Disparate Pieces

by space_trash_princess

Summary

"For as long as I can remember, the Force has shown me visions of the future. It is a future I must fight and sacrifice for, but it will all be worth it once it comes to pass. I know you’ve experienced such visions as well: of the forest on Starkiller, of Ach-to, of me."

Rey gasped. “You know about that?”

He cupped her face and brought it close to his. “Know of them? I shared them. The force pulled in both directions, giving us both glimpses of what was to come. Although, I think I may have been given more insight than you have. But trust me. We all have a destiny, Rey, and yours lies with me.”

Rey’s past visions had not felt like a call to destiny. They had seemed more like a warning.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The blue surface of Ach-to came into view as Rey exited hyperspace. Tiny islands dotted its surface, partially obscured by the hovering clouds. Having flown without a copilot, she strained to reach the controls to initiate the Falcon’s landing sequence.

Chewbacca had asked to be brought back to Kashyyyk to aid in the defense efforts against the First Order. With the New Republic leadership lost to Starkiller, Snoke had taken it upon himself to fill the vacuum of galactic power. His forces had taken system after system until his influence reached farther than that of the late emperor. To mark his achievement, he had elevated his title to match.

There was little the Resistance could do. With their location discovered and resources nearly depleted, the Resistance had been forced to evacuate to the abandoned rebel base on Hoth. Even though Starkiller had been destroyed, it had fulfilled its purpose of crippling any opposition against the First Order. Since first arriving on Ach-to, Rey’s correspondences with Leia had been increasingly bleak, making her loathe to even pick up her holopad. If it weren’t for Finn, perhaps she wouldn’t. Updates on his recovery always made it worth it.

Rey gathered up the supplies the Wookies had gifted her and walked down the ramp of the Falcon. Night greeted her along with another of Ach-to’s frequent rains. While Kashyyyk had been sunny and humid, Ach-to’s bitter cold stung at her skin and breezed through her layers of clothing. As close as she was to the shore, the salt air filled her nostrils and her boots sunk into the damp soil. The heavy downpour beat against the rocky terrain, making her climb up the mountain’s stone steps even more treacherous.

Once she had reached Luke’s hut, she sat down the foreign foods and spices she had been given. Attempting to bite into the rind of one of the bulbous fruits raw had proven impossible. Hopefully, Luke would know how to prepare them.

Strangely, he wasn’t there. After sundown, he always returned to his hut to rest by the fire. He would stare into the flickering flame and pick at his dinner, offering her only the barest of conversation. Leia had warned her it might take time to convince him to return, especially after Han’s death. She’d been right. During Rey’s first week on the island, he had refused to take his father’s saber, then refused to even speak to her until she had claimed one of the adjacent huts, declaring she wasn’t going back to the Resistance until he did. Eight weeks later, the stubborn old hermit still preferred silent meditation to saving the galaxy.

Rey stepped out of the hut, ready to call out for Luke, but froze when she saw a strange figure in the distance. They faced away from her, clad in black armor and carrying a long club. Hoping to take the intruder by surprise, Rey slipped the Skywalker saber out of her satchel and crept toward them. The sound of her footsteps was lost in the heavy patter of rain. As she ignited the blade, the stranger spun
at her, only to have her slice off the end of his club. It landed with a thud beside them. As Rey adjusted her form to counter his next blow, her feet shifted in the mud, giving him the opening he needed to slam the shortened club against her knuckles. Rey cried out as the force of the blow caused her unsteady feet to slide out from under her. The saber fell from her hand and deactivated as it rolled out of reach.

He held his club over his head, ready to land another blow. Before he could strike, a fiery blade lanced through his chest. He screamed in pain, then went silent. His charred corpse fell at the feet of Kylo Ren. Rey stood upright, then froze when she saw Luke’s green lightsaber deactivated in his hand. She was too late.

Kylo stood over her, his blade casting a crimson glow over his scarred face. Six other men gathered behind him, each wearing a variation of the black armor her attacker had worn as well as a uniquely frightening mask. Kylo was the only one to bear his face.

It was then that Rey realized she had seen this all before. Some details were different, such as Kylo’s missing mask, but otherwise, it was exactly like the vision she had seen on Takodana—the vision that had set her on a collision course with Kylo Ren.

Kylo turned to his men, muttering something she couldn’t hear. He deactivated his saber and latched it to his belt alongside Luke’s before turning back to face her. Aside from the scar, there was something else in him that had changed. The intensity she had seen on Starkiller had morphed into something more refined, perhaps more dangerous. No longer was he a wounded animal lashing out at all who came near him. He regarded her with single-minded intensity, his eyes cold and calculating, and his posture like that of a stalking predator as he approached. He shot out his hand, his fingers flexing like a set of claws, and the world around her fell away.

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Rey awoke, a heavy fog still clouding her senses. All she could feel was a pair of hands under her knees and supporting her back. She opened her eyes to find Kylo staring down at her. She shoved against his chest and tumbled to the floor, then hissed as her freshly bruised saber hand hit the ground. She stood to glare at him as she rubbed the sting from her palm.

“Where am I? what have you done with Luke?” Glancing around, she saw they were in a tightly confined space with a rhythmic rumbling beneath their feet. A turbolift, she realized.

“Skywalker is safe for now. Ultimately, his fate relies on you.”
The lift lurched to a stop and opened on a pair of Stormtroopers. Kylo stepped out between them, and strode down the dark hallway, his cape swirling behind him. Rey called out to him but was ignored. If it weren't for the armed men blocking her way she might have gone after him. Balling her fists, she turned to the Troopers. “What’s going on?”

“His Imperial Majesty wishes to have a private audience with you,” one answered.

“What?”

“His Imperial Majesty commands it. Come with us”

She stared up at their reflective eyepieces, thoroughly fed-up with masks. What choice did she have? Kylo could be bluffing. He could have already killed Luke, but in case he wasn't, she needed to behave until she knew for sure.

She followed them down the hall, silently fuming. Thankfully they kept their hands off her and let her walk of her own volition. The halls were the same metallic black and gray she had come to expect from the First Order. All the doors were sealed shut. But unlike Starkiller, where she had snuck around groups of troopers and uniformed personnel, these halls were empty, like she was back inside an abandoned starship on Jakku. Their every step echoed around the hollow space. After a series of turns, which Rey committed to memory and filed away for later, they stopped in front of a door. It was the only one in the expansive hallway.

One of the troopers inserted his passcard into the wall console beside the door, commanding it to slide open. “Wait in here,” he said.

Rey stepped into the darkness. Before she could ask for further explanation, the door slid closed behind her. The locking mechanism hissed and the lights switched on around her. She blinked as the artificial bulbs stung at her eyes.

A viewport ran along the far wall and revealed the star-studded blackness beyond. Evidently, they were onboard a starship. The room was enormous, with a wide bed, a sitting area, and rows of storage compartments—all bleak and rigid like the halls she had passed through. This certainly wasn't a prison cell. Nor was it an audience chamber for an Emperor.

Rey hugged her arms. It was freezing and her rain-soaked clothes weren't helping. Granted, everywhere felt freezing to her after Jakku. Hopefully, her body would adjust at some point. She
tried to keep herself from trembling, telling herself it was just the cold. She could get through this. Staring at the door, she wondered how long she was expected to wait, and why here of all places. Before she could further speculate, the door slid open and Kylo Ren stepped inside.

With his face unobscured by darkness or rainfall, Rey could get a proper look. The scar she'd given him ran between his brows and along his cheek before disappearing into his cloak. It was raised and inflamed, standing out against his pale, freckled skin. Even when it healed, he would bear the mark forever. She shouldn’t pity him. He had more than earned it after all he’d done.

“Are you here to take me to Snoke?” Rey demanded.

His jaw twitched. “Lucky for you, that won’t be possible.”

“But the troopers said the emperor wanted to meet with me. What’s going on?” She crossed her arms and kept her chin held high.

Kylo smirked, his full lips curling in a way that was hauntingly similar to his father. However, something darker lurked beneath. “I did want to see you. That’s why I had you brought to my quarters.”

Rey’s arms fell to her sides as his meaning sunk in. “You’re lying.” All the bluster was gone from her voice, leaving it quiet and trembling.

“Afraid not. It is a time-honored tradition for adherents of the dark side of the force to depose their masters once they no longer require their teaching. It was inevitable.”

Rey inched away from him until the backs of her knees hit the edge of the bed. “So you—”

“Yes. I’ve taken my rightful place in the galaxy. If you hadn’t been stuck with Skywalker on that damp rock, you would have known that by now.”

Rey’s fury rose to the surface once more. “How did you find Luke? Who told you where we were?” Surely, no one with the Resistance with that level of information clearance would have betrayed them. Not willingly, anyway. Images of her comrades restrained and tortured for information filled her thoughts.
“You did. I could feel your blinding light from across the galaxy. Following you was easy. You may not have given me that map, but with you to guide me, I didn’t need it.”

Rey’s mouth fell open. It was her fault. Instead of bringing Luke back to the Resistance, she had unwittingly aided in his capture. She bit her lip, refusing to give him the satisfaction of seeing her cry. “And why did you take me? You had already found Luke, why kill one of your men to spare me?”

Kylo’s nostrils flared. “He had to me made an example of. Perhaps instinct kicked in when you took him by surprise, but that does not excuse insubordination. The order was to capture you, unharmed.”

“But why?”

“Because I have a proposition for you.” He replied.

Rey stared blankly, unsure of how to react.

“My intelligence probes have located the Resistance base on Hoth. I could order an invasion whenever I please, and judging from what my scouts found, your friends would be ill-equipped for such an attack. You are fighting a losing battle. I trust you will prefer my bloodless alternative. Should you agree to my terms, I will allow the Resistance to keep Hoth and all remaining Republic territories. I will relinquish all claim to them and declare a permanent ceasefire. Any prisoners we currently house, including Skywalker, will be delivered safely to their friends and families.”

They were haggling over planets and lives like bits of scrap metal. Rey had never needed to bargain for anyone’s survival but her own and the responsibility weighed heavily on her shoulders. “What’s your price?”

“You.” He took a step closer. “You will remain here. With me.”

“So I’m to be your hostage?” Rey asked.

When he lifted his hand, she flinched, expecting a mental invasion like the one she had experienced during her first time as his prisoner, but the pain never came. His wide palm cupped her cheek.
“Not exactly. More like my companion, an apprentice of sorts. It would be a shame to waste your potential. I wasn’t lying when I said I could show you the ways of the force.” His thumb traced her jaw and brushed over her lower lip. “There’s so much I could show you.”

Rey batted his hand away. He let his arm fall to his side without retaliating or shifting his conceited expression. “I’m being more than generous. Do you accept my offer?” He asked.

Since Rey had reached physical maturity, and even a few times before then, numerous offers had been made on her by the lecherous patrons of Niima Outpost. She had refused them all with harsh words or a swing of her bo staff. But this was different. This wasn’t a handful of portions or canteen of water being dangled before her eyes, but the fate of millions. She had to take it. And perhaps, with her on the inside, she might obtain information that could give the Resistance a fighting chance. Until then, she would endure. “I accept.” She felt a piece of her break away as she said the words.

Kylo’s smile broadened. “Wise choice.”

Rey’s gaze flickered to the bed behind her.

“That can wait,” Kylo said. “For now we should find you some dry clothes, perhaps something to eat. It will be a couple hours before we reach Mustafar.”

“Mustafar?”

“Yes. That’s where I live when I am not on a mission. We’ll be staying there for a short while.”


“He will be delivered to the Hoth base along with the terms of our agreement.” He walked across the room and slid open a drawer to pull out a wad of fabric. He handed it to her before walking over to a wall console and punching something into the keypad.

Rey unraveled the bundle. It was a simple, black shirt that was obviously one of his. Refusing to needlessly disrobe, she slid it on over what she already wore. It was heavy and warm, driving the chill from her shaking limbs, and would have been comforting if it weren’t for the faint smell of him that clung to the fabric. She would need to get used to that smell, she reminded herself.
After a moment, Kylo stepped away from the console to face her. “That’s taken care of. His shuttle will launch shortly. I had no doubt you would see things my way and had everything prepared beforehand.”

“How do I know you aren’t lying?” Rey asked. “You could have killed Luke and lied about all of this.”

“I will give you access to my hyper-transceiver so that you can contact the Resistance. I’m sure they will want proof that you are both alive and compliant.” Kylo walked over to the viewport and offered her his hand. “If you want immediate proof, allow me to give you your first lesson.”

Rey went to his side but refused his hand. He took her by the shoulders instead and shifted her to face the viewport.


Rey felt him at the edge of her mind, nudging her in the right direction. She allowed him to guide her until she felt Luke’s presence below them. It was faint, but it was unmistakably him. It was a strange, fleeting sensation like she had caught a glimpse of him in the corner of her mind’s eye. She could feel his sadness and resignation. Then, his presence shifted and the hull of a small ship appeared outside the viewport that reminded her of an old imperial shuttle she had once picked apart. She could feel Luke onboard.

“There he is,” Kylo whispered. “Safe and sound, like I promised.”

Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Rey backed against the headboard as the mattress dipped beneath Kylo’s added weight. He crept toward her on hands and knees, then caught her by the ankle to drag her beneath him. His hands were braced on either side of her, his face hovering inches from hers.

Having been raised among so few humans, Rey had never given much thought to physical beauty. One dust-sodden drifter was much the same as the next. Even so, Rey knew that Kylo was handsome. Beyond her better judgment and personal reservations, he appealed to her in some strange, primal way, with his full lips and angular features. If she could forget who he was, pretend they were just two strangers sharing a bed for the night, she might possibly enjoy this.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Rey and Kylo sat in silence at his table, the stars outside streaking by as they traveled through hyperspace. Kylo ate his meal with impeccable manners, a vestigial habit of his privileged upbringing, no doubt. Rey dipped her spoon into the strange meal he had given her—likryt stew, he called it. She stirred the floating chunks of meat before selecting a small one to bring to her mouth. She hadn’t had fresh meat in nearly a year and whatever this was, it was far less gamey than a Jakku skittermouse. The savory flavor spread over her tongue and the warmth ran through her chilled insides, but after only a few morsels, Rey could already feel her stomach begin to reject it. Dropping her spoon back into the bowl, she slid it away.

“Not hungry?” Kylo asked.

“I’m just not used to this sort of food.”

“Well, you need to eat something. You’re skinny enough as it is.” Kylo blew on his next steaming spoonful.

Rey rolled back her dangling sleeves and grabbed the bowl with both hands. Keeping her eyes narrowed and locked with his, she slurped it back, letting the spicy sauce dribble down the corner of her mouth, then slammed the half-empty bowl onto the table and wiped her chin on her shoulder. Her stomach roiled in protest, but the unsettled look Kylo gave her was worth it.

An alarm rang at his side, prompting him to pull his hyper-transceiver from the inner pocket of his robes. The black and silver device was small enough to fit in the palm of his hand. He glared down at the screen, jaw clenched, then silenced it with a tap of his finger. “The Resistance has made contact. I’m sure they want confirmation that you consent to our agreement. Meanwhile, I have other duties to attend to.” He slid the transceiver to her end of the table and left without another word, the door’s locking mechanism hissing behind him.

Rey immediately recognized the flashing identification number. She tapped the screen, commanding the transceiver to project Leia’s hologram.
The resemblance between her and Kylo was undeniable. While he had inherited most of his looks from Han, his eyes were dark and expressive like Leia’s and possessed the same uncompromising intensity. “Rey? Oh, Rey, are you alright?” Leia asked.

“Allright” could hardly describe her situation, considering where she was headed and whose company she would have to endure for the foreseeable future. “I’m okay,” she said, sounding far from convinced.

Leia lowered her voice. “Has anyone hurt you?”

Leia didn’t specify, but Rey knew who she meant. “He gave me food and something warm to wear. I’m not in a cell either. It was made quite clear that my stay will be...a break from protocol.”

“Is he there now?” Leia asked.

“No. It’s just us.”

Leia nodded and ran her hands over her face, sighing heavily. “I just read through the terms that were sent to me. Rey, you don’t have to do this. I would never ask you to.”

“I know that.”

“Surely there’s something else we can—”

“There isn’t,” Rey said. “This is what’s best for everyone. You have to trust me.”

“But what about you?”

For so long, that had been Rey’s sole purpose: just survive the next day and hope it was the one she’d been waiting for. But things had changed. She had friends she had grown to trust, who were worth the sacrifice she was making. “I couldn’t come back now even if I wanted to. At least this way my absence can do some good.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I don’t quite understand it, but he used the force to find me,” Rey said. “How do you think he found Luke after all this time? It was me. If I came back theResistance, I would be a danger to everyone.”

Leia paled. “I know exactly what you’re talking about. Ages ago, I experienced something similar when Luke was in need of rescuing. I’m not surprised Ben is capable of it. He was always gifted in the force, so sensitive to the thoughts and feelings of those around him. But I never dreamt he would use that power for this.” Her voice cracked. She then took a moment to regain her composure. “This isn’t your fault, Rey. I don’t want you to live your life as a hostage because of misplaced guilt.”

“That’s not why I’m doing it,” Rey said. “And it won’t be forever. He said I could end the deal whenever I wished, so I’m not a hostage. Not really.” Just a pawn, a plaything for his twisted whims. Leia didn’t need to know the details. “I’ll be alright, I promise.”

“If this is what you have decided, then the Resistance will respect that. We will be eternally grateful for your sacrifice,” Leia said. “But promise me, if anything goes wrong you will end this and come back immediately. No one here would ever blame you. In fact, I’ll likely have a hard time keeping some of them from mounting a rescue mission against your wishes.”

“I promise.”
Leia nodded solemnly. “Finn is doing well. His rehabilitation is going smoothly and his spine has taken well to the implants. He should be back to his usual self in no time. I haven’t told him about the agreement yet. I wanted to talk to you first.”

“I understand.” Rey managed a small smile. “Tell him I miss him.”

“He misses you too. We all do.”

They said their final goodbyes before Rey ended the transmission. The silence was deafening as the weight of her decision sunk in.

The door hissed open and Kylo stepped inside. “All finished?” He asked. “How much of our deal did you explain?”

Rey glared up at him. “I skipped most of the details. Your mother doesn’t need to hear the rest of it. She’s worried enough as it is.”

“Is that what she told you? I’m sure she was thrilled with our little treaty. It cost her nothing, after all.” Being in no mood for a debate, Rey changed the subject. “Are we almost to Mustafar?”

“We should be exiting hyperspace shortly. The shuttle is waiting for us in the hangar bay to bring us down to the surface.” He offered her his hand. When Rey refused to take it, he caught her by the wrist and pulled her close to loop his arm through hers. He looked down at her with a smug grin. Biting her tongue, Rey allowed him to escort her out the door.

At the entrance to the hangar, the hall was lined with uniformed crew members standing at attention. Rey wondered if any of them knew who she was or why she was here. If they did, they didn’t show it. They were like mass-produced droids fresh from the assembly line, their only indication of humanity being the sweat forming on more than a few foreheads and the way they trembled as Kylo passed. Rey wondered if it was his mere presence that inspired fear, or if the incident on Ach-to of Kylo cutting down his subordinate had not been an isolated one. Kylo had reverted back to a steely, unreadable expression. He may as well have been wearing his old mask.

At the end of the hall stood a uniformed officer with a sickly pale complexion and orange hair scraped back in military fashion, just as stiff and severe as the rest of him. He resembled a living piece of war propaganda. “This must be the girl you spoke of, Your Imperial Majesty.” The officer bit out the words with a slight edge of disdain as he stared down at her like a misplaced bit of cargo. Rey stared straight back.

Kylo pulled her even closer to his side. “She is. She will accompany me to Coruscant when I come to inspect your progress on the Imperial palace. I hope you will be able to handle things until then.” The officer kept his eyes forward and posture rigid as Kylo brushed past him.

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The surface of Mustafar reminded Rey of a story her father had once told her about the Realm of Chaos where the dead endured an afterlife of pain and torment. For a brief moment, she was a child again, terrified and alone, wondering if she had already met her fate. But the heat of Jakku was nothing compared the burning surface of Mustafar. The bay doors slid open, bombarding her with the smell of ash and the searing heat of the atmosphere.

At the end of the landing pad, Rey saw Kylo’s fortress jutting out of the volcanic rock. A stream of glowing lava poured from its center into the burning sea that surrounded it. The angular edges of the structure rose in four spiked towers gathered together, nearly touching, to form a single point that
pierced the blackened sky. Looking up, Rey couldn’t find a single star. The clouds of ash had blocked them out, encasing her in the molten prison.

She couldn’t imagine anyone, even someone like Kylo, choosing to live in a place like this. Aside from the inhospitable environment, there was a troubling aura that hung over it like a shadow, condemning the place to impenetrable darkness. When Kylo led her through the obsidian doors, a terrible feeling burrowed itself into her heart, threatening tragedy and despair should she choose to enter. “What is this place?” she asked.

“It belonged to my grandfather during the reign of the old empire,” Kylo replied.

The doors moaned as he opened them with a wave of his hand. He led her through the desolate halls, through hollow chambers, and winding passages until they stopped before a set of doors. He waved them open and guided her inside. His personal chambers were much like the ones on the starship, but larger and built mainly from rock instead of metal. The viewport overlooked the lava sea, flowing and churning, with pillars of smoke escaping its depths.

Kylo pointed to a smaller door at the far end of the room. “The ‘fresher is through there. Go ahead and bathe and allow the medical droid to look you over.”

Rey detached herself from his side and made for the door. She needed a wash. Her clothes were filthy beneath the shirt he had given her.

As she closed the ‘fresher door behind her, she jumped at the sound of a mechanical whirl and turned to see a red lens staring out at her from a wall console. “How may I be of assistance?” It asked.

“Are you the medical droid?” The voice certainly didn’t sound like it had a lifeform behind it.

“Correct. I am DT-88, programmed for personal health and medical care.” Its voice was deep and monotone, more like an enforcer droid than a medical unit. “Are you in need of assistance?”

“Um, sure. I suppose.”

At that, the droid dislodged itself from the console, revealing itself to be a palm-sized sphere of black durasteel. It propelled itself through the air, circling her like a small moon, as its red scanner ran over her body. When it reached her hand, it froze and let out a small alarm.

“It’s just a bruise,” Rey said.

Its red eye swiveled up to look at her. “No fracture detected. May I extract a blood sample for further health analysis?”

“Fine.” Rey sighed and offered her hand.

A black needle extended from the droid’s body and pricked the end of her middle finger before sliding back into its shell. After a moment of calculation, it let out another alarm. “Severe nutritional deficiencies detected. Blood sugar, essential nutrients, and body fat all dangerously low. Symptoms may include: fatigue, bone weakness, reproductive disorders, fainting spells, electrolyte imbalance, increased susceptibility to infections—”

“I know all that.” Rey batted the droid away. She didn't need to hear the symptoms. She lived them.

“Nutritional supplements and a specialized dietary regimen are recommended.”

“Alright, but for now, just tell me how to work that thing.” Rey pointed to the glossy black tub at the
end of the room that looked big enough to accommodate about five of her.

“Allow me.” The console clicked and water came gushing out of the faucet to fill the bath. “I have added a cleansing solution to the water. Will you be needing anything else?”

“No, that’s it.” Rey peeled off her clothes and tossed them into a pile on the floor.

“Powering down,” the droid announced before rolling its lens into the back of its socket.

Rey submerged herself in the chilled bath, letting it soothe her hot skin and tight muscles. As she worked the water into her matted hair, it bubbled and emitted a clean, pleasant odor. This would have been enough water to last her for months and here she was bathing in it. The wastefulness almost angered her, but instead, she floated and tried to calm herself. She would save her fury for a more worthy target.

Kylo was probably wondering what was taking her so long. If only she could remain here, enjoying the simple pleasures she had long been denied, and forget about the fate that awaited her just outside the door.

Once the skin on her fingers and toes began to wrinkle, Rey lifted herself from the water and wrapped herself in one of the towels folded on the edge of the bath. She wrung the water from her hair and combed her fingers through it before letting it fall damp and heavy over her shoulders.

She emerged from the ‘fresher to see Kylo had already rid himself of his outer layers, leaving only a thin shirt and trousers. Rey stared down at her feet.

“Not having second thoughts, are you?”

She shook her head.

“Good.” In a swift motion, he grabbed the edge of her towel and cast it aside. His smile widened. “If I had known what was hidden beneath those desert rags of yours, I would have made an offer the first time I caught you.”

Keeping her face in a tight scowl, Rey crossed her arms over her breasts, flushing pink from head to toe. Kylo picked her up and carried her to the edge of the bed. Splaying his hand between her breasts, he pressed her down against the sheets. They were cool against her bare back. “Last chance,” he warned.

“Just get on with it.”

He unfastened his trousers and pulled himself free. Rey squeezed her eyes shut as panic shot through her. She had observed male anatomy before, both human and alien, but in those instances, she had been armed and clothed and the men had been simple desert dwellers with no sense of decency, not a ruthless emperor she had bargained herself to. His hands came down on her knees, warm and calloused. She allowed him to part her thighs.

Rey cried out as he drove into her with a quick thrust, sending a shock of pain through her core. “Kriff! That hurts, get off.” She kicked at his chest and wiggled free. Sliding to the other end of the bed, she tucked her legs against her body. “Do you even know what the hell you’re doing?” She knew little of human mating habits, but surely they required more preparation than that.

Kylo's ears turned red. “You need to relax.”

“You aren’t exactly helping.”
He exhaled through flared nostrils. “Alright. Allow me to oblige.”

Rey backed against the headboard as the mattress dipped beneath his added weight. He crept toward her on hands and knees, then caught her by the ankle to drag her beneath him. His hands were braced on either side of her and his face hovered above hers.

Having been raised among so few humans, Rey had never given much thought to physical beauty. One dust-sodden drifter was much the same as the next. Even so, Rey knew that Kylo was handsome. Beyond her better judgment and personal reservations, he appealed to her in some strange, primal way, with his full lips and strong, angular features. If she could forget who he was, pretend they were just two strangers sharing a bed for the night, she might possibly enjoy this.

Before the thought could linger, his lips pressed against hers, hard and demanding as his hands groped at her body. One found her breast while the other slipped between her legs. She clenched them shut, but his long fingers had found their target. His movements were clumsy, but her body responded nonetheless. She winced as a jolt of pleasure ran up her spine.

He broke the kiss to whisper in her ear. “Better?”

She refused to respond, but the ease with which he entered her the second time answered for her. Kylo let out a small gasp and swore under his breath as his hips molded against hers. He started with slow, steady thrusts, then lifted her hips and looped her ankles behind his back to allow him to thrust deeper and harder, filling her almost to the point of pain. His mouth found her neck and left a trail of kisses along her collarbone, making her skin feel like a tangle of exposed wire, ready to spark and burst into flames. Small, incomprehensible noises escaped her lips.

She felt a strange sensation building inside her, like she was climbing to the top a sand dune, the midday sun beating down on her. What she hoped to find at the summit, she had no idea.

Kylo’s face contorted in pleasure each time his hips rolled into hers. His breathing was ragged and heavy. Just as Rey was nearing her summit, Kylo stilled. A deep moan tore from his throat. He withdrew, sending her tumbling back down to the bottom of the dune, feeling both defiled and dissatisfied.

Kylo slumped beside her, his sweaty limbs still intertwined with hers. Rey untangled herself from his grasp then slid off the bed, wanting to get as far away from him as he would allow.

“How are you going?” he asked as she pattered over to the ‘fresher door, her legs weak and shaky.

“I need another bath.” Anything to rid herself of the sore, sticky feeling between her thighs.

Kylo chuckled. “Is that an invitation?”

As an answer, Rey slammed the door behind her and hoped he wouldn’t try to follow. She slumped her back against it, then slid down to the floor and rested her head on her knees. Small bruises had already begun to form where his fingers had dug into her thighs. Her body and mind were a jumbled mess. She would never get this moment back or undo this decision. Even when she had the intel she needed and escaped this wretched place, she would be leaving a small shred of herself behind. He would always be her first. Rey took a deep breath and brushed away the wet hair that clung to her face, along with the tears that were forming. She made her choice. She could get through this, she told herself.

A short time later, Rey stepped out of the ‘fresher as clean as she was ever going to get. Kylo had left another one of his shirts at the foot of his bed and fallen asleep in a tangle of dark sheets. Rey pulled
it on and slipped under the covers, keeping as far to her side as she could manage without falling off. Kylo groaned, his long arms probing beneath the covers as he tossed and turned. Rey gasped as his hands found her waist and pulled her against him. His eyes were still closed and his mouth was ajar, a faint snore rumbling at the back of his throat. Unwilling to wake him and unable to lift his heavy limbs off her, Rey allowed sleep to take her.

Chapter End Notes

Don't worry my dear reader. Things will get better for these two lost souls in due time. Thank you for reading and leaving feedback! I am truly grateful.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Rey's training finally begins in the bowels of a sith temple where ancient secrets lie buried. After a bit of sparring, Kylo has a little surprise for his captive companion.

Rey had never slept on actual bed until last night. There was, however, a faint memory at the edge of her mind of her mother holding her, stroking her hair, and humming a song Rey had long forgotten, as they laid upon a thin cot. Whenever she tried to examine it in closer detail, it would slip like sand through her fingers. She couldn’t even remember her mother’s face. Just the sound of her voice and the way it felt to have her arms wrapped round her. Inside her fallen AT-AT on Jakku, a pile of flat scrap metal and shreds of cloth had served as her bed. Some days when she had tried to sleep in, too exhausted from the day before to pick herself up, the morning sun would penetrate the hull of her metal home and force her outside to avoid burns or heat stroke. On Ach-to, all she’d had was a stone slab and the bunks aboard the Falcon had been stripped by Unkar Plutt ages ago. But now as she laid tangled in the soft blankets and plush mattress that sunk softly beneath her, cradling her sore body, she knew Kylo and all that had transpired between them the night before couldn’t spoil it. Just like her bath, it felt like a stolen pleasure that could be snatched away from her at any moment.

“Are you awake?” Kylo asked.

Just the sound of his voice made her face flush with shame. “I’m up.” She said, running her fingers over the sheets one final time before sitting up and rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Kylo stood at the edge of the bed with folded fabric in his hands. “What’s that?” Rey asked.

“The new clothes I’ve chosen for you. Put them on. Unless you’ve taken a liking to my wardrobe, that is.” He tossed them onto the bed within her reach.

As soon as he turned to walk toward the dining area, Rey slipped out of the nightshirt, rolled it up, and threw it against the wall. He was dressing her now like a little doll. Before he could turn and comment on her nakedness, she shoved on the new garments. The fabric was thin and breathable and partially sheer over her shoulders. It wrapped around her in a way that resembled her discarded desert garb, making her wonder where Kylo had gotten it. The trousers were simple and loose and the shoes were fastened with wide bands that wrapped up her calves. Every inch of it was the same pale shade of gray. If Rey didn’t see colors beyond black, gray, and red soon, she swore she’d either go blind or pluck her own eyes out to end the dour monotony. But at least it wasn’t black. Kylo’s shirts had made her blend into her dark surroundings as if she belonged in this charred carcass he called home.
“I’ve followed Deetee’s recommendations for your breakfast,” Kylo said, taking his seat at the table.

“Deetee?”

“The medical droid. He gave me your abysmal bloodwork results. This should pack in enough nutrients to sort you out fairly quickly.”

Rey walked over to find a round pastry at her end of the table. In a way, it resembled the rehydrated polystarch she was accustomed to, but upon taking her first bite she found it to be far softer with a flaky crust and a touch of sweetness in the center. Kylo’s plate was piled high with a variety of meat and fruit, along with other foods she couldn’t name. Whatever it was, it smelled fantastic.

“I also kept your delicate palate in mind and chose something a bit bland for you,” Kylo said. “I wouldn’t want you getting sick on the training room floor.”

Rey took another bite before speaking with her mouth full. “Did you make this?”

Kylo wrinkled his nose. “No. The kitchen staff did.”

“You have staff? I didn’t think anyone else was here.”

“It’s mostly droids, but there are some living staff. They choose to keep to themselves.”

“I wonder why?” Rey mumbled before taking another oversized bite, scattering flakes of pastry.

“You should be more aware of those around you. Always stay vigilant,” Kylo said, tapping the chrome table. “We’ll need to work on that.”

“Is that what we’ll be doing today?” Rey asked.

“Perhaps not that skill specifically, but we will be training once we're done eating.”
Rey finished her breakfast and waited for him with her arms crossed while he ate at a sluggish pace, carefully cutting his meal into chewable bites. He then led her by the arm through the dim empty halls of the castle and again Rey measured her steps, memorizing every passage and archway, taking note of any imperfections in the stone and metal that might help her distinguish one path from another. It all seemed designed to make her feel small and insignificant, with its towering ceilings and rooms so large she could hardly see the end of them. But as they descended to the lower levels, the passages narrowed and the walls slowly closed in around her like she was crawling into the gut of a massive beast.

Their journey ended at a door with a symbol inlaid in the center. It resembled a small red sun with sharp rays spreading out in four directions. Kylo laid his hand over it. The symbol illuminated and the door rumbled beneath his fingers before it dragged open. “This is where we will be training from now on,” he said.

They stepped into a wide room with eight doors lining the walls. They were much the same as the one they had come through but covered in carvings of a language she couldn’t decipher. Between the doors were eight stone statues over twice Rey’s height with vivid expressions of pain and rage carved into their stone faces. Rey stared up at them and felt as though they were staring back, full of malice and cruel intentions. From the eyes and mouths of each statue poured a thin stream of lava that flowed into their open hands before dripping down into the glowing moat that surrounded them.

Kylo’s hand skimmed the small of her back, startling her, then came to rest on her hip. “Don’t worry. They’re long dead. All that’s left of them are these statues and the knowledge they left behind.”

“Who were they?”

“Ancient lords of the Sith. This temple had been abandoned, hidden deep within the rock until my grandfather and his master unearthed it and built this castle around it.”

Rey knew little of the Sith beyond the stories she had been told as a child. They were the dark shadows of their Jedi counterparts, always clawing their way to power at any cost. Of course, there were also the frightening stories of Darth Vader and his elusive master. Her father’s stories about them had seemed genuine, but Jakku and its inhabitants had a way of crushing childish dreams. Too stubborn to discard the tales of the Jedi and Sith entirely, she kept them quietly buried along with her dimming hope of her parents’ return.

“Are you a Sith?” Rey asked.

“No. The cycle of master and apprentice ended with the death of my grandfather. Had he survived
and had my uncle been wise enough to accept his teachings, the order would have continued. Instead, I study the texts and holocrons they left behind.”

“What are holocrons?”

“You’re certainly curious today.” Kylo wrapped his fingers around hers. “Allow me to show you.”

He led her to one of the doors which opened on a set of stairs. They descended into the darkness until Rey’s foot landed with a thud as the steps abruptly ended. A moment later, a globe of light flickered on overhead to reveal the room. Compared to the main area, it was tiny. Kylo’s head nearly brushed the ceiling. Shelves ran along the far wall, filled with books that appeared older than both Kylo and her combined, as well as loose holodisks and piles of dust-coated paper. At the center of the room were two wooden chests. Kylo crouched before one and pried it open. Its lid hung loosely on broken hinges which appeared to have been torn open, leaving a splintered gash. Inside were eight black and gold pyramids with symbols etched along the base.

“These holocrons store recordings of old masters. To open them, one must use the force. The dark side in particular,” Kylo said. “Go ahead. Take one”

After a moment’s hesitation, Rey selected one at random. It was small enough to fit in her palm and burned faintly against her skin like a cooling ember. It emanated darkness, much like the rest of the temple. A voice crept into her ear, too quiet to understand but slowly building the longer she held it. Dropping it back into the chest, she withdrew her hand.

As Rey stood and staggered back, Kylo rose beside her and steadied her with a firm hand on her shoulder. “Don’t worry. As much light as there is in you, I doubt you’d be able to open one yet.” He picked up the discarded holocron which glowed red as inspected it. “But maybe you could, with my help. There is a touch of darkness in you that with the proper guidance could lead you to true greatness.” The reflection of the holocron lit his eyes a burning red.

“Kylo, I thought we were here for training. Can we please just go?” Rey tugged at his sleeve, feeling like a scared child. Whatever was inside those things, she wanted no part of.

Kylo placed the holocron back into its chest and turned to face her. Whatever had come over him seemed to have passed. “Alright. First, we will start with some basic lightsaber forms.”

From one of the adjacent rooms, he retrieved a pair of metal rods that were the approximate size of
an activated lightsaber and handed one to Rey. He talked her through a basic form, physically moving her into the correct stance. “This is known as form one or Shii-Cho.” He guided her through the movements before taking his place opposite her.

“Had you ever used a weapon like a lightsaber before?” He asked as he initiated their mock-duel. His blow was hard but lacking the fury he showed on the battlefield.

“Not really.” Until she’d found her staff, she had simply used whatever was available. Some of her makeshift were of similar weight and size to a lightsaber, but she never kept them long enough to really learn to use them. If they didn’t fall apart, she would trade them for portions once something better was salvaged or when day’s haul was too slim to barter for a much-needed meal. They were mostly spare parts to begin with, not proper weapons.

“You did well enough on Starkiller,” Kylo said. “But remember that I was badly injured at the time. You barely lasted a minute on Ach-to against my knight.”

Excuses about the terrain and weather came to mind, but Rey bit her lip and kept quiet. For once, he was right. The foes she found herself facing since finding the Force were nothing like the desert street thugs she could easily kick into the dirt.

“But despite your lack of training, you have a great deal of potential. More than you know. If you follow my lead and you can become more powerful than you’ve ever dreamed of,” Kylo said. “I think you’ll find me to be a much better teacher than Skywalker.”

“Luke never tried to teach me the force.”

He swung low, striking her ankle. “Then what were you doing all that time on that desolate rock?”

“Trying to convince him to return to the Resistance,” she said, slashing back at him.

“I guess you can thank me for completing your mission.”

She landed a hit to his ribcage with a hard thwack. Snapping to attention, he lashed out with a long-reaching swing. She ducked in time, but as she lifted her rod to retaliate he extended his hand and used the force to send her sliding back on the smooth floor.
She barely managed to remain standing. “What was that about? I thought we were working on saber forms.”

Kylo shrugged. “In combat, you must use whatever advantage you have. If you want me to teach you how to perform a Force push, I will. You already managed to summon a lightsaber, so this should be a quick lesson. It’s just a matter of reversal.”

“Show me.”

“Okay. I’m going to come toward you and I want you to try to push me back. Reach for me with the force and shove back as hard as you can.”

Rey nodded and set her rod on the ground. Kylo did the same then began to amble toward her. She extended her hand just as he had. She tried remembering how she had summoned the lightsaber but came up empty. That had been a moment of blind discovery and was not easily replicated.

After a few more steps, Kylo skid back a hair before resuming his approach. He gave her a small nod of approval. “Feel the Force, Rey. Bend it to your will.”

She furrowed her brow and focused until her hand trembled. Kylo jerked back a second time, sliding farther back than before.

“Just a bit more. Come on.” His eyes went wide as he was shoved against the wall. He quickly righted himself and ran a hand through his hair as he laughed. “Not bad. Now try that during combat.”

They kept sparring, each landing their fair share of blows as the hours passed, until they were both covered in a glistening sheen of sweat, their faces flushed and breathing ragged. Rey knew she would have a few new bruises added to her growing collection. Her legs were growing weak and when Kylo slashed at her feet again, she was unable to counter in time and fell flat on her back.

He stared down at her, arms crossed, clearly amused by her compromised position. “That’s enough for today. I think we’ve earned a bit of a break.”
Rey frowned and lifted a skeptical brow. “What sort of break?”

“You’ll see. Just follow my lead.” He returned the training rods to their proper place before leading the way.

Keeping within the narrower passages of the castle, they made a few short turns before reaching a wooden door. For the first time since arriving on Mustafar, Rey felt moisture in the air. Beyond the door was a small, cavernous room with a wide pool of bubbling gray water. Sharp rock formations hung from the ceiling and shot up from the uneven ground. The patterning of water droplets dripping and splashing against the rocks added to the soothing atmosphere. It was a true oasis.

“Because of the heat and minerals, the hot spring helps improve blood flow and speed up muscle regeneration. Perfect for after a training session.” Kylo undressed, revealing that Rey had indeed left a few bruises of her own. “Take all of it off,” he said. “The sulfur will ruin your clothes.”

Part of her wanted to refuse just to spite him, but the spring was too tempting. She didn’t bother to gauge his reaction as she disrobed; she could already feel the approval radiating from him as the shirt grazed over her breasts. She unfastened her trousers and let them puddle at her feet before kicking them aside and putting her hands on her hips. “Happy now?”

“Very.” He took her by the wrist and pulled her to the water’s edge.

She snatched back her hand and claimed her side of the pool. Thankfully the water was cloudy from the swirling sediment and minerals, allowing a bit of privacy once she sunk neck-deep into its depths. Now she could relax.

Staring at the ceiling she noticed a light sprinkling of yellow over the dark rock. She stood to get a closer look and found that it was a cluster of tiny yellow flowers. The vine they sprouted from clung to the ceiling and wrapped around a rock spike before disappearing into a crack. The blooms had yellow leaves slashed with violet and fuzzy orange buds in the center. She finally found color.

“Volcanic soil is extremely fertile,” Kylo said. “The planet’s surface is inhospitable, but down here, things are able to grow.”

Rey turned to find him studying her with eyes half-lidded and the corners of his mouth curled into a lazy grin. She dove back below the surface, splashing water. He closed the distance between them and before she could utter a protest, he cornered her at the edge of the pool. She pushed against his
chest, first physically, then with the Force.

His grunted as he was slammed against a rock, but then tossed back his wet hair and chuckled. “I thought we were done sparring.” He swam back toward her, eyes narrowed, daring her to try to push him away again. His hands struggled to get a hold of her slippery skin, but once he had a firm grip on her hips he lowered her onto his lap. Rey gasped as he filled her. He moved in rapid strokes, his teeth clenched and bared. All she felt was uncomfortable friction and the hard rock scraping against her back.

“Slow down, for kriff’s sake,” she said.

He ignored her and continued his frantic pace until she dug her nails into his shoulders to drive in her point. “I said slow down.”

He complied, dragging himself out achingly slow before driving back in even harder. After the initial shock and discomfort passed, she felt her pleasure mounting as it had the night before. He drove into her over and over until she felt her pulse beating in her ears as it raced to match his. To allow him to hit her in just the right spot, she hooked her legs around his waist and held on by his shoulders. She let out a long moan and raked her nails down his chest as her release shook her. He echoed her sounds of pleasure and thrust her against the rock one final time. For a second, she could have sworn she saw stars.

As they both fought to catch their breath, Kylo held her tight against his chest and whispered in her ear. “A bit more enthusiastic today, I see.” He used the same mocking tone he’d used when she was flat on her back in the temple.

“Just be quiet before you manage to ruin this.” In that moment, she felt more like a traitor than a martyr and didn’t need his voice reminding her who she was wrapped around. She rested her forehead on his shoulder and traced her fingertips over the raised scars on his back, wondering what she had gotten herself into.
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Days and weeks pass in a blur on Mustafar. Kylo and Rey fall into a routine and begin to adjust to one another's company until he spoils what progress he had made by taking her training a step too far.

Chapter Notes

I'm a little late in posting, but I wrote a bit more than in previous chapters. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With no way for Mustafar’s dim sun to pierce the ash clouds that plagued its atmosphere, there was no light to mark the passing of the days. Instead, they relied on their instincts to know when to sleep, train, and eat. Periodically, Kylo would disappear to handle imperial matters but he never left the planet. Rey had learned to sense his every move. She could even feel the way he slammed down each foot in succession as he strode through the obsidian halls and felt the way his spirits lifted when he neared their bedchamber. His approach lifted hers as well sometimes. Even his presence was preferable to the crushing silence. Whenever she was alone and idle for too long, the darkness of the ancient Sith that lingered in the castle seemed to close in on her. Kylo was her only choice for human contact. Perhaps that why he’d brought her here.

That morning, Rey had awoken to find that Kylo had migrated to her side of the bed, going as far as to take over her pillow and offer his chest as a replacement. Thankfully, they had slipped back into their nightclothes before falling asleep the evening before. But one of his hands had slid into her shirt to rest the small of her back and the other rested on her leg which was coiled around his.

“Kylo?” She wiggled in his tight hold in an attempt to wake him.

After a bit of effort on her part and heavy snoring on his, he finally responded. “What is it?”

“Can I ask you something?”

He buried his face in her hair and squeezed her tighter. His reply was impossible to make out.

“This is important, Kylo. Wake up properly.”

The question had been burning in her mind for what felt like weeks. She’d weighed her options, deciding on the right time and the right way to press her case. Yesterday’s training had gone splendidly as she’d worked her way up to form five and last night had been mutually fulfilling as much as she hated to admit it. Now seemed a good a time as ever. Even if it wasn’t, she hadn’t the patience wait any longer. “Can I please have a holopad to speak to my friends whenever I want?”

He pulled back to look her in the eyes. “A holopad?”
“Yes. I had one in my satchel on Ach-to, but when I woke up on your ship it was gone. Do you still have it?” Leia had given it to her a before she’d left to find Luke and apologized for how outdated it was. It was still more cutting-edge than she was used to. Having little else to do on Ach-to, she’d tinkered with it extensively to adjust it to her personal preferences. It had originally been intended for military personnel so she’d uninstalled most of the software. All she needed was a way to reach her the Resistance.

“Yes, I still have it. It’s here in this room, actually.” his hands crept down her back and teased her waistband. “How badly do you want it?”

“Kriff, Kylo. I just want to talk to my friends. They probably want to know I’m still alive.” Her words came out harsher than intended. She bit her lip but refused to break eye contact as she waited for him to answer.

“Fine.” He untangled himself from her and stretched before walking over to his storage compartments.

She threw back the covers and followed. He slid opened one of the endless drawers to reveal one which contained both her satchel and the clothing she had worn on Ach-to that she had discarded on her first night in the castle. “You kept all this?”

Kylo’s jaw twitched. “Do you want it or not?”

Rey grabbed her satchel and left the clothes behind. Only one thing was missing from the drawer. “Where’s the lightsaber?”

He shoved the drawer back into its socket. “I have returned it to its rightful place.”

Rey went to the bed and began unpacking her few possessions and arranging them on the nightstand, but kept the blaster Han had given her inside the satchel. First was her little seedling which still clung to life. She’d found the seed on Ach-to and had planted in a clay cup that had a fine crack running down the side. It had taken weeks of tending and waiting for the seed to sprout, but she’d had little else to occupy her time. Eventually, the green sprout had shot up and sprouted fuzzy little leaves, then a tiny flower bud. It still had yet to open, but the swirl of petals tucked into the bud was bright yellow. The island had been covered with greenery but just being around it wasn’t the same as watching a plant grow to completion. She could only hope that the little flower would adjust to the dry atmosphere of Mustafar.

Beside her seedling, Rey laid out the other baubles she had collected. There was a steelpecker claw, oddly colored bits of metal, the tooth of a gnaw-jaw, a few stones that had a strange shape or texture—anthing that had caught her eye. Kylo lifted a brow at her little collection before making his way to the ‘fresher.

As soon as he shut the door, Rey pulled out her datapad. She dug her fingers into the seam of its outer casing to pry it open, exposing its components. Nothing looked out of place. No strange microchip or change in the circuitry that might indicate Kylo had made any adjustments or bugged it. Scrolling through the entry logs and what little she had stored on the hard drive showed no signs of tampering. Feeling assured that her conversation would go unmonitored, she sent out a comm request to Finn.

After a moment, his voice came through somewhat muddled. “Rey? Is that really you?”

“Of course it is,” Rey replied.
He hollered then spoke through gleeful laughter. “It’s so good to hear your voice again.”

“You too. But why isn’t your holograph projecting?”

“I’m in the medbay going through my exercises so I just bought my commlink. No visuals on this thing. You’ll have to reach out again later when I’m back in my bunk if you want to actually look at me,” Finn said. “You will be able to reach me again, right? You’ll be allowed?” Rey wasn’t sure if it was pity or misplaced guilt that she heard in his voice.

“Yes, Finn. I have my holopad now and can use it whenever I want.”

“How are they treating you? General Leia said you would be receiving special treatment. At least that’s what the terms of the agreement said. That turned out to be true, right?” He lowered his voice to a whisper, using the same concerned, coddling tone Leia had. Rey nearly called him out to insist she could handle things on her own, but instead, she smiled at the fact that they cared enough to worry about her at all. “How are you being treated?” he asked. “If anything is wrong you can tell me.”

Rey wasn’t sure how to put Kylo’s treatment of her into words. “I’m alright. I have food, water, and a real bed to sleep in. There’s even a medical droid in the next room that looks after me. Can’t replace Beebee-Ate, but Deetee’s proven useful.”

Finn sighed. “I still can’t believe you agreed to stay there. When Leia told me you’d been taken again...I should have been on that island with you. I should have stopped this before it happened instead of being stuck in the medbay, having droids teach me how to walk again like a child. I feel so useless in here.”

“You could never be useless.”

“Thanks, Rey. I can walk now, even if I’m not back to my old self. I guess I can find something to do around here. I’m just not used to this sort of treatment. Stormtroopers who are too weak to fight aren’t given an honorable discharge and sent back home. They certainly don’t get put on bedrest.”

“You don’t have to worry about that anymore,” Rey said. “You just keep improving and keep your communication channels open. Who else is going to keep me company while I’m stuck here? It’s so refreshing to hear you again. It may just be through the comm channels, but I’m sure the holograms will help.”

“Is this really how it’s going to be from now on?” Finn asked. “I’m never going to see you face to face ever again?”

Kylo had given her back her belongings easily enough. Perhaps with a bit more leverage, she could negotiate further privileges. She had no intention of keeping up the deal going forever, but at the same time had no idea how long it would have to last. She would need a big breakthrough in intel to justify her return to the Resistance. “Of course we’ll see each other again.”

“When?”

“I—I don’t know,” She said. “I’m sure I can arrange something. You just have to trust me.”

“Of course I trust you, but it’s not you I’m worried about.”

Rey’s breath caught as her eyes flickered to the ‘fresher door. Kylo leaned against the archway, his hair wet and his body wrapped in a towel. He stared at her datapad, his mouth set in a grim line.
“Finn, I have to go.” She said.

“Why? What is it?” Finn asked.

“It’s nothing. Something just came up. I’ll talk with you later,” she said as Kylo approached the bed. Finn hardly had enough time to say goodbye before the signal cut off.

“So that’s who you wanted to contact? I assumed you’d contact my mother first,” Kylo said, his words dripping with disapproval.

“I said I wanted to speak with my friends, so that’s what I did,” she said, hugging her datapad against her. “I miss Finn and I wanted to know how his rehabilitation is going. He had to have a spinal implant after what you did.”

“He left a few marks of his own.”

“But you actually deserved them,” Rey said, her voice low and bitter.

Kylo dropped his towel before rifling through his for a clean set of robes. Despite dressing himself heavy layers from the neck down every day, he certainly lacked modesty where she was concerned. “Just so we’re clear, I’m not setting up a little rendezvous for the two of you, so don’t bother asking,” he said as she shoved his legs into his trousers.

Rey fumed. “I need some sort of outside interaction or else I’ll go mad. You can’t just lock me in here with you.”

“Yes, I can. It’s what you agreed to. Besides, you seemed perfectly satisfied with our arrangement last night,” Kylo said with a taunting glint in his eye.

Rey colored and thought about hurling her datapad at his head, but doubted his willingness to replace it. Instead, she placed it in her satchel.

“If you miss social interaction so much, you’ll be pleased with our schedule once we reach Coruscant. I have an endless string of meetings to attend and appearances to make and you will remain by my side. By the end of it, you’ll be sick of interaction and begging for a moment alone.”

Silently, she already was. She sat steely-eyed, waiting to see if he had finished his inane rambling. She would need to find some useful intel soon. Now that she had her datapad back, perhaps she could put it to good use. If not here, then on Coruscant. If she was to be paraded around like some sort of war trophy, then she could at least use it to her advantage. She might overhear something worthwhile.

“Just forget it. We have a lot to cover today,” Kylo said, buckling the wide belt around his waist with a click.

Rey chose to dress herself in the ‘fresher. She then ate her breakfast in silence across from Kylo before following him out the door.

“Can you sense the presence of the castle staff?” Kylo asked as they walked.

She reached out as he had taught her, searching through the force for their signatures. There was a stirring at the edge of her consciousness. She felt someone. Reaching further, she found twelve signatures clustered together. “Yes. I can feel twelve of them. They’re somewhere...north of us, I think.”
“There are more than that elsewhere in the castle, but go on. Tell me what are they’re doing, what they’re feeling.”

It felt intrusive, but she knew if she objected, Kylo would find some thin excuse to dismiss her moral objections and perhaps chastise her for having any at all. As gentle as she could, she focused on each one, trying to get a feel for who they were and what they might be doing. She heard the beeping of a monitor, the feel of warm metal beneath their fingers, the stiffness of a uniform that hugged too tightly around the arms. All were human, some older than others, and mostly male. They were focused and diligent and gave no indication she was peering in at them. “They’re inside a large room with lots of equipment. They are...hard working but not unhappy.”

“You must have found the command center.” Kylo nodded. “And your assessment of them is correct as well. They are all wholly committed to my New Empire and beat out countless less competent officers for the privilege of serving at its heart.”

Rey silently approved of his analogy. This molten, twisted, fortress was perfect.

Once they reached the temple, Kylo stopped at the door and turned to her. “Place your hand over the seal. I want you to open it.”

“Well.” Rey stared at the red sun then covered it with her palm.

“Now, I want you to focus. You need to let your emotions flow, your anger, your passion, your pain. This is a temple of the Sith. You need to prove yourself worthy of opening it.”

“Can’t you just open it?”

“No. This is a lesson. Now focus.”

She exhaled, closed her eyes, and tried to focus on her memories of Kylo, back to the first time she felt the darkness edging at her mind, coaxing her to land a killing blow while he laid bleeding in the snow, right before the ground opened up and robbed her of the decision. For a moment, the righteous anger filled her, flowing through her hand and causing the seal to warm beneath her touch. Then, the image shifted and became muddled with visions of Kylo’s wandering hands and needy touch. Surely, that should have counted as passion, but she couldn’t quite grasp it. The only true passion she had felt was faint and fleeting, rarely lasting more than a few moments before being followed by shame and regret. It wasn’t enough to open the seal.

She pulled back her hand. “I can’t. Just open the door so we can practice saber forms.”

He begrudgingly agreed and slapped his hand against the seal.

They began their mock saber sparring, but there was a tension in the air that was absent the day before. His blows were harder than they’d been before and he’d forgone naming the forms or explaining much of anything. He swung his rod with ferocity, putting his weight behind it instead of keeping step with her. Rey rose to the challenge, meeting his moves with spontaneity and relying on instinct rather than practiced motions. She maneuvered her rod like she was fighting with her staff but adjusted her style to match the shortened weapon.

Kylo grit his teeth and pulled his lips into a snarl as he parried her blows, driving her further back. Soon she was unable to land a single hit and barely managed to dodge or block him. His moves were wild and haphazard. When she lifted her rod to block his downward swing, she gripped it with both hands to brace it against him. He struck hard enough to force her to the ground and send fire shooting through her bones and locked joints. He’d nearly broken something. Her rod fell to her side
with a noticeable dent in the middle.

Before she could right herself, he took her by the wrists and stood over her, his face inches from hers. “If that was a lightsaber, you’d have lost your hand holding it like that. You aren’t training to use some stick you picked out of a junk heap. Pay more attention.”

Rey almost criticized his use of training weapons in place of the real thing considering how far she had progressed but with the way he was acting she had no interest in seeing him wield an actual lightsaber. Instead, she wrenched her hands back and rubbed at her smarting palms. “What’s wrong with you? I not going to spar with you if you're going to act like this. I’m not a combat droid you can vent your frustrations on.”

He tossed his rod down alongside hers. “Fine. We’ll try something else. Don’t move.”

He disappeared into one of the adjacent rooms and returned with a holocron in his hands. “I want you to try opening it.”

“I can’t,” Rey said, backing further away. “I couldn’t even open the door earlier. What makes you think I can open that thing?”

“But you almost had it! This temple should be much harder to open than a holocron anyway.” He placed the little pyramid in her hands. “Try it. Focus on your emotions, your darkness, the free them and let the force flow through you. It’s in there. I know you feel it too. You just need to reach for it.”

Touching it as little as possible, she took the holocron and studied its glassy surface and metal edges. The darkness of its contents bled into her fingertips. “I don’t think I want to see whatever’s in this thing. Can’t you just teach me what I need to know?”

“No. This is a lesson in itself. Open it.” His hand closed over hers, forcing her to hold it tighter. The metal edges burned against her palm.

He towered over her, lips set into a thin line. He wasn’t letting this one go. She took a deep breath and focused on the holocron, picturing the locking mechanism and drawing from whatever negative emotion she could grasp. She held onto the fear that her plans would fail and that she would never see her friends again, but the inner gears refused to budge. “It’s not working.”

“Then pick another emotion.”

“Like what? I don’t know what I’m meant to focus on.”

“Anger and pain are the surest paths to the dark side,” Kylo said. “Focus on those who’ve hurt you. Focus on their betrayal. Think of your family.”

Rey’s mouth fell open. “My family? Why would you—”

“They left you, Rey,” Kylo said. “I saw it all, remember? It’s something we have in common.” He placed a hand on her shoulder. “They shut us out, left us in the hands of incompetent, manipulative guardians that saw us as nothing more than tools to further their own ambitions. Harness that anger.”

“They—they didn't abandon me. Something must have happened to them. Something that stopped them from coming back. They wouldn’t have just left me.” She tried to break from his hold. She wouldn’t let him sully her precious memories; the times when her father would sit her on his lap and tell her stories or the way her mother would brush her hair and tie it into the three buns she still replicated. Her parents loved her. They had to.
“Don’t lie to yourself,” Kylo snapped. “They left you, Rey. They left you in that desolate wasteland to toil and die.”

“You don’t know that!” She screamed. The holocron glowed red and shifted beneath her fingers. She dropped it but it continued to move, its metal points spinning and its triangular planes unfolding.

He grabbed her hands. “Yes. You almost have it. Keep going.” She tried to free herself, but he held her in an immovable grip, his fingers digging into her palms. “Think of that junk dealer sending you out into the wasteland to rifle through imperial wreckage for measly portions. Hold onto the pain of hunger, the fear of starvation, your anger at your fellow scavengers who did all they could to crush your dying hopes.”

“Stop it. I’m done with this. Let me go.” Tears beaded in the corners of her eyes, threatening to spill over. The holocron dimmed and folded back in on itself to hide away its secrets once more.

“Why do you fight it? You could be so powerful,” he whispered in her ear. He pinned her against the wall and caught her face in his hands to pull her mouth to his. His lips were hard and bruising as they moved against hers. “Don’t fight it,” he murmured against her mouth. “You don’t understand what you’re giving up, how strong you could be—how strong we could be together. No one could ever stand in our way. This is your destiny, Rey.”

She opened her mouth as if to accept the kiss, but then bit down on his lower lip as hard as she could, tasting blood. He cried out and released her, giving her the opportunity to summon the Force and slam him against the far wall. He hit the stone with a hard thwack and crumpled to the floor. Rey spat out his blood and wiped her swollen lips.

Kylo moaned as he pulled himself up on hands and knees. Blood trickled from his open mouth and his hair fell over his face. He looked up at her, eyes red and bleary. “It wasn’t meant to be like this. This wasn’t how it was supposed to happen,” he murmured, his face twisted in frustration. It sounded like he was saying it more to himself than to her.

Before he could come after her again, Rey bolted through the open door, ignoring his cries of protest. She tore through the vacant halls, her lungs straining and legs aching as she headed for their bedchamber. Without Kylo to open the door, she pressed her weight against it until it slid open enough to allow her to squeeze through then closed it behind her.

She stared at her holopad on her bedside table, wondering if she should contact Finn again. She imagined herself unloading all her frustrations and fears in hopes that he could comfort her through the low-res hologram projector that she hadn’t yet managed to work the glitch out of. She walked over and ran her fingers over the buttons, but couldn’t make herself press them. If she revealed too much, he might try something drastic. There was also no point in him worrying about her more than he already was just to make her feel better. She was stronger than that. She had to be.

After a long while, Kylo still hadn’t returned to their room. Rey could feel him stalking through the halls, his saber blazing in his hand, spitting sparks as he lashed out at the walls and columns of the castle. Rey lay curled up in their bed, her arms wrapped around herself, too frightened to move and knowing there was no place in the castle in which she could hide from him. As the hours passed, she tried to fight off sleep and keep herself sitting upright and alert, but eventually, exhaustion overpowered her and she slumped over, still curled into a ball, and fell asleep.

Rey was awoken by the sound of fabric brushing against itself and a slight movement of the mattress, Kylo’s presence filled the room once more. Holding her breath, she silently turned to look at him. He sat facing away from her on his side of the bed. His training robes had been exchanged for his nightclothes and his hair was a tangled mess. There was still that desperate anger he had shown
before, but resignation and exhaustion emanated from his signature as well. Without addressing her, he slipped under the sheets and curled up against the edge of the bed. He looked almost pitiable. Certainly non-threatening—for now at least.

She turned her back to him again and attempted to fall back to sleep. Before she closed her eyes, she noticed an addition to her collection. One of the flowering plants from the hot spring had been planted in a chrome cup and set beside the one from Ach-to. If it wasn't for his earlier actions she might have thanked him. Perhaps this was his way of apologizing. She doubted he would say it to her face. She felt like ripping it out of the dirt and tearing it leaf from stem, but she couldn't make herself do it. It was too pretty a gift to destroy and would be a welcome addition to her collection. Hopefully, she could look past who had given it and why and just enjoy its colorful blooms.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for leaving such lovely comments and kudos. All feedback is welcome, good or bad. Come find me on Tumblr if you want to chat privately: http://space-trash-princess.tumblr.com/
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

Rey does a bit of sleuthing while Kylo is away.

From what she could tell, Kylo's temper had cooled since the night before. Still, she refused to acknowledge him. Instead, she curled up on her side of the bed, facing away from him as he went about his morning routine in silence. She reached out from under the covers to stroke one of the seven blooms on the plant he had given her. It seemed to be adjusting well to its new environment, winding its spindly vines up the edges of the cup and spilling its leaves over the edge. The leaves were edged with splinter-like thorns that pricked at her fingers despite being barely large enough to see.

“It’s called a lyris,” Kylo said. Rey had been too distracted to sense his approach, but once she heard his voice, her hand shot back under the sheets. She could feel him standing over her at the edge of the bed. Daring a quick look at him, she saw he had already changed into a clean set of robes.

“I’m not training today,” Rey said, pulling the sheets tighter around herself. “And I’m never setting foot in that temple again.”

Kylo let out a heavy sigh. “I’m not asking you to. In fact, I will be leaving the planet shortly and you will be free to spend you time however you like. When I return, you will accompany me to Coruscant.”

“Where are you going?” Rey finally turned to look at him. She winced as she saw his lip swollen and scabbed over where she had bitten him. His eyes were bloodshot and ringed with dark circles.

“Imperial duties,” he said. “Your friend caused quite the upheaval when he defected. Multiple stormtroopers have been displaying open insubordination. General Hux says that he has it under control, but that’s clearly a lie. Just recently, one of them tried to escape before immediately being recaptured. They are now being held to await a proper punishment. I am now forced to intervene. A statement has to be made to prevent further rebellion.”

Rey shot him a look of disgust. “What do you expect when you steal children from their families to be turned into living weapons? You think they’ll just blindly follow orders?”

“I’m your friend had filled your head with his side of things.” Kylo rolled his eyes.

“His name is Finn.” Rey bared her gritted teeth as she said his name.

“Stormtroopers have been in use since before I was born,” Kylo said. “Even the Galactic Republic, which your allies are so intent on resurrecting, had their army of clones.”

“That justifies your decision to continue it?” Rey said, her voice rising with her temper. “You talk about how you were forced to leave your family for training, but then you subject countless others to an even worse fate. You’re a hypocrite.”

Kylo lifted his hand as if to reach for her but then balled it into a fist at his side before turning away. He then went to his console and pressed the button that activated it as Rey had seen him do countless
times before. Once it powered on, he would punch in his code. She had never paid this much mind, but now it piqued her interest. Without him on the planet to monitor her every movement, in person or through the force, she could put her freedom to good use. She watched his fingers glide over the input keys, craning her neck to see the sequence in which he pressed them. As soon as he began to turn back toward her, she rolled back under the covers, pretending that she had been lying in that position the entire time.

He bent over her and tucked a strand of sleep-tangled hair behind her ear. She shivered as his fingers traced over her skin, lingering on the edge of her jaw. “I won’t be gone long,” he said before he withdrew and headed for the door. “Enjoy your transmissions with your friend until then,” he added with an edge of venom.

The door shut behind him, relieving her of the impossible burden of deciphering his moods and intentions. He was like a corroded circuit that could blow at the slightest provocation. She could already the knot in her stomach untangling in his absence.

She repeated is access code over and over as she stared out the viewport and waited for him to leave the atmosphere. Once she saw his shuttle lift off the landing platform, she breathed a sigh of relief and slipped off the bed. The floor was rough beneath her bare feet, but as calloused as her soles were, she hardly felt a thing. If she wouldn’t be training, there was no reason to put on her shoes or even change out of her soft nightclothes. She approached the wall console and saw that it had already powered down, leaving the screen black and only a faint glow beneath the input keys. She pressed the activation button Kylo always used and typed in his code as soon as the system brought up the security prompt. She held her breath as it processed the code, worrying that an alarm might sound or some sort of touch recognition would recognize that she was not an authorized user. Instead, the home screen flickered on like always, awaiting further input.

After scouring every system and databank available from the console, Rey found almost nothing of use. It seemed to allow transmissions between it and other systems within the castle, such as the hangar bay control tower and the command center but had almost no information stored on its hard drive. It informed her of the status of the castle and planet, like how the volcanic activity was currently low and the planetary defense shields were running at full capacity. Rey swore under her breath. She would need to continue her search. Hopefully, Kylo’s code would work someplace else.

The command center seemed to be her best bet. Unless they worked in continuous shifts, she might find a chance to sneak in. She closed her eyes and reached through the force, finding the staff officers hard at work at their stations. There were four of them at that moment. Taking out her datapad, Rey recorded their number along with the current galactic standard time. It was strange to see the numeric time once again. Apparently, it was midday despite her just having woken. Not that it mattered. She just needed to accurately record the officers’ schedules.

An alarm rang out, causing Rey to nearly jump out of her skin. It was coming from behind the bedroom door. Regaining her composure, she pulled it open to find a droid that barely reached her waist. It went quiet as soon as she came into view. It held a large box over its cylindrical body. Rey lifted the lid and saw it was filled with a variety of food. Kylo must have arranged the delivery to feed her in his absence. It was the sort of food Kylo always chose for her—somewhat bland, but nutritious and filling.

She had already begun to feel the effects of her new diet; her muscles felt stronger, her mind felt clearer, and she could now train for longer without tiring or feeling short of breath. As trivial as it seemed, she couldn’t help but notice the aesthetic changes as well. Her hair and skin had softened and her body had filled out in a feminine way. Kylo had voiced his approval by pawing at her breasts and whispering some lewd comment she hadn’t bothered to remember.
Rey took the box of food and thanked the droid. In return, it let out a mechanical chirp before skittering down the hall. She shoved a roll of bread in her mouth before reentering the room and setting the box on the bed. She sat herself down within arm's reach of it, her legs crossed and muscles relaxed as she searched through the force one more to continue her surveillance.

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After monitoring the officers and recording their movements all day, Rey’s box of food was empty and a vein was throbbing painfully against her temple. So far, the command center had not been left empty for even a moment. According to galactic standard time, it was the middle of the night. She just had to stick it out for a few more hours and she would have their full schedule for the day.

