Summary

“Game over,” the voice whispered in her ear.

The first time Rey goes laser tagging with her friends, she nearly beats the highest score until a mysterious dark figure stops her.

Notes

A Modern AU highly inspired by the "Take me laser tagging and then push me into a corner and kiss me. then shoot me and walk away" Tumblr post.

Thanks to my amazing beta-reader, nite0wl29 ♡
“I’m sorry; I don’t think I can do anything this time.”

Rey nervously tightened the grip on her bag as she sighed exasperatedly, the words of the mechanic echoing throughout the large shop. She knew her car was doomed—it had been for months, if not years. Nevertheless, she’d still been holding onto the hope it would wait until summer to break, when she didn’t have to go to school nor work.

“I can drop you off after my shift,” he offered with a saddened smile while wiping his greasy hands on the legs of his orange jumpsuit.

The smile she returned wasn’t as warm as she’d intended it to be, still bitter about her vehicle’s breakdown. She’d been used to fixing it herself or with the help of her roommate, even more frequently for the last two months. Saying she hadn’t been expecting it to croak would have been a lie: the unusual noise she’d heard coming from the hood on the way back home had alerted her enough to leave it on the side of the road and call Poe. It hadn’t taken more than twenty minutes for her neighbor to show up and drag the old truck to the garage he worked in.

“No, thanks. I’ll call Finn.”

A subtle smile made its way to the mechanic’s lips as he nodded, heading back to the other side of the shop where a colleague of his waved at him, obviously struggling with a tire.

Rey had known Poe since she’d settled in Kamino, which was about three years prior. The little house next to his had been the only one offering a vacant room and not demanding an insane amount of money for it. It could have been way worse: she had decent quarters, the university nearby and two roommates, Finn and Rose, who had become her friends in the space of two days. They were far from being the perfect cohabitants: Finn could spend an insane amount of time under the running water of the shower, Rose usually forgot to turn the lights off and she kept losing her keys— but Rose would always find a way to fix anything broken in the apartment while Finn never let them starve to death, turning poor leftovers, including nothing more than pasta and cheese, into a delicious meal with an incredible ease.

It had only been a question of weeks before Poe showed up, introducing himself with a ridiculous confidence and inviting them for a drink none of them had been able to refuse; he was charming, but on top of that, extremely welcoming. The impromptu visits had become more and more frequent, until they’d reached the point where they’d gotten used to seeing him show up at least
once a week, his arms either weighed down with food or video games under their amused smiles, always accompanied by the young, ginger dog that was now running towards Rey. If dogs could smile, this one would surely be at this moment.

“Hey boy-” The Labrador’s paws landed on her stomach forcing her to take a few steps back, unable to repress her smile any longer as she started rubbing the dog’s chin.

It took Finn twenty minutes to pick up his phone and ten more to arrive at Black Squadron Garage. Rey was still playing with the dog when the brakes of his car squeaked in a familiar sound before the door slammed, making Poe’s colleague Jessika glance at them from under the car she was draining.

“Sorry, I had to gas up,” he said as he got out of his car. “What is it this time?”

Rey shrugged as she watched Poe’s dog welcome Finn with his usual barking, alerting his owner who appeared a few seconds later, his bright orange suit nearly glowing in the nascent darkness of the evening. Judging by the grease marks on his cheeks and hair, she would have sworn he’d just tried taming his curls.

“Finn!” He exclaimed, addressing a wide smile to the man as he greeted him with a gentle tap on the arm, the other idly rubbing his dog’s head. “I’m afraid Miss Johnson’s car has breathed its last breath.”

“It was bound to happen,” Finn replied as he landed a hand on Rey’s shoulder. “I’m still impressed you managed to keep it running for so long,” he added, turning to her with a compassionate smile.

So was she. This car had been both a miracle and a nightmare for the last three years, granting her a sensation of freedom until it refused to start, most of the time when she was already late for class. She had been rather lucky until now, having both her roommates and neighbors to drive her whenever this happened. But some things eventually had to stop, and today her luck had officially run out.

“I’ll drive you tomorrow, and we can figure this out on Saturday,” Finn added, but she was already far away, her eyes lingering in disbelief on the old truck.

It might have been a piece of junk, but it was her piece of junk; and despite her constant complaints, she’d grown attached to it. A very bad habit of hers, she knew it. She couldn’t help keeping everything, unable to throw any of her stuff away, resulting in her room being an absolute mess. Even the slightest change in her daily life felt unbearable: she kept buying the same washing powder, the same shampoo and the same ready-prepared dishes, driving both Finn and Poe crazy whenever they went to the supermarket together. Rose didn’t appear bothered by it, although she had her opinion on the ready-prepared dishes.

“You need a drink,” Poe stated, arms crossed as he followed her gaze.

If someone could understand her attachment to the vehicle, it was most likely to be him. The idea was appealing, but she hadn’t planned on being out tonight. Truth be told, she hadn’t planned anything -but this wasn’t planned.

“I don’t-” she started, shortly cut by the mechanic.

“Come on, if not a proper burial, you owe it at least a goodbye drink!”

Running low on excuses, Rey turned to her friend in hopes of finding an ally in him. A great mistake of her’s, she realized, when she saw his eyes leaving hers to meet Poe’s, and his shoulders
slightly shook by a helpless shrug.

“He’s right. Carcass deserves a goodbye drink.”

She rolled her eyes at the name they’d all given to the car, doing her best not to show her amusement. “*One* drink--” she said, a finger raised as a warning.

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“Hugs!”

“Dameron, for fuck’s sake.”

Arms wide open as if he was going to embrace the bartender, Poe stepped into the place as if he owned it, ignoring the man’s flustered gaze as he leaned an elbow on the marble counter.

“Animals are not allowed in here!” he spat, scowling at the silent dog wagging his tail who was looking at him with the same excitement he bestowed upon anyone laying eyes on him. Unflappable, Poe pretended to look ignorantly around him for a few seconds before innocently pointing to the dog with a thumb above his shoulder.

“That’s insane, Baby’s right here!”

Poe’s lips curled up in a grin, waiting for the other man to burst in the same laughter engulfing Rey and Finn. Ignoring the joyful bark of the dog at his name being called, the man closed his eyes and let out a loud, exasperated gasp.

“You named it Baby.”

It was more of a statement than question; a weary, disbelieving statement Poe met with the same huge smile that hadn’t left his face for the last few minutes as he nodded proudly. An uncontrollable snort escaped both Finn and Rey as they watched the scene from a few feet away. They’d moved on from the embarrassment they once felt every time the mechanic idolized his dog, now accustomed to it. Even Finn, formerly afraid of every animal, had grown attached to him after spending a lot of time with his owner.

“Anyway, I’m just here for a drink with my squad.” He beckoned the two students to approach with a wave of his hand, still leaning on the counter.

“We’re not his squad,” Finn hastened to clarify with a frown, shortly cut by Rey landing a hand on his shoulder.

“I think we are,” she admitted, hardly repressing a laugh.

The place was a rather peculiar one: halfway between an old diner and a modern bar where neon lights met vintage seats, all rhythmed by a remote background music that sounded like a soundtrack from an epic science-fiction movie clashing with the jukebox secluded at the other side of the room. *A diner from the future*, Rey thought as she grabbed her drink and sunk into her chair. *A diner in space*, she corrected herself as she noticed the small bulbs on the ceiling recreating a perfect night sky.
“To Carcass,” Poe solemnly declared as he raised his drink among them.

The three glasses clinked against each other, and so did the second and third they ordered. Rey thanked herself for sticking with lemonade when Poe’s glass landed a bit abruptly on the table as he finished his third margarita, eyes fixed on the neon sign hanging above a door near the counter.

“You know what I haven’t done in a long time?”

Finn turned to Rey with an inquiring look as she followed Poe’s gaze. It took her a few seconds to adjust to the neon light’s brightness and decipher the words it was shaped in.

“Laser tag?” she asked, incredulous.

“Laser tag,” he confirmed with a mischievous grin.

They had already been away for too long, Rey thought as she turned to Finn. Rose would probably start wondering where they were or worse, feel left behind.

“I’ll help you get you a new car if you win.”

The offer awakened a spark in the young woman’s eyes before she could begin to decline. Poe wasn’t even drunk, which meant he was more than serious. Judging by Finn’s smile behind his glass, her driver wasn’t opposed to the idea either.

“One game,” she warned as the three of them got on their feet, heading to the counter.

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“Another drink, I suppose.”

The red-haired man behind the counter greeted them with a bored glare for the second time of the evening, already grabbing three glasses when Poe stopped him by raising a hand in surrender.

“We’d like to join the game, actually.”

The way his eyes suddenly lingered on Poe betrayed his surprise, but Rey remained stunned by the man’s ability to stay calm and composed under any circumstances. Pushing the glasses aside he took a few steps to his right, running his fingers along a computer’s keyboard for a few seconds before he looked up to them. “Names?”

Only Finn wasn’t able to pick his own name due to its popularity and ended up with FN-2187, his initials followed by his student ID number.

“Alright, anyone’s first time laser tagging?”

Rey timidly raised her hand, already feeling the judging eyes of the bartender examining her as he pressed a walkie-talkie in his pale hands.

“Three players, one novice” he announced in the small black device.

“Copy,” replied a voice from the other side.
A few more hits on the keyboard later, he seemed to remember something and looked down on the silent labrador as if he was searching for his words.

“The dog can’t go inside.”

“Of course!” Poe agreed, kneeling next to his dog while muttering a few words to him. Baby almost immediately headed behind the counter, under the annoyed eyes of the owner.

“Your garage is literally next door. Can’t you just leave him there?”

“No,” the mechanic replied with a serious face as he got back on his feet. “You know why?”

“Please don’t say it—”

“Because nobody puts Baby in a corner.”

This time, Rey hadn’t anticipated the giggle that escaped her at the sight of the man’s deadpan expression as he handed them three little red badges, clearly fighting the impulse to roll his eyes. He silently pointed to the door behind him, beckoning them to enter as he inhaled deeply, avoiding Poe’s insisting gaze.

As soon as they passed through the doors, Rey felt as if she’d stepped into a far, far away world: the dark room was faintly enlightened by black lights highlighting her shoelaces and white shirt, red and blue dots originating from hanging uniforms dancing on the walls and ceiling before her intrigued eyes. Poe and Finn were already heading towards the equipment when a deep, modulated voice echoed between the heavy walls of the Briefing Room.

“Welcome to Starkiller Base. Put a jacket on and grab a blaster.”

Imitating the boys, Rey grabbed the first jacket within easy reach, inserting her red badge into the slit above the gun hanging at her side. Her name automatically appeared on the small screen, accompanied by an instruction: connect earpiece.

“Earpiece?” she asked aloud. The game hadn’t even started, and she was already lost.

“For beginners. Right there.” Poe pointed at a basket in the corner of the room, not bothering to turn around as he helped Finn adjust his jacket.

Rey furrowed her brows as she placed the small device in her right ear, more and more ill at ease but slightly curious. A series of small beeps rang into her ear, inviting her to wait for whatever tutorial she was probably going to hear. A rousing music started as the doors opened on a gloomy maze; the lights went down, the only one left being another neon sign above their head signaling that the game had begun.

“Turn right.”

Rey almost jumped at the voice echoing in her ear, but did as she was told. The artificial smoke hovering above her head blinded her even more, but she trusted the tutorial and kept running on her right.

“Go on the bridge.”

“The bridge…” she mumbled to herself, narrowing her eyes as she looked around her. “Where the
“On your left,” the voice specified in a less formal tone that made her frown.

“Thanks,” she whispered, immediately feeling like an idiot for thanking a device as she turned left where a footbridge appeared behind the foggy wall.

“You’re welcome.”

The voice’s quick answer made her freeze in the middle of the bridge: this was definitely not an automatic device. Taking a deep breath, Rey focused on the game, recalling why she’d accepted to play this game as she scanned the area before her. She was way too far from her comfort zone, even more with a stranger’s voice in her ear. However, this stranger seemed to be her ally; a fact that encouraged her to speak again.

“What should I do, now?”

The answer was quick to come.

“Shoot them, then go hide in the corners. Aim for the shoulders.”

“Alright,” she murmured as she tightened her grasp on the plastic gun. “Thanks, Voice.”

Much to her surprise, the game appeared to be a rather enjoyable one. Finn and Poe kept chasing each other in the maze giggling like children while she hid behind the thin walls, shooting them and heading towards a new hiding spot instructed by the voice in her ear. A rather enjoyable voice, she had to admit.

“Is that cheating?” she asked as she shot Finn for what felt like the tenth time in the space of two minutes.

“Only if you get caught,” he replied. It was a he, of that she was certain: his deep voice had betrayed him from the very first minutes of the game.

Five minutes later, the lights turned back and they all came out of their hiding spots with childish smiles on their faces. Breathless, the trio headed back to the counter where the barman handed them their respective scores.

“I won!” Rey exclaimed with disbelief as she took a look on Poe’s paper.

“You did.” His eyes kept looking incredulously back and forth between her paper and his. “You’re not far from the highest score.”

“Which gives you a free pass for next time,” the barman stated without even glancing from his computer screen. “Do you want to use it now or later?”

A smirk appeared on the friends’ lips as they looked at each other, disheveled but definitely keen on going back to the maze they’d just left.

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“Welcome back, and congratulations on your last score.”
Rey smiled as the voice greeted her, nearly relieved to notice it was the same that had guided her twenty minutes ago.

“Thanks! Maybe I won’t need you, this time.”

“We’ll see.”

Both of them were right: it appeared she was naturally skilled with a laser gun, but the voice was a great help when it came to finding her way through the maze. She nearly suspected him for starting one of the smoke canons when Finn had been chasing her, but hadn’t dared ask. Five minutes before the game was over, Rey cast a glance at the score appearing on the small screen of her blaster.

“Hey Voice, what’s the highest score, again?”

“6,536”

Rey risked a glance at her own score. 6,198. She wasn’t far from it.

“I’m gonna beat it,” she announced with a confidence she hadn’t suspected she had.

“I doubt it.”

“We’ll see,” she replied with an irrepressible smile he would anyway not see from wherever he was. She shot Poe in the shoulder and started running to one of her previous hideouts, when the same beeps announcing the end of the communication echoed in her ear. “Voice?” she breathed as she threw herself on the nearest wall, not expecting to be left alone so soon, unwarned.

6,236. A few more shots would do, she thought as she stepped out of her hiding spot and headed towards the bridge. A rush of smoke erupted from a canon on her right, catching her by surprise while masking the path she was about to take.

“Seriously?!” she groaned as she nonetheless sunk into the hazy curtain. She’d never been a bad player, but winning something had literally brightened her day after her car’s breakdown. Another small victory would be very much welcome.

She’d nearly reached the bridge when a tall, dark figure emerged from the smoke, catching her off guard. Neither Poe nor Finn was that tall, she realized as the figure kept walking towards her, blaster pointed on her shoulders. A small beep followed by the lights of her jacket turning off informed her she’d been shot, but she couldn’t help stare at the figure still walking towards her.

“Voice?” she asked again, tapping on her earpiece in hopes for it to help her as she walked backwards, vainly firing at the dark figure who idly avoided her shots. “I take back what I said; I might need your help on this one.”

Her back hit a wall, stopping her movements as the incessant beeps kept ringing in her ear. Now only inches from her, the tall figure leaned to reach her height. Her whole body froze as she felt the stranger’s breath brush the skin of her neck. Their jackets bumped into the other and a shiver ran through her spine.

“Game over,” the voice whispered in her ear.

She felt something touching the front of her jacket and a new shot echoed, deactivating her lights once again. Breathless, Rey stood still as she watched the stranger disappear behind a wall she hadn’t noticed until now. When her jacket reactivated, she remained motionless, letting Finn shoot
her when he passed by, chased by a giggling Poe.

The beeps she’d grown accustomed to suddenly stopped, bringing her back to reality.

“How’s that score going?” asked the voice in a detached tone.

She didn’t reply, running a hand along her neck as she watched the maze relight under her stunned eyes.
“Five players: one novice.”

Hux’s creaking voice echoed between the dark walls of Ben’s small office—or more accurately, the cupboard which Hux dared to call an office. It wasn’t nearly as big as his kitchen, but at least it had a significant large window to enlighten the room on sunny days. It wasn’t even midday, yet the desk was already covered with sheets of paper of variant sizes, some blank and others grayed by incomplete sketches. One or two notebooks were struggling not to disappear under a pile of broken devices; and there, among the mess, was this stupid walkie-talkie flickering, demanding his attention.

After a brief glance to the computer screen on which five unknown figures stood awkwardly in front of the bar, he sighed and grabbed the walkie-talkie.

“Copy,” he absent-mindedly mumbled before tossing the device back on his desk where it nearly hit his cup of coffee.

Another look at the screen informed him the small group had entered the Briefing Room. Instinctively, he swept their faces with his eyes and ended up frustrated. Again. There had been dark-haired women in their twenties, but none even close to the one he’d found himself thinking about for the last two days. It was stupid, he knew it really was: it had just been another talkative player—a novice, moreover—but something in the way she spoke had caught him off guard. Maybe the repartee? Maybe the accent?

And she’d almost beaten his highest score. He knew he was a poor loser, and a rather proud one added to that; even Hux had remained incapable of beating him, for his greatest amusement. Yet in less than an hour, some incompetent stranger had nearly reached his level. It’d driven him crazy, for certain—but also very curious. Curious enough to leave his office and responsibilities, grab a blaster, log himself in the game and chase her in the maze he’d created and knew by heart. Of course Hux had scolded him the minute he’d found out, because his place was in the office, and he already had enough to handle with this dog not to deal with him being a stubborn ass, but it’d been worth the astounded expression his presence had put on her face.
She probably hadn’t been expecting such a reaction from him; and truth be told, neither had he. It was as if something bigger than him had guided his steps, from the moment he’d left his chair to when he’d realized he was way too close to her, but it was also way too late to back out.

He rolled his eyes at his own idiocy and Hux’s voice rose again, bringing him back to reality. “Will you start the freaking game?”

Not even bothering to answer, Ben shook his head in hopes to clear it from his thoughts and quickly grabbed the mouse. Two clicks later, he could hear the usual music echoing under his feet, signaling the beginning of the game. A small beep that was not from the walkie-talkie informed him the novice player had connected his earpiece. Repressing a sigh, he clicked on the side button of his headset and turned his chair to face the screen, following the player through the different angles the surveillance cameras gave him. She wasn’t that bad for a beginner, but spent most of her time bumping into her friends and asking the same questions about what she was allowed to do or not.

“You must leave once you’ve shot someone; give them time for their jacket to reactivate,” he idly stated while watching the young girl shooting at someone for the third time in a minute.

“Oh, yes! Sorry!” she repeated once again.

Voice.

She would’ve called him Voice.

The thought crossed his mind without any warning, surprising him to such an extent that he nearly broke the lead of the pencil he’d let running on a paper for the last five minutes. He usually drew during off-peak periods, but since today was definitely not going to be as entertaining as Friday night -at least, this would keep him busy.

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“Rey? You prefer chocolate or mint?”

Deeply sunk in the sofa, Rey grabbed the backrest to lift herself and caught a glance at her roommate holding ice-cream jars in her hands with an inquiring look, her black hair tied up in a messy ponytail and a pair of glasses perched at the top of her head.

“I don’t know. Mint?”

“Thank god, I hate it,” Rose sighed with relief as she closed the refrigerator before heading to the sofa where Rey quickly moved her legs, making way for her friend to join her.

It was only one in the afternoon, but Sundays always were a place out of time in the house. While Finn would often be out for training, it was Rey’s day off, meaning she for once didn’t have to get up early. Since neither her or Rose were fond of sleeping late, the two girls would usually take advantage of the calm in the house to watch movies and eat as bad as they could while their roommate wasn’t there to scowl them about their bad habits. Of course, he would find the empty jars of evidence in the bin- but the damage would already be done. Enjoying every spoonful of her snack, Rey didn’t notice the paper that had left her pocket until Rose picked it from the carpet.
“Oh—it’s from Friday night, right?”

The young woman bit her lower lip at the sight of her friend examining the score sheet. Despite her profound kindness and the efforts she’d made not to let her deception appear, it was obvious Rose had once more felt left aside. They’d tried coming back as soon as they could to eat with her, but she’d already made dinner and ate by the time they’d come home, assuring them it wasn’t a big deal despite her unusual silence.

“Oh, um,” Rey replied, uncertain about what to say as she watched her friend unfold the paper.

