Play To Win

by Enterprisingly

Summary

Ben Solo – aka KyloRen – is a professional gamer, playing the first-person-shooter StarKiller for the internationally ranked eSports team, The First Order. He’s made a name for himself as a ruthless competitor with a ferocious temper and top-notch skills that can’t be beat. That is, until a mystery player named ReyOfLight begins thoroughly trouncing him whenever they cross paths.

What follows is the unlikely story of a rivalry that turns into a friendship that turns into… something else entirely. All while the eSports community watches with bated breath and popcorn in hand.

Notes
Welcome to my completely ridiculous eSports AU that got way out of hand!

The original idea was inspired by this post by Weatherbug02 who very generously let me run off screaming into the night with it.

This story would not be fit for human consumption without the assistance of my two beautiful, brilliant, and generous betas breadscraps and cyborgharpy.

Notes!
1. This story is fairly humorous but I do touch on some delicate subjects including anxiety, misogyny/homophobia and harassment in the gaming world, and sexual harassment. None of this takes place between Rey and Ben and there's nothing too intense but I felt fair warning was due. There is also just a ridiculous amount of swearing.
2. This story is just over halfway written and I will be posting new chapters every Monday until the fic is complete.
3. The chapter count is an estimate but may go up.
4. The game they are playing in this AU is called StarKiller. It is an Overwatch re-skin with some heavy modifications, but the whole thing should be easy to understand even if you don’t play Overwatch.

Please feel free to come yell at me about this story on Twitter or Tumblr.
“Millenia on the roof, Millenia on the roof! Someone take care of her before she gets to our – Mother FUCKER!” Ben Solo rips off his headset and throws it across the room. From the corner of his eye he can see it hit the wall and clatter to the ground, but his attention is mostly focused on Millenia. She transforms into a meteoric white javelin that obliterates what remains of Ben's health, the integrity of his teams' objective, and any hope they had of winning the match.

The defeat screen pops up on his central monitor, flashing red like his temper.

Distantly he can hear the defeat music and the garbled voices of his angry teammates, meaning that once again his volume is probably turned up way too high. If his mother were here she'd be nagging him about damaging his hearing. Thinking about his mother at a time like this will only serve to plunge him further into the depths of his black mood though, so he forcibly swats the thought away and goes to collect his headset.

The black and red leather of his expensive new gaming chair creaks when he stands, as do all of his joints. He realizes that he’s been playing non-stop for about four hours. Not an exceptionally long time for someone who routinely plays for eight to twelve but it feels like an eternity considering, for the first time in his entire career as a pro StarKiller player, he hasn’t won a single match.

Ben snatches up his headset – also new, also expensive. It’s slightly scuffed from bearing the brunt of his anger, but thankfully not broken this time. In the last two months alone he’s been through at least four pairs, which is excessive even by his standards. He stalks back across his darkened room to drop heavily down into his chair once more, leaning back against the headrest stamped with the logo of his team, The First Order.

When he slides the headset back onto his head, his ears are instantly filled with the angry chatter of his teammates.

“- well if you didn’t get so tilted whenever you get shackled then maybe you’d actually be able to get free and you’d stop fucking up our strat!” Snaps Hux.

“Like you have any room to talk about getting tilted, Hux! You left our fucking objective unguarded to get into a Sniper war with the other Executor!” Phasma snarls back.

“Either make out and get it over with already or stop flirting,” says Eyja, sounding bored as ever, “We have bigger problems here. Like why the fuck Ben keeps getting owned by that asshole playing Millenia. All you’ve been doing for the last four hours is feeding kills to that little shit.”

Ben’s fingers tighten around the armrests of his chair so hard that his knuckles turn white.

“He’s fucking cheating,” he snaps, “no one is that fast or that good.”

“Sure, whatever you say,” Caide drawls, thick Texas accent somehow making his sarcasm all the more irksome, “Get your shit together though. You’re our Striker and if we can’t count on you to do your job then maybe we should invite… what was his name? ReyOfLight? To take your place.”

One of the arms of his chair makes an unsettling cracking noise.
“Come talk to me when you actually learn how to respond to a fucking call out,” Ben spits out.

“Hey maybe we should go cool off for an hour?” Comes the hesitant voice of Mitaka.

Mitaka, the sixth member of the team, has never been overly fond of conflict. Ben secretly suspects that the only reason he’s here – aside from actually being an incredible Support player – is that their manager knows that without some sort of peacekeeper, the team would destroy itself with the same ruthless efficiency that makes them a force to be reckoned with in game.

There’s some general sighing and grumbling before Hux says, “Fine. I wanted a smoke break anyway.”

“Just get a goddamn vape like everyone else and you’ll save yourself a lot of time,” Caide says.

Ben’s just about to sign off, thinking that maybe some time beating the shit out of his punching bag might do him some good, when he catches sight of the little icon on his mailbox that means he’s got a private message.

He clicks on it.

From ReyOfLight

nice trick with the whirlwind before the shadow shroud, u almost had me last time! GG! :) 

Ben stares for a few seconds, brain short-circuiting. Is this asshole fucking with him? Is he trying to taunt him? Hot rage boils in his stomach. What the fuck is he supposed to say to this?

From KyloRen

Nice trick with the hacking. 1v1 me without the help of an aimbot sometime and then we can talk.

He hits send then immediately reports ReyOfLight for cheating and closes out the game window, still seething.

Rey Sanderson blinks at her computer screen, feeling disgruntled and frankly offended by the message from KyloRen.

“This guy thinks I’m using an aimbot,” she says to Finn, who looks up over the top of his monstrous gaming laptop to meet her eyes. “Why does he think I’m using an aimbot?”

“There’s a lot of ego at this level of play,” Finn says, shrugging, “You handed his ass to him pretty soundly. I’m not surprised that he got nasty. Just block him and move on.”

Rey nods and her finger hovers over the mouse, poised to click the Block Player button, but at the last minute she switches over to the Report Player button instead and files a complaint about abusive behavior.

It's not that she never wants to play with this guy again. He might be a giant dick, but he's also the single best Silencer player she's ever seen. Plus Silencer is a hero she's always struggled to play well,
and it had been interesting to see an expert at work. Even if she had beat him soundly.

*Too bad he’s a raging asshole,* she laments.

“Well last game was a resounding success so I think we should probably log off for a while, end on a high note. BB needs a walk and I know half of you haven’t eaten since this morning so I’m laying down the law,” says Poe, and through his headset Rey can hear the sound of his aging chair squeaking as he leans back and stretches.

“Rey, you absolutely have to play with us though,” says Rose, giddy excitement pouring through her headphones, “if we work this well together with no previous experience and Finn not even playing on his real rig, I can only imagine how unstoppable we’ll be with a little practice!”

“Right?” Her sister, Paige, chimes in, “Finn! Why didn’t you tell us you had another friend in Diamond? Rey makes everyone else we’ve tried out look like a monkey with a mouse!”

That gets a chuckle out of the whole team.

“Come on, I’ve really only been playing this for about a month!” Rey demurs, “Surely you’re exaggerating a bit!”

“Nu-uh,” Finn says, grinning at her over his laptop, “You’re a natural! A prodigy! You're making us veterans look like noobs.”

“Finn! Stoooop!” She says, covering her flushed, grinning face with both hands in embarrassment.

“If we get him to lay off the over-the-top flattery and early 2000’s slang can we please keep you?” Jessika asks, “Qualifiers for the Championships are opening up soon and we really do need a Striker.”

“It’s true,” says Poe, “And I know you’ve really only just gotten into this but if you think it might be something you’d consider doing seriously, well… Listen. It’s hard and it’s a longshot but there’s a lot of money in eSports right now and I’ve been talking to some of our old team’s sponsors about signing us again if we can get a team together.”

Rey leans back and chews on her lip. She’d known when Finn had coaxed her to play with his group today that it was essentially an audition for a spot on the team. True, she has only been playing StarKiller for a few months, but for as long as she’s been able to scrape together the funds to do so, she’s been playing games on used consoles and borrowed machines and she loves it. She loves it in a way that she doesn’t really love anything else.

Video games have been her lifelong escape from a world that wasn’t good and wasn’t kind. They taught her to be her own protector, her own problem solver, and they led her to Finn. All of this is to say: gaming has given her a lot.

The idea is… well. It’s tempting, to say the least. The team is awesome, StarKiller is fun, and while it would be a huge risk to drop her hours at work enough to do this for real… it’s also a dream come true being handed to her on a silver platter.

“Rey?” Finn prompts, making her realize that she’s been silent for too long.

“Let me think about it for a couple days?” She says, at last, “I really want to say ‘yes!’ You guys are the coolest and this sounds like an amazing opportunity, but there’s a lot to consider.”

“Yeah that’s fair,” Rose says, “It wasn’t an easy decision when Paige and I decided to go full time
with streaming so we get it. And you should know that there is a chance that we will work our asses off and still fall short.”

“Think about it,” Jessika says, “Just let us know by next weekend okay? If you don’t want the spot, you’re always welcome to play with us for fun, but we’ll need to see if we can find someone else to be a permanent team member.”

“You got it” Rey says brightly, “I’m gonna go take a break… maybe make something to eat, but I’ll be on later if you guys want to join up again.”

She signs off and pushes back from her desk, but doesn’t get up quite yet. She stares at her computer, a cobbled-together beast of a rig that runs like a monster and looks like a heap of junk, and thinks about the choice ahead of her.

Risk: essentially quitting a stable, reliable job to pursue a dream that might as well be on the moon, it’s so far away.

Reward: a career as a professional gamer.

Her bank account is healthier than it has ever been but that’s still not saying much. She’s also so new to StarKiller, she knows nothing about the culture of it. Is this really the world she wants?

Thoughts of food buried under her musing, she decides to take a run to think it over, hoping that the rhythmic pounding of her feet on the pavement will shake the right answer loose.

Ben reads the email message for the fifth time, hardly believing his eyes.

To: bensolo@firstorder.com

From: aholdo@starkillersupport.com

Subject: RE: [REPORT #3396572]

KyloRen, Thank you for bringing a potential rule violation to our attention, we at Far Galaxy take hacking and the use of aimbotting technology very seriously and as such we have spent the last few days carefully reviewing the behavior and activity of the Player, ReyOfLight. We are pleased to report that we have found no evidence of any rule violations. We hope you’ll continue to be a valued member of our community. Please let us know if there is anything we can help you with further.

Sincerely,

Amylin Holdo

StarKiller Support Team Lead Moderator

“This cannot be real,” he mutters into his darkened room. There has to be something they missed.

Maybe it’s not directly on ReyOfLight’s end, maybe he’d hired someone to fuck with Ben personally? Or maybe it’s a tech issue. He needs to call his ISP again and make sure that they’re not
throttling his speed like they did once a few years ago when he had exceeded his data limit too severely for three months in a row.

He’d thought that was dealt with, though, especially considering he pays an assload of money each month for his state of the art fiber optic connection. Stranger things have happened.

What has never happened is that he has never been so absurdly outclassed by another Striker.

*Could my computer have a virus*, he wonders as he begins running a scan that he knows isn’t going to catch anything because he’s not stupid enough to use his precious gaming machine for anything other than *gaming*. Well, and streaming. But that’s neither here nor there. The point is it’s not like he’s torrenting porn on this computer. The odds of him having a virus are slim to none.

Frustration curls hot in his stomach. It’s not unusual to end up in intense Striker vs Striker battles in StarKiller. That’s kind of whole point of the class: to shoot far ahead of the team, clear out the AI adversaries, and set up the objective for the rest of the team to claim, securing their victory.

There are only so many footholds on each map and battles over them are common. But somehow ReyOfLight always seemed to be one step ahead of him. Somehow they were always after the *exact same targets* and every time ReyOfLight had pulled ahead, victorious. Perhaps most distressing of all was the fact that – more than once – ReyOfLight had actually managed to kill him in the first stage of the game. Technically that sort of PvP wasn’t even supposed to occur during the first stage; both parties were still fully shielded by teammate buffs that had yet to run out and the sheer amount of damage that it took to override that was staggering.

The whole thing just feels off. Millenia is *not even* the designated counter to Silencer. The way this kid had used her was totally out of the box. Ben had been flummoxed at every turn. It’s *wildly* embarrassing how badly he’d been beaten and the only saving grace of this whole mess is that Ben hadn’t been streaming today.

He shudders just thinking about how awful his Twitch chat would have been about the whole thing. Ugly doesn’t even begin to cover it.

“This is bullshit,” he says aloud, “there’s no way this fucker is actually that good. It’s probably some kid who just got lucky by accident on someone else’s account. He certainly types like an uneducated infant.”

“Or maybe you just suck,” Says Hux’s voice in his ear, making Ben start. He’d forgotten that he was still on Discord with his teammate, talking about their practice schedule for the next month, “It might just be that your pro days are coming to a close.”

Championship Qualifiers are coming up in two months. Setting aside the ReyOfLight incident, The First Order is the best team around. The idea of them not qualifying is, frankly, laughable, but they still can't afford to lose focus or get sloppy. James Snoke, their manager, doesn’t fuck around and failure is not an option as long as they’re under contract with him.

“You’d love that, wouldn’t you,” Ben sneers, “you really think Snoke would let you take my place? Hah. We both know that Sniper is the gateway into this game and you don’t have what it takes to be a Striker.”

“Neither do you, if some… what did you call him… ‘lucky child’ can beat you that thoroughly,” Hux says and Ben can hear the nasty little smile curling his lips.

“Go fuck yourself Hux,” He says, clicking over to the google doc that houses their team schedule,
“Also, this looks fine but I won’t be able to practice on the 8th through the 12th of March; I’m
guesting at StarFall Con. I’ll be back in time for our games on the 14th though.”

Hux sniffs and makes a note on the doc. Ben watches the text appear in real time, feeling at slightly
better. Needling Hux about the fact that he’s still never been offered a guest spot at a big convention
without the rest of the team never gets old.

“Don’t get distracted while you’re there, Solo, Your performance can’t afford to take any more hits,”
Hux says, by way of a goodbye and then drops the Discord call.

Ben rolls his eyes and stretches. He checks the clock on his screen. It’s a quarter past six; still pretty
early. He hasn’t streamed a lot recently and he’s got aggressive energy to burn. He figures that a few
hours of kicking random assholes to kingdom come and arguing with his Twitch chat should leave
him feeling at least a little better.

He fires up his broadcaster, drops a link to his stream onto his twitter, and takes five seconds to
indulge in his vanity. He checks to make sure that his hair is neat and that he doesn’t have crumbs on
his shirt or something equally embarrassing before he switches on his webcam.

The monitor on his left fills with his rapidly scrolling Twitch chat as his regulars tune in. Most of
them are posting dumb memes and emojis, although a fair number are also spamming him with
trolling comments, trying to bait him into fighting with them in particular. His viewers are always
eager to see his famous temper in action, and even more to grab a small piece of his fame by
becoming immortalized as a part of his channel’s history.

“WHAT’S UP EVERYBODY I’M KYLO–FUCKING–REN AND YOU’RE WATCHING THE
ONLY STARKILLER CHANNEL THAT MATTERS,” he nearly yells into his mic, allowing his
public persona to drop into place. Satisfied that he’s got everyone’s attention, he lowers his volume a
bit and continues, “Tonight’s stream is gonna be a little different. I’m not gonna play with the rest of
the Order tonight, because we’ve been practicing all day and I’m fucking sick of them. So I thought
I’d do something else instead. I’m gonna queue publicly and play with the rest of the assholes on this
shitshow,” he says.

His chat goes nuts with people begging him for his friend code or asking if they can queue up with
him instead. Ben ignores it all.

“As usual, if you can actually play well enough to get matched with me, then you’re welcome to
come for me,” He smiles, more of a twist of his lips than anything genuine, but it gets the point
across. Looking directly into the camera, he says, “I’ll be more than happy to destroy you publicly.”

He clicks the Public Game button and the loading screen pops up. It takes about a minute to fill out
the team, a bit slower than he’d like, but it is still early on a weekday. The West Coast isn’t on at this
hour. It also doesn’t help that he’s so highly ranked that the pool of players who fall into the same
category as him is very small.

StarKiller’s ranking system is complicated, almost needlessly so. It stacks up as follows: Copper,
Bronze, Silver, Gold, Platinum, and Diamond. And within each color there are numeric levels – from
one to one thousand.

Since the very first time he finished his placement games, Ben has never dropped below Diamond
900. He’s at the top of his personal game and the game at large. Currently he’s the top-ranked
Silencer player in the world, no small achievement, considering the fact that there are nearly 30
million players on StarKiller worldwide.
The screen flashes white, swapping over to the hero selection menu. As usual, he goes to click on Silencer, but hesitates for a split second, and to the surprise of himself and his audience, he finds his cursor selecting Millenia instead.

Millenia’s avatar is a shapely woman in a suit of totally batshit silver sci-fi armor with a massive jetpack on her back and a smooth, reflective helmet that covers her upper face, leaving only her mouth exposed. She strikes a triumphant pose on the screen as the game asks him to confirm his pick.

“Ah, what the fuck. Let’s get really crazy tonight,” he says, half to himself, and half to his chat, which is going so fast that it’s more of a blur than anything coherent. He clicks confirm.

“I played against some chickenshit little aimbot last week who was doing some stuff with Milly that I’ve never seen before. I reported his cheating ass but you know how Far Galaxy’s support team is – fucking useless – so I’m gonna try to recreate the bullshit I witnessed earlier. I won’t be able to because I know what I saw and none of that should have been possible, so maybe this will prove my point.” He says, cracking his knuckles and rolling his wrist as the rest of his team locks in their characters.

The team comp is aggressive, but not completely unbalanced. Aside from Ben playing Striker as Millenia, there are two Offense players (Coronet and Lothal, one fast, one powerful, both acceptable choices), a Sniper (V-19, not Ben’s favorite but he’s been buffed recently and his new exploding rounds can take down half of most heroes health in one hit), a Tank (Libertine, slow but a good damage soaker), and their Support, who is the only real sour note.

The player whose name is SandWizard37 has chosen Nebulon.

He pushes the talk button on his mouse so that his team can hear him and says, “I just want everyone to know that if we lose this match, it’s because SandWizard37 is a dumbass,” several other people on the team laugh and SandWizard curses at him. “No idea how you made Diamond when everyone who’s ever played this game for five seconds knows that Neb can’t heal for shit and her AoE stuff only works half the time.”

This predictably sets off a war in his chat between people trashing Nebulon and the people who are racing to defend their status as Nebulon mains.

“Listen we all know that you think you’re a big fucking deal, KyloRen, but you’re a punk ass bitch and no one actually gives a shit about your opinion,” SandWizard bites out, “I wouldn’t piss on you if you were on fire.”

“Ahh, I get it. Like hero, like player: totally useless. Good thing I was planning on carrying you to begin with.” Ben replies, before glancing over at his chat where the debate is still going. “Yeah, fight it out in there; victor wins absolutely nothing.”

The chat obliges and the argument continues (along with a lot of comments that just say ‘lul owned’ and ‘get wrecked’), as the game screen flashes and their lineup is displayed, posing in formation in front of a massive, wrecked starship half buried in sand, below the banner that reads “Jakku”.

“Oh great, Jakku,” he groans, as the countdown timer starts, “this map is such a shitshow. Hey Far Galaxy, since I know you stalk my streams, when are you gonna fix this map so that people stop getting stuck on the geometry when using movement-based Ultras?”

The last time the First Order had lost a really big tournament match it had been thanks to Phasma’s hero getting caught on nothing in the middle of her Ultra’s dash, meaning she hadn’t been able to
back Ben up at the final push, and he’d been crushed by Kessel Run’s entire offensive line as well as their Striker.

“Supremacy on Jakku! Ready! Fight!” Calls the voice of the lightly-accented female announcer and the game begins.

The thing about Rey’s life is that for the majority of it she was in a bad place. She had bounced through foster homes and orphanages from the age of six until she was able to emancipate herself at seventeen.

It was in one of many foster homes that she’d first come across video gaming as a form of entertainment.

She had been staying in the spare room of the Johnson’s drafty house in Surry, just outside of London, and on one night when she was about eight and was missing her parents too badly to sleep she had crept out into the living room, thinking she might try to quietly watch some telly. There had been a strange device plugged into the television, though, with a colorful box that held something called Super Mario World perched atop it. Several minutes of fiddling around later and Rey was sitting on the floor, nose so close to the screen that the static from the cathode rays made her hair stand on end. Lively music played as she steered a tiny pixelated man around a matching world. She was entranced, enthralled, and utterly hooked.

Her foster parents found her the next morning curled around the controller, snoring.

She stayed with the Johnsons and their three children for almost a year, until they’d gotten pregnant again and she’d headed back to the orphanage. Despite how young she’d been, the memories of that time had endured and crystallized into the closest approximation of childhood happiness. In that time her fascination with gaming had been fanned into a full-blown obsession, aided by her foster father gifting her a used Gameboy Color and a small stash of games that had belonged to his oldest son when he was younger.

Through a combination of craftiness and sheer determination, Rey had managed to hang onto those precious gifts through the next nine years, despite many a stint spent in very gaming-averse households.

Her obsession to the medium led to her making friends at school purely so she could play games on their shiny new consoles, and to this day she could still call up a mental list of every gaming store in the Greater London area, if really pressed.

It was in one such store that she had met Finn.

The summer of 2012 was hot and muggy and Unkar Plutt, the mechanic she’d been living with since the new year, had booted her out of his shop because she wouldn’t stop bothering him about teaching her how to dismantle a vintage engine block that had been sitting untouched in the corner since she’d arrived.

“Isn’t there a bathroom for you to mop, or something you should be doing instead? Like homework? Aren’t you supposed to be in school?” He’d snapped.

“Finished it earlier, I could be learning how to take apart an engine, and nope! School’s been out of
“Listen kid, I don’t have time for your shit right now. Got three cars to finish by tomorrow, so you can either get out of here before I whack you or learn to fuckin’ shut your trap.” He’d told her, from below the chassis of a beat up Vauxhall Corsa. He rolled out just enough to lock eyes with her over the rise of his massive belly, “Got it?”

Rey didn’t need to be told twice.

With nothing else to do, she’d wandered down the street to the nearest tube station, hopped the turnstile, and caught a train to the other side of town to her favorite gaming store.

The Trading Post was a hole in the wall, crammed floor-to-ceiling with used games and consoles, racks of magazines and guidebooks, shelves of action figures and vintage collectibles, and it always smelled vaguely of dust and cigarette smoke.

Teedo, the short, balding owner of the shop, acted like Rey was the world’s biggest inconvenience every time she darkened his doorstep. All the same, he would let her set up consoles in the back of the shop and play whatever she wanted, so long as she helped him unload boxes from the high shelves in the back of his store-room when she was done.

That afternoon, when she walked back to her usual spot, there was already someone there.

“Hey Teedo, I’m here to keep playing Call of- ” Rey broke off as she caught sight of the newcomer. He was a dark-skinned boy with close-cropped hair and the widest smile she’d ever seen on anyone. He wore a white collared shirt with some sort of fancy crest (a school, maybe? She could remember thinking) embroidered over his heart.

“Oh great, now there’s two of you freeloaders. I don’t care who plays as long as one of you moves boxes,” Teedo had grumbled, throwing his hands into the air and storming off to go smoke behind the store, pausing only long enough to call, “If you steal anything, I’ll tan your hides!”

Rey and the boy looked back and forth between the retreating shopkeeper and each other for a split second before bursting into laughter.

“Hey,” he’d said, in an American accent that took her by surprise, “I’m Finn. Wanna be my player two?”

He scooted over on the sagging, faded loveseat, patting the space next to him.

Rey glanced at the television, where the opening screen of Halo: Combat Evolved was waiting expectantly, and then at Finn. She smiled back hesitantly and sat gingerly next to him.

“I’m Rey,” she said, taking the controller he handed her.

“You ever played this one before?” Finn asked and when she shook her head, his smile got impossibly brighter, “Me either! Let’s have some fun.”

And they had.

Every day for the next three weeks they had met up at the Trading Post, helping Teedo with chores and working their way tag-team through the entire Halo series. They stuffed themselves with crisps and candy that Rey nicked from kiosks along her route to the shop, drank room-temperature soda and bonded over their shared passion – and their shared status as orphans with guardians who
couldn’t care less about them.

It hadn’t occurred to Rey that Finn wouldn’t be around forever until the day he told her, sadly, that his grandmother was taking him back to the States. And Rey had suddenly been consumed by a feeling she’d never felt before: fear that she would never see someone she cared about again and that the pain of that might kill her.

For the first time since she was a child, Rey, who had mastered the art of never being attached to anyone, had cried over the idea of losing touch with someone.

She and Finn had exchanged email addresses and vowed to keep in touch. Rey had curled her pinkie around his and made him swear that no matter what they’d see each other again. It had taken four years, a lot of saving, scraping, and some questionably legal hustling, but they managed to keep that promise.

Now, she and Finn sit in their shared living room in San Diego. The cool evening breeze of January in southern California blows gently in through the open window of the apartment. The place is slightly shabby, but it’s fantastically located.

A graphic designer and a junior auto shop mechanic, they really shouldn't be able afford this place on their salaries, but the landlady, a tiny, ancient woman named Maz, had decided to cut them a deal because they apparently reminded her of some old friends. As the wind brings with it the soft sounds of people going about their business in the open green space of Balboa Park across the street, Rey thinks about the life she had before this one.

The life where she was small and scared and lonely, the one where she clung to every scrap that she could get her hands on because she never knew where the next one would come from, if it ever came. She thinks about how many people had told her that she would never amount to anything; that the combination of her unfortunate birth and her more unfortunate interests had set her up for a life of obscurity and failure.

And very abruptly, Rey has the answer she’s been trying to settle on for the last week.

“Hey Finn?” She says, poking him in the thigh with her bare toe to get him to look up from the thread he’s engrossed in on the StarKiller Reddit sub.

“What’s up, Peanut?” He asks, meeting her eyes.

She grins at him. “I’m in. I’ll be the Striker for The Resistance.”

Finn smiles at her like he had that first day, seven years before, letting out a loud whoop of joy and pumping his fist in the air.

“Hell yes! You won’t regret this, Rey! We’re going straight to the top, just wait and see!”

He holds out his fist for her and she bumps her own against it, laughing.

“I can’t believe you actually convinced me to do this, but you’re right: this is once in a lifetime stuff. If Poe really does have sponsors lined up and we can really do this the right way… It'll be tight but I think I have enough in the bank to tide me over until we start winning competition games,” she draws her brows together in mock seriousness and wags her finger at him, “And we’d better win! No excuses!”

Finn nods emphatically, holding his hands up in surrender, “I would never dream of disappointing you. You’re scary when you’re mad!”
She nods fiercely, “Damn straight. Now I’m gonna go heat up that casserole Mrs. Tico sent you home with; all this life-changing decision stuff has made me hungry. I’ll try my best to leave you some.”

Finn laughs, “I’m glad you’re joining us, Rey. I know you think we’re exaggerating, but girl… I’ve always known you were good at games, but you play StarKiler like you were born with a mouse in your hand. It would be a waste to not show the world how good you are.”

Rey flushes and waves him away, getting off the sofa with some effort as this couch is the sort that tries to eat everyone who sits down on it, and walks around the back of it into their kitchen.

She’s puttering around, debating whether or not she wants to drink a beer or if she wants to stay clear-headed so she can play a few gamse after dinner, when she hears Finn calling to her.

“Rey, Rey, get in here! You need to see this!” He says and Rey hustles into the living room, leaning over the back of the sofa behind Finn so that she can see his screen. There’s a Youtube video open on it, showing a StarKiler match. She has a second to wonder why it looks so familiar before she realizes that it’s because she’s watching their match from last week, the one with the player who had accused her of hacking.

It’s switching point of view from player to player in the way that indicates the footage was captured by a spectator of the match, but mostly it’s alternating between her and the other team’s Striker as they duke it out across the crystal caverns of the Crait map.

The video is entitled: ‘STARKILLER PRO KYLOREN GETS OWNED OVER AND OVER BY MYSTERY PLAYER IN EPIC SMACKDOWN’

It has been up for about an hour and it has nearly twenty thousand views.

She and Finn glance back and forth between each other, mouths open in shock for a few seconds as the video plays out and she unleashes her meteoric Ultra on KyloRen, snatching a last-second victory from the jaws of defeat. Then the video cuts to footage from another match, this one on Takodana where she had managed to box him into a room where he couldn’t escape.

“Rey,” Finn breathes, “You didn’t tell me the guy you were fighting was KyloRen.”

Rey swallows around her suddenly very dry tongue, feeling nervous and unsure, as though she’s missing a crucial piece of information that she really ought to have here. “I didn’t even know his name until after the last match when I messaged him. Why? Is he famous or something?”

“Rey,” Finn says again, “Famous doesn’t even begin to cover it. He’s the best Striker in the world and one of the biggest assholes in the game.”

“Oh,” Rey says, feeling numb and a little tingly.

“And you annihilated him repeatedly,” Finn says, glee creeping into his voice, “Oh my god, Rey, I’m so glad you’ve agreed to play for us because you’re about to become the most desirable player on the pro StarKiller circuit.”

Ben’s out for a run when the messages and calls start pouring in. First from his teammates, then from
every random person he’s ever spoken to in what feels like his entire life. At this point he’s actually half-surprised that his parents haven’t decided to call him about it too.

To: First Order Group Chat

From: Armitage Hux

Just thought you might want to know that a video of your crushing defeat officially leaked last night, Solo. Thanks in advance for the shitstorm we’re all in for now.

From: Armitage Hux

Snoke’s not going to like this.

From: Armitage Hux

Have you watched it yet? It’s brutal.

From: Eyja Fjord

Hux it’s 5 fucking am if u don’t stop texting I’m going comreover to ur house and murder u >:(

From: Phasma Scyre

Wow they made a supercut! It’s that whole set of matches.

From: Caide Steton

no idea who that milly player is but they’re gonna be trouble aren’t they

From: Eyja Fjord

WHAT PART OF IT’S 5AM STOP TEXTING DON’T YOU ASSHOLES UNDERSTAND

From: Armitage Hux

This is a crisis. Mute your fucking notifications if it’s such a big problem.

From: Dopheld Miitaka

Oh this is bad...

From: Ben Solo

It’s just a stupid video. It doesn’t matter.

From: Armitage Hux

That’s not how Snoke is going to see it.

From: Eyja Fjord

SHUT THE FUCK UP OR I’M QUITTING THE TEAM!!!!!!!!!!
Ben pinches the bridge of his nose and scrunches his eyes shut for a few seconds before following Hux’s advice to Eyja and muting the conversation. It’s too early in the morning for him to deal with his teammates. He normally sort of likes that – with the exception of Mitaka – they’re all kind of assholes. They have an understanding; none of them need to be delicate about each other’s feelings. But every once in a while he thinks that it might be nice to have someone in his life who didn’t simultaneously love watching him fail while also punishing him for it relentlessly.

He’s aware that this is a hell of his own making but at this point he’s in so deep that he really wouldn’t even know how to begin digging himself out.

Ben has never been great with people. He was an awkward teenager: constantly putting his foot in his mouth, stumbling into social faux pas after social faux pas, an emotional bull in a china shop. To be fair, it’s not like his parents were much help.

His mother, Leia Organa, the brilliant politician with the gift of gab, had never understood his social ineptitude or the acute pain and shame of being repeatedly forced into situations to which he was not at all suited.

And his father, the famous Formula One race car driver who always seemed to ride the fine line of being just enough of a jerk to be interesting, was still sensitive enough to know how far was too far. For all his smoothness, Han Solo could never quite explain to his son how that all worked.

His parents had both been so caught up in their own lives and their crumbling marriage that they had neither the time nor the emotional energy to help their anxious, awkward son learn how to be a real person. So he’d learned on his own. The internet had taught him that being mean first would protect you from ever having to be genuine or vulnerable, and then the livestreaming community had taught him that if he was mean in just the right way, people would actually love him for it.

At this point, Ben’s not even sure if he has actual, real feelings or if he’s just so many layers deep in the persona of KyloRen – pro gamer, untouchable douche – that there’s just nothing inside his heart any more.

He shoves his phone back into the pocket of the slimline black jacket he wears for running in the freezing New York City winters and picks up his pace again. He’s somewhere near the south side of the Harlem Meer lake in Central Park, about half an hour’s run at a decent pace from his place on the Upper East Side.

As much as he hates to admit that Hux is right about anything, he does need to get home and see for himself how bad the damage to his online rep actually is. And regardless, Snoke is definitely going to have something to say about it.

Ben can imagine that it’s going to go something to the tune of ‘how disappointing, Ben Solo, that you continue to disappoint me by being a disappointing disappointment, who despite having won every championship for the last two years, still will never be good enough to justify all the effort I, noted billionaire philanthropist, James Snoke, have invested in your sorry, disappointing career, blah blah blah disappointment’.

His feet pound against the pavement, long strides eating up the ground as he swaps his music for something that fits his mood a little better. More bass, more guttural screaming, less comprehensible lyrics.

Ben’s not bitter. He’s not. He has no real reason to be. Snoke has helped him build his career from a
streamer with a few hundred subscribers to a household name in the gaming world. He’s always been a good gamer, but Snoke has made him great. It’s just that there is literally no pleasing his manager.

No sponsorship deal is good enough, no victory is absolute enough, and every defeat is a personal failing instead of a factor of playing a game of chance and skill where sometimes things just go sideways. But without Snoke, there’s no First Order, and without the team, there’s no career at this level. With no career, there’s no KyloRen, and without him… well.

It’s not worth dwelling on.

Snoke is a fact of life for Ben and if he wants what he offers, then sometimes he has to swallow his fucking pride, leash his temper, and dance on command.

It’s still dark when he gets back to his brownstone townhouse, and the wind has turned bitter in a way that suggests snow is inbound. He dials the code to his door and hurries inside.

There are three messages from Snoke by the time he checks his phone again.

From: James Snoke
I got some interesting news this morning.

From: James Snoke
I’ll just assume you know what I’m talking about and save us both the time.

From: James Snoke
Call me.

He thinks about calling Snoke right away, but dismisses it because he still hasn’t seen the video and he wants to know exactly how bad a call he should be anticipating.

Ben sits down at his desk and switches his computer on. It takes a few minutes to come online but at last he gets Chrome open and types ‘KyloRen’ into the search bar, trusting that if this video is as big a deal as everyone’s making it out to be, it will pop up.

He’s not disappointed. It’s the first news hit, as a few gaming blogs have already picked up the video and run stories about it overnight.

Game Stats Blog says: ‘Controversial StarKiller player KyloRen suffers blistering defeat at the hands of a mystery player in new video!’

PixelExPolygon says: ‘Watch KyloRen get a taste of his own medicine in a brutal video!’

StarKiller Daily says: ‘An off-day or the new normal? Are KyloRen’s days on top numbered?’

He clicks on the StarKiller Daily link, and scrolls past the article, down to the video. It’s short, only about 6 minutes long, but the headlines weren’t kidding. While there’s nothing overtly wrong with his playing, ReyOfLight had played Millenia in such a perplexing way that Ben had been unable to predict his actions at all and he’d found himself floundering.

There are six defeat clips from their matches, obviously posted by someone who’d been hanging out in spectator mode, and he looks like an amateur in all of them. Ben, who hadn’t given spectator mode
much thought until now, suddenly feels extraordinarily angry about the newly released beta feature.

Disgusted, he closes the window, unable to even watch the ending of the final clip much less delve into the comments section to see what people are saying.

This call with Snoke is not going to be fun.

His thumb hovers over the call button next to his manager’s name for a longer time than he would ever be willing to admit to, before he finally forces himself to just nut up and make the call.

Snoke picks up on the fourth ring, because he’s the kind of dick who likes to make people wait.

“Ben, so good of you to call,” he drawls.

“You told me to, so I did,” Ben says, forcing himself to hold his temper in check.

“And a good thing too,” Snoke says, “because I’m sure you realize that we have one big problem already and adding any sort of… unpleasantness between us right now would just be… so unfortunate, wouldn’t it?”

Ben grunts an agreement.

“The problem, my young friend, is not that you had some bad matches. It’s that you were personally humiliated in the public eye by a player that no one has even heard of before. Which makes you look bad. Which makes the team look bad. Which makes the sponsors nervous, which we simply cannot have,” Snoke says as though he’s explaining something complicated to a complete idiot.

“So here’s what’s going to happen. We’re going to do some damage control. I’ve already reached out to this ReyOfLight player and we’re going to stage some matches between the two of you, I think prime-time streamed games would be ideal, and you’re going to beat him so thoroughly that no one ever questions your skills again.”

Ben’s hand tightens around his phone.

“Are you telling me to cheat?” He asks, feeling his temper begin to escape from his fragile control.

“I’m telling you to clean up your mess,” Snoke snaps, any veneer of blasé friendliness gone and replaced with cold iron, “You looked like a fool and once again left me to mop up after your mistakes. I will be offering this person a not insignificant amount of money to play in this ridiculous charade, after which he is to disappear from StarKiller forever.”

Ben feels hot rage begin to claw its way out of his throat. Say what you would about his behavior, his record as a player has never been anything but spotless. He’s earned his spot at the top and nobody, not even Snoke, can take that away from him. This whole thing makes him want to vomit.

“What if ReyOfLight won’t do it?” He asks, forcing his voice to hold steady.

“Oh he will,” says Snoke, dismissively. “Everyone has a price and it’s just a matter of finding his. And when I find it, I expect you to play your part so we can all put this ugliness behind us and go forward into the qualifiers without any further… disappointments.”

Ben doesn’t trust himself to speak so he remains silent.

Snoke chuckles – a hoarse, uncomfortable sound, “Well, this has been fun but I have things other than cleaning up after you to see to today so I’ll be back in touch when I hear from ReyOfLight. And
I expect you to answer.”

The line goes dead.

It takes a few seconds for Ben to let the phone fall away from his ear. When his hand slides back into his lap, he realizes that it’s shaking.

Chapter End Notes

So here it is, folks! If you’re enjoying the fic so far, please consider sharing it with a friend! Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated and fuel my desire to write faster!
YOU GUYS!!! I cannot even begin to tell you how amazing the response to this story has been and what that means to me! Thank you so, SO much.

Before we dive in to part two, here's some housekeeping notes.
1. Starting now, this fic will update every Monday! Mark your calendars and get excited!
2. I'm upping the chapter count to 9. I've been writing like crazy over the last week and I realized that I wanted more time to develop certain aspects of the story without them feeling crowded. So three more chapters it is.
3. I'm also upping the rating. Because I love you.

As always, so many thanks to my beautiful, brilliant, and talented betas breadscraps and cyborgharpy.

Rey is not used to people wanting her attention. Quite the opposite in fact; for most of her life if people weren’t outright ignoring her, then she was doing her damndest to make them forget that she existed. It was just better for everyone, really.

So in the days that follow the release of the video that introduced her StarKiller alter ego to the world, she feels like she’s having something of a prolonged panic attack.

For starters, friend requests and messages begin pouring in at such an alarming rate that she’s forced to lock down her account security. Now, only people who she actually gives her full username to (including the four digit friend code at the end) can actually request her, and no one who isn’t on her friends list or who wasn’t just in a match with her can even send her messages.

She’s a little too late in setting her profile to not display the email address that is attached to her account though. By the time she gets to it, her gmail inbox has already filled up as well. Everything from interview requests to sponsorship offers have flooded in, and she’s glad that it’s the weekend and she’s not working at the auto shop (which she definitely needs to put in her notice at now) because just keeping on top of her mail is becoming a full time job.

The whole Resistance team descends on her and Finn’s apartment on Saturday afternoon so that they can talk about how best to handle this whole situation. Sponsorship offers all get forwarded to Poe, whose stint working in political campaigns has left him capable of charming the pants off of anyone (and everyone).

Rose and Paige agree to field the interview requests, responding politely that ReyOfLight is not currently taking questions but would instead be making a press release soon.

Writing said press release is Finn’s job. He’s good with words and he’s technically the one who got her on the team, so leaving him to decide how they’re going to announce this to the world seems fair.

Jessika spends the day helping Rey get accounts set up on social media and Twitch, all under her
“Even if you don’t use them, it’s good to have them so that no one can impersonate you,” Jessika had said firmly when Rey objected to the idea of needing an *instagram* of all things.

Rey finally manages to wrangle her inbox down to something reasonable in the middle of the afternoon, which is when she notices one email that she had passed over before because it did not fall into the categories she was dealing with.

The email is from a First Order domain email address.

“Don’t open that!” Finn says, when she shows him, “I bet it’s a virus!”

“Why would they send her a virus?” Rose asks, brow creasing in confusion.

“Because I made their star player look like a fool maybe?” Rey groans, burying her face in her hands.

“I think you should see what they want,” says Poe, ever the pragmatist. “It really can’t hurt. And if this is a virus, well, at this point, it doesn’t matter if you brick Finn’s laptop. You have three different computer companies offering you sponsorships. You can just get him a new one.”

The fact that she’s in a position where she could just casually *sacrifice a laptop* is way too much for Rey to think about right now, so she shakes her head and runs a virus scan.

The message comes back clean, so holding her breath as though she’s defusing a bomb, she opens it.

And her eyes go wide.

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*To: reyoflight@gmail.com*

*From: Adelaide.Dormé@firstorder.com*

*Subject: An Offer From Mr. Snoke*

Greetings ReyOfLight,

*My name is Adelaide Dormé, personal assistant to Mr. James Snoke, the manager of the professional eSports team The First Order. Congratulations are in order for your sublime performance in a series of matches against our champion Striker, KyloRen. Mr. Snoke has instructed me to reach out because he would like to speak with you about your future as a professional player of StarKiller. He believes you are quite talented and that we may be in a position to be very beneficial to each other.*

*Mr. Snoke’s personal number is attached below and he looks forward to your call.*

Adelaide Dormé

*Personal Assistant to James Snoke,*

*Owner & CEO of Snoke Industries,*

*General Manager of The First Order*

Rey reads the whole email twice to herself and then once more aloud to her team.
Everyone promptly begins speaking at once, talking over each other, shouting, and gesturing wildly. Finn tries to grab his laptop so he can “give that dick a piece of his mind”, but Rey tugs it back and eventually regains control of the situation by standing up on the couch and yelling, “EVERYONE SHUT UP!”

Everyone stops talking just as abruptly as they began, all of them looking up at Rey, mouths hanging slightly open.

“Okay. Here’s what I’m gonna do. He’s the manager of the most powerful team in the league that we’re trying to break into and I’ve already ruffled his feathers. So I’m going to call him and very politely explain to him that I appreciate him reaching out but I’m not interested in whatever he’s offering. Otherwise, I have this nasty feeling that it’s going to blow up in our faces when we actually start playing and winning and wind up facing the First Order in person. Because that is the goal, right?” She says, looking around at her teammates, “Going all the way to the top?”

Very slowly, as if unfreezing, they begin to nod. Rey nods back once, setting her jaw with a confidence that she doesn’t truly feel.

She fishes her phone out of her pocket and dials the number in, then sets the laptop aside. She walks out onto the balcony in the hopes that the cool air and relative peace will help her focus for what might be the most delicate phone call she’s ever had to make.

The phone rings for so long that she almost thinks he’s not going to answer, or that perhaps this whole thing was maybe just a prank. But just as she’s about to hang up and go back inside, there’s a static pop on the other line and a voice says, “ReyOfLight, I presume?”

Rey’s mouth decides it’s a good time for the annoying Sahara Desert impression that it’s been doing lately and she coughs before answering.

“Yes. James Snoke?”

“One and the same. It’s a pleasure to speak with you. I must say, I was not expecting… well. You’re certainly full of surprises.”

Rey bristles at the implied “I wasn’t expecting a girl” that goes unsaid.

“Now, what shall I call you? ReyOfLight is a bit of a mouthful,” Snoke says. His tone is polite but Rey gets the feeling that he’s not so much asking for her name as he is demanding it. This is a man who is clearly used to getting what he wants.

She dislikes him instantly.

“You can call me Rey,” she says, firmly. “Just Rey.”

“Well, just Rey. Let’s get down to business. I have an offer for you, one that I think will benefit both of us tremendously.”

“Oh?” Rey asks, feeling ice crawling up her spine. She can’t put her finger on it, but every word he says makes her more certain that this call might have been a mistake.

“You are clearly a talented player. So talented that you made a mockery of my star Striker right before Qualifiers for the Championships are supposed to begin. Are you aware of that?” Snoke asks, but he doesn’t wait for her to reply. “So here’s my proposal: I’d like to hire you. It would mostly be a publicity thing to get the sponsors of the First Order to calm down during this delicate time. There would be minimal work on your part and the compensation… well, let me put it plainly, would be
astronomical. Whatever you make right now, I will happily double it, possibly even triple if that’s what it takes, so long as you’re willing to do your part and agree to my conditions.”

Rey’s heart stops. That kind of an offer is not something that anyone, not even the slew of new sponsor hopefuls, has ever made to her. With that kind of money she could finally pay Finn back everything she still owes him for helping her pay her immigration fees and travel expenses and the guilt over that gnaws at her constantly. That kind of money represents a sort of freedom she’s never had in her life.

*It… will not come without a massive catch. Nothing in life is free. And anything that this man hands you should be checked for traps,* says the voice of reason in her head.

“What are the conditions?” She asks.

“Oh, just small things. Trifles, really. You would be required to put on some public matches against my Striker, we would own your professional contract, of course, and there would be the usual sort of non-disclosure agreement that goes along with an arrangement of this nature,” Snoke says, breezily. Rey, who has been around people who lie and cheat and use others before discarding them for her entire life, suddenly sees the whole picture click into place with horrifying clarity.

“You’re… you’re trying to pay me off! You’re trying to bribe me to lose matches to your pet player and then you’re going to… you’re going to hold my ability to play professionally hostage!” She hisses.

Snoke laughs, cold and hard.

“Oh come now; don’t act so shocked. What else could I possibly have wanted to offer you? I already have all the players I need, players who have followings and reputations that lucrative sponsors want to attach themselves to, not little nobodies who can play a few good games but don’t have what it takes to make it in this world for the long haul! And think about what I’m offering you here! Your fifteen minutes in the spotlight – and if you’re as cute as that darling little accent of yours, then I’m sure you’ll be able to twist that exposure to your advantage too – not to mention a paycheck the likes of which no one else could hope to offer you.”

Rey goes hot and cold, her face flushing and her body tingling like she’s accidentally stuck her fingers in an electrical outlet. She hasn’t been this furious since the time that Unkar Plutt had gotten shitfaced and told her that – since she was fifteen – she was old enough to pay rent in his home, but that if she ever fell short she was welcome to pay the remainder in *favors.*

“I think this call is over. You have insulted me repeatedly, underestimated me in every way possible, and I will *never* take anything you are offering, not under any circumstances. Go fuck yourself, you massive tosser. I’ll see your players in the game, when my team and I *crush* them into the ground!” She practically screams into the phone before ending the call with a jab of her finger.

She stalks back into the room to find everyone sitting very quietly, all trying to pretend that they weren’t eavesdropping. Rey looks around at them and over at her rig, the one she built and the one that she had beat KyloRen “the best Striker in the world” on fair and square.

“Finn, finish that press release. We’re going to *destroy* the First Order,” she says.
twelve hours a day, every day, while he and the First Order practice. They lose an acceptable handful of matches and win a truly obscene number. His chat is vicious in it’s mockery but snapping back at them doesn’t have quite the same satisfaction as it did when he felt unbeatable.

All the same, he can’t help but feel a surge of vicious admiration for ReyOfLight. There aren’t a lot of people out there who could say no to Snoke.

He and his teammates are all playing like people on a mission, which Ben supposes that they are given that Snoke has made it clear that if they don’t manage to hold onto their sponsors, he’s taking the lost funds out of their paychecks.

The Qualifiers are right around the corner at this point and in the hours when he’s not either streaming or working out, he’s been keeping tabs on the rest of the playing field. He likes to make a game out of gauging who will be an actual threat and who are just hungry fame-seekers trying to use the publicity of the Qualifiers and Championships to launch their own sad little streaming careers.

This is the third year that the Championships have been held in an official capacity by Far Galaxy and a number of the teams are familiar from the years before. Philadelphia’s Alderaan, the Dallas Death Stars, and LA’s Kessel Run – the three other teams that had made it to the finals the first year – are back again this time with minor adjustments to their rosters. Also returning are the Tokyo team, Jedi, and San Francisco’s Sith Lords: new entries from the last year who proved themselves worthy competition. Though he's hesitant to refer to the Sith Lords as worthy anything because they're kind of the fucking worst. There are a few others that Ben makes note of, planning to research their players and standard comps when he has a free minute.

He doesn’t quite admit to himself that he’s curious if he’s going to see ReyOfLight in one of these rosters at some point, but every day that goes by that the name doesn’t show up leaves him feeling a little more hollow. He wonders what that guy’s deal was; did he just appear for long enough to make Ben’s life harder, only to melt back into the ether of the internet, never to be seen or heard from again?

And then, two weeks after the video went live, just as people seem to be forgetting about his failure to move on to newer, more interesting drama - it happens.

It’s a small press release on StarKiller Daily, announcing that another team has registered to participate in the Qualifiers.

*The Resistance, representing San Diego, CA has officially thrown their hat into the ring for their first shot at the Championship as a team.*

Poe Dameron (PoeHotDameron - Offense), Paige Tico (PaigeSix - Offense), and Jessika Pava (Testor - Tank) are former members of the now dissolved Rebellion (formerly of Orange County, CA) and they are joined by Rose Tico (TicoTock - Support), Finn Gunner (FN2187 - Sniper), and Rey Sanderson (ReyOfLight - Striker) who made headlines in the gaming world earlier this month for defeating KyloRen (Striker for New York City’s First Order) in a series of 1v1 duels.

There you are, he thinks, the spanner in the works, come to fuck my life up again.

Since he hasn’t had the chance to actually play against ReyOfLight since that day, Ben has no idea if the events of the last time are an aberration or if Rey (which, what sort of name is that?) really just is that much better a Striker than he is.

It’s quite late, nearly 3 AM and Ben has been worn down by the strain of both his grueling training
schedule and being forced to perform in the public eye the entire time. He’s feeling a little vulnerable, maybe even insecure – not that he would ever admit to it – but it’s very likely this that leads him to make a very foolish decision.

Ben gets out of his bed where he has been lounging, browsing the web on his iPad, and walks into his office. He sits down at his computer and, before he can stop himself, opens up his inbox on StarKiller. He scrolls down to his conversation (if two hostile messages can even be counted as such) with Rey and opens it.

*From KyloRen*

*I see you’ve decided to enter the Qualifiers.*

Ben hits send and sits back, immediately feeling like the world’s biggest tool. His last message – the one where he accused Rey of cheating – stares pointedly back at him. He momentarily wishes he could just delete himself from existence.

He’s half expecting to see a message informing him that he’s been blocked by ReyOfLight. But while that never comes, neither does any sort of response. He then realizes that he’s sent this message in the literal middle of the night like the loser – with no life outside of this game – that he is.

The minutes tick by and he’s just about to get up and try to sleep his shame off when a new message pops up.

*From ReyOfLight*

2 things. *I real classy of u to send ur asshole manager to fucking try to pay me to LOSE TO YOU PUBLICLY after the first thing u did was to accuse me of cheating and 2 go fuck urself*

He presses a knuckle into his eye, trying to chase away a sudden headache.

“This is a fucking terrible plan. You should stop now before you say anything stupider,” he says aloud, as he begins to type a response.

*From KyloRen*

*For what it’s worth that was his idea and I tried to tell him not to do it. I thought it was shit and I’m glad you didn’t accept. You beat me and I got tilted. I’m an asshole but I’m not a cheater.*

*From ReyOfLight*

*m8 if u told me the sky was blue i’d go check. why should i believe anything ur saying? for all I know ur whole career is built on cheating and ur just trying to cover ur ass*

*From KyloRen*

*Fair, I guess but it’s not and I’m not. Listen… You’ve made my life really hard, whether or not that was your intention. I’m just curious what your deal is.*

*From ReyOfLight*

*i just like games and i’m good at them. nothing more or less until u and mr. creepy got involved. i didnt post the vid and i didnt even know who u were until after it went up.*
srry ur life sucks now but thats not on me

Ben blinks, staring at the message in something close to shock.

From KyloRen

I don’t want to sound like an egomaniac but how did you NOT know who I was? You’re clearly a pro player and you schooled me like a fucking child. I’m all over this game.

From ReyOfLight

id just started playing then wasn’t even thinking pro at the time. just having fun with my friends. also i dont normally follow like streamers and stuff. why watch when i could be playing u kno? used to play a lot of sunshot and dragon lords tho and they have a lot in common with sk

From KyloRen

God, the irony of this is so intense that I’m surprised that it’s not generating its own gravitational field yet. People have been coming for my head for as long as I’ve been streaming professionally and it’s you, who didn’t even know me from fucking Adam, who finally got me.

From ReyOfLight

hahaha! what can i say? im just that good B)

From KyloRen

It’s hard to argue when the evidence indicates that you are.

From ReyOfLight

u know when ur not accusing me of cheating because ur bitter about losing or acting a fool on ur stream ur actually not that bad

Ben’s eyebrows shoot straight up to his hairline. He looks back over his last messages and while they’re not exactly friendly, they’re certainly not as antagonistic (or filled with swearing) as most of the ones he sends (and receives).

From KyloRen

You’ve watched my stream?

From ReyOfLight

a few times. gotta study the competition u kno. ur too angry for my tastes tho; when i mute u its actually fun to watch u play. ur real good with silencer and praetorian. ive tried them a few times but theyre not for me.

From ReyOfLight

anyway i gotta sleep thanks for clearing the air about snoke I guess
He thinks about it for a second, hesitating because he knows that this is another one of those things that could very well come back to bite him in the ass, but he decides that what the hell, in for a penny, in for a pound. Snoke’s already mad at him and he’d be furious that he’s even talking to Rey as is, it’s not like Ben can get in worse trouble.

Before he can chicken out he hits the Send Friend Request button next to Rey’s name and icon, the outline of a stylized sunburst with a sword rising out of the center.

A moment later a popup appears on his screen.

You and ReyOfLight are now friends!

Despite himself, Ben smiles.

The last few weeks have been something of a haze. Between practicing StarKiller with the team until all of their eyes feel dry and raw and their fingers are aching, she’s also been getting the whirlwind experience of an accelerated sponsor courtship spree. Had the whole KyloRen thing never happened, Rey probably would have been totally content to sit that whole deal out. But as it is, all of their potential sponsors are very keen to meet her. StarKiller’s hot new mystery wunderkind.

What the fuck is her life?

So every night this week, after practice wraps, she’s been throwing on the only nice dress she owns and joining Poe at a series of fancy restaurants and on a few Skype calls with some companies that are just too far to make the trip.

Thus far the Resistance is now being sponsored by a high-end PC parts distributor called Cyarika, an athleisure brand aimed at geeks called Nerd Thread, and SolarTech, a company that makes solar paneling. The latter they had accepted mostly because it was sort of hilarious for a player named ReyOfLight to be sponsored by them. They have a few more of these meetings in the next week, but their sponsors have already been… generous, to put it mildly.

Cyarika in particular has been keen to get them anything and everything they could possibly need from computer parts to transportation and hotel rooms for competitions. In exchange, their branding will be absolutely everywhere on the Resistance competition uniforms. It’s a fair enough trade, in Rey’s book.

She and Poe have just returned from one of these meetings with a brewing company, whose offer they were tempted by, if only for the free beer, but ultimately decided against accepting. Despite how tired she had been going into the meeting, Rey perks up the instant they walk through the door. Poe beats a hasty retreat into Finn’s room, waggling his eyebrows at Rey as she rolls her eyes back at him.

“Just keep it down in there,” she scolds.

“Can’t make any promises!” Poe responds, winking.

It had been kind of weird when they first started dating; not because they were both men, but because Rey had been so used to having Finn all to herself for so long. The idea of sharing him with someone else had made the part of her that held onto everything that was hers with an iron grip go kind of haywire for a while. But they’d figured it out, slowly but surely, and both men had always been great about making sure that Rey never felt abandoned or excluded by the two of them when they are all hanging out as friends.
Poe had been the first of Finn’s friends that Rey had met when she came to the US, followed shortly by Jessika. The Tico sisters had come a good deal later, after Finn had gotten into StarKiller and started hanging out with them after their old team’s matches.

Rey hadn’t become really close with them though, until she started playing StarKiller herself.

The door to Finn’s room closes with a squeak, leaving her alone in the living room with too much energy to go straight to bed. She considers going for a run briefly, but there have been a series of late-night armed robberies in the neighborhood recently and Rey likes not being shot too much to risk it. Instead she shuffles into her room and changes out of her dress and into her PJs, then back out to her computer.

A match or two should take the edge off.

Rey is almost done with her first match when the message pops into her inbox. She ignores it, figuring it’s probably another excited player recognizing her from the KyloRen deal and trying to get her to friend request them.

When her match is over, she clicks back out to the lobby and opens her inbox, fully prepared to delete the message without responding but instead, her brain screeches to a halt when she sees who is actually talking to her.


Her first thought is “how fucking dare he” followed closely by an admonishment for herself for not blocking him in the first place.

Unfortunately she actually has to open the message to get to his profile so that she can block him. This, she thinks peevishly, is an oversight in the UI. If I’d designed this I’d be able to block him with my brain.

But as her cursor hovers over the Block Player button, she catches sight of his message. Against her better judgement, her temper takes the reins and her mouse drifts away from the block button and over to the text box.

She responds. And he replies.

Which is how she finds herself having… well, a civil, if not friendly conversation with fucking KyloRen.

He’s definitely still an ass. His ego probably needs its own plane ticket when he travels, and he’s certainly entitled as all hell, but she learns a few things that lower her hackles slightly.

It’s a short conversation, maybe only 20 minutes start-to-finish and it’s weird in a way that she’s very abruptly too tired to process properly, so she makes her excuses and gets ready to push away for bed.

And that’s when the friend request pops up.

**KyloRen has sent you a friend request!**

[Accept] [Decline]

She stares at the screen wondering if she’s seeing this correctly. And then once she’s positive that
yes, KyloRen did indeed add her as a friend, she has to think for a while longer about whether or not she actually even wants to accept this.

It’s definitely not a good idea.

This guy is nothing but trouble.

But like.

Rey’s got pretty good intuition about people. And despite what she’d said about muting him when she watches his streams (which she’s definitely seen more than just a few of – she’s justifying it as research but there’s definitely another level there that she’s just not ready to touch because it sort of smacks a little of unhealthy obsession) she actually enjoys listening to him talk about the game itself. When he’s not in the middle of a toxic rage – snarling and snapping at his teammates, his opponents, his Twitch chat, and God – he has a dry sort of humor and he’s smart. He understands the strategy of StarKiller in a way that Rey doesn’t yet.

She’s all instinct where he’s calculated and thinking three moves ahead at all times.

KyloRen is, for better or worse, interesting.

She closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, reopens them and clicks accept.

Then, before she can do anything else dumb tonight, she switches her computer off.

Rey pushes away from her desk, staring at the black mirror of the screen where StarKiller had been a few seconds before. She feels… well. Honestly she’s not really sure how she feels.

Going, essentially in an instant, from a mechanic by day and nerd by night to the kind of person who is a professional nerd that goes to fancy dinners with people who want to sponsor her and has honest-to-god rivalries with famous internet people… it’s just a lot for a girl from all the shitty parts of London to deal with.

Rey heads off to bed and drops into a deep, dreamless sleep the second her head hits the pillow.

When she next wakes up, it’s to the delicious smell of pancakes wafting in from the kitchen. Rey yawns and stretches before climbing out of bed. She wanders into the kitchen where she finds Finn sitting bleary-eyed at the kitchen table, reading something on his phone, while Poe flips pancakes, whistling and shirtless.

“Morning Sunshine!” He calls, tossing a cooked flapjack onto the already towering stack on a plate by the stove.

“Mo-o-orning,” Rey replies, muffling her yawn with the back of her hand.

“We expecting company?” She asks, pointing at pancake tower.

Poe grins, pouring more batter into the pan where it sizzles happily, “Jess watched BB for me last night so she’s bringing him by in exchange for breakfast.”

Rey takes a seat across from Finn and pours herself a glass of orange juice from the carton on the table, “Okay so four people. But that’s food for at least six.”

Finn looks up at her over the top of his phone, grinning widely

“Some of us worked up a big appetite last night,” he says.
Rey fakes disgust, sticking out her tongue and scrunching up her face, “Gross! I don’t need to know this!”

Finn kicks her leg playfully under the table.

“Hey, you asked, peanut!” He says with a laugh.

She laughs and kicks right back.

Jess shows up ten minutes later with Poe’s orange and white corgi, BB, in tow. The four of them devour the pancake feast, talking about a new strategy that Finn wants to try for the Canto Bight Casino map and the girl that Jess went out with earlier that week, who it turned out had also gone out with a guy Jess had dated for a while.

“Sometimes this world is just so crazy small, you know?” She says, before taking a huge gulp of her orange juice.

“Speaking of which, you guys will never guess what I learned the other day,” Poe says, leaning in like he always does when he’s got the juicy gossip.

“Well don’t keep us waiting!” Rey says, slipping a leftover scrap of pancake under the table for BB.

“So remember how I worked as an aid for Senator Organa for a few years? Well, I reached out to congratulate her on keeping her seat in the election and she asked me to come back. I obviously told her that I couldn’t because we’re about to blow the hinges off the esports world and she told me…”

He pauses dramatically for effect, looking around at his rapt audience, “That her son is actually a Pro StarKiller player too. Ben Solo.”

“KyloRen is a Senator's son?” Rey gasps, covering her mouth in shock.

“I know, right?” Poe says, “And talk about the apple falling as far away from the tree as possible. Leia is amazing. I wonder how her son ended up such a shithead?”

Rey has another one of the strange moments that she gets from time to time when she is abruptly reminded that she is a stranger in a strange land. For all that she calls America home now, there’s a lot she doesn’t exactly understand. The political system – broken and inefficient as it might be, she understands – but the actual players are all sort of a mystery to her.

She has no idea what Leia Organa is like as a person. But it awakens another thought in her, one that she had previously been avoiding, which is that KyloRen – Ben Solo – exists outside of the realm of StarKiller. He has parents and neighbors and people who he buys milk and shampoo and stuff from. He might even have friends, though with his attitude, Rey finds that even harder to fathom than the idea of him having a family.

This feels like the sort of time that it might be appropriate to mention to her friends the strange conversation she’d had with the man in question just the night before, but she holds her tongue for just a fraction too long, unable to make herself actually utter the words. She’s not exactly sure how she could even explain what happened. There’s really no good reason why she hadn’t just blocked him outright, much less why she actually accepted his request. Her lips remain shut and the conversation moves on, the moment passing.

And Rey finds herself with the beginning of a secret.

Snoke finally relents on the streaming requirement two weeks before the Qualifiers begin. Despite
there being no change in the amount of time that he’s expected to spend practicing StarKiller with the First Order, the fact that he’s not on camera all the time comes as a huge relief. The reduction in psychic noise just from being able to pick and choose when he actually wants to stream means that, despite the actual competition drawing closer, his stress level goes way down.

Ben’s actually having a pretty good day on Monday. He and his team ran strat tests all morning (crushing team after team on five different maps) and post lunch break he’s actually feeling mellow enough to turn his stream on for a while. He figures he can let the peanut gallery watch while he practices with Swoop and Marauder. They’re two of the Striker Heroes that he uses least often, but whose special abilities both make them useful back pocket options.

His mellow mood seems fairly contagious and his chat is actually behaving itself without his mods having to do much work. Not that they ever really work too hard in his channel. It’s a well known haven for trolls and bad behavior, but even the infamous KyloRen has some standards.

He’s playing with Phasma and Mitaka (the two members of his team that make him the least angry just by breathing) and he has them on Discord, where they’re all picking apart the flaws in the strategy of the last proper team they’d faced down when the game loads in.

They’re playing a public queue game on The Varykino castle map. This is easy mode for all of them, or it is until a flash of silver appears in his peripheral, and he realizes that he’s being targeted by the opposing team’s Millenia.

“That’s on my six,” Ben calls. “Gonna try to shake her on the balcony.”

He dashes for the south side of the castle. He’s playing Swoop this round, the character’s red and yellow armor, wide, sail-like wings and pointed helmet making him both incredibly odd and highly distinctive looking. Good bait for wayward Strikers who might otherwise be doing something actually useful for their teams. Ben gets to the balcony with Millenia in hot pursuit.

She’s been shooting at him with disorienting energy blasts, but Swoop is highly maneuverable, even in tight spaces, and Ben’s been able to avoid all but one of them. He bursts through the door, out onto the wide open space and activates Swoop’s flight ability. It sends the hero soaring upwards and then back down to land directly behind Millenia. He begins firing sticky grenades while he’s still midair and coming down, thinking that he’s got her caught.

“Get fucking wrecked,” Ben says triumphantly.

Which is when Millenia pops her shield and the enemy Coronet drops all of her bombs directly on top of them, killing him instantly.


“Coming back to spawn to meet you,” Mitaka tells him. “We almost have this map. I’m gonna boost you so you can go set up the last objective for us.”

Ben respawns in the dark and dramatic castle dining room, just as Mitaka’s Phoenix rounds the corner, golden fire radiating in every direction as he pops her Ultra, granting Ben some fucking awesome flame-powered super speed.

He bolts across the map, heading for the final objective point, when he sees Millenia enter his frame of vision again. He knows that her health must be low at this point and the temptation to break off
and try to finish her off is so strong that it takes literally all of his self control to stay the course.

Then she starts shooting energy beams just as he hits the stairs to the tower where his objective lies.

“Can one of you get this asshole off of me?” He snaps, just as he hears the sound of a gong that indicates that a Fulminator has unleashed his Ultra and the kill tracker shows all five names of his teammates.

“Sure I’ll get right on it,” Phasma snaps sarcastically at the same time that Mitaka says, “sorry!”

“Motherfucker,” Ben groans as one of Millenia’s disorienting blasts makes his screen warp and stretch uncomfortably. Ben knows the match is lost, as is any hope of actually capturing this objective, but he’s so pissed at the Millenia that he whirls around to try to take her out at the very least, and runs headlong into her meteor Ultra.

“SON OF A MOTHERFUCK!” He yells as his health drops to zero.

The defeat screen flashes into place and Ben can feel himself beginning to spiral into one of his rages when he happens to glance at the chat box. It’s a feature that he almost never bothers to look at because he’s on mic with his team and he doesn’t give a shit about his opponents. But this time it catches his eye and never in his entire streaming career has he been more glad that he had moved the game chat out of his streaming window. Because had he left it in the streaming window, right there for the whole fucking world to see, would have been the following message:

ReyOfLight: oooh u almost had me that time! best 2 out of 3? :D

“What the fuck?” Is what Ben says out loud because the odds of getting paired up against Rey in a random match, even at their level are so small. And yet, here they are.

Okay, you’re on,” he says and weirdly, while he’s definitely still pissed about the defeat there’s a frisson of excitement under his skin at the idea of really facing off properly against Rey. He should have known who he was fighting from the minute that – instead of attempting to fight – the other striker had acted as bait to take him out. Rey is the only player he’s ever encountered who’s crazy enough to pull a stunt like that.

“Who the actual fuck are you even talking to?” Phasma asks. “Have you finally just snapped, live on Twitch?”

“The enemy Milly wants to dance,” Ben says, “and I’m feeling generous.”

“So I guess that means we’re playing the rest of this game out?” Mitaka asks.

“Yep. If he wants to play, then we’re gonna play.”

He picks Praetorian this time around, remembering that Rey had mentioned not being very good with him and hoping that the lack of familiarity might be an advantage he can use here. It’s touch-and-go for a while but at the last second, Rey’s shot goes wide, leaving an opening for Ben to unleash his Flurry of Blades Ultra directly in Rey’s face.

ReyOfLight: hey! u did it! only took 7 matches but u finally beat me!

It’s an instant kill and Ben chuckles. “Not so fun when you’re on the receiving end, huh?”

“Oh my fucking god,” Says Phasma, just as his Discord pings and a series of rapidfire messages pop onto his screen.
@Phastasm: Ben, I just saw chat and please for the love of god tell me that you are not actively engaging with the person who kicked your ass so thoroughly that the rest of us ate shit for it for two weeks live on your stream

@Phastasm: b/c if you are and this goes the way last time did

@Phastasm: and we all get reamed over it

@Phastasm: I will come to your fancy shithole home and kill you myself

@KyloRen: It’s under control

@Phastasm: I’M NOT KIDDING I WILL KILL YOU

Ben snorts and turns his attention back to the game. He has an objective to set up and a game to finally win so he can regain a fraction of his security in his actual skills as a player.

Despite Phasma’s continual stream of cursing and Ben’s obsession with chasing Rey down any time Millenia appears in his vicinity (he does at least manage to get another kill on her, which he feels justifies his behavior), they somehow manage to win the second map.

ReyOfLight: we’re neck and neck now kyloren! winner takes all

And because something about Rey makes him stupid, Kylo breaks another rule and replies.

KyloRen: Nah, by my count I’m two kills up.

KyloRen: So unless you get me twice next match, this little game is mine.

ReyOfLight: lol easy peasy

The game chat goes nuts as everyone on both teams seems to realize that they have somehow accidentally wandered into the middle of some sort of grudge match between the unholy terror that is KyloRen and his mysterious arch nemesis.

@Phastasm: DEATH. AND. MURDER.

@MTKA: BEN WHY

“Hey assholes,” Ben says, addressing his Twitch chat. “Little did you know that you’ve actually been watching some fucking StarKiller history in action just now. I’m sure all of you dicks remember ReyOfLight, the player whose career I helped jumpstart by eating a bunch of Milly Ultras,” he says wryly. “Well guess who’s back for round two?”

His chat becomes an unreadable blur.

“We’ve been having a little contest, so far we’re one and two, advantage mine. So place your fucking bets because this is the final round and it’s gonna be all out balls out.”

He hesitates for a second on the Hero selection screen, but in the end he selects Silencer, just because he wants to make a spectacle of it. Besides, Silencer has always been his favorite.

They’re playing the Finalizer Starship map and the second the game starts Ben knows he made the right call. Silencer was made for close quarters and Millenia is at a serious disadvantage.
He plays as normal, clearing the AI bots and setting up the objective for his team until he catches sight of the tell-tale silver. He races towards her, using Silencer’s Shadow Shift to flank her and he gets a few solid hits in, but it’s not enough. A well-timed disorientation blast leaves him unable to defend himself against her follow up shots.

He respawns in the upper command deck.

“Anyone have eyes on Milly?” He asks.

The random Sniper who had been grouped up with them calls out: “I saw her heading towards the throne room. I think that’s where their objective is this time.”

Ben races toward the throne room, dispatching a wayward enemy Phoenix on the way, and arrives just in time to see Rey begin setting up their objective. She’s distracted by the task, which involves standing in a designated area and shooting the shields off of a massive glowing orb on a nearby wall.

He takes aim and pops his Ultra, feeling the thrill of victory rising in him as Silencer’s Shadow Shroud spreads out, racing forwards like a wave to engulf Millenia. She’s trapped, backed into a corner with nowhere to run. Ben has her.

Got you, he thinks, just in time to watch Millenia’s Ultra activate, sending a blinding comet of white directly into his face. The screen is so obscured by particle effects from the colliding abilities that for a second, Ben can’t tell what is even happening.

And then the Kill Tracker pings.

**KyloRen Eliminated ReyOfLight with Shadow Shroud**

**ReyOfLight Eliminated KyloRen with Meteorite**

Ben sags back into his chair, speechless. Never, in two years of playing this game has anyone been able to take him out mid-Shadow Shroud.

Rey had seen what was coming and used it as a chance to snatch victory out of his grasp at the final second.

Completely ignoring both the Twitch and game chats, which are going wild, and his teammates who are yelling in his year, Ben stares blankly at his screen with his jaw slack and eyes wide.

“Who the fuck are you?” He asks, even though he knows full well that ReyOfLight can’t hear him.

Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying the fic so far, please consider sharing it with a friend! Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated and fuel my desire to write faster!

As usual, please feel free to come yell at me about this story on Twitter or Tumblr.
February I

Chapter Notes

I continue to be completely floored by the response to this story. You guys are so incredibly giving as an audience and it is my absolutely pleasure to write for you. I've been writing fic for the better part of my life at this point and I've never had a reaction to my work like this before. I cannot tell you how much it means.

Thank you to adrearner for the INCREDIBLE MOOD BOARD and to kitten-the-cat and reylosfate for making rec posts for this story!

Also there is a new tag ("several people are typing...") courtesy of VioletWillson.

As always huge, major, most effusive thanks to the two perfect humans – breadscarps and cyberharpy – who helped me wrangle this monstrosity into something readable. This chapter is over 11,000 words long and they were truly instrumental in making it work.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“We need a coach. Or like… a manager or something,” says Rey, sighing heavily. “I just really wish we had someone who knew how to navigate all of this bureaucracy. You know, someone who could either show us how to do it, or handle it for us so that we could just focus on playing well instead of… what are these again?”

Rose looks over her shoulder at Rey.

“Legal releases to show our sponsors logos on live TV, as well as three different streaming networks,” She says, helpfully.

Paige shakes her head and takes a long drink from her coffee cup. “It was not this complicated when we were with the Rebellion.”

“Yeah,” says Poe, “but that was before actual news networks started reporting on the StarKiller Championships. A lot can change in a year. We’ve gone mainstream now.”

Rey, who had been watching her teammates work on the documents strewn about the table while she finished brewing a new pot of coffee, brings the now filled and steaming carafe over to the group and drops down into the remaining open seat.

“You know, I don’t think any of you have ever actually said what happened with your old team,” she says, topping off everyone else’s coffee cups before filling her own.

Paige and Poe exchange a glance. It’s not a happy look.

“It was… complicated,” Poe says carefully. “The team was pretty divided on what the end goal was. Half of them just wanted to see if we could get into the Championships at all, they weren’t even thinking about this as a career option. The rest of us were a bit more… invested. So when we actually made it, the level of commitment just…”
“It really wasn’t there,” says Paige, bluntly, her pen scratching across the form she’s currently working on as she signs her name.

Poe sighs and nods. “We made it to the round before the Semi-finals and everyone besides me n’ Paige n’ Jess just kind of fell apart under the pressure. We didn’t have a plan, we weren’t prepared enough. We were just running on adrenaline and it caught up with us.”

“C’est la vie.” He shrugs.

“Speaking of this though, I think Rey might have been right,” Paige says, and the other three turn to look at her, with eyebrows raised.

“Oh?” Rose says, “What about?”

“I think we really should have a manager,” she replies.

Rose nods.

“We’ve definitely got a better handle on commitment and investment than Rebellion, but if we don’t get someone who can hold steady if things get tough, we might be setting ourselves up for failure further down the line.”

“Obviously we need to pull Jess and Finn in on this, but I agree. And I’d go one step further, which is to say: by the time we make it through Qualifiers, we really should have someone onboard with us. Someone who can help keep us from self-destructing,” Paige says, firmly.

“Sounds like a plan then,” Rey smiles. “Now pass me one of those contracts; the deadline is right around the corner and you lot are taking way too long with this.”

Rose passes Rey a form and she sets about signing and dating as directed.

The kitchen is quiet for a while, save for the rustle of papers, scribbling of pens, and the mellow indie rock playing on Finn’s speakers.

The loud buzz of a phone going off makes everyone jump.

“Sorry!” Rose says, picking up the offending device to check her notifications. She taps her screen and scrolls for a few seconds before clicking her phone off and setting it down once more.

“Looks like the number of Qualifier matches has increased this year from twelve to sixteen because there are more teams who are eligible. That was Far Galaxy sending out the updated schedule, by the way, so make sure you all actually read it,” she says.

Rey’s brows draw together.

“Does this change our odds of getting into the Championships or have they widened that bracket too?” she asks.

Rose shakes her head.

“Unfortunately it looks like it’s still the same number of actual spots in the final fight,” she says grimly. “It’s still only the top four teams in each bracket that will be going to the Championships.”

“We’re just gonna need to win more games then, right?” asks Rey.

“Well,” Paige says, looking up from her paper, “Our chances have gone from one in three to one in
four now, so it’s probably not gonna come down to the number of wins alone.”

“Yeah, we’re gonna need to win games and do so with the highest number of match victories possible to give ourselves the best chance here,” says Poe. “It’s a taller order than we signed up for, but we can handle it.”

He grins at Rey and says, “After all, we have our secret weapon: the unstoppable ReyOfLight!”

She smiles and laughs a little but her chest tightens and she feels the acidic burn of the coffee in her stomach turning sour.

The team all looks towards her, seeming to expect her to say something in response, but before she has to fake some confidence that she’s really not feeling, she is saved by Jess and Finn’s return from the grocery store. While Poe is busy filling them in in this latest developments, Rey excuses herself, volunteering to take BB on a quick jog. She’s fairly notorious amongst her friends for being unable to sit still for longer than a few hours without needing to do something physical. Thankfully, that keeps her hasty exit from looking too suspicious.

The quick jog accidentally turns into a two-hour long wander through Balboa park. They stroll through the rose garden and around the koi pond before looping back around to the wide green expanse of the balboa tree-lined lawn. The fresh air calms her, and though she’s loath to head back indoors, she finally lets BB drag her back to the apartment a little before sunset.

There’s fresh tamales and beer waiting for her, along with boxes containing their new competition uniforms, courtesy of Nerd Thread. The team ends up putting on an impromptu fashion show with them, strutting their stuff across the living room, laughing until they’re dizzy while BB barks at them from underneath the coffee table.

By the time everyone but Poe and Finn leaves it occurs to Rey that she hasn’t actually been on StarKiller all day – a first since her dive into the deep end of the world of professional eSports.

She’s too exhausted to even consider a match but she’s been carrying on a few chat conversations with other players, so she logs into Far Galaxy’s browser site to check her messages.

As expected, there are messages from HappyHyperDriver and SlowNLow, both fellow Millenia mains who have been asking her how she managed to hit Silencer mid-Shadow Shroud.

You just have to be fast and good at keeping track of his target zones, even when he’s in motion, she keeps telling everyone who asks, though it does little to stop people from acting like there’s some larger secret at play.

Less expected is the message from KyloRen.

From KyloRen

When are your first Qualifier games?

From ReyOfLight

next week hbu?

From KyloRen

This Thursday. You’re in the Western bracket, right?
**From ReyOfLight**

yah we are tho i think we play like 6 teams from soca alone

**From ReyOfLight**

i didn’t realize there were so many in the area until we got our qualifiers schedule. apparently they made our bracket bigger.

**From ReyOfLight**

its 16 matches now instead of 12. did urs increase too?

**From KyloRen**

It did. The game is getting more popular and there are more teams that are eligible for the Championship now. It was bound to happen.

**From KyloRen**

I wouldn’t worry too much, most of the teams they’re adding are totally green. You have what, three vets on your team? That’s a pretty solid advantage.

**From ReyOfLight**

i guess…

**From KyloRen**

This is your first professional gaming competition right? Are you nervous?

**From ReyOfLight**

yes and kinda

**From KyloRen**

You shouldn’t be. You’ll do fine.

**From ReyOfLight**

thanks! thats… actually so nice coming from u!

**From KyloRen**

I don’t do nice. It’s just the truth.

**From ReyOfLight**

sure ok

**From KyloRen**

Whatever.
Rey signs off, feeling strangely buoyed by the conversation. In truth she has been extremely nervous. It’s partially about the Qualifiers – if they don’t make it to the Championships at this point Rey’s really not sure what she’ll do. It’s not like she has a job to go back to.

But even before they discussed the specifics of the fall of the Rebellion, the unorthodox nature of the team and her own relative inexperience has been weighing on her mind. Rey has never been a part of a professional eSports team before and she can’t help but wonder if Poe, Paige, and Jessika – the veterans – sometimes look at her and see their old teammates who let them down. She wonders if they don’t sometimes regret their decision to invite her to join them.

Impostor syndrome has hounded her all her life. Despite the recent success she’s found, Rey can’t quite shake the feeling that one of these days someone is going to look at her and realize that she’s just some punk kid from nowhere, playing at being a real pro.

Oddly, Ben’s words make her feel better. Sure, he could just be building her up as a part of some sort of bizarre scheme to set her up for failure, but it really doesn’t feel like it. Enmity aside, he actually seems to respect her as a player.

The best Striker in the world thinks I’m a good player, she thinks, letting a small smile curl her lips upward. That’s gotta count for something.

It’s research, Ben tells himself, as he types ‘ReyOfLight’ into his browser’s search bar and hits enter, it’s completely normal to google your opponents. I’m not doing anything wrong.

This internal monologue does very little to make him feel less like he’s committing some sort of thought crime. He keeps expecting Snoke to come bursting in his door at any second demanding to know why he can’t stop obsessing over this person who keeps beating him publicly.

His manager has yet to acknowledge the competition that took place on Ben’s live stream the other day but Ben isn’t foolish enough to assume that it’s because he doesn’t know about it. Snoke is definitely just biding his time, waiting until he can use it to his advantage somehow.

Ben rubs a hand over his jaw, feeling the prickly hint of stubble, and watches the Google results load. He either has time to shave or indulge in his curiosity this morning, and curiosity easily wins out.

The username ReyOfLight pulls up all of the usual social media links, as well as a small trove of articles (mostly about the video) and a link to the guy’s Far Galaxy account page. For a second, Ben actually thinks he’s hit the jackpot.

Then he clicks on the Twitter link.

There’s the same sunburst icon as on Far Galaxy’s site, a banner image with the logo of The Resistance, and a profile that reads:

Rey Sanderson

@ReyOfLight
I came here to kick ass and play games and I’m all out of games.

Striker for the Resistance

Website: jointheresistance.com

Location: San Diego, USA

And, almost as if it was designed specifically to taunt him, the only thing that has been tweeted from this account is the video of their first showdown with the caption “get wrecked”.

Mouth flattening into a tight line, he goes back and clicks on the link to Instagram.

All the information is identical, and though there is slightly more activity on the Instagram feed, none of it is remotely helpful. There are a handful of screenshots from games, a couple photos of sponsor swag (Ben has posted enough of those to know what they look like), and a bunch of pictures of a fat corgi. Not a single personal photo.

He checks Facebook (there are a few Rey Sanderson’s both male and female, but none of them have their locations listed), Twitch (there’s a profile but no streamed content), and even Youtube – but it’s just another empty account.

Ben feels like he’s hitting a wall.

He also feels a little unhinged about this whole situation, frankly. It’s weird. ReyOfLight is a massive question mark. Ben usually knows a little about the other people he’s playing against. At his level the talent pool is just not deep enough for mystery in most cases. When there’s a player who’s being a pain in his ass, a quick Google search will usually tell him everything he needs to know and give him a face to attach to a name.

In Rey’s case, he has no fucking clue. He’s been assuming that Rey is male because, in his experience, most pro players are. Even that could be wrong. He wouldn’t know because this asshole doesn’t have any personal pictures on the internet and the name Rey could belong to anyone. The guy is like some sort of bizarre digital ghost.

Frustrated, Ben closes out of the Google tab and scoots away from his desk.

It’s just after 8 AM. He’s already been on his run and consumed an entire pot of black coffee, but thanks to his googling, there’s now only half an hour to complete the remainder of his morning routine before he actually has to leave for the day.

Reluctantly, he forces himself to abandon his internet stalking and go get ready to make the 20-minute journey from the Upper East Side to Midtown Manhattan.

He brushes his teeth, combs his hair, shoves his feet into black Doc Martens and bundles into his winter gear. During the coldest month of the year he forgoes his usual leather motorcycle jacket for a black wool peacoat with a high mandarin collar because he’d really rather not freeze to death.

Eyja is fond of telling him that this jacket makes him look even more like a vampire than usual, but Ben doesn’t really care. He privately thinks that the coat has a very ’Adam Jensen from Deus Ex’ vibe and Ben’s always been a bit of a sucker for that whole aesthetic.

He wraps a massive black scarf around his neck and the lower half of his face, pulls a beanie over his head, and heads out into the bitter cold of a New York February.
His favorite band, an Industrial Metal group called Vader has just released a new album and he listens to that during the 5-minute walk to the 86th Street station and as he rides the Q train into Midtown. Ben stands in the center of the car, holding onto the railing on the ceiling and doing his best to avoid making eye contact with anyone else, letting the loud music quiet his mind for a while.

Emerging at street level once more at the Herald Square subway station, he discovers that the wind is now blowing directly at him and the remainder of his trek is spent with his head bowed in a futile attempt to avoid being blasted directly in the face. His eyes are watering and his mood is truly foul by the time he finally reaches his destination.

During competitions, the First Order team moves their operations from their various domiciles to the training facility that Snoke maintains for them.

The facility sits on the 24th floor of the black glass and steel skyscraper that houses the Snoke Industries headquarters. Only four blocks from Bryant Park, the desirable location and ostentatious building signage are a testament to exactly how well James Snoke has done for himself in the twenty-odd years since he assumed control over the company.

Ben had been too young to really understand at the time, but he can still remember his parents discussing the incident in worried tones over the breakfast table, while he spooned Cheerios into his mouth. Snoke’s acquisition of the company had been a hostile takeover that had rocked the financial sector.

The first time Ben had set foot in the building, it had made his jaw clench up with immediate dislike. The place has not gotten any better with repeated exposure.

Everywhere he goes, Ben feels like an outsider. At 6’2 he looms head and shoulders above most of the general populace, far too tall to go unnoticed. The fact that in his winter gear he looks like a cyberpunk biker gang reject doesn’t help him blend in any better in this sterile office building environment.

The crowd of people in the building’s glossy lobby – number-cruncher types with their pressed suits and leather briefcases – swirl around him, giving him the same calculating once-overs that he has been receiving his entire life. Their eyes scan him up and down before they seem to dismiss him as utterly worthless. It makes Ben want to pick up the nearest available projectile and hurl it through a window.

Unfortunately, no matter how much he might wish otherwise, the training facility is a necessary evil. The First Order plays well scattered across New York City, but when they’re together, they’re an unstoppable force of nature. There is something about being in the same room that creates an energy between them that improves their performance in a way that Ben cannot express with words. It’s actually nearly miraculous that six people who so frequently dislike each other can work so well in close quarters.

He scans his ID badge at the security checkpoint and walks past the reception desk and the throngs of people doing their best to stare at him without staring at him, heading for the elevator bank.

As usual, the elevator is overfull and Ben wedges himself back into the corner, trying to avoid making contact with anyone by accident. The ride up to the training facility seems to take an eternity, the car stopping seven times to let people out. The doors finally open on the 24th floor and Ben steps out into a familiar white hallway.

This floor houses a large bullpen of cubicles on one end, a block of private offices in the center, and the First Order’s HQ on the other end.
To Snoke’s credit, the training facility is a gamer’s dream come true. It features a room with a state-of-the-art computer setup for each member of the team, a kitchen that is perpetually stocked with snacks, drinks, and catered meals, a lounge with a massive TV, a small but well-appointed gym and bathroom, and a conference room.

If it were not smack-dab in the center of this corporate hellscape, Ben might have even liked it.

Once he’s inside the First Order’s space, he finally takes his headphones out. The thundering base of Vader’s music is immediately replaced by the sound of two of his teammates talking in the kitchen.

“- told me that they’re going to nerf Trident soon because he’s just too strong in the second phase,” Phasma is saying.

“Fucking hell. I knew they were gonna pull some shit like this. I guess that means I’m going to have to start playing Quasar again,” Eyja grumbles bitterly. “He’s so slow though! Ugh!”

He hasn’t seen any of his teammates in person in a while – not since the whole ReyOfLight incident began – and he’s really not looking forward to it. But he doesn’t have much of a choice. With a heavy, resigned sigh Ben walks into the kitchen to make his presence known.

The two women standing in front of the massive brushed-chrome fridge could not be more different, but they both turn to pin him with identical glares when he enters the room.

Phasma is tall, broad, and nearly as pale as Ben. She wears her platinum blonde hair in a short faux-hawk, with both sides shaved. She is dressed practically for the frigid weather in black leggings, running shoes, and a gray turtleneck fleece sweater. She looks less like a professional gamer and more like a bodybuilder, which makes sense because whenever she isn’t on StarKiller, she’s most likely lifting weights.

Eyja on the other hand is small and dark. She has dusky brown skin, long, curly black hair, and amber, cat-like eyes. Ben has always felt uncomfortable meeting her gaze directly because their intensity makes him feel like she’s doing her damndest to read his mind (and possibly succeeding). She beautiful, in the way that poisonous animals so frequently are, and she wields her attractiveness like a weapon.

Today she’s wearing a pair of spike-heeled boots, distressed black jeans, and a very low-cut purple top with the Twitch logo on it, showing off the tattoos that decorate her chest and arms. He thinks she must be freezing – the winter chill penetrates even into the training facility – though she’s not showing it.

“Well, if it isn’t the great and terrible KyloRen,” Eyja drawls, “come to grace us mere mortals with his presence at long last.”

Ben rolls his eyes.

“Hello to you, too,” he says.

“I’m surprised you even dared to show up today after the stunt you pulled on Twitch last week,” Phasma says by way of greeting.

Ben scowls at her.

“Stop being dramatic. It wasn’t a big deal,” he replies. “What was I supposed to do? Quit the fucking game on livestream? That definitely wouldn’t have looked worse than actually playing ReyOfLight and tying with him.”
Eyja rolls her eyes and pops the cap on the Monster Energy drink she’s holding in one of her delicate, pointy-nailed hands.

“Sure, whatever you say,” she says, “but if Snoke throws a shit fit about it and we end up in streaming hell again, don’t expect us to come to your rescue.”

Before Ben can reply, Hux sticks his head into the kitchen from the training room.

“Would you all stop wasting time and get in here? We have strats to drill,” he says, before disappearing once more.

“Whatever,” Ben mutters, stalking out of the kitchen after Hux.

Rey snuggles down into her bed, bending her knees up and propping her brand new laptop against her chest so that she can better see the screen. It’s a beast of a computer, and despite the name, it’s not really intended for use on a lap. It was a signing bonus from Cyarika and Rey, who has lived below the poverty line for her entire life, certainly wasn’t going to say no to a computer worth more than the beat-up Vespa she rides around on.

Despite the laptop’s hefty proportions, it’s absolutely more portable than her gaming rig. This means that for the first time ever she can use a computer in the privacy of her own bedroom, instead of in the living room where she and Finn have their gaming desks set up.

This newfound privacy is a blessing and a curse.

A blessing because she can finally watch as many dumb Youtube videos as she wants, listen to her music without having to wear headphones so she won’t annoy Finn, and chat with her online friends from the comfort of her bed! She has an iPhone 5 that she could theoretically have been doing all those things on for quite some time now. But it’s so old and buggy at this point that trying to use it to do anything too complicated is a recipe for disaster.

And it’s a curse because instead of doing any of those things, she’s found herself obsessively watching KyloRen’s backlog of videos on Twitch. Specifically, watching him in his videos.

He’s not classically handsome and he’s definitely not Rey’s type.

Not even remotely.

He has a long nose set in a longer face, a full mouth that always seems to be drawn tight with displeasure, and his skin has the obvious pallor of someone who never sees sunlight. His thick, dark hair is long enough to cover his ears. Combined with his penchant for black clothing it gives him a sort of gothy, tech-bro-meets-vampire look.

And yet.

She finds herself thinking about his face a lot. And thinking that it’s actually rather interesting, really. It’s just such a terrible shame about his personality.

Because, good lord, Ben Solo sure does spend a lot of time being really angry about a game that he claims to actually enjoy.
What’s he like when he hates something for real, Rey wonders.

She’s not thinking any of that now though; she’s watching this video, almost enraptured.

The game on her screen is from a few months ago and it stands out from the rest of his videos because for once, he’s not playing Silencer. Nor is he actually playing Striker at all. Much to Rey’s surprise, Ben has elected to play an Offense hero: Eravana, a massive and powerful mecha warrior with a tractor cannon arm that can haul an unsuspecting player halfway across the map.

Given how infrequently she’s actually seen him play anything other than Striker, Rey really couldn't have predicted just how good Ben would be in this role. But he’s cleaning house on the other team. At one point he kills four other players, one right after the other, yanking their Striker and their Support into range of Eravana’s lethal cannon blasts before taking out both Offense heroes. The remaining two players are left to scramble back to their base to regroup.

For someone who can appreciate the amount of skill it takes to engage one enemy at a time, this sort of rapid-fire, lethal play is electric to watch. As is Ben.

Because the other thing that she could not have predicted was just how much Ben’s face changes when he’s not angry. It’s mostly subtle cues – a loosening of his scowl, the relaxation of his mouth, a lack of fury in his eyes – but it feels like he’s taken off a mask and Rey can actually see what lies beneath. Ben laughs as the other team scatters, leaving him free to go back up his Striker, and Rey realizes that for once it’s not a mocking, hollow sound. He’s genuinely relaxed and having fun.

It hits her that she’s never actually seen him like this when he’s playing Striker. She has to wonder if the pressure of competition is a factor, or if he actually just dislikes playing that role.

There’s a ping, letting her know that she has a new message on StarKiller and Rey pauses the video before switching over to her browser where she has the Far Galaxy site open.

From KyloRen

Hey, what heros do you play besides Milly?

There’s a strange swoop in her belly, like her thoughts somehow summoned him into her inbox (asking an alarmingly topical question to boot). She’s technically done nothing wrong but Rey still feels like she’s been caught red-handed.

From ReyOfLight

shes my fave but i like umbran and marauder too for striker. radius for tank, executor or phantom for sniper, phoenix for support, coronet and quasar for offense. developing a new respect for eravana tho. why?

From KyloRen

You should respect Eravana. He’s the most versatile Offense hero in the game and I’m surprised that more people don’t play him.

From KyloRen

And I wanted to ask if you want to play a match together sometime? We’re both Strikers so it’s a little tough, but one of us could play another role and I think it would be interesting.
From ReyOfLight

i dunno…

From KyloRen

It was a stupid idea. Forget it.

From ReyOfLight

i just mean that its getting like… real close to qualifiers. what if someone makes a vid of us playing together and it goes viral? u were a huge dick the last time that happened.