Just when she felt she couldn’t go on any longer without risking some sort of brain injury or at the very least passing out, she felt the four remaining officers rise from their stations and file out of the room all at once. She quickly noted the change in her datapad and waited for them to return. As the minutes ticked by, the command center continued to go unattended. Nearly an hour had passed when seven officers whose signatures she didn’t recognize entered the command center and each claimed a station. Rey noted the change once more and calculated that she had approximately forty-three standard minutes to get in and out without one of them catching her if she used this as her window. She could make it work.

She fell back on the bedsheets, too exhausted to do anything else. Her connection to the force felt like a worn, rusted tool. She untangled herself from their minds and curled up into a comfortable ball before falling asleep.

When she woke again, she rubbed the sleep from her eyes. They ached and stung as she opened them. Even though she had hardly moved at all yesterday, she felt as sore and sweaty as she did on her hardest days of training. After checking her holopad and reaching briefly through the force to confirm that those within the command center were running on the same schedule as yesterday, she decided to start her day with a bath.

The bath had quickly become her personal oasis where she could forget her troubles and bask in the chilled fragrant water. One time, however, Kylo had burst into the ‘fresher and insisted on bathing with her. She had resisted, splashing water at him and arguing for her right to privacy, but he ignored her as usual and stripped down to join her. Once he had finished, she had drained the water and started her bathing ritual over again.

But now she was alone, with only a powered-down Deetee for company. She tapped on his console to wake him.

“How may I be of assistance?” he asked, his red lens staring at her, bright and alert.

“I just need a bath.”

“You do not require a health assessment? His Imperial Highness has instructed me to see to your medical care.”

Rey shook her head and began to undress. “No, Deetee. Just a bath.”

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Once she had bathed and eaten the day’s food delivery, she had considered contacting Finn or Leia, but ultimately decided it would be best to wait until she had some good news to share. There was no sense in getting their hopes up.
The officers had yet to break from their schedule, so now she just needed to wait for her time window to come around. She laid back on the bed, conserving her energy and waiting for the hours to pass. More than once she caught herself picking at her nails or winding a wet length of hair around her finger until she accidentally plucked a couple strands out by the root. She shoved her hands under her arms and turned over, willing her racing pulse to slow down.

Her window of opportunity was getting closer, but any misstep or miscalculation in her plans could cost her what little freedom she had should Kylo discover her intentions. Hopefully, he wouldn’t be able to sense any change in her from where he was now. Rey was able to sense his movements and bits of his emotions when he was within the castle, but now that he was off-planet she could only feel a distant flicker of his signature beyond the atmosphere. She hoped it was the same on his end.

She checked the time again. It was a bit early, but she could stand to lie around doing nothing any longer. After tying back her hair and dressing in her day clothes, she left the room with her satchel slung over her shoulder. The corridor was empty of both organic and artificial life. She scanned the walls and ceilings as she passed through, searching for signs of surveillance and finding nothing. It made sense. Unlike the architecture of his ships, Kylo seemed intent on keeping the castle as an archaic monument to his dark forebears. The wall consoles and droids were the only signs of technological advancement she had seen thus far. The doors didn’t even have locks. That was pure arrogance on his part, she decided. Why bother relying on technology to protect you when you can sense intruders from lightyears away and hack them to pieces with a flaming saber? But there were the planetary shields to consider. If the Resistance were to stage an invasion of Mustafar or if she decided to escape, she would need to disable them. Hopefully, the command center would have what she needed.

Following the force signatures of the officers through the castle’s maze-like interior proved disorienting. At first, she had chosen the wrong passage and ended up on a level too high, but after doubling back she soon found her way. Looking at her datapad, she saw that she had lost some time, but hadn’t yet missed her window.

The four officers were on the other side of the wall she leaned against. She could feel them. Once she felt them stir, she waited a moment before holding her breath and peeking around the corner. She caught a glimpse of a polished black pair of boots as the last officer turned down a far corridor. The command center was empty. Rey walked around the bend and approached the wide doors of the command center. There was a small console to the side of it. Rey punched in Kylo’s code and the doors slid open.

Inside was a room lined with monitors that reflected her image back to her. Small lights flickered all around her from the arrays of input panels and comm stations. Again, she searched for signs of surveillance but found none. Although, in this technological hive, it was hard to tell. She stepped over a bundle of wires that ran across the floor and approached the largest of the workstations. It was situated at the far end of the room. She tread carefully, terrified that she would set off an alarm or bump into the wrong thing.

She took a deep breath and activated the workstation. The screen lit up and requested an access code to continue. She obliged, tapping in the sequence with shaking fingers. The system made a beeping noise as it accepted it. Rey whipped her head back to the door, her eyes wide like a startled animal, scared someone might have heard. When no one came, she berated herself for her paranoia, then cracked her knuckles before addressing the workstation again.

There was a long list of possible commands, but one option piqued her interest: the scomp link release. With a quick press, the cylindrical connector slid out of its socket beside the screen. Rey had seen them many times before. It was a common blank for droids and devices, including many models
of holopads. She slipped hers out of her satchel and slid the scomp link into the bottom socket. An alert came up on the screen reading “data transfer channel established”. She couldn’t help but smile.

Navigating back to the home screen, she then searched for useful data to copy. Each data transfer required that she reenter Kylo’s security code and each time, Rey held her breath, expecting someone to burst in at any moment to stop her. She searched as fast as she could but soon discovered what Leia had meant when she said the datapad was outdated. Each transfer dragged on, the completion bar inching forward.

By the time her time window was reaching its end, she had copied over the castle layout from the security files, the employee security codes and schedules, and the landing and takeoff authorization codes. As the codes completed their transfer, she saw the time displayed on her screen. There wasn’t much left. Not knowing how long the next transfer might take, Rey decided not to press her luck any further. She disengaged the scomp link and powered down the workstation, hoping that what she had found would be of use to her friends.

Just as she reached the door, she felt a disturbance in the force. Kylo’s signature ebbed at the edge of her mind, closing in and growing clearer by the second. He was here.

She tried to retrace her steps as she took off through the doors. The sound of her panting breath and her feet beating against the ground echoed around her. She nearly fell down a flight of crumbling stone stairs but caught herself in time.

Kylo grew nearer and nearer. He was in a foul mood. When Rey reached the hallway leading to their rooms, she saw him the opposite end and immediately froze. He wore a dour expression. His clothing was richer than she’d ever seen. A new cape hung heavily off his shoulders to trail behind him and his knee-length robes were made of glossy leather and studded with polished black gems. He wore a dour expression and on the bottom of his lip was a pink crescent where she had bitten him.

“Why were you running?” Kylo asked, lifting a brow.

“I—I wanted some exercise so I went exploring,” Rey stammered as she fought to catch her breath.

“When I felt you arrive I came as fast as I could.”

“Alright. Go gather your things. We’re leaving immediately.”

Rey’s stomach sank. “Right now?”

Kylo nodded, “I told you we would be leaving for Coruscant as soon as I returned.”

“Is that why you’re dressed like that?” Rey asked.

“Yes. There will be a large procession awaiting our arrival and it is important that we dress appropriately. Custom demands it.” He gazed down at her wrinkled clothing and tangled hair. “Don’t worry. A specialist is waiting for you onboard who will fix you up.” He held out a gloved hand. Judging from the way he stared at her and the dark aura that surrounded him, Rey knew better than to refuse.
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

It was an endless sea of color and light spreading out toward the horizon, even more beautiful than it had looked from the atmosphere. Ships sped by and people walked the city streets below. They were of all species and wore glamorous styles of clothing Rey had never seen before. It was like a dream she might have conjured up, but far beyond what her imagination was capable of producing. She rested her hand on the glass that separated her from the fantastical world outside, grinning in childlike wonder. “Can I go out and see the city soon?”

“We’ll see.” Kylo’s hands came down on her shoulders, the leather of his gloves feeling alien against her skin. “We will be here for quite a few weeks—months if things prove more difficult than planned, which I suspect they will. We will be spending nearly half our time here for the foreseeable future.”

The future. Something twisted in Rey’s chest when he said it.

As soon as they boarded the imperial starship, Kylo led Rey to a small room where a woman sat waiting for her. He rested his hand on Rey’s shoulder and bent down to whisper in her ear. “I’ll be back when you’re finished. Just do what she says and you’ll be fine.” Before leaving, he placed a kiss on her forehead, her cheek, and another on her neck. Rey glanced at the woman, feeling herself blush. They’d never had an audience before. The woman stood as Kylo slipped out the door and closed it behind him.

The woman had on a sleek black uniform like any other officer but wore it with a sophisticated poise Rey hadn’t seen in any of the others. It was as if it were designed with her willowy figure in mind. Her steel-grey eyes appraised her, not in a demeaning, judgmental way, but with the focus of a craftsman. “I know just what to do.” She gave a small bow. “I am Mal Tarilla, my lady, and I have the honor of preparing you for your public debut.”

Rey balked at the formality. “I—alright. What do I need to do?”

“Nothing at all. His Imperial Highness was very specific in his requests, so I have everything prepared already.” Mal offered her a tight-lipped smile.

Well, that certainly sounded like Kylo. Hopefully, it wouldn’t be too humiliating.

“Don’t look so nervous,” Mal said, lifting Rey’s chin with her manicured fingers. “You are in good hands, I assure you. I have spent years preparing girls and women to bloom in high society and if my instincts are correct, you will be a natural.”

Rey was then subjected to a lengthy session of washing, plucking, and grooming using tools that she had never seen in her entire life. She sat at the vanity while Mal worked her over, moving each part of her in turn like a life-sized doll. She was even beginning to look like one. Her skin was flushed pink from her scalding bath and was now completely hairless, save for her head and brows. Mal had told her it was a common beauty ritual but to Rey, it seemed more like a form of torture. Kylo would pay for this.
Mal held her face as she applied a waxy substance to her eyelids. “Stay still, please.”

Rey did her best to overcome her reflexive urge to swat away the strange devices as they approached her face, but she couldn’t stop herself from squirming. Once her lids were coated, making them feel uncomfortably heavy, Mal sighed and looked over her handiwork. “That’s done. I mean no disrespect, but I don’t think I’ve ever had a subject so fidgety. Has no one ever done your makeup before?”

“I’ve never worn makeup at all.”

Mal’s eyes went wide. “Oh. I see. Next is your clothing. If you’ll go ahead and disrobe, I’ll go get everything.”

Rey nodded and did as she was told, stripping off the thin robe Mal had given her after her bath. As she waited for her to return, she looked herself over the mirror. Every freckle and defining blemish had been covered by a coat of strange, flesh-toned paint before being dusted with various powders that reddened her cheeks and caused light to reflect lightly off her eyelids and cheekbones. Her eyes were rimmed in black, making them appear somehow larger and her hair fell over her shoulders in shining ringlets. She still looked like herself beneath it all—not like a tacky holoshow starlet as she had feared she might resemble, but all the products on her face still felt confining and unnatural. Her fingers itched to rub it all off.

Mal returned with an armful of black fabric and a broad smile. She held it up for Rey to see, revealing it to be an elaborate dress. Silver thread was woven into the fabric, causing it to shimmer as it moved. The hem and neckline were studded with black gems that matched the ones on Kylo’s robes. Mal helped her pull it over her head, laced up the bodice from behind, then guided her hands through the thin ribbons of fabric that served as the sleeves. They laced over one another, forming an intricate pattern over her collarbone and back. The gauzy skirt flowed delicately over her hips and brushed against the floor. Her makeover might not have been the most pleasurable experience, but the results were proof of Mal’s skill and dedication.

“All done,” Mal said before pulling out her comlink. “I’ll inform His Imperial Majesty immediately. I think he will be very pleased.”

Moments after being summoned, Kylo stepped through the door. When he saw her, his stony exterior melted and was replaced with open admiration. Ignoring Mal, he crossed the room. “You look stunning.” He again kissed her neck.

“I better be after all that trouble.” Rey pulled back and folded her arms. “Was all of this really necessary?”

“Yes. If I’m going to have you by my side, you need to look like you belong there. I prefer you natural and bare, but coruscanti society is far more demanding. Now, come with me to the bridge. I think you will enjoy the view.” As his gaze wandered over her, lingering on the places where the fabric hugged revealingly at her body, he ran his hand over her bare arm before looping it through his.

“Alright.” Rey rolled her eyes.

Mal bowed to both her and Kylo. “It was an honor serving you.”

“Thank you for everything,” Rey said. “It was a pleasure to meet you.”

“No need to be so final. You will see her again soon,” Kylo said. “I’ve arranged for her to stay at the
palace to attend to your needs and offer some female companionship.”

“I will see you again once we reach the palace, My Lady,” Mal said, taking another bow.

Rey had heard of similar arrangements from the holonet. Skilled attendants often trailed behind women of status—a distinction Rey had never pictured herself being given.

Rey smiled and allowed Kylo to guide her out the door and through the ship to the bridge. It reminded her of the command center, with uniformed officers working tirelessly, surrounded by control panels and illuminated monitors. Some of them stole quick glances at her before quickly turning back to their stations.

Kylo led her to the very front of the ship, far enough from the others that they wouldn’t be heard. Hyperspace zoomed past them until Coruscant appeared. Not a single stretch of greenery or bare land could be seen on the planet’s surface. The city encased the planet in an artificial shell studded with innumerable lights in every color Rey could imagine.

“Look at it. This is the seat of my new empire.” Kylo said, his head lifted high. “For millennia this planet has served as the center of the universe, suffering through endless war and inept rulers, but now it has fallen to me. The will of the Force has come to pass and my destiny can now be fulfilled.”

“Your destiny?” Rey asked.

“Yes. My grandfather's life was cut brutally short and now his legacy rests on my shoulders. My uncle buried himself in impotent Jedi philosophy and even tried passing it onto me while my mother turned to politics and let her potential go to waste,” Kylo said. “Neither of those paths was ever an option for me, nor would I have chosen them. My fate was sealed the moment I was born. For as long as I can remember, the Force has shown me visions of the future. It is a future I must fight and sacrifice for, but it will all be worth it once it comes to pass. I know you’ve experienced such visions as well: of the forest on Starkiller, of Ach-to, of me.”

Rey gasped. “You know about that?”

He cupped her face and brought it close to his. “Know of them? I shared them. The force pulled in both directions, giving us both glimpses of what was to come. Although, I think I may have been given more insight than you have. But trust me. We all have a destiny, Rey, and yours lies with me.”

The visions Rey had experienced had not felt like a call to destiny. They had seemed more like a warning.

Kylo released her and looked out the viewport once more. They had arrived at the Imperial palace. It was simply designed, with broad planes sloping upward to a flat roof upon which five spires were built. Four were placed on each corner of the structure while the tallest rose from the center. Hanging down the sides of the palace walls were red banners illuminated by spotlights, bearing a symbol Rey had never seen before. It was a black triangle with small circles on each of its three points and four lines running vertically through its center. It must be Kylo’s Imperial sigil, Rey thought.

The starship lowered and docked in the palace’s hangar bay. Once they exited the ship, Rey saw the rows upon rows of immaculate starships of various models and sizes that, while intimidating, sparked a mechanical interest within her. It was easier to appreciate the masterful engineering of the glossy black vessels when they weren’t trying to gun her down. She imagined picking one apart and comparing it to its imperial predecessors on Jakku just to see how technology had progressed.

Kylo led her past the hangar bay and into the palace, flanked by officers on either side. Rey gasped
as she saw the palace interior. The hall they had entered was grand in both scale and design, with polished columns towering hundred of meters over their heads and swirling marble designs inlaid beneath their feet. Light streamed in from above, casting it all in an ethereal glow. If the castle on Mustafar was a raw chunk of obsidian, this palace was a glistening pearl.

“You like it?” Kylo asked, smiling faintly as he led her forward, even in the presence of his subordinates.

“I think it’s amazing,” Rey said, her eyes and mouth wide open as she looked around.

“I’m glad,” he said. “This palace has a long and complicated history. It was built millennia ago and passed along for different purposes through the ages. It served as the preeminent temple of the old Jedi Order before it was seized by Emperor Palpatine and converted into the imperial palace.”

It certainly looked nothing like the Jedi temple on Ach-to, which was now a stone ruin. Either the means or the priorities of the Jedi must have changed drastically over the centuries.

Kylo led her through a pair of silver doors which two guards pulled open as they approached. Inside, was the imperial throne room. Tapestries that matched the larger ones outside hung from the ceiling, waving faintly as the doors swung shut behind them. At the far end of the room was a black throne on a raised platform. A paneled window formed a fractured halo behind it, silhouetting it in daylight, and on each side of it were three of Kylo’s remaining knights standing at attention with their signature weapons in hand. Below the throne stood a small group of officers who were soon joined by those who had followed Kylo and Rey.

General Hux was among those present. He stiffened when he saw Rey, then shifted his attention to Kylo, pursing his thin mouth and straightening his back. From what little Kylo had told her of the General, Rey knew that he was the overseer of the stormtrooper program and the driving force behind Starkiller base. Finn had been reluctant to tell her about his time in the program and she had never pressed the topic, so she had no way of knowing what history the two of them might share, but just looking at his face, he seemed capable of any atrocity she could imagine.

The crowd parted as they approached the throne. Rey looked to Kylo, waiting for him to tell her where to go. Instead, he kept her arm looped through his and led her up the steps, sat on his throne, and pulled her down beside him. She gave him another questioning look, but he offered no explanation, only a faint smile. He settled into place, resting one hand on the arm on his throne and the other on her hip as he held her in place at his side, radiating pride and satisfaction.

Looking out at the crowd, Rey wondered how many imperial officials knew of their arrangement or why Kylo had spent so much time hidden away in his castle with his new captive. Hell, he probably bragged about it. This was why he’d had her dressed her like this, she realized. She was a glittering ornament on his arm while he playing the part of the conquering ruler bringing home the spoils of war. In the eyes of his men, she would serve as living proof that the Resistance had been subjugated. Some of their audience hid their reactions better than others. General Hux’s face, in particular, had turned a troubling shade of red.

Kylo turned to the man nearest to the throne. “You may approach, Mitaka.”

The trembling officer swallowed hard before kneeling before the throne. Even if the gesture was meant for Kylo, it felt wrong for Rey to be on the receiving end of it. “Your Imperial Highness. I have come to report on the state of the planet’s security,” he said, his lips trembling as he spoke, somewhat muddling his words. Not once did he look Kylo in the eye. He glanced up at Rey for a second, then fixed his gaze back on the polished floor
“You may rise and give your report,” Kylo said, his voice deep and severe as he adopted his facade of imposing formality.

Mitaka stood and smoothed down the fabric of his uniform. He spoke of sectors and districts that Rey didn’t recognize, using a jargon she could only glean half the meaning of. The state of things was clear, however: the planet was slowly but surely bowing to its new ruler. As expected from a newly subjugated populace, there had been numerous riots and attempted uprisings, which had all been snuffed out by the stormtrooper patrols.

General Hux stepped forward to elaborate on that particular topic. According to his account, it was growing difficult to subdue your subjects and your army simultaneously. More instances of insubordination had arisen and been dealt with in the harshest of ways. Rey did all she could to contain her anger. Kylo evidently sensed this and moved his hand to her shoulder. To their audience, it likely appeared to be a possessive gesture, and in a way it was, but Rey felt his intent. He knew she was upset. She kept her emotions in check. Now was not the time for an outburst.

For the remainder of the lengthy audience, Rey remained at Kylo’s side, waiting for the crowd to thin out. The officers left to return to their posts once their reports had been given and soon they were left with only Kylo’s knights. “You may now go. We are retiring for the evening.” He told them.

They obeyed without a word, gathering up their weapons and filing out the chamber doors. Rey felt the tension in the room dissipate as soon as they left.

Kylo rose from his throne, pulling her along with him. As he led them to their suite, Rey took in her surroundings with a genuine smile. As they stopped at the suite door, hasty footsteps followed close behind them. They turned to see that Hux had found them. A vein bulged at his temple and his nostrils were flared wide. “I need to speak with you,” he said.

Kylo turned to Rey. “Wait for me in the suite,” he said, removing a glove and pressing his hand against the security panel to open the door.

Not wanting to remain in the general’s presence any longer than necessary, she slipped inside. It was dark, but instead of searching for a light, she let her curiosity guide her. She pressed her ear against the door and whether it was through the force or the thinness of the metal, she could just barely make out what was spoken between the two of them.

“I kept my opinions to myself when you had the girl brought to your private estate,” Hux said. “It is not within my rights to question how you seek...companionship. However, keeping her safely stowed away for your pleasure is one thing, but parading her before your men and openly sharing your quarters...do you have any clue what sort of danger you are welcoming into our midst? Don’t be blinded, Ren. She could assassinate you in your sleep. She’s already carved into your face, who’s to say she won’t aim for your neck next time?”

“She’s smarter than that,” Kylo said. “Without me, she would have the likes of you to deal with.”

That was certainly true. Kylo’s fixation on her was the only thing protecting her friends from obliteration.

“What am I to tell the other officers? I have been dealing with endless inquiries since the two of you arrived.” Hux said.

“What would you have me tell them?” Kylo asked. “That they are in the presence of a member of the Resistance that helped to destroy your monstrosity of a base? That a slip of a girl from nowhere of importance aided in the greatest humiliation of your career? When the time is right, they will all
understand why I have chosen to bring her here. Until then, they may think what they like and keep it to themselves. That goes for you as well.”

“Ren, I—”

“If you fail to address me properly again, I will be forced to have you reprimanded. And believe me when I say I would give me great pleasure.”

“Yes, My Emperor.” Hux’s tone was callus, almost sarcastic.

“Better. You are dismissed,” Kylo said.

Hux’s footsteps clicked against the polished floor and faded into the distance. Seconds later, Kylo entered the room. “You don’t need to worry about him.” He said. “He’s just a prideful bastard stuck in his old ways. Just do your best to ignore him. If he seeks you out, come to me and let me deal with it.”

“Alright,” Rey said. She didn’t need to be told to avoid him. Her instincts warned her enough.

“Why are we standing in the dark?” Kylo asked. He flipped a switch on the wall to light the room. It appeared to be only an entryway with four doors leading further into the apartment. It was similar in style to their rooms on Mustafar, only more technologically updated. What first caught her attention was the viewports as the blinds slid upward automatically to reveal the awakening nightlife.

It was an endless sea of color and light spreading out toward the horizon, even more beautiful than it had looked from the atmosphere. Ships sped by and people walked the city streets below. They were of all species and wore glamorous styles of clothing Rey had never seen before. It was like a dream she might have conjured up, but far beyond what her imagination was capable of producing. She rested her hand on the glass that separated her from the fantastical world outside, grinning in childlike wonder. “Can I go out and see the city soon?”

“We’ll see.” Kylo’s hands came down on her shoulders, the leather of his gloves feeling alien against her skin. “We will be here for quite a few weeks—months if things prove more difficult than planned, which I suspect they will. We will be spending nearly half our time here for the foreseeable future.”

The future. Something twisted in Rey’s chest when he said it. This wasn’t her future. Her future was a fuzzy, distant thing that she rarely dwelled on. For so long, she hadn’t been guaranteed one. All she knew for sure was that it would include her friends, hopefully someplace safe and pleasant. It certainly didn’t include Kylo Ren. But at least her time with him would be spent, at least partially, in a more pleasant environment.

“Where are my things?” Rey asked. “I never got them back after Mal dressed me.”

“In our bedroom,” Kylo said. “Follow me. I had it updated for your arrival. Mal oversaw the changes. I rarely spent time in my quarters until I began sharing them with you, so some amenities needed to be added.”

He led her into one of the adjacent rooms with an enormous circular bed in the center surrounded by dark curtains that hung from the ceiling. Glowing fixtures were imbedded in the walls, bouncing light off every polished surface. Along one wall was a vanity with a variety of tubes and bottles like those that Mal had, all used laid out in neat rows. In the drawers were luxurious clothes folded neatly. There were dining and lounging areas like in their suite on Mustafar, but with a few more embellishments. The table was laid out with a embroidered cloth and a set of glistening crystal
tableware that looked like it might shatter if she dared to touch it. She sat down on one of the couches, which was decorated with a plush throw blanket and soft pillows. She hugged one to her chest and rested her cheek against the soft texture. “Mal has excellent taste.” She said.

Kylo looped a strand of her hair around his finger. “She certainly does.”

“You said my things were in here. Where are they?” Rey asked, setting the pillow aside.

Kylo gestured across the room. “Over there.”

Rey went to where he had pointed and found a shelf that had been hidden from view by the bed’s drapery. At eye level, each of her items were laid out just as they had been on Mustafar with her satchel beside it. She flipped it open and found it empty. “Where’s my holopad, Kylo?”

He sighed and strode to her side. He looked down at her, his eyes dark and condemning. “It has been wiped and safely stored away. In time, if you manage to prove yourself, you may earn it back for the sole purpose of communication, but even then it will need to be monitored.”

“What?”

Kylo narrowed his gaze. “Did you really think I was foolish enough to leave you alone in my castle with all my secrets unguarded, knowing what you are capable of? It was a test and you failed.”

Tears welled at the corners of Rey’s eyes. She balled her hands into fists and glared up at him. “How dare you—”

Kylo caught her by the shoulders again, harder this time. “How dare I? You are the one who has committed treason. I would be completely justified in dissolving our deal and putting an end to both you and your precious Resistance after what you did.”

“So why don’t you?” Rey shouted.

He cracked a sadistic smile. “Oh, no. I’m not done with you just yet.”

Rey felt as though she might be sick. Her cage had grown more luxurious, but the walls were closing in, making her wonder if his promise to let her go if she asked had been a lie.

“For now, let’s just go to bed,” Kylo said, taking her by the wrist.

Rey twisted it free. “No. Not tonight.” She recognized the hunger in his eyes.

“What do you mean, not tonight?” Kylo asked, stepping closer, his massive body casting a shadow over her.

“I mean that I’m not getting in that bed with you,” Rey said, straightening her posture to make up for her height.

Kylo fumed. “After everything I’ve done for you today? Mal, the room, the clothes—”

“I didn’t ask for any of it.”

Kylo ground his teeth. “Fine. If you’re so displeased, then I’ll just take them back.” He reached behind her and unfastened the lacing of her dress with a few sharp pulls. Rey gasped and tried to break free, but his arms pinned her against him. When he released her, the dress fell at her feet. He picked it up threw the bundle onto the vanity.
Rey staggered back, trying to cover herself, waiting for him to come after her. Instead, he stomped over to his side of the bed and disrobed before slipping beneath the covers, turning his back toward her.

Naked and cold, she went over to the sofa and covered herself in the throw blanket to settle down for the night. She kept her eyes open, staring at Kylo, until she heard the sound of his faint snoring rumble through the room. Only then did she feel safe in letting sleep take her.
Chapter 7

Chapter Summary

By now, everyone seemed to have caught on that something was wrong. Mal had warned her of the gossip she was creating among the imperial staff, but Rey didn’t need to be told. She saw it in the way they spoke quietly amongst themselves, how their curious gazes shifting between the two of them, and she felt the tension in the room spike each time she avoided Kylo’s touch. She had dodged his kisses and brushed his hand away so many times and so openly, that he had almost given up altogether, likely to save his own reputation. Perhaps he thought his subordinates would think he had grown tired of her and that that was the reason for their frigid interactions. However, the satisfied looks that Hux shot their way made it clear it was too late for that.

As Kylo predicted, complications had kept them on Coruscant longer than initially planned. Weeks came and went, with Kylo constantly being called away to various parts of the planet, even off-planet on the rare occasion, as he worked to secure his empire’s rule. Some days, he would leave before dawn and only return after Coruscant’s four moons dipped below the horizon. He would then collapse on his side of the bed, always left her side empty as a silent invitation. Rey refused it each time. Instead, she had staked her claim on the largest couch in the sitting area and made a nest of pillows and blankets for herself. More of her makeshift bedding seemed to appear every so often for her to add to her growing pile—another of Kylo’s attempts at bribery, no doubt.

One morning, she had arisen to find her holopad on the table of the sitting room, its memory wiped and replaced with an extensive collection of literature and holovids. He had given her an imploring look from across the room, but instead of humoring him with a response she had laid it back on the table and continued with her morning routine as though it were nothing.

The few meals they shared were eaten in silence, save for the bits of information Kylo would give her about upcoming events that she would be expected to attend. Such appearances proved to be even more trying than their meager interactions in the apartment. She remained at his side, refusing to be led by his arm, keeping her expression either vacant or disapproving depending on the nature of the event she was forced to endure.

By now, everyone seemed to have caught on that something was wrong. Mal had warned her of the gossip she was creating among the imperial staff, but Rey didn’t need to be told. She saw it in the way they spoke quietly amongst themselves, how their curious gazes shifting between the two of them, and she felt the tension in the room spike each time she avoided Kylo’s touch. She had dodged his kisses and brushed his hand away so many times and so openly, that he had almost given up altogether, likely to save his own reputation. Perhaps he thought his subordinates would think he had grown tired of her and that that was the reason for their frigid interactions. However, the satisfied looks that Hux shot their way made it clear it was too late for that.
Both her and his duties were taking their toll on Kylo’s volatile moods. It was a creeping anger that built slowly, hidden by his cold exterior until he would shout at and threaten those who had displeased him. Rey had lost count of how many officers he had publicly demoted.

But while his temper had turned on those around him, he was nothing but repentant with her. He never expressed it verbally, but whether it was the pillows, the holopad, or the glittering additions he had made to her rock collection, he was obviously making and effort. But superficial luxuries and a handful of shiny baubles on her shelf were nowhere near enough to earn her forgiveness. He seemed aware of that fact but decided to sulk and pine instead of making actual changes to himself or even give her a proper apology.

Whenever Kylo was away, Rey was left in the care of Mal. Due to her advanced age, Mal served as more of a maternal caregiver than a friend. Even if Rey could look past her Imperial ties, there was little common ground for them to relate to one another. Mal would attend to her, setting out a beauty ritual Rey could never seem to follow on her own or even see the purpose of, whenever it be the constant bathing or the heavy, uncomfortable gowns she was given to wear. Mal could spend hours messing with her hair, styling it into braids, buns, curls, or some combination of the three.

When Mal decided she looked presentable enough to be seen, Rey would often occupy her time by walking the palace halls or spending time in the palace greenhouse. No matter what she chose to do, Mal was always trailing close behind. There was little else for Rey to do. Seeing the same palace interior over and over caused it to lose its initial charm and now only served to remind her of her confinement while her correspondences with Finn and Leia reminded her of what she was missing. She could hardly hold a decent conversation anymore. Being kept as a palace decoration didn’t give her many stories to tell. She would instead skirt around the details of her captivity and steer the conversation toward their lives instead, which were infinitely more exciting.

Hearing about how the Resistance was adjusting to their small slice of independence and that they were expanding their facilities to accommodate those fleeing imperial rule both filled her with joy and made her want to shut off the transmission and scream. She should be there. She should be helping them. But if she was there, none of the things she wished to participate in would be able to exist.

As much as she hated feeling boxed in, she spent most of her time in Kylo’s quarters. She could avoid the speculative looks of the palace staff and imperial officers, forgo the gowns and powdery makeup, and simply curl up on her cushions and relax.

Mal occupied a spare bedroom in the suite so that Rey wouldn’t need to walk a single step outside Kylo’s apartment unescorted. There was also another room that remained locked to her at all times. Her curiosity ate away at her, but out of fear he might suspect her of spying again, she hadn’t asked
what lie beyond the durasteel door.

As Rey and Mal sat across from one another in the sitting area, morning light streamed in from the viewports, reflecting off Rey’s holopad screen and into her eyes. With her reading interrupted, she lifted herself out of her nest of pillows. She grabbed the glass of water Mal had placed on the table for her and went to water her plants. Her little Ach-to shrub was thriving in its little cup, but the Lyris from the Mustafar hot spring was rapidly outgrowing its home. There was hardly any space left for soil in between the twisting roots and vines. Overnight, a thin tendril had crept up onto the shelf above it. Rey peeled it back and curled the newly-formed vine back into the cup that housed it. Unless she wanted it to swallow their entire room, it needed a new place to stay, perhaps permanently. She couldn’t picture herself taking it with her when she left Kylo’s company. There was no need for another reminder of her time with him. Her accumulating memories were enough.

Mal rose from her seat and set her holopad aside. “His Imperial Majesty should be returning from his morning engagement very shortly. I will go and fetch breakfast for the two of you.”

“Thank you,” Rey said, smiling over at her. "I'm famished."

Mal approached her and brushed back a tangled strand of hair, sighing as she looked it over. “You are quite welcome. And perhaps while I'm gone, you might consider freshening up a bit.”

“You already gave me a bath.”

“But your hair hasn’t even been brushed,” Mal said as she separated a damp tangle with her fingers. “Please, my lady. It is my job to keep you looking presentable. And I'm sure His Majesty would like to come home to see you looking your best.” Rey made a face at that. Mal sighed. “At least change into some proper clothes?”

“What’s wrong with my clothes?” Rey glanced down at herself. She had chosen the simplest clothing Kylo had given her. The fabric was still more luxurious than anything she’d ever worn before coming here, but at least it didn’t have and gems, corseting, or other needless adornments.

“Those are nightclothes, dear,” Mal said.

Rey shrugged. If Kylo wanted some glittering socialite to float around his palace in flowing gowns and perfume, he could look elsewhere. However, Mal’s disappointed face managed to sway her. “Fine. I’ll do my hair and find something...sensible to wear.”
Mal gave a relieved smile and thanked her before leaving to get their breakfast. Once she’d left, Rey went to her vanity and combed through her hair, wincing as she caught the brush on the tighter tangles. Once her locks were tamed and falling smoothly over her shoulders, Rey dug into her drawers for something to wear. Out of the clothing that was obviously designated for daytime instead of night, she found a simple tunic and pair of leggings. Judging from the beaded garments beside it, the outfit was likely the underlayers of a more elaborate ensemble, but for breakfast with Kylo, it wouldn’t need anything more.

Rey soon sensed his approach. His heels dragged on the floor and even from a distance, she could feel the knot of tension between his broad shoulders. This week seemed to be particularly taxing for him and admittedly, her attitude had only exhausted him further. He had only spent a couple of hours in the apartment the evening before, and this morning he had been gone before Rey or even the sun had risen. He entered the room, greeted her with a weary look, and began stripping off his cape, boots, and other restrictive layers of clothing, down to his trousers and light undershirt. He had dark circles under his eyes and his hair lacked its usual glossy sheen. Rey wasn’t certain, but his face seemed a tad more gaunt than when she’d last seen him. “Has Mal gone to get breakfast?” he asked.

Rey nodded.

“I’ll be right back, then.” He walked out into the entryway, leaving her alone once more. Rey felt him unlock and enter the adjacent room.

Moments later, Mal returned with a covered tray and laid it in the dining area. “His Majesty has arrived?” she asked, glancing over at his discarded boots.

“Yeah, he’s in the other room.”

Mal nodded and pulled the cover off the platter and laid out their individual plates. “Then I will be in my room until either you or His Majesty call on me,” She said, taking a small bow.

Rey thanked her as she left, likely to fetch breakfast for herself to be eaten in her own room. As Mal put had put it, it wasn’t proper for a servant to eat with the emperor. Where that placed Rey on the social hierarchy, she was unsure. Several words came to mind: companion, courtesan, prisoner, none seemed to fit. No wonder there was gossip surrounding them.

She then sat down at the table to her bowl of vitamin supplemented porridge. Having the same bland gruel every morning was beginning to make her sick to her stomach. At this point, even the smell
made her insides turn. Kylo’s had been served his usual mountain of a breakfast. One thick slab of cheese, in particular, seemed to be begging for her to take it. She gave in, reaching across the table and devouring it in a single bite. It was rich and creamy and melted in her mouth. She definitely needed a new meal plan.

After sneaking a few more morsels from Kylo’s plate, Rey began to question his absence. She walked out into entryway and found the door his force signature was hidden behind. When she tapped her knuckles against the door, it gave way beneath her had and creaked open. Behind it, was a tiny room. Kylo knelt in one corner in front of a stone table on which rested the melted remains of a black helmet. He whipped his head around and stood abruptly.

Rey raised her hands in surrender, backing away. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s alright.” Kylo reached for her, reflexively, but immediately retracted his hand. “You can look if you want. I assume you want an explanation.”

Carefully, Rey stepped into the dimly light room and approached Kylo’s shrine. Beside the helmet was the skywalker lightsaber, as well as a crudely carved necklace and a holodisk. “What is all this?”

Kylo reverently brushed his hand over the ruined face of the helmet. “All these things once belonged to my grandfather, Anakin Skywalker, later known as Darth Vader. They came from a variety of sources, the latest addition being from you, of course.” He tapped the saber.

Rey saw the sentimentality in his eyes, the longing for what was lost and what had never been, a person he had never know but found kinship with nonetheless. She remembered when they had first met and she had peered into his thoughts and fears. Darth Vader cast a long shadow inside him.

Kylo looked back at her as if wondering why she was still there. Perhaps he expected her to be repulsed by his collection. but truly, its existence came as no surprise. She could have imagined far worse things he might have been hiding. To his surprise, she knelt down beside him and examined his collection.

Kylo cleared his throat. “These items make me feel closer to my grandfather and remind me of my purpose. I had visions of him before I even knew of our familial connection. My family lied and told me it was just nightmares that I should ignore. They couldn’t comprehend the destiny the Force had laid out for me. It was a destiny they rejected, leaving me as the last hope for his legacy.” He stared into the vacant eyes of the helmet. It was so mangled and deteriorated, it was hard to imagine it as the face that had once struck fear into the hearts of the entire galaxy.
The other items radiated a darkness, not unlike what she had felt on Mustafar. But there was something else as well—a tender, despairing feeling that surrounded the trinkets. “What are these?” Rey asked, pointing to the holodisk and necklace.

Kylo’s expression softened. “Those were my grandfather's keepsakes to remind him of my grandmother. Let me show you.”

He placed the holodisk on his palm and activated it. A small hologram of a woman appeared. She was dressed in an elaborate gown and had her hair done up in a complex arrangement. A smile lifted her beautiful features. This was the wife of the legendary sith. Rey knew Vader had to exist, given that she knew his descendants, but seeing her was another matter entirely. As was the unavoidable reality that behind the legend of Darth Vader was a person just as human as her, who had treasured the memory of a wife while fighting to keep the galaxy in chains. And evidently, he had loved her enough to leave those feelings to linger after all these years. From all the stories Rey had been told, she wouldn’t have thought a monster like him was capable of such a thing.

“What happened to her?” Rey asked.

“She died when my mother and uncle were born,” Kylo said. “My grandfather had foreseen this and did everything he could to prevent it, even going so far as to turn to the dark side to seek the power it would grant him.”

“But it didn’t work?”

“No. It didn’t. Perhaps if others had not interfered, or if she had accepted his offer to join him, she might have lived to rule the galaxy at his side.”

“I see.” Rey looked back at the woman, noticing the resemblance between her and her children. Even the subtle similarities between her and Kylo. “And what about the necklace?”

He smiled again. “Grandfather made that for her when they first met. He was just a slave back then.”

“A slave?”
“Yes. The Force has a way of using the most unlikely of people to shift the fate of the galaxy. Even those from desert wastelands,” he said.

“The Force seems particularly fixated on your family,” Rey said.

“What about yours?” Kylo asked. “They had a daughter with more potential in the force than nearly anyone I’ve ever seen or heard of. Surely they must have been powerful themselves.”

She shook her head. “I don’t remember much, but I have no memory of them ever using the Force. Although, my memories are admittedly faded.”

“What all do you remember?” Kylo asked.

Rey rested her chin on her knees. “I remember us traveling a lot. That’s where I developed my affinity for starships, I think. My mother was always repairing the engine and I was always there to watch. I don’t know why we moved around so much. It might have been their work, but I don’t even know what they did for a living. Their names were Kalen and Mila Andara. They were kind people, always telling me stories and playing games with me when I was little. There’s no way they left me on Jakku on purpose. Something must have happened to them before they could come back.”

Looking up at Kylo, Rey saw his smile had faded and his eyes had a distant look. “Is something wrong?” she asked.

“No. I was just thinking of something. It doesn’t matter,” he said, lifting himself off the floor. “Let’s just eat our breakfast. I need to be leaving again soon.”

They existed in silent limbo for a moment, unsure of how to proceed. They had just exchanged more words than they had for the past twelve weeks combined. Pushing past the awkwardness, Rey followed him back to the dining area. As they sat at far ends of the table, the silence followed. He shot her hopeful glances as she picked at her breakfast, waiting for her to speak again. For whatever reason, she decided to oblige. “Kylo, do you think I could plant my liris out in the greenhouse? It’s overgrowing its cup.”

He thought for a moment and swallowed his mouthful of sausage. “I suppose so. There should be space in there somewhere. I’ll inform the gardeners that I have approved it.”
“Great. I’ll go get Mal so she can escort me.” Kylo’s eyes widened as she gave him the first genuine smile since their arrival on Coruscant. She then pushed aside her bowl and reached for a sliver of juicy green fruit off his plate and popped it into her mouth.

He moved his fork out of her way and made no comment on her lapse in table manners. She still held on to her old habits, despite Mal’s admirable attempts to teach her. Like the gowns and makeup, she found the ritualistic table etiquette to be a tedious virtue of high society. It was just the two of them eating breakfast with no one else to see and judge, so she didn’t see the point in keeping up pretenses.

“But don’t stay in the greenhouse too long,” Kylo said. “In four hours I will hold an important audience in the throne room. You’ll need to be there.”

“Alright. I won’t stay long.” Rey cracked a small frown. Another meeting meant another round of primping and a wardrobe change, no doubt. She grabbed a slice of brown toast from his platter before going to retrieve her holopad.

“Hungry?” he asked, lifting a brow.

“I’m tired of that bland stuff. It’s starting to make me feel sick,” Rey said. “I’m sure I can handle proper food by now.”

Kylo wiped at the corners of his mouth. “I’m glad to hear it. I’ll let the kitchen staff know.”

Rey thanked him as she left the room. When Mal opened her door to answer Rey’s knocking, her smile quickly faded upon catching sight of what she wore. “My lady, surely you can find something finer than that.”

“We are going to the greenhouse to plant this thing.” Rey lifted the lyris for her to see. “I wouldn’t want to get any of the nicer stuff covered in dirt.”

Mal winced. “You intend to plant it yourself? Why not give it to one of the gardeners?”

“Because I want to,” Rey said. “And I promise to wash up and pick something nice for the assembly this afternoon.”
“Alright,” Mal said before closing her door and leading the way out of the apartment. Rey followed Mal through the palace grounds to the enormous greenhouse, her overgrown lyris in hand.

“You seem to be in high spirits, my lady” Mal said.

Considering the fact that, for once, her morning hadn’t been a silent standoff between her and Kylo, it was easy to see why. “I’m excited to plant this thing,” she said, flicking at the tumbling vines. “I have no idea how big it might get, but in the greenhouse, it will be able to reach its full potential.”

“Oh, certainly. It is the most advanced nature enclosure on the planet and produces enormous quantities of pure oxygen.”

“Wonderful,” Rey said as she examined its yellow blooms.

Mal keyed open the door and led her inside. The greenhouse stretched on for nearly half a kilometer and rose high above their heads. The rows of plant life were packed so closely together, that it seem more like an overgrown forest than a planned garden. The glass panels that made up the walls and ceiling allowed light to stream in and for Rey to see out into the palace complex. Not far beyond, where the outer gates and the imperial city rising beyond it. Kylo had yet to take her out into the city and Mal had claimed she didn’t have the authority to request an armed escort that would be needed to take her. Rey had considered asking him on many occasions but had thought better of it. The idea of being stuck with him and a small army of stormtroopers had made the idea lose its appeal. However, if he continued to be as agreeable as he had been this morning, she decided she might reconsider.
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Rey sneaks out for a little adventure in the streets of Coruscant and finds that her decisions have far-reaching consequences.

In the palace greenhouse, Rey found that she could pretend she was out in the open air, living a freer life someplace else. She could lose herself in the maze of foliage and breath in the pure oxygen, letting it soothe the pent-up frustration from her body and mind as she wove aimlessly through the rows of vegetation. When the watering sprayers kicked on, she would let it wet her face and soak through her clothes, sending a soothing chill over her skin.

With her Lyris in hand, she walked toward the far end of the greenhouse where the was a small clearing that she thought would make a good spot for planting. She crouched on the ground, not caring about the wet grass beneath her knees, or the stains they left on her leggings. If they weren’t fit for anything but lounging and sleeping in her and kylo’s quarters, what did it matter? She dug her nails into the ground and ripped free handfuls of grass until a patch of dirt emerged. After days of existing in an oversized metal box, the fertile soil smelled rich and inviting. Blissful even. If only she could always be among nature this way.

She continued to dig a sizable hole in the ground, letting the dirt burrow under her manicured nails. She could already imagine Mal’s disapproval. She would insist on cleaning them before Kylo’s audience in the throne room.

Once she pried the Lyris out of its chrome cup, she placed it into the hole before patting the dirt around it back into place. She then stood to admire her handiwork and saw that it leaned to the left and its vines curled in strange patterns after so many weeks of conforming to a tiny enclosure. She hoped that, with time, it would adjust to its new surroundings.

With that done, Rey resumed her usual garden ritual of meandering through the trees until she met a wall of glass, then turning in a different direction to start again. The leaves and branches pressed against the sides of their enclosure as if trying to break free. But near the far end of the greenhouse, the plants began thinning out enough that Rey could lie back on the grass and bask in the light of the sun and the heat of the solar emitters that hung overhead as her mind wandered into daydreams.

There was a single white-armored guard posted outside the back door. They remained motionless in the corner of her eye. Every so often, they would leave before being replaced moments later. The only indication that it was a different trooper each time was the slight variation in height. Having taken a liking to the sunny spot, Rey had seen this many times before during her previous visits. To amuse herself, she had more than once counted the seconds between the guard exchange, which only amounted to a scant minute. She stared at them, counting down until they would return, always wondering what lie beneath each helmet.

There had to be more like Finn. The trouble Hux was having was proof of that. She considered speaking to one of them, perhaps tapping on the glass to get their attention, but the inhuman masks sapped her courage. She also doubted Kylo would be pleased. Ignoring him was one thing, but turning her attention to a guard would be a cutting insult, which after his behavior that morning, she had no will to inflict.
The next day, Kylo shared her breakfast again, but this time they both had a variety of rich food to enjoy. At first, Rey was unsure if she could finish the amount she had been given, but proved herself wrong and earned a slight stomach ache. The taste of spiceloaf and ripe fruit was worth it. Kylo was quiet as he had been as of late, but seemed more at ease than he had before. He greeted her and engaged in light conversation as if they were falling back into their strange version of normalcy.

When they had finished their meal, Rey decided to ask her favor. “Kylo, do you think you can take me out into the city today? Or if not today, sometime soon?” She smiled sweetly in an attempt to sway his answer.

He went took on a guarded expression and rose from the table. “I’m afraid not. Until our security situation is under control, it isn’t safe.”

Rey dropped her smile. “And when will that be? We won’t be here much longer will we? I thought we were going back to Mustafar.”

“I had overestimated Hux’s ability to handle imperial affairs while I’m gone. I still have much to do before I can leave for an extended period,” Kylo said. “And I thought you would prefer it here anyway.”

“Yes, I suppose so.” Rey stared down at her empty plate, thinking over ways to busy herself inside the palace walls. After so many weeks without a weapon or tool in her hand, her sense of purpose was beginning to chip away.

Kylo rested his hand on Rey’s shoulder. It startled her, but she didn’t pull away. As he leaned down, she remained still as he gave her a small his on her cheek. “I’m doing everything I can. I’ll take you to see the city as soon as possible. For now, we would be too much of a target.”

She nodded weakly “I understand.”

When he came close again, this time aiming for her mouth, she instinctively flinched back. He stilled for a moment, looked away, then left the room without another word, his eyes glued to the floor.

Wanting to check on her lyris, Rey changed into the same outfit from the day before, which was still grass-stained and spotted with dirt. This time Mal didn’t bother commenting on her clothes. She must have known it was a losing battle.

After making sure her lyris had gotten enough water and rearranged its spreading vines, Rey reclaimed her stretch of grass near the far end of the greenhouse. From where she lay, she could see the city lights glittering beyond the palace walls, beckoning and taunting her.

After an hour or so, a small door in the palace wall opened up and one of the greenhouse gardeners walked through with his keycard in hand. Before he made it to the greenhouse door, Rey slipped back between the trees to watch from the shadows. Once he had keyed open the door and walked inside, he slipped his card into his coat before slipping it off to hang on a hook. He then picked up the bucket of tools that sat nearby and went to work deep within the maze of trees.

Rey had seen the gardeners before. They would spend hours adjusting the moisture vents, trimming any weeds that had sprouted, and attend to any sick or wilting plants. To maintain her sense of escapism, Rey avoided their path, which was easy to do in such a large space. Also, Mal would think it improper for her to be seen rolling around in the grass with her hair loose and clothes stained.
Before reentering the sunlight, she stopped, realizing that the gardener had walked in the direction of her lyris. Kylo said he would tell the gardeners about it, but to be sure, she followed the gardener’s path. She found him near where she had planted it, but he didn’t seem to be paying it any mind. Having rolled up his sleeves, he was hard at work at a broken section of pipe in the filtration unit. The sight sent her gears turning.

Ignoring courtly manners, she approached him. “Do you need any help?”

The man paused, his hand holding the pipe in place as its contents dribbled down his arms and soaked his shirt. He face was clean-shaven and youthful, albeit weighed down by the tiredness that seemed to plague the entire palace as of late. After only a glance, he wrinkled his nose at her and turned his attention back to his work. “No. I don’t need any help. The hell are you doing in here anyway? What sector are you from? Sanitation? Kitchen?” He tightened his wrench, only for the pipe to spray him in the face.

Rey reddened and stared down at her feet. “No. I’m not staff.”

“Then who are you and what are you doing here?” he asked, too preoccupied to look her in the eyes.

There was that question again. Rey wrinkled her brow. “I’m the Emperor’s...companion—guest.” She lifted her chin. “I’m the emperor’s guest and my name is Rey.”

The gardener blanched and dropped his wrench. His eyes narrowed, then went wide in recognition. “I’m so sorry, my lady. I—I didn’t recognize you. I was told about your plant but I didn’t know you’d...I haven’t worked this shift in a long time and wasn’t expecting to see you. Forgive me.”

“It’s alright. Calm down,” Rey said. “No harm done. I wanted to know if you needed help.”

“Oh, no. No need.” He waved dismissively at the spewing pipe. “I’ve got this covered. Then I’ll test the filters, trim the foliage a bit, adjust the humidity settings, do tests on the water ph levels—all that. It should take me a few hours, but if you want some privacy and need me to get out of your way, I can come back later.”

“No, it’s fine. I’ll go,” Rey said, pointing back over her shoulder.

He bowed his head. “Alright, my lady. Have a good day.” He gave her a nervous smile, perhaps expecting her to run to Kylo with a bad report. Instead, she smiled back and returned to her basking spot.

Once she laid back down, she found that his jacket was obscuring her view, forcing her to move to a different patch of grass. She stopped. His keycard was still in his jacket pocket, she realized. The guard had left mere seconds before. She stared at the jacket, her fingers trembled and her heart raced in anticipation. She could be out and back before Mal or anyone else would notice. And if the gardener didn’t recognize her, the random citizens who might not even know of her existence certainly wouldn’t. She would be a random pedestrian without an escort or anyone to call her “my lady”.

She snatched out the card and shoved it into her waistband. Looking through the nearby trees and foliage, neither Mal or the gardener were within sight. She peeked around the corner of the greenery, pressing her cheek against the glass, until she caught a glimpse of Mal sitting on her bench, engrossed in whatever entertainment was loaded on her holopad.

Rey took a deep breath and approached the back door of the greenhouse. She had less than half a minute to reach the outer gate. She slid the keycard through the locking mechanism and took her first
step outside the glass enclosure. Surely there would be someone guarding the outer wall, but they might think she was a low-ranking staff member as the gardener had. Sher darted across the yard and slipped the keycard into the console of the palace gate.

Her chest constricted when she saw the stormtroopers posted on either side of the door’s exterior. She stepped over the threshold, eyes forward, walking with all the confidence she could muster.

“Where are you going?” one of them asked, stopping her mid-step.

“I—I was told to leave.”

“There aren’t any shifts ending this time of day,” the trooper said. “What is your sector and designation?”

She kept her back to them as she replied “I’m kitchen staff. His Imperial Majesty wasn’t pleased with his breakfast and I was told to return home for the rest of the day.” She drew upon the force to give her words more credibility than they deserved.

“Alright,” the trooper said, sounding somewhat bewildered. “Carry on.”

“Thank you,” she replied, walking away as fast as she could without arousing suspicion. She took the first turn she found in the sea of skyscrapers to escape their line of sight. She leaned against the alley wall, breathing in the city air. It was filtered and left a slight metallic taste on her tongue, but in a way, it was as thrilling and new as the natural enclosure she had come from. Millions of sounds and smells surrounded her, and although she hadn’t seen any yet, she could feel the force signatures of Coruscant’s billions of citizens teeming around her. They were impossible to distinguish one from the other due to the sheer number of them. Taking another turn, she followed their signatures toward the city she had watched from afar for so long.

Weaving through the metal jungle, she came upon a crowded marketplace. The center of it was filled with people and the buildings towered overhead, built atop one another, with power lines strung between them. Small shops were nestled into the lower levels of the buildings, surrounded by busy crowds. Stormtroopers were among them. The citizens granted them a wider path than other passers-by, but otherwise paid them no mind. They must be a constant presence here, Rey realized. Kylo did say security was volatile.

One shopkeeper, a Farghul whose storefront seemed quieter than the others, waved to her and beckoned her forward. Jewels studded his ears and were woven into his thinning mane and his colorful robes looked like they had once been quite fine. “Something happen to your clothes, dear? Come! Look what I have to replace them. I’ll give you a special price.” He flashed her a set of yellowed fangs.

Rey looked down at her grass stained leggings. “I don’t have any money,” She said. She also had more clothes than she would ever need waiting for her back at the palace.

The shopkeeper shrugged. “Shame. My business would soar if ladies as beautiful as you were wearing something of mine. Perhaps another time.”

“Maybe.” Rey smiled and continued through the square. Her eyes widened and her mouth hung open as her new surroundings flooded her senses. People of various species spoke in a multitude of languages and wore a variety of exotic clothing. Music was being played on instruments she had never seen before by a small band of musicians sitting on a corner with an overturned hat placed in front of them to collect coins. The smell of spiced meat drifted out of a nearby food cart, making her wish she had some credits to buy herself a lunch.
When she glimpsed a stormtrooper looking her way, she turned to hide her face. She took a deep breath. There was no reason to be so paranoid. He was keeping watch on the market. To be safe, she wove through the crowd and out of the square, taking the first turn she reached to continue her exploration.

There was no one else in the small street she had chosen, but the buzz of life could be heard and felt from a distance as well as from within the buildings around her. Speeders and smaller ships raced over her head in the space between the buildings and larger vessels flew above the skyline, blotting out the sun for a fleeting second as they passed. The buildings were so close together and so tall that it seemed like the streets were cracks in a metal canyon so deep only thin slivers of sunlight managed to reach the bottom.

Taking a turn onto a wider street, she came upon a group of young children—two humans and a twi'lek. They kicked around a ball in a dead end street, smiling and laughing. One of the humans, a girl with blonde braids and a gap in her teeth, kicked the ball crookedly, sending it spinning over to where Rey stood and watched. They all turned to face her.

“You lost or something, miss?” the green twi'lek boy asked.

“I’m new around here and just was looking around.” Rey said. “It seems exciting, so far.”

“I guess so,” he shrugged.

The human girl with a round, freckled face pushed past him. “You're new around here? Welcome to the Imperial city.” She flashed a toothy grin.

“Thank you,” Rey said, smiling back. “If you don’t mind me asking, what’s it like living around here? Do you like it?”

The blonde girl answered first, playing with the end of her braid as she spoke. “Things are different now, but it isn’t so bad.”

The freckled girl tugged playfully at her friend’s other braid. “You would say that. Your father got a job in the palace.”

The blonde girl flipped a braid over she shoulder. “Yeah, and now mother doesn’t have to work at Markol’s store anymore. She can stay home and take care of me and Kalen. And I also get to hear father talk about all kinds of cool stuff about the palace.”

“Like what?” Rey asked, resting her hands on her knees or lower herself to their eye level.

The girl tapped at her chin. “Well, he told me its super fancy inside. And that there’s a pretty lady who lives there.”

“Like a queen?” the other girl asked, leaning on her shoulder.

The twi’lek boy raised a finger in objection. “Actually, since we have an emperor now, she would be an empress. But anyhow, I think we would know if we had one. She could be his sister or something.”

The blonde girl snorted. “I doubt it. Father said they held hands and that she sits on his throne. Sounds like an empress to me.”

The twi’lek crossed his arms. “Well, she could—”
The freckled girl groaned and shoved at his arm. “Just let us imagine for once. Try it. It’s fun.”

He shrugged and rolled his eyes as the blonde burst into a fit of giggles. “See! I told you I had good stories,” she said.

“You sure do.” Rey smiled, her face reddening. “And I’m glad your father has a good job now.”

“Also, my mother’s shipping business had been better.” The twi'lek boy said, raising his finger again. “She said it was because the planets are all...ah, what’s the word?”

“United?” Rey offered.

“Yeah, that sounds right. United,” he said.

The freckled girl lowered her voice. “I’d like it here a lot more if we didn't have all the creepy trooper guys around, though.”

“I agree with you there,” Rey whispered. She then handed her back the ball. “I should be going. Have fun and stay safe.”

“We will,” The freckled girl said, grabbing the other children by their arm.

“I’ll make sure of it, the boy said.

Rey waved goodbye and ventured down a diverging path. She felt more people gathering. Music echoed nearby, the heavy bass vibrating through the metal streets. Turning the corner, she saw people gathered outside some sort of cantina with neon lights decorating the outside and shining from within. The music spilling out of it sounded like it was made for dancing. If she had more time, she might have joined in. The people dressed in brighter clothing than she had seen in the market, with tighter fabric and shorter hems. Many had a slight sway to their walk that was likely brought on by the drinks they were holding. The doors of the establishment were kept wide open to allow the patrons to come and go in large groups, laughing and joking with one another like the children back in the alley. Rey had limited experience with cantinas, but something told her there was indecent about being at a place like this before night had fallen. Mal wouldn’t approve. That made it more tempting in a way.

Rey looked over her shoulder and saw a stormtrooper posted nearby that she hadn’t noticed before. Upon hearing a strange sound, Rey’s attention turned back to the club. A male bothan standing outside the door called out to her. Whatever he was trying to tell her was lost in a jumbled mixture of his own language and galactic basic. He was so drunk that the human whose shoulder he clung to was the only thing keeping him from collapsing. His feet shuffled over the pavement as his friend dragged him forward.

“I think he likes you,” his friend said, his own speech slightly slurred. “Can’t tell what he’s saying, but you’re definitely his type. Wanna join us?”

Rey heard the stormtroopers footsteps behind her. Without giving the man a response, she slipped into the gap between the cantina and the building beside it. Once more, she was alone. The cantina music faded into the background, drowned out by the sound of her rapid heartbeat. The path was scattered with litter and it smelled faintly of vomit and alcohol. It must have been where the partiers went when their fun nights out caught up with them.

She needed to get back to the palace. Hopefully, the guards would have changed shifts since she left. Otherwise, she would need to come up with another excuse for her return. Grazing her hand over her
hip, she reassured herself that the keycard was still secured in her waistband. Mentally retracing the steps she had already taken, she directed her path toward the palace.

She soon realized her sense of direction was not attuned to the structure of a city. The path she walked was cold and empty, far from the lively market she had first encountered. The buildings were growing more dilapidated as she went. Rooftops stooped lower to the ground, several windows were boarded up, and only a few pedestrians passed her by, none of which acknowledged her. When she passed another alleyway, she caught a glimpse of a stormtrooper walking in her direction. Keeping her head down and pace steady, she walked on.

A sound came from above her. Looking up, she caught a glimpse of black cloth hanging over a rooftop. It disappeared, punctuated by what sounded like footsteps. Rey tried reaching out with the force like Kylo had taught her, to read the intentions of whoever it was, but with so many people in the surrounding buildings and nearby streets made it impossible to distinguish one signature from another.

The next corner she turned on was a dead end. No sunlight reached the forgotten corner. She turned back, ready to double back and find a better path, but froze as a stormtrooper appeared in her path. A bead of sweat ran down her spine. This was no routine patrol.

The stormtrooper stalked forward, keeping his black eyepiece fixed on her. “I thought I recognised you,” he said. “You’re a long way from the palace, my lady.”

Rey paled, her mind scrambling for an excuse. There was none. “I—I wasn’t trying to run away. I was exploring. I’ll come back with you now, okay?” She lifted her hands in surrender, imagining what privilege Kylo would take from her as punishment.

The trooper stepped closer. “I bet His Imperial Highness is wondering where you are.” He pulled off his helmet to reveal a youthful face with bloodshot eyes and heavy stubble. His mouth was set in a hard line as he stared her down.

“What are you doing?”

“You are a pretty one. I bet His Highness will miss you.” He drew the blaster at his side and aimed it straight between her eyes. “I certainly hope so.”

As he pulled the trigger, a blur of black robes dropped from the roof above and pounced on him, slamming him onto his back and sending his helmet and blaster skidding out of reach. Covering her mouth to stifle her scream, Rey backed against the wall behind her. Kylo was on top of the trooper, who struggled beneath him, his armor caved in where Kylo had landed. Rey couldn’t see from her perspective, but from the sputtering gasping sounds she heard she knew Kylo had his hands around his throat. There was a hollow crack as the trooper’s head was slammed against the pavement.

Panting, Kylo stood and turned to face her.

Everything from his hair to his robes was in a wild disarray. His skin was covered with a sheen of sweat and his face was flushed with exertion. “Are you alright?” he asked.

Rey looked from the dead man to Kylo. “I didn’t mean...I was just exploring.” She hardly recognized the sound of her own voice, as pitched and broken as it was.

“Are you hurt?” He reached for her, but retracted his hand when she inhaled sharply and flinched away. “It’s okay. I’m not here to hurt you. I want to see if you’re okay.” He moved forward again, and when she didn’t move, he pulled her against him and tucked her head beneath his chin. “I said, are you hurt?”
She shook her head against his chest.

He breathed a heavy sigh. “You're in shock, then. I'm bringing you home.” He removed his cape and draped it over her shoulders before gathering her up in his arms.

She must have been, for as frightened as she was, she couldn’t find the strength to move her shaking limbs. “How did you know…” She glanced down at the fallen trooper and growing pool of blood, but immediately returned her gaze to his.

He removed his cape and draped it over her shoulders before gathering her up in his arms. “I felt you venturing outside the palace walls and decided to investigate. I knew the city could be unsafe but I didn’t expect to find something like this.” He adjusted his hold so that she was held against him with one arm. He then bent down and picked up the fallen helmet, using the shattered eyepiece as a handle. “Someone will answer for this, I promise you.” His voice had a darkness to it that she hadn’t heard in a very long time.

She looped her arms around his neck for support. “You could find me in this jumble of people? I could seem to separate one signature from another. There's just so many of them.”

“I can always find you.” He leaned his head against hers as he began the journey back to the palace. “Never forget that.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

Rey and Kylo deal with the aftermath of the attempt on her life and, in more ways than one, must face the reality of their circumstances.

The pedestrians made way for Kylo as he carried Rey through the city streets toward the palace. Many stared in awe or confusion, but none dared approach them. He wove through the alleyways and larger paths as if he knew them by heart. The stormtroopers they passed saluted and called out his titles once they recognised him. His hold on her tightened and he strode on without acknowledging them.

“I think I can walk on my own, now.” Rey said.

Kylo shook his head, still glowering at the path before them, his eyes darting from side to side as he surveyed their surroundings. “No. You're still in shock. It's best I carry you for now.”

“I’m fine. Just put me down.”

He looked at her, his brow furrowed and eyes rimmed in dark circles. “You just survived an assassination attempt. I’m not taking any chances.”

Rey had a feeling there was more to it than that. Having his arms occupied wouldn’t help him should he need to defend her again. Perhaps he was the one in shock. There was a twinge of fear in his eyes along with the vengeful fury and he was holding onto her with desperate fierceness as if she might be snatched from his arms. His fingers bit into her thigh and shoulder and his chest pressed against her side as it rose and fell in shallow breaths.

“I could have handled it. You didn’t need to swoop in like that.” she said.

He flashed her a sceptical look.

“Don’t look at me like that.” she said, her voice raised in indignation. “I know I could have. I would have dodged the shot and summoned the blaster out of his hand or force pushed him or used a—”

“I’m sure you could take anyone in the entire imperial army, the whole galaxy even, but I wasn’t about to take that chance. Alright?”

“Fine.” She leaned her head into the crook of his neck and balled the fabric of his tunic in her fists. She didn’t need anyone to save her, least of all him. It was his fault she had become a target in the first place. “How long had you been following me, anyway?” she asked.

“Since you reached the market.” He said it casually, as though stalking someone and sneaking around on rooftops was in any way normal. Although, it was far from the strangest thing he’d done. It was almost tame in comparison.

“Why did you let me wander for so long? I would have thought you’d step in and drag me back to the palace as soon as you felt me leave.”
Kylo reddened. “You seemed...happy. I didn’t want to spoil it.”

Of course she had been happy. She had her first taste of freedom in over five months. All the jewels he foisted on her and all the servants and “my lady”s couldn't make up for that. As much as he tried to dress it up, this was still a bargain and whatever glittering palace or hallowed castle he chose to place her in would be a cage. She was only there for her friends’ sake. And while he hadn’t forced her to be intimate with him since their arrival on Coruscant, her shackles were no less chafing.

As they approached the front gates of the imperial palace, the four stormtroopers standing guard saluted. Kylo turned to the closest one. It was hard to tell with his face obscured, but his eyepiece seemed to be tilted to look at the broken helmet in Kylo’s hand. “One of your own is lying dead in an alley of the lower sixty-fourth sector. See it taken care of before some desperate citizen decides to pick him apart.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” the trooper relied before flipping on his transceiver.

“And send a message to my knights that they will be needed immediately to stand guard outside my suite for the night.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” The trooper keyed in the code, causing the gates to open. They were several meters high elaborately designed and cast in shining chrome that glinted in the dying sunlight. Kylo carried her through as soon as they opened wide enough for him to pass.

“Your knights are here?” Rey asked, sounding as though she’d been told there were wasp-worms roaming the palace. “I haven’t seen them anywhere.”

“They have special missions off planet but they always stay close in case they are needed. Within the palace they have their own rooms. They seem content to stay there when not on a mission, unseen by everyone else. Tonight will have to be an exception.”

“I see.” The idea of his masked followers standing outside her door seemed more unsettling than going unguarded. But at least they weren’t stormtroopers.

“Now will you put me down?” Rey asked once they had crossed lawn and passed through the palace doors.

He gave a disapproving huff in reply before lowering her to the ground to stand on her own feet. Just as she took her first step, he caught her hand and wrapped his fingers around hers. “Stay close until we get to the suite.”

Knowing further protest would be pointless, Rey rolled her eyes and decided to humor him. Although, she had to admit that his wide shadow hovering over her was somewhat comforting. No one in the galaxy would dare to cross him for the sake of getting to her.

Perhaps now that her life had been threatened, he would restart their training sessions or allow her to carry a weapon of her own. The weight of a staff or blaster had been replaced by that of heavy gowns and jewels that would only hinder her in a fight. Without a proper weapon or even a training staff, she hadn’t been able to practice the forms he had taught her. Once, she had attempted to use a broken branch she’d found in the garden, but the balance of it made it a poor substitute. Without practice, she was losing her edge. Today was proof of that.

Once they arrived at the door to their suite, the knights were already lined up on either side of it, their weapons drawn. They unnatural stillness reminded her of the statues of the sith temple on Mustafar. Perhaps, if they removed their masks, lava would pour from their mouths as well. They stepped aside
as Kylo approached and led the way into their suite.

