Summary

In the legacy of Skywalker Family Traditions, located directly below 'losing a hand,' was a note that sons would always disobey orders to save their mothers.

Snoke really shouldn't have ignored that.

Or: The failed assassination of Leia Organa will bring everyone together. Eventually.

{Heed the tags friends}
The room was ablaze, burning fabric raining from the ceiling as a dark figure advanced, flames reflected by the metallic blade of his sword. Behind him the door jumped, attacked from the outside by a group whose voices were growing increasingly alarmed. Their horror, however, was nothing compared to that of the woman trapped inside with her would be assassin, his eyes gleaming cruelly through the slits of his dark mask.

"You will stop and drop your weapon."

Heavy boots stepped over the shards of glass marring the carpeted floor, snapping the largest of them. Even laced with the Force, words had no effect on him.

"You will stop and drop your weapon!"

He raised it instead.

Of all the times Leia had been close to death, she was sure this was the closest ever. She was alone, with nowhere to run, and unarmed. Of course, the one time she did not have a weapon close to her was the time something like this happened.

Just my luck.

She tried to avoid the strike, but even if she constantly forgot her age, her body did not. The blade fell as she was backing away, too slow to entirely avoid it. The point hit her cheek, sliding in a diagonal arc over the arm she had raised to try and protect herself. The hilt came next, striking her with such force that it threw her to the ground.

I am not dying here.

The door jumped again as another man's voice joined the group on the other side. Recognizing it, even in this situation, was comforting—Poe. Poe had arrived, which meant that even if Finn hadn't been outside before, he was now. They were always together.

"How does no one have a detonator?!" Poe shouted furiously.

The flaming wardrobe on the far wall lost its precarious balance, collapsing inwards with a whine and then to the floor with a crash. Sparks were thrust into the air by the impact. Her assailant jumped, distracted by the sound of the crash, and Leia seized her opportunity at his momentary distraction.

She had never been formally trained in the Force and the most physical uses of it had never been where she excelled naturally. Luke had tried to teach her something as simple as moving a stone once, but to no avail. Even so, she had listened to him, memorizing everything he had taught her in case it became useful. Maybe it was for that reason that she expected him to come to her rescue now, to manifest from her memory of pleasant summer days spent listening to his instructions, face serious and voice sure, to aid her in the present.
And a memory of instruction did rise in her mind's eye, then. Only, the one doing the teaching wasn't her brother, but a six year old boy with a roguish smile that made him look just like a dark haired miniature of Han.

"It's right there. You just have to grab it," she heard him saying, pointing at something on the other side of the burning room and rolling his eyes when he looked at her again. "Come on, Mom, you're always like 'Ben, you can do anything as long as you try' and then Ben is the one doing everything because apparently you can't."

It was like he was there, with her among the flames. Only he wasn't and he hadn't been for the longest time. The words, that memory, she knew what it was about: a flour sack perched on the top of the kitchen cabinets. A flour sack that Ben himself had put there and refused to fetch unless she tried first.

"It's really easy; you grab it and swing. Well, don't swing, that will make it go away from you. Grab it and pull it with your mind. If you focus, it will come." He had then stopped at her side, dark eyes intent on their target. "I know you can do it, Mom. I'll catch if it falls."

Only she couldn't and he hadn't. The sack had fallen, hitting her shoulder, then his head, and exploded in a huge wave of white dust. They had stared in shock at the disaster until they had looked at each other, covered in white from head to toe, and collapsed onto the floor laughing.

_I lost him. He's not here. He's not coming back._

Even so, she did as her memory of him instructed, reaching for the Force and grabbing the first piece of burning furniture she could. The moment she swung it, the chair hit her assailant square in the back of the head, sending the sword flying out of his hands.

It did little else to stop him, but it didn't matter. It had worked well enough. Worst case scenario, she could keep him at bay until Finn, Poe, and the soldiers on the other side of the door broke through. She reached out again, feeling for something heavier as a smaller blade was slid off her attacker's belt. In a moment, he was over her, one hand reaching for her hair. She bit her lip, tasting the blood gushing out of the wound on her face. The huge collapsed wardrobe was rising, turning—

_I know you can do it, Mom._

Before she could take aim, the door exploded and, with it, a wave of blaster fire filled the room. The man released her and Leia threw herself on the floor, covering her head for protection. Finn's voice rose above the gunfire as all but one weapon ceased firing.

"Oi, girl, girl! That's complete overkill! Stop! I said stop!"

Poe was helping her up, dragging her away from the burning room and into the corridor as Finn wrestled a blaster out of the hands of a young female soldier, a blue skinned Twi-lek.

"Bring the body over here," he ordered, grabbing the girl by the jacket and pulling her out of the burning room. "By the Force, Allya, stop that! You can't kill him anymore than you already did!"

Leia braced herself against the corridor wall, breathing heavily as Poe grasped her shoulders, his voice wrought with concern.

"Are you alright?"

Leia made an affirmative gesture with her head, her attention going from the pilot's face to the group now dragging the corpse of her attacker through the giant scorched hole that had previously been her
"Show me his face."

The Twi-lek got herself away from Finn and dropped to her knees. The moment she pulled the mask away to reveal a round bearded face, silence fell over the group.

"I know him," Poe whispered, right next to her. If his voice had been horrified before, it was nothing to how it sounded now. "He works in communications."

*I know. This isn't good.*

She turned to Finn, looking him dead in the eyes.

"Cut all transmissions. We're evacuating."

Chapter End Notes

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Next up -- checking in with Hux.

Comments are much appreciated.

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An aside -- please forgive any odd grammatical quirks you may find.

Mme Windcage is the primary author.

Mme DD is responsible for editing and supplying Mme Windcage with plot bunnies.
The Strategist

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Strategist - Day 1, Part 2

"General."

Leaning over the tactical display on the Finalizer's bridge, Hux pinched the bridge of his nose, the sudden interruption almost making his patience snap right along with his train of thought.

"Any matters not pertaining to our present engagement can be taken to the First Officer," he growled, even as an uncomfortable sensation settled in the back of his mind, screaming at him to turn. "Dismissed."

The small planet on the chart was revolving, a red blinking dot coming slowly into view. All around it, readings detailing anti-aircraft guns and defensive positions began sprouting. In an instant, they had pulled him in again, wrapping around his mind in such a way that they seemed a lot more real than the bridge and crew around him.

There was a large canyon to the south, small buildings surrounded by hangars and planetary defenses hidden within the forest. There was not one location he didn't already know by heart. He could trace the path the TIEs would take without the system pointing it out to him, see the landing spots for the troops as though he had been to view them personally. He had planned it all to the smallest detail, lost sleep over it, and even so he was not satisfied. There was always a flaw, a small fault in the plan that could be explored further and would be exploited by his enemy if he didn't detect it in time.

"Sir."

The call came again. This time, though, there was something familiar in it. That meticulously drawn tone was as well known to him as his own. Hux forced himself out of the strategic reverie he had been engaged in for the last few hours, turning to face an expressionless silver helmet and the woman wearing it.

"They have arrived."

Phasma's words were like being doused with a bucket of cold water, effectively destroying any semblance of peace he had achieved while ruminating strategies.

"Where did you put them?"

"In the officer's quarters."

Hux's mouth twisted. He couldn't possibly have heard that right.

"Wasn't there anywhere else?"

"Considering Kylo Ren's position and status, any other arrangement would be considered disrespectful." Phasma's head tilted slightly to the right. "Had you made preparations elsewhere, Sir?"
"I was just taking my sanity into account, Captain."

"It's temporary."

"Of course. Thank you."

He turned again to the chart, focusing his attention on the three moons orbiting his target. His mind, however, seemed to have gone from military strategy to 'I might actually start sleeping on the bridge' in the few moments Phasma had taken to speak. He certainly couldn't envision a world where the first thing one wished to deal with in the morning was Kylo Ren's temper and snide remarks. There was also not another person in the galaxy he wished to deal with less if they were attacked on night watch. The sheer quantity of sarcasm that flew out of that man's mouth alone was likely illegal in several quadrants, and not at all conducive to mounting a successful defense.

He took a deep breath. This was neither the time nor place. They hadn't had such a clear shot at the heart of the Resistance since they had been detected in the Illenium system some three weeks ago. The destruction of Starkiller base had given them enough time to disappear and reorganize. Since then, his fleet had hit secondary bases and ships, destroyed supporting groups and villages, but never had any hint at where the heart of it truly lay. Until now. This was their chance to put a definitive end to the Resistance. Finish it once and for all.

And now he couldn't concentrate.

"Lieutenant, review the attack plan."

Seated to his left, Lieutenant Ferrar activated the display's dynamic view. Several TIE battalion indicators appeared instantly next to the planet.

"Yes sir. The first stage will focus on engaging any fighter battalions that haven't moved to intercept the Finalizer. Our pilots' mission is to draw enemy fire and attention away from the anti-aircraft batteries located in sectors A to D7. These defenses will then be engaged and destroyed by a smaller TIE group approaching north-by-northwest. Upon completion, they will join the rest of the attack battalions. Any vessel evacuating from the Resistance base at this stage is to be ignored."

Hux frowned. The officer's hand lingered over the commands. A flaw—if there was a single flaw...

"Proceed."

"The airborne assault will then move to protect the Ground Assault Transports. Second stage battle tactics will focus firepower on the Resistance troops defending Landing Area 1 next to South Entrance, Landing Area 2 near North Entrance and Landing Area 3 in the Emergency Evacuation Hangar. As soon as the Stormtrooper's battalions are on the ground, air assault will engage and destroy the remaining evacuation vessels. Stage three will be completed upon ground confirmation."

"Send it to Operations Control." His eyes went from the tactical display to the communication personal in the far corner of the bridge. "Any word from our contact on the ground?"

"He's sent no confirmation of mission success, Sir."

The assassin failed, then. Our window is closing.

He turned to Lieutenant Ferrar again.
"Calculate the moons' orbits in relation to the base location. I want an angle of approach that minimizes the impact of any existing moon based defenses. The—"

He stopped. Phasma was still there. He could see her armor reflected in the now blank tactical screen.

*What is it now?*

"Yes, Captain?"

"With all due respect, Sir, shouldn't you be welcoming Commander Ren?"

"Ren knows exactly how welcome he is here," he retorted. "Furthermore, there are more important things to deal with than anyone's delicate sensibilities. Something, I am pleased to say, Ren doesn't suffer from."

*One of his very few good qualities.*

"Sir, Supreme Leader Snoke sent him."

"I'm well aware of that."

Which actually reminded him that the Supreme Leader had not only announced Ren's imminent arrival, but he had also trusted him with giving the other man his orders. Something that, all things considered, he really couldn't postpone.

*It's not enough that I run the fleet; I have to go around playing errand boy now too.*

"Speed up the preparations on the lower decks; we will be entering light speed as soon as the engagement trajectory is calculated. First Officer, the bridge is yours."

The corridors leading to the officer's quarters were deserted. Between his crew and Phasma's men, one would believe that anyone going around the *Finalizer* would rapidly run into a patrol, but that didn't seem to be the case. In fact, the only stormtroopers he encountered were stationed next to the access lift and they, judging by the identification plates, belonged to Phasma's assault platoon and not the *Finalizer's* security. For once, he didn't really want to know what had happened. He had enough problems to deal with without adding to them the logistical ones Phasma had apparently already solved.

The lift opened into a long narrow corridor, flanked on both sides by doors. After a moment's hesitation, he turned left, advancing to the closed door of the visitor's quarters. He didn't bother knocking, instead forcing the door open with his credentials and stepping inside. In a second, four covered faces had turned in his direction: three men and one woman—or so he assumed, it really was impossible to tell in those cloaks—all bearing similar facial covers and clothes, all sitting on the circular sofa in the middle of the common room, and none of them Kylo Ren.

"Where is he?"

The shortest member of the group, a man with an admirable collection of guns and detonators in his belt, wretched himself out of the deathtrap formed by his two more corpulent colleagues, stretched, and tapped on the closed door leading to one of the bedrooms.

"Ren. General Hux is here."

There was no answer, not that it surprised him. Ren's usual response to any message was to burst
unannounced into whatever place the communication had arisen from, not reply to it like someone civilized. That the Knights had to deal with the same thing he did should probably amuse him, however, there was something far more entertaining happening right under his nose.

Normally, any large visiting committees would leave all its low-ranking officers in the barracks several floors below. Such arrangements, however, were either below his present 'guests' status or whomever had made the arrangements clearly had little to no knowledge of the true size of the officer's chambers. The common room was close to bursting with only five occupants and, with no more than two beds in the adjacent rooms, their sleeping arrangements would be something he would gladly pay to see. He could, of course, move some of them down the corridor, but there was no need to make them comfortable when he wasn't—and hadn't been—since Supreme Leader Snoke had decided to send them, the bloody Knights of bloody Ren, aboard.

"General Hux."

The words, accompanied by the sound of a helmet sealing itself, brought his attention to the dark figure now advancing in his direction. His already deteriorating mood plummeted further instantly.

"Ren. And," Hux stopped. They were all 'something' Ren, but he didn't care enough in the moment to try to recall the particulars. "The rest. Such an honor."

Contempt dripped from his voice, dense enough for one to savor it. It was a sweet release and the only one he had presently, all things considered. Not everyone, however, was equally tolerant of his personal brand of well-mannered disrespect. Kylo Ren might have a short fuse and a quick temper, but he was too well versed in Hux's language to mindlessly start chopping limbs. The big lump of meat now on his feet and making his way towards him was a different matter altogether. Hux doubted he would have any qualms about cleaving him in half.

"I would consider controlling your men, Ren," he sneered. "I don't think the Supreme Leader would take kindly to them wreaking havoc on my fleet. Not after the latest fiasco."

Ren's head quirked to the side, mockingly inquisitive.

"Letting the Jedi wannabe run away? I admit that you have already shown an appalling lack of competence where she is concerned, but ending up with a whole freighter stranded in the middle of nowhere while the Resistance goes off with a shipment of our newest recruits takes the whole concept of failure to new heights." He looked around, his gaze lingering on each member of the group. "Out of curiosity, who was responsible for that?"

The phrase 'colossal fuck up' went unspoken.

The previously advancing lump of meat stopped in his tracks, his hands clenching the upper half of the large weapon he had with him. So there was his answer. He wasn't even surprised. He didn't know the rest of the Knights' work as well as he knew that of Ren, but he had started assessing them in his mind as soon as he'd heard of the disaster.

He knew it couldn't have been the man now in front of him. Firstly, there was a kind of suicidal recklessness in Ren's conduct that didn't easily go unnoticed. And secondly, as much as he hated him, the Enforcer had a rather good head on his shoulders. He was quick to think, quick to adapt, and not easily surprised. If something had gone so absurdly wrong under his command, Ren wouldn't have lost his footing, frozen and idle, sitting with his mouth agape as the Resistance happily made off into the stars. He would have given chase. And if doing that with a sabotaged hyperdrive
didn't get him blown to pieces—one could dream, after all—the Resistance would have had a real problem on their hands.

Then there was the woman. If he remembered correctly, there had been at least one other female Knight, but he hadn't seen her in years. Not that those bloody billowing robes and masks made it easy to tell them apart. Even so, if he were to place a bet, he would say that she was the one he had worked with on several prior occasions. She was the only one of the Knights whose 'help' he would take without question, if the Supreme Leader ever remembered to give him a choice. Like Ren, she had also been eliminated from his mental list rather quickly. He didn't have to ponder what she would do if anyone stormed her command and tried to steal something, as he knew it quite well. The Resistance, on the other hand, would have been up for an extremely nasty surprise if they had been dealing with her. The moment they put their hands on the prize—the carrier—Isahaine would have ordered it blown to kingdom come.

A defeat is only a defeat if someone gains something, she had once said. She was a curious one, and actually he rather liked her. It was a pity, truly, that she had sworn her allegiance to the Knights. He would have gladly made her a captain if she hadn't.

So, one of the three remaining men was to blame. It was an interesting puzzle, that one. It wasn't easy to scratch any of them off the list. In fact, judging by the way their actions, missions and identities seem to mix together, anyone would think of them as some kind of three headed beast and not separate individuals. Setting aside the debate of who was responsible for the latest debacle—no easy feat since the lump of meat was still loudly grinding his teeth in Hux's direction—he recounted what he knew of the personalities of the remaining Knights.

Number one was the loner, the lean man who had announced him and was now inspecting one of his many detonators. That one was exclusively an assassin. Not a good bet. Number two was a brutish, impatient man being held in place by the woman's outstretched legs. Possible culprit. Number three: big lump of meat with the menacing weapon and anger control issues to rival Ren's. He was a surprisingly good commander and well liked by the troops, if Hux was remembering the records correctly, but also prone to start making bad decisions as soon as he lost the upper hand in battle.

... Right.

Truth be told, the abrupt ending to what had been a rather pleasant mental exercise was still just as frustrating the second time around as it had been on the bridge. He really should have considered not looking through the files, extend the pleasure by finding a way to force the information out of a man that, now that he thought about it, had yet to say a word.

His eyes went from the Knight at his left to the absolutely still form of Ren. For someone who was always so damn quick with his comebacks, so set on getting the final word in each and every argument, he seemed awfully distant. In fact, he didn't seem to be paying attention at all.

"Or maybe," Hux whispered, a small smile touching his lips when he detected some movement behind the mask, "You count your failures by the number of so called Knights you have lost. We are at, what?" He looked around, pretending to count the individuals present. "Four? I will leave the one you killed personally out of this. It's only fair."

That had hit the mark. Ren's shoulders tensed. Even with that accursed helmet on, he could see his demeanor changing. The air around them became oppressive, crackling like a storm was approaching. Without warning, Ren took a step forward, intruding so suddenly on his personal space that only the hard-wired reaction of keeping himself grounded kept him from backing up.
"I do wonder, General, if this sudden interest in my affairs is a way to make yourself feel better about yours or just an excuse to look away from them," he snarled. "FN-2187's leap to freedom does seem to have opened a floodgate. In fact, our captured recruits have some very interesting backgrounds—second and third offenders, non-conformity, set for execution. Yes, General, I do read the reports. A shame this wasn't on yours. So the question does beg an answer—is this supposed latest failure my responsibility or yours?"

"I would be careful where I threw my accusations, Ren. The Supreme Leader is tolerant with you, but I am not him."

"Curious. It never crossed my mind that you were."

A strangled laugh rose from the group on the sofa. From whom it came, however, he didn't have time to discover, as Ren was speaking again.

"So tell me, to what do I owe the immense pleasure of your presence?" he questioned. "That is, if this is not an extension of the welcoming committee. I would be truly honored if it was."

Hux kept his eyes on him, clenching his teeth. *Errand boy, indeed.*

"We have received information about the location of one of the Resistance hideouts. We are hitting their base. The Supreme Leader wants you, all of you, on the ground."

Ren nodded his acknowledgment. As one, the Knights rose. Hux could feel his mouth setting into a hard line as he saw Ren make a gesture to join them before stopping, as though prematurely ending their conversation were a mistake and not an intentional slight.

"Anything else, General?"

"There has been a change of plans," he announced. "If the Resistance leader, Leia Organa, is not yet dead, you are to kill her. It is an order from the Supreme Leader himself, and it should be simple enough for even you."

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- Finn.

Comments much appreciated.
Finn knew a lost battle when he saw one. He had once been, and in lots of ways would always be, a stormtrooper. Even if his easy-going personality more often than not made everyone around him forget his origins and training—sometimes to the point they seemed to see him as some kind of inexperienced newbie—that was something that he could never do. Before his desertion, FN-2187 had been one of the best recruits in Captain Phasma's stormtrooper program, an intelligent and inventive soldier she had herself praised, and that had never gone away.

Even if he resented Phasma, hated her, had actually thrown her into the trash compactor on Starkiller base and wished beyond everything that she died there, he had been forced to come to terms with the fact that part of him was actually grateful for her hard and merciless training. If it wasn't for that, he would likely already be dead and the Resistance would have lost a precious advantage over the First Order. If it wasn't for that, he might have been waiting for the miracle that would turn the tide of the present battle instead of simply knowing that South Entrance, like the base, was lost from the start.

"Finn, they're gaining on us fast!" The shout came from behind him, from the rather childish looking soldier that had been giving him cover for what seemed to have been hours. "We are not winning this!"

Another atmospheric assault transport was landing on the other side of the battlefield, its underbelly opening to deploy wave after wave of stormtroopers.

"What do we do?"

"Keep them at bay for as long as—"

A huge piece of burning metal, what had been an X-Wing, crashed into the line of assault transports. In a panic, Finn raised his eyes to the sky, searching the carnage overhead for Poe's X-Wing and almost collapsing with relief when he saw the pilot's unmistakable acrobatics still in place. He knew the X-Wing squadrons were being slaughtered. Huge balls of fire were dropping out of the sky, mangled and unrecognizable pieces of metal raining down on both the Order's soldiers and his Resistance allies. He knew that when they did regroup there would be faces missing among the pilots, that he would end up crying over more than one friend. He just prayed Poe was not among them.

His attention left the sky, moving to the soldier behind him and then to the battlefield they were presently sitting on. Shots were flying everywhere and corpses littered the open space between the two fields. The First Order had been able to clear their way to middle field and was now occupying the defensive trenches. In the distance, he could see glimpses of Phasma's silver plated armor as she organized the next assault. Even knowing that the Captain always accompanied her troops, he had not expected or desired to end up locking horns with her. Given the size of the base and the three or four attack fronts she and Hux had put on the ground, Finn had actually been quite certain he would be lucky enough to miss her. Instead, he had found himself personally targeted by her from wave one.
"New assault."

"Guns at the rea—!"

His order was silenced by an aggressive roar. A huge black shuttle, one that he knew too well, was making its way down. The moment it flew overhead, what little hope he had of being able to keep the First Order at bay died. There were far more urgent priorities now.

"Fall back! All of you fall back! Close the door!"

They were dying as they were retreating, three of them caught in the chest by stormtrooper fire, a group to the far right blasted by a passing low-flying TIE. Finn was clenching his teeth, firing into the fast approaching offensive as he made his way to safety.

"Finn! Come on!"

He ran the last few meters. A shot grazed his head, blackening the wall behind him as he dove under the closing doors. The interior was awfully empty. Of his initial thirty man squad, less than half remained and most of them seemed to be injured. A young woman approached him, helping him to his feet with a bloodied hand. At his questioning gaze, her head made a slight move to a small alien propped against the wall. Finn didn't need her to shake her head to know he was dead.

"Has the General left?"

"No. And the door won't hold for long."

"Let's hope it holds long enough."

He turned his blaster against the door's commands, making what was left of the group follow him through the large access corridors of their base. Even if he had learned to never consider anywhere his home, the fast deterioration of the building was depressing to watch. The Resistance hadn't been there that long, but he had been able to bind some places to his memory. The room with the jammed door they were now passing had served as one of the pilot's dormitories. That was where that silly drinking competition Poe had dragged him into had taken place—not that he could remember half of it having been one of the first to succumb to all the alcohol. Then there was the armory, now completely empty. The stairs that lead to the observatory and at the end of the corridor—

A blaster shot crashed into the wall at his side, making them all stop to look at the huge mass of white moving through an adjacent corridor and in their direction.

"Go! Go! Go!"

He pointed his blaster down the corridor, shooting as the rest of the group ran passed. The door to the base headquarters at the end of the corridor was opening. With a last volley of shots, he ran as fast as he could after the rest of the group, bursting through the door and almost falling over a fallen pile of large empty boxes that were sprawled all over the floor. Looking up, he saw the Twi-lek girl, Allya, with her blaster pointed directly at his head. Remembering her actions from earlier made him extremely relieved she wasn't as trigger happy now as she had been when the General had been attacked.

"Put that down and close the door."

She obeyed, rapidly inputting the code as his group surrounded the consoles in the middle of the large room. There were less than ten people there. Well, nine, as the tenth was the golden protocol droid that followed the General everywhere and that, true to his nature, was doing the same now.
Finn stopped next to it, breathing heavily.

"General, we have to go!"

At his words Leia straightened, looking at him over the consoles' display. Finn cringed at the sight of the ugly gash marring the left side of her face. Even if she had looked far worse than she really was when they had rescued her from the burning room, Leia had not escaped unharmed. The right side of her face was swollen, one of her arms wrapped in bandages and her normally elegant moves hindered by a slight limp. Even through her pain, however, it was them and not herself she was worried about.

"So few…"

"Now, General."

"I'm not leaving until everyone is safe."

The structure shook violently, large pieces of debris falling over them as an explosion rocked the building.

"There is no time! They've broken through our defenses. Captain Phasma is leading the ground assault. She'll lock us inside and turn this base into a killing ground!"

Leia moved around the console, making the last remaining staff get up and directing them to the door. Not that she was going with them; her eyes were still set on the radar, following the few ships that had made it past the TIE's and into the Finalizer's line of fire.

"General. They have started firing against the evacuation ships and that huge black shuttle that just landed—"

"I know." Her voice sounded beyond tired. "I know, Finn."

A new explosion was heard in the distance. Blaster shots filled the building.

"South entrance has fallen," announced one of the remaining men. "They are pouring in!"

Finn pulled him from the consoles, shoving both him and his nearest colleague in the direction of the only door left available. Their escape routes were becoming fewer and fewer by the second. If they didn't leave now they might as well spare Phasma the trouble and shoot themselves.

"General!" She had moved to the other side of the console now, her eyes set on the communications display. "Please, don't make me carry you out."

Leia stopped in her tracks, her eyes hardening at his words. A horrible sensation of déjà vu ran through him at the sight of that expression. Whatever she was going to say, however, was cut off by a horrible screeching noise coming from the door. Finn's stomach twisted as he turned around.

"Defensive positions! Destroy the consoles!"

Allya grabbed Leia's arm, pulling her to the exit. That she had decided to act like the General's shadow after the night's events was probably the only good thing that had come out of this.

"Come. We are running out of time."

*If we haven't already.*
Finn dropped behind a stack of empty boxes, adjusting the blaster's scope as the door bent and snapped, crushed from the outside. He knew what was coming. Even if he still had no idea how this Force-thing worked, he was perfectly capable of recognizing its effects. They had a trained Force sensitive on their tracks: one of the enforcers, the so called Knights of Ren.

Finn closed his eyes, leaning his head until it rested on the cold metal of the nearest box. He no longer cared how the Force did or didn't work. The only thing he wished was for it to listen.

*Please, let me get out of this. Let Poe be alive. Let me see Rey again.*

With a last painful screech, the door snapped. A tall ominous figure forced its way through the twisted metal. He knew who it was the moment a cross-shaped lightsaber came into view. Kylo Ren. Out of all of the possibilities, it had to be him.

*Guess the Force is more on their side than ours.*

They were not getting out alive.

"Open fire!"

Ren raised his saber, protecting himself from the onslaught. That, however, was no reason for the way the blasts were missing him. The shots seemed to be bending, hitting walls, consoles and everything else in the room except the person they were aimed at. For a moment, Finn's mind was transported to his first and last battle in the Order's service and the moment that same dark figure had turned to freeze a blaster shot midair. It was that all over again.

*Only this time he has a new trick.*

He had hoped they could at least keep their attacker at bay long enough for the General to enter the labyrinth of corridors that made the evacuation route. Once she was there, she would at least have a shot at saving herself. The time they could have bought, however, seemed now to be completely dependent not on them, but on how quickly Kylo Ren would assess the situation, lock onto his target and make his move. Finn knew that would take just seconds. They had seconds and the General had just reached the exit.

"Keep firing! Protect the General!"

They were still missing and, in a gesture that looked almost mocking, Ren turned to the mangled door, raised his left arm and closed his hand with a brutal gesture. The moment he pulled it down, the entrance collapsed, half of the top floor caving in with a thunderous wail. A cloud of dust and debris burst forward as the lights failed, plunging them all into darkness. In the next instant, they were frozen in place, gripped by a cold, unrelenting force none could get away from and from which only the General had been spared. Finn could see her stopping, her hand gripping the door jamb.

*Don't look back. Run. Run!*  

She didn't, instead she made her way back. Even if she couldn't possibly outrun Ren, even if she would get killed either way, Finn wanted to scream. He should have made her leave sooner, thrown her into an evacuation transport if need be. That should have been his priority. That she was going to get captured or killed by the Order was on his head. It was entirely his responsibility. He should have guessed what their objective was the moment the *Finalizer* had appeared on the radars. After what had happened that same night, he should have known their intentions immediately.

Finn tried to twist himself out of his prison. It was impossible to know how long he could last in a confrontation against Ren, but it should be enough, he hoped, for the General to escape. If he was
going to be killed anyway, he would prefer going down fighting rather than suspended like a piece of meat by a Force trick. But try as he might, he couldn't release himself. The old wound on his back was throbbing with the effort and he couldn't move a single muscle.

Leia stopped in front of him. There was no escape. Her small, proud form was the only thing between all of them and the towering monster standing in the middle of the red tinged shadows. Rey could have stopped him; she had stopped him before. More than wish her there, though, more than wishing he could see her again, he wished desperately that she wouldn't be made to watch what was coming. If she wasn't to be spared their deaths, if the Force was so set on favoring the First Order that it had tipped the scales completely in their favor, then at least a small kindness. That was all he asked for.

*Don't make her see this.*

The threatening hum of the lightsaber was getting closer. Death, he knew, would show no mercy.

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- Rey shows up.

Comments much appreciated as always.
The universe, Rey had discovered, was a web of memory: fragments of what had been, of what was and the echo of half a million possible futures being born and dying in every instant. In it there was nothing permanent save for the past. Finding hers, however, when there was so little to latch onto, was like trying to feel her way in the dark. She had seen fragments of her life in her dreams or in disturbing visions that kept assaulting her, and she remained incapable of understanding.

She had seen fire and rain, been surrounded by death, found herself face to face with Kylo Ren, and all the while been so terrified that the only thing she wished to do was run. Worse still, was when she woke up crying, not even remembering the reason for her tears.

Today, however, it was different. In her meditations, she was running over a small bridge in what appeared to be a well kept garden. Neatly cut shrubs and beds of flowers slipped past her as she went faster and faster. It was beyond beautiful. It felt safe and warm. It felt happy. Her desire to know exactly where she was, though, was not to be pursued. The child she had once been was getting off of the path. Soft grass was now around her feet, roots trying to trip her, shrubs pulling at her hair. Despite that, she didn't stop. Her mind was set on the lake now emerging in front of her and on something orange floating between the water lilies and green moss covering its surface. It was too far for her to reach it, midway between the bridge and shore. Even so, tiny hands stretched in a desperate struggle to capture it, rowing the water in her direction in an effort to get it closer.

"You're going to fall in."

The voice startled her, making her jump backwards and look around in search of whoever was there with her. It took a while to find him. His clothes, a dark shade of brown, blended into the rocks and almost completely hid him. She hadn't noticed him on arrival, but judging by the way he was sitting—his legs folded, head resting on one hand—and the large book laying on the ground in front of him, he had been there for a long time.

Rey bit her lip, ignoring him in favor of the still floating orange object. Her fingers touched one of the water lilies leaves, pulled it aside, and began rowing the water again.

"I said that you're going to fall in."

He seemed older than her dream self, fourteen or maybe fifteen, but time had robbed him of a face or, at least, distorted his features so much that he could have been anyone. Only his voice remained clear: warm, rich, and calm. Deceivingly calm. Not that she had any idea why she thought it so.

"When you do fall, I won't help you."

"I will not—!"

Her hands slipped. In an instant, she was surrounded by cold water, slowly being swallowed by a dark world she couldn't release herself from. Panic grabbed her and then something else did, pulling her back to the light with surprising strength.
"Zero out of ten," she heard the boy's voice say as she gulped for air. "I knocked off ten for the inartistic twist mid air and falling nose first into the water. Put your feet on the pool bed; it's not that deep."

Rey obeyed, stretching her legs until her feet were well set in the ground. Her hair was all over her face, little leaves tangled in it, but she seemed somehow to have escaped the moss. Even if he was not nearly so drenched as her, the boy had not been so lucky where the moss was concerned. His pants had turned green since the last time she had seen him and his hands were not much better.

"All good?"

She nodded, embarrassment gripping her as she noticed the water stopped somewhere around the middle of her chest. He released her and with two careful strides climbed out of the lake, crouching to offer his hand in help. Rey, forcing her way through the water behind him, shook her head.

"I can get out alone." She put her hands on the tiles that outlined the shore, mimicking is movement to get out. "See?"

"I didn't doubt you." He let himself fall onto the grass, using his arms to prop himself up from that position. "What were you doing anyway?"

Rey, mid way through removing the leaves from her hair, looked to the lake, a wave of panic instantly grabbing her.

"My pilot." She could almost feel his confusion. "My doll. It's a Resistance pilot. It has an orange uniform and..."

Her eyes were burning. She could no longer see it. How was she supposed to find it now?

"How did it get there?"

Somewhere inside the little girl, an older Rey fought to answer his question. Had someone thrown the doll in the lake? Had she dropped it? She knew the answer had to be somewhere, but, before she could find it, the boy had sat up, stretching his arm towards the water and all her questions were immediately replaced with the little girl's confusion. She followed his movement, her attention setting first on his arm, then on the lake. Something was disturbing the water. A ripple was forming close to the center, bubbles breaking the surface as if it had started to boil. Rey took a step back, taking refuge behind him.

"What...?"

An orange rag broke the surface, levitating for a moment above the water and shooting straight to the boy's hand.

"Here."

She was gaping at him, so astonished that only when she had the doll secure in her arms was she able to speak.

"Thanks!"

"It's probably full of leeches, though."

Rey screamed, dropping the doll only to hear him trying to suppress a bellyful of laughter. Older Rey wanted to punch him—and hard, for that matter. She really didn't care how old he was, that hadn't
been the least bit funny. Curiously enough, it seemed that was something she and her younger self agreed on. A tiny fist was making contact with his arm, hitting him with all the strength she could muster. She might as well have tickled him, as the contact made him lose all self-restraint. If he had been trying to control his laughter earlier, he was not trying now.

"You're really mean!" she screeched, hugging the water out of the doll. "People won't like you if you do that!"

And yet, whatever her words were, even if she kind of wished to punch him again, she actually felt a strange sense of fondness for the older boy. Biting her lip, she sat down right next to where he laid, columns of light falling all around him.

"What's your name? I'm—"

"Rey!"

For the second time, Rey was startled. This time around, however, she was back in the present, not in meditations that might be long gone memories, and she knew exactly who was calling for her.

"Rey, are you in there?"


She stretched, working out the knots in her back as she stood up. Contrary to the large, well lit garden she had stood in mere seconds ago, reality found her in a small, dark hut with little more than herself for company. Having claimed the shed for herself when she first arrived on the island, Rey had since added small touches to its interior - a small vase she had found while exploring the island was set next to her rather uncomfortable bed; a soft, multi-colored cloth she had found on the *Falcon* was suspended over the door, and the small window, the only source of light, had little cacti growing all over it. Of all her few possessions, her favorite were the flowers. She had cut them herself, dried them and now they were everywhere. In the old vase, peeking from the large gash between the stones and even in the depression in the center of the hut. It was simple, it was close to nothing, but they made the hut feel a little like a home.

Her true home, on the other hand, the *Millenium Falcon*, was still in shambles, too fiercely defended by Chewie to go through any changes, even those it so desperately and clearly needed. Her courage, it seemed, was enough to confront the First Order, but rapidly drained at the sight of the mournful Wookie. She couldn't, for the life of her, take what little he had left of his old friend, of Han Solo, away from him. Even if the carrier felt like a mausoleum, even if she was certain that was the last thing Han would have wished for it to become, she didn't feel she had the right to disturb it.

"Rey?"

Luke's voice was beginning to sound worried. In an instant, Rey was at the door, struggling against the wind to open it and stepping aside to let her visibly relieved Jedi master enter.

"Are you alright? I thought—" He stopped mid sentence. Even half blinded by the strong light outside, his eyes had found the flowers. "Those are new."

"Do you like them?"

He looked around, seemingly thinking about his answer. Rey wanted to smile at the way his mind was fighting to find what to say. She knew he had no strong feelings towards her newest additions. Luke was a minimalist and, true to that, he surrounded himself with those things that served a purpose. He would find beauty in medicinal herbs, tea leaves, and spices. Beauty for the sake of
beauty, however, was a concept he wasn't able to grasp. Even if he was far too polite to ever put his thoughts into words, she knew he saw this particular hobby as a waste of time.

"It's agreeable," he ended up saying, the mechanical hand combing his hair backwards as his blue eyes turned again to her, concerned. "Are you alright? I have been calling you for some time."

"My apologies, I was distracted."

Luke frowned at those words, clearly conscious of their true meaning.

"Did you see something?"

Rey hesitated.

"Just a boy."

Well, if there was a way of saying something and absolutely nothing at all simultaneously, she had surely mastered it. Maybe it was because she had only known Luke for a short amount of time, but she never been particularly comfortable sharing her visions with him. If anything, he had by now grown accustomed to her vague responses. Today, however, the idea of sharing what she saw, of telling him about the boy from her meditations, was causing more than simple discomfort. She suddenly felt defensive.

"A child? A living child?"

"If he's real, I don't think he's a child anymore."

"I see." In an instant, hope turned to sadness. "Try not to lose yourself in the past, Rey. It's the present and future that should interest us, not the shadow of what was."

"I haven't forgotten your teachings."

"Nor my criticism," he sighed, disapproval directed at himself. "Tell me about this friend of yours."

She knew that the question was coming and, even so, was caught off guard. If Luke hadn't noticed her lack of eagerness to talk before, he did now. His expression became softer.

"I rarely see you smile, Rey, and yet this young man filled you with happiness," he noted. "I can see it in your face. Tell me about him."

Rey massaged her neck. The garden, so vivid mere moments ago, was rapidly losing its colors. All the small details, the moss, the flowers, even the boy's voice, were all leaving her. Even so, she remembered him well. She had no wish to forget him.

"He was nice, and kind of mean, but at the same time."

"Sounds like my sister."

Right, because that made so much sense.

"General Organa is really sweet."

"Obviously you've never seen her on a bad day—or tried to save her. She has a really sharp tongue. If I remember correctly, she called Chewie a walking carpet."

Rey didn't know if she should laugh or not. Knowing the aforementioned Wookie, she felt more like
admiring the General's nerve than anything else. Luke, on the other hand, was lost to his memories, melancholy drawing a smile on his tired features.

"And the Falcon, you should have heard her—"

A low growl came from the door. Chewbacca's head broke through the cloth. It took a few moments for Rey to understand what he was saying and, when she did, Luke was already out the door. She grabbed both her staff and the lightsaber and sprinted after him, her stomach tying itself into an uncomfortable knot as she stepped onto the grass and climbed to one of the tallest huts. Rey could hear the communication device crackling before she entered; the voices coming from it were indistinct, but the sounds…

*The Resistance is under attack.* Those had been Chewie's words. What she was hearing though…

"Those are blaster shots. They—the First Order is inside their base!"

Luke was fighting to get the signal clearer and for an instant she thought she heard Finn's voice, urgent and commanding, on the other side. The uncomfortable knot was now painfully similar to being stabbed.

"We have to help!"

"You will not get there in time. Calm down, Rey."

Only she couldn't. Explosions were coming from the listening device and Finn's voice—because it was definitely Finn's voice—was there with them. She couldn't stay here, safe and sound, and simply listen. She had to do something. She had to—

Before she was able to think about what she was doing, she had stormed out, her face hit by the cold oceanic breeze as she ran downhill. Luke was shouting her name, but she wasn't listening. The *Falcon*. She had to get to the *Falcon*. She had to save them.

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- checking back in with the strategist.

Comments much appreciated.
"Three left," Hux counted, his eyes leaving the Finalizer's damage report to face the black clad group gathering on the shadowy bridge. "It shouldn't take too long before you run out of allies, Ren."

"General, this isn't wise."

_I'm not in the mood to be wise._

Even so he had to recognize that Phasma, now taking her place at his side, was right. Even with his eyes dropping to focus on the report before him and his mind half consumed by the calculations pertaining to the time needed to ship and install the two main thrusters a single demented X-Wing pilot had somehow managed to destroy, he could see Kylo Ren pacing around the bridge. Even the Knights, what was left of them anyway, were staying away from him.

Personally, however, he was either becoming suicidal or his fury was leading him into the realms of lunacy. He wasn't, and had never been, afraid of Kylo Ren. True, he kept a close eye on the man's explosive temper, but that was more out of concern for the Finalizer's well-being than his own. He was also perfectly aware that Ren could physically overpower him with ease and that the Force would only make that easier. He knew he was dangerous. Even so, he didn't tiptoe around him, didn't censor his thoughts, and didn't for one moment hide his dislike for the man. That being said, he had always been prudent and it was that exact sense of caution that he felt dangerously close to throwing out the proverbial window.

It had taken three days—three bloody days—to conquer and stabilize the area, and what did they have to show for it? An empty, half-collapsed building, an ever growing pile of Resistance fighters' corpses and assorted body parts, his flagship floating uncontrollably for Force knows how long, and _no dead Leia Organa!_

He didn't care if Ren was acting like a demented caged beast. For once, he was sure that no matter how pissed the Enforcer was, he himself was more so.

"We had them surrounded," Hux observed. For all his fury, his voice hadn't lost the cool, collected tone it normally possessed. "How did she escape?"

A short, uncomfortable silence was the first answer to his question, then, to his surprise, Phasma took a step forward.

"I assume the responsibility for that, General."

"I fear I'm not understanding you."

"A large number of the stormtroopers responsible for closing the northern entrance betrayed us. I had personally handpicked them. This is my responsibility."
If the silence was uncomfortable before, now it could have been cut with a knife. Hux's fingers ran over the reports edges' time and time again. He hadn't bothered to look in Phasma's direction on arrival; in his mind, failure was not something associated with the Captain, and therefore he couldn't possibly say what shocked him more: her words or the state of her normally impeccably polished silver armor. She looked a mess—mud and blood were smeared all over the protections and on her right side the plates had turned black from corrosion. The acrid smell they gave was assaulting his nostrils in such a way that he couldn't fathom how he hadn't noticed something was off before. Even knowing they had just come from the planet's surface, that was not normal.

"Details."

"There is little more to it, Sir. Our north offensive collapsed as soon as it hit the ground. The troops began fighting each other instead of the Resistance and their general took advantage of the situation. Survivors report a large number of stormtroopers jumping into the transport with her."

Hux dropped the report on the nearest console, pinching his nose as he tried and nearly failed to keep his rising fury from bursting forward. Nobody, least of all himself, had anything to gain by having the commanding officer of the *Finalizer* losing his ability to think straight. He needed answers and he needed them fast.

"Why wasn't I informed?"

"We have been fighting pockets of our own men from the moment the Resistance left. I ordered radio silence."

She didn't continue, even so he knew perfectly what was left unsaid. Neither she nor any of the stormtroopers were particularly knowledgeable about the *Finalizer*, but to see it floating lazily in the sky would have set alarm bells off in the mind of even the densest of the soldiers. The Resistance certainly knew more than enough about his command ship's current state; he doubted the pilot responsible for it hadn't repeated his story to exhaustion by now. Considering what Phasma was saying, he could easily imagine the thoughts behind her decision: no need for the Resistance to know the full reach of their present predicament and take advantage of it. It had been a sound decision. That being said, he really wished she hadn't bothered to make it. The *Finalizer* was more than capable of surviving those Resistance flies. It had all its cannons still in place, it was maneuverable even without the main thrusters, and presently he really needed to take a shot at something least he went completely off his rocker from sheer frustration.

The strategy had been close to perfect. He had studied it again and again in search of the mortal flaw that landed them in their present situation, but the flaw had been something he couldn't control. They had been betrayed and, because of that, they were fighting traitors on some backwater planet instead of loading a body to present to the Supreme Leader upon returning to headquarters. The only silver lining he could think of—because at least some of his hard thought plan had actually been a success—was that in its hasty retreat, the Resistance was unknowingly revealing their hideouts. He had made sure to put tracers on all the ships they had let escape. Not that he would get his hopes up based on that, as the ships had gone in all possible directions. The hunt would take time and there was no assurance it would lead them to their target. Even so it was better than nothing; at least they weren't again at the start line, like they had been after the Ilenium system. This time they had leads. He could work with that.

*More like I have to work with that.* With the Technology Department handling his latest request at the speed it was moving, he really had no choice.

"How much longer until we control the surface?"
"Hours, Sir. But I would advise making a full sweep of the area with the Finalizer's tracking system before leaving."

"We are not leaving anytime soon, Captain," he retorted. "Your men will have days to comb the area extensively before we get any assistance here."

He took the report again only to stop before actually having the chance to start reading it. There was that strange silence again. What was it now? Why was he having to force every bit of information out of Phasma? What—?

He stopped in the middle of his exasperated mental tirade and carefully studied the remaining Knights. The man with the detonators was not in a much better state than the Captain. Judging by the pattern of the burns and torn cloth, he had probably been right beside her when whatever happened had happened. Not obviously injured, but clearly using the small frame of the female Knight for support, the surviving member of the muscle duo didn't seem any worse for wear. That being said, one of them was bleeding, as he could see drops of blood marring the floor.

Phasma's reticence to talk—

"And the other Knight—?"

His mind screeched to a halt. Who exactly was missing? How was he supposed to know that when the two Knights were so disturbingly similar? Last time he had seen them together, down in the Officer's Quarters, it had been easy, but while apart…

_I have no time for this._

His eyes abandoned the group to focus on the dark figure now coming in their direction.

"Who did we so tragically lose, Ren?"

The remaining Knights shrank. Phasma, on the other hand, didn't.

"The missing Knight was gunned down," she informed.

"By whom?"

"Harbor a guess, General."

This time the voice answering belonged to Ren. If Hux had expected his tone to match his angry stance, he would have been wrong. His voice was calm, mocking and deadly. The reason everyone in the group was walking on eggshells was more than clear now. The last time they had heard that tone, one of his bridge officers had ended up half strangled.

"I assume the responsibility for that as well."

Phasma's words made Ren stop in his tracks. His torso turned slowly in their direction, the dark mask hiding his eyes settling menacingly on them.

"If Veshay was stupid enough to get herself killed, it's on her head not yours, Captain." Ren started, leading Hux to the realization that he had been incorrect in his initial assumption that three of the Knights were male. If their uniforms didn't hide the most basic details… "As for your apologies, I would rather have a corpse than empty words."

"We are making all possible efforts to find it, Sir."
"Clearly you will have to double those," he said. "We will not leave without the body. I don't care how long it takes or what you have to do. I want it retrieved."

Hux pinched the bridge of his nose. Once upon a happier time, he would be blissfully unaware of where the present conversation was leading. Unfortunately, that innocent version of himself had crashed and burned somewhere down the line and become far more knowledgeable than it wished.

"If you think I will be turning the Infirmary into a morgue, Ren, you—"

But Phasma had not finished talking. Her voice, far calmer than either his or Ren's, was filling the bridge and for some reason what she said was far more audible than his exasperated words. It was like watching a disaster unfolding in slow motion.

"Sir, we have to consider the possibility this Veshay has been captured, or possibly deserted."

And there it was—Ren's infamous temper, run over. The unstable red lightsaber sprang to life. A group of officers in Ren's vicinity scrambled out of the way as he took a long step towards the nearest console and raised the weapon.

_There goes the communication system_, a rather nonchalant voice in the back of his mind said, watching as the blade crashed into the console, once-twice-again...

Hux stopped counting. The fury he had been keeping in check finally boiled over—the final straw in an entirely too horrific day.

_I'm going to kill him!_

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- The Scavenger

Comments much appreciated.
The Scavenger

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Scavenger - Day 4

Master Luke was furious.

Sitting behind the commands of the *Millenium Falcon*, her eyes glued to the *Finalizer's* large frame, Rey muttered an honest apology to Luke's last message, permitted herself a moment's hope, and made the communication system receiver run through the channels used by the First Order.

Like all times before that, however, she had no luck. Apart from the communications between the TIE squadrons that were flying around the warship, the region was eerily quiet. There had not been a single message received nor one sent since she arrived, and even at this distance it wasn't difficult to see something had gone very wrong with the warship.

*I hope the Resistance was what went wrong.*

A small group of strange looking ships left the *Finalizer's* monstrous hangar, maneuvering around it until they reached the thrusters. Rey followed them with her eyes, observing their slow, careful motions with interest. The group was entering one of the larger ship's thrusters. She was too far away to see exactly what they were doing but some half hour later the small dots reappeared. As they pulled away, the thruster came with them, slowly separating from its socket.

"That's kind of cool," she murmured, sprawled over the *Falcon's* commands to try to take a better look at what was happening. If they were going to repair the thruster, she really would have a hard time not getting the *Falcon* closer. A thing that size…

Repairing, though, didn't seem to be on the Order's agenda. The ships dragged the thruster and released it, letting it fall in the planet's direction. In an instant, a flame appeared against the green. Rey felt her heart ache. That could have been dismantled and used to—

She stopped herself before she finished.

*I'm not a scavenger anymore.*

Even so, seeing the second thruster joining the first and burn on entry was not made easier. Her mind had gone back to selling parts and buying portions and that was not a place she could easily get away from. It had been part of her life for far too much time.

*I'm a Jedi apprentice and I'm not here to worry about how many portions the First Order just burnt.*

She turned to the communication system again. The search kept finding only silence. She stopped it and turned the handle manually, listening for anything that could have been from the Resistance.

*Come on. Come on.*

Silence again.

Like Luke had said, she was too late, far too late to help anyone. They could have escaped, of
course, but even that was looking bleaker and bleaker. She had been trying to keep her eyes as far away from the carcasses of several Resistance ships floating around her as possible, but she had to acknowledge their presence. Even if some really had been able to escape, the First Order attack had been a bloodbath and the chances of survival were slim.

"Chewie, are you having any luck?"

A long growl answered her question. It was a 'no.' Even so Rey jumped out of the pilot's chair determined to join him in the *Falcon*’s common room. The moment she did so a stab of pain in her shoulder stopped her in her tracks, making her reach for the back of the chair while groaning.

*Not this again.*

She lowered herself into the chair, forcing her breathing to remain slow and controlled as she waited for the pain to subside.

Chewie, who clearly had heard her groan, entered the cockpit.

"I'm fine," she assured him, smiling at the wookie. "Don't worry. Just a cramp."

It was an outright lie, but there was nothing she could have said that actually described what that sudden sensation was or what was causing it. There was absolutely no reason for her to be feeling any sort pain but—

*It always comes back.*

She took a slow, controlled breath, silencing the fear that rose in her heart every time the sensation she had come to call 'ghost pain' resurfaced. It was not that bad this time. It was bearable, manageable. No reason to worry. Master Luke had assured her there was nothing wrong with her. She was fine.

*I am fine.*

Only there were moments she sincerely doubted she was.

There had been one particular occasion some weeks after her arrival on Ach-Too that had cemented that certainty in her mind rather deeply. Even if looking at that moment from the comfortable distance of the present made her accept that between her fear for Finn's life and the shock of Han Solo's death, she had had more than a few reasons to feel as unwell as she was feeling, the profound mental exhaustion she had been struggling with was anything but normal. Even now, remembering that was disturbing. She had felt tired to the point of not being able to feel. She had been sure she would return to normal the moment Finn woke up only…

*I didn't.*

She had been afraid then. She knew she had to talk to someone, but Finn, the only person she felt comfortable with, was on the other side of the galaxy and Master Luke…

*Why can't I ever bring myself to talk to him? He is wise and kind and...*  

And she knew he cared about her. Every time she had tried to tell him though, she ended up changing the subject.

*And then I almost gave him a heart attack.*
It embarrassed her to think about it. She had been on the top of the island with him, in the exact same place she had met him, trying to convince him to take her as his apprentice, when it happened. She wouldn't forget it for as long as she lived, the way the massive wave of agony had crashed into her and sent her to the ground. She didn't remember anything else until she had woken to Luke’s concerned face but the pain—she couldn't forget that pain. It was like all her bones had been broken. Like before, however, there was nothing wrong with her. Nothing, at least, that anyone could find and for some reason the agony had burnt the lethargy out of her. Mentally, she felt like herself again. It was all so strange, so completely nonsensical that after that occasion, she had never said a word about it again. In her mind, she felt that if she ignored it, it would end up going away. Only, it never had. It had become sporadic and never again affected her mood that seriously, but the pain always came back.

*It's like something snapped inside my shoulder,* she thought. Her fingers felt around the muscle going from her chest to her arm, touching the pained spot carefully but, as suspected, there was nothing wrong. She took a deep breath, prepared for a stab of pain and pressed the muscle. Again nothing.

She should just stop being stubborn and talk to Luke. Or, if not to him, because she had the irritant tendency of getting tongue tied next to him, to someone else who could give her a hint about what was happening. Maz Kanata, for example. She knew about the Force; she was really old, old enough to remember the Jedi Order in its prime and possibly to have shared their knowledge. Maz Kanata would know what to do. She was a good bet.

*Not that I know where she is.*

Well, maybe not that good.

*I could make the best of my time here, go tap on the Finalizer's door and ask Kylo Ren,* she told herself sarcastically. *A nice talk, a hot cup of tea, and, with any luck, I could also make that General of theirs tell me what happened to the Resistance.*

If Finn was here to hear that he would be laughing. Laughter, however, didn't come to her easily; it was one of the many things Jakku had burnt out of her while nurturing a crushing feeling of loneliness and fear of loss.

*They can't be dead. Finn can't be dead.*

She forced herself to swallow the pain and got up. Chewie was waiting for her in the main room, an auricular next to his ear.

"Still nothing?"

He growled, shaking his head in response.

"I think the *Finalizer* is having some problems with its communications. The system is completely silent,* Rey said, taking a seat besides the Wookie. The surveillance equipment he had connected to the *Falcon* was ancient. As far as their current predicament went, however, it was probably their best bet on finding anyone. "What do you think we should do? Do we risk sending a message? If we wait much longer..."

She felt her heart drop at the sound of her own words. She had been waiting most of her life. Hadn't Jakku taught her anything about what that accomplished?

Chewie’s large hand gripped her shoulder gently, a low, complex set of roars rising from his chest.
"I know."

*If they're dead they won't come back, and if they're alive we better find them ourselves.*

She got up.

"We're leaving then."

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- checking in with Hux.

Comments always appreciated.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Strategist - Day 5

"General, this is not a good time."

"Is it ever?"

The thunder crackled overhead, a low rumble filling the air as he looked around to access his surroundings. In all, Hux admitted, he had been expecting a lot worse than what he was seeing. Phasma's reports had led him to believe the region was still littered with bodies and other remnants of the battle. She had gone so far as to try and redirect his arrival to Landing Area 1 near South Entrance just the day previous on the grounds that North Entrance was not fit to receive anyone.

Either the Captain had a very different idea of what 'fit' meant or she had made the soldiers labor all night to get it to its present state. There were no bodies, no wrecked X-Wings or TIEs, no discarded weapons—in fact, if it was not for the scorched marks on the buildings and blood on the ground, the overturned vehicles that had clearly been barricades and the defensive trenches, not to mention the gutted former base with one of its three domes collapsed—he would have had a hard time convincing himself that he truly was standing on a recent battlefield.

*Even the smell is wrong,* he thought as the cold wind whipped the long jacket against his body, bringing the scent of pine trees, rain and wet earth to his attention. It smelled exactly like Arkanis. Even the tempestuous sky above him looked like the one in Arkanis.

*I'm getting homesick.* The realization hit him the moment he found himself looking up, hoping the sun would break through the heavy clouds he had specifically chosen to synchronize his arrival with. Not that there was any chance of that. He had made sure there wasn't. After that time being forced to inspect one of the Technology Department's weapon development sites while being half-blinded by the sun's glare, he always made sure the sun wouldn't make an appearance during any of his planetary visits. It was only now he really wished he hadn't taken that precaution. He would have enjoyed seeing a column of light breaking from the clouds…

*Now I'm getting homesick and sentimental.*

He rolled his eyes at that. At least the realization had the good side-effect of throwing that idiocy out of his mind. *The quicker I get back to the Finalizer…*

A familiar sound broke his thoughts, forcing his attention towards the line of trees on the other side of the landing pad.

"Do I hear blaster fire, Captain?"

"A patrol detected a group of deserters hiding in the forest," she informed him, her cape flapping in the wind. "Ren took charge of the offensive."

As if in response to her words, a huge column of dirt and pine needles exploded over the top of the trees, moving in the opposite direction of the wind and with an unusual pattern.
"I can see that."

_The one time I want to talk to the man, he's Force blasting his way into battle._

"I believe you discovered something of interest?"

"I could have sent that up, Sir."

"You said that yesterday, Captain, and the day before. Where is it?"

Phasma turned on her heels, signaling for him to follow her.

She guided him around the building and then through a heavily guarded secondary landing area Hux believed to be the one he had initially considered for the offensive and ended up deciding against. If he was correct both on his present whereabouts—which he believed he was, judging by the clover like arrangement of the landing platforms—and on his previous assessment of the regional risks, there should be a cleverly placed line of defensive towers somewhere in the same direction as the distant, and now skeletal, anti-aircraft battery to the south.

_And there they are._

Only three remained standing and just one was intact. The strange thing, though—

"Captain, why are we felling trees?"

"Corpse disposal, Sir," she informed him, not even looking up from her data pad. "I thought it safer considering how much time it's taking to control the area."

Corpse disposal—he swore if that somehow involved constructing massive bonfires on Ren's orders…

"And the trees, Captain?" he insisted, pointing her attention towards the large clearing next to the former defensive towers. "What was that for?"

"Graves. I ordered the bodies of the soldiers who remained loyal to the Order be buried away from the ones of traitors and Resistance fighters."

"That, Captain, is a waste of time."

"I see it as pragmatism, Sir. No need to alienate any devoted soldiers over the treatment we give their dead comrades. Things are bad enough as it is."

They entered the forest, walking over the crushed weeds of an overgrown path until a clearing opened among the trees and a large group of stormtroopers came into view. One really didn't need to ask what they were walking into; the stench was enough. Forget Arkanis, the place smelled exactly of what it was: a mass grave.

"We had to reopen this site. There is a discrepancy between registries that needs to be clarified," Phasma informed him as a soldier on the farthest end of the large pit to his right scanned a body, gave a command, and the two transporting it threw it inside the hole. "Lieutenant."

A soldier with a red shoulder guard approached, handed another screen to Phasma, and removed himself from their presence at her command. Only when he was sufficiently out of earshot did she give him the monitor.

"North Entrance."
Hux frowned, selecting said entry and running through it. The information being displayed was little more than a chain of stormtroopers' identification numbers and their statuses. Even so, it took only a moment to notice a pattern between several of those who were neither identified as 'Deceased' nor 'Alive.'

"We had an entire battalion join the Resistance," he commented, evenly, after looking the document up and down for several minutes. "And its complete chain of command."

Phasma took a step closer; her voice had become so quiet it was actually difficult to understand her. "Sir, was this battalion acting under your command?"

"I wouldn't take control over your subordinates without bringing it to your attention first, Captain."

"I had hoped you might." She looked around, on the other extreme of the pitch the soldiers were throwing another corpse down the hole. "Do you believe Ren might have ordered it?"

"As an infiltration attempt or treason?"

"The first one, Sir."

Hux cleared away the drops of rain that were starting to hit the screen.

"His orders were to kill the Resistance Leader. I fail to see what that would accomplish in that scenario."

Unless he wished to let her escape…

The thought flashed through his mind like lightning just to be cast aside a second later. Unless Ren wished to bring the full force of the Supreme Leader's wrath down on himself—and they were all bound to brave that particular storm after this new fiasco—there was absolutely no reason to do something as obvious as what Phasma was presently showing him.

This would be the height of stupidity…

The man might be a compassionate fool, but he was not a brainless one—well, not counting that foolishness with the scavenger girl. His reticence to rip the information out of her head and kill her had exploded in his face and almost gotten him killed. If anything, they should be grateful to the girl for curing him of that particular brand of idiocy and, if not to her, then to the Supreme Leader. Whatever that training had been, it had worked. Not that he had the same amount of faith in the Supreme Leader's methods as Snoke himself seemed to have, but—

I'm expecting him to relapse at any moment, not to part ways with his senses entirely.

And by that he meant he was expecting a not so obvious act of kindness, not a clear act of treason. Even he had more faith in Kylo Ren than that. Not much, truth be told, but enough. Even so—

Better safe than sorry.

"Keep this information out of Ren's hands for the time being, Captain," he said, his eyes still on the screen. If Ren was betraying them, Hux would be keeping the upper hand. "You talked about a discrepancy in the registries?"

Phasma's fingers were tapping on the blaster.

"I wish to have more than suspicions before discussing that, Sir."
"As you wish. And," he hesitated, his mind still knocking around the missing battalion and ending up scratching around a name he could not make himself remember. "The missing Knight?"

"We remain unable to—"

She stopped, looking over his head towards the forest. There was something moving between the trees, heavy footsteps could be heard crushing leaves and behind it—

"Defensive positions!" Phasma shouted above the approaching sound of blaster fire.

The group of stormtroopers lead by Phasma had only enough time to close ranks in front of Hux before a group burst out of the forest, blasters firing towards the trees as if they were running away from someone. The identity of said pursuer become apparent the same instant a massive wave of air threw one of the stormtroopers across the clearing and into the pit behind them.

"Friendly incoming. Choose targets, men! Fire only on my command!" Phasma's voice paused, waiting. "Fire!"

The retreating figures fell in a volley of shoots, rapidly being replaced by a second, larger group stumbling out of the forest and again into Phasma line of fire.

"Fire!"

Another Force blast, this time followed by the unmistakable sound of a lightsaber crashing into something.

More likely someone.

He could see it now, the red tinge between the green and grey trees and a fast approaching black clad figure. A third group of stormtroopers was also coming into view. Phasma held her open hand up in front of her group, concentrating on the battle between the trees. The blaster fire was coming closer and closer.

"Back away slowly, men. Keep General Hux covered at all costs. Guns at the ready," she called. "General, leave that pistol alone and put your head down!"

There was blaster fire flying around them now, most of it too high to represent any real danger as they backed away. The group between the trees was approaching fast. The red lightsaber thundered, arking wide and whipping a stormtrooper square in the chest. Behind it, a group of soldiers was becoming visible, marching a few meters behind the dark figure.

"Aim for anyone not behind the Commander. Keep a low line of fire. At my command."

The air exploded: gunfire, shouts, and the aggressive roar of a lightsaber echoing all around them. It all ended as suddenly as it started. In the middle of the rapidly controlled chaos, only two figures remained locked as if in battle. Kylo Ren, his saber ablaze in his hands, and an extremely tall, muscular stormtrooper impaled at the chest by the red blade.

Ren's left hand stretched to the white helmet, the white faceless protection fell to the ground, rolling over the high grass and stopping. The dark visor of Ren's helmet locked with a pair of blue eyes until they glazed over, then the saber was pulled out of the man's chest, letting him fall limply to the ground.

"Take him. Secure the region," he ordered to the two soldiers at his back, moving away from them and towards Phasma as he spoke. "Captain, I was lead to believe this area had been abandoned."
"A last minute decision, Sir."

"Have you found the body?"

"We haven't and I have to reiterate my belief that this Veshay deserted. The sooner we consider this scenario—"

"Captain," Ren interrupted, his tone polite but final. "I'm the one who has the unfortunate pleasure of knowing Veshay. Treason is your men's expertise, not hers."

Hux pinched his nose at that. Contrary to what had happened when they first had been hit by a desertion—that of FN-2187—he really had no way of dismissing that accusation now. Even so, Ren's tone was infuriating in the extreme.

"What are you suggesting, Sir?" Phasma asked.

"That she truly and completely become one with the Force, apparently," Hux offered, putting away his weapon as several soldiers ran past them. "You might want to start considering contamination, Ren, instead of this blind faith in this Veshay."

"And you might start considering using the Finalizer as more than an ornament in the sky, General, and run a planetary sweep over this place."

"Might I remind you, Ren, that your antics with that saber damaged more than just our communication system," Hux retorted, and there was a small sense of victory in knowing that, for once, the result of one of Ren's temper tantrums was proving as frustrating to him as to everyone else. "If you want a planetary sweep, use the Force."

"There are ways one can hide from the Force," Ren snapped. "As for your question, Captain, I don't remember ever stating I believed Veshay to be dead, only that I wanted the body as proof."

That made both he and Phasma pause. There were times Hux sincerely wished he could put his hands around the bloody man's neck and squeeze. How were they supposed to know that?!

"Neither I nor the Captain can read minds, Ren," he growled. "If this Veshay is alive, what would her present course of action be?"

"Concern yourself with finding Veshay's or her body's whereabouts, General. Her actions are none of your concern."

Of course, because having you hunting someone down never affected us in any way.

If he needed any more reasons for opposing the Knights involvement with military operations, Ren had just about given him another one. It wasn't enough that they disrupted the chain of command and their orders took precedence over everything else; now the fleet, his fleet, had to worry about the Knights—unless he was very much mistaken on his reading of the situation—inner conflicts.

I will not have lightsaber battles aboard the Finalizer! Force knew his flagship had already suffered enough damage from one lightsaber wielding maniac without having two or more doing the same. He had to get rid of them—both Ren and his Knights—and the sooner the better.

Oh, now there's an idea.

"I believe you are familiar with sector DCF-98."
Ren's visor locked with his eyes, cold drops of rain falling against his helmet as he did so. When he spoke, his voice held not annoyance but something akin to nostalgia.

"Smuggler space."

Hux was momentarily thrown off balance. Smuggler space? What in the Force's name—had the man hit his head?

"DCF-98 has been under our control for more than three years," he corrected, impatiently. "It holds one of our advance posts and several construction plants."

Not that it was half as productive as it should be. The local Resistance cell was far too disruptive for that and frankly, until now, he had considered several times if it wouldn't be less costly to move the production elsewhere and level the area over maintaining the site.

It's lucky I've been too busy to take any sort of action.

"Why is this of interest to me, General?"

"I believe you are fluent in this particular primitive dialect," he continued, rain falling softly around them. "And since you rendered the Finalizer unable to send a distress signal—"

"You need a messenger."

"For which you will do. Unless, of course, you have some pressing business to attend to or wish to remain indefinitely stranded with us. Your choice."

Silence and then finally to his surprise:

"Very well. Anything else?"

Since you are, for once, willing to be useful...

"If you cross paths with the local Resistance cell, wipe it out."

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- let's see how Finn is doing.

Comments appreciated now and forever.
The Stormtrooper - Day 6, Part 1

The hangar was bursting with activity, dozens of people running around shouting orders at each other as several groups of mechanics fell on top of the arriving X-Wings.

Carrying a large container of spare parts between them, Poe and Finn made their way towards the ship closest to the carrier's inner door, stopping from time to time to let several large groups that moved in unison pass. Even without their white armor and helmets—and some of them had kept those—it was easy to guess who they were.

*We can get out of the Order, but getting the Order out of us isn't so easy.*

About an hour ago, Poe had feigned tripping to ram him out of a stormtrooper line he had, apparently, been falling in and out of as he fetched spare parts for the pilot. Not five minutes had passed since that same pilot had dropped a huge wrench dangerously close to his feet to stop him from going as stiff as a board every time the commanding officer moving an extremely organized stormtrooper battalion around the hangar shouted an order.

Despite his frustrated reactions to Poe's not so subtle attempts to snap him out of First Order conditioning, Finn was actually quite grateful for his efforts. The last thing he wanted was to start high-stepping around the carrier.

"Where do we drop this?" Finn asked, as they approached the ship. "Don't tell me the platform."

"It's the platform. It really is the platform."

They went around the ship, dropping the heavy load unto the rising platform BB8 was rolling next to. Poe smiled at the tiny droid and hit the "UP" bottom, leaning against his ship and focusing his attention on the center of the hangar. Finn could guess what he was looking at; the commander of the stormtrooper battalion had just put an end to the exercise. Even with his back towards them, he could hear it breaking apart.

"It's fortunate they didn't all need a Resistance pilot to get here," Poe commented with a good natured smile. "Or, you know, I would have to be captured several times."

"That isn't funny, Poe."

"The First Order would have also run out of TIEs by now. I doubt production could handle it. I call that a win-win situation."

Even if he didn't want to, Finn had to smile at that.

"I thought you liked TIEs. Always wanted to pilot one."

"Wanted to own one, actually, and I will salvage one when this mess is over." BB8 emitted a sad beep, leaning closer to Poe's legs. "I'm not leaving you behind, buddy. Those fighters don't know what they're losing without a droid."
That seemed to cheer up BB8, as the next instant he had launched himself into a rapid tirade of beeps. Finn lost the meaning of after the first five seconds. Poe, as expected, didn't.

"Yeah, I've been curious about that too."

"About what?"

Poe climbed nimbly to the top of the raised platform, pointing at a group of soldiers passing next to them with a long tool Finn could only begin to guess the purpose of.

"Do you know them? Any of them?"

Finn looked towards the group he was pointing at and then to hangar as a whole. Most of the former stormtrooper battalion had gone inside the carrier now, but even so…

"I know some faces."

"Friends?"

*Friends* conjured the memory of a tremulous hand fighting to reach his face, screams and gunshots echoing all around him…

"Finn." Poe's worried voice broke through his darker musings. "You did have friends."

"Slip and Nines are dead."

The pilot's face fell. For a moment, he didn't seem to know if he should come down to hug him or remain where he was. Poe being Poe, however, meant not saying something was never going to be an option. Finn, who decidedly did not wish to be alone with his thoughts at the moment, welcomed the distraction.

"Was it us?" Poe asked, leaning over the X-Wing and inserting the tool somewhere inside the cockpit. "The Resistance, I mean."

"It was us or them, buddy. Nothing personal."

Poe didn't seem to be remotely satisfied by his choice of words, but even so he didn't push it. His upper body disappearing again inside the cockpit instead.

"Why 'Slip'?" he asked, his voice muffled by his position.

"He kept falling behind in training, and I kept going back to get him, so, Slip."

The pilot's head resurfaced, one hand pushing the hair away from his eyes.

"What the hell did they call you?"

"Eight-Seven."

BB8 emitted a rapid sequence of beeps. Whatever he was saying forced a snort out of Poe before he dove again into the cockpit.

"Yeah, we should all be grateful I got to him before he named himself. Slip—poor guy."

*He fell against you.*
The thought arrived uninvited, leaving a bitter taste in Finn's mouth. He had never told Poe a lot of things: his involvement in the attack in that village in Jakku, for example, or how he had never wished to take up arms against the First Order, but most of all he had never told him the real reason that had lead to his desertion and had no intention of ever doing so. Slip's death was more the First Order's responsibility than it would ever be Poe's. If Finn had to distribute blame, himself, Phasma and Hux—in that order—would be the ones he would be pointing fingers at. He doubted, however, that Poe would see things like that. To kill some faceless stormtrooper he didn't know existed was one thing, but to know he had killed one of Finn's friends…

No, there was no need to burden him with that.

"You know, I still find it surprising that so many people—" Poe stopped mid sentence, looking around the raised platform and then to the ground. "Pass me that toolbox there, Finn. No that other one. The one with the red handles." Finn raised said toolbox up to his outstretched hands. "Thanks."

"You were saying?" Finn asked as Poe started muttering to himself, looking for whatever tool he needed.

"What? Oh—I find it curious so many stormtroopers are willing to leave the First Order and join the Resistance," he said, his face strangely contemplative as he looked down at Finn. "I also find it curious you've been showing less and less enthusiasm with each new arrival."

Finn blinked.

"I have?"

At his feet, BB8 gave a clearly affirmative beep.

*Even the droid thinks so?*

"The first time," Poe said, throwing the tool he had just reached for back to the toolbox and going through it again. "You were really happy. That was when we saved that group who was going to be executed for hiding villagers from a firing squad. You talked to them for hours. Almost broke their backs hugging them, really."

Finn rolled his eyes at that description. Anyone who heard Poe talking would think he went around terrorizing new arrivals with cuddles.

"But now," the pilot continued, "It's like you would prefer they hadn't come. Rey—her name is Rey, right?—Rey saves a shipment of stormtroopers and leaves one of the Knights stranded in the middle of nowhere? Pure genius, by the way—and you don't so much as bat an eye, you didn't even talk to them. By the Force, you looked at them like they were a ticking time bomb or something." He entered the X-Wing cockpit, his words mixing with the metallic clangs of repairs. "And then, these guys who were parading around the hangar, you know, the ones that jumped on the evacuation ships with the General, appear and your mood gets dark as hell."

Poe's arms appeared over the X-Wings open cockpit, a large mechanical device in his hands.

"Catch this."

And he threw it down. Finn raised his arms, caught it, and almost fell back as, a second later, something much larger fell right in front of him. He could feel his heart almost stopping in his chest as he retreated.

"Really, Poe?" He groaned as he recognized the pilot as the second falling object. "I see this thing
coming at my head and then you jump behind it? Do you want to give me a heart attack?"

"Not my intention."

He took the device from Finn's hands, sat it on the first steps to the still raised platform and turned it sideways, trying to pull something out of a small socket. Finn followed his movements with interest. Was that the radio or the board computer? Poe had said he had been having problems with both of them. Before he could ask, however, the pilot had stopped to look at him, all teasing gone from his dark eyes.

"So what I was trying to get at with all that talk about stormtroopers and them joining the Resistance was—is something rubbing you the wrong way?"

Finn opened his mouth to give that question a sound 'no,' but stopped with his mouth half opened looking at Poe and then at BB8 and then back at Poe. There had been something in the pilot's words that was tickling in the back of his mind. He really couldn't say anything about any past behavior. That carrier Rey had taken from under the Knights' nose had given him fits of laughter and he really couldn't remember any particular feeling that could have made Poe think like he did, but this most recent group of deserters, the ones now walking around the carrier…

"Look, it's nothing important," he tried to assure Poe, but the pilot's eyes didn't leave him. "It's just…"

How do I even put this without sounding like some kind of First Order sympathizer?

"I don't like their over eagerness to shoot against their former allies and even less how easily they left their own comrades to die." Well, that could have sounded a lot worse. It could also sound a lot better and now his thoughts were tripping all over each other. "It's not like if you were shooting at the First Order. I mean, if I want to compare it, it would be more like you opening fire against the Resistance. They're the people you grew up with, the people you know, your friends and even if you don't think about it at the time, it isn't easy. Or it shouldn't be because—"

An incoming vessel warning spared him trying to get that to make sense, but not until BB8 gave a long euphoric beep and almost ran over his and Poe's feet did he turn. Next thing he knew, he was sprinting behind the droid, waving his arms at the ship as it landed.

"Rey! Rey!"

The Millenium Falcon landed in the middle of the hangar, opening its large entrance as it did so. He was inside before it totally hit the ground. One second later, he had run into something—not Rey but a large, hairy, brown thing with huge hands that saluted him by almost splitting his back in two.

"I'm also happy to see you, Chewie," he mumbled, barely able to breathe as the wookie turned away from him and growled. Next thing he knew, a smaller frame had hugged and released him.

Rey, looking a lot more healthy and well-fed than the last time he had seen her, was there. By the Force, he had to present her to Poe. Damn, he had to introduce her to half the people there!

"How did you find us?" he asked, as she crouched down to talk to BB8.

"Luck. A lot of it." The answer made him smile. Luck was what she had said every time one of her plans didn't end up going in the exact opposite way she had intended. "Master Luke received your distress message, but when I arrived at the system, there was no one there but the First Order. I heard them inside the base. I thought they'd killed everyone. What happened?"
Finn found himself opening and closing his mouth at her question. It was the exact question he had made all possible efforts not to think about over the last few days rearing up—the half collapsed room, the invisible hand keeping him in place, the dark monster making his way towards the General and then when they should all have been killed—

"Finn?" Rey insisted. "How did you get out?"

Luck, he wanted to reply. We had help, he could have said. All good answers that would have bought him time to explain that absolutely unbelievable situation that somehow seemed to indicate the Order's Enforcer had completely lost his marbles. What came out of his mouth was the worst thing he could have told her, the same thing Kylo Ren had said even before he had turned off his lightsaber and an explosion had pulled him out of whatever trance had made him stop in front of the General and reach a hand out towards her face.

"Kylo Ren has orders to kill the General."

Rey's eyes were the size of saucers, a horrified expression he had only seen her wear once—the moment Han had been stabbed by his son—flooding her face.

"But, I can feel her. You—What did he do to her?"

She didn't give him time to answer, not a single second for him to tell her anything else. Before he could even try to grab her, Rey had disappeared out the door.

"Rey!"

*Why am I so bad at talking?!*

And then he remembered something worse: the General's insistence that she should not be disturbed, her clear orders to keep anything and anyone away from one of the briefing rooms.

*Oh no…*

And now he was also running, shouting for Rey to stop as she ran across the hangar and into the carrier. Poe's confused face was peering over the dark X-Wing. He said something, but Finn was too busy shouting to hear it.

"Rey, stop!"

She wasn't listening. She was also a lot faster than the last time he had been running around with her. He saw her hesitating near one particular bifurcation, and for a second he was sure he could catch her, but the next instant she had dived to the left.

"Rey!"

He couldn't catch her. It was absolutely impossible to keep pace with her when everyone in the corridors seemed to be magically moving out of her path while getting all hopelessly tangled in his.

"Rey! Listen to me!"

She was moving away from the empty corridor and towards the door to the briefing room the General had requisitioned. For a moment, Finn allowed himself to hope that the General had finished with her *private matter* already and was now strolling around the carrier instead, keeping her eyes on everything like she always did. The problem was that Rey's path had just turned away from the corridor that led to the bridge and was now moving towards the General's quarters. Knowing his
friend's sixth sense with directions and where they led, she would be more than panicking by now. He could see her face turn whiter every time she was forced to choose a direction.

"Stop! Please! Rey!"

She came to a halt in front of a closed door, knocked and, getting no response from the inside for several seconds, stepped back and made an assertive move towards it with her hand. To Finn's horror, the door started opening.

"She's alright! Rey!"

Too late. Inside the small and scarcely furnished room, Leia, dressed in an elegant green dress, had jumped out of her desk's chair. Standing in front of her, a tall dark figure, one who had no business being there, turned its head to reveal an easily recognizable helmet. Upon seeing it, Rey reacted on instinct; the single bladed lightsaber she had on her belt flying to her hands as she threw herself inside the room.

Oh no…

The dark figure turned as she approached. He didn't, however, try to defend himself or make a single gesture to get out of the way. In a second, the blue lightsaber had gone through him; a moment later, Rey followed.

"Quite the entrance," Kylo Ren said, his holographic image momentarily going static. Even the voice distorher couldn't hide his amusement.

Finn muttered an apology to Leia, stepped inside at her commanding gesture, and immediately closed the door. Rey was getting up and looking around at them as if they had all suddenly sprouted a second head.

In all, Finn thought, she was probably the only one seeing the full insanity of the situation. And that—*that* had been what he wanted to talk about.

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- The General.

Comments are welcome.
The General

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The General - Day 6, Part 2

This is not going well.

And that wasn't just the understatement of the century. Even so, Leia kept on hoping that if she was able to resist the urge to label the situation as the disaster it was rapidly proving itself to be, she would also keep her rising temper from becoming as pronounced as that of the man who had once been her son.

"Our time is short and this conversation is circular. Hux will discover it before we've accomplished anything."

His criticism, she knew, was more than fair and to the point. They had been in that briefing room for what felt like hours and moved not a metaphorical inch away from their starting point. By now, she had committed everything around her to memory: the white and blue auditorium chairs on her back; the large chunk missing from the tactical table they were all sitting around and the mane of wires coming out of it; the blinking light next to the door; the huge, strange looking blue stain next to her feet and the people—the people most of all.

Admiral Ackbaar sitting to her right was himself to the last bit of brown skin and white uniform. His head, as always, moving slowly from side to side so that his huge watery eyes could focus, one at the time, on whoever he was speaking to. To her left, Commander Cody, Intelligence, was sitting like a king on banquet day: half sprawled in his chair with his forest green eyes focusing on the man in front of them—the man whom they were supposed to be listening to, if not negotiating with—like he was some kind of badly chosen entertainment or a piece of putrid meat.

In high contrast to that, the Order's Enforcer—she had to force herself not to think about him in any other way—kept himself straight and so absurdly still it became almost uncomfortable to look at him. And then, then there was her: a long, practical green dress, her hair tied at the back of her head, her back throbbing with the strain of sitting in a chair that was dangerously close to be trashed in the garbage chute at the conclusion of this affair, and her mind fighting to remain calm and sharp as the conversation threatened to go downhill again.

"How can we be sure your General isn't listening now? How can you?"

That had been Ackbaar and that had actually been a worthy, sensible and fair question, one without any sort of hostility or hidden accusations, exactly like she had learned to expect from him. Only it was too late to try to establish a common ground. The hostile, mistrustful atmosphere that was polluting the exchange was not something that could be swept under the carpet by saying what should have been said at the beginning of the meeting. Ackbaar might be willing to try—Force knew, she was willing to try too—but there were two people there who weren't and wouldn't even give it a moment's thought: Kylo Ren, who was at least polite in his refusal, and the Commander, who was the exact opposite.

"Hux isn't listening. You have my word, Admiral."
"Word?" snarled the Commander. "I wouldn't take your word for anything even if it was the last thing standing between me and death!"

"Rest assured, I will promptly move it out of the way if that scenario arises."

"Is that a threat?!"

Leia wanted to slam both their heads against the table. At her right, Ackbaar made a backwards gulping movement with his head, huge eyes focusing on the head of his infuriated ally.

"A threat?" he gargled, his voice sounding like he was speaking through water. "I find myself fearing for the state of your Department, Commander, if you can no longer differentiate between the Enforcer's sense of humor and his threats."

"I have precious little patience for jokes and even less for stall tactics. This man is a security risk! At this very moment, half the First Order is probably triangulating our position and moving to intercept us! It's a wonder the Finalizer isn't already upon us!"

"The Finalizer suffered serious damage during our last encounter," Leia heard herself saying, her voice sounding as impatient as it had been in her youth. "Unless you are suggesting General Hux is going to have his flagship towed into battle, I don't see it appearing anytime soon. That being said," she turned the Enforcer. "I too wish for some assurance of the safety of all the individuals involved in this arrangement."

"My word is all you have."

Leia leaned against the back of her chair; her mind getting as far away as possible from the violent discussion Ackbaar and the Commander started having over her head. They might as well be shouting to the wind for all the attention they were paying each other's reasoning, not that any of that mattered. Those words had been the final nail in the coffin, exactly as intended. The Enforcer had made perfectly clear how much he was willing to compromise from now on—absolutely nothing.

In a way, she felt responsible for the failure of this meeting. Ben—no, not Ben, her son was dead—Kylo Ren had asked her for a meeting in private but she had refused. She was too scared she would say something stupid, or worse confront him with his actions, with what he had done to Han, to risk being alone with him—and so she had suggested the present arrangement instead.

Ackbaar and the Commander had not been innocent choices. The Admiral was an old friend, a veteran of many battles, and not all of them fought on a battlefield. The Commander was Head of Intelligence and, despite his present behavior, was a cold, pragmatic man who knew more about the First Order's inner workings than any of them, given his prior experience with the Empire. Together, she had hoped they would bring impartiality and intelligent discourse to the meeting. They had brought accusations and bias, instead. The only one who had tried to make anything out of the disaster was the Enforcer and he was certainly no diplomat.

*My Ben never was.*

*My Ben is dead. I don't know this man.*

Even if that was true, he still spoke like her son, in some ways even behaved like him. And at their last base, he had—

*Why are you torturing yourself like this? Think of what he did to Han. The Enforcer is not Ben.*

But that same Enforcer was now resting his arm on the table, tapping his fingers in a pattern too
precise to be random, and her thoughts came to a screeching halt.

*This is going nowhere.* She read. *They are wasting both your time and mine.*

And then the words ceased, replaced by a nonsensical string of numbers and characters that took a moment to recognize. A communication channel address. He kept discreetly tapping it until she dropped her eyes.

*Do what you wish.*

And he rose, suddenly looming well above all of them. If he couldn't get Ackbaar and the Commander to do anything with his words, he certainly could with his stature. Both of them had gone absolutely quiet.

"You seem to have me mistaken for someone who will wait indefinitely as you bicker over something that should've already been agreed upon," he said. "I want your answers. Now."

The answers were those all of them already knew would be given. They wouldn't trust him. They wouldn't listen. They had no interest in any information he had wished to share nor in anything he wanted in exchange. The communication was disconnected, the hologram collapsing to the floor. Upon its disappearance and that of the man it had taken the form of, the briefing room suddenly seemed much brighter. Her mood, however, wasn't lifted in the slightest.

"I'm really sorry, Princess," said Ackbaar. "We can't trust anyone that dangerous based on so little evidence."

"Believe, Admiral, that I trust him less than you do. Even so, I wouldn't describe risking torture and execution as 'little' evidence."

"A ruse," Cody retorted, getting out of his chair with a hard expression on his face. "Probably conjured by that General Hux and their 'Supreme Leader'. I doubt the Enforcer has the brains to put something like this together and last as long as he did without someone whispering in his ears."

Her fists clenched at those words, but she forced her ire back. These men knew Kylo Ren only as the Enforcer. They had no idea who he had been to her, a lifetime ago.

"Be that as it may," Leia said, rising herself. "He is one of the three top officers of the First Order and we dismissed him like a misbehaving child."

"The man is a brainless brute. Competent, I will give him that, but if it wasn't for the Force, he would have ended up as cannon fodder on some backwater planet long ago."

That almost made her snap. Had she been younger, she probably would have. Age, however, had come with some benefits and the painfully repetitive chant of 'he is not Ben' kept her from ripping the Commander apart for his words.

"The Resistance is in dire need of allies and, if not those, then information," she retorted, coldly, her eyes going from Ackbaar's large ones to the indifferent gaze of the Intelligence Department leader. "We just refused both. If such an opportunity arises again, I do hope you are able to reign in your misgivings long enough to judge what we are offered and act according to that." At least Ackbaar had the decency to look embarrassed. "You will find me at my post if you need me."

Only, upon leaving the briefing room, she found herself not going to the bridge but roaming around the carrier with a communication channel address repeatedly forcing itself back into her thoughts.
What should she do? By all means, the Resistance had just severed both its hands and feet where Kylo Ren was concerned, but, just like the day before when he had first made contact, his latest request was to talk to her—not to the Resistance, but to her.

\textit{Do I even risk that?}

She stopped, finding herself next to the hangar entrance. What looked like a battalion was maneuvering around the space, a man shouting orders that were immediately followed. An uncomfortable feeling set in her stomach at that sight. That was the battalion that had followed their retreat, the one that had turned against the First Order near North Entrance and made their escape possible.

\textit{I should already have taken its command apart. This is too much of a risk.}

But that wasn't her priority now; if she was to do something about the Enforcer, she needed someone trustworthy to keep vigil by the door. Her first thought was Poe, but even if BB8 and his dark X-Wing were just beside the entrance, there was no sign of him. Finn came to mind next, as the man was reliability itself; he also was one of the few to know the full story behind their present confused relation with the Enforcer. But, as always, when Poe was missing he was too.

The third option to come to mind was, surprisingly, a baby faced, blue-skinned Twi-lek who had taken to following her around since the assassination attempt, and had also been with her and Finn at their last base. Her name was Allya, Leia believed, but if she wasn't already playing shadow she had probably been recruited to pilot a carrier. Skilled for someone so young...

In the end, the door would have to guard itself. Leia returned to her quarters alone, entering to find C3-PO waiting for her inside. By the looks of it, the droid had been trying to salvage what was left of her clothes after the explosion, fire, and assassination attempt in her previous quarters. In other words, there were clothes everywhere. From a long black coat hanging on the bathroom door, to a set of nightdresses right over the small bed, and a pile of scorched but folded clothes on a chair, her bedroom had all the makings of a laundry room.

"Princess. General. It's so good to have you back. How was the meeting?" he asked, raising his right and then his left arm as much as he could to show her two white dresses that had long ceased to fit her and she mostly kept for sentimental value. One of them had holes burned all over. \textit{Han gave me that. Do you wish to keep these?}"

"I do. Thank you. And the meeting was a disaster."

"Oh, I'm truly sorry for that, Prin—General."

C3-PO observed as she moved the pile of scorched clothes out of the chair, sat, and inserted the communication channel address that had been given to her in her private communication system.

\textit{Do I really want to do this? Am I acting with my head or my heart?} Was there even a difference between those two? She waited for what felt like an eternity, eyes fixed on the string of numbers and letters as Han kept coming back to her mind.

\textit{Be the General. You lost your boy. He just happens to sound like him.}

She looked at the protocol droid, resting a hand on the red arm he still kept.

"I beg you not to say anything. Not now and not to anyone."

"Of course. To whom will you be speaking?"
The question was answered by the almost simultaneous appearance of a black figure that turned slowly in their direction, a dark, expressionless, and easily recognizable helmet covering its face. C3-PO let a little 'Oh my!' escape but was silent after that.

"I admit that I was not expecting to be contacted." Kylo Ren said.

"I'm of the opinion nobody would be this persistent if it wasn't important." She had wanted to say 'nobody would commit treason twice' but found it wiser not too. Force knew what he thought he was doing. Best case scenario, he was being patriotic. "Before we continue, how can you be sure the First Order is not listening?"

"I crippled the Finalizer's communication system."

"That is not something that will go unnoticed. If General Hux—"

"Hux is not only aware of the issue, but was present when it occurred."

And her resolution to be the General crashed right there, a sickening fear rising from her heart and bursting through her mouth before she could do anything to stop it.

"What?!"

"Hux is far too intelligent to trust anyone, but he does trust my temper to lead to irrational fits of anger and property damage. He is furious, but not in any way surprised at the present outcome. This meeting is safe. That is not saying we shouldn't hurry. This connection might be untraceable; FN-2187 and all your new 'recruits,' however, are not." He stopped for an instant. "That is what I wish to talk about."

Straight to business. He would never guess how grateful she was for that.

"Explain yourself."

"As a safety precaution, all operatives of the First Order have trackers implanted in their bodies," he said, his hands going behind his back and settling in a military stance he didn't seem conscious of falling into. "The original design has little to do with surveillance. It's main objective was orbital tactical support and guaranteeing the safe retrieval of stranded troops in a retreat scenario. It is a short-range system, and I take from your reaction you didn't know existed."

I didn't.

"Why hasn't anyone informed us about this?"

Why hasn't Finn?

"I doubt the deserters you have been receiving know anything about it. As I said, it was a short range system and it shouldn't have caused any problems to your allies unless they had the misfortune of being caught by the sensors during a planetary sweep."

"What changed?"

"Hux was and largely still remains a member of the Technology Research and Development Department. Their high financing is mostly due to their close relation with the General and their eagerness to focus their efforts on whatever project tickles his fancy. What has been tickling him lately, however, is not a weapon, but a flood of desertions," Ren continued, his head leaning slightly to one side. "Hux doesn't like things getting out of control, particularly his control. He is also good at
planning for what he already has and even more so at turning other people's strengths into their weaknesses. The Resistance has been growing out of First Order rejects. Your strength was born out of the Order's failure and the Technology Department has found a way of rectifying that. The orbital tactical support system will be updated into a surveillance and tracking system. The fleet is already being called back for fittings."

"You're saying the First Order will be able to detect these trackers at long range?"

"I am saying the Order will find your hideouts, every single one of them, and slaughter everyone."

If felt as though all of the warmth had been sucked out of the room with his words. C3-PO was moving its torso to look at them one at a time. Even if the droid had nothing close to an expression, she could sense its horror. It was exactly the same way she was feeling.

Ackbaar and Cody's refusal to hear... Their dismissal... If she hadn't called...

_This isn't just important; this is vital._

"Hux still has no knowledge of this," Ren was now saying. "To hell with towing the flagship into battle—Hux wouldn't wait for the tugs. He'd make us all get out and push if he had an inkling of how close your latest engagement with him put him to victory."

"If what you said about the _Finalizer_ 's communication system is true, there is still time," she pointed out. _Not much, not enough, but there is time._ "Why do you come to us with this information? What do you hope the Resistance has to offer for it?"

She was afraid of his answer, but even more of her hope. If he asked for what she feared he would ask—

_This is not Ben and if there is anything left of my son in there, he won't._

Ben had never been one to drop his problems at someone else's doorstep and even less to run away from them. He was prone to badly thought out, if well-meant, decisions that fell well away from the right ones, but had never been a coward. If anything, he was too much of the opposite. The Enforcer fell exactly in the same category. He wasn't asking for protection. He wasn't running.

_He is just as proud as Ben._

She could see that in his stance. It was not arrogance, but a sort of confidence, overconfidence perhaps, that the boy she had known did not possess, even if he had more than made up for that with tenacity. In all, it was a disastrous combination of traits for anyone—courage, a steely resolution, and a brain that came second to his heart. Even so, the one who was to blame for the end result that was now in front of her—that dark distorted image of what he could have been—wasn't just Snoke, but also her. She should have been more present, more attentive, his mother before anything else.

_I should never have sent him away._

And the pain, the love, the longing, crashed into her at that. Leaving her gazing at the dark figure and wishing beyond hope or reason that he was truly there and that she had enough courage to reach out to him, to grab him and pull him to her even if it meant he would strike her down.

_I love you even in this form..._ But I can't... I can't...

Her voice held no emotion when she spoke.
"What do you wish from us?"

Before he could answer, someone started knocking at the door, a known, powerful presence Leia
had not felt in a while reaching out with the Force in search of her. Before she could consciously
register who it was, the Force swirled, the door opened, and an ashen faced young woman
rushed inside.

"Rey?"

The moment their eyes met, Leia could feel the fear subside inside of her. At least, until Rey saw the
Enforcer and a blue lightsaber made its appearance. Half a second later, the girl had crashed through
the hologram and a sheepish looking Finn was closing the door. Kylo Ren's holographic image
trembled.

"Quite the entrance," he said to Rey, and his dry amusement made him sound exactly like the son
Leia had lost. "If everyone on your side is done trying to eviscerate me, General Organa, I would
like to negotiate."

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- The Scavenger

Comments make Madame Windcage write faster.
"Would someone tell me what is happening?!"

The last time she’d asked a question like that, she’d promptly been introduced to a rathtar. This time, however, the dangerous predator in question was not trying to mangle them, but, apparently, strike a deal.

*I really don't know which is worse.*

No, actually she did. She would rather be stuck on a space station with three angry rathtars again than anywhere with Kylo Ren. At least rathtars would stay there the moment she got out. Shaking Kylo Ren off the scent, she knew from experience, was nearly impossible. The man kept coming back until he was put down with finality.

*And even then, he'll still find a way.*

If he was half as tenacious at negotiations as he was at trying to kill them, they were about to be given a run for their credits, and that was if he wasn't actually trying to kill them because—

Her thoughts came to a halt. Hesitating, actually stopping mid way three times, Rey finally turned away from the swirling white mass passing by the *Millenium Falcon's* cockpit window to look at Finn sitting in the co-pilot's chair.

"Did he really help you?"

Her friend—who had been feeling his arms, legs and torso with an incredulous, horror-struck look since General Organa had dragged them away from her quarters on the grounds that 'this is no conversation to have on a long distance channel,' put all of them on the *Falcon*, and confided in them what had made Kylo Ren take leave of his sanity—looked up at her.

"Wha—What?" He replied, distracted.

"Did Ren really help you?"

Finn's mouthed the word 'tracker' one last time, then he swallowed and nodded. Rey took a look behind them, towards the chair where Leia sat silently, her eyes set in a thoughtful expression that for a moment made her look very much like the man they were discussing. Rey felt a chill run up her spine.

*You know they look alike, stop being foolish.*

She turned again to Finn, dropping her voice.

"What happened?"

"We were too late getting out of the base. Two armed fronts were already inside and I had the
General some five minutes away from the only escape route we had left, then the guy bends the freaking blast door like butter, destroys half the ceiling and freezes us all in place. I really thought he was going to turn the place into a slaughterhouse. And then, to make matters worse, the General decides to turn back and put herself between and us and him and—"

The room fell away and Rey found herself watching the scene Finn described as though she had been there.

"I have orders to kill you."

The voice was chilling in the extreme; a cold, distorted near-whisper that rose from the back of her mind as clear as a shout. Behind it, Rey could hear the distant echoes of explosions and blaster shots. She was no longer in the Falcon and, even if she could still see Finn, it was among a group of people frozen in place in the middle of a dark half-destroyed room. General Organa, her clothes full of dust and unmistakable scorch marks, were occupying her mind's eye instead. Leia wasn't saying a word, but her eyes spoke for her: tranquil and profoundly sad, the eyes of someone looking at something dearly loved and long lost. Rey had only time to ask herself why the General was looking at her like that when she saw what was in her gloved hand. A cross shaped red lightsaber. Ren's lightsaber.

What the—?

The moment that question filled her mind, she was back to herself, watching from the sidelines as an unseen observer as he moved towards the group. The shadows were moving, dancing with the red light until the walls looked like something living. To Leia's left, Finn's effort to release himself from the Force was obvious, but pointless. And then, it all stopped. The dancing red tinged shadows, the thunderous sound of the saber, even the distant sounds of the battle. Ren had stopped in front of Leia, his weapon resting against the holster on his leg, his hand reaching hesitantly to touch her face. It never had a chance of doing so. An explosion rocked the building, forcing his attention back to the pile of bricks and mangled steel at his back. The moment was over. The frozen group was free and Finn was drawing his weapon just to have it intercepted and pull down by the General's hand.

"There are problems with our northern offensive," the dark figure informed them, the black gloved hand grabbing hold of the lightsaber as he moved past the absolutely incredulous Resistance group. "You will follow me and leave through there."

He stopped at the door, turning to face the obviously reluctant expressions as more and more explosions were heard around them:

"Unless you wish to hold a vote."

Rey echoed his words aloud, her eyes studying Finn's expression intently for any kind of reaction. He snorted so loudly she could have heard him on the other side of the Falcon.

"How do you know he said that?"

"Weird vision just now," she clarified. She took another look at Leia and dropped her voice further. "He guided you out?"

"Dropped us midway. When we reached the northern entrance, you sure as hell can bet we saw him there, trying to get the troops together." Finn massaged his neck. "Biggest mess I ever saw. Everyone fighting against everyone, I—"

His eyes had set on the exterior following the star trails passing by the Falcon with a strange
expression. At a loss, Rey raised her eyebrows at him.

"What is it? Is something wrong?"

"No." He didn't seem at all sure of that. "Aren't we dropping out of lightspeed soon, Rey?"

Rey turned to the commands, her hands rapidly flying over them as the Millennium Falcon slowed down. As the starry exterior became focused again, Leia got up and approached them.

"He isn't here yet," she said without having to look at the exterior. "Put all power to the shields. I don't want us being an easy target to any long range weapons or that shuttle's cannons."

Rey did as instructed, taking a quick look at Leia as she did so and wishing beyond everything she had Kylo Ren's knack for reading minds. She would have given almost anything to know what the General thought of the present situation and even more of the one Finn had described. She didn't see Leia as a particularly emotional person but, even if she wasn't, there wasn't a chance being face to face with Ren, helped by him and talking to him, wasn't affecting her. She loved him or, at the very least, she had loved the boy he had once been. That was not something that could go unnoticed in the way she had talked about him or having personally witnessed her pain when she had discovered who had killed Han Solo.

You don't deserve her love and yet she loves you.

It was unfair. He was a monster and yet, if he had been the one left on Jakku, the General would have gone back for him. She would never abandon him to fend for himself. She would not have given up on him.

You don't deserve any of them.

Something dark was taking hold with her thoughts, and she could see Han Solo, Luke Skywalker and General Organa smiling at her, opening her arms to her, in her mind's eye.

And then the darkness gained a voice, soft and understanding.