Seeing it between someone else’s hands, she now noticed how crumpled the corners were. Truth be told, it wasn’t the first time it had been unfolded in the last two days; on Friday night, Saturday morning before she went to work, Saturday evening while emptying her pockets and this morning, right after she’d awakened. That voice, she hadn’t been able to brush it off her mind, as the stranger that had cornered her at the end of the game. Thankful that Finn had taken her silence on the way back home for fatigue, she’d spent the ten minutes’ drive staring at the second paper the bartender had given her, lit by the street lamps’ lights. The more she’d thought about it, the more she’d found herself ridiculous for doing so. She’d examined it so much she even knew the scores by heart: 4,326 for Poe, 3,948 for Finn, 6,236 for her, and 50 for ‘Kylo’.

So that was the stranger’s name: Kylo. And probably the name behind the voice.

“Who’s the fourth player?” Rose asked with a frown, bringing the paper closer to her eyes.

“No idea,” Rey replied with a shrug and an honest tone.

Both of them remained silent for a moment before Rose returned the paper, obviously not as curious as her.

“I used to go there with my sister,” she started, nearly changing the subject. “She always won, but I loved it.”

She was probably not doing it on purpose, but Rey couldn’t help feeling a bit guiltier at this information. Every time Rose spoke about her sister, it was as if her eyes were filled with sparks. The two of them were very close, but Paige was unfortunately so busy and far away from Kamino that they’d only seen her once, for no more than ten minutes. Rose never complained about her absence—she was way too proud for this—but Finn and Rey had quickly made a point of honor not to leave Rose alone whenever she started mentioning her, one of the many signals she was starting to feel lonely. Folding the paper, Rey nearly jumped when the vibrations of her phone echoed on the coffee table next to them, accompanied by a stinging ringtone.

“I really need to change it,” she mumbled as she leaned to pick the device where a picture of Poe was smiling at her, thumbs up. “Yes?”

“Rey!” Poe’s voice shouted from the other side, “It’s your lucky day!”

Rose gave her an inquiring look, obviously hearing the neighbor from her spot. She shrugged in response. “What do you mean?”

“I said I’d help you get a new car, right? Come to the garage!”

The girls exchanged a smile and Rose paused the movie they were not watching anymore, almost as excited as Rey who was already trying to remember the bus’s timetable.

“Can you wait an hour or two until Finn comes back?”
“Hang on,” Poe intimated before shouting something they couldn’t hear, his voice slightly covered by the usual ambient noises of the place. Another voice remotely replied something inaudible before a muffled sound informed them he’d grabbed the phone back. “Actually, it would be great if you could come now.”

“How am I supposed to-”

“I’ll drive you,” Rose cut her before she could finish. “We’ll be here in fifteen minutes!” she added a bit louder to ensure Poe heard her, looking at the phone as she took another spoonful of her chocolate ice-cream.

“Great, see you soon!” he hastily replied before hanging up.

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Without any surprise, the garage they stepped in twenty minutes later was as noisy as the phone conversation had suggested: about three or four people were waiting in line for one of Poe’s colleagues to register their vehicles while Jessika and Tallie hurried at the back of the shop, their orange jumpsuits similar to Poe’s already covered in grease. Joyous barks welcomed the pair, whose hands were soon buried in Baby’s fur while a second brown furry dog came running around them; his eyes staring at the girls as if he was unsure about his right to beg for their attention.

“Chewie!” a voice called, causing the dog to stop and run back to where he’d come. A whistle reverberated in the hangar, catching Baby’s attention – but not as obedient as his peer, the Labrador remained firmly sat against Rose’s legs as he watched his owner come to them, accompanied by another man.

“Rey,” Poe announced when he reached her, “Mr. Solo here might have something that could interest you.”

The man following him -Mr. Solo, probably- examined her with a distrustful glare before finally extending an arm covered by an old leather jacket to firmly shake her hand. Everything from his elusive eyes to his grumpy face screamed his reluctance about this impromptus meeting. Judging by his features, Rey would have estimated him to be roughly fifty-five or sixty years old, hardly more; but considering her poor social life, guessing someone’s age was probably not what she was best at.

“Pleasure to meet you, sir,” she stammered with a smile as his eyes examined her once again, probably judging the outfit she was wearing. In her haste, she’d grabbed the first things her hands had laid on: an old blue jumper and a pair of jeans she’d had for way too long. She hadn’t taken the time to brush her hair -it was Sunday, after all- resulting in her tying this mess in a muddled half bun on the way to the garage while, in the driver’s seat, Rose kept wondering which car was waiting for her.

“Sure,” the man mumbled, apparently as clumsy as her when it came to small talk. Both of them turned back to Poe in hopes for him to either fill the silence that had settled or at least keep their eyes busy until one of them spoke again.

“Oh right, that’s my turn.” Unfolding his arms, the mechanic beckoned them to follow him and headed to the small parking lot next to the garage.
After they passed Rose’s car, Rey took a look around and lingered on every vehicle, her curiosity growing at each step she took. If she trusted Poe and his excitement, this one was a good deal; probably a recent one with a reasonable price. Poe suddenly stopped and her eyes caught sight of a red sparkling Prius. Taken aback, she started opening her mouth to immediately say she was taking it whatever the price when the mechanic snapped his fingers on her right to get her attention.

“The Falcon!” Poe announced, arms stretched out as if he’d been introducing a guest on a talk-show.

*He was way too enthusiastic for an old vehicle almost similar to the one she’d left here two days ago,* Rey thought as she scrutinized the car with incredulous eyes. It was somewhere between an old pick-up and a Jeep, but didn’t inspire the same sense of security. Arms crossed, she started examining it from all angles, noticing some scratches on the grey paint as she passed the passenger’s door.

“It’s…” she started, unsure about how to stay polite but true to her thoughts.

“A Millenium,” Poe completed before she could finish. “One of a kind! New motor and brakes, full safety system, large trunk, vintage car radio…”

Speechless, Rey let her friend guide her inside the car as he kept praising its low gas consumption. Brushing the old radio with the tip of her fingers, she finally turned to him with a skeptical look in her hazel eyes. “Is this a joke?”

“What?” A hint of a laugh crossed Poe’s face as he turned to her, almost not believing her until he crossed her gaze. “No, of course not. Why?”

“There’s no way you’re being serious,” she started while pointing to the car’s hood from the driver’s seat she was sitting in. “That one’s garbage!”

“Hey, careful kid,” warned the old man’s voice from outside.

Casting a glance at him through to the rear-view mirror, Rey saw the grumpy man scowling at her, hands on his hips with his giant dog by his side. Careful not to knock the car’s door in the wall as she opened, she jumped out of it and crossed her arms as she reached the man, narrowing her eyes under the bright sunbeams caressing her face.

“How much do you want for it?”

“Six thousand five hundred,” he announced without batting an eyelid.

A slight chuckle escaped her as she turned back to the car, eyes wide open as she further scrutinized the scratches on its side. In no way had she been expecting a brand new race car, but abandoning Carcass for a car twice as old as her wasn’t exactly what she considered a ‘good deal’.

“This car will never let you down,” the man insisted in a softer tone as he took a step forward to reach her. “Trust me. I’ve had it for more than thirty years, and never a single problem.”

“I’ve spent my teenage years in that car,” Poe added with a mischievous smile as he joined them. “Trust me, this one can survive anything.”

The nostalgia previously hovering on the old man’s face disappeared at the mechanic’s words, making way for a frown. Raising a finger as if he’d been about to lecture him, Mr. Solo stopped halfway and brushed the idea away with a wave of his hand in surrender.
“I don’t even want to know-” he stated with a sigh as Poe patted him on the shoulder, not letting go of the smile animating his lips.

“How come you’re selling it if you love it so much?” Rey interrupted, crossing her arms as well as she gave a sidelong look to Rose playing with the dogs.

A new, gloomy expression crossed the man’s face. “That’s a story for another time, kid.”

If she were honest with herself, Rey knew she wouldn’t find any better vehicle for less. Noticing Poe’s imperceptible nod as she turned to him with an inquiring look, she turned to the car and examined it once more. She needed a new one- and the radio could play the tapes she had found at a flea market a few months ago. A sigh escaped her and she closed her eyes, almost not believing what she was about to do.

“The garbage will do,” she admitted with a shrug.

“Falcon.” Mr. Solo corrected as he shook her hand, his face slightly smoothed by a smile he tried to repress. “The Falcon.”

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A few signatures and handshakes later, both Mr. Solo and the girls went back to their respective cars after agreeing on coming back next weekend for the last papers and official sale of the car. Once back at their house, Rose and Rey went back to the sofa they’d left an hour ago, not bothering taking their shoes off as they lazily sunk among the pillows. Their Sunday routine quickly went back to normal, the hours passing by at an incredibly fast pace until the sound of the front door opening echoed across the living room.

“I’m back!” Finn announced as he burst into the room, loaded down with two bags, one probably containing his sportswear and the other imprinted with the next door grocery’s logo.

Rose immediately got up to free him from the second one, shorty followed by Rey who cast a curious glance inside it. “Wine? Are we celebrating something?”

“You tell me,” the young man replied with a knowing look.

Rey’s lips turned into a grin as she stared at her friend. “That chatterbox wouldn't even let me tell you myself.”

“We were on the phone,” Finn innocently explained with a shrug, “Guess it just slipped out.”

“On the phone, huh?” she picked up, her grin intensifying as she noticed him avoiding her gaze. “You two do it a lot.”

“Of course we do,” he retorted, still avoiding catching her eyes, “We’re friends.”

“Sure,” she whispered, watching Finn disappear behind the bathroom’s door.

Half an hour later, Poe burst into the house still wearing his dirty orange jumpsuit, victoriously holding a pack of beer above his head.

“I solemnly declare Sunday night open!” he shouted, gladly smiling at the sight of Rose rushing
over to pet Baby.

“No beers,” Finn warned from the kitchen. “Tonight’s classy, we’re only drinking wine.”

Confirming her roommate’s statement with a nod, Rey took a sip from her glass and put it back on the kitchen counter she was sitting on, greeting their neighbor with a radiant smile.

“If I didn’t know you any better, I’d say you’re cooking pasta,” the mechanic speculated while curiously extending a hand above the pan, quickly rejected by a tap from the cook.

“Definitely pasta,” Rey confirmed, taking advantage of her friend’s lack of attention to pick one from the plate.

Poe chuckled lightly as he watched Finn chase her from the counter once more, muttering to himself about their childish behaviors while repressing a laugh. She’d been sitting on it since he’d started cooking dinner, a bad habit she’s developed from her first days in the house, driven by her curiosity and irrepressible desire to taste everything the poor student experimented with.

“Well, looks like someone’s proud of herself!”

Both of them stopped and turned to Poe, holding a grayish piece of paper in his free hand. Rey stiffened as she recognized the score sheet that’d slipped from her pockets for the second time today. She started opening her mouth to ask for it back, but Finn cut her off before she could say a single word.

“Seriously?” he asked, hesitant about whether he should be laughing, or scolding.

She’d always been materialistic, almost always unable to throw things away: bus tickets, old notes. Always had a good reason to keep it, for Finn’s greatest irritation every time he stepped inside her bedroom; a side-effect from growing up in foster families and only being allowed to carry one bag every time she had to move.

“Well, she can be!” Poe added, finally handing her the paper back after he’d taken a brief look at it. “6,236... I don’t think I’ve ever made such a high score.”

“Beginner’s luck,” she mumbled, glad he hadn’t noticed the fourth player as Rose had earlier.

“We should go back,” the girl tempted from across the room. “I’d like to see that in person!”

Rey absent mindedly leaned her back against the kitchen counter, her heart nearly skipping a beat at the idea of going back there. A new feeling somewhere between fear and curiosity slowly grew, invading her mind with an intensity she knew she wouldn’t be able to chase away.

“Please?” Rose added, a pleading smile spread across her face that was definitely not helping.

“She said please,” Poe pointed out with a shrug.

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“Four players.”

 Barely taking his eyes off his drawing, Ben distractedly grabbed the walkie-talkie for the
Raining days were always synonymous with more clients -for Hux’s greatest displeasure- and so were weekends. Judging by the poor view he had from his small window and the crazy amount of customers, today was both. Yet, he had taken the liberty of partly watching the games, and focusing on one of the numerous unachieved works lying on his desk.

“They just entered the Briefing Room,” Hux’s voice added through the device.

A remote bark reverberated behind the bartender’s voice, inciting Ben to take a look at the screen before him.

“What the-”

It seemed that Dameron was back and had once again left his damn dog under Hux’s surveillance, but the mechanic wasn’t the one his eyes lingered on. Hastily reaching for his glasses and putting them on, Ben adjusted his headset and leaned further on the messy desk, ignoring the pieces of paper creasing under his elbows.

She was back, as unbelievable as it was, and had already grabbed a jacket way too large for her. Trying to ignore the unsteady beats hammering from his chest, Ben quickly looked at the start button he was supposed to click on so the game would begin and turned back to the screen: they were all almost ready. Furrowing his brows, he took a heavy breath and noticed her casting a quick glance towards the box containing the earpieces.

“Come on, take it…” he muttered between his teeth, unable to take his eyes off the screen.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for the comments and kudos on the first chapter, I was definitely not expecting this but this was very rewarding and motivating! I can't wait to write the other chapters and see what you think about how the story goes. I hope you like this second chapter, don't hesitate to tell me what you think!
In the course of her life, Rey had had to face many situations where she’d had to make a difficult choice, starting with leaving the town she’d always lived in to attend Kamino’s college. There, she’d had to choose which classes she wanted to take and convince not only herself but the administration about her capacities through a long, manuscript letter she’d spent an entire week writing. Finding a job and a place to live had been somewhat easier, regarding the little vacant places in the students’ neighborhood, but once again, the odds had been in her favor.

The familiar feeling of uncertainty accompanying each of these choices reached her as she cast a glance to the earpieces box at the other side of the room, and she found herself mentally cursing at her own idea. She’d always been aware of her high sense of curiosity, but this time, it was rather unwelcome –Friday night’s episode had already kept her mind off things for the last two days. She couldn’t allow herself to do the same when a new week was about to start, especially not with the fair amount of work she knew was waiting for her.

Besides, it was just a stranger’s voice; nothing exceptional.

“Rey come on!” Rose urged her from the entrance. She was wearing one of the colorful jackets and a contagious smile, the whole making her look as excited as a five-year-old could be. Finn and Poe were standing a few feet from her, both nervously bouncing as they stared at the door, waiting for it to free the four of them into the maze.

Fuck, she mentally cursed as she discreetly grabbed one of the earpieces. Heading to the uniforms, she slid the device into her back pocket before snatching a jacket on which she hooked the attached blaster. Voluntarily postponing the moment she would activate the earpiece, she idly inserted the small badge the bartender had given her and watched her name appear on the small screen, followed by a neutral score she would –hopefully- quickly increase.

“Any minute now,” Poe whispered between his teeth while nervously glancing around the room as if searching for something.

His competitive side was definitely showing in that kind of moment, reminding Rey of the numerous game nights they’d hosted at the house: even if he could never stay upset for very long,
every game he lost was an offense to the mechanic, who usually fell silent when beaten by someone. His pride was luckily not as strong as his need to play, and he always came back with a grin, asking for revenge.

As if he’d been acknowledged, the small red light reflecting on their faces turned green and the door immediately creaked open.

"Every man for himself!" Poe shouted as he quickly sunk into the maze. The lights of his jacket spread in the mist for a few seconds before disappearing, causing Rose to giggle before she hurried after him, the usual epic music already wrapping them in an oppressive atmosphere.

“After you,” Finn offered with an exaggerated bow as Rey considered the three entrances in front of them.

“Well, thank you, sir.” A shot echoed in the Briefing Room and Finn opened his mouth, muted by her unexpected betrayal.

“You-traitor!” he finally managed to articulate, looking at her with wide eyes while his jacket’s beeps accelerated as a warning of its oncoming reactivation.

A genuine laugh escaped Rey at the sight of her roommate’s indignation and she started running towards the hiding spots she remembered from two days earlier. If she revealed herself as good as she’d been then, shooting him wouldn’t be a problem- but thanks to his daily training, Finn was way faster and would easily outrun her, which made a significant adversary of him. The sound of shots fired echoed from the other side of the maze, followed by the distant voice of Poe: “Miss Tico, that was a dirty trick!”

Typical Poe, Rey thought with a smile as she reached the bridge she’d been headed to. The smoke hovering above them had already started disappearing, allowing her to take a wide look at the maze before her eyes. Rose was running to the South of the hangar and would soon meet Finn, who walked with a great discretion, cautious not to let the LEDs of his jacket betray his presence as he hid behind every wall he could reach. Opposite to them, Poe curiously wandered across the maze, looking around and up with an incredible ease. He was the perfect target. Squatting down to avoid being noticed, Rey raised her blaster at eyes level and closed an eye, focusing on his shoulders. She’d almost locked her aim when a series of familiar beeps resonated from her back pocket, causing her to flinch.

Each one of her muscles tensed as her heart missed a beat, significantly lowering her body heat. Truth be told, she hadn’t really expected the device to activate: the bartender hadn’t registered her as a beginner, and neither had she connected the device to her equipment. Careful not to leave her hiding spot, she slowly picked the small object and placed it in the crook of her ear, holding her breath in anticipation as she heard the other’s breathing mirror hers.

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Ben’s fingers had run in a hasty dance on his keyboard, running counter to the codes he’d settled years ago. A minute was enough for him to lower the shields of Starkiller system, but finding the right device to connect to appeared slightly more complicated since he had no idea which one she’d taken. Impatient but determined, he’d tried each and every one of them, closely checking the young woman’s reaction every time he connected to one of the devices, sending the usual signal. It
wasn’t before the fifth attempt that he saw her shudder and grab the small, black object he’d seen her borrow with a high relief. When she finally placed it in her ear, Ben found himself instantly frozen, helplessly staring at her figure shadowed by his own reflection on the control screen. The usual small beeps announcing the oncoming connection rang into his headset, and silence fell again as he watched her hunker down on the bridge.

Even in the darkness of the hangar, her face was the most interesting he’d ever seen; sweet traits deformed by a wince every time she raised her weapon and started focusing on her target, kind eyes of which he hadn’t had the opportunity to guess the color of- but he would’ve pictured her with brown or green ones. The high amount of pixels on the left screen didn’t allow him to see her reactions, yet he didn’t fail to remark her immobility. Had the cameras gave away once again? Casting a sideways glance to the corner of the screen, he saw Dameron chasing the other boy in the South part of the maze. No defective cameras. Back to the part of the screen focusing on the bridge, he noticed her free hand slowly leaving the earpiece and drawing back to the blaster as she got on her feet.

A loud shot echoed in the maze under his feet, and she disappeared in the maze once again. A few seconds were enough for him to find her: fast and furtive, she almost looked as if she was sliding from a wall to another, careful to stay hidden while probably keeping an ear on the ambient sounds that could betray her friends’ positions. The other girl wasn’t far from her now, he noticed from a quick look at the other screens before focusing back on her. She’d probably heard her too: said wince came back on her face as she extended her arm and tightened her grip on the laser weapon, sweeping the area with her eyes. A soft chuckle escaped Ben; the sight of her narrowing eyes could have been menacing if she hadn’t seemed so small in the oversize jacket she hadn’t even bothered adjusting before leaving the Briefing Room.

Her head almost instantly turned, and his heart missed a beat at the realization his headset was still connected to her earpiece. His eyes widened as he instinctively held his breath, waiting for either a reaction from her or a miraculous brainwave. The same guilt that had been following him for the previous days every time his mind wandered to the events of Friday night came rushing back. She was a stranger, he internally repeated to himself, this was just a game. Another shot fired drew his attention back to the screen, where he witnessed the second girl chasing his previous adversary, blaster in hand.

Forgetting his previous statement, Ben leaned a bit further on his desk, some of his unachieved drawings crumpling under his chest as he narrowed his eyes in concentration as well, waiting for them to reach a certain area. His mouse at the ready, he watched the figure of his stranger attain a certain spot and clicked.

Not even a second later, the other girl found herself stuck in a dense fog. Repressing another chuckle, Ben silently watched as his unexpected protégé stared at the smoke her friend had disappeared in before she started running again. Following her race through the surveillance cameras, Ben couldn’t help but wonder if he’d dreamt the smile on her lips when she’d seen the smoke canon activate.

“Aren’t you a bit silent, for a voice?” She abruptly asked after throwing herself against the nearest wall.