Inside, Mal stood waiting. “Is she alright? Those men outside said there was an attack. What happened?” she asked. The air of propriety that always surrounded her had vanished, leaving terror in its place. It was the most expressive Rey had ever seen her. Her small mouth quivered as she waited for an answer.

Rey managed a reassuring smile. “I’m sorry for scaring you and leaving you in the garden. But don’t worry. I’m alright.”

“I managed to intervene before she was hurt,” Kylo said, placing the broken stormtrooper helmet on the ground. “And I will be seeing to her security personally from now on. Your services are no longer required.”

“Kylo, it wasn’t her fault,” Rey said. “I stole a keycard, okay? She couldn’t have known. Don’t punish her for my sake.”

“This isn’t a punishment, and I doubt anyone could keep you from escaping. What I’m concerned about is your safety.” He turned to Mal. “I mean no offence, but I doubt being a bodyguard was part of your training as a handmaiden. You have served us well and I will see that you are given a new assignment that will suit your skillset.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.” Mal bowed before turning to face Rey. “It has been an honor to serve you, My Lady.”

“Thank you for putting up with me.” Rey pulled her into a hug. Mal seemed surprised by the gesture, at first, but reciprocated. She then collected her few possessions before bidding them farewell and leaving them alone in the suite.

“So you’re my bodyguard from now on?” Rey asked. “I’ll follow you to all your meetings, even the ones outside the palace or off-world?” The chance to travel sparked her interest.

“All my meetings will be conducted via hologram until the investigation is over and our security issues are resolved.”

“So we’re just going to stay locked up in here all day?”

“No, no,” he said, resting his hands on her shoulders. “We are returning to Mustafar where I can keep you safe.”

Rey’s displeasure at the prospect of returning to that cursed molten rock must have been evident in her face. Kylo cupped her cheeks and lowered his voice to a level that was likely meant to be reassuring. “It’ll only be for a little while, I promise.”

“If we have to go back, can we start training again?” Rey asked. “Not in the temple, but in a large room, maybe?”

“Yes, we can train again. And we won’t have to keep up appearances anymore, either. So no more of those gowns you hate so much” he said. “Once everything is settled, we can come back and explore the city whenever you like. I just need to make sure everything is safe before then.”

“I understand,” Rey said.

He released her face, then recaptured her hand to draw her into their room. Only then did he leave her side. “We should get some sleep. I will address the court one last time tomorrow before we leave
for Mustafar.” He sat on the edge of the bed and peeled off his boots and clothing. When he lifted his undershirt over his head, Rey saw the purple blotches that had formed at the center of his chest.

“Is that from the blaster? I thought it missed.” She approached him to get a better look at the wound.

Kylo balled up his shirt and tossed it to the floor. “It’s just a bruise. My clothing is padded. Precautions need to be taken when you are a walking target.”

The bruise was slightly raised and spread over most of his chest and the upper part of his abdomen. Rey winced at the sight of it. “Do you have any bacta gel? Some patches?”

“Top drawer on the left.” Kylo jerked his head toward his storage units.

Rey opened it and found a variety of basic medical supplies. She grabbed the gel and a bandage then crawled onto the bed where Kylo sat waiting. He had been injured trying to save her, so it was only fair she should see to the wound. Back on Jakku, something as precious and useful as bacta was a luxury she had rarely been able to afford. Once, she had traded seven portions worth of parts to afford a dose when she had torn open a long gash in her leg on a bit of scrap metal. She had gone hungry for a while, but it had been worth it to stave off infection.

She unscrewed the tube and squeezed a bit onto her fingers then smoothed it over the bruises as gently as she could. The gel was cool to the touch. Looking up at Kylo, she saw his ears had gone red. “You know this isn’t necessary. It’ll heal on its own. You should be getting some sleep instead. You’ve had a long day and I doubt tomorrow will be much better.”

Rey peeled the backing off the patch and smoothed it over the dark center of the bruises. “Just hush and be grateful.”

Kylo stared into the bedsheet, his eyes narrow and distant, his neck muscles taunt.

“Are you mad at me?” Rey asked. He blinked and lifted his gaze to hers. “I can sense how angry you are,” she said.

He sighed and ran his hand through his hair, which was becoming noticeably overgrown. “I’m not mad at you, I just...I thought you were running away. When I felt you leave the palace, I panicked and ran to find you. And when I did, you were just exploring and I don’t think I’ve ever seen you smile like that before. Not with me.” He paused for a moment, his teeth and fists clenched. “When that trooper attacked you, for a split second I thought I might never see you smile like that again. I swear to you, Rey. If this was a planned assassination, I will find whoever did this and tear them apart with my bare hands.” He dug his fingers into the bed sheet and took another breath. “So I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at just about everyone else, including myself, but not you.”

“Alright,” she whispered her heartbeat pulsing in her ears.

“Thank you for being such a good nurse. Now you should get some sleep. I will see you in the morning.” Kylo said before turning over and slipping his legs under the covers.

Rey stared at his bare back, which still radiated pent-up rage and self loathing, then back at herself. She was kneeling on her side of the bed which he had left open for her each night they had spent here—the side she had never slept in. She crept closer to Kylo and leaned over his shoulder to plant a small kiss on his cheek. He flinched as if she’d shocked him, then rolled over to face her. “What are you doing?”

“Getting some sleep” She slipped under the covers and curled herself against his chest, the same way they had slept so many nights on Mustafar. She wrapped her arms around him and rested her head on
his shoulder. His bare skin was flushed hot against her cheek. “Thank you for saving me today. I don’t think i’ve said that yet.”

“I—your’e welcome.” He looped his arms around her with some hesitation, but when she leaned into his embrace, he caught her tightly against him and buried his face in her tangled hair. She had a feeling he needed this as much as she did.

If this was foolish, she could at least say it wasn’t her worst decision of the day. As much as she hated to admit, she had missed this. “Goodnight,” she whispered.

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She awoke to the blissful sensation of soft bedding around her, a plush mattress beneath her, and a warm hand on her cheek. The hand was wide and calloused and the thumb traced her jaw, then tucked a hair behind her ear. “It’s time to wake up,” a voice said, low and gentle. “We’ve slept nearly to noon.”

She opened her eyes to find Kylo staring down at her, his eyes half lidded and a small smile on his lips. The long sleep seemed to have rejuvenated him. The dark rings that had been beneath his eyes the past weeks had faded and his cheeks had a healthy color to them. His chest was still bare and the skin around the bacta patch was free of bruises. Her nursing had worked. As for herself, she was curled against his leg, her face halfway on the pillow and halfway on his hip, and her hand was laced with his.

Any other day they had awoken like this she might have feared he had an alternative motive for waking her, but the look he had in his eyes wasn’t lustful, but merely content. She realized she felt the same.

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In the dining area, they ate the breakfast Kylo had laid out. “I will start the investigation into your attack and assemble all my top officers to lay out my new course of action,” he said, biting into a purple fruit that dribbled red juice over his fingers. “I doubt many will take well to it.”

“What are you planning to announce?” Rey asked.

Kylo paused to wipe the stains from his hands. “I am announcing the dissolution of the stormtrooper program.”

Rey’s mouth fell open and eyes went wide. “You're what? But how? And Why? Because of what happened yesterday?” She couldn’t help smiling at the idea. Finn would be relieved to know.

“Not entirely. Yesterday solidified my decision and forced me to move it forward a bit faster than i’d anticipated, but I’ve been planning this for a while. You were right. You can’t steal children from their families and expect loyalty. We will need to find a new way to hold the galaxy together.”

“I can’t believe...This is wonderful, Kylo.” Rey felt as though she might cry tears of joy as a grin spread across her face.

Her smiled back. “I knew you would approve.”

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Kylo brought her along to the assembly in the throne room. He held the broken stormtrooper helmet in one hand and grasped Rey’s hand with the other. His knights flanked them as they went.

Upon reaching the throne room he force pushed the doors open before the guards even reached for the handles. A crowd uniformed staff awaited them.

The knights took their positions on either side of the throne and Kylo sat her upon it before standing between her and the crowd with his head held high. His free hand was folded behind his back, but the other held fast to the helmet, his fingers splayed across the surface as though he wanted to crush it beneath them. There was no doubt in Rey’s mind that he could.

She could only imagine the deadly expression he graced his audience with, but their nervous faces and the feelings of frustration and rage emanating from his back told her all she needed to know. The growing crowd gave her questioning looks as well, staring like they didn’t quite recognise her. She didn’t blame them. A plain tunic was worn in place of a gown and her hair was tied in the three-bun style she had solely missed. She kept her eyes on Kylo to avoid their probing stares. They spoke in hushed tones amongst themselves, but when General Hux walked through the open doors, they all fell silent.

Hux approached the throne and gave Kylo a courtesy bow and Rey a fleeting look of distaste. “You summoned me, your Highness.”

Kylo threw the shattered helmet at his feet, sending bits of tinted broken glass scattering across the marble floor. “Yes. I did.” He said through gritted teeth. “Your incompetence has reached its end. One of your men attempted to assassinate Rey yesterday evening. If he had been successful, your life would have been forfeit. In fact, if I wasn't feeling so generous I would have taken it as soon as you entered the room.”

A glint of fear shone through Hux’s rigid exterior. “It must have been another one who had gone rogue. You knew that has been happening as of late. Why was the girl not given a proper escort to prevent such an attempt?”

“Her security is my concern. Yours was keeping your men in check, making sure they were defending what is mine, not destroying it.”

“I have been doing all that I possibly can. There are millions of soldiers. It would be impossible to —”

“Enough excuses. I am tired of your failures. This one will be your last.” Kylo said. “I am decommissioning the stormtrooper program, starting immediately.”

The officers around him tore their gazes from Kylo to stare at Hux and await his reaction. His thin lip quivered, but his voice boomed. “You are letting sentiment cloud your judgement. How will you rule your empire without an army? Who will hold the galaxy together?”

“We will evolve as the old empire did when their clones died out.” Kylo said. He turned to face a woman who towered over the men around her. She wore her platinum blonde hair cropped short and her steel-blue eyes possessed a collected precision that Hux’s lacked. While many of those around her had their eyes and mouths wide open at the spectacle before them, she remained calm. “Captain Phasma will be elevated in your place and will begin recruiting soldiers from across the empire.” Kylo continued. “Instead of stealing soldiers from their cradles, we will allow those capable of combat to defend their own planets with our careful supervision.”
Hux looked from Phasma to Kylo, his nostrils flaring. “Who will agree fight for you? You expect every world to go along with this?"

“If we are an empire worth fighting for, then people will rally to defend it. Not everyone has to resort to brainwashing to gain loyalty.” Kylo said. “Enough of this insubordination. Be glad I’m letting you walk out with your life.”

Something snapped in Hux’s expression. The cracks that had formed in his exterior widened to allow his fury to pour out. “You speak of stealing and manipulation like they are beneath you.” He sneered. “At least I never resorted to kidnapping and blackmail to force a woman into my bed.” The room went silent around him, as if everyone in attendance held their breath. A sadistic smile crept over Hux’s face. “What? You didn’t tell anyone else about that detail of your little treaty with the Resistance? That you stole that girl, dragged her back to your castle and threatened to murder everyone she cared about if she didn’t comply?”

The silence dragged on as everyone struggled to process what had been said. Hot tears pricked at Rey’s eyes as panic and shame sliced through her like a blade. From what she could sense from kylo, her feeling were shared.

The sound of Hux’s scream broke the silence. With a swipe of his hand, Kylo held him in the air. Hux clawed at his throat, making horrible choking sounds that echoed through the hall. A few officers gasped and all moved to the sides of the room to avoid him as he struggled overhead. Just when Rey thought she’d be sick at the sight of his writhing body, he plummeted to the ground in a black heap. Mitaka ran forward as Hux fought for air, gasping and wheezing.

“Don't touch me!” Hux swatted him away and pulled himself onto his hands and knees before collapsing once more.

Kylo turned to his knights. “Escort him to a holding cell. The rest of you may leave.” Kylo said.

Two of the knights moved forward to pull Hux up by his arms and drag his barely conscious body from the room.

“We should go,” Kylo said. His voice was uneasy, as if he too had a hard time processing what had just occurred. The rage Rey had felt in him was replaced by revulsion and shame. Despite the progress they had seemingly made, everything Hux had said was true.
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

She felt a small twinge of guilt, like the code cylinder was a hidden knife she was planning to plunge into Kylo’s back. He had saved her last night and she had slept beside him willingly for the first time. And for the first time, he had demanded nothing further. But then Hux’s words returned to her once more, making her stomach turn. Kylo had stolen her, blackmailed her out of her dignity, then locked her in a gilded cage. She owed him nothing.

The throne room seemed oddly hollow with only the two of them in it. Kylo stood at the door with his back to her, his shoulders slack and head hanging low.

“You told Hux about us?” Rey asked. “About everything?” She had thought their regretful beginnings was a secret between the two of them. At first, she had assumed he’d spoken of her as a conquest, the spoils of their war with the Resistance, but never imagined him admitting to the bribery. It would seem beneath as an emperor. And from the way he had been acting, he didn’t seem intent on humiliating her—not intentionally, anyway.

“No,” Kylo said. His voice was harsh, but it was obvious his anger was not directed at her. “Hux knew of your...acquisition, but I never told him you were the reason for the treaty with the Resistance. I told him you were collateral to keep them in line. Hux was one of the few that read the agreement through. He must have pieced together the truth on his own,” he added solemnly.

Rey stared down at her feet, wondering what the officers who had left were thinking and what new gossip would spread through their ranks. It felt ridiculous that she would care at all. They were the enemy. It shouldn't matter what they thought of her. She was used to being looked down upon, but not for something like this.

As her gaze wandered over the floor, she looked to where Hux’s cap had been left, the dark fabric stark against the pale marble. Beside it was his fallen code cylinder. Rey had found a few amongst the imperial wreckage on Jakku, along with the incinerated remains of their bearers. Upon opening the devices and asking around Niima Outpost in case they were of value, she had learned that they held information on their wearer and allowed them access to secure files and locations.

She looked back up at Kylo, who's back still faced her, and then back down at the cylinder. It was potentially more useful than the keycard she had stolen. Bending down, she slipped it into her shoe and pretended to fasten it, her heart palpitating as she waited for Kylo to turn around and catch her.
When he did turn, she was already standing up again, the cylinder tucked safely against her ankle.

“Are you ready to go?” Kylo asked. “We just need to go get our stuff and board the ship.” He looked her in the eyes only briefly before staring back at the floor, seemingly preoccupied with his thoughts.

“I’m ready,” Rey said.

They walked side by side and hand in hand, as they always did, but their fingers did not interlace. The change felt wrong. It was the first brick in the barrier Rey could feel forming between them by the minute. With every brush of their shoulders or whisper of fabric as his cloak caught against her legs, Hux’s words would flood back, along with the troubling imagery it dug up. Like Kylo towering over her, reaching to quiet her mind before he stole her away; or how she had felt as he laid out the details of their deal, his mouth curving sadistically; or the way she’d ached and cried after their first night together. She remembered his demands, in bed and in training, and his maddened musings on the dark side and destiny and how she was somehow caught up in it as well. There were pleasant memories as well, but they were woefully outnumbered.

Starved for affection and human contact, she had been fooling herself, allowing herself to grow complicit and forget all he had done. She pulled her hand away as soon as they passed through the door to their suite.

Kylo went straight for the fresher, pulling off his outer garments on the way there, his face hard and unreadable. Just as the door shut behind him, Rey dashed to the shelf where her keepsakes were kept and removed the code cylinder from her shoe. She buried it deep within the soil of her sprout from Ach-to. Somehow she would find a way to get it to the Resistance. It might not be enough, but another piece of intel might come along to supplement it. Especially if Kylo was intent on keeping her closer than ever during his discussions of imperial security. Military meetings with high-ranking officials sounded promising. More so than the dull formality of the throne room.

She felt a small twinge of guilt, like the cylinder was a hidden knife she was planning to plunge into Kylo’s back. He had saved her last night and she had slept beside him willingly for the first time. And for the first time, he had demanded nothing further. But then Hux’s words returned to her once more, making her stomach turn. Kylo had stolen her, blackmailed her out of her dignity, then locked her in a gilded cage. She owed him nothing.

Rey was startled from her thoughts at the sound of Kylo’s fist slamming into the fresher’s wall. She felt his second hit leave a small fissure in the stone. His skin split open as he continued the onslaught, his frustration and anger radiating from behind the door, shaking her to her bones. She took a deep breath and cradled her arms against herself, dreading the trip to Mustafar and what he might have planned for her there. At least she wouldn’t have to face the scrutiny of the court for a while. Let
them think what they want. She would be on the other side of the galaxy, imprisoned with Kylo Ren.

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Once Kylo had calmed himself as much as he was able and packed us his possessions into a large trunk and Rey had gathered her things into her satchel, they were ready to head for the hangar. Everything else they would need was on Mustafar, including a more practical wardrobe. She had that to look forward to, at the very least.

Rey felt the crusted blood on his knuckles as she held the hand he had wrapped around hers, but made no comment or offer to bandage it. It was best not to discuss it.

“Phasma will begin the preliminary stages of replacing the Stormtrooper program. It will take years due to the sheer size of it, but not a single soldier will be added to their ranks from this day onward. I promise,” he said, an edge of desperation to his voice. He did his best to appear restrained and suppress the rage that still lingered, but he could hide neither from her. His force signature was still buried in her mind in a way she feared might never be remedied.

“The Imperial forces will need to be completely restructured and certain assets will need to be liquidated or repurposed. I will also be sending out representatives to each system to negotiate for the creation of a draft and enlistment system. I will be taking a non-militaristic approach and offering incentives in return.”

“Like what? Payment for their service?” Rey looked up at the glassy fixture overhead and shimmering details on the polished design on the ceiling. “I’m sure you can afford it.”

“Yes, of course.”

“What about the children that are being trained right now?” she asked. “Will you return them from where they were stolen?”

“Not all of them have families to return to, I’m afraid,” Kylo said, swallowing the lump in his throat. “The families we are able to locate will be compensated for the wrong that was done to them.”

“What price are you going to put on a child?”
“That would be impossible. Family is priceless. But I will still make sure they won't be delivered into a life of poverty.”

Rey ran her thumb over the scab forming over his knuckles. “Good.”

“Your knights aren’t coming?” Rey asked, noting the size of the craft he had led her to. If they were all meant to fit in there, the ride was going to be far more unpleasant than she’d thought. It was a personal shuttle barely large enough for two. It was well-armored and reminded her somewhat of a tie-fighter—like the ones of the First Order that had chased her, Finn, and BB-8 on Jakku—but more aerodynamic, with broader wings that angled backward, emblazoned on either side with Kylo’s imperial sigil.

“My knights will be staying here in my place whenever they aren’t on missions. I need to maintain a presence here to remind them all who rules this empire,” he said. “I doubt my decision will be met with unanimous approval, so many reminders will be needed.”

No knights. Another small point in Mustafar’s favor. “What about Hux’s punishment? Is he going to be kept here on Coruscant somewhere?” Honestly, she was surprised Kylo had allowed him to live.

“He is being transported to the highest security prison outpost in our Empire. I want him alive to see me dismantle the monstrosity of a military he had dedicated his life to. Once I grow tired of that, I’ll decide what to do with him. Something public and viewable on the holonet” The corners of his lips lifted into what looked like a smile for the first time since leaving the throne room.

Rey might have been disturbed by his sadistic side shining through, but regarding Hux, she shared his need for retribution. Perhaps not on such a grand scale—if it was up to her, she would have just ended it quick and clean—but she appreciated the thought. Hux might have spoken the truth, but he had spoken gravely out of turn.

“Why are we taking such a small shuttle?” Rey asked. “Another security measure?”

“Exactly,” Kylo said as he opened the hatch. He moved aside and gestured for her to enter. “I won’t need a legion of officers like on a larger vessel—just a copilot.”

Stepping inside, Rey saw what he meant. The interior consisted of a single cockpit and nothing more, with two seats at the wide controls at the front viewport. Kylo ducked his head to follow her
inside, then claimed the larger of the two seats. “I’ve seen you fly, so I doubt you’ll have trouble with this.” As Rey settled in beside him, he paused a moment and leaned back into his chair, appearing as though a weight had come down on his shoulders. “Rey, before we leave...what Hux said—”

“I don’t want to talk about it. Let’s just go.” Rey pulled the lever to initiate takeoff. The ship engines rumbled beneath them and lifted them into the air.

“A—Alright.” Kylo adjusted his grip on the controls and guided them out of the hangar and up into the atmosphere.

As they worked alongside each other in silence to make the jump to hyperspace, Rey caught a glimpse of Coruscant’s surface below: the glittering lights of unending city life, the hovering spacecraft, and winding streets full of people who were now too distant for her to see. It might be a long while until she would be able to explore it again, but the memory of it and her own daydreams would sustain her.

The feel of the controls beneath her fingers and the view of space spread out before her might have been thrilling if she hadn't been aware of where she was headed.

Mustafar proved to be just as uninviting as ever, the lava sea churning around the volcanic islands that spotted the surface. Rey’s memory of the choking sulfur air resurfaced just by looking at it. Before they penetrated the atmosphere, a transmission came over their speakers and lit up their communication interface. “Identify yourself and input your security clearance,” the voice said. It was monotone and stern, but undoubtedly human.

Kylo pressed the comlink and leaned close to the mic. “Your Emperor has returned. I’m giving my clearance code now.” His fingers flew over the keys, his palm and wrist obscuring the keypad from Rey’s line of sight. She couldn't tell if this was an intentional decision on his part.

“Access granted,” the voice announced. “It is my honor to welcome you home, Your Imperial Majesty.”

“No mention of me?” Rey asked when the signal cut off.

“No need.” Kylo shrugged and guided them down to the planet’s surface. “So that everything would be ready for us, I sent word ahead that I would be staying for a while. Knowing that, your presence is a given.”
The whole galaxy knew she was tethered to him, it would seem. She could only hope that the gossip surrounding Hux’s outburst hadn’t reached the ears of the castle staff as well.

Kylo guided them into the hangar, which she realized she had never actually seen before. The last time they arrived, the shuttle had dropped them off at the front landing pad before returning to its flagship. Since Kylo’s personal ship was not multiple times larger than the castle itself, as was the case with the imperial star destroyers, it made sense he would keep it stored away where neither ash clouds or lava could reach it.

The hangar was not nearly as large at the one in the imperial palace, but impressive nonetheless. Near the ceiling, a viewport ran across one wall. Uniformed staff sat at their consoles, speaking with one another. The security staff, Rey assumed. The large space was filled with a variety of imperial spacecraft, some of which looked personalized like the one they arrived in, but none were as small.

There was however, a bit of light-colored metal Rey spotted in the corner of her eye. At the very back of the hangar was the Millennium Falcon, tucked away with a dark tarp thrown over it. Another souvenir of her capture. Kylo seemed to be as much of a collector as she was. At least hers didn’t include ancient dark side artifacts and unwilling companions.

Kylo silently acknowledged her discovery by meeting her gaze for a fleeting second, then led her by the shoulder in the opposite direction, carrying his massive trunk in his free hand. Entering the castle from a different entrance proved to be disorienting, as if she was reliving her first night here, seeing it as a strange and terrifying new place. It was far colder of a welcome than arriving at the Imperial palace on Coruscant for the first time. Instead of blinding her with its brilliance and making her feel small and insignificant, this castle made her feel that the walls were embedded with a million all-seeing eyes watching her every step. She wondered which was worse: gossipy imperials or the spiritual remnants of dead sith.

Kylo’s hand was cold on the small of her back as he led her to their old room. Upon entering and seeing their bed, Rey wondered how much of their former routine he would be expecting her to revert to. She quickly dismissed the thought. He had hardly made eye contact since Hux’s outburst.

“I will be occupied by meetings for the rest of the day. You can do what you like. Perhaps tomorrow we’ll have time to train in the empty banquet hall in the east wing,” Kylo said.

Rey nodded. He released his hold on her to take a seat at the table and pull out his holopad. Seeing as he had claimed that portion of the room, Rey tossed her satchel onto the bedside table and folded herself into a comfortable spot on her side of the bed before opened her own holopad.
As Kylo dove into his meetings, Rey little attention to the botany manual she had loaded up on her screen. The rest was spent on scanning Kylo’s conversations for useful information. There was little to be found. The names and location of a few outposts and bases came up and were quickly filed away in her mind, but most of his meetings for the day consisted of debating the merits of his plans for a replacement army with an endless string of uniformed holograms.

There would be a native army for each planet as well as a large centralized force to be stationed on Coruscant. Rey didn’t quite understand the military jargon being used, nor did she care to, but for information’s sake, she remained alert.

There wasn’t much else to do as she wasted the day away, reclining on her pillow with her legs crossed and shoes discarded on the floor. Twice, a delivery droid brought them food, which Kylo shoved into his mouth with uncharacteristic haste before returning to his duties. Rey picked at hers, the sweet delicacies leaving a sour taste in her mouth. She considered unpacking her satchel and arranging her things, but felt that doing so would only cause the reality of her situation to sink in further. There was no point in making it look like home if it would never feel like one.

Only when Kylo concluded his meeting with the now General Phasma, did Kylo slump back in his chair and switch off his holopad. He faced her, his skin ashen and eyes red from staring at holograms for so many hours. “We should get to sleep.” He said.

When they had first cohabitated on Mustafar, a statement like that would be heavy with implication, but the sullen look of him told Rey that wasn’t the case. He pulled off only his outer cloak and shoes before slipping under the covers and curling into himself on the far end of the bed. Rey did the same, not bothering to change her clothes or even bathe. She hadn’t broken a sweat all day, so why bother? The two of them lay on either side of the wide mattress, as close to the edges as they could, with what seemed like galaxies between them. The arrangement should have been a relief, but Rey felt oddly hollow. Rebuking herself for acknowledging the feeling, Rey forced herself to clear her mind and give in to the weariness that tugged at her eyelids.

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During the night, Rey’s body woke her, prompting her to toss off the covers and make her way through the dark room toward the ‘fresher.

Upon entering, she was startled by a mechanical sound. DeeTee was awake as well. “Welcome back. May I be of assistance?” he asked. “It has been many weeks since I have seen you last and almost five months since your initial health check and blood sampling, according to the galactic
“At this hour?” Rey rubbed at her eyes and squinted drowsily at DeeTee’s red lens. “Fine. Whatever. Just get it over with so I can get back to bed.”

Without leaving his socket, DeeTee extended his sampling needle and pricked her finger before sliding it back into the wall console. “It will be a moment until your results are ready.”

“Fine.” Rey used the ‘fresher as she had originally intended while DeeTee ran the tests.

After a moment, his console buzzed. “Your results show a marked improvement since your last test. Your blood sugar is within the normal range, body fat and muscle density has increased, vitamin deficiencies have diminished, and my system is also showing that you are currently pregnant. Congratulations.”

Rey’s stomach dropped as the room spun around her. “What did you say? That’s not possible.” If she’d started having monthly cycles, she certainly would have noticed. She’d never bled once in her life—not from there at least. And Kylo and her hadn’t had sex in ages. Something wasn’t right.

“My tests have an accuracy of ninety-nine point nine percent. There is no error. Further testing will be needed to look into the child’s health, but for now, I will forward my results to His Imperial Highness.”

“No!” Rey shot out her hand and wrenched DeeTee from his socket, adrenaline surging through her veins. The mechanism that held him in place tore out behind him and the red light of his lens dimmed and extinguished. Breaking into a cold sweat, Rey peeked out the ‘fresher door and saw the black heap of Kylo wrapped up in the covers, snoring softly. She inched toward her side of the bed, landing each step as lightly as she could, to take her satchel and slip DeeTee inside. If she didn’t take him, Kylo might be able to extract the results once she left.

She had to leave. That much was certain. Any progress Kylo had recently made paled in the light of his possessive fury. Add a child to that and she would never see the outside of these castle walls for as long as she lived.

She imagined his knights guarding her night and day, watching her from the shadows. Kylo would probably be pleased to have an heir to his empire, someone to training from the crib to mold them into his dark successor, raising them on ghosts and holocrons, teaching them to draw their strength
from pain and suffering until the day they would be strong enough to depose him.

She wouldn’t let that happen.

She placed a hand on her abdomen, which was still flat, drawing on the force to sense what lie there. She felt it. A spark of life, like a little star in the darkness. Tears welled in her eyes.

She had been willing to risk her own future for the sake of the truce, but not the future of an innocent child. She gave Kylo one last look, feeling unwanted guilt pierce through her again before being blotted away by her better judgment.

First, she would need a weapon, as her escape might not be an easy one. Kylo’s trunk. He hadn’t locked it. It sat by the door, untouched. She made quick work of the lock with a bit of scrap metal from her collection. Tossing aside a folded bit of cloth draped over the top of his belongings, she found the contents of his shrine. She paused at the Skywalker saber, fearing it might plague her with visions like the last time she had uncovered it. At the sound of Kylo letting out a particularly loud snore, she snatched it up, thankfully to no effect. The metal felt cold and heavy in her hands.

After placing the saber into her satchel, she slipped out the bedroom door. The halls of the castle were empty. The only sound was her panting breath, her feet tapping against the ground with each quick step, and her belonging rattling together as her satchel bounced against her hip. She had to get to the hangar. The Falcon was her best bet.

She ran down the corridors Kylo had led her through and soon arrived at her destination. When she pressed her hand against the door, it creaked open. Peeking her head through, she looked up to the security center but saw no one on guard. Not even a droid. The lights were on, but no one sat at the controls. It was strange, but she had no time to question it.

She dashed for the Falcon and tugged off the tarp. It looked cleaner than she’d ever seen it. All the sand had been scraped off it and the makeshift patches on its hull had been replaced by color-matched metal seamlessly welded in place, making it look startlingly new. Inside, she found it similarly restored. She walked through the cockpit, her neck arching back to get a better look. Everything from the control panels to the seat cushions had been upgraded. It didn’t look perfectly new, but like she had somehow stepped back in time, perhaps to when Han and Chewie had flown it across the galaxy.

She settled into the pilot’s seat and prepared for takeoff. She took a deep breath. As soon as the engines powered up, there would be no going back. Her decision made, she flipped the switch and let the roar of the engines fill the room, likely echoing through every hollow crevice of the castle.
Her heart thumping, she piloted the Falcon out the hangar and into the open air, half expecting hidden security turrets to shoot her out of the sky. She put her whole weight behind the thrusters and lifted up into the atmosphere. She looked back at the planet below her, hoping she would never have to look at it ever again, then set her coordinates for Hoth.

Once the Falcon was set on its course and entered hyperspace, Rey pulled out her holopad and sent out a transmission to Leia.

Leia received the transmission but didn’t switch on the hologram functions. It was just as well. Rey didn’t like the idea of Leia seeing her curled into the pilot’s seat with tears staining her face.

“Rey, are you there?” Leia asked.

“Yes. It’s me.” Rey said, her voice coming out weaker than she intended.

“You don’t sound right. Is something wrong?”

“I—I escaped. I couldn’t do it anymore,” Rey said. “I’m sorry about breaking the deal. I know you said I could come back, but I still...I just needed to leave. I’m headed for Echo Base.”

“It’s alright, it’s alright,” Leia said. “Tell me, did something happen?” Her tone was cautious as if she expected the worst.

This time, Rey was unable to hold back her sob. Her eyes burned and her shoulders shook as she wrapped her free arm around her stomach.

“Oh, Rey. I’m sorry. I’m not on base at the moment,” Leia said. “I’ll let the others know you’re coming and get there as soon as I can.”

Rey nodded but remembering there was no visual transmission, choked out a small affirmation.

“I should’ve never let you get tangled up in this,” Leia said, her voice heavy with grief. “I’m so sorry.
Whatever it is, I’ll do all I can to make it better. Just get to the base and we’ll figure this out.”

“Thank you,” Rey said.

“I will see you soon, Rey. May the Force be with you.”

The transmission cut out, leaving Rey in dark silence once more as the stars zipped by her. She pulled her legs closer and rested her head on her knees, reaching through the force for the little star inside her. It shone brightly as if trying to comfort her.

As Rey forced herself to breathe evenly and calm herself down, her thoughts were drawn to the future. If she could keep the child’s existence from Kylo, she would, but as powerful as he was and as connected as they were through the Force, she doubted that was possible. She would raise the child on her own and give them the best life she could.

Well, she wouldn’t be entirely alone. There was always her friends with the Resistance and, of course, Leia. Leia would undoubtedly love her grandchild despite its origin, but Rey wondered if its existence would serve as a sore reminder of her son’s misdeeds. It certainly would for the rest of their allies who didn’t have a soft spot in their heart for Kylo Ren. Kylo’s legacy would likely shadow the child for their entire life—a predicament Leia would no doubt sympathize with.

But Rey knew that, no matter what, the child would always have its mother. The idea that she could fill such a role was bewildering. It hadn’t been a full hour since she learned of its existence, but already her heart was filled with fierce protective instinct and overwhelming love.
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

It was somewhat humbling to be in the place where such a monumental battle had taken place. Living among the scraps of the battle of Jakku had certainly been inspiring. She could still remember the half-blind old wanderer she had met at Nimma outpost who had regaled her as a child with tales of Rebel exploits, pointing out the wreckage around them to illustrate. At least the antiques she saw now were placed there on purpose, not discarded remnants of fallen armies. She wondered for a moment if her rebel helmet had been found and sold, as she expected the rest of her makeshift home would be by now, or if it had been lost to the ever-shifting sands.

Rey arrives on Hoth and reunites with Finn. Revelations are made and Echo Base receives an unsuspected visitor.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hoth’s sun had just peeked over the horizon, casting a shimmering glow over the frozen landscape, when Rey piloted the Falcon down to the Echo Base landing pad. She winced as a glint of sunlight reflected off a frozen peak and caught her eye. Hoth was obviously inhospitable for a human, but beautiful nonetheless. The perpetual snow hid the scars of war, making it seem calm and idyllic.

The wind few against her like a hail of needles as she lowered the ship’s exit ramp. She had brought a lightsaber but hadn’t thought to bring something to combat the cold. She had never known true cold until Starkiller. The signs of the cold had fascinated her then, despite her anxiety over the task before her, just as it did now. Her breath made faint clouds in the air and her teeth rattled despite her attempts to clench them shut. She wrapped her arms around herself and hunched her head low to conserve heat as she trudged across the landing pad toward Echo Base. The snow that covered it soaked through her thin shoes to stab at her toes and the permafrost beneath it made each step slick and uneasy.

In the distance, she saw a figure huddled against the door. They wore a brilliant white coat with a fur-lined hood pulled over their head that obscured their face. When she came closer, she was able to get a better look. It was Finn. His face was a strange mixture of joy and dread as he ran to embrace her, nearly slipping on the ice. She threw her arms around him and pressed her face against his frost-coated shoulder. “I missed you so much,” she said. The cold even made talking a painful exertion. Not that her emotional state helped at all; her throat had been raw before she’d even landed.

“I missed you too,” Finn said. "General Leia told us that you were coming, but not much else. We’re waiting on her for further orders and keeping on high alert. Now tell me, what happened?”

She pulled back and stared up at him, her eyes stinging from the tears that seemed to be freezing on her eyelids before they had a chance to fall. “I need to get to the infirmary.” Part of her hoped they might tell her it had all been her imagination and DeeTee had been mistaken. While she had somewhat come to terms with the child’s existence, the resulting consequences sat heavily in her mind. She always wanted a family, her own flesh and blood, but not like this.
“What’s wrong? Did they hurt you?” He held her lightly by the shoulders.

Rey stared at the entrance to avoid his worried look. “It’s...not like that. I just need to see a medic.”

“If you say so. Anything to get out of this cold.” Finn said, watching her carefully, no doubt searching for signs of mistreatment, perhaps a bruise or a cut, or something in her eyes that might give her away. He would find out eventually, but Rey wanted to be absolutely certain before she shared her news.

The inside of the base was what she had come to expect from the Resistance. The room they entered was corroded by rust and frost and the workstations were filled with the best technology they could afford as well as older models that still worked. The walls had been patched many times over, with the oldest peeking through, and while many wires and exposed pipes had been replaced, many appeared older than she was. A few personnel look up from their work to give her a passing glance, but none seemed to recognize her or give her arrival much thought. Leia must have kept things low profile.

It was somewhat humbling to be in the place where such a monumental battle had taken place. Living among the scraps of the battle of Jakku had certainly been inspiring. She could still remember the half-blind old wanderer she had met at Nimma outpost who had regaled her as a child with tales of Rebel exploits, pointing out the wreckage around them to illustrate. At least the antiques she saw now were placed there on purpose, not discarded remnants of fallen armies. She wondered for a moment if her rebel helmet had been found and sold, as she expected the rest of her makeshift home would be by now, or if it had been lost to the ever-shifting sands.

Finn placed his fur-lined coat on a rack filled with similar outerwear. Underneath, he wore a brown Resistance uniform that was unique among his peers, with embellishments on the chest and a clean, formal cut to it.

“Get promoted while I’ve been gone?” Rey asked, trying her best to lighten the mood.

“Yeah, I guess so,” Finn said. “There are a lot of bases in Resistance territories, but this one is one of our central locations. And I was given the job of looking after it—under Poe’s supervision, of course. I guess that makes me second-in-command. Or third when the general is on the base.”

“Congratulations. It suits you.” Rey smiled, genuinely this time. “Big improvement from sitting in the medical ward all day.”

“Thank you, and yes, big improvement. I would have told you already, but I was told to stop talking about the Resistance in our comms in case we were being monitored. Poe already got onto me about telling you we were accepting refugees from imperial territories. That’s another subject I’ll need to fill you in on.” His smile disappeared as he led her across the room. “Now tell me, how did you escape? And on the Falcon of all thing?”

“I’m not entirely sure. The lookouts were gone and the planetary shields were down. It was so easy. Especially after all the emphasis he had put on security.” Rey opened her satchel so that Finn could catch a glimpse of the saber she had hidden. “I stole this thinking I’d have to fight my way out. but after leaving...the room I was staying in, I saw no one.”

“That’s odd. I mean, I doubt they would let you go just to track you here. They already know where this base is and our territories were outlined in the agreement, so it would be easy to comb for outposts,” Finn said, leading her down another bend. “Man, Leia needs to get here soon so we can plan a course of action. I’m surprised she didn’t call for an evacuation already.”
Kylo wouldn’t have let her go on purpose. Rey knew that much at least.

Finn stopped in his tracks, causing Rey to nearly bump into him. “I almost forgot.” He disappeared into an adjacent room and reappeared with a coat that was a bit thinner than the one he had worn outside but just as white, and draped it over her shoulders.

Rey slipped her arms through the sleeves. “Thank you.”

“Our heating is a bit outdated and surprisingly low on the list of repair priorities. But don’t worry. The medical unit is state of the art. And anything they can’t heal, well, that’s Luke’s business. I never knew the force could heal wounds, but apparently, it can. Weird, but useful.”

“Luke is still here?” Rey asked. She considered trying to give him the Skywalker saber again. It sat uneasily at her side, and now that she didn’t need it to carve herself an escape off Mustafar, she felt like finding herself a suitable replacement. The blaster Han had given her had been missing from her collection when her satchel was returned to her on Coruscant. Unsurprising, since Kylo had just caught her in attempted espionage.

“Yeah, Luke’s here,” Finn said. “And he’s not too happy about it. I think he’d rather fly back to where he was hiding, but Leia would probably chase him across the galaxy and drag him back here if he tried that again. He just stays in his room and meditates or whatever and has Threepio bringing him his food. The only times he comes out is if we have someone with wounds that our medical staff can’t fix. Then he’ll come help, mumble something about making himself useful, then disappear again.”

“Sounds like him,” Rey said. “I wonder if he was ever like the legends made him sound.”

“From what Leia says, he was. She has some pretty cool stories from back when they were stationed on this base during the rebellion. Have you ever heard of a Taunton?” Finn asked. Rey shook her head. “Well, anyway, she really gave him hell when he first got here. You should have seen it.”

“I wish I had,” Rey said.

He led her to the infirmary where a handful of resistance personnel sat at the medical stations placed throughout the room. None looked gravely injured. Just getting checkups, Rey supposed. A few glanced her way when the entered and she thought she recognized a few of them, but not by name. A couple gave her strange looks before returning their attention to the droid or nurse who was treating them.

“Finn, is there somewhere more private I can go?” She asked.

“Oh, sure,” he said. “Follow me. I’ll bring you over to Major Kalonia’s office. She’ll take a look at you.”

Rey recognized the name. Kalonia was the medic who had treated Finn and Chewie after Starkiller. She had given Rey a cursory examination as well, before returning to the patients who were more obviously injured. Kylo hadn’t landed a scratch on her, only a headache from hitting the tree and a lot of unanswered questions. It had seemed strange to her why he hadn’t just ended it when he so easily could have, but now she knew why. He had never wanted her dead. If only she was as sure of her friends’ safety.

After three knocks, Kalonia opened her office door and peered out at them.

“Rey wanted to be looked at in a more private setting, so I brought her to you,” Finn said. “I hope you don’t mind.”
“Of course not. Come in,” Kalonia said, opening her door wider and gesturing for Rey to enter. “I’m so glad to see you safely returned to us. We were all so worried, dear. That was such a brave thing you did.”

“Thank you,” Rey said.

“I’ll be right out here when you’re done,” Finn called out before Kalonia shut the door on him.

“Now that we are in private, tell me, what can I do for you?” She asked.

Rey took her seat on the examination table, letting her feet dangle off the edge. The papery disposable cover crumpled beneath her. “I...you won’t tell anyone, right? Not even Leia? This is just between us?”

Kalonia placed her hand over hers. “Yes, of course. You can tell me anything. My lips are sealed.”

Rey took a deep breath, folded her hands in her lap and wrung them together as she stared down at them. “I think I might pregnant. Well, I’m pretty sure I am, but I just wanted to confirm it and...to see that the baby was alright.”

When she looked up at Kalonia, Rey saw the expression she had feared. It was one of both horror and pity, thinly veiled by professionalism. Of course she would react that way. They all knew where she had been and for how long. It was an easy conclusion to make and no amount of excuses could make it right. And Rey was tired of excuses.

“Rey, I’m so sorry.” She placed her hand over hers again. “You’re safe here now, don’t worry. And no one will think less of you for this. It isn’t your fault.”

Rey nodded.

“I’ll get the scanner,” Kalonia said before patting her hand and walking over the storage cabinets behind her. She pulled out a small silver device. “This tests for all sorts of things, including pregnancy. I just need a blood sample.”

Rey offered her hand and within seconds the device let out a small buzz.

Kalonia winced at the tiny screen. “It’s positive.”

It didn’t come as a surprise, but to hear it aloud made Rey feel like she’d taken a blaster bolt to the chest. “I didn’t even think that I could...I never had a cycle or anything. I thought I was...” She groaned and rested her face in her hands.

Kalonia patted her shoulder. “You look much better than when I first saw you. It is possible that you became healthy enough for ovulation and conceived during your first cycle.”

“I suppose that makes sense.” Rey thought back to her and Kylo’s nightly—and sometimes morning or afternoon, depending on his mood—ritual. No wonder this had happened.

“Do you want me to do further scans to see how everything is going?” Kalonia set the device on the table.

Rey nodded. Kalonia opened another cabinet to retrieve a larger device with several wires coming out of it. She connected one wire to her holoprojector and another one with a flat nodule at the end, she handed to Rey. “Place that right below your navel, please. Then lean back.”
Rey obeyed, lifting her shirt to stick it in place. The cold metal of the sensor prickled her skin. Blank loaded up the monitor and tapped in the proper commands. Rey felt a small pulse from the sensor and the sound of a tiny beating heart come out of the monitor which displayed a murky image she couldn’t quite decipher, illuminated in the blue projection. There was a small blip on the screen that moved in time with the rhythm. “Is that the heart?” Rey asked. It was so small, and no doubt smaller within her, but it beat was strong and steady.

“Correct,” Kalonia squinted at the image, wrinkling her brow.

“Is something wrong?”

“You're farther along than I anticipated. About five months, to be exact.”

“What? How is that possible if I'm not even showing yet?” She looked down at her exposed stomach. There was only the slightest curve to it—slight enough that she hadn't noticed it herself—not nearly large enough to indicate a pregnancy. She had only seen pregnant humans on holovids, but surely they hadn't exaggerated that much.

“It isn’t unheard of in women as tall and athletic as yourself. Some take ages to show and when they do, it isn’t much. It also appears that the baby is undersized and your amniotic fluid is dangerously low, which could be due to your medical history.”

“Will they be okay?” Rey’s lifted herself onto her elbows and stared Kalonia straight in the eyes.

“I can’t say for sure, but as long as you get plenty of fluids, take the necessary supplements, and perhaps stay on bedrest for a while, I think both you and the child will be fine. She has a strong heart, that’s for sure.

“She? It’s a girl?”

Kalonia smiled and pointed to another portion of the scan. “Yes. You are carrying a girl.”

Rey looked where she pointed and thought she saw the outline of her daughter in the scan. She had a daughter. She couldn’t help but smile, even as the tears continued to fill her eyes and blurred her vision. Another thought entered her mind as well: Kylo Ren was going to have a daughter.

There was a knock at the door. “Rey, are you alright? General Leia just arrived on base,” Finn said.

Rey pulled off the sensor, tugged her shirt back down, then wiped away her tears as best she could. “You can come in now.” There was no point in hiding. The whole base would know eventually, but she wanted Finn to be the first.

His eyes went wide as he came in to find her looking like a teary mess, despite her best efforts. “Rey, what’s wrong? Are you sick or something.” He looked over to Kalonia for answers but her face betrayed nothing.

Rey took another deep breath. “Finn, I’m pregnant. I’m having a baby.” Her voice was low, both to keep their conversation from the people just outside the door, and because Rey feared that her emotions would get the best of her again. It must have been the hormones or something. In that moment, she wished she was a stoic Jedi like Luke, with no outward emotion beyond vague discontent. She needed to get ahold of herself.

“I’ll be back momentarily,” Kalonia said as she slipped out of the office and closed the door behind her.
“You’re…” Finn’s mouth fell open and his expression shifted from shock to boiling rage as he connected the dots in his mind. “I’m going to kill him. I’m going to chase him across the galaxy and then I swear I’ll kill him.”

“Thank you, Finn. I expected you would say something like that.”

“Don’t thank me. I should have prevented this in the first place. I should have never let you stay locked up with that monster for so long.” He balled his fists at his temples then threw them down at his sides. “Dammit! I should have stolen a ship and broke you out as soon as you were captured. I wanted to, I swear. But Leia said to stay put and I did.” Now he was crying too. Tears trickled down his face as it twisted in anger. “I’m so sorry, Rey.”

“Would everyone quit apologizing? I was the one who agreed to the deal. No one here is responsible for what happened.”

“You didn’t agree to this.” Finn motioned to her midsection.

“I did what I had to do, Finn.” Rey shifted in her seat and stared down at her hands. “It wasn’t your fault.”

She looked back at Finn to see that the rage on his face had been replaced by sorrow. He swore under his breath and stepped forward to embrace her. She returned the gesture and buried her face in his neck and squeezing him tight. “It’s a girl, Finn. I’m having a daughter.”

“I will be there for both of you, I promise.”

They were jolted apart by the sound of an alarm blaring out of the intercom overheard. Finn pulled out his holopad and powered up the interface.

“What’s going on?” Rey asked.

He opened the office door and she followed him as he rushed toward the infirmary exit. “Incoming ship headed straight for the base. It’s small and sending out a signal of surrender,” he said. Those around them were powering down the equipment, gathering their belongings, and rushing to their stations.

“It’s surrendering? Whose ship is it?” Rey asked, dodging a medic droid that skittered past her, beeping rapidly.

“No word yet. Just a ship no bigger than a tie fighter signaling its surrender and requesting permission to land. I need to get to the command center and see what’s going on.”

Leia blocked their way through the door. She was dressed in a practical, military-issue vest and trousers, with her hair woven into a simple braid—just as Rey remembered her. “That won’t be necessary, Finn. It’s been taken care of,” she said, then turned to Rey. “It’s so good to have you back. I hope you received the care you needed while I was gone.” Surely, she couldn’t know about the baby, Rey told herself, but there was a strange glint in her eyes.

“Ah—yes. I did.” Rey nodded. She dreaded breaking the news to her. No doubt there would be even more tears than when she had told Finn, but only from herself. She couldn’t picture Leia crying in any set of circumstances.

“What do you mean things are taken care of?” Finn asked. “You know what’s going on?”

“I have accepted the surrender and granted the ship permission to land. A cell is being prepared.”
"For who?"

Leia cracked a bleak smile. "My son."

Rey’s stomach dropped. Or perhaps it was her daughter sensing her turmoil. Finn’s hand shot in front of her, shielding her as if Kylo would burst through the door at any minute. He probably could if he wanted to. The only question in her mind was why she hadn’t sensed his approach. He had to be hiding his force signature somehow, likely out of fear that she would run away again. Part of her wanted to. But she couldn’t leave her friends to deal with him, no doubt in a state of blind rage. If she made a wrong move, he might just kill them all like he had promised.

"Follow me," Leia said. She led them toward the holding cells as the crowd thinned out around them. Still, Rey couldn’t feel Kylo, even as she was actively searching for him. Maybe she could convince Luke to teach her how to hide as well. It would make her life on the run easier if Kylo continued to pursue her.

Leia stopped them at the end of a long hallway and the three of them stared as Kylo appeared at the opposite end, led forward by a pair of Resistance guards. A brown cloth sack was pulled over his head and his arms were restrained behind his back.

"Are just a couple guards going to be enough?" Finn asked, whispering between the three of them. "And what kind of cell do we have to keep him contained? You seem strangely calm about all this, General."

"I have nothing to fear from that boy," Leia said, staring at the sack the concealed his face. Rey wondered how long it had been since she had seen it uncovered. "He reached out to me before he entered Resistance territory," Leia said. "We talked at length and he made his intentions quite clear. Trust me when I say the guards and the cell are just a formality to keep everyone else at ease."

Finn exhaled, fixing a death-glare on Kylo’s head. "You’re the General," he conceded.

Rey slipped her hand into her satchel to rest it on the hilt of the Skywalker saber. Her pulse quickened. She wouldn’t let parental devotion allow Kylo the opportunity to take Leia from her a well. The guards placed Kylo into an adjacent room and stood outside the door, one on each side, their arms crossed and eyes forward. Leia approached and waved them away before entering the room herself.

....

The wait was pure agony. Rey grew exhausted from reaching through the force to keep an eye on Leia. As tempting as it was, she kept her reach limited, just enough to be sure she was alright as the minutes dragged by like a millennia. Kylo, meanwhile, remained walled off. His signature brushed against her in a brief acknowledgment, but then retreated once more. The Skywalker saber remained in her hand, which had grown sweaty as it gripped the metal. Finn leaned against the wall beside her, his hand resting on the regulation-issue blaster strapped to his belt. The glances they exchanged confirmed their mutual intentions.

They sprung to life in unison as the cell door creaked open and Leia stepped out, unharmed as far as they could tell. Finn breathed a sigh of relief. "Any news? What does he want?" he asked.

"He wishes to speak with Rey," Leia said.

"After all he—no. Hell no!" Finn said, moving between Rey and the door.

Leia placed a hand on his shoulder. "You should go to your bunk. They need a moment alone."
“What?” Finn stared down at her like she had just spoken in wookie.

Leia ignored him and turned to Rey. “That is if you are willing to speak to him.”

She knew. Rey could tell just by looking at her. “She’s right, Finn. I’m sorry, but you should go.”

“You don’t have to do this Rey,” he said.

Rey pulled him into another hug, squeezing him as if it would make all her problems disappear. “I’m afraid that I do. I’ll meet you in your bunk when I’m finished. I’ll explain everything.”

“If that’s what you want,” he returned her embrace, nearly lifting her off the ground in the process. “Stay safe, okay?”

Rey nodded against his chest and pulled out of his hold. “I promise.” She bid him goodbye and he reluctantly returned it before shambled down the long hall, glancing at her over his shoulder before turning around the bend.

Once he was out of sight, Leia returned her attention to Rey. “Ben’s told me his version of things, but before you go in there, I want to hear yours. I know why you left and I understand completely.” Rey’s eyes widened as her suspicions were confirmed. “But tell me. Beyond that, was your time with him as awful as Finn seems to believe?” Her voice almost sounded like pleading, but her eyes held a resignation that told her she was braced for whatever truth Rey would reveal.

Hearing him referred to as Ben threw her off for a moment as if Leia was referring to a stranger. “I—he’s...It’s complicated. It wasn’t all bad, I suppose. I had everything I could want, materially. Just no freedom to go where I pleased or do as I wished. I know he’s your son, but he...he can be cruel and demanding and completely unpredictable.” Rey closed her eyes and took a deep breath, her voice quavering as she scrambled to put words to the emotions she barely understood. “He could be kind at times. Things were getting better toward the end, in some strange way, I suppose.”

“I won’t ask you to forgive him for what he’s done to you or to others. Frankly, he doesn’t deserve it,” Leia stared up at her, her face worn by hardship and a lifetime of regret that had manifested in the man in the cell behind her. “But just know that there is still a spark of light within him if you look deep enough. And it burns brightest when he speaks of you.”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this took a little longer than expected. I was sick in bed with a brain too foggy to write anything of worth. Thank you all for your patience and support! Your comments and Kudos make my day!
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Their deal broken, Rey confronts Kylo in a Resistance prison cell on Hoth where he has allowed himself to be detained. Questions arise among the Resistance and Rey is forced to come to terms with her situation as she tries to find her place among them.

Throughout it all, Rey could feel Kylo brooding at the edge of her mind, no longer hiding his force signature. He was fully aware of who she was with, but Finn and Poe seemed ignorant to the battle raging unseen around them. Knowing she wasn’t planning to run away and abandon her friends, there was no reason for Kylo to hold back. She kept him at bay as best she could and tried to concentrate on the news she was being told, but every so often, she would feel his presence probing deeper, searching and reaching not only for her signature but their daughter’s. Their little star fluttered inside her as he drew closer before Rey was able to will him away again. It took what little energy she had left to fend him off. She needed to learn to close him off for good. She needed to speak with Luke.

The cell door was thick and heavy, held in place by rusted hinges that groaned as Rey pried it open. She gave Leia a parting look of solidarity before stepping inside. The room was practically bare. There were only durasteel walls and a pane of transparisteel that stood as a barrier between her and Kylo. The was another door set into the barrier, to allow people to pass though, but it was sealed with a mechanical lock and a deadbolt. Not that Kylo seemed intent on escape. On his side of the room, He kneeled with his hands still bound behind his back and his head hanging low. His hair, disheveled from sleep and being covered with the sack, hung down over his face.

As soon as the door shut behind her, his head snapped back up. He scrambled to his feet and came so come to the barrier that his breath fogged on its surface. “How did you leave the planet?” he asked. His voice was frantic and his eyes were dark-rimmed and bloodshot.

“I wanted to know the same thing. The shields were down and there were no guards,” Rey said, keeping a considerable distance between them.

“What?” His expression was one of genuine confusion.

So she had been right. He hadn’t let her go on purpose. “What do you want, Kylo?” She crossed her arms.

“You,” he said. He shook his hair out of his face. “And our child. Why else would I degrade myself like this?”

Rey felt a chill run up her spine that had nothing to do with the heating system’s shortcomings. “So you know?”

“DeeTee’s test results are processed and stored in the wall console, not his detachable body. Ripping him out of his socket did nothing. The results were waiting for me on my holopad when I woke and found you missing,” he replied.
“So your first thought was to fly here and surrender?”

“How else was I supposed to reach you?” He asked as if it was obvious. It had appeared to her that he had reacted with as much blind panic as she had upon receiving the news. “If you decided to run, it would just be an endless chase and if I came here with imperial forces, it would be all out war. I didn’t want to be forced to kill one of your precious friends and give you another reason to hate me,” he added wryly.

“I thought killing my friends was your plan if I chose to break the deal.” Rey took a step forward and lifted her chin to match his height.

“Don’t say that. The deal isn’t off.” His voice hitched in his throat and his chains rattled behind his back. “Call off your friends and come home. Please, Rey. I need you—”

“I ended the deal when I left Mustafar. I made my decision and am prepared for the consequences,” Rey said. “Back to fighting, New Empire versus Resistance, until everyone I loved was dead. That’s what you promised when you dragged me to that molten rock and blackmailed me into your bed.” She bared her teeth as she spat out the words.

Kylo winced. “So this is about what Hux said in the throne room.”

“It isn’t about what anyone said. It’s about what you did. Hux was just the wake-up call,” Rey shouted, hoping the cell was at least partially sound-proof. “You were the one who kidnapped me and started this mess”

“I know, I know.” He slammed his forehead against the barrier, startling her. The cloak he had drawn over his force signature dropped and his remorse and desperation poured from his mind into hers, overwhelming her. It was a current of despair that threatened to drag her down into its depths.

“I had no right to take you and to...do what I did to you.” He glanced down at her stomach. “But I want to make it right. Please. No restrictions or rules, you can even visit your friends if you’d like, anything you want. Just come back with me so we can be a family. A real family. Together we can rule the galaxy. Just like my visions.” He had slid to his knees, still leaning against the barrier, as close to her as he could get.

“And what makes you think I want that?”

Something cracked inside him. He swallowed hard and let his hands fall limp into his lap. He stared up as if she had just driven the saber into his gut. “So I was just your captor, then? You never cared for me at all?”

Rey stared down at him, letting his pain and sorrow wash over her as she searched for an answer. She had none. Whatever it was between them, she could neither understand or define it. Instead, she said the only truth she had. “I pitied you.” As soon as she said it, she immediately left the cell without looking back and slammed the door behind her. The guards parted to make way for her to rush to Leia’s arms.

“It’s alright Rey,” she said, patting her back. “You were brave to go in there and even braver to have come back to us. You’re safe here. Both of you are.” She smiled that knowing smile again.

“How did you know about the baby?” Rey asked, pulling back.

“Ben told me,” Leia said. There was that name again. Hearing him referred to as Ben seemed wrong. It made her think back to when she had first heard it spoken aloud by Han on the bridge of Starkiller.

“He told you?” Rey asked.
“He had assumed that you’d told me already and spoke as if I already knew, saying he needed to see you and talk about the baby. He said quite a bit about you, actually. That’s what made me agree to accept his surrender.” Leia said. “Despite the circumstances, I’m actually quite thrilled about the baby, although that might be selfish of me. What matters is what you feel.”

“She’s my daughter,” Rey said, staring down at her too-small stomach, feeling her daughter’s light pulsing within.

“It’s a girl?” Leia’s face lit up.

Rey nodded. “Like you said, even if the circumstances aren’t the best, I still love her.”

“I’m glad,” Leia said, looking more hopeful than Rey had ever seen her. “After Ben left us, I never thought I’d have grandchildren, that he would ever let anyone get close enough for it to happen.” The sadness returned for a moment as the reason for their closeness no doubt came to mind. A botched treaty following a kidnapping is hardly the sort of courtship a mother would wish for her son.

“Anyhow, would you like to go join the others now? You are free to come and go as you please around the base.”

“First, I have something for you.” Rey dug into her satchel and pulled out the code cylinder. “I stole this from a man named General Hux before I escaped. I thought it might hold useful information the Resistance could use.”

Leia took it and looked it over with a gleam in her eye before slipping it into her vest pocket. “Yes, this is wonderful. Thank you, Rey. I’m sure we will get a great deal of use out of this. The Resistance is once again indebted to you.” Her voice had taken on a diplomatic air as the cogs of political and military strategy turned in her mind.

“I’m glad I could help,” Rey said. At least she had something to offer the Resistance to make up for the trouble her return would bring. But her mind was too exhausted for thoughts of intergalactic war. Right now she needed rest and the comforting presence of her friends. “Do you know where Finn might be?” she asked.

“Probably in his bunk. The barracks and the mess hall are the safest bets when he isn’t on duty.”

Leia led her to another section of the base, passing through various checkpoints as she assured those around her that the situation was under control. They walked through a narrow tunnel and down a flight of metal stairs with railings too cold for Rey to grasp without gloves. Maybe Finn would have a pair.

At the bottom of the stairway were the barracks, where row upon row of numbered doors lined the halls and numerous Resistance personnel came and went, some in uniform and others in civilian clothing. Leia led her along and eventually stopped before a room marked 1138.

After a single knock, the door flew open and Finn burst out to greet them. “You’re back,” He said, throwing open the door and waving for them to enter, a wide grin on his face.

“I told you I would be fine,” Rey said as she stepped over the threshold and into his room. There were two beds and other mismatched bits of furniture throughout the room, including a cluttered desk and a fraying armchair. One bed was occupied by Poe Dameron, who wore a uniform nearly identical to Finn’s. BB-8 sat at his feet and swiveled to face her and beeped excitedly as she approached.

“Good to see you,” Poe said, smirking. “Now maybe these two will stop worrying so much.” He flicked the antenna on BeeBee-Ate’s head.
“I doubt it.” Rey smiled back at him and took a seat on the bunk across from his.

“I’ll see you all a little later,” Leia said from the doorway. “I have quite the political mess to clean up.”

They each bid her goodbye with an empathetic smile. The presence of Kylo in their holding cell and his strange surrender would be a difficult situation to explain to the rest of the Resistance.

BB-8 rolled over and nudged Rey’s leg. She patted his head and smiled into his lens. “I missed you,” she said. He chirped happily in response.

Finn slumped into the bunk beside her. “Do you need anything? Food? A warmer coat?”

“Actually, I could use a pair of gloves. But first, I could really go for something to eat. Are they serving food in the mess hall anytime soon?” Rey asked.

“They’re always serving food,” Poe said. “Comes in handy during late shifts. I can go get us all something if you want and pick up some gloves from supplies on the way back.”

“Really? That’s would be great. Thank you.” Rey said. If she could avoid the crowds for today, it would be a blessing.

As soon as Poe left, Finn’s smile disappeared. “How did it go?” he asked.

“About as well as I expected.”

“When do I get my turn with him?” Finn squeezed his hand into a fist, cracking his knuckles.

“Finn, no.” Rey placed her hand over his. “You’re going to get yourself killed. Let me deal with him, alright?”

“So I’m supposed to stand back and let him hurt you instead?” He asked.

“Finn, it’s—” She bit her lip, once again racking her brain for the right words to explain her and Kylo. “It’s not what you’re thinking.”

“Then what was it?” He asked. “I just want to understand so I know what the hell I’m supposed to do. I’m sick of being useless while you take the brunt of everything. I want to help. All I know of him is what I saw with the First Order, then when he killed his own father on Starkiller, nearly crippled me, stealing you, and now this,” He gestured to her middle. “I just want to understand.”

“Of course he did all those things. I’m not saying he’s not completely insane and incredibly dangerous. But with me, he’s dangerous in a different sort of way. I’m not sure how to explain it.” She rubbed her temples and exhaled. All this stress couldn’t be good for the baby. "I think he tried to make me happy, in his own deluded, selfish way. On a good day, he could be kind and make for tolerable company and make me forget all the awful things he’d done. So it wasn’t all bad. I think he believed that if he had me long enough, I would choose to stay with him even without a deal, that I could truly care for him. He was training me in to use a lightsaber and would ramble on about destiny and the Force. And I was never short on comfort.

“But despite all that, I know what he is and I would never have agreed to any of it or stayed for another moment if it weren’t for the deal. At most, I feel sorry for him and at worst I want to run him through and forget it all ever happened.” She wrapped her arms around her stomach. “He never asked what I actually wanted. It was always about him. I knew if I stayed, it would be the same way with our daughter.”
Finn sat silently for a long moment as her words sunk in. His face was hard to read, but his discomfort was obvious. “I’m glad you made it back,” he managed to say. “What are you going to tell everyone? It’s up to you, but if you’re going to stay, they will know eventually.”

“I’m not going to deny anything or come up with some stupid lie to cover it up,” Rey said. “I’ll tell Poe when he gets back. Kriff, I thought my time as a public spectacle was over.”


“Only part of the time. The rest I spent on Coruscant and I had only just returned to Mustafar when I escaped. Kylo seemed to take pleasure in dressing me up, taking me by the arm, and parading me around with him like his pretty little empress. Really I felt more like a useless doll.”

Finn wrinkled his nose in disgust. “Wow. He really is delusional.”

“Yeah. He is.” Rey pulled the thick blankets off the mattress and drew them over her shoulders. “I didn’t see him much on Coruscant, to be honest. He didn’t touch me the entire time we were there. I slept on a sofa instead.” Finn’s jaw tightened, but he made no comment. “He would bring me with him to the throne room and have me sit beside him while he held court, but other than that, he gave me space and had a servant watch over me. Her name was Mal. She was nice.

“The only time I left the palace was the day before we left. I stole a keycard and snuck out into the city. I was going to come back, but a stormtrooper found me and put a blaster to my head.”

“Woah, what?” Finn raised his hand to pause her story. “He sent a stormtrooper to kill you because you ran off?”

“No, no.” Rey sat up, waving her hand dismissively. “That’s not what happened. He was acting on his own, I think. From what he said, it sounded like he wanted to hurt Kylo by hurting me. Kylo was the one that stopped it. He saved me. After that, he announced to his entire court that he was ending the stormtrooper program.”

Finn’s mouth fell open. “What? He’s just gonna end it?”

“Yes. He said that...what was it.” Rey rubbed her hand over face. “Right. He said that you can’t steal children from their families and expect people to be loyal to you. That we needed a new way to hold the galaxy together.”

Rey could almost see the questions and conflict running through Finn’s mind. He sat in stunned silence, clinging to the edge of the bed to steady himself. “He couldn't have said that,” he said. “Must be a trick.”

Rey sighed and fell back onto the mattress. “I don’t know. Maybe it was.” She rolled into the blankets to cocoon herself in their warmth, then curled into a ball as she stared up at the ceiling.

Aside from a second trip to the medical clinic for a round of shots and supplements, Rey spent the remainder of her day in Finn’s room, where he and Poe caught her up on the Resistance operations she had missed. They sat in the bunks with Poe’s haul of packaged food between them. It didn’t compare with all she’d become accustomed to on Coruscant, but the company of her friends made the meal cakes and dehydrated protein biscuits taste better than anything in the galaxy.

As the three of them reclined on the stiff mattresses, propped up on their pillows, Poe told her of how
Jessika Pava had ferried a group of rouge imperial mechanics off a base on Yavin 4, then Finn took his turn to tell her how he, Poe, and Wexley had set up an underground network for stormtroopers to escape to resistance territory and aid in the Resistance. Finn’s insider information was still invaluable and had made the operation possible.

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Finn insisted on giving Rey his bed and making a makeshift bed of blankets for himself on the floor. Rey tossed and turned in bed as her daughter moved uneasily inside her and Kylo’s presence refused to leave them. Come morning, she had hardly slept at all. Regardless, she put on a brave face and happily joined her friends for a morning meal in the mess hall.

It was a large space with lines of artificial light overhead, the wires that powered them hanging down unnervingly low over their heads. Perhaps she could put her repair experience to good use while she was here. The tables were filled with Resistance personnel in a wide range of uniforms, from maintenance workers and mechanics with their oil-stained jumpsuits to high-ranking officers in pressed brown cotton and pins of distinction on their breasts, all mingling together. The display of camaraderie was beyond anything she had seen from the New Empire. These people actually acted human, freely laughing, gesturing with their hands while they talked, and smiling genuine smiles.

As Rey walked into the room, a man without a uniform rose from his seat and hurried to greet her. “My Lady,” he said. “It is an honor to see you again.” He gave a slight bow of his head. He had cropped hair and strong face that Rey didn’t recognize.

“You know her?” Finn asked.

“Oh,” the man said, turning slightly red. “I’m certain she doesn’t remember me. My Lady, I was stationed at the imperial palace until I was able to escape and find refuge here with the Resistance. I’m so glad to see that you have done the same.”

“It’s Rey,” she said. “Just Rey.”

