie dead at his feet, nothing more than charred corpses whose mouths remain twisted in eternal screams.

"Lord Joruus." A female stormtrooper in chromium armor approaches. "We are ready to take the capital."

Joruus C'baoth nods. "Lead the way, Captain Phasma."

Further down the Celanon Spur, the First Order has breached the Mid Rim and is now laying waste to the floating cities that hover above the surface of Ithor. The SkyYards are burning and the retreat has been sounded, Resistance and Galactic Alliance starfighters working in tandem to form a protective barrier around the remaining herdships as they scramble for the hyperlane.

"Seems to me that they could just make for the jungles below, assemble a resistance there," Kaye Galfridian mutters as she and Raynar Thul join the blockade of the Great Atrium on the Tafanda Bay, covering the civilians being evacuated to waiting escape cruisers.

"The Ithorians consider the surface of their planet sacred," Raynar says, casting a Force barrier to repel the blaster bolts aimed their way by advancing stormtroopers. "They may not set foot on it. Hence the floating cities."

*I should have known that,* Kaye thinks with a twinge of guilt. As second-in-line to the throne, she hadn't paid much attention to her lessons when she was growing up, but she has to improve if she is to one day become queen after her lord father— that is, if there is an Artorias left to be queen of once this war ends. She studies the barrier; she can't see it but it's there, the lasers are harmlessly bouncing off an invisible wall that extends about six feet in both length and height. She remembers a long-dead brother telling her how difficult it is to maintain an energy shield of this nature, how very few Jedi could manage it.
"All clear!" yells one officer, glancing behind him to see the last of the civilians trickle out of the vast hall. "Fall back, make for the ships—"

The eastern side of the Atrium shatters in a burst of moss-covered glass, admitting a fresh torrent of stormtroopers. Kaye tugs at Raynar to hurry him towards the exit but all too soon he stops in his tracks, rooted to the spot as he stares at something. At someone.

Across the hall, a maskless Alema Rar deflects five successive blaster bolts with her lightsaber in a series of whirlwind motions. She turns on her heel with the final slash, a maneuver that places Raynar in her direct line of sight.

Their eyes meet.

* 

On Sarvchi, Rey kisses Kylo Ren—*Ben Solo, Ben, my Ben, my only*— with all the strength and hope left in her foolish, wayward heart, eyes screwed shut and fingers tangled in his lovely hair, her lips pushing against his. It occurs to her that she might not be very good at this but she doesn't* care*— and neither does he, judging from how the Force is singing silver hymns all around them, judging from how he's returning her kiss with equal ardor, holding her so tightly that there is no more distance between their bodies, *no more, never again, forever like this, please.* It's the most natural act in the world to open her mouth when he licks at the seam of it, to welcome the devouring sweep of his tongue and meet it with her own. They're clumsy with each other at first, rough in the onslaught of sensation, but in the end it's just like sparring, isn't it, flowing around the other's movements until they fall into a rhythm that works. She's getting quite breathless—she has, of course, fantasized about kissing him before. Those were the secret thoughts that crept into her bedroom late at night, snuck up on her whenever she watched him train or meditate. So many years of yearning, crashing through her system in an endless wave. He tastes sweet, like the Jogan fruit, and she can't get enough, delving into his mouth with such eagerness that she nearly tips him over, forcing him to brace one arm on the floor behind him. He smiles then, she feels the curve of it against her lips, and suddenly she's smiling, too.

But, because he's* Ben,* he doesn't let her take the lead for long. And, because she's* Rey,* she yanks at his hair in indignation when he wrestles control from her, grabbing her wrist and slanting his mouth over hers in hard, demanding pulses. Her head spins; she clutches at his bare shoulders like they are lifelines. Cushioning the back of her head with one large hand, he lowers her to the floor, his mouth still attached to hers, kissing her ravenously as he follows her down.

*
Amidst wide halls of disintegrating glass, Alema streaks towards Raynar like a being possessed, teeth bared and jade eyes flashing. He calmly stands his ground even as she launches herself at him; her blade sparks against the Force barrier that sprouts from his feet to swirl around him like a cloak. Their gazes remain locked through the blaze of scarlet plasma.

"I carry her with me every day." Raynar's voice is pitched so low that Kaye, watching from the sidelines, thinks at first that she is only imagining it. "I am sorry, Alema. Believe that, if nothing else."

"I'm glad you finally got that off your chest," hisses the Twi'lek. "It must feel good. But apologies won't bring her back."

"Neither will this path that you have chosen. Don't you see it? We were being manipulated from the very beginning. All of us. The grandson of Darth Vader would not come willingly, so Snoke set into motion a chain of events that would bring Solo to him—"

"Is that something you learned during your nice little exile?" Alema lashes out with a tendril of Dark energy that dispels Raynar's barrier. He's left defenseless as she swings her blade but he takes a step backwards before it can make contact. Undeterred, she continues on the offensive, the air blurring with light as red as blood. "Did you have a wonderful time meditating and communing with the Force and finding yourself while I have spent every moment since then still breathing in my sister's ashes—"

It is a deadly dance, fluid and methodical. He is unarmed but he grew up with her, was a Jedi Knight with her, knows her moves and tells. He keeps dodging, sidestepping, weaving around the edges of the blade, and her frustration grows with each second that he doesn't fight back. He never takes his solemn blue eyes off her face. The walls of the Great Atrium keep collapsing panel by panel under merciless First Order bombardment, letting in bright sunlight. Open sky.

*I've been here before,* Rey thinks, pinned to the floor with Kylo's weight above her, a tight coil in her belly, his hardness pressing between her thighs. But some things are different. On Jakku, in the shadowy bowels of the *Ravager,* they had collided sharp and furious; here on this rain-drenched world, they are skin-to-skin and sacred.

Kylo lifts his mouth from hers, concluding their— first real series of kisses— oh, stars, Rey's heart
is pounding madly against the bones of her ribcage, the lovestruck teenager that she once was crowing in triumph. Without missing a beat, he returns to feasting on her neck, those plush lips and that clever tongue mapping the spots that make her toes curl. She refuses to stay idle, working her hand between their bodies so that her fingers can graze the muscles of his abdomen, so beautifully defined, contracting as his breath hitches when her wandering hand trails past his navel, to the fastenings of the trousers slung low at his hips—

He surges upwards to capture her bottom lip between his teeth, tugging gently at the same time that his hips grind against hers. It's the push-pull of it, the delicious jolt of pleasure-pain, that has her raking her blunt nails across his scarred back. At first she worries that she's hurting him but this doubt is assuaged when he **growls**, so low and deep that she feels it in her core. And it hits her like a bolt of lightning, how even this is not enough, she wants more of him, she wants all of him, the desire in her veins a dark mirror to the flames dancing in the hearth.

"Touch me," Rey gasps against Kylo's mouth. She takes his hand and guides it back to her breast; his palm burns her skin through the cloth wraps, and tentative caresses soon give way to the bold strokes of his thumb and the strumming of his fingers, so good that she could almost weep. "Yes, like that—"

"You're so bossy," he murmurs, kissing the tip of her nose before pulling away to simply stare at her face as he continues his ministrations. He's panting raggedly now, lips swollen, pupils blown wide. "Force, I knew you'd be bossy," he says, voice hoarse and thick. "Knew—**hoped**—you'd have stars in your eyes."

"You put them there," Rey breathes, tugging him down for another kiss.

* The gaping black jaws of the First Order insignia rise over Garqi's capital city, huge swathes of which have been reduced to smoke and ruins.

Amidst the celestial wastes of the Savareen sector, the sole remaining A-wing interceptor of Gold Squadron dives into a suicide run, its Tognath pilot wide awake yet dreaming of the long-lost Holy City of Jedha as she plows into the transparisteel viewport of an enemy warship.

On Gyndine, Kyle Katarn ducks for cover behind an overturned assault tank, clutching at the blaster wound in his side. He allows himself to rest for a moment, listening to the battle as it rages all around him. "I'm getting too old for this," he grunts, before igniting his lightsaber once more and jumping back into the fray.
In the Jedi sanctuary on Ossus, Tionne Solusar pauses at the doorway of the training room where Luke is putting himself through the final paces of Alchaka, an extreme variant of Moving Meditation designed to tire the body and sate the spirit. Careful to afford him some privacy for this highly personal ritual, she keeps her opalescent gaze fixed on the stone tiles as he traverses the length of the chamber in a sequence of complex martial forms and dizzying positions, green blade flashing in the light of the twin suns pouring in through the windows.

You are preparing for battle, my master, Tionne muses. You will give it all you have. As you always have.

Luke sinks to the floor in the center of the room, eyes closed, sweat dripping down his aged brow. Sensing that his meditation is at an end, Tionne speaks. "Master Luke, I have word from Kyp Durron. They had no choice but to retreat from Kalarba with great loss of life. The First Order has now severed the Rimward leg of the Corellian Run; Master Durron is en route to the Trade Spine where the Resistance and the Galactic Alliance are assembling the defense of the Core."

"Have we heard from Rey and the others?" Luke asks.

"Negative." A communications blackout had been established; the Sarvchi team is supposed to make contact only once they're safely away from any Chiss frequencies that might detect their transmissions.

"Very well. I believe it is time for you and I to head to the Core." Luke stands up, still looking slightly disoriented from the Alchaka ritual but there is firm determination in his tone. "Send a message to Okko, ask him if his people can—"

"Master," Tionne interrupts, "the Ysanna are already here." She bows. "They await your command."

The tiny part of Rey that's still capable of coherent thought wonders if she's been drugged as Kylo continues to ply her with kisses. There seems to be no other explanation for this fog enveloping her entire being in an odd mix of languid warmth and increasing urgency. He is everywhere, his
tongue in her mouth, his hands on her skin, his broad shoulders the roof of her world. It's his hands that her concentration keeps flickering back to; the mere feel of them even as they glide along relatively chaste places like her forearms and her sides is making her ache.

"Touch me." She whispers it over and over again, like a prayer amidst the shadows and the firelight. How she's missed these hands. Touch me, love, it's been so long.

"Yes." He moans the word into the dip between her collarbones. "Yes, sweetheart, anything you want." He buries every syllable into the tops of her breasts as he fumbles to work the wraps loose.

No, she thinks with a hint of panic, that'll take time we don't have. She's already so close to something, she'll die if it's snatched away from her like he had once been. Already she can hear the rain slowing down.

Rey gropes for Kylo's hand again, lifting it from her chest, his soft whine of protest quickly choked off when she urges it lower. He's all too eager to comply, fingers toying with the fabric at her hipbone.

"I—" He pauses, looking at her with eyes dark and glazed but uncertain. "I don't— you'll have to show me how you—"

It takes Rey a few seconds to identify the new feeling that's flooding through her as embarrassment. She turns slightly, hiding her flushed face in his bicep, muttering her next words into the steely muscle there. "I don't know. I've never..."

"Never?" he echoes, sounding incredulous. And happy.

"It's not like we were particularly encouraged to explore, you know," she sulks. "Whenever I— wanted to, down there— I'd just... meditate."

He's silent for a worryingly long time. When she musters the nerve to peek at him through her lashes, his expression is almost predatory, bruised lips curved in the slightest trace of a warped grin. It appears as if the red-gold light of the fire reflected in his irises is shading to scarlet, a rich, dangerous undercurrent running through the Force. She knows that spike of energy for what it is. Dzwol shásotkun. It curls around her, winding its way into the corners of her heart. All-consuming. Possessive.
Chapter End Notes

Gentle reminder that *Dzwol shâsotkun* is from the Code of the Sith and in Basic it translates to "There is only passion." (°ʖ°)

The Braxant Run.

Kaydel Ko Connix.

Tabala Zo.

The Shipwrights' Trace.

Duro.

The Wookieepedia page for the Witches of Dathomir provides information on their society and the various clans.

Garqi.

Many thanks to Rinso for nominating Joruus C'baoth as a Knight of Ren! There's one more left to be unveiled.

The Celanon Spur.

Ithor.

The Tafanda Bay.

The Savareen sector.

RZ-1 A-wing interceptor.

Tognath. (I'm still not over Rogue One guys alsjfdfsld)

Gyndine.

Alchaka.

And, since it's been quite a while, the Ysanna, as well as the probable defection of Fondor and the rest of the Colonies, are mentioned in Chapter 2 of this fic.
Chapter 24

Chapter Notes

Belated Happy Valentine's Day!

A few readers have asked if we can really finish the story in just four more updates... No. No, we can't xD I base chapter count on my outline but the Reylo scenes tend to get away from me, meaning I have to move stuff around so as not to mess with the overall pacing. However, I promise that we'll end at Chapter 30, or even earlier if I can manage to up the length of each installment from here on out. I'm sorry, I know some of you must be getting impatient :(

I'm flying to Singapore tomorrow for a short vacation but I'll try my best to get some writing done for the next update. In the meantime, I would love to know your thoughts on this one.

Soundtrack:
1. Burn Me - Xandria feat. Zaher Zorgati (suggested by meritmut)
2. Rootless Tree - Damien Rice feat. Lisa Hannigan (below_the_starry_clusters_bright)
3. The Cross - Within Temptation (below_the_starry_clusters_bright)
4. Dark Doo Wop - MS MR (synchronized_strangers)
5. Sheep In Wolves Clothes - Little Hurricane (synchronized_strangers)
6. Gasoline - Halsey (Priya365)
7. Wonderwall - Ryan Adams (Priya365)
8. Wicked Game - RAIGN (Priya365)
9. DKLA - Troye Sivan feat. Tkay Maidza (Priya365)
10. Blind - Placebo (Priya365)
11. Sugar - Wanderhouse (Priya365)
12. Stay - Michelle Featherstone (Priya365)
13. I Can Make You Feel Young Again - Copeland (ViolaTheForceWhisperer)
14. Down In Flames - Ella Vos (ViolaTheForceWhisperer)
17. What If This Storm Ends - Snow Patrol (Nemo)
18. Guys My Age - Hey Violet (alyssalopezbor)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The copper star of Domir cedes Dathomir's sky to Koratas' ruby crescent, twilight's chill creeping over the plains like a velvet curtain being drawn. Tamith Kai winds her chain of dark magic around one lumbering rancor's legs, which are as thick as tree trunks but powerless in the embrace of her runes. A swift, sharp tug, and the beast topples to the ground to be picked apart by a swarm of droidekas, its hapless rider mowed down by stormtrooper artillery.

Aquamarine light flashes at the periphery of Tamith Kai's vision. She turns, a shield of pure,
crackling shadow materializing in her grip just in time to block Kirana Ti's sidelong slash. Barely a second passes before the shield reassembles itself into two curved daggers pointed outwards, nicking Kirana's arm as she jumps back. The Jedi Master and the Knight of Ren size each other up for several long moments before colliding once more in a whirl of light and shadow, the air muddled with the din of rancors and the shriek of lasers and—

—the shattering of glass, everywhere, all around, both Raynar and Alema losing their balance as the floor tilts when the first of the Tafanda Bay's repulsorlifts begins to fail. She is quicker to correct her stance, thrusting her lightsaber forward—

(— and four years ago a beam of brilliant amethyst plunges into Numa Rar's chest—)

A shard of laser clips Alema's wrist, forcing her blade to the side a scant half-breath before it can stab Raynar through the heart. The Twi'lek howls in pain, her weapon clattering to the floor as her head snaps towards the new assailant.

Several meters away, Kaye Galfridian is already lining up the blaster's scope, readying herself to pull the trigger once more.

*Mine, mine, mine,* roars the beast in Kylo's chest, his entire world narrowed down to the sight of Rey quivering and barely dressed in the glow of the flames, all kiss-stung lips and disheveled hair and wide hazel eyes. It's every feverish dream he's ever had, coming to life in this crude little swamp hut and coaxing all his blood south as black claws rake at the edges of his mind. *Here, at last, everything you've ever wanted.* They speak to him from across the ages, these long-dead Sith lords whose voices he first heard in the holocrons at Centerpoint Station, who now promise him sin and glory in a ghostly chorus. *Willing, untouched, beloved. You are free.*

Kylo bends down to claim Rey's mouth again. She's so sweet and pliant beneath him; in his current state he could swallow her whole. When his fingers begin to glide in feather-light strokes over the damp fabric between her thighs, she gasps, instinctively locking her knees together, trapping his wrist between her legs. He stifles a laugh against her lips, far from chastised; oh, he's *thought about* this, in his Praxeum room late at night, thought about laying siege to the defenses of the girl who slept so innocently down the hall. Only, she'd just told him that she hadn't been so innocent then, hadn't she?

"And what did you think about?" he asks, his voice dropping an octave in between teasing little nibbles at the delicate lobe of her ear. "Whenever you 'wanted to—'?”
"You," she says without hesitation, sounding dazed, sounding caught in the undertow of the same spell that's washing over him. Her fingers dig into his arm. "Always you."

He can't help it— he has to kiss her again for that, a fierce, heated kiss that leaves them both breathless and rocking into each other. When she finally spreads her legs, hips canting towards his palm, the triumph that floods through him is that of a conqueror's— exultant, dark. Her features are soft with an unearthly combination of fear and wonder and he remembers their forms glossed silver in the Yavin night, remembers chasing her to the edge of the courtyard as summer wind blew through the trees, remembers how the light in his hands had been green, not red. He sinks his teeth into the pulse point at her neck in a bid to distract himself but there are more cracks running through his memories now, old sensations, old images bleeding through the hollow shell that the Supreme Leader's teachings built around him, dreams of sand, dreams of snow, dreams of starlight, always starlight, spilling through the dense green world of his youth. *Pick up your sword, your place is with me, why are you lying, I love you, I love you, I love you—*

His fingers stir of their own accord, tracing the outline of her center through her undergarments. She keens into his mouth, rolls her hips so beautifully, and it's a latent sense of decorum that prompts him to ask, "May I—?" as his hand hovers at her waistband.

"I think so," Rey mumbles, the words almost indecipherable because she's busy scattering kisses along the line of his jaw. "I think so. Yes."

*\*

The blaster is torn from Kaye's grasp as if an invisible chain had wrapped around it and *pulled*. It floats out of reach before swiveling to face her and she's suddenly staring down the barrel of it. Time comes to a grinding halt; all sounds cease.

And then Raynar reaches out with the Force, hauling her to his side just as Alema telekinetically pulls the trigger, the blaster bolt whizzing through the empty space where Kaye had stood only a moment ago.

"You have to go, Your Highness." Raynar's gaze is fixed on Alema as she summons her lightsaber into the palm of her uninjured hand. The floor tilts again as another repulsorlift blows out, sending the Twi'lek careening into the far end of the hall. Kaye would have slid, too, but Raynar holds her firm by the waist. "Hurry. Before the ships leave you behind."
"You're—you're not coming?" Kaye sputters.

"I will try to follow." Alema has regained her bearings and is now running towards them, shoving aside debris and stormtroopers alike; even at this distance, the sheer rage in her eyes is palpable. "But first there are some things that I must try to make right."

"I'm not leaving you!" Kaye snaps. Raynar *does* look at her, then, with a flicker of surprise, and she feels a surge of vindictive pleasure that, after several missions together, she was finally able to chip at that maddeningly calm facade. "If you're staying, I'm staying, too. Do you want my blood on your hands, Lord Thul?"

It's a cheap shot and she's not proud of it, but it does the trick. When a nearby panel of glass collapses over their heads, Raynar freezes the shards in place. He jerks his head towards the exit and Kaye starts running, latching on to the sleeve of his robe as she goes. He follows her lead, but not before redirecting the entire multitude of glass towards Alema, buying them precious time to escape. Kaye glances over her shoulder only once as they leave the disintegrating hall. Alema's dodging the glass, immaculate features twisted in pure hatred. Kaye thinks that the sight will stay with her.

* 

And in the swamplands, by the hearth, in a warm tangle of limbs and blankets, Rey's spine arches as Kylo scrapes his teeth along the column of her throat and the slight swell of her breasts while his hand learns her body. It is awkward and untutored and sometimes it hurts, but, because it's *Ben*, it's the most amazing that she has ever felt, as if she is being gilded from within by strings of light. She might as well be boneless, might as well be a comet streaking through the night sky, urged higher and higher by his fingers and his lips. His thoughts are open veins in the Force, she senses his fascination with the sounds that she makes—his disbelief that he's capable of eliciting them from her—and she also senses his thinly-veiled panic that he doesn't know what he's doing, that he can't take her where she needs to go.

*I trust you*, Rey sends out to him. She's never meant it more.

He brushes a spot inside her that makes her jolt, eyes flying open. "Wait, wait," she pants as she grabs his wrist and tries to twist away, the pleasure so sharp and electric that it terrifies her. "Ben, wait—" She hates how broken her voice sounds but it must have the opposite effect on him judging from the way he shivers and presses harder against her thigh.

"It's all right, it's fine," he rasps into her hair, his fingers resuming their gentle assault. "I've got
you, you'll be fine— just let me—"

She never knew it could be like this. All those nights spent tossing and turning in bed, thinking of him, the pillow cool beneath her flushed cheek, willing away all those illicit sensations even though it felt like her body had a mind of its own, retreating into the serenity of the Jedi Code despite the hidden parts of her that were blooming in the tropical heat— she never knew. And soon she is crying out into the crook of his neck, begging him for something she can't name, faster, higher, always, more, his whispered words in her ear her only constant, the Force a whirlwind, Light and Dark shifting over her in rolling waves. "Stay with me," she chants without really having any idea what she's saying, she's too far gone, she's so close. "For nearly all my life, I've only ever wanted you to stay—"

His name is a sob on her lips when she finally unravels. His eyes are embers in the gloom when he pulls back to watch her face, his own features tinged with reverence as she falls off the cliff that he was coaxing her towards. It feels like lightning is pulsing from her core and spreading throughout her body, all the way down to the tips of her toes. She's all locked limbs and delirium, spasming around his fingers. It reminds her of the rapture. It reminds her of Takodana, when the forest burned and she would have willingly burned along with it. It reminds her of glory and of dying. *Wonoksh Qyâsik nun.*

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In the indigo dusk of Dathomir, beneath the pearly crimson arc of the crescent moon, Tamith Kai rises several inches off the battlefield, her body bent backwards, feet kicking uselessly in the air, speared through the stomach on the point of Kirana Ti's blade.

---

Kylo's lips are on Rey's again, kissing her through the last few waves of pleasure that threaten to tear her apart, holding her down lest she float away. How strange, how fitting, that her anchor should come in the form of her ruin. He kisses her cheeks, her jaw, the tip of her nose, her forehead — and it's the same pattern as in that room in her mind, it's the same way he said goodbye. She offers him a languid smile amidst the ebb of her aftershocks, reaching up to play with the strands of hair that have fallen across his forehead. He looks so young in this moment, pleased with himself and absolutely awed by her. Rey's heart is glowing.

"We should—" Her sentence is cut off when he drops another quick peck on her lips. While it's second nature by now to kiss him back, she does manage to get the rest of the thought out eventually. "We should try that again."
"Greedy little thing," he chides, but he's already rubbing circles on her bare hip, fingers still wet from—from her. Desire spikes anew in her abdomen.

"I meant with you, this time," she corrects in a rush, not knowing how to say it, that she wants to make him feel good, too. Not knowing the words for this yearning, so far from sated. Her own hand wanders to the waistband of his trousers. "Teach me?"

He's just starting to flash her the beginnings of a lopsided grin when his eyes suddenly widen. He wrenches himself off of her as if he'd been punched in the gut and scrambles to his feet. She sits up, jerked back to harsh reality as a pervasive chill seeps into her bones at his absence.

"What's wrong?" Her voice seems unnaturally loud. She realizes that, at some point down the line, the rain had stopped without her noticing.

Kylo doesn't answer—at least, not right away. He's hunched in on himself, face buried in his hands, every rigid line of his broad frame trembling. "She's dead," he croaks. "Why—how—"

Rey stands up, blanket clutched to her chest, confusion and dread replacing the warm contentment of only moments ago. She makes to approach him but is halted in her tracks by his narrowed glare, a glare blazing with such white-hot fury that it echoes through the nets of the Force.

"Was this part of the plan all along?" Kylo hisses. Water ripples in the cisterns, stirred by the raw brunt of his emotions. "Were you tasked to distract me while your friends attacked my Knights?"

"What are you talking about?" Rey demands. He shoves past her as he stalks over to the mantelpiece to retrieve the rest of his clothes, brusquely shrugging off her grip when she attempts to lay a hand on his arm. She can only watch as he dresses, reeling at how quickly—how drastically—things have changed. It's not until he heads for the door that she's spurred into action, haphazardly throwing on her own garments. "Where the hell are you going?"

The world is eerily silent the way it tends to be after a storm. She's not prepared for what happens next; beneath a dew-stained canopy of gnarltrees, Kylo whirls around to face her, one long arm stretched out. The Force Stun wraps around her like a serpent's coils, freezing her in place, squeezing the air from her lungs. "I have lost my head over you for the last time," he snarls, his energy signature ensnared in the wrathful grief that she last sensed from him the day Numa died. "And I have wasted enough hours as it is." Before she can cast her shields, he ruthlessly delves into her mind, sussing out the events of yesterday, watching through her eyes as the womp rat speaks
and the Clawcraft glide and the tracker falls into gurgling muck.

"At least you didn't lie about that"— she hears the words as clearly as if he'd uttered them aloud. His contempt for her is tangible, as is his disgust with himself, and it's too much, especially after what they had shared, after how vulnerable she had been before him—

Rey shuts down.

Afterwards, she will only ever be able to describe it in terms of metal and a slow, deep winter. It is blessed in its numbness, the ice that crawls through her bloodstream and seeps into her heart. Her stomach is lead, her arms are lead, her soul is a ravaged wasteland as she stares into his eyes without seeing them. There is none of the rage and betrayal of that first heartbreak, down in the mines of Corbos. She feels nothing. And for that she is grateful.

Kylo unclips her lightsaber from her belt and holsters it at his side, leaving her unarmed. How foolish she had been to trust someone long gone. He relinquishes his telekinetic grip, opting for a physical hold on her wrist instead. "We will find the Eye and I will take it to my master," he says tersely. "Perhaps I should take you with me as a bargaining chip as well. I wonder what the Resistance would do to save the Sword of the Jedi."

Not much, Rey thinks. Not if it meant conceding vital ground to the First Order. The war is bigger than the fate of one person, she has learned that by now and she doubts that her commanding officers will jeopardize the lives of millions upon millions to see her unharmed. She wouldn't fault them for it if they made that call. Everyone is bound by duty and—let's be honest here, Rey—there is no one who loves her that much, who would choose her over the entire galaxy. It's a bitter realization but she lets herself confront it, lets herself shoulder the surprisingly weightless burden of acceptance, stumbling after Kylo as he drags her through the woods. She can't endure it anymore, she can't keep grasping at stray threads of hope that he's finally coming around only for those hopes to be brutally dashed again and again. She promises herself that this was the last time.

Silver mist carpets the swampland, pooling around her ankles and raising curly tendrils into the air. For a while, the only sounds are water, splashing and dripping, and breath emerging in harsh puffs as Kylo forces his way over increasingly rougher terrain. He obviously still has no idea where he's going and soon Rey begins to suspect that they're walking in circles, but she keeps that to herself as she trawls the nearby Force for any sign of Finn and Poe.

"Who died?" she asks, both to satisfy her curiosity and to prevent Kylo from noticing her attempts at a search. He keeps accusing her of trying to distract him; she might as well prove him right.
"Were you not informed?" he sneers, but he shoves the answer into her head, anyway. The faint impression of a blue lightsaber, a ruby sickle in the sky that she pegs as Dathomir's fourth moon, the broken link among the Knights of Ren where Tamith Kai should be. Uneasiness flutters in her gut, not at the witch's passing but at the fact that she seems to have been killed in a battle Rey knows nothing about. What has been happening while she's here on Sarvchi, spectacularly botching this mission?

"Hurts, doesn't it?" she goads. "To feel your friends die, too far away for you to save them—"

"You think I didn't feel it?" His voice cracks like a whip through the early morning stillness, his scarred face white with rage. "You think I do not know precisely where in the temple every single one of them fell? That I cannot describe, right down to the very second, how each of them died? How many times do I need to explain to you that it was necessary?"

She shrugs as much as she can with his fingers clamped around her wrist. "You tell me. How many times do you need to explain it to yourself?"

"I didn't kill any of them." He falters in his tracks, his free hand clutching at the side of his head as if it's starting to throb. "I never struck the fatal blow. Not once. I couldn't..." He trails off, and in the desolate silence, in that cold, empty place inside her, Rey's cruelty takes root.

"Honestly, that's worse," she spits out. "That makes it so much worse, because it means you didn't even have the guts to do your own dirty work. That's why you're afraid that you will never be as strong as Darth Vader—"

"I learned, didn't I?" he yells, and for a moment they're in the snow again, the air between them thick with a shared loss. "I learned—"

"No. You didn't." It's frightening how calm she is. "You missed his heart. He's in a coma and that's why you can't feel him in the Force. Your father is alive."

Those who handle crystals— kyber, Corusca, Adegan, or otherwise— do so with care. Even the ones hard enough to scratch glass have their weak spots. Exert enough pressure along the lattices, and the cracks will spread throughout the rest of the gem.
The same goes for buildings. Sometimes all it takes is one perfect blow to a specific joint in the frame or a cornerstone in the foundation for even the mightiest tower to collapse.

The same goes for people. We are made of facets, stitched together by dreams and fears and the things we believe in. We carve identities for ourselves, glued in place with stubborness or bravado or a lack of alternatives; we do this for our own protection, clinging to the shell that we pray is strong enough to contain the soul within. But sometimes the soul fights back, howling and scrabbling at the walls that cage it. Sometimes all it takes for our careful constructs to fall apart is the right words applied to that one fault line where we need it most.

All boys are doomed to love their fathers. Luke Skywalker knew that well, and now for his nephew the relief of Han Solo’s survival is as vivid and intense as a solar flare cutting through the rim of abject midnight. It blanks out everything else, the purest, highest form of joy tearing at his heart. It is a rupturing, a violent destruction painted in the fast-rushing blur of an old life, a stream of images of everyone he has lost and of everyone still left to him as the spell of countless Memory Walks begins to shatter.

Kylo Ren breaks. And somewhere inside him, what is left of Ben Solo blinks in the clarity of absolution and, struggling and single-minded, reaches out with both hands to claw its way back to the Light.

*\

When he lets go of her wrist, she's not sure which of them moves away from the other. She knows only that there is distance between them once more, Kylo leaning heavily against a tree trunk while she stares down at the mud smeared on her boots.

"Why..." His voice emerges tremulous and cracked. He swallows, tries again. "Why didn't you tell me sooner?"

"Because I am selfish." She hadn't been able to admit it to herself but there's no use hiding from the truth anymore. "Because, after what happened on Starkiller Base, I thought that I would be enough to bring you back. I wanted to be enough." I wanted you to love me enough. "I should have told you the moment we saw each other again on Dantooine, but I guess I had a rather inflated sense of self-importance. And we all suffered for it. I am sorry."

"Rey."
It's the way he says her name that tells her she has won. But it's an exhausted, hollow victory. The kind that comes at the cost of the self. She doesn't say anything, and the minutes roll past them in earthly silence. There are tears in his eyes, tangled in his lashes, staining his cheeks.

Rey eventually senses three people approaching. Finn, Poe, and— someone else. Someone whose energy signature she doesn't recognize but burns in the Force like the heart of a star. An unknown Jedi? No, that's not possible—

She hones her focus. They're running. Running from something massive and—

— hungry—

"Lightsaber!" Rey shouts at Kylo. He reacts quickly despite his inner turmoil, tossing her weapon at her just as Finn and Poe burst from the undergrowth.

"Can't catch a break," Kyp Durron had groaned when that second Leviathan roared from the chasms of the Corbos valley. Rey echoes those long-ago sentiments now because— as if yesterday's giant slugs hadn't been enough— an enormous white spider scuttles into view, blocking out what few feeble rays of dawn had managed to penetrate the roof of leaves and branches. It's as tall as a young gnarltree, the bulbous, speeder-sized head supported by eight twisted legs, the menacing red eyes fixed on Finn and Poe.

"What a nice present you've brought me," Rey complains once the two men reach her side.

"Forgot to put a ribbon on it," Finn snarks at the same time that Poe does a double take, catching sight of—

"Ben?"

"I'll explain later," Rey hurriedly tells the pilot. "Where's the other person—"

The spider lunges. It's met by the twin beams of Rey's saberstaff, by Kylo's shrieking scarlet crossguard, by blaster fire. Despite being outnumbered, it moves with predatory swiftness on the treacherous, swampy terrain, its armored skin a deterrent to laser and plasma. Rey seizes her opening as soon as she sees it, diving through a gap between the legs and lancing her saberstaff into the soft underbelly. The spider emits a shrill scream, and then its fangs are piercing through
Rey’s collar— missing her neck by centimeters— and hurling her against a nearby tree. She slides down into the mud, the pain momentarily robbing her of breath, and Finn darts over to help her up.

The mists shift, enveloping the field of combat in hazy veils of silver gray. Rey squints, glimpsing Kylo’s silhouette as he manages to hack off one of the now-wounded creature’s many legs. It tilts on its side, unsteady but still malevolent, scrabbling towards him—

A shadowy figure drops from the branches in a whirl of brilliant white light, spinning and slicing at the beast in quick, efficient strokes that seem to be everywhere at once. Two blades, Rey realizes after a while. I’m looking at two blades. One is shorter than the other and, from her vantage point, the angles appear slightly off because the hilts are curved and held in reverse-grip.

It’s over almost before she knows it. The figure carves a lethal slash down the length of the spider’s head, splitting it wide open. The arachnid’s legs are the last to stop moving, still twitching violently in the shallows as its killer lands on one knee. The mists part, affording Rey a better view of—

— an elderly Togruta female dressed in a motley of browns and greens, much like the Chiss from last night, with weathered orange skin and piercing blue eyes. She ignores Rey, Finn, and Poe, staring only at Kylo, who is still shrouded in half-light and fog as thick as smoke, looming a few feet away from her, tall and broad-shouldered and messy-haired...

