

EPISODE 8 – SHADY KNOWLEDGE

The twin suns were high and looming when Rey stalked into the moisture merchant's warehouse, long shadows trailing after her. She was sweat-slick and fuming, the shade of the warehouse only building on her anger. She did not want to be here – being here, arguing like this, it all reminded her of Jakku.

I should have accepted my portion.

She remembered the words leaving her mouth and they filled her with fury.

I should have accepted my portion.

She had fought and destroyed evil incarnate and those words echoed through her soul and reminded her how weak she had been, how weak she would always be, her hand seeking the comforting chilled metal of her lightsaber and

“Mechanic slash farmer!” Zevvy flew over, tiny bulbous body swaggering in the air, the smile that had once been so friendly now looking predatory. She tried to look into his mind with the Force and failed, remembering his people could not be touched. “Do you have moisture so quickly? I think not, eh? I do not have anything for you to fix.”

“Aside from your prices,” Rey seethed, stepping closer to him. He fluttered back, his eyes going wide as he finally understood that this was not a social call.

“What you say?” the tiny toydarian managed to get out before Rey Force-lifted a bench and flung it at him, pressing it in, pinning him to a wall. She stalked over to him, fury building with every step, remembered shame a thrill between her legs.

She was overcoming a nightmare that had sat in her for a lifetime.

“You've been cheating me.”

“No, no, is fair pay.”

“Rey-,” Jothed said. She'd forgotten the twi'lek was there, and she shoved a couple of fingers in his direction.

“Then why is he making more for the same amount and quality of moisture?” Rey demanded.

“Wait, wait, I can explain,” Zevvy was begging now, the bench leaving indents in his skin, and Rey knew she could crush him in an instant. Jothed was behind her, hand on her shoulder, and she didn't know what to think about that. She was a mire of confusion and Jothed was whispering low in her ear, his hand drifting down her back, soothing, soothing...

“Rey...” Jothed's voice was a warning. Through her anger she sensed two approaching guards, drawn by the commotion. “You're scaring people, Rey, you need to get your emotions under control...” He told her to breathe and she did, in and out, in and out, the bench falling onto sand, Zevvy fluttering gracelessly around them. Jothed was saying something to him, fixing her mistake as the guards closed in.

“Is there a problem here?” the first guard asked, an older and weathered zabrak.

“No, no problems,” Zevvy sputtered. “Just a misunderstanding.”

“I have a-” Rey began, but Jothed's hand was on her back and her shoulder and he squeezed and she felt ashamed somehow, lowering her voice, lowering her gaze, shuffling in place as she

seethed, "Sorry. No problems."

The guards wandered away, both of them looking over their shoulders before leaving her line of sight. Something in the zabrak's eyes made her shudder; she remembered the old tale of the Sith, Maul, another echo of a childhood legend.

She tried to dismiss it, tried to settle herself, leaning heavy into Jothed's touch. She couldn't quite manage a smile, but she felt herself calming down – his touch never felt like a threat, the way everything -

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- else did.

"Sorry she was being so unreasonable," Jothed said, and Rey felt herself bristling, but then, "but how are the prices you're paying her fair, exactly? I know our moisture is of similar quantity and quality." The toydarian drifted to a crate and settled, letting his bruised wings rest.

"You," Zevvy said, point at Rey, "you do not pay the syndicates protection and you scare them off, so they come to me. They threaten to cut off my wings unless I pay your protection."

"So fight them off," Rey grumbled. Jothed squeezed her arm.

"Do I look like I fight?" Zevvy glared at her, one of his wings stretching painfully. "I pay my protection money so I don't have to. And now I pay your protection so you don't have to. I charge you, I keep my wings, you don't do whatever it is you do to them."

"Then hire some guards," Rey said. The last bit of her thought rose high, Jothed's fingers massaging the base of her spine, traveling up to soothe muscles, cresting at her neck. She bowed her head, accepting his comfort and the toydarian's excuses.