“Alright,” the man said. “Well, Rey, it is good to see you in safe hands. I would give you my name in return but I haven’t chosen one yet.”

Rye smiled, happy to see another stormtrooper had defected like Finn. She was, however, acutely aware that those around them had grown quieter and more had begun to glance in her direction. Once again she was faced with a whispering crowd, their black and white uniforms replaced by brown and orange. She exchanged pleasantries with the former stormtrooper and hurried to the food dispensers at the far side of the room. The eyes followed her, boring into her back as she pressed in the sequence for a packet of fried bean pastries.

Finn and Poe followed close behind. “Are you alright?” Finn asked.
“I think I want to eat back in the room,” Rey said, making a second selection on the dispenser and shoving her breakfast into her satchel.

“Are you sure?” Poe asked.

“Yes.”

Finn nodded. “Alright. We can get our food and come—”

“No. I need some time to think. Just stay here and I'll see you when you get back.” Rey glanced at the table nearest to them. Three pilots were speaking amongst themselves, looking at her out of the corner of their eyes. They looked away as soon as she spotted them. Surely it wasn’t all malicious gossip. Some of them were just concerned, Rey knew. But the fact that they were speaking of her at all, wondering and speculating on her time with Kylo and her subsequent return, made her feel uneasy. Things would only get worse once she started to show. She left the mess hall, the eyes still trailing her.

Just as she stepped through the door, she felt a hand on her shoulder. Turning around, she saw Leia with an armful of packaged food and a canteen. “Good morning, Rey,” she said.

“Oh, good morning. Breakfast?” She pointed at the food in Leia’s hand.

“These aren’t for me. I’m bringing them to Ben.” Leia lowered her voice. “Are you going to speak with him again, or would you rather I deal with him alone?”

Han’s face flashed through Rey’s mind, as did Kylo’s unfulfilled threats against her friends. “I’ll go. It’s me he’s here for—well, me and her.” Her hand instinctively found her middle. “Until he’s convinced that he won't be getting either, I doubt he’ll give up this prisoner charade.”

Leia handed her the bundle of food and canteen. “Here then. He needs to eat something and I don’t think it would be wise to send anyone else in there.”

“I know what you mean. I’ve already spoken to Finn about not getting involved.”

“He’s brave, I'll give him that.” Leia smiled, shaking her head. “And reckless. All of them are. Why else would they still be here on this old forgotten base, waiting for hope to come along when they could leave and find a quieter life elsewhere?”

“I’m sure stories of the rebellion inspired quite a few of them. It certainly did for me,” Rey said. “Small groups of people clinging to hope conquered greater odds before. We can do it again. Your presence and Luke’s reminds us of that.”

“I’m so glad you’ve returned to us. You really do belong here. You will always have a place among us, as will my granddaughter, no matter what becomes of my son.” Her eyes were sorrowful, but her smile was reassuring. She was likely used to fighting a war opposite her son, but to have him as a prisoner, where they no doubt could feel one another through the Force more clearly than ever, probably touched on raw wounds. “Oh, and you’ll need these,” Leia dug into her vest pocket to retrieve a set of keys on a silver loop and handed them over. “For the cell and for his restraints.”

“Thank you,” Rey placed all she had been given into her satchel and waved goodbye before heading for the holding cells.

As Rey neared the end of the corridor, she heard the shuffling sound of mechanical limbs around the corner. She picked up her pace and turned to see C-3PO shuffling down the hall, a packet of dehydrated nerf meat in his golden hand. Rey walked up beside him. Her confrontation with Kylo
could wait for a little while. Truthfully, she was glad to have found a distraction. “Is that for Luke?” she asked.

Threepio’s eyes brightened. “Ah, yes. Master Luke takes his meals in his room,” he said. “And might I say, it is good to have you back with us, miss Rey.”

Rey smiled. “It’s good to be back. Do you mind if I come along? I have something for Luke.” She would sleep a lot better with a blaster at her side instead of his saber.

“I suppose that would be alright,” Threepio said. “Follow me, if you wish.”

He led her at a sluggish pace to the far end of the barracks, to a door with the number scratch off and a handle that appeared to be broken. It looked more like a maintenance closet than anything. Before she or Threepio could announce their arrival or knock, the door creaked open. Threepio went in first with Rey close behind. “We have a guest, Master Luke,” Threepio said.

The room seemed like a recreation of his hut on Ach-to. It was lit by a small space heater in one corner that took the place of his old fireplace with a chrome teapot warming on top of it. The room was stripped of what little amenities the other bunk rooms had—no storage units or even a bed frame. Instead, a nest of his belongings was gathered around his cot which was placed on the floor. The only difference she saw in Luke himself was that his robes had been cleaned and his beard had gained a few inches.

Threepio laid his meal on the floor beside him. Only then, did Luke turn to acknowledge her. “I hoped you would come to see me,” he said.

“Really? What have you heard?”

“Everything there is to know, I think. Leia came to see me. I hope you don’t mind.”

Terrific. Even the hermit knew of her situation. At least it saved her the effort of trying to explain herself at every turn. “I came to give you this,” she pulled the Skywalker saber out of her satchel. “And to ask you about something.”

He stared at the saber blankly, as if he had expected this. “I was given back my saber when I was sent here.” he nodded to where is was tucked away in a corner between his cot and a pile of weathered books. “You should keep that one for now. I feel that you may need it.”

“This again? This saber belongs to your family. You should have it. I’d rather have a blaster or a new staff or really anything else.”

“From what Leia told me, you are a part of this family now, in a way.”

Rey reddened. “That’s not the point.”

Luke shrugged. “You brought it up. Is there something else? Do you not know how to use it? Is that why you hesitate to take it.”

“No. Kylo...I was taught saber techniques on Mustafar. I’m pretty good, I think.”

“Then what are you afraid of?”

“I’m not afraid of anything.” Rey snapped. She bit her lip, instantly regretting it. She groaned and slumped down on the floor and laid the saber between them before folding her legs and burying her head in her hands. “It’s just that...this thing was what got me caught up in this mess of fate and
visions and the Force. Kylo or Ben or whatever you want to call him, he said he had visions of me as well. That my fate was tied to his. Now there’s the baby and I just...can’t escape him. Even when he’s in a cell he’s still in my head. That’s what I wanted to ask you. I want you to teach me to shut him out.”

“So your plan is to block him out forever?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you have a plan at all?”

“All I know is that I will never be his prisoner again, and neither will my daughter. I will do whatever is best for her and do everything I can to protect her.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Luke smiled, something Rey had never seen him do before. It was warm and hopeful and for a moment, he looked like the wise, brave Jedi she had imagined as a little girl, but perhaps a bit scruffier.

“My father had once had visions and out of fear, he let them consume his thoughts and cloud his judgment. If he hadn’t been so intent on stopping them, they might not have come to pass. He turned to the Sith for guidance but still did not find the power to save my mother. He found only a black hole of pain and suffering. My sister and I were hidden from him and each other for our own protection, so we wouldn’t become pawns in his dark ambitions and that of his master.” he scratched thoughtfully at his beard. “But that was another time and my parents were different people from you and my nephew. As much as Ben tries, he is no Anakin Skywalker.”

“He told me about your parents. He had a necklace and a holo of your mother,” Rey said, remembering when she had found his hidden shrine.

“He always was sentimental, in his own strange way. Always searching for meaning and guidance in the people and objects around him. The Force has always spoken to him in strange ways,” Luke said. “I would advise you to think less of Ben’s visions and focus on the task at hand. As for his mental intrusions, I can only help so much. Eventually, you must face him. You can’t run forever. I sense that the Force has plans for you both, as well as for your child. Whether those plans aligned with Ben’s visions—or his interpretations of them—remains to be seen. You must choose a course of action based on what is right, not what your fear is telling you to do.”

Rey smiled back. “After I speak with him and bring him some food, can I come back here?”

“Yes. I will show you what I know about warding off mental intrusion,” Luke said. He then sighed, his expression turning grave. “And Rey, There is something I wish to discuss with you when I see you next. It is...difficult, but it cannot be put off any longer.”

“Oh. Alright.” Rey picked herself up off the ground, curiosity eating away at her. “I’ll be sure to come back quickly then.”

“And remember, Rey,” Luke said. “While you do not owe him your trust or forgiveness—those are yours to give on your own terms—I urge you not to give into your anger or let resentment rule you. That is the path to the dark side and untold suffering. Proceed with caution and a listen to your heart with a clear mind. Only them will the right path reveal itself.”

“I will. Thank you,” Rey said as she made for the door.

“And may the Force be with you,” Luke said as she closed the door behind her.
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

“She,” Rey added, feeling her own voice begin to waver. “It’s a girl.”

A smile washed across his face. He stared at her stomach, where his hand still rested, with a look of joy and disbelief. With such gentle words and touch, he almost seemed like any other father, concerned more with their child’s health than cosmic destiny, like they were an expectant couple like any other. It was a pleasant thought that was quietly dismissed.

“What if what’s best for her is being away from you?” Rey asked. Her words might have been cruel, but they needed to be said. “What if you’re wrong about the future and she wants nothing to do with your empire. What if she finds herself more drawn to the light?”

When Rey passed the guards and entered Kylo’s cell, she found him just as he was before: hair a complete mess, clothes rumpled, and a worn look on his face. But this time he didn’t rise to greet her. He stayed where he was, his back leaned against the wall and his cape wrapped around him as a blanket. No one had thought to give him a coat, or if it crossed their mind, they chose not to. He looked like a wounded animal, broken and declawed.

His eyes followed her as she came to stand to stand before the barrier door. “You came back,” he said.

Rey pulled the food packets and canteen out of her satchel and waved them in front of her. “Breakfast,” she said before taking out the ring of keys. She tried one and then another until one slid into place and unlocked it with a hollow click. Next was the deadbolt. It was stuck in place, but a good shove did the trick.

Still, Kylo remained seated, even as Rey threw his meal at his feet. “Is this an attempt at deprivation torture or do you expect me to open these with my teeth?” He asked. He shifted his arms, rattling the chains behind him.

The keyring still in her hand, Rey considered her options. She had the smallest key between her fingers, which she assumed went with his restraints, and ran the pad of her thumb against its tarnished surface. “Can I trust you?” she asked. Stupid question. Of course, she couldn’t.

“I have no wish to harm you,” he said, sounding even more defeated than he looked.

Surprisingly, the reversal of power held no satisfaction. “Fine. Turn around.”

He obeyed, turning his body to allow her to reach his cuffs. They fell to the floor with the heavy clunk of metal striking metal. He then made quick work of the food packets, tearing them open and wolfing them down in seconds before guzzling his water and tossing the canteen aside. His manners had apparently been abandoned along with his dignity.

“How long are you going out keep this up?” Rey asked, her shadow hanging over him. “I know you
could escape if you wanted and go back to ruling the galaxy or make good on your old threats. Do your men know where you are?”

He wiped his mouth on his sleeve. “As far as the galaxy is concerned, we are both still on Mustafar. I’m hoping to keep this a quiet affair and bring you home without turning it into a public scandal. I think we’ve both had enough of that.”

“I am home. Back with the Resistance where I belong.”

“You belong with me. Both of you do,” he said bitterly. “You can’t keep our child from its destiny, Rey and you can’t keep running from yours. I’ve seen it. It is the will of the Force. This child was created for a reason.”

“They were created because I was stuck in your castle, sharing your bed every night for over two months,” Rey said, trying her hardest to contain her rage, knowing it would be a poor choice to escalate things. “I don’t care what your visions told you.”

He ground his teeth and squeezed his eyes shut. “If you would let me explain, or let me show you, you might understand.”

Rey felt him creeping into her mind as he had the night before, searching for a way in, sending chills down her back. “Stop it!” she shouted. Without meaning to, she had used the Force to slam the back of his head against the wall. He grunted in pain upon impact. “Stay out of my head—out of both of our heads. Kriff, I hardly slept last night because of you.”

“I could say the same.” He said, rubbing his latest token of her rage, further tangling his hair in the process. “Can you blame me for being curious? It’s my child too, after all.”

He sounded so defeated Rey couldn’t help but feel a twinge of pity, or whatever it was he made her feel. She closed her eyes and breathed, trying her best to clear her mind as Luke had told her so she could will away whatever it was.

It didn’t work. When she opened her eyes again, he was still staring up at her, eyes red and pleading. She swore under her breath. “This was a mistake. I’m leaving.”

“Wait!” He reached for her but stopped himself short, his hand hovering inches from her middle. “Please. Just once?”

It might have been a mistake, but Rey decided to allow him this small parting gift. “Fine,” she whispered. Whether it would satisfy him, or only encourage his obsession, she couldn’t be sure.

His hand splayed over her abdomen, nearly spanning the width of it. It was warm, slightly trembling. His expression was somewhere between fear and awe as he felt the tiny life they had unwittingly created. His breath caught as their daughter moved inside her, barely a flutter she wouldn’t have paid any mind had she not known the cause. Rey felt her face flush hot. She stared at the wall to avoid looking him in the eye. Perhaps she could pretend he wasn’t here, wasn’t touching her.

Kylo broke her illusion. “Amazing. How did I not notice before? Maybe if we had been closer these past weeks…” Rey could feel his eyes on her, demanding her attention. She reluctantly obeyed, meeting his gaze with a slight scowl and a bit lip. “Despite what you think, I want what’s best for them,” he said.

“She,” Rey added, feeling her own voice begin to waver. “It’s a girl.”

A smile washed across his face. He stared at her stomach, where his hand still rested, with a look of
joy and disbelief. With such gentle words and touch, he almost seemed like any other father, concerned more with their child’s health than cosmic destiny, like they were an expectant couple like any other. It was a pleasant thought that was quietly dismissed.

“What if what’s best for her is being away from you?” Rey asked. Her words might have been cruel, but they needed to be said. “What if you're wrong about the future and she wants nothing to do with your empire. What if she finds herself more drawn to the light?”

“She’s my daughter,” he said. “I’ll love her regardless of her allegiance.” It sounded like it pained him to even consider the possibility, but his words seemed sincere.

“Really?” Rey asked, becoming more acutely aware of his proximity and his touch by the second, her knees trembling.

He looked back up at her. “Of course I would. I chose you, didn’t I?”

Before Rey could respond, the blaring alarm overhead overwhelmed her senses. She covered her ears. “What’s going on?” She shouted. It was the same alarm that had sounded when Kylo had entered Resistance territory. “What did you do?”

Kylo withdrew his hand and covered his ears as well before shouting back at her over the alarm. “Nothing! I don’t know what’s going on.”

Rey left the cell and stuck her head out into the hallway. The guards were gone, the hallway was burning from one end, and she heard heavy, synchronized footsteps coming down the other. She coughed and pulled her collar over her mouth as she choked on the smoke-filled air. “There’s fire!” Rey shouted as she ducked back into the cell.

Rey looked down at his shackles. His status as a willing captive didn’t matter right now. They couldn’t stay here. “Something’s happening. We need to find the others and figure out what’s going on.”

Kylo nodded and went to the door to see for himself, his arm hanging back to shield her from whatever unseen threat had set off the alarm. He wrinkled his nose as smoke filled the room. “Stay behind me,” he said, reaching for her hand. Hearing the footsteps closing in, she took it. His palm was sweaty and his grip tight.

Rey gasped as four stormtroopers turned the corner, blasters in hand. They’d been spotted. One sprinted toward them and shouted something to the others which was muffled by their helmet and the blaring alarm. Rey felt the heat of the fire at her back as it inched closer, cutting off any means of retreat.

Kylo shoved his hand into Rey’s satchel and grabbed the saber despite her yelp of surprise. “Get behind me, now!” He ignited it and placed himself between her and the approaching troopers. Under any other circumstances, she would have protested and insisted on joining whatever fight awaited them, but she wasn’t looking after her safety alone anymore.

He turned it in his hand, testing its weight. Baring his teeth, he scraped the end of it against the ground to create a shower of blue sparks to ward the troopers off. With a swipe of his hand, the one who had alerted the others was thrown into the air and slammed against the ceiling. Even over the alarm, Rey heard the crack of his bones.

The others scattered, but quickly recovered and resumed their approach. Two of them charged and were cut down effortlessly, reduced to a charred heap of flesh and armor. The third, however, had
hung back and was aiming his blaster straight at Kylo’s head.

“No!” Rey shot out her hand, sending the trooper flying against the wall. His blaster fired, striking Kylo in the shoulder. The saber fell to the ground and extinguished on impact. He cried out, clutching his shoulder that was now a smoldering mess of charred cloth and flesh. The smell of it and the bodies of his victims nearly made Rey gag.

The trooper landed amongst the corpses of his comrades. Kylo reached with the force to drag him forward, screaming in pain and terror. Once he had him close, Kylo bend over him, ripped off his helmet to reveal a face streaked with blood and sweat, contorted in terror and agony.

“What sent you?” Kylo pressed his hand against his forehead, causing the trooper to cry out as he sliced into his mind.

After a moment of searching the trooper’s memories, Kylo paled. He clenched his fist, cutting off his cries of agony. The alarm had died out as well, leaving only the sound of crackling flame. The act made Rey’s stomach turn, but she felt little sympathy for a man who would have killed both them and their child.

“What did you see?” Rey asked, finally daring to step forward.

Kylo stared at his hand in disbelief before closing it into a fist. “It’s Hux,” he said. “The castle on Mustafar, it’s gone. He thinks he’s killed us both.”

“The shields and the guards…”

“It was him,” Kylo said. “He staged a coup and declared war. He’s sent imperial troops across Resistance territory.”

“Then we need to find the others,” Rey said, her voice shaking as reality struggled to settle in her mind. She picked up the saber with her spare hand and slid it back into her satchel while the other remain linked with Kylo’s. His hold steadied her, as much as she hated to admit it to herself.

“The Resistance can’t withstand an Imperial invasion. If your friends have any sense and all, they’ll be evacuating,” he said, glancing back at the fire and wincing as the smoke blew into his eyes.

“Which way’s the hangar?” his eyes darted around the hallway, searching for an alternative route beyond the inferno behind at their backs.

“Follow me,” Rey tugged him toward the clear end of the hallway, stepping over the broken bodies. She did her best to avoid their dead gazes which stared up at them in frozen horror, painted red by the flames.

“Alright. You lead, I’ll stay alert and make sure we don’t run into more trouble.” With his long strides, he easily kept pace with her as she pulled him along the smoky passageways of the base. A few members of the Resistance ran past them, all heading toward the hangar. A few paused long enough to confirm Rey’s assumption, shouting about the evacuation, but most were too frantic to speak to Rey or realize whose hand she held onto. She could hardly blame them. Aside from the cape, he certainly didn’t resemble an emperor.

Kylo alerted her to approaching troopers, allowing her time to redirect their path. Having only come to the base the day before, most of her navigation was intuitive guesswork, but thankfully they managed to avoid further encounters. In fact, the number of troopers Kylo sensed in the vicinity was seemingly few for a ground invasion. Perhaps they would be able to escape before a second wave managed to touch down.
“We've got more company, but your friends are close up ahead,” Kylo said as Rey led him around another corner, his cape whipping behind him as he picked up the pace.

“The hangar was only a few yards away. Let’s go.” She heard the heavy steps of the troopers behind them, drowning out their own frantic steps. She squeezed at Kylo’s hand a little harder. His saber hand, however, was still hanging limply at his side and the blood of his wound was visible where it had trickled down his wrist. He would need a medic as soon as that got to safety.

When Kylo threw open the doors to the hangar with a wave of his hand, they saw the chaos that was unfolding within. A small squad of stormtroopers had evidently found them as well. Outside the mouth of the hangar were the remains of two imperial ships and numerous stormtrooper bodies lay on the ground, blaster holes shot through their armor, alongside a fair amount of Resistance casualties. The survivors, which appeared to be nearly every inhabitant on the base, were stepping over the corpses, shouting for one another, scanning the crowd, their hands on their weapons. They didn’t even pay attention as Rey and Kylo stepped in and sealed the door behind them.

In the center of the chaos was Leia, waving people down and directing them toward the empty ships with all the authority of a woman twice her size.

“Leia!” Rey shouted, waving the get her attention. Kylo stalled for a moment at the sound of his mother’s name but begrudgingly followed as she tugged him along.

Leia whipped her head around to face them and lifted her hand to silence the uniformed officer who had been speaking to her. She rushed to greet them and threw her arms around Rey’s shoulders. “You made it. I was just about to come for you. I’m so glad you’re safe—all three of you.” Leia said. Her and kylo made brief eye contact and she offered him a gentle smile. His face remained unreadable.

“He thinks we're both dead,” Kylo said.

“Better keep it that way. For now, you need to get off this base immediately.” Leia pointed toward the Falcon, which sat near the hangar exit. “I had it moved in here yesterday. It’s all fueled up and ready to go. I had the emergency stored replenished. Take it and find somewhere they can't find you. Away from the fighting.”


“Luke is gone and the others might have escaped already as well. If not, I'll find them and make sure they get to safety. I'm just about to head the control center. They might be there,” Leia said. “As much as you may want to help, I won't have my grandchild caught in a war zone. Keep her safe as well as yourself. I have my duty to fulfill and so do you. Now go.”

Rey nodded, tears blurring her vision, and pulled her into another hug. Leia returned it, then broke their embrace to push her in the direction of the ship.

“Wait. One more thing.” Leia caught Kylo by the sleeve. When Rey stayed back as well, Leia raised her hand to object. “I'll just be a moment. Get to the Falcon,” she said, her tone leaving no room for negotiation. Rey forced herself to step away and continue on through the crowd. She looked back at
the two of them. Leia had lifted her hand to cup his cheek and was saying something Rey couldn’t make out over the sound of Resistance ships speeding out of the hangar.

After stepping inside the Falcon, she closed the door behind her and rushed to the cockpit to look out into the sea of fleeing Resistance fighters. Kylo and Leia were the only ones standing still, like the eye of a living storm. Leia held his face with both hands and was pressing his forehead to hers. Her lips were still moving. Rey longed to hear what they were saying. She distracted herself by preparing the takeoff sequence.

When she looked back into the crowd, Leia was gone and Kylo stood alone, staring straight at her with that same pleading, defeated expression he had worn in his cell. The thought occurred to Rey that she could fly off and leave him to Hux’s men. No one else in the hangar would take him. Even if Leia pulled herself away from her duties and took him with her to whatever safe haven they could find, he wouldn’t last long in the chaos, surrounded by the survivors of the attack who would no doubt assume he had been the one to order it. Rey was his only hope of escape.

He walked toward the ship, slow and deliberate, never breaking eye contact, waiting for her to make her decision.

Just like Luke told her, she sets aside her grievances, as numerous and justified as they were, and searched her heart and the Force within her for the right path. She couldn’t let him die like this. Whatever it was, she felt it deep in her bones and it was far more than pity. She might not understand it or understand him, not entirely, but she knew she needed time to figure it out. They weren’t done just yet.

She released the entry ramp and Kylo bolted onboard. He fell into the co-pilot’s chair and helped her prepare the ship for liftoff without missing a beat. Even with only the use of his left hand, he manipulated the controls like they are an extension of himself, flicking each one with incredible speed and precision. His force signature thrummed with relief and gratitude. They lifted into the air and aimed for the atmosphere.

Just as Rey had feared, the sky was filled with imperial ships with Kylo’s sigil scraped off their sides, leaving bits of red behind like bleeding wounds. But as small as the falcon was and as well as she and Kylo piloted it, they found it easy to slip by the battlecruiser and blanks. It also helped that many other Resistance ships were making their escape at the same time. A few were hit by enemy fire, bursting into clouds of smoke and shrapnel, but most made it past.

“Where are we going?” Rey asked. It wasn’t as if she had much of a grasp on galactic geography and as the now former emperor, Kylo surely had a better idea of where to escape.

“Mustafar,” he said, typing in the coordinates into the navigator.

“What? I’m not going back there,” Rey shouted. “And I thought Hux destroyed it?”

“I need to see for myself.”

Rey looked out the viewport at the enemy ships. Any one of them could turn around and blow them to bits. There wasn’t time to argue. “Fine. Just hurry.”

As he worked at the controls, sweat beading on his brow and his good hand doing the work of two, Rey kept her eye on the imperial fleet. The battlecruiser hovered over the base like a gnaw-jaw on Jakku waiting for the sun to dip below the dunes so their hunt could begin, while the smaller starcraft reminded her of the ripper-raptors who would trail close behind to pick at the discarded remains of their prey. Deep within her, be it through the Force or pure intuition, she knew something was
wrong. They were picking off what ships they could, but pursued none. They weren’t even closing on the base. This was no invasion.

“Kylo, hurry. Please,” Rey said.

“I’m trying,” He said. Just then, the navigator lit up, their coordinates set and calculated. He sighed with relief.

In their last moments before entering hyperspace, they saw the hundreds of turboblaster turrets mounted on the battlecruiser’s hull aim toward Echo Base and along with the surrounding ships, strike it with full force.

Rey felt the breath leave her lungs and heard herself scream. She caught only a glimpse of the carnage below, the fiery remains of the old rebel base filled with an untold number of the Resistance, before it all disappeared in a blinding streak of stars as the Falcon was jettisoned across the galaxy.

his face ashen and Eyes wide in horror, Kylo rose from his seat. Rey heard his steps staggering backward and the sound of his back slamming against the wall before he slid to the ground with a heavy thud. Then came the screams. He sounded like a beast caught in a trap, both terrified and angry, spitting out a jumble of curses and incomprehensible shouts until his voice died out and dissolved into muffled sobs.

When Rey had recovered enough to look behind her, she saw him on the ground, leaning against the wall with his head in his hand and hair caught in his fist. If it were anyone else, she might have taken this as a sign he wished to be left undisturbed, but that was not the case with him. She could feel him drawing her in, calling out to her across the short distance. With the Falcon set on its course, Rey lifted herself from her seat. Her legs felt like water as she approached him. Kneeling, she reached out and caught him by the wrist and drew it back. He released his hair and lifted his chin enough to allow her to see his face. He was red around his eyes and nose and his cheeks were streaked with tears. His breath was shallow and shaking. “She’s gone. I felt it,” he said.

Rey choked back tears of her own. The longer Kylo stared at her, the more she felt his sorrow and pain. She felt herself moved by something beyond pity—compassion perhaps. She wiped her tears on the back of her sleeve and reached for him. He flinched as she cupped his cheek, his flesh was warm beneath her hand. Despite all she knew of him and what he was capable of, she couldn’t fear him. This wasn’t the fearsome Kylo Ren, conqueror of worlds. At least for that moment, he was the Ben Solo, vulnerable and devastated by loss.

Rey could feel him silently begging to touch her again, to find comfort in her arms. She gave him a small nod and immediately, his good arm circled her and pulled her against him. Rey relaxed into his embrace, breathing in his scent, which she had almost forgotten. Even with the use of only one arm, his hold was like tempered steel. Rey adjusted herself on his lap and his head rested on her shoulder. They fit together like two broken pieces
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

After a short stop Mustafar, Kylo and Rey must search for a place to hide out where Hux and his men will be unable to find them. The outer rim seems to be their best bet to ensure their uncertain future.

The flight to Mustafar had been a short one and Rey and Kylo had spent the entirety of it in each others arms. The were seemingly fused, their skin sticky with a thin sheen of sweat accumulated from their recent ordeal and the combined heat of their bodies relaxed against one another. Even their lungs had begun to rise and fall in sync, as did their heartbeats. In the quietest moments, once their ragged breath had finally slowed, Rey could have sworn she had felt their daughter's heartbeat as well, thrumming fiercely to keep up.

At the sound of the navigator signaling their arrival, they were shaken from their strange moment of truce and began to detach from one another. When Kylo pulled away, he looked like a thief caught in the act. He lifted himself off the floor, dusted off his robes, and retreated back to the safe distance he had been keeping before.

Rey rose as well and noticed he had left a small bloodstain on her sleeve. Ignoring it, she approached the viewport to peer down at the planet. It was hard to see any change from such a distance. “Want to fly in closer? I’m not picking up anything on the scanners. Doesn’t look like we were followed or like Hux left any of his men to guard it.” Why send valuable troops to patrol a graveyard when you had more innocents to slaughter?

With a shaking exhale, Kylo slid into the copilot's chair. “Yeah. Let’s get closer.”

They engaged the flight controls and pierced the planet’s atmosphere, passing through layers of ash clouds until they spotted the surface and jerked back the thrusters to fly parallel to the lava sea. With Kylo navigating and Rey steering, they sped over the crimson waves, dodging lava geysers and pillars of volcanic rock that jut out of the sea like the spikes on the back of some volcanic monstrosity swimming below the surface.

When the smoke cleared and the castle came into view, Rey could hardly tell it had been there at all. A black crater surrounded by bits of charred stone were all that remained. Streams of lava crept over it, eating away at the rubble.

Rey didn’t protest when Kylo guided them to the ground and landed the ship on a stable stretch of rock. She watched from a fair distance as he dragged his feet down the exit ramp, breathing in the sulfur air that hit his face and blew back his tangled hair as he stared out at the ruin of his grandfather’s castle. What was left would surely be consumed at high tide, burying the legacy of the Sith forever. The holocrons, the contents of his shrine, all the tombs and treasure stored within its walls—all lost to the fire and brimstone. Even the ominous aura that had hung over the place was diminished, reduced to a vengeful whisper, overpowered by the hiss of the burning shore.

Rey pulled the edge of her shirt over her mouth and squinted to keep the ash from her eyes, but Kylo kept his wide open until they reddened from the heat and sprung fresh tears. But he didn’t sob like before. He held his silent wake and returned to the cockpit without a word, wiping his eyes on his
sleeve.

Rey followed, feeling a profound sense of relief along with a twinge of sympathy. For her, the castle had held nothing but terror and memories best forgotten, but for Kylo it was another blow to the life he had carved out for himself, another snapped thread that had tied him to the family legacy he had tried to hard, albeit misguided, to live up to.

“We need to get moving,” Rey said as she engaged the lift off sequence.

Kylo slid in beside her to help. “We aren’t rejoining the fight.” He said. “We are getting you someplace safe where that bastard can’t find either of you.”

“I know that. It’s too dangerous. What we need is to find someplace where we can lay low and find you a medic for your arm. And depending on how long we stay, I suppose I’ll need to see one as well.”

“That’s for sure. My joint feels like someone stuck a knife into it, but I can’t feel a damn thing from the shoulder down and it won’t move an inch,” Kylo said bitterly. “What about you? Did you see a medic on Echo Base?”

“First thing I did when I landed.” Rey laid her free hand over her middle. “Major Kalonia examined me.”

“Is everything alright? How far along did she say you are?”

“Five months.”

Kylo’s hand froze on the thruster. “Five? How is that even possible? Look at you!” He gestured toward her with an incredulous look on his face.

“She said something about my fluid being low and the baby being undersized but still healthy. She gave me some supplements and said things should be alright if I do everything I’m supposed to.”

Kylo shook his head in disbelief. “We definitely need a medic. Where do you want to go?”

Rey paused. She had no idea. She was grateful he had asked her first, but her knowledge of the known universe beyond what she had read in outdated flight manuals and on the holonet was pathetically lacking. From what she could remember, she had only been to five planets in her life and as for the ones she knew only in theory, there was no telling which would be safe after all that had just happened. “I have no idea. Do you?” Surely he would have a working knowledge of the galaxy that had just been stolen out from under him.

He thought for a moment before answering with surprising resolve, his hand gripping the controls. “I know where we need to go.”

“Where?”

“Cendril. It’s a small moon on the outer rim. Forested, cool climate, a small population to maintain the fueling station. It’s a pretty quiet place overall and they should have medics in the village.”

Rey wasn’t sure where that was, but she nodded anyway as he gave her the coordinates to punch in. She had heard of the outer rim. The outlandish stories on the holonet had sounded no worse than Jakku. “Will we be able to hide there?”

“We can camp out in the forest if that’s alright with you,” He said. It was clear he knew what he was
suggesting: an untold amount of time on a strange moon, hiding out in the woods with only each other for company. But this time they would be sharing quarters on equal ground. No deal to maintain. Only survival.

She had little choice. And a small part of her wanted to investigate whatever had possessed her to seek comfort in his arms and soothe his cries and share in his grief. She had indulged him once again. Or rather, she'd indulged herself. Whichever it was, she had no idea. Her mind was racing too fast for her to sort it out. It was best to focus on the task at hand. “Do you have any credits?” she asked.

“I think so. I surrendered my saber, but not my credit chip. It isn’t traceable, so it can’t be used to locate us.” He dug into the inner layers of his tunic and drew it out. It was so small a general pat-down wouldn’t have found it, and like Leia had said, his imprisonment had only been a formality. It was then that Rey realized his saber had been destroyed along with the base, hidden away for safekeeping while he had been contained. Yet another piece of his crafted persona had been ripped away.

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Like Kylo had said, Cenril was a small moon. Its surface was cloaked in black with only a few pinpoints of light shining outward. There wasn’t a spot of green, just an endless forest of black leaves. A bit unsettling, but certainly a fine hiding place.

Kylo directed her to one of the few spots of land that wasn’t covered in dark foliage: a small hangar on the edge of the port. Inside was a variety of ships in various states of repair, each at a station being worked on by mechanics or fueled up. They landed the falcon in an empty spot.

Kylo stood and rearranged his cape to fold over his head and drape over his shoulders, effectively covering his wound and casting his face in shadow. It almost resembled the cloak he had worn on Takodana when they first met, but without the long outer garments and mask, he looked less like a monster from her nightmares and more like a roguish outlaw. Fitting, since they were both technically outlaws now. Or ghosts as far as Hux was concerned.

He then opened the overhead compartment and pulled out the blaster he had taken out of her collection, the blaster Han had given her on Takonana. He strapped it to his hip. It seemed to complete his undercover persona. The disguise would no doubt frighten many, but the fact that Rey knew what lie beneath all the dark layers, more than she cared to recall, prevented it from having any effect on her.

“That’s where you hid the blaster?” Rey asked.

“I didn’t hide it. I just put it back where it belonged.” He said before turning on his heels and striding out of the cockpit.

Rey added that to her growing list of questions for when they had a moment’s peace. The Falcon’s miraculous restoration ranked pretty high on the list.

She slammed her hand on the release and followed him to the exit ramp. Their sound of gurgling fuel pumps, grinding metal, and the smell of oil bombarded them as soon as they stepped out into the hangar. At the bottom of the ramp, a rodian in a gray jumpsuit was waiting for them with a holopad in hand. “Names?” he asked, glancing between them, his eyes glazed over.

Rey felt the panic shoot through Kylo as he scrambled for an answer. “Um, it’s Ben. And Rey,” he said.
It didn’t sound all that convincing, but the rodiann shrugged and typed it in. “Fine. What will you be needing? Just a fuel-up?”

“Yes, but I need to leave it here until I get back from the village. I have a stop I need to make.”

The rodiann wrinkled his snout. “That’ll cost you extra. This isn’t a storage facility. Normally I would refuse, but you’re lucky this hunk of junk doesn’t take up much room.” He looked over the hull with a disapproving look. “Sure you don’t need any repairs?”

“Don’t touch anything,” Kylo said, the warning clear from his tone as he shoved the credit chip in front of him.

“Whatever you say.” The rodiann raised his free hand in mock surrender before sliding Kylo’s card through the reader and handing it back. “Just get back soon before I send it to impound.”

“Fine,” Kylo said before stomping off toward the exit.

Rey hurried to catch up and lowered her voice to a whisper. “Why did you give him your...that name.” It felt wrong to think of the name as his outside the moment they had shared on the falcon. The bit of Kylo’s face that was visible flashed red. “No one gives their real name in a place like this. Especially when it’s a name everyone would instantly recognize. Would you prefer I shout out my identity and have every lowlife in the quadron trying to capture us in hopes of a reward?”

“But you used my real name.”

“Yours isn’t widely known. No one will think anything of it,” he said. Rey added his choice of name to the growing list of questions.

He opened the door and they stepped out into a pile of ash that had collected against the hangar like a gray snowdrift. The place was covered in the stuff. The village wasn’t made up of huts or tents like the rural villages Rey had seen before. The streets appeared to be packed earth beneath the ash and were lined with ramshackle buildings stacked on top of one another, patched and repainted in countless places. It appeared as if someone had taken a chunk of a sprawling metropolis and dropped it into the forest to rot and be overtaken by black creeping foliage and greenish-gray moss. It was like a strange dream-world with all the color sapped out of it, save for the flickering neon signs lit up in uburesh, some missing letters, or with exposed wires sparking along the edges. Strange animals roamed the streets, many without a person to lead or control them; some were scaled lizards of some sort and others were indistinguishable mounds of fur scuttling along on six legs.

The people were a mixture of sentient races, most wearing some form of flight gear or fuel-stained garments in shades of black and gray to camouflage the ash that clung the hems of their cloaks. None paused to acknowledge Kylo or Rey as they wove through the crowd. They all walked on with their heads forward and eyes staring down at their boots, as though every citizen had a personal cloaking device.

A grayish twi’lek with a missing lekku and his face covered in a half-mask shoved past them, grunting as his shoulder struck Rey’s. Kylo fumed and clenched his fist, but Rey closed her hand over his and flashed him a warning look. This wasn’t the time or place for an incident. He relented and moved his hand to the small of her back to her closer to his side and guided her through the street, swerving to avoid further collisions.

Kylo stopped and pointed in the distance. “There. A medic. I knew they’d have one nearby.”

Rey looked where he had pointed and saw the green sign flashing “Licenced Medic. All Sentients
Welcome. No Solicitors.” It was a narrow building crammed between an electrician and a cybernetics workshop. Like most of the village, the windows were bolted shut, but a sign over the door said “open”. Kylo walked up the short stairway and rapped the knuckles of his good hand against the door, knocking loose the ash that had clung to the chipped paint.

In mere seconds, the sound of turning tumblers and unlatching deadbolts could be heard from behind the door. It creaked open to reveal an elderly male tarsunt peering out at them. Like all of his species, he had glassy, black eyes set far apart in his leathery face. They squinted up at Kylo suspiciously. “Are you injured?” he asked.

Kylo nodded. “It was an industrial accident—”

The tarsunt wrinkled his furry brow and waved for him to stop. “Don’t tell me. I don’t need to know what happened, I need to know what’s wrong. You can keep your business to yourself.”

“Close range blaster fire to the shoulder. It won’t move and all I can feel is a stabbing pain in the joint.”

The tarsunt ran his paw over his beard which was as gray as the ash at their feet. “Hmm. Better. That information I can work with. Come in.” He unlatched the last chain lock before squinting at Rey who was still standing at the bottom of the stairs. “She with you?” he asked Kylo.

“I am,” Rey answered before bounding up the stairs and slipping in the door behind Kylo.

“Fine. Come in, I suppose,” the tarsunt said. “Just be sure to knock the pollen off your boots and clothes before I let you into the clinic.”

“Pollen? You mean the ash?” The room they had entered was a narrow entryway with a rusted coat rack and a dim light overhead. Rey pulled off her coat and hung it on a free hook.

The tarsunt snorted through his wide snout. “Sure looks like ash, but trust me as a local when I say its pollen. The trees release it from their spores up in the canopy and the stuff covers the whole blasted moon until the rainy season comes. Then it gets washed away and soaks into the soil to fertilize the next generation of forest and start the cycle all over again. Leaves us with about a standard month or two where this place is bearable to live in. Small wonder we only have fueling station and surrounding businessmen like myself to cater to visitors like the two of you.”

Kylo winced as another shock of pain ran through his joint as he tried to remove his outer layers one-handed. He grit his teeth and hung it on the rack, then smacked the rest of the pollen off his shoes. “So you are a licensed medic?”

The tarsunt snorted through his wide snout. “My name is Vassik Cherrim, second in my class at the Geonosian Medical College. I pride myself on my skill as a medical professional as well as my discretion. Both serve me well in a place such as this.”

“I see. Do you have any experience with maternity care, human specifically?” Kylo asked.

“I’ve had my practice here for over forty standard years and have treated many expectant mothers and delivered my fair share of children. Humans are far simpler to handle compared to other sentients that have more complex reproductive systems and larger numbers of offspring.”

“But you have delivered a human?”

“Yes, a few times,” Vassik said as he unlocked the door to the clinic. He then turned to Rey. “If you don’t mind me asking, are you the one who’s expecting?”
“Yes,” she said. “I’ve seen a medic recently, but I’m sure I’ll need one again soon. There have been complications. I’m actually five months along.”

Vassik pulled at his beard again. “Hmm. I’ll take a look then. You do have credits, correct?”

“Yes, we have credits,” Kylo said. “As much as you need. We will be here for a while, so you can expect a handsome reward for ensuring my daughter remains healthy and then delivering her when the time comes.” He stepped into the clinic behind Vassik, staring down at him to emphasize their vast difference in stature. “Sound fair to you?”

“There are few things I truly care for, but children are certainly among them—and credits of course.” Vassik spread his furry muzzle into what must have been an attempt at a smile. “Your precious daughter is in safe hands.”

“We’ll see how well you do with my arm first,” Kylo said.

Rey stepped into the clinic behind them. It was cleaner that the entryway. Nearly spotless, in fact. Medical equipment and strange electronic devices filled the shelves, lined up neatly, each carefully labeled. She didn’t recognize even a third of their names, but they all appeared sterile. No rust or blood splatter like the clinic’s rough outer appearance had made her fear and anticipate. Even the clothing Vassik wore was free of the ash or oil stains the other locals seemed to wear like badges of honor.

Vassik brushed back his mane of fur and flexed his paws before slipping on a pair of gloves. “Alright. You can have a seat there.” He pointed Kylo in the direction of a chrome bench near the end of the room. “And you, my dear, can wait over there if you’d like.” He pointed Rey toward a chair a few feet away.

The red cushion was frayed at the edges, but it looked clean, so she accepted his offer and watched as Vassik examined Kylo, absentmindedly wringing her hands as he pulled a device off a nearby shelf. The label said it was some sort of scanner. He flicked a switch to power it on while hovering it a few inches from Kylo’s shoulder. Without his outer layers, the wound was exposed through the torn fabric, revealing how much of a bloody mess has been made of it. He hissed in pain as Vassik gingerly lifted his arm by the wrist and ran the scanner down the length of it.

“Can you feel my hand touching you?” Vassik asked, wearing a pensive look on his face as he stared into the scanner’s display screen.

“No. I can only feel my socket. Nothing else.”

“Hmm. Perhaps we can save the socket, then.”

“Save it?”

“Tell me, have you injured this arm before?” Vassik asked. “Much of the nerve damage seems recent, but there is a great deal of scar tissue in there.”

Rey and Kylo communicated their mutual recollection with a quick glance and a shared thought. That was the shoulder she had stabbed with the end of the lightsaber before slashing it open along with his face on Starkiller. She had seen the scar countless times in their shared bed, but the lasting damage had never occurred to her. He had never shown any signs.

“Yes, it was injured before,” Kylo said. “Healed it with bacta and thought nothing of it. It never gave me any problems. Not what’s this about saving my socket?”
“Well, whatever was done to it before, this new injury finished the job. I’m afraid your nerves are beyond repair. Not to mention your blood vessels and tendons are shredded and you have several microfractures in your upper humerus.”

“And what does that mean exactly?”

“It means that at best you will have a dead limb hanging at your side for the rest of your life and at worst, it will become massively infected and poison your blood or your body may reject it entirely until it succumbs to gangrenous rot.”

Rey’s hand clamped over her mouth as her stomach turned. Kylo had gone an unsettling shade of white as he stared down at the glossy black floor and she could feel his thoughts spiraling into fear and helplessness he was unable to conceal. After a moment, he lifted his chin and stared Vassik straight in the face, his heart racing. “Remove it,” he said.

“Just want I was thinking.” Blank switched off the scanner and slid it neatly back into its spot on the shelf. “Not the most pleasant solution, but it’s your best option at the moment.”

Kylo ran his hand over his face and exhaled. “If you’re wrong or you screw this up, I promise you, I will—”

Blank silenced him with a pat on his good shoulder. “I’m not wrong and I won’t screw it up. Do you think I would have lasted so long in a place like this, where most of my clientele would think nothing of turning me into a fur cloak if my scalpel slipped? I have taken many limbs before and they’ve all come off clean. And lucky for you, I have a partnership with the cybernetics specialist next door. I use his services more than I’d like to say. In certain lines of work, it seems like limb loss is almost a rite of passage. Especially in this part of the galaxy.”

Kylo’s eyes had been burning a hole in the far wall with a distant, defeated look. “When can you do it?” His voice was weary, as if the hardships of their day had been compounded in a single moment.

“Right now, if you’d like,” Vassik said. “I’ll have the droids ready the operating room upstairs.”

“See to her and the baby first,” Kylo said. “If that’s alright with you,” he added, his gaze lifting to meet Rey’s once more.

Rey nodded. There was a lump in her throat which preventing her from speaking, but she wasn’t sure what she could possibly say at the moment. Nothing would improve their situation.

“I can do that now while the preparations are being made.” Vassik walked over to a wall panel and punched in series of commands until it beeped in what sounded like confirmation.

He then pulled another scanner off the shelf, along with a blood sampler and, with Rey’s permission, began an examination almost identical to the one she’d received from Major Kalonia on Hoth. Kylo kept a watchful eye, his spirits lifting as the sound of their daughter’s beating heart was amplified throughout the room.

“Your little one is healthy, but you were right about there being complications. You need plenty of rest, water, and a properly supplemented diet. If what you’re...” he waved in Kylo’s direction, “what he said is true, that you will be here for the delivery, I suggest you come to see me at least every other week until then. Where will you be staying? I can safely say that no one in the village will rent out a room without asking far more questions than me as well as asking for a hefty sum for their trouble. You have to understand, we can’t accept strangers with open arms. We don’t want our little settlement getting caught up in turf wars or attracting bounty hunters. It’s best if our visitors come for
what they need and then be on their way.”

“We’ll be staying as long as we need to in the forest. That won’t be a problem, right?” Kylo asked.

Vassik set the scanner aside. “Not as far as I'm concerned. If you can stomach living out in that tangled mess, you're welcome to it as long as you don’t meddle in anyone’s affairs or drag anyone into yours. No one cares about that forest. The wood of the trees is so brittle it isn’t even good for lumber. Some people chop it for wood, but it makes an awful smoke and burns too fast. And then there are the brakens and flint mice to worry about. Nasty pests.”

“We’ll be fine,” Kylo said.

“I’m sure you will. Now, let me see to your arm. The droids should have the operating room prepped by now.”
Rey and Kylo attempt to settle into their hiding spot on the forest moon of Cendril. With no contract to uphold, a new dynamic begins to form.

Without a way to measure time, Rey could only guess how many hours had passed since Kylo had followed Vassik upstairs to the operating room. She fidgeted in her seat and more than once caught herself picking at the loose threads of the cushion. Breathing in through her nose and out her mouth, she slowly tried to calm her nerves. She was being ridiculous. It was just an arm and he deserved it anyway. Well, he’d deserved the initial injuries on Starkiller. The blaster bolt he’d taken on Hoth was another matter. That hit he’d taken for her and their daughter.

Rey wondered if she would have done the same. Certainly, for the baby, but for him, she wasn’t quite sure.

Finally, she felt Kylo emerge from the fog of anesthesia. The stairway door opened and he stepped into view. His tunic had been removed and was balled up in his remaining hand. In its place were a series of bandages. They enveloped his shoulder and wrapped around his middle to secure them in place.

Even bandaged and minus a limb, Kylo managed to appear formidable. The sullen look he wore made him all the more terrifying, in fact. Not to herself, but to Vassik who walked anxiously beside him. Kylo would likely have the same effect on anyone else they should come across. He didn’t need an empire behind him for that.

“All done,” Vassik said, clasping his paws together. “Everything went according to plan and with the measurements I took, Gendrel should have your new appendage by around this time tomorrow. A clean cut like this will make aligning the neurotransmitters quite simple. I really outdid myself on this one.” He opened a drawer and pulled out a vat of bacta and a handful of bandages. “Here. Use these if anything should come loose, leak fluids, or some such mishap. Until then, get some rest.”

Rey stood up to take them, seeing as Kylo’s remaining hand was occupied, and set them aside. He struggled to pull his tunic back on one-handed but had a look of determination on his face that told her he wanted no assistance. It was a matter of pride, Rey supposed. How very like him. Once he’d shrugged it on and straightened it as best he could, he pulled the credit chip from his inner pocket and handed it over to Vassik who happily snatched it up and ran it through his scanner.

After returning the chip to Kylo, he turned to Rey. “And you, my dear, should come see me in a week or two. Sooner, if anything seems wrong.”

“Allright,” Kylo said. “If that is all, we need to return to our ship.”

Rey gathered the bacta and bandages as Vassik bid them goodbye. In the entry room, after pulling her coat back on and waiting for Kylo to struggle back into his outer layers, she snatched his cape off the hook. “Just let me do it,” she said. “We don’t have forever.”

He let his arm fall to his side and bent his head down for her to rearrange his disguise. “I’m sorry
about your arm,” she said, keeping her eyes on the cape instead of his face while she draped it over
him.

“Don’t be. You and the baby are safe. That’s what matters,” he said.

She looked him in the eyes. His train of thought had evidently gone the same direction as her own. This was another injury she had caused him, by far the most severe and the only one she regretted. “Well, I’m glad you’re alright—or better than you might have been.” She stumbled over her words and stared at the woven fabric of his cape again. As strange as it was to say it aloud, it was the truth. Regardless of all that had transpired between them, she didn’t want him dead. She hadn’t truly realized that fact until the attack on Hoth. When she’d deflected the blast away from his head, she had acted on instinct, drawing on something buried deep within her.

“It would have been worse if you hadn’t been there,” he said. That was true as well. As distracted as he had been, he might not have deflected the blast in time. They were both capable of slipping up, it would seem. Even against a stormtrooper.

When they stepped out into the street, they found the air had cooled and the sky had taken on a dark violet hue. Whatever caused the strange color, be it some atmospheric gas or the ash-like pollen in the air, it was lovely to look at and didn’t seem to affect the breathability of the air around them.

Back in the hangar, the rodian fuel attendant seemed perplexed by the empty sleeve hanging at Kylo’s side but didn’t dare to comment as he handed him their bill. “Good thing you showed up when you did. It’s nearly closing time,” he said. That explained why the Hangar was nearly empty.

“So we’re just going to land in the forest and hide out there?” Rey asked once they had retaken their places at the Falcon’s controls.

“We’ll look for a clearing.” Kylo said. As he finished his sentence, a sharp pain ran through his bandaged shoulder, strong enough for Rey to feel the ripple of its effect.

“Did he not give you pain-killers?” She asked. If she could feel it that strongly, she could only imagine what Kylo was experiencing on his end.

“I don't want any.” He grimaced and continued the liftoff sequence.

“You just lost an arm for kriff’s sake,” Rey said. “Is this your way of drawing on pain for power or something the that?”

His expression darkened as he stared out the viewport. “That’s not what it’s about. Just let me deal with it how I need to. Please.”

He sounded so pitiful that Rey considered turning back for pain-killers on her own, but as stubborn as he was, she knew it would be useless to try to convince him. It was probably meant as a form of self-punishment, she realized. “Fine. Do what you want, but don’t forget to change your bandage. I don’t need you getting an infection. You’re in bad enough shape as it is.”

She guided them out of the hanger and up above the treeline. It was so thick, she was unable to see the ground at all, let alone a clearing big enough to land in. Only after they had combed the area with the scanners for nearly half an hour did they find one. Without the scanner, they wouldn’t have noticed it at all. The only indication that the forest floor was open below was a small gap in the canopy.
When they lowered the falcon, it seemed as if the forest was swallowing them alive. Brittle branches snapped beneath the weight of the ship as they touched down and powered off the engines. The air outside was thick with pollen they had stirred up during landing, but once it settled again, they could see why it had been so difficult to find a spot to land. Not only did the thick trunks of the trees shoot up from the ground close together, but their upper branches reached out to tangle and weave with one another, so thick with leaves that they nearly blotted out the purple of the evening light.

The canopy seemed to form a second sky, with pinpoints of light shining through the gaps in the trees to serve as stars. Even the hole their descent had left was much smaller than expected, having closed up like a healing wound.

The edge of the clearing could be seen from the cockpit. It opened into pure darkness and from the way they were so tightly cocooned inside the forest, Rey doubted daybreak would lighten it a significant amount.

“Now that we’re here, I want to try reaching the Resistance,” Rey said. “Perhaps they’ve gotten to safety by now. Whoever made it, that is.”

The dread she had put out of her mind since leaving Hoth crept back in. It still didn’t quite seem real. Luke was the only person she knew for sure had left the base, but there was no telling if he had been caught by Hux’s men after that. No one’s survival was guaranteed and she had no idea how to search for them through the Force from such a distance. Perhaps that only worked with individuals more closely linked in some way, for better or worse. That had to be it. Kylo had been able to find her halfway across the galaxy, but Hux’s invasion had taken him by surprise.

Kylo lifted himself from the copilot’s chair with a groan that he failed to suppress. “Alright. I’ll go lie down while you search for your friends. Good luck.”

She sensed his words were sincere, but it was strange to hear him wish for the survival of the people he’d sworn to kill.

Rey could only hope Hux hadn’t made good on the threats Kylo had given up on. Some of the Resistance had to have escaped. Hopefully, Finn was among them.

With Kylo gone, she switched on the Falcon’s transmitter. Leia’s comm channel was the first she tried, mostly out of habit, but also to quiet the part of her mind that was convinced this was all some horrible nightmare. Her attempt to connect was met with static and then deafening silence.

Deciding she had mourned enough for one day, she tried Finn’s channel, refusing to dwell on darker thoughts. But once she was met with silence yet again, her feelings reemerged, not as sorrow, but as a burning, vengeful anger building in the pit of her stomach. Hot tears blurred her vision, but she took another breath, long and deep, refusing to let them fall.

This wasn’t over yet. He could still be out there, running or hiding. His comm channel hadn’t been reduced to static, so his transmitter had to still be intact somewhere. There was still hope.

The only other comm channel she knew was Poe’s, but he didn’t respond either. She tried Finn’s again, then Poe, and on and on, until all the light streaming into the clearing had gone out. Weariness tugged at her eyes and tired limbs, begging her to go to sleep. If she kept it up much longer, she knew she’d collapse at the controls, so instead, she switched on the hologram projector to record a message.

She wiped her eyes, cleared her throat, and forced herself to smile as it flickered on. “Hello, it’s Rey. I’m safe and in hiding. If you’re out there, please contact me if you can. I need to know I’m not the
only one who made it out.” She cut it off and sent it out to both Finn and Poe, hoping one of them would still have their transceivers on hand and find the opportunity to respond.

They couldn’t be dead. She refused to even consider the possibility. Switching off the transceiver, she headed to the Falcon’s bunk room for the night.

Instead of finding Kylo sleeping in one of the beds, Rey found him leaning against the wall, his disguise removed, leaving only his under tunic and trousers.

On the floor, she saw the mattresses had been taken out of their bunks, placed alongside one another on the floor, and covered with a pile of blankets and pillows.

“Manage to contact anyone?” Kylo asked.

“Not yet,” Rey said. “Now what have you done with the beds?”

“Making you a better one. You could fall out of those narrow bunks and hurt yourself and the baby. This way, you get more room to spread out and there’s no risk.”

“I wouldn’t fall out of the bunk. You’re being paranoid.” It was far too late and she was far too tired for this. “I slept just fine in Finn’s bunk on the base without rolling off.”

A curious expression flickered across Kylo’s face for a moment before disappearing again. Perhaps she should have chosen her words more carefully. “It’s better like this,” he said. “I know how much you shift in your sleep. Trust me.”

Rey flushed pink. “You move a lot too. And you get really grabby and snore like a bantha.”

“Well, you won’t need to worry about that. I’ll be up in the cockpit so you can have the room to yourself. You won’t hear a thing.”

“You’re just going to sleep in a chair? That can’t be good for your shoulder,” Rey said. “Do you want one of the blankets or something? There’s plenty.”

He shook his head. “You’ll need all of them. It get’s cold at night in this climate. I’ll get something for myself tomorrow when we go into town.”

“Oh. Alright. If you’re sure.”

“Goodnight, Rey,” He said before stepping out of the room and closing the door behind him.

After a few moment of silence, looking down at the oversized bed he’d constructed, Rey realized how long it had been since she had slept in a room alone. She had the baby, of course, but it wasn’t the same as having Kylo wrapped around her or curled up a few feet away. Even on Echo Base, she had been within arm’s reach of Poe, Finn, and BB-8.

The room felt hollow and unnervingly quiet. After so many years of sleeping in solitude, it shouldn’t have felt so strange to fall back into her old ways, but she had evidently become accustomed to Kylo’s nightly habits, no matter what criticism she voiced against them.

Regardless, she slipped under the covers alone and curled on her side with the sheets pulled close around her, hoping to awake to a clearer mind.

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Come morning, Rey awoke from a dreamless sleep and entered the cockpit to find Kylo in the
copilot’s chair, curled into an uncomfortable looking position with his neck leaning at an angle and his legs stretched awkwardly in front of him. His cape was draped around his torso as a makeshift blanket like he’d done in his cell on Hoth.

Not wanting to wake him, she kept as quiet as she could while she selected her breakfast from the emergency food storage and took out the supplements Colonia had given her. The capsules left a bitter taste in her mouth, but the dehydrated dewback meat overwhelmed it with a warm blend of spices. She considered fixing herself one of the instant packets of caf, but remembered something she once heard about pregnant women limiting their caffeine intake. It was best to play it safe.

Just as she slipped the packet back into the food canister, Kylo stirred from sleep. He groaned and stretched, popping a few of his vertebrae in the process before prying his eyes open to find hers.

“Good morning,” Rey said. Without the social confines of their contract or a rebel prison, she realized she had no idea how to share a meal with him. Their new arrangement, whatever it was, would take some getting used to. “Um, are you feeling any better? Want something to eat?” she asked.

“Not much better,” he admitted. His face alone could have told her as much. It was paler than usual and the fabric of his cape had left an imprint on his cheek. His eyes were red and slightly swollen, likely from the tears he’d shed the day prior. “What about you and the baby?” she asked.

Rey glanced down at her nearly non-existent bump and gave it a pat. “Fine, I think. Now that I know she’s there I’m learning to sense her moods. They seem to be influenced by my own.”

“You tend to have that effect on people.” He was staring where her hand rested with a warm look in his eyes, his fatigue seemingly lifted for a brief moment.

When he lifted his gaze to hers, she directed her own back to the food storage. “So, do you want something to eat, or not?”

“Sure. Pick something out.”

To hopefully aid his healing muscles, she grabbed the packets that had the highest protein content and brought them over.

“Wait,” he said as she turned to walk away. His remaining hand hovered in the air, his eyes once again begging for permission. “May I?” he asked.

Rey nodded, allowing him to breach the distance between them to rest his palm against her stomach. It was warm and strong, spreading out to shield their daughter like living armor. His eyes were weary but filled with love and devotion, perhaps a twinge of fear. “I will never let anyone hurt her. You know that right?”

“Of course I do.”

“I want to do things right for her. And for you, if you’ll allow it.” He looked up at her and this time, Rey found herself unable to look away. “We won’t live in hiding forever. I promise.” The fire in his eyes seemed to have taken the place of his crackling saber. Under different circumstances, she might have feared such a look.

Rey placed his hand over his. “Thank you,” she said, her voice quiet and unsure. She might have gotten used to his many other habits, but the way he could be swept away by his convictions never ceased to baffle and amaze her.
When he drew his hand away, his expression reverted to what is was before, but slightly more at ease. He tore open his food packets and ate each one in a single bite without bothering to read the labels. “I’m going to search the perimeter and scout ahead until it’s time to leave for the clinic,” he said. “It’s not far, so it would be best to walk if we can. No sense in bothering the fuel hangar and having them questioning why we’ve stuck around.”

“Alright. I’ll try contacting Finn again.”

He nodded and flipped the exit ramp release. His blaster still hung at his hip. He must have slept with it on him.

Rey powered on the Falcon’s transceiver and resumed her ritual from the evening before: one comm channel and then the other, without a break between them to dwell on the possible reasons why they weren’t answering.

After a few hours of sending out her signal, in which she emptied another round of food packets and noticed the shifting of the light shining through the trees to mark the passage of time, she spotted Kylo emerge from the woods and released the ramp to let him back on board.

“The path is clear and so is the forest for a three-kilometer radius. It should be safe to go to the clinic now,” Kylo said once he entered the cockpit. He had a healthy flush to his cheeks and sheen of sweat on his brow. Black was a bad choice of color for this planet, judging from the way the silvery gray of the pollen shone out in sharp contrast. The fine powder had collected around the bottom of his boots and cape, with some sticking to his face and hair.

“Would you mind if I stayed put?” Rey asked. “I want to keep trying the transceiver.”

He gave her a look of both concern and sympathy. “No word yet?”

Rey shook her head.

“Well, I don’t know how I feel about you staying here alone. I mean, the forest is clear, but...well, it’s up to you,” he said.

“I don’t need to be looked after every second of the day.” Rey rubbed at her eyes which stung from staring at the transceiver screen for so long. “But maybe I should come, after all.” Her legs felt weak as she stood. Perhaps a walk through the woods would do her some good.

“Good,” Kylo said, barely containing his relief. “Maybe we can find you a portable transceiver in town. One of the stores should have something and we’ll need to do some shopping to stock up on essentials anyway.”

Rey smiled. “That would be great.”

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The journey through the forest took twice as long as Rey might have guessed from the distance on the ship’s scanner. Nearly every other step was delayed by a coil of tree roots bulging out of the black soil threatening to trip them.

There were also the strange creatures they encountered, a couple of which Rey assumed were the brakens and flint mice Vassik had mentioned the day before. The furry lumps with legs she had spotted in the city skittered along the ground, stirring up pollen and emitting a shrill whistling sound. There were also winged creatures no bigger than her hand that would swoop down near to their heads, buzzing furiously at them, probably seeing them as intruders in their territory. Other sounds
spilled out from the dark trees, deep in the shadows, but whatever made them declined to make an appearance.

Kylo kept his hand at the ready, either to clutch his blaster at the sound of a breaking twig or to reach out and stop her from tripping over a fallen branch half hidden by a heap of pollen. By the time they heard the clamor of civilization and spotted the settlement through the trees, Rey was ready to Force push him into a low-hanging branch. While his concern was admirable, she wasn’t a helpless child in need of coddling.

Even without a canopy overhead to block the evening light, the streets were almost as dim as the forest and the locals and the new crop of visitors alike regarded them just as coldly as before. Just when they were a few meters down the street from the clinic, Rey spotted the words “Zebb’s General Store” lit up on a sign hanging over a wide set of doors.

“Maybe we should stop here on the way back,” Rey suggested, nodding her head in the store’s direction.

Kylo regarded it with careful scrutiny before answering. “Why don’t you go on in while I’m being fixed up,” he said. “That is if you’re sure you don't need to see Doctor Vassik again.”

Rey nodded, her eyes wide in disbelief. “I’m sure. But are you?”

He exhaled heavily. “Yes. If anything happens, I’ll know and come running. You can handle yourself.” He kept his expression rigid, his lips in a fine line, as he forced out the words. “We’ll need food, sanitary items, a few changes of clothes, perhaps. Pick out anything you’d like, I mean it.”

Rey burst into the broadest smile she’d had since they touched down on Cendril’s surface. “Thank you. And I’ll know if anything goes wrong with you as well, so the same goes if you get into any trouble.”

“Don’t tempt me,” he said. “It might be worth it to see you running toward me for a change.”

Her face went hot. “Well, don’t take too long.” She yanked open the shop door and slipped inside to hide her reddening cheeks. He always knew what to say to throw her off. As if their unusual circumstances weren’t enough to do that. Hell, just a couple days ago she was swearing he’d never see her again.

A lot had happened in those couple of days. Each memory left a permanent mark on her heart and a horrible image in mind; the burning hallway, the dead troopers and Resistance fighters, Echo Base obliterated while she hovered helplessly in the atmosphere. Each moment had a whirlwind of pain and loss, but some memories were overshadowed by Kylo’s shift in temperament that had begun in his cell and culminated with Leia’s death. The way he’d clung to her and cried as they jettisoned through hyperspace came to mind.

“You need something?” a gruff voice called to her, jolting her back to reality.

It was an aqualish shopkeeper standing behind the front counter. All manner of tools, weapons, and electronics hung on the wall behind him and various supplies filled the shelves lined up to his left. It wasn’t organized with the sterile precision of Vassik’s clinic—in fact, it looked more like a junk vendor on Niima outpost after coming across an imperial supply cache—but as long as he had what she needed, she saw no need to complain.

She even spotted a line of clothes hanging in a far corner, all in shades of brown and gray. They all looked plain and rustic, a happy change from her Coruscanti wardrobe and well-suited to Cendril’s
climate.

She couldn’t remember the last time her clothing wasn’t selected out of necessity or the dictation or generosity of another, so the thought of choosing for herself was thrilling.

She turned back to the shopkeeper. “Um, yes. Actually, there are quite a few things I'll be needing.”
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Throughout their journey, her anticipation had only grown, clawing at her mind like an animal caught in a trap. She grabbed the strap of her satchel, the only item she had convinced him to let her carry, and adjusted it higher on her shoulder and shifted impatiently in the grass. “You do realize you’re starting to scare me? Why are we even doing this?” she demanded.

“Because you deserve to know the truth,” he said. “If someone had done the same for me, I might not have—things might have gone differently.”

She wasn’t sure what he meant, but she could feel the gravity of his words, the way he chose and weighed each one in his mind. “Alright. Show me what you need to show me.”

He nodded. “Follow me.”

They wove through a thick patch of trees and underbrush, dodging the thorny branches that clawed at their clothes and ducking under tangles of serpentlike vines. The sounds of the forest died out around them as they moved through the darkness, no snapping twigs, rustling bushes, or animal calls. A strange feeling overtook her, something oddly familiar, but horribly hollow that grew stronger with each step.

With her cart full of rations, two lightly-used holopads, and all manner of medical supplies, Rey allowed herself to become lost in the clothing section. So much, that she failed to notice Kylo’s force signature closing in. A mechanical hand joined hers to rifle through a basket of miscellaneous tunics. She gasped and snatched her hand away.

“Oh, it’s you,” she said, her hand pressed to her heart which had skipped a beat at the sight of the metal. It was a dark silver with a nearly matte finish. The components were exposed, moving in a strange recreation of human anatomy, the lack of skin making it all the more intimidating. “Don’t they make false skin for cybernetics?” she asked.

“I declined their offer,” he said, lifting his sleeve to give her a better look. “I have no wish to hide it. I fought and survived and I will wear it proudly.”

“Is that why you let your face scar over? And all your other scars, for that matter.”

He pulled his disguise away from his face. “The reasons vary. For most of my marks, they serve as reminders of my past failures as well as a warning to my enemies of how hard it is to take me down. My face is another story—that one came from you after all. Think of it as a memento.” He ran his fingers over the raised length of it, between his eyes, down his cheek and jawline, before trailing down his neck and shoulder.

“I see,” Rey said, ignoring the chill that the sight had sent over her skin. “Well, are you going to pick out something new to wear as well?” From their trek through the woods, the state of his clothes had only gotten worse.
“I suppose I’ll have to,” he said, grimacing down at the selection.

He chose for himself a variety of robes, trousers, and tunics in varying shades of brown and gray. He had little choice of clothing due to his height but managed to find enough that fit. The last item he selected was a replacement for the cape he had wrapped around his head and shoulders. It was a woven shawl in charcoal gray that was long enough to wrap around his head and shoulders several times and still have the ends hang down his back.

Once the goods were paid for, Kylo insisted on carrying them back to the Falcon himself, insisting is new arm needed the practice. Rey knew better than to argue. As least it would keep him occupied and allow her to walk without his constant interruptions. Even when she did land her feet on uneven ground or catch one on a bit of tree root, she managed to stay upright and keep pace with him. The forest floor wasn’t any worse than the surface of Jakku where a hunk of a broken starfighter might emerge from the shifting dunes to trip you up and send you tumbling into the sand.