"Anakin?" she whispers, in a rough old voice faded at the edges with disbelief and memory.

Rey thinks that she sees Kylo flinch, right before he steps out of the gloom. "You have the wrong Skywalker," he rasps, extinguishing his blade, "Ahsoka."

Chapter End Notes

Domir.

Koratas.

Knobby white spider.

Before I get pelted with tomatoes and rotten eggs: I PROMISE, THE SMUT IS HAPPENING. These last few installments are also going to be mostly Reylo interaction. Just hang on a little while longer, darlings <3 And a huge shoutout to wordghost, who correctly guessed our womp rat’s identity! #AhsokaLives
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

All the Ahsoka love is making me so happy. I’ve been sitting on that twist since halfway through Like Young Gods and it felt great to finally be able to share it with you guys :) For the readers who aren't familiar with her, this update gives a little background of her time with the Jedi Order before venturing into my own version of what happens after Rebels. Needless to say, spoilers for that series and The Clone Wars abound.

Thank you for all your wonderful comments. The support for this fic blows me away every single time and I really do take your inputs into consideration when crafting tone and character dynamics. If you have any lingering questions about, well, anything, now is the time to ask so I can weave them into the narrative of the last five chapters. This also goes for whatever you might like to see happen between Ben and Rey. I'm open to suggestions because y'all deserve to be as satisfied as possible <3

Soundtrack:
1. Gun - Mas Ysa feat. Nicole Miglis (suggested by nemo)
2. Dynasty - Miia (AMac)
3. Scars - Tove Lo (AMac)
4. I Was Wrong - Sleeperstar (AMac)
5. Not Afraid Anymore - Halsey (AMac)
6. Mercy - Shawn Mendes (AMac)
7. Like I'm Gonna Lose You - Jasmine Thompson (AMac)
8. Half Light - Banners (AMac)
9. Devil Devil - MILCK (below_the_starry_clusters_bright)
10. Take Me To Church - MILCK (below_the_starry_clusters_bright)
11. Stay Now - All Good Things (Psychomantium)
12. Just Like You - Celldweller (Psychomantium)
13. Smoke and Mirrors - Gotye (meritmut)
14. Save Me - Gotye (meritmut)
15. Making Mirrors - Gotye (meritmut)
16. Endlessly - Amaranthe (meritmut)
17. Too Much Is Never Enough - Florence + the Machine (telnovela)
18. 3 Rounds and A Sound - Blind Pilot (anon)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rey has heard of Ahsoka Tano but only in bits and pieces, from what few scraps of information Tionne and Luke had managed to reconstruct about the Old Jedi Order. A mention in a journal here and there, a note scribbled in the margins of some esoteric test, snippets of Rebel Alliance communiques that had degraded over time. And, once, in a holocron, long since lost to the Siege.

Rey was fifteen when she first saw it, the training vid that had been tacked onto the end of a rather dry lecture on forms. The Togruta girl was slight in stature, dressed in apprentice robes, and moved
as swift and lethal as a nexu. Her two lightsabers were a brilliant yellow green shade, held in the
unorthodox Shien reverse-grip that Eryl Besa had also favored.

"This is Ahsoka," Tionne had murmured as Rey watched the hologram of the girl flicker and leap
and slice through the air in breathtakingly acrobatic sequences. "Anakin Skywalker's padawan.
From what I've gathered, she would have been fifteen, like you are now, when this vid was taken—
about a year before she was expelled from the Order for her purported role in the bombing of the
Jedi temple hangar on Coruscant."

"'Purported'?" Rey had echoed.

"Those were dark times," Tionne had said. "So much misinformation going around, so much
confusion... No one knew whom to trust. Ahsoka was a casualty of that. Her name was cleared
eventually, but, as there are no records of her having ever been Knighted, we can assume that she
didn't go back to the Order. The next we see of her in the chronology is as a member of the Rebel
Alliance."

Within the confines of the holo, the Togruta had dropped to one knee at the end of her drill, chest
heaving from exertion. "Snips?" a voice had rumbled offscreen— a voice that Rey would not hear
again until she was twenty years old. Her expression brightening, the young Ahsoka stood up,
striped head tails dangling past her shoulders as she turned to the unseen man who had spoken. The
vid had ended there.

And now Rey is watching a wrinkled, aged version of this face, wreathed in the mists of Sarvchi,
studying Kylo with eyes that see ghosts. Without the adrenaline of battle and the Force to spur her
movements in combat, Ahsoka is slow to rise to her feet, the strain apparent in the quiver of her
joints as she sheathes her weapons.

"Poe and I ran into her last night," Finn explains to Rey. "Or, well, to be more accurate, the giant
slugs chased us all the way to her mud hut and she saved our butts. We set out at first light to look
for you and then we got attacked by that spider. Anyway, she's our womp rat, she's—"

"Ahsoka Tano," Poe gushes. "The original Fulcrum. She—" He suddenly clamps his lips shut,
gaze darting to Kylo, who has slumped against a nearby tree, looking shaken.

Ahsoka steps towards him, fishing a small cloth bag out of her pocket and then tipping what it
contains onto her open palm. It's a crudely-hewn, silvery lump of rock. Kylo stares at it as if his
heart is in his throat.
"What is alive must heal," says Ahsoka, holding the Eye of the Sun out to him. "Yes?"

Long minutes pass before Kylo responds. "Yes," he says in the voice of a man who has realized that there is nowhere else to go. His hand closes over the ancient relic.

And then there is light, flowing from between his and Ahsoka's clasped palms, leaking out through the gaps between their fingers, suffusing the mists in white-gold radiance. Finn and Poe glance about their surroundings, surprised by the gentle yet unnatural wind that comes out of nowhere, stirring the leaves and rippling across the shallow pools, but Rey's gaze remains transfixed on Kylo as pure, soothing energy softens the ragged lines on his brow and the dark circles under his eyes. The years fall away and what is left of Snoke's poison withers— she feels it, feels the knots in his soul loosen until his presence in the Force shades even closer to what she remembers from the Yavin 4 years. The Light winds around him in graceful, serene coils, chiming a hymn of benediction. A song of hope at the end of all things.

*

When it is over, he staggers backwards, his hand dropping to his side. He lifts his head, desperate to seek out Rey's gaze, to hold on to it as one would a rope while dangling over cliff's edge.

Their eyes meet.

She looks away.

His world, so newly rebuilt, shatters.

*

"How did you get that?" Rey asks Ahsoka, gesturing to the Eye clutched in one russet fist.

The Togruta blinks as if noticing Rey for the first time. "I have always followed the growth of the New Jedi Order with interest," she says slowly. "For many years I traveled Wild Space and the Unknown Regions, never venturing rimwards, but I checked the HoloNet and listened in on rumors in cantinas and marketplaces whenever possible. I thought— I thought that it was good. That
balance was being restored to the galaxy by the next generation of Force users. I wished you all luck." She pauses, glancing uncertainly at Kylo before focusing on Rey again. "I heard about the First Order's attack on Luke Skywalker's Praxeum two standard days after it happened. I was already living here on Sarvchi but I decided I should— go and see it for myself. The ruins. That temple was our old base in the time of the Empire and I wanted to..." She trails off, shrugging. "I don't know what I wanted to do. Perhaps it was the will of the Force. I arrived on Yavin 4 and went down to the vaults, and that's where I found it. The Eye. It called to me. I don't think I need to explain that further."

"You don't," Rey says, remembering the insistent pull of the Skywalker lightsaber from beneath Maz's castle on Takodana.

"And so I took it with me," Ahsoka continues. "Kept it safe and hidden here in the swamplands until I learned through black market channels that Mirax Terrik was looking for it. Because Mirax is married to Corran Horn, I suspected the Jedi's involvement but I couldn't be sure. So, when I traced the lead back to Lando Calrissian, I sent a message that only old allies would be able to decipher. Cassian Andor's code." She sighs, her expression rife with distant, bitter memories. "I felt him die on Scarif all those years ago. And Bail Organa, and—" Her voice catches but there are no more tears left to be shed. Not after a life like this. "And Master Obi-Wan. Master Yoda. And, finally, four years after the Battle of Yavin, I woke up in the middle of the night and I knew that he was—" She stops, shaking her head, turning to Kylo once more. "I did not want to believe the rumors that his grandson led the Knights of Ren. I hoped it wasn't true. But seeing you now— you burn so brightly in the Force, just like he did, and evil men have always been attracted to that kind of power, desiring nothing more than to shape it to their will. Snoke really did a number on you, didn't he, child?" She reaches up to touch his scarred cheek with gnarled fingers in a way that makes Rey wonder if she is perhaps touching someone else's face across the span of years. Kylo is openly weeping now, his nose red and tears rolling down his pale features. "He cried a lot when he was a baby," Leia had once reminisced. "My poor son. He felt too much. Had too many monsters in his head. Even then."

"But now you have a chance to make things right," Ahsoka tells him, earnest and solemn. "Stand tall like your grandfather when I still knew him— as a Jedi Knight and a hero of the Clone Wars. Let that be the legacy of his that endures."

The first faint skeins of morning sun have crept through a scattering of gaps in the swamp canopy, thinning the white mists, when Ahsoka hands the small cloth bag containing the Light-imbued artifact to Rey. "I'll lead you back to your ship. If you did land near the coordinates I sent, we should be able to find it easily."

"We could get Valin to put up a homing beacon," Poe suggests. "I know we're under a
communications blackout but if we can hook up with the *Ebon Hawk*’s short-wave signal on a scrambled frequency—" 

"On it." Rey's already fiddling with the chronometer on her wrist, the thankfully waterproof black device that doubles as a comlink. 

Finn leans in close to mutter in her ear as she attempts to program a secure connection. "So, is Ren cured now, or something?"

"Or something," she echoes. "He's looking a bit shellshocked at the moment."

Finn studies her for a while, and whatever he sees on her face prompts him to remark, "Yeah, well, I don't think he's the only one. What happened?"

"Nothing." *A mistake. The last one I will ever make."

"It's just that— I thought you'd be happier about it. Having him back, I mean."

"Do you want me to throw a party or to get us off this planet?" she snaps, his words picking at the loose threads of her temper as she punches the keypad with more force than necessary. "We're on a tight schedule here."

Finn and Poe exchange bewildered looks. It's the pilot who asks her, "But what happens now, Rey? Do we take him with us?"

*I don't know.* Her heart is pounding against her ribcage, too loud, too achingly slow. *I'm sick of making the wrong choices. I'm sick of messing up.* A flare of static emanates from the comlink—and, immediately afterwards, Valin's voice, rolling through the clearing in tones both urgent and relieved. "Finally!" he exclaims. "Have you found the Eye yet?"

"Just did," says Rey. "We—"

"Tell me later. We have to leave now. The radars are picking up a ship and five speeders heading our way. About the right size for a patrol."
Rey starts, remembering the Chiss from last night, how one had glanced back at her and Kylo with suspicion. "ETA?"

"Ten minutes."

Valin sends her the *Hawk*'s coordinates, which she shows to Ahsoka after signing off. The Togruta squints at the miniature holographic map with a slight frown. "That's at the very edge of the swamp. Thirty minutes from here. We could run but that would still be cutting it too close."

Finn and Poe glance at each other again in that way they have of being able to communicate without a single word. "Okay, so, while we were running from the spider earlier, we *did* pass by some kind of ship," Finn cautiously volunteers. "It was concealed behind some trees and too far away for us to get a closer look, but I think it was an *Upsilon*-class shuttle. Like what the First Order uses."

"Wouldn't be going out on a limb to suppose that's yours, yeah?" Poe addresses the question to Kylo, who doesn't respond. "We could take that one instead, it's not too far from here..."

The silence that follows is long and, for Rey, almost unbearable. She watches a myriad decisions play out across Kylo's face, holding her breath. Finally, he swallows, dark eyes pensive, lips set in a taut, somber line.

He nods. Like a man accepting his sentence. Like somebody who already has one foot in the grave.

Valin is understandably perplexed when Rey comms him with the information that they've acquired another ship and will make their own way back to the Sanctuary on Ossus, but he doesn't press any further and only wishes her clear skies— an expression that she returns in kind as Finn leads her and the rest of the group to the shuttle. They find it after a few minutes of brisk walking but, as Finn and Poe scurry up the ramp, Rey hangs back, turning to Ahsoka.

"You could come with us," she tentatively suggests.
Ahsoka flashes her the ghost of a smile. "My fight ended a long time ago. I'm too old. I'd be of no use in a real battle."

"You don't have to fight," Rey argues. She's conscious of Kylo staring at them both from the base of the ramp but she does her best to ignore him. "You could meet Luke... settle within the Rim, help us reconstruct the history of the Old Jedi Order... we still have so many questions..."

"There is no place for me in the New Republic," Ahsoka says gently. "I chose this life a long time ago. I have found neither peace nor absolution here, and I doubt that will change if I return to where my ghosts lie waiting." She takes hold of Rey's hands. "Your friends have told me a little bit about you, Rey— that you are the Sword of the Jedi. Have you ever wondered why you were given such a title when you were taught that the sword is always a Jedi's last resort? The future is clouded but... you have a difficult decision ahead of you. I can only offer you this counsel: Whether we travel old paths until the end or forge new ones— we keep walking. And we do not forget those who carried us." She squeezes Rey's wrists in reassurance, once, and then lets go, looking over at Kylo and nodding in farewell. "Ben. When I first saw you, back there in the mists, you looked so much like Anakin. But you remind me of Padme, too. A part of me always suspected. Whenever they were together, it lit up the whole room." A genuine smile touches her lips, fond and wistful, and for a moment Rey can glimpse the padawan in the holocron, young and bright and unafraid. "You have her grace."

* 

Ahsoka watches Rey ascend the ship's ramp. Even though the girl's back is turned, there's no mistaking the sustained tension in the line of her shoulders as she passes by the tall, dark-haired man who devours her every step with soft eyes. It's impossible to miss, the way his hand rises as if to place itself on the small of her back, before dropping limply to his side.

Oh, Ahsoka thinks. And then, with a hint of wry amusement, Not again.

Kylo follows Rey up the ramp. Once they've crossed the threshold, they turn to face Ahsoka, both of them looking wan and unhappy and so very defiantly afraid of what the future holds. Force, she thinks, was I ever that young? Was Anakin? And yet, of course the answer to her second question is yes. She has no frame of reference for what her master would have looked like past his twenties, except for an ominous figure in black armor and billowing cape, a damaged helmet revealing one half of a face that she had once known well as the lights of the Sith Temple on Malachor flickered red and indigo and electric, blinding white.

"I won't leave you. Not this time."
"Then you will die.")

The doors hiss shut. The shuttle launches into the air on a whirl of repulsorlifts, extending black durasteel wings as it glides over the treetops. When it is nothing more than a speck in the distant sky, Ahsoka begins the slow trek back to her hut, remnants of mist trailing around her hunched form. Perhaps someone walks with her, at the very edge of her perception, or perhaps it's only an illusion cast by the shift of the sun's rays over water and vapor.

Either way, she rolls her eyes. "I'll say this about him— he's definitely as dramatic as you were. It must run in the family."

Poe flies them through the Sarvchi skies at breakneck speed, making extensive use of cloud cover while Rey scans for Chiss craft with the Upsilon-class' advanced sensor suites.

"This is the firepoints' blind spot." Kylo gestures to the map provided by the navicomp. "Keep heading north until you hit the Murgo Choke, and then let me take over. We need to turn at a very specific point in the hyperlane to avoid getting pulled out by the gravity wells. There is no margin of error."

It could still all be a trick; Finn conveys as much to Rey with a nudge from his mind to hers. *We don't have any other options,* she thinks back at him. *Between the three of us, he'd be easy to overpower, should it come to that.* She is unsure whether Kylo was able to pick up on this exchange or if the undercurrent of suspicion is palpable in the Force but, in any case, his jaw clenches.

"FN-2187," he says. "I remember you from the village."

"His name is Finn," Rey quickly corrects.

A beat. A bitter wound known to the two of them alone. She thinks of blue eyes, a charming grin, and an elegant fighting stance, and she wonders if he's doing the same.

They make it to the Choke without incident. Poe and Kylo switch seats, starlines reflected on the latter's face as he straps himself in beside Rey. The awkwardness of the situation is lessened by the
Rey snatches her fingers away, bringing her hand further into her side of the dashboard. I can't, I can't, not again, I'm so tired. Kylo's energy signature wavers as if she'd punched him in the gut, knocked the air from his lungs. The starlines wash over them, silver pulses in the shuttle's dim light. And of course they've been here before, they've been like this before, surrounded by their friends on the way to Corbos—

The navicomp screeches a grating alert; it's all the warning Rey, Finn, and Poe have to brace themselves before Kylo cuts the thrusters and pulls the shuttle sharply to the side, the durasteel hull whining in protest at the abrupt change in course. A subtle shift to the fast-racing landscape of mass shadows beyond the viewport indicates that they're now on a completely different hyperspace corridor— the Rago Run. There is a breath of collective relief.

"All right, so this route is going to force us into the Mid Rim." Poe is peering over Rey's shoulder, studying the map. "Quickest way to Ossus is if we veer into the Namadii Corridor junction and head on up the Celanon Spur. From there, we can take the Entralla Route back to the Outer Rim. It's a long-ass haul but I'll go as fast as I can and try to shave off a few hours."

"Copy that. Finn can be your co-pilot." Rey stands up. Now that there's no immediate danger, she can no longer deny her exhaustion. Even the simple act of getting to her feet has made her woozy. Thinking it over, she realizes that the last time she'd slept was the night before the Battle of Dantooine.

"Where are you going?" Finn calls after her as she retreats to the inner compartment of the shuttle.

"Sleep," Rey announces, not bothering to look back. "I am going to sleep."

*Mistake.*

This has been the one word reverberating through Kylo's head from the moment his soul seized the
joy of his father's survival and refused to let go and he'd found himself gazing into Rey's dull, cold eyes. The word— the concept of it— had incessantly gnawed at him as he tangled with the spider, his movements precise but his mind reeling so that he might as well have been acting on autopilot. *Mistake.* It hit him hardest after the Eye of the Sun had leached the last of Snoke's influence from his veins, when Rey looked away. *Mistake. I made a mistake.* Even as he listened to Ahsoka Tano, even as he wept from the sheer grief of how badly he had lost sight of *everything*— it still lingered there, ever present, in the blank walls around Rey's Force signature, in how she would neither let any part of her body touch him nor so much as glance his way if she could help it. *I made a mistake.*

He leaps out of the pilot seat to hurry after her, nearly banging his head on the roof of the cockpit in the process. Just as she disappears from view behind the cabin doors, his way is blocked by FN-2187— Finn. Kylo bites down on the instinctive rage that flares within him— that a *stormtrooper* would dare be so bold— and he hides this rage between teeth and tongue, swallowing it like a bitter pill.

The shorter man lifts his chin with a confidence that is not that of a stormtrooper's. "We might as well get this over and done with before you go to her. Before you fix whatever it is that happened," Finn says. "I was part of the First Order squad deployed to Corbos under the command of Armitage Hux and Alema Rar." Kylo's eyes widen but Finn pushes forward, speaking in a rush as if he needs to divulge the whole story before he gets Force-choked. He talks about how they had brought the Sith hounds to that barren planet. How Alema woke the two Leviathans with the amulet from Darth Vader's glove— the same amulet that Finn himself had been tasked to make sure got swallowed by one of the tuk'ata so that it would find its way to Ben Solo. A lure, a message, a reminder that no one can escape their destiny.

("*A little while longer,* he had whispered to the relic in his palm, humming with Dark Side energy as familiar to him as his own heart's blood. "*Just let me stay for a little bit more.*")

And that's not all. Finn tells Kylo about the red valley, how they had waited for Snoke's signal to retrieve the ultimate prize— the Skywalker heir— once he had fully succumbed to the darkness. Finn describes how he had been the one to pry Ben and Rey's fingers apart as they lay on the ground. "At first I thought she was dead. She *looked* dead. And I thought that was why it was so difficult to wrench your hand from hers— it happens, doesn't it, the muscles stiffen— anyway—" He swiftly disregards this line of thought, possibly because Kylo had blanched— "anyway, yeah. She just didn't want to let go. And neither did you."

There is a part of Kylo that is always watching himself, always watching others, always watching how people transmute the world. It's this part that can't help but silently laugh in twisted, self-loathing humor at how expertly he has been manipulated all his sorry life by everyone except the girl on the other side of the doors. The one whom he has wronged the most.
He shoulders Finn aside without saying a word and strides into the inner compartment, desperate to finally, finally start making amends.

All Upsilon-class shuttles are designed with the comfort of high-ranking passengers in mind. Aside from a well-stocked pantry and a video screen, the inner compartment boasts a long couch outfitted in handsome black leather, where Rey is fast asleep. There is a door leading to a smaller room with an actual bed but she must have been exhausted enough to drop off on the first soft surface she came across. The sight tugs at Kylo's heart; she sleeps the same way that she always has, curled up on her side at the very edge of the couch, trying to make herself as small as possible.

She doesn't stir when he scoops her up, placing one arm under her legs while the other supports her back. Yet another sign of exhaustion—years of training and this war would have made her a light sleeper like him. He carries her to the bedroom and there is something about this act, what it resembles, that hollows his chest with shades of longing. It's not unfamiliar—he'd had moments like this on Yavin 4, too, random and quiet little moments when he looked over at her and found himself missing the future. Days that hadn't happened yet, and never would.

He deposits her onto the mattress as gently as he can. She stirs, blinking at him with bleary hazel eyes. Force, those eyes. He remembers how they look in all kinds of light—fierce and tawny in the early morning, soft and almost green in the forest at high noon, dark in starlight. Those eyes had rolled in patented annoyance whenever he teased her, had so prettily implored him to stop sulking, had, sometimes, it seemed, shone for him and him alone. How could he have forgotten? Now they're wary and, even through the fog of sleep, gazing at him as if she's bracing herself for another blow.

The mattress dips beneath his weight as he sits down, feet on the floor, the upper half of his body turned towards her. He places one hand on her flat stomach; she stills, and it is so different from Sarvchi, from that delighted, anticipatory tension before she melted into his touch. He'd never been good enough to touch her but he can't help himself—and isn't that just like him, always pulling her into the mire of his own ruin even though she deserves better, she always has—

"Please understand." Kylo's voice cracks a little but he perseveres. While he would have rather run himself through with his own lightsaber than relive what he'd done to her in the hut when he sensed that death from systems away, he knows that he owes her an explanation. "Tamith Kai was one of the first Knights that I started training with on a regular basis—one of the few that I could tolerate for an extended period of time. In the First Order, I was surrounded by people either bewildered by or afraid of the Force. Except for the Knights. They were all I had. That is the reason I felt grief at her passing—"
"And you took it out on me." Rey's voice is eerily calm and distant. He realizes that she's not fully awake, her eyelids at half-mast. "What have I ever done to you, Ben? While you were bonding with your Knights, I was praying for you to come home. And now you have the gall to sit there and ask me to understand why you Force-stunned me and dragged me through the woods. All because you were sad that an evil woman had died—the same woman who brought me to Starkiller Base to be tortured. I guess you conveniently forgot about that as well." A hint of anger creeps into her tone but it's soon swallowed by a yawn. Forget exhaustion—this is someone who has been completely drained by recent events. Who has reached the end of her rope and has nothing left to give. "I shouldn't have to understand anything. Let me sleep. It's the least you can..." She doesn't even finish that sentence, trailing off as she sinks back into slumber, retreats to the blessed oblivion where nothing, no one, can disappoint or wound.

Kylo has no idea how long he sits there looking at her with that horrid, heart-sized lump in his throat. Eventually, the weariness—the desire for numbness—overwhelms him, too. His mind screams at him to leave her alone but his body gives up the fight, shaking as he lies down on the bed and curls himself around her. He drapes one arm over her midsection and hides his face in her neck, no longer caring that she will probably hate him even more when she wakes up to find him clinging to her like some pathetic, overgrown limpet. He thinks about the last time she fell asleep in his arms—the cheerful glow of lamplight, the scattered wreckage of dismantled droids, the burnished dust of Corbos, his chin resting atop her head while she drowsily traced patterns on his chest and he stroked her arm as the stars glimmered in the sky above. So much has changed since then. So much has been lost. All because of him.

It is in this moment of holding Rey as the ship glides through the Rago Run that it crystallizes in Kylo's mind, the same thing that Anakin Skywalker had realized too late. You start out thinking you're doing it for love but the final trap is that you only think of yourself. This is the true cruelty of the Dark Side; in the end, all you will ever have is yourself. You need the Light to balance it out, but what happens if, through your own actions, your light has strayed too far from reach?

Kylo closes his eyes and breathes in Rey's scent, the warmth of her skin. He sobs, quiet, shuddering, gasping sobs that are muffled half by the pillows and half by her hair, bursting from his chest more violently the more he tries to rein it in. She doesn't hear him, doesn't stir. After a long, long while, he caves to his own fatigue and falls asleep like this, right next to her, the world tasting of salt.

There is almost nothing left of the once imposing cities that had surrounded Cona's mining headquarters. The Inner Rim planet's serpentine inhabitants had refused to submit to the First Order, provoking a vicious battle that lasted well into the night with both sides suffering heavy losses. Even though the Arconan have finally surrendered, it doesn't quite feel like a victory to Tahiri Veila as she picks her way through mazes of dead stormtroopers, her path lit by dozens of burning rubble strewn across the warzone.
There is movement at the corner of her eye; she automatically raises her blaster and fires. The bolt ricochets off a phrik electrostaff with a clang that makes her teeth ache.

"Oh, come on." Zekk's natural voice is obscured, not by his usual mask but by the same model of respirator that Tahiri also wears, which provides breathable air to humanoid lungs in Cona's ammonia-rich desert atmosphere. "You knew it was me."

Tahiri shrugs, her curtain of white-gold hair shifting slightly with the gesture. "Maybe I did, maybe I didn't."

"Stop sulking. You can't make the Jedi pay for Tamith Kai's death by switching off your comlink and shooting at me," Zekk chides her. "I've just come from Manaan— very successful invasion, by the way, thanks for asking— and I'm here to fetch you."

"Where are we going now?" Tahiri demands, pouting behind her breath mask.

"Duro has fallen," Zekk answers. "Our forces have broken into the Core and are now amassing at Reece." 

"That dirtball?" Tahiri wrinkles her nose. "Why?"

"Because, little brat who doesn't pay attention during briefings, it's the perfect staging point," says Zekk, a hint of glee evident in his emerald-hued eyes, "to launch an attack on Coruscant."

Chapter End Notes

This installment references Chapters 15, 16, and 18 of LYG. Let's also keep on reliving the events of The Wrong Jedi and Twilight of the Apprentice because I love to suffer :) 

Namadii Corridor.

Entralla Route.

Kylo's epiphany on the trap of the Dark Side is based on the Revenge of the Sith novelization by Matthew Stover.
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Massive chapter by my standards but I have no self-control when it comes to battle scenes, apparently. I was hoping to get this fic done by March but the most I can hope for at this point is to crank out another update before the month ends. Never fear, darlings, we're finishing in April even if it kills me.

Would love to know everyone's thoughts on this installment! To tide you over until the next one, I have a Reydar WIP that's wrapping up soon. It's cracktastic fluff and, like, the complete antithesis of the Sword of the Jedi universe, if that tickles your fancy.

Soundtrack:

1. This Changes Everything - Stars
2. I'm Not Your Hero - Tegan and Sara
3. If You Leave Me Now - Foxes
4. Home - The Narrative
5. Wildest Moments - Jessie Ware (suggested by AzAngel1)
6. Promise - Ben Howard (nemo)
7. Weep Ye No More Sad Fountains - Sense and Sensibility OST (Kbourne2012)
8. Human - Of Monsters and Men (DauntlessSubconscious)
9. Landfill - Daughter (DauntlessSubconscious)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Rey wakes up— or perhaps she doesn't, perhaps this is a dream, the sheets soft and the room dimly-lit and the faint, muffled drone of the engines a quiet lullaby. Someone is lying on top of her, his head pillowed on her chest. He's heavy but it's not uncomfortable, she likes the sensation of being weighed down, of sinking into the mattress. It's the safest she's felt in years.

Without opening her eyes, she traces his profile, her fingers gliding over a furrowed brow, a strong nose, and sensual lips. She smiles, happy, disoriented. Ben. She winds her arms around his neck and he stirs, mumbling something that sounds like her name against the side of her breast. It's lovely. So, so wonderful and lovely. She drifts off once more, finally at peace.

In the cockpit of the Upsilon-class shuttle, Poe's leaning back in his seat, having shifted to autopilot an hour prior. He drums his fingers on the armrest as he mulls over the newest addition to their erstwhile team while Finn listens. "When he tore where I hid the map from my mind, it hurt. There was a part of me that couldn't believe it, you know? I mean, he and I played Dejarik when we were kids. After he got the information he needed, he just... stayed there for a bit. In my head. I
think he was looking for my last memory of General Organa because, the moment he got ahold of her face, he drew back like it had burned him and left the room." Poe shudders. "What I'm wondering is— what exactly are we doing? What's the gameplan? We're taking Kylo Ren to the last Jedi sanctuary left in the galaxy. Yeah, he's broken free of Snoke's programming, but has he really? It's a huge risk. I don't like it and I've got a feeling that most of the top brass won't, either."

"I think that, at this point in time, we should follow Rey's lead," Finn says slowly. "She knows him best."

"But does she know him now? 'Cause I never expected Ben Solo to kill Lor San Tekka and then torture me on an interrogation rack. Although, granted, their history runs deeper." Poe stares morosely at the dashboard for a while before nodding to himself. "Okay. Sorry. I have to tell mission control about this. It's the right thing to do. Rey can give me flak for it later."

"You can hide behind me when she does," Finn offers with a wry smile. "I'll be your shield."

Poe laughs as he guides the shuttle out of lightspeed in order to establish a communications line with Ossus. "I'm holding you to that."

A slight vibration runs through the ship's hull, nudging Kylo into a state of semi-consciousness. He blinks at the glowing digits of the chronometer on the nightstand. It's too soon for Poe to be jumping back into realspace, he would have to go and check...

Belatedly he notices that he has rolled on top of Rey. She doesn't seem to mind— in fact, she's clinging to his neck, the fingers of one hand buried in his hair. He sighs, unable to stop himself from nuzzling at her collarbone, inhaling her scent. It is not an act of desire even though their encounter on Sarvchi had been cut short; he just wants to console himself that this is real and that, no matter what happens in the near future, no one can ever take these moments of being in her arms away from him.

While he is wholeheartedly amenable to staying where he is and leaving Poe to his own devices, with wakefulness comes the realization that his throat is as dry as dust. It's nothing a glass of water won't fix but he is loath to untangle himself from Rey, who whines in her sleep when he eventually gets around to doing so. He kisses her cheek before crawling out of bed and she curls up on her side, grumbling under her breath as if she's subconsciously miffed at him for depriving her of her human blanket. A bittersweet smile flickers across his lips.
The bedroom door hisses open as Kylo steps into the lounge compartment, and it's barely shut behind him when Finn enters from the front of the ship. "Are we in realspace?" he asks the stormtrooper— the former stormtrooper.


Apprehension tugs at the pit of Kylo's stomach at this stark and chilling reminder that he is on his way back to his estranged family. To the Resistance, and the Jedi, and what is left of the Republic. He can no longer ignore the fact that he is hurtling towards whatever fate either the Jedi Council or the Galactic Alliance's tribunals will levy upon him.

Finn's thoughts must be running along the same lines because he blurts out, "I'll tell them everything about Corbos. I came clean to General Organa months ago but, if there's a trial or something, I'll speak for you."

"There is no need." Kylo pours himself a glass of water. "I release you from your duty."

Unexpectedly, Finn snorts. "You always did have a mouth on you."

"And you were never afraid of me."

"No," Finn says. "All I ever felt was guilt." He'd come in for water, too, and the two men silently drain their glasses before dropping them into the shuttle's automated dish service.

"Why did you do it?" Kylo finally asks. "What made you defect?"

Finn's brow creases as he ponders his answer, as if he understands how important it is to give the right one and why Kylo had asked. "It built up. Like a seed in my mind, growing roots and branches. Until Tuanul, when I told myself, no more."

That was the way it had been for Kylo, too— not just how he reached for the Light on Sarvchi but also how he had severed himself from it on Corbos all those years ago, too exhausted to keep on pretending to be what he was not. And, yet, the identity that he nurtured under Snoke had in the end rung false as well.
"That seed," Finn continues, "was planted in the valley, when I had to carry you away from her. I remember thinking what an evil thing it was to do that. To have come between two people who loved each other like that. That was when I started not wanting to be that kind of person anymore."

Finn returns to the cockpit, leaving Kylo alone to brood. He's about to sit on the couch and just... think for a while, try to get his head in order, when suddenly—

— he feels it explode from Rey, a wave of pure horror and overwhelming despair so thick that it closes up his own throat. He runs, stumbling into the bedroom and flicking on the glow-panels to drench the surroundings in bright, bluish light. "Rey, what—"

He stops short.

She is still lying on the mattress but this time flat on her back, staring at the ceiling unseeing, lips parted in a frozen grimace that is terrible to behold. Her neck snaps toward him once she registers his presence, her blunt nails raking at the sheets like claws.