Dameron was just a few steps away from her, slowly approaching with his usual grin as he grabbed his blaster. Unable to ignore his fast beating heart, Ben chose to remain silent, curious to see how she would choose to get away from it. She remained still, only moving her head to the alley where the mechanic kept approaching stealthily. Thanks to the camera’s angle, Ben managed to notice her head slightly turning and followed her gaze: she was keeping an eye on the lights of her
adversary’s jacket reflecting on the surrounding walls. Smart. When they appeared intense enough to signal his imminent arrival, she stepped out of her hiding place and shot him at the stomach. Her proud laughter echoed in his headset, and Ben suddenly found himself unable not to smile nor talk.

“And aren’t you pretty good, for a novice?”

The words had escaped his lips before he could change his mind about saying them. The self-confident tone he’d surprised himself with two days ago was back. Escaping from her friend’s line of fire after one of his shots deactivated her own jacket, she flew to the center of the maze while curiously looking up around her. Her gaze met one of the poorly hidden cameras and she stopped, unknowingly staring at him through the screen.

“Is that why you stopped me?” She’d obviously tried to make her voice sound accusing, but something about it coupled with the subtle frown crowning her face betrayed the hesitation behind her question.

And back were the guilt and shame.

“Did I scare you?” Ben asked back, trying not to drop his confident facade.

Of course he’d scared her—it had been his goal the second he’d stepped in the maze.

“You shot me,” she reminded him on an obvious tone as she looked away from the camera.

“You’d been cheating,” he replied with a shrug she couldn’t see.

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He wasn’t wrong on this: she’d been cheating. The weight of a bad day combined with the excitement of the game were in no way an excuse, but remained the only plausible reason she’d settled on for going against her principles. Besides, it wasn’t as if she’d asked for his help.

“Thanks to you,” she added almost immediately, defensive.

Silence fell again between them, and she tried her best to maintain a proud appearance as she left her alley and headed to the other side of the maze where she could hear Finn’s voice. After an entire minute of silence, Rey cast a discreet glance at one of the other cameras and started wondering if she’d hurt the stranger’s feelings. Before she could inquire about it or even apologize, his voice resonated again.

“FN-2187 waiting for you on your right.”

He’d used his formal voice, the tutorial one. Casting a quick glance around her, Rey raised a suspicious eyebrow as she didn’t notice any light blue or red lights around her.

“Yeah, like I’m gonna believe y-”

She stopped in the middle of her word, cut by a sneering Finn erupting from nowhere and pointing a blaster at her stomach.

“That’s for earlier,” the student proclaimed with a theatrical tone and high gestures before pulling the trigger.
Her jacket’s lights switched off with an electronic sound and the equipment started beeping almost similarly to the earpiece a few minutes ago, counting the seconds for its reactivation.

“Well, now we’re quits,” she stated with an innocent smile as she saw Finn looking at her jacket with anticipation.

“No we’re not,” he replied with a shake of his head and an amused smile. “Your betrayal hurt me. I think I could use thirty more points.”

And she could use a little help. Repressing the temptation to articulate the idea out loud, Rey risked a glance at the camera behind Finn then looked around, looking for a way out.

“I promise I’ll never sit on the counter again?” she tried, raising her hands in surrender.

“Uh-uh, not enough.”

The beeps of her jacket hastened as her chances to escape lowered with each passing second.

“I’ll do the dishes.”

“I know you won’t.”

“I’ll cook?”

“Not in your wildest dreams!”

“Bend down,” the voice suddenly advised.

Following orders had never been something she was used to doing, let alone those of a complete stranger; yet at her greatest surprise, Rey obeyed and bent almost instantly, avoiding a blast of smoke by a hair’s breadth. Recalling the same misfortune happening to Rose not even five minutes ago, she turned back to the overlooking camera and allowed herself to address it with a subtle smile before heading to the bridge she knew would be a safe place, hoping Finn wouldn’t follow suit.

“Thanks, Voice,” she articulated with hesitancy as she kept running across the maze, keeping her free ear open to the noises around her.

“You’re welcome.”

Thankful for the absence of cameras in front of her, she allowed her smile to grow bigger at the confirmation that the stranger had well and truly saved her skin more than once tonight.

“Novice,” he added after a few seconds.

Even without seeing his face, Rey could hear the smirk on his lips. Rolling her eyes with amusement, she jumped on the bridge and carefully stretched out until her body was as one with the cold floor, weakening the lights of her jacket and giving her a closer look at the area.

“So, are you allowed to help the players?” she whispered as she saw Finn passing under her at a great pace.

“Not really,” he admitted. “But I guess I can count on your discretion.”

She shook her head, talking with the unpleasant bartender had obviously not been something she’d planned. He certainly didn’t seem of a good company, and had probably had enough with Poe’s teasing. A quick look at the distant numeric clock above the emergency exit informed her there
were only two minutes left of the game.

“Anyway, I’d rather beat that highest score by myself than by cheating,” she added as she swept the area with her eyes once again, looking for a new target to shoot.

“And how’s it going?”

Opposed to the last time he’d inquired about her score, he now sounded sincerely interested and she caught herself wondering if he wasn’t just great at concealing his thoughts behind a detached voice. Cautiously, Rey raised the blaster at her eye level and felt her disappointment as she stared at the four numbers on the small screen.

“4,328,” she shamefully announced as she realized he’d called Finn by his user name not long ago: he probably had everyone’s score under his eyes, yet he’d made her say it out loud.

“That’s actually pretty good for a third time.”

“I was way better on Friday,” she retorted, ignoring his encouraging words.

“Winning takes time.”

That particular sentence stopped her halfway in her movement as she got her weapon ready to fire on Poe’s approaching figure. He was right, and couldn’t have picked better words to regain her attention. For every victory in her life, even the most insignificant one, she’d learnt to rely on her patience and optimism; and when the latter was missing, she’d never had a better choice than waiting for it to come back. Where time could have erased all trace of hope in her, it’d only sharpened it and forged a more than welcome strength that’d helped her overcome fears and loneliness.

Yes, winning did take time.

“Maybe I should come more often,” Rey finally whispered, keeping an eye on Poe’s shadow.

“You should,” the voice confirmed straight away.

A mutual silence fell between them once again, only interrupted by her heart dropping then drumming across her body.

“To improve your skills, I mean,” he added after a fair amount of seconds.

“Obviousl-” she started, shortly cut by a loud buzz echoing through the walls of the hangar.

The lights turned back on and the lights of her jacket abruptly disappeared, leaving her with an unsatisfied feeling as she heard her roommates looking for the exit, each far from the other.

“Time to leave, Novice,” the voice declared with the same noticeable smirk she’d heard earlier.

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“I declare laser-tagging our new tradition!” Poe said the moment she stepped into the Briefing Room.
Rose excitedly approved the mechanic’s idea with a nod, making it difficult for Finn to unlock her jacket she’d probably been struggling with.

“Careful, someone’s not a big fan of new things.” He warned with a not-so-subtle nod towards Rey.

“I’d like that, actually,” she contested with a shrug as she hooked her jacket on the nearest coat rack.

Finn was far from being wrong: changes were definitely not her thing, but feeling the small device on her skin had hastened her answer and heightened her curiosity. Ignoring the raised eyebrows of her roommate, Rey turned and started walking to the box in the corner of the room when a voice she was the only one able to hear rose again.

“Rey?” She stopped and tried to ignore how hearing him call her name in the crook of her ear didn’t fail to make her shiver. “Keep it.”

“They were a bit heavy-handed on the smoke.”

Finn approved Rose with a nod and quickly looked back to the road. Far from the blue sky they’d left before entering Starkiller Laser Tag, the city was now covered with a growing darkness announcing the oncoming night. Half listening to her roommates complain, Rey stared at the window where she watched a race between three raindrops hastily glide to the end of the pane.

“Yeah, I got stuck in it too; couldn’t stop coughing for a hard minute,” Finn added, one hand on the wheel and the other drumming on his lap, following the radio’s rhythm.

A compassionate sound probably coming from Rose echoed in the car. Nothing alarming for Rey, who’d been used to hearing it for the last year: Rose was a very caring person, who almost never failed to perceive her friends’ feelings. Poe’s reaction, however, convinced her to turn from the raindrops race and take a look at her roommates. After a few seconds of focusing on the two of them, she noticed Rose shyly brushing Finn’s cheek with the back of her fingers. Another shiver ran across Poe’s leg, shaking hers as well.

“Sorry,” the mechanic hastened to say, adding a grin to his lips as soon as she met his eyes.

“It’s ok,” she assured with a knowing smile through which she tried to relay comfort and understanding.

“Everything alright in the back?” Finn asked while casting a glance in the rear-view mirror, causing Rose to slowly land her hands back on her knees.

“Yeah, just Baby being his impatient self,” Poe said with a rather convincing amused tone.

Rey tightened her fingers around the small device tucked in her pocket as she watched him absent-mindedly pet his sleeping dog whose head was lazily resting on his lap. Words could lie, but eyes were obviously not allowed this privilege.
I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw all your kind comments and kudos on chapter 2, thank you so much! Every single word really warmed my heart <3 I hope you like this third chapter, don't hesitate to tell me what you think about it, or even what you think will happen next ;)
The ear-splitting sound of her alarm clock dragged Rey away from sleep with an abruptness she wasn’t expecting. Grumbling at the early hour, she groped along her night table in search of the noisy box, her hand clumsily pushing a few items before reaching the main button and hitting it. Silence fell again in the room, and her head thanked her for this newfound peace. Slowly opening an eye, she met the light of the first rays of sunshine piercing through the lacy curtains of her small window and risked a glance at her clock: 6am. Another grunt escaped her sealed lips, her body and brain argued about the temptation to stay in bed and enjoy the warmth of the sheets she was still wrapped in. The fight didn’t last long, her brain winning the argument as every morning and ordering her legs to chase the blanket away. Ignoring her own reluctance at the idea of getting up, Rey felt her legs obeying and winced as she felt the fresh air of the morning brushing her bare skin. Now exposed to the coldness of the room, she took a deep breath and sat on the edge of her bed.

What day was it? Her eyes searched for her phone and found it seconds later, lying on the floor among the numerous items she’d pushed from her nightstand a few minutes ago. Leaning with another deep breath, Rey grabbed the phone and a smaller second device that she cautiously placed next to her alarm clock. Wednesday, she acknowledged after casting a glance at the screen of her phone. A yawn escaped her as she slowly got on her feet and stretched out, awaking the rest of her body still weak from the past hours of inactivity.

The house was still silent at the exception of the sound of her feet on the wooden floor. As cautious as every morning not to wake Finn and Rose, she crossed the corridor on her tiptoes and snuck in the bathroom, not bothering to lock the noisy door behind her. Quickly looking at the mirror above the sink, she met her own tired gaze staring at her, the hint of dark rings under her eyes betraying the late hour she’d fallen asleep the night before. Given the chance to do so, Finn would have scolded her about studying way too late; but truth be told, the only thing that’d kept her awake had nothing to do with her studies. Tossing and turning in her bed, Rey hadn’t stopped staring at the
earpiece in her hands. An incredulous muffled laughed escaped her as she realized her own stupidity for fighting the somnolence of her body, waiting for a device to activate until one in the morning. Nothing had happened for the last three days, and nothing probably would.

*But he’d told her to keep it,* she remembered as she started brushing her hair, wincing at every knot trying to resist the brush. And despite it being his idea, he hadn’t given a single sign of life for the past three days. Letting out a desperate sigh at her disheveled reflection, Rey quickly brushed her teeth and went back to her room where her eyes lingered on the earpiece. A pair of jeans in hand, the young woman curiously approached the device staring back at her from the nightstand and realized how loud a silence could be as she considered taking it with her on her round. She’d already slipped it in her pocket and kept an eye on it while in class, convinced she’d heard the familiar beeps every time a phone vibrated not far from her. The object was small yet already taking way too much room in a routine where there already wasn’t any more. Fighting the urge to grab it and throw it in her bag, Rey turned to her wardrobe and picked the warmest jumper she could find before jumping in her jeans and leaving her room, ignoring the way her eyes kept demanding to look back.

On her way to the door, she grabbed a cereal bar waiting for her on the kitchen’s table and cautiously put her shoes on before leaving the silent house. Morning greeted her with a small yet agreeable ray of sunshine caressing her face, contrasting with the fresh breeze keeping her awake despite her desire to crawl back to bed. The street was as calm as every morning, only birds and dog walkers strolling around the trees and pavements with a solemnity only morning people were allowed to witness. Smiling at the sensation of being privileged, Rey raised her arm and cast a glance at her watch: 6:30. He wouldn’t be long now.

“Hey there,” Poe’s familiar voice called behind her.

His tone was slightly less cheerful than usual, she noticed as ginger paws landed on her stomach before she could say anything. Absent mindedly rubbing Baby’s head to calm him down, Rey cast a smile at her neighbor and asked him the same question as every morning.

“What to post, today?”

“No, thank you.” Fresh air really had a way to wake people up, Rey noticed as she watched the mechanic smile to her with the brown, lively eyes she knew all too well. “Have a good day!”

“Have a good day,” she wished back before hastily walking to her car, keys in hands. Seconds later, the motor of the so-called Falcon roared with enthusiasm, achieving to drag her into the beginning of her day as she turned the wheel and left the peaceful neighborhood.

-The-

The sensation of a hard, cold material against his cheek dragged Ben away from the uncomfortable sleep he’d fallen in hours ago. Slowly blinking and raising his head from the pile of electronic devices on his desk, it took him a few minutes to realize he wasn’t at his flat but in the small chair of his desk at Starkiller Laser Tag. Narrowing his eyes as he met the early morning lights bursting into the room through the window, he took a look at the clock above his head and sighed both of pain and relief: he still had time to go home and steal two or three hours of sleep before his shift started. A yawn escaped him as he straightened up and extended his arms above his head, feeling his body taking revenge on the bad position he’d slept in by twisting each of his muscles with a
malicious pleasure. Running a hand where he’d felt the cold metal of a tool on his face, Ben noticed a small line appearing along his cheek and noted he should have a look at it once back home.

Now facing his desk in the daylight, he realized how messy it was: a dismantled blaster placed above a pile of sketched threatened to fall, surrounded by dozens of screwdrivers and other dismantled devices he’d found in the reserve the night before. Disassembling the blaster and fixing its problem shouldn’t have taken him more than twenty minutes, yet he’d displayed this task until the very last moment, offering Hux to close the bar for him and waiting for the bartender to leave to sneak in the stock room and quickly retreat in his office, arms laden with every little thing he’d found and judged usable for what he had in mind. She’d taken the earpiece, but the device’s system wasn’t made to work beyond Starkiller’s walls; he’d realized it a few hours after she’d left, when trying to activate it after the last game had ended. Neither the few codes he’d entered in the program nor had his numerous attempts been enough, leaving him in the same state than the week before: foolishly hoping for her to come back, and mentally cursing himself for thinking such things.

Cautiously sorting the items on his desk to reach his headset, he grabbed the screwdriver he’d fallen asleep on and expertly closed the casing he’d been exploring all night until his eyes had given up. With no real conviction and another yawn, Ben switched on the side button for the fifth time since the night before and got up, not expecting anything to happen as he turned the computer’s screen off and grabbed his car keys. Just as he grabbed the jacket lazily hooked on the back on his chair, three familiar beeps echoed in his ears and stopped him halfway.

True to itself, his heart missed a beat as he held his breath. All remaining of tiredness suddenly left his body, every small beep emerging from the device causing him to stiffen more as he settled the headset around his neck, keeping an ear on the echoing signals. After a few seconds of listening to this steady rhythm, he finally grabbed his jacket and left his desk, the adrenaline slowly dropping and making place for lethargy to come back and remind him of how badly he missed his bed. A week, he realized as he passed the entrance door; a week of falling asleep on his desk, working until late hours on the sketches his boss had ordered, unable to complete a single one of these. The fresh breeze of the morning hit his face with an unexpected yet welcomed violence temporarily keeping him awake as he started walking to his car parked not far away.

“Ben,” a voice greeted him from behind with an energy it was way too early to accept.

Knowing very well whose voice it was, Ben slowed down his pace and turned over, his gaze meeting the mechanic’s.

“Dameron,” he replied with an almost imperceptible nod.

He hastened after noticing the mechanic had slowed down as well, willing to keep their boundaries as this stage of occasional awkward greetings. Ignoring his friendly smile, he couldn’t help feeling a familiar jealousy slowly growing inside him as he recalled noticing the same smile being addressed at the girl a few days ago. Chasing the thought away with a wince, he opened his car and sunk into the driver seat, already dreaming about his bed ten minutes away from here when the small beeps emerging from his headset suddenly stopped, signaling the beginning of the connection. As speechless as the last time they’d been connected, Ben took a deep breath as he placed the headset correctly and opened his dry mouth, determined to not make the same mistake twice.

“Voice to Novice?” Hearing the stupidity of his own words, Ben closed his eyes and threw his head against the headrest. Fast thoughts, bad ideas, he thought as he turned the key in the ignition and
left the parking lot, focused on the answer that never came. As soon as his car passed the Greek restaurant behind the Black Squadron Garage sign, the usual beeps echoed in his ears, signaling the end of the connection.

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“Kaydel Connix speaking, how can I help you?”

The calm yet busy ambiance Rey liked so much instantly smoothed as she stepped into the city hall. As amazed as usual by the warmth of the place contrasting with the coldness she’d been in for two hours now, the young mailwoman took the last steps separating her from the large cream desk settled in the middle of the hall and cast a smile at the secretary silently greeting her while listening through the phone perched between her shoulder and head.

“I’m sorry, Mayor Organa isn’t here today,” she calmly explained while pointing the office’s door with a smile, nodding to insure Rey she was allowed to go there.

Mouthing a thank you to the blonde woman who quickly replied with a conniving wink as she asked her invisible interlocutor if he could spell his name, Rey walked up to the large woven door and knocked twice before a remote answer reached her ears, allowing her to come in.

“Rey, dear, come, have a seat!”

Finally meeting the woman’s warm eyes, Rey offered her brightest smile as she took place on the chair facing the mayor’s. The office’s scent of vanilla instantly wrapped her in a familiar feeling of safety and sooth, soon accompanied by the woman’s soft voice as she sat as well, clearing the desk of the few papers between them.

“Tea?” She offered, already sliding a warm cup to her.

“Thank you,” Rey accepted with a smile as warm as the mug she placed her frozen hands on. The two women’s affection for each other hadn’t stopped growing since the first time Rey had delivered her first package to the city hall, alone and lost in the city she’d just arrived in; thanks to Organa’s obliging secretary and another helpful visitor, she’d been able to complete her first round in time and keep the job, and had since gotten into the habit of taking a few minutes to stop and talk with the two women every morning. Delivering each letter in person had since become a habit, slowly leading to a few words exchanges then to the daily tea she was just now enjoying, welcoming the break with a great pleasure.

“How’s your morning so far?” the woman inquired with a sincere interest, taking a sip of her floral cup of tea.

“Not so bad,” Rey replied with a shrug, ignoring the incessant thoughts that hadn’t stopped blurring her mind as well as the emptiness of her pocket. “I’m almost done. How about yours?”

“Just started,” she answered with a smile before turning her head towards the window overlooking the parking lot. “New car?”

Stopping in motion as she’d begun raising the hot beverage to her lips, Rey raised her eyes on the woman and followed her gaze until her eyes lingered on the Falcon.
“Oh, yes. Mine broke down; Poe came to my rescue and found this new one for me.” She took a cautious sip before adding, half-laughing in the cup, “Not so new, actually, but it does the job.”

Her eyes lingered back on the mayor, silently nodding as she kept staring at the old grey pick-up overhanging the other cars. She was a very beautiful woman, her age only betrayed by the grey hair she always put in sophisticated, elegant buns that never failed to make Rey feel as if she should make something about her own appearance too, nearly ashamed to burst into this office every morning in old jeans and jumpers, crowned with the sky blue cap of the post office only to cover her messy hair.

“I take it you met Han,” she added with a smiling yet distant voice, not taking her eyes off the window.

Another muffled laugh escaped Rey at the memory of the grouchy man.

“Mister Solo? Yes, just a week ago. A bit grumpy, if you ask me.” Just realizing her last words and their inappropriateness since the mayor seemed to know the man, Rey felt her eyes widen as she quickly added on a less confident tone: “You know him?”

“I even married him.” The answer came with an amused smile that didn’t match her heavy, nostalgic eyes.

Rey’s mouth turned in the shape of an O at the information, eyebrows raised at the surprising couple she couldn’t help picturing in the car that was now her own.

“Well, he wasn’t that grumpy-”

“Oh, he is,” Mayor Organa assured with that same warm smile that hadn’t left her lips since she’d stepped into her office. “But don’t let him intimidate you. That would give him way too much pleasure.”