From KyloRen

No you’re right, it IS getting close to Qualifiers. Thank you for the reminder. I was clearly losing focus here, a mistake that I’ll be sure to correct. Goodnight.

From ReyOfLight

don’t be like that ben :/

She waits for a while, messing around on Facebook and trying to distract herself by reading stuff on the StarKiller subreddit, but as the minutes finally crawl past midnight, Rey is forced to come to terms with the fact that Ben is not going to respond.

The disappointment that coils in her gut is almost ridiculously disproportionate to the actual incident but she feels sort-of betrayed. Like this weird, tentative, not quite friendship that they had been building has crumpled and she’s not exactly sure who to blame.

Disappointed, a little pissed, and very tired, Rey turns out her light and closes her laptop. She ends up falling asleep curled around it. If she inexplicably dreams about being curled around the object of her frustrations instead, well… it’s not like the laptop is going to tell anyone.

Ben doesn’t really know why it bothers him so much that Rey wouldn’t agree to play with him. The truth is that he’s right: the two of them playing together is a terrible idea. Snoke would lose his shit, his teammates would lose their shit, and the whole internet would probably implode if they got wind of this.

ReyOfLight and KyloRen playing together. It’s ludicrous.

But the fact that Rey hadn’t even considered it, the firm and swift rebuttal of his idea, feels like a rejection that cuts surprisingly deep. They’re on opposing teams, yes, but it’s lonely at the top of the charts and he likes the idea of playing with someone else who truly is on his level. And no, his teammates do not count because playing with them is frequently agonizing. But beyond playing, he actually wants the chance to talk to Rey in a more effective way than through StarKiller’s messenger.

This has passed the point of becoming an obsession. At this point he’s straight up obsessed.

Ben scrubs his hands over his face, feeling like a loser.
“What is wrong with me?” He wonders aloud in the dark of his room.

*Here lies the career of KyloRen, laid low by some nobody who doesn’t want to talk to you. Get it together and grow the fuck up,* he scolds himself sourly.

He tries to stop thinking about Rey.

He fails spectacularly.

Two days later, when he nearly costs his team a practice match because he loses focus when he sees that the enemy Striker is playing Millenia, Ben makes a decision.

*This has gone on long enough,* he thinks, grimly.

As soon as he is back home that night, he opens StarKiller and sends Rey a message.

*From KyloRen*

All I want is a single match. I’ll even be the one who swaps roles.

*From KyloRen*

Please.

He sits in his computer chair, twisting back and forth and chewing on his lip for five solid minutes, half expecting that Rey will either finally block him or tell him to go screw himself. At long last, a new message appears.

*From ReyOfLight*

why do u want to play with me so bad?

Ben exhales in relief.

*From KyloRen*

Because I think it will be interesting.

*From ReyOfLight*

bullshit

*From KyloRen*

Fine. I want to talk to you. You’re a mystery, Rey. Nothing on google, nothing on social media. You’re the first person who can regularly beat me and I don’t know shit about you. I’m curious.

*From KyloRen*

All I want is one game and if you never want to hear from me again, you don’t have to.

*From ReyOfLight*

… one game. i play striker. not tonight tho i gotta sleep.
From KyloRen

Okay. You free tomorrow?

From ReyOfLight

after 4pm pst yes

From ReyOfLight

dont make me regret this

Ben grins.

From KyloRen

Deal.

The next day passes in a blur. He practices with his team on autopilot, not even reacting when Hux gets so tilted during a match that he actually throws the whole game on purpose.

“Are you stoned,” Caide asks Ben at one point, incredulous, “or do you just not care?”

Ben just flips him off and cues the team up for another match.

That night, instead of sticking around to eat the catered dinner that is provided for them in the kitchen, he practically runs out of the building.

His commute seems to take about five times as long as usual but he finally gets home and makes a beeline straight for his gaming chair, practically buzzing from excitement.

At last he’s going to unravel the ReyOfLight mystery and then he’ll be able to get his life back on track. No more obsessing, no more internet stalking, no more distractions. Nothing but competition and victory.

He should have done this ages ago, really, and saved himself the hassle.

Ben logs into StarKiller, sets his online status to ‘invisible’ so that no one will try to join him at random, sets his voice chat to ‘group only’ instead of ‘team’, and then navigates to his friend’s list.

ReyOfLight’s name is lit up in green, indicating that he’s online, so Ben clicks the invite to team button, and waits.

There’s a soft ping and the pop of static that indicates that someone else has joined his voice channel.

“Hello, ReyOfLight,” Ben says, waiting for the other man to speak.

There’s a hesitation of a few seconds, then a soft, feminine voice says, in a posh British accent, “Hello, KyloRen.”

His jaw drops.

The other man is not a man at all. ReyOfLight is a girl. A girl with a charming accent. Everything in his brain screeches to a halt.

“Hello?” She says again, “are you there?”
Ben tries to speak, chokes, clears his throat, and says, in a voice that cracks in a way that he’s not at all proud of: “You’re… you’re British.”

Rey heaves a sigh so loud that Ben can practically feel it through his headset.

“Do we have a problem here?” She asks, a hard edge creeping into her tone.

“No! It’s just… surprising.” Ben says, mind racing a mile a minute as he tries to reconfigure his entire perception of Rey from the nerdy gamer bro he’d been picturing into… well… a nerdy British girl with a pretty voice.

“Uh-huh. You know, your manager was surprised by my… Britishness too,” she says, sounding testy.

Ben shakes his head, forcing himself to get it together.

“I promise I’m not judging you for being a girl. Or British. You know as well as I do that most pros are male and you don’t exactly advertise your gender,” he says. “I’ve been thinking you were a guy this whole time. It just caught me off guard, that’s all.”

“I suppose,” she replies, still sounding wary.

There’s an awkward pause and then she asks, “Wait, Snoke really didn’t tell you?”

“No,” Ben says, frowning, “he did not. We don’t really talk much unless it’s about sponsorships or training schedules.”

“He’s a creepy fuck, you know,” Rey says bluntly.

“He’s a necessary evil,” Ben replies.

“Yeah sure, whatever you say,” she says, voice dripping with sarcasm, “but just know that you’re the one who is willingly working for gross, corporate Satan.”

“Listen, I didn’t ask you to play so we could argue about my manager. I really do just want to talk to you.”

There’s a pause then Rey says, “Okay, fine. Launch a game. You have until the end of the match and if you’re not entirely terrible, then we’ll see where we stand. Also if you get toxic or start yelling I’m out, okay?”

“Alright,” he replies, fighting back his knee jerk desire to tell her that she doesn’t need to worry about that. Because of course she does. He has literal years worth of video demonstrating his enormous capacity for being a toxic, yelling jerk. Twitch loves to hate him for it. It’s part and parcel of the KyloRen brand and the idea that he’s trying to dispel any of that mythology is frankly mind-boggling. He doesn’t know what it is about Rey that has him feeling so turned around.

What the fuck is happening, he wonders.

Ben clicks on the public match button, and there’s silence between them while their match roster fills up and he gathers his thoughts.

“You know, ever since you beat me I’ve been thinking about what I’d say to you if we ever got the chance to talk for real,” he says, at last, defaulting to honestly because he literally can’t think of what else to do. “But now that we are, I don’t really know what to say.”
Rey laughs – a surprised, warm sound that makes Ben feel a little tingly. “I think I actually know what you mean. It’s been kind of weird having my whole StarKiller career tangled up with someone who I don’t know at all.”

“Had you really never heard of me before those matches?” He asks.

“Never. I wasn’t joking when I said that I was new to the game,” Rey says.

Ben shakes his head. “Un-fucking-believable. People would kill to play like you. What are you doing playing for an upstart team like the Resistance?”

Rey makes a rude noise at him. “Excuse me, those are my friends you’re talking about, mate! And as I recall, my upstart team wiped the floor with yours.”

“Only because they had you with them,” Ben says.

“You do know that it’s not a compliment if you’re also insulting the people I care about at the same time, right?” Rey asks him, waspishly.

Ben smirks. She’s so reactive and he finds that he enjoys getting a rise out of her. All the same he doesn’t want to chase her off so he relents.

“Fine, fine, I won’t say anything about your team any more, even if we both know that you could do far better.”

The game loads up, cutting off whatever response Rey might have made. She selects Millenia as usual and Ben, who has marked himself as an Offense player for this game, chooses Erevana.

“Hey,” Rey says, switching subjects as they wait for the rest of the team to lock in Heroes, “Why do you play Striker?”

Ben pauses, caught off-guard.

He’s… honestly never really thought about it. It’s surprising given the number of interviews that he’s done, but he’s not sure if anyone has ever really asked him that question before.

“In the beginning I played it because it’s the most interesting position. And it’s reasonably self-sufficient, which is good when you don’t have a team but,” he says after a beat, “now I play it because I’m good at it. Why?”

“You don’t really seem to like it,” Rey says, bluntly, “I think being a Striker makes you angry.”

Ben’s face creases into a frown and he jerks back as though he’s been slapped, “What are you talking about?”

“Your streams. You yell a lot less when you’re playing anything other than Striker,” she says.

The game loads up the Jedah Temple map and they get ready to play.

Ben chews his lip so hard that it begins to bleed a little as he attempts to sort through his thoughts. The strange curl of warm delight that she’s watching his streams is at odds with the real anger that she’s also used them as a tool to analyze him and is now telling him about himself.

He wants to snap at her and tell her that she doesn’t know him, that she doesn’t have any idea what she’s talking about but… she kind of does.
It’s just not something he’s ever admitted to anyone.

Being a Striker is frustrating. A great deal of responsibility for his team’s victory or defeat frequently rests squarely on his shoulders. Working for Snoke, failure to achieve victory is not a forgivable offense.

But he’s built his entire career in this game on being the best Striker in the world. It’s not like he can just drop that now because he feels like it. Besides, it’s not like switching to playing something more fun would suddenly make him a less angry person. These two things are separate issues.

After a beat he says, “It makes for better content.”

The game begins and he watches Rey shoot ahead to begin capturing footholds while he marches Erevana out to begin the assault on the enemy team.

“What does that mean?” She asks.

He bites his upper lip and wonders how to even begin explaining any of this to someone else.

“It means that Twitch likes to see streamers get angry and I’m good at giving the people what they want,” he says after a minute.

Ben yanks the enemy Coronet out from behind a corner and blasts her to pieces.

“That sounds… kind of awful,” Rey says, sounding a bit disgruntled.

“It’s not that bad; anger is cathartic. Powerful. It’s good if you know how to use it right.”

“Okay, Mr. Serial Killer, but it also makes you reckless and stupid and it’s shit for your blood pressure,” she says and Ben can nearly hear her rolling her eyes at him. “But you do you, I guess.”

He doesn’t respond because he doesn’t know how. Rey’s words speak to things that he has occasionally thought, in weaker moments, but never voiced. They’re buried so deeply, under so many layers of his KyloRen persona, that they’ve almost been crushed to nothing by the sheer weight. But her words are like sunbeams, breaking through cracks and illuminating dark spaces. Something stirs within him.

This way lies trouble, he thinks, you should really stop talking to her. Now. Before it’s too late. Quit the game, block her, don’t look back.

He doesn’t.

Rey doesn’t know what to make of Ben Solo. Somehow, speaking to him over the voice channel has made him even more mysterious than he had been over chat.

He’s prickly and gruff (occasionally downright rude). But as they work their way across the map and he catches up with her, guarding her flank with Erevana while she clears the bots and sets up the objective, there’s no trace of the toxicity that she’s seen from him so many times before. Even when they lose serious ground to the other team and both wind up getting killed and having to respawn, he keeps his cool.
Where’s all that anger now? Is he just holding it back because I told him I’d leave if he didn’t?

This version of Ben feels like a different person from the others that she has seen. He is neither the raging asshole who accused her of cheating, nor the twisted, toxic egomaniac who he seems to play most often for his Twitch audience. This version of Ben is closest to the quietly humorous, intelligent man who sometimes shows up on late-night streams and in their messages on StarKiller.

*Will the real Ben Solo please stand up,* she thinks.

The other thing that she legitimately can’t figure out is what his goal with this conversation is. He’s not grilling her about her team or her strategy, he’s not demanding that she apologize for beating him, he’s not belittling her or (perhaps worse) hitting on her.

He’s just asking her questions about her gaming history and listening patiently while she responds.

He also willingly answers all the questions that she asks him and makes her laugh a few times with his dry humor.

It’s so strange that Rey keeps having to resist the urge to pinch herself, just to make sure that she’s not hallucinating this whole thing.

They’ve long since finished their first game, and are now in the second match of their third. Rey, who had spent the entire day practicing with her team, keeps waiting for the usual feeling of burnout to set in but it doesn’t come.

The conversation with Ben rolls right along, and it’s almost like StarKiller is just a backdrop.

“How did you get into professional eSports?” she asks, as they’re battling a Swoop in the gift shop room on the Citadel map. “As far as the internet is concerned you just sprang fully formed into the universe, winning Championships.”

“Googled me, have you?” Ben asks, wryly and Rey thinks she can hear a smile in his tone.

“Seems fair since you did it to me first,” she says.

“True. I always google my competition though. I’ve been playing PC games since I was ten,” Ben says, tractor cannoning the enemy Striker so that Rey can use her Ultra on him. “My uncle bought me a computer and I was hooked right away. But I didn’t start playing professionally until after I graduated from college.”

“You went to college?” Rey asks, sounding surprised, as she captures the objective.

Ben scoffs, “Is that so hard to believe?”

“I’m just curious what college degree leads to a career as a professional angry man on the internet,” she says, cheekily.

Rey shoots the enemy Fang, who’s trying to kill him. The mechanized silver ninja is blown backwards off of his feet, his death animation causing the six glowing blue knives that perpetually orbit the hero to fall to the ground.

“I have a degree in mechanical engineering from NYU,” he says, “Same level of anger and frustration but this job pays better.”

Rey blinks as yet another confusing piece of the Ben Solo puzzle gets added to the mix. She has a
hard time imagining him sitting studiously in a lecture hall, much less in an engineering lab.

“Anyway,” he says, not giving her a chance to respond, “I started out playing Knights Republic, did that for a few years right when Twitch was first getting big, and then when Far Galaxy launched StarKiller they recruited me to be part of the beta. And the rest is history.”

As the victory screen flashes across her computer, bringing their latest game to a close, Rey glances at the clock and starts.

It’s nearly 10 PM. Finn will be home from his date with Poe soon. She and Ben have been playing for nearly four hours and the time has flown.

“Hey,” Rey says, “drop us out of the queue. I have to get ready for bed soon and if we get into a new game we’ll be here for another hour.”

“Fuck, when did it get this late?” Ben swears, and Rey suddenly remembers that he’s on the East Coast, meaning that while it’s ten for her, it’s one in the morning for him.

He clicks the exit game button, sending them back to the lobby.

“You know,” Rey says, leaning back in her chair and tucking her legs up underneath her body, “this wasn’t as terrible as I was expecting.”

“Oh?” Ben asks, and Rey might be imagining it, but she can swear that she hears a very slight quaver to his voice.

“Yeah; honestly I was half expecting you to just spend the game calling me a ‘cheating bitch’ or telling me to go make you a sandwich and stop ruining your game or something,” Rey says, twisting her headphone cord around her finger.

“I told you that I wanted to talk,” Ben says, sounding a little miffed.

Rey shrugs, even though he can’t see it, “Yeah, well considering your reputation and some of our past interactions, can you really blame me?”

“I… guess not,” he says after a beat.

Rey laughs, “You know, this really was fun though.”

“It was,” Ben agrees softly.

“Maybe we can… I dunno… do this again sometime?” She asks, voice hesitant.

There’s silence on the other end of the line before Rey hears Ben sigh heavily.

“I would like that but… you actually had a point when you said that us playing together isn’t a good idea,” Ben says. “My team is… well. They’re very concerned with optics, as you might have surmised from Snoke’s meddling fuckery.”

Rey feels like someone has doused her in cold water, like the bubble of peaceful camaraderie that had been established between them has suddenly popped, leaving her back in reality.

“Right,” she says dully.

There’s another pause, and Rey is about to tell him to have a good night so that she can go off to eat the pint of ice cream in the freezer and feel like an idiot for ever believing that she might have started
to form some sort of genuine connection with Ben, when he speaks again.

“But if you ever want to talk on Discord… about StarKiller or whatever, I’d like that,” it comes out in an awkward rush, like he’s trying to get the words out before he changes his mind.

Rey, despite herself, smiles.

“Sure; that would be cool,” she says.

The next day is Monday, and it’s grueling as Mondays are wont to be. On this particular one, his entire team is being especially awful. Normally his teammate’s snarling would have sent Ben spiralling into a mood of his own. However, he’s so tired after only getting four hours of sleep, that he just doesn’t have the energy. So instead of allowing himself to be baited into a long, drawn out argument, he stalks off to the lounge.

Ben pulls out his phone and the Discord app stares back at him. Rey had sent him her username on StarKiller’s messenger and had accepted his Discord friend request before signing off. But he’s still not sure if that actually means it’s okay to just… message her out of the blue.

His fingers hover over the screen of his phone for a minute but… he really doesn’t know anyone else that he even likes enough to talk to about stuff like this. So he goes for it.

@KyloRen

If I murder Hux will you come play Sniper for the FO?

@ReyOfLight

lol not on ur life m8

@ReyOfLight

what did he do this time?

@KyloRen

Convinced Snoke that we need to do more “team building”.

@KyloRen

Which is fucking rich from the guy who never does anything for the team to begin with, by the way.

@KyloRen

We’re doing a fucking workshop next week.

@KyloRen

Obviously no one is happy about it so now he’s storming around the training room, calling us all names.
@ReyOfLight

LMAO don't take this wrong but it sounds like u could use it

@KyloRen

There's going to be group puzzle solving, Rey.

@KyloRen

If I end up in prison will you at least smuggle me a computer so I can play StarKiller?

@ReyOfLight

yah sure

The next few days blur together for Ben. The First Order practices for 12 to 16 hours a day and Ben actually sleeps on the couch at the training facility on Tuesday night because he's too tired to face the commute home.

He's so tall that his feet hang off the end of the sofa and he wakes up feeling sore and poorly rested at 6 AM when the janitor comes in to empty the trash.

His time at the training facility being what it is, Ben rarely sees anyone other than his teammates or Snoke. While all of them drive him up the wall on a good day, the stress of the competition conditions draws his temper tight as a bowstring. Everything they do sets his teeth on edge.

The only bright spots in his day are the messages that he exchanges with Rey.

@ReyOfLight

they just buffed milly

@ReyOfLight

u scared yet?

@KyloRen

They also just made Silencer completely invulnerable during Shadow Shroud. I don't think I'm the one who should be scared.

@ReyOfLight

guess we'll just have to fight it out and see ;D

@ReyOfLight

spoiler alert: its still u

@KyloRen

Make it to the Championships and then we'll see if you've actually got the skills to back up all that talk.

Rey sends him a GIF of a man very aggressively saying “bring it!” and he laughs.
Ben goes to the gym early on Wednesday morning, and spends an hour running on the treadmill before the rest of the team arrives. One of the walls of the gym is made entirely of massive glass windows and while Ben prefers his runs in the park, even he can admit that this is a nice view to look at while working out.

Smoke and steam billow from chimneys and exhaust pipes across the city, which is painted silvery-blue by the early morning, winter light. Flocks of birds speed across the skyline and rows of cars and people inch along in miniature down below.

He’s in the cool-down stage of his run when his phone buzzes and he sees the telltale Discord notification. He slows down to a walk and opens the message.

@ReyOfLight

hey

@KyloRen

You’re up early. Or late, I guess. It’s 4am for you right?

@ReyOfLight

couldn’t sleep

@KyloRen

Are you okay?

@ReyOfLight

yeah this is stupid but i fought with finn today about a strat and now im worried ive broken the whole team.

@ReyOfLight

sorry this isn’t even ur problem and uve got ur game tomorrow

Ben blinks at the message. He’s not entirely certain that anyone has ever come to him to talk about conflict resolution. He’s an expert at starting fights but he’s never been any good at making up. All the same, there’s something that flutters just beneath his breastbone at the idea that Rey trusts him enough to ask his advice.

@KyloRen

I don’t mind. I just don’t really have great advice here. As you might have noticed, I’m not exactly Mr. Go Along and Get Along.

@KyloRen

But... I’ll say this. A team that plays together as effectively as yours does isn’t going to fall apart over a single argument.

@KyloRen

Just talk to him tomorrow when both of you have cooled off and you’ll be fine.
He stares at the messages, feeling foolish.

“Who the fuck am I to be giving advice about this?” He mutters, slowing the treadmill down further.

@ReyOfLight

*that's actually really comforting*

@ReyOfLight

*thanks :)*

Ben lets out a relieved breath.

@KyloRen

*Yeah, no problem. Now go to sleep.*

@ReyOfLight

*lol k*

@ReyOfLight

*night ben!*

Ben tucks his phone away and finishes his workout. He doesn’t realize that he’s smiling again until Caide and Hux come in.

Caide – who is built like a brick wall, and would give the impression of your typical corn-fed Texan, were it not for the brilliant shock of lime green hair on top of his head – freezes in place, staring at Ben like he’s just seen a ghost. He’s so wide that Hux actually has to lean around him to look at Ben, but when he does, his face adopts an expression of nearly comical disbelief as well.

“What’s wrong with your face?” Caide asks, aghast.

“What?” Ben asks, expression shifting into a frown.

“You were *smiling.*” Hux says in disgust, lips drawn back in a sneer. “Are you sick?”

“Oh *fuck* off,” Ben snarls, stalking out of the gym to go take a shower in the attached bathroom.

Nothing could have prepared Rey for the experience of her first professional eSports match.

Far Galaxy’s Qualifier set up is simple yet brilliant. At the start of the process each team is assigned a designated facility, with gaming rigs provided by the company, where they will go to play all of their Qualifier matches. This allows Far Galaxy to maintain complete control over all variables, level the technological playing field, and prevent cheating.

The Resistance Qualifier facility turns out to be the small ballroom of the Marquis & Marina Marriott hotel that sits right next to the San Diego convention center. Rey is familiar with the area from going
to Comic Con, but it looks completely different without the throngs of cosplayers and media banners draped everywhere.

Their gaming stations are set up in a neat line at the front of the room, with massive projector screens set up behind them so the judges and live audience can see what’s happening in the match.

Stepping into the room for the first time, Rey's heart leaps immediately into her throat. The sudden fear that she has made the biggest mistake of her life steals her breath and makes her head swim.

The room is packed with spectators, which surprises her. She had been expecting only a small handful of truly die-hard StarKiller fans to show up. After all, this is just a Qualifier, not a Championship game. That doesn’t seem to matter to the gathered crowd; they have signs and they’re cheering.

Ben has been silent for the last few days, since he and the First Order had their first Qualifier games. It’s not the first time Rey wishes that she’d maybe asked him more about what to expect from this whole process. She’s also a little confused about why he’s essentially disappeared on her, but she doesn’t have the emotional energy to worry about anything other than the game right now.

Is it too late to back out now, she wonders, as her chest tightens and her palms begin to sweat.

Then she feels Finn’s hand in hers, squeezing tightly. The knot in her stomach eases. She squeezes back, looking over to smile at him.

“We’ve got this,” he says to her, grinning.

She still doesn’t quite trust her voice, but she smiles and nods once.

The team files up to the front of the room as the crowd whoops and cheers for them.

She sits down at the computer with her name on it and slides her headset over her ears. Everything that isn’t StarKiller falls away.

Distantly Rey can hear the sound of the official announcer reading off their names and information, but she’s slipping into the zone. Her fear evaporates in an instant. This is familiar. This she can do.

“A game consists of three matches. In order to win the game, a team must win at least two matches. The four teams with the highest numbers of wins at the end of the Qualifiers will move on to the Championships, which are being held this April at the Cosmopolitan in Las Vegas. Qualifier match one for the San Diego Resistance vs the Long Beach Twin Suns begins now,” the announcer says, and the game screen in front of Rey flashes, bringing up the Hero selection.

“Here we go,” says Poe over the team chat. Rey can hear the grin in his voice and she finds that despite all of her nerves and anxiety, a matching smile is stretching across her own face.

She’s grown very used to playing StarKiller in her apartment with only Finn physically in the room with her. It would stand to reason that trying to play in a high stakes match with everyone in the same place and a live audience for the first time would be a disaster. But that could not have been further from the truth. The experience of playing with the whole team in the same room is electrifying.

The Twin Suns are good.

But the Resistance is so much better.
Rey plays Millenia for the first two maps, but switches it up in the last one and plays Marauder – who is better suited for the Canto Bight casino – on the third. Tosche, the enemy Striker, makes a valiant effort, but he just can’t keep up. Bizarrely, as she runs circles around him, Rey finds herself missing playing against Ben. The challenge of playing against someone who can keep up with her is exciting in a way that this one-sided fight just isn’t. But fun isn’t really part of the equation when it comes to competition, so she forces herself to refocus.

The team plays flawlessly and in all three matches, they completely wipe the floor with their opponents.

As the third and final victory screen pops up, the entire Resistance jumps to their feet, laughing and hugging each other.

The crowd is going nuts too, as the announcer declares victory in favor of the Resistance, but Rey hardly registers it. She’s too busy reveling in the high of the moment.

“That’s what I’m talking about!” Finn crows, pumping his fist in the air.

Poe smiles blindingly at him before leaning over to lay a kiss on his mouth that makes the gathered crowd cheer and wolf-whistle. Camera flashes from the official event photographer pop like static in the background.

“Rey!” Jessika says, throwing her arms around Rey’s shoulders and nearly knocking her over. “You were incredible!”

She flushes and hugs Jess back.

“Forget me! That missile soak you did on the last objective won the game,” Rey enthuses.

Before Jess can respond, the announcer comes over to join them.

“Congratulations,” the man says, reaching out to shake hands with each one of them in turn, “that was very well played and you should all be very proud.”

“Thank you,” Finn says, beaming.

“Your next match isn’t for another hour so I would suggest that you go get something to eat in the green room,” he says, gesturing towards the door that leads off to the small conference room where the team had been instructed to leave their stuff earlier that morning.

They’re relaxing, eating sandwiches from the catering table when Rey’s phone buzzes. A notification on the lock screen proclaims that she has a new message on Discord.

She clicks on the notification to open it and feels a strange jolt of intense relief when she sees that it’s from Ben.

@KyloRen

Congratulations on winning your first Qualifier.

@ReyOfLight

that was fast are u stalking me?

@KyloRen
I follow the StarKiller Twitter. They just announced that your team beat the Twin Suns.

@KyloRen

And sorry for not responding, this has been a busy few days.

@ReyOfLight

whoa whoa whoa was that an apology?? who are u and what have u done with kyloren????

@KyloRen

I take it back.

@ReyOfLight

im just teasing! its okay. uve had 4 matches now right?

@KyloRen

Yeah. How was your first competition as a professional?

@ReyOfLight

scary as shit lmao

@ReyOfLight

but good

@KyloRen

Of course. I knew you’d do well. You can beat me after all, it’s not like anyone else is really a challenge.

Rey grins and snorts a laugh. It’s such an egotistical statement but… it’s also weirdly nice. Ben Solo is a mystery wrapped in an enigma, wrapped in what she’s beginning to suspect are some deeply-ingrained defense mechanisms. Rey, who has always loved a good puzzle, can’t help wanting to peel everything back and see what’s really underneath.

@KyloRen

I almost feel bad for your next opponents. They won’t know what hit them.

There’s a fluttery feeling in her stomach.

“Hey, who are you texting?” asks Rose, as she flops onto the couch next to Rey, startling her so badly that she nearly drops her phone, and has to fumble to keep a hold of it.

“Just a friend from StarKiller!” Rey says in a voice that makes her wince internally; it’s a little too high and loud and Rey knows that she sounds highly suspicious.

Rose raises an eyebrow at her, craning her neck to try to get a look at Rey’s screen.

“You don’t have any friends from StarKiller other than us,” Finn chimes in from over by the catering
Rey leans away from Rose, clutching her phone to her chest, and glares at Finn.

“Quit being nosey!” she says, feeling her heart flip-flop. This definitely isn’t something she really wants to talk about with her team right now of all times.

Rose’s brows raise higher and then her mouth opens into a small ‘o’ of surprise.

“Oh, oh!” she says, in a conspiratorial whisper, “do you have a secret boyfriend?”

Rey’s eyes go wide and she can feel her face going hot.

“No!” She yelps. “Definitely not!”

Rose grins. “Mhm. Whatever you say!”

“I don’t have a boyfriend, secret or otherwise!” Rey insists, “I’m just talking to a friend.”

“Sure you are.” Rose winks at her.

“Hey, how about instead of talking about my non existent love life, we talk strats for the next match,” Rey says.

Rose gives her a look that says ‘I know exactly what you’re doing’, but lets the subject drop.

Their next opponent is an Orange County team called Ascendancy and they are better than the Twin Suns, but the Resistance still pulls out on top, two matches to one.

When they get back to the green room, there’s another message waiting for her.

@KyloRen

See? I knew they didn’t stand a chance against you.

Rey can’t help the giddy little smile that crosses her face.

Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying the fic so far, please consider sharing it with a friend! Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated and fuel my desire to write faster!

As usual, please feel free to come yell at me about this story on Twitter or Tumblr.
February II – March I

Chapter Notes

Writing this story is such a tremendous joy. You are the best readers a girl could ask for! Sorry it took me so long to get back to comments (and asks) this past week! I had a convention this weekend and when I wasn't working, I was making a Kylo Ren costume so I was a liiiiiitle busy.

SO MUCH LOVE TO Adrearner, who made another GORGEOUS MOOD BOARD and Ohtze for recc'ing this story!

As always huge, major, most effusive thanks to the two perfect humans – breadscarps and cyberharpy – who helped me wrangle this monstrosity into something readable.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ben wakes up at exactly 7:00 in the morning after his fifth and six Qualifier games – feeling groggy and poorly-rested – to the sound of his phone ringing.

At some point in the night he’d rolled over and his face is now smashed into one pillow while another has fallen over to cover his head. They do very little to shut out the shrill noise, and even less to prevent the vibration of the infernal device from reverberating through his mattress. Irritated, he does his best to ignore it, but when whoever it is calls for the second time, he gives up. He scrabbles around his bed, shaking out his dark gray sheets and trying to locate his phone.

He picks it up on the fifth ring without checking the caller ID.

“What?” he snaps into the speaker.

“Good morning, Mr. Solo. I’m sorry if I woke you up,” says Adelaide Dormé, not sounding sorry in the slightest. Snoke’s personal assistant is nearly as hard as he is, and only marginally better at disguising it.

“Adelaide,” Ben grumbles, by way of greeting, “do you need something or is this a social call?”

“I’m finalizing your travel arrangements for StarFall today and Mr. Snoke instructed me to call you to discuss your itinerary,” she says breezily.

Ben groans and rolls over onto his back, throwing an arm over his face. Between training for fourteen hours a day, playing matches against the best of the East Coast’s StarKiller teams, and trying to keep from murdering his teammates, he’d actually forgotten that he had agreed to be a guest at the second largest gaming convention in California in two weeks.

“Right. That,” he says, tersely.

“As you know, you’ll be flying from JFK to LAX on Thursday morning,” Adelaide says, “We’ll have someone come pick you up at the airport and take you over to your hotel. You’ll be staying at the JW Marriott right by the convention center – king suite, as usual.”

She pauses for a second and Ben can hear the sound of her manicured nails tapping on her keyboard.
“That night you have a dinner with the reps for NVIDIA, so I’ll be sending you a brief on them. Make sure you actually read it this time because Mr. Snoke does not want a repeat of last year when you called their marketing head Aaron Daniells, ‘Allen Samuels’,” she says in a pointed tone, “are we clear?”

Ben smirks, despite himself. Daniells had spent the whole night fawning over him in the most obsequious and ingenuine manner possible so Ben had made it a game to see exactly how far he could push the other man before he dropped the act.

“Well?” snaps Adelaide.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever. I’ll read it,” Ben mutters, smirk slipping off of his face.

“Good. So on Friday you have a meeting with the MSI reps at nine, interviews with StarKiller Daily and Kotaku at eleven and eleven-thirty respectively. You’ll break for lunch for an hour, and then you have signings at your table from one to five. After that, you have an hour and a half to yourself before we’ll be sending a car to pick you up for the guest dinner with the StarFall executives. Please be showered, changed and ready to go when the car arrives.”

“Are you going to send me a copy of this or am I just supposed to remember it,” Ben grouses, feeling annoyed and overwhelmed already.

“Of course I will be sending you a copy, but we both know that this is the only way to ensure that you actually have no excuse for missing anything,” she tells him bluntly. “Now let’s talk about Saturday.”

Ben groans and lets the phone fall away from his ear. Adelaide’s voice is a distant drone as she continues her spiel.

He wonders idly when it was that conventions stopped being fun. He knows that at one point in his life he actually quite enjoyed going to them. But in the last few years the experience of being shuttled from place to place on a tight schedule, being forced to perform on command, and having to actually talk to legions of people who see him only as a consumable content generator has really begun to wear on him.

Adelaide talks about panels and signings and all Ben hears is ‘work work work’.

Ugh, he thinks, and of course this is taking place in Los Angeles. Ben hates Los Angeles. Unlike New York – with it’s attractive scenery and efficient transportation – LA is ugly and sprawling. It takes five times as long as it should to get anywhere. The traffic is bad, the air is worse, the constant sun gives him a headache, and you can’t get a decent bagel for love or money.

He sighs and brings the phone back to his ear.

“– driver will pick you up at 8 AM, and drive you to LAX where you will fly home. Any questions?” Adelaide says.

“Just send me that itinerary,” Ben says with a heavy sigh, before hanging up.

He wants to go back to sleep, but at this point he’s too annoyed. Normally Ben is not one for sleeping in. He likes the discipline and order of a schedule and his includes an early morning workout or run followed by coffee and catching up on his email and social media notifications.

But yesterday’s second game had been a shitshow – the first Qualifier that they’d lost, actually. He’d been up late into the night replaying every move he’d made, every mistake that might have cost him
his victory. Snoke sending him an email detailing what he thought Ben’s particular failings from the game were certainly had not done much to help him sleep.

*It’s all a bunch of fucking bullshit, really, everyone loses matches sometimes. This shit just happens,* he thinks. But there’s a second voice in his brain, darker and more treacherous, that replies, *but you’re not everyone and it’s not supposed to happen to KyloRen.*

Irritated and badly in need of distraction, he pulls up Twitter to clear out his notifications and see what’s going on in the world today.

The very first tweet is from StarKiller Daily and it makes his eyes go wide.

**StarKiller Daily News @StarKillerDaily**

*EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW with the players of The Resistance: the off-beat team who is taking the West Coast Qualifiers by storm! How they’re shaking up the pro formula, their favorite strats, maps, and heroes, and how they like their chances against the LA Big Three.*

And at the bottom of the tweet is a photo. It shows the team, dressed in their orange and white uniform shirts, standing with arms around each other in front of their computers. The team is beaming while the crowd around them cheers. This was clearly taken after they’d won a match.

Ben clicks on the image, enlarging it so that he can better see the faces of the team. Even without their names written on their shirts, he would have recognized half of them on sight. On the right is Poe Dameron, a longtime opponent and also, improbably, his mother’s former aide. He’s standing next to Jessika Pava and Paige Tico who Ben has also faced in tournaments before. Next to Paige is a girl who can only be her younger sister Rose; they have the same dark hair and identical smiles. Beside Rose stands a dark-skinned man whose shirt says *FN2187*, and, with her arm around his waist is…

**Rey.**

Ben’s eyes go wide and he’s unbelievably grateful that there’s no one around to witness him because he is completely thunderstruck by his first glimpse of the face of the girl he’s now been talking to for over a month.

She’s gorgeous. Not in the calculated way that Eyja is – the carefully made up face and professionally blown-out hair that Ben’s teammate prefers are nowhere to be seen on Rey. She’s beautiful in an easy, effortless way with the sun-bronzed complexion of someone who actually spends time outdoors regularly. Her eyes are a warm, and her smile is so big and brilliant that it makes them crinkle up at the corners. Thick, light brown hair that falls in relaxed waves around her face to her narrow shoulders. She’s lean and fine-boned with a narrow waist and long legs. She has the sort of figure that makes even the shapeless competition uniforms look stylish.

He clicks on the link in the tweet, hoping for a more high-def photo on the blog itself and he’s not disappointed.

He zooms in and drinks in the sight of her face.

She has hazel eyes and *fucking freckles* across her cheeks and nose. His heart skips a beat.

He’d had some idea in his head, before, of what Rey might have looked like, but it doesn’t hold a candle to the real deal. As he stares at her face – her real face – that image evaporates like the early morning mist that hangs on the Central Park ponds in the face of the sun.
There’s no reason that she should be getting to him like this. She’s just like any other player. All the same, she is. He saves the photo to his phone, all the while trying not to think about exactly how creepy that is. As he wanders through the rest of his morning in a daze, he keeps coming back to it.

Not even the arrival of the email from Adelaide with his hellish StarFall schedule manages to bring him down.

And when Rey messages him to say good morning a few hours later, he smiles so widely that his cheeks hurt.

When Poe first suggests the meeting, Rey thinks he’s joking.

“Senator Organa’s brother is offering to manage us?” She asks incredulously through a mouthful of toast, scattering crumbs across the table. She hastily wipes them away, embarrassed.

Poe grins.

“Yup! Leia put us in touch. She’s been following our progress, apparently. Her brother Luke used to play pro rugby – went to the Olympics a couple times and everything – and he managed professional sports teams for years after that,” Poe pauses to take a sip from his coffee mug.

“According to Leia he’s been in retirement for a few years but he’s getting bored with it and starting to annoy her. She’s trying to put us together to see if we might be a good fit.”

“Does he even know what eSports are?” Finn asks, sounding about as skeptical as Rey feels.

Poe laughs and drapes an arm around Finn’s shoulders, easy and casual.

“Yeah, remember how I told you guys that KyloRen’s Leia’s son? Not sure exactly how much Luke knows, but that whole family definitely knows more about our world than your average group of baby boomers,” he says. “Besides, apparently Luke is a total nerd. Leia said he’s always been into strategy games and stuff. And he lives in Oceanside, just up the Five so he’s actually pretty close.”

“I mean,” Finn says slowly, “we have been talking about finding a manager and it can’t hurt to at least meet this guy, right?”

Objectively, Rey agrees with Finn. But she feels strangely hesitant for a reason that goes beyond Luke’s qualifications or dubious familiarity with esports.

She and Ben have been talking. A lot. A fact which she still has not mentioned to her friends. They have no idea and at this point she’s really not sure what to do about that. She should have said something right at the beginning. Maybe there never should have been a beginning to begin with.

Unfortunately it’s too late for that now and she’s got a huge, very troubling secret in the form of her friendship with a guy whose team they will hopefully be facing off against in the Championships, for a prize worth millions of dollars.

She really, really does not like the idea of adding another person to this equation, much less one who actually has his own personal connection to Ben.

“What about KyloRen?” Rey asks suddenly.
“What about him?” Finn asks, frowning.

Rey rolls her eyes at him, setting her half-eaten toast back on her plate.

“If Leia is his mother and Luke is her brother… don’t you think it would be like… a conflict of interest for him to be managing us when we play against his nephew’s team?” she asks.

Poe scoffs and shakes his head.

“Ben Solo isn’t… close to his family,” Poe says, which is something that Rey had already sort of gotten a sense of but can’t say anything about because she has no business knowing that at all. “He cut off contact with all of them after Leia and her husband split and he’s basically been radio silent since then. She told me that they kind of keep track of him through the game news, but they don’t really talk. Honestly I think if Leia is suggesting Luke, it’s a fairly good indicator that there’s not really any sort of emotional baggage there.”

Rey feels a curl of disappointment rise in her chest.

Well there goes my simplest excuse for not wanting him, she thinks, and then abruptly feels very guilty.

In reality, a man who has spent the better part of his life managing professional sports teams is perfect for them. He’d be absolutely qualified to help them navigate the tricky waters ahead. She feels selfish for putting her own secrets ahead of the needs of her team.

This has to stop, she thinks, I’ve either got to handle this like an adult or I just need to stop talking to him. I can’t play both sides of this.

She takes a long drink of her breakfast tea, letting the creamy sweetness and warmth of it settle on her tongue and steel her nerves before she fixes what she hopes is a convincing smile on her face.

“Well, why not?” Rey says.

Poe nods, clapping Finn’s shoulder and shaking him around a little bit while Finn tries not to spill his orange juice.

“Poe! Cut it out,” Finn grouses, shoving his boyfriend’s arm off of his shoulders. Poe just grins at him before turning back to Rey.

“I’ll call Jess and see if she can pick the Ticos up and bring ‘em over. I spoke with Luke earlier and he told me that if we want we can meet up today. He’s going to a reception at a friend’s gallery tonight, but he’ll be free if we want to get lunch,” he says, already pulling his phone out of his pocket.

That afternoon The Resistance piles into Poe’s aging but freshly washed and waxed, white Ford Explorer. Rose and Rey, who are the two smallest members of the team, find themselves sitting in the third row with BB’s head resting on Rey’s lap. They’re sitting behind Jess and Paige, who are talking about the pros and cons of various mics for streaming. Poe drives, one arm resting on the edge of the window, while Finn navigates from the passenger seat.

This is the comfortable, familiar configuration (plus or minus the dog) that they adopt any time a situation arises that requires all of them to be in the same vehicle.

Rey has had her phone in her hands for the last ten minutes as she dithers on whether or not she should message Ben and tell them that they’re going to interview his uncle as a potential manager.
She keeps opening and closing the Discord app while Poe drives along the highway towards the Gaslamp District where they’re meeting Luke.

Eventually she decides to just bite the bullet.

@ReyOfLight

hey, u busy?

@KyloRen

No, you caught me at a good time. We’re taking a break.

@KyloRen

What’s up?

@ReyOfLight

i… need to tell u something

@ReyOfLight

promise u wont freak out or anything ok

@KyloRen

Well this is ominous.

@ReyOfLight

so u know how were looking for a manager

@ReyOfLight

well poe and ur mom are apparently super tight

@ReyOfLight

and she suggested to both ur uncle luke and poe that he should come manage us

@ReyOfLight

so…….. were kinda going to meet him

@ReyOfLight

are u ok with him managing us?

Rey chews her lip as she hits send on the last message. As the minutes crawl by and he doesn’t reply, her brain starts cooking up all sorts of disaster scenarios.

*Ben freaks out and yells at her. Ben never speaks to her ever again. Ben calls her on Discord right now and blows her cover completely. Ben-*

—*responds.*
Well that’s definitely NOT what I thought you were going to say.

My relationship with my family is… complicated, as I’ve mentioned.

yah i know which is why i messaged u

didn’t want u to hear about this 2nd hand

is this ok?

Well I don’t love it.

Luke managed me for a while, in the beginning.

Back when I was playing Knights Republic.

He had a lot of ideas about what my career and life should look like, but none that actually lined up with what I wanted. And he didn’t ever bother to ask.

Things… deteriorated pretty quickly.

We haven’t spoken since.

oh shit im sorry

It’s all in the past, it doesn’t matter.
@KyloRen

If you want him to manage you that’s between you and your team. He certainly has an impressive record of creating champions across disciplines.

@ReyOfLight

ur sure u wont feel like… betrayed or anything tho?

@KyloRen

He means nothing to me now. Hard to feel betrayed by someone you don’t care about.

@ReyOfLight

thats harsh ben :( 

@ReyOfLight

hes ur family  

@KyloRen

Family isn’t everything and my relationship with Luke is what it is. You asked, I answered.

@KyloRen

Do what you want.

@KyloRen Is Offline

Rey frowns down at her phone, feeling like she’s just been kicked in the sternum. She doesn’t have long to brood though, because Poe is pulling the Explorer into a parking space outside of the Horton Grand Hotel.

“Alright, everyone out,” he says, shutting off the engine.

They all clamber out, Rose handing BB to Rey before climbing over the folded down middle seat herself. Rey checks the corgi’s leash before setting him on the ground. He shakes himself and then wanders off to sniff a parking meter.

They enter the lobby as a group and walk towards the hotel restaurant. Rey tries not to gawk too hard at the elegantly-decorated interior. She feels very underdressed in the grey linen shorts, white lace top, and strappy sandals that she had felt reasonably cute in just that morning.

A host with a waxed moustache and a shiny bald head that gleams in the overhead light meets them at the front of the restaurant, called Salt & Whiskey. He speaks softly with Poe before nodding and leading them through the dining room and out to the connected dog-friendly courtyard. It’s a decently-sized space with a number of small tables. In the center is a single long table occupied by an older man with long, silver-gray hair.

Luke Skywalker does not look like a former olympic rugby player. He doesn’t look like a man who has spent his life managing professional sports teams. He especially doesn’t look like the kind of man who wants to manage a group of excited twenty-somethings who are trying to break into the world
He looks like he lives in a hut in Big Sur and enjoys early morning yoga and fishing.

Luke stands up when he sees their group entering the courtyard, greeting them with a smile and a wave.

“You must be Leia’s former protege and friends,” he says, clapping a hand into the one that Poe holds out for him to shake. “You should know she still hasn’t given up hope that you’ll come back to work for her.”

Poe laughs, “Seems like she finally might have if she’s sending you to come manage us.”

“Maybe,” Luke says with a mischievous twinkle in his eye. “Or maybe she’s hoping I’ll just sabotage everything and you’ll come running back.”

There’s a brief moment of awkward silence where Poe seems to be at a loss for words – Rey, Jess, and Finn glance at each other, and the Ticos both shuffle in place – before Luke looks around at all of them and bursts out laughing.

“I’m kidding, I swear! Come sit down and let’s talk,” he says, gesturing to the table.

Luke, as it turns out, is far more knowledgeable about esports than Leia had led on. Rey has a suspicion that a lot of that might have come from his time with Ben. Something, she also notices, he carefully does not mention.

As they sit in the courtyard, listening with rapt attention, Luke tells them about how he’s been following the development of eSports from a fringe concept to a mainstream pastime that is now airing on national TV networks, tracking the ways in which the sport mimics and is different from traditional team athletics.

“I’m actually thinking about writing a book, to be honest,” he says, as the waiter comes around with everyone’s food, “and while I can’t say that I’ve ever managed a StarKiller team, I certainly know a thing or two about working with teams in the heat of competition. If you’d be willing to take a chance on an old man, I’d be interested in seeing where this goes.”

Rey bites into her burger, and wonders what exactly had happened between Ben and Luke. The man in front of her is nothing like what she had been expecting after the conversation in the car.

Luke is humorous and warm, and despite his impressive career, quite humble. The fact that he’s asking them – their ragtag, relatively untested group – if they’ll let him manage them is almost ridiculous.

She chews and swallows, hardly tasting her food.

“We’re actually in a really good place,” Rose says. “We’ve won our first two qualifying games and as far as personal stuff it’s been really smooth sailing. Plus we have Rey, who’s kind of a phenomenon in the StarKiller world these days.”

“Yeah,” Finn agrees, “What we really need right now is someone who understands all the contracts and stuff we’re signing and how to deal with sponsors and how to make sure that everyone is on the same page so we can stop having to have the same team meetings three different times whenever there’s an important decision to make, you know?”

Luke nods, “That’s fine, but if anything changes and you find that you need more guidance or a
more hands on presence, I can do that as well. I might not know StarKiller like rugby, but I know strategy and competition.”

“Obviously we’ll need to talk about this,” Paige says, taking a sip of her Arnold Palmer. “But I for one am very glad you were willing to meet with us.”

She glances around and everyone else nods, except Rey – who is so lost in thought that she misses her cue until Jess clears her throat and she realizes that everyone is looking at her expectantly.

“Oh, yeah. Same,” she says, hoping that she sounds at all convincing.

@ReyOfLight

my team is signing luke as our manager

@ReyOfLight

just thought u should hear it from me first

The messages come in like a one-two punch, making his phone buzz and slide across the black marble of the kitchen island in the First Order training facility. Ben is currently sitting on one of the high stools while he eats lunch with his teammates.

He turns his phone over so he doesn’t have to see the notifications.

Until Rey messaged him the other day, he hadn’t really thought about his time with Luke in a while. It was definitely one of the darker periods in his life.

He’d been 21, freshly graduated from New York University with his engineering degree, a bunch of job offers on the table, and the steadfast knowledge that he absolutely did not want to take any of them.

All he’d wanted to do at the time was pursue his burgeoning career as an online personality in the gaming world. He was just starting to really pick up momentum, and the idea of being able to do that full time had been intoxicating. It was the first thing that he felt like he’d ever really chosen for himself.

Even his degree had been picked out of a handful of “acceptable” choices for the son of a prominent senator. Gaming and streaming, however – that was all him.

And the name KyloRen had been gaining a following that was all his own. It had nothing to do with him being the son of the Great and Powerful Leia Organa or the Dashing Scoundrel Han Solo.

And then his mother had laid down her ultimatum: if he wanted to give up his “nice, normal career to do this gaming thing” he had to let his uncle manage him.

Luke will help you, she’d said, he’s good at this. He knows what he’s doing. We don’t want you to change, and we don’t want to control you. We just want you to be successful and Luke can help with that!
It was all bullshit, of course, because Luke had come in and immediately tried to change everything. Had tried to change him.

And Ben… just couldn’t. It felt like once again his family and all of their bullshit were reaching into his life, inserting themselves into every place they could. They refused to let him have anything that wasn’t about the family and their image. All while the family, in their typical, hypocritical fashion, was in the middle of their own crisis.

His parents finalizing their divorce, all while Luke preached to him about the importance of cleaning up his act and reigning in his temper for the sake of appearances, was the final straw.

Three months later he was picked up by Snoke and the rest was history.

The fucking fact that Luke is even tangentially back in his world…

Ben grips the chopsticks that he’s holding so tightly that they snap, making Caide and Mitaka, who are talking about the latest StarKiller patch notes across the table from him – jump.

“Jesus fuckin’ Christ,” says Caide. “What’s eating you, Solo?”

“Yeah, Ben, you’ve been really weird today,” says Mitaka as Ben motions for Caide to hand him another pair of chopsticks from the takeout bag sitting next to him.

“He’s fuckin’ weird every day,” Caide says, tossing Ben the replacement chopsticks.

Ben catches them, glaring at his teammates.

“It’s nothing, just family bullshit,” Ben mutters, pulling the chopsticks out of their wrapper.

“Your dad get caught with a hooker or something?” Caide asks, around a mouthful of sushi. “That’s what happened to mine last Thanksgiving. Mom threw the turkey through the window and chased him off the ranch with a shotgun. Blew a hole in the back windshield of his favorite pickup.”

“Has anyone ever told you that your family is kind of a Texas stereotype?” Mitaka asks, shaking his head.

Caide laughs.

“All the time. So was it a hooker?”

“No it wasn’t a fucking hooker, Steton,” he says. “My uncle has decided to manage another pro StarKiller team.”

“Wait, is this the one who managed you before you signed with Snoke?” Mitaka asks.

Ben inclines his head.

“One and the same,” he says, popping a sushi roll into his mouth. It’s one of those Americanized rolls that’s so big that it’s actually difficult to eat it in one bite and it takes some serious effort to chew and swallow it.

“Luke Fucking Skywalker,” Ben sneers when his mouth is no longer full.

“Who’s he managing?” Caide asks.

Ben pauses. Obviously he knows exactly who his uncle is managing but he can’t exactly reveal that
information without saying that he has spoken to said uncle or someone on the team in question. Both are bad options. So instead he says, “No idea. My mom just texted me to let me know.”

“You should find out. Maybe we can find a way to use that against them,” Caide says before draining the remainder of the Mountain Dew he’s been working on, standing up to toss the bottle into the garbage. “Otherwise I’d just forget about it. Can’t do shit about it now and it doesn’t matter.”

“Caide’s right,” Mitaka says. “You’re with us and we’re the defending champions of this league two years in a row, thanks to Snoke. Your uncle managing a team doesn’t change that.”

Ben pops another sushi roll into his mouth and chews pensively.

His phone buzzes again and reluctantly, he turns it back over.

    @ReyOfLight

    i hope this doesn't change things with us

Ben swallows then sighs. It’s not Rey’s fault that her team has decided they want Luke to manage them. And it’s not exactly like she can tell them not to because KyloRen doesn’t like it. They are – as far as literally everyone else in the world is concerned – bitter rivals.

    @KyloRen

    Don’t worry, I’m not going to stop talking to you.

    @ReyOfLight

    good id miss u if u did

Ben’s ears suddenly feel hot and he gets a little light headed. This bullshit with his uncle aside, Rey is still Rey and well… against literally all of his better judgement, he likes her. Something in his chest that has been coiled hot and angry since she first mentioned Luke the other day softens.

    @KyloRen

    I’d miss you too.

“Hey, Ben, lunch break’s over,” says Mitaka, “hurry up and finish your sushi before Hux comes in and starts yelling about wasting time again.”

Ben sighs and sets about eating the rest of his lunch.

Snoke drops in that afternoon to watch them play a few matches and then to review footage with them in the conference room.

“You were too hasty to use your Ultras every time you got cornered,” he tells Eyja, whose face remains the perfect mask of serene boredom, save for her eyes which stare dangerously at their manager.

“And Hux, the next time you go chasing the enemy Sniper and leave the objective unguarded in the third phase, I’m docking your pay.”

Hux adopts a pinched, quietly furious expression, and trembles with repressed fury as he says, “But if I don’t chase them down, they will take everyone out from the other side.”
“Well that’s why you have two players on offense whose entire job is to go kill things. Use your grown-up words and call their locations out,” Snoke barks. “Your job is to make the objective room impassable for anyone who might be trying to get in there. Am I making myself clear?”

“Yes,” Hux bites out around clenched teeth.

“And I don’t know why you’re smirking, Solo,” Snoke says, rounding on Ben. “You might have held the objective last time but that Quasar nearly eliminated you. You lack focus.”

Snoke crosses his arms, expensive black business suit pulling tight across his shoulders. He surveys the assembled groups with a disdainful glare.

“You are not even half-way through the Qualifiers and you’ve already lost a match. I sincerely hope that this week’s performance is better. I don’t pay you all to be sloppy. Shape up or find another team.”

Everyone is mutinously silent, none of them wanting to give Snoke a reason to lecture them any longer. When Snoke seems satisfied that they are all sufficiently cowed, he nods once and says, “Get back to work. You’re playing Rogue One and Deathwatch tomorrow and I expect victories.”

Then he stalks out of the room.

The team plays with ferocious efficiency for the rest of the day, barely speaking save to call out moves and enemy positions. By the time Ben finally leaves the building at a quarter past ten at night, he’s wound tight as a spring.

Instead of turning left to begin his usual walk to the subway, he turns right, heading up towards Bryant Park. The early March air is bitterly cold and his breath puffs out in white clouds that hang in the street lights. The sidewalks glisten faintly with melted snow. Steam billows out from grates in the sidewalk and people stream around him in a nameless, faceless blur.

He pulls his phone out as he walks.

@KyloRen

Hey. Can I call?

He keeps Discord open and his eyes flicker back and forth between the screen and the sidewalk in front of him.

@ReyOfLight

gimme 15

Ben tucks his phone back into his pocket and continues his slow walk towards the park.

True to her word, 15 minutes later, he feels his phone vibrate against his hip and he pulls it back out again.

@ReyOfLight

dog leashed shoes on lets do this

He hits the Start Voice Call button beneath her name and waits for her to answer.

“Hi Ben,” she says brightly, and some of the stress of his day just vanishes.
“Hello Rey,” he replies, then, “I don’t want to talk about Luke.”

She lets out a sound that might be displeasure or a laugh or just a noise of surprise; it’s a bit difficult to parse without the ability to actually see her face.

“Alright,” she says, “Then what do you want to talk about?”

Ben pauses at the crosswalk across from the park, waiting for the light to change.

“Literally anything other than StarKiller or my uncle,” he says, bluntly.

Rey laughs and the warmth of it sends tingles dancing across his entire body. In the background of the call he can hear the sound of kids playing and birds chirping.

“Where are you now?” He asks.

“Balboa Park,” she tells him, “I’m in the desert garden, about to head over to the rose garden and then maybe the fountain. It’s my favorite place to take BB for walks.”

“I’m in a park too,” he tells her, “but yours sounds a little more traditional than mine.”

“Are you in… Central Park?” She asks, hesitantly, “If you’re not then I’m all out of guesses. That’s the only New York park I know. And I only know that one from movies.”

Ben chuckles as he walks through the small forest of kiosks that are still lit up and peddling their kitsch to unsuspecting tourists. It’s dark here but Ben can picture Rey, walking through the evening sunlight on the other coast.

“No, I’m in Bryant Park right now. It’s where the main branch of the Library is. There’s also an ice skating rink here,” he tells her.

“Ohh,” she breathes, “I’ve never been ice skating before. Is it fun?”

Ben thinks about being dragged onto the ice rink by his parents when he was about seven and wobbling around, too terrified to let go of the railing for half an hour until they let him go sit on the sidelines while they chased each other back and forth across the slick white surface. He’d vastly preferred watching them skate to actually doing it himself. He wonders if he’d enjoy it more now, but the idea of doing anything that put his hands and wrists in danger is out of the question.

“I’m not the best person to ask, I’ve only been once,” he says. “What’s a desert garden?”

“It’s basically what it says on the tin; it’s a garden full of cacti and desert plants. I have to keep a close watch on BB here because he’ll try to sniff them sometimes and stick himself. But this part of the park has the best views and the fewest people,” she says.

Ben sidesteps a woman trying to wrangle two yelling children who are pulling her in separate directions and thinks that a place with less people actually does sound quite nice.

“Is BB your dog?” He asks, as he turns right and heads up the northern edge of the park. “I see you posting about him all the time on Instagram.”

“No, he belongs to Poe. But he’s very fat and Poe doesn’t walk him enough to counteract all the treats everyone gives him so I usually take him for a run in the evenings.”

“Huh,” Ben says. “You run too? I usually do a few miles every morning.”
“Yep! When I don’t have BB with me I’ll usually do a nice long run but he’s just a corgi so I have to go a bit slower when I have him. Short legs you know?”

Ben chuckles, “I grew up with a French Bulldog. I know what you mean.”

“Hey,” says Rey, changing the subject, “I just remembered that you’re wandering around in the middle of winter at night in New York. Aren’t you freezing?”

“Aren’t you from London? I thought all you Brits liked the cold,” he replies.

“Just because you’re used to something doesn’t mean you have to like it. I’ve been in SoCal for three years now, and the weather is much better here;” she says, firmly.

He smiles.

“Fair. And to answer your question, yes. It’s freezing. I just…” he chews his lip for a second before he lets out a sigh and continues, “I had a long day. I wanted to be outside for a while.”

Rey makes a ‘hmm’ noise of agreement.

“Has it helped at all?”

“Some. The conversation has helped more,” he says, words slipping out before he can stop them and he feels his entire, frozen face blushing bright red.

She laughs, bright and pleased. “Glad to be of assistance!”

They stay on the phone for another ten minutes until Ben finally gets to Grand Central station and he has to hang up so he can get on the train.

The glow in his chest keeps him warm the whole way home.

The thing is, Rey really should have seen this coming.

It’s just that her time with The Resistance had been going so well that she had almost managed to convince herself that it was going to last. That they were just going to breeze straight on through the Qualifiers to the Championships.

But of course, that is a fantasy. And reality is something else entirely.

In reality, nothing is ever that easy.

Their third Qualifier had gone well; the enemy team had struggled to recover from the early death of their support in the first match and then from the loss of the first match for the rest of the game.

Sitting in the green room afterwards, laughing and taking dumb selfies with her friends, Rey never suspected the turn their luck was about to take. There were some nerves, of course. The next team that they were slated to face was hugely successful both in and out of StarKiller.

The Los Angeles Nightsisters are an all female team who had risen to fame by entering and dominating a tournament that had legitimately advertised itself with the slogan “the truest test of your
All six players were independently ranked in the highest echelons of StarKiller’s leaderboards before coming together. Since teaming up, the group had become a force to be reckoned with. Despite, or perhaps because of, their explosive success, the Nightsisters had received a fair amount of pushback in their early days. The drama that surrounded their entry into the professional esports world had been so intense that even Rey, who hadn’t been interested in StarKiller at the time, had heard about it.

But instead of driving the Nightsisters out of the game, the pushback against them had made Far Galaxy sit up and take notice. Amilyn Holdo, the head of the company’s support team, had actually championed the Nightsisters to the point that they had become the faces for a new advertising campaign last fall. Incidentally it had been that campaign that had finally convinced Rey to give StarKiller a shot.

Backstage before their game against the Nightsisters, Rey is much more worried about looking bad in front of a team that she admires, than the real possibility that the Resistance might lose.

But they do. Spectacularly.

The game is a disaster from the very beginning, when Rose misses her timing on her buffs and the whole team is forced to head out with half the shields they should have. Rey is taken out before she even gets a single foothold established and after racing back from the respawn, she spends the rest of the match playing catch up.

The Nightsisters are a ruthlessly efficient unit. They herd the Resistance around the map, preying on their weaknesses and splitting up the group with AoE attacks. By the time the third and final defeat screen flashes on their monitors, everyone on the Resistance is feeling thoroughly demoralized.

Luke meets them in the green room, saying something supportive and probably helpful, but Rey isn’t hearing it. Her blood is rushing in her ears and her heart is in her throat.

She’s thinking about her team and how they’ve done nothing but tell her how good she is and how important to them… and how she’s paid that back by letting them down completely.

Rose is distraught too, sitting with her head bowed low while her sister and Finn sit on either side of her, holding her hands and speaking softly.

The car ride home that night is awful and silent. Rey leans her head against the cool window, watching the streetlights fly by as her breath fogs against the glass.

They play another two games that week. Another loss, this one against the Seattle Assassins and a skin-of-their-teeth victory against the San Francisco Bowcasters, thanks to a well-timed headshot by Finn that takes out the enemy Striker before he can keep Rey from finishing her work on the objective. They celebrate the victory, but it is not with the same fervor with which they celebrated their first two wins.

A shadow has fallen over the mood of the team and they can’t seem to shake it.

Practice is a tense affair as tempers get stretched closer to breaking than they have ever come before.

Luke instructs the Team to spend more time together not gaming but instead talking strategy and team dynamics. He encourages them to talk about their feelings and concerns with each other. But Rey is not built for sharing her burdens at the best of times, and the harder he pushes her to open up to the group, the harder she pulls back.
She knows that as both the least experienced member of the team and the lynchpin upon which their entire strategy rests, the real problem is not something that can be fixed by talking and sharing. It can only be fixed by her playing better. Being faster.

In her heart of hearts, Rey knows that the whole team must be thinking that they have made a mistake with picking her. The only reason that they have not said so is that they are all too nice to be that cruel.

But every time she misses a callout, or fails to get the objective set up in time, the thought plays over and over in her mind: they would be better off without you.

Things only get worse from there.

As they head into their third week of Qualifiers, Rey notices that a team called the Sith Lords has begun a dedicated campaign of harassment against them on social media.

_DarthPlagueis #SithLords @DarthPlagueis69_

_The Resistance is proof of the fact that pro gaming is just better when it's left in the hands of REAL MEN #BringBackGamerGate #StarKillerQuals_

_DarthMaul #SithLords @Darth_Maul_

_Replying to @DarthPlagueis69_

_Can’t believe a bitch like @ReyOfLight actually beat KyloRen. Guess they’ll let anyone claim to be the best striker in the world these days…_

_DarthMaul #SithLords @Darth_Maul_

_Replying to @Darth_Maul @DarthPlagueis69 @ReyOfLight_

_Wait till you fight a REAL striker… you fuckers won’t know what hit you_

The tweets only get nastier, with more and more people piling on to agree, and Rey closes out of Twitter in disgust after a few minutes.

The Sith Lords seem to object to everything from the number of women on their team, to the fact that Finn and Poe are gay, and that – aside from Rey (who doesn't count because she is a woman and they hate her) – none of them are white. She reports them, but Twitter does nothing.

It’s a disgusting barrage of harassment that only grows more vicious as their next two games, against the Seattle Havoc and the second of LA’s big teams, Kessel Run, both end in defeat. The fact that they manage to win a match in each game, preventing the other teams from gaining the coveted 3 to 0 victory, is hardly enough to raise their spirits.

That night she’s laying in bed, staring at the dark ceiling above her and desperately trying to sleep, when she feels her phone buzz against her hip.

For a moment she considers just picking the phone up and throwing it across the room without reading whatever message or tweet or Instagram DM or whatever is there, but it buzzes again, twice more, and in the end she sighs and picks it up.

_@KyloRen_
How are you holding up?

@KyloRen

I know things didn’t go well with Kessel Run and Havoc.

@KyloRen

And you’ve been quiet. Are you okay?

She stares at the messages for a long while before bursting into tears.

@ReyOfLight

can i call?

@ReyOfLight

i know it’s late but

@KyloRen Is Calling

[Accept] [Decline]

“Rey?” His voice – worried, and rough like he’s very tired – fills her ear.

“Hey,” she hiccups through tears.

“Are you… are you crying?” Ben asks, sounding immediately more awake and truly alarmed.

“No?” She lies, as another sob escapes her lips.

“Please don’t cry,” he says, “Tell me what’s wrong.”

Rey rolls onto her side, phone cradled against her ear. “This is stupid. I shouldn’t be this upset. It’s just two bad games and some nasty tweets.”

“Is this about the Sith Lords? They’re all little basement-dwelling assholes, Rey. They’re not worth this,” Ben says.

“But people agree with them. A lot of people, Ben,” she says as a tear runs across the bridge of her nose and drips onto her sheets.

“They’re all fucking trash. None of them are even worth a second of your time. You’re the best Striker I’ve ever played against and your team is admittedly impressive. You know, for a group of upstarts,” he says, with none of the venom that the epithet had held the first time he had described her teammates as such.

She lets out a watery chuckle, before dissolving back into full blown hysterics.

“You keep saying I’m a good Striker – everyone keeps saying I am, actually – but if I’m so good, why are we losing?” She asks between sobs.

“Because it’s a game of chance and skill with a billion moving variables and you won’t always win,” he tells her with a great deal more patience than a man with his reputation has any right too.
The tears keep coming and she wipes furiously at her eyes.

“Rey. I don’t know how to fix this,” Ben says, sounding urgent. “Tell me how to fix this.”

“I don’t think you can, not from New York,” she says miserably, “I wish you were here.”

“I wish I was too but…” he breaks off and pauses, and there’s a bunch of tapping in her ear for a second before he says, “it’s not San Diego, but… I will be in LA for StarFall this weekend.”

The sob that was working its way out catches in Rey’s lungs. “You– you’re not joking?”

“No. I’ll be in LA for three days. If you want to… I mean. If it wouldn’t just be too weird you could… come up?” Ben actually sounds so nervous and hesitant that it causes Rey to let out another watery chuckle in response.

“God I want to. But I don’t know… wouldn’t it be really bad for us to be seen hanging out at a con?” She asks, “Like way worse than us gaming together?”

Ben lets out a deep sigh. “Ah, Fuck. Of course, you’re right.”

She feels the corner of her mouth tick up, in an ironic smile.

“I appreciate the offer and that you’re trying to make me feel better but I think I’m going to have to just take solace in the fact that if I call you to cry while you’re here, at least it won’t be three in the morning for you,” she says, trying not to let the disappointment that he’ll be so close and she still won’t be able to see him join the hundred other sorrows currently swirling in her chest.

“I don’t mind,” Ben murmurs, “you can call me anytime you want.”

She falls asleep with the phone cradled to her chest.

The next day is filled with more tense, downtrodden practice and the day after that dawns so ominously that Rey can’t even force down plain toast for breakfast. Her stomach churns like an uneasy ocean and she feels almost feverish.

They have two games on their schedule: the third big Los Angeles team, the LA Legion, and finally the Sith Lords themselves.

It’s with great trepidation and minimal conversation that they all pile into the Explorer and drive downtown.

Luke meets them in the green room, trying his best to not look as worried and somber as they all feel.

“I know this has been a really rough patch,” he says, “but you are better than your worst moments and when you communicate effectively, you are unstoppable. No matter what happens out there today, I am proud of you.”

“Are you sure you were kidding about Leia sending you to sabotage us?” Poe asks, and Luke looks so legitimately confused for a few minutes before remembering his joke from their first meeting that it actually does surprise the team into laughter.

Some of the ice in the room melts and by the time they are ready to face the Legion, they’re feeling better than they have in a while.

The game with the Legion is very close. In the last second, an enemy offense player manages to capture their objective, securing the third match seconds before the Resistance could secure their
And it’s depressing, but the way they had played felt so much better – so much more like their old team dynamic – that Rey actually feels hopeful about their upcoming match against the Sith Lords.

Which is perhaps what makes it so incredibly bitter when in yet another last second, last match fight, the Sith Lords snatch victory out of the hands of the Resistance.

Because Rey was too slow on the objective.

The Defeat screen feels like it’s searing itself into her eyes, turning everything red and hot, and her chest is too tight and she’s…

… got to hold it together. She will not give these horrible people the satisfaction of seeing her cry over losing to them.

But the sensation that she is drowning just presses in on her and her teammates’ comforting hugs do nothing to chase it away.

“You can’t take this so personally, Rey. You played well and that’s what matters here,” Luke says, coming over to clap his hand on her shoulder in a warm, fatherly manner that should have melted her heart but instead just sets her teeth on edge.

On the drive home she is still wrapped in a whirlwind of emotion so intense that it threatens to choke her and she just can’t anymore.

She can’t do this. She’s letting everyone down again and again and there is no one she can talk to about it… except… Ben. Who is only two hours north of her right now.

It’s a split second decision. It might be a mistake but she doesn’t care. It might be complicated and stupid but she’ll figure something out. The only thing that Rey knows for sure is that she needs to see him.

She pulls her phone out.

@ReyOfLight

im coming to see u

Chapter End Notes

If you’re enjoying the fic so far, please consider sharing it with a friend! Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated and fuel my desire to write faster!

As usual, please feel free to come yell at me about this story on Twitter or Tumblr.
March II

Chapter Notes

I feel like I just keep saying “I can’t believe the response to this fic” and crying in capslock at you guys but REALLY! I CAN’T! This has been the most rewarding storytelling experience of my life and I’m so excited that you guys are excited. This is actually a very difficult time for me personally and your support has meant the world.

Notes!
1. Chapter count has gone up again! I’ve set it at 12. That being said, I have 10 chapters currently written, and my best guess is that we’ll probably land somewhere around 13-14. I’ve just decided that I’m not rushing this story and since I already have everything plotted out, I’m not too worried about how long it takes to get there.
2. Have you ever thought to yourself: this fic is okay but it would be better with a soundtrack? Well, GUESS WHAT. You’re in luck! I’ve very carefully curated a Spotify playlist for this fic and you can listen to it here.
3. Eyja’s name has generated a couple of questions so here’s a pronunciation guide! The “Ey” sounds like the “ey” in “hey” and the “ja” is pronounced “uh”. So Ey-uh. Fjord is pronounced like Fee-yord.

Adrearner, the edit queen of my heart, has done it again with this AMAZING mood board for the Resistance!

As always, this story would not be what it is without the help of my incredible betas. Cyborgharp and Breadscreap are just beyond compare. I owe them countless thanks for helping me turn my rough story into something that is suitable for human consumption.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The last two days have been an un-ending nightmare. Between the cross country flight, the mandatory sponsor schmoozing, and the forced socialization with fans, industry professionals, and journalists alike, Ben's desire to ever even speak to another human being has dropped to absolute zero. With, that is, one very notable exception, who is on her way to him at that very second.

It's just after 8:30 in the morning, still too early for most of the con-goers to be up and about on a Saturday. StarFall might be advertised as the largest gaming convention in the US but in reality it is probably also the largest party con as well. People come here to game hard and drink harder.

This leaves a great majority of the more than eighty thousand attendees either still in their beds or wandering around in a hungover stupor early on Saturday morning. It’s therefore an ideal time for one of the gaming world’s most recognizable figures to slip out of his hotel room, ride the elevator down 20 floors to the lobby, and walk right out the front door without anyone stopping him to ask for a photo. (Or alternatively, just taking one without asking – which might be worse.)

Ben walks a few blocks from the hotel to an outdoor shopping center. It’s far enough away from the convention that his chances of being recognized drop down to a more acceptable level. Satisfied that he has once more returned to the land of relative anonymity, he parks himself on a bench and calls an Uber.
While he waits, he has his first opportunity to really consider exactly what it is that he’s about to do.

When Rey messaged him the night before he’d been at a formal cocktail party with the StarFall administrative board and all of the other convention guests. He was four whiskies deep thanks to the open bar, and the idea of anything that could save him from another day like the one he’d just been through would have been enough to tempt him into rash action.

The fact that it was Rey who was offering to save him… Well, he’d been helpless to say no.

It didn’t help that his drunk brain had insisted that ‘she’s the reasonable one here so if she thinks it’s a good idea, who am I to disagree?’

They’d texted furiously back and forth, while Ben tried desperately to shake off the people who kept coming over to talk to him. Some were other StarKiller players that he kind of knew from running into them at other conventions or on the competition circuit.

Amongst the crowd was Karis Goldblum – Tank for the Nightsisters – who he’d done a panel with about sponsorships at TwitchCon last year. He’d also spied Gial Ackbar, who he will never forget because the guy drinks like a fish and had done three different keg stands at the 2016 E3 Xbox afterparty. There were a handful of other players around but most of them kept their distance, glaring balefully at Ben from across the room. Everyone who wasn’t attempting to murder him with their eyeballs though, had spent the whole night trying to get on Ben’s good side, which had made coordinating things with Rey unnecessarily difficult.

Over the course of the party, they’d made a tenuous plan. She’d catch the Amtrak commuter train leaving San Diego at 5:55 AM. He’d meet her at Union Station. They’d have a day together before she headed home. No one would be any the wiser. Everything else was just details that could be filled in later.

He’d been too intoxicated and exhausted to really and truly understand the implications of any of this until he’d woken up the next morning.

Rey is coming to meet him. In person. And he’s ditching the con and his carefully orchestrated schedule of duties to see her, without a second thought.

His Saturday schedule is thankfully lighter than Friday, but he is still expected to sit on three panels over the course of the day and wait at his table for his fans to come and gawk whenever he isn’t doing that.

Ditching the con is exactly the sort of thing that will send Snoke through the roof. He’s going to be in a world of trouble when all is said and done.

Ben finds that he just doesn’t care.

His Uber picks him up shortly thereafter. It’s a black Lincoln Town Car, driven by a man who stays blissfully silent during the ride. Ben finds himself compulsively checking the Discord app to see if he has any new messages from Rey. As they draw closer to Union Station he is suddenly gripped by a combination of giddy excitement and overwhelming terror.

What if she doesn’t show? What if she does, but this goes badly? Which would be worse? He thinks.

Before he can reach a conclusion, the Town Car is pulling up at his destination.

Union Station is a white stucco building, built in the Spanish Mission style that is common in the older parts of LA. A stout clock tower stands next to the tall, arched entry to the station and the time
reads 8:50. Rey’s train is due at any second.

Steeling his nerves, Ben climbs out of the Uber and walks into the station.

Inside, the Spanish styling continues with a brightly tiled floor and a high ceiling covered with intricately painted wood beams. Ahead of him lays the main terminal, full of small news shops and restaurants, and the staircases that lead to the LA metro platforms. To his left is the Amtrak terminal, where Rey’s train will be stopping.

Round, stained-glass chandeliers hang from the ceiling at regular intervals, illuminating neat rows of old fashioned benches and the antique brick of the walls. A squat, wooden information desk sits in the center of the action and Ben walks towards it, looking for a marquis with information about arrivals and departures.

He never makes it.

A sudden influx of people entering the station through the door on the opposite end of the room catches his eye and he turns just in time to see her.

Rey steps into the station and his fucking heart actually skips a beat. He forgets how to breathe. His face goes red – all of it. Every stupid romcom bullshit trope happens to him at once.

Vaguely, in the part of his brain that is still working, Ben wonders if he’s just going to drop dead on the spot.

It would certainly solve most of my problems, he thinks.

She’s wearing a flowy, sleeveless knit dress in a pale cream color. The hem is asymmetrical and it flutters around her knees as she walks. A pair of well-worn, brown ankle boots adorn her feet. Her wavy hair is pulled back, with a small half-ponytail at the back of her head to keep it out of her face. A pair of oversized sunglasses with brown rims are perched on her head.

She’s looking down, trying to stuff a pair of white earbuds into the brown leather purse that she has slung over one shoulder and Ben is so relieved that he has a fucking second to get himself together before he actually has to talk to her. Even that doesn’t really do much, because as soon as the cord is tucked safely away, she looks up and straight into his eyes.

Rey beams at him.

“Ben?” She calls out, loud enough to carry across the echoing room. He finds that his voice has abandoned him so he just nods.

Her smile grows impossibly wider as she picks up her pace, striding towards him. And then she’s throwing her arms around his waist.

Ben can’t actually remember the last time that anyone has hugged him.

Really hugged him, that is. He occasionally has fans do the awkward one-armed side-hug thing for photos, but he’s fairly touch averse to begin with and his reputation tends to keep most really touchy-feely people away.

Standing there with the warmth of Rey’s slender frame pressed into his hips and chest, her dainty arms snaking around his back, he has a hard time remembering why he doesn’t ever do this. Carefully, half-terrified that he’s going to do something wrong and break her (because fuck she’s tiny) he wraps his arms around her, pulling her in and allowing the iron in his spine to unbend
slightly. He knows this has to be the most awkward hug in the world, but Rey doesn’t seem to care.

People walk by, not paying them any mind. For a few seconds they stand there, locked together, before a train whistle blows and they both start, as if remembering that the outside world exists.

Rey practically leaps backwards, disentangling herself from his arms. Ben misses her warmth immediately. Her eyes dart all around the room, suddenly unable to meet his. There’s a charming pink flush across her cheeks that makes her freckles stand out even more fiercely.

“I… uh… sorry. I should have… warned you that I’m kind of a hugger,” she stammers.

That surprises a laugh out of him.

“I couldn’t tell,” he teases dryly, and she finally meets his gaze again just so she can make a face at him.

“Hello, by the way,” Ben says.

She grins up at him.

“Nice to finally meet you,” She replies and then she fucking sticks her hand out for him to shake, like this is some sort of business meeting.

He rolls his eyes at her and takes her hand, but not to shake it. Instead he wraps his fingers around hers and begins pulling her out of the middle of the walkway, back towards the main part of the station. Rey blinks at him but offers no resistance, and follows him easily.

“I don’t actually know if you had anything planned for today,” she says, following after him, “but I have a few ideas. I had a lot of time to research on the train.”

Ben feels his mouth quirk up into a lopsided grin.

“Good, because I hadn’t really gotten past this part in the planning. I was supposed to be at a con today, after all,” he says, glancing down at Rey.

Her face grows serious and she frowns at him.

“You’re not going to like... get in trouble for this, are you?” she asks.

Ben is definitely going to get in trouble for this. But he doesn’t want to worry Rey, so he just shrugs one shoulder.

“I’m KyloRen, remember? I’ll be fine,” he says, before guiding her over to look at the map of the LA Metro system.

“So what were these ideas of yours?” Ben asks. Her hand is tiny and warm in his and she still hasn’t pulled away. They’re standing shoulder to shoulder and the whole thing feels comfortable in a way that Ben – touch-phobic, socially awkward, physically awkward Ben – cannot explain.

“Have you ever been to LA before?” Rey asks.

He sighs. “I come here a lot, unfortunately. Gaming industry can’t stop putting on events in this city, as I’m sure you’re well aware.”

Rey grins, “Not a fan, I take it?”
“You could say that,” he says, looking back down at her, “but to be honest I don’t really care what we do, as long as we’re far away from StarFall.”

She laughs, warm and bright. “Got it. Well, in that case, why don’t we get as far from Downtown as possible? They just built a new line that runs all the way out to the Westside and Santa Monica.”

Rey traces the bright blue route on the map, labeled “Expo Line”, that heads south and then west from Union Station.

“It’s a bit of a ride, but there’s fun stuff out there,” she tells him. “Does that work?”

“If that’s what you want,” he replies with a small inclination of his head.

Rey nods decisively.

“Then Santa Monica it is!” She says, then leads him away from the map and over to the ticket machines.

She lets go of his hand in order to fish her wallet out of her bag. Ben finds that he misses the touch instantly.

It takes some effort to navigate the ticket machine – they are not intuitive and neither one of them is familiar with the LA Metro. But eventually they end up with two plastic cards that have a full day’s pass loaded onto them and they make their way through the station and down to the platform for the Expo Line.

They don’t have to wait long; a train pulls into the station a moment later and they board, making a beeline for a pair of available seats.

Rey offers him the window but he shakes his head and gestures for her to slide in first. She does so, grinning and peering out the window and he sits down next to her. A pre-recorded message plays, advising passengers to hold on. Then the doors of the train car slide shut with a pneumatic hiss and they’re off.

Rey had gotten some sense that Ben was tall from the photos that she’d seen of him. But knowing that someone is tall and actually experiencing it are two completely different things.

He doesn’t so much stand as he looms. He’s so large that it would be difficult for him to do anything but. She could also tell from photos that he was fit but in person he’s so solid that it’s a little mind boggling. When he’d hugged her in the station she’d felt as though she was being enveloped by him. It’d made her brain go kind of fuzzy and her heart speed up. Despite the time that has passed since she pulled away, her pulse has not gotten any slower.

Which might have something to do with the fact that Ben keeps touching her.

To be honest, she’s not entirely certain that he’s doing it on purpose.

It’s little, casual things. His thigh pressing against hers as they sit side-by-side on the plastic seats. A large, warm hand against the small of her back as he guides her out of the train doors.

Rey, who has always been very physically affectionate with her friends, would not have thought
much about touches like this under normal circumstances. But based on the way Ben keeps glancing down at whatever part of him happens to be touching her at the time with a look of slightly incredulous wonder, Rey gets the feeling that touch is not such a common feature in his life.

She’s deeply grateful that he has not brought up her breakdown from the other night, nor has he addressed the fact that clearly something had caused her abrupt decision to throw caution to the wind and come up to meet him. Rey isn’t foolish enough to think that she’ll get away without talking about it for the whole day. For now she’s just happy to bask in the fact that Ben is here with her. She can just pretend that they’re like any other two people out exploring the city together.

They walk down the stairs of the Downtown Santa Monica station, and head west along Colorado Avenue. He crowds in close to her – not in an oppressive fashion, but as though he’s afraid to lose her in the sea of people and wind up alone in this strange place.

Rey takes pity on him and reaches out to take hold of his hand again. She laces their fingers together and he relaxes instantly.

Amongst the palm trees and brightly colored buildings, bathed in the warmth of the Southern California sunlight, Ben looks less like a goth vampire than he does on his streams. He’s wearing a sleek black leather jacket over a black v-neck shirt. His long legs are covered in a pair of slim-cut, dark jeans that are shoved into a pair of heavy soled black boots.

All of his clothing is tailored perfectly and even Rey – who’s about as far from a snob as it’s possible to get – can tell that it’s all well made and expensive. His jacket feels buttery soft whenever it brushes against her. It’s not for the first time that she thinks that if it weren’t for StarKiller, there’d be no reason in the world the two of them would have known each other. They could not be more different had they been born on separate planets.

Ben squints up at the sun in displeasure and reaches into his pocket to fish a pair of aviators out. Settling them on his nose, he runs a hand through his hair to push it out of his face and looks down at her.

“Where to?” He asks.

“We-e-ell,” she says, stretching the word out, “we have a few options! There’s the beach, of course, the 3rd Street Promenade which is like… outdoor shopping and restaurants and stuff. We could catch an Uber to Venice Beach and go to the boardwalk, or we could just go to the pier.”

She points down the street to where the ocean glitters, and a massive wooden pier stretches out into the water. A small carnival is perched at the end, crowned by a ferris wheel that spins slowly, its colorful gondolas dangling gently high above the action.

He raises an eyebrow.

She grins mischievously. “Trust me. It might look like a tourist trap – and it totally is – but we are tourists and they have an arcade!”

He gives her another one of his crooked half-smiles, the kind she’s growing ridiculously fond of at an alarming rate.

“I see. You brought me out here to continue our competition,” he says, smirking.

“Whoever wins the fewest tickets buys lunch?” She suggests brightly.

Ben’s half-smile turns into a real smile and she catches a brief flash of white teeth before he turns
back towards the pier and tugs her along.

“You're on,” he says.

“I hope you’ve been saving up – I think I’m going to work up quite an appetite, beating you at skeeball,” she tells him cheerfully.

It’s a lovely day in Santa Monica, in the way that late winter days in Southern California so often are. The sun is warm, but it’s tempered by the cool breeze rolling off the ocean. Seagulls wheel overhead, crying out as they search for their next meal. Throngs of people, all caught up in their own conversations, pass around Rey and Ben in either direction. The sounds of street performers drift by on the breeze as they cross Ocean Avenue and head down onto the pier itself. They pass under the metal arch and the concrete sidewalk is replaced by worn wooden planks.

Once the car driving onto the Pier parking lot passes they dash across to the other side of the boardwalk towards the arcade. A multitude of songs and bells and buzzers announce its presence. The white wooden structure is jam-packed with games and machines from all across the ages. A Street Fighter console sits next to an ageing Zoltan cupboard, right next to a series of miniature basketball games.

“Ta-da!” Rey says, spreading her arms wide.

Ben looks around, curiously, before bending down to peer into the glass case of a claw machine.

“I haven’t been to an arcade since I was in college,” he says, straightening once more.

Rey rolls her eyes and sort of half shoves, half steers him towards the machine where they can trade cash for tokens.

“Oh, grandad,” she says. “You’re what, 30 tops? I’m sure it’s just been ages and ages.”

He smirks at her. “I’ll be 31 this year. Didn’t anyone ever teach you to respect your elders?”

“Nope,” she says cheerfully as they reach the machine.

Rey opens her purse to retrieve her wallet once more, but Ben puts his hand over hers to stop her.

“Let me,” he says, pulling a slim black wallet out of his back pocket.

Rey opens her mouth to protest, feeling acutely uncomfortable with the idea of taking a handout from him. Ben cuts her off.

“You already made the trip up here. If I thought for half a second you’d let me pay for your train tickets I’d do that too but…” he trails off giving her a pointed look.

He’d offered to send her money the night before and she’d shut that down instantly. While she might not have his kind of high-end-endorsement-deal cash, she certainly has enough to take a day trip to LA without it being too much of a strain.

She huffs and crosses her arms, pretending not to watch as he feeds $40 into the token machine. Tokens pour out in a jangling waterfall, nearly overflowing the collection basket.

“That’s… a lot more than I expected,” Ben says nonplussed, making Rey chuckle.

He puts a bunch into his pockets, but there are way too many to fit. Rey opens her purse and they pour the remainder in.
Tokens acquired, they turn back to face the colorful chaos of the arcade.

“You talked a big game about beating me at skeeball,” Ben says, “so why don’t we find out whether or not that was all talk?”

Rey, as it happens, is excellent at skeeball. She and Finn used to play all the time at the grungy little arcade in the neighborhood they’d lived in when Rey first moved to San Diego. All that practice has paid off. She beats Ben soundly and laughs until her sides hurt as he gets increasingly frustrated with his inability to toss the ball correctly so that it ends up in the tiny holes above the slanted wooden board.

“You’re using too much force! Relax and be gentle about it. Like this,” Rey says, hefting a ball before taking aim and tossing it with pin-point accuracy so that it rolls up the ramp and hops into the highest scoring hole.

Ben crosses his arms over his chest, frowning.

“It’s rigged against tall people,” he mutters petulantly. “If I was short like you this would be easier.”

“Who are you calling short?” she grouses, turning to face him, “I’m quite tall for a woman, you know.”

He steps into her space, uncrossing his arms. She finds herself having to crane her head up to look him in the eye and she raises her chin defiantly.

“Is that so,” he murmurs and the only reason that she can even hear him over the din of the arcade is that he’s so close that they’re practically breathing the same air. She can feel the heat radiating off of him.

“Yes,” she replies, suddenly a little breathless, “I’m a perfectly respectable height. You’re the one who’s absurdly tall.”

He smirks. “Alright, ‘perfectly respectable’ Rey, go collect your tickets. I think I’ve given you enough of a head-start on this contest.”

She sticks her tongue out at him.

His eyes flick down to her mouth, then back up to meet her own. There’s a beat and a weird crackle of tension passes between them. He’s leaning forwards, almost imperceptibly and-

-a bell rings loudly. Whatever spell they were under has broken.

They spend another hour and a half in the arcade. Thanks to all of their practice in StarKiller, they’re both very good at rhythm and shooting games. Ben beats her at House of the Dead, but only because Rey really hates zombies and keeps freaking out whenever she gets bit by one.

“How does the blood in StarKiller not bother you but this does?” Ben asks, as she lets out a another shriek and misses her shot by a mile.

“It’s not the blood!” She yelp, “I just saw 28 Days Later when I was way too young and realized that the Budgens grocery store they go to is down the street from the foster home I was living in. I had
nightmares about zombies chasing me through the produce aisle for like the next three years!”

He chuckles.

“Okay, that’s fair.”

They play Tekken and Rey gets her revenge by winning through button-mashing, while he tries his best to beat her with clever combos and strategy.

“You’re not even playing!” He argues as she blasts him off the screen once again.

“Sorry! I can’t hear you over how awesome I am at this game!” Rey replies, grinning like the Cheshire cat.

Ben spends a while showing off on the Terminator pinball machine, first for Rey and then for an increasingly large crowd of excited kids.

By the time Rey drags him off, he’s fairly certain that he’s nearly caught up to her ticket count. Not that it really matters at this point; they had started sticking all of the tickets in Rey’s purse after they ran through their first batch of tokens and they’ve long since gotten their winnings all mixed up.

Speaking of tokens, they’re finally down to their last few. They’re look around to see if there’s any other games they want to try when Rey’s hand flashes out and grabs his arm.

“Ben!” she says, gleefully. “They have a photo booth!”

She points and – sure enough – there’s an old-fashioned looking photo booth in the corner of the room.

Ben sighs. He’s… not crazy about having his picture taken. He always looks awkward and uncomfortable. In the decade that he’s been creating online content he’s sort of come to terms with how he looks on video. But still photography always makes him kind of… itchy.

But Rey is tugging him forwards and she looks so delighted that he really can’t bear to say no. So he climbs into the booth after her, and the curtain slips closed, leaving them pressed in tightly in the confined space. He maneuvers her around a bit to get them both in frame and ends up with her tucked under one of his arms, the softness of her body pressing all along his side.

His heart feels like it’s trying to hammer its way out of his chest.

“You know you’re supposed to smile for these,” she says when she catches a glimpse of what he’s certain is his panicked expression.

“My… face doesn’t really do that,” he says. “I have a weird smile.”

“I like it,” Rey replies, as she turns to put tokens into the coin slot, “but if you won’t smile, you have to make silly faces. That’s just the rules.”

She looks up at him and fucking winks, just as the photo booth begins its countdown sequence for the first shot.

The photo strips finally drop into the metal box Rey looks at them for a long moment, then laughs before handing the second one to him.

He’s not quite smiling, but in all three photos, he’s definitely staring at Rey – who is making the requisite silly faces and even throwing a peace sign in the third shot – with a sort of stunned awe.
“Close enough,” she says, before tucking the photo strip into her bag (which now has a fuzzy keychain dangling off of it that’s shaped like some sort of cute, fuzzy bird-monster). He slips his own into the pocket of his jacket.

Ben looks down at the tickets spilling out of Rey’s purse.

“Do you want to redeem those for anything?” He asks.

Rey looks over at the prize counter and bites her lip.

“I think I’m okay; I really just wanted to play the games. Besides, if we get something then we have to carry it around all day. We should find some kid to give these to though,” she says.

They leave the arcade, stopping a child on the way out to hand him their massive spool of tickets, save for one that Rey rips off and sticks into her purse next to the photo strip. The boy, who can’t be older than ten looks like Christmas and his next six birthdays have come all at once. Ribbons of tickets in hand, he runs gleefully towards the ticket redemption counter to go pick out a toy.

Without thinking about it, Ben finds himself reaching for Rey’s hand again and lacing their fingers together. They walk further down the pier, stopping to watch a man playing his guitar, before wandering over to the miniature amusement park, perched out above the ocean.

“I’ve never done it but the internet told me that the views from the ferris wheel are pretty awesome,” she says, shielding her eyes with her free hand so she can look up at the wheel. “Do you want to give it a go?”

“Why not,” he says, and they go to buy tickets.

Ben has a moment, standing there in line to ride the brightly colored ferris wheel, that he thinks about what the people who only know him as KyloRen would say if they could see him right now.

He’s following this girl around, totally content to do whatever makes her happy so long as he gets to remain in her company.

He feels like a different person around her, like she’s somehow busted straight through a lifetime’s worth of defense mechanisms and found the man hiding underneath.

It’s a little liberating.

It’s a lot terrifying.

He knows in a distant, storm-on-the-horizon sort of way that there’s a very real chance this does not have a happy ending.

Someone who can crack him open with such ease has far more power over him than he even wants to contemplate. And that’s not even taking into account the reality of their situation.

No matter what happens today, they’re still rivals. Their teams are enemies. The fact that she smiles like the sun and he never wants to let go of her hand doesn’t change that.

Some of his internal brooding must show on his face because Rey turns to face him, frowning slightly.

“Everything okay?” She asks.

“Yeah,” he says, forcing his dark thoughts aside and returning his focus to Rey, “Just worried I
might be getting a sunburn.”

Her eyes go comically wide behind her sunglasses.

“Are you wearing sun cream?” She asks him, urgently. “You’ve got that ‘I never go outside’ look so you’ll burn to a crisp super fast if you’re not!”

“I’m not,” Ben admits. To be fair, he hadn’t really expected to be outdoors at all on this trip so sunscreen hadn’t really seemed like a necessary addition to his packing list.

She makes a disapproving sound at him, then opens her purse and rummages around, fishing out a small tube.