"I woke up and you were gone," she whimpers in a small voice stained with unshed tears. "I thought I'd just dreamed it— I am dreaming, aren't I? You're not really here. You didn't come back. I'm so stupid—"

"It's not a dream." The words spill from his tongue in a rush as he climbs onto the bed, settling on top of her and resting his forehead against hers. "I'm here, sweetheart, I'm here—"

"No, you're not," she chokes out, shaking her head and attempting to twist away from him, all dry sobs and erratic pulse as she hides her face in the pillow. "You're not here, you're not, you left me—"

Panicking and at wit's end, Kylo sits up on the mattress, hauling Rey's leaden body into his arms and crushing her to his chest, rocking her back and forth. "Sweetheart," he murmurs over and over again, not knowing what else to say, pressing kisses to her hair while regret and self-revulsion rise to the back of his tongue like bile. What have I done? he thinks numbly. Her reaction goes far beyond grief— she has been traumatized to the very core, and he has spent practically all their time together since Jakku accusing her of merely tricking him. What have I done?
She sucks in great gulps of air, each heaving, rattling sound that she makes like a blow to his heart. She feels so tiny in his arms, her light in the Force a feeble, drooping thing. He sees her as she was when they were younger, brimming with life, absolutely enamored with the whole universe and with him. He sees her as she was on Sarvchi, smiling up at him in the glow of the fire with such tremulous, girlish hope. He should be resigned at this point to the damage he wreaks on all the things that he has ever dared hold on to, but it is only now— it is only truly now— that he realizes he has saved her from every monster except himself.

Her spasms gradually abate. She draws in one last shuddering breath and then stiffens in his arms. "Sorry, you can let go of me now." Her voice is devoid of all emotion. "I just— I get these dreams sometimes. Of you. Of everyone. We're back at the Academy, they're alive. Things like that. It always feels so real. It always gives me a shock when I wake up. You can let go now," she repeats, this time sounding stronger and much more commanding.

He doesn't. Stars help him, he should, but he doesn't. When she tries to wriggle out of his grasp he tightens it, burying his face in her neck and rubbing her back in haphazard strokes, the way his father would embrace his mother, the way he was shown love as a boy even if he had refused to acknowledge it. Any lingering doubts he might have had about the validity of his real memories have been extinguished. I have to make it up to her, he vows, I have to—

They both freeze at the crinkle of the intercom. "Madame Jedi, you up?" It's Poe, sounding strained. "Rey?"

She extricates herself from Kylo and clambers out of the bed, hitting a button on the wall. "Yes, I'm awake."

"You'd better get over here. Now."

* *

The first thing Rey notices when she strides into the cockpit with Kylo at her heels is that they're in realspace. The second thing is that Finn and Poe are huddled at the dashboard looking like the wind has been knocked out of them.

"There's been a change of plans," Poe announces. "We're reversing course."
"No one was picking up my transmission to Ossus, so I commed Valin, instead. That was when I found out—" He swallows. "The Hawk is on its way to the Core, and so are we. A lot happened while we were dark. The First Order swept through the northern quadrant and all the way to the Inner Rim. Our forces put up a good fight at Duro but were eventually pushed back. Pretty clear what the next target is. It's all hands on deck to defend Coruscant."

Rey whirls to face Kylo. "Did you know about this?" she asks harshly.

He hesitates. "It is called Operation Midnight. A simultaneous attack from all sides, pushing towards the Core and calling in alliances that were brokered months, years prior. I did not think that they would do it. So many in High Command were opposed due to the logistics involved. But perhaps the Supreme Leader—Snoke," he quickly corrects, "felt that it was time."

"Could it be because you went AWOL?" Rey wonders.

Kylo looks stricken and she regrets saying it out loud. A full-scale galactic invasion is one more sin to layer over all the others. She's not completely beyond mercy yet—she acknowledges that he already has enough to castigate himself for.

"We're going to rendezvous with a Resistance division that's coming from the Outer Rim," Finn adds. "Valin will get there before us and let the officer in charge know that we're approaching in a First Order shuttle."

Rey's gaze flits to Poe. "Did you tell Valin about—"

"Yes." Poe fidgets in his seat but his expression is resolute. "I hope you understand why I had to. However, we did decide not to alert the Resistance yet. Cards on the table, Rey— I don't like keeping my comrades out of the loop. But if they find out we're bringing Kylo Ren onboard one of their capital ships, they just might blow us to pieces before we even get a chance to dock."

A couple of Recon-X starfighters glide through the darkness of the Corellian sector on silent 4L4 fusial thrust engines, maneuvering around stray asteroids and glittering nebulae with the deftness of
T-16 skyhoppers in atmospheric flight as their sensors trawl for incoming spacecraft. No sooner has the Upsilon-class shuttle blinked into existence out of the Binayre Razorcat pirate run when the Recon-X's immediately drop down to flank it, alerting their command center on the mother ship via instantaneous hypercomm data relays. After an exchange of identification numbers and code words, the starfighters guide the shuttle to where their main fleet is cloaked outside the Martial Cross— another small hyperlane, like the Razorcat, except that this one terminates at Coruscant.

The mother ship is a dagger-shaped Venator-class Star Destroyer still bearing the crimson markings of the Old Republic. Poe whistles when it shimmers into view. "It's the Vigilance. General Kenobi's flagship during the final days of the Clone Wars."

"So it's, what, a hundred years old?" Finn scoffs. "Wouldn't want to see it exchange broadsides with the Finalizer, that's for sure."

"Strategy's just as important as brute strength, if not more so," Poe argues as he initiates the docking procedure. The Recon-X's fall back, allowing the Upsilon-class to ease into the destroyer's hangar bay.

Rey exhales in relief once they're safely inside, glad to be among allies again. The shuttle doors slide open with a hiss of hydraulics, and then Valin Horn is storming into the cabin, his every movement purposeful and brisk, mouth set in a grim line. Strangely enough, it is this change in the usually easygoing Jedi that impresses upon Rey how serious the situation is.

He points at Kylo. "You," he says in a terse voice, "stay right here. I have no idea if there's anyone onboard who will recognize you but we ought to play it safe." It's only when he turns to Rey that his demeanor softens. "Are you all right, kid?"

She nods and lets him guide her gently, by the elbow, out of the shuttle, Finn and Poe following close behind. She can't bring herself to look around at Kylo but she feels his eyes narrowing at her and Valin's retreating backs.

"Hope we don't get into too much trouble for this," Valin mutters. "Can you assure me that Solo's got his head on straight?"

"Yes," says Rey. Despite her own problems with Kylo, there is no denying what had transpired when Ahsoka held the Eye of the Sun up to him. His tears had been as real as the energy that burned away Snoke's poison. "I felt the Light break through."
Jysella is in the middle of conversation with the commanding officer on the bridge but she instantly turns to Rey at the latter's approach, a huge smile setting her face aglow. The two girls hug; somewhere in the background is a chorus of excited mechanical chirps as BB-8 is reunited with Poe but Rey can only focus on Jysella in this moment, embracing the redhead more tightly than she ever has before, the stress of the past few days evaporating from her system—or at least herded off to where it's more manageable. How can one person feel so much like a coming home from war?

"It's all right," Jysella soothes, asking no questions, giving what comfort is needed. "We'll be fine, my sister. We'll figure it out."

The officer snaps off a sharp salute when Rey is introduced to her. She is a tall, olive-skinned woman with straight black hair pulled back in a neat bun and dark eyes the shape of willow leaves. "Admiral Dosmit Raeh, at your service."

The years fall away.

Somehow, Rey manages to find her voice. "You were with the Tierfon Yellow Aces. You crash-landed on Jakku."

"That's right," says the admiral, surprised. "How did you—?"

"I grew up there. I found your helmet." Rey's six years old again, the visor slipping down her nose as she pretends to be a starfighter pilot over the golden sands. "I brought it with me to Yavin 4 but it was lost during the Siege." Where is that helmet now? Perhaps woolamanders had carried it into deeper forest or perhaps it's still buried beneath rubble, gathering dust like so much else from her childhood.

Dosmit smiles, more beautiful and more regal than she'd ever looked in Rey's daydreams. "Imagine that," she muses. "It is an honor, then, to finally meet you, Sword of the Jedi."
Rey’s heart lifts in her chest, just like it did when she met Finn, who had read her childish scrawl on a long-abandoned AT-AT’s wall. She marvels at how the desert has a way of coming back when she needs it most, when she needs to be reminded of what she has overcome. Of what it took to get here. Of everyone that helped her along the way.

*All things heal.*

The Battle of Coruscant is well underway by the time the *Vigilance* emerges from the Martial Cross. After the First Order decimated the Galactic Alliance fleet stationed at Reecee, they had launched their attack from the OboRin Comet Cluster and are now carving a path through the combined forces of the Resistance and what Republic vessels had not been in-system when Hosnian Prime was destroyed. Rey watches from the bridge of the *Venator*-class as TIE fighters and X-wings crisscross the celestial wastes, bobbing and weaving amidst the silver-lined silhouettes of much larger cruisers and dreadnaughts, lasers and explosions lighting up the star-strewn darkness.

"Shields up!" Dosmit's voice booms through the intercom as the *Vigilance* descends on the field of combat. "All pilots to your stations!"

"That's my cue." Poe claps Finn on the shoulder and hurries away with BB-8 trailing after him.

"Don't start without me!" Valin calls. He chuck Rey under the chin and ruffles Jysella's hair before taking his leave as well.

"This isn't even your assigned division—" Dosmit attempts to protest but it's too late, the doors have closed behind the two men. She shakes her head, a long-suffering expression on her face. "It's probably for the best that some of our new recruits sit this one out. Far be it for me to deny Poe Dameron and Valin Horn the opportunity for a dogfight."

"Perish the thought," Jysella mutters.

Rey assesses the battle, piecing together what she can see through the viewport and on the radar screens. General Garm Bel Iblis is confronting the First Order fleet head on from his flagship, the *Bail Organa*; Bothan Assault Cruisers under the command of Admiral Traest Kre’fey are deploying long-range missiles and strafing runs to the sides; meanwhile, General Wedge Antilles leads a rear
offensive primarily with Rogue Squadron and the Imperial-class Star Destroyer that had been named after the late Mon Mothma. The First Order is surrounded but not outnumbered—a few ships have already slipped past Bel Iblis' blockade to hammer at the planetary shield of Coruscant.

"Uh oh," Finn says.

The Finalizer has risen up to meet the Vigilance, all sleek three thousand meters of it dwarfing the old destroyer, turbolasers and ion cannons and point-defense turrets swiveling to engage.

"Its TIE complement is busy with the Bothan squadrons," Dosmit observes. "We have a chance if our X-wings can outflank it before broadsides."

"They're going to have to fly really fast," Finn points out.

"I have an idea," Rey says.

* *

Amidst the bustle of activity in the hangars, no one pays much attention to the dark-haired stranger climbing into one of the spare X-wings. He's not in uniform but neither are Poe and Valin, and the fresh-faced junior officer in charge of the Vigilance's backup squadron had been all too happy to cede control to Commander Dameron after confirmation from the bridge.

"Red Leader it is, then," Poe says happily, noting the brand-new scarlet insignia on his starfighter as he and BB-8 breeze through preflight checks. "Glad they decided to bring that back. All wings report in."

"Red Two, standing by," Valin announces.

The other pilots are quick to take up the call. "Red Three, standing by—" "— Red Four, standing by—"

A beat. And then—
"Red Five," says a voice over the squadron's frequency that causes Valin to almost choke on his own spit, "standing by."

Poe frowns. "Was that—"

"Red Leader, I think Red Five should stay grounded," Valin hurriedly interrupts.

"Considering that you need all the pilots you can get and I flew circles around him in training, Red Two is cordially invited to make me."

Valin slumps in his seat. There's no way he can drag Kylo back to the shuttle, not when the hangar doors are about to open at any time. He switches off his transceiver and thumps his head gently against the dashboard. "The Council will be out for my blood."

*

"You are sure about this?" Dosmit can't quite conceal her apprehension as Rey straps in at the captain's seat, pulling up the main hyperdrive terminal.

"Positive," Rey lies through her teeth, disabling the navicomputer. She won't have any use for it in what she's about to attempt. Even though she's currently made of nothing but trembling nerves, her tone is calm and steady when she's patched through to Poe and asks him, "Commander Dameron, think you can handle a Redemption run?"

On the grainy viewscreen, Poe's eyes widen in recognition, a wild and reckless grin spreading across his face as he says, "Hell yes."

*

At her station on the Finalizer, Chief petty officer Unamo's fingers momentarily pause over her datapad. "General, the target is moving," she tells Armitage Hux. "They're pulling to starboard."
"Turning tail, most likely," Hux sneers. "It's far too late for them, of course. All systems, prepare to—"

But, before he can finish giving the order, the Vigilance disappears.

"Sir, they've jumped into hyperspace," Unamo says blankly.

"That's impossible," Hux spits out. "They were right in front of us. There are no hyperlanes anywhere near this area—"

* (*Instinctive astrogation," Eryl Besa told Rey, tapping the side of her head as she coaxed the Shadow Sabre into an uncharted branch of the Yavin Bypass. "I'll teach you how to do it someday.")

And she had.

* *

Every Republic starfighter pilot worth their salt is familiar with the Redemption scenario—jokingly nicknamed "the Requiem scenario" by those who have flown in the training simulation. Various squadron frequencies resound with cheers and whoops of awed disbelief from veterans scattered all throughout the field of combat as the Vigilance materializes behind the Finalizer and releases a stream of X-wings and heavy cruisers before jumping back into hyperspace—only to appear in front of the enemy ship half a second later and unload more offensive craft on the other side of the transfer. A jump between star systems can take little more than an hour; a jump in-system occurs in the blink of an eye. The Vigilance flashes in and out of existence, peppering the Finalizer's flanks with wave upon wave of starfighters until the Resurgent-class is completely besieged. "Fire at will! Fire at will!" Hux is screaming from the bridge. Realizing that their mother ship is in trouble, the TIEs race to defend it but are cut off by the nearby Bothans. It is precise, calculated mayhem, the Force moving through Rey as she zips between dimensions on a hair trigger. It's easy, Eryl's saying in her memories, in the corner of her heart where she holds them all safe, you just have to know where you are and where you're going.

"Mine is a restless life," Rey chants under her breath as starlines explode before her eyes. "I shall never know peace." She jerks on the throttle, leaping into realspace on the Finalizer's port side.
"Though I shall be blessed—" The Vigilance's hangar doors open for the last time, releasing its final X-wing squadron to rain down lasers on the First Order's proudest warship— "for the peace I bring others—"

She makes one more jump. The Vigilance materializes at a slanted angle above the Finalizer, and opens fire.

* *

Even though the Redemption run has weakened its shields and taken out a good chunk of its armaments, the Finalizer is still a formidable foe. But there is a reason Dosmit Raeh was promoted to admiral and, under her deft guidance, the Venator-class scores several direct hits in quick succession. It's not long before they're joined by a dreadnought from Wedge Antilles' fleet, the Lusankya, survivor of the ill-fated Orinda Campaign, its assault concussion missiles smashing into the Finalizer's underbelly. A few more well-placed bombardments from above, courtesy of the Vigilance, and it is over. The Resurgent-class' massive hull starts to crack, deep, wide fissures stemming from prow to stern, and then the battlecruiser disintegrates with such force that Rey would have been knocked to the ground by the resulting shockwaves had Finn not instinctively reached out to steady her. "Pull up!" Dosmit yells as clouds of shrapnel hurtle towards them like asteroids, several slamming against their own shields.

Rey sinks into the nearest empty seat, the Finalizer's conflagration filling her eyes like a star in the midst of supernova. People are cheering, pelting her with compliments. Dosmit is heartily shaking her hand. Finn is beaming at her.

"They're going to talk about this for a long, long time," he says. "How does it feel, making ace pilot history?"

* *

Hundreds of First Order dropships plunge through the atmosphere of Coruscant, regurgitating streams of stormtroopers, battle droids, and technobeasts on the upper levels of the Galactic City. They are met by the planet's ground defense forces under the command of Carlis Rieekan, along with the Jedi and the Ysanna. Buildings collapse in the garish light of the midday sun, tinted red and blue and green by lightsabers and blaster bolts.

"Master Skywalker, they've breached the Palace District," gasps a Republic lieutenant, scrambling to Luke's side. "Master Daeshara'cor is requesting backup."
Luke nods, catching Okko's eye and signaling with his first two fingers to a narrow walkway that leads to the Senate District's ancillary. The chieftain of the Ysanna bounds off in the direction Luke had indicated, his tribe of gold-masked warriors hurrying after him. They form a perimeter around the Imperial Palace's courtyard, Concussion bow slugthrowers picking off hostile units with lethal Force-guided accuracy.

In the middle of the courtyard, the Twi'lek Jedi Master Daeshara'cor is locked in a fierce lightsaber duel with Joruus C'baoth. At first, she seems to have the upper hand, her natural agility enabling her to dance rings around the aged human Darksider, but a well-timed blast of Force lightning knocks her backwards into the air, depositing her at Luke's feet.

"Take a team with you into the Palace," Luke tells her. "Blockade the inner sanctum. Commander Sovv is coordinating the battle from there—don't let the First Order get to him at all costs."

Once Daeshara'cor has left to do his bidding, Luke draws himself up to his full height and faces Joruus across a courtyard littered with dead bodies, the air singing with lasers that somehow never seem to hit the two men, either diverted from their course at the last minute or bouncing off invisible barriers.

"Skywalker," Joruus intones, his smile lopsided and sharp. "You were little more than a boy the last time I saw you. It was a grave mistake, not killing me on Wayland all those years ago. You should have known that I would return to exact my vengeance one day."

"Mercy is never a mistake, Joruus," Luke replies evenly. "You are the one who erred by continuing on the path of the Dark Side."

"If Thrawn could see us now." Joruus laughs, veins of lightning emanating from his fists. "You vanquish one evil only to herald another. An endless cycle. It has made an old fool out of a young fool."

"Yes." Luke ignites his blade as he sinks into opening stance. "We are, both of us, foolish old men."

The loss of the Finalizer has dealt a heavy blow to First Order ranks, allowing Resistance and
Galactic Alliance fleets to advance. Steering around the curve of a CR90 corvette so that its
gunmen can take care of the three TIE fighters that have latched on to his tail, Poe glances around
just in time to see swarms of Immobilizer 418 cruisers descend upon the distinctive crimson-
colored Errant Venture and Admiral Kre'fey's flagship, the Ralroost, trapping the destroyers in
gravity wells that effectively halt their trajectory towards Coruscant. Like birds of prey moving in
for the kill, several First Order Lancer-class frigates approach, followed by another Star
Dreadnought.

"Red Squadron, to me," Poe commands. "We need to punch a hole through that Interdictor screen
before the enemy opens fire."

"Happening everywhere, Red Leader," says Valin as he drops into formation behind Poe after
quickly surveying the field of combat. "I count ten other capital ships similarly disabled."

Poe curses. "Leave it up to Imperials to never stray from formula."

A new voice breaks into the frequency. "Need a hand, Commander?"

"Jess! I mean— Blue Three," Poe corrects, grinning as a battalion of T-70 X-wings comes
swooping down from the front lines. "All right, we got this. Red Squadron, let's blow those
Interdictors to pieces. Blue Squadron, cover us from those frigates."

As the two squadrons diverge, a nearby carrier unleashes more TIEs from its hangars, dozens of
black orbs plummeting into the midst of the X-wings and engaging them in bursts of stutter-fire.
"Red Five, check your six," Valin mutters grudgingly. He's about to come to Kylo's aid when the
latter throws his starfighter into abrupt reverse, zooming backwards into the clutch of TIEs. The
First Order pilots scramble to avoid impact but Kylo seamlessly tilts up into the perfect angle to
shoot them down one by one until only a couple are left. These last two are quick to recover and
return fire— only for Kylo to swerve out of their way and lead them on a tight chase of loops and
wild arcs, darting amidst the gravity wells and laser currents at breakneck speed. The enemy units
are rewarded for the tenacity of their pursuit when he dashes them both against the hull of one
Immobilizer 418, the resulting collision causing the cruiser to implode in on itself, its projected
gravity well blinking out of existence and giving the Ralroost enough leverage to free itself while
Kylo hurtles away from the explosion unscathed.

"That was some nice flat-hatting," Jessika Pava remarks, blissfully unaware of Red Five's identity
as she dives into a strafing run on one of the Lancer- classes. "I haven't seen an X-wing
outmaneuver eyeballs like that since I watched those old astromech feeds of Luke Skywalker."
"Nah," Valin can't help but quip, wondering if he can ever regain the ten years that had been taken out of his life by Kylo's hair-raising flight path. "Only a smuggler could be that sky-touched. That was Han Solo all the way through."

Chapter End Notes

T-65BR X-wing reconnaissance starfighter.
The Binayre Razorcat.
The Martial Cross.
The Vigilance.
The OboRin Comet cluster.
Garm Bel Iblis.
The Bail Organa.
Traest Kre'fey.
Bothan Assault Cruiser.
The Mon Mothma.
The Redemption scenario.

Eryl mentions her instinctive astrogation ability to Rey in Chapter 14 of LYG. The Lusankya and the Interdictor screen technique is first referenced in Chapter 13.

In the EU, Joruus C'baoth was killed by Mara Jade during the Thrawn Campaign.

The Errant Venture.
The Ralroost.

"Flat-hatting" is starfighter pilot slang for showing off or engaging in dangerous maneuvers, while an "eyeball" is a TIE.
I promised I would try to update again before the end of the month and here it is! While I haven't had the time to catch up on all the comments last chapter, I do want to let you guys know that I appreciate each and every single one of them. Thank you also for indulging my love of battle scenes :) You're all being phenomenally patient with an author who's geeking out instead of delivering on the shippy goodness. I've dreamed of writing my own Star Wars novel ever since I was little—this hot mess is definitely not on par with the EU books but it feels amazing to be able to share it with such a supportive audience. I have the best readers in the world.

Work's going to be mad for the first week of April and then I'm off to Taiwan again for a short vacation (and to catch Coldplay's "A Head Full Of Dreams" tour!) but I'm going to do my best to post Chapter 28 before I leave. In the meantime, I would love to know everyone's thoughts on this latest installment.

Chaos reigns on the *Indomitable*, a Galactic Alliance *Majestic*-class heavy cruiser that the First Order has just disabled and forcibly boarded. Blaster fire is exchanged as Republic soldiers make their final stand, helpless to stop the wave of stormtroopers pouring from one hallway to the next, glow-panels blinking on and off in response to fluctuations of the ship's power core wrought about by the static field of the Interdictor screen.

Commodore Turk Brand stations himself at the viewport of the *Indomitable*'s bridge. His spine is ramrod-straight, gaze fixed on the main doors over the shoulders of his crew that have assembled into a defensive formation between him and the boarding party. The power ebbs once more, plunging the room into darkness—a darkness that is soon illuminated by a blaze of scarlet, tearing the metal doors to shreds as easily as if they were fashioned from cloth.

Brand's men open fire on the slender masked figure that steps into the room. Her lightsaber spins in front of her body like a fiery whirlwind, alternating between redirecting each blaster bolt and slashing at chests and spines as she presses forward, serpentine head-tails snapping through the air and soldiers falling dead at her feet. With a careless sweep of her free arm, she crushes the throats of the last three crew members in quick succession. Brand seizes the opportunity to shoot but his lasers are swiftly deflected and then he, too, is lifted off his feet, the breath slowly being squeezed from his lungs.

"Commodore." The Twi'lek's distorted voice sounds like it's miles away, the world burning black at the edges and flooded with excruciating pain. "I'll give you one chance and one chance only. What is the override code for Coruscant's orbital defense platforms?"
She releases him from the Force choke. He sags against the viewport, gasping for air. While some enemy dropships had managed to slip through cracks in the battered planetary shields, the majority of their fleet can't edge past the heavily-protected revolving platforms, the turbolasers and myriad turrets of which are currently giving First Order ranks a very bad time. Brand takes solace in this as he wheezes, "I will— never— tell y—"

He cries out when the data is brutally torn from his mind at the same instant that the lightsaber is plunged through his stomach. The Twi'lek's smooth obsidian mask staring down at him is the last thing he sees.

* *

Once she has satisfied herself that the Galactic Alliance Defense Force's second-in-command is well and truly dead, Alema Rar strides over to the *Indomitable*'s main terminal and inputs the necessary codes. Every single orbital platform hovering above Coruscant grinds to a stop.

* *

In the courtyard of the Imperial Palace, Joruus has sheathed his blade in favor of more cruel weapons—lightning streams from his gnarled fingers, disintegrating each massive chunk of stone and metal that Luke placidly levitates to fend off the strikes. The Ysanna have disappeared into the palace to assist in the blockade of the inner sanctum, and Joruus has slain Luke's other reinforcements just as Luke has knocked his out of commission. The skirmish is whittled down to these two veterans of the Thrawn Campaign, pitting strength and skill against each other for what would be the last time. They are alone.

At least, right until the hulking shape of Irek Ismaren is hurled into their midst, the courtyard tiles shattering beneath the cyborg's weight and the force of the throw.

Irek staggers to his feet. His mechanical left arm hangs loosely from its socket but screws back into place once he passes a healing hand over it. Judging from the dents in his armor, he has been locked in intensive combat for quite a while. He pays no heed to either Joruus or Luke, eyes narrowed at a path snaking through the rubble from which, soon enough, Kyp Durron and Tionne Solusar emerge.

"How's it going, Master Luke?" Kyp yells without breaking his stride to cross lightsabers with Irek.
"As well as can be expected," Luke says wryly, dodging another lightning blast in the same movement that he uses to send a hail of jagged debris sailing in Joruus' direction. "What about you, Kyp?"

There's a sickening crack of bone as Irek's elbow smashes into Kyp's nose. The Jedi hastily Force-pushes the Knight of Ren towards Tionne, who is quick to land a deep slash on the circuit panel in the cyborg's thigh. With the back of his hand, Kyp wipes away the generous spill of blood down his chin, his nose at an alarmingly crooked angle.

"Never better," he says.

* *

Onboard the Vigilance, Rey scrambles into the cockpit of the hangar bay's sole remaining GAT-12 Skipray Blastboat while Finn and Jysella take up the two gunner positions.

"Do we have a plan?" Jysella asks.

Finn nods, inspecting the weapons menu on the vidscreen. "Go where we're needed, destroy as many First Order ships as possible."

Jysella's face falls somewhat. "So we don't have a plan."

Rey glances over at her in disbelief. "'Sella, that was the meanest thing I've heard you say in fourteen years.'

"Almost fifteen," the other girl shyly corrects. "I'm turning twenty-one next month."

"Let's hope we all live to celebrate," Rey mutters under her breath. She steers the Blastboat out of the hangar and plummets into the field of combat, into the tumultuous, seesawing, zigzagging, lethal sea of wings and laser cannons and shrapnel. Finn and Jysella coordinate their firing with her sharp curves and abrupt dives, leaving in their wake a trail of incinerated TIEs that dissolve into the vacuum like stalks of pollen bowing before a gale. And of course Rey feels each dying pilot's light blink out in the nets of the Force just as keenly as she had felt the horror that wracked the
Hosnian system, of course everyone is connected even if it's just by the skin of their teeth. Perhaps when all of this is over she will be able to mourn for the mercy she could not grant, for the girl she left behind once the war began.

"Incoming at six!" Finn warns.

A Lancer- class frigate has shot its quadlaser at them from behind, four blasts from different angles in rapid succession. Gritting her teeth, Rey yanks the ship into a barrel roll, the celestial wastes swirling as up becomes down becomes sideways. Once they've righted themselves, Finn returns fire with a proton torpedo, cheering when he scores a direct hit. Rey goes starboard to avoid the molten shard of durasteel that hurtles out of the explosion and straight towards them, and this new trajectory sweeps the Blastboat into the path of an Immobilizer 418 that succumbs to a Red Squadron strafing run almost the very moment Rey lays eyes upon it.

No choice, she thinks, her fingers tightening around the control yoke. Fly through. She weaves into the narrow spaces amidst the splinters, the sparks, the disintegrating bulkhead, the bits and pieces and cables, all the while wishing she'd selected something more maneuverable than a kripping GAT-12. The Immobilizer's severed communications tower spins wildly in a combination of zero-gravity and aftershocks; Rey goes vertical—up, higher—pushing the thrusters to their limit in a desperate bid to avoid getting sideswiped by the next rotation. She makes it, just barely, but the X-wing that had dealt the final blow to the Immobilizer has just plunged into a dive, obviously eager for its next target, and—

—there's no time to swerve, there's no room to stop, we're going to crash—

Rey throws up her off hand, palm pressed to the viewport as she freezes the oncoming starfighter in place. She tugs at the yoke with her other hand but—nothing. The Force is heavy in the air, pulsing from one vessel to the other in a feedback loop of identical skill. The X-wing pilot has frozen her ship, too.

The transceiver crackles. Kylo's voice fills the Blastboat's cabin. "Rey."

™

It is careful and delicate, the act of easing away from each other, the nose of his X-wing scraping against the bow of her Blastboat. It's only when they've veered apart at safe distances and she's checked his callsign that she snaps, "What do you think you're doing, Red Five?", provoking startled looks from Finn and Jysella. "Wait, no, don't answer that," she amends upon realizing that this is not a discussion for military shortwaves. "Just watch yourself."
Before he can reply, an urgent directive is transmitted from the *Vigilance*, temporarily muting all other comms. "Attention, all units," says Dosmit, "platforms are down. I repeat, platforms are down. All remaining starfighters and dreadnoughts are hereby instructed to make for Coruscant."

Rey's brow creases. "What about the ships still trapped by the Interdictor screens?"

"Our frigates will do what they can," Dosmit replies, "but we must concentrate the bulk of our efforts on defending the Republic."

"They're part of it, too!" Rey protests. "Admiral, look— that's the *Bail Organa*, the *Mon Mothma*— all those lives onboard— they *are* the Republic!"

"Nemesis Seven." Dosmit addresses her by the callsign of all Blastboat pilots. "Those destroyers are named after people who dedicated their whole lives to the greater good. Their crew are *soldiers*. As we speak, their captains are already discussing self-destruct protocols to take out as much of the enemy as they can. As long as you are in one of my fighters, I am your commanding officer and I *order* you to not let what we have already accomplished and sacrificed today be in vain. I will see you above Coruscant."

*In response to some arcane signal from Irek, hordes of technobeasts bound into the palace courtyard, effectively surrounding Luke, Kyp, and Tionne. "This is overkill, isn't it?" Kyp complains, his mild tone belying the three-point attack formation that he and his fellow Masters have seamlessly slipped into.*

"I beg to differ," Irek says coldly. "This is insurance. The problem with you Jedi is that you never seem to stay dead."

Joruus cackles as he moves to stand beside the cyborg, dwarfed by the latter but bridling with an even more malevolent aura of Dark energy. "That's true. Where is *she*, by the way? I would love nothing more than to meet the woman who brought Lord Ren to the Dark Side."

"If anything, Joruus, the fault was mine," says Luke. "You will never harm any of my students again."
The Blockade of Coruscant is the *hairiest* tangle of dogfights that Rey has ever participated in—more like a free-for-all, really, with units on both sides scrambling to cause as much damage as they possibly can. In this tight space, she finds herself having to dodge friendly fire almost as often as enemy lasers. But it is amazing, to her, at least, what mechanisms the human psyche adopts to cope with intense stress—behind her, Finn has Poe on comlink and they've somehow gotten into a pissing match over who can gun down the most number of hostiles.

"You should join us," Finn suggests to Jysella, who smiles but says nothing. Rey understands. Finn and Poe aren't bad men but, for a Jedi—especially a Jedi who has mastered the White Current—ending human life can never, under any circumstances, be treated as a game.

"Whoa." Poe's awed voice crackles from the comlink as Jysella's proton torpedoes smash into the engine of a First Order carrier in the process of unloading its TIEs. "*That would probably count as six.*"

"Yeah," Finn agrees. "On second thought, 'Sella, never mind— you'd kick our asses."

Rey guides the Blastboat into a steep arc over the *Lusankya* and then charges at the TIE formation attacking it. There's a flash of red at the corner of her eye—*both* eyes—

"*What d'you say, Nemesis Seven?*" Valin comms from her right flank. "*Pincer move?*

"If Red Five can handle it," Rey says stiffly.

"*I can handle it,*" Kylo grits out on her left. As if he has any right to be annoyed with her!
Rey continues her forward trajectory with Finn and Jysella blasting away while Kylo and Valin spread out and then zoom back in to besiege the TIE clutch. Poe joins them at the last second, flying in from above and picking off what's left. They then run at the Dominion, a First Order Star Dreadnought, and are joined by a swirl of gray X-wings, each one moving with a swift, acrobatic recklessness that is breathtaking to behold.

Rey will never in a million years admit to feeling giddy but she can't help the stunned grin that spreads across her face. She's flying alongside Wraith Squadron. The Dominion doesn't even know what hits it before it shatters into space dust.

*A*

A Guardian-class corvette streaks through the ashen skies of Coruscant, smoke pouring from its aft end and hull groaning as it starts to crack apart. "Damn that Corran Horn!" Zekk bellows, scrambling for the eject button of his co-pilot seat. "Tahiri, we gotta bail!"

"No need," says Tahiri. Behind her mask, frosty green eyes narrow in concentration. "I found a nice, cushy spot for us to land." With a little telekinetic assistance, the Judgement dips below the rooftops of the Senate District and crashes into the barricade erected by Coruscant's ground defense forces, flattening most of the structure and allowing the stormtroopers to advance once the dust has cleared.

A platoon of Republic battle droids encircles the corvette's wreckage; what they see emerge from it are two figures clad in black armor, slight enough to be human teenagers. The droids open fire but their lasers are repelled by the boy's electrostaff. The girl with long blonde hair walks through their midst, casual and unperturbed, cloak billowing in the wind—and then, without breaking stride, she raises her hand and waggles her fingers as if she were crushing a sheet of paper in her fist. Every single droid spasms and crumples, limb by limb, to the ground.

"Too easy," Tahiri complains. "Where are the Jedi?"