"It's not you they're waiting for. They don't want you," it said, as a tall pale man walked towards the group waiting for him, a red lightsaber ablaze in his hands. "But you could be. You're the daughter they deserve. You're the one they should wish for."

The saber ignited, stabbing through Han, then rising high above the group to crash into Leia and then Luke, leaving them all lifeless at his feet.


The words reverberated in her mind as the pale man turned, his face snarling. The dark eyes that had so confused her, for they held kindness where there should have been none, were red and cold and cruel now.

"You can have all he threw away to yourself," the voice whispered, as Kylo Ren, the monster, the fiend, the murderer she had envisioned as being under the metal mask, not the one who hid behind it, made his way towards her. "It could be all yours. Family. Love. A home."

The red saber rose above her head and as it fell she discovered she had her lightsaber in her hands.

"If you kill him," the voice said as the darkness closed around them, suffocating all. "Kill him and it will all be yours."
And her movement changed, aiming for his heart, aiming for the kill—

No!

And she fell back, crashing to the ground and then through it, away from the darkness, away from the voice, back to herself, stunned.

What in the—?!

"What if he brings TIE squadrons with him?" she heard Finn ask right at her side, his dark eyes set on Leia, neither him nor the General seemingly conscious of how far gone she had been in whatever vision she had just seen. "The Knights function outside of the military hierarchy, but the fleet does have to provide them with support. If he is having second thoughts about helping you, General—"

"We fight our way out." Leia smiled and looked at Rey, combing a stray strand of hair behind her ear. "We have this pile of bolts and a very good pilot. We'll be fine."

Her smile hurt. It hurt even more after seeing her dead at the hands of the person who was the reason for her pain, but Rey had no time to dwell on it. Something dark shook the Force, a heavy and fast approaching presence she knew well. Some moments later, the Falcon gave a warning signal.

"Approaching signature," Rey announced, her voice still shaky as she studied the instruments for more than one signature. "He's come alone."

Finn gave a surprised whistle. Leia’s relief was more subtle, but far more intense.

The distinct form of the black command shuttle, lights running up its huge defensive wings, dropped out of light speed, cornering around them and coming to a halt in front of the Falcon. Almost immediately, the incoming transmission signal lit up on the console.

"Be civil," the General asked, grasping their shoulders. "Pass the transmission to the common room."

Rey obeyed, hitting the console buttons as Leia went down to the Falcon's interior. A moment later, both she and Finn did the same, stepping into the ample common room to find both the General and Ren's holographic image in silence right beside Chewie's gaming table.

"I believe the rest of your entourage is here," Ren observed the moment they arrived.

He had chosen to wear a heavy black cape and pull the hood over the dark helmet. The moment she set her eyes on the dark visor, however, Rey found herself not looking at it, but seeing the snarling feral features and red eyes that had assaulted her mind just moments ago. Her hands were moving to the lightsaber before she could stop what apparently was a hard wired reaction to his presence and calm herself enough to notice he had his attention on her.

Calm yourself. I was never afraid of him before and I am not now.

She held his gaze until the dark visor moved away from her, slowly turning to face Finn and then Leia.

"FN-2187 has something to share," he said, making the General turn her attention to them.

"The name is Finn and yes," Finn said, swallowing hard before he continued. "I'm calling bullshit on this tracker thing."

Leia eyebrows went up immediately, her lips mouthing 'what are you doing?' at Finn, but Kylo Ren's
reaction was more curious than offended. In fact, on the whole, his presence was disturbingly calm, the trepidation that always seemed to be just beyond the surface completely absent.

"Your reasoning?"

"Starkiller base." Finn began, his face so tense it had become wood like. "That thing should have lit up like a rocket the minute I hit the ground. How do you explain that it didn't?"

"I can hardly be held accountable for Hux's blindness, but I would harbor a guess at him being too busy savoring his latest victory and planning his next to have noticed."

"He had a whole army to notice it for him," countered Finn.

"Starkiller had a serious security breach long before you arrived." He didn't move a muscle; even so Rey was sure he had his attention on her again. "If it pleases you, however, I can easily dispel your doubts."

"How?"

"Jakku. Hux found you remarkably fast." Finn's expression went from stiff to terrified. "If you wish further confirmation, I can have this ship's scans on your freighter. It should not take long."

Apparently, however, Finn didn't need any more confirmation. His eyes were filling with that nervous expression Maz Kanata had identified as belonging to someone who wished to run. Judging by the wording of her next request, General Organa had noticed exactly the same.

"If you know anything about the location of these trackers, you have to share it with us," she said. "If we take them out—"

"Knowing Hux, I would venture that they aren't anywhere easily removed."

"Can we disable them?"

"That would be my approach."

"I like that plan," Finn said, taking a step forward, nervous eyes fixed on Ren. "How do we do that?"

"You would need access to First Order technology and files."

"So we steal those. Keep it coming."

"We also need a stormtrooper to access the building."

Finn froze in his tracks. Rey, on the other hand, felt her jaw drop at what she was hearing.

"Are you trying to borrow Finn?" she blurted out, incredulous.

Finn's head turned to her.

"Borrow? I'm not a pair of pants you can loan out, Rey."

"As you so eloquently put it, I am trying to borrow your friend."

"Still not a pair of pants!"
Rey wasn't hearing anything of what he was saying though. In fact, she had stepped in front of Finn unconsciously, as though trying to keep him out of Ren's sight.

"You have thousands of stormtroopers, if not more, at your disposal," she pointed out. "The hell you are taking—!"

Leia's fixed her with a stern look, silencing her angry tirade instantly.

"Rey has a point," she then observed. "It should be easy to grab one of your soldiers and do whatever you want with him. Why are you coming to us?"

"I know FN-2187's loyalties and he won't betray those who so kindly received him. As for the rest, let's call it common interest."

Rey clenched her teeth. What common interest? Those trackers and the long range surveillance system General Organa had talked about didn't affect Ren in the slightest. In fact, for a First Order leader, it should have came as an answered prayer, an ending to all problems. What did he care about one more massacre? What did he care about one more murder? It hadn't been the first or last he would be involved with.

"You know what you have to do," the darkness whispered, unheard by anyone else present, as Finn once again took the lead.

"Let's say this thing happens. I'm a stormtrooper again, I go steal things. Where are they at?"

"Stormtrooper training facility and Officer's Academy."

Finn looked at a loss for words for a moment. When he regained that faculty, however—

"You don't need me! You need bloody Phasma!"

"That is totally out of the question."

"And you are totally out of your mind!"

Rey grabbed Finn's arm and took a step forward, facing Ren as he made an almost imperceptible gesture with his head.

"Finn is marked by the First Order as a deserter," she pointed out. "He has a price on his head."

"Ranks, much like identifications, can be easily modified. He can become anyone." His attention went back to Leia. "Your answer?"

The General's response wasn't immediate. Her eyes were focusing on each of them one at a time until finally settling on Ren.

"You want Finn to take part in an infiltration operation at the center of First Order space. The objective of it being to steal the technology that would allow us to make this new long range tracking system obsolete before it can come into existence," she said, pensive. "You have something to gain from either our actions or being able to access this technology. Whatever it is, you are not sharing it with us. Even so, you expect not only that we help, but also that I entrust one of mine to you without any proof of your good will save from actions that could have easily been planned and information I have no way of confirming. You are asking for blind trust." She shook her head. "And I don't trust you."
Those words had been a mistake and Rey knew it even before they had fully formed. The previously calm countenance of the Enforcer imploded, a massive wave of pain echoing in the Force and crashing into her. She wanted to scream as she was pulled under. It felt like being drowned. Her mind, her heart, her everything fighting to rise above the emotions only to be pulled back under them. The words hurt. They hurt like only an old festering wound could, and they were ripping her apart.

"A monster." Darkness whispered again, echoing in the storm as pain was crushed and distorted, turning into something angry. "You know what he will do."

Rey forced her way through the raging Force storm, liberating herself from its grasp to stare, teeth clenched, at Ren. If he had been there physically, she would have put a lightsaber to his throat and silenced whatever he was going to say next, but he wasn't and Leia seemed completely unaware of the tempest behind the expressionless mask. Words—words would have to suffice.

You killed Han. You won't take her too.

And above all, he wouldn't hurt Finn. Not again.

"I don't trust you either, but if Finn is going, I'm going too."

They all turned to her—Finn with gratitude, Leia with fondness, Kylo Ren with—

"How noble."

Sarcasm, apparently.

"Name your price, General."

Leia's fingers formed a triangle.

"I want Snoke's location," she said. "I want to know his defenses and the way past them. I want his schedule, if he has any; his guards, his communications channels, his weaknesses. Everything the First Order has on him."

Silence. Behind the heavy cape, Kylo Ren's right hand spasmed. As if in response, the ghost pain in Rey's shoulder intensified.

"If those are your terms," he conceded. "I will give FN-2187 three days to think. It's his risk. Meanwhile, as further proof of this so called good will of mine, I will be leaving some of my Knights in your care. Consider them as safeguard."

He was what!?

"That won't be necessary," Leia assured, livid.

"It has already been arranged."

---

The Enforcer

This was a mistake.

The dark walls were running past him, the floor lights casting massive shadows as he marched
through the shuttle's narrow deserted corridors, his footsteps reverberating on the walls and ceiling until they too become part of the violent storm of his thoughts.

*I knew this would be a mistake.*

His feet brought him into a smaller corridor, traveling down it until an almost invisible door opened at his approach. The moment the door clicked behind him, the storm he had been holding in exploded: the helmet crashing into the far wall, his hand closing around the lightsaber hilt and igniting it. The next instant, it had crashed into a small table, cleaving it in two, then again, then hitting it until it became completely unrecognizable.

What was waiting under the anger, however, made him wish he had kept it bottled up for something less painful to focus on.

*I don't trust you.*

The lightsaber hit what was left of the table, this time doing nothing but scatter the pieces into every corner of the small, dark room and open a huge gash in the floor. Those words had no business injuring him, but somehow the old pain—a pain that didn't belong to him, but to a weak foolish boy—was still there, haunting him, hounding him, making him falter.

The lightsaber blade retracted. Without its murmur, the only sound in the room was the low beeping of the shuttle's internal communication device to his left. Strapping the lightsaber to his belt, he reached for the controls.

The pilot's voice, muffled by the helmet and the channel, crackled on the speakers.

"Sir?"

"Erase all registry of this encounter. Coordinates. Light speed trajectories. Communication logs. Everything."

"Sir."

The connection dropped, leaving him alone with his thoughts and his doubts. His attention went around the room, stopping finally at his only constant companion, the only confidant he had and would ever trust: the twisted old helmet lying on the work desk.

"I hadn't planned on involving the Resistance. It came as an opportunity and I acted with the belief that it would make things easier. Now I fear it will cause it all to fail," he said to it. His voice was cracking and he hated himself for it. "I need your guidance."

If he had truly been waiting for an answer, he would have been disappointed. Like all the times before, his grandfather offered no response, no assurance, nothing. His mind was battling itself as he sat on the chair.

It was the map to Skywalker all over again, the choice between the droid and the girl, a deviation from his mission, a new variable, his weakness—

His fingers flew to the hard patch of twisted scar tissue on his face, running down the lightsaber's path with increased harshness until a warmer, gentler touch stopped him and the ghost of a large hand cupped his cheek.

Kylo jumped to his feet, fleeing the sensation and looking towards Vader's helmet.
"I will keep what I promised. I will bring your work to fruition and succeed where you could not. Whatever happens, I will."

And if General Organa wouldn't help him, he would proceed as usual.

Alone.

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- back to Leia.

Comments make DD edit faster.
"General, I'm so glad you're here," Captain Xarv said, his small frame running across the bridge the moment she stepped inside. "I have to voice my deepest reservations about our present course of action. We lost a great number of fighters in the last attack. To send the stormtrooper battalion away is, in my opinion, an extremely bad call."

Leia took a fortifying breath, fighting with herself not to take a step back, hit the 'close' command on the doors control panel, and make a run for it.

Did everyone on this damn ship hold a meeting and decide to use attrition tactics? This is what? The hundredth time I'm hearing this?

It was like she couldn't take a step without having someone jump on her to discuss her latest comand. From Ackbaar to random officers, she doubted that there was a single person that hadn't already sprinted across the carrier to intercept her. Well, with Xarv as the exception. The small alien had clearly been waiting to trap her on the bridge and have his say.

It would have been quicker to call all of them and hold a meeting. This is just ridiculous.

She looked to her side to Rey who had been following her around the carrier since they had stepped out of the Falcon. Leia was absolutely certain the girl wished to talk as she couldn't think of any other reason for her to be following her, but until now the closest they had come to talking had been in her quarters and that too had been interrupted by frantic knocking on her door.

What must the girl be thinking?

Leia had at least been able to force her into some clean clothing before they both had been evicted from the room, but that was as far as it had gone. Neither she nor Rey had been able to put two words together without being overwhelmed by someone jumping out of some dark corner and giving them the full dissertation on 'Staff Statistics, Future Tactics, and Security Risks—An essay on why we should keep the stormtrooper battalion here' all over again.

And speaking of all over again...

Xarv, his large face going through a myriad of colors, had now stopped in front of them.

"I beg you to reconsider this!"

She sighed, forcing herself to enter the bridge. If she had to be grateful for something, it was being in the middle of night watch and not having to discuss this with the Captain in front of a fully staffed bridge.

"It's exactly because we took such a high number of casualties that I wish this battalion sent away," she said, repeating the words that had been on the tip of her tongue for most of the day. "They will be far more useful on the front lines than sitting idly with us."
"General, it's one thing to distribute our strength, but this—this is throwing it away and leaving us completely unprotected!" Xarv said, gesticulating with his arms. "General Hux slaughtered half of our fleet and, while I respect your decision of not calling the remaining ships back due to the dangers a rendezvous would represent, the pilots and X-Wing squads need reinforce—!"

"Stormtroopers are infantryman, not pilots. They will do nothing for our squadron's present predicament."

"We will have to set up base somewhere, General."

"We will not be setting up base anywhere," she retorted, growing impatient. She had to put a stop to that conversation before she exploded. "What's our present course?"

"General, you are sending them all away!"

*I'm not sending them* all away, she retorted even if only to herself. That would indeed be the wise course of action given the present situation, but she couldn't bring herself to kick out the ones that integrated with the medical staff, not when half the Resistance had been saved by them after the last battle.

*I'm a lot of things, but I don't have it in me to be that callous. Or ungrateful.*

"General, please, I beg you to—"

"Captain, that is enough. Our route."

Xarv's head dropped as he silenced himself and guided her to the other side of the bridge. It only took a few minutes, however, for Leia to discover her attention slipping away from their route and back to the stormtroopers. She could sense the pilots eyes on her, the accusation in them…

*Don't think this is easy for me. Don't think I'm doing this with a light heart.*

"Keep changing the route. I want our course as unpredictable as possible," she said upon hearing the end of Xarv's explanation. "If we are intercepted by the First Order, our tactic should be to run, not fight. Now, Rey, if—"

Leia turned around, momentarily surprised to find absolutely no one at her side. It took another turn to find the girl, her light grey vest against the dark starry background passing by the bridge's viewport, her attention focused on the bright blue, eye-like structure among the stars. Her expression made Leia smile as she joined her.

"It is rather beautiful, isn't it?"

"What is it?"

"The remnants of star."

"That was a star? I always thought—"

"That when light dies all that remains is darkness?" Leia pondered for some moments. "That is true in some cases, but sometimes light just finds a different way of surviving." She pointed at the blue structure. "And you end up finding some truly beautiful things in dark places."

Rey smiled at her words, her eyes full of that kind of wonder that was usually reserved for children. She was truly a charming mixture of woman and child, as resourceful and independent as she was
innocent. The way that had come to be, however, saddened Leia. Solitude and hardship weren't the teachers she would wish on anyone, least of all a child. It was admirable, really, that Rey had not only survived, but kept her light intact. Even so…

Sometimes I wonder if that is truly possible.

Leia had survived too much to believe someone could go through life and not know darkness. One could, of course, turn one's back on it or decide not to be defined by that which they carried, but there wasn’t anyone, absolutely anyone, that hadn’t or wouldn’t cross paths with it.

And this girl would be more than justified in carrying it around.

She wondered if Luke…


She turned to Rey, guiding her out of the shadowy bridge.

"I have been trying to contact my brother," Leia told her while they walked through the deserted white corridors. "To tell him that you are safe with us, but I can't get the signal passed. I take, by his meddling with the reception, that he still refuses to take part in the war effort?"

"He does. I tried to talk to him about that several times. I'm really sorry."

"Don't be. This is neither your fault nor your fight," Leia sighed, setting her gaze on the eye like formation now visible on one of the corridor's windows. "Luke was extremely lucky Rey had been the one sent to Ach-Too, because if it had been her, he would have ended up thrown off a cliff. This moment, however, wasn't the time to stew over Luke's continued evasion, even if it did infuriate her. "I might not agree with my brother's position on this matter, but I do understand it."

"I don't. He could be here, with you, making a difference for everyone," Rey retorted, looking ahead of them with a hard expression on her face. She could hear muffled voices—for an instant Leia thought she recognized Poe's—in the distance. "If he would just let me help him—"

Leia was momentarily confused. Help him?

"Luke doesn't need help. He chose exile and that means he is the only one who can break himself out of it." They took the corridor to their left, the one that lead to her quarters, as she continued on. "There is always a moment in our lives when running away is preferable to facing our problems. In the end, however, whatever we do, whatever light we choose to chase to get away from our demons, we always end carrying them around." She sighed. "I love Luke dearly, but he won't be able to keep running forever."

"Even so, I—"

Rey didn't finish, pain flashing across her face as her left hand flew to her shoulder. Leia took a step closer to her.

"Training injury?"

Rey blinked, looked at her as though dazed, and shook her head.

"No, not really," she murmured, massaging her shoulder. "I—This—I was feeling this long before Master Luke accepted me for training. It's nothing, just somewhat annoying."
And yet there was something akin to fear in her eyes.

"We have doctors here," Leia pointed out, stopping by her quarter's doors. "I can have them here. If that's a strained muscle, it isn't that hard to—" But Rey was shaking her head again and Leia carefully moved her questions in another direction. "How long has this been going on?"

"Weeks? It's really nothing to worry about. Master Luke—"

But Leia, now introducing both of them to her well lit quarters, wasn't hearing what her brother thought. Her mind was diving into the recent past, to the tall figure she had come face to face with just a few hours ago, to Starkiller base and an unconscious Finn, and then further away to her brother's messages in a past so distant, so much happier than now, it was actually painful to remember.

"It's not like it's ineffective," she could hear Luke say in her mind, his sand colored hair beaten by the wind. "Far from it. Ben is a very capable fighter and he has a very good idea of where his strengths lie. His tactics work. But, and I will not lie to you about this, Leia, his fighting technique is reckless, far too aggressive, and I can't get through that thick head of his that a good defense is as effective as a powerful attack. By the Force, he was raining blows on me for more than twenty minutes during today's training. There isn't a single muscle in my arms I'm not intimately aware of, but was he convinced I was right by not landing a single blow? Of course not." Luke rolled his eyes even as his lips quirked in a fond smile. "He's as stubborn as Han."

He had been, but both Ben and Han were dead and she had no trouble visualizing the man that had robbed her of both of them towering well above Rey. She couldn't fathom how their confrontation could have ended with the girl coming out on top, with Luke's description of her son's fighting techniques—

"Does 'weeks' mean since Starkiller base?" she asked, tense, and to her surprise, to her absolute relief, Rey's eyes filled with surprise.

"Starkiller base? No. Why?" Rey stopped, clearly frustrated with herself for not understanding immediately what bush Leia's question had been beating around. "It wasn't him."

Which, judging by the venomous way she said 'him,' wasn't an attempt to spare Leia's feelings but the absolute truth.

*Thank the Force for small mercies.*

C3-PO, who had done a rather good job of taking all her clothes off the furniture in the last few hours, approached them, a small tray with a green cloth, two mugs and a large quantity of cookies in his hands.

"General. Lady Rey." Rey almost tripped over the carpet at those words, her face going so red that Leia had to bite her lips not to smile. "I took the time to make some tea while I monitored the messages. It's a new recipe. I hope you both like it."

"You're a sweetheart, *Threepio,*" Leia said, taking one of the cups, while Rey muttered an almost imperceptible 'thank you,' quickly moving to sit by the small observation window with the tray. "Has he said anything?"

"No," C3-PO guaranteed. "But I have to say he was very rude to you, Prin-General. The way he talked, acting like he didn't know you, and—and me! He didn't say a word to me!"

Leia's heart was heavy as she forced herself to smile gently at the droid.
"He probably didn’t recognize you with the red arm."

"Gracious! That is true. I should have reintroduced myself. How silly of me!" He turned away from her, muttering, obviously horrified by his oversight, as he made his way back to her workstation. "What was I thinking!"

Leia closed her eyes, taking a moment to harden herself before she sat besides Rey, both of them observing the dark emptiness as it slid past the viewport.

"You want to ask something," Leia said, taking a sip of the dark drink and savoring its softly sweet flavor as Rey’s still blushing face turned to her.

The silence seemed to become heavier than before, settling among them as if it was an entity in itself. Leia didn’t have to ponder on what Rey wanted to talk about; her hesitation, the way she was studying her face as if wishing she could see what was behind it, made it extremely obvious.

*If only that would also make it simpler.*

"Do you think he is being honest? You said you didn’t trust him but you’re acting as if you believe him anyway," Rey finally got enough courage to say, one hand smoothing her trousers as if to keep itself busy. "I don’t trust him, but I will trust your judgment."

Leia took another sip of her drink, looking at Rey and then again to the stars. She suddenly felt tired. Extremely tired.

"Are you asking me what I rationally think or what I want to believe?" she asked with a pained smile. "Because those are two very different things."

Rey’s eyes dropped to her still full cup of tea.

"I don’t know Kylo Ren," Leia continued, her heart heavy. "I hoped for a long time that I still did, but he killed Han and, well, I don’t understand what Snoke did to him, but—"

She couldn’t bring herself to say it, to put her painful denial of his identity out in the world. That would be making it final. That would be denying her heart its last desperate hope and mean accepting she would never see her son again.

"But we know that the trackers are real, that they can and will represent a serious problem if the Order implements this new technology of theirs," she choose to say instead. "There is no easy choice here and we have no time to investigate the veracity of the Enforcer’s claims. It’s not so much a question of trust, but choosing the risk we would rather take."

Rey frowned, apparently perfectly conscious of the way she was cornering around the issue and not willing to let it go. Even so, saying the next words seemed to require all of her courage.

"You risked a meeting with him, weren’t surprised in the slightest when the doctors found the tracker on Finn, and now you are breaking apart a stormtrooper battalion and sending them away," she pointed out. "Not only that, you are doing all of this behind the backs of the rest of the Resistance. You believe him." Her voice held an incredulous kind of note as she said that. Her next question sounded like a plea. "Why?"

*Why.*

Leia closed her eyes, blocking the room and all that surrounded her. She had been turning over that question, agonizing over the answer, questioning if she was projecting Ben, who had always
abhorred lies and dishonesty, on the Order's Enforcer; if she was acting on feeling rather than reason; if she was being blinded by who he had been…

*Why don't I think he's lying?*

"General?"

Rey's voice was beginning to sound worried.

"Ben was an atrocious liar," she found herself saying. It was the simplest of reasons and yet it felt like she had just ripped her heart out in sharing it.

"You would know if he was lying?"

"Not just me. You would too. Everyone would," she said, feeling drained. *This day has been far too long.* "I'm quite certain that Kylo Ren has his own agenda, but as far as what he told us goes, yes, I do believe he is being honest."

"What about the Knights?"

Leia shook her head. She couldn't fathom for the life of her what Ren expected to accomplish with that particular course of action, and even less with informing her of it, but the fact that Rey hadn't felt any strange presence among the Resistance gave her some security. Whatever plan he had, it seemed, had not advanced inside of the Resistance yet.

*I can deal with that.*

"Don't worry," she said. "This week saw me gaining a new shadow. I doubt anybody could jump on me without having their throat slashed open by my new self-appointed bodyguard."

"Who is it? Have I seen him—her?"

"Allya? No. She's rather young, younger than you at least, but trustworthy. Finn knows her; I believe he was the one who taught her how to use a blaster. I will also be keeping Chewie close."

"So…"

"I should be as safe as I've ever been."

*Which isn't saying much.*

A small beep coming from the workstation had both she and Rey jumping out of their seats and moving towards the console. Leia nearly ripped the paper reading its contents, as Rey looked over her shoulder.

"Is it him?"

"Yes."

And it was as impersonal as the way he had spoken to them. Nothing more than a string of coordinates. Not a greeting. Not a joke. Not a goodbye. Not Ben.

*He is being respectful and I should be grateful for it, only I really am not.*

Rey took a step closer, looking at her with concerned eyes.
"General?"

"Leia," she corrected. "Please."

Rey blinked, trying to force the name past her lips only to give up. She took a deep breathe, obviously trying to ground herself, and spoke.

"I've been thinking about this surveillance system and the trackers. I've decided I'm going to the First Order, even if Finn doesn't."

Leia looked at Rey, trying to read her resolute expression. She wasn't surprised in the slightest by those words.

"Why?"

"Finn is my friend. I can't let him go the rest of his life with a target on his head. He deserves better than that!"

"I see."

Obviously prepared to continue defending her position, Rey's lips parted, then closed again.

"You—you aren't going to stop me?"

"I'm not saying that I feel comfortable with your plan, but no, I won't. This is your decision and he is your friend."

*And I would go myself if I could.* Not that she had forgotten the last time she had decided to rescue someone on her own—that disaster with Jabba the Hutt would be engraved in her mind forever—but if Han had been more than worth the risk, what Snoke had taken from her was more than worth her life.

*And I would end up fetching a shell, wouldn't I?*

It was all too much all of a sudden. Her eyes were burning and in her hands the small paper with the coordinates felt like the biggest treasure in the universe. It was silly. It was painful, and she needed to be alone.

"You should go and rest," Leia said. "We all should. Have you been given quarters?"

"I'll be staying in the *Falcon.*"

Leia looked around the room, finally finding C3-PO making himself useful in the most un-useful manner possible: adjusting the lights. Leia made her way towards him, touching his red arm. The droid turned in his rather unbalanced fashion to look at both of them.

"Yes, General?"

"Would you mind accompanying Rey to the *Falcon?"

"That's really not necessary," Rey said. "I know the way."

"My pleasure, General. Will you be needing anything else from me?"

She wouldn't and as they both left—Rey visibly embarrassed at being escorted, but still looking her way and C3-PO talking incessantly as he always did—Leia was left alone.
Only one is never truly alone.

Alderaan. Her parents. Han. Ben. Her ghosts, they were all here with her.

There will be time to mourn when this is all over. That time isn't now.

The brusque tone accomplished nothing. For once, she couldn't force herself to be strong and she had no desire for anything save for hearing their voices.

Let them go. Let them rest. They are all long dead.

But she was already making her way to the workstation, one of her hands hovering over it as the other took the pendant out of her necklace. The moment it touched the interface, the holographic display awoke, drawing the pale face of a long-gone teenaged boy back into existence with it.

He's dead. He isn't coming back. I'm lying to myself if I believe otherwise.

She didn't care. She needed to hear him. She needed to remember what he looked like, what he sounded like under Kylo Ren's faceless mask. She needed to do that before Snoke destroyed her memories like he had destroyed her son.

I don't care if this makes me suffer. I don't care if I end up feeling like I'm losing him all over again.

And just like that, a calm kind voice filled the silence and she wasn't alone anymore.

"So this is somewhere in the middle of the night," she heard the boy say as he leaned backwards, his neck stretching to look at something to his left. "Believe me, you don't want to know the hour, and I've been trying to sleep for Force knows how long, so—Hi, Mom, this is obviously Ben and I will be sleepwalking through whatever is planned for tomorrow."

Leia smiled as he yawned, massaging his eyes and ending up supporting his forehead in one hand as he continued.

"My guess for tomorrow is maybe—? More roof repairs or something? My colleagues are already so detached that if I detach some of their teeth by accident, it'll make no difference." He rolled his eyes at that, setting them on her the next instant like he felt a kind of annoyed need to explain what he meant. "And yes, Mom, I'm joking. Don't go all Uncle Luke on me. So today—today we're in some Force forsaken hole in the middle of nowhere and we keep being beaten by storms. I can't seem to get a stable connection anywhere to talk to you. On the bright side, we were lucky enough to find a dripping roof to put over our heads and I was up fixing tiles on top of one of these things most of the day so…"

There was some kind of low rumble and he turned rapidly, grumbling something under his breath at whatever had happened.

"I know you can't see it, but it was just blown out by the storm," he informed her, his tone growing more annoyed. "There will be finger pointing in the morning, so I do hope they drown. Again, not serious." His hand went through the dark mass of curls he was obviously trying to grow out. "I told Uncle Luke I'm not good at fixing things, but apparently—"

He stopped suddenly, looking around as if he had heard something and expected someone to be there. For the briefest of instants, he not only looked a lot younger than he was, but absolutely terrified.

"Mom, I—" Leia leaned forwards, but he didn't continue; he seemed physically unable to do so.
"Can I come home?"

The recording ended, only to tremble and pick up at the beginning of the next message. She kept hearing him through the night, her heart tightening as he grew older, his messages less frequent and his words as scarce as his smile.

_Name your price_, he had said the last time she had seen him, a dark faceless figure taking the place of her boy. She knew what above all else she had wished to say. What, despite everything that he had become and done, she wished to ask. She had plenty of time to be General Organa. There would be tomorrow and the day after that—she had weeks, maybe years. And so today, just for today, as he kept pleading with her time and time again to come home, she would just be his mother and she would allow herself to cry. She would allow herself to pray.

_I want my son back. Please, please, come home._

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- Finn!

Write something in the box down there if you feel like it.
The Stormtrooper

He had never heard Rey laugh or, at least, never quite like this. It was warm and contagious and, sincerely, Finn no longer knew if he was laughing at Poe's rather cruel and completely inaccurate impression of General Hux as a cackling, half insane old man going around the Finalizer's bridge spitting nonsense, or along with Rey so he could continue to see her without the heavy restraint that normally ruled her conduct.

Even if it was just for this, it was worth introducing her to Poe.

He had always been of the opinion that Rey and Poe would get along well. Even if their personalities were night and day, they had enough in common to be friends. Sure, Poe had almost made her slip into defensive mode with his extremely warm and expressive welcome, but he had somehow been able to make amends in the last few hours. First it had been BB8, then an invitation to help him with his X-Wing, and finally he had taken to telling her in full detail what exactly had caused her to witness the Finalizer's crew dismantling two of the warship's main thrusters. From there to the present mockery of Hux, it had been only a matter of minutes.

That Finn too was laughing without feeling afraid or the need to point how wrong the portrayal was had been a pleasant revelation. Hux had never been a constant presence during his training, not like Phasma had, but the General had something about himself that left a lasting impression, something that told everyone he wasn't someone to be made fun of or joked about.

And yet, as Poe winked at him, smiling widely as Rey leaned against the dark X-Wing and sat next to BB8, clearly unable to stop laughing, he was able to see the humor in what the pilot was doing. Maybe not as much as Rey did, but enough that, for an instant, the First Order was a mere shadow, little more than a bad dream.

If only that was true.

The moment he thought that, the fear Ren's words had awoken inside him returned. He had hoped against hope, even after Ren had presented that rather solid argument about how fast the troops had found him on Jakku, that the Enforcer was misinformed. Unfortunately, General Organa's insistence that he went to the Medical Bay had eviscerated his hopes. Ren could, of course, be mistaken about the new surveillance system, but he wasn't about the implants. They existed; they were operational and could not be removed.

Finn looked at his two friends. Poe who had a big enough heart to put the entire galaxy inside of it, and Rey whose lonely eyes hid the strongest person he had ever met. They had been the first people to see him not as a soldier or a stormtrooper or a member of the First Order, but as an individual, someone who was valuable not as tool, but simply because he was alive.

And I'm putting them in danger just by being here.

He had put both of them in danger before—Poe to a lesser extent than Rey, as the pilot would be dead or worse if he had not taken him off of the Finalizer, but that didn't make any of this easier.
Both Kylo Ren and General Organa had acted like he had a choice, a decision to make about his participation in the madness the Enforcer had planned. One of them had gone as far as setting a deadline for it. The thing was that he really didn't feel like he had a choice. He could try to flee, of course, but he'd stopped believing that accomplished anything the moment Rey had been taken prisoner on Starkiller. Nobody protected anybody by running away.

_I have no choice._

And yet, he wished he did. The idea of going back was nauseating, and to work with Kylo Ren of all people, the man who murdered Han Solo in cold blood…

*But if I don't do this…*

He tore his eyes away from the X-Wing supports he had been blindly contemplating for the last few minutes and set them on Poe, Rey and BB8, only to find all of them looking at him expectantly.

"What did I miss?"

"The epic tale of our escape from the *Finalizer*, buddy, and the rare opportunity to contribute to it," Poe said, leaning against the X-Wing, and looking at Rey. "By the way, Rey, thanks for taking care of my droid and that guy over there. I don't want to imagine what would have happened if you hadn't."

Rey took a second to react to that.

"We took care of each other, really," she ended up saying, clearly embarrassed, and jumped to her feet. "I'll go fix your radio."

She dove behind the X-Wing, BB8 rolling after her beeping happily. The moment she disappeared, Poe turned to him, his expression serious.

"I don't know what I was expecting her to be like, but do you know how lucky you were to run into someone like that?"

"Believe me, I do."

And if possible, the guilt he was feeling for putting the two of them in danger rose tenfold. He felt deeply grateful—and far safer, though he was loathe to admit it—knowing Rey's intentions to come with him, but knowing at the same time what he was throwing her into only made him wish he could disappear in the middle of the night.

He wondered what Poe would think if he knew the full details of what they were planning. General Organa had clearly stated that no one, and that included Poe and even Chewbacca, was to know of their contact with Kylo Ren, what had transpired between them, or their present plan. He doubted the wookie had noticed anything strange, but Poe had noticed something was off the moment they had left the *Falcon*.

"What was that about?" he had asked, knocking on the door of the dormitory in the middle of night watch and dragging him from his bed for a chat.

They had roamed the deserted corridors for hours, first in silence, then with Finn trying to convey what was happening without actually revealing anything. In all, Finn believed he had been successful. It was difficult to say what exactly Poe had concluded beyond the very general lines of: 'I have a mission. It's my call even though I could hardly make another choice, and I'll go through with it because it's what's right for the Resistance,' but he had understood the rather desperate request for
advice behind the words and answered the call as best as he was able.

"This isn't about doing what's right for the Resistance or the galaxy, Finn. This is about making a choice you can live with for the rest of your life," Poe had said, leaning against a large observation window. His words had actually surprised Finn. "Whatever that is, make sure you can look back on it and feel proud. If things go south, you can hold on to that, even if there isn't anything else to hold on to."

"That's what you do?"

"I'm with the Resistance because I would rather die fighting the flames that are trying to destroy the galaxy than sit and watch it burn," he answered. "That's how I feel, but it doesn't mean you or anyone else has to feel the same. There's no shame in thinking differently, in acting differently, or in making another choice. What's right for you might not be what's right for others."

"You volunteered to retrieve that map to Skywalker."

"I decided to take that risk because I wouldn't have been able to live with myself if I hadn't. I volunteered because, for me, it was the right thing to do. There were plenty in here that disagreed, and more that were convinced that I would be found, captured, and killed." He had laughed at that. "They were mostly right, of course, but I believed, and still do, that I did the right thing. Remorse is our enemy here, Finn. And remorse is mostly achieved by doing something that goes against our nature because others see it as right." He had grasped his shoulder after those words. "Wasn't that why you left the First Order?"

And now I have to go back.

He wondered what Poe would have said if he knew what his mission really consisted of, if he would still think the same way or if he would try to dissuade him from this course of action.

Do I want him to?

Rey, who was now talking softly with BB8 and hidden by the X-Wing motor, hadn't. Her response to his question about what she felt he should do had been as straight to the point as her reactions always were.

"Do you believe what he told the General?"

It wasn't as if he didn't believe what Ren had said. He saw the Enforcer as many things: a monster for starters, vicious, murderous, with delusions of grandeur and without a drop of compassion in him. What he didn't see Ren as was a liar. He clearly had some reason to be acting the way he was, even the General said so. But lying, well, he didn't think he was lying. The General seemed to think exactly the same thing. And Rey…

She doesn't think he's lying either.

That, if nothing else, disturbed him. Worse, as the deadline approached, he had started to suspect that Rey had not only decided to accompany him, but that she was determined to go even if he didn't.

I have my back against the wall.

That sensation followed him through the rest of day, intensifying as night watch grew near and slowly the hangar emptied.

"You can still say no," Rey said as they climbed into the Falcon a few steps behind Leia. "You can
But will you turn back?

Poe's words ate at him. Pride. Remorse. Something he could live with.

Would I ever forgive myself if I say no to this?

More than that, would he ever forgive himself if she went alone? If she ended up hurt or worse because he had been too afraid to go back?

The *Falcon* left the Resistance fleet, diving into hyperspace and towards a set of coordinates Leia inputted on its console. The same fear coursed through them as they approached the destination, but like the last time the only thing coming to meet them was the black shuttle.

"He isn't there," Rey observed as it approached and veered in the direction of a small moon in the middle of the stars. "He didn't come."

The General's eyes didn't show anything more than hard resolution as she got up from her seat and followed the path of the shuttle from the cockpit window.

"Let's not jump to conclusions," she said, consulting the radar nevertheless. "How many people are inside?"

"One," Rey muttered, her expression becoming momentarily distant.

"The pilot," Leia concluded, moving towards the ground scanners. "The surface is deserted."

"No hyperspace signatures either. What do we do?"

Rey's questioning eyes were on him, not the General.

*You can still turn back*, they seemed to be saying, and he very much wished to do so.

*Make sure you can look back on it and feel proud*, Poe's voice retorted. *You have a choice, even if you don't feel like you have one."

"We risk it."

He almost laughed at his own words. So be it, then. If he did go down, it would be in the middle of the fire—the same flames he had so desperately tried to get away from.

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- back with Hux.

Leave Madame Windcage some love if you've got time s'il vous plaît.
The Strategist

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Strategist - Day 10

The newly installed cannons were still unaligned.

“Signal the TIEs to reposition the target,” Hux ordered, walking along the bridge’s central platform, his attention on the slowly revolving former Resistance carrier in the distance. “How far along are we with the calibrations?”

“Ninety five percent, General.”

This is taking far too long.

A group of TIEs approached the gutted carrier, stabilizing it and dragging it closer to the Finalizer. In the farthest region of the bridge, three officers adjusted the head of a signaling lamp, sending his orders to a TIE suspended midway between them and the rest of its group. Meticulously, the pilots started maneuvering the carrier, turning it, then immobilizing it in a predetermined spot over the Finalizer’s bow.

“Calibrations now at ninety seven percent, General,” a voice announced to his left.

“Target positioned.”

How bored am I to be supervising this?

“We are green. Cannons fully calibrated and charged.”

“Signal the TIE’s to release the target,” Hux ordered, turning towards the radar to observe the carrier’s trajectory as it was launched further away from his flagship. His fingers tapped on the edge of the console as his target approached the limits of the cannons range. “Lock on and fire.”

The floor under his feet vibrated, a low hum filling the bridge as the cannons turned and four bright energy trails burst towards the target. An explosion ensued in the distance.

“We have contact. Positive on all fronts. Fourth cannon showing signs of excessive recoil.”

Hux left the console, traversing the bridge and stopping behind a short blond woman rapidly pressing buttons on her console.

“Is it the same one as before?”

“Positive, Sir,” she confirmed. “It got misaligned by several degrees.”

“Possibly a mechanical malfunction. Get engineering to the site.” He turned again towards the radar. “Is the target still usable?”

“Destroyed, General.”
“Signal the TIE’s to drag some of the other wrecks into position,” Hux ordered. Somewhere behind him, the door to the bridge opened. “We will be running a full combat simulation. Have the solid projectiles removed and—”

A low whisper of ‘General’ interrupted him, the sheer amount of panic contained in the word making Hux look around expecting some kind of imminent disaster to befall the bridge and instead finding the pale face of Mitaka, eyes wide and hands tremulous, set on something—or someone, for there was only one person in the entire First Order that could put Mitaka on the verge of a nervous breakdown—behind him.

Impossible. He can’t—

And then a voice broke through his incredulity, a woman’s voice—low, distorted, unknown to him—and all of his nightmares collided into a sense of utter shock as Hux looked over his shoulder and found three black figures standing on his bridge.

I’m going to kill you, Ren.

“General Hux. A moment of your time.”

The Knights. Ren had forgotten his bloody bags.

“This is highly inconvenient,” Hux retorted, pinching the bridge of his nose as he observed the TIE’s through the radar.

“We will try to be quick,” the woman hissed, and something in her voice, a cold note that sounded disturbingly like a threat, made him turn, face devoid of emotion.

“What is this about?”

“A simple question of headcount, General."

“Headcount?”

The bridge’s door opened again, this time to let Phasma and a stormtrooper unit in. The Knights’ heads turned in unison as she approached, her soldiers scattering around the bridge as she covered the distance between them and positioned herself at his side.

The female Knight made a pacifying gesture, her mask’s visor on Phasma’s.

“There is no need to get protective, Captain. We aren’t here to cause trouble.”

“That remains to be seen,” Phasma retorted, her hands grasping the blaster as if she was expecting to have to start shooting at any moment.

This is not good.

Worse, as if reacting to her tension, the bridge had fallen eerily quiet, the sounds of chatter and work disappearing as every single officer reached down under their respective consoles to where Hux knew they all kept sidearms. It would be a truly moving display of loyalty if they weren’t presently surrounded by the instruments keeping his flagship from taking a nose dive directly towards the planet.

“Captain, lower your blaster,” Hux ordered, calmly, his eyes never leaving the Knights. “I will not
have the *Finalizer* crash into the surface on account of this.”

Phasma’s shoulders tensed, but, even so, she obeyed, engaging the blaster’s safety and letting it rest by her side.

“A wise decision, General,” the female Knight said as, around him, the bridge’s crew obeyed his implied order. “Now, where is Ren?”

Hux felt a sudden need to bang his head against the nearest wall. Of course, when wasn’t the root of all his problems *him*?

“Ren is engaged elsewhere,” he informed her, voice measured as he faced the group. “He agreed to fetch the help we need to get out of this hole.”

“A agreed?” she repeated, surprise turning into an accusation. “This was all you. Why?”

*I don’t like your tone.*

“Ren knows the local dialect.” *And I wished to get rid of him.* “He is non-essential personnel and perfectly capable of dealing with less than ideal circumstances on his own. On the whole—”

“You are saying he went *alone*?”

The *something* in her voice was back, that cold hissing note that sounded so much like a threat. At his side, Phasma made a discreet movement with her arm, momentarily covering the top of the blaster with her cape. From his position, Hux could see her removing the safety from the blaster.

“General. Was he alone?”

Hux’s fingers tapped on the console, his attention fixed on the dark mask, his memory going to his first assessment of the Knights’ identities and hers in particular.

*This woman is not who I thought she was.*

The Knight he had taken her for, the woman he had worked with on various occasions, had always spoken to him with a brusque sort of honesty, but never with disrespect. He had no idea who the one now in front of him was, but Isahaine Ren she was certainly not. He knew nothing about the woman now before him, nor what to expect.

*This is not good at all.*

His fingers were still tapping on the console as he answered, eyes slowly measuring each of the three Knights before returning to her.

“I admit that I thought he had taken all of you with him,” he said, facing the skull like mask that covered her face.

“You thought wrong.”

*I truly don’t appreciate your tone.*

“You see, General,” she continued. “We are supposed to accompany him at all times. This is highly irregular.”

“I’m rather sure he’s trying to get on my nerves, not yours,” Hux said, trying his best for a calm, diplomatic tone and succeeding magnificently at impatient and authoritarian instead. “A shuttle may
already be on its way to collect you.”

He gestured towards the exterior as he spoke, only to see the three Knights follow his gesture and turn towards the exterior, expectant.

*If I could magically conjure something, it sure as hell wouldn’t be him!*

Given the circumstances, however, that would probably be the wisest course of action. Judging by how restrained their behavior had been in Ren’s presence, they were afraid of him, and there was nothing like fear to keep people on the line.

“If you are done—”

“We are not done,” she snapped. “You will provide us with the means to get to Kylo Ren.”

Hux wanted to laugh. He would have, if that wasn’t akin to suicide. If she thought he would waste the last of his shuttles on them…

“I will do no such thing.”

“You are being intentionally uncooperative, General.”

“My job doesn’t involve babysitting Ren or assisting you in doing so,” Hux snarled, lips pursed in anger. “Now, I would be extremely grateful if you would leave and proceed to do your jobs.”

The woman’s fists clenched.

“The Supreme Leader will be highly unsatisfied when he discovers that you were directly involved with Ren’s disappearance.”

“I doubt he will be thrilled when he finds how this other Knight, Veshay, not only betrayed you, but continues to elude your searches,” Hux retorted, coldly. “In fact, I’m under the impression Ren won’t be particularly satisfied by this continued failure, either. Or am I wrong in assuming he put all of you to assisting the Captain in locating your missing member?”

His words were meet with silence. It was difficult to keep the smirk off his face as, with a last venomous look in his direction, the trio abandoned the bridge.

*Checkmate, then.*

He turned back the radar, victorious.

“Status.”

“Three cruisers are now in place.”

“Have them placed on a wider—”

“Sir. A word in private.”

Hux pinched the bridge of his nose again. *You too?*

“Is this important, Captain?”

“I wouldn’t be interrupting you if it wasn’t.”
Hux turned away from the console, signaling towards a more private corner of the bridge.

“Speak.”

Phasma looked around, before closing the distance between them and whispering in an irate tone.

“That was reckless, telling me to lower the blaster—”

“I have the utmost confidence in your hand to hand combat proficiency.”

“This is no laughing matter.”

“I have three very irritated Knights aboard the Finalizer, as hilarious as that would be if I wasn’t the one stuck with them, I can assure you that I’m not even slightly amused.”

Phasma pointed her finger towards the bridge’s closed door.

“She killed three of my men when she discovered Ren had left—two of them on the planet, then one aboard the Finalizer,” she informed in a whisper. “She can’t be trusted. I ask you, I beg you if I must, to act with caution.”

“Is this what you wanted to discuss? Because if it is—”

Phasma removed a screen from her belt, offering it to him. He knew what that was without her having to utter a single word.

“North entrance again?” he asked, indifferent, as he ran his eyes over the stormtroopers’ identification numbers and their statuses. “This adds nothing to what we already know.”

Phasma was looking around again, tensing as two of the bridge’s officers passed them and turning to him the instant they were distant enough not to hear.

“Sir,” her voice was tense. “The battalion that disappeared—those soldiers were not the ones picked for the assault. None of them were.”

Hux looked up, his eyebrows settling into a furious line.

“What?!”

“Someone switched the groups. I have no idea who. I questioned the stormtroopers, but they know nothing and all of their stories coincide.” Her voice dropped even lower. “This was introduced into the Finalizer’s system. Whoever did this has high level access.”

“Have you ordered a search for the perpetrator?”

“The system was cleared,” she fell silent again, waiting until a new group left the area. “Sir, I don’t think this is Ren. We must inform him of—”

“Of what?” he asked with just a hint of anger. “Another mass desertion? One, for all we know, he could be perfectly involved with?”

“I have worked with Ren in the field. He is respected, but I can assure you he doesn’t evoke the kind of loyalty needed for a whole battalion to defect on his command. The troops—”

“Know as much about him as we do, which amounts to nothing.”
“General, this is not the time to start doubting each other.”

I have been doubting Ren since that bloody map came into play.

That had been the moment everything had started to unravel. First, holding silence over FN-2187. Then, insisting on getting the droid, only to get sidetracked because of a worthless scavenger and let it slip into the hands of the Resistance. And finally, his silence about intruders on Starkiller’s oscillator…

And now this. What is he playing at?!

“Sir?”

“I want answers, Captain,” Hux said, his lips drawing down into a thin line. “We will not be informing Ren of anything until then.”

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- checking in with Kylo Ren.

Comments are always nice!
Life was, in many ways, an ongoing game of chance. It worked in a series of high stake situations one had to navigate, negotiate, or fight through to survive. Like a game, it changed its appearance over time. Circumstances changed; conflicts shrank and grew, or they disappeared altogether. Players and objectives followed the same pattern, but whatever form it took—that game, that gamble, above which life fought to keep its precarious balance—it was always the same, the rules set by people whose lives had long ended, but whose power struggle controlled everything for millennia.

In the grand scheme of things, most people were just born to be fed into the meat mincer. Those who believed otherwise were merely lucky enough to have dodged the blades. For the vast majority, it was a matter of being caught in the midst of the conflicts. They had nothing to gain from any of it and ended up paying the price for other people's ambitions all the same. They were like specs of dust, grains of sand silently carried down a stream, their lives forgotten, their deaths indifferent. They were not players. They were people like those killed in the Hosnian system, targeted for no other reason than being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Then there were those that, for whatever reason, genetic or otherwise, had been born into the heart of the game. Those were the ones who thought themselves players and that were, in fact, little more than pawns thrown against each other at some mastermind's whim, all of them thinking they had joined the fight willingly, that their objectives mattered, that they could make a difference. Those were the fools like himself, the ones that had something to gain, but even more to lose. They knew the rules, if not the stakes or the plan, and the ones that ruled Kylo Ren's life, even if they had never been stated, were as clear to him as if they had been.

Don't ever trust anyone. Don't ever trust yourself.

Be useful and you will be rewarded.

Obey and you will be made stronger.

Show weakness and—

Supreme Leader Snoke's face floated in his mind, a veiled threat in his eyes.

It was clear, it was simple, it left him no choice—only he hadn't lived with General Leia Organa for a third of his life without learning something, and he had probably learned far more than she realized. Her motto of 'you can do anything as long as you try' had been well meaning, if not unrealistic, but more than that, it had failed him time and time again. The one she ruled her own life with, however, was different. It had kept him afloat. In more ways than one, it had kept him alive.

And now you wish that it hadn't.

It was only fair that she didn't trust him. There was no reason left to deserve anything but her scorn. Even so, in his mind, her warm hand grasped his shoulder, the hard expression she had been facing someone with dissolving into a mischievous smile as she leaned over him. She had been young then,
younger than he was now, but he hadn't been able to conjure her face for the longest time and, even now, after seeing her just days before and being startled at how different she looked, how tired she was, he still couldn't envision her properly. The only thing left was her words.

"Always play to your strengths."

His job would have been made easier if he was told to play to his weaknesses, but even so he was not blind to his strengths. He was powerful with the Force and a skilled warrior—even if the fact he had been defeated by a stormtrooper and a scavenger suggested otherwise.

Only General Organa hadn't meant any of that. In her eyes—or so he imagined—his strength was in the way his explosive temper, quiet nature, and often unpredictable behavior meant that people frequently underestimated him. He may have intimidated half the Order into obedience and terrified the rest to the point that they didn't dare utter a word of dissension, but there wasn't a single person—with the unfortunate exception of that annoying sycophant Hux, who was far too observant for his own good—that didn't take him at face value.

On the whole, he didn't remember exactly when or exactly why he had gone from tool to player, but he had been gambling both his sanity and his life far more than he should as of late. One of them was on the verge of collapse; the other was losing value by the second. If he was alive, it was because he was useful to the cause. It had become obvious, however, that he had lost the very thing he couldn't afford to lose: Leader Snoke's trust. Never before had he needed the Knights breathing down his neck during a mission. Snoke could call them whatever he wanted. Kylo knew what they were there for: to monitor him, report on his activities, to keep him in line—

And to put me down if the situation calls for it.

He had no idea if he had been fortunate or unusually far sighted when it came to that particular possibility. Whatever the case, those among the Knights whose involvement could have put him in danger were away, either assigned to far too important missions to be dispensable or so far away they wouldn't be able to reach headquarters in the short window the Supreme Leader needed them to. Snoke had been forced to work with what he had and the end result had been Essen, Lyr and Ryhase, a group that was trouble enough without Veshay—one of his red flags—having materialized out of nowhere before she vanished again entirely during the assault on the Resistance base.

Kylo had half expected—even half desired—for Veshay to follow him to DCF-98, but neither her, nor any of the Knights he had left stranded on the Finalizer had. There was a sense of victory in that, even if he more than acknowledged what his current actions spelled for him. This wasn't navigating loopholes or choosing to interpret orders the way they best suited his interests. It was insubordination, and for that he would pay dearly. The thought of punishment, however, didn't scare him as much as it should. As long as no third party got caught in the crossfire, he was passed caring. Still...

If FN-2187 doesn't come, I risked everything for nothing.

He ran his eyes over the skyline. In the distance, the column of dense, black smoke he had passed on his way to the floating city kept rising, twisting against the dark blue sky as it made its way between the white skyscrapers and even whiter clouds.

Too early. I'm not giving them enough time.

He had taken long enough to reach DCF-98, with the detour he had made to negotiate with General Organa only making the trip longer. If his calculations were correct, the shuttle should already be on its way. If it would bring someone was another question altogether.
He could proceed without FN-2187. The original plan didn't involve him the slightest. It didn't involve anyone but himself, actually, but the former stormtrooper's presence would give him an advantage, something with which he could tip the scales. If only he was just looking for the shuttle, focusing on his mission, and not listening to the Force, trying to find something, trying to sense her.

Rey, his mind supplied, unbidden. Her name is Rey.

His fists clenched as a group of birds flew past the window.

It was frustrating. He had done everything that had been asked of him, sacrificed everything, and yet he was still getting sidetracked, doubting himself, tripping over the same pitfalls—feeling.

"Sir."

Kylo turned towards the call, his attention falling on the seven man stormtrooper squad now present at the end of the small flight of stairs that lead to the panoramic window. Taking the lead, the only stormtrooper with a red shoulder blade saluted him.

"We apologize for the delay, Sir. He's outside now."

"A full day, Sergeant, doesn't qualify as a delay," he retorted, annoyed. "Explain yourself."

The stormtrooper hesitated. Truth be told, he didn't need to say anything to give an answer. His mind was transparent to the point of actually assaulting Kylo's with the information he sought.

"There was a problem, Sir."

Behind the mask, Kylo frowned, his attention turning again towards the column of black smoke twisting its way out of the city. His mind was filling with images and details the Force was eager to deliver. Empty, scorched streets and overturned vehicles. A still young man in a First Order uniform being caught in an explosion. People cowering behind closed doors. Dozens of bloated, discolored, decomposing corpses left to rot on the sidewalk and swinging from street lamps—

He knew what he was seeing was truth, but he could think of few reasons to leave evidence of a battlefield days after the fact.

*I'm either in dire need of enlightenment or about to cross paths with a man of unparalleled callousness.*

It didn't matter, whatever the case. Solving that was Hux's job, not his, and Hux could deal with it later. Or he would if the words hadn't already left Kylo's mouth before he could do anything to stop himself.

"By 'problem', Sergeant, are you referring to the reason for the rather distasteful display of failed biohazard disposal?"

"Dis—Display?"

"The macabre decorations this place has acquired."

The Sergeant looked around the large room they were standing in, completely at a lost.

"I'm not understanding, Sir."

*How dense can he be*?!
"The deceased presently decaying in the streets," he said in a low voice, head turning slowly to the soldier. "What is that about?"

"The Resistance did that, Sir. The Governor ordered the dead left where they fell," the Sergeant informed him. "In his opinion, they will be instrumental in deterring the locals from joining any rebel groups."

"They will be instrumental in starting an epidemic," Kylo retorted."I want it cleaned."

"Yes sir."

"Send him in."

The Sergeant saluted again, walking to the door to let a second stormtrooper unit in. Were the situation different, Kylo might actually have found some humor in the way the unit presented itself, its ranks closed so tightly around the bulky figure of an older dark-skinned man that one could only conclude they were expecting him to make a run for it at any moment.

An extremely realistic scenario given that he can barely keep pace with you.

In fact, the one concern that should have been on the soldiers' minds was making sure the man reached his destination before a heart attack reached him. A flicker of sympathy broke through his annoyance, only to be crushed by a rising sense of anger when the battalion opened ranks to reveal the impeccably dressed elder—his head held high, dark expressive eyes somehow finding his behind the helmet's visor—and an uncomfortable feeling settled in the back of his mind. A warning. He felt like he knew him, or, at least, that he should.

Who is this?

The elder threw his cape backwards, stepping away from the soldiers.

"I bid you welcome to DCF-98," he said in the local dialect, his accent so heavy it was almost impossible to understand his words. "It is an honor to meet someone of such high stature. It highly diminishes my own."

It took a moment to process what he had heard, even another to convince himself he hadn't put some weird spin on the words and construed some meaning—one that somehow involved his and the elder's height difference—that they weren't meant to have. The moment he convinced himself otherwise, however—

Hilarious. I call for the governor and I am brought a man who is more likely to be the tailor.

The elder had certainly dressed for the part. There wasn't anything about his appearance that had been left to chance. His clothes, a pale blue, were elegantly tailored, his white mustache carefully trimmed, his hair freshly dyed and combed. The stormtroopers could have shoved as many First Order arm-bands as they wish up his arm, covered him in First Order garments and regalia without being able to hide what he was—a local. And that accent…

"You know Basic. Speak it or I will find someone else who will," Kylo ordered, signaling the stormtroopers to step back as he studied the elder, the uncomfortable feeling only getting stronger as he went. Why did he feel he should know him? More important than that, however, was understanding why he was there. The man was clearly meant to be a local liaison, but the only reason for him to appear instead of the governor was— "The Order had sent a representative to this system. Where is he?"
The man crumpled momentarily at his words, but the weathered face soon regained its confident expression. His tone, however, was measured throughout.

"Dead," he informed him in Basic. "Alongside a great number of your troops."

"That answers nothing."

"This region has been having serious problems with rebel groups. Your Governor was one of their victims. They," The elder frowned, pausing, as if trying to decide how much he could say without painting himself as a target. "They planted a bomb." He sighed, his eyes momentarily diverted to the rising column of smoke behind Kylo. "If you wish to talk to the witnesses…"

"Hardly. When was this?"

"Shortly before your arrival. His body—"

"Unless the former Governor has risen from the dead ready to resume his prior duties, it really doesn't concern me," he retorted, studying the old face. "Who are you?"

"The name's Calrissian," the elder informed him, the Sergeant's mind taking Kylo's attention away from the familiarity of that name as it started yet again to leak into his—a door being broken down. The man now in front of him rising as a stormtrooper battalion burst into his house. "I was elected as this city's representative until the First Order provides us with a new governor."

You were forced into that position at gunpoint you self-ingratiating fool, Kylo mentally snapped, releasing himself from the images.

"And should I congratulate you on that achievement or offer you my condolences?" he asked, humor finding its way into his voice at Calrissian's torn expression. "Both, then."

The elder blinked, cleared his throat, and choose to proceed as if he hadn't heard him.

"May I ask what the Master of the Knights of Ren is doing here?" he asked. "I highly doubt Supreme Leader Snoke would answer your Governor's distress calls by sending someone of your position."

I highly doubt he would answer them at all.

"General Hux suffered a setback," Kylo informed him, eyes rising to the large, geostationary structure visible past the skylight. "It's his wish to have the Finalizer towed in for repairs at one of your docks."

The Calrissian reflected in the window's glass shook his head.

"Did he also mention how he plans for that to be done? Or should we bring him here through the power of prayer?"

"Is this about the rebels again?"

Calrissian took a step forwards and for the second time, somehow, found his eyes behind the mask.

"This place is under siege. It has been for almost a year. We can't get anyone in or out of this city without risking them being shot out of the sky. I have no idea how your shuttle was able to land without being shot down, but there isn't a way we can get anything, much less the number of tugs needed to drag a Star Destroyer, to the General." Calrissian hesitated and, if nothing else, Kylo had
to respect the man's nerve for what he said next. "If General Hux needs help, we must be provided with the means to help ourselves first."

"Or I can take my business elsewhere."

"If you can even get out of the city," he confirmed. "The General must help us first."

_The General would send your city crashing into the planet's surface rather than do so._

It was laughable. He had business far too important to be losing time at DCF-98. Solving the sector's problems was not even remotely his job and yet the options he had left were even worse than somehow ending up doing exactly that while still obeying Hux's commands.

_I have no time for this._

Sense, logic—everything was screaming at him to swallow his pride, turn back, abandon the city to its luck, and put Hux's oh-so-brilliant mind on the hunt for another repair zone. Only, he could already see the end result. Hux salivating over yet another failure on his part, using it to ingratiate himself with the Supreme Leader and making him look like a fool.

_Not. Again._

His fists clenched, muscles tensing as the storm inside his mind picked up.

_I can't face the Supreme Leader without my guard dogs. I can't stay here and I can't leave. I'm losing time!_

He was also treading the same path that commonly lead to his temper snapping. In fact, was it not for the crushing pain in his right shoulder half-paralyzing his arm, he probably would've been racing down darker paths instead of turning to question Calrissian. As it was, his voice was little more than a snarl.

"Have we any of these 'rebels' in custody?"

"Not to my knowledge." Calrissian's dark eyes turned to the stormtrooper with the red shoulder blade.

"No, Sir," the Sergeant echoed, and his mind was leaking information again. "The ones captured—"

"Committed suicide," Kylo finished, impatient.

It was setback after setback and the Sergeant's overwhelming eagerness to share useless information wasn't helping.

_He knows nothing. Not a whisper about sympathizers, not a single hideout…_

Anger was making it increasingly difficult to organize his thoughts. For all the conversation was achieving, he might as well pull a sack over his head and hit the streets blind in hopes of being attacked and led to—

Wait.

"Sergeant. Assemble a strike team. I want our enemies captured alive."

"Sir."
Kylo descended from the raised platform that lead to the window. As he did so, Calrissian approached, dropping his voice until it was barely audible.

"Even if your men are able to capture the rebels, they won't talk," he whispered, and for the third time his dark eyes found the one's hidden by the dark visor. "They never talk."

Behind the mask Kylo's expression hardened.

_They don't need to._

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- The Scavenger.

Commentaires s'il vous plaît. - DD
**The Scavenger - Day 12, Part 1**

*This isn't going to work. It can't possibly work.*

Rey fastened the belt around her waist, adjusting the armguard straps and then those of the black boots as she looked around nervously, expecting Force-knows-what to jump at her from behind the scarce furniture as she fumbled with just about everything while pulling the black garments over her clothes.

*This is stupid, reckless, farfetched!*

It was all of that and more, but throwing increasingly frustrated words at the situation didn't change things.

By now, Rey couldn’t pinpoint what among the many badly thought out details took the cake in the ‘worst plan I ever heard’ competition, but two points stood out above the rest.

First, the immediate concern: there was something wrong with the pilot.

It had been Finn who had noticed it first, pointing it out to her as Rey rejoined him at the base of the shuttle’s access ramp after the overwhelming wave of affection that had made her sprint back to hug a startled Leia had subsiding enough for her to stop looking back at her lonely figure and pay attention to Finn's suspicious expression.

“That isn’t normal,” he had said, his head nodding discretely at the absolutely still and silent figure lingering at the top of the ramp, its face hidden by an ugly black helmet she had never before seen. “Something isn’t right.”

Even now, she had no idea what exactly had caught her friend’s attention; Finn himself had not been able to pinpoint what that was—something in the way the pilot was standing or in the flat voice he had used to direct them to the shuttle’s private chamber—but when almost a day after their departure the pilot had came back to present them with two large closed boxes, Rey had finally been able to sense the source of whatever Finn had noticed. It was subtle, almost untraceable, but it was there, wrapped around the pilot’s mind like a shroud, pulling him into a deep, slumbering state—the Force. The pilot was little more than a puppet bent to someone's will.

The culprit was obvious. *Kylo Ren.*

Even if Finn was clearly relieved to know that their presence was being kept secret—as horrified as he was by the pilot’s predicament—Rey had a lot to say about Kylo Ren’s sense of entitlement over other people’s minds and even more about the way he intended to hide them in plain sight: both her and Finn were masquerading as Knights.

*Does he really think nobody will notice their colleagues being replaced by Finn and I?!!*

Wasn’t he supposed to be the son of Leia Organa and Han Solo? They were both clever and
resourceful, brilliant even. Had he completely missed inheriting anything worthwhile from his family? His fascination with genocidal maniacs was bad enough, but must he also fail at simple logic?!

Couldn’t he think of anything better than this?!

Can I?

Rey stopped, one arm in the sleeve of a long black jacket as her brain tried to find a better solution.

It doesn’t matter.

Even if there weren’t any other options, it was still a bad plan. Someone was bound to notice something was off, and, by the looks of it, it was perfectly possible someone would do that just by looking at her: the black garments didn’t fit her. They belonged to someone with far larger hips—not to mention a larger chest, but the shirt could be folded and hidden under the jacket. The trousers were a completely different matter—whoever owned these prior was shorter than her. By some miraculous coincidence, she did fit inside the boots, but still.

“This isn’t going to work,” she repeated, her anger turning into worry as she looked down at herself. “It won’t work.”

Her fingers smoothed the fabric as she looked around the dark, depersonalized room, eyes running over the uncomfortable furniture. Rey had to admit that it was not in the slightest what she had expected of the First Order, even if, in a strange way, it was exactly what she had expected of Ren. No comforts. Nothing indulgent. Nothing to call his own. Everything he had of value he seemingly kept with himself.

In a way, it reminded her of Master Luke. Only Luke Skywalker’s hut on Ach-Too had a worn lived-in feeling that made it seem like a home. There was nothing similar to that in this room. It was impersonal, cold and—save for a large open book left forgotten over the work desk, its pages held in place by a long wooden box—empty. Even her small house on Jakku had felt more welcoming. Even she had had more pleasure in her life, as awful as it had been, then he seemed to have in his.

Am I pitying him?

The sudden realization left an unpleasant flavor in her mouth, making her turn her back to the desk and start walking around the room, her mind going back to Starkiller base, to Han Solo, Finn, and Chewie—and then, without her permission, to a pale man whose dark eyes had turned sad and desperate, whom she had left broken and bleeding in the snow.

He deserved it. He deserved everything he got.

Something swirled inside her, whispering words she didn’t understand as she saw Finn unconscious in the snowy forest, his back opened by a lightsaber, and Han Solo—who in his rough, brusque way had been nothing but kind to her, who had offered her a job, a place to belong, who was everything she had dreamed for a father—impaled in the chest by the same weapon that somehow had failed to kill her friend.

“Finn?” she called, trying to push the images out of her mind. “Are you ready?”

A low mumble answered her from behind the closed door as once again she saw Han falling, disappearing, dying, and a soft voice, a kind voice that was filled with pain, reached out to her from the past, speaking as if the one behind it not only cared but understood.
He would disappoint you.

“What do you know?” she whispered to the empty room. “You know nothing, you—”

The door opened, sliding to reveal Finn, who was shaking his head in an exasperated way that seemed to indicate he was either coming to terms with the plan or about to have his say about it, and he entered the main room.

“The man’s brain is clearly leaking out of his ears,” he announced, opening his arms so that Rey could take a clear look at the heavy black garments he was wearing and that, in his case, belonged to a less powerfully built Knight of average height. “You think this is bad, don’t you, Rey? But do you know what’s really bad?”

He turned back to the room he had been dressing in, pulling something that looked like a blaster out of it and then a small weapon whose similarities to a dagger ended in the flat blunt blade that would be more suited for a kitchen than a warzone.

“Tell me, what is this? Should I start slapping him with this thing?”

Rey had to laugh at that, shaking her head as she took the strange weapon and examined it, unable to reach any conclusion about how it should be used.

“You look good,” Finn said, taking the weapon back and putting it in a holster in the large belt. “I mean, it’s disturbing as hell seeing you dressed like that, but you really look the part.” A pause as he looked, eyebrows raised, to her belt. “Are you taking the lightsaber?”

Rey looked down. The jacket design meant that only half of it was held in place by the belt, leaving the straps where she had put Luke’s lightsaber visible.

“I feel better taking it,” she said to Finn. She then pointed to the old staff she had already put on her back and to the pistol Han Solo had given her. “I’m also taking these.”

“The walking armory,” Finn said. She punched him softly in the arm, forcing a short laugh out of him before his expression turned sad. “I never thought I’d be going back,” he muttered, his eyes darkening, a hand going to the back of his neck, the place where she knew the tracker had been placed. “I thought I had escaped, but things are never that simple are they?”

He gave her a nervous smile, as if apologizing for his sudden lack of control, and looked around, falling silent. Rey bit her lips, fighting to find something appropriately comforting to distract him and instead blurt out anything but:

“What should I know about them?”

She wanted to hit herself for asking that. Finn, however, didn’t seem to find the question strange or out of place. He frowned, thinking.

“About the Knights? I really don’t know that much,” he admitted. “I mean, they’re supposedly a large group, but I only ever saw Ren, and even that was only once for a few minutes. He’s their commanding officer, or something.”

That gave her an unpleasant feeling.

“What do they call him?” she asked carefully, as the same realization seemed to hit Finn and his expression fell. “What did stormtroopers call him?”
“Commander. Mostly Sir.”

The unpleasant feeling multiplied tenfold.

“That is something I won’t be calling him,” she muttered, incredulous, as a long beep echoed through the room, drawing their attention to the shuttle’s inner communication console. It was Finn who approached it, hitting the buttons with ease. At once, the flat, empty voice of the pilot crackled on the line.

“Currently dropping out of light speed, Sir. Approaching destination.”

“Inform ground control of our arrival,” Finn ordered, his voice controlled, even as his expression filled with anxiety. “We will be in the cockpit for the final approach.”

“Yes sir.”

The connection dropped, leaving them both staring silently at each other. At last, Finn walked to the adjacent room, bringing a dark helmet back with him and grabbing the one resting next to the chair as he walked.

“Whatever happens,” he said, giving her the helmet. “We stay together.”

“We stay together,” she repeated. A promise. And they both pulled the masks over their heads, disappearing under their dark countenances, stepping into the skins of monsters.

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- oh, there’s Luke!

Madame Windcage subsists entirely on comments and plot bunnies. Supply her as you are able.
The Jedi Master

The Jedi Master - Day 12, Part 2

*Something is wrong. Something must have gone wrong.*

Alone, his greying hair battered by the same wind that punished one of Ach-Too’s high cliffs, Luke Skywalker scanned the horizon, blue eyes going over an even bluer sky as night set over the remote part of the galaxy he called home and the distant stars appeared, shining their light over a man that had once answered their calling and somehow managed to meet their demands.

Today, however, like all the days since his life and those of the people he held dearest to him had turned into a living hell, the skies offered him neither comfort nor the rush of enthusiasm they had once filled him with. Instead, looking up, Luke felt nothing but a terrible sense of foreboding and a gut wrenching worry at the long absence and continuous silence of the young woman his sister—and, inadvertently, his nephew—had sent his way.

*Where are you, Rey?*

The wind picked up around him, whipping his robes furiously as Luke kept straining his eyes in hopes of seeing the *Falcon* approaching the island. It was an exercise as pointless as his presence on the cliff, but it gave him a purpose that couldn’t be achieved by simply staying inside his hut channeling the Force and waiting to feel the girl’s presence. Even if it accomplished exactly the same thing—*nothing*—standing here at least felt like doing something.

*And exactly when did I start calling this ‘doing something?’*

Frustration rose from somewhere in his chest, breaking through his usually calm countenance and making him look around, eyes alit with the same fire that had guided him in his youth and that, for a moment, made him look exactly like the young man that had stared at the skies of Tatooine wishing more than anything he could leave them behind. Then, as suddenly as it had awakened, the fire went out, leaving Luke staring blindly at the darkness that surrounded him, his expression growing more and more conflicted as time passed.

If any of his old Jedi Masters could see him now, they would be, if not screaming his ears off, probably making him wish that they would. Even so, he wished more than anything that one of them would appear and help him sort out his thoughts. At this point, he really didn’t care if he got Ben Kenobi’s endless sarcasm, Master Yoda’s brutal honesty, or Anakin Skywalker’s action packed, overly aggressive solutions for everything as long as one, or even all three of them, would appear to counsel him. Not that *that* was about to happen, and he wouldn’t give himself false hope that it would. It had been years, too many years, since the last time he had seen any of them. Sometimes, deep in meditation, he thought he could hear them. Being on Ach-Too, surrounded by the Force, had assured him that he in fact could, that they were there, somewhere in the Force, only distant and out of reach.

“Did I disappoint the three of you so much?” Luke asked the night, his voice carried away by the wind until nothing was left of it. “Did I fail you like I did everyone else?”

No response. His thoughts going back to Rey, Luke focused his attention on the stars, his mind searching the Force for her distinctive presence, but not daring to go so far as making his presence known to any Force sensitive who might be listening. Ach-Too was far too valuable and too
vulnerable to risk, and even if in the back of his mind the young man that had left Master Yoda’s Jedi training to protect his friends was rebelling against his older self’s lack of action, Luke ignored that part of himself, focusing on the present, his mind pulled in all possible directions by his duty as a Jedi.

*Come on, Rey. Come back.*

Both the skies and the Force remained empty.

His eyes finally dropping to the sea, and Luke took a step back, still ignoring the increasingly loud voice inside of him that was screaming at him to do something, and turned his back to the horizon. Things weren’t as easy as part of him wanted to believe. They had never been, not now, not when he had lost Ben, not when he had risked everything he was and valued to bring Darth Vader back to the light, not when he had abandoned his training, not when he had left Tatooine. Even the decisions that he had made in a flash and the ones he knew to be right had come with the unforgiving weight of regret.

He was, he knew, blessed in way most people weren’t. He had always held his choices in his hands, most of the time being able to make them or lucky enough that the people who had taken them away from him cared about him more than about themselves. Even so, even if the mistakes and the missed opportunities were his and only his—or maybe because of that—he found himself struggling, clinging to his duties and the things he held dear as he looked at the path ahead, waiting for the moment he would have to give up on one or both of them, and praying that it wouldn’t come.

Only, it always did, and now, alone within the darkness, Luke felt that, once again, he had come to a fork in the road and that he was standing there face to face with a choice he knew he would have to make, still hoping that something would happen and he wouldn’t have to take either path, that he would be spared that pain.

*Please, Rey. You have to come back.*

The wind was howling around him, seemingly trying to throw him off the cliff as he made his way down, the small empty huts almost mocking him as he did so.

Truth be told, he didn’t know Rey all that well. Much like him, the girl was quiet. The few times she had spoken were often to beg him, day after day, to train her. Even so, Luke believed he had observed enough of her to be sure about something: whatever happened, she would always return. The only other time he had seen her disappear, that had held true.

This time, however, he feared it wouldn’t, and, for the life of him, he couldn’t think of any reason that didn’t involve a set of circumstances that spelled disaster for the galaxy as a whole.

*I ordered her to come back. I begged her. Why else…?*

“It’s called a choice. Last I recall, that was something you agreed people should have.”

Luke almost jumped out of his skin at hearing both those words and the voice that had spoken them. Turning—that ever present pessimism he had acquired as he grew older proven once again right—Luke faced the place the voice had arisen from, watching as everything around him changed, small empty huts turning into walls, grass disappearing under cold, hard floor, silence fading into unmistakable city noises and mechanical hums.

He felt as if he were a ghost, completely cut off from Ach-Too and his physical body. He hoped, for his sake, that the floating sensation he felt didn’t mean he’d mindlessly walked off of a cliff in reality
just because the Force or Ach-Too, or both, had decided to pull him into his memories at the worst possible time.

Focusing on what he was being shown, Luke found himself, as he had been once, looking around a shop. He had no clear memory of the place where he now stood. It was a small place, respectable in its appearance, and judging by the tools and components carefully displayed on the walls and ship parts scattered on the counter, somewhere he had gone for repairs to his ship. Nothing strange about that. He had stepped into dozens if not hundreds of those during his life. There was nothing special here, absolutely nothing worth mentioning.

“Are you even listening?!” the same voice that had pulled him there snapped, turning Luke’s attention towards a tall young man who was standing, half hidden, in a dark corner, brown eyes following him while he walked around the shop. Luke recognized him instantly. “Uncle Luke!”

“I’m listening,” Luke heard himself saying, curtly, his past self’s attention going now to a huge side section of a motor. “And we will talk, Ben, when you have calmed down.”

“And when will that be?! When it becomes inconsequential? When it no longer matters?” his nephew retorted, eyes gleaming in an almost feverish way. “I need you to listen to me now, not when and where you deem me worthy of your time!”

It felt like being stabbed. That conversation—if one could go as far as call it that—and the accusations of his nephew were two things he remembered well. It had been the beginning of his undoing—one of the many memories, the many mistakes, that the Force showed him, regularly, unrelentingly, as though punishing him through sheer repetition for not seeing what was before his very eyes even then.

“I will not discuss this with you when you’re in such a mood, Ben,” he heard himself retort, turning away from the motor to stare at the shadows where his nephew had taken refuge. “I wish to discuss the reasons for this sudden decision of yours with you, not your anger.”

“I can’t stay there. I—”

Ben fell silent, head turning towards what looked like a service door. The minute he did, a third man, one Luke hadn’t acknowledged as being of any importance until now, stepped from behind the counter, joining Luke next to the motor with a strange expression on his face. Whatever he had wished to say, however, was cut off when the door opened and a small chubby alien pulling a trolley joined them.

“I believe I have a part that will suit your needs,” he announced. “Please come closer.”

Exchanging a long, meaningful look, both Luke Skywalker and the third man—Lor San Tekka, he now recognized—stepped towards the trolley.

“This is not what we asked for,” Tekka pointed out, his normally benevolent expression and quick, mocking smile absent.

“It is true it’s an older model, but I believe it will do the job.”

Frowning, Luke crouched next to the equipment, inspecting the wiring and power connection with less than his usual enthusiasm.

“This thing is falling apart,” he replied, looking up at the owner who remained impassive.

“We sell second hand components. I can guarantee it will take you to—”
“The next shop you own?” Tekka finished for him, stepping aside so that Ben, whose curiosity had drawn him out of the shadows, could take his place at his side. “Or possibly our graves, judging by the overall state of the thing.”

“It is a somewhat moody model, Sir, but—”

“For moodiness, he already has me,” Ben murmured, and Tekka's expression turned carefully blank with the effort it took not to laugh. “Is this a joke?”

The owner looked up, small eyes growing even smaller as he studied this new arrival, clearly unimpressed by both his youth and the worrying state of dishevelment Luke knew to be completely unlike his nephew. In fact, for someone who was always so careful with his appearance, Ben looked like an absolute disaster: hair unkempt, beard unshaven, dark rings under his eyes. Even the clothes, a black pilot’s suit, weren’t something he would normally be caught wearing. It was as if something had happened that had sent him dashing for a spaceship without any consideration or concern for how he would look on arrival.

But if his appearance worried the Luke of the present, the only effect it had on the small alien was to dismiss him even more quickly than he normally would.

“This is all I have. If you don’t like it—”

It was a mistake nobody made twice. In a moment, dark eyes had found their mark and that something behind Ben’s eyes that was equal parts alluring and terrifying had found its target, latched on, and looked.

“May I suggest looking in the basement?” he asked, as the owner tore his eyes away from him, mouth agape. Ben kept going, ruthlessly. “Second shelf, right next to the carburetors. You might be, let’s say, ‘surprised.’

“I’m sorry, but—”

“Do what the boy says. We both know he is speaking the truth,” Tekka ordered, somehow managing to look menacing as he did so. The moment the shopkeeper left for the basement, however, he bent over laughing. “That—by the Force, that was—”

Tekka raised his hand, clearly aiming to ruffle Ben’s hair—something Luke now remembered Tekka had, much to his nephew's annoyance, been in the habit of doing—only to stop and take a long hard look at him.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” Ben snarled, his voice so strange that the lie was obvious. “I can’t stay there,” he insisted, facing Luke again. “I—”

Luke frowned, studying his nephew’s face and finding something like torment there.

“Is this decision of yours to do with the conscription?” Luke asked, testing the waters cautiously. “I’m aware of your position and—”

“My position?” Ben repeated, something dark settling in his expression, his voice suddenly calm. “You are concerned about my position?”

“Ben, we have discussed this before.”
“I’m not the one bringing it up now,” his nephew retorted, even as his expression went darker. “I can’t stay there. If you don’t trust me enough to release me, then send me somewhere else. Put me in some cave hunting for kyber crystals for all I care. Just don’t make me go back.”

Shaking his head in confusion, Luke grabbed his nephew’s shoulder, squeezing it hard as he did so.

“Look, Ben, I don’t know the reason behind this decision of yours to leave us, but—look at me—I need someone I can depend on keeping an eye on the Academy. I need someone who can defend the place if something happens. That person is you. I need you there.”

“Then please come back, with me, right now.”

Luke hesitated, a conflicted expression taking hold of his face as he took a quick look towards Tekka’s neutral expression and then to Ben’s pleading one, only to end up shaking his head.

“I swear it won’t take much longer for my work to be finished,” he said. “After that, I’ll return, and if you still wish to leave I will give you the freedom you need to hunt for—what is it that interests you? The Imperial Library? The Jedi Archives?” Something tense in Ben’s expression broke then, a timid smile finding its way to his face. “Believe me, I’ll be making you travel so much, you’re going to wish you were with us, but for now, Ben, indulge me one last time. I need you there. Please.”

He could see his nephew’s resolution swaying, then, finally, breaking.

“If that's what you want,” he whispered, his voice regaining its strength as he took a quick look towards the door the shop owner had disappeared through. “You know, of course, that he’s going to have you mugged the minute you step out of here.”

“I didn’t,” Luke sighed, far too conscious of his nephew’s attempt at escape to simply let him leave it at that. “Whatever is worrying you, Ben, we'll work it out. I promise.”

The memory collapsed, words echoing through the Force as Ben’s ship rose into the sky, disappearing into a blood red sky and someone else, Rey, her face as resolute as her eyes, appeared at his side.

Another memory then. Another round of penance.

“You have to go back,” she said, visibly out of breath as they climbed up one of Ach-Too steep cliffs. “General Organa, the Resistance, they all need you.”

“I will not be going back,” the vision of himself argued.

“But you must. The galaxy—you haven’t seen what it's become!”

“I have seen more than you know. It doesn’t change my decision.”

“People are dying! The First Order is gaining ground and General Organa told me that the Republic has been all but destroyed,” she insisted. “Finn—he's my friend—he can tell you more about it than me. He was a stormtrooper, he really knows about these things. We need you.”

“I understand your reasoning, but—”

“If you do then please come back, with me, right now.”

Hearing the same plea in a different voice froze him to the core. Without thinking, Luke raised his attention towards the sky, to the place where Ben’s ship was disappearing, only to find that the
Falcon had taken its place, vanishing into space, and that Rey too was gone.

“No…”

The memory crumbled again the instant he understood what he was truly being shown. Ach-Too’s huts came back into focus as cold wind battered his face and a known presence—only so distant, so weak, that for a second Luke doubted he was truly feeling it—gave voice to his realization.

"Lost one, you have. Lose the second, you must?"

It felt like being electrocuted. The next thing he knew, he was running down the cliff, a distant promise echoing in his mind until it was the only thing he could hear.

Whatever is worrying you, Ben, we'll work it out.

His last words. That had been the last thing he had said to Ben, and it had been a lie. He should have guessed; he should have felt the disaster coming; he should have paid more attention not only then, but over the years, and done something.

Instead I was blind.

And, because of that, a week after his last conversation with his nephew, his Academy would lay in ruins, Kylo Ren rising from both its ashes and those of a young man that had came to him begging to be spared.

He had failed Ben. He had failed Leia and Han. He had failed everyone who had ever trusted him. Luke Skywalker, the Resistance Hero, the Legend, the last Jedi Knight, was no longer the boy who saved everyone and that found everything he touched turning to gold. He was the one who had watered the seeds Snoke himself had sown and remained blind to their corruption. He was the one who had set everyone he cared about on the path of destruction and failed to see where it was heading. He had thought Ach-Too to be the path the Force had given him to make amends for his failures, to make things right, but—

What good will that do if I can’t save even one single person?

He had lost everything already. His Academy was nothing more than rubble, Tekka was dead, Ben lost to the dark side, and Han had given his life trying and failing to bring him back. That didn’t have to mean that he would have to fail Rey too.

He wasn’t about to make the same mistake twice.
Finn, ever the optimist, had been running through possible scenarios since they had departed the meeting point, running the gamut from the tame to the impossible. That the scene greeting them on arrival managed to shock him was a testament to how unusual it was.

He had to admit that he had no idea how the Knights were usually received. His contact with them during his time in the Order was limited to Kylo Ren himself and that interaction had been fleeting at best. Ren’s arrival on the Finalizer had been so lacking in pomp and circumstance that it was only when he had hit the ground on Jakku that most personnel became aware of his presence.

That, however, did nothing to alleviate the dread Finn felt about the way their arrival would be greeted. He put the way Ren’s comings and goings were kept silent down to the man’s personality, not protocol, and as certain as he was that neither Hux nor Phasma would indulge in something as frivolous as a formal reception, Finn could certainly conjure up images of some local Governor trying to impress important guests with a demonstration of how well things were going in his sector.

_Honestly, I was expecting some sort of flashy military parade, not ..._

His mental worst case scenario, courtesy of a very pessimistic part of himself, was simple betrayal—being arrested on disembarking, taken before a firing squad for execution, and watching as Rey was captured and escorted to Snoke before the blaster bolts rained down on him. This, however...

The driver hit the brakes hard, causing the stormtroopers that had been sent to escort he and Rey to sway in their positions as the ground transport’s door opened. Reminding himself not to run after the soldiers, Finn strolled as indifferently as he possibly could out of the vehicle, forcing the group to keep pace with him instead of the opposite, as he assessed his surroundings. Hidden under the black helmet, his expression grew tenser and tenser.

Truth be told, a military parade would have been a preferable reception to the one currently greeting them. Not an hour ago, some brilliant boneheads with a death wish—probably some group of freedom fighters Finn would have sympathized with were the situation different—had decided to open fire against the black command shuttle they had been traveling in. With cannon fire raining down on them and trails of grey smoke from various ammunitions dancing around the shuttle and hitting the large defensive wings, ground control had ordered their landing diverted to the opposite side of the city—not that that had done much to spare them from the ground fire or Rey’s insistence with the pilot that she could land the shuttle right in the middle of it.

_Thank the Force she didn’t._

It wasn't as if he doubted Rey could do it. He was, in fact, quite certain she could land anything anywhere, but his level of comfort with flying had already been close to zero after being shot down by the Finalizer and it had dropped well lower than that after Han Solo’s crazy antics with planetary approach at lightspeed. If there was something he really didn’t want to experience, it was landing in the middle of anti-aircraft fire when there was no need for it. Fortunately, the pilot—who seemed to have snapped out of whatever Force mind-control was gripping him—was of the same opinion.
They had followed ground instructions, landed, and been immediately picked up by the same military ground transport that had just now dropped them right in the middle of what looked disturbingly like a stabilization operation.

*Or it would, if there were more soldiers.*

Finn’s hands closed around the blaster-like weapon—one he suspected was some cross between a sniper’s rifle and a blaster—and took a better look at the situation around them, growing more certain that something was wrong with every detail.

His experience with the Order didn’t go beyond the attack and subsequent purification of the village in Jakku, but Phasma’s training did cover all the potential missions soldiers might be involved with. Stabilization, the last stage of a conquest, involved destroying all the remaining pockets of opposition fighters and taking control of all government and military facilities that might have escaped the main stage of operations. It could extend to evacuating the civilian population and searching their homes for weapons, closing sewers and underground facilities, arresting prominent members of the society and, basically, getting rid of everything and anyone who could be used for subversive purposes. It was a slow and time-consuming procedure that was normally handled by the appointed Governor and required the use of complete platoons, not—

*Three guys guarding a building’s entrance, the seven man squad that is escorting us, and—*

Judging by the sounds of blaster fire coming from inside of the low white building they were approaching, only a few more soldiers inside. It was strange. It made absolute no sense, actually, when he could clearly see the red banners of the Order flying from every rampart in the city. On the whole, the place looked both like it had been under the Order’s rule for quite some time—months, perhaps years—and at the same time—

*Like they arrived only yesterday.*

He didn’t like it. The *Finalizer*’s absence and that of any Star Destroyer class cruiser made it clear the city wasn’t a recent Order acquisition, and the presence of a great number of construction plants in the planet’s vicinity underscored that further. It really shouldn’t matter to him what was happening, but even with his relief at the fact that the Knights reception was exactly the same as any other First Order’s operative—being thrown into battle upon arrival—he was worried. Extremely worried.

*And I’m not the only one.*

Walking by his side, her shoulders set in a line so tense they seemed to have been carved from of stone, Rey was too.

“Who talks?” she asked, leaning discretely in his direction, her warm strong voice transformed into a low cavernous whisper that made a shiver run up Finn’s spine. “One of us has to talk.”

“I know the procedures,” Finn reminded her, his distorted voice, something that didn’t sound at all human, causing Rey’s masked face to snap in his direction as if she needed confirmation it was really him speaking. “I’ll take care of this.”

He wished he felt as confident as his newly acquired voice made him sound. For every step he took in the direction of the insubstantial barricade near the building’s entrance, he felt his courage tested, and the moment the stormtrooper escort took them passed it, leading them inside the low white building, fear gripped him, forcing him to grapple with it as they navigated the long white corridors and elegant halls. The blaster fire they had heard coming from the inside was becoming louder and louder.
I can do this, Finn repeated to himself as they entered a lift that dove down so rapidly he no longer knew if the pressure in his stomach was from fear or the sudden plunge. I can do this.

He could have been saying he couldn’t do it for all the good that chant was achieving. He felt panicky, scared to his core. This won’t do. Even inside his head his voice sounded wrong. This won’t do at all!

“Is he waiting for us?” he blurted out in the general direction of Rey’s ear, careful so that the group surrounding them didn’t overhear. “Can you sense his presence or something?”

“He’s somewhere in the building,” Rey shook her head, her eyes invisible under the long visor. “I have no idea where.”

The lift stopped, opening its doors to let both he and Rey step outside and join a small group of stormtroopers, their blasters at the ready and their white armor so polished that for a moment they were almost indistinguishable from the walls. Looking at them, finally forced to face them, Finn found his voice.

“Status report,” he ordered, both he and Rey stopping side by side as the commanding officer, sporting a battered blaster and a red armguard, approached them.

“The building is surrounded, Sir,” the soldier, a woman, informed him as she stopped in front of them and saluted. “We have blocked all the exits. Hostiles were detected moving through the building’s inferior levels.”

Hostiles? The designation surprised Finn. In his experience, the First Order was much more descriptive about their enemies than that. It spoke of the Resistance, the Republic, criminals, but ‘hostiles?’

“Have we engaged them?”

“Positive, Sir. There are reports of confrontations on three fronts.”

“Is Commander Ren inside?”

The soldier made a slight gesture with her head.

“He is, Sir.”

“Orders?” he asked, too quickly and with too much anxiety. Be it the helmet or simple indifference, however, nobody seemed to notice it.

“Capture the enemy and take them to the Commander,” she informed him. “Kill only if we have no choice.”

Finn felt his stomach drop.

These hostiles—he wants to question them.

In a flash, Finn’s mind had gone to Poe and his absolute resignation with his fate after being subjected to Ren’s particular method of ‘interrogation.’ A wave of profound pity rose within him as he tried to imagine what Ren wished to possess or know this time that had granted someone his attention in such an unfortunate way.

I don’t know which is worse—stabilization operations or this. Finn came to the horrible conclusion
that even if Ren didn't want them anywhere near him for the interrogation—if he remembered correctly, Ren had unceremoniously thrown everyone out when dealing with Poe, not that Hux had gone that far away—they were expected to assist him with the hunt.

*I would certainly expect that if I were in her place,* he thought, studying the commanding officer in front of them. A lifetime wearing those same protections had given him a very good notion of what the people under them were thinking and, if body language were any indicator, she was clearly expecting only one reply. Rey would hate what came next. He would even more, all things considered, but they had no choice.

*We agreed to this.*

“You will take us to him.”

*And with a little luck we won’t get involved in any fighting.*

They weren’t five meters past the blaster door when ‘luck’ decided it wouldn’t favor them in the slightest and ‘fighting’ exploded all around them. Diving for cover as something flew past them and exploded against the wall, Finn just wanted to curse.

“Why the hell is there always someone shooting at us?!” he snapped, blaster fire flying everywhere as the corridor filled with acrid grey smoke. Somewhere to their right, the stormtroopers had begun firing, the distinctive voice of the commanding officer shouting orders amongst the chaos. “Are you alright?”

Rey, what little he could see of her anyway, nodded her answer, the pistol she had kept with her flying to her hands only for her to stop midway into firing position as if she had just remembered exactly who they were fighting and which side they were supposed to be on right now.

“I hate this,” she murmured in a tone so exasperated that Finn was sure he would have recognized her even if he hadn’t known who was under the black mask. “I won’t fight for them.”

*At some point, we'll probably have to do that anyway,* Finn thought. ‘At some point,’ however, didn’t have to mean now or today or anytime soon.

“Let them deal with it.”

It was easier said than done. As the battle became more and more violent, reinforcements thickening their attackers lines, explosions echoing all around them and blaster fire flying everywhere, it rapidly became clear that ‘at some point’ was actually right then. Rey was the first to strike out, her hands flying to her staff as a huge man carrying a blaster appeared right at their side. Her aim was, as ever, perfect. The staff twirled, hitting their attacker square in the jaw, then swept out to strike down a second figure bearing down on Finn. In the space between breaths, he was the one forced to put his rifle’s butt into an attacker’s ribs. Only when he was about to remove the safety from the blaster did he remember that they weren’t supposed to kill anyone.

*Because that's so freaking easy!*

More and more fighters were coming into view, some of them getting so close that the whole situation seemed about to break either into a fistfight or call for the use of bayonets. Dodging another attacker so that Rey could knock away their blaster—something that ended with him having to punch their attacker to put him out of commission—Finn was rather sure everybody was going to go with the second option, and that wasn’t good news.

*This is going to turn into a bloodbath!*
Rey circled around him, staff raised parallel to her arm.

“We should retreat!” she shouted at him, twirling her weapon in a low arc that hit someone right in the knees. “This is absolute madness!”

*Welcome to the First Order!* Finn wanted to shout back, but instead ended up tugging her in the direction he knew the stormtroopers were, while shouting:

“We have to keep them alive!”

Rey kicked someone in the chest sending him—or her, it was impossible to tell—crashing into the ground.

“There’s no winning this!” The staff struck again, sending the same attacker she had just kicked back to the ground before he could get up. “We’re outnumbered!”

*This coming from the person who tried to escape from a First Order base alone,* Finn thought, once again sending his rifle’s butt crashing into an incoming hostile. *I would have been better off with a bloody hammer!* He missed wielding Skywalker’s lightsaber all of a sudden. As much as that wasn't his field, it would've been much more useful in the present situation than a rifle.

“There has to be an end to this!”

“When you see it, let me know!” Rey retorted.

In another situation, Finn would have laughed at that; at the moment, however, he was far too busy trying not to die to even crack a smile. He had been trained for situations like this; strategy and survival tactics had been hammered into his mind until they became second nature. The odds they were facing on this occasion, however, were a lot worse than the ones he been trained for or found while fighting alongside the Resistance. Like Rey had said, they were outnumbered, and far more worrying than that was the fact that their present allies’ numbers were far less than what was normally required for a successful operation. He was sure a well organized squad could have tipped the scales while fighting a much larger enemy than the one they were facing and not even call it a challenge, but the squad that was with them was far too small and obviously missing several soldiers. This, added to the state the city was in and the fact that Kylo Ren—a man that operated outside of the chain of command—was the one presently in charge made that bad feeling of his get even worse.

It made no sense. He admitted he had very little basis to judge Ren's military prowess being that Jakku and the attack on the Resistance’s last base had clearly been Hux’s handiwork. Ren though—he wasn’t sure what Ren was apart from a bloodthirsty murderer. Takodana’s assault had been standard procedure, the kind of thing every platoon would be able to do on its own without any officer around. It had no personal touch apart from the rather hasty departure once Rey had been captured.

Even so, one thing was certain, standard procedure or not, the man that hadn’t spared resources at Takodana would be sparing them here. Something was wrong here; what it was and what it spelled for him and Rey worried him greatly. Stormtroopers might be seen as little more than tools—dispensable tools at that—but they were essential to the Order’s war machine. The moment they were absent was the moment things started to fall apart and, judging by what he was seeing, things were going downhill. Fast.

*Shouldn’t that please me?*

Shouldn’t the fact that the Order was having its just deserts make him, if not happy, at least feel
slightly vindicated?

Why doesn’t it?

Diving under the blaster fire, his mind managing to somehow recall Starkiller’s destruction while he did so, Finn finally managed to crouch next to the stormtrooper squad, Rey diving to his side a second later.

“Have you called for reinforcements?” he shouted over the noise.

“The squads that haven’t reached rendezvous are involved in confrontations, Sir. Our distress call has been acknowledged, but—”

“Better tell them to start running!” Rey snapped, striking a blaster away from one of the fighters both of them had left unconscious on the floor. “Unless they wish to rescue our corpses!”

Another wave of grey smoke made its way towards them, obscuring the hall to the point Finn couldn’t see anything beyond vague shapes.

Just what we—

He didn’t have time to finish that thought. A massive explosion rocked the hall, sending him flying against a flight of stairs. His training kicking in fast enough for him to feel around and grab his weapon, Finn stood up, ears ringing, and looked around as debris rained over him, searching the dense smoke for—

“Rey? REY!”

He remembered a moment too late he shouldn’t be calling her by name—not that he knew what the hell he should be calling her by. That, however, became irrelevant in a second. He could see her, a figure all dressed in black, rapidly approaching him. Still disoriented after being thrown across the room, Finn only understood she was shouting a warning the moment someone grabbed him, pulled him backwards, and threw him behind—

Riot shields, he realized just in time to stop himself from punching the Riot Control stormtrooper that was trying to drag him to safety square in the face. Good thing too, as he’d probably be fed a Z6 baton to the gut in retaliation.

Would they do that to a Knight?

That was a question dangerously close to being answered as Rey, probably blinded by smoke, was already upon them, swinging her staff as, at his side, the stormtrooper raised his baton to intercept the attack.

It was a disaster in the making—a nightmare—and above all one he couldn’t stop unless he threw Rey down and made everything look, if not worse, then suspicious as hell.

Not to say the topic of conversation from here to headquarters.

And they couldn’t risk that, not when canteen gossip had a way of finding officers’ ears and spreading like wildfire up the chain of command, not when it would reach Phasma, who would inform Hux, who would start inquiring after them, discover something was off—

And have us executed.
Even so, he had to do something, anything to stop what was about to happen. Finn opened his mouth to shout for her to stop and found his words dying before being spoken. Someone had stepped in front of Rey, intercepting her staff with a strange, cross-shaped guard he took a moment too long to recognize as the hilt of Ren’s unlit saber. That he didn’t recognize it instantly was probably a testament to the explosion’s violence; fortunately, it hadn’t rattled him enough for his body not to recognize a threat when he saw one. In less than a second, Finn had risen from behind the shield, his eyes looking directly at the black visor as the riot control troops ran passed them, diving into battle.

“Collect any survivors,” Ren ordered the soldier next to Finn, who immediately disappeared into the fog. His attention then turned to Rey. The moment they locked eyes, he seemed to freeze.

“Sir.”

The moment broke, forcing Ren’s attention away from Rey and towards an officer now appearing through the fog.