“Lucky for you, I never leave home without it,” She tells him, passing him the sunscreen. He shoves his sunglasses up into his hair, uncaps the bottle and squirts a glob of it onto his hands. It’s somehow both slimy and drying at the same time and he really doesn’t want to put it on his face, but even though he’d just used the excuse as a deflection tactic he also really does not want a sunburn.

So he sighs and smears it across his nose, cheeks, and forehead, rubbing it in until he no longer feels it sitting on his skin.

Rey looks up at him and bites her lip.

“You have…” she gestures at her cheek.

He wipes at the left side of his face and she snorts a laugh, reaching out to wipe a remaining smudge of sunscreen off of his right cheek. His skin tingles where her fingers touch his skin.

Her hand falls away and she nods, satisfied.

They don’t have to wait long for the ferris wheel. After a few minutes they’re loaded into a gondola and the wheel is turning slowly, lifting them high up into the air.

Admittedly, the view is something to behold. LA from the ground is frankly one of the ugliest places that he’s ever seen in his entire life. But from out beyond the coast, looking back over the city from their perch in the sky, it is completely transformed.

The coastline stretches like a pale golden band that hooks north, disappearing from sight. LA sprawls beyond the steep cliffs that separate the beach from the city, an ocean of glittering glass and steel as far as the eye can see. Clusters of skyscrapers stick out of the skyline every now and then and mountains snake off into the distance beyond them.

Ben looks over at Rey to ask her what she thinks of the view, but the words die in his throat. She’s twisted around in her seat, gripping the edge of the gondola and staring out across the city with an awed expression.

“Whoa,” she breathes, “I knew LA was big but I didn’t know it was this big!”

She reaches into her purse, pulls out her phone, and then climbs up to kneel on the bench so that she can take pictures. Her actions make the gondola rock a little and Ben’s stomach lurches nervously.

He scoots along the bench so that he can wrap his arm around her waist, holding her steady as much for his sake as her own. Seeing her perched so precariously sends the sort of danger signals into his brain that he does not normally experience outside of particularly tense StarKiller tournament matches.
“What are you doing?” she asks, though she doesn’t fight his grip (thank fuck).

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Saying you from yourself,” he replies dryly.

She lets him hang onto her while she takes her fill of pictures of the scenery, before sitting back down. The angle of his arm around her body pulls her into his lap when she does. She lands there, surprised and staring up at him for a second, before a mischievous smile curls her lips upwards and she holds up her phone to snap a selfie of them both.

Catching him off guard means that he has no time to freeze up and the photo that she snaps is… actually quite nice.

They look awfully cozy, against the backdrop of the ferris wheel high above the ocean. She’s nestled against his chest, head tucked neatly under his chin, and his arm is still wrapped around her. He looks easy and relaxed and she’s smiling brightly enough to light up a room.

“There,” she says, sounding very pleased with herself, “now we have at least one good photo of our adventure.”

She scoots off his lap and Ben lets her go, less because he wants to and more because he’s so overwhelmed by absolutely everything about this woman that he doesn’t have the mental fortitude to retain control of his body right now.

They’re both hungry by the time the ferris wheel deposits them back down on the pier, so they walk back up to the mainland in search of food. As they go, they discuss what they do and do not consider to be an acceptable lunch venue. Rey will essentially eat anything from anywhere, but Ben is far more particular.

She tries to convince him to try In-n-Out Burger but his face gets sort of scrunched up at the idea of it.

“I don’t care if it’s practically a religion around here, Rey, it’s still fast food burger patties,” he says. Rey really has to force herself not to fight him over this. She might be a Brit by birth, but the Californians have certainly perfected the art of the hamburger at In-n-Out and she is not normally one to let someone insult it in such a fashion.

However, this is the first thing that Ben has actively put his foot down about, so she relents with a sigh.

They end up on the patio of a restaurant called Blue Plate Taco, a stone’s throw from the Pier entrance. Once they’ve placed their orders and the waitress has departed, a silence falls between them. She glances up at Ben through her lashes only to catch him looking back at her, pensively.

Rey can almost see the question forming in his mind before he actually says anything. And she wishes that she could stop him, that they could remain in their bubble for just a little longer… but that’s just not how life works.

“Rey,” he says, at last, “what happened last night?”

She sighs heavily, picking a sugar packet out of the little bowl sitting on the side of the table, and
turning it over in her hand.

*Nervous fidgeting,* one of her foster mothers had called it; Rey has always felt better, talking about anything heavy, if her hands are occupied. It soothes her anxiety, grounding her in reality.

“We lost again,” she says, then shakes her head and laughs – self deprecating and bitter, “I lost again, actually. Twice. We came so close, both times. And losing to the Legion sucked, but… well. They haven’t spent the last two weeks shitting on me and my team.”

Rey folds the packet in half, trying to split the sugar granules inside evenly on either side of the crease. Ben sits across from her, listening quietly. He’d removed his jacket when they sat down and his newly bared arms are crossed over the expanse of his chest. He has a tattoo; a black ring a little thinner than her pinkie finger around his right bicep and it peeks out underneath the bottom of his sleeve. There’s a sleek, high tech black watch on his left wrist and Rey notices sort of absently that the face is reflecting a round circle of light onto the ceiling. He’s so still that he almost looks like a statue.

“I wanted to beat the Sith Lords so badly, you know? Not just because we needed the win to help our ranking, but to prove them wrong about *everything* they’ve been saying. About my team. About me. And instead, not only did we lose to them, but we lost because I wasn’t good enough,” she says, looking up to meet Ben’s eyes. “In the end they were right. I don’t have what it takes. I think I made a mistake by joining the Resistance.”

She looks down at the table and flattens the sugar packet back out again. The misery of the night before had ebbed away with her excitement about finally getting to see Ben, and now it rises back up. She has that drowning feeling again. This time there are no cameras, but there’s also no crowd around to drive her resolve to hold it together. There’s just Ben.

Tears begin welling in her eyes and she wipes at them furiously. Rey is not a crier. The fact that she has already cried to him about this once makes a repeat performance feel downright *humiliating*. She hates how weak she must seem to him right now. Her life has been crueler and uglier than this before and she’s not sure why *this* of all things is the straw that’s breaking the camel’s back.

“You don’t need this to be a load of fun for you,” Rey says, unrolling her silverware from the paper napkin so she can use it to blot her eyes. “Bet you’re wishing you’d stuck around the con right about now, huh? It would certainly be a lot more fun than watching me mourn the end of my StarKiller career before it’s even really begun.”

“Stop it,” Ben says so vehemently that it takes her by surprise. Her eyes flick back up to meet his. He looks stormy, brow furrowed and jaw tight. He raises his right hand and extends a finger.

“One; let me be clear; those fucking ‘Shit Lord’ assholes have never been right about anything. Ever. They’re good at StarKiller, but the thing they’re really great at is wearing their opponents down by harassing them before big matches. They’ve been pulling this sort of shit since the first time they competed.”

His voice is a low, furious rumble. “I will say this to you over and over until you believe me. Hell, if you won’t believe me, I’ll go through all the members of every team who has ever played against them until we find someone that you will believe. Their opinions are worth less than nothing.”

He extends a second finger.

“Two; you are one member of a six man team. Can you honestly tell me that no one else on your
team made any sort of mistake, at all?” he asks.

“Well I… I mean…” she stammers, trying hard to remember anything at all about the matches that wasn’t just the horror of the last few seconds. Then she finds herself getting annoyed because his tone is awfully pointed for someone who wasn’t even playing.

“I wasn’t exactly following them all around, keeping tabs on what they did. I was trying to do my job,” she snaps.

Ben nods, seeming unconcerned by her anger.

“Exactly, you were doing your job and they were doing theirs. All five of them, Rey. And they each made mistakes of their own, just like every other player. That’s what happens in a team sport,” he says, “You can’t set the entire blame for the team losing squarely on your own shoulders. That’s unfair to you and your teammates.”

“That’s quite rich, seeing as how the first time we ever talked, you told me that you didn’t like being a Striker because there was too much responsibility with it,” Rey scoffs.

Ben inclines his head, understanding dawning on his face.

“True. But do you know the biggest difference between you and I as Strikers?” He asks, continuing before she can answer, “You actually have a team that works together. I have four people who would literally rather throw a match than cooperate half the time, and one guy who’s so busy worrying about everyone’s feelings getting hurt that he’s too distracted to do his damn job.”

“Sure, my teammates can play well, but they’re just as likely to do so to boost their own scores, not to help the team. That means that in my case, whether or not we win or lose is almost always up to me.”

Rey blinks at him, mouth hanging open slightly.

“If there’s a problem with you as a Striker right now, it’s that you’re not recognizing what you have with your team,” he says, bluntly. The words are harsh, but his tone is not. Rey has a strange moment where she really, really wants to slap him – but at the same time, she feels like something is clicking for her, in a way that it never has before.

This is what she thinks Luke was trying to get her to understand. He was just wrapping it in language that couldn’t get through to her.

“Oh,” she says quietly.

“And third,” he says, face finally softening a bit as he extends his ring finger, “I would rather be here with you than back in that hellscape of a convention center any day of the week.”

That actually startles a laugh out of Rey, which triggers another round of tears.

“Sorry, sorry,” she says, dabbing at her eyes. “I promise I’m not gonna start bawling again. This is... all just a lot. And this has not been an easy few weeks. Thank you, though.”

She reaches across the table to rest her hand on his, and his large fingers wrap around hers, squeezing gently. Ben brushes his thumb back and forth across her knuckles and the idle motion sets something warm curling in her stomach, similar to the feeling she’d gotten earlier when he’d held her by the waist in the gondola.
All of this is strange and unfamiliar territory for Rey. She doesn’t know what to do with the racing of her heart or the way everything about Ben speaks to some deep, primal thing in her body. And she doesn’t know how to reconcile any of the events of the last two months with what’s happening right now. Her head still spins if she thinks too hard about the fact that the same man who sent her an angry message and accused her of cheating is now holding her hand and telling her to get her shit together because she’s good enough and she just needs to believe that.

“Hey,” she says, a thought that has been lingering in the back of her mind for the last few weeks suddenly occurring to her, “Why are you always so nice to me? I thought you told me that KyloRen doesn’t ‘do nice’. Given how this all started and the fact that we’re literally rivals; you should hate me.”

Ben sighs, thumb stilling where it rests on the back of her knuckles.

“I really should,” he says, honestly, staring off at the ocean, “But I really don’t.”

Heat begins to creep across Rey’s cheeks, down her neck.

“You’re smart, you’re a badass gamer, you’re interesting, you’re easy to talk to. I like you a hell of a lot more than any other StarKiller pros I know,” his gaze slides back over to hers, “and it doesn’t hurt that you’re… uh…”

He breaks off, going a little pink at the ears.

“I’m what?” Rey asks.

“You’re pretty,” he mumbles, looking down at the table, cheeks now flushed the same shade as his ears.

“Oh!” She says, heart stuttering in her chest. Her face is so warm that she thinks she might be able to fry an egg on it at this point.

He coughs and scratches the back of his head.

“So, uh… yeah we’re rivals, but I think we can safely say that we’re also friends at this point. And honestly, if I’m going to beat you, I’d rather beat you because I played better, not because someone got inside your head and made you feel like shit,” he says with an shrug.

And that… well.

It knocks the air out of Rey’s chest.

*Of course* he could be lying. But Ben has never struck her as someone who is good at subtlety. He wears his angry, screamry, douche persona like a mask. But that mask is, if anything, less nuanced than the person he is underneath.

As he sits here, open and unguarded, holding her hand and blushing, she really and truly believes him.

Their food shows up shortly after. Reluctantly, they let go of each other’s hands.

The tacos are delicious: crispy, fried fish in corn tortillas with cabbage, creme fraiche, fresh salsa, and a heavy drizzle of lime. Rey’s lingering sorrow and melancholy melt away as she eats, and as usual she is amazed by the healing properties of good food.
After lunch they wander through the 3rd Street Promenade, stopping to get ice cream from the whimsically named Creams & Dreams before circling back around to the beach. This time, instead of heading out onto the pier, they walk down onto the sand. Rey stops once they’re off of the pedestrian walkway and unties her brown ankle boots. She steps out of them, pulling her socks off as well, and wiggles her bare toes in the sand while Ben looks on dubiously.

“You know you’re going to get sand in your socks when you put those back on later,” he tells her, looking at the substance in question like it has personally offended him.

She just smiles.

“That’s what the shower stations are for,” she says, hooking a finger through the leather straps around the ankles for easy carrying.

Ben still looks skeptical and elects to keep his own shoes on. They stroll along the pier, following its wooden support beams down towards the ocean.

Right before the shoreline the underside of the pier opens up, creating a shady space lined with thick wooden posts. They walk beneath it and pause there for a while, watching the waves roll back and forth, crashing harmlessly against the wooden struts holding the massive structure aloft.

“I have to admit that I wasn’t sure about this place when you suggested it,” Ben says, turning so that they’re standing face to face, “But it was a good choice.”

Rey’s slightly higher up on the beach than he is, and at this angle they are almost equal in height. She laughs.

“You can thank my friends Google and Yelp for this one,” she tells him. “When I got on that train this morning I really hadn’t thought past ‘get to LA’.”

He reaches out and tucks a stray whisp of hair behind her ear.

“We’re a pair of fucking idiots, aren’t we?” He says, mirth tugging his mouth into a lopsided grin.

“The biggest,” she agrees.

They eat dinner at a fancy sushi restaurant called Sushi Zo. Ben’s eaten at the sister location in New York before and had quite enjoyed it. He’s glad to finally have a chance to eat at the original location. It had been an idle suggestion that Rey had jumped on before he could mention exactly how prohibitively expensive the place was, and it makes him feel guilty about dragging her along. He knows that the price of her train ticket alone had cost her a pretty penny.

Ben tries to convince her to let him pay, even going so far as to argue that technically he had probably lost their competition in the arcade and they’d still split the bill for lunch, but she won’t have any of it. She threatens to eat all of his gyoza if he doesn’t let it go, so eventually he relents.

They split a platter of sushi and sashimi and spend the meal trading weird convention stories.

“I had a guy who was convinced I was Keira Knightley at E3 last year,” Rey tells him.

“He wouldn’t listen to reason and he called all his friends over to meet me too,” she says. “The fact
that she had no reason to be at E3 didn’t even seem to matter to them. So now there are a bunch of people with fake Keira Knightley autographs.”

“Last year at Dream/Hack we lost Mitaka for three hours and when we finally found him, he looked **wrecked**. Hair all over the place, bite marks on his neck, shirt on backwards. Then Luce Mirai – you know, LuceCannon of the Nightsisters – fucking came up, smacked his ass, thanked him for a good time and walked off,” Ben says, “I thought Hux was going to have a stroke. He’s had a thing for her since they both played pro Sunshot and she’s never given him the time of day.”

The sun is setting when they finally leave the restaurant. Rey shivers. Her sleeveless knit dress had been ideal for the weather earlier, but without the sun the combination of the evening desert chill and ocean breeze have brought the temperature down quickly.

When he catches her shivering, Ben shrugs his jacket off and drapes it over her shoulders. He takes it as a sign of exactly how cold she is that she doesn’t even argue, she just sticks her arms through the sleeves and zips it up.

It’s massive on her and it looks frankly ridiculous. He wants to give the fucking thing to her and watch her wear it forever.

Hand in hand, they walk to the Metro station and hop a train back to Downtown LA.

“There’s a nerd bar near the station that I go to every time I come up here for cons,” she tells him. “It’s called Scum and Villainy. All the decor is villain themed. Lots of black and red. You’ll love it.”

The Expo Line is a street-level train and they spend the ride back pressed in close, watching the street lights and traffic pass by. At one point Rey lifts his arm up and drapes it around her shoulder. He blinks down at her.

“I’m still cold,” she says, and he feels her shrug against his side.

He tucks her in closer, breathing in the scent of her soft, floral shampoo.

He’s hesitant about the fact that the bar is actually in Downtown LA. It’s not close enough to the convention center to be truly in the danger zone, but the fact that it’s specifically a nerd haven raises the risk of them being recognized significantly.

However Rey is so eager to show him this place that in the end Ben decides that it’s worth the risk to keep seeing her smile.

The interior of the bar is decked out in black and bathed in red light that has the effect of illuminating the room without actually brightening it at all. Framed pictures and posters showing the most iconic villains from all media cover the walls and loud music pounds through the venue.

It’s just after nine and the place is already hopping.

By the look of them, the clientele is definitely the same crowd that would spend their day at StarFall. Ben instinctively hunches down and tries to make himself as inconspicuous as possible. It doesn’t really work, because he’s huge and it never works, but thankfully everyone seems fairly intent on their own business and no one pays them any mind.

They grab a table towards the back of the venue, off to the side of the dance floor. It’s a round table with a curved booth and it allows them to sort of sink into the shadows. After a few minutes, a waitress swings by to take their drink orders and returns with a RedBull and vodka for Rey and two
fingers of Maker’s Mark, neat, for Ben, as well as a round of tequila shots.

As the night wears on, Rey remains snuggled in close to his side. She had taken off his jacket once they sat down, and he finds that he can’t stop his fingers from tracing patterns across the bare skin of her upper arm as they nurse their drinks and watch people slowly begin to trickle out onto the dance floor.

“You drink like a sorority girl,” Ben tells Rey when she downs her second shot from a glass shaped like a miniature skull.

“And you drink like an eighty year old librarian,” she giggles back at him as he sips his whiskey. It’s smooth and warm as it settles in his stomach, leaving him pleasantly relaxed.

He feels – more than hears – Rey sigh against him. They’re both loose limbed from alcohol and a new familiarity with sharing space with one another.

Rey shifts so that her head rests right underneath his chin, like it had on the ferris wheel. It’s maybe his favorite thing about having her in person. She fits into the negative space around him like she was perfectly designed to do so.

“I wish I didn’t have to go home tonight,” she says.

And his heart just stops.

Because he’d forgotten that she’s leaving. That this visit is a one day deal, and that day is coming to a close rapidly.

The last southbound Amtrak train leaves Union Station at 11:15 PM and Rey will be on it.

Suddenly this whole entire day does not seem like enough. He feels like he’s missing time, like he’s spent the day in an alternate reality and he is crashing back into reality once more.

“What?” She asks.

“Go home tomorrow. Just... you can crash with me tonight. I have a huge suite all to myself, there’s plenty of space. We could just... I dunno... watch TV or whatever. Anything you want to do. Just stay.”

He’s looking into Rey’s eyes and the haze of the alcohol and the shifting light makes this whole thing feel like some sort of crazy fever dream and he’s just not ready to let her go yet. Not when he’s only just started to discover who she is as a person when she’s not behind a computer screen and 3,000 miles away from him.

Not when he’s starting to discover that there might actually be something left of a human being underneath KyloRen after all.

“Stay,” he repeats, “please.”

“This is such a dumb idea,” she says.

“I know,” he tells her.
Rey leans forward and buries her face in his chest with a groan.

“Alright” she says, and he can feel her lips moving against his skin. “I’ll stay.”

Chapter End Notes

I don’t even know what happened with this chapter. It was supposed to be like half this long but they just would not stop acting like BESOTTED FOOLS. So I hope you all enjoyed this nearly obscene pile of fluff.

If you're enjoying the fic so far, please consider sharing it with a friend! Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated and fuel my desire to write faster!

As usual, please feel free to come yell at me about this story on Twitter or Tumblr.
Guys I am so sorry that I am so far behind on comments this week! I'll try to catch up! As always that you so much for the support it really does make all the work I put into this worth it!

Notes!
1. WE HAVE ART!!! The incredible Panda-Capuccino drew a gorgeous piece for this chapter that I have been screaming about very quietly all week! I’m including it in the fic because it’s PERFECT and I’m CRYING.
2. I was informed that my soundtrack link didn’t upload properly last week so I’m posting it again! I had fun making it and you can hear it here.

My incredible beta Cyborgharpv owns my whole soul. She keeps trying to get me to stop heaping credit onto her but honestly guys, this fic wouldn’t be HALF as good without her help. You can also find her on tumblr as ashesforfoxes and you should definitely go follow her and show her some love.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They pay their tab at the bar then stumble out onto the street again and hail a cab to take them to Ben’s hotel. At this point, they are both well and truly intoxicated.

Rey has this vague idea in the back of her head that this is colossally stupid and almost certainly going to bite her in the ass, but she finds that she can’t quite bring herself to care.

She isn’t ready to leave either, really.

It’ll be fine, she thinks, we’ve just gotta get up to Ben’s room without anyone seeing us together and we’ll be golden. Really, how hard can that be?

“Here’s my room key. You need it to work the elevator,” he tells her, handing her the black, rectangular card. “Take it and go up to the 20th floor and I’ll meet you up there once I get a replacement from the front desk.”

“Sounds easy enough,” she says.

The taxi drops them off on a the corner of Georgia and Olympic and they walk the short distance to the hotel.

Rey has never been in a building that looks anything like the JW Marriott. It’s straight out of science fiction with its huge glass and marble lobby. Its soaring ceilings are decorated with massive, multicolored lighting installations that make everything sparkle.

It actually reminds her a little of the Spire map in StarKiller.

There’s a bar on one side of the hotel that is teeming with people, some in cosplay, all in full party mode. When the massive glass doors slide open, a wall of sound from the crowd washes over them. Maintaining a careful distance from one another – like they’re spies in some sort of action thriller –
Rey and Ben enter the lobby.

She heads right towards the elevators while he turns left instead, heading for the front desk.

Rey walks with what she hopes is purpose, but might actually be a sort of unsteady wobble, intent on getting into an elevator as quickly as possible. It’s right about then that all their plans begin to fall apart. As it turns out, the hotel has decided to set security personnel with scanners in front of the elevator bank. She tries to sidle on by but a man in a white uniform steps directly into her path.

“Please scan your room key and present your ID, ma’am,” he says, holding one arm out to prevent her from getting any closer and gesturing to his colleague, who is standing with the scanner to his left.

“I have a room key but my name’s not on the reservation,” she says, very carefully, trying her best to seem as sober as possible.

The guard shakes his head.

“Then I’m afraid we can’t let you up. New hotel policy to cut down on room parties,” he says, and Rey begins frantically looking around for Ben, but she can’t see him anywhere near the front desk from her current vantage point. “You’ll need to either have the person whose name is on the reservation come down and get you or –”

“She’s with me,” says Ben, as he hurries up behind her and drapes an arm around her shoulders. He pulls her into him, doing his best to shield her from any curious glances. Ben is a solid wall of warmth against her back and she ducks her head down, doing her best to hide herself in the shelter of his body while keenly aware of the throngs of con-goers around them.

“Sorry, sweetheart. I didn’t know they’d give you any trouble.” Ben plucks the key card out of her hand, and passes it to the guard so it can be scanned, while he pulls out his wallet and flashes his ID.

“Oh, Mr. Solo!” The guard exclaims, surprised. “We were actually instructed that if we saw you we were to–”

“Can I go up to my room or not?” he snaps, interrupting the man, and for the first time all day, Rey sees the KyloRen that the rest of the world knows.

“Yes of course! But wait! Your ma–” the guard starts to say, but Ben just snatches his cards back and steers Rey into the open and waiting elevator car, pounding the Close Door button while the guard shouts something frantically at him. Ben swipes his card and punches in the floor number.

Once they’re alone and the car starts moving, Rey turns to face him, though she doesn’t bother stepping away. She stands between his legs as he leans back against the corner of the elevator.

“That went well,” she says dryly, “nothing suspicious or noticeable happened at all.”

They stare at each other for a beat, then Ben’s face breaks into a grin and they’re both laughing, leaning on each other. His hands are on her hips, and her face is pressed into the curve of his throat.

“Hey,” she asks, leaning back a bit to look up at him, “how’d you know to come over?”

“There was a sign about the new elevator policy right by the front desk. I tried to get to you before anything like that happened but… clearly I was a little late,” he says.

Abruptly, something else occurs to her.
“Why’d you call me sweetheart?” She asks.

He grins down at her.

“Because I wanted to,” he says.

She feels her face getting hot but decides to blame the alcohol.

“Oh, okay.” she says, leaning back into him, resting her chin on his chest. She feels floaty and a little separate from herself. She should feel nervous, really. All of this is a bad decision. For all that she feels and undeniable pull towards him, Rey still really doesn’t know Ben that well. But she feels safe with him. There is no doubt in her mind that he will not hurt her, that he will not take advantage of her.

She stares up at him and he looks down at her with something close to delighted awe. In the golden light of the elevator, she can’t see a single trace of the darkness and anger that she knows dwells inside him.

They stay like that until the elevator hits the 20th floor and they clumsily stumble out into the empty hallway. The dark purple plush carpeting muffles the sounds of their footsteps.

His room is a suite on the south side of the building and it overlooks the plaza below, including the massive LA Live stadium and the convention center. When they enter the room, the lights are all off and the room is bathed in the slowly shifting pink and purple glow coming off of the five-story high LED screen on the stadium across the street.

It looks like something out of a dream and she feels like she’s floating as she enters the room. She strips off his borrowed coat, depositing it on a chair before walking past the sitting area to look out the massive, floor-to-ceiling windows. Rey presses her hands and face up against the glass, staring out across the dazzling expanse of Downtown LA below.

Ben follows her into the room, but stays where he is after the door shuts.

She can feel his eyes on her like a physical touch. Rey turns to look back at him and the strange tension that has been sizzling between them all day crackles back to life with a vengeance.

After a long minute he finally steps away from the door and walks towards her.

He steps into her space, carefully, like he’s half expecting her to bolt at any second.

She reaches up, draping her arms around the back of his neck, linking her fingers together and letting her hands rest against the soft fabric of his shirt.

One of his large hands settles on the curve of her hip, the heat of it like fire through the thin fabric of her dress, and then slides to her lower back as he pulls her in closer. His other hand comes up and cups her jaw, gently, carefully. She turns her face into it, rubbing her cheek against the warmth of his palm. His fingers are strong and have just the barest hint of callussing.

“Rey,” he says, and her name comes out as a sigh.

She tilts her face back up to meet his gaze.

“What is this?” Ben asks, sounding as confused and awed as she feels.

“I don’t know,” she tells him, honestly, as her heart hammers in her chest.
His thumb moves in slow strokes across her cheek.

“What do you want it to be?” he asks, as the light outside shifts slowly from purple to bright blue.

“I don’t know,” she says again, feeling a small, lopsided grin pulling at the corner of her mouth. “I want it to be less complicated.”

Ben gives her a tiny, wry smile of his own, then leans forwards until his forehead rests against hers. They’re so close. It would be so easy for Rey to rise up onto her tiptoes and press her lips to Ben’s. But the last few shreds of her rational mind hold her still.

“Me too,” he says, very softly.
They stay like that for a while, watching the lights play across each other’s cheeks and lips.
and eyelashes.

She yawns.

It catches them both so off-guard that it startles more laughter out of them.

“Sorry,” she says, “I guess I’m tired.”

Ben smiles fondly down at her, thumb brushing over her cheek once more before letting his hands fall away and stepping back.

“What time did you have to get up to catch your train this morning?” He asks.

“Ugh, like 4 AM,” she says.

Ben walks over to the open black suitcase sitting on the luggage rack next to the massive king bed. He rummages around for a few minutes before tossing Rey a bundle of fabric. She catches it and discovers that it’s a pair of black men’s pajama pants that feel like they might be real silk and a soft purple T-shirt with the TwitchCon logo across the chest.

“They’re clean,” Ben tells her, “go change and we’ll find something to watch.”

Rey nods and yawns again and goes to change in the bathroom.

She wishes that she had a toothbrush and a change of underwear with her but she really hadn’t been planning on staying the night. She changes out of her dress into Ben’s shirt and pants. The pants are so large that she can’t keep them up, no matter how tightly she ties the cord at the waist, so eventually she just gives up. Thankfully the shirt is so big on her that it falls nearly to her knees.

She uses her finger and the tiny tube of toothpaste that she finds in the complimentary toiletry basket to do the best makeshift tooth-brushing job she can, then bites her lip before borrowing Ben’s comb to undo the tangles the ocean air had created in her hair. The room shifts around her a little lazily, alcohol-haze still blurring her vision a little. Rey feels like she’s looking around the chrome and marble of the bathroom through a soft-focus lens.

Rey splashes a little water on her face and scrunches up her face. She takes a deep breath, steeling her nerves before collecting her discarded dress, bra, and the silk pants and pushing the door open once more.

She steps back out into the room to find that Ben has also changed. He’s wearing a black StarKiller shirt from the 2016 Championships and a pair of relaxed black joggers. He’s sprawled out on the white expanse of the massive bed, leaning back against the headboard with the TV remote in one hand while he clicks around on a sleek, black laptop with the other.

“The pants were a little too big,” she tells him, setting them back in his open suitcase. He finally looks over at her and his face does a number of interesting things as he seems to register that she’s now wandering around his hotel room without anything on below the waist.

“Oh,” he says, dumbly. Rey laughs. His eyes follow her as she walks around to the other side of the bed, climbing up onto it. She mimics his posture, leaning back against the headboard, though she curls her legs up underneath her to keep her toes warm in the cold of the air-conditioned hotel room. There’s an ocean of space between them now, and Rey thinks about scooting closer, but she’s not really sure that’s a good idea. Things between them have never been simple and there is no denying that they’ve been complicated even further by the events that transpired today.
It’s for the best that nothing else happens, Rey thinks, it’s just easier if this is as far as it goes. We can still come back from this.

Feeling suddenly a little maudlin, she looks up at the flat screen TV mounted across from the bed to distract herself. There’s a menu open and Ben seems to be trying to navigate through it so that he can stream something from his laptop.

“Did you have something in mind to watch?” she asks, and he blinks, suddenly seeming to remember that he was in the middle of something. He goes back to clicking things on his computer.

“No really,” he says, “but I have subscriptions to basically every streaming service on the market set up on this laptop so we should be able to find something.”

He finally gets the TV to connect and the contents of his laptop are projected on the massive screen.

Rey takes one look at his background and snorts.

It’s a piece of seriously dramatic Silencer fanart, featuring the masked hero rising out of the darkness, laser cannons in hand and arms crossed over his chest.

“You’re such a Silencer main,” she says, rolling her eyes, “edgy ‘til the very last.”

He rolls his eyes back at her and opens a Chrome window, blocking his background from her sight.

“You have a Millenia wallpaper on your phone, you don’t get to talk,” he says dryly.

“Whatever you say edgelord,” Rey replies, with a smirk.

In the end they settle on Stranger Things, letting the small town supernatural drama of the residents of Hawkins carry them off for a while. It’s almost like there are magnets pulling the two of them together. Every shift, every motion either one of them makes slowly closes the gap between them until finally Rey just gives up and throws logic and caution to the wind.

She scoots in next to him and wraps herself around his arm, leaning her head on his shoulder.

*He smells nice,* she notes, absently.

It’s not a chemical smell, there’s no scent of Axe body spray or expensive-yet-still-disgusting cologne. He just smells like soap and aftershave and the leather of his jacket.

His hand moves to rest on the skin of her bare knee. The contact sends tingles dancing across her body and makes her stomach swoop. But he holds still and while she never quite loses her hyper-awareness of his hand on her, eventually she becomes accustomed to it.

Rey notices that his sleeve has ridden up a bit, exposing more of the tattoo that she’d seen before. It is not – as she had previously assumed – a single line, but rather a series of them. They range in width; thick and thin, stacked in a neat line up his bicep. There are five that she can see, though Rey suspects that more might be hiding underneath his sleeve.

She runs her fingers back and forth across the black ink, fascinated by the way the lines lay over the muscles of his arm. Her eyelids grow heavier and heavier, until she feels him shift a little and glances up, to make sure everything is okay.

Ben is looking down at her with the softest expression she’s ever seen. Ever so easy, like it’s the most natural thing in the world, he leans over and kisses her.
It's chaste, just a brush of his lips against hers, and it's over so quickly that in her sleepy, tipsy state she wonders if maybe she had just imagined it. She sighs happily and snuggles in closer. At some point during the second episode, Rey drifts off.

She wakes sometime later, no longer drunk. It’s still night out but the room is quiet; Ben’s laptop has been closed and set aside and at some point he must have pulled the covers up over both of them. They’re laying close, not quite touching, but they’re curved towards each other like parentheses.

She studies the unusual lines of his face, which has become so very important to her in just a short time. Pink and yellow light from the massive screen outside helps to soften his hard edges.

*Will I ever see you like this again,* she wonders.

Rey lays there for a while longer, drinking in the sight of him, close enough to touch and yet still so very far away. Eventually she drifts off again, heart heavy.

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Ben wakes up warm and comfortable, with a face full of sweet smelling hair that tickles his nose every time he breathes in and a warm body tucked in against his chest. His mouth has that dry, cotton feeling that comes after a night of drinking and his head hurts a little, but otherwise, this is the best he’s felt in a long time.

Without thinking he reaches up and smooths the hair aside, nuzzling his face into the newly uncovered skin of his bedmate’s neck, and pulling her pliant body in towards his. Small feet slide along his legs and a firm, round backside presses right up against his-

*Wait.*

His eyes snap open and his whole body goes stiff as he realizes just *who* it is that he is spooning.

Rey makes a sleepy, contented noise, and snuggles closer, just as Ben remembers with lightning bolt clarity that he had *kissed her* last night.

His soul abandons his body and fucking exits stage left.

*Jesus fucking mother of shit hell Christ balls,* Ben thinks.

It takes literally every last ounce of his self control to roll away from her, but there’s a *situation* between his legs and he *cannot* deal with what will happen if she wakes up and realizes that his dick is pressed hard against her ass. The sound of displeasure she makes when he pulls away nearly does him the rest of the way in. Ben squeezes both of his hands *very* tightly and counts to twenty in his head, trying to get himself under control.

Once he’s no longer about to lose his mind over touching a girl like a pathetic, horny teenager, he glances at the clock. It’s just before eight. Unfortunately they don’t really have the luxury of laying around. The later in the day it gets the more likely it is that they’ll suffer a repeat of the night before.

“Rey,” he says, reaching over to shake her shoulder, “Rey, wake up.”

“Mmno,” she mumbles, burying her face in a pillow, “piss off.”

He looks at her for a minute, her hair splayed out across the crisp white bed linens in a messy halo
and the shape of her body sprawled out beneath the covers. He sighs.

She looks so comfortable there and he hates to have to force her back out into the waking world. He’d be perfectly content to let her stay in his bed all day if she wanted.

“Rey,” he says, leaning in close, “I just read on StarKiller Daily that they’re nerfing Millenia.”

That does the trick and Rey shoots bolt upright, eyes wide and wild.

“What?” she cries, then blinks as she realizes that he’s just sitting there, grinning at her.

“You’re such a shit, Ben Solo!” She grabs a pillow and begins hitting him with it.

He laughs, holding up his hands to defend his face from her attack.

“Yep,” he says, “but it worked, didn’t it?”

Rey stops beating him with the pillow and leans around him to look at the clock.

She sees the time and heaves a sigh.

“Damn,” she says, then she falls back against the pillows with a groan, covering her face with her hands.

“Oh my God. I totally forgot, I’m supposed to be at practice with my team in an hour. That’s not happening,” she says, “Finn is going to kill me. This is going to be a huge mess.”

Ben can sympathize. Even if he wasn’t staring down the barrel of saying goodbye to Rey, today would suck. He’s going to need to come up with a very good excuse for his absence and being incommunicado for 24 hours. Not to mention facing down the wrath of his irate manager.

“Come on,” he says, shoving those thoughts aside, “if you get ready fast enough we can get breakfast at the station before you leave.”

Rey sighs dramatically.

“Even in the worst of times, at least we still have food to look forwards to,” she says.

They sneak carefully down to the lobby. This morning Rey is wearing a black hoodie that she’s borrowing from Ben over her cream dress. It’s one that he picked up last November when he went to hear Vader in concert with Phasma and it has the band’s geometric logo printed in dark gray across the back and on the left side of the chest. Like the rest of the clothing that he’s lent her in the last day, it’s far too big. Combined with her sunglasses, the black hood covers her hair and face, obscuring her identity completely, and he sincerely wishes that he’d had it to give to her last night.

While they ride the elevator down he watches out of the corner of his eye as Rey pulls her phone out of her purse, presses the button to switch it off of airplane mode and winces as it suddenly fills up with notifications of missed texts and calls from her teammates. It occurs to him, then, that he actually has not even looked at his own phone since he used it to call an Uber the morning before. He’d switched it off when he got on the train with Rey. It wasn’t like getting texts from Snoke in real time would have made this any less of a disaster.

*That’ll be fun,* he thinks.

The lobby is mostly empty. The security guards from the night before have been relieved and a new pair stand at the entrance of the elevator bank, paying Rey and Ben no mind.
Rey calls an Uber from the same shopping mall that Ben used yesterday and on their ride to the station, she silently reaches over to take his hand. Their fingers slide together, interlocking like two puzzle pieces falling into place. He feels a pressure in his throat every time he swallows.

Twenty-four hours. That is all it has taken and he’s already having trouble imagining returning to his life without Rey within arms reach. How is he supposed to go back to that?

They both pick at their food – a savory crepe with bacon, eggs, and cheese for him and a sweet one with strawberries and Nutella for her – while the clock ticks down.

“Ben,” she says, voice soft amongst the echoes that fill the high ceileding station, “I… this…”

He watches her face, small and sad as she struggles to come up with words before shrugging and looking at him helplessly.

“I know,” he says, “I feel it too.”

That prompts a sort of crooked half-grin.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’re very melodramatic?” she asks.

Ben sighs.

“I’m not, usually,” he tells her, “normally people say that I’m just regular dramatic. This is all your fault.”

She snorts at him and drinks her coffee. It tastes a little burnt and bitter, even with all the milk and sugar she dumped into it.

“This was fun though, right?” she asks. “Like even though things kinda suck right now, this was worth it?”

He nods.

“Yeah. It would have sucked worse if I came out here and we didn’t get to see each other,” he agrees.

“It could be a very long time before we have the chance to see each other again, you know,” she says in a hollow voice, “so I’m glad we made the best of this.”

Ben frowns because that is actually not quite right.

“That’s only true if you don’t make it to Championships though, isn’t it?” He says, and Rey’s head snaps up.

“But we’re really far behind–” she begins to say.

He smirks at her.

“Then I guess you’d better catch up. Because I’ll be in Las Vegas in a month and really, if you’re not there for our rematch, then what’s even the point?”

Her eyes go wide and then narrow and she sets her jaw, the beginning of a small smile curling her lips.

“Okay, Solo,” she says. “You’re on. I’ll see you at the Championships. And when you lose, I’ll let
you buy me dinner.”

Ben grins. “We’ll see.”

The train ride home sucks.

Rey curls up in Ben’s hoodie, which he hadn’t even made any effort to get back, burying her nose in the fabric that smells like him. Her brain keeps replaying little moments from their time together like a video that won’t stop looping. The kiss, far off and hazy — like she half-dreamed it — tugs particularly hard on her heartstrings and she finds herself fighting off tears more than once.

As the train speeds along the coast, she pulls out her phone and opens up her messenger app to finally deal with the fallout from the night before. The messages in the Resistance group chat had started around 9 PM, after Finn had tried and failed to get a hold of her on his own. They make her wince as she scrolls through them.

To: SQUAD

From: Finn Gunner

Has anyone heard from rey?

From: Paige Tico

Can’t say that I have

From: Jessika Pava

Nope sorru

From: Jessika Pava

*sorry

From: Rose Tico

Not today. Why???

From: Finn Gunner

It’s probably nothing don’t worry abt it.

The next message is from just after eleven.

From: Finn Gunner

Actually forget my last message. We might need to worry a little.

From: Finn Gunner

Or a lot. I'm seriously freaking out.
From: Poe Dameron

Babe you’re panicking. I told you to stay calm I’m coming over.

From: Rose Tico

GUYS!!! WHAT’S GOING ON???

From: Finn Gunner

Rey went out early this morning and hasn’t come back.

From: Finn Gunner

She left a note saying she was gonna go hang with a friend from her last job but… I texted him and she never made it over to his place.

From: Finn Gunner

She’s not answering her phone.

From: Jessika Pava

Oh shut

From: Jessika Pava

*shit sorry ducking autocorrect

From: Jessika Pava

**FUCKING

From: Paige Tico

Have you called Luke yet? Maybe he’s heard from her

From: Finn Gunner

I have and he hasn’t.

From: Rose Tico

She was REALLY weird after yesterday’s games… Not saying we shouldn’t worry but! IDK maybe she’s just out clubbing or something???

From: Poe Dameron

Finn open your door I’m out front.

From: Rose Tico

Keep us posted okay??

From: Finn Gunner
For sure.

The rest of the texts in the chain are mostly the team throwing out suggestions of where she could be and generally freaking out as the time for their scheduled practice had rolled around and she was still nowhere to be found. Rey blows out a heavy breath and responds.

**From: Rey Sanderson**

*im SO SORRY! im ok i promise! my phone was off i didnt see any of this*

**From: Rose Tico**

*OH THANK GOD!!!! WE WERE SO WORRIED ABOUT YOU!!!*

**From: Finn Gunner**

*REY!! WTF GIRL WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN?*

**From: Rey Sanderson**

*its a long story but i promise ill explain when i get home*

**From: Finn Gunner**

*God. Ok. When will you be home?*

Rey glances at the clock. She still has about an hour left on her trip and then another fifteen minutes of driving once she actually gets back to San Diego, so she tells him that she’ll be home around noon and closes out of the chat.

Badly in need of a distraction, she opens up Twitter – only to be consumed by immediate regret.

When Rey had texted Ben that she was coming to see him, her initial idea had been to visit for only a couple of hours. She’d suggested that perhaps they could get lunch or hang out somewhere downtown. It was Ben who had suggested ditching the con altogether for the day, so Rey had assumed – that while some people might be a bit disappointed that their favorite streamer wasn’t signing autographs – his absence wouldn’t cause too big a fuss.

It turns out she was dead wrong.

Twitter is freaking out. Her feed is covered in posts with the hashtag “FindKyloRen”. It takes her a few minutes of deep breathing to calm the rising panic in her chest enough that she can actually read some of the tweets.

The wild speculation about what could have happened to Ben ranges from a cocaine bender to abduction and every single person on the planet seems to have something to add to the conversation.

Rey’s about to close out of the app, feeling overwhelmed and anxious, when she sees something that turns her veins to ice.

**John D. Branon @johndbomb**

*Well KyloRen’s not dead! I saw him with some chick at Scum and Villainy last night. Sorry for shit pic quality but does anyone know who this girl is? #FindKyloRen*
Attached to the tweet is a photo. It was clearly taken when they were curled up together in the booth at the bar and thankfully the picture quality is poor thanks to the dim red lighting of the establishment. Rey is tucked into his chest at this point, face mostly obscured by her hair and his arm but she knows, without a doubt, that if she were to show this picture to someone who knew her well, they would recognize her instantly.

“Bloody hell,” Rey whispers, hand flying up to cover her mouth.

_How could we have been so stupid, _she thinks, _why did I suggest that fucking place and why didn’t Ben shoot that idea down? At least one of us should have known better!_

She has _never_ been the kind of person to take careless risks; even when she was hustling her hardest to earn her way out of the UK, she’d always kept her head solidly on her shoulders. But the pull that she feels towards Ben defies both reason and common sense and apparently, in order to spend time with him, so does she.

Panic reaches out it’s familiar hand to grab her by the throat, fingers curling and choking. Rey fights it back. She _has_ to – she needs to think. Keeping this _thing_ with Ben a secret from her team has now officially backfired and if she doesn’t get ahead of it, it is going to bury her.

_I have to tell them_, she decides, _this picture isn’t going away and for better or for worse, they should hear it from me._

She mulls over the idea of confessing her real whereabouts in the group chat, but decides against it. The Resistance is still in the middle of a difficult place – as a team and in the Qualifiers – and telling them all that she and Ben Solo are… _whatever_ they are over text doesn’t seem like a great idea. So she resigns herself to having some deeply uncomfortable conversations and spends the rest of the journey home trying not to have a complete, anxious meltdown.

As awful as the train ride is, walking in her front door to find Finn and Poe in the living room, wearing identical looks of deep concern and upset, is actually way worse.

“Rey!” Finn says, leaping to his feet and practically running across the room to wrap her in a massive hug the second she steps through the door.

“We were so worried! Where were you?” he asks, pulling back to look her up and down, scanning for any sign of injury. “And don’t say you were with Gary because he said you weren’t with him _at all_ yesterday and—”

Finn breaks off and stares at the hoodie she’s wearing.

“What?” Rey asks, frowning as she tries to follow his sudden change of subject,

“The hoodie you’re wearing. It’s for a metal band called Vader… Peanut, _what happened_?” He sounds so genuinely distressed as he looks down into her eyes and Rey, for the third time this week, bursts into tears.

At this point, Poe, who has been observing them silently from the couch gets to his feet and comes over. He gently steers the two of them into the kitchen.

“Okay, okay,” he murmurs, “let’s get you some tea and then we can talk.”

“But, Poe—” Finn begins, and Poe cuts him off.
“Give her a second to breathe, babe,” he says, guiding Rey into one of the kitchen chairs and Finn into another.

Rey sniffs gratefully, wiping her eyes on the sleeves of the hoodie which have fallen down to cover her hands.

“God, sorry,” she says, once she’s capable of speech again, “I’m so sorry.”

“Are you okay?” Finn asks, reaching over to lay a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

She nods.

“Good,” says Poe from over by the stove where he’s set Rey’s kettle on to boil and is now pulling her box of imported tea bags down from the cabinet where she keeps them.

“You gave us a real scare,” Poe says, seriously, “and the only reason that we didn’t call the cops immediately is that they won’t let you report someone missing if they’ve been gone for under 24 hours.”

“I kept wondering if you’d gotten hit by the guy who’s been mugging people around here,” Finn says and he sounds so legitimately distressed by the idea that Rey is actually afraid that he’s going to start crying too.

She feels a tidal wave of guilt wash over her and she shrinks down into the hoodie in shame.

“I am so, so sorry,” she says, miserably. “I really never intended for you to worry. Things have been so bad online recently and I kind of… well. I turned my phone off for a while to get away from all the notifications. I forgot that would mean that you guys couldn’t get a hold of me either.”

She ducks her head so she doesn’t have to see the look of betrayal on Finn’s face.

The kettle begins to whistle and Poe takes it off the burner, pouring the steaming water into one of Rey’s chipped white and gold mugs.

He sets it in front of her then pours a cup for himself and Finn as well.

“Okay,” says Poe, once he’s joined them at the table, passing Finn his mug before he takes a seat.

“We know you’re an adult and you can make your own choices. We don’t need to know where you are 24/7 and you don’t have to share every detail of your life with us,” he says. “But. You are our teammate and more importantly our friend and you do owe us some explanation for why you vanished and missed practice. Do you want to tell us what happened?”

Rey takes a careful sip of her tea, burning her lips and tongue all the same, and sighs.

“Honestly?” she says, looking up at them, “I think I had a bit of a breakdown.”

Finn snorts. “Rey, I cherish you like my sister so please know this comes from the most loving place possible when I say: no shit.”

She scrunches her face up at him and he holds his hands up in surrender.

“I think the pressure got to me. I’ve been feeling like I was letting all of you down in the game recently and then the Sith Lords had their whole hate campaign going… and losing to them just sent me over the edge. I really, really needed to get away from everything for a while, you know?”
Finn and Poe share a glance, frowning.

“Rey,” Poe says, “We all knew about the Sith Lord stuff, we’ve all been getting it and I know that’s really hard to deal with when you’re not used to it. Hell, it still sucks even when you are used to it, but what gave you the idea that you were letting us down?”

She looks down at the mug clasped in her hands and sighs.

In hindsight, especially after her talk with Ben, she feels a bit foolish.

“To be honest,” she says, looking up once more, “I think it was just deep insecurity. All of you guys have been playing so much longer than I have, half of you have actually been professional players before too. And Striker is an important position. I felt like – as the newest and least experienced member of the team – any time a game went poorly, it had to be because of something I did. And once I got that idea in my head I just couldn’t get it out.”

Finn shakes his head, a look of sympathetic understanding dawning on his face.

“Peanut I–” he glances at Poe, who is wearing a matching expression, “–we had no clue. Why didn’t you say anything?”

Rey rubs the back of her neck, embarrassed.

“I was afraid that if I brought it up first, you’d all agree with me and kick me off the team,” she mumbles.

Poe snorts.

“Rey,” he says, “I adore you like Finn’s sister, so please know that this comes from a place of love too: that’s so dumb.”

“Hey,” says Finn, gently punching him in the arm, “you can’t just steal my lines!”

Rey swallows around the lump in her throat. She still has one last admission to make and it is the most difficult.

“I promise from here on out I’ll talk to you guys if I’m feeling insecure about my playing or my place on the team,” she says, “but there’s one last thing I have to tell you.”

She pauses and looks down at her hands clasped around her mug.

“Rey?” Finn prompts, and even without looking at him she can hear the frown in his voice.

“So when I said I needed to get away… I meant physically away, too. I… I went to LA yesterday, to visit a friend,” she says. “Someone I’ve been talking to basically since all of this stuff started, actually.”

“Okay…” Poe says slowly, “Is this the person you’re always texting?”

Rey nods and bites her lip.

Just do it, she thinks, quick, like ripping off a plaster.

“The person I went to see – my friend – was Ben Solo,” she says it in a rush then her eyes flick up to look at her teammates.
Finn and Poe are staring at her with matching expressions of wide-eyed shock.

“B… Ben Solo,” Finn sputters after a few seconds, “KyloRen… you… friends?”

“Rey I thought you hated him,” Poe says, still stunned. “How the hell did you go from that to running off to Los Angeles for a secret meet up?”

She’s half afraid that she’s just gonna start crying again, but she manages to keep it together.

“It happened by accident,” Rey says quietly. “I never blocked him so he messaged me one day and we started talking. He’s… different in private than he is on his streams.”

Poe begins shaking his head.

“No, Rey, I’ve known him for years. Remember, I used to work with his mom. Not to mention all the times I’ve played him in tournaments. I mean I never knew him well but… that guy is trouble,” he says.

Rey frowns at him, feeling suddenly irritated.

For all his talk about Rey being an adult who can make her own choices, there is something irritatingly paternalistic about Poe's tone that rubs her the wrong way. She’s got her issues, yes, but who doesn't? Rey has been looking out for herself since she was a child and she’s not about to let anyone – even her well intentioned team leader – tell her what to do now.

“Listen,” she says, more firmly than before, “I’m not telling you this because I’m asking for permission to be friends with him. I know all of you have friends on other teams; it’s not against the rules. I’m telling you because… because when we were hanging out, someone snapped a photo of us. And while we’re just friends, that photo makes it look like there’s something else going on.”

She pauses and stares down Finn and Poe. They both still look a little poleaxed but there is a shade of contrition about Poe’s face.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Finn asks, sounding a little hurt. “Did you not trust us?”

“No, of course not! I didn’t tell you because at first it wasn’t important and then there was never a good time. But I’m tired of keeping secrets from you,” Rey says.

“Since we’re here and talking and knowing the internet there’s about a fifty percent chance that this is going to go viral and ruin my life somehow, I thought it might be nice for my friends to know so they could have my back.”

There’s silence in the kitchen after Rey finishes speaking. The men exchange a silent glance, then look back at Rey.

“Okay,” Finn says. He raises both his eyebrows and his hands in a gesture that is something of an incredulous surrender. “I think the guy is the ultimate fuckboy and I don’t know what you see in him, but you’re right. It’s not our call to make for you. You’re my friend and I’m not gonna judge.”

Rey gives him a watery smile.

“Thank you,” she says.

They both turn to look at Poe, who is still regarding Rey silently with crossed arms. After a long moment he sighs and closes his eyes.
“Alright, alright,” he says, “I guess this could be worse: you could be friends with one of the Sith Lords or something.”

Rey pulls a face.

“Don’t even joke! I would never!” she says, indignantly.


Her stomach sinks. She’d forgotten, in the chaos and emotion of everything, that Luke was part of this equation too. She… really isn’t ready to talk to him about this yet.

“The team yes, Luke no. He… he really fucked Ben up. It took me ages to even get him to open up about it,” she says, bluntly. “I know a lot of that was family stuff, but I still really don’t want to talk to him about Ben. Apart from yesterday I’ve kept my friendship with him from impacting our team and I’d like to keep it that way. If I start talking to Luke about him…”

She trails off and shakes her head. The boys are looking at her like they don’t quite know how to refute her statement but neither one is particularly happy about it.

“I’ll tell him if it ever becomes a situation that messes with the team, okay?”

Finn and Poe share another long, meaningful glance but in the end Poe sighs, shrugs, and relents. The tension in the kitchen eases and Rey feels her own anxiety beginning to ebb away.

She’s just about to take another sip of her tea when Finn says, “Aha!” startling her and causing her to slosh some of her drink onto the table.

“What the hell, Finn,” she grouses, grabbing a paper towel off the roll in the center of the table to mop up the spill.

“I figured out the hoodie! It’s KyloRen’s, isn’t it?” Finn says, triumphantly.

This time it’s Poe and Rey who share a silent, meaningful glance before bursting into laughter.

To say that Snoke is angry would be the understatement of the century.

Snoke is so angry he does not actually call Ben. He has Adelaide do it – “because if Mr. Snoke has to hear your voice right now he’s going to murder someone”— and she instructs Ben that upon his return to New York he will be meeting with his manager to discuss the very serious consequences for ditching StarFall.

When asked where he was, Ben had decided that the simplest excuse was the best so he simply says he got blackout drunk at the cocktail party and spent the day sleeping it off.

When he finally gets Adelaide off the phone, he goes, with a great deal of trepidation, to check his notifications on Twitter. They’re usually hard to wrangle but today they are completely out of control.

And it is at this point that he discovers that in his absence, things have taken a truly alarming turn.
He’s trending on Twitter. In the last 24 hours he’s gained nearly 4,000 followers, there are 89 new private messages. He has to turn push notifications off on his phone because they are so numerous that they are actually causing the device to lag.

“Mother fucker,” he groans, closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose.

“You okay man?” asks his Uber driver.

“Fucking amazing,” he snaps, scrolling through tweet after tweet of people wondering where the hell he is or speculating on whether or not he has died. His mentions are a nightmare and he doesn’t even bother going into the “FindKyloRen” hashtag itself. The first few tweets in his notifications tell him everything he needs to know.

Sabine @Sabine_Wren

OMG MY FAVE STREAMER’S GONE MISSING!! I HOPE HE’S OKAY!!
HAVE YOU SEEN HIM??? #FindKyloRen

Bodhi Rook is at StarFall @YaFlyBoy

My bro Ben Solo has gone missing from StarFall Con in Los Angeles. If you’ve seen him please contact @StarFallCon! #FindKyloRen

Ralo Surrel @redddd11

*sees #FindKyloRen is trending, learns KyloRen has gone missing* FUCKING FINALLY! Hope he’s actually kicked it so we can get some REAL streamers up in here!!!

Mr. Muster @glenmuster1995

Wnet 2 starfall jsut 2 c kyleren but hes missing @StarFallCon i want my $ back!!
#FindKyloRen

Eyja Fjord - The First Order @Vulptexx

Thank you to everyone helping to look for @KyloRen! We’re all very worried about him so please let one of us on #theFirstOrder know if you hear anything! xx
#FindKyloRen

Ben rolls his eyes at the last tweet; Eyja’s words of concern as hollow as ever even in text form. He chews his lip furiously as he types out a quick tweet.

Ben Solo // TheFirstOrder @KyloRen

Jesus guys. I’m fine. You can all go back to worrying about important shit now.

Ben turns off his notifications, closes Twitter, and opens his texts with even more trepidation.

To: First Order Group Chat

From: Armitage Hux

FUCK YOU SOLO
From: Armitage Hux

YOU’D BETTER BE DEAD IN A GUTTER SOMEWHERE BECAUSE IF YOU’RE NOT THEN I’M GOING TO KILL YOU FOR THIS

From: Dopheld Mitaka

Hux, he could be hurt! Or worse! Maybe take it down a notch til we know what’s going on?

From: Eyja Fjord

That would be just fucking like him to die right before Championships.

From: Dopheld Mitaka

6 hours and still no word…

From: Phasma Scyre

I bet he’s blackout again like GalaCon two years ago.

From: Caide Steton

LOL

From: Caide Steton

he slept in a bathtub that time, right?

From: Eyja Fjord

We should have turned on the water and let him drown because Snoke’s fucking BITCH SECRETARY just called to say that we’re all on BEN FUCKING SOLO CLEANUP DUTY ON SOCIALS UNTIL THEY FIND HIM.

Ah, Ben thinks, that explains her tweet.

From: Armitage Hux

How do we always end up cleaning up his messes? This is such bullshit!

From: Dopheld Mitaka

Guys… can we PLEASE dial it down?

From: Caide Steton

chill dude

From: Caide Steton

bet he’ll show up soon
The last text in the chain was sent at 9:45 the night before and Ben would really love *not* to have to interact with any of these people right now, but that’s not really an option.

*From: Ben Solo*

Sorry to disappoint, I’m *not* dead.

*From: Dopheld Mitaka*

Are you okay???

*From: Ben Solo*

I’m fine.

*From: Phasma Scyre*

Wow how great for you. *Where the FUCK were you?*

*From: Ben Solo*

This con is a joke. Got drunk, slept it off. Didn’t realize everyone was going to get their fucking panties in a twist over it.

*From: Ben Solo*

Last I checked I’m still allowed to make my own choices.

*From: Eyja Fjord*

Yeah, not when Snoke is done with you, you won’t be.

*Armitage Hux is typing …*

Ben decides that he’s had enough of his teammates bullshit and closes his messenger app too.

There’s still most of a con day left so he puts a call into the guest liaison and asks if it’s worth it for him to come sit at his table. The man explains politely but firmly that if Ben sets foot in the convention center it will actually be a security hazard due to the stampede it’s likely to cause. So when the Uber drops him off at the Marriott, Ben goes immediately up to his room. Frustrated, irritated, and exhausted despite a great night’s rest, he flops face first down on the bed.

He notices that the pillow his face has landed in still smells like Rey’s shampoo and he lays there for a while, breathing in her scent. He’s torn between missing her and wishing that he’d just gotten on the train with her and gone south to San Diego and left all of this bullshit behind.

Ben wonders how it’s possible to go from never having laid eyes on someone to not being sure how he’s going to live without her in the space of a day, but that’s where he’s at.

Rey is… *amazing*. Like her handle suggests, she illuminates everything around her and he hadn’t realized how much he craved that until she was standing before him.

“God damnit,” he mutters.

*I’m so fucking screwed*, he thinks.
And this is just the emotional portion of this equation, it’s not even taking into account how unbelievably attracted he is to her.

Ben has had one short, unfulfilling, and volatile relationship in his life. He’s also had a couple of unsatisfying casual sexual encounters. But as a general rule, he does not look around and find himself physically attracted to people.

Honestly, even the idea of touching other people is enough to make his skin crawl.

With Rey, touching her had not just felt easy but almost necessary. His body had gravitated towards hers, seeking her out like he was under some sort of spell. Everything about Rey called to him like a siren song.

He’d tried hard to hold himself back, not wanting to overwhelm her or push too hard too fast, but honestly she’d seemed to be in the same boat as he was.

Kissing her was a really really terrible idea. It had crossed some sort of invisible, unspoken line that the two of them had drawn at the beginning of their day. And she hadn’t pushed him away or reacted negatively (she actually hadn’t said anything about it at all and he hadn’t brought it up this morning for fear of making everything suck even more) but he’s aware that things have changed now.

If she and the Resistance do manage to push through and they end up fighting it out at the Championships, he’s definitely going to be emotionally compromised about this whole thing.

How the fuck is he supposed to play at the top of his game when all he can think about is her eyes in the sunlight, and the softness of her body pressed against his, and the sound of his name on her lips, and the way she snores softly in her sleep, and–

“Jesus fucking Christ,” he mutters, rolling onto his back.

Between his pining and black clothing he’s one Evanescence t-shirt and a notebook full of bad poetry away from falling into emo teenager territory.

He shoves the maudlin thoughts away, but his brain, which is stuck on an endless cycle of thoughts about Rey, just fills the newly vacated space with a new batch about the next time he’ll be able to see her. If Rey and her team can make it to the Championships – and Ben really thinks that they can – then in just over a month, they’ll be in the same place once more.

In another glitzy, glittering hotel, another city of bright lights and hidden places where he can pull her aside and steal time with her. Feel her body against his, her skin under his hands.

He’s been doing his best to ignore the insistent ache in his groin, but as his mind wanders to the possibilities that Las Vegas might hold for them, his cock throbs inside his jeans.

Idle fantasies. That’s all it takes and he’s fully hard.

Ben closes his eyes, takes a deep breath and decides that yes, he is going to cross yet another line today. Thus far he’s managed to avoid jerking off to thoughts of Rey, though the temptation has undoubtedly been there since the very first time he saw her photo. It had just felt… wrong somehow. It still feels a little shameful. But misses her and wants her and he’s so far beyond shame at this point. If he can’t have her here, he’ll have her in his head.

He shucks his jeans and boxer-briefs off and lays back on the bed, fisting his cock in his hand. At this point it’s already leaking from the head. He runs his thumb across the slit, spreading the moisture around to help his dick slide through the circle of his fingers with greater ease.
He imagines grabbing the hem of the shirt she’d worn the night before, thinks about pulling it up over her head and baring her body to his hungry gaze.

In his head she’s wearing nothing but a pair of white panties; she doesn’t seem like the type who would go for overtly sexy clothing but that doesn’t matter to him. The clothes don’t matter: Rey, just Rey, is the best thing he can imagine.

He thinks about stepping into her space, feeling the heat radiating off her skin. He wonders how it would feel to slide his palms along the bare flesh of her waist, down over the curve of her hips and the swell of her ass and then back up to cup the softness of her bare breasts in his palms.

What it would be like to trace her nipples with his fingers, how she might gasp and moan if he were to bend forwards, to tease them with teeth and tongue until she’s begging and desperate.

In his mind he envisions dropping to his knees, her small hands holding onto his shoulders, as her hazel eyes watch him watching her. He can envision what it would be like to kneel before her, hands caressing her thighs, nudging them wider.

Ben strokes himself furiously, pressure building like an oncoming storm. He imagines sliding fingers into the waistband of her panties so he can drag them off her hips. Thinks of pressing his mouth to the soft sweetness at the apex of her thighs. He’s been sort of ambivalent about this act in the past but the idea of giving her pleasure for its own sake… well, he likes the way that sounds. He’s captivated by the idea of hearing her gasping his name as she falls apart, of worshiping her with fingers and tongue as she begs for him to give her more more more –

With a guttural moan, he comes all over his hand in a pathetically short time.

“Okay,” he tells himself, as he continues to lay on his bed, breathing hard and staring at the ceiling, “that’s out of your system. Now get your shit in order.”

He can’t afford to be distracted right now. Ben needs to get his head on straight if he’s going to go toe to toe with Snoke and come out on top.

Chapter End Notes

WE EARNED OUR RATING! *fireworks emoji x5*
I hope you guys enjoyed part two of my love letter to LA. It’s been my home for the last 3 years and this spring I’ll sadly be moving away. Every place that they go in LA is real, save for Scum & Villainy. A place with that name does exist but it’s actually a Star Wars themed bar in Hollywood. I moved it south east and changed it up a bit to suit my purposes because Star Wars doesn’t exist in this ‘verse.

If you're enjoying the fic so far, please consider sharing it with a friend! Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated and fuel my desire to write faster!

As usual, please feel free to come yell at me about this story on Twitter or Tumblr.
March IV

Chapter Notes

Holy shit guys! 1000+ kudos! Thank you so much!!! I am STILL behind on comments because my health has been extremely terrible but I read and TREASURE every one. There’s a lot to get through in this chapter so I’m not gonna ramble too much! Friendly reminder that the views of characters do not necessarily reflect views of the author.

Thank you to reylo-bot for the wonderful manips! Also if you’ve made something and I haven’t posted about it, I definitely missed it! Please hit me up and let me know where it is!

My beta Cyborgharpy is, as always, the BEST.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On Monday morning, Rey makes her team an amazing breakfast and tells them the truth. She had learned early on that people are usually more receptive to potentially dicey news when it comes hand in hand with food. It’s a tactic that has served her well and which she has employed liberally throughout her life.

“So I’m friends with KyloRen and I kind of went to LA to visit him this weekend because I was so stressed out about StarKiller and really needed a break,” she says, before setting a plate of pancakes onto the table next to a mountain of eggs and a platter of crispy bacon. “Anyone want syrup?”

Rose, Paige, and Jess’s faces are a study in comic incredulity. Poe and Finn, who have already heard the news don’t even pause in their chewing upon hearing it again.

“Listen, we’ve all been there. Sometimes you just need to go scratch an itch and only a bad decision will do, right?” Jess says, after the shock wears off, then a gleeful grin spreads across her face, “Ben Solo, though… You aim high girl! Was he good, at least? He’s way too aggro for my taste but a dude that big’s gotta be packing.”

Rey turns as red as the inside of the watermelon she’s just pulled out of the fridge to begin cutting up.

“It’s not like that, Jess!” Rey yelps, as her traitorous brain latches onto the words and goes very bad, very unhelpful places.

“Sure it isn’t,” Jess says, winking. “But really I’m just glad that you’re back safe and ready to play.”

“What’s he like?” Rose asks, frowning. “I’d always just thought he was the East Coast version of a Sith Lord.”

“He’s really not.” Rey says, “I think he has a lot of stuff going on but he’s really… I dunno, He’s smart and he’s actually funny underneath all the antics. And he’s been very supportive while I’ve been trying to figure out my place in all of this. He kind of talked me through my breakdown.”

She brings the cut watermelon over to the table and sets it down.

“He helped me understand that the way I’d been thinking of my role on the team was actually
damaging my ability to play well with you guys. I feel like I get it now.”

“Well, I’ve never liked the guy, but if he’s being a good friend to you then who are we to judge?” Paige says slowly.

Rey has to turn back to the stove, busying herself with the sausages in the frying pan so that her teammates don’t see how misty-eyed she’s getting.

*I am so lucky to have these people,* she thinks.

Later that day, Rey has a long talk with Luke about the things that had been weighing on her prior to her trip to LA. She’s careful not to mention either LA or the fact that she went there to see Luke’s nephew, though. She couldn’t quite articulate it to Finn and Poe, but after having heard Ben talk about his time with Luke, she can’t bring herself to trust him completely.

He seems nice and unassuming enough… but Rey has already put her faith in Ben. Even with the knowledge that things between family were likely much different than the purely professional relationship that Luke has with the Resistance, Rey has a hard time *not* taking what Ben has told her into consideration.

The team practices for six hours and it’s good. Rey feels some of the ease and comfort that they had all experienced the first time they played returning. By the time they’re done for the day, everyone is in high spirits and it seems that things are once more returning to normal for the Resistance.

She is so relieved she thinks she might cry.

The only sour note is that her phone remains conspicuously silent. Ben hasn’t texted her, and she’s not quite sure what she’s supposed to say to him right now either. It has only been a day and a half since she left him in LA but it feels like an eternity.

Eventually she just sends a ‘hey’ and waits. He’s alive and back in New York, she knows, because he’s posted a few times on Twitter. But he doesn’t respond to her message.

Rey obsessively checks her texts, then Discord, then the Far Galaxy app over and over throughout the day, hoping for contact and growing more anxious with every hour that passes with none.

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Snoke’s personal office occupies the south-western corner of the top floor of the Snoke Industries building.

*What a stupid fucking name for a company,* Ben thinks as he sits in one of the uncomfortable, mid-century modern chairs, made of metal and hard leather, across from his manager’s desk. According to Snoke, this chair is something called a Wassily chair. It’s an original piece of furniture from the famed Bauhaus School in Pre-World War II Germany, an important relic. A piece of history. An incredible status symbol because each one is worth nearly $30,000. Snoke has four.

It is the most uncomfortable fucking thing that Ben has ever sat on in his entire life.

Snoke stands behind his desk, hands clasped behind his back as he looks out the window, surveying the New York City skyline. He doesn’t say anything for a long time, so Ben remains quiet as well.
“So,” Snoke says, after the silence between them has stretched to the point where it’s beginning to drive Ben up the wall, “What do you have to say for yourself?”

“Not much, really,” Ben says, “I told Adelaide what happened. I drank too much, I slept it off. I really didn’t think it was that big a deal. The panels I missed had four other people on each of them and–”

“That’s the story that you’re going with, hm?” Snoke interrupts, turning around to pin Ben with this piercing gaze.

Snoke is somewhere in his early fifties. Ben’s not quite sure exactly how old he is, just that he was young when he took over the company twenty years before and his time at the top has not been easy. He’s completely bald and he has the look of a man who does not sleep much. Dark shadows dwell perpetually beneath his eyes and there are two nasty, poorly healed scars carved into his cheek and forehead from the removal of some cancerous spots a few years back.

He’s difficult to look at.

“I don’t know what to tell you; there was a lot of alcohol at the party–” Ben begins but snoke cuts him off once more.

“How dare you lie to me!” Snoke snarls at him, “You ran off with Rey Sanderson and you were foolish enough to get caught on camera!”

Ben jerks back as if he’s been slapped.

“Wh-what?” He manages to sputter out.

“Oh yes,” Snoke says, pointing at a folder on his desk, “go ahead and open that and then please continue to tell me about how you were drunk in your hotel room the whole time.”

Ben grits his teeth and flips open the file folder. Sure enough, there’s a photo of him and Rey from Scum & Villainy. Her face is mostly obscured and Ben can’t figure out how Snoke managed to put the pieces together to come up with the correct answer.

This cannot be happening, Ben thinks. Staring at the picture, he feels like the floor beneath him has opened up and he’s plummeting towards the street. He hasn’t spoke to Rey in days. He can’t afford to be distracted, not now, not when he’s focusing all of his energy on trying to slip firmly back into his KyloRen persona. He’d thought – foolishly, he now realizes – that if he could just play this cool enough he might actually get by unscathed.

“How did you know?” Ben asks.

Snoke actually laughs at that.

“Because it’s you, and I know you better than you know yourself. Who else would it be?”

A sneer curls his lips, pulling at his ruined cheek.

“Your teammates have been very helpful in informing me about the fact that you’re practically obsessed with this little nuisance. Hux told me you spent an hour when you were supposed to be watching your own footage watching the Resistance play and looking up her statistics. He also mentioned that you’ve developed a new and interesting texting habit since all of this began.” Snoke continues, “Her image is public domain so it wasn't hard to figure out what she looks like. The answer was obvious and your lack of denial has confirmed my suspicions.”
He levels Ben with a furious stare.

“So tell me right now why I shouldn’t just drop you from the First Order for this act of flagrant, not to mention stupid, disobedience?”

Ben had known that retribution was coming, but this punishment seems disproportionate to the crime. True fear lances through Ben at Snoke’s words. He can’t lose his place on the team. No matter how much strife they cause him, Ben needs the First Order. Without StarKiller every part of his carefully constructed life will fall apart. And he’s not sure that anything will be left in the aftermath.

Unfortunately, fear has always had the side-effect of making him angry. And being angry around Snoke never ends well for Ben.

He’s on his feet before he even registers that he’s moved. It takes literally every ounce of strength he possesses to keep from leaping across the table and decking his manager across his scarred face.

“You won’t fucking fire me,” Ben snarls, “who else would take my place?”

“I would do it in an instant,” Snoke replies, “I would rather have the First Order miss the Championships this year than have you humiliate my team any further. I hold all the cards here, not you. How could you, when I know how badly you need to win. How much it eats you alive when you lose. You’re all talk and this is your last chance.”

Ben panics.

“I’ve been playing her,” he says, his brain is going a hundred miles an hour as he tries to cobble together a viable excuse. “She means nothing to me. She’s just a rival I couldn’t figure out how to beat. I saw an opportunity to learn about her weaknesses and I took it.”

“If that was the case then why didn’t you inform me first?” Snoke demands, eyeing him with narrowed suspicion.

“Because I thought you’d say no. I wanted to come back with something viable to use,” Ben says.

“That is the most idiotic thing I’ve ever heard. Have you forgotten what exactly your place is in all of this?” Snoke says, “You don’t get to make decisions. I point, you shoot. That’s how this works.”

Ben looks down at the desk, remaining mutinously silent.

“So did you learn anything or did you just cause me an enormous PR headache for nothing?” Snoke asks.

“She’s… she’s young,” Ben begins, trying to force his chaotic brain back into some semblance of order. Without his rage as a deflection tactic, Ben is actually a shit liar so he opts for embellished half truths. “And very new to the world of professional play. She has no concept of strategy – everything is pure instinct with her.”

Snoke makes a disgusted noise.

“No! I also learned that she’s nothing without her team. And she cracks easily under pressure. She doesn’t have what it takes to make it as a Pro long term,” Ben says, putting as much disdain into his tone as he can manage. Lying about Rey makes him feel sick but what choice does he have?
Snoke shakes his head.

“Congratulations: you’ve damaged your stock in the eyes of your sponsors irreparably for nothing. I’ve never even met the bitch and I could have told you all that,” he spits. “She’s nothing more than a distraction. This little side project ends now. No more obsessing, no more games, no more secret meetings. You don’t even get to think about her from here on out.”

He crosses his arms, bunching up the gaudy gold tie he’s wearing today and regards Ben with furious eyes.

“I own you. Everything you are today is what I’ve made you. I built you up from nothing. I’ve given you a team that wins Championships, I have given you the best technology that money can buy, and every last resource that you could possibly need to maintain your status at the top of this world.”

Snoke steps forwards.

“You are rich, you are successful, you are living your dream without your pathetic family holding you back,” he says, lips curling in disgust. “And all I ask of you in exchange, is that you represent my company and my team in a fashion that keeps both of us in good standing with our… very generous sponsors that make this a lucrative endeavour for the both of us. That’s not much to ask, now is it?”

Ben’s hands tighten into fists, blunt nails digging crescents into his palms.

“No,” he grinds out through clenched teeth.

“Of course not,” Snoke replies. His voice is smooth and calm, with a deadly edge. “Now sit down, so we can finish this.”

Ben wavers for a second, remaining on his feet.

“Sit down, Solo. I won’t ask again,” Snoke says, low and dangerous.

He forces himself back into the chair, feeling sick to his stomach. Snoke has him by the throat and they both know it.

“I am finished cleaning up the messes you’ve been making as you piss all over your own career,” Snoke says, shaking his head as he drops into his high backed leather chair.

“This is your last chance,” he says. “Fail me again and that will be the end of your StarKiller career. I will kick you off the team so fast your head will spin, and I’ll hold your professional contract until your dying day. KyloRen will fade into obscurity and so will you.”

Ben’s heart leaps into his throat. There’s a flinty promise in his manager’s pale blue eyes and he has no doubt that Snoke means every word.

When he had first signed on with Snoke, he’d been poor and struggling to keep his head above water on his meager streaming income, without the aid of his family’s support. Snoke’s offer – the money, the sponsors, the gear – had seemed too good to be true. In retrospect, of course it was.

But at 21, desperate and hungry, it had been a perfect trap.

The contract he’d signed was a devil’s bargain, riddled with clauses that granted Snoke nearly complete control over Ben’s career. Everything from his right to play as part of a professional StarKiller team to the percentages of his tournament earnings that could be penalized for contract...
violations (as decided by Snoke, of course) were firmly in his manager’s hands.

Hindsight is always 20/20 and these days Ben would never sign a contract like this. But that doesn’t help him now.

He signed his soul away a decade ago and he’s trapped forever.

“Am I making myself clear?” Snoke asks.

“As crystal,” Ben replies.

“Good,” Snoke says. “Now let’s talk specifics.”

In order to make reparations for StarFall, Ben’s pay is docked 5%, the whole team is sentenced to extra long practice hours – to work on the communication skills you’re so clearly lacking, Snoke tells him.

And worst of all, Ben finds himself signed up to go make nice with everyone he pissed off.

Over the next few weeks he will be spending any free time that he has between practice and matches wining and dining sponsor reps, as well as the members of the StarFall board who happen to live in New York. Ben is expected to somehow be both the KyloRen that they want to see and also to put on an apologetic, happy-to-be-of-service act.

Seeing as how those two things are like oil and water, these dinners are sure to be something of a horror show.

But as he rides the elevator down to the ground floor of the Snoke Industries building, he thinks about Rey in his arms and the way she looked, smiling in the sunlight high above L.A. And Ben thinks that no matter what shit he’s being forced to eat right now, he’d do it again for her in a heartbeat.

When the text finally appears on her screen with the ding of her text tone, Rey reads the message so many times that she feels like it’s been burned into her retinas.

Ben Solo

Snoke knows.

It’s the first contact she’s had from him in four days, the longest stretch since they’d begun talking for real. Another message joins the first a few seconds later.

Ben Solo

Sorry for the radio silence, I’ve been trying to do crisis management over here.

Rey Sanderson

was it the picture?

Ben Solo
Yeah. You saw it too, huh?

Rey Sanderson

yah :/ i saw it on the way home.

Ben Solo

I unfortunately only learned about it when Snoke was shoving it in my face.

Rey Sanderson

fuck! it was so heavily shared that i didnt even stop to think that u might not see it

Rey Sanderson

this is all my fault

Rey Sanderson

scum & villainy was my idea

Ben Solo

It’s not your fault.

Ben Solo

I knew it was a risk to go and agreed anyway.

Rey Sanderson

still i feel bad :( 

Rey Sanderson

what does this mean for us?

Ben Solo

Trouble, honestly. He’s ordered me to cut off all contact with you.

Rey Sanderson

so what that shitty asshole gets to tell u who u can be friends with now?

Ben Solo

It’s not that simple, Rey.

Rey Sanderson

it is tho… is he telling u that we cant be friends?
I mean yes…

Rey Sanderson

:(((((((

why does he even get a say?

Ben Solo

Because the First Order is not like the Resistance. It’s a dictatorship, not a democracy. Snoke’s word is law.

Rey Sanderson

so are u just gonna stop being my friend now? does this mean everything in la was meaningless?

Ben Solo

No, Rey. It means we’re going to have to be more careful.

Ben Solo

Not even Snoke could make me stop talking to you.

Despite the fact that the logical part of her brain is warning her nothing good can come of this, Rey can’t fight the thrill she feels upon reading his words.

Rey Sanderson

good because if he ever tried to make u… id fight him

Ben Solo

Haha he wouldn’t know what hit him.

After that, they text and FaceTime as often as possible but both of them are so busy that their interactions are usually limited to stolen moments late at night.

Even with the knowledge that what they are doing is absolutely against the rules and could very well lead to disaster, their chemistry is undeniable. Things have fundamentally changed between them in the wake of LA.

It begins slowly. Rey knows on her end (and suspects strongly on Ben’s) that neither of them have a lot of experience with this. Being open about feelings, being vulnerable emotionally, is not something that comes to them naturally. But there’s an undeniable current of want between them. And they are helpless in the face of it.

Somewhat surprisingly, Ben is the first one to cross the line into actual flirting. She sends him a picture – a selfie of her wearing his hoodie and sticking her tongue out, captioned with ‘srry m8 its mine now’. His response is swift:
Ben Solo

You look cuter in it than I ever did. Guess you can keep it.

Ben Solo

But only if I get to keep you.

Her heartbeat goes supersonic and Rey flails around on her bed for about five minutes, hyperventilating and making a high pitched, gleeful sound before she is calm enough to respond.

Rey Sanderson

if u promise to feed me well im urs

It’s game on after that. They flirt shamelessly with each other. It remains fairly innocent but at this point, Rey’s pretty sure that Ben talking about the StarKiller patch notes could make her feel hot and bothered.

Ben Solo

It’s fucking cold right now. I’m trying to sleep but my bed is freezing.

Ben Solo

Wanna come be my space heater?

Messages like that are nearly enough to do her in.

They dance around labeling what the thing between them actually is, as if by not putting a name to it, they can protect this new, fragile thing from the reality of their situation.

All the same, texting and FaceTiming are no substitute for the real deal, and now that Rey knows what it’s like to have him within arms reach, she misses him like crazy.

The only thing that keeps her from sinking into a full depression is the fact that she is a woman on a mission.

She wants to get to the Championships more than she’s wanted anything in her entire life.

The fact that she’ll be able to see Ben again is a huge part of it, for sure, but ever since coming back from LA Rey has felt the drive to compete – to play, to win – coursing through her veins once more. Their time together has re-ignited the flame inside of her heart that had been on the verge of going out.

Gaming is what she does. And she does it well.

So she works hard, and gives everything she can to her team all day before crashing into bed at night.

If she wears Ben’s Vader hoodie all the time – as though it’s not laughably too big for her and decidedly not her style – and dreams about his hands on her body and his lips pressed against hers, that’s nobody’s business but her own. Her team says nothing about said hoodie but Rey catches them exchanging glances when they think she’s not looking.
Ben’s teammates are at his throat from the second he steps back into the training facility. Phasma gets so mad the first time he speaks to her in person that she actually crushes a Monster Energy Drink can in her hand, spraying the entire kitchen with sticky-sweet liquid. The screaming match they have makes the glasses rattle in the cabinets.

The First Order ends up doing a few days of practice from their home gaming rigs after that to allow everyone to cool off before their next Qualifier games.

On Thursday Eyja finally decides to stop pretending that she can’t hear Ben when he speaks and confronts him directly over voice chat.

“So. Was it worth it?” She asks, coolly.

“What?” Ben replies, glancing away from StarKiller to frown at his open Discord window.

“Was getting your dick wet really worth how much we all hate you for this shit?” Eyja replies.

“Yeah Ben,” Mitaka says, sounding miserable, “I hate to agree but you’re being really selfish lately. Every time you pull something like this, Snoke punishes us too and you just don’t seem to care.”

“Fuck you. It’s not like I went to see her for fun,” he fires back.

“I don’t think I believe you,” Hux chimes in. “You and Miss ReyOfLight looked pretty cozy in that photo I saw.”

Ben feels his anger uncoiling again as his teammates pick at him, digging their sharp little noses into the raw wounds that Snoke had cut in him only days before.

“You want the truth?” he snaps, desperate to end the conversation and move on to anything else. He resorts to his old standby: a good old fashioned KyloRen rant. “I went to see her because I needed to know how to beat her. I convinced her that I liked her and I’ve been playing her for weeks. She’s so pathetic and desperate that she just bought it all and spilled her guts to me. Now I know her weaknesses like the back of my fucking hand.”

He channels his anger at his teammates into his words, pushing all the venom and disdain into his tone that he can muster. His voice climbs in volume as he goes, until he’s all but screaming into his mic.

“She means nothing to me; she’s a fucking professional irritation and I don’t give a shit about her. The next time we go toe to toe I will destroy her, her team, and anyone else who stands in my way! Including you fucking shitheads if you don’t learn to mind your own business!”

The barbed words almost sting his throat on the way out and Ben’s not sure if he hates himself more for saying these things about Rey – even if they are to protect her in the long run – or for being able to come up with vitriol like this so easily. Who is he that he can just ad-lib this shit about the only person he gives a shit about?

There’s silence on the line for a few seconds and Ben waits, heart in his throat, for a reply.

Phasma laughs.

“Wow,” she says, “I’m actually a little impressed.”
“Me too!” Eyja says, “Personally I thought that you’d lost your edge after she beat you all those times. But I guess she isn’t carrying your balls around in her purse after all.”

“I don’t buy it. If this was all part of some clever plan, then why is Snoke punishing you – and us by extension?” Hux asks, suspiciously.

“Because I didn’t tell him first,” Ben says, as though he’s speaking to a particularly unintelligent child. “He doesn’t like it when his puppets dance without his say-so.”

“I mean, you’re not wrong,” Caide says.

“Why didn’t you tell us at least?” Phasma asks. “Might have been nice to get a heads up about the incoming shitstorm.”

“Because every time I so much as sneeze in a way you don’t like, you go tattle to Snoke,” Ben shoots back. “I was trying to keep this on lockdown. And then once I got back you all had already decided that you knew my motivations so what was even the point of talking to you?”

“Hmm,” Phasma replies, but she lets the subject drop.

“Still can’t believe you didn’t seal the deal on that one man,” Caide says, “she’s got that up-tight, repressed school girl thing going on but I bet she’s wild in the sack.”

“Can we talk about anything else?” Ben snaps, blood boiling and self control unraveling fast. “All I’ve heard about for days is ReyOfLight and if I have to hear anything else about her I’m going to punch something.”

“I almost feel bad for that poor little thing,” Eyja says, “Too dumb to know that she was being played by the big bad KyloRen. I bet she’d be heartbroken if she ever learned the truth.”

Eyja’s voice is cheerful and bright with just the tiniest hint of mirth. It’s not an unusual statement by any means but… there’s something about her tone that makes the hair stand up on the back of Ben’s arms. Before he can respond, the game they’re loading into finds enough players to fill out the other team and the screen blinks over to the Hero selection menu and they’re all distracted from Ben’s drama.

He actually can’t believe that this ruse has now gotten by both Snoke and his teammates but he’s not going to push it. At this point his best hope is to keep his temper in check and pray that something big and interesting happens to someone else on the team and draws everyone’s attention away from him.

His teammates ease off of him a little after that, though the long practice hours leave all of them feeling grouchy and uncharitable. Most of their interactions after that are limited to snappish callouts in the game.

It’s a bad few weeks, maybe the worst since Luke was managing him and his parents were splitting up. But despite all of the First Order’s internal strife, they play incredibly. They advance to the Championships with ease, winning 12 of their 15 Qualifiers.

When the last Victory screen on their final match pops up, Ben sags, boneless back into his gaming chair, listening to his team and the crowd going crazy around him. Even though he’s been working his ass of to get here, the thrill of the win almost doesn’t even register. All Ben can think is that – so long as the Resistance can pull through and win the rest of their games – in two weeks time, he’ll be with Rey again and none of the bullshit will matter.
The Resistance wins their next four matches in a surprise upset that StarKiller Daily declares to be “the greatest comeback of this year’s Qualifiers”. Everyone who even remotely cares about StarKiller watches their progression with stunned disbelief as the Resistance does their best to prove that their first few matches were not – in fact – flukes.

Going into their last game against the Orange County Asteroids, a team who is sitting at three victories and twelve losses, they are in exceptionally high spirits.

They stride into the ballroom that they have grown so familiar with over the last five weeks, waving at the audience, pausing to take pictures with fans and to shake hands with the Far Galaxy staff members who have run every one of their Qualifiers and seen them ride the emotional rollercoaster from the highest heights to the lowest lows and back again.

And Rey feels pretty damn good. She feels proud. She thinks about the first time someone ever made her feel inferior for being a girl in a game and how far she has come since then. Ben had been right, when he told her to stop valuing the opinions of the internet trolls like the Sith Lords. They are the same small and petty people who have always been around and who she has always risen beyond by the power of sheer skill and determination.

There are people in the audience holding signs with her name on them, cheering as they watch the Resistance walk into the room to take their place at their gaming stations for one last game.

She beams. Just being here is a victory in its own right.

They settle into their chairs, doing mic checks and stretching their hands and wrists in preparation for the match ahead.

“Welcome to the San Diego Resistance’s final qualifying game for the 2018 StarKiller Championships! Today they will be facing off against the Orange County Asteroids. The scores as they stand are: the Resistance with eight wins and six losses and the Asteroids with three wins and twelve losses,” He turns away from the audience to observe the team, “The first match begins in five, four, three, two, one…!”

The game launches. Rey selects Millenia, watching as her teammates lock in their Heroes and then the screen flashes, revealing that they will be playing on the Archeon Starfield map, inside of a hollowed out moon. It's a decent pick with lots of open chambers that make Milly’s flight a valuable asset, though Rey reminds herself that she’s going to have to be very careful about the tight hallways and corners where she might find herself trapped.

When the familiar voice of StarKiller’s announcer declares “Battle Royale on Archeon Starfield Ready? Fight!” Rey leaps into action, team falling into place behind her as they spread out across the map to begin their work.

The Asteroids are a fairly middle of the road team. They are not bad enough to make her almost feel bad for just crushing them, but they are also not good enough to be a real challenge. Their Striker is always slower on the uptake than Rey and she has no trouble at all getting the footholds established or the Objective set up. They win the first match in a decisive blaze of glory as Rose uses Solara’s Ultra to resurrect Poe’s Fulminator, who promptly kills four members of the other team.

Match two is a little rougher. The Ahch-To map is much more spread out and the cave portions give
the Asteroids more places to hide. It’s very close but the enemy Fang manages to take Rey out with a headshot when she’s on the objective, costing the Resistance precious seconds that allow the other team to just barely beat them to the finish line.

“It’s okay guys,” Poe says, over the headset, “we’ve got this. Last match and then we’re there.”

Rey, who had played Umbran in the last match, just to switch things up a little and keep the Asteroids on their toes, goes back to Millenia for their final match.

“I’ll be stuck to you like glue this time,” Rose says, “you set us up and I’ll keep you fighting!”

She holds out a fist and Rey bumps it.

“No one I’d rather have in my pocket,” she replies.

Then the screen flashes over to the intro and all six of them groan in unison.

It’s fucking Jakku.

“Not Jakku,” Finn moans.

“Keep it together,” says Jess, “We’ve had comp matches on here before and it’s been fine. Don’t freak out.”

They all make various noises of assent and the game begins.

True to her word, Rose stays tight on Rey as they speed through the Starship Graveyard. Rey battles and takes down the enemy Striker fairly early on, her disorienting blasts keeping the other player from being able to target effectively. And as the match moves from the first to the second stage, things are going well.

“Libertine coming in hot from the freighter,” Paige calls out, and Rey and Rose move as a unit to clear the area so that they don’t get stuck dealing with Libertine’s absurdly high hitpoints.

“Fuck, they have a V-19 on top of the engine room. He’s sniping and keeping us from coming to back you guys up. Can you come around to the south and try to get the bots cleared out of the bomber so we can come at him from the other side?” Poe asks.

“On it,” Rey says, already in motion. She slips out the back exit of the room, Rose trailing after her. They shoot forwards across the dead zone: a flat, open expanse of desert that has little to no cover.

Just as they are about to enter the derelict bomber, she spots both of the enemy team’s Offense players trying to hide inside.

“Change of plans, it’s occupied,” she says, “We’re going to head to the command deck. We don’t have enough time for a long battle here. I need to finish getting the objective set up. Come back up in there as soon as you can, Finn.”

She and Rose turn for the entrance to the massive, hulking starship that makes up the majority of this map, just as the enemy offensive line catches sight of them and begins to give chase. They race into the ship, dodging shots.

And suddenly she’s stuck. Millenia cannot move and no matter what Rey does, her character remains frozen. It’s just for a few seconds but that’s enough.

“Shit, I’m glitching!” She curses, “Rose, get out of here!”
But Rose, who was sticking so close to Rey’s side, gets taken out by the enemy Lothal with a few well placed hits and Rey watches three fourths of her health disappear as the Trident’s Triple Blast Ultra shreds through her.

“Damn!Respawning in five in the lift, be right there,” Rose says.

That attack knocks Millenia free though and the second she can move again, Rey activates the hero’s flight and takes off into the air.

She steers Millenia into the command deck through a huge crack in the ceiling, dropping down right on the objective and begins shooting as soon as she has a clear line of sight on the orb.

“Shielding you now,” Rose says as her Solara rounds the corner into the room and begins buffing Rey.

“Got the V-19, everyone fall in to the objective!” Finn calls.

Rey watches as the shields around the orb she’s targeting slowly come down and excitement rises within her. They’re so, so close.

The remainder of the Resistance trickles into the room from various entrances, taking up guard positions.

The shield is almost gone.

There’s a flicker of movement at the top of her screen and Rey glances up, just in time to watch the enemy Coronet flying in through the same crack in the ceiling that Rey had flown through and deploying all of her bombs.

Her screen flares bright with the explosions and the Kill Tracker pings.

*Corellian Eliminated PoeHotDameron with Bombardier*

*Corellian Eliminated TicoTock with Bombardier*

*Corellian Eliminated PaigeSix with Bombardier*

*Corellian Eliminated FN2187 with Bombardier*

*Corellian Eliminated Testor with Bombardier*

Rey, who is still freshly shielded watches in horror as her entire team is taken out and Millenia’s health drops to almost nothing. She’s still firing at the shield, praying that she can hold on for five more seconds, but just as she thinks that maybe, just maybe she’s going to do it, Correllian shoots her with Coronet’s gun. Millenia falls. The Asteroids claim their objective.

The defeat screen flashes up on all of their monitors.

They’ve lost.

Numbly, Rey slides her headset off and sets it down on the table. She feels hollowed out and empty. Not in the way that she had felt after losing to the Sith Lords. This time it’s like she’s so tired that she has no more energy left to even feel bad. The announcer is saying something, but Rey isn’t really hearing it. She wants to go back to the green room and text Ben. She wants to go home and sleep for a week.
She starts to get up when Finn grabs her hand and shakes his head.

“We gotta wait for them to announce the final rankings and then we can leave,” he says quietly. “It won’t be long now.”

She stays put, chest tight.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, thank you for your patience! We have finally received the adjusted rankings for the 2018 StarKiller Western Bracket Qualifiers,” the announcer says after what feels like a hundred years but is probably closer to five minutes. A hush falls over the room.

“The teams that will be moving on to the Championships are as follows: In first place with eleven wins and four losses are the San Francisco Sith Lords, in Second place are the Los Angeles Nightsisters with ten wins and five losses, in third place is Los Angeles's Kessel Run with nine wins and six losses. For the last slot, there were five teams who tied with eight wins and seven losses.”

He pauses to look down at the tablet in his hands then looks back out at the crowd again.

“In the case of a tie between teams we look at the number of individual matches that each team won to determine their order in the ranking. With twenty nine match victories – actually the most in the bracket – I give you the fourth team that will be moving on to the Championships in Las Vegas: the San Diego Resistance!”

There’s a roaring in her ears as everyone in the audience leaps to their feet and begins screaming and cheering.

Rey’s mouth falls open in shock. Somehow, against the odds, they’ve done it. They’re going to the Championships.