“I hear something,” Kylo said once they entered their clearing.

“Another animal?” Rey asked.

“No. It’s coming from the ship.” He inched closer, bringing down each step soft and slow, and pressed the entry ramp release. Rey heard the sound as well as she came up behind him. Kylo’s eyes went wide. “It’s the transceiver. Someone’s making contact.”

Rey gasped and raced ahead. Inside the cockpit, she heard the alarm loud and clear and saw the blinking communications display. It was Finn.

Se slammed her hand on the receiver. “Finn? Are you there?” she shouted, her voice cracking with excitement.

“Rey! I’m here,” he answered.

“Where are you? Is everything alright? What’s happening?” She leaned over the transceiver as if her proximity would force an answer out of him—or better yet, enable her to reach through the comm channel to embrace him.

“Well, we made it out of there,” he said. “Poe and I, along with the other survivors, have been making the rounds to the other bases and searching everywhere else we can think of for more of the Resistance and our allies. We’re headed for an old hideout right now. Poe thinks there might be a few of us there. We’re still on the run, I’m afraid, but they haven’t got us yet. What about you? Are you alright?”

“I’m safe. Leia put me aboard the Falcon before it all...well, before it happened,” Rey said. “I have food and supplies. There’s even a medic close by.”

“Oh, good. How’s the baby?”

“She’s alright. No change that I can tell.”

“That’s great!” Finn said. “We were so worried about the two of you. I know you can handle yourself, but, well, I could say the same about a lot of the people we lost. And I’m not just talking about the General. In each attack, they targeted the top command. Most are gone. Poe has admirably stepped up to fill in and call the shots. In fact, why don’t I go get him? Wait here—I mean there. Wherever it is you are, just stay put for one moment.”

The signal went quiet and Rey heard Kylo’s footsteps behind her. Peering over her shoulder, she
saw him set down the supplies.

“Rey, is it really you?” Poe’s voice came through the transceiver.

“Yes, it's me.”

He let out a triumphant holler. “That’s great. Is everything okay there? Are you safe?”

“Yes, yes, I’m safe.”

“That’s great,” Poe said, lowering his voice to a more reasonable volume. “Hey, listen. I hate to say this, but if you are in a good place to hide out, maybe you should stay put. At least until we establish a base of operations and have everything secured.”

“What?” Finn cut in.

“Well, I don’t want you and the baby getting caught in the crossfire,” Poe explained. “We all want to see you again, believe me, but I don’t want to risk it. Is that alright with you?”

Rey glanced back to where Kylo was leaning against the far wall, his eyes distant. “I suppose,” she said. “I want to see you all too, but you’re right. There’s a medic and I’m safe onboard the Falcon. It’s for the best, I suppose.”

Another voice came through the transceiver. “I hate to end this so quick, but we need to get moving.” It was Jessika Prava, Rey realized. They had hardly spoken, but she still remembered her voice.

Finn groaned. “Alright. Just a moment. Rey, I’ll message you back, so keep your transceiver on.”

“I will. Actually, I got myself a new transceiver today that I can keep it on me at all times,” Rey said, reaching for the keypad. “I’m sending over the new frequency.”

They each said their goodbyes, promising to message back as soon as circumstances allowed, both ends of the connection warning the other to stay safe. Then Rey shut off the signal, her burden of worry lifted for the time being. The war wasn’t over, but she and Kylo weren’t the only ones left to fight it.

“I have to admit, I didn’t think they would make it,” Kylo said. “But I’m happy for you. Really, I am.”

“Thank you,” Rey said.

“And I’m glad you didn’t tell them you're hiding with me. I think your friend might do something...ill-advised if he knew.”

She knew he meant Finn without even saying his name. “Would you blame him for being worried? You two haven’t crossed paths in the best of ways, especially when I’ve been involved. First Starkiller, then my abduction and the deal, and then I show up at the base pregnant and crying my eyes out. What’s he supposed to think? All he would see is my former kidnapper taking advantage of the situation.” A few days ago, she might have thought the same.

Rey knew her words hurt him, but he covered it with a wry smile. “So you’re saying he doesn’t know me like you do?”

“I don’t think anyone in the galaxy knows you quite like I do.” She gave an exasperated sigh and
leaned back in the pilot’s chair.

He shrugged. “That didn’t exactly sound like a compliment, but I’ll take it.”

They took turns in the ship’s fresher to wash off the sweat and pollen from the day’s journey and change into their new clothes. Kylo chose a gray ensemble from his new wardrobe and put the rest away in a storage compartment. It was simpler than anything she’d seen him in, and the first time she’d seen him wear anything other than black. The lighter shade suited him.

Her own choice of clothing was a loose, brown tunic dress paired with simple gray leggings and boots. Most of what she’d chosen had been loose, in fact. She thought that maybe wearing tight belts and fitted shirts weren’t the best choice for her growing daughter. Maybe with a bit more room, she’d be more apt to show herself. No matter what Kalonia or Vassik said about her supplements and fluid intake improving things eventually, she couldn’t keep from worrying about her size.

The next morning, after sharing another vacuum-sealed breakfast, Kylo stood and looked down at her with a grave expression. “I need to come clean,” he said.

Rey put down what remained of her food. “What do you mean?”

“Now that we’re safe and my arm is taken care of and your friends have been found, there’s something you need to know.”

Whatever it was, Rey could feel it through the Force burning in his mind. “Go on.”

“While this moon is a fine hiding place, there are many others I could have taken us to that would have served just as well. I chose this one because...well, I guess you could call it an additional motive rather than an ulterior one.”

“What the hell are you saying?” She stood to stare him face to face, cursing their difference in height.

“I’ve been planning to take you here for a while, way before any of this mess made it a necessity. I thought I was putting it off until we worked things out between us and were on better terms, but now I know I was fooling myself. Really, I was putting it off because I didn’t know how to explain it.”

“What could you possibly show me in the middle of a forest on a gas outpost in the outer rim?” Whatever it was, it made him more visibly nervous than when he was preparing to have his arm removed.

“Judging from our distance from town, it’s about a day and a half’s walk from here. I’ve been there once before.”

Rey gave frustrated sigh. “Fine. I’ll pack supplies. If you won’t tell me what it is, we’re leaving now.” If they didn’t she’d go mad from anticipation, or worse, her mind would conjure up some horrific scenario to taunt her until she knew the truth.

Rey packed two days worth of food, a fair amount of medical supplies, blankets, and both their transceivers—all of which Kylo insisted on carrying. She followed him through the forest, over roots and fallen branches, toward whatever awaited them within the woods. Kylo walked as though he were marching toward his own grave. She could feel his trepidation through the Force, as well as an unfamiliar pull. Perhaps the Force wished for her to see his revelation as well. Why the Force always arranged for them to face their seemingly intertwined destinies deep within a mysterious forest, she couldn’t say.
They stopped periodically to rest and eat, but still, he refused to say where they were headed. It wasn't until the end of the second day that she saw the truth for herself.

Kylo halted, his hands trembling, both mechanical and flesh, and stared deep into the forest before them. “We’re here,” he said, his voice barely a whisper.

Throughout their journey, her anticipation had only grown, clawing at her mind like an animal caught in a trap. She grabbed the strap of her satchel, the only item she had convinced him to let her carry, and adjusted it higher on her shoulder and shifted impatiently in the grass. “You do realize you’re starting to scare me? Why are we even doing this?” she demanded.

“Because you deserve to know the truth,” he said. “If someone had done the same for me, I might not have—things might have gone differently.”

She wasn’t sure what he meant, but she could feel the gravity of his words, the way he chose and weighed each one in his mind. “Alright. Show me what you need to show me.”

He nodded. “Follow me.”

They wove through a thick patch of trees and underbrush, dodging the thorny branches that clawed at their clothes and ducking under tangles of serpentlike vines. The sounds of the forest died out around them as they moved through the darkness, no snapping twigs, rustling bushes, or animal calls. A strange feeling overtook her, something oddly familiar, but horribly hollow that grew stronger with each step.

Then she spotted the clearing, the bright patch of light, and the metallic heap that sat in its center half-covered by black ivy and pollen. Kylo pulled back the hanging foliage to allow her to enter the clearing for a closer look. Above them was a hole in the canopy that hadn’t closed up like the one made by the Falcon’s landing, like a gaping wound that had never healed. She squinted in the sunlight. Once her eyes adjusted, the reality before her was able to set in.

This had to be another vision. The scene before her was impossible. But it wasn’t a shifting, indiscernible thing like the others had been, with time rushing past her in a blur. In fact, time seemed to have stopped entirely.

She recognized the silver hull, broken and burnt. The cylindrical thrusters at the back of the ship. The small wings jutting out the sides now bent beyond recognition. The last time she’d seen that ship was when it was flying off into the atmosphere, leaving her in the care and eventual servitude of Unkar Plutt.

In the early days of her abandonment, she’d always wondered where her parents had gone, what they might be doing out in the galaxy, or if they still spared her a thought. Never had she imagined an end for them like this. As she’d grown older the only thing keeping alive her hope of their return was the stubbornness that had allowed her to survive on Jakku at all. It had taken a First Order invasion, an awakening of the Force, and Maz’s stern words to get her to see the truth that they had likely been dead for quite some time. But to see it in front of her was another matter entirely.

She felt her knees buckle beneath her. Kylo rushed to catch her, but she slipped from his grasp and fell to her knees. Her hands covered her face as tears slipped through her fingers. Radiating empathy, he stood over her, too afraid to close the distance between them.

“How?” she choked out. She swallowed the lump in her throat, a few more tears escaping in the process. “How did you know? How did you find them?”
With her eyes fixed on the warped metal wreckage, she couldn’t see his face, but she could feel his pain and uncertainty through the Force. “I knew because I was there,” he said. “I watched it happen.”

“What?” She whipped her head around to stare up at him in horror.

“When you told me their names, I knew. Kalen and Mila Andara were...collectors of sorts. They had taken an interest in Sith and Jedi artifacts. There were others with similar inclinations, but your parents…” He took a breath and searched for the right words. “They were very prolific. As my uncle and I were searching Jedi ruins from before the purge in hopes of uncovering some forgotten knowledge, we crossed paths with them on many occasions.

“One, in particular, involved them stealing a relic from under my uncle. I wasn’t aware at the time, but it was my grandfather’s helmet—well, what was left of it. Leaving me on the ship, he managed to steal it back from them. But they pursued us and made the choice to fire on our ship. When one of our engines was hit, Luke made the choice to fire back. We managed to make an emergency landing. They didn’t.

“I’m so sorry. Rey, if we—I had known you even existed, I would have come for you. It was after the crash that my visions started to include you, but I had no idea who you were or where you were. I just knew I needed to find you. It wasn’t until I finally did, back on Takodana that I knew why—or at least I thought I did.”

They remained in silence, time still in an apparent standstill. All that Rey knew was that her world had fallen out from under her, plunging her into a chasm of pain and uncertainty. To still her thrumming heart and stop the world from spinning, she reached through the void and caught Kylo by the hand. He joined her in the grass and folded her into his arms and let her sob into his shoulder, her cries finally breaking the silence and echoing through the clearing.

They left the ship to be swallowed by the vines and pollen and eventually be buried by time. Retracing their steps through the woods felt like walking in a trance. Their daughter turning inside her, just as unsettled as herself, was the only thing that reminded Rey she was still awake. That and the soft crunch of Kylo’s footsteps in front of her.

That night, as they camped out between a tangle of trees, picking at their meals and warming themselves by the fire Kylo had built, Rey found the will to speak again. “Thank you for showing me,” she said. If only his uncle had been as brave. Now she knew what he had been so nervous to speak with her about on Echo Base before the invasion had separated them. Staring into the fire, she crushed a dehydrated yeast cake between her fingers. She had really thought Luke might be the brave Jedi of her childhood stories, offering to teach her what he knew to ward off mental invasions, letting her keep his family saber, saying she was one of them now. She threw the rest of her meal into the fire and took her bedtime supplements instead. “Did Leia know? Or anyone else?” she asked, wrapping her blanket around her.

Kylo shook his head. “No one knew. It was a time when we were traveling together, my parents too occupied and ill-equipped to handle my growing power. They dropped me in his lap and he dragged me along on his aimless adventures, teaching me petty tricks and lightsaber forms. It was never enough. I was a difficult teenager with an opportunistic dark-sider worming his way into my brain, after all.

"After the crash, my opinion of my uncle shifted from ineffectual to dangerously naive and reckless. Runs in the family, I guess. Snoke gleefully latched onto my doubts at the time.

“The next time we visited my parents and the rest of their friends and allies, we spoke nothing of it.
We barely spoke of it between ourselves, but I could see how it ate away at him.”

At least Rey’s memory of Leia was untarnished. And while she would have liked to have known sooner, Kylo’s hesitance to bring it up was understandable considering their circumstances. What she couldn’t understand was Luke allowing her to live in ignorance while he shut himself away in his hut on Ach-to day after day while she pleaded for him to help in the fight against Snoke. She had risked her life to get to him and bring him back. Everyone had. And many had lost their lives in doing so.

She realized that she’d not gotten the chance to ask Finn and Poe if they had found Luke and couldn’t quite decide which answer she would now prefer. Maybe he’d found some new rock to hide under.

The next night, once they had reached the ship and retired to their separate areas of the ship to sleep, Rey was unable to find peace. She turned and shifted in the sheets, unable to fall asleep for more than a few moments before she was assaulted by troubling dreams.

Eventually, She tore off the sheets, shoved on her boots and her thickest tunic, and went outside the ship for some fresh night air, hoping it would clear her head.

Purple patches of light were scattered over the ground like lost jewels, reminding her that there was still a universe outside their dark hiding place. She looked up through the gaps in the canopy and spotted the stars. The sight brought a smile to her lips. Tonight was a night for stargazing.

It had been some time since she had done any climbing, but after so many years of doing it each day on much larger ships than the Falcon, she found it easy to scale the side of it and haul herself up onto the flat of the hull. She brushed off the pollen that had accumulated and laid back on the cool metal. The stars peered down at her through the gaps in the canopy. She let her hand slip down to rest on her own little star, her precious daughter, who was shining brighter than ever. The curve of her abdomen still felt strange to her, but at the same time reassuring. Her daughter was making her presence known. She was growing. She would fight past her unfortunate beginnings to thrive. Rey could feel her tiny efforts, stubborn and persistent. With Kylo and herself for parents, she never stood a chance to turn out level headed and would no doubt be a force to be reckoned with once she was unleashed upon the world, but for now, that burning stubbornness was being put to use ensuring she would live to see it.

“What are you doing up there?” came a voice from below.

Rey gasped but quickly realized who had spoken. “Kylo, you startled me. I'm just looking up at the stars.”

“Well you scared me,” he said, arms folded. “I felt you having trouble sleeping but when I went to check on you, you weren't in bed.”

“I thought some fresh air and stargazing might help.”

“I see. Well, I should stay out here too then. I don't want you out here alone.” He paused, likely thinking up another excuse. “Can I come up?”

“I suppose.”

He climbed up beside her and laid on his back, shifting awkwardly against the hard metal. “You find this relaxing?”

“Yes. When I was little, I look up at them and wonder which star system my family was in or I'd imagine them flying down to get me right then and there. Other times I would just fall asleep trying
“It’s a shame you can see so few from here,” he said. “Too many trees.”

“Even a little bit of starlight is worth coming out to see.”

“Yeah. I suppose so. Actually, I used to watch the stars too, many years ago, before I was sent away for training. I’d spend my days hiding behind my mother’s skirt, attending every petty political function she dragged me to. But at night, I would look up at the stars outside my window and wonder if that would be the night my father would come home.”

Rey turned to look at him. He’d never brought up Han on his own before.

“He never fit in with my mother’s world and preferred to galavant around in this ship while I was stuck planetside. Even as a toddler I could tap into the Force to sense when he was near. And when he wasn’t. I would look out my window, scanning the sky and wait for that ripple in the Force to tell me he was headed home for one of his visits. I would always beg him to take me away with him. Sometimes he did for a short time. On one occasion, he taught me to fly on this ship.” It was hard to see in the dark, but Rey could tell his eyes were full of sorrow as they stared up at the stars, like the lonely little boy he still was in some small way.

“Why did you do it?” Rey asked. The words tumbled out of her mouth and she immediately regretted it, but the question had been screaming for release for months. More so once she’d seen the Falcon’s restoration.

The pained expression that passed over his face made it obvious he knew what she meant. “I was convinced my attachment to him was a weakness,” he said. “Snoke had me believing I needed to destroy him to receive clarity in the Force and reach my full potential but that was just another one of his lies. He had been tearing me in different directions for so long—as long as I could remember—until I didn’t know what to think or believe.” He paused to take a shaky breath. “After the deed was done, I finally realized that. But it was already too late. I couldn’t take it back no matter how much I wished to.”

As his voice began to tremble, Rey reached her hand out to cover his. He held it like a lifeline and laced his fingers through his.

“After Starkiller’s destruction, I was summoned to Snoke’s inner sanctum to stand before him in the flesh,” he continued. “It was then that he informed me I wasn’t done. There was another weakness I needed to destroy, one more connection to sever before I could continue with my training.

“He knew what I felt for you before I fully comprehended it myself. When he searched my mind and discovered I could find you through the Force, he ordered me to kill you and lay your corpse at his feet. Instead, I turned on him. He underestimated me and underestimate how my will to protect you and our future I saw in my visions could fuel me more than the darkness ever could.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Rey asked. “Why was your first thought to steal me away and manufacture an absurd deal to keep me?” Her tone of voice was more curious than accusing, but it was yet another question that demanded an answer.

“I didn’t know what else to do. Gentleness had been trained and beaten out of me by then. Not that that’s any excuse.” He held her hand a little tighter like he was scared she might snatch it away. “Without a master holding me back, I decided I needed to find you and fulfill the destiny I had foreseen. I pictured myself residing in my grandfather’s castle, ruling over the galaxy that would have rightfully been his, had his own master not held him back. I felt I needed to stake my claim on all I
believed to be mine, including you.

“Rey, I won’t ask for forgiveness I don’t deserve, but you deserve to know how sorry I am for all the pain I’ve caused you.”

“Thank you for saying that.” She felt her chest tighten as she remembered each transgression. She wouldn’t excuse his past actions, but she could no longer hate him because of them. They were many, for sure, but the good had begun to outweigh the bad. Each reassuring word, gentle touch, look of concern, and now the brave honesty and repentance. She had waited years for those things and never expected to receive them from Kylo Ren. She could hardly reconcile that name with the man that laid beside her. He wasn’t the innocent child Leia had lost, nor was he the monster from her nightmares, her captor, and tormentor. Not anymore. He was something altogether new. Something worth a closer examination.

After a long period of staring up at the stars, Kylo spoke again. “You know, we could fly to any of those star systems if we wanted and take on entirely new names to make a new life for ourselves and the baby.”

“And travel to all the amazing places I've always wanted to see,” Rey added. “Yeah. I thought about it, but you know I can't. My friends are still out there. When the baby is safe and I can join them again, they’ll need me.”

Kylo sat up. “Rey, when we get back to the Resistance I'm going to help them whether they want me there or not.”

“What?” She hadn’t given much thought to how she would reconcile her connection with him to her loyalty to the Resistance. The idea of him joining in on the fight seemed admirable, but absurd, considering at least half of them would likely want him dead as much as Hux.

“My mother died for the resistance and everyone in it and she’d do it again if she were still alive. I know she would. Fighting in her place is the least I can do to honor her memory”

Rey smiled. “I think that would make her very proud.”

“When do you want to know what her last words to me were?” Kylo asked. “She said she forgave me. That no matter what I'd done, I was still her son and she loved me.” His voice began to quake again. “And then she said she was sorry for failing me, for sending me away, for not protecting me from Snoke, and seeing the signs from the beginning. For years I had carried so much resentment and in that moment it just disappeared. Despite it all I always loved her. I should have told her that. But again, it was too late.”

“I’m so sorry,” Rey said. “I wish we knew what was going to happen so we could have saved her. Hux will pay for this. The Resistance will make sure of that.”

“I rid the galaxy of a tyrant once before. With the help of your friends, we can do it again.”

Rey opened her mouth to respond, but instead, let out a yawn by accident.

“You should probably get some more sleep,” Kylo said.

“Oh. About that,” Rey said. “Sleeping in the cockpit doesn’t look very comfortable. Why don’t you take one of my mattresses and take one of the bunks?”

“You’ll be okay sharing a room with me again?” he asked, toying with her fingers which were still locked with his. There was a tremulous excitement in his voice he was trying unsuccessfully to hold
“It’s too quiet in there,” Rey said, once again thankful that the darkness hid her face. “I thought that maybe if I wasn’t alone, I might sleep a little better.”

“Even if I snore like a bantha?” he asked.

Rey chuckled, easing the tension in the air. “I think I’ve gotten used to it by now.”
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

Kylo and Rey fall into a routine of tranquil domesticity on Cendril as they continue to hide from Hux and his allies, but the Force has other plans.

Chapter Notes

Fair warning: this chapter involves blood and potentially disturbing imagery. I have included these things in this fic before, but never in this particular context. Otherwise, please enjoy.

As the days bled into weeks and Rey became acclimated to her unusual surroundings and circumstances, she had come to enjoy the arrangement she and Kylo had carved out for themselves. Her mind was often with the Resistance as she anxiously awaited one of Finn’s updates. But in their little clearing that at first seemed so dark and uninviting, they had achieved a sort of domestic tranquility on Cendril. Without the reservations that had crippled their previous interactions, they shared their meals spoke on whatever topic they could think of for hours on end and in the process, began learning every quirk and fact about one another they hadn’t already known.

After a bit of gentle probing on Rey’s part, Kylo spoke of his early years on the capital words of the New Republic: Hosnia, Quarrow, and Chandrilla, which rotated periodically. Between his mother’s diplomatic responsibilities and the stifling security measures placed upon him as her son and heir to the Alderaanian legacy in the eyes of its survivors, he hadn’t been allowed the freedom his youthful fervor demanded. So while he’d protested being sent away with his uncle, he had been glad for the opportunity to explore the unknown beyond the pages of a book or holovid—a sentiment Rey could empathize with. They seemed to possess the same insatiable curiosity in their hearts which demanded adventure.

Rey’s childhood tales painted a picture of a less privileged life, to be sure, but still strangely analogous. She told him what little she remembered of her family. They never stayed in one place for long, leaving her with few lasting memories. Her most solid memories were of Jakku. Of how she’d adjusted to a life of labor. Like his, they were the memories of a lost child, seemingly discarded, staring up at the stars, hoping that someone out in the galaxy still cared and might one day offer the opportunity to pull themselves out of their circumstances.

Kylo also spoke of what he’d done in his short time as Emperor and all he intended to do once he was rid of Hux. As much as he detested the political squabbling he’d so often witnessed while accompanying Leia, he admitted how much he’d learned from the experience. Taxes were slashed, trade between systems was freer than ever, and sanctions on slavery were finally being enforced. And while his seemingly flippant dismissal of so many of his officers had rattled her during their stay on Coruscant, upon hearing their sordid records in better detail, Rey could no longer see it as a tyrannical abuse of authority. For all his show of being a heartless dark-sider with the galaxy by the throat, he had actually been quite the reformer. Leia would have been proud. Now, they could only
hope Hux hadn’t destroyed his work beyond repair.

When weighty topics seemed overwhelming, the most mundane of facts and snippets of memories were shared. Like how Rey had found a desert flower on Jakku and kept it alive as long as she could and then saved it after it had dried and faded.

“When we retake the palace, you can plant as many flowers as you’d like,” Kylo promised. “You can even expand it if you’d like.”

He then told her of how little Ben Solo had been self-conscious enough about his ears to grow out his hair to hide them.

“But they suit you,” Rey assured him. She smiled and brushed his hair behind his ear, which reddened at her touch. She drew back her hand to cover her mouth and stifle a fit of laughter. “And that. That’s my favorite part. I don’t need the Force to tell what you’re feeling.”

He rolled his eyes in good humor and put his hair back in place before changing the subject.

The stories of the adventures he had taken with Han, most of which he hadn’t even shared with his mother for fear of being grounded, seemed to be his favorite to tell. His face lit up when he spoke and he gestured widely with his arms to demonstrate the size of the beasts they encountered and the various piloting tricks they had pulled off. He would end each story with a distant yearning in his eyes, a look Rey suspected would never fully leave him.

At night, after their meals were eaten and what few chores they had around the Falcon were completed, they settled down in the crew quarters, him in his bunk and her in her nest of mattresses and bedding on the floor, with a dim nightlight between them in case they needed to rise during the night without disturbing the other. Rey found the light useful now that their little one was pressing against her bladder and sending her to the ‘fresher more often than she liked. And Kylo had been right about her tossing and turning in her sleep, now more than ever. She was a light sleeper and the baby would often wake her with the lightest of movements.

One night, Rey had opened her eyes by chance to find Kylo staring down at her from his bunk. He whispered an apology and turned over to face the wall. The following morning, Rey awoke to find him turned back toward her with his arm extended, hand spread on the edge of her mattress, the tips of his fingers just under the blanket. She crawled out of bed and went about her morning routine and spoke nothing of it. As intimate as their nights had been in the past, she knew it wasn’t the sort of thing that should leave her flustered, but both he and their situation had changed so much that such a small thing managed to stick in her mind.

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After a morning check-up at Vassik’s clinic, Rey spotted a small machinery workshop among the buildings squeezed in together along the main road. Unlike most, it had a window that wasn’t boarded up or bricked over. As foggy and dust-coated as it was, it gave her a hazy view inside. There were barrels of wires and plugs, shelves full of miscellaneous parts, and a few disassembled droids that appeared to be more rust than metal. The shopkeeper, a green-skinned arcona, was slumped at the front register looked as worn as the droids with his tattered jacket, tired expression, and what looked to be a fine coating of pollen, although that might have been an effect of the dirty window.

“What is it?” Kylo asked. “Do you need something in there?”

Initially, the view inside had merely fired up the mechanic in her, but once she thought about it, an
idea struck her. “I still have DeeTee on the Falcon. Maybe I could fix him up. A medical droid would be good to have around and honestly, I miss tinkering.”

“Sound fine to me.” Kylo reached for the shop door which had a sign above it that read “Parts and Repairs” in faded uberesh.

A soft alarm rang as they opened the door to announce their arrival and the shopkeeper looked up to greet them with a gruff snort. The view from the window had been a poor preview for what was inside. The workshop went much farther back than she’d imagined and held enough parts to have bought her a lifetime’s worth of portions on Jakku, a true scavenger’s hoard.

“Like what you see?” Kylo asked, flashing a crooked smile.

“Ah, yes. very much.” Rey realized she must have looked like an overexcited child at the sight of it all. That, or a steelpecker that had just spotted a fresh bone pile to pick at. “It’s just that, on Jakku, this is the sort of stuff I lived for, quite literally. I would have done almost anything for all this.”

“Well, now you can have as much of it as you like,” he said. “Parts and tools to repair the droid and anything else you want.”

Rey spent the remainder of the morning picking over the place, rifling through every box and shelf. Some patrons might have found the disorganization inconvenient, but to her, it felt like home. Once she’d accumulated an armful of mismatched parts, tools, and a few oddities she picked for purely aesthetic reasons, Kylo fetched her a sack from the shopkeeper to free up her hands for further picking.

By the end, she had filled the sack to the point that she was forced to drag it behind her on the dusty floor until Kylo stepped once again into relieve her of her burden and bring her collection to the front counter. Realizing she had found enough for the day, followed him to the front, until a bundle of fibrolite tubing caught her eye and sparked another idea. “Wait. Just one more thing.”

She unwound the twine that bound the pipes together and selected two of comparable length to take from the bunch. She tested the weight of them in her hand before bringing them to the front. When she added them to her other finds on the counter, Kylo lifted a brow. “Does the ship’s plumbing need fixing?” he asked.

“You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“Alright.” he slid his credit chip over to the shopkeeper.

“That you for indulging me,” Rey said. “I know this probably looks a bit ridiculous.”

“Not at all,” Kylo said. “In fact, I saw some fuel gauges and compressor plugs in there, along with some other stuff that might come in handy should something go wrong with the ship.”

Relieved, Rey lifted her head a bit higher. “The ship looks great, by the way. Did you do the restoration yourself?”

“Yes. Han—my father wouldn’t want that ship to fall apart. He taught me how to keep it in good repair, so I put his teaching to good use.”

Once they had returned to the ship, Kylo excused himself while Rey sorted through her day’s haul. DeeTee’s new power cable and other potentially compatible parts were set aside. The rest, she sorted and put away in the storage room; ship parts went in one section, wires and circuits in another, tools
were tested and placed into a large drawer, and so on. It was tedious work, but the feel of her hands on metal and the mechanical curiosity coursing through her as she identified each part brought her back to a simpler time. A time rife with hardship, but without the complications of galactic warfare and rebellion. Back then she’d only had her own survival to worry about. The farther the memories of her previous life became, the brighter they seemed upon recollection.

Not that she would trade away her present situation. Unkar or his lackeys weren’t there anymore to snap at her for not working hard or fast enough and the items she held would remain in her possession instead of being traded away for food. She found that tinkering without her survival at stake was a relaxing experience. Therapeutic even.

Once everything was put away, Rey realized Kylo still hadn’t returned to the ship. She could feel him just outside, never straying far from camp. He did that on occasion. He’d excuse himself for a few hours and return without explanation. Rey was content to give him his privacy. But not today. She was too anxious to put her favorite purchase to good use. Hopefully, Kylo would be just as excited.

Rey found what had been keeping him once she opened the exit ramp, carrying the two fibrolite tubes under her arm. He was standing out in the clearing, aiming Han’s blaster at a row of logs he’d lines up a few meters away. With his mechanical hand, he pulled the trigger, sending a blaster bolt whizzing between two of the logs to hit a distant tree. A nearby animal made a startled sound from the bushes and Kylo swore under his breath.

“Something wrong?” Rey asked.

He rolled his right shoulder where metal met flesh. “It’s just not what I’m used to, I guess. I keep practicing, but I don’t know.” He holstered the blaster and ran his hand through his hair. It went well past his shoulders now, much like her own.

“Well, would you be willing to practice saber forms instead,” Rey asked, holding one tube like a saber and spinning it in the air to demonstrate.

“I had a feeling that’s what you wanted those for and I don’t think that’s a good idea.” he looked down at her stomach which had become more pronounced in recent days, to their mutual relief.

Rey spun the pipe in her hand. “These are just fibrolite, not heavy whatsoever. And the exercise will be good for us.” she patted her middle. “I’m not asking for a real sparring match, just a refresher course on saber forms.” She tossed the other pipe toward him which he caught with his left hand. Despite being right-handed before the amputation, he had begun favoring the left. The result was shaky at best. “We’ll want to be at our best once we get out of here and join the others,” she added.

“Fine. Just simple forms. And maybe we can practice some safer force abilities like levitation or mental awareness as well.”

“Sounds wonderful,” she said. “And if you’d like, I can take a look at your arm and see if any adjustments need to be made.”

And just like that, their routine shifted once again for the better. Kylo’s use of his new arm improved drastically once Rey made the necessary adjustments. It was a slow task involving careful loosening and tightening of the bolts and the alignment of the joints, and several readjustments after testing it out and receiving his feedback. Despite being attached to a human body, it was just like any other repair job. Once she’d finished, he was able to use it nearly as well as the arm he’d been born with.

They progressed in their training, honing each other's skills like iron sharpening iron. Every empty
moment not occupied by daily tasks or casual conversation was spent practicing and studying the Force. Kylo served as her living holocron, giving her every bit of information he had. He proved to be a gentler teacher than before, not only due to her condition but due to the profound change she sensed in him. Instead of rambling about darkness and destiny and pain, he favored clarity and patience. With the boundaries between them dismantled and their antagonistic game of push and pull laid to rest, she learned far faster than she had on Mustafar.

The physical training was necessary and kept her nimble, but the intangible Force abilities were what truly thrilled her. Lesson one was advanced telekinesis.

“The size of the object doesn’t matter,” he told her one morning as she struggled in vain to lift the Falcon from where it stood. “As impossible as the task may seem to you, it is nothing to the immeasurable power of the Force. You need to feel it and let it flow through you. Listen to it. Trust it.”

Closing her eyes, she did as instructed, listening and trusting, believing in the impossible. When she opened them again, she had succeeded. The Falcon trembled in her grip, loosening its layer of pollen which dusted off in grayish clouds, but it held its place in the air. The landing wasn’t nearly as smooth, but that didn’t matter. She’d succeeded. She hollered and threw her arms around Kylo in a burst of triumph. He went rigid but slowly eased into the embrace. She’d never done that before, she realized.

“Well, great job,” he said. “I think a celebratory round of goldfruit juice is in order.”

When practicing with their mock sabers, Rey adhered to Kylo’s old advice about taking whatever advantage one could find. His hesitation to strike her had grown as she had, allowing her the upper hand. He parried her blows but rarely returned them. Rey was not as merciful. He received a fair amount of bruises, but instead of complaining about the imbalance of their positions, he seemed to relish the challenge. Each hit drove him on as he tried to match the pace of his instruction to her progress.

At night, the winged insects which Rey had learned were called lissits, buzzed around their heads, accompanied by a symphony of other unidentified sounds from the canopy and underbrush. The forest always came alive in the evenings, making it her favorite time to be outside the ship. Kylo seemed to agree, often joining her in stargazing.

One evening, they dueled in the moonlight, having lost track of time in their combative dance. The sweat on their skin had cooled in the frigid air, sending chills over Rey’s skin and numbing her fingertips.

Just as she was about to land a blow on Kylo’s thigh, she felt their growing daughter join in the fight by kicking her in the bladder. “Oof.” She dropped her pole and held her middle with both hands.

“Something wrong?” Kylo asked.

“She got a little excited, I think. Wow. That was the biggest kick I’ve felt yet,” she said, chuckling and running her hand over the bump. “A real fighter, I’d say. Ah, there she is again.”

“Can I feel?” he asked, dropping his pole. He always wore a look of such devotion and compassion in his eyes whenever the topic of their daughter arose—two emotions she had once thought him incapable of. But there they were, right on his face. To see his fearsome visage melt in front of her was a sight to behold.

“Of course you can feel,” Rey said. “And you don’t need to keep asking every time. She’s your
daughter after all.”

His smile matched her own as he reached to cover her stomach with a wide and gentle hand. Rey felt their daughter kick again, and judging from the joy in his eyes, he’d felt it too. “What are we going to name her?” he asked.

That topic had been floating in Rey’s mind since the day she discovered her pregnancy. It hadn’t taken her long to decide. “Remember the flowers on Mustafar? The ones you gave to me and I planted in the palace garden?”

“Lyrises, right?”

“Exactly. I was thinking that would make a fine name for her. Lyris.” It was fitting. Their little flower grown from between the cracks of volcanic rock in the bowels of a Sith castle, but no less precious and beautiful for it. And judging from the timeline, the day she found the lyrises in the castle’s hot spring might have been the day their daughter was conceived, if not soon after. She was the only good and pure thing to come out of that desolate place.

“I think that’s a great idea,” Kylo said. “But what about her last name?”

Rey’s smile shifted to stubborn resolve. “I thought of that too, and I’m not having my daughter take the name Ren.”

“I wasn’t going to suggest that, but I do want her to carry my name,” he said. “As long as you don’t mind, I want the whole galaxy to know exactly where she comes from.”

“You mean—”

“I want her to take the name Solo,” he said.

“But how will everyone know she’s yours if you no longer use it? Everyone in the Galaxy knows you as Kylo Ren.”

“I’ll just have to change that,” he said. “Starting with the Resistance. I doubt they would be as quick to accept my help going by the name Kylo Ren. Ben Solo come to aid the Resistance in his parents’ absence sounds far better.”

“Ben?” Rey practiced saying the name aloud. “That will take some getting used to, but I like it.”

“I was named after the Jedi who trained my grandfather,” he said. “Not too bad of a choice, I suppose.”

“Really? You’ll have to tell me about him sometime.”

He picked his pipe off the ground and struck it against his boot to knock off the pollen. ”I’ll tell you all about it tomorrow. For now, I think we should get inside and rest.”

Settling into bed did little to calm down Lyris’s little tantrum. After another kick, Rey wrapped her arms around herself and curled into a ball on her side. “Go to sleep, little starlight. Mama needs to rest,” she murmured. A name might have been chosen for their daughter, but the nicknames had stuck. Even Kylo was fond of using them. They would likely use them well into the future until Lyris was old enough to protest.
Another kick had Rey turning over to the opposite side of the mattress to find a more comfortable position. She would need to get used to having her sleeping interrupted, she reminded herself. Two more months of nighttime kicks and turns and then the sleepless nights to come once Lyris was out in the world, squalling for her every need. It would be worth it. She would kiss away every tear and rock her to sleep and never let her go. She fell asleep with a smile on her face as her imagination drifted into the future.

In her dream, Rey was floating. Warm water soothed her chilled bones and gently lapped against her face. She smelled sulfur. Opening her eyes, she found herself in the hot spring on Mustafar. She stood upright, her bare toes pressing against the rough bottom of the pool and let the gray, mineral-rich water run down her body. The air was thick and humid. She’d almost forgotten how it had felt. So suffocating. She eased herself out of the spring to stand on dry land and noticed she still wore the nightdress she had slept in. It clung to her skin, semi-transparent, the droplets trickling down to pool at her feet.

Her stomach hadn’t gotten very large, but looking at it now, it was as flat as it had been all those months ago when she had been a hostage here. Strange, but it was just a dream, she told herself. She had never realized she was in a dream before. Normally she went along with whatever nonsensical scenario played out and only acknowledged it absurdity upon waking. But it had to be a dream. The castle on Mustafar was gone, the hot spring she was standing in buried beneath the lava sea.

As if strung along by an invisible thread, she left the cavern and went up the rocky steps. She wandered through the corridors, letting her feet take her wherever they willed.

As she rounded a corner, she caught a glimpse of a small boy with a shock of black hair. His childish laughter lingered behind him, calling her forward. She followed. With each step, she seemed to move forward ten times as many, causing her surroundings to rush by her in a blur as she sped up to follow the boy. He seemed oddly familiar and somehow connected to the strange pull that she felt.

A heavy, modulated breathing filled the halls of the castle, echoing around her and shaking her to the bone. The oppressive darkness of Mustafar wormed its way into her chest to seize her by the heart and strangle out her hope and joy. The dark voices she’d heard whispering in the walls were louder than ever. Something told her this wasn’t an ordinary dream. It was trying to tell her something. Something she might not like. Rey quivered but did not allow the sensation to slow her down.

She feared for the little boy she chased after. This was no place for a child. Finally, she saw him again, running away from her down a long corridor. He looked over his shoulder and they locked eyes for a split second, giving her a better look at him. His noble nose, his freckles, pouting lips, and rounded ears half hidden by dark curls—she knew him. He appeared to be no older than four or so, but the resemblance was obvious. It was little Ben Solo.

“Ben!” she shouted.

He ignored her and darted through a wide set of doors. She followed close behind, finally gaining on him.

When she saw what was inside, she froze in place and stared, unable to do anything more. She had entered a large room with one wall lined with viewports to provide a horrific view of the churning bubbling hell of Mustafar’s surface. It cast the room in a vulgar red hue, most notably the figure who was staring out into the lava sea. The rasping breathing from before was amplified, apparently coming from the metal mask the figure wore. It was swathed in black, staggeringly tall and casting a long, dark shadow for little Ben to stand in. Ben stared up at the monster with reverence and awe.
This definitely wasn’t a dream and it was something beyond a nightmare. Another vision perhaps, a warning from the Force itself.

When she tried to shout to Ben, she found she had no voice and when she tried to move forward to shield him, her feet refused to obey. All she could do was watch.

Little Ben ran up the figure and tugged at its billowing cape. “Grandfather, I finally found you!” he shouted. “I knew it was you! I’m here!”

So that was Darth Vader, death incarnate, the Emperor’s right hand, destroyer of both Jedi and Sith. Somewhere inside that creature was Anakin Skywalker, the great grandfather to her unborn daughter. The thought chilled her insides more than all the horrors of the castle combined.

Vader looked down at little Ben and took him by the arm. Ben squealed with glee. But then Vader shifted, elongating and thinning. His mask disappeared and his face morphed into a pale and withered thing. Ben shrieked and tried in vain to pull away as the creature’s pale fingers tightened around his arm and its thin lips curled into a smile.

“Ben!” Rey shouted, her voice returning. Just as she was able to take a step forward, the vision shifted, leaving her in an empty blackness. The modulated breathing was gone, replaced by her own labored breaths. There was also a familiar buzzing in the distance, the rustle of leaves. She reached out and touched the bark of a tree. The pollen that coated it dusted her fingers. She was back on Cendril.

She walked forward, her hands outstretched to navigate her through the darkness until the moonlight faded in and allowed her the faintest glimpse of her surroundings. There was another rustle in the underbrush, louder this time, and faint footfalls on the soft dirt.

She ran toward the noise and spotted little Ben running through the bushes, his hair flying wildly behind him. Something was different about him, but darkness made it impossible to tell.

“Ben!” she called after him as he darted through the trees, further and further away from her. She sped up, her damp clothing chilling against her skin in the night air as the wind blew past.

When she spotted him again, he was crouched behind a bush, staring off somewhere in the distance.

“Ben, Why are you running?” Rey asked. “What are you trying to show me?”

A streak of moonlight filtered down through the canopy to illuminate his face as he turned to face her. It was then that she realized what was so different about him. This child wasn’t Ben at all. Their pale, freckled cheeks were framed by the same mane of thick curls with little ears sticking outward and the same full lips pulled into a familiar pout, but the eyes staring up at her were her own, brown flecked with gold and green. “Lyris?” Rey took a careful step forward. “Little starlight, is that really you?”

Her daughter bolted upright and took off through the trees. “Wait!” Rey cried, resuming her chase. “Please, don’t go!”

She chased after her, ignoring the vines and branches that whipped at her arms and legs as she ran until the forest opened up into a clearing. Just like the last time, she fell to her knees at the horrible sight she found. Her parent’s ship was right where she’d left it, but now the wreckage was engulfed in flames as it groaned and collapsed under its own weight like a dying animal. The exit ramp hung open like a broken jaw with black smoke billowing out of it. Lyris stood before it, silhouetted in fire.

“Lyris, Please!” Rey cried. “Come back to me. Don’t go near it.”
Lyris looked back at her, then ran up the broken ramp and into the flames as Rey screamed her name.

All Rey could hear was the crackling of the fire and the sound of her own heartbeat in her ears. Then the sharp sound of an infant’s cry ripped through the air and a dark figure emerged from the flames with a bundle in its arms. The figure seemed dreadfully familiar, but its face was impossible to distinguish. All she could make out was its silhouette against the flames and the movement of the tiny bundle in its arms.

“Let her go!” Rey shouted. “Give her back! Please!”

The haunting sound of Vader’s breathing swelled in the air, scraping against her eardrums, louder and louder until Rey had no choice but to cover her ears, shut her eyes, and scream to blot out the noise. She called for Lyris, for Kylo, for Ben.

Rey awoke to the sound of Kylo’s voice. He was bent over her, his eyes wide with fear. “Rey, I’m here. It’s going to be okay.” He didn’t sound so sure. “I’m taking you to Vassik. The hangar is still closed, so I have to carry you, alright.” He cupped her face with a trembling hand.

“What’s happening?” Rey asked. Her voice was slurred and her head was spinning. When she tried to move, she felt wetness around her. That part hadn’t been just a vision. She felt the mattress and realized it was soaked through. “Something’s wrong,” she cried. “What happened?”

“I—I don’t know. We need to find Vassik.” He slipped one hand under her legs and the other behind her back and lifted her into his arm.

Rey screamed as the movement sent a stab of pain through her abdomen. Looking down at her mattress and saw the pool of blood she had left behind and cried out in pain and terror.

Kylo pulled her close, kissed her sweaty forehead. “It’s going to be alright. I’ll make this right,” he murmured against her hair.

When he ran down the exit ramp with her cradled in her arms, they were pelted by a heavy downpour. The rainy season had come. Using the Force, Kylo tore a path through the forest, uprooting trees and cracking boulders. Rey clung to him as he raced toward the clinic with his teeth bared and eyes filled with tears and rain. She lost all sensation in her extremities and her vision began to blur and the pain in her abdomen continued to rip through her, but could still feel Lyris’s light inside her, struggling to hold on, small and trembling like a flame in the wind. Concentrating, Rey channeled all the Force and willpower she had to shield her little starlight from the raging storm until the forest faded from view and she went limp in Kylo’s arms.
Chapter 18

Chapter Summary

Rey awakens in Vassik's clinic on Cendril to find her and Kylo's lives irrevocably changed.

Something was missing. It felt like a vital part of her had been ripped out, leaving her broken and incomplete. Rey emerged from the fog of unconsciousness, groaning in discomfort and felt around herself to get her bearings as her sight returned. She was lying on a thin mattress, dressed in unfamiliar clothes, and covered in a thick blanket. Kylo knelt at her side, his hand wrapped around hers.

“You're awake!” His eyes lit up when her movement caught his eye. “Vassik, she’s awake!” he shouted over his shoulder. His cheeks were covered in heavy stubble and drained of all color. They appeared thinner as well.

“What happened? Where am I?” Rey asked, her throat was raw causing her voice to come out in a hoarse whisper. Before Kylo could form an answer, her vision and the subsequent horror rushed back to strike her like a blunt weapon. She gasped. “Lyris!” She brought her hand to her stomach, which felt achingly hollow and found it to be as flat as it had been in her vision. “What happened? Where is she?”

Kylo’s hand flew to her cheek. “It’s alright. She’s here.” He rose and went to the other side of the room, which was sterile-looking and unfamiliar. Vassik’s operating room, she assumed. Kylo returned wheeling a metal bassinet in front of him and brought it beside her.

Despite the ache she felt throughout her limbs, Rey lifted herself upright to get a better look. Her mouth fell open. Lying in the bassinet was her little starlight, so small and fragile-looking that Rey feared a single touch might shatter her. Her torso, no wider than Rey’s hand, rose and fell as she slept and her arms were no thicker than Rey’s finger. She had a small breathing apparatus over her mouth and wrapped around her little head, which was topped by tiny wisps of dark hair. Despite her worrying appearance, her force signature burned brighter than ever.

Rey covered her mouth to stifle a sob, torn between concern and relief. Kylo sat down on the cot beside her and held her shaky shoulders. Her strength hadn’t fully returned, so she latched onto him as an anchor, letting him circle her in his arms and tuck her head under his chin. “She’s going to be alright,” he murmured.

“How...what happened?”

“There were complications. You went into early labor but Vassik managed to save you both.”

“So early? How’s that even possible?” Rey couldn’t take her eyes off the squirming bundle in the cradle beside her, so small she could easily fit into Kylo’s hand.

“She’s a real fighter, like you,” he said, smoothing back the wisps of hair from Lyris’s eyes. “She has a lot of growing to do, but she’ll be alright.”
“Is it safe for me to hold her?” Rey asked. She needed her close. Having her outside of her body felt so disorienting and wrong.

Kylo nodded. “I’ll get her.” He bent over the bassinet and gently slipped his hands under her head and body. She stirred, scrunching her face and wringing her little fists. “I’ve got you,” he said. “Are you ready to meet your mother?” Lyris reached out and wrapped her hand around his finger as he lifted her up.

Minding the wires and tubes, which were thankfully long enough, he placed her on Rey’s chest. She felt so warm and incredibly light. Even though Lyris weighed almost nothing, not having her resting inside her, turning and kicking, did not sit well with her. But the feel of skin-on-skin contact and having the ability to look her in the eyes was worth it. She would just need to adjust. Rey gingerly held her there, eyes wide in awe, slowly filling with tears again. The seed of worry and guilt that had taken root so long ago bloomed in her heart. If only she’d done something different. If only she had earned more portions and grown to have a healthier body, if only she had seen the signs of pregnancy early on and gotten the medical attention she needed, if only she had been more cautious, eaten better, slept more, taken more supplements—

“Don’t think like that,” Kylo said. “Don’t blame yourself, please.”

“Are you reading my mind?”

“I don’t have to. I can see the guilt in your eyes,” he said. “The same look I’ve had for the past two weeks.”

“Two weeks? I was unconscious for two weeks?”

Kylo nodded. “You had about as many tubes in you as she does now. Vassik removed everything but the feeding tube once you stabilized, but said it was best not to wake you. Your body needed time to heal. It still does.”

The passage of time certainly explained his appearance. Rey looked down at her arms and saw the tiny needle-prick scars that surrounded the one tube that remained. She hadn’t even felt it. With every nerve screaming at her, the small discomfort of a nutrient tube had been drowned out. But even so, she shuddered at the thought of being wired up like a circuit board. “Why don’t I remember anything about the delivery? Was it a c-section or——”

“You woke up briefly. I was there. You did wonderfully. Both of you were so brave and strong.” He ran his hands over his face, sighing. “You did all you could, so I don’t want you blaming yourself. This is all on me, alright? If it wasn’t for everything I did to you, you wouldn’t have had to go through any of this. It’s my fault and mine alone.”

Rey thought for a moment, glancing between the little blessing asleep on her chest and the broken, mournful man who’d unwittingly helped to make her. “I made my decision for the sake of the Resistance. I don’t regret it,” she said. “If we hadn’t made that deal, we would still be fighting an endless war.”

“But I shouldn’t have forced you to make that decision in the first place,” Kylo said. “I should have come to you in peace and told you how I felt from the beginning. I don’t need you to make excuses to make me feel better.”

“I’m not making excuses. You were a controlling bastard there in the beginning, alright?. Selfish, demanding, terrifying at times.” She caught him but the cheek as he tried to turn away and threaded her fingers through his hair. “But you changed. And we made her, didn’t we?” She looked down at
Lyris who had just opened her eyes, the same eyes from her vision.

His grimace softened as bent down to plant a kiss on Lyris’s head. “Yes, we did.”

With his head still leaning close, Rey rested her forehead against his. “Thank you for getting us here safely. You saved us. Don’t forget that.”

He chuckled. “You’re welcome, of course, but I must admit it was partly selfish. If I had lost the two of you, I’m not sure what I would have done. Probably would have ripped the galaxy in two. I suppose saving you was a mercy on everyone.”

“Then, on behalf of the galaxy, I guess I’ll thank you again.” She placed a kiss on his forehead, returning a healthy color to his cheeks. She held his gaze and sensed a thought lingering there, some question burning at the forefront of his mind.

There was a knock at the door, then another immediately after.

Kylo groaned and kissed her briefly on the cheek. “Come in, Vassik,” he hollered.

Vassik entered with an armful of medical equipment and an overtaxed look about him. His clothes were wrinkled and his mane was a matted halo around his head. “So it’s true! You have rejoined the walking world. Splendid.” He dropped what he was carrying onto a chrome table and scurried to their side. “What a lovely sight.” He bent down, muzzle nearly touching Lyris as he examined her and Rey.

“Yes, I am back. Thanks, in no small part to your skill, I’m sure,” Rey said.

He straightened proudly and smoothed the front of his robes. “True, true. But you were an exemplary. Both of you were. And lucky you had him around to get you here in the storm.” He nodded to Kylo.

“Can you tell me what happened, exactly?” Rey asked. “What caused all this to happen so quickly?”

Vassik laced his finger together. “It is referred to as placental abruption when the placenta detaches from the uterus. Yours was a complete separation, resulting in premature labor and heavy blood loss.”

Rey recalled the gray sheets stained red. “Yes, I remember that part.”

“Luckily we had a blood donor handy,” His muzzle lifted into that strange smile of his as he pointed to Kylo.

Kylo shrunk from the praise. “I did what I had to.”

Lifting his sleeve away from his wrist, Rey found the small entry wounds and thanked him with a broad smile.

“So Lyris is really going to be okay?” Rey asked, offered her finger to Lyris, who readily took it.

Vassik ran his hand over his mane, only for it to spring back up as his paw left it. “Well, at eight standard weeks early on top of being undersized to begin with, I was worried your little one hadn’t a chance. But she pulled through. As you can see, I’m still monitoring her vitals and testing periodically for abnormalities or complications, but everything is stable now. She was just waiting for you to wake up.”
“And the face mask?”

“Her lungs are her weakest point, I’m afraid. I’ve been administering a steroid gas through the breathing apparatus, but the disability may follow her forever, along with her stunted growth. She should thrive like any other human child, but she may need the occasional help with her lungs and I doubt she will reach the height of either of you.”

“That’s okay,” Rey said. “What matters is that she made it.” She also wouldn’t be the only member of their family to be of small stature. Leia commanding the Resistance, making her diminutive five feet seem like twenty came to mind. She could already sense the same plucky resolve in Lyris.

“Oh, and another thing,” Vassik said. “Now that you are awake, I suggest we try natural feeding. Much better for her growth than artificial supplements alone. If you are up to it, of course”

“Is it safe to take the mask off?”

“Oh, yes. She only needs it a few hours a day and it’s best to keep it on while she sleeps, but letting her breath oxygen on her own should be good for her.”

Vassik carefully removed the monitoring wires, feeding tube, and lastly her mask. Without it, Lyris coughed and made small wheezing sounds before adjusting to the air and breathing steadily. Vassik gave the three of them their privacy, Rey having assured him she knew what to do. She had seen other humanoid mothers feed their young and once she had found a human example in a medical manual.

When Rey opened the front of her tunic, Kylo shot a hesitant glance her way, as if he expected to be dismissed as well. She ignored him and continued. There was no point in feigning modesty between them.

Lyris took to it well, clamping on quickly and eating her fill, all while clasping Rey’s finger in one hand and a strand of her hair in the other. With her tiny features now visible, Rey and Kylo melted at the sight of her. Her cheeks were rosy pink and her hazel eyes were wide and bright, ringed in thick lashes. As she ate, her brows were scrunched into a determined expression; apparently, she took her health as seriously as they did.

In the silence, the imagery of Rey’s vision returned, and with it the image of an older Lyris. “She’d going to look a lot like you.”

Kylo lifted a brow and snorted. “What? How could you possibly know that?” His cheerful demeanor hardened as he felt the gravity of her thoughts. “Is something you need to tell me?”

Rey bit her lip. “I had a vision, at least I think I did. It felt like it did the last time and I don’t know how else to explain it. She looks just like a saw her, just smaller, and…” She paused to inhale and think of a way to explain all she had seen. “I saw you—a younger you. We were on Mustafar and there was Snoke and your grandfather—kriff, I can still hear that breathing...

“And then I saw Lyris, who I thought was you at first, running through the forest. I found my family’s ship, the fire, and she just ran straight into it.” Rey held her closer and kissed her head again. “Something—someone had her. It was a dark figure coming out of the fire.”

“Was it Snoke? Vader?” Kylo gripped the edge of the bed.

“I don’t think so. They seemed familiar and definitely male, but he didn’t look like either of them
from what I saw. He wasn’t large enough and the way he moved, well, it was different. He had her in his arms and she was screaming and there was nothing I could do. I have no idea what all of it meant but think it was a warning. When I woke up and saw the blood…I had just seen her run into the wreckage of my parents’ ship. I thought that maybe that meant I was going to lose her.”

Kylo pulled her in close, allowing her to rest her head on his shoulder. “We aren’t going to lose her,” he said. “I won’t let that happen. And I think it’s been proven how misleading visions can be. Maybe we shouldn’t dwell on it and just keep doing what’s best for her.”

“You’re probably right,” Rey said. “But I wish the Force would be more be more specific sometimes. It’s infuriatingly cryptic.”

“A agreed.”

Lyris unlatched and let out a mewling cry.

“She’s done eating, I suppose.” Rey wiped Lyris’s mouth with the edge of her tunic before drawing it back over her breasts. To calm her down, she lifted her higher on her chest and smoothed the fine hair on her head, hushing her softly. With her cheek resting against Rey’s heart, Lyris looked up at her father, eyes bright and curious.

“See, I told your mother would wake up to see you,” He leaned over and kissed her nose. She sniffled and tried to wiggle away, but he chuckled and kissed her again on the forehead, messing up her hair in the process. The lines of worry on his face faded the longer he looked at her.

Rey quietly watched, baffled by the oddly endearing sight. He was the last person Lyris needed to be protected from, and yet she had almost stolen this from them and hid her away from Kylo forever.

There was a knock at the door and Kylo reluctantly sat up and hollered for Vassik to enter. This time he came bearing an odd metal basket and a bag of supplies. “You will be needed these when you are cleared to leave,” he said. Setting down the bag, he lifted the basket to show them. “This incubation crib was designed for the offspring of smaller species, but it should fit her just fine. By the time she outgrows it, she likely won’t need it. The vital sign monitor is built into the side and this cover blocks out all light and dampens sounds so you needn’t worry about disturbing her as she sleeps and this filter purifies the air.” he tapped the vent on the tinted transparisteel cover.

“That looks perfect,” Rey said.

“A real marvel of technology,” Vassik agreed. “I’ve already added it to your bill, along with the cost of that poor 2-1B unit.”

“The what?”

“I had a 2-1B surgical droid in here before, the one that assisted me in his amputation all those weeks ago,” Vassik said, side-eying Kylo. “During the first day of your stay, when you and the child’s prognosis was less certain, he took it upon himself to…dismantle it when it gave him less than pleasing results.”

Rey’s eyes went wide at the thought of Kylo lashing out with the Force in clear view of Vassik.

“Worry not,” Vassik said with a reassuring smile. “My policy of patient confidentiality still applies in cases of…unique abilities. In fact, I think it is my best interests to keep quiet about such things. I wouldn’t want to get on his bad side, after all. And I thought trigger-happy vagabonds coming
through my clinic were bad enough.” He laughed to himself, then quieted when they failed to join in.

“Speaking of medical droids,” Rey said. “I have a DT unit on my ship I’ve been meaning to repair. Would that be of any use to us if I can get it running.”

“Ah, they are wonderful little droids and would make your return to your ship even safer. Can’t be too careful when one’s health is at stake. I can even give you a programming upgrade for infant care, if you would.”

“That would be great. Will we be able to leave soon?” It seemed a bit quick but she reminded herself she had actually been there for two weeks. Kylo’s prickly face was proof of that.

“I will re-check both your vitals and if all is well, you can leave whenever you like. But I do insist you return once a week for checkups.” He tested a sample of her blood, checked her breathing, and asked a long list of questions, some of which would have sounded suggestive if they hadn’t been spoken in such a bluntly scientific manner.

Once all the tests were in, Vassik cleared both Rey and Lyris to leave. He handed his bag of supplies to Kylo. “Here is a supply of replacement breathing masks, some more infant-sized garments I ordered for you from the tailor, supplements for both mother and child, the droid upgrade—all charged to your bill.”

“Anything else we should know before we leave?” Rey asked.

“Oh, yes. You should be on bedrest for the next month, no exertion, minimal stress—just relax and give yourself time to heal. The child should be monitored closely and placed on the ventilator at night and for a few hours every day, especially if you hear her wheezing or coughing for any length of time.”

Once all was finished and they were cleared to leave, they thanked Vassik again and bid him farewell.

“Would you like me to carry you?” Kylo asked.

“No need,” Rey said, opening the clinic door. Her legs felt weak from misuse, but that wouldn’t improve if she didn’t start using them again. Kylo carried the bag of supplies while she carried sleeping Lyris in her incubator.

The streets of Cendril appeared fresh and new, the storefronts and signs wiped clean by the rain. Streetlights shined brighter without pollen coating them and many windows had been opened to let in the clean, cool air. Streams of rainwater trickled down the doorframes and awning of the buildings and off the wires strung between the rooftops to pool in the street in wide puddles. Pedestrians did their best to swerve to avoid them, but many were unsuccessful and had their trousers and long robes soaked up to the knee. Many carried umbrellas in anticipation of another bout of rainfall, which Rey suspected could come at any minute judging from the slight mist she felt fall on her face.

Kylo led her by the hand toward the forest and she gasped at the sight of it. The black leaves, once covered in a thin layer of pollen were washed clean to reveal their slick, leathery texture. She peered down at one and saw veins of purple running through. The forest wasn’t entirely colorless, after all.

When they found their clearing, Kylo cursed under his breath at the sight of the open ramp. “I didn’t close it,” he admitted. “Wait here. I’ll check to see if it’s safe.”

He went inside and after a bit of shouting, a few six-legged flint mice came scurrying out and disappeared into the trees. “All clear,” he hollered
Once inside, Rey’s first instinct was to head for the bunkroom and find a place for Lyris’s incubator, but when she remembered the bed of blood she’d left behind, she froze. “The mattress…”

“I’ll take it outside and burn it,” Kylo said.

Rey nodded. “Thank you. I suppose I’ll go fix DeeTee and put the supplies away.” She stuck out her free hand to take the bag, but Kylo hesitated. “I can carry it a few meters down the hall. And I promise I’ll get straight back to bed once you’ve fixed the room.”

He handed the bag over. “Fine. Just be careful.”

Rey slung it over her shoulder and headed for the storage room, not daring to look back in case she caught sight of the mattress as Kylo removed it. Once inside, she fished the upgrade chip out of the bag and pulled open the cover of Lyris’s incubator. She was wide awake, staring straight at her. “There you are, Starlight,” she said. Lyris lifted her eager arms and groped eagerly in the air. “I just need to fix up the droid and then we can play, alright?” She let her hold her finger for a brief moment before kissing her head.

Just when she was about to pick DeeTee out of a drawer, Rey spotted a bit of black fabric hanging on a wall hook. She pulled it down and spread it out, recognizing it as Kylo’s discarded black cape. A new use for it came to mind. She looped it across her body and tied it securely at the shoulder, forming a sling to cradle Lyris against her freehanded. Lyris wiggled happily and grabbed at a strand of hair that fell over Rey’s shoulder within her reach.

“Better than lying in a crib, eh?” In response, Lyris tugged harder on her hair, but as small as she was, Rey barely felt it.

After tinkering with DeeTee and replacing the necessary parts and wires, with Lyris watching eagerly from her sling, Rey was able to rig him up to a spare battery and power him on. He floated as high as his power cable would allow and made the same whirling sound Rey remembered as his lens opened up.

“He adjusted his aperture and looked her over for a few seconds before his programming managed to catch up with him. “Hello, mistress. It is good to see you again. Are you in need of assistance?”

“Well, It’s a bit complicated.” Rey chuckled and pointed down at Lyris, whose eyes were wider than ever as she stared up at the droid. “There were some complications and she came a bit early, but my daughter is here now. Her name’s Lyris. You will be looking after her now as well.”

DeeTee zoomed his lens on Lyris’s face and buzzed in recognition. “I see. I am afraid I am not authorized to handle specialized infant care. May I suggest a nanny droid?”

“I’m the only nanny she needs. You are a personalized medical unit, correct? Well, meet your newest patient.”

DeeTee backed up a centimeter or two as Lyris feebly reached for him. “My apologies, Mistress, but I—”

Rey pulled out the upgrade chip and waved it in front of his lens. “I have it covered. This upgrade should bring you up to speed, alright? Now turn around so I can insert it.”

DeeTee swiveled around to allow her to slip it into his chip reader. “Will I be getting my wall console back?” he asked. “I will be needing it to run tests and perform advanced calculations.”

“I’m afraid not. I could hook you up to the ship’s computer, though,” Rey offered.
“That should be sufficient.”

With DeeTee’s battery in hand, Rey strung him along like a leashed pet as she headed for the bunkroom. She had the incubator under her arm, filled with a few days worth of diapers, clothes, and other supplies while Lyris hung comfortably in her sling, rocking gently with each step.

Kylo was leaning in the doorway and lifted a curious brow at the sight of them, focusing in on his repurposed cape. “Very innovative,” he said, opening the door for her. The room was just as she’d left it, but with her nest of bedding replaced by the lone mattress Kylo had been using. “I can sleep in the bare bunk, so don’t worry about me,” he said.

Rey thanked him as she put her things away and set Lyris’s incubator between his bunk and her mattress. They ate their supper in their beds before settling down for an early night’s sleep.

For a long while, they remained awake, each with a hand in Lyris’s open cradle, a tiny fist wrapped around either of their fingers. Sleeping soundly with her ventilator already on for the night, her chest rose and fell in a slow, soothing rhythm.

“She’s just so small,” Rey whispered. “I just can't get over it.”

“She was even smaller when she first arrived. So wrinkled and pink, no bigger than my hand. When Vassik allowed it, I would just sit beside you with her resting on my chest, waiting for you to wake up. Before your bleeding stopped and you made improvements, I was afraid you never would. It was even worse than when you left Mustafar. At least then I knew you were safe with your friends.

“This has been the most terrifying two weeks of my life. I thought I was going to lose you forever, that our daughter would never get to meet you, that I would have to raise her on my own somehow if she even managed to make it—and the blame would have all fallen to me.”

“I told you to stop saying that. What matter is that we’re here. You were the one who saved us this time, remember that.” Rey slipped her finger out of Lyris’s grip, slow enough to not wake her, and covered Kylo’s hand with her own. “We might not have made her in an ideal way, but I’m glad that we did. It was all worth it to be with you two, even with all the complications and mishaps. Thank you for giving her to me, Ben.”

He was briefly stunned by the sound of his name before he was able to form a cohesive sentence. “Yes. It was all worth it. And as for Mustafar, I’ve come to realize that I’m glad that the castle is gone. I’m truly sorry for the officers that were likely killed when Hux destroyed it, but as for the castle itself, along with all the texts, artifacts, and holocrons—the galaxy is better off without them. That isn’t a life I can return to anymore. I spent so long chasing that legacy, but now I know I want to build one of my own with the two of you. I want to make things right.”

“I think that’s wonderful.” she smiled at him in the faint glow of the nightlight.

He smiled back. “Goodnight, Rey. I hope you have better dreams this time.”

Rey gave his hand a final squeeze before he slipped it free of Lyris’s grasp and gently closed the tinted cover of her incubator for the night. The lights of her monitor flickered on, shining bright green to tell them all was well.
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Rey and Ben adjust to their parental duties as they continue to hide from the newly-crowned Emperor Hux.

Come morning, it wasn’t Lyris’s wailing or her natural rhythms that woke Rey, but a blaring, beeping alarm that reverberated through the hull of the Falcon. She groaned and pulled herself from bed, still sore both inside and out.

Ben shot up from his bunk, his hair a wild mess from readjusting himself throughout the night in his hard, pillowless bed. “I think that’s your transmitter.”

Cold dread shot through her. She’d been out for two weeks, unable to answer Finn’s messages. “Kriff. They’re probably worried. Check on Lyris while I take care of this.”

In the cockpit, she found her transceiver on the Falcon’s control panel. The accusatory alarm was accompanied by Finn’s identification number blinking in red. Hopefully, he had good news to share. Maybe he had been too preoccupied with the Resistance to contact her and wouldn’t notice her absence.

As soon as she accepted the transmission, his voice called out louder than the alarm. “Rey! Are you there? Please tell me you’re okay!”

Luck wasn’t been in her favor, it seemed. “Yes, it’s me. I’m alright,” she answered.

“What happened? Where were you?”

Rey gripped the transceiver until her knuckles turned white. A hell of a lot had happened. “Finn, I’m sorry I scared you. I was in the med clinic and didn’t have my transceiver. I’m so sorry.”

Finn finally brought himself down to a more reasonable volume. “No, no. It’s alright—wait. Why were you in the clinic for so long?”

Rey peered down the hall to see Ben watching her from afar with Lyris curled up in his arms. “Well,” she said. “I had my baby.”

“You what?”

“That’s why I was in for so long. It was an early labor but we’re both okay and recovering here on the Falcon.”

The channel went quiet for a moment before Finn managed to fumble his way through another sentence. “So you actually have a baby on board with you. Right now. And everything’s going okay? But it’s so early.”

“She’s small and she needs help with her breathing and will need time to grow, but yes, she is okay and here with me. Do you want to meet her?”
“Well, Yeah. Of course I do,” Finn said. “Want to power up the hologram projector?”

“Alright.” Rey put the transceiver back on the control panel, angling it to scan her for projection. “Just wait a moment while I go get her.”