“The Governor requests your presence,” a Sergeant announced. “He says it’s urgent.”

“He can wait five minutes.”

“Sir, there has been a problem.”

Ren released Rey’s staff, turning towards the officer with his normal brusqueness.

“What problem?”

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- The Scavenger.

Say hello in the box down there if you will.
The Scavenger - Day 12, Part 4

Rey knew this place. She had been here once, alone in the dark industrial corridors where she now stood, the humming of the pale blueish lights, the distant sounds of machinery, and a forced, pained breathing that now was nowhere to be found, echoing all around her. It was her vision come to life.

Of all the things she had seen in that first vision on Takodona, of all the things that had been forcibly burned into her mind, this was the only part she had consciously clung to, for it had also been the place where she caught sight of a familiar face—that of a boy she had dreamed of since childhood. His had been the only company and source of comfort she had had during her lonely and harsh childhood on Jakku. As the years went by and she grew older, he had all but disappeared from her dreams, leaving her even lonelier than she had already been. Rey had eventually dismissed him as her younger self's desire for a friend, his obvious loneliness a reflection of her own, and the fact that he always acknowledged her, smiled at her, was no more than her desperate desire to be seen, to be something more than a scavenger.

Yet, even as she dismissed him as a figment of her imagination, Rey had clung to his image—to the boy who, even if imaginary, had been the closest thing she had to a friend—and she had held onto his image harder still when her dreams of him were replaced with dreams of a dark masked figure she would later come to know as Kylo Ren. As horrifying as it had been to see Kylo Ren jump right out of her nightmares and the rest of her vision like a terrible premonition of things to come, once she had time to think about it, it had also given her hope. The boy from her dreams had been there, in her vision, standing alongside a dark shadow, looking at her as if pleading for help. If Kylo Ren was real, if Luke Skywalker and the dark figure of Darth Vader were all real, then he had to be too.

That her meditations on Ach-Too often included him now, like a long forgotten memory, made her all the more sure of his existence.

She had hoped in the instant she had recognized these corridors—a fool's hope really, since things never went in the exact way her visions showed her—that he would be here now, waiting for her, and that something good might come out of her and Finn’s presence in this city, that he was the reason they both were here. She had hoped so, so much, and instead found herself walking alongside a row of bodies, stopping every few steps so that Ren could crouch next to one of them and search their minds. For some strange reason, she was able to sense every time his careful probing tried to latch onto them and instead fell into what felt like an endless void.

It was a horrible sensation—nauseating—and even if her experience with stepping into other people’s minds started with latching onto Ren’s fear and bursting inside his head, and ended some minutes later with deceiving a stormtrooper, she was rather sure that no living mind was supposed to feel like that, all empty and wrong. It made her wish she could occupy her thoughts with something else, but unless she kept going on and on about the boy in her vision there was little else to occupy her time.

The room they were now in was situated deep inside the floating city—Cloud City, Finn had called it. So deep, in fact, that they had been navigating not only service corridors, but also underground
waterways to get there. Bathed in darkness and oppressively hot, the room had just one point of interest: a large, circular window of elegant design, one that seemed to say that at some point this place had had a rather different use. She had—she was almost ashamed to admit it—pictured a family living here, not that that fantasy held for long. First, because the window lead to nowhere—well, to a massive hole, but that was beside the point—and second because of the bodies. She had seen worse, far worse, on Jakku. They shouldn't affect her so, but they were Resistance fighters and they had chosen death rather than falling into the Order’s hands. If that didn’t speak for itself…

A chill went up her spine, forcing her to abandon that train of thought. Her attention went towards Ren’s crouched form, one hand hovering over the head of a freckle faced man lying on the floor. Her fists clenched as, once again, she felt herself pulled towards the body, her mind drawn closer to the emptiness where the fighter's own should have been. Ren’s mental tendrils twisted around it, trying to find an entrance, and then dove, falling into an endless empty pit as he searched, looking, scrapping at nothing, and while he did so, she was pulled along, diving further and further into darkness, into absolute nothingness.

She couldn’t get away. She wasn’t one to scare easily, and yet there was something in the back of her mind screaming at her to get out of there, to climb out of the pitch, to—

*Stop it!*

Ren’s fingers jolted back as if he had heard her, the probe collapsing as he pulled back and stood, attention going from the corpses to the small row of prisoners aligned in front of the window. Being reminded of their presence did nothing to improve Rey’s mood. Those were the survivors of the Resistance group she and Finn had been fighting. That they had been captured—and left unconscious by various methods the minute Ren had heard of the nature of his “problem”—was their responsibility. They had helped. They had fought them. The very thing she hadn’t had any wish to do was the first thing she did—help the Order. Help him.

*Something good might still come out of this,* Rey reminded herself, trying to focus on something positive, going back to the boy in her vision and the fact that she had seen him here, once. *He might still be here. We can still help him.*

The more she thought about it, the more sense it made. Why else would things lead them here? Why else would she have seen him in those corridors?

“Take them,” Ren ordered, his distorted voice breaking through her thoughts. At his command, both a small group of stormtroopers and an elderly man approached.

“Poison?” the man asked, stepping into the space left by the removal of the fighters’ corpses. “It looks like it.”

“My men searched them, Sir,” a stormtrooper with a red shoulder guard retorted, turning from Ren to the elder and then back to Ren with clear discomfort. “Every weapon they had, anything they transported that could be used to inflict injury, was taken away from them.”

“Clearly not everything,” the elder pointed out, his expression turning undeniably cocky as the Sergeant’s discomfort gave way to annoyance and he turned to face him, fingers drumming menacingly on the blaster. “Not that I want to deny the merit of the Sergeant’s ‘they all dropped dead at the same time without any reason whatsoever’ hypothesis. I, too, was in need of new nightmares.”

Someone snorted. It took her about two seconds to recognize that someone was Finn and put an elbow to his ribs to stop him from bursting out laughing. Finn tended to laugh when things got tense. Not that it accomplished anything; as fast as Finn was at regaining control of himself, the elder was
faster, shrewd brown eyes setting on him, studying the distorted features of Finn’s helmet with a closed expression.

Try as she might, Rey didn’t know what to make of him. Her first reaction had been hostility, the First Order arm-band he had on his bicep only making that worse. Finn’s reaction to him, however, had left her feeling slightly curious. Excitement, enthusiasm—he was behaving in the exact same way he had when coming face to face with Han Solo. In high contrast to that, the elder’s reaction to their arrival had been less than welcoming, his face clearly reading 'not more of you' as both she and Finn had come into view. Be that as it may, his loyalties were clear.

The Order.

The elder, the man Ren simply called Governor and for whom she had no other name, was a First Order sympathizer, and he wasn’t making a secret of that.

“Will this hinder our efforts?” he was now asking, turning his attention away from Finn and to Ren’s silent form with a serious expression. “Given what happened, it would be safer to assume they are all in possession of whatever killed the other group.”

Ren didn’t answer, attention so firmly set on the captives—most of them now regaining their senses and looking around in confusion—that he didn’t seem to be conscious of anything else. At last, without a word, he stepped away from both them and the Governor, approaching one of the fighters and crouching in front of him. The unconscious man was jolted awake, jerking back the instant his eyes fell on the mask in front of him. Whatever he might have done next, however, was made irrelevant. The Force grabbed both him and the rest of the captives, paralyzing them as Ren, his head tilting slightly to the right, studied him. In a moment, he had risen again.

“Check his teeth.”

The Force released the fighter as the stormtroopers fell on top of him, one of them wrestling the prisoner’s mouth open while two others grabbed his arms, pulling his head back. It took less than a minute for them to find whatever Ren had been referring to. The closest soldier pulled something out of the rebel’s mouth, turning to hand it to Ren, who ignored it, letting it fall instead to the Governor’s hands.

“Search them all.”

Rey clenched her fists as, with varying degrees of brutality, the stormtroopers wrestled the prisoners’ mouths open. At her side, Finn was paying no attention to the scene unfolding in front of them, eyes set on the thing the stormtroopers had removed from the fighters’ mouth. It looked like a tooth. Only, judging by the Governor’s incredulous expression and her friend’s interest, it wasn’t.

“Going old-school now?” the Governor commented, his expression growing colder as, at the end of the row, the soldiers suddenly released one of the prisoners, stepping away as a dark haired woman collapsed to the ground. “This could become a problem.”

“As long as I’m able to get the information I need, whatever they choose to do is irrelevant,” Ren retorted.

His reaction wasn’t at all what Rey had imagined. She had imagined him responding with sadistic pleasure over what had just happened, or irritation at having lost one more of his prey, maybe fury towards the soldiers that had failed to remove the poison before the woman could ingest it. What she hadn’t expected was the resignation. That, and the fact that her expectations of Ren were proving closer to how the Governor felt.
Turning her head discreetly towards the elder—something she found to be absolutely impossible with the limited range of motion afforded by her helmet—Rey studied his expression, only growing more confused the longer she did. There was hate there, plenty of it. Under normal circumstances, she would consider it strange for an Order ally to openly display malice for a superior, but coupled with Finn's reaction to seeing the elder for the first time...

“Confirmed fatality,” the stormtrooper at the end of the row announced, breaking the flow of her thoughts as he stepped away from the dark haired woman’s body. “All brain activity has ceased.”

“I will leave the disposal of the bodies in your hands, Governor.”

“Will there be more joining them?”

Rey exchanged a quick look with Finn at the Governor's cold tone, as even Ren turned to face the elder. For a moment, a strange fleeting moment, Rey was sure the three of them thinking in unison, equally taken aback, then Ren broke away from them, his attention back on the prisoners, his voice commanding and indifferent.

“The prisoners will be at my disposal for long as is deemed necessary. They are to be kept alive and unscathed.”

The Governor made a tense, almost imperceptible gesture with his head, his expression hardening.

“And after you are finished?”

“You have already established a preference on the manner of delivery?”

“If I might be so bold as to be honest, coffins.”

A muffled word—something that sounded a lot like ‘what?’ coming from Finn—and Ren’s attention turned to the elder, listening.

“You’re surprisingly bloodthirsty, Governor, not to mention cooperative.”

The elder looked back at him evenly.

“You saw our streets. You saw—”

“You!”

The shout made them all turn to the prisoners, eyes falling on a muscular man who had wrestled out of one trooper's arms, his mouth actually foaming with rage.

“You!” he shouted again, eyes set on the Governor. “You are working with them! Helping them! Betraying all we stand for! We will have your head! We will liberate this city and have your head, Calrissian! And when she arrives, she will praise us! She will see our great work and praise us! General Organa will—!”

He didn’t have a chance to say anything else. The massive wave of contempt that was rising from the Governor had been eclipsed by something else—something stronger, something furious. Rey had no chance to discover what that was. The Force thundered around Ren. In an instant, it had grabbed hold of the captive, hoisted him into the air, and thrown him against the circular window.

It shattered, the difference in pressure between the small room and the hole on the other side of the window pulling him into the abyss as the rest of them fought against the wind to stay in place.
“He’s insane!” Finn snapped as both of them grabbed hold of a pipe, clothes flapping in the violent wind. All around them, the soldiers were holding on to whatever they could find, some dragging the prisoners with them, most leaving them to fend for themselves. “Insane!”

The wind calmed, stopping as Ren, who had seemingly remained undisturbed by it, turned to the rest of the captives.

“Anyone else?” The question was meet with the type of tense silence only fear could command.

“Take them.” He turned to face the stormtrooper’s commanding officer. “Sergeant.”

The soldier stepped closer, carefully, fearfully, as if he had just entered a minefield.

“S-Sir?”

“The preparations?”

“In their final stages. There are,” He stopped and swallowed, looking over at his rapidly retreating subordinates as if they might provide him with support. He got none. “There are some doubts that we can evade anti-aircraft fire. Air assault awaits your permission to engage.”

“Denied.”

“Sir, the TIE squadrons—”

“Are less than enough. Your troops have suffered severe personnel loss and are running extremely low resources; I will not squander what little there are on pointless endeavors. Keep the TIE’s on the ground.”

Ren turned away from them at that, walking towards the man, Calrissian, who had moved to the window and was peering out into the abyss from a safe distance away. For a man that had clearly been caught by surprise at Ren’s sudden outburst, his words remained as bold as his personality:

“Are you in the habit of defenestrating people?”

“Merely some light persuasion.”

Calrissian turned away from the broken window, a strange expression plastered on his face.

“Will you be defining hard?”

Ren stopped at the edge, extending his right arm over the abyss. The Force rushed to answer him, bursting upwards from inside the huge hole until the same man that had been sucked out of the room crashed into his hand, grabbing desperately at his arm, terror filled eyes darting between Ren and the drop below.

“Leave us,” Ren ordered.

Rey clenched her fists as the four of them obeyed, eyes refusing to leave the duo as the door to the small room closed behind her.

“You know the truth,” the same voice she had heard on the Falcon whispered, the door slipping shut and hiding the two men inside from her view. “You’ve seen it before.”

She could hear screaming and Han Solo was reaching for a pale, expressionless face, stroking it with his last strength… and falling… falling…
“You know what he is,” the soft voice whispered to her.

Rey clenched her fists, anger bubbling inside her as the screaming continued, unheard by all but her.

Monster.

With that, the something that had been lurking in the recesses of her mind, twisted and warped, grabbed hold of her disgust, breathing in her anger with relish, and then let go, disappearing altogether.

—

A galaxy away from her, Leader Snoke opened his eyes, staring into a dead, starless sky.

He smiled.

The board is set.

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- The Enforcer.

Mmes Windcage et DancingDisaster sont très encouragés par vos commentaires.
The Enforcer - Day 12, Part 5

“It’s getting worse,” a quiet voice whispered, soft words shaking him awake as the hand that had been combing through his hair receded. “No, I cannot sense it myself.”

The door clicked shut, silent footsteps going down the corridor as the blade of light, visible under the room’s door, went out, plunging the room into complete darkness.

“A vision? I’m telling you it’s not like that.”

He sat on his bed, eyes peering around the room to find his only escape blocked.

“He told me he saw a shadow—a shadow, Luke. In his room.”

It was getting closer, sliding over the carpet and toy sword left forgotten on the floor, studying him as it approached.

“You—you can see me.”

It was impressed, then its tone changed, turning softer, almost concerned.

“She will cast you out,” it warned, making his eyes snap to the door and his heart tighten before he was able to force himself to face the shadow again. It was close now, closer than it had ever gotten.

“Han would make things worse! He has no patience—Ben? Are you awake?”

The shadow was over him. Its darkness was all he could see.

“Come to me. You can do great things, Ren.”

“Ben!”

----

“Sir!” The pilots raised their left arms as Kylo Ren walked past line after line of TIEs. Trying to clear his mind after his unexpected lapse into old memories, he raised his head and feigned interest in the unnecessary inspection currently taking place before him, his thoughts far too consumed by a more pertinent development to fully focus his attention on anything else.

Supreme Leader?

The question was carried through the Force, turning ever quieter as he listened, waiting for an answer, waiting to feel that same presence that had haunted him for as long as he could remember return to his side.

Leader Snoke?

Footsteps echoed through the metal structure, reverberating in the hive-like dock, as Kylo stopped,
vaguely conscious of the lonely pilot with red marks on her helmet and her gunner, the left side of
their TIE’s reactor pannels, cracked from top to bottom.

“Special Forces?”

“Tarkin squad, Sir. Shot on entry.”

He heard himself commenting something, a pensive note in his voice, his mind still focused on the
Force, still looking for an answer, still trying to feel the presence.

The lack of response disturbed him. Leader Snoke had always been there. He had been present when
no one else was, the only constant in his life, and yet, as Kylo listened, daring to drop his shields to
peer around, there was nothing. There was nothing but the people around him, nothing beyond their
minds, their thoughts, their feelings, their—

----

“You can feel it, can’t you?”

His fingers were running over a crack in the window’s glass, feeling around the sharp edges as
darkness set around him.

“Their mistrust,” it continued, softly, as the rain fell against the window. “Their judgement, their
fear—so much potential and yet they cast you aside, fearing you will rise well above your—”

It stopped. It shifted, veering until it stood not around him, but at his side, looking down at him.

“They haven’t told you.” It suddenly understood, and it pitied him. It pitied him. “You don’t know
anything.”

----

Supreme Leader? Kylo insisted, the Force trembling with the call and falling quiet as he again
waited for an answer, for that voice, for the endless whispering to return. The only response,
however, came from the past, from the dark room wherein the shadow’s features had become clearer
with each passing visit.

----

“They chose lies over trusting you,” it murmured. “Do you want to know, Ren? What it is that they
fear? The reason she won’t have you back? Who it is that she sees every time she looks at you?”

His fingers ran over the sharp edge, pain shooting up his hand as the skin ripped open, blood
dripping to the floor. He turned away brusquely, desperately, unsure if it was from the potential
answers or an attempt at dispelling the shadow. As he did, everything changed, darkness turning into
light, the lonely room into a vast open wilderness, and the shadow into a ghostly man with kind blue
eyes, hair untouched by the howling wind.

“This shadow you see—it talks to you,” he said, crouching in front of him, mind so silent it was
impossible to read. The quiet disturbed him and yet it was the first respite he had ever gotten, the first
peace he had ever known. “I can help you. Nobody should be inside your mind, Ben.”

----

Leader Snoke?
Nothing. There was nothing. And his mind was far too open, far too vulnerable without its shields, so much so that everything around him was starting to seep through, drifting aimlessly into his mind, demanding his attention.

Calrissian’s worry.

FN-2187’s uneasiness.

The Sergeant’s overwhelming confidence.

The girl’s hostility. Her desire to kill him.

*Why didn't you kill me when you had the chance then?*

For a moment, he was back on Starkiller. The planet was crumbling, the ground shaking under his feet and cold seeping through his clothes and into his wounds as he and the girl remained locked in battle. He could still see the surprise—not at his words, not at his offer, but at having forgotten her advantage, at having forgotten the Force—on her face. He could still see as she receded, channeling it, reached out for its help.

There had been no doubts in his mind at that moment. He would either be victorious or dead. She would either accept his offer or kill him. There was no middle ground. No other path. Nothing beyond that moment, that battle, that offer.

*Why spare me?*

She had had no desire to spare him. It had been written on her face and flowing through the Force. Hatred. Fury. She had given her answer just by looking at him, just by being capable of what he was not.

*Why falter when you so despise me?*

He could still feel the saber’s impact, the burning paths it had opened on his skin. Victory or death. He thought he knew which awaited him—what was bound to be his fate. Yet, despite everything, he had no desire to accept it. He refused to give up on his life, even if there was nothing for him afterwards, even if he couldn’t see anything beyond that moment.

“What is it that drives you, then?”

The question snapped him back to reality, and he found himself turning to face Calrissian, almost fearing he had been voicing his thoughts aloud. As far as Kylo could tell, however, neither he nor Calrissian—or anyone for that matter—had spoken. In fact, judging by the way his eyebrows were settling into an increasingly hard line, the Governor’s attention was a quadrant away from here.

*Is the pot truly calling the kettle black?* he asked himself, mimicking the Governor’s movements and looking around the structure for whatever was causing the elder such discomfort. Unfortunately, that wasn't hard to find.

The dock they were presently at stretched over the limits of the city, perching on its side like an oversized wasp’s nest. Being that it was not the most secretive or secure location for a military building, the infrastructure’s interior design followed a very different launching method from the one found on Star Destroyers’ hangars: TIEs were held in line on launching ramps and dropped towards the empty sky below the city upon launch. The only access to the ships was in long metal walkways and stairs suspended at each level. The design, if anything, made it even more obvious how precarious the Order’s hold on the city was. A conquered city wouldn't require such concealment.
Things were so dire that the Sergeant seemed to have reached a silent agreement with his subordinates on how best to relay information to him. They had shown Kylo to the late Governor's office, directed him to his reports, and removed themselves from his presence with haste, apparently anticipating his wrath over what he would find.

While perhaps overly cautious, they weren’t wrong about the severity of the situation. Simply put, there were no reserve troops, no vehicles, no solid ammunitions, no working supply lines—no anything, really, except a surplus of TIEs and a disturbingly high number of causalities.

The remaining pilots were now assembled on the walkway before him, small groups standing in front of the lines of TIEs. In all, they numbered twenty—twenty for at least four times that many vessels. He had twenty with which to build something remotely resembling an air defense and that was without considering—

Calrissian grumbled, the sound interrupting Kylo’s mental tirade as he leaned over the railings, looking up and down, shaking his head.

“Governor, spare me the theatrics. Speak.”

The elder looked at him and then at the dock, pursing his lips.

“Forgive my assumption, but,” he started, wiping a drop of water from his clothes. “I don’t believe the Order has enough resources to capture the anti-aircraft positions needed to ensure control over the skies and maintain this new assault against the rebel’s headquarters without seriously compromising its hold over the city. Not when this,” he made a gesture towards the pilots, “Is all the air support you have. This could be catastrophic for both your efforts and the population.”

“You misread my intentions, Governor. I’m not capturing anything.”

Calrissian's brow furrowed, confusion taking root in both his expression and his mind. He wasn’t the only one; most everyone there, including most of the soldiers, appeared equally confused. There seemed, however, to be an exception. Someone was rapidly connecting the dots.

“It’s a diversion.”

*FN-2187. Of course.*

For all his irritating qualities—of which there were many—he at least had a brain. Unfortunately, however, his words were also the cue for the Sergeant’s recent obsession with the TIEs to resurface.

“With your permission, Sir,” he said, and the group of pilots' turned to him expectantly, as though they already knew what he was thinking. “I would conduct an extensive search and present you with all pilots presently residing in this city.”

*Force give me strength.* Or, better yet, patience; his surplus of the former wasn't going to help anything. Putting the already embattled population of locals through a search and seizure that culminated in forced conscription on a suicide mission wouldn't win them any allies.

Calrissian seemed to be thinking along the same lines. He stepped away from the railings, brow now so furrowed it seemed in danger of tearing his face apart.

“That would be poorly received, no doubt,” he retorted, coldly, somehow succeeding in voicing not only Kylo’s thoughts, but what was probably both the population and the TIE pilots’ feelings all in one go. “It was hard enough for me to convince the tugs’ crews to volunteer for this endeavor. They will be risking their lives to get the General here. It would be in very poor taste to reward their
sacrifice by harming their families and friends.”

“We need air assault, Sir,” the Sergeant kept insisting, all the while feigning deafness. “If we can get enough TIEs in the air, we might—”

“Dedicate ourselves to scraping them off the walls after the anti-aircraft battery has shot them down?” Kylo finished, wryly. *That would no doubt be memorable.* “The present arrangements will do. As for your concerns, Governor, I gave you my word in relation to their families; I’m not in the habit of breaking it.”

“I don’t doubt your word, only…”

*You do,* Kylo filled in, attention disengaging from the conversation before his temper started boiling at the lie. It was easier said than done, but, even so, focusing on his two ‘Knights’—both of them standing as far removed and behind the rest of the group as they could—proved to be a good enough distraction for it not to get too out of hand.

They had come, FN-2187 and the girl. A truly pessimistic part of him had already become convinced that they wouldn’t and started making provisions. Those same provisions were, both fortunately and unfortunately, now proving unnecessary. Here or not, the present circumstances were far from ideal. Things weren’t supposed to be this bad.

*And I’m surprised why exactly?*

His shoulder choose that moment to pulse an agonizing staccato, reminding him that his earlier theatrics with the prisoners was, perhaps, ill-advanced, and he reached out for Leader Snoke once again for a distraction. His call went unanswered, again, and he refocused instead on the information he had gained during the interrogation of the prisoner.

The rebel’s mind had gifted him with a virtual gold mine of information. Alas, much of what he had discovered was information that would be far more interesting to Hux than it was useful to him. Still, he pieced together what he could, and he was quite certain that his conclusions were truth.

A city, long held by the Order, in utter disarray at the hands of a ragtag band of freedom fighters rallying under the name of General Organa, but not necessarily under her purview. They were poorly equipped, but had managed to nearly overtake the city all the same. It was the sort of situation that could only come about with help from someone on the inside, though the who still escaped him. Yes, things were quite the mess, but—

*It's just a matter of being patient.*

Someone would slip up—they always did—and then he would know the culprit. That, however, was not his primary concern at the moment. His concern was retrieving aid for the *Finalizer,* not dealing with a small coup. The real issue was ensuring that more information did not reach the rebels before he could do that, and that was quite the task when he couldn’t trust anyone present.

*I will have to choose who I distrust least.*

That would be a fun thing to work out, and even more so when he had already chosen what, between the city and getting the tugs to the *Finalizer,* took priority.

“Sir,” a voice called from above them, rapid footsteps echoing in the dock’s metallic structure. Kylo turned to find a stormtrooper perched on top of the nearest spiral staircase. “Several hostile groups have evaded the security grid and disappeared underground. We are receiving reports of ships trying to leave the city.”
So much for waiting patiently.

He moved away from the railings, turning towards the Sergeant as he did.

“Put the tugs in the air.”

Calrissian expression was incredulous in the extreme.

“You’re leaving?” he blurted out as the pilots started running towards the TIEs. “Now?”

“Someone has to collect the General eventually,” Kylo retorted, his attention settling on the two false Knights. The launching lights were already turning green and there was no time for further consideration. Someone had to be left in charge. “Sergeant, you will be answering to Nephys.”

At the back of the group, FN-2187’s face darted from the girl to him, clearly realizing that he was now answering to the name Nephys. For someone whose mind seemed to be descending into full blown panic, he kept a remarkably tight hold on himself. Still...

It’s a risk like any other.

More important than that was deciding what to do with her. He frowned, considering her attempt at escape on Starkiller. A ship—she had been going for a ship, and not in the desperate unthinking way he would expect from an escapee but in a way that was focused, confident and bold.

His eyes found her helmet visor, his head tilting slightly as he did so.

“You are a pilot.”

It wasn’t a question; even so, she took a step forward, somehow managing to sound defiant even with just two words.

“I am.”

It was admirable.

“You will be coming with me.”

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- things would probably go better if more people listened to Phasma.

Comments, s’il vous plaît!
Phasma had been awoken by the sound of distant footsteps, instinct making her rise and reach for her armor even as her mind remained too muddled by lack of sleep to clearly access anything, least of all what had roused her straight into combat readiness. Every fiber of her being was filled with the certainty that something was wrong.

Hands tugged at the straps of her armor and removed the safeties from her weapons as she listened to the voices coming her way, trying to guess the identity of their owners not by the muffled words but by the way the footsteps echoed down the barracks hall. Two of them were heavy, confident and perfectly synchronized. She knew her subordinates when she heard them. The other set was so light that it was nearly silent. In fact, if it wasn’t for that nagging sensation telling her something wasn’t right, she might not have heard it at all.

That’s not a soldier.

It hadn’t sounded anything like a fleet officer either, but of the two remaining options that was the only one that made sense. Engineering had no reason to enter the barracks without contacting her first. The bridge crew wouldn’t be down here normally either, but there was a short list of reasons that could make them wish to avoid using the warship’s internal communication system to summon her and, suffice it to say, none of them were remotely pleasant. She had been out the door even before the group had had the opportunity to reach the corner and prove both her conclusions and sense of alarm correct.

Now marching down the Finalizer’s corridors, both the soldiers and an extremely uncomfortable bridge officer—Mitaka—at her side, Phasma went deeper and deeper inside the warship, stopping only when she reached the perfectly camouflaged door to the security control center. Stepping inside, she ran her eyes over the many security displays, attention going from the drowsy bridge to the busy officer’s quarters and then to the mostly deserted corridors.

It was to no avail.

“How can we have lost him?” she asked, voice cold, as she turned to face the group standing behind her.

Mitaka, his pale face turned greenish by the displays’ light, was clearly anxious, hands twisting his black fleet cap and looking around nervously. Flanking him, a group of stormtroopers from the Finalizer’s security department stood in complete silence. They, just like any other soldier, wore the white armors and helmets for which the Order’s infantry was known. They, just like any other soldier, didn’t show any trace of individuality. They, like her, were nothing but tools. Emotion, camaraderie—tools had no need for that. Tools had no need for fear. Yet at this moment, waiting for her response, waiting to know what had happened, she felt nothing like the tool she should be.

“I would advise all of you to speak. Quickly.”

Trading uncomfortable looks, the soldiers finally set their collective gaze on Mitaka. Phasma,
however, was too exhausted, too strung out, to care what they did so long as they answered her, immediately. The officer, meanwhile, looked stricken, panicked, as though he were waiting to—

*Be dragged across the room by an unseen force.* She almost sighed, growing impatient. *I’m not Ren, Lieutenant.*

Reminding him of that, however, would be about as useful as trying to snap him out of the sorry state of nerves he had been in since reporting the droid’s escape from Jakku had gotten him half strangled by Ren. As unfortunate as the situation had been—and falling prey to one of Ren’s angry outbursts certainly qualified as unfortunate—she had no sympathy to spare.

“Speak.” Mitaka appeared to be willing himself to become one with the wall. Phasma was unmoved. “Lieutenant.”

Still busy turning his hat into something absolutely unrecognizable, Mitaka finally straightened up. When he spoke, however, it was so quietly that the *Finalizer*’s humming itself nearly drowned out his voice.

“We have been running several tests over the last few days, Captain,” he informed her in a whisper. “There were some problems caused by our confrontation with the Resistance that could be solved without external assistance. We were set to run a behavioral check on the shields during the night watch. High density impact. That involves targeting a small portion of the ship and monitoring—”

“Skip the details, Lieutenant.”

Mitaka blushed a deep red at her reprimand.

“Oh—Of course. My apologies, Captain. The General requested that we inform him when we were ready to start. We already had the TIE’s on standby when we contacted him.” Mitaka twisted his hat again. “He never arrived at the bridge, Captain. We can’t find him.”

Phasma turned back towards the security displays, taking a long hard look at each of the images. Once again, she turned up with nothing.

*This isn’t good.*

“Where was the General last seen?”

“The bow, some thirty minutes ago.”

“Do we have footage?”

The fleet officer responsible for the console turned several buttons. Six of the many displays went momentarily black, filling with images of the warship’s corridors some seconds later. Her attention turned towards the display on the left lower corner and Phasma observed as Hux appeared and disappeared out of the images, walking down a completely deserted corridor with his typical cool disregard. Frowning, she followed his every move, until suddenly, without any sort of warning, he turned a corner and—

*What the…?*

“Play that again.”

The soldier obeyed, rewinding the footage again and again until, incapable of making sense of what she was seeing, Phasma ordered her to stop, staring at the empty corridor the General should have
appeared in with a deep frown.

“Is this the right feed?” she asked, stabbing the image with one finger.

“Yes.”

“Are you sure?” she insisted.

The officer hesitated, her delicate features hardening as she looked up, almond-shaped eyes studying Phasma.

“Do you wish that we confirm the source?”

“Yes.” Not that it changes the facts, but even so… “Examine all of the remaining feeds. Search for duplicates.” She turned, facing Mitaka and the stormtroopers again. “Have we conducted a search of the area?”

“We did, Captain,” Mitaka assured, sounding as if he was about to cry. Phasma doubted her patience would hold if he actually did. “He isn’t anywhere.”

“This is the Finalizer, Lieutenant; people don’t fall down some hole and disappear from existence,” she retorted, voice calm and measured even if her mind was anything but. “I’ll take it from here.”

Mitaka seemed to hesitate, looking at her and then to the security displays behind her before, apparently, understanding what he had been ordered to do and turning to exit, still twisting the hat, his footsteps eerily silent. Phasma turned her back on him, ignoring his retreating form in favor of the displays. Even so, she could still see Mitaka. His image, now entering one of the displays, registered vaguely in her mind as he retreated. There was something strange—something wrong. There was something wrong with him.

“Lieutenant.”

Mitaka jumped at her calling, turning to her with a confused expression. Whatever she had seen—if she had seen anything at all—was gone. There was nothing suspicious in the young officer’s expression or stance, only fear, anxiety, and growing confusion.

“Y-Yes, Captain?”

I’m on edge. Jumping at nothing. Imagining things. Lack of sleep was clearly playing games with her head.

“Report to the bridge,” she ordered, waiting until he left the room before addressing the officer on duty again. “Was there anyone in the vicinity?”

“The closest security patrol arrived from the opposite direction only seconds after the General left our cameras.” She pointed to said group now appearing in the empty corridor. “He was nowhere to be seen.”

“Are all the soldiers accounted for?”

“Affirmative.”

“And there were no unauthorized take offs?”

“The hangars remain on lockdown in accordance with the General’s orders.”
“He’s still aboard then.”

“All accounted for.” She pressed several buttons, showing her all three Knights sitting in the visitor’s quarters. “Should we raise the alarm?”

“No.” The response had crossed her lips even before she had time to think about it. “Keep this quiet. I don’t want to raise any unnecessary panic.”

Phasma leaned over the console, examining the corridor Hux’s image kept going down with a deep frown. She could already envision his infuriated expression if she raised the alarm and his disappearance turned out to be nothing more than a glitch interfering with one of his many night time strolls. Truth be told, she could also envision his even more infuriated expression if she did and it turned out to be something. For a man that was so vocal about Ren’s lack of self-preservation—out of resentment that it hadn’t gotten him killed, mind you—the General seemed to be equally lacking in that department. It was one thing to behave in the way required for someone of his station—she understood that, she did exactly the same—but overconfidence was another thing altogether. She had learned the difference between those two the hard way. No amount of pride had been worth finding herself at FN-2187’s mercy, immobilized by a wookie and completely unable to defend herself. No amount of pride had been worth contributing to Starkiller’s destruction or to the Order nearly losing its three highest ranking officers in one go.

*I begged you to be careful, General.*

She had done more than that, truth be told. In the aftermath of the Knight’s threats, she had reached out to the General with an elaborate plan to move his quarters to the relative safety of the barracks. If she had ever seen Hux at a complete loss for words, it had been then. The request had been absolutely outrageous; it had never crossed her mind that he would accept. She hadn’t intended for him to accept, however. Far from it, she had put it forward in the hopes of making him receptive to common sense. She should have known better than that. Hux had gone from looking horror-stricken to facing her like she had announced a mutiny.

“I will not be seen walking around my own command with an armed escort, Captain.”

“It’s a matter of security. Given the present situation—”

“Your concern is noted. I will hear no more of this.”

Overconfidence. It was overconfidence all over again. Even so she had obeyed, dropping the subject all together, all the while going behind his back and ordering security to keep a close watch on his movements. If something had happened despite her precautions, she swore she would shove him inside his quarters and blast the lock out.

Her fingers closing tighter around her blaster, Phasma looked over the displays one last time, before turning to the security officer.

“Raise security near the hangars. Keep me informed of any developments,” she ordered, gesturing towards the stormtroopers, who approached. “Limit the access to the bow. I want a team assembled from the on-duty patrols. Search the bow, top to bottom, including all the service corridors and evacuation paths.”

“And Engineering, Captain?”

“I will deal with Engineering.”
That was easier said than done. Stepping inside what was known as the *Finalizer*'s entrails—even if nobody called Engineering that to its dwellers’ faces—Phasma was instantly greeted with an aggressive and entirely unhelpful growl of ‘no blasters here’ from a technician working on a line of large cannons suspended from the ceiling. Inquiries after the General resulted in an equally useful reply.

“That would be glared into victory,” he had commented, his voice dripping with that unique brand of dry humor that occasionally broke through his façade.

Being glared down by one of said technicians as she went down a narrow metal ladder, Phasma felt inclined to agree with him. Navigating the *Finalizer*'s innards was a battle all its own.

*He isn’t here,* she finally concluded, eyes running over a series of hydraulic pumps as yet another group glared at her.

She hadn’t expected him to be. As much as Hux liked to be kept on top of things, he also maintained an extremely strict division between the different members of this crew. Fleet officers, stormtroopers, and engineering all mixed like oil and water. The General himself kept mainly to the bridge, only crossing the unspoken boundaries when something went wrong.

*And lately everything is going wrong.*

Phasma sighed, looking around. It was a dead end. It would be better to go up and—

The ground dropped from under her feet. Instinctively reaching to grab the railings, Phasma was tossed to the floor as the walkway she was standing on jerked violently from side to side. Balancing herself, she rose to her full height, looking around as the alarms started blaring, rotating lights painting the space around her a menacing scarlet.

That had not been an external impact. That had felt exactly like—

*FN-2187's antics.*

She was running, sliding under closing security doors and shoving the technical personal aside as she tried to contact both security and the patrols she had redirected to the bow through her personal communicator. It was to no avail. The lines were completely silent. They didn’t even seem to be working.

Phasma burst out of Engineering minutes later, grabbing the first stormtrooper she encountered by the shoulder. There was blood. There was blood all over the soldier’s armor.
“Where?”

“The main hangar, Captain!”

She didn’t wait for him to say anything else, running in the direction everyone else seemed to be running away from until—

Her stomach fell.

A small group of pilots was fighting to shut down a security door, a steady stream of injured soldiers, their armors broken and twisted by heat, fleeing out of the adjoining chamber as they did so. She could feel the air being forcibly sucked out as they kept going, but that wasn’t the worst. Far from it. The moment her shoulder collided with the door and she looked over to access what was happening, she realized the situation was far more dire than that.

The security door separating the hangar from the Finalizer’s interior had clearly jammed. Kneeling next to the controls, two technicians were fighting to get it working at the same time as they fought not to be sucked into space. Beyond them, the hangar—what little she could see of it—was completely wrecked. She could see several TIEs, still connected to the security cords, flapping in the wind.

“Close it!” she shouted, shoving both the last remaining soldier and her blaster inside behind her as she threw herself into the last room between the Finalizer’s interior and the hangar. Nobody questioned her command, letting the interior door snap shut behind her as she let go, sliding down the floor until she hit the opposite wall, hands grabbing at the first thing that offered her support against the vacuum of space. Muscles straining to keep her in place, Phasma looked over at the two technicians and then at the door’s circuits. The problem became clear the instant she did so. The door hadn’t jammed. Someone had blasted the hangar’s external control terminal out of existence.

“The emergency controls?” she shouted, a pair of grey eyes looking up at her before focusing back on the fried circuit.

“On the inside, Captain,” she said. “There’s no way we can get there!”

Phasma strained her neck to look inside the hangar. As she did, one of the cords keeping the TIEs inside the hangar snapped. The ship was tossed forward, colliding violently with two others, before hitting the opposite wall and breaking apart. There were pieces flying everywhere, hitting the ground, ripping out huge sections of the hangar, being sucked into space. And the alarms—the alarms were getting louder and louder.

It was Starkiller all over again.

No, not again. I won’t allow it.

“Security tether.”

The two technicians looked at her like she had gone mad. Obedience, however, had been instilled too deeply for questions. In an instant, she was inside the hangar, grabbing hold of twisted pieces of metal as she fought not to be sucked out of the warship. She could feel her grasp weakening with every step she took.

Tools have no need for fear, her training kept shouting at her as she went, forcing her attention away from the hangar’s entrance, from death, and towards the console a few meters away from it. It was still functional. She could see the lights blinking as she approached.
Tools have only one purpose.

Her feet slid under her and she hit the ground hard. The technicians on the other end of the security line were tugging on it, trying to get her to return. She ignored them, focusing instead on the console and on the path leading to it. There was debris flying all around, fragments of ships and pieces of the Finalizer. Even so, Phasma got back to her feet, bit her lips, and released herself from the piece of metal she had been holding onto.

She slid for a few meters, reaching out to grab hold of the console. She succeeded. At the precise moment she stood up, however, something hit the back of her skull and threw her against the terminal. She felt her helmet breaking, cracking open like an egg, before it was forcibly shoved off of her head. For a moment, she couldn’t tell if she was dead or alive. She couldn’t even breathe, pain making great white lights flash through her vision.

A tool’s value is only equal to its success.

She raised her arm, feeling for the console commands, vision focusing enough for her to see the pad, to insert the code, to—

It stopped. She could see the hangar’s door closing, feel the unrelenting pull on her body lessening, hear as everything that had been flying around the hangar crashed to the ground with finality. Lowering herself to the ground, fingers trying to access the damage to her head, she heard a voice.

“Captain.”

What?

“I have positive confirmation that you are on site.”

A voice she would have recognized anywhere.

“The bridge is blind.”

Only, it made no sense.

“Status report.”

Her head was ringing and a steady stream of blood was dripping down her neck as Phasma tried to raise her arm and reach for the console’s communicator. The only thing she seemed able to do, however, was remain seated, putting pressure against the wound on her head as she saw Mitaka approaching her quarters, his reflection on the security displays—

Wrong.

Wrong…

“Captain.” The voice called again, urgently.

Phasma reached out for the communicator. Too dizzy to make sense of whatever her mind was trying to tell her, she held instead to that voice, to its orders, to the present.

“Sir.”

She sounded nothing like herself, her voice tremulous and out of breath, but still she found it in herself to look around, to obey, to be the eyes Hux needed her to be.
There were flames. Flames going up the walls.

“Dispatch emergency personal. The hangar is on fire!”

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- The Strategist.

Comments welcome in the box down below.
“The hangar is on fire!”

The words crackled over the speakers, low and almost imperceptible. Hux felt himself freeze as their meaning crashed into him, mind going momentarily blank before it snapped back in place and he turned to face both his bridge and chaos like he had only ever seen on Starkiller.

“Dispatch emergency personnel to the main hangar,” he ordered, speaking over the alarms and raised voices around him, attention focusing on the technician crouched over an open section of the bridge wall. “Close all security doors.”

The man pulled a keyboard from behind the console’s screen, fingers tapping line after line of code into the display.

“Commands are unresponsive, General.”

“Change to emergency protocols.”

“Unresponsive, Sir.”

Hux frowned, rapidly reading the lines as the technician went through the wiring, pulling out two connections and trying again to make the Finalizer’s system react. It was to no avail.

“Override order, officer identification 4WS-U19. Go into emergency lockdown.”

The technician hit the commands, fingers going down the new strings appearing onscreen.

“Responding, Sir. Success reported on—”

The bridge lights went out, a loud explosion making both he and the technician jump backwards to avoid a tongue of fire bursting from inside the walls. All around them, officers were scrambling away, stumbling as they tried to avoid the flames.

“Put that out!” Hux shouted at them, leaning towards his personal communicator at the same time the technician jumped towards the console, trying to smother the flames with his jacket. “Captain.”

A pause. A long silence before she answered.

“Sir?”

It sounded nothing like her. In fact, he had to double check the identification number at the hangar’s terminal for confirmation before replying.

“The security doors must be closed manually, Captain. Gather your men.”

“Acknowledged, Sir.”
He turned away from the burning terminal, lips pursing in rage as the emergency lights gained intensity, painting the bridge red and orange. He knew what was happening. There was only one reason for this absurd sequence of events.

“Status.”

The young man responsible for the starboard side's lower consoles turned his head up, one hand still grasping the closest officer’s chair.

“Main generator went offline, General. Life support and shields rerouted to the secondary reactor. Instrumentation running on backup power.”

Sabotage—someone had sabotaged his ship from the inside, and there was only a short list of suspects with an even shorter list of reasons for doing so.

“Sir, unauthorized launch reported.”

Such as that.

“Destroy them,” Hux ordered, eyes setting disdainfully on the ‘unauthorized launch’ warning lit on the officer’s console, before flying over the radar and setting on the exterior to find—

What the…?

Whatever he had expected to find, that was not it. The idiot—

Idiots.

—had stolen not a TIE but an Atmospheric Assault Lander.

Now this is rich.

Not to say pure madness. In fact, he could hardly look away from it, marveling at the depths of stupidity he hadn't known existed, all the while expecting the coup de grace to befall the occupants of the stolen transport. It would be small compensation for the wreckage inside his ship, but he could live with the nominal satisfaction that seeing them blown to bits would bring. It was a question of time, anyway. The thing had no chance against a TIE’s weapons or speed. It—

Hux frowned, thoughts grinding to a sudden halt as he approached the bridge viewport, hands grasping one of the supports as he followed the assault transport’s trajectory, expression growing darker and darker.

The thing—the thing was veering, dancing around the blasts shot by the TIEs, actually evading them. He had seen something like this before.

Where?

That manner of flying, those acrobatics—

Jakku. The Resistance pilot!

And not only that man. The X-Wing that had put his flagship in its present predicament, whoever was at its commands, flew like that too, evading blasts like he could guess not only their trajectory but the attackers’ positions. Not even Special Forces could do that. No normal person could, except perhaps—
Hux turned brusquely, pale eyes going around the bridge, confirming every face, searching every
dark corner, lips pursing in anger as he went. There was something missing, something whose
absence he normally wouldn’t mind, something that nevertheless should be there. Something that
wasn’t.

“Lieutenant,” his voice dropped, rising only enough so that an officer passing by could hear him.
“Scan that ship. Give me a headcount.”

“Yes, General.”

Would they dare? Would they even have the nerve to pull something like this?

A second set of footsteps stopped behind him, and he turned to face an absolutely terrified bridge
officer.

“Sir! Engineering asks permission to run a full system manual restart.”

If his mind had gone blank before, it was nothing to what it did now. The bridge had fallen so silent
that he could almost hear the heads turning in his direction. He knew perfectly well what they were
thinking, for his thoughts were going the exact same direction. If ever there was a set of
circumstances and locale unsuitable to run a system restart on anything—least of all the Finalizer’s
central processing unit—the present was only slightly better than during an active engagement. In
fact, considering the gravitational field surrounding them, it was in some ways worse than a battle.

We’ll be running for the pods if this goes wrong.

Hux took a last hard glance to the runaway transport and then to the planet’s mostly green face,
expression going neutral.

“Granted. Alert the crew.”

An all new set of alarms began blaring, echoing up the corridors alongside a robotic warning.

“Prepare for system restart. Repeat. Prepare for system restart. All crew to its posts.”

“Initiating countdown,” a voice warned, coming from the lower consoles. “Sixty seconds.”

Hux snapped two supports out of the floor, putting his feet through them, one hand holding to the
nearest console as its operator, and most of the bridge, strapped in around him.

“All crew to its posts. Repeat,” the warning kept saying. “Prepare for system restart.”

“Thirty seconds.”

“Gravity simulator going offline!”

The downwards pull ceased and the omnipresent hum that filled the ship disappeared entirely as the
line of officers to his left rose a few centimeters off their chairs.

“Ten seconds.”

“All systems off!”

Immediately, a sequence of low clicks echoed, the unmistakable sounds of electrical instruments
going off as the many screens went blank, and then silence descended. There was nothing beyond
that profound silence that was only found in space.
“Reactor successfully restarted.” Silence, then a hum coming up the walls, rising. “Systems coming back online.”

The crew looked around, most eyes setting expectantly on the ceiling lights. Someone to his left was repeating something in a low voice. It sounded like a prayer. If it was, it went unanswered. The electrical system choked.

“Take the strain off of the initialization process,” Hux ordered, voice projecting across the bridge. “Prepare to run instrumentation off the secondary reactor.”

“The reactor won’t be able to support instrumentation and sustain both life support and shields at the same time, Sir.”

The bow was turning to port, both the TIEs and the assault transport disappearing from view as the green faced planet filled the viewport.

Would he truly have to point out what was already abundantly obvious?

“The strain on power production—”

He would.

“Prioritize in accordance to the gravitational field to our port side, Lieutenant,” he said, his voice so collected he could have been running that scenario from inside a simulator. “Keep this ship in orbit.”

“Systems rebooting.”

His fingers clasped the console, their hold growing tighter as the second attempt failed. To his left, close to the door, the same technician that had tried to override the controls was floating next to the still open wall console, now coated in flame retardant foam. Even from this distance, Hux could see his hands diving among the wiring, rapidly pulling connection after connection out.

“Systems going back online.”

The hum was rising, trembling. The technician tore the last wires out of the wall, pulling something out from somewhere behind them. The instant he did so the lights flickered, then stabilized.

What the hell?

“Prepare for gravitational pull.”

It was as uncomfortable as it sounded, but Hux was already halfway across the bridge, eyes glued to the device in the technician’s hand before his body even had time to readjust.

This is impossible.

It looked crude and handmade—the exact opposite of everything that belonged on his bridge and yet it was clearly some sort of storage device. One that, unless he was very much mistaken, he knew the owners of. That left only the question of how. How could anyone even plant that on the bridge without anyone, including him, having noticed?

“Review the security logs,” he ordered, grabbing the device and turning to see the group of TIEs fly over the viewport. “The ship?”

“Entered hyperspace, Sir.”
Time for a different approach, then.

Hux took to the communicator again.

“Captain.” No response. “Captain.”

Again silence.

“Locate Captain Phasma. Get her and a stormtrooper squad to the Officer’s Quarters, immediately.”

“The Captain is being moved to the Medical Bay, Sir.”

To the Medical—Was there any other setback he needed to be informed of?

His eyes snapped to the closest stormtrooper officer.

“Get your men.”

The Officer’s Quarters were empty, silence pressing against the dark walls as he joined the stormtroopers waiting in line in front of the door to the Visitor’s Quarters.

Thin ice. He was stepping on very thin ice. Even so—

“Tear it down.”

The battering ram slammed against the door, metal twisting under the impact as it was thrown and crashed into the door's locking mechanism.

His controlled expression momentarily turned to fury as Hux observed as the metal bent, unmistakable snapping sounds echoing from inside the door as the battering ram fell against the lock. Throwing it aside, the soldier’s hands dove into the hole opened in the bent metal, forcing it to slide into the wall as the cylindrical object that had once been the lock collided with the impeccably polished floor and rolled, stopping only as it hit Hux’s boots. The soldiers waiting at his side, buzzing with aggression, burst inside before the door was fully open, weapons raised, shouts of ‘go, go, go!’ echoing in the otherwise silent Officer’s Quarters.

There were no shots fire. In less than a minute, one of the soldiers had come back out, stopping in front of him.

“Three confirmed fatalities, Sir.”

Hux stepped over the battering ram, moving past the broken door and the soldiers until he stood next to the circular sofa, eyes coldly assessing the room and stopping at the sight of the three corpses, propped up on the sofa, dressed as Knights.

His eyes flashed with fury.

“Search the ship. Find them.”

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- Hux again, because this sub-plot needs tying up.
We love hearing from you.
“General, this is highly irregular; I really must ask you to—!”

The door slid shut, words silenced behind five centimeter steel as Hux snapped the lock in place, mind momentarily registering the incredulous expression of the nurse attending to Phasma before he walked across the room, stopping in front of the viewport, eyebrows set in a furious line.

“Leave us when you’re finished.”

Needle in hand, her attention still focused on the blinking lock light on the door, the nurse mumbled a ‘yes, General’ before leaning back over the mostly healed gash on the back of her charge’s head. Phasma’s blue eyes opened as she did so, slowly focusing first on the polished white floor and then, without moving her head, on the door.

To say she looked rough was an understatement. Her shoulders were slumped, exhaustion draining both her strength and alertness. A stiff breeze looked liable to knock her over. But she was still Phasma, and her exasperation bowed to nothing.

“Sir,” The door emitted a quiet sequence of beeps followed by a louder rejection chime. “Is that the Head Doctor?”

“Possibly, Captain,” Hux replied, dismissively, continuing before she had time to further elaborate on that topic. “You requested my presence. Are you in a condition to speak?”

“I am,” she assured, as the needle dug into her skin. “What happened?”

“Preliminary investigation points to sabotage. On site reports from the hangar differ too much to conclude anything about the way it was carried out, but the culprits are who you would expect them to be.”

Blond hair clinging to her temple, Phasma closed her eyes.

“Do we have confirmation?”

“If the surveillance footage had survived the blast perhaps. Alas, it did not,” he replies, eyes settling on the emptiness beyond the mostly green planet. “Whatever the case, facts remain. The Knights are gone.”

“And the fire?”

Hux’s expression tensed, her unexpectedly weak voice pulling him right back into the scenario of his nightmares.

Fire.

He would remember that forever: Phasma’s warning and then chaos the likes of which he had only
seen on Starkiller.

He would be on his deathbed and that whole situation would be what would be playing in his mind. Not the rallies, not the battles, not the Order’s ultimate victory, but the way the *Finalizer*’s bow had started turning to port, both the TIEs and the assault transport disappearing from view as the green planet slowly filled the observational windows and the warship’s power choked.

Death—and a humiliating one at that—had been staring him right in the face. He had seen it, standing on his bridge wearing that bastard’s face, speaking with his voice, using his exact words—

“*Useless.*”

*Shut up.*

“*Worthless.*”

*Shut. Up.*

“*You’re good for nothing, boy.*”

*SHUT—!*

“General.”

Phasma’s voice dispelled the mocking image of Death cloaked with Brendol Hux’s *thrice damned* visage. He turned, anger roiling, to find her still sitting in the chair, eyebrows raised in clear inquiry as the nurse hovered over a tray to her left, taking out a pair of scissors.

“The fire?”

“Extinguished, Captain.”

Clear relief washed momentarily over her expression, only to fall back into mild interest as the nurse turned to her, speaking in a voice so quiet he only understood the final words.

“It’s advisable to remain lying down, Captain.” She then turned to him. “General.”

The nurse saluted him, opening the door only to run into the clearly disgruntled blond man dressed in the white uniform of the Medical Corps who had been on the other side. Whatever he saw in Hux’s face, however, caused him to shut the door in clear retreat. The moment the lock clicked, Phasma shifted her shoulders uncomfortably, forcing herself to sit straighter, sweat breaking out on her a temple as she did so.

Hux frowned. Before he could say anything, however, she raised one hand, eyes momentarily going unfocused.

“General, before you continue, permission to speak freely.”

“Granted.”

“Would you please lower your voice?”

His frown deepened.

“There’s a thing called bacta on this ship, Captain,” he pointed out, irritably, pulling a chair closer to the observation window as she turned her head to follow his moves and a wave of pain washed over
her face. “As well as pain killers.”

“I would prefer to keep my wits, Sir.”

“I would prefer to have you on the ground at the shortest possible notice, Captain,” he retorted, attention turning to the completely destroyed silver helmet placed at the foot of the bed. “It has been reported by technical personnel on site that you were hit by the superior half of a TIE’s solar reactor,” he informed her, attention going to the Finalizer’s exterior again. “While it was still attached to said TIE.”

Shock crossed her face, followed by something that looked a lot like fear, and then her expression went absolutely neutral.

“Is this relevant, Sir?”

“Some perspective, Captain. It might prove useful.”

A small white capsule passed under the window, and both of their eyes followed it as it slowly made its way towards the planet. Clearly recognizing it for what it was, Phasma's eyebrows rose.

“Are we losing pods?”

“That’s corpse disposal.”

The small white capsule fell towards the planet, igniting as it entered the atmosphere.

“How many casualties?”

“Apart from the two dozen or so caught in the hangar’s explosion or pulled out into space, three.”

“Who?”

What does that matter?

“The soldier responsible for the Security Center,” he informed her, nevertheless, “found in the Knight's quarters dressed as a decoy.”

“Dark haired, fair skinned?”

“That would be his description.”

A strange expression went over Phanza’s face at his words.

“A man then? And what of the other two?”

Hux could see his expression growing more and more enraged as he stared past his own reflection, a slight snarl on his lips as he remembered that particular discovery.

“Also in the visitor’s Quarters, also dressed up as Knights. Your men had to ram down the door to retrieve them.”

He had been tempted to leave them there so Ren could see with his own eyes the chaos his Knights had caused. Alas, biohazard concerns aside, the knowledge that Ren’s ‘solution’ to finding them there when he returned would likely be to deposit them in Hux's own bed kept Hux from doing so. The brief bit of pleasure it would give him in the midst of this disaster wasn't worth it.
Besides, Hux had more pressing concerns. He knew with infuriating certainty exactly what would come of this nightmare. He would report it to the Supreme Leader and be told, in no uncertain terms, that he was to let it go, that the Knights were none of his concern, that their dealings were not in his purview. Worst case scenario, he would be blamed for impeding their pursuit of Ren in the first place. If it wasn't a forgone conclusion that he would be forced to bow to the Supreme Leader's wishes all over again he might, just might, have found the restraint to keep acting as he always did—devoted, obedient, and subservient.

Instead—

*I won’t stand for this!*

He had been more than tolerant—he would go so far as to say lenient—with Leader Snoke’s envoys. He was expected to accommodate their eccentricity and give precedence to whatever waste-of-time endeavor they were engaged in without batting an eye, without questioning its value—or lack thereof—to the Order’s cause, but not this time. He wouldn’t be forced to accept this—not by anyone, not by anything, not even by the Supreme Leader. He wouldn’t accept this. Not this blatant disrespect for his position. Not—

“Is Lieutenant Mitaka among the dead?”

The question broke through his anger, and he focused his attention back on Phasma. His surprise must have answered her question, as she continued before he could speak.

“Did he ever leave the bridge?” she queried.

“The Lieutenant was off-duty on yesterday’s night watch,” Hux answered, mechanically, voice collected even as he was forced to clasp his hands together to stop them from trembling with poorly suppressed rage. “He, nevertheless, stayed on the bridge. We were running a behavioral check on the shields, high density impact. His knowledge of the Order’s weaponry was needed.”

Phasma’s expression was grave.

“He never left?” she insisted.

“I can personally vouch for that, Captain.”

She shook her head as if trying to clear her thoughts, only to clasp the chair arm and tremble at the rush of pain from her head wound.

“Not wanting to sound critical, Captain, *but*—”

She made an impatient gesture for him to lower his voice.

“Captain, I’m barely able to hear myself,” he retorted, impatient, even as he heard his voice drop. “You requested my presence. What is this about?”

“Sir, were you ever at the bow?” she asked, teeth clenched.

“No. Why?”

"I was called to the security room just prior to the hangar fire. There were suspicions that you had gone missing,” Phasma informed him, swallowing back the pain. “Footage from the bow shown to me by the security officer in charge had you disappearing from one security screen to the next."
"Captain, I was on the bridge immediately prior to the fire. No such footage could—"

“A changling.”

Hux found himself blinking at Phasma.

“A—?” He shook his head, studying her face for signs of disorientation. “Old footage, Captain, is a far more probable explanation than—”

“Lieutenant Mitaka,” she retorted, and he raised his eyebrows at the record number of interruptions. “He was the one that notified me of your disappearance, Sir. He seemed off. There was something—something wrong with him, but I couldn't place it. It was a Knight. It's the only explanation for the Lieutenant being in two places at once.”

Hux could feel the blood drain from his face, then anger sharpening as Phasma’s surprise at the identity of the soldier from the Security Center—at him being a man—suddenly became clear.

_The female Knight._

And at that, the puzzle pieces left in the wake of both the hangar’s sabotage and the booby trapping of his bridge suddenly become clear. An alien, a changeling—so that was how they had gone around the hangar without raising suspicions. That had been how they had gained access to the bridge and how they had evaded security, even tricked Phasma. It was how nobody, including himself, had seen a thing!

_Mockery. This is mockery!_”

"These Knights, Captain," Hux asked, fists clenching. "What were their names?"

"According to the files, Sir, Rhyase, Essen and Lyr," Phasma answered, pausing for an instant, frowning, clearly trying to force her mind to cooperate. Her face had lost most of its color by now. "And the vanished Knight, the tall woman—"

"Veshay."

He hadn't forgotten about her. Veshay, however, did not concern him. As far as he knew, she was not involved. She was, and would remain, Ren's problem. The others, however, were _his_, and he needed to put faces and names to the masks.

Rhyase—Rhyase that he had confused with Isahaine, the Knight he had worked with several times before—he could pick out of the trio immediately. The female Knight. Phasma had seen her unmasked, so he had an angle there. Essen and Lyr's identities, on the other hand, eluded him. One of them was the saboteur, a changling, and the other's involvement was still a mystery.

It was too vague.

_It won't do._

Anger slowly but surely turning into cold resolve, Hux held his own reflection’s gaze, seeing every single line of emotion leaving his expression as he got up, turning to find Phasma mimicking his movement, apparently intent on blocking his path.

“I know that expression. This isn’t worth it, General.”
She looked beyond exhausted; a simple step to his right and there would be nothing she could do to stop him from leaving. It would be easy, logical even, but he held her in esteems far too high not to meet her gaze.

“Rest, Captain.” And with that, he left.

Stepping inside his own quarters, Hux made his way towards the bookshelf squeezed behind the chessboard, pulling out a set of old textbooks to reveal a hidden space behind them. Attention lingering for a moment on the brownish dots smeared all over the blue uniform hidden inside, he reached under it. His fingers hit something, pulling out a carved wooden box he quickly set aside and then the still charged six-chambered revolver he had been looking for.

Expression cold, Hux opened the chamber, attention going over the five remaining bullets, before he put the weapon on the chessboard and restored all the books to their former place. Only when he turned back did he notice that he had forgotten the box. Almost mechanically, he opened the lid, taking out one of the old chess pieces lying inside and raising it up to the light, attention going over every imperfection and visible mark of wear in the carved wood. The irony of what piece he had selected hit him a moment later.

Black Knight.

Hux placed the piece in the middle of the board, one finger over its head. Then he pressed it, unbalancing it until it fell, crushed under his fingers.

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- Leia, who is not amused by her son's antics.

Comments: because Madame Windcage won't ask, but Mme DD is certainly shameless enough to.
Leia had been looking at the sky when he’d arrived, her attention so captured by the still collapsing
Death Star that she only noticed him when his arms snaked around her waist and turned her towards
him for a kiss.

He was as he had been, as he always would be in her fondest memories—quick smile and
mischievous eyes, a scoundrel through and through.

“Trying to run away from the festivities or from me, Your Highness?”

“Try both,” she had retorted, playfully.

“You’ll have to hide better than this then,” Han commented, leaning in to kiss her and somehow
managing to pull a wine bottle from behind his back while he did so. “Because you've got the
complete package right here and I really don’t intend to drink this alone.”

His voice, his eyes—he was seduction itself, leaning in for another kiss like that—or at least he
would have been if the ewok hiding behind his legs hadn't chosen that exact moment to leap out of
hiding, laughing maniacally.

“Ignore the bear,” Han had said, sounding exasperated, even as he tracked its escape with his eyes.
Leia turned him back to her. “Now where were we at?”

It had been one of those magical moments, just the two of them, laughing and dancing and kissing,
alone with the stars, completely forgotten by the world.

“I love you,” she had whispered, running her fingers through his hair as they lay on top of one of the
wooden cabins, distant music rising among the trees.

“I know, Princess.”

He had pulled her to him—

And Leia had awoken in her room, cold and alone with the knowledge that he was dead. She hadn’t
dared fall asleep since. It was a sweet lie, but waking would never allow her to forget.

Leia looked around her room, listening, trying to find something to occupy her idle mind, but there
was nothing save herself and her guilt to be found. She missed Han, not only his presence and his
company, but also all those infuriating things—big and small—that used to drive her mad. She
missed waking up to their small family. She even missed their fights.

*Where did we go wrong, Han? When did we let things get so out of hand?*

Her hand went to her neck, only to end up closing over the soft fabric of her nightgown. Panicked,
Leia looked around the bed, lifting the pillows, searching between the bed sheets, before turning her
attention to the floor, then the work desk.
I can’t have lost it!

She would never forgive herself if she did. That necklace was everything she had left of—

“Can I be of help, General?”

Previously in charging mode, C3-PO had clearly been awoken by her frantic gestures. Looking to the place where he stood, Leia could see him approaching her with obvious concern.

“How you been—?”

She remembered then. She had driven herself to distraction watching Ben’s old messages, the horrified understanding that could only be borne of hindsight forcing her to stop in favor of sleep.

I—I took it off and—

She leaned towards her bedside table and opened its lonely drawer, fearing being wrong all the way, but one glance inside left her awash with relief.

“It’s alright, Threepio. I found it.”

It was there, right beside an old book she had never gotten around to finishing. After a moment’s hesitation, Leia shut the drawer again, leaving the pendant inside.

Listening to what that pendant contained had been a mistake. She had thought herself prepared, and she had been prepared for many things indeed—finding herself mourning her son all over again; missing his humor and the way his expression always betrayed what he was truly feeling; how profoundly kind he had always been; missing even his darkness. What she hadn’t expected was for what he had been and what he had become to merge, for her boy and Kylo Ren to become a single person. What she truly hadn’t expected was to no longer be able to love one and despise the other, and now she felt angry. At herself, yes, but mostly, at Ben—Ren!

…

I don’t even know what to call him anymore!

Getting to her feet in search of something else to occupy her thoughts, Leia approached her window, frowning as her eyes fell on the two carriers visible directly under her and moving to the empty space at the end of the formation.

Ackbaar hasn’t returned yet.

Having volunteered both himself and his command ship to escort the former stormtrooper battalion to one of their many active battle fronts—one of the few places they could be both useful and not put the rest of the Resistance in danger—Ackbaar had left not a day after she had dropped off Rey and Finn on the barren moon. It was too short a time gap for him to have returned, but the breach the heavily armored Home 1 absence opened in their ranks left her feeling slightly uncomfortable. If the fleet had looked fragile with it there, it looked nearly abandoned with it gone.

The fleet—when did I start calling six ships that?

Leia sighed, turning her back on the window. A quick change into more appropriate clothes saw her as ready to face the day as she’d ever be, so she settled into her desk and set her attention on the latest report she had received, reading an absolutely depressing tale of rising casualty numbers and terrain losses that painted a very bleak picture for the Resistance on one of their main fronts.
A lost battle. Another one.

She turned towards the work desk keyboard, rapidly typing her orders—a retreat—and going over to the next report. Her heart grew heavier the longer she read. The second one was even more disheartening than the first.

Concede victory and focus elsewhere. This is becoming our strategy far too often.

And without the support of the Republic fleet, it would only get worse. If they weren’t cautions, the Resistance’s morale would plunge, as not even their success at Starkiller could bolster it indefinitely.

And what that entails both for us and the galaxy...

Leia shook her head, massaging her temples.

The Resistance had been quite powerful in her youth. Even when they could not stand on equal ground with the Empire’s fleet, they had had the financing and the manpower to make their work very difficult. The Order’s fleet wasn’t half as numerous—it probably wasn’t a tenth of what the Empire had possessed, actually—but to judge them based on that was a deadly mistake. Their technology was far superior; their soldiers and officers’ training knew no rival; their propaganda machine was dangerously effective and Brendol Hux’s son—what had been his name?

Armitage, she recalled.

It mattered little now. The Armitage Hux she remembered was a little boy, a child with unhappy eyes and a downcast head. The man he had become was nothing of the sort. She had been on the receiving end of his battle tactics. She had been forced to retreat by his fleet. She had seen what he was capable of. She knew brilliance when she saw it and the younger Hux was that in spades. He was also, unfortunately, a fanatic, even more so than his father Brendol had been. She had listened to his speeches—the few that Intelligence had been able to grab hold of—and they had sent shivers down her spine. It was not a question of how much hatred the man seemed to have within himself, how in love he was with the Order’s ideology, or how certain he was that he was doing what was right—as disturbing as that was—but how magnetic he was. She herself had felt it, the way the words wrapped around one’s mind, the way they captivated.

We are facing a charismatic and highly intelligent fanatic. Leia shook her head at that. That child...

Lost. The child Armitage Hux had been was, alongside so many others, lost, and the galaxy was paying dearly for having allowed such a thing to happen. It was those same lost children that were reducing the Resistance to guerrilla tactics: hit and run, take what you can and leave. The Order called its fleet superior and Leia feared, even if she wouldn’t ever say it out loud, that it was. Starkiller’s destruction had been their only victory and its cost had been high. Their only victory since had been in Finn’s desertion showing other dissenters a path out, and the Order wouldn’t be defeated like that. The recent development with the trackers proved Hux wouldn’t allow something like that to continue.

If we had our old numbers...

That was an impossible dream. The Resistance had indeed been powerful, but the years that followed the death of the emperor and the consequent demilitarization of the Empire had slowly drained its strength. People had wished to return home, to rebuild their lives, to start families, to live, and, while the war did continue, one by one they had left, trusting the Republic they had fought for with the future they dreamed of building. She had been no different. Trading a life of armed fighting for one of political warfare had seemed natural, and even more so when Ben was born.
She had not been lying when she told Han that some of it had been good. Those first years had been like a dream, but it just couldn't last. In hindsight, she should have known it wouldn't from the beginning. She loved Han and knew he loved her, but they were at the same time too similar and too different for things to go smoothly and, in the end, their relationship had turned into a freighter wreck of a marriage.

*How did I get back to this?*

How had she gone from the Order to Han and Ben?

Leia closed her eyes, resting her head against the chair as she inhaled the soft smell of her perfume, listening as the cruiser reactor echoed up the ventilators, filling the room with a soft hum. It was strangely peaceful. It was—

She jumped to her feet. There were footsteps coming down the corridor, footsteps and the sound of something metallic rolling down the hall. Leia shook her head in disbelief, tired eyes focusing on the clock beside her and then on the door. Without realizing it, she found herself opening her door and calling into the hall:

“Problems sleeping or are you taking the blasters for a walk?”

Judging by the way the three of them jumped—well, Poe and Allya jumped; BB8 made a startled humming noise and dove behind Poe's legs, the silly thing—they weren’t expecting her to be awake nor to become aware of their presence. In fact, their twin expressions of guilt were suited for children caught with their hands in the cookie jar. It made her both want to pinch the bridge of her nose in exasperation and laugh. BB8's terrified behavior led her to settle on guilt, however.

“What are you three doing here?” she asked with a sigh, attention going over Poe’s orange uniform—he had just gotten off of patrol it seemed—to Allya’s firm grip on the blaster—at least she had the security on—to BB8 still peering out hesitantly from behind Poe. “Sleepwalking?”

The pilot’s effort at finding an appropriately humorous way to justify their presence gave way to an amused smile at her query. Allya, on the contrary, didn’t react immediately, too busy stretching her neck to detect possible assassins behind Leia to register what she had said. The moment she did, though, she seemed to deflate, her pale gold eyes going from vigilant to nervous in less than a second.

*I really shouldn’t say such things to the girl.*

“Patrol,” she whispered, speaking not with Leia but to her blaster, her voice so low that even in the quiet hall it was almost impossible to hear her.

Unlike Allya, Poe was rapidly regaining his composure.

“It’s really late, General,” he pointed out with concern. “Shouldn't you be sleeping?”

“I have a lot to do,” she heard herself answering, whilst shaking her head.

Truth was that she wouldn’t be able to rest even if she did try. Dreaming about Han had actually been a respite. As a rule, every time she dared close her eyes, her mind was lost to a nightmare. In it, Ben and Han were face to face on a bridge over a chasm. They seemed to be talking, neither of them conscious that she was there too, that she was running, that she was trying to reach them. But she could never stop what happened next.

*I know I lost them. Both of them. I know that, I don’t need to be reminded of it constantly.*
Leia stepped back inside her quarters.

“Come in,” she told the trio, signaling C3-PO to stay charging. “And close the door.”

She turned the chair she had been sitting on towards the sitting room, observing Poe as he walked towards the window, eyes growing distant as hers must have been at the sight of the small fleet.

*He’s worried.* It wasn’t difficult to guess with what and for whom. A part of her wished she could tell him what was going on, but—

*It’s not a question of trust.* Because she trusted Poe. She just didn’t know where to begin explaining that his childhood friend and the man who had captured him on Jakku were one and the same.

Leia’s attention turned to Allya, now stepping closer to her. The girl was chewing her lips nervously as she took a small container out of her belt and poured its contents into the mug Leia kept on her workstation. A rich exotic smell rose from the steaming liquid.

“Is that tea?”

Allya shook her head affirmatively. Judging by how embarrassed she looked, if she was human she would probably had turned a dark shade of scarlet by now.

“I—I think that’s the name in Basic,” she murmured, placing the mug in Leia’s hands. “They had me piloting one of the freighters last time we went to fetch supplies. I bought it in the market. For good dreams.”

Leia almost spilled the tea at those words. She looked at the girl with her eyebrows raised.

“Have you been sleeping in the corridor again?”

She couldn’t fathom why the girl had taken to curling up in front of her door at night, but she’d given up arguing days ago and told her to just come inside instead. She wouldn’t mind the company. If nothing else, it would be a distraction, and that simply couldn’t be comfortable.

“No. This was, maybe, the day before yesterday?” She looked to Poe for help. To Leia’s absolute horror, the pilot’s expression turned pensive. He nodded. *Not both of them!* “I was going to the hangar and…”

“You heard me talking.”

That didn’t come as a surprise. C3-PO had long ago informed her about that unfortunate side effect of her dreams. Curiously enough, both C3-PO and Allya’s solution to her problems were the same: tea. It actually made her smile.

“Is it good?” Allya asked, as she took a sip of the drink.

It was *awful.* The leaves had been over brewed and the flavor of the drink had dissolved into something reminiscent of swamp water. Still, she forced herself to swallow and say in her most sincere tone:

“Delicious.”

The girls face lightened, the nervous expression fading into a shy smile before she trotted back to sit with BB8. It was the first time Leia had ever seen her so innocently thrilled and, all at once, she looked quite young.
She’s a child.

Leia had never been comfortable with making Allya part of the Resistance. They had saved her from a First Order prisoner transport not long after Starkiller’s destruction. How the girl had ended up there, surrounded by a handful of First Order dissenters and failed stormtroopers set for execution, was something she had not yet shared, but it was obvious by how she clung to Leia and the rest of the Resistance that she had nowhere else to go. And so, she had stayed, but—

She wasn’t supposed to be fighting.

But with their lack of personnel, there were plenty who were willing to overlook her age in favor of making ends meet by any means necessary. Allya had gone from helping with supplies, to organizing munitions, and the moment someone had realized she had received some flight training, to pilot’s duty. In the end, it was Finn who, given his life experience, had rather different notions about, well, many things, had erred on the side of pragmatism and taught her how to use a blaster. There was no turning back from there. The harm was done.

She looked at Allya. The girl was now mimicking BB8 as he leaned slightly from side to side, beeping happily at her. At the window, Poe was chuckling at the display.

“That droid is already spoiled rotten, Allya!” he said, snickering even harder when the girl started making random beeping sounds at the droid, trying to speak to it that way. “You’re making it worse!”

“But he’s cute.”

“That’s how they get us!”

Leia looked from one to the other and then to the ground, her heart heavy.

The war will make graves for us all. She shook her head. I’m in a really optimistic mood tonight—

The ship’s sirens blared their interruption. Jumping to her feet, she saw Poe, weapon immediately in hand, look towards the window, face furrowing in confusion.

“What the hell?”

And then he was out the door, BB8 on his heels, as Allya took his place, mouth agape at whatever she saw out the window.

“The Order?”

Allya nodded. Before Leia could step out of the room and make a dash for the bridge, however, Captain Xarv’s voice called to her from the emergency communicator on the wall.

“General, an Order command shuttle is approaching the fleet,” he informed her, sounding so calm Leia suspected he was going into shock. “They are asking for permission to land.”

What?!

She didn’t care to hear more. A very bad feeling was settling along her spine as she rushed to the hangar bay. She arrived there in time to see the superior side of the black shuttle’s wings slowly descend into their landing position.

Forcing her way through row after row of Resistance soldiers with weapons pointed at the shuttle
door as it opened, Leia found herself stopping right next to Poe. She couldn’t speak, staring in disbelief at the half dozen figures coming down the shuttle’s access ramp and presenting themselves in front of her. They had made no efforts to camouflage what they were, from the long dark robes to the masks covering their faces, their identities were obvious.

“Are the Knights also deserting?” Poe asked, leaning closer to Leia’s ear, his pistol firmly pointed towards the new arrivals.

And before Leia could think of what to say or even question how they had found them, the Knights moved. As one they took a step forwards, fell to one knee, and placed their weapons on the ground. As one, they rose and stepped back, and then to her and everyone else’s shock they raised their hands to the masks and removed them.

The silence could be cut with a knife as they repeated that same choreographed display and put the helmets next to their weapons.

Leia was having a hard time finding her voice, her attention jumping from Knight to Knight, focusing on their behavior rather than their faces.

There were six of them in total. To the far right of the group, a short young man was elbowing the dark skinned woman at his side and gesturing discretely at BB8. At their side, the oldest member of the group, his face half destroyed by scars, was ignoring every single weapon pointed at him and looking with clear interest at the X-Wings. Then two women, clearly not human, but similar to the last bit of milky white skin and white hair, who were studying the soldiers. Last, a muscular man with burning red eyes whose gaze raised goosebumps up her arms. He rather looked like he wanted to murder someone and, rather sure of who it was, Leia found herself sympathizing with him involuntarily.

She too wanted nothing more than to throttle Kylo Ren.

---

Halfway across the galaxy, General Hux sat in his quarters stewing, eyes glued to the files of the trio of Knights that had made a mockery out of his entire command, while in Cloud City, Kylo Ren prepared to set his own plans into motion, his false Knights—having assumed the identities of Nephys and Isahaine—at his side. Knights, it seemed, were the order of the evening.

Chapter End Notes

Next up - The Scavenger

Comments inspire Madame Windcage to write faster, which in turn makes Mme DD edit faster, and that leads to chapters being posted sooner. Allegedly.
The Scavenger - Day 15, Part 1

“You should sell it, you know. The flight simulator. Get yourself some food. Dreaming is good and all, but there's no place for that here, kiddo. It won’t ever accomplish anything.”

Rey’s eyes snapped open, vision focusing on the TIE’s front window as a tired, sun-bitten face she had no idea she still remembered fell back into the oblivion of her memory, leaving her alone, hands clasping the TIE’s controls, eyes going around the cockpit, almost expecting everything around her to crumble and reveal nothing but the scorching sands of Jakku.

It was an old fear, one that had been born long ago—the result of too many nights dreaming of her faceless family, of being in another, far happier place, only to wake up to the same vast desolation, nothing but the stars for company, nothing but herself for miles. On those long nights, trying to soothe herself back to sleep, conjuring up sweet nothings to justify her family’s continued absence, she had finally been able to find a distraction in a rundown, dented, completely outdated flight simulator she had uncovered from the sands.

Her intentions at first had, she admitted, been to fix it and sell it for food. At some point, however—probably the instant she turned it on and understood what exactly had come into her possession—that had changed. Some of her best memories, her only good ones, in fact, were of evenings spent sitting in front of that simulator, eyes glued to the screen, hands grasping the commands, voice cursing at her initial prepotency for running into walls and hangar doors or laughing at her absolutely disastrous first landings. Laughing. She didn’t even know what her own laughter sounded like until she had sat in front of that screen. She had all but forgotten what enjoying something felt like before she'd grabbed onto the simulators controls and discovered her love of piloting.

In a way, the simulator had saved her. She picked a ship, usually at random being that she started out knowing nothing about them, and then trained and trained until she could pilot it perfectly. Then she jumped to the next ship model—or ship class—and learned everything all over again. Too many nights she had fallen asleep from pure exhaustion, only discovering she had been sleeping when Jakku’s unforgiving sun had woken her up. Days had gained a new routine then, going from scavenging, selling parts and eating—or, at least, occasionally eating—to scavenging, selling parts, eating, and learning to fly.

In a place where an individual’s life was about as valuable as a grain of sand, where everybody was no one, she had slowly carved out her identity. She was a pilot. She was, even if just to herself, someone, and that spark of pride, as small as it was, had given her strength. While everything else conspired to pull her down, to break her spirit, the knowledge, the certainty, that she excelled at something few in Jakku even knew of, had steeled her. She was a pilot. Jakku could take everything away from her. It could starve her and kill her, but it couldn’t take that.

The day the simulator had broken down for the last time, she had lain on her bed wide awake for hours, eyes set on the dark sky visible from a series of little gaps in her home’s metal wall, her mind recalling numbly the tired face of a man who had died that same day, his body left behind, lost inside the Star Destroyer sunk in the sands. She didn’t know his name. She had no idea who he was or had
been. She had never had any desire to, but he was the only person she had known whose harsh words had been spoken in kindness. One of the few people who, knowing she was in possession of something valuable, hadn’t tried to rob her or kill her or worse to make his fortune off of it.

“You should sell it, you know,” he had said, watching as she tested the metal under her feet and walked carefully towards an open elevator shaft at the end of the Star Destroyer’s darkened corridor. “The flight simulator. Get yourself some food. Dreaming is good and all, but there’s no place for that here, kiddo.” He had stepped onto the same panels she had just cleared. “It won’t ever accomplish anything.”

With a crack and then a menacing metallic moan, Rey had turned to see the floor giving out under him, darkness swallowing the other scavenger as a bloodcurdling scream echoed in the corridor.

“You are wrong,” she had whispered to the night, curled in her bed as she tried to block out both the screaming and the silence. “You are wrong.”

She had never sold the simulator, not even when she had finally accepted that no amount of coaxing could make it work again. She hadn’t dismantled it or built something else in its place. It was still on Jakku, inside her small home, useless, taking up space—filling her with crushing guilt every time she thought of getting rid of it.

“I helped you. I made you a pilot. The least you can do is keep me,” it seemed to say.

It was the silliest thing, giving a voice and feelings to an inanimate object and yet—and yet it was still there, and every so often she would pause beside it, check to see if it would start up one more time, to see if she would get one last chance to use it.

It never did.

Be that as it may, it didn’t change what she knew she had accomplished. She was not the most experienced pilot or the most confident one—flying the Falcon for the first time had been a testament to both that and the importance of urgently finding a co-pilot—but she learned fast and she was sure she could state, without the slightest hint of arrogance, that she was a good pilot.

In view of that, she had to admit something. Whatever had been looking after her on Starkiller, whatever had assured she didn’t get her hands on a ship and try to run that way, but had instead made her crash right into Han Solo, Chewie and Finn, whatever that was, be it the Force or something else, had saved her life. Her pursuer, she now knew, wasn’t just a good pilot or an experienced one, he was—

Reckless. Insane.

And brilliant. So brilliant that, for a moment, she had completely forgotten not only whom she was fighting beside, but also who the pilot in the lead TIE was. It was all she could do to stop herself from letting go of her senses and demanding he explain how the hell he was making his ship slide in whatever direction he desired while rotating it on its horizontal axis without it stalling midair and plunging him to a certain death.

Getting out of Cloud City had been a nightmare. As far as she understood, Ren’s intention had been to use the ships leaving the city as camouflage for the tugs he intended to get to the Finalizer. The presence of the TIE’s was more of a diversion than an attempt at an air defense, or so Finn had suspected. Things had gone well at first, but it hadn’t been successful long enough for the tugs to get out of the city safely. Once someone on the rebel’s side had seen the decoy for what it was, they had turned their anti-air battery on the sluggish tugs. In less than a minute, one of them had been hit by a
barrage of missiles. For an instant, it had been suspended in midair, split almost perfectly into two halves, before it plummeted to the ground, engulfed in flames.

That had been the moment their squad leader had thrown his own commands aside, broken formation, and dove at vertiginous high speed towards the ship that had fired against the tug. She was still wrapping her brain around what had happened next. Ren had rotated the ship horizontally, fired the TIE’s cannons directly into the other ship’s bridge, and spiraled back up to blast a second smaller ship out of the sky, all while the first target was still falling.

It was absolutely brilliant. She would kill to fly like that. She would also have been dead in about three seconds if she had gone up against him in a ship while fleeing Starkiller.

*I’ll take lightsabers any day.*

Rey had no idea why she had tried to keep pace with him during the battle. It had been three days since they had entered hyperspace and her muscles were still aching from the strain. In fact, the only thing making her feel slightly better about things was that she hadn’t been the only one. The Special Forces’ pilot—the only one who, besides her, had been chosen to escort the tugs—had tried to do the same and had been just as successful as Rey, if not less.

*Definitely less.*

Not that the other woman was in any way a bad pilot. Far from it, she had experience exuding from every single pore, but there was something missing, something…

A white warning light lit up on the TIE’s console, grounding her back in the present as the Special Forces pilot’s voice rose from the communicator.

“Approaching destination. Exiting lightspeed.”

The swirling white mass began to focus, stars passing rapidly at their side until finally the same system she had visited less than a week ago focused in front of her. Everything was the same as far as she could tell: the large Star Destroyer frame visible against the dark green planet, the remnants of the destroyed Resistance vessels still floating around. Nothing had changed. Not even the silence. The only difference, it seemed, was the rapidly approaching TIE patrol demanding their identification.

Abandoning the tugs now making their way towards the *Finalizer*, Rey followed as Ren’s TIE dove under the Star Destroyer, making its way to the warship’s port side only to see him stop before he cleared the large warship’s underbelly, remaining absolutely immobile for the few seconds it took her and the other pilot to catch up with him.

“Proceed to the hangar.”

The words weren’t just meant for the Special Forces’ pilot. Rey, however, ignored the implied order, pulling her TIE alongside his as it ascended towards the open and, judging by the lack of light, inoperative hangar, she now noticed was right above them. They entered it slowly, carefully, the TIEs’ frontal lights illuminating the wrecked floor and scorched walls of a room that reminded her of the wrecks she used to scavenge on Jakku.

The other TIE descended slowly, landing near one of the hangar’s corners, a dark figure jumping from its hatch and landing several meters below to look around. Turning her ship in the opposite direction, Rey’s eyes went over the oppressive darkness on the outside. She had a bad feeling—like someone was there, in the shadows. Watching.
I don’t like this.

Her left hand was over the TIE’s upper instrument panel, fingers slowly rotating a large dial and then moving it downwards. The lights grew in intensity, the beacon slowly going down the blackened wall and over a group of TIE’s secured to a stair-like structure on the wall, before illuminating piles and piles of debris: ripped floor panels; twisted metal; a dark figure, its covered face facing the TIE, one hand rising towards it—

Rey had less than a second to kick in the frontal thrusters before the TIE jerked violently forward, a metallic groan echoing all around her as the metal panels bent under the strain. She could feel the Force grasping at the structure, pulling against the TIE’s motors, straining them, taking them past their limits.

Not good!

There were alarms going off all around her. Behind her, something had starting emitting a high pitched whine and she could smell burning rubber. Even so, Rey’s eyes refused to leave the dark figure, focusing on the eyes behind the visor of what wasn’t a helmet but a white mask covering the Knight’s—because, incomprehensibly, it was a Knight!—face. And somehow, someway, she understood.

You want me to crash.

And that infuriated her a lot more than having the Knight simply trying to kill her would. Muscles straining to keep a tight grip over the commands, Rey pressed a button on the TIE’s controls, releasing the frontal cannons from their brakes and rapidly turning them towards the unknown figure. Without a second’s hesitation Rey pressed the trigger. The woman jumped out of the way, releasing her grip on the TIE and forcing Rey to rapidly reverse the thrusters as her head hit the chair hard. She dove for the trigger again, but the figure had disappeared. She couldn’t even sense it, but she did sense Ren.

Left. To the left.

The TIE slid and stopped. Several meters under her, Rey could see the cross shaped lightsaber fall towards the far larger staff like weapon the woman wielded. Rey had both of them in sight. There was no way she could hit one without hitting the other. She couldn’t—

“Do it,” a now familiar voice whispered. She bit her lip, finger hovering over the trigger. “Two birds…”

Rey shook her head, eyes focusing on Ren’s back.

“Move,” she whispered. “Move!”

If Rey didn’t know better, she would’ve thought he had heard: the lightsaber twisted, deflecting the Knight’s blow as she dove under the weapon, away from her opponent. Rey took her chance immediately, seeing as the Knight jumped away, disappearing behind one of the piles of debris. The instant she blasted that away, the woman was gone again.

Where?

She had no time to found out. A huge broken beam came crashing directly into the cockpit’s circular window. Rey made the TIE dive, feeling the right solar panel collide with the ground as the beam flew over the ship, and then pulled up, turning until she found the two dark figures and going again for the trigger.
They were at each other’s throats again. The Knight’s weapon falling in a brutal cleaving movement, ripping through the air as Ren dodged away from it, letting it crash into the ground and trapping it against the floor. The next instant the burning red blade was aiming towards his opponent’s neck, forcing her to let go of the weapon and reach for the Force. Whatever she did with it was too fast for Ren to evade, and it hit like a punch. It was all it took. The Knight dove for her weapon, ripping it from under him. An instant of unbalance and both of them stepped back, circled each other, and threw themselves forward again.

The battle was beginning to turn vicious as Rey, shoulder suddenly almost paralyzed with pain, finished adjusting the cannon’s aim and leaned forward, finger over the trigger, looking for her chance to fire. As she did, something strange happened. For a moment, Rey could have sworn she saw the Knight’s weapon changing, curving, warping like a living thing. She had less than a second to wonder at what she was seeing—if anything at all—before Ren was jumping off the pile of debris both he and the Knight had made their way up onto, sliding down and turning at the bottom, clearly expecting an attack.

He had miscalculated, and he wasn’t the only one. Rey, thinking exactly the same, also misunderstood the Knight’s intention. She was now turning, one hand raised towards the TIE, towards her. It was as if time had stopped. There was lightning—lightning—coming her way. It hit the right wing. Immediately, a danger sign lit up on the console, a huge explosion echoing behind her before Rey could do anything to block the power supply. The TIE was dropping, systems failing, and something vicious was twisting in the Force, rising as Ren again fell on the Knight, sending the lightsaber crashing against the woman. The instant he did, the lightning burst away from the ship, hitting the ceiling and sending a huge section of metal crashing down on top of the two figures as their weapons made contact. Immediately, Rey pulled the commands, fighting to land the TIE, only just avoiding crashing it straight into the floor as a giant burst of lightning filled the hangar with an almost blinding light and—

Nothing.

Breathing hard, Rey released the commands, eyes straining to see through the darkness. Several moments passed before a red glow reappeared and a dark figure stepped under the TIE’s light beacons, head slowly turning in all directions—Ren. But apart from him, no one; there was no one else there.

Impossible. This can’t be.

Rey jumped out of the pilot’s chair, almost forgetting her helmet as she ran towards the TIE access hatch and climbed down the ladder. Jumping a meter or so to the ground, she quickly stepped out from under the TIE, hands firmly gripping her staff, her right shoulder absolutely pulsing as she approached Ren.

It felt like walking towards a storm.

“Where is she?”

“Not here.” It was not an answer, but he didn’t seem to be listening. The Force was thundering around them. “They all left.”

“Who left? Who was she?”

The hangar door opened; a long shadow appeared and then dozens of figures were stepping into the blade of light. Eyes straining to adjust to the sudden brightness, Rey found a very tall blond woman dressed in a black uniform similar to the one Finn was wearing when they first met, only full of
insignias and with a long cape on top. She was making her way towards them. The woman was
frowning, her expression hardening as her intense blue eyes went over the incandescent metal left in
the awake of the TIE’s blasts, then she raised her left hand, giving a signal that made most of
stormtroopers following her scatter around the hangar.

“The bridge reported blaster fire coming from inside the hangar, Sir,” she announced in a voice that
carried even from halfway across the hangar. “Did you get a positive identification?”

A low rumble started, then something metallic was falling, and the woman turned instantly, left hand
hitting the blaster light as she pointed towards one of the debris’s piles, following an unrecognizable
piece of burnt metal as it tumbled down. Lowering the blaster, her eyebrows raised in suspicion, she
turned back to Ren.

“The General requests—”

She had no chance to finish. Ren’s attention had broken away from the hangar and fallen on her.

“When did this happen?” he demanded, gesturing around the scorched remains of the hangar.

“Some three days ago.”

His voice pitched lower with each word.

“Were they able to reach lightspeed?”

“Positive, Sir.”

Ren’s fist clenched. In seconds, he had stormed passed the tall woman, not even stopping when she
turned his way, voice urgent.

“The General requests your presence on the bridge, Sir.”

“The General will wait.”

He was boiling. Rey could see it in his shoulders, read it in the line of his back, sense it in the Force.
A lifetime of being forced to survive by always paying attention and avoiding that which could do
her harm was screaming at her to get away from him fast. Yet, she followed him all the way to a
common room, it's door looking as though it had been rammed down recently, and made no move to
leave when he slammed the door back in place with the Force. Instead, she tore off her helmet, threw
cautions to the wind, and demanded answers.

“What’s happening?”

Ren stopped in the middle of the room, not turning her way, silence only growing denser the longer
he stood there.

“There has been some unrest within the Knights’ ranks due to recent events,” he finally said, his
calm tone a contrast to the violent way the Force crashed around him. “This is the aftermath.”

“The aftermath?” Rey gestured in the general direction of the main hangar. “That Knight tried to kill
both of us!”

“There were bound to be repercussions.”

“From what?” she demanded to know, dropping the helmet onto the circular sofa in the middle of the
room. “Aren’t you the Knights’ leader or something?”
“I am.”

She waited for him to continue. She waited for an answer for what felt like an eternity, attention firmly set on his back. Contrary to that time in Starkiller’s interrogation room, however, when she had rather wished he would just shut up, now that she did want him to talk, he wasn’t uttering a single word.

“That Knight in the hangar—”

“Is taking advantage of hierarchy dynamics. As I said, repercussions were to be expected.”

Rey was rapidly running out of patience. Could the man stop being so enigmatic?! Was he constitutionally incapable of giving a straight answer?!

“You said ‘they’ left,” she pointed out, unwilling to let it go. “I only counted one. Are the others Knights too?”

His silence was as good as an answer.

“Is losing Knights also ‘hierarchy dynamics?’”

That got a response. He turned brusquely, his voice filled with an edge that hadn’t been there before.

“I didn’t lose anyone,” he snarled. “Veshay is clearly within this vessel. As for the whereabouts of the rest, that is, unfortunately, not that hard to guess.”

Now, it was her turn to be silent. Eyes fixed on the dark visor, a foreboding feeling rising in her chest as she studied him, she felt she knew the answer. Still, she asked.

“And where would they go?”

She would wish she hadn’t.

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- The Stormtrooper.

Write something in the box, s'il vous plaît.
The Stormtrooper - Day 15, Part 2

“Emergency teams report no causalities. The ship seems to have been flying unmanned.”

Crouched next to a large broken window, both his attention and thoughts so set on Cloud City’s night skyline that he didn’t hear the Sergeant approach, Finn found himself almost jumping to his feet to salute the officer, the hard wired reaction nearly beating out his brain’s survival instincts screaming ‘don’t do that,’ and resulting in a strange up and down twisting maneuver as he forced himself to remain still.

“It couldn’t get here alone, Sir—geant!” he said, rapidly waving one arm in the general direction of the wall of illuminated buildings to cover his error, quietly sighing with relief when the officer looked away from him. “Didn’t anybody see anything?”

The Sergeant raised his blaster, adjusting the scope and running it up and down the skyscrapers Finn had pointed towards.

“This is a business area, Sir. At night and in the present climate—well even if someone saw something,” he trailed off, shaking his head and dropping the blaster before facing Finn. “It is possible some of the neighboring buildings have video surveillance. If you want, my men can get hold of it.”

Fingers running over a set of deep scratches, Finn made a nervous but affirmative gesture with his head. Then, doing his best to look as ‘Knightly’ as possible—something that apparently meant trying to act like Ren, talk like Phasma, and fail miserably at both—he got to his feet, turned towards the destroyed wall behind him, and entered the adjoining room. Feet sinking between piles and piles of destroyed electronics, Finn stopped next to the pair of stormtroopers standing guard over a large overturned ship, its blinking exterior lights the only source of light in the destroyed room.

This is so not good.

Shoulders growing tenser the longer he looked at the markings on the side of what was clearly an Atmospheric Assault Lander, he was forced to come to grips with what it all meant. Finn stepped inside the wrecked ship, looking around the empty interior and entering the cockpit.

He might know nothing about how the ship had ended up crashing into the building he was presently in, but he knew where it came from—the Finalizer. Given that the computer system showed no flight path or clearance, whoever had piloted it to Cloud City had somehow managed to evade the Star Destroyer’s cannons, survive the TIE patrols, enter lightspeed, and, inexplicably, then ended up destroying three floors of a building and the vessel itself crashing into the same city the General was presently—he hoped—getting his flagship towed towards.

It makes no sense.

“Have we looked into anti-aircraft fire?” Finn asked, looking to the ship’s commands in hopes of seeing something the soldiers might have failed to notice. “Both the Order’s and Rebel's?”
“All the anti-aircraft positions were recaptured according to your instructions, Sir. Our soldiers haven’t shot down anything since.”

Finn nodded, turning his back on the pilot’s chair and exiting the ship.

“We need to remove this as quickly as possible.” He noted, facing the Sergeant. “Preferably without anyone noticing. Can we dismantle it or...?”

The question ended on an uncertain note. Being able to hear his own voice inside the helmet, Finn felt like cringing. His commands sounded more like questions than anything else. His voice held no conviction, much less any of the authority he had learned to wield during training in the Order or whilst being with the Resistance. Were it not for the distorter making him sound threatening, there wouldn’t be a person here who wouldn’t be raising eyebrows at his behavior and slips of tongue.

Sir-geant, I called him Sir-geant.

And that wasn’t even the worst slip up. He had been falling behind the officer, catching himself looking for permission to speak, eagerly listening to his insights, and too often doing little more than agree with his suggestions rather than put his own forwards and acting them out. He was behaving like a stormtrooper; it was a miracle no one had noticed yet.

I’m a complete disaster!

Even so, he knew—in a not so vocal part of his mind—that he was not being entirely fair with himself.

Amid the absolute strangeness of being ‘Nephys,’ he seemed to have at least been doing a decent enough job for the officer’s initial reservations about serving under him to have disappeared. The Sergeant had clearly been—for whatever reason—attempting to curry favor with Ren. His over eagerness to be useful, to find solutions to every single problem facing them, to meddle into matters he knew less than nothing about, were all part of his effort to gain favor—not that Ren seemed impressed or even conscious of what was going on. As far as Finn had been able to tell, the Enforcer was both far too preoccupied with something else to be paying full attention to him and becoming increasingly annoyed by the officer's efforts. What possible motive he had in leaving Finn responsible for the city, however, was something he could not fathom and that the officer had obviously taken personally.

The instant Finn had stepped away from the TIE’s launching ramp after seeing Rey’s fighter following the rest of the TIE group, he had been hit by a less than friendly ‘Your orders?’ coming from the Sergeant. It had taken almost a day and the recapture of nearly all of the enemy held anti-aircraft positions for the ‘Sir’ to reappear in the officer’s vocabulary.

Finn had chosen to take that as a positive sign. It was the only one he had, since he really did believe he was leaving a rather poor impression of himself.

I’m a far better soldier than this.

He had been a hell of a good soldier in the Resistance. He knew how to lead and there was no way of refuting that when Phasma herself had constantly picked him for the command position during training. One look at the white helmet and red shoulder blade of the officer, however, and, somehow, all of that amounted to nothing.

I need to get it together.

He did wonder how the true Nephys would be behaving, what he would do in his position. More
than that, he wondered what the hell had happened to him and where he was. The last thing he
wanted was for the Knight he was impersonating to appear in front of him.

*I can already imagine it: the double take, ensuing murder over identity theft...*

Finn shook his head, stepping away from his fears and into the blindingly white elevator both he and
the Sergeant had been making their way towards.

“How long until we have the surveillance footage?” he asked as it started descending. “Whoever was
on that transport—”

“We will have their identities as soon as possible, Sir.”

*That didn’t answer my question,* Finn thought. There seemed to be something broken between his
mind and his mouth stopping him from saying it out loud, however. Instead, feeling the elevator stop
at the atrium, he found himself asking:

“Did we inform the Governor about this?”

“No, Sir, we—” A pause whilst the door opened and then, in an extremely displeased voice,
“Permission to speak freely.”

“Yes?”

“We didn't, but someone did.”

Finn turned his eyes to the large atrium, attention going first to the large glass wall over and around
the door and then to the shrubs aligned at both sides of the path leading to the entry. A second later, a
tall elderly man came into his line of sight.

“There’s no one?” Calrissian’s voice echoed against the high ceiling, multiplying into thousands as
the Governor, now dressed in brown, a beige cape flapping behind, joined them, two soldiers
flanking him. “Have you searched the building?”