Chapter End Notes

I AGONIZED about this chapter. I know there’s a lot of heavy shit in here now that we’re finally getting into the real dark side of Ben’s life. I’m posting this and running off to go get a bunch of honestly terrifying medical testing done. Maybe leave me a comment and let me know what you think to help keep me company today?

If you're enjoying the fic so far, please consider sharing it with a friend! Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated and fuel my desire to write more!

As usual, please feel free to come yell at me about this story on Twitter or Tumblr.
March V

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for your continued support of this story and for all your kind words and messages about my health. I won’t belabor it too much here because it’s not really the place, but I’ve been sick for a long time and I’m finally starting to get some answers for why that is. They’re not the answers I want but they’re better than a giant question mark. This story has been something of a lifeline for me over the last few months and I can’t express what it means that it’s helping so many of you guys get through the week too. I am hopelessly behind on responding to comments, but I read and treasure each one. Love you all lots and lots.

Notes!
1. If you’ve ever wanted to meet me in person and you will be in Southern California next weekend, I’ll be at Wondercon! If you’ll be there, holla at me.
2. My beta Cyborgharpy not only CRUSHED the editing on this chapter but she also wrote FIC FOR THIS FIC!!! Please go read Dreaming in Digital -1 which is some PHENOMENAL SMUT set in chapter 6 because she is the hero that we needs but don’t deserve.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ben frowns heavily looking at the messages on his screen. The words are in English but they don’t make any fucking sense.

Direct Message From: Cand0r

@Cand0r

Hey bro, hear you stole my wife at starfall

@Cand0r

Which is impressive! When did you invent teleportation?

@Cand0r

Because I could have sworn we were home watching Battlestar Galactica on the couch that night lmao

Cassian Andor of Atlanta’s Rogue One is one of Ben’s oldest acquaintances from the gaming world. Ben might even call him a friend if the two of them ever actually talked about anything deeper than gaming and general internet shit. Ben actually gets along well with a few members of the Atlanta team. They frequently end up at the same tournaments and conventions and are usually down for a chill night of drinking.

Cassian finishes off his message chain with a link to one of the more popular StarKiller fan forums and Ben clicks on it with no small amount of trepidation. The only thing that Ben doesn’t like about Cassian is that it’s always a little bit of a gamble to open his links. He once sent Ben to a gallery of
unnervingly realistic fetish fan art starring members of the pro StarKiller scene and Ben still hasn’t quite recovered.

This time it’s thankfully not anything meriting brain bleach, but it’s still… a lot.

*GameScope / Far Galaxy / StarKiller / Pro Players / KyloRen MIA at StarFall Con!*

*Page: 1,2,3,...,6,7,8*

*KyloFan18*

Responding to JDBomb: “[img link] Posted this on Twitter too. Anyone figure out our mystery girl’s ID yet?”

Can’t beleive some s1utty b1tch actually stole kylo from me!! So heartbroken!!!!

*[MOD] Swoopit*

Responding to KyloFan18

Reminder that intentionally bypassing the profanity filter repeatedly is a bannable offense, as are verbal attacks against people. Please refer to the community guidelines if you need a refresher on either of these things.

Ben rolls his eyes. There has always been a strange contingent of his fanbase that – despite his personality – is still madly in love with him. They’re the ones who stalk him at cons and leave creepy comments on everything he posts. For the most part he just ignores them; unlike some streamers who are more than happy to use their influence to generate an endless stream of hookups, Ben really wishes these people would just leave him the hell alone.

*going4broke*

Responding to JDBomb: “[img link] Posted this on Twitter too. Anyone figure out our mystery girl’s ID yet?”

Knowing Kylo, she’s gotta be a StarKiller girl.

*tanksalot*

Responding to going4broke: “Knowing Kylo, she’s gotta be a StarKiller girl.”

The girl in the photo could literally be any chick with brown hair why are you so sure she’s a SK girl?

*xxSpaceBabexXx*

Responding to tanksalot: “The girl in the photo could literally be any chick with brown hair why are you so sure she’s a SK girl?”

I mean it’s common f****** knowledge that Ben doesn’t give a shit about anyone whos not involved with SK. He’s said it 100 times on his stream.

Also lets check the facts. 1, this happened at StarFall (a gaming convention where the biggest property represented was StarKiller). 2, this was taken at Scum and Villainy which is nerdy as f***. No normie girl would want to go there. 3, USE YOUR
Ah, Ben thinks, realizing why Cassian sent him the thread. The man takes a perverse delight in reading conspiracy theories about his marriage. He and Jyn are so disgustingly in love that Ben honestly wonders how they have time to play StarKiller between all of their flirting on social media. That does not stop the internet from trying to prove that it’s all a big cover up for a huge dark secret, though.

Out of idle curiosity, Ben keeps scrolling.

**tanksalot**

*Responding to xXxSpaceBabexXx*

*Lol calm down. Also check your facts EVER before you post dumb shit. Jyn wasn’t even AT Starfall.*

**xXxSpaceBabexXx**

*Responding to tanksalot: “Jyn wasn’t even AT Starfall.”*

*OFC she wasn’t officially you dumb s***. If she’s having an affair with kylo she’s not gonna livetweet it.*

**RedRoom**

*Responding to xXxSpaceBabexXx*

*You guys are missing something important here. It’s not Jyn because even if Jyn was willing to cheat on Cand0r (LMAO) she actually has taste. She’d never go for a toxic jerk like Kylo. My friend was at the bar that night and he overheard them talking about how much Kylo was gonna pay her to blow him. That girl was a prostitute for sure.*

**ReyloFanForever**

*Responding to JDBomb: “[img link] Posted this on Twitter too. Anyone figure out our mystery girl’s ID yet?”*

*IT’S REYOFIGHT!!! KYLO IS IN LOVE WITH HER AND THEY’VE BEEN HAVING A SECRET AFFAIR SINCE HE LAUNCHED HER CAREER IN JANUARY!!!!! THAT’S WHY HE LOST TO HER AND WHY THAT VIDEO GOT POSTED!!!!! HE DID IT FOR LOVE!*

Ben almost drops his phone on his face.

This is not the first time that someone has put forth the idea that he purposefully took a knee so that Rey could launch her career. In fact, the theory had been very popular right after the video dropped. Because Rey’s gender hadn’t been public knowledge at the time, the usual assumption was that he did it either for a shit load of money or to fuck with his team. Unfortunately, since it has now been widely publicized that Rey is a girl, it seems that the idea he’s doing it for sex (or love, in this case) is now on the table.

And even though half this random weirdo’s comment is patently incorrect, it’s still just a little too close for comfort.
KyloFan18

Responding to ReyloFanForever

SHUT THE F*** UP!!!! KYLO WOULD NEVER STOOP SO LOW! REYLO IS FAKE AND YOU’RE A DELUSIONAL IDIOT!

xXxSpaceBabexXx

Responding to ReyloFanForever: “IT’S REYOFLIGHT!!!”

It’s DEF not Rey. Thats Jyn’s forehead, I would know it anywhere! Take your stupid theories somewhere else thanks!

[MOD] Swoopit

Responding to KyloFan18

This is your second warning. One more strike and you will be facing a 7 day ban for abusive behavior. Also general reminder that this is a forum for discussing professional gamers and their gaming activity. Discussion of their personal lives or romantic relationships is against the community guidelines. If this subject continues I will be locking this thread.

ReyloFanForever

Responding to xXxSpaceBabexXx: “Its DEF not Rey. Thats Jyn’s forehead, I would know it anywhere! Take your stupid theories somewhere else thanks!”

So my theory that the girl Kylo LOST TO ON PURPOSE (which was already proved in a NathanVsStarKiller vid last month) who lives in CA and is single is stupid. But your theory that Jyn is cheating on her husband and flew to LA to do it makes sense. You Jynlo fans f****** disgust me! REYLO IS REAL GET USED TO IT!

Thread Locked By [MOD] Swoopit

“Reylo?” He mutters to himself, and Jesus Christ if this theory has a name people have way too much time on their hands.

Ben’s stomach churns uneasily, making him seriously regret the expensive, heavy pasta dish he’d eaten at dinner. He hates that anyone is even remotely close to figuring out that Rey is the girl in the StarFall photo, but in this case at the very least, it seems like there’s not much in the way of a real crisis.

ReyloFanForever had gone so far ‘round the conspiracy theory bend that they’d stumbled onto the truth, but they had come off like such a lunatic that no one had even stopped to consider that they were right. It’s a best case scenario.

“This will blow over soon,” he mutters, repeating the words that have become something of a mantra for him in the wake of his return from LA. Some new drama will crop up and everyone will forget all about him. He’s just gotta weather the storm a little longer.

Ben backs out of the forum and clicks over to the DM from Cassian once more.

@KyloRen
Yeah you got me. Sorry you had to find out this way.

@cand0r

Fuck I knew it

@cand0r

Well I guess if I have to share the love of my life, I might as well share with the best

@kyloren

You are so weird. How the fuck did you trick Jyn into marrying you again?

@cand0r

No fucking clue haha

@cand0r

Speaking of my wife, she wants to watch a movie so I’m signing off

@cand0r

I won’t ask cuz I know you won’t tell me who it is but I hope you and photo girl actually had some fun

@kyloren

…

@cand0r

I’m just saying; a good fuck might finally get the stick out of your ass

@kyloren

Fuck OFF, Andor.

@cand0r

lol

Ben shakes his head and exits out of the Twitter app.

The internet, he thinks, was a fucking mistake.

After nearly six solid weeks of going non-stop, the sudden influx of free time that Rey finds herself with feels sacreligious.

She has basically forgotten how to relax at this point. In the first week between the end of the
Qualifiers and when they’re due to fly to Las Vegas for the Championships, she keeps getting caught by sudden surges of anxious certainty that there is something crucial that she has forgotten to do.

There are, of course, about a million and a half things that the team has to get done before they head off to Championships. Luke takes on the vast majority of it, proving to be worth every penny that they’re paying him. (As a side note, Rey is fairly certain that they’re not paying him anywhere near what he made when he was managing sports teams. They’re well supported by their sponsors, but not that well supported. Luke seems to genuinely just be doing this for the fun of it. Senator Organa, it would seem, wasn’t kidding about him being bored.)

Thanks to Luke’s deft handling of the technicalities, the Resistance has only two, fairly easy jobs during the prep weeks.

First, they keep practicing just enough to stay sharp but not enough to get burnt out. Second, they do a respectable number of interviews and press meeting with various blogs, gaming news sites, and actual news sites. They’re even interviewed at one point by their local newspaper, The San Diego Union-Tribune. The article, accompanied by a photo of the team wearing their competition uniforms and looking badass, is printed on the front page of the Arts & Culture section.

The writer calls them a ‘local sensation’ and Rey has to sit the fuck down because her life has officially gone all the way off the rails.

One evening when they do not have anything else going on, Rey’s sitting in the living room, half listening to the sounds of Poe clattering around the kitchen, cooking while singing along with the upbeat hip hop that plays quietly in the background. She’s on the floor, leaning back against the couch next to Finn’s legs. He’s playing Rocket League on the PS4, laughing and yelling at whichever of his friends is on the other end of his mic as they both do their best to use the cars they’re controlling to steer a giant soccer ball into the correct goal. BB is curled up like a round, orange doughnut – snoring next to Rey’s thigh.

This is honestly the most relaxed that she’s felt in ages. As much fun as playing StarKiller is, it’s just nice to have a moment where they’re not high-key stressing about it. Right now they’re not professionals or teammates or anything, really. They’re just friends.

The tension that lives perpetually in her shoulders eases somewhat as Rey shifts around a little, getting more comfortable on the huge, squishy floor pillow that she’s currently perched on.

Her laptop is resting on her legs and she’s been idly scrolling through her social media for the last hour or so. She’s still not really great at using most of it – save for Instagram which she surprised both herself and all her friends by becoming hopelessly addicted to – but she’s gotten much more adept at using it in recent weeks.

Jess had been right when she told Rey that it was important to have that stuff locked down. People are already getting… kind of weird about her. She’s not a celebrity. Not to most of the world, any way. But to a very specific, niche community, ‘ReyOfLight’ means something and people are fascinated by her.

People speculate about her (her skills, her history, her relationship status) on gaming forums, talk about her on Tumblr blogs, and tweet at her constantly with all sorts of personal questions. It’s super weird. And in the wake of the #FindKyloRen photo scandal that had sent internet sleuths tripping all over themselves for weeks, super terrifying. They thankfully still haven’t figured out it’s her (a few people have suggested it but no one has paid the idea much mind) but Rey’s pretty sure that it’s only a matter of time before they do.
One of the biggest surprises has been that the First Order has kept quiet about her identity. Rey can feel the increasingly familiar touch of Snoke and his scandal-quashing about this whole situation. Ben gets actively uncomfortable any time she asks him about it, though. After a few unproductive conversations, Rey gives up and decides not to look a gift horse in the mouth. She suspects that Ben must be paying some kind of price to keep her identity safe but if he doesn’t want to tell her, she can’t exactly force him.

She sighs and shakes her head, willing herself to go back to her musings on the internet at large, which are somehow less troubling.

Paige and Jess, who have been on this ride for much longer, have been invaluable resources for Rey to lean on and she’s pretty sure that she would have become paranoid and gone into hiding long ago had it not been for the two of them.

At this point, she mostly just ignores the weird stuff – makes liberal use of the ‘block’ button – and tries to go about her life as if nothing has really changed.

Besides, social media isn’t entirely terrible. Internet trolls and invasive fans aside, she’s started to connect with a lot of other cool people in her industry through it. She keeps scrolling until a little notification pops up, letting her know that she has a new Twitter DM. It’s from Rose so Rey opens the message without hesitation.

**Direct Message From: TicoTock**

@TicoTock

*Please look at this amazing fanart that just crossed my feed!!!*

The next message is a link to a tweet with a cropped down image preview. Rey clicks on it and feels her eyes go wide. Rose is something of a StarKiller fan art fanatic and has been sending stuff to Rey since she joined the team. For the most part it has been pretty tame: funny comics, epic illustrations, cute doodles and the like.

This is not any of that.

It’s a beautifully rendered digital painting of Millenia and Silencer, sans armor, wrapped in an intimate embrace, *in flagrante delicto*, so to speak. He’s holding her in his arms, head bent so that his lips can touch her bare chest, while one of her legs curls up around his naked waist. It’s not explicit, seeing as how the artist has strategically posed the characters so that nothing is showing, but it’s abundantly clear what is going on in the picture.

Rey’s heartbeat goes 0 to 60 and she can feel herself blushing to the roots of her hair as she rapidly clicks away from the image. Thankfully Finn is too busy yelling at the TV to have noticed.

@ReyOfLight

*OMFG ROSE U ANIMAL DONT JUST SEND ME PORN WITH NO WARNING LMAOOO*

@ReyOfLight

*i mean its v pretty but fins sitting RIGHT BEHIND ME XD*

@TicoTock
LMAO!!!!!!!

@TicoTock

I’m so sorry!! I didn’t even think!! I just needed to share this!!

@TicoTock

TBH I ship them so hard after that last cinematic that FG released!

@ReyOfLight

saaaame tho honestly i liked them together before that too

@TicoTock

I bet you did!! (^_^)

@ReyOfLight

whats that supposed to mean?

@TicoTock

Oh I dunno… just wondering it you’re SURE this doesn’t have anything to do with a certain edgy Striker from New York who just SO HAPPENS to main Silencer?

@ReyOfLight

NO!!!!

@TicoTock

You sure???

@ReyOfLight

yes were just friends

@TicoTock

I mean listen… I’m not gonna pry (except that I totally am) but are you sure?? You SPENT THE NIGHT with a guy that no one else in the league can stand and you come back telling us he’s sweet and supportive……

@TicoTock

Are you POSITIVE there’s nothing going on there?

@ReyOfLight

nothing happened!

@ReyOfLight

well ok one thing happened but u CANT TELL ANYONE
Rey’s heartbeat speeds up even further. So much for being subtle. Then again, Rose has always been uncannily perceptive about her teammate’s emotions. Rey and Ben haven’t even really discussed what their relationship is now, though. The kiss, the flirting, the… feelings... it’s all a crazy complicated mess and it’s not something she really wants to get into while she’s supposed to be relaxing.

@ReyOfLight

i do not!

@TicoTock

YOU DO!!

@ReyOfLight

omfg rose pls ur killing me

@TicoTock

Fiiiiine. I’ll stop tormenting you about your boyfriend - I mean FRIEND - Ben Solo

@ReyOfLight

ROSSSSE

@TicoTock
The subject changes after that, moving on to various bits of StarKiller gossip until Poe calls Rey and Finn into the kitchen to come get their dinner.

But even as she laughs and jokes with her friends, Rey’s mind keeps drifting back to the image.

All the heroes in StarKiller wear helmets and masks, leaving the community to decide for themselves what they look like underneath. Even in the story cinematic videos that Far Galaxy releases every couple of months – alongside new maps, heroes, and events – they never feature the characters with bare faces.

This artist had chosen to give Millenia honey-brown hair and Silencer a strong, prominent nose and hair that falls in black waves around his face.

They’re not perfect likenesses of her and Ben but… between the passing visual similarity and Rose’s comments, Rey’s traitorous brain easily makes the leap from the image of the characters to something far more personal. This has been happening with increasing frequency and usually at very inopportune times. A stray image or thought will trigger a sudden surge of raw desire leaving her thirsting after a guy who lives a whole continent away.

Which sucks because he lives a whole continent away.

*You could have made this easy on yourself;* she thinks, stabbing a little too aggressively at her salad with her fork, *you could have tried to date literally anyone who lives within driving distance. Maybe they’d even be someone that everyone you know didn’t side-eye you about all the time. You could have done the Tinder thing like everyone else and this wouldn’t even be an issue! But no; you had to fall for your rival whose boss hates you and who might as well live on the moon.*

Life just isn’t fucking fair, Rey thinks as she chews her salad bitterly.

The one good thing about Snoke having found out about Rey is that he’s placed an absolute moratorium on the First Order so much as mentioning her name. Rey Sanderson is a forbidden topic. Snoke claimed that it was to keep this from turning into another scandal, but Ben privately suspected that it had a lot more to do with keeping him from thinking about her.

Hux had put up quite a fuss about this in the beginning. He’d been ready to broadcast Rey’s identity far and wide.

“It would only be fair; a scandal for a scandal, really,” he’d said in a petulant voice as he poured himself a cup of coffee in the First Order kitchen. It took literally all of Ben’s self control to keep from punching said coffee out of his hands and covering the kitchen with yet another beverage for the second time in two weeks.

“I’m legitimately surprised that you didn’t do it yourself, Solo.”

“There’s no point right now,” Ben had replied, forcing his voice to remain neutral, “if I fuck with her too early, I’ll lose the shock factor and just make her really determined to beat me by the time we actually play her.”
Hux had looked like he wanted to press the subject further, however at that moment, Mitaka had stepped in to remind everyone that they shouldn’t even be talking about this because if Snoke found out it would be trouble for all of them. Hux had gotten that pinched, unhappy look on his face again, but had thankfully dropped the subject and not broached it again.

Nearly two weeks after that incident, Ben is laying in his bed, thinking about the tangled web of lies that he has woven around himself and wondering how exactly everything had gone so wrong, so fast.

Ben really hadn’t bargained on how difficult it would be to go through his days having to pretend to really, really hate Rey. He also hadn’t taken into account how much the guilt of that charade, even though it is entirely for her protection, would eat at him when he actually has the chance to talk to her. What choice does he have though? If Snoke and his team found that he has real feelings for her, they’d rip her to shreds.

Ben feels like the biggest asshole in the universe. He’s so disgusted by the whole affair that he can’t bring himself to admit to Rey what he’s done. The shame of his cowardice wears on him too. It’s a vicious cycle that he can’t seem to break out of and so Ben does what he has always done when his feelings start eating him alive: he compartmentalizes and represses.

While he’s with his team, he shuts everything he feels for Rey in the deepest darkest part of his heart, and buries himself in the role of KyloRen.

While he’s with Rey, it’s KyloRen who gets buried. The fact that Ben feels instantly better the second he stops wearing the mask and relaxes gets buried deepest of all, because he really can’t fucking deal with the implications of that right now.

All the same, as the days grow into weeks, even Ben’s masterful mental gymnastics begin to grow a little sloppy. He can feel his control slipping and he knows that eventually he’s going to fuck up. Something is going to give and when it does it won’t be pretty. He’s right, of course, but when it does happen, it’s so much worse than he could have predicted.

It starts with a bad morning practice session. Hux is in his finest form, which is to say all up Ben’s ass from the moment he logs online.

Phasma had dropped a dumbell on her foot in the gym the night before because Mitaka had frightened her, so she now has a fractured toe and is in the worst mood Ben has ever witnessed.

Mitaka for his part is so distressed about this that he can’t stop apologizing and blaming himself for everything which is making Phasma even angrier.

Eyja is pissed because no one bothered to ask how the photo shoot she’d done for PC Gamer Magazine had gone.

And Caide shows up for practice half an hour late and hungover.

“Jesus Christ,” Phasma says, “Why are you like this?”

Caide laughs, then groans.

“Sorry – I thought it was Saturday,” he says.

There’s a muffled screaming noise from Eyja.

“I hate you so fucking much,” Hux sneers.
“Let’s just play already,” Ben says, impatient to get this over so he can get to his scheduled call with Rey, “We need to run the Skyhook strat a few more times to see if it’s viable or just a fluke.”

They all load into the game and struggle through a handful of matches as they try to hit their rhythm.

The tension between all of them is like a living thing, though. It’s a seventh member of their team that tags along, screwing them up at every turn. They fight constantly. Everyone is to blame for every little mistake, every failure is the personal responsibility of anyone who isn’t the person shouting about it.

It fucking blows.

Ben can’t help but think about the early days of the First Order, back when they’d been freshly pulled together by Snoke. They were all highly ranked pros with followings on social media or Twitch and they’d had the sort of vicious drive to compete that made people think twice about challenging them.

Back then all Ben had cared about were his victories. His rank. His scores. The challenge and the prestige. It had been easy to ignore the endless barrage of negativity – he’d been numb to it.

But something has changed recently. It’s like the iron wall that he had built around himself so long ago is starting to crumble. He’s beginning to feel.

Ben has a sinking suspicion that his exposure to Rey, with her ability to blow his defenses wide open without a second thought, has a lot to do with it.

This is exactly what he had been afraid of, as they stood together on the Santa Monica Pier. There are cracks in his foundation now, and problems are pouring through.

The team manages to scrape together a handful of victories but they just can’t find their flow.

Eventually Hux starts bitching about needing a smoke break and Caide complains about being hungry and everyone generally makes terrible excuses and bails on the rest of the practice.

Ben sits in his gaming room, feeling restless and unsettled.

It’s not like he can say that he was happy before and he certainly wouldn’t know how to give up Rey now, even if he wanted to. But at least before she crashed into his life, he’d been able to fool himself into thinking that he was doing okay.

He’s certainly not okay now. It’s like somewhere along the line he’d turned off all of his emotions except for anger. And then Rey had come along, carelessly flipping switches in his heart and everything had come back online. The good and the bad.

It’s not her fault – and it’s not like she has any idea that she did this – but abruptly Ben is furious with her. He’s filled with the futile kind of anger that threatens to consume him as he wishes he could roll back time to the day of their first fight. Back when things were simpler.

Of fucking course, because this is his life, that’s when she FaceTimes him.

He answers automatically before he can register why it might just be a terrible idea for him to talk to her right now, scheduled call or not. Her grinning face fills the screen – all sun bronzed, freckled skin and straight, white teeth.

“Hey! How was practice with the wanker squad?” she teases brightly and there’s something about
her words that acts like a match dropped in a puddle of gasoline. He loses it.

“Oh I see how it is; I’m not allowed to say a fucking bad word about your team but it’s just fine for you to shit on mine,” he snaps.

“Excuse me?” Rey says and in the camera he can see her physically recoiling from him.

Her stunned eyes look huge and hurt. A little voice in the back of his head is screaming frantically to stop because this is Rey and he’s fucking this up but he’s never learned how to de-escalate a fight. All Ben knows how to do is stick his knife in where it will hurt the worst and twist. So he does.

“No, no; I get it,” he sneers, “I have to toe the line for you just like everyone else. But you can fucking do or say whatever you want to me.”

Rey’s dark eyebrows draw into a frown.

“Ben,” she says sharply, though he can see that her eyes are shining with unshed tears, “I’m sorry for insulting your team. You’re right: it was uncalled for and I shouldn’t have done it.”

She pauses, collecting herself before she continues, voice stronger, “But you have no right to fucking shout at me like I’m some stranger on your stream! If you’re going to be a total prick then I’ll just go.”

Her words are like a slap across the face or a bucket of ice water dumped over his head. And just as quickly as his anger had risen up, it departs, leaving him only with shame and self loathing.

“No! Wait, please!” he says quickly, afraid that if she hangs up now she’ll be gone for good and the only time he’ll ever see her again will be across an arena, over the top of a computer screen as they duke it out in StarKiller.

“I’m… fuck. Sorry. I’m sorry Rey,” he says putting his face into his hand for a second before looking up to meet her eyes. They’re still wary and suspicious, like she’s waiting for him to snap at her again.

“I’m sorry,” he says once more, “I’m having a shitty day. It’s not your fault.”

“You’re right about that,” Rey says, frowning. “I mean I really am sorry too, if I said something wrong. I was only joking since you were complaining about how difficult they were being about everything lately. But you’re right: I asked you not to insult my team and you stopped. If it upsets you for me to insult yours then I won’t do it.”

Ben sighs and pinches the bridge of his nose.

“No, really, they are being extra shitty right now. I think I just… fuck, Rey, I don’t know. I don’t know how to explain this,” he says, feeling helpless.

“Why don’t you try?” Rey suggests gently.

He sits for a minute, silently mulling the whole twisted situation over in his head. He has just barely figured out how to admit his own misery to himself and the idea of being open about it, even to Rey (maybe especially to Rey), makes him feel so stupid and weak.

In his head he thinks: I have everything I want. I have my fucking dream job. I gave up everything for this… And it’s like I sold my goddamn soul for it. My manager treats me like an idiotic child, my teammates hate me, my family is a fractured mess, I don’t have any real friends besides you. I’m ten years beyond college with an outdated degree in a field I hated. StarKiller is it for me. I love this
game, I love the challenge and I love the competition, but I am living a lie and it's tearing me apart.

How can he possibly tell her the truth – the whole truth – and expect her not to judge him harshly for it? Only an absolute idiot would get himself trapped in such a terrible situation.

Ben breathes heavily out through his nose.

Rey is still watching him silently with her huge, hazel eyes. There’s no anger in her expression now, just empathy.

“I think…” he begins, then leans back in his chair and laughs a little bitterly, “I think I actually hate my team.”

Rey waits patiently for him to continue.

“Sometimes I think the First Order is so good because we’re all playing with knives against each other's throats. Any time one of us fucks up, everyone else tears them down about it. Doesn't matter how big the mistake is; failure is not an option here.”

Sympathy and understanding dawn on Rey’s face.

“Everything is always so hateful with them so when I made fun of them… it was just more of the same, right?” she asks.

Ben sighs.

“Pretty much,” he says. It’s not quite the truth but it’s close enough.

“Why don’t you leave then? Find another team? I bet any team in this league would jump at the chance to have you in their ranks. I think even my team might push me out if you offered to join.”

He gives her a wry, half-smile.

“You're selling yourself short, again. But that’s beside the point. I’m under contract with the First Order. I’d leave if I could, but… they’re the team I have and there’s nothing I can do about it.” He shakes his head.

Rey frowns again.

“Well then when your contract comes up, you should leave,” she says.

Ben’s lips twist. It would be a great suggestion, if his contract was ever going to expire. But he’s tired now and doesn’t feel like belaboring this subject with Rey any longer. It’s clearly stressing her out and it’s certainly not doing him any favors, either.

“I’ll think about it,” he says.

She nods once.

“Good,” she says, fiercely, “you deserve to have people around you who respect you, and treat you well, Ben.”

That statement strangely makes his eyes prickly. He’s not sure that it’s a sentiment that anyone has ever actually expressed to him before. He’s not sure that he deserves any of that, but it’s certainly nice to hear. Ben gets to his feet, using the motion to move the camera away from his face for a second so he can blink rapidly a few times, then brings the phone back up and walks into his kitchen.
“Thanks,” he mumbles. He knows that his face is probably a little pink but there’s not really much he can do about it, so he just resigns himself to the fact that Rey is always going to own at least a little bit of his dignity.

He makes coffee and they talk about the other teams that have made it to the Championships, until Rey gets a text that her roommates are on their way back from the store.

“Hey,” he says, before she can bid him farewell and hang up, “Are we… you know… cool?”

Rey gives him an appraising look.

“Yes,” she says. She looks away for a moment and her voice gets quiet, “though… you know my childhood wasn’t… great. It brings up bad stuff when people I care about raise their voices at me. So I really don’t like the shouting.”

He cringes, feeling the shame welling up once more.

“I know and I don’t like it either,” he says. “Not with you, anyway. I can’t promise I won’t fuck up again but I’ll do better.”

“We both will,” she says, “and yeah, we’re cool.”

He smiles at her and she smiles back. It’s a little hesitant at first but when she ends the call a few minutes later she says:

“Bye Ben!” in her warm, sweet voice and she’s wearing the same, full-blown brilliant grin that always makes his heart skip a beat.

Ben collects his coffee and goes to sit down at his kitchen table. He sets the phone aside and leans back in his chair, staring up at the crown moulding around the edges of the high, white ceiling.

Rey is totally unlike anyone else he’s ever met. She’s empathy personified, with a delicate heart that has been poorly handled by the world, all wrapped in a ferocity and strength that he admires immensely. She’s smart and funny, insanely talented, and so ridiculously attractive that it makes his head spin.

It’s no wonder that he’s such a fucking idiot around her. How could he not be, when he’s head over heels in love with her?

His brain comes to a screeching halt as the last thought really registers.

“Holy shit,” he breathes.

Because there it is… the thing he’s known for weeks now but that he hasn’t quite let himself admit.

He’s in love with Rey. Like really in love with her. Horrible love song, throw caution to the wind, big stupid in love with her.

This is fine, he thinks, trying not to panic.

He’s abruptly reminded of the drawing that frequently floats around the internet during times of stress and trouble, of a cartoon dog sitting at a table, drinking coffee as the room burns down around him.

That’s it, he thinks, that’s my whole, goddamn life.

“Okay,” he says, bracing his hands on his knees and staring at the floor, “Okay. So you’re in love
with her. This doesn’t change anything. You were in love with her two fucking weeks ago too. So just… keep doing what you’ve been doing. It’s fine. This is fine.”

This is, in fact, very much not fine. Ben is in way over his head.

Along with practicing and doing interviews, the team technically has a third, unofficial job: they have to make sure that they’re outfitted properly for the Championships.

The official schedule of events, along with details about their accommodations, travel arrangements, and about eight billion legal agreements had arrived the day after they’d Qualifiers had ended.

Along with the matches, there will be multiple press panels, an opening ceremony, two official parties (though they will only be invited to the second if they actually make it to the quarterfinals), and an award ceremony. All of these events come with dress requirements that are as specific as they were unhelpful.

Finn and Poe hadn’t been much use either as they’d declared their intention to wear nice jeans, and button-ups or t-shirts and jackets at any event where they don’t have to wear their uniforms.

“You guys do know that women can’t really get away with that, right?” Rey had asked them, exasperated, “I mean, technically I can do whatever I want. I could wear a bag and no one could stop me–”

“You army of loyal fanboys would love that,” Poe had replied, grinning, “How many people have asked you to be their ‘hot gamer GF’ this week?”

“Oh shut up,” Rey grumbled, “the point is it’s a lot easier to miss the mark with women’s clothing and I don’t know what I’m doing here. Men… you don’t even know how lucky you have it.”

“Sorry peanut,” Finn said, “We’re not really ‘fashion gays’. ”

So Rey had texted the rest of the team. Which is how she finds herself in Jess’s bright blue Ford Mustang, on the way to a shopping trip.

Rey doesn’t really… do that. Shop, that is. Like ever.

It’s sort of a holdover from living in poverty for her whole life. It’s not like she’d ever had much money to spend on things that weren’t necessities and to be perfectly honest, anything that she had managed to scrape together beyond the basics had almost always gone to games or gaming equipment.

Sure, Rey likes to look nice and she has enough clothing that isn’t completely disgraceful (or grease-stained from her time at the auto shop) in her wardrobe to get by on the day to day. But none of it is really… ‘press ready’ or ‘casual elegant’, whatever the hell that even means.

Thankfully, Jess, Rose, and Paige are more than happy to lend a hand; after all, they’re in the same boat.

“Let’s go get dressed for battle,” Jess says, as they climb out of her car in the parking lot of the Westfield Fashion Valley Mall.
It’s a massive two-story outdoor shopping center, boasting what seems like a truly excessive number of stores, many of which Rey has heard of but never seen in person.

She’s been a proud thrift-shopper and frequenter of discount outlets up until this moment. But with money from her sponsors in her pocket, she supposes it can’t hurt to splurge a little.

Besides, she wants to look her best. There will be cameras everywhere, people judging every move she makes. Ben will be there. It would be nice not to worry about looking underdressed or out of place, on top of everything else.

“So here’s the deal,” Paige explains as they walk into the mall itself, “Unlike the guys who can roll up in whatever they want, if we want people to talk about our playing instead of how we look, we need to hit a really specific mark. It’s fucking ridiculous, but it is what it is.”

Rey sighs, “I kind of thought as much. I was trying to explain that to the boys earlier but they don’t get it.”

“They try,” Rose says, “but it’s hard to imagine when that is literally not a problem they’ll ever have unless they like… show up naked.”

Jess snorts, “Now that I would pay money to see.”

“God, same!” Paige laughs and turns back to Rey to continue explaining, “So for the press panels we need to look clean and put together, and cool, but not too sexy or we’ll get all the shitty slut-shaming stuff. We need a new outfit for each day of press so all of our pictures look different. So that’s three outfits. You can probably get away with wearing the same pants if you really want but I’d recommend getting three pairs just in case you want more options day of.”

“For tops, you want something fun and flattering,” Jess chimes in, “Most of the photos will be waist up because of the way the tables are set up.”

“So focus on finding three shirts or dresses you like, grab some pants that work and maybe snag a pair of shoes that you like. You should know that the rooms tend to be freezing to keep people from sweating and smelling bad. So either jackets or long sleeves aren’t a bad idea,” Paige says, helpfully.

“Okay,” Rey says, “that actually doesn’t sound too bad.”

Rose grins at her, “Well, that’s because we haven’t gotten to the stuff for the parties yet. Which, if you’re like me, is way worse.”

“Booo!” Jess says, “Party clothes are the best part of this whole deal. But let’s focus on the press stuff first.”

They begin their quest in the H&M. Rey likes the store immediately. It’s reasonably priced and divided helpfully into sections that keep her from getting too overwhelmed. She wanders through the racks, picking things up until her arms are so full of clothing that she can barely hold anything else.

“I’m gonna go try stuff on,” she calls to her friends, who are all similarly burdened.

She’s in the dressing room, stripping out off her ancient Sunshot t-shirt and light gray jeans when her phone buzzes.

Ben Solo

Hey, can I call for a bit?
Rey Sanderson

srry! im clothes shopping w/ the girls rn

Rey Sanderson

ill be home around 5 tho if u wanna talk then?

Ben Solo

Shopping for stuff for the Championships?

Rey Sanderson

yah i think i get the whole press deal but wtf am i supposed to wear to the parties????

Rey Sanderson

why do they even have formal parties at this thing? isnt this like..... sweaty nerd central?

Ben Solo

Hahaha

Ben Solo

It is. The first year we all wore uniforms for press but they started having us dress up last year and I guess that’s sticking around.

Ben Solo

I think it’s part of Far Galaxy’s drive to legitimize this sport. They’re trying to get us all to dress like adults for five days.

Rey Sanderson

uuuuuuuuuuugh lmao

Ben Solo

I mean… I for one am glad they’re doing it.

Rey Sanderson

oh? id have thought u were like… as anti formal-wear as they come

Ben Solo

Oh, trust me, I am.

Ben Solo

I’m just looking forwards to seeing YOU dressed up.

Rey, who has been texting back and forth with Ben in between trying on various outfit combinations
reads his last message and goes crimson. She’s currently wearing only a bra and jeans and she can see that the flush has spread all the way from her face down to her chest and the tops of her shoulders from three different angles, thanks to the dressing rooms’ helpful triple mirror.

Rey Sanderson

what would u do if i turned up in a parka?

Ben Solo

You’d still look hot. But probably more in the ‘dying from heat stroke’ way.

It doesn’t matter how many flirtatious messages they exchange; each one hits her just as hard as the first. She can’t say that she dislikes it, quite the opposite in fact, but Rey just wishes that she could keep her heart from leaping out of her chest every time it happens. He makes her feel smitten and silly and completely out of control. She’s dated a couple of guys, had crushes here and there… … But she’s never felt like this.

There’s this sort of… creeping certainty that grows in her every time they talk, that Ben might be someone that she can’t live without any more. Rey doesn’t know what would happen if he vanished – just stopped talking to her suddenly – but she’s pretty sure that it would be bad.

Very bad.

Not worth thinking about.

Especially not when Ben seems to be freaking out that he might have gone too far and is now trying to dig himself out of the hole of the earlier joke, with very little success.

Ben Solo

I mean, you’d still look hot though. The other way too.

Ben Solo

You know, the looking sexy way.

Ben Solo

… Jesus please just kill me.

Rey Sanderson

lmao!!!!!

Rey adds a laugh-crying emoji and hits send. She pauses for half a second, biting her lip, then thinks what the hell, you only live once, before typing:

Rey Sanderson

its ok ben

Rey Sanderson
"i think ur hot too

Rey Sanderson

and i promise u ill wear something WAY better than a parka ;)

“Rey? You in here?” Comes Rose’s voice on the other side of the door, followed by a knock that nearly makes her jump out of her skin. Frantically Rey shoves her phone back into her purse.

“Y-yeah?” She stammers out, trying to collect herself.

“Can I share your dressing room? Everything else is full,” Rose says.

Rey quickly fans her face, trying to will her blush away.

“Yeah, sure, come on in,” she says, unlocking the door.

Ben re-reads the message on his phone again, and like the five billion times before, he still can’t be sure that what he’s seeing on the screen is actually real and not just the product of his overactive imagination and how much he desperately misses Rey. He’s not sure if she’s teasing him intentionally or just because Rey was basically born to send him spinning.

Ben Solo – aka KyloRen, 30 year old scourge of the internet, unholy terror, asshole, scandal making douchebag – is going to come fucking undone because a girl told him she’d wear something sexy for him in a text message that also included a *winky face* emoticon.

What is his life even coming to?

Ben takes a few steadying breaths and a few (more steadying) sips of beer, before firing up the StarKiller client.

She’d sent the message an hour before and he hasn’t stopped looking at it since. He needs to get his mind off of Rey for a little while, or he’s gonna lose it.

In light of the fact that he’s going to be playing nothing but Supremacy maps during the Championships, Ben selects the King of the Hill game mode. It’s a capture the flag equivalent; each team has a flag and a base. The first team to find and capture the other team’s flag and get it back to their own base scores a point. Three points is a match victory and said matches tend to go fast.

Ben likes playing it when he’s just trying to kill time because it actually doesn’t have any effect on his ranking. It’s a bit of a free-for-all with the actual character roles meaning less than they do in the regular game.

It’s a nice change of pace.

The game pairs him with five other random people and they exchange their usual pre-game chatter.

“Dude, KyloRen,” says the excited girl named SnipSnap playing Fang, “I watched you guys *curb stomp* Deathwatch the other week! That was an exciting game.”

“Thanks,” he says.
“You looking forwards to the Championships?” asks a guy with the username DarkHelmet.

“I guess,” he replies, as they load into the game. They’re on the Crait map. It’s a huge maze of red crystal caverns and sci-fi military outposts and Ben quite enjoys the aesthetics of the place.

“Do you just get like… a fuck-ton of ass when you win a Championship game?” DarkHelmet asks, sounding way too interested. The team shoots forwards, in search of the enemy flag.

“Ugh, gross,” says SnipSnap, “Quit playing with one hand on your dick for five seconds, Dan.”

DarkHelmet – Dan, apparently – laughs.

“You’re no fun, Kris; I’m just trying to live vicariously,” he says.

Ben rolls his eyes and dispatches the enemy Fulminator, who is trying to flank SnipSnap.

“This is StarKiller,” he says, dryly, “no fun allowed.”

Then he mutes the whole team channel so he can just lose himself in the game for a bit.

They’re two points up and hunting for the new spawn location of the enemy flag when his phone buzzes twice in quick succession.

Ben glances down to see the notifications.

Rey Sanderson Sent An Image

Rey Sanderson

does this look ok? rose n paige are split on it and we cant find jess so ur my deciding vote

He pulls off into an alcove and crouches Praetorian down so that the red-armored warrior sort of blends in against the red crystal of his surroundings. Ben clicks the message open.

The breath he was in the process of drawing gets caught in his throat and he chokes on air.

It’s a photo, taken in the large mirror of a white dressing room.

It shows Rey in a short-sleeved, sequined dress that fits her as though she was poured into it and stops tantalizingly at mid thigh, showing off her long legs. Combined with the dainty, spiky heels she’s wearing, the whole ensemble makes Rey look elegant and polished in a way that he’s never seen before.

He thinks she’s beautiful when she’s passed out and snoring with no makeup on, or wild-haired and pink cheeked from running in the park with BB. It doesn’t matter to him what she’s wearing, he’s into her no matter what. But. This look makes something curl hot and heavy, low in his gut. He can imagine her standing in the flashing lights of a Las Vegas nightclub, glittering like a star. He can also imagine pulling her close in the dark of said club, grinding his body up against hers and for fucks sake he doesn’t even dance.

I’m losing my mind, Ben thinks, helplessly, as he also loses the game that’s still playing out on his screen without his input.

Ben Solo
Okay is not the word I’d use.

Rey Sanderson

oh :( i liked it

Ben Solo

Shit, sorry, tone doesn’t come across in texts: you look fucking phenomenal.

Rey Sanderson

lmao its ok so thats a yes?

Ben Solo

Let’s just say, that’s a dress I’d go to a party just to see you in.

Ben Solo

Or out of.

Ben has about ten seconds of true panic where he realizes what he’s just said. For all their flirtation (and there has been a lot) this is one line that they have not yet crossed. The physical and emotional attraction between them is undeniable, but even so, they’ve both skirted around actually talking about sex.

Ben doesn’t know for certain, but he suspects strongly that Rey has never slept with anyone before. He doesn’t know how far is too far with her and he’s terrified that he’s going to scare her off with the intensity of his desire. So they’ve been sort of… circling the issue like nervous sharks, neither daring to actually go in for the kill until now.

I’m such a fucking idiot, he thinks, when am I actually going to learn some self control?

He’s halfway convinced himself that he’s just taken everything way too far way too fast and ruined everything, when his phone buzzes again.

Rey Sanderson

is that a promise?

His dick, which is always at least vaguely interested whenever Rey is involved, twitches insistently in his pants.

“Holy fucking hell,” Ben breathes, before he straight up quits the StarKiller client without warning his team. He’ll eat the fucking penalty for ditching a match, but there’s no way he can keep playing in this state.

He picks his phone up again.

Ben Solo

Absolutely.

Rey Sanderson
guess im buying this dress then ;)
March VI

Chapter Notes

I have never been more grateful to have this story queued up and ready to go than I am right now because I am the most tired. Thank you to everyone who came and talked to me about this fic IN PERSON at Wondercon! Cyborgharpy – the world’s best beta/convention buddy – and I had a blast wandering around together and meeting you guys. This whole experience is unreal and you guys are the BEST. SO MUCH LOVE TO ALL OF YOU.

Also! Adrearner made another BEAUTIFUL mood board, this time for the First Order and you should all go check it out and give her some love!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ben Solo

What’s your rooming situation like?

Rey Sanderson

im sharing with rose

Rey Sanderson

whats urs like?

Ben Solo

Ah, the perks of being a returning champion: my whole team has private rooms.

Rey Sanderson

ooooo perfect for finishing our stranger things marathon right?

Ben Solo

Exactly.

Rey Sanderson

it was pretty spooky last time….. can i sit on ur lap if it gets too scary?

Ben Solo

Maybe you should sit there anyway, just in case.

Rey Sanderson

maybe I should ;)

**Ben Solo**

*God, I know you’re joking around but I wanted to hold you like that SO badly in LA. Having you by my side wasn’t close enough.*

**Rey Sanderson**

*what makes u think im joking?*

This sort of overtly sexual flirtation is a first for Rey. And if she and Ben end up sleeping together for real – something she would very much like to do – that will be a first for her as well.

Relationships and sex have never exactly been high on her priority list. She was never opposed to them, but her life from 17 onwards had been consumed with getting herself emancipated, trying to leave the UK, moving to the US, getting a job, and trying to earn her keep. That hadn’t left a lot of time for her to go looking for love.

The closest she’d ever gotten to having sex with anyone before was a boy that she went out with a few times when she was 19. He had clumsily put his hand up her shirt while they were making out at a party. He’d sort of jigged her bra-covered breast around and Rey had found his inexperienced pawing to be more irritating than arousing. She’d gotten busy with work and gaming and new friends, and she’d just never actively sought out physical intimacy like that again. It wasn’t intentional, but that aspect of her life had just slipped through the cracks until now.

*Should I be more nervous about this?* She wonders, thinking of every novel and movie where virginity – and the losing of it – caused the heroine no end of stress and worry.

But honestly the whole concept of virginity just seems like a stupid thing to freak out about. It’s not like it’s actually worth anything. Rey really really wants to sleep with Ben. And he wants to sleep with her. It doesn’t even matter that she’s never been with anyone else before. Honestly she’s more nervous that something will go wrong between them in the parts of their lives that do not involve sex.

Logically, Rey knows that sleeping with Ben is maybe the worst idea she’s ever had. There’s a list of reasons as long as her forearm why she should absolutely not do this.

His team.

His manager.

The sneaking around.

The championships.

Their actual, real life professional rivalry.

And yet.

Ben has climbed into her heart and she can’t get him out. His voice, his hands, his eyes, the way she remembers his warm, solid body pressing against hers; everything about him affects her on a molecular level. He makes her want things that she’s never really wanted before.

Even if she never gets the chance to see him again after the championships, she wants what they didn’t get when they were in LA, when she was still trying to hold back and stay strong.

She wants Ben, even if it’s just for a night.
And he wants her too.

Rey has overcome far greater challenges in her life. Surely she can sleep with him and still be professional enough to face him down in the arena like nothing has changed.

Right?

She has the apartment to herself for once that Friday. Finn and Poe have gone down to Calexico to visit Poe’s parents for the weekend. They’d recently moved there from Guatemala to be closer to their son, but the rigorous schedule of the qualifiers had left little time for leisurely family visits. Given how short the trip from San Diego is, the boys had decided to take full advantage of their downtime to go stay for a few days.

BB has long since been fed, walked, and put up in his crate in Finn’s room for the evening. The kitchen has been tidied up and her laundry is done. Finding herself at loose ends, she turns, as usual, to her phone and Ben.

**Rey Sanderson**

*hey u busy tonight?*

His reply is instantaneous.

**Ben Solo**

*I just got back from a dinner with another StarFall exec and I was planning on streaming for a bit to blow off steam.*

**Ben Solo**

*If you have a better idea though, I’m in.*

Rey grins.

**Rey Sanderson**

*ancient order just released a new 2 player campaign dlc on steam*

**Rey Sanderson**

*idk if u ever played ao but its fun and i thought maybe we could do that together*

**Rey Sanderson**

*its not quite sk but at least theres no nosey ppl all up in our bizz*

**Ben Solo**

*Haha I love Ancient Order. I actually downloaded that earlier and was going to ask if you wanted to play sometime.*

**Rey Sanderson**

*great minds think alike! :D*

**Ben Solo**
Ten minutes later, Rey is tucked into her new gaming chair, courtesy of Cyarika, one leg folded up to her chest while the other dangles off the edge of the seat. She’s sipping a peach hard lemonade and she accepts the Discord call with a silly grin on her face.

“Bad night, huh?” She asks.

“Snoke came along to make sure I was behaving. So I had two old, bald men talking down to me for three hours,” Ben says, grimly.

“Gross,” Rey says, pulling a face. The mere mention of Snoke is enough to set her teeth on edge. He’s something of a sticking point between them and neither one of them has a great solution for his presence in their lives so they both avoid bringing him up more than is absolutely necessary.

“Let me put it this way: if you hadn’t suggested this, I was going to go pick fights with strangers on the internet for a couple hours just so I’d have an excuse to yell at people,” Ben says.

Rey rolls her eyes. “I still really don’t understand why you think that’s relaxing. I hate fighting with people.”

She hears Ben blow out a breath.

“Yeah, I know,” he says. “It’s just good for getting your mind off of what you’re really mad about. Which is handy, if there’s nothing else you can do about it, you know?”

Rey thinks she gets it as much as she can, but where Ben’s rage burns hot and explosive, Rey’s anger is a slow, cold thing. It sets in like a winter chill, freezing everything until she is surrounded by ice, protected from whatever pain made her angry in the first place. It is not an enjoyable experience and it rarely makes her feel better in the long run.

They are very different in this way.

Which is all to say that the idea of intentionally getting mad at people sounds completely ridiculous to her.

“But that’s beside the point,” Ben says, “We’re gaming tonight and you’re a much more enjoyable distraction than a bunch of angry nerds on the internet.”

“Says the angry nerd on the internet,” Rey teases, shaking her head.

“Yeah, yeah; load up the game and let’s get playing,” Ben says and she can nearly hear him rolling his eyes.

She obliges, launching Ancient Order in her Steam window.

Ancient Order is a space-faring first person shooter with some added swordplay elements that gave it a different feel from most of the other games on the market. Rey had enjoyed the single-player campaign a lot.

The story followed a warrior named Vesper, from an order of genetically engineered super soldiers who had been accidentally left behind by her strike team on a mission in deep space. The original game chronicled her journey as she escaped the hostile planet and found her way home. The action is fast paced and shares some technical DNA with what she likes about the combat in StarKiller.
The co-op campaign is a new, but highly anticipated downloadable addition to the game, allowing a pair of players to take on the role of the other two members of the strike team and fight to get back to their missing teammate. It’s a shorter campaign, adding about five or six hours of content to the game, but it’s perfect for her and Ben to fill an evening with.

“Do you want to play Scavenger or Berserker?” Ben asks as he joins her game session and his name appears in her party list.

“I’ll take Scavenger, if you don’t mind. They’re basically the same but I always liked her design better,” Rey says.

“Go for it,” Ben tells her, locking in Berserker. “Just so you know, it’s been about a year since I played AO, so this first mission may be a total wreck.”

Rey laughs. “God, same. I’ll set this on Hard Mode for now, then. If it’s too easy we can swap it up to Nightmare later.”

“Sounds good,” Ben says.

Rey sets the difficulty and starts the game. They sit in silence during the opening cinematic, watching as Scavenger and Berserker argue with their superiors and break out of a space station, stealing a spaceship and flying off towards the distant star where their lost teammate had last been seen.

As the cinematic ends and their avatars are dropped on a strange, technicolored world, Rey sits up straighter, rolling out her wrists, fingers poised over her keyboard and mouse. In the distance she can see tiny figures milling around a stone structure. She turns to Ben and hits the key for the “get pumped up” emote, making her avatar dance around on the screen.

Ben laughs.

“Alright, let’s kick some alien ass,” Rey says, grinning.

Ancient Order’s co-op campaign is way more fun than it has any right to be. The original game was fun and Ben had enjoyed it but playing with Rey has him grinning like a maniac from the very first firefight they get into.

Part of it is just that he and Rey are so incredibly in sync with each other that playing with her is half combat and half digital dance. But the other half is that in a game that lacks the high stakes of StarKiller, the two of them end up spending half their time screwing around.

Rey steals all the sticky grenades and uses them to trap him in bad spots. She also shoots him with her ricochet canon – bouncing him halfway across the map. In retaliation, he shoves her off of every ledge, roof, and wall he can, making her yell and laugh as she either plummets to her death or has to activate her limited use jetpack to stay alive and pulls aggro on all the enemies before leading them over to flatten her.

They’re in total hysteresis by the time they actually finish the first mission. Everything is funny, including the very dramatic dialogue that their characters exchange before the boss fight. Even on hard mode they manage to take him down with relative ease, and as their end of mission scores pop onto the screen, Ben is already feeling a thousand times better than he had at dinner.
“Hey,” Rey says cheerfully in his ear, “Looks like I beat you.”

He looks at their scores and sure enough, Rey has 59 kills next to his 55.

“Yeah,” he replies, “but I’m pretty sure about five of those kills were me and I have a better K/D ratio than you do because you couldn’t stop falling off of stuff. I bet if we were playing straight I could beat you every time.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night!” She says, laughing, “But this gives me an idea: why don’t we make this more interesting?”

“Oh,” Ben asks, intrigued, “what are you thinking?”

“You’re drinking beer, right?” Rey asks, “Do you have anything harder?”

“I have whiskey, how come?”

He can practically hear Rey grinning when she responds, “That’ll do. I have a bottle of Jose Cuervo and I think we should play a little drinking game. Whoever gets the lowest score has to take a shot.”

Ben scoffs. “You’re such a lightweight though, this is hardly a fair contest.”

“Says the guy who lost this round,” she taunts.

And that, as it turns out, is just enough to engage his competitive side. Part of their relationship has always revolved around competing. They’re so well matched in everything they do, it’s just fun to see who comes out on top.

He can feel the smile on his face widening as the familiar thrill of excitement – the one that Rey elicits in him so often – dances through him.

“Alright, you’re on,” he says, “let me get my whiskey.”

He slips his headphones off of his head and goes to collect the whiskey and a shot glass from his kitchen.

“So,” he says, settling back into his chair, “next round, whoever has the fewest kills takes a drink?”

“Yep!” Rey says brightly, before clicking the button to launch the next mission.

They sail through the swirling, multicolored galaxy for a few seconds before they’re deposited on their next planet. This time it’s a sparkling, snow covered mountainscape populated by mechanical beasts with four legs, dog-like heads, and dragonfly wings made of light.

“Oh,” Rey breathes, “they’re so pretty, I almost hate to kill them.”

Then she shoots the one that’s charging them square in the face.

“Glad to see that isn’t gonna stop you from fully participating in your own contest,” Ben teases.

Rey blows a raspberry at him. “Yeah, you wish, mate!”

They fight their way across the snow-covered battlefield, messing around a lot less this time, as they focus their attention and energy on taking out as many of the enemies as possible. They’re both horrible kill-thieves, sniping enemies from each other whenever possible, bragging and laughing each time. These enemies swarm and mob them in a way that the ones on the last planet had not and
in the chaos, it becomes more and more difficult to keep track of numbers.

By the time they face down the boss, Ben has no idea who will actually come out on top. But as his red laser sword cleaves through the boss’s thick, mechanical neck, triggering the end mission screen, he’s feeling pretty confident.

“Aww nooo!” Rey says and Ben smirks.

“Drink up,” he tells her. Through his headphones he can hear the faint sounds of a metal cap being unscrewed from a bottle and the clink of glass against glass. There’s a beat of silence then Rey makes an “eugh” noise.

“This tequila is so shitty, I hope Poe brings back more of the good stuff this time,” Rey says. “Also enjoy that victory. It was my gift to you.”

“Of course it was,” Ben says, dryly.

“Mmhmm,” she says as she launches the next mission, “Now hang on because this time I mean business.”

Rey wins the next two rounds, and Ben wins the two after that. The last one is close but he edges ahead by a single point, mostly because he gets the killing blow on the boss again.

They’re probably about halfway through the campaign at this point, and he’s feeling loose-limbed and relaxed. It’s a combination of the distraction of the game, the warmth of the alcohol, and Rey’s presence. Her voice in his ears, sweet and bright, fills up his whole world, his whole head, leaving no room for the usual chaos of his thoughts.

They land on a new planet, a glittering dark forest filled with bioluminescent flora and fauna and he’s about to open his mouth to say something, when Rey says:

“Hey if I drink much more, I’m not going to be able to play at all and that’s no fun… so I was thinking we could put something else on the line.”

“What did you have in mind?” He asks, previous thoughts evaporating.

He can hear the mischief in her voice when she says, “Well… how about… loser has to post something of the winner’s choice on Twitter and leave it up for 24 hours?”

Ben snorts.

“Sure, why not,” he says.

Rey plays like a woman on a mission and beats him by such a wide margin this time that Ben half wonders if she wasn’t bluffing about feeling her alcohol.

He says as much to her.

She laughs.

“I’m just very motivated,” Rey replies, “Because I really really want to see the school photo you’re gonna post on your Twitter.”

“Oh come on,” he pleads, “I looked like the kid who gets beat up in every bad teen movie. Please let me post anything else.”
“Nope! A bet’s a bet!” She says, laughing.

“You’re the fucking worst, you know that?” He grouses as he searches through his files, finding a photo from high school. True to his words, the photo shows him at 17, gangly and weedy with his enormous ears poking out from underneath the short haircut that his mother always insisted on him wearing at that age.

“When I win next time, you’re going to regret this so much,” Ben grumbles.

He opens up Twitter and uploads the photo along with one of him flexing in the mirror post-workout from earlier in the week. He captions them with ‘*talk shit, get fit #fbf to when I was a punk ass weakling*’ and hits post.

“There. Your prize. I hope you’re happy now,” he says as he hears Rey tapping away on her keyboard.

“Cheater!” she exclaims, though her tone is more amused than anything else, “This was supposed to be a punishment but you put it next to that picture where you look like you’re the size of a small mountain and you could bench a city bus. You’re just gonna get all these thirsty people telling you how hot you are now!”

Ben laughs. “Gotta be more specific with your wording next time.”

“Yeah well since you’re apparently an expert in loopholes and also enjoy being eye candy. Here’s some specific words for you: when I win next round, I want a shirtless pic. Not on Twitter, just for me!” She declares imperiously.

Ben’s stomach drops all the way through his floor and into the living room of his downstairs neighbors.

“Same,” he manages to choke out around his suddenly dry mouth, before his brain can really register what he’s just asked for.

“Oh, I mean, it doesn’t have to be totally shirtless. You don’t have to be naked.” There’s a roaring in Ben’s ears as he begins rapidly backtracking, terrified that he’s just crossed some sort of serious line. “You could wear a tanktop if you want? Or you know, maybe just send a normal pictu–”

“Shirtless pic for shirtless pic! ” Rey says with a laugh, “You’re on!”

He smiles so hard that his face hurts. This seems to happen a lot when Rey is involved. It’s like he’s trying to make up for 30 years of frowning in the space of a few months and his cheeks just *can’t* keep up. He’s going to develop smile lines and he’ll have no reasonable explanation.

She’s just so much more than he even knows what to do with in every possible way.

Rey launches the next mission and they’re off. Both of them cheat like *crazy*. He steals her sticky bomb trick from the first round and uses them to hold her in place while he racks up kills. But in return, she bounces him away from every weapons cache with her ricochet canon and by the end of the game he’s totally out of ammo. He’s forced to rely on his sword while Rey bombs swaths of enemies from the rooftops.

They get a simultaneous kill on the boss, though, with a new combo move that is legitimately so cool it momentarily distracts them from their contest. It involves throwing their swords back and forth in a deadly whirl of light that shears the towering wraith in two. Basically it’s *fucking awesome.*
Ben is holding his breath as the end screen loads and when it does, he can’t help the whoop of joy he lets out.

He’s beaten her 74 to 73.

“Damn!” Rey says, “I really thought I had you again!”

The smile on his face fades a little.

“You… you don’t actually have to send me a shirtless photo. I don’t want to pressure you into anything,” he says, beating back the part of his brain that is yelling at him to stop being nice because he really wants this. It’s hard, but not that hard; of course he wants this photo, but not if it comes at the cost of making Rey uncomfortable.

As it turns out, he really need not have worried.

“Nope! A deal’s a deal. Gimme a sec,” Rey says. Then there’s some rustling an a clunk as Rey removes her headphones and sets them down, followed by the sound of a zipper, then silence.

A moment later, his phone dings. He grabs it faster than he’s ever picked it up in his entire life.

Rey Sanderson Has Sent An Image

“Don’t laugh, okay,” Rey says as the rustle in his ears indicates that she’s put her headset back on.

“I would never,” he says, as he clicks on the notification, opening the image in question.

Ben forgets how to breathe, then promptly remembers again, just in time to clap a hand over his mouth to avoid letting out the bark of laughter he had just promised he wouldn’t.

The picture is simultaneously the hottest and funniest thing he’s ever seen in his life.

She’s not entirely topless, but it’s close enough. She’s wearing a very sheer, light blue bra that does very little to obscure the dusky pink peaks of her nipples or the soft swell of her breasts. They look like they’d fit perfectly in his hands, which is an image he’s going to be thinking about for a long time to come. Her hair is down, curling gently around her face, which is stained faintly pink by a delicate blush.

It’s her face that makes the whole thing funny though. Well, that and her pose.

She’s contorted herself like a girl in a bad comic book, spine twisting in an over exaggerated fashion, chest puffed out as far as it will go, one arm propped on her hip, while the other is held high above her to take the photo. She’s also giving him what he has to guess is her idea of a ‘come hither’ look, dialed up to the nth degree. She’s puckered her lips out into full duck-face, and her lashes are so low that she almost looks like she’s just closing her eyes.

Ridiculous pose or no, his dick is suddenly awake and paying attention. He’s half-hard already and he shifts in his chair, trying to find some sort of relief.

“So?” She prompts, “Is it okay?”

“Yes,” Ben manages to choke out.

“I know my boobs are kind of small and I’m not like… totally shirtless but you also kind of cheated
last time so—” She babbles.

“Rey,” he cuts her off, fully serious, “You’re perfect, your boobs are perfect, the photo is perfect.”


He’s not ready, of course, but he acquiesces anyway and they launch into the next mission.

She’s still bright red as the mission starts, and so flustered that she doesn’t even realize until they’re actually landing on their new planet that she hadn’t put her shirt back on before sitting down.

There’s a strange, electric thrill running up and down her body, dancing across her skin. It had felt empowering to hear Ben’s breath catch and his voice go hoarse at the sight of her photo. Even though she knows that she’d done everything in her power to make it more silly than titillating.

Taking the actual thing had been awkward as fuck. She hadn’t quite registered how unfamiliar and uncomfortable she was with the idea of trying to make herself look sexy until she was faced with the task. It wasn’t the act of taking the photo, or even the fact that she knew she’d be sending it to Ben. It was the fact that when she looks at her own body, she doesn’t really see… sexy. She’s long and lean: great qualities in both runners and race horses, but not so much in a bombshell seductress.

Rey also leaves her bra on. Not that the sheer blue mesh of the delicate bralette really hides much, but… this is honestly the first time she’s ever taken a photo like this and she feels that it’s only fair that she get a little wiggle room in this bet, seeing as how Ben had taken plenty of liberties with his tweet.

She’d snapped a few serious photos where she actually did give it her best, but she just found herself looking at them and seeing everything that she lacked in the sex-appeal department. So she’d decided that if this wasn’t working, she was just going to have to do something else. Hence the duck-face and Escher Girl pose.

At least if the photo did nothing for Ben in terms of making him see her as desirable, it might amuse him.

But Rey should really know better at this point than to assume that she knows anything about how Ben’s brain works.

Because even though she can’t see his face when he gets the photo, she can tell he’s into it. And Rey’s into that. This game that they’re playing is dangerous. But it’s dangerous in an electrifying way that she feels like she could become addicted to very easily.

“I’m getting my picture this time,” she says, finally breaking the silence between them, missing their playful banter.

“I could just send you one,” Ben says, “If you want it so badly.”

“Nu-uh,” She tells him as she does a twirling move with her laser sword that slices through three enemies in a row, “I’m earning it fair and square.”
And she does, beating Ben by a full nine kills.

She waits patiently while he take his photo, eagerly watching her phone for updates.

When the photo finally comes in, she lets out a laugh.

“You are too much,” she tells him, still giggling.

It’s the single most dramatic selfie that anyone has ever taken. To begin with, he’s filtered it in black and white which makes the stark contrast between the dark of his room and his alabaster skin all the more obvious. On top of that he has his right arm bent up, hand resting on the back of his neck. The tattoo that she’d traced with her fingertips stands out dark against his skin. She had been correct in assuming that there were more lines hiding underneath the shirt, as it turns out, she can count eight in total.

Ben’s head is turned slightly to the left, but he’s looking back at her with a small smirk. His hair is pulled back at the nape of his neck in a low, small ponytail, keeping it from obscuring the thick column of his neck and his bare chest is...

Oh my god, Rey thinks, eyes wide as the moon as they rove over him. It’s not that she could have missed how fit Ben is when she’d spent so much time in close quarters with him. But knowing and seeing are two very different things indeed. He looks like he could toss her over his shoulder without a second thought and carry her off to have his way with her.

Yes please and thank you, says her lizard brain helpfully.

“How are you this ripped?” is what she says aloud, once her voice starts working again, “I mean I knew you were built but this is ridiculous! Aren’t gamers supposed to be skinny weaklings?”

Ben laughs. “I work out a lot. Everyone on the First Order does, actually. Being in shape makes your brain work better.”

“Oh my god,” Rey says breathlessly, eyes roving over the picture, “I can’t believe you slept with a shirt on in LA and deprived me of this.”

“I usually don’t wear a shirt to sleep… I just thought… you’d be more comfortable,” Ben says, sounding a little embarrassed.

Rey makes a sound of displeasure.

“So rude,” she says, shaking her head as a grin stretches across her lips. “Guess I’m just going to have to beat you again to teach you a lesson.”

“As if,” he replies. Then his voice drops low and dangerous, “I have big plans for this next win.”

She gets a full body shiver and there’s a throb between her legs. Rey bites her lip and starts the next mission.

This one is close, they cross a lava flow and up into a black castle of jagged obsidian, but at the last minute, the boss knocks her back into a fire, killing her instantly and allowing Ben to get a final strike in on the black-masked creature. He wins by one kill.

Rey sighs.

“You’re going to make me regret not asking what you wanted as your prize this time, aren’t you?”
she asks wryly.

Ben chuckles.

“I hope not,” he says, then pauses, takes a breath and continues, “I want to see you on video chat. Like you were in the photo. If… you’ll let me?”

Rey’s heart stutters and her stomach swoops dangerously. The picture had been one thing – she’d had some semblance of control over the whole situation – but with video chat, there’s no hiding behind silly poses. There’s just her and him.

At the same time. He clearly likes what he saw in the photo or else he would not have asked for more. And since that’s the case… the idea of him watching her, wanting her… well. It has a certain appeal. She shifts in her chair, pressing her thighs together.


She can hear his sharp intake of breath.

“Switch over to Discord,” Rey tells him, minimizing the Steam window, before clicking over herself.

The Jose Cuervo bottle is sitting next to her mouse and she thinks about reaching out and taking a swig directly from the bottle, to bolster her courage. But… she wants to do this. She doesn't want to do it because she’s tipsy and feeling bold. She wants Ben to see her and she doesn’t need more alcohol to make that happen.

Rey runs her fingers through her hair, sits up straighter and takes a steadying breath, before she clicks the ‘Start Video Call’ button.

Ben accepts and there’s a few seconds of silence between them as they wait for their videos to load.

When he finally appears on her screen, he’s sitting in the darkness of his room, lit by the pale light of his monitor. He, like she, appears to not have bothered to get dressed again post photo. He’s staring at her with hungry eyes and she shivers again.

“So,” she says, a little awkwardly, forcing herself not to cross her arms over her chest, “here I am.”

“There you are,” he murmurs, voice low in her ear, and it shoots straight down her spine. Then he sighs, “Rey, you have no idea what you do to me.”

Her heart is beating so fast that she feels like she might pass out and her mouth is dry as a desert.

“It’s… uh… it’s mutual,” she says.

“Can I see you?” He asks, “You know, without your bra?”

There’s another throb between her legs.

“Yeah. Okay, yeah,” She says, before reaching behind her back and fiddling with the clasp for a few seconds. At last it comes free and she takes a deep breath before sliding it off of her shoulders, baring her breasts to Ben’s gaze. Her skin feels hot and prickly and cold in the air of her apartment. Her nipples harden instantly, pulling taught into small peaks. She licks her lips.

He lets out a soft groan of appreciation.

Rey watches him with fascination as he leans in closer, almost as if he doesn’t realize what he’s
“Rey,” he whispers her name so softly and suddenly it’s all she wants in the world to hear him say her name like that in real life. To feel his breath against her skin as he pulls her close, as his hands rove across her body.

“Fuck; do you have any idea how badly I wish I could touch you right now?” He breathes.

“Probably about as much as I wish I could touch you,” Rey admits.

She notices that his right hand has dropped below the line of the desk, out of her sight, but the angle and the slight motion of his arm clues her in to where it’s landed and what he’s doing.

“Are…. are you touching yourself? Because of me?” She asks him, awed and fascinated in equal measure, as the heat in her belly intensifies.

He closes his eyes and takes a deep breath before answering.

“Honestly, I’m just trying to keep things under control here,” he says, voice rough, “I ah… think I might need to sign off.”

“What are you going to do?” Rey finds herself asking.

Ben groans and she feels the sound between her legs.

“I’m going to go jump off a building,” he deadpans, rolling his eyes, “No, I’m going to go jerk off before I embarrass myself any further in front of you.”

An idea rises out of the depths of her mind. One that feels almost shockingly bold; like it came from someone else and Rey just picked it up by accident.

But as she watches Ben watching her, curiosity and desire override her embarrassment and she decides that she very much likes the way it sounds. Rey, for her lack of practical experience, is not naive, so she knows exactly what she’s suggesting when she says:

“I mean that’s my plan too… so… what if… maybe you stayed and we could… you know....” It’s stuttering and hesitant, less because she’s unsure and more because she finds herself floundering for the vocabulary here. Rey’s out in open water, adrift and praying that he’ll see her flare and come pick her up before she drowns in her own embarrassment.

His sharp inhalation stands the hair on end all along the nape of her neck.

“Are you sure?” He asks, dark eyes peering into hers from a million miles away. And there’s a lot in there, desire and hunger, yes, but also disbelief and awe and something else that Rey doesn’t quite recognize.

She nods once, firmly.

“Yes,” she says, “I can’t touch you and that sucks but I want to see you. And I want you to see me.”

Ben closes his eyes and Rey can actually see him mouthing numbers as he counts to ten silently.

She grins.

“God,” he says, “if this is a tactic to kill me before championships to thin out the competition, let me just tell you: it’s working.”
She laughs and he opens his eyes and looks at her again.

“So?” She asks.

His face splits into a grin and he reaches up to angle his camera a little better, so she can see not only his face and chest, but the rest of his body as well. He’s leaning casually back in his chair, legs spread wide and planted firmly on the ground. She licks her lips involuntarily at the sight of his chiseled abs with a trail of dark hair leading down into black pants that are tented by his impressive erection. His thumbs are hooked into the waistband, teasing.

“I’ll show you mine if you show me yours,” he says, grinning crookedly.

She tilts her own camera down and takes a deep breath before sliding her pink cotton sleep shorts off. She hadn’t even registered until just then that these are the pair that are covered in little 8-bit hearts. Not exactly her sexiest outfit.

Honestly it doesn’t seem to matter to Ben though. He is staring at her newly revealed blue cotton panties, with the very obvious wet spot as evidence of what their whole game has been doing to her.

“Listen, just a heads up,” she says, looking away, “I’ve never done this before, okay, so I might… not be like… porn-star good at this, or whatever.”

“Fuck, Rey,” Ben says as he slides his own pants off, “if I wanted to watch porn I’d go watch that. Please trust me when I say that this is way better.”

He pauses and his cheeks get a little pink.

“Besides, I’ve never done this either,” he says, “so I guess we can figure this out together.”

Something warm blooms in Rey’s chest and she finds herself smiling as her eyes slide back to her screen so she can watch him slipping his pants off.

Either he wasn’t wearing underwear or they just came off at the same time because Rey suddenly finds herself looking at Ben’s dick where it rests long and hard and leaking shiny wetness against his belly.

He wraps a hand around himself and Rey is momentarily transfixed by the sight. Thick fingers resting below the flushed head, squeezing and stroking slowly.

For a second, she forgets that he can see her too, forgets everything except that Ben is so fucking hard and she did that to him. She wants to touch him, to taste him, to feel him inside of her. Rey has never wanted anyone as much as she wants Ben now.

“Rey?” Ben says, and she snaps back to reality.

“Yes?” she replies, tearing her eyes away from his dick to look at his face.

“You gonna lose the panties?” He asks. There’s no trace of a command there, just hopeful curiosity.

“Oh!” She says, then steels her nerves and lifts her hips so she can shimmy the garment in question down her legs.

“God, sweetheart,” Ben groans, stroking himself, “Why the fuck do you live 3,000 miles away? All I want to do is touch you.”

“What would you do if you were here?” She asks, feeling bolder and more daring than she ever has
before. This whole experience is waking up something wild in her and she thinks she might like it.

The hand that isn’t fisted around his cock runs through his hair, pushing the tendrils that have escaped the ponytail back out of his face and giving her a glimpse of his ears, which are charmingly bright red.

“Oh god, uh… I’d… kiss you. All over. Your face, your neck… your tits. I’d get my hands on them too, and play with them until you couldn’t take it anymore,” he says, starting out hesitantly, but growing bolder as he speaks.

Her hands drift up her body to cup her breasts. She presses them together as much as she can, kneading and squeezing, before dragging her thumbs back and forth across her nipples. He watches her, transfixed.

“And… fuck, I’d get a hand between your legs,” he continues, his voice a low rumble in her ears, “Jesus, you’re so wet already, I just want to watch you come on my fingers.”

Leaving her left hand in place, her right trails hesitantly down her stomach. The ticklish skin and muscles jump under her own touch. Then, before she can lose her nerve, she slides her fingers through the sparse, dark hair between her legs and into the slickness below.

Rey whimpers and leans back against her chair, letting her legs fall a little wider. Her eyes drift half closed as her fingers graze the little bundle of nerves at the apex of her thighs.

She rolls her nipple between her fingers, tugging and pulling as her other hand delves lower, plunging into the wet heat of her body. She doesn’t know how to make a show of this, so she doesn’t bother trying. She just circles her clit with her thumb and fucks herself on her own fingers, while she watches Ben touch himself.

“Like this?” she asks, around a choked off moan.

“Just like that,” he breathes.

Rey’s got a healthy imagination but nothing her brain has come up with has ever left her this hot and aching and desperate. Her fingers, which have been perfectly adequate for servicing her needs up until this point feel too small. Seeking more stimulation she slides her fingers up and focuses her attention on her clit.

“Ben~” she gasps, around the shudder of pleasure that rolls through her body, curling her toes and arching her spine.

“Fucking hell,” Ben says, around a strangled moan as he passes his thumb across the head of his dick, “I promise when I do get to touch you, I’ll make sure it’s worth the wait. I’ll give you anything. Everything. Whatever you want.”

Rey whimpers, waves of tingly, mind numbing pleasure are building like a tsunami and she can feel her release waiting just out of reach.

“Are you close?” He asks her.

“Yes,” she pants.

“Come on sweetheart, let me see you come.” And his deep voice, unsteady with his own exertion, pouring directly into her ears through her headphones, combined with one last pass of her fingers, sends her over the edge. She comes trembling and shaking, with a startled cry.
She feels transported, light and drifting for a few seconds before she returns to her body. Her eyes—which had drifted closed at some point—flutter open and ahead of her on the screen she can see that Ben has picked up his pace and he’s saying her name softly, like a chant in her ear. He watches her with half-lidded eyes, hunger and desire writ plain as day in his gaze.

“Ben,” she responds, fingers still working languidly between her legs as aftershocks of pleasure skitter across her skin, “I want to see you come too.”

That seems to do it for him. With a groan, he spills across his chest and stomach and hand and Rey feels a deep bloom of satisfaction, low in her stomach.

_I did that to you_, she thinks, feeling proud and possessive, _No one else gets to see you like this. This side of you is mine and mine alone._

“Rey,” Ben breathes, tilting his head back against the headrest of the chair, “Are you sure you’re real? Sometimes I wonder if I didn’t just make you up.”

She lets out a bark of surprised laughter.

“I certainly feel real,” she says.

He shakes his head before rolling it forwards so he can look at her again.

There’s a beat of silence between them where they just stare at each, separated by screens and distance but utterly naked before each other.

Ben’s chest is flushed and Rey watches with fascination as his dick softens against his thigh.

He’s looking at her with that strange, unplaceable expression again. And despite how physically exposed she’d been only seconds before, this is the most vulnerable she’s actually felt this entire night.

“I wish I could kiss you,” he says, at last, with a sigh.

“I wish you could kiss me too,” she replies, “I’m still mad that I kind of thought I was dreaming when you did it in LA.”

Ben chuckles.

“Then I guess I’ll just have to do it again in Las Vegas. So you’ll know it’s for real.”

Rey grins at him then gestures at the mess on his stomach and hand.

“Hey,” she says, “go get cleaned up. We only have like one more mission left and I want to know what happens to Scavenger and Berserker.”

“You’re still thinking about the game?” Ben asks, sounding _minorly_ insulted.

“Listen,” she says, grinning, “I was _only_ thinking about you just now. But the story is very compelling so hurry up!”

He shakes his head, but smiles faintly as he complies with her request and goes to clean himself up.

Chapter End Notes
I have been sitting on this chapter for a month and a half OH MY GOD.

If you're enjoying the fic so far, please consider sharing it with a friend! Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated and fuel my desire to write more!

As usual, please feel free to come yell at me about this story on Twitter or Tumblr.
I’m extending the chapter count again because I can’t be stopped and neither can this fic.

Kayurka did GORGEOUS ART FOR MY STORY AAAAAAHHH! I’m so in love and you should all go tell her her amazing it is.

As always, Cyborgharpy is the best beta a girl could ask for and she makes this story so much better every time she edits.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s kind of funny, actually, but despite the abrupt comedown from their extreme intimacy, Rey’s insistence on finishing the game is probably the best possible thing that she could have done for them. It brings them back into familiar territory, deftly steering them away from any potential awkwardness that could have bled over and tainted their interactions in the wake of the video call.

They play through the final mission of Ancient Order, Discord video windows still open but shoved to the side to make room for the game. As Rey legitimately cheers and tears up over the happy reunion between Vesper and her teammates, Ben realizes that while everything is different now, nothing has changed. And it’s awesome.

“Are you crying?” he asks as Rey swipes at her eyes, carefully not meeting his gaze in the webcam.

“No!” She lies, then, “Maybe! Shut up! I’ve been waiting to see them re-unite forever.”

Something in his chest squeezes fondly as he watches her. She’s dressed once more in his Vader hoodie, a pair of fuzzy socks, and her little pink shorts, trying valiantly to hide her tears of joy over this game, and she’s just so cute it’s killing him.

It seems strange, given how recently he was watching her coming with his name on her lips, naked and panting but... he’s so stupid in love with Rey that he likes this version of her just as much as the other. Right now, the thing he wants most of all is just to pull her into his arms, bury his face in her neck and fall asleep to the sound of her heartbeat, feeling safe and comforted by her presence.

The credits begin to roll and he yawns, suddenly aware of the fact that it’s 2AM.

Time just doesn’t work right whenever Rey’s around.

“I should have gone to bed two hours ago,” Ben says.

“Yeah,” Rey replies, “But then you’d have missed all the fun.”

Ben inclines his head in agreement.

“True, and that would have been a real shame,” he says, “but I’m fucking exhausted and I really do need to go pass out now. I have to stream tomorrow since I didn’t do it tonight.”
“Okay,” she says, resigned, “I should probably sleep too.”

They stare at each other again, neither of them making any move to end the call.

“Hey.” He pauses, then figures that she’s seen him naked so there’s not much more point in subtlety. If he’s ever going to go all in, now is the time. “This isn’t just a casual thing to me. I hope you know that?”

Her hazel eyes are huge and vulnerable when they meet his in the camera.

“I want this. For real. If you want that too,” he says, trying to choose his words with care but stumbling anyway.

“What exactly is this?” she asks, gesturing between them. “I don’t… I’ve never been with anyone before. Not like this, anyway. And honestly… I’m terrified. I’m so scared of how much could go wrong.”

Ben leans back in his chair and blows out a breath.

“I think you had it right when you said you just wished it was less complicated, back in LA. Because it is; it’s complicated as fuck,” he says.

He shifts his jaw, a nervous motion that he hardly even registers.

“I want a relationship with you. I want to call you my girlfriend and fucking… I dunno… hold your hand all the time, and play co-op games with you in the same room or whatever. Couple shit, you know.”

Rey lets out a soft laugh.

“Yeah,” she says, “me too.”

Then her face grows serious.

“I don’t want to do a secret long-distance relationship thing for the rest of eternity, though. And I have a hard time seeing another option with things as they stand right now,” she says, looking down at her lap. His heart pounds in his chest like he’s running a marathon on speed.

She bites her lip and looks up at him again.

“But at this point I also don’t think I can go back to my life the way it was before we started this, even if I wanted to. So… where does that leave us?”

“What if, for right now, we don’t worry about labeling it? Let’s just take it slow and see what happens. There’s a lot of shit in our way but nothing is impossible. We’ll figure it out. We’ll make it work,” he says. And he means it.

She smiles at him; a slow, hopeful thing that breaks across her face as she looks up at him through her lashes.

“Yeah, okay,” she says, “I can work with that.”

He carries the look on her face to bed with him and dreams of holding her in his arms all night long.

The next morning dawns bright and cloudless and despite his late bedtime he forces himself out into the early morning chill for his daily run.
His head is a chaotic whirl, the events of the night before replaying over and over. He still can’t believe that any of it had really happened. The game, the contest, the Skype – Discord? – sex, the acknowledgement that the thing between them is real and definitely mutual.

How the actual fuck am I supposed to stream today, he wonders as his feet pound against the Central Park jogging path.

He spends the rest of the run doing his very best to forget about his responsibilities, and chooses instead to think about Rey and the fact that in less than a week, he’ll be face to face with her again.

The pleasant daydreams carry him all the way back to his brownstone, through a shower and breakfast and right up until he switches on his broadcaster and begins streaming.

And then, as it is so wont to do, reality catches up.

“WHAT THE FUCK’S UP, ASSHOLES? I’M KYLOREN AND IT’S MOTHERFUCKING STARKILLER O’CLOCK,” he shouts into his mic as he clicks through the menus in the game window and idly watches his chat scroll.

“A new patch dropped earlier this week so I was thinking that for today’s stream I’d go ahead and test out the new “buffs” on the Striker heroes and see how badly Far Galaxy has decided to fuck all of us who managed to make it to Championships.”

His chat responds enthusiastically – various people jumping in to add their opinion about the patch to the conversation. Far Galaxy is notorious at this point for releasing major hero balance patches with game-altering modifications at the worst times. The entire StarKiller community is usually ready to throw down about it, so it’s a perfect subject to generate the sort of vitriolic anger that people come to his streams to watch.

Ben clicks into a public game, exchanging barbs with his chat while he waits for his team to fill up.

“No, I think it’s fucking stupid that they increased the cooldown on Whirlwind because now Silencer’s primary shield ability is effectively useless,” he’s saying, when a new voice interrupts him.

“Yo, my man Kylo!” says his new teammate. The man has a deep voice and the username SpaceBluntzzz.

“’Sup,” says Ben.

“Bro, it’s so crazy getting matched up with you here! I actually saw you at StarFall,” SpaceBluntzzz says. He speaks in a sort of slow and drawn out way that makes Ben think that the “Bluntzzz” part of his name is not just for show.

“Oh?” Ben asks, trying not to sound too bored. “Did you come by my table?”

“Noah dude! I saw you in the hotel lobby! It was that night that everyone thought you were dead,” SpaceBluntzzz laughs. “I actually posted about it on Twitter but I don’t think anyone saw.”

Cold fear trickles down Ben’s spine. This is the last thing he needs people talking about on his stream.

“Looks like you were ahead of the class,” Ben says, forcing his tone to hold steady. Two more people join the team and Ben latches on to them to change the subject.

“If either one of you plays Tantive or Lothal I’m gonna fucking throw the match – they just nerfed
both of them into the ground,” Ben says.

“Jesus Christ, calm down,” says Antilles1. “I’m a Sniper anyway, Tank and Offense nerfs don’t mean shit to me.”

“Why do they keep nerfing Lothal?” whines KanidyGoesBoom.

Unfortunately the change in conversation doesn’t stick, because as soon as everyone has locked in their heroes, SpaceBluntzzz is at it again.

“So anyway, I totally get why you went missing, though, that chick you were with was fucking bangin’. I would have skipped a con to get a piece of that too. Are you ever gonna tell us who it was or are you just enjoying watching the internet play detective too much?”

Ben’s heart fucking stops. This is it. This is the nightmare, worst-case scenario.

Fuckfuckfuckfuckfuck. Think, Solo, he berates himself as the wheels of his brain spin uselessly. Out of the corner of his eye he can see his Twitch chat going bonkers and he just knows that this is already beyond containing.

Out of options, he does the only thing he can think of: he laughs.

“I don’t understand why you’re all so fucking obsessed with this” Ben says, forcing as much dismissive disinterest into his tone as he can muster, “she’s nobody. It doesn’t matter.”

“So she was a hooker,” SpaceBluntzzz says.

“Yeah well we already called that one,” says Antilles1, “there isn’t a girl on this planet who would fuck KyloRen for free.”

“She wasn’t a fucking hooker,” Ben snaps. “Now can we pay attention to the game or do I need to invite you all over for a slumber party so that we can braid each other’s hair and talk about who I’m fucking some more?”

Ben plays mostly on muscle memory for the next few hours, letting his mouth spout off his usual rage-rants and colorful commentary about the various “improvements” that the new patch has added to the game. He does his best to drive conversation as far away from anything that could possibly even remind people of StarFall.

But all the while his brain is going a million miles per hour as he tries to figure out how to put this cat back in the bag. If the identity of the girl in the StarFall photo gets out, it’s going to hurt Rey in a very real way. Ben has been on the internet long enough to realize exactly how the eSports community will take this: he’ll be a player, Rey will be a slut, and public scrutiny will poison everything. Not to mention, if the truth of her identity gets out then he’s going to be forced to take the lies that he told his team and Snoke public.

And with good reason: how could he possibly expect her to stand by him if she has to listen to him insulting and belittling her? Rey might have her insecurities but she also has plenty of self respect. She’s not the type to take something like that laying down. Even if he could convince her that he is just acting, that he does not mean the horrible things he’s been forced to say about her, if the eSports community hears the things he’s said, there would be no world in which the two of them could ever pursue a public relationship when all was said and done.

There’s a noose around his neck and with every step he takes, it grows tighter.
Luke Skywalker

Hi Rey,

I’m trying to take the chance to spend some personal time with each member of the team before the Championships. I know you’re at loose ends today with the boys in Calexico and I wanted to invite you up to Oceanside for lunch so we can talk. Let me know if you’re free.

Best,

Luke

Rey reads the text message and wonders, not for the first time, if at some point all the baby-boomers in the world had been told that text messages and emails were the same thing. Luke (and every boss she’s ever had who even knew how to text) certainly seems to be under that impression.

She still feels kind of awkward around Luke and she has a sinking suspicion that in the wake of Friday night’s events, she’s going to have a harder time than usual looking him in the eye. But Rey has already decided that no matter what the nature of her relationship with Ben might be, it’s not going to interfere with her career. So that means she just has to gird her loins and be a professional about this.

Rey Sanderson

yah im free today and lunch sounds good

Rey Sanderson

where/when do u want to meet?

Rey Sanderson

also ive got bb this weekend and i cant leave him alone

Luke Skywalker

Hi Rey,

Great to hear! Why don’t we meet at the Bagby Beer Company at 12:30? They’re dog-friendly so you can bring the pooch.

Best,

Luke

Rey Sanderson

ok :) see u soon

Rey locks her phone screen and gets up to make herself presentable.
Finn and Poe had taken Poe’s Explorer for their trip, leaving Finn’s white Honda Civic behind for Rey to use if she needs to go somewhere that her Vespa won’t take her.

It’s a little early, but even on a Sunday, the drive up the Five to Oceanside can get a bit backed up sometimes, so Rey loads the corgi into the car and hits the road.

It’s a nice day: clear and sunny, and a scattering of fluffy white clouds dot the sky. The ocean glitters in the sun off to their left as Rey and BB drive up the coast. She’s rolled the passenger seat window down just enough for BB to stick his nose out the window and the air feels pleasant on her skin.

Despite her trepidation about meeting up with Luke, she is still riding the high from Friday night.

*Obviously* they’ve got about six billion problems to work out. Everything from geography to Ben’s nightmare of a manager are standing between them. But they’re on the same page. They’ve acknowledged that they want this. That they want each other. This is real.

Rey hums along to the song on the radio as they pass through Encinitas, over the wide, flat Batiquitos Lagoon, and then up through the tiny town of Carlsbad into the slightly larger town of Oceanside.

She turns off the Five at Oceanside Boulevard, heading west towards the coast, then turns again onto a side street, glancing between Google Maps and the buildings on either side of the street as she tries to locate the Bagby Beer Company.

As it turns out, Rey need not have stressed about locating the building. The Bagby Beer Company is a large, dark gray building that occupies half a block all on its own. The front boasts a high wooden fence that separates the open air dining section from the sidewalk. Even without the large, green sign on the front of the building, Rey would have known she was in the right place from the massive brew tanks that loom behind the structure.

She pulls into the parking lot, clipping BB’s leash onto his collar and hoisting him out of the car.

“We’ve got to stop feeding you table scraps,” she says to the dog as she deposits him on the pavement. BB whines sadly at her.

Girl and dog make their way into the courtyard, and Rey has a strange flash of *déjà vu* from the first meeting with Luke when she spies the older man sitting by himself at a table. He’s wearing hemp sandals, khaki shorts and an honest-to-god Hawaiian shirt, along with a small pair of reading glasses. He’s perusing the sports section of the San Diego Union-Tribune.

Rey takes a steadying breath and fixes a smile on her face.

*Here goes nothing,* she thinks, walking towards him, BB jogging behind on his stumpy legs.

“Rey! Good to see you,” Luke says, lowering his paper as she draws even with the table. His eyes twinkle cheerfully in the light of the mid-day sun and he honestly looks like such a beach-bum that Rey’s brain expends an excessive amount of processing power trying to reconcile the fact that this man shares any DNA with Ben.

“Thanks for the invite,” she says, taking a seat across the square, wooden table from Luke before leaning down to tie BB’s leash to the leg of her chair. The corgi obediently lies down by her feet and is asleep within seconds.

“I’ll ask the waiter to bring a bowl of water over for him,” Luke says, leaning over slightly so he can
observe the dog.

“Thank you for picking somewhere we could bring BB. He has a crate but if I try to leave him in it during the day for longer than a couple hours he starts to howl and the neighbors complain,” Rey says.


“I have one like that;” he says, “an old blue heeler named Artoo. Grumpy as can be, always needs to be in the thick of things. This guy is Poe’s, right?”

Rey grins. “Technically, but he’s sort of… the team mascot at this point? He spends more time at me and Finn’s place and since everyone’s always over there it’s just some kind of sitcom about six people all co-parenting and over-feeding a dog.”

That gets another chuckle out of Luke. He grows serious again and gives her an appraising glance.

“You know, when I first met you, you were wound so tight I wasn’t even surprised when you snapped and ran off for a weekend. Disappointed, yes, but not surprised,” he says. There’s no judgement in his tone, but Rey still feels a little called out.

“You’ve been getting better and better since then though. Confidence looks good on you, kid,” he says, and the words ease the sting of his previous statement a little.

“Well,” she says, “I told you when we talked that time that this whole thing has been something of a whirlwind. I think maybe I’m finally getting used to everything. Being in the public eye. Having people lean on me.”

Rey pauses then huffs a soft laugh, shrugging a little.

“Leaning on people too.”

Luke nods. “Given how quickly your life changed, I’m actually impressed with how well you’ve rolled with everything. You’re tough and you know how to get back up when you stumble. That’s good; it means you can handle what life throws in your way.”

Rey feels her cheeks get pink and she ducks her head, busying herself with reading the menu to hide her smile.

The waiter comes by a few minutes later and takes their orders, returning promptly with beers for the humans and a small metal dog bowl full of water for BB.

“So…” Rey says as the waiter departs once more, “Was there something you wanted to talk to me about or is this just… for fun?”

Luke smirks and for a flash of a second Rey sees something familiar about that look.

*Ah, there’s the family resemblance,* she thinks.


“Well, you *did* introduce yourself by saying that Leia sent you to sabotage us,” Rey points out, grinning. “That’s not the sort of thing you just forget about.”

Luke groans.
“Ahh, you guys are never going to forget that one are you?” he asks.

Rey sips her beer before answering.

“Nope!” She says, cheerily.

“This really is just a social visit. Poe and I’ve worked together a fair bit but I really don’t see the rest of you outside of the time we spend on preparing for games or at competitions. I want to know the players on the team as people. And I want you to get the chance to know me, too,” he says.

The statement is so at odds with what little she’s been able to pry out of Ben about Luke as a manager, that it legitimately catches her off guard.

“Why?” She asks, then flushes when she realizes how rude that must sound, and stammers, “I mean… uh…”

“No, it’s a fair question,” Luke says, “I know plenty of managers in all sorts of industries – sports to music – that prefer to view their clients as jobs, not people. But… that’s not me. Not any more.”

Luke sighs and settles back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I know you’ve had a couple of run-ins with my nephew, Ben, he goes by KyloRen in StarKiller,” Luke says and it takes every ounce of willpower that Rey has to maintain her neutral expression.

“You… uh… could say that,” she says.

Luke’s lips twist up into a half smile.

“A long time ago, back before StarKiller, I used to manage him. It was a favor to my sister and her ex-husband, Han. They were still married back then. Ben was… difficult. But he was talented, and interested in exploring this new world of gaming on a professional level.”