A distant explosion unfurls from behind a row of half-decimated skyscrapers. It's waves of Force lightning slamming against a barrier of Light Side energy, and the impact reverberates for miles.

"I think they're over there," says Zekk. "Y'know— just guessing."
Despite their piecemeal successes Rey soon realizes with a chill that the combined fleets of the Resistance and the Galactic Alliance Defense Force are hopelessly outnumbered. With each First Order TIE squadron that is destroyed, more keep hurtling into the fray. And to say nothing of the great warships gliding through the black like sea monsters, obliterating everything in their path. A heavy resignation drags along the pit of her stomach, she's prepared to go down fighting if she has to, but—

Kylo's X-wing darts into her line of sight. She watches him fly like his father, brash and defiant against all odds. *I don't want to die,* she thinks before she can suppress it, before she can remind herself of the heartache. *Not when I've only just found you again.*

Upon noticing that he seems to have strayed from his team, she accesses his squadron's frequency in case she needs to stay out of the way of an unfamiliar maneuver. "Red Five," Poe is admonishing, "get back into formation—" And it clicks. Kylo's hovering around the Blastboat, protecting her flanks, covering her every move. Just like Ben Solo had done on Corbos, in battle with the tuk'ata, in all that moonlight.

* 

The space above the field of combat ripples at the edges, and then faint silhouettes bloom in the darkness like shadowy dreams of shapely wings, gradually solidifying until—

The Mon Calamari fleet descends from the Perlemian Trade Route, hundreds of *Mediator-* class battle cruisers, *Viscount-* class Star Defenders, and MC90 warships stretching out as far as the eye can see. They take out the gravity well projectors first, ruthlessly bombarding the Immobilizer 418s until the capital ships trapped underneath can break free. Every single Republic defender's communications system buzzes with an incoming transmission, flaring to life on the static-tinged crest of a woman's voice.

'*This is General Leia Organa of the Resistance. Many of you have fought by my side against Palpatine, against Thrawn, against the Imperial Remnant. Each time we have emerged victorious, with new weapons and better tactics. I tell you now, keep fighting. This is a war we know how to win. I speak to you from the star cruiser Remember Alderaan, and I promise you, we will prevail.*" 

* 

Luke Skywalker smiles upon hearing his sister's broadcast on his comlink. He stops doging the
technobeasts and the whirl of red lightsabers and blaster bolts, turning around to face the new maelstrom of lightning that Joruus has launched at him. He closes his eyes. Perhaps he thinks about Yoda, or old Ben Kenobi, or his father. Perhaps he carries all of them with him.

Any advice for me?

Someone speaks from across the span of years in those simple, infuriatingly enigmatic words from his boyhood. Use the Force, Luke.

He chuckles. I knew you were going to say that.

When the lightning hits, he lets it course through him, absorbing the energy and heightening it with his own. There is pain, yes, but that is to be expected. Sometimes all we can do is rise above.

Planting both feet firmly on the ground, he redirects the lightning, bends it away. It explodes from him in blinding currents, slashing through every technobeast on the battlefield in a white-hot chain that leaps from one target to the next. It sears through Irek Ismaren, overloading his circuits with countless volts of electricity And it ends where it began, with Joruus C'baoth, who howls like a moon-mad wolf as the lightning floods his veins and burns him up from within. Luke then uses the last vestiges of strength to coax the tendrils of energy higher so that they crash in tidal waves over a TIE squadron that has zoomed in on the Imperial Palace, brutally cutting short their planned strafing run. The few that remain operational are swiftly dealt with by Kyle Katarn onboard the Moldy Crow and Corran Horn in his X-wing.

Thoroughly depleted, Luke sags to his knees amidst a rain of falling TIEs. "I'm getting old," he murmurs, before he allows himself to sink into oblivion. And yet the Light is there to catch him. As it always has, as it always will.

From her prone position on the ground, Tahiri slowly props herself up on one elbow. Her mask had cracked when the lightning hit, and now she blinks one bewildered green eye at the Jedi Master who had shove her out of harm's way at the last second.

"I shot off your limbs on Fondor," is all she can manage to say. "I killed your husband."
"I know," Tionne Solusar replies. "Perhaps one day you will understand why this is how I choose to honor him."

Once the remnants of the First Order navy have limped into hyperspace, it is a relatively simple task to subdue the troops that made planetfall. Minor skirmishes will continue to rock the Galactic City for the next few hours but Commander Sovv is more than capable of closing the deal, and so the Jedi leave him to it. There is another matter that requires their immediate attention.

In orbit above Coruscant, an Upsilon-class shuttle transfers from the Vigilance to the landing dock of the Remember Alderaan, where the Jedi Council is already waiting, rendered stiff and silent by the news that they have received. Still feeling the aftershocks of the lightning maelstrom, Luke leans heavily against Katarn, his gaze fixed on the transport's doors. Valin and Jysella are the first ones through, sporting identical strained expressions as they bow to the Masters and take their place at their father Corran's side. A fresh current of tension spikes through the group when a tall, lean figure emerges from the bowels of the shuttle and slowly, hesitantly makes his way down the ramp, followed by a solemn-faced Rey. She keeps her sights trained on the slumped line of his broad shoulders as he plods toward the Council, staring down at his feet.

And then there is the sound of more doors scraping open. The sound of running. Leia pushes her way through the assembled Jedi and doesn't break stride until she has lain a gentle hand on her son's scarred cheek, looking into his eyes for the first time in almost three years. He blinks down at her numbly, his hand rising of its own volition to clasp her wrist. She takes in his sallow complexion, his gaunt features, the slight tremble to his lower lip. "Oh, Ben," she sighs, "what have they done to you, my darling?"

He collapses into her arms. He exhales. There is so much sorrow in that sound, and so much crushing, bittersweet relief.

What can he say to his uncle, when he is led to him? What else is left to be said?

"Ben." Luke does not restrain him but something about how he holds Kylo's gaze makes it impossible to look away. The question that he asks is— unexpected, to say the least. "Do you forgive me?"
At first, Kylo wants to say that he is the one who has erred, that he should be throwing himself at his uncle's feet and mercy if he could only find the will to move, but then he sees the lines on Luke's worn face that had been carved there by Numa's death. By the day Alema left. By the years spent not understanding his nephew, all the arguments, all the missed chances to insist that Han and Leia visit and talk to their son, the failure to protect him from the monsters in his head.

"I— I don't know," Kylo whispers. He hates that this is the truth, hates how young his voice sounds, hates that at the end of it all he is truly still this selfish, unable to let go of the resentment, the wreck of years.

But Luke nods. "The important thing is that you're here now," he says, "and that we can begin to mend these old wounds."

* 

Kylo spends the next hour in a haze of disbelief, feeling far away from his body while faces and voices speckle across his perception, only to dissolve into the ether when he tries to focus. Rey, Valin, and Jysella answer most of the questions—where did they find him, who had the Eye, did he fight in the battle—but he manages to mumble a few responses here and there, the Force guarded and wary around him as the Council trawls for signs of manipulation or deceit. Does Snoke know where you are? No. Do you know where Snoke is? No. What is his plan now that we've stopped the invasion? I don't know. Are you hungry?

"Yes—" He looks up, startled. He hadn't noticed who asked the question but he thinks it was Tionne. She's the one who's now shrugging at the other Masters. "We might as well feed them. They went straight from a covert operation in the Unknown Regions to a battlefield in the Core."

"I mean, I could do with some—" Valin starts to say but is cut off when his father raises an eyebrow at him.

"You," says Corran, "neglected to contain an unknown variable in a combat situation. And, Rey, you smuggled the Master of the Knights of Ren onto a Resistance capital ship. Believe me, there will be a discussion about this."

Valin gulps. Rey says nothing but lifts her chin, stubborn and defiant as always.

But they get fed eventually. While the Jedi Council meets with Leia and her most trusted officers,
Rey, Kylo, Valin, and Jysella are ferried off into what must be a break room for the ship's crew. They take their places at the small table, with Rey and the Horn siblings huddling close together while Kylo occupies the other end. As service droids trundle into the room bearing trays laden with food and drink, Valin and Jysella watch Kylo with apprehension; Rey pointedly looks everywhere else. Kylo suspects that this will be the longest meal of his life.

* *

Awkward.

That's the only way Rey can describe what's happening right now. *Awkward, awkward, awkward,* the chewing and sipping sounds that everyone's making too loud in the fraught silence, each clink of a utensil like a thunderclap right next to her ear. The meal consists chiefly of bland ship's fare such as exo-protein wafers and nutripaste, but there are also slices of cold Corellian spiceloaf—one of the few spaceworthy meat preparations in the galaxy—as well as a platter of...

"Air cakes!" Valin's hazel eyes light up. "Look, Rey, your favorite—"

She can't help smiling at him as he levitates the sweets towards her. He's always like this at mealtimes, coaxing her to eat, making sure she doesn't just pick at her plate as she's tended to do since—

Kylo slams his mug down on the table. The three Jedi start, hands automatically flying to lightsaber hilts; he ducks his head, mutters something that sounds like, "Excuse me."

That is the point when the door opens, and Raynar Thul steps inside.

Rey has never seen Valin look this panic-stricken before. His gaze swings from Raynar to Kylo and back again. "Have a seat, Thul!" he barks, leaping to his feet and practically *pushing* the blond man into the chair farthest from the glowering, ominous presence at the other end of the table. "Have we won yet?"

"We won the moment Ackbar's fleet jumped out of hyperspace." Raynar is remarkably unperturbed, snatching a wafer from the tray and taking small, meticulous bites. "But, yes, the last First Order troops in the Galactic City have surrendered. When I left, Sovv was already dispatching warships to the Giju Run. The plan for now is blockades but we *do* need to start reclaiming as much territory as possible."
Valin nods. "Since we have the Core, getting a foothold in the Inner Rim would allow us to squeeze in on the Colonies from both sides—"

"Useless," Kylo blurts out much to Rey's surprise. "Now is not the time for Sovv to be conservative. That was the bulk of the First Order navy at Coruscant— the most powerful warships, the finest generals. What few weren't destroyed need to be chased down and eliminated now, before they can regroup."

"Good thinking, Solo," Valin drawls. "There's only a slight problem— just a teeny, tiny one, you understand— we don't know where they went."

"I can find out," Kylo says.

"No." The word tumbles from Rey's lips in a snarl. "You can't let Snoke into your head again. It's too dangerous."

"It's the only way." Kylo looks down at his plate. "I can feel him scrabbling at the walls. When I reopen our connection, I believe I will be capable of fooling him long enough to discern Centerpoint Station's whereabouts— but the longer I stay away, the more suspicious he will become. I need to do it as soon as possible."

"If you think Luke and your mother will—"

"They fought in the Rebellion," he reminds her softly. "They understand the meaning of sacrifice."

She bristles. "And you think I don't?" She no longer cares that her voice is too loud, no longer cares that there are other people in the room. "After Exar Kun, after Corbos? I know sacrifice, Ben. I know that personal isn't the same as important but this is too much! You can't. It's too much—'

"Corbos," he repeats in a wooden, emotionless tone that fans the flames of her ire, "where you died for me. Perhaps it's time that I return the favor."

Rey couldn't have controlled it if she'd tried. Her temper flares and the Force flares with it, latching on to the nearest available target— which, unfortunately, happens to be the platter of spiceloaf. It
skips worryingly across the table and then hurls its contents into the air, splattering Kylo's pale face with strips of the cold, herb-studded meat.

Valin's jaw drops. Jysella claps a hand over her mouth to contain her startled gasp. Raynar pauses in the act of reaching for his second exo-protein wafer. And Kylo— well, he looks at her, stunned at first, and then in that way of his that she remembers from her childhood. Like she's something he's never seen before.

And then Valin bursts out laughing.

He laughs so hard that tears spring to his eyes and he has to lean against Rey's chair for support. She slaps his knee, about to hiss at him to stop it, but he merely drapes one long arm over her shoulders while clutching his stomach in mirth. "Never thought I'd see this again," he manages to say in between hearty guffaws. "Ben Solo, covered in food—"

The thing about Valin Horn's laughter is that it's contagious. Always has been. It comes in peals of joy that are scratchy at the edges, soul-deep, and it's not long before Rey starts laughing, too. She knows that she, on the other hand, doesn't have a particularly nice-sounding laugh— it's too strident and she tends to snort and hiccup in between giggles— but it feels good for the tension in her shoulders to roll away like this. For the corners of her lips to tilt upwards, crack open wide. She feels Kylo's Force signature sort of waver but, before she can analyze that too closely, Valin bumps his forehead against hers in affection and the signature suddenly warps into something jagged and furious. And that is all the warning anyone gets before the dish of nutripaste comes zooming off the table and hits Valin square in the face.

In the next wave of disbelieving silence that follows, the now mostly empty dish slides to the brown-haired Jedi Knight's lap, nutripaste dripping down his cheeks. He smacks his lips, contemplating the taste, until he finally remarks, "Needs more salt."

"I concur," says Raynar. Sitting on Valin's other side, he'd gotten splattered, too. The two men exchange glances, blue eyes meeting hazel, nodding at each other once in tacit agreement before Force-pushing all the remaining plates on the table at Kylo Ren.

Everything after that is a blur.
When Luke Skywalker enters the break room, it's to the sight of plates and utensils scattered across the tiles and all four occupants covered in synthfood. They freeze when they see him, guilty looks on their faces.

"Well," he sighs, "this certainly takes me back."

Chapter End Notes

The Indomitable.

Orbital Defense Headquarters.

GAT-12 Skipray Blastboat.

WRAITH MOTHERFUCKING SQUADRON (emphasis mine).

I opted for the Mon Calamari fleet to emerge from the Perlemian Trade Route because that's the only Coruscant hyperlane I know of that junctions with a Calamari sector route, the Overic Griplink. There is at least a 70% chance that I'm wrong, lol. Sorry.

Mediator-class battle cruiser.

Viscount-class Star Defender.

MC90 Star Cruiser.

Leia's speech is a condensed and edited version of her monologue under similar circumstances during the Yuuzhan Vong War.

The Remember Alderaan.

Exo-protein wafer.

Nutripaste.

Spiceloaf.

Air cake.

Giju Run.

A wise person once commented, "I remember a few chapters ago Kylo thought he would love to hear Rey laugh again and hasn't yet. At this point, I would love for someone else to make her laugh first, and he has to deal with that. I NEED REGRETFUL BEN." Thank you, Kbourne2012, for inspiring the last scene and allowing that food fight from LYG to come full circle!
Chapter 28

I apologize for the continued radio silence but my schedule this past week made it so that I could either respond to your wonderful comments or finish a new chapter before I fly out. Thank you so much for all your insights; rest assured that I take them to heart and I use them as a guide to craft the kind of conclusion that all you amazing, patient readers deserve.

Trigger warning: There's a part here that's based on my personal experience of how trauma can affect one's relationship with food. It's touched on briefly in the dialogue (and has already been foreshadowed by previous mentions of how Rey has lost weight), so proceed with caution. Writing is one way to confront our inner demons and, with this chapter, I finally lay some of mine to rest.

I will be hiking in the remote woodlands of Hualien when they drop the Last Jedi trailer at Celebration (I mean, they have to, right?) but I will be with you all in spirit!! LOOK FOR THE FORCE AND YOU WILL ALWAYS FIND ME. Thoughts on this installment would be very much appreciated. See you guys when I get back!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

In the deep dark of a Resurgent-class battlecruiser's massive communications bay, Snoke's holo peers down with narrowed, calculating eyes as Alema prowls restlessly at his feet, snapping and snarling at the pale redhead whose lanky frame is rigid with controlled fury, his right arm in a sling.

"We had them," Alema rants. "We should have won. I did my part but apparently you just sat there gawking while that scrap heap of a ship maneuvered rings around your precious, state-of-the-art Finalizer that's now scattered all over the Corusca sector in waves of space dust!"

Hux lifts his chin, meeting Snoke's unflinching gaze even though his pointed tone leaves no room for doubt that he's addressing Alema. "I fully admit that there was failure on my part to put together an adequate response. The situation was irregular, to say the least. We could not have foreseen that the Vigilance's crew would be capable of accessing an uncharted hyperlane in the heat of combat—"

"Are you stupid?" screeches Alema. "You think any old Republic flyboy could have done that? Mark my words, there was a Jedi piloting that ship and I have a pretty good idea who—"

"Enough." The silky purr from the flickering colossus is more effective than any shout could have
been. Alema falls into deferential, albeit sullen, silence. "This is a temporary setback. Nothing more," continues Snoke. "We still have the Core surrounded. It won't take long to organize a second onslaught. For now... for now, come to me. I have received word from Zekk and Tahiri that they managed to escape Coruscant and are on their way to my location. We must regroup."

"What of Kylo Ren, Supreme Leader?" Hux asks.

Only the slight downward curve of a reptilian mouth hints at Snoke's displeasure. "When he emerges from whatever hole he's slunk off to, General, rest assured that I will accept nothing but the best of explanations for his absence at this crucial period in time."

"You can't reach him, either?" Alema blurts out before she can stop herself.

Snoke lifts one gargantuan hand. From systems away, Alema is lifted off her feet and sent slamming backwards against the far wall. "He will not betray us," the holo growls. "My methods are thorough. Foolproof. There is no going back to the Light for one such as him, after what he has sacrificed. We will wait."

Hux derives far less pleasure from watching Alema struggle to her feet, gasping for breath, than he thought he would. For Snoke to lose control like that, the situation was far more dire than previously assumed. Everything— all the careful planning of long years— seems to be in tatters. But he knows that he must trust in the Supreme Leader's guidance, his vision, above all else. "We will need to deploy countermeasures," Hux says, "to ascertain that the Resistance does not follow us to Centerpoint. I will advise Zekk and Tahiri of the same."

Snoke shrugs. "Do what you like. It is all the same to me as I have already awakened the defenses. Anyone who tries to attack my fortress will be walking into a trap. Even the Jedi." He allows himself a small smile in the dim light. "Especially the Jedi."

* *

The only sound in the pristine white 'fresher unit is that of cold water gurgling down the drain as Kylo rinses foodstuff from his hands, the rest of him scrubbed clean. Raynar and Valin observe from the doorway; they had taken turns washing up and Kylo had been designated the last to do so. He has no illusions as to the reason for that— his presence onboard is still a secret to most of the Resistance crew and only his former comrades can be counted on to subdue him should he prove untrustworthy after all. They need to keep an eye on him at all times.
He turns off the tap and runs his hands through the electronic drying system before following Raynar and Valin back into the corridor. That undignified, ridiculous food fight had served a purpose in taking some of the edge off, and now the three men are quiet—almost contemplative. The last time they were together like this had been four, nearly five years ago. Perhaps it's ghosts that walk with them as they make their way to the Masters' conclave.

Upon seeing Rey and Jysella emerge from another 'fresher unit further up the hall, Valin's steps quicken towards the girls, leaving Raynar and Kylo behind. They walk side by side without looking at each other until, finally, the golden-haired man breaks the silence.

"I just want you to know," Raynar says softly, "that there is nothing so terrible that you can't come back from it. Scarred, yes. Changed, yes. But come back all the same."

Kylo's staring at Rey. She and the Horn siblings have paused, waiting for him and Raynar to catch up. Her profile is turned in his direction as she murmurs something to Valin, her hazel eyes fixed on the other man, and it's ludicrous but, after all that has happened, she's never seemed further out of reach than she is now.

"My sins are worse than yours," Kylo tells Raynar.

"Still so competitive." There's a trace of House Thul for a moment, a flash of that bored arrogance from their youth. "I do understand what it's like to have someone in my head, Solo. I understand how the voice gets so loud that it drowns out your sense of self and becomes the only reality you can cling to. There are times when I still dream of him, the Dark Man. He was a puppet, too, you know."

Kylo's gaze flickers to Raynar, who continues, "You cannot live in someone else's head without giving up a part of yourself as well. Back in those days I caught glimpses of his memories. The tombs of Korriban, the death of his master, the war, and how he slept for eons until something—someone—woke him up. I was too blinded to put two and two together for a while, but now—" He gestures from himself to Kylo, and then to the three Jedi a few feet away from them, as if tracing constellations in the air. "All of this was set in motion long ago. I persevere, I atone for my mistakes, I help those who love me—because, right now, that is the singular worst thing I can do to Snoke."

"Vindictiveness does not strike me as befitting a Jedi," Kylo dispassionately observes.

"That is my burden," says Raynar, inclining his head in calm acceptance. "But you were never really a Jedi, were you?"
Rey glances at them as they draw near. The line of her mouth falters, and Kylo has to entertain the very real possibility that it will always do that whenever she sees him from now on. Valin places a consoling hand on her shoulder, and—

And redemption is a slippery slope. You can climb all you want, with all your strength, but your demons are waiting to grab at your ankles and refuse to let go. And sometimes they succeed in pulling you back down a mile for every inch that you were able to surpass— more so when you hadn't even been a particularly nice person to begin with.

Ben Solo had never been nice. He had been volatile, cruel, and, towards the end of his time at the Praxeum, half-mad with love. The sickening jealousy he had felt at watching Valin lead Rey away from the *Upsilon*-class shuttle, plying her with her favorite sweets, and making her laugh— it comes roaring back through his veins, it blossoms into something dark and ugly in his soul where it has spread its twisted roots. It breaks his heart.

He shoves Valin away from Rey with a snarl. He barely registers the look of confusion on the other man's face before it's blocked by Rey placing herself between them, shoving him right back. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" she demands, an irate flush creeping onto her cheeks. "Stay away from him!" Her hand instinctively drops to her lightsaber hilt, posed to draw.

It breaks his heart.

A look of unspoken agreement is exchanged among Valin, Raynar, and Jysella. Kylo is so preoccupied with Rey that, while he notices Jysella opening a set of doors somewhere at the periphery of his vision, he doesn't pause to consider what it could mean. That is, until Valin and Raynar grab him, taking hold of one arm each, and practically *throw* him into the same interrogation room that Jysella is now pushing Rey into. The doors hiss shut, and then there is the unmistakable beeping sound of a lock being activated on the other side.

"Hey!" Rey pounds on the metal with her fists. "Let us out! Valin!"

"You and Solo need to talk, kid." The reply is muffled but firm. "Just go ahead and have it all out. Ten minutes. The Masters will understand."

"No, they won't!" Rey yells. "Have you taken leave of your senses— there's a war on—"
"A war," Valin counters, "that we cannot win without you at your best, your most focused. It's time, Rey. Just have it all out," he repeats, "and then let it go."

She hurls a stream of foul curses at the durasteel, throwing in a couple of kicks for good measure. Kylo has retreated further into the room; he can only watch as the love of his miserable life attempts to fight a set of heavy, inanimate doors with the same reckless intensity with which she once tried to beat a shuttle-sized Yavin monster to death armed with nothing but her quarterstaff. Despite their strained circumstances, he feels an overwhelming surge of affection for her in this moment—an affection that all too soon tapers off into a hollow pang when he remembers how her first instinct had been to call Valin's name. He has spent two years being tortured by the lie that Rey never loved him. It is nothing compared to the crushing pain of her falling in love with someone else.

Giving up on the door, she turns to face him, harnessing her emotions with a slow, deep breath. "What was that just now?" she asks in a quiet, wary tone hinting at the venom underneath. "Why did you push Valin?"

"Forgive me," Kylo sneers, "did I interrupt your moment?"

Rey's eyes flash as she draws herself up to her fullest height and, somehow, it is this commanding demeanor she adopts that truly drives home the fact that she is no longer the girl he left behind. "I've put up with a lot of shit from you over the years, Solo, but I have to admit that this petty jealousy takes the cake." There's a warning there, if only he were in control of himself enough to heed it. A warning that is also an entreaty. Don't do this to us.

But, ironically, that is what sends him over the edge. After everything he has done, she is letting him know in her own way that there is some part of them that can still be saved. He does not deserve such grace. He is furious with Snoke, with the Jedi Code, with this whole goddamned war and the mess that they have become because of it, and all of that fury has nowhere to go except to pipe back into himself and feed the savage darkness that will always be part of who he is.

"Why shouldn't I be jealous?" he roars, stalking towards her, possessed by no other monster except his own self. "All that time I spent with the whips to my skin and the claws in my head, cut off from everyone and everything familiar, longing for you—" Rey inhales once more at that, but it's a quick, shallow, startled breath, barely audible beneath the torrent of Kylo's words that stutter from a tongue thick with bile—"wanting to die, do you understand, Rey, I wanted to die! But that was never an option because..." He's crowded her up against the wall now without even really thinking about it, his vision bordering dim at the edges, hazy and red like blood. "Because I had to see you again. No matter the circumstances. I would take what I could get. As long as I could see you again." It is bitter and staggering all at once, this relief that courses through his system at finally confessing such a thing. "Where were you while that was happening to me? What were you doing? Letting Valin Horn feed you air cakes—"
"Stop," Rey whispers, spine pressed ramrod-straight along the wall, eyes more green than brown and pleading in the bluish light. "Stop it, Ben."

"— although I am somewhat surprised, considering that you didn't like him all that much when we were younger—"

She's always had a temper to rival his. "How convenient for you to remember that," she grumbles mutinously.

"Don't you get it yet?" He is all heartache and desperation as he peers down at her. And then more words burst from the knots in his throat, words that had been a long time coming, words that spring from no other place but the vale of grief, on the lips of the wrecked remnant who survived to come out the other side.

★

Kylo lunges before Rey can react, dropping one hand to her waist while the other slams into the metal wall beside her head, effectively caging her in. "I remember everything!" he snarls, loud enough to make her flinch. "How you move—the way you breathe—" His words hitch on a strangled half-sob as he stares at her like a man caught in a waking dream. He wrenches his trembling hand from the wall, skimming the line of her jaw with his knuckles, stopping to touch the pad of his thumb to her bottom lip. She can't look away from his scarred visage, from the ruins of what once was. "How your eyes met mine in the starlight," he continues through a broken, haunted rasp of a voice, "and I felt like the look on your face."

Yavin 4 again in her mind, in the air around them, with the green trees rustling cool and pulses of silver raining over them both as their hearts beat together, everything frightening and new and oddly wondrous. And also the ship's cabin, that subspace crawl when their gazes found each other's in the glow of a dozen constellations like hands reaching out through the entirety of space and time, the divine within their grasp and the future full of promise...

"But you were so young," Kylo says in that same raw, aching tone. "I wanted to wait... I knew— I knew, even then, that my days with you were numbered, but I hoped—" With his hand still cradling her face, he sags against her, all six feet of him leaning into her much smaller frame so that they would have toppled backwards had the wall not been there to support them. "Darling, how I hoped," he groans, kissing her shoulder like he can't help it, and then he shudders as he is gripped by a darker and more recent memory. "And all of that to end up watching Valin touch you —"
Indignant, Rey bites. His thumb is still at her lips and she sinks her teeth into the flesh of it. Kylo pulls away with a hiss of pain, looks at her with his mouth hanging open, almost comical. She's hit by a brief yet dizzying wave of deja vu— this is how we met— before the stunned disbelief in his eyes shades to something sinister and retaliatory.

He swoops down and she knows what's coming, wants it so badly but not when he is like this— she turns her head to the side at the last possible second. His lips land on her cheek instead.

"Won't you let me into your mouth, cyar'ika?" he murmurs hoarsely against her skin. "Must you be wooed?"

Rey's shaking with a heady mix of fear and the desire that had been awakened on Sarvchi, but she stays silent as Kylo kisses a tender, blazing path down to her jaw. A soft gasp is torn from her throat when he scrapes ever so lightly with his teeth; he lifts his head expectantly but she clamps her lips shut, raising her chin in stubborn defiance.

"I'll just kiss you everywhere else, then," he rumbles, voice low with promise.

She lets him. She lets him because each brush of his lips to the slope of her neck builds her up, higher and higher, kindling the black flames that lick slowly through her core and consume her veins. She lets him with all the agony, the fever of her youth. He kisses her breasts through her shirt, and then the valley between them, and then lower— her ribs, her navel, the spurs of her hips, lifting her shirt just the slightest bit to gain better access, ardent in his desire to mark her as his, and only his. Rey's wrists twist of their own volition to dig her fingers into the unyielding wall, the cold durasteel a sharp contrast to the hot swipe of Kylo's tongue on her bare skin. He's on his knees now, laving at her stomach, his hands clutching her waist. Everything feels so surreal and far away, with him peeking up at her through his lashes every so often to gauge her expression, waiting for her to relent, to give him what he craves.

He startles another gasp from her when he hooks her knee over his shoulder and nips at the inside of her thigh, the sharp sensation tantalizingly dulled by the fabric of her leggings. I need you, Rey thinks helplessly. I need you, but—

A single tear slides down her cheek. Kylo looks up again just in time to notice, and to freeze. Time stands still and, in all the silence, Rey manages to find her voice. It's small but at least it's steady as she says, "When they took you away, I couldn't eat. Food tasted like ash in my mouth so I'd just spit it out. And then one night I woke up hungry. Starving, like I hadn't since Jakku. I raided the larders and just— I just started gulping down whatever I could get my hands on that didn't need to be cooked. It was too much, too fast. I gorged myself until I felt sick, and then I— I vomited. All
over the floor." She feels him close his eyes against her thigh, feels the tremor of anguish that hits him like a blow. "It was Valin who found me, on my hands and knees, covered in puke. My appetite has never really been the same since then. I eat when I need to but not as much as before. That's what Valin does, he encourages me to get a full meal whenever he can, and I..."

Kylo stands up, carefully setting her leg down and moving away. Rey doesn't want that, either—she steps forward and hides her face in his chest. "He's like a brother to me. I've never loved anyone but you," she whimpers, her walls crumbling, leaving her pride in shreds. "Please don't hurt me anymore. I honestly don't think I'd be able to take it. Please, Ben. That's all I ask. Don't hurt me anymore."

The hesitant embrace that he wraps her in is markedly chaste. "No more," he agrees, gentle and solemn. "I promise, Rey. No more."

She wants to say that she believes him. Wants to push herself into taking one last leap of faith. But the harsh and simple truth is that there are facets of him that she can no longer recognize, sharp edges in his soul that hadn't been there two years ago. None of it is his fault but—how can she believe someone she doesn't know anymore? Still, though, if she allows herself to relax in his arms, if she lets her body remember, then perhaps her heart would follow suit. She can do that much for him, at least...

Her comlink goes off. Their time is up.

*

The conclave drags on until Coruscant has eased into its night cycle, the Masters interrogating Kylo as they use the Force to measure the strength of his truths and his resolve. They mutter among themselves, the occasional argument rippling through the calm but swiftly quelled. The Jedi Knights are present only in an observational capacity, waiting with bated breath for the verdict, straining in an attempt to hear what is being said several feet away. Rey never takes her eyes off Kylo, her heart squeezing painfully in her chest every time he winces when a Master delves too deep into his head. It is necessary, she knows, but cruel. How could they, after knowing what Snoke had done to him?

Luke and Leia engage in a final discussion, the latter fretfully rubbing her arms as if it is all she can do to not walk over to her son and hold him. At last, Luke turns to address the room.

"I believe that a consensus has been reached. I will summarize it for the benefit of the Knights, as well as for formality's sake. Right now, the most pressing concern is Snoke's destruction once and
for all, and that is what we will focus on." It's Luke's subtle way of letting the observers know that
Kylo's fate has not yet been decided. "Ben is our sole link to Snoke. He will reestablish their
connection and return to Centerpoint, comming us once he has the coordinates."

Rey scrambles to her feet but Luke has been expecting this. He silences her with a level stare
before she can open her mouth. "The only way that Snoke won't suspect treachery is if Ben goes
back to him with something valuable. Something worth forgiving his absence for."

Jysella is the first to understand. "The Eye of the Sun."

Luke nods. "Ben will tell Snoke the truth about how he discovered where the Eye was hidden. He
will say that he severed his link to his master and to the Dark Side so that Ahsoka Tano and the
Sarvchi team would trust him— and that he fought them off and escaped Chiss Space with the
relic."

Rey shakes her head. "No. Master Luke, no. We can't do this."

"Rey," Katarn warns but she speaks over him, raising her voice.

"We can't use him like this!" She's poised to run to Kylo, to shield him however she can, but
something about the way he hunches in on himself, eyes on the floor, tells her that this action will
not be welcome. "That makes us just as bad as the First Order! What if Snoke sees through Ben's
ruse— he'll kill him—"

"We won't let that happen," Luke says firmly. "A fleet will be assembled, prepared to go into
hyperspace the moment the fortress' coordinates are relayed. We will also dispatch a Jedi strike
team to tail Ben's shuttle and infiltrate Centerpoint. He is going to need all the backup he can get
once First Order sensors have detected the fleet. It is also this strike team that will assist him in
using the Eye against Snoke while the battle rages outside."

Valin speaks up. "Question— why don't we skip the fleet? Go in, kill Snoke, get out. Nice and
easy."

It's Leia who answers. "That was the initial plan. However, the First Order is so much more than
Snoke. It's also his generals. What remains of High Command will either be onboard Centerpoint
Station or orbiting it on their flagships. Now is the time to strike. The First Order rose from the
ashes of the Galactic Empire; they must be eliminated in this assault unless we want a rematch in
another thirty years."

"So you're just going to let your son walk back into that hell, General?" Rey demands, too carried by her anger to soften her words. Someone's tugging at her arm, urging her to take her seat, but she has no idea who it is— her world is narrowed down to Luke and Leia and Kylo. "You're just going to shove him back into Snoke's clutches—"

The older woman's expression is impassive. Everyone needs masks at some point. Everyone has a private self that must be kept hidden for duty's sake. It is a sacrifice of sorts, and no one understands that better than Leia Organa. "It was Ben's idea, Rey."

*

After the details have been hammered out, the next hour is spent preparing. And saying goodbye.

"Raynar."