Ben was at the door and passed her Lyris, who whimpered at the separation but soon quieted in Rey’s arms. Rey smiled at Ben and mouthed a thank you. He nodded in reply and retreated to a safe distance from the holoscanner while Rey settled into the pilot’s chair and switched it on.

The blue projection rippled then steadied to reveal Finn’s smiling face which lit up at the sight of the tiny bundle in Rey’s arms. She propped her up on her knee, one hand holding her in place and the other supporting her head. “This is Lyris Andara Solo. Lyris, meet your uncle Finn.”

“Wow! She’s amazing,” he said. “Beautiful name, too. So you chose to go with Solo?”

Rey briefly colored at her little slip and searched for a convenient but truthful explanation. “It’s what Han and Leia would have wanted.”

Finn gave her a somber smile. “Yeah, I think you’re right.”

“And how are things with the Resistance?” Rey asked. “Any progress?”

“Since we last talked, we’ve picked up a couple more of our people who were off on a mission when their base was hit. A little banged up, but they’re going to be alright.”

“What kind of mission were they on?” Technically, the agreement and it’s ceasefire was still in effect until Hux seized power. Not that Rey expected them to abide by it completely; she certainly hadn’t.

“They were helping to smuggle defecting stormtroopers out of Imperial territory. That whole operation’s gone to hell.; lots of runaways were stranded along the escape routes or retaken by the Empire. Whatever plans Kylo Ren may or may not have had to disband the stormtrooper program, Hux certainly doesn’t share them. His father was involved with trooper training way back in the old empire. Family tradition, I guess. He’s a real fanatic. You should hear his speeches.” Finn shook his head. “Or don’t, if you’d prefer to get a good night’s sleep.”

“I can imagine.” Rey said, holding Lyris a bit tighter. “I only saw him a few times, but each one was...memorable. He reminds me of the old imperial propaganda holos I found on Jakku; Rigid and clean, but a tongue like a poison dagger.”

“He’d probably take that as a compliment,” Finn said. “On a different note, what’s your plan? Long-term, I mean.”

“I don’t know. I’ve been ordered to be on bedrest for the next four weeks and I have to keep an eye on Lyris all the time. We both have some recovering to do.” Rey smoothed down the curl sticking up on Lyris’s head.

“I think it’s just as well that you stay put. We aren’t the most stable operation just yet. All we’ve got is a few ships and a skeleton crew with dwindling supplies and no credits to replace them. I thought things were stretched thin before, but this is just living off scraps. All we can do is run and hope to rescue as many as we can in the process. The way things are now, we couldn’t take on a single imperial ship on our own without being blown to bits within seconds.”

“Wait, so funding is the issue?”

Finn smiled wryly. “Isn’t it always?”
Rey cursed herself for not considering it before. Credits had never been in her tiny pool of resources. Not long ago she had dealt almost exclusively in scrap metal. “Finn, I have Kylo’s credit chip. Completely untraceable. If it weren’t, Hux would have found me by now or at least deactivated it. I can transfer you the credits you need.”

“Really? Wow, you’re sure?”

Rey glanced at Ben. He appeared deep in thought as he leaned against the far wall, silently listening. He turned to her and nodded. Not wanting to alert Finn, Rey did her best to send Ben a silent thank you. A faint smile came to his lips, letting her know he’d received it.

“Yes,” she said. “I’m sure.”

The transmission burst with Finn’s triumphant laughter. “Man, I wasn’t expecting news like this today. I didn’t even think you’d answer after so many days of silence. But now we can get food, medical supplies, the weapons and tech we’ve been needing, shield upgrades for our ships. And best of all, you’re safe! And Lyris. She’s just so sweet, Rey.” Lyris must have recognized her name or at least been excited by the loud noises. She lifted her scrawny arms in the air and made a gurgling noise that Rey chose to interpret as a thank-you. She and Finn giggled at the sight of her. “Mind if I call a few others in to see her?” he asked.

“Go right ahead.”

Finn rose from the chair he’d been sitting in, leaving the transmission empty. A ruckus came through the transmission along with excited voices too distant to distinguish. When Finn returned, Poe, Jessika, and a few other resistance pilots she vaguely recognized crowded into the hologram, squeezing in to fit the scanner’s perview. They congratulated Rey, asked a slew of questions as to her and Lyris’s health and safety, then showered compliments on them both.

The weariness of rebellion faded as the conversation devolved into Finn and Jessika making increasingly ridiculous sounds and faces to elicit a response from Lyris, who refused to participate and instead retreated into the fabric of Rey’s shirt.

Eventually, Poe intervened and steered the conversation back to the pressing issues. They spoke of how to use the credits Rey would supply and their further plans once their resources were sufficiently replenished. Rey’s place in all of it came up as well, solidifying Finn and Rey’s conclusion that it wasn’t safe for her to rejoin the group just yet.

“But we are working on an eventual resettlement of Kashyyyk,” Poe explained. “The new Empire withdrew some time ago—why I’m not sure—and Hux has been too preoccupied with systems and planets richer in resources to bother retaking it. The native forces and terrain would make it a hard and expensive invasion, anyhow. It could be years before they try it. It’s the perfect place for us to regroup and set up a new base of operations. We’ve already contacted Chewie and he’s doing what he can to rally support among his people while we’re out here rescuing our own.”

Rey voiced her agreement and listened to some of the finer details of their plan before they said their goodbyes and dispersed, leaving only Finn and herself on the line.

“I forgot to ask before, but did Luke make it out with you?” Rey asked.

“Yes.” Finn’s tone turned somber and his shoulders sunk low. “He didn’t take Leia’s death very well, as you can imagine. He’s more closed off than before if that’s even possible. Just stays on the ship and won’t even talk to the droids.”
Objective, Rey knew she should feel sorry for Luke. It must be horrible to lose a sibling. But it was even worse to lose a parent, she thought. She felt a stab of guilt for even thinking such a thing. That sort of vengeful hatred was the path to the dark side. Vowing to sort them out later, she packed her tangle of emotions into a far corner of her mind.

Her reunion with Luke was inevitable. It was true what he’d told her in his cramped hovel of a room on Hoth: they were family now. The once comforting notion was now a bitter memory.

“Are you sure you will be alright on your own?” Finn asked, pulling her back to the present. “You don’t need someone to come help you?”

“Thank you, but no.” She glanced toward Ben. “We’ll be just fine.”

“Well, I guess this is goodbye until next time,” Finn said.

“Goodbye, Finn. Good luck out there.” Rey smiled and cut off the signal.

As soon as the blue haze of the hologram fizzled out, Ben stepped out of his corner. She could feel how much he hated listening to her speak as if he didn’t exist. It went against his needy, territorial nature. As if to reclaim them both, he scooped her and Lyris into his arms. “Back to bed. I’ll worry about your breakfast.”

Rey snatched the transceiver off the control panel before he brought them into the hallway. “Fine, but you don’t need to carry me everywhere.”

“But I like to.”

“Well, sometimes I think you just do it to show off.”

He shrugged. “Are you complaining?”

She laughed and looped one arm around his neck while the other held Lyris in place. “No. I’m not complaining, just pointing it out.”

“Good, because I don’t intend to stop.” He laid her down on her mattress and pressed a kiss to Lyris’s head. “And she seems to enjoy it,” he added. That was undeniable. As long as she was awake, Lyris’s eyes were wide and observant and Rey could sense her thoughts swimming as she surveyed the world around her. The higher he held her, the happier she seemed to be.

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Having so little experience with credits, Rey let Ben handle the transfer to the Resistance. Messages were sent back spilling over with undying gratitude, all addressed to her. Hopefully, they would give him the thanks he deserved once she managed to explain why he was there with her at all. It would be a touchy situation, but one she had a long while to prepare for as she and Lyris continued to recover.

In the first couple of weeks, to Ben’s relief, Rey kept to her bed and allowed him to prepare and deliver her meals. The feeling of redundancy returned to gnaw at her mind, but the thought of the battle to come kept her guilt at bay. After all, she needed rest if she was going to be of any use to the Resistance.

After a few more weeks had passed, Rey’s muscles had ceased to ache and her strength had begun to return. Upon closer inspection, she found that her body was back to the way it had been, although Lyris had hardly changed her physique in the first place, as small and early as she was. Ben,
however, was not entirely convinced, no matter how glowing her results at the clinic continued to be. When she dared to suggest they resume training, he immediately declined.

“Vassik said at least four weeks of rest,” Rey reminded him. “It’s been seven.”

Still, he was unmoved. She wanted to whack his stubborn head with a training rod, but after the hell he’d endured for those two weeks she’d lost in the clinic, Rey decided it was best to humor him. As a compromise, they continued to hone their Force abilities that didn’t require a saber, such as levitation and telepathy.

When they weren’t training, Rey spent most of her time in the pilot’s chair with Lyris hanging in her sling, babbling, wiggling around, and staring out the viewport. On the rare occasion an insect would fly by or a small animal could be seen in the trees, Lyris would shout at it and tug on a strand of Rey’s hair. Her grip strength was improving.

Ben often joined them and took a turn with Lyris, resting her on his chest to put her down for a nap or in the crook of his arms to tell her a story. Lyris couldn’t understand the words but stared up at him like he was the most riveting thing in the galaxy. He changed and cleaned her without complaint, soothed her when she cried, grabbed for her ventilator at the first hint of wheezing, and when she fell into a sour mood, he would stare her down, mimicking her tiny pout, until she gave in and smiled.

Rey could easily count those seven weeks as the greatest in her life thus far.

…

One evening, Rey found herself unable to sleep. Her mind was grappling with the decision that had hung over her head ever since she and Ben had been thrown back into each other's lives and into hiding. Now that Lyris was here and the Resistance could summon them any day now, a decision needed to be made. Her answer was now obvious.

She had thought about her choice for weeks, had come up with half a hundred excuses that were entirely reasonable, but had failed to sway her. She knew what she wanted and if anyone, even her own better judgment, had anything to say, she no longer wished to listen.

“Ben, Wake up,” she whispered.

He made a muffled sound and rolled over before going still again.

“Ben,” she said, louder this time.

He woke with a start, his eyes bursting open before scanning the room for whatever had woken him.

“Rey? What is it? Do you need something?”

“Yes,” she said, her heart hammering against her ribcage.

“You need some water or something?”

“Um. I’m cold,” she said, quickly losing her nerve.

“You want another blanket?”

She swallowed her pride along with the lump in her throat. “Not exactly.”

He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and met hers in the darkness. “Then what do you want?”

“You,” she patted the space on the mattress beside her.
“Rey, are you really awake? Do you know where you are?” He spoke as if she had gone mad. Perhaps she had.

“Yes, I’m awake,” she said. “Now get over here before I change my mind.”

He scrambled from his bunk, nearly tripping over his own feet, and placed his hand on the edge of her mattress, ready to pull back the cover. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.” She threw the blanket back and pulled him in beside her. He seemed too scared to move but allowed her to direct him. She crawled onto his lap and pulled open the latch of his trousers.

“What are you doing?” he whispered.

She chuckled. “You know exactly what I’m doing, so why don’t you pitch in?”

His face colored and he remained frozen for a moment before he mustered the courage to unfasten her nightdress. “But Lyris—”

“Is asleep in a soundproof incubator with DeeTee on standby.” She pulled his shirt over his head.

He slipped off her nightdress and set it aside, slowly taking in what little of her nakedness the nightlight revealed. “But your body—”

“Completely healed.” She slipped her hand lower and found him ready despite his feeble excuses. When she wrapped her hand around his length, he sank into the sheets and let out a low moan. He’d been craving this for a long time. She pulled back to grace him with a teasing smile. “And I had Vassik inject a fertility inhibiting implant during my last visit, so you are officially out of excuses.”

They savored the steps leading up to consummation, sharing lingering kisses and rediscovering each other's bodies in the darkness. Rey laid a gentle kiss on each scar she had given him: the small crescent she’d bitten into his lip, the raised line that bisected his face, and finally the seam of his artificial arm. The metal felt cool against her lips.

Only when they were both red, panting and as ready as they could ever be did Rey guide him inside her. She had never been on top, she realized. She quite liked it. And from the way Ben had lost himself in the rhythm of her hips rocking against him, it appeared he liked the change as well.

There was a fair amount of awkward fumbling as they relearned each other's rhythms and overcame their initial hesitation. Despite what she had previously thought, Rey discovered she was still sore in a few places she hadn't realized, forcing them to pause and readjust every so often. But she didn't let that slow her down. The slight discomfort was overshadowed by the feel of him hitting the deepest parts of her in just the right spot. She leaned over him with her hands braced on either side of his head and his hands clutched at her waist to deepen each thrust as their pleasure mounted in perfect synchronization, their mind bared and intertwined as much as their flesh.

When their release shook through their bodies it felt like it could incinerate them both. They cried out and Rey collapsed onto his heaving chest. She rolled off him, fighting to catch her breath, and laced her hand through his.

Before, even on their best nights, it had never been like that. There had always been a barrier, a grudge, or underlying fear to stand between them, but now things were seemingly reversed. The Force had been pulling them together for so long and she’d fought it the whole way, but now she wanted nothing more than to be caught up in its current. Ben was a part of her now. They had come to trust, respect, and care for one another, perhaps even—
“I love you,” he blurted out. “I—well, I assume you know that already, but I don’t think I actually said it before. It’s true though. I have loved you for longer than I even realized. You do know that, right?” His palm was sweaty against hers.

Rey nuzzled her cheek against his shoulder. “Of course I do, Ben.”

“Do you think you could ever love me too, even a little bit? Even after everything...”

“Possibly.” She leaned over to kiss him, then laid there gazing at him, grinning wide, letting their mental link answer for her.

He laughed and smiled back. It was a silly question. More of a formality, really, after baring their minds to one another. There were no secrets between them. Their bodies comfortably sore and their faces flushed from emotion and exhaustion, they slowly drifted back to sleep. Lyris would need them to be well-rested come morning.

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When Rye woke, Ben was relaxing on his side, propped up on one arm and staring down at her with a half-lidded, sated expression. The emotional and physical release had done wonders for them both, it seemed. There was also something shimmering in his eyes and at the edge of his mind.

Her body was still sore in a pleasant sort of way. It had been quite some time since she had awoken to that sensation, but that morning was the first time she unabashedly enjoyed it. “Good morning.” She stretched and wiped the sleep from her eyes.

“There’s something I’ve been meaning to ask...” He exhaled, his ears turning red. “Lyris already has my name. I want you to take it as well if you’d like.”

Rey stared at him, stunned for a moment. “Ben, it’s not like I’m planning to run out on you.”

“I know, but I want us to officially be a family so everyone will know that you belong to me—and I to you. Not like it was before. When we retake the Empire, I want you by my side as my Empress, not my...companion, hostage, or whatever filthy rumor they spread about you. I want the whole galaxy to know that things have changed.”

Rey barely contained the laughter building in her chest. The absurdity of her, a scavenger-turned-rebel, becoming the empress of the largest empire the galaxy had ever known.

“Someone has to keep me in line.” Ben smiled. “And I think the public will love you. You truly have the gift of persuasion. Just think of all you could do to make that galaxy a better place.”

“Is this a marriage proposal or a treaty agreement,” Rey asked.

He cupped her face. “A marriage proposal, of course. Sorry, I’m babbling about politics. It’s been on my mind. That’s not the reason I’m asking you, though, it’s just an additional benefit. But on the topic of politics, having us officially married would make things easier for Lyris. Legitimacy is important to Coruscant high-society and to many other worlds we will need to form alliances with. I want her to rule the galaxy one day as a true, legitimate heir in the eyes of the people. Trust me, having people gossip about your lineage can be a nightmare.”

Intact families were almost non-existent on Jakku and legal marriages even fewer. The closest thing Rey had come across was when two scavengers managed to tolerate one another long enough to make conjugal visits in one another’s tents. Such unions always dissolved, often with one party making off with the other’s horde. She’d never thought she’d have even that.
But what she now had with Ben certainly fit her understanding of a married couple, especially after last night; they shared a bed, a home, and a child. They shared a life. The idea of putting that into some database seemed like an insignificant add-on. But, apparently, Ben and the monolithic entity he referred to as “high-society” didn’t see it that way.

“How are we going to get married if we are hiding out in a forest on an outer rim moon?” she asked.

He winced. “I hadn’t considered that. I was thinking too far ahead.” He hung his head, inwardly berating himself.

She lifted his chin. “Wait, just tell me how it usually works. Does Coruscant have some sort of ceremony? Or how about Alderaan?”

“Most human cultures exchange a token for representing a marriage, usually a piece of jewelry.” His eyes shot open. “Wait, I’ve got it.” He kissed her on the forehead before tumbling out of bed, shoving on his trousers and rushing out the door.

While she waited for his return, Rey woke Lyris, who cried as she awoke, but was quickly soothed by Rey’s touch and a peppering of kisses before starting her morning feeding. As expected, her hair was an utter mess, curling up every which way. She pouted up at Rey as she fixed it. She was definitely going to look like Ben, just perpetually smaller in scale.

Ben entered to room to find Rey back in bed with Lyris tucked against her bare chest. There was a familiar trinket in his hand.

“I thought you lost that on Mustafar,” Rey said.

He knelt in front of her, holding up the carved necklace for her to see—the necklace his grandfather had once made. “I took it with me when I followed you to Hoth. I was so sure I could convince you to come back and that this gift would demonstrate what the two of you meant to me. I was mistaken, of course, but the sentiment still stands. This is an important artifact in my family history, but one of the few not tainted by the dark side. My grandfather gave this to my grandmother as Anakin, not as Vader and now I offer it to you as Ben.”

“Goodness, that’s—,” Rey covered her mouth, too flustered to continue. “Oh, Ben. I really didn’t expect any of this, but yes. I accept.” She held out her hand. “Of course I do.”

“You’re sure?” he asked. “You really want to spend the rest of our lives together until the day we die and become one with the Force.”

Rey laughed. “That’s one way to put it. Yes.”

“But you have to know that I will never be as...light as you are, but I think I can meet you somewhere in the middle. I can’t promise I won’t be reckless, selfish, and stubborn sometimes, but for you, I want to try to be the best man I can be.”

“Ben, just hand it over already. I said yes,” she said, her cheeks burning and lips spread into a wide smile.

Ignoring her open hand, he slipped it over her head. Unlike the other jewelry he had given her to wear on Coruscant, it actually looked and felt like it belonged around her neck. It was light and simple but held a history few new and fewer understood. It was the perfect marriage trinket for a scavenger and an Emperor, just as it had been for the slave and queen who’d held it before.

“Rey Andara Solo. I like the sound of that.” She pulled him close and pressed their foreheads
together. The necklace hung over Lyris’s head. She grabbed for it, then gurgled in frustration when she couldn't quite reach it.

Ben tilted his head to kiss her, his warm, full lips covering her own, gentle but trembling with excitement before breaking away for air. She’d ever seen him so happy, alive, and renewed. It felt as though time had stopped and the ravages of war and the gray complexities of their uncertain future could never touch them. In that moment nothing mattered but the little family they had pieced together.
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

Ben sat beside her. “You don’t need to get mad at them for my sake,” he said, “and I don’t want your relationships to be ruined because of me. I’m here to help, not fracture the rebellion.”

“This wasn’t how I pictured our arrival. I knew there would be some hesitation to trust you, but...” Rey ran her hands over her face, sighing. “I guess I was just being naive. I should have expected this. They’ve been looking at me like that since I landed on Hoth. Granted, there was more reason to be concerned at that point, but being treated like some fragile, helpless thing...it’s insufferable. And it’s not like many of them know me all that well besides Finn and Poe since I hadn’t stayed with them for long before leaving to find Luke. I care for them and I care for their cause, but pity can’t replace comradery.”

The following weeks stretched out in endless bliss. When they weren’t attending to the rapidly-growing Lyris, Rey and Ben spent their energy in the bed they now shared or in hours of rigorous training. Now that she was fully recovered, they were able to spar at their full capacities, further sharpening their skills for the battle to come. As caught up as they were in their routine, the message from the Resistance summoning them to Kashyyyk came almost as a shock. It was what they’d been preparing and waiting for, but it also meant their private little world was now at an end. They had to rejoin the fight and face whatever the future held.

“I’m not going to lie and say I’m looking forward to dealing with the Resistance,” Ben said. “But I am ready to help.”

“I can sympathize,” Rey said. “Luke will be there too, remember.”

He rubbed his hands down her back, gazing down at her reassuringly, the metal of his cybernetic fingers leaving a faint chill on her skin. “We’ll manage. It will all be worth it once we get close enough to Hux that I can personally strangle him. Or I may go with decapitation, I haven’t decided.” He flashed a faint smile, lifting her spirits. He could always manage that, even when she didn’t feel like being cheered up and they both knew she could do the same to him. Whether it was through the Force or the complementary nature of their personalities, they now had a firm grip on each other’s heart and mind.

“As long as you dispatch him quickly.” Rey tapped the tip of his nose. “No delaying for the sake of spectacle. You don’t want to lose him this time.”

“I think coming back from the grave will be enough of a spectacle,” he said. “Speaking of which, how are you going to explain me to your friends when we arrive? I’m guessing you haven’t told them?”

Rey sighed and rested her head against his chest. “I’ll figure something out. To start, I’ll have Finn meet us at the landing pad alone so things don’t go mad from the start. We can work from there.”
They paid one final visit to Vassik’s clinic before leaving. He sold them enough medical and infant care supplies to last a lifetime and made a show of their departure. Rey wasn’t sure which he would miss more: them or the bills they always racked up, but he sounded at least partly sincere.

“One more thing before you go,” Vassik said, once he’d finished their checkups. “It occurred to me that having the child’s ventilator in her cradle can be a bit inconvenient, especially if you wish to take her on a stroll without it. To remedy this, I ordered her a compact breathing apparatus to use throughout the day whenever she seems out of breath or makes any troubling noises.” He pulled a box out of a drawer and unwrapped a transparent mask shaped to fit over the lower half of a humanoid face with a compact filter over the nosepiece. “It’s a bit large, but it should still work for her and she can grow into it.” He handed it to Rey.

Without turning it on, she placed it over Lyris’s mouth. It covered her entire face. Lyris grunted and tried pushing it off and when Rey slipped it into her bag, she stared daggers at the pocket it had been placed in.

“You’ll get used to it, sweetheart,” Ben said before pulling out his credit chip and handing it to Vassik, who was chuckling at her little tantrum.

“Despite their helpless nature, human offspring are a true delight,” Vassik said, wiggling a paw within Lyris’s reach. She took it and bit down on a hairy finger, made a face, then cried out angrily at the taste of it. Vassik wiped the paw on his clothes and laughed even louder. “Nice try, little one.” He patted her head.

“Sorry, she’s been doing that a lot lately.” Rey slipped her back into her sling. “Curiosity I guess.”

Vassik nodded. “She is definitely curious. I swear those watchful eyes of hers could pierce durasteel. She’ll certainly make up for her size with her wit.”

They parted with mutual gratitude and well-wishes before hauling their purchases back to the Falcon. Perhaps they would return one day. The confidentiality policy might come in handy again.

As they walked back through the woods toward camp, Rey carefully admired and memorized each notable detail, from the craggy black trees to the insects buzzing through the air, and the light spray of rain she felt on her face. Cendril didn’t seem so terrible now that she was bidding it farewell. She plucked a leaf as a souvenir, admiring the purple veins scattered across the slick surface.

Before they entered hyperspace, Rey turned back to give the moon one final look. It seemed that every place she left behind—Jakku, Ach-to, Coruscant, even Mustafar—left a bittersweet longing in her chest. Her memories of the harder times dimmed while the good shined brighter than ever, calling her back as if she could relive them. Perhaps it would always be like that. Maybe that’s how it was meant to be. Considering how hard and stagnant her early life had been and how complicated her life had become, she had no idea what to consider normal.

The future was so uncertain in comparison, like stepping out into darkness. But at least now she had Ben by her side to anchor her.

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The view of Kashyyk was a welcome sight, yet strangely similar from where they’d come as if Cendril was its cold, shrunken, shadow.

They flew over the marshes and the sprawling mountain range that pierced the hovering wisps of cloud to touch down on the landing pad at the edge of the forest. Nearby was a small cluster of ships
consisting of stolen Imperial vessels and the precious few starfighters that had survived the initial attacks on the Resistance. Many bore mismatched patches and the burnt scars of close encounters, but they appeared to be well-maintained.

Finn was standing at the edge of the landing pad, leaning against an x-wing, likely unprepared for the surprise that awaited him.

Ben pressed the ramp release and tied Lyris’s sling around himself with her inside it, failing to hide his worried expression as Rey led him outside.

Finn ran forward to greet Rey, but when Ben step into view, he reflexively grabbed his blaster and aimed. Before he could pull the trigger, Ben’s hand shot out, causing the weapon to burst into a hail of shrapnel and litter the ground, smoke rising from the shattered pieces.

Lyris shrieked at the sound and wriggled in her sling, her hands grabbing for her father’s protection. Finn stood frozen, trembling. It wasn’t Ben’s power that paralyzed him, but his own shock and fear.

Ben pulled Lyris from the sling and wrapped her in his arms, giving Finn a clearer view. “Be careful where you aim,” he said, his voice low and threatening, almost like his old self.

Rey ran forward to stand between them. “Finn, it’s alright!”

“Why is he here?” Finn staggered back.

“He’s been with me since Hoth. He came because he wants to help.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” His hand hovered over his empty holster, still shaking.

“Because I knew you’d react like this.” She gestured toward him and the broken pieces of his blaster.

“Are you a hostage?” he demanded.

“No, no.” She pressed her hands to her aching forehead. “Listen, things...happened. It’s hard to explain, but,” Rey braced herself for Finn's next reaction, her face flushing and her fingers closing around her necklace. “Lyris wasn’t the only one who took his name. We’re together now. Officially.”

“Together? With Kylo Ren?” A torrent of emotions passed over his face, too muddled for Rey to clearly interpret, but through the Force, she could sense his confusion, anger, and a twinge of betrayal.

Indignation flared in her chest. “I married Ben Solo,” she corrected, her face hard and insistent. “I know it doesn't make any sense, but I love him.” She felt Ben’s heart leap behind her. She hadn’t said it out loud before.

Finn looked between Rey, Ben, and Lyris as if he’s stumbled into some backward dimension. His gaze lingered on Ben, who kept a watchful eye on him. “Rey, if you’re really here of your own free will, then can we talk in private?” Finn asked.

She nodded and turned to Ben. “I'll be right back.” She pulled Lyris out of his arms and kissed his cheek, sensing Finn’s revulsion behind her.

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She followed Finn to a nearby clearing, grass and fallen leaves crunching beneath their feet. It was
hidden by overgrown shrubs with a babbling creek beside them to muffle their voices—the perfect place to hold a private conversation she didn’t wish to have. Regardless, she stepped into it and regarded Finn warily, unsure of where to begin. “Do you want to hold her?” She bounced Lyris on her hip.

“Oh. Of course.” Disarmed by the offer, his furrowed brow relaxed somewhat as he held out his hands.

Lyris scowled between them and whined as she was passed over as a human peace offering, but settled down once Finn smiled at her. “Remember me?” he asked. “I’m your uncle Finn.” Lyris studied him closely, toying with the hand he offered, keeping a stern expression as she examined his palm. Without warning, she jerked it closer and clamped her toothless jaw over the flesh of his palm. Unaffected, Finn let her gnaw at him. He cracked a smile, releasing some of the tension in the air. “May the Force be with us when she grows teeth.” He pulled his hand free and ruffled the curls on her head. “I can see she has your spirit.”

“I suppose I see myself in her, but she certainly favors her father in almost everything.”

The levity in Finn’s expression faded. “Rey, how am I supposed to take this? He kills Han, nearly kills us, steals the throne and then you.” He looked down at Lyris, eyes full of sorrow, perhaps regret. “And when you manage to escape, you’re pregnant and swearing he’d never get his hands on either of you. What am I supposed to think? I’m supposed to let him walk into camp and act like this is normal?”

Rey felt tears sting her eyes, but willed them back. What he said was true, but that wasn’t all of it. She wasn’t some misguided victim who’d crawled back to a monster. He’d done all the crawling back and groveling. “Things have changed, Finn—he’s changed.” She placed a hand on his shoulder. “This is what Leia always wanted. She knew there was light in him still and she was right. It took some digging, but I finally found it, along with many other things I never expected.” Rey recalled the strange facets of the man she’d grown to love: his humor, his gentleness, his burning temper that matched her own.

“Leia was his mother. It makes sense she would love him no matter what and want him back. I’d never fault her for that. But after everything he did...Rey, how do I know he’s really changed? How do I know he hasn’t gotten into your head? I know what he’s capable of—”

She pulled back her hand and curled it into a fist at her side. “Dammit, Finn, he hasn’t brainwashed me. I’ve seen the change for myself and you can too if you give him a chance. Trust me, Kylo Ren is gone.” Lyris whimpered, sensing her frustration.

“I just want to keep you safe,” Finn said.

“So does he. I would be dead if it weren’t for him and so would Lyris. We’ve saved each other so many times that I’ve lost count.

“And he’s such a good father, so sweet and patient. You should have seen how worried he was when Lyris came early. He stayed by my bed for two weeks and gave his own blood for transfusions.

“I can make my own decisions and this one has been made and you’ll just have to learn to accept it. Whether you like it or not, he’s my husband, now. I understand that you’re skeptical—I would be too—but I’m just asking that you give him a chance to prove himself. He wants to help. Technically he already did when he transferred you those credits.”
Finn winced. “Do I really have to thank him for that?”

“It would be polite, but I guess you don't have to.”

Finn looked down at Lyris, who still studied him with an intelligence that seemed beyond her years. “I'll head to camp first and explain things to the others. Somehow.” Lyris grabbed at his jacket, trying to pull off a pocket fastener, then squealed as he handed her back to Rey.

“We'll start unloading the ship and follow you in a bit,” she said.

Finn nodded and disappeared through the trees, his steps uncertain, like he was afraid to leave her.

Back at the Falcon, Ben was loading their most crucial supplies onto the exit ramp. He wore a stubborn expression. Still on edge from having a blaster aimed at him while holding Lyris, Rey suspected. She approached and placed a hand on his back, which was knotted and tense. “Finn's going ahead of us to explain things as best he can before we arrive. Wouldn’t want the whole camp turning on you.”

He exhaled. “I don’t know. They still might. He could be rallying them against me right now, loading their weapons and setting traps. The brave rebel heroes ready to save the damsel from the awful, murderous, irredeemable monster.” he slammed a bag of food packets onto the supply pile, nostrils flaring.

Rey wrapped her free arm around him and pressed her cheek to his back. “It's alright. We can do this.” Lyris made a gurgling sound at the hanging strand of Ben's hair that now reached his shoulders. “See, she believes in you.” Rey chuckled.

“Well, that’s all I really need.” He turned around and slipped Lyris back into the sling he still wore, then pulled Rey into his arms, tucking her head beneath his chin. “Just you and her.”

They followed the pulsing mass of Force signatures through the forest, stepping over rotting logs, and prickly shrubs. It was similar to the forest of Cendril but much larger to suit its enormous natives, with trees spaced far enough apart for the light of the golden sunset to pour in freely through the canopy.

As they neared the camp, Rey could hear the hushed voices of its inhabitants and saw the glow of a bonfire in the distance. As the features of the camp came into view, she realized it looked like any other Wookie village she'd seen during her previous visit. Wooden stairwells wound up the trees to the scattered hive of treehouses half hidden by moss and leaves, with a network of rope ladders strung between them. Around the firepit were stumps and overturned logs serving as chairs. The familiar faces of the Resistance occupied them, along with a few new additions she didn't recognize and a scattering of wookies who towered over the other species. Luke wasn't among them.

Rey and Ben stepped into the firelight, quieting the crowd, save for the brave few who whispered to those close by. Rey paid them no attention. It was obvious they were speaking of her.

Ben, despite his outward civility, was growing increasingly irate as the whispers swelled, closing in on him. She squeezed his hand a little tighter, holding their intertwined fingers where the others could see.

Between two uniformed pilots, Rey spotted the former trooper she'd met on Echo base, the one who'd recognized her from the palace. He gave them a genuine smile and whispered something to the man beside him before catching sight of Finn. He then fell silent, looking unsure of himself. At
least she had one ally among her supposed friends.

Poe was the first to stand and embrace her. “It’s good to have you back.” His casual demeanor seemed to affect the crowd. Many sat easier on their log stools and adopted a kinder expression, ending what had felt like a standoff. Finn, however, stood even more rigid.

Jessika was the next to come forward. She kept her head down, avoiding Ben’s line of sight while throwing her arms around Rey and cooed over Lyris. Rey knew she meant well. She would just need time to come around.

After they had taken their seats on a mossy log and a wookie with chestnut fur offered them each a bowl of stew from the bubbling pot set over the fire, the whispers died down and the onlookers returned to their meals and varied topics of conversation. But even then, Rey caught them stealing glances every so often. She was a public spectacle again, but unlike the imperial court, this crowd didn’t hate her. At least she hoped none of them did.

She pulled herself as close to Ben’s side as she could, with Lyris nestled between them. The food they’d been given seemed more suited to wookies. The portions were enormous and laden with strange spices that tasted alien to her tongue, but she enjoyed it nonetheless and ate all she was given. She would need her strength. She kept one hand in Ben’s and the other she used to shovel hot stew into her mouth, ignoring how it burnt her tongue.

Their meal was interrupted by a tiny cough that started between them then grew into a pitiful wheezing. Lyris was having a fit. It had been awhile since her last, but perhaps the change in climate had set her off.

Ben sprang to her aid, snatching her out of her sling and grabbing the ventilator from Rey’s bag. The crowd hushed and openly stared as he put the mask over Lyris’s face. She coughed, balling his shirt into her tiny fist as she fought to breathe. Holding her to his chest, he gently rubbed her back, encouraging her with quiet words and breathed steadily to demonstrate until her wheezing stopped. Once her lungs rose and fell in sync with his, he removed the mask and she coughed one last time, then released her grip on his shirt, relaxing again. He kissed her head and slipped her back into the sling and resumed his meal, seemingly ignorant of his audience.

Rey knew better. His Force signature was oozing smug satisfaction.

In the corner of her eye, she caught a glimpse of Finn, who seemed relieved, yet baffled. Seeing Ben go from fearsome villain to doting father was certainly a strange sight, especially to someone who only saw him as he once was. She quietly reveled in their little victory and kissed Ben on the shoulder. “Well done,” she whispered.

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By the time the daylight had run out, leaving only the moons, stars, and dying fire to light the camp, most had finished their meals and left for their treehouses. Few seemed eager to stick around. That wasn’t like them.

They had every right to hate and fear him, Rey reminded herself. They just needed the opportunity to see him for what he truly was.

It was then that she heard a familiar growl. Ben’s head lifted as well, searching for the source. The door of one of the larger treehouses nearest to the ground swung open and Chewbacca stepped out into the evening air. He had a female wookie beside him and his hand on the shoulder of a smaller, wiry-haired wookie. It was Malla and Waroo, his family.
Rey’s joy was overshadowed by the panic she felt shoot through Ben. His face froze in uncertain fear and shame and he slunk back a few steps, away from the revealing firelight.

Chewie approached with Malla and Waroo close behind. He greeted Rey with a friendly growl and bent down to face Lyris. She clung to Rey’s shirt, wide-eyed. Chewie lowered his voice to a register that was obviously meant to be soothing but did little to ease her fear. She’d never seen anyone larger than her father.

“This is my daughter, Lyris.” Rey glanced back at Ben. “Our daughter. I’m guessing Finn told you about her by now.”

Chewie looked to where Ben stood in the shadows, then told her he’d been informed of his arrival and reason for coming. Halfway between an order and a request, he beckoned Ben forward. Ben slowly obeyed, stepping into the light of the bonfire so that Chewie could look him over, while Ben stood frozen, shame and regret pooling in his stomach and seeping from his Force signature to hers.

In his guttural native tongue, Chewbacca welcomed him home. He’d missed him, he said. He was proud of him.

Ben’s stony expression cracked, shifting to one of confusion and disbelief. This obviously wasn’t the reunion he’d expected. In a quick lunge, Chewie embraced him, lifting him off the ground and squeezing hard enough to pop several vertebrae. When he released him with a firm slap on the back, Ben looked like he might fall over, but managed to steady himself.

Ben and Rey spoke in basic and Chewie in shyriiwook as they discussed their time on Cendril, the state of the Falcon, and finally Lyris. With Rey’s blessing, Chewie gathered her into his arms, his claws retracted, and noted that she looked just like Ben had at that age, but perhaps a bit smaller. Once Lyris got over her fear and stopped crying, she began pulling at his hair. Chewie roared softly, pretending to be hurt. She put on a devilish expression and tugged harder.

Waroo, more than double Rey’s age but barely adolescent for a wookie, stepped closer with curious eyes peeking out from his fur. Lyris shook as what she likely saw as a small monster extended a paw and roared happily at her.

It wasn’t long before Malla pointed out how late it was getting. Rey agreed; Lyris needed to get to bed. Chewie offered to help Ben unload the ship.

“We won’t be long.” Ben promised her.

Rey nodded. “We’ll be right here. Take your time.” They had a lot to discuss once they had their privacy.

As soon as Ben and Chewie were out of sight, a few members of the Resistance that had yet to leave for the night finally dared to approach her. They still had that unsettled look in their eyes, for all their warm words and embraces.

They saw her through filtered lenses now that her presence was intrinsically tied to Kylo Ren even more so than before. She wasn’t just the escaped captive of their enemy, she had defended him, pledged her life to his, carried his child in her arms.

Rey wasn’t sure if Lyris was just overwhelmed or if she could sense the tension in the air as well. Clinging to Rey’s shirt, she refused to smile at those gathered around her, which ironically her look even more like her father. Rey hoped the stigma would be wiped by the time she was old enough to understand it.
But perhaps that wasn’t possible. After all, Vader had been long dead but his legacy still managed to twist the life of young Ben from beyond the grave.

Karé Kun was among those who came to welcome her, a pilot who had served alongside Poe in the New Republic Starfleet before they both joined the Resistance. She leaned close to Rey, speaking in a whisper as if Ben was crouching in the bushes nearby, listening in. “So you’re sure you don’t want to bunk with one of us?” she asked.

“Thank you, but no,” she replied, loud enough for the others to hear. “I’m happy to share a room with my husband. That’s what I’ve been doing for ages now, after all.”

They watched her as if they expected her to break out of a trance and beg for a rescue. “So he...treats you well? You really love him?” Karé asked.

“Yes. He loves me and Lyris more than anything.” She smoothed down Lyris’s hair, which had curled in the humid air.

“You’re sure he’s really here to help?”

“I know he is. With the Force—it’s strange, but we can sort of feel each other's thoughts and feelings without even trying. He can’t lie to me; I’m in his head.”

She folded her arms. “And he’s in yours? Poe told us how he can—”

“No. It’s not like that. This isn’t anything like what he did to Poe. It’s just what happens sometimes when two force sensitives interact. Leia and Luke were like that too.”

“Alright,” Jessika said after a long silence. She forced another smile and pulling her into a hug that lacked her usual energy. “Your word on this is good enough for me to sleep easy. I guess this is goodnight.”

“Goodnight.” Rey hugged her back.

The group dispersed, leaving Rey to stare into the remnants of the bonfire, Lyris fast asleep in her sling. She extinguished the smoldering embers with the heel of her boot.

When Ben returned, carrying an armload of supplies, it felt like some of the clutter of his mind were cleared away. His conversation with Chewie must have gone well. If only she were so lucky.

After bidding Chewie goodbye, she led Ben by the hand up into the cluster of treehouses, ignoring the concerned looks she received and the few hateful glances thrown at Ben by those they passed on the rickety walkways.

Entering the treehouse Finn had indicated earlier, she slammed the door behind them. Ben gave her a questioning look, but she ignored it and started into Lyris’s last feeding. He unpacked their things while she patted Lyris’s back, wiped her dribbling chin, changed her before placing her into her incubator for the night with a farewell kiss.

Having been made large enough for a wookie, the bed could certainly fit the two of them. Rey slumped down onto it and began peeling off her clothes and tossing them into a pile on the thatched floor. Ben sat beside her. “You don’t need to get mad at them for my sake,” he said, “and I don’t want your relationships to be ruined because of me. I’m here to help, not fracture the rebellion.”

“This wasn’t how I pictured our arrival. I knew there would be some hesitation to trust you, but...” Rey ran her hands over her face, sighing. “I guess I was just being naive. I should have expected
“They’ve been looking at me like that since I landed on Hoth. Granted, there was more reason to be concerned at that point, but being treated like some fragile, helpless thing...it’s insufferable. And it’s not like many of them know me all that well besides Finn and Poe since I hadn’t stayed with them for long before leaving to find Luke. I care for them and I care for their cause, but pity can’t replace comradery.”

“You’re right,” he moved his hand to her shoulder and traced his thumb along her collarbone. “I guess we’ll have to give it time. You’ll prove your agency and I’ll do my best to prove I’m not going to murder them all. Although, I might fall short of that promise if anyone points a blaster near Lyris again or tries to take either of you away from me.” He chuckled darkly before trailing off. “Sorry. I shouldn’t joke about that.”

Rey turned, placing her hand on his chest. “It’s alright. I understand.” She removed his shirt for him and added it to her pile on the floor.

“Ready for bed, then?” He asked as she went for his trouser clasp.

She smiled and lifted a brow. “Almost.” She pushed him back onto the lumpy mattress and slip off his trousers.

“These huts don’t look very thick walls,” he said. “Are you sure you want to do this here?”

As an answer, she crawled onto his lap, grabbing onto him. He sat up to face to look her in the eyes as she straddled him. “Rey, what if someone hears us? You aren’t exactly quiet. Neither am I, admittedly.”

“You want me to stop?” she asked.

“No. Just asking.” He took her by the hips and entered her with a quick thrust.

She gasped, digging her nails into his back. He knew just what she needed. This wasn’t a night for gentle foreplay; she needed a quick, rough release of the day’s pent up anger. They both did.

The last time he’d taken her like this was after a particularly aggravating day of training. They had thrown aside their poles and turned their bed into a training field instead.

“I doubt they’ll hear us over the sound of the forest at night, anyway; there’s always some animal or insect making a racket. This is more of a personal statement.” She bit down on his shoulder, just hard enough to leave a mark. Always the masochist, he moaned and clasped her tighter as she worked her way up his neck and to his ear. “If they do hear, so be it,” she whispered. “I can damn well sleep with my husband without someone swooping in to save me.”

He chuckled and rolled on top, pressing her into the mattress beneath him, thrusting deeper.

“Agreed,” he said through clenched teeth.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and took his face in her hands. “You’re mine, remember? Nothing they say or think changes that.”

He bent down to kiss her, biting her lip and tangling his tongue with hers before pulling back, panting, sweat beading his face. He flashed a crooked grin. “I love you too.”
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Ben and Rey begin to find their place within the ranks of the Resistance as they plan their next mission, but Rey's mind is elsewhere. Her daughter's safety and the implications of her vision plague her. There is also the matter of Luke, whom she knows she must confront over the fate of her parents.

Rey emerged from their treehouse with Ben at her side and Lyris slung across her. The light filtered through the canopy to glint off the rainwater that had collected on the leaves and moss that surrounded them in shallow puddles and spatterings of dew. The air smelled of wet soil and decaying trees, a foreign smell to Rey's nose she had grown to like, and the abundance of oxygen provided by the endless greenery cleared her sleep-addled mind. Gripping the wooden railing and looking down to the clearing below, she found that they had not been the first to awaken.

Their band of fifty or so rebels was huddled in a circle, their voices rising through the trees in a faint whisper. Whatever they were saying, it seemed of great importance, with Poe doing most of the talking. Leadership apparently hadn't gone to his head; he looked every bit the capable rebel leader without losing a spot of his approachable, charismatic charm. The only difference Rey could spot was that, along with with a few more burns and tears, his old uniform now had several more badges pinned to his breast, likely to signify his elevated position.

“My mother would be proud of him,” Ben said, leaning over the rail beside her. “I can’t say I like him—which is a biased opinion, I'll admit—but I can say he is everything my mother ever wanted in a son: a daring ace pilot to follow in their rebel footsteps, a man others gladly follow and admire. And I’ve been in his head, so I know it isn’t an act—he really is that insufferably perfect. She deserved to have a son like him.”

“Stop it.” She tugged front of his shirt and looked him straight in the eye. “Ben, she would be proud of you too. It isn’t about what anyone deserves. She wouldn’t have traded you for the galaxy and neither would I.”

A hint of a smile shone through his somber expression. He pulled her close and buried his face in her hair. “Thank you. Now, are you ready to go down there and face them?”

“Yeah, I’m ready.” She adjusted her tunic to cover one of the pink marks Ben had left on her skin the night before. Unlike her loose, breathable tunic and tights, his layers of gray covered all she’d left on him, save for the small mark on his neck that peeked out from under his cloak. She smiled to herself. They probably wouldn’t notice it.

As Rey descended the staircase, snippets of conversation reached her ears. Something about an outpost, weapons, security. They were planning something.

“What’s the mission?” Rey asked once she and Ben touched solid ground.

They crowd turned toward them, falling silent, their faces uncertain. Many looked to Poe to await his judgment.
Poe cleared his throat. “It’s a weapons manufacturing outpost. We have the location and we’ve been planning the operation for weeks now. We’re going to shut it down and free the people in the labor camp that surrounds it.”

“How can we help?” Ben asked. His tone was nothing but cordial, but Rey knew he was baiting them, daring them to refuse his help. It seemed to work. Fear and uncertainty emanated from the crowd. Many shot him distasteful looks, and others turned back to Poe, no doubt hoping for an official rejection.

“Well, I’ve seen what you’re capable of,” Poe said, cracking a wry smile. “As long as you’re on our side, I think we’ll have a great shot at pulling this off.”

“What?” came a shout from behind Poe. It was a male abednego named Oddy Muva, whom Rey had met briefly once before. “We’re just going to bring him along into enemy territory and let him run wild? How can we trust him?”

“You want to turn down the help two Force-users?” Wexley asked. “I don’t know about you, but I plan to live through this mission and if that means going in with him, then I’ll do it.”

“Who’s going to watch him?” Karé Kun asked. She leaned on Wexley’s shoulder and glared at Ben like he was a gnaw-jaw that had snuck into their camp to devour them all.

“I will,” Finn cut in, raising his voice over the rest. “Wexley’s right. We need the help. I’ll add him to my team.”

“And what will this team be doing?” Ben asked.

There was a bit of grumbling from the crowd, but Poe silenced them with a firm wave of his hand. “I’ll just lay it all out,” he said, beckoning Rey and Ben forward.

They took a seat on a wide stump within the inner circle of the gathering. A few shifted uneasily beside Ben but managed to tolerate his proximity as Poe went over the plan.

“Like I said, we will be infiltrating a weapon manufacturing plant on Vorsik. It’s a fairly new facility and Hux has brought in a bunch of prisoners to work it. One team—mine—will clear out and liberate the work camp surrounding the building while two other teams deal with the situation inside. That’s one team to shut down production and another, smaller team to sneak in to disable their security and communications so they can’t call for backup. Finn is leading the team to clear out the plant. Are you in, Ben?” He spoke his name with confidence, but it seemed unnatural coming from him.

“Of course,” Ben said.

“What about me?” Rey asked. “Where am I needed?”

They looked at her as if they’d forgotten she was there. They’d all been focused on Ben.

“I’m glad for the help, but what about the baby?” Poe asked. “Will she be alright staying behind?”

Rey gazed down at Lyris’s dark, curly head resting against her. Her entire life, Rey had always been able to jump into any situation she pleased with only her own safety to consider, but now she had a fragile little life tethered to hers that needed protecting. Just the thought of leaving her for even a moment resurrected the hellish vision from the night of her birth; the fire, the heavy breathing, Lyris’s screams.

No. She couldn’t let her fear immobilize her. Just like Ben had said, visions from the Force could be
misleading. She had to focus on the current task and do what was right.

“Do you know long will this mission take?” Rey asked. Vassik had sold her a large amount of the nutritional packets he’d given Lyris during the two weeks Rey had been asleep, in case her milk stopped or some other emergency arose. Those could feed her for a while.

“It should only take two or three days at most, less if everything goes according to plan,” Poe said. “The system is a short jump away and the facility’s pretty small.” Poe gestured those around him. “We don’t exactly have the numbers for larger operations.”

“So this really is everyone we’ve got?” Rey asked. They really did need her and Ben’s help.

Poe nodded solemnly and Oddy Muva spoke up beside him. “Ziff and L'ulo on a supply run right now, but other than them, this hideout is all we have.”

A vein bulged in Ben’s forehead. Even without reaching through the Force, Rey could read his thoughts on his face; for every life, he’d taken, Hux would pay tenfold. That notion, at least, served as a unifying cause between him and the Resistance. Hopefully, it would be enough.

“I have milk replacement packets for Lyris and a medical droid to monitor her,” Rey said. “I just need someone to watch her when she isn’t in her incubator.”

From the cluster of wookies near the back of the group came Chewbacca’s low growl. Malla was staying behind with Waroo. She could look after Lyris. When Ben had been an infant, she’d looked after him on the odd occasion, so she knew how to take care of a human child.

Ben colored slightly at having his childhood mentioned, but then thanked Chewie for the offer. He then turned to Rey. “Will you be alright with that?”

“I think so.”

“Alright!” Poe clapped his hands together. “One more for the mission. How would you feel about joining the recon team?”

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With the addition of Rey and Ben, they spent the remainder of the morning making changes to the mission tactics while snacking on the leftover stew from the night before. One the new plan was agreed upon, the crowd dispersed with each member leaving to fulfill their duties before takeoff.

Just when she was about to take Lyris to Malla, Rey spotted something metallic high up in the canopy. It was Threepio. He shuffled awkwardly across the walkway toward a small treehouse near the top, one of the wooden stew bowls in his hands. “Luke,” she whispered.

“What?” Ben followed her line of sight. “Oh. I see. That must be where he’s hiding.”

Rey swallowed hard. “I need to go speak with him before we leave. If I don’t do this now, I'll just be distracted during the mission.”

“I think you're right. Need me to come with you?”

She shook her head. “Thank you, but no.” Her fingers felt numb interlocked with his. She pulled them free and handed over Lyris. “I won’t be long.”

Rey made her way back up the stairs, winding round and round the thick tree trunk, keeping one
hand pressed against it to steady herself. The bark was abrasive against her palm and so brittle that flakes of it fell away as her fingers skid across it. Once she reached the level of the canopy that Luke’s treehouse was located, she pulled back her hand and saw that it was stained green from bits of moss she’d passed over. She wiped it on her leg. As she crossed rope bridge to Luke’s doorstep, her legs felt shakier that rickety planks beneath her feet.

It looked like any other treehouse in the hideout, but a sense of cold isolation hung over the place as tightly as the creeping vines and moss, chipping away at what little resolve she had. She felt Luke’s signature behind the door which she guessed he rarely opened. Even here, he remained in exile.

The door was unlocked and creaked sharply as she drew it open. The room she looked just like his hut on Ach-to or his converted storage closet on Hoth, with his few belongings tossed into small piles. His clothes was a bit worn, his beard had gained a few inches, and his bore a few more lines but fundamentally, he hadn’t changed at all. He wasn’t just a man caught up in the past, but one altogether disconnected from reality.

After a moment of her standing there with only Artoo and Threepio silently acknowledging her, Luke's eyes finally rose to meet hers.

There was no point in pleasantries. They would only delay her and be ignored by him. “Has anyone told you where Ben and I have been for the last few months?” she asked. Luke stared at her but didn’t reply or even shift his ragged expression. “We were on the forest moon of Cendril—black trees, ash-like pollen, fueling station. Do you know what Ben told me, what he showed me there?”

Luke shrunk even further into his seat and squeezed his eyes shut.

“He brought me to the crash site,” Rey said in a harsh whisper. “He told me what you did.”

Luke pried open his eyes, their brilliant blue seemingly into into a dull grey to match the rest of him. “Rey, I didn’t mean—”

“I know. It was an accident,” she snapped back. “One you chose to keep it me, even after you realized who I was. You felt it when I arrived on Ach-to, didn’t you? Isn’t that what you were going to tell me on Hoth, after you told me we were a family now?”

He winced and nodded. “Yes. I knew then who you were.”

“Offering yourself as a replacement for the one you took?” Her tone laced with venom but choked by tears. “You let me sit on that blasted planet for weeks, begging you to return to the Resistance. You let me go on wondering and hoping for a family that had been dead for years.”

“I’m so sorry. I should have told you myself. I shouldn’t have waited,” he said, hanging his head.

What little manners she had told her to return his apology with forgiveness, but she knew it would be a lie if she gave it now. No matter how pitiful and broken he seemed, she couldn't do it. “Back on Hoth, when we talked about Ben, you said my forgiveness was mine to give. Well, I’m afraid I need some time.” She knew it made her a hypocrite. She had forgiven Ben and was asking others to do the same, but she was unable to forgive this shattered husk of a man. She felt sick.

“I understand,” he said. Somehow his complacency made it worse.

This had been a bad idea. Her mind and heart were even more of a mess than they were before, like a tangle of wires ripped out and reconnected in all the wrong places. She remembered his instruction to clear her mind and search for the correct path, but for now, that seemed as impossible as clearing the forest outside into a flat plain.
For now, there was no right path as far as he was concerned. Before either of them said anything more she might regret, Rey left the room.

Waiting for her on the rope bridge was Ben, with Lyris peeking out of the dark folds of her sling with a serious expression, likely sensing the frustration that poured from Rey’s Force signature.

“Are you okay?” Ben asked. He kept himself at a mental distance instead of diving in to see for himself.

“I don’t know, honestly. It’s just—I need time to think. But thank you.” She walked toward him, away from the haze of despair behind her. The bridge beneath them swayed to the rhythm of her heavy footsteps as she hurried to bury her face in his chest and wrap her arms around him. Lyris made a small, discontented sound as she was caught between them. Ben hushed her with a kiss on her curl-covered head.

“We need to go get her supplies from the ship. I left the milk packets in the Falcon’s storage room and she’ll need more clothes.”

“Alright, but if you want to talk, I’m right here.” He tilted her chin up to face him. “Always.”

Unable to translate her emotions into words, she instead opened her mind, letting it mesh with his in silent understanding. He hugged her a little closer, despite Lyris’s protests. His presence in her mind was like a balm, soothing and healing as he shared the burden of her thoughts.

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As Rey and Ben returned to camp, their arms full of everything Lyris could conceivably need in their absence, they were met in the clearing by the former stormtrooper who’d noticed Rey the night before.

“It is great to see you again, My La—Rey! Rey. Sorry.” He shook his head, chuckling at his blunder. He seemed far more at ease than Rey remembered, despite all that had happened since they’d last met. The rigid, practiced mannerisms that so often came from stormtrooper training had fallen away like a shed skin, leaving him bright and vibrant.

Rey smiled. “No, it’s alright—ah, have you chosen a name yet?”

“Oh, yes. It’s Sev. You see, my designation was FN-7727, so I just shortened the seven,” He said. His regulation haircut had grown out along with his grey-flecked beard. While he seemed younger in spirit, he looked to be nearing forty.

“Well, it’s a pleasure to be properly introduced, Sev,” Rey said. “Ben, Sev was a stormtrooper assigned to the Imperial Palace on Coruscant. He recognized me when I arrived on Hoth.”

Sev smiled warily at Ben and bowed his head. “Your Majesty.”

Ben nodded in return. “Was there something you needed to talk about?”

Sev slipped his hand into his jacket. “Yes. I have something for you.”

Instinctively, Ben’s hand shot to his blaster, but before he’d even drawn it from the holster, he let his arm fall limp at his side. Sev had indeed taken out a weapon, but not to use against him. It was the crossguard saber, the one Ben had relinquished and supposedly lost on Hoth. He held it out to him.

“Where did you get that?” Ben whispered, taking it and looking it over like he hardly recognized it,
staring in disbelief.

“Arana was working in storage when the base was hit,” Sev replied. “It was one of the few items he saved. Like all of us, he had thought you were the one behind it all and didn’t want you to come looking for it. But now that that’s clearly not the case, I convinced him to hand it back over. You might need it on the mission.”

“And the others were okay you giving me this?”

Sev shrugged. “There were some objections, but ultimately, we agreed that is you wanted us dead, you could accomplish that just as easily unarmed.”

“Fair enough,” Ben said. “Thank you for giving it back.”

“You are most welcome.” Sev bid them goodbye and left to finish the last minute checkups on the ships, leaving them alone in the clearing.

“Ben?” Rey placed a hand on his shoulder. “Are you alright?”

“I—I’m fine. In just wasn’t expecting that. And seeing it again after all that’s happened...I was a different person when I made this. Angry. Misguided.” He let out a long breath.

“Do you want to use your family saber instead?” Rey asked.

He shook his head. “If you think mine holds bad memories, you should hear the stories behind that one. I’m fine using this one.” He slid it into his belt beside his blaster.

She took his hand and pressed a kiss to his knuckles. “Alright. We’ll both get to put our training to good use then.”

“But only as a last resort. If we just go in swinging and leave a witness, we risk exposing ourselves. Hux would do everything he could to hunt us down. We need to stay dead.”

“Agreed. Only for emergencies. Good thing we practiced with blasters too.”

....

“So you’re sure you’ll be alright looking after her while i’m gone?” Rey asked.

Malla towered over her, silken arms outstretched to take Lyris. She’d handled human children before, she assured her. Little Ben had been a handful, but a delight to look after. That was ages ago, but only a small stretch of time in the long lifespan of a wookie.

“But she’s much more fragile than Ben was, remember.” Rey hated how desperate she sounded, but she couldn’t help but be nervous. Until now, she’d never stepped more than a few meters away from Lyris, yet here she was handing her over to a member of a species known for harsh tempers and removing limbs while she went off on a dangerous mission off-planet. But Malla was no threat. Anyone looking into her gentle eyes could see that.

Malla acknowledged Lyris’s handicaps and repeated them in detail along with the procedure for dealing with each one; the incubator to monitor her during the night and regulate her vitals, the supplements to help her grow, the ventilator in case she had difficulty breathing.

“Mistress, I will be here as well to assist in the event of an emergency,” DeeTee added. He’d been activated and brought over along with the rest of Lyris’s supplies. He hovered, weighed down
slightly by the battery that hung from his round body.

Waroo was couched beside his grandfather, Attichitcuk who was asleep in his patchy armchair, his toothless mouth hanging open as he snored. As strange and feral as they seemed, they were part of a real family. There was no better place to keep Lyris.

Rey’s chest tightened and her eyes burning, no matter how convinced she was of her decision. “Alright,” she said. “I trust you.” She handed Lyris over, feeling the weight of her absence immediately. “I’ll come back for you, little starlight, I promise.”

Rey paused at her own words. They had flowed naturally from her lips, but their source seemed peculiar, pulled from some distant memory—one she’d relived during her vision on Takodana. At least she thought it was a memory. It certainly echoed her parents’ broken promise. The same promise she now made.

But she would not allow history to repeat itself. She would come back.

Malla roared softly down at Lyris, handling her with a deft care that few would believe a creature of her size was capable of. Lyris stared wide-eyed and curious, scrunching her little nose, but didn’t cry out. It seemed she was getting used to wookies. She certainly would within the next couple of days.

“I should go now,” Rey said.

Malla nodded, growling in agreement. Behind her, Waroo stood and approached. In a soft, uncertain voice, he asked Rey to look after his father.

“I don’t think he’ll need my help, but I promise to watch out for him,” she replied. “And we shouldn’t be gone long.”

Warro ran up to her and wrapped his hairy arms around her waist, squeezing her as tight as he could. He had yet to achieve his father’s strength.

Waroo had said goodbye far too many times. When Rey had brought Chewie back so many months before, he’d told her of the long separations from his family due to the oppression the old Empire had imposed on the planet, enslaving the wookies and cutting them off from the rest of the galaxy. He and Han had fought to end the tyranny, and succeeded, but had still left scars on Kashyyyk and it’s inhabitants, especially on the young and vulnerable like Waroo.

She hugged him back. This was why she was fighting. She had to ensure that families such as these, including the one she and Ben had formed, could live in peace. No matter how confused and conflicted she was about nearly everything else in her life, she knew for certain that this was the right path to follow.
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

Rey and Ben join in on their first mission with the surviving members of the Resistance.

“I’ll meet you back here once our jobs are done.” Ben kissed her softly once more, barely brushing his lips against hers. “And we can resume this once we return to Kashyyyk,” he whispered. “But now we need to get out there and make Hux wish he’d died on the floor of our throne room all those months ago.”

At Poe’s command, those leaving for the mission had exchanged their usual flight suits and civilian clothing for stolen imperial uniforms. They were identical in cut and fabric to those worn under Ben, but now they bore a flaming red patch on the shoulder—the same symbol the First Order had used which Hux had reclaimed as his own. The slivers of white pointing toward its center resembled the mouth of a rathtar ready to devour the galaxy.

The electrical technician uniform Rey wore sat uneasily on her body, sagging in the waist and bunching up in the joints. Only the belt kept in in place. The Resistance was limited to what they’d been able to steal, so there were few sizes to choose from.

The fit of Kylo’s disguise seemed to have the opposite problem. They’d given him the largest one they had, but even so, the torso of his fleet engineer uniform was stretched tight over his shoulders and his wrists peeped out of the gaps between his cuffs and gloves. But at the very least, it came with a helmet to hide his face and a large trouser pocket to hide his saber. Rey kept her own hidden in the largest of the compartment of her utility belt.

Nearby, Finn seemed to be struggling with his own engineering disguise, fiddling with the snaps half-heartedly and staring down at his feet.

“Is everything alright?” Rey asked, leaning close to keep their conversation as private as possible, but it hardly seemed necessary. Those around them seemed thoroughly occupied by their pre-mission duties.

Finn flinched as the sound of her voice pulled him back to the present. “Oh, hey! Yeah, I’m alright, it’s just I’m still not used to putting these things on.” He closed the final clasp and dusted off the front of it. “You need something?”

“No, I was just wondering how we’re going to get past the planetary shields,” Rey said. “Surely, just looking like an imperial inspection crew and flying their ships won’t guarantee us entry.”

Finn cracked a smile. “Of all people, I assumed you would know the answer to that. It was you who got us those codes after all.”

It took a moment for Rey to make the connection but that day on Coruscant—the one she had hoped to forget—resurfaced. “Hux’s code cylinder? It made it off Echo Base?”

“Sure did, thanks in part to myself. Leia handed it off to me right before I took off. Right before the base was destroyed.”
Pride bloomed in Rey’s chest. Her attempts at espionage hadn’t all been failures. “But wait. How has Hux not realized you’re using his own codes against him?”

“Well, you see, we only use those codes whenever we aren't planning to leave anything behind. If we leave a data trail or any witnesses who could lead the Empire back to us, it’s all over. We’ve been lucky so far and they haven’t caught on, but each mission is a risk. That’s where your team comes in. If we don’t disable their communications and wipe their databases, they could get word back to the capital and our cover would be blown. Or worse, they could call in reinforcements.”

“I’ll make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Alright! Let’s get moving!” Poe called out from atop an Imperial shuttle, one hand casually gripping the wing to steady himself. It seemed unfair how well his Imperial captain’s uniform fitted him. Even dressed as the enemy, he managed to look heroic.

…. They split into two groups, one heading for the facility and the other for the work camp. After exchanging goodbyes with those assigned to the opposite vessel, they began boarding the shuttles. Rey and Ben found a seat beside Sev who, like her, was disguised as a technician. It was a relatively small craft, but large enough for the others to keep a casual distance from the three of them. Sev didn’t seem to take notice of the slight.

“I spent so much of my life aboard these things,” Sev said, running his hand over the black interior. “I might have been aboard this very ship for all I know. Who would have guessed I would be repairing it for the Resistance?”

“You repaired this ship?” Rey asked.

“And just about every other vessel we have,” Sev replied. “I was trained as a starship mechanic during my time in the Stormtrooper Corps. There were always jobs that needed doing, so why not put the men they’d stolen to good use when they weren’t sending us off to die?” He shook his head reflexively as if to keep the memories from creeping back into his mind. “But I liked being a mechanic. It was good to do something with my hands that didn’t involve killing. At least not directly. It didn’t feel like it at the time, but being assigned to guard duty on Coruscant was probably the best thing that ever happened to me. It eventually allowed me to escape, but most importantly, It didn’t involve civilians. No burning villages, no blaster fire, no innocent lives lost. Just a bunch of self-important pricks ordering me around.”

Ben raised a brow. “So you join up with the Resistance and start fighting all over again? Why not go out and start a new life for yourself?”

Sev smiled wistfully. “I almost did. I wanted to disappear and work as a mechanic somewhere the war couldn’t touch me. Somewhere I could forget all this madness. But I realized that wasn’t an option. I have too many years of service to atone for, so here I am, back to fighting so others won’t have to. I couldn't turn my back on the galaxy when I have the chance to make a difference.”

“That’s very brave of you, Sev.” Rey placed a hand on his shoulder.

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“Thank you. But don’t forget your own bravery. I heard the gossip and saw how you handled yourself in court. And I admired your willingness to sacrifice your freedom for the safety of your friends. Along with Finn’s growing legend, I think you may have inspired me too, in a way. And now that I’ve had the chance to speak with you face to face, I know for certain I would have been proud to call you my Empress had we both stayed where we were. Perhaps someday I still can, My
Lady,” He bowed his head courteously.

“Sev, I told you, It’s just Rey.”

Sev’s tan cheeks turned red. “Right. Sorry. I just got caught up for a moment there. Old habits.”

Rey pondered Sev’s words. Ben had spoken of reclaiming his throne and seating her beside him, but getting the Resistance to go along with that sounded like an impossible fantasy. For now, it didn’t matter who filled the Imperial seat of power as long as it wasn’t Hux. After they’d shattered his regime, they would pick up the pieces and find a way to bring the galaxy back into relative peace.

Absolute peace would never be an option. Rey knew the nature of sentient life all too well to believe that. They would always need to fight for freedom. Even the Jedi, the mythic paragons of justice, were known best by their choice of weapon.

Rey felt Lyris’s signature growing farther and farther away, tugging at her heart, as they neared Vorsik. Her safety would always be worth fighting for. And so was Ben’s. She would have to part with him as well once they reached the planet.

She needed to concentrate. Closing her eyes, she slowed her breathing, seeking clarity of mind. Ben could handle himself and Lyris was in good hands. As for Luke, there was nothing she could do at the moment so there was no sense in dwelling on it, especially when she put her personal grievances up against the survival of those around her.

....

During the hyperspace jump, Rey went to the cockpit where Finn sat beside Wexley at the controls with his helmet on the floor between them. Like Ben, his infamy required a more thorough disguise. Wexley, however, was not so easily recognized and had chosen a captain’s uniform like Poe had. The two of them sat uneasily in their seats, hands resting on their blasters as they stared off into the dizzying rush of hyperspace.

“Almost there?” Rey asked.

Wexley’s head perked up. “Yes, actually.” He checked the navigation panel, “Right about…” He pointed out the viewport and started mouthing a countdown. “Now.”

Just as he predicted, they came to a halt before a small red planet, making him smile at his own precision, or perhaps his blind luck.

Seconds later, their comm channel lit up and a cold voice filled the cockpit. “State your business.”

Wexley cleared his throat and leaned into the transmitter. “Inspection team 359-B, requesting permission to land.” His voice had taken on an air of imperial formality that was completely alien coming from him. It was an impressive mimic. One he seemed to enjoy, judging by the way his mouth curled faintly in amusement.

“We are not scheduled to be inspected for another month,” the voice insisted. “Provide your access codes immediately.”

“I am sending them your way, officer,” Wexley said as Finn pulled the code cylinder from his pocket and inserted it into the scomp link port of the transceiver.

The display flashed green at the successful transmission and the voice returned. “I apologize, sir. The Vorsik Manufacturing Plant is honored by our liege’s presence and is fully prepared to be inspected
on our service to the Empire. Permission to land had been granted.”