Rey listens, hardly daring to breathe, lest she accidentally interrupt Luke and never get to hear the rest of his side of the story.

“Anyway, he grew up in the public eye because of Leia and Han’s celebrity. And they were worried that Ben – with his temper and his extreme behavior – was going to make a fool of himself and ruin his job prospects for the rest of his life. I don’t think they ever really believed that he could make an actual living through gaming or streaming, or any of it. So they asked me to step in and take charge of his career and try to keep him from crashing and burning.”


“So I did. And I tried to manage him like I would any other client. I really tried to do what I thought was right by him but I think in the end… I was so out of touch with who he was as a person that I missed everything important and I drove him not just away from me, but away from our whole family.”

With a heavy sigh, Luke looks back and meets her gaze.

“So that’s why I want to know you as people. That’s why I’m trying to do this right, this time around. I failed the first time someone trusted me to help them in this industry… and I can’t fix it with him, but I can do better this time around.”

Now that Rey has heard Luke’s version as well as Ben’s, she feels like she can see – like she
understands the whole, sad picture. It’s the story of a family split and fractured along every possible fault line, every member a casualty in their own way. Rey’s heart aches for them.

“I think you are,” she says. “Doing better, that is.”


Rey looks at Luke. Behind the affable exterior and the carefree air that he puts on, there’s a sadness that she’s never quite noticed before. It’s in the melancholy in his eyes, creases worn into his face from stress and sorrow. She feels something loosen in her chest, a knot of fear that has lived there since the day that she first met Luke.

She thinks for a moment about telling Luke the truth about her and Ben. But selfishly she holds her tongue. There’s peace and ease between them now and despite his words she’s still not sure what he’d make of their relationship. Besides, the whole thing is so new and fragile and confusing. Rey hasn’t had a chance to fully process exactly what she and Ben really are now and Luke is not the first person she wants to open that can of worms up with.

So she sips her beer instead.

“Now. I’ve done enough sharing here. It’s your turn. Tell me how a girl from London ends up playing StarKiller professionally in San Diego.”

Ben’s phone has been blowing up – vibrating across the glass of his bedside table with every message alert – for the last half hour. He’s been ignoring it in favor of packing for his trip, but after a string of rapidfire buzzes sends the device skidding to the floor he finally gives up and goes to check his messages.

For the most part it’s just the usual bullshit. A lot of it is from Twitter. There’s a thread by the Sith Lords calling him out because he’d called them inconsequential and annoying on his stream the other day, making up a solid 30 notifications all on its own. He scrolls past a few emails reminding him about his upcoming flight to the notifications from the First Order group chat.

There are a lot of messages. It takes Ben a while to read through all of the logistical crap about shared Ubers and reminders to pack uniforms to actually get to the real conversation.

To: First Order Group Chat

From: Caide Steton

Is Bitcoin a good investment?

From: Phasma Scyre

If YOU’RE asking about it then the answer is no.

From: Caide Steton

Yeah that’s what you said about weed dispensaries and look who’s making BANK NOW BITCHES’
From: Armitage Hux

I’ve been investing in it since 2009. It’s the ONLY viable cryptocurrency IMO.

From: Armitage Hux

If you’re interested, I could sell you some.

From: Caide Steton

Tiiiiiiite thanks bro!!!

From: Phasma Scyre

God you two are the worst kind of people.

Ben rolls his eyes and continues scrolling.

From: Eyja Fjord

God… do you guys want to hear something stupid and hilarious?

From: Phasma Scyre

I mean probably not but I feel like you’re about to tell us anyway…

From: Eyja Fjord

Trust me Phas, this will make you laugh. I’ve been DYING for HOURS.

From: Eyja Fjord

GameLinq.com just released their annual ranking of the hottest women in esports

From: Eyja Fjord

OFC I’m on it, though I’m only #2 which is CRAZY

From: Eyja Fjord

But you’ll NEVER guess who made #3…

From: Phasma Scyre

Jyn Erso? She’s pretty hot.

From: Eyja Fjord

LMAO AS IF!! No she’s like 8th.

From: Dopheled Mitaka

Luce Mirai?

From: Eyja Fjord
Gross. Sorry I know you had a fling or w/e with her but she’s fugly AF and nope.

From: Dopheld Miōka

Hey! That’s rude, Eyja. You’re only saying that because you’re intimidated by her. >:(

From: Eyja Fjord

LOL sure

From: Eyja Fjord

But back to the subject at hand……..

From: Eyja Fjord

According to the morons at GameLinq not only is she “a beast mode striker who’s taking StarKiller by storm” but the third hottest woman in esports is…..

From: Eyja Fjord

Ben’s little fuckbuddy : ReyOfLight!

From: Caide Steton

I mean I’d do her

From: Armitage Hux

A: gross, but not surprising. We all know you’ll fuck anything that holds still long enough. And B: You’re KIDDING. She’s so… plain.

From: Eyja Fjord

I know right? Maybe they included her so high up on the list as a charity thing to help boost her self esteem?

Ben re-reads the last message, fingers tightening around his phone. He forces himself to take a few deep breaths – in through his nose, out through his mouth.

Eyja has always had a nasty streak that rears its head any time she feels threatened by another woman. She’s fond of telling anyone who will listen that she thinks women are dumb and dramatic and that she’d much rather be friends with men. Which is rich, given that Eyja is possibly the most dramatic person Ben has ever met, besides Hux. It probably explains why those two are thick as thieves.

Normally when he sees this sort of behavior from her he can recognize her insecurity for what it is, leaving him to roll his eyes and move along. But seeing it turned on someone he cares about is making Ben’s blood boil. This whole situation has him seeing red. Between Eyja’s behavior and the fact that a “legitimate” gaming news site is actually ranking women by their attractiveness – like that actually matters – Ben is ready to lose it.

From: Ben Solo

Your inferiority complex is showing, Eyja.
From: Eyja Fjord

So’s your crush.

He’s about to respond when another message notification from Eyja appears. And then another and another. These messages are not in the group chat though, like the rest, but is instead in their private text chain.

Eyja Fjord

Listen, you asshole. I didn’t say anything because honestly I was giving you the benefit of the doubt and trying to treat you like a grownup.

Eyja Fjord

But there’s something fucking sketchy going on with you and that girl.

Eyja Fjord

Between the fact that you tried to hide that you met her from us, and how goddamn weird you get any time anyone mentions her…

Eyja Fjord

I don’t know what it is but it’s not right.

Eyja Fjord

And ON TOP OF ALL THAT! You’ve been acting like more of a psycho than usual recently. You’ve always been a ragey asshole but you used to at least PRETEND to toe the line… I fucking know something’s up with you.

Ben’s heart lurches in his chest, cold fear wrapping around his spine.

Ben Solo

You’re crazy. The only sketchy thing is the fact that you are THIS obsessed with me.

Ben Solo

Maybe you should spend less time worrying about me and more time worrying about yourself.

Eyja Fjord

Deflect all you want Ben but I’m not blind. Do you have feelings for her?

Ben Solo

Don’t be fucking stupid Eyja.

Eyja Fjord
That’s not an answer. I think you’re way more into her than you’re letting on.

Ben Solo

I literally could not give less of a shit about her. She’s a dangerously skilled opponent and I want to crush her into the ground at Championships, that’s it.

He types the message, acting on furious instinct to throw Eyja off his scent. But the second he hits send, Ben gets this horrible, sinking feeling that he’s just done something very wrong. It doesn’t seem possible, but if these texts ever get back to Rey, it will be a catastrophe.

Eyja Fjord

I certainly hope so.

Eyja Fjord

Because we all want this Championship win and if you do ANYTHING that jeopardizes it, literally none of us will have your back when Snoke puts your head on the chopping block.

He sets the phone down and runs his hands up over his face and through his hair before letting them fall to his sides.

“Fuck,” he says to the empty room. He’s out of options; he needs to tell Rey the truth.

Rey rifles through her underwear drawer, looking for the low-backed bra that she had bought specifically for one of her party dresses and wondering how it was possible to lose something that had never gone anywhere other than the shopping bag she’d brought it home in.

The bra, as it turns out, is hiding under a pile of freshly laundered socks, next to the photo booth strip and ticket from the Santa Monica arcade. She’d tucked them away in there for safekeeping after she got home, not quite ready to have anyone else looking at the evidence of their time together. Rey picks the photos up and grins a little as her eyes rove over her and Ben’s tiny, black and white faces.

Though it has only been about a month, it feels like an eternity since she last saw him. Now she has less than twenty four hours before they’ll be face to face once again.

She slips the photo strip back into the drawer and carries the bra over to her partially-packed suitcase, daydreaming about sneaking off to secluded spots and stealing kisses and touches as she goes.

Finn knocks on her open door, and the sound makes her jump. Seeing Finn immediately reminds her of the real reason she’s packing for Las Vegas and that of course makes her feel guilty. It’s a cycle she’s been caught in for the last week and Rey is ready to get off of this rollercoaster ride right now.

“Hey, how’s it going in here?” he asks, peeking in as it swings into the room from the impact.

“Good,” she says, shooing her thoughts away. “What time is Poe picking us up tomorrow?”

Finn steps all the way into the room and leans against her door frame.
“Eleven,” he says. “The flight to Vegas is only about an hour long so we don’t have to get up at the crack of dawn. We’ll get in with plenty of time to settle in before we have to start doing actual Championships stuff.”

“Oh, yeah, cool,” Rey says.

Finn gives her an appraising look, frowning slightly.

“You nervous?” he asks.

Rey, who is folding a shirt on her bed, stills for a second, biting her lip before turning around.

“Kind of?” She says, “There’s… just a lot waiting for us in Vegas, you know?”

Finn smiles warmly at her.

“We’re gonna kill it, though,” he says. “No matter what happens, we’ve already done something incredible. But I think we actually have a real chance here.”

“I do too. And I know it wasn’t like… an intentional goal or anything but we really are breaking some barriers and doing something important,” she says, looking up with a small half smile. “We’re four women and two openly gay guys. If we win Championships this will be eSports history.”

Finn’s grin is bright enough to eclipse the sun.

“It’s so fucking cool, right?” he says honestly. “And I don’t want to like… put too much pressure on you again but a big part of that is thanks to you. We really wouldn’t be here without you, Rey.”

“Finn…” She says, feeling her eyes prickle. She blinks furiously to keep the tears at bay.

“No, I’m serious. I’m so proud of you. And I’m so proud to be your teammate and your friend.”

She sniffs and blots at her eyes. “Every time you say something like that I get so scared that one day I’m going to disappoint you and you’re going to take it all back. If… if things don’t go well at Championships… if I mess up and let you down… will you still love me?”

Finn snorts and walks into the room to wrap her in a hug.

“Peanut, there is nothing you could do that would make me stop loving you.”

Rey swallows around the lump in her throat and wraps her arms around his back in return.

“Same,” she says into his shoulder, “I love you, you know? You’re my family.”

“And you’re mine,” he says, kissing the top of her head.

Finn pulls back a little to look at her face.

“Hey,” he says, “no pressure but can I ask you a question?”

Rey nods.

“You and Ben Solo… what’s the deal there?”

Rey bites her lip and looks towards her feet for a second then her eyes flicker back up to Finn’s.

“We’re… kind of a thing,” she says, twisting her hands.
Finn snorts.

“Yeah, I sort of figured that much out. Actually the whole team did. You’re not very subtle,” he says.

Rey looks back down at the chipped coral nail polish on her toes.

“It’s… god, Finn. It’s so complicated,” she chews her lip. “I don’t think either of us expected this to happen or for it to happen so fast but… I really like him. And he really likes me.”

Rey feels one of Finn’s big, warm palms land on her shoulder. He squeezes gently.

“Are you gonna be okay playing against him?” he asks.

“Yes,” she says, and Rey’s surprised to find that she doesn’t even doubt it at all.

“We both knew from the beginning that this fight was coming. And it’s kind of hard to explain but… I think we’re both looking forward to it. I mean it will suck for whoever loses but that’s not going to stop us from giving it our all,” she says, with a little shrug.

“Rey…” Finn sighs, and his eyes are uncertain. “I just don’t want to see you get hurt.”

“It fine,” Rey insists. “Yeah I mean it might suck a little but we’ll be okay.”

“What if it’s not? What if he like… I dunno, freaks the fuck out? That’s kind of KyloRen’s thing, remember?” Finn replies, scratching the back of his neck. “He snapped a keyboard over his knee after losing a tournament once. Are you sure that this… ‘not-a-relationship-relationship’ thing you have going on is gonna be okay? And are you sure that he’s really the kind of guy you want any of that with in the first place?”

*What if Finn’s right,* whispers a little voice in her head, and a cold shiver runs up her spine. But she shoves it aside. She *knows* Ben now. He wouldn’t do that, not to her.

And it’s a good thing too, because Ben is inside of her carefully constructed walls, lodged so deep in her heart that to try to get him out would kill her.

“He won’t. When the time comes, I’ll kick his ass same as always, and we’ll be fine” she tells him.

“If you say so,” he says, brows drawn together in a doubtful frown.

“I do,” Rey replies firmly.

Finn sighs and relents.

“Alright,” he says. “You know him better than I do, I just hope he doesn’t disappoint you. I’m gonna go finish my packing so I can chill and play something with Poe tonight. Also, don’t forget your uniform pants, they’re still in the dryer.”

Finn walks out into the living room, leaving her standing in her room alone.

Rey shuts the door behind Finn and goes back to packing, mind racing as excitement and anxiety war for control over her thoughts.

About half an hour later, she’s nearly done shoving things into her suitcase. She’s trying to decide which of her two pairs of nice shoes to bring with her, when the familiar FaceTime ringtone begins to emanate from her phone. Rey grins and picks it up.
FaceTime From Ben Solo

She accepts the call and her smile widens as Ben’s face fills her screen. He’s paler than normal in the blue-white light of his phone and Rey thinks that she can’t wait to see him in natural light once more.

“Hey!” She says, brightly, “What’s up?”

Ben sighs heavily and Rey’s smile fades as she begins to notice the slight crease between his brows and the tension in his jaw.

“I have something I need to tell you,” he says, with no preamble.

Her heart stutters a little in her chest.

“Okay,” she says, feeling a frown begin to overtake her smile as she crosses her room to sit down on her bed.

“It’s… fuck. This is not going to be easy and I need you to just listen to me and let me tell you the whole story before you respond, alright?” he says.

“Ben, you’re scaring me,” Rey tells him. Then a bolt of fear shoots through her, “Oh my god. Are you breaking up with me? Already? Was this because I wasn’t good at Skype sex? Because if that’s the case then you should have just said so then and not –”

“No! Rey, god no I’m not breaking up with you,” Ben interrupts. “And this isn’t about sex.”

His words do little to calm her nerves. She bites anxiously at her lip.

“Well if you’re not breaking up with me then what is it?” She asks.

Ben looks away for a moment, then takes another deep breath, before answering.

“I haven’t been entirely truthful about a few things since StarFall. And for a while I thought that by keeping this shit from you that I could protect you. I thought I was doing the right thing. But I’ve realized now that by lying I may actually have put you in a worse situation. Put us both in one, actually,” he says.

Rey shakes her head at him.

“What are you talking about?”

There’s a long pause on Ben’s end and Rey watches his Adam's apple bob in his throat as he swallows.

“Rey, when Snoke and my team found out that you were the girl in the StarFall photos, I lied to them about why I was with you. If they had suspected the truth I knew that they’d either attack you directly or Snoke would force my hand and make me stop talking to you for real,” He says “So I did the only thing I could think of to throw them off your scent; I told them that I had met up with you because I was manipulating you. Trying to figure out your weaknesses so that I could use them against you.”

Rey recoils physically from the phone.

“You said what?” She says.
“Please, just let me finish. Then you can ask me whatever you want or yell at me or… anything, Just. Please.”

Rey shakes her head at him in disbelief but falls silent.

“They bought the excuse. Or at least they accepted it enough that they didn’t dig too deep. But in order to keep it that way I’ve had to keep the lie going and Rey… I’ve said some really, really horrible things. You… you know what I can be like. What people expect from me. If I’d been anything other than the worst version of myself then they would have suspected that something was wrong.” Ben looks down, like he’s too ashamed to meet her eyes while he’s talking. “And I know this is fucked up but I just… I didn’t know what else to do.”

He falls silent and glances up at her once more. Rey’s mouth is bone-dry and she finds that her tongue is thick and clumsy in her mouth. Numbly, she searches for the words she needs to form a response.

She feels thunderstruck.

*Of course* it’s not like she’s forgotten that the Ben she knows is *not* the one that the rest of the world sees. KyloRen and the First Order are the shadow that falls across every aspect of their relationship. But still… the idea that for all this time, while Ben had been telling her he cared and treating her like she was precious and special to him, he had simultaneously been trashing her in front of his team… well. It makes bile rise in her throat.

“Why… why are you telling me this now?” She finally manages to get out. “It’s fucking *bullshit* that you’ve been doing this and that part of the conversation is *not* over yet, but I would have been *much* happier *never* having to hear about it. So why tell me now?”

“Because I’m a fucking idiot,” Ben says bitterly, “Snoke has basically banned the whole team from so much as mentioning you publicly because he thinks you’re a distraction for me and doesn’t want to remind our sponsors that you exist.”

He laughs a little bitterly.

“But Eyja’s a conniving, scheming snake. She’s forced me into shit-talking in places where she could collect receipts. I’m pretty sure that if she thinks she can hurt you or distract you at the Championships with the shit I’ve said, she will. I don’t know if she’s planning on shoving my words in your face in person, or putting something online, but you need to know that it’s all a bunch of lies, I didn’t mean anything I said to them.”

“And what have you said, exactly?” Rey asks, almost dreading the answer.

“Rey…” Ben says, a note of desperate pleading in his voice.

“No,” Rey snaps back. “You’re right; I *should* hear this from you.”

Ben covers his eyes with the hand not holding his phone.

“My team and Snoke… they wanted proof that I’d actually met up with you to scope out your weaknesses, not just for fun. So I had to give them something they’d believe. So I said you were immature and naive. That your success was just luck that would eventually run out because you don’t know strategy… that you’re nothing without your team. And… fuck… Rey please don’t make me do this.”

He nearly begs.
There’s a sort of rushing noise in Rey’s ears and she feels herself growing colder and more distant with every word.

“Say it,” She says, and her voice sounds like it’s coming from a million miles away in her own head. Ben scrubs his hand down his face.

“I told them that I had you wrapped around my finger but that you were nothing to me,” he replies, voice barely above a whisper.

She processes his words like a pebble falling into a deep well. They enter her ears and travel slowly through her brain, echoing and repeating until they settle into her heart.

“So while you were telling me that this wasn’t a casual thing, you were telling them that I was nothing,” she says, quietly.

“Rey, I didn’t mean anything I told them,” Ben says desperately, “You have to know this. You know me.”

“Do I?” Rey spits back. “You hide from the rest of the world behind the name KyloRen and your temper. How do I know that you’re not hiding from me too?”

She shakes her head at him. It’s ironic that only moment’s before she’d been defending him to Finn. Really and truly believing that somehow she was safe from the cloud of toxicity that follows KyloRen around. How foolish she’d been.

“You’ve just told me that you’ve spent the last month lying to everyone around you including me! Anyone on your team could have come after me with your words at any point and I would have been unprepared and none the wiser! So how the fuck am I supposed to trust anything you say now?”

Rey feels something hot and wet on her cheeks and she is surprised to discover that she’s crying. The anger and betrayal she feels right now are eating into her like acid. They burn in her throat and stomach.

“Rey, I swear I have never lied to you about how I feel. You mean everything to me. I never wanted to hurt you and I would never have done anything like this if I had another choice,” Ben says. His dark eyes are wide and panicked and Rey wants to believe him so badly. But even if he’s telling the truth, and everything that he’s said really has been all in the name of protecting her, it’s still twisted as fuck that his idea of protection involves toxic lies and defaulting to his darkest self.

“That’s such a load of bollocks,” she snaps, shaking her head at him as furious tears continue to well from her eyes, “You didn’t have to lie about any of this! You could just have manned up and told Snoke to go fuck himself. He’s your manager, not your nanny; if he doesn’t like that you’re with me, he can just piss off. This isn’t his business!”

“Rey,” Ben says with an edge of frustration, “I’ve told you that the First Order is not like the Resistance. All of my business is Snoke’s business.”

“I don’t understand why you’re even still working for him,” she says, irritated. “You obviously hate him and he’s disgusting and horrible!”

“I do and he is, but he also holds my professional contract,” Ben says and it’s like the words have been torn out of him. He pauses for a second, shoving a hand through his hair. “If I leave him, I will
have to leave StarKiller and the world of professional eSports. My contract with him grants him nearly absolute control of my life, it will never expire, and he will never let it go. I signed it when I was just a kid but that doesn’t matter. Rey, he all but owns me.”

And Rey’s heart just fucking stops as the puzzle she’s been trying for weeks now to work out finally falls into place. The anger that has been building inside her doesn’t die away completely, but it pulls back a little as horror and understanding wash over her. Her tears cease, like a faucet that has been shut off, though a few more dry, hiccuping sobs work their way out.

“Oh,” she says in a small voice, “Ben, I had no idea…”

She stares into his eyes, searching the face on her screen as though she’ll find answers hidden between his beauty marks.

“Yeah,” he says.

“So if you told him the truth about me and he told you to give me up…” She begins.

“I would have to choose between you and literally everything else in my life,” Ben finishes grimly.

They’re silent for a while.

“Ben why didn’t you ever tell me this?” Rey asks, after a long moment,

He looks down, jaw shifting in a way that Rey has come to realize over the last few weeks, means that he’s really unhappy about something but trying to contain his feelings.

“Because I was a fucking coward and I was afraid that if you knew how much I’d fucked up my life, that you’d run as far away from me as you could,” he says, then laughs a little bitterly. "I should have told you anyway. You should have had the choice to run. It would have been so much better if we’d never even started this to begin with.”

Rey frowns at him.

“You’re an idiot, you know that?” She says, though the words aren’t as harsh as before, “You’re absolutely right that you should have told me. It was selfish and unfair of you to keep me in the dark about all of this stuff, but I can’t believe you think so little of me that you honestly believe I would have dumped you over this.”

Ben looks up at her, startled.

“What?” he says.

“If I’d known that your whole life was tied up in some nightmare contract, I would have done everything differently. We could have completely avoided the entire StarFall mess and everything that came afterwards! I could have come up and seen you when it wasn’t going to ruin everything and we still could have gotten to know each other, and I still would have fallen for you but you never would have had to lie and we wouldn’t be fighting now!” She replies, exasperated. “Maybe I could even have found a way to help you with Snoke!”

Ben opens and closes his mouth a few times, and Rey can see a faint red flush of embarrassment staining his cheeks.

“We are a couple, right? Or something like it?” She asks and stares at him until he gives her a jerky nod. “Then you need to stop making decisions about stuff that affects both of us without talking to
“‘Are’... you used present tense... you’re... you’re not leaving me?” Ben asks, staring at her with hopeful eyes.

“Way to miss the point,” she says, glowering at him. “And I honestly don’t know. This is so fucked up, Ben. The fact that you kept all this stuff from me, that you’ve been secretly trash-talking me, and that even if the trash-talk *is* a lie that you’re tied permanently to people who force you to do stuff like that... it’s a lot.”

She leans back against her headboard, feeling the wooden slats pressing into her spine. It’s uncomfortable, but she feels so emotionally untethered right now that the discomfort is almost grounding.

Rey can see Ben’s heart shattering in his dark eyes

“It is,” he agrees. “And I *know* I screwed up. I hated lying to you and I *never* wanted any of this to happen. But I can’t take any of it back now. All I can do is try to fix what I’ve done. Please, *please* give me the chance to try to fix this, Rey. I can’t lose you. Not before we’ve really gotten a chance to be together for real.”

Rey gnaws on her lip and screws her eyes shut. She’s still mad at him. And hurt. So hurt. And there’s a not-so-insignificant part of her that wants to tell him to fuck off and leave her alone. Tell him that he’s brought nothing but chaos and trouble into her life and that she never wants to see him again, except for when she’s beating him into oblivion in StarKiller.

But that’s just not true.

Because despite everything, despite the hurt, and the anger, and the betrayal, she still cares about him. She... *fuck*, despite *everything* Rey is pretty sure she *loves* him. Which really just drives the knife of this betrayal in even deeper.

“I’m not ready to give up on us,” she says, “but I think we need a little time to work our shit out. And I don’t think that right now is the time for it.”

Ben watches her silently through her phone. He’s so still that she thinks the app might have frozen for a second until he blinks.

“Don’t get me wrong, Ben: I’m so upset about this that I’m not even sure what to say to you. There is *so* much we need to talk about. But for now, I think we need to focus on the Championships because if we’re serious about fixing what’s gone wrong, then we need to give that our full focus. And I won’t split my attention away from my team right now, not even for you.”

“Okay,” he says, and his mouth pulls into a tight, resigned line but he nods.

“This means no room visits, no sneaking around, no *anything* in Las Vegas,” she says.

“If that’s what you want,” Ben says, then he blows out a frustrated breath, and looks beseechingly into her eyes, “But... *fuck*, I just want to fix this right now. I hate that we’re not okay. You have to know that I would do *anything* to make this up to you, Rey.”

“If that’s the case then you’ll take this seriously. Don’t lie to me. Give me some space. Focus on the Championships now so that when we do have time to focus on our relationship, there’s no chance that you’ll resent me for distracting you,” Rey says, then she laughs a little bitterly. “And *you* have to know that this is *not* how I wanted this to go either. But I think this is how it has to be if we don’t
want to screw this up beyond repair.”

He closes his eyes and nods once again. “Alright.”

Silence falls between them and for the first time since they began speaking, Rey really isn’t sure what to say to Ben. The rift between them is like an open wound in her heart and it aches.

“God, it’s late. I still have to finish packing and I know your flight is super early tomorrow, so I’m gonna let you go,” Rey says, with a sigh. Her finger hovers over the disconnect button and she bites her lip before adding, “Have a safe trip okay? Even though I’m mad at you, I still want to at least see you with my own eyes in Las Vegas. I worked really hard to make sure that would happen.”

“I know,” he says, voice soft and eyes softer, “I’ll see you at the Championships.”

Rey lets her phone fall to the mattress when he’s gone, and curls up on her side. She’s wrapped up in Ben’s hoodie but despite everything, all she wants is to be wrapped in his arms instead. She stays that way for a long time.

Ben stands in Terminal 3 of McCarran International Airport in Las Vegas, patting down all of his pockets and looking through his black leather duffel bag with a frown on his face. At some point during his flight, his phone had gone missing.

It’s just one more layer of shitty icing on the awful cake that has been his last 24 hours. After hanging up with Rey he’d spent nearly an hour beating the shit out of his punching bag, but even the exhaustion of his workout hadn’t done much to help him sleep. He’s spent the whole night tossing and turning. He knows that telling her the truth was the right thing to do, but that doesn’t make him hate himself any less for the whole fucking fiasco.

And she was right, of course, that this could all have been avoided if he’d just been honest with her from the beginning, thought his actions through a little more. Just trusted her the way he should have. Now it’s too late and they’re tangled in a mess that could easily spell disaster for one or both of their careers and, in his case, his whole life.

His restless night led into a frustrating morning. A traffic-filled commute to JFK with an Uber driver who talked non-stop about his Broadway career that was “going to take off any day now” led to a 45 minute wait at the TSA checkpoint and of course his bag had been randomly selected for searching.

Once he finally got through, he was running so late for his flight that there was no time left for him to grab coffee. He’d been forced to sprint to his gate, making it to the counter just as they announced final boarding.

Exhausted, frustrated, and uncaffeinated, he had dropped into his seat, nodding his head once to Snoke – his seatmate for the flight – in greeting. And that was when the pilot had come on the PA system to announce that there would be a bit of a delay on takeoff.

In the end, they sat on the tarmac, waiting to take off for over an hour.

Snoke had taken full advantage of the opportunity to remind Ben of all of the ass-kissing and hand shaking he was still expected to do as a continuation of his “sorry I ditched a convention” tour. Not even the stewardess slipping him an extra complimentary bottle of Dewar’s could make that easier to
stomach.

Once Snoke was satisfied that Ben had been properly instructed on that, he’d of course moved on to his other favorite hobby: listing all of Ben’s mistakes from past matches.

That had filled the rest of the time pretty handily for them both, leaving Ben ready to open the emergency exit and go running off the plane before they’d even gotten into the sky.

Thankfully his manager had fallen asleep shortly after the plane took off. Ben had spent the intermittent time doing Sudoku in the creepily-named *Voyeur* magazine, compliments of Virgin Airlines.

When they finally arrived at the gate, Ben and Snoke – who were sitting at the very front of the First Class cabin – found themselves standing in the terminal, waiting for the rest of the team to deplane.

“I have some business to attend to,” Snoke said, as soon as Mitaka, Phasma, and Caide joined them. “I’ll see you all at opening ceremonies tonight. Don’t be late.”

Then the bald man strode off down the concourse, leaving the First Order behind.

“God *fucking* damnit,” Ben snarls, raking a hand through his hair in frustration and causing several people around him to turn and look with startled expressions. None of those people are his teammates, who are so used to his behavior that they no longer even notice his outbursts.

“What’s wrong, Ben?” Mitaka asks.

He’s just about to reply when Hux and Eyja – who had been sitting in the last row of First Class and had gotten stuck behind an old woman getting off the plane with two separate cat carriers and a walker – finally enter the terminal.

“You left your phone on your seat,” says Hux, brandishing said phone as though it has personally offended him. Eyja stands behind him, arms crossed, looking as though she’s just smelled something foul. “You’re lucky the flight attendant found it before we were all off the plane.”

Ben has *never* in his life been so happy to see the ginger asshole.

“Thanks,” he says.

Hux’s lip curls a little, “You should really be more careful with your technology, Solo. Leaving it lying around like that was careless.”

He meets Ben’s gaze and there’s a flash of something behind his eyes that Ben can’t quite place, but before he can ask Hux what the fuck his damage is this time, Phasma starts talking about baggage claim and everyone immediately chimes in with all the stops they need to make before they can go there. It takes almost half an hour for them to finally get down to the baggage carousels. (They have to stop and let Mitaka play a few rounds on the slot machine and everyone needs to pee and go to Starbucks.)

It’s while they’re standing around waiting for five very complicated drink orders – and one black coffee for Phasma – that Ben finally thinks to check his phone.

Since he started talking to Rey he’s become kind of obsessed with it, checking constantly and waiting for a new message from her like an addict longing for his next fix. But after their conversation the night before, he’s not exactly expecting much.
Which is why he’s startled when he taps the screen to wake it up and sees a wall of messages from her which had been sent while he was in the air and had all come in at once when the plane had landed.

_Rey Sanderson_

*hey i hope u survived ur plane trip*

_Rey Sanderson_

*b/c i have some things to say*

_Rey Sanderson_

*i was up all night thinking about our convo and while i still dont like ANY of this and HATE that u lied to me i also feel like i sort of understand how things got this bad*

_Rey Sanderson_

*i believe u when u said u never intended for any of this to happen and that u were trying to help*

_Rey Sanderson_

*and while i was laying awake all i could think is that i MISS U and i was so sad we werent gonna get to hang out in vegas now*

_Rey Sanderson_

*i kno this seems like mixed signals and im srry i promise im not trying to give u whiplash*

_Rey Sanderson_

*or be a tease which might be worse*

_Rey Sanderson_

*but......*

_Rey Sanderson_

*i like u so much it makes me stupid so im not giving up on this relationship*

_Rey Sanderson_

*ur still in huge trouble*

_Rey Sanderson_

*but were gonna figure this out*

_Rey Sanderson_

*and in the meantime lets try to enjoy any actual time we do get together*
Even from the tiny thumbnail, he can tell It’s the photo from the Santa Monica Ferris wheel. She’s on his lap, smiling like the sun, the city and the ocean spread out behind them. He’s looking easy and relaxed, draped around her like it’s the most natural thing in the world.

*Rey Sanderson*

we make too cute a couple for our story to end sadly

*Rey Sanderson*

so stop brooding like i kno u are

*Rey Sanderson*

ps even if were not gonna have like a big romantic date or hook up or w/e i hope ur still prepared to buy me dinner when i beat u

*Rey Sanderson*

u promised when we were in la

*Rey Sanderson*

and im not letting u out of that so easily <3

It’s so typically, classically Rey; so full of cheerful optimism, even in the face of overwhelming odds, that he feels his whole body relax. The tension that has been knotting him up so badly that he could hardly sleep the night before drains out of his body like water.

She’s right. Things do kind of suck right now, but it doesn’t have to mean five days of misery. They’ll figure this out. They’ll be okay.

“Hey Ben,” says Mitaka, “Your drink’s ready.”

Ben looks up from his phone, startled, and sees his teammates standing at the entrance of the Starbucks waiting for him.

“Stop getting distracted and get a move on. We have a tournament to win,” says Hux and there’s that same, strange look in his eyes that Ben can’t parse. “Are you coming with us or not?”

Ben doesn’t reply but snatches his coffee off the counter and shoves his phone back into his pocket as he walks over to join his team.

Chapter End Notes

Ummm... please don't hit me? WE ALL KNOW THE FLUFF COULDN’T LAST!

If you're enjoying the fic so far, please consider sharing it with a friend! Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated and fuel my desire to write more!
As usual, please feel free to come yell at me about this story on Twitter or Tumblr.
April II

Chapter Notes

Despite life trying its best to keep this chapter from going up today, here it is. This chapter is also the longest in the fic, clocking in at over 13k and it has pushed us over the 100k word line. I can’t believe I EVER thought this was gonna be like 20k tops lmao.

I have SO MANY THANK YOU’S this week! You guys are SPOILING ME AND I LOVE IT SO MUCH!! Adreamer, Cloisismyfairytale [x] [x], and Reyromantic all made wonderful moodboards and I’m living for them! If you’ve made me something and I haven’t linked it here then it might have slipped through the cracks on tumblr. Tag me again so I can see and share your amazing gifts next chapter!

This chapter would not be going up today without my INCREDIBLE beta Cyborgharpy. Go read her fic, follow her on tumblr and love her for she is a hero and a champion.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Oh my god is that Ahsoka Tano from the Jedi?” Rose gasps, pointing across the hotel lobby at a tall woman wearing a long, red dress, a white denim jacket, and a blue-and-white snapback.

“Rose, don’t point,” Paige scolds her excited sister. “That’s so rude! Who raised you?”

Rose sticks her tongue out at Paige.

“You did, dummy,” she says, and they both burst into laughter.

The lobby of the Cosmopolitan Hotel and Casino is filled with people. Some are obviously here for the StarKiller Championships, others are just here for the regular Vegas experience. Rey hardly registers any of them because she’s too busy looking around at the hotel itself.

She feels a little like she’s going into sensory overload. The lobby is dark and not nearly as massive as the soaring, open atrium of the JW Marriott in LA, but thanks to clever interior design it feels infinite. The ceiling is covered in mirrors and the black marble floor is polished to a reflective shine so perfect that when Rey looks down she gets vertigo.

Every wall and all eight of the massive, rectangular columns that support the ceiling are covered in video screens that are playing a wild array of trippy, ever-changing videos. Right now they’re all showing orange leaves swirling slowly across a black background; only seconds before, they’d been covered in images of snaking black and white lines that had chased each other up and down and out of frame. The videos are being picked up and reflected back by all the mirrors and the overall effect is that of being inside of a massive kaleidoscope.

“Hey Peanut, you still with us?” Finn asks, waving a hand back and forth in front of her face.

Rey blinks and turns to look at him with wide eyes.

“I feel like I’m high,” she says.
“Right?” He agrees, “This place is wild.”

“Alright gang,” says Poe, as he rejoins the group from the concierge desk, “we’re all checked in to the hotel and Luke’s taking care of the event registration.”

“Rey and Rose, Jess and Paige – you guys are in double queen rooms. Finn, you and I are in a king together, and Luke’s in a king too,” he says as he passes out their room keys. “We’re all in the Chelsea tower on the 23rd floor, but we’re a little spread out.”

Everyone takes their room keys obediently and they all head, en masse, towards the elevators, towing their suitcases behind them. They pass several more teams on the way. Rey recognizes a few faces from watching old tournament matches in preparation for the Championships. The six members of the Vegas team, Riot, wander by, laughing and talking. A few seconds later she spies the distinctive black and red striped buzzcut of Maul Opress of the Sith Lords, which sours her good mood considerably.

“I had kind of forgotten those assholes were going to be here,” she mutters under her breath to Finn.

He bumps her shoulder with his own.

“I’m glad they are. We’re gonna crush them this time,” he says.

Rey grins at him.

They’re in the elevator, doors sliding shut, when Ben enters her field of vision.

He’s surrounded by his team and wearing a beanie over his hair, but Rey would know him anywhere. Her heart skips a beat in her chest.

He turns to look at one of his teammates who’s saying something to him.

_Caide_, she thinks, recognizing the barrel-chested man with green hair. Ben’s eyes slide right past him and meet hers instead.

It’s a split second, but it seems to last forever. His gaze locks with hers and Rey forgets where she is – forgets how to breathe, forgets her own damn name – and then the elevator doors slide shut and reality crashes back in.

“Speaking of people and crushes,” Poe says, nodding towards the place that Ben had been only seconds before, “looks like your man made it in one piece, Rey.”

“I didn’t notice,” she says, trying to keep her voice carefully neutral while her heart races in her chest.

“Uh-huh,” says Finn, rolling his eyes.

When the elevator arrives at the 23rd floor, they break off and head to their separate rooms to unpack and get settled in. It’s about 3 PM and they have a couple hours before they need to be dressed and ready for the opening ceremonies. It’s enough time for quick, post-travel showers and clothing changes. Rey takes full advantage of the moments that Rose is in the bathroom with the water running to give herself a stern talking to.

“Remember: we’re here to play, not here to lose our shit over a boy. A complicated boy with lots of baggage, no less. So keep it together,” she says firmly, wagging her finger at her own reflection in the full-length mirror outside the bathroom door.
Once they’re both freshly scrubbed, with blow-dried hair and makeup applied, they don their team uniforms and head down to the Va Bene cafe in the lobby. The rest of the team slowly trickles down to meet them. Surprising no one, Poe shows up last with his hair looking even more perfectly tousled than usual.

“He brought a whole bag of hair stuff,” Finn laments, as he slides into the booth next to Rey. “I was ready an hour ago but he told me he hadn’t even gotten to the ‘curl creme’ yet.”

Rey laughs.

“You complain but we all saw you looking at him like he’d hung the moon when you two were coming over,” she teases.

“I don’t need this from you,” he grouses, giving her a look of faux-disappointment.

“You don’t need what from who?” asks Luke as he walks over to their table. He’s dressed in a pair of khaki pants and a green button-down shirt. Even though she’s been around him since that morning, Rey still can’t get over the fact that not only did he shave his wild, bushy beard, but he also got a haircut. Luke still looks like a bit of a hippie, but he’s more of a… business casual hippie than a Burning Man attendee now.

“Nothing!” Finn says, quickly, prompting laughter from the rest of the team.

“You’re all checked in,” Luke says, sitting in one of the remaining open seats and setting a thick, brightly colored file with *Far Galaxy* written across the front and a water bottle on the table.

“I’ve got badges for all of you and the lady running things around here told me that when we’re ready to head into the opening ceremonies, we’ll need to go over to the side entrance of the arena. There are people there who will get you guys seated and keep you from getting stampeded by rabid fans. Which she also wanted me to remind you about. So. There are a bunch of those here. You might get mobbed.”

“Well that’s comforting,” says Jess, wryly.


“We couldn’t have done it without you,” Poe says as he returns from the counter with a sandwich and a bottle of iced tea in hand. “This year was *way* bigger than last year. We would have been drowning in logistics and legalease if you hadn’t signed on. You really came through for us.”

Their captain looks around at the team, shaking his head slightly.

“The rest of you guys don’t know because he was so smooth about it, but Skywalker here is the whole reason that we had most of the interviews we did over the last two weeks, and *that’s* the reason that Razor and LootCrate are looking to sponsor us now.”

Luke looks down at his lap, pleased, and a little pink in the cheeks.

“Yeah, well…” he mumbles, “Just do well here and don’t make me look like a fool for hyping you up, okay?”

“I think we can do that,” Rose says, tapping her water bottle against Lukes.

They finish their meals with relative haste before making their way through the chaos of the casino.
and up several escalators, over to the elevator that will take them up to the third floor. The Championships (and all related ceremonies) have taken over the largest venue in the hotel – the Chelsea.

Rey becomes increasingly aware of a rumble of noise as they approach the main ballroom. As they enter, the rumble resolves into the sound of a massive crowd cheering. She looks out across the sea of people and chairs and for a second she freezes.

The old refrain of *oh fuck oh fuck I am not good enough I do not belong here what am I doing* plays in her mind and she feels her heartbeat leaping into her throat. But then, just like he had on the morning of their first match, Finn slips his hand into hers.

“You’re okay, just keep walking,” Finn says in her ear. “And wave like the Queen; there are a lot of people here who have signs with your name on them.”

She looks up, up, *up* into the audience and sure enough, he’s right. There’s her screen name, the orange logo of The Resistance, and even just a giant picture of Millenia on a sign that says ‘RESIST THIS!’ Signs for her are *everywhere* and she realizes that she’s smiling.

Her body unfreezes. Rey – still holding onto Finn’s hand – takes a deep breath and follows her team into the room, waving at the roaring crowd as she goes.

The opening ceremony for the Championships has gotten steadily bigger, brighter, and more theatrical every year as the profile of StarKiller has risen in the public’s awareness.

This year it’s completely off the charts crazy. They have some trendy pop-rock band who performs to a screaming crowd before the Far Galaxy execs make a series of speeches welcoming the teams to the event and talking about the importance of what they’re doing here to the world of eSports.

The CTO is very excited to unveil the new gaming setups and massive screens that will be used to show the matches to the audience in real time. Amylin Holdo, the community head and leader of the support team talks at great length about the exciting new ways that fans can interact with the games and the players. Then each of the teams gets to watch as their names, photos, and stats are shown to the entire arena in a massive presentation set to epic music.

Ben finds the whole thing to be an overblown waste of time.

When the confetti cannons go off, showering the whole room with bits of metallic golden paper, he’s really ready to be anywhere else.

Well, not anywhere, if he’s being honest.

What Ben actually wants is to walk two aisles back and about fifteen or sixteen seats to the left, to where Rey is sitting. The brief glimpses he’s caught of her – in the lobby, as the doors to her elevator closed and as she made her way to her seat, surrounded by her teammates – have all but short-circuited his brain.

He’s in caveman mode and the idea of simply going over, picking her up, and carrying her off so that they can be alone together sounds like the only acceptable course of action. Obviously this is not even remotely in the cards, and it transforms an event that Ben would normally tolerate with resigned
patience into an interminable slog.

When they’re finally released and ushered out towards the side exit, he heaves a huge sigh of relief. Snoke, who had been sitting with them for the ceremony, turns to survey the team. His eyes linger on Ben for a few seconds longer than the rest of the group.

“Once more, business calls. Enjoy your evening – but if any of you are not in fit shape to play tomorrow morning, the consequences will be swift and painful. You are playing in the first match of the day tomorrow at 9AM and I expect you all to be at the top of your game,” he says, then departs without so much as a backwards glance.

“Sooo...” Mitaka says, once Snoke has vanished from sight, “Anyone else hungry?”

“I could eat a fucking elephant,” says Phasma. Ben’s in a similar state: the shitty burger he’d scarfed down before the ceremony hadn’t done much to take the edge off of his hunger.

“I’m down for food,” he says, shoving his hands into the back pockets of his black uniform pants.

“We should probably change, or we’re not gonna be able to get anywhere without people stopping us,” Caide says.

“Good point. Hux, Eyja? You guys in for dinner?” Mitaka asks.

The two people in question are standing slightly off to the side, heads bent close together so that Eyja can whisper directly in Hux’s ear. At the sound of their names, they turn in unison, fixing Mitaka with matching looks of irritation.

“We’re not hungry,” Hux says, “go on without us.”

“Oh,” Mitaka replies, sounding disappointed. “Are you sure? It’s Phasma’s birthday and–”

“We’re sure,” Eyja says, lips flattening into a line before she turns back to Hux and gestures with her head, away from the group.

They walk off towards the casino, heads bent towards each other once again.

“So,” says Caide, crossing his arms and staring after them, “you think they’re fucking?”

Phasma snorts.

“Hux wishes,” she says, shaking her head and making a sour face.

“I think Eyja kind of wishes too…” Mitaka says, frowning at their retreating backs. “They’ve been awful cozy recently.”

Ben makes a face.

“Well I officially don’t need that image, so I’m voting that we go find food now and stop talking about what those two are up to before I lose my appetite,” he says firmly.

They get changed and end up at a bar and grill place in the Bellagio called FIX, because it’s actually Phasma’s birthday and she’s in the mood for meat.

Ben chews his $62 steak mechanically, trying his best to keep up with his teammate’s conversation. He is not, by nature, a talkative person – so it’s not like he really needs to do much. But his brain is a one track disaster at the moment. All he can think about is how stupid it is that he and Rey are
literally less than a mile away from each other for the first time in a month and yet somehow they were closer when they were still in New York and San Diego.

It’s bullshit.

“Hey, wanna go play some poker for a while?” Mitaka asks as the waiter swings by their table to return their credit card and receipts.

Ben glances at his watch. It’s only 9:30 but both jetlag and his own thoughts are beating the shit out of him. He’s exhausted.

“I think I’m gonna call it an early night,” he says, grimacing.

“Your loss,” Phasma says with a shrug.

Ben bids his teammates a good night and splits off from them, leaving them in the casino of the Bellagio. He’s always privately thought that it looks a lot like the inside of an old lady’s living room from the 90’s, dialed up to 11, complete with tassels and an overabundance of Persian carpets.

It’s with his hands shoved carelessly into his pockets that he wanders out of the hotel, and runs right into a gaggle of young women wearing StarKiller shirts.

These aren’t other pros in their uniforms; they’re fans. One of them is wearing a shirt with the First Order’s logo on it and has a rolled up red sign under her arm. They’re talking loudly about their predictions for the outcome of the Championships. Hoping he hasn’t been spotted yet, he ducks his head and skirts along the edge of the sidewalk.

He’s not quite fast enough, though, and he catches one of them saying “Is that KyloRen?” before he sees them turn as a unit and begin hurrying in his direction.

Ben picks up his pace, weaving through the crowd and cursing his height for making him so easy to spot.

“Kylo! KyloRen?” One of them calls.

“Wait! Can we get a picture?” Cries another.

He’s nearly running at this point, ducking around a batchelorette party and a bus-load of Chinese tourists, and hustling up the escalator to the skyway that will take him back over to the Cosmopolitan. At the top he risks a glance backwards and breathes out a sigh of relief as he sees neither hide nor hair of his would-be assailants.

Feeling a little embarrassed at the fact that he – a 30 year old man – had legitimately just run away from a bunch of girls, he runs a hand through his hair and continues on his way at a more dignified pace.

It takes him a bit to get back to his hotel through the throngs of people. The skyway is not a straight shot, but rather weaves and wanders between the two hotels. When he finally draws even with the double glass doors that lead into the casino, the exhaustion of his day is wearing on him like a physical weight.

Ben fishes his phone out just to make sure that he hasn’t missed anything important and he’s so caught up dealing with his notifications that he almost doesn’t register the flash of orange out of the corner of his eye. However the color is bright and arresting enough against the dark browns and purples of the decor, that it manages to catch his eye. He looks up to see Hux and Eyja sitting side by
side at a table in the dark wood-paneled restaurant just off to the right of the casino.

He has just a second to think how strange it is that they’re both sitting on the same side of the table instead of across from each other before Snoke sits down in the empty seat opposite the two of them. Their manager picks up a glass of water and takes a drink before leaning back and listening to whatever Hux is saying.

Ben frowns at the scene, feeling like maybe he’s missing something important.

There is no reason for Hux and Eyja to be talking to Snoke alone.

*Could they be trying to renegotiate their contracts,* he wonders. The timing is odd, but neither of his teammates has ever had much in the way of patience. It could just be that they’re trying to leverage their level of commitment to the upcoming tournament for a raise.

Honestly, Ben wouldn’t put threatening to underperform on purpose in order to get more money past either of them.

He realizes that he’s been standing still in the middle of the walkway for a while. It’s really only a combination of sheer luck, and how engrossed the three seem to be in their conversation, that has kept them from spying him idling there.

He’s really not in the mood to deal with any of their bullshit tonight so he resumes walking, heading towards his hotel room.

His phone buzzes as he gets in the elevator. There are a handful of other people in the elevator with him but they all look extremely drunk and he doesn’t recognize any of them as StarKiller players.

*Rey Sanderson*

* u free?

*Rey Sanderson*

* im on my own for a bit if u wanna call*

He feels a buzz of anxiety under his skin. They haven’t had a chance to talk since he got her texts and he’s unsure if he’s about to have one of his usual conversations with Rey or a serious discussion about their relationship. All he knows is that he doesn’t want to do this over the phone, not when they’re in the same city for once.

*Ben Solo*

* Would you be willing to come over?*

*Ben Solo*

* To talk, that is.*

The elevator shoots towards the 29th floor. And he stares at his screen until the three little dots pop up indicating that she’s typing a response.

*Rey Sanderson*

* this feels like a bad idea…*
Ben Solo

Probably, but we have the rare chance for privacy and a face to face conversation and I’d like to take it.

Rey Sanderson

alright what’s ur room #?

He types it in and she responds with the thumbs up emoji and “see u in 20”. He spends the rest of the elevator ride gnawing on his lip, growing more jittery with every stop the car makes.

When it finally reaches his floor, Ben practically bolts out of the elevator and races to his room. He swipes his keycard to open the door. Once he’s safely inside he scrubs them over his face, feeling like he’s competing for a personal record for “highest adrenaline level in bloodstream”. His heart is racing, his mouth is dry, his palms are sweating.

Rey will be in his room in a matter of minutes and even though he was the one who suggested this, he has no idea what to do about that.

He busies himself with brushing his teeth and cleaning up stray pieces of clothing until she knocks on the door. Then he takes a deep breath and lets her in.

“Hurry up!” She says, barreling into the room, “close the door!”

She moves too quickly for him to take her in properly but as soon as the door clicks shut he turns around and feels like all of the air has been punched out of him. She’s wearing dark jeans and a white t-shirt with a gray sweater tied around her waist, and black flats. There’s nothing sexy about this outfit but all the same he feels a twitch of interest from his traitorous dick.

Stop it, he chides himself, this is not the time for that.

They stare awkwardly at each other for a few seconds, both of them seemingly at a loss for what to say, before their eyes meet and Rey bites her lip.

“Um,” she says. “Hi.”

“Hey,” he replies, “Do you… want to sit down?”

Rey glances around the room, at the massive, snow-white king bed and the table with a pair of uncomfortable looking chairs in the corner of the room. She unites her sweater and deposits it and her familiar brown purse on the TV console before sitting delicately on the foot of the bed.

Gingerly, as though trying not to startle a wild animal, Ben sits beside her.

He has never been good at cleaning up his emotional messes. He’s great at fighting and hurting people’s feelings in order to protect himself from having to admit fault or feel guilt. But everything about his relationship with Rey is different.

For the first time he’s found someone whose feelings he cares about more than his own and he just doesn’t know what to do with that. It makes him vulnerable and scared and weak – all things that make him want to lash out – but at the same time Rey is the last person in the word he wants to hurt. Navigating this feels like trying to thread a tiny needle and his big, stupid fingers just don’t have the dexterity required.
“So,” she says, a little awkwardly, turning to face him. He mirrors her so he can meet her eyes, “How are you doing?”

“I’m… better now that you’re here,” he replies, “I’ve felt like shit since we hung up last night.”

“Me too,” Rey says, and the earnestness in her voice makes his heart squeeze. “Did you get my texts?”

“I did,” he says.

“When you didn’t respond I thought maybe…” Rey trails off for a second, looking down at her hands, twined together in her lap, “I dunno. I thought maybe you were mad at me or something.”

“What?” he says, recoiling. “No, I didn’t get your texts until we landed and I didn’t have enough time to actually compose a decent response until right when you texted me again. I… I didn’t know what to say.”

Rey levels him with a thoroughly unimpressed look.

“Okay first of all,” Rey says, “literally a thumbs-up emoji is better than silence.”

And Ben cringes.

“Second, what you did was shitty and I’m still mad,” she says, but while her words are harsh, her tone has softened considerably. “I trusted you with a lot, I never lied to you, and you kept so many secrets from me that it almost makes my head spin. The only reasons I didn’t dump you on the spot are that you actually came clean about all of this and I really do believe that you thought you were doing the right thing.”

Ben’s heart leaps into his throat. The idea of losing her makes his head spin and his stomach churn. She is his center of gravity now and if he were to lose her, he’s pretty sure he would just fall off into space.

“Rey,” he says, and his right hand reaches out of it’s own volition, fluttering around her shoulder then falling to lay on the mattress, unsure if he still has permission to touch her so casually. “I never, ever wanted to hurt you and I’m… I’m so fucking sorry that I did.”

He can actually see her breath catch, chest stilling momentarily, and it occurs to him that he hadn’t really apologized to her yesterday. He’d just laid his misdeeds at her feet and begged her not to leave. And she had forgiven him all the same.

Her hand moves to cover his where it rests on the mattress. Ben looks down at their joined hands then back up to her face.

She is far too good for him and he does not deserve her. He’s a mess of a man in a golden cage of his own making. He should tell her to run, to get as far away from him as possible. But selfishly, he cannot let her go.

“We’re in this together, you know,” Rey says, quietly. “I don’t need you to protect me. I just need you to be honest and trust me.”

“I do trust you. I just… I was afraid that if I told you the truth that you’d leave,” he says, turning his hand so that he can wrap his fingers around hers. “I know how you feel about Snoke and you deserve a lot better than an asshole like me who comes with a fucking monster manager.”

“And on that note,” she says, frowning at him, “you’ve got to figure out some way to get away from
your team and Snoke, because this also doesn’t work if we have to spend the rest of our lives hiding.”

Ben’s stomach sinks and he frowns back at her.

“Rey.” He says, hating that his voice nearly breaks on the tail end of her name.

“I told you: there is no getting away from him. I thought you understood that by asking me to do that you are asking me to walk away from my life and the career I have built by sacrificing everything.”

Rey tugs her hand free from his and crosses her arms over her chest.

“So what you’re saying is that if I want to be with you I have to do the one thing that I explicitly told you I didn’t want to do?” She fires back at him.

Frustration bubbles up through him and he clenches his fists in his lap.

“That’s not what I’m saying,” he says. “Once the Championships are over I’ll talk to Snoke. I’m sure we can come up with some way to spin this that will convince him to accept it. All he really cares about is money and optics so if we can sell the idea of our relationship to him in a way that plays to those things–”

“Money? Optics? Ben, do you even hear yourself right now?” Rey says, shaking her head at him. “This is our relationship – our future – you’re talking about and you sound like… like… you’re talking about a marketing opportunity.”

Rey climbs off of the bed and begins to pace around the room.

“Bloody hell,” she says, “this is so f*cked up.”

Ben tugs up the right sleeve of his shirt, exposing his tattoo. The eight lines of black that ring his bicep stand out especially harsh in the light of the hotel room.

“Every time I have won a Championship, broken a record, placed first in the world, I have added a line to this tattoo. It’s a reminder that in order to do what I love – the only thing I’m any good at, the only thing that has kept my life from being a complete waste – that I have to earn it with blood, sweat, and tears,” he says, and her eyes are wide as the moon as they rove over the lines with new understanding.

“Snoke will never let me go to another team,” Ben lets the sleeve fall back down, mostly covering the tattoo and shakes his head. “He will never let me play another game. Unless I want to leave this world behind forever, I belong to him. And whether or not I like it, that’s just my reality.”

“Rey, I don’t know what else to do. I … I can’t lose you. But the choice you’re asking me to make is one that I don’t think I can.”

Awkward silence falls between them as they stare at each other across the space of a few feet that suddenly feels like the Grand Canyon.

Ben rubs at his eyes, suddenly so tired he’s not sure how he’s even still conscious.

“I’m sorry,” he says, quietly, “I really didn’t want to fight with you again.”

“Me either,” Rey says in a small, sad voice from where she’s standing, hip propped against the TV console.
“Listen, all of this is stuff we can talk about more later because it’s not going away, which – incidentally, is the problem,” he laughs a little drily. “But we get to see each other in person so rarely… can we just… not do this right now?”

Rey sighs.

“What should we do instead, then?”

From most people, Ben might have assumed that it was a coy come-on, but this is Rey and he knows her question is genuine.

“Can I just hold you for a while?” He asks, looking up at her through his lashes.

There’s been a nervous tension that has held her body rigid since the moment that she stepped into his room, but at his words Ben sees some of that melt away.

“‘I know we said nothing… you know…” he says, shrugging a little awkwardly, “but…”

Rey doesn’t answer him with words. Instead she toes off her shoes and climbs up onto the bed, crawling up towards the headboard. Then she turns back to him and pats the space next to her.

Something in Ben’s chest eases and he clambers up the bed to join her, settling back against the pillows and gathering her into his arms. He pulls her tight to his chest and buries his face in her hair, nose pressing against her scalp. One of her arms loops around his waist. She sighs against his throat, a warm puff of breath against his skin that makes him shiver a little.

Rey melts into him, legs tangling with his, face tucking securely against the curve of his throat and Ben thinks this might be the first time he’s been really, truly comfortable since he put her on that damned train back to San Diego in March.

“I’m sorry,” he says into her hair, “I’m so sorry.”

His hands rove up and down her back, soothing, memorizing. He’s not really sure what he’s apologizing for at this point. He certainly has a lot to be sorry for, but in this moment he just wants her to know that she means enough for him to swallow his pride, to admit his faults.

That’s a lot for him.

Ben doesn’t really do sorry.

But he has learned by now that Rey makes him break all of his rules.

“Stop that,” she says, tipping her face up so that they’re practically nose to nose. “I thought you wanted to be done with fighting for right now.”

“I was under the impression that ‘sorries’ usually were what happens when you are done with fighting,” Ben says dryly, unable to fight back a small smile at the way her freckled nose scrunches up in response.

“Just shut up and hold me,” she says with a huff.

“What if I don’t want to shut up?” He says, bantering back reflexively, because that’s just what they do.

“Then I’ll make you,” Rey tells him, eyes narrowing.
The smile is pulling into a real grin.

“Oh?” He asks, “and how exactly—”

And then Rey is kissing him and his brain short-circuits.

Their noses bump together, his abnormally large one getting in the way of course, but Rey’s enthusiasm more than makes up for any awkwardness. His hand that had been tracing the knobs of her spine through the soft cotton of her shirt comes up to cradle the back of her head as he angles his mouth against hers. Her lips are soft and pliable against his and Rey makes a soft sound of satisfaction and his tongue darts out to trace along the seam of them. They taste faintly of vanilla chapstick, and her mouth parts willingly for him.

Her hand rests on his hip and Ben realizes that he’s all but grinding against her without meaning to. He sucks her bottom lip between his and nips at it gently, which makes her let out a little gasp of delight.

“So much for behaving ourselves,” she says, breathless as she pulls back. She’s staring at him with wide, slightly dazed eyes and her lips are red and kiss-bruised. It’s a good look on her. He wants to see her like that a lot more. Maybe all the time. “You’re dangerous; I make bad choices when you’re around.”

“We can stop if you want,” he says a little hesitantly, though that’s the last thing in the word that he wants right now.

“I do not want,” she says.

Rey pushes on his shoulders and for a second –despite her words – Ben thinks she’s putting a stop to this before it goes any further, but as he draws back, she goes with him and he finds himself rolled onto his back, lap full of Rey, with her hair hanging like a curtain around their faces. Her eyes gleam as she leans down to nip at his lips. She might not have a lot of experience, but Rey is apparently just naturally good at everything she does.

He lets her have her fun for a while longer before he rolls her over, his large hands pressing her much smaller ones back into the pillows and hips caging her body in. He pulls away for a second, looking down at her and his heart beats so fast at the sight that it’s a fucking miracle that he’s not having a goddamn heart attack right this second.

Ben leans down and drops a chaste kiss at the corner of her mouth, then one on the other side, the tip of her nose, the apple of her right cheek, before finally dipping down to nip at the corner of her jaw, beneath her ear.

“Oh!” she gasps, arching up against him. The contact makes him lightheaded and he sucks at that spot, making her writhe.

The sound of a phone vibrating cuts through the air, making both of them jump like startled cats.

“Ben,” Rey says, “I need to get that.”

“Just ignore it,” he groans against her throat before pressing his lips against her skin once more.

“No, you dummy, it’s my team.” she says, shoving at him. “We were all at the – oh! – the Venetian and I told them I wasn’t feeling well so they’d – stop kissing me, I need to get the phone!”

With a groan, Ben rolls off of Rey, collapsing back on the bed as Rey scrambles to fish her phone
out of her purse.

“Hi Finn,” she says, picking up the phone, “What? Oh, no I’m uh… I’m in a bathroom in the lobby of the Cosmo. Yeah. No I uh… think that rotisserie chicken I got was bad… what? No I’ll be fine for tomorrow. What? No! You don’t need to send Rose in, I’ll be back up to the room soon.” As she talks, she paces back and forth, looking flustered.

Ben snorts, despite the insistent throb of his dick which has not yet caught onto the fact that it is not going to be getting what it wants out of this encounter.

“Yes, I promise. I’ll be fine. Yeah. You have a good night too. I’ll see you tomorrow."

Rey shakes her head as she hangs up.

“I didn’t want to get into a whole lengthy explanation of what was going on when I left to come here so I just told them I wasn’t feeling well,” Rey says by way of explanation as she shoves her phone back into her purse.

“I see,” Ben says.

“I really do need to go back to my room though or they’re gonna send out a search party and make a whole huge scene,” she says, a little regretfully.

Ben sighs and climbs off the bed. He walks over to her and tugs her to him for another long, lingering kiss. Her hands find their way into his back pockets and he wonders once again if this isn’t all just a big plot to kill him off before the Championships begin.

After a moment Rey pulls back.

“I’ll see you tomorrow at the party,” she says, “but I really do have to go.”

“If you insist,” Ben says. He’s aiming for suave but he’s pretty sure that he actually lands in petulant teenager territory.

“Good luck tomorrow,” Rey says with a grin. “Don’t get knocked out before I get to kick your ass.”

“Dream on,” he snorts, “this is my crown and I don’t plan on letting it go, even for you.”

“We’ll see,” Rey laughs, then she rises up on her tiptoes to press one more kiss against his mouth before pulling away to put her shoes on.

When she’s gone Ben takes the longest, coldest shower of his entire life.

It does fucking nothing.

The First Order wins the first game of the Championships before the Resistance is even done eating breakfast on Saturday morning. Rey watches the livestream on the Twitch app on her phone while forcing herself to choke down an omelette and breakfast tea despite the intense flip-flopping of her stomach.

“Still feeling sick from last night?” Rose asks, wincing sympathetically.
“Uh… yeah,” Rey says in what she hopes is a convincing voice. “I think I’m getting better though.”

“Must suck to be the Sandstorm,” Paige says, wincing a little in sympathy, when Rey reports the score of the match to her team. “They flew all the way here from Dubai just to lose the first match of the whole tournament.”

“At least now they can go enjoy Vegas,” Finn points out, which everyone is forced to admit is true.

She shoots a quick congratulations text to Ben when Finn and Jess both go to refill their cereal bowls, leaving her alone on her side of the table.

They kill time in the breakfast buffet until they have no choice but to get changed and head down to the Chelsea for their first match.

It’s funny, Rey thinks, but the strangest thing about their first game of the Championships is how normal it feels.

Stripping away the lights, the cameras, the massive audience and the huge screens projecting her gameplay and her face to said massive audience – this is just another game like every other one that they played to get here.

The presence of the other team on the other side of the large stage is also a little weird, but as Rey and the Resistance finish exchanging pre-game handshakes and greetings and settle into their gaming stations, muscle memory kicks in and all of her anxiety washes away.

Far Galaxy staff members wander around behind the gaming stations, passing out water and checking that all the equipment is running correctly.

At center stage, Amylin Holdo is holding court as the MC for the tournament. The lights catch in her pastel pink hair, twinkling off of her piles of silver jewelry and her hairband.

“Please give a warm welcome to our next set of competitors! From Dallas, Texas: the Death Stars!” She holds her left hand out towards the team in question, pausing to let the crowd scream and cheer, then swaps her mic over so that she can hold her right hand out towards the Resistance.

“And from San Diego, California! The Resistance!” She announces.

The crowd roars back, whoops and cheers echoing through the arena. From the stage, they appear to Rey as a singular dark mass, studded with pinpoints of light from cameras and phones and glowsticks. It’s oddly comforting. Like this, it’s easier not to think of them as people but just as the same vague, nebulous “audience” that might be watching her games in any other scenario.

Holdo continues to talk, outlining the rules of the Championships.

Unlike the qualifiers, the bracket is arranged so that teams are paired up randomly and the winner of each match will move on to face a new opponent, while the losing team will be eliminated from the competition. This will go on until one team emerges at the top of the bracket, victorious. The only exception to the sudden-death elimination will be the two losing teams of the quarter finals, who will be facing each other for the third place title.

Rey can feel Luke’s presence from where he stands behind them, still, calm and observant as always. As usual she’s sitting between Finn and Rose and as she settles her headset over her ears, everything just goes still.

She can hear the sound of her own breathing and steady heartbeat in her ears for a few seconds and
then Poe’s voice is coming over the channel.

“Alright. This is it. We’re well rested, looking sexy, and about to do what we came here to do: win this whole thing,” he says making everyone laugh.

“Damn right,” says Finn.

“Don’t forget,” Jess chimes in, “everyone keep your eyes open and the chatter to a minimum.”

“Copy that,” Rey says, “Rose you wanna pocket me so we can do the pincer strat? I’ve been studying these guys and their Striker panics when he gets cut off from the rest of the team in the second stage.”

“Sounds good,” Rose replies with a firm nod and a little smile.

Holdo announces the start of the game and the countdown begins. Rey selects Millenia. She breathes in. Breathes out. Grins. Leaps into action.

They utterly destroy the Death Stars.

It’s like someone has linked the Resistance up and they’re all in each other’s heads, reading every thought, predicting every action. They’re fast and ferocious and they give their opponents no quarter.

By the time the final victory screen pops up and their half of the stage is flooded with blue light, the entire audience is on their feet screaming. When Rey pulls her headphones off to tackle-hug her teammates, the sound nearly bowls her over. She’s laughing (and maybe crying a little too) and she’s being hugged by so many people that she’s really not sure whose arms belong to who.

Holdo comes over once they’ve calmed down enough that they can be approached safely. She offers them her congratulations and then steers them over to center stage so they can shake hands with their defeated opponents. The Death Stars all look a little shell-shocked and go down the line mumbling “good game” as if on autopilot.

Rey feels a little bad for them; being eliminated at their first match is doubtless an enormous blow, but at the same time, it’s hard to get too down in the dumps when the alternative would have been her team being eliminated instead.

Both teams are shuffled off the stage and sent up to their rooms to change before they’re expected to report to one of the conference rooms across from the Chelsea, where the press junkets are taking place.

Rey dresses in a white, loose knit sweater over a white tank top, a pair of washed-out jeans, and her trusty brown ankle boots. Rose, who’s dressed in a black-and-white striped shirt and a brown skirt, comes out of the bathroom, hopping on one foot as she tries to stuff the other into a ballet flat.

“Can stress make your feet swell?” she asks. “Putting these on was never this hard before!”

“Come on,” Rey says, laughing, “Poe just texted to ask where we are. And if he’s ready to go that means we’re late.”

They snag the badges that Luke had passed out to them the day before off of the dresser and head back to meet the team at the elevators.

The conference room is bursting with reporters. There’s a high table with six microphones at one end where Sandstorm is sitting, looking dejected, as they finish up their last round of interview questions.
The moderator cuts the journalists off.

Rey follows her team quietly into the back of the room and then up along the side as the moderator thanks Sandstorm and dismisses them from the stage.

She’s done her fair share of interviews at this point – both on her own and with the rest of the team – but as they mount the stage and settle into their seats, Rey actually feels like this aspect of the Championships might be much more intimidating than the actual games.

“Thank you for joining us,” the moderator says, beaming at them all. “My name is Taslin Brance and I’m the press coordinator for Far Galaxy. I’ll be moderating today’s Q & A. Congratulations on your first win, by the way! What an excellent start for a new team. If you’re ready to begin, I’d like to open up questions so we can keep this moving right along.”

They mumble their thanks and assent as Brance shields his eyes and looks out into the audience.

“Ah, let’s start with you. Go ahead,” he says, pointing at someone in the crowd.

A weedy looking man towards the left of the middle of the pack stands up and adjusts his glasses on his nose.

“Um, hello, congrats on the win guys! Really well played,” he says, “I’m Ken from gaming news site PixelExPolygon. I was wondering how it feels to be the only team that made it into the Championships by merit of match wins instead of game wins?”

It’s a rough start and it only gets worse. The reporters ask some questions about their actual game play, but most of them seem more interested in their personal lives. The team fields questions about drama in their ranks (“because doesn’t it get dramatic with this many women on a team?”). A blogger whose name Rey forgets the second he’s done introducing himself, actually asks her how she feels about being named the third hottest women in eSports.

Rey looks over and meets Rose's eyes and they share a real look for a moment.

“Oh you know,” she replies drily, “I’m really just anxious to hear when the list of hottest men in eSports is coming out.”

That gets a smattering of awkward laughter as the men in the room try to figure out whether or not she’s said anything they can actually get mad about.

They’re only in the press room for about 45 minutes, but by the time they’re finally dismissed, Rey never wants to speak to another person about StarKiller ever again.

“Are you sure we have to do that twice more?” she asks, scrunching her face up and jabbing her thumb back towards the room. “Also was it just me or were those journalists way ruder than any of the ones we’ve faced in the past?”

Paige chuckles.

“They’re putting the pressure on to see if a good story falls out,” she says, “and If we plan to keep winning then unfortunately, yes. It will only get worse.”

“There there, Peanut,” Finn says, draping an arm around her shoulders, “We won our first match and we’re done with press for now so all that’s left to do is go drink daiquiris in the pool and watch the other games on livestream until the party tonight!”
“Alcohol soothes all wounds, hmm?” Rey asks.

They’re walking back through the lobby when Jessika, who was leading the group, stops in her tracks so suddenly that everyone else almost runs into her.

“Jess what—” Rose says.

“It’s her,” Jess says, and Rey realizes that her teammate, normally the epitome of unflappable, has turned bright red. The reason becomes apparent about five seconds later when a group of very beautiful, very familiar women walk across their path.

It’s the Nightsisters: dressed for press (and, Rey thinks, to impress). One of their number, a tall black girl with a shaved head, looks their way to lock eyes with Jessika. She grins and winks.

“OHMYGOD YOU DIDN’T,” Paige whisper-screams, rounding on her teammate as soon as the girls pass out of earshot.

“I did,” Jess confirms, burying her face in her hands.

Rey looks between the women, confused.

Poe, who has been standing with his mouth hanging open for the last 20 seconds, suddenly bursts into hysterical laughter.

“Holy shit – Jessika Pava!” He wheezes between peals of laughter, “When you said you’d hooked up with another player at Championships last year I did not know it was Talia Bardot!”

“To be fair, at the time I didn’t either,” Jess moans, through her fingers, “I somehow missed seeing her face attached to her team at the opening ceremonies. Since we didn’t end up playing the Nightsisters last year, I didn’t figure it out until their ad campaign dropped last fall.”

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Rose asks, jabbing her in the side with an elbow.

Jess finally lets her hands fall away from her face, which remains a brilliant crimson.

“I really didn’t think it mattered, you know? Shit happens at these parties and I figured it was a one time thing and she probably didn’t even remember me…” Jess trails off shrugging.

Poe shakes his head, grinning.

“Oh she definitely remembers,” he says.

“You guys are never gonna let me live this down, are you?” Jess sighs.

“Literally never,” says Finn.

The group starts walking again and the conversation moves away from Jess’s drunken hookup to whether or not Finn can get a pizza delivered to the pool.

Rey continues to mull the incident over in her head, however.

Obviously there’s a difference between hooking up with an opponent by accident at a party and carrying on a secret relationship with one for several months. But…

It’s nice to know that she’s not the only one who can’t stop fraternizing with the ‘enemy’.
Ben is trying hard not to get too excited about the party. That’s not something he’s ever had to do before but ever since his conversation with Rey about parties and dresses and the removal of said dresses, all of that shit has been unhelpfully tangled up in his useless brain. Their all-too-brief makeout session from the night before had not helped matters at all. It’s deeply annoying and also pointless because no matter what Rey decides to wear to this party, it’s not like it’s going to change the fact that he still isn’t allowed to lay a hand on her tonight.

She might as well just wear a giant “OFF LIMITS” sign because that’s what she is to him. Off fucking limits. Every single person who could blow his whole life apart will be in attendance at this party, meaning that if he’s not on his best behavior, the carefully constructed stack of dominoes that is his current relationship with Rey will tumble to the ground. So he can look, but he can’t touch. And he definitely can’t do any of the other things he’s been daydreaming about recently.

He just needs to keep reminding himself of that and – no matter how tempting it might be to drink away his irritation – not get so drunk that he forgets to behave.

“I should just fucking stay in,” he mutters as he tugs on the cuffs of his jacket to straighten them out. He’s wearing black from head to toe: a suit jacket with a slim collar, black button up and tie, and slim-cut pants. The whole look is a lot more polished than he really feels comfortable in but it’s not like combat boots would really fly at the venue where the party is being held. He stubbornly does not let himself admit that a big part of his motivation is also to look like the kind of guy who could stand next to a girl like Rey without embarrassing her. He won’t be standing next to her, of course, but…

“Who the fuck are you right now?” Ben asks his reflection.

There’s a loud knock at his door.

“Bro, you ready?” Caide’s muffled voice filters through the wood.

“Yeah, I’m coming,” Ben sighs.

His whole team is outside the door, waiting for him.

Caide, Mitaka, Hux, and Phasma are all wearing matching suits, though the men’s are all black and Phasma’s is blindingly white. Eyja looks stunning and deadly in a tiny black dress and towering gold heels.

She smiles at him when he steps out, giving him a full-body once over.

“I guess you’re capable of cleaning up after all,” she drawls, “you must really be hoping to get laid tonight.”

“You’ve seen me in a suit before, Eyja,” Ben says, rolling his eyes at her and ignoring the latter half of her statement entirely.

“Have I?” she asks, casually examining her nails. “Must not have made an impression.”

She slips her arm around Hux’s.

“If we’re all done being passive aggressive can we get to the party please?” Phasma asks.
They move as a unit through the hotel to the Marquee Nightclub, flashing their passes at the bouncer at the door and finding themselves escorted back to the VIP section where many of their fellow StarKiller teams are already letting loose. An EDM remix of a popular hip-hop song pounds through the venue and strobe lights paint the world in a dizzying array of colors.

Ben looks around and tries not to be too disappointed when he realizes that the Resistance (and Rey) isn’t here yet.

As soon as they’re inside, the First Order scatters to the four winds to go mix and mingle with the other party goers.

Ben, who always feels like he’s not just at the wrong party but also in the wrong zip code at events like this, follows Phasma over to the bar and gets himself a Bulleit on the rocks before making a beeline for an unoccupied corner of the room. He leans casually against the wall and sips his drink. At the very least the booze is good. It had better be, seeing how expensive it is.

He stays in his corner, nursing his glass and people-watching for a little while. Because this is a party at a gaming Championship, the crowd is mostly male and the smattering of women in attendance are all finding themselves highly sought after. Beneath the strobelights Ben sees many a familiar face and he makes something of a game out of trying to spot every member of each team.

At one point, Mitaka comes to join him for a bit, chatting idly over the music, before drifting off to go say hello to the Nightsisters. Phasma eventually rejoins Ben by the wall and they watch from the sidelines as Mitaka is practically carried off by Luce Mirai with a look of total awe on his face.

Ben checks his phone and his watch every couple of minutes. A half an hour of this monotony stretches towards a full hour. One drink turns into four and as his vision is beginning to blur a little around the edges, he strongly considers just calling it a night.

Which is when Rey steps into his field of vision.

Ben’s perch is not suited for watching the entrance so he’s not exactly sure when she arrived but he wishes that he’d had some sort of alert system set up because the sudden shock of her presence steals his breath completely.

Her hair falls in loose curls and there’s dark makeup around her eyes that make them look even larger than usual. She’s wearing the silver sequin dress, and when she turns around to say something to one of her teammates, Ben realizes that the dress is completely backless.

His fingers go a little nerve-less and he sets his whiskey down on the nearest table before he drops it by accident.

“Oh good,” Phasma says acidly, shaking her head as she also spies the team making their way towards the bar. “Looks like trouble just walked in. You going to behave yourself?”

“I don’t know why you all are being so weird about her,” Ben snaps, “Eyja gave me this shit too. For all that you’re accusing me of being obsessed with Rey, it’s you guys who can’t stop talking about her. Snoke told me to stop fucking with her so I did.”

Phasma rounds on Ben, giving him a thoroughly unimpressed look.

“Cut the shit, Solo,” she says, “You lose your head when she’s involved. The KyloRen I know would never have ditched a con for a girl. I really wanted to believe that you did it for the team but honestly? After watching you for the last few months I just don’t buy your story.”
Ben tries to defend himself but Phasma holds up a hand to stop him.

“No. Save it. I’m sick of listening to your bullshit. Go do whatever you’re gonna do. Go ‘exploit her weaknesses’ or stick your tongue down her throat or whatever. I’m not your mommy and I can’t stop you. But just remember that everyone is watching. Our sponsors are watching, fucking Snoke is probably around here watching somewhere. And if you get us into trouble again because of your weird obsession, I’ll snap your neck.”

Ben forces himself not to rise to Phasma’s challenge, grinding his teeth and blowing a breath out through his nose. In this moment, he is viscerally reminded of why Phasma plays Tank on their team. She’s an unbreakable force of nature and he feels appropriately intimidated.

“I wasn’t going to do fucking anything,” he says. “I was actually going to leave, if you really must know.”

Phasma gives him a look that says: ‘I don’t believe a word you’re saying’.

“I’m going to go get another drink—” she begins to say which is when Poe Dameron steps up to them.

“Well, well, well! If it isn’t the First Disorder,” he says smirking at them.

Ben and Phasma look at each other and then back down at Poe, silently.

“Can we help you?” Phasma says at last.

Poe’s smile widens.

“Not me,” he says, stepping aside to reveal Rey, who is standing right behind him, looking like she wishes the ground would just open up and swallow her where she stands.

“Her,” Poe finishes.

“I don’t want to talk to him right now, Poe!” Rey insists, tugging on his arm, ineffectively.

“Nah, this is perfect,” Poe tells her. “You’ve been staring at him since we got here. I get it. You’ve got your whole… secret romance thing and you don’t want to blow your cover. But I can get you within flirting distance without anyone suspecting a thing! You can like… fake fight and send him secret signals. It’s foolproof; Poe Dameron’s got this handled, baby.”

“Don’t you hate him and totally disapprove of us even talking?” Rey says. “What’s with the sudden change of heart?”

“I’ve had a lot of time to think about this –” Poe begins.

“You’ve had less than 24 hours since I overheard you and Finn gossiping about us on the plane!” Rey cries, with an edge of hysteria to her words.

“Just accept this gift okay? Okay,” he slurs a little, placing both of his hands on Rey’s shoulders and nodding decisively.

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“Just accept this gift okay? Okay,” he slurs a little, placing both of his hands on Rey’s shoulders and nodding decisively.
“What are you even talking about?” Rey asks, shaking her head.

“What?” Poe says, then he turns to Rose and Finn. “Wanna go start shit and make a big scene with the First Order so Rey can get some face-time in with her boy?”

“Sounds like shenanigans, I’m in,” says Finn who is leaning slightly in the way of the truly inebriated. Rose just giggles hysterically. Dread descends like a lump of iron into Rey’s stomach. Before she can respond to tell her team to cool their jets, Poe takes her by the wrist and pulls her across the room towards Ben.

He’s wasted enough that he has absolutely no regard for the crowd and he bumps into at least four people, causing more than one spilled drink incident on the way over and leaving Rey to the task of smiling apologetically as she’s dragged by.

The Resistance had celebrated their first victory, as planned, by changing into bathing suits and hanging out by the pool, drinking sugary drinks for the rest of the afternoon while they watched the remaining games on their phones. Miraculously, all phones involved had avoided meeting a watery end.

It had been a perfect way to unwind from the stress of their matches and the press junket, but all of them had been a little unprepared for exactly how strong the poolside bar had made their colorful cocktails. The end result is that on the sliding scale of sobriety all of them, including Rey, are at least tipsy. Poe, Finn, and Rose – who had decided that afternoon Jager shots sounded like a great idea – are actually wasted when they arrive at the party.

Rey had caught sight of Ben almost immediately. He’s so tall that it is a little hard to miss him. The fact that he is standing next to his equally tall teammate, who’s dressed in a bright white suit, certainly didn’t help him blend in any better.

She’d thought that she was doing an okay job of pretending not to stare, but apparently she can’t quite help herself and she was not tremendously surprised when Poe noticed who she kept looking at.

What she couldn’t have predicted is how wildly he would misinterpret the whole situation, or the fact that once he had decided that Rey desperately wanted to talk to Ben, that he would try to make that happen by any means necessary.

This cannot be happening, Rey thinks miserably, as all of her plans for staying as far away from Ben – because she cannot trust herself around him right now – are picked up by her dumb, drunk teammate and tossed right out the window.

So there she is, wearing a super hot dress in front of the super hot guy she’s super crazy about but can’t touch, with her meddling teammates who won’t just leave well enough alone.

“KyloRen, meet your fucking match,” Poe says, looking back and forth between them, eagerly. And Rey sighs, swearing on everything that she holds dear that at some point she’s going to find a way to make Poe pay for this.

The biggest problem with this whole scheme is, of course, that once the Resistance and the First Order are face to face, Rey’s team seems to forget that there was ostensibly a point to this endeavor and just gets way too into the trash talk.

Phasma is clenching her jaw hard enough to break a tooth and Ben is so pale that he looks like even more of a goddamn vampire than usual in his black suit.
“What the fuck is going on?” asks Phasma.

“I don’t know, I don’t want any part of this,” Rey manages to choke out around her utter mortification.

Unfortunately her teammates don’t seem to have the good grace to be ashamed of their ridiculous behavior.

“So Ben, are you ready for Rey to spank your ass in front of the whole world?” Poe asks, giving Ben a once-over. “You look like the type who’s into public humiliation.”

Rose who is the sort of drunk who giggles uncontrollably choses this moment to regain control of her voice long enough to blurt out, “I’ve read that fic! Do you want the link? It was super hot, oh em gee, Milly like bends Silencer over and —”

“Rose!” Rey says, cutting her friend off before she can legitimately start doing a live retelling of a porn fanfic in public.

“Right, okay, I’ll send it to you tomorrow!” She says cheerfully. “I know you liked the other one I sent and this one is waaaaay hotter!”

Rey is actually shocked that she does not die of humiliation right then.

“So was there a point to this or did you all just come over here to make tasteless jokes?” Phasma snaps.

“Aww don’t be like that, Phas,” Finn snickers, “We’re just having fun! You should try it some time!”

“This is officially too stupid for me,” Phasma says, giving Ben a disgusted look, “Remember what we talked about.”

Then she stalks off, shaking her head and muttering under her breath.

“Wait, come dance with me!” Finn calls after her, “We can even do the robot if that will make you feel more comfortable!”

She flips him off without looking back.

As if awoken by Phasma’s departure, Ben unfreezes. He stops staring into the middle distance like his soul had fled to the hinterlands and finally meets her eyes.

“ReyOfLight… We… meet at last, I guess,” he says.

“Yep. We do,” Rey replies because really, what the fuck else is she supposed to say here?

*I’m going to murder Poe,* she thinks, *sorry Finn, sorry BB; he’s gotta die.*

“And now she’s gonna own your ass,” Poe says, waggling his eyebrows. And Rey turns to glare at him.

“Okay, this is stupid,” she says.

“Aww come on,” Poe whines, drunkenly, “we’re just having some friendly banter, right Ben? A little trash-talk is just part of the game. Right?”
“Is it?” Ben asks, still staring at Rey. He’s got an expression on his face like he’s at war with himself. Half starved for any interaction they do get to have and half infuriated that it’s happening like this. Rey can relate.

She’s about to make her excuses and drag Poe off to give him a stern talking to when something in Ben’s face shifts and he gets this… very small gleam of mischief in his eyes.

“Well, I’m not really in the mood for yelling tonight. So, seeing as how I launched your career by very generously letting you beat me, why don’t I buy you a drink to celebrate how far you’ve come,” Ben says, and it’s such a stereotypical, douchebag KyloRen thing to say that it’s really all Rey can do to keep the smile from splitting across her face.

She sees what he’s doing, even though she almost can’t believe it; somehow, Ben has caught onto Poe’s game and he’s actually… playing along.

She tosses her hair and stares imperiously at him.

“As if! Kicking your ass around six different maps was just my warmup round that day,” she says. “But I’ll take that drink as my prize.”

“I think we’ve long since proved that I can beat you when I want to,” Ben scoffs, then gestures towards the bar. “After you.”

“You’ve only beat me twice out of the nine matches we played. You must really have wanted to lose seven times.” She grins at him as she strides towards the bar, head held high, leaving her teammates to sloppily high-five each other or whatever they’re doing now behind them.

Rey notices that the people around them are staring a little, though the music is loud enough that no one who is not in their immediate vicinity would have been able to hear their actual conversation. As they push through the crowd and draw even with the bar, Rey feels the heat of Ben’s body pressing up against her and she shivers.

“Can’t have you slipping off before we settle this once and for all,” he says, leaning down to speak directly in her ear. In the press of people she feels him trail his fingertips across the bare skin of her lower back and she shivers.

“I wouldn’t dream of leaving until I get my drink,” she tells him, smirking.

“Of course,” he says, “I’m a man of my word.”

He buys her a Tequila Sunrise and gets another whiskey for himself and they find a nice, neutral spot where they can stand a reasonable distance apart to continue their charade.

“It’s so loud in here that if you just look really angry, people can’t tell what you’re actually saying from far away,” Ben says leaning in towards her, brow furrowed.

Rey copies his expression and replies, “I’m so sorry about Poe. I didn’t realize he’d do that. He’s super drunk.”

“It’s fine,” Ben tells her, “at least now we get to talk a little. And I get to see you in that dress.”

Rey puts the hand not holding her drink on her hip and juts her chin out defiantly.

“You like it?” she asks.
Ben gives her a mock-disdainful once over, a smirk curling the corner of his lip up.

“Absolutely,” he says.

They stare at each other for a few seconds and the utter absurdity of this whole situation is just intense enough that Rey can’t deal.

“Okay, I actually can’t hold character any longer,” she tells him regretfully, “I think I need to go back to my friends before I laugh and blow our cover.”

She can see Ben fighting back a smile.

“Yeah. As much fun as this is, it’s not really how I wanted to spend time with you tonight,” he says.

Rey bites her lip and glances surreptitiously around. Most of the people who had been watching them before have drifted off. The club is too loud for real eavesdropping and they’re clearly not going to give people the blow-out fight that everyone had been expecting, so their value as entertainment has decreased significantly.

“I wish we could just get fifteen minutes alone,” she says. “It feels like a waste of good atmosphere that we can’t celebrate together at all.”

He gives her a long, indecipherable look then says, “Fuck it. I saw the door to a stairwell that leads to the roof right around the corner. Meet me there in ten.”

She gives him a small, tight nod.

“Okay,” she says before fixing her most fearsome glare on her face, raises her voice and says: “Yeah well we’ll see who’s laughing after I take home the title!”

Then she turns on her heel and marches off towards her team.

He’s standing just inside the stairwell, propping open the door to the roof with his body, letting the cool night air blow through his hair when he hears footsteps on the stairs below. His heart hammers for a second as he wonders if someone else has chosen this spot for a rendezvous as well and he’s about to be caught red handed.

“Ben?” Rey’s voice echos up to him, and he relaxes.

“Up here,” he responds and he hears the sound of her spindly high heels clip-clopping up the stairs. She rounds the corner looking flushed and a little nervous. Her hands are fisted reflexively in the skirt of her dress, as though she’s trying to lift it out of her way, even though it ends above her knees.

His heart flutters at the sight of her.

“Hi,” he says. “For real this time.”

“Hello,” She replies, a shy smile breaking across her face. “God, I am so, so sorry about that. And sorry it took me a little longer to get away. My friends wanted to talk about everything but it’s so loud in the club and they’re so drunk that it was just a whole… mess. I told them I needed to use the bathroom and they finally let me go. Though I really thought Rose was going to try to come with me
for a second there.”

Ben laughs and holds out his hand to her. Rey reaches out and takes it. He flips the metal door-stop down with his foot, securing the door in it’s open position then tugs her out onto the roof with him.

From high above the city, Las Vegas is a glittering, quiet ocean of light.

Hand in hand they walk past a forest of vents and whirring fans, close enough to the waist-high wall that they can see over the edge, but not so close as to be in any sort of danger.

Rey shivers slightly in the cool desert wind and he turns to face her, running his hands up and down her bare back, trying to warm her up.

She steps in closer to him. There is electricity bouncing between them, tension so thick he could cut it with a knife. He thinks that he might have been half-hard since she left his room the night before. He aches for her like he’s never ached for anyone in his life.

Up here, high above all their earthly concerns, there is no reason to deny himself any longer, so he leans down and captures her lips with his.

When he runs his tongue out across her lips, he can taste the sweetness of her drink. She opens her mouth obligingly to him and he tilts his head like he had before, so that he’s at a better angle to chase that sweetness into her mouth without bumping their noses together.

Earlier he had been too overwhelmed with sensation and the utter giddiness of actually having her in his arms to really register what he was feeling. But now he has time to savor every sensation, every little sound she makes. Kissing her for real is so much better than anything his lonely, touch-starved brain had managed to come up with. Her very presence sets every one of his nerve endings alight. Ben never wants to stop kissing her, never wants to do anything with his hands that doesn’t involve touching her. He wants to hold her like this forever.

His hands come up to cup her face, thumbs resting on her jaw while his fingers slide back into her hair. It’s soft as silk against his skin.

She nips at his lower lip then whimpers when he sucks her tongue into his mouth.

When they finally pull apart, panting hard, her lips are swollen, her cheeks are flushed and once more the pupils of her eyes are blown wide and black, leaving only a small ring of hazel around them.

“You’re very good at that,” she says, before rising up on tiptoes to press her lips to his again.

Ben laughs against her mouth.

“Really,” he murmurs, pulling back to look at her. “And here I was thinking that I definitely need more practice.”

A particularly strong gust of wind blows past them and Rey shivers. Ben wraps his arms around her, tucking her slender frame into his body and letting his chin fall to rest on top of her head. Her arms snake around his back, up underneath his coat and he can feel her hands pressing into his back.

She fits so perfectly against him, feels so right in his arms that he almost can’t take it. He wants to keep her there forever. He wants to tell her that he loves her and he’s never going to let her go. His heart thunders against his ribcage and there’s not a chance in the world that Rey can’t hear it. That she doesn’t know.
“We have to go back in soon,” she says against his chest, “my friends will freak out if I’m gone too long.”

“Yeah,” he says against her hair. She smells like wildflowers in the summer sun. Hot desert air and clean soap. Rey smells like a place he wants to call home.

“I don’t want to go, though. This is all I’ve wanted to do since LA,” Rey says with a happy sigh, nestling into his warmth, “it’s almost enough to make me forget what a huge mess this all is.”

Ben sighs too.

For half a second he’d almost forgotten why they’re up here, making out on the roof like naughty teenagers instead of back down in the club like everyone else who’s probably hooking up tonight.

Ben thinks of his team and prying eyes, the way they are always watching him circling ever closer to discovering the truth about Rey. He thinks of the player on his stream who had seen him and Rey in LA, thinks about the fact that below them there are a hundred and fifty odd people, any of whom could stumble up here for a smoke break at any second and blow both of their worlds to pieces.

He closes his eyes and lets himself imagine that they are a normal couple, up here by choice instead of necessity. But the truth is that it is just a dream and they’ve definitely pushed their luck far enough for one night.

He releases Rey and steps back a little.

“We should go back in,” he says, and he finds that he can’t meet her gaze. If he looks into her eyes now he might say something truly foolish. He loves her so much that it hurts and she makes him stupid just by standing there.

A strand of her hair flies free and he reaches out to tuck it back behind her ear. Then he bends down and kisses her once more, trying to memorize the sensation of her lips against his own.

“Alright,” Rey says, when he pulls away. Her eyes are sad in the purple-dark of the Las Vegas night sky and he knows without her saying a word that her thoughts are a mirror image of his own. She takes a deep breath and smiles up at him, a little melancholy, but lovely as ever.

They make their way down the stairwell in silence, hands linked together until they get to the last flight of stairs. Then they separate and move so that they’re a reasonable distance apart.

Like that will actually matter if anyone catches us together here, he thinks bitterly.

Carefully, Ben peers out of the door, looking around to see if anyone will take notice of them coming out of the nondescript door. The wide hallway, which is lined with a veritable forest of columns and strange, massive pieces of art, and conference room doors. It appears to be deserted so he gestures for Rey to go. She looks back at him over her shoulder, and bites her lip, as if holding back words, then she walks off down the hallway. Ben keeps a careful eye on his watch, giving her a solid three minute head start before he, too, slips out of the door and heads back towards the main part of the hotel.

Just as he’s about to round the corner back into the hallway where the club entrance is located, Ben hears a soft click, like someone pulling a door closed behind him. He’s suddenly on high alert, glancing back the way he came. But the corridor is empty. He thinks for a moment about turning around and doing a quick sweep, just to be safe. Without Rey’s presence to bolster him, the alcohol is catching up and Ben really just wants to go back to his hotel room to sleep.
“You’re jumping at shadows. Calm the fuck down,” he mutters to himself under his breath, as he keeps walking.