“Governor.” Finn saluted, seeing the Sergeant’s shoulders tensing as he tried to find a safe enough
middle ground between what the officer was obviously seeing as someone questioning his
competence—again—and the Governor’s need for information. “Have you been briefed?”

“I have been informed that a ship was seen flying over the business area,” Calrissian began, looking
over the atrium and then at Finn with a deep frown. “That it opened fire against this building before
making its way inside. There are also reports of an undetermined number of passengers leaving the
 crash site, but not the building.”

Finn felt his jaw drop.

*This man knows more than us.*

That was something that also hadn’t gone unnoticed by the Sergeant.

“How?” he inquired, suspiciously.

“This is my city,” Calrissian said simply, his voice calm, cautious. “More importantly, there are some
breaches in the perimeter you might want to take into account. Mostly service corridors no longer in
the blueprints and—”

“I advise you to keep away from the Order’s military operations, Governor.”
“This is my city, Sergeant,” he repeated, politely, eyes settling on the white helmet. “If I say there are breaches in the perimeter, you would do well to listen.”

“This city belongs to the Order, Governor, consider that before—”

Finn raised one hand, his imperious gesture silencing both the men with such speed he actually found himself thanking his incredulity for making him act completely against his nature.

“You’re willing to share the location of these service corridors?” he inquired, the question filled with more curiosity than actual desire for information.

Calrissian raised an eyebrow at the question, looking almost surprised by it, then nodded. Finn felt absolutely dumbstruck.

“With the Order?”

“If it pleases you.”

This makes no sense.

“It would.”

It would also please me to know what the hell is going on!

It wasn’t the first time that thought had popped into his mind. In fact, it had taken center stage from the instant he had recognized the man. He knew of Lando Calrissian. How could he not? History as taught by the Order was mostly used for propaganda purposes and, that being the case, was unsurprisingly partial, but even if the amount of cherry picking used to polish the Empire’s image, actions, and ideology into a highly sanitized version of what had happened had shocked him—he had never dreamed it would be as extensive as it had proven to be when he left the Order—that wasn’t saying he hadn’t suspected something was off with the Order’s version of history. If one paid attention—or better yet, didn’t zone out during instruction like Nines had—there were things that really didn’t make sense, facts that didn’t connect, actions that seemed to contradict each other, and people that one would think had a lot more to gain by siding with the Empire who had instead joined the Resistance.

Calrissian’s position in particular had been extremely confusing, even if not as bizarre as it was proving to be now. The man was an Alliance War Hero and yet, here he was, alive when he should have been killed, free when he should have been jailed, working with the Order, feeding it information, running down the local Resistance cell in a far more merciless way than even the Order was. As much as Finn had believed him to be playing double agent when first coming face to face with him—he had been absolutely exhilarated, thinking that against all odds he and Rey had found an ally—now he was not so sure, and the longer he interacted with Calrissian, the less sure he was.

This man is a Resistance Hero, Finn reminded himself, studying the Governor as the wrinkles around his eyes deepened as the man frowned at the detailed holographic blueprint of his city the Sergeant had turned on and he started sharing the location of the entryways to the old service tunnels. He fought against the Empire. He was at the second Death Star. He can’t be siding with the Order.

“A word of advice before you put your soldiers inside,” Calrissian said, stopping himself midway through his explanation to face Finn. “The structure is a maze; there might be better options than searching the interior.”

“We seal it,” the Sergeant offered, indifferently, but still sounding suspicious.
“Or you can have it gassed.”

“That could take days,” the officer retorted, not caring enough to hide his displeasure.

“A simple precaution, Sergeant.”

Calrissian’s eyes had turned cold, so much so, in fact, that Finn found himself swallowing.

*People don’t change this much, do they?*

No one could possibly go from fighting the Empire to being this close to its ideological heir in thirty or so years, could they?

*He has to know what the Order is!*

Even so, whatever his side, Finn found himself not only admiring Calrissian, but wishing he had even half the Governor’s confidence. With no allies and surrounded by troops that were either suspicious or downright hostile towards him, he still behaved like he was the one in charge.

“Your preference, Sir?” the Sergeant asked, breaking the flow of Finn’s thoughts.

“Seal it,” Finn said, giving thanks once again for how distorted his voice was. He really had no love for helmets, had had enough of them after being forced under one for half his life, but he was truly beginning to love the distorter. He might not feel any confidence whatsoever, but that thing had it for him. “Put all accesses under surveillance until the operation is finished.”

“Sir.”

“Any *other* recommendations, Governor?”

Calrissian made an affirmative gesture with his head.

“Might I point your attention towards—”

Finn found himself distracted. Some strange system in the helmet’s visor had turned on, silently directing his attention towards a dark corner leading to the emergency access behind the lift. Not turning his head, hands closing tightly over his weapon, Finn followed the warning with his eyes, stomach twisting as he saw a group of humanoid figures amidst the shadows.

“A stray.”

*A what?*

“There’s a stray.”

The unknown voice seemed to be echoing inside the helmet, cold and hostile. He could see weapons drawn, the unmistakable signs of aggression, and yet they remained hidden, observing, apparently not conscious of being stalked themselves. There was hesitation. They hesitated.

*I found the ship's crew.*

And whoever they were, one thing was certain, they weren’t stormtroopers. He had but to look at them, at the way they stood, to know that.

“Hostiles at 8 o’clock,” Finn whispered, not taking his attention away from the group even as he saw the Sergeant discreetly moving his trigger hand, clearly signaling the soldiers flanking Lando
Calrissian to take offensive positions. “Confirm visual.”

“Confirmed.” The Sergeant’s voice was even lower than his. Finn took a deep, steadying breath, unconsciously letting the officer yet again take charge. “On my command.”

Finn would never know who moved first, only that the instant they started firing, the unknown group had stepped out of the shadows. They approached fast, two of them falling behind to cover their colleague as she charged, evading the barrage of blasts or intercepting them with a staff that couldn’t look more different from the one Rey used while still being called staff. It was far longer and thinner, ending in a sharp blade that seemed to be electrified.

*If that thing reaches us…*

It ceased to be an ‘if’ in about a second. One of the attackers giving her cover threw something in Finn’s direction, a round object that opened the instant it hit the ground, filling the air with a disorienting high pitched noise that nearly caused Finn to drop his weapon and rip the helmet off of his head to cover his ears.

The woman ran passed him, twisting the sharpened staff in a wide arc that caught one of the soldiers in the throat, blaster fire from her group catching the second soldier in the chest. Turning to fire, Finn saw Lando Calrissian being spared a deathly strike as the second soldier’s dead weight sent him to the ground. The attack, however, still found a target, cutting right through the Sergeant’s arm plate, splattering blood all over the white protections. An instant later, he was caught in his side by a blaster shot.

It was as if the world had stopped, time slowing as the armored figure fell, knees hitting the ground before the rest of his body did. In that moment, Finn, head still ringing, was no longer seeing the officer; he was seeing Slip and he was back on Jakku, amidst the flames, back to back with him, hearing an abnormally close shot hit something, turning to discover that his friend was dying. Only this time, instead of freezing him, the shock put him on the offensive. He was firing against the woman before he even had time to think about what had happened or what he was doing.

It was a bad move from the start. The first shot grazed her shoulder, causing her to drop her weapon. Then, turning to him with an expression of hatred that only fell short of competing with the one Kylo Ren had given him while in Starkiller’s oscillator room, she picked up the weapon again, throwing herself at him.

The attack was brutal.

Having once been hit by Rey’s staff and, in a far more unpleasant memory, by Ren’s lightsaber, Finn had long decided to keep as far away from beings wielding anything of the sort as possible. It took about three seconds to remember exactly why. The staff slashed in a rapid up-down movement, hitting not him but his weapon as he tried to get a clear shot at her. The next instant, his weapon had choked, refusing to fire, forcing him to use it as a sort of shield when the staff twirled and its sharpened end tried to reach for his throat time and time again.

Finn clenched his teeth. He couldn’t survive her attack for long, not while being forced to defend himself with a weapon that was never intended for close quarters combat and that was far heavier than any blaster he had ever wielded. What was infuriating, however, wasn’t that he knew he had to find a solution to get out of the current situation and wasn’t seeing one, but that she wasn’t that good —she wasn’t Ren. If he had Skywalker’s lightsaber with him—!

She kicked him in the stomach, throwing him down, and using the momentum to swing the staff behind her back and intercept a bluish blast aimed for her head. Hitting the floor hard, Finn felt a
strange sense of victory, his eyes going to the place where Lando Calrissian was lying, one of the
dead soldier’s blasters in his hands. That had been a disruptor shot. The electric field around the staff
collapsed.

Finn didn’t wait a second longer to jump to his feet, rapidly advancing towards the woman, not
willing to let her take the offensive again, only to see her raise her hand, followed by Calrissian being
dragged across the atrium by one of the flower pots.

Oh, come on! Not this!

It was hell. Revealing what she was seemingly meant all gloves were off. The reason she wasn’t all
that impressive with the staff was revealed in about a second—the thing was a defensive weapon.
Her attack of choice was the Force.

You must be joking!

Everything was moving—ripped shrubs being throw his way, large flower pots coming from every
side—making Finn jump over them as he ran, trying to lead her attention away from the place the
Sergeant his mind believed was Slip was, trying to reach the rest of her group, the only place where
he could get a weapon and the only thing remotely similar to safety that could be found in the atrium.

Or, at least, so he thought.

Finn threw himself to the ground, evading by inches the absolutely monstrous reception desk thrown
his way, only to see both of the unknown men jump away from it as it tumbled down in their
direction.

“Rhyase!” the taller of the duo, an extremely muscular man sporting a large scar that had cost him
one eye, shouted. “Stop!”

Either she didn’t hear or she didn’t care.

The third member of the group, a tall man with a round young face Finn could have sworn he had
once seen on the Finalizer, was throwing away the weapon he had been using until now, taking out
two pistols from his belt and pointing them at Finn. Before he could shoot, his expression changed,
eyes moving to the ceiling as a menacing groan filled the atrium.

“Lyr!” he shouted, and Finn could have swore that for a moment his face changed, turning lizard
like. “Up!”

His colleague didn’t even look, raising both his arms and collapsing to one knee as one of the
atrium's huge candelabras fell on top of the three of them and stopped just a few meters before it
could crush them against the floor. All the while, Finn didn’t stop running, attention focused on the
weapon his attacker had discarded, bent on claiming it. He jumped out of range of the candelabra.
The third element of the group mimicked him, diving away from the candelabra and right onto Finn's
back.

They collapsed to the floor, something slippery making contact with the back of Finn’s neck and
leaving him completely paralyzed. He could see the man named Lyr tossing the candelabra aside,
making his way to where Finn was being rolled onto his back and pinned to the ground.

“Back, Essen!”

And now she too was there, standing over him, raising the sharpened end of her staff, aiming it
towards Finn’s unprotected throat. Before she could stab him, though, Lyr's hand closed around her
wrist. For a moment, they did little else than face each other, then Rhyase's dark, almond shaped eyes
turned to the wall of glass behind her. Something strange went through her expression as she looked
past it and then, abruptly and incomprehensively, she stepped back. All of them did.

**What the…?**

It took several moments before Finn was able to move again. When he could, they were gone and
Lando Calrissian, limping but otherwise miraculously unscathed, had somehow managed to liberate
himself from the gigantic flower pot, stopping next to Finn as he forced himself into a sitting position.

“Who was that?” the Governor asked, blaster still in hand.

_Hell if I know._ Not that a rather disturbing hypothesis about the provenience of at least two clearly
trained Force sensitives wasn’t already taking shape in his mind. _This day just keeps getting better
and better._

“Raise the alarm, report—”

Finn didn’t finish, his eyes had found the three fallen stormtroopers. One of them was moving, taking
off his helmet, checking the bleeding wounds on his abdomen and arm as he did so.

_Slip._

Finn forced himself to his feet, having to almost drag his still reluctant legs towards his friend.

“Slip, are you—?”

He stretched his arm out to help him stand, relief washing over him as the stormtrooper began turning
to him and—the illusion shattered; he remembered.

_Slip died._

And the brown skinned, dark eyed man staring in confusion at his offer for help—his fingers still
pressing the wound in his limp arm—couldn’t have looked less like him. He was older, some ten
years older than Slip would ever be. He was an officer. He was a stranger.

Finn stepped back, feigning indifference as he let his hand fall, looking at just about everything in the
half destroyed atrium whilst fighting to keep his attention away from the people. His mind was
screaming at itself.

_I saw Slip dying. What’s wrong with me?!_  

His attention went over the broken candelabra, vaguely acknowledging the dirt covered floor, and
then going over the ripped shrubs. It finally settled on the glass wall, resting on the bit of dark sky
visible between the skyscrapers. He could see the stars, they were—

His stomach fell.

“Sergeant, gather the soldiers.”

Checking his two dead subordinates’ pulses, the Sergeant turned his still uncovered face to Finn.

“Sir?”

“All of them. Quick.”
Calrissian, now joining them, looked around.

“What—?”

Finn pointed upwards, mind filling so quickly with defensive battle tactics that he couldn’t remember anything but stormtrooper jargon with which to answer the Governor.

“The sky is falling.”

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- The Scavenger.

Write something in the box below, s’il vous plaît.

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An aside -- plans are being made for bonus chapters. Keep an eye out for more on those.
The Scavenger

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Scavenger - Day 15, Part 3

“ Noticed some valuables missing, Ren? Or should I make an inventory?”

The question had come from their left, echoing down the empty corridor as its speaker—a tall slim man with flaming red hair—turned the corner, green eyes rising from the screen he had been reading to look disdainingly first at Ren and then at her.

“I will refrain from asking where you got this one,” he said, signaling to her with one hand. To their left, a stormtrooper patrol stopped, raising their arms to salute them. “Considering the rate at which you are losing constituents, it won’t take long for me to see the back of her as well.”

“Speaking from personal experience, General?”

Ren’s voice was dangerously low, his already dark mood souring further as the General spoke. Even so a slight trace of what sounded a lot like humor to Rey’s ears was clear in his voice, twisting around the words in such a way that it seemed that was all they were made of. There couldn’t be anything further from the truth. Anger was what Ren’s words were made of, what he himself seemed to be riding on, and if getting under the General’s skin was what he desired, he had succeeded. Hux’s collected expression collapsed, lips pursing in fury as they all stopped next to a door and his gloved fingers flew over the security pad. The door slid into the wall, lights turning on as the three of them went down a long flight of stairs and finally stepped inside a circular briefing room with dark walls and a mirrored floor.

“Blueprints. DCF-98,” Hux called, a low electric hum filling the room at his command. A second later, the holographic display in the center of the tactical table had come to life, drawing Cloud City’s easily recognizable outline as it loaded. “I better have something useful to work with this time, Ren. If you brought back something akin to that scavenger—”

Rey slowly turned her back on him, stepping away from the increasingly hostile atmosphere settling between the two men as discreetly as she could and moving towards the only point of interest in the briefing room: the viewport running all around it.

‘If you brought back something akin to that scavenger’ the General had said. Studying him through the glass reflection, she felt like cringing. If he only knew...

Her attention didn’t stay on Hux for long, however. In an instant, her eyes had been captured by the green planet under her and by the absolutely gigantic triangular frame expanding both over and under her—the briefing room apparently overseeing a mainly hollow section of the warship’s bow. All around her, small dots of color could be seen slowly maneuvering to dock with the large warship. The closest of them, a red tug, was turning slowly to grab hold of a solid section of the warship’s underbelly.

As much as the tugs’ maneuvering interested her, Rey’s attention was as far away from them as it could possibly be. Thoughts of Cloud City, the missing Knights, and Finn were clamoring in her mind to the point she could feel nothing but anxiety for her friend and anger at both herself and Ren.
He did this on purpose.

The conversation—for lack of a better term—she had had with him in the Visitor’s Quarters replaying itself over and over again in her mind, Rey tried to focus on the red tug, only to find herself cursing Ren seconds later. Even if she still couldn’t make head or tails of the cryptic way he had talked about repercussions, of one thing she was certain: he had planned this. This was his doing. This was what he wanted.

We should have stayed together.

That above all things was crushing her with guilt. She and Finn had no allies here, no one else to trust besides each other. She should never have allowed anything to separate them. She should have sent Ren’s orders to hell and turned the TIE back.

“We agreed to this, Rey,” Finn had retorted when she voiced her concerns, and she could see him as he had been, covered in the black Knights’ garments and standing at the base of the TIE’s access path. His head was following one of the ships as it went down the launching ramp. “This is who we are now.” He had made a gesture towards the clothes. “Knights. See you in a few days.”

He seemed so certain of that. She, on the other hand, wasn’t.

What if they didn’t see each other?

What if he died?

What if—?

If

If she wasn’t so worried, she might actually be paying attention to the discussion happening right behind her. If she wasn’t so angry, she would be trying to understand the power dynamic that underlined the discussion. Instead, she could hardly maintain a single line of thought, though it wasn’t as if the way the two men were trying to rip each other’s throats out was something she could miss. She also didn’t miss what their interaction truly stood for. This wasn’t a simple argument. It was a power struggle and, for the life of her, she couldn’t understand why Ren, who could so obviously physically assert himself, was not doing so, and was instead choosing to pace around the room, his robes rustling behind him, all the while locked in a verbal spar with the General.

“What I see here, General, is them going well over their heads to steal a ship,” he was now saying, whatever had lead to those words lost to her. “Considering how much pride you take in your weaponry, one would think you more than capable of stopping them.”

“I was forced to run a full system restart while your Knights’ happy attempt at blowing up the main hangar just about managed to set fire to the rest of my ship,” Hux retorted, eyes gleaming with anger. “Care to explain the reason for the failure of your Force abilities when dealing with the rather large rat presently crawling around the Finalizer’s conduits?”

Ren’s response was silenced by a loud metallic screech. Her attention flying back to the tugs, Rey felt like cringing at the way the red one to her left was trying to dock with the warship, its central axis rotating, the approach angle completely wrong.

That won’t work!

It hit the fuselage, colliding violently against it and then, with something akin to an electric explosion, slid back, crushing one of the many circular devices that ran in a large square matrix across the
Finalizer’s hull. In a second, Hux had materialized at her side, eyes hardening at the ripples going through the suddenly visible shields. He raised his wrist, speaking into a communicator.

“Captain Peyton, have the TIEs repeat my previous warning about the shield distributors to the tugs. I want what’s left of my ship intact.”

The tug was trying to dock again, approaching the warship at the exact same angle that had made it crash into it the first time, only at a much faster pace. Rey grimaced as it once again hit the fuselage. This time the screeching echoed throughout the warship, filling the briefing room with a loud high pitched shriek.

“Captain, make it clear that one more failed landing will result in the ship being used for target practice.”

A long line of cannons turned immediately, clearly making the tug into a target. The smaller ship stopped moving, fearfully floating under the section of hull it was trying to dock with until a TIE patrol appeared. Hux waited until the exchange was over to turn his back on the window. As if reacting to that, the cannons turned outwards again, now seemingly uninterested in the tug. Even so it was obvious that had been no idle threat. Rey could see it in the General’s eyes. He meant it. He would fire.

I preferred Poe’s Hux.

Remembering the pilot’s jokes about the Order’s General was one of those things that would always make her laugh. She had never met someone with the nerve to do something like that. There wasn’t anybody on Jakku that would even think of mocking Unkar Plutt, no one that would dare utter a word against his trade prices and constant meddling with payments, much less go around pretending to be him so publicly and in such mocking tones. In Jakku, the one who held food held power and Plutt had known quite well how to use both the very real danger of starvation and brute force to keep everyone toeing the line. The furthest anyone had gone whilst rebelling against him was by calling him The Blobfish and, well, she had probably completely lost her mind and good sense with BB8, but other than that people kept their heads down.

Despite that, she had to admit that whilst laughing at Poe’s performance, she had been imagining his General Hux as looking like a human version of Unkar Plutt. Laughing at him had been cathartic in a way that knowing Plutt was dead, seeing him dead, hadn’t been. It had made her see how profoundly ridiculous the junk boss had been. It had taken a huge weight off her. But at the same time it couldn’t have put her farther away from the truth. There was nothing, not even the slightest trace of Unkar Plutt, in the General. He didn’t look anything like what she had imagined.

And who does?

Rey rolled her eyes at that. She probably should have stopped trying to give faces to people after the ‘creature in a mask’ fiasco with Ren. She had been so sure that the provocation would throw him off balance, that there was something under that helmet he didn’t wish to show, that he was hiding something. Well, she had been right. He sure as hell was hiding something, just not what she thought he was and, instead of throwing him off balance, she had ended up doing that to herself.

Genius, Rey.

At least the General wasn’t exactly a shock. She hadn’t truly been expecting him to look like Unkar Plutt or act like Poe had said. It was more a question of demeanor. She had expected some snarling, spitting zealot, someone visibly insane and, well, if he was any of those things, he certainly didn’t show it. He didn’t show it at all.
A soft knock on the door, followed by rapid footsteps going down the stairs made all of them turn to face the same tall blonde woman both she and Ren had come face to face with upon arrival.

“The hangar is secure, Sir,” she announced, approaching the table with long strides. “The soldiers are presently trying to ascertain how the Knight was able to disappear from the hangar, but given the level of destruction on the inside I fear we will have little to no success.”

Hux gave her a slight nod, signaling one of the chairs to his right with one hand as he did so. With a quick glance in Rey’s direction, the woman followed his instructions. Even so she didn’t sit, choosing to stand behind the chair, eyes going up and down Cloud City’s holographic blueprints in the center of the tactical table.

“How did you find DCF-98, Sir?” she asked, turning towards Ren as the display zoomed in, showing the city’s ground level.

“Not to my satisfaction, Captain.”

And just like that Rey was back at Finn, at being worried for his safety, at feeling increasingly angry. There wasn’t anything she wished more than to run out of the briefing room door that very moment, grab a TIE or a shuttle or anything that could take her back, and yet, here she was, listening to the three people behind her as they talked, unable to do anything, stuck on the Finalizer, having to wait until the tugs took it to lightspeed and, as unfair as it was, suddenly becoming furious with Luke Skywalker.

This isn’t his fault, a calmer part of her tried to remind her. He has nothing to do with this.

She didn’t care. Her temper was boiling and, at the moment, Ach-Too, Master Luke, and his so called ‘instruction’ were the only things she could see clearly. Meditation. That was all he had ever made her do, the only thing he had ever shown an interest in teaching her, and what was that good for? Now that she needed something to rely on, now that she needed the Force, she had nothing, she knew nothing besides sitting and meditating.

And what does that even help me with?! Nothing. The answer was nothing. Absolutely nothing.

I could have learned that alone!

Fists trembling, Rey made herself face the reflections of the three people behind her in the viewport, their voices coming slowly back into focus as she attempted to calm down.

“The Finalizer can provide suppressive fire upon arrival, but you will have to make do without orbital support once on the ground, Captain.” The General was saying, his expression deeply pensive. He was the only one of the group who had chosen to sit. “And with less than that once it’s docked for repairs.”

“Any suggestions, Sir?”

“First stage should guarantee control over the dock, military headquarters, and as many of the anti-aircraft batteries as possible. Regaining control over the sky is essential.”

The Captain’s large blue eyes were going over a series of blinking red dots on the hologram, her expression showing little more than mild interest even as she again spoke.

“With the situation the Commander described and this layout we will be facing an attrition war,” she
pointed out, seemingly unfazed by such a proposition. “It will take weeks.”

“There are tunnels,” Ren informed her, stopping his pacing long enough to look at the hologram.
“The Governor is sufficiently cooperative.”

The Captain frowned slightly, giving Ren a short nod and again turning to Hux.
“I will manage, Sir.”

“About the Resistance headquarters—”

Rey turned her attention away from them again, vaguely conscious of Hux’s voice as she focused on the sea of clouds breaking the planet’s green.

_The minute we return, the Resistance forces in Cloud City will be slaughtered._ If it wasn’t for Finn, she would be wishing beyond all hope that the tugs would prove incapable of taking the _Finalizer_ to Cloud City, that the Order would have to abandon ship and crawl to whatever hole it had come out of, defeated. Instead she was left feeling torn. _There is no winning this._

If she could at least know he was alright...

Rey looked at her own reflection, fingers softly knocking on the glass as she thought, eyes set on the black visor covering her face. Finally, she took a deep, steadying breath and closed her eyes, focusing on the Force.

Immediately, the _Finalizer_ lit up around her, hundreds of presences coming together to form what seemed to be a huge star. Slowly, hitting mental walls all the way, Rey was able to make sense of them, turning the huge mass into individual lights as she tried to get the Force to answer her needs. She could ‘see’ the three people behind her, sense the strange way in which one of them stood apart from the others, the way the Force flowed around him, before she forced herself to look away from them and then further. She could sense the _Finalizer_’s crew around her, and then the people inside the tugs. She could sense—

She shivered, feeling something empty coming her way—or maybe it was she that was going its way, she had no way of knowing—and almost snapped her eyes open in shock at how that felt.

_It’s pulsing, I can feel it pulsing._

It felt wrong, a slit of nothingness the Force couldn’t touch. It was like a void. Like—

_Death._

She wanted to run, to get away from it as quickly as possible, and then she remembered Finn. She had to find Finn.

_How?_

The individual presences around her were becoming clearer the longer she focused. If she could sense them that clearly, there had to be a way to find him.

_I need a path._

And she felt there were paths, they were all around her, waiting to take her further than that system, towards the distant echoes of life, towards the stars. If she only could reach them…

_There has to be a way._
Her mind was tripping over everything as she tried to find it. Nevertheless, sometimes she could swear some of the distant lights were coming closer, but the instant she tried to listen they disappeared.

*And there are billions.*

She felt like panicking at that.

*I don’t even know where to look.*

Even so, she tried, reaching out even if that meant stumbling all the way and getting the same results time and time again. Silence and more silence. She couldn’t find Finn. She couldn’t go further than this system.

*I don’t even know if it's possible.*

Rey opened her eyes, unwilling to accept defeat but defeated all the same.

Around her, the lights were out. The room quiet.

*They left.*

How long had it been? How long had she been lost in the Force? She looked down. The green planet was no longer visible from the window; there was nothing in front of her other than the deep emptiness of space.

*We're moving.*

Rey took off the helmet, pulling the lose strands of hair away from her face as she looked around for the red tug and found it safely docked to the warship. It was a small comfort, even if not the one she had been looking for.

“You are upset.”

The voice came from behind her, making her turn sharply, one hand on her staff, vision fixing onto the dark figure of Ren. He had turned the closest chair towards her and, judging by his position—leaning forwards, arms resting on his legs, the lightsaber hilt being distractedly turned over in his hands—the answer to her question about how long she had been focusing on the Force was hours. She had been lost in the Force for hours.

Her eyes set on the helmet’s silver inlay. He wasn’t looking her way, attention fixed on the cross-shaped hilt as it turned. Even so, she felt she had seen this all before. This was disturbingly like that time at Starkiller, waking up to find she wasn’t alone, that for some strange reason he had chosen to stay there and—

*What the hell has he been doing this entire time?!*

Actually, Rey didn’t care. She was turning to leave, mind set on getting to the door and then beyond it, to put as much distance as she could between herself and Ren, to get away from him even if he—and her anger at him—was the only distraction she had from being worried sick over Finn.

“I must admit your loyalty towards people you barely know is admirable.”

Rey kept walking, intent on ignoring him, only to find herself stopping at his next words.

“You will be happy to know FN-2187 is alive.”
Rey didn’t turn, but neither did she leave, simply standing there unable to decide on what to do as he once again spoke.

“You believe I’m lying to spare you an unpleasant truth?”

Rey turned to him at that, finding the deep darkness hiding his eyes now on her and staring defiantly into it. His head tilted at that, lightsaber turning. Always turning.

“Rest assured that I have neither intention nor desire to see any harm come to him.”

Ren’s voice was becoming more distant the longer he spoke, echoing as if it had to cross a huge distance to get to her, and, out of nowhere, it was snowing. Snowflakes were falling at a steady pace between her and him, covering the Finalizer’s dark floor. It took Rey a moment to understand where she was, that she was back in Starkiller’s dead, frozen forest, anger exploding from inside her as she turned, sending her attacker’s weapon flying halfway across the battlefield, left fist raising to hit—

Finn!

It was Finn.

And she was the one with the lightsaber, she was the one attacking him, she was ripping his back open—it was happening again. She was Ren. She was Ren and his voice was all around her, echoing in the dead forest as she sent Finn crashing into the frozen floor.

“I had several opportunities to kill FN-2187,” he said as Finn lay, unmoving, at her feet. “If I wished him dead, he would be.”

And at that, it all disappeared. Rey was back in the dark briefing room, unable to come up with a satisfying answer as to what had happened, all the while trying to convince herself she hadn’t just almost killed her friend, that he was alright, that he had been alright after—

Ren’s voice broke the silence, an edge, that same darkness from before, an emotion she could not name, filling his voice.

“What did he do to earn this much devotion?”

Rey’s expression hardened, eyes becoming harsher the longer she looked at Ren.

“That’s none of your business.”

Rey could have sworn she felt his gaze bore into her eyes at those words. Immediately, instinctively, she dove inwards, preparing to defend herself from his probing, swearing she would pull her lightsaber on him if he even dared approach her mind, but it never came. She knew by his next words what he must be doing and yet she could not find him, she could not sense him, that distinctive presence she had once felt in her mind wasn’t there. She knew he had to be somewhere, only—he wasn’t.

“He came back.”

Rey could hear it, even with the distorter completely warping his voice. He was talking like he understood and she hated him for that. She hated him for the deceit. For the lie.

“I don’t know how you did that,” Rey practically growled, not taking her eyes away from the dark mask. “But you will get out of my head. Now.”
Silence. Then, dropping his eyes, Ren lifted one hand to his helmet, placing it in such a way that, for a moment, she thought he was removing the odious thing. Instead, he pressed something on the inside and his voice changed.

“Can you sense it?” he inquired, and it was his true voice, that calm, rich tone. “It’s pulsing, twisting, pulling against the Force as it tries to fight it.” He contemplated the lightsaber for an instant. “An emptiness.”

Rey looked back instinctively, towards the place she knew were that void, that thing she had felt earlier, was and then back at Ren.

“You can sense it.” He stood up, walking towards the window as he spoke. “It’s called a rift. It’s a wound in the Force. It’s a common find at battlefields or at any place that has experienced a high number of deaths or prolonged suffering.” A pause and then on a quieter note: “This one will heal.”

“This one?”

Rey snapped her mouth shut. She didn’t need to encourage him.

“There are several well documented rifts in the galaxy,” Ren answered, falling into a military stance as he looked to the stars. “Some of them have been festering for millennia. Others are as recent as this war. Many more, on account of who created them, you won’t hear anyone acknowledge.”

The ‘why?’ was on the tip of her tongue. This time, however, Rey managed to remain silent, to look the other way, all the while wishing she could slap some sense into herself and stop paying attention.

“Death causes rifts. You can find their echoes in the Force; they survive long after the memory of life does. They survive even after the rift which created them is healed.”

He turned his head to her at that.

“Earlier you tried to reach out through the Force in search of a presence, a flame amongst billions. With appropriate training, it is indeed possible. I find, however, that it’s easier to listen for the moment the flame is extinguished.” There must have been something in her expression, for his voice turned softer. “I said easier, not comforting.” His head tilted as he studied her. “You still don’t believe me.”

“Why should I? You don’t care about Finn.”

“You’re right,” he conceded. “For him, I don’t.”

“This plan of yours, then,” Rey retorted, coldly. “Figures.”

She kept her gaze on him despite that, trying to see passed the dark visor as too many questions started piling up in her mind and she was forced to push them down. They could wait. She wouldn’t ask him. It didn’t matter how much she wished to know the answers, she didn’t need him, she had—

“Skywalker,” Ren interrupted, sounding as if he had heard her thinking. “You found him? You—” He stopped, whatever had been building in his voice cresting with his next words. “You choose him.”

He sounded hurt.

“Did he agree to train you?”
Why the hell did he sound hurt?!

“Is mind reading suddenly failing you?”

Rey wanted to kick herself for saying that. She wanted to kick herself even harder when that provocation made him take a long step towards her and stare right into her eyes.

He was close. He was too damn close.

“Did he agree to train you?” he repeated softly, and Rey waited. She waited to sense his mental tendrils burst forward, she waited to throw him out of her mind, to make him taste his own medicine. She waited and waited until his next question made her feel like someone had taken the floor right out from under her. “How many times did he refuse?”

It all came crashing into her at that. Ach-Too. Master Luke. Her request. His words…

“What reason did he give that so deeply injured you?”

She should look away from him. She should leave. And yet…

“What made him change his mind?”

She was still here.

“Did he share his Jedi knowledge with you?”

A shiver went down her spine at that and, as if he had sensed her discomfort, Ren fell silent, breaking eye contact, stepping away, thinking.

“A Jedi…”

There was a strange note in his voice, something thoughtful, something that sounded suspiciously like doubt. Only, that doubt didn’t sound like it was his.

“Curious.”

Don’t take the bait.

Don’t take the bait, Rey.

“What’s curious?”

An alarm broke over them, a low deep ‘haruuuuuuuuu’ drawing her attention as a cool deep female voice started echoing outside the briefing room.

“All crew to their stations. Repeat. All crew to their stations. Prepare for lightspeed.”

Ren took his place next to the viewport again, attention set on the darkness.

“What’s curious?” Rey insisted, talking to his back.

“Do you wish to become a Jedi?” he inquired, not looking her way.

“Yes!”

She hadn’t hesitated. Her voice held nothing but hard set resolution, and yet the very thing she had been trying her hardest to push out of her mind was making itself known again.
It was all coming back.

Rey raised her eyes to find Kylo Ren looking at her, the same kind of pity that had been in his eyes on Starkiller present now, tinging his voice as the darkness behind him started to change, star trails turning into blinding light.

“Strange. It feels nothing like it.”

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- Luke is still around. Let's find out where.

Madame Windcage subsists entirely off of plotting and comments. Please help her out with the later.
Nymev Lake on Takodana was exactly like he remembered: the yellow-green light of the surrounding forest reflecting off the deeply blue surface until it looked as though it was made of silver.

Making his way down, the engine’s roar echoing all around him, Luke made the X-Wing drop from the sky, flying it parallel to the water and then turning it gently so that the place where Maz Kanata’s castle had stood came into view.

He had known from the beginning nothing would be here, but the absence of the tall sturdy fortress and the ruins that had taken its place were still a sad sight to behold. That fortress had stood for millennia. It was a piece of history, of so much that had been lost, and now there was nothing but a pile of rocks.

One more fading memory.

The X-Wing landed, sending the yellow leaves that had started to cover the ruins flying everywhere. Jumping out of the ship, feet landing between loose debris, Luke looked around, expecting something, anything, to acknowledge his presence. Instead, he was left standing all alone, softly hitting a chord in the Force, making it tremble in a discreet calling.

He wasn’t expecting Maz to be here, truth be told. She hadn’t survived as long as she had by being reckless, and staying in one place when she had so clearly been made a target by the Order would have been exactly that. He knew she would have left and gone into hiding the minute it was safe enough to step off of Takodana, but still Luke held onto the hope she would have left something that told a friend where to find her, anything that served as a clue.

Let me be right.

Stepping into the ruins, eyes going over the piles of bricks and fallen trees, rocks sliding under his feet as he walked, Luke found himself looking from the fortress ruins towards what he was sure had been the landing place for the Order’s ships. In his mind, he could almost see the troops advancing towards the fortress, the way it had been conquered. A swift attack: first destruction raining from the air, then a rapid conquest from the ground. It shouldn’t have taken more than a few minutes. Maz’s defenses hadn’t been made for something like that. They had no chance.

And yet…

Luke stopped, looking over the ruins until his attention was captured by a white clad corpse slumped in a position that seemed to indicate he had been hit with brutal force, a white baton lying a few meters away from him.

It was only stormtroopers that laid here, their corpses broken tools unworthy of even the slightest form of respect, all of them abandoned and forgotten.
Like they were garbage.

Luke crouched next to the fallen soldier, attention going over the broken armor at his torso and stopping at the helmet.

The stench was awful.

The silence, the anonymity of who laid in front of him, was worse.

“The battle has ended. Find your peace with the Force.”

The words felt empty with no one to hear them. That was a piece of comfort for the living, not one for the dead, and there was nobody here. There was probably no one anywhere that would have cared to listen, that cared for whoever this had been.

Do I care?

The answer eluded him. He knew he cared on an intellectual level, but that was his duty as a Jedi. Emotionally, however…

Luke looked into the dark visor, attention going over the same features he had been fighting since he was a young man.

The Code dictates detachment.

For detachment brought clarity; it enabled one to see the world and the Force without the filter of emotion and make the right choices.

Right choices…

Luke laughed at that, the sad mirthless sound that rose from his throat running a shiver up his own spine. Immediately, he was back on his feet, stepping away from the dead soldier, again on the hunt for something that might have been left as a message—a symbol in the stones, a strange rock formation, something discreet. Even something within the Force.

Luke stopped, one hand resting on the stone arch at the top of a steep slope he had just climbed, heart falling as the faded dark presence at his side gained a name.

Ben.

Luke looked around, overlooking the battlefield from under the broken stone arch like he was sure his nephew had done. This much destruction, the abandoned corpses, it shouldn’t surprise him. He had seen it all before. And yet…

This was you?

Why did it still shock him? Why was he once again caught by the same fog of disbelief that had set around him when he had returned to his ruined Academy? Why was this still so difficult to accept?

I know him to be more than capable of doing this.

And yet, it still pained him. It pained him to imagine what had become of his nephew after running the Academy itself through with his sword. It pained him even to think what destruction killing Han had unleashed over the thing, this monster Ben had become.

The part of him that was still that young man that had fought against the Empire lashed at him
furiously at that description, attention focusing on the faded presence at his side, almost dissecting it as he searched and searched, all the while thinking of Vader and the fading light inside of him. How that light, as weak as it was, had ended up saving them all.

And that pained him even more for, what he found, he knew from the start.

_Vader had light, yes_, Luke conceded internally, stepping away from the archway. _This creature doesn’t._

And that was what made it even more urgent that he found Maz. He needed to get to her. He needed her help to find Rey before this creature wearing Ben’s skin became aware of the same thing Luke had detected inside the girl and used it to his advantage.

_I can’t lose her._

If he did, if the galaxy lost Rey, this second chance the Force had given them—this second chance he had taken far too long to embrace—all would be lost.

He was running against time.

He was running against the Order.

He was running against Snoke.

Worst of all, he was running against Ben.

_He worries me the most._

And that was not helped by the way people were still—he had discovered—going around underestimating the man that was now the Master of the Knights of Ren. Even Rey, who Luke credited as being particularly observant, had fallen into that trap. She hadn’t seen _it_. She had talked to him, she had fought him, she had defeated him and yet, despite all that, she underestimated him. That scared him. It scared him to no end.

Silently, Luke climbed down the slope, his eyes going over an odd looking mark on the stone pile to his left and finding nothing of note. Finally, hope dying, he shook his head.

“Maz?”

He called this time not through the Force, but with his voice. Like before, there was no answer. Was it possible she hadn’t left anything behind? Not a droid, not a single clue as to her whereabouts?

_I need your help, Maz._

More than that, he needed her knowledge. He needed to know the details of what had been happening while he protected Ach-Too. The Force might have kept him informed of many things, but it still wasn’t enough to decide on a course of action. Not when the last thing he wished for was that the galaxy knew he had come out of hiding, not when he couldn’t risk contacting Leia out of fear that, if Rey wasn’t with her, he would end up putting his apprentice in far greater danger than even her awakening had landed her in.

_She’s a fighter, and was it not for that…_  

Was it not for that, and given how quickly Ben had zeroed in on her, Rey would either be dead or another within the Knight’s ranks. They had been lucky that, as far as he could conclude, Snoke had
apparently little to no respect for his apprentice's input and hadn’t listened to him. That he, like Luke, hadn’t been expecting a young woman, fully grown, to be at the epicenter of the awakening.

Luke found himself stopping at that thought, listening through the Force until he was once again able to sense Rey’s awakening. It was no more than an echo now. It had almost disappeared, but at the time it had spread through the Force like lightning. A child—that was what Luke had thought, what he was sure Snoke had thought—that it was a child coming into his or her power. He hadn’t expected to see, in a matter of hours, the *Falcon* coming his way and depositing Rey on Ach-Too, asking him for instruction.

It made no sense. No Force sensitive, much less one as gifted as Rey clearly was, would have his or her abilities dormant well into adulthood. It was unnatural, impossible. She should have been using the Force for years. She should have been tapping into it even if just unconsciously.

If ever there was a moment when Luke had wished Leia’s path had walked parallel to his, instead of straying as far away from the Force as it could, the moment when he first laid eyes on Rey would be it. He had been in desperate need of insight then, of someone to talk to and discuss what should be done. Rey’s age wasn’t a problem, but what he had felt inside of her was.

*I took her in out of fear.*

And yet, what did he really fear? Rey? Or his own failure? The failure that had made him lose so much already.

Luke went past a huge pile of black bricks, face frowning at what looked a lot like a flight of partially hidden stairs to his left. He approached it, carefully, moving a huge tree branch out of the way and, confirming his suspicions, stepped inside. There was something there calling for him.

“Maz?”

The room he stepped into, a basement by the looks of it, was strangely intact, little more than dust and some debris littering the floor. There were two adjoining rooms to his left, filled to the brim with piles of boxes, but little else. Now that he was inside, the corridor actually gave him a very bad feeling, but it was what lied, seemingly discarded, at the end of the corridor that truly captured his attention. The thing calling him—a box; an old wooden box lying on its side, lid broken.

*An empty box,* Luke concluded, picking it up off the floor and turning it in his hands. Knowing Maz, however, if one knew how to look—

Luke searched inside, the bad feeling only intensifying the longer he remained there. There was a staged feeling around him. Something that felt a lot like—

*A trap.*

Luke turned calmly, seeing two dark figures come down the stairs, a third one seemingly detaching itself from a wall he had gone past just moments before. He knew what they were in a glance.

*Knights.*

“Where is your Master?”

The three dark figures stopped in front of him and, for the second time, his voice, as emotionless as his expression now was, filled the room again.

“Where is your Master?”
None of them answered, instead choosing to approach him, circling him like vultures, moving in complete synchrony, long robes flapping around their feet, weapons drawn. Careful not to show them the lightsaber and reveal what he was—who he was—Luke concealed the box inside his robes, studying them, expecting them to make the first move.

_They will attack as one._

And as one, they did.

Luke dodged a falling sword, dancing away from the second assailant and rapidly maneuvering himself so that the three Knights were left together. Only then did he ignite the saber. It broke through the closest Knight's defenses before he could even move, cutting through the second and stabbed the third in the chest. It was fast, took no more than a few seconds, and yet it was not fast enough. Stepping back, Luke could feel as the last Knight returned to the Force, his last dying breath used to channel it, his death exploding like a bomb.

Going up the stairs, Luke, attention once again on the box, felt it go through him.

It was a warning.

A single word.

_Skywalker._

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- Let's see how Finn is holding up in Cloud City.

Comments are, as always, very much appreciated and enjoyed.

An aside -- Updates will now take place on Saturdays, give or take.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Stormtrooper - Day 18, Part 1

Finn was running, blaster fire crashing around him as he forced his way passed the Order’s barricades, shouting at the soldiers to fall back as he advanced. All around him, the street was rapidly flooding, water exploding out of a broken pipeline and filling the craters left in the wake of the heavy artillery fire, its unrelenting advance creeping dangerously close to the place where the communications vehicle laid, its rear end completely swallowed by the ground, soldiers still fleeing from the inside.

Throwing himself behind a carbonized civilian vehicle, Finn took a deep breath, attention going over the few meters of no man’s land separating him from his target and then flying over it, to the enemy and its already moving front lines.

*What am I doing? What do I think I’m doing?*

Clasping his blaster harder, Finn jumped out of hiding, a wave of relief washing over him when, almost at the same time, the unmistakable sound of the Order’s heavy artillery joined that of the blasters. A moment later, one of the vehicles comprising the enemy front lines was blasted out of formation, tumbling down the battlefield as the soldiers dove for cover, attention as far away from Finn and his sprinting across the open field as it could possibly be.

This was, nevertheless, an empty victory; nothing more than a ruse to gain time. Time that, judging by the way his feet were plummeting into water and the virtual sea now leaving the vehicle half flooded, was rapidly running out.

*Come on! Come on!*

He seemed to be moving too slowly no matter how fast he ran. Even when he had jumped inside the hole, crashing down through ripped metal panels and broken beams to find himself with water up to his waist, Finn didn’t feel he was going fast enough and that feeling was only made worse when he discovered the vehicles superior hatch had jammed.

“Are you kidding me?!”

Finn raised the blaster, firing against the hatch until it fell from the hinges and, twisting himself through the opening, he jumped inside. The interior, much like the exterior, was flooded, water rapidly raising around him. It wasn’t yet high enough, however, to have reached the electronic equipment or the corpse, still strapped to its chair, dangling some meters above his head.

*And now I’m promoting myself to communications*, Finn thought, throwing the blaster up towards the terminal’s lateral side and, his teeth clenched, pulling himself out of the cold water by holding onto the chairs and perching himself against one of them.

*Tell me this still works.*

Without hesitation, Finn pulled the helmet off of his head and grabbed hold of one of the headsets,
putting it closer to his right ear. The sounds of blaster fire and heavy artillery were coming ever closer as he turned the dials, waiting to hear something—anything—over the wire.

To say the Order’s situation was desperate didn’t even start to describe what was presently happening around him and even less what he feared was coming their way now that the advanced defensive line he had been commanding—the last thing keeping the enemy offensive from marching over to the barracks doorstep—had finally broken.

It had been—was it three days since the offensive had started? More? Having barely slept, Finn had completely lost any notion of time, the conflict dragging itself against his mind in such a way that it could have been going on for weeks. Rest, however, as hard as he had fought to impose it on the soldiers, was not something he could permit himself. As uncomfortable as he still was about his position in this madness, there was one thing he had come to accept: as a Knight, he was the highest ranking officer in the city. This was not a simple question of Kylo Ren having tossed the command in his direction. At this moment he was—as much as it disturbed him—the soldiers’ connection with high command, the only person keeping them fighting, giving them assurance there were indeed reinforcements coming, that the Finalizer and Hux were on their way—even if he himself was getting less and less sure about that with each passing moment.

As lost as he was about time, he knew one thing: the Finalizer should already have arrived. His tactics, his troops, everything Finn had put on the ground to make sure that this retreat looked anything but one told him as much. The few resources they had were strained well past their limit and the most optimistic assessments of the officers working with him—the same ones that had given him little more than a day before the defensive operation collapsed—had long been proven false. Even so, even having made them resist far longer than he himself believed possible, Finn knew that his tactics wouldn’t hold indefinitely, that this was borrowed time and that his battle to keep clear what he knew would be Hux’s preferred landing spots was getting closer and closer to being lost. He couldn’t keep pushing injured soldiers to the front lines, he couldn’t keep up with this level of causalities—he knew it was all hanging on the edge of a knife. He had known that long before he had starting catching himself looking up towards the sky waiting to see the Finalizer appear and almost praying that it would.

Praying for Phasma and Hux, Finn shook his head at that, almost crushing the headset against his ear trying to listen for someone on the other end. I’m going insane.

That, or he was desperate.

…

Okay, it was the second one.

Finn turned the radio signal full blast. The water was now pooling around his feet, soaking the heavy protective garment he was wearing as it kept going, creeping ever closer to the terminal. He needed to contact the rest of the Order’s troops. It was imperative he did. This blasted thing had to—

“Work!” he practically begged. “Come on!”

Finn punched the terminal and, to his surprise, the same instant he did voices started appearing on the headset. In his relief, Finn found himself rolling his eyes.

Next time, I will punch first, ask later.

“Issue order 27,” he said, in response to the crackling voices inquiries, the rising water making him throw protocol out the window. “Repeat: issue order 27. Fall back and regro—”
The terminal gave a menacing electric moan as the water hit it, making Finn rapidly release the headset as it short-circuited.

“No...”

No-no-no-NO! Not this! Not when… It couldn’t have stopped working!

*I need to get them out!* If the troops got stranded—!

Finn took to the dials again, rotating them, waiting to see anything similar to power return to the radio. Around him, the air was getting heavy with humidity, the vehicle darker...

*Time to move*, a calm but strict voice that sounded remarkably like Phasma said inside his head.

Immediately, Finn turned his back on the terminal and looked up, attention going from the opening connecting the vehicle rear to the driver’s cabin and then around him, towards the open maintenance door left wide open right above him and the electronic devices blocking his path.

This was going to be a lot more difficult than he had anticipated.

Water now up to his chest, Finn threw the helmet up, succeeding in making it go passed the chair with the soldier and through the door. Then, he rose to his feet, grabbing the blaster he had thrown to the terminal’s lateral side upon entering and tried forcing the maintenance door to close with his shoulder. Several strong shoves later, he was able to squeeze himself between it and the chair with the dead soldier, and finally towards the light, to the driver’s cabin.

It took but one look up, towards the sky, to know things had taken a turn for the worse a lot faster than he had anticipated. There was blaster fire flying over the vehicle, yes, but only from the enemy side of the line. He could no longer hear the Order’s blas—

His torso half way through the door, arms supporting him, Finn frowned, blindly contemplating the cabin as he listened. No. He could hear them. That soft whistle–so low it would have gone unnoticed if he wasn’t so familiar with the Order’s weaponry–that was the sound of a high precision cannon from one of the prototype tanks preparing to fire. They hadn’t left. They were still here. He could hear them. He could also hear—

…

Was that…?

Finn was moving before he could be sure, jumping back inside the rear of the vehicle and onto the top of the closest terminal. He could be deathly wrong, but he could swear that—no. There it was again, it sounded like a cough. Like a—

It definitely wasn’t his imagination.

Finn looked down. The water was still creeping up, leaving a dark, menacing pit under him as it rapidly swallowed one of the soldier’s arms. Worse than that, however, was the way the approaching enemy offensive and heavy artillery was unbalancing the vehicle, making it sway dangerously, threatening to send it further down the pit were it had fallen.

It was too dangerous.

*I have to leave. Now.*
Instead, Finn found himself biting one of his gloves to pull it off, then reaching down, forcing his fingers under the soldier’s helmet and against his neck. It was cold, sticky with blood, but under that…

A pulse.

And now, even with the heavy artillery getting louder, the vehicle clearly sliding off the road, he was half hanging from the top of the terminal, his torso over the chair, trying to release the belt from around the soldier and less than happy with that effort.

“Great!”

He jumped inside the water, feet hitting the place where he knew the open maintenance door would be as he took the blunt blade out of this belt, trying to get whatever that was to work. The water was just under his shoulders, his uncovered face inches away from the one hidden by the stormtrooper's white helmet.

“Don’t you dare wake up.”

Of course, with his luck the soldier would. With his bloody bad luck, the soldier would wake up, recognize him and the whole thing would go even further into hell!

How does this freaking thing…?!

Finn was holding the weapon over his head, trying to keep it out of the water as it went passed his shoulders, and he pressed just about everything to get it to work. Then, in frustration, he hit the weapon against the chair. The same moment it connected, a large crack appeared from top to bottom. His face fell.

I'm so getting murdered by a Knight.

Either that or he would drown. Come to think of it, he could also get shot.

I'm a bloody optimist.

At least, the thing was on and the small burning blade, almost invisible on one side—and for which he could not think of any real use whatsoever—should be more than enough to cut the soldier out.

And it better do that fast.

A huge explosion echoed over him, sending Finn’s head plunging under water as the vehicle slipped down. Panicking for an instant, almost convinced that the vehicle had completely gone underwater, Finn kicked himself up, towards the light he could see over him. His head broke through the surface almost instantly, but he had to acknowledge the warning of impending doom for what it was.

I have to get out.

Finn pressed the burning blade against the belt, cutting through it and, letting the soldier fall limply to his shoulder, pulled them both out of the rising water, climbing towards the connection door separating the rear of the vehicle from the driver’s cabin. He had barely gotten there, the wound on his back throbbing mercilessly, when the vehicle slid back once more.

This time, however, it didn’t stop.

And now, Finn was running, grabbing his helmet and replacing it over his face while kicking the
door open, before tossing both himself and the stormtrooper out the door. The car groaned and slid, its motor the only thing visible above the water when it stopped. Finn’s problems, however, were just starting. He had escaped from drowning by diving in front of the enemy offensive, he could see blasters being aimed at him seconds before he was able to get himself and the soldier to cover behind what was left of the flooded vehicle.

*How do I put myself into these situations?*

Phasma would have a freaking full report on this if she could see him now. She would be pummeling him with it and–and, speaking of the Captain, where the hell was the *Finalizer*?

The same low whistle he had heard before, the sound of the high precision cannon, echoed around him, giving him little more than a few moments warning to lie on the ground before the air thundered, a huge explosion echoing behind him.

“Sir!”

Finn raised his head to see a white tank rushing in his direction, stormtroopers jumping out of it and firing as it stopped, wheels diving in the water, sending it flying everywhere.

*Where the hell did they get that tank?*

Actually, that wasn’t important. Finn was tossing the soldier onto his back and running, jumping inside the tank as the stormtroopers rapidly retreated from the battlefield and back inside the tank.

“Go!” the Sergeant shouted, punching the wall at his side as he entered and putting a new volley of blasts through the closing door, before turning to him and freezing. An instant later and much like Finn had, he was pressing his fingers to the soldier’s neck.

His stomach dropping as he let himself fall against the tank’s fuselage, sensing as it started hitting the abandoned barricades, dashing at high speed to rejoin the rest of the Order’s forces, Finn felt nothing more than a visceral need to kick himself. He had done it again. He was giving himself away. This was how his cover would be blown!

The Sergeant was now looking at him, signaling the many soldiers surrounding them, holding to the tank’s handles to take the soldier further inside.

“With all due respect, Sir,” he started, sounding awestruck. “You’re insane.”

Finn snorted at that, panic somewhat receding at those words.

*He doesn’t care what I do. He looked around to the soldiers. None of them do. Calm down.*

It was easier to order himself to do so than actually doing it.

*They know something isn’t right! You just gave them all the clues to—!*

“Was the retreat order acknowledged?” he inquired, silencing his internal panic while looking at his own hands and noticing he had lost one of his gloves to the water. Without hesitation he took the other off, letting it fall at his side as the Sergeant, still crouched at his side, answered.

“The signal collapsed before we could hear any confirmation.”

That were bad news.
Be dismissive.

“We will have confirmation upon regrouping. Any approaching lightspeed signatures?”

“None, Sir.”

Finn got to his feet, attention in the sky, searching for anything that showed that the **Finalizer** had arrived, expecting to see the warship’s A.A.L. or maybe its TIEs making their way down, hoping beyond hope that the exact same qualities—Force have mercy, he was calling them ‘qualities’—that had allowed the Order to spread like wildfire over the galaxy in such a short amount of time wouldn’t play against them here even when he was rather sure that they would, that this bottomless pit Cloud City was becoming was turning itself into his and the soldiers graves.

*That they aren’t coming...*

Finn took a deep breath, eyes on the darkening sky as he forced himself to calm down. He couldn’t know that. The Order’s top branch was an explosive mixture of very dangerous and, at least according to canteen gossip, not entirely compatible ingredients that frequently mixed in very unpredictable ways. There was no way of knowing what they, as a group, would decide; if they would even work together or if Hux alone would be calling the shots. Considering that the General was one of those intellectual types—like General Organa herself, now that he thought about it—Finn found it impossible to say. He feared what, if left alone, Hux might have decided after hearing what was going on in Cloud City. It was about as probable the General’s calculations had made him decide to retake the city as it was that he had put the **Finalizer** on route back to headquarters.

*Tell me, he didn’t go for that second option.*

If he had, they were already dead.

*We need more time.*

*What for? To prolong the agony?*

Finn shook his head at that. Trying to assure that side of himself that was dead set on believing they had been left to fend for themselves that it was wrong, that they would come—that Kylo Ren, at least, had clearly intended to come back—least fear started trying to grab hold of him.

*They will not come from over us,* he reminded himself, still looking to the sky. *Approach will be done from the dock side, flying under the radars. Nobody will know they are here before they touchdown.*

He needed more time.

Finn frowned, looking at the streets rapidly going by as the tank kept speeding along, several vehicles dashing by their side. The words hung over him, making his thoughts race as a trail of smoke flew past them, hitting a section of the street in front of them and forcing the vehicles to swerve to avoid a new crater.

“What are the side street statuses, Sergeant?” Finn inquired, following the smoke trails left by what he knew to be enemy heavy artillery with his eyes. Low caliber, those were definitely low caliber. “Do we have control over them?”

“Indeed, Sir.”

“Break the group. The more mobile units are coming with us. We will approach the hostiles from
behind. Everyone else is to act as bait and retreat to the barracks,” Finn ordered, grabbing hold of the vehicle’s handles as, only seconds after the Sergeant repeated his orders, he feel the wheels turn under them, six of the vehicles doing a full 90 degree turn and entering a half destroyed side street.

The Sergeant put his blaster in his other hand, his injured arm obviously still not healed enough to hold against such force, and forced his way through row after row of soldiers to access the rear of the vehicle and look outside. The tank had turned again before what he had expected to see came into view.

“You believe their offensive has separated?” he inquired, making his way again towards Finn, as the soldiers swayed around him.

“We were being targeted by low caliber weaponry only, Sergeant. I’m rather sure it did.”

“You orders?”

“Approach from behind, trap them between oursels and the troops at the barracks.”

“Yes, Sir.”

Finn bit his lips as the officer turned to the soldiers, thinking. He needed to buy as much time as possible. There had to be a way.

“Sergeant.” The other man turned, half way into addressing his men. “I want their vehicles.”

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- The Stormtrooper, part two.

Leave something in the box down there, s'il vous plaît.
The Stormtrooper

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Stormtrooper - Day 18, Part 2

“I’m too old for this,” Calrissian complained, words rising above the sounds of blasters, motors and heavy vehicles being maneuvered around the barracks as Finn ran up the flight of stairs leading to the building’s main entrance, the cold from his still drenched clothes freezing him to the bones. “Much too old.”

Attention breaking away from the Sergeant’s tank now speeding out of the barrack’s front courtyard and disappearing down the street leading to the docks, Finn took a quick glance towards the four defensive cannons perched on top of the barrack’s roof. The sense of victory—one that he knew from the start would be short lived—dissipated the moment he turned to face the Governor.

It was written on his face that something had gone wrong—but, then again, what hadn’t?

Finn’s idea of crushing the enemy's front line between his group and the defensive positions at the barracks had been, he admitted, a success, but apart from that there was little that had gone their way. In their haste to kill them, the rebels made the poor tactical decision of hunting an Order battalion like it was easy prey. Finn could have given them a full dissertation on why that was a deathly mistake in all circumstances, but the rebel offensive had given no other ground. Of the four defensive lines Finn had risked his life to contact, only one had been able to fall back to the barracks. The rest were either stranded or had already been killed, all troops lost alongside their equipment.

He had known from the beginning that time, odds, and everything else were stacked against them, but if the rebel command was holding off its attack until it had disposed of whatever was left of Finn’s lost defensive lines, then they wouldn’t even be given the honor of a battle. They would be facing a slaughter.

We don’t stand a chance.

And judging from Lando Calrissian’s expression, the Governor had probably gotten his hands on some piece of information that made the situation even worse than it already was. The man looked not only disturbed, but worried, afraid, and—

Why, why was he three strides away from an active battlefield?

“I asked you to remain inside, Governor,” Finn pointed out, voice urgent, stepping closer to the man and forcing him to reenter the building’s white atrium. He was not having Lando Calrissian stepping into the shoes of General Organa and taking on the star role in the ‘our base is going to hell but I’m still here’ play.

A soldier came sprinting down the large flight of stairs to their left, navigating through row after row of soldiers, before giving Finn a rapid salute that looked completely lopsided until he noticed the woman was raising her left arm due to the fact that her right one was in a sling.

“The last anti-aircraft positions are lost, Sir,” she informed him, soldiers going passed them as she did. “First reports indicate that the troops weren’t able to either disable or destroy the cannons. They
are targeting the remaining TIEs.”

“Get the stormtrooper squads here, quickly. Any lightspeed signatures?”

“None, Sir.”

Finn closed his eyes, feeling as if the floor was falling out from under him. They weren’t coming, then. Or if they were, they would arrive far too late to be of any help.

“Transfer all the injured and medical equipment to the tunnels under the barracks,” Finn ordered, attention falling on the two soldiers transporting a third on a stretcher and moving towards one of the buildings wards. “Get them out of the way.”

“Yes sir.”

The soldier sprinted back up the stairs, leaving Finn to take Lando Calrissian through a virtual sea of injured soldiers doing their best to get blasters, solid ammunition, armor and a large array of handheld weaponry ready for the rest of the troops to take into battle. Without a second glance, Finn took one of the spare black uniforms being divided up by one of the groups and moved to a small darkened room—what looked to be an office, with most of its furniture made of glass—locking the door behind himself and the Governor.

“What happened?” he asked, tossing the Knight’s soaked uniform and helmet towards the large glass desk and jumping inside the uniform with such agility he felt his stomach fall a moment later. He was doing it again. He was acting like a stormtrooper.

Finn looked up towards the white door, almost afraid of what he would see on Calrissian’s face. But, instead of alarm or suspicion, Finn found the two dark eyes locked on his face, worry replaced with what he could only describe as sadness—sadness and pity. It confounded him to no end.

What?

“Is there a problem, Governor?”

“You’re young,” Calrissian blurted out, before a look of exasperation overtook his face as what he’d said registered. His voice became harsher. “There is indeed a problem.”

Taking the heavy protective garment from the pile of clothes—the only piece of Nephys’ attire that seemed to be made of a kind of waterproof fabric—Finn tossed it over himself, following the Governor with his eyes as he settled into the padded black chair on the other side of the table.

“A problem?” he repeated, biting his tongue just in time to stop himself from bursting out laughing at Calrissian’s employment of the singular. *Force have mercy, I’m far too tired for this. What is it?*

Urgent knocking at the door interrupted him, making Finn shove the dark helmet over his head and run to open it. The battered pattern of the stormtrooper’s armor distinguished him as the same Sergeant he’d mistaken for Slip in the Atrium. More importantly, however, he was the same Sergeant Finn had seen making his way towards the docks in a tank only a few minutes prior.

*Oh, that’s not good.*

He jumped inside, closing the door with such urgency even Calrissian got to his feet.

*Tell me we haven’t lost the dock,* Finn found himself silently praying. *Please tell me we haven’t lost the dock.*
The Sergeant turned to him, pulling his helmet off as he did so. He didn’t need to say anything. His dark expression was enough.

They had lost the dock.

“We are surrounded,” Finn concluded, seeing him make an affirmative gesture with his head. “Do we have any status on the troops?”

“No. It is possible a small contingent was able to get inside, but we have no confirmation,” he informed him, one hand raking through his extremely short hair as he spoke. “More importantly, Sir, the enemy offensive is making its way towards us. We’re vastly outnumbered. Our troops won’t—”

A sudden rise in the volume of the blaster fire outside made his dark brown eyes jump from Finn to the door, voice dropping while he did so.

“If the Commander wasn’t able to reach the Finalizer—”

“Ren reached the Finalizer, Sergeant,” Finn heard himself say, actually surprising himself with the level of certainty in his voice. “Rest assured he did.”

“This delay—”

Finn grabbed the Sergeant’s shoulder.

“They will come.”

It was a lie and, judging by the look on his face, one that the officer believed about as much as Finn, but...

*The truth won’t keep anyone fighting.*

Finn walked towards the door, marching side by side with the Sergeant and putting Nephy’s rifle on his back as he spoke.

“We must contact the troops at the docks, have them—”

A soft cough made both of them stop, attention jumping from the door to Calrissian.

“The enemy fleet took out the satellites feeding communications,” he informed them quietly, making Finn’s hand fall away from the door. “You can’t reach them.”

If Finn's stomach were twisted before, now it had dropped through the floor altogether, leaving him with a deeply unpleasant taste in his mouth.

“How do you know that?”

A sad, defeated smile was his only response, the words collapsing under a loud explosion that jolted both he and the stormtrooper to full combat readiness.

“Get yourself underground!” Finn shouted towards Calrissian before leaving the room.

They were running, joining the sea of soldiers making their way out of the barracks, seeing them grab the blasters as they went, many of them following officers as they went outside and then they too were in the front courtyard, going down the stairs, running towards the defensive lines.

Night had fallen over the city by now, a dark veil covering the sky and painting the white buildings
and wide streets with shadows. Their opponents might not yet be visible, but their shadows were
drawn under the street lights, stretching like fingers in their direction.

There was a whistle and then an explosion. In the same instant, one of the four defensive cannons on
the barrack’s roof was turned into a flaming torch. Without missing a beat, Finn signaled the soldiers
still inside the building, pointing up as he did so.

“Get a squad up there and put that—”

*Out*, he finished mentally, a second impact and then a deep moan leaving him able to do little more
than watch as the cannon fell, crashing into the courtyard while still aflame. That same instant,
blasters began firing from both sides of the battlefield, the shadows of heavy artillery appearing under
the street lights. Finn was running, getting himself to the tactical advantage point next to a line of
already firing tanks. He had just fallen behind one of the barricades, signaling the troops to take their
positions, when one of the tanks was blown up by enemy artillery.

“Target the anti-tank guns!”

There were projectiles raining over them now, hitting the ground and the walls, rolling in all
directions. They didn’t explode, however. Instead…

*Not these blasted things again!*

Dark grey smoke filled the battlefield, blinding them as it got thicker and thicker.

*They are forcing us to remain stationary.*

And, like that first time, when he and Rey encountered this scenario on their first day in Cloud City,
the enemy troops weren’t affected in the slightest by the poor sight conditions. They were advancing
all the same, relentless and deathly.

Finn was clenching his teeth as he punched the Order emblem affixed on the white tank at his side. If
the enemy was using this mess to gain terrain, they were also putting themselves into target range.

“Use the heat sensors!” Finn shouted at the soldiers inside the tank.

The tank’s main cannon turned. An instant later, it fired, making a huge tongue of fire rise from
somewhere between the fog. It was all it took. Now that Finn knew where they were, he could make
out figures in the fog. He had but to look at them, to their contours, to know that those weren’t
stormtroopers. Those soldiers weren’t with them.

At his side, the Sergeant took the lead instantly, voice rising well above the sounds of battle as he
gave his orders.

“Blast them out!”

A volley of blaster fire came from all around Finn, crashing into the approaching offensive, making it
scatter for cover as it did. To his right, he could hear the sounds of another confrontation, a closer
and more physical one. Putting his blaster on the ground, Finn took Nephys rifle-like weapon from
his back, pointing it in that direction as he adjusted the scope and then shot one-two-three-four times.

The weapon choked, making him dive behind the barricade, hitting the weapon’s firing mechanism
to try and get it to work again, fire now raining on him. The tank’s cannon turned again as Finn
forced the rifle’s chamber to open, pulling it out and then putting it back in place, only to discover the
trigger still stuck in position and—
A shadow. A deep dark shadow was now in front of him. His training kicking in, Finn started getting up, prepared to throw the rifle against this attacker only to have someone stop him, a heavy hand forcing him behind the barricades and inexplicably succeeding in doing so. A second figure, this one white, was going passed him now, throwing its blaster in a low ark and making it crash into the attacker’s ribs, before throwing it up, hitting him in the face and then twisting it to shoot the man point blank.

Finn could feel his jaw drop open as the Sergeant dove back to his side, holding his arm as the white protection plaques went red. Those moves—that had been specialized hand to hand combat from one of the Order’s advanced programs, not core training. Finn recognized it, trying to place the technique...

It hit him.

“You’re from riot control, Sergeant?”

“Indeed, Sir,” he answered, chuffed.

To think anyone would sound so happy that they were.

_I owe you one, Sergeant._

And he would never have the chance to repay it. Finn could hear confrontations around them getting closer and there was no way they could tip the scales in this situation. The only bright spot in this whole disaster was that, at least, Rey hadn’t stayed here. She hadn’t turned the TIE back as he knew she had intended to do, nor done something brave and foolish to get herself back here alone. He knew she could deal with Kylo Ren. She could leave this mess behind and get herself back to Luke Skywalker, to her training.

*She will do great.*

She would be great.

She would make a great Jedi.

*I would have liked to see that.*

But he wouldn’t. He wasn’t coming out of this alive. Nobody was.

Finn closed his eyes, hitting the rifle with the palm of his hand again. This time the inner mechanism snapped back in place.

*At least, I can go down fighting.*

It served as no comfort. He was dying here all the same. Side by side with the Order’s soldiers. Alone.

“What’s your identification?”

It took him a while to understand that that had been his voice, his question. It took him so long that only when the Sergeant turned to face him did Finn understand what he had asked.

“ID-2927,” he informed him, clearly out of breath.

And now, Finn couldn’t stop. He had to know. He had to hold on to this piece of sanity, of life, for as long as he could.
“What do they call you?” Finn inquired, signaling towards the closest officer as she shouted coordinates to the soldiers inside the captured enemy tank to their right and then dropped behind the closest barricade as it fired, jumping back a meter or so as it did.

The Sergeant was touching the bloodied bandages on his arm. He hesitated. He hesitated for so long with his answer that Finn’s mind actually started twisting itself around the many silly nicknames someone could fall victim to.

“It’s Fisher.”

Finn’s surprise must have been obvious, for the white helmet's visor moved away from the injury and back towards him.

“I received several reprimands during officer’s training for, as the Captain put it, ‘fishing’ my colleagues out of trouble. The nickname stuck.”

After a moment’s incredulity, Finn snorted.

*Between you and me, Sergeant, I’m surprised the Captain hasn’t resigned in exasperation.*

What was left of the still burning tank to their left moaned loudly, taking Finn’s humor down with it as it fell in on itself.

The *Finalizer* wasn’t coming.

Nobody was.

And he was so damn desperate for help that he was actually imagining the high shrieks of the TIEs echoing down Cloud City’s streets.

Finn looked towards the stars, knowing perfectly what he would see—*nothing*—only to find himself staring at a bright white light getting bigger and bigger while…

That wasn’t his imagination. That was—

“DOWN!”

The troops hit the ground seconds before the blast crashed into the enemy lines, wreaking havoc in their midst before it disappeared and a volley of blasts from up above took its place. Then lights, the sound of motors and the TIE’s shrieks began getting closer and closer.

*It can’t be!*

The lights flew over the barracks, then over them, their motors blowing the smoke away from the battlefield as they got lower and lower and then hit the ground, cutting the enemy’s access to the barracks, their underbellies opening to let out a massive wave of white.

Either he was hallucinating or—

“Nephys.”

A familiar voice. That voice held power. It pulled at him, making him jump to his feet and turn, a clear image of a silver platted stormtrooper filling his mind so completely that he could do little more than blink in confusion, mind going completely blank when his eyes came to rest not upon a silver visor, but on a woman’s large blue eyes.
He knew her, but not like this.

Finn found himself leaning against the barricade, an absurd wave of relief washing over him as he stared at her, simultaneously knowing exactly who she was and being completely unable to reconcile the image of the Captain who had trained him with the woman standing before him. It was lucky that exhaustion had so completely drained him of intelligent thought, for he would otherwise have given a thoughtless 'yes, Captain,' and that wouldn’t go unnoticed. With Phasma, nothing went unnoticed. Instead, he forced his eyes to go to her armor. It had been turned a grayish-red by fire, dust and darkness, but its once pristine silver color was still apparent.

“You’re Nephys,” she repeated, eyebrows forming a harsh, impatient line, and at that his mind snapped back into action.

“Yes.” Finn had to bite his tongue to stop the ‘Captain’ from getting out.

“Status.”

His voice and part of his mind seemed to have gone onto autopilot as he answered. He could hear himself talking, his report clear and to the point, but it didn’t sound like himself. He could see Fisher at his side and Phasma’s eyes studying the battlefield as she listened, hands adjusting the blaster scope, but he felt horribly detached, exhaustion draining whatever was left of his mental faculties and turning his body into an automaton, while he, Finn, was left simply observing the exchange.

Phasma was gone as quickly as she arrived, joining her soldiers and disappearing into the battlefield. And, stupidly, senselessly, Finn was able to do little more than stare wide eyed at her as she did, a sudden realization forcing him to fight with himself not to let out a piece of dangerous nonsense and alert her to his identity.

Even so, seeing her walk towards the troops, he couldn’t help but be curious—

Where was her helmet?

Chapter End Notes

It's always a Fisher saving the boys' butts, isn't it?

Next up -- The Strategist.
The Strategist - Day 18, Part 3

“The Captain’s offensive is on the ground, Sir,” Lieutenant Ferrar called out, one hand firmly closed around the tactical display’s frame as a series of external impacts rocked the Finalizer. “All enemy units are moving to intercept. Main assault is still en route to the city.”

“Redirect suppressive fire. Target all enemy heavy artillery moving towards—”

A piece of distorted metal—a burning, half destroyed enemy vessel—crashed into the bridge’s tower, interrupting his order with a violent shove that forced everyone on the inside to grab hold of the nearest consoles or risk being tossed to the floor. Bringing himself to his full height, Hux clenched his teeth, eyes going from the tactical display to the bridge’s viewport, taking in the live versions of the dozens of enemy vessels the screen to his left rendered as small blinking dots.

“Give me the readings on the cruiser weaponry and shields,” he ordered, stepping away from the tactical display and moving over to the bridge’s central platform with long strides. “Lieutenant Mitaka, prepare to fire at my command.”

Mitaka made an affirmative gesture with his head. His verbal acknowledgment, however, died before it left his lips, his face going deathly pale and dark eyes filling with terror as they found something seemingly hovering above the General’s left shoulder.

Hux closed his eyes at that, practically begging some unnamed deity for the mental fortitude needed to ignore who he knew was standing right behind him. He really, really had no time, patience or desire to deal with—

“General.”

Him.

“I swear,” Hux heard himself saying, anger flashing in his eyes as he turned to face Kylo Ren, “If you ‘forgot’ to mention this, Ren, I will—”

The Enforcer’s head tilted at his words, attention turning away from the vessels attacking them to him as several officers ran passed.

“If by ‘this,’ you mean the enemy fleet, General, I could hardly have missed it.”

“Your convenient bouts of memory loss have made you miss worse.”

“I admit, I’m touched by your concern. For the sake of specificity, General, when did this ‘amnesia’ of mine take place?”

“Might I remind you—”

Another more violent impact rocked the bridge, forcing Lieutenant Ferrar—who had been approaching them—to grab hold of Mitaka’s shoulder to avoid a face first introduction to the floor.
“Sir, the TIE offensive has broken through the enemy defense lines,” Ferrar informed him, giving his colleague an apologetic look as Mitaka straightened both his back and his fleet cap. “Readings show that the enemy cruiser’s shields are crumbling.”

“Lock on all main cannons and fire.”

Mitaka’s hands moved over the console’s commands, pressing them as Hux turned his attention towards the viewport. At the front of the triangular bow, four trails of white light began forming, the floor vibrating under his feet as they connected and burst up, flying across the battlefield and crashing into several small support ships before finally hitting the pale cruiser.

“Increase power to the cannons, Lieutenant.”

From the corner of his eyes, he could see Ren’s head turning slowly, observing as the energy trails slid, carving a burning path in the cruiser’s light grey fuselage and then thickening, a sequence of explosions ensuing all over the hull at the same time as a barrage of bright blue projectiles were unleashed from the enemy ship.

“All crew brace for high density impact,” a voice announced over the speakers, echoing in the bridge and down the Finalizer’s corridors as the proton torpedoes approached and the crew grabbed hold of the nearest supports. “Repeat—”

Hux turned again to Mitaka, finding the dark eyes settling on him in a clear inquiry.

“Full power, Lieutenant.”

The tremor under his feet became more prevalent, an almost imperceptible smirk touching Hux’s lips as, this time, the energy trails ripped right through the enemy cruiser, impaling it like a sword and practically cutting it in half as they moved.

*One less problem...*

A hiccuping sound broke through his thoughts, a soft shudder rising from deep inside the Finalizer, making his attention dart towards the dark, mirrored floor and then upwards again as the inbound torpedoes collided with the warship and the energy trails from the cannons collapsed.

Shoulders tensing, Hux stepped away from Mitaka’s console, almost crashing into Ren’s newly appointed babysitter as he did so. Their eyes crossing–Hux’s green ones getting increasingly annoyed at this uninvited overcrowding of his bridge as the ones hidden behind the helmet’s golden, squared inlay dropped away from him–he watched as the Knight took a careful step back, removing herself from his path without any sort of defiance.

*This one, at least, knows her place.*

He went past her, approaching the starboard side lower consoles as the readings on the displays spiked back up again.

“Status.”

“Sudden drop in power supply, Sir,” the head officer informed him, attention set on the readings on the various screens around him. “Requested engineering at the main reactor. First readings might indicate it’s unable to cope with the energy spikes demanded by high density impact.”

Hearing that was like swallowing an ice cube, his mind flashing back so suddenly to the reactor choking after the Knights sabotage that Hux had to shake his head to get himself back to the present.
“Redirect power from the secondary reactor to shields,” he ordered. “The cruiser?”

“Still operational, Sir.”

Impossible.

“That is an MC75 cruiser, General. It won’t go down that easily,” Ren commented from behind him, the tone with which he spoke making Hux rather sure he was dealing with some kind of relic from the last war. “The Captain?”

“Leading the ground offensive.” Where you should be. “There has been a change of plans.”

“So I have noticed,” Ren retorted, joining him as he walked over the bridge, his new Knight falling some steps behind them and looking to the warship’s instrumentation with what, even with the helmet hiding her features, was unmistakable curiosity. “What does this new plan entail?”

“Reconquering DCF-98 is now secondary to guaranteeing orbital control. The bulk of the ground offensive was moved to secure the docks,” he informed him. “The Captain is presently at the barracks commanding a smaller decoy group. A first evaluation of the enemy’s movements seems to indicate the hostile offensive fell for the distraction. They are moving to engage.”

Ren’s head turned in a slow hawk-like fashion as he turned from the exterior to face him.

“You are going for the TIEs.”

“Indeed. Something that, I might add, would be unnecessary if your Knights hadn’t all but wrecked the launching racks connected to storage.”

“Your complaints have been noted, General, and the problem will be solved. In the meanwhile, be grateful you still have a ship.”

Hux stopped in his tracks at that, cold fury making him set his gaze on the dark visor.

“If I had the slightest suspicion of you being involved in this sabotage, Ren, I would have ordered your ship shot down on arrival,” he hissed, voice going deathly quiet as a group of enemy fighters went passed the bridge, raining blasts against the windows. “In your place, I would be careful. There is little that would give me more pleasure than strapping you to a TIE and making you use your little light stick to engage enemy vessels.”

“Clearly a tactical masterpiece in the making;” Ren retorted, voice filled with a deeply cold but still humorous note that left Hux fighting his equally deep desire to push him out of an airlock. “And, considering the present situation, it might be the only plan left.”

Hux blinked at that, the sound of explosions and alarms going off on several of the bridge’s consoles coming back to focus alongside what sounded like...

He pursed his lips, rapidly getting his expression under control and, turning his back on bloody Kylo Ren and his bloody mind reading, giving his attention to an absolutely flustered officer running across the bridge and stopping next to them.

“The A.A.L.s from the main offensive are under attack, Sir;” he forced out, breathing hard and all the while trying to ignore the Knight he had stopped right besides, shivering when she set her attention on him. “Enemy anti-aircraft has shot down five of the transports. The rest are being forced to land.”
“How far away from the docks?”

The man swallowed hard, his expression giving Hux all the answer he needed, as yet another warning of incoming high density impact echoed around them.

“Turn the TIEs—”

The words died in his throat. The large signaling lamp had an even larger group of officers around it, making a sour taste fill his mouth at the implication that it was down. No communications.

“How far away from the docks?”

The man swallowed hard, his expression giving Hux all the answer he needed, as yet another warning of incoming high density impact echoed around them.

“Signal Special Forces to get back to the hangar. Have the A.A.L.s ready to launch. Lieutenant,” Mitaka raised his eyes to him. “Destroy that cruiser.”

“I need a window.

His eyes were on the display, going up and down the enemy positions, studying their ranks for weaknesses that could be exploited to open a path for the transports and get them to the dock. It all depended on that. If he was unable to get the pilots still inside the Finalizer to the city and then back here with the TIEs to initiate the third stage of operations, they were as good as dead.

“Tarkin squad was able to reach the hangar.”

“Raise the shields. Have the transports ready for launch.”

He needed a way, even the smallest of opportunities would do. He needed…

A pilot.

His eyebrows shot up, back straightening as clarity made his attention break away from the tactical
display and his eyes crashed into the dark visor hiding Ren’s.

No. I won’t ask him.

And that was more than pride talking. This behavior, this uncooperativeness, was typical of Ren. He had been forced to face it after capturing the Resistance pilot in Jakku. It had been the same with the map to Skywalker and it was the same now. Ren had known then and knew now that he was their only way out. He knew it and, instead of jumping to a ship, he was here—forcing them to go to him for help, to admit defeat.

I’m not begging.

The bridge was shaking around them, an alarm breaking as they remained motionless, facing each other.

You have as much to lose as me, Hux thought, eyes not moving an inch away from the visor as the lights flickering around them. No, you probably have more.

The female Knight was looking at them now, eyes gone from staring at the readings on one of the wall’s displays to staring at both of them.

She was little more than a slip of a girl—thin as a shadow and, although armed to the teeth, just as unimpressive. She wasn’t someone whom anyone would think of looking twice at and yet, for someone who couldn’t have looked any less like Phasma if she tried, it was incredible how much she was able to mirror both the Captain’s stance and what he knew would be her reaction to the present situation—incredulous exasperation.

This isn’t worth it, General, he could almost hear Phasma say, the clear voice rising from that slim, dark figure that so contrasted with her as he stared at Ren.

No, Captain, it is.

Because, he wouldn’t beg. He wouldn’t yield.

Ren could get himself out there of his own volition or die here.

With them.

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- The Scavenger

An aside -- Mme DD has heard from a credible authority that there is going to be a special bonus chapter written as a thank you when we hit 100 kudos. So, uh, smash that kudos button if you're interested in that sort of thing.
The Scavenger - Day 18, Part 4

“What makes you think I can pilot that?”

“You can’t?”

Instinctively dropping her head to avoid being hit by low flying TIEs going passed her, Rey forced herself to swallow her retort to that particularly well aimed shot at her pride. She clenched her teeth and moved her attention from the carrier she and Ren were approaching in favor of Ren’s masked face, all the while aware of the TIEs high-pitched shrieks echoing in the overcrowded hangar.

“I’m better with TIEs,” she pointed out to him, only to be meet with silence. “Well?”

“I don’t trust you not to break formation and dive to the city in search of FN-2187.”

“His name is Finn,” Rey corrected, irritably, all the while feeling the warship shudder under her feet. “And I’m not going to do that.”

Ren, who until now had been marching down the hangar with such long strides that she was nearly jogging to keep up, stopped. His head turned, then tilted so that the dark visor could face the one hiding her eyes.

“You aren’t?” he queried, the second word so heavy with meaning that, for once, she was the first to break eye contact. “Really?”

Rey crossed her arms, eyes going over the straight lines and sharp angles of the transport and then following the steady stream of pilots getting inside it. So maybe getting to Finn and making sure he was alive was exactly what she intended to do. That, however, wasn't the point.

“I’m far more useful in a fighter than in that thing,” she continued, insistent, watching as Ren’s attention followed her gestures towards the transport. “You know it and so do I.”

He seemed to ponder her words for a moment, attention actually turning towards the line of TIEs on the opposite side of the hangar as he did. Then, as suddenly as he had stopped, he was on the move again, turning away from her without so much as a word.

“Well?” Rey said, running after him only to stop a few steps from catching up, her expression going from hopeful to annoyed as she stared at Ren’s retreating back.

What was she doing running after him? What the hell did she think she was doing? Five freaking days and this Knight thing was already going to her head!

To hell with this.

Expression now resolute, Rey turned her back on Ren, attention focusing on the first ship in the line of TIEs on the other side of the hangar as she started walking towards them.
The hangar she was presently in was situated on the Star Destroyer’s bridge tower. Infinitely smaller than the gigantic main hangar and with red and black flags hanging from the grayish-white walls, it seemed to have served as a private hangar of sorts until the destruction of the main one had forced the crew to make ends meet with it. Overall, the place was in a sort of controlled disarray. The ships that had previously been there—all of them ones she had never seen before, with the exception of a black command shuttle which she thought might belong to Hux—had been pushed against the walls to open up space for the pilots, technical teams, TIEs and the carrier Ren wanted her to pilot.

Having been present in what was left of the main hangar during the Finalizer’s lightspeed approach to Bespin—both she and Ren had been meant to accompany the Captain’s offensive, but had instead ended up jumping out of the transports and getting themselves to the bridge at the last possible minute—Rey had witnessed the controlled chaos the “all crew to their battle stations” alarm had unleashed over the warship and the tension it had generated in its wake. For that reason, at this moment, she was able to see—on top of sense—that what was going on around her was not the same trained, professional atmosphere that had reigned on the warship at that time. There was an underlying thread of suppressed fear that hadn’t been present in the warship then and that now was rapidly becoming prevalent, growing with every external impact, threatening to break free every time a low moan echoed down the Finalizer’s corridors, causing all movement to cease for an instant, subsiding under something else, a feeling of “we have been through worse” that was—admirable as it was—quite foolish, in her opinion. If Rey had ever trusted someone as much as the crew of this ship trusted its commanding officer, she had long forgotten it. This level of confidence, this kind of unwavering devotion that on the bridge had been prevalent to the point of feeling suffocating, wasn’t something she was able to understand.

It isn’t something I wish to understand.

For even if all of these people, every single one of them from the soldiers to the officers, had that something which she lacked, they felt it with an intensity that terrified her. It was more than loyalty, more than trust. It was, she feared, that sense of belonging Maz had talked about and if that was the case…

Her steps lost their spring as she found herself going ever slower and finally stopping, eyes going from the line of TIEs to her reflection in the mirrored floor, the ship trembling all around her as she stared back at the dark helmet.

I will never be able to find it.

Maz had told her that what she sought was ahead of her, but as much as she wished for it to be true, as sure as she had been about who Maz was referencing, the reality was that Luke Skywalker—as kind and wise as he was—belonged to the Force, to the Jedi and their knowledge. The connection she had hoped to find with him, that she had been so sure she would feel the second she found him, was nothing like the one she found. He was a Jedi Master and, as much as she admired him, he was her teacher, not the family she had hoped to find, and the reality was that if not him then there was no one—not anymore. Maz had been wrong. There was no one in her future waiting for her.

A groan echoed from the walls, snapping her out of her very ill-timed reverie. A low metallic shriek was her only warning before the Finalizer jerked so violently there was no way she could keep herself grounded without something to hold onto. The tremor went through her, shoving her from side to side as the hangar moved, technicians and pilots grabbing hold of the closest supports and the claws keeping the ships immobile moaning from the strain. She was falling, the ground getting closer…

And then the Force wrapped around her, pulling her back to her feet and into a large hand that closed
around her shoulder keeping her steady. A moment of deep gratitude filled her, before the dark presence—his presence—filled her mind. She pulled away from him the very same instant the hand let go of her shoulder.

“I don’t need help,” Rey said, as calmly as she could, eyes glaring into the dark visor. “I had it under control.”

“If by control you mean an impromptu meeting with the floor, I have no doubts you did.”

“That was not what I meant!”

The warship shuddered, Ren’s head swiveling as sharply as a bird of prey as he took the situation in.

“Come.”

Rey turned instead towards the TIEs, only to hear a very frustrated “we have no time for this” coming from behind her. She turned back to face him.

“You have other pilots,” she pointed out to him.

“I need a capable pilot.”

She was having none of this.

“I’m going to help Finn, not taking part in your ongoing row with the General,” she retorted, the memory of turning away from the shield’s readings to find the man in front of her and General Hux locked in the most ill timed stare down ever rising to the forefront of her mind, fueling her anger at both—yes, both—of them. There was a bloody battle going on! What—what!—had they think they were doing?!

They will get us all blown up!

And over what? Pride? That, or pure pigheadedness. At this point, she really didn’t know which of those two options—if not actually just the two men themselves—was more to blame for the situation. She just knew that had that display not ceased to function on account of a huge explosion that made both of them break eye contact and turn their backs on each other, she would have taken matters into her own hands.

By snapping their heads against each other!

Okay, that was kind of a really bad idea so not like that, but still she would have found a solution. Like hell was she going to get blown to bits on account of two fully grown men not being able to put their differences aside to get the job done.

“Sounds familiar.” A clear dig at her present frustration with Ren himself.

Rey’s eyes narrowed, staring straight at the darkness hiding Ren’s eyes.

“This is not remotely the same.”

“Clearly.”

“And. Stop. Doing. That.”

“Your mind is open,” Ren retorted, adjusting the gloves around his wrists. “I find it curious that considering what Skywalker knows…” He stopped, left hand dropping to touch the lightsaber hilt he
had strapped to his leg, before continuing, thoughtfully. “I find it curious that shielding wasn’t the first thing he taught you.”

“You have nothing to do with what Master Luke taught me.”

“Nor with what he didn’t?”

Rey was feeling a sudden and completely unwelcome wave of sympathy for anyone and everyone forced to deal with Kylo Ren on a daily basis. This man—this man was exasperating!

Another external impact rocked the ship. The flags on the hangar moved, ripples going down them as that same hiccuping sound she had heard on the bridge echoed from below them. Ren’s attention snapped to the floor. This time he didn’t even glance her way as he started moving towards the transport, the only sign he hadn’t completely forgotten her presence being a short commanding word thrown her way.

“Come.”

The urgency in his voice made Rey hesitate, eyes jumping between the transport and the line of TIEs. She knew what she wanted to do. She had to help Finn. And yet… What was she doing standing still? And why was General Organa suddenly the only person she could think of? Why was it that Leia—her smile, her sadness—was suddenly so heavy on her mind? If something happened to her—why was she so certain that if something did it would all be her fault? It made no sense.

I have to get to Finn.

And yet, the feeling was overwhelming. It was exactly like that time in the Rebel base after Han Solo had been killed: the rapidly retreating Resistance leaving behind a lonely figure, her dark eyes the only ones in the entire base that had stopped to look at the young woman silently getting out of the Falcon. Rey hadn’t know who Leia was then and hadn’t recognized anything besides her eyes. She had that man’s eyes, Kylo Ren’s eyes. The same color, the same shape, and yet, despite that, the moment Leia had approached her Rey had felt as if the entire world—her entire life—had fallen on top of her. Looking at Leia, she had just wanted to cry.

It had made as much sense then as this did now.

Why am I so scared for her?

She liked General Organa. She liked her very much, but she barely knew her. Why—?

The warship shuddered.

I have to get to the city.

And she was running. Not to the TIEs, but to the transport.

Ren had already disappeared deep inside it, yet Rey had only to reach the top of its loading ramp for the crowd of pilots inside to open a path for her to him. Rapidly walking under the flickering lights and going passed covered face after covered face, she finally entered the cockpit, immediately taking the helmet off to look around.

Every single wall panel in the dark cockpit was open, Ren presently leaning over the switches and buttons of the one to her left, right hand going down over them, even as his mind—not his fingers—flipped them.
This better be good.

Considering what she had seen of his plans, however, it probably wasn’t.

“What are you doing?” she grumbled.

“This is an Atmospheric Assault Lander,” Ren informed her, closing the door and squeezing himself between the cockpit’s four chairs to get to the pilot console. “Faster and a lot more maneuverable than the carriers used by most of the Star Destroyers, and doubling as orbital support for the infantry. It’s also smaller. Hux uses them to guarantee a minimal number of causalities during ground approach.”

Rey frowned at that, her attention going from Ren’s back to the pilots in the adjoining room and doing a rapid headcount of those present.

Ten-Twenty-Twenty five…

“How small are these?”

“The large carriers are prepared to transport about two hundred soldiers plus ground vehicles.”

He wasn’t answering. He wasn’t answering and she was getting a really bad feeling.

“And this?” Rey insisted, still counting. Fifty-seven…

“It’s meant to carry twenty soldiers.” Rey’s head snapped back to him. What?! “I’m rerouting power to the anti-gravitational field generator.”

Rey could feel the blood leave her face. No-no-no-no! That means—

“You want me to glide to Cloud City?!”

“I said I needed a good pilot.”

“What you need is a bloody miracle!”

Not to mention a new brain!

He turned at that, looking at her, one arm leaning on the pilot’s chair.

“Let’s hear your plan, then.”

She didn’t have a plan—not even a worse one—but that didn’t make this acceptable! Not that Ren cared. He was still talking.

“You will follow the remaining Special Forces vessels outside. Once you are out there, Hux will blast his cannons to open a safe passage to the planet. Whatever path he finds you, take it.”

Rey was frowning, eyes following Ren as he moved one hand to close the wall panels’ doors with the Force. How he could know what the General would or wouldn’t do when they hadn’t done anything more than have a go at each other was beyond her.

“I know Hux.”

And this new tendency of his to reply directly to her thoughts was infuriating beyond belief.
“Focus on getting to the planet,” Ren continued. “We will keep the enemy away from you.”

“We? Who is this we?”

He was now pointing, one at a time, to the various sections of the commands in the pilot’s console.

“Weaponry. Thrusters—”

His hand stopped over the center of the panel, and Rey rolled her eyes—

“Shields,” she finished. “I know.”

—and fell silent instantly, staring at the panel.

“You know?” Ren queried, now looking her way and sounding just as perplexed as she felt.

Even if she did wish to answer—which she didn’t—she had nothing to give him other than confusion. It made no sense. Why did she know? How could she when she had never encountered a ship like this?

*It doesn’t matter.*

She glared at him.

“This ship won’t make it passed the atmospheric reentry. It’s overpacked,” she pointed out to Ren. “Once it is caught in the gravitational field, it will fall. What makes you think I’m going to risk crashing alongside it?”

“FN-2187 is down there,” Ren answered, simply, as if that sealed the matter.

It didn’t.

“This ship will crash—”

“Once on the dock, the TIEs will split up.”

“—long before it has a chance to reach the city.”

“I will lead the bulk of the TIE offensive back here.”

“Are you listening at all?”

“The remaining will join the groups giving support to Phasma.”

He wasn’t listening. He bloody wasn’t!

“Your friend is with her,” he was now saying, still ignoring her, that dark aura she had felt in the briefing room emanating from him. “Do what you wish.”

Rey blinked.

*What?*

Ren was out before she could be sure of what he had said, rapidly moving passed the pilots in the adjoining chamber and then jumping outside through the closing door. She could see his back getting smaller and smaller as he walked through the hangar, taking off his helmet as he climbed up a black TIE access ramp—or at least what she thought was a TIE. It still looked like one even with sharp
triangular wings set not vertically but horizontally alongside the elongated cabin and—

It wasn’t important. The important thing was—what was she doing? Why was she sitting, strapping herself to the chair, connecting the motors, hands firmly grasping the commands?

*This is madness. I’m mad.*

The lights over the hangar’s closed door had gone from red to orange. There were TIEs taking their positions around her, and the strange one Ren had grabbed hold of was taking its place right in front of her. Beyond it, the hangar door was sliding into the wall, opening to reveal a deep black emptiness and the partially lit face of Bespin floating among what looked like a never ending number of vessels.

*I’m not doing this.*

The light above the hangar door turned green, the TIEs blasting out the exact moment it did.

*I’m so not doing this.*

But she was doing it, she was outside, and the pandemonium she flew into was worse than she had expected: enemy fighters falling on top of the A.A.L. the second she left the dock, TIEs rapidly turning in pursuit, the white energy projectiles of the *Finalizer’s* cannons raining around her as she put the motors full blast and got away from the warship, waiting for the General to open Ren’s mentioned passage.

*I swear if he doesn’t—*

She didn’t have a chance to finish that thought. The *Finalizer’s* main cannons were turning, firing in perfect synchrony against a section of the battlefield leading to the planet. There were ships burning, exploding, many more fleeing as she turned the A.A.L. that way, flying passed the Resistance ships, trying to evade the solid projectiles coming her way as she approached the planet.

Ren had told her the ship was faster than the ones normally used to transport troops to the ground, but if this thing was fast she really didn’t want to imagine the amazing speed the Order’s normal transports reached. The A.A.L. was sluggish and poorly maneuverable. She had said they would crash on reentry, but that appeared overly optimistic now. She was taking a pounding. The shields were dropping and they were going to be blown up by the Resistance offensive.

*Great. Just great.*

Being killed by the side she supported was not exactly how she wished to go.

Rey hit the starboard stabilizers controls, making the ship jump out of the way of an incoming torpedo and then dive, escaping a wave of blasts shot by a fast approaching fighter. She could hear the pilots in the adjoining compartment crash against each other, low mumblings and curses echoing among them as she pulled the ship back onto course. Bespin and Cloud City’s marker was blinking on the display to her left, the board computer furiously trying to calculate the course to get there as more and more warning lights turned on over the console. She didn’t need to look at them to know what was coming.

*I knew this ship was carrying too much weight!*

The enemy fighters were back on top of her, forcing her to dance around the blasts as her TIE escort disengaged from their present targets, turning in pursuit of the group that was trying to kill her. To her left, one of the Resistance fighters lost control, going passed her and spiraling uncontrollably, a
TIE still on its tail. Then above her, one of the TIEs was hit by a missile, its right wing separating from the rest of the ship before the round cabin exploded. Ren’s sharp profiled TIE had fallen on top of the vessel that had destroyed it a second later, sending it crashing into a support vessel while he pulled his ship up, left wing failing to hit the wreckage by mere centimeters.

Rey could do little more than chew on her lips as this went on, firmly grasping the commands as she fought to keep her course, the planet getting closer and closer as the battle intensified around her.

It was insane. She had never been involved in anything like to this.

A support vessel was getting in her path. It was actually trying to physically block her from maintaining her course to the city, its cannons locked on her. She was too close to the planet, already. If she changed course now with the extra load the ship carried, she would have to go back, to the middle of the ongoing offensive, to readjust it. But if she didn’t change course...

She had to pull up. She had to.

Two blue lights flew above her, passing so close to the transport that, had she chosen to pull the A.A.L. up they would have hit her instead of the support vessel in her path. A second later, Ren’s TIE flew overhead, pulling in front of her, all cannons firing against the ship. It wasn’t moving, despite that. It was still in her path. And then, the same blinding white lights of the cannons the Finalizer’s crew had used to rip through the Resistance cruiser shot pass her. They hit the support vessel with horrifying precision, practically cutting it in half before it exploded.

And now the TIEs were closing formation around her again. She could hear the pilots in the vessel’s radio as they confirmed their positions, their voices so distorted that the only thing she could understand was—

“Tail.”

The next moment, they were entering the atmosphere.

And this is the moment we crash, a rather calm voice said inside her head.

The commands were trembling violently in her hands, almost as if fighting against her for control as, in search of a point of reference, her eyes went from the lights emanating from the thrusters of Ren’s TIE just in front of her, to Cloud’s City profile in the distance, its skyscrapers’ lights like beacons in the night.

The A.A.L. was not falling. Yet. She could feel the ship losing lift. She needed more speed.

Reroute power from weaponry to the thrusters.

Her left hand flew over the panel, hitting the commands with an ease that only knowledge—a knowledge she knew she didn’t have, not with this ship—could achieve. Instantly, she could feel the ship stabilizing. A soft instinctive touch on the commands later and she could feel it starting to glide. Even so, to land—

The TIE flying under her exploded, making the rest of the close knit formation break and fall behind. In front of her, Ren had turned off his ships thrusters, pulling the triangular wings into a vertical position. The wind caught them, throwing the ship back like a kite.