Half-reassured, Rey acknowledged her words with a soft nod and took a brief look at her watch: 8:30.

“I should go,” she stated with a sigh before raising the mug to her lips and finish the now tepid tea. “Thanks for the tea Mayor Organa,” she added as she got up. “Have a good day.”

“Leia,” the woman corrected for the umpteenth time as Rey had already reached the door, causing an imperceptible smile to settle on the student’s lips as she left.

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“Solo.”

Not even taking his eyes off the new headset he’d been dismantling for the past hour, Ben let out a sigh as Hux’s voice echoed from the walkie-talkie for the third time in a few minutes. A quick look at the screen connected to the surveillance cameras of the bar had been enough to inform him there were no players, thus no reason for the bartender to require his presence. The sizzling sound of the communication echoed once more.

“Solo.”
Muted by the screwdriver clamped between his teeth, Ben rolled his eyes at the sound of his colleague’s voice and grabbed the device with his free hand; the other stuck trying to keep the headset’s casing open.

“What?” he snarled with a muffled voice, feeling the screwdriver dangerously slipping from his mouth.

“Boss is here,” the bartender reported on his usual drawling tone. “He wants to see you.”

The tool he’d been holding escaped Ben’s mouth and fell on the floor with a metallic sound, running a shiver through his already tensed body. Allowing himself a few seconds before switching the answering button, he took a deep breath and replied with the most composed voice he was capable of.

“Tell him he can come upstairs.”

“He already did.”

Two firm knocks confirmed Hux’s words. A familiar lump settled in Ben’s throat as he left his chair and took the few steps separating his desk from the door, feeling his heart hasten in a way he knew way too well, announcing the strange meeting of both excitement and apprehension as he opened the door.

“Ben, Ben, Ben,” the man started, stepping into the room as soon as the door opened. “How’s my artist doing?”

Hands clasped behind his back, he started walking around the office with an amused smile his curious eyes wandering on every item that wasn’t his, the long grey coat covering him from shoulders to toes trailing behind him like a snake.

“Perfectly fine sir,” Ben responded on a calm, prudent voice.

A heavy silence settled on the room as he watched his superior slowly turn to his desk, his eyes sweeping it with an unfathomable expression. After a few seconds of observation, the man took a hand out from his back and extended it to the pile of drawings, visibly pleased with the sketches before his eyes.

“Interesting,” he finally said. His fingers brushed the first papers aside, spreading it on the wooden surface to reach the ones under. Silently watching him, Ben held his breath as he observed the long fingers, deformed by heavy rings trailing down his drawings; he finally ended its race on a sketch he’d been working on a few days ago, when desperately trying to chase a certain stranger from his mind.

“This one is good.”

Unsure about what he’d just heard, Ben raised his head with an inquiring look, repressing a frown as he watched Snoke taking the drawing between his pale hands.

“For a children’s book,” he added, not even hiding his disgust as he absent-mindedly threw it on the floor before taking a seat at the desk.

“This one was personal,” Ben explained while trying to ignore the man’s hands curiously wandering on the drawings to finally land on the open headset and multiple tools scattered around it.
“Is that personal as well?”

These were the kind of questions that weren’t expecting any answer. He knew it, as he knew what was about to happen seconds from now.

“Pathetic.”

He closed his eyes, just in time to avoid the sight of his drawings flying across the room. A few landed next to him, brushing his skin in their slow fall as he focused on taking deep breaths, waiting for the storm to come. Instead of that, a simple sigh filled the silence, encouraging Ben to open his eyes and face Snoke.

“I thought you were committed, Ben, but if you have other projects in mind—I understand. Just tell me, I’ll find someone else.”

If someone had come into the room at this very moment, nothing in his honeyed voice nor bothered eyes would have betrayed the man’s previous gesture: a concerned frown crossing his face, he was now contemplating the drawings on the floor while brushing his chin with a hand, the other crossed with his arm against his chest.

“No.” The word escaped his mouth with a worry tone before he could compose himself. “I can do it. I will.”

Every trace of concern disappeared from Snoke’s face, making place for a satisfied smile as soon as he eyes lingered on his employee.

“That’s the Ben I like to see.”

Letting out a sigh, Ben silently thanked him with a nod and immediately kneeled down, taking deep breaths while avoiding Snoke’s gaze he could feel lingering on him. Over the past years, he’d learned to hide the majority of his emotions when facing his superior’s moody temper, but the only thing he hadn’t managed to control yet were his trembling hands now gathering his drawings. Alert and carefully listening, he watched the man stepping over the remaining pieces of paper covering the wooden floor and stop next to him.

“What’s that on your face?”

A wrinkled hand landed on his cheek, tracing the thin line left by the screwdriver a few hours prior. A shiver ran down his spine, his whole body freezing.

“It’s nothing,” he assured as he felt a wince crossing his face the moment the cold ring of the man touched his chin.

The hand remained on his cheek a few more seconds before he finally stepped back to the door.

“See you next week, artist.”

And with a wave of his hand, he was gone.

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Slamming the Flacon’s door as she jumped out of it, Rey knelt down just in time to greet two huge
dogs in her open arms. After the usual minute of happy head bumping, both Baby and Chewie ran back to the hangar of Black Squadron Garage, allowing their owners to approach Rey.

“Missed me?” she snickered as Poe hastened his pace to join her, letting Han linger behind him.

She hadn’t replied to his text asking her to drop by after her last class, knowing his phone was always either in his jacket while he was working on a car or connected to the hangar’s speakers, blowing Black Squadron’s favorite playlist on repeat.

“A day without you and I’m lost,” the mechanic sarcastically admitted while wiping his hands on his legs. “I actually just received the last few papers for your car, and I need you to sign this.”

Taking the papers he handed her, Rey took a quick look at it and felt her heart drop at the sight of the words.

“Junk yard?”

“I can’t keep it here.”

A shrug shook Poe’s shoulders and he gave her a compassionate smile. Risking a glance at her old vehicle, Rey let out a sigh: she knew it to be the best solution, only she hadn’t been expecting the separation to happen so fast.

“Just a signature and that’s it?”

“And that’s it,” Her friend confirmed with a curt nod.

That car had been a nightmare she hadn’t stopped complaining about for the past year. The screeching wheel, the weak brakes and the broken radio: they’d driven her crazy for months, yet she couldn’t help feeling like a simple scribble was way too simple for such a car.

“Come on kid,” a now familiar voice urged her as a second figure shadowed the paper she was staring at.

*Don’t let him intimidate you,* she recalled the mayor’s words from earlier as she looked up to the man who had just reached them, hands in the pockets of his brown leather jacket. *That would give him way too much pleasure.*

“Mister Solo,” she greeted him while extending her hand with a smile. “I had a tea with your wife today.”

The old man’s face slightly changed, the hint of an uneasiness settling in his eyes. Slowly, he took a hand out of his pocket and took Rey’s, shaking it distractedly without taking his eyes off her.

“I’m sure she only had nice things to tell you about me.”

Noticing the not-so-confident tone in his voice, Rey settled for a neutral shrug and a smile, accepting the pen Poe handed her and lingered her eyes back on the papers. As soon as the blue nib met the paper, she heard three small beeps ringing from the depths of her pocket and her heart missed a beat. Doing her best not to lose her composure, she tightened her grip on the pen and signed both papers authorizing Poe to bring her car to the wrecking yard and the one stating that she was now the official owner of the 1998 RD Millenium, ignoring her now racing heart as she tried not to grab the device from her jacket.

“Congratulations, you can now legally drive your car!” Poe joked as he took the papers and pen
“Well, I guess I now have to offer you a drink if I want to surpass Leia,” he suggested after handing the papers back to Poe.

Had she not been taken aback by the small noises emanating from the earpiece, Rey wouldn't have noticed the small, unexpected smile on the man's face.

“I can’t, I have to go.” Crossing Poe’s disappointed eyes, she added with a sincere smile, “I’m sorry, next time, I promise.”

The signals she’d been waiting to hear for three longs days kept ringing in her pocket, increasing her sudden desire to be alone. Glad she’d come back home after her round to bring the earpiece with her in class, she dived her hand in it to muffle the sound while Mister Solo called his dog back.

“That’s too bad. Chewie kind of likes you.” He observed as the dog sat next to her, nearly slamming his head on her knees. “Join us next time?”

Both she and Poe turned to him, stunned by the surprising friendly tone in the man’s voice.

“Sure,” Rey nodded with raised eyebrows.

“Then I guess it’s just the two of us, Poe.” He stated, causing a frank grin to appear on the mechanic’s face.

Taking advantage of her friend’s new preoccupation, Rey waved her hand and hastened to her car, grabbing her keys as soon as she left the two men.

“Bye Carcass,” she murmured when passing next to the old car that wasn’t hers anymore. Not allowing herself to stop and be emotional about this last goodbye, she focused on the last steps separating her from the Falcon and grabbed the now silent earpiece from her jacket, hands shaking with anticipation. What if she didn’t know what to say? What if he was a creep? Ignoring her thoughts, her hand put the device in the crook of her ear and her legs stopped in front of her car. What if she’d imagined the signals?

“Voice?” She heard herself ask with a weird tone.

“Novice?” the stranger retorted with an out-of-breath yet smiling voice.

All doubts left her as she recognized the familiar voice and a soft chuckle escaped her. Shaking her head at the realization that she was probably not the only one wondering about what to say, she opened her car and sunk in the driver’s seat, letting out a sigh as she welcomed the privacy of the place. Now, she could allow her voice to increase at its natural level. “Still not very talkative.”

“I need a moment,” he admitted.

Another muffled chuckle echoed between them, and she found herself unable to state if it was his or hers. “Pretty convenient, for a voice.”

She turned the key in the ignition and put her seat belt on, releasing the brake in a patient silence.

“So, what exactly does a novice do in her spare time when she’s not trying to beat my score?”

Surprised by the rapidity and confidence of his words, Rey raised her eyebrows and let an
irrepressible smile cross her lips.

“For now, she’s driving home.” She vaguely informed, turning the steering wheel to leave the parking lot. “Want to keep me company?” She suddenly added, shifting up a gear.

“I’d like tha-”

A metallic buzzing cut him mid-sentence, quickly followed by a series of beeps signaling the end of the connection. Caught out by the suddenness of it, Rey let a swear escape her, ignoring the car honking behind her as she gritted her teeth out of frustration.

Chapter End Notes

Snoke is here, and so is Leia (but not the connection, apparently)! I hope you liked that chapter, don't hesitate to tell me what you think about it! I feel like I'm repeating myself, but thank you so much for all your kind comments and kudos <3
“Rey!”

“Hm?”

Barely looking away from her notes, Rey raised her eyebrows in response to her friend's insistence, showing she was listening.

“What did you get?”

It took her a few seconds to understand what Rose was talking about, hardly remembering the test their professor had given them back twenty minutes earlier. The semester had only started two months ago but the strict schedule her part-time job demanded was already tiring her out, stealing precious hours of the early morning her body would have gladly used to rest some more. Truth be told, morning deliveries weren’t entirely to be held responsible for her current fatigue: ignoring her own incessant yawns, she’d fought against her sleepy eyes until early hours of the morning. Her eyes lingered on the small device settled on the nightstand that seemed to be staring back at her with a teasing invisible look, more silent than ever.

_How could such a small thing occupy her thoughts with such strength?_ She ran a hand along the pocket of her jeans for the third time of the day, mentally cursing herself for growing attached to objects with such facility.

_And to strangers._

The thought hit her before she could brush it away, causing her to wince at the realization. She’d fought against sleep for a complete stranger she’d talked to no more than three times including the conversation shortly cut the day before. Repressing a frustrated sigh as she recalled the missed opportunity she’d had to learn more about the voice, Rey turned the test paper over and announced her grade in a whisper, acknowledging it at the same time as Rose.

“B. You?”

“B minus,” Rose murmured with an emphatic shrug that betrayed her irritation.
Since she’d met her, it had always been clear to Rey that despite her genuine ability to care for them, Rose couldn’t help comparing herself to others: whether it was in class or at home, the smallest defeat would always be taken to heart, hidden behind one of her carefree smiles. Far from being as skillful as Finn when it came to reassuring the young woman, Rey bit her lower lip and turned back to her notes, probing her mind in search of a subject to cheer her roommate up. She found it after a minute of silence, thankful of her good memory.

“So… Paige is arriving tonight, right?”

Judging by the bright smile that played on her lips at the mention of her sister, this had been the right topic to steer on.

“I can’t wait for you to meet her, she’s amazing.” Rose assured with a nod as she leaned closer to Rey, forgetting to take notes of their Professor’s speech that had been going on for almost a quarter now. “Maybe we could take her with us tomorrow when-“

“Miss Tico? Miss Johnson?” The voice of their History teacher echoed, catching their attention. “I assume you have a question?”

Taking refuge in a shared silence, the two girls shook their head and solemnly went back to taking notes, each doing their best to remain focused on the lesson and ignore their wandering thoughts.

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A few miles away, the screams of an old clock radio echoed through Ben’s apartment, dragging him away from the deep sleep he’d succumbed to hours ago. Cautiously opening his eyes while struggling not to let the high lights of the late morning blind him; he let a grumble escape him as a farewell to his sleep and gathered his strength to chase the covers away, welcoming the cool breeze passing by the open window on his half naked body. Muting the alarm with a sharp blow, he risked a glance at the two needles: 10:47. He wasn’t late yet. His chest heaving under deep breaths, Ben rolled on his stomach to reach the other edge of the large bed where he let his legs dangle above the floor for a few more minutes before finally landing on the floor. The coldness of the parquet achieved to fully wake him up as he stretched out with a long yawn, suddenly aware of how he’d missed sleeping in an actual bed, away from the never-ending buzzing of the computers overrunning the small room he called his office. A wince escaped him as a crack resonated from his back; one night could obviously not fix a whole week of sleep deprivation, especially not with a busy mind keeping him awake with speculations on how this earpiece could finally obey him. How a stupid earpiece could manage to monopolize his thoughts when he should be focusing on the boss’s commission was highly disturbing.

A shower would probably help, he thought as he trailed to the bathroom, his heavy head spinning at the high luminosity thanking him as soon as he stepped into the dark room. A shiver ran down his spine as his feet met the cold tiles on the floor, urging him to stand on the bathmat in front of the sink. Another yawn escaped him as he raised his head, his narrowed eyes landing on the mirror above the faucet where he met his own sleepy gaze. His reflection would have usually been something he’d have avoided, yet today, something pushed him to stare back at it. Apart from the signs of fatigue framing his brown eyes, it was exactly the same pale, dull face he’d worked hard to ignore every morning when passing by the mirror. Childish, according to Snoke. Always haunted by an obvious weakness, and too expressive to win.
Grabbing the edge of the glass sink with a hand, he ran the other through his untamed hair to examine the red line left on his cheek the day before. A shaking finger left his dark hair to trace down the already fading scar, only now fully acknowledging its presence. Almost reaching his chin, he suddenly stopped at the memory of Snoke's hand there and stepped back with a deep breath. Ignoring the coldness of the floor under his feet, he slowly lifted his head, facing his reflection once more. His superior had never let a comment on his body escape, but he knew it not to be necessary; a simple gaze at his uncovered broad chest was enough for him to know how uneven he was.

Leaving the mirror’s frame in the blink of an eye, Ben sharply opened the shower’s curtain and disappeared behind, allowing the water to flow and sweep his concerns away with its soothing constant stream. Once he cut off the water and stepped out of the shower, another welcoming fresh breeze brushed his wet skin, causing him to shiver once again as he reached the closet facing his bed. A few water drops, held in soaked strands of hair until now, started running along his bare back as he unfolded a grey t-shirt in which he buried his head before grabbing black jeans he quickly put on. His eyes now used to the luminosity of the room bathed in sun, Ben cast a glance at the small phone placed on the kitchen’s counter; a small green light announcing new messages kept flickering, as if begging him to pick it up.

Not even bothering to repress a sigh, he took the few steps separating him from the old mobile phone and opened it abruptly. Narrowing his eyes under concentration, he tried to ignore the knot taking shape in his chest at the sight of his father’s name appearing on the small screen.

‘Your mother is out tonight, wanna have a drink?’ – two hours ago.

Another sigh escaped him, deeper than the previous. Not even bearing to reply and remind Han he usually worked until late hours in the evening, Ben closed the message to open the next one.

‘Poker night on Tuesday. You’re asked to be there. A.H’

If it hadn’t been for the knot tightening on his heart, he would probably have laughed at Hux’s odd habit to sign each of his texts. Typing a brief answer to inform he’d gotten the information, Ben turned to lean on the counter as he opened the third message, keeping an eye on the hour next to the battery’s state.

‘Commission’s on your desk. See you on Tuesday.’

Knowing very well that last message wasn’t expecting any answer, he closed his phone and tucked it in the depths of his back pocket.

Barely half an hour later, the front door of his apartment closed loudly, shaking the Christmas decorations that never seemed to leave the neighbor’s door. Hastily going down the stairs, Ben settled his headset around his neck with an unexpected enthusiasm at the idea of being able to work on it with proper tools and computers. Idly pushing the door leading to the parking lot with one shoulder, he grabbed his key and reached his car in a few steps before settling on the driver’s seat. One big roar later, the dark grey Cadillac left the street, heading to Starkiller Laser Tag at the pace of loud music slamming against the closed windows.
“Can’t you sit on a chair, for once?”

Looking up from the textbook laying on her lap, Rey felt her already spreading smile die on her lips as soon as she met Finn’s sullen gaze. Weighed down with his sports bag and a plastic one about to split open under the weight of errands, the young man’s face was far from wearing the usual smile he greeted them with every night. Frowning at the sight of her friend’s uncommon behavior, Rey immediately left the counter and tossed her book away, taking a few steps towards him.

“Finn? What’s going on?” she cautiously asked, trying to cross his elusive gaze.

Alerted by her question, Poe and Rose both turned away from the TV, causing their colorful cars to fall out of the road they were racing on while the screen went black, quickly brightened with an orange ‘Game Over’ accompanied by an electronic decrescendo. From under the table at the other side of the room, Baby looked up as well: eyes wide open at the tone of Finn’s voice. Before anyone could talk, the dog got up on his paws and trotted to him, tongue excitedly lolling out as he got closer to the plastic bag.

“Nothing,” Finn grumbled with a wince as he put the grocery bag down the counter, ignoring the three pairs of eyes staring at him with disbelief.

Both Rey and Rose remained silent as they watched him turn back and head to his room and exchanged a confused gaze while Poe started rising up from the couch, staring at the door with narrow eyes. He started opening his mouth when a loud noise echoed from the corridor, followed by the unmistakable yet highly surprising sound of Finn swearing on a very harsh tone, followed by Baby running back to the living room, ears down.

“Poe, could you please hold your dog away from me?”

Not without a frown, the mechanic kneeled to his dog’s level to calm him down with soft rubs on his head while glancing to the corridor with concern.

“Everything alright, buddy?”

Turning to the corridor Poe was staring at, Rey tilted her head to see Finn picking books and clothes from the floor and throwing it back into his large bag, each movement more abrupt than the previous. Hesitantly, she walked away from the living room, making sure to close the door behind her before squatting down next to her friend and helping him pick up his items from the carpet in a heavy silence.

“Coach threatened to dismiss me for next game.” He finally confessed under his breath. Rey’s attempt to hold his gaze failed again, his eyes firmly lingered on the t-shirt in his hand displaying his team’s logo under his name.

“You know she won’t,” she assured on the softest voice she could. “She said the exact same thing last year, and you’re still here.”

Despite her apprehension that these weren’t the words he needed, she noticed a subtle shrug shake the young man’s shoulders as he buried the t-shirt in his bag before rising back on his feet. Following suit, Rey gave him an encouraging smile and nodded her head to the bathroom’s door.

“Go have a shower; we’ll take care of dinner.”

Silently thanking her, Finn acquiesced and disappeared behind the bathroom’s door in the span of a few seconds, leaving Rey alone in the dark corridor. Pretending she didn’t hear him sniffing at the
other side of the door, she grabbed his bag to drag it to his room and went back to the living room where she was greeted by two pairs of worried eyes silently asking her about Finn’s state. Reassured by the shake of her head accompanying her shrug, Poe uncrossed his arms and walked to the kitchen corner, rolling the sleeves of his brown jumper up to his elbows.

“I’ll start cooking. We don’t want Paige to starve when she arrives, right?”

A smile made its way on Rey's lips as she watched Poe expertly busy himself in gathering ingredients and tools, diving in a conscientious silence she'd only seen of him while working at his garage. Trustful about his cooking skills, she retreated in the couch next to Rose who silently interrogated her with an inquiring look.