“Good. And have all personnel report to their stations for individual inspection—that includes the workers and their overseers. We will be sending the other half of the inspection team to the campsite, so have all the workers report there. And be quick about it. You wouldn’t want to delay His Royal Majesty.”

“No! Of course. I shall personally see to the preparations right away.”

Wexley cut out the signal and chuckled. “I’ll never get tired of that.”

As they neared the planet’s surface, the shuttle carrying the second team split off and turned toward the campsite, carrying twenty Resistance fighters along with it. She could see the camp on the horizon. It was a cluster of black domes beyond a field of towering rock formations, stark against the bright red of the soil and as bleak and unwelcoming as she’d expected. Silently, she called on the Force to aid them, hoping it would decide to listen for once.

Once Rey turned to get a look at her own destination, the camp seemed almost welcoming in comparison. It was a sprawling, black monolith with smoke billowing out of countless exhaust pipes that jutted out of its surface like poisonous barbs. Rising above the black fog was the central control tower which her team would be tasked with taking out. Hux’s appropriated sigil flew above it, whipping frightfully in the dust clouds like a warning.

The landing pad was placed in front of the building and beside it was a line of uniformed officers with their heads high and arms folded behind their backs.

Rey left the cockpit to returned to Ben’s side just as he had taken his helmet into his hands. “Wait, not yet!” She pulled him down into a farewell kiss. He took one hand off the helmet to cup her face and deepen it, letting his teeth rake over her lips as they parted.

Many of those around them looked on with varying degrees of discomfort and or even disgust, but none dared to voice their opinion or let their gazes linger for too long. They simply shoved on their helmets or straightened their uniforms before headed toward the exit.

“I’ll meet you back here once our jobs are done.” Ben kissed her softly once more, barely brushing his lips against hers. “And we can resume this once we return to Kashyyyk,” he whispered. “But now we need to get out there and make Hux wish he’d died on the floor of our throne room all those months ago.”

He slid on his helmet before following the others down the exit ramp which kicked up a cloud of copper dust as it struck the ground. Rey followed joined him, taking her place in the formation outside the ship.

The desert air embraced her like an old friend, flushing her cheeks and beading her neck with sweat. Vorsik’s surface was a russet brown, with little vegetation scattered across its rocky landscape. The clay-rich soil had baked in the twin suns, cracking and splitting into deep fissures, and the stone spires that jutted out of the soil were ringed in thin layers of sediment gleaming in greens, yellows, and golds. Even the smallest tower of rock was as large as a fully-grown wookie and cast long shadows over the ground.

Wexley stepped forward to offer the welcoming party a regulation salute. “Is everyone in place and ready for inspection?” he demanded.

“They are,” replied the officer with the rank of lieutenant emblazoned on his armband. His stiff,
humorless face betrayed a sliver of the panic he felt at facing what he believed to be his superior in direct service to the Emperor. “Might I ask when His Imperial Highness will be joining us?”

Wexley’s expression twitched, a convincing show of displeasure at the man’s eagerness. “When he sees fit, Lieutenant. We will continue with the tedious matters of the inspection until then. He had many forthcoming engagements and follow a gang of technicians around a minor weapon’s outpost would be a waste of energy.” He forced a sigh of dissatisfaction. “But fear not, once you and your men have been thoroughly looked over and granted his approval, he will personally acknowledge your contributions to the Empire. His guards will remain here with him.” He gestured to the two Resistance fighters in trooper armor standing guard outside the empty ship. “Meanwhile, our technicians inspect your exterior and our engineers look over your assembly lines and such.”

The lieutenant nodded sharply. “Yes, captain.”

Wexley brushed past him toward the entrance with a line of twenty-one supposed technicians trailing behind him, Ben included. Rey sent him a silent goodbye through that strange thread of the Force that bound them together.

…. Rey, Sev, and Jessika circled around to the side of the building, their heavy boots kicking up gravel as they walked in formation.

Sev led the party until coming to halt before a chrome ladder bolted to the side of the building. “Here we are,” he said, taking hold of the first rung.

As they ascended the ladder, the smoke spilling over the side of the building’s edge stung her eyes and blurred her vision, forcing her to mainly rely on the evenly placed bars to guide her upwards.

Through the wall before her, she could hear the grinding and screeching of the machines as they made the bombs and blasters Hux would use to murder countless innocents and everyone she loved. The thought inflamed her, pushing her onward.

A rough shuffling sound overhead drew her attention and her hand fell against the smooth durasteel of the building where the next rung of the ladder should have been. Forcing open her eyes, she saw Sev’s feet. They’d reached the top.

Sev offered her a hand to pull her up onto the roof. “According to the schematics, the transmitters for the on-planet communication and security systems should be evenly placed across the roof and that tower holds the transmitter for off-planet communications.” He pointed to where it thrust upward through the smoke. “Someone needs to climb that thing, disable it, and install the jammer in its place.”

“I’ll do it,” Rey offered, raising her voice over the sound of the rushing wind and churning gears.

Sev nodded and handed her the jammer. It was a heavy device that resembled a commlink, but was far thicker and had a series of wires hanging loosely from one end, ready to be plugged into a large power source.

Sev turned to Jessika. “We each need to find three amplifiers—there should be six in total—and meet back here.”

“I think I spotted one already,” Jessika said, pointing into the distance. They all turned and saw the blinking pinpoint of light in the distance that pierced the clouds of exhaust.
“Alright,” Sev said. “When we’ve finished, the three of us will head back to the ship to standby as backup.”

Rey made her way through the pipes and fog toward the communications tower. This would be no different than scaling the wreckage on Jakku, she thought and had a much slimmer chance of collapsing beneath her. The metal rods running between the tower’s three support beams were much wider than that of the ladder that had brought her here, but if she reached as far as her arms would allow, she could climb it just as easily.

Hooking the jammer to her belt, she began her climb, one bar after the other, higher into the polluted air. The thin rods were slick in her sweaty grasp and the wind whipped relentlessly at her body, sending sand particles to scrape at her face and tear at her oversized jumpsuit which billowed around her straining limbs. But with gritted teeth, she pressed on, climbing until the tower narrowed to a single point with a blinking console and satellite atop it. The banner was there as well, flailing wildly, just within her reach. She caught the edge of the fabric and tore it free and tossed into the foggy blackness below.

With one arm wrapped her around the tower support beam, she extended the other toward the console’s circuitry compartment. After opening the circuitry, she removed the cutters from her belt and worked the blades around the biggest cluster of wires and clamped down, nearly losing her balance from the force it took to slice them through. They spewed sparks over her hand, like a beast spitting venom in its death-throes, but she bared down and continued cutting until the last wire was severed.

The lights left the console. The signal was dead, allowing the satellite to be put toward a greater cause. She disconnected the console’s power cord and attached the jammer in its place. It lit up, as did a series of lights on the base of the satellite. Grasping the tower with both hands, Rey let out a sigh of relief. No distress signal would be able to pierce the atmosphere to warn Hux and his minions. For now, they just needed to deal with the immediate threat.

As she worked her way back down the tower, Rey reached through the force, searching for Ben. He was inside the building on the opposite side from where she’d climbed the ladder. The familiar signatures of the Resistance surrounded him. There were also the unfamiliar—the imperial officers Wexley’s team was meant to be appraising. The longer she climbed, the more of the unfamiliar signatures were snuffed out. The Resistance was winning, she realized. She could feel the victory rising in Ben’s chest.

Then something burst, searing through Ben’s mind and bleeding into hers, nearly sending her tumbling down to the roof to be impaled on the jagged exhaust pipes. She clung to the tower with both arms and legs, trying to pry her way back into Ben’s mind.

She found pain and the smell of blood. His own blood. It was wet on his face and head which was no longer covered by his helmet. She felt the shattered pieces of the tinted transparasteel clinging to his hair.

“Ben!” she shouted into the fog, too disoriented to care who heard her.

She fumbled down the rest of the way down, trembling with panic. Her team was standing at the bottom of the tower to meet her, likely drawn by her call.

“What’s wrong?” Sev asked. “What’s happening to Ben?”

“I don’t know. I can’t feel him properly. He’s hurt. We need to go.”
Jessika reached for her shoulder. “But Rey—”

Rey snatched her arm away and tore off through the smoke toward the opposite side of the building—toward Ben. She heard the shouts of her teammates and then their hurried footsteps once she failed to answer.

Eventually, she stopped, lungs aching. He was right below her through endless layers of metal. She scanned the rooftop. There had to be a way into the building.

After a moment of searching, drawing on the Force to enhance her senses, she found it—a small hatch built into the flat metal of the roof. She jerked it open and jumped in without looking and landed on her feet with a thud that shook through her calves.

She was in a narrow hallway with a blaring alarm bouncing off the reinforced walls to rattle her eardrums. Ben was still many floors down, but she could hardly feel him past the pain and fog that clouded his mind.

She jumped at the sound of Sev’s feet striking the ground behind her, followed shortly by Jessika.

“I need to get to Ben!” Rey shouted over the alarm.

“We’re going with you,” Jessika shouted back.

Rey nodded and turned to continue running, but froze as a band of uniformed officers turned a corner into the hallway, blasters at the ready. She’d been too focused on Ben to take notice of the cluster of twelve Force signatures closing in on her, pulsing with panicked determination. They were heading down to join the fight too, Rey guessed.

The black-clad officer at the head of the group aimed her blaster their way as she led her troop forward. “Identify yourselves!”

“Maintenance staff, Sergeant.” Sev saluted.

“Give me your rank and designation,” the woman said, aiming her blaster at Sev’s head. Her troop crowded in, trapping them from all sides.

Rey felt her stomach drop. They hadn’t been given specific aliases. Just disguises and orders.

After a dreadful pause, in which neither herself or her friends could offer an answer, the Sergeant narrowed her gaze into steely slits and took a step backward. “More imposters. Prepare to open fire.”

“Wait!” Rey shouted. The air shook with an energy that felt strangely familiar, but more powerful than anything she’d ever felt or imagined.

The faces of the officers went slack, their eyes glossed over, and their fingers went limp on their triggers. They weren’t moving. They weren’t frozen in fear as though she held them in place through the Force like Ben had taught her to do. Her hold dipped into their minds, their will grasped between her trembling fingers.

That’s why it felt familiar. It was the same sensation she’d felt when she’d mind-tricked the stormtrooper that had been assigned to her cell on Starkiller so long ago, but she’d somehow extended her reach to the entire group.

“Put down your weapons,” Rey said, carefully enunciating each word, driving each syllable into their skulls.
The twelve blasters clattered to the ground. They stared at her, their hands trembling and empty, their eyes expectant, waiting for orders.

Rey let out a shaky breath. “You.” She pointed toward the Sergeant. “How do I get to the lowest level of the building?”

“Behind you.” The words tumbled from the woman’s mouth, slurred but still comprehensible. “End of the hall. Turbolift,” she blurted out before falling silent once more.

This wasn’t going to last. Rey felt her grip slipping as she fought to hold them all. She scanned the walls, reading the signs posted over the doors until she found what she needed. “There! Go into that storage room, all of you, and lock the door.”

The troop paused, slowly processing her command before obeying it. The Lieutenant typed a code into the wall console beside the door marked “storage” and followed her troop inside it. It slid shut with a mechanical hiss. When Rey ran to check it, she found it was locked.

“What’s happening?” Jessika yelled. “What—how did you?”

“I—I don’t know,” Rey admitted. “I’ve never...not like that.”

“We should go.” Sev nodded toward the turbolift at the end of the hall.

“Right.” Rey ran past them and activate the lift.

As they descended into the bowels of the facility, Rey could feel Ben’s Force signature growing nearer. He was still alive. In fact, his mind seemed to have cleared, the pain and disorientation replaced by rage. She felt his muscles straining, the Force rushing through him. Rey wrung her hands and shifted impatiently as the numbers on the lift counted downward.

When the door slid open, Rey’s gasped at the scene before her. They were in what appeared to be the main manufacturing center. It was filled with a winding assembly line and an enormous power generator that now laid in ruin, sparking and spitting black smoke. Around it, bodies littered the floor, marred by blaster wounds and savage burns. Behind busted helmets and masks of blood, Rey couldn’t distinguish friend from foe.

Those of the Resistance that lived were grouped at the end of the wide room. All eyes were on Ben. He before them, arms lifted into the air, his bloodied face contorted in anger. Held above him by the Force were five officers struggling to free themselves, begging for mercy or shouting curses.

With a swipe of his arms, Ben sent them flying to all corners of the room. Their bodies were shattered against the broken equipment and durasteel walls, before falling the ground in bloodied heaps, their Force signatures extinguished in an instant. Only the crackle of sparking wires and burning equipment filled the room.

“Rey!” Ben’s voice tore through the silence.

He rushed to meet her. Still in shock, she opened her arms to embrace him. The carnage fell away, leaving only the warmth of his touch as he crushed her against him and tucked her head under his chin.

“What happened to you? To everything?” Rey asked.

He pulled back and looked over his shoulder to where Karé Kun sat slumped against the wall, staring at the ceiling and applying pressure to a wounded shoulder. Her Force signature was a pit of
shame and self-hatred so deep, Rey felt she might be sucked into it if she dwelled on it for too long.

“Friendly fire,” Ben said, gripping her shoulders. “Karé thought she could take advantage of the chaos to get rid of me. When my helmet managed to save me, she tried a second time and hit the generator instead. It burst, killing everyone within range, including a few of our own.”

Rey scanned the remaining rebels. Right away, she felt the familiar signatures of Finn and Wexley, but overall there were only seventeen left out of twenty-one. She felt as though someone had emptied a blaster cartridge into her gut.

Ben steadied her and looked her straight in the eye. “This isn't over, Rey. We need to get to the workers’ camp. Something’s wrong.”

Rey stretched her awareness as far as she could manage. Just barely, she could sense a disturbance in the direction of the camp. The pain and panic pierced her mind like needles. There wasn’t much time. “Kriff, we need to go.”

Ben nodded. He raised his voice to reach the ends of the room. “The second team needs reinforcements. Anyone who is willing and able needs to leave with me for the campsite now. Everyone else, get to the ship and lay low.”
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

The battle for Vorsik continues with an injured Ben leading the charge.

Rey sighed and ran her hand against his cheek. “There’s nothing that can stop you is there?”

“Not in the entire galaxy. Except for you.”

In the distance, Rey heard a burst of blaster fire. Ben was at her side, leading the charge with ten others behind them as he wove through the maze of rock formations toward the camp.

Another blast rang out and Rey felt another life extinguish as the shot echoed over and over through the rocky canyons.

Sweat soaked her uniform. Red dust flew through the air, bringing tears to her eyes as she ran until it felt like her legs might give out, avoiding the deep fissures that cut through the rocky ground. But she was no match for Ben’s long strides. His blood-soaked hair whipped behind him and his breath came out in hot bursts through flared nostrils and clenched teeth. He passed her, his arms slicing through the air as he launched himself forward.

He swore viciously as another blast reached their ears. He ripped open his pocket and pulled out his saber.

Rey leaped over a boulder and rushed to his side, nearly tripping in the process. “What are you doing? The officers will recognize you.”

“Doesn’t matter. They’ll all be dead.” He ignited his saber. The tip scraped against the ground, spitting sparks.

There was no stopping him when he was like this. Anyone could see that. Rey almost pitied those on the receiving end of his rage, no matter how much they deserved it.

As they neared the camp, they two of them hid among the surrounding rock formations. As rest of their party caught up and drew their weapons, Rey peeked behind a slab of sediment.

To make way for the campsite, it appeared the terrain had been ground down into a flat stretch of land, leaving no place to hide or take cover. The huts were too far away. Alongside them was their stolen vessel now in ruins. With blasters aimed at their heads, the workers and rebels were held back, like livestock for slaughter. But the officers bore just as many wounds as their captives and four bodies Rey could identify were not of her crew nor did they wear the drab worker's uniforms. The Resistance had put up a good fight.

Blood was invisible against the red soil, but the blaster fire had left burnt halos around the corpses that laid at the feet of the enforcer. Rey recognized a few of the lifeless faces, but many were strangers. Mostly twi’leks and meerians—common targets for slavers.

The enforcer motioned to an officer who then dragged a new victim to the center of camp. It was
Poe. Bruised and disheveled, but alive. Rey heard Finn gasp behind her, then felt fear grip him as Poe was forced to his knees.

The enforcer’s lips spread into a morbid smile. He gripped Poe’s hair with a gloved hand and pressed his blaster between his eyes. “Speak!” His voice made even his own men jump. “Who sent you? Where is your base?”

Poe spat blood at the enforcer’s boots.

He struck him across the temple with his blaster then pressed it back against his head. “Last chance, Rebel scum.”

Ben ran out of hiding and swiped his hand through the air, causing the enforcer’s arm to snap back at a gruesome angle. Once Ben released him, the man fell and curled into himself, screaming and clutching his arm. A shard of exposed bone stabbed through the black fabric of his sleeve.

The remaining officers fumbled for their weapons, only to had them ripped away with a wave of Ben’s hand. Those still in hiding came out and took aim the unarmed men. Poe’s team and a few workers joined in, grabbing the fallen weapons to strike back at their tormentors, while those unable to fight retreated.

Ben and Rey relied on their sabers, slashing through the approaching officers. The smell of cauterized flesh and hot blood filled the air. It was over in seconds.

Rey spotted movement among the dead—the enforcer. On hand and knees, he was dragging himself toward a bolder than might serve as cover. Ben formed a fist and dragged the man forward, despite his attempts to dig his nails into the dirt to delay the judgment that awaited him. Ben pressed the heel of his boot into the man’s barrel chest until the air was forced from his lungs.

“Kylo Ren.” He wheezed. “You’re alive.”

“Kylo Ren is dead. My name is Ben Solo.” He plunged his crackling saber through his chest, pinning his corpse to the ground.

Those surrounding him watched in awe as his extinguished his saber as left the man where he lay to return to Rey’s side. Her cupped her face, pressed his head against hers, and reached through the Force to assure himself she was unharmed. She buried her face in his chest and let out a choked sob.

“Is it really you?” a voice beside them asked.

Rey and Ben turned. It was a green Twi’lek shrunken by age and hardship. “You said Kylo Ren was dead, but that face, that saber...”

Ben clutched her hand. “Ben Solo is my true name, but you would have known me as Kylo Ren. I was your emperor and yes, I’m alive. For now, at least.”

The chatter of shock and disbelief swept over the crowd. “The emperor has returned,” someone shouted.

A young human in a threadbare uniform threw himself at Ben’s feet. “Thank you for freeing us, Your Majesty!”

“The true Emperor lives!” An old woman lifted her hands in the air. “He has returned to vanquish the usurper!”
“Is that true?” asked a Meerian girl. Her left eye was bloodied and swollen shut, but the other stared up at Ben, beseeching and hopeful. “Will you put an end to all this?”

Ben scraped back his hair, then wiped his bloody fingers on his jacket. “I will do everything in my power to destroy Hux and everything he stands for. You won’t be slaves again. Not while I’m alive.” He used the same tone he’d used when addressing his subjects on Coruscant. Diplomatic, but fervently sincere. Almost like his mother.

The girl smiled and shook the arm of the man beside her. “All hail the one true emperor!” she shouted.

“Wait, wait.” Ben raised a hand. “These men and women around you deserve credit as well. They aren’t my army, we are members of the Resistance. I’m not your ruler anymore.”

At first, the crowd seemed perplexed but then turned their praises on the members of the Resistance.

A Twi’lek child approached Rey and wrapped her arms around her leg. “Thank you!” she said. The child’s mother scooped her up before thanking Rey herself. “We are forever in your debt.”

“I’m glad we could help.”

At the edge of the camp, Rey spotted another Twi’lek no older than two kneeling over a lump on the ground. Another corpse. As Rey drew closer, she saw the boy was sobbing and tugging at the limp arm of the body, crying out for his mother in Twi’lek.

Rey had heard the language around Niima Outpost and had studies it through holotapes. She announced her presence with a gentle “Hello.”

The boy choked back his tears. “They all gone?”

Rey nodded and offered him a hand. “Yes. They can’t hurt you anymore.”

He stared at Rey’s hand and pulled at his blue lekku. Along with his fingers, they were bandaged with cloth scraps. The facility must have used the children for labor as well.

“Mama gone?” the boy asked.

“Yes. Mama is gone.” She offered her hand again. “I’m sorry.”

A few more tears escaped the boy’s eyes before he wiped them on the back of his hand and followed Rey.

As she led her back to the bustling crowd, the mother and child who had thanked her rushed forward. “Oh, Suli!” the woman cried. “There you are. Here, I’ll take him.”

“Are you family?” Rey asked, placing him in the woman’s arms.

She kissed the boy’s bandaged fingers. “No, but we can be. I knew his mother before we were brought here. I’ll look after him like my own.”

With the child in safe hands, Rey found Ben sitting on a large rock with curious onlookers surrounding him. The bleeding from his head wound hadn’t stopped. It had soaked through his hair and drenched his neck. The dried blood formed a crusty film over his skin and the fresh stream ran hot and sticky down his back.

He looked up at her, but his reaction seemed delayed. He was paler than usual and was breathing
heavily. “We should get to the ship,” he said.

“We need to get you bandaged up.” She tilted his head and parted his hair to get a better look. It was even deeper than she thought. She tore a piece of his jacket’s inner lining to press down and stop the bleeding, then gasped as she felt the small depression in his skull. “Kriff! It’s fractured. We need to hurry.”

Poe winced. “Luke should be able to handle it. He healed Oddy when he broke his arm in three places a couple weeks ago.

“Then let’s get moving.” Rey pulled Ben’s arm over her shoulder and hauled him to his feet.

“Whoa, here, let me help.” Poe lifted Ben’s other arm over his shoulders.

“This isn’t necessary,” Ben mumbled.

“You’ve done enough.” Poe smiled. “I can’t tell you how thankful I am you showed up. You saved us, Ben.”

Ben managed a half smile.

…. 

After the workers gathered up the few belongings they had, they accompanied the Resistance survivors on the arduous trek back to the factory.

Flames flickered over the rocky skyline and smell smoke polluted the air. The fire from the generator must have spread. As they turned the final bend, thy saw the facility. It was unrecognizable. The heat from the blaze licked at Rey’s skin and burned her retinas.

Poe came to a halt a safe distance away and turned to the mixed group trailing behind him. “Well, the fire should make it look like a mutiny when they come to investigate. Before that happens, we need to leave.”

Rey looked to the landing pad where their own ship sat alongside three other imperial vessels. One looked big enough to carry all thirty or so of the surviving workers.

“I can fly them to a safe port,” Wexley offered.

A Twi’lek man threw up his hand. “Please! Take us to Ryloth. I haven’t seen my homeworld in years.”

“I suppose I could do that. Any objections?”

“We have no quarrel with the Twi’leks” said a Meerian man with a woman and child beside him. “Our homeworld was taken long ago. If my children can live in peace on Ryloth until our people are free, then there is nothing more I could ask.” Those around him voiced their approval, with one woman offering him a place in her village if it could be found.

The Resistance headed for their remaining ship and Wexley led the workers to the imperial shuttle. But one woman lingered—an elderly Meerian who wore her silver hair in a thick coil down her back. She approached Ben, who stubbornly clung to consciousness, and held out her hands, palms raised—a traditional Meerian greeting. Rey had read about their customs in an old travel holodisk.

“Ben Solo,” the woman whispered. “Long live the Emperor.” From the way she pronounced the
words, it was obvious her grasp of Galactic Basic was limited, but the look in her eyes told them she was sincere. Perhaps she’d been taught the phrase to swear loyalty to Hux and amended it for Ben.

“Bandomeer will be free,” Ben said, straightening himself as best he could. “I will make sure of it. You will see your homeworld again.”

She thanked him in Meerian, so overwhelmed that her words would have been impossible to understand for even the most fluent of native speakers.

...

Once the woman left, Rey and Ben were alone on the landing pad. Rey gave the burning ruin of a building a final glance, then looked down at her uniform. The darkness of the fabric masked the blood, but she could feel the foul stickiness seeping through to her skin. Some was Ben’s but much of it wasn’t. She remembered the officers she had condemned to the storage room on the upper level.

It shouldn’t have unsettled her. After all, the help she’d given the Resistance on Starkiller had led to the death of so many more. It had just been so long since she’d taken a life. The last had been on Hoth.

At least she could still say all her kills had been to save herself or those she loved. But those she’d trapped inside the burning coffin in front of her had probably thought the same thing when they’d taken air at her head.

She thought back to her first kill. Back on Jakku. She’d only been around twelve or so and had stumbled across a blaster during her scavenging. It looked almost new, probably belonging to a scavenger who met a grisly end by a fellow sentient or roaming beast. Either way, it was functional.

She’d made the mistake of using it on a Gnaw-jaw when another scavenger was nearby. As soon as he heard the blast and saw what she held, he came after her. A scrawny human was an easy target. He chased her over a dune until, in her desperation, Rey turned on him. She aimed for his heart, but as inexperienced and panicked as she was, she clipped his neck instead. It took several minutes for him to bleed out into the sand. She watched, crying, wanting to flee but unable to look away.

His ribs were visible through the thin shirt he wore. He had no shoes, so his feet were covered with burns and blisters and his hands bore the jagged cuts and calluses from prying scraps from the sand.

She stayed until the sand buried him. The sun dipped below the horizon and the chill of the night crept over her skin. That morning, she traded the blaster for twelve portions—more than she’d ever earned.

Just like the man on Jakku, Hux’s followers had chosen their side and made their choice, forcing her to do the same.

....

Onboard the ship, Rey and Poe brought Ben to the supply room in the back. They laid him out on a large crate full of dehydrated emergency meals before Poe left to pilot in Wesley’s place. Ben groaned as his muscles adjusted and relaxed against the flat surface. She brushed back the hair that stuck to his face. One of his eyes had a patch of red around the iris from a burst blood vessel, but they stared up at her with the same intensity and warmth they always did.

“You could have died today,” she said.

“I knew that going in.”
“Yes, but after you were already injured, you still ran in there and fought while you bled out.” She couldn’t help but think of their encounter in the snowy forest of Starkiller, him beating his wound, his blood staining the snow.

“I had to. I couldn’t let you all be slaughtered while I hid on the ship. That wouldn’t have done anything to heal my head.”

Rey sighed and ran her hand against his cheek. “There’s nothing that can stop you is there?”

“Not in the entire galaxy. Except for you.”

She kissed his forehead and once she pulled back, he’d closed his eyes, embracing the tiredness that dragged at his body and mind. Laying a hand on his chest, she felt his steady heartbeat and felt the gentle movement of his lungs. She curled beside him on the crates, keeping a vigilant hand on him, hoping his condition would remain stable during their journey.

…. 

With the thick wall between them and Ben to distract her, the minds and voices of her teammates melded together into a jumble of discontent at the edge of her mind. Only the loud or familiar voices rose above the rest.

“We’re really taking him with us?” Someone asked.

“Let’s leave him behind,” said another.

“We aren’t leaving anyone.” Rey recognized Jessika’s voice. “We don’t abandon our own.”

“He isn’t one of our own,” Kare Kun said. Rey probed deeper and sensed her sitting apart from the rest, arms wrapped around her legs.

“What would Leia think if she had seen you trying to murder her son?” Joph asked. “If you had come with to free the others instead of hiding in here, you would have seen how he almost died for us. If it weren’t for him we’d all be dead and if it wasn’t for you, Greer would still be alive.”

Kare Kun’s sorrow and hatred mingled within her and bled out through the Force.

“Hey!” Poe’s voice shook through the ship. “We’ve all lost people we care about today, but this isn’t how we do things. We can discuss things further when we land, but for now, we need to remain calm.”

“Well, I say we discuss it now,” someone said. “Are we all just going to forget Starkiller?”

“That was Hux’s project. Ben wasn’t even there for the launch,” Sev said.

“I don’t care if he snuck away at the last minute, he was still a part of the First Order.”

“If we’re going to dig up people’s pasts, let’s at least be consistent,” Sev said. “Do you all forget what I and so many other defectors did before we came here? You risked your lives to rescue former stormtroopers like me and welcomed us with open arms, but you forget what we once were. My entire life I helped to oppress and murder the innocent. Civilians, families, children. I wish I could say I remember each one, but there were too many. But I can remember the screams, the burning villages.”

“What if he wants to take back the throne when all of this is over?”
“Would that be such a bad thing?” Sev asked. “You all knew his as Snoke’s lackey, but I also knew him as my emperor. I served at the palace on Coruscant and witnessed his leadership firsthand. Like everyone else, I didn’t expect things to change much once he took power, but I was wrong. It was slow at first, but things started changing. We were pulling out of territories, cracking down on slavery on Imperial planets, and ending so many of the oppressive, unjust practices that Snoke had put in place. The officers and officials who had treated me,” he nodded to Finn, “who treated us like disposable tools—they hated him. He was dismantling the regime they had profited from for so long and reshaping it into something new.”

“I know we’ve all lost people, but holding on to the past won’t help us to destroy Hux before he creates something even worse than that base. If you kick Ben out for what he did, you’ll have to do the same to me.”

The ship remained silent for the remainder of the journey, save for the quiet groans of the injured and muffled sobs of the grieving. Sev’s words laid heavily on their minds.

....

Once they landed, Rey woke Ben and allowed Poe and Finn to take him to see Luke. “Lyris and I will be there soon.” She kissed him. “So you better heal fast.”

As the rest of the group headed for the clearing, Rey noticed Kare Kun lingering behind. Rey called out to her. Kare looked back, bracing herself as Rey approached. “Kare, I—I understand why you did it. And I know you didn’t mean for anyone else to be hurt.”

“Rey—”

“He’s my husband. I love him. I know he’s done terrible things and I won’t defend his past actions, but please don’t try to take him from me. I need him. Our daughter needs him.”

Kare flinched. “The First Order took my father before I joined the Resistance.”

“Kare, I’m sorry.”

“Thank you for...understanding. Honestly, most people in your position would have blown me out the airlock. And I’m sorry for the damage did. Truly.”

....

In Chewie’s treehouse, Lyris was sitting in Attichitcuk’s lap, gripping handfuls of shaggy hair. She stared as if she could read his mind by staring into his beady eyes. One day, perhaps she would. He grumbled at her in shyriiwook and she replied with garbled nonsense sounds. He roared back and again she mimicked him, scrunching her little brow and opening her mouth as wide as she could to let out a gurgling sound that was obviously meant as a roar. Unlike Attichitcuk, she was speaking nonsense, but it was an impressive change from her silent stares and occasional whimpers and shrieks.

“Lyris, I’m back,” Rey hollered from the doorway.

Lyris turned and let out an excited screech,.yanking at Attichitcuk’s fur, as if commanding he hand her over.

Rey laughed with happy tears in her eyes. “I’m coming, little starlight.” She crossed the room and scooped Lyris into her arms, peppering her face with kisses. Lyris giggled and latched onto Rey’s hanging strands of hair.
Inside Luke’s treehouse, Ben was sitting up in bed. The blood had been washed from his face and his eyes were bright and alert.

Rey’s hesitation to face Luke, who sat in a nearby chair, disappeared as she seated herself at Ben’s side. “Are you alright?” She brushed back his hair. The wound wasn’t completely healed, but the swelling was gone and the cut was closed, like weeks of healing had passed in an instant.

“I think I’ll make it.”

“Ouch.” Rey prided her hair out of Lyris’s fingers and tossed it over her shoulder. “She has quite the grip.”

Ben laughed. “That’s my girl.” He balanced Lyris on his chest and kissed the top of her head. She clung to his shirt and giggled.


“Of course.”

“And there’s one more thing.” She had to ask. If anyone could give her answers it would be him. “During the mission, I did something strange. I didn’t mean to, I didn’t even know I could, but I mind-tricked an entire troop of imperial officers at once. Is that even possible?”

Luke smiled. “Rey, I think you’ll find the Force is much stranger and more powerful than you can imagine. I have heard of such talent before and I will teach you what I know. If that is what you wish.”
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Rey turns to Luke for answers Ben is unable to provide, while the Resistance struggles to remain intact after the tragedy on Vorsik.

“So, you're going to take Luke up on his offer?” Ben asked as he and Rey ventured through the network of rope ladders and stairways. He spoke plainly without urging her in either direction or peering into her mind to discover which was she was leaning toward.

Lyris had fallen asleep in Ben’s arms, one hand gripping his hair and her head resting on his shoulder. She wheezed faintly, almost like Ben’s snore, but far more troubling.

Rey pulled the ventilator out of Lyris’s supply bag and eased it over her head without waking her. Like Ben, she was difficult to wake. “I’ll go over in the morning and hear what Luke has to say. I have to. Controlling more than one person was so strange and unnatural.” And so easy to slip into, like trying on a stranger’s clothes and finding they’re a perfect fit. “Had you ever done anything like that? Or even heard of it?”

“Luke may have mentioned something at some point, but I’ve forgotten. If I had come to Snoke with that kind of power, he would have put me in command of his armies instead of the Knights of Ren. And I couldn’t even keep them all under control.”

Rey thought back to his mysterious followers in their personalized armor and masks. No doubt, each one held a story. But each story had likely reached its end on Hux’s command. Perhaps Ben would tell her what he knew someday.

“It makes sense you would be the one to have influential power,” he said. “Hell, you can do that without the Force.”

Bartering for scraps was good practice, but even then, the Force might have been tipping the scales in her favor. If only the Force-healing Luke had displayed came as instinctively. Power like that would have saved her many recovery days in which she’d been unable to earn food. “I think I’ll ask Luke about Force-healing as well.” She brushed back Ben’s hair to look at his closed wound. “It’s incredible. If something happens to you or Lyris, I want to be able to do something besides applying a bandage and hoping I don’t lose you before I find help.”

Ben ran his cybernetic hand over Lyris’s back. “Good idea. I wish I could have taught you that, but I’m afraid that’s another area I never made any progress in. I can rip things apart, but putting them back together…”

“Hopefully I’ll have better luck.”

“I’m sure you will.” He put his hand on her hip and pulled her close. “In fact, I believe I’m due for a healing session right about now,” he whispered. “We have unfinished business to attend to.”

Some might find it distasteful after all they’d seen and done that day, but it was what they needed—their bodies and minds melding together through Force and flesh, finding a healing balance between
them. Rey would have gladly taken him up on the offer if it weren't for the woman she sensed walking behind them.

She turned to see Pamich Nerro with a silver box in her hands. They had only met briefly, but even without her dispatchers uniform, Rey recognised her cloud of dark curls and bright eyes.

“Sorry if I snuck up on you,” Pamich said. “After today, that’s the last thing any of us need. I just wanted to bring this to you.” She handed the box to Ben, struggling with the weight of it. “These belonged to your mother. They were with her on Hoth.”

“Where did you get this?” He tucked it under his arm. “I didn't think there was time to save anything.”

“The box was already on her ship; she always kept it there. General Organa was supposed to leave with Jessika and I, but she had Oddy take her seat before going back to evacuating everyone she could.”

“I see.” Ben stared down at the box, grazing his nails over the edge of it.

“I don’t know what’s in it, but I thought you should be the one to open it.” Pamich pursed her lips, waiting for Ben to look her in the eye. Once he did, she smiled. “You really saved us today, Ben. Your mother would have been proud.”

“Thank you.”

“You're welcome.” Pamich looked around, making sure they were alone before lowering her voice. “And I want you to know, not all of us feel the way Kare does. We’re glad you came to help. Really.”

“Good to know.” He gave her a genuine smile. She seemed startled by such a rare sight but was quick to return it.

Once they’d bid one another good night and Pamich had walked a fair distance away, Ben spoke again. “What are we going to do about Kare?”

“I told her I forgave her,” Rey said. “I told her I understood why she did it.”

“Do you?”

“No. Yes. I mean, not long ago I would have done the same, but things have changed. I want them to see that so we can work together as a team.” She curled her fists. “But honestly, I felt like bashing her face in along with anyone who’d dare to stop me.”

“As incredible as that would be to witness, I think you made the right choice.” With both hands occupied, he rested his head against hers. “I would go on about how much of a better person you are than me, but I think that’s been well established by now.”

Rey opened the door and followed him inside their borrowed home. “You’re really going to say that after everything you did today? You’re a hero, Ben.”

“I can say the same about you.” He kissed her neck and sat Leia’s box on the bed.

While Rey took Lyris and settled her into her incubation crib, which she was rapidly outgrowing, Ben placed Leia’s box on his lap and flipped open the latch. The hinges squeaked as he opened it.
“Can I see?” Rey asked.

“Of course.” He patted the bed beside him as he stared inside.

She sat Lyris’s supply bag aside before joining him on the bed. Atop a stack of unmarked folders was a worn hardcover book with scraps of multicolored paper wedged between the pages and sticking the sides with a small, deliberate script written on them—a journal perhaps. Underneath the book and folders were eight holodisks, bits of jewelry, and a strange purple toy with striped limbs and green button eyes.

Ben grabbed the toy and gave it a soft squeeze. “This was mine. She kept this?”

Rey could hardly imagine Ben being a toy-loving child; even seeing him hold it now looked a bit ridiculous. At least the doll she’d made herself as a child had resembled a humanoid and not whatever monstrosity that was meant to represent. But it did look soft. She reached out to see for herself. “You used to play with this?”

“A little.” He smiled faintly. “A friend of the family, Lando Calrissian, gave it to me as a baby. This thing is ancient.”

Lyris screamed through her ventilator, startling them both. Rey rose and went to her side. Thankfully, it was a needy scream, not a painful one. “Come here, Starlight.” She disconnected and removed the ventilator before lifting her out. “Are you hungry again?” She bounced her on her hip. Lyris shook her head, then butted it against Rey’s chest and grunted.

“You just want attention, don’t you.” Rey ruffled her curls and laughed.

Once Rey laid her out on the bed and took her seat beside Ben, Lyris pulled herself upright and crawled toward them, her hair falling on her face. She sneezed and did her best to brush it out of her eyes.

“She needs a trim.” Rey curled a strand of Ben’s hair around her finger. “We all need one.”

Ben crouched low, smiling devilishly at Lyris. “She’s right, little one. You can’t live like an animal forever. Your mother may eat like one, but that’s no excuse for you.” Lyris covered her eyes with her hands and squealed through a broad smile. Ben lunged forward and tickled her sides until she burst into a fit of giggles.

Rey laughed along with them. “What are you doing?”

He quirked a brow and snatched her wrist to pull her down beside them. “Having a little fun.” Taking her by the waist, he drew her close, squeezing Lyris between them. Their breath and heartbeats synchronized into a gentle rhythm as they laid there.

“One day it will be like this for good,” Ben said. “Just you, me, and her. No more war. I’ve always loved a good fight, but pointless squabbling isn’t worth risking this.” He kissed her, deep and desperate like he had before they’d parted ways on the mission. “You and I will bring peace to this galaxy somehow. I may have misinterpreted my visions before, but that part is certain.”

Rey’s own visions came to mind, but she didn’t want to contradict him. Even if he was mistaken, she didn’t want to spoil the moment. They would deal with reality later.

Lyris sat up and squealed, pointing over at Ben’s doll peeking out of Leia’s box at the foot of the bed.
Ben dragged himself from Rey’s side “You want the doll?” Ben asked.

She squealed again.

“Alright. Wait a second.” He dragged the box closer and placed the strange doll in Lyris’s hands. She immediately opened her mouth to gnaw on its ears, but Ben tapped her nose. “No biting.”

She glared up at him, then hugged the doll instead. It was almost the same size as she was; for all her progress, she was still noticeably undersized.

“That’s called a tooka doll,” Ben explained. “It was mine when I was your age.”

She hugged the tooka’s neck in a way that resembled a chokehold as she smiled up at him.

Rey peered into the box. “Any idea what these holodisks could be?” Other than the dates marked on them, there was no indication of what they stored.

“Don’t know. You can test them if you like.”

Rey got up to find her holopad among her pile of possessions and slid the first disk she grabbed into the slot. The projector powered on with a click and lit up a hologram of a planet.

“That’s Alderaan,” Ben said. “My mother’s homeworld that the old empire destroyed long before I was born. Her adoptive family were the planet’s monarchs.”

Rey smiled. “So you’re royalty by blood and adoption. What does that make us?”

“Well, that would make Lyris a princess,” he said. “And you too, but I have better plans than that. You’ll be my benevolent Empress, ruling by my side. I’ll need someone to balance me out, after all. That’s how we’ll bring peace to the galaxy. That’s how my vision will come true.”

Rey brushed her thumb over Lyris’s cheek. “I don’t know Ben. These visions...whatever happened to letting them go and just doing the right thing?”

“You ruling at my side is the right thing. Not just for me, but for the sake of the galaxy.”

Rey smiled wryly. “The scavenger queen?”

“My grandfather was a slave, my uncle grew up as a farmer, and my father was a criminal, but they each did their part to topple the old empire. Your origins don’t matter. What matters is what we can do for the galaxy.” He cupped her face. “And you could do so much. You’re kind, honest, inventive, and you don’t put up with anyone's nonsense or take the easy way out. The galaxy could use a ruler like you.”

And he would be a great ruler as well. She hadn’t seen it before, but it was obvious now. She brushed back the hair that had fallen on his face. “Thank you, Ben. But for now, we just need to keep fighting. After that’s done, we’ll see how things play out.”

“Alright.” He held up his hand in mock surrender. “Enough of my rambling. Let’s see what the next holodisk has in store.”

It held a model of the millennium falcon and the next was a picture of Luke and Leia that appeared to be at least ten years old. Not long before Ben had left.

When the fourth hologram lit up, Rey gasped. For a second she thought she was looking at Lyris. Little Ben was sitting on Han’s lap while Leia stood and bent to kiss them both on the cheek. Ben’s
childish laughter rang out like a bell, high and sweet.

Lyris responded by babbling and crawling closer in search of the noise. They looked so alike. The only difference was in size and a few features like her eye color, which Lyris had inherited from Rey. If only Leia had lived to see the resemblance. If the stories of Force-sensitive's becoming one with the Force to watch over the living were true, perhaps she already had.

Lyris reached for the hologram only to have it phase through. She screeched and snatched back her hand. Rey laughed and pulled her into her lap as she squirmed and glared at the hologram. “It’s alright.” Rey waved her hand through the blue haze of the projection. “It’s just a picture.”

“That’s me,” Ben said, pointing to his smaller self. The recording looped back and little Ben giggled again as the young Leia kissed his cheek. “And that is your grandmother and grandfather.”

Lyris quirked her brow and touched the hologram again. When she pulled her hand back unharmed, she smiled up at Ben triumphantly.

“I wish you could have met them,” Ben said. Rey felt the sorrow and guilt pooling behind his eyes, threatening to pour over. He hid it with a crooked smile. “Sorry about that, kid.” He kissed her mop of curls and powered off the holopad.

After gathering up the contents of Leia’s box, they settled in for the night. Once Ben had fallen asleep, Rey reached over him to shut off his bedside lantern. She spotted the holodisk of his family laid on the table beside it. With a smile, she turned off the light and nestled in beside him.

….  

With their latest mission complete, the Resistance was left in limbo. Fractured and uneasy, they filled their day with target practice, ship repair, and meandering conversation—anything to keep their hands and minds busy.

Kare had been confined to her room until Wexley, Ziff and L’ulo returned from transporting the survivors and gathering supplies so that a decision could be made on how to handle the situation. She hadn’t protested.

To avoid the awkward encounters with friends she wasn’t sure she still had and the accusatory stares of Kare’s supporters, Rey headed straight for Luke’s room.

She stood before his door, studying the grooves and imperfections in the wood as her mind grappled for an excuse to turn around and hide. But she wasn’t a coward. She had to face him and hear him out. But she wasn’t sure where they stood at this point. She’d spat on his apologies and excuses, but he’d been the one to invite her back. He wanted to help.

She knocked on the door. Within seconds, it swung open on the shining face of Threepio.

“Miss Rey! It is good to see you again. Master Luke has been expecting you all morning.” He ushered her inside. Artoo whistled a greeting from beside Luke, who was sunk into the seat of his chair as if he hadn’t moved since the day before.

Rey swallowed the lump in her throat along with her pride. “You said you would tell me what you know about...whatever it was I did on Vorsik.”

“Yes. Have a seat if you’d like.” Luke set aside his cup which had obviously been crafted for wookiee-sized hands.
She sat the edge of his bed, bracing her hands on her knees.

“From what you’ve said, I believe you performed what is called battle meditation. This technique is used to rally one’s allies toward a common goal, all while demoralizing the enemy. It's the sort of skill that can turn a battlefield into a dejarik table.”

“You can use it on allies? If you’re on the same side, what's the point in controlling them?”

“It can be used for more than just giving orders. Sometimes, people need a soothing hand to quiet their fears and allow them to focus on their goal. It creates unity.”

“Isn’t that a bit manipulative?”

“It’s no different from our dear Poe giving a speech, using words to bolster morale.” Luke groaned as he lifted himself from his chair. “But you must be careful when using this power. Jedi limited its use to emotional pushes and battle coordination, much like they limited their use of a mind-tricks, but anything beyond that is of the dark side. To violate the autonomy of another person and take them over completely is a dangerous thing which may leave you and those you command irrevocably changed.

“But it can be tempting for some. There are records of Sith who commanded large armies of thralls, but eventually, both the Sith and his army would lose their minds and sense of self.”

A cold chill shook through Rey. “Luke, that sounds a bit familiar—being stuck in someone’s head I mean. And changing because of it. You see, ever since Starkiller, when Ben reached into my mind and I pushed back, we’ve had this strange connection. Even before I wanted him in my head, it’s like he was lodged in there. That’s how he found us on Ach-to and it’s only gotten stronger since. We can feel each other's thoughts and emotions and influence them if we wish. It’s like our minds are pressed side by side and melting into one another.” She took a breath and stared down at her hands, wishing there was someone else who help the answers she needed.

“So you can feel him now?” Luke asked.

“Yes.” He was playing with Lyris, trying to escape the endless worries that had piled up. “I told Leia about this when we the terms of the treaty were agreed to and she told me he shared something similar once with you. But this seems to go much deeper. After all, she wasn’t able to find where you were hiding out for seven years.” Her last words had more bite than she’d intended.

Luke sank further into his seat, his brows furrowing. “I don’t think what you share is anything dangerous. And it is true my sister and I shared a similar connection to a lesser extent.” He cracked the first smile she’d seen from him since Hoth.

“She told me it happens when two Force-sensitives become connected in some way, like masters and padawans.”

Luke nodded. “Bonds often form between force sensitives, yes. I’ve never heard of one as strong as you’ve described, but then again, Jedi were forbidden from forming such connections.”

To a child in need of heroes to aspire to, the strict limitations of Jedi life had been an afterthought. But in reality, they changed everything. “I don’t think Ben or I could ever be like the old Jedi,” Rey said, her shoulders slumping. The Jedi of the old stories were exactly that—idealized myths no one could hope to emulate. The truth sat across from her, all grey-haired and heavy-hearted.

“No, that boy could never be a Jedi,” Luke shook his head. “Nor was he cut out to be a Sith. He’s always wandered through the middle ground.” He spoke as if Ben were still a boy. Perhaps that's
how he still saw him. He had to process Ben’s choices somehow, Rey supposed.

“I think I might be the same way,” Rey said. “Our tempers are matched with his.” She was just a bit more subtle about it, prone to inwardly stewing instead of lashing out in fits of destructive rage.

“Good. He needs someone who can keep him in line. I never could, but after so short a time you were able to bring him back from the brink. Thank you. You did a Great service to the galaxy by bringing him back to us.”

Rey forced a smile. “You’re welcome.” Her love life hadn’t been a charity mission. It had been a storm of mutual manipulation and loathing that had miraculously morphed into the precious thing they now had, like carbon being pressed into a gem.

“Now, would you like a demonstration of battle meditation?” Luke asked.

Happy to leave the cramped quarters, she followed him out onto the stairwell. He pointed to the people gathered below, cleaning their weapons and repairing their stolen uniforms. “Feel what I’m about to do.” The Force pulsed around him as he closed his eyes.

Like clouds parting to let in the daylight, the grief hanging over the camp dissipated. Sensing the changed, many paused and lifted their heads.

Luke opened his eyes. “I have cleared their minds. Now, do as I did and grant them a moment’s peace. Give them hope.”

She hugged her arms. “Are you sure?”

“A mental reprieve will be well-deserved after all they’ve endured. If you do it properly, it will be as if you comforted them one by one.”

“You do this often?”

He shrugged and quirked his mustache. “It’s not my strong suit. I can ease them for a moment, but with your reach and force of will, you could do so much more.”

Rey breathed in her nose and out her mouth. “Alright. I’ll try.” She closed her eyes and reached through the Force to find each signature within the camp. So many thoughts and emotions were pulsing through the canopy and in the clearing below. She felt them as far as the landing pad. Their minds were a jumble of uncertainty, anger, and sorrow for those they had lost.

She focused on what hope she had within her and spread it like a healing balm over their minds, restraining herself as best she could. Not a command, but a suggestion. If they wished to ignore her and wallow in despair, they had every right to. She felt her hold on them begin to slip and her mind stretched. Before it snapped, she let go and sucked in a breath of air. Her surroundings rushed back into focus, as her mind and body realigned.

“You did well.”

As they leaned over the railing, Rey did her best to answer the questions he had about her and Ben’s connection and the training they had done on Cendril. Her answers were short and she kept her eyes downcast, but he didn’t seem to mind.

As genial as she tried to be, the darkness that clung to her heart like a parasite still demanded vengeance. But what else could she do to him? All he had left was a dwindling lifespan and head full of grief and distant memories. She couldn’t stand to look at him for long without turning to self-
loathing.

“I’m sorry you were unable to reform the Jedi Order.” She said once he had finished with his questions. “Maybe there’s still some other Force-sensitives besides Ben and me who would be more suited to it.”

Luke stared off into the tangled wilderness, his eyes distant. “Perhaps. But it’s possible the Jedi no longer have a place in the galaxy. If so, I will be proud to have been the last. Maybe a new era of the Force is under way.”

“Perhaps.” As she gazed at the silhouette of mountains she spotted through a gap in the trees, thoughts of Lyris filled her head. Of how her family legacy would shape her future, what could happen if Ben or herself were to lose their lives fighting for her freedom, what sort of life she would have depending on the possible outcomes of the war she wasn’t even aware of.

“Is there something else you wish to ask me?” Luke asked.

“I need to go. I think Lyris needs me.” The lesson on Force-healing could wait.

“Is something wrong?”

Everything about this was wrong. The fact that he could sit there and carry on a conversation as if this was normal, as if nothing had changed, as if she hadn’t thought of a hundred ways to exact vengeance only to end up directing her hatred toward herself. “I just need time,” She said, pulling herself to her feet and heading down the stairs.

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“I felt what you did,” Ben said with a sly smile as she entered their room.

“Do you think anyone noticed? Did I go too far?” Rey slumped into bed beside him, eager to jump into a conversation with someone she could make eye-contact with for more than three seconds.

“Not at all. Dameron’s mood improved while he was here, but didn’t question the cause.”

Rey stole a half-awake Lyris from his arms and kissed her mussed curls. “What did he come to say?”

“Ziff and L’ulo are on their way back and when they land, we’ll have to let them know what an emotional minefield their walking into. And until Wexley gets back, we can’t decide what to do about Kare, so for now, she’s agreed to stay in her room until a decision can be made.”

“He told you all this?”

Ben lifted his chin. “I am capable of holding a civil conversation without supervision,” he said. “Now, are you ready to go down to the clearing for something to eat?”

“You don’t want me to bring some for us to eat up here?”

“No. I’m not the one under house-arrest. And like Pamich said, not everyone here wants to jam a knife in my back.”

“I’ll still keep a careful watch.”

“Always vigilant.” He leaned close, brushing his nose against hers. “And afterward, once Lyris is down for her nap, we can finally get some alone time.”
Lyris coughed.

“Yes. I said your name, Sweetheart,” he said. “But right now it’s your mother’s turn to get some attention. You can’t have me all to yourself.”

They laughed but were cut off by another cough, louder this time. “Don’t worry, I got you.” The humor in Ben’s voice had vanished.

He was across the room and back with her ventilator within seconds, just as her cough worsened. With her mask in place, he cradled her against his chest.

Rey rubbed her back as she wheezed, the muffled rasping sound grating against her eardrums. “Easy, easy. Breathe like Papa, Little Starlight.”

Despite their combined efforts, the fit worsened, until Lyris was alternating between crying out and fighting for air. Ben’s shirt was balled in her fist and tears streaked her reddening face.

“DeeTee,” Rey shouted. “Can you scan her?”

His spherical body emerged from the pile of Lyris’s belongings, his wires and battery trailing behind him. After a moment of circling overhead with his scanner grazing over Lyris’s body, he let out a chirp of alarm. “Bronchial restriction detected.”

“Why isn’t the mask working?” Ben asked, looking like he was seconds away from shattering him against the wall.

DeeTee trembled. “The mix of steroids and bacta are doing all they can. They are dampening the symptoms of the episode and should ultimately end it.”

“It never takes this long,” Rey said. “Scan harder.”

DeeTee zoomed in his lens and honed in his scanner to the lower portion of Lyris’s back. He beeped again. “Slight mucus build-up detected which could be due to changes in the weather, dust and pollen particles in the air, or other allergens. While harmless to most healthy adults, these triggers could worsen her condition. Her lungs and immune system are simply not equipped to handle such things.”

After a rough gagging sound, Lyris’s coughing slowed to a faint wheeze. She whimpered and clung to Ben. “I’ll put her in the incubator,” he said. “And I think eating in is out best option for tonight.”

Rey nodded, knowing an additional stop would have to be made. She would need Luke’s instruction on Force-healing after all.
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Before Ziff and L’ulo had a chance to put a foot on the ground, they were swarmed by their closest friends. Standing at a distance, Rey smiled at their infectious enthusiasm. The more time she spent with the Resistance, the more she came to appreciate the closeness they’d forged from the hardships of war. None of them could be certain they would have another day to share. Enduring such an existence alone tended to harden one’s heart, but sharing the burden seemed to create a unique sort of comradery Rey hadn’t known she was missing. In that moment, even the recent tragedy and subsequent disagreements fell away, prompting Rey to store the memory in her mental trove of keepsakes.

There was a knock at the door. Rey sensed Jessika standing behind it, fidgeting with a stand of her hair and shifting uneasily in her boots. Leaving a sleeping Lyris in Ben’s arms, Rey peeked her head outside. “The baby’s sleeping. Do you need anything?”

Jessika’s expression was much the same as it had been before the mission. Her Force signature emanated understandable concern but lacked the suspicion and resentment that had possessed so many others.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Jessika whispered. “I just wanted to let you know Ziff and L’ulo are about to land. Want to come?”

Rey glanced over her shoulder to gauge Ben’s reaction. “Go on,” he said. I’ve got her.” He bounced Lyris in his lap. She slept with one arm wrapped around his hand and the other grasping the tooka doll.

“Thank you. I won’t be long.” With one last look at Lyris, Rey eased herself through the doorway, trying to keep the door hinge from creaking.

Together, they trudged through the forest toward the landing pad. After the heavy rain that had battered their rooftops the night before, the mossy ground sunk beneath their weight. No wonder the Wookies preferred the trees. They would be up to their knees in wet soil after only a few steps.

Forty or so members of the Resistance had gathered for the impending arrival. They needed their spirits lifted or at least a distraction, so forming a welcoming party seemed like an ideal solution. Many cheered as Ziff piloted the freighter toward the landing pad and touched down with a thud of the landing gear and hiss of the engine.

It was a newer craft, perhaps one Ben’s funding had afforded, with no identifying marks to align them to one faction or another. One might have taken them for an independent shipping vessel or a civilian family traveling the galaxy. Rey hoped they had been smart about how they spent Kylo’s funds. Too much in any one place would arouse suspicion. Perhaps that’s why they had taken to long to get back.
Before Ziff and L’ulo had a chance to put a foot on the ground, they were swarmed by their closest friends. Standing at a distance, Rey smiled at their infectious enthusiasm. The more time she spent with the Resistance, the more she came to appreciate the closeness they’d forged from the hardships of war. None of them could be certain they would have another day to share. Enduring such an existence alone tended to harden one’s heart, but sharing the burden seemed to create a unique sort of comradery Rey hadn’t known she was missing. In that moment, even the recent tragedy and subsequent disagreements fell away, prompting Rey to store the memory in her mental trove of keepsakes.

As the crowd dispersed and began wandering back to camp, Rey spotted a round head poking out the Astromech socket topped with a pair of antenna and a curious lense.

She turned to Jessika. “Is that Beebee-Ate?”

She hadn’t seen him since Hoth and assumed he’d been lost in its destruction. She’d been too preoccupied with her sentient friends to ask about him. Some might have found her attachment to what was essentially a piece of equipment ridiculous, especially considering her livelihood had been dependant on pillaging mechanical things, but Beebee-Ate was no hunk of scrap.

“Yeah, that’s him.” Jessika chuckled. “Little guy gained quite the reputation, so Poe had to change up his paint job a bit. Maybe once this is over, we can set him back to normal.”

When Beebee-Ate dislodged from the socket and lowered himself to solid ground, Rey saw what Jessika meant. His orange design had been scraped away and replaced with factory-standard silver and white. If he were humanoid, he would have looked naked.

“Beebee-Ate!” Rey called out.

He whirled his head around and chirped. Barreling past the crowd and over a few toes, he rolled up to greet her, jabbering in binary.

“I missed you too,” Rey said, crouching down beside him and flicking his antennae.

Back at the ship, Poe was unlatching the last of the ship’s storage chambers. He spotted them and laughed. “Found a replacement for me, I see?”

With an indignant buzz, Beebee-Ate pointed out how long it had been since he’d seen her.

“You’re right, buddy.” He walked toward them. “It is good to have her back. She didn’t come alone, though. Promise you’ll be on your best behavior when you see him.”

Beebee-Ate cocked his head to the side, beeping curiously.

…. 

Back in the clearing, those who had unloaded their share of the supplies had taken a seat by the fire with their portion of supper.

Ben had chosen a secluded seat on the opposite side of the fire. Lyris was perched on his lap, her ventilator strapped on and DeeTee hovering overhead.

Spotting Ben, Beebee-Ate rolled to a stop and let out a concerned chirp.

“It’s alright,” Rey said. “He’s with me. Come on, Beebee-Ate.” She motioned him to follow and took a seat beside Ben.
“The BB unit?” Ben asked.

“Well, here he is. The droid you were searching for.” Rey smiled at the strangeness of it all—her and Ben sitting before the little droid that had caused their paths to cross.

Beebee-Ate inched closer, lens zooming in on Lyris, chirping excitedly. Before he could get any nearer, DeeTee darted between them, blaring a warning alarm. Beebee-Ate rolled back. For the first time Rey had witnessed, DeeTee switched from galactic basic to binary to jabber back and forth with Beebee-Ate. They sounded like a pair of squabbling children.

“Hush, both of you!” Rey said. “Beebee-Ate, this is my droid, DeeTee. He’s a medical unit and looks after my daughter.”

DeeTee emitted a buzz of warning before retreating to Lyris’s side. She yanked on his wires, eliciting a shrill beep.

Rey pulled his wires from Lyris’s grip and pinched her cheek. “How is she doing?” she asked.

Ben placed Lyris in lap. “Alright, I think. A bit of coughing, but not like before. She woke up a few minutes ago, so I brought her down here to wait for you.”

Lyris looked up and grasped her finger, but her eyes lacked their usual spark. After all the sleep she’d gotten, she still seemed drained. “I’m sorry, sweetheart,” Rey said. “I’m going to take you to your Uncle Luke, alright?” She paused at her own words. Like Luke had said on Hoth, they were family now, but it was a strange notion she wasn’t sure she could fully accept. But Lyris had a right to know her family, regardless of her own reservations. “Yes, we’re going to see Uncle Luke. He can make you better.”

“Do you need me to come with you?” Ben asked.

“I’ll be alright,” Rey said. “But what about you?” Those nearby were already side-eyeing him and Ziff had been staring openly since he’d entered the clearing.

“Don’t worry about me. I can handle it.”

Rey rose through the canopy and found her way back to Luke’s treehouse, longing with every step to return to solid ground.

Threepio answered the door. “Ah! Miss Rey! I’m so very delighted to see you again.”

Rey had never met a droid as polite as Threepio. DeeTee was formal, but monotone, making him no match for a protocol droid—especially one like Threepio.

It was no wonder the only protocol droids she’d seen on Jakku had been nothing more than scrap. They were flimsily built and seeing as they could only travel at a slow, shuffling pace and couldn’t bend their arms, they were a luxury for those who had other droids or staff to do their heavy-lifting. But even so, she couldn’t help but find his neuroticism strangely charming.

“Do you need something?” Luke asked. He was seated in his chair, still the stagnant, meditating
hermit she knew him to be.

“I do.” Rey approached him. “It’s Lyris. She needs healing. I was hoping you could do it and then teach me so I can do it later on my own.”

“What seems to be the matter?”

“Well, because she was born early—about two months in fact—and was undersized even before that, she has issues with her breathing. She has a ventilator mask and an incubator to sleep in, but she keeps having these fits of horrible coughing and wheezing that leave her exhausted. Ben and I just have to hold her and breathe with her until it passes and it’s only been getting worse.”


Rey kissed Lyris head and handed her over, her chest tightening. Lyris felt so vulnerable in her hands, especially with Luke reaching out to receive her.

He wouldn’t hurt her, Rey reminded herself. He had no reason to. Even if he had, he wouldn’t dare. Not while she and Ben were around.

Down in the clearing, Rey could feel Ben was as nervous as she was. Due to her absence and due to the tensions rising around him as his presence and intentions were explained to Ziff and L’ulo.

“There she is.” Luke’s smiled broadly through his beard, holding Lyris with a careful grasp. She gave him an uncertain look as he settled her onto his knee. “I didn’t get a proper look at her before,” he said. “She really does look like Ben did all those years ago, so small and curious. They’re delightful at this age.”

He leaned in close, allowing Lyris the opportunity to snatch the end of his beard. With a tug, she freed three strands of silver hair. At least her strength hadn’t left her completely. Luke rubbed at his chin and rearranged his nest of facial hair. “Yes, the resemblance is remarkable.”

The thought to apologize on Lyris’s behalf occurred to Rey, but she dismissed it.

Luke tilted up Lyris’s chin, only to have her glare at him with a pursed lip. “Hmm. Seeing as this something she’s struggled with since birth, I’m not sure how effective Force-healing will be. But I’ll try.” He closed his eyes and placed a hand on Lyris’s chest.

Rey felt the Force move around them and through them until Lyris cut through the silence with a heavy cough and a bout of wheezing.

“What’s wrong?” Rey's nails dug into her palms. “Why didn’t it work?”

Luke hung his head, sighing further into his chair as he let out a heavy sigh. “I don’t think it will.”

“You aren’t going to try again?”

“Force healing is meant for illness and injuries, Rey. This is neither. If this is how her body is for the time being, then I can’t fix her lungs anymore that I could grow myself a new hand.” His cybernetic replacement flexed. It was bare metal, like Ben’s.

Impotent rage built behind Rey’s eyes and burned in her throat, threatening to burst out as a scream or a flood of tears. It wasn’t only directed at Luke, but at herself, at their circumstances, at the Force itself for however it might have directed her confounded destiny. “So there’s nothing you can do?”
“I’m afraid not.” He ran a hand over Lyris’s curls, which then sprung back into place. “What did your medical droid have to say about her condition?”

“That the ventilator was doing all that was possible. Basically, the same answer you just gave.” She slipped her hand into her pocket and idly tapped the transparisteel mask.

“It is natural for you to be concerned, but I sense there is something else that is troubling you. Something besides the war, her lungs, or being stuck in here with me.” He smiled in a way that would have been comforting if it weren’t so gratingly patronizing.

Rey wondered if her own ability to sense the thoughts and feelings of those around her annoyed people in the same way. Probably not. She knew when to keep her mouth shut and mind her own business. “If you already know what I’m thinking, just come out and say it.”

He raised a brow. “I don’t need the Force to see something is troubling you.”

“Fine.” Maybe he could offer some insight Ben couldn’t. “On the night she was born, I had a vision. I saw... many things, but the worst of it was the fire. In the clearing where my parents crashed, I saw a figure in the flames. I don’t know who. But he had Lyris and she was crying and there was this awful breathing noise.” She threaded her fingers through her hair and exhaled a shaky breath. “Ben said I shouldn’t dwell on it, but I can’t help it.”

“Ben is right. You aren’t the first to have such visions. But you must remember that fear is the surest path to the dark side. My father, he—”

“You think I don’t know that?” There was a tremor in her voice. “You think I don’t feel the darkness creeping in on me every time she cries and fights to breathe, every time I think about Hux and how he would kill her to get back me and Ben.” She wiped her tears on the back of her hand. “I feel it every time I look at you.”

It was as if Luke’s face had aged ten years, his sorrow and regret pulling at every wrinkle. He didn’t protest as Rey pulled Lyris off his lap.

“I can’t lose her. She and Ben are the only family I have left,” Rey squeezed Lyris against her chest. Lyris hugged her back, babbling in an almost comforting way. Perhaps she sensed her distress and wanted to help. “I would rip apart the galaxy to keep her safe and I don’t care which side of the Force that puts me on.”

“Then I cannot help you.”

She left him without another word, Lyris held tight in her arms. But even in the open air, she was unable to find relief. The sounds and emotions of the discourse below rose through the canopy, rumbling through the trees and shaking the rope bridge beneath her feet. Their words were like poison in the air. Despite being the topic of discussion, Ben was no longer seated below. She followed his Force signature to their treehouse.

Upon entering, she kicked the door closed behind her, nearly unhinging it from its wooden frame.

“No luck?” he asked. A rhetorical question, considering he could no doubt feel her emotions screaming through the Force. But from his even tone, it was obvious he meant to soothe her.

She responded with an exasperated groan and a burst of pent-up emotion from her mind to his before slamming herself down on the bed beside him. With the Force cackling wildly around her, she nearly caved in the mattress. “Hippocrates. Bunch of kriffing hypocrites. Your uncle too!”
“I could have told you that. Imagine being dumped on his doorstep and being forced to listen to his lectures and mantras every second of the day. But he means well, which makes him all the more infuriating. Same goes for all those people down there arguing over me.”

“Why aren’t you angry?” Rey asked. “I thought you’d be down there arguing your case.”

“Believe me, I want to, but for now, I’ll leave the diplomacy to Dameron. If I went down there I’d only escalate things and cause an even bigger argument. We need to save our ammo for the real enemy.”

“Exactly!” she slammed her hand on the bed. “How can we defeat them if we’re squabbling like a pack of gnaw-jaws.”

He embraced her from behind and rested his chin on her shoulder. “If they take too long deliberating, I say we take the Falcon and deal with Hux ourselves.”

“You must be joking. We can take on a manufacturing facility, but I doubt even we could take on the entire capitol.” she kissed Lyris’s head. “It would be too risky.”

“I know. Just a daydream—one I might have tried for if I didn’t have so much to lose.” His mouth soothed her better than his words, trailing down her neck and shoulder.

…. The next day, Rey sat cross-legged on the bed with Lyris curled up in her lap, carefully watching her every breath. She watched he rise of her tiny chest, her breath fogging up her ventilator mask and the faint wheeze that accompanied it. Her eyes stung from being held open so long.

Ben slid his hand over her shoulder and rubbed her neck between the hard pads of his fingers, easing the knot of tension that she'd accumulated. “Are you going downstairs anytime soon?” he asked.

Since speaking with Luke, she’d missed two meals and a good deal of daylight tending to Lyris, who she’d fed with clockwork precision, both naturally and with a helping of her supplement meals. Now that Rey considered it, her own stomach felt like an anxiety-ridden pit. Perhaps a helping of stew would help.

“I’ll get ready.” She pulled Lyris to her chest and rose to get her sling. Ben eased it over her head and tied it at the nape of her neck. Once Lyris was settled into it, Rey pulled it tighter and doubled the knot. Not that it had ever come loose, but just for good measure. As a bonus, it brought Lyris a bit closer, pressing her against her breastbone.