She could hear the battle behind her now—the high shrieks of the TIEs, the cannons firing, the explosions. There were projectiles flying around her too, failing to hit her by mere inches as Cloud City got closer and closer. And then a strong shove rocked the ship, an explosion next to one of the
thrusters sounding, and she could feel it losing lift again, her hands flying over the controls to try and correct it as it did. Cloud City was just in front of her, it was getting bigger by the second, the Order’s dock hanging from its side growing ever closer.

*If I reroute power from the shields…*

She couldn’t. If something hit her and she had no shields up it would rip the ship from side to side. But if she didn’t…

The ship was rapidly losing altitude. This was no moment for doubts. Rey pulled the shield lever completely down. Moments later, she was flying over the Order’s dock, the A.A.L.s underbelly scrapping it as it cleared the building, and then the ship was dropping, threatening to crash into the darkened street in front of the dock even as Rey struggled with the commands, forcing it to remain straight as it dropped and dropped, falling among the projectiles shot by a group of heavily armored vehicles close to the line of buildings and then hitting the ground, sliding over the street until it crashing against the base of a pedestrian bridge, halting against it.

She was running now, shoving the helmet over her head as she joined the pilots going down the access ramp. There was something around her, a warning in the Force, a feeling of incoming danger telling her to get out of the transport—to get out now!

Her feet hit the streets. Just a few steps ahead of her, one of the pilots was hit in the chest by enemy fire, falling limply to the ground as the rest of his colleagues ran across the streets. The enemy line, heavy vehicles and all, was approaching. The shrieks of the TIEs and the battle taking place in the sky were getting ever closer. They were surrounded.

A fighter dove to the street, flying parallel to it and firing against the A.A.L. until it exploded. The explosion shoved both her and the closest pilots to the ground as two TIEs made their appearance over the dock, following the other vessel as it pulled up alongside one of the skyscrapers.

The street was painted red by the dancing flames as Rey got to her feet, eyes going from the approaching enemy line to the now sliding door leading to the Order’s dock. The first pilots were getting inside, going passed the line of stormtroopers running outside. It was close, it was so close…

She jumped behind a civilian vehicle with one of the pilots, watching as he took a grenade from his belt and shoved it towards the enemy line. The instant it exploded both of them jumped out of hiding, running towards the door and going passed the stormtroopers giving them cover. The soldiers closed ranks behind her, getting back inside and closing the door as the dock’s spiral stairs and hive-like launching ramps appeared in front of her, the building filling with shrieks as the first pilots to arrive launched the ships.

Rey’s footsteps echoed in the structure as she climbed down one of the spiral staircases then ran across one of the walkways until she reached one of the launching ramps still with TIEs inside. Entering the last in line as two pilots jumped inside the two in front of her, she took a moment to breath as she threw the helmet into a support inside the cabin and sat.

Never again—*never again*—would she participate in one of Kylo Ren’s insane plans. Next time, he could take his bloody ideas and shove them up his—!

The TIE in front of her was going down the ramp. Taking her gloves off, Rey ignited the TIE’s thrusters, attention set on the launching lights as they turned from red to orange. There was nothing but sky under her, a deep dark nothingness to dive into.

The lights turned green.
Her hands hit the brake’s release button and the TIE went down the ramp, gaining velocity as it broke away from the ramp. Rey blasted the thrusters full force as it fell across the sky, pulling it up the moment it had enough velocity to guarantee lift and rising among the rest of the TIEs, towards the battle up in the sky.

It was worse than she had thought. Apparently, a great number of enemy fighters had been following her tail as she flew the A.A.L. They were everywhere, engaging in a ferocious battle with the TIEs, trying to shoot down the ones still falling out of the dock and all the while being pursued by the ones already in the air.

Rey pressed the trigger, hitting one of the vessels engaging a group leaving the dock and only becoming fully aware of what she had just done—*which side* she had just fired against—when the ship started falling towards the planet.

*What am I doing fighting for the Order?*

She turned the TIE up, joining a patrol flying by her and engaging a group flying passed them. The Resistance vessels went around Cloud City, turning to dive inside it as both she and the TIE squad followed in pursuit, blasting their cannons at them.

*What the hell am I doing?*

One of her group was shot down, falling towards the streets as she dove behind one of Resistance vessels, flying over a never ending sea of military vehicles on the streets, their cannons firing against a slowly approaching line of stormtroopers.

*I shouldn’t be fighting for them.*

In the radar, she could see as the TIE offensive broke apart, the bulk of it pulling up towards the *Finalizer* as the rest came towards her, converging on the low white building now in front of her, three very asymmetric looking red and black flags hanging from the roof, a line of A.A.L.s on its front courtyard.

*The barracks!*

The thought had barely crossed her mind when a projectile fell from over her, crashing into the courtyard and hitting a defensive line of tanks behind the transports. An explosion came from under her, destabilizing the TIE’s flight as the surviving soldiers come out from the wreckage, trying to get inside the building as a squad lead by a dark figure came outside.

*Finn!*

He was running passed the wreckage now, signaling the tanks to target the air offensive before she lost sight of him. But it didn’t matter. He was alive. *He was alive!*

Rey turned the TIE up, going around a building and then diving to fly over the barracks, the cannons, the A.A.L.s, and then towards the moving Order offensive, towards the heavy vehicles on the enemy lines, hands firmly gripping the TIEs commands as she fired.

She wasn’t doing this for the Order. She was doing this for Finn.

And they were going to get out of this alive.

Chapter End Notes
Next up -- The Enforcer, wherein Ren takes issue with a lamp.

An aside -- We broke 100 kudos and Mme DD now has in her hands the outlines for two special bonus chapters. Thank you, thank you!
The Enforcer

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Enforcer - Day 18, Part 5

The enemy cruiser was falling, tumbling down towards Bespin’s darkened face, lights still flickering, ships fleeing its hangars as the TIEs dived in pursuit.

It was, he had to admit, a strangely depressing sight to behold as the pale cruiser hit the planet’s atmosphere, flames igniting all around it as it started to burn, collapsing over itself.

Sliding the starboard and port side control handles in opposite directions, Kylo made his ship slide, turning it away from the cruiser and immediately—instinctively—hitting the missile launch commands. Two blue trails of light burst from under the pilot’s cabin, veering to the left to chase after one of the many fleeing support vessels trying to jump to hyperspace. He didn’t bother to see if the missiles would hit; he knew they would, felt the moment they did—the instant of panic and then the sudden snuffing out of light, the ripples in the Force followed by emptiness, by silence.

Death—both his own and that of others—was an ever present companion to Kylo Ren. The young boy he had been had distanced himself from Death least he went mad from always knowing, always sensing, always feeling like he too was dying, dragged behind those who fought to latch onto something as they went into the dark. No matter what he did, however, to step away from this so called gift of his, time and training—even Leader Snoke's instructions—had done nothing to give him any semblance of peace. Even now death hit him like a physical blow. For years he had sought indifference, the strength that only it could offer, and yet…

“*This is life’s only certainty,*” Skywalker’s voice echoed from deep in his memory. “*We all return from whence we came.*”

Philosophy. His mind was going with philosophy of all things and Force knew he had had enough of *that* to last a lifetime. It had never helped him. It had never done anything for him. It had never done anything but deny him the closure he so desperately needed, filling him with even more doubts than those he already had—and for what?

Kylo’s expression hardened, one hand shoving errant hair out of his eyes as he forced the ship into a dive and blasted a B-Wing out of existence. A few seconds later he was over the *Finalizer*’s bow and flying over a long line of shifting defensive cannons, a sequence of rapid flashes coming from the warship’s bridge signaling an order to focus fire on the retreating support vessels as he made the ship roll, diving under the *Finalizer*, the two fighters he knew would be there falling directly into his line of fire.

The Force trembled, ship fragments hitting the shields as he flew passed the striped orange and black tug still attached to the *Finalizer* the enemy had been targeting, then pulled up, flying alongside the battleship’s control tower and disconnecting the main thrusters.

His ship stopped high over the warship, leaving it no bigger than a hand on the upper viewing hatch, as, all secondary thrusters blaring, Kylo made the TIE twist over itself, the deliberate slowness of the move giving him enough time to evaluate what was left of the battle. A handful of Resistance ships fell to Order fighters, and enemy ship after enemy ship entered hyperspace to escape the slaughter.
He dove back down and a new, clearly irate, sequence of flashes came from the *Finalizer*’s bridge, every burst of light that made up Hux’s furious signal to ‘get yourself here’ filling him with ire.

His expression irate, Kylo turned the ship away from the *Finalizer*, intent on ignoring the order and returning to lead the TIEs still pursuing the fleeing enemy vessels.

He had had enough of Hux and his blasted signaling lamp by now. It had been a never ending blinking out of the corner of his eyes from the very first moment they had arrived back in orbit, forcing him to divert much needed focus from the battlefield to satisfying Hux’s loudly broadcast personal whims.

Skywalker had talked about life’s certainties? Well, he had one. Hux’s signaling lamp driving him mad!

A warning trembled in the Force, the unmistakable signs of impending danger coming his way. He had been too distracted to react to the threat in time. In an instant, an impact on the port side wing made the ship swerve violently, his momentary loss of control over the vessel causing his right shoulder to collide violently against the chair, pain shooting down his arm and nearly ripping the lingering wound in his abdomen open, as he forced the ship to stop spinning, succeeding in stabilizing it just in time to avoid crashing into the warship’s bow and see the gunner of a nearby Special Forces TIE take out his attacker with a deathly accurate volley of shoots.

Looking to his side, he found a familiar cracked wing closing formation at his side, recognition of the duo instant: the original surviving members of Tarkin squad—the same pilot and gunner that had accompanied both Rey and himself on their original flight out of Bespin.

“Most of the offensive is now controlled, Sir,” the pilot informed him, voice crackling in the radio alongside several other muffled voices coming from the rest of the TIEs. “We should be able to gain full orbital control in a few minutes.”

Trying to close his right hand over the commands only to find the limb unresponsive, Kylo frowned at the words, attention focusing on a distant group of support ships disappearing into hyperspace. The TIEs that had been targeting them made their way back to rejoin the bulk of the group next to the burning cruiser.

“Call in your squad and return to the *Finalizer*,” he ordered, the continuous flashes coming out of the bridge registering in the back of his mind as he spoke. “Wait for my command.”

“Sir.”

The pilot’s words joined the group of muffled voices permanently echoing in the radio as Kylo reached out to the Force, closing it around the unresponsive arm and forcing it to grasp the commands and propel the ship forwards, only to be met with an immediate loss of power from one of the reactors for the main thrusters. The sudden and very unwelcome need to run his lightsaber through something took hold of him as a series of warnings simultaneously lit up the console, forcing him to turn the ship back towards the *Finalizer*.

The stabbing pain in his ribs was becoming unbearable by now, but truth be told the damage to the ship was the only thing making turn his back on the battlefield. His physical state was little more than a hindrance, an obstacle to be mastered and conquered. The ship’s needs, on the other hand, were not to be dismissed. The vessel was a prototype, the last of the now discontinued line of *Resurgent Phantoms* the Order’s Technological Department had been trying to revive, invaluable even if he was the first to admit that, as far as TIEs went, they had not turned out as planned.
The original TIE Phantoms had been built for stealth and there was little that was different with the Order’s take on the line. Speed was the Phantoms’ main characteristic. Everything, including firepower, bowed down to its speed and its cloaking ability. Overall, it was an extremely unbalanced ship whose combat effectiveness depended solely on the pilot. The tiny margin for error was well captured by its other moniker— TIE Coffin.

He had desired something a little more balanced than this for his own fighter, something more in line with the Imperial TIE Advanced if he was being honest. However, the Star Fighter Development Research Bureau was the only branch of technological research he had ever been interested in and the opportunity to get his hands on a ship that promised a challenge—even if piloting, for all the pleasure it still gave him, was one of the many things he had consciously chosen to step away from in his new life—had been too tempting. He had turned up at the research facility’s doorstep on an ill-thought out whim ages ago in search of a ship, not that he’d needed to worry much about how they’d interpret his appearance. The engineering teams had almost fallen over themselves to get him what he wished, their only worry other than getting him to leave before he destroyed something being what the General would think.

Their fears spoke of how little they knew Hux, however. The General had simply raised his eyes from the report he had been reading and studied Ren’s newly minted Coffin in the Finalizer’s hangar with murderous glee, before rolling his eyes at himself and murmuring:

“No such luck.”

It had taken him a lot longer than Hux to accept the ship would be a permanent resident on the Finalizer. He had approached the Phantom as no more than a temporary vessel, something to occupy himself with while he waited to get his hands on something more to his liking, but somewhere down the line he had gotten attached to the ship, to its reliability, to simply seeing it on the hangar, a constant when he had none, and it had become irreplaceable in a way that few things were.

The Phantom cleared the hangar’s entrance, flying over the technical teams, before curving slightly to the right and rotating to land in the spot it had left some hours before. Getting himself to his feet, Kylo got out of the dark cockpit, jumping off of the access ramp to dive under the triangular wing at his left and access the damage to it.

Looking up, he was forced to admit it was a lot worse than he had expected.

The panels were cracked, some of them missing altogether. A direct hit both to the reactor’s phase one convertor and the convertor coils on the rear side of the wing revealing itself as the reason the power supply from the port reactor to the cockpit had been interrupted. It spoke a lot about the Order’s technology that a hit so close to the connection arm hadn’t caused the wing to jump out, but that didn’t change the fact that this still wasn’t something he could fix. Or, to be more exact, it wasn’t something he would risk fixing unless he had no other choice. Force sensitives might be renowned for their intuitive ability with machinery, but even if he knew what must be done to get the ship back to working order, he didn’t trust himself to fix this level of damage. This had never been where he excelled. He needed the technical teams on this and he needed them fast.

Diving back under the wing, this time feeling a stab of pain to his ribs as he did so, Kylo’s eyes intercepted those of the mechanic running his way. Immediately, he pointed her attention towards the damaged wing.

“Get your team here,” he ordered, distractedly massaging his shoulder as he climbed back onto the access ramp and entered the Phantom’s dark cabin while looking back. “Replace the complete set of pa—”
He almost rammed into someone as he spoke. One glance at the impossibly rigid posture of the man was all Kylo needed to identify who it was that had deigned to visit him.

Hux.

There was little he could do but sigh deeply and roll his eyes.

Jubilation.

The General turned instantly, voice clear even amidst the loud roar of engines and voices coming from the hangar.

“Forty ships made the jump to hyperspace.”

“I'm pleased you know how to count.”

“That accounts for half the enemy fleet, Ren!”

Kylo walked passed him, left hand running over the buttons and switches on the pilot’s console, disconnecting the systems he had left on and turning to leave—only to find Hux blocking his path, eyes gleaming with fury.

“That was a tactical retreat,” he said, pointing in the general direction the enemy fleet had fled towards.

“I’m well aware of that,” Kylo retorted. His voice sounded strange. It took him a moment to understand why. The helmet. He raised his left hand, pulling it from its stand and towards him with the Force. “I’m more curious about what you expected me to do about that.”

“I expected you to do your job.”

Kylo’s eyes bored down on Hux’s, voice void of humor.

“Do you also expect to see me multiplying to make up for your lack of resources?”

“That would be suitably disturbing, but hardly,” Hux snapped, eyes growing colder by the second. “I don’t think you fully grasp the seriousness of our situation.”

“I’m rather sure I do,” Kylo replied, his dangerously soft voice, changing to its more menacing tone the instant the helmet sealed itself over his features. “And I would advise you to start building your defenses, General, instead of wasting both your time and mine giving lectures about what I do and do not know.”

He stepped to the side at that, going passed Hux, dark clothes rustling as he went, only to see the General turn on his heels to join him. He was now marching at his side, expression perfectly collected, which was never a sign of good things to come.

“The dock?” he practically snarled, both his voice and his thoughts snapping like a whip as they went down the access ramp.

“All surrounding streets are under enemy control,” Kylo informed him, dryly, both himself and the General leaning over as a TIE flew over them. “I would discourage any further attempts at getting troops to land near it.”

“The enemy units?”
“Both infantry and heavy vehicles. I can confirm the presence of a stormtrooper contingent inside the
dock, but they are hardly enough for any sort of offensive.”

“And your Knight? The A.A.L. pilot?”

“She joined the group providing air support for the Captain.”

Hux frowned at that, head turning, eyes following the arrival of the rest of Tarkin Squad, a pensive
expression announcing that he had just disconnected himself from everything around him. He wasn’t
the only one, though. Testing his fingers to find them still paralyzed, Kylo was again channeling the
Force, mind going, without his permission, from planning to Rey as he raised his arm with the
Force’s help and forced his hand to move.

Rey hadn’t come. He had known from the start that her mind was made up, that the decision to rejoin
FN-2187 was final. Even so, there had been a part of him that wished it wouldn’t be like that, that
she would change her mind, and that was even now expecting to see her land.

Going down to Cloud City had been brilliant piloting on her part, especially for someone who trusted
the Force so little that she barely listened to it. He had thought that normal while leaving Cloud City
for the Finalizer some days ago. Untrained, alone and without a teacher, natural talent and instinct
only took you so far. His assumptions, however, hadn’t been correct. Skywalker was involved. The
map he had failed to acquire had lead her straight to him. She had made a choice. She had asked,
been forced to plead and beg, but…

He stopped himself at that, vaguely conscious of stepping out of the hangar and into one of the
Finalizer’s dark elevators. His thoughts sudden turn left him frowning at the dark door.

Why did this matter? Why did any of this matter?

_I offered myself_, the answer came unbidden. _I could have done it. It would——_

A flash of fury swept through his mind. That very same instant, he let go of the Force shrouding his
arm and it all but collapsed at his side, the pain forcing a sharp breath out of his lips but otherwise
balancing him again.

There was nothing to this line of thought. She had chosen and her choice had been Skywalker. That
was final. That was—

_She doubts._

It felt like being stabbed. There was something to those words—something he hadn’t felt in years
that was haunting to the point of being painful.

Closing his eyes, the almost indistinguishable images coming out of Hux’s mind a mere background
to his own thoughts, he could do little more than clench his left fist, eyes flashing with anger as he
recognized that feeling. That pain.

_Did she really choose? Or did others choose the path for her?_

_Hope._

It was _hope_ and he despised himself for feeling it. He had drunk from this chalice before. He had
tasted its ashes when everything collapsed. Hope was little more than poison, a measure of weakness
for those who lacked the courage to accept the truth in front of them and instead chose to wallow in
the comfort of lies—to believe what they wished instead of facing reality.
And reality, in this case, was simple.

*She made her choice concerning me,* he reminded himself and there was no kindness in those words. The truth was never kind. *It is a no.*

And while he might not understand what the hell Skywalker had been teaching Rey that had left her *this* unprepared, that was final.

*There will be no more to this.*

The elevator stopped with a soft upwards jerk, both himself and Hux marching out of it as a technician entered, eyes fixed on what looked like a damage report and muttering to himself. Hux followed the man with his eyes, attention snapping back to Kylo the instant the doors closed.

“*Our present tactical approach to DCF-98 needs to be rethought,*” he announced. “*Fetch me the Captain.*”

Kylo was silent, ignoring the words and their undercurrent that made it clear this was an order and not a request. His gaze had locked onto the blasted signaling lamp. His hand itched slowly towards his lightsaber instead.

First things first.

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- Seriously, has anyone else wondered where Phasma is from?

Comments are an immense source of joy, so please do leave something in the box.
The Captain - Day 19, Part 1

In her nightmares, Phasma was always running, bare feet slipping on loose debris as she made her way through gutted streets, the skeletal remains of buildings looming high above her as she looked at the dark sky, alarms echoing in the distance.

There had been a time before that, a time of laughter, warm and safe, when the sky was filled with dreams and little else but that. She remembered it still even if it was little more than a shadow, a specter that had longed ceased to feel real, that may as well never have been, for nothing would ever go back to normal. Nothing would ever be made right.

Fear was not something she had known until they had come. Now, hands trying to grab hold of the debris as she fought to climb up the wall of rubble that had once been the city’s skyscrapers, it was the only thing on her mind. There wasn’t anywhere safe. Not for her, not for the thousands fleeing around her, diving underground, dragging behind them what little was left of their lives while they shouted for children, for parents, for anyone that might be missing.

In that, they were at least luckier than her. Reaching the top and sliding down the opposite slope, running towards a small gutted building across the road that was, against all odds, still standing, her only certainty was that none of the voices were calling for her, that there was no one left for her to run towards.

Silence fell. The few remaining lights in the city went out as she found the small opening in the bullet ridden wall in the middle of the building that would be her temporary sanctuary. Breathing labored, she threw the battered blaster she had been carrying on her back inside before squeezing herself through the same small hole, feet hitting the stairs leading to an underground basement and hands picking up the weapon again as she dove into the darkness below.

If one could call this life, then this was hers. Running. Hiding. Waiting. The cold bite of the weapon she was hugging and the heavy fabric she had thrown over herself as she cowered against the wall were the only comforts she had in the face of what she knew was coming, the sound of her own ragged breathing her only company before the silence came to an end.

The Republic had arrived.

They came with the distant roar of engines, making an unnamed terror rise from deep inside her when, like all the times before, only silence rose in defiance. She was alone, truly alone. And then the whistling started—the bombs, the explosions, the unending death.

It may only have lasted a few minutes, but to her it felt like centuries had passed before it all came to an end and the alarms gave a short blast that announced it was safe to leave her shelter. Carefully, she crawled back outside, still holding onto the blaster, dragging behind her the red Empire flag she had been hiding under, only to look around to find she didn’t recognizing anything anymore, not even the devastation.

She had been ten then and war had long been all she knew. Be it fighting in it or preparing for it,
little had changed. There might be a lifetime standing between the child overlooking the ruins and the
Captain she had become, but there were things one was stuck with no matter how much time passed.
She would always be running from the sound of explosions and alarms. They would always be
center stage in her nightmares, even if her childhood terrors had been replaced by a more recent hell.

Starkiller.

“They have destroyed the oscillator, Captain!” A terrified officer was shouting from behind her,
running down the command shuttle’s access ramp, trying to make himself heard over the chaos.
“We'll all be dead soon if we don’t leave!”

The ground was shaking under her, incandescent molten rock exploding from underneath the dock
as the cracks on it widened, swallowing TIE after TIE and threatening to take their shuttle down with
them as the base started to collapse, rocks tumbling down the cliff and crashing into the landing pads.

“Captain, if we don’t leave now we might as well sign our own death warrants!”

A menacing roar coming from under her feet silenced the officer’s words just before a giant column
of fire broke through the ground and crashed into a group of A.A.L.s that had just taken off. The
remaining soldiers that were trying to jump inside those still on the ground looked up in horror as
they fell, crashing to the dock, aflame.

“Captain!”

“You will hold this shuttle here until I say otherwise!” she snapped, stepping aside so that a group
fleeing from the A.A.L.s crash zone could enter it.

It was chaos, absolute chaos, but even so she remained firm. Her attention going over the soldiers
still fleeing from inside the base, she searched the crowds for the people she was sure still hadn’t
evacuated. No matter the chaos, no matter the risks, neither Hux nor Ren would leave the base
before absolutely necessary and their definition of necessary was, on the best of days, overly
optimistic.

With a moan and a crash, a pilot to her left jumped out of his TIE, throwing himself out of the ship
only seconds before it disappeared down one of the burning crevices. He was running towards them
now, jumping inside the shuttle the same moment she turned to find Hux at the base of the ramp, his
head nodding to her mildly in acknowledgment as he climbed aboard.

“The fuel cells ruptured,” he informed her in a whisper, managing to look collected even while
delivering what might as well be both his and everyone else's death sentence. The next instant, he
had turned away from her, voice cracking like a whip as they both climbed aboard the shuttle.

“Triangulate Kylo Ren’s position and contact the Finalizer. Prepare all systems for lightspeed.”

The air offered about as much safety as the ground, fire exploding around them as the shuttle flew
over the forest, the pine trees snapping under it, breaking like twigs as the ship forced its way down.
The minute they touched ground, the soldiers stepped outside, running towards what would have
looked like a pile of black rags were it not for the blood pooling under it, the snow avidly drinking it.
Ren had been both conscious and coherent when the soldiers had pulled him inside the ship, looking
over the injury in his abdomen as they tried to stop him from bleeding out. When the broken
lightsaber one of the soldiers had brought inside was placed in her hands, she had been even more
surprised that he was alive. Even so, Ren losing in battle was not what shook her most that day. It
had been joining Hux in the shuttle’s cockpit as it jumped to hyperspace side by side with the
Finalizer, the base exploding behind them seconds later, to find something in his eyes that she had
seldom seen there which had truly disturbed her.
It had never, until that moment, truly hit her that they, just like that girl surveying her home’s destruction, could lose everything—that what they were fighting for, what the Order was building could come to nothing, that everything could collapse. Ren’s aura of invulnerability had shattered, as had Hux’s infallibility. They were proved human that day.

In the here and now, marching behind Lieutenant Ferrar as he lead the three of them alongside row after row of the ground vehicles stored inside the Finalizer’s bow, his pleasant but heavily accented voice flowing around them as he went over a rather long—and utterly mind numbing—explanation of the equipment’s manual unloading and the logistics involved in the operation, she was once again made acutely aware of that.

“You can’t seriously be considering this course of action,” she argued, voice low and tone becoming harsher the longer she was forced to go over the topic. “The risks involved are—”

“All communication channels are presently unavailable,” Hux replied, straightening the sleeves of the long jacket he was wearing, attention going over the charred remains of the tank presently being lifted to the hangar above them as he did so. “The enemy destroyed the city’s satellites, and the repairs scheduled to the Finalizer’s systems leave us with a rather large window before any sort of contact can be established between your troops and tactical support. Unless you’re considering leading your offensive without it, it will have to be provided from the ground.”

“That doesn’t justify your presence. You are a high profile target.”

“Aren’t we all?”

This discussion had been going on for hours—from the very first moment she had stepped inside the Finalizer, actually. This, however, was the first time her mind came to a halt at his words, the question’s dismissive tone making her eyebrows settle into a hard line. Capitalizing on a group of technicians coming from their left, she discreetly slowed her pace as though trying to maintain privacy for their conversation. Unconsciously, exactly as she knew he would, Hux mimicked her. It was only when the technicians suddenly got in their path, fighting to drag a heavy power cord towards the nearest of the storage’s lifts and effectively separated them from both Kylo Ren and Ferrar, that he understood her intent to corner him.

“Captain…”

Observing as Ren’s back moved between the crowd presently inside the storage, she saw Ferrar offer him a datapad while gesturing at another group of carriers. Satisfied that he was thoroughly distracted, Phasma turned to the General, ignoring his irritated glare entirely as she tried to talk some sense into him.

“Some of us are more of a target than others,” she pointed out to him, the group with the power cord still walking by, the clamoring of hammers echoing all around them. “There is a price on your head.”

“That is neither new, nor impressive.”

“Allow me to disagree considering the rate at which it’s growing,” she said, drily, the hint of curiosity rising to Hux’s eyes making her soldier on before he could inquire about the present value of the bounty. “The minute the enemy gains knowledge of your presence, there won’t be a roof in that city without a sniper on it.”

“I trust your ability to handle the situation.”

His trust made her more apprehensive than confident. The city was already showing all the tell tale
signs of an impending disaster. She would not have it turn into another Starkiller. She would never
again allow the three of them to be at the epicenter of a war zone simultaneously if she could help it.

“We don’t have enough means to face the enemy offensive and guarantee your safety. The resources
we will have to dispense for that would seriously hamper our ability to retake the city.” That had hit
the target, if the renewed vigor of his glare was anything to go off of. “Tactical support can be
provided by another.”

Hux gave her a penetrating look.

“Let it be noted that I consider this precaution unnecessary.”

She would note anything as long as it wasn’t him with a bullet through his head.

Stepping over the power line, they marched alongside a line of tanks, following it until they were just
a few meters away from the service elevators. Ferrar’s blond head reappeared at their left, his eyes
studying the rails holding the vehicles in place, a deep crevice forming between his eyebrows as he
touched one of the connections with the tip of his boot.

If his next words were anything to go by, the unloading operation had hit another setback.

“What are your immediate concerns, Captain?”

*We would be here all night for that list, Lieutenant.*

“Medical supplies, solid ammunition, and ground vehicles.”

“We might have a problem providing the third one,” Ferrar informed her, pressing the connection
with his foot and trading a meaningful look with the General when it broke. “Most of the burnt
section has been removed and replaced, Captain. Even so I fear we will be unable to complete the
repairs according to your timeline. We can’t risk one of these getting caught in the—”

A screech interrupted him, making the three of them turn to see the lift transporting the charred tank
come to a halt, the supervisor coordinating the manual pull shouting furiously at the group looking
down from the hangar as the platform tilted dangerously to one side.

“Lift,” he finished, unnecessarily.

In an instant, a group of technicians had all but shoved the three of them inside the closest of the
service lifts and hit the up button. Her attention was still on the tank, observing it through the closing
doors, when a low and aggressive ‘do try to remain awake, Ren’ alerted her to the figure leaning
against the wall to her left. Clearly not having understood the words for the warning to flee that they
were, Ferrar looked away from the tank as the door slid shut, focusing his attention on the three of
them one at the time, trying to understand who had spoken, only to come to a stop at Ren who was
tilting his head in mock curiosity.

At least I’ll have company for this round of bickering.

“An annoying buzzing, Lieutenant?” he queried Ferrar, dark eyes slowly coming back into focus. “I
heard it too.”

Hux’s eyes turned to slits, an infuriated glare directing itself towards the dark figure as Ren glared
right back. Signaling a deeply puzzled Ferrar to ignore the exchange, Phasma could do little more
than sigh, clear her throat and watch as, small mercy, the staring contest broke down without further
incident.
“For once,” she thought. Ren’s attention returned to studying the display in his right hand, eyebrows furrowing in concentration; Hux’s turned to Ferrar.

“Lieutenant, there has been a change of plans,” he announced, as the elevator started to accelerate to the side, moving away from the hangar and towards the bridge. “You will be providing tactical support for the Captain on the ground.”

Ferrar’s capacity to look utterly unfazed by the sudden development was frankly admirable.

“Objectives, Sir?”

“Presently, the enemy has control over all positions south of our headquarters. There are reports of a high number of enemy ground vehicles and troops moving to give support to the faction holding that part of the city,” Hux informed him. “We will need to cut off their supply lines and strand them before we move against them. Also, we will have to guarantee the more vital equipment is on the ground before the enemy has time to start targeting the carriers. A convoy must to be maintained between the *Finalizer* and the barracks.”

“Anti-aircraft status?” Ferrar queried.

“Anti-aircraft has been mostly taken care of,” Phasma assured. “The Knight, Nephys, ordered the towers destroyed as he retreated with the troops. Air strike has been targeting the remaining ones.”

Ren frowned at that, fingers tapping on the helmet he was holding in his left hand as he kept studying the display.

“That doesn’t change the fact that a long term unloading operation will leave the carriers vulnerable,” he said. “Every possible landing route is privy to ground fire. An escort, as well as a permanent air defense, will be needed to minimize equipment and personnel loss. Depending on the orbital defenses—”

“The orbital defenses are close to non-existent,” Hux replied. “The dock tried to connect to a line of turrets when activated but they seemed to have been destroyed. Without the *Finalizer* providing support, there is no chance for success.”

The General fell silent, his words hanging like an ominous warning as he frowned at the ceiling, attention falling on Ren a moment later.

“We’re dependent on the TIEs. Take the first group down. Select our best pilots for the escorts. Also, that Knight of yours, the one from the A.A.L., I want her on this.”

A strange, slightly amused expression crossed over Ren’s face at that and when he spoke his voice was dripping with sarcasm.

“She will be elated. Shall I share this joyous news with her, or would you like the honor for yourself?”

The elevator stopped, its door sliding open before Hux had time to answer. The next instant, Ren was stepping outside, face disappearing under the helmet as he took again to the display he was still studying.

“I will be waiting for you in the hangar, Captain,” he said, head raising for a second to look at Ferrar. “As well as you, Lieutenant.”

Phasma raised her eyebrows at that. Last time she checked, no TIEs—not even the ones belonging to
the Special Forces—had space for three people.

“We will be taking mine.”

Cramped quarters it was, then.

“Of course, Sir.”

She turned away from him to find Hux staring at her as if he was suddenly questioning her sanity.

“Do you know what a Phantom is, Captain?”

She had the feeling she was about to find out and, judging by Ferrar’s words as he turned to Hux, green eyes going wider and wider, it wouldn’t be anything good.

“Out of curiosity, Sir, do you write eulogies?”

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- The Jedi Master, wherein it is confirmed that Maz is basically Yoda.

Comments, s'il vous plaît!
Thunder was crackling in the distance. Its roar echoed through the empty corridors as Luke made his way down them, robes rustling in the oppressive silence. The pleas of the long dead still echoed through the Force here, hundreds of voices crying as one for help still ringing through the deserted corridors. They forced him to stop and listen from time to time, simultaneously fearful that he would recognize a voice in the masses and pained that he no longer could.

"Help us!"

It had been years since he had been here, yet the wound in the Force, the rift, was still fresh enough that it felt as if it had been opened just hours before. The screaming still filled the halls, and the phantom sound of lightsabers denouncing a battle between Light and Darkness had yet to fade.

*It feels as if they are still here. Still trapped.*

It felt as if he had arrived just in time, as if he could still stop what had happened, but that had always been a lie, a trap of endless grief and guilt laid down by the Force. There was nothing that could be done here. He had known it then and he knew it now. It was too late. Every chance had been squandered, every warning ignored. The Force had tested him and he had failed. This desolation he was walking through was as much his doing as it had been Ben’s. In some ways, it was more his doing than Ben’s for he hadn’t been here when he should have been. He could have stopped this if he had just listened, if he hadn’t been so blind.

"I can’t stay here."

Luke stopped, his nephew’s voice breaking through the cacophony across the years, his image appearing in front of him—child, boy, and man.


The dark tendrils caught Ben, spreading over his skin, leaving him no more than a shadow amongst a thousand others.

"Help."

And Luke was moving again, walking through these corridors that had once been filled with life—that had once been his life—hands touching the scorch marks in the walls, attention going beyond the destroyed windows to look at the launching pads where he had left his X-Wing and from there to the forest. In a way, Luke felt that he had never left this place, that this was his grave as much as it was that of his students, as much as it was Ben’s.

"Please—"

Luke stepped into the main hall, approaching the broken parapet overseeing the ground level of the structure. A smile passed his lips as he followed the column of light dropping from the broken
skylight of the main chamber to find it touching the branches of a deeply burned but still flowering tree. Its roots were breaking out of the flowerbed it stood upon to dig between the floor tiles, crushing them as it spread across the room, searching for water. Searching for light.

*It survived?*

Luke made his way to the ground floor, climbing on top of the roots until he stood next to the blackened trunk, hesitating for a second and then touching it.

It happened as he knew it would. The Force trembled, then it gushed forward, going through him as if the tree had recognized him, and at that exact instant everything around him changed. The halls filled with memories, with voices and faces, with presences—only for them to fall into the same silence that had robbed him of them long ago, leaving him alone, standing among their corpses, a menacing lightsaber roar echoing in the room.

*I teased Ben so much because of that saber.*

It had been immature of him to do so, but Ben had made it nearly impossible to resist the temptation when he had justified his choice of hilt design.

“I would like to avoid the family tradition of losing a hand.”

That had been just after the second of Ben’s Jedi Trials and Luke hadn’t been able to stop laughing long enough to reproach him for joking at such a serious time.

The truth was that he understood the real reason behind the choice rather well. He had been the one to train Ben, after all. Luke knew his nephew too well to deny that the threatening appearance of the blade was intentional, but the reinforced hilt, the extra potency, the over strained crystal—they were all necessities, a response to the demands of a fighting style that had been growing increasingly aggressive and would only become more so with time. He had been the only one to see it that way, though.

“A Jedi’s lightsaber is a reflection of its wielder,” another master had stated during the examination. “What does this say of you?”

An executioner’s weapon had been what they had called it, a mockery of the Jedi tradition and mission. Nothing had been spared criticism—not its construction, nor its design, nor the crystal’s blood-orange hue.

“What makes you think this is acceptable?”

In that saber Luke had only seen Ben. It was in the endless smuggling of pieces to his room, then in the secrecy with which he had treated its construction, and especially in the brashly unapologetic way he had dumped a broadsword style lightsaber in front of the examiners when he had everyone convinced, including Luke, that he was going with dual wielding—all of that was Ben being Ben. The only one anyone else seemed capable of seeing, however, was Vader.

*Was I wrong even then?*

Had that been another warning he had failed to heed? Another mistake?

“Why?” Luke asked the ghost in the hall, the vision of Ben standing over the dead filling his mind. “Why do this?”

Luke turned, eyes rising to meet the dark ones he had known so well. Only the person standing
behind him, standing amongst the corpses, wasn’t Ben. She didn’t belong here; she had never been here.

Know your fears, so they may not touch you.

“What do you see?”

Luke didn’t turn in the direction of the new voice, attention too set on the vision of young woman whose skin was darkened by the sun and brown eyes had captured his. She was as beautiful as she was terrible, as determined as she was cruel. She was Rey, and she wasn’t.


“Oh, only what I brought with me.”

The figure collapsed at his words, leaving him to turn and find Maz Kanata a few steps away from him, studying his expression. There was nothing about her that had changed. From her weathered yellow skin to the wise eyes amplified by her lenses, she remained exactly as he remembered her.

I, on the contrary—

Luke shook his head.

“I found your message,” Luke told her, looking around his Academy’s destroyed hall. “Did it have to be here?”

Maz’s expression grew sad at his words.

“Still hiding then. The Luke I knew was braver than this.”

“You’re standing on that Luke’s grave,” he told her quietly. “And this, Maz, is simply cruel.”

“It’s necessary,” she replied, sitting on the roots of the Force tree, light settling around her almost like a halo. “I see the girl isn’t with you. What happened?”

Luke approached her, eyes running up the walls to take in the deserted corridors and collapsed columns, stopping at the broken pieces of glass still hanging from the skylight that once shone brilliant light into the former meditation room. The weight of what he knew had happened inside these walls, in this exact place, still threatened to crush him.

“Why here?”

Maz made an uncomfortable gesture, head going to rest on one hand.

“At one time, I thought I could manage your Ben’s fury,” she confided, fingers dipping into a small puddle between the roots in front of her. “I underestimated Kylo Ren’s wrath. It taught me to hide where he doesn’t wish to search.”

Luke frowned at that, confusion and then comprehension slowly hitting him as a clear image of Rey standing on Ach-Too’s cliffs, her hand raised in offering came to his mind.

“You are talking about the saber? My father’s saber?” he queried, shaking his head when she remained silent. “You stole it.”

Maz didn’t miss a beat, expression hardening.
“How had you imagined it had gotten to the girl?”
“I had hoped you had done something less extreme.”
“Held a talk over tea with your nephew?”
That was another kind of extreme.
“You found it here then,” Luke clarified, running his prosthetic hand through his hair. “Abandoned.”

Like everything else.

Maz expression fell, eyes saddening.

“Did you even know Ben?”

He had been asking that same question to himself for years.

“I know what that saber meant to him.”

“You know how much he valued it,” Maz amended. “As a family heirloom. What it meant—no, Luke, you don’t. Or you wouldn’t think he would have willingly left it behind.”

She fell silent, studying his face, whatever she meant to say after that silenced by a flower falling from one of the branches and landing in her lap. Her eyes going to the charred trunk as she picked up the pure white flower, Maz smiled.

“I do love this tree,” she commented. “It has no reason left to hope and yet for all it saw, for all it suffered, it never lost sight of itself.” She touched the petals gently. “Have you talked to your sister?”

Luke found himself dropping his head, eyes fleeing her scrutiny. He considered Maz to be kind, far kind than Master Yoda or even Ben Kenobi had been, but in some ways he felt she was harsh in ways they weren’t. Or perhaps it was that she was a lot more unforgiving.

“I haven’t had the opportunity,” he lied, and in the corner of his eye he could see Maz put the flower in the small puddle, observing it as it floated.

“Where is the girl?” she asked.

“I had hoped you would know that.”

“Why?”

“You knew I was coming.”

“I felt a warning in the Force, a dying Knight’s voice. It spoke your name.”

Luke closed his eyes, shaking his head.

“You knew before that.”

“I’m not a seer. In leaving that box, I took precautions. That is all.” She raised her eyes from the flower, facing him. “Why isn’t the girl with you?”

“She left.”

“Left?”
“The Resistance Headquarters were attacked. Rey took off before I could stop her,” he confided. “I haven’t seen or heard from her since.”

Maz chuckled at his words, a soft “I knew I liked that girl” passing her lips as her quiet laughter rippled through the Force. For a moment it was as if everything—even the ghosts—were alive and laughing alongside her.

“So you lost her.”

“I didn’t lose her!”

“What do you call this then?” Maz leaned forward, clearly expecting an answer. When he gave none, she got to her feet and walked towards the tree, touching it gently. Her voice had lost its amused edge when she spoke again. “You come to me like everyone else, asking for information, searching both answers and advice. You might not like what I have to say.”

That made Luke frown, his next choice of words careful.

“Rey is in danger. I have to get to her. She needs—”

“I will tell to you the same I told Han.” Maz said, speaking over his words. “Go home.”

“I’m home, Maz.” That clearly irritated her. “You have to help me.”

“I just did.”

“You meant for Rey to find me.”

“I meant for a great many things that I thought ruined,” she replied. “And that now I hope might still be salvageable. That girl—”

“Has everyone hunting her. Snoke, the Knights, Ben…”

“You?” Maz queried, softly.

It hit him like a physical blow.

“I’m trying to protect her.”

“While you leave your sister standing on a battlefield alone, losing everything she holds dear to the war?” Maz shook her head. “You do a great disservice to them both by convincing yourself one is some kind of indestructible force of nature and the other a naïve maiden in need of guidance.”

“I hold no such vision of them.”

“Then you will listen to me, Luke, when I say Leia is the one who needs you,” Maz said. “Go to her. Let the girl make her own choices. Trust her to make the right ones.”

“You know where she is.”

Silence, then a sigh.

“She is where she should be.”

Chapter End Notes
And Maz doesn't even hit Luke with a cane. She's very kind like that.

Next up -- The Scavenger.
The Scavenger - Day 19, Part 3

*I turned off the power supply*, Rey was reciting, teeth biting into the flashlight she held between her lips as she twisted her upper body through the reinforced hull of the TIE she had piloted during the battle over Cloud City.

*I drained the pipes and closed the security valves on the cockpit*, she continued, setting her back against one of the metallic beams twisting its way inside the ship’s connection arm.

*I made sure there is no power running through the electric circuits. There shouldn't be a problem.*

Having assured herself for the umpteenth time that she had taken all security measures, Rey took a wrench from her belt, rapidly releasing the brackets holding each side of what, if the sheer amount of silver liquid pooling underneath it was any indication, was the damaged section of her coolant system, before carefully removing it. Almost instantly, an acrid smell filled her nose, making her scramble out of the open section of the TIE’s connection arm, gasping for air.

*Bad idea. This was a bad idea!*

Fearful she might expel a lung in her ensuing coughing fit, Rey took a quick look at the cracked pipe section she had taken out and determined the damage was too severe to repair herself, before tossing it up and over the TIE’s port reactor. It flew a meter over it before disappearing into the darkness. Rey listened as she tried to regain full use of her lungs, raising her arms in victory a few seconds later when a loud clang and the sound of several pieces of metal falling served as proof she had hit her target.

“Five points!” she announced, her enthusiasm at her feat broken instantly by a fit of coughing and her stomach twisting itself into a painful knot, as the reason she had dedicated herself to the frustrating endeavor of fixing a TIE once again threatened to take over her thoughts.

*Don’t go there. Don’t go there, Rey.*

Letting herself fall onto her back, legs still inside the open hatch, Rey looked around for an instant. Her eyes went over the dots of light running along the dock’s metal walkways, their glow was not nearly enough to break the deep wall of darkness around her, before her eyes focused on the light above her TIE.

The dock had been empty for hours, the sounds of engines and cannons being tested having long been replaced by the heavy footsteps of the stormtroopers patrolling the dock. Their voices echoed in the structure alongside muffled laughter. It was quiet, peaceful even, and yet, as she laid here, the cold wind coming from the open launching ramp under her swirling around the TIEs, she could do little more than feel angry. The calm she had been sure the night would bring her—for it always had in Jakku—the solitude she so desperately needed to sort out her thoughts, to stop agonizing about everything that was going wrong and find some sort of balance within herself, was well beyond her reach.
Things were not supposed to be going like this. She was not supposed to be—

_**Staring at the ceiling wallowing in self-pity?** She asked herself, rolling her eyes as she did so. _**Back to work, Rey.**

Immediately she was on the move again, cautiously sniffing the air before leaning forwards and reentering the TIE’s connection arm. A few minutes later she was out, one hand forcing the lose strands of hair out of her face as the other pointed the flashlight towards the now repaired coolant pipe and the firmly closed brackets on its ends. Beneath it, the leaked liquid was moving slightly, little waves—probably caused by wind hitting the dock—crashing at the puddle’s edges. She would have to find a way to clean that. Now, however, she had other priorities.

Rey closed the lid, screwed it shut, and made her way back into the TIE’s well lit cockpit.

_**This had better work,**_ she thought, leaning over a small open section of the wall and reconnecting the right wing’s power supply to the cabin. Then, she turned towards the cooling system security valve.

_**Moment of truth…**_

Rey crossed her fingers as she turned the valve, making her way to the pilot’s chair where she waited, expectantly, to see if the check lights would start up on the TIE’s maintenance screen.

She had been at this for hours—going up and down the TIE’s connection arm, repairing parts, fixing fried wiring, testing systems, expecting to see them _**work.**_

It was, she was forced to admit, an absolutely maddening task and it wasn’t made any easier by the fact that whoever had designed the TIE had made it nearly impossible to fix. A slight malfunction, the smallest of breaks, and this absolutely amazing piece of technology—a ship that was any pilot’s dream—was meant to be tossed aside and scrapped. It irked the scavenger in her fiercely—nothing, not the ship, not its systems, not even its pieces, had been meant to outlive their initial value.

_I feel like most things here aren’t,_ Rey mused, sitting on the pilot’s chair, one hand supporting her head as the maintenance screen kept generating its log. _Not even people._

Eyes settling on the dark piece of sky under the dock on the other side of the TIE’s circular window—the silhouette of a ship, lights blinking, appearing over the clouds—Rey sighed. She had no idea what was making her think like that, what was making her so sure the Order existed in some sort of transient state to which everything within it bowed down, but there was a strange atmosphere around her, an unlived _**something**_ that was making her feel she had stepped inside a grave.

_If this is the Force trying to tell me something, I really wish it would stop._

She didn’t need some cryptic message that could be interpreted a dozen different ways weighing on her mind when there was already so much to worry about. She was in need of clarity, not confusion. She was in need of some peace of mind, not still more things to confuse and confound her.

_I don’t need this._

And she definitely hadn’t needed it when first opening the TIE’s ground hatch to access its mechanical parts. As she’d stood there shaking her head at the nightmare inside, it had felt like there was someone right behind her, watching her, observing her every move, leaving her with a horrible sensation she couldn't name, and _she didn’t need this right now._ Even if that sensation was the driving force for her to get the TIE back into working order—because she was going to fix it, even if she had no idea of whom or what she was standing in defiance of, mark her words she would prove them wrong—she really wasn’t in need of more troubling thoughts to motivate her!
Unfortunately, the ship wasn’t exactly helping with those and judging by the sudden sequence of loud warnings coming from the log, her efforts at fixing it had been about as successful as distracting herself from everything else.

*The cooling system is back up at least,* she noted, running her eyes towards the few green lights. That was something. *And the radio is working.*

All the things that relied on the power supply from the right wing, however, weren’t.

“Great,” Rey mumbled, feeling for a screwdriver on her belt and leaning over the maintenance screen to screw the support tighter. “Just great.”

*Back to square one. Again.*

She turned her back on the pilot’s chair, going up the rope dangling from the TIE’s upper access hatch and stepping again onto the connection arm. As much as she had wished for a distraction, a challenge to keep her mind occupied, by now this was proving little more than an exercise in frustration, and the very thing she was trying to keep her mind off of was sneaking its way back in the longer she kept hitting the same problems.

*Things weren’t supposed to be like this!*

Rey kicked a small piece of broken fuselage away from her, eyes widening as she watched it fall into the chasm under the TIE, hit the metal railing running under the ship and then, rather than fall down the launching ramp and into the sky, jump inside the toolbox she had left open there. In about a second, there were tools flying everywhere.

“Five points?”

Rey almost screamed. The part of her that hadn’t instantly died from embarrassment turned towards the masked man now standing at the border between light and darkness, words falling out of her mouth before she could do anything to stop them.

“You heard that?”

And now the tattered remnants of her dignity were gone too.

*Bloody brilliant question, Rey. Would you like to try again for maximum damage to your pride?*

She crossed her arms, observing as Kylo Ren stepped into the light, clothes beaten by the wind.

“What are you doing here?” she snapped.

“I’m not the one who should be asked that,” he pointed out quietly, attention going over the TIE, something in his voice, something within the Force, that was equal parts hopeful and cautious, rising with his words as he glanced at her. “What are you—?”

Rey didn’t wait for him to finish before jumping from the TIE, feet safely hitting the metal bridge Ren was standing on as she landed. It was a gesture she had repeated to the point of becoming second nature by now and yet, for some strange reason, the instant she jumped she felt her heart sinking, fear and then relief washing over her the instant she was on the ground, staring angrily at the darkness hiding his eyes.

“What does it look like?”
“Other than unsafe?”

If looks could kill he would be well on his way to his grave. Seeing as the Force apparently refused to work like that, Rey instead ignored him and walked towards the toolbox to start tossing the tools back inside.

“What happened?”

Rey clenched her hands over the lid, letting the material bite into her hands as she fought to remain silent, to not look anywhere near his eyes.

It was an exercise in futility from the start.

“I got hit.”

“That is obvious.”

“While trying to land at the barracks.”

Knowing that was the reason would probably make him happy.

“Hardly,” Ren replied, looking up and studying the damage to the TIE, an almost inaudible whisper of “damage to the port side convertor coils and phase one reactor” coming from under the mask before he again turned to her, sounding disturbed. “How did this happen?”

Rey took a deep breath, a silent chant of “ignore him, ignore him, ignore him” echoing inside her mind as she continued putting the tools in the box, pushing the answer to that question out of her mind and as far away from his as she could. He had nothing to do with that. She didn’t own him any type of answers and—

Rey blinked. Ren was leaning over the toolbox, offering her a very professional looking black display with the Order’s symbol right in the center of it. Her answer was out before she even had time to think about it.

“No.”

“You might want to take your refusal to Hux,” Ren said, sounding amused but still offering her the display. “Also, if it isn’t too much trouble, do inform me before you do it. That would be one of those once in a lifetime opportunities I wouldn’t want to miss.”

Rey closed her eyes in exasperation. Was anyone—anyone—able to talk to him for more than a few seconds without wanting to throw him at a wall? She herself was this close to taking a page out of the Hux’s book and start saying whatever came to her mind where Ren was concerned.

“He would be proud.”

“Stop doing that,” she snapped, snatching the display out of his hand if just for the sake of shutting him up. Her eyes fell on something she recognized, at least: coordinates, routes, and what looked a lot like an inventory. She had a very good idea of what this was just by glancing at it. “The answer is most definitely still no.”

“Hux. This was hardly my idea.”

Rey glanced at him, expression deathly serious.

“I can tell,” she replied, putting the display on the floor next to the toolbox, something in the group of
coordinates making her study it with more attention, focusing on the destination as shown on the city map. “Are those the barracks?”

That same instant, Ren’s clear amusement with her initial answer vanished, attention turning from the TIE to her.

“Is this still about—?”

Rey looked up, anger bubbling to the surface.

“Finn,” she snarled in a low voice, interrupting him before he could say that identification number he kept insisting on using. “His name is Finn.”

In her fury, she threw a screwdriver inside the toolbox so roughly that it flew back out. It never hit the ground, though. Instead, the Force curled around it, sending it flying directly into Ren’s gloved hand. For some strange reason, she was sure he was chewing on his lips as he stopped on the other side of the toolbox and offered it to her.

“I don’t need help.”

He crouched all the same, putting it inside the toolbox, head rising so that the dark visor met her eyes. Despite that same dark feeling from before shrouding him like a cloak, his tone was unmistakably gentle.

“It is about him.”

If she had to chose what she hated most about him, it would always be how kind he could sound.

“Have you satisfied yourself about his safety?” Ren queried, fingers tapping on the toolbox. Rey didn’t answer; not that it mattered, he was getting his answers all the same. “You saw him,” he murmured, eyes still on hers. “Can you sense him now?”

This again.

Expression hardening, Rey looked straight into the dark visor, certain for some reason she was staring straight at his eyes even if she couldn’t see them.

“What does it matter to you?”

Ren tilted his head, looking thoughtful.

“That your friend did quite a good job keeping the barracks under the Order’s control,” he informed her. “Phasma has requested he be placed under her command. She is not easily impressed. You should be proud.”

She was not proud; she was livid.

“You left him with her?”

Rey was on her feet instantly, stepping away from him, looking up and down the hive-like structure of the dock, struggling with a sudden wave of panic that was screaming at her to get to the barracks, to get to Finn now!

“For one who calls him friend, you have an appalling lack of faith in him.”

Faith? This was not about—Rey turned on her heels, advancing on Ren as he too got to his feet. The
part of her mind that was still hard wired to Jakku, to simple survival, taking notice of the lightsaber strapped to his leg—not the best choice if he wanted to use it—and the careful, somewhat unbalanced way he rose before stopping right in front of him.

“He will get caught,” she pointed out in a low voice. “You may not care about anyone but yourself but—”

“What do you know about FN-2187?”

“Stop calling him that.”

Ren tilted his head, gazing into her eyes.

“The stormtrooper who refused to fight,” he muttered, raising his hand towards one of the tools now floating around them and catching it mid-flight—which of them had sent the tools flying into the air?—before breaking eye contact. His voice had lost all gentleness. It sounded harsh. It sounded—

“He certainly knows how to romanticize treason.”

Angry.

Only, the feeling in itself wasn’t anger. She knew anger, both her own and his, and this—she didn’t know this feeling. Though, frankly, she didn’t care to. She was having none of whatever had brought on his current tantrum.

“He told the truth,” she retorted, and even if that hadn’t been exactly the case from the beginning, it mattered little now. “And he was doing what was right.”

That hadn’t come out the way she wanted it to, but she stood by her words even as Ren turned to look at her, a sigh—what would actually have sounded a lot like a chuckle if it wasn’t for its heaviness—coming from under the mask.

It infuriated her to no end, him treating her like a stupid child.

“If you want to say something, say it.”

Like he needed to be prompted to do so. In fact, it surprised Rey a lot more that he wasn’t doing so already and instead standing still, attention on the TIE, clothes softly flapping in the wind.

“I’ve lost count of the times I have heard those exact words,” he finally confided, voice tired, his next words answering a question she hadn’t voiced. “Your Master’s Jedi. The New Republic. The First Order. The Resistance. Everyone talks of right and forgets to say for whom.”

Rey blinked, stunned. That was not what she had been expecting. She had been prepared to hear him have a go at Finn and to rip right through him for that. This—it didn’t even sound like him. And the answer to that question—because there was a question in his words, though she didn’t know if he was asking himself or her—was one she could answer confidently.

“For the galaxy.”

His shoulders slumped.

“That was their answer too,” Ren murmured. “And yet, they all meant different things by it. None of their truths coincide.”

He stopped at that, shaking his head, fists clenching as he did so. He looked troubled. He looked…
Rey was studying him now. A strange sensation that she didn’t know him overcame her. A sense that, as senseless as it sounded, this was not Kylo Ren was wrapping itself around her as he stared at the sky under the dock, having seemingly forgotten her presence, and at the precise moment the silence broke, crushed by a shout, a plea, a name.

“Ben.”

A shiver ran through him, but it wasn’t until Rey spoke, her request lacking even the slightest bit of hostility, that he recoiled, stepping away from her, trying to take refuge in the shadows.

“Take off that mask.”

Time seemed to stand still, dragging itself around them as they stood face to face and the voice she could have sworn had risen side by side with her words disappeared.

This was not as it had been on Starkiller, that lightning fast, confident reaction. Instead, she found him hesitating, searching her eyes as the darkness behind him swelled, creeping ever nearer, looking almost as if someone was within it. Watching. Waiting.

Then, finally, the gloved hands rose to the helmet, touching its sides, and it opened. Before he could pull it off, his body tensed, head snapping to the right and letting go of the helmet as though it had burned him. Ren closed the distance between them and reached forward to grasp the fabric of her hood. He pulled it over her head, fingers holding one of the sides so that her face was hidden. It was a question of seconds and, before Rey knew it, a group she hadn’t heard approach was stopping just a few meters away from them. Stormtroopers. She could see little more than their white leg protections from her present position, but there was no doubt about that. Nor, she might add, about the identity of the man behind the very cautious and somewhat confused question that followed:

“Is this a bad time?”

“Far from it, Governor. Your timing is impeccable.”

Ren sounded like he wanted to murder someone. Actually, that made two of them. She too wanted to murder someone. The difference was who.

“What is this about?”

“Your Captain has sent a stormtrooper battalion to bolster the battalion presently under your command,” Lando Calrissian’s informed them. “I took it upon myself to—”

“Make sure they didn’t get lost? I’m touched.”

Rey, on the other hand, was boiling.

She was centimeters—centimeters! —from his chest! She was so close she could smell him. She had but to glance up to see several scorch marks on his clothes and his black hair peeking from under his helmet. She could hear both his actual voice and the one coming from the distorter at the same time.

“The supplies?”

Had he no concept of personal space? Of propriety? Of how this looked to observers? The only time she had been closer to him than this had been in Takodana’s forest and Force knew what the hell had possessed him, then or now!
“The supplies are still being routed here, Sir. Also, the mess hall closed several hours ago.”

Rey’s stomach twisted at those words, her considerations about kicking him if he didn’t let go of her hood this very moment forgotten. As if noticing her change in demeanor, Kylo Ren’s attention went from the soldiers to her.

“You haven’t eaten.”

“Not hungry.”

“In almost two days.”

This was going too far.

“Stop. Reading. My mind.”

“Shall I go further and refrain from listening to your stomach?”

And now she was thinking of kicking him again.

He turned to the soldiers.

“Send something up.”

What?!

His fingers let go of her hood as the soldiers left, right hand going for something on his belt and passing so close to his lightsaber that even though she felt no aggression coming from him, Rey was going for her own. It never reached it. Instead, she was left staring at her own hands and the item wrapped in black and emblazoned with the Order's logo that he had put in them. Portions. These were portions. They didn’t look remotely like the ones from Jakku but…

Her expression darkened, a very sinister hypothesis going through her mind as she studied the wrapping. These sorts of things happened on Jakku—something like kindness, like a friendly gesture of goodwill, but if one didn't take the proper precautions one ended up dead. Or worse.

“It isn’t poisoned,” Ren sighed, breaking the stream of her thoughts as he moved after Calrissian, who had remained after the soldiers left. “I’m under the impression this is not a social call.”

“I fear it isn’t. Your other Knight, Nephys, sent me.”

Rey almost dropped the food, hurrying towards Calrissian, listening as he kept talking.

“There have been some developments in your absence he wishes you to be informed of.”

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- The Enforcer

Comments, while not necessary, are eternally appreciated.
His adversary was charging, feet crushing the snow as he raised the blue lightsaber, teeth clenched, and a war cry on his lips.

"Your other Knight, Nephys, sent me," Calrissian’s words echoed between the trees that existed only in Kylo's mind, their urgency rippling through the Force as Kylo, snow falling around him, deflected a first blow—high to his throat—then a second lower one, clearly meant to cripple his right leg. "There have been some developments in your absence he wishes you to be informed of."

A third blow, testing, as Kylo started to advance, the same onslaught of information that had hit him as he was approached by Calrissian some hours prior still clamoring mercilessly through his mind, mingling side by side with his memory of the events on Starkiller. His opponent closed both his hands over the lightsaber's hilt, determination written on his face as he raised it, crashing it against the red saber. Once. Twice.

Nothing—absolutely nothing—of which he had been informed had come as a surprise. He had known them to be here—his bloody guard dogs—but to have confirmation come from FN-2187 of all people was unanticipated. He wasn’t expecting any sort of cooperation from him and to have it after just six bloody days was too sudden a change—too suitable a development—not to raise his suspicions.

Their weapons crashed, engaging in a series of rapid blows as his adversary was forced to fall back, stumbling over the snow, momentarily unbalanced.

Creative, clever, top of the FN Corps since their introduction, a model soldier—Kylo remembered every word he had read as he closed both his hands over the hilt, swinging it with such violence his adversary crashed to the frozen forest floor. It probably spoke for itself that rather than just listing FN-2187 many splendid qualities, Phasma had attached a note next to his scores that spoke of, if not actual pride, then at least some sort of ill disguised satisfaction: the Captain’s own training scores, red circles noting every single instance in which she had been matched or came close to being matched.

The man jumped to his feet, his next attacks surprisingly clumsy, cutting through nothing but air as Kylo easily evaded them, the recollection of a short note under “Tactics”—a third score clearly identified as “Armitage” that seemed to indicate that a nineteen year old Hux had given his evaluators a severe group migraine during testing and forced them to mark over top grade—made him clench his teeth in exasperation as he raised his saber, swinging it in a series of rapid blows as his adversary staggered back.

Was it some fleeting semblance of clairvoyance that had kept Phasma from going around noting every single one of Hux’s damned achievements side by side with those of FN-2187’s? Because, frankly, Kylo doubted he—or the display he was reading, for that matter—were going to survive much more of this glowing monstrosity of an evaluation.

And then, of course, he reached the final notes, penned personally by Phasma’s sharp hand.
“Prone to let empathy interfere with his actions.

In need of experience outside of simulations.

Signaled for officer’s training.”

An officer. A bloody officer!

The red blade roared, cutting through the air, failing to hit his adversary’s neck by inches.

He had doubted Phasma's assessment was true after FN-2187’s initial desertion. He remembered FN-2187 as he had been on Jakku: frozen in the middle of a battle, grappling with something dangerously close to a panic attack, his mind consumed by the death around him as he stood unable to breathe, unable to fight or even to avenge his fallen friend. Panic and grief had made his mind transparent and desertion had been at the forefront of it. He had wished to run, to put a galaxy between him and the Order, to never look back, and Kylo should have executed him just for thinking it. Instead he had stood on the other side of the battlefield and hesitated. He had let him live and held his silence.

Why?

Their weapons crashed, the blows unbalancing his adversary enough that he ended up trapped against a tree, weapons locked.

Had that been done in pity?

Burning flesh, a scream, and then a vicious blow, aimed to kill.

Had his own weakness swayed his hand when he should have swung, or had he simply not cared enough to act?

The red saber cut through a tree, his adversary diving under the blade, rapidly moving away from him, feet sinking into the snow as he tried to regain his balance.

Did it even matter when the next time he had seen the traitor, FN-2187 had discovered that there was strength to be found in fear and dared use it against him?

A strong blow, desperate, but still carefully aimed. It hit his shoulder, the burning pain waking something that had been dormant as he turned, snarling.

If he only could have taken pleasure in the final moments of their confrontation, in the brutality it allowed him to display. As much as he hated him, however, it all remained the same. It gave him no pleasure to replay it all. In the end he had, incomprehensibly, found himself sparing him again in his mind's eye, his only wish as he disarmed the former stormtrooper and ripped his back open to make a simple fact clear—

I could have killed you.

I can still kill you.

Don’t ever forget that.

He had no explanation for why he hadn’t followed through with it on Starkiller. He was one for actions not threats, but he had not been thinking clearly enough at the time to have been planning anything or even to be able to focus on something besides the fact that it hadn’t worked. Something
had gone wrong, he had failed in some way, and instead of feeling invigorated by Han Solo's death, he felt weakened, a pain far worse than any he had ever felt threatening to destroy him from the inside taking hold. It hadn’t been until much later, after the attack on the Resistance base, that he had become grateful he hadn’t been of clear enough mind to cut the traitor down in that forest.

Kylo clenched his teeth, saber spinning in his hands as he started to pace. Around him, the frozen contours of forest were losing their clarity, collapsing to reveal the darkened ground level of the Order’s dock in Cloud City and a stormtrooper officer, face covered, a white shoulder blade showing her rank.

“Send a group.”

She gave him a respectful nod, approaching the soldiers—all of them donning the infantry’s white protections—waiting next to Kylo’s command shuttle’s open access ramp as he kept to his irritated musings about FN-2187.

A future officer. He nearly scoffed aloud.

That at least explained why under her calm, aloof demeanor, Phasma had been so disturbed. Hux’s reasons he had understood well, as the General had been doing what he did best: evaluating future risks and planning for them. FN-2187 mattered nothing to him when compared with the possibility of the Order’s ranks hiding hundreds like him. From the moment he had shot down the stolen TIE, Hux had been twisting his mind around a way of stopping a possible stampede. From the moment the Finalizer’s cannons had failed to kill the TIEs occupants, however, Phasma had been accessing the individual and the risk he alone could represent.

In a way, she must have felt like she was hunting herself. It explained the large reward on FN-2187’s head. It explained her eagerness to kill him the instant she had got confirmation of his presence at the now destroyed Resistance base. She had considered him an asset and, having lost it, she had wanted it destroyed.

As far as Kylo was concerned, however, he hadn’t been remotely impressed with FN-2187. He could respect the courage he had displayed in facing him on Starkiller—he could count on one hand the number of people that had chosen to go down fighting rather than fleeing him—but were it not for Phasma’s concern making him curious enough to research his record, he would never have considered FN-2187 for the task ahead.

Even so, he had doubted. He normally trusted the Captain’s judgment implicitly, but this he had wished to test for himself, to get his own answers on his own terms, and so upon leaving Cloud City he had left him behind, responsible for a city Kylo had previously made sure would be at least manageable. He had been curious of what he would find on his return, but he hadn’t been expecting Essen, Lyr and Rhyase to almost blow up the Finalizer or the mess he had ended up coming back to. It was luck they had arrived in time to stop the Order’s troops from being massacred, but it was not luck that had kept them alive up until they did. An anxiety-ridden, overly emotional traitor to the Order he might be, but FN-2187 was what his file claimed and he could be useful, far more useful than Kylo had initially thought or planned for.

I can make this work.

Or, at least, he would find a way to make it work, when he wrapped his mind around why the traitor was so eager to cooperate and inform him of what had happened in his absence. There was no love lost here. FN-2187 both despised and feared him. His feelings towards the former stormtrooper were a lot less charitable. So why? There had to be a reason. There was always a reason. Everyone expected something in return.
What is it?

What was that he wanted? He could even forgive Calrissian for going over the complete volume of the wondrous achievements of FN-2187 if his mind would only give him the bloody answer rather than forcing him to listen to the in depth commentary of FN-2187’s heroic leadership of the last three days!

The stormtrooper officer gave him a warning sign. Looking up, Kylo found four of her subordinates jumping to their feet and moving to surround him, the electric fields of the Z6 already connected. Almost immediately, the Force cracked around him, a clear warning, followed by the simultaneous charging of the group, succeeding in doing what he had been trying to do for hours now: shutting down the irritating line of thought that had made him go over FN-2187 and what he might be planning and instead redirect his rising frustration to a more productive endeavor—training.

The red blade cut through the air, the brutal sweeping movement making the cracked crystal of his saber roar as the soldier to his right raised his weapon, a low grunt coming from under the helmet as the lightsaber crashed into his baton’s conductor vanes and then twisted, releasing itself from the electric field and moving in a short ark to intercept a second weapon, this one coming from his left and aimed for his ribs—more specifically, targeting the wound left by the furball’s bowcaster.

So it still shows, Kylo mused, evading a simultaneous attack from his back and front and seeing the batons fall, their up-down movement cutting through the place he had been standing as he deflected a third incoming strike. The weapons met, engaging in a series of rapid blows until a well aimed kick broke through the closest soldier’s defenses, sending him crashing to the floor, the impact making the baton fly away from him.

One less.

He twisted the saber aiming for the soldier to his left, only to see him dive, rolling out of harm’s way and getting to his feet, breathing ragged, covered head following his defeated colleague as he rapidly moved away from the still ongoing battle and then making the baton rotate in his hand. It was some kind of sign. The same instant, the soldiers still engaging Kylo tried for his ribs, identical strikes coming at him from different directions. One of them grazed his clothes as he moved away, the other slipped along the lightsaber as its hilt flew up and crashed into the soldier’s throat.

Two.

Kicking the weapon away from the fallen soldier's hands as he still tried to rise, Kylo turned to his two remaining adversaries. The closest of them rotated a baton in his left hand while the other approached carefully, studying him, muttering something under his breath that made his colleague close his hand over the baton’s handle, determined.

Kylo frowned, raising the saber defensively as the soldier approached. Even without reading his mind, he recognized this for what it was. A sacrifice. That meant—

He twisted the saber, making it lock unto the baton’s conductor vanes to force it out of the soldier’s hands. He offered no resistance, letting go of the weapon immediately and diving as the last soldier appeared from right behind him. It was either evade or defend. It took the baton crashing into the saber for him to know he should have gone with the first.

It felt as if his shoulder had been ripped open again, the limb losing all strength as he stepped back, making the Force close around the arm, forcing it to move, hand to firmly grasp the weapon, as the soldier—noticing weakness—renewed his efforts to pound his defenses into oblivion.
It was a welcome change—a needed one—that had become even more urgent when one considered that the last sparring partner he had that hadn’t minded putting blows through every single hole in his defenses had been Skywalker. He should have remembered sooner that Riot Control would have very few qualms about following down that path and trying to do the same. Not that he was matched by any stormtrooper, especially not—

*FN-2187 was hardly what I call competition!*

Fury exploded around him as Kylo rolled over himself, left hand breaking through the soldier’s defenses and grabbing hold of his wrist, immobilizing the blow as his shoulder collided with that of the soldier, the red blade between them, inches away from his half amazed, half terrified opponent’s neck.

“Dismissed,” Kylo called, letting go of the soldier’s wrist as he stepped away from the soldier, saber still ablaze as the group saluted him, their commanding officer joining them as they went up the spiral stairs.

Rotating the saber in his hands, Kylo disengaged it, the roar ceasing to echo up the hive-like structure above him as he looked around and spotted Lando Calrissian now fighting to make his way passed a crowd of pilots and down the spiral stairs. As he stepped onto it, the contents of his mind become as obvious to Kylo as if he was probing. A large, half destroyed white atrium came into view and then three people he knew—a slim alien wearing a face that didn’t belong to him, a short woman with dark almond-shaped eyes, and a muscular man, his face disfigured by the same scar that had cost him an eye.

Essen, Rhyase, and Lyr.

The Force thundered furiously, anger threatening to explode from within him as Kylo turned his back on Lando Calrissian, untying his hair as he approaching the shuttle’s ramp to fish his cloak from under the protective garments he had removed.

As far as productive ways of dealing with his temper went, training, it seemed, had just backfired. He was more furious seeing that particular trio now then when he had first listened to Calrissian’s tale about a group of Force sensitives that had crash landed inside a skyscraper and then proceeded to attack the Order’s forces. If he was being honest with himself, however, it was not the information or from who it had came from that most angered him—even if the later certainly did rile his temper—but the sudden awareness that for all his certainties about the trio’s whereabouts he hadn’t, even once, actually felt any of them here.

*First Veshay, now this.*

Kylo pulled the cloak around his shoulders, one hand pressing the painful scar dissecting his right shoulder as an admirably serene presence approached him.

“Yes, Governor?”

His voice, not the slightly contemptuous one that emanated from the distorter but that which was his own, seemed to break through Calrissian’s professionalism, surprise filling his mind as he stopped, momentarily taken aback.

*Not what he expected then.*

Kylo pursed his lips, irritated. His voice was never what anyone expected. It didn’t fit him. It was too soft to be commanding, too kind to pose a threat—it was all that he despised about himself, all he
fought to release himself from being paraded about for the entire galaxy to hear.

“Speak, Governor,” he snapped.

Calrissian jumped, mind rapidly regaining its bearings.

“Forgive my boldness but...” He coughed. “This trio that attacked us, am I correct in assuming that you know who they are?”

Kylo sighed, fury now at a rapid boil.

“You should refrain from asking questions for which you already have the answers, Governor.”

“My conjectures hardly count as facts,” he stated, cape caught in the wind coming from the launching ramps above them. “Those were Knights?”

The light above the shuttle exploded, shards of glass raining over the ship as Kylo closed his eyes, forcing himself to reign his temper in.

“Again,” he snarled, pulling the hood over his head, face disappearing in darkness, before he turned to the Governor, catching a glimpse of curiosity going over his face as he tried to see passed the shadows. “You told me this trio attacked the garrison, killing two of the soldiers and trying to do the same to you and its commanding officer.” Calrissian nodded. “And Nephys?”

“I believe they were trying to get him alone before taking him out,” the Governor clarified as Kylo’s eyes bored into his, the image of Essen pinning FN-2187 to the ground as Lyr grabbed hold of Rhyase’s wrist to stop her from slitting his throat now rising from Calrissian’s memory.

As clear as it was, however, it was not clear enough for him to make any sort of conclusions.

Nephys, like Veshay, had been capable of hiding both his presence and identity. Nephys, contrary to every single Force sensitive he had ever met, was adverse to using the Force for violence. That is not its purpose, he used to say.

He’s dead now.

Had he been so adverse to violence that he wouldn’t even defend himself against a threat? Would it pain him to know that Kylo didn’t know the answer? That after everything Nephys had done, all he had sacrificed, Kylo hadn’t known him well enough to answer something as simple as that?

Kylo raised his eyes, blindly looking up the dock, until he found a lonely dark figure making her way across one of the walkways, covered face studying a display. Rey. She felt conflicted. Or at least she did up until she looked down, eyes meeting his before she turned her back on him, a very clear “it’s still no” echoing from her mind.

I haven’t even said anything.

And, truth be told, he was not thinking about Hux’s thrice dammed Unloading Operation as much as he was focusing on the jacket—Isahaine’s jacket—that Rey was wearing and Calrissian’s worried query.

“Is it possible they left?”

“It is possible.”

But not a gamble he was willing to make. Not a worthwhile risk. It was, well, curious that, for some
reason, this particular hypothesis seemed to be as disturbing to the Governor as it was to him—a pity that he was far too preoccupied, that he had far too urgent matters to consider, to search his mind for the reason why.

Expression hardening as Rey ran up one of the spiral staircases, disappearing from sight, he turned away from Lando Calrissian, entering his shuttle without a word. Rather than going to his quarters and making his way to the shower as he had originally meant, however, he hit the ramp’s commands, moving deeper and deeper inside the ship as it closed and entering a small door used for maintenance.

A blast of vapor hit his boots as he walked in, locking the door with his mind as he moved towards the communication system and the long distance radio he had attached to it. It took a few minutes, an eternity in his mind, for the channel he entered to even connect, another even tenser one for it to be answered and a dark figure, that of a Knight, head respectfully lowered, to make its appearance.

“You are alone.”

“As per your instructions.”

Kylo nodded, attention going to the door behind him, assuring himself of the sturdiness of the lock he kept firmly in place with the Force. It was unnecessary, in a way even laughable, that he did so. There was only one person here that could break through it and hiding behind a locked door had never kept him safe from that which he feared. Nothing ever had.

“We have a problem,” he announced, quietly. Isahaine straightened at his words, raising her eyes to meet his, the white mask she covered her face with a specter of light among the darkness surrounding them both. “Essen, Lyr and Rhyase have broken away from the ranks. I can’t sense or confirm their presence on my side. It’s possible that they will appear on yours.”

“You orders?”

“Keep to your assignment. Engage them only if they leave you no choice.”

Isahaine nodded, looking to her left, vigilant, before speaking to him again.

“There is a possibility they went to Leader Snoke,” she reminded him, voicing his own concerns. “If it comes to his knowledge—”

Her words hung in the air around him as Kylo closed his eyes, mind stretching beyond his body as he listened, not knowing what terrified him more: the silence and what it entailed, or that it would end—that sooner or later, this respite would be over.

“It is possible he knows already,” he admitted, and her shoulders tensed. It is possible he knew from the beginning.

“What do we do?”

Kylo studied the white mask, eyes boring into the slits hiding his Knight’s eyes until he caught a glimpse of pale gold, unwavering and devoted, their expression steely, a mirror to his own resolve.

“We endure.”

Isahaine gave him a short nod, right hand raised over her heart as the transmission cut off and Kylo stood silently looking at the empty space her image had occupied.
Endure.

He had never known any other path.

Chapter End Notes

Next up -- The General, because we haven't checked in with Leia and those pesky Knights of Ren in a hot second.

Comments are just about the only hope we have for finishing this story before the next movie comes out.

An aside -- the two bonus chapters will include background on the many, many Knights of Ren, as well as an interlude looking into Finn's childhood with the Order.
“Inquisitorius,” a voice whispered breathlessly, unfettered wonder clear in the man's tone. Normally so carefully concealed, his Imperial accent flowed freely, flush with the sort of reverence reserved for childhood fantasies made real. “I thought them dead, murdered, I–”

He fell into an embarrassed silence at the sound of the door sliding open behind him.

Mind still consumed by the tactical meeting she had just left, Leia took a moment to refocus her attention on the man waiting for her inside the small room, her eyes coming to rest on those belonging to the leader of the Resistance Intelligence Department. Hastily, he returned the helmet he had been examining to its place on the table, looking more like a child caught sneaking sweets than anything else.

“My apologies, General, this is hardly what I requested your presence for,” he began, clearly uncomfortable.

Doing her best to keep her attention as far away from the line of masks and weapons surrendered by their recent guests as she possibly could—and the nagging sensation of being observed by them prevailing despite her efforts—Leia made a pacifying gesture in Cody’s direction, taking a chair at the table as she did so.

“Commander Dameron was delayed. We should allow him a few minutes before starting,” she said, accepting the display he offered her and signaling vaguely in the direction of the diamond shaped mask Cody had been inspecting on her arrival that was so unlike those of the other Knights. She herself had concluded as Cody had. It was strongly reminiscent of the visors worn by a much older order, the Inquisitorius, a group of fallen Jedi that had served under the Empire and whom she and much of the galaxy had believed extinct after the last war. “I had meant to ask you about that mask.”

Cody visibly clammed up at her words.

“Knights are not my specialty,” he reminded her, defensiveness turning into deflection almost instantly. “If your son hadn’t accompanied Master Skywalker into his self imposed exile, I might have had an angle with them. If Ben had come back with this envoy you trusted the map to, General, I could have found a way to get him into a position to give us information. Alas, he didn’t. That gives me very little to work with.”

Leia's expression saddened, guilt battering her on two fronts—most of the Resistance, and galaxy, for that matter, believed her son had gone into exile with her brother after the massacre at the academy, but that lie was an old weight on her shoulders. The sound of her Commander forcibly replacing his Imperial lilt with a more neutral tone, as if he had just revealed an unforgivable secret about himself and would be put on trial for it at any moment, was a newer but no less heavy one.

I’m not accusing you of anything, Commander, Leia thought, shaking her head. The only person that can be blamed for getting us into this mess with the Knights is me.
The truth was that the eight days since the group had arrived had been an absolute disaster, their presence having disturbed the wasp’s nest that had been lying dormant since the destruction of the Hosnian system and making her more than aware of the underlying tensions and suspicions that had been slowly growing well before that. Disturbingly—worryingly—it felt as if many members of the Resistance took as much issue with those fighting alongside them as with the Knights themselves, suspicions and accusations being rained down upon anyone unfortunate enough to have been identified as an “Imperial” and, by proxy, responsible for leading the Knights here in the first place.

*If they only knew…*

She still wanted to throttle Kylo Ren for this. He couldn't have been blind to the problems this would cause and she had *explicitly* told him not to, though *Force forbid* he listen to anyone's input but his own and—

*It doesn’t matter.*

What mattered right now was ensuring she didn't lose the leader of her Intelligence Department and his full team to this absolute freighter wreck of uncertainty and accusation—something that, judging by his defensiveness, was not at all outside the realm of possibilities, even given how unfalteringly loyal he and his team had been since defecting to their cause.

Sighing, Leia raised her eyes to him.

“As sure as I am that you would be more than capable of fooling us all and getting half the Order inside the Resistance if you so desired,” she began, “I don’t doubt your loyalty. I know you had nothing to do with this.”

Cody seemed taken aback by both her blunt honesty and her trust. Just a second later, however, he had dropped his gaze, surprise turning into a bitter smile.

“They are one of very few,” he told her. “The atmosphere inside the Resistance is not the most welcoming towards someone of my origin right now.”

He was still speaking in that neutral accent, insisting on a subterfuge he had never cared to use with her before and that he had no reason to use with her now. She had known who and what Cody was from the moment he had appeared at the Resistance’s doorstep with a pile of information on the Order in his hands and his full team in tow, all of them swayed in the wake of the Hosnian system’s obliteration.

*One more breach of the Republic’s so called ‘peace treaties,’* Leia mused. One more bit of proof of how deeply broken interstellar relations and diplomacy had been after the last war and of how little had been done to fix that.

*We spent thirty years kicking the Imperial territories into submission. We should have expected they would fight for their way of life the same way we did.*

Resistance. Rebellion. For all his knowledge about the First Order, Cody had not been part of it. In fact, from the little she had been told, both he and his team had been trained in the same way Imperial agents once were and had been working as liaisons for the Order—collecting data, identifying planetary weaknesses—long before the fleet had ever stepped out of the Unknown Regions. They had kept to their mission as former Imperial representatives in the New Republic right up until the moment the Hosnian System had been destroyed.

Too late, many would state, following that with the typical accusations that did nothing but open
more wounds. She, however, had long learned to be grateful, not judgmental, of these small reminders that the galaxy had not gone insane as a whole, that some people were not so embittered in ideology and steeped in anger to not recognize the butchering of an entire system for what it was—wrong.

Sanity, if nothing else, might still save us.

With as many factions in play as there were, it was truly their only hope. The New Republic had always been a mixed bag of former Alliance and Imperial territories vying for power, a never-ending power struggle wherein the former Alliance powers put sanctions upon Imperial territories that were little more than thinly veiled punishments for the prior war, while the Imperial territories, smaller in number, often lost the political battle of wills and suffered all the more for it. That the First Order had emerged from the hardest hit of the Imperial worlds should shock exactly no one, and yet the Alliance powers in the New Republic denied the severity of the problem, passing off blame while the Order grew in both numbers and influence, forcing the few who saw the impending storm for what it was to muddle together resources to form pockets of resistance groups, her Resistance forces principle among them.

She sighed, shaking her head, and turned back to Cody, running her fingers over the display in her hands.

“Please speak normally, Cody.”

The Commander frowned at the request, but he acquiesced, if a bit hesitantly.

“If you so wish.”

It was probably strange that that accent of his actually gave her some hope.

“Your son won’t be joining us?” he queried, continuing his prior train of thought.

Leia closed her eyes for an instant, letting the words roll over her. A strange mixture of both gratitude and loss rose up at the thought that no one in the Resistance had known Ben enough—or known him at all—to realize how contrary to his personality both exiling himself and not rising to help were, before washing over her with its full weight as she remembered Cody’s clash with Ben’s adopted persona.

“You might have found yourself at odds with him, Commander.” She turned to the helmets, voice tired. “Ben was an idealist and hardly what I would call a Republic sympathizer.”

“Then we have something in common,” Cody replied, dismissively, glancing at the helmets. “I fear I will be of little help as far as our present ‘guests’ go. The Knights are secretive. As for the Inquisitorius—”

Cody’s expression became thoughtful as his voice trailed off. He picked the helmet up again, almost absentmindedly, and stared into the black visor, a strange kind of longing in his eyes.

“I grew up with stories about these people,” he told her. “They were this bastion of virtue set on defending Imperial values and our way of life from those set on destroying us.” He smiled sadly at that. “When our planetary defenses collapsed, I remember looking at the sky, thinking they would come to protect us. They never did.”

He returned the mask to the table with an almost reverential care, his normally cold demeanor coming back in full force the instant he let go of the mask.
“I doubt, however, that nostalgic propaganda and fairy tales are what you desire, General,” he said, looking around the small room, taking in its naked grey walls and pale electric blue lights as he paused. “All information I had access to pointed to the group having been extinguished by the time Emperor Palpatine died. The remaining brothers and sisters were all thought to have been killed in battle or executed in the years that followed the High Inquisitor’s death. I believe this,” he signaled towards the Inquisitor’s helmet. “Makes it safe to assume some of that information was doctored to serve as a contingency plan, something to keep us blind to the full reach of the Inquisitorius and the Emperor.”

Leia shook her head at that, attention never leaving Cody’s pale face.

“There are some things we do know,” she reminded him. “The observatory on Jakku. The Order.”

“All of them proof that the Emperor was playing several hands ahead of both the Alliance and his own Intelligence Services.” Cody frowned, a deep crevice forming between his eyebrows. “I believe it is safe to assume from a purely operational standpoint that whatever was left of the Inquisitorius was sent into the Unknown Regions at some point. If this was done in the period leading to the battle of Endor—and considering the number of skirmishes between the Alliance and the Empire at the time, it would have been easy to blame the disappearance of one or more Star Destroyers on your side—it’s entirely possible that some of their members accompanied an expedition into that region.”

Soft knocking at the door cut off anything else Cody may have said. Both he and Leia turned towards it as Poe's sun-bitten face peered inside, the rest of his body following it while transporting what looked a lot like a floor grid. Mimicking his initial movement, optics peering from the door, BB8 entered a mere instant later, rolling happily behind Poe.

“My apologies, General, we had a problem,” the pilot announced, pointing to the grid now leaning against his legs before he continued. “One of the Knights found a way to throw this through the bars and at the guards. One of them is now nursing a broken arm and categorically refuses to say what provoked them into attacking.” Poe shook his head in clear frustration, knowing as well as anyone that there was likely some sort of provocation in the current climate. “As a point of interest, these grids happen to be welded to the floor. I would like to suggest we take a different approach to dealing with this group, General.”

“Such as Force restrainers?” Cody offered, coldly, green eyes meeting Leia’s. “I heard they're still available on the black market.”

Poe’s brown eyes flared, leaving no time for Leia to have her own say.

“They're scared. Force knows what they'll do if we try to—”

He stopped, the layers of meaning in his words seemingly hitting him so suddenly that he was left staring at Leia, clearly trying to process what he had just said.

_The joys of being Force sensitive_, Leia thought, sympathetically. She knew quite well what was going through Poe's mind, though it really didn't take the Force to recognize his stunned expression at feeling empathy for the situation of perceived enemies. Her sympathy had little time to shine, however, as Cody was talking again.

“Most of this ships' crew is calling to have them flushed out of an airlock,” he informed Leia, shrugging at her outraged expression. “My solution is more humane.”

Poe rolled his eyes, snapping out of his musings.
“I wish them a slow painful death as much as the next guy, but what I meant was taking an approach that doesn’t involve antagonizing them more than we already did by shoving them inside the brig.”

Leia blinked, momentarily confused.

“The brig?”

Poe frowned.

“Should I assume placing them there wasn’t what you ordered?”

It wasn’t. She had personally escorted them to the officer’s quarters and left them under heavy guard.

“I will have a word with Captain Xarv when we are finished.”

She was going to bloody murder him.

“Take a seat, Poe.”

The pilot obeyed, leaning the floor grid against the wall before sitting in the chair right next to hers, one hand running through his curly hair as he looked around, studying the now completely overcrowded room with some confusion.

“Before we continue, is there a reason we're holding this meeting inside a storage cabinet?”

“High security locker,” Cody corrected, tone leaving no room for questions.

Poe’s expression became visibly mischievous.

“Is that what you call it when Allya is guarding the door?”

“What?!”

Leia was forced to grab hold of Cody’s arm before he had the opportunity to jump out of the room and scare the girl half to death.

“She is acting under my command,” Leia stated. “Now, where were we?”

Leaning against the wall, accent again concealed, Cody gave Poe a summary of their conversation. When he finished, the pilot was staring thoughtfully at the black helmet and double-bladed spinning lightsaber hilt at the end of the lineup.

“I think I know who your Inquisitor is,” he muttered. “Dark skinned woman, shaved head.” Poe shrugged at both her and Cody’s inquisitive expressions. “I had a Knight hunting down my droid. She and that blue eyed guy were looking at it when they arrived. Yes, I do know how paranoid I sound.”

Cody chuckled at that. Leia, on the other hand, felt like cringing. She would not think about the identity of the Knight Poe had mentioned. She would not think about her son.

She took a deep, steadying breath, forcing her mind to replace the image of Kylo Ren with that of the Knight, the woman, Poe had just mentioned.

“She's too young to have been an Imperial Era member,” she pointed out. “She would have been no more than a child at the time the Emperor died. An apprentice, if even that. Of far more concern to me is the Inquisitor who trained her.”
“I can understand being worried about another Force user being in play, but how does knowing who help us?” Poe queried.

“The Inquisitorius were unlike any other adepts in the Empire,” Cody replied. “They were trained by Lord Vader himself to hunt down and destroy the remaining members of the Jedi Order.”

“We don’t know much about Snoke,” Leia continued, tone grave. “What we do know is that he’s very old and a very powerful Force user. The possibility of a connection cannot be ignored.”

The possibility that one of my father’s apprentices survived only to target my son—Leia shook her head, tabling that personal matter for later contemplation, and turned back to Cody.

“It is possible that if we cross reference both your registries and those of the Alliance we might be able to find out who among the Inquisitorius’ brothers and sisters survived,” Leia stated. “Also, what, if any, Star Destroyers made the initial trip to the Unknown Regions. I’m interested in their crew registers.”

Poe raised his eyebrows at that.

“Would those exist?”

“The Empire was thorough. An endeavor of this magnitude would warrant several files even if it was done in secret.” Cody stated. “I doubt, however, they would have been left lying around in some encrypted server. Even if we discover some candidates for having taken this initial expedition, if the files we need to confirm it were hidden in the Imperial Library we might as well forget ever getting our hands on them.”

Leia’s expression hardened.

“We are more than capable of dealing with any security force that—”

Cody shook his head.

“It is not a question of man power,” he told them. At her side, Poe was leaning forward with clear interest. “After Emperor Palpatine’s demise all of the Empire’s military archives were moved to the Imperial Library. As a security measure, all servers that had harbored them previously were cleaned and destroyed. When it became clear the Empire would lose the war, orders were issued for the Library itself to be moved into a safe location.” He crossed his arms. “That location was never disclosed. Maybe the Order knows where it is at, but...”

Silence filled the room as he trailed off. At her side, Poe had straightened, looking pensive.

“We might take these queries to the Knights,” he pointed out, quietly, all but ignoring Cody’s eye roll. “They deserted. They came to us. It can’t hurt to try.”

“I thought you said one of them had broken someone’s arm.” Cody signaled towards the grid Poe had left against the wall. “With that.”

“Your Inquisitor did it, actually,” Poe retorted calmly, talking to Leia next. “My point is that we can’t conclude they won’t help without first giving them a chance.”

Leia smiled sadly at that. Too kind—Poe was far too kind for his own good.

“It’s too much of a risk. I won’t put anyone in harm’s way just so I can negotiate with the Knights.” She sighed. “I doubt the Resistance would accept that, anyway. Taking in stormtroopers is one thing.
Knights, though—Vader has cast too dark a shadow for people to see past it. They will be seeing him. They will be judging him.”

Also, whoever these Knights were, whatever reason Kylo Ren had for sending them here—collateral being the one that made the most sense to her, even if she could think of more than a dozen others and it seemed entirely too simple to be true —she doubted they had any intention or reason to help them.

“Bridges can’t be built from only one side,” she muttered.

Poe’s expression hardened, immediately.

“Bridges can’t be built if both sides do nothing,” he pointed out. “Look at the mess that got the galaxy in.”

Cody visibly cringed at those words.

“Speaking of the mess the galaxy is in, and before we stray much further from what brought us here,” he said, leaning over Leia to connect the display he had given her when she had first arrived. “I fear the stampede has just started, General.”

Leia’s heart dropped, eyes growing wide as planet identification after planet identification started jumping out of the star chart on the display.

No. Not this. Not now.

“How many?” she queried, urgently, attention flying from the display to Cody. “How many governments have given their allegiance to the Order?”

The Commander kept his silence for an instant, his hesitation— seemingly an effort to soften the blow to those within the Resistance that were about to be caught in the backlash—making Leia brace herself for the worse.

“Many,” he ended up stating, quietly. “Too many. Including some I had thought would prefer neutrality.”

“Who?”

What followed, she thought, must have felt a lot like waiting to be sentenced—time dragged endlessly, seconds stretched to years, silence getting heavier and heavier until it seemed impossible to lift, and then the verdict fell in its most brutal form.

“All colonies set up by the Empire have now fallen behind the Order,” Cody announced. “They don’t represent any physical danger for the planets in the vicinity. Rather, we're talking about mining colonies, plantations—if the Order grabs hold of the resources they are offering, however, we will be facing a disaster.”

Leia gave the display to Poe, starting to pace around the small room as she spoke.

“Is the Order’s fleet moving to reclaim those planets?”

“They don’t seem to be. Yet. But the Order seeing victory after victory in several sectors seems to have precipitated things even in more protected areas.”

Poe raised his eyes from the display.
“What does that mean?”

“Most of the former Imperial planets are raising the Order’s flag.”

Leia found herself pressing her temples, while Poe’s face had just turned ashen.

“One of the few things holding down the Order is lack of manpower to control territories,” he pointed out, one hand going to BB8’s head. Whether he meant to calm the visibly distressed droid or himself was not clear. “What planets are these?”

“Tinnel IV, Axxila, Eriadu—” Looking at both their expressions seemed to make him stop. “Most of the resistance comes from the Core Worlds, but it might just be a question of time until that changes.”

Leia took a deep breath, straightening her dark jacket as she kept pacing.

“Was the Finalizer spotted at any of the Order’s battlefronts?”

“Not to my knowledge. I can confirm, however, that it has left the site of our former base. I sent a team to investigate. They aren’t there anymore.”

Leia gave him a short nod of acknowledgment. It seemed likely they had returned to their base in the Uncharted Regions for repairs, then. That left them with both very good news and news that was very bad.

Getting our hands on a way to disable the trackers is a victory; having the Finalizer back on the front lines is not.

She shuddered to think what the First Order’s offensive would become once the warship was there. Their war machine seemed to have been oiled and tested to such an extreme that it was more than able to run its course even without one of its main pieces being in place, but put the Finalizer back on the front lines and...

We have to do something.

There had to be something that could be done.

Poe was still shaking his head at the display.

“How in the hell can they be gathering support this fast?” he asked to no one in particular, raking his hands through his hair with such force he was becoming completely disheveled. “We have been sitting here picking up crumbs of information, meanwhile they’re building an army!”

Cody made a strange face at that comment.

“Ah, yes. The crumbs.” He rolled his eyes in clear exasperation. “On a more depressing note, my team has intercepted a message seeming to indicate that several governments and rebel groups have agreed to a meeting.”

Leia turned on her heels immediately, approaching Cody.

“When is this?”

“In a few days.” He didn’t seemed pleased by this information, though the reason was hardly a mystery. “If this goes as well as the one we had the pleasure of participating in just after Starkiller—”

Leia ignored that last part, turning to Poe.
“Pick some squads and find a way to get the Knights off of the cruiser in secret. I’m not leaving them unattended while we're at this meeting.”

“General—”

“We are leaving at the shortest possible notice.”

She opened the door, stepping out into the hall to find Allya leaning against the wall by the entrance. She seemed slightly out of breath, but Leia had no time to question her and she resumed her self-appointed role as Leia’s shadow without comment. Following Leia outside, Poe stopped at her side, voice dropping low.

“General, have you forgotten the last time you went to one of these summits?”

“I haven’t,” Leia replied. There was no way she could forget what had been said. “But this might be the last chance we’ve got to gather support, so if they want to talk let them. I won’t allow that to be a problem.”

Cody came out of the room, inputting a security code into his pad and turning to them while staring at the ceiling lights, pensive.

“We might have a problem, actually,” he announced, expression blank. “We were not invited.”

Leia raised her eyebrows, turning to Cody even as she absentmindedly reached out to straighten the rumpled sleeve of Allya’s white jacket.

“Do you have the coordinates?”

“Of course.”

Leia tilted her head. The sudden change in her demeanor brought a small, knowing smile to Cody’s face.

“Well then,” she stated, and for a moment, short as it was, she was the Princess again. “I just invited myself.”

Chapter End Notes

The Inquisitorius and their sabers are canonical. Also, we strongly recommend you read up on the Jakku Observatory which is part of the expanded universe canon that, in part, explores the creation of the First Order with various characters who you've all come to know and love (cough, Hux, cough). Star Wars Wikia links included for your rabbit hole reading pleasure.

Next up -- Finn, Phasma, and Fisher advance across the battlefield, while Stormtrooper Scuttlebutt is revealed to be the most effective gossip train in history. Dear Finn will have more problems with one of those things than the other, though only just barely.
Comments and kudos are life giving, etc. Write something down in the box!
The Stormtrooper - Day 21, Part 1

As Finn finished readying himself for another day of trying desperately not to blow his cover while working under Phasma, a knock sounded at his door. Ensuring his helmet was firmly locked in place, he opened the door to find, as though summoned by thought alone, Phasma herself, face inscrutable even at this early hour.

“I require a moment of your time, Nephys.” Her voice was icy. Swallowing down the feeling of impending doom those words carried, Finn nodded and made to step into the hall connecting to the troopers barracks. Her hand grabbing his shoulder, grip tense, made him freeze.

“In private,” she continued, pushing him back into the room and shutting the door firmly behind her, engaging the lock.

Well, that's it. I'm caught. Now I die.

“An incident has been brought to my attention.” Finn took a deep breath, trying to face his demise bravely. “And I require your insight.”

Wait, what now?

“Of course,” he answered, cautiously, taking a seat at the desk across from the door. Phasma remained standing, tense.

“At first call this morning, a trooper was discovered to be missing from the barracks,” she stated, her gaze intense. “He was found, unconscious, in a storage closet nearby and has no recollection of how he got there. All personnel were accounted for at lights out yesterday evening, 2330 hours.”

“Sleep walking?” Finn queried, dumbly, unsure of what this had to do with him. Phasma continued on as though she hadn't heard him.

“The computer system indicates that the door to said closet, prior to this morning, was only opened once last night, well before lights out. The Sergeant, Platoon Leader, and Squad Leaders all confirm, however, that IN-2094 was in bed at that time.”

“Are you saying that the trooper was somehow in the closet all night and present for the lights out head count?” That's not possible, Finn’s mind chanted. “Troopers don't sleep with their helmets on and people can’t be in two places at once.”

“Correct, and that's why I've come to you. I believe that the trooper in the closet was IN-2094, and that he was there all night. I also believe the reports from his chain of command that they believe they saw him at lights out.” While her emphasis was not lost on Finn, he still didn't follow her logic. She forged on without him. “A patrol reported seeing a man leaving the vicinity of the barracks at approximately 0330 hours. Soon after, IN-2094 was discovered to be missing and, subsequently, found in the closet. The two seemed unrelated until a member of the patrol reported witnessing something odd.”
She paused, so Finn gave her a gesture to go on. She sighed deeply, taking a seat on his bunk, one hand running through her short hair.