"Coach issue," she tacitly explained as she grabbed the two gamepads laying on the carpet and tossed one to Rose.

About twenty minutes later, the two girls were so engaged in a wild car race it took them a few seconds to notice Finn had stepped into the room, a soft smile shadowed by obvious shame as he took the few steps between him and Poe, biting his lips while obviously searching for his words.

“I… Sorry.”

Brushing Finn's worries away with a wave of his hand, Poe shook his head with a knowing smile as he stepped away from the boiling pans a few seconds, affectionately landing his hand on his shoulder. The familiar sound of Baby’s paws drumming on the parquet caused them both to spin towards the source of the noise, only to see the ginger dog hesitantly trotting to Finn.

“Sorry boy,” he apologized while leaning to his level, kneeling down on one knee as he further cupped the Labrador’s face with his hands. Obviously far from bitter, the dog joyously licked his face before joining the girls in front of the TV where he flopped down on the carpet.

“Well, dinner’s ready,” the mechanic proudly announced. “Is Paige coming soon?”

Momentarily looking away from the game at the mention of her sister, Rose winced at the sound of her car crashing into a wall and grabbed her phone.

“Any minute now,” she started as she drummed the screen with her thumb. “I received something, she’s probably already-”

Noticing a change in her voice, Rey turned to Rose, a bad feeling overrunning her as she waited for her friend to say what she already suspected.

“Oh, she’s… not coming.”

A deadly silence followed her words, only broken by the sound of her phone being locked. It was unfortunately not the first time Paige cancelled a visit at the last minute, and neither her sister nor her roommates could hold it against her, knowing how demanding and unpredictable her job could be. And yet, Rey couldn’t help but feel slightly remorseful as she recalled Rose's disappointment earlier when facing her grade.

“Ok, you all need a change of mind,” Poe proclaimed, covering his mouth with a clenched fist as a frown crossed his face. "What about that bar in the city center you like so much?"

Internally thanking him for reacting with such rapidity and consideration, Rey immediately replied, not allowing another silence to hover between the four of them.
“Takodana’s?”

“Yes, that one!” The mechanic acquiesced with a snap of his fingers towards her.

“I don’t know,” she cautiously started, a hint of reluctance in her voice. “We have classes tomorrow.”

Aware of her crossed arms betraying her thoughts, Rey cast a glance at her roommates in hopes of finding support: Still kneeling next to Baby, Finn addressed her with a warm yet weak smile. Rose, deeply sunk in the couch, trying her best to keep a neutral face, her eyes visibly sullen.

“Come on, you could all use a little distraction right now.”

All while talking, Poe handed her a plate from which emanated a sweet fragrance of fried food blended with a honey-like smell; probably due to the sauce shining above a small mountain of colorful cubes.

“I actually think it's a great idea,” Finn interjected as he joined Rose on the old couch facing the screen on which a small turtle kept hurrying around a garden, sometimes hidden by the main menu of the game.

A sigh of surrender escaped Rey as she tried to ignore Poe’s proud smile, nodding as a sign of agreement.

“Just one drink,” he promised before walking to Rose and Finn, laden with two steaming plates.

“Well, destiny really is a bitch, tonight.”

Hands firmly settled on his hips, Poe stared at the ‘closed’ sign hanging on the glass door with disbelief.

“You’ve got to be kidding me…” Finn mumbled next to him, narrowing his eyes as he tried reading the small handwritten note glued on the sign. “Rey, come see it.”

Already walking to them, Rey reached her roommate in a few steps before practically sticking her nose to the door, deciphering the small words scribbled in fading blue ink: ‘permanent closure’.

“What’s going on?”

It was now Rose’s turn to ask, yet none of them had the heart to tell her the news after the silent tears they’d all notice streaming down her face during the ride. Warned by the closed door and her friends’ looks, she quickly understood and stopped halfway.

“Let’s just go home,” she said with a sigh. “I’m tired anyway.”

Still an awful liar, Rey thought as she noticed Rose’s voice to be slightly more high-pitched. Pushed by a protective reflex at the sight of her defeated friends and a sudden curiosity, she found herself discovering her own words as they escaped her lips. “Or we could go to Starkiller?”

She didn’t fail to notice Poe’s incredulous look landing on her at her sudden suggestion, nor did she miss the victorious smirk playing on his lips.
“We know they’re open,” she hastened to explain while doing her best to keep a straight face. “Now that we’re here.”

It didn’t take a long time for them to agree, nor to get to the Laser Tag building. Enlightened by the neon lights that were starting to feel familiar, Rey let her eyes wander around the place as she followed the trio, curiously lingering her eyes on every single customer.

“You know it’s a child’s game, right?” The bartender greeted them with a flat, exhausted voice.

“Relax Hugs,” Poe scoffed while leaning an elbow on the counter. “We’re just here for a drink.”

“At least you didn’t bring your dog,” the red-headed man hissed as he started picking empty glasses and placing them in front of him, chasing the mechanic’s elbow away with a brief tap of his hand.

Ignoring his obvious irritation at the idea of talking with them, they all quickly ordered their beverage before heading to a table next to the jukebox.

“He really isn’t fond of you, is he?” Finn asked in an amused tone once they weren’t within earshot anymore.

About to follow Finn in his inquiries about the small angry man, Rey almost jumped at the familiar sound of three remote beeps; busy staring at every man in the room and trying to guess what their voices sounded like, she’d almost forgotten about the earpiece hidden in her jeans, its presence slowly becoming a habit. Slowing her pace, she slid her hand in her back pocket to grab the device and, in the blink of an eye, placed it in the crook of her ear.

“Rey? Bench or chair?” Rose asked from the table where they’d started settling around, her soft voice covered by the two men’s laughers.

“Whichever,” she managed to articulate with indifference.

Highly aware of her hastening heartbeats, she released a lock of hair from behind her ear in hopes for it to cover the small device as she joined them. Seconds after their glasses clinked against each other, she felt her heart looping as the small beeps vanished, making place to a silence quickly broken by a familiar voice. His voice.

“I’d like that.”

Muted by the presence of her friends, Rey still couldn’t help expressing her perplexity with a frown. Thankful for Poe’s ability to captivate people’s attention through his talkativeness, she raised her glass at her mouth’s level and hid behind it, waiting for her face to recompose as she welcomed the fruity taste of the drink between her lips.

“That’s what I wanted to say yesterday,” the voice added after a few seconds of silence.

Amused by his hesitant tone, a small smile crossed her lips as she put her glass back on the table where she planted an elbow, resting her head in her hand while trying to focus on Poe’s story about his young years in boarding school. He’d almost make it to the outcome when the deep voice rose once again with a hint of disappointment almost causing her to shiver.

“No game tonight?”

She allowed herself a slight shake of the head, assuming he could see her from wherever he was. A long minute of silence followed her move, then broken by a soft gasp of understanding from the
other side.

“Oh, right, you can’t speak -”

“Five players, one novice,” the bartender remotely announced in her ear. Wincing at the sound of his flat voice echoing through the device –moreover using the word ‘novice’, Rey instinctively turned to the counter only to see him putting down a black walkie-talkie before handing five customers small badges and pointing to the Briefing Room’s entrance with the same cold glare he seemed to greet everyone with.

“Rey? Something wrong?”

Pulled back by Finn’s voice, she turned away from the bartender’s figure to address her friend a reassuring smile, nevertheless noticing the electronic sounds in her ear signaling the end of the connection. Almost fully focused, she spent the next fifteen minutes listening to Rose and Poe's jokes and complaints about their respective former boarding schools, occasionally cut by Finn's questions about rumors he’d heard back in his younger years. She would’ve happily taken part in the conversation, if it hadn’t been for her uncontrollable need to constantly check out if the connection signal wasn’t ringing yet. Nodding from time to time, and joining the smiles and laughter, she certainly hadn't been expecting that signal to sound.

The usual soft background music suddenly stopped, replaced by the unexpected screeching of an electric guitar making the several speakers allocated around the place crackle under the high notes reached by the instrument. The few customers scattered all over the room all raised their heads, surprised by the unusual change of ambiance and looking around them as if in hopes for a secret event to be announced.

“Well, that’s new,” Poe exclaimed with a smirk, his amused eyes looking around in search of the person to thank for the change of playlist.

One way or another, I’m gonna find ya, the invisible singer started singing with a husky voice. Immediately recognizing the famous fifties’ song, Rey incredulously glanced at the bartender who, judging by his obvious exasperation, was definitely not the one to blame. She could’ve joined Finn and Rose’s laugh if she hadn’t been struck by the realization that there was probably only one person other than the red-haired man able to control anything in this bar.

I’m gonna see ya, I’m gonna meetcha meetcha-

Now as engaged in the song as the other customers, Poe started silently mouthing the lyrics along the singer’s voice for Rose’s greatest entertainment whose face had gone from displaying a forced smile to a genuine laugh, shaking her whole body and the bench Poe and her were sitting on. Soon, Finn joined the movement and started recording the scene with his phone, silently laughing behind the screen. Heartily involved in this conniving moment, the three of them failed to notice Rey’s eyes widening as she focused on the next lyrics bursting through the speaker above them.

She’d never caught it until tonight, but the verse’s lyrics were way more meaningful than the chorus: stalking, watching... A feeling of discomfort slowly seized her at the realization, soon accompanied by a guilty amusement as the singer mentioned loosing and tracking. Some songs just appeared to be catchy independently of their lyrics, just as the Blondie’s hit was probably not a hidden message her brain had started working on. Yet, the possible meaning of these words didn’t leave her mind for the rest of the outing; neither did it vanish when her back hit the hard mattress of her small bed once Poe had dropped them off, her stinging eyes begging her for the proper amount of sleep they'd been deprived of for the last days. And just as she felt her eyelids surrendering against the heavy weight of tiredness, she could’ve sworn hearing the first dynamic
notes hastily playing in her head, covering the muffled ringing of the small device back in the pocket of the jeans she hadn't bothered to take off.

“Game night!” Poe exclaimed as he burst into the place the day after, greeted as always by a sigh from the bartender.

*This was far from being reasonable*, Rey thought as her thumb hit the ‘connect’ button next to the first Bluetooth device appearing on the list, but no one would ever know. Besides, it was just a joke. *A joke shared with a stranger she hadn’t spoken about to anyone*, she silently admitted to herself as she hit another button, knowing full well she now couldn’t change her mind as the sound of an electric guitar echoed between the walls of the bar for the second time in less than twenty-four hours.

“What the-” The bartender repressed his own words with a jolted sigh and gritted his teeth, casting a glance to the ceiling as he rolled his eyes with apparent exasperation.

She'd heard it on the radio earlier during her morning round while still thinking about the previous night; and even though she'd never paid any more attention to Pat Benatar's words, they now sounded like the perfect response to the evening before's unexpected song she suspected the voice to be responsible for—supposing that the previous song was indeed addressed to her.

“Four players,” he snarled in the walkie-talkie under Poe’s amused look. “And turn off that music, for God's sake.”

A chuckle escaped Poe as he patiently waited, his fingers discreetly tapping on the counter following the music’s rhythm, only stopping to grab the small badges Hux handed him. Careful not to cross his gaze, Rey followed her friends while the singer’s words kept resonating around the room, daring whoever the song had been written for to ‘hit her with their best shot’.

“Noted,” she managed to hear right before the Briefing Room’s heavy doors closed behind her, plunging the quartet into darkness spattered with the flickering lights emanating from the numerous jackets that hung around them.

Taking advantage of everyone’s lack of attention while putting their equipment on, Rey turned her phone off and put it back in her pocket, switching it with the small earpiece that hadn't left her the whole day. A smirk made its way to her lips at the signals that immediately echoed in her ear, followed by the green light announcing the game's beginning.

“I didn’t know I was dealing with a hacker.”

Despite her irrepressible desire to respond on the same tone, Rey shrugged subtly and sunk into the maze. Once she’d reached one of her usual hiding spots and made sure no one was around, she cleared her throat, avoiding the security camera hovering over her.

“Can I ask you a favor?” she hesitantly asked while firmly grabbing her weapon.

“Anything,” the voice almost instantly replied.

“Don’t help me today.”
Surprised by her request and its effect on him, Ben uselessly nodded before moving away from his keyboard.

All the excitement he’d felt at the sight of her walking in minutes ago immediately faded to make place to a guilt that only irritated him more. He knew he shouldn’t have played that song the night before. Truth be told, he didn’t even know what’d led him to do it; but it sure had scared her enough to put some distance between them. He’d hoped her silence of the night before was just the cause of an early sleep, but it was now obvious she couldn’t find it in her to clearly ask him to leave her alone.

Snoke’s remote voice suddenly hissed in his mind. *Pathetic.*

Feeling a shiver run down his spine and his muscles tense, he tore the headset off his head and tossed it on the desk, spilling the end of his cold coffee on one of his notebooks. He wouldn’t blame her; it was the second time he’d begrudgingly scared her.

“Voice?” she remotely called, her accent still very noticeable through the device.

Risking a glance at the screen next to him, Ben watched her throwing herself behind a wall, chased by one of her friends.

“I didn’t say I don’t want you to talk.”

The hesitancy in her voice slightly reassured him as he incredulously put his headset back on, tension slowly leaving his body.

“Not helping you is harder than expected,” he managed to articulate after taking a deep breath.

It wasn’t entirely true, but the muffled laugh that escaped her was worth it.

“What do you want me to talk about?” he added after a moment of silence, trying not to let his uneven breathing betray his growing nervousness.

“Whatever you want,” she whispered after a momentarily silence as well as she slowly retreated back to a safer place.

Dameron wasn’t far from her, he noted as he focused on the second screen—he was actually rather close and about to shoot her. Forcing himself to remain silent until the inevitable happened, Ben searched for a possible conversation topic that wouldn’t include the game happening before his eyes.

“So… Pat Benatar?” he finally inquired once she was alone again, her friend running at the other side of the maze.

“Well, you set a high standard with Blondie.”

“She’s a classic.”

“Shall I assume I’m talking with a big fan of hers?”
It was now his turn to let a chuckle escape him before falling silent again, watching her run to her other friend and shoot him in the shoulder as he’d taught her two weeks earlier.

The conversation revealed itself to go easier than he’d expected, numerous moments of silence allowing him to take a break and think about what to say next. Fifteen minutes didn’t allow them to talk much, both constantly cut either by his hesitancy or the intense races around the maze she engaged in, laughing out loud with the other players. Sooner than expected, small red letters appeared on Ben’s screen while the strong buzz signaling the end of the game echoed throughout the maze.

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“Could you do me a favor as well?” He mumbled as she was heading to the exit.

Surprised by the suddenness of his question, Rey hummed her approval as she passed the bridge she’d grown used to hiding on, her curiosity now piqued.

“Keep an eye on your earpiece.”

Not bold enough to confess the device had almost never left her since their unachieved conversation two days ago, she contented with a subtle nod as she entered the Briefing Room where Finn was already untying Rose’s jacket, oblivious of the young woman’s pink cheeks as his hand slightly brushed her waist in a last attempt to loosen her stuck belt.

It wasn’t before an hour later that she understood this request, finally diving under the cold blankets of her bed when the three usual beeps echoed from the earpiece she’d just placed on her nightstand. Growling as the coldness of the room caressed her extended arm she grabbed the device and raised it to her ear, listening to the endless signals without high expectations. After a few seconds of waiting, her eyes widened as the sound of another’s breathing joining hers.

“It works.”

An uncontrollable smile crossed her lips at the pure astonishment in his voice.

“It works,” she confirmed in an incredulous murmur.

A yawn escaped her and, before she could add or listen to anything more, she surrendered to the slumber her body had been begging for, the corner of her lips still crooked in a coy smile.

Chapter End Notes

I’m so happy that I’ve finally found time to write this chapter, last week was a rollercoaster but I’ve been wanting to write these music scenes since the very beginning! Once again, thank you very much for all these kudos and kind comments, you guys are amazing readers <3 I hope you liked this chapter, don’t hesitate to tell me what you think about it!
Unlike any other day, Rey woke up a few minutes before her alarm clock. Completely awake, contemplating the ceiling while waiting for the old radio on her nightstand to drag her out of bed. Even though waking up so early had now become a habit, she still hated leaving her bed for the cold, lonely world of Kamino in the early morning. With a brief glance to the other device settled on the table the events of the prior evening came rushing back to her.

‘It works’.

His voice echoed in her head as she grabbed the earpiece and examined it, her blanket covering half of her curious face. She couldn’t recall hearing the sounds signaling the end of the connection before she’d fallen asleep, too tired to say anything else than repeating his incredulous statement. An odd feeling then made its way to her, settling a lump in her throat and a twist in her stomach as she realized the awkwardness of this situation: she’d been willingly communicating with a complete stranger she’d only met through a game tutorial two weeks ago and didn’t know a thing about. She didn’t know his face or his name - just his voice.

Before she could further explore her thoughts, the alarm clock announced the beginning of her day with a shrill noise she quickly shut down with her free hand before she jerked the covers away and let her bare feet meet the cold, itchy grey carpet Finn hated so much. Stretching her muscles as she got up from the soft mattress, Rey let a yawn escape her as she made her way to her wardrobe where she grabbed a pair of jeans and a green sweater. Hurried by the coldness of her room as her pajamas consisted of an oversized t-shirt and shorts met the floor in a muffled noise, she quickly slipped her arms and legs through the clothes. Her skin shivered at the contact of the still frozen fabrics. After a small passage to the bathroom, she crossed the main corridor of the house on her tiptoes, bag and jacket in one hand while the other held the small earpiece in a tight grip as she went down the steps leading to the main door.

The soft caress of a morning breeze greeted her as soon as she closed the door, achieving to open her sleepy eyes. Back resting against the house while she struggled with gravity to put her shoes on, she didn’t notice Poe approaching her until Baby joyously jumped on his back legs, firmly
landing his front paws on her stomach waiting for her to pet him. Unable to resist the dog’s happiness she abandoned her shoelaces to kneel at his level and allowed him to fully greet her.

“Easy, buddy.” Poe mumbled with a smile as he offered Rey a hand she gladly grabbed.

“Anything to post today?” She asked once back on her feet, dusting her jumper.

Rejecting the offer as usual with a wave of his hand, the mechanic called his dog with two firm pats on his lap. Once they both wished each other a good day, Rey put her jacket on and slipped the earpiece in her pocket before walking away towards her car.

“The Falcon,” she muttered between her teeth as she sunk into the cold seat, mocking the previous owner’s voice. “Bloody frozen Falcon.”

Rubbing her hands together in an attempt to warm herself up: she let out a sigh and started the car; ready for her day to begin.

Two and a half hours later, the car stopped in front of the town hall with a grinding noise slightly covered by the sound of the tape playing in the old radio. After slamming the door louder than she’d expected, Rey tightened her grip on the large envelope addressed to the mayor and stepped into the hallway; almost instantly welcomed by the radiant smile of the secretary.

“How’s your morning going?” She politely asked as she took the receipt Rey handed her.

“One more hour, and I’m officially off until Monday.” Rey responded as she gave her the envelope.

“Any plans?” The secretary asked, giving her the signed receipt back.

Issuing her a shrug as a response, Rey turned to the large doors of the mayor’s office with an inquiring look, waiting for Kaydel to confirm she could enter. She hadn’t even reached the third knock when the distant voice of Mayor Organa called her to enter, her voice as warm and welcoming as usual.

“Rey dear, how are you?”

Soon won over by the woman’s contagious smile, Rey took the few steps separating them and accepted the warm cup she was handed; amazed by the woman’s capacity to always serve her tea at the perfect temperature.

“I’m fine, my week is almost over. How about you?”

A sigh escaped the woman’s lips as she sat back on her chair, glancing at the few papers scattered across her desk with concern.

“I cannot say the same,” she stated with a sad smile before she took a sip of her own cup. “You may have heard about Takodana’s shutdown?”

A small pinch on her stomach caused Rey to widen her eyes; she’d completely forgotten about her favorite bar being shut down, as she had been way too focused on the mysterious voice and his taste in music.

“I saw the sign on Thursday. What happened?”

It wasn’t in her customs to inquire about the mayor’s work, but she and her roommates had always
had a great affinity with the owner. Suddenly wondering if something had happened to Maz, Rey opened her mouth to ask, but was shortly cut by the mayor.

“I am off to see Mrs. Kanata in the afternoon.” Something in her voice betrayed her little hope for the bar to open again, yet she insisted on keeping a brave smile on her face and skillfully steered the conversation away from Takodana’s, focusing on Rey and her studies. They’d only been speaking for a few minutes when voices echoed in the hall quickly followed by two firm knocks on the wooden doors.