Kirana Ti's voice gives him pause as he's filing out of the chamber where the strike team has been issued their final briefing. He turns to face her, and she holds out his old lightsaber— the one he had cast aside after fashioning the amethyst blade, possessed by a dream of glory.

"The time has come," she intones. "Take up your sword, Jedi."

*

In Leia's cabin on the Remember Alderaan, she presses the Eye of the Sun into Kylo's hands. "I will be there," she tells him. "At the head of the fleet. Just give me my opening, and I will make amends for what I let happen to you."

Kylo starts to protest but she stops him, squeezing his hands. "Get us to Centerpoint. And succeed, so that you can be there when your father wakes up and we can all apologize to one another properly." She smiles. "Ben, you're my only hope."
The hangars bustle with activity as more soldiers arrive and preflight checks are run on all available ships. While Valin and Jysella hang back to speak with their father, Rey walks up the ramp of the *Ebon Hawk* with Raynar right behind her. She's almost at the threshold when someone says, "Lord Thul."

Kaye Galfrian is standing at the bottom of the ramp, dressed for combat in a gunner's flightsuit, her blue eyes fixed on Raynar.

"Your Highness," is all he says.

Squaring her shoulders, never taking her gaze off of him, she snaps off a sharp, precise salute. He bows to her. There is no need for words.

Rey looks off to the side to afford them privacy. She sees Corran ruffling Valin's hair while enveloping Jysella in a tight, one-armed hug. Something clicks, just then, in her mind, and she's hurrying down the ramp as fast as her legs can carry her, skirting around troops and Jedi and technicians alike. She's out of breath once she reaches the *Upsilon*-class shuttle but she doesn't stop, barging into the deserted cockpit, and then the equally deserted inner compartment, and then the small bedroom, where Kylo is putting on his armor. He'd worn it into Chiss Space, changing to civilian attire once he'd belatedly realized that the Master of the Knights of Ren would not exactly be welcomed with open arms on a neutral world.

*Don't blush*, Rey chastises herself but it's too late, color flooding to her cheeks. It's ridiculous that she should be embarrassed by walking in on him shirtless after what had already happened in the Sarvchi swamps.

Apparently, Kylo is thinking along the same lines. The lopsided smirk that he aims her way is small, but it is fond. She rolls her eyes, allowing herself to pretend for a moment that she is just seeing him off on a routine mission. She'd hated it every time he left, even then. That is the important thing to remember now. *It doesn't matter whose fault it is anymore*— hadn't she told Han something like that on Starkiller Base, as the Force rushed through her? Stand tall. Keep moving.

*And do not forget*, Ahsoka Tano had said, *those who carried you.*

Rey picks up one of Kylo's arm-guards that's splayed haphazardly on the mattress. She holds it out like an offering and he lets her slip it onto him. The left arm-guard first, and then the other, her fingers gliding over his sinews and his skin as if memorizing every inch. She helps him with the
gloves, too, followed by the black tunic, until finally only the helm is left. It's impossibly heavy in her hands as she clutches it to her chest.

He bends slightly, gazing at her with warm brown eyes that flutter shut when she presses her lips to his brow before putting the mask on his head. "You can kiss me when all of this is over." Her voice trembles along with her fingers as she fastens this last piece of his regalia into place. "There. That's your added incentive to stay alive. And mine as well."

She steps out of reach before he can react. If she says anything more, if Kylo so much as touches her, she's going to beg him not to go or, worse, she's going to commandeer this shuttle and fly both of them out of the Corusca sector and away from the war, to the very edges of the galaxy where they can be free.

He regards her from behind the smooth, blank planes of the obsidian helm, inscrutable as always. "May the Force be with you," he rasps in that hollow, metallic voice.

Rey nods, slowly backing out the door, keeping her eyes on him until even the time for that, too, is past.

*   *

Hours later, as the Hawk drifts through the sublight, the oppressive silence in the main cabin is broken by an incoming transmission, a string of code flashing on the dashboard's holoscreen. Since Rey's piloting the ship, it's Valin who runs the necessary decryption sequence, unpacking the grid coordinates and then keying it into the navicomp.

"R-5," he announces tersely. "Korriban."

Chapter End Notes

Credit where credit is due: AzAngel1 was the first person to suggest that speaking with Raynar will help Ben navigate the maze of redemption, and Ben/Rey are a little more upfront with each other here because Rinso insisted that I give them a chance to talk it out <3 More honest discussions and confessions of undying love to come but, first, who's ready for the final showdown?? *dun dun dun dun* Again, feel free to let me know either here or on my Tumblr what you think or hope will happen! Who lives who dies who tells your story
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

Hi, I'm back! I apologize for the delay but work was crazy when I returned from vacation (which was awesome, by the way, thank you all for the well wishes). Even as I type this, I actually have to rush to get ready for a meeting, so I'll keep this short and sweet: ONE MORE CHAPTER AND AN EPILOGUE TO GO!!! I truly appreciate everyone taking the time to read, bookmark, leave kudos, share their thoughts, and even rec this series on other websites. Special shout-out to Vivien for the encouraging words that gave me the last push I needed to finish this installment. See y'all in a few days. HOPEFULLY. FINGERS CROSSED.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"What is Ben doing?" Leia wonders out loud, hand lain over her chest to stay the tremors in her heart as skeins of code unfold on the holoscreen in the Remember Alderaan’ s command center. "The more messages he sends us, the more he risks getting caught."

"Very useful messages, though," says Luke, brow furrowed at the ongoing decryption. "According to this, the heart of the fleet— that is, Centerpoint Station and the destroyers flanking it— is encased in a shield projected from Korriban itself. We will have to deploy a ground force to that planet." His gaze flickers to Leia, enigmatic yet penetrating. "I agree that it seems unnecessarily risky since Rey's team would be able to sense the shield as they approach Centerpoint and comm us. By any chance, could you have said something to Ben before he left...?"

Leia grimaces. "I shouldn't have brought up Obi-Wan. I wanted him to know that there are other legacies, not just Vader's, but perhaps I was trying to console only myself. I keep messing up when it comes to my son."

Luke pats her hand. "I think," he muses at last, "that you and I tend to forget we have already lived this story. It's all too easy to see ourselves in Ben and Rey and the rest, going into battle so young and brave. But this is their generation's war and it must be fought on their own terms."

"I placed quite a burden on Ben, didn't I, by giving him that name? Along with mine and that of his father's."

"A burden he never managed to accept but he bore it all the same, for as long as he could. And now he has come back to us. We must do better this time."
Above the crimson sphere of the ancient Sith homeworld named Korriban, Centerpoint Station's vast silhouette is an expanse of midnight black wreathed at the edges with glimmering silver stars and completely surrounded by what remains of the First Order's primary fleet. Rey steers the *Ebon Hawk* through the labyrinth of frigates and battlecruisers, keeping her mind as blank as possible. Jysella's Immersion veil can conceal the ship from enemy sensors but, if the Jedi aren't careful, Snoke will be able to detect their presence in the Force. Or so Kylo had said. There are four of them on the strike team— Rey, Valin, Raynar, and Jysella— for that reason. The combined energy signatures of too many Jedi gathered on one ship would tip Snoke off long before they manage to board his fortress. And as to how they will accomplish *that*...

Repairs on damaged ships are being conducted in shifts as per the First Order's blockade protocol. When one of the more battered-looking *Lancer-* classes breaks formation, heading to an open landing dock on Centerpoint, the *Hawk* latches on to its tail unseen; the plan is to wait in the hangars until the Resistance simultaneously attacks Korriban and the blockade above it, blowing Kylo's cover. "Here we go," Rey mumbles under her breath as they coast through the great old doors and are swallowed up by the darkness.

Just outside the Kamat Krote hyperlane, in one of the Resistance destroyers hovering above the planet Bosthirda, an officer looks up from the flashing screen of an incoming signal. "Master Sebatyne, the *Hawk* is in position."

"All right, move out," the reptilian Jedi Master instructs. "Set coordinates for Korriban and immediately go blue once in realspace." She leaves the bridge and makes for the nearest troop transport, where Finn and his men are stationed. "Ready, Lieutenant?"

Finn nods. "Let's hope this is the last big one, Master."

"Ah, you're still just a hatchling." Saba's scaled lips curve in a fierce, amused snarl. "I'll let you in on a secret— war never ends."

In the Supreme Leader's throne hall nestled deep within the heart of the fortress, the Eye of the Sun
rotates slowly atop a pedestal, suspended in a zero-gravity beam. Snoke had attempted to hold it earlier, one withered hand emerging from the shadows— only to pause, inches away, and then draw back. And now, as silence reigns in the cavernous chamber, Kylo senses a strange emotion from the being lurking out of sight. It's fear. Snoke is trying to conceal it but Raynar had said that you can't live in someone else's head without giving up a part of yourself as well. At this point in time, Kylo knows the Supreme Leader better than anyone else. Snoke cannot touch the relic. He is afraid.

"It must be destroyed," he growls at last. "And you must be the one to do it, Kylo Ren. It was made to repel my kind but you, a child of both light and darkness, may bend it to your will."

*Should we not keep it, then? To help me?* Kylo is sorely tempted to ask. Or perhaps to goad, because he can already tell what the answer is. He understands now. All his life his destiny to save the galaxy from itself has been dangled before him, an enticement, a promise. But Snoke will not so easily give up his power even as he purportedly grooms Kylo to be his heir. *Is this partly why you called to me for so long, why it had to be me? Because you foresaw the Eye's return and you needed someone loyal to get rid of it once and for all?* A fresh sense of betrayal twists thorns through his heart. He feels more alone than ever before.

Until he remembers saber-callused fingers on his bare skin, soft lips on his forehead. *"Kiss me when all of this is over,"* she had told him, her forest-colored eyes so determined and so beseeching in that final act of forgiveness that he didn't deserve, not when he hadn't even been able to muster the words to apologize in the first place. He'd departed the Corusca sector with such a heavy, hollow ache, no thought left to him except that he had to find a way to make it up to her, to finally, *finally* prove himself worthy of her.

But now, in the midst of the Dark Side energies that prowl through the fortress, that ache is replaced with steely resolve. *I'm not alone.* Kylo straightens up, stands just the slightest bit taller than he had a moment ago. *Somebody is waiting for me.*

The Eye *glows.* Tendrils of gentle white light sprout from its craggy surfaces, wafting in his direction only to dissolve once they brush the shadows surrounding the pedestal.

"It recognizes you." Snoke's tone is contemplative. "It is... aware that it is in hostile territory, and it clings to that last shred of who you were before you came to me. Or perhaps..." He leans forward, gaze narrowed. "Perhaps that boy is not as dead as you would have me believe."

"He fell with his father," Kylo stiffly replies.
Snoke shoves into his mind with none of the elegant precision that characterizes his technique. It is more like a hack job, brutal and painful, and yet it is blocked by that same familiar presence, that other someone that Kylo has long suspected lives in his head as well. Only this time he knows who it is.

("I will keep you safe.")

I'm not alone, he repeats to himself, in that secret place where the Supreme Leader cannot penetrate. I've never been alone. It was the Dark that made me think otherwise.

Mollified by the seeming absence of anything to be suspicious about, Snoke leans back into the gloom. "Take some time to reflect with the holocrons," he commands. "Martial your strength, your skill, and decipher the best method to drain this Jedi artifact of its power."

* *

Afternoon sun pours into the Valley of the Dark Lords, its molten rays illuminating the Massassi script engraved on the ancient tombs. From a high vantage point on the Reliquary of XoXaan, infamous Marchioness of the Black Legions, Phasma watches her stormtroopers guard the perimeter of the shield generator that had been installed amidst the crypts, a modern structure of cylinder blocks and turrets that sticks out like a sore thumb from the maze of old Sith stonework.

All of a sudden there is a shimmer on the horizon, the telltale sign of a cloaking device being switched off. And then the sky is dark with ships— heavy cruisers and troop transports and a smattering of X-wings unloaded from the looming wedge of a star destroyer outlined against the blazing daylight.

"Comm Centerpoint," Phasma barks at one of her lackeys as she scrambles to mount the generator's defenses. "We need reinforcements. Now."

* *

"Now," says Leia, and the starlines beyond the viewport give way to realspace, to the still and silent silhouettes of the First Order fleet. "Engage."
Alarms pierce the sterile hum of Snoke's fortress, disrupting the mechanical rhythms of its crew and onboard troops. During the commotion that unfolds, the Jedi strike team slips out of the hangar; time is not on their side but Rey spares a precious second to glance over her shoulder at the ship that they're leaving behind to the mercy of whoever discovers it. There's a slim chance that the isolated bay they had docked at will be forgotten in the chaos, but the odds are even greater that they'll have to take an escape pod or a commandeered shuttle out of this place. She might never see the *Ebon Hawk* again.

As they race down the busy corridors wrapped in Jysella's Immersion veil and guided by Kylo's painstaking description of the layout, they are sent reeling by—an explosion of darkness, that is the only way it can be put into words. Pure rage, malice, and hatred, so intense that it is *loud*, it is a roar, rolling through the hallways and gouging at the walls. It emanates from some far-off region below their feet, from where the throne room would be. Snoke has realized his prized student's deception, and he is *furious*.

Jysella does her best but, in the face of such raw power, the White Current peters out as they're right smack in the middle of a stormtrooper platoon. The cry of *Intruders!* goes up and then it's a mess of lightsabers deflecting blaster bolts, of waves of Malacia and Force Stun. Out of the corner of her eye Rey notices that Raynar is the only one among them who has not drawn his blade, preferring to incapacitate his opponents by less final means. Her own kill count is ratcheting up with each second that passes even though she's trying—*

*Am I?* One end of her saberstaff, the blade that was Obi-Wan Kenobi's, spears a white armored torso. *Am I really trying? Is there any way I could have avoided this death?* These are the questions that hound her throughout the entire skirmish and all the ones that come after it as the Jedi fight their way from one corridor to the next, the lights dimming as they advance further and further inside, until finally there is only the glow of tech and weapons.

Rey slices through the last two stormtroopers standing between her and the turbolifts. The footwork of that maneuver has her crashing into a broad chest, one strong arm wrapping around her waist and holding her tight. Battle-stained and weary, she lets out a sob of relief against Kylo's shoulder.

"Took you long enough," he grunts at the rest of the strike team, his modulated voice guttural and static-tinged over Rey's head.

"Yeah, we got a bit held up," says Valin. "Glad to see you're not wasting any time *cuddling,* though."
Kylo doesn't deign to respond but neither does he let go of Rey even as they all pile into the turbolift. "This is the quickest way to Hollowtown," he says, referring to the nerve center of the fortress where Snoke's hall is located. "Expect a lot of hostiles."

And then the swift, gliding descent, a blur of smoke and lights, the temperature dropping with every level that they pass. Kylo's gloved fingers are in Rey's hair, tweaking the bun above her nape as his expressionless obsidian visage stares down at her face. She's looking up at him, too, her own hand clutching his wrist. *We should have had years. A lifetime,* she thinks mutinously. *It was stolen from us. Time to make them pay.* So what if these aren't Jedi thoughts? So what. She's had to conform to Jedi thoughts nearly all her life and look where it got her—

*No. That's not right.* She exhales, tries to breathe out this sudden flare of vindictiveness that had come from nowhere, but her mind is getting all fogged up with— with *something.* Her blunt nails dig into the leather of Kylo's glove in an attempt to ground herself in reality, in the present moment.

"Does anyone else feel that?" Jysella asks, calling Rey's attention to the palpable crackling energy in the atmosphere that's gradually causing her arms to erupt in goosebumps. It grows in strength the further they descend until it is thick and stifling like summer heat, and yet the air is *cold.* Arctic.

"It's Centerpoint's defenses kicking in," Kylo says quietly. "I have yet to see them in action but I would feel them sometimes, slumbering within the walls. Lying in wait."

"They're a kind of Sithspawn, that much is certain," Raynar murmurs, brow creased as he trawls distant Force currents. "But you'd think Snoke would have used them in battle long before now."

Kylo shakes his head. "Sithspawn are rare in this day and age. Hard to find, harder still to control. It makes sense that he would keep them close, where they can feed off the energy from the holocrons and provide a last line of defense. Unlike the stormtroopers, *they* are not expendable. That was in fact one of my first punishments. A lash for every tuk'ata slain on Corbos."

He says it in such a blank, neutral tone that Rey's grip tightens on his wrist. Will it ever be anything less than a sharp, stabbing pain in her heart each time she allows herself to confront the torture he had suffered at Snoke's hands? Our relationships with other people are constantly shifting, new layers added to an existing dynamic with every word, every touch. Events pile up and, sometimes, in the heat of the moment, in the red of our anger, we lose sight of the important things that had come before. We forget. And while Sarvchi had wounded her beyond belief, he has endured more than his fair share, too, hasn't he? She may not have completely forgiven him yet but —
Should have kissed you, she thinks, still transfixed on the mask hiding that beloved face. Should have let you kiss me. It's like she's learned nothing at all from their cruel separation. They could die in the next few minutes, and she will never get to feel those lips on hers again.

The turbolift coasts to a stop, the doors sliding open with a hiss that is too loud in all this silence. They reluctantly untangle themselves from each other and follow Valin, Raynar, and Jysella into the empty, pitch-black tunnels of Hollowtown. Kylo walks in front of Rey, left arm stretched out behind him to almost reach around her waist and his body angled slightly towards hers like a shield. This, too, is memory, Corusca gems glittering in the stone walls of Exar Kun's temple and Ben at twenty-five, an emerald green lightsaber blazing in the darkness and his soft voice murmuring, "Stay close to me."

They press on, the dull tread of their footsteps a subtle reminder that this ancient station had been crafted from asteroid ore, not durasteel. The walls form crevices against Rey's questing fingertips, and it is all too easy to imagine the horrors that had lurked within. Her eyes have not yet fully adjusted to the lack of light and so it's the stench that she notices first— a foul, rotten miasma of burnt skin, of guts hacked open and left to steam in the air. The odor is muddy and oppressive; it makes her gag.

There's a damp squelch from up ahead, immediately followed by Valin's stifled cry of disgust. "Kriff, what have I stepped on—"

Light. A small white Force-manufactured orb, blossoming from his cupped palm. It doesn't banish the shadows but it's enough to see by. Enough to make out the bodies.

"No," Jysella whispers in shock.

The passageway is littered with dead stormtroopers, their limbs twisted at odd angles and their torsos brutally mangled. Torn to shreds, lying in pools of their own blood and entrails. Some had ripped off their helmets in their last moments of life, staring up at the strike team with sightless eyes and mouths gaping open in eternal, frozen screams.

"The order to evacuate Hollowtown would have been sounded once the Sithspawn were released," says Kylo. "These were the poor bastards who didn't make it out in time."

"What could have done this?" Valin demands.
Raynar studies the corridor, his calm eyes peering into the dark that seems to wind on forever. "I have a feeling we're about to find out."

Finn is operating on sheer battle instinct as he scrambles over the rocky ledges of Korriban. Blaster bolts hurtle towards him against the sun's glare; he fires back, ducks behind pillars, hits the dirt, and yet steadily advances, keeping the shield generator always in his sights. They've lost the element of surprise; Phasma has rallied and scattered their ranks, effectively cutting Finn off from the Jedi Masters. The telltale gleam of their lightsabers are too far away, held up at a chokepoint near the entrance of the valley, and a formidable barrier of anti-aircraft artillery is picking off the X-wings one by one.

Kyle Katarn's voice spurts from the comlink in Finn's ear. "Status report, Lieutenant!"

"Honestly, Master?" A First Order grenade detonates at Finn's right, shattering the base of a massive statue—he has to throw himself off a steep outcrop to avoid getting pulverized by the smirking visage of a long-dead Sith lord, wincing as he lands hard on his stomach. "Not good."

"We've managed to take out several frigates and cruisers up here in the black but Centerpoint Station itself and the capital ships are still heavily protected by the shield, we're barely denting it," Katarn grunts. "I need the ground troops to neutralize that generator, stat!"

_Easier said than done_, Finn huffs to himself. Crawling forward on his elbows, he pushes his way through corpses and pockmarked earth until his hand closes on the grip of an FWMB-10 repeating blaster. He clenches his teeth and pries the weapon loose from the dead heavy assault trooper's fists, refusing to wonder if it's someone he knew. "Hey!" he shouts at a nearby Resistance squad. "Hey, cover me!"

They nod, and he's off, charging at the shield generator and swinging the megablaster's barrel to and fro as it rattles off barrage after barrage of lasers, gunning down the stormtroopers standing between him and his target. The war has swallowed him whole; he's only distantly aware that he's screaming, that tears are leaking out from the corners of his eyes. A sea of white helmets and black visors, _maybe I know you, do I know you?_ Enemy fire bends away before it can make contact, like light reflecting off a mirror; he doesn't even have any idea _how_ he's doing it except for some vague lessons in basic Alter abilities a couple of months back. _Sometimes the Force just helps you,_ Rey had told him once, and perhaps it's unfair that he should have the Force while so many others don't, he shouldn't be cheating death this way—
Made it. He's at the base of the generator now, he's running up the stairs two steps at a time, he's squeezing between the anti-aircraft platforms—

Phasma is waiting for him, already lining up the scope of her Sonn-Blas F-11D rifle. It's too late to dodge, too late to counter, too late to do anything...

Something small and spherical rolls onto the ground, stopping once it hits the tip of Phasma's chromium boot. She looks down and so does Finn. The miniature charge reels off several shrill beeps and then explodes.

Valin's orb of light bobs in front of the strike team as they cautiously advance deeper into the tunnels. Rey is chilled to the bone by now, one more drop in temperature away from alerting any nearby Sithspawn with the sound of her chattering teeth. The vindictiveness she'd felt back in the turbolift has resurfaced, this time an uglier, more potent incarnation that is harder to ignore. She's no stranger to this, to the Dark Side coiling around her and tightening the closer she gets to its source, every emotion amplified and turned rotten. Her fingers knot into the rough fabric of Kylo's cowl as she presses nearer to him, desperate for warmth. His hand drifts up her side to rub her arm, his head turning so that the mouthpiece of his helm nudges her temple. It could have been a kiss, almost.

She spies a flicker of movement further up the passageway, over the sharp jut of his shoulder. Given their height difference, it means that whatever she sees is also tall, or—

— floating—

Valin moves to kill the light but Kylo stops him, metallic voice tense with recognition. "Don't bother. They don't need eyes to see. We'd only be handicapping ourselves. Just keep still until I say otherwise."

Rey stares at the cluster of black spheres inching towards them, distinguishable from the shadows only because of the sparks of crimson energy roiling throughout their surfaces. "What are they?"

"Derriphan," Kylo replies. "Devourers. They are parasites that siphon the life essence of the organic host. These ones are sluggish, just out of hibernation, and they should be easy to outrun. Don't let them swarm around you."
"I note a distinct lack of pointy appendages," says Raynar.

Kylo nods. "Those stormtroopers were killed by something else."

"Oh, good— two kinds of Sithspawn," drawls Valin. "And here I was worried that we wouldn't get enough of a workout."

Rey counts ten Derriphan in all, moving slowly through the dark tunnel and prodding the air with viscous smoke-like tendrils that are constantly melting back into the globular bodies and reappearing at different angles. They remind her of dying, oozing stars, and the temperature continues to plummet as they draw nearer, attracted to the pulse of life emanating from the humans at the other end of the passage.

Kylo gently eases out of her grip, positioning himself at the vanguard. He holds up one hand, the other dropping to the hilt of his lightsaber, and he begins to speak to the Derriphan in a low, gnarled hiss of old Sith words. Newly-minted traitor that he is, he still has power over them as he'd had over the tuk'ata and the Leviathans of Corbos— only this time he no longer needs his grandfather's amulet as a crutch. Gurgling and sputtering, the black spheres weave aside with grudging obedience; he's shepherding them, Rey realizes, creating a space through which the Jedi may safely pass.

"Now," he says, and they run.

Finn blinks as the dust settles. Phasma has been blown off her feet, is now an eerily still lump of chromium armor a good yard or so away, and Finn is...

Still standing. Still alive. A Force barrier had enveloped him at the last second, protecting him from the worst of the blast. Kyp Durron is standing at the bottom of the steps, arm still raised from the act of throwing the grenade and then projecting the barrier around Finn.

"Go!" Kyp calls, turning to face the masses of stormtroopers that are hurrying towards the generator, lightsaber ablaze. "I'll hold them off. Go, Lieutenant!"
Finn hurries to the generator, shaking his head at the complicated sprawl of buttons and levers on the dashboard panel. "I'll just have to do this the old-fashioned way." He removes the pyro denton charges strapped to his utility belt and lining the inside of his jacket, wedging some between the controls, scattering the others around the foundations. And then he's rushing down the stairs again, hitting the remote button and tackling Kyp out of the path of the powerful, ground-shattering explosion that rips through the Valley of the Dark Lords, reducing the generator to smithereens.

"Shield is down," says Poe Dameron. "All squadrons, to me."

And the roaring hurricane of X-wings and Blastboats switches course, converging on Centerpoint Station as First Order and Resistance destroyers exchange broadsides over Korriban.

The strike team pauses at a fork in the tunnels to catch their breath, chests heaving. Even from here, Rey can sense the Derriphan gaining awareness of the trick and giving chase, plodding but relentless. Minuscule specks of asteroid ore crumble to the ground as a fleeting vibration runs through the walls.

"We need visual," Raynar says into his comlink. "What's going on out there? Has the shield been deactivated?"

"Affirmative," Katarn replies. "But we're up to our neck in SSDs, and Centerpoint's own armaments are dealing massive damage to our fleet. Two of our capital ships have been obliterated. You need to take her down from within."

It's a confirmation of the team's worst fears after Kylo had briefed them on the fortress' stats. It's why they had stopped. The path branching off to the right leads to the Glowpoint, the energy reactor; however, Snoke's hall lies in the opposite direction.

"We need to decide who goes where," says Valin. "And we need to do it now, because—" He motions behind them, where the air curdles with the approach of the Derriphan.

"You and Raynar head for the Glowpoint," Rey tells him. "Ben, Jysella, and I will handle Snoke."

It's a spur-of-the-moment decision, made under pressure and a quick evaluation of skillsets, but, as the team separates, she's suddenly seized by a wave of vague apprehension. As if this choice will haunt her for as long as she lives. She stops in her tracks to glance over her shoulder but Valin and Raynar are already disappearing into darkness. Kylo presses a hand to the small of her back, urging her onwards.

* 

The rakghouls come out of nowhere. Rey knows them for what they are because of Old Republic holocrons depicting the beasts in battle. Hunched, bipedal figures lurking in the bowels of Hollowtown, falling upon Rey, Kylo, and Jysella in a rain of fangs and claws. Unlike the Derripphan, they move with striking speed, teeth snapping and elongated nostrils sniffing out their prey. Lightsabers are ignited, the orange of Jysella's Solari crystal and the sapphire of Rey's saberstaff and the scarlet of Kylo's crossguard slicing jeweled arcs through the gloom, illuminating the flat, eyeless faces of the rakghouls, the slime covering their sickeningly humanoid bodies, the way their jaws unhinge impossibly wide to emit high-pitched shrieks and snarls.

"Guess we know what killed those 'troopers," Rey mumbles, darting out of reach of a set of whirling claws. Even as her body slips into the autopilot of combat forms, she can't help but notice, at the periphery of her senses, a certain whispering. Dark blossoms of rot, of soulless decay, coming from behind the walls. They must be close to the main holocron chamber now. The phantoms of the long-dead Sith are calling to her.

She notices something else, too. The rakghouls give Kylo a wide berth at first; even when he hews through their ranks, they are reluctant to attack. On the other hand, they tear at Jysella as if starving for the taste of her flesh, screaming in what appears to be anger when they get too close to her blade. These creatures had been bred to abhor the Light, and they recognize it in the Jedi all too well.

Where does that leave Rey? The rakghouls don't seem to know what to do with her, either. They're still aggressive but tinged with a hint of wariness. She slashes the head clean off one and is brought up short by the gaping mouth of another as its spindly limbs pin her to the wall. It speaks. She doesn't recognize the syllables that hiss off the long, drooling tongue, and her momentary confusion goads the beast into rolling its neck back, gearing up for a bite—

She is out of options. The ghosts croon in her ear. She brings her free hand up to that horrid mouth and a strange, wild power flows from her fingertips, draining the life and heat from her opponent until it is nothing more than an icy corpse, falling at her feet to join similarly unmoving fellows. The skirmish is over. Jysella is staring at her, green eyes wide, and so is Kylo, his stunned disbelief apparent in the rigid posture of his frame.
"What was that?" Rey demands, her mouth dry. "What did it say to me?"

Kylo hesitates, as if he wishes he could protect her from the truth. But they've both come too far for lies now. "It asked you if you were its master."

More Derriphan have slithered out from the crevices in the walls, joining the screeching rakghouls that assail Valin and Raynar from all sides as they race to the Glowpoint. It is frantic, desperate fighting, there in the long deep dark. Kylo had warned them not to let the Derriphan swarm but Valin is so distracted with fending off the rakghouls that he doesn't realize the floating black spheres have drifted into a half-circle around him until it is too late. One long tendril latches on to his wrist, and the pain is more immense and debilitating than anything he's ever known—more so than the burn of lightsabers or the bite of blasters or, yes, the mind tricks of Exar Kun. The Sithspawn close in on him as he crumbles to the floor, writhing in agony, the tendril still attached to his wrist and the world blurring at the edges—

For as long as he lives, Valin will never be able to figure out how Raynar did it. He will replay this moment in his mind over and over again as the years roll on and, yet, he will always wonder how Raynar managed to summon a veritable tidal wave of Light Side energy that crashes into the beasts, sweeping them backwards several feet and giving Valin precious time to stand up and retreat further into the passageway. He doesn't glance down at his hand until he's reached Raynar's side but, when he does, his heart stops beating for one long, torturous moment.

His left hand has withered to the bone. It's nothing more than a dessicated, nigh unrecognizable mass of charred, flaking skin, of exposed papery gray tissue.

There is no opportunity to dwell. There is no choice but to keep on running. He and Raynar turn the corner and there's the door to the Glowpoint in sight, at the end of one very long, narrow hallway.

Behind them, the Sithspawn are recovering from Raynar's onslaught, already starting to lurch forward.

Raynar goes still for half a second, head cocked to the side as if listening to something that only he can hear. Then he nods to himself and ignites his lightsaber.
Valin opens his mouth to protest, but Raynar silences him with a pointed glance at his useless left hand. "Of the two of us, I am currently more suited for combat. I will give you the time you need to program the self-destruct sequence." He shrugs. "I never quite got the hang of the tech stuff, anyway."

"That is the most humble thing I've heard you say in twenty years," Valin jokes weakly. "See you later."

Raynar offers him a wan but genuine smile. "May the Force be with you."

More twists and turns in the tunnels, more Derriphan emerging from the crevices, and more rakghouls clawing at the walls. Rey's muscles are starting to ache by the time they arrive at the entrance to the holocron chamber, and of course that's part of Snoke's plan, isn't it? To tire them out before they even reach him.

The ordeal is not yet ended. The doors slide shut between her and what few Sithspawn are still alive and in pursuit, but she can't even spare a sigh of relief for that. Because now she, Kylo, and Jysella are in a vast room bisected only by the bridge connecting the doors to an identical pair several meters away, beyond which lies the Supreme Leader's hall. If there is a floor, Rey can't see it; the space below the bridge is shrouded in mist. Scattered throughout the chamber are several circular platforms rotating on their own individual axes and floating about in slow, arcane orbits, ringed by arrays of blood-red, pyramid-shaped holocrons. Two platforms are located directly on each side of the bridge, each one bearing a slim figure dressed in black. The one on the left still wears a mask but the one on the right is Tahiri, face bare and golden hair blowing in the same unnatural wind stirring the mists below.

They're flanking Alema, who stands in the middle of the bridge, also maskless, a red lightsaber blazing in each hand.

It's Tahiri who breaks the silence. "Lord Ren?" Her bottom lip trembles. She looks and sounds like a bewildered child.

"Control yourself," Alema snarls at her. "Betrayal is his specialty, after all."

"You're one to talk," Rey growls. "You betrayed everything your sister stood for."
"Died for," Alema corrects in an ugly tone. "Let's finish this, Sword of the Jedi."

Rey is already moving, saberstaff alight. Perhaps it's the same trap she fell into on Artorias, charging without a second thought, but she doesn't care. It's almost over, Snoke is just in the next room, there is nothing to hold her back. Alema Rar is as good as dead.

A barrage of lasers scours the mineral-veined bridge at her feet, interrupting her momentum as she's forced to deflect. Stupid, stupid, she chides herself. Always neutralize the long-range fighters first. She takes a flying leap onto the platform where Tahiri is, plasma blades clashing at the corner of her eye as Kylo duels Alema and Jysella takes on the masked figure— the one called Zekk, Kylo had said when questioned on the identity of the other Knight who had escaped from the Republic's clutches on Coruscant.

Up close, Tahiri appears unhinged, a frenetic current of mixed emotions rippling beneath her porcelain features. Rey knows that Tionne had pushed her out of the lightning's path on Coruscant; she wonders if it's the first time anyone has shown this girl mercy. She isn't going to get it from me, Rey vows as she steps into her attack.

* 

The doors leading to the Glowpoint are under a numerical lock. Valin allows himself a brief string of muttered curses before he removes a screwdriver from his utility belt and embarks on the arduous task of dismantling the keypad one-handed, with little telekinetic nudges here and there. He's sorely tempted to hack at the thing with his lightsaber but he's fairly certain that will only cause the safeguards to kick in and bar the doors for good.

Behind him, the hordes of Sithspawn approach Raynar warily. "Jidai," one of the rakghouls spits out in a voice like brittle twigs, all fangs and malevolence.