It’s not until he wakes up at the crack of dawn the next morning, with a pounding head and a dry mouth, to the sound of his phone vibrating across his nightstand with notification after notification, that he realizes he should have maybe paid a little more attention to his gut instincts.

*Toby Beckett / Riot Offense / #BEOFFENSIVE @toby1*

My dudes your not gonna believe this shit but I just saw @reyoflight and @kyloren sneaking around together after the StarKiller championships party (o_3) #GetSome

“Fuck,” he says, throwing an arm over his face.

“My sentiments exactly,” says a cold voice from the direction of the room’s sitting area.

Ben sits bolt upright in bed, but even before he lays eyes on his unexpected visitor he knows exactly who it is.

“Get up, Solo,” says Snoke, “It’s time you and I had a talk.”

Chapter End Notes

So uh… shit’s getting real. (Also who here is team Hux/Eyja ((Heyja??)) even though they're a pair of meddling shits?)

If you're enjoying the fic so far, please consider sharing it with a friend! Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated and fuel my desire to write more!

As usual, please feel free to come yell at me about this story on [Twitter](https://twitter.com) or [Tumblr](https://tumblr.com).
April III

Chapter Notes

Fair warning: this chapter gets dark. Those warnings on the first chapter of my fic? They apply to this chapter. Refresher for anyone not paying attention: toxic gaming culture stuff (slut shaming, sexism, homophobia, and general shittiness). Also sorry this went up a bit late. I really wanted to make sure this was done right.

Thanks to cloisismyfaireytale [x][x] for the moodboards! If you’ve made me something and I haven’t linked it here then it might have slipped through the cracks on tumblr. Tag me again so I can see and share your amazing gifts next chapter!

As always my beta Cyborgharpy is my rock and both this story and I would be a mess without her.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

ReyloFanForever @ReyloFanForever

Replying to @toby1 @ReyOfLight @KyloRen

I KNEW IT #StarKillerCrossedLovers #Reylo #ReyloForever #ReyloIsReal

Val Newton #VegasRiot @10NewtonPunch

Replying to @toby1 @ReyOfLight @KyloRen

I thought there was something off about them when I saw them together at the party! You don’t undress your archrival with your eyes in public unless there’s something else going on IF YOU CATCH MY DRIFT ;)

Kaito Eso - Rogue One @K2SO

Replying to @toby1 @ReyOfLight @KyloRen

Hey Toby: quit gossiping. Last year you said @chokichoki hooked up with @TallyMark but we all know that turned out to be a lie.

Ahsoka Tano - Tokyo Jedi Striker @chokichoki

Replying to @K2SO @TallyMark @toby1 @ReyOfLight @KyloRen

Yeh don’t know how you mixed up 2 of the top players in the game buttttttttttt \_(吾\)/-

Toby Beckett / Riot Offense / #BEOFFENSIVE @toby1

Replying to @chokichoki @K2SO @TallyMark @ReyOfLight @KyloRen

A: not my fault Talia and Asajj have the same haircut and B: I know what I saw. Rey and Kylo were sneaking out of the fucking stairwell, looking wrecked. So everyone can
suck my fat one.

**ReyloFanForever @ReyloFanForever**

*Replying to @toby1 @ReyOfLight @KyloRen*

ARE THERE PICS?????

Rey finishes scrolling through her notifications just in time for another wave to come flooding in and she falls back on the mattress in despair.

“This cannot be happening,” she groans. It seems that no matter how careful they are, she and Ben cannot get so much as an uninterrupted second alone together without all of StarKiller finding out and getting involved. Rey knows that it would have been best if they had actually stuck to her original plan of zero interaction during the Championships. She knows. It’s not like she’s an idiot.

There’s just something about Ben that makes her throw common sense right out the window whenever they’re breathing the same air.

“Oh it’s definitely happening,” Rose says from where she’s sitting up in her bed, still buried under most of her blankets, but scrolling through the internet at full-speed nonetheless. “None of the big news sites are talking about it yet but it’s all over the forums. Also just throwing this out there but I knew you weren’t going to pee last night! You never pee alone at parties.”

“I know, I know,” Rey says, chagrined, “I was trying to keep stuff as quiet as possible. You guys were just so drunk I wasn’t sure I could actually trust you not to yell something by accident.”

“Fair, but also: you didn’t do a very good job. The last time I saw a gaming fanbase get so worked up about a relationship was when everyone was convinced that Jyn Erso had seduced Cassian Andor away from his Knights Republic team. Look at this!”

Rose rolls over to show Rey her screen and Rey leans in to see that on the front page of GameScope’s StarKiller forum most of the top threads are speculating about her relationship with Ben.

**KyloRen and ReyOfLight Relationship: CONFIRMED? [Locked] [1,2,3...7,8,9]**

**Biggest Championship SCANDAL EVER! [1,2]**

**REYLO????? [1,2,3...4]**

**Did anyone else think Gold Squadron got robbed? [1,2,3...4,5]**

**FG should have nerfed Lothal HARDER [Locked] [1,2,3...9,10,11]**

**Talk about a power couple! (ReyOfLight/KyloRen relationship discussion) [1]**

“Oh my god why are people like this?” Rey cries, “Three off the biggest teams in the league got knocked out of the tournament yesterday and no one cares because they’d rather speculate about whether or not I’m sleeping with Ben!”

She rolls back onto her bed, staring forlornly up at the ceiling.

“Well it was a given that some teams were gonna lose,” Rose says, throwing back her covers so that she can swing her legs over to sit on the side of her bed. “A potential scandal is a lot more interesting
because it’s a surprise.”

Rey rolls up to a sitting position as well, turning to face her teammate. Rose’s hair is sleep-mussed and sticking up at odd angles. She’s wearing an old Kingdom Hearts II shirt and a pair of flannel pajama pants printed with 1-Up mushrooms. The overall effect of this makes her look very young, belying the fact that she is almost three years Rey’s senior.

“You know,” Rey says, “I didn’t tell anyone but before we got here Ben and I actually had kind of… a fight, I guess. It’s complicated, like everything else with us. Anyway, we’d sort of agreed to stay away from each other so we could focus on the Championships for now. But then Poe got it in his thick head to get us face to face and it all fell apart.”

“Yeah, we’re never letting Poe make plans when he’s drunk ever again. Sorry for my part in that whole debacle,” Rose says. Then her expression grows thoughtful and she taps the bottom of her chin with a finger, “Though, you know it really seems like most of your problems come from trying to keep everything secret. Maybe this is actually a blessing in disguise?”

“If I had my way we would have stopped hiding a long time ago,” Rey says, shaking her head with a bitter laugh, “but Ben is convinced that it’s going to make everything worse. Oh well; cat’s out of the bag now.”

Rose leans across the gap between their beds and puts a comforting hand on Rey’s knee.

“Well, we need to get up and get ready for our games today. I’m gonna hop in the shower real quick. Why don’t you text Ben while I’m doing that? Talking to him should be your first step.”

Rey places her hand over Rose’s and gives her a grateful squeeze.

“I will, thank you,” she says.

Rey waits ‘til Rose has disappeared into the bathroom before gathering her nerves and picking her phone back up. In the few moments since she last checked there has been a renewed flood of notifications from Twitter, plus a few texts from her team, now that 7am has rolled around and even the most hungover of them are rallying to face the day.

All the texts are variations on the “have you seen the internet” theme so Rey answers all of them with perfunctory words of assent and finally taps over to her message chain with Ben.

There she falters again because *what the hell does she say now?*

*Hey looks like we’re going public! Sorry this is happening at the absolute worst time?*

*Too bad about your psycho manager, the world knows about us now and frankly I’m relieved because this secrecy bullshit was what got us in trouble in the first place?*

*So remember that fight we had two days ago that we agreed to put off until we finished up here? Yeah that’s not gonna happen now.*

She stares blankly out the massive sliding glass doors that lead out to the room’s balcony. The gauzy privacy curtain is still drawn across it and the pale dawn light that filters through makes everything in the room look washed out and gray. For a moment Rey no longer feels like she’s sitting in a ritzy hotel room, high above this city she’s come to to chase her ultimate dream. She feels small, and unsteady, and *tired.*

It’s weird, because in a roundabout way, this is what Rey wants. No more hiding, no more secrets.
Yes, the fact that the timetable has been moved up on having to deal with their relationship in the face of Ben’s contract and manager kind of sucks. The fact that it’s now a distraction for both of them during the Championships sucks even more. But this was going to happen at some point anyway.

Rose is right: this should feel like a relief.

And yet, as she begins to type, Rey is overcome by a sense of dread.

    Rey Sanderson

    heyyyyy if ur seeing this then uv probably seen the mess on Twitter

    Rey Sanderson

    looks like weve gone public

    Rey Sanderson

    what do u wanna do?

She hits send on the third message, chewing her lip and watching her screen intently for the usual three little dots that indicate Ben is typing a response to appear.

But as seconds stretch into minutes, nothing happens.

Eventually Rose steps out of the bathroom, towels wrapped around her body and hair.

“What did he say?” she asks as she begins her morning skincare routine.

“Nothing yet,” Rey replies, lips twisting. “I’m starting to freak out a little.”

“Nooooo! Don’t do that! There’s a million things that could be keeping him from responding and you need to get into game mode,” Rose says, rubbing moisturizer into her cheeks and across the bridge of her nose.

“I know, I know!” Rey forces herself to put her phone to sleep and toss it aside. “Anyway, I swore I wasn’t going to let him distract me and I meant it!”

Sunday is the largest day of the tournament, with the remaining teams slated to play a second game in the afternoon if they make it through their first in the morning. The Resistance will be facing the London team, Empire, first and if – when, Rey corrects herself – they beat them, they will move on to face either Kessel Run or, much to Rey’s displeasure, the Sith Lords next.

Even thinking about them is enough to make her angry, and in light of this morning’s Twitter debacle, Rey is praying that Kessel Run knocks them out so that she doesn’t even have to face them.

“Everything is going to be fine,” Rey says, not sure if she’s trying to convince herself or Rose.

“That’s the spirit,” Rose says. “And remember: no matter what the internet says, you’re way more than your relationship with some guy. We’re gonna kick ass today and shut up everyone who doesn’t remember that.”

Rey gives her teammate a fierce nod in the mirror and climbs to her feet to get ready for the day.
“How did you get in here?” Ben asks, sitting up to address his manager.

Snoke leans against the plush blue cushions of the room’s settee and scoffs a harsh little laugh.

“Please,” he says, “all the reservations are under my name.”

He slips a hand into the breast pocket of his dove-gray suit and pulls out a room key, waving it lazily in the air before Ben.

“I asked the front desk and they happily obliged,” he explains, as though Ben is far too stupid to put that together himself. Then Snoke’s demeanor shifts from lazy arrogance to cold fury. “Now are you going to get up or would you like to have this conversation from your bed like the child you’ve been playing at being?”

There’s a split second where the desire to defy the man who’s talking down to him – who is always talking down to him – wars with Ben’s shame at being called a child and his need to prove that he is not one.

In the end, it is neither of those impulses that wins out, but the sobering realization that there is only one reason for Snoke to be here right now. Making him angrier will do nothing to help Ben get out of this mess.

He gets to his feet, grateful that he’d been too tired last night to figure out the complicated climate control system in the room, so he’d gone to bed fully clothed in order to combat the chilly air.

Even if Snoke were not occupying the center seat of the settee, Ben would not have chosen to join him on it. He opts instead for the small brown armchair stationed across the hammered steel coffee table from his manager’s seat. The chair is short by armchair standards and it forces Ben’s knees up uncomfortably. He feels even more oversized and awkward than usual.

“So,” Snoke says at last, his voice even and still as his emotionless face, “it comes to this at last.”

*Comes to what?* Ben wants to ask, but he holds his tongue.

“You know,” Snoke continues, “I really can’t tell what about this is worse: the fact that you – my most dependable, my *most dedicated* player – would violate your contract because some girl batted her lashes at you, or the *utterly* insulting fact that you thought I would buy your lies without looking into them for myself.”

Ben forces himself to remain still, though his hands tighten where they’re gripping the armrests.

“Is this about the ReyOfLight rumors on Twitter?” he asks through clenched teeth.

Snoke throws his head back and laughs, a harsh, humorless sound that fills the room and grates on Ben’s already fraying nerves.

“It is not *just* about the rumors from Twitter, and you know that already. But if you’d rather play dumb, then I suppose I can humor you. I know that you skipped StarFall for no reason other than to see Rey because *you* wanted to and you lied to me when you got caught to protect your own ass,” Snoke’s lip curls with disdain. Cold sweat begins to drip down Ben’s neck.

“I have known you for the better part of a decade and you are not *nearly* as clever as you think, Solo.
You don’t scheme, you don’t *plot*; you just attack,” Snoke sneers at him. “To your credit, your team might have bought your act, at least for a while. But really, I’m embarrassed *for* you that you thought that load of horseshit would work on *me*.”

“If you were so sure I was lying, then why let me stay on the team?” Ben grinds out, finally breaking free of the paralysis that has held him still since the moment that he sat down.

The corners of Snoke’s mouth tick up into a cruel facsimile of a smile.

“I’ll get to that in just a second, but for now, let’s keep going though your transgressions,” Snoke says. “Not only did you lie to me about your actions in Los Angeles, but you also lied when you promised you would stop interacting with Rey.”

Ben’s mouth goes dry. He swallows a few times, but that only has the effect of making his tongue stick to the roof of his mouth.

“Even if that were true, how would you know?” He manages to choke the words out around teeth that abruptly feel far too large.

“The thing about people is that when you make it clear that you don’t care how your actions affect them, they have very little motivation to keep your secrets,” Snoke pins Ben with a pointed look. “Especially when your secrets put their goals in jeopardy.”

Suddenly the purpose of the scene he’d witnessed two nights before, Hux and Eyja’s private dinner with Snoke, becomes abundantly clear. And now that he sees it, Ben curses himself for not realizing it earlier.

They’d both been suspicious of him from the start and Ben knows that neither of them would hesitate to betray him if they thought that they stood to gain anything. But talking to Snoke during the Championships would put the whole team at risk. If Snoke fires Ben now, the First Order would be forced to drop out of the tournament.

*So why did they wait until…* then it clicks: his phone. It had still been locked and unmolested when Hux gave it back after getting off the plane, but… Ben’s notification settings would have displayed all of Rey’s texts on the lock screen.

He’d been far too distracted by the messages themselves and the relief of having his phone back to even register that by sheer accident, Hux had blown his secret wide open.

“Fucking *traitors*,” Ben mutters.

“Like you have *any* room to talk,” says Snoke, so angrily that Ben actually flinches.

“Your teammates came to me because they’re concerned that you’ve lost focus and they are sick of you putting some *girl* above the wellbeing of the team. I happen to agree with them. All of this brings me to my third point: you have betrayed and broken the trust of your team *and* me during the most important tournament of the year.” Snokes eyes burn with rage as he leans forwards over the coffee table. “And all of that for what? Sex? *Love*?”

“Shut the fuck up,” Ben snaps, leaping to his feet and sending the ridiculous armchair skidding back. He looms over Snoke with his hands clenched into bloodless fists at his side.

The anger explodes out of him with almost physical force. He feels like he’s been sleepwalking for years and he’s just waking up. Like he’s come up from the bottom of a deep pool and the bubble of water that was lodged in his ears has just popped.
Yesterday, when he and Rey had argued about Snoke, Ben had told her that to leave him meant leaving StarKiller as well, meant leaving professional gaming. To quit would be to kiss his whole life goodbye. In that moment he had been fully sincere when he said that it was a choice he wasn’t sure he could make.

Ben loves Rey, needs her like the air in his lungs, but even he can see that this is fast. He is sure, all the way down to his marrow, that Rey is it for him, that he will love her for the rest of his life. But… he doesn’t know if she feels the same. The thing between them is only a few months old and they haven’t even put a label on it yet.

No matter how deeply he feels for her, some part of him still balks at the idea of walking away from a decade and a half of work to build the life he’s always dreamt of for something so new and fragile that a strong gust of wind could blow it away.

But as he’s sitting there, in that uncomfortably small armchair, listening to this man insult him and insult Rey, all he can think is: what life?

As a young man Snoke had sold him his dreams at the price of his liberty, his loyalty, and his soul. But for all that Ben has given, he has never felt any level of joy that even comes close to the satisfaction of holding Rey in his arms.

His kingdom is hollow, his dreams are a pile of ash. And even if his love for Rey was not a factor here, Ben knows that he would feel the same.

This is the end of the line.

“Listen here, you shriveled piece of shit,” Ben snarls, leaning in so that he can speak directly into Snoke’s twisted face. “I’m done playing your games.”

Ben pulls back, drawing himself up to his full height.

“I lied because you’re a controlling psycho who thinks his players are robots and not fucking people,” he says, “I don’t care if I never play pro eSports ever again; it will be worth it to get out of your garbage contract. I fucking quit.”

Ben expects to feel dread or regret swooping in once the words have left his mouth, but instead, he just feels lighter than he has in years.

I’m free, he thinks, heart soaring.

Snoke, for his part, regards Ben silently for a long moment, before he very slowly brings his hands together in a loud clap. Then another and another.

“Well, that was quite a performance,” he says, mildly, looking down to pick some imaginary dirt out from underneath one of his fingernails. “Are you feeling better now that you’ve gotten that out of your system?”

“What the fuck is wrong with you? I’m not fucking kidding,” Ben snaps, although a curling vine of anxiety is beginning to wind its way through the pit of his stomach.

“I never did tell you why I let you stay on the team, despite knowing that you had become unreliable and dishonest, did I?” Snoke asks mildly, eyes flicking back up to Ben’s.

“I quit. What the fuck does that even matter now?” Ben asks, though the anxious feeling in his gut has grown far larger and is now winding tendrils around his heart.
“Do sit back down and I’ll tell you,” Snoke says, indicating Ben’s discarded chair.

Ben remains on his feet, though uncertainty has swept in and knocked the fight right out of him.

“That was an order, not a suggestion,” says Snoke, and the mild tone of voice from before is completely gone, replaced by tight, cold fury. “Sit, or live with the consequences.”

Numbly, Ben drops back into the armchair.

Snoke gives him a tight smile, utterly devoid of warmth.

“From the moment I learned that you had played against Rey on your stream, I knew that you were beginning to drift from my control,” he says. “I could tell that one day soon you might foolishly decide that you did not need to listen to me or even to break your contract. So I began preparing.”

Dread settles like a heavy mantle around Ben’s shoulders.

“You see Solo, I am a firm believer in the principle of the carrot and the stick,” Snoke says, “Carrot: I give you everything you need to become an undefeatable champion in any game you want. Stick: when you take my resources but don’t deliver results, I dock your paycheck or increase your streaming requirements.”

Snoke reaches into his breast pocket once more, this time retrieving his phone.

“But when neither the stick nor the carrot work any longer, well… I had to find a bigger stick,” He says, a true smile spreading across his face for the first time since he turned up in Ben’s room. “You asked why I let you stay on the team, even after I knew you were lying to me. Allow me to enlighten you.”

The smile grows, stretching and pulling at the scar-tissue of Snoke’s cheek.

“I have always believed that ours was a mutually beneficial arrangement; I give you your dream and you in turn make me as much money as humanly possible. It was what you swore you wanted – the only thing you wanted – when I signed you.”

“I was a fucking child,” Ben says, anger clawing its way back out from behind his fear. “You took advantage of my desperation and naivete and you know it.”

The smile evaporates from Snoke’s face.

“You were 21 and despite what the media might tell you, adolescence is not eternal. Even after reading the contract you were eager to agree to the terms. Do stop playing the victim,” Snoke says, nastily.

“Get to the damn point,” Ben snaps.

“The point is that despite your recent antics, you are still a valuable asset to me. And I’m afraid that I’m just not ready to let you go,” Snoke says. “It pains me to do this, really. But since you can no longer be trusted to fall in line and stay there like a good boy on your own, I had to find another way to motivate you.”

He looks down at the device in his hands, tapping across the screen for a few seconds.

“I have to say that it’s touching how much you and little Rey seem to care for each other, if the messages she sent you the other day were anything to go on” Snoke says casually. “And you’re not
the only one who adores her. She’s been quite the golden girl of StarKiller ever since that video of her making a fool of you went viral.”

He holds his phone up so that Ben can see the video on the screen, then hits play.

It’s poor quality to begin with, black and white, grainy security camera footage, heavily compressed from playing on the small screen. But it’s clear enough that it’s looking into an empty elevator.

A pair of people – a tall man in black and a smaller woman in white – stumble through the open doors, hitting the button for their floor before collapsing into each other in the corner of the elevator directly across from the camera.

Ben’s stomach lurches violently as it becomes abundantly clear what he’s looking at.

The woman says something and they both laugh. His hands are on her hips, her face is pressed against his neck. They look like they’re about to jump each other right there in the elevator. As the car stops she finally pulls away from him and takes his hand to lead him out of the door. Both of their faces turn directly towards the camera, and even despite the poor quality of the video, it’s more than enough to dispel any doubt about the identity of the couple.

Across the bottom of the video, a white caption reads “JWMarriott Tower Elevator 4 – 11:57PM – 03/10/18”

“What,” Ben says, hardly able to speak through the mix of rage and terror coursing through his brain, “the fuck is that.”

Snoke withdraws the device a split second before Ben can make a grab at it. His hand passes through empty air.

“Insurance,” Snoke says. “Imagine how quickly the tide of opinion on that poor, sweet girl might change if it were to become public knowledge that she bought her wins from you with sexual favors? This video paints a pretty clear picture of the nature of your relationship. If it were to find its way onto the internet with the right context… well… if you think the rumors swirling about the two of you are bad now, just think how much worse it could get for her. After all, the only thing the internet loves more than putting someone on a pedestal is dragging that person down into the dirt.”

There’s a rushing noise in Ben’s ears. His hands are locked on the arm-rests of his chair like vices, knuckles white and bloodless with the effort.

Snoke closes out of the video, locking his phone before slipping it back into his pocket.

“And wouldn’t you know… it just so happens that I’ve come across some of her other sensitive information… purely by chance, of course… how do you think the gaming community would like to have the personal phone number and home address of the biggest cheating slut in StarKiller?” Snoke drops the words so nonchalantly that Ben doesn’t quite register the seriousness of the words for a few seconds.

But when he does, the sheer horror and revulsion he feels would have taken him to his knees if he were not already seated. Snoke doesn’t even need to connect the dots any further, Ben can already see where this leads.

“Now Rey Sanderson seems like a sweet girl…” Snoke pauses with a nasty little chuckle, “Well, that’s actually not true at all. She’s rude and frankly not much to look at. I honestly don’t see what charms of hers have you so spellbound. But all that aside, ruining her life and putting her in danger is not my first choice. It’s nasty business and completely unnecessary, unless of course, you still want
to walk away from me?”

The brief, ephemeral glimpse of freedom that Ben had gotten just moments before is ripped out of his grasp and he slumps forwards in his chair, like a puppet with its strings cut.

There is irony there but he feels too broken to appreciate it.

Terrible, ringing silence stretches between them until he can no longer bear it.

“You win,” he says, and his voice is the sound of defeat, even to his own ears. “I’ll do whatever you want. Just… leave Rey alone.”

Snoke smiles but all Ben can see are the jaws of a shark as it swims forward to devour him.

“Of course,” he says, smoothly, “As long as you do as your told, she has nothing to worry about.”

Ben still hasn’t replied by the time that Rey and the Resistance are ushered backstage at the Chelsea theater to await their first game of the day.

Under normal circumstances Rey would probably be freaking out, searching the halls frantically for him, desperate to talk. But this is game day and even though Rey had spectacularly failed to hold up the promise she made to herself to steer clear of Ben, she is not willing to compromise on the other.

She is not going to give her team half of her concentration, not when they’ve all fought so hard to get to this point and when they’re so close to their goal, to really making it, that she can taste it. So Rey puts her phone to sleep and sticks it in her back pocket before turning back to face her team. She’s startled to find that Luke is standing right in front of her.

“Whoa! You scared me,” she says, pressing a hand to her chest, trying to slow her racing pulse.


“Sorry kiddo, I was actually trying to figure out how to get your attention without doing that.”

Rey offers him a smile and a thumbs up.

“I was off in my own little world,” she says, “did you need something?”

“I actually wanted to grab you for a quick chat,” he says, gesturing towards a small group of unoccupied black folding chairs in the corner of the room.

Her stomach swoops a little.

*Here it comes,* she thinks. They’re still about 40 minutes out from the match and Luke likes to save his pre-game talks for closer to the 20 minute mark. There is only one thing *this* talk can be about.

“Ah… sure, yeah,” Rey says.

She follows Luke as he winds through the scattered occupants of the room: techs, Far Galaxy staff, and the occasional Cosmopolitan employee. Distantly Rey can hear the sounds of the cheering crowd, the muffled voices of the announcers, and the driving music playing overtop the gameplay
being shown on the massive screens. They’re separated from the din by a pair of swinging doors and each time someone walks through them, a wave of sound washes into the room.

The team had been in this room the day before, but Rey had been too nervous to really register her surroundings. As she sits in one of the empty chairs, she takes in the high ceilings and walls, all painted black and lit with dim lights to keep from flashing the darkened arena. A craft services table sits along one wall, laden with food and drinks that all the players are too nervous to touch, but everyone else seems to be helping themselves too with aplomb.

The Resistance is huddled together on one side of the room, orange and white jerseys making them stand out in the dim space. On the other side, the opposing team is clustered together as well.

“So,” Luke says, once he’s seated, “I’ve been seeing some… interesting things on Twitter this morning. Rumors about you and my nephew, to be specific.”

“Yeah,” Rey says, “I know.”

“Is there any truth there?” Luke asks, so calmly that he might as well be asking her about the weather forecast.

Rey bites her lip and looks over at a massive pile of cables on the floor beside them.

“A little?” Rey says, then she quickly looks back up to Luke, feeling her cheeks heat. “But it’s not what you think! I… we were together outside of the party last night but, we weren’t um… we didn’t… you know… do anything.”

Her eyes dart back up to Luke’s face. She’s expecting… well, Rey’s not entirely sure what she’s expecting. Anger, maybe? Disapproval, possibly. But what she finds there is a sort of gentle understanding.

“I didn’t think you had,” Luke says, “I just wanted to make sure I had your side of the story before I start planning our PR response to this.”

“Well, we weren’t doing anything last night but…” Rey says, steeling her nerves, because if she’s gonna ask Ben to be honest about their relationship with the most difficult person in his life, the least she can do is the same, “But Ben and I are kind of… a thing.”

Luke’s eyebrows actually shoot so high up his forehead that they nearly disappear into his newly-trimmed hair.

“Since when?” He asks, incredulous.

Rey looks at the cords again and sighs.

“Since StarFall, really. We’ve been talking since January, but he was… Ben was the friend I went to see when I panicked and ran off. He helped me get my head on straight.”

“Ben Solo? My angry, estranged nephew, Ben Solo?” Luke asks, sounding poleaxed. “Are we talking about the same person?”

“Yes and yes,” she says.

Luke does frown then.

“Rey, I don’t mean to question your ability to make your own decisions, but… Even before I drove
him away, Ben had issues. From what I’ve been able to glean, following his career with Snoke and the First Order, those issues have only gotten worse with time,” he says. “I can’t say that I’m thrilled to hear that you’re… uh… romantically entangled? With him.”

Rey crosses her arms and levels Luke with a frown of her own.

“It’s funny how everyone likes to say that they’re not questioning my decisions right before they question my decisions,” she says.

“Listen, I’m not gonna try to tell you to break it off, but, Rey… there’s a lifetime of hurt and anger in that boy. You can’t let a handsome face and a pair of pretty eyes blind you to that,” Luke says seriously, “Whether he means to or not, he is going to break your heart someday.”

“You know, the whole reason I never told you about this in the first place was that by the time we met, Ben had already told me how you treated him,” Rey says fiercely. “And nothing that you told me that day at lunch contradicted what he said either. But despite his monster manager and the total mess his life became after you drove him away, I think he’s come a long way from being the boy that you knew. And you might know that if you had ever reached out to try to patch things up with him. You have no idea…”

She breaks off, shaking her head, suddenly too irritated to speak.

Luke holds up his hands in a placating gesture.

“Whoa, okay,” he says, “clearly this is something we need to talk about a lot more, but right now is not the time.”

Rey forces herself to relax, and nods.

“But you should know that no matter what happened in the past, Rey, I do love Ben,” Luke says and he reaches out to clasp her shoulder. “If you’ve somehow managed to reach him, and he really is good for you, I can’t be anything other than glad to hear that. I really, sincerely do only want the best for the two of you as individuals, and… even as a couple, if that’s what you want.”

His words steal the breath from her lungs and Rey feels the prickle of tears in the corners of her eyes. She blinks furiously, willing them away, but unable to wipe at her eyes lest she smear mascara all over her face before she has to go get on stage in front of the entire gaming world.

“Thank you,” she says and Luke squeezes her shoulder.

“Twenty to showtime, Resistance and Empire on deck,” a production assistant calls out.

“Well you heard the man. Let’s go talk to the team. You lot have a game to win,” Luke says, with a small smile.

Empire is better than the Death Stars by a fair margin. The Resistance wins the first match but loses the second, leading to a neck-and-neck nailbiter of a third match. In the last minute they manage to pull off a stunning victory when Paige uses Fulminator’s Ultra to kill the entire opposing team just as they had taken up positions on their objective. It’s not an easy win, but it is a good one.

The crowd screams so loud that Rey can feel it in her bones. Her smile stretches so wide that she’s half afraid her face is just going to break.

“What are you doing playing with these Yankees?” Rex Wolffe, the Empire’s Striker asks with a
grin as he shakes her hand post game.

“You’d rather I took your spot instead?” Rey quips, making him laugh.

“Fair enough,” he says, releasing her hand and moving down the line to shake hands with Jess.

The exhilaration from the win lasts for the next couple of hours until halfway through their lunch break, when Twitter alerts her that the Sith Lords have beaten Kessel Run.

The sandwich she had bit into suddenly tastes like ash in her mouth.

She tries to swallow the massive bite of unchewed sandwich but it gets a little stuck in her dry throat and she winds up coughing and choking while Finn pounds her on the back.

“Don’t die,” he says, firmly. “We still need you.”

“Thanks,” she gasps out as the sandwich finally works its way down her gullet.

She takes a long drink of water and pushes her phone across the table towards Finn.

He looks down and reads obediently, before swearing loudly enough that the heads of all the people sitting at the tables next to them swivel around to stare at him.

“The Sith Lords? Really?” He groans.

“Uuuuugh,” says Jess, dropping her face into her crossed arms, “why won’t those guys just go away?”

“Okay, okay,” Luke says, “I know none of you are happy about this but think about it this way: you’ve got a second chance to show these clowns what you’re made of and this time you’re not coming off of a demoralizing losing streak.”

He looks around at the team, one eyebrow raised until everyone gives in and makes some sort of noise or gesture of agreement.

“Right, now let’s talk strategy. The Opress brothers have been favoring the M&M strat recently but that leaves them vulnerable to being separated and picked off. So here’s what I was thinking…” Luke says, and the team leans in to listen, anxiety fading as they go into game mode.

Ben has always given 100% to his competitive StarKiller games. He has never wanted to give anything less.

But as he sits at his gaming station, listening to the crowd cheer and his teammates talking quietly amongst themselves, he has never wanted to throw a match more in his entire life.

And never in his life has that been less of an option. Snoke had been very clear that one of the conditions to keeping Rey safe was that he had to play each and every match to the fullest extent of his ability.

He might have underestimated Snoke’s ability to detect his bullshit before, but Ben has never tried to put anything past him in StarKiller. Snoke knows what Ben playing at the top of his game looks like
enough for him to be able to pinpoint any deviation or lapse with no trouble at all.

From here on out each and every loss of his will be gone over with a fine-toothed comb. He will be questioned and quizzed until Snoke is satisfied that there really was nothing that Ben could have done to prevent the loss.

It’s just one of many new rules and conditions that he is now bound by.

Chief amongst which is that he has to break up with Rey. Immediately. Of course.

Ben had known from the minute Snoke had played his trump card with the threat of doxxing Rey that there wasn’t a snowball’s chance in hell that he would get to keep her. Anyone who meant enough to Ben for Snoke to weaponize them was too dangerous for him to have around. Divided loyalties, and all that.

At least he had convinced Snoke to let him break it off with her in person, instead of over text as his manager had originally wanted.

“She won’t believe it unless she hears it from me in person,” Ben had said, feeling like a man signing his own death warrant.

“Fine. Do it however you like, as long as you do it today,” Snoke replied. “Oh, but do be sure to keep this little agreement between us. If she were to find out and start making trouble, that wouldn’t end well for her either.”

“Hey, Solo,” Hux calls over the headset. “Wake up. We’re about to begin.”

“Hux if you say anything to me that isn’t about this game, I’m going to put my fist through your face,” Ben snarls back.

Silence falls across the team chat as Ben’s words register in his teammate’s ears.

“O-okay,” Mitaka says after a beat.

Then Holdo is striding across the stage, her ridiculous pink hair glowing under the hot stage lights, and the game screens go live on their computers.

They’re facing off against the Beijing team, the Republic, for the first game of the day. The Republic had placed second in the Asian bracket, behind the Jedi, and they have a reputation for having some of the best teamwork in the entire league.

Ben selects Silencer and takes a few deep breaths. Despite the massive audience staring right at him, Ben is still keenly aware of Snoke’s laser stare drilling into the back of his head. He doesn’t even need to turn around to get the message loud and clear: if you fuck this up, Rey pays.

It’s not their cleanest game, but Ben plays like a man possessed. And despite losing the first match, and almost losing the second because of a communication fuck up between Caide and Hux that leaves both their support and the objective unguarded at the same time – they manage to hold on and claw their way to a victory in the third match as well. It’s sloppy but at least none of that is Ben’s fault and they’ve made it through to the next stage.

He shakes hands with The Republic and poses for the requisite victory photos on autopilot, following his team off the stage and into the darkness of the waiting room and then back out into the main drag of the Cosmopolitan.
“Solo. Remember our what we talked about,” Snoke says, before he strides off towards a man who Ben vaguely recognizes as part of Far Galaxy’s board of directors.

The team watches him go in silence. No one asks Ben what Snoke was talking about and that is the only small mercy. Caide, Phasma, and Mitaka wear the same sort of bewildered expressions they’ve had all day, Hux and Eyja look like they can barely suppress their satisfaction.

“I’ll see you for the second game,” Ben mutters then stalks off, unable to bear the presence of his team any longer.

His phone with the still-unanswered texts from Rey is burning a hole in his pocket.

But what can he even say?

There’s a part of him that foolishly thinks that maybe if he just never talks to her again, he can freeze their relationship like it is. But that’s stupid. If he and Rey are not broken up by the end of the day, he has no doubt in the world that Snoke will make good on his threat.

Ben loves Rey and he would choose her happiness and safety over his own every single time. And that means that he has to do whatever he can to protect her, even if that means losing her.

*I’ll do it tonight*, he thinks, before the party. *That way she can go see her friends and they can comfort her. And I can go drink myself into a stupor and pass out.*

A loud bell rings and a clinking waterfall of coins begins to pour out of a slot machine somewhere to his left. It calls up the memory of an arcade on a pier, warm sun, cool breeze, salt air and a small, tan hand in his–

*Fucking stop it.*

Ben realizes that he’s been standing right in the middle of the casino, frozen like a statue and he forces his legs to begin moving once again, carrying him back towards the Chelsea tower elevators.

He lays on his bed for the next hour and change, not sleeping, but not quite awake either. Memories of his time with Rey play on a loop in his head and he can’t turn them off. It’s the sweetest kind of torture, and one that Ben knows he’ll be living with for a long time to come.

Rey is standing at the craft services table, trying to decide if it’s worth forcing herself to drink more water or if that’s just going to result in her needing to pee in the middle of the game when a shadow falls over her.

“I don’t know what he sees in you,” says an unfamiliar male voice.

Rey whips around and finds herself face to face with the sneering mug of Maul Opress.

“It’s kind of amazing, she thinks, that he can stand there and address her so casually after all the shit he’s said about her online.

“Just came to see the girl whose pussy convinced KyloRen to let some nobody trash his rep,” Maul
says, sneer widening. “How does it feel to have fucked your way into the big leagues?”

“For your information I was already signed with the Resistance before I even knew who the hell KyloRen was,” she says.

“Sure you were. Are you hoping that if you fuck him enough some of his talent might actually rub off on you?” Maul asks.

“Piss off,” Rey says. Rage is vibrating through her bones. “I have nothing else to say to you.”

Maul laughs, a nasty nasal sound.

“Throat too sore from sucking Solo’s cock last night?” He goads.

Rey notices that he’s speaking quietly enough that no one besides her can hear what he’s saying.

He’s a bully and a coward. Color her unsurprised.

Even so, the anxiety of being cornered and harassed by an aggressive man is getting to Rey. Maul is deliberately trying to knock her off balance before their game. And it’s working.

“You’re the one who won’t stop talking about his dick,” she says, staring Maul down and forcing her voice to hold steady, despite the thundering of her heart in her chest. “Maybe you’re jealous?”

Maul leans in closer so that he’s practically speaking into her ear now. Rey’s hands grab hold of the edge of the table as she forces herself not to recoil or bolt. She won’t give him a reaction, she won’t.

“So you do admit to it,” he says, “you fucking slut—”

“What’s going on here?” Says Poe, loudly, coming up to stand beside her and she’s so relieved she could cry.

“We were just having a friendly chat, you know, Striker to Striker,” Maul says, drawing back.

“Yeah I’m sure,” Poe says, in a voice that is pure sarcasm.

“Why don’t you fuck off back to your team to plan how you’re going to drink away your sorrows after we beat you,” Rey says.

Maul’s eyes flash dangerously and Rey is so thankful that Poe is with her because something tells her that if he weren’t he might have tried to get physical.

“Do you seriously think we’re afraid of you? After we owned your asses in the Qualifiers?”

“I think Rey’s suggestion was a good one,” Poe says firmly, “unless you’d like us to call someone from Far Galaxy over to get their opinion…”

“Whatever, fag,” Maul says under his breath, turning and stalking back to his team. Rey stares after him in disbelieving horror.

“Hey,” says Poe and her gaze snaps away from Maul’s retreating back to her teammates face. “You okay?”

“Yeah. He said some shit but… honestly… what’s new?” Rey mutters, shaking her head. Then she looks up and stares Poe dead in the eye. “Are you okay, though? I heard what he said at the end there.”
The corner of Poe’s mouth twitches up into a small, ironic smile.

“The thing about being a gay man in eSports is that you hear a lot of garbage,” he gives Rey’s shoulder a fond squeeze. “It’s shitty but you learn to let it roll off your back because sooner or later they’ll slip in front of someone with power and then they’ll get banned. But he was trying to threaten a member of my team… and well, he just sealed his own fate.”

Rey finds that a smile to match Poe’s is creeping across her face.

“We’re going to destroy them, aren’t we,” she says. And a shiver of anticipation rolls through her. For the first time since she learned who they’d be playing, Rey cannot wait to play.

“Totally,” Poe replies.

It’s a slaughter.

As Luke had predicted, Maul and his brother Sav are running a high risk, high reward strat called the M&M with Maul playing Marauder on Striker and Sav using the tank Magnaguard. Both characters employ short bursts of high speed and massive damage, making them deadly in a closeup one-on-one duel, but the long cooldowns on their abilities leave them vulnerable to attack if they do not take out their target on the first engagement.

The point of the M&M strat is to sync up the attacks, picking a target, isolating them, and taking them out with a one-two punch. Then, target eliminated, the pair would retreat to wait out the cooldown before attacking again. But the Resistance is prepared for this. Paige targets Maul’s Marauder relentlessly with Quasar’s immobilizer blasts and Poe uses Trident’s net to snare Magnaguard at every turn.

The loss of their Striker and Tank within the first stage of the first map sends the Sith Lords into chaos.

As Rey streaks across the Jedah map towards the first set of footholds, utterly unmolested, she feels a wild sort of joy take hold deep in her heart.

“These guys are something else,” Finn cackles as he snipes down the Sith Lord’s support player. “You’d think they’d learn from this and change up their strat but they’re so tilted that they’re just picking the same heroes over and over and running right back out to die!”

“Guys, you’re not gonna believe this, because I know we just flipped to stage three, but the objective is at ninety percent,” she says. “Make that ninety five… one hundred! Fall in!”

And just because she can, Rey hits Milly’s dance emote, making her avatar shimmy and twirl on the spot as her team races in to join her on the objective, securing their win.

As the victory screen appears, Rey glances over to where the Sith Lords are sitting, all of them staring in stony silence at their screens. They pointedly avoid looking at each other or the Resistance.

They don’t fare much better in round two. This time they’re running a strat called Duck Hunt that involves using an entire lineup of slow-moving heavy hitters. But the Resistance, who all favor speedy characters with solid health reserves, run circles around them.

There’s a dicey moment when their other Offense player, Sheev Palpatine, corners Paige and Rose in the stables on the Canto Bight map. Erevana’s tractor cannon and the closed-in walls keep them from being able to get out, but Rey is already so far along in capturing the objective that even that setback doesn’t shake them.
When the second Victory screen pops up Rey actually laughs aloud. They’ve done it. There is one more match that will be played out, a chance for the Sith Lords to put at least a single point on the board and deny the Resistance their full three point win, but regardless of the outcome, they’ve already won.

“So we’re just gonna give this one to them out of pity, right?” Jess snarks.

“Of course,” says Poe, before he locks in his selection of Coronet. He is nothing if not petty and the hero currently has no designated counter in the game, making her a total pain to defend against no matter the team comp.

Rey dodges and disorients Maul, who has been tilted since the first match and has utterly given up on capturing the objective in favor of trying to take her out. She feels like she’s watching him melt down in real time and while Rey’s not normally one to relish in someone’s public humiliation, she decides that she’ll make an exception just this once.

She’s dancing on the objective again when they win the third match.

There’s a rhythmic chant pounding through the arena, but it isn’t until Rey pulls off her headset that she realizes the audience is screaming “Resist this!” over and over.

Rey practically floats across the stage to shake hands with the Sith Lords, all of whom seem to be going through a different stage of grief.

She and her teammates can’t stop smiling and laughing, tackling each other with hugs as they stumble backstage. They’re nearly hysterical, high off of the thrill of victory and the satisfaction of finally putting the Sith Lords in their place. And, as Rose points out once the doors of the room swing shut behind them, cutting them off from the stage:

“WE’RE IN THE SEMI-FINALS!”

There’s more screaming and cheering and hugging and Rey feels like her heart is so full that it might burst.

Ben rejoins his team just before their second game. When the time comes for them to take the stage, Snoke grabs Ben’s arm as he’s about to file out after his teammates.

“Do try to act like a human being this time,” he says. “Can’t have people wondering what’s wrong with you, now can we?”

Ben yanks his arm out of Snoke’s grasp and jogs to catch up.

This time he makes a handful of callouts between capturing footholds and objectives like it’s his sole purpose for existence. They’re playing the Vegas team, Riot, this match and the audience is very much in favor of their opposition.

They wave the purple and gold colors of Riot; booing loudly when the First Order wins the first match and cheering uproariously when Riot takes the second.

Much to the crowd’s disappointment, The First Order takes the final match, knocking the hometown
team out of the running and advancing to the Semi-Finals. Feeling Snoke’s gaze on him, Ben forces himself to clap hands with Mitaka and Caide and forces something that feels vaguely smile-adjacent onto his face as he shakes hands with the other team.

He feels like he’s moving in a dream. Between blinks he somehow travels between the stage and his room.

Ben dresses for press in a daze, pulling on dark jeans and one of his many black t-shirts with a black jacket. It will have to do. He’s just not capable of putting any more effort into this charade of being a willing participant in his own life any longer.

The team walks in a silent group towards the elevator bank but as they step inside, Mitaka seems to reach his breaking point.

“Ben, what’s going on with you today?” He asks. Ben can see his worried face reflected in the gleaming walls of the elevator.

“Nothing,” he says.

“Bullshit,” Mitaka replies, with uncharacteristic force, crossing his arms. “I’m half tempted to hit the emergency stop if that’s what it takes to get you to talk.”

“Do it, I don’t care,” Ben says.

“Okay, seriously, what the fuck dude,” says Caide, grabbing Ben’s shoulder and spinning him around. It’s the second time Ben has been manhandled today. He’s getting really fucking tired of it.

“Yeah, this is weird even for you,” says Phasma, frowning.

Ben looks around the elevator at the three of his teammates who are confronting him and the two who are conspicuously silent.

“If you want to know, maybe you should ask Hux and Eyja what they were doing the other night instead of joining us for dinner,” Ben sneers, getting a perverse stab of satisfaction from the way Eyja swallows nervously and Hux blanches even whiter than usual.

“We were having dinner with Snoke,” Eyja says, probably trying for justified, but winding up somewhere in the neighborhood of nervous uncertainty, “to talk about Ben and his ReyOfLight problem. We’d all talked about how we needed to do something if it got worse. And it got worse! So we did something.”

She stands up as straight as she can and juts her chin out defiantly.

“What the fuck made you geniuses think that the middle of Championships was the right time for that?” Phasma snaps.

“He was planning to meet up with her here!” Hux snarls, “She was texting him about dinners and spending time together. We saw it when Ben left his phone on the plane like a fucking idiot.”

“So you saw a handful of messages about me socializing like a normal human being, out of fucking context, and just decided to ruin my life?” Ben says, taking a step towards Hux.

“No, I saw a pattern and I – we decided that it was time to end it,” Hux spits back. “You’ve lost focus and your priorities are compromised. We all signed the same contract, agreed to put the team first! And all of us have fucking done our part, except for you!”
Hux laughs and shakes his head.

“You want to know what’s really funny about all of this?” he asks, continuing before anyone has the chance to reply. “This whole time, while all of us have been toeing the fucking line and paying for all of your shit, Snoke has never shut up about how our real job here is to be the team you need. We’re just fucking props to him. Just here to help you be the best in the world, the biggest fucking star. And you don’t even care.”

Silence falls in the elevator when Hux finishes speaking. Ben knows in an intellectual sort of way that maybe, maybe some of the things that Hux has said are valid. But the image of Hux and Eyja sitting across from Snoke, ruining his life out of spite, fills up every corner of his mind.

He takes another step forward, fists clenching and unclenching.

The elevator dings and the door opens into the lobby.

“Okay, everyone out,” says Mitaka, sounding like a man on a sinking ship who has just been handed a life preserver.

Ben turns and strides out of the elevator without another word.

The press panel is an endless nightmare of people asking invasive questions about Ben’s love-life, occasionally interrupted by a question about team comp. All the same, the relief of being dismissed lasts only for a fraction of a second until Ben remembers that the clock he had set for himself has officially run out. The time for him to find Rey and end things has come at last.

He splits off from his team once more and goes to sit on a bench in the casino.

Rey’s messages stare up at him, expectant and waiting and he can’t believe what he’s about to do.

It’s not fair.

But it’s the only way to keep her safe.

Ben Solo

Hey can you meet me by the door from last night?

Ben Solo

We need to talk.

Rey forces herself to stop obsessively checking her phone after she takes yet another look post press panel and sees nothing but Twitter notifications. Simultaneously worried, hurt, and annoyed, she shoves the device into her purse and resolves to just give him a piece of her mind when she sees him at the party later.

Instead, she decides to spend the hours between now and then sitting in the hot tub, recovering from a long and irritating session of saying “no comment” to different reporters who only wanted to ask about her relationship with Ben.
She nurses a single screwdriver, having learned that they pool bar is not to be taken lightly, and wishes that she could switch places and ask each of the reporters some invasive questions about their complicated relationships for once instead. When she’s so waterlogged and pruney that she can’t stand another second in the water, she naturally goes to take a shower.

By the time she steps out of the bathroom, curls of steam wafting through the air behind her, Rey finally feels like she’s approaching relaxation for the first time since she woke up.

She’s in the process of pulling her hair up into a messy bun when Rose reaches for her perfume, causing a small avalanche of cosmetics across the surface of the vanity.

“Woops!” says Rose, deftly catching a tube of mascara before it can roll off the edge. “If I can get this perfume on without wrecking our whole room then I’m good to go.”

“I’m ready when you are,” Rey tells her, edging out of the bathroom so that she doesn’t get caught in Rose’s perfume cloud.

She pauses just outside the door make sure that her skirt isn’t tucked into her underwear or something equally embarrassing. It is not and she takes a moment to take in her reflection.

Rey feels sexy tonight. A sleeveless black dress with a narrow, plunging neckline that shows off the delicate valley between her breasts clings along her torso before fluttering around her thighs. The same spindly heels she’d worn the night before make her legs look a million miles long. She’s put effort into her hair and makeup and she likes the way the dark liner makes her eyes look brighter, the gloss on her lips makes them look fuller, and the delicate curls that have escaped from her artfully messy bun frame her face like one of those beachy, carefree girls on Instagram.

“You gonna stand there checking yourself out all night or are we actually gonna go to this party?” Rose asks, coming over to bump Rey with her hip.

“Hush, you,” says Rey but she follows Rose out the door and down the hall to the elevators.

They’re maybe a little early for the party, but unlike the one in the club the night before, this is a smaller event in the Cosmo’s fancy bar/lounge and they have been promised food.

The Chandelier Bar is somehow both exactly what the name suggests and so very much more. A massive structure that looks like a glittering, pale purple jellyfish made of crystal beads hangs from the ceiling three stories up, all the way to the floor of the casino. Rey has seen it in passing as she’s walked to and fro in the hotel – it’s utterly impossible to miss – but this is the first time that she’s been inside.

As she and Rose present their passes to security, they’re ushered past the purple velvet ropes that have cordoned the space off from the general public for the evening. They step up onto the raised, round platform of the venue beneath thousands upon thousands of strung crystals and Rey feels like she’s stepped into a fairytale.

A four piece string quartet is playing on a slightly smaller platform that is built off of the main bar. Several members of other Semi-Finalist teams and a good deal of the Far Galaxy staff are already in attendance, seated on low sofas or leaning against the chrome bar, watching waiters mix cocktails. Off to the right a silver staircase winds along the center structure up into the skeins of hanging crystals, leading to the upper floors of the venue.

“Whoa,” says Rose and Rey nods emphatically in agreement.

“Canape?” Asks a small man with a tray of delicate puff-pastry creations, who has appeared
soundlessly by Rey’s elbow.
She and Rose each take one.

“What do you think this is?” Rose asks.

“I dunno but it’s tasty,” says Rey, who has already devoured hers.

They post up at the bar, ordering drinks and chatting with a tall, Japanese man with a British accent and a pair of round glasses who introduces himself as Kaito Eso from Rogue One.

“That’s Jyn’s team, isn’t it?” Rey says, perking up. “I’d love to meet her.”

“If you stick around a bit, she’ll show up,” Kaito says, “She and her husband, Cassian, went to get a couple’s massage after the game because they’re those kind of people so they’re running late.”

Rose laughs.

“They do this a lot, huh?” she asks.

Kaito stirs his martini with his olive spear and sighs.

“They’re so in love it’s disgusting,” he says.

More people filter in. Jess and Talia show up, looking very cozy, and stop to say “hi” before they head up the stairs, laughing about something private. The rest of the Nightsisters and Mitaka – Ben’s small, quiet teammate – roll up not too long after that.

Paige, Finn, and Poe arrive around 9PM with two of Kaito’s teammates, a pair of men they introduce to Rey and Rose as Chirrut and Baze. Both men are Chinese but that’s where the similarity ends. Baze is tall and heavyset with a mane of black hair that would make Ben jealous. Chirrut is not short but appears so next to Baze. He has a wiry frame, close cropped hair, and a face that seems to be fixed in a permanent smirk.

“Are the lovebirds still getting ready?” Kaito asks.

Chirrut replies, “Nah, we sent Bodhi in to chase them out.”

By the time the remaining members of Rogue One come striding into the party, the whole group has migrated over to occupy a table away from the main bar. Kaito waves to them and Jyn nods in response.

She’s a willowy woman, with fair skin and dark hair. She and Rey actually look rather a lot like they were cut from the same cloth, enough so that Rey occasionally gets mistaken for her at conventions.

She’s holding hands with her husband, the roguishly handsome Cassian Andor, who is patting their companion, a short man with a long, dark ponytail of curly hair on the back. All three of them are laughing about something as they saunter up the stairs.

“Resistance!” Cassian says, by way of greeting, “Congrats on the wins!”

Then there’s a lot of hugging and handshaking as everyone who has not been introduced yet meets everyone else.

“Rey, so good to finally meet you,” says Jyn, as they shake hands, “And congratulations on being one of only four female strikers to ever make it this far.”
“I was thinking about that earlier,” Rey says, “You know, the First Order is the only team in the Semi-Finals whose striker isn’t a girl?”

Jyn smirks.

“As it should be, really,” she says and Rey, who already admired her as a player, decides that she likes Jyn instantly as a person too.

Cassian looks around the fairly sizeable crowd filling up the bar now and frowns.

“Speaking of those guys, where are they?” He asks.

“I saw that dude Mitaka earlier, and Phasma’s around here somewhere,” says Poe, “But the rest of them haven’t showed yet.”

“Huh,” Cassian says. Then he leans over and kisses Jyn’s cheek. “You want anything to drink, my love?”

“A whiskey sour, if you don’t mind, darling,” she replies with a warm smile.

“I’ll be right back,” Rey says, abruptly feeling morose and unsettled.

She stands up and walks away from the group, around the back side of the bar. There’s something about the way that Jyn and Cassian look at each other, touch each other so openly and with such obvious affection that’s getting under her skin. It’s like she’s starving and they’re flaunting a six course gourmet meal in front of her. They don’t even realize they’re doing it, so Rey can’t really be mad at them.

Instead, she reaches into her purse, pulling out her phone with every intention of sending Ben another text to express exactly how little she appreciates being given the silent treatment all day. That is, of course, when she sees the messages that he’d sent nearly three hours before and is forced to swallow some of her ire in the face of her own hypocrisy.

The back side of the bar is still well-populated but it’s less crowded than the front. People are sitting in smaller groups, talking more quietly and there are a smattering of empty tables. She sits down at one and types her response.

Rey Sanderson

srry i didnt see this til now

Rey Sanderson

im already at the party

Rey Sanderson

just meet me there?

This time the dots indicating that Ben is typing appear immediately.

Ben Solo

That’s not a good idea.

Rey Sanderson
Rey Sanderson

no point in trying to be sneaky now

Rey Sanderson

besides this is a party were both supposed to be at

Ben Solo

Rey you NEED to meet me somewhere else.

Rey Sanderson

wtf is going on???

Ben Solo

I'll tell you when you meet me.

The flames of irritation ignite once more in Rey’s chest. She honestly can’t believe his nerve. He should have messaged her the second he woke up and saw the mess on Twitter, or at the very least once he’d seen her messages. The fact that he’d put her on ice, left her waiting and stewing in her own anxiety with no communication all day, only to begin acting shifty and demanding when he finally deigned to respond is really beyond the pale.

She frowns intently down at her phone as she begins tapping out her response.

Rey Sanderson

no u kno what

Rey Sanderson

this is dumb

Rey Sanderson

u ignore me all day then when u finally respond its to be cryptic and weird af

Rey Sanderson

im at the party

Rey Sanderson

if u wanna talk u can talk to me here

She shuts her phone off and stuffs it back into her purse.

“Everything okay?” Finn asks as he comes up to her table. “You kinda ran off with no explanation just now.”

“Just got a little overwhelmed,” she says, before taking a deep breath and forcing herself to relax.
This is a night for celebration, after all. Ben will either show up or he won’t but she’s not going to let his weirdness ruin the party for her. “Everything’s fine. Go back to the group, I’ll be there soon.”

Finn gives her a look like he’s not quite sure if he believes her but in the end the sound of their friends laughter from around the corner proves to be an effective siren song and he gives her a small nod before heading back.

The tone of Ben’s messages combined with the anxiety of the day has left her feeling uneasy. She wants him to just stop acting so strange and show up already. Rey is tired of the weight of secrets and sneaking and the eyes of the internet being the arbiters of her relationship.

Where are you, Ben, she wonders, staring down at the white tabletop.

A few minutes later she finally heaves herself to her feet and goes to rejoin the party, only to find that everyone, save for Poe who is talking to Holdo by the stairs, has moved to the second floor. The upper levels of the bar are fully enclosed in the crystal curtains and the light inside is a pale pinkish-purple that glints off of all the chrome and white decor and makes the whole place feel otherworldly. The music is louder up here, the sounds of the string quartet replaced by jazzy swing broadcasted through speakers.

“No it was Dragon*Con 2015 when Wedge bet everyone he could out-drink Akbar and ended up throwing up into a potted plant in the Hyatt,” Cassian is saying to Finn.

“Are you sure?” Finn asks, “Because I thought that was the year that Ezra almost got arrested for public nudity because someone dared him to streak through – oh, hey Rey!”

“What are you guys talking about?” she asks, slipping into the conversation circle between Finn and Rose.

“We’re just talking about how everyone we know is a walking disaster that no one should really have let out of the house unsupervised,” says Jyn.

“Speaking of walking disasters,” Rose pipes up, “do you guys remember that one year at GalaCon when Biggs and Snap dared each other to do a blindfolded walk through the convention hall?”

Rey allows herself to be drawn into the fold of conversation. She gets another drink and laughs along with everyone’s jokes and after a while, she’s almost feeling back to normal.

Of course, that is when Ben shows up.

There’s no warning, he just appears behind her, materializing like a shadow.

“Rey,” he says, startling not only her but everyone around her as well, “we need to talk.”

She spins around to face him. He is not properly attired for the party and Rey is actually a little surprised that security let him in, underdressed as he is in jeans and a t-shirt.

“Nice to see you too, Ben,” says Cassian, frowning at his sudden intrusion. Ben gives him a long, hard look that Rey cannot decipher before his eyes snap back down to meet hers. His mouth is a flat line and a muscle tics in his jaw occasionally. He looks… angry.

“Oh, okay,” Rey says, frowning at him. Her heart is racing a mile a minute in her chest.

Ben turns away and walks to the far side of the room. She glances back at her friends who are all staring between her and Ben, giving them a small smile before following him away from them.
People are staring, Rey can tell, and suddenly she wishes that she’d been just a bit less petty about this. Maybe she should have listened to Ben and met him somewhere more secluded.

But what’s done is done and there’s no turning back now. To leave together in search of more privacy would just cause a bigger scene.

The Chandelier Bar is round, meaning that there are no quiet, hidden corners in which to talk. Instead Ben leads them to the space just beneath the spiral staircase, where the architecture provides at least the vaguest hint of privacy. They’re standing close. Not so close as to look obviously intimate but close enough that it’s odd for a pair of people who are not supposed to have anything between them beyond a professional rivalry.

She looks up into his face.

“Ben?” she asks, just loud enough to be heard over the sound of the music.

“I really wish you’d met me upstairs,” he says, voice tight. He’s speaking softly so as not to be overheard.

Yeah, me too, she thinks, but what she says is: “what’s going on? You’re scaring me.”

He takes a deep breath. Rey watches his massive chest expand and contract under his shirt and remembers what it was like to feel him breathing as he held her in his arms.

“I can’t do this,” he says at last.

“You can’t do what?” she asks, frowning.

“This,” he says, gesturing between them. “Us.”

The realization of what he’s saying washes over Rey very slowly, but when it hits, it does so with all the force of a tsunami. She nearly staggers under the weight.

“What do you mean you can’t do ‘us’?” she asks, as she starts to feel the stinging moisture of tears gathering in her eyes. She leans in closer, whispering, “is this about your team? Are they watching you? Are you still acting?”

His nostrils flare with frustration as he breathes deeply, clearly trying to hold onto his temper.

“I’m not acting, Rey! I’m being serious here,” he says, “I’m sorry, this isn’t how I wanted to do this.”

His jaw works, the nervous tic that Rey had found so endearing, a secret word in the language of Ben that she had been so proud to decipher now sending a lance of cold fear through her heart.

“You asked me the other day to choose between you and my career and when I presented you with options – with a compromise that would allow us to be together – and you threw it back in my face. It made me realize something that I’d been ignoring because I… because this was a fantasy and I wanted to keep believing in it for just a little longer.”

“Ben,” she whispers, “please don’t do this.”

He shakes his head.

“You will never be happy unless I leave Snoke and in order for me to do that, I have to throw away my whole career. I have been doing this for almost fifteen years, Rey. I’ve known you for three months,” he says, “No matter how much I like you, that math just doesn’t add up.”
Her ears ring with his words and then they just ring. High-pitched and loud, the sound almost drowns out everything in her mind.

“You’re really choosing Snoke over me,” she hears herself say, and it’s not quite what she means, but her heart feels too brittle, too fragile to let herself ask what she really wants: you’re really going to abandon me?

His hands flex like he’s thinking about reaching out and Rey finds herself taking an involuntary half-step back. She’s never been afraid of him before, but that was back when she thought she knew him. Rey feels like she’s looking at a stranger now.

“I’m not choosing fucking Snoke,” he spits, “I’m choosing the only option that makes any goddamn sense. My contract is not going away and I’m not fucking ready to give my career up just because you want me to. We hardly know each other, Rey! Think about it! Really think about it! How much time have we actually even spent in the same room?”

Rey is stunned, speechless. They haven’t spent a lot of time together, it’s true, but they’re certainly not the strangers that Ben is trying to paint them as right now. Surely the hours they’ve spent talking must count for something? How could she love him enough for this to be tearing her heart to shreds otherwise?

“All our time is borrowed- no, stolen from our real lives,” he says and there’s a faint tremble to his voice as he speaks. “And that’s all we’ll ever have unless I leave. And can you even imagine, if the pressure on our relationship is high now, how fucking astronomically unbearable it would be then? It would be a disaster. I’m really doing us both a favor by putting a stop to it now.”

“How can you possibly think this is the right thing to do? After everything we’ve shared? Does all of that really mean nothing to you?” She wipes away the tears with the back of her hand, aware that the mascara she had applied earlier is smearing.

“Of course it doesn’t mean nothing,” he says. Frustration leaks into his tone as he shoves a hand through his hair. “But that’s why this is the best option. If we’re like this after a couple months, imagine how bad this would be after a year! This path leads towards nothing but pain.”

“It doesn’t have to! We could figure it out!” she says with quiet desperation, as tears finally overflow from her eyes to spill down her cheeks.

“And if we didn’t?” Ben fires back. “Sorry Rey; no matter how you slice this, you have everything to fall back on – career, friends, support system – and I have nothing.”

“You have me!” she insists, forcing as much intensity into her voice as she can without shouting. The crowd of onlookers is growing, she can tell, but she doesn’t want to give these voyeuristic vultures any more of this than she has to. Rey wants to reach out and grab him by the collar of his shirt, shake him until he sees sense. “I told you; I will help you!”

Ben looks at her with eyes that are so full of anguish that it steals her breath, before he lets out a single bark of disdainful laughter.

“You say that now. But what happens when the stress of the distance and the scandal gets to be too much? What happens when someone else comes along, someone less complicated and more attractive?” He shakes his head, and his lips are curled into a humorless smile. “You’re so young. Your life hasn’t even really started yet. You don’t even have a clue what you want, much less what it would mean to stick this out.”
Rey jerks back as if he’d slapped her. He might as well have, really, a physical blow might have been easier for her to take then the words he just threw at her. She’s no stranger to violence, having faced her fair share in her time in the foster system. But Ben’s words rock Rey to her foundation.

The sorrow and confusion and utter heartbreak that she had been feeling before are swamped by the sudden onslaught of rage. It rises in her like the tide and she lets herself drown. Sinking down, down, down into the black, frigid depths. The world around her feels muffled and muted, like she’s looking at it through a pane of cloudy glass. Even Ben, standing right before her, seems to be speaking from a long way off.

Distantly she’s aware that the glass in her hand has slipped from nerveless fingers, crashing to the ground and splashing the watery remains of her Verbena across the floor.

She takes another step back.

Her spiked black heels crunch on broken glass.

“Rey,” Ben is saying, “you have to know that I’m doing this for both of us—”

“Stop talking,” she says, and despite the tears that are still rolling down her face, her voice is calm like the surface of an untroubled river, hiding a deadly current below. “I thought that this was special. I thought… I thought you felt this too. That this was worth fighting for. But I guess I was wrong.”

She takes another step back.

“You can tell yourself whatever lies you want. But we both know the truth; you’re not doing this for anyone but yourself. And you’re doing it because you’re a coward.” Her lips curl around the accusation. She watches his massive frame hunch in on itself with every word, as though they have impacted him physically. And she wants to scream at him, to curse him because he does not get to break up with her and then look like she’s the one who’s just broken his heart.

“You know what?” she says, “Maybe you’re right. Maybe this is for the best. Because I have tried and tried to get through to you, tried to show you that there are other options but if this is what you’re choosing, then fine.”

Rey turns away, then turns half-way back.

“I just hope that when you finally realize how empty your life is that there’s anyone left who still gives a shit about you.”

Ben opens his mouth like he’s going to respond, but before he can, Rey is turning around once more and storming off into the gathered crowd of whispering spectators, shoving through until she knows she’s out of his sight.

She reaches an unoccupied couch and crumples into it, pressing her face into her hands and sobbing like her heart has just been ripped clean out of her chest.

Ben doesn’t exactly remember how it all goes down.

He’s a mess of emotions as he enters the bar, walking straight past the bouncer, who is so occupied
with a gaggle of fans trying to get into the party that he doesn’t even see Ben.

He’s furious with Rey that she’s making him do this in public, terrified that the scene this makes might set Snoke off anyway, causing him to lose Rey and fail to protect her all in one fell swoop. His heart – so newly rebuilt from the lump of ice and ash that it had been for years – shatters on impact the second he sees her. Ben hasn’t even done the unforgivable thing he’s come here to do and he already aches for her like she’s a phantom limb.

It’s ironic that just days after he had agreed to never lie to her in order to protect her again, he finds himself doing just that.

Ben leads her away from her friends and delivers the killing blow, smashing their relationship into a million pieces. He watches her lovely face crumple and her heart break in real time and for just a fraction of a second, he wonders if maybe this wasn’t the right call after all.

But what choice did he have, really? This is not a storm that they can weather just by staying strong and clinging together more tightly.

If Snoke doxxes Rey and spews his filthy lies about her, plastering her information across the internet, it will tear open all the private corners of her life. It will leave her vulnerable to real-world harm in a way that not even the strongest person could endure unchanged.

Death and rape threats would only be the beginning. She’d get stalkers and people showing up at her home to harass her and her roommate. Or worse. Her phone would become a device through which any troll or predator could reach into her private world to spit hate and hostility at her 24 hours a day. Ben could never subject her to this.

Rey might be sad now, it might hurt for a while, but at least she will be safe.

His story is a calculated yarn spun with just enough truth to sell the lies. And oh, it definitely sells them.

He’s preparing to slink off, to run away like the miserable bastard that he is, when something changes in Rey and her trembling sorrow turns to icy rage. She returns fire, and Ben feels like she has just cleaved open his chest with her words. Then she’s marching off, leaving him to face the crowd of onlookers alone.

Without a word, Ben flees the scene, pushing through the crowd as he bolts down the stairs and out of the bar.

People are calling, shouting after him. Ben ignores them in favor of continuing his rapid egress from the Cosmopolitan. He passes through the casino, shoving open the first set of glass double doors and then the second and then he’s out on the street at last. He comes to a stop, folding over at the waist to rest his hands on his knees, swallowing in lungfuls of cool night air.

It smells like exhaust and cigarette smoke and street food, but it helps ground him a little. Eventually he straightens up and looks around, taking stock of his surroundings.

Which is when he catches sight of Hux and Eyja, who are talking and smoking on the sidewalk beside the casino and do not appear to have noticed him standing there.

Rage so thick that it clogs Ben’s throat and turns his vision red. And once again, his body is moving before his brain even registers the motion.

The pair are so deep in conversation Hux only sees him coming about a second before Ben’s fist
swings up and into his face. Ben’s knuckles connect with the shorter man’s sneering mouth, skin splitting on the sharpness of his teeth. The impact splits Hux’s lip like a ripe grape.

Hux gasps in pain, cigarette falling from his hand.

“What the fuck are you doing?” he howls, wide-eyed, clutching at his mouth as blood begins to drip down his chin. Ben grabs him by the lapels of his fancy jacket and hauls him bodily over so that he can slam him up against the wall of the hotel. Once again people around him are staring, though this time there are several cries of alarm from bystanders, including Eyja, who rushes up to them, doing her best to pull Ben away from Hux.

“Stop it!” she screams, “Let him go!”

Ben ignores her and leans in so that he’s speaking directly into Hux’s terrified face.

“Someday, at some point in the future I hope someone screws you the way you screwed me,” he snarls. “I hope they take the only good thing in your life and force you to smash it apart. The only reason that you are not dead right now is that I want you to know what that feels like before you go.”

“Ben, you psycho, stop this!” Eyja yells as she continues to yank on his arm, to no avail. Hux stares at Ben, so terrified that he’s unable to speak, he just swallows reflexively and he struggles against Ben’s grip.

He shoves Hux against the building one more time, then lets him go and rounds on Eyja.

“And you. Consider yourself lucky that I don’t hit women,” Ben says, shaking his hand before looking down at the abraded skin of his knuckles. His eyes flick up to meet Eyja’s once more. She lets go of his arm and takes an involuntary step away from him. “I’d wish the same thing on you, but I don’t actually think you have feelings. So know this: one day your looks will fade and everyone will realize what a fucking snake you are and you will be left alone with nothing. And I hope that emptiness eats you alive.”

There is a great sort of cosmic irony in the fact that the words he’s using against Eyja now are so very close to the ones that Rey had turned on him just moments before.

He surveys his teammates. Hux, who looks like a deer on the verge of bolting, is being comforted by Eyja, who has rushed to his side and has a hand on his arm.

“I’ll see you both for the fucking Semi-Finals,” Ben sneers, then he heads off to go drink himself into a stupor anywhere other than the goddamn Cosmopolitan.

Chapter End Notes

:’) (If you wanna fight me IRL for this, you can find me at my local eSports bar on Friday nights!) Also WTF chapter lengths. I din’t know why they keep getting longer but this one was over 15k.

If you’re enjoying the fic so far, please consider sharing it with a friend! Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated and fuel my desire to write more!

As usual, please feel free to come yell at me about this story on Twitter or Tumblr.
Chapter Notes

SORRY ABOUT MISSING LAST WEEK’S UPDATE! My mom came to town and I just had no opportunity to sit down and write while she was here. I pushed the updated to make sure I gave myself enough time to do this chapter right. This *should* never happen again but if it does, please check my twitter or tumblr for updates!

Anyhow, ONTO THE NOTES! Thank you all SO much for the insane response to last chapter! I would say sorry for the tears butttttttt…. We all know I’m not sorry. :D

Shoutouts! Thanks to theforcebonding for the amazing fan art! HUGE THANKS to the ladies of the Fake Geek Girls podcast for giving me and this fic an incredible shoutout on their latest episode! If you’ve made me something and I haven’t linked it here then it might have slipped through the cracks on tumblr. Tag me again so I can see and share your amazing gifts next chapter!

If I didn’t have Cyborgharpy I’m pretty sure I would have run off screaming into the wilderness long before now. She’s the best and I love her.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I *told* Rey he was bad news,” Poe is saying in what he probably thinks is a quiet voice but is actually a lot closer to a hoarse roar. “I’m going to *kill* that fucker when I get my hands on him!”

“No fucking helpful right now, Dameron!” says Jyn. “Just go back to the goddamn party and tell everyone to grow up and stop being a bunch of shitty gossips.”

There’s a pause filled with muttering, then Jyn, again, “You too Finn! We’ve got this. You guys just go do damage control.”

The bathroom door swings open and closed and then Rey hears the clip-clop of Jyn’s heels across the marble floor.

“Okay, they’re gone,” she says, as she comes to sit down on one of the benches next to Rey, Rose and Paige. “I swear, men just have zero emotional intelligence sometimes.”

Rey, who is sitting, slumped against Rose’s shoulder in a semi-catatonic state, says nothing.

Surprisingly, it had been Jyn of all people who had swept in and hustled Rey up off the sofa and out of the bar, while the rest of the Resistance had still been standing around, too shocked to react.

“Just hang onto me and walk,” she’d said quietly into Rey’s ear, “Let’s go find a bathroom. You’ll feel better with a little privacy. Trust me.”

Rose had caught up with them just outside of the party with Paige hot on her heels and the three of them had escorted Rey to safety like an expert security team.

Now they’re sitting in a large, absurdly fancy bathroom somewhere in the lobby of the Cosmo, not too far away from the Chandelier Bar. True to Jyn’s words, Rey *does* feel better now that there aren’t
a thousand prying eyes on her, but that’s not saying much.

“How are you doing?” Jyn asks, kindly.

Rey laughs: a harsh, watery sound.

She feels like she’s been stabbed in the chest and she’s just sitting there watching the blood pour out.

“How are you being so nice to me, Jyn?” she asks, finally lifting her chin up so that she can look Jyn in the face. “You hardly know me.”

The other woman gives her a small smile.

“Because I’ve been where you are before. Sort of. I don’t really know what just happened, though I have some idea just from… context clues. But I’ve had my own darkest hour in front of half the gaming world. I just remember that I kept wishing everyone would stop staring and give me five seconds to process. I figured that you might be in the same boat,” she says. Jyn’s blue-gray eyes are full of warm compassion.

Rey struggles upright and wipes at her face with the backs of her hands. She catches a glimpse of her reflection in one of the tall makeup mirrors at the vanity counter across the way and grimaces at what she sees there.

Her makeup is a smeared ruin. What little mascara had avoided getting washed down her face in tear-tracks has been smeared and smudged in a way that would give even the most sleep-deprived raccoon a run for its money. Her cheeks are puffy and her eyes are bloodshot.

“Fuck, I can’t go back to the party like this,” she mutters, uselessly attempting to clean up the remains of her makeup with her fingers, but only succeeding in smearing it around further.

“Don’t even worry about that,” Rose says, gently pulling Rey’s hands away from her face.

“But people will be talking–” Rey begins to say.


Rey clenches her hands into her lap and looks down once more. The floor of the bathroom is a glossy white granite. It glitters in the soft gold lighting of the room. It’s so shiny that Rey can see her face reflected in it.

Everything is shiny in this goddamn hotel. The chrome furniture, the mirrored walls behind her that reflect the makeup mirrors on the other side of the room, the fucking floor. Everywhere Rey looks, she can see herself reflected back and it’s like she’s looking into an alternate reality.

She kind of feels like she’s in one right now. She still can’t wrap her head around what exactly has just happened.

Ben broke up with me. Ben broke up with me, in public, right before the Finals.

The sudden betrayal makes her head spin.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Rose asks, quietly.

“No,” Rey says with a small, harsh laugh. But she continues anyway, “Ben broke up with me.”

“He what?” Rose gasps. At the same time that Jyn says, “I knew he was seeing someone!”
She flushes.

“Sorry,” she says, sounding chagrined. “Cass had been trying to get him to open up about it for ages.”

“I thought you guys had just had a fight about whatever happened between you two last night! I didn’t think even he was a big enough dick to pull something like this though!” Rose continues.

“No, it was definitely a breakup and believe me when I say that no one is more surprised than me,” Rey says bitterly. “Everyone told me that he was an asshole and I knew that but I really… he was always different with me. This… fuck. I don’t even know what to think right now.”

“That asshole,” Paige seethes. “Poe was right. We should kill him. Do you want us to? Because we can. Jess probably knows how to hide a body.”

Rey lets out another watery chuckle, “Maybe. I’ll think about it.”

“Rey, I hate to even suggest this,” Jyn says hesitantly, and Rey glances over to see the other woman’s brow furrowed with worry, “but given the timing I think you need to consider it. Do you think he did this intentionally to sabotage you?”

Rey’s stomach lurches and her head spins.

Because as much as it shreds whatever is left of her wounded, bleeding heart to even think of it, Jyn is absolutely not wrong. There’s no way to look at what Ben did and not take the timing into consideration. But… it doesn’t feel right.

“You’re not wrong that this looks shady as fuck,” Rey says quietly. “But I really don’t think this was premeditated. He actually told me that one of his teammates might try to sabotage me here and while that could have been a ploy to throw me off his real agenda… it just feels… too convoluted for him. He’s not one for headgames, you know?”

She pushes herself up and begins to pace back and forth across the sitting area. In the tall mirrors across the room, a thousand Rey’s pace with her.

“Actually, I don’t even think this was all his doing, either. I just know his fucking manager is behind this somehow.” She can hear her voice growing louder, echoing around the room, but she can’t bring herself to care. The cold anger of before is gone now. Hot rage, like Rey has felt few times before in her life, begins to burn through her. She’s a dry forest in the summer heat and the anger is a lightning strike.

“Ben was so twitchy about what would happen if that bag of dicks found out about us and what do you know? The day after the internet catches wind of our relationship, he’s breaking up with me!”

She clenches her fists and forces herself not to begin crying again and instead focuses on placing one foot in front of the other as they carry her across the shiny white floor.

Click-clack click-clack click-clack turn. Click-clack click-clack click-clack click-clack turn. And repeat.

She stops pacing and turns back towards the other women. They’re all staring up at her with looks of mixed sympathy and concern.

“I know it sounds insane but… fuck! Just trust me when I say that based on what I know about Ben Solo and Snoke, this is the only thing that makes any sense!”
Rose is still giving Rey her best sympathetic, understanding eyes, but Paige and Jyn share a doubtful glance over the shorter girl’s head.

“Just on the off-chance this was some sort of underhanded head game,” Paige says in a reasonable tone, “do you think it’s worth saying something to Far Galaxy? I mean it’s not like there’s really rules about a situation like this, but-“

Rey is shaking her head long before Paige finishes speaking.

“No,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest and shaking her head. “Everyone is going to be talking about this already. No matter what happens, I’m going to be hearing about this for the rest of my career. If I get Far Galaxy involved… no one will ever take me seriously again.”

As she speaks, Rey feels the flames inside of her licking higher. The realization that his actions have forever altered the conversation about her career makes her feel sick. It’s odd but something that Ben had said to her once about using anger as a tool keeps replaying in her head.

*Anger is cathartic. Powerful. It’s good if you know how to use it right,* he’d said.

For the first time, Rey understands what he’d meant by that. If Ben had broken up with her under any other circumstances, the sorrow of that loss might have crushed her. Rey’s anger is a shield around her heart. Sorrow rages on the outside of that barrier, but it cannot break through.

“I am not going to run to Far Galaxy and tell them that Kylo-fucking-Ren hurt my feelings so they need to do something about him,” she snarls, “I don’t need their help because I got dumped. And I really don’t care why he broke up with me tonight. It doesn’t matter. He did it. He made his choice. And I’ve made mine.”

“Rey, what do you mean?” Rose asks.

“Nothing that happened between me and Ben before this moment matters at all. I came here to win and that hasn’t changed. I’m done getting caught up in all the drama that goes along with his life,” Rey’s lip curls. “If he and his horrid teammates actually make it through to the Finals, I am going to destroy them.”

Ben is only mildly hungover when he wakes up the next morning around 6 AM, which is frankly miraculous given how much he’d had to drink the night before. His longing for Rey is a black hole in his chest and he’ll be fucking stunned if it doesn’t eat him alive before the day is over.

There’s a chunk of time missing from the night before. The last thing he really remembers is punching Hux before catching an Uber to some shithole bar away from the strip. Ben’s not sure exactly how he got back to his room, but he definitely slept in his clothes and his mouth has the stale acrid taste in it that indicates he must have thrown up at some point.

He lays in bed for the next two hours with his eyes closed, ignoring the intermittent buzzing of his phone in his pocket from what he presumes are Twitter notifications. When Ben can procrastinate no longer he rises, dresses in his competition uniform and meets his teammates down in the buffet for breakfast.

The whole affair is strained and tense. Snoke sits at one end of the table, drinking a green smoothie
and giving Ben pointed glances between reading on his phone. Hux and Eyja sit as far away from Ben as possible, shooting terrified glances in his direction every couple seconds. Hux’s lip is obviously split and swollen, though it appears that he has gone to great lengths to cover any bruising with makeup. Given how pale Hux is, he can’t have gotten it from Eyja, meaning that he must have borrowed it from Phasma, or purchased it specifically for this purpose.

Phasma and Caide, for their parts, are eating breakfast with the sort of single minded determination that they normally reserve for StarKiller.

Mitaka won’t shut up.

He rambles endlessly about whatever he can to fill the silence and when it becomes clear that no one is going to respond, he begins fucking *Snapchatting* so that he has a reason to keep talking.

Ben drinks four cups of black coffee and eats half a piece of bacon.

“You’re all *awfully* quiet for a team that has made it to the semi-finals of the StarKiller Championships. It’s almost like you’d rather not be here,” Snoke says, as the team wraps up their meal. “Sponsors don’t pay to see their logos on ungrateful brats. I expect to see appropriately positive attitudes during your matches, or I might start getting some ideas about the team line up for next year, do I make myself clear?”

Everyone mumbles their assent without meeting eyes.

“Wonderful,” says Snoke, dryly.

They make their way to the Chelsea in a silent pack and file into the back room to find that Rogue One, their first opponent, is already present. The Atlanta team is dressed in their bright blue and silver uniforms and are standing in a nearly perfect line, with arms crossed and frowns on their faces as they watch them.

Ben meets Cassian’s eyes and he knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that those scowls are all intended for him and he notes with a vague, sort of internal hysteria that this truly is the most alone he’s ever been in his entire life.

Every single person that he might once have been able to talk to about *any* of this has either abandoned him or been shoved forcibly out of Ben’s life.

He walks off and grabs a seat on a folding chair in the corner of the room. He sits there, silent and unmoving, trying to will his conscious mind to just turn off. If Snoke wants a robot, then that’s what he’ll get.

“You’re really fucking scum, you know that?” says a voice to his right and Ben looks up and into the furious face of Jyn Erso. “I mean I always knew you were a toxic asshole but this? This is on another level.”

“Leave me alone, Jyn, I’m not in the mood,” Ben says, turning away from her.

“Oh, *oh*! I’m so sorry!” she spits, “You’re not in the mood! Well, I wouldn’t want to *inconvenience* you! No, fuck you! The only reason that I didn’t go straight to Far Galaxy about the shit you pulled last night is out of respect for Rey! But just because she’s being a way bigger person than you doesn’t mean that you’re gonna get away with this.”

Ben has never seen Jyn angry before. She’s just not really the type. But she’s furious now, cheeks flushed and eyes flashing as she leans down into his space.
“That girl has just begun her career. Was she really so terrifying that you couldn’t just leave her the fuck alone?” she sneers. “You, Ben Solo, are everything wrong with this sport. No matter how the rest of this tournament plays out, I want you to know that she’s already far outclassed you in every single way possible.”

Ben remains silent and lets the barbs of Jyn’s words slice into him.

“You know,” Cassian says, as he comes up to join the confrontation, because this day really can’t get any worse, “I actually thought you were better than this. Guess I was wrong.”

You don’t fucking understand, Ben wants to scream at them, to tell them the truth but he knows better. And before he can even formulate a retort, a defense, anything to say, Cassian turns to Jyn.

“We’ve wasted enough time on this asshole and Matha wants to talk strategy,” he says, before taking her hand and leading her off.

As soon as they’re gone, Snoke seems to materialize out of the darkness on his other side, like a fucking ghost.

“Even when you’re doing as you’re told, you still manage to make a mess, don’t you,” he says, watching Jyn and Cassian’s retreating backs with disdain. “How hard is it to follow simple instructions? Break up with the girl, don’t make a scene.”

“She wouldn’t meet me anywhere private,” Ben says, closing his eyes as he rubs at his temples. “I didn’t have much fucking choice, okay. I figured that me breaking up with her was probably higher up on your priority list. Was I wrong?”

Snoke gives him a long, hard look.

“I will be lenient this one time, because I am not entirely without mercy,” he says softly, and Ben wants to fucking laugh because Snoke doesn’t even know what that word means. “But remember: I hold all the cards here. This little farce of a relationship between you two is over, or Rey’s information and that video will find their way onto the internet. Am I understood?”

Before Ben he can respond, Mitaka is suddenly right next to them, waving his phone in Ben’s face.

“And here’s Ben and Snoke! We’re about twenty minutes out from the semi-finals and we’re excited, can I get a ‘hell yeah’?” He asks.

There’s silence and the enormous, forcefully cheerful smile that Mitaka is wearing begins to slip. He pulls his phone back.

“Ah… um… did I interrupt something?” He asks, suddenly looking anxious.

“What are you doing?” Snoke asks, irritated at the intrusion.

“Just… taking videos for Snapchat?” Mitaka stammers out. “You said you wanted us to be more positive.”

Snoke’s lip curls.

“Delete that video immediately and stop messing around. It’s nearly game time,” he says, before pinning Ben with a hard look. “You know the drill. Don’t disappoint me.”

Then Snoke turns and walks back towards the rest of the team.
Mitaka stands there for a moment, frowning between Ben and their manager.

“Ben?” he asks, softly, “What’s going on here?”

For a fraction of a second Ben thinks about telling him. After all, Mitaka is his teammate and he’s always been the only member of the team who actually gives a shit. But there’s just no point. Getting Mitaka riled up will just destabilize the team and jeopardize the match.

“Just Snoke being Snoke,” Ben says bitterly, “you know how it is.”

Mitaka bites his lip, like he wants to say something else.

“Solo, Mitaka, your presence in the pre-game meeting is not optional,” Snoke calls from across the room.

Ben sighs and gets to his feet, walking towards his team like he’s walking to his execution. Mitaka trails behind him.

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Rey wakes up angry and she remains angry for the rest of the morning. The hot rage that had burst through a few times the night before has faded with the coming of the dawn. Now she has sunk back into the familiar, icy calm of her cold anger and she is grateful for it.

It’s safe in there, protected from the way people stare and whisper, from her teammate’s sympathetic glances, from Luke’s patronizing “I told you so’s” disguised as condolences. It’s safe from the raw, aching pain of having lost Ben. Rey floats like a bubble of not-yet-frozen water inside of an ice cube and feels nothing.

Her teammates try everything to engage and distract her; from threatening over-the-top violence against Ben and the First Order to acting as though nothing is wrong at all. She knows that they’re all trying to help, that they are at a loss for how to behave, but instead of making her feel better their anxious fretting just reminds her of exactly how fucked up everything about her life is right at this moment.

On what should be the most exciting morning of her professional life to date, Rey stands in the overpriced Cosmopolitan buffet, staring down at a serving tureen of eggs that have sat out for just a bit too long to be appetizing, and she feels nothing.

She is empty, hollow, cold.

The flashes of rage have long since burned out as she laid awake through a night that had seemed to drag on for years.

There’s a saying that one of her co-workers from the auto shop had been fond of quoting, and as she listlessly spoons rubbery eggs onto her plate, it plays in her head like an unwelcome popup ad: “when someone tells you who they are, listen”.

Rey had really and truly imagined that she had seen something different in Ben, something besides the stereotypical douche, the toxic gamer bro, the selfish asshole that he’d branded himself online.

How naive I was, she thinks, I ignored every warning, forgave every fuckup, I was willing to look
But the idea that Ben Solo and Kylo Ren are two different people, is, of course, false. And now, Rey is paying the ultimate price for forgetting that.

She grabs a single piece of soggy bacon then scans the buffet table for anything else that she can use to decorate her plate so that her teammates don’t fuss at her about not eating enough on top of everything that they’re already worked up about. She settles on the fruit salad because that at least looks like it’s been refreshed recently.

As she lay awake thinking about the events that had transpired – the whole timeline of their relationship all the way to it’s explosive conclusions – Rey’s certainty that Snoke was involved had only grown. It is the only thing that makes any sense. That being said, it doesn’t actually excuse Ben’s actions in any way.

The truth of the matter is that either Ben was telling the truth when he said he was choosing to remain with Snoke voluntarily, effectively declaring that Rey was less important to him than StarKiller after all and that he’d rather dance to Snoke’s tune than be with her.

Which certainly put things into perspective for Rey.

The other option is that Snoke had somehow found a way to blackmail Ben, to force him into breaking things off with Rey. It… sounds crazy, but frankly, from what she knows of Snoke’s character, blackmail is definitely in his wheelhouse.

This of course, would be forgivable on Ben’s part if he hadn’t chosen to lie to her again, just days after the last time their relationship had come to crisis over his dishonesty.

Either way, Ben had taken their relationship between his hands and torn it to shreds, and in doing so, he’d unknowingly ripped open the deepest of Rey’s scars.

Letting people in is not something she makes a habit of. As a child who was left a lot, Rey had grown into an adult who did everything possible to prevent herself from ever experiencing that sort of pain.

If it means that she is distant and detached from most people, then so be it. People cannot leave you if you never get attached. People cannot hurt you if you keep them at arm's length. And never had she ever let anyone in as close as she had let Ben.

He wasn’t wrong when he’d said that this had all happened fast. The span of a few months, really. But Rey had felt a kinship, a connection with him that she had never felt before and she’d opened her heart to him.

Rey has always been a creature of survival: self-sufficient and capable of overcoming any obstacle thrown in her path. No matter how much weight falls on her shoulders, she always finds a way to carry it.

She knows that lurking outside of the thick walls of her distant, icy rage, there is an ocean of heartbreak and at some point soon, those walls will crack and she will drown.

But for right now, the combined strength of her anger and her iron will keep her moving. She will not give anyone the pleasure of watching her fail because Ben Solo broke her heart. She will not feed the rumor mills anything they want. She will not lose a single game in this tournament, not to the Nightsisters, and certainly not to the First Order.
She had trusted Ben and he had let her down in every way possible. She will take everything from him and show him no quarter.

Resolute in her determination, Rey scoops a pile of greasy potatoes onto her plate and crosses the dining room to join her team.

Unsurprisingly, Rogue One is out for blood.

The First Order plays against them frequently, seeing as how they’re all in the same bracket and therefore prone to ending up at the same tournaments.

But Ben has never seen them like this. Jyn, who usually plays Swoop, makes it her personal mission to ruin Ben’s day by playing Praetorian instead. Praetorian, the hero who has just recently been given a new ability that people are referring to as the Ultra-killer.

His long, segmented red whip syphons Ultra charge off on any hero that it touches. This means that as Ben and Jyn race neck and neck through the chaos of the Spire map, he can never build up enough Ultra charge to get a Shadow Shroud off on her and she wipes him out on the Objective with her Flurry of Blades, cinching the first match in the favor of Rogue One.

For the second match, they’re on the Jedha Temple map and Ben plays Marauder. He gets a lucky hit in on Jyn early in the match that forces her to retreat to the arms market to recuperate her health. Ben uses that time to capture as many footholds as possible and he’s racing through the tight, claustrophobic hallways of the abandoned temple before he catches sight of Jyn again. She’s flanked by Kaito who’s running Solara and Cassian who’s playing Quasar.

“Fuck, I need backup in the upper temple or we’re gonna lost this match,” Ben calls.

“On it, go towards the basket room and I’ll meet you and pick them off,” Caide says.

Ben pulls left, darting through hallways and chambers into one that’s entirely filled with random baskets – hence the name – where Caide is indeed waiting with Fulminator at the ready.

“Go to the right,” Mitaka calls, “I’ve got my Ultra on the garden terrace and I can boost you.”

Ben darts past Caide and follows Mitaka’s instructions, leaping out of a window, across a narrow gap and over to the other side of the building. On the roof, to his left, he can see Chirrut’s Executor perched and taking aim down into the courtyard. There’s a split second where Ben considers going off course to take him out. It would be so satisfying, just to throw the whole match and go on a murder spree. But he can’t waste the precious seconds, so instead he calls out the location to his team and keeps charging towards Mitaka.

“Shit!” Caide snaps, as the gong of Fulminator’s Ultra goes off, “I got their support down, but the Quasar and Praetorian are both still up. Low health though.”

Boosted by Phoenix’s Ultra, Ben blazes through the rest of the footholds. Out the temple windows he can see his team doing battle on several different fronts against their opponents. Eyja’s Coronet gets taken out by a well-placed shot from the enemy Quasar, but he doesn’t have time to stand around and watch the scuffle because he can see Jyn racing along the opposite roof.
Ben captures the final foothold, clearing out the last of the bots, and then dives through the doors into the Objective chamber. The Objective is half-way up by the time Jyn arrives. Ben doesn’t even give her the chance to start in on him. He fires off Marauder’s Ultra, reducing her health to zero, but also leaving all of Ben’s abilities on a 5 second cooldown.

“Fall in, fall in!” He calls, “Just blew my Ultra and the Objective is almost up!”

Chirrut snipes him with a headshot, but they manage to pull out a win all the same.

As the third match starts up, adrenaline makes Ben’s hands shake. This is it. If they win here, they’re going to the finals. Two days ago he couldn’t wait. Now he can’t wait for it all to be over.

The third match is a neck and neck, skin of the teeth affair. He and Jyn are both playing Praetorian this time, as if by some unspoken agreement that if one of them is going to be a dick they might as well both be dicks.

They’re playing on D’qar jungle base and Ben spends the whole match trading blows with Jyn beneath dense foliage.

“Will one of you please fucking get her off my back?” Ben snaps after the third time that she steals a huge chunk of his Ultra charge just before it fills.

Eyja comes to back him up, still playing Coronet and together they manage to drive Jyn off. Chirrut is guarding the Objective chamber entrance with V-19, though, and he manages to snipe Eyja down before Ben can kill him.

He’s on the Objective, setting it up when he sees the entire Rogue One Offensive line coming his way.

“Guys, fucking back me up or we’re losing this!” He calls as he’s forced to abandon the Objective so that he can dodge the incoming fire.

“Coming, just don’t go down,” Phasma says.

“Hurry the fuck up!” Ben snaps as he shoots at Baze’s Trident, dodging nets and gunfire.

The Objective is sitting at 78% and Ben keeps glancing anxiously around the screen for any sign that Jyn is about to come in and begin stealing it.