“Come in,” Leia called with a frown.

The left door creaked open, revealing a greyish-haired figure standing awkwardly in the doorway.

“Han,” the woman welcomed him with a polite nod as Rey turned in her chair to see the man walking towards the desk.

Silent, she couldn’t repress a frown as she observed the two of them politely shaking hands, remembering the mayor talking about having married this man and wondering if she’d forgotten to mention a divorce.

“Hi, kid.”

Dragged away from her thoughts by his greeting Rey shook the hand he offered her, and cast him a smile as she grabbed her cup back.

“What is it?” The mayor asked as she got up to reach him, her voice slightly less formal than before.

Aware of the tensed silence that followed the question, Rey hastened to finish her tea and got on her feet in the blink of an eye.

“I better go,” she said before Leia could assure her she was more than welcome to stay. “Say hi to Maz for me.”

She grabbed her jacket hanging on the back of her chair and grabbed her bag before hastily walking to the door, followed by two pairs of eyes.

“Don’t crash my car.”

Raising an eyebrow at the grumpy man’s words, Rey rolled her eyes with amusement as she closed the door behind her and stepped into the still deserted hall, slightly more lightened than earlier. Careful not to interrupt Kaydel’s phone conversation, she walked to the main entrance on her tiptoes; almost holding her breath until she got out of the building. A sigh of relief escaped her as she glanced at the sky above her: Finn was probably about to leave the house for his training, and she knew how a bright blue sky always managed to cheer him up. Once back in her car she tossed her bag on the passenger’s seat and turned the key in the ignition. The radio instantly came back to life while the monotonous voice of a journalist repeated the same information she’d heard an hour ago while delivering some packages in the North side of her perimeter. Biting her lips with impatience, she started looking in the car doors compartments in hopes to find the instruction book and finally change the radio station. Only now noticing the glove compartment in front of the passenger’s seat, she leaned to grab the lever and quickly pulled her hand away as a mountain of small items tumbled out of the case.

Lying on the floor were twenty tapes staring back at her, handwritten notes glued to their colorful covers. Right between ‘Lando’s playlist’ and ‘Wedding songs’, the figure of a woman singing in a
white dress caught her attention. ‘Long trips’ she managed to decipher on the piece of paper glued onto the blue cover, next to the artist’s name written in capital letters: ‘BLONDIE’. Amused by Han’s taste in music and the coincidence, she cast a glance at Leia’s window then at the hour displayed next to the gas level: she was running late. A wince crossed her face as the journalist kept talking with a monotonous voice, and she hesitantly cast a glance at the numerous tapes scattered on the floor. Something about them felt like these were rather intimate items, yet she couldn’t help scanning the different covers, looking for something familiar.

Nobody would know, she thought as she randomly grabbed a red case and opened it. Urged both by the rumbles emerging from the hood and the hour, she put the small tape into the fence next to her wheel and left the city hall’s parking lot; ready to finish her round accompanied by the sound of a 80’s synthesizer.

An hour later, Rey’s heart missed a beat as three small beeps echoed from the depths of her jacket. Tightening her grip on the handbrake she’d just set, she felt her chest heave under a deep breath as a wave of uncertainty she’d felt earlier came rushing back to her mind. Joking around while playing a game was a thing; but now, away from the comforting darkness of the maze, she suddenly felt incredibly vulnerable and stupid. Slowly turning down the volume of the radio, she plunged a hand into her pocket to take the earpiece and place it in her ear with anticipation.

The signal disappeared after a few seconds, making way to a short silence.

“Hey,” She managed to mumble, definitely less confident than she’d ever been.

“Did I wake you up?”

A smile made its way to her lips as soon as his words echoed in her ear. Despite the obvious concern something in his deep tone managed to reassure her, and brush half of her thoughts away.

“You didn’t, I just got back from work.” Something in her voice had changed as well, betraying the doubts wandering through her mind.

“Night shifts?” A hint of shyness emerged through the device, letting her know she probably wasn’t the only one trying to figure out how she was supposed to feel about this whole earpiece situation.

“Mornings,” she corrected with a small smile while cutting off contact.

Making sure both Finn’s car and Rose’s bike weren’t parked in their street anymore she grabbed her bag and jumped out of the car. Conscious of the silence dangerously settling between them, Rey cleared her throat as she slammed the door and started walking to her house.

“Did you just wake up?”

“For my defense, I had a long night.” He admitted with a sleepy voice as she turned her key into the lock.

“Did someone try to beat your score?”

A soft chuckle echoed through the connection, and Rey swore she’d heard him smiling at her question.

“I wouldn’t allow that.”

It was now her turn to smile as she stepped into the unusual empty house. A shiver ran down her
spine at the unspoken allusion to her first game; memories churning around all at once in her head. Her back hitting the wall, his breath on her skin, his jacket hitting hers, the playful way he’d pronounced the two words that’d frozen her body for a solid minute; every single detail achieved to weaken her voice as she raised it again.

“You wouldn’t,” She confirmed while passing the door of her room.

Absent-mindedly putting her bag under on her desk, she collapsed on her untidy bed without even bearing to take her jacket off. Allowing herself a few seconds of silence while contemplating the ceiling, she suddenly turned her head towards the clock radio settled within easy reach on her nightstand. 10:57, the evil box informed her with its bright red lights.

“Are you planning on spending your whole day in bed?” she inquired, now determined to keep the conversation going as long as possible.

“Unfortunately not.” She noticed the emphasis made on his second word betraying a physical effort. “I should be getting ready for work.”

Another muffled noise resonated through the earpiece, followed by a deep sigh of his, provoking a new shiver to travel down Rey’s back.

“Day shift?” She asked on an amused tone, trying to ignore her disappointment at the shortness of their conversation.

“Day shift,” he confirmed on the same tone. “Starting in half an hour.”

“You really should get ready, then.”

She instantly regretted her words, knowing the silence that would follow the end of the connection would allow questions and fears to haunt her for the remainder of the day. A noise similar to the one of a creaking bed resonated through the device, soon followed by his hesitant voice.

“Actually, I was wondering-” The beats of her heart hastened their pace as she remained silent, uselessly nodding while waiting for him to continue. “When exactly can I call you?”

Caught off guard by the question, Rey opened her mouth and closed it, weighing her words before allowing it to cross her lips. It appeared to her, as she mentally examined her weekly schedule that apart from nights and mornings, having roommates left her with very little time alone.

“Maybe… mornings?”

Despite her desire to ask about expanding their time together, a glance at the clock reminded her of his timetable and the fair amount of work she still had to do before Monday.

“Mornings. Works for me.” Judging by the absence of the usual beeps signaling the end of the connection, he was as reluctant as her at the idea of hanging up.

“Have a good day.” She finally mumbled, grudgingly.

“Same. I mean, have a good day as well.”

Helplessly smiling at his clumsy stammering, Rey held her breath until the electronic beeps rang in her ear. Staring blankly at the ceiling she took the device off and put it back in her pocket, feeling highly aware of how empty and silent the place was suddenly. Deprived of the usual noises of Finn busying himself in the kitchen covered by whatever show Rose was watching, the house now
seemed determined to remind her how alone she was. A sigh escaped her as she got on her feet to sit at her desk; ignoring the many drawings and texts she still had to work on, she grabbed her phone and let her fingers dance on the screen looking for the last conversation she’d had with Poe.

‘Can I drop by? Solo forgot some things in his car.’

The reply came remarkably fast, almost causing her to jump at the sound.

‘Sure, bring your lunch!’

Smiling at the positive answer she grabbed her bag and quickly made her way to her car, relieved to leave the house.

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“Missed me?”

Both Rey and Poe looked up from their sandwiches at the sound of Han’s voice, just in time to raise their lunches above their head as the big ball of fur the man insisted on calling a dog jumped on their lap under Baby’s glare.

“Are you planning on spending your whole weekend with my family?” the grumpy man asked Rey, shaking Poe’s hand then hers.

“I’m his secret son,” Poe confided with a mysterious voice before she could ask anything, tilting his head with a knowing look.

“We put up with you for a few months. Get over it kid.”

“Still a secret son,” The mechanic insisted with a shrug before taking a new bite of his sandwich.

Biting her lips to repress her smile as she noticed one distorting the old man’s face Rey put her sandwich back in its box and leaned to grab her bag.

“You forgot these in the glove compartment,” she said as she grabbed a random tape and handed it to him.

Furrowing his brows at the tape she gave him, Han softened at the sight of the case covered with one of the numerous scribbled notes. Silent for a few more seconds, he allowed a nostalgic smile to cross his face before handing her the tape back with a shake of his head.

“Keep it, kid. I bet you could use a little music while on your delivery round.”

“Are you sure?” Rey asked with a frown, recalling the ‘Wedding song’ tape she’d noticed.

“I won’t tell Finn,” Poe assured with a wink.

Half-laughing at the idea of Finn raising his eyes to the stars in front of new objects she hadn’t had the heart to throw away, she silently thanked the mechanic with a nod and shoved the tape back in her bag among the numerous others she’d brought with her.

“I wouldn’t have thought of you as a delivery girl,” Han stated as he cautiously sat on the stone
bench opposite to them. Remembering Mayor Organa telling her not to let her husband impress her, Rey repressed a frown and shrugged with a smile, grabbing her sandwich back to take a bite.

*She really should thank Poe,* she realized a few hours later as she opened another one of the books she’d brought with her. Perched on an old chair she couldn’t stop rocking, the young woman looked up from the front page and cast a glance at the mechanic handing a tool to the laying figure of Jessika. Their voices covered by the loud music emerging from the small speaker settled on a shelf threatening to collapse under the weight of the numerous boxes placed on it. Every Saturday of every week since the mechanic had introduced himself to his neighbors he’d never failed to let Rey stay at Black Squadron Garage to escape the loneliness of an empty house and had never made a single comment about it. Judging by the fact that neither Rose nor Finn had talked to her about that, it appeared that Poe wasn’t the chatterbox as he’d let her believe. Both reserved when it came to serious talking, these afternoons remained mostly silent, her reading sessions occasionally interrupted by Wexley or Tallie whenever one of them beckoned her to join them for a coffee.

“See you tonight?” Poe asked around six o’clock as she started gathering her books; brought back to reality by the setting sun blinding her through the small window next to her.

Signifying with a nod that his presence for dinner was more than welcome she waved to his colleagues, and left the hangar after one last stroke to Baby who kept following her despite his owner calling him back.

Not even an hour later, Poe and his dog were both welcomed by a sweet smell of onions and tomato as they stepped into the house. Sitting on the counter as usual, Rey was listening to Finn talking about his day while he absent-mindedly stirred the vegetables and meat quietly roasting deep down in the pan; barely noticing the sound of the door opening behind him.

“Rey,” Poe greeted nonchalantly as if they hadn’t spent the afternoon together.

Answering with a nod, she pretended to take a look at the book opened on her lap while the mechanic took the few steps separating him from Finn and stuck his head above his shoulder, curiously looking down to the pan.

“Bolognese?” He questioned, already plunging a finger into the red sauce.

“Don’t-”

The word died on the young man’s lips, replaced by a stunned look all over his face. Wide-eyed, Finn raised a hand to his right cheek that was now covered with a red trail. Slowly, he turned to Poe, narrowing his eyes while opening a surprised mouth.

“My hand slipped?” The mechanic tempted with a smirk while walking backwards.

Discreetly looking up the book she hadn’t started reading, Rey noticed a subtle smile at the corner of Finn’s lips as he took a step toward their neighbor.

“My hand slipped?” He repeated, blinking with disbelief while tightening his grip on the wooden spoon he hadn’t let go of.

“Guilty as charged.” Poe admitted, raising his hand in the air as a sign of surrender.

A tensed silence settled between the two of them, only broken by the sounds of Baby’s paws on the floor as he kept walking around them, happily panting. Quietly watching from her counter, Rey unconsciously held her breath, waiting for one of them to move. A jolt escaped her when Poe suddenly jumped to his left closely followed by Finn as he ran to the other side of the room with a
“Sorry buddy, you- the tomato makes you look like a cartoon villain,” Poe managed to articulate between two breathes.

Not repressing her laugh anymore, Rey put a hand on the edge of the sink to maintain her shaking body as she watched the two boys running around the room, now both laughing at the mechanic’s comments as he desperately tried to escape. After a solid minute of chasing, Finn finally caught Poe’s arm and the two of them tumbled to the old sofa; their laughter covered by the joyous barks of Baby.

“You’re- you’re a child.” Finn muttered, out-of-breath but smiling.

“Says the one with war paints.”

Another series of giggles and barks echoed through the room and the two disappeared behind the backrest of the sofa, leaving Rey’s sight for a few minutes. Rolling her eyes, she couldn’t help smiling incredulously and plunging a finger into the sauce as well, knowing how good of a cook Finn was. About ten minutes later, the door opened to reveal a disheveled Rose.

“I’m home,” she futilely announced with a tired smile as she stepped into the room with a raised brow, looking for the source of the noises.

Relieved to see her back from her working day Rey addressed a warm smile to Rose - who barely noticed her as she was too busy staring at the sofa where Finn was struggling to get up, a hand on his stomach as to settle his heaving chest.

“Rose! How was your day?” Poe asked as he straightened himself on the sofa, greeting her with a smile as warm as the one Rey had given her.

“Fine,” she replied with a shrug before hanging her jacket on the coat rack. “What about yours?”

With no exception to the rule their dinner ended later than intended. The four of them listening to each other’s day while Finn insisted they all take a second plate, threatening to let them starve for the rest of the month if the dish happened to be full at the end of the night. When the two hands of the clock above the TV almost hit midnight, Poe got up from his chair and helped Finn clear the table while Rose and Rey were playing with Baby on the carpet. Once the dishes had been done, he wished them all a good night and left; quickly followed by Rose who disappeared in her room after a yawn.

“What’s that smile?” Finn asked Rey once it was only the two of them.

She shrugged as a response, her smile widening while she put the dry glasses in the dish cupboard.

“Rey?”

“You still have war paint, buddy.”

Voluntarily emphasizing the last word, she chuckled at his incredulous expression as he raised a hand to his cheek, brushing the dry tomato on it with a sigh.

“Good night,” she added with a smile before leaving the kitchen, heading to her own room.

As soon as her legs met the cold sheets of her bed, her eyes automatically lingered on the earpiece settled on the nightstand and the morning conversation came rushing back. Somewhere between
their questions and banter, the memory of his sleepy chuckle brushed her concerns away and lulled her to sleep before she could realize her eyes had just closed.

The daylight piercing through the curtains had already half awakened Rey when a series of tones echoed in her silent bedroom. Wondering why on earth she’d settled an alarm on a Sunday morning, she didn’t open her eyes until a familiar voice she hadn’t been expecting to hear resonated a few inches from her, distant yet recognizable.

“Morning?”

Wincing at the sudden amount of light she had to face, she let a grumble escape her as she allowed herself a few more seconds to get her head straight.

“Hey” she replied, placing the device in her ear and scrubbing her eyes as an uncontrollable yawn cut her off.

“I did wake you up this time, didn’t I?”

Hearing the sudden concern in his voice almost dragged Rey to lie, but she knew the weakness of her own voice would inevitably betray the truth.

“I should’ve gone to bed earlier,” she admitted with a weak smile. A moment of silence followed her statement before she added with a sigh, “I think I’m gonna go back to sleep.”

“Sure,” he hastened to agree, his firm tone hinted with a touch of disappointment. “Get some rest.”

About to close her eyes again, she gathered the little strength she had left to raise her voice, remembering she had no control on their connection.

“Voice?”

“Yes?”

A small smile made its way on her lips at the speed of his reply.

“Tomorrow. I start working at 6:30.”

Now allowing her eyes to plunge into darkness, she took the earpiece off and put it back on the nightstand before falling into a light slumber. Still aware of the noises surrounding her, she heard the door slamming around eight o’clock, signaling Finn’s departure to his last training session of the week. Not even twenty minutes later, she heard the soft footsteps of Rose wandering around the kitchen and the sound of the coffee machine getting started. Once she felt fully recharged from the past week, Rey left her room and made herself a cup of tea before joining Rose at the sofa: ready for their lazy day to begin. The Sunday wasn’t as chatty as the previous one, but the silence they shared while binge-watching their favorite show revealed itself to be soothing: no changes of habit, no impromptus visits, and no expectations about an earpiece. When she climbed in her bed that night, Rey was almost surprised at the satisfaction she’d had to let the device in her room for the day.

Yet, when the small beeps echoed through her pocket on Monday morning, she couldn’t help noticing the smile she could feel spreading on her lips.

“Morning,” she greeted on a fake casual tone as soon as the signals stopped.
“Sounds like you fully recovered from your Saturday night.”

“Indeed.”

She turned the key in the ignition and let out a sigh, realizing she was now to hold a conversation for at least two hours.

“So, what kind of job makes you wake up so early?”

“Deliveries: North and East of the city.” Much to her surprise, the answer flowed with an ease she hadn’t been expecting.

A soft ‘hmm’ of acknowledgment echoed through the device, heavy with sleepiness. Recalling how patient he’d been with her tired self the day before, Rey remained silent for a few minutes before she started talking again, recalling her newly acquired collection of tapes hidden in the glove box.

“Hey, guess what I found in my car.”

Grabbing the blue case annotated ‘Long trips’ she’d purposely left on the top of her bag she opened it, sliding the small tape in the car’s radio. Her ears perked up as she waited in anticipation for his reaction. His soft chuckle resonated as soon as Blondie’s voice started singing.

“You sure have great tastes in music.”

Thankful that the previous owner of the Falcon seemed to have a things for 80’s music, Rey took a deep breath and kept silently driving until her interlocutor was awake enough to fully engage in a conversation. After an hour of questions about her job and studies, she reached the town hall’s parking lot and straightened the handbrake before cutting off contact, muting the car’s motor in the blink of an eye.

“This is where I leave you,” she announced without bearing to hide the disappointment in her voice. “I… liked it,” she added after a few seconds of hesitation.

“Me too. The early waking was worth it.”

“Go back to sleep,” she recommended, trying to ignore the giggle in her chest begging to be let out.

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Despite what he assured her, Ben didn’t go back to sleep once he cut their connection. Tossing the headset at the other side of his bed, he remained stretched out among the disordered sheets for half an hour before the rumblings of his stomach dragged him out of bed to his kitchen. He couldn’t stop thinking about their earlier conversation as his day went by, realizing how hardly Armitage’s snarly voice affected him as he hissed his name for the third time in the walkie-talkie.

Their new morning calls had seized his thoughts to such an extent that the following day, Ben didn’t hear his colleague calling him at first when he crossed the bar. His thoughts wandered to the early conversation he’d had with Rey hours ago about her favorite movies.

“Solo. Solo!”

Suddenly aware of his name being called, he turned to the red-haired man standing behind the
counter and gave him an inquiring look.

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“Home?” Ben replied with a frown, probing his memory in search of an event he’d obviously forgotten about.

“Poker, Ben.” Armitage reminded him with a roll of his eyes. “Poker.”

A sigh escaped him as he remembered the texts from last week and he closed his eyes with reluctance before trailing back to the stairs leading to his office. Poker night. He’d almost forgotten about that.

Not even half an hour later, Snoke and his friends - as he liked to call them - appeared on the screen of his computer and started taking place around a table Hux had settled not long ago. The scene was almost a caricature of some old mafia movies: smoke hovering above the group as one of them drew upon a ridiculous heavy cigar and black hats covering their faces while they all turned to their host, waiting for him to open their monthly game night. Ben couldn’t hear Snoke’s speech from where he was, but still knew half of it by heart: ‘Members of the First Order’, he would begin with before feigning a smile that was everything but warm, ‘I’m glad to have you here tonight.’ The rest of it would mostly be about what he called their ‘latest achievements’ and ‘oncoming projects’.

Avoiding watching his superior, Ben stared adjusting the security camera’s angles to fit the guests’ positions and waited for the game to begin to grab the headset hidden under his desk and place it on his head, patiently waiting for the game to begin.

After years of watching in the dark he’d grown used to Snoke’s approach and techniques. The omniscience offered by the cameras had allowed him to notice and learn the men’s mimicking when one of them was lying. The notion often drove him into believing the zoom Snoke asked him to make on their cards was only a confirmation of his own suppositions.

“Three heads,” he whispered in the small micro half an hour later after having made one of these zooms on Garmuth’s deck of cards, while Hux served them a set of shots for the fifth time of the evening.

Both unfortunately and lucky for him, the game lasted long enough to prevent Snoke from visiting him after all his guests had left. As he dropped onto his bed that night, Ben didn’t fight the usual companion that was his insomnia, and fell asleep as soon as his face met his pillow.