"Yes." Raynar slips into the Makashi opening stance, feet apart at a perpendicular angle, knees bent, blade pointed towards his foes. "I am Raynar of the House of Thul, Jedi Knight and son of lost Alderaan. Before today, I have not held a lightsaber in years. I should be a push-over, yes?" The tip of his blade criss-crosses the air in Form II's salute. "Come get me."
After a few minutes of hurried fumbling, the keypad's front panel clatters to the ground and Valin yanks out the relevant wires. The doors slide open. He looks back, about to beckon Raynar over, but the words die in his throat upon seeing that the other man has been completely outflanked by the Derriphan and the rakghouls, which are unable to penetrate further into the corridor due to the Force barrier that has unfurled from wall to wall like a net. As if sensing eyes on him, Raynar glances over his shoulder, meeting Valin's gaze. He shakes his head.

Valin stumbles backwards over the threshold of the Glowpoint, blindly grasping for the knob that will lock the chamber from the inside. He is unable to look away until the doors have completely shut and the last sliver of the scene in the corridor has disappeared.

This is how Valin Horn will choose to remember Raynar Thul. Not as the pampered young aristocrat, the childhood bully, or the sniveling, broken shell with a friend's blood on his hands—but as the man standing between him and the darkness, surrounded by an aura of radiant light. At peace and unafraid.

Chapter End Notes

Luke and Leia's discussion on Obi-Wan and legacy and all that was inspired by this comment from Rinso (and, yes, I still owe you a Zekk and Tahiri escape scene).

Leia's spiel about burdening her son with his names is based on an EU quote, only she was talking about the retconned Anakin Solo.

Kamat Krote.

Bostirda.

Valley of the Dark Lords.

XoXaan.

Derriphan.

Rakghoul, although in this fic I give them a level of sentience and do away with the infectious aspect.

Raynar's last words are also from the EU novels. *cries*
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Before anything else, ReyloRobyn2011 made a gorgeous aesthetic for this fic. Thank you, babe!

So here it is, the culmination of our little AU’s Skywalker Galactic Hail Mary (term courtesy of Jinga). It's really long, guys, and that's why I had to extend the chapter count. No more cliffhangers, though; this installment contains the final showdown in its entirety, while Chapter 31 will wrap up all loose ends and *cough cough* culminate... something else... that has been a very long time coming ;) Chapter 32 will be an epilogue.

Happy reading! Let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Despite Centerpoint Station’s gargantuan size and superior weaponry, it is still taking its knocks from the Resistance fleet. A strafing run led by Poe scores several direct hits on the roof of Hollowtown, causing the floating platforms in the holocron chamber to tilt on their side for one worrying moment. Rey loses her balance and Tahiri is quick to seize the opportunity to aim a blaster bolt right at the middle of her saberstaff, forcing her to shift the angle of her blades to deflect. But since she's already teetering precariously on the edge—

Rey falls, the abyss rising up to meet her, her vision a blur of black ore and scarlet crystals.

On the bridge, Kylo breaks his defensive stance to hurriedly sweep an arm out, Force-shoving Rey onto another platform before she disappears into the mists. This earns him a gash along the ribs from the whirlwind of Alema's twin blades, and he barely manages to sidestep her follow-up thrust.

"You said you wouldn't make Galen Marek's mistakes!" the Twi'lek screams at him. "And yet you threw it all away. Do you honestly think they'll take you back after what you've done? They don't understand us, Ren! They never have!"

He catches one of her blades in the angle of his crossguard. "Did you know it was Snoke who woke Exar Kun?" He speaks as calmly as he can, willing logic to pierce the haze of her hatred. "Snoke is the reason she died, Alema. He set all of these events in motion."
Her jade eyes are glittering with tears of fury. "It's still Skywalker's fault. He wouldn't let me bring her back— but of course his nephew would be above the rules—"

"That's not fair."

"No?" She sneers. "They made us think the Dark was the most terrible thing, that we were monsters for carrying it inside us. They thought I was wrong for wanting revenge on Thul, for wanting to see Numa again— and that's really unfair." She wrestles free of their blade-lock and advances on him in a series of dizzyingly fast strikes that takes all his years of training to counter. "Why was it different for you? Why did you get to save the one you love?"

* 

From her prone position on this new platform that Kylo swept her onto, Rey springs to her feet. The blade that was Anakin's immediately clashes with the electrostaff in the hands of Zekk, who has been similarly dislodged from his original platform by Jysella. Plasma shrieks against phrik, a cloud of sparks flaring at the point of contact.

"You're the bitch who killed Kueller," Zekk grunts.

Rey smirks. "Guilty as charged." She kicks his legs out from under him but he stops his fall with a palm planted on the floor, using it as leverage to somersault away from her, the arc of her saberstaff narrowly missing his torso. The back of her neck prickles; she veers to the side, dodging the crimson glint of a blaster bolt before whirling around to face its source. Tahiri had chased her to this other platform; blaster in each hand, she fires off several more shots in quick succession at the same time that Zekk launches his own attack. Rey's saberstaff spins and slides through the red-tainted shadows, redirecting Tahiri's lasers onto Zekk and letting her footwork carry her towards the female Knight of Ren— until, at last, Tahiri is forced to fight at close quarters, blasters holstered, lightsaber drawn.

On the bridge below, Jysella has rushed to Kylo's aid, the two of them versus Alema in a triptych of movement and red and orange light spanning the entire length of the narrow walkway. Jysella's composed, methodical style of fighting is a fine counter to Kylo's reckless, wide-angle maneuvers, but Alema holds her own as viciously as a cornered rat. The world shakes again as Resistance cannons batter the hull outside and this time Rey is ready for it, seizing Tahiri's wrists in a grapple and slamming her forehead into the other woman's at the exact moment that the platform tilts. Tahiri falls off with an outraged shriek but manages to grab hold of the bridge, hauling herself up onto it and behind Alema just in time to block the strike that Kylo had been about to land on the Twi'lek's spine.
Pity, Rey grumbles before turning on her heel to confront Zekk once more. For the next few minutes it is an even match between the two staff wielders— Rey is faster, more agile, but she also has to sacrifice much-needed openings in order to avoid the electromagnetic pulses that jolt out from each end of Zekk's weapon like shards of amethyst lightning. The holocrons around them thrum in the darkness, calling to her— at first in a faint susurrus and then, as the duel drags on and rage and frustration creep through her veins in a wash of black water, the voices grow more audible. They speak all at once— men, women, reptilian hisses, snuffling grunts from tusked maws, shrieks, birdsong— a ghostly chorus in a long-dead language. The words unfold in Rey's soul like wings. 

Midwanjontû châtsatul nu asha.

Zekk ducks below her next swing, the tip of his staff making a beeline for her chest and crackling with enough electricity to stop the heart. Rey is absolutely having none of that, she's already died like this once and it had hurt. Before his staff can make contact, she spreads her fingers in front of his face as if to claw at his helmet, Sith voices crooning in her ear. She channels a barrage of destructive Force energy into his optic nerves and Zekk howls, faltering backwards, panicked and temporarily blinded. Rey spears him through the shoulder, her sapphire blade piercing flesh and muscle and bone all the way out the other side. He sinks to his knees and she pulls back, both hands on the hilt of her saberstaff as she gears up for the final blow.

That is when she feels Raynar die. That crack in the current of light, that spiderweb of grief. She can't fully process it yet, not in the heat of this battle, but what startles her is how her anger doesn't spike as she expected it would. Instead, she finds herself thinking about how he'd fought his way through the corridors of Centerpoint Station without taking a single life. She thinks about choices, how our lives are made of choices, branching into different paths, on and on until journey's end.

She thinks, Enough. No more. And she passes a hand over Zekk's temple, knocking him out with a Force Stun.

Alema and Kylo freeze at the same time, lightsabers locked at each other's throats. She's down to one blade as he has disarmed her of the left one— it had fallen into the mists below. He sees Raynar's death in her eyes; for a moment, they are children again.

But it is quick to pass. She twists away from him with a snarl. "Thul was mine!" She's shaking, chest heaving, expression wild and frantic. "His death was mine— the Supreme Leader promised —"

Rey leaps onto the bridge in front of Kylo, facing Alema, dropped on one knee before straightening
up. Over the Twi'lek's shoulder, Kylo sees Tahiri jump onto another rotating platform; Jysella follows, having learned to stick close, to not give her opponent the chance to use blaster fire.

"I can't fight you," Rey tells Alema, much to Kylo's surprise. She sounds so bitter, so utterly vengeful yet exhausted. "There is too much anger in my heart."

"Typical Jedi weakness," Alema goads. "You should have realized by now that only one of us is getting out of this room alive. It's you or me, Rey."

"It doesn't have to be." Rey's eyes flash. "I saw Numa in the Netherworld of the Force. She said that the bad years were upon me and she asked me to be kind. How can I forget something like that?"

"You're lying!" A couple of nearby platforms and holocron spirals shiver, not from another gravitational upset but rather from the sheer brunt of Alema's rage. "I have not seen her since that day on the jungle moon. Why would she come to you and not to me?"

"Because you are shrouded in darkness as I was," Kylo realizes out loud. "Because Snoke kept her from you." As he kept Anakin Skywalker from me. "Did you not think that your sister's love would transcend the divide of death? This is what the Dark Side has done to us, Alema. It made us forget our connection to others. It made us believe it was the only real thing left in the world."

Alema screams. It is a sound that chills Kylo to the bone as revolving black platforms shake and Sith holocrons shed ruby light over the mists. She charges at him and Rey, her lightsaber whirling in a lethal dance—

— clashing with Jysella's, who has leapt back onto the bridge. Kylo glances up to see Tahiri disarmed and unconscious, immobilized on the platform by smoky chains of light the color of snow. The White Current. The song of the Fallanassi. Not even Luke Skywalker had been able to master this interpretation of the Force, and it occurs to Kylo that Rey's journey as a Jedi Knight was not all that he hadn't been there to witness. He had missed seeing shy little Jysella Horn come into her own as well.

"Rey. Ben." Jysella speaks through gritted teeth, pushing against the intersection of her and Alema's blades. "You have to go. We're running out of time."
Alema moves to intercept Kylo and Rey as they rush for the doors of Snoke's chamber but Jysella firmly blocks her path.

"Your fight is with me," Jysella says.

Smirking, Alema replies, "Won't be much of a fight, then."

Rey doesn't look back even though fear has gripped her heart like a heavy fist. There are ways for a being of immeasurable power to survive the vacuum of space or, if all else fails, to rise again—they have to make sure Snoke is permanently destroyed before Centerpoint Station goes up in flames.

Everyone is connected. Our choices are all tangled up with those of so many others to form a vast constellation, the one true path. If she doesn't honor Jysella's choice, then Raynar and the pilots and soldiers who sacrificed their lives to get them to this point will have died for nothing. We carry one another until the bitter end.

Kylo waves a hand at the doors, some arcane combination of symbols traced in air and darkness, and they slide open. Rey hurtles over the threshold, Kylo at her heels. The creak of stone, the shudder of unseen mechanisms, and then the entrance closes behind them. As if they have been devoured.

Rey blinks. She has walked into a room where all the lights are out. Kylo is—gone, his Force signature vanishing the second the last splinter of scarlet illumination from the holocron chamber was completely hidden behind the sealed doors. She says his name, anyway. "Ben?" Her voice is as thin as reeds, met only by deafening silence. It's even colder here at the center of Snoke's power. She shivers in her Jedi robes.

"Ben?" she tries again. Nothing. A sliver of panic creeps into her system. It is a seed in the pit of her stomach, sprouting into a thorny vine that climbs up her throat.

_Left you again, did he?_
The words are funneled into her mind from some mysterious, unseen source, and yet they are so crisp, so solid, that they might as well have been whispered in her ear by a raspy, crooning voice, old as worlds and imposing enough to make Rey feel small. Unworthy. Poor child, it continues, sounding both sympathetic and amused. Always getting left behind. And yet still so trusting. Still so naive, hoping that this time will be different, and the next, and the next. It's never different, is it?

"He came back," Rey mumbles. "You took him away but he came back. All on his own."

Something laughs in the darkness—a low, eerie chuckle that rolls on and on in tandem with the waves of despair that keep relentlessly crashing over her no matter how she attempts to school her tumultuous mind into a semblance of peace. He didn't come back for you, scavenger. Yes, I see your heart, I see your memories... You said it yourself— you wanted your love to be enough, but that wasn't the case, was it? Sniveling brat that he is, he turned on me because of his fool of a father. That was his weakness, not you. Never you. Such arrogance, to think that a desert rat could be first in someone else's heart for once.

Rey is trying so, so hard not to cry at this point. The unshed tears burn in her throat and behind her eyes. Full-fledged Jedi Knight and war hero she may be, this has always been the crack in her armor. Two, almost three years now of battlefields and being strong, and yet every time she's thought about Ben Solo, she's reduced once again to that achingly vulnerable, tremulous girl on Yavin 4. How could she have given someone that much power over her? On a rational level, she knows that Snoke is manipulating her with the usual Dark Side tricks, but there is a shard of truth in his words, lodging deep in her soul and growing and growing with every moment that passes.

She shakes her head in an effort to clear it. Takes one step forward, and then—

The gloom adopts a new shape. She is back in the mines, those dusty underground tunnels beneath Corbos. She can't see Ben but she knows he is there. She remembers him being there, and she's already bracing herself for what will happen next.

"I am not in love with you."

A wet sob spills from her lips. She's buried this particular memory so deep that the pain guts her, catches her completely off-guard. He already told you then, didn't he? purrs Snoke. But you refused to believe it. Oh, Rey, you really do have such a high opinion of yourself.

"Ben." She squeezes her eyes shut, hoping it will help block out the insidious voice. "Ben, where
So hardheaded, Snoke sighs. I'd have thought that you'd be tired of forgiving him by now. Perhaps you need reminding.

Rain. She feels it on her skin, she hears it come pouring down. When she opens her eyes, it's to the monsoon-streaked ruins of the Praxeum, to the pale corpses of her friends staring up at her with sightless, accusing glares. It didn't happen exactly like this, of course— the bodies had not been clumped together, so neatly arranged, but rather scattered all over the grounds where each one had fallen as they tried to defend themselves or protect the younger ones— but there is no denying that there had been a night like this. A night when the First Order had emerged from the shadows, triumphant at having destroyed Luke Skywalker's Jedi Academy, ripping apart the only family that Rey had ever known.

She's looking down at Seff Hellin's frozen, blood-soaked grimace when Snoke resumes speaking in soft tones that somehow carry over the roar of the storm. *Did you not love them, too? How could you have dishonored their memory like this? Forgiving the man who facilitated their slaughter, saving him, tumbling into bed with him. Disgusting girl. Traitor.*

"It wasn't like that!" Rey bursts out, recoiling from the scene stretched out before her as she latches on to Sarvchi, how fiercely she had been kissed, how sweetly she had been worshipped, how tender had been the look in Kylo's eyes. "It wasn't disgusting. It was—"

*Filthy. A betrayal of your vows. You might as well have rutted on the pyres of your dead friends. You were that sordid, Snoke says with contempt. All for a man who hurt you again and couldn't even muster the words to express remorse for it. A man you forgave— again— and sent back to war with a kiss and a promise. How disappointing, that the Sword of the Jedi should be nothing more than a pathetic little martyr. You're still that lonely junkyard orphan, aren't you? Still so hungry for whatever scraps of affection you can get.*

The Dark swirls around her. And this time she welcomes it, welcomes the fury, welcomes the loathing, welcomes anything that isn't this old heartbreak that has been her constant companion ever since she was eighteen.

"Rey!"
Kylo has been clawing at the icy walls like a man possessed, mask long since discarded so that he could shout for her over and over again until his voice had been scraped raw. The doors had shut behind them and she had disappeared. No Force signature, nothing. Just the endless black and the desolate cold. He blindly stumbles through his former master's hall, confused because the layout seems to have changed, leading him around in circles upon circles. Finally, he turns a corner that hadn't been there before and sees her, her back to him as she stares off into the distant gloom.

"Rey," Kylo exhales in relief, rushing towards her.

He's not prepared for it, how swiftly she whirs around and lunges at him with her sabre staff ignited. It's only reflex that saves him from getting his head slashed clean off his shoulders, his scarlet blade automatically flaring out of its emitter and colliding with hers. Through the muddled haze of blue light bleeding into red, he looks into her eyes and his pulse spikes in alarm. Irises the color of gold stare back at him, strange and terrifyingly beautiful to behold on such a dear, familiar face.

"Snap out of it," he murmurs as gently as he can, knowing that he is one false move away from disaster. "This isn't you."

"Why?" she hisses, and it is her voice but also not. As if every part of her has been held up to a broken mirror and he is seeing only scattered, distorted reflections. "Because I'm not falling at your feet, pleading with you to be nice to me? Because I'm finally starting to show some backbone?"

It's so twisted, so ridiculous. She had challenged him at every opportunity since the day they first met. But he knows how Snoke works, knows the nature of the mind games that have led her to this particular headspace. "Whatever he told you— whatever you saw— none of it was real. Remember that this was how Exar Kun did it— he took our weak spots and made them bigger than ourselves —"

"We've been here before," Rey breathes. "Amidst the swirling sands, in the belly of the dead ship —" This is Kylo's next clue that she's not wholly herself, this stilted, archaic way of speaking, as if the thought is in another language and has to be translated into Basic before being spoken out loud — "I was trying to convince you that you were being manipulated. You did not come back to me then. Why should I come back to you now?"

"Because you're smarter than I am. Always have been," Kylo tells her quietly.

"Too late for compliments." She knees him in the stomach, follows it up with a series of whirling slashes that he barely manages to parry. "Too late for all the words you never said. You couldn't
even apologize. I had to beg you not to hurt me anymore. You made me beg!"

Although he fights for his life in the duel that ensues, he can't help but notice that there are certain aspects to her demeanor that he recognizes from the holocrons. There is something about Darth Zannah in the way Rey wields her double-bladed lightsaber, something about XoXaan in the curve of her sneer. It must have happened during the fight in the previous room— their ghosts had clung to a mind made especially receptive by circumstance. And yet this version of Rey is not totally unfamiliar; he saw her like this on Takodana, when she had burned everything to the ground, and on Starkiller Base, when she had brought him to his knees. It's such a stark contrast to the girl she had been— the Rey who exists in his memories, who had loved him with such sweet, happy innocence— that he is seized by an overwhelming sorrow, a bone-deep exhaustion. When is enough enough?

Kylo sheathes his lightsaber at the same time that Rey brings hers down in an overhead strike. He stops the weapon's trajectory with his hands, both ends of the hilt biting into his leather-clad palms. "I'm not going to say it!" He raises his voice, not only because his own helpless anger has taken root but also in the hopes that the increase in volume will jar her to her senses.

"What?"

"I'm not going to say it!" Kylo repeats. "All of it— everything that I should have said. You deserve to hear me say it but not like this. If I say it now, you'll always wonder if it was just to save my own skin. I'll say it when this is over, when we're home free and safe and there is no more room for doubt or fear. We've earned that, Rey. Our own terms, our own ending. Snoke is not going to take that away from us!" He leans down to press his forehead against hers; the edge of the Skywalker blade sears his shoulder, scorching through his armor and into his flesh, but he doesn't care. He will gladly bear anything for her. "Now— if you don't want to hear me say it, you're just going to have to kill me, because I promised that I would never hurt you again and I intend to make good on that." He swallows the lump in his throat. "It's all up to you, cyar'ika."

"You would fall to my blade, at this time and in this place?" she scoffs, ugly and grating and raw. "You would jeopardize the fate of the galaxy like that? You would die for nothing?"

"You, for you," he corrects without hesitation. "Now and forever, for you."

He can tell that she doesn't believe him. At least, not right away. But as her weapon continues to dig into his shoulder, coming perilously close to cutting beneath tendons and into the bone of his clavicle, he sees what remains of Rey struggle to the surface of her cruel expression. Her eyes widen in something like epiphany as the golden light in them fades, giving way to brown and green like the last wisps of sunset retreating from a forest canopy. The twin beams of her saberstaff
vanish, and he releases the hilt so that he can gather her in his arms, crushing her to his chest as he buries his face in her neck.

She's sobbing, the sound muffled in his uninjured shoulder. "You're an asshole, Ben Solo."

He smiles ruefully against her cheek. "I know."

* *

Jysella Horn is wounded. Badly. She limps further up the bridge, keeping her weight off the ankle that Alema had sliced to pieces, that she doesn't have time to heal. The Twi'lek advances, dodging the blasts of Force energy being sent her way, a crazed gleam in her eyes.

"A sister for a sister," she gleefully declares. "How I would love to see Valin mourn."

"Will it take away your own grief?" Jysella asks.

Alema falters, her lips quivering faintly before tightening into a terse line as she launches a new attack. Taking a deep breath, Jysella disappears into the White Current of the Force, Alema's lightsaber slashing through empty air. Before she's able to recover from her strike, Jysella materializes behind her, lightsaber already sweeping forward. The side of the blade misses Alema's outstretched arm by mere centimeters as she ducks and spins and then—

— red clashes against orange, orange slips down, red lashes out—

— and because instinct takes over, because there is no way to parry or to block at this angle, Jysella pushes the tip of her lightsaber into Alema's chest before the other woman's blade can make contact with her abdomen. Time seems to stand still in this moment, their gazes locked, the phantoms of the Sith looking on.

Jysella realizes her mistake too late to correct it. Her strike has left her wide open, Alema's lightsaber still capable of traversing those last few fatal inches to ensure that she takes her killer down as well. Jysella closes her eyes, bracing for the inevitable. She wants to go without fear.
There is the sound of a lightsaber being extinguished. She opens her eyes to see Alema cast her weapon aside, where it rolls off the edge of the bridge and into the mists below. She's not looking at Jysella now but rather at something over the latter's shoulder. Someone.

"Stay a while," Alema whispers. "I will be there. I will be with you soon."

As she sinks to her knees, so does Jysella, who cradles her fallen opponent, her former comrade, in her arms, not letting go until the last vestiges of life have fled, sending a wish out into the void that the next world will be kinder to Alema Rar than this one ever was.

Snoke's fury manifests itself in reams of crackling energy that whip around Kylo and Rey as cold as winter, as sharp as lightning. The pair jumps apart before a violent, swirling wave slams into where they had been standing not even a second ago, the shockwaves of the resulting impact sending Rey to the opposite end of the hall from Kylo. She acts quickly, with teeth-gritting determination; concentrated streams of her own power reach into the darkness, untangling its thorny knots. All illusions are dispelled and suddenly Snoke appears mere feet away in a pool of silverly illumination, a pale, willowy being shrouded in midnight robes on a jagged throne. He is considerably smaller than the holoprojections of him that Kylo had told Rey about, but still he must be at least seven feet tall, with frost-colored irises wreathing pupils that seem to contain an entire universe of stardust and black holes.

He is keeping vigil over the Eye of the Sun; it floats on its pedestal in front of him, within arm's reach. Rey makes a dive for it but is forced backwards by another ground-shattering, static-charged conflagration.

"Did you really think it would be that easy?" Snoke asks, low and mocking.

Rey shrugs. "Was hoping you'd have gotten tired of being a goddamned nuisance by now." She gets sideswiped by a fresh blast of static; it singes her sleeve. "Evidently not."

She studies the strange whips of energy darting out from every corner of the room even as she continues to dodge and weave around them. It's not lightning as she'd previously thought— it's more like the Dark Side distilled to its purest essence, more like what you get on the opposite end of the spectrum from ultraviolet. Antilight— black light, if there could even be such a thing. Sometimes it splinters red at the edges for a moment before reverting to its original inky hue, carving destructive patterns across the gray-blue room. It occurs to her that the Derriphan had been made of something similar. Void-light, afterlight, light without time.
"It's over, Snoke," Kylo calls out. The Supreme Leader's focus shifts to him, giving Rey a much-needed break from the Dark Side onslaught. That eldritch, piercing gaze makes him feel like an errant child but he perseveres. "The Knights of Ren are no more and we have your fleet surrounded. The First Order ends today."

"You were my finest creation," Snoke says with no small amount of bitterness. "You had so much potential. All my careful planning over the span of so many years, it was only ever to help you."

"I do not doubt that a lot of planning went into it," Kylo says curtly. "Although I wonder for exactly how many years... ever since I was five, perhaps?" There is no response from the figure on the high throne, and that's all the confirmation he needs. "Those Imperial fanatics who abducted me— the Empire Reborn— they were working for you, weren't they? Perhaps they didn't even know it themselves— you have always thrived in the shadows. But that event was what let you wedge yourself fully inside my head, wasn't it? It planted the seeds of my father's fear and it laid down the foundations for my grandfather's ghost. It opened the door to my nightmares and let you in."

"All for the greater good," Snoke stiffly replies. "All to restore order to the galaxy."

"I was five years old," Kylo snarls. "You had no right. And I am going to make sure that you never get to do this to anyone else ever again— there will not be enough left of you to."

The Supreme Leader's eyes glint red; he curls one hand into a fist, shadow energy streaming out from the gaps between his long, skeletal fingers. "Those are very bold words, Kylo Ren."

A scarlet blade shrieks into being, quillons surging with all the raw energy of a broken kyber crystal. "My name," says its wielder, "is Ben Solo."

Void-light pools on the stretch of floor in front of Snoke and the Eye of the Sun, a fog-thick mass coalescing into the broad, hulking, simian shapes of an army of spectral Massassi warriors, each one two meters tall and brandishing a gigantic, wickedly sharp battle axe.
Rey plants herself at Ben's side. "You just had to piss him off," she mutters.

"It's my greatest talent," he quips. "Pissing people off, I mean."

"Not going to argue with that." She rolls her neck slowly, working out the cricks, before igniting her saberstaff and deftly twirling it in a one-handed wrist spin, a maneuver that ends with her sinking into Ataru's opening stance. "Shall we?"

There are fifty Massassi in all, woven from shadow instead of flesh and bone, their eyes crimson slits in the darkness. Ben attacks from the left while Rey sweeps in from the right, hacking through enemy ranks until they meet in the middle, blades automatically colliding for a heartbeat before they both turn on their heels, fighting back to back. Each Massassi that they cut down dissolves into wisps of smoke, only to reassemble again after a few seconds. Ben had been expecting that, more or less—they originate from Snoke's mind, and only his death will banish them once and for all—and he makes it so that every combat sequence carries him one step closer to the Eye's pedestal, Rey following his lead. The Jedi artifact strains toward them but it's trapped within the zero-gravity well by some invisible force that nullifies telekinesis.

Rey launches herself at the expansive torso of one Massassi warrior, carving a lethal path along its spine. In the split second before it disintegrates, she uses what's left of it as leverage, pushing off from it on the spring of her knees alone, flying backwards to thrust her saberstaff through the skull of another approaching opponent before landing lithely on her feet. Ben's jaw would have dropped if the situation hadn't been so precarious, if four Massassi hadn't converged on him at the same time. He telekinetically pulls one into the waiting edge of his lightsaber and then brings the hilt 'round to cleave another at the waist, using the Force to rend the third at the same time. The fourth's axe swings at him but is interrupted by the slant of Rey's saberstaff as she slides between them, kicking the Massassi away so that she can break their lock and pierce it through the gut.

Ben drops a quick kiss to the shell of her ear. "Thank you."

She wrinkles her nose at him. "You're not off the hook yet, you know." Inclining her head in the direction of the pedestal, she tells him, "Come on. We're almost there."
At the Glowpoint, hunched amidst a tangle of dashboards and machinery, his mangled hand dangling uselessly at his side, Valin inputs the final string of code into the mainframe. He’d already had several false attempts but, this time, the countdown for the self-destruct sequence flashes on the screen.

*T minus ten minutes.*

He leaves the reactor chamber in a hurry, igniting his lightsaber once he's past the doors. No Derriphan lurch out of the gloom to meet him, no rakghouls. While he notices that scorch-marks gouge the walls and floors, as if another massive wave of energy had flooded the corridors, he doesn't see Raynar's body in the piles of Sithspawn corpses lining the way back to the fork in the tunnels. Perhaps he can't bring himself to look too closely— or perhaps, and this is what he would like to believe, the physical shell vanished when Raynar Thul became one with the Force. The greatest, truest enlightenment for a Jedi.

Valin finds Jysella in the holocron chambers. Tahiri and Zekk are unconscious on the platforms and Alema is dead on the bridge— he might think about that later, perhaps even grieve, but for now he only has eyes for Jysella, who is staring at his hand in horror. "Valin—"

"It's all right, sis. Nothing a prosthetic won't fix." He brings his arm up to span the distance between them. "You know what you need to do. I'd rather no one else do it but you."

Biting her lip, Jysella nods. She brings her lightsaber down on his wrist as gently as possible, severing his withered hand from his arm. There is no pain, not when the nerves have been deadened like this, and he offers her a grateful, reassuring smile when it's over. "Now let's go help our friends."

Rey is almost at the Eye's pedestal when it happens— a blast of void-light knocks her backwards, her saberstaff flying out of her grasp. She attempts to summon it into her palm but she's blocked by crackling, shadowy bars that materialize around her, caging her in. Ben is swarmed by the spectral Massassi and she clamps a hand over her mouth so that she won't scream his name, so that she won't distract him, her willpower sorely tested every time the axes hit their mark. Still he fights on, bullheaded as always, despite the shoulder that she herself had injured, despite the masses of his enemies that keep resurrecting, despite the numerous wounds that he has sustained. It's when he closes both hands over the Eye of the Sun that Snoke launches his last line of defense— the Massassi's forms transmute back into waves of darkness that crash over Ben Solo all at once, swallowing him whole.
Rey screams then.

He's never felt pain like this before. Not even during that year of torture and isolation. Nothing that had been done to him then could have prepared him for this. It assails him from all sides, so intense that his vision goes white at the edges. It pours into his wounds, splinters into his bones, an unbearable agony mingled with the cold throes of despair. He can't win. He is weak. He is not worthy of his family's legacy. He lacks the strength to do what must be done. His grip on the Eye loosens and then—

— holds fast— as if several hands have reached out to wrap around his, firmly pressing his fingers to the stone, which is now glowing with light, trying to keep the darkness at bay—

He will never know if they had really been there, or if his mind retreated into the refuge of imagined constructs in a last-ditch attempt to save itself. Perhaps the Eye called them forth. Perhaps the Force means that no one is ever truly gone. Perhaps the pain is making him hallucinate.

Or perhaps everyone meets again, someday.

They are not as he saw them last, pale and lifeless in the monsoon night, on ruined ground lashed by explosions and by rain. They are as how he secretly prefers to think of them still—grinning, always prepared to exchange wisecracks and friendly blows, backlit, blurred at the edges by the Yavin sun. Eryl Besa's standing in front of him, between him and Snoke's throne, while the others have gathered to flank him on both sides, their hands over his, over the Eye.

_I know you feel like you don't deserve our help_, Eryl says, her voice faint, like it's coming to him from far away, or perhaps from his memories of what her voice sounds like, _but, at this point in time, it's no longer about what anyone deserves. You can do this, Solo. You have to do this. You've come so far and now you just have to go a little bit further._

_Not long now_, Ulaha Kore agrees. _We're with you._

_So stand up_, Ganner Rhysode adds from his place at Ben's left. _Rise above._
Eryl presses her lips to his forehead. *All sins forgiven,* she says. *All debts repaid.*

Ben gets to his feet. It is a slow process but they are there, urging him higher and then onwards as he carries the Eye to Snoke. They surround him, the friends that he will never see again in this life, the people who exist now only in buried memories and half-forgotten dreams. They walk with his heart.

* 

The image of a golden sun appears on the surface of the stone. At first, nothing else seems to happen, but Rey soon notices that the shadows in the chamber are gradually receding, as if dawn is breaking through in its soft, gentle way. And then the Light *explodes* from Ben's outstretched arms, a blazing conflagration that obliterates the remnants of Snoke's defenses, trapping him within a pillar of energy that's on a much larger scale than the one used to destroy Exar Kun. As the Supreme Leader's power weakens, the bars of Rey's cage disappear. She barely has time to register that she is free before the doors to the hall are blown open by a combined Force blast from the Horn siblings.

"Rey!" Jysella throws her lightsaber and Rey automatically holds up a hand to grab it, planning to run it through Snoke while he is immobilized on his throne. She snatches the hilt from the air, thumbing the emitter, and— nothing. The blade does not emerge.

"What?" Rey says out loud, blinking down at the weapon in shock.

Snoke starts to laugh. He is in obvious agony, his chuckles more like sputtering gasps, but the gleam in his eyes is triumphant. "I recognize that crystal. That is the Solari gem, is it not? It can only be wielded by one who is pure of heart. One who walks in the Light." He shakes his head, sneering. "There is too much darkness in you, Rey of the wastelands. You are no Jedi Knight. You have failed."

"Don't listen to him, Rey," Ben warns through clenched teeth, shaking from the effort of holding the Eye aloft, but it is too late. Snoke's words hit her like a blow, adding to the horror that she already feels at the sight of the dead lightsaber in her hand.

And then her mind suddenly clears. It's strange, but it's as if the sword that had been hanging over her head for years had finally dropped and this chilling confirmation had been all she'd needed to face the pain of it— a pain that soon ebbs, giving way to something that takes her a few seconds to
identify as relief. All her doubts about the Code, her acts and thoughts of rebellion, they come racing to the forefront and are met with calm acceptance.