"From where? From who? At what cost? Do I look like I am made of credits?"

"Then tell me who they are and I'll deal with it."

"Even if you do, more people will show up," Zevvy grimaced. "And they'll be worse, at least at first."

"Why?" Rey asked, and it occurred to her that she had been a figurehead, never a leader; the way the other two were looking at one another letting her know that she was swimming out of her depth.

"To establish themselves," Jothed explained.

"Yes, yes, that," Zevvy agreed. "They'll kill some people to put everyone else in their place, make some examples."

"People will die," Jothed nodded, pressing on her nape. She gasped a little and tried to shrug him off, embarrassed to be handled like this in front of the toydarian. Jothed's hand left her flesh and she turned to look at him, saw the hurt on his face. He was trying to help her; she would have to make it up to him. "And you'll still end up paying eventually."

"What if I take out the new people?" Rey asked, sounding like a child, even to herself.

"More will come," Zevvy said. "More will always come. It is the way this works, the way it always works. Everyone pays someone, and when there's no one to pay someone will come and make sure they are respected."

"Can you give us a minute?" Jothed asked Zevvy, and the toydarian motioned to his wings. Rey felt

Jothed's fingers entwine her own and pull her away and she realized that the damage she'd caused meant that they would be the ones to walk away from him.

In her mind, she could not help picturing herself as a petulant and naive child being led away by a patient adult.



“What?” Rey asked, when they were alone. He recoiled like she'd hit him and she found herself apologizing, shuffling in place as he came closer, hands on her shoulder, worrying the kinks in her back, soothing, always soothing...

“I was a smuggler,” he whispered. “I know how this works. If you like, I can find the right people, talk with them and set a deal.”

“I do not get this. Back on Jakku-”

“This isn't Jakku,” Jothed soothed, fingers dipping over her shoulder blades. She gasped a little, breath shaky, fingertips circling the border of her breasts before circling up and away, back to her shoulders, back further. “And it's okay. What would a warrior or scavenger or whatever know about this kind of stuff?”

What does that mean?

“What does that mean?” asked Rey, feeling defensive.

“It's okay,” he said, his hands leaving her. She leaned back, trying to find them, to find him, but he'd stepped back from her and was holding up his hands. “It's like how I couldn't figure out the tech at my farm and you could. This is a skill I have. Let me help.”

Let me help.

I should have accepted my portion.

She felt like she was drowning in a miasma of memory and emotion and want, the touch of him still lingering on her skin. He hadn't even touched her, not really, his fingers always on fabric, but she still felt like a kid when she whispered

“... okay.”



Rey didn't know how the meeting was set up. She didn't even know who the meeting was with. Jothed took care of everything in the span of a few nights, leaving her side and coming back against with his small touches. He told her that a representative would come out to speak with them on behalf of the local daimyo, who she would likely never meet.

They went through their routines and Rey felt herself sliding into easy familiarity when she spotted a landspeeder heading in their direction – a modified X-36, an upgrade to the classic model that had been used on this planet for more than forty years.

The woman that climbed out was dressed in a lacy bit of nothing – a long green skirt with slim

gold bands that connected to one another around her waist, more deep green fabric cupping her chest and held in place with wire and gold. There were decorative bangles on her arms and a collar around her wrist, and she stepped out of the X-36 with a graceful, predatory confidence that made Rey nervous.

Her lips parted to show gleaming teeth, her hair streaked brown and gold, her eyes flashing. She was utterly unconcerned with the amount of skin she was showing, and she sauntered towards them as if she owned the ranch and they were her guests.

"Hello," the slave girl said, and Rey wondered why they would send a slave, was about to comment when she felt Jothed's fingers on the small of her back, quieting her. "My name is Sarje Cemm. I'm here on behalf of Daimyo Orey."

"Thank you for coming," Jothed said, stepping in front of her. "I'm Jothed, and this is Rey."

"Rey Skywalker," Rey said, putting emphasis on her chosen last name. The woman looked at her quizzically, as if dealing with a precocious teenager, and she could see the moment that the woman wrote her off as unimportant.