“They were unable to capture the man before he escaped into the tunnel system, but one patrolman reported that the man appeared to change in both appearance and height.”

Apparently, Finn's gobsmacked brain was no longer controlling his mouth, because he blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

“A shape shifter makes more sense to you than sleep walking and a computer glitch on the door log?” She eyed him with a mix of resignation and exasperation at that, though Finn honestly couldn't tell if it was at his response or because she was hearing the words coming out of her own mouth.

“You are aware of the events that transpired on the Finalizer prior to Commander Ren and Isahaine Ren arriving with the tugs?” He nodded for her to continue. He was aware that the group of Knights who had attacked himself and the governor were the same ones that had nearly caused the Finalizer to crash, and he was also aware that a fourth Knight had disappeared during General Organa's assassination attempt only to reappear and attack Ren in the hangar when he and Rey arrived with the tugs. Ren was close lipped about the entire affair, but Phasma seemed to regard them as traitors to the cause that needed to be exterminated immediately.

_Well, at least I'm not at the top of her hit list anymore._

“The diversion that allowed them to sabotage and subsequently escape the Finalizer was caused by a changeling impersonating both the General and a bridge officer. We've identified him as one Essen Ren, and he is the only one who could be responsible for this incident.”

Phasma spoke as if this cleared everything up. It did not.

“I'm sorry, Captain, but I still don't see how you think I can help.”

She frowned, studying him.

“Ren, as I'm sure you're aware, does not look fondly on the concept of collaboration and, frankly, if you were assisting the deserters, they wouldn't need to lock one of my troopers in a cupboard to sneak in, nor would they have attacked you when they came to Bespin.” Phasma rose to her feet, pacing around the room. “I understand that Knights operate within a different chain of command in general, but _these_ Knights are _here_, infiltrating our ranks and collecting information, for what purpose I do not know. I need to know everything you do about these _traitors_.”

Finn shifted uncomfortably.

“To be honest? Not a lot. I don't engage with the others often, outside of the Commander and Isahaine, of course.”

He'd only _engaged_ the trio once, actually, and he'd been busy trying not to die in the atrium at that point. He'd never crossed paths with the fourth. Hopefully Phasma didn't have reason to expect otherwise, or he was in trouble.

“I was afraid you'd say that,” she said, sighing, and Finn exhaled softly himself at not being exposed. Then, quietly to herself, “Why I expected Ren to tell his personal _medic_ more than he tells me...”

_Medic?!_

Discarding that thought for later contemplation, Finn turned to face Phasma, who had abandoned her
pacing for a spot at the window.

“If I understand this situation correctly, Captain, either four Knights have suddenly decided to go rogue in an effort to blow up the *Finalizer* and everyone on it for reasons unknown, or—”

Phasma visibly tensed, before turning to face him. Her tone was measured when she finally spoke, as though it pained her to say what came next.

“They may be acting under orders. The Supreme Leader himself assigned Veshay, Essen, Lyr, and Rhyase Ren to the *Finalizer.*”

Silence reigned in the room at that. Finn knew what she was implying, logically, but voicing it was tantamount to treason and it spoke of how grave Phasma considered the situation that she’d said this much out loud.

If the trio who had attacked was, indeed, acting under orders, it would mean that Snoke had forsaken the gem of his fleet. Given that Ren himself was committing treason by smuggling Rey and himself in, and factoring in the destruction of Starkiller with the failure to assassinate General Organa, it wasn't outside the realm of possibilities that Snoke had determined the *Finalizer* and its crew were no longer fit to continue his work.

But still, attempting to destroy the ship outright?

If it were anyone else suggesting this, he'd have dismissed them as alarmists out of hand. But no, this was the Captain and he was intimately familiar with her brand of well-reasoned logic. As she often told the troopers during tactics training, *three times is a pattern.*

First the *Finalizer,* then the attacks in the atrium and hangar, and now an infiltration of the barracks—it all added up to an organized effort to undermine, damage, and destroy them. As for Kylo Ren, it wasn’t that hard to interpret his refusal to discuss the matter as a sign that he himself didn’t know what was driving the Knights’ actions.

And then there were the rumors trickling down from the higher ups and only whispered about by the troops—that the communications system had been down for weeks after the failed assassination of General Organa, yet no other First Order ships had come to investigate; that the missives sent by the *Finalizer* using the Cloud City outpost’s channel had not only gone unanswered, but that the outpost itself was no longer receiving daily orders; that, for all intents and purposes, the *Finalizer* had been left to fend for itself in a hostile system while heavily damaged.

It was really no great leap to conclude that something was very wrong.

*This is the best thing that could happen for the Resistance, and the worst place in the galaxy to be stuck.*

Breaking out of his musings, Finn refocused his attention on the Captain. Phasma, however, seemed quite done with the present conversation. Finn, on the other hand, had nothing but questions. Principle among them:

"How do we proceed?"

“With caution and our assigned mission,” she replied, curtly. “Trust information to no one that you cannot verify the identity of, lest it fall into the wrong hands. I have already notified Commander Ren of this breach by the deserters. Their fate is for him to decide.”

She moved away from the window, approaching the door, before turning back to him, one hand over
“And Nephys?” Her voice was ice. “I trust you understand that this conversation does not leave this room? You're competent. I'd hate to lose you.”

Finn swallowed reflexively at the threat in her words.

“Understood.”

“I do thank you for your time. Also, Lieutenant Ferrar has requested our presence in the briefing room. Contact the Sergeant. Meet me outside in five minutes.”

Finn sat in silence after she exited, mind working furiously to make sense of what he'd just been told.

*Oh, it's shaping up to be a fine day.*

——

The line of tanks was advancing through the dense woods at a crawl. The lowest lying of the tree branches pulled at the green camouflage clothes covering the tanks despite the best efforts of the soldiers who dove ahead to clear the debris. Still, their envoy patiently and discreetly encroached further and further into rebel territory, and the element of surprise was what mattered now.

Hidden behind a line of dense bushes, the cold from the grass under him somehow managing to get passed the three layers of protective garments that comprised Nephys’ attire, Finn looked away from the carefully placed mirror shard that allowed him to keep vigil over what was going on behind him. His attention instead focused on adjusting the sites of his binoculars in hopes of gaining a more detailed view of the open field some fifty meters ahead of him.

Running the binoculars up and over the enemy lines, frowning slightly as he went over the patrols and heavy vehicles—their headlights switching off one by one as the sun started to rise over the city —Finn finally turned his attention further ahead, studying the building behind them.

“I believe I have found something that might suit our needs, Captain,” Lieutenant Ferrar had announced to Phasma the moment they had entered the briefing room earlier that day. Ferrar's hand had then motioned towards the hologram that was hovering over the tactical table, displaying a digital blueprint of the same building visible through his binoculars presently. “*This* is a Tibanna gas refinery and it contains much of what we need to repair the Finalizer.”

When Finn had examined the blueprints, he had noted that the refinery was large. Seeing it now, however, he had to admit that his initial assessment didn't do the building justice. The thing was massive and, moreover, only one of the many buildings that made up the circle of refineries spanning the city. Given that what he could see was only the above ground level—and there was most certainly an underground area teaming with enemy troops—Finn was beginning to fear that Phasma and Ferrar had vastly underestimated both the resources and time needed to capture the site.

*We just couldn't have started with a smaller plant. No, we had to go for the biggest refinery on Bespin.*

Worse than the fact that the vast majority of the building was underground, however, was the fact that it was built like a fortress. Its reinforced walls and containment measures meant that what laid beneath was nothing short of a labyrinth.

“Indeed,” Ferrar had replied when he'd voiced concerns over this very possibility during the briefing. He had then zoomed in on the portion of the blueprints detailing the exhaust port above the refinery
—why was it always an exhaust port?—as Finn, Phasma, and Fisher had taken their places at the table.

“However, the capture of this site is critical. Not only does it provide us with resources for repairing the Finalizer, but it will also open a clear path for retaking the city from the rebels by denying them those same resources and ensuring our ability to safely execute the Unloading Operation. The Commander has been running reconnaissance. He reports that all of the city’s refineries are placed over a ring-like structure connected to the channels used to capture gas. All of these refineries capture points are located underground and are interconnected. Most are completely cut off from the surface. This is one of the four capture points that isn’t completely inaccessible.”

And just like that, here Finn was, face to face with the impossible task of retaking a mammoth refinery under heavy guard.

Finn raised the binoculars, running them over to the top of the exhaust port that covered the dock. He frowned slightly beneath his mask at the lights blinking on the top of it before bringing the view back down to study the ground entrance. Immediately, he found what looked like a group of pilots going passed the heavy vehicles and making their way inside.

“If the blueprints are correct,” Ferrar had continued. “We can conclude this refinery doubles as storage for the carbonite plaques used to ship tibanna out of the city. However, and more importantly —”

“Its tower connects to an underground dock.”

A shiver ran up his spine at the memory of those words and the man who had spoken them. In retrospect, and considering where and with whom he was presently ‘serving,’ he really should have been paying more attention to his surroundings. It was inexcusable, honestly, that he was so caught up in the disaster of working directly under Phasma again that he had completely missed Kylo Ren standing just inside the door when he entered. Of the two evils, Phasma seemed to promise a slightly quicker death— slightly.

I should be grateful that I’m not stuck with Ren.

He really should be if Ren’s murderous expression were any indication. The malevolent cloud that usually surrounded Ren seemed especially thunderous that morning and, worse, entirely directed at him.

What have I done to him now?

Not that Phasma discovering him was really a better alternative to Kylo Ren’s ire. If she got even the slightest inkling of who he really was, a quick and painless death was probably the best he could hope for. Oddly, he suspected that betraying the Order and blowing up Starkiller were secondary crimes to stuffing her down a garbage chute.

Still think that was a good idea, Solo?

Really, he should have thought that one through more. He would never in his wildest dreams have envisioned anything like what was going on now as far as consequences went, but he had been on the receiving end of Han Solo’s mad plans the entire day. How had he not considered this would blow up in his face? How had he not for a moment thought that Phasma would not only find a way to get out of the trash compactor, but do so with a vengeance?

He would never presume to say he knew Phasma—because he didn’t, he hadn’t even known her
face until a few days ago—but he did know the Order’s Captain. She had trained him. She had been the one honing his skills and those of the rest of the FN Corps. She had been with them every step of the way. If nothing else, he should have considered how dangerous and resourceful she was before engaging in Solo’s antics and allow himself the split second pleasure of seeing Chewie dump her inside the trash compactor chute.

*Best case scenario, she will do the same to me.* Finn let his covered head fall against the grass, shaking it slightly as he listened to the tanks discretely maneuvering behind him. *Only using a firing squad.*

He no longer had the energy to be nervous, though. Instead, his mind seemed to have transcended anxiety, skipped passed hysteria altogether, and entered the realm of deeply pessimistic serenity. The sense of impending doom just didn't seem to get a reaction out of him anymore.

*There's an upside, at least.*

The sound of heavy footsteps approaching him made Finn lift his head. Eyes going to the shard of mirror to find Fisher making his way to his position, Finn offered him the binoculars as he dropped at his side, rapidly turning his attention back to the handful of tanks and soldiers around them.

“We have a similar situation near the southwest and southeast entrances, Sir. Heavy vehicles, sentinels, and mobile patrols are doing rounds around the building,” the Sergeant announced, voice low. “The northeast entrance remains blocked. We sent in a demolition team, but readings show the rebels filled the tunnel with wreckage. The Captain has kept a force there to act as a diversion, but otherwise that option has been abandoned.”

“The Captain is keeping to the primary plan of attack then?”

“I believe so, Sir. Most of the heavy vehicles are already stationed around the dock. These,” he made a gesture to what still remained of the line behind them, “Are the ones set to provide ground and air support to the offensive.”

Finn paused to take that all in. Still going over the enemy lines, Fisher, however, did not.

“On a different note, Sir, your inquiry about Isahaine.”

Finn’s head snapped so quickly towards the Sergeant that his neck actually cracked and a wave of deep gratitude washed over him as he faced the white mask and dark visor covering the man’s face. *He didn’t forget.*

Force knew that was easy to do, but he hadn’t. More importantly—unlike *some* people—he hadn't pretended to forget. Force knew Kylo Ren *had.*

“Did the Corporal report back?” Finn queried, head leaning towards Fisher.

“Indeed, Sir. She confirms Isahaine’s presence at the dock.”

Finn let out a sigh of relief. So Rey was there after all.

“Is she alright?”

Fisher's voice took on a conspiratorial tone.

“She was working in *close proximity* with the Commander. The Corporal assumed she must be.”
Finn blinked, struck with the sudden certainty that Poe would be laughing his heart out if he were here to hear that, and frowned. He was certain there was a hidden meaning somewhere in those words, but any chance he had of parsing it out was lost with Fisher's next words.

“Shouldn’t the Commander have informed you of this, Sir?”

Finn bit his lips, fighting to find a suitable explanation for asking Fisher to suss out information instead of asking his purported commander and leader instead, and almost exhaling in relief as Fisher turned his attention back to the enemy lines, studying them intently.

Fisher must have expected an answer, however, as he pressed on when the silence stretched too long.

“You're not on good terms with him, then?”

“We had a minor disagreement recently.” Biggest understatement ever, Finn thought, rapidly steering the conversation back into safe waters. “Was the Corporal able to talk with Isahaine?”

“I fear not,” Fisher stated. “There was a situation.”

Finn’s eyes grew wide, stomach dropping with anxiety.

“What kind of situation?”

“Compromising.” The Sergeant stopped for an instant, returning the binoculars to Finn, looking as though he were weighing his next words carefully. “This disagreement with the Commander, Sir, did it involve Isa—?”

Fisher did not have the chance to finish inquiring further, nor did Finn of asking what he meant by compromising. Though Finn's mind demanded to know what the hell Ren had done and had, in fact, already begun devising methods for punishing him with extreme prejudice if he so much as dared raise a hand against Rey, the silver plated boots that had just stopped next to Fisher single handedly halted all further consideration.

Not missing a beat, he offered the binoculars to the woman now dropping to one knee at his and Fisher’s sides, the green cape meant to camouflage her silver armor in the densely vegetated terrain fluttering slightly as she did.

My luck just keeps getting better.

“If you two are quite done gossiping, report,” she snapped.

The part of his mind not completely dedicated to ensuring Phasma didn't discover his true identity took a moment to think that, yes, he was definitely missing something.

“Target in sight, Captain,” Finn whispered, observing as the Captain holstered her blaster and took the binoculars, pointing them in the direction of the refinery. A spear swung ominously from it's place on her back as she did—and, really, what did she need that for, effect? “Confirmed hostile presence inside the refinery. I'm lead to believe the dock is in use.”

“Any confirmed takeoffs?”

“Negative, but I can confirm several pilots moving in and out of the structure over the last few hours.”
The Captain’s expression hardened at that information, returning the binoculars to him as she looked up. Frowning at the blinking lights on top of the structure, she spoke into the com unit wrapped around her wrist.

“Reconnaissance status.”

The line crackled for a few moments before Lieutenant Ferrar’s heavily accented voice came from the other end.

“Reconnaissance has confirmed the refinery to be online, Captain. Further readings indicate the presence of two fully-filled, medium-sized gas repositories under it. The structure is reinforced. Even so, the Tibanna is highly flammable. The use of blasters while on the inside is inadvisable.”

“Acknowledged.” Phasma looked around, expression pensive. “The carriers?”

“Not yet ready for launch, Captain.”

“We will be initiating ground assault, Lieutenant. Give me air strike status.”

The Captain got back to her feet with those words. Mimicking her, Finn jumped to his feet, picking up the shard of glass serving as a mirror as he did, his eyes on the only tank that had not advanced ahead of their location and the numerous stormtroopers surrounding it. Finn found himself side by side with Phasma, then, head rising to meet her eyes, as he was thrown right back to stormtrooper training by her next words.

“Your assessment?”

It took a moment for him to answer. The fear of falling short of the Captain’s expectations and failing to gain her approval raising up so suddenly that Finn could do little else but sigh. The very real danger of falling back into old habits and completely blowing his cover by acting like a stormtrooper was back in full force, and he closed his eyes to collect himself, concealed behind his mask though he was.

This was bad. It was bad in a way that tripping over himself over and over again with Fisher and his troops couldn’t hope to be. For all his initial exasperation with him, the Sergeant had been tolerant with his slips of tongue and nerves, seemingly preferring to focus on Finn’s good qualities rather than what Fisher most likely saw as a Knight’s eccentricities. Knights existed outside of the normal Order command structure, after all, so one ill-versed in their ways might easily dismiss such slips.

Phasma, he knew, would be anything but forgiving. She knew Knights, and, more importantly, she knew him. She had been the one to train him and she knew what made up FN-2187 from start to finish. He had only one chance at this.

And I’m failing already.

He thought he had released himself from her grip, but in hindsight he had but to think about his ridiculous reaction after capturing her on Starkiller to know he hadn’t. ‘Phasma,’ he had called her, as though his very tone didn’t instead convey Captain. In this moment, Finn wanted nothing more than to laugh at his own nerve.

Who was I trying to fool?

Judging by the twin reactions of Han Solo and the Captain herself—the knowing looks, both unimpressed—the answer was himself. ‘Phasma’ was still very much Captain Phasma to him. And that was a problem—a very big problem, particularly where his cover was concerned.
“The enemy’s forces are spread thin around the dock,” Finn informed her, each of his words careful and measured. “This is the only entrance they’ve actively reinforced. I think it's safe to infer from that decision that they don’t have enough troops to guarantee a strong defensive line along the perimeter of the entire plant. They'll converge on whatever attack fronts we create.”

Phasma studied him for a moment, blue eyes boring into the dark visor in such a way that he started fearing he had said something that had denounced his identity or training. When she spoke, however, there was nothing in her voice other than a curt and direct order.

“Sergeant, bring Riot Control.”

Phasma raised her right hand as Finn followed Fisher towards his troops. Immediately, the cannon of the tank that had remained in the vicinity turned, firing a deathly accurate shot towards one of the two heavy vehicles located by the docks ground entrance. As if she had choreographed it beforehand, two blasts immediately echoed in the distance, the sound of the Order's heavy artillery joining that of the shot from the tank besides them.

The battle was already in full swing when Finn—surrounded by Riot Control—joined it, a grenade tossed from the enemy lines forcing him and the soldiers around him to scramble for cover as it flew over them, exploding amongst the forest and bringing a large tree crashing down just ahead of them.

*Any cover's good cover in a firefight.*

Jumping behind the trunk side, Finn sent a volley of shots through the limbs, catching one of the many rebel soldiers in the chest before he was forced to drop low to the ground, fire now attracted to Finn's position. Rapidly closing ranks again, Riot Control ran passed his position, several lines of soldiers with shields forming barricades in front of the rest of the Order’s troops. Immediately, groups of stormtroopers were moving to take advantage of their positions, volleys of shoots raining over the enemy lines as they advanced.

The tank hidden among the trees fired again, an explosion followed by the second enemy tank being violently tossed against the dock’s walls ensuing soon after. Taking advantage of the situation, Finn jumped out of hiding, only for the large number of rebel ground troops now making their way out of the docks to force him to dive behind the barricade formed by the closest Riot Control group almost immediately.

Phasma had done similarly, close enough that Finn could hear Lieutenant Ferrar through her com device.

“Radar readings indicate enemy air assault is moving to your position, Captain,” Ferrar’s voice announced, his words coming at the same time Finn aimed another volley of shoots over the riot shields and registering as he was forced to dive back down, stomach twisting when he glimpsed not only ships launching over the top of the dock but a line of heavily armored cars coming from their left.

“Incoming reinforcements!” he shouted over the sounds of explosions and blaster fire.

Having had to roll to take cover behind the same set of shields, Phasma tossed her cape back, raising the com to her mouth.

“Send in air strike!”

She turned immediately, raising her blaster to put a shot through one of the approaching vehicles windshields. The vehicle veered to the right, crashing into the dock’s wall with the driver slumped
against the wheel. There were soldiers jumping from inside the car now, raining blaster shots down on them as the rest of the convoy approached.

Rising from behind a group of soldiers to their left, a rocket launcher perched on his shoulder, one of the stormtroopers fired against the cars. Flying above the vehicles, the projectile ended up crashing to the ground, exploding as the car it had been pointed towards was steered out of its intended path, going up the small slope leading to the garden and coming back down, having avoided the trees and blast by inches.

The vehicle’s new path was not clear, however, and it hit a pit formed from a stray explosion, fortuitously throwing the enemy gunner operating the mounted weapons atop the transport into the road. Finn, up until now focused on disarming the gunner, turned his blaster towards the driver, while the soldier with the rocket launcher reloaded the weapon and fired again. Soldiers jumped out of the car before the projectile crashed into it, covering their heads and trying to step away from the explosion. Trying to target them, Finn found his attention jerked in another direction by Phasma shouting right from behind him.

“Fall back!”

Finn looked in her direction as the order echoed over the battlefield, his confusion dying as he followed her line of sight. A second, much larger convoy of armored cars and tanks was circumventing the dock and coming from their right.

“Fall back, men!”

Shots raining over them, Riot Control lifted their shields, stepping back as fast as they could, the soldiers behind them firing at the approaching offensive.

More and more of the Order’s tanks were joining the offensive now, their projectiles’ trails rising from the middle of the trees to pursue the enemy vessels as they started filling the sky and targeting the infantry.

“Air strike is at your position, Captain,” Ferrar’s voice announced, his words interrupted by a X-Wing diving towards them and making the soldiers run for cover. It opened fire, explosion after explosion following in the wake of the soldiers. “Engaging enemy.”

A group of TIEs flew over their positions, high shrieks echoing over the garden as one of the pilots from what were clearly Special Forces dove, engaging the attacking X-Wing and forcing it to pull up. Having jumped behind the fallen tree side by side with Phasma, Finn raised his head, studying the battlefield in front of them.

At his side, Phasma groaned, muttering something under her breath, before jumping out of hiding and firing against the enemy lines, shouting for Riot Control to close ranks again.

The X-Wing had all but wrecked their lines, leaving white clad corpses lying on the pavement surrounding the refinery and in the craters left by the ship’s blasts. Still, the surviving soldiers had closed ranks again in a matter of seconds, the barriers formed by Riot Control advancing again across the battlefield.

Jumping right behind the closest line of shields, eyes running over the dead as he shot volley after volley of blasts towards the troops at their left—their vehicles now being used as makeshift barricades—Finn found his eyes jumping frantically to the soldiers around him, a wave of fear washing over him as he found himself searching for a tell tale red shoulder blade among them and the sudden realization that he had lost sight of Fisher at the beginning of the battle freezing him to his
core.

Where is he?

Firing against the enemy as his eyes rapidly swept over the area around him, he caught sight of Phasma—now in the middle of the group to his right, having just lobbed a grenade directly into the collection of the vehicles to their left—but was still unable to find the Sergeant. Finn clenched his teeth, stomach twisting.

Where—?

A crash sounded besides him, followed by the distinct sound of something breaking, and then the closest shield started falling. With no time to think or immediately access what had happened, Finn dropped his blaster, grabbing hold of the bloodied shield as the soldier—armor broken over the shoulder he had been using to keep the shield in place, but clearly alive—was rapidly pushed to the middle of the group.

“You know how to use these, Sir?” a voice queried over the sounds of blaster fire, heavy artillery and explosions coming from all around them.

Turning his head to face the closest of the riot troopers, the red shoulder blade until now hidden by his position behind the shield confirming his identity, Finn found himself almost collapsing with relief.

“I'd better, Sergeant!”

The blasts crashed into the shield like hammers, making it a lot more difficult to hold them in place than Fisher and his troops made it appear. The instant Phasma shouted for them to advance, however, Finn found himself cursing his decision to step into the injured soldier's place. This wasn't just hard—keeping the shields steady was a bloody nightmare!

“Good to see your arm has healed up, Sergeant!” Finn shouted, his words apparently making the officer aware of how wobbly Finn’s shield was when compared to the very straight, very steady shields of the rest of his group.

“It's all in the center of gravity, Sir!”

It has to be more than just that!

They were advancing still, shots crashing against the shields, the troops behind them engaging the enemy and diving behind the lines as the battle in the sky made bits and pieces of ships rain around them. Then, an explosion came from the middle of the trees behind them, followed by a tongue of flames rising up in the sky, a sure sign that one of the Order’s tanks had just been blown up by an enemy air strike.

This is not going our way.

The concentration of blaster fire increased as the line of tanks and armored cars that had been coming from their left succeeded in blocking the entrance to the dock. Finn clenched his teeth against the onslaught.

This is not going our way at all.

Mechanically, he searched for Phasma, finding her in the middle of the group to his left now, head tilted as she barked instructions into the com on the same wrist that held her blaster steady, blue eyes
sweeping the battlefield. She looked calm—out of breathe, but composed. It was strange how, despite no longer being on her side or under her command, her confident demeanor was still so reassuring.

“Troops are now engaging a large resistance pocket near the north-by-northwest entrance,” Finn could hear her saying, the soldiers around her taking turns firing against the enemy lines. “Several heavy vehicles are on site.”

Shoulder pressed against the shield, Finn tried to see beyond the blood smeared on it. From the little he could make out, there were at least ten vehicles in front of the door, two of them armored tanks. There was no way they were getting passed that line unless the Order’s tanks or air strike took care of them. They had to call in—

He never had the chance to finish that thought. Phasma was dropping her blaster, expression tense, as her voice boomed over the battlefield with the force of a bomb.

“DOWN!”

Finn didn’t question the sudden order, didn’t stop to think. He just let go of the shield and dove to the ground while holding his helmet in place, the other soldiers following after him. It was a question of seconds before a whistle flew over them and the air all but exploded—heat, fire and screams—followed by the earsplitting roar of a low flying TIE, echoing loudly around them.

Finn raised his head as the violent wind died to find shields and helmets rolling all over the battlefield, soldiers jumping to retrieve them. Still lying on the ground at his side, helmet blown off, was Fisher, who was staring, wide-eyed, towards the burning wreckage around the dock’s entrance.

“He’s insane,” he muttered, looking towards Finn as a trooper ran towards them to return the sergeant his helmet. Fisher seemed unable to break out of his state of deep incredulity. “The pilot, he’s insane. Damn insane.”

They jumped to their feet, Fisher jamming his helmet back on as they ran towards Phasma. Already flanked by soldiers, she was steadily making her way inside the dock, expression seeming to indicate she didn’t know if she should be critical or impressed by whatever had just happened. Despite his curiosity, Finn could do little else but look around as they joined her, soldiers closing ranks behind him and marching passed mangled metal and flames.

The enemy tanks were little more than twisted metal now and the armored cars had all but been blasted out of line, lying in pieces all over the battlefield. If there were bodies—and there had to be—they were undistinguishable from the rest of the wreckage. There was no sign of the TIE that had done this anywhere—not in the sky, not on the ground—but the scene had all the tell tale signs of a missile strike. Beyond that, however, Finn had absolutely no idea what to make of this. In fact, his mind gave him only one certainty as he entered the dock.

There was a pilot in the Order that was about as mad as Poe.

Chapter End Notes

Whew! That was longer than anticipated. Chapters seem to be amping up in length as we get closer to the conclusion of this particular arc, so we hope you enjoy that.
Re: Phasma's Spear, we just couldn't help ourselves after seeing the episode 8 promotional art of her with one.

Comments in the towel section are loved. - DD

Next Up -- The Enforcer is making final preparations for the air support portion of the Unloading Operation, which would be much easier if Rey would stop distracting him.
The Enforcer - Day 21, Part 2

“I thought it was a no.”

“It is a no,” Rey replied in tones that left no question as to her opinion of Hux's request for her assistance in the Unloading Operation.

“Might I inquire as to why you're here, then?”

Rey turned away from him in favor of watching the battalion of pilots he had just dismissed as they went through pre-flight checks of their assigned TIEs. Though her hood concealed her face from him, the ruthless way she tore into a portion packet and vigorously chewed through the tasteless bar made her irritation plain. Whether it was centered on him or the situation in general, Kylo could not say, but no one ate rations like that without something distracting on their mind.

“Just clearing my head.”

“Clearing your head?”

“Thinking,” Rey snapped, unhelpfully, and Kylo rolled his eyes in turn.

“A much needed clarification,” he replied, footsteps echoing on the metal floor as he made his way to the Phantom, flanked by two pilots who had remained after his briefing. “Allow me to rephrase the question—why were you at a briefing for a mission you refuse to take part in?”

Rey shrugged, eyeing the pilots still following them warily.

“I was in need of a distraction.”

I wasn’t, Kylo mused, darkly, as he turned to enter the corridor leading to the launching ramp the Phantom was suspended from. Coming to a stop beneath one of the large wings, he pondered his certainty that, no, that wasn’t the reason she had been there. Unfortunately, that train of thought immediately lead him back to the memory of the meeting itself, wherein he had found her hazel eyes peering at him from amongst a group of pilots and stuttered. Badly.

A moment for the ages, certainly.

He still wanted to run his saber through something for that. Not because of her, mind you, but himself. One would think, given who his mother was, that he would have inherited a knack for public speaking. Alas, genetics had failed him here too, another on the list of worthwhile things nature had not deigned to pass onto him. Still, he was more than capable of holding a damned briefing. He had done it more times than he could recall. He more than knew how to coordinate an offensive and—

I still stammered like a thrice damned teenager with a crush at the sight of her. Since when has her good opinion mattered?
Speaking of Rey, she was now leaning against the railing, back towards the *Phantom*, and clinging to the portion she was eating, body and mind so tense that Kylo could only conclude she thought he was about to snatch the food way from her.

*And now I've been downgraded to 'food thief' risk levels. How much lower can the mighty fall?*

Kylo shook his head, attention split between studying Rey's face and listening to the steady stream of thoughts coming from her mind, a slight frown marring his face as he did so. He had no intentions of broaching the subject of her prior lessons with Skywalker but, as distractions from the absolute idiocy he was currently pondering went, this train of thought was at least worthwhile. Though his perusal of her thoughts had yet to yield insight on why she had come to his briefing seeking distraction, or what she needed distraction from in the first place, it did beg a more interesting and far more concerning question—why was she so easy for him to read?

Everything about his easy access to her thoughts was wrong, *unnatural* even. On Takodona, he had tracked her down using only the wild tendrils of fear she gave off, mixed with a sense of purpose to escape. Strong thoughts and emotions were easy to read, though, and to be expected in a Force sensitive recently awakened. Yet, in the interrogation chamber, she had instinctively raised shields against his intrusion into her mind, pushed back forcefully into his own, and *won*.

*Won?* He snorted, ruefully. *More like eviscerated my shields. I should be grateful she lacked the skill to dig deeper or the cruelty to capitalize on my mistakes.*

And, *oh yes,* it had been his own mistakes that had given her an opening. He'd felt a new Force sensitive, probed into the pain and isolation inherent in her life of hard won survival as an orphan on Jakku, and thought *perhaps* like a wistful fool—*perhaps* he might make a Knight of her, *perhaps* he might make an apprentice of her, *perhaps* he might find a companion, an ally, a *friend*.

He snorted again. *Idiot.*

Those same scavenger instincts he mocked her for were what lead her to grab onto his mental probe and climb, climb, climb, until she was through the open door of his own mind and diving, grasping at whatever she could find to throw back at him with all the finesse of a youngling, tearing and rending through his shields and landing on—

*“You are afraid that you will never be as strong as Darth Vader!”*  

A voice that sounded entirely too much like Han Solo still chimed *got it in one kid* whenever Kylo reflected on this particular humiliation. A small mercy, then, that she had no idea the depth of her discovery. It was not, as she had suggested, lack of *power* that Kylo feared—it was lack of mastery, of faith, of commitment, of the ability to rise above as his own keeper, unshackled and unbound by Sno—

*Enough!*

He was doing himself no good reflecting on what he could not change. His present concern was Rey's open mind and the way an enemy might slip into it, unguarded as it was, and manipulate her. *That* was something he could control.

He questioned what Skywalker had taught her in their time together. His former master had always pushed shielding first and foremost for his students and Rey would have been no exception. Kylo had experienced first hand her mind's natural inclination to protect itself. There was no logical reason for her to have slid backwards in progress since then.
And then there was the other issue, the odd puzzle piece that had been nagging at him since the interrogation on Starkiller. While he had been in her mind, he had brushed up against something other, something artificial and wrong. Were he not an adapt in mind probes, he'd have missed it, so well concealed as it was. It was there-and-gone, fleeting and deeply hidden, and Rey could not have created it. In fact, Rey didn't seem to be aware of it at all, given that she'd not even responded to his brief brush against something so obviously well hidden. Even now, he caught flashes of a barrier around something—some event, some memory—and then it vanished without a trace. Whatever it was, it was not of her creation, and it was driving him utterly mad.

What am I missing? What's wrong?

Come on kid, you've nearly got it. Just think Ben—

“Commander.”

Lieutenant Ferrar's voice was a welcome interruption to his musings. Kylo took a deep breath, closing his eyes and willing away the ghost of the man he'd killed who seemed intent on haunting him even now.

“Operation status,” Kylo requested, speaking into his communicator and returning his attention to the Phantom’s elongated black frame, hanging on the launching ramp behind Rey.

“We're facing some delays while loading the injured onto the carriers, Sir,” Ferrar informed him, voice crackling through the channel and echoing down the launching ramp. “The Captain has initiated the ground offensive. She expects to attract enemy fire to her position before the carriers are launched. Air strike status is requested.”

“The TIEs are ready to launch on her signal.”

“Acknowledged, Sir.”

The com fell silent as a wave of frustration not his own washed over him. Kylo turned his head to find Rey looking furiously up and down the dock and then at him.

“How long is this going to take?” she asked, fingers tapping impatiently on the helmet she held under one arm, expression growing harsher when he tilted his head. “I understand we will be stuck here until the Finalizer is repaired, but judging by your briefing you mean to conquer this city,” Rey continued in a low voice. “I didn’t come here to fight for you.”

"Rest assured, I haven't forgotten what you came here for,” Kylo sighed. “It's a lot more vital to me than to your friends.”

'Oh, I doubt that.'

The thought rang out as clearly as if it had been spoken. Kylo inclined his head towards her, eyes meeting the hazel pair glaring daggers at him.

“You doubt it?”

“This was supposed to be an in and out job. You spoke of it as such. You spoke of it as if it was urgent.”

“Would it appease you if I stole a shuttle right now and made my way back to headquarters?” Kylo queried, softly, eyes boring into hers as he listened to the words she didn't need to voice. “Or will your suspicions only be raised further?”
Rey clenched her fists at his answer, the query seemingly having hit a chord.

“How long will we remain here?”

“Cloud City is of value to the Order. Unless Hux is able to call in the fleet, I don't expect us to leave prior to its conquest.”

More importantly, there was the question of the rogue Knights. Phasma's carefully worded message about a security breach at the barracks was alarming enough on its own. Her attachment of ancillary details had only made matters worse. A suspicious man with the ability to shape shift might seem, to anyone else, the result of one soldier's overactive imagination, but there was no question it had been Essen Ren.

And, of course, where Essen was, Lyr and Rhyase were sure to follow.

A detachment of Knights whose skills ranged from infiltration and intelligence gathering to systematic sabotage—they were a problem that needed to be solved, and soon. If their Force presences weren't currently obscured, he'd have dealt with them long before now. As it was, he could not, and that was a matter of still greater concern than any potential coordinated attack they might attempt. They lacked the finesse to hide themselves from him completely like this, even with their combined skill in the Force. The only possibility that was left was unpalatable, to say the least.

If the Supreme Leader was concealing their presence in the Force, it was as a means to an end. Unfortunately, there were no clear bets as to what that end was. It was just as possible that he had discovered Kylo's own treachery as it was that Hux had fallen out of favor over the successive disasters that were Starkiller and the attempted assassination. It could even be something far less disastrous for all involved, though Kylo wasn't nearly enough of an optimist to hope for anything of the sort.

Now, however, was not the best time for this contemplation. Things being as they were, he had an offensive airstrike to focus on.

Glancing over to the only Force sensitive he could presently discern, he was struck by an overwhelming wave of annoyance, none of it his own. Judging by the way she was looking at the Phantom, thankfully, it wasn’t entirely directed at him.

Small mercy that.

“Any luck with the TIE?” Kylo queried, and her head snapped towards him in an accusatory fashion.

“Don’t change the subject.”

Under the mask, Kylo raised his eyebrows.

“I was under the impression we had finished,” he replied, evenly. “Unless you wish I supply a timeline.” He smiled, wry, “Or you could procure one from Hux yourself.”

“No! About the incident at the barracks last night. You said you received word from Phasma about an infiltration by the Knights who attacked Finn. What's going on?”

Kylo froze, stunned. He had most certainly not said any of that out loud.

“Fine then, I heard it. You're projecting, loudly,” she continued. “Now, answer my question. I'm tired of being out of the loop.”
Kylo slammed up his mental shields with a vigor normally reserved for an audience with the Supreme Leader. There was absolutely no way she should have heard him.

“And what, exactly, did you hear?” He would applaud himself later for the evenness of his tone.

“Exactly as I said—tell me about what happened at the barracks.”

“I—later. It’s not safe to talk about such things openly.”

_Well, let’s talk about something else. At least I can do that._

And _I need time to determine what in the Force’s name is going on here!_

One of Rey’s eyebrows twitched at his words, eyes closing in exasperation. She pursed her lips together tightly and, apparently deciding she was done with his constant evasion for the time being, tugged her hood up over her face, ending the conversation. Immediately, Kylo was struck with a very clear image of the damage to her own TIE, still in the repair hangar where she’d left it earlier, as if he were looking at it from her own eyes.

_Wrong, wrong, wrong—this is very wrong!_

His mind was immediately brought back to his earlier contemplations of Rey’s unusually open mind, but Kylo had neither the time nor the privacy required to examine this most recent revelation and so, with all the grace and skill he possessed, he changed the subject.

“A hit to the port side convertor coils and phase one reactor,” Kylo muttered, aiming for pensive, and focusing his attention on the _Phantom_’s new port paneling. It had been the same damage, he now recalled, to the exact same wing as his own. It had disturbed him then, but it disturbed him far more now when coincidences seemed to be the special of the day. “How did that happen?”

“I was trying to land at the barracks. I got hit.”

“Why?”

Rey blinked, then pressed her lips together. There was reticence and discomfort—something she didn’t wish to tell and—she deflected her train of thought before he could find out what.

“I guess someone pressed the trigger in my direction.”

“Oh really?”

“What does it matter to you?” Rey asked, pressing the bridge of her nose. “I’m trying to fix my TIE. It’s not like—!”

She stopped herself, frowning slightly at him, but he heard it when she finished with _‘it’s not like it can get any worse than it already is’ _all the same.

“I would start by disputing that,” he said, wearily, ignoring Rey’s irritated ‘stop doing that’ for the background noise it was at this point. He tossed his cloak over the railing, prepared to take a look at the damage himself, as the sound of blaster fire coming from his communicator grew in volume and his mind steeled itself for battle. “Have you tried redirecting power to the ship’s secondary circuit?”

“It’s fried too.” She glanced at the Phantom, turning to face him. “And I didn’t ask for help.”

“I’m not offering it,” he replied, tilting his head at her suspicious expression. “I’m not a mechanic. Bypassing?”

“You built that.” Rey pointed towards the lightsaber strapped to his leg with visible loathing as
though it proved his mechanical prowess. “It works.”

“Quite the compliment,” Kylo replied, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Bypassing?”

“Made it worse,” she grumbled after a long moment, pained, and rolling her helmet between her palms as if it was the only thing keeping her from punching him. It was actually depressing how much she was fighting with herself to simply talk to him.

“Have you considered replacing the reactor?”

“I can get readings from the reactor. It’s not busted.” She studied him, next words spoken with clear caution. “What do your technicians do when they have problems with the wings?”

“Replace them. It only requires detaching and installing a new one.”

Rey’s expression was pure outrage.

“I won’t trash a perfectly functional reactor just because of a connectivity problem I can’t find,” she snapped. “That is out of the question.”

The sound of blaster fire coming from the com on his wrist was becoming more and more intense and an accompanying feeling of urgency rang through the Force, making him step away from Rey and up the Phantom’s ramp.

“There is circuitry running from the back-up cells you might want to try,” he informed Rey, removing his helmet just as Phasma’s call for airstrike rose from the communicator. “It is controlled from the pilot’s console.”

Rey had turned his way now, facing his back.

“Those cells won’t be able to withstand the power input from the reactor,” she threw at him through the closing access ramp. “It won’t work.”

“I tend not to say that until after I tried.”

He was halfway down the launching ramp and turning the ship’s systems online, when his own words registered. Bitterness filled his expression at yet another reminder as Kylo felt the ship fall through the sky, its heavier rear end making it spin until Cloud City was right in front of him, turning smaller and smaller, TIEs falling away from it as white trails of condensation formed at the Phantom’s wings’ apexes.

Hitting the switches to his right as the Phantom entered a cloud, Kylo closed his hands over the controllers, carefully testing the fingers in his right hand as the thrusters connected.

The ship shuddered around him, then roared, engines propelling it out of the shroud of clouds and towards the city, a cacophony of voices echoing from the radio. Around him, the rest of the TIEs were raising, pilots confirming their positions.

“Initiating stage one.”

Acknowledgement came from a dozen different voices and the group of TIEs flying around him fell into order, a cracked wing appearing at his side as Tarkin squad closed formation.

“Readings indicate the enemy has deployed several squadrons, Sir,” the lead pilot informed, her voice muffling the ones coming from the rest of the vessels. “Your orders.”
“Alpha Squadron's priority remains providing support to the ground offensive,” Kylo replied, before hitting one of the radio switches up, opening a private channel with the pilot. “Alpha One.”

“Sir?”

“Wipe them out.”

The TIEs were back at Cloud City, flying alongside its external walls and then rising high over them before turning back down, diving towards the white skyscrapers and then between them, entering the gutted streets. The buildings and bridges turned into a white mass as the Order's red flags, still spread all over the city, got caught on their tail wind.

“Target ahead.”

The streets opened into a garden. The pockets of green breaking up the monotonous white of the city and the exhaust port of the factory—funny how the Galaxy's history could be written in exhaust ports—were the only details Kylo was able to take in before all hell broke loose. Fire rose up from the ground as the enemy fighters ceased engaging the ground troops in favor of meeting the incoming Order air strike.

The Phantom rolled between the blasts fired from a fast approaching B-Wing group, dropping away from them and then stabilizing. Tree leaves flew around it as its wings nearly touched the sea of green trees right under them.

Kylo’s fingers hit the trigger. A line of tanks targeting the air offensive exploded, no longer half hidden in the trees. One of them flew several meters in the air, flames lashing out from under it. One short pull of the controllers had the Phantom curving along the exhaust port’s walls, circumventing the structure and then shooting towards to sky, momentarily joining the ferocious battle taking place there, cannons blaring.

“Carriers have lift off,” Ferrar’s announced, voice crackling over the radio as one of the fighters Kylo had been targeted exploded. “Enemy fighters moving to engage.”

Kylo pushed the Phantom’s controllers in the opposite direction, forcing the ship to slide and then rush forward to engage a close knit X-Wing formation diving towards the Infantry.

“Initiate second stage tactics,” Kylo ordered the pilots, the Phantom’s blasts making one of the X-Wings careen directly into the one behind it. “Beta Squadron, return to escort duty. Alpha, remain.”

“TIE deployment confirmed,” Ferrar acknowledged, as one of the X-Wing pilots ejecting himself from his ship’s wreckage and the two ships fell, tangled in each other. “We have fallen behind schedule. Radar and atmospheric readings indicate the General’s equipment transporters are already en route. Ground status, Captain.”

An explosion came from above Kylo, raining ship fragments over the Phantom and forcing him to swerve to avoid hitting a TIE wing as it came crashing down on him. Not an instant later, Tarkin squad was flying passed him, engaging in a vicious dog fight with the group that had destroyed the ship.

“Troops are now engaging a large resistance pocket near the north-by-northwest entrance,” Phasma informed him, out of breath, the sounds of battle crackling on the speakers. “Several heavy vehicles are on site.”

Kylo’s gloved fingers ran over the Phantom’s console, hitting several buttons as he twisted the controls, turning the ship’s axis as it flew over the massive exhaust port. Glancing down, he saw anti-
aircraft weapons from the group engaging Phasma’s troops explode around him and forcing the TIEs trying to dive to their aid to pull up. Kylo frowned, attention momentarily caught by the dock’s ground entrance and the vehicles blocking it.

“Target acknowledged.”

The ship roared around him, shivering with anticipation as it rushed up the sky, towards the ferocious battle, cannons striking an enemy vessel, before it dove, the strain from the maneuver resulting in a stabbing pain that threatened to crush Kylo’s ribs. Then, the ground was rushing to meet him, the trees getting closer and closer.

“Heads down, Captain,” Kylo ordered, quietly, pulling the ship up.

It would be a matter of seconds to clear the tree line. Expression tensing and hands firmly grasping the controllers to keep the ship stable, Kylo hit the missile controls. Two blue lights shot forward, fired from directly under the cockpit, rushing towards the lines of enemy vehicles defending the entrance and crashing at the very same instant as the *Phantom* flew over the lines of stormtroopers.

A column of fire rose up the dock’s walls and the wave of black and red came to meet him, debris hitting the shields as a familiar voice shouted at him to ‘*pull up, kid, pull up!*’ He ignored it as he dove through the flames and then passed the dock’s entrance, the dark tunnel coming into focus as the *Phantom*’s alarms bleared and the Force thundered its own warning.

Kylo hit the secondary thrusters, pulling the wings to a vertical position the instant he was out of the tunnel, forcing it to reduce speed, blaster fire coming from the ground raining against the shields as his vessel came to a sudden halt. The dock was dark around him. The refinery’s vehicles and carriers still inside served as cover for the hostile presences he could sense. One, two—

*There you are.*

Kylo frowned. From well underground, he felt two dark presences he knew well, but the sensation was so tenuous he find himself doubting he was truly sensing them. In fact, they seemed—

*Still obscured, then. And where is the third?*

Forcing the *Phantom* to remain immobile for a moment as he dove through the Force, searching, Kylo came up empty. Their presences had vanished again. Refocusing on the battle, he slid the ship around the dock, stabilizing only when it was hovering over the same tunnel it had burst out of. The Order’s troops coming out of it were being forced to jump behind the vehicles and containers next to the entrance, riot shields in hand, blaster fire raining around them even as the enemy offensive started falling inside the refinery.

Having momentarily lost the trail of the other Knights, he brought the *Phantom* down side by side with the troops and rejoined the offensive. As the access ramp opened in front of him, Kylo removed his saber from its straps and decided to forgo the helmet in favor of raising his free hand towards the enemy, sending what was left of it crashing into the walls. The Force thundered, rushing towards him as he breathed it down, blustering his senses, his power, lending him its strength as he stepped forward, attention fixed on the same staircase the enemy had disappeared down.

“*Batons out, men!*”

Phasma’s voice echoing orders into the room announced her presence directly beside him. The footsteps of dozens of stormtroopers reverberated in the metal structure as they descending towards the refinery, blasters being traded out for batons as they went.
Once again, he was struck by the presences of Lyr and Rhyase Ren. While he had been uncertain before, the brief flash he caught through the latticed metal floor of them descending into the bowels of the refinery removed all doubt.

“Captain, two of our early morning guests have returned,” he noted, and her hardened expression told him the subtlety of his meaning was not lost.

Phasma’s face in battle, Kylo decided, was more fiercesome than any he had ever seen. Perhaps he would suggest against a replacement helmet for the sake of morale.

“Acknowledged, Commander,” she replied. Then, to the troops, “Shields ready men!”

The troops’ converged on the lower level and, at Phasma’s command, launched their attack against the remaining Rebels sequestered in a room filled with gaseous mist. The minute they were inside the door, they were met with blaster fire.

“This is a damned tibanna refinery,” an irate voice snapped from somewhere to his left, where a stormtrooper group was. It sounded annoyingly like FN-2187, but Kylo had no time to confirm that suspicion. He raised his left hand, drawing the Force forward and then, with a brutal backwards gesture, pulled it back, snapping the blasters out of the soldiers’ hands. At his side, Phasma rotated her spear ominously in her hand.

“Glad to have you on board, Sir.”

The red lightsaber roared to life as she and the soldiers pushed forward, painting the mist red and drawing a wave of panic from the enemy as they met the Order’s troops and realized, horrifyingly, exactly who was among their numbers.

The other side, it seemed, didn’t share Phasma’s enthusiasm.

Chapter End Notes

Next up - Rey is back in the hangar, but things are not all quiet with one rogue Knight still unaccounted for. Things come to a head as Rey meets back up with Finn, Kylo, Phasma, and Calrissian.

Other Notes -
A reviewer on FFN raised an important question—why do Rey and especially Finn seem so willing to fight for the Order (or, at least, go along with this mess) for as long as they have? What happened to the tracker chip mission? The answer comes in two parts.

First, multiple and converging POVs have a way of making it seem like more time has passed than actually has, so Mme Windcage and myself have added dates to each chapter. In reality, Finn and Rey arrived in Cloud City on Day 12 and we are, presently, only on Day 21. Up until Day 18, they were both separated—Finn left to fend for himself in Cloud City and Rey traveling to and returning with the Finalizer alongside Kylo.

Second, Rey has been generally unwilling to engage on behalf of the Order. Her first battle is when she and Finn arrive in Cloud City. Her second is on Day 18 when the Finalizer returns and she only agrees to assist in the transport mission to get back to
Finn. After her arrival, she sticks to repairing her damaged ship and categorically refuses to further assist the Order.

Finn is a bit different. While necessity is certainly part of the answer, history is the other half. As was addressed directly back in Chapter 8 and indirectly in flashbacks since, Finn has complex feelings regarding other stormtroopers and the Order itself. While he adamantly opposes the Order's mission, the troopers were his brothers in arms his entire life and that doesn't go away after a few weeks with the Resistance. With his combined guilt over Slip and Nines deaths, need to keep his cover, and fairly recent desertion status, it makes sense to us that he would naturally fall into the role of a commanding officer until he could continue with his original mission.

Yes, the trackers are coming back very soon. This whole disaster with the Finalizer, rogue Knights, and Cloud City, unfortunately, mean that Rey, Finn, and Kylo cannot just slip away to deal with things without raising alarms.
The Scavenger

Rey passed the time after Ren’s departure in meditation, searching the Force intently for Finn’s presence, diligently working to parse his thread from the multitudes locked in violent combat across the city. The exercise and the Force both proved uncooperative, pushing her further away from Finn and towards childhood fantasies instead—a foggy memory of a boy, a young man really, standing under a copse of trees.

It struck her as odd that she recalled him now, someone she couldn’t prove the existence of but whom her mind shouted was and always had been real. With all that was going on around her, she’d all but forgotten her resurgent visions of him from Takodona and Ach-Too, even the recent one from her arrival in Cloud City, in the ensuing chaos. He’d been there, pushed to the edges of her mind, and it flooded her with guilt. That she had forgotten him for any reason approached the unforgivable. As certainly as she knew he lived and breathed, she knew he needed her help, and she intended to give it. He’d been her only companion, her only friend, through the lonely years on Jakku and she would not abandon him now.

Though some might call what happened next luck, Rey knew it was sheer stubbornness that kept her pushing through the Force even as death and emptiness rippled and spread like wildfire. Though she hadn’t been able to find Finn in the midst of the chaos, she would be glad later that she did not yield to the horrifying feeling of battle and break her trance. If she had, she would’ve missed him—the boy, the young man, her oldest friend.

“Wait!”

Her voice echoed through the Force as the sounds of battle died down to a low hum. Distantly, she felt Kylo Ren’s presence reaching back over the battlefield, searching for something, as her mental gaze fell on the familiar figure of her old friend.

“Wait! I can help you.”

It was like looking through a dark fog—he stood at a distance, turned away from her, taller and broader than she remembered, but it was impossible to discern anything more. She knew him by presence, not sight, but it was enough. This was her old friend, she was certain, and not another memory or vision in the Force. Yet her enthusiasm for meeting him again after all these years was tempered by the sure knowledge of where she had found him. He was not just in Cloud City, but the heat of the battle, and she felt a wave of panic rise up as she reached for him.

His aura could only be described as bewildered.

“Where are you?”

He didn’t answer, studying the darkness that surrounded them instead. Where he once would have greeted her with a roguish smile and a distracted hand run through his hair—her heart twinged painfully for the mannerisms she’d forgotten until this moment—now he was still, cautious. He didn’t engage her, didn’t look at her, didn’t even seem to trust her.
“Don’t you remember me?”

Her question only seemed to make him more suspicious and, as much as it hurt, it hit her then that he had changed—or maybe she had been the one to change, to grow up, and now she was seeing him as he truly was—not just lonely but lost, a dying ember of light in the midst of the swelling shadows.

“Please, tell me where you are.”

He gave her no answer, but, then again, he never had before. He had never spoken much at all. There was no reason for this time to be any different, even when the answer was obviously here in the city and she was only asking to reassure herself. No, what she wanted was to make known her promise, but Force knew how threatening ‘I will find you’ was likely to sound. Instead—

“Wait for me.”

It was as good as saying nothing, and she could feel him slipping away from her.

“Please wait for—”

“Ma’am?”

The vision shattered, leaving her with a heavy heart and an aching shoulder, the face of a stormtrooper reflected in the round window of her TIE.

“The Corporal requests your presence at the top level.”

Rey wanted to scream. The frustration at being interrupted remained with her as she made her way up to the dock’s top floor. A group of technicians and soldiers were waiting for her when she arrived. Her frustration evaporated as she crouched besides the door they had all gathered around, mind instinctively expanding into the room beyond to investigate and confirming the suspicions that had warranted her presence in the first place.

There was someone on the other side.

Actually, she corrected, a group, but one presence in particular stood out. It was dark and the Force twisted around it in such a way that her hackles rose—a Knight.

She had a very bad feeling about this.

“Where does this lead to?” Rey queried, troubled, her voice a whisper and her hands toying with the helmet she had discarded in favor of her more practical hood. “Engine room or something?”

Hovering just behind her, neck stretched to listen through the door, Lando Calrissian—as elegantly dressed as ever in shades of dark beige—looked her way, answering before the Order’s personnel had the opportunity.

“An emergency dock. It has been inoperative for years.”

“We use it as one of the support points for the claws holding the dock to the city,” the grey eyed technician kneeling closest to her clarified, attention going briefly to his subordinates before returning to her. “This dock is a mobile structure. It was unloaded and installed by the Vanquisher at the beginning of the Stabilization Operation. It wouldn’t be the first time the rebels have targeted it.”

“Governor Ozzel raised security around the dock because of it,” a second voice informed Rey,
drawing her attention to the stormtrooper whose white shoulder blade denoted her as squad leader. Her voice was familiar, but it still took Rey a moment to recognize her as the same officer that had received Finn and herself on arrival a week prior. “Approximately forty percent of our casualties under his command were due to skirmishes targeting the dock’s connection arms.”

Rey snapped her attention back to the door at that, bad feeling multiplying tenfold. Uncertain of what, exactly, she was expected to do about all of this, she scrambled for an appropriate response and threw out the first thing that came to mind.

“Does Ren know about this?”

And why—oh why—of all things in existence, was that him?

“The Commander is aware. He bolstered security before leaving.”

The officer traded a quick glance with the chief engineer as she finished speaking, their silent exchange making it clear to Rey that she should’ve been aware of this fact already. The pregnant pause that followed told her she was still missing something and that the personnel surrounding her expected her to be taking the lead on whatever it was.

She took the opportunity to curse Kylo Ren’s existence, on principle.

“We had soldiers out there, Ma’am. We’ve been unable to contact them.”

The reality of what she was facing hit her like a bucket of cold water.

“Shouldn’t we investigate then?” Rey queried, jumping to her feet. The personnel around her traded confused looks and she knew with gut wrenching certainty that it had been the wrong response. They were expecting commands, not questions.

This can’t be happening.

A distant part of Rey’s mind was waiting for someone to burst into laughter, letting her in on what had to be a joke. She was no commander, and certainly not one for the First Order of all things! They couldn’t honestly think she was in charge here!

Alas, the longer they stared at her, expectant, the more futile that hope seemed. It was obvious that Isahaine Ren, whoever she was, was not only a Knight, but a First Order commander of some reputation, and Kylo Ren had clearly left the woman she was impersonating in charge.

Rey mentally contemplated how best to murder Ren for leaving her with this mess.

Force have mercy.

Whether on her nerves or on Ren’s chances for survival when she got her hands on him, it was impossible to say.

The door was forced open manually, cold air heavy with dust gushing from the dock as they stood to the door’s sides. Still focusing on the Force, her attention torn between the still ongoing battle in the distance and the rapidly retreating presences in the adjoining room, Rey stepped inside, staff in hand, her feet taking her to the small gap between the dock’s edge and the city that offered a clear view of the sky under it. Inside, Rey saw what she could only conclude were the aforementioned connection arms tasked with keeping the dock from tumbling down towards Bespin’s center.

They looked so unprotected from her vantage point that she was actually surprised they were
attacked from inside the city rather than from the air. Her shock must have been obvious, for a technician immediately whispered to her.

“They are inaccessible from below, Ma’am.”

Turning to see who had spoken, Rey found one of the technicians following behind the soldiers giving her an apologetic look.

“I’m assigned to the project team,” he said, by way of explanation.

“Close it,” the stormtrooper officer ordered, hitting the door with her fist and following the troops inside.

The blade of light that they had been standing in grew smaller and smaller, eventually disappearing altogether. The dock’s door snapped shut with a groan and the lights from the soldier’s blasters broke through the ensuing darkness, flying over a group of bodies as they searched.

“They left,” Rey announced, sensing the dark presence moving away before seemingly disappearing all together. “There’s no one here anymore.”

The officer dropped her weapon immediately.

“Search the site for booby-traps. Explosives. Anything,” she ordered, turning towards the engineering team taking cover behind the defensive positions close to the door. “Wait for my signal.”

The soldiers stepped away from the group, spreading out through the darkness. Eyes straining with the effort of trying to see through it, Rey followed cautiously, concern for maintaining her cover secondary to that of not getting ambushed by something.

Well, with the way today’s going...

The dock was an ample space, separated into two halves by a huge industrial arm that dove through the floor, disappearing far below it. Rey approached the hole made by the arm, her ever present scavenger’s curiosity piqued by the unusual mechanics, and her attention was soon captured by something else. There, in the shadows, hidden just behind the arm was—

A ship?

She froze for an instant, then recognition had her scrambling under the connection arm to get closer to the vessel, bewitched by the familiar red and white panels, motors she knew, a cockpit she’d been inside a lifetime ago—

It can’t be it.

And yet it could be nothing else. The look of this ship was burned into her very bones, as known to her as the feeling of abandonment. She’d watched this ship every night in her dreams, breaking atmosphere over Jakku, leaving her behind.

This is impossible.

She stepped closer to the vessel, taking in the dinged fuselage and the scorch marks burned into it. What in Force’s name was it doing here, of all places, tucked away in an inoperative hangar, as abandoned as she had been?

A movement caught her eye, a fleeting shadow at her periphery. No, not abandoned after all—there
was someone here. Hands gripping her staff tightly, Rey approached wearily. As her eyes adjusted to the low light, she perceived a figure besides the access ramp, facing her, waiting.

This was not good. This was not good at all. Who was this man? And where were the Order troops? How had they not noticed him and the ship already?

The man stepped forward. Instinctively, Rey raised her staff and he stopped, still a distance away. Any hope she may have harbored for recognizing this strange man with her parent’s ship, however, was dashed as soon as she saw his face. She didn’t know him, didn’t recognize him. Nothing about him was familiar to her. He was just a man, clean shaven with grayish-blue eyes, remarkable only in the way he scrutinized her, as though she were someone he ought to know but had forgotten.

No, Rey corrected, he was remarkable for the lightsaber strapped to his belt.

Who are you?

A younger, more trusting version of herself might have made the mistake of dropping her guard at the sight of his weapon, blinded by stories of knights and heroes. She knew better than that now—not everyone walking around with one of those things was a Jedi. Kylo Ren had taught her that much.

Who are you?

What the hell was going on here? And, far more importantly, why wasn’t anyone moving to give her support? She couldn’t hear anything from above her. It was as though the troopers were gone, as though everyone was gone, as though she and this strange man who made her chest ache with some fleeting phantom feeling were the only two people in the galaxy and—

“Is something wrong?”

Rey turned to find Lando Calrissian looking at her from the other side of the connection arm, and with him the noise from the room returned. A shiver ran up her spine, and a feeling of profound emptiness followed it, stretching out into the Force itself. She instinctively reached out for the sensation, grasping at it like water running through her fingers, and turned back to the ship.

It was gone.

Was it ever even there?

In the space between breaths, the last of the presence faded away, and Rey was left with an aching that felt almost like—

Father.

She felt the air leave her lungs like a physical blow. That wasn’t possible. None of this was possible—

“Ma’am.”

It took her a second to remember that meant her. Stepping away from the now empty space forcefully, fighting the urge to look back as she went, Rey came back around the connection arm, leaning over to look down the edge where the claw was attached and finding the team already inspecting it.

“Detonation charges,” the man Rey thought to be the Head Engineer informed her grimly, passing
over a spherical device that Rey recognized as the charger in question for her inspection. He then pointed his flashlight up, running its beacon across the connection arm’s articulations and Rey soon found herself swallowing, mind discarding what she had just seen in favor of the more pressing issue of being surrounded by bombs. There were dozens more detonators. “These models are armed at long distance.”

It went without saying that this was a worst case scenario.

“Can you remove them?”

Once again, the Head Engineer and Corporal shared mystified glances, and Rey was reminded that commanders did not ask questions in lieu of giving orders.

“Do it,” Rey ordered, trying again for authority. Instead, the Corporal leaned into her closely, almost whispering into her ear.

“We risk them detonating the charges remotely before we can finish,” she said. “Can you sense them, Ma’am?”

Considering the fact that she had spent hours searching the Force for Finn’s presence without success, it was stunning how easily Rey’s mind veered off in search of the rogue Knight. Her mind raced out of the room, diving through the Force and passed dozens of presences before crashing into that of the Knight and those who had helped sabotage the dock arm. So seamless was her search that she replied without thinking:

“Yes.”

It was apparently the right answer, but for all the wrong reasons. The officer was signaling her troops. They were moving towards the door and—

“Contact the Captain. Keep her informed of our coordinates. Ma’am,” the trooper called to her, and Rey suddenly felt like a prize tracker volunteered for the hunt.

Oh, she was going to throttle Ren when this was over!

The corridors behind the inactive dock were as dark and empty as the dock itself, the emergency lights running across the floor inoperative and the only light coming from the beacons of the soldiers blasters.

Even sensing both their urgency to act and her own desire to hunt down the Knight—finally an uncontested enemy—Rey found herself stopping, attention returning to the technicians about to leave and lock the door behind them. The inner door controls had been shut down as a security precaution when the dock itself was deactivated.

“Wait.”

The soldiers stopped, moving to surround her protectively—prize tracker indeed—as she leaned over the inner console, reconfiguring wires and codes that would allow her to open it from the inside in an emergency. She had no desire to be trapped here if things went wrong.

As her fingers worked over the door mechanism, her internal monologue was equal parts Finn’s voice chanting ‘you got this, Rey,’ which she didn’t for a second believe, and her own voice cursing Kylo Ren for, well, everything. She certainly did not have this disaster under control, nor did she want to, and she placed the blame squarely on Ren himself.
“If you don’t mind, I will accompany you.”

Rey almost jumped out of her own skin, so distracted by her musings that she’d missed the man coming up behind her.

Turning her head to find Lando Calrissian standing above her—and, really, what was with these people and personal space? Rey frowned slightly, reticent. She may not have any sort of sympathy for the man, what with him being a First Order sympathizer, but she wasn’t without tact. Still, was there a nice way to say this to him? He wasn’t a soldier—

*Neither am I.*

—nor was he young.

Rey rolled her eyes at the thought. Jakku, that was definitely Jakku talking. Digging her fingers further into the wires as she searched for a way to tell him he’d only slow them down, the Governor foraged on.

“I know this city,” he said, looking around. “This was one of our old emergency routes. It runs around the city’s largest circumference and it connects several docks. They used to be part of the evacuation plan but some two decades ago it was decided the population should be directed to the landing zones on the top level and the docks were abandoned. The corridors still serve their original purpose but,” Calrissian sighed, shaking his head. “You’re going to need me. This place is a labyrinth.”

Rey bit her lips, unconvinced.

“How bad?”

“Using potential chaos as a scale, pray we never need to evacuate through them.”

He was clearly worried, though Rey got the impression it wasn’t just about the potential explosives. For someone wearing a First Order armband, it was odd that he should seem so uncertain of his own safety.

“You city is valuable.”

The words came out without her permission, not that the Governor or the troops seemed to find them odd.

“Depending on whom one asks, the Tibanna might be valuable. Us? Not so much,” Lando Calrissian told her, the dark note in his voice immediately replaced by a surprisingly captivating smile. He looked younger all of a sudden, not so much a politician as a scoundrel accustomed to charming his way in and out of every conceivable situation. If he meant to gain her trust, however, his plan had just backfired. Rey knew his kind well. They were the ones full of proposed alliances, who promised split shares and then disappeared without a trace once the job was done. She had fallen for that trick once; she would not be fooled by whatever ends this smile was meant to achieve.

“You will forgive me if I admit that by accompanying you I hope to keep to your Master’s good side.”

It took her a moment to realize he didn’t mean Snoke, but Ren, and somehow she bristled more at the later implication than the former. She had no idea what Calrissian wanted from Ren of all people, and even less idea why he believed accompanying her through the tunnels would endear him to the Commander, but more to the point—
“You think he has one?”

Lando Calrissian laughed, and Rey thought it might be the first real one she’d heard from him.

“Considering his reputation, it’s the only plausible conclusion,” Calrissian’s voice dipped low, conspiratorial. “He’s not what I was expecting.”

Rey frowned slightly, glancing back at the Governor before she resumed tugging on the wires.

“What were you expecting?”

“A man more like the Emperor’s Right Hand, perhaps.”

Rey paused at that, and an image of the monster Kylo Ren tried so hard to emulate filled her mind—tall, imposing, more machine than man. Yes, even she, whose opinion of Ren was quite low indeed, could see where Calrissian might have expected something else.

“Darth Vader, you mean?”

The Governor’s expression was neutral, but his reply, when it came, certainly wasn’t.

“We had the honor of his presence once,” he confirmed, unable to stop the humorous twitch of his lips. “Of course, Lord Vader was never nearly so known for his humor as your own Master.”

Rey rolled her eyes at the comment, finally finishing with the mechanism, and suppressed a snort. Wouldn’t it just irk Ren to know that he had finally surpassed the reputation of his own idol, only to realize it was for his sense of humor? The door snapped shut at her side and the troops fanned back out, clearly ready to leave. The commanding stormtrooper turned to face Calrissian.

“The Captain is running ground assault in the southeast main refinery, Governor. Keep us away from there and out of friendly fire,” she ordered. Rey used her distraction to switch to her helmet, unwilling to be caught in only her hood should they stumble upon friendly fire anyway. “Where to, Ma’am?”

The Changeling

Essen was running, neck twisting to look back as the group around him broke apart, soldiers diving for narrow flights of stairs and adjoining corridors as he kept going, teeth clenched, while he cursed his own inability to keep track of the group of soldiers—and Force Sensitive—presently hunting him down.

Damn this!

He had long learned he couldn’t trust the Force to keep him safe, tenuous as his hold on it was. It had failed him more times than he could count, more than once leaving him stranded in the middle of hostile territory, blind when he had needed its help the most, and so he had developed his own natural abilities instead. He had honed his species inherent shifting abilities to a finely bladed edge, moving through skins as seamlessly as stronger users did the Force.

If it served as any consolation—and it really didn’t—he really had done everything in his power to avoid this scenario from the get go. He had gone to great pains to gather every possible advantage, every iota of information, in his incursion into the barracks, and it was markedly unfair that such
careful planning was failing him now of all times.

She was not supposed to be here!

Air assault. That was her place, those were her orders, meticulously outlined in the damned General’s itinerary he’d worked so hard to get! She was to assist with escorting his transporters. What the hell was she doing on the ground! What the hell did she think she was doing disobeying?

Why does she have to muck up everything?!

“Lyr,” Essen snapped, pressing the com on his ear as the last of the rebels disappeared down a corridor, only to be meet with silence. “Lyr.”

Glancing sideways as he awaited a response, Essen’s eyes caught his reflection in the window of a disused room he was running past, momentarily transfixed by his own shifting appearance. Bones cracked as they uncoiled, features morphing from the rough edges of a raggedy rebel to a streamlined, elegant face topped with dark hair—this skin was much more comfortable, belonging to a young bridge officer from the Finalizer, one Lieutenant Mitaka.

“Lyr!”

His continued hails went unanswered, the line keeping deathly quiet as he ran down stairs and through corridors, the blaster shots signaling enemy combatants growing closer and closer until—

A low rumbling warning rang out in the Force just in the nick of time for him to stop lest he be run straight through by the sharp blade coming towards his neck. Instead, it came to rest against his skin, pressure just on the right side of drawing blood without doing any real damage. Essen clenched his teeth, observing the short woman who emerged from the shadows filling the corridor to his left, studying him with clear suspicion written across her delicate features.

“Essen,” a rough voice greeted, placidly, from behind her, and a second form detached itself from the darkness. “Release him, Rhyase.”

If anything, Lyr’s confirmation of his identity made her seem more reluctant to obey, and she circled him instead, weapon still biting at his neck as she spoke, the threat as plain in her words as it was in the blade pressed to his throat.

“Keep changing your bloody face every time you’re away from us and, one day, I will kill you.”

“Keep to that line of thought and you won’t live long enough for that!”

Lyr shook his head, pinching the bridge of his nose before grabbing hold of one of Rhyase’s wrists and pulling her back, separating the two squabbling Force users. At that, Essen deactivated the detonator he’d pulled out in retaliation to Rhyase’s threats, reattaching it to his belt, and his eyes met Lyr’s disfigured face, voice urgent.

“She’s here.”

“She?” Rhyase queried, repositioning herself at Lyr’s side, their arms brushing.

“The girl from Starkiller,” Essen snapped, impatient. “She’s still on the ground.”

Rhyase blinked, head tilting slightly as she looked down the dark corridor from whence he’d come, as though expecting her to appear spontaneously to satisfy her sudden curiosity.
“Is she?”

“Rhyase,” Lyr sighed, and she refocused her attention on Essen and the matter at hand, frowning softly.

“Your point being?”

“You know our orders,” Essen pointed out to both of them, and, really, it was like dealing with children.

Again, it was Rhyase who spoke, expression thoughtful.

“Yes, but—”

“But!?”

“Just wondering if it’s to our best interests.”

Essen’s eyebrows jumped, incredulous eyes jumping to Lyr in hopes of finding someone sensible, but he remained silent, expression inscrutable.

“He agrees,” Rhyase translated, dispassionately.

“He has a mouth.”

“She’s better with it,” Lyr replied, and Rhyase snorted, dragging her dark hair away from her face. Pinching the bridge of his nose in exasperation, Essen nearly missed Lyr’s next words over the sounds of rapidly approaching blaster fire. “Kylo is also here.”

“What?”

“With Hux’s lap dog.”

“The Captain?” How sweet. Now we just need Hux and we’ll have a bloody reunion.

He extended a hand towards Lyr’s belt, where a device that monitored the gas levels of the factories hung.

“The Supreme Leader was clear in his orders. The girl is not to be harmed. We’re aborting.”

Rhyase and Lyr traded a meaningful glance that was filled with the sort of complicity Essen had seen once too often on their faces to ignore.

“If you so much as touched anything, I swear—”

He lurched forward, ripping the small device from Lyr’s belt. His hair flared into a shocking red reminiscent of Hux, then his camouflage fell altogether to reveal the gray, reptilian face that was Essen’s own. His beady black eyes widened in horror at the readings and he snarled into the silence:

“What did you do!?”

The Scavenger
They advanced more quickly than Rey expected, though not as quickly as they would have were the Governor not with them. At this point, however, Rey doubted that anyone in the group, herself included, held any lingering reservations about his presence, not when they’d seen first hand just how sincere he had been in describing the underground paths as a labyrinth.

The corridors multiplied at an alarming rate, becoming more and more numerous the deeper they went into the city, sometimes giving way to rooms, stairs and even lifts, many of which looked as though they’d been condemned and now dropped straight to the planet’s core below. It was every bit the maze Calrissian had described. Were it not for him guiding their physical movements as she gave mental chase to the assailants, they would be utterly lost by now.

Unfortunately, neither his aid nor her tracking had gotten them any closer to their goal and the frustration among the soldiers was palpable now, though their slow progress had nothing to do with the layout of the corridor itself. No, more often than not, the problem was that the presence itself faded in and out at random, such that Rey had to stop regularly to refocus, all the while trying to evade pockets of rebel forces that had escaped under the city after the battle and whom the troopers—and herself by proxy, unfortunately—were forced to engage with at nearly every turn.

“We’re not going to get anywhere like this!” It seemed the Corporal’s frustration had finally reached critical mass. One of her subordinates raised his blaster to catch a fleeing rebel in the back, taking him down before the man could regroup to fire on them again. Rey’s stomach twisted at the sight.

“What seems to be on radio silence, Ma’am,” one of the soldiers informed her from his position in front of the radio, rechecking the channels all the while. “The lines are all dead.”

“The coms aren’t the only thing that’s silent,” a second voice pointed out, one of the soldiers standing at the front of the group, looking back towards them as he spoke. “It’s entirely too quiet. We should—”

The sound of a blaster firing interrupted whatever he might have suggested and the rest of the soldiers tensed, blasters jumping up as they looked around, closing ranks around the Governor and the soldier responsible for communications.

“That sounded incredibly close.”

“Acoustics?”

The Corporal seemed to be struggling violently with herself not to voice her opinion of the Governor’s snark at a time like this, before turning to Rey for guidance.

“Ma’am?”

The pistol Han Solo had given her firmly grasped in her hand, Rey focused again on the Force, face tensing in concentration and then frustration as the atmosphere of expectation around her deepened. She doubted that any of the soldiers around her grasped how truly difficult locating a single presence in the heat of battle in a populated city was, but then again Rey herself seemed to have failed to understand that. Ach-Too, it seemed, had done little to prepare her for the real world.

Not to mention there were only two people living there, she groaned to herself.

To make matters worse, the Force was behaving oddly right now, or perhaps it was more accurate to say something was acting on the Force itself oddly. Whatever the case, everything felt shrouded, dense and impenetrable, like a thick, damp blanket had been dropped over her senses. Where the hall
was quiet, the Force was silent as a graveyard. Even Kylo Ren’s presence, one she could neatly pick out half a planet away, had vanished. He was not in the skies above the city, nor aboard the *Finalizer*, nor on the ground—

Rey had no time to finish that thought. The blood drained from her face as the Force suddenly came alive with a clap, a warning ringing out that she echoed to the troop commander.

“They’re coming our way!”

The officer cursed loudly, turning furiously towards the Governor.

“I said to keep us away from the offensive!”

“We’re not anywhere remotely near it! If there’s anyone who shouldn’t be here, it’s *them*!”

*And I’m the one who should have sensed them!*

Rey’s own temper finally boiled over, cursing Luke Skywalker and his lackluster instruction for what was neither the first time, nor likely to be the last. How in the hell had she failed to sense not one but two groups headed directly their way?

The Corporal rushed to a room they had passed several meters back, dragging Calrissian as she went, calling for the radio controller to contact the approaching Order offensive as she gave the command to break down the door to the anteroom before they were overrun. She had luck with neither, and the battle reached them just as she got the door open.

Forcing the Governor into the room through a gap between two soldiers, Rey was one of the many left stranded outside when the battle exploded and the first, it seemed, to be targeted.

A gas canister hit the ground near her feet, spilling dense black smoke into the corridor, and the hall erupted in blaster fire. A group was approaching from the left, and one in particular was advancing on her quickly. She grabbed hold of her staff seconds before an electrified baton swung at her ribs, blocking the strike, but she was unbalanced by it, staggering backwards and fighting to remain on her feet.

The baton rose up again, intent on striking her head, and Rey thrust her staff upwards catching her attacker in the face before brutally swiping his knees out from under him. As soon as he fell, she recognized—

“Finn!”

He groaned from his spot on the floor, reminiscent of their first meeting.

“Rey?!”

She could sense his presence *now*, of course, as she helped him back to his feet, their eyes meeting despite the masks that covered both of their faces.

“What are you—?” he started, horrified. “I’ve been worried sick! Are you alright?”

The Force grabbed hold of both of them before their reunion could continue, sending them flying out of harm’s way just seconds before an explosion left a crater in the ground where they’d been standing. They hit the floor several meters away, sliding past a tall figure, the smoke and shields of the troopers behind him tinted crimson by the glow of his saber.
"How many?" Kylo Ren queried, demanding as always, as another trooper threw a flash bang down the hall, illuminating the figures firing on them now. "How many soldiers were with you?"

Rey retrieved her pistol as Ren violently threw a combatant against the ceiling. Typical.

"Two squads, some fifteen people, including the Governor. They must have retreated inside the—"

An explosion rocked the hall. Finn pushed her to the floor behind the cover of the shields and even Ren was forced to dive for safety. Despite the situation, Rey found her ever-present anger with Ren’s mere existence rearing it’s head again. What in blazes name was he doing here? She had seen him leave on a ship! She was at his bloody briefing, for Force’s sake, where he had made his role in the operation clear. He was airstrike, so what in the hell was he doing on the ground?

With a violent gesture, Ren threw a number of enemies straight into the ceiling, including one he’d been holding onto at the time. His callous disregard was the final straw where her temper was concerned.

"Is this your definition of an airstrike?!"

Ren was already back in the fray, saber rotating to deflect a shot and send it back towards the same man that had fired it. Amidst the smoke she could see little of his face, but apparently he was about as pleased to see her as she was to see him.

"I’m much more interested in your flexible definition of the word no!"

"This is not that!"

Ren scoffed, rotating his saber to intercept a second blast.

“Oh, please do enlighten me as to the difference then!”

Irritation aside, Rey wished she had the time to do just that. Unfortunately, relaying the information about the rogue Knight and the detonators on the dock arm would need to wait for a time when they were not surrounded by enemy troops. The remaining stormtroopers had taken the opening Ren's violent expulsion of the encroaching enemy forces had given them to fall into line behind him, driving the rebels further back.

Wherever the Order's forces had come from, it was clear that the confrontation had been dragging on for quite some time. The troops showed visible signs of exhaustion. Finn, who remained steadfastly at her side, panted as he exchanged the baton he had been wielding in favor of his blaster. Instead of slowing down under the strain however, the troops seemed to rally—or maybe they were fleeing from Ren, who was once again sending Force blasts ripping through the corridor, leaving the soldiers little choice but to move or perish with their enemies.

"Signal the advance lines!"

The troops moved in unison behind him, shields raised in front of the rest of the troops as they fired, and another wave of fog filled the corridor, painting it a smoky gray once again. The confrontation now seemed less of a battle and more of a slaughter, though it would be foolish to dismiss the danger the enemy still presented. Pushed back as they were, stormtroopers were falling around her nearly as rapidly as the rebels, hit as soon as they left their covered positions to fire.

"Join the shields!" Finn shouted at her side, before grabbing up an injured soldier who had fallen to the ground. Nearby, Rey saw the door to the room where the troops that had accompanied her earlier had taken cover.
The battle grew more violent as they approached the crux of the enemy troops. Ren's lightsaber crashed ceaselessly into rebels who had either been too slow or too foolish to move out of the way, close quarters forcing him to pull his swings in or risk grazing the walls and gas-filled pipes they may contain. Rey revised her earlier assessment of the unevenness of the battle—if the Order troops were using blasters so close to the gas lines, things must not be going as well for them as she thought.

Not that Ren seemed impacted at all. Even forced to use his saber more as a shield than a sword, he still made quick work of the poor souls in his path. The Force was thundering around him, tearing through the enemy as if they were rag dolls.

"We've got them running," Finn pointed out to no one in particular, labored breathing making his words come out half-strangled. He looked back at one of the soldiers. "Where's the Captain?"

His answer was a thunderous roar rising up from the opposite end of the corridor. Ren immediately stepped back, raising his hand to signal the troops to remain still as he peered into the fog. Blaster fire could be heard in the distance.

The sounds of battle died shortly after, though stray kill shots occasionally rang out as white figures slowly emerged from the fog, systematically checking the bodies of the rebels as they went.

Rey slumped against the wall as Ren switched off his saber. Finn turned towards her, momentarily distracted by a stormtrooper bearing the red armband of a squad leader, before returning his full attention to her.

"Are you alright?"

"What are you doing here?"

They nearly spoke over each other, frantic to ensure the other was unharmed. The stormtrooper officer behind Finn sighed, though neither Rey nor Finn noticed his theatrics, busy as they were with their own.

"I was worried sick about you!"

"I'm fine! Are you?"

A hand grabbed the back of her jacket forcefully, pulling her from Finn and their fevered exchange, before dragging her towards the room the soldiers she had come with had taken shelter in. Unceremoniously ordering the remainingsoldiers and the Governor out, Ren released her, but not before using the Force to shut the door in Finn’s face.

If Rey wasn’t so stunned, she may have thought to protest.

"As touching as that reunion was, I'm afraid I must interrupt before the inevitable hugging can get underway," Ren stated, as though the mere concept had offended him, and Rey was sorely tempted to break down the door and do just that, if only to irk him. “There are far more important things to concern ourselves with at the moment than your boyfriend.”

"He is not my—"

"That isn't the point." Though he did seem less murderous than a moment prior. Rey really didn't care to know why. Bad enough the man traipsed about in her head without being subjected further to the inner workings of his.

"Now then," he continued, tone mollified, tugging his hood more firmly into place as he did. "What
has turned your defiant 'no' into a stroll through Cloud City's underbelly?"

Before Rey could answer, Phasma appeared in the doorway, apparently having overridden the lock. She approached them in measured steps, green cape whipping ominously around her legs.

"The Corporal has reported the presence of enemy combatants at the inactive dock-on site. Command reports that engineering has found signs of interference at the join." She announced, likely for Ren's benefit, before turning to Rey. "Report."

Even if she couldn't feel Ren's eyes boring holes in the side of her head, Rey knew what was about to happen. Again.

"Long distance charges have been deployed in the connection arms."

One of these days, she would figure out how he did that without her ever feeling him in her mind. In the meantime, she would settle for furious over another breach of privacy.

"I can speak for myself."

Phasma's eyebrows jumped appraisingly, impressed, though why Rey didn't know. Ren, on the other hand, had turned his gaze to the floor. A less informed individual might interpret his body language as uncomfortable, chastised even, but Rey knew better. He'd looked the same way in Starkiller's interrogation room when she'd answered his query about BB8 with schematics.

Humor. The man had it in spades, for all Rey found his sense of it appalling.

"Speak, then."

Rey traded a glance with Finn, who had slipped inside with the Captain, before giving them a quick—and likely entirely too informal—account of the events that resulted in her crashing into their offensive. The Captain's expression had gone carefully blank by the time Rey finished, but Ren had taken to pacing like a caged animal.

"The presence you sensed—it disappeared from time to time?"

Rey bit her lips. While that was true, she'd also been unable to feel the Order offensive until they were directly atop her, Ren included, but she was hesitant to reveal that with the Captain present. Instead, she aimed for subtle.

"It was like it was obscured, or something."

Ren stopped, turning to face her, searching for—something. Rey wasn't sure what. He turned to Phasma instead.

"Contact the troops, Captain," he ordered. "Have them surround the—"

He was interrupted by a distant rumbling, like the sound of thunder, but that wasn't what stopped him. Rey felt it too. The Force crashed into her with desperate urgency, a warning to flee, now.

All four of them sprinted for the hall, Phasma shouting for the soldiers to retreat as Ren turned, hand outstretched towards the door, and then—

All movement and sound ceased, save for a high pitched ringing noise drowning out Rey's every thought. She found herself on the floor, so disoriented that, for a moment, she thought she was back on Jakku, fallen through a hole in the dilapidated floor of a sunken Star Destroyer. Then she opened
her eyes.

Around her, chaos. Everything was wrecked—parts of the wall to her right so disfigured that she could catch glimpses of the mine shaft beyond them. Debris sparked dangerously, ready to catch fire at any moment. The earlier war zone was torn open anew.

"What?"

Rey was sure she'd shouted, but she could barely hear her own voice over the ringing in her ears. Her mind and body both refused to cooperate with her, thoughts and movements slow, encumbered. The pale, dark eyed man who had fallen beside her was jumping to his feet, searching over the group before his eyes landed on her, lingering and concerned, and she could only stare in return as her mind struggled to catch up. He took off at a run as soon as she was on her feet, and he was halfway down the wrecked corridor before she recognized him as Ren.

Another man appeared behind her—Finn, she realized, finally regaining her bearings—as well as a group of soldiers. The entire structure of the city seemed to be swaying underneath them, and a low rumble was still echoing down the halls. The sounds of distant explosions and even more alarms rose up, sending the remaining soldiers bounding in the same direction as Ren.

She made to go after them—it seemed to be the protocol—but someone grabbed her roughly from behind before she could leave. Her eyes met Phasma's blue ones.

"Fetch Armitage."

Her voice was breathless, eyes wavering in and out of focus as she struggled to her feet. For all the urgency in her request, however, Rey had no idea who or what Phasma was talking about.

"Armitage?"

"General Hux."

Another tremor rocked the structure, in time to the Captain's clarification. The floor lurched beneath Rey's feet and she nearly fell again as the entire corridor seemed to plummet, settling again with a whine. Phasma's face was turning paler by the second.

"Find him." She shoved Rey in the dock's direction. "Go!"

Chapter End Notes

Next Up - Back to the Finalizer, where repairs are under way and Hux as just fallen to his memories.
“Is this it?”

“We triangulated the position, Sir. These are the coordinates.”

Frowning, a deep crevice forming between his eyebrows, Brendol Hux leaned forward, fingers tapping on pilot’s chair as he surveyed the terrain around them, eyes straining to see beyond the clouds of dust that danced around the ship.

“Take us in.”

The landing was anything but soft, one of the landing pads slipping from its initial position making the vessel plummet a meter or so before the pilot blasted the stabilizers to correct the trajectory.

“My apologies, Commandant,” she said, Brendol’s hand closing around her shoulder making the tension leave both her back and her voice. “Your orders?”

“Activate the turrets and keep the engines running. The rest of you, with me.”

Until this moment doing his best not to have his presence acknowledged, Armitage closed his eyes, the tremulous breath leaving his chest becoming stuck the instant his father’s pale eyes found him and a look of pure loathing left him frozen on his spot—salvation coming only when one of several officers riding on the opposite side of the cockpit rose to his feet, nose buried in a holo display and eyebrows furrowed.

“Our supplies are on the low side, Sir,” he informed, forcing Brendol’s attention onto him. “I have sent word to the Ravager to replenish our stock, but I’m not positive they have yet received word of the supply vessels. If not, considering the number of extra mouths already on board, we might have reached the limits of our intervention here. We should take that in consideration in our future dealings.”

“Noted. Inquire as to how many we can still support next time the channel is open. Also, have the Ravager flag the nearest of our allies’ vessels. If more have the right potential, it would be in poor taste not to be able to meet the demand.”

Brendol paused, pensive, a step to the side giving the officer opportunity to walk with him.

“Where exactly is the Ravager?”

“Camouflaged in the asteroid belt, Sir. Dropping out of lightspeed there did a number on our shields and hull, but the surveyors were not mistaken on the system’s predicament. It has proved a small sacrifice considering our gains. Even so, to call for reinforcements—”

“The sector is thriving with piracy and other forms of degeneration. If the Republic ships intercept some of our communications and decide to investigate, the Ravager has my permission to use its cannons. I’m tired of playing by their rules.”
He didn’t seem to be the only one. Walking among the soldiers, Armitage could see the way the troopers’ hands closed around the blasters. All of them seeming to hope the permission would extend to them, that they too would be allowed to take arms against their enemy even if they knew it was impossible, that their mere presence in this planet was a breach of the Galactic Concordance and a risk to the population—that justice wasn’t theirs to deliver.

Not yet, Armitage corrected himself, words filled with finality even as his eyes lingered on the black hover car at the center of the overcrowded cargo hold—the one his father and the young officer were making their way towards. He watched them sit side by side, chest clenched painfully, the burning feeling rising to the back of his throat forcing him to clean his eyes least—

A strong pain exploded on the back of his head, the rather creative cussing the impact inspired making both a despair filled growl and snickering rise in the proximity.

“He is taking after you, Sergeant!”

“Be that on your head, Sir!”

I am rather sure it was on mine, Armitage mentally snapped, proceeding to glower at the guilty party—Sergeant Tagge, who he hadn’t heard approach—the moment he found him standing right behind him. His scowling would be a lot more impressive, he feared, if he wasn’t just eleven and the stormtrooper officer wasn’t a tower of a man that had but to stand to be intimidating.

“We will be placing bets, Sir,” one of the troopers making his way inside the battered ground transport stored inside the cargo hold stated. “Keep fighting the good fight, kid!”

“Bloody hilarious, private,” Tagge growled back right before shoving the helmet over his head. “Now shut it and move! That means you too, kid.”

The convoy left the vessel’s storage in a tightly knit group. Tanks closing at its rear and front, the hover car riding between the Infantry’s Ground Transport and the small assembly of supply carriers accompanying them.

Feeling the ground transport jump and jerk under him, Armitage approached one of the small hatches, letting his attention wander outside as the black vessel that had carried them fell to the distance, turning smaller and smaller until it disappeared all together.

There had been a city here once. All reports and the New Republic’s Senate stated that there was city here still. He had been curious to see it. Arkanis had had little to call urban. Maybe Scarparus Port with its small buildings, stores and landing pads could have aspired to call itself that, but for the most part his home planet remained rural. A village here and there. Crops. A lonely state breaking through the greenery. Even his father’s Officer’s Academy, hidden underground as it had been, made for a poor sight. Other than that it was pine trees and rain—too much of both most would say and so Arkanis remained as it always had been, remote and poor.

Maybe that had been the reason he jumped at the idea of coming here. Allowing himself to feel the rush of excitement even if that meant being stuck with his father for Force knows how much longer and that chilled him to his core. He wanted to know what an Imperial city looked like. To see in what way it differed from the Republic one on Chandrila that he knew far too well already. He had spent hours with his mind consumed by the images of this place. The high skyscrapers touching the clouds. The smaller buildings rising around them almost like a staircase. Beyond them, the smallest hint of green, a forest just outside the city's limits. It was wonderful and it had allowed his imagination to run wild, filled with possibilities. He wanted to see it. All of it!
And now I have.

There was nothing. No skyscrapers. No streets. They were stepping on their rubble, moving passed gigantic piles of debris, the streets snaking around them making it clear that the devastation stretched far beyond what the eye could see.

Not even the trees survived.

The hover car’s door closed with a bang. Looking around, Brendol strode away from the convoy and to where his son already stood, green eyes stuck to the curtain peeking from the skeletal remains of the building to their right.

“So much for the New Republic’s assurances,” he commented, turning to bark at the troops. “Spread out! And untangle the flags, let there be no doubt who we are! Also, Kendal—”

Getting off the car, the officer he had been engaged with rushed to their side, pebbles snapping under his feet as he did so. The dust was already turning all their boots and uniforms grey.

“Focus your efforts on finding that boy’s position. I would prefer if we didn’t leave without him.”

The self satisfied expression that invariably covered Lieutenant Kendal Ray’s face crumbled.

“We assumed the boy would interest you, Sir,” he stated, looking over the high piles of rubble around them and then to the still standing building, vigilant. “I admit, he is—”

“A survivor.”

“Feral might be a better word,” Kendal replied, concern making itself more and more obvious. “And I am not at all sure if he is all there, if you get my meaning, Sir.”

Striking a match with which to light the cigarette he was holding between his lips, Brendol frowned, pensively.

“He is lucid and coherent,” he stated, blowing out the smoke with clear pleasure. “If you are hitting at some deeper trouble, I am hardly qualified to evaluate it.”

“He fired against you, Commandant.”

Kendal’s voice was trembling when he spoke, the fear suddenly filling his voice making Brendol turn, expression softening. He looked unexpectedly warm, reassuring as he went on to held the young officer’s shoulder, his fatherly gaze something he had never cared to bestow upon his own blood.

“He fired against me and yet I’m unscathed,” he pointed out. “He let me approach enough that we talked. Considering what he must have seen, it is rather remarkable, is it not?”

Kendal’s only form of rebuttal was a worried expression that seemed to imply a sudden desire he had never called his former instructor here. As concerned as he himself was, however, Armitage only dropped his head. Eyes focusing on the ground. His worry wouldn’t be received in the same kindly fashion. Nothing ever was. Not even his silence. He was never able to get anything right.

“We have no guarantee the boy will be as amenable the second time around.”

“I would discuss that psychology suggests otherwise, however, I seem to recall your interest in the subject was secondary to your calling to the arts.”
Kendal’s face turned a very dark tone of scarlet.

“I was twelve, Sir. If that boy finds the tracker—”

“The boy has great potential,” Brendol replied, unconcerned. “He is coming with us. I am overly tired of pandering to the mediocre.”

Armitage shrank as the pale eyes fell on him. Seeing both men leave him, feeling a knot on his throat as they approach the vehicles and then walked passed them—approaching the place where the troops were unloading the food supplies and organizing them into neatly piles—he wished the words hadn’t hurt, he wished he could obey Admiral Sloane’s advice and follow them.

“People’s natures aren’t something that changes,” he still could hear her say, dropping to her knees in front of him. The conversation had happened years ago and doing that had allowed them to stand at the same height. It had been kind of her to take that into account. She was kind. Yet he wished she hadn’t done it. That wound on her side had obviously hurt her. “I wouldn’t expect your father to change no matter what threats I hang over his head. Even so, listen, observe. There is much you can learn from him if you pay attention.”

He had agreed. It had taken all his courage to do so, but he had promised he would. It had made her smile.

“Someone told me Brendol was once a great man. Sometimes I think I can see how.”

“Can you?”

Her smile had turned sad at his hope.

“Not in him.”

He hadn’t understand who she had meant, he didn’t still, and he cared little for who that was when compared to how much he feared he would disappoint her too. Even so, he couldn’t follow. A crowd was beginning to approach the food supplies, the group breaking away from it and the way charm was emanating from every single one of his father's pores speaking just of how important this was—and yet, he just wanted to flee, to be by himself and not to think.

The afternoon would find him elbows deep into one of the ground transport’s wheel suspensions, the blast of pressurized steam that had hit one of his hands making him pace up and down the vehicle’s length, trying not to scream, panic at having to reassemble the bloody thing with a hand he could barely move before anyone saw what he had been up to, somehow leading to the worst row of target practice he had ever experienced.

_Stupid._

The shot flew over one of the tin cans he had set on top of a section of debris, crashing into the bullet ridden wall behind it.

_Stupid._

Again he failed. And his hand ached, horribly, the blisters covering the more badly burnt parts of it a stark contrast with the deeply red skin.

_Stu—_

This time the tin can flew before he had a chance to fire, jumping to the air and falling back down.
He turned on instinct, blaster pistol raised despite the horrible throbbing on his hand, to find a child, a boy about his age, dressed in rags, some meters away from him and with a blaster pointing straight at his head.

"Who are you?"

His stance spoke of hostility as did his voice. All hesitation absent as he kept the blaster steady. If worse come to pass there was no doubt that he would fire. Clinging to his extremely tremulous pistol, Armitage was not so doubtful he would be able to hit him given the torturous ache in his hand as that he would be able to press the trigger. He had never been any good with life targets. His father could sing songs about that—he most certainly would if he didn’t see that as a slight against himself—and yet, as much as he wished to call out to him, he knew better than to do it. He wouldn't come. It was preposterous to think otherwise and—

"You look like him."

The other boy spoke in a voice that was filled with a kind of longing that was painful to listen to and the moment he talked, Armitage, watching the blaster slightly dropping, knew who this was. He could hear his father and Lieutenant Ray go on and on about him.

A survivor, remarkable and with great potential, they had called him.

His stomach turned, something twisted and wounded that wished to cause as much damage as it had been dealt making him turn his back on the other child without a word, without acknowledging him, and pour his attention over the disassembled suspension.

Retribution had a sweet taste. For about two seconds. The next the boy appeared on the other side of the wheel, crouching and studying him as he reattached one of the secondary arms to the vehicle.

"You can fix things?" he asked, cautiously, shrugging when Armitage frowned at him. "I was watching."

He pointed at his blaster's scope in explanatory fashion. Armitage went from frowning to glaring.

"Also, you have oil—" the boy continued, unaffected, and stretched one arm under the suspension, fingers reaching to touch his face. "Here."

His voice faltered. He seemed almost fearful Armitage would shatter the instant his fingers touched his face and for a moment actually seemed surprised that he didn’t, that he was real, that he was there. Then, he was biting his tongue, focusing on the offending oil and trying to remove it.

It was a careful touch despite that. Gentle. Everything he had long learned not to expect, and it froze him on the spot, leaving him to lean into it until his mind recovered from the shock and he actually looked at the other child. He might have returned the favor if he only knew where to start. Also, if he had a sponge and water. And possibly scissors. He doubted that throwing the other boy into a sonic shower would solve any—any of that. He was filthy, covered from head to toe in dust and mud, his hair full of knots, its color impossible to discern since it had turned the same tone of grey of his skin and clothes. He was of the same color of the devastated city, of this rotting corpse around them and he was utterly unremarkable, except for the eyes. They were blue and haunted and contrary to his home still very much alive.

"What happened to you?" Armitage queried, managing to sound exactly like he hadn't meant to—gentle—while pointing the wrench he was using at the bloody cloth wrapped around the boy's left foot. "That looks bad."
Not that commenting on it would award him with an answer. In fact, glancing at his eyes and then at
the line of tin cans Armitage had been trying to hit, the boy seemed determined to get some answers
of his own.

“Are you always that bad?”

Armitage scoffed.

"I would have hit it if you hadn't showed up."

"You were missing before that."

"It's called target practice. Some are bound to miss."

"All of them?"

"Like you can do better."

"I can do better."

"Demonstrate."

It had been spoken like an order, meant as such and, for a moment, the other boy seemed about to
obey. Fingers falling away from his face, he rose, blaster steady and pointed at the first of the line of
seven cans. It took less than a second before, seeming to grow aware of what Armitage was
planning, he turned the blaster and rapidly counted his bullets. That Armitage didn't get punched
there and then was nothing short of luck.

"You counted them!"

"I did."

"You were trying to get me out of rounds!"

"I was."

His smile was met with a ferocious glare and something that looked a lot like a snarl. It was nothing
new, but it hurt all the same. Dropping his head, Armitage threw himself back to work, still stealing
glances at the other child. Despite his anger, he wasn't leaving. In fact, there was a sort of mild
interest in his expression everytime he glanced his way. That and something strange that was making
Armitage go back to study his face time and time again.

“He is coming with us,” his father's words had been spoken with finality and still he thought he was
seeing something which meant they would be leaving him behind. It hounded him until he couldn’t
help but see it. Until it was clear as day.

"You are not a boy are you?"

The blue eyes bored into his, their cautious expression answer enough.

A survivor, remarkable and with great potential, they had called her.

The wounded thing twisting in his stomach still wished for little more than to do harm. If only those
eyes were not making it so difficult to hate her. If only he wasn’t stupid enough to hope she might,
just might, be a friend.
“Don’t tell them that,” he heard himself whisper. “Do you have a name?”