Ben takes two heavy blasts from Trident just as he catches a distance glimpse of red lacquer armor. Panic begins to creep up, but just then, Phasma and Caide come barreling into the room as Fulminator and Erevana.

“Someone call for a demolition team?” Caide quips, as Rogue One’s Offense players scatter.

Ben dives back for the Objective.

They win, just as Jyn’s Flurry of Blades unleashes in the room and her sound of frustration is so loud that Ben can hear it through his headphones, over the music and the thundering roar of the crowd.

He sags, boneless, back in his seat, staring up at the blinding lights on the ceiling until his eyes water and sting.

They’re officially in the fight for the crown now.
The ice around Rey’s heart thaws briefly when they beat the Nightsisters.

It is easily the hardest game that they have played thus far, in the Championships or otherwise. At their level everyone is good. Good enough, even, that it’s easy to forget that all of them make the average player look like a toddler mashing buttons on their sloppiest days. Most matches don’t really feel like professional matches, not really.

This one did. As always, the Nightsisters worked together like a well-oiled machine, operating with surgical precision and employing all their most successful tricks. But the Resistance is not the same team that they had faced in the Qualifiers. They are more practiced, more comfortable with each other. They communicate better and trust that when one of them falls, the rest will be there to pick them back up.

And leading the charge is Rey, who is holding tight to the prickly thorns of her rage, letting it sharpen her mind and make her hungry for anything that does not feel like pain and loss. It’s a tense game and there are no easy wins on either side, but as the third and final Objective is captured, Rey knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that this victory was earned.

Unfortunately, once they finish their congratulatory handshakes and end of game chit-chat and Holdo begins ushering the Resistance off the stage, Rey remembers exactly what comes next.

As the defeated parties in both semi-finals games, Rogue One and the Nightsisters will play against each other for third place. All while the Resistance and the First Order wait together in the wings.

This isn’t news. It’s not like Rey had forgotten that she’d have to see Ben today. Ironically, she’s been operating under the assumption that the two of them would end up here no matter what since the moment they made it into the Championships. It’s a real exercise in either hubris or arrogance and she’s not exactly sure which just yet.

It was almost a given that the First Order would make it to the Finals. For all their faults as human beings, they are undeniably the best team in the world, by numbers alone.

But Rey’s belief that she would actually get the chance to face them… that was really where she’d first left logic behind. The Resistance had made it into the Championships by the skin of their teeth. They’d gone up against not just one but two of the teams who had absolutely crushed them in the Qualifiers, not to mention the best of the best from the global StarKiller scene. That they have made it here at all is frankly miraculous.

But Rey had never once doubted that they would.

She should feel elated. This is the definition of a dream come true thanks to hard work and sheer grit. Instead, she feels like she wants to be sick.

She is sitting in a black folding chair between Jess and Finn, all of their eyes are glued to the massive screen showing the match that’s playing out live on the other side of the wall. The room is painted in pinks and oranges, brilliant pops of color and explosions flashing across the screen making the light shift.

Weirdly, it reminds Rey of standing in Ben’s room in the JW Marriott, letting the light play across their faces and carry them off into some sort of dream world.
She’s trying not to look at him. She’s trying not to look at any of the First Order in their crisp black and red uniforms sitting in a line on the other side of the room.

She’s trying but she’s failing.

They all look miserable and unseasy. None of them are watching the match, instead they shoot sidelong glances at each other or fiddle with their phones. Every time Rey’s eyes land on Ben, he’s looking right back at her. His eyes are bloodshot and there are dark circles below like he hasn’t slept in a year. He’s so pale that he’s nearly translucent. He looks like shit. The wretched agony on his face is so vivid that he might as well be standing on his chair screaming about how much he hurts.

Fuck you, Rey thinks, fuck you, you massive prick. You have no right to look sad. You made this choice! You did this!

Another, smaller, uglier part of her feels a surge of vicious satisfaction. It’s a quiet thing that she just barely registers buried beneath the rest of the noise in her head.

But that small part of her says serves you fucking right.

Rey has been betrayed before. Screwed over more times than she can count. Hurt, abused, abandoned, neglected, you name it, she’s suffered it and lived to tell the tale.

But in this moment, none of the shit that has come before can even hold a candle to the way that Ben made her feel the night before.

She sneaks another glance at him and their eyes meet once more. Rey steels her nerves and hold his gaze this time, narrowing her eyes until he flinches hard enough that she can see it, even across the distance of the dimly lit room. He looks away.

He’s not the only one staring though. The whole day people have been watching her as though waiting for a repeat of last night’s hysterics. Her team is doing their best to carry on as though everything is business as normal, but everywhere Rey goes she is followed by whispers and pointing and knowing, judgy looks. She hasn’t even bothered to look at social media today. At this point she knows that all she’ll find there is nosy questions and incorrect gossip.

She made Rose and Finn check that morning, just to be sure that no photos or videos had turned up (thankfully, it seems like they managed to dodge that bullet) and afterwards told the entire Resistance – including Luke, who looked like he was holding back an “I told you so” the size of the Moon – that she didn’t want to hear anything about Ben or the First Order unless it involved discussing how to beat them.

When, after what feels like a decade, Luke finishes talking strats and the Third Place game finally wraps up, the Nightsisters file into the room, cheering and celebrating, followed by a slightly more subdued Rogue One. The Far Galaxy staffers burst into action, hustling the finalist teams out of their chairs and up into two lines, side by side before the stage door, and directing Luke and Snoke (who are eyeing each other like a pair of gladiators about to do battle) to the door that will lead them to the box they’ll occupy during the match.

“You gonna be okay?” Rose asks, as they walk towards the stage entrance. Rey can see the First Order doing the same from their side of the room and her chest grows hot and tight.

“I’ll be fine,” she replies. “I came here to win, and nothing has changed.”

Rose gives her a skeptical look but stays silent as they form their line, with Rey, as the Striker, bringing up the rear.
She’s standing next to him, close enough that she could reach out and touch him. Wrap her fingers around that stupid goddamn tattoo around his arm. Punch him in the jaw. She can feel him, like he’s generating some sort of magnetic field in the air.

She won’t look at him. Refuses to be the one who gives ground. Already she can feel the vibration of sound from beyond the doors – the crowd, the music, the announcers – and it joins the hum of anticipation and anger that sings through her veins and makes her feel like she’s seconds from simply shaking apart at the seams.

This is it: the moment she’s been working towards non-stop ever since her journey began.

“Rey.”

He says her name softly, so softly that she’s the only one who can hear him, and for a split second she thinks that maybe she might have imagined it. But when her eyes snap to his he’s looking at her and they are not the cold, furious things from the night before. They are the soft, gentle eyes that she’s come to know, come to love…

“Rey, I’m…” he beings, stops, swallows.

A crack runs up the ice wall of rage around Rey.

His mouth opens once more and NOPE. She cannot allow him to say whatever it is that he’s about to say, She cannot let her anger fade, if it fades, if the ice melts, she will be left with nothing more than the vacuum of all consuming loss.

He has taken her heart, he has taken her trust, he has made her an object of ridicule at a time when her star should never have been brighter or higher.

Rey will not let him take anything else from her. Not now, not ever.

“Stop. Whatever you’re about to say, I don’t fucking care,” she says, quietly, eyes fixed firmly on the back of Finn’s head. “Don’t ever speak to me again.”

The doors burst open and then they are marching out onto the stage for the final fight.

The back of Ben’s throat is tight as he takes his place in front of his computer.

Of course she’d told him to fuck off. What the hell would he even have said to her if she’d let him continue speaking?

I’m sorry? I didn’t mean it? It’s all a lie? I am drowning in my own mistakes, please save me?

It’s just that, as they stood there, less than a foot between them he had been unable to stop himself from trying to reach out. Ben’s just lucky that Snoke had already been hurried out of sight. Even so, someone, probably Hux, is certainly going to report his slip up later and Ben’s going to have to grovel to keep Rey safe.

He sits before his computer, the StarKiller homescrn already loaded up on the machine, and stretches out his wrists. There’s a dull ache along the top of his right arm, radiating down from his wrist into the meat of his forearm, caused by how tightly he’d been clenching his fists during
whatever matter of passed-out stupor he’d dropped into the night before. His hands are clammy and damp, he’s kind of vaguely aware that he’s sweating through his shirt like a fucking newbie at his first tournament. He wipes his palms on his pants and tries to focus on his breathing.

He can feel two sets of eyes on him, amongst the multitudes and he notes with bitter irony that he has both of the assholes who’ve managed him staring him down from their special box behind the players.

“Welcome to the final game of the 2018 StarKiller World Championships!” Holdo’s voice booms through the theater, cutting through Ben’s thoughts and bringing him back to reality.

“Let’s hear it for this year’s Finalists! On the left we have our defending champions! Hailing from New York City – with more tournament wins than any other team in the league – it’s the First Order!” Holdo gestures towards them and the crowd cheers and boos in equal measures. To Ben’s eyes, the audience is a mass of amorphous black shapes beyond the barrier of the stage lights.

He slides his headphones over his ears, but the audience is so loud that he can feel the sound in his bones.

“And on the other side,” Holdo continues, her voice broadcasting through the headset as well. “Our challengers! This newly formed team began in the lowest spot on the bracket and has gone on to defeat some of the toughest contenders in the league! Please give a warm welcome to The Resistance of San Diego, California!”

The way the crowd reacts to that statement makes their response to the First Order’s introduction look like a polite golf clap.

“Ugh,” says Eyja.

“This isn’t a popularity contest,” Phasma says, tightly, “don’t get distracted.”

There’s some general muttering on the team channel while Holdo finishes laying out the details of the final match of the tournament.

Ben doesn’t listen to any of it, instead he sneaks a glance over towards Rey.

She’s staring at her screen with the same determined intensity that he recognizes from watching her matches. She nods her head at something one of her teammates says, giving a short response before adjusting the tilt of her screen.

Rey looks… normal. It makes him feel a little like someone has just slipped a knife between his ribs. It’s not that he wants to see her hurting, absolutely the opposite, but… seeing her there, so unaffected, after her icy dismissal backstage… it’s like he’s looking at a stranger in Rey’s body.

The open, radiant warmth that he has grown so used to seeing from her is just… gone.

*Does she not care? Or is she just so hurt that she’s shutting down?*

He forces his eyes back to his screen and tries to pay attention to what his team is saying. Obviously throwing the match in a fit of petulant rage is completely out of the question. So like it or not, he has to play this game like nothing has changed. He’s legitimately not sure what will happen if they lose, even if it’s because the Resistance is just better and they manage to beat the Order fair and square.

Ben doesn’t *really* think that Snoke will play his trump card just out of spite… but… he wouldn’t put it past him either.
“Dameron has been playing Coronet recently so maybe you should try Erevana,” Mitaka is saying to Caide.

“Good idea,” Caide says, “I’ll have to be quick on the draw but I should be able to at least make him think twice about running into tight spaces.”

“Keep your eyes out for fucking FN2187,” says Phasma, “Recently he’s been playing Fang like the sneaky bastard he is, and we’ve had a real problem with surprise headshots nearly costing us matches.”

“Mitaka,” Ben says without looking away from his computer, surprising every into silence. “Play Phoenix and stay in my pocket.”

Out of the corner of his eye, he can see his teammates glancing at each other, eyebrows raised.

“What?” he snaps.

“Well…” Caide begins, cautiously, “I mean… we didn’t really know… you know… how you’d do against… her.”

Caide says ‘her’ the way most people say ‘cockroach’. Ben’s lip curls and his hand tightens around his mouse.

“What? You thought I’d be too busy crying to fucking do my job?” he sneers. “Well think again because it must be fucking asshole Christmas; looks like you’re all getting your wish. I’m here to play, conflict-of-fucking-interest free.”

What a fucking load of shit; his interests have never been more conflicted. Ever.

His gaze slides sideways and he can see all of them staring at him.

His lips curl.

“If we lose this fucking game it won’t be because of me. So follow my fucking lead and do your jobs,” he spits. “Mitaka. Phoenix. In my pocket. Am I clear?”

“Y-yeah,” Mitaka stammers and then the game begins.

They lock in their heroes and load into the Takodana map. Ben watches the camera pan over thick foliage, flag-adorned castle, and the ancient ruins while the announcer calls out the details of the game then declares: “Ready? Fight!”

And they’re off.

Ben, playing Silencer, heads directly for the crumbled ruins, seeking out the first of the footholds. Mitaka is buffing him steadily, drifting behind him like a red kite attached to Silencer by a golden thread. He dispatches the bots on the footholds with ruthless efficiency, capturing the ground then moving on. In the background he can hear the first volleys of gunfire and power attacks as first stage combat begins.

He and Mitaka move together as a unit along the side of the castle, then down towards the forest.

There’s a tinny, resonant pew sound and then Mitaka is cursing in his ear as Phoenix is knocked back, not dead but stunned and paralyzed. Ben swings his camera left just in time to catch sight of the enemy Fang perched high on the castle tower, taking aim at him.
“Ben, go!” Mitaka calls, and Ben doesn’t even think, just obeys, Shadow Stepping across the open space into the cover of the trees as he watches Finn hit Mitaka with an explosive round.

“Respawn and meet me in the ravine!” Ben says, “I have to keep getting these footholds or Re-they’re gonna get ahead.”

He stumbles over her name, unable to actually get the single syllable word out.

Ben dives deeper into the woods, circling down into the hollow where the forest section of the map splits open into a narrow ravine, crammed full of bot enemies.

Or at least, it should be.

But when Ben gets there, the ravine is empty and he has only a second for his brain to compute that this must mean that Rey is already here before she’s on him.

She’s also playing Silencer.

And the jolting shock of that – he hadn’t even known that she’d be practicing with him, much less that she’d developed enough confidence to use him in the fucking Championship Finals – is enough to make him stumble for just long enough for her to get right into his space and hit him dead in the chest with a solid shot from each of her Silencer’s guns.

Ben regains his composure and activates his own Death Spiral, a defensive move that sends out a whirling tornado of damaging energy as his avatar slips away.

Rey is already dodging his move though, hopping up the side of the ravine to take the high ground and shooting down at him. Ben dodges as well and counts her shots, waiting and timing his attack for the moment where she’s forced to reload, before pressing his own advantage. He unloads both of his guns directly into the other Silencer’s face and watches as Rey is forced to activate her own Shadow Step, pulling far back and melting into the forest.

The urge to chase her is strong, but he snarls and forces himself back towards the Objective.

Ben is intimately familiar with the workings of Silencer and he knows well enough that while the character is powerful, his slow health regen is going to make Rey vulnerable for the rest of this stage. He has the chance to press the advantage and capture this Objective before she’s strong enough to make another pass at him, if he can just focus.

“Mitaka, where the fuck are you?” He snaps into the headset, “I need you on the hill in 2 seconds.”

“On it,” Mitaka responds, and sure enough as Ben dashes out of the ravine to the last foothold before the clearing where the Objective sits on this map, he sees a streak of red indicating that Mitaka has indeed joined him once more.

“They’re using the goddamn River Rider strat,” Eyja calls, “Hux! Watch out– FUCK!”

The kill tracker pings and Ben’s gut clenches.

*PoeHotDameron Eliminated Vulpexx with Bombardier*

*PoeHotDameron Eliminated HeyBigBaller69 with Bombardier*

*PoeHotDameron Eliminated GenerallyHux with Bombardier*
“Guys, you need to tie it up at the Objective,” says Caide, whose voice is tight with anxiety, “we got blindsided over here. They’re all coming your way.”

Ben takes aim and begins shooting down the Objective.

“Mitaka, get down and prep Sun Shield,” Ben says.

The Objective ticks down and down and down. A burst of gunfire to their left. The deep *boom* of Dreadnaught’s ultra goes off.

“That should slow them down,” says Phasma as the kill tracker lists four casualties on the enemy team.

Rey’s name is not amongst them.

The Objective is almost down.

“Anyone who’s alive, *fucking fall in now!*” Ben orders.

Phasma and Mitaka bolt for the glowing circle on the floor.

They hit it just as a wave of black comes rolling out of the forest and Ben watches Rey’s Shadow Shroud race towards him.

The capture gauge ticks up.

Ben takes aim, trying to spot the tiny point of vulnerability that Far Galaxy had claimed they’d gotten rid of, but had of course, not quite gotten right.

In the space between one heartbeat and another he fires.

The Objective capture gauge hits 100%.

The Shadow Shroud disperses.

Victory.

One down, two to go. Ben is going to *fucking throw up*.

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“Fuck!” Jess pounds her fist on the table. “That was so close!”

“Hold steady,” Poe says, calmly, through Rey can hear a note of stressed displeasure in his voice, “we still have two more matches. This is not over yet and I have a good feeling about this match.”

It turns out that Poe’s good feeling is, in fact, accurate. The second match goes much better. Rey had gotten a sort of vicious joy at watching Ben falter when she appeared as Silencer, but she knows that deep down it was the pettiest of petty choices. She’s certainly more skilled with the black-clad hero now than she used to be, but if she’s being honest, she’s still not good enough that she has any business playing him in a match with stakes like this.

Especially not against Kylo-Best-Striker-In-The-Fucking-World-Ren.
This time around she plays Millenia, and when the Finalizer map loads up Rey is rewarded for her choice. Most people dislike playing Millenia on this map. Its close quarters and narrow hallways with few high ceilings make a highly mobile character like Millenia less useful if played traditionally.

However, Rey has discovered that she can use the natural funnel of the map to her advantage. She pushes ahead fast and hard, dodging bots and letting Ben do most of the actual work of cleaning out the footholds and setting up an ambush where she can catch him coming down the hallway once he’s worn his health down.

Her gamble pays off and Ben runs directly into the business end of three disorienting blasts and her Ultra.

“That’s right, asshole,” she says into her headset as Silencer’s health drops to zero.

Then Rey turns around and books it to the Objective.

“Fall in, on the Throne Room!” she calls, “Silencer’s down but he’ll be back and coming for blood in a second.”

“Coming,” Paige says. “Just gonna… kill their tank… yep! Got her.”

“Posted up at the north entrance,” Finn calls. “Keep your eyes peeled, Mitaka’s playing Phoenix again and I think he’s rezzed Silencer.”

“Copy that,” says Poe as he joins Rey in on the Objective, followed seconds later by Jess.

“What are we at?” Rose asks. “I’m dodging their sniper and can’t get through!”

“Just keep him busy for another couple seconds, we’re almost there!” says Paige as she too falls in on the Objective. With her addition the counter finally fills, granting the Resistance their victory.

As sound explodes from the audience, Rey leans back in her chair. They’re tied now. One more game.

Then it’s all over.

She feels… weirdly empty. Her team is fist pumping and high fiving each other. But Rey can’t muster up the emotional energy to join in.

She hazards a quick glance across the stage and her eyes click with Ben’s.

Her stomach drops and cold sweat breaks out down her spine.

Wrong wrong wrong, says a voice in her head. This was supposed to be… electric. The final showdown between them. One part duel, one part dance, one part seduction.

This was supposed to be fun.

It’s not fun.

It fucking sucks.
They’re playing on Crait, of all places, for the third and final match. It’s weirdly fitting, seeing as how the first time Ben and Rey ever played each other it had been on this map.

Ben’s entire world has narrowed down to the red and white pixels on his screen as he sends Silencer shooting into the crystal caverns.

He has to win. He has to win.

This will be his final, awful sin against Rey. In the space of a day he will have broken her heart and stolen her dream.

But he has to. Because he loves her and this is the only way to protect her. From a mess he created to begin with.

*What a fucking nightmare.*

Silencer is mowing down bots inside the bloody red chambers of the StarKiller map. He’s making good progress towards the Objective. Winning this won’t be easy – of course it won’t, he’s playing against Rey and she is objectively better than him – but it is at least possible.

Paige Tico’s Quasar foolishly enters his line of fire and he dispatches her with a few quick hits, hardly breaking his stride.

Ben’s chest is getting tighter and tighter. He doesn’t even know what to call the thing he’s feeling right now.

He sees a flash of white on his screen. Millenia.

She shoots.

He dodges right.

Too far.

He’s out of place now, has to change tactics.

He dips into the next chamber, Shadow Stepping for extra speed.

She doesn’t follow, instead she takes over his old route, the quickest path to the Objective.

She’s going to beat him there.

He’ll have to take her out on the point.

He goes left at a fork in the hallway, dashing down into the lower level where the Objective chamber sits. All the bots are dead.

Rey’s already been here, carving a path of destruction through the enemies that says *you’re next.*

He breaks into the chamber and–

She’s not there.

The Objective is empty, untouched.

He didn’t see anything on the kill tracker but just in case…
“Did one of you take out Milly?” He calls over team chat as he enters the chamber.

“No, but you need to hurry the fuck up with the Objective because we’re getting slaughtered out here,” Eyja snaps.

Ben makes it to the Objective circle, deep in the heart of the chamber, surrounded by tall red crystal columns and outcroppings. Backing up against a rock outcropping on the edge of the circle to defend against ambush from behind, he raises his guns and takes aim.

That’s when he sees her.

She’s standing on the fucking Objective target. Or she is for a split second, anyway, because just as soon as Ben realizes what’s going to happen, Rey activates Millenia’s ultra, and then all Ben can see is white.

ReyOfLight Eliminated KyloRen with Meteorite

There is dead silence in the arena for a fraction of a second and then the crowd is screaming louder than ten thousand jet engines roaring to life all at once.

They haven’t lost just yet. Rey is on the Objective and though he is down his respawn point is not far away. If he can move fast enough he can make it back to the room, maybe get some backup and take her out. Steal the Objective for himself and clinch victory for the First Order.

But as he watches the countdown clock that shows how long he has until Silencer respawns, an awful voice that sounds horribly like Snoke’s dry rasp fills his head, drowning out all rational thought.

*It’s already over,* he thinks, *it’s all over and you failed and you’ve already lost everything. You’ve lost Rey, you’ve lost your team, you’ve lost your purpose. You fed all of it into a meat grinder and in the end, it was all for nothing.*

* Fucking stop it,* he tells himself, shaking off the paralysis and leaping back into action.

All of this happens in the space of a couple seconds – maybe three or four, tops. But Ben feels like he lives whole lives in that time. Whole, horrible, empty, ruined lives.

“FUCKING SHIT!” Phasma yells as the kill tracker pings her name as a casualty. Ben feels like he’s rejoining the proper flow of time, disoriented and dizzy. “God I hate their Sniper!”

He sprints towards the Objective as fast as he can go, thinking *please, please let me get there in time!*

He does, in a manner of speaking get there in time. But not time enough to win the game. Just time to watch Rey and the Resistance capture the Objective.

The defeat screen appears on the screen and Ben’s mind goes blank.

The First Order is enraged. They’re shouting at each other in his ears. He should… do something, right? Stand up? Say words to his teammates and fucking pretend to be a human being? Do *fucking anything?*

But he *can’t.* He’s empty and hollow and cold.

He’s lost the match.
He’s lost the game.

He’s lost Rey.

He is Icarus and he’s falling towards earth, skin blistered by the sun, trailing wax and feathers as he falls.

And the worst part of all of this, is that when he lands, he will crush Rey too.

He slides his headphones off and sags back in his chair, limp.

“Get up, Ben,” someone is saying, quietly in his ear.

Mitaka.

“You have to get up, we need to go shake hands,” he’s saying.

Mitaka looks… sympathetic, maybe? But he’s still pushing on Ben’s shoulder, trying to hoist him out of the chair.

Ben stands up on autopilot. He hasn’t even looked over to the other side of the stage yet, where he can hear the Resistance celebrating over the roar of the crowd and the thrum of the music.

He walks like a robot, trailing after Mitaka towards the middle of the stage. The First Order has stopped snarling at each other and they are now deathly silent amongst the jubilation.

They are arranged into a line with Ben bringing up the rear, and then they walk forwards as instructed by Holdo. One by one, Ben feels his hand make brief contact with those of the Resistance. Everyone mumbles ‘good game, GG’ and squeezes far too aggressively to be polite.

Dameron, Tico, Pava, Tico the younger, Gunner.

Rey.

It’s as though someone has pressed pause on the world. The second they draw even with one another, both of them freeze in place. The crowd, the cameras, the Far Galaxy staff, their teams… all of it just vanishes. They are alone, the only two people on this stage. Maybe the only two people in the whole world. Ben, whose eyes have been glued to the floor just behind Mitaka’s feet since he joined this procession, looks up for the first time.

He looks at Rey. Rey looks right back. They do not touch. They do not say anything. His mouth is dry and his throat works uselessly, trying desperately to produce saliva. (It doesn’t.)

His heart is standing outside his body, so close he could touch it. He could touch her. He could reach out and take her in his arms. He could fall to his knees. He could apologize for everything, in front of all these people, in front of the whole world. But what would be the point? He’s already failed. Snoke is going to ruin her life no matter what. She will hate him anyway.

There is nothing he could do, here and now, that would not make things worse. Any scene he made would just add fuel to the fire, make people more certain of Snoke’s lies. He has to… he has to salvage this. Somehow.

The spell has broken and Ben is suddenly, viscerally aware of how not alone they are. The eyes of two thousand odd people are all fixed directly on them. Staring. The whispers are almost as loud as the cheers.
This is not how post-game handshakes are supposed to go.

Ben does the only thing he can think of: he holds out his hand towards Rey, like she had done to him, the very first time they met.

“Good game,” he says in a voice that isn’t his own.

For a second, Rey stares down at it like she’s never seen a hand before. Her eyes – sad and resigned; the only sign of life in her otherwise impassive face – flick up to meet his.

“No,” she says, “It really wasn’t.”

And then, without so much as a backwards glance, she walks right by him, leaving Ben standing alone in front of the whole world, hand outstretched to nothing.

Chapter End Notes

#savebensolo

If you’re enjoying the fic so far, please consider sharing it with a friend! Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated and fuel my desire to write more!

As usual, please feel free to come yell at me about this story on Twitter or Tumblr.
Chapter Notes

“This should never happen again,” she said about update delays and then promptly delayed an update. Sorry y’all. Being sick is the worst and sometimes your body just quits on you at the worst possible time. For me that was my writing day last week.

Shoutouts! Thanks to kazcet and kayurka for the INCREDIBLE fanart!! If you’ve made me something and I haven’t linked it here then it might have slipped through the cracks on tumnlr. Tag me again so I can see and share your amazing gifts next chapter!

Along with being the best beta on the planet, Cyborgharry has also done all of us an incredible favor and written another companion oneshot fic that is HOT and you should go read it as soon as you’re done here!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rey doesn’t really remember the award ceremony or the press panel afterwards. The dinner later that night – at some Michelin-Starred Chinese restaurant with the Far Galaxy execs – is a hazy blur as well. What she does remember is people trying to talk to her about Ben. In press she deflects with cold “no comments”, in private she changes the subject and makes hasty conversation exits.

She also remembers the long, terrible night that follows, when the ice finally melts and her anger is replaced with sorrow so profound that she’s not quite sure how she survives.

She sobs and shakes in Rose’s arms while her friend rubs a soothing hand over her back and makes gentle “shushing” sounds.

Every once in a while Rey tries to speak, but sorrow has stolen her voice and all she can do is sob.

It’s as though Ben’s betrayal has cracked her all the way down to the core, tapping into the wound left by her parent’s abandonment.

She does not feel like ReyOfLight, StarKiller Champion and top Striker in the world – which she is now, as more than one Far Galaxy employee had informed her, gleefully. ("About damn time someone unseated KyloRen!") She doesn’t feel like an inspiration or a role model or a gaming rockstar.

She feels like a seven-year-old child who has just been tossed aside because she’s no longer convenient.

There’s another layer to her grief too, which becomes more and more apparent as the hours pass: losing Ben means that she has lost the person who she has come to depend on when she needs someone to talk to. She loves Finn deeply and dearly but there’s a lot that he just doesn’t get, despite their shared childhood traumas. It’s stuff that – on the few occasions when she’s tried to talk to him about in the past – he just does not seem able to understand. Rose is sweet and loving, and Rey could not be more grateful for her soothing presence, but she could never understand the way that Rey is hurting right now.
Ben had – for lack of a better word – gotten it. He’d gotten her.

In his own way, Ben had been caught in a similar struggle to Rey. They had both been stuck in a form of self-imposed isolation in order to protect themselves from being hurt. Rey’s isolation had manifested in the form of maintaining a safe emotional distance, even from people who she liked. Ben’s had manifested by surrounding himself by people that he could never like so there was no risk that he would ever open himself to them in the first place.

She’d felt a kinship with him and it had made her trust him, made her willing to open her heart and her emotional walls to him because she felt safe in the assumption that surely someone who understood how terrifying it was to be open and vulnerable would never betray the trust that she was placing in him.

And maybe she should have known better, with her own experience to tell her exactly what would happen if someone who defended themselves by closing off would do if they felt threatened. Maybe it had been foolish to rest so much of her weight on someone who was struggling too. Maybe she should have seen this all coming from the very beginning.

If Snoke hadn’t been a factor – and Snoke is undeniably a factor – this might all have played out differently.

The only thing that she remembers clearly from the award ceremony had been a moment when she’d glanced across the stage to where the First Order sat only to find Snoke, who stood behind them with a possessive hand on Ben’s shoulder, staring right at her. He’d given her a small, smug smile, eyes glittering under the stage lights in a way that had made Rey go cold. Had Rey not already suspected his involvement in the dissolution of her relationship with Ben, that would have done the trick.

But, it doesn’t matter. She’s chased this line of thought over and over and over. It always leads back to the same place: Rey had opened her heart to the wrong person and he had abandoned her.

Really, nothing else matters.

Eventually she cries herself to sleep and Rose tucks her into bed before moving back to her own.

Ben has never had particularly strong feelings one way or another about his apartment. It’s the place that he lives. It keeps the snow off his head and holds all of his stuff. He’d moved into it with the money that he’d made off his last Knight’s Republic win and simple hadn’t ever bothered to move out.

The walls and ceilings are painted white, the floor is paneled with dark wood. Gleaming chrome appliances lord over a kitchen that rarely sees any use. It’s furnished entirely with black IKEA furniture. There is some generic, trendy art on the walls and a few framed posters from games and tournaments, but there no photos, and few meaningful personal effects. Massive glass windows look out over the line of dreary brownstones on the other side of his street.

The whole place gives off the vibe of a showroom that he has just taken up residence in.

As he drops his bags just inside of the entryway and pushes the door shut behind him, Ben feels like he’s seeing the whole place for the first time in the four odd years that he’s lived here.
It’s… fucking awful.

He leaves his bag where it falls and toes off his boots before walking through the living room, into his bedroom.

The king bed with slate gray sheets and a black comforter sits, made up neatly by the cleaning service that comes in once a week to tidy up after him, despite the fact that he really doesn’t make much mess to begin with.

Ben sits heavily down onto it, buries his face in his hands.

Snoke had been ominously silent after the First Order’s defeat at the hands of the Resistance. It wasn’t until they were out of the public eye that Ben’s manager had pulled him aside and hissed “you’ll face the consequences for this once we get back to New York.”

Ben’s still not sure what exactly those consequences will be.

He and Snoke are in something of a Mexican standoff at the moment. He did, technically, do everything that Snoke had asked and despite a split second of stunned hesitation, Ben truly had played his matches against the Resistance to the fullest extent of his abilities.

He had technically fulfilled the terms that Snoke had laid out for him. But he had still lost and losing had never been acceptable, especially not losing a match like the Championship Finals. Against someone like Rey.

But here is where the water grows muddy. If Snoke doxxes Rey then Ben can leave because he will have lost the only thing keeping Ben under his control. But if he doesn’t, then Ben will see the threat as empty and have no reason to stay. So punishment of some sort is a guarantee.

And Ben is certain that in the end, it will be Rey who pays the price.

The frustration and pain in his chest are like a living animal, clawing at the inside of his ribs, turning his heart and lungs to ribbons.

Ben can see now that from the very first moment he’d signed his contract, he’d been trapped. But it was like he’d been sleepwalking through his life, content to live in his cage because he was too numb to do otherwise.

Now he’s awake, and there’s nothing he can do.

He’d already tried and failed to get free. And he’d lost everything in the process.

“Fuck,” he says into the silence of his room, then “FUCK!”

He leaps to his feet, lashing out at the nearest object, a tall floor lamp. He sends it flying across the room. Metal crashes into wood and the glass ball at the top shatters, sending shards in all directions.

“GOD FUCKING DAMNIT!” Ben roars, sweeping his hand across his diresser, sending a clock, a stack of books, and several trophies from various competitions crashing to the ground. Another lamp meets a similar fate to the first.

He rounds on the massive, framed posted that Far Galaxy had sent him after his first tournament win, autographed by all the voice actors in the game. He puts his fist clean through it, smashing glass and tearing paper, with such force that he actually puts a hole into the drywall behind it.
When he pulls his hand back there are glass shards in his knuckles and blood is streaming freely down his fingers. He doesn’t even feel it. He pretends that the poster is Snoke's face, pulls back and punches again. Imagines his fist colliding with ruined skin and sunken bone. He rips the poster from the wall and hurls it across the room.

In a blind rage he stumbles across the detritus littered floor of his bedroom into the bathroom. He collapses forward, gripping the lip of the sink and looking up into his face. His eyes are red-rimmed and he’s breathing like he’s just run a marathon.

“Fuck you,” he spits at his reflection, “fuck you! You stupid, stupid, worthless piece of shit.”

His rage and sorrow are so powerful that he’s nearly panicking now. He can’t draw a full breath of air. Every emotion that he’s been pushing down since he woke up to find Snoke in his room is boiling over and Ben doesn’t know what to do.

He’s gotten so, so good at being angry at other people. Displacing everything negative onto anyone but himself. But here he is, at the bottom of the rabbit hole. There’s no one else here.

Sure, he’s angry at Snoke. He’s even a little mad that Rey forced him to have their confrontation in public. But really, at the end of the day, the person that he’s the most furious with is himself.

If he’d just seen that Snoke was bad news from the beginning, or hell even if he’d put the pieces together, come out of his goddamn stupor just a few months earlier… maybe if he’d been totally honest with Rey from the start, before it was too late he would not be here now.

Maybe I’ve earned this, he thinks, maybe I deserve this…

“FUCK!” Ben roars once more and the word scrapes it’s way out of his throat. There’s a stinging heat pooling in his eyes and then it’s spilling over and as he looks at his reflection, Ben realizes that there are tears spilling down his cheeks.

He’s crying.

He can’t remember the last time that he cried but he doesn’t know what else to do.

He’s scared and hurt and sad.

He wants someone to hold him and tell him that it will all be okay. He wants to not be alone any more.

Very abruptly, for the first time in nearly a decade, Ben wants to talk to his mother. It’s like being punched in the gut, the nostalgia is so intense.

He remembers a moment a lifetime ago, when he’d been racing to the front door as she was coming home from work, seven-year-old limbs flailing wildly as he ran, so excited to show her the model robot he’d built out of Legos. He’d tripped over the corner of the hall-runner just before the door and the robot had crashed to the ground breaking apart. She’d bent down and gathered his small, sobbing form into her arms. The memory is so vivid that he can practically smell the antique rose perfume that she used to wear, can almost hear her voice dry and warm, as she says, “come here baby, it’s okay. We’ll fix it together.”

And here he is now, almost thirty-one, crying his eyes out and all he wants is for his mom to hold him in her arms and tell him how to fix his broken life.

Ben stumbles back from the sink until his bumps into the wall behind him. He slides down, dropping
to the floor.

He hasn’t felt the urge to reach out to her since the day that Snoke had presented him with his contract.

He’d been sitting in that stupid Wassily chair in Snoke’s office, looking down at the stack of paper before him, thirty pages thick and so full of legal jargon that he could not parse, there had been a moment when he’d thought that perhaps he should ask her to take a look at it before he signed.

But Snoke had looked down at him and asked, “Why the hesitation?”

“There’s just… a lot of stuff in this,” Ben had stammered back. “I feel like I should ask my mother or one of her lawyers to take a look–”

“This sort of contract is industry standard; it’s long because it’s designed to protect both our interests,” Snoke replied. “Besides, I thought you came to me because you were tired of her meddling in your career?”

And that had really been all it took. Ben had signed the contract without a second thought.

But now, as he sits on the floor of his bathroom with a bleeding hand and a broken heart and no other options, he can’t think of anything else to do, so he reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone.

He dials.

She picks up on the second ring.

“You just gonna stay in there forever?” Finn asks through the door.

Rey thinks he’s being a little dramatic; they’ve been back in San Diego for less than 24 hours, only about 16 of which she’s actually spent hiding under her covers, so it’s not like she’s been doing her depression hermit routine for a truly excessive amount of time.

“Yes,” she says though, because she’s feeling petulant and sorry for herself.

There’s silence for a moment before Finn sighs loudly.

“Then I’m coming in. Really hope you’re not naked,” he says. The door opens and she hears his heavy footsteps plodding across the room.

Her mattress springs squeak with protest when he sits down next to her.

“You missed celebratory taco night,” Finn says.
“I’m not hungry,” Rey mutters, tucking tighter into fetal position.

“Yeah, and I’m Lebron James,” Finn replies. “You haven’t eaten anything since yesterday morning. You’re definitely hungry, but you’re too busy being sad to realize it yet. There are leftovers in the fridge for when that changes.”

“Thanks,” she mumbles.

“You know you can talk to me, Rey,” he says gently, laying a hand on her arm over the blanket. “Rose gave me the CliffsNotes about what went down with Ben at the party, but I know there’s still a lot you’re not talking about. I’m here if you want to... I dunno... talk it out?”

“Okay,” Rey says, wishing that he’d just leave already. She’s so tired. She doesn’t have the energy to talk about this right now. Not to Finn, not to anyone. Well. That’s not entirely true.

She wants to talk to Ben, but he’s the reason that she feels like this in the first place so he’s obviously not an option.

Finn sighs again.

“Alright, I can take the hint,” he says, giving her arm one more pat. “But you should know; I’m not gonna let you waste away in here. We should be celebrating, you should be celebrating. I’d be a real shit friend if I didn’t drag you back out into the world eventually.”

Rey doesn’t respond.

Finn gets to his feet.

“Make sure you eat something, okay?” he says as his footsteps retreat from the room and the door swings shut once more.

Rey remains cocooned in her blankets for a little while longer, running her fingers back and forth across the soft, cream jersey of her sheets, feeling the lumpy mattress beneath.

It occurs to her in a displaced, idle sort of way that she can afford to buy a new mattress now. Hell, she could afford to move into a brand new apartment all by herself. Even after taxes, paying Luke, and dividing the Championship pot six ways, by her standards, Rey is filthy rich now.

She can’t even believe how apathetic she is about this. This is her dream. Here she is, an establish professional gamer, Champion of her game, with enough money in the bank to pay off all her debts and live a comfortable life. And here she is, laying in bed, crying over a boy. She should be better than this. She should be above this.

Everything just feels tiring and pointless. She’s so exhausted. If this is what all her dreams coming true feels like, then why even bother with the rest of it?

Ugh.

She knows that she’s been dramatic. She’s been happy long before he showed up and she knows that at some point she will be happy again. But this in-between stage, where all she can feel is pain… just really sucks.
“What’s wrong?” Leia asks, and it’s like the last ten years are just… gone.

There’s no ‘why haven’t you called’ no ‘you have a lot of nerve’. Just his mother, who sounds genuinely worried.

“Nothing’s wrong,” he says, pitching his voice as low and steady as possible, trying to hold back the tremor that threatens to give him away. Calling her was definitely a mistake, born out of a moment of weakness. He can’t let her know how bad things really are.

After all, Leia is a meddler. She would not be able to hear that Ben is in some sort of trouble without trying to get involved and if she did that, it would do nothing but stir up trouble and possibly get Rey hurt. But he can’t tell her this; it’s not a fight he could win with logic, and the emotional battle would defeat the purpose of him calling just to hear her voice. To pretend like any part of his life is not falling apart.

“It’s just been a while. I wanted to… see how you were,” he finishes lamely.

Leia makes a suspicious ‘hmm’ sound on the other end of the line.

“You know, you’re a lot like your father, Ben; not very good at lying,” she says. “Is it a girl?”

“Mom,” he begs, “can we please not do this?”

There must be something in his voice because she sighs but says, “Alright. If you don’t want to talk about it I guess that’s your choice.”

“Thank you,” Ben says and he means it. In this moment it’s hard to remember all the fights and all the ways that she’d let him down. He’s so hungry for genuine affection that he’s pretty sure he could forgive her almost any sin in this moment just so long as she’ll talk to him and make him feel like he’s not so alone.

“How… how is dad?” he asks and it strikes him that he legitimately doesn’t know. His mother is always on the news; he hears about her on a nearly daily basis whether he likes it or not. But once his father had retired from racing, he’d sort of slipped out of the public eye all-together.

“He’s… okay,” Leia says, and she sounds tired, “he had a scare a couple years ago – minor heart attack – but he pulled through alright. He's down in Arizona, working on cars with his old buddy Chewie, these days.”

Ben jolts.

“I didn’t know about his heart,” he says. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I didn’t have your number so I called your manager. Left a message with his secretary. Didn’t anyone tell you?” Leia asks and Ben can hear her frowning through the phone.

“No,” he says softly, “no one told me anything.”

“Ben…” his mother says and she’s using a tone again that sends all the alarm bells ringing because she’s definitely about to steer right back into a conversation that he just cannot have with her right now, “Ben what’s going on with you?”

“Don’t. I can’t get into this with you, okay? Just… I’m sorry,” he says, “I’m just… I’m sorry I wasn’t there when dad was sick and I’m sorry I haven’t called ‘til now. I’m… I’m sorry I stayed away so long.”
His mother makes a quiet noise on the other end of the line and he can almost see her face softening as it used to when he was a child and he’d bring her home something that he’d made for her in school.

“Oh Ben; I’m just happy to hear from you again,” Leia says gently, “I missed you.”

Ben closes his eyes and just soaks her words in.

“Listen,” she says, “we’re about to go back into session but… I just want you to know that no matter what trouble you’ve gotten yourself into, if you ever need me, all you have to do is call, okay?”

Ben makes a noise of assent, not quite trusting himself to speak.

“And… I’d like to see you again. If you’ll let me. Maybe next time I’m in New York?”

“Sure,” he says, even as he knows that there’s no way that Snoke will ever let him within a mile of his mother.

“Good. That will be good,” she says, “I… I love you Ben. I’ll talk to you later, okay?”

And Ben somehow manages to choke a “you too” out through a throat that is tight with the desire to burst right back into tears once more before he hangs up the phone.

Time passes like cold molasses, slow and sluggish. The light of evening slowly fades into the dark of night and Rey doesn’t move, save to roll onto her other side when she begins to develop sore spots. She’s sort of dozing in that hazy state between sleep and waking, not really thinking. Just drifting.

Just after the last shreds of sunset have gone, there’s a series of short buzzes by her hip that make Rey start.

She’d turned off all her push notifications for social media because the constant vibrating of her phone was giving her anxiety and more often than not the messages just made her more depressed.

“Should have turned off texts while I was at it.” she mutters as she fights her way out of her blankets to grab the offending device. As she starts to swipe the menu down so that she can set her phone to “do not disturb” she catches sight of the messages on her screen.

_Luke Skywalker_

_Hi Rey,

_We need to talk. I know you probably don’t want to, but this is important._

_Best,

_Luke_

_Luke Skywalker_

_Hi Rey,”
This is actually time sensitive. Please respond when you get this.

Best,

Luke

Rey frowns down at her phone.

“What the fuck?” she says, feeling affronted. Luke, who couldn’t muster anything better and more comforting than “I wish things had gone differently” while wearing a look that said “well, what did you really expect?”, Luke who’s mismanagement of Ben’s career had set him on the path that ended with Rey’s broken heart to begin with, has no business pressuring her to talk about anything.

And besides, what could possibly be so time sensitive now? It’s not like Ben’s going to break up with her again any second now.

Irritation begins to creep over her, drowning out the sadness for the first time since she walked off the stage in Las Vegas. This is really just insult to injury at this point.

She opens the message and navigates over to the menu at the top of the screen to mute him, when another message comes in.

Luke Skywalker

Rey. Please. It’s important.

Rey bites her lip. Somehow his abandonment of the formality tips the balance and piques Rey’s curiosity enough to respond.

Rey Sanderson

im not in the mood luke

Rey Sanderson

this had better be important

“You get one chance,” she mutters as she waits, staring down at her phone.

Luke doesn’t text back, choosing to call her instead.

“Rey,” he says by way of greeting, voice serious.

She frowns.

“What’s going on?” she asks. “I’m not in the mood for a heart-to-heart and if this is about PR stuff I’m hanging up.”

“Rey,” he says again, more insistently, “are you near a computer? There’s something you need to see.”

Rey frowns and wedges her phone between her ear and her shoulder as she reaches out, dragging her massive laptop across the covers to rest on her lap. She opens it up and waits while the screen loads.

“Okay what’s so urgent?” she asks.
“Google your name,” Luke says grimly. “And I’m sorry in advance that I have to be the bearer of bad news.”

Rey does so with trembling fingers and as the results load, it becomes clear why Luke had sounded so distressed.


PixelExPolygon says: ‘Did ReyOfLight bribe KyloRen to throw the Championships? Racy Security Footage Points to Yes’

GameLinq says: ‘Did ReyOfLight Sleep Her Way to Victory Against KyloRen? [Video]’

“Holy shit,” Rey says as her eyes land on the image preview in the PixelExPolygon link, where somehow, impossibly, there is a screenshot from security camera footage in the Marriott elevator, showing her pressed up against Ben.

She clicks on the link out of sick curiosity, and sure enough there it is, the tiniest and most incriminating snippet of their time in Los Angeles, playing out in black and white.

“The video was posted on the StarKiller Reddit this afternoon along with a whole, long rant detailing your supposed illicit affair with my nephew and the way that you agreed to trade ah… sexual favors for wins,” Luke is saying but Rey has stopped listening.

This just never ends. She was an idiot to think that it ever would. Rey curses the day she got mixed up with Ben Solo.

“... not a new idea but some people are petitioning to have Far Galaxy review the game footage from the Finale. I don’t think it will go anywhere but I just thought you should hear about it here first. We should start thinking about how to respond –”

Rey begins to chuckle. Hysterical peals of laughter curl out of her until she’s laughing so hard that she can’t fucking breathe.


“Fuck this,” she gasps between breaths, “I’m so done.”

Rey closes out of the search window.

“Luke, you can tell the press whatever you want. It doesn’t fucking matter. People will believe whatever they want and I can’t change their minds. So I’m done trying, okay?” she says.

“Rey, I really think you should be more proactive about this,” Luke says and she can hear the frown in his voice. “This is your career we’re talking about here.”

“No,” Rey says, shaking her head, “it isn’t. This is my sex life. And people can’t seem to understand that those are two different things. So you say whatever you want to the press. I don’t care.”

“Rey–”

“Bye Luke,” Rey says, and she hangs up.

As she sits there, staring blankly into space, Rey slowly begins to realize that what she’d said to Luke, about being done, applies to more than just her feelings about press. She’s done with gaming,
done with StarKiller, done with Ben Solo, done with San Diego, done with everything. She’s tired. Enough, Rey thinks, I’ve had enough.

He’d picked the glass out of his knuckles while he was talking to his mother but his hand aches and he leaves a smeared red handprint on the white tile of the bathroom floor as he pushes himself to his feet.

He rinses his hand under the cool tap water then pulls the first aid kit out from beneath his sink and sets to work bandaging up the cuts. None of them are deep, but a few are long and should probably be seen by a doctor, especially seeing as how he makes his living playing games with his hands.

Gaming is the last thing he’s thinking about, though, as he spreads Neosporin across the broken skin and places bandaids over the wounds.

Ben is putting the first aid kit back under the sink when there’s suddenly a loud pounding sound from his front door that sends his heart slamming up into his throat.

It’s Snoke. It has to be Snoke. Somehow he knew that I talked to my mom or he’s come to mete out punishment or, or, or–

His brain spins like tires stuck in mud.

The pounding on his door continues as Ben picks his way across the ruin of his bedroom.

“I’m fucking coming, hang on!” he snaps as he approaches the front door and undoes the latch. He rips the door open, glaring straight ahead only to find that he’s staring at empty air. He cranes his head downwards and there, much to his astonishment, is Mitaka.

“Can I come in? I have something to show you,” he says.

Ben thinks about shutting the door in his face. It’s an appealing option, but as he looks into Mitaka’s wide, open face, Ben closes his eyes and steps back to let him inside.

Ben sits on his sofa, watching Mitaka pace nervously around the room. It strikes him that this is the first time that he’s actually had Mitaka in his apartment. That he’s ever had anyone in this apartment.

“Before I show you this I just want to tell you that I had no idea what you guys were actually talking about, not until I rewatched it. Snoke told me to delete it, but I got such a weird vibe that I just kind of… saved it instead?” Mitaka is fiddling with his shirt hem again, staring miserably down at the carpet.

“You know all this time I was so caught up with the fact that all this ReyOfLight stuff kept making Snoke punish the team and I thought that there had to be a good reason for it. Like sponsors or
something,” Mitaka runs a hand through his hair, sending the orderly strands into complete disarray. “It wasn’t until I was thinking about it later. About the way that Snoke only cared who you were spending time with, to the point that he made you break up with her in the middle of the Championships, that I realized there was something else going on.”

Mitaka gets to his feet and begins pacing around the room again. Ben watches him silently.

“You know Luce and I have been sort of seeing each other for like eight months now and Snoke has never said anything about it. Not even when we faced the Nightsisters at GalaCon,” he says. “He doesn’t care about the rest of us the way he cares about you… and I use the word ‘care’ loosely because it’s… honestly, Ben, it’s fucked up.”

Mitaka rubs his hands over his face.

“And the crazy thing is, I really used to be jealous! I used to think that you had it so much better than us!” He shakes his head, “I had no clue… I just… I’m sorry, I’m so sorry. I swear I didn’t know.”

“What are you talking about?” Ben asks, unable to follow his teammate’s words.

“Just. Here. Watch this. I’m sorry,” Mitaka says, pulling his phone out of his pocket and clicking around on the screen before handing it over to Ben.

It’s a saved Snapchat video, from backstage at the Championships. Ben hits play.

“Hey Mita-migos! It’s ya boy, Mitaka checking in from backstage at the Finals!” Mitaka is saying into the front facing camera, then he switches over and begins pointing it around the room. “We’re all feeling good, getting pumped up for the game! There’s Eyja and Hux talking strats…”

He points the camera at the two who are decidedly not talking about anything but are instead sulking in the corner, before quickly turning over to film Phasma who is examining the craft services table.

“Hey Phas, what’s good?”

“Not the fucking chip selection, that’s for sure,” Phasma is saying but Mitaka is already turning away, heading across the room towards the tiny figures that Ben can recognize as himself and Snoke.

With a jolt, he suddenly understands what Mitaka had meant.

“I don’t know how she can eat at a time like this,” Mitaka is saying, but underneath him, Ben can hear snippets of the conversation, growing louder and clearer with every step that Mitaka takes.

“– you’re doing as you’re told – make a mess, don’t you? How hard – to follow simple instructions? Break up with the girl, don’t – scene.”

“– didn’t have much fucking choice – breaking up with her was – higher up on your priority list –” Ben in the video spits back.

“I can’t eat before big games; I’m too excited to be hungry,” Mitaka says, voice garbling parts of the conversation.

“– be lenient this – time – But remember: I hold all the cards here. This little farce of a relationship between you two is over, or Rey’s information and that video will find their way onto the internet. Am I understood?” Snoke says.

“No Idea where Caide is hiding but here’s Ben and Snoke! We’re about twenty minutes out from the
semi-finals and we’re excited, can I get a ‘hell yeah’?” Mitaka asks, blundering into the scene.

And then silence as Ben and Snoke stare directly into the camera like a pair of deer in the headlights.

“So, uh, that,” Mitaka says as the video cuts off and Ben looks up slowly to meet his eyes. “I promise, if I’d understood that he was actually *threatening* you, *threatening* Rey, I would have done something sooner. I’m so sorry, I didn’t know.”

“You’ve had this all this time,” Ben says, tightly, and he can’t decide if what he’s feeling is anger that Mitaka had held this back or utter relief that *proof*, real, tangible, irrefutable evidence of the shit that Snoke is threatening to pull had come falling into his lap in the moment when he needs it most, “and you’re just showing me this now?”

“I… I didn’t really understand what I’d seen until earlier today…” he babbles, twisting his hands together in the hem of his shirt. “And then I saw what Snoke did and I understood…”

Ben freezes in place and all other emotion is completely replaced with fear.

“What did Snoke do?” he asks.

Mitaka blanches.

“I thought you would have seen already…” he says.

“Show me,” Ben says, grimly. “Even before Mitaka types something new into the search bar and hands the phone back over, Ben’s already certain of what he’s about to see.

“I’m so sorry,” Mitaka says again and he’s saying it so often that it’s beginning to sound like nonsense to Ben.

It’s not as bad as it could be, be supposes – after all it’s not like her address is there – but Ben sees this video and the assault on Rey’s character for what it really is. It’s a shot across his bow.

It’s Snoke saying: “no more chances.”

And just like that, Ben reaches the end of his tether. Snoke has gone too far, but unlike when he’d come at him in Las Vegas, Ben is not defenseless.

“Ben?” Mitaka asks, “You in there?”

“Mitaka,” Ben says, “send me that fucking video. I think it’s time to give Snoke a taste of his own medicine.”

As soon as she hangs up on Luke (something she feels *minorly* guilty for, but honestly she’s having a really hard time seeing past all the bullshit people keep dumping on her) Rey Googles ‘one-way flights from San Diego’. She buys a ticket to the first beach destination with a nonstop flight that departs the next morning.

“I’m going away for a bit,” she tells Finn and Poe that night, when they come to check on her, having just encountered the latest scandal themselves. She’s throwing team uniforms out of her suitcase and replacing them with hiking boots and bathing suits. “Don’t feed BB too much while I’m
The boys glance at each other but don’t try to change her mind and for that Rey is infinitely grateful.

“How long will you be gone for, exactly?” Finn asks.

Rey tosses a pair of thong sandals into her bag and shrugs.

“Until I feel like coming back,” she says, then zips up her suitcase.

The next morning she boards a flight to Hawaii with a cabin reservation on Maui and a stack of books in her carry-on. Her laptop remains where she left it on the table beside her bed.

As the plane takes off over the sparkling blue water of the Pacific Ocean, Rey switches her phone off and settles back in her seat. For the first time in months there’s no StarKiller, no press, no social media. No Ben. She ignores the shallow throb of pain at the last thought and forces her shoulders to relax.

Up here, high above the ocean, all of her problems look very small.

The next morning, Ben sits down in front of his gaming rig, turning on lights and cameras, loading up his broadcaster. Familiar actions that he has performed a hundred, thousand times before. He could do a stream in his sleep. But never before has he done anything like what he’s planning to do right now.

This is… this is the nuclear option. The point of no return, the mutually-assured destruction. He’s going to go down in flames today and he’s going to go down hard. But at the very least, he will take Snoke out with him.

Snoke had been so smug, so proud when he’d declared to Ben that the secret to controlling him was to find a bigger stick. But Snoke had made a critical miscalculation. He’d gotten sloppy. He had enjoyed lording his renewed power over Ben just a bit too much, and he’d unknowingly set in motion his own undoing.

Fucking game, set, match, motherfucker, Ben thinks, as he tweets out:

Ben Solo // TheFirstOrder @KyloRen

Want the TRUTH about ReyOfLight and the StarKillerChampionships? WATCH MY STREAM NOW (link in bio) #StarKiller #AMA #KyloRen

He sets his stream to the “starting soon” page and makes sure that everything is set to go when he’s ready. Mitaka sits on the other side of the room, on the sofa that Ben rarely uses.

Mitaka had insisted on being here for moral support when Ben made his move and he’d shown up at 7AM with coffee and donuts.

“Are you sure about this?” Mitaka asks.
And Ben glances over his shoulder to give him a firm nod.

“Yeah,” he says, “I’m done playing by his rules. The only thing that’s gonna keep Rey from getting doxxed is if the whole world knows that Snoke is the one who plans to do it. If I make this public and her info winds up online, there’s not a chance in hell that anyone will believe that it came from anyone but him.”

Ben turns back to his computer.

“Here goes nothing,” he says, then goes live on his stream.

It’s a different set up than usual tonight. Instead of his usual game window with the small insets showing his face and occasionally his hands, the only thing on the screen is Ben’s face. His eyes flick down to check the view count – 20k and climbing, he notes with grim satisfaction; this will be on the front page of Twitch for sure – then he looks directly into the camera.

“There have been a lot of rumors floating around about what happened during the StarKiller Championships between me and the Resistance Striker, Rey Sanderson, who most of you probably know as ReyOfLight,” Ben begins, “but if you think the rumors are fucking batshit scandalous, just wait until you hear what really went down.”

He leans back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest. His chat is going so fast he can’t even hope to parse it, so he ignores it.

Here it is, he thinks, point of no return. Edge of the cliff. End of the road.

And it really is, in more ways than one. The next words out of his mouth will tear down the lies that he has built up around himself over the last decade. Telling the world the truth about his career is going to ruin his reputation. After all, who could possibly be afraid of a man who’s spent the better part of his adult life letting himself be bullied into submission? He knows that to do this is not just to incite the wrath of Snoke, but also to invite the ridicule and the judgement of his peers, his fans, and the gaming media at large. He’s not getting out of this one, pride and reputation intact.

And yet… for Rey, it’s a sacrifice that he’s willing to make. It’s one that he should have been willing to make from the beginning and his biggest and most profound regret is that he wasn’t.

“But in order for me to really explain what all went down next weekend, I need to take you back to when this all started,” he says, “back in 2008, when I signed a fucked-up contract with my manager, James Snoke, and ruined my own goddamn life.”

And just like that, Ben is leaping off the cliff, falling into open sky.

Ben unloads everything. His shameful history, the way he’d allowed himself to be manipulated and played and used for years on end. The way he’d willingly ignored all the damage that Snoke was doing to himself and to everyone around him. The way he’d let Snoke build a wall between him and his family. The way he’d let Snoke push him further and further into the most toxic corner of gaming culture until he had practically become the poster boy for it.

And the way he hadn’t blinked or cared about any of what he’d said or done at Snoke’s behest because all that had mattered was money and fame and victory.

And then he gets to Rey.

“The very first thing that Snoke did after he found out that I’d been beat by some random player that no one had heard of – and yes, she did beat me fair and square, and no, I did not let her; in fact I
actually reported her for cheating. I’ll happily provide screenshots if you don’t believe me. But the first thing that Snoke did, was to try to bribe her into playing more matches against me where she was supposed to lose,” Ben sneers. “Obviously she didn’t accept and instead went on to beat the shit out of me a bunch more times just because she could.”

He shakes his head.

“And then something weird happened; we started talking,” he pauses, and takes a deep breath, “And then I fell in love with her. I think I was in love with her right from the beginning, but I didn’t know it until a few months had gone by.”

Ben’s lip curls as he continues speaking. “Most of you have probably seen the video of me and Rey that was posted on Reddit earlier with a story that honestly gives fucking Fifty Shades a run for its money. I’m not gonna deny that I was with her at StarFall because I was. But it wasn’t some drunken hookup. We were in an actual relationship up until my psycho manager decided that having emotions like a normal human meant I wasn’t capable of playing like a professional, despite having done nothing else for the better part of ten years. So he gave me an ultimatum: break up with her or he’d doxx her and let all of you shitheads rip her apart in the court of public opinion.”

Out of the corner of his eyes, Ben can see Mitaka, sitting, watching him with rapt attention and wide eyes. He can only hope that everyone in his audience, which has swelled now to an astounding 50k viewers, is paying as close attention.

“See the thing about Snoke is that if he says he’s going to do something, he does it. So when he told me that he planned to ruin Rey’s life if I didn’t dump her and win that tournament, I took that threat seriously.”

His jaw works as he feels rage build anew at the whole situation.

“Now I bet half of you have just decided that I’ve finally snapped,” Ben says, “which is why it’s a good fucking thing that James fucking Snoke isn’t the only person who can post videos to the internet.”

Ben swaps his stream screens and suddenly the broadcast window is filled with the video file that Mitaka had sent him.

As the video plays, he hits ‘post’ on the tweet that he had cued up as well, and within seconds it’s gone viral.

“You are all gonna walk away from this believing whatever the fuck you want; I can’t stop you, it’s a free fucking country,” he says as he swaps back over to the single camera screen, “but know this: Rey beat me every time because she’s a better player than I am. She’s always been the better player and she will always be the better player.”

His chat is supersonic.

“And now you’ve all heard it, straight out of his fucking mouth: James Snoke fully intends to doxx Rey Sanderson because he wants to hurt her because he thinks it will hurt me. And if anyone hurts her or her information winds up online, I guaran-fucking-tee that James Snoke is to blame.”

Ben leans forwards, into his camera.

“Rey, if you’re listening, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry. You never deserved any of this. And Snoke? You psychotic asshole? I fucking quit. Again. And this time you can’t do shit about it.”
Chapter End Notes

If you're enjoying the fic so far, please consider sharing it with a friend! Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated and fuel my desire to write more!

As usual, please feel free to come yell at me about this story on Twitter or Tumblr.
April VI - May I

Chapter Notes

Apologies for another 2 week delay but that seems to be the schedule that’s needed for me to actually get these chapters done and up to par for posting right now, just given all the other stuff I have going on in my life right now. Like health. And family drama. And going back to school. And getting my falconry license. (Speaking of which, I’ve sketched out a short Reylo falconry AU fic because weirdly specific AUs is apparently the name of my game. So keep an eye out for that, soon if you like birds and Reylo banter, I guess.)

Quick note! I originally had Rey going to Maui but I decided to send her to Kaua’i instead. It fit the story better. So I’m going back and changing that but really nothing beyond the name has changed from the last chapter.

Shoutouts! Y’all I have been so blessed by the incredible Kayurka [x] who is feeding me beautiful fanart like mana from heaven and is DEFINITELY inspiring me for next chapter. If you’ve made me something and I haven’t linked it here then it might have slipped through the cracks on tumblr. Tag me again so I can see and share your amazing gifts next chapter!

So my INCREDIBLE beta, Cyborgharpy has finally begun posting the really wonderful rocker AU that she’s been working on for MONTHS and I cannot recommend it enough. If you like my fic then you will like this too. If you’re sleeping on her fic, you are MISSING OUT. Thanks are also owed to the wonderful Saturnine-Stardust for helping me with legal jargon and understanding how the court system works.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Rey spends almost two months in Hawaii and just lets herself disappear from the rest of the world. The act of being invisible is a familiar thing, and she finds that it’s almost unsettlingly easy to slip back into her old patterns.

I am nobody, don’t notice me, she thinks, nobodies don’t get hurt because no one cares enough to hurt them.

At first she locks herself in the little cabin that she’d rented and reads all the books that she’s brought with her before going to a local used book store where she trades them in for still more books. She reads those too. The new books vary in quality from surprisingly good to nigh unreadable, not that she’s feeling too picky right now. Escapism is as escapism does and they serve their purpose.

Even so, books and sleeping can’t quite fill all the hours of silence, which leaves Rey with plenty of time to think.

Which she soon discovers might not be such a bad thing after all. Everything that had happened since January had all happened so fast that she’d had no time at all to just process. She’d rolled from one massive life decision to another on instinct alone.

And to say that had been a mistake was the understatement of the century.
So at long last, Rey sits down and does some much-needed soul searching.

Trying to sort through her feelings is not something that she’s very good at and the effort of it leaves her feeling exhausted, like she’s been doing hard labor. Which isn’t too far from the truth. This is less a peaceful meditation and more like an archaeological excavation. She’s digging down into the dirt and confronting the stuff that she’s been burying for her entire life.

In layer one, as she breaks soil and begins the work of actually confronting her feelings, she cries a lot.

Some of what she finds is the betrayal and heartbreak from her breakup with Ben and frustration with how unfairly she’s been treated by a community who should respect her without question after her victory at the Championships. But as she digs deeper, she realizes that it’s more than that. All of the damage and hurt that she’s been shoving down since she was a child – everything that she’d never dealt with, everything that she’d been pretending not to feel – has been sitting down here, like veins of magma, building pressure and preparing to explode, much like the volcano on the Big Island that had incidentally begun to erupt on the day that she’d arrived in Hawaii.

All those insecurities and anxieties: her fears about not being good enough, her secret suspicion that she does not in fact belong in the world that she has chosen to occupy. Her poisonous belief that in the end anyone she depends on will eventually abandon her.

She cries for the child she was and she cries for the adult she is now. She cries because life isn’t fair and she doesn’t know what to do about that. She cries because she’s overwhelmed and afraid. She cries because she’s never properly cried for any of this.

Eventually those tears run out. It honestly takes about a week and a half for her to stop feeling like she’s in danger of randomly breaking down in the middle of every-day activities. Once the tears stop Rey feels better.

It’s as though the cracks in her soul have been polished away. She feels a little raw like the new, pink skin over a healing cut. It’s not exactly comfortable, but it’s good.

Rey had never quite understood the idea of catharsis before but she feels like she has a better grasp on it now.

Once the tears stop Rey actually sits up and takes notice of her surroundings.

She’s staying on the island of Kaua’i, and once Rey has pulled free of her misery enough to actually look around, she quickly realizes why it’s called the Garden Isle.

The island is lush and green in a way that is utterly alien after years of life in the arid desert climate of southern California.

Rey runs and hikes and bikes and snorkels and sunbathes. She eats far too much Hawaiian bar-b-que and learns to surf from a local man named Jango who doesn’t ask too many questions. Though, he does ask her out after their fourth lesson.

“There another guy?” he asks as they trudge up the beach, surf boards propped on their shoulders.

Rey stumbles a little on the sand, not sure how to respond – because yes but also no – but in the end, her silence is enough of an answer and Jango just heaves a rueful sigh and grins.

“Ah well, I had to try,” he says.
“Sorry,” she says, and Rey’s surprised to find that she means it. It’s not that Jango’s not nice or handsome, or good company. But even if she were emotionally prepared to begin dating again, he’s just… not what she wants.

Jango, for his part, accepts the rejection gracefully and doesn’t bring it up again.

About four weeks in, she’s sitting out on her rented board, past the waveline, watching a group of kids laughing and whooping as they race each other across the surf on jet skis when it hits her.

In layer two of her dig, Rey discovers that she’s lonely.

Rey no longer feels fragile and brittle, like a strong gust of wind might shatter her, but she certainly no longer feels whole and happy all on her own. She misses Finn’s constant support. She misses the easy camaraderie of her teammates. She misses Luke’s steady guidance.

She even misses Ben.

She misses their conversations and the way he’d always supported her and built her up. The way he helped her find solutions to her own problems. She misses the way he made her feel special and desirable and wanted. She misses the way he sounds and the way he smells and how safe she’d felt wrapped up in his arms.

Rey’s still furious with him for what he did, of course. But strangely that anger has not, as she’d predicted, turned to frozen hatred. It has instead mellowed and settled into something that feels like an old injury. Her heart aches whenever she catches sight of anything that so much as calls him to mind, but she’s no longer so consumed with pain and rage that it threatens to choke her.

What a waste, she finds herself thinking morosely as she kicks her legs back and forth in the cold water of the Pacific ocean. A building wave rolls towards the shore, gently raising and lowering her board beneath her.

And it was a waste. The whole thing. Their relationship was the dictionary definition of wasteful. She’d wasted time and energy and love on him that he had thrown away like it meant nothing. She’d opened herself up, made herself vulnerable to him.

Had he just been willing to see things through, Rey knows that their relationship could have been transformative for both of them. They’d been on the precipice of something amazing and Ben had been too consumed with cowardice to even try. She’d thought they were on the same page. As it turned out, they weren’t even in the same fucking book.

Maybe it was too fast, maybe it was too foolish, maybe it was completely insane, but she would have been willing to take the risk with him.

She’d put herself out there for him and had gotten kicked in the teeth as a result. Not only had Ben broken her heart but he’d also made a royal mess of the rest of her life on the way out. His actions had directly resulted in her humiliation, both personal and professional. He’d forever tarnished her reputation and changed the conversation around her career. And he’d had the gall to act like it was all for the best.

Frankly that’s the thing that hurts the worst.

A seagull flies overhead, crying out as it scours the water below for fish. Its passing shadow shakes Rey from her thoughts. There’s nothing she can do about her broken life out here on the water, and while this sabbatical has done wonders for her mental health, it’s quickly becoming clear that she’s done about as much as she can while disconnected from the rest of the world.
It’s time for Rey to put Ben Solo behind her. To stop feeding energy into thoughts of him. She’s not ready to even think about dipping her toe back into the dating pool yet and the idea makes her feel a little queasy for a reason that she can’t quite put her finger on. All the same, it’s probably time for her to at least try to move on.

With a heavy sigh, Rey shakes off her melancholy, paddles her board towards the waveline and rides the surf back into the shore.

Several more sunshine-drenched, quiet weeks pass and then before she knows it, the second week of May finds her on the front porch of her cabin, drinking wine and holding one of the new old books open in her lap. It’s then that she picks back up on her old line of thought and accidentally hits layer three. This time though, she finds herself thinking less about Ben and more about StarKiller and gaming in general.

Specifically, she begins thinking about why she even began her journey towards becoming a professional player in the first place.

It’s a little ironic, but for all that Rey is irritated that the public conversation about her gaming career is so tied up with Ben, her internal conversation is just as tangled. She realizes, with no small amount of shame, that she has fallen into that same trap.

Something that had always been a deeply personally important tenet of her identity had become all about Ben and her relationship with him.

Rey’s love for gaming is so much bigger and more meaningful than that. Gaming was the one place where, regardless of her gender, of her absent parents, of her poverty, of her shit luck and miserable circumstances, Rey could prove that she was just as good if not better than anyone else. Gaming to her was not about where she was from, but what she could do all on her own if she really tried. It was proof that if she worked hard enough she could determine her own fate, chose her own destiny.

She’d been so overwhelmed by the intensity of her feelings for Ben that she’d lost sight of that. So caught up in this new and unfamiliar thing that she’d forgotten that long before she fell in love with him, she’d already had a true love in her life. Way back in the beginning, other people and what they thought of her hadn’t meant a thing.

Ben could break her heart, the community could try to tear her down, assholes like Snoke could try to bribe or threaten her but in the end, none of that matters. In games, Rey’s talent speaks for her and the proof of it all is right there on the screen.

And it’s then, in that moment, that Rey finally realizes that she’s done hiding and running and feeling sad and sorry for herself. She’s paid her dues and given enough of her energy to this whole mess. She’s been living in a bubble since she got her and it’s just about time for her to step outside and start living her life for realm once more.

The next morning Rey sits on the sofa in front room of her cottage, watching the waves roll up onto the beach in the early morning sun through the window, and calls Finn. She’s using the cottage landline, which in and of itself is something of a novelty, but her phone has been turned off and tucked away in her bag since she got here. Thankfully she knows Finn’s number by heart after years of listing him as her emergency contact.

“Rey? Oh my god, you’re alive!” he says, when he answers. He sounds a little breathless and a lot relieved.

“Hey Finn,” she says, and she’s surprised to find that she’s actually smiling as she speaks. The sound
of his voice alone making her heart squeeze with affection.

““You scared the shit out of me. If you hadn’t sent that postcard a while ago, I would have reported you missing again. You’ve really gotta stop doing this. My heart can’t take it, Peanut. Every time you pull a stunt like this you take a few years off my life,” he says.

“Sorry,” Rey says, cringing a little, “Really, I am so sorry. I should have stayed in touch a little more. I just… I really needed to disappear for a while.”

“No, Rey, you’re not hearing me. I know why you did it,” Finn says, “I do. But you’re not an unwanted orphan anymore. You have people who care about you and worry about you and… man… I get that you need your space to deal with stuff sometimes, especially stuff like what happened to you recently. But we’re not just your friends when it’s convenient to you.”

Rey cringes harder. Because Finn is right.

“I know,” she says feeling properly chastised, “I really feel bad about the way I’ve treated you. About the fact that I keep shutting you out along with everything else. I’ve been doing a lot of soul searching recently and I’m starting to really see how bad this really is as a coping mechanism. It’s not fair. I’m going to do better.”

“Well… good,” Finn says, though Rey can hear a note of skepticism in his voice that sets off a twinge of disappointment. This is her bad, though. They’ve been down this road before and she’s just going to have to re-earn his trust.

“So,” he says after a beat, “is your reverse rumspringa helping?”

“What’s a ‘rumspringa’?” Rey asks.

“It’s a thing Amish teens do where they go out and see the world. Use cell phones and stuff before they decide if they’re gonna keep being Amish. You took a break from your all-tech, all the time lifestyle to go be one with nature so it seemed appropriate,” Finn explains, “though now the joke’s less funny because I’ve had to explain it.”

Rey cracks a smile.

“It’s still a pretty good joke. And it really did,” she replies honestly, “I actually think I’m ready to come home soon.”

“Really?” Finn asks, and all traces of disappointment have vanished from his voice, replaced by honest eagerness.

“Yeah,” she says, nodding even though Finn can’t see it, “Not just yet, but soon. I miss you guys.”

“The team’s going to be so relieved,” Finn says. “We were starting to think you were gone for good.”

“How’s everyone doing?” asks Rey, realizing that she actually doesn’t know what anyone else has been up to in her absence.

“Pretty good, all things considered,” Finn says, “Though we’ll all be better once the gang’s back together and we can start playing again. I think Rose and Paige might be turning into compulsive shoppers and Jess has started dying her hair weird colors again, and you know she only does that when she’s going through something. Oh, and I’m going to take Poe on vacation to keep him from repainting any more rooms out of boredom. We’ll be in Miami for two weeks at the end of May,
once he’s done re-tiling the bathroom.”

Rey laughs.

“God, Hawaii has been really nice but I’ve really missed you guys,” she says, “I miss BB too. I miss StarKiller. I think I even miss Luke a little.”

There’s an awkward pause.

Rey frowns feeling a tiny curl of anxiety rise up.

“Oh no, what happened?” She asks, almost dreading the answer.

“You haven’t heard?” Finn asks, and Rey can practically hear his eyebrows raising through the phone.

“Heard what?” she replies, anxiety mounting, “Please tell me he didn’t have a stroke or like… leave the team because of me.”

“No, no nothing like that,” Finn says, hurriedly. “He took a break from managing us to help… uh… Ben uh… wait, Rey, do you really not know what’s happened since you’ve been gone?”

“Finn, I haven’t so much as seen a computer since I got here,” she says, a little more snappishly than she intends. “I’ve been totally off the grid. I don’t know anything. But if it involves Ben Solo then I probably don’t want to hear it.”

“You know,” Finn says, “normally I’d agree with you but I think in this case you actually do… do you have a computer where you are? There’s something you really need to see right now.”

“You know what?” Rey says, mood soured, “No. I think I’m good.

“Rey…” Finn says, pleadingly.

“No,” she replies firmly, “Ben Solo is dead to me. I don’t care what he’s done now. It doesn’t matter.”

And it’s not quite true, but Rey thinks that maybe if she fakes it hard enough, eventually it might be.

The first thing that Ben does after ending his tell-all stream is to call his mother.

“I… I need your help,” he says, when she picks up.

“Tell me everything,” Leia replies.

And he does.

Leia listens patiently while Ben pours his story out to her.

It’s strange, because he feels so drained after the stream, but somehow it’s easier the second time around. Coming clean, telling the truth.

Because he knows what kind of woman his mother is, he would be willing to stake a great deal on
the fact that at several points during the conversation, she’s actually biting down on her tongue hard enough to draw blood in order to keep from interrupting him.

He’s grateful for her restraint.

“So if I have this straight,” she says when he finishes speaking, “this dick has had you under some draconian contract for the last decade and when you finally tried to quit he blackmailed you to keep you working for him. And he threatened the girl you were seeing to do that?”

“Yeah, I mean that’s the simplified version of it,” Ben says in a voice that scratches out of a throat that is still sore both from yesterday’s abuse and his lengthy stream.

“You always did have a real knack for getting into the worst trouble possible,” she says, “but lucky for you, I’m a civil servant. Outmaneuvering dishonest snakes is ninety-nine percent of my job. It’s a shame you released that video though.”

“What?” Ben asks, feeling like he’s missing something. “I just told you that it was the only way that I could ensure that Rey would be safe from Snoke.”

“Well of course. And personally I think you did the right thing, but from a practical perspective it would have been our easiest bargaining chip to get you out,” Leia says. “And speaking of Rey, have you actually spoken to her since any of this happened?”

Ben flinches. He’d thought about trying to reach out before calling his mom but fear had frozen his fingers and kept them from typing out a message. Somehow the prospect of confessing his love and apologizing to fifty thousand strangers was less daunting than trying to communicate with her directly after everything he’d done.

“... no,” he reluctantly admits.

“Ben!” Leia saya, scandalized, “You need to call her! This is serious. She needs to hear the truth and she should really hear it from you!”

“Mom, please,” Ben says, “I just… I can’t right now. I need to make sure that she’s really safe first. I have to. If anything else happens to her because of me… I… fuck.”

“Fine,” Leia says with a huff. “But you have to promise me that you are going to call her. I’m serious, you may be a victim here but so is she and you owe it to her to make sure she knows what’s really going on.”

“I promise,” Ben says, though he’s not entirely sure that he’s going to be able to keep that promise, coward that he is.

He wants to reach out and call Rey, to apologize, to fix things between them, of course. But the idea of trying to talk to her before he has properly, tangibly fixed the problem that he caused… he just can’t do it. He can’t bear her wrath right now and he certainly doesn’t deserve her forgiveness.

“Alright,” says Leia, sounding mollified. “Switching gears, is your friend still there?”

Ben looks up, startled, and realizes that Mitaka is in fact still in the room. He’s been sitting so quietly in the corner, listening to Ben and Leia’s conversation, that Ben had nearly forgotten that he was there in the first place.

“Yeah, Mitaka’s still here,” Ben says.
“Good. Put me on speaker, I want to talk to him too,” Leia commands and Ben obeys.

“Hi uh… Mrs… uh… Senator Organa,” Mitaka stammers when Ben holds the phone out in his direction.

“Call me Leia,” she says, “Now. Let’s talk about how to get you boys out from under that asshole’s thumb.”

The three of them talk for so long that Ben’s phone almost dies and he has to scramble to find a power cord for it before it drops the call. It vibrates constantly with notifications and missed calls and messages until Ben just turns all push notifications off, with no plans to turn them back on in the foreseeable future.

Mitaka’s contract is not quite as serious as Ben’s but that’s not saying much and the longer they talk, the more outraged Leia grows on both of their behalfs.

“This goddem shvantz… You both need to lawyer up immediately,” Leia says with utter seriousness. Ben can tell that she’s more upset even than she’s letting on, based on the fact that Yiddish curses have begun to slip into her vocabulary. “If Snoke has seen your stream – and given what you’ve told me about him I would act on the assumption that he has – he’s likely already working with his own legal counsel to try to bury you. He’ll go for defamation and slander for sure, and anything else he thinks he can make stick.”

She pauses for a second and Ben can hear her typing furiously on the other end of the line before she says, “Unfortunately, this isn’t my area of expertise. I do know someone who not only knows plenty of entertainment and sports lawyers but also understands your world quite intimately and I’d love to loop him into the call. But I’m not sure how you’ll feel about it Ben.”

Ben’s stomach lurches as he connects the dots and realizes exactly who his mother is talking about.


“I do,” says Leia, firmly, “I know there’s history there but… things have changed a lot since you last spoke and he’s the best person you could possibly have in your corner right now.”

Ben fights back his gut urge to tell his mother that he’s done all the forgiving and forgetting he can stomach for right now. Because she’s not wrong. And if he adds in the fact that Luke is now Rey’s manager on top of everything else… well… not pulling him in is downright foolish.

“Fine,” he says, “call him.”

“Alright. I’ll be right back,” Leia says before the line goes dead.

Ben, who has moved to sit on the sofa next to Mitaka because holding his arm out from across the room had gotten old very fast, stares down at the phone for a long moment before looking up at his teammate.

“I… thanks,” he says, and Ben’s legitimately surprised at the sincerity in his own voice.

Mitaka, for his part, just gives Ben a small smile.

“I just wish I’d done something sooner,” he says.

Ben shakes his head.
“You put your neck on the line here too by giving me that video,” he says, “Snoke’s not gonna just let you slide either, not after helping me. I think that makes us square.”

Mitaka looks unsure and a little miserable, like he’s not quite sure he really agrees with Ben’s assessment of the situation, but the phone vibrates on the sofa between them, cutting off any further arguments on the subject.


The first time that Ben hears Luke’s voice he feels a knee-jerk reaction of rage so powerful after all this time that it takes him by surprise, but he forces himself to reign in his temper. He agreed to this, after all, and to refuse Luke’s help here would be not only foolish but potentially harmful for Rey.


“Now is not the time, boys,” Leia cuts in, “Ben, I’ve filled Luke in on the broader details though you’re going to need to give him the specifics later too.”

“While you’re both definitely in deep shit the good news is that your little contract problem actually has a very simple solution,” Luke says. “Did you know that there are some states where contracts with non-compete clauses are considered to be unenforceable? And that a clause like that is frequently grounds for voiding the entire contract?”

Ben’s heart lurches.

“What are you saying?” Mitaka asks, exchanging a cautiously hopeful glance with Ben.

“What I’m saying is that New York is now prosecuting employers who abuse non-compete agreements and from the sound of it, that’s only the tip of the iceberg for you boys,” says Luke.

“Which means,” says Leia, “that no matter what Snoke throws at you, we may have just found your get-out-of-jail-free card.”

And for the first time in what feels like a century, Ben smiles.

Snoke had, as Leia predicted, sued him for Defamation and Slander, though he’d also come after Ben and Mitaka both for violating their Employee Agreements by participating in Ben’s now infamous stream and making the damning video public.

“He’s just throwing as much spaghetti at the wall as he can and trying to see what sticks,” Luke says when Ben sends him a copy of the complaint that Snoke had filed. “We can talk more when I arrive tonight.”

“You’re… what?” Ben asks, frowning in confusion.

Luke lets out a long sigh. “Leia didn’t tell you, did she?”

Ben glances over at his mother who is sitting at his kitchen table, tapping away at her laptop – and if the sight of his mother in his apartment isn’t a mindfuck and a half Ben really doesn’t know what is.

“Tell me what?” He asks, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I’m flying to New York tonight,” says Luke, who doesn’t sound much happier about the prospect than Ben feels.
“Right,” says Ben. It makes sense, of course; Luke is helping with the case and they’re actually approaching something that resembles speaking terms but…

It’s still Luke. Ben’s man enough to admit that he made his own choices and the trouble he’s in is his own fault. That being said, it’s undeniable that Luke’s actions had played a massive role in creating the circumstances that allowed Snoke to manipulate Ben so perfectly.

“Why didn’t you tell me he was coming?” Ben asks his mother, crossing his arms and giving her his sternest glare when he hangs up the phone.

“Cat’s out of the bag, huh?” she says, sounding only a little bit contrite.

“If by ‘cat’ you mean my uncle. Is there a reason you didn’t think this was maybe worth mentioning before now?” he asks while a vein throbs in his temple. He’s trying – he’s trying so hard to be more patient, to be grateful, to be forgiving. He’s trying to be more like Rey.

Ben is trying, but some things about family just don’t change.

“Mom…” he says.

At last Leia sighs and meets his eyes properly.

“You’re right,” she replies, sighing, “I should have told you. But… I knew you wouldn’t be happy about it and…”

She glances down at her lap and when she looks back up again Ben can see that her brown eyes are shinier than usual.

“You were glad to see me, Ben,” she says, “you talked to me without yelling and we haven’t fought and… I wanted to hold onto this for as long as possible.”

And Ben kind of… crumples a little, internally. The angry buzz of frustration that had been building in his chest vanishes in a puff of smoke. He crosses the room and drops into the chair beside his mother with a heavy sigh.

“I’ve been a really shitty son,” he says, one corner of his lip pulling into a humorless smile.

“I wasn’t exactly Mother of the Year,” Leia replies softly and she reaches out with her small, soft left hand to take his right. Her skin is more wrinkled and bears markers of age that are unfamiliar to him, but that touch is familiar all the same. He notes that she’s still wearing the ring that his father had given her almost twenty years before. It’s not her wedding band, but the fact that she’s wearing even this much is interesting.

“I’m sorry that this is what it took for us to get here, but I’m glad to have the chance to make some things right with you,” Leia continues.

Ben turns his hand over so that he can hold his mother’s hand properly.

“I’m glad you’re here,” he says. And what he means is ‘I’m sorry, I’m still hurt but I’m ready to move past that, and thank you for not abandoning me this time. I forgive you’. Leia squeezes his hand.

“I promise I’ll tell you first if I invite anymore people from your past to visit, from here on out,” she says and Ben feels his lips twitching into a small smile despite himself.
His first meeting with Luke is very strange. They have no clue how to talk to each other. Ben finds Luke’s eternal joking to be irritating and in poor taste given the gravity of the circumstances and Luke seems to be greatly disappointed that the years have done nothing to make Ben any more relaxed or easygoing.

They sit awkwardly across from each other in a restaurant specifically chosen as neutral ground for a first meeting spot by Leia.

She, for her part, eats her soup and blithely comments on the interior decor and the weather if the conversation ever grows too heated.

“Man, you are still so touchy,” Luke says during the salad course, frowning at Ben over the top of his wine glass, “I was hoping some of Rey’s restraint might have rubbed off on you.”

“Why are you even here?” Ben snaps, the combination of condescension and the reminder of Rey striking like a match against his temper, “Why even offer to help? Your opinion of me clearly hasn’t changed since the last time we spoke.”

Luke sets his glass back on the table and regards Ben with his sharp eyes.

“I’m here precisely because my opinion of you has changed,” he says. “I know I didn’t give you a fair chance to control your own destiny and I know I treated you like a child, but back then you were determined to act like one. That’s not true any more.”

“Then why the fuck do you keep picking at me?” Ben grits out.

Luke sighs and looks off to the right for a moment before meeting Ben’s gaze once more.

“Because I’m afraid for you. I don’t want them to be so distracted by your temper and your outbursts that they miss what I can see in you now: the maturity and the strength and the compassion,” he says with surprising sincerity.

It’s maybe the nicest thing that Luke has ever said to him. There’s a lump in his throat but he swallows a few times, forcing it down. He has no idea how to respond so he just looks away and drinks his wine in silence.

“How is she?” Ben asks, later that night, as they stand on the curb, waiting for Leia’s driver to pull the car around.


“You know who, “ Ben says, irritated, scuffing one of his heavy boots against the sidewalk.


“Ah, Rey… You broke her heart and tarnished what should have been the brightest moment in her life. Then your boss spread lies about her all across the internet,” he says flatly. “Last I heard, she took off on a well deserved vacation and shut her phone off. She sent a postcard to Finn from Hawaii about a week ago and that’s all we’ve got.”

Ben physically flinches and looks away from Luke.

“I was just trying to protect her,” he says, more to himself than anyone else. He feels Luke’s hand rest briefly against his shoulder and give it a squeeze.
“I know, kid, I know,” he says. “She’ll be okay.”

They’re nice words, but the guilt over how badly he’s screwed up Rey’s life just by being in it clogs his throat and he finds that he’s utterly unable to reply.

Snap Wexley, an old friend of Luke’s and a high power entertainment attorney agrees to represent Ben and Mitaka and days later they file countersuit against Snoke on the grounds that their Employee Agreements were both unenforceable and violated their workers rights.

The courtroom is the first time that Ben has seen his former manager since Las Vegas and even having to share the same air as him makes the tie that Ben is wearing feel like it’s way too tight around his neck. Snoke glares daggers at Ben throughout the proceedings and his skin crawls.

*How did I spend ten years around him,* Ben wonders when they take a short recess, during which he decides that using the bathroom is not worth the risk of potentially running into Snoke unsupervised.

Mitaka was right: there’s something in the way that Snoke looks at Ben – wants him – that goes way out of bounds. It’s not sexual, thankfully, but there’s an intense covetous, possessive edge to Snoke’s fixation on Ben. It’s a desire for ownership, control. Possession.

It’s super fucked up.

After that there are a few weeks of their lawyers battling back and forth during which Ben combs through his entire correspondence history with Snoke and spends all his free time working out to get rid of the anxious energy that process causes. His hand is still too messed up to use the punching bag so he mostly just lifts a shit-ton of weights and runs circles around Central Park like an over-caffeinated border collie.

The only upside is that Snoke had not always been as careful to keep his tracks clear as he had been with releasing Rey’s video. Ben’s search yields a small trove of correspondences from his former manager and staff that paint a pretty clear picture of how Snoke had operated.

His mother takes a commuted jet back and forth from DC to New York as often as possible just to be there with him. After a childhood marked by her absence, her presence now means more to him than he knows how to articulate.

Luke takes up residence out of a vacation rental condo a few blocks away from Ben’s brownstone, though he and Mitaka both spend most of their time in Ben’s living room working on the case with ferocious determination.

In late April, Snap informs Ben that Snoke’s team is unwilling to settle so they will be moving to trial and in the second week of May, he finds himself walking up the courthouse stairs, flanked by Mitaka and Snap, to meet his fate.

Rey tries, she really does, to put Finn’s words out of her head. She take a two day-trip to Maui and goes hang gliding. She eats at a few hoity-toity restaurants and even attends a luau that one of her vacation neighbors invites her to.

But all the same, weeks later, she still hasn’t been able to work up the courage to book her flight home and she’s still thinking about how insistent Finn had been that she look at the latest
development in the unending Ben Solo drama saga.

Eventually, disgusted with Ben, Finn, God, life and herself, Rey gives in and goes to see what Finn’s big fuss was about.

Her phone is so dead at this point that even plugging it in doesn’t work right away. It sits there, charging on the bed with the ‘Low Power’ symbol on the black screen for what feels like hours. It’s probably not hours, but Rey’s sense of time is beginning to distort again the way it does when she gets anxious.

So, with an irritated huff she stomps out of the cottage, hops on the slightly rusty bike that came along with the rental, and pedals the short ride into the nearby town. There’s a small internet gaming cafe that she’s carefully avoided up until this point because if there was anywhere on this island that someone was likely to recognize her, that was it. Today however she bikes right up to the front door. She locks the bike up on a light post out front then goes inside.

The cafe is small and smells a great deal like the Trading Post had: faintly dusty with notes of feet. It’s a familiar smell that – while not exactly pleasant – sends a wave of nostalgic longing crashing over her. The walls are plastered with posters for games and shelves around the edges of the room boast a host of mismatched gaming equipment and old TV monitors. There are four small tables, each with six computers set-up for gaming. A man wearing a shirt with a scantily clad anime girl is sitting behind the front counter engrossed in the comic that he’s reading and he doesn’t even look up when Rey comes in.

“Computers are $15 an hour for the first hour and ten every hour after that. Snacks and drinks are buy two get one free,” he says.

“Thanks,” Rey mumbles, keeping her head down as she hurries towards an unoccupied group of computers near the back of the establishment. There are only two other patrons in the cafe, both young men who are utterly absorbed in their own games, and mercifully neither of them seem to take any notice of her.

She slips on the station’s headphones (forcing herself not to wonder when they’d last been cleaned), jiggles the mouse to wake the screen up, and types her payment info into the window when prompted. Finally, online at last, Rey takes a deep, steadying breath and types ‘KyloRen’ into the search bar. Each letter feels like a blow against her healing heart.

Her stomach churns as she hits enter and waits for the cafe’s sluggish internet to load the results, but at long last they finally begin to load.

Right beneath his Wikipedia entry, Twitter, and Twitch sits the following article:

**GameLinq: KyloRen’s Explosive Confessional Stream:** What you need to know!

**PixelExPolygon: The Revenge of KyloRen**

**Kotaku:** ReyOfLight and KyloRen Are the Gaming World’s Romeo and Juliet Story that You Never Knew You Wanted

Her heart begins to pound, throat going dry. It’s as though all her weeks here relaxing and healing have all been for nothing.

*Why the fuck did Finn make me look at this,* she wonders miserably, *it’s just business as usual. I don’t need this.*
But just before she can get too disgusted and shut the window, she catches sight of one last news story from StarKiller Daily from the day that she had taken off for Hawaii.

**KyloRen Sets the Record Straight:** Ben Solo tells all about how his manager lied, manipulated, and coerced him into staying on the team and ending his relationship with ReyOfLight.

Rey’s heart thunders to a halt.

She clicks the link with shaking fingers and hits play on the video at the top of the page.

“Ben Solo has had an eventful week. Just days after coming in second at the Championships the Striker was accused of intentionally throwing the competition in exchange for sexual favors from Resistance Striker Rey Sanderson after racy footage of the two appeared on Reddit,” says a man’s voice over footage cut together from Ben’s streams.

“In response, Solo took to Twitch to show the world that not everything was as it seemed. During a stream that was filled with one shocking revelation after another, Solo quit the team and alleged that his former manager James Snoke was guilty of everything from extortion to threatening Sanderson. Snoke has responded by suing Solo for defamation and the case is expected to move to trial.”

The video swaps from the stock footage to the stream in question and suddenly Rey is looking right into Ben’s face, listening to his voice.

Rey watches, growing ever more dizzy and breathless by the second. His voice rolls over her, familiar and strange in equal measures and his words are a gale-force wind blowing through her heart. The doors that she had thought were so carefully closed and locked, mementos of a time best put behind her, are blown wide open. It catches on all of her rough edges, cutting her to the bone and healing the wounds all at once.

“And then I fell in love with her. I think I was in love with her right from the beginning, but I didn’t know it until a few months had gone by,” Ben is saying, dark eyes boring directly into hers from a million miles and so many weeks away, and she’s crying again.

**Damnit,** she thinks, as her resolve to stop shedding tears over Ben Solo is washed away by the torrent of emotion that overtakes her.

She can’t even see him anymore though the tears pooling in her eyes. Rey curls in on herself, knees pulled up to her chest as though trying to hold herself together physically if not emotionally.

“Now I bet half of you have just decided that I’ve finally snapped,” Ben says, “which is why it’s a good fucking thing that James-fucking-Snoke isn’t the only person who can post videos to the internet.”