"I assume you're the adult here? I'm told you would rather deal with us directly than have us skimming off your profits," Sarje said. She led them down into Rey's home, took a seat at the table and unshouldered a bag Rey hadn't noticed while staring at the slave's legs, her midriff, her- "I'm here to let you know that that's fair. Let's see if we can come to some kind of accord."

"I'm sure we can," Jothed said, taking the seat closest to Sarje. "We're reasonable, right, Rey?"

"... right," Rey fell into the seat beside Jothed, furthest from Sarje. It felt like she was being cut out, but Jothed's hand found hers, rested on her thigh. He was her friend. She could trust him here.

Let me help.

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Their conversation was beyond her understanding. She knew machines and knew their value, but this was a conversation about net and gross profits, margins, relative value and worth, transport and protection fees – logistics she had never had to think about and could not know comprehend. The two of them clearly understood it all and were enjoying themselves, but Rey felt bored, started looking around the room, fidgeting, wishing she had something to do.

Sarje was playing with her hair, leaning closer to Jothed, showing off the firm curve of her chest. Her confidence and her exposed flesh was something utterly unfamiliar to Rey, as alien as the language they were speaking and the contract they were building. They were setting terms now, she thought.

She caught a snippet about tying the finances of their ranches together.

"Is that necessary?" Rey asked.

"I'm taking a pay cut to help you out," Jothed said, squeezing her hand. "It's like what you did for me, and it's the least I can do to help you out after all you've done for me. If you're okay with it I can speed some things up, but I'll need access to your accounts."

She looked at him, the frailty of him. She could crush him with her mind.

She nodded, trusting him, granting him access.

They immediately lost her as they went back to talking percentages, quality, scale, reparations.

“What reparations?” Rey asked.

“For our men,” Sarje said, teeth gleaming. “You killed a bunch, and this isn't like the Death Star, this isn't an inside job perpetuated by the Emperor to garner sympathy.”

Rey stared at her.

What?

“What?”

“Shhhh,” Jothed soothed, his hand moving up her thigh. “We're nearly done.”

And she was ignored again, the two of them talking. Jothed laughed at something she said, some joke only the two of them understood. The only time either of them spoke to her was when they needed to sign something or they needed access to a file or account. She felt a little nervous but Jothed smiled at her and held her hand and she did what she was told.

Eventually, Sarje smiled and stood, collecting her things. The curve of her hip and angle of her skirt showed Rey that she wore nothing underneath, her bottom shaved clean and bare.

“Thank you for your time. This has been delightful,” Sarje said, then caught Rey looking where she shouldn't. “Would you like a taste? It's a little extra if you're not a member, but I promise I'm worth it.”

“What?” Rey blinked.

This was another area where she lacked expertise – despite the horrors of Jakku and the times power had been forced on her, she'd never had the sort of healthy relationship that Finn and Poe did. The closest she had was her doomed quasi-romance with Ben and that had been terrible, the pull between them written to failure. She'd indulged herself a few times, trying to find comfort in the wake of trauma, but this-

“I think that will be all,” Jothed said, protective.

“Too bad,” Sarje said. She sighed, shook Jothed's hand, stepped closer and touched Rey's cheek. “You look like a real sweet heart.”

Excuse me?

Rey felt as if she had been slapped.

Sarje smiled and patted her cheek, gentle, then sauntered away, saying that she would see herself out. Rey stood still and shook, trying to figure out why she was feeling the way she did, but then Jothed's hand was on her hip and he was sliding close behind her.

“There,” Jothed whispered, sweet breath on her neck. “Should we celebrate?”

Rey wasn't sure what he meant, turned around to tell him that and then his lips were pressing against hers, his hand was under her scarf and exploring what lay beneath, and it wasn't like she didn't want this, not like she was protesting, not like she didn't know Jothed and owe him for what he'd done.

She closed her eyes and let him guide her down onto the table.