"There we go, then." Her voice is strong and and steady as she taps Jysella's lightsaber to her utility belt. "All this time, I've been pretending to be something that I'm not— even after I saw what it did to someone I love, how it tore him apart." She's speaking to Snoke, her gaze fixed on his scarred visage, making sure that he hears every word loud and clear. "All this time, I was taught to believe that it was either the Jedi Code or the Qotsisajak, but each one has hurt me in its own way. And at last I understand why." She raises her right arm and draws it back, elbow bent, palm turned up to the ceiling. The Force wraps her in a trance, Light and Dark flickering into each other, tangling together. Sith phantoms are still whispering but there is one whom she hears loudest, like a wild song in her heart— the one she had killed, the one who dreams of her in the Netherworld, eager for vengeance on the one who had used him, go, do it, I'll show you how, Sword of the Jedi. "Light cannot exist without darkness, but darkness must not be allowed to flourish. The balance must be maintained," says Rey. "We need peace so that our passions don't consume us. We need strength to act on our knowledge, to ascertain that knowledge does not stagnate. We need power to fulfill our duty, and we need serenity to keep our power in check." An elongated, sharp-tipped shape begins to form above her palm; it looks like a spear, a shard of lightning-streaked midnight, black smoke curling between her fingers. "There is freedom in life. There is purpose in death," Rey whispers. "The Force is all things, and I am the Force."

She waves her free hand at the Wall of Light, creating a small divide, and then she hurls the Spear of Midnight Black through it, right at Snoke. It pierces his heart. He screams, writhing on his throne, head thrashing from side to side, his body crumbling into the dust of ages, the last thing he sees being Rey and Ben Solo standing side by side, watching him perish with identically solemn expressions, the Force moving through them both in mighty currents. In his final seconds of existence, Snoke also sees what he had missed all these long years— everything about this moment bears the mark of destiny, an awakening, a shift in the song of the universe. He sees it all— the Light, the Dark, and the Gray.

* *

T minus one minute.

* *

Behind Snoke's throne is a small alcove with a hidden door leading to a tunnel which, in turn, leads to a hangar bay containing several short-range escape pods designed to hold one person each and drop them onto the nearest planet. The catch is that each pod needs to be activated with a fingerprint scan that recognizes only the First Order's High Command and the Knights of Ren.
Despite her protests, Rey gets pushed into one first; Ben is all business as he straps her in and presses the pad of his thumb to the scan, relaying piloting instructions in her ear all the while. He waits until her pod has ejected from the hangar before repeating the same process with Jysella.

Valin's just about to climb into the next pod when the explosions from the energy reactor reach the tunnel, the vibrations rattling through the hangar itself. He hesitates, already making to give way to the other man. "Solo—"

"Not a chance," Ben replies, shoving Valin into the seat and keeping him there with the Force. "I'll be fine. Or maybe not, I don't know. Just— take care of her."

Rey's pod has just slipped through Korriban's atmosphere when Centerpoint Station disintegrates. She has landed on a smoldering battlefield flying the victorious Resistance flag and is in Finn's arms when Jysella drops down, followed shortly by Valin.

"Where's—" she starts to ask but the question dies in her throat at the grim look on his face.

_No_, she thinks.

"He pushed me out just as the explosions hit the hangar," Valin explains. "Rey, I'm..." He trails off with a helpless shrug.

_No._

Rey has no idea whether to scream or to cry or— to laugh, at the numbing irony of it all. She feels the slow seesaw of her mind tip towards the point of breaking.

Finn touches her arm. "Look."

A fourth escape pod is barreling towards the ground. It's badly damaged, trailing a thick stream of smoke, but it's spiraling jerkily as if its passenger is using the Force to soften the landing. Still, it hits the rough earth with a resounding thud, several meters away from where Rey and her friends
All eyes on the battlefield fix on the new arrival. He climbs out on shaky legs from the wreckage of metal and transparisteel, pale-faced and blinking, stunned, in the light of the setting sun.

Rey is already running. Ben's eyes widen when he spots her but, before he can so much as move a muscle, she *hurls* herself at him, looping her arms around his neck to pull herself up his body, wrapping her legs around his waist. He instinctively clamps one hand to the base of her spine and his free arm to the backs of her thighs to keep her supported against him. In full view of the Resistance forces and the Jedi Masters and the defeated stormtroopers, amidst the ruins of the Valley of the Dark Lords, as the lingering smoke of battle wafts into the dust-laced air, she rains down frantic kisses on every inch of his face— forehead, jaw, nose, cheeks, scar, every beauty spot, every freckle. And, finally, she presses her lips to his, the red-gold sunset burning through her closed eyelids, her fingers tangling in his hair.

He kisses her back. The two of them sway slightly as he loses a bit of balance, but Rey isn't afraid. Ben will never let her fall.

Chapter End Notes

*Darth Zannah.*

The paragraph about how Rey is so different now from the Rey in Ben's memories was inspired by [this comment](#) from the lovely datswatutink.

The final duel between Jysella and Alema carries shades of a certain storyline that might be familiar to EU readers. I don't want to spoil anyone who's working their way through the novels or is planning to, so take my tears instead. *cries*

*Massassi warrior.*

*Spear of Midnight Black.*

I based Rey's monologue off my favorite version of the [Gray Jedi Code](#) over on SW Fanon.
Chapter 31

Chapter Notes

It's oddly fitting that, after making you darling readers suffer through so much slow burn, the smut chapter should turn out to be the longest one yet :P I'll save the cheesy message for my last author's note next update, but, yes, the main storyline of "To Kingdom Come" ends here. Currently accepting epilogue headcanons and whatnot, and I would also like to thank meritmut and ReyIoRobyn2011 for listening to me whine about this chapter <3 Happy reading! Comments would be greatly appreciated!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They've taken him away.

Rey is standing by one of the large, sun-drenched windows lining the walls of a meeting room in the Imperial Palace on Coruscant. She stares out at the battle-scarred cityscape, barely listening to the Jedi Council's quiet, neutral-toned discussion— she's thinking of Ben, how he never took his eyes off her even as the Resistance slapped manacles around his wrists and led him away. His armor had been too recognizable despite the absence of the mask, and they've locked him up in a heavily-guarded, Force-nullifying cell until his trial at the end of the week. Rey hasn't seen him in two days.

"The *Ebon Hawk* was spotted hightailing it out off Centerpoint Station right before it blew," Katarn is saying. "Since the *Hawk* didn't return to the fleet, we must assume that she is now in enemy hands."

"Probably Zekk and Tahiri," muses Tionne. "Those two have a knack for escape. I should have taken them in after the Palace District skirmish, but Master Luke collapsed..." She trails off, grimacing at the memory of those chilling moments when she'd thought her master was dead. "They slipped away in the commotion that followed. That could have been the case on Centerpoint, too."

"I should personally see to the *Hawk*'s retrieval, if the Council will allow it," says Valin. "That was my mother's gift and I should be the one to get it back."

"Did you mean perhaps that recovering a cherished material possession would be an added bonus to bringing two Darksiders to justice?" Luke asks wryly.
Valin grins, raking his synthskin-covered cybernetic hand through his hair. "Of course, Master."

"Hux escaped, too," adds Saba. "That's the information we're getting from the First Order officers that we captured and interrogated. We could ask Ben where he thinks they went, if there's any chance they'll join forces even without Snoke to lead them."

Rey senses the hesitation among the conclave. It is faint but it is there. Only the Jedi Masters have clearance to visit Ben but they are wary of the ysalamiri cages in his cell—nutrient frames playing host to lizard-like creatures from Myrkr that project a bubble which deadens the Force.

"That's another thing we have to discuss," Corran bluntly announces. "Galactic Alliance High Command did not see fit to inform us that they had put Republic scientists to work on reconstructing Thrawn-era tech. They were planning to use it against the Knights of Ren, or so they say, but they could not manufacture the cages on a large enough scale to be deployed in combat—at least, not yet."

"It is unnerving," agrees Kyp, "that we were left out of the loop on this one, considering that the cages neutralize all Force users."

"Master Cilghal will take care of spearheading the formal inquiry," Luke decides. "Given her previous role as the Mon Calamari ambassador, she has the most experience out of all of us when it comes to the intricacies of politics."

"Alliance High Command are not politicians, though. They're soldiers," Cilghal gurgles. "I will try my best, of course, but the way forward hinges on General Organa moving to ease the Republic out of martial law and rebuilding the Senate."

"If anyone can do that, it's Leia," says Luke. "I have high hopes in the surviving crop of junior senators. Young blood—new ideas—could be just what our government needs at this point." He clears his throat. "Now the Council must decide what to do about Ben—what role we, as an Order, will play in his upcoming trial. To minimize accusations of bias, I hereby remove myself from this conclave. Rey, please come with me."

Han Solo had been transferred from D'Qar to the Imperial Palace's medbay following the Battle of Korriban. It is to his bedside that Luke leads Rey and, much to her surprise, Ben is there as well,
along with Leia. Four armed guards stand at attention outside Han's private cubicle, their blank faces concealing the unease that Rey senses like prickles in the currents of the Force. For them, Kylo Ren is a dangerous war criminal who has no business moving about so freely, away from the ysalamiri cages—but, as the commanding officer that led their troops to victory above Korriban and one of the few remaining symbols of the Republic, Leia Organa is currently the most influential woman in the galaxy. She has used that clout to enable her son to see his father.

The guards salute Luke and Rey but otherwise refuse to make eye contact. Rey has been expecting this. If they hadn't been present at the Valley of the Dark Lords, word of the embrace and the kiss would still have spread. She finds that she doesn't particularly care. Let the rumors swirl, let her reputation be dragged through the muck—she loves Ben and he loves her. Let the entire universe know.

She makes a beeline for him the moment she enters the cubicle. His tall, broad frame is squeezed into a chair by his comatose father's side, and she's seized by a wave of affection at this, the latest round in Ben's never-ending battle to fit into standard-sized furniture. His pensive gaze is fixed on Han at first but, when Rey lays a hand on his shoulder, he turns his head to nuzzle at her wrist, mumbling a greeting against the tips of her fingers as she slides into the chair next to his.

"How are you?" she asks, smoothing Ben's dark hair away from his forehead. "Are they feeding you well, have you been sleeping—"

He mirrors her actions, tucking a loose strand of her own hair behind her ear. "You wish me fattened up before my slaughter?" he inquires.

Her skin crawls at that. His humor is more twisted now compared to the time before Corbos, that familiar blend of sarcasm and self-deprecation taking on a sharper edge. "Don't joke about that," she snaps, her voice emerging harsher than intended. "You fought on our side in the Battle of Coruscant and you helped defeat Snoke once and for all. They're not going to execute you." Even as she speaks, a hint of uncertainty nags at the back of her mind. The War Crimes Tribunal has yet to hand out any death sentences for foot soldiers and mid-level officers, but the galaxy is hungry for First Order blood. It's being whispered about that such a fate indeed awaits what few of Snoke's High Command hadn't perished or escaped. That Armitage Hux—when they find him—is a dead man.

Logically, so is the former Master of the Knights of Ren. Jedi Killer. Architect of the Tuanul genocide. Conspirator in the destruction of the Hosnian system.

Luke and Leia have tactfully withdrawn to the opposite side of Han's bed, affording Ben and Rey some privacy. "The scans detected a marked increase in brain activity earlier this morning," Leia is telling her twin, audible to Rey in the silence that has fallen between her and Ben. "I was hoping
that now would be a good time to try what we previously discussed."

Rey's gaze flickers from Ben to his mother. "Which is?"

It's Luke who replies. He splays his fingers over the pocket of his robes, telekinetically drawing out the Eye of the Sun and levitating it over Han's prone form, where it floats, revolving slowly, in the space above his heart. "Leia and I were wondering if the Eye's cleansing energy could be used to lift Han from the _morichro_ trance," says Luke. "Let's see..."

* 

When Han Solo wakes up, it's his son whom he sees first. "Hey, kid," he croaks in a voice withered from disuse. A pair of huge hazel eyes blinks at him over Ben's shoulder and he continues, smiling painfully through facial muscles that haven't moved in a while, "Made an honest woman out of your pretty little Rey yet?"

Ben brings his father's palm to his scarred cheek, too overwhelmed to do anything except weep. Leia throws one arm around him as she buries her face in her husband's chest, and Luke grips Han's other hand where it rests on the mattress. Rey hangs back, feeling rather extraneous, a mere spectator to such an intensely private moment among family, but it's not long before Ben wraps his free arm around her and pulls her into the hug, Leia's fingers reaching out to stroke her hair. There is so much love in this room. Love at the end of darkness. Rey breathes it all in.

* 

The next day, she is summoned before the Masters and tasked with flying to Ossus to secure the Eye in the vaults of the Jedi Sanctuary. _I can't leave_, she wants to protest. _What if they move up the date of his trial, what if they start allowing visitors and I'm not there_—

But she keeps her mouth shut. Everyone has to do their duty, and she is bound by the decrees of the Council. Han lends her the _Falcon_ and she picks the quickest route, hurtling at near-breakneck speed through the sublight and down the hyperlanes. The sooner she gets there, the sooner she can go back.
As a favor to Luke, Okko had assigned some of his people to watch the Sanctuary while the Jedi are wrapping up loose ends on Coruscant. It is therefore a handful of Ysanna who receive Rey at the entrance, who inform her that Tiu Zax had also made planetfall a few hours ago. Tiu had been the only Jedi deployed to the Garis sector to repel the First Order invasion; like Kirana Ti on Dathomir, she had been victorious.

The Eye temporarily forgotten, Rey searches the halls for her friend, following the energy signature's trail to one of the meditation chambers. Tiu is floating several inches above the floor, legs crossed in the standard pose. Rey's about to beat a hasty retreat, guilty at having interrupted the exercise, but the Omwati calls out, "No, stay. I'm almost done."

Once Tiu has planted both feet back on the floor, she and Rey bow to each other in greeting. "I'm just here to drop off the Eye of the Sun," Rey explains. "I need to be getting back right after."

Tiu nods in understanding. "Of course you must be present at Ben's trial."

Rey hesitates. "I've been thinking about what you told me on Dantooine. How your people view the Force as a single entity, with no Dark Side and no Light. Do you— do you believe that, too?"

"I am a Jedi," Tiu replies. "My beliefs align with our Order still. But that doesn't make the Omwati Force tradition any less valid in my eyes."

"What if—" Rey licks her lips nervously. She has yet to tell the Masters how she killed Snoke, has instead requested for some time to process things. But she will have to debrief as soon as she returns to Coruscant. "What if there is a Light and Dark Side, and... something that's in between? Would it be possible to align with both? What do you think?"

Tiu studies Rey for a long while. At last, she says, "I think that the universe is too vast to allow for only one view of the cosmos."

("11,854 HoloNet results found for 'maker,' 'creator,' 'the Father,' 'progenitor,' 'god-king...'")

Her expression serene, Tiu traces a constellation in front of Rey's face as if administering a blessing. It is the Sign of the Guardian, which on the world of Omwat means both safe travels and until we meet again. "We all have our own paths to walk," Tiu says, perhaps sensing Rey's crisis of
faith even if she doesn't know the reason for it. "Whatever you decide, you will always be my friend."

The Eye thrums incessantly in Rey's pocket as she ascends the winding stone staircase that leads to the storage vault. Bemused, she takes it out once she is in that room of salvaged relics, scrutinizing it intently where it rests on her palm. It is a living thing, this gray rock, imbued with so much Light energy that it is capable of what is very nearly a form of communication with those who know how to access its power. It glows in Rey's hand like it's trying to tell her something.

"Okay." She closes her eyes. "Speak, then."

She is on Yavin 4. On the cliff overlooking the ocean, where she had seen the First Order's warships break through the skies. Only this time it's a calm summer's day and everyone is there. Everyone she ever loved. They are silent, but smiling, and Rey knows deep in her heart that the Force has deigned to be merciful— that she is finally, finally being given the chance to say goodbye.

And so she does. Going up to each one, telling them what she remembers most, what she misses most, what of them she will carry with her until her own time comes. They listen, her fellow apprentices whom she grew up with, the older Knights who had been her mentors. The last person she comes to is Ganner Rhysode. "That day by the river, when we were looking at old holos and I tried to flick water into your eyes," she says, "that was the first time I laughed after they took Ben away. Thank you for that. I never told you how much it meant to me."

Each word is a burden lifted, one step closer to grace. The cliff fades away and suddenly she is somewhere she has never been except for once, in a dream. There is the sound of distant, roaring water. The clean, pure lines of a whalebone bridge. "You ended up here, after all," she muses in wonder.

"You told me I could," says Finn Galfridian, blue eyes warm. "And now I will do something for you. The point of all of this is closure. You know what that means, right, kid?"

"An ending," Rey says.
The prince of Artorias nods. "I'm not saying that forgiveness has to be now, or that you even have to forgive at all. It doesn't make you any less of a person if you're not yet ready or never will be. But, if you decide that you are, it has to be final. Over and done with. You can't use it as a crutch to win an argument or to justify your actions, all right? No more going back, no more bringing up the past. Let our spirits rest."

"Are you giving me relationship advice?"

He laughs, golden and joyous. "Take it as you will. We're very proud of you, you know. You used to be that scrawny little kid who wouldn't stop climbing things, and that old staff you used to have — it was twice your height but you lugged it everywhere. And now..." He ruffles her hair. "Well. May the Force be with you, Sword of the Jedi."


When the scene changes, Rey is standing in the valley where she died, arid red mountains and parched earth spread around her. The person in front of her is younger, with kinder eyes and an unmarked face, clad in Jedi robes and holding an emerald green lightsaber at his side. Rey's breath hitches in her throat. She knows what it means for him to be here in this vision. She knows what he's silently asking her to do.

"I have to let you go, too, don't I?" she whispers to the Ben Solo who lives on in her memories, the one whom time has frozen still. He doesn't respond, doesn't so much as nod, but his solemn expression says it all. "I just— I just think it's unfair, what happened to us," she continues, faltering. "I think about what could have been. Maybe there's another universe where we didn't have to go through all this — all this shit. Where no one's heart got broken and we skipped to the happy ending. But I want you in this universe, too, and that's what counts — what I have to fight for. So—" She pauses, struggling to reign in her tears. She doesn't want her last look at him to be through wet, blurry eyes. "So I guess this is goodbye. I know you think it's not my fault but I'll say it one more time, anyway — I'm sorry. And I will always love you."

He offers her one of his rare, beloved half-smiles, extinguishing his Jedi blade. The green light blinks out and he turns around. Her gaze remains fixed on his retreating back as he walks away, ready after so long to take his place in what is past. And there stay.
The first death sentence is meted out a few hours after Rey returns to Coruscant. In the courtyard of the Imperial Palace, from which the debris of battle has only been partially cleared, one of the captured First Order generals comprising Snoke's High Command is executed by firing squad on charges of genocide. Murmurs of grim satisfaction ripple through the assembled masses once his body hits the ground, and then it happens— as the dead man is carted away, someone starts to cheer. The raucous cry is taken up, exploding in volume among those who wave the flag of Hosnian Prime.

*Justice. The sentiment echoes off the Galactic City's rooftops, breaking the stillness of high noon. More.*

The ysalamiri stir in their cages; one crawls an inch further up the nutrient frame where it is attached while, on the opposite end of the cell, the other opens its fanged mouth in a yawn. They are strange creatures, the ysalamiri— dragons in miniature, covered with a fine golden fur. Even stranger still is the feeling of being cut off from the Force by the invisible nullification fields that they project, which encompass Ben's entire cell. It's like losing not a limb but an organ, some vital part of him hollowed out and replaced with a dull ache.

It is the night before his trial. Tomorrow, at dawn, the War Crimes Tribunal will decide his fate. According to Tionne, who visited him earlier, she, Kyp Durron, Rey, and Finn have filed their testimonies of how he had been forcibly abducted on Corbos. Rey has also issued her account of the Battle of Centerpoint Station, as have Valin and Jysella. There are additional statements on his behalf from other Jedi, Poe, and the Resistance officers who fielded his encrypted communiques to Leia. "We're making your case as solid as possible," Tionne had assured him.

Ben is not particularly optimistic. Even if the Tribunal can somehow be convinced to accept his status as a defector, he has the blood of Praxeum students, Tuanul villagers, and Hosnian citizens on his hands. The best he can realistically hope for at this point is a lifetime in prison— and, yet, with each high-ranking First Order official gunned down, execution is becoming more and more likely.

The truth is, he can make his peace with that. And perhaps part of him already has.

Ben drapes sheets over the two ysalamiri cages, not wanting to spend what could very well be his last night in this life subjected to their beady reptilian stares. He has just sat down at the edge of his bed— or the narrow metal-framed cot that passes for a bed— when the cell doors hiss open and Rey walks in.
An involuntary shudder passes through her slight frame, her brow creasing as the Force leaves her in tandem with the doors sliding shut. "That's horrid," she mumbles under her breath before focusing on him. Her expression softens, and Ben—

He's not proud of it, but he has to lean his elbows on his bent knees and bury his face in his hands, the mere sight of her at this time and in this place eliciting more tears than he cares to admit. "Sweetheart," is all he can say at first, the word muffled in the flesh of his palm. He thought he'd be able to march to whatever fate with calm acceptance, but now she is here and he doesn't want to go. Doesn't want morning to come.

When he finally looks up at her, she hasn't moved from the doors. Even at this distance, he notices that her eyes, while dry, are rimmed red. "I begged the Masters to let me see you," she says. "A lot of strings had to be pulled but here I am. For— for the rest of the night."

Ben gets to his feet. Rey holds up a hand to stop him before he can go over to her. "First," she says, taking a deep breath and closing her eyes, "tell me you're sorry."

And even after all that they've been through, there is still a part of him that cringes at the daunting, impossible task of putting everything in such plain, bare terms. Words for him have always been too inadequate, too clumsy to capture what he thinks and sees and touches and feels and remembers, but he has learned by now that there are some things that need to be said out loud. And he had promised.

"You asked me, once, to be kind to you," he says slowly. "I regret that I did not do that as much as I should have. You have deserved nothing but kindness all your life. I am sorry. For everything I ever did that hurt you. For all the times I snapped at you or tried to push you away. For letting my own fears and the darkness come between us. I am sorry."

It's not enough, he knows. It will never be enough. But she nods, anyway, eyes still squeezed shut. "Okay," she breathes. "Now tell me you missed me." She's wearing loose Jedi robes, her face scrubbed clean, and he wants nothing more than to hold her and never let go.

He starts walking towards her in quiet, measured steps. "I missed you," he rasps, wondering what it is about the truth that can be so simple and yet still pierce his heart. "While we were apart, not a day went by that I didn't miss you. Even when I refused to admit it to myself. You were... a constant ache. I saw you everywhere. In my dreams, in tricks of light, even past the gates of the holocrons." He stops walking once the distance between them has been split in half. "And even before that. When we were younger. I missed you at night and every time I had to go away on a mission. I missed you the moment you left any given room."
She's smiling now. It's a faint smile, yet oddly shy and hopeful, and he feels a disquieting stab of guilt that it takes so little to make her happy. "Now tell me you love me," she says.

He resumes his deliberate pace towards her, more words leaving him with every step he takes. "I love you. For a while it was the greatest pain of my life, but I do. I've loved you since you were eighteen, and that was the one thing that Snoke could not take away. I know you think you weren't enough to bring me back to the Light, but the thing is, you were. You... chipped away at the armor, all those false constructs. You made me want to be the kind of man who is good to his father. The kind of man who would willingly atone for past sins." He's standing right in front of her now, his voice dropping an octave. "I love your eyes, your freckles, the sound of your laughter, the way you scrunch your nose," he murmurs. "I love your stubbornness, how you fight, how you make me feel at peace. I love your strength and how it reminds me that I have my own. I have always loved you, and I will carry my love for you to the end of this life and the next."

Rey's eyes start to flutter open but she determinedly closes them once more, as if she wishes to savor his words just a little while longer. "Okay," she repeats. "Now kiss me."

Ben kisses her right cheek first, and then the left. A giggle threatens to spill from her lips but she clamps them shut, her faint smile widening. He takes his time pressing another light kiss to her jaw, then to the tip of her nose, then to her forehead. By the time he leans down to brush his lips against hers, he's smiling, too. "Go?" he teases.

"Yes," she says breathlessly, now full-on grinning against his mouth. "Go, Ben. Go."

Ben's lips are soft against hers, slightly cold from the chill air of his cell but moving so gently, so sweet and searching. He tastes like toothpaste and smells like soap, the hair curling at his nape still somewhat damp from the shower he must have taken before she arrived. He strokes his fingers along her jawline in silent entreaty and she readily parts her lips, eliciting a rumble of pleasure from him as he delves into her mouth. There it is again, the momentary blankness, the short-circuiting of her brain that she'd experienced on Sarvchi— Ben's tongue is in her mouth— but she rallies enough to return the favor, clinging to the front of his dark tunic as she pulls him close. They've dressed him up in civilian clothes, the plain linen worn and smooth and bunched up in her fingers. She squeaks in surprise, her eyes snapping open, when he scoops her up in his arms. He smirks at her indignation, mollifying her with another kiss before he carries her to bed; the short walk takes longer than it should have, mostly because she keeps cooing endearments and sweet nothings in his ear and kissing his temple and nudging his nose with hers, her arms wound around his neck. By the time he deposits her carefully onto the thin mattress, his heart is racing a mile a minute beneath her palm and so is hers.
In the series of long, slow, drugging kisses that follows, she helps him tug his tunic over his head, and then he is rearing back to toss the garment to the side, kneeling between her parted legs. Shirtless Ben is one of Rey's favorite Bens, and this time is no different, with him looming above her, pale face framed by dark waves of messy hair and something of the wolf in his slight smile. She holds her arms out to him, beseeching, and he lowers his mouth to her neck, mapping out the sensitive spots that he had discovered by the fire in that little hut in the swamps. There is no time for hesitation or second thoughts— tomorrow they could very well be parted again for who knows how long, or for forever. He peels her robes off of her, kissing every inch of her bare skin as it is revealed, and then she sits up, scrambling into his lap and leaning in for another kiss while she blindly fumbles with the wraps around her chest.

Once the wraps have been shoved to the floor along with the rest of her outer garments and she's focused her attention back onto him, Rey realizes that Ben is staring at her breasts. He looks completely dazed, his mouth hanging open like the wind has been knocked out of him. She should probably be feeling self-conscious but it's kind of— flattering, and amusing, all at once. Especially when he doesn't even hear her say his name the first time and she has to repeat it in a louder, laughter-tinged tone of voice.

"Sorry," he mutters, the tips of his ears flushing an embarrassed shade of red. "I just can't believe I'm finally getting to see them—"

This admission that he has fantasized about seeing her breasts makes Rey giggle from a heady mix of both bashfulness and delight. The sound spikes into a gasp when he suddenly bows his head to kiss her left breast, cupping the right in his hand— and then she is no longer gasping, but sighing, whimpering, head rolling back and spine arching from the swirl of his tongue and the scrape of his teeth and the way his fingers caress her sensitive skin. She tugs at his hair and rakes her nails across his scalp, and it's when his mouth starts to suck gently, insistently, that it becomes too much; she falls back onto the mattress and he follows, pinning her down with the weight of his body, rendering her near delirious with the interplay of fingers and lips and tongue and teeth.

Despite the overwhelming pleasure of these myriad sensations, there is still one issue nagging at the back of her mind, no matter how hard she tries to block it out. "We have the same taste in men, after all," Alema Rar purrs in her memories, and perhaps she's a horrible person for being jealous of a dead woman but she can't help it. It's the darkness in her, clawing and possessive, preying on the insecurities that had been left to fester in the time that they were apart. If not Alema, then someone else, certainly— perhaps the witch or some other nameless, faceless First Order lackey. "You're really good at this," Rey grumbles, even as she hates herself for it.

Ben stops, peering up at her through sooty lashes. She avoids his gaze, staring up at the ceiling and willing herself not to cry. I ruined it, she thinks. I knew I'd ruin it, why couldn't I keep my mouth shut—
He crawls up so that she's forced to look into his eyes, grabbing her hand and pressing her knuckles to his lips. "If I seem like I know what I'm doing," he says tenderly, "it's because I've thought about doing it for years. All the things I've ever wanted to do to you, I'd flesh them out in my head, in great detail, over and over again. Night after night and, hell, sometimes in the afternoon." He flashes her a roguish, predatory smirk as she turns beet-red. "Sometimes I watched you spar in the Grand Audience Chamber and I'd start daydreaming. About this. About us. About kissing and touching you everywhere." As if to prove his point, the hand that's not holding hers gives her breast one last affectionate squeeze before drifting past her torso and her hips and at last settling between her legs, pushing her underwear to the side. He teases her there for a while, waits until she's squirming and clutching at his shoulder before he slips a finger inside. "I was waiting for you," he rasps in her ear as he starts to thrust. "There was never anyone else. There will never be anyone else. I never want to do this with anyone but you, Rey."

The smoky heat in his voice when he says her name goes straight to her core. She closes her eyes and lets him coax her towards the peak she first found on Sarvchi, lets herself be guided there once more by his kisses and his words and the way he moves those clever fingers. "That's it," he's murmuring unsteadily, sounding a little feverish and strained himself, like he doesn't even know what he's saying anymore, "there's my girl— my beautiful girl— I've got you, sweetheart, let me take care of you, cyar'ika, let me feel it—"

It's too much. Between his touch and the praise and all this love, it's too much. Rey crashes into orgasm for the second time in her life, stars burning and light unfurling behind her eyes. And, just like before, Ben watches her face through it all, his dark gaze worshipful, transfixed. As if she is the only thing in the world that matters.

* 

The bedsprings clink as Ben sits up, drawing a boneless, blissfully compliant Rey into his lap. He undoes the already lopsided buns in her hair, runs his fingers through the chestnut locks so that they fall past her shoulders in glossy waves. "This," he confesses, "is another fantasy of mine. Your hair down, you coming undone..." He wraps a section of her hair around his fingers, tipping her head back so that he can nibble on the column of her exposed throat. "That night on Yavin 4," he mumbles into her skin, "when you woke me up— remember?— before we went sparring— your hair was loose and, Force, you have no idea what I wanted to do to you right then and there."

"I think I do," Rey sighs, her fingers tracing drowsy patterns along his bare spine. "Think I saw it written all over your face." She initiates the kiss this time, straddling him as she explores his mouth with the same ardent curiosity that she had applied to dismantling and reassembling tech. It's not long before she starts grinding down, tentative and experimental at first but gradually gaining confidence as he moans into her mouth. His hands fly to her hips, guiding her movements until they're both panting, until the flimsy barrier of her underwear and his trousers is too much to bear.
"I think we're in my fantasy now," Rey admits in a broken gasp against his neck, and Ben loses what had been a tenuous hold on control in the first place. They collapse onto the mattress, amidst those tangled sheets, kissing and touching and, when her fingers slip below his waistband and wrap around him for the first time, it takes the discipline of every single breathing exercise and meditation form over the course of three decades for him not to climax right then and there.

Afterwards, he will only have a hazy memory of her impatiently helping him out of his trousers, of him kissing her knees as he slides her underwear down her calves. It's only when he has positioned himself between her thighs that he notices the vulnerability in her wide hazel eyes and the way she's biting her lower lip to keep it from trembling. The sight sobered him up a little, pierces the lust clouding his mind. He bends down to slant his mouth over hers in a soft, soothing kiss, working his hand between their bodies to rub himself against her wetness. Go slow. He has to go slow. He has to make it good for her.

When Rey relaxes in his arms and kisses him back, when she cants her hips to meet his, it feels like the single greatest benediction that Ben Solo has ever received in his life. "I love you," he says, realizing that he can never say it enough, as his mouth finds its way back to the slope of her neck. He really likes kissing her there, he decides. "Love you so much." He starts rocking into her little by little, and damn if his vision doesn't go blindingly white at the edges at how tight she is. "I love you, Rey—"

"Yeah?" She's grimacing a bit as she tries to get accustomed to the new sensation, but there's a spark of fond challenge in her eyes as she rests her palm against his scarred cheek. "Show me."

* 

The stretch is not as painful as she'd feared, possibly because she's so ready and Ben's wicked mouth is doing a fine job of distracting her, but it's uncomfortable and she can't help the wince that tears itself loose from her throat when he rolls his hips forward, sheathing his length fully inside her. "Wait," she says, and he obediently freezes in place. She can see the muscles of his arms strain from the effort of keeping still, can feel the desperate tension emanating from his body as he throbs against her walls. There is something sacred about this moment, it's there in the air around them even cut off as they are from the Force. It's there in his eyes, in the staccato rhythm of his pulse mingled with hers. Biting her lip again, she nods, and before long they are moving together, achingly slow at first, whispering encouragement and words of love in each other's ear.

Rey can't pinpoint the exact moment when it starts to feel good; all she knows is that soon she is digging her blunt nails into Ben's haunches to spur him on, shifting the angle of her hips to take him deeper. He curses viciously when she does this, clamping one large hand on her waist to keep her still. Her brow creases— it's oddly familiar, the pattern of his warm breath on her neck—
She bursts out laughing. "Are you— are you doing breathing exercises?"

"Oh, switch off," Ben grunts. She's still giggling when he thrusts again, a bit harder this time— as if to punish her— and maybe she likes that, maybe she likes the way he hits the spot inside her that he’d discovered on Sarvchi, maybe that's why her laughter fades into these nonsensical little gasps and whimpers, these soft pleas for higher and always and more as his hips snap against hers over and over again.

All it takes is the brush of his thumb at the apex of her thighs for her to fall apart once more. She arches her spine, his name leaving her lips in a sigh as she spasms and flutters around him and drags him with her over the edge. He is all too eager to follow her down, his thrusts becoming more erratic, the hand that he clutches her shoulder with trembling, and, oh, the way it feels when he spills inside her, how the sound of her name rolls so reverently off his tongue—

Ben collapses on top of her and, without missing a beat, starts peppering her face and her collarbones and her breasts with languid kisses. "Amazing." His normal pallor is gone, flushed from exertion, and he is grinning, he is actually grinning, wide and boyish and completely carefree. "You're amazing."

Rey blinks up at him, breathless, matching his smile with an adoring one of her own. "So are you."