She had. She might have given it to him then, but something had distracted her. There was this rumbling of engines in the distance, lights coming down from the sky. If he ever saw pure terror, he saw it then, on her eyes the moment the air raid sirens started to echo over the ruins. Then, she was diving to grab his hand, to pull him away from the open field and into the half destroyed building and from there to its dark basement, her fingers sinking into his burned hand.

As much as Phasma’s grip had hurt him at the time, it was no reason for the way it hurt now. The explosion of pain making the memory crumble and tossing him right back to a present where a blasted piece of machinery he should not have been distracted from had just managed to blast a column of pressurized steam right into his fingers and a different, if equally horrific nightmare, immediately opened its uninviting arms to engulf him.

“Have you heard about Commander Ren?” a voice was querying, rising from deep inside the TIE launching racks. Whoever was speaking remained invisible, hidden by a never ending series of heavy cables and hydraulic arms, the metal all around him seeming to work as an acoustic chamber. “With that Knight?”

“What were they doing?”

“They were this close. I have some ideas.”

The smooching noise climbing up the mechanical parts made Hux scramble out of the maintenance hatch, head crashing right into its borders as he returned to the main hangar with this utterly nightmarish vision filling his mind.

Was—was that Kylo Ren’s love life he was hearing his crew discuss? What sort of blasted detour had he taken from his memories that had landed him right into hell?

“They have been at it since the first A.A.L.s came up.”

Hux’s head snapped up, eyes meeting with those belonging to the dark skinned woman leaning over the same piece of hydraulics he had been working on. Pulling the hair out of her face, Major Jarnek let her back rest against the nearest TIE reactor, a critical glance directed at his hand.

“I have been calling your attention to the steam build up for the last fifteen minutes, Sir.”

He hadn’t been listening. In fact, surveying the Finalizer’s main hangar from the top level of the TIEs’ launching racks—the gutted dark floor, piles of discarded pieces and the viciously torn up walls lying below, somehow making the snickering coming up the maintenance hatch louder—he rather wished he wasn’t listening now.

“What—?”

On a second thought, scratch that. He didn’t want to know. In fact, considering the fleet they had let escape some days ago and the overall state of the Finalizer, gossip should be the furthest thing from everybody’s minds. Not that the fragments of work making rounds around him were all the more pleasant. Something which Lieutenant Arran, climbing the steep steps to the top of the racks and raising the security chord so that he could dive under it, was clearly bent in making clear.

“This thing is going to blow us a new one, Major,” he grumbled, hand expressively pointing at the racks. “If it is not the conveyor belts, it’s the hydraulics. If it’s not the hydraulics, it’s the lubrification system. We will have a better chance at fixing it if Commander Ren had run that damned saber of his through the—”
He stopped, frowning at Jarnek as she pointed urgently—and not at all discreetly—in Hux’s direction. Blinking once, twice, Arran cleaned his throat.

“Figuratively speaking as you can imagine, General.”

Mind having taken a vertiginous dive into a collection of memories of wrecked consoles and broken equipment that was anything but figurative, Hux pressed the bridge of his nose, the diagnostic tool he had been attaching to the circuitry coming to life as his try at a dismissive “Of course, Lieutenant” somehow turned into a ominous snarl that made officer’s spine stiffen and his voice find its professional tone.

“The teams going over the racks on the other side of the hangar have reported some success on putting them to work. We are taking some of the TIEs to the dock’s hangars as you had previously instructed, Sir,” he informed. “As for the rest of the Finalizer we keep hitting problems with the reactor. It is probable we will have to replace it once we are back at headquarters. Our last mishap set the heat regulators off. We are making all efforts to—”

“Double them,” Hux interrupted, what little was left of the scattered embers of his patience draining with alarming velocity. “And, Lieutenant, have your men count those tools. If I hear anything resembling rattling inside the racks they will be answering to me.”

The officer saluted him, stepping away with such velocity his movement looked a lot like a retreat.

“Astounding,” Jarnek commended. And truly, the humorous note of her voice was easier to ignore than the slightly critical one that gave it its ever present edge. “If the teams are about to have a run in with the Annihilator’s Chief Engineer, General, do save me a front row sit. If it is half as entertaining as your ‘If I find another asteroid on that bow, I will weld you to the blasted hull’ showdown with Vice-Admiral Argrave I wouldn’t want to miss it.”

For the love of—

“The entire fleet makes a short range lightspeed jump into a predetermined spot,” Hux retorted. “He alone manages to break formation and land thirty miles away, right on an asteroid field. The penetration rate blew up the shields and a third of the bow, Major. As you very well remember. I stand by my words.”

“No criticism intended. Even so, with your permission, I would like to point out that considering your record, I am inclined to believe that all we are missing is the Captain cracking her fists for the machinery to spontaneously fix itself.”

His mind apparently having taken the suggestion that unleashing Phasma on the TIE racks was a foolproof way to solve their problems, Hux found his attention slipping away to the place, right in the middle of the hangar, where a group of very battered A.A.L.s were unloading a deluge of injured soldiers. The corners of his mouth twisting, he ended up shaking his head, diving inside the maintenance hatch again. It took less than a minute, however, to find himself being interrupted.

“Sir.”

What now?

It was a soldier.

“There—There is a problem.”
Smoke was rising in Bespin’s sky, a black mass that scarred the otherwise white clouds twisting between them as the probe dropped through a sky turned red by the approaching night.

“Entering Bespin’s life zone. Flight pattern steady.”

“Get it to manual,” Hux ordered. “Take us in.”

Seated at the center of the row of terminals at the bridge’s lower consoles, Jarnek bit down one of her gloves, pulling it off as she hit a series of switches, expression growing tenser the longer she studied the display.

“Manual control activated,” she announced, static filling the feed. The officer manning the terminal to her left reached for the glove she was holding between her teeth. “Requesting access to the Finalizer’s navigational system.”

“Wouldn’t it be easier to just follow the smoke?” Captain Peyton, the Finalizer’s First Officer, pointed out to her, pacing back and forth along the bridge. “Quicker also?”

“Not in this wind, it won’t,” Jarnek replied, gruffly, the controller trembling under her left hand, eyes irritably surveying her team, all of it having remained in their spot despite her request. “Someone get that damned navigation system up now!” she snapped, a trace of despair finding its way to her voice the instant a matrix appeared over the display and she understood why no one had moved. “Someone who is not the Director!”

Fingers leaving the console, Hux was barely listening to Jarnek’s words, mind not even registering the officer’s lapse into his old rank as he returned to stand behind her again, staring at the images in the display. His best at appearing calm and collected while vigorously cursing his decision to listen to Phasma and stay put was not enough, it seemed, to erase the lines of tension he could clearly see in his reflection.

“Scans are coming up empty, Sir.”

The words echoed in the bridge, those among the crew that weren’t participating in the search stopping on the upper level to steal glances at the consoles. Lips pursed, Hux leaned over Jarnek’s shoulder, watching as she forced the probes optics to follow the smoke pillar. Her search was almost immediately obstructed by the sea of deeply white clouds several kilometers under the probe’s position.

“I have half my command inside that city, Major. Drop the probe. Find it.”

Giving the display a last infuriated glare, Hux marched up to the bridge, approaching the viewports, attention going over the dock’s walls surrounding his warship and the forest of industrial arms presently repairing its hull. Beyond them, just passed the closed access to the dry dock, laid Bespin. Red and ominous. White clouds splashing its face. The planet was gigantic. And yet he could see the smoke. Even from here.

His fists balled, eyebrows furrowing in fury.

Starkiller. The Resistance Base. The Finalizer. And now this. There was probably some reason his life had turned into this succession of catastrophes, but truth was he didn’t so much care to find it as he wished he could put a quick end to this ongoing nonsense by blasting the bloody settlement out of the sky. Was it not for the fact that he had his troops inside, he would level the site. Was it not for the fact that he needed this thrice damned rebel’s nest to get the Finalizer back into working order, he would be using this city for target practice instead of ever considering risking what little was left of
Starkiller’s engineering teams in dealing with whatever inferno had just taken over the city.

*I’m not having an encore on account of this accursed place!*

It was *enough* having been forced to relive Starkiller’s last moments on account of Leader Snoke’s desire to make absolutely clear exactly by how many threads his position was hanging from, without the present situation taking him right back to the base’s command room and the chaos once the oscillator had been destroyed—to that bastard Brendol’s derision as he had stood, a decade earlier, sneering at the base’s plans.

“*Project Director. How did I end up stuck with a spineless thing such as you?*”

“Found it, Director,” Jarnek’s voice announced, words pulling Hux back to the present. Immediately, he stepped away from the viewport, hovering just to the edge of the lower consoles. “The city is some three kilometers below its initial position and dropping.”

A pause. Shock taking over Jarnek’s voice as readings filled her display.

“It’s—it’s *tilting*.”

“Are there any ships leaving the structure?”

“None, Sir.”

Which meant that either Phasma was still very much in control or—

“Get the engineering teams to the dock’s hangar. Communications status?”

“Only the receivers are functional, Sir. All channels are—”

A commotion next to the viewport interrupted Umano’s words. Mitaka’s sprint across the bridge making both her and Hux’s attention jump away from the new communication consoles and to the place where he had been—where the radar technician with whom he had been speaking still stood, staring transfixed at something outside the ship.

“Sir, there is a TIE.”

*What?!*

Hux turned on his heels, crossing the bridge, eyes almost immediately finding the black dot rushing their way. At his side, the officer seemed to be far to shocked to be thinking clearly.

“Vessel showing an erratic flight pattern.”

*Erratic?!* It was zigzagging around the bloody industrial arms! Diving under them! Rushing to get out their path as they *worked!* What the hell did the pilot think he was doing?! How had he even got the vessel through the dock’s hangars and in here?!

“Cannons locked,” Mitaka announced from the other side of the bridge. A line of cannons on the bow turned, targeting the approaching TIE. The pilot was now flashing the ship’s light beacons in the bridge’s direction. “Your orders, Sir?”

Hux was leaning forward, one hand clasping the supports as he focused on the vessel. For all their urgency, the flashes showed no pattern, just random noise and yet—*yet*—

He turned to Umano.
“Lieutenant, search the channels. Patch that ship through.”

Mitaka’s hands were hovering over his console, the line of cannons still moving. Behind Hux the group of engineers and technicians that had surrounded Jarnek was climbing up the stairs, staring outside as the lines crackled around them, a woman’s voice coming in and out of focus, disparate words echoing on the bridge.

“Sir, the shields are down!” a voice reminded him from somewhere to his left. “If that thing reaches us it will cut through the bridge like–!”

He had no time to finish. The pilot’s voice had just became clear. Her breathing was so labored she seemed to have been running rather than piloting to get to them. That in itself would have been a bad enough sign without her visible distress. Without her words.

“There has been an explosion! Captain Phasma asks for General Hux to come down!”

Chapter End Notes

Both Brendol Hux and Rae Sloane are part of the expanded universe canon.

Madame Windcage here! Thank you so much for your patience, this was a long time without publishing. Next chapter has a slightly different format than usual, so expect a lot of POVs as Rey takes Hux down and this disaster that has engulfed Cloud City develops.

See you all there! :)
The Scavenger

The command shuttle was approaching ground, fragments of Cloud City's exterior walls falling on it as its large frame forced its way through a section of broken panels, blaster fire raining against its shields.

Hearing the defensive wings fold, Rey jumped out the pilot’s chair, turned her back on the huge domed chamber opening in front of her and the battle going on inside, and ran out of the cockpit, squeezing herself through the still opening door to join the blue uniformed group assembled next to the closed access ramp.

“Commander Ren informs that the initial explosion seems to have extended to some of the nearby gas repositories, General,” the heavy accented voice belonging to Lieutenant Ferrar was saying. For all his professionalism, Rey could have sworn she sensed the officer’s terror. It crepted at the edge of his speech. Every phrase ending with a slight tremor, almost like sharp intake of breathe. “He reports he can still hear gas pockets going off. As for our mission target, it seems to have gone offline. The Commander’s group is engaged in a skirmish with the group of enemy fighters presently inside the refinery, for that reason he is unable to ascertain why.”

Standing right in the middle of the group, pale skin painted blue by the light of the holo display he was reading—and as far as Rey could tell, trying to bind the information and schematics inside to memory—Hux took to himself to answer that question.

“It is possible some sort of automatic security procedure was activated by the initial blast. Otherwise, I would expect the explosion to have extended to the entire ring of refineries.” Around him, the rest of the technicians traded dark looks, the same hypothesis having clearly gone through their minds.

“Major, status report.”

Something exploded against the fuselage, the strong impact making a shiver go down the shuttle. As one the group looked up, Rey’s own attention going over the dark walls around her, praying the shields could withstand the assault as a woman’s voice struggled to be heard amidst it.

“We are moving on the disabled repulsorlift engines, Sir,” Major Jarnek informed, taking over from Ferrar. “Calculations indicate the remaining ones should be able to keep the structure stationary, but are clearly failing to do so. The droids can’t provide any accurate readings as to the reason why.”

“Your evaluation?”

“Unstable power supply related to insufficient fuel injection to the circuit,” Jarnek stated not missing a beat. “The structure tilt is also a contributing factor.”

Fingers moving the document he was studying up and down, a large group of schematics coming into view, Hux grimaced.

“I assume the machinery having come out the nearest junkyard has nothing to do with the systems failure whatsoever.”
Rey’s own attention having been captured by schematics—her relief at recognizing what some of them were still not enough to untie the knot in her stomach—she found herself biting her lips at the words.

A jest—or maybe not. There was no way of knowing. She couldn’t read Hux beyond very superficial emotions—and even those were mostly shrouded in anger. Was he anybody else, however, and she might have found it in herself to point out that, no, they hadn’t. The machinery depicted was ancient but she had seen enough of junkyards and Cloud City to say that no way in hell had the two anything in common. Here, however, with him, even taking a step forward felt like an impossible endeavor. And the instant the General’s eyes broke away from his work, to fall on her—suspicious and hostile—she was rotted to the floor, struggling to speak, despising that part of herself that wished to remain silent, that wanted to see the Order fail now of all times, even more than she despised him.

“I can help.”

Childish. It had sounded childish. Stupid. An empty offer when it was anything but. And nothing was made better by Hux giving the lightsaber on her belt an humorless glare.

“I can already picture it.”

The shuttle hit ground. The ramp opened. Before Rey could even think they were out. Running, heads lowered, the pressurized air from the ramp’s lock blasting around their feet and stray blaster shots crashing against the shuttle, they stepped inside the domed chamber, feet flying over broken Tibanna plaques and live cables, minds focused on reaching a line of A.A.L.s and then the barricades beyond them.

“The Captain is making her way back, Sir!” one of the technicians shouted from Rey’s side, compressed against his ear. The city was moaning, rocking mercilessly as they rushed forward. “She–!”

A solid projectile flew over their heads, its explosion, followed by a cloud of black smoke and an intense smell of burning fuel making the entire group dive for cover just seconds before the grey underbelly of one of the A.A.L.s making their way through the broken wall flew over them, flames bursting from its thrusters.

“Move in, men!” Phasma’s voice bummed, the Captain herself diving to take cover behind the line of barricades now in front of them. She then pointed back, towards the enemy lines the pilot was pointing his increasingly out of control ship towards. “Follow that–!”

The vessel hit the floor with an earsplitting crash, the cacophony of panels breaking and bending as it started to slid—enemy fighters fleeing its path as it ripped through their lines and then crashed into the far off wall—seemingly robbing Phasma of both voice and balance. She fell to one knee, grabbing hold of a rising Hux’s shoulder as she went down, both of them falling behind the barricades at the same time.

With no time to think, Rey dived back behind them, the blaster shot crashing into the barricade at her side leaving her staring wide eyed at the burning mark up until a sudden outburst of anger shook the Force and Phasma punched the floor. She was clenching her teeth, eyes going in and out of focus as she surveyed the violent skirmish going on on the other side of the chamber and then turned her attention towards the group around her, where she found Hux, alongside what appeared to be a sudden and visceral need to drag him back inside his shuttle.

“General—” she stated, slightly out of breathe, her tone carefully guarded. "Where exactly is your armor?”
"Is that really what matters right now, Captain?"

Her eyes flared.

"Do you have any notion of how easily I could pick you up from the other side of the battlefield?"

"Consider me dully grateful you are on this side."

"This is no time for wit!"

“What makes you think it is a good time for me to go around playing dress up?!"

“I have told you—! I should send you up!"

Belly down on the floor, the city lurching beneath her seeming to emphasize Hux's side of the spat just as much as the shot ripping part of the barricade apart and forcing Phasma to shove his head down did the Captain's, Rey glanced from the crashed A.A.L.—the soldiers inside visibly kicking the loading ramp open to be able to escape the flames—to the pair at her side, utterly incredulous.

What were they doing? Was this really the time for—?

The city shivered, moaning and screeching as it jerked back and forth, those inside having little choice but to rid the tremors. Both looking up, the hand with which Phasma had grabbed hold of Hux's shoulder latching onto him with renewed vigor—her fingers now visibly digging into his uniform—the Captain was still the first to get hold of herself. Decided and urgent, her eyes swept the group lying on the floor, locking onto Rey almost immediately. It was all the warning she got. Before she could even make head of tails of what was happening, she was being pulled up and into this uncomfortable third vertex to the pair. Mouth agape at Phasma discreet acknowledgment nod, Rey followed her lead when the other woman turned back to Hux.

“The structural status, General?”

Exasperation practically irradiating off him, green eyes meeting the rather ominous twitch on the Captain's eyebrows with glaring—oh great, are they not finished yet? —Hux went back to his detached professional tone.

“A large number of the repulsorlift engines responsible for keeping the city afloat has gone offline,” he informed, the city seeming to fall beneath them as he spoke. “Major Jarnek reports that some of the lifts on the side affected by the explosion remain functional, but they seem to have had their fuel supply cut. This is causing a rather accentuated structural tilt. Give it enough time and the discrepancy in momentum between the still functional repulsorlifts and those affected by the explosion will cause a stiff enough angle that a catastrophic system failure will become inevitable.”

It was not only Phasma who had just gone pale. Her stomach twisting, eyes jumping between the pair in front of her, Rey felt dizzy. She truly didn’t need to understand half of what Hux had said to know what he was implying.

“How long?” she found herself stuttering, actually shrinking when Hux’s eyes fell on her. “You are saying the city will fall—Sir!”

That 'Sir' had came as a afterthought, something that judging by the way his eyes were growing colder, Hux had noticed.

“Until it leaves Bespin's life zone? About thirty minutes,” he even so informed. "The loss of airwhortliness, however, could happen at any minute."
At her side Phasma went back to survey the battle.

“The Major’s team will be running manual corrections on the tilt,” Hux continued. "It is possible it can avoid the second scenario, but I would not be relying on it. We need to restore fuel supply to this side of the city, the sooner the better.”

Seeing Phasma turn back to him, shoulders seeming to have been carved out of rock, his lips set into a grim line.

“This will look magnificent in both our service sheets,” he told her in a quieter, more familiar tone. "Right next to losing Starkiller. Either saving a rebel den or riding it to our deaths. Should I type this in or will you?”

What could only be described as long suffering look being thrown his way, Phasma otherwise ignored his comment.

“There will be no impediment to reach the control center, Sir.”

Rey turned her attention towards the rebel lines, her heart clenching. There was an impediment right there if she ever saw one. Not that the Captain seemed to see it as such. She was up, signaling the riot troopers getting off a landing A.A.L. to close ranks around Hux and stepping away from him. She was already half a battlefield away when, adjusting the scope of his blaster pistol and grumbling an almost inaudible “If someone as much as utters the words fuel cells–”, Hux ordered his group to move.

As bad as things had been when Rey had run across the city at Phasma’s orders to fetch Hux, they weren’t as bad as they rapidly proved to be now. The city was trembling, thrown back and forth as if caught in a strong wind and the tilt the General had mentioned was not only present, but noticeable. To make matters worse the manual corrections to try and keep it from getting out of hand really weren’t helping them advance.

“Angle readjustment underway,” the voice belonging to Major Jarnek announced through the coms. “Brace for impact.”

Rey barely had time to shove her staff into the nearest door jamb before the ground fell from under her feet. Shoulder screaming, the pain actually rendering her unable to hold on to the staff ending up tossing her to the ground, she was left to watch as the rebel that had been barreling down on her bashed the butt of his rifle into the place her head had been.

“The Commander’s forces are above your position, Captain,” Lieutenant Ferrar informed right as shot sank into back of the rebel and the man fell. The pair of silver leg protections marching passed Rey and giving her a very clear image of who had just shot her assailant, were, however, rapidly made secondary when Finn made his way into the informations being given over tactical support. “Nephys reports his attempt at hunting the enemy units breaking away from the main force has been meet with failure. The rebels are blasting the doors’ terminals as they retreat. All seems to indicate they are trying to lock us inside the refinery. Expect greater resistance going-”

Footsteps and shouts were heard coming in their direction, a second wave of enemy soldiers appearing at the end of the narrow corridor making Phasma turn to one of the officers on site.

“Lead the bulk of the forces ahead. Keep them distracted,” she ordered, doubling back to where Hux stood with the rest of the engineering teams just as the riot shields were raised again. “Lieutenant, take us around.”
It didn’t matter how many times Rey had been forced to brave battlefields, she was rather sure she would never get used to this. Not to the shots raining death around her. Not to the shouted orders. Not the way the Force seemed to scream, the emptiness of what Ren had once called rifts crashing into her time and time again as the soldiers in both sides fell. If she truly had to fight she preferred a ship to this and when they finally reached the control center, she had this growing certainty she wasn’t the only one. Hux was grumbling under his breath, anger making the line of his jaw clench even as he marched inside the refinery’s control center, head held high. Too high. He had not taken two steps inside when shot darkened the wall at his side, forcing him to turn, pistol raised to see Phasma already midway into fulfilling his would-be-assassin’s death wish. A strike to his neck followed by her shoving his midsection against one of her knees and then face into the nearest chair arm, sending him to the ground in seconds.

“Set a perimeter outside,” she ordered, the green cape she was wearing whipping around her legs as she marched across the control room addressing the soldiers. “Double check everyone’s identity. Nobody approaches this site and nobody enters it without my permission. Any breaches are to be reported immediately.”

She looked back to the place where the rebel laid, finger firm over the trigger.

“Orders, General?”

“We need intel, Captain. Arrest him.”

Breathing a sigh of relief, Rey looked around, taking in the consoles, the engineers and droids making their way to them and stopping to survey the three viewports, each of them surveying a different mineshaft. Even with the city taking them all to their deaths, this was amazing. Letting that opinion slip out, however, resulted in a ill-humored glare from Hux and a curt—

“Darn bracing.”

—as he marched passed her, eyes already raised to the probe ascending through one of the three mineshafts in front of him.

“All systems are green, Sir,” someone announced, the low hum enveloping the control room underlining just that. “Routing the fuel supply to the generators.”

Eyes going back to the probe, Hux raised his com.

“Readings, Major?”

“Fuel supply is back online,” Jarnek announced, her voice breaking through the com chatter alongside a screech coming down the vents. “System registering unstable electrical readings. Brace for repursorlift restart.”

A horribly uncomfortable sensation of being forced against the floor joined the rocking of the structure, only to be followed by the city suddenly dropping again and forcing everyone inside to grab hold of the nearest supports least they be tossed against the control room’s instrumentation.

“Power surge,” Jarnek stated, dispassionately. “Systems registering a spike in—”

_Bang!_

“Gas meters dropping!”

Again the city lurched. Being thrown against the back of the nearest chair, Rey grabbed hold of one
of its arms, eyes raising to Phasma as she too went to hold on to the same chair, a haunted expression taking hold of her eyes as a series of alarms started shouting both inside and outside the control room.

Marching passed them, lips pursed, Hux pointed at the rotating lights.

“Someone cut those.”

Phasma’s seemed to be jerked back to the present at the order, eyes dropping from the alarms to him and then to Rey from whom she stepped away, expression now carefully blank.

“What happened?” Hux asked, stopping behind one of his engineers, attention going over the gas meters on the console.

“We have a blockage, Sir. Lower levels. It is affecting fuel supply.”

“Can we solve it?”

The engineer, a young man with raven black hair, was hitting the buttons, shaking his head as he went, hands visibly trembling.

“It looks like some sort of security system. It's unresponsive.”

“Probably needs on site confirmation. Get me the blueprints,” Hux ordered, again taking the blaster pistol out. Phasma was on top of him the same instant, somehow succeeding in trapping him between herself, the chair and the console in a single stride.

“A word, Sir. In private.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose at how clearly cornered he had allowed himself to get, Hux turned to both the closest officers and Rey.

“Leave us.”

There was a question as to what he intended that order accomplished. There was no such thing as privacy in such closed quarters least all of them moved to the corridor—and even then. In the end, and considering how clear his conversation with Phasma was, Rey might as well have remained at the Captain's side.

“This is a no.”

“Honestly—”

Phasma leaned forward, voice dropping.

“The lower floors are filled with rebel fighters. I will not lead you through a battlefield with a blaster pistol and no armor. You will be dead within seconds.”

“Given this structure’s predicament, I would argue my physical location makes little to no difference as to that,” he replied, only to sigh at Phasma’s irate expression. “Unless you can suggest someone—”

A wave of fear crashed into Rey, thousands of terrified voices rolling over her making her ball her fists, find her courage, and step forward.

“I can do it. I can help.”
A violent jerk ripped through the city, the structure swaying back and forth making Rey clench her teeth as Phasma grabbed hold of Hux’s shoulder. His reticence, however, was not made mute by either the gesture or the city lurching. Suspicion was clearly written in his face. Rey felt like despairing.

“Do you really think I can make any of this worse?!”

He seemed to think so, he truly seemed to think that, and Phasma’s grasp on his shoulder was being joined by her glaring holes into the back of his head. That if nothing else, seemed to finally make him yield.

“Lieutenant,” he barked to the com. “Where is Ren?”

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**The Enforcer**

The Force was thundering, its tendrils twisting as Kylo raised his arm, the gesture freezing the chunk of metal flying at his troops before he whipped his arm down, tossing the beam down the mine shaft visible through the wrecked wall and rapidly falling back, FN-2187 signal for the troops to fire at will, giving him enough cover to join the returning group and their commander.

"They are closing the blaster doors!" FN-2187 shouted in his direction, putting a volley of shoots over Kylo's shoulder and shouting for the defensive line to raise the shields. "Destroying the controls! There is no way we—!"

A grenade was tossed in their direction, exploding against the already unstable floor before Kylo had time to reach out through the Force and intercept it. Watching the floor collapse into the mine shaft, FN-2187 put a new charger into his blaster, visibly irate.

“Are they insane?! They will die with us!”

Panting, right shoulder screaming under the continuous strain it was being put under, Kylo had to fight not to roll his eyes at the words, his own growled—

“Don’t you tell.”

—inspiring a equal parts vicious and creative mental snap from the former stormtrooper as he ordered the riot troops to close the shields, the shots that had been raining over the lines of rebel fighters congregated at the opposite end of the darkened corridor stopping at his order. Left to single handedly lead the assault—not that he wasn't doing that before—Kylo stepped forward, channeling the Force, his senses ignoring the two presences he could vaguely discern amidst the enemy lines so that he could again try to pinpoint a third more dangerous foe—Essen, who didn’t seem to be anywhere.

*Where is he?*

Kylo dove under a wave of blaster fire, a series of well aimed shots coming from what was undoubtedly Lyr’s blaster forcing him to fall back while twirling his saber. Back finally hitting the riot shields, he took to the nearest stormtrooper officer.

“Advance.”

Looking to his left, clearly taking in the way bits and pieces of the destroyed wall and floor hanged
precariously over the mine shaft, the Sergeant signalled his troops. Immediately, the soldiers formed two lines, their shields covering both the front of the group and its exposed flank. Focusing on the Force, Kylo pressed forward again, the city shuddering around him, feeling almost as if it been caught in the wind, allowing him to leave his troops behind as he again raised his hand and the Force roared, blasting forward to crash right into the blast coming from the other side of the corridor. The sheer difference in power made it rip right through it and then into the enemy lines, sending soldiers flying against the burned walls.

“Press them!”

The lines of riot troopers charged down the corridor, ramming the shields against the torn enemy lines and making their batons fall on them.

His own saber ripping through the closest enemies, Kylo joined his troops, the glimpse of a pair of familiar faces in the midst of the rebels fleeing the carnage making him shove the closest enemy aside as he fought to follow.

“Regroup!” FN-2187 shouted from somewhere among the troops. “Close the advanced—!”

A tremor grabbed the city, an uncomfortable sense of lightness in his stomach followed by a distant metallic whine being the only warning Kylo got before the floor disappeared from under his feet and his entire group came crashing against each other, thrown violently against the walls and then the floor.

Gasping, forced to release himself from the terrified trooper that had landed right on his ribs, Kylo got back to his feet despite the pain, focusing in the Force even if the fear coming from all over the city was distorting it, leaving him standing in the midst of what felt like liquid fog, barely able to breathe.

“We are going nowhere like this,” FN-2187 snapped, his voice—or maybe it was his thoughts, Kylo was not paying enough attention to know—exploding on his mind as Kylo searched, trying to find both his prey and his path, only vaguely aware of the other man approaching him, bits and pieces of the walls snapping under his boots. “We are going far too slow, we are nowhere near mission success and—Are you listening to me?!?”

His concentration having been broken, Kylo let his attention fall on FN-2187, dark eyes finding the visor hidding his features just as the other man seemed to become aware of who he was talking to—of who exactly he had just grabbed by the shoulder and forced to turn.

“I—”

He shivered, hand releasing Kylo’s shoulder. For all his desire to put the entire city between the two of them, however, FN-2187 remained where he stood, holding Kylo’s gaze as he found his courage, willing himself to confront him even if it meant pleading with a heart he was dead certain Kylo didn’t possess.

“This city is falling ,” FN-2187 pointed out, begging. “The General won’t and the Captain won’t care to, but you have to call for evacuation!”

The city jerked as if on cue, an ominous metallic moan coming from above making both them and the Sergeant trying to coach his terrified troops back to their feet—Fisher, FN-2187’s mind called him—look up.

“Now!” FN-2187 insisted, a trace of despair on his voice.
Hair beaten by the wind coming up the broken mineshaft, Kylo bored his eyes on those hidden by Nephys’ helmet, FN-2187 whispered words forcing his mind to break away from the here and now to rise through the Force, up and up the city, until he could not only sense, but also hear the minds of those inside, their fear as they found themselves trapped matched only by the soldiers charged to keep them so.

“The General won’t and the Captain won’t care to,” FN-2187 had said. There was some truth in that. As much as Phasma seemed to have blocked the evacuation effort, however, her decision to spare the engineering teams from having to approach the city amidst a stampede of fleeing ships and block anyone from going around spreading the good word on what was happening, had little to do with the chaos inside. Most people remained trapped in the evacuation paths rather than against her troops, their panic so reminiscent of another not so distant memory that he found himself slipping into it, left watching as the red trail of Starkiller’s blast cut through the stars, disappearing amongst them as he stood, unable to stop what was about to happen with either action or word.

His fists clenched, the unlit ligthsaber’s hilt biting into his right hand forcing him back to the now. His eyes settled on the visor covering FN-2187’s eyes.

“Regroup.”

The other man’s back straightened further, remaining standing between him and the troops, mind snarling, bombing him with images, with feelings, with—

“You can’t ask us to go down with this place!”

—a dying soldier, a friend, the closest thing he had had to a brother, lying in the sands in Jakku, a bloodied hand reaching out for him—

“You are leading us to our deaths!”

—a grinning man repairing a X-Wing, an orange and white BB unit chirping happily next to his knees—

“I will not—!”

—Rey. Smilling.

Kylo’s fist crashed into the nearest wall, pain breaking through the images just as the ghost of a hand cupped his face, gently stroking the path left by the lightsaber. It was not just FN-2187 that was facing him now, the entire contingent of troops was and, if that wasn’t enough, he had tactical support bitting his heels.

"Commander?"

“Yes, Lieutenant ?!"

That he could actually hear Ferrar jump on the other side of the com was probably as good an indication as any as to the tone of his voice.

“The General has reached the Control Center, Sir,” Ferrar informed. “He wishes to know your position and status.”

Struggling to control his temper, the thought that this was a most excellent time for everyone to start ganging up on him going through his head, Kylo stepped away from FN-2187.
“We have moved passed the control center and emergency dock. Presently engaging a large enemy group. The advance is being slower than anticipated.”

“Are you anywhere near the engine room, Commander?”

His attention turning towards the mine shaft in front of him and the lights running up it, Kylo grimaced.

“Hardly.”

A pause as Ferrar undoubtedly took this information to Hux.

“The General is sending a team your way, Sir. The Captain and Isahaine Ren are with them. He will coordinate the efforts to reestablish fuel supply from his position.”

If there ever was a level of surreal at which point Kylo would expect to wake up this was about it. Right before he incurred a second life debt with Hux of all people. Since the Force refused to take him out of this nightmare, however—

Disconnecting his com, Kylo turned to FN-2187.

“Regroup.”

Stepping over pieces of the walls, the twisted wall paneling offering them glimpses of the mineshaft during their descent, they finally found the rebels barricaded at the entrance of a half destroyed chamber several floors below. It took seconds for the battle to reignite, but once it started it was the same as before. A frustrating tug of war between the two groups. The Order would be going a lot faster was it not for Rhyase’s barrage of offensive Force abilities proving a lot more trouble than anticipated. Overall, he was forced to admit, FN-2187 was correct in his assessment of the situation, even if not in his conclusion. They were going too slow, far too slow. If they were to stand a chance of reaching the Engine Room something had to be done.

“Take charge.”

Commanding the troops from behind the riot shields FN-2187’s head jerked in his direction, mind irate then confused and finally incredulous.

“Take charge? What are you—?!?”

Kylo didn’t deign him with an answer. The next instant the Force had frozen the first of the rebel lines, the red saber joining the killing as Kylo rushed forward, away from his troops, moving to block Rhyase and Lyr’s escape and savoring the panic going through their minds as they found themselves trapped, forced to back away from Kylo’s ruthless advance.

He wouldn’t be able to get them, though. Rhyase’s face might be twisting in fury, her soft features turning into something that didn’t look remotely human as she shoved a line of rebels in front of Kylo and steeled herself for the upcoming battle, but Lyr had gotten some lessons out of Essen’s book. He was looking around, searching, thinking, finding the only escape left available and pulling her towards it.

It was as Kylo had planned.

He followed.
The Captain

“Where is Ren?”

“He is gone, Captain.”

“Gone?!”

Dropping to her knees, a shot sinking into the protections covering her left arm, Phasma let her shoulder hit the nearest door jamb, the troops that ran passed her, blasters raised, guiding her attention towards the corridor turned battlefield and the vicious confrontation going on there. Noting Isahaine diving to take cover at her side, Phasma then turned to Nephys and the Sergeant responsible for Cloud City’s garrison, ID-2127, the same man she had unintentionally lead everyone to call Fisher.

“What do you mean Ren is gone?!”

Shrinking under her gaze, the two men traded an uncomfortable glance, their scrape with what she could only assume had been Ren’s personal brand of crazy seemingly having struck them so utterly dumb they could do little more than stand mute as the city lurched and her patience drained.

“Sergeant!”

The officer raised one hand, pointing her attention away from the chaotic battlefield and to a section of destroyed wall on the terrain already cleared by the troops.

Irritation threatening to breach the surface, Phasma adjusted her scope and pointed her blaster at the section of destroyed wall Isahaine was already looking towards. Not a second had passed before both women traded an incredulous look.

“Did he offer any explanation for this?!” Phasma snapped, making both Nephys and Fisher jump. The later’s shout for the troops to close ranks immediately become lost on the former’s attempt to understand the inner workings of his commanding officer’s mind.

“Two of the Knights that attacked the garrison were among the enemy lines, Captain,” Nephys informed, his exhausted breathing giving him a slight stutter on some of the words. “He broke them from the group and forced them to flee through, well—that.”

Phasma pressed her temples. Really, it should be enough to have to deal with Hux being reckless to now have Ren jumping on the bandwagon with him.

“Lieutenant, patch me through to the Commander.”

“Commander Ren has fallen out of range, Captain,” Ferrar state, the sounds of blaster fire coming from the other side of the shields raising in volume. “I haven’t be able to reach him for several minutes.”

Phasma turned towards Isahaine, her questioning look being meet by the younger Knight taking a steadying breathe and putting her left hand on the ground, long fingers sliding through debris that seemed eager to evade their path. It took only moment, however, for her to look back up, a quick head shake all but flooring Phasma’s hopes.

“I can’t find him,” she said, the eyes hidden by the golden visor seemingly having became stuck to the damage to Phasma’s arm rather than her face. "The Force is quiet.”
Glancing towards the blankened protections and thorn cloth covering her arm and immediately covering both with her cape, Phasma stabbed the center of her com with one finger.

“General, there is a problem.” She took a steadying breathe. This promised. "We have lost Kylo Ren.”

“I will strive not to be consumed by optimism, Captain. Report.”

“We have confirmation of Rhyase and Lyr Ren amidst the enemy lines. Ren is on pursuit,” she informed, attention going to the battlefield just as a violent shiver rocked the city and the soldiers fought not to be tossed to the ground. “His troops are at the designed rendezvous, Ren himself is reported to have fallen out of range.”

Silence as Hux’s seemed to bit something down and his voice took on a different tone, dull, strangely lifeless as if he had his mind elsewhere.

“The last of Ren’s operational decisions was described to me as ‘entering a refinery’s exhaust port through the pedestrian entry with a TIE’,” he pointed out, a stray blaster flying over Phasma’s group and crashing into the nearest lamp plunging the site into deeper darkness. “Given that, I fear some further clarification is needed as to what ‘fallen out of range’ means.”

To her left, Nephy’s had taken to shake his head in the midst of commanding his troops, his despair filled banter with an outraged Isahaine all the more audible for Phasma's sudden inability to form any form of coherent thought.

"Exactly how hard did you hit him?”

"I can't possibly have hit that hard!"

"Captain."

Hux's voice. Looking to her left, to the same place Fisher had pointed her attention to, eyes surveying the broken wall and wait laid beyond it, she shook her head. “Ren–”

How did she even put this?

“Ren seems to have jumped inside one of the city’s mine shafts.”

“There is hope still.”

Phasma’s eyes flashed. If anything, Hux seemed to have sensed her fury from half a refinery away for his dreamy tone immediately vanished.

“If Ren remembers Takodana’s consequences half as well as I do, he will at least be refraining from the wooing of maidens.”

A new outraged exclamation of 'What?!' coming from both Knights at her side, left Phasma pressing her temples.

"We will have to do without him, Captain. Proceed with troops and regroup if or when the opportunity arises.”

Hux’s voice became part of the chatter echoing through the channel, a shudder running through the city, followed by an uncomfortable jerk, finally making his voice reapper.
“Reestablish contact when you reach target.”

The line went silent. The same instant Phasma jumped to her feet, shouted at the defensive line to drop the shields and joined the battle.

The lights were flickering, pieces of the ceiling snapping under their feet as they advanced. Here and there half collapsed walls gave way to Bespin’s sky and the drop under them. Carving a path through the enemy troops, head pounding, Phasma didn’t take long to give up on her blaster in favor of the spear she still kept on her back.

Twirling it in particularly vicious strike that hit a charging rebel before she kicked him towards one of the holes connecting to Bespin’s sky, she found herself diving under a knife just a moment later. A sharp pain followed by the flavor of blood touching her lips telling her she had not been successful on avoiding the blow entirely, Phasma danced away from the blade, evading strike after strike until she found an opening and, intercepting it, punched the man’s elbow. His weapon falling to her hands, Phasma found her next strike cutting through air as, without warning, the man crashed to the floor.

A new attacker being meet by her armored fist, she looked back, her confusion being put to rest at seeing Isahaine jumping up—the staff sweep that had stolen the legs from under the rebel being followed by a quick strike to his throat that left the man unconscious on the floor.

The troops could deal with that later. Stepping over the fallen enemies, the way the Isahaine was still stealing glances at the bloodless damage on her arm, making her once again cover it with her cape, she surveyed the battlefield, touching the bleeding gash running across her chin and lips and immediately discarding it for the cosmetic damage it was.

Irrelevant.

What was relevant was how sparse the blaster shots echoing in the chamber were and the way the electric roar of the Z6s took precedence over everything. Finding enough room to fire, Phasma took her blaster from the the leg holster and put a shot through one of the enemy fighters attacking her troops just as Nephys appeared at her right, limping, forcing her attention towards him.

“They have blocked the exit, Captain,” he informed, pointing to a closed door behind him with his Z6. “The controls seemed to have been destroyed from the other side.”

Mind registering the last of the enemy fighters present being taken out, Phasma looked around. No matter how she looked at what was going on on, this was little but bad. The confrontation had been largely physical, something which in itself wouldn’t be problematic, but that made matters slow. More than that, she was quite able to understand the logic behind their enemy’s movements. They were building their numbers further down the line, slowing them so they could cork the Order’s advance.

This won’t do.

She looked around, eyes finding Isahaine and immediately pulling her aside.

“I will take the troops around and provide a distraction, choose a task force and move towards mission target. We will rejoin you at first opportunity.”

Phasma turned away from the Force user, not expecting an answer, her voice clear as she approached the advanced lines.

“Lieutenant, find Isahaine a path.”
The Stormtrooper

“With all due respect, Lieutenant, this cannot be what got you to the Finalizer!”

The city shuddered, lights flickering around the troops as Finn turned the Z6 baton he was wielding against the grid covering the nearest air vent. Glancing back to make sure no enemy fighter appeared on the deserted corridor, Finn turned back just in time to see Rey’s legs and feet disappear down the shaft.

Sighing at what he could only describe as his best friend’s overeagerness to go around this refinery forcing him and a group of stormtroopers to squeeze themselves into increasingly small places—no really, they had gone from service corridors to air vents, he feared to think what would come next—Finn followed her, immediately finding himself crawling—

More like swimming

—through what must be century’s worth of dust.

Just my luck.

That the only thing he could think about was that when the city hit the ground he would be stuck inside an air vent with Rey and two dozen stormtroopers was probably a good indication as to his state of mind at this moment. Seeing his friend rapidly crawling away from him though, was more than enough for Finn to push aside such thoughts and follow until Rey stopped several meters down the vent, the sound of her lightsaber igniting being followed by the sound of falling metal and Ferrar’s voice.

“The blueprints say you should be inside the engine room, Ma’am,” he stated. “Can you confirm it?”

Rey jumped down. Pulling himself out of the vent and hearing the rest of the soldiers jump behind him, Finn stepped away from the group, eyes surveying the ample chamber drowned in reddish light and almost sighing when the machinery gave away what he was seeing. Rey’s words, as she took off her helmet and carefully secured the hood in a way that would hide her face, only deepened his sense of relief.

“I think this is it.”

“Acknowledged. Surrendering tactical support.”

Thank the Force...

“Confirm arrival at mission target.”

Finn almost shed his skin. Honestly, as much as he had been praying for Hux to take over tactical support and save them—if not from the rebels then certainly from the conjoined genius of Rey and Ferrar and their love for so called “stealth tactics”—that didn’t mean he wanted to go into cardiac arrest for having the General’s voice suddenly erupt at his ears!

“We are on site, General,” Finn groaned seeing as Rey turned in his direction, a clear plea for help in her eyes. “Can you provide us with a description of what we are looking for?”

“Hardly,” Hux replied, the city shuddering making him fall silent for an instant. “It is probable the control center’s request has activated some sort of visual sign or alarm. Spread the troops. Find it.”
The thought that the General had to be joking being voiced in a very neutral—

“Acknowledged, Sir.”

—Finn looked around, an insane need to reach through the com and grab Hux by the neck, making him shake his head as he noticed the chamber seemed to go on and on forever, tubes running near the ceiling and walls, and all sorts of machinery sprawled as far as the eyes could see. The question here wasn’t if they could find whatever it was that Rey had been sent to find, but if they couldn’t have shoved Hux inside the air vents and let him figure this out on his own.

“The General informs we are looking for a device with some sort of visual sign or alarm,” Finn announced, the way the soldiers visibly stepped closer to each other as a new tremor went through the city making his voice become far more commanding than him himself expected. “Spread out.”

They were searching as they were running, Finn keeping close to Rey as she surveyed the machinery, the soldiers having run off in every direction until—

“Ma’am!”

Rey disappeared from his side the same instant. Moving to follow her, Finn found himself stopping, a strange sensation, something he really couldn’t put his finger on, keeping him in place, forcing him to fall back slowly, not daring to turn his back on the engine room.

“Do we have it?” Finn queried as Rey’s footsteps fell silent. “Is it it?”

Rey didn’t answer immediately, when she did though—

“It’s valve system,” she said. “It’s manual!”

Trying to see passed the piping, small puffs of Tibanna being disturbed by his feet and the cloak whipping behind him, Finn looked back. Rey’s words might not bear any meaning to him, but whatever she was implying certainly made sense to Hux. The General’s voice had visibly tensed, changing to the demanding, no-nonsense tone Finn was accustomed to hearing.

“Focus on restoring fuel supply. All troops close ranks.”

Having to repeat that order, seeing Rey’s hand drop away not from her staff but the lightsaber, Finn turned away from her just as she reached the valves and felt his stomach drop almost instantly.

There was movement in the chamber. A group of shadows in the far off distance. Grasping the baton firmly, connecting it, Finn clenched his teeth at the lonely figure rapidly moving in on them. It was tall and powerfully built, so much so that for a moment it looked like Phasma and, as insane as it was, he prayed that it was her, that this was the Captain, that it was she that was here, that—

The figure broke through the fog. It wasn’t Phasma, but a man. Tall and pale and in a Knight’s uniform.

“This is unfortunate,” he said, dark brown eyes rising to the place where Rey stood as he closed in on Finn. “Extremely so.”

Ren?

“That is not–!”

He hadn’t needed Rey’s warning, nor, Finn might had, his friend rapidly throwing herself forward to
understand something was deeply wrong. Before Ren—No, the Knight, Essen, the changelling Phasma had discussed with him earlier, could raise his weapon, he had moved out of the way, tossing himself against his thorax and sending him to the ground.

Raising his head, a sharp intake of breathe coming from the Knight he had tossed to the floor, Finn felt his stomach drop at what he saw coming their way. The shadows in the distance… those weren’t stormtroopers either. This man had brought the enemy with him!

“Engage them!” Finn shouted to the troops already moving passed him. The machinery around them, at least, seemed to be working. “Don’t let them anywhere near the fuel—!”

He should never have taken his attention away from the Knight he was still half sprawled on top off. Essen twisted himself from under him, kicking him hard on the ribs and pulling a long dagger from somewhere on his belt. Having already assumed a defensive stance, the Z6 at his side, Finn was spared having to defend himself by Rey appearing at his side and tossing the staff forward, disarming the Knight in one single strike.

Not that it hindered him for more than a few seconds, next moment the weapon had been called back and Finn found himself under a rain of blows, Rey joining him in trying to again disarmed the Knight. As far as he could tell, however, Essen wasn’t remotely interested in her, evading her staff, dancing away from it as he kept going for Finn. And he was fast. The speed with which he could rain blows more than making up for lack of physical strength.

That Essen was not interested in Rey, however, didn’t mean her unrelenting assault wasn’t rapidly draining his patience. The Knight turned away from Finn, the dagger being swung up in a tense ark to deflect her staff. Next instant, he had entered Rey’s defenses, leaning down, one hand going for her stomach. He never touched her though, instead something akin to a low explosion echoed and she stumbled back, the frustrated expression taking over Ren's stolen features telling them something had gone wrong. It took an instant for Finn to understand exactly what. Rey was raising her own hand. One instant Essen was turning back to face her, the next he had been swept off his feet and sent crashing against a set of pipes.

Sprinting passed Finn, Rey was barreling down on the Knight’s sprawled form an instant later.

“Rey, wait!”

Too late. The Knight had waited until the last possible moment to get up, but when he did it was with one intent only: to kick the staff out of her hands.

And now it was Finn who was running, trying to reach them. Not that Rey seemed to need his help. Her staff might have been sent flying away from her, but that was not stopping her in the slightest. She had pulled the lightsaber out, connected it and was again charging.

Alarm was clear on the Knight's face, his entire body tensing as he saw Rey approach and was forced to dive under her first strike, a sweeping one-handed strike that cut through the place he had been standing, and then stumble backwards, seeing her close both her hands over the hilt and, twirling it, swing it down.

There was something disturbingly familiar in the way Rey fought. It was fast and brutal and left Finn with this uncomfortable knot on his stomach. He had seen this before. He knew it. As he struggled to reach them, though—something he would have done so by now if he wasn’t finding himself forced to punch his way through the engine room!—Finn had more urgent things to worry about than finding where he knew this fighting style from. What he could observe of Essen’s stumbling and running away was leaving him with one certainty. The Knight’s fighting inability was a ruse. And
Finn couldn’t understand for the life of him if Rey, her back to him and still charging, was seeing it as so.

*His feet, Rey! Look at his—!*

He couldn’t get the words out. A rebel fighter had just got on his path and forced him to intercept a baton with his Z6. Not that his attention had left Rey and, to his horror, it actually seemed the Knight was succeeding on leading her on. It might not look like it, but Rey’s adversary was completely controlling the battle.

Stuck in a power struggle with the rebel, Finn clenched his teeth.

“He is tiring you!”

His friend’s back tensed. She broke her strike mid swing, stepping back as the dark brown eyes jumped from Rey to him. Their expression was ice and Finn didn’t stand to see what he was going to do, instead he dived to the floor just as Essen raised his hand. The Force blast missed him by inches, catching the rebel he had had his baton locked with in the back and sending him flying to the other side of the engine room.

*Keep him in place,* Finn mentally chanted, getting to his feet. Rey had already jumped to the offensive again. *Keep him place, Rey!*

Essen charged, diving passed Rey’s defenses to grab hold of her wrist, succeeding in stopping the lightsaber strike as he prepared a strike of his own and—

He froze.

Rey’s hood had become dislodged, whatever she had done that had kept it so firmly in place up until now finally giving away and making it fall to her shoulders. The Knight's shock upon looking at her face, however, paled in comparison to Rey's own once Essen's features started to crumble, Ren’s black hair rapidly graying, his face aging, his entire facial structure changing into that of a squared jawed man with grayish-blue eyes that couldn’t have looked less like the Enforcer. And yet—yet, something of Kylo Ren did remain on this stranger features. Something Finn had never noticed or maybe had never cared to notice. This man too looked exhausted, drained of both hope and joy. The sense of absurd familiarity he was getting from him, however, had nothing to do with Ren, but with something deeply engraved in the pale eyes, a kind of silent strength that remained undisturbed, untouched, and that felt absurdly familiar.

“Impossible.”

Essen’s words broke the spell, the sounds of the battle returning full force alongside something or someone that filled the Knight's expression with dread.

“Essen!”

Turning his head Finn could see one of the two Knights he had last seen scrambling away from Kylo Ren appear in the engine room, diving through the battle, making his way to his colleague.

“Rhyase has Kylo but the lap dog is on us! Move it!” he shouted, turning to the rebel forces. “Retreat!”

Phasma’s silver plated armor appeared in the midst of the wave of troopers suddenly jumping inside the engine room, her appearance, however, was made secondary by Essen stretching his hand towards an either dead or unconscious rebel. The known gesture made Finn dive forward, trying to
intercept what he was sure Essen was targeting—the woman’s blaster—tonly to find himself crashing to the floor on top of it, able to do little else but stare as one of the devices strapped to her belt, bent and cracked and—

Finn scrambled away from the body, trying to put as much distance between himself and whatever the device was, the thought it was a grenade and the Knights were planning on taking the entire refinery down with them so consuming his mind that he was shouting at Rey to run, to take cover, to get away from here even if she was as stuck here as he was and the second Knight, the muscular man with the scarred face, was suddenly stopping, turning, seeming to realize something and then almost lazily waving his hand.

It happened as if in a dream—a nightmare. The gesture that on a normal person should have amounted to nothing had been imbued with power. One of the rebels was turned, expression strangely vacant, her blaster raised. There was nothing Finn could do. Nothing but watch as Essen released himself from Rey, shoved her aside and a shot sank into her shoulder.

No.

No!

“Rey!”

She was falling, left to hit the ground as Essen stood watch, for a moment seeming to hesitate about what he should do and then turning to flee, falling behind his colleague, still looking back at Rey even as he disappeared in the midst of the retreating rebels and a last shove of his hand made the container on the rebel’s belt jump and break, filling the chamber with smoke.

Having let go of his weapon, Finn couldn’t care to follow. He couldn’t see anything, the only fragments of reason he could grasp not even belonging to this time, but to Jakku, to Slip, to his worst nightmare made real, but he knew that he had to find his friend. He would find Rey if he had to feel his way to her. She was here somewhere and he couldn’t help but think that she, just like Slip, was dying.

No. Please. Please, please, no!

He could hear footsteps approaching, see this silhouette amongst the smoke, a threat for which his senses were screaming at him to get hold of a weapon and himself now, but he couldn’t care less for who that was. He had found Rey, his fingers had just closed around her arm. He could smell blood. She wasn’t moving.

“Rey!”

The Enforcer

Pain. The entire world was pain. Scorching heat and thorn muscle. Overstressed nerves screaming into his head. Surprise. Panic. And then nothing.

Kylo stumbled back, strength faltering, the tip of a electrified staff sinking into his skin sending pain ripping through his senses. The red saber hit the floor, blade collapsing, the scream of the crystal silenced. The next moment, a well aimed kick to his still healing ribs had sent him to the ground, Rhyase’s presence immediately stepping away from him and rushing down the corridor, only to disappear almost as if swallowed by the Force.
Get up. Now!

The lightsaber flew back to his hand, its blade a promise of swift death to whoever had just managed to shoot him from the back.

This is not over!

Kylo turned, snarling, only to find himself stopping, growling at the broken beams and lose cables, eyes following the flames falling from the ceiling and stopping at the half closed door through which Rhyase had disappeared. There was no one. He was alone amidst the wreckage and the pain was little more than a ghost, a distant echo, almost as if—

His stomach sank.

He was running before he had time to be certain.

Chapter End Notes

I am feeling a little evil right now.

So, this chapter... Different format, I may use it again for some of the future battle sequences if you liked it.

Have an amazing week (and TLJ if it's the case)! I will be back as soon as I finish the next chapter. - Windcage
The Enforcer

Chapter by Windcage

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Enforcer - Day 21, Part 5

The chair crashed to the floor with an ear splitting bang, the sound rising up the naked walls and echoing in the high ceiling as Ben stumbled away from the table, his entire body reeling from a nightmare he wished he couldn’t remember and that had left him shaking, the image of a prosthetic hand protruding from under a collapsed wall still clearer to him than the library where he stood.

A sob escaped his lips, horror leaving him to curl over himself, the way the Force thundered around him—its tendrils crashing against the walls, making the windows shake as viciously as if they had been caught in a storm—not allowing him even a moment to reassure himself before he had to pull himself together, the lightsaber he had reached for in his panic falling back to its holster, distress being swiped of his face, if not his mind.

It was getting worse.

He had known it for quite some time, but never before had the point been driven so clearly to him as today—the smell of charred wood filling his nostrils even as he returned to his senses and the nothingness that had swallowed everyone clearer than the dozens of presences asleep around him. Their presences were still so shrouded that he couldn’t tell if they were safe or not.

One hand pressing against his mouth, eyes firmly closed for a second, Ben forced himself back to his feet. Stumbling into the column of moonlight spilling from the window to pick up his chair, he searched the shadows festering on the darkest corners of the library until he was certain one on particular was not there. Certain that he was alone, he dragged himself to the bookshelf furthest away from the holo display he had been studying and let his fingers run over the book spines. The orange hue of the lightsaber spilling over the tomes when he connected it, he then went over the titles, trying to decipher them whilst not really caring for what they were.

He was tired, exhaustion biting at the corners of his eyes forcing him to blink to remain focused. Even so, Ben couldn’t risk returning to his quarters, he didn’t dare fall asleep, he didn’t trust that this time he wouldn’t wake up for the nightmare to be real. That he would open his eyes and it would all be gone.

Don’t think about it.

Not that he could force himself not to. It was engraved on his mind. All of it.

The flames climbing up the walls.

The wreckage filling the corridors.

The dead under the fallen debris.

None of it he could understand. All of it he was certain to be somehow his fault.
Letting his head rest against the books, Ben let out the tremulous breathe, attention slowly going over the darkened library, his mind taking in the empty tables, the moonlight falling from the windows, the—

“Force have mercy,” someone groaned from behind him. “Are you trying to burn down the building?”

He almost did out of shock. The tip of the saber grazed the shelves as he danced away from them, lightsaber firmly held on his hands, all senses ready for a fight—only to find an elderly woman in Jedi garments approaching him, her eternally pensive expression bristling in such a way that he actually feared she would fly at him for threatening her precious books.

“The thing off,” she growled, a finger stabbing the air in his direction when the blade collapsed. “If I ever get to write that code on the improper use of lightsabers, I will fill ten pages just with you!”

“What would be the latest entry?” Ben queried, grabbing hold of one of the books at random and making his way along the tables, back to the place he had his robe at, not daring to raise his eyes to the Master slowly limping behind him for fear of what she might see if he did. “Thou shall not use thy saber as a chandelier?”

The Master coughed, suspicion and laughter battling in her mind for a moment. That she let out a snort was a victory all on its own.

“And reading light just as a precaution.”

She looked around, the Force softly trembling around her as she listened, searching, suspicion not at all assuaged.

“What are you doing here?”

“Class planning.”

“Class–?”

She pressed her temples, the tapping of her cane stopping a few moments after Ben took his place next to the holo display.

“We are passed curfew. Also, last time I checked you were assigned to sparring practice, not—”

She twisted her hand making the tome slid off from were Ben had put it and jump into her hands.

“Kyber crystals.”

A surprisingly mischievous smile rose to her face.

“There is someone here.”

Ben rolled his eyes. There was absolutely no one else here. Even so, he was ready to run with the bait if only to keep his mind out of everything else. A thousand witty remarks were already on the tip of his tongue when, humor rising to champion him, he looked up and found his words being strangled by terror.

Fire.
The library was burning. Flames exploding out of the walls, the ceiling crashing into the floor, windows breaking and in the midst of it all—

No!

Ben was running, digging through the debris, hardly remembering he could call the Force to him whilst he pulled the elderly woman from beneath them, his hands glowing gold as he put them over the large gash on her chest and—

“Why?”

Panic made a shiver ran up his spine. That same instant Kylo raised his eyes, the glowing light around his hands sizzling out as he found himself staring not at a long deceased Master, but at a young woman, her body still trapped under the debris, blood pouring from a ugly gash on her shoulder, confusion taking over her expression as if she too could see his past self scramble out of the undamaged library, hear the shout of “Ben!” following him as he burst out the door, running for a ship, towards the only person he was certain would be able to help him and who had given him nothing but empty words.

“Why would you–?”

He reached out to her a moment too late, sensing her slip between his fingers before he had a chance to anchor her to him and his mind, in turn, filled with a different nightmare. That of a panicked girl, her screams echoing over the dunes as she fought against the person holding her in place, trapping her in an inferno that felt too much too real.

“Come back!”

That plea. It was her desperation that made him turn, searching for those who had inspired it only to find himself stepping into an open wound that wasn’t just hers but also his—that left him staring at this oval vessel raising from her memories until his own turned it into the Falcon and he had little choice but to watch it disappear, the girl’s screams suffocating him until her fear, her pain, was all that he could feel, all he could think about, until it was everything and—

“Where the hell were you?!” FN-2187’s voice exploded, the man himself appearing suddenly in front of him, forcing his way through the troops occupying the chamber beyond the door Kylo had just forced open, whilst pushing the soldiers blasters down. “I had tactical support trying to reach you and—!”

Panting, dread having left his mind filled with fog, Kylo could hardly register the way the dunes around him were giving way to this narrow corridor, much less the man in front of him and what his presence meant. Panic twisting in his stomach, he reacted out of instinct, a wave of hand sending the former stormtrooper crashing into the nearest wall as he kept going down the corridor, blind to the soldiers fleeing his path and the visibly shocked Sergeant rushing to help FN-2187 to his feet, his mind focused in one thing only.

Rey.

She was here somewhere. Her presence might be little but a whisper, this flame lost amidst a hundred others, but she was here. Even with his heart hammering in such a way he could barely hear anything else, he knew that. She was here. Amidst the soldiers. Fading.

Where?!

The answer came to him like the softest of tugs. Turning his attention to the left, he forced himself to
look, to truly look, at the a sea of soldiers lying or sitting on the floor, to search, to see—

“Move!” he growled, shoving the nearest of the soldiers aside with little care or concern. Time and time again he would have to repeat the order. “Move!”

He found Rey lying amidst a group of injured officers to the far side of the corridor, blood covering the green cloth bandaging her shoulder, her face overtaken by a pallor that was as unnatural as it was wrong.

“Rey?”

She didn’t answer, didn’t move.

Pain forcing him to clench his teeth as he dropped to his knees, Kylo tossed his gloves aside, leaning forward to unwrap the fabric covering her shoulder and inspect the viciously thorn skin underneath.

“What do you think you are doing?”

FN-2187. His voice not so irate as it was frightened.

“Get the hell away from her!”

His hand closed around Kylo’s shoulder, forcibly trying to push him away from Rey only to release him with a pained shout when an electricity bolt ran up his arm. Still panting, exhaustion leaving him barely able to breathe, Kylo extended a hand and put it over the heavily bleeding wound.

Letting out a soft whimper as the golden glow enveloping Kylo’s hands went to wash over her shoulder, Rey fell silent after that, her lack of reaction leading Kylo to look around, frantic, his attention finally falling on the cloth that had been around her shoulder.

Camouflage.

This belonged to the infantry. More importantly the residue around it, this presence, this belonged to—

“Captain!”

It occurred to him a moment too late just how bad an idea this was. Cursing himself, Kylo closed the Force around FN-2187, dragging him to his side and pulling him to his knees, only to force his hands inside the golden glow mending Rey’s injuries as he loudly, and not at all kindly, projected his orders right into his mind.

“You are a healer! Behave like one!”

Battling this deep desire of shoving a fist into Kylo’s face for the treatment he was being subjected to, FN-2187, nevertheless, had the good sense to postpone any retaliatory moves until after Phasma—blaster attached to the supports on her upper leg protections and looking somewhat diminished in stature without a cape whipping behind her—had left.

“Sir?”

“What orders have been issued?”

“All troops are presently on standby,” Phasma informed, keeping herself at what she clearly had deemed a safe distance. “We are to evacuate if the structure reacts poorly to the next set of testing. The TIEs are already on position. All ships trying to follow us out of the city are to be shot down.”
Ignoring FN-2187’s outrage at that last bit of information, Kylo took a deep breathe, his hands starting to visibly tremble from the strain of healing.

“And if the testing succeeds?”

“We are moving on the ring of refineries.” Her hand went to rest over her com. “The General wishes to have full control over the city’s fuel production least—”

A threatening metallic groan, a reminder of how precarious their situation was, interrupted her. Looking up, the fear around him starting to thicken as the lights flickered and Cloud City’s rocking again gained momentum, Kylo clenched his teeth, FN-2187 rapidly throwing himself forward to put himself between Rey and any falling debris, making his attention go back to her and the meager improvement on her injury.

He had to get her out of here.

He had to get her to safety.

Finding himself struggling to rewrap the bandage around her shoulder—his hands being slapped aside by FN-2187 as he took to himself to do that with surprising expertise—Kylo took Rey in his arms, the pained moan rising from her lips making him look down.

Her head had fallen against his shoulder, the tremors still rocking the city sending shivers down her back as she went on to mutter something incomprehensible. Jumping to his feet, FN-2187 closed his hands around hers, hopeful for a moment. The next, Kylo felt fury veering it’s head, the question, the thinly veiled accusation, that followed almost causing him to toss the other man across the room.

“Why isn’t she waking up?” FN-2187 snarled, voice lowered, mindful of Phasma’s proximity. “What—? Rey!”

The exclamation made Kylo turn his attention away from the visor covering the other man's visage, his expression going from exhausted to distraught the moment he found Rey's face. There were tears running down her cheeks, it took him a while to look passed them and understand the reason behind the other man’s hope.

She seemed to be stirring. Her head pressing against Kylo’s chest, fingers closing around his robes, twisting them, her eyes fluttering under the lids. When she opened them, though, they were glazed, blind to everything but whatever nightmare that had captured her mind and now refused to release it.

Feeling his heart sink, Kylo had to force out his next question, no longer caring whom or even if anyone, answered him.

“How did this happen?”

Still looking at the flickering lights, Phasma seemed to be returned to the present by the sudden lack of strenght in his voice.

“She was engaged in battle with a Knight present in the Engine Room when the one fleeing my troops entered it,” she stated. "It is possible she was overwhelmed.”

“I find that improbable. The wound–?”

“Blaster. Republic-issued,” Phasma went on to clarify. Stealing a glance at Rey shoulder, she seemed to hesitate before offering the next bit of information. “Republic designed weaponry is commonly overcharged. If used correctly it will burn through armor.”
Standing at their side, watching in horror as the Captain locked her eyes with Kylo's to give him an almost imperceptible headshake, FN-2187 seemed to be getting just as nauseous as Kylo felt.

"Wake up," he begged, grabbing hold of Rey's hands. "Wake up!"

"Are all vessels grounded?"

Her harsh expression a stark contrast to the way her fingers again went to rest over her com, Phasma glanced at Rey and turned her back on them, marching down the corridor, leaving FN-2187 to whisper a dumbstruck—

“They are grounded.”

—as both he and Kylo went down the corridor and, forcing a blaster door opened, stepped inside the chamber where the A.A.L.s and the command shuttle remained, waiting for the troops to board them.

Climbing up the ramp of the nearest of the vessels, Kylo raised his attention to the pilot looking down from the hatch leading to the cockpit.

“Take her to the Finalizer,” he ordered. “Contact the Med Bay once you are in range.”

“Sir.”

Lowering Rey to the ground, careful as not to cause any her further harm, Kylo let his hand rest over her forehead for a moment, softly stroking it with his thumb before getting back to his feet and turning to leave. He ended up stopping almost immediately, a tug on his cloak making him glance back.

Around him, the A.A.L. walls had given way to a garden, the smell of blood and burned fuel disappearing under those of flowers and freshly cut grass. A memory. And in it the injured young woman at his feet had been replaced by a triumphantly smiling child, her hands firmly latched to his cloak.

"Found you."

She had found a ghost. And yet, getting to his knees, covering her with the same cloak she was holding on to, he hadn't the heart to take that illusion away from her. Stepping back to the present, glancing at Rey's lonely figure as the garden collapsed, he grabbed FN-2187’s shoulder, keeping him inside the vessel as he himself went down the access ramp, back to the troops, where he belonged.

“Stay with her.”

The Changeling

“Explain yourselves.”

Standing on one knee, head lowered in reverence, Essen closed his eyes, the presence pressing against his back making him shiver as he kept his attention on the ground, waiting for one of his colleagues to take the lead, not daring to look up.

“I am waiting.”

A sharp intake of breath going passed her lips, Rhyase dropped her head even lower, her voice
strained when she took the lead.

“We offer our most sincere apologies, Supreme Leader. It—it was a miscalculation.”

The last of her words came out strangled, dread taking over her expression as, much against her will, her body stiffened, her back getting unnaturally straight, the presence around them becoming more and more oppressive.

“A miscalculation,” Snoke said, growling. “I gave you one simple task. To monitor Kylo Ren and assure he was returned to me safely. And until now what did you manage to do?”

Still in her unnatural position, Rhyase tried to claw at her neck, a sickly pallor taking over her countenance as she struggled to breathe.

“Once you fail to make him keep to his orders. Twice you let him escape—”

“Hux refused us aid!” Lyr stated, glancing at Rhyase, a hint of panic in his voice. “If it wasn’t for him—!”

“Hux? Hux?!”

Not daring to call attention to himself, Essen risked a glance up, his eyes falling back to the ground the moment he found what he feared he would see. A shadow, some kind of living darkness festering behind the gigantic hologram showing the face of Leader Snoke.

“Do you mean to tell me three of you can’t get the mutt to cooperate? Three of you aren’t enough to force him into submission?”

“We acquired a vessel, we were successful on tracking Ky—”

Rhyase fell to the floor gasping for air, the tendrils that had been holding her veering to shove Lyr’s face into the floor.

“You made a show of even that!”

“The girl is alive.”

“No thanks to you.”

A sudden tiredness took over Snoke’s voice. Sensing his tendrils approach him, the gigantic hologram turning in his direction, Essen closed his eyes, trying to shield his thoughts, trying desperately to keep the young woman from the refinery safely locked inside his head.

“I want them unscathed,” Snoke whispered to him. "Both this girl and Kylo Ren."

Shivering, the pain he expected not coming, Essen dared to meet the eyes of the man, the thing, in front of him, dread rising to his face at what he found there.

Knowledge.

He knew.

“Bring them to me.”

Chapter End Notes
New chapter is here with a little bit more of Kylo's backstory :) In terms of chronology this happened just before the events on that memory Luke relived on his first chapter.

See you all in the next chapter! - Windcage
The Stormtrooper

Chapter by Windcage

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Stormtrooper – Day 23, Part 1

There had been no moon that night in Jakku, the shroud of stars the only light over the dunes as the A.A.L.s approached the village, their lights disconnected, their engines silent, not even a TIE on sight. Finn remembered the silence well, how surreal it had felt when war was what they were rushing towards. To those in the ground, however, the Order’s appearance must have felt like death itself had suddenly swept over them, invisible and silent, and when it hit the ground just as unforgiving.

That effect had been no accident, he knew. Simple though it might have seen that approach had had as much of a carefully thought out tactical component as Hux’s more elaborate operations. He had meant for the enemy to panic, to unleash chaos among its ranks, to “facilitate a transaction” as the Captain had put it, and left nothing to chance. Yet, despite everything, the fate of those on the ground had not been decided until the rebel cell hidden in the village had opened fire, and the old man leading it had deemed it wise to mock Kylo Ren in front of one of his co-commanders and a battalion of her troops. Some would have called his actions courage, Finn no doubt had at one point, then his mind had become bent on seeing the exchange in another light and it was not so much courage he was being forced to witness but a horrifying display of callousness on the rebel’s part, the indifference that had cost the lives of the very same people the elder had been using as shields enough to make his stomach turn.

The village in Jakku and the events that had unfolded there had long been something Finn avoided thinking about. It was enough that he was forced to revisit it in his dreams to have it haunt his waking hours—and Force knew that had started to happen too. Today, however, while trying to lie to rest the memory of Slip dying, Finn had taken not to flee from his demons, but to face them. The way they had caught him while he fought to find Rey amidst the fog worrying him to the point he had deemed it not enough to agonize over his friend’s condition, but also to torture himself by going over that night’s events in what he had hoped would to be a detached and purely tactical fashion.

Oh yes, like that was ever going to happen.

Despite his mood, Finn found himself shaking his head at the thought. Relief at finally recognizing himself in his own mind, however, was not enough to break through the disgust his ‘detached and purely tactical’ approach had stirred within himself. He had thought he could never grow to despise anything as much as he did the First Order. And yet here he was. The terrified faces of the villagers as clear to him now as if they were still alive, and feeling as sickened with the Order’s actions as he did with those of the rebel cell it had faced.

It killed them before the Order even pulled the trigger.

It was not as if he held any kind of naïve illusion about how war was fought and won. He had long ceased to expect mercy, much less compassion out of anyone. Even so, he had expected—No. He expected the side he had joined to be better than this. Better than the Order. It had to be. Or, at least,
so he had kept telling himself, fighting to convince that ever skeptical part of his brain that the side he had joined was different, honorable, and now—

Now Cloud City.

“Every ground report I had access to states that the enemy inside the captured refineries has been mostly neutralized,” Finn heard himself state, awareness of how attentively the officers assembled around him were listening to his report making him discreetly look passed the bridge’s viewports and towards the forest of industrial arms repairing the Finalizer’s bow, before swallowing his nerves and proceeding. “Some resistance pockets remain operational, but they don’t justify sending in reinforcements. In fact, despite having fallen behind on schedule, the infantry is making steady gains in all fronts.”

Pointing at the tridimensional image of Cloud City hovering at the center of the tactical table, Finn called the officers attention to the city’s main refineries, more exactly to the one that, contrary to its two surviving siblings, was now identified by a pulsating blue dot.

“Corporal ES-5550, left in charge of the eastbound offensive by the Captain, has given the all-clear sign on the main refinery to the east.”

A murmur of approval went over the bridge, officers leaning towards the nearest of their colleagues. All discussions were, however, rapidly cut short by the visibly unstable hologram at the head of the table taking a stand and Hux’s voice rising from the speakers, sharp and skeptical.

“Is this Corporal to be trusted?”

Standing to Finn’s left, Sergeant Fisher’s equally blue, equally unstable hologram nodded.

“She is thorough, Sir,” he assured, the line breaking making his voice come in hiccups. “A competent officer, even if she has long been forced to operate outside her area of expertise.”

“How is?”

“Reconnaissance.” Fisher straightened his back further, the unspoken question in the General’s eyes making him continue. “We had been facing a long-drawn-out guerilla situation prior to Commander Ren’s arrival. Without reinforcements being provided and with most of the chain of command gone, Governor Ozzel had to make ends meet with what officers we did have. The Corporal’s situation is hardly an isolated case.”

The head of one of the industrial arms approached the viewports, attaching itself to it as a second and a third joined it. In a moment, the sounds of cutting and welding had taken over the bridge forcing the meeting to a standstill until they manage to detach the pane from its socket and disappeared with it, leaving cold air to gush inside the bridge.

A deep frown having taken over his expression, Hux glanced at the man downing the fleet’s great coat who was silently standing in his shadow.

"I will assume we have hit another setback, Captain Peyton," he commented. "Details?"

"One of the droids going over the Finalizer’s diagnostics insisted in running integrity tests to the bridge's viewports," Peyton informed, his coat whipped by the wind coming from outside. "It found a fissure. The pane is presently being replaced."

Hux nodded.
"The droid?"

"An extremely grumpy BB unit." A snort coming from the midst of the assembled officers forced Peyton to give all of them a critical look. "It kept going over unauthorized and undeclared modifications to the TIE Isahaine Ren used to reach us. In all honesty, Sir, I truly wouldn't like to be on her shoes when that particular droid finds her."

Having to bit his lips to stop himself from laughing, this very clear memory of BB-8's meanstreak assuring him he would better pass this information to Rey the moment he got back to her, Finn felt his stomach sink the next instant.

Rey.

She—

"Nephys." Finn jumped on his spot, head jerking towards Peyton who had just addressed him. "Your companion. Am I right in assuming she is Isahaine?"

"Indeed, Captain, she—" Peyton's furrowing eyebrows left Finn blinking in confusion, the warning forcing him to stitch is words into what he hoped was an helpful answer. "She is recovering."

Turning away from him as if the exchange had never happened Peyton returned his attention to Hux.

"We have noted the droid's serial number and identification, Sir. We thought it might interest you."

"It does, Captain," Hux agreed, absentmindedly, all the while frowning at the city's blueprints. "Sergeant, are the late Governor Ozzel’s reports available?"

“Commander Ren has had access to them, Sir. Has he not?"

Going from pensive to aggravated in five seconds flat and visibly struggling to keep his plummeting mood from landing the murderous visage in record timing, Hux gave Fisher a piercing look.

“Are they available?"

"I will see that they are delivered to you, General."

"Excellent. Lieutenant." Ferrar looked up, a series of glitches leaving all holographic channels frozen only allowing those on the Finalizer to hear the final part of the General's commands. “—move the TIEs in and open the unloading route to the eastern refinery. We will be occupying the site. The westbound offensive?"

Stealing a glance at the holo pad he had on his hands, Finn went back to his report.

“I have been offered guarantees that the troops will have the entirety of the captured area under control during the night. It is important note, though, that despite being at the northern refinery’s doorstep, all information indicates the operation has stalled."

“Stalled.” Hux repeated, hands settling behind his back. “This is Ren’s offensive. Where is he?"

Clearly in the middle of issuing Hux's orders, Ferrar's hologram turned back to the meeting, reaching forward to unmute his channel and answer the General's question.

“He has surrendered his command, Sir. I was lead to believe he was making his way back to the southern main refinery.”
“With what purpose?”

“The Commander has that flying death trap of his still on site.” An heartfelt shiver went up Ferrar's spine. “It appears, however, he found his path blocked. My best guess is that he doubled back and will appear at your position.”

The line of Hux’s jaw hardened.

“What an honor. Proceed.”

“Far more concer—”

A high pitched screech, rapidly followed by the connections belonging to every single officer presently in Cloud City collapsing, filled the bridge. Attention jumping from the place Hux had occupied to the one, at his side, where Fisher had been, Finn balled his fists, the undercurrent of panic taking over the bridge and making officer after officer stop their work to glance at the tactical meeting not subsiding even when Peyton took over the proceedings, his queries directed at the group responsible for communications.

“Our side or theirs, Lieutenant?”

“The General’s side, Captain.”

“Your evaluation?”

Flipping switch after switch in her console, clearly trying to bring the channel back up, Umano glanced in the Captain's direction, her expression remarkably serene.

“Given the city’s predicament it might be nothing. The connection was unstable to begin with.”

“Even so—” Peyton frowned, taking the fleet cap off to run a hand through his greying hair and then putting it back on. “Search all channels. Make sure the city is still there.”

An eternity. That was what waiting felt like. Then pinging. The crackling of the line mixing with the sounds of hammering and welding coming from outside the Finalizer. Voices melding into a conversation Finn was rather sure had not been meant for any of their ears.

“Fuel supply is presently being rerouted to the surviving repulsorlifts from several of the conquered refineries.” Hux. His voice was clear, even if the holographic connection struggled to bring his image back. “We should no longer be running manual corrections to the tilt.”

“We have little choice.” A woman's voice. Crackling. “A large section of the repulsorlifts located on the explosions’ vicinity is beyond repair, unless we can get the remaining to work—”

“Are the repulsorlifts located exclusively over the wider perimeter or can they also be found on the lower side of the city?”

“Both. We can have the droids ran calculations to ascertain which we can relocate to the affected area, but this can take days, weeks—The stress the manual corrections are putting on the city could cause the structure to break apart.”

Feeling slightly nauseated at what had sounded a lot like a sentence, Finn could but stare as the hologram of the young, dark skinned woman that had spoken it reclaimed its place and the realization that he had not taken a single instant to go over the identities of those around him left his face expression as tense as her shoulders.
He knew her.

Or, at least, he knew of her.

Major Svenna Jarnek. Structural Engineer. From Starkiller's Project Team.

"I can't offer any guarantees as to this city, Director," she went on to state. "We have to evacuate."

"Evacuation is hardly an option in the present scenario, Major. Without this city as base—"

An ominous metallic moan rose from the speakers alongside Hux’s words. Looking away from Jarnek, only now seeming to become aware of the returning connection, the officers around him and what had transpired, the General’s eyes pierced right into Finn.

“Proceed with your report.”

Fists still balled, Jarnek’s words echoing in his mind, Finn bit his lips.

At what point had he become so disgusted with what was happening on Cloud City—with these so called rebels—that relying on Hux of all people seemed like the sane and logic thing to do? When had his brain looked at the man who had mercilessly destroyed the Hosnian system and one-sidedly decided not only to demote him to lesser evil, but that he was Cloud City’s only chance of survival?

Am I out of my damn mind?!  

Back to Finn’s side and clearly taking his silent rant for trouble pinpoint exactly where on his report he had been interrupted, Fisher’s hologram leaned on his direction, a whisper of “fires” calling Finn’s attention back to the present and a waiting General.

Silently thanking Fisher, Finn went back to addressing the assembled officers.

“Far more concerning than the still ongoing skirmishes are the fires raging in several of the repositories affected by the explosions.”

Peyton raised his eyebrows, turning to a third hologram, that of the broad shouldered officer standing at Jarnek’s side.

“Has the emergency personnel not reached your position, Lieutenant?”

The drumming of his fingers being heard through the speakers, the officer grimaced and yet again Finn found himself cursing his prior distraction.

This man too was no stranger.

Lieutenant Piotr Arran. Construction and Maintenance Supervisor. Also from Starkiller’s Project Team. Finn had lost count to the number of times sanitation had been called by his department.

“They are already on several of the affected locations, Captain,” Arran stated. “I have, however, been receiving reports of enemy troops roaming the affected areas and forcing the teams to flee. We need the infantry to assigned squads to—”

“Our squads are already spread thin, Lieutenant,” Fisher stated, tone cold.

“Your squads, Sergeant, are running with at least double the soldiers necessary,” Arran retorted. “To split these units would allow my personnel the protection it needs to deal with the situation.”
Feeling his irritation rise alongside that of the Sergeant, Finn crossed his arms.

“A solid suggestion if we had the resources,” he pointed out, quickly reminding himself to take his concerns to Hux rather than lock horns with Arran. “The Med Bay is reporting an abnormal amount of injured amidst the infantry officers. Both the causality’s reports and those compiled from the medical droids’ registers by the Head Doctor all show the same pattern: the enemy offensive specifically targeted anyone wearing an officer’s shoulder blade. The assignment of individual squads to the Lieutenant’s teams is not feasible.”

“This entire city’s sole purpose is to capture and store Tibanna,” Arran shot back, unmoved. “We are sitting on a structure that has all the right ingredients to turn into a fireball and, at this very moment, at least a quarter of its repositories have either blown up or sustained heavy damage. Feasible is the last of our concerns. The fires have to be put out.”

His attention on Cloud City’s blueprint rather than on the row threatening to spill over it, Hux turned to Ferrar.

“Did anyone remember to note the fires’ locations?”

Swiping whatever he had been working on for most of the meeting from his holo display to the tactical table, Ferrar nodded.

“Stored information sent by Commander Ren’s com shows he has been flagging the fires. I fear some of them will prove problematic.”

Frowning as he leaned to study the mass of red dots appearing at the south-southwest sector of the city, Hux ended up nodding and making a gesture to address Phasma.

“Captain, contact the officers in charge, have—”

His voice sizzled out, shock at finding a vacant space at his side rather than his infantry commander leaving him staring at the place she normally occupied.

“Where is the Captain?”

“At the Med Bay, receiving treatment for what she described as superficial injuries.” Ferrar grimaced. “I’m not at all sure the Captain knows what ‘superficial’ means, General.”

Pressing his lips, Hux went on to address Fisher.

“Sergeant, contact the officers in charge, have their troops sweep the areas surrounding the captured refineries and seal all blaster doors. Make sure everything is clear before allowing engineering in. Major, as it stands this city is the only supply line available to us and as such it’s vital for the Finalizer. Make all efforts to repair the damage and keep it airborne. Lieutenant,” Arran raised his head. “You will return to the Finalizer. Focus on TIE racks and the long distance communications.”

He returned his attention to the tactical display and those around it.

“If the enemy has any surviving brain cells left—which, given the fact that their fool proof plan to defeat us was to blow up a city alongside with their troops, I doubt—they will be taking advantage of our underground incursion to fortify their lines and reorganize. If we are to stand a chance of holding on until the fleet arrives, this cannot be allowed. Captain Peyton, you will deploy the rest of the garrison and empty the Finalizer’s storage. Ours is hardly a stabilization force but we will make do with what we have. What’s the status on the southern refinery?”
“The equipment meant for it is presently being rerouted to the barracks,” Ferrar announced, glancing at Jarnek. “I had meant to ask the Major to evaluate if it is safe to use the exhaust port even if the refinery has all but disappeared. Considering the situation in the city’s lower levels, however—”

“I will get back to you, Lieutenant,” Jarnek assured.

Reaching up to press something that made Cloud City's map be replaced by a star chart showing Bespin and the dock the Finalizer was presently in, Hux pressed his lips, dissatisfied.

“As for the orbital status... Has there been any activity detected in the system?”

“The receivers haven’t detected signs of scouts or drones,” Peyton informed. “All appears to be quiet. We are taking the TIEs out of the Finalizer. If the enemy returns before we are able to contact the fleet, we will be ready, General.”

“Is the Persecutor anywhere to be found?”

Diligently manning her post, Umano turned on her chair.

“Colonel Veers seems to be running on radio silence, General. All indicates, he is keeping to his orders and tracking General Organa. His reports describe several successful attacks against her forces.”

Head turning in Umano's direction with such violence his neck cracked, Finn felt as if the ground had just disappeared from under his feet. The question came before he could stop himself, concern and fear hidden only by Nephys' helmet and his mind rapidly catching up to his mouth, leaving him shouting at himself to behave like a thrice damned Knight as he heard his voice again fill the bridge.

“Their flagship? Was it destroyed?”

“The Mom Calamari cruiser, Radus, is still missing,” Umano informed almost causing Finn to collapse with relief. "The Colonel theorizes it might have fled to deep space. As for the Order’s fleet—” A tense glance was traded with Peyton. “We have lost several decryption ciphers, it will take us some time to be fully updated on their status.”

Even with Umano being outside the transmission zone, Hux seemed to notice something was off.

“What is it?”

Again she traded a glance with Peyton.

“I can’t speak with certainty, General,” Umano went on to state, caustically. "But judging by the Colonel’s reports and several Star Destroyers pinging, part of the fleet seems to be moving to conquer Coruscant.”

Hux seemed to have became frozen in his place for a long moment.

“Coruscant?”

“I can’t speak with certainty, General—”

“On whose orders?”

“Vice-Admiral Argrave’s.”
He gritted his teeth.

“Compile all available information and send it down, Lieutenant.”

“Down?”

Looking a lot like a man searching for salvation, Peyton turned to the place where Phasma should be at. Left only with the Captain’s empty chair to answer his pleas, however, he turned to Hux.

“All of the short range communication systems required for providing tactical support are now available, General,” he stated. “There is no need for you to remain on the ground.”

It was debatable Hux was even listening. His murderous expression very much that of a man trying to wrap his mind around the amount of damage the Order’s offensive was suffering in his absence. It was only when Ferrar spoke that he seemed to return to the present.

“With all due respect, Sir,” he said, softly. “Does the Captain know about the transfer?”

Guilt flashed over Hux’s expression. It was gone before he spoke.

“Is the city’s Governor anywhere to be found, Lieutenant?”

"He was on site when enemy offensive blew up the southern refinery," Ferrar offered, expression hardening. "As it seems he was aiding the Corporal’s men and Isahaine Ren hunt down the enemy cell responsible for deploying explosive charges on the docks’ arms. Captain Phasma sent him to the barracks after the explosion. Several officers report he was instrumental in calming the population during the city’s plummet. He remains on site.”

Hux nodded.

“I wish to have a word with him.”

“Should I inform him?”

A quick smirk crossed Hux's face.

“No.” He turned to the rest of the table. “See to the arrangements. Dismissed.”

Finn stepped away from tactical chamber with the rest of the officers, a glance at the now returning industrial arms—one of them with the new pane for the viewport firmly attached to it—making him intercept Fisher before the repairs could get underway.

Signalling the Sergeant to remove his helmet, Finn ended up grimacing. To say the man appearing from under it seemed seconds away from collapsing didn’t start to describe his appearance. He was visibly drained. Exhausted.

“You should rest,” Finn heard himself said, sympathetic.

“Same to you,” Fisher shot back. “Isahaine’s status?”

“The droids assure that she is out of danger,” Finn sighed, grateful for the officer's concern. “Even if not without going the extra mile to make perfectly clear that she is lucky to have both life and limb. And not in that order.”

Fisher snorted.
“Bloody balls of sunshine all of them,” he commented, only to visibly withdraw the next instant, seemingly having remembered he was talking not with a fellow officer, but with a Knight. “What should I tell Commander Ren, Sir?”

Finn blinked. Ren?

“He inquired after her before leaving with the offensive. I believe he is expecting news.”

Anger threatened to take over Finn’s mind, fury pulsating alongside the still very present ache of being tossed against a wall just the day before, yet, it was gone before he could fully acknowledge it, leaving him to sigh, this very sour flavor in his mouth.

“Tell him the truth,” Finn grumbled. “She hasn’t yet woken up.”

“As you wish, Sir.”

“More importantly, Sergeant—” Fisher returned his attention to him, helmet already half way into covering his face. “Inform Ren that I will try to persuade Isahaine to stay on the Finalizer.”

Safe, his mind added. Not that he had a clue why he had chosen to extend this information to Ren. It was not as if the man had or would ever extend him the same courtesy.

“I, myself, will be going down with the rest of the Finalizer’s garrison and join your troops for the final push on the northern refinery.”

“We will have one of the transports waiting for you,” Fisher guaranteed, visibly grateful. “Is there anything else—?”

“A personal favor if you are willing to—”

He didn’t need to finish, Fisher’s expression spoke for itself.

“If the Governor survives his meeting with the General, I too wish to have a word with him.”

“You believe he was involved with the latest events?”

“In all honesty, Sergeant, I don’t know.”

In fact, at this point, he didn’t feel he knew anything. Not about Lando Calrissian. Not about the enemy. Not about anyone’s allegiance. The only thing he felt certain about was that he didn’t need to know General Organa all that well to be rather certain that not in a million years would she support what was going on in this city. She would never accepted this. There was something wrong—there was something very wrong going on here.

The sounds of welding and hammering again filled the bridge. Watching Fisher salute him as his hologram collapsed, Finn glanced at the industrial arms fixing the glass pane and then passed them towards Bespin and the small dot of light, the city, still in its sky. Only then did he leave the bridge.

Marching the Finalizer’s corridors while going passed dozens of soldiers who had once been his brothers in arms, Finn reached the Med Bay several minutes later, the flurry of medical droids rushing in his direction forcing him to wave them away and retreat inside the officer’s ward before he was overwhelmed.

Locking the door to the room where Rey laid, Finn made sure no technician had yet came to fix the cameras he had disconnected and then removed helmet, exhaustion catching up to him leaving him to
drag his feet towards the window’s parapet and collapse over it.

Grimacing when he locked eyes with his exhausted reflection, Finn closed his eyes, trying to get himself into if not a comfortable position at least one that would allow him to sleep, before looking towards the bed to check on his friend condition.

He was up the same instant, panicked and running out the door.

She was gone.

Chapter End Notes

Well, Finn just can’t catch a break. Lando is in for a nasty surprise. And Rey vanished. Things are looking up - or not.

An excellent 2018 to all of you dear readers :) - W.
The Captain

Chapter by Windcage

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Captain – Day 22, Part 2

“I believed you described your men as exceptional,” Kylo Ren was stating, voice flowing down the A.A.L. access ramp as he himself stepped on it, the roar of the convoys landing in the barracks' backyard not enough to muffle the bite in his words. “Trained from birth. I would think them capable of flushing out a three people cell, in a closed city, with the utmost ease.”

Walking at his side, greatcoat being whipped against his legs and posture so rigid that the way Ren’s body flinched every time his left foot hit the ground was all the more noticeable, Hux pursed his lips, anger drawing lines around his eyes.

“My soldiers, Ren, are not a means to solve your problems. If you are incapable of stopping your subordinates from running rampant, I suggest you either alter your manner of command or forfeit it entirely.”

“Much in the same way you forfeited yours in view of the recent flood of desertions?” Eyebrows raised in mock curiosity, Ren tilted his head. “For curiosity’s sake, General, this makes exactly how many failures?”

“These Knights are hardly my responsibility,” Hux retorted, teeth clenched. “Controlling them is about as much my job as having to work out how to deal with their predilection with explosions. I will not be blamed for this blunder.”

“Rather, you will find a way to work it in your favor?”

“How considerate of you to remind me I have that option.”

“By all means, General, that is by far your most successful tactical approach.”

“While yours is not having one at all!” Hux snapped, the dropping temperature making the words leave his lips in white puffs of air. “I have enough to deal with in my hands. You better start thinking in ways to solve this.”

“Might I suggest better calibrations to your cannons?”

Standing at attention in front of her troops, hair and cape being whipped furiously by the same rain beaten wind that had so far been successful in leaving Ren’s dark curls an outright mess and was struggling to rip the fleet cap from Hux’s head, Phasma glared at the exchange, her expression forced back into blankness when Ferrar leaned her way.

“Might I assume the General kept you in the dark, Captain?”

“Can you think of any other plausible explanation for this, Lieutenant?”

Ferrar’s sympathetic sideways glance turned apologetic.
“For what is worth, Captain, we did try to stop him. But with you being in the Med Bay—”

An approaching convoy forced the exchange into silence.

Feeling the air tremble under the roar of the A.A.L.s’ engines, Phasma found herself grimacing, the headache she had been forced to grapple with since the refinery had exploded coming back to her full force alongside a nurse’s voice, her words as clear now as when they had been spoken, mere hours ago.

“We have done what we can, Captain. You have to rest.”

First Lieutenant Azzel Strayat. Medical Support Officer. The fearless way in which she had blocked her from leaving the Med Bay was a testament to Hux’s skill at hand picking his crew. Strayat’s restraint with both Phama’s brand of selective deafness and the droid that had been making its rounds around them, insisting the nurse had gone around dressing Phasma’s wounds all wrong, was, however, an accomplishment that belonged to Strayat herself.

“Do I need to remind you of the nature of your injuries? Or the incident in the hangar?”

“I am quite aware of that.”

“You have to rest, Captain.” Phasma’s expression had made her sigh. “The General assigned me to you. Would you at least try?”

That had been a remarkably low blow. For all her certainties she would not be able to sleep, however, Phasma had obeyed, grudgingly going to sit on the bed. She didn’t remember much else after that. At least until she had woken to the sound of engines, sirenes and the anti-aircraft batteries firing, and ran to the window to discover that the Finalizer’s garrison was being fully deployed. That and Hux’s black shuttle rushing through the skyscrapers, what seemed to be the brunt of the enemy force trying to blow it out of the sky.

Of the many unpleasant wake up calls she had lived through that took top five. It truly mattered little that she had known almost immediately she was looking at a diversion, when she really didn’t have to stretch her imagination that much to know what it truly meant.

That this was what it meant.

Saluting as Ren and Hux approached the lines of stormtroopers – the General’s long held desire to feed the Knight Commander to the Finalizer’s cannons not so strong as her own urge to pull him aside and question him as to what he thought he was doing – Phasma fell behind them, eyes following the tightly knit transporter convoy flying overhead, the roar of the vessels' engines momentarily upstaging the ongoing spat.

"Transporters approaching landing zone," the male voice echoing through the barracks' speakers announced. "All ground personnel clear landing area B-7. Repeat. All ground personnel clear landing area B-7. Standby for walker deployment.”

Flaming streams of fire hit the ground as the convoy maneuvered over the landing pads, the walkers attached to the vessels' underbellies going online as an almost imperceptible announcement of “B-7 clear for reception” was made on the same male voice. The group hit the ground with surprising lightness. Legs unfolding, cannons moving out of their sockets, the walkers abandoned the landing pad just as the transporters took to the sky again, leaving room for the discussion to spike.

“In case it has escaped your notice, this is an army, Ren. It serves a greater purpose than to satisfy your whims.”
“Or settle your personal grievances?”

Lips pressed, the taste of blood and bacta immediately filling her mouth forcing her to relax her expression less she tore the wound crossing her lips open out of exasperation, Phasma forced her attention away from her co-commanders and turned to Ferrar, whose gentle temperament was, at least at this moment, far less liable to get on her nerves.

“The security measures, Lieutenant?”

“We have troops inside all buildings offering a clear line of fire to the barracks, Captain,” Ferrar stated, forcing himself to stop staring in utter astonishment at his squabbling superiors and point her attention to the line of buildings through which the Finalizer’s convoys where maneuvering. “We have resorted to evacuate the entirety of the closest blocks. Sharpshooters are providing cover from the roofs. There are also several Special Forces—”

Shouting rose from one of the landing pads they were walking by. Immediately turning, her confusion at seeing a stormtrooper being tossed from the platform made null when her eyes fell on a man diving for the soldier's blaster, not even aiming as he fired it on their direction. Phasma reacted before she had time to think. Hearing the blaster go off, the red trail of a shot becoming frozen just as it was about graze her shoulder, she raised her own blaster and pressed the trigger—had it not been for the hand immediately intercepting the weapon, forcing the shot to sink to the ground, it would have cut right through the prisoner now being overwhelmed by soldiers and beaten back into submission, sinking into his chest.

“Sergeant.”

Right hand still firmly closed around her blaster, Hux looked up, each word like the crack of a whip.

“I don’t care by which means compliance is achieved.”

Standing at the top of the landing pad, the electrified conductor vanes of the Z6 with which he had just stroke the prisoner down hanging mere inches over the man’s neck, Fisher didn’t drop his attention either to them or the disarmed soldier getting to his feet. Stepping back to allow the rest of the squad to take over the situation, he instead took to circle around the group, attention on the prisoner, baton held in a very clear threat.

“Your orders, General?” he queried.

“I have little to no interest in the physical state the prisoner is presented to me. He just needs to be able to talk. Do as you see fit.”

Turning towards Phasma, his glacier expression crumbling the instant he took in both the state of her face and her missing armor, Hux was clenching his teeth the next instant, Ren having released the blaster shot and letting it crash against the barracks’ walls a hundred or so meters away, unsurprisingly setting him off.

“Unless you have something against it!”

“I wouldn’t presume to teach you how to do your job.”

“You wouldn’t—only you do, Ren, repeatedly and while disregarding that which should be your function!” Hux growled, releasing the blaster. "I am overly tired of running around compensating for your outbursts and poor planning!”

“But such a marvelous job you do while at it. I recall you ordering an air strike on Niima Outpost
after I specifically told you I wanted the droid unarmed—"

“A droid you conveniently elected to ignore and allowed the Resistance to get hold of!” Hux spat, again marching towards the barracks, rain dripping off the greatcoat. “And then what? When the chance to strike a crippling blow to the Resistance presents itself, rather than do your job, call for reinforcements and hold your ground, you grab some girl, stuff her inside your shuttle and retreat!”

“Far from me wanting to miss your breakdown of my decisions,” Ren offered, a dark note on his words. “Or to deny you the chance to marvel me with your theoretical tactical knowledge.”

Looking back, eyes raised to survey the skyscrapers, the mishap with the prisoner weighing in her mind in such a way she was half expecting to see the glare of a sniper scope break the otherwise darkened windows and being forced to toss Hux to the ground, Phasma found herself ramming right into his back instead.

“Lets have your valuable contribution to our present conundrum, then,” she heard him snap, the sinister blue gleam taking over his eyes speaking of a far more urgent threat than any prowling enemy fighter. “I can barely wait to—”

“Enough,” Phasma growled, forcing her way between the two men, her eyes meeting first Ren’s dark brown ones and then boring into the green pair belonging to Hux. “Inside. Now.”

Trading a poisonous glare, rain crashing around then with increased violence, both men obeyed. That they marched inside without further incident, however, was a ruse Phasma refused to fall for. She had known them for far too long and knew them far too well to believe they weren’t sharpening their daggers. This wasn’t remotely finished and, as far as it served her purpose immensely to have them simply shut up, she needed to separate them if anything was to be achieved – something that, she might add, was next to impossible when both of them were present.

Stopping upon entering the barracks atrium—the sea of visibly exhausted soldiers around them remaining, for all intents and purposes, blissfully unaware of their arrival–Hux took off his cap, securing it between his left arm and his torso, before addressing Ferrar.

“The Governor, Lieutenant?”

“We are keeping him under watch, General. If you wish to interview him now—”

“Wouldn’t you prefer to change first, Sir?”