The week went by; their conversation slowly reaching a step where they’d stopped speaking about the tapes playing in her car and started asking each other more personal questions. At this point, he knew all about her favorite TV shows, and how she loved spending her entire Sundays in company of her roommate while she knew about his favorite books and artists.

It wasn’t an easy rhythm to follow: he often got home around ten and fell asleep hours later to wake up to the shrilling screams of his alarm clock settled to ring at six o’clock sharp, but hearing her voice greeting him half an hour later was - by far - always worth the lack of sleep.

As the week went by, he slowly became accustomed to this new schedule. His impatience only grew wider at the idea of seeing her again for her weekly game.

But on Friday, she didn’t come.
He spent the evening scrutinizing the screens before his eyes: waiting for her and her friends to pass through the door and draw an umpteenth sigh from the bartender after one of the numerous jokes Dameron seemed to make every time he stepped into the bar. Indeed, a lot of people made him roll his eyes, but none of them accompanied by the girl Ben was waiting for.

Around eleven, he finally constrained to reason and grabbed his jacket after the last customer had left the bar: split between disappointment and anger towards himself. *Maybe these morning conversations had been too much for her,* he thought as his car left the deserted parking lot. Knowing how fast his brain could turn into the one of a poorly trained detective, he still couldn’t chase an idea away as he opened the door of his apartment ten minutes later. She didn’t have any control on the connection: she couldn’t reject his calls nor mute him. Maybe she’d felt obligated to talk to him? Maybe she was, once again, afraid of saying ‘no’. Maybe he really scared her?

The sole idea of having dragged her into such an uncomfortable situation was enough to twist Ben’s stomach; oblivious of the late hour announcement by the clock, he took the headset from around his neck and settled it on his head. Slightly shaking, his fingers hit the side button and the usual beeps started echoing in his ears while he started searching for his words, ignoring the short breaths anxiously heaving his chest. The question slipped from his mouth as soon as the small beeps stopped.

“Are you-”

"Sorry about tonight, there was an emergency.” She hastened to explain before he could even finish. The worry in her voice seemed sincere, but it was still very probable she was trying not to hurt his feelings. “The tap leaked, there was water everywhere; it wasn’t a pretty sight.”

The lump in his throat came loose at her words and a sigh he hadn’t realize he’d been holding escaped him.

“No problem,” he managed to articulate. “I’m glad you're ok.”

A silence settled between them, allowing his thoughts to scream louder. She'd obviously had enough, and he shouldn't call her anymore.

“I wish I would've been in the maze instead of that swimming pool,” she confessed in a less confident voice than before.

Unable to repress the smile slowly making its way to the corner of his lips, Ben suddenly realized how irrationally he’d been panicking. Noticing how sincere she sounded he relaxed his shoulders, and sat on the edge of his bed. Yet, the idea that she could still be afraid of rejecting him didn’t fully leave his mind.

“I should let you sleep,” He mumbled. “You probably need some rest.”

“So do you. I still have to work tomorrow,” she reminded him, her voice muffled by the sound of the covers she’d probably just slipped under.

*She’d alluded to their daily calls herself.* The information took a few seconds to make its way to his brain; maybe she wasn’t that reluctant to talk with him after all. Aware that the new silence following her words was the one announcing the end of the conversation, Ben heard his voice rise for one last confidence.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you.”

The words had passed his lips before he even had a chance to think about it. His heart had slowly
but surely taken control over his mind. Another muffled sound from her led him to think she’d either sunk into her bed or fallen from it. He shouldn’t have said that.

“Me neither,” she finally admitted in a whisper in which he easily pictured an invisible smile.

Chapter End Notes

Looks like the connection finally works for good!

Once again, thanks to everyone for the kudos and amazing comments! I’m always glad to answer your questions, hear your theories and scream with you in the comments section ;) Don't hesitate to tell me what you think about this new chapter!
Since she’d moved to Kamino, Rey had never seen such a rainy November: blurred by infinity of
water drops the windshield of her car barely allowed her eyes to clearly make out the road. Her
chin close to the wheel, she narrowed her eyes as she engaged in a corner, doing her best not to
plow into a wall. Slightly covered by the sound of raindrops hitting the car, Blondie’s voice
tirelessly sang the chorus of one of her best hits. It had almost become a tradition: she would
remain silent for the first twenty minutes, listening to a tape of her choice while waiting for him to
talk once fully awaken. Once the singer had stopped begging whoever the song was for to call her,
Rey took advantage of the small silence between the songs to say what she’d had on her mind since
they’d started listening to the tape.

"I meant it, you know," she suddenly commented as the first notes of the second song emanated
from the radio.

Had she known his name, she would just have used it to check if he’d fallen asleep. A spasm ran
down her fingers as she remembered the pseudonym clearly written on the score sheet that hadn’t
left her nightstand’s drawer: she actually had a name to call him, but there was no way this was his.

A sleepy “Hm?” caressed her eardrum and, before she could notice, stole a smile from her frozen
lips.

"Hit me with your best shot," she mumbled with a voice she was doing her best to keep from
faltering. The muffled chuckle preceding his answer reinforced her idea that she shouldn’t have
said that. Yet, she couldn’t help thinking about the confession he’d made five days ago, slowly
starting to feel the need to come back into the maze, to know he wasn’t far from her.

“You didn’t learn, did you?”

Here it was again; that voice, that incredibly deep voice that accompanied her each morning,
speaking on a dangerously playful tone she knew she’d shamefully been eager to hear.

“I still want to beat that score.”
Realizing her tone was slightly more confident than previously, Rey straightened up in her seat and focused on the road, anticipating his response.

"One day," he evasively mused after a few seconds during which the voice from the radio had started humming a new song, calmer than the previous.

"Maybe next week?" she asked, amused by her own reference to the song she’d associated him with.

“Or Sunday?”

Noticing the serious tonality in his words, Rey felt her smile vanishing and her heartbeat hasten. She couldn’t deny her envy to see him appearing in the maze again, neither could she ignore her growing curiosity; but after so many conversations, meeting face to face would feel just as being naked in front of him. He wasn’t a friend, yet he wasn’t a complete stranger either. No words could describe what was between them, but she surely wasn’t ready to reflect upon it. Of course, she’d thought about giving her number: texts weren’t something she was comfortable with but still allowed more reflection in a conversation. Unfortunately, it would also deprive her from hearing the soothing sound of his voice. Besides, despite the restricted conversation time and occasional interferences, she liked the unique aspect of the earpiece now settled in her ear. Searching for her words to express her thoughts, she opened her mouth when a flash suddenly brought her back to the rainy reality.

“Holy shit!” she cursed, realizing what had just happened.

“I… guess not Sunday, then?”

Both disappointed and surprised, his voice managed to bring back a smile to her lips as she seized the opportunity to change the subject.

“I think I ran a red light,” she explained as she tightened her grip on the wheel, anticipating the next curve.

“Oh.” A new silence settled between the two of them, soon broken by another question from him. “Where?”

Casting a brief glance around her, Rey narrowed her eyes furthermore. “Near a gas station.”

“The one next to Takodana’s?”

Repressing her head from turning to the small bar she already missed, Rey kept her eyes on the road, ignoring the sudden idea blossoming in her mind. “This one,” she affirmed.

“I live in the building across the street,” he commented with a way-too-casual voice, confirming her earlier feeling; the bar was strategically placed, not far away from the Laser Tag. Kamino wasn’t a small town, but it was acknowledged that only the city center was well served by public transports, compelling workers and students to settle in the area. Rey remained silent for a few seconds, fazed by this suddenly new information.

“I can’t believe they closed,” she finally said, deriving from the subject once again. “I loved it there.”

“Me too. I heard there was an illegal financial issue.”

A frown crossed Rey’s face, testifying of her surprise. She didn’t know Mrs. Kanata on a personal
level, but she’d always seemed like a responsible and respectable woman. Thankful for the raindrops and music filling her silence, she absent-mindedly hummed the last notes of *Sunday Girl* until he started asking about the classes she was supposed to attend that day.

“I gotta go,” she sighed two hours later as she passed the sign announcing her street.

“Already?”

His sheepish tone made her lips curl into a smile; they’d been talking about food for about an hour and a half, starting with their favorite meals until she’d mention her poor cooking skills, pulling an exaggerated gasp from him: *How could she even appreciate ready meals?* Reluctant about her vain glorification of Bacta’s ready-to-eat Cajun chicken, he’d engaged in a passionate speech she hadn’t dare interrupt; both amused and impressed by his sudden ease.

“Already,” she confirmed with a shrug she knew he couldn’t see. “Speak to you tomorrow.”

“Sure. Have a good-”

She didn’t hear the last word, hastened to throw the earpiece in her pocket as she saw Finn waving at her from Poe’s doorstep.

It had appeared over the last weekend that the leak in their bathroom was more important than they’d originally thought: the pipe connected to their shower was blocked as well, condemning the whole bathroom. All the affordable plumbers in town not being available until next weekend, Poe had graciously opened his bathroom to his neighbors, at least figuratively- they’d exchanged each other’s duplicate keys months ago based on Rose’s idea as prevention measures. Side by side, the two boys ran to her car, Finn sheltered from the rain by Poe’s jacket spread above his head while the mechanic seemed to dive into his hooded jumper with some of his rebellious locks dangling over his forehead. Seconds later, a soaked Finn sunk into the passenger’s seat, breathless.

“Bloody weather!” He exclaimed. “Thanks Poe,” he added as he handed him the leather jacket that had probably limited the damages.

“No, keep it!” The mechanic stammered with a smile, rejecting the jacket. “It suits you.”

With a small smile, Rey noticed Poe biting his lips before slamming the door and running back to his house, leaving Finn completely speechless. Patiently waiting for her friend to process what had just happened, she felt her smile widening as soon as she crossed his gaze.

“What?” The athlete snarled with a defensive look.

“Nothing!” She assured as she raised her hands in surrender, repressing the giggle she could feel in her chest.

“I know what you’re thinking,” he mumbled while buckling his belt, “and you better stop.”

“I didn’t say anything!” Rey argued, not noticing Rose running to the car wrapped in a light blue windbreak until she knocked on the window to signal her presence.

“You were thinking loudly,” Finn mumbled as their friend jumped on the backseat, spreading a sweet smell of vanilla slightly covered by the scent of wet plastic as she leaned between the two of them.

“Did I miss something?” Rose asked on her usual beaming tone.
“Finn got a new jacket!” Rey announced with a bright smile, moving just in time to avoid his hand reaching for her ribs, ready to tickle her sensitive spot.

Rose’s eyes landed on said jacket with a weak smile before she leaned back in her seat. Once she’d silently fastened her belt, Rey started the car and made a U-turn, heading back to the city center where a long day of studying awaited the three of them.

- - -

One more day, Ben mentally told himself as a new wave of papers flew across the room. Repressing the urge to close his eyes and wait for it to be over, his eyes lingered on an invisible point at the other side of the room and focused on his breathing. Deep breath, hold, release – a pen crossed the room in less than a second, ending its race against the window before falling at his feet with a tinkle. His back almost leaned against the wall, Ben waited for a moment of silence to risk a look around the room: drawings splattered on the floor as usual, some ripped or crumpled.

“What did I tell you?”

One more day, he repeated as he insisted on avoiding his superior’s glare. One more day and Friday would come, bringing the usual feeling of lightness and her daily visit he couldn’t wait anymore for. The sound of heavy footsteps echoed in the room, followed by a hissing voice.

“Look at me.” Snoke demanded, emphasizing each word with as much disdain as he could.

Guilt overwhelmed Ben as soon as he laid eyes on the man. The disappointment was more than obvious, yet he couldn’t help feeling like the twenty-minute long sermon he’d just been given was quite unfair.

“I said I can do it,” he proceeded to explain in the calmest tone he was capable of, “but one week isn’t enough.”

A shiver ran down his spine at the sound of Snoke’s sigh and a heavy silence fell in the room, almost as unbearable as the man’s tantrums.

“One more week,” he finally conceded. “Because I know what you’re capable of doing.”

Ben’s shoulders fell slightly relaxed and the guilt half-vanished at his superior’s last words as he noticed a slight softening in his voice. Of course he could to do it. He’d drawn the plans of the maze under their feet, this one was in no way a difficulty; he just needed more time and concentration.

“Thank you,” he whispered as he knelt down and started picking up his drawings, knowing the conversation now wouldn’t be long to end.

“I hate it, you know.” Snoke whispered as he started walking around the room, stepping over the numerous items he’d thrown minutes ago as if each of them was highly toxic to his skin. “I’d rather come here to have a pleasant talk with you, like in the good old days.”

Deep breath, hold, release. Still avoiding his gaze, Ben silently nodded as he kept gathering drawings and pencils from the floor. The good old days; the words kept echoing inside his head. Hux used to refer to their teenage years with the same terms; sometimes even touched by a hint of
nostalgia. This seemed a lifetime away. Deep inside, Ben knew he would rather go back to the days where Snoke was nothing more than their professor than having him as their superior, but a simple look around him was enough to remind him how thankful he should be. Wherever he was, something reminded him of Snoke’s generosity: his job, his car, his apartment—everything he had, he owed it to him.

“You have a talent, Ben. Don’t waste it on puerilities.”

If he hadn’t gulped, Ben would’ve almost smiled to emphasize his nod as he got back on his feet. These compliments were rare, so rare that he almost didn’t dwell upon the implicit criticism on his personal works.

“I won’t,” he assured with a shake of his head.

A satisfied smile distorted the old man’s lips; as he opened his mouth to express his satisfaction, a small ring resonated from the desk and captivated his attention. Eyebrows raised, Snoke took the few steps separating him from Ben’s phone and idly opened it, scanning the screen with his piercing eyes.

“Tenacious man - your father is.” He stated on a casual tone after a full minute of silence. “Looks like he could use some company.”

Without further ado, he tossed the phone back on the desk and walked towards the door, ignoring the second ring echoing. His eternal long coat snaked behind him, waving along his pace as he went down the stairs to return to the public area of the bar where Hux was probably waiting for him. Once sure he wasn’t within earshot anymore, Ben closed the door and collapsed in his chair, finally allowing his eyes to close. After a few minutes of rest, avoiding his texts didn’t seem like an option anymore; straightening up in his seat, he grabbed his phone and read the few words shyly staring back at him.

‘Chewie found your old jacket today’

‘The one with the secret pockets’

Tightening his grip on the device, Ben felt a twitch shake his eye as he stared at his father’s messages; split between weariness and a curiosity he knew he’d better chase away right now. Deep breath, he reminded himself, hold, release.

“This is new.”

The smile on Rey’s lips widened at his sleepy, yet intrigued voice as she tossed the tape case away and placed her hand back on the wheel. Her finger started following the drum’s rhythm with an ease she hadn’t expected; pleased by the new artist she was listening to.

“Tired of Blondie?” He asked, clearer this time. She almost didn’t hear the disappointment in his voice, but he could as well have been too tired to compose himself; the connection had only been open for two minutes, and he was already talking.

“She’s great, but I needed a change.”
“And what are we listening to?”

Extending a hand to the case of the tape she’d found in a yard sale months ago with Rose, Rey cast a glance at the black and white cover before reading the band’s name out loud. “Death Stars.”

“Interesting choice,” he commented before confining himself back in a total muteness.

Once they’d reached the traditional twenty minutes, Rey changed the tape’s side for the second time of the morning and took a deep breath, knowing full well she was about to take a step further into their daily conversations.

“Voice?”

His usual “hm?” echoed in the crook of her ear, sending a wave of shivers to travel down her whole body. Focusing on the score sheet of her first game she knew to be cautiously folded and hidden in the drawer of her nightstand, she cleared her throat and straightened up in her seat as she did whenever she had a presentation to do in class.

“Should I call you Kylo?”

She wasn’t sure of the pronunciation, nor was she sure of this being a good idea, but there was no coming back now that she'd asked.

“If you want to.”

Despite what she’d imagined, he didn’t sound surprised at all, or prone to confirm his name. Frowning with discontentment, Rey turned the wheel and engaged the car on the main street, deliberately thinking out loud. “Kylo,” she repeated pensively. “What kind of name is that?”

“Yeah, cause Rey is a very common name,” he retorted almost immediately.

A chuckle escaped Rey at his remark and she hardly ran a red light for the second time of the week. Her name had been a moot point for as long as she could remember. From kindergarten back in Jakku to her arrival in Kamino she’d always been confronted by people asking about her name and its signification: Was it a diminutive? A nickname? Something from a forgotten age or country her parents had selected to make her sound important? Judging by her official papers, it was indeed her full name. Three letters set down on a rigid paper, staring back at her; probably wondering about their meaning as well. Of course, she’d tried to ask the internet about it as soon as she’d had access to a computer, but the results had definitely been less satisfying than what she’d imagined. ‘Rey: boy name, Spanish for king.’ Had she grown up with her parents, she would’ve known if they just had a great sense of humor or had been so uninterested by her that they hadn't bothered searching for a girl name.

“I think I kind of like ‘Voice’, actually,” she considered with a shrug.

“Yeah, me too,” he admitted.

As she reached the city center, Rey grabbed the usual tape her radio had been playing for more than a week and put it back in the player; careful not to let the volume cover her interlocutor’s voice as she heard him clearing his throat.

“So… are you coming tonight?”

Her smile helplessly widened at the obvious hesitancy in his voice.
“I sure am. I have a score to beat, remember?”

With each passing day, she’d noticed her confidence growing bigger; she had better comebacks, and more audacity. Two weeks earlier, she would never have dared ask about his name; even less admitting she’d missed him as she’d let him know last Friday. He’d once again been the most daring of the two of them, but she now felt like following suit.

“You sound pretty confident, for a Novice,” he observed with his calm tone often preceding an interesting conversation.

“And you sound rather afraid, for a defending champion.”

Her eyes widened as she heard her own words leave her mouth. It was as if she was discovering a part of her she never knew existed: a playful, bantering Rey, speaking to a stranger through an earpiece. ‘September Rey’ would never have believed that.

“Careful, you haven’t played for a week.” He warned. “You’re probably rusty.”

- - -

She was definitely not rusty, Ben realized a few hours later as he observed her progressing around the maze.

This was their second game of the night, and she was well placed to end up first in this one. Discreet - but fast as she ran along the walls with an impressive ease for someone who’d only played a few times. She was alert, blaster at the ready and instinctively bending down to hide the lights of her jacket each time she heard someone near her area, which was no easy task regarding the unusual amount of player with her tonight: in addition to her three friends and herself, a group of teenagers had chosen the same day, and time, to celebrate a birthday, alternating between the maze and the bar where Hux agreed to serve them the cocktails they ordered despite their obvious young age. They had credit cards, and that was all he needed to know.

“You really are getting better,” Ben admitted after she’d emerged from behind a wall to shoot the noisiest one right on his left shoulder.

“Better than you?”

A brief sigh of amusement shook his shoulders as he pursed his lips, ignoring the smile begging to settle on his lips. “You’re getting close,” he carefully declared.

An incredulous gasp resonated in his headset, inciting him to focus on her through the screen before him. She hadn’t stopped walking, cautiously weaving from one hiding spot to another. Judging by the path she’d chosen, she was probably heading for the bridge.

“Come on, look at my score,” she whispered as she knowingly avoided Dameron and the other girl who’d obviously decided to team up. “I could even use a nemesis down there.”

She was right; her score had never been so high. After a few seconds of silence, Ben realized what she’d just said and looked up from his monitoring screen, eyes wide open. *Hit me with your best shot*, her voice repeated in his head with an amused tone that hadn’t stopped haunting him all week long, as if daring him to decide the level of seriousness of her words.
“So I’m your nemesis, now?” These were the only words he’d managed to find: nothing too daring, but still following her pace with a similar smirk distorting his voice.

“You prevented me from winning, that’s pretty much an enemy’s move.” Hadn’t he had a visual on her through the security cameras, he could have sworn there was a hint of bitterness behind her playful expression.

“And I helped you,” he hastened to remind her. “Twice.”

“Right,” she agreed as she reached the bridge. “Complicated enemies, then.”

A few minutes passed, during which they both silently observed the maze before their eyes. Keeping his mouth shut about the incoming players wasn’t as complicated as the last time, Ben realized; she could definitely handle herself. Besides, he’d promised not to help her in any way: no hints, no directions and no surprise smoke. After dangerously walking near her, Dameron and his auto-proclaimed teammate both left the area and a sigh resonated in his ear as Rey’s figure visibly relaxed at the top of the bridge. Nothing in her looked like she belonged here: perched on the metallic installation with an incredible ease away from the melee happening at the other side of the maze. There was something incredibly soothing in her; maybe the voice, or maybe the way her soft features screamed her innocence. In these rare moments of calm, Ben’s usually noisy mind slowed down and everything vanished. The commissions, his father’s texts, poker night: it all disappeared, until he couldn’t think about anything. Just her.