…. Rey winced at the dying daylight that filtered through the trees as they ventured down to the clearing. It proved to be far quieter than the day before, but that didn’t mean there was peace. The rift within their ranks was a physical one, with splinted groups gathered in separate circles instead of mingling together as they once had.

Sev welcomed them to his group, which included Jessika, Pamich, and Finn among the welcoming faces. Rey settled in between Sev and Finn while Ben went to get their food.

“Is the little one alright?” Sev asked.

“Oh?” Rey looked up, blinking. “Yes. I think so. She hasn’t had a fit since this morning.” She flexed her finger which had Lyris’s fist curled around it.
“Have you taken her to see Luke?” Finn asked.

“Yes, but that didn’t help. She isn’t injured or sick, she was just born too early and too small.” She was nearly a year old, but like Vassik had said, her development would likely lag behind for the rest of her life.

“I’m sorry,” Finn said. “I wish I could help.” He ran a finger over Lyris’s cheek. She gave him a small grin, which he returned.

A shout from within the forest startled them to attention. It was undoubtedly familiar and accompanied by two sets of footsteps. Wexley entered the clearing, a few days scruff added to his beard. A scrawny man walked beside him—not one of the disguised rebels or a former worker. The man wore an Imperial uniform which hung loosely on his narrow shoulders. His blonde, almost white, hair was scraped back in regulatory fashion and his pallor suggested that he was rarely required to step away from a desk. His gaze wandered toward a nearby Wookie before darting back to his feet.

Poe rose to greet them. He leaned close to Wexley and whispered something, making sharp gestures with his hands, his expression hard. Judging from the defeat on Wesley’s face, they were likely discussing Kare. But he didn’t look surprised. He’d been there to witness the fallout of Kare’s insubordination first-hand.

With a stiff embrace, they parted and Wexley gestured to the pale man beside him. “This is Lieutenant Gentry, surprisingly alive and well.”

The chatter rose from the crowd as they relaxed in their seats, many offering the strange man a smile. Rey had never heard the name, nor could she fathom why her friends were cheering the survival of an imperial officer. Unless she had miraculously been robbed of her instincts, she was certain that was no disguise Gentry wore.

“While on Ryloth,” Wexley said, “I swept through the safehouses we used for the stormtrooper defection network before it was...dissolved. They were still empty, but my snooping was spotted and made it back Gentry.”

“But we thought you’d died with the others,” Finn said.

“I’m afraid I thought the same of you.” Gentry gave a sharp bow of his head. “I’m currently on shore leave and had a similar thought to survey the area. I didn’t expect my droid to pick up footage of Wexley, here.” His smile was thin and unpracticed, but genuine, flashing his neat row of polished teeth.

Wexley slapped him on the back, nearly knocking him over. “And now we have our mole back and he’s done quite a bit of digging.”

“Are there other survivors?” Jessika asked.

“A few,” Gentry said. “The rogue stormtroopers that were recaptured are being held on the prison planet of Kish. Hux has been waiting for an opportunity to dispose of them publicly and now he has created one.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ben asked.

The sight of Ben startled Gentry even more than the Wookie. “Pardon me, Your Majesty—Solo. Sorry. Wexley told me to expect your presence, but I had not properly prepared myself.” He smoothed back his hair and faced the crowd. “Anyhow, what I meant to tell you is that Hux is
planning something catastrophic. Because Solo had demilitarized so much of the empire and granted so many systems autonomy, Hux has decided to make a comeback. A fleet of starships is at this very moment preparing to retake all the territory he lost along with anything else he sees fit.”

“How many ships?” Rey asked. “How big?”

“Each one is larger than an Imperial-class star destroyer,” Gentry said. “There are eleven completed so far with plans to expand the fleet to at least ten times that. But there is a small window of opportunity we may be able to slip through. General Phasma is at the helm of the flagship and will be making a stop on Kish to pick up the rogue stormtroopers, all of whom will be brought to Coruscant and publicly executed as a part of the debut ceremony for the fleet.”

Rey felt a chill slither through her insides.

“And that’s our window,” Wexley said. “We need to get to the prison and onto that ship. That’s how we can bypass the capital’s security and get to Hux. Judging from his history, he will be up close for the slaughter if not aiming the blaster himself.”

“How are we going to infiltrate Kish?” Jessika asked.

“That’s where I become of use,” Gentry said. “I will pull the favors remaining to me so that I may be reassigned to Kish. Once inside, I can arrange for a patrol to happen upon one of your ships. Once you are inside the prison, some of you can remain as prisons while the rest masquerade as guards to keep an eye on them and make sure they make it onto Phasma’s list of defectors. It will take a bit of clerical maneuvering, but I think I can manage it.”

Finn raised his hand. “I volunteer as a prisoner. If Hux wants to execute defectors, then I’m sure he’d love to get his hands on me. What better way to kill a stormtrooper rebellion than publicly executing the one who started it? Someone with more restraint might be afraid of creating a martyr, but from my experience, I doubt he’ll be able to resist.”

Wexley blinked, his mouth gaping open. “A—are you sure?”

“Absolutely. If you want to get us close to Hux, I can make it happen.”

The crowd fell silent, the weight of his proposal bearing down on them.

Gentry cleared his throat. “Very well. Now, do we have any other volunteers?”

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Until all the food and drink had been consumed and the sky had darkened to star studded blackness, they labored over the details of the plan. The divisions that had split the camp disappeared as they crowded around the dying fire. By then, most had chosen to be either a prisoner or a guard.

Ben chose the latter. He needed an excuse to wear a helmet. Rey however, sat undecided, staring down at Lyris who slept curled up against her.

Finn caught her shoulder and whispered in her ear. “Rey, you don't have to do this, you know.”

“What are you suggesting?”

“If you need to, you can stay here and look after Lyris. She needs you. And you would just be distracted on the mission and worry yourself sick. I don’t want to see you go through that.”
“He’s right,” Ben said.

“You too?” Rey asked. “On a mission this important, how can you suggest leaving a Force-user behind? What if something goes wrong?”

“They’ll have me,” Ben said. “And something going wrong is precisely why I think you should stay. If something happens to me, Lyris will need you.”

Bile rose in Rey’s throat. “But if I’m not there I can’t prevent that from happening.” Her voice was strained and desperate.

“I’ll be there,” Finn said, exchanging a look with Ben. “I’ll keep an eye on him.”

Rey sat in stunned silence, glancing between them. She wasn’t a child in need of coddling. But Lyris was. Rey bit her lip and turned her attention back to her, knowing she couldn’t stand to leave her again.

…. 

When the meeting adjourned for the night, Rey found herself back in her and Ben’s room. It didn’t quite feel real. Like she was walking through a cold, endless nightmare which threatened to tear both her heart and mind in two. She went through the motions of her nightly routine—feeding Lyris and placing her in the incubator, removing her clothes, untying her hair, then curling up under the covers. Even the abrasive texture of the blanket felt dull against her skin.

Ben took her by the hips and pulled her into the curve of his body. “It’s not that I don’t think you can it.” He kissed her shoulder. “You could probably take them on single-handed and still have a shot, but I don’t want to risk it. If you’d prefer, I’ll stay behind with her instead—”

“No.” Rey stiffened. “I’ll stay. You’re right.” Taking a deep breath to fight back her frustrated tears, she curled a strand of Ben’s hair around her finger, hoping he was right, that soon they wouldn’t have to part again, that the galaxy would be at peace, creating a safe place for their little starlight to grow up in. They’d take her somewhere green with wide open spaces to let her breathe the clean air and play in the sunlight.

She felt Ben peeking in on her daydream. They smiled wearily at one another and intertwined their fingers. “I will come back for you both. Nothing in the galaxy could prevent me from doing that.”

Rey laughed and squeezed his hand. “If you don’t, I’ll drag you back here myself.” All their promises were nothing but hopeful daydreams, but with the galaxy burning around them, they needed something to cling to. No matter the odds, they needed hope.
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Each night, she laid awake, reaching through the Force to find Ben and assure herself he was alright. He reached back with a comforting touch. Everything was going according to plan, he assured her. He would be back soon.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Once Ben and the Resistance had left, Rey had kept to her room, entertaining Lyris as best she could, all while beating back the doubts and anxiety that threatened to smother her. On the second day, she had ventured outside with Lyris slung around her and trekked endlessly through the forest with no direction in mind. She kept her attention split between Lyris and maneuvering over the uneven terrain. It was a suitable distraction. After so many hours of walking, her legs threatened to give out and forced her to turn back. Luke’s Force signature acted as a beacon to guide her back. On the third day, heavy rainfall had confined her to her room and the company of Lyris and her own darkening thoughts.

Each night, she laid awake, reaching through the Force to find Ben and assure herself he was alright. He reached back with a comforting touch. Everything was going according to plan, he assured her. He would be back soon.

After Lyris’s first feeding on the fourth day, Rey set her down on the bed and patted the space in front of her. “Crawl over, Sweetheart. Come to Mama.”

Lyris flopped over onto her side, a small scowl on her face. “Pa!” she shouted.

Rey blinked. That didn’t sound like incoherent babbling. There was meaning behind it. “What did you say, Sweetheart?”

Lyris sat upright and stared back at Rey. “Pa!” she repeated.

“You want your papa? Is that what you’re trying to say?” Rey smiled wider than she had in days. Lyris had never spoken a coherent word before. But she was nearly a year old. Her lagging physical development could be blamed on her conditions, but her mind seemed beyond her age. Rey should have expected this. She shuffled a bit closer and pulled Lyris onto her knee. “Papa will be back soon, Sweetheart, I promise.”

Frowning, Lyris rubbed her fists into her eyes. “Pa! Pa!” she wailed.


She looked up at her for a moment, her tiny lips mouthing the word. “Ma!” she shouted.

“That’s right.” Rey kissed her again. “I’m your mother, sweetheart. And you have a big, strong papa too. He’s a brave warrior and right now he’s off saving the galaxy. I would have joined him, but you need me more.” She curled a strand of her dark hair around her finger. “Speaking of which, do you
"sense any change, DeeTee?"

“No change in her condition detected, Mistress,” DeeTee said.

Lyris perked up her head and pointed at his hovering body. “Dee,” she said.

Rey laughed. “Yes, that’s DeeTee. He’s here to look after you too.” For now, her vocabulary seemed limited to single syllables. If only Ben had been there to hear it. “Ah! Wait!” Rey leaped from the bed and pulled her holopad from her satchel, then switched on the holo recorder and propped it up against a pillow to capture herself and Lyris. “Say hello to your papa, Starlight. Just like the transmissions with Uncle Finn, remember? Look at the lens.” She grasped Lyris's arm and waved it for her.

“Pa!” Lyris called out after a moment of indecision. She searched Rey's face for approval.

“Very good, sweetheart!”

“Pa! Pa!” Lyris shouted, slamming her hand on the bed.

“He’ll be here soon, Starlight.” Rey nuzzled her hair and smiled into the lens. “He and the others will come back and we’ll have all sorts of fun. He’ll give you lots of hugs and kisses, I promise.”

Lyris giggled, ignorant of Rey’s meaning, but excited by her enthusiasm. Rey tickled her sides and neck and her giggles grew louder until they trailed off into a fit of wheezing.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Rey pulled her back onto her lap. “I didn’t mean to do that. Here, I’ve got you.” She turned off the datapad to help Lyris through her fit, losing track of time along with her sense of merriment.

The moment had passed, but at least she’d captured it.

Once the rain stopped and they’d had a few hours without another downpour, Rey deemed it safe to leave the room. She went outside and peeked over the railing to see the Wookies rekindling the fire and starting their evening meal. The legs of meat Mala dropped into the pot were larger than Lyris, making Rey wonder what part of the planet those creatures roamed. Perhaps the next day’s walk was better off canceled. The insects that buzzed at night and nipped at her arms were bad enough.

Halfway down the stairs, Lyris grabbed at the edge of her sling to get Rey’s attention. “Uk!” She shouted.

Rey lifted a brow. “What do you mean by Uk?”

Unable to elaborate, Lyris merely repeated the sound. Rey thought about the names of those Lyris had met, syllable by syllable. “Do you mean Luke?”

Lyris jabbed a finger toward a cluster of tree houses, one of which belonged to Luke. “Uk!” She said in an impatient tone that made her resemble Ben more than ever.

Rey stared up to where Lyris had pointed, baffled that she would point to Luke and recall his name after so little interaction. If she was only spouting random names she remembered, Finn or Jessika would have been higher on the list.

Unless it wasn’t random. Besides Kare, who was to remain within the camp for the duration of the mission, Luke was the only other human nearby. Perhaps Lyris could sense him. The way she and Rey picked up on one another’s feeling might not have been due to maternal intuition or Rey’s own
use of the Force. Perhaps, Lyris was displaying her own power. Rey remembered how Leia saying
Ben had always been attuned to the thoughts and feelings of those around him. Why should his
daughter not display the same talent combined with a Force-user like herself?

Rey took Lyris’s pointing finger and curled it back into her palm. “We aren’t going to see Luke,
today, my Little ight. I didn’t think you liked him anyway.”

Lyris sniffed and diverted her attention to the Wookies below. “Chu,” she said.

“Yes, we will go see Uncle Chewie.” Rey laughed. “You sure are talkative.”

Lyris smiled proudly, displaying the three teeth that had emerged so far.

The rest of their day was spent amongst the Wookies. Upon hearing Lyris’s new monosyllabic way
of speaking, Chewie roared with laughter and rattled off a list of simple words in his own language.
She tried her best to say them back, but only succeeding in making garbled growling noises.
Nonetheless, she earned a pat on the head from his massive paw.

Waroo joined in the fun as well, kneeling in front of Lyris and blurting out words for her to try.
Again, none were successful, but Lyris seemed pleased to see a Wookie that stood a bit closer to the
ground and Waroo seemed glad to not be the youngest in camp for once. He squeezed in between
Rey and Malla on their log seat to eat his meal while his mother picked at his fur, pulling out burrs
and twigs, and quietly chastising his grooming habits. He grumbled in reply and woofed down
another mouthful of stew.

That night, Rey slept fitfully, drifting in and out of sleep in a tangle of sheets and sweaty limbs. In an
attempt to fill her mind with the dark calm of her true surroundings, Rey opened her eyes. Across the
room, she saw the monitor on Lyris’s incubator glowing green, further easing her mind. Lyris was
safe, Ben could handle himself, and Rey needed sleep if she was to be of any use come morning.
She wrapped her arms around herself and buried her face in her pillow.

Sleep offered no solace. In her dreams, her fingers itched for her saber, yearning to join a battle
raging light years away. The soles of Ben’s boots struck durasteel in rapid succession and her feet
ached to run beside him. She turned again beneath the sheets and winced at the sparks of sensation
that ran through their bond.

She awoke, but the nightmares followed her. Pain ripping through her like a knife piercing the back
of her skull. The ghost of Ben’s pain rammed through her stomach, causing her to curl in on herself,
clutching at her middle. She steadied her breathing and tried to piece her thoughts back together.

Reaching out, she felt him. His heart beat and his mind held the same steely concentration it had
before. The pain she had felt had not come from the present, nor had it been a simple nightmare. The
feeling that lingered in her mind stemmed from the Force itself. But it wasn’t a vision either. It was
too vague and immaterial, consisting of imageless sensations. It was more like a flash of premonition,
a disturbance in the Force—a warning.

There was still time to prevent it, but how much, she couldn’t be sure.

Ripping off the blanket, Rey stumbled from her bed and over to Lyris. A tremor shook through her
legs as she readjusted to reality. Lyris wailed as she was pulled from her bed, bleary-eyed and
lethargic. Rey whispered what comforting words she could manage, then slung her satchel over one
shoulder with her free hand.
Throwing her door open with a Force-push, she darted out into the night. The rain had returned. The wooden panels of the rope bridge were swollen with rain and slick beneath her feet, nearly causing her to slip between the gaps. The rough twine of the railing scraped her hand raw as she caught herself. Gritting her teeth, she kept running, shielding Lyris from the downpour as best she could as they neared Luke’s room.

This time, Luke answered his own door, jerking it open before she’d even knocked. “I felt a disturbance in the Force.”

“It’s Ben and the others. They’re in trouble—or they will be. I don’t know how, but I felt it.” She had to shout to over Lyris’s cries and the beating of raindrops on the leaves and rooftops.

“Where are they now?” Luke asked.

“I don’t know. I can feel it, but I can’t give you coordinates.”

“Then what—”

“I have to find him.”

Luke paled. “Rey, I don’t know if that’s the best—”

“You want me to crawl back into bed and hide? Or sit and meditate while I feel the people I love die?”

He winced. “Rey, I—”

She gripped his arm. If it weren’t for his robes, she might have broken the skin beneath the dull edges of her nails. She shook him for good measure. “Enough! Just listen to me. I need you to watch Lyris until I get back. If all you’re going to do is sit in here and heal the people lucky enough to make it back, you can damn well heal her should the need arise. Watch her breathing. If you’re unsure about anything, ask Malla.” She handed Lyris over with a forceful gesture.

He took her, hands fumbling to position her in his arms. “You’re leaving her with me?”

“You’re her family, right? Right now, you’re all she has left until I get back.” She stared down at Lyris’s face wet with tears and rain—the miniature copy Ben’s lips, now quivering; Ben’s ears poking out from the thick black curls that clung to her forehead; the hazel eyes that were undeniably her own. “Ma!” she shrieked, latching onto the front of Rey’s tunic.

Rey choked down the lump in her throat. “I’m sorry, sweetheart, but your father needs me. I’ll be back as soon as he’s safe.” With a trembling hand, she detached Lyris’s fingers and stood back.

Lyris wailed louder and nearly slipped from Luke’s grip. He managed to hold her back. “Rey, are you sure about this? If you took a moment to think this through—”

“There’s no time. I can think in hyperspace, but for now, I need to go.” She gave Lyris one last look. “I’ll be back as soon as I can, sweetheart.” Before she lost her nerve, she turned and walked out the door.

This was no time for meditation, clear minds, and right paths.

Using her saber to light her way through the underbrush, Rey found the Falcon at the edge of the landing pad. Under different circumstances, it might have been a pleasant reunion. The familiar musk of the ship’s interior—a blend of aged leather, accumulated grit, and sweat—had gone stale. It was
like stepping into her own keepsake box instead of Leia’s, so full of memories and sore reminders.

She shook her head. There was no time for distractions. There were more memories, she assured herself. They just had to live long enough to make them.

She engaged the liftoff sequence and piloted herself into the atmosphere. Ben had never needed coordinates to find her, so neither would she. With one last look at the surface of Kashyyyk, Rey blasted into hyperspace, ignoring the pull to turn back.

....

Gentry’s description failed to prepare her for the sight of the ship hovering over the prison planet of Kish. The inspiration the designers had taken from the various models of star destroyers was obvious in its general shape, but with a contemporary edge to its design. It was a space-faring beast in metal armor with two artillery mounts on either side of the hull, pointed forward like a pair of claws. For an eye, the beast had a superweapon mounted atop it, glowing red from within like a condensed sun. They had repurposed the technology developed for Starkiller, it seemed.

The Falcon’s alarms blared as the ship’s tractor beam latched on and the communications panel lit up. “By the authority of the Imperial navy, I order you to identify yourself,” came a booming voice.

“I—I’ve come to surrender,” Rey said. “I hand myself over to Imperial custody. I am unarmed.” She drew on the Force to give her words an added touch of believability, hoping to avoid further questioning. If that didn’t work, there was always a full-blown mind-trick.

“Affirmative. You will be escorted to a holding cell upon landing.” The voice cut off.

Rey let out a sigh of relief, then redirected her efforts to find Ben. He was onboard the ship, whole and unharmed. And reaching back. He was coming for her.

The Falcon moaned as it was dragged toward the open jaw of the hangar bay doors. They swallowed her whole then clamped shut behind her. An entire city could have fit inside the hangar. Row after row of tie-fighters, shuttles, and several models she’d never seen filled the space. It was enough to mobilize the largest army she’d ever known, enough to take on the galaxy. And there were ten more on their way. The thought shook her, causing her fingers to tremble as she unbuckled herself from the pilot’s seat.

Ben was close. Along with a multitude of imperial officers. Stepping down the exit ramp, she spotted her welcoming party, their blasters at the ready. Fifteen strong, they varied in rank and uniform. Hidden behind a stormtrooper mask was Ben. Like the others, he was aiming for her vitals, but unbeknownst to the rest, he was reaching through the Force, bombarding her with questions as well as his pleasure at seeing her face again.

For once, Rey was grateful for the makeup, gowns, and elaborate stylings Mal had adorned her with while on Coruscant. Unadorned, her overgrown hair loose about her shoulders and dressed only in her leggings and sleeping tunic, they wouldn’t recognize her.

An officer stepped forward. “Come quietly and you’ll live. I don’t know what possessed you to reveal yourself, but unless you have a death wish, I’m afraid you’ll be disappointed. The time for negotiations or prisoner exchanges has long past.” He gestured to the men behind him. “Someone search her and escort her to the cell block.”

Ben cut through the crowd and strode forward. Silently offering an apology, he ripped off her satchel and pulled her hands over her head before running his open palms down her body. She trembled and
stiffened her lip, feigning disgust.

“All clear,” Ben said.

“Good,” The officer waved toward the Falcon. “Now someone else deal with that scrap pile while the rest of you return to your posts. You are dismissed.”

Pulling her forward with her hands bound behind her, he led her to the hangar’s exit and into a corridor of black durasteel. It was large enough to fly an X-wing through, as were the chrome doors that towered over them on either side.

The walls of the cell block loomed even higher, with rows of transparisteel cells embedded in them, lit only by dim red lights that hung overhead. The poor wretches that inhabited the cells ranged from one extreme to the other, either curled up in the corners or glaring out with their fists pressed against the barrier. The flagship truly was a beast and this was its belly, full of unfortunate prey awaiting a grisly end.

Instead of stopping before an open cell or taking her up to a higher level, he led her to the far end of the cell block and through a narrow door. Inside, five more troopers awaited them. Wexley was the only ally she sensed behind their masks.

One man wasn’t wearing one at all. He tensed as they stepped inside, but relaxed when he saw Ben wasn’t a higher ranking officer come to scold him. The stranger narrowed his eyes at the two of them. “You need something?”

“I’ve got what I need,” Ben said, shoving Rey toward one of the doors that lined the far end of the room.

The man threw back his head and laughed. “Don’t be late for duty in the morning and be sure to put her back when you’re done.”

Rey didn’t need to fake her disgust.

From their relaxed postures and the scale and decor of the room, it appeared to be some sort of common area. Ben led her to yet another door that led to a room even smaller than the cells and just as dimly lit. A bed was set into the wall, but the rest was bare. He unlatched his helmet and nearly shattered it as he tossed it aside. His free hands were on her in an instant, pulling her against him.

“What are you doing here?” he asked in a harsh whisper. “Where’s Lyris?”

“She’s with Luke.” Rey splayed her hands over his armored chest. “And I’m here because of what I felt. It was a disturbance in the Force. You’re in danger—more than usual—so I had to come and make sure nothing happens. I don’t want you facing Hux without me; staying behind was a mistake.”

“Thank you for worrying about me.”

“Look, I know you wanted me to stay behind, but—”

“Don’t.” He cupped her face. “It’s not like you need my permission to come or go anywhere. And honestly, it felt wrong being here without you.” He ran his thumb over her cheek. “We’ll just have to make sure we both get back to Lyris when this is all over.”
“It’s a deal.” Rey leaned into his hand. “How long until we leave for the capital?”

“Around two days until the fleet arrives, then one more for us to get there.”

“Will you put me in a cell until then?”

“Not a chance.” He smiled and planted a kiss on her forehead. “I’ve got you right where I want you. I’ll make sure the other guards keep their mouths shut, but until we reach Coruscant, you’ll just need to wait in here.” He handed over her satchel. “And I have to report back for duty.”

“And I'll be here waiting,” Rey slung it across her and slipped her hand inside to touch the cold metal of her saber hilt.

….

Through the hours she spent in Ben’s bunk room, which passed at an odd pace without daylight to judge them by, she occupied herself by tracing his signature as he moved through the ship. He passed several Resistance members going about their own assignments in every part of the ship, from the hangar bay to the bowl of the engine rooms. They had placed themselves quite evenly through the Imperial ranks. Like Sev had said, when troopers weren’t needed for killing, there were countless other jobs that needed filling.

At the end of the day, he returned with a spare portion of food for her to eat before they curled up into his bunk. It was too cramped for true comfort, but being in each other's arms again was worth waking up with an aching back.

Her second day aboard the ship passed much the same as the first, until Ben returned early, his face stricken.

“What’s wrong?” Rey asked.

“Change of plans.” He nearly crushed his helmet in his grip. “Finn’s plan to be bait has backfired. Phasma has more sense than Hux, it seems. Just showing his face here caused quite a stir, so she’s planning on putting an end to it. But she doesn’t know that some of her guards have been replaced. I wasn’t able to get onto his security detail—she used her personal guards for that—but I was able to hide a weapon on him before he was taken.”

“Hux approved this?”

“Of course not, but everyone on board either agrees with her or fears her enough to remain silent.”

Rey rose from the bed, her disused limbs flooding with adrenaline. “We need to go.”

Ben nodded and slung her satchel around himself before placing the cuffs back on her wrists, unlatched. “If anyone questions our arrival, I'll say Phasma ordered your execution as well.”

Stepping back out into the cavernous spaces of the ship had them feeling like insects skittering across the floor, hoping they wouldn't be spotted and crushed beneath someone’s heel.

Thankfully, no one questioned their presence as they ascended through the levels of the ship. Few spared even a sideways glance until Ben threw off her cuffs and took her hand.

“What are you doing?” Rey whispered.

“She has him on the bridge. We need to run.”
Without a word, she followed him down the last few turns until they came upon the wide doors of the command center. The entrance was sealed and flanked by troopers on either side.

Just as Ben lifted his hand to toss them aside, they were startled by the sound of a blaster bolt from behind the doors.

“Finn!” Rey ran ahead and took out the guards herself, flinging them against either wall.

Ben caught up and helped her to pry open the doors.

The workstations of the command center sat empty, lit by the starlight that streamed in from the wide viewport. Finn stood facing away from them at the center of the bridge, a blaster trembling in his hand, a heap of silver armor at his feet with a smoking crater left in the breastplate.

“Finn?” Rey whispered, approaching cautiously. The emotions she felt from him were a conflicted tangle, not the sense of sweet victory one might have expected.

Finn turned, eyes wide. “Rey? You’re here?”

Rey nodded. “Yes, I’m here to help. And Lyris is safe with Luke.”

“Good.” He stared back at her with a distant, glassy expression, then glanced back down at Phasmas corpse which had a puddle of blood forming around it. He let out a shuddering exhale.

Perhaps if they had discussed his time with the First Order, Rey might have better understood. Maybe one he had time to process things, they still might. For now, she embraced him, resting her cheek against his shoulder. He squeezed her back.

They heard the thundering of fists striking the door and several sets of footsteps approaching. Pulling back from Finn, Rey grabbed her saber. “What do we do now?”

“If we fight them no, we’ll never get close to Hux,” Ben said, tearing off his helmet.

After a second of panic, an idea hit her. “Wait! I know what to do.” Rey searched the room for a comlink. Near the far end of the room, she found the communication panel with several channels spanning the entirety of the ship, including the ship-wide intercom.

“What are you doing?” Finn asked.

“Just trust me.” She took a deep breath and switched on the intercom. Closing her eyes and drawing on the Force, she reached out to touch the thousands of minds that inhabited the ship. “Everything is under control.” She said into the speaker. “You may return to your stations and proceed as planned.” Their minds were like an ocean, pulsing with life, each drop an independent will for her to bend. She skirted her hand over the waters, careful not to dip below the surface—just a gentle push to calm their minds and banish their doubts and suspicions.

After releasing her hold and switching off the comm link, her legs gave out. Ben caught her by the arms and lowered her into the nearest chair, then knelt beside her. “Rey? Are you with me?”

She pressed her hand to her temple, trying to quiet the ringing in her ears. “Yeah, I’m here. Did it work?”

“They aren’t banging on the doors,” Finn said. “and there aren’t any alarms going off. I think we’re good.”
“Are you okay, Finn?” Rey asked.

“Yeah, I’m okay.” He slipped his blaster into his belt and clenched his hand at his side to keep it from shaking. “But what are we going to do now? I don’t see how the original plan can work once everyone figures out what happened. Phasma was meant to escort us, prisoners, personally.”

“I have an idea.” Ben kissed Rey’s forehead and squeezed her hand before standing. “I won’t be gone long.”

“Where are you going?” Rey asked.

“Well, firstly we need to refill these workstations with our own people.” He gestured the seats that Phasma had emptied to have a private audience with Finn. “And on the way back, I’m stopping by the armory.” He glances down at Phasma’s corpse. “The rest of the crew can’t know what happened here. It would blow our cover along with the operation. So instead, we’ll switch things up a bit. I’ll take Phasma’s armor.” He pointed to Finn. “And you’ll take my trooper armor. As far as this ship’s crew is concerned, you died here today. Sound alright to you?”

“Yeah. I’m in,” Finn said.

“Stay safe,” Rey reminded him.

“I’ll try,” Ben said before sliding the doors open just enough to slip through.

Finn took a seat beside Rey and placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. “That was amazing, by the way. You really okay?”

“She placed her hand over his and smiled. “Thank you. And yes, I’m alright, I think. I had a brief lesson on battle meditation from Luke but had never attempted anything on such a large scale. It was—exhilarating. Exhausting. I wasn’t even sure it would work.” She shook her head in disbelief.

“Well, I’m glad it did. And I’m glad you’re here. Who knows what might have happened if you hadn’t done...,” He gestured vaguely with his hand, “whatever it was you just did.”

“I can imagine.” Rey’s smile faded as she recalled the disturbance she had felt on Kashyyyk—the sharp pain in her head, the blow to the gut.”

Ben returned with Wexley, Poe, and three other rebel pilots, wearing a shining set of Phasma’s spare armor. There was inch or so difference in height, the fit of the shoulders differed, and his gait was all his, but unless someone was studying him with a keen eye, he wouldn’t be spotted. He then handed Finn the uniform he had shed.

“Thanks. I’ll head back to the cell block,” Finn said. “Need to keep up appearances.” Rey bid him goodbye with a quick hug. They would see each other soon.

Gentry arrived moments later and shrieked once he saw two of the pilots carrying Phasma’s limp body toward the storage compartments on the far wall.

Gentry raised a slim finger. “Is there nothing else we can—.”

“No,” Ben said, his voice modulated by the helmet. “We can deal with her later, but for now, no one can know she’s dead.”

“Fine, fine.” He lifted his hands in surrender.
Ben removed his helmet and seated himself in the captain’s chair. As Rey moved to join him, she felt him tense. “The ships,” he said, bracing his hands on the armrests. “Where’s the eleventh one?”

Rey stepped closer and saw the nine ships had arrived, each a smaller copy of the mothership, but no less capable of unthinkable devastation.

“Oh, that. It’s meeting us on Coruscant,” Gentry said. “Some last-minute stop, I was told.”

“Stopping where?” Ben asked.

“I don’t know,” Gentry headed for the comm link. “But I can find out.”

He tapped in a sequence and after a moment, they heard a voice on the other end. “Bridge, this is navigation. Standing by for orders.”

“Officer Silval, I have an information request.” Gentry slid to the edge of his chair and leaned on the panel. “Where was our eleventh ship scheduled to go before rejoining us on Coruscant?”

“Yes, sir. It was the Kashyyyk, the Wookie planet. We extracted the coordinates from the records on the rebel ship we impounded two days ago. An encampment was found there, mostly abandoned, but with a few stragglers. They are being taken to the imperial prison as we speak and will be—”

The transmission cut off as the panel sparked and shattered under Ben’s invisible grip.

The sound of His’s saber igniting and slashing against the far wall faded as Rey’s mind and body went numb. Clinging to consciousness, Rey felt for Lyris’s Force signature. She was alive, a little flickering light in the void of space, light years away.

The Empire had her. That sniveling, power-grabbing bastard had her. Before she gave into temptation and flew into a fury like Ben, possibly breaking the minds of every officer on board, she was startled by a violent gasp. Turning, she saw Gentry clawing at his throat. Ben stood before him with his hand outstretched. A scream escaped Gentry’s throat as Ben tore into his mind.

“Stop it!” Rey shouted, running to take hold of his arm.

He obeyed her, allowing Gentry to suck in a ragged breath.

“Standard procedure,” Gentry managed to choke out through his bruised windpipe. “I didn’t know.”

“He’s telling the truth,” Ben said, defeated. “It wasn’t his fault.”

No, Rey thought. This time, the blame was all hers.

Chapter End Notes

The fic is almost done! Thank you all for your support and feedback.
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

After Ben and Rey's daughter is captured, the Resistance Plan is set in motion to reclaim both Lyris and the throne Hux has stolen. But the Force has a plan of its own, as do a few of Rey's foes and allies.

Chapter Notes

I compiled the last two chapters into one long one. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

What if they've taken her ventilator? What if they've figured out who she is? Is someone there to comfort her when she cries or help her through a coughing fit? Such were Rey's thoughts as Ben held her. She kept her tears as quiet as she could, but a few choked sobs escaped. She could feel a few tears fall from Ben's eyes as well, the accompanying cries held back by a tight lip and clenched jaw.

The others kept to a respectful distance and busied themselves at their workstations, pretending not to hear. But Rey could sense their sympathy.

“What did I do?” Rey whispered against his armored chest. She caught a glimpse of herself in the chrome breastplate and placed her hand over the warped reflection. “I wasn’t thinking. If we lose her, it will be my fault.”

“Hey, hey, look at me.” He cupped her face with one hand and smoothed back her hair with the other, like comforting a weeping child. She pulled his gloved hands away and sat higher in their shared seat to look him in the eye on an equal level.

He sighed and abandoned the patronizing tone. “I just want you to know that you don't get all the blame here, alright? I was the one who left on this mission and left you there. And you don't know what would have happened if you hadn’t come to find me.”

“Yes, I do. I would have killed them all,” Rey said. “I would have ripped them apart before letting them get her.”

“Maybe. But you don't know how things would have gone down and it’s pointless to waste your energy thinking about it. We just have to deal with it now.”

They would go mad if they stayed like this, Rey realized. They needed a distraction. “I have something to show you,” her expression softened. She pulled her holopad from her satchel and flipped through the recent recordings.
With a click, the hologram of Lyris and herself lit up.

“Say hello to your papa, starlight,” the hologram said. “Just like the transmissions with Uncle Finn. Look at the lens.”

“Pa!” Lyris called out.

The knife imbedded in Ben’s heart twisted painfully. He sank into the seat and stared at the holo with eyes and mouth wide. He threaded his shaking fingers through Rey’s.

“Very good, sweetheart!” said the Rey in the recording.

“Pa! Pa!”

“He’ll be here soon, Starlight.” The Rey in the recording nuzzled her hair and smiled to the lens. “He and the others will come back and we’ll have all sorts of fun. He’ll give you lots of hugs and kisses, I promise.”

A sob shook through Ben as Lyris’s coughing fit started. The rasping sound reverberated through the hollow room, gut wrenching and accusatory. He clamped a hand over his mouth to silence his cries.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” the Rey in the recording said. “I didn’t mean to do that. Here, I’ve got you.”

Rey thanked the Force when her recorded self cut off the transmission. Her heart was heavy with the emotions the Jedi had long forbidden: hatred, desperation, love. She let them mingle inside her, ready to fuel her and drive her forward once they reached Hux. Then she would have her vengeance. There was darkness in her, but in that moment, she didn’t care. Perhaps that’s how it was meant to be. All that mattered was getting Lyris back.

She and Ben were then left in deafening silence, sharing the captain’s chair as they had once shared their throne. They stared numbly out into space as the stars streaked by, their minds and arms curled around one another, seeking comfort and mutual reassurance, but finding only a mirror of their own grief. For once, they felt incomplete in each other’s arms. As they traveled through hyperspace, everyone in the command center busied themselves at their stations, speaking only when necessary. Every so often, they would catch eyes with one another and share a look of solidarity. Or outright pity when looking at Rey. She did her best to ignore them.

Periodically, Gentry would glance at the cupboard that served as Phasma’s coffin for the time being, his face pale and nauseated. It was strange for Rey to see someone so unaccustomed to witnessing death firsthand. That was a normal reaction. It had never occurred to her how desensitized she had become—her and everyone else in this conflict. Gentry might have slipped intel to the Resistance and helped to cover their tracks as they spirited troopers away through their secret network, but she doubted he had ever been so near to the consequences of the war he found himself tangled in. She was almost jealous of his ignorance.

Once the hours of travel had stretched on into near oblivion, they finally left hyperspace to hover above the glittering surface of Coruscant. They passed easily into the atmosphere, past the shields and security vessels that would have obliterated them were it not for the guise of imperial authority.

The lights of the city had dimmed and far fewer ships flew over the skyline. The lessened air traffic could be blamed on the day’s planned events, but the patches of darkness could not. Rey hadn’t grown that attached to the planet, having seen so little of it, but the thought of those billions of lives being stifled by Hux’s ambition relit the fire within her.

She recalled the small glimpse of the city she’d stolen during her brief escape from the palace
compound—the lively street market, people of every sentient race imaginable, the lights, colors, and sounds. Even the grimier parts had their own sort of charm. Under different circumstances, if she and Ben had made peace before leaving, Coruscant might have been her home. A real home. Perhaps it still could once this was all over.

There was a knock at the command center door.

“It’s Sev,” Rey said, pulling herself from her daydream.

Wexley rose to let him in. Sev entered, wearing the armor he’d once risked everything to shed, his helmet tucked under one arm to allow them to verify his identity and speak uninhibited—and to avoid another second trapped beneath that accursed mask, Rey suspected.

“The shuttle is ready,” Sev said.

“Shuttle?” Rey repeated.

“Only a few of us are going down to the planet for the procession,” Sev explained. “No point in flooding the city with soldiers just to bring them back up again.”

“This ceremony is just a show of strength before Hux starts tearing his way across the galaxy,” Poe said. “This ship is a permanent assignment for most of those on board. On that note, am I still staying up here or has that part of the plan changed too?” He spotted the confused look on Rey’s face and decided to elaborate. “I’m taking command of the ship along with Sev and will keep up appearances while our disguised guards and prisoners are down on the surface. If we lose control of this thing, we have no firepower left.”

“Excuse me,” Gentry said, shoulders slumped and his gaze fixed to the floor. “Would it be completely out of line if I were to request to stay onboard as well? I’m afraid I’m feeling a bit ill. This isn’t—I’m not used to this sort of thing.”

Poe paused for a moment, brow furrowed in deliberation, before answering. “Alright. I’ll see if someone wants to volunteer to pose as a guard in your place.”

“Thank you,” Gentry said. “I believe I will better be utilized here on the ship.”

Rey agreed, suspecting he might become a liability if he were faced with an armed enemy. He was a desk-bound intel source, not a foot soldier.

“What about you?” Ben asked Rey. “We didn’t plan on having you here, so it’s up to you what part you want in this.”

“I want to get down there and find Lyris,” Rey said. “I can’t wait any longer.”

“Do you need me to come with you?” Ben asked.

“No. They need you,” She took his hand and squeezed it. “I’ll bring back our baby and you focus on taking that bastard down.”

“Sounds like a plan.” He said.

She felt a twinge of disapproval from him over the guilt that still lingering in her mind. It wasn’t her fault, he reminded her. He would have done the same thing. She blocked him out. She didn’t need a pep-talk, she needed to fix her mistake.

With everything decided, those who had a helmet placed them back on and Rey allowed Ben to
place the cuffs back on her wrists. Even though they weren't latched and it was all just pretend, acting as his prisoner and looking at him through a mask brought back strange and distant memories.

More members of the Resistance came to fill their seats as they prepared to leave for the shuttle. Jessika and Finn were among them and shared brief farewells with Rey, who chose not to burden either of them with the news of Lyris and the others. They didn’t need the distraction, and she couldn't bring herself to say it aloud.

“You like that seat, Dameron?” Ben asked as Poe sat himself down in the captain’s chair.

“As a matter of fact, I do.” Poe flexed his fingers over the armrests.

“Good. Once this is over, I’ll need someone to take command and turn this fleet into a force for peace and stability instead of terror. Who better than the best pilot in the Resistance?”

“In the galaxy,” Poe corrected.

“Maybe. We’ll just have to test that sometime.” Ben laughed before raising his voice for the rest of the room to hear and reverting to a more diplomatic tone. “I’m grateful to all of you for participating in this mission and all that you have sacrificed and risked leading up to today. If we all live through this, I believe the galaxy will thank you as well, but that’s not something I can guarantee. I wish I could.”

“I will gladly risk my life for my rightful emperor,” Sev said, standing a little straighter.

“Our rightful emperor,” Finn repeated, smirking and shaking his head. “Never thought I’d be with you on that one, but I guess I am.”

“I’m surprised you aren’t vouching for Dameron,” Ben said.

“He tried,” Poe said, rolling his eyes. “Trust me, not happening. I’ll lead pilots and soldiers, but put the whole galaxy in front of me and I’m out of here on the next shuttle.”

“Does that mean you accept my offer?”

“Sure. That is if you can get the rest of us to vote you back in once Hux is gone. Don’t worry, though. I’ll put in a good word for you.”

The corners of Ben’s mouth curled into a faint recreation of Poe’s hopeful grin.

….

Rey never imagined she would’ve missed seeing Ben’s sigil hanging from the slanting walls of the palace and flying atop the spires and walls of the compound, but that was her immediate thought when she saw Hux’s banners hanging in their place. She certainly never imagined she would be here risking her life to return him to power.

Ben must have followed her trail of thought. He gave her a knowing look and laced his fingers through hers. “When we get down there, I want you to stay onboard the shuttle and wait until we’ve gone to slip out. Just go find Lyris and find a safe place to hide. I’ll come find you when it’s over.”

“No,” Rey said. Ben flinched at her refusal. “Sure, I’ll slip away, but once I find her, I’m coming to find you.”

Just then the shuttle swooped down into the hangar and landed. Everyone began to unlatch themselves from their seats and line up in formation in front of the shuttle doors.
Knowing there was no time to argue and no way of changing her mind, Ben gave a defeated sigh. A silent farewell hung in the air between them. Her fingers trembled as she forced herself to let go of him. She squeezed them into a fist and returned to the front of the ship while he went to join the others. Peering over the shuttle’s dashboard, low enough to not be seen by onlookers, Rey saw the members of the Resistance standing in the formation below, filling their roles perfectly.

Then Hux entered the hangar. No longer was he an amorphous entity for them to fight against, but a man. Living, breathing, killable. Rey fought against her burning instinct to charge down the ramp and blow her cover for the chance to plunge her saber through his chest, consequences be damned. But she held back. They had a plan and deviating from it had only caused her grief.

Hux was flanked on either side by a dozen decorated stormtroopers with long pikes in their hands, red pauldrons over their shoulders, and black capes flowing behind them. Hux wore a cape of his own, pure white and long enough to fan out behind him on the marble floor. The rest of his regalia was tailored to match—a gleaming white recreation of military garb, covered in unearned medals, gaudy embellishments, and a fiery red sash running from his golden epaulet to his belt. He’d even crowned himself with a thin band of gold that ran through his overstyled hair and across his brow.

As distracting as Hux’s transformation was, Rey almost overlooked the woman standing between two of the troopers, her hands behind her back and hair in her face. When she looked up, revealing herself, Rey’s stomach lurched. It was Kare. She had dark rings beneath her eyes and a bruise on her jaw.

Looking back at Hux’s face and seeing the anticipation in his pale eyes, Rey knew what had happened. Feeling for Ben, she realized he did too.

Hux had been expecting them.

It was too late to go back.

Stay on board, Ben silently begged her, don’t make a sound.

Hux stepped forward to address Ben. “Thank you, General, for bringing the prisoners, but I fear you have more rebels among you than you originally thought.” He gestured to the troopers at his side, prompting them to aim their blasters at the heads of each disguised member of the Resistance. “They do play their parts well, don’t they?” He nodded to one of his troopers who then stepped forward to tear the helmet off Finn’s head. The corners of Hux’s mouth curled sadistically. “As you can see, some of them had more practice at others.” He chuckled at his own observation and at the hatred in Finn’s eyes. “I hope the crowd doesn’t mind our assembly being extended to accommodate the extra executions. And the staff will have more to clean up as well, of course.”

Hux’s men unmasked the rest of the Resistance one by one and bound their wrists behind them. All except Ben. Hux was saving him for last, Rey guessed.

Unable to break away from her captor’s firm grip, Kare uttered a series of apologies in between sobs. It wasn’t her fault. They had tortured her. She hadn’t meant to reveal their plan.

Ben stood rigid, stewing in his anger, waiting to be unmasked himself. His hand itched for his hidden saber.

Hux came to stand before him. “Due to your record, I won’t punish you for this oversight, but I will ask you to be more thorough in your security next time. This could have gone far worse than it did.”
Rey felt Ben’s blood turn cold along with her own. Hux didn’t know. Phasma’s death hadn’t been part of the plan, so Kare couldn’t have informed them of the switch.

Ben spoke to her again through their link. Wait until we leave, then find Lyris. I’ll deal with this.

“Silence!” Hux shouted, startling even his own men. Rey’s heart nearly stopped, but she then realized Hux hadn’t been speaking to her or Ben. Instead, he glared down at Kare who hung limply in her captor’s grip, sobbing hysterically.

“Just do what they say,” Wexley begged her. He was crying as well.

“Why are you here?” Kare asked him. “You were supposed to stay onboard the ship.” It was true. Wexley had been the one to take Gentry’s place.

Hux looked between them, nose wrinkled as if he’d smelled something vile. He pulled his personal blaster from his belt and, without sparing another second, shot Wexley point-blank in the head. The sharp gasps of those around him echoed the sound of the blast.

The trooper dropped what remained of Wexley with a wet thud. Kare’s scream filled the hangar and Rey kept a tight grip on her own mouth to keep from joining in.

“I told you to be silent!” Hux shouted. Kare bit her lip, silencing herself, body trembling. Hux pointed to the guard beside Wexley’s corpse. “Find someone to clean that up and then join us in the throne room.” He motioned to the others who trailed behind him as he left the room, heels clicking with each step against the smooth marble.

….  

Once Rey mustered the courage to stand and get a better look at her surroundings, she found herself alone in the Hangar, save for a single trooper stationed by the door that led into the palace. She swallowed hard and crept down the exit ramp, hand slipped into her bag to wrap around her saber.

The trooper stiffened as she approached and reached for his own weapon. “Identify yourself!”

Rey laced her words with suggestion as they slipped past her lips in a cool, even tone. “You will let me pass. I’m just a kitchen worker. You saw nothing out of the ordinary.”

The trooper’s hand went slack on the trigger. “Nothing out of the ordinary.”

After influencing an entire ship, commanding a single man was effortless. Before he could recover, she slipped past him into the hall. Many of the decorations she had once derided were now stripped away, likely sold off to fund the war. As if stealing from the mouths of his citizens wasn’t enough. She was certain he would let the galaxy crumble if he could be emperor of the ashes.

There was no time to linger or mourn. She continued to follow Lyris’s Force signature through the maze of halls and rooms. It led her out into the palace courtyard.

Above her, the mothership loomed, casting a shadow over the city as far as she could see.

She felt Lyris pulling her toward the east wing of the palace on the opposite end of the courtyard. Walking slowly, she dampened her presence and subtly dulled the senses of the guards stationed at the various corners and gates of the courtyard. It didn’t take to avoid suspicion. Dressed as plainly as she was, they’d probably mistake her for a servant of some sort anyway. But she didn’t want to take the chance.

She had almost made it across the lawn when a rumble and hiss ripped through the atmosphere. The
world around her was cast in a red light. Squinting, she looked up to see the fiery eye of the mothership’s superweapon burning white hot as it charged to fire.

This wasn’t part of the plan. Not one she had any part in.

The concentrated inferno shot out and hurled toward the ground. Heart-rending screams rose from the citizens beyond the palace walls. She wasn’t hallucinating, Rey realized, nor was this a vision.

Was this how the inhabitants of the Hosnian system had felt? Nowhere to hide or run, no time to escape. Just certain death staring down at them.
She reached for Ben through their bond. He was just a short distance away but still too far to cross in the little time they had. She could feel the panic brewing within and around him. He hadn’t anticipated this either. His Force signature clinging to her own was the last thing she felt before the world around her slipped away.

…. Each breath Rey took stung like tiny needles in her lungs, searing her dry throat. She coughed and turned over, unsure which was way up. Groaning from the soreness of her body and the dull ring in her ears, she dug her nails into the grass to ground herself, then rose to her knees.

She was still in the courtyard. She was still alive.

Above her, the mothership remained, it’s weapon extinguished. It had been a focused hit, not a death-blow for the planet like she had assumed. Someone had planned this.

Rey gasped as an emergency service vessel flew overhead, sirens blaring. Turning to follow its path, she saw the palace burning behind her, half of it demolished, the rest clinging to its ancient foundations as the fire brigade worked to extinguish the flames which rose high above the ruins and hissed as it was doused by torrents of water.

Ben had also survived. He clung to life, somewhere in the palace ruins, his signature still linked with her own. But then the question of Lyris’s safety overshadowed her sense of relief.

Expanding her awareness, she found her again. Lyris’s Force signature pulsed with fear, crying out with a ferocity that stung Rey’s shock-addled mind.

Forcing herself to stand, Rey ran on across the lawn, dodging the debris and patches of burning grass, and into the remains of the palace. Ignoring the panicked servants and officials that rushed by her, she ran through the marble halls with one hand over her mouth to keep out the smoke. The scorched air burned her eyes.

The lights had gone out, the generators and power lines likely destroyed, making it more difficult to see with each level she descended into the bowels of the castle. She took out her saber to light her path. Pieces of collapsed walls and broken pillars littered the floor along with others sorts of rubble.

In a room containing an array of cracked monitors and darkened display panels, loose wires hung down from the collapsing ceiling to block her path. The frayed ends sparked as she approached. It was as if she were back in the dark forest of Cendril, cutting away at vines and dodging fallen logs and boulders.

Once the path was clear, she took off running again and found the next set of stairs. At the bottom, her feet met solid ground and she could sense no further levels beneath. This had to be it.

She lifted her blade to illuminate the uberesh script engraved over the single door at the end of the stairwell. The words confirmed her assumption. These were the palace holding cells. With a hard
swipe, she raked her saber through the door to carve into the thick durasteel. Stepping over the threshold, she continued her pursuit. Lyris wasn’t much farther now.

The hall was narrow and the air was thick with smoke. At the far end was a wall of fire. Her heart lurched. There were no more exits, no other way forward.

A familiar cry rose above the sound of crackling flames.

“Lyris!” Rey screamed.

Her cries were growing louder, closer.

Just as Rey braced herself to rush forward, a figure emerged, silhouetted by fire. Its face was shrouded in smoke and darkness. Lyris’s cries came from the bundle in his arms.

“Let her go!” Rey shouted. “Give her back! Please!” She readjusted her sweaty grip on her saber as hot tears ran down her face.

Between cries, Lyris wheezed and coughed, harder than ever, the sound echoing through the hall. All this smoke would kill her.

The figure rushed forward and Rey ran to meet him, saber held high, teeth bared.

“Stop!” The man shouted, raising a defensive hand.

Rey froze as her saber cast light on Luke’s face. Lyris was in his arms with her ventilator covering her mouth. “Ma!” she whimpered, reaching out her hand and grabbing the air between them.

Rey let out a strangled cry of shock and relief, then extinguished her saber. She nearly dropped it in her hurry to put it back in her satchel. Without the blue glow, they were left with only the light of the fire, but that’s all Rey needed to grab Lyris and pull her into her arms.

There was no time for an extended reunion. They needed fresh air and the heat was building quickly. “Where is everyone?” Rey asked.

“The guards fled and the Wookies are being held elsewhere; these cells would never hold them for long. We’re the only ones down here.”

“Then we need to go,” Rey grabbed his arm. “Follow me.”

He trailed behind her as she led them back up the stairs and through the ruined palace. When they burst through the nearest exit, she looked up and saw the flames on the upper levels were extinguished, but the air was filled with black smoke billowing downward. The murky haze enveloped them.

A few of those lucky enough to escape the fire and destruction were out in the courtyard, clinging to one another and sobbing. Others kept to themselves, their eyes wide and empty, shell-shocked. A couple had lost consciousness entirely and were sprawled out in the grass. Rey might have mistaken them for corpses if she couldn’t feel their signatures pulsing with life.

The fire was gone, but the smoke still lingered. And the trauma, Rey suspected, would last a lifetime. Lyris demanded Rey’s attention with another fit of wheezing and a desperate tug on her shirt. The smoke was thinner than it had been inside the palace, but she still couldn’t take it.

Rey scanned the horizon for the nearest gate out of the compound, but then spotted the greenhouse in which she’d spent so many hours lounging in solitude. The transparasteel haven had been mercifully untouched by the fire. A few chunks of rubble had shattered a few of its panels, but the air within
looked relatively clear.

She ran to it with Luke not far behind and stepped through one of the jagged holes in its wall. A stolen key card wasn’t needed this time.

The air felt like ice on her skin and cooled her burning lungs. Lyris felt it too. She made small whimpering noises and greedily sucked in the clean air that flooded through her filter.

Rey lowered herself to her knees and fell back into the grass, fighting to catch her own breath. Lyris rose and fell atop her chest.

Finally, in the light, she could get a proper look at Lyris. Her sweat-drenched hair was plastered to her forehead and her eyes were red, but she appeared unharmed, overall. No signs of neglect or torture. As the adrenaline drained from her body, the soreness in her limbs and her flurry of emotions rushed to fill its place, causing fresh tears to spring to her eyes. They ran down her cheek in thin streams and into the grass.

“Ma,” Lyris squirmed in her arms.

“I’m here, Little Light. “I’m here” Rey held her tight and nuzzled her hair. “I’ve got you.”

Once Lyris’s breathing stabilized, Rey pulled off the ventilator to allow her to breathe on her own. She coughed once, then began to gulp down heaving breaths of fresh air without the ventilator to regulate her pace.

The grass crunched beneath Luke’s footsteps as he approached. Rey pulled herself upright. He sat in the grass beside her and with a calloused hand wiped the sweat and ash clinging to his face and beard, looking more tired and disheveled than ever.

Rey stared, unsure of what to say. Her vision had come true. But it had been of him. “You kept her safe,” she managed to say. “They didn’t figure out who she is? They didn’t try to hurt her?”

“They tried,” Luke said. “I lied about who I was and claimed her as my granddaughter. I don’t exactly look like they would have expected the Jedi Luke Skywalker to look, so it was easy to persuade them. I hope you don’t mind.”

“No, I don’t mind,” Rey recalled the state Kare had been in and wondered what horrors Luke had spared Lyris from. It wasn’t as if Hux took issue with harming children.

“My Lady?” came a voice from behind her.

Mal nodded and ran forward. She fell to her knees beside Rey, ignoring the grass-stains she had so often chastised her for. There were tears in her eyes, along with a tenderness Rey had never seen in them. “Your hair.” Mal tucked a tangled lock behind Rey’s ear as she laughed in disbelief. She let it fall back over Rey’s shoulder before pulling her into a tight embrace. Rey hugged her back.

Mal stiffened and released her. “I—I’m sorry. I got carried away.” she wiped away a tear before it could fall.

“No, no.” Rey placed a hand on her shoulder. “It’s alright. I’m glad to see you again. I doubted I
ever would.”

Mal relaxed. “How are you even alive, My Lady?”

“It’s a very long story that I’ll gladly share later,” Rey said. “Luke, this is Mal. She was my friend when I stayed here before.”


Luke shrunk from her wide-eyed gaze. “Yes. That is my name.”

“And His Majesty? Does he live as well?”

Rey felt his Force signature searching for her, growing closer. “Yes, he’s—”

Lyris cried out and waved her arms, hungry for attention.

Mal’s hand flew to her chest. “Is that…” She glanced between them, eyes narrowed. “She’s your daughter? Yours and...”

“Yes,” Rey said, feeling her face go red. “We’re married now—that too is a bit difficult to explain. This is our daughter, Lyris.”

Lyris squealed happily upon hearing her name.

“You named her after the flower you planted.” Mal smiled and glanced around at the surrounding foliage.

Rey had been too preoccupied to notice before, but now she realized the lyrises were the only plant blooming in the greenhouse.

“They are resilient little things,” Mal said. “When they started to multiply, the gardeners tried to tend them back, but they grew too quick and choked out the roots of every other plant. Once we cleared out their withered remains, the lyrises spread and flourished in their place. But I don’t really mind. They provide as much oxygen as the plants did and have beautiful flowers. I think your little one was aptly named.”

Lyris giggled and tore a bloom off its vine, crushing half its petals in the process.

Before she could try gnawing on it, Rey snatched it away. “Careful, they’ll poison if you eat them.” She tossed the ruined flower away and rubbed the pollen off Lyris’s hands.

“Now that, I didn’t know,” Mal said. “We usually don’t have tiny hands grabbing at them and trying to eat them around here.” She ran her hand through Lyris’s curls, then snatched it back, her eyes widening. “Your Majesty!” She stood and bowed in proper courtly fashion.

Rey looked around to see Ben step over the bits of broken transparisteel and into the greenhouse. Bits of him were broken too. His cybernetic was gone, leaving frayed wires and sharp bits of metal jutting out of the socket, and what flesh was visible on him was bruised, bloodied, and torn. Heedless Of his injuries, he ran forward. Rey rose to meet him and with Lyris in her arms, the three of them embraced. For a moment, time ceased to move forward and nothing else mattered. They laughed and cried and tended to each other with kisses and soothing words.

It took a blaring alarm to tear them from their blissful reunion. It came from an Imperial shuttle, one of the newer models Rey had seen onboard the mothership. It landed on the grass outside, a sharp
reminder that this day was far from over. Their green oasis couldn’t protect them forever.

“Stay here,” Ben said, his eyes darkening as he stared at the ship’s shining hull, vengeance brewing inside him. He stepped out to meet it with his saber ignited. Without a word, Luke stood to join him.

Rey would have gone if she could have bared to leave Lyris. Instead, she stayed back, her hand on her own saber, just in case.

The exit ramp hissed and unfolded, smoke curling around it as it cut through the air. Rey heard several pairs of footsteps.

It was Sev who first exited the ship. With one hand, he dragged another man forward, bound and bloodied beyond recognition. But Rey knew that Force signature. It was Gentry. Sev threw his at Ben’s feet and the two exchanged words Rey couldn’t hear.

Before she could probe further to listen in, Ben called out to her through their bond to explain in his own words.

It had been Gentry who had fired on the palace, attempting to kill both Hux and Ben in one strike. Sev and Poe had regained control of the ship and reduced him to his current state, stopping just short of killing him themselves. Sev had done most of the damage, Rey knew. She could see the blood on his knuckles. The destruction Gentry had wrought could never be undone, but Poe now sat the helm of the mothership again to ensure nothing more could happen.

But you said he hadn’t betrayed us, Rey said through the bond.

He hadn’t, Ben replied. Not yet. I should have looked deeper. I might have found his plans if he even had any by then.

I should have let you.

Don’t! His insistence rippled through the Force. You did the right thing with the information you had. You can’t blame yourself.

Then neither can you.

But I can do this, he told her before silencing their bond. It was like cutting off a transmission. He said something more to Sev, who took a step back. He held his saber high above his head and in a single stroke, ended what little remained of Gentry’s painful existence. As brutal as it seemed, it was a mercy. There was no easy recovery from those injuries and he didn’t deserve the healing touch of the Force.

Rey almost pitied the broken corpse at Ben’s feet. In his mind, Gentry had probably justified his actions, convinced himself the sacrifice was worth it for the greater good. Like she had often done. But the difference between them remained. She would never have slaughtered the innocent along with the guilty and endangered so much more.

....

Rey, Ben, and Luke’s ability to sense those around them proved useful in finding what survivors who remained trapped within the palace ruins. Those above ground had mostly perished on impact, but many were trapped in the lower levels behind broken doors, collapsed walls, and security mechanisms that no longer had the power to free them with the press of a button or a card swipe.

Thankfully, most of the Resistance captives had made it out, including Kare Kun. Rey unbound her
wristed and shuddered at her distant thoughts of revenge.

When Rey came upon what remained of the throne room, where Ben had nearly died, she found it mostly intact. Save for the far end of the room where the ceiling had fallen upon the throne and surrounding area. Several bodies had been trapped beneath it, mostly faces Rey couldn’t recognize.

What drew her attention amongst the mess of shattered marble and broken bodies was Hux, still on his throne, half-hidden by the large chunk of debris that had caved in his chest. His white robes stained with blood and smoke. His pale eyes looked upwards, wide open as if the sky still rained fire upon him. The Emperor of the ashes.

Rey left him for the others to remove, hoping the image would one day leave her mind. He didn’t deserve a place in her thoughts. No more than he’d deserved to sit upon that throne.

Once all the survivors had been retrieved and the cleanup crew had started about their business, Rey remained in the greenhouse to assist Luke in treating those whose wounds were beyond the help of medical droids.

“When I pictured us fixing things, I didn’t think it would involve rebuilding this place from the ground up,” Rey said as she stared at the jagged ruin of the palace through the transparent roof of the greenhouse. “There were times I wished to see it destroyed, but not like this.”

“Quite a lot of things will need rebuilding.” Luke laid a hand the head of the young serving girl he was treating, willing her to sleep and give her troubled mind a rest. He didn’t bother to lift his head.

“Aren’t you sad to see it destroyed?” Rey asked. “All that history, just gone. You might have turned it back into the temple it once was.”

Luke shook his head. “There was little chance of that. Like I said before, I doubt there’s really a place in the new galaxy you’ll help to build for me or my teachings.”

“That’s not true.” Rey reached for his hand, surprising even herself. Limply, he let her take it as he stared in confusion. “I think the Force crossed our paths for a reason.” Rey told him. “If you hadn’t taught me what you did, I wouldn’t have made it off that ship. And we’ll surely need your help in the future.”

He finally lifted his head. “You want me to stay here? With you and Ben? After everything…”

“Yes. We’re family now.” The idea no longer carried the bitterness it once had. Like it had been with Ben, things had changed.

“Alright. If you truly think that, I will stay and lend what help I can.” He squeezed her hand before drawing his back into his lap.

“Good. I would have hated to have to track you down again. Don’t think I wouldn’t do it.”

“Oh, I don’t doubt it. The notion will keep me firmly planted here, I assure you, just like these little poison flowers.”

Ben soon joined them, having finished his diplomatic work for the day. After all that had happened, the vote among the Resistance had been nearly unanimous in his favor. As for the imperial elites of Coruscant, few had survived Hux’s assembly and those who had now pledged their support for Ben’s return out of genuine admiration or for fear of the fleet Poe commanded in his name.
The war was won, but the aftermath would take years to sort out. So many wrongs to right, institutions to dismantle, and the decisions of what to put in their place to usher the galaxy into a new era of peace.

Ben took a seat beside Rey. His face betraying the weariness he felt, but it was not the tired brooding he had so often showed, but the satisfied fatigue earned from a day of working toward a worthy purpose. “If you are staying, you can help us with Lyris,” he said, having heard their conversation through the bond. “I can already feel her powers growing and I’m sure there will be many things Rey and I will be unable to teach her.”

“You really want me to teach her?”

“I do,” Ben said. Rey sensed the unspoken understanding that passed between them as former master and student and as uncle and nephew. She would have to ask about that history one day.

Luke’s smile dimmed and his voice lowered to a whisper. “But what will I tell her when she starts asking questions? I’m sure she’ll see other families and know some of hers is missing.”

“In this family, there will be many questions, whether you’re here or not,” Ben said. “We’ll just have to figure out how to deal with them as they come up.” He placed his hand on Lyris’s head, which she immediately grasped and began to gnaw on. “What we won’t do is keep secrets and cover them up with lies. Things will be different this time.”

....

Ben had arranged for a public address to formally reintroduce himself to the galaxy as Ben Solo. The confusion of the palace massacre, fueled by tabloid gossip and public hysteria, needed clearing up as well.

Inside a storage building at the far end of the palace complex—one of the few livable structures remaining—Ben prepared for his speech. He and Rey had temporarily claimed as their own. The rebuilding of the palace was still in the planning stages.

His robes had been hastily tailored and his haircut had been done at the last minute, but he still looked every bit the just and formidable ruler Rey knew he would be.

After straightening the purple cloak draped over his shoulders for the thousandth time, positioning it to hide his missing arm, he turned to where Rey sat feeding Lyris. “Aren’t you going to get ready too?” he asked.

Rey shrugged and recovered her breast. “Why? I’m just going to be in the crowd with Finn.”

He smiled devilishly. “No, you’re not. You belong on that stage just as much as I do. An emperor needs his empress by his side on a day like this.”

“But all those people.” A flush crept up her neck. “They don’t know me.”

He extended his hand. “They will soon enough.”

She searched for an excuse. “I’m not ready to leave Lyris with anyone yet.” And likely never would be, but that was a hurdle she would overcome later. Maybe when Lyris became too heavy to carry. If that day ever came.

“That’s alright,” Ben said. “They’ll want to see her too.” He chuckled as Lyris smiled up at him, flashing her newest tooth. “I can’t think of a better way to usher in a new era and the dawn of a
dynasty than with a successor to carry it forward. The masses love children. They’ll certainly love her.”

Rey couldn’t help but smile. “I think you’re right about that.”

“So are you coming?” He asked, extending his hand a second time.

She accepted it and took her place at his side. “Why didn’t you tell me about this sooner? I could have prepared.”

“Because I knew you would find a way out of it.” He opened the door and ushered them out into the courtyard where Finn and Sev stood waiting. They had taken time off their high-ranking duties to serve as their guards for the day.

…. 

As Rey peered out into the crowd, hope bloomed in her heart, more than she’d ever dared to feel. The crowd gathered outside the Senate Rotunda was vast and diverse, and above all, welcoming. Support for the Resistance and longing for what Ben had promised before his supposed death had grown rapidly under Hux’s brief regime. She and Ben were greeted with cheers as they stepped out onto the platform.

With confidence and conviction, Ben gave the speech Rey had expected, going over his plans for the galaxy and all he vowed to do as its leader. What she hadn’t expected was the honesty with which he spoke.

There would never be absolute peace, he warned, nor could he protect every citizen in the galaxy—no leader could. But he promised to devote the remainder of his days to creating a galaxy where men like Hux feared to show their faces and innocents like little Lyris and all children like her could live freely.

Rey stood beside him and took her own improvised turn to address the masses. She was one of them, just a person who wanted a safe world for herself and her family. Her elevated status hadn’t changed that.

New enemies would arise and challenges would stand in their path, but trusting in the Force and in one another, they could face them.

The crowd cheered again, in their native tongues and galactic basic. Rey understood maybe half the jumbled shouts, but the rallying cry that resounded above the rest was clear. “Long live the Emperor. Long live Ben Solo.”

Rey spotted a familiar group near the front of the stage. A green twi'lek boy with two human girls beside him. He stared right at her, mouth agape, then shook the arm of the blonde on his right who then alerted the freckled girl beside her. All three shared up at Rey in stunned recognition. “And long live the empress!” the blonde girl cried, her fist in the air. Her words were repeated by those around her, rippling through the crowd and echoing back.

Ben shuddered and let out a small gasp, squeezing Rey’s hand.

“What is it?” she asked.

“My vision,” he said. “It’s come true.”
I can’t thank you all enough for following me on this crazy writing journey. Your kind words have been a blessing these past months. Next, I am going to be working on an original, non-fanfic novel I’ve been putting off for years. Wish me luck! May the Force be with you. Always.

Thanks for reading! More updates to come soon. All comments and kudos are much appreciated and feedback is welcome, whether it be negative or positive. Feel free to message me on tumblr>> http://space-trash-princess.tumblr.com/

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