They don't sleep. There is no time to sleep, not when sunrise will bring judgment, not when there are still so many words left to say and so many parts of each other left to learn. They talk and make love all through the night, and part of Rey wonders if the Jedi Council suspected this might happen — if her giving in to her desires was the reason for the sorrowful, resigned look on Kyle Katarn's features when she abandoned all her pride and prostrated herself at his feet, face bowed to the floor and weeping, Master, please let me see him, please, have mercy on me, please let me see him one last time—

She determinedly pushes the memory from her mind as Ben presses a kiss to the inside of her thigh. "I might not be very good at this," he warns.

"Don't care." Rey settles back against the threadbare pillows, carding her fingers through his hair. "You'll always be the best I've ever had."
It turns out that Ben is very good at it. He leaves her a sobbing, gasping, dripping mess, and her core is still throbbing pleasantly from the aftershocks when she crawls down his body to return the favor. It takes a bit of work and it feels awkward at first, but soon she's getting into some semblance of rhythm and he's groaning filthy endearments and bucking his hips against her mouth. That must be when his eyes fall on the chronometer on the wall, because he suddenly gasps out the time and pulls her back up, kissing her swollen lips at the same time that he slides into her from below. Only two more hours before dawn, and his thrusts are so frantic, so desperate, that it's all Rey can do to cling to his neck and hang on. They keep on talking to each other, keep on kissing in between murmurs of unending devotion that soon turn into promises for the future. Rey doesn't know what comes over them then, it can't be a Force trance because the Force is dead within the ysalamiri shroud. They're just pretending, that's all, they're just letting themselves believe for a few brief, wonderful moments that there is still some way out of this and into the life together that they both want. "I'll build you a house," Ben mutters feverishly, wrapping his arms around her waist as he rocks up into her. "Nice little house beside a lake, with space for a garden— for those flowers you love so much—"

Rey starts crying. "I don't know how to plant anything that isn't from the desert," she sort of laughs, sort of hiccups into his neck, "and you don't know the first thing about building a house, either—"

Ben is unfazed. "I can learn. We'll learn together. You'll probably end up better at it than I am." He turns his head slightly to sink his teeth into the lobe of her ear, hips swirling against hers in a slow, sensual pattern that robs the breath from her lungs. "We'll have a shed for your tools, for whatever tech you get it into your pretty little head to tinker with— a library for my holos— we'll eat breakfast out in the garden, you'll fall asleep in my arms at night—" He's crying now, too, Rey can feel his tears on her cheek. "Want to get married? We can get married— anything you want— I'll do it, I'll give you everything—"

She rests her forehead on his, eyes closed. "I'll give you children," she whispers against his lips, tasting salt and longing and lost dreams. "Sons who will grow as tall and as strong as their father. Who will stand proud like him in this life—" Her voice breaks— "and the life after."

She knows it's all just crazy, desperate talk. She understands on an instinctual level that he would doubt his ability to be a good father after what he had done to his— but they can pretend for now, can weave fantasies out of ashes. He rolls her over onto her back and kisses her, long and fierce and deep. "Daughters, too," he grunts out. "They'd need to have your ears—" She manages a laugh at that, and then they are falling silent, they are holding each other close and moving more deliberately, trying to draw the pleasure out for as long as they can.

"Ben." Rey is shaking, is sobbing. "Ben, don't die."
He wipes the tears from her cheeks with the pad of his thumb. "There is no death, there is the Force," he says hoarsely. "Be strong for me, sweetheart."

Dawn comes too soon. She leaves his cell with love bites on her skin and a soreness between her legs, but she holds her chin high, coolly staring down the guards who dare to cast furtive glances her way. The next time she sees him, the sun is rising beyond gilded windows and he is being led into a room of Galactic Alliance and Resistance personnel and Jedi.

Commander Sien Sovv looks like he has been made to swallow some particularly bitter pill. His gaze sweeps the assembled crowd before locking onto a point behind Rey's shoulder; she glances around and spots Leia Organa in the audience. However, before she can decipher the look on the older woman's face, Sovv is making his address, drawing Rey's attention back to the front of the room.

"After reviewing the case of Ben Organa Solo, the War Crimes Tribunal hereby moves that his sentencing be formally turned over to the Jedi Council," Commander Sovv announces stiffly. Rey's heart jumps into her throat. This is why the hearing had been closed to the public, why Sovv had glanced at Leia before he spoke. What deals had been made in the political back-channels, what had General Organa sacrificed? "It was as a Jedi that he was taken by the First Order, and it is as a Jedi that he shall be tried for his crimes."

Ben has always been good at reading people. All it takes is one look at the exhaustion in the postures of the Jedi Masters, the terse calm tightening their features, to know that they have been up all night negotiating with the heads of the Galactic Alliance Defense Force. Sovv's announcement had all been for show; Ben's fate had been decided before he'd walked into that courtroom.

It is Katarn who decrees permanent exile to the Outer Rim Territories and Tionne who seconds the motion, the two of them seamlessly playing parts that had been settled on prior to this trial. Ben is pretty sure that they have consulted Luke as well, even though his uncle has officially inhibited himself from this case and is therefore not present. Anything less than a life sentence will earn the ire of the galaxy— it is a miracle enough as it is that Sovv and his High Command have agreed to this. This has his mother's doing all over it.
It is Corran Horn who lays out the terms— they're letting him keep his lightsaber but he will be outfitted with a tracking implant that will allow the Jedi Masters to know his location at any given time, an implant that will automatically deliver a lethal shock to his brain should he try to remove it or to set foot beyond the Outer Rim. Once he ships out, Ben Solo will die without seeing Republic worlds ever again.

It is mercy, not judgment. It is more than he deserves. He bows before the Masters, before these people who watched him grow up and whom he betrayed, and he accepts this sentence, their last gift, the only thing they had left to give.

* "How are you holding up?"

At the sound of Finn's voice— the other Finn, the hero of Korriban— Rey glances not at him but at his vague reflection that has appeared beside hers in the transparisteel. She shrugs, returning her gaze to the hangar bay below, where Ben is saying goodbye to his parents and to his uncle, the Millennium Falcon's entry ramp extended and waiting to receive him. "It was high time I settled down, anyway," Han Solo had said gruffly. "Take care of her, kid." Ben's first stop will be Kashyyyk, to make his peace with Chewbacca who had led the resistance there, and then he will journey on to his region of exile and the implant will be activated. Rey will see him again, she's sure of that, but it might not be for a while. It's not like she can just go scurrying off to the Outer Rim whenever she feels like it.

"That was some pretty clever politicking, huh?" Finn jests in an attempt to lighten her mood.

"You better get used to it," Rey grumbles. "Being a Jedi means cooperating with the Republic. It's in our vows."

"About that." Finn clears his throat. "I have decided not to pursue my training in the Force."

Rey does look at him, then. Waits for an explanation.

"I was a stormtrooper all my life," Finn says. "And, well, no offense, but a Jedi is just another kind of group identity, isn't it? I'd be trading one for the other. I want to figure out who I am first."
And, just like that, it clicks in Rey's mind.

("You have a difficult decision ahead of you," Ahsoka Tano had said. "Whether we travel old paths until the end or forge new ones—we keep walking.")

Rey hugs Finn. "Thank you," she says. "Until we meet again. Visit me."

"Visit you where?" Finn calls, laughing, once she disentangles herself from him.

"Don't know yet!" she replies over her shoulder. "I'll comm you!"

And then she is not walking, but running, to the hangar bay. She nearly careens into Luke in the process— without missing a beat, she drops to her knees, extending her saberstaff out to him so that he may do with it as he pleases. It's made up of his heirlooms, after all.

Luke frowns down at her for a long, long while, but, finally, he shakes his head. "Keep it, it's yours" he says solemnly. "But, Rey, are you sure? After how you defeated Snoke, the Council and I do have some misgivings—"

"I am the Sword of the Jedi when the sword is the Jedi's last resort," Rey tells him in a steady tone of voice, looking up into his storm-blue eyes. "That means my hands cannot stay clean. That means I must be at the front rank, and that I must cast a shadow for others to take shelter in. I will carry the darkness, Master," she vows, "but I will not let it carry me."

"Then I am no longer your master," Luke tells her gently, extending a hand to help her to her feet. "I wish you clear skies, child."

In the pilot seat of the Falcon, Ben stares morosely at the control panels as he fiddles with the slight outline of the implant on his wrist. It is too much, of course, to ask Rey to watch another ship sail away, never to return, and, besides, they already said everything they needed to last night. And they won't be parted forever; Ossus is in the Outer Rim, after all, he'll just have to wait until her business sends her his way. Still, he would have liked to kiss her goodbye.
He's too wrapped up in his thoughts to pay attention to the Force; thus, it is much to his surprise that a slim figure throws itself into the cabin in the split second before the doors finish sliding shut. He stands up, only to be promptly tackled to the floor by Rey, her arms immediately dropping to their preferred spot around his neck as she slams her lips against his, kissing him senseless.

"What—" Ben manages to choke out once they come up for air. "Rey, you can't—" Even as he protests, his hands settle firmly at her waist, keeping her pressed against him.

Rey just smiles, leaning forward to rub her nose against his. She waits until his lips have curved into a reluctant smile of their own before she declares, in a voice shaking with emotion and the entire universe shining in her eyes, "I am done with people taking you away from me."

Chapter End Notes

Ysalamir.

The Finn Galfridian cameo is dedicated to NivMizzet and the many others who have professed love for him :') The part where Rey says goodbye to her memory of Ben was conceptualized when I read AzAngell's comment about how they're both completely different people now, and Ben's line about Rey's strength was similarly inspired by a discussion with Kbourne2012.

Aaah, I don't know what else to say. This is surreal. Thanks for sticking with me for so long, friends <3
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

Two more beautiful playlists have been created for this fic: Starlight by pondish and Darkness in the Light by thefaultinourathorss. ReyloRobyn2011 requested this awesome manip of LYG-era Ben, and taz76 made a fantastic tribute cross stitch. Thank you so much to the four of you for brightening my day, and thank you to all of you for... well, for everything.

I listened to "Naked As We Came" by Iron & Wine on loop while writing this chapter. Which happens to be the very last chapter of TKC. I truly hope that it proves worthy of the time it took to get here and that you'll let me know what you think!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once the starbloom planted outside the window has grown taller, it will be able to filter the sunlight streaming into the bedroom. For now, though, it is a diminutive green sapling, and hot shards of gold pierce Ben Solo's eyelids, forcing him out of sleep. Squinting against the glare, he groggily extends his left arm in the direction of the white linen curtains; they close over the glass panes at the flick of his wrist as if stirred by some invisible breeze. Before he can shut his eyes again, however, he realizes that his other arm had gone numb during the night.

Ben turns his head towards the culprit. Rey is facing away from him, rolled over on her side and using his right arm as a pillow. Linen-muted sunlight dances along the elegant curve of her bare spine, adding copper tones to the freckles scattered across her tawny skin. They hadn't bothered putting on their sleep clothes after last night, when he'd practically started ravishing her on the front porch upon her return from Artorias— an absence of two days that had felt like weeks.

The sheets have slipped past Rey's waist, revealing a hint of backside. Ben winces as his exhausted body rallies valiantly to the cause. Stars, he's no better than a teenage boy— although, to be fair, he had gone without until his thirties. He'd waited for her, and he's never regretted it. Best decision of his life.

She whines in her sleep when he pries his arm out from under her. The sound tears at his heart. She's the morning person of the two of them but, on the rare days that he wakes up first, nothing can get him out of bed until she opens her eyes. He's still haunted by the room on the Upsilon-class shuttle, by the look on her face when she whimpered, "I woke up and you were gone."

Ben gathers Rey's hair to the side, pressing a kiss to her nape. His hand Wanders to her front, lazily playing with her breasts while his lips trail down her neck. It has been six years since they left Coruscant together but everything about this moment still feels like a gift. The way she arches into
his touch even while asleep, trust so intrinsically woven between their bodies. The faint smile that he glimpses at the corner of her mouth when he murmurs soothing words in her ear. The rustle of sheets when he curls around her and eases his hand between her legs.

She’s ready for him, wet and pliant and willing, but she doesn't fully wake up until he slips inside her. "Good morning," she sighs, craning her neck to kiss his jawline.

"Very good morning," Ben quips with a wolfish leer, and Rey giggles, a drowsy, dulcet sound that he swears is the sexiest thing he's ever heard.

He rolls her over onto her stomach, muffling a groan into the crook of her neck when she wiggles her hips against his. It's slow and gentle loving, bathed in morning light, and she clutches at his wrist, whispering soft little words of encouragement against his palm, her lips brushing across the wedding ring on his finger. He'd been all set to marry her on the nearest inhabited planet the second they entered the Outer Rim Territories, but she'd put her foot down. "Your parents will never forgive us if we don't invite them," she'd scolded, "and I want my friends to be there." The ceremony had been held on Ossus a year after war's end, a simple, quiet affair attended only by his family, the Jedi, and Finn and Poe. Ben honestly doesn't remember much of it— everything had been a blur compared to Rey in a white dress and how her hazel eyes had caught the light of the setting sun when they were declared bonded for life.

He ducks his head to pepper kisses on the sensitive spot between her shoulder blades, relishing in the way she undulates beneath him to meet his languid thrusts. "You feel so good, sweetheart," he croons, spurred on by a flicker of mischief threading through the haze of sleepy, warm desire. "You're being so good for me."

"Ben," Rey moans in half-hearted admonishment, burying her face in the pillow to hide the blush that always creeps onto her cheeks whenever he gets a little filthy. Chuckling, he digs his teeth into the round of her freckled shoulder while he strums at the small bundle of nerves between her thighs. It doesn't take long for her to peak after that, and he exhales a reverent curse at the still unbelievable sensation of her tight inner walls rippling and contracting around his length. He finishes inside her, his mind whiting out in bliss.

When he falls back onto the mattress, she wastes no time in tucking herself into his arms, resting her head on his bare chest. He holds her in a loose embrace, mumbling sweet nothings into her hair. The sunlight peeking through the curtains seems less annoying now, and he luxuriates in the feeling of this, a lazy morning in bed with his wife, made even more precious by the fact that he had once thought such a future was beyond his reach.

"Do you think..." Rey trails off, tentatively cupping a hand over her flat stomach. It's not that they're actively trying, but they've finally arrived at that point in their lives wherein they're ready if
it happens. She's twenty six now. As good an age as any to bear a child— a child that, Ben vows, will never want for affection and support, but also— and this is important— will be loved as much as he has come to realize Han and Leia love him.

"Perhaps," he says in response to Rey's unfinished question. "If not, we'll just have to try again." He grins faintly at the ceiling, already imagining trying again.

She snorts. "You're insatiable." It's a familiar, playfully grudging complaint of hers, but she steers the conversation back to the matter at hand. "If he turns out to be Force-sensitive, I don't think we should send him to Ossus just yet. We can train him in the basics first, see where his affinity lies."

Ben doesn't miss the dreamy note in her voice, and his heart gives a twinge. Any lingering doubts he might have are inconsequential in light of the fact that Rey absolutely wants a family. He can't deny her that. "Yes, it would be best to let her decide what path she wants to take."

Rey lifts her head to wrinkle her nose at him. His breath catches at how the sunlight brings out the green in her eyes. "Just so you know," he says before she can launch into their usual debate about whether their firstborn will be a daughter or a son, "I was serious about trying again. Don't you want to make sure?" He schools his features into a plaintive expression. "I heard early morning's the best time for it..."

"You're making that up," Rey accuses, but she glances at the chronometer on the bedside table before dropping a kiss on his chin. "In any case, it's not so early anymore, and we have to leave soon— Ben!" she shrieks, because, at the reminder that they have somewhere to be, he immediately lets go of her and tugs the blanket over his head, screwing his eyes shut. "Oh, no, you don't!" she manages to say in between bursts of laughter as she attempts to wrestle him out of bed. "We've been putting this off for months—"

He snores loudly in response. Undeterred, she worms her way beneath the blanket and whispers in his ear, "If you get out of bed now, I'll let you feel me up in the bath."

"Deal," he says immediately, his eyes flying wide open.

He carries her to the 'fresher in the same way he had carried her over the threshold of this house when they returned to it as newlyweds, years ago. She's still laughing, her legs dangling in the air. He almost thinks he'll never be happier than he is in this moment, but the truth is that he's long stopped measuring, quantifying, and comparing. It's no use. Every moment with her is the happiest he's ever been.
The MR-9 housekeeping droid that had been a gift from Ben's parents has just finished setting the table by the time Rey wanders onto the porch, a freshly-showered, afterglow-softened husband in her wake. He's always extra affectionate after sex—light touches to her hips, little kisses to her temple or to the shell of her ear. It's as if he's making up for what happened on Sarvchi, she thinks with a pang.

Rey and Ben sit down at the table, and the droid retreats into the house to get started on cleaning duties after pouring them cups of Manellan Jasper, a sweet, jewel-toned tea that smells like rose petals. Rey takes a sip, savoring the delicate flavor as she gazes out over the shimmering azure waters of Lake Sui, the green shores of which are but a stone's throw from their doorstep.

They had gotten the house at a remarkably modest price from a merchant friend of Lando Calrissian's who, as Lando put it with a snort of disgust, had "more summer homes than he knows what to do with." Rey suspects that Han and Lando used less-than-ethical methods to whittle down the cost, but she's not complaining. It's a small yet beautiful place made of white allacrete, with a silvery blue roof and a wraparound porch. The previous owner had taken all of his expensive paintings and tapestries, but Rey had contentedly adorned the space with potted plants, scattering them everywhere—on the shelves between Ben's books, on the chalcedony counter-tops, on the windowsills—until the sun-drenched interiors looked like an extension of the garden outside. The very same garden that Ben had insisted on helping her plant, which is currently bordered by the half-finished tool shed that he struggles with and yells at once a week.

She smiles at him over her tea. He may not have actually built her a house—and, in all honestly, the tool shed also seems to be a lost cause—but he has made her a home, and that's what matters.

He reaches for her hand on the table, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. "We didn't get to talk last night," he muses, and she stops herself from quipping, Gee, I wonder why, because the look on his face is so earnest. She knows that he values this most of all—being able to talk to her, getting to hear the details of her life. "How was the coronation?"

"It went well. No one shot anyone, at least." Rey waits for the corner of Ben's mouth to curve slightly up before she adds, "Kaye—although I suppose it's 'Her Majesty' now—sends regards." He had also been invited, for formality's sake, but his presence would have diverted attention from such an important ceremony. "Kaye looked...powerful. So brave and strong. She will be a good ruler."

"All the best monarchs are forged in battle," Ben agrees. "They understand what is at stake. They
do not take life so lightly." He waits for her to start eating before following suit, ever the gentleman. "Were you and Jysella able to catch up?"

Rey shakes her head. "She wasn't there. There was a conclave on Zonama Sekot happening at the same time. But the Jedi did send Cilghal to represent them. We'll be seeing everyone later, though."

Ben makes a face. "Don't remind me."

"Well, I spoke with your mother on Artorias and she made me promise to drag you to lunch—kicking and screaming if necessary." Rey nudges his foot with hers under the table. "Did you use up all your extrovert points on Venestria, or something?"

"Or something," Ben grunts. They'd spent the entirety of last week in the Clacis sector, helping with the postwar rehabilitation effort.

Rey takes another sip of tea, grateful for the warmth that seeps into her bones. Mornings here on Endor are always cool, what with the house's proximity to the tightly-knit pine and redwood forests clustered at the base of the snow-capped mountain range that the Ewoks call the Dragon's Spine. They're an hour's speederbike ride away from Bright Tree Village, where they trade for meat with the vegetables from Rey's garden. The Ewoks are cordial; they felt the First Order's sting, but their fondness for Leia Organa runs deep.

That's who Kaye reminds Rey of. Leia. A few days before the coronation, Rey watched on the HoloNet as Kaye stepped out onto the palace balcony to announce that Caled Galfridian had journeyed to the halls of his fathers. Her complexion had been wan and, yet, her blue eyes remained dry as she put on a show of strength for her people, flags all around the courtyard lowering to half-mast while the cry went up—The King is dead. Long live the Queen.

At the official ceremony itself, Rey had watched the Artorian crown being placed on Kaye's shining mass of gold hair, and she had remembered the princess in the marketplace who looked so much like her older brother, and the Resistance soldier who had sent Raynar Thul off to his last battle with a salute. To have lost so much, to bear it all with such grace—it is the same steel that is ever-present in Rey's mother-in-law.

"Credit for your thoughts?" Ben prods, and Rey tells him about the comparisons she has drawn between Kaye and Leia, and how she has realized that the darkness can never hope to triumph in the face of women like them.
"Women like them," Ben echoes, gazing at Rey tenderly in the morning stillness. "Women like you."

Hours later, deep within the Adega system, the *Millennium Falcon* approaches the gilded atmosphere of Ossus and is gently coaxed by Rey into a smooth dive, with Ben beside her in the co-pilot seat. Layers of gases and ozone fade away and they make planetfall into—

Autumn. The stately kingwood forests are draped in brilliant hues of red and gold, surrounding the Jedi Sanctuary like a sea of fire. The landing pad is unusually crowded but Rey manages to ease between Tionne's *Lore Seeker* and Katarn's *Moldy Crow*, leaving Ben to handle the shutdown procedures while she barrels down the *Falcon's* ramp, towards the slight figure waiting for her at the entrance of the temple.

Underneath a pale sky, amidst foundations of stone swirled through by scarlet leaves, two women bow to each other. One is dressed in somber brown robes, while the other wears a cloak of dove-gray fabric.

"Sword of the Jedi," greets Jysella.

"*Master Horn,*" says Rey.

And then they burst into laughter, all traces of formality vanishing as they tumble into each other's arms.

Jysella leads Rey into the Sanctuary, briefing her on the Zonama Sekot conclave while Ben trails behind them, carrying his and Rey's overnight bags. "Master Luke's address was very interesting. He told us that he's no longer convinced we're meant to police the galaxy. The Jedi began as a meditative order that was little by little drawn away from the Force and into the mundane. He's not advocating total withdrawal but, instead, attuning ourselves to the longer view—reaching out to those who seek to serve the Force in whatever way they are capable of. I think he's been speaking with Tiu, to be honest. He says that the Force flows through all of us differently and that, if we are to survive as an order, we must learn how to work with other viewpoints, incorporating all of these differences into the common goal of balance."
"So what happens now?" Rey asks.

Jysella shrugs. "We're still working it out. But I think it's safe to say that, from here, we'll be moving further away from the old traditions."

She shows the couple to Rey's old habitation unit, where Ben drops their bags. And then they make their way to the dining room. Everyone is there, waiting with smiles and glad cries and hugs. If any tears are shed— well, it's only the happy kind.

*I*

"I couldn't possibly eat another bite," Leia declares, pushing away her empty plate.

"Don't see why you couldn't," Han scoffs. "All you had were those tiny sandwich things— wouldn't fill up a rvada."

Leia rolls her eyes. "I had some of the soup, too, and a little veal—"

"Bird food," Han mutters as if he hadn't heard her, glaring at the remaining sandwiches on the serving dish like they've personally offended him. Stars, but he has gotten cranky in his old age. Leia decides to ignore him, turning her thoughts to more pleasant matters.

Nearly everyone's finished eating by now. Across the table, Ben has one arm casually draped over the back of Rey's chair. He and Valin are talking in serious, quiet tones, the latter recounting how his most recent lead on the *Ebon Hawk*'s whereabouts had ended in a duel with Tahiri Veila in Hutt Space; they had been forced to work together in order to escape the *kajidii* whose spice den they inadvertently turned upside down.

Rey, meanwhile, is having an animated conversation with Finn and Poe, who have spent the past few years rebuilding infrastructure and communities in the Mid Rim. Leia doesn't miss the way Rey leans into Ben from time to time, and how Ben absentmindedly trails his fingers along the curve of her shoulder whenever she does so. There is a certain lightness to the set of his naturally pensive features that Leia has never seen before. Her son is at peace, and in love. That makes everything worth it— even the deal she had cut with the Galactic Alliance Defense Force to support their initiatives in the Senate. Leia is no fool; she understands that there might be repercussions for allowing a military power so much leeway, but she's not *anyone*'s puppet, either.
Besides, the new senators are young, bold, and idealistic— more than a match for Sien Sovv's old guard.

"How's the weather on Endor this time of year, Ben?" Han asks. "If it's not too cold, your mom might like to visit with Chirpa's tribe."

"Kneesaa is the chief now," says Ben. "Chirpa's daughter. But, yes, winter's a long way off. It's a good time to come over."

"Great, we'll plan it," Han says gruffly. "Won't be too crowded at your place?"

Ben shrugs. "We'll make room. Bright Tree isn't far— I'm sure the Ewoks will be glad to see you."

Leia catches Rey's eye and they exchange the patently exasperated grimaces of women used to dealing with stubborn Solo men.

"We'll have to bring Threepio," Chewbacca opines in Shyriiwook.

Luke nods. "They'll never forgive us if we don't bring him."

"The mighty Golden One!" Han and Leia intone, and start sniggering.

Ben leans down to explain the joke to a puzzled Rey. His voice is too low for Leia to hear but his body language speaks volumes. How he hunches over her protectively, how the line of his mouth is not quite smiling but very soft. Rey giggles, and he actually beams— or as close to beaming as Leia's ever seen her son look. As if he is stupidly proud of the fact that he is able to make his wife laugh.

We're okay, Leia thinks, patting Han's thigh in a rare gesture of affection. We're all going to be okay.
It has been a long time since Rey last spent the night at the Jedi Sanctuary. Everything is more or less how she remembers it—the smell of Ecclessis figs drifting in through the open window, the roar of the waterfalls. What's different is that Ben is in bed with her, warm and solid and real instead of just a distant dream. The lights are off and they are in their sleep clothes; he's lying on top of her with his head turned to the side, cheek pillowed between her breasts as she drowsily strokes his hair. Their conversation is soft, muted, punctuated by yawns, and, right when she thinks they'll fall asleep like this, there's a commotion from the adjacent room, followed by the sound of scurrying footsteps and a tentative knock at their door.

The Force tells them that there's no cause for alarm, but Ben looks annoyed in the faint starlight as he untangles himself from Rey's arms. She sits up in bed, squinting as he activates the glow-panels and opens the door to reveal three younglings huddled out in the hallway.

"Master Solo, there's a ghost in our room," whispers Lyric, the yellow-eyed Melodie from the purple mountains of Yavin 8.

"It's not a ghost," argues Chitter, scrawny and birdlike and blue-skinned, "it's the pulse of an electromagnetic field causing unusual activity patterns in the brain's temporal lobe."

"Well, why didn't you and your temporal lobe stay behind, then, if it's that simple?" snaps redhead Vekki.

All three of them had been sent to the Jedi by their respective families and clans once they started showing signs of Force-sensitivity, and they are still adjusting to their new environment, so far from their homeworlds. It should then have come as no surprise to Rey that Ben would be remarkably patient with them, all signs of annoyance vanishing, but she can't help blinking at the sight of her dour, moody husband shepherding three kids who barely come up to his knees back to their room.

However, when she catches up to them, Ben mutters to her in an aside, "One. We're only having one."

Rey smirks. "We'll see."

After Ben proves to the initiates that the sound they'd heard had only been the creak of the building's ancient pipes, they're quick to settle down but, unfortunately, refuse to fall asleep right away, entranced by the novelty of these two people who they have to call Master but aren't Jedi Masters. Before long, Lyric has somehow conned Rey into telling her the story of the monster who had chased her and Ben through the jungles of Yavin 4, while Chitter and Vekki ply Ben with
questions about battlefields he's fought on and enemies that he's faced. They're on opposite sides of the room but Rey hears Chitter express his astonishment that Ben had made it out in one piece, save for the scar on his face.

"Somebody loved me." At the sound of Ben's solemn voice, Rey glances over at him to find that he's already looking at her, his dark eyes so achingly gentle. "That is how I survived the war."

Because dawn is slow to break in the autumn months, it is still dark when Luke Skywalker wakes at his usual time, shadows clinging to his footsteps as he pads through the stone halls. These days, he likes to watch the twin suns emerge from a wrought iron settee on the balcony of the second level, the one overlooking the waterfalls. Artoo trundles creakily at his side, beeping once in a while. "Yes," Luke soothes in response to a particularly shrill burble as they round the corner, "I will counsel the initiates to stop using you for levitation practice. You're an old droid now, they should handle you with care..."

Approaching the settee from the eastern side of the long balcony, Luke stops in his tracks upon realizing that Ben and Rey have beaten him to his favorite spot. Faint skeins of pink streak the sky and, in the lightening shadows, he can just make out their figures dressed in gray. Rey is sitting on Ben's lap, murmuring in his ear while he has one arm sprawled over the backrest of the settee, the other one curled around her waist.

Despite Luke's chagrin at having stumbled upon them in such a private moment, he can't help smiling wistfully at the scene. He sees them as they were on Yavin 4, Ben missing a crucial step during sparring when Rey walked out onto the courtyard, Rey valiantly pleading with Ben to smile for the holocamera. "Come on, show me your sometimes-I'm-not-an-asshole face—" —"What'll you give me in return?"— "Ben!" Luke doesn't know whether to laugh or cringe at the memory, but he is certain now that he and the other Jedi had been wrong to warn against such a love. They had focused too much on the burgeoning darkness in Ben Solo, afraid that passion would exacerbate it. This regret had been on his mind when he'd addressed the convocation on Zonama Sekot. "The Force does not flow from us, but through us. And, thus, it flows in different ways. Sometimes the light comes in from another angle."

Rey scrambles out of Ben's lap and walks over to Luke upon noticing his presence. Luke projects a thought to his nephew that he doesn't have to get up— I know you've already used all your extrovert points for this month.

Who the hell started that joke? Ben grumps.
Your wife, Luke wryly replies.

He waits until Rey has reached him to tell her, "It really is very good to see you."

"And to confirm for yourself that Ben and I have not fallen to the Dark Side?" she teases gently but with a hint of steel beneath it.

Luke raises one hand in surrender. "You were always one of my smartest students."

Rey smiles. A smile that tells him all has been forgiven. "We're fine, I promise. And I do appreciate you checking in, even if I give you grief for it."

Luke turns grave for a moment. "I have heard rumors from the Lothalians that the Bendu manifested to you on Atollon."

She exhales. "Yes. Last year. Ben and I responded to a distress call that we picked up on the Falcon. We flushed out a Silan that had been terrorizing one of the villages. After we killed it, the Bendu showed himself to us."

"What did he say?"

Rey's brow creases as she plucks the words from her memories. "That he is... the one in the middle. That Ben and I have found a path few can walk, but he will help us walk it until the end. Honestly, I don't know if we should trust him."

"It is wise to be wary of such elementals," says Luke. "The Bendu is an ancient being that has not been seen since the days of the Empire. His involvement with the Rebellion is shrouded in mystery; we only have Kanan Jarrus' account of that. However, according to ancient lore that Tionne has dug up, the Bendu holds dominion over that place between the Light and the Dark. He is its guardian. And it sounds to me that he has given you his blessing. You and Ben have some talking to do, to figure out where to go from here. But that can wait, I think." He offers her a small bow before turning to walk away and find another spot to meditate in, motioning for Artoo to follow him. "The view from up here is beautiful," he tells Rey over his shoulder. "Go and enjoy it with your husband."
By the time Rey returns to Ben on the settee, the twin suns of Adega Besh and Adega Prime have risen in crescents over the horizon, tinting the cascading waterfalls with a diamond glow. She tucks herself into his side and he wraps his arm around her once more, the two of them watching as daylight gradually spins the lush forests spread out below them into a carpet of crimson and gold.

*I dreamed this,* Rey thinks, *or something like this, at least. This is the future I was told I could still have. The future I fought for.*

"Hey." She pokes Ben's arm and tips her face up to his in an unspoken command.

"Always so bossy," he grumbles, but he is smiling when he leans down and kisses her, soft and sweet, in that place of stone and water, beneath a burning sunrise.

Chapter End Notes

- **Starbloom.**
- **MR-9 housekeeping droid.**
- **Manellan Jasper.**
- **Lake Sui.**
- **Conclave on Zonama Sekot,** altered slightly to fit this universe.
- **Venestria.**
- **Clacis sector.**
- **The Dragon's Spine.**
- **Kajidii.**
- **Kneesaa.**
- **Lyric.**
- **Chitter.**
- **Vekki.**

The reunion scene with Han, Leia, and Luke is for ReyloArt, who convinced me to write it.

Rey and Ben meeting **the Benu** was suggested by lizzpercush.
The gradual shift in the Jedi Order's view of the Force was inspired by a comment from the reviewer Guest, and that bit about their changing perspective of Rey and Ben's relationship was in response to some questions posted to me by hegelstriad.

Luke's flashback to awkward flirt!Ben Solo is for Kbourne2012, Jinga, datswatutink, and everyone else who's been asking for such a scene for ages.

And, lastly...

My dear readers,

This is the fic that traveled the world. I wrote bits and pieces of it on beaches and mountains all over the Philippine archipelago, on a rooftop in Bangkok, in a garden in Munich, on the train to Vienna, one rainy afternoon in Taipei, and as my plane approached the lights of Singapore. I spent most of my trips alone, but I never felt that way because I was writing for you guys. I carried all of you with me.

Like my travels, this particular writing process has changed me as a person, pushing me out of my comfort zone and helping me grow. For that, I have you, my readers, to thank. When I started posting "Like Young Gods" to AO3 in January of 2016, I never dreamed that it would garner such an amazing response. Your constant support has helped me through some dark times over the last several months and has given me the confidence I need to pursue writing not just as a hobby, but as a passion. I am indebted to each and every one of you, more than words can say.

While I am a bit sad to lay "To Kingdom Come" to rest, I'm also glad that I could give the Rey and Ben of this universe the happy ending they deserve. Regarding Rey, especially, it has been the experience of a lifetime to track how a scrappy desert scavenger became the Sword of the Jedi. I followed her through twenty years of her life, with all of you by my side. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, thank you, friends. It's been an honor.

Until we meet again,

Thea <3

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