It worked like a charm. Even if seeing not one but both her co-commanders look down, taking in what in Ren’s case were scorched, in some places torn up garments and in Hux’s a very rumpled uniform, hadn’t been remotely in her plans. Nor was, she might add, seeing Ren run his fingers through his hair and, looking utterly annoyed, squeeze it to let out a very generous amount of water. He had stepped away from them just an instant later.

*Added bonus.*

On another occasion, she would have spared a thought for the soldiers or droids she had just put the human equivalent of an erupting volcano on route towards. At this moment, however, she had an entirely different type of natural disaster to deal with. One that was closer to one of Starkiller’s blizzards than anything else.

“How many cycles, Lieutenant?” Hux queried, the blue gleam receding from his eyes as he took to gaze at the rain.
“Four, Sir. But with the battlefront still active–”

Hux made an acknowledgement gesture with his head.

“Switch the on-duty soldiers at the barracks with the ones being deployed by the Finalizer and make inquiries as to the state of the troops on the ground. I will not have our front lines stumbling over their own feet. Same to you, Lieutenant.” Ferrar seemed slightly taken aback by this sudden inclusion. “Direct the Governor to my shuttle and retire for the day. I will take it from here. Captain, if I may have a moment of your time–”

“Of course, Sir.”

Watching Hux march down the corridor, Ferrar dutifully following behind him, Phasma took an appraising look at her troops, finally zeroing in on an officer supporting three blue stripes on his helmet - the mark of someone belonging to the Finalizer’s security - and took him to the side.

“There is a security risk that must be addressed,” she told him, glancing over his covered head to make sure the exchange was kept private. “A changeling that has in the past compromised our operations by successfully impersonating a bridge officer and a stormtrooper. Consider yourself under high alert. All soldiers are to keep within each other’s range at all times. Any suspicious activity is to be dealt with. Put a perimeter around the shuttle. Nobody is allowed in the General’s presence without me being present. No weapons enter it.” She surrendered her blaster as she spoke. “Resistance to comply is to be met with deadly force. Even if it is me. Especially if it is me. “Are we clear?”

Silence. A long one. Then, on an absolutely dumbstruck note.

“Captain?”

That she could hear that part of her mind that over the years had taken to sound a lot like Hux sneer at the officer was warning enough to what was to come. The dwindling line holding her patience snapped.

“Have we gone deaf or just blind?!” she growled, voice raised. “Move!”

Stepping inside the shuttle’s quarters several minutes later, the sound of the sonic shower being turned off on one of the adjoining rooms telling her of Hux’s position, Phasma approached the tactical table. Attention going over the city’s blueprints and then towards the tactical studies and engineering reports hovering around it, she ended up running her eyes over a medical file, the familiar identification number displayed there making her stop.

ZT-8320, it read. Officer identification 4WS-U09.

That was her. And she really didn’t need to read it to know what it stated.

An unwelcome wave of guilt leaving her fingers hovering over the document, Phasma glanced towards the closed door hiding Hux and swiped the file out of the tactical table, leaving a medical report from the Finalizer to take its place.

Stepping away from the work area, she approached the place where a support table and – she had to roll her eyes – an electric blue sofa were to be found. Her eyes might have lingered longer on that absolute monstrosity of a color if she had not become distracted by another far more urgent issue.

The round viewport.
It was open.

_Honestly!_

It took her approaching it to understand why.

Rain and pine trees.

She had found Hux staring at the trees surrounding Starkiller’s command base one too many times not to find herself hesitating. Arkanis. He had described it to her once. A long time ago.

Comprehension, however, was no reason for how difficult it was to stab the commands, or to hear the slightly disappointed note with which the voice filling the shuttle addressed her.

“I see you already managed to place me under house arrest.”

Turning to see Hux walk out of the refresher and approach the tactical table while buttoning his shirt, she gave him an irritated glare.

“Did it ever cross your mind to inform me about this?”

“I’m informing you now.”

“We had an _agreement._”

“Two days, _Captain,_” he recalled, going over the wrist buttons. “Two days, and these Knights managed not only to make a fool out of my entire command, but also to almost succeed in single handedly whipping it out. I’m not going anywhere.”

“What are your intentions?”

Stopping half-way into his shirt, Hux seemed about as surprised by her lack of further scolding as she herself was. Frowning - apparently not wishing to look a gift fathier in the mouth least he be bitten - he went into addressing her concerns in stride.

“There are some options,” he stated, studying the city’s blueprint as it rotated over the tactical table. “Namely where the population is concerned. I will harbor a guess that these rebels were never that great an ally—if they were ever one at all.”

“You believe they aren’t locals?”

“Or that in the very least they are being provided with outside support,” Hux acquiesced. “I am very much interested in their ground equipment, but if it goes in line with their freighters and support vessels they will be incredibly well equipped.” A pause. And then, in a contemplative tone. “More importantly to our situation, though, unless I’m very much mistaken the latest events won’t have warmed the population’s disposition towards our enemy, even if it might yet intimidate it into cooperation. Whatever chance we have on getting more than a simple foothold in this city, it has to be acted on fast.”

She could already see where this was going.

“If this _chance_ in any way involves rallies—”

“It’s my intention to start small.”

_That can’t be much better._
"Offering protection. Answering shortages."

*Force give me strength, it really isn't.*

"It is nevertheless probable the enemy will blame the explosion on us. Whatever our actions are, there should be no doubt about who is providing aid."

There was this voice inside her head telling her to rapidly step outside, jam the door, grab a pilot and put the shuttle on route to the *Finalizer* this very instant. That it was accompanied by her mind immediately weighing in on how much glaring that would entail and was actually demeaning it a worthwhile risk, spoke not only of her present mental state but also of the growing intensity of her headache.

*It isn’t as if that is even a possibility anymore.*

And that left her with—

"That, all of it, Armitage, is a no."

"It is not as if we have much of a choice."

"We can retrograde."

The words came unbidden. Whatever she had expected to accomplish with them, however, to see Hux drop his eyes, the ever so slight indication the same thought had crossed his mind—that he agreed —was not remotely it. Weighing her words, Phasma stepped closer to the tactical table, eyes never leaving his face.

"The tugs got us here. A tactical retreat,“ *Any retreat at all,* her mind corrected. “Would allow us rejoin the fleet and return with enough resources to easily reconquer this city.”

The corners of Hux's mouth twisted. After a moment's hesitation he had hit the pad on the table. Cloud City's blueprints dissolved, in its place a star chart, several blinking blue dots breaking the sea of stars.

"The fleet is indulging in nostalgic delusions of Imperial restoration and trusting Argrave to deliver on them,” Hux scoffed, deriding, whilst pointing her attention at a system a large number of the Star Destroyer indicators was moving against. "That is Coruscant. The Heart of the Empire."

*W-what?*

"That will take months."

"Months, years—As urgent as it is to put an end to this travesti, I wouldn't trust Argrave as far as I can throw him in normal circumstances, with the *Finalizer* in its present state, I will only use the fleet as a last resort.”

“And headquarters?” Phasma probed further, attention going back to Hux. "If we provide the tugs with our own pilots and the coordinates—”

“The tugs have a short range operational radius and practically non-existent radiation shield. Even if they manage to get us within the Cradle’s range—”

The rest of his words seemed to become stuck in his throat. A shadow that Phasma recognized taking over his expression, he spoke in a voice that hardly sounded his.
“I won’t have us share the Imperialis’ fate.”

She shouldn’t have cared. That she did was unbecoming of a stormtrooper, of an officer—of her. And yet, she found herself reaching for him all the same, one hand closing over his shoulder, eyes searching for his, finding them and pulling him away from the star chart. Back to the present. Back to her.

“Has the Med Bay discharged you?”

The query had been made in that same quiet voice and the tip of fingers went to touch his face, gently caressing his cheek.

“It is purely cosmetic damage,” she said. “It doesn’t require any further attention.”

The lie had come to her easily, as sour as it tasted. It made him sigh.

“Sometimes, I wonder if you wouldn’t benefit from a dictionary.” Hux said, face pressing against her hand. “That wound is hardly cosmetic.” Seeming to remind himself he had yet to finish with his uniform, he pointed at the obvious lack of hers. “Your armor?”

“The Med Bay judged it necessary to confiscate it. They seem to doubt my capacity to follow instructions.”

“A fine job you are doing convincing them otherwi—”

His back stiffened, attention jumping from her to the door just as her thumb stopped caressing his face. Footsteps could be heard from outside. Hand falling away from his face despite the lack of alarm from the soldiers, Phasma put herself between Hux and the door. Getting himself to her side, while putting on his gloves, Hux gave her a slightly critical look.

“Shove me inside a bunker why won’t you?”

“I’m considering it.”

Hux raised his eyebrows, the amused smirk threatening to break through his visage crashing the moment the door slid open, the lack of announcement—something that was an announcement in itself—leaving both of them to lock eyes with Ren who, having somehow managed to fit inside one of fleet's uniforms and armed, had stopped mid way into his impetuous march inside.

“The Governor is making his way here,” he informed after a few moments of studying them, then went to stand on the darkest corner of the room, his presence barely detectable in the overall darkness.

A knock on the door some minutes later and, just as Ren had announced, the Governor himself stepped inside. Back straight and with a confident gaze, his puffed up attitude seemed nevertheless to suffer a puncture the instant he went through the threshold and his eyes fell not on whoever he expected to be here but on Hux. He didn’t lose his footing for too long, however, words being offered to them in a strange language.

Frowning, expecting a mute query as to her knowledge of what had been said, Phasma glanced at Hux only to find him throwing Ren a particularly nasty look and step away from her.

“I am sure Ren finds this charade amusing,” he stated, voice back to its normal tone and dripping with contempt. “I have long observed he revels in playing with his prey before disposing of it. You will find I have neither the time nor the right temperament to partake on his pastimes.”
Mouth twisting itself into a sneer, Hux bored his gaze into the elder.

“I assume you are Lando Calrissian. Baron Administrator.”

Cringing, tension obvious in the way his eyes run up and down Hux’s visage, Calrissian settled for strained politeness. If a cheeky one.

“Governor is quite enough,” he said, carefully surveying his surroundings before giving all of them a profoundly charming smile. “You must be Commandant Brendol Hux’s son. You look remarkably like him.”

“A mirror could have told me as much, Governor,” Hux hissed. “If this is a sample of what your intelligence looks like I fear you might rapidly be proven expenda—”

The door crashed into the wall before he could finish. Barging inside without any care for protocol, panting and dishelved, Ferrar had yet to open his mouth and Ren had already pushed his way passed him, running out of the shuttle.

“General!”

Holding on to the door jamb, seemingly about to collapse from either exhaustion or pure terror, Ferrar struggled to get his breathing under control.

"The Finalizer detected a communication beacon leaving the city," he stated, wrestling the words out. "Lieutenant Umano informs she is trying to contain it, but we—we received a distress signal. From one of our own. A BB unit in the dock."

Seeing Hux's eyebrows raise in query, Ferrar swallowed. His eyes were the size of nuts.

“It reports the Jedi from Starkiller is on site!”

Chapter End Notes

One more chapter is down and some things never change - like Hux and Kylo trading pleasantries.

Next chapter lets get back to Rey :) 

Notes: the Imperialis was Admiral Sloane's command ship. Fathiers are the horse like animals that appeared in TLJ.
The droid crashed violently into the wall, sparks flying out of its badly dented main body as it fell to the floor, the sirens it had activated blasting all over the dock.

Relying on the consoles behind her for support, the hand she had used to Force blast the intruder still raised, Rey stared at the piece holding the droid’s optic as it rolled across the floor, the now destroyed black unit’s resemblance to BB8 leaving her stomach twisting with horror as the red gleam of the single optic faded to black.

*I didn’t mean to—*  
The door jumped. Glancing at the consoles, the frequency readings spiking telling her they remained operational despite the deteriorating situation, Rey made a gesture to pick the droid’s top piece, trying to find a way out of the chamber as she did so. The badly planned out action sent her stumbling down that same instant, pain overwhelming her senses in such a way that she fell to the floor.

Hissing, struggling to so much as get back on her knees and elbows, Rey clenched her teeth, the group of presences on the other side of the door and their unrelenting attack against it making her look from the droid’s processing piece to the walls.

There had to be a way out of here. A maintenance hatch or service corridor or *anything at all* that she could use to escape. There was no way she could have been caught so completely by surprise if it wasn’t for something like that. She had to find it. She had to—

*Get up!*  
Rey forced herself to her feet. Limping across the chamber whilst hiding the droid’s top piece inside the chest protection of the piloting uniform she had stolen, she covered her face with the black helmet, her frantic search leading her inside a chamber under the consoles. A maintenance lift, she understood as it dropped, the soldiers’ voices following her down.

“The Control Center’s door is blocked, Sir. All Order personnel absent but accounted for. Still no visual confirmation of the Jedi’s—”

Rey took a steadying breath, the words losing their meaning the further down she got and having all but disappeared when, feeling the lift stop with a jolt, she scrambled out of the small space, agony forcing her to drop behind the ammunition boxes piled by one of the launching ramps.

“What do you remember what happened, Ma’am?”

The question rose from her memory like a ghost, a memory for which Rey, fighting to find her strength and join the pilots nervously staring towards the uppermost floor, had the same answer to now as when she had first been faced with it.
No.

She had no memory of how she had gotten this injured. Her last recollection being that of Essen’s shock at looking at her face, his changing features morphing into that of a man she felt with painful certainty had once been her family. Other than that her memory held no answers. She truly wasn’t certain about anything up until she had woken up alone, confused and terrified by a vision of fire and blood she had been so certain to be real, she had ended up lashing against the medical droids rushing to her aid, leaving them so scared most had refused to approach her before a doctor was there for them to cower behind.

“Do you know where you are?”

The world beyond the launching ramp at her side was a blur, darkness cut only by the hue of the engines of the ships being diverted to the site. Even so agony hadn’t so clouded her mind that she lost sight of her present whereabouts or predicament. At the time, however, her answer hadn’t been the one the doctor expected or desired, sudden clarity sending her limping to the Med Bay’s viewport and leaving her shaking in pain as she searched for a way to look beyond the industrial arms, not even remembering she could use the Force to do that.

“Cloud City! Is it safe?”

Pale blue eyes studied her face even now. Struggling to get back up, to grab a TIE and get to the Finalizer before the already blaring sirens sent the troops crashing right into her, Rey didn’t remember the doctor’s eyes to be that cold. She didn’t remember his presence being this dark.

“That is good enough, I suppose,” she heard him mutter seemingly in response to one of the round droids behind him quietly beeping something into his ear. “The city is still airborne, Ma’am. You were shot and evacuated from the frontline yesterday.”

Yesterday.

Shot.

Evacuated.

She didn’t remember any of it. Not a single thing. Instead, her mind jumped from Essen and his changing features, to a burning building and the sound of desperate pleas for help—to their silence as one after the other they fell to the sound of lightsabers. She had been running then, sure that nightmare was real. Rushing down the burning corridors in desperation, she had tried to get to those begging for help before they fell and yet she should have know, she should have know the instant she found him— her friend, the young man she remembered meeting by the lake—standing over the carnage, an elderly woman lying dead at his feet, that it had been one of her visions, a memory that didn’t belong to her.

“Why would you–?”

He had turned to flee before she could finish her question. But, in truth, she hadn’t wanted him to answer. She wasn’t sure she wished to understand what she had been shown or who her old friend was. Not anymore. For once, she was grateful that her mind was so filled with fog from the failing painkillers that she could not reach the answer she knew she already possessed. That, while she stood here trying not to succumb to the pain, a litany of “You have to get out of here. You have to get to a TIE. Get up!” going through her mind, most of her had became stuck on this deep desire she had the cloak he had given her with her now, that she hadn’t left it safely stashed under the bed on the Finalizer’s Med Bay, that having it now would made her feel safer.
A penetrating buzz went through the hive-like structure around her. Back pressing against the ammunition boxes, Rey opened her eyes to a dock now painted red by the rotating lights over the launching ramps. Her horror at seeing the doors giving access to Bespin’s sky close shut was nothing, however, to that bursting from her chest when a blue hologram appeared all over the walkways. The depicted man’s voice was so embedded with scorn it had left it barely recognizable.

“This is General Hux of the Star Destroyer *Finalizer.*”

*Oh no—*

“There is a security breach at your location.”

Rey scrambled from behind the ammunition boxes, marching alongside the pilots and soldiers and then passed them as they stopped, congregating around the General’s many holograms.

“One of the criminals responsible for Starkiller’s destruction is reported to be on site.”

There was only one way out of here now: the blaster door giving access to the dock’s connection arms and the city.

“All personnel on site is to surrender their head gear and submit to identification.”

She had to get there.

“This order is to take effect immediately.”

It was enough that she did.

“Standby for reinforcements.”

If she was able to get to Cloud City for sure she could make up some reason for Isahaine Ren to be on the ground. In fact, considering this disaster she had but to point the finger at—

“Stop!”

She had felt the order before she heard it. Left hand closed over the stairway railing, Rey could sense the soldiers breaking away from the closest of the groups surrounding the now fading holograms. There were seven of them, all men, all stormtroopers, their blasters raised. For all their aggression, however, they were about as terrified as she felt.

“Pilot!”

*How did they even—?!*

“Remove your—!”

Rey didn’t wait to find out what would happen the moment she refused to do so. She didn’t allow herself to think. Instead, she turned, hand raised and Force blasted the group away from her. She was running before they hit the floor, up and up the spiral staircases, the soldiers’ shouts alerting their colleagues on different floors to her position.

Trying to leap two steps at the time, Rey found herself clenching her teeth. She wouldn’t be able to keep this pace up. The group of soldiers on the ground floor opening fire and forcing her to pull the lightsaber out to defend herself, were all the more proof of that. Even using her left arm sent agony
rippling down her back and as for defending herself—

A red energy trail sank into the metal stairs next to her head, the saber having falled to hit it by several inches.

She had thought this would be easy. Ren had always made this look easy! Spinning his saber to intercept shots like it was nothing! But this was anything but easy and never before had she missed her staff half as much as she did now. She was better and far more experienced with it. More importantly still, she hated not being able to control the damage she dealt!

“Don’t be stupid, girl.”

The words were little but a whisper, a call for her to fight made on a stranger’s voice and to which her mind responded, the squad rapidly moving to block her from reaching the next flight of stairs turning into a target.

“Finish them!”

The saber roared, cutting through the arm plate of the first of the soldiers and failing to stab the one right next to him only because a third attacker appeared from behind her, rushing up the stairs. Pain making her stumble when she tried to elbow the soldier’s neck, Rey spinned, saber twirling to strike, only to end eye to eye with a freckled face she had never seen and a presence she did know.

Tarkin’s squad lead pilot.

She lend me a toolbox.

Rey pulled away, breaking the strike mid way and ending up cutting the pilot’s pistol in half rather than running the blue blade through her arm. A low explosion followed, the Force sending the Order’s pilot crashing down the stairs and straight into her gunner’s legs, the infantry blaster he had already raised to shot Rey with being sent to the floor alongside the pair. Dropping the same hand with which she held the lightsaber, Rey was running again, that last bit of Force yielding having so depleted her she had to use her arm as leverage to get up the stairs.

I am not that far, come on!

The dock seemed to be getting bigger despite the assurances she gave herself, her target growing more distant instead of the opposite. The top floor she had traversed not that long ago to access the control center growing in extension with each step. To make matters worse, the soldiers were now everywhere, running up the spiral staircases, out of the control room, their blasters raised.

Using the Force to grab hold of a large metallic bench, Rey sent it crashing against one of the groups, sending them tumbling to the floor.

“They are trying to kill you, foolish girl.”

A shot from a second group grazed her by inches, a second far better aimed one being, by sheer luck, intercepted by the saber. Yet, despite that, despite shivering and panting and being vastly outnumbered, there was nothing in this entire dock, in this entire city, that terrified her as much as that voice and the way it pulled at something inside her. Something that wished to obey.

“Show them no mercy.”

Shut up!
It felt like she would never reach the blaster door. She was punching and kicking and using the Force in every single way she could conceive and even so it felt like she would never get there, that exhaustion or pain or something else would catch up to her before she did.

The soldiers under the bench released themselves from the piece of metal, one of them, an officer with a white shoulder blade, shouting something to his colleagues as they tried to reach for the weapons they had lost in the collision. That group, however, was the least of her concerns when every single stormtrooper on the top floor seemed to have heard the man’s orders, most of them stopping so that a group rapidly replacing their blasters for Z6 batons could pursue her.

Again reaching for the bench, Rey swiped it across the top floor robbing the legs from beneath the soldiers as she kept going, the ones actually managing to jump over the piece of metal and follow her, making her silently curse herself, her extremely flawed plan, Cloud City and the First Order for landing her on this and Kylo Ren for—

The dock jolted, an explosion outside forcing Rey to glance to the ground floor where Ren’s shuttle still stood just as the unmistakable shriek of the TIEs went around the structure and her stomach lurched.

Anger offered her the strength she needed to keep going, the last of the soldiers being removed from her path by the same gesture that forced the blaster door to open and then snap shut behind her.

Now on the disabled dock she had entered just the day before, Rey collapsed against the door, the cold wind rushing up the gap between the dock and the city making her shiver and look down, towards the forest of connection arms keeping the dock anchored to Cloud City and then passed then, to the base of the structure, where she could see flames.

The antenas.

They had taken out the antenas.

Punching the ground in frustration, Rey began to rise—the moment she got to her feet, however, she discovered pain must, at some point, have robbed her from the world for she was already running, a strange orange lightsaber biting into her right hand as she opened a path through a burning building, screams coming from all around her.

No. Not this. This isn’t real. Wake up!

And yet, when she forced her eyes open, the flames, the building, they were all still there. Creeping at the edge of her vision, threatening to consume the darkened dock even has the sound of bending and cutting rose from behind the locked door behind her.

Trying to shake the images away, Rey limped passed the connection arm, thoughts getting more desperate the clearer the flames got.

This isn’t real.

She had to shake it off. If she wasn’t to be allowed her strength, she needed her wits. She needed to be able to think!

Please!

It felt like shouting to the wind. Her thoughts immediately drowned by the roar of flames, the pleas rising in volume until dread and panic at her utter inability to do anything for those begging for help were the only things she could feel.
She had seen this place before. Before she had woken up at the Finalizer, this was where she had seen. This building. She had ran through this inferno, trying to help—being met with failure at every step.

*He was here too.*

And, even if she wasn’t certain that was a good thing anymore, that was the thing she chose to focus on. *Him,* rather than the sound of lightsabers and the Force roaring as one after the other the presences were extinguished. *Her friend,* rather than this thing that seemed to be growing and festering from the despair around her.

Following down the same path Lando Calrissian had lead her and the Order’s troops down, marching passed the blocked paths and derelict elevator shafts, Rey soldiered on, attention the furthest she could from the wrecked and burning wood her mind was filling Cloud City with. She refused to acknowledge what laid under all that, her eyes straining to see passed the beams and the destruction as she got rid of the pilot’s helmet and the uniform that went with it, one of Isahaine’s black trousers and the upper garments Leia had offered her coming into view. Of the Order’s uniform she kept only the chest protection, glancing inside to find the top piece of the BB unit safely tucked over Isahaine’s mostly ruined jacket.

*It will do. It has to.*

Even that was part of the struggle to keep herself from falling to the vision threatening to swallow all of her senses. It was getting worse by the minute. She could barely see Cloud City's corridors now and what she saw was enough to turn her stomach.

*Not real!*

But if at some point this had been real, if at one point the dread and horror consuming her had belonged to someone—and she felt with horrible certainty that it had, that she was reliving someone’s feelings—what had been witnessed had been nothing short of a massacre. There were corpses everywhere. The walls bared the marks of still incandescent lightsabers marks. And the silence—

Rey forced one of the city’s blaster doors open, the lightsaber sounds coming from inside ceasing just as she was faced with the scene inside.

She had found *him.* Her friend. The boy she remembered meeting by a lake. And the blood orange saber he yielded had just ripped the saber out of the hands of the woman facing against him, sinking into her chest. Only when she fell, body hitting the floor, did Rey notice what laid at his feet.

*No. This couldn’t have been...*

“Rey!”

The calling forced her to look beyond the walls of the burning chamber and towards the man bursting inside the memory, running towards her.

“*They are on you! You have to get away from here! Come!*”

It was her chance to flee, to follow whoever this was and disappear and yet she found herself rotted to the ground, staring, mortified, towards this new arrival as he stepped into her fading friend, to take his place amidst the fire and the dread and her memories of a sunny garden and a laughing boy, laughing, the columns of light falling through the leafs lacing him in both light and shadow.

"You're really mean! People won't like you if you do that!" Rey heard herself saying, her accusatory
tone turning into curiosity. "What's your name?"

She remembered it now.

As she did Ren's angry words, when Han Solo had dared to use it.

"Your son is dead. He was young and foolish like his father, so I killed him."

Rey was shaking her head, not noticing the tears streaming down her face, a deep sense of betrayal crushing her heart, her anger blinding her to Ren's concern, to the panic in his voice as the soldiers that had been following her stopped at the entrance, blasters raised.

"Drop your weapons!"

His voice echoed in the high ceiling, not that Rey was listening.

She had pulled out her saber.

She was connecting it.

She attacked before she could become aware of the dark presence strangling her mind.

Chapter End Notes

Here we are again, dear readers, and Snoke has finally left the sidelines. Of course, he couldn't have given Rey that piece of information about her old friend being Ben at a worse possible time.

Hope you liked this one! And now off to write the next one, which will be a Multi-POV if all goes well :)

See you next time! - W
Rey's Folly

Chapter by Windcage

The Strategist

“The Jedi has succeeded in exiting the site, Sir,” an officer stated, right arm raised in salute as Hux marched down the shuttle’s access ramp, a wave of white clad soldiers following in on his footsteps. “Several of our troops are in pursuit. It shall not take long before she is captured.”

The words registered on the back of his mind, tugging on Hux’s rising impatience as they rose to the forefront of his thoughts. Forcing himself to keep his irritation at being fed information he was already in possession of carefully in check, Hux gave the officer a curt nod.

“Can you confirm that this was the same Jedi from Starkiller, Colonel—?”

“Romodi, Sir,” the officer clarified. “The intruder was disguised as one of our own. She had somehow managed to steal a pilot’s uniform, for that reason—”

Thunder cut through the exchange with an earsplitting roar, light scarring the clouds making most everyone inside the dock glance towards the top hatch in time to see the gentle rain that had been beating down Cloud City turn into a violent downpour and the gale following in its wake toss the shuttle hovering just outside against the dock’s entryway.

“Bring it in!” Romodi barked to his com, face palling as the vessel’s starboard side was again thrown against the dock and he started feverishly signaling the pilot. “Take it to the ground floor!”

Water streamed down the shuttle’s black fuselage, cascading off it as the vessel dropped through the column of rain, clearing floor after floor, its huge wings folding, the Order’s symbol embellishing them being cut in half as the vessel moved to land right opposite Kylo Ren’s entirely black shuttle.

“Close the hatch!”

Curved blades were released from their sockets, rotating as they went to cover the entryway. Standing next to the platform’s railing, seemingly indifferent to the rain hitting both his jacket and face, Hux watched as they shut, the wistfulness with which he had faced the storm—and that so contrasted with the unease of the troops around him—only abandoning his eyes when he turned on his heels, cold and demanding, to catch Romodi so completely off guard that for a glaring moment the Colonel could neither hide his distaste for the much younger officer he was forced to report to, nor recall what exactly it was they had been discussing.

Expression hardening further, Hux stepped closer to him.

“This Jedi you let escape, Colonel,” he stated, his perfectly collected tone a threat on itself. “She was either the Force Sensitive present on Starkiller during the base’s collapse or a Knight masquerading as her. Which was it?”

Romodi stood silent for a moment, visibly struggling to get his composure back and ending up
speaking in such a low voice his words seemed to be forced out with irons.

“She was the Jedi, Sir. Not a Knight,” he guaranteed. “As it was proven by her lack of knowledge of proper protocol and the way she tried to make use of the distraction provided by your appearance to evade the dock.”

Romodi’s distaste was almost palpable now. That, however, didn’t seem to affect his capacity to give credit where it was due—

“She acted just like you predicted she would, General.”

—even if he sounded like he was praising a child for a cleverness he hadn’t judged it capable of. And that left Hux to grit his teeth.

“The Command Center, Colonel?”

Romodi signaled towards the other side of the floor, all but ignoring Hux’s seven men stormtrooper escort as he himself moved to guide him.

“I mean you no disrespect, Sir—”

Oh, but you must certainly do.

“—but the description being circulated throughout the Order’s channels—”

Hux’s expression became such that Romodi seemed to be made suddenly acquainted with his sense of self-preservation. The harm, however, was done. Hands going behind his back as he stepped along the railing, observing the injured soldiers being helped to Med Bay on the lower floors, Hux had gone from irritated to furious.

A weed, he mentally growled, all the while observing Romodi by the corner of his eyes. One more.

And that it downed the tell tale blue uniformed of one attached to the Technology Research and Development Department—the very same department Hux had dedicated most of his military career to—was only not as infuriating as being reminded of the absolute monstrosity being sent to the Order’s positions in Cloud City. He knew far too well what that thrice damned Jedi’s description looked like! In fact, he could find quite a few words to classify it just from the top of his head!

Such as generic!

Which was closely followed by “unhelpful” and something to the lines of—

I am going to bloody murder you, Ren!

—that was long overdue and that lead his mind straight to Captain Peyton and his entirely too patient expression as he went over what Kylo Ren’s highly honed uncooperativeness sense had splattered all over his reports on the Jedi and that someone had made a hell of a good job copying, ad verbum, into her wanted poster.

“I admit I had expected the Commander to be far more eloquent than this,” Hux could still hear his First Officer say, a deep sigh rising through the holographic channel on the shuttle. “He does know, I hope, there is more than one ‘bronze skinned female’?”

Staring murderously at the same information from wherein Peyton had just extracted that shining pearl, Hux had raised one hand, preparing to swipe the offending file off the tactical table.
“Considering this is Ren, Captain, we should probably be grateful that he hasn’t bestowed us all with something to the even more vague lines of ‘a girl’.” He had sneered at that. “It is equally arguable he knows there is more than one of those.”

The rant must have carried deep inside the shuttle despite its quiet tone, for Phasma, still adjusting the white chest protection she was putting on, had stepped out of Hux’s quarters, stopped at his side and stabbed the document with one finger before it could disappear off the table.

“As general as this is,” she had offered, reading the file from over Hux’s shoulder. “The chosen articles do seem to imply Ren knows there is more than one female creature in existence.”

Not even Peyton’s Imperial Navy background had been able to stop his lips from trembling. If that had been due to frustration or to suppress a smile, however, Hux had not been able to tell then and he had far bigger concerns now than to ponder on it—left manning tactical support from inside the still landing shuttle, Ferrar had opened the channel to him.

“The troops have visual on the Jedi, General.”

“How far away is she?”

“Not as far as she wished to be would be my guess, Sir.” The com beeped, making Hux glance at the information appearing on the device’s small display. “She was able to exit the former evacuation routes and enter what I believe is part of a disabled refinery. The Governor’s maps are not clear. Commander Ren is on site.”

Hearing the sound of the droplets skimming through the ceiling hit the protections of the soldiers marching behind him, Hux let out a derisive snort. It had been years since he had last seen that as any sort of tactical advantage.

“Your position, Captain?”

Phasma’s voice was crackling, her words only partially comprehensible when she spoke.

“Still several minutes away, Sir,” she stated. “If the Jedi evades Ren what would be her routes?”

Before Ferrar could answer, Hux had frowned, only vaguely aware of Romodi pointing his attention towards the open access door leading to the city—no doubt the path the Jedi had used to escape—as he went on to answer.

“If she is clever,” he theorized, the group of soldiers he was now marching passed getting to their feet despite their broken armors to salute him. “She will get further underground and access the city’s living quarters. It is by far the shortest route to access enemy territory. Also, it would allow her to camouflage herself amidst the civilians. If she gets herself that far she is as good as lost. It is imperative we trap her at her present position.”

A small click came through the line as Ferrar joined the discussion.

“Should we inform Major Jarnek about the situation, General?”

Footsteps muffled by the drenched floor section he had just entered, Hux was momentarily confused.

“Jarnel?”

“Some of the Major’s teams are right in the path the Jedi will take if she manages to flee, Sir,” Ferrar clarified. “If she chooses to target them like she did the oscillator—”
Hux frowned, stopping next to the broken door to the Control Center.

“Tell Jarnek to evacuate all the teams from that sector. Also, Lieutenant—” Hux leaned to look inside the half destroyed lock mechanism, studying the damage before pressing himself against the door jamb to be able to enter the room. “General Organa targeted the oscillator. From what I have observed this Jedi has hardly the tactical knowledge or ruthlessness necessary to—” He stopped, eyes finding the BB unit lying next to a deep dent on the wall, his words gradually losing their vigor. “—plan something on that scale—”

His right hand remained closed over the door even as his eyes scoured the control center, going over the entire room as he searched and searched for the unit’s top piece, the one which held the memory chip and that would have rendered Ren’s report useless—not that it wasn’t already—and finally coming to rest on the consoles and the frequency readings on its displays.

His stomach hit the floor the same instant.

The beacon—

“Lieutenant Umano.” His chief of communications voice was on the line the very same instant. “Search the frequency channels. Can you find the distress signal?”

Silence followed. One in which he could actually hear her turning the console’s dials. Then, finally—

“It has suffered a severe drop in potency, Sir, otherwise it remains functional.”

Hux clenched his teeth.

‘If’ she is clever, he had said.

No. Not if.

He was back in the dock that very instant, eyes skimming over Romodi as he approached the railing.

“To all technical personnel on site.”

His voice carried despite the lack of technological support, echoing in the damp metal, making every single person and droid present on the different floors raise their attention to him—how bizarre it was to address a hundred or so different faces was something his mind wouldn’t register until much later.

“The distress signal coming from your location is still active. Search every connection box on the dock. Every TIE. Every single short distance radio. Find the source and disable it!”

He turned his back on the dock, moving to enter a lift he had spotted right next to the door to the Control Center while addressing Umano.

“Open a permanent line to the Finalizer, Lieutenant. I want it fully operational and on a support position,” he ordered, the door snapping shut behind his escort. “Captain Phasma, you and your men will return to the barracks.”

On the other side of the line, Phasma didn’t show any signs of even slowing down, her troops’ footsteps echoing rather clearly on the line.

“Captain,” Hux barked. It got him an answer.

“I believe Ren needs support in dealing with this Jedi, Sir.”
“So you have told me.”

“You agreed.”

Seeing the numbers rapidly go down on the lift’s display, he was starting to wish he hadn’t.

“There has been a change of plans, Captain,” he stated. “We have destroyed the dock’s antennas, but failed to disable the distress signal. There is a strong possibility that whatever allies this Jedi tried to contact will come to her aid. I need you leading the infantry.”

“We can’t afford to lose Ren, General.”

“In that we disagree. Break the chase.”

Phasma’s voice dropped further. Still she was not stopping.

“We are dangerously understaffed,” she reminded him. “The Finalizer has suffered heavy damage. Our resources are less than ideal. And we not only have rogue Knights, but now a Jedi moving against us. If we lose Ren—”

She didn’t proceed. She didn’t need to. Forcing his way passed the troops, Hux was all but cursing under his breath.

“A reminder you are wearing a standard issued armor,” he said through the com, stepping out of the lift and marching towards the shuttle. “Don’t expect the same level of protection or damage absorption you would get from your own.”

“Acknowledged, Sir. Target on sight.”

Barging inside the tactical position on the shuttle’s private quarters to find Ferrar standing next to the round viewport—the way he pressed his com against his ear and chewed his lips telling that he was having difficulty reaching Jarnek—Hux gave the officer an acknowledgment nod, going to stand in front of the tactical table.

“Infantry feed. ZT-8320. Connect to holographic channel.”

The blueprints on the tactical table collapsed, filling with the fed from Phasma’s helmet just in time for him to see her adjusting the blaster’s scoop. Squinting, trying to make sense of the chimney like chamber expanding both over and under her position and the walkways and scaffolding inside, Hux finally put his hands behind his back, recognition making him frown.

“Captain, you are inside one of the city’s mineshafts,” he informed and Phasma looked down the chasm under the rocking walkway where she stood, following the noise of lightsabers to a permanent looking platform several meters under her feet. Watching the two figures standing there, their weapons glare burning the image as they meet in battle, Hux started absentmindedly pinching his gloves. “There are walkways both over and under your position. Spread the troops, have them target the Jedi from up above.”

On the much lower platform, said Jedi kicked her far larger adversary right on the ribs, forcing Ren to grab hold of the railing not to crash to the floor.

“Patch me through to Ren, Lieutenant.”

Returning to his side, Ferrar was already shaking his head.
“He doesn’t have his tracker on him, Sir,” he informed, right as Ren regained his balance and evaded the Jedi’s blade by inches. “Both his signal and com are still at the barracks.”

Hux was not even surprised.

“Well then, any friendly fire incidents are on his head. Captain, the—”

He fell silent, attention on the battle. There was not nearly enough detail in the image to make much sense of anything at this distance and the reddish blur of the helmet’s night vision only made it worse. Even so, there was something deeply unnatural in the way Ren was looking up in the midst of defending himself, glancing towards the troops he should already know were there. Whatever had gotten into his head, it did beg the question—

*Why?*

The answer came so quick, it felt to Hux like he had suddenly gained the ability to read the other man’s damned mind.

“Hostile on site.”

Phasma stopped right in the middle of issuing the troops their orders, searching the red mass around her.

“Behind you, Captain. Give me a visual.”

Her eyes flew over the site where Ren had just become locked in a struggle with the Jedi, going passed the scaffolds suspended around her and the soldiers making their way up. She had turned, going to survey the very same walkway she herself stood on, the shadows around it and—

There was *someone*. There truly was someone. Hux could see a figure marching down the walkway, slowly coming into view.

“Hostile confirmed, Sir.”

Staring at the same individual Phasma was facing, he could hardly move.

This—

This was quite *enough*.

“Captain, gather your men. Get yourself out of there.”

Phasma moved, but not to obey him. Instead, she looked down the deactivated mineshaft, staring at the platform where Ren was still having no success stopping the Jedi’s aggressive advance and then up again, towards the figure now coming to a stop.

From his position in tactical control, Hux stepped closer to the feed, hands grasping the tactical table’s borders, voice as tense as his stance.

“Captain, if Ren elects to exert no control over his Knights, he can deal with the consequences himself.”

Still, it was the same as nothing.

“I’m ordering you to retreat.”
She was raising her blaster.

“Phasma!”

The Stormtrooper

“The channel is now open, Sir,” Lieutenant Umano informed, fingers flying over the dials on her console as Finn stepped inside the Finalizer’s bridge, the organized chaos inside forcing him to open a path through the officers or risk becoming stranded by the entrance. “Contact with all First Order’s positions inside the city has been established. Tracking system online. Scanning all frequencies.”

Until that moment standing besides Umano, one hand closed over the back of her chair, Peyton stepped towards the warship’s viewport, his almost inaudible—

“Acknowledged, Lieutenant.”

—followed by an infusion of authority to his voice and person that made the Captain suddenly stand out on the bridge, his voice bumbling over the mechanical warning calling the crew to their stations and the voices filling the bridge with a loud buzz.


The floor jolted forwards. Forced to grab hold of Mitaka’s arm least he was thrown face first to the floor, Finn tossed an apology in the now mortally pale officer’s direction, running across the bridge’s central platform and skimming to a stop next to Peyton.

“Captain,” he saluted, watching as the Finalizer started clearing the industrial arms. “What happened?”

Grayish blue eyes turned away from the exterior, going to study the helmet covering Finn’s features with a harshness that he hadn’t expected from the soft-spoken, virtually invisible officer that had been standing besides Hux during the briefing.

“What happened?”

Peyton’s glacier tone giving him the certainty that whatever this was it was also something he should already be aware of, Finn joined the Captain as he marched across the central platform, hearing him bark orders at the crew.

“Charge the high-precision cannons and load all solid-projectile based weaponry. All available TIEs are to be launched. Any ships, regardless of affiliation, that try to leave Bespin at this stage are to be shot down on sight!”

Seeing the bridge crew rush to obey his orders—Mitaka’s fingers in particular, flying over his console—Finn again turned to Peyton.

“I’m in need of some clarification, Captain.”

Peyton didn’t seem all the more pleased with this particular choice of words. Even so, turning his back on the bridge, eyes scanning the gigantic red planet in front of them, he answered.
“We intercepted a transmission leaving the city. What the Lieutenant—” He gave Umano a respectful nod. “—called a beacon. Some kind of primitive distress signal.”

“This coming from one of the enemy positions,” Finn concluded, attention on the industrial arms going by the warship.

Giving him a penetrating look through the ship’s viewport, Peyton dropped his voice.

“The signal came from one of our own positions, Sir,” he informed and Finn almost cracked his neck turning his head to him. “The dock. We have visual confirmation that the same Jedi that was present in Starkiller was on site.”

There was no way in the freaking galaxy, he could have heard that right! There was no way Rey would—!

“This distress signal—” Finn found himself saying, a horrific hypothesis making his eyes search the shroud of stars. “Who was the receiver?”

The question was one born out of pure dread and despite his controlled tone some of it must have shown for Umano turned on her chair, fingers still pressing the auricular to her right ear.

“It’s a beacon, Sir. It works by running over the frequencies, not by focusing on one.”

Somehow that sounded even worse than anything Finn’s brain could have come up with.

“Anyone can receive it?”

“Providing they are listening,” Umano conceded. “It is a fallible system. Dangerous only if it isn’t rapidly snuffed out. At this point and with the loss of potency, the signal won’t be travelling very far.”

“Considering this Jedi known allegiances, however,” Peyton stepped in, his thoughts clearly more in line with Finn’s own fears than Umano’s serene view of the situation. “I will harbor a guess she was trying to contact the Resistance.”

Turning back to her workstation, Umano glanced at him.

“General Hux has expressed doubts that the group active in this city is in any way affiliated with Leia Organa’s organization, Sir. Their methods—”

“Captain.”

Both Finn and Peyton turned, attention falling on an officer that had been forcibly opening a path through his colleagues to get to them.

“The Knight we had hidden on board, Sir—the one called Veshay—she seems to have gotten herself to the ground.” Peyton’s expression hardened further. “She has engaged the troops.”

“Do we have visual?”

The feed came to life over the bridge’s tactical table. Approaching it side by side with Peyton, trying to make sense of the red mass he was being show, Finn actually was able to make out Rey for the briefest of moments. Her saber was cutting through the air, forcing her far taller adversary to duck out of its path. Then, just as she advanced, something happened and static filled the transmission, the nonsensical sequence of images that followed coming to a violent stop when the trooper on the other
side hit the ground, rolled and—a giant chasm coming into view—extended one arm to grab hold of the railing, legs going over the platform as a shout of—

“Open fire!”

—rose through the speakers in a familiar and commanding female voice.

A wave of energy trails came from up above in response, raining around her position as Phasma struggled to get back on the platform and a black clad figure appeared at the corner of the transmission, whirling her weapon to deflect the shots as the Captain charged her way.

“Is she out of her mind?”

Peyton’s horror filled whisper released Finn of his own shocked state, allowing for the loud buzz inside the bridge and the crew around him to come back into focus just as Phasma again looked down, towards the platform where Rey had just managed to send Ren to the ground and was now grabbing her shoulder, visibly in pain.

Taking advantage of the helmet’s anonymity to let his dread ran freely, Finn turned to grab Peyton’s arm, not really caring to understand what the hell had given rise to any of this.

“Captain, I don’t care how you accomplish it,” he stated and for a moment, short as it was, he swore he saw some form of respect on the older officer’s eyes. “Get me down there.”

The Captain

Phasma stumbled backwards, breathing ragged, the Force blast that had just sank into her stomach making her fall to her knees and elbows just as a second blast ripped through the scaffolding up above, forcing her soldiers to grab on to the railings least they were thrown down the mineshaft.

“Regroup!”

The order came out half strangled, her heart pounding at her ears making Phasma’s head throb mercilessly.

“Surround her!”

Three soldiers jumped onto the walkway where Phasma and Veshay stood, one of them landing almost directly on top of the Knight, Z6 roaring, only to be grabbed by the neck and violently shoved to the floor. The impact made his weapon ricochet off the platform and fall inside the chasm, leaving his two colleagues to join forces and attack.

Clenching her teeth, attention dropping to the place, deep below her, where Kylo Ren was still head’s deep into trying to turn his duel with the Jedi in his favor, Phasma forced herself to join her own battle, every instant, every moment, she could spare used to feverishly search the red-tinged mass of rocking walkways around her.

Where is it?

Veshay’s weapon grazed her right leg, cracking the white protection only to sink into the laced metal of the walkway when Phasma swiftly moved away. Seeing her pull on the weapon’s hilt only for it to remain stuck in place, Phasma took her chances, pulling a combat knife off her belt and launching
herself at the Knight. She hadn’t given more than two steps before both herself and the three soldiers were forced to jump to the walkway directly below the one where they stood, the grid being ripped from under their feet and tossed to their heads only missing them by pure chance.

“This isn’t working, Captain!” the only officer of the group shouted, both him and his subordinates running to close ranks next to her. “She—!”

The scaffold rocked violently as Veshay too jumped down, barreling down on them with such ferocity, Phasma found herself falling back with the rest of the group, all the while shouting into her com.

“Open fire! All units open fire!”

A wave of blaster shots rained from up above, hitting the metallic walkways and forcing Veshay to whirl the whip over her head to defend herself as all four of them fled.

“She is toying with us, Captain!” the same officer pointed out, panting. “She isn’t tiring!”

*She has to tire!*

“Take the side path!” Phasma ordered, shoving him that way. “Get her from behind!”

One of the soldiers tossed his Z6 her way as he jumped over the gap between the two platforms. Connecting it, hearing the electrified vanes spring to life, Phasma was nevertheless still looking around, silently cursing as she made it spin in her hands.

She had lost both her blaster and spear by now. The first discarded at the start of the confrontation, deemed a burden in what promised and had proven to be a mostly physical confrontation; the second lost after she had been thrown off a walkway some meters above, the pain that had resulted from that fall not so crippling as it was to find her weapon gone.

*It has to be somewhere!*

But Veshay was already on her and Phasma was forced to dance away from her blows. The Z6 cut through the air, aiming for Veshay’s ribs and ending up crashing into a large toolbox when the Knight jumped out of the way, her weapon twisting as if of its own accord to whip Phasma across the chest and shove her into the same toolbox the Z6 had hit.

The platform rocked, the impact making it swing and then crash into the ones connected to it. The violent impact made the toolbox fall to its side, throwing tools everywhere before it began to slide across the floor and plummeted inside the chasm. Both holding for dear life—both following the toolbox as it ricocheted back and forth on the mineshaft—the two women took a moment to assess each other before again lurching forward.

Their weapons met. Veshay’s whip somehow, *someway*, having turned into a spear and going on to block every single of Z6’s strikes up until Phasma’s soldiers appeared behind her, and almost as if of its own volition it turned flexible again, diving to deflect a second Z6.

Stuck between two adversaries, for the first time seeming to be at a disadvantage, Veshay visibly tensed, dancing away from the blows, diving under them, biding her time until the fatigue she seemed to be immune to caught to her adversaries—until they made a mistake. And she hadn’t to wait long.

Breathing ragged, her Z6 moving in an up-down ark that finished with the electrical vanes violently hitting the floor, Phasma could see that moment as clearly as Veshay did. It happened right there.
When, exhaustion catching up with her, she was unable to pull the weapon up fast enough and Veshay broke into her defenses, dropping and lurching, to sink her shoulder right into Phasma’s already sore ribs.

She crashed to the floor, hitting it with a pained gasp, the Z6 flying off her hands and off the platform. Hugging her ribs, vision swimming, she nevertheless searched the mineshaft, a mirthless laugh breaking through her lips when she saw her hopes shattered by the gleam of the two lightsabers deep below her.

*This is not good.*

A scream rose from behind her. Struggling to her feet, eyes finding the soldier who had been engaged with Veshay hanging from the walkway and the remaining two fighting to hoist him back to the platform, Phasma found herself not only alone but unarmed, watching as Veshay twisted her weapon and sent it straight for her.

A rush of panic went up her spine, followed by a horrible moment when she didn’t even know what to do and that left her with only one choice as how to defend herself.

She raised her left arm.

The blade hit it the same moment, cracking the white protection plate like it was nothing and sinking into the limb below.

The exclamation of horror that echoed in chamber, however, hadn’t come from Phasma. She had felt no pain. No blood was drawn. *She* was already twisting her arm, grabbing hold of the weapon impaling it, the group of visibly shocked soldiers from where the scream had risen—and that were now facing Veshay’s unprotected back—making her roar with fury.

“What the hell are you—?!?”

The advantage was lost. Veshay had closed her left hand around the weapons blade, sending lightning rushing down it. It would have amounted to nothing if this were Phasma’s own armor, with her present one, however, the electricity surged up her arm, sending her crashing against the railing with a cry of pain and then through it as it broke under her.

For a moment that felt like an eternity, she fell, seeing the scaffold where she had been at turn smaller, a terror she hadn’t felt since childhood grabbing at her heart. Then, as suddenly as it had started, it all came to a stop. Her back crashed against something solid, the impact so violent it left her gasping for air. Her strength failing completely did not, however, so disorient her that she did not turn on her stomach, fingers desperately sinking into the laced metal, anchoring her to safety just as she spotted her spear and Veshay landed right between them, something akin to a huge hand immediately pinning Phasma against the floor.

“This has been *pleasant*, Captain,” she stated, the air trembling and shivering under her voice. “But it is quite enough. You will take your troops and *retreat*.”

Veshay raised one hand, calling the whip that was still impaling Phasma’s arm to her, before turning to leave.

“You will obey.”

The words rang on her head. There was nothing she wished more than to listen. To do what she been raised to do and—
Phasma clenched her teeth, right hand falling on the blaster pistol hidden on the utility belt. Pulling it
on the Knight, she fired, forcing Veshay to dance away from the red energy trails as her weapon
coiled and twisted, rushing for Phasma and crashing into the pistol just as she tried to force her body
to move, to reach for the spear, to—

Her breathing caught on her throat. The same invisible hand from before—the Force, this is the
Force, her increasingly terrified mind suddenly understood—closing all around her, not only pinning
her, but squeezing, crushing.

“This does not concern you, Captain,” Veshay reiterated and the fog again burst forward, strangling
her mind. “My battle is not with you. Take your troops and retreat.”

She didn’t.

She couldn’t.

The white armor cracked and broke as the Force pressed around it, leaving her gasping for air, but all
she could think about was Starkiller. Starkiller and that wookie and what her fear had caused.

“This stubbornness will take you nowhere, Captain,” Veshay stated, the reluctance in her voice
reflected in the way she hesitated to make the Force close further. “Retreat.”

The chest protection snapped with a sickening crack, she couldn’t breathe and yet, through the huge
black bolts filling her vision, through her panic, Phasma thought she saw movement on the
scaffolding overhead, the troops rushing down to occupy the lower levels, their weapons raised—

It was not her imagination.

Next moment, a wave of blaster fire forced Veshay to flee and dive and roll away from the vicious
onslaught coming her way. Left to hit the floor, desperately gasping for air, Phasma could see a
second group barge inside the mineshaft, a long tongue of fire blasting towards the Knight just as she
raised her hand towards the upper levels and one of the walkways jumped, one of its cables
snapping, leaving the troops to hang on to the railings and each other as it tilted dangerously.

Her whip again turning into a spear and being used to deflect the shots, Veshay looked around,
visibly trying to find a way out whilst fleeing the flames and the troops, her momentary panic leaving
her blind to a third wave of soldiers—one that was forcing a maintenance hatch open on the level
directly over Phasma and silently making its way inside.

Having managed to drag herself to her spear, fingers feebly closing around it, Phasma watched as,
one by one, troopers carrying Z6s, soldiers in white cloaks and normal infantrymen squeezed
themselves through the small hole, the deluge only stopping when a pale man dressed in black and
with General’s stripes on his sleeve jumped nimbly onto the platform, surveying his surroundings.

Hux—

She was in far too much pain to be able to recall which of the two this one was supposed to be and
her mind seemed to be losing its grip on reality completely, not even allowing her to work out if this
was Armitage or Brendol Hux as it slipped in and out of consciousness, leaving her with only
fragments of clarity as the world lost its contours.

One moment, she saw Veshay blast through the trooper firing the flamethrower against her, the
smallest of missteps forcing her to rip the cloak of her back as it exploded in flames.

Then, the three soldiers that had been fighting at Phasma’s side were hovering over her.
The last time she opened her eyes, she was being dragged passed a line of flametroopers and the man standing right behind them.

“We have the Knight surrounded, Sir,” a trooper downing a red shoulder blade stated, voice tense, the Z6 on his hand pointing him as being Sergeant ‘Fisher’, Cloud City’s garrison commander. “All troops ready to evacuate the site at your command.”

“No yet, Sergeant,” the officer with the General’s stripes stated, pensively, and, for the briefest of seconds their eyes met—Phasma’s and this man’s whose identity she still couldn’t quite grasp. “Keep up the pressure; make sure she doesn’t get away.”

A loud moan echoed down the mineshaft just as he finished speaking. Then a snapping sound. All heads turned up just in time to see the last of the cables holding the scaffold Veshay had previously blasted with the Force, break. Screams filled the mineshaft as the troops tried to flee its path and it came crashing down, one extremity, then the other, hitting the platforms below, snapping them off their cables as the entire structure started shivering and rocking and coming down.

At her side, the General leading the troops had gone pale.

“Retreat!” his voice ordered, struggling to be heard over cracking and crashing and groaning. “All troops retreat!”

Seeing the soldiers that had been attacking her flee, Veshay pulled the mask off her face, a single glance upwards making her look around, searching for a way out before the scaffolding coming loose over all of them could take her down with it. She had not taken a step towards her chosen escape route when one of the falling platforms ripped right through her path, forcing her to jump out of the way, to turn, to flee, lightning wrapping around her left hand like a glove as she made her way towards—towards them.

We are not getting out.

Even Phasma’s panic felt numb. Seeing the troops jumping inside the small hatch from where they had came or being pulled to the other side by those already there, Phasma glanced towards the General at her side, the rocking structure having sent him to his knees.

Fire, not ash, her mind offered her dazedly—stupidly—while glancing at his hair, head lulling back and forth. This was the Commandant. This was—Armitage.

It was the only thing that mattered. The platform was rocking menacingly, Bespin’s sky and certain death lay just beneath. Yet, she fought to get to him, struggling against the darkness threatening to swallow her mind, against the soldiers now dragging her to the hatch, against herself to grab Hux’s wrist, to pull him with her, to get him to safety.

Her fingers could do little more than brush the tip of his, falling away as, using the railings as leverage, he got back to his feet and raised the com, attention on the ranks of flametroopers blasting their weapons to keep the charging Veshay at bay, his expression as vicious as his voice was calm.

“Captain Peyton, fire a deep-penetration mark to my present position.”

Phasma didn’t need to see the expression on the Knight’s alien face to know it had filled with disdain, that she didn’t judge him capable of making good on that threat.

Darkness overtaking her senses just as she was hoisted inside the hatch, Phasma would remember thinking the troops had a far better understanding of their commander than she expected—as she would that unwelcome pang of pity for Veshay.
The Enforcer

First there was a whistle, hushed, almost inaudible, easily lost amidst the roar of the lightsabers and the noises of crashing and snapping and screaming coming from up above. Then, a distant explosion rocked the area, its noise not as clear as that of grinding that seemed to be growing closer.

Evading the blue saber’s strikes, his ribs screaming as he moved to block one of the blows, Kylo glanced up just in time to see a large cylindrical device cut its way inside the mineshaft, the manner in which the working drills on its conic shaped head firmly lodged it to the wall section mid way between the scaffolds and his position making his stomach sink through the floor.

“Run—”

His voice was but a whisper, a horror filled one, and Rey’s blue saber again flew at him.

“Rey!”

The world exploded, the air itself seeming to be set aflame and ripped from his lungs before a wave of scorching heat hit him like a hammer and Kylo was forced to grab hold of the railing, the sounds of whining and grunting as flames exploded from the walls, making him look up the mineshaft, towards the crumbling platforms, where he could still sense not only the troops but also Hux.

Are you bloody trying to kill everyone?!

The moment an energy trail dived inside the mineshaft, crashing into the wall just as the troops trying to keep Veshay inside blasted their flamethrowers and Rey kicked her way from under the pieces of broken scaffolding that had crashed to the platform, he had his answer.

No, not everyone.

Letting go of the railing, seeing Rey press the top of her shirt pressed against her mouth as more and more energy trails cut their way inside, Kylo ran to her, bent on dragging her out. Rey’s confusion at the chaos around her, however, disappeared the moment she saw him and the blue saber sprang back into life.

There was barely any time to defend himself and the attack caught him so completely by surprise that the blue blade actually grazed his arm, ripping through the black sleeve of the fleet uniform he was downing and cutting a burning trail through his skin before he was able to evade it.

His pained grunt being accompanied by an almost simultaneous exclamation of pain from Rey, called Kylo’s attention to Rey. She was staring at her own arm, incredulity written all over her face.

“What in the Force’s name—?!”

That had been her voice, her question, inside his head, and the instant she understood he had heard it, she was moving on him, fury written all over her face.

“What the hell did you do?!”

The blue blade crashed into Kylo’s saber just as he raised it to protect himself, then forced him to
strike downwards, to actually sink the saber’s tip through the floor, to be able to intercept the blow aimed for his right leg. Evading the following kick to his face, Kylo dropped low, dancing away from the blows, saber roaring as it accompanied his movement and then twirling as he got back to his full height, his following strike so strong it actually broke through Rey’s defenses. Seeing an opportunity, Kylo twisted his saber, hilt going for her arm, moving to disarm.

He never got a chance to reach her, though. A new energy trail ripping through the mineshaft and rocking the structure forced him to grab the railing just as Rey dived, fleeing the strike, the agony going up her back—one he too could feel—so encumbering her movements, she actually stumbled to the floor, crashing over the debris scattered around, dread at again finding herself at a disadvantage, making her reach through to the Force to grab anything that could be used against him and ending up sending a large piece of broken metal directly to Kylo’s head.

Cutting a red trail through the metal, Kylo found Rey standing on the other side, saber raised to cut through the air in a swiping movement that Kylo intercepted easily and that she then twisted to make the saber stab at him.

Throwing his saber up, Kylo made the blue blade slide until it was practically stuck to the cross-shaped hilt, before pushing and pulling and forcing both their weapons and eyes to lock.

“Hux is going to burn down this place!” he tried to reason with her. “We have to get out!”

Trails of tears were still visible on Rey’s face, even if the heat from the cannons energy trails or her own anger had long dried them.

“Do you hate me to the point of dying here?!"

Rey tried to kick his legs, his effort to evade the blow actually allowing her to get away from him and again reach for the debris, forcing Kylo to cut through them, before she was again at his throat.

Nothing changed no matter how much he tried. They were still circling around each other. Weapons meeting. Red and blue cutting the air time and time again as the energy trails from the cannons ripped through the mineshaft and heat waves crashed on them.

They were at a standstill. Evenly matched. Locked in this circle of push and pull as the world crumbled around them. And there was no escape. No way out.

“I’m trying to help you!”

Rey closed both hands around the hilt of her saber, making it cut through the air on a downwards ark before, seeing as Kylo deflected it, she again pulled it up. Despite her fury, the next blow had hardly any strength behind it and the instant Kylo stepped out of the way, strength seemed to betray Rey all together, leaving the blue blade to cut through the railings, her complete inability to pull the saber back up leaving her completely unprotected.

It was his chance. His only chance. And was this anybody else, he would have struck to kill or used the Force to strangle his adversary’s mind. He would have been victorious. And yet, at this point, he couldn’t even think to disarm her. Instead, he reached out to try and grab her hand, attention already on the exit, ash raining over them both.

“Come on.”

He had no one to blame but himself for what happened next.

“Rey!”
Her name died on his lips, replaced by a strangled intake of breathe when, without him even noticing how, her feet connected with the still healing wound the bowcaster had left on him and pain sent him crashing to the floor, blood trickling down his abdomen soaking his clothes.

*Get up. Come on! Get up!*

It mattered little how many times his mind tried to shout his body to get back up, he always ended falling back to one knee again, eyes stuck to Rey as she approached him, saber ablaze, face snarling, just like in the forest, before the crumbling planet harboring Starkiller had put itself between them.

Could she—Would she be able to stop this time?

*Do you even want to?*

He never got a chance to find the answer to any of those questions. There was a groan, then the sound of metal being cut and melted before the red hot energy trail diving inside the mineshaft crashed directly onto what was left of the scaffolding overhead.

Sensing Hux, alongside what little off his troops was still here, flee for their lives, Kylo was left with a split second warning before the platforms where they and Veshay had been standing started raining on them. Fleeing on opposite directions—Rey diving inside the technical room right in the middle of the platform, Kylo running over the bridge—he was caught by a wave of agony, the pain of when her shoulder hit the floor so consuming his mind that one of the falling debris hit his back, making him lose his saber right before feeling the floor disappear from under him.

He was falling, body plummeting through the chasm under the platform, panic sending his hand grasping at anything he could grab hold off until, purely by chance, his fingers closed around the laced metal of the platform’s floor.

Left hanging by his arm, actually having to propel himself with the Force to get back up, Kylo looked up the mineshaft, not daring or let go of the railing—not yet—and then to the place where he could sense Rey trying to catch her breath, trying to force her mind to conquer the agony running down her back as she steeled herself for battle again.

Patting, Kylo both wished to laugh and shout at his own stupidity. He had thought—When he found her he had thought this charade to be a ruse! A way for her to get away from the troops! To get herself out of the mess she had somehow got herself into and, in so thinking, he had let her lead him inside this blasted mineshaft! He honestly had thought she had planned this out and all things considered he had been damned impressed with how fast she came up with this solution, with how clever it was—with how absolutely naïve he was to think even for a moment that she trusted him to this point, that they were passed this. That they would ever be passed this.

*I am a bloody fool!*

Finally finding the courage to let go of the railing, he found himself also being the bloody fool who was getting her out of here if he had to Force blast her to the other side of the door.

Something that, the very moment Rey jumped out of hiding—her eyes growing to the side of nuts when she saw his open hand right in front of her face—he did.

It felt as if a wave had risen from behind him and, upon crashing into Rey, sent her flying across the platform—not that even in this she was willing to go silently and he very much would have liked to suppress that hint of admiration, when she twisted midair, stabbing the saber through the platform to stop her flight and landing, hand raised respond to him in fashion.
Her blast, however, didn’t even faze Kylo. Making the Force close around his left arm, he slashed right through it as he marched in her direction, bent on taking her passed the door—and ending up raising his hand instead towards a powerful presence he could sense coming from up above, falling through the mineshaft.

No sooner did he turn than a tall, extremely muscular togruta land on top of the technical room, sliding down its roof to land some meters behind him, her visibly burned left hand raised to call the whip falling alongside the debris back to her side.

Seeing it coil around her arm, a greenish white-striped face turning to him, Kylo raised the saber her way, suddenly much too aware of the blood soaking his clothes, the way breathing kept getting caught on his throat—of the fact that he could hardly stand on his feet.

For Force’s sake—

Coal black eyes studied him, jumping to Rey and back to Kylo, seeming to ponder their options—options that considering how her attention suddenly snapped to the entryway behind Rey seemed to be rapidly running out.

Watching Veshay flee the site, dread filling his mind as she disappeared inside the city, Kylo looked at Rey—who still gave no signal of intending to leave—the desperation in his voice now clearer than ever.

“We are going to die if we stay here! Please, listen to me!”

He couldn’t call her to reason. He couldn’t reach her. Not even by projecting into her mind. This was just like in Starkiller. That same blind rage. That same fury. Even if couldn’t fathom who she wished to protect this time, who was that she wished to—

“Rey!”

A blue energy trail flew right over Kylo’s head, crashing into Rey’s saber and making the blue blade collapse. Watching in utter confusion, feeling a hand close around his shoulder to stabilize his visibly shaky stance, Kylo thought for a moment that this was Phasma—at least, until the moment he remembered that Phasma didn’t introduce herself anywhere with anything short of killing shoots and a man marched directly passed Kylo, practically ripping the unlit saber out of Rey’s hands.

“What the hell are you doing?!”

“Finn?”

She spoke as if seeing him through fog, not that FN-2187 seemed to notice, he was pulling on her wrist, following Kylo out of the mineshaft and back inside the city.

“Did the Captain see her?”

Kylo didn’t care to answer. Veshay’s decision to flee had not so much to do with the crumbling mineshaft or FN-2187 eminent appearance, as it had with what Kylo himself could sense moving through Cloud City, coming directly for them.

“Hux.”

“Hux?!”

And the entire blasted infantry if he was to believe his senses!
“Get her to the barracks.”

Closing his hand firmly over Rey’s wrist, FN-2187 didn’t argue. His quick reaction, however, was broken by him looking around, towards the maze of corridors opening around them, clearly far too aware of the disaster coming their way to be able to think creatively.

“We can’t get to the barracks like this,” he stated, shaking his head. “The General ceased all military activity in the area on account of the orbital bombardment, but once he lifts it there will be troops swarming everywhere!”

He turned to Kylo.

“I can’t get her passed the patrols.”

“She can get herself passed the patrols.”

“Not with half the infantry on her!”

It wasn’t as if he was wrong. There had to be a way—

“Finn! Give me the saber!”

“You won’t need it.” FN-2187 replied, not even glancing at her.

“That Knight—!”

That Knight—

Kylo’s attention flew to FN-2187.

“Track Veshay. Follow her. She won’t attack you.”

FN-2187 didn’t seem to hear the outraged exclamation Rey gave that plan. Instead, he nodded, pulling her with him and going passed a damaged door.

Closing it shut with his mind, trying to remove himself further away from the bombardment site, Kylo instead found his knees giving out under him, agony and exhaustion forcing his back to go rest against the cold wall and leaving him pressing the bleeding wound on his abdomen up until a pair of boots stopped in front of him, and a glacier voice he could hardly recognize made Kylo raise his attention to meet a pair of disturbingly blue eyes.

“Where is she?”

Hux. And seeing the troops go passed both of them, Kylo couldn’t but notice one absence.

“Where is the Captain?”

“I am not in the mood for this, Ren.”

He never was. Only this must be the first time Kylo couldn’t find it in himself to string him along. Not even to buy time.

“Nephys is on pursuit. Isahaine is coming down.”

Hux all but bared his teeth at him, giving Kylo’s visibly bloody clothes a cold glare before turning back to join the infantry. Left to struggle back to his feet and limp behind him, Kylo watched as the
troops cut through the door both Rey and FN-2187 had used to escape with a single plea in his mind.

_Please, get her out._

Chapter End Notes

For once I was able to keep my word and give you all the multi-POV chapter I spoke about. This chapter was reviewed by Jojo1112. Big thank you to her!

Next chapter, let's check on Leia. - W

Notes:

Veshay is a togruta, that you might recall as being Ashoka Tano's species. The greenish coloring of her skin is also based on the species canon skin tone. The First Order uses braided armbands as rank insignia. As for Hux's, they are very clearly shown here.
The General

Chapter by Windcage

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The General - Day 23

The Millenium Falcon had left the Resistance fleet under a shroud of secrecy, the drowsiness that always accompanied night watch having allowed for the pilots escorting Leia to leave the Radius undetected and join the carrier as it entered hyperspace.

Contrary to what Leia had thought upon inviting herself to the Republic’s Summit, that which her Intelligence Department had gotten its hands on was not a destination, but the first on a long list of coordinates that had taken them all over the quadrant, forcing them to brave checkpoint after checkpoint in what would have been a tedious and uneventful journey, was it not for Cody’s deteriorating mood making him end his dissertation on the failings of their hosts security measures with a ominous—

“If Hux got his hands on this, he will shoot us straight into a star!”

—and Poe voicing what Leia was sure everybody had been too shocked to say the instant the star trails had given way not to a remote piece of universe, but an easily recognizable planet, its face alight with a vast metropolis and its skies busy and alive.

“Are they damn insane? I say we turn back!”

Coruscant.

Leia remembered when she had first seen this planet. Her hands scrubbing the condensation off the ship’s portholes, nose pressed against the glass, her attention on the skyscrapers going by her, not even the storm punishing the city with terrifyingly strong gales being able to crush her excitement when her father’s delegation had stepped down the access ramp and the Imperial Senate building opened its doors for them.

First stepping on what had at the time been called the ‘Heart of the Empire’ had been a thing of wonder and if anyone asked what memory stood to her as the defining moment for her future that day was it. She remembered everything with clarity. The darkness inside the Senate chamber. Entering Alderaan’s tribune with Bail Organa, his light touch on her shoulder making her jump forward to signal his desire to address his peers. Standing at his side, excited and eager to learn, even as this deep sense of dread racked her brain at Emperor Palpatine’s presence.

For the rebellious and impatient girl she had been—the same one who frequently spaced out during lessons and had managed to get herself kicked out of boarding school for her fierce adherence to the former Republic’s ideals—the Imperial Senate was, if not the learning institution Bail Organa had wished for her, at least the one who had managed to get his point across. It had been by sitting at his side during the long sessions that she had learned the value of discretion. By observing the senators that she had been taught to hide her hand, to choose her battles and to listen.

As young as she had been at the time she had taken over her father’s responsibilities, she had been
experienced in a way few of the youngest members of the Senate were. More than that, however, she had been, for more than a decade, privy to a parade of the comings and goings of the same officers she would one day meet on the battlefield.

Firmus Piett who had been known for his calculating methods even in his youth.

Lorth Needa whose fate at Vader’s hands, like that of so many others, haunted her more and more as the years passed.

Maximillian Veers to whom she would lose the base on Hoth.

Wilhuf Tarkin who had gone from patronizing eye rolls at her impertinent answers, to contemplating her like a ticking time bomb of which he knew exactly the intentions of. Their entire relationship was perfectly synthesized in that last fateful banter, her eternal spite at the man being meet by his usual sarcasm and an order she would be hearing to her dying day.

In a way, Leia felt she had been facing the same people her entire life. Even when the New Republic had established its Senate—the pompously dubbed Galactic Senate—some of the people she had come to face there were the same from her youth. Childhood ghosts, she liked to call them and while most faces had faded with time, looking up to the chamber of the long deactivated Imperial Senate, fingers running over the parapet of Alderaan’s tribune, Leia could but recall them, the summit she had momentarily left bringing forth one particular session, one of the many times all the chaos and heartache of the present could have been averted and hadn’t been.

In fact, it was all so clear she was becoming convinced the Force was doing something. It was the only conceivable reason for the way this chamber seemed to be filled, functional, alive in a way that hadn’t been in almost thirty years—and for her to be in the center of it all, the painstakingly long list of planets she had been reading coming to a sharp end as she raised the holo pad and waited for the echoes of her voice to cease, a five year old Ben right at her side.

“The planets I bring before you are but the tip of the iceberg,” Leia stated, not letting go of her son’s hand. “In total, there have been more than a hundred reports concerning similar encounters with what appear to be well organized groups operating inside the boundaries defined by the Galactic Concordance. I call the Senate’s attention to the statement given by a Captain Braiss, officer in charge of a peacekeeping unit in the Outer Rim, in which he describes an ‘unidentified group, supporting military grade equipment of Imperial design—’”

“I will assume, Senator Organa, these are confirmed sightings?”

Her carefully prepared speech having been ripped to shreds with infuriating expertise, Leia turned to the tribune hovering alongside hers, attention latching to the middle-aged man rising to his feet and taking over the senator at its front.

“I rather not discuss idle gossip by some overly bored guards that have nothing better to do than spin tales about their favorite boogeyman, or fill themselves with death stick up until they actually think they saw it,” he continued, dismissively. “I hope there is something of substance to these accusations, otherwise, this continuous slander—”

“This ‘slander,’” Leia replied. “Is well supported by registries—”

“On Republic vessels. Written by Republic personnel. Catalogued by you,” he stated, an almost imperceptible smirk rising to his lips when only silence meet his words. “I see I was not incorrect.”

Feeling her hand being squeezed as the other tribune moved away, Leia dropped her attention to find
her son on his tiptoes, frustration at being barely able to look over the tribune’s barrier clear in his face as he tried to point at Leia’s challenger.

“Who is he?” he whispered.

Pressing her lips, not daring to keep her attention away from the Senate’s session for more than a few seconds, Leia leaned over Ben, dropping her voice.

“The Commandant of the Imperial Officer’s Academy at Arkanis.”

Ben frowned at her, his obvious conclusion that she had stumbled all over the man’s rank making it impossible for her not to smile when he gently tried to point out her mistake.

“Commander?”

“Commandant.”

She would save her lecture on the intricacies of the Imperial chain of command for later. At this time, as much as it amused her to see the red-haired boy standing at the back of the other tribune mimic Ben and point her to the rather stormtrooper-like man at his side, it was the way the senators had closed ranks around his father that consumed her thoughts. Had she known who the former Imperial territories had managed to raise out of whatever hole he had chosen to crawl into, she would have left Ben at home. This session would be nothing but vicious—and that was before a second tribune joined hers and golden skinned Twi-lek wearing the Republic’s fleet brown uniform rose to its front. Now, Leia could only sigh. Dropping to kiss Ben’s forehead, she pointed to the chairs.

“Go sit.”

“Senators.”

The voice coming through the speakers forced Leia to turn her attention back to the Senate before Ben, walking backwards, had a chance to reach the chairs.

“It has been five years since the Galactic Concordance was signed. However, and under the guise of conducting de-Imperialization operations on our soil, this Republic has maintained its aggressive stance towards the Imperial worlds that fell under its jurisdiction. These convenient sightings brought forth today seem to me as nothing more than a means to justify the continuous sanctioning—”

Mom Mothma rose from the central tribune.

“Commandant Hux, you stand here at the Republic’s invitation. This chamber will not tolerate baseless accusations against—”

“Contrary to this plague of unconfirmed Star Destroyer sightings, Chancellor, my accusations are well funded. They are echoed by your own military. By your politics. By your innocuous celebrations of victories over territories left defenseless by the forced removal of the troops—”

“I would like to remind this Senate,” Admiral Chilsse interrupted, his tribune moving in such a way that Brendol had no choice but to hide his distaste as he was forced to face the Twi-lek head on.

“That the Imperial army retreated from the Republic’s space under the Concordance clauses. A treaty that the Empire itself signed.”

“A treaty that the Empire signed believing our civilians would be treated fairly. Not rounded up, forced to face mock trials and made destitute.”
“The Republic agreed on providing restitutions to the individuals and species targeted by the Empire and its very convenient treaty detailing what qualifies as a sapient species,” Chilsse threw back turning to the Senate. “The populations of the former Imperial planets are in no way innocent bystanders to the conflict. They profited heavily from the war. Even now, they cling to the Empire and its late Emperor, keeping flags raised inside their houses, going so far as harboring war criminals—”

“You mean demobilized soldiers.” Brendol countered, voice cold. “The fathers, brothers and sons sent home after being pardoned by this very Senate.”

“Your men are no better than butchers,” Chilsse snapped. “Stormtroopers are highly trained soldiers and represent a serious threat to the Republic stability if left to run rampant. I have in other occasions expressed to this Senate just how irresponsible it is not to punish these men for their crimes. If we lack the facilities to see to their sentencing, it would be better to execute them!”

“What for, Admiral? To have a revolution on our hands?” Leia intervened and truly she couldn’t tell which of the men looked more astonished. Chilsse who seemed about to request an assessment on her sanity. Or Brendol who stood as if about to pull a time table out of his pockets and confirm if he had stepped into the correct Senate session. “I came before you with proof of a possible external threat and I will remind all of you that we are in need of unification, not more cracks to tear us apart. What we are observing are bold if careful incursions into our systems and—!”

“The Dantooinne tribune would like to remind Senator Organa that the Galactic Empire and all support groups affiliated to it were disbanded!” a senator stated, her tribune rising to join them. “To perpetuate rumors about some kind of organized military junta operating under the Empire’s flag is not only dangerous but irresponsible! Your insinuation—!”

“I don’t insinuate. These sightings are no fairy tale!”

“One would think that given Commandant Hux's record he would be the first person any Imperial effort to reorganize would go to!” she retorted, speaking over Leia. “I would like to point out to Senator Organa, that he is right here!”

Leia would have liked to point out she believed the former Imperial officer to be up to his neck on whatever was building up beyond the Republic’s boundaries, Chilsse jumping back into the discussion, glaring at the new intervenient, however, kept her from doing so.

“I don’t doubt Senator Organa’s claims,” he stated. “All these names she has brought before you, I make my own. Axxila. Lexrul. Sweswenna. Carida. Eriadu—These former bastions of the Empire stand in this very chamber, part of a Republic they despise. I should, perhaps, remind you all that Commandant Hux—these planets’ chosen spokesman—is a war criminal himself!”

“Truly?” Brendol's tone was glacier. His son’s attention snapped to Chilsse with his next words. "What does this Chamber call you for your actions in Arkanis, Admiral? A hero?”

The Senate stood still, the irate glaring with which Brendol had been met since he had arrived giving way to nervous glances.

Looking back to where Ben was sitting, dark eyes locking with the senators one at a time, Leia could but curse herself for not having sent him out of the tribune when she had the chance. This was exactly what she had been afraid this would lead to. He should not be here.

“The operation against Arkanis concerned the capture of—” Chilsse started to say only to have Brendol finish the phrase for him.
“A glorified schoolmaster,” he stated, bitterness making the corners of his mouth twist. “I stand before this Senate now without any of those holding your leash seeming to be able to rub anything together as to justify my immediate arrest. So tell me, what is your justification for the siege?”

Before Chilsse could answer, Mom Mothma had taken to herself to diffuse the situation.

“Arkanis was a tragedy,” she acquiesced, evenly. “A catastrophic military blunder born out of a hasty and ill thought out tactical approach for which the Republic has procured to make amends. Heavy restitutions to the population are under away. The rebuilding of Scarparus Port was made a priority. Arkanis is an example of the Republic’s determination to restore peace and order to a galaxy raised to the ground by Imperial rule.”

“What Arkanis is, Chancellor, is a façade. Nothing more than a smokescreen with which to perpetuate this image of the New Republic as saviors and call attention away from the war it still wagers,” Brendol spat. “Also, a catastrophic military blunder? An ‘hasty and ill thought out tactical approach’? Do you dare to imply it was an accident?”

Without as much as a glance back, Brendol waved his hand on his son’s direction.

“Give the boy your tactical registries and he will point out half a hundred ways your claim is false.”

Glaring at Chilsse with an intensity that said he wished to burn him where he stood, the blue fire on the boy’s eyes went out with those words, his father's disdain leaving him to retreat inside himself. It would take two decades and the First Order's fleet leaving the Uncharted Regions for Leia to understand that had not been a slight against the Republic. And why the boy had looked so hurt.

“Arkanis was a deliberate, carefully planned military operation approved by this Senate,” Brendol went on to say. “These planets Senator Organa was so kind to mention? It's this very Senate with its so called committee for Imperial Reallocation that is bleeding them dry. The bombing of their infrastructures and the blockade of any effort of rebuilding were approved here. And yet, while epidemics ran their course on Carida and famine wrecks Eriadu, your major concerns are rouge Star Destroyers!”

A pause as Brendol looked at Chilsse and then to Leia.

“If the Republic Fleet is proving itself incapable of providing appropriate security for what little of our fleet didn’t crash into Jakku, we are hardly to blame for it. If Senator Organa fears someone is smuggling Star Destroyers out of the dismantling lines, maybe she should take her attention elsewhere and look closer home!”

The words hit her like a bucket of cold water, the implied accusation making cold anger rise from the deepest part of her heart.

No.

No way was he dragging Han into this.

No way was he putting this mess on her husband.

“Our storages, Commandant, are well guarded,” Leia stated, forcing herself to remain calm. “I spin no accusations against our allies. My vote has long been in line with stopping the senseless incursions against formerly Imperial territories. That is not to say we should turn a blind eye to the organized Imperial loyalists on our doorstep.”

“And where is your proof?” the senator from Dantooine demanded. “If you even have any!”
“There are sightings both by the fleet and the infantry. Our troops—!”

The Senate exploded in booing, a fifth, sixth and then seventh tribune joining the ones hovering in the chamber, their occupants shouting in her direction forcing Mom Mothma to again take a stand, all the while giving Leia a slightly apologetic look.

“This continuous war mongering has no place on this Chamber, Senator Organa,” she sighed. “The Galactic Civil War is over. You would do well to accept it.”

Fuming, barely able to keep her fury from showing, Leia stepped away from the edge of her tribune, fingers sliding away from the parapet as the tribune returned to its original place. Sitting to find Ben again on his tiptoes and on the place she had left, Leia shook her head. Her son’s struggle to see over the barrier would have made her smile was it not for the fact he was visibly trying to climb up it and she couldn’t shake this fear she would see him vault over the parapet.

“Ben.”

He was back on the floor even before she spoke, neck still stretched as he rushed back to her, attention so firmly glued to the proceedings he didn’t see her lurch forward to grab him. His laughter would have been a lot more reassuring if it wasn’t for how swiftly it ceased and Ben went to sat quietly at her side, his expression so heavy Leia ended up resting her head on top of his, her protective grasp on him getting tighter and tighter the longer he remained quiet.

“Mom?”

Leia looked down, meeting a pair of brown eyes that were exactly like her own and that had just lost their mischievous light.

“He was telling the truth,” Ben said, proceeding to clarify what he meant when she frowned. “About the bombs and the famine and—” He stopped for a moment, lips mouthing the word ‘epidemic’ and giving up on trying to pronounce it the next instant. “The sick people. Why won’t we help them?”

A large hand closed around her shoulder, carefully jerking her back and forth. Confused, pulling Ben closer to her, Leia looked up. In front of her, having entered the tribune Force knows how, was a tall hairy something. That and a worried pair of golden eyes peeking from just behind the creature’s enormous frame.

“Are you alright?”

A growled question. A wookie. Chewbacca. And diving under his arm, something dark going over her expression and making her drop to one knee in front of Leia—

“Did you see something?”

Allya. Fearfully, Leia glanced to her side. Her heart shattered the same instant.

Ben.

She could still feel his warmth, his presence, but he wasn’t here. He was—

“Just a memory.”

Leaving her two assigned bodyguards to trade half relieved, half worried glances, Leia got to her feet. The buzzing of voices coming from the adjoining room becoming more and more prominent, she turned towards the tribune’s entrance. Just outside, lifting the huge Republic flag embracing the
meeting chamber, was a golden skinned Twi-lek, a specter jumping right out of her memories. She needed nothing else to be reminded of where she stood and the present the vision had stolen her from. The Republic Summit. Or as she liked to call it—

_The Mess._

“General Organa,” Admiral Chilsse saluted, eyes sweeping critically over the deactivated Senate chamber. “Not the safest of meeting places.”

“Discretion has its flaws.”

“And there are no gains without risks?” He laughed, pleased. “I must admit I was surprised to find you here. Not to say extremely relieved. I had feared I would be stuck with the politicians and their endless squabbles and not get anything done for the entirety of this summit.”

“I should remind you I am one of those politicians, Admiral.”

“Are you, General? Were you ever?”

The smile that meet Leia’s closed expression had something predatory to it, it only took him finding Allya getting herself behind Leia, however, for his expression to change, something gentler, sadder, softening his expression when he noticed her age.

“One of my own.”

Taking Leia’s invitation to sit, something he did, to her relief, on the opposite side of where her son’s ghost had been sitting, Chilsse frowned at the headdress Allya was wearing and that kept her blue appendices firmly folded and latched to the back of her head.

“You should be careful with how tight those lekku are, child.”

“They get in the way during fighting.”

“My granddaughter shares similar views,” Chilsse said, fondly. “All the while we are still trying to get the younger one to stop stepping on his. Your name?”

The timid smile that had risen to Allya’s face at the mention of the Admiral’s family, was swept off her face at the question.

“I—Allya.”

“Hers is Aayla. You must be the same age.” Chilsse frowned, glancing at the blaster in Allya’s hands and turning to Leia. “How is she with the Resistance?”

“We captured one of the First Order’s prisoner transports.”

And, just like that, gentleness turned into harsh steel. Getting to his feet, seemingly finding stillness too hard a feat to accomplish, Chilsse walked up to a flickering light at the tribune’s entrance, hitting it with one finger until it stabilized again.

“Things have come full circle, haven’t they?” he said. “The Republic. The Empire. The Rebel Alliance. They just go by different names now.”

“There is a big difference on how things come to pass.”

“Does that matter?”
“It matters.” It always matters. “I assume your fleet was not present at the Hosnian system.”

Chilsse walked back to his place, this time leaning against the tribune’s parapet instead of sitting.

“No. We were assigned to one of the Republic’s more remote territories. We were made aware of what was going down the same way everyone else was. Red trails in the sky. The coms going silent. Never going back up.” He shook his head. “Are you aware of what happened?”

“Yes. But I am interested on your insight.”

Focusing intensely on the floor, arms crossed, Chilsse took his time to think.

“From a purely tactical standpoint and as far as preemptive strikes go it was extremely effective first move,” he finally said, not betraying any emotion. “Most of our fleet and the entirety of our ruling body taken out in one single strike. Chaos rippling through the remaining territories. Panicked governments pulling out troops, raising planetary shields, leaving more fragile territories unprotected. Everyone left without common leadership. Chaos is a good ally. And even more so when it is backed up by the psychological impact of seeing a fleet of Star Destroyers breaking out of lightspeed in several strategic points. It was clever. Up until they lost their base.” He sneered at that. “I would doubt these rumors about the Order having some prized tactician in their midst, but—Have you heard of the manner Chardan was conquered?”

“I fear having General Hux on my trail is not conductive to be up to date with news from the war front.”

Nor was, Leia might add, having fallen out of grace with most of the people in this summit on account of her shared bloodline with Vader.

“If you would be so kind as to enlighten me.”

Seeing that the light was again flickering, Chilsse raised his attention to the Senate chamber, a visibly suspicious expression on his face.

“I recall you left in the midst of our first summit due to irreconcilable differences?”

If by ‘irreconcilable differences’ he meant refusing to participate in what had been rapidly turning into a session of name calling—

“Yes.”

“The meeting in Chardan was our next effort to organize the remaining planets into a common defense. It backfired.”

“Meaning?”

“We don’t know when they got there, nor how they discovered the rendezvous, but the Order had its troops on the ground. Black armored soldiers from Special Forces. Them and that rabid dog of theirs, the infantry commander, a trooper with a silver armor.”

Captain Phasma, a voice that sounded remarkably like Finn’s whispered in Leia’s mind, the unique mixture of revulsion and respect he always imprinted that name with clear even in his absence.

“They took control of the military facilities responsible for the planetary shield and ground defenses even before anyone noticed they were there,” Chilsse continued saying. “The instant the First Order’s fleet broke out of lightspeed the shield collapsed, only to be shut after the bulk of their
ground offensive was inside. For those amongst our people that weren’t able to evacuate in that window there was no way out. They were targeted by Chardan’s own planetary defenses and killed.”

Leia closed her eyes.

“When was this?”

“A month or so ago.”

“How many Star Destroyers were involved in conquering Chardan?”

“Three. Including—”

“The Finalizer,” Leia finished, interlacing her fingers when Chilsse gave her a surprised look. “Starkiller wasn’t the only instance I faced General Hux on the battlefield, Admiral. This kind of carefully planned blitz attack has his name written all over it. More than that, however—” Something mischievous lightened Leia’s eyes, despite how dark her demeanor was. “The silver armored trooper? Her being on the ground meant he could not be that far behind.”

Glancing at the place Ben’s memory had occupied, Leia felt her heart tighten. She wondered—

“Was any of the Knights on the ground?”

“Two of them. A pair of women, I believe, working with Special Forces.”

“Kylo Ren wasn’t sighted?”

“He wasn’t there. And anyways, the Finalizer didn’t stay for long. It pulled out with its troops before the battle was concluded. Where it went afterwards we know not.”

Leia closed her eyes, relief at her son’s absence from Chardan crashing there and then. A month? That was right on schedule for—the very clear memory of the Finalizer appearing on the Resistance radars, of her base being surrounded by the Order and Ren coming to her help engulfed her mind. All of a sudden she felt nauseous.

Where were you before that, Ben? Where were you?

Dread threatening to consume her thoughts, Leia forcefully steered the conversation to other matters.

“What is being done to stop the First Order? What kind of defenses—?”

The lamp on the tribune’s entrance had gone back to flickering again. This time Chilsse didn’t care with inspecting it, gesturing for Leia to follow him, he took a step towards the exit.

“If you would accompany me outside.”

Moving to follow him, discreetly mouthing “Get Cody” in Chewbacca’s direction, Leia put forth her best innocent expression as she marched beyond the not so innocent flickering lamp.

She had no idea of how her Intelligence Department had gotten hold of the electricity or the mental gymnastics that had gone into thinking this was a discreet way of passing messages, but—

Honestly, Cody!

Seeing Allya fight to raise the flag covering the exit, only to have Chewie take pity on her efforts and
pull the thing up with ease, Leia accompanied Chilsse to the meeting room.

Light leaving her blinded for a few seconds, the irate words raising up the chamber much more clear for that, Leia ended up sighing as she finally took in the overcrowded chamber and the empty pulpit to her left, attention coming to rest in what appeared to be two warring groups right in the center of the chamber and the many ambassadors rapidly fleeing the site.

“We were the first planet they attacked. Retribution for harboring your summit after Starkiller’s destruction,” someone, Leia could not tell who, was saying, fighting to make himself heard over the arguments and accusations being thrown around him. “The Order’s troops have taken over our cities and government. If we are to stand a chance of pushing them out of our territory we need support! All of your support!”

“It is the planets in your vicinity that are responsible for giving immediate military support,” a second voice retorted with frigid calm, the tall slim frame of a Pau’an male Leia recognized as Tek Patil breaking over the sea of heads on the more numerous of the two groups. “Least there is a reason why they haven’t—”

“And what might that reason be?!” a woman exploded, stepping to the front of what, with people rapidly fleeing the site, was proving to be a four people line.

“Ambassadors, this is not the time—!”

“On the contrary, this is exactly the time!” she spat, expression enraged, one finger stabbing the air. “What exactly are you accusing us of?!”

“Our planets are being conquered one after the other,” Tek Patil replied still in the same frigid voice. “Swallowed by the Order’s war machine as if they were nothing. And yet your planets, all of your planets, lay undisturbed. One doesn’t need more than two working brain cells to see where this is going.”

The group behind him exploded in shouting, accusations crashing into each other in such a way, Leia could only understand some of them.

“We rebuilt your planets!”

“Spying for the Order!”

“You refuse us help!”

Grabbing hold of the young ambassador’s arm before she could punch anyone on the opposing group—something she seemed increasingly close to doing—an older woman took to the front.

“The Galactic Concordance dictated the disarmament of all Imperial planets and colonies,” she reminded, evenly, not letting go of her young companion. “That was the price of peace.”

“If your fear of an Imperial uprising inside the Republic’s boundaries hadn’t made you disband our military—!” the third member of the group started, only to be interrupted almost instantly.

“And why should we let you keep it?!” an angry voice asked. “To have you turn it on us the first opportunity you got? Not that you seem to need it, considering how quickly the rest of your kin turned to the Order!”

“It is our planets that are left defenseless! Not yours!” the same young woman from before spat, still being held in place by her older companion. “It is our planets that are closer to the line of fire!”
“Ambassadors! While we trade accusations, the Order—!”

Expression growing heavier as the argument rose in volume, Leia sighed, heart heavy.

*Things never change.*

At her side, Allya leaned next to her ear, staring incredulous at the feud.

“They won’t help each other?”

*Not even this.*

A bitter chuckle come rolling down Leia’s throat, the sheer amount of derision in her laughter shocking Leia about as much as it seemed to shock Allya. In fact, both Twi-leks were looking at her, golden eyes studying her face. Even if she could ignore Chilsse’s carefully guarded look with ease, doing the same with Allya was difficult. Her eyes, even if they were so different from Ben’s dark ones, still gave her the feeling she was looking right at him.

“I won’t lie to you and say things didn’t work like this before. That they didn’t always worked like this.” Leia sighed, guilt making her point to the four ambassadors on the receiving end of their peers fury. “What do you know of them?”

Biting her lips, eyes running over the symbols in the group’s armbands in a way that seemed to say she was terrified to get this wrong, Allya glanced nervously at Leia.

“These *are* Imperial worlds.”

“Former Imperial worlds,” Leia corrected, ignoring the way Chilsse clicked his tongue at the correction. “They used to make up for a small percentage of the Republic, and were all the worse off for it.”

Even so to think only *four* had not gone running for the First Order—

“You know them?” Allya queried.

Staring at the still ongoing contest, Leia forced a smile.

“I know everyone.” She pointed at the members of the group one at a time. “Eelie Lorjan from Lexrul. Zeive Kopel from Zaadja. Ajast Milneri from Lipetsk. Cas Neij from Carida.”

Leia frowned. Come to think of it, she thought she had glanced one more planet. One she was actually very surprised to find here.

*Where is—?*

“Arkanis?” Chilsse offered, pointing towards one of the many ambassadors that had fled the scene and now stood alone next to the window. “At their best behavior after that affair with Carise Sindain, aren’t they? Meant on proving on whose side they are on. Not that eager to flaunt their riches in our faces.” Once again Chilsse’s predatory smile made an appearance. “If you hit them hard enough they stay down.”

Something strange went over Allya’s expression, some sort of emotion Leia couldn’t quite place and that was gone before she could try to understand what it was.

“I thought Arkanis was poor,” she said.
“It was.” Leia agreed, diplomatically, studying Chilsse by the corner of her eye. This wasn’t exactly a topic she wanted to touch with him here.

“Isn’t it—?”

“A certain General’s home planet? It is,” the Admiral offered in a strange tone, before turning to Leia, gesticulating towards the increasingly vicious argument. “But isn’t this touching? Look at all of them, General. All these esteemed members of the late Republic Senate, alive!” His tone became darker. “Luck doesn’t quite cut it, does it? It almost looks like they were warned.”

A cold shiver going down her spine, Leia forced her attention back to him.

“We had our previous conversation interrupted, Admiral. If I recall correctly.”

“Indeed. And you were asking what is being done?”

Hands going behind his back, Chilsse started leading them across the chamber.

“I have spent days trying to convince these bureaucrats to refocus our efforts on what can be salvaged. If we had things my way, which I fear we will not until it is far too late for anything to be done, all planets directly on the Order’s path would surrender this very instant.”

Leia could only stare. This didn’t sound like Chilsse at all, unless—

“What for, Admiral?”

“If the Order is short on anything that is manpower and that can be used in our favour. The Order’s offensive works with two very distinct groups.” He pointed at the holo map on the center of the chamber, in particular to the moving red line creeping ever closer to several systems and then to the one that stood behind it. “The vanguard with which, unfortunately, we are getting rather familiar with, and a slower moving line responsible for stabilizing conquered territories and organizing supply lines. Despite how fast the front line moves, you might have noticed that the number of territories they hit is small. In fact, many of their territories are actually Imperial planets that have given their allegiance to them.”

Leia frowned, pensive.

“And you think if a large enough number of planets surrender, that could be used to overwhelm their resources?” Leia shook her head. “I doubt the Order would fall for that. Hux certainly won’t.”

“That boy reeks of tactical simulators. The way he lost Starkiller—”

“He might be inexperienced, but he is not stupid.”

_Nor is my Ben_. Ben—Kylo Ren would see straight passed this charade.

“Hux might not be stupid but he is absent. And there is something, something going on that—”

Again Chilsse glanced at the holo map and shook his head. “Considering that the bureaucrats inside this chamber refuse to listen to me, however, it is probable we might have to do with another solution to permanently cripple the Order. Going directly for the serpent’s head. Cut it before it has time to strike again.”

“This being Snoke?”

“Their unofficial triumvirate. At least, the ones we can take out. Without Master Skywalker, Kylo
Ren is out of our reach. But the infantry commander and Hux are different.” A pause as he gazed at the map, unfeeling. “I remember that boy. I suppose I should be sorry, but when the seed is bad—”

Leia felt herself freeze. The towering figure of Darth Vader immediately filling her mind and crumbling to give way to Luke. To Ben.

“I don’t have the privilege of thinking like that, Admiral.”

Stepping away from Chilsse, Leia wandered around the room, not seeing or hearing anything of what was going on around her and only vaguely aware of Allya at her side and Chewie rejoining both of them, her mind consumed by Chilsse’s words.

“When the seed is bad—”

Its cruelty haunted her. As did Ben’s kindness, a lifetime ago.

“Why won’t we help them?”

Leia stopped her pacing. The raised voices had fallen silent, discussions replacing the rage-filled argument from before making her look around, frantic, until she found five ambassadors assembled in a discreet corner. She was marching in their direction the same instant.

“Ambassadors.”

Barely visible amongst the shadows where they had hidden, the entire group stopped talking, backs tensing. Of those present, only Ajast Milneri turned, an entirely fake smile on his lips.

“Senator Organa. To what do we owe the pleasure?”

It was hardly one if his increasingly rigid smile was anything to go by. It mattered little, however, she was not here for the pleasantries. There was something in the air, a kind of warning in the Force that told her—

“You are leaving.”

It was not a question and that, if nothing else, seemed to make those bent on ignoring her turn to face her.

“I assume you came to stop us,” Eelie Lorjan, the eldest of the group, stated.

Her smile was genuine, but sharp. Painfully so. It made Leia shake her head.

“I don’t believe I have the right.”

Studying those present one by one, Chilsse’s suspicions about the reason for their survival hanging over her like a hammer, she steeled herself for what came next.

“The First Order is not the solution.”

“And this is?” the same angry young woman from before derided, glaring at those assembled in the chamber in fury. She reminded Leia of someone. It took a moment to realize it was herself. “We didn’t come here to serve as punching bags!”

“Zeive,” Lorjan sighed, again grabbing hold of her arm, forcing her to calm down. “We are here at your peers invitation, Senator Organa, and we came in good faith. We thought, foolishly I now understand, that for all our differences, at long last we could be in agreement. Yet, even now, we are
forced to show gratefulness for the crumbs grudgingly tossed our way, to accept them as some kind of mercy, when more times than we could count, even those were taken from us.”

She shook her head, exhausted.

“With all due respect, Senator, why shouldn’t the First Order be our answer?”

“You are here. You know why it is not.” Leia stepped forward. “Retribution is not justice.”

“Your side as long defended that it is,” Cas Neij whispered, trading a heavy look with the still silent envoy from Arkanis. “When Carida was raised to the ground, it wasn’t the Order that forgot us.”

A shadow of sadness swept over Lorjan’s elderly face.

“For what it’s worth, Senator Organa, we are grateful that you tried.”

And turning their backs on her, they stepped away, leaving Leia alone, listening to Allya’s and Chewbacca’s footsteps as they returned to her side, eyes captured by the bustling city beyond the window, the lights of the forest of skyscrapers so bright that they outshone the stars, Ben’s question still in her mind.

“Why won’t we help them?”

She had hoped—

But no. It was far too late.

*We lost them.*

*All of them.*

Chapter End Notes

Things truly aren't going well for anyone. And they are about to become a lot worse.

Note about Rating going up: so, yeah, the rating will go up (and yes, *that* is the reason why!). Also, pardon the absurd level of eloquence of this statement.

Other Notes:
*Carise Sindian*, who was referred in passage is part of the extended canon - Bloodline. She was the senator from Arkanis and a First Order supporter. Like her the *Siege of Arkanis* and the *Galactic Concordance* are canon. Leia being kicked out of boarding school was mentioning on *Star Wars - The Force Unleashed*.

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