Even the sound of Snoke’s voice, with distance and time, is enough to make her skin crawl. But she can’t turn it off. She needs to see him confess his sins on camera.

It’s almost like the world has been weirdly out of focus for weeks and suddenly she’s seeing things clearly for the first time. Ben was, once again, trying to protect her. He had never wanted to break her heart. He’d found himself in an impossible situation and chosen her safety over his happiness.

He had never abandoned her. Never rejected her. He had not thrown her away.

Ben had still lied to her. Still broken her heart. Still done the unforgivable.
And yet.

And yet.

This changes everything.

The next morning, Rey boards a flight back to San Diego, heart beating so fast that she’s half afraid she’ll die before she lands.

The courtroom had grown familiar to Ben over the last few weeks but as he makes his way up the steps for the final time, he can’t quite believe that this is the end.

After today, his fate will be sealed. He will either be completely free of Snoke’s control or Snoke really will own him forever.

“I have a good feeling about this,” Snap tells him as he and Mitaka slide into their seats beside Ben.

“That makes one of us,” Ben mutters.

“No, I think Mr. Wexley is right,” Mitaka chimes in, “We have a strong case and our evidence is sound. They almost have to rule in our favor.”

Ben remains quiet. It’s nice that his team is optimistic. Just like it’s nice that Luke and Leia are in the audience. But none of that will change the fact that thus far, whenever he and Snoke have gone head to head, no matter the circumstances, Snoke has always come out on top.

Even now, as Ben glances over to the other side of the courtroom, he can see his former manager leaning casually back in his chair, consulting with his flock of black-clad lawyers, who have encircled him like vultures on a corpse. He looks easy and unconcerned.

Ben looks away before Snoke notices him staring and clenches his fists where they rest on his thighs below the table.

Around the room, the jury is shuffling around, attempting to get comfortable in their tremendously uncomfortable seats, and the audience is slowly filling in.

At precisely 9 AM, Justice Monna Matha enters the room, and with a bang of her gavel, the trial is underway once more.

“Plaintiff, if you would like to present a closing argument,” she says.

A tall man with a neatly trimmed white beard and perfectly groomed white hair takes the floor.

“Your honor,” he nods to the judge before turning to face the jurors. “Ladies and gentlemen of the jury. This is not a trial about abused employees seeking justice, as the defense would like you to believe. No, instead, this is a trial about two adult men of legal age who, with sound minds and bodies, signed a contract with my client, Mr. Snoke in order to achieve fame, fortune, and unparalleled career success, all with his assistance.”

The lawyer begins to pace slowly back and forth down the line of the jury box.
“My client has spent the better part of a decade nurturing these young men’s careers, pushing them personally and professionally to be the best versions of themselves possible. And never in all that time did either of them raise a complaint about their treatment or the expectations that Mr. Snoke had for them as laid out by their contracts, in exchange for significant personal, practical, and financial support. Never was any displeasure expressed. Why? Well, given the evidence, one can only assume that it’s because both Mr. Solo and Mr. Mitaka were happy with the arrangement.”

Snoke’s lawyer stills his pacing, standing dead center before the jury box.

“These two men have had plenty of time to raise complaints about their contract, their working environment, and Mr. Snoke himself. But instead, they chose to use his generosity until the point when they no longer found him useful and then had the nerve to not only break their legally binding contracts, but also to spread lies to the media, to release partial and low quality video footage, completely out of context, that paints my client as a petty, vengeful child instead of the CEO of a Fortune 500 company and manager of a well respected eSports team. They have slandered and defamed him, costing his business millions in lost revenue and irreparable damage to her personal reputation.”

The lawyer spreads his arms theatrically.

“You, ladies and gentlemen of the jury, it is your responsibility to see that justice is served today. Do not bow to pressure to treat these adults like children who did not know what they were doing and were not smart enough to find a resolution to their small personal conflict with Mr. Snoke. A conflict, I might add that only occurred because Mr. Solo decided to violate his contract, leading Mr. Mitaka to follow suit. Mr. Snoke isn’t a perfect person, but he did everything he could for these men and they threw it back in his face in a way that may very well ruin his good name and destroy everything that he has built. Do not let that happen.”

Snoke’s lawyer sits down and Ben realizes that he’s been digging his nails into his palms so hard that he’s nearly drawn blood. He’s also nearly bitten through his tongue in an effort to keep from leaping out of his seat and screaming at the lawyer that every word out of his mouth was a fucking lie.

He feels a cold prickle along the back of his neck and glances over to see that Snoke is staring at him once more. A small, nasty smile curls across his lips and Ben nearly vomits.


Snap gets to his feet, blocking Snoke from view and Ben turns away, deliberately not looking over at his former manager.

“That was a nice speech,” Snap says, “even though the entire thing was predicated on a lie. The lie being that either of these young men ever owed James Snoke anything – not time, not loyalty, not obedience – seeing as how the contracts that he tricked them into signing without review by unbiased counsel were not just draconian and controlling well beyond any reasonable measure, but were also in violation of numerous labor laws and employee agreement regulations. Furthermore, as we have shown over the course of these proceedings, not only have Mr. Solo and Mr. Mitaka been thoroughly wronged and mistreated in their workplace for years, but all of the claims made by Mr. Solo about Mr. Snoke’s actions and behaviors have been proven to be correct.”

Snap spreads his arms wide.

“My opposition made a long and flowery speech about justice and doing the right thing. I’m not going to do that. I’m not going to do that because you can already see from the weight of the evidence that we’ve provided that there is only one just outcome here. James Snoke is a bully. And
he’s a bully who’s been using things dressed up to look like they’re legal to get away with being a bully for years. It’s time for that to end. It’s time for justice to be served for such heinous manipulation and abuse of the same legal language that is supposed to keep employees – all employees – safe. Thank you.”

As Snap sits down, Ben can hear the audience behind him murmuring and the judge banging her gavel.

“That was awesome,” whispers Mitaka, who looks a little star-struck.

Let’s just hope it was enough, Ben thinks.

The jury breaks to deliberate and Ben finds himself wishing that he was a smoker, so that he might have an excuse to duck outside somewhere private for a few minutes to deal with the panic that’s rising in his chest.

What if it wasn’t enough, he thinks, what if we lose?

He can’t even imagine what his future looks like if his contract with Snoke remains intact, because he has no future. Snoke will own him forever and the torture he will face, the price he will pay for what he has done, will be beyond measure.

The jury deliberations seem to take years. Every time Ben glances at the clock above the courtroom, the hands seem to have been glued in place. But at long last the jurors file back into their box.

“Have you reached a verdict?” Justice Matha asks.

“We have your honor,” replies the jury spokesman.

The room is so quiet that he could hear a pin drop. No one is breathing now.

“On the matter of Slander and Defamation we find the defendants not guilty, as all claims made about James Snoke have proven to be true. Furthermore, on that matter of enforceability of the Employee Agreements, the jury finds both defendants not guilty, as the Employee Agreement contracts as written by Mr. Snoke and his legal team are unenforceable in the state of New York.”

There is much more that gets said after that, by the judge and jury – the words criminal charges and investigation and prosecution are said multiple times. Snoke’s legal team and the entire audience have all erupted into a frenzy of buzzing whispers, but Ben barely registers any of it.

I’m free, he thinks, I’m free and Rey is safe. It’s over. At last, it’s over.

Snoke finally catches him as they’re exiting the courtroom. Ben is following after his family and and Mitaka, with Snap bringing up the rear as he talks quietly with his paralegal, when a bony hand reaches out and takes hold of his shoulder, halting his progress with surprising strength.

“Solo,” Snoke sneers, “I should have known that you were more trouble than you were worth. I hope you’re happy now. You will never again have an opportunity like that one I gave you. You could have been great but you threw it all away. Such a disappointment.”

Ben turns his head to look at Snoke, and really really looks at him. This man who has held his life in a chokehold for ten years. Who has belittled and tortured him, isolated and abused him, threatened the woman he loves.

He looks at the ruined crater of his cheek and the manic, furious gleam in his blue eyes. The sallow,
graying skin and the way his clothing hangs off of his ageing frame.

He thinks of all the things that he would like to say, of how satisfying it would be to simply haul off and punch Snoke square in the face, right here, right now.

Then he glances around and sees the way people are looking at Snoke, whispering and frowning, staring at him with newfound disgust.

Ben plucks Snoke’s hand off of his shoulder.

“Go fuck yourself,” he says, and then turns away leaving Snoke to stand there in dumbstruck silence, hurrying down the hall to catch up with his group.

It’s early afternoon and as they approach the exit to the building, Ben notes that the sun streaming in through the massive courthouse windows is actually quite lovely.

When they step through the doors, a wall of reporters – an unlikely mix of gaming journalists here for Ben and Mitaka and financial correspondents here for Snoke – all clamor for pictures and video and sound bites.

“Mr. Solo! Mr. Mitaka! What are you going to do now? Is this the end of the First Order?”

“Do you feel any remorse for the damage you’ve caused to Mr. Snoke’s non-gaming businesses?”

“Are you happy with the verdict?”

“Are you done with professional eSports?”

“Will there be a criminal investigation?”

“What about Rey Sanderson?”

Ben bats away most of the mics, ducking his head down to try to cover his face.

“No comment,” he mutters on repeat until his mother’s security escorts him directly into a car behind the rest of his group, and closes the door, shutting out the chaos.

He takes a deep breath and feels himself relax.

“See kid? I told you it would all work out,” says Luke, smiling and Ben is about to respond, when his phone rings.

He picks it up, and completely overstimulated as he is, doesn’t even bother to check the caller ID.

“Hello?” He says.

“Ben?” Says a familiar British voice on the other end of the line and every one of his nerve endings springs to life all at once.

“Rey,” he breathes and he’s aware that every single person in the car is now staring at him with raised eyebrows, all trying to keep as quiet as possible so that they can overhear what’s going on. He doesn’t care at all.

“Hi… uh… Ben I… I saw the stream. And I’ve been away for a while but I saw it and I needed to talk to you so I came back. I… I know why you did it… I understand why you broke up with me, and I’m still mad but…” she stammers like she has no idea how to articulate what she’s feeling
inside. Ben can relate. His heart is beating in an unsteady rhythm that matches her tempo, like a candle flickering every time she speaks.

“I just… I just called to… I don’t know…” she trails off.

“Rey,” he says again, a little stronger this time, “I have a lot I want to say to you. A lot we need to talk about. But I don’t want to do it over the phone. Can… can I come see you?”

“Yes!” she says, before he’s even finished speaking and hope swells to life in his chest once more.

“Tell me where you are,” he says, “I’ll be there tonight.”

Chapter End Notes

PS the Organa-Solos are Jewish and you can take that from my cold, dead fingers. Hence Leia swearing in Yiddish like my Jewish aunt. “goddem shvantz” means goddamn dick in Yiddish.

If you're enjoying the fic so far, please consider sharing it with a friend! Comments and Kudos are greatly appreciated and fuel my desire to write more!

As usual, please feel free to come yell at me about this story on Twitter or Tumblr.
Well guys, here it is! The last chapter! I really hope everyone has enjoyed the ride as much as I have. I finished wiring this last night and actually got really choked up about it. This fic has been a part of my life for the last 5 months and pulled me through some really dark places. I’ve made some incredible friends because of it and it’s just been the most amazing experience all around.

There’s a chance that I may add an epilogue chapter, but this is the end of the main story. Consider anything else DLC, okay? ;)

Shoutouts! You guys have given me so many incredible gifts this week! I am BLESSED! Selunchen [x][x] Is trying to MURDER ME WITH FEELINGS. do-rey-lo-mi-fa-so did THE CUTEST SNAPCHAT ART and Saturnine-Stardust drw one of my favorite scenes from the Championships! If you’ve made me something and I haven’t linked it here then it might have slipped through the cracks on tumblr. Tag me again so I can see it!

MAY YOU BE AS BLESSED AS I, WITH A BETA AS MAGNIFICENT AS CYBORGHARPY. I owe her everything for her help with this fic. Thank you for your help and thank you for your friendship.

May II

Eyja Fjord had never fit the image of a stereotypical ‘gamer’. 

To begin with she was very obviously female. Then there was the fact that she was very obviously not white. Her mother was the daughter of a real estate mogul from India who had met her Swedish-American banker father on a transatlantic flight. The couple had married shortly after and stayed together just long enough to produce a child, before splitting up. She had been seven, living with her father in New York City when 9/11 happened. After that, no one had ever let her forget that because she was brown she was “other”, that she did not belong.

For as long as she could remember she’d heard the snide comments, whispered behind her back and shouted through her headset: “get back in the kitchen”, “if you suck my dick maybe I’ll carry you a few rounds”, “bitch, cunt, whore, slut: you don’t belong here” and racist garbage that didn’t bear repeating, even in the privacy of her own mind. Not that any of this ever stopped Eyja from diving headlong into the world of gaming.

Despite the wealth and privilege in which she was raised, Eyja’s main takeaway from her childhood had been isolation and neglect. Her father was always away on business, her mother had moved back to India, and none of the white kids at her school wanted to hang out with her. So Eyja had turned increasingly to video games as a form of escapism and sanctuary. She was prodigiously good at them from the start. Good reflexes and fine motor skills, plus a logical, quick-thinking mind and a temperament that was cool under pressure made her perfectly suited for the fast paced challenges of the games of the early 2000’s.

But this almost made the lack of acceptance she found in this new online world (where the color of
her skin and the fact that she was female should have mattered less than ever) feel even worse. Still, she persevered, undeterred by the harassment, and finally she even began to welcome it. The more she endured, the stronger and more unbreakable she became.

Eyja fancied herself a piece of blazing hot iron on an anvil and every nasty word was a strike of a hammer, forging her into a razor-sharp sword.

She was no older than 14 when she finally figured out the secret to unlocking acceptance in this digital world that she could not gain elsewhere. Boys and games were, at their core exactly the same. They followed patterns and rules and logic that they were not quite aware of and if she input the correct cheat codes, both would bend to her will.

Eyja discovered that men were happy to forgive her the sin of her gender as long as she made it clear to them that she wasn’t like the whiny, bitchy, useless girls they hated so much. That she could play just as well (but not better, of course) than they could, and that there were even benefits to having her around.

Webcam technology was just beginning to infiltrate the public sector and between fuzzy image quality, dim lighting, and enough makeup, Eyja could easily fool men into thinking that she was at least 18.

The more she flirted and stroked egos and flashed just a little of her newly developing cleavage, the more willing they were to let her into their spaces and shield her from anyone else who might seek to bully her. She never saw anything wrong with her behavior, no matter how often other women caught onto her game and critiqued her for it. After all, if men were going to use and hurt her anyway, then she had no reason to feel bad about turning the tables and using them right back. To her mind, any girl who didn’t like it was obviously just jealous.

Eyja was always keenly aware of how precarious her position was, though, and she guarded the legion of white knights that she had gathered around her fiercely, driving off any other woman she thought might threaten her safety atop the tower she had built. Every other girl was a potential usurper, coming to steal the interest and attention from her. If that happened, she would be left alone and defenseless once more and that was something that Eyja simply could not have.

Eyja had known that Ben wasn’t happy for months but it wasn’t until ReyOfLight appeared that Eyja truly began to worry that her kingdom was about to come crashing down.

She remembers vividly talking to Phasma (who she had accepted with some reluctance once she realized that Phasma was no threat to her status as queen bee of the First Order) about the way that Ben had thrown logic and caution aside and battled Rey on his stream.

“He’s going to fuck us all over for that asshole,” Phasma had said, and Eyja, had known right then that she was right.

And lo and behold, Ben had in fact, fucked them all.

It’s early in the morning in New York. Eyja sits out on a balcony of a downtown Manhattan apartment, clutching a cup of coffee in one perfectly manicured hand and watching the sun creep up over the horizon. It’s cold up here in the early dawn light and she’s only wearing a black camisole and panties. There’s a robe somewhere in the apartment behind her that she could put on but it would ruin her whole image so she does without it.

The wind lifts a single, perfectly sculpted curl off of her cheek and tosses it about artfully.
She hadn’t slept much the night before. In fact, Eyja hasn’t really slept well since Hux had showed her that fucking text chain on Ben’s phone.

It was like something had snapped loose inside of her: some primal, jealous, fearful thing. She’d seen those messages and known without a shadow of a doubt that no matter what happened next, one of the pillars upon which her kingdom sat was crumbling and that if she didn’t get Rey out of the picture, it would collapse for good. Ben Solo was slipping away at the worst possible moment and she couldn’t let that happen.

It’s not that Eyja was jealous that Ben had feelings for someone else. God knows that she does not find him attractive and the idea of a relationship with him had never even crossed her mind. But Ben, like every other member of the team, was hers. Her property, her territory, her… well. If she had friends, they might be that too.

Eyja isn’t proud of how she handled that revelation, not that she’s admitted it to anyone. Though that has less to do with Ben’s feelings and more to do with the fact that she is now realizing that she, in her desperate attempt to oust someone she saw as a threat, may have unwittingly destroyed her own life.

There’s a pack of Parliament Lights and a fancy silver lighter on the table in front of her. She sets aside her coffee and fishes a cigarette out of the box with fingers that are only trembling a little because of the cold. She lights the cigarette and takes a deep drag, feeling the burn of the smoke entering her lungs in a way that has become embarrassingly familiar as of late.

Ben’s livestream and the video of Snoke threatening to blackmail him by doxxing Rey are the most viral things on the internet right now. Everyone is talking about them. Gaming and non-gaming news sites alike had picked up the story. And how could they not? The son of a senator fighting a finance titan over high stakes gaming drama and true love was good clickbait.

It’s a fucking made-for-TV movie of a story and it makes Eyja want to vomit.

She hates that even though she sort of saw this coming she didn’t really see it. She’d always thought that at the end of the day when push came to shove, Ben was cut from a similar cloth to her. That he’d choose power and position over sentiment. That he’d understand that they were all on the First Order because there was nothing that mattered, other than the game.

And now there’s a lawsuit. And fucking Dopheld Mitaka, the First Order’s biggest cheerleader, the last person who she ever would have suspected of turning traitor, had thrown his lot in with Ben. Those two idiots were actually fighting to have their employment agreements (and the rest of the Order’s by extension) rendered null and void.

She hasn’t spoken to either of the traitors since the day of The Stream. She’d tried, of course, but both Ben and Mitaka had summarily blocked her (and the rest of the team) out of their lives. Caide and Phasma had responded to this move with characteristic and irritating nonchalance.

“There teams break up all the time,” said Caide.

“If they want to leave then it’s good riddance,” said Phasma. “Maybe we can finally play with someone who isn’t a giant fucking child."

So Eyja had once more found herself turning to Hux, who was the only other person who seemed to understand exactly how shitty this situation really was.

Her phone, resting on the table next to her abandoned coffee cup, vibrates periodically with
notifications and news updates, each more frustrating and disheartening than the last. She really should just turn it off but she can’t stop watching her whole life implode in slow motion. It’s like a scab that she just can’t stop picking at.

“Fuck my life,” Eyja mutters, taking another drag from the cigarette and hearing the faint crinkle as the paper burns away. She knocks the ash off the edge of the balcony and lets the wind carry it away from her, wishing it could carry her off too.

“It’s fucking freezing out here, why are you in your underwear?” Hux’s irritated voice comes through the open doorway. “And are you smoking my cigarettes again? I told you that if you want some I can just buy you your own pack.”

She puffs on the cigarette again before answering, letting the words and the smoke drift out together.

“This is my apartment, I can do what I want,” she says. “If you don’t like it you can go back to your place.”

“Quit being so fucking stubborn for once,” Hux replies as he steps out onto the balcony and tosses a bundle of red cashmere fabric at her. She catches the robe and glowers at him, though she does drape it over her legs. The warmth is a relief.

Hux takes a seat in the chair next to hers. He’s wearing black sweatpants with the First Order’s name and logo printed up his left leg and a black henley. His hair is mussed from sleep and he’s squinting in the pale daylight like it’s high noon.

Eyja’s phone vibrates again and they both glance down at the screen to see a news alert from StarKiller Daily proclaiming: ‘Why the First Order Lawsuit Might Finally Tame the Wild West of Pro Gaming’.

“Thanks,” Eyja mutters, flipping her phone over so she doesn’t have to look at it any longer.

Hux reaches out and grabs his cigarettes off of the table, tapping the carton a few times to knock one out. He lights it and leans back into his chair.

“Do you think they’re going to win the case?” he asks, after a beat.

“Probably,” she says, stubbing out her cigarette in the ashtray on the table.

Silence falls between them once more as frustrated, unhappiness bubbles in Eyja’s chest. She looks over at Hux, watches him exhaling smoke through his nostrils, staring out into the open air of the New York skyline.

“How did we get here?” she finally blurts out.

“Clearly we misjudged Ben’s motivations,” Hux replies.

“That much is obvious,” Eyja snaps, “but I just… fuck! It’s been weeks and I still can’t wrap my head around it. He’s throwing everything away for a girl he’s known for like… what… three months?”

“It’s more than that, E, and you know it,” Hux sighs, flicking his cigarette.

“Fine,” she sneers, “Maybe it is but… come on! We’ve spent the last three years essentially building Ben and his career up. We all bowed to Snoke and followed his crazy rules and did whatever was asked of us to be the team that Ben needed. And like, yes, it was good for us too, but we were
always there for him no matter what dumb shit he did and he just… he just threw that away!”

Eyja’s fists clench in the bathrobe on her lap.

“This was supposed to be all of our dream, this was what we all wanted! I don’t understand why when he changes his mind, he gets what he wants while we have to lose it all,” she says, shaking her head. “Maybe we went too far, but so did he!”

“Look, I fucking hate him as much as anyone,” Hux says, “but I think in this case… Jesus. I can’t even believe I’m saying this, but I think this one’s on us. We fucked up and we’re paying the price.”

“Big words now that all’s said and done,” Eyja spits back, “but I remember you being all for our plan to get Snoke on his case about Rey at the time.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” Hux says. “But… I never told you this before, but the night that he beat the shit out of me… when he walked away I was actually afraid he might kill himself. And I couldn’t stop thinking that even if he is an ungrateful douche who let us down that I didn’t want his blood on my hands.”

Eyja reels back.

“You really thought he’d do something like that?” she asks, frowning.

“Yeah,” says Hux, lips pulling flat, “And it kind of made me wonder about… you know… how we ended up on a team that was so fucked up that we didn’t need our opponents to beat us because we could just as easily destroy ourselves.”

Tension crackles between them as he stares her down, daring her to tell him he’s wrong.

“I… guess we didn’t have the healthiest working dynamic ever, huh?” Eyja concedes at last.

“That’s the understatement of the century,” he replies with no small trace of irony.

Eyja drops her face into her hands and rubs tiredly at her eyes, grateful that she’d forgeone her usual heavy eye makeup that morning.

“I guess Ben’s not the only one who lost perspective in all of this, huh?” she asks.

Maybe this really is for the best. Maybe it’s just time for the First Order to end,” says Hux. “Besides, we’re two of the best players in the league. It’s not like we’re gonna be out of a job for long.”

There’s a long moment of silence that stretches between them. Somewhere below them a car horn honks and several more respond in kind. Hux smokes his cigarette down to the filter and drops it into the ashtray.

“What do you think it’s like?” she asks quietly, turning to meet Hux’s pale, green gaze.

“What do I think what’s like?” he replies.

“Loving someone like that,” she says, looking away. “Loving them so much that nothing else matters? Enough to burn everything down and walk away, no questions asked.”

“I wouldn’t know,” says Hux.

“It sounds fucking terrifying,” Eyja replies.
And she means it, but she can’t help but feel a small stab of disappointment when Hux makes a noise of agreement. But when he fishes a pair of fresh *Parliament Lights* out of the box, hands one to her and lights them both, he looks up and there’s something new in his gaze. A warmth, maybe, that she’s seen hints of before, but never so clearly as right in that moment.

“Well,” he says, “Maybe it’s not so bad when it’s the right person.”

Her cheeks heat and she looks away, pretending that the sunlight in her eyes is the only reason that they’re watering a bit.

“Maybe, you’re right,” she says.

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Rey returns to an apartment with a newly painted living room and kitchen and a re-grouted hall bathroom. She also returns to a fine layer of dust over *everything*, piles of drop-cloths and painting supplies indicating that Finn had whisked Poe out of the apartment with very little preamble.

She passes straight out and sleeps for nearly 12 hours, but the next morning she wakes up buzzing with a nervous energy that she can’t seem to burn off, even after an hour-long run.

So she dumps her clothes into the washer, stows her suitcase away underneath her bed, switches on the telly and sets about cleaning the apartment, trying her hardest to avoid thinking about Ben or StarKiller or any of the big, mature, important resolutions that she had made while in Hawaii.

It had all seemed very easy and straightforward while she was still on vacation.

Rey would come back to San Diego and call him up. Tell him that even though they hadn’t parted on the best of terms that she understood that there had been extenuating circumstances and that she wanted the chance to talk things out. Or something. But now that she’s here, back in real life, the prospect of reaching out seems daunting and terrifying.

What if things have changed in the two months since he recorded his stream? What if she’s been away too long and someone else has taken her place? What if the things that he’d said during their break up (some of which, even with the newly revealed context were still frustratingly *true*) had worked their hooks into Ben’s heart and convinced him that he’d made the right call after all by breaking things off with her?

What if her long absence and silence had felt like a rejection and he’d come to hate her?

So Rey distracts herself with reruns of daytime comedy shows and scrubs the apartment from top to bottom. Or she does until the news comes on and the very person she’s trying her hardest *not* to think about is suddenly plastered across her screen.

“It is being reported that professional StarKiller players Ben Solo and Dopheld Mitaka have just won their lawsuit against former manager, Snoke Industries CEO, James Snoke. The case gained national attention after Solo publicly accused Snoke of extortion, fraud, and making threats against the safety of his then-girlfriend, Rey Sanderson, to keep him working for Snoke.” Behind the news anchor, an attractive woman with very shiny blonde hair, plays images of Snoke and Ben leaving the courthouse and wading through a sea of mics and cameras. Rey realizes, idly, that Ben’s wearing the same suit that he’d worn to the first party in Vegas, although he’s wearing a white shirt this time.
“The judge ruled in their favor on the grounds of an unenforceable Employee Agreement,” the news anchor continues. “The defamation and slander suits were both dismissed, due to the fact that overwhelming evidence proved that Solo’s allegations were in fact true.”

Rey suddenly becomes aware that she hasn’t breathed for this entire story because the world has grown kind of fuzzy around the edges. She forces herself to inhale. He’s right there, in moving color. Despite the reporter’s description of how tremendously victorious he is, Ben still looks sad and lost.

He looks like he did when she refused to shake his hand after the Championship Finals, the last time they’d seen each other face-to-face. And maybe it’s a bit narcissistic to assume that it has anything to do with her, but Rey is suddenly positive that she needs to call him and she needs to do it now.

“The case gained national attention due to Snoke’s status as the owner of a Fortune 500 company—” The woman goes on, but Rey has stopped listening. She’s propelled – as if someone is controlling her like an avatar in a game – across the room to snatch her phone off the desk where she’d left it to charge.

When Ben answers the call, his voice washes over her and it’s like she stuck her hand into an electrical socket. Every one of her nerves is alight, all of her hair is standing on end, and her heart is pounding so hard that she’s sure he can hear it through the phone.

“Hello?” he says.

“Ben?” she replies, even though she knows it’s him, she’s just too dumbstruck to say anything else.

And then he says her name like it’s some sort of prayer and he’s the holiest man on earth. It’s all Rey can do to remain standing as she clutches her phone to her ear like a lifeline.

Eleven hours later, the sun is setting and Rey is furiously dusting the living room in an attempt to keep her shit together. Because Ben is coming here and he’s coming now and after months of silence and hurt and misunderstanding and secrets and distance they’re finally going to be face to face once more.

This time there will be no teams, no friends, no reporters, no managers, no roommates. No distractions. Nothing but the two of them in Rey’s apartment. And Rey can’t wait but she also can’t stop panicking that after all of this they’re going to find themselves here and realize that in the end, there’s too much muddy water under the bridge for them to ever truly fix what was broken.

She’s so caught up in her anxious cleaning that she doesn’t even register the passage of time and as she’s standing there, dusting the spotless flat-screen for the fifth time, there’s a hesitant knock at the door.

Rey drops her duster then scrambles to pick it up, realizing as she does so that she’s still dressed for cleaning, in a white tank top and her 8-bit heart shorts. Her hair is piled into a messy bun on top of her head and she isn’t wearing a drop of makeup. Her apartment is spotless but she looks like a mess.

There’s no time to do anything about this though, so she stashes the duster in an open drawer on the entertainment console and calls out “coming!” in a voice that breaks a little as she trips and slides across the floor towards her front door.

She stands there for a second, hand on the knob, and takes a deep breath. She can see the shadowed shape of someone standing on the other side of the frosted glass window at the top of the door, but he doesn’t feel real quite yet. Rey is half terrified that when she opens the door it’s going to be a
pizza delivery to the wrong address or worse, just a figment of her imagination.

*You can do this,* she tells herself, then undoes the deadbolt and opens the door.

She looks up (and up, and up — she’d forgotten exactly how tall he really is) into his face.

Ben looks exhausted. The shadows under his eyes are deep and dark and there are lines around his eyes and mouth that she doesn’t recognize. But he’s here and real and she’s never seen anything better in her entire life.

“Hi, Ben,” she says, and the words are barely a whisper.

“Hey,” he replies but before he can get another word out, Rey is throwing herself forward, wrapping her arms around his neck, burying her face into his shirt. His arms come up with aching slowness — as if he’s afraid that if he reciprocates the hug, she’ll vanish into thin air — but as soon as they close around her, his entire body sags into hers.

“You’re here,” she whispers into his neck.

“I’m sorry it took so long,” he says into hers.

And that’s really all it takes and Rey is crying again. It’s not the ugly, painful, sorrowful crying that she’d done so much of in the wake of their breakup. It’s relief and joy and love, rolling over her like an unstoppable wave.

Ben holds her tighter and she can feel him shaking like a leaf. His lips move soundlessly against her throat and she feels a dampness against her skin that seems to indicate that he might be in a similar state. They stand there in her doorway, holding each other while the last vestiges of daylight slip slowly away.

After what seems like years, they finally pull apart, swiping at their damp faces with hands and sleeves. Once they’ve more or less re-established some composure, Rey reaches out, taking his hand in her own, wordlessly tugging him into the apartment. He stops only long enough to snag the handle of the black duffle bag that he’d dropped beside his feet before following her inside.

Rey’s apartment is *warm.*

That’s the first thing that Ben registers as he steps through the doorway. It’s warm temperature-wise because it’s late May in southern California and the weather is already bordering on unbearable, but the overall feeling of the space is warm too. He’s seen it in the background of FaceTime calls and on her webcam, but he’d always been so busy staring at Rey that he hadn’t really registered her surroundings.

The apartment is lived-in and homey, comfortable and inviting. It’s a place that’s obviously decorated for functionality and comfort over aesthetic, though there’s the faint scent of fresh paint that indicates that perhaps someone was trying to change that slightly.

The front door leads directly into the living room, a large space crowded with comfortable looking chairs and a well-worn sofa, with a pair of gaming desks set up towards the back. Off to the left he can see a semi-open kitchen and to the right is a hall that leads off deeper into the unit. It’s also so
clean that Ben doesn’t doubt that he could eat off of the floor.

“Sorry, it’s kind of a mess right now,” Rey says, causing him to raise an eyebrow at her.

They come to something of a halt in the middle of the living room and Rey suddenly develops a bad case of the fidgets and loses the ability to look at him.

“So– do you want something to drink? Or eat? I don’t have anything in the fridge but I could order takeaway… um… sorry… I didn’t know how this was gonna go so I… didn’t know what to get,” she trails off. It’s clear that she’d lost track of time and was utterly unprepared for his arrival.

Ben fights off a smile at her sudden awkwardness because he can definitely relate.

He’s been ready to see her again for what feels like forever, but he hasn’t got a clue what to do now that she’s actually here.

“Water would be great,” he says.

She shoos him over to the sofa and goes off to the kitchen to get his water. Ben settles onto the left side of the couch, sinking into the plush cushions that threaten to swallow him whole. Rey returns a few moments later with two glasses of water, one of which she hands to him, the other which she clutches with both hands as she takes her own seat on the other end of the sofa.

“So,” they begin at the exact same time.

They both break off, laughing nervously.

“Can I go first?” Ben asks.

“Alright,” Rey replies.

“Okay. Thanks. And thanks for letting me do this in person. I could have said it over the phone, but I think we’ve had enough conversations through devices. I wanted to do this the right way for once,” he takes a deep breath and looks her right in the eye. “I want to start by saying I’m sorry. I’m sorry for lying to you, I’m sorry for screwing up the Championships for you, I’m sorry for hurting you, I’m sorry for getting you mixed up in my life when I knew that it was dangerous for both of us.”

Rey frowns and opens her mouth to interrupt, but Ben holds up a hand.

“Please, let me finish,” he pleads gently, and she closes her mouth, settling back against the armrest of the sofa.

“I’m also sorry that I wasn’t honest with you about everything that was going on so you could make your own choices, fully informed.” His mouth is dry and he wasn’t lying about really wanting the water but he can’t bring himself to stop talking now, afraid that if he pauses to drink he’s going to lose his nerve and he’ll never get the chance to say what he needs to. “I’m so grateful to you for waking me up from the nightmare I’d been living in. You made me realize that I’d not only lost control of my life but that I had actually given it up. I was sitting there and letting all this shit happen to me without lifting a finger to stop it. And I probably would still be if you hadn’t come into my life.”

“Because of that, I can’t bring myself to be sorry that I got to be with you, even if it was just for that short little time, even if that’s all I ever get. But I will be sorry forever that you were the one who paid the price for my mistakes, and if you’ll let me, I will do everything in my power to make this right,” he finishes.
Rey’s face, which has been an unreadable mask since he began speaking, softens, ever so slightly.

“Oh, Ben,” she says, and he can’t help the way his nerves prickle at the sound of his name on her lips.

She looks down at her fingers, rubbing back and forth across the condensation on her glass, then back up at him.

“You’re right; you should have been honest with me about a lot of things from the beginning. It was never my job to fix your life and it was shitty that you let me open so much of myself up to you without ever being honest in return,” Rey says, seriously.

Ben flinches, looking down at his own hands as they clench reflexively around his own glass, but takes the admonishment without protest. She has more than earned the chance to air her grievances with him.

“But not all of this was on you,” she says. Ben looks up, frowning.

“But Snoke –”

“Was an asshole,” Rey interrupts, “but as much as he meddled, he wasn’t the main problem with our relationship. Not really. You know the thing that hurt most about how you broke up with me? It was that a lot of what you said at the time was true.”

She gives a little, one-shouldered shrug.

“Everything was so… I dunno… intense with us. It was this big, star-crossed, forbidden thing. And everyone was acting like it was life and death. It was easy for me to forget that the entire scope of our relationship really only was a few months at most. I knew you had issues and shit to deal with that you weren’t telling me about and I knew that what we were doing could potentially blow up in our faces. I was just so convinced that if I wanted this – wanted us – to work badly enough that it would.”

Rey sighs.

“I asked you for things that I had no right to ask of you, even if I did think I was asking because I had your best interests at heart. I know you said you were grateful for it and believe me, I’m really glad that you finally got rid of Snoke, but I’m sorry that it happened because I essentially forced you to choose between your career and me.”

Ben feels a little light-headed and for a second he can’t quite parse the words that are coming out of her mouth. Because it’s something that has lingered, like an ugly shadow in the back corners of his mind. He’d been so angry with himself, so scared for Rey, and so afraid that his actions had driven them far past the point of no return that he hadn’t ever properly let himself think about the fact that even before the breakup, their relationship had been far from perfect.

Getting angry with Rey meant admitting that she wasn’t perfect and that somehow felt like something he had no right to do, given how he had treated her. But just because he’d never let himself be consciously angry about it didn’t mean that the anger wasn’t there. Hearing Rey take responsibility for her part in their mess feels like someone has just removed an invisible weight from his shoulders that has been crushing him for months.

“We really just fucked this whole thing up, didn’t we?” he says, ruefully.

“Yeah, we made a right mess of it,” Rey replies, with a small, self-deprecating smile. Her eyes flick
away for a second and she bites her lip, before looking back to him and saying, “But… I don’t think it’s beyond saving. If… you know. You still want to.”

He sucks in a breath.

She sets aside her own untouched water glass and reaches out across the space between them, and he reaches back to take her hand in his own. Her fingers are chilly and damp and it should be unpleasant but he’s so happy to be allowed even this again that he doesn’t care.

“I went away for a while after the Championships. Unplugged and got off the grid and all that. It’s why I didn’t see your stream sooner,” she says as her fingers lace with his. “And the whole time I was there I kept trying to get over you, kept trying to move on, to forget what had happened. But I couldn’t. I don’t think I really wanted to be over you. I think I wanted the chance to work our mess out so that we could see what was on the other side. Because I think that when we’re at our best, we make each other better.”

“It’s not gonna be easy,” he says. “I’m not easy and even without Snoke around I’ve got a shit-load of baggage that I think I’m really only just starting to deal with.”

“You? Difficult? I don’t believe it!” she teases.

He rolls his eyes.

“I’m being serious, Rey,” he says.

“So am I,” she replies, sobering slightly. “We’ve both said and done awful things to each other and we’re just going to have to acknowledge that and do our best to move past it. And it’s not like you’re the only one with baggage here. But the whole point of a relationship is that you have someone to help you carry the stuff that’s too heavy to handle on your own, right?”

Her thumb is stroking across the back of his hand and Ben is practically dizzy with everything that’s happening right now. He doesn’t even know how to respond so he just squeezes Rey’s hand tighter. She squeezes back.

“We don’t have to figure everything out right now, but… what you said on your stream… is it still true?” she asks and there’s a small note of terrified uncertainty in her voice that makes his heart clench.

He doesn’t even need to ask what she’s referring to because it’s been hanging there, an unspoken thing between them ever since she called and told him that she’d watched the stream in the first place.

“I shouldn’t have said it there,” Ben says and Rey flinches. “No, sorry, it’s not because it didn’t mean it. I just… I should have said it to you first, before I said it to the world.”

Now it’s Rey who is hardly breathing, she’s staring at him with her huge, hazel eyes, holding out her heart to him once more, trusting him not to break it again.

“I love you,” he says, softly. It’s like the floodgates have been opened and words come pouring out of him, “I love you, I missed you, I’m sorry, thank you –”

Rey makes a noise in the back of her throat and then she moves, so fast that his eyes can’t quite register what’s happened until it’s already over and she’s practically thrown herself across the sofa to capture his lips with her own.
She kisses him, swallowing his words, drinking them in like she’s been parched for days and they’re cold, fresh water. She’s straddling one of his legs, a little awkwardly as he’d been turned at the waist to face her, but he doesn’t even care. Her arms wrap around his neck and his hands come up to rest on her waist.

Ben kisses Rey like he’s never going to get another chance, ironic considering the discussion that prompted this, but he feels like he’s just received a stay of execution. He nips and licks his way into her mouth, tangling his tongue with hers.

When they finally pull back, both breathing hard like they’ve been running a marathon, he looks up into her face, eyes wide with wonder.

“I love you too,” Rey says, before leaning back in to kiss him some more, and it’s a good thing that she’s in the mood to take charge of things because Ben is so overcome that it’s practically miraculous that he doesn’t start crying right then and there.

Eventually, some of the desperation cools a little and Rey settles back, still perched over one of Ben’s legs that, when not in the heat of the moment is actually a little uncomfortable. He tells her as much and she scoots backwards, flushing a little, so that she’s now sitting with her knees pressed against the outside of his thigh.

He reaches out and tucks a stray strand of hair from her messy bun behind her ear.

“Rey,” he begins. Then he yawns, startling both of them.

She yawns too, mirroring him.

“Sorry,” he says, yawning again because now that he’s not running on pure adrenaline, five months of exhaustion are crashing down on him all at once.

“No, I forgot!” Rey says, “It’s really late for you, isn’t it?”

“It’s only midnight, it’s fine,” Ben says, through yet another yawn.

Rey shakes her head, climbing off the sofa.

“It’s bedtime,” she tells him.

And he wants to argue that it’s fine and they should just keep doing what they’re doing, but he’s so tired and her words are making so much sense right now.

“Fine, okay. I’ll just… crash out on the sofa then?” he says, looking uncertainly at Rey because, yes, she invited him to stay when he’d said he was coming and yes she’d just kissed him senseless but he doesn’t want to presume.

Rey rolls her eyes and hold her hand out to him.

“Come on,” she says.

He takes her hand and lets her pull him to his feet and lead him down the hall to her room.

“Bathroom’s down there,” Rey points to the door at the end of the hall, “Go change and brush your teeth before you climb in here. You smell like airplane.”

Ben fumbles through the motions of brushing his teeth and stripping down to his boxer briefs in an increasingly profound torpor. At this point, he’s forced to concede that even if he’d wanted to do
more than sleep, he is physically not awake enough to do so. By the time he stumbles back into Rey’s room, the world has grown dark around the edges.

She’s sitting on the right side of the bed, so he crawls around to the left and drops down, sliding underneath the jersey sheets and knit blanket and the second his head hits the pillow, his eyes slide shut and sleep begins to take him. The pillows and the sheets smell like Rey, though faintly, as if it’s been a while since she slept here and he makes a mental note to ask her where she’d actually been for the last few months.

Despite the fact that it’s just after 9pm on the West Coast, Rey switches the bedside lamp off and crawls into bed beside him.

“I’m glad you came,” she whispers.

He manages a grunt in response.

The last thing he registers is the feeling of Rey settling in beside him.

Rey wakes up with Ben spooning her; his arm like a warm seat belt pulling her back against his bare chest.

She shifts a little, trying to free her left arm from where it’s been pinned beneath her body, slowly going numb, and her ass brushes against something long and hard between Ben’s legs. She freezes.

Despite a lack of practical experience, it’s not like Rey doesn’t know what’s going on. Morning wood is not a mysterious phenomenon to her. It does however leave her in a bit of an awkward predicament because she’s not really sure what the protocol is for like… acknowledging it.

Unsure of how to proceed with that, she re-focuses on getting her arm free with as little wiggling below the belt as possible. It takes a bit of doing but she finally manages to work it out from underneath her body and rolls over onto her side.

Muted morning sunlight is streaming in through the gauzy fabric of her curtains and her internal clock is telling her that it’s close to 7am. Ben is still sleeping soundly, the rhythm of his breathing deep and even, undisturbed by her movement.

Rey turns her head to the side so that she can look at him. It seems like a lifetime ago that she was watching him sleep beneath the shifting lights in LA but he looks somehow younger here and now than he did back then. Her eyes roam across his face, tracing his beauty marks, long nose, and full mouth.

The shadows beneath his eyes are still there, but they’re fainter now that he’s actually slept.

She’s suddenly consumed with the need to touch him, so Rey shifts once more, rolling onto her left side.

Her heart is abruptly so full that it makes her throat tighten up. Ben is here and while things aren’t completely fixed, they’re a damn sight better than they had been 24 hours ago. All of this is still a little surreal, but it no longer feels like their relationship is some sort of insane fantasy. They’ve slogged through the mud now, torn their idealized dream down off the pedestal and brought it to
earth. It should feel like a disappointment. It doesn’t. It feels like a relief.

This is real, now, and it’s something that actually stands a chance at surviving real life.

Rey trails her fingers gently across Ben’s cheek, along the shell of his ear, along his brow bone, across his lips.

He stirs in response to that, twitching and scrunching up his face, and she freezes like a kid caught with her hand in the biscuit tin. His lashes flutter, although his eyes don’t open just yet.

“What’re you doing?” He mumbles against her fingers.

“What?,” she lies unconvincingly.

“Hmm,” he responds, cracking his eyes open to look at her, then he turns his face up to press his lips properly against her fingers. He places a kiss there, followed by one to the center of her palm.

His hand moves from where it had been resting against her back to wrap around hers and he lifts it so that he can kiss the delicate skin of her inner wrist.

Something hot sparks to life low in her belly.

“What’re you doing?” Rey asks, as his lips skim lower down her arm, leaving a trail of warm, lazy kisses in their wake.

“Exploring this new map,” he says against the crook of her elbow, startling a laugh out of her.

“Did you just call me a map? What do you think this is, a game?” she asks with feigned affront.

“Yes,” he says, setting her arm back down in the small gap between their chests, and giving her a mischievous grin before leaning in so that he can press his lips to her forehead. “The loot’s not great but I’ve heard the other rewards more than make up for it.”

“If this is your idea of dirty talk, it needs work,” Rey says, which is a total lie because somehow this is actually doing it for her and she finds herself pressing her legs tighter together against the insistent throb there.

Ben kisses the tip of her nose and the corner of her mouth.

“You sure?” he asks, “Because I have a line I just came up with about hitting max level together that I thought was pretty good—”

“Oh my god, you nerd,” Rey says, laughing as she tilts her head to kiss him properly.

They both have morning breath, but she stops caring about that pretty quickly as Ben deepens the kiss and slides a leg between hers, providing sudden friction against the apex of her thighs and the vivid reminder that he’s rock hard and ready to go against her hip.

She moans at the contact and Ben takes full advantage of her parted lips to suck her tongue into his mouth. She rocks herself against him, searching for friction, for relief, and he hums encouragement as she moves.

And it’s good, it really is, but it’s not enough.

“Ben,” Rey gasps, pulling back and sitting up to give herself enough space to think, “are we doing this?”
Ben pushes himself upright as well so that he can look her in the eye.

“Do you want to?” he asks.

“Yes,” she says, and she’s a little astonished to discover that she’s not even remotely embarrassed to admit it. “Do you?”

“Absolutely,” he responds.

“Great!” She says, before pulling her shirt over her head.

Ben stares at her in awe, looking for all the world like she’s just hit him with one of Millenia’s disorientation blasts.

“Can I touch you?” he asks.

“I would prefer if you did, actually,” Rey says, though the end of ‘actually’ comes out as a squeal as she suddenly finds herself on her back with Ben straddling her. His hands cup her breasts, and they’re so big that they actually engulf them fully, which does something kind of funny to Rey’s brain.

He drags his thumbs across her nipples, pinching and tugging gently, making her gasp and arch her back up into the sensation. Ben sucks a bruising kiss into the skin below her ear before nipping and licking his way down her throat and chest to lap his tongue against one of her nipples.

“I’ve been dreaming about this ever since you sent me that photo for our bet,” he murmurs, almost reverently, before he sucks the nipple into his mouth, biting gently down. Rey feels every single sensation directly between her legs. She’s so wet that she knows her panties must soaked through.

The slight scrape and sting of teeth, soothed away by warmth and the gentle swirl of Ben’s tongue has her moaning and threading her fingers through his hair to clutch at his head. He pulls off of her right nipple with a pop before swapping his attention over to the other and repeating the process.

“Oh my god, oh mygod,” Rey is saying and this shouldn’t feel like so much but it does and she’s so glad that she’s laying down because if she were sitting upright, she’s not sure that she could remain that way for long.

Ben gives her left nipple a final suck then kisses the underside of her breast before continuing further south. He crawls down the bed so that he can nuzzle his face against her stomach, until he reaches the edge of her shorts, where he pauses. Rey props herself up on her elbows to see what he’s doing and he looks up, meeting her eyes.

His finger traces the waistband and she shivers.

“Can I?” he asks and she nods, mutely, suddenly unable to form words with a mouth that has gone dry with anticipation.

He tugs her shorts and underwear off in a single move, tossing them over his shoulder and leaving her bare before his hungry gaze. Rey bites her lip, watching Ben swallow thickly as his eyes take in the thatch of dark hair between her thighs.

She knows that it’s kind of silly because he’s seen her naked and fingering herself before so there’s...
not much mystery left but she’s suddenly a little self conscious, hoping that he likes what he sees.

Should I have waxed? Shaved? Rey wonders briefly, but if the answer to either of those questions is yes, Ben doesn’t mention it.

Instead he gently parts her thighs, and traces a finger along the cleft between them, just barely grazing her clit and making her gasp.

“God you are fucking perfect,” he says, pushing her thighs farther apart so that she’s wide open to him, air cold against her slick center. He licks his lips and Rey can feel herself getting wetter by the second.

His thumb presses against her clit and Rey lets out a sound that she’s pretty sure she’s never made before: half gasp, half moan.

“Does that feel good?” Ben asks as he moves his thumb in slow circles.

“More of ah- that but faster,” Rey pants and Ben complies. She shudders as pleasure sparks through her veins like static electricity. Then there’s a firm pressure at her entrance and Ben is slipping one of his thick fingers inside of her.

“Oh, oh!” Rey cries out. Ben’s lips twitch into a grin as he begins slowly pumping the digit in and out of her, curling it up so that it hits a little bundle of nerves that make her vision go fuzzy while his thumb continues to move, maddeningly slow but so, so good across her clit. A second finger joins the first after a few more pumps, and then a third and Rey moans, feeling the stretch and pressure. His fingers are much larger than hers.

Ben alternates between kissing her senseless and studying her, watching her reactions like he’s memorizing new move combos.

Rey gets a little lost in the sensation for a bit, and it isn’t until he withdraws his fingers that she comes back to herself with a disappointed whine, though that sound morphs into another moan as Ben replaces them with his mouth.

He eats her out like she’s his last meal. Ben fucks her with his tongue before sucking her clit with a single-minded focus that makes her head spin and she finds herself rocking against his mouth and pleading with him, “more more more”, and “yesyesyes just like that”, and “Ben please don’t stop” until the pleasure that has been building steadily in her boils over and she arches up, gasping his name as she comes undone.

When she finds her way back to herself, Ben is grinning up at her like the fucking Cheshire Cat. His mouth is slick from his work and that reminder is makes her hyper-sensitized body throb with desire.

“But not bad for a bonus round,” he says.

“Come here,” she demands, and Ben complies, crawling up her body so that she can kiss him. She can taste herself on his mouth but it’s not as weird as she’d thought it would be.

Rey runs her hands down the planes of his back and fuck he’s just so massive it’s a little mind-blowing. Her hands finally come to rest on the curve of his fabric-covered ass.

She squeezes and he lets out a surprised laugh.

“Take these off,” she says against his mouth and he complies, rolling away to strip them off before climbing back up until he’s kneeling before her. Rey rises up onto her own knees, crawling across
the bed to meet him.

She’s filled with impatient curiosity. She wants to touch and taste and do everything, but she figures that looking is a good place to start.

Her eyes rove over him, drinking in the sight of his cock, resting hard and thick against his stomach, leaking precum from the flushed head, and if she hadn’t known he was Jewish before, she certainly would now.

She reaches out with hesitant fingers, tracing across the soft skin there before wrapping around the girth of him. He’s so thick that her fingers just barely meet around him and she shivers, remembering how full she’d felt with just Ben’s fingers working her open. Desire and anxiety pool in her stomach in equal measures as she wonders if he’ll even fit inside her.

Ben leans down, pressing his face into the juncture of her shoulder with a groan.

“God, Rey, fuck that feels good,” he pants against her skin.

“Tell me what to do here,” she says, “I’ve never done this before.”

“Fuck,” he chokes out, “okay, uh, squeeze a little tighter. The speed’s fucking perfect, you’re fucking perfect, holy shit,” he babbles as she follows his direction.

One of Ben’s hands clutches tight at her hip, while the other rests on the mattress, steadying himself.

“I want you inside of me for real,” she says, and his dick twitches in her hand, precum spilling over her thumb as she drags it across the head.

“Christ, okay, hang on,” Ben says, pulling back, and stealing her hand with his own. “Condoms.”

“Did you not bring any?” Rey asks, raising an eyebrow.

“No, of course not,” Ben replies, “I wasn’t sure things would go this way but I didn’t want to be unprepared. But they’re in my bag, in the living room.”

“Then go get one,” she says.

“But… your roommate? Roommates?” He hesitates, frowning.

“They’re on vacation,” Rey tells him, with a smile. “Don’t worry, no one’s gonna see your ass besides me.”

She gives the ass in question a small pinch and Ben lets out an actual yelp of surprise that turns into a groan as the hand still on his dick gives him a gentle squeeze.

“Hurry up and get a condom or I’ll do it and there’s no guarantee I won’t get distracted snooping through your stuff,” Rey tells him with a wink.

“Be right back,” he says, scrambling off the bed, and Rey is weirdly charmed by the fact that he seems to be having trouble remembering how to use his limbs. He’d seemed so confident as he worked his way around her body that for a brief moment, amidst the pleasure, Rey felt some insecurity about her lack of experience flicker to life.

She falls back against the bed, hands idly playing across the skin of her stomach and chest as she listens to the sound of Ben rifling through his bag in the other room.
Ben hurries back, a small handful of foil packets in hand. He tosses most of them on the nightstand before ripping one open and rolling the plastic of the condom down onto his dick.

He rejoins her on the bed, settling between her legs.

“This is… this is the first time you’ve done this, right?” he asks, hesitating, as he lines himself up with her entrance.

“Yeah,” she says, frowning, “why?”

“Just checking. We’ll take it slow,” he says and he begins to press into her.

It doesn’t hurt, exactly, she’s plenty wet and ready to go, but the stretch of him fills her up in a way that is utterly unfamiliar and she gasps, tightening involuntarily around him, before he’s even halfway inside.

“Keep going, I’m okay,” she says when Ben freezes, looking panicked.

“Are you sure?” he asks, prompting her to reach up so that she can pull his face down to hers for a kiss.

“Yes. Keep going.”

He does and a few seconds later he moans against her mouth as he’s seated fully inside of her.

“God you’re fucking tight,” Ben says, “let me know when you want me to move.”

She gives herself a few more seconds to adjust to the feeling, then rolls her hips experimentally and pleasure rolls through her like a wave.

“Oh!” she gasps, “Move. Now. Please!”

Ben moves.

His hips pull back and he slides almost all the way out of her before driving back in and she sees fucking stars.

It’s not the same feeling as when she gets herself off or even when he’d eaten her out, but sure enough, there’s another orgasm building in her like a distant, rolling thunderstorm. With every thrust of Ben’s hips it grows and grows.

She rakes her blunt nails across his chest (noting and filing away for later that he gasps just like she had when she catches his nipples) before wrapping her arms around his back and just holding on. She rocks her hips, meeting him thrust for thrust, breath leaving her in frantic gasps. Then it hits her like a thunderclap and she tumbles over the edge once more, and feels Ben follow her down, seconds later.

Ben has never in his life been one for post-coital cuddling. In every sexual encounter he’d ever had prior to this one, the moment the deed was done, he’d been anxious to disentangle, usually with the goal of getting immediately in the shower at the forefront of his mind.
But as he collapses onto the bed, weak and shaky from his orgasm but still careful not to crush her beneath him, he can’t fight the urge to gather her to him, pulling her close to bury his face in her hair, breathing in her scent and reveling in the feel of her in his arms.

He kind of can’t believe that this has really happened. That at long last they’re finally here. He also can’t believe that there was ever a time in his life when he was so shut down that he’d willingly chosen anything over this.

Rey makes some contented noises against his neck and he just closes his eyes, pulling her closer.

“I love you,” he says against the crown of her head.

“I love you, too,” she replies and he can feel her smile against his skin.

They lay there for a few minutes as their breathing comes back down to normal, before Rey is finally the one who pulls away.

“Gotta pee,” she says in response to his noise of displeasure. “And you should deal with that.”

She gestures towards his crotch and he grimaces as he realizes that she’s right.

While Rey is in the bathroom he climbs out of the bed and disposes of the condom in the trash can before bending down to grab his underwear off the floor. He tugs them on and walks down the hall to stand outside the bathroom door. He takes his own turn once Rey comes out, relieving himself before splashing some water on his face and brushing his teeth. When he emerges once again he hears the sound of Rey clattering around in the kitchen so he heads there instead of back into the bedroom.

“We’re gonna need to go to the store later,” she says when he comes into the room to see her digging through the fridge while the coffee maker steams and bubbles happily. “I hope you like eggs, because that’s what I’ve got.”

“Eggs are fine,” Ben says, “do you want some help?”

“No, go sit down, I’ve got this,” Rey tells him, gesturing at the little kitchen table with the spatula that she’s just pulled out of a drawer.

As they eat their eggs and drink their coffee, Rey breaks the silence, pointing at the tattoos on his arm, clearly visible in his shirtless state.

“Do you ever regret getting those?” She asks. “I’ve been thinking about getting one myself but… it’s permanent so it’s a little scary.”

He glances down at his arm, where the rings of black sit.

“I don’t regret the tattoos, necessarily, they do represent important moments in my life. Major achievements. Shit I’m proud of,” he says, “But I do regret the reason that I started getting them. It’s just a reminder of how fucked my whole life was now.”

Rey nods.

“That’s understandable,” she says, reaching out to run her fingers across the skin there. “But maybe someday you’ll be able to look at it as a reminder that even when things were at their worst you still managed to survive.”
“That would be nice,” he says, then tilts his head in her direction. “What are you thinking about getting?”

Rey blushes a little and looks down at the table.

“The Resistance symbol. Small, on my ankle or wrist maybe,” she says, “I’ve never really a family, you know. But I realized while I was away from them that that wasn’t true any more, thanks to them.”

“I like it,” Ben says.

Rey grins at him.

“Well, if I ever get the courage to do it, you’ll be the first to know,” she says.

Ben insists on doing the dishes after which they go to take a shower. Rey suggests they share to save time and water, but they get distracted by the prospect of shower sex and end up wasting a good deal of both instead.

The rest of the day is spent running to the store for groceries and taking a long, leisurely stroll through Balboa Park. He texts Mitaka a little, just to check in and see how he’s holding up. Mitaka, as it turns out, is on his own California trip, up in LA, visiting Luce.

He and Rey talk a lot. Which is fair, seeing as how they have a lot to talk about. Some conversations are easy and enjoyable (see: the one about Rey’s sabbatical in Hawaii) and some are much harder and leave both of them in need of some time apart to cool their heads (see: anything involving the fact that Ben doesn’t have any fucking clue what he’s doing next). But piece by piece they begin to work through the mountain of unsaid words between them, chasing out secrets and replacing them with truths.

That night they make dinner together, shoulder to shoulder in the kitchen and Rey rides him ‘til she comes, nearly sobbing his name in desperation.

He falls asleep holding her.

The next week passes in a dreamy haze of food and sex and early morning runs and late night gaming sessions. They steer clear of the PC games for now, choosing to revisit old favorites on the various consoles stashed around the living room.

Ben can’t remember the last time he felt this good, this relaxed. It’s like the jagged edges of his battered heart are finally beginning to smooth over. They argue sometimes but he doesn’t feel his old, wild anger rising up to take hold of him when they do.

It’s still there, and Ben doubts that it will ever really be all the way gone and dreads the next time they have a real fight, but even this is a nearly miraculous change.

Each and every night they fall asleep curled up together in Rey’s bed or on the sofa, watching Netflix, but always pressed as close together as physically possible. They’re both keenly aware that this is their second chance and neither one of them wants to waste it.

The gaming community and media continues to speculate and stick their noses in where they don’t belong, but here and now they finally have the chance to shut out all the unimportant noise.

Ben does make a point to talk to his mother every couple of days though, and to people like Cassian and Jyn, who had reached out once the truth about the Championships had come to light. He hasn’t
entirely forgiven them yet for how quickly they had turned on him, thought the fact that they had done it in Rey’s defence softens the blow somewhat.

All the same, he’s learned lately that a life without meaningful connections isn’t worth much, and as much as he loves Rey, she can’t be the only thing in his world. It’s neither healthy nor reasonable. So when people offer him olive branches, he’s doing his best to accept them.

Eight days after Ben arrived in San Diego, they’re sitting in the living room, playing a heated game of Mario Kart in their underwear, when the sound of keys in the lock comes from the front door, followed by barking.

“Oops!” Rey says, “I forgot they were coming home today!”

“Wait, what?” Ben says, glancing frantically back and forth between the TV (where Rey is winning the goddamn race) and the door (which is beginning to open).

“Don’t lose focus now, Solo!” she taunts, just as the door swings wide open.

Several things happen at once: for starters, a very fat corgi comes bounding into the apartment, barking up a storm, followed by Rey’s roommate Finn and his boyfriend Poe.

“Hey Peanut, we’re ho- WHAT THE FUCK WHY ARE YOU NAKED?” Finn cries, dropping all of his bags and covering his eyes.

Then, Ben gets hit with a fucking koopa shell right before the finish line and finishes in last place.

“We’re not naked, we’re wearing underwear,” Rey says.

“Hey Rey. Ben. I guess the two of you made up then?” says Poe, with raised eyebrows as he looks between them.

“We did,” Rey says, getting to her feet, causing Finn to immediately throw his hands over his eyes, horrified.

“Please put some clothes on!” he pleases, “Both of you, I’m begging you! It’s bad enough that I have to see you – my adopted sister – in this state but having to look at this guy too; it’s just too much!”

Ben snorts, looking over at Rey, who’s actually wearing a very conservative sports bra and briefs, which is a far sight more than she had been wearing not too long ago. The memory of her naked and kneeling before him to take him into her mouth makes his dick twitch with interest and Ben abruptly decides that more clothing is in fact a good idea.

Rey grabs some jeans out of the dryer and shimmies into them, but Ben has to go back to her room to actually find his clothing. He can hear the sound of Rey talking to her roommates through the door as he dresses and while Finn certainly seems animated, he doesn't really sound too distressed now that Rey’s no longer scandalizing him. Ben takes it as a good sign that they’re not immediately screaming at him to leave or screaming at her to make him.

When he emerges once more, dressed in black jeans and a black shirt (because that’s pretty much the only thing he owns and he’s packed in a hurry) they’re all seated around the living room.

Rey pats the sofa next to her and he slides into the seat, glancing warily at her roommates who are perched in the chairs on either side of the room.

“I feel like this is the part where we’re supposed to give you the shovel talk,” Poe says, resigned,
“but honestly Rey can handle herself. And besides, I think you’ve already proven that you care about her, even if you didn’t quite stick the landing last time, to put it mildly.”

Finn crosses his arms and eyes Ben a little more suspiciously.

“But seriously, if you hurt her again, they’ll never find your body,” he says.

“Guys,” Rey scolds. “Play nice.”

“Alright, alright,” Poe says, “So Ben, we heard you finally dumped Snoke. Good for you. What’s next for you?”

Ben glances down at his hand, clasped tightly in Rey’s, then looks up to meet her eyes.

“I’m not sure quite yet,” he says, then, when Rey gives him a look that says ‘you can do better than that’, he sighs and continues. “We’ve been talking about some possibilities but this is the first time I’ve actually had any kind of freedom in almost ten years. Making decisions… is hard.”

“Shit, yeah, I bet,” says Finn, as he bends down to scoop BB up into his lap.

“Starting your life over isn’t easy. At least you guys look like you’ve finally got this thing figured out,” Poe says, gesturing between them. “Though the distance is still a factor, huh? Do you think you’ll stay in New York?”

He’s been thinking about it for days and the longer he spends here, the less he wants to leave – not for a day, not for a week, and certainly not for some nebulous unspecified amount of time until the next time he can come back. And just like that, he realizes that this one decision at least has already been made for him. No matter what else is happening, he knows at least this much.

Ben looks down at Rey, who is wearing the look of grim determination that she always wears when she’s reminded of the fact that some elements of their future are still very uncertain. He slips his hand into hers and gives her a lopsided grin before answering.

“Nah, I’m gonna miss a lot about living there, but the winters are fucking freezing and people are assholes,” he says, squeezing Rey’s hand. “I’ve heard San Diego is pretty nice though.”

It takes a second for Rey to realize what he’s just said, but once she does her eyes grow wide.

“Are you serious?” she asks, stunned, “I thought you hated California!”

“Let’s just say it’s seriously grown on me,” Ben tells her, smile widening as he watches Rey’s eyes fill up with happy tears and she begins blinking them away furiously, though that doesn’t do much to help and they begin to spill over, coursing down her cheeks in shiny tracks.

“You promise you’re not just moving here for me, right?” she’s saying. “Because we talked about this and we both agreed that impulse decisions are a bad thing and–”

“Rey, I love you. I’d move to the moon for you if you asked me to. Or New Jersey. California is no big deal. One of us was going to have to relocate at some point anyway and it might as well be me. You’ve got your team and your life here,” he says, reaching up with his free hand to wipe her tears away. “There’s nothing I care about in New York that matters even half as much to me.”

Her roommates at the very least seem to have the good sense to realize that this is a private moment that they’ve accidentally become a part of and they very quietly get up and sneak out of the room. Ben decides that maybe they’re not so bad after all.
“I don’t know what comes next for me, right now,” he says, “but I do know that I want to be with you. You’re my waypoint marker, Rey, everything else is negotiable, but I’m not interested unless it gets me closer to you.”

“So you’re really gonna stay?” Rey asks laughing a little through her tears.

Ben leans forwards and presses his lips against her forehead.

“Yeah,” he says, “I’m gonna stay.”

Chapter End Notes

Who are we kidding, of course there’s an epilogue coming at some point but I’m not sure when I’ll have it done. Could be days, could be weeks. I’m back in school and things are crazy but keep an eye out for that plus the falconry AU at some point in the future.

Thank you to everyone who has commented, shared, kudos’d, made art, made playlists, made manips, sent me joyful screaming messages on social media. Even though I kind of got too overwhelmed to keep up with responses I’ve read every single one and you have no idea what your support meant to me.

As usual, please feel free to come yell at me about this story on Twitter or Tumblr.
SURPRISE! This took a bit longer than I intended but I hope that it is worth the wait! Thank you ALL so much for the love and support you have shown me and this story you cannot even begin to know how much it means to me.

The INCREDIBLE ART in this chapter comes from the inimitable Kayurka who has given me so many beautiful pieces of art for this fic that I treasure with all my heart. Check her out on Tumblr and Twitter! If you’ve made me something during my hiatus that I haven’t responded to, please let me know! Tag me again so I can see it!

As always: this fic comes to you by the grace of cyborgharpy my dear friend and treasured beta. She is beyond compare and you all should be reading her fic Gimmie Sympathy because it’s BRILLIANT. (Also go follow her on twitter for quality content at @ashesforfoxes!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

One Year Later

Ben is pretty sure that the only reason he lets Rey con him into a walk on the beach is that they’re in Santa Monica for the day, which is special to them, and Ben, for all his outward protesting to the contrary, is utterly unable to deny her anything. They’d been in the area to visit the California Far Galaxy offices and seeing as how it was such a nice day for June in LA, they had decided to spend a couple hours playing tourist again before driving back to San Diego.

They’re strolling along the sand, Rey – barefoot and nearly skipping with delight – and Ben, stubbornly still wearing his heavy leather boots that not even the California heat has been able to convince him to give up – hand in hand. As he watches Rey reveling in the sight of the sun-drenched beach and sparkling ocean, he feels like maybe tromping through the sand is worth it for the brilliant smile on her face alone.

“Oh Ben! Look, how cute!” Rey says, tugging on his hand and bringing him back to reality as she points up the beach ahead of them.

Ben follows the line of her finger until he finds what she’s pointing at. A short distance away stands a gaggle of people all looking down at something and it takes him a minute to realize that they seem to have stumbled across some sort of corgi owners meet-up. And then he blinks, bemused, as it becomes clear that all the dogs are wearing costumes.

The humans are doing the best to get all the corgis lined up nicely but the one wearing a shark costume won’t cooperate and even Ben can’t quite contain his snort of amusement.
“We should have borrowed BB!” Rey says, “Then we could have joined in the fun. Don’t you think he’d look cute dressed like a little robot or something?”

Ben tugs her in a little closer, draping his arm around her shoulders and pressing a kiss against her temple.

“I, for one,” he says, against her hairline, “am glad that I don’t have to share you today, even with a dog. Even a cute one in a robot costume.”

Rey laughs and turns to press a kiss to the underside of his jaw in return.

“Well that’s very sweet, but you’re gonna have to share me for a second because I’ve gotta go take a picture of this for Finn, but I promise I’ll be right back!” She says, disentangling herself and sprinting off across the beach, phone in hand, auburn hair blowing in the breeze.

As he watches her go, Ben’s heart pounds like it’s going to burst right out of his chest. He loves her so much that it almost hurts. He would be happy to spend the rest of his days as a moon in her orbit if that was all she offered.

The fact that she seems to take everything he offers and give it back a thousand fold… it’s enough to almost bring him to his knees when he stops to think too hard about it.

The box that has been moving from one of his back pockets to another for the last few weeks is suddenly burning a hole through the fabric.

Ben has been living in California for almost ten months now, and while he still complains about the endless sunlight and the lack of public transit, and the traffic, and how sub-standard all the bread products are, he’s actually beginning to like it. The pace is slower on the West Coast and Rey is here.

He feels like he can breathe deeply for the first time since… well… maybe ever.

For a while in the early days, he’d bounced back and forth between New York City and San Diego, crashing at Rey’s apartment or Mitaka’s place, trying to get all of his affairs in order on the East Coast and then trying to figure out what his life looked like without Snoke.

There had been plenty of recruitment offers from other StarKiller teams, but he just hadn’t been interested. Instead he’d focused on streaming and convention appearances. One fun thing he’d learned was that if he and Rey did con meet-and-greets together he found them a whole lot less odious than when he did them alone. Actually, as it turned out, cons in general were more fun when he and Rey did them together.

At this point Rey was more than famous enough to garner her own throngs of adoring fans and conventions were more than happy to book them together once they realized how much they could capitalize on having the two of them appear together.

And then almost six months after he’d officially traded his winter coat for SPF 100 sunscreen, Far Galaxy had reached out to him with an offer that was too good to turn down.

Black Diamond was their latest top secret project and they were looking to sign a roster of high profile gamers to be in the first wave of their beta. The deal came with a hefty paycheck and the guarantee that he could work from anywhere he liked.

For example, the house he’d purchased in San Diego with the money from selling off his Upper East Side brownstone.
He and Rey had initially tried to do the normal, healthy relationship thing where she had lived at her place and he had lived at his and they saw each other for dates and sometimes spent the night, but after the fifth time that her roommates caught one of them sneaking to the bathroom stark-naked in the middle of the night (“My eyes!” Poe had wailed as Ben just crossed his arms and glared), everyone agreed that it was probably for the best if Rey moved in with Ben.

Up ahead of him, Rey is bending down to pet a corgi dressed in a lobster costume, while talking to the dog’s owner and Ben sighs, resigning himself to the fact that he’s probably going to have to go talk to these people too if he ever wants to get Rey back.

It takes him a bit to extricate her from all the dogs and people, but once they’re on their way again, Rey turns to him and says, “So we’re getting one of our own, right?”

And the look she’s giving him is all huge hazel eyes and thousand-watt grin and before he even knows what he’s doing, Ben finds himself nodding.

They stroll onwards as the sun begins to inch towards the horizon and the shadows grow longer.

The box in his pocket grows heavier with each and every step. And then he can take it no longer.

“Rey,” he says, and points out towards the shoreline in front of them, “what’s that over there?”

“What’s what?” Rey asks, frowning.

“It’s right over there, by the water,” he says still pointing towards absolutely nothing.

Rey slips out from under his arm again and trots over to the imaginary object.

“I still don’t see what you’re talking about, Ben,” she says, brow furrowed. “There’s nothing here.”

“Huh, must have just been my imagination,” he says, doing everything possible to keep his voice steady.

When Rey turns back around, Ben is down on one knee.

When Rey says ‘yes’ and kisses him like this is the last chance they’ll ever get, crying and giggling at the same time, he doesn’t even care that he’s got sand all over his pants.
Asked @ReyOfLight to be my player two forever. She said yes.

[external image 2]

**Rose Tico - The Resistance @TicoTock**

Replying to @KyloRen @ReyOfLight

**YES!!!!! PLEASE LET ME PLAN YOUR WEDDING. I'M THINKING A SILENCER/MILLENIA THEME. IT WILL BE TASTEFUL.**

[external image 3]

**Finn Gunner #ResistThis @FN2187**

Replying to @KyloRen @ReyOfLight

*Hey! I asked Rey to be MY player two years ago and here you come stealing my line. Just when I was starting to think you were ok too! SMH (jk you know I’m already picking out my man of honor tux)*

**Poe Dameron #ResistThis @PoeHotDameron**

Replying to @FN2187 @KyloRen @ReyOfLight

*Well there goes MY proposal idea… damnit Ben!*

[external image 4]

**Cassian Andor ~ Rogue One @Cand0r**

Replying to @KyloRen @ReyOfLight
Ben, you’re turning into a respectable adult! What happened to my favorite sweary manchild? I hardly recognize you! ;P (CONGRATS YOU TWO, SO GLAD YOU FINALLY WORKED IT OUT)

Ben Solo @KyloRen

Replying to @Cand0r @FarGalaxy @ReyOfLight

Fuck off, Cas.

Cassian Andor ~ Rogue One @Cand0r

Replying to @KeyloRen @FarGalaxy @ReyOfLight

HAHAHA there’s the Ben Solo I know and love. (PS @RebelJyn sends her love too)

[external image 5]

Dopheld Mitaka // Kessel Run @MTKA

Replying to @KyloRen @ReyOfLight

I’M CRYING LOVE IS REAL

[external image 6]

John D. Bannon @JohnDBomb

Replying to @KyloRen @ReyOfLight @MTKA

Did you guys see this? CC: @Phastasm @Vulpexx @GenerallyHux @HeyBigBaller69

Phasma Scyre - DeathWatch @phastasm

Replying to @JohnDBomb @Vulpexx @GenerallyHux @HeyBigBaller69 @KyloRen @ReyOfLight @MTKA

You’re gonna need a bigger stick.

John D. Bannon @JohnDBomb

Replying to @Phastasm @Vulpexx @GenerallyHux @HeyBigBaller69 @KyloRen @ReyOfLight @MTKA

What?

Phasma Scyre - DeathWatch @Phastasm

Replying to @JohnDBomb @Vulpexx @GenerallyHux @HeyBigBaller69 @KyloRen @ReyOfLight @MTKA
It’s for the shit you’re trying to stir.

Caide Steton - DeathWatch @HeyBigBaller

Replying to @Phastasm @JohnDBomb @Vulptexx @GenerallyHux @KyloRen @ReyOfLight @MTKA

Lol

[external image 7]

Far Galaxy @Far Galaxy

Retweeted @KyloRen

Massive congratulations to our newest Pro Streamer for the upcoming @BlackDiamond and @ReyOfLight, one of @StarKiller’s most talented and charming players. We at FG wish you both all the happiness in the word! PS we’re all expecting invites to the wedding, after all, we introduced you ;)

[MOD] Swoopit

Responding to ReyloFanForever

Listen. Discussion of players personal lives or romantic relationships is against the community guidelines. I should suspend your account for this. But I’m so f****** happy this story got a happy ending that I’m just gonna let it slide just this once. I am however locking the thread because we both know that if I leave it open it’ll be a mess within minutes.

Thread Locked By [MOD] Swoopit

One (More) Year (And Three Months) Later

“Rey?” Comes Finn’s muffled voice through the door, “you almost ready to go?”

“Just a minute!” she calls back, clicking furiously away on her keyboard.

“Are you… are you gaming? I’m coming in,” Finn says, sounding scandalized, before barging into the room.

“Hey!” Rey says, indignantly, though she’s doesn’t lose focus on the screen for a second, “I could
have been naked.”

Finn snorts.

“As if. Rose and Paige were here at 5 AM helping you get ready. This is a bit of a weird time to be playing StarKiller though, everyone’s downstairs, waiting for you so we can drive over to the venue,” He comes up behind her and leans over her shoulder so he can see her screen. “Is this like a jitters thing?”

“No,” Rey says, as she shoots disorientation beams at her opponent. She’s playing Millenia as usual and it takes a second for all the particle effects to dissipate enough for Finn to see that the person she’s fighting is playing Silencer.

“Is that Ben?” Finn asks and Rey flushes a little.

“Maybe?” She says, trying for a voice that she hopes doesn’t sound too guilty. “Would it be better if I said it was someone else?”

“No!” Finn cries, gesturing up and down at her and then back at the computer screen. “You’re sitting here in your wedding dress duking it out online with your fiancé! Also I feel like this is cheating on the ‘don’t see each other on the day of the wedding before said wedding’ rule but I’m not quite sure how.”

“I know I know; this looks really weird. But… it’s how we met, right? And it’s a part of our relationship. We wanted to incorporate that into our day somehow,” she says as she blasts Silencer off of the objective and begins capturing it herself.

Finn steps back and pinches the bridge of his nose.

“I will never understand you two,” he says, shaking his head. “Never.”

Ben makes a slight miscalculation on the speed of his newly nerfed ability cooldowns and Rey is able to fire off Millie’s Ultra, directly into his face, dropping his hit points to zero. She lets out a whoop as the victory screen pops up.

Finn watches judgmentally as she types a bunch of heart emotes into the chat box and then logs off.

“Feel better now that you’ve established dominance?” he asks, dryly.

Rey grins at him, standing up from her gaming chair and coming over to smooth down the front of his crisp white suit. The whole ensemble is pulled together with a black tie and a corsage of golden flowers clipped to his lapel.

“I feel amazing. And you look amazing. Thank you for being my Man of Honor,” she tells him. “Even if you think I don’t know how to do weddings right.”

Finn snorts.

“You quantifiably don’t know how to do weddings right,” he says, but offers her his arm all the same.

Rey gathers the gauzy swell of her skirt into one hand and slips the other through Finn’s arm.

Arm in arm they walk out of the gaming room and through the wide, airly hallways of the house where she and Ben live these days.
They descend the steps slowly, Finn keeping a careful watch to make sure that Rey doesn’t get tangled in the million-and-a-half layers of fabric that make up the bottom of her gown. It’s a delicate, floaty thing that swirls around her as she moves.

It’s a slightly non-traditional dress. No stain or lace for Rey, just light, airy silk organza, in pale white with gold beads and crystals embroidered here and there. It’s an A-line dress, with a plunging neckline thanks to the way the chiffon fabric is crossed over in the front. Her shoulders and back are exposed and her hair, longer now than she’s ever let it grow before, drapes like a mahogany curtain across her upper back. She’s wearing a pair of gold rose earrings, her ‘something borrowed’ from Leia.

“Ben’s gonna flip his shit when he sees you,” Finn tells her as they reach the bottom of the stairs and Rey laughs.

“I hope so! I won our last game as non-married people so he has agreed that we can in fact get the dog he promised me forever ago. Hopefully this will help make him forget about that.”

“Do you guys make all your important decisions through competition?” Finn asks.

“Only the really important ones,” Rey replies with a grin.

He groans as he helps her into the limo where all the other bridesmaids are waiting. Rose, Paige, Jess, and Jyn all ‘ooh’ and ‘ahh’ appropriately, though very shortly the conversation turns to laughing about the latest disaster to come out of E3 this year and things start to feel normal again.

The ride seems to take no time at all, which might be because it’s not actually that long a drive to Balboa Park.

“You’re so beautiful and I love you so much,” Rose tells her, dabbing at her eyes with a spare tissue as they all pile out of the limo, “even if I am still sad that you didn’t agree to let me make this a cosplay wedding.”

“She’ll get over it eventually,” says Paige, giving her sister a one-armed hug. “We’ll see you at the main event, okay?”

And then Rey is left to hurry up and wait in a little room that is labeled “bridal lounge” but in actuality feels much more like a very fancy department store dressing room, while everyone else assembles.

For a while she’s alone in the room, sorely regretting that she opted to pass her phone off to Finn for now because she’s so antsy that she’s about to jump out of her skin. Not from nerves – no, Rey has never been more sure about anything in her entire life than the decision to marry Ben – she’s just a mess of conflicting excitement and terror that she’s about to wake up and realize that her beautiful, wonderful, perfect life is all a dream.

She could really use a good game of Bejewelled right about now.

Thankfully, she’s not left to stew for too long.

There’s a gentle knock on the door and when she opens it up, she smiles broadly at the sight of Luke, looking very polished by his standards, in a dark gray suit, holding an enormous bouquet of white and gold peonies, roses, and lilies in his right hand.

“I can see my sister had her hand in the decorating scheme,” he says, glancing between the flowers and Rey’s dress.
“How did you know?” Rey asks, grinning.

“She’s very fond of what I believe the kids these days call ‘bling’,” says Luke.

Rey laughs.

“Come on in,” Rey tells him, stepping back so that Luke can enter.

“You look beautiful, Rey,” he says, smiling in that very small, very proud way that never fails to compel Rey to grin back.

“You don’t look so bad yourself, old man,” She says, closing the door.

There’s a beat of silence as Luke takes her in.

“I never did thank you,” he says, “for everything you did for Ben. Even when he was doing his best to be unworthy of help.”

Rey shrugs a little. Everything from that first few months of their relationship feels like a distant nightmare at this point, a time not ever forgotten, but one certainly moved beyond.

“I think he just really needed someone to love him. And I needed someone to love me just as badly. It was a win-win,” she says softly. “He certainly didn’t make it easy sometimes but in the end the scales between us came out pretty balanced.”

Luke gives her a small nod.

“Still,” he says, “that boy got very lucky the day he met you and I hope he never forgets that. I know that neither I nor Leia ever will. Thank you for helping him find his way home.”

Rey has to blink her eyes a few times to keep from crying and ruining her makeup.

“Thank you, Luke,” she says, and with that, she can faintly hear the opening strains of her walking music begin to play.

“Time to go,” she says, smoothing down her dress and hair.

“You ready?” Luke asks as he takes her arm like Finn had before, and hands her the giant bouquet.

“The readiest,” Rey replies, grinning.

Luke opens the door and they head out and into the open-air of the flower garden where the ceremony is taking place.

When they round the corner of a tall hedge-row and begin proceeding down the white fabric-lined aisle, she has to pause for a second to take in the sign. Sitting in the rows of white wooden folding chairs she sees all of her friends and her teammates, her makeshift family of choice. The all of the Organa-Solo’s are there, including Ben’s father Han, who is attending under Leia’s supervision and many, many promises of good behavior.

She sees the members of her community who have supported her, who had helped her lift herself up out of the pit of self-conscious anxiety and fear that her entire career would revolve around her relationship with Ben. Holdo’s lilac hair glows like a halo in the sun and when Rey glances in her direction she sees the entire Far Galaxy delegation in their section, smiling and waving as she walks by.
And there, at the very end of the aisle, she sees Ben. He looks as handsome as she’s ever seen him, dressed in a black tux that fits his massive frame like a glove. He’s facing the podium, but when she’s about halfway down the aisle, Cassian nudges him in the side and Ben turns to see her and his face cracks into the widest smile that she has ever witnessed on his face in a public setting.

Rey is suddenly so overcome that it’s all she can do to not run the rest of the way to him and throw herself into his arms. Thankfully Luke is there, keeping her steady on. She hands her bouquet off to Finn as she walks past him and then she’s there. Standing face to face with Ben.

Rey, who has seen him almost every day for over two years still can’t believe that he’s a real person that she gets to touch and hold and love. That he’s hers. Forever.

Ben takes her hands in his, massive fingers and palms wrapping around hers like they’re nothing, Rey knows for a fact that her makeup doesn’t stand a snowflake’s chance in hell of surviving this ceremony intact.

“Good game,” she whispers to him, making him laugh quietly. “You know, you almost won that last match.”

Ben’s eyes rove across her face, so soft and so warm that Rey fears she might melt where she stands. She looks back across the last two-and-a-half years and once more she’s struck by how lucky they are that somehow they ended up here.

The officiant steps forwards and clears his throat, preparing to begin speaking and Rey knows that maybe she should turn and look at this person that they’ve hired specifically to talk to them at their wedding, but she just can’t tear her eyes away from Ben. He seems to be laboring under similar difficulties.

“I might have lost the match,” Ben says so softly that she alone can hear, and he gives her hands a gentle squeeze. “But I’m pretty sure I still won the game.”

“Welcome friends and family. Today we are gathered here to bear witness to the most joyous of occasions: the wedding of Rey Sanderson and Ben Organa Solo,” says the officiant, but Rey can barely hear him over the song of her own heart.

And if she spends the rest of her wedding crying tears of joy, well, who can really blame her?

The thing that no one ever bothers to mention about wedding nights, Ben thinks wryly, is that you’re probably gonna be too tired from the wedding to do anything fun after the reception.

He’s sitting at a table with Mitaka and Poe – who are caught up in some deep conversation about gaming mice that Ben has not been paying even a drop of attention to – watching as Rey and all of her brides-people pose for photos with various fun props against the custom backdrop they’d ordered expressly for that purpose. It’s a pure black sheet with their names printed in gold foil across the top and cascades of string lights dripping down it, creating a glowing star-field. Rey, who is currently in the middle of a six-person group hug, outshines them all.

Ben has some vague idea that he should be feeling abandoned or jealous of everyone who’s stealing Rey’s attention from him right now, but honestly? He’s never going to get tired of watching Rey be happy. He’s good sitting with his chin resting on one hand, elbow propped on the table, while she
dazzles the room. Besides, she’s already made him take all sorts of photos that he just knows are going to come back to haunt him and a break from having a camera pointed in his face is a welcome relief.

The party rolls on and eventually Ben finds himself pulled out onto the dance floor by his new wife, which – he has a wife! Now that is a headtrip.

Their first dance is to the Lana Del Rey song “Video Games.”

Ben had rolled his eyes when Rey suggested it, but as he stands here swaying with her in his arms (because that’s the only kind of dancing he knows how to do) it feels weirdly right, even if it is a bit on the nose.

“It's you, it's you, it's all for you; everything I do,” Lana croons and Ben gets it.

“Hey, you nerd,” Rey says, looking up at him.

“Hmm?” Ben responds, meeting her gaze as he pulls her closer, fingers splaying out across the bare skin of her back.

“Wanna play Super Smash Bros later?” She whispers to him, winking.

“I love you so fucking much,” Ben says, laughing as he leans down to kiss the Cheshire grin right off her face.

Their assembled friends and family cheer and whoop at the sight.

When he pulls away, Rey leans her head against his chest and hums contentedly.

They stay at the party for another hour or so. Long enough to feed each other cake – skipping the tradition of trying to get it all over each other as Rey had made her displeasure with that particular idea known back when they’d first began planning this whole thing.

“Don’t you dare shove it in my face, Solo, it’s a waste of good food!” She’d told him, jabbing him in the chest with a finger to make sure her point stuck.

The cake is a fairly traditional three tier affair, chocolate cake with white chocolate ganache icing, however instead of cake toppers they had opted for Millennia and Silencer figurines, and the whole thing is covered with red crystal rock candy that makes it look like Crait.

They also stick around long enough for Ben to do his fair share of socializing and greeting guests – which is not exactly fun but also isn’t nearly as bad as the shit he’d had to endure under Snoke’s thumb so he just grins and bears it – before he notices that Rey is beginning to yawn. He checks his watch, and winces at the 11:34 he sees there. It’s not exactly late by their standards but this has been an exceptionally long day.

They bid their farewells and bundle into the waiting limo, and finally – finally – they are alone. The volume of Rey’s skirts makes fitting them both on one bench difficult but neither of them is interested in being far apart, so they figure it out, shoving the majority of the fabric off to the left so that Rey can cuddle up to his side, hugging his arms and leaning her head on his shoulder. He lays his hand on her right thigh, tracing idle patterns across the fabric.

“So, Mrs. Solo,” Ben says, not even bothering to hide the smirk that curls the corners of his mouth at the sound of those words, “I believe you said something about Smash.”
He feels Rey smile against his shoulder.

“I believe I did,” she says.

They actually do play Super Smash Bros that night, but not until after Ben has carried Rey across the threshold of the opulent honeymoon sweet of the US Grant Hotel where they’re spending the night before catching their flight to Japan in the morning.

And they certainly don’t play until after Ben has carefully undone what feels like several hundred tiny closures and hooks on Rey’s dress, or until the beautiful garment falls to the floor and leaves her standing there, completely naked save for a pair of white lace panties.

Ben, who has seen Rey naked countless times by this point still feels like the breath has been knocked out of him at the sight.

When Rey steps forwards and begins divesting him of his tux – jacket first and then tie – Ben’s hands drop to her waist so that he can pull her closer, bending down to kiss her full on the mouth until they’re both panting and a little dizzy.

“When we first met,” she says breathlessly, as she works at the buttons on his white dress shirt, “did you ever think we’d end up here?”

“Are we talking first meeting in the game or in real life?” Ben asks, reaching down to undo his belt buckle, to speed the process along.

“In the game,” Rey answers.

Ben huffs a laugh, pulling the belt free.

“Well at first I thought you were a dude and also cheating so not really, no,” he says.

He reaches up to cup Rey’s face in both of his hands, marveling as usual how someone who looks so delicate and fragile can be as tough and so very much his equal in all ways.

“Real life though?” Ben murmurs against her lips, “By the time I put you on that train I was five seconds away from proposing on the spot if I had thought that would have stopped you from leaving.”

Rey nuzzles her face against his palms.

“I would have said no,” she tells him, with an apologetic smile, “but it would have been a tempting offer.”

Ben kisses her again. He kisses her and kisses her, reveling in her softness and the sweet taste of the chocolate that still lingers in her mouth from the reception.

As Rey finally manages to get the last of his buttons undone, she shoves his shirt off of his shoulders, leaving him bare to the waist, and pulls back slightly.

Her hand reaches up and traces across the black bands that encircle his right bicep before she leans in and with very great care, places a kiss on each one.

“What are you doing?” Ben rumbles, chest suddenly feeling tight with an emotion that he doesn’t quite know how to classify, and eyes prickling a little.

“Reminding you that you survived – that we survived – and we are here because of it,” she tells him,
stepping back towards the massive white expanse of the king sized bed, and sliding her underwear down her legs.

_Every day, he promises her silently, every day I will be more grateful for you. I will never stop being grateful for you._

“Now get your pants off and come join me over here,” she commands and really, who is he to say no?

Rey tries to tug him up to the top of the bed to join her straight away, but Ben chooses instead to crawl up between her legs, draping them over his shoulders so that he can eat her out like she’s the last meal he’s ever going to have and he takes great pleasure in the way she writhes and arches and tugs on his hair as he licks and sucks at her before ever so carefully sliding two fingers up inside of her, curling and pumping them until she comes around them, chanting his name like a prayer.

Only then does he surge up to meet her, letting her grasping hands pull him in for a filthy kiss that sends and electric bolt of desire straight to his dick. Rey’s hands reach down between their bodies to grasp hold of him and she pumps him once, twice, making him see stars, before she guides him into her body.

“Ben,” Rey gasps against his mouth as he presses inside of her, brain going haywire at the heat and warmth of her body surrounding him with delicious pressure. He pauses for a second before pulling out and thrusting back into her, hard.

“I love you- oh! Yes, do that again!” She wraps her legs around his hips and rolls against him to meet his thrusts.

“Rey,” he says against her throat, licking a stripe across the salty sweet skin he finds there. “My Rey of light.”

Ben thrusts into her over and over, fingers of the hand that he isn't using to support his bodyweight above her, rubbing slow, firm circles over her clit. He murmurs nonsense endearments and promises into her skin and mouth over and over until he feels her clench around him and his vision starts to white out.

He comes with a shudder and a groan, and Rey’s hands smooth across his back and shoulders soothing him through it as she kisses his face, his neck, his chest, any bit of him that she can get her mouth on.

When at last he collapses next to her, they’re both panting and sticky with sweat, but he can’t stop himself from reaching out to tug her into the curve of his chest.

“Mazel Tov,” Rey says, grinning back at him before she yawns.

Ben snorts.

“You’ve been spending too much time with my mother,” he says.

Rey makes a face.

“Can we please not talk about your mum while we’re naked in bed?” she says, then wriggles out of his grasp.

“Oh come on! I didn’t think it was _that_ bad,” Ben says, reaching for her.
Rey laughs, leaning back over to kiss him.

“I’ve gotta pee,” she says, before darting off towards the bathroom. “I’ll be back in a sec.”

When she returns a few minutes later, Ben is leaning back against the pillows, one arm thrown up above his head.

Rey leaps up onto the bed, crawling across the sheets until she’s looming over him.

“So,” she says, grinning, “Smash?”

They do play Super Smash Bros then, until Rey can’t keep her eyes open any longer, and she falls asleep, controller in hand, curled up next to Ben while the character selection screen music plays.

Ben lays awake for a while longer, staring down at her and running his fingers through her hair.

He thinks about Snoke. He thinks about his old teammates. He thinks about all the ways that things could have turned out differently, turned out worse. Turned out with him alone, lost forever in the dark. Ben can still feel the ghost of Rey’s lips where they had touched each of his tattoos and it’s as though there has been an alchemical reaction there. As though they’ve been transmuted and changed on a fundamental level.

They are no longer marks of shame, of a time when he could only measure himself in victory or failure. They are battle scars. Proof that he endured. That he kept going long enough to get here. Long enough to find Rey and himself.

Ben holds Rey very close and traces her freckles with his fingertips until his own eyes grow heavy and he drifts off to sleep as well.

He dreams that he’s fallen into StarKiller, taking Silencer’s place on the starting screen. When he glances over, Rey is standing by his side, resplendent in Millennia’s silver armor. He smiles.

The voice of the game announcer echoes around them: “Supremacy on Varykino! Ready! Fight!”

They leap into action and Ben grins.

This is going to be fun.

Game Over

Play Again?

Chapter End Notes

This is the sappiest epilogue ever and it’s WHAT THEY DESERVE.

I have a new fic up, if you’re down for another wild AU! I finally published the first chapter of my Reylo Falconry AU, A Bird in the Hand and I hope that you’ll come
along on that ride too!

Thank you to everyone who has commented, shared, kudos’d, made art, made playlists, made manips, sent me joyful screaming messages on social media. Even when I was on hiatus I still read every comment on this fic and they helped me power through and find my inspiration to write this epilogue!

As always, please feel free to come yell at me about this story on Twitter or Tumblr (even though I’m really not using it much since they’ve decided to set their whole platform on fire).

Works inspired by this one: Dreaming in Digital -1 by cyborgharpy, Dreaming in Digital - 2 by cyborgharpy, Fan Friction by cyborgharpy, Enterprisingy

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!