“You know, I appreciate it,” he heard himself say as if he wasn’t controlling his words anymore. Even the confused chuckle she made had something innocent.

“Helping me?” she cheerfully asked. He could easily picture an amused frown crossing her face.

“That’s... not what I meant,” Ben said with a chuckle as well, slightly more nervous than hers. He was stepping on a dangerous territory, he knew it.

“Losing?” she tried once again on the same taunting tone she’d used earlier.

“I appreciate your presence here,” he busted as if the words had been burning his tongue.

The silence that followed his declaration was probably the longest, heaviest he’d ever been confronted by. Slowly realizing what he’d just said, Ben closed his eyes and buried his face in her hands, elbows firmly planted on his desk. These were probably his last words to her, and she’d remember him as nothing more than a creep.

“And…what does it mean, exactly?”

A wave of panic overwhelmed him as he opened his eyes and looked away from the screen. There was no way she couldn’t hear his heart loudly drumming inside his chest; this was too much, he’d said too much. No music or red light could save him this time he realized as he acknowledged the silence between them, begging him to answer. A quick look to the screen informed him that none of the other players had moved. For the first time since she’d grabbed the earpiece in the Briefing Room, Ben wished someone would interrupt their conversation. This was the stupidest thing he’d ever said, he thought as a lump started settling in his throat. Had he been familiar with expressing his feelings and controlling his words, he would’ve wriggled it out and changed subject as she’d done earlier in the week. But Ben was far from familiar with the art of social interactions and, instead of thinking, raised a hand to his headset with a wince.

“Voice?”
Both surprised and hastened by her curiosity, he let his finger push the button next to his ear and felt his heart miss a beat at the small beeps signaling the end of the connection.

“You’re an idiot, Ben Solo,” he mumbled as he watched her confusingly looking around.

The thought didn’t leave him when she left the building, nor did it disappear when he stepped into his apartment.

An hour later, there he was again: staring at his headset on the sofa, repressing the urge to call her again on a Friday night, haunted by the possibility that he’d gone too far. *Five words.* The game had only lasted fifteen minutes, and he’d found a way to blow everything up with only five words. There was no wondering why he’d been assigned to the hidden office rather than the bar: Hux was unbearable but he never grew attached to customers or frightened them. Nervously running a hand through his hair, Ben took a deep breath and grabbed the device. He needed to apologize and hear her: depending on her tone, he would either behave as if nothing happened or stop calling her for good.

He would miss her voice, he realized as he pushed the small button engaging the connection. *Her laugh in the morning, and the way she hummed along the songs, partially covered by her car’s purring.* As surprising as it was, he would probably even miss the journalist’s monotonous voice waking him up around 6am every day. Six beeps. One more and the connection would open.

“Still awake?” he tempted in a whisper as soon as the signals stopped.

A muffled sound he recognized as the one he heard each time she wasn't fast enough to grab the earpiece echoed through the headset. His lips released a sigh as soon as he heard her voice; instead of the anger he’d anticipated, he was greeted by a surprised voice, in which he nonetheless noticed a hint of disappointment. “What happened?”

His thoughts escalated quickly, trying to find a suitable excuse. He could always put it on a low battery, or pretend he had no idea why the connection had suddenly decided to obey its own law. But something about her pushed him not to lie and settle with the truth.

“I may have…”

“Panicked?” she achieved for him with a perceptible grin that surprisingly reassured him.

“Overthought,” Ben corrected.

Her soft chuckle achieved to convince him to release the breath he’d been holding until now and relaxed his shoulders before sinking deeper in the sofa. Easing off his posture, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath before voicing what he’d been wanting to ask for days now.

“Are you free on Sunday?” He wasn't sure he'd even articulated.

“Maybe,” she warily replied after a moment. “Why?”

*She wasn’t going to make it easy,* Ben realized as a new silence settled between them. “You said you wanted to come more often.”

“I did,” she confirmed, her voice too patient.

*There was no way she hadn’t understood what he meant,* Ben thought as he nervously gulped, searching for a way to insist without sounding like she had no choice- it was in times like this he regretted he'd inherited his father’s clumsiness instead of his mother’s ability to charm people with
words. Lucky for him, the young woman proved to be slightly more resourceful than him and her voice rose again.

“But I don’t think my friends would be up to-” she started, shortly cut by his impatient voice.

“Maybe you could come without them.”

An umpteenth silence fell, only broken by the sound of her bed squealing as she probably straightened up to sit. “And how exactly am I supposed to play alone?”

“You wouldn’t be alone,” Ben murmured.

Doing his best to prevent his hands from shaking more, he grabbed the nearest drawing and started ripping it into the smallest pieces he could. “Sorry,” he mumbled after a full minute of muteness from each side, “I don’t know what I’m doing.”

Another muffled sound resonated in his ears, betraying her nervous movements.

“Works for me,” she finally said in a whisper.

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A shiver of anticipation ran through Rey’s whole body as she stepped out of her car two days later. The parking lot was as deserted as the streets of Kamino she’d driven through, at least for what she could recall of it. Never had a ride seemed both so long and short, cadenced by her loud heartbeats and thoughts she hadn’t managed to mute. Truth be told, she’d almost thought of not leaving her bed: awaken one hour before her alarm clock, she’d spent enough time staring at her ceiling to imagine how bad this could go. He could just as well be a renowned psychopath, trained to befriend naïve new players and lure them into the maze away from plain view and disappear without any witness. The more she thought about it, the more she’d sunk deep under her covers; kidnapping, blackmail… black market? Despite the little voice in her head assuring she was only over thinking it, she’d ended up hoping he wasn’t going to ask for a ransom: even all together, her friends wouldn’t have been able to pay for her freedom.

She really looked like a horror movie character rushing towards her death, Rey realized as she reached the door of Starkiller Laser Tag with hardly collected steps. Doing her best to ignore her fastening heartbeats, she weakly gripped the door handle with a shaking hand and pulled it. A sigh escaped her as the door creaked open; despite his instructions and guarantee that he’d leave it open, she still hadn’t expected it to actually work so easily. After casting a glance above her shoulders to check no one was around to call the police and signal a burglary, she slipped into the entrance, closed the heavy door and leaned her back against it. Out-of-breath, she allowed herself a few seconds to accustom her eyes to the darkness of the place while also hoping for her heart to stop jumping around and come back to a peaceful pace. If the latter didn’t occur, her eyes soon started wandering around, curious to discover the bar in a whole new way.

Without the blinding neon lights and appalling bartender, the atmosphere almost felt peaceful: the abandoned jukebox suddenly didn’t seem out of place, bringing a vintage touch to the place while the arcade game settled at the other side of the room seemed almost sinister, now deprived of all its lights and sound effects. Finn would hate it, she thought as she noticed some dirty glasses still waiting to be cleaned up on the counter, achieving to make the bar look like a saloon. He would
also hate to know she’d accepted to meet a stranger in a secluded place, but now was not the time to step back. Shaking her head to chase her friend’s scolding voice away; Rey raised her arm to take a look at her watch: quarter to nine. Rose had probably found her note by now, explaining she had something to do but would probably be back around ten at the latest. Sticking her hands in the depths of her pockets, she took a deep breath and started walking to the Briefing Room where the door had been left open, failing to ignore the sound of her footsteps echoing around the empty room.

As soon as she stepped into the room, her eyes landed on an empty coat rack and her heartbeats resumed with greater intensity. He was already there. Slightly shaking, her legs made their way to the jacket she usually wore and she gulped, realizing what she was doing. She turned to the entrance when she realized her jacket wasn’t activated, and the excitement she hadn’t known was in her slowly vanished: he’s forgotten to give her a badge. Thinking fast, Rey retraced her steps and slipped behind the counter; her eyes swept the area surrounding the cash register, trying to remember where she’d seen the bartender reach for the badges. Just as she was about to go back to the Briefing Room, a small red item caught her attention: prominently displayed on the customer’s side of the counter, the badge was guarding a small folded piece of paper she hastened to open.

‘Good luck. -Voice’ She gulped once again as she read the words and clenched her fist around the small object as she headed back to the Briefing Room. Once facing the entrance of the maze, she inserted the badge into the slit above her blaster and looked at the small screen, waiting for it to activate her lights and weapon. ‘Novice: 0’ soon appeared before her eyes, drawing a soft chuckle from her.

"Seriously-" she whispered with a shake of her head, slightly more relaxed than before. A smile made its way to her lips and she took a deep breath: this was just a game, she mentally repeated herself, nothing to worry about.

A puff of smoke blurred her vision as she stepped into the cold hangar where the usual epic music had already started to play. At least they weren’t in a complete silence – music was their comfortable silence. Just as she passed the first alley leading to her favorite spot, she noticed a change in the usually monotonous notes and raised her head to the main speaker, just in time to notice a blue light disappearing behind a remote wall.

Just a game, she repeated herself as she instinctively threw herself behind the nearest wall. A game in which she was supposed to chase her opponent, and sometimes hide from him; when put that way, it almost sounded like an accurate description of what they’d been doing with words for the last two weeks. Only now acknowledging the familiar song accompanying their game, she felt a smile spread on her lips: he really hadn’t left anything to chance, she noted as Pat Benatar started to sing. Gathering her courage, she took an umpteenth deep breath and cleared her throat.

“I hope yours says ‘Voice’,” she inquired as she stared at the small screen at the back of her blaster.

A soft chuckle resonated from the direction she’d suspected him to be hidden.

“Of course,” he replied after a few seconds.

His voice was way deeper than the one she’d heard through the earpiece so many times; but judging by the shivers his baritone sent through her body, it was definitely him. Noticing a muffled sound betraying his movements, Rey held her breath and quickly left her spot on her tiptoes, careful not to make a sound as she instinctively headed to the bridge. He knew her favorite areas and moves, but she had the advantage of being ahead of him; if she managed to keep a good distance between them, she could reach the metallic platform before he did and aim at the strategic
points of his jacket while he was still on the ground.

_Then, she would have a proper idea of what he looked like._ Chasing the thought away with a shake of her head, she took another look at the screen on her weapon and focused on the maze before her eyes.

_Knock me down it’s all in vain,_ the singer taunted her from a sizzling speaker just above her head as she passed the wall with ‘ambush alley’ tagged on it in a bright orange. After the next corner, she’d only have to climb a few stairs and she would be on the bridge. Pushed by her intuition, she turned her head right before reaching said corner and jumped behind a wall just in time to avoid a shot from behind.

“Feeling a bit rusty?” Breathless and shaking, she was the most stunned of them by the taunting words she’d managed to articulate, firmly leaning against the wall.

Another chuckle echoed behind her as a response, betraying his position once again. He wasn’t far from her: five meters, seven at the very most. Scanning her memories of the area, Rey closed her eyes and focused on his footsteps partially covered by the music. Judging by the noises behind her, he’d found her position as well and had started cautiously approaching her. She still had an advantage: despite the respect he’d shown, it seems this game blurred his common sense and led him to underestimate her. Knowing he would have expected her to run away, Rey waited for the wall across her to reflect the lights of his jacket to softly retrace her steps in the alley parallel to the one he was now progressing in. Once she’d outdistanced him enough, she took a pin out of her back pocket and threw it in front of her.

He was just as predictable as her: as soon as the small item hit the ground, she heard him hurrying in the direction opposite to her and quickly made her way to the path she’d originally intended to take. After a solid minute of silence only broken by the song playing on repeat above her, Rey started to lower her guard, treading on the floor with a slightly more confident pace as she approached the bridge. Not even a meter before the final corner, she almost jumped as she heard something not far from her dangerously getting close to her position. Weapon at the ready, she gulped and started walking backwards. The improbable scenarios she’d thought about before entering the building came rushing back as she realized how close she was to seeing him again. This sounded exactly like a scene from a horror movie, she thought as a wince crossed her face while she kept staring in front of her. She was the stupid girl killed at the very beginning, missed by her friends then quickly forgotten to make place for the real plot: the remaining characters chasing her murderer and being killed as well, one by one, each death more cruel than the previous one. _Rose would definitely be the last one_, she thought as she kept walking backwards. She was smart and mistrustful, highly skilled with-

Her back hit something, putting an end to her escape and concerns. Surprised to have already reached the first wall, Rey started to turn when she felt the wall moving as well and stopped. _This was no wall_. Holding her breath and her blaster, she felt her eyes opening wide and her heart falling to her knees at the sound of a breathing that wasn’t hers.

“You can still surrender,” he suddenly murmured.

For the first time since the game had started, there was no hint of a grin in his voice; just as much anticipation as she was now feeling in the depth of her chest. _She could run_, she realized as she remembered the exit was in front of her. Maybe she should, judging by the unbelievable pace her heart had settled to. But as usual, her curiosity remained stronger than her common sense and instead of that, she turned and placed her weapon on her opponent’s chest. Jacket and blaster clinked against each other with a sound that reminded her of the toys her first foster family had
given her. Focused on her blaster, she released her lungs of the air they’d been holding for too long and kept postponing the moment she would have to raise her eyes. Judging by the motionless chest her weapon had landed on, she wasn’t the only one struggling to breathe at a normal pace.

Right above their heads, she could hear Pat Benatar tirelessly opening the chorus for the umpteenth time.

“You got me,” he mumbled in a long minute of muteness.

Both terrified and insanely eager to face him, Rey blinked twice before allowing herself to finally look up and meet his gaze.

_He was tall_, she noticed as she crooked her neck more than expected, _utterly tall_. Two of her wouldn’t have been enough to compete with him. Completely oblivious of her original goal, she let her eyes linger on his shoulders above which she noticed wavy raven hair hanging lazily, slightly disheveled by their chase. Finally, she carefully lingered on the eyes she’d been avoiding for too long. _His brown gaze was definitely as intense as his voice:_ both intense, penetrating, and staring at her. Definitely not what a serial killer would look like.

It took her a great deal to recompose herself and tighten her grip on the blaster she was still holding. With a small knock on his jacket, she beckoned him to step backwards. Ignoring the inquiring look he cast her, Rey focused on her breathing until she heard the back of his jacket meet the wall.

“Game over,” she murmured after a few seconds.

She would’ve expected him to laugh at her poor impersonation of him, but not a sound left his mouth except a muffled gasp. A rush of blood warmed her cheeks as she finally allowed her eyes to linger on his lips: slightly parted, they betrayed his astonishment and almost made him look as if he was silently begging for her to free him. All things considered, it was very likeable he was hoping she would let him go as much as she was hoping neither of them would break this moment. Now inches from his face, Rey felt her jacket hit his and felt his spasmodic breath brush her warm cheeks. As she locked eyes with him for the second time, she felt his body considerably closing the gap between them with one step and his chest heaving against her weapon. He was close; dangerously close.

Brought back to reality by the feeling of his hair brushing her forehead, her finger pulled the trigger and deactivated his jacket, giving her exactly two seconds to run towards the exit. Not even bothering to take her jacket off, she rushed outside of the Briefing Room then from the bar, almost hitting her head as she threw herself on the door and ran to her car.

_Now she wished he would have been a psychopath_, she thought as she started the ignition; there was no way she could ever forget this gaze. Shifting the first gear, she crushed the pedal and took a brief look at her phone: three missed calls from Rose, five e-mails waiting in her inbox and one message from Poe. Forgetting her car was still moving she frowned and opened it, only now realizing he’d probably seen her car parked near his workplace. Was he looking for her?

“Hey!” a familiar voice called from outside, pushing her to look up.

The same stunned face she’d ambushed a few minutes ago met her gaze, this time in the light of the day and behind the windshield of a grey Cadillac she’d just banged.
It was about time these two met again!

Thanks again to everyone for the kudos and amazing comments, I'm always glad to see your reactions and ready to answer your questions and scream with you in the comments section! Don't hesitate to tell me if you liked this new chapter ;)}
Despite the few meters and two windshields separating them, Ben could feel his heart was about to leave his ribcage for good; breathless and wide-eyed, he absent-mindedly applied the handbrake and got out of his car, ignoring the journalist’s voice emerging from the radio announcing today’s weather and local news.

Rey was as stunned as he was—probably even more, judging by her mouth gaping as she slowly mirrored his movements and opened her door. How she ended up driving this car—his car—was a mystery, but surprisingly not enough to keep him from holding her quizzical, dumbfounded gaze. Now that he could see her in the daylight he realized how the darkness and neon lights of the maze hadn’t been enough to do her justice; even the security cameras hadn’t been able to give him an accurate taste of her hazel eyes underlined by the subtle trail of freckles spanning over her nose.

The dancing lights on her jacket reflecting in her eyes suddenly reminded Ben of his own get-up. He hadn’t taken his equipment off either. He had been too caught up in the rush of events and focused on the only thing that mattered since she’d pulled the trigger: not letting her get away.

Catching up with her hadn’t been an easy task, mainly because of her rapidity. Her weekly laser game sessions had obviously paid off: she’d left the maze in less than two seconds, leaving him with nothing but a rapid-beating heart and an amber-scented hint most of all, she’d literally frozen him on the spot. They hadn’t been that close since their first encounter. Days, weeks of observation, conversation and hesitations that had led to this moment where he’d found himself cornered by this girl, holding his breath in anticipation, wondering if now was his turn to make a move.

Luckily, he’d parked his car next to the fire exit, which was much easier to access than the common parking lot’s. This meeting had been a bad idea: from the moment he’d suggested it to the moment he’d mindlessly thrown his car in front of hers in a last minute attempt to keep her from
running. Only now realizing the stupidity of this move, Ben swallowed hardly; if she hadn’t felt threatened by him so far, she certainly was now.

Something in her eyes, highly contrasted with her delicate traits; some sort of wary untamed look, as if she were a wild animal ready to escape at any sudden move. Maybe that was why he didn’t dare make a single noise, frozen again as he lost himself in her eyes until a familiar voice coming from behind dragged him back to reality.

“Everything alright here?”

Of course, Dameron had to be there at this exact moment. Only breaking eye contact to roll and close his with annoyance, Ben took a deep breath, turning to face the neighbor.

“Minor accident,” he briefly replied, hoping the man would quickly go back to his garage. Instead of that, he took the few steps separating them and knelt down next to the crushed passenger’s door, silently examining it. “I was about to leave, actually,” Ben added as he noticed a suspicious glance being cast to Rey. She was now staring at the spot her car had hit, biting her bottom lip with apprehension.

“Well, you won’t be going far with that,” the mechanic stated as he got back on his feet with a sigh, hands planted on his lap. “Let me fix that.”

It was more of a fact than a question; a polite yet firm way to inform him he was to follow him to Black Squadron and leave his car up to the whole team. The very idea of trusting them with his precious car would have been enough for Ben to strongly disapprove, but the blinking lights of his jacket reflecting on Dameron’s eyes quickly reminded him that he wasn’t alone in this situation. She was still there, trapped between his car and the building, staring at them with the most bewildered look he’d ever seen cross her face. From what he’d seen through the security cameras these two were good friends; and from the guilty look he was seeing right now with his own eyes this good friend hadn’t been informed about her presence here.

With another deep sigh, Ben nodded in surrender and sat back in his car, ready to follow the mechanic and clear the way so Rey could leave the parking lot without further questions. A wince crossed his face as he heard Poe’s voice rise again, barely covered by the sound of his car as his foot pushed the accelerator.

“Rey? You’re not coming?”

Unable to repress it any longer, Ben looked down on his wing mirror only to catch a glance of Poe leaning at the car window’s level, sticking his head inside. The windshield she was behind blurred her face, but he could still perceive the embarrassment veiling her eyes. After a few seconds of silent exchange, she nodded as well, beckoning the mechanic to take place next to her. Just before he opened the passenger’s door, he gestured for Ben to go and climbed into the old truck. His eternal smile slightly faltered.

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“Did he do anything to you?” Poe asked with a tight voice as they reached the garage.

Rey gulped, cautiously avoiding her friend’s insisting gaze. She’d been prepared for a question as soon as she saw him approaching. Judging by the hour and the fact that he hadn’t even put on his
usual orange jumpsuit, he’d probably been looking for her as soon as he noticed her car in the parking lot. There was no way she could deny what she’d been doing here: with every turn of her wheel, the plastic jacket squeaked and flickered even more than before, reminding her about the obvious no-issue situation she’d trapped herself into.

“No,” she replied with the most contained tone she was capable of at the moment. “Why would he?”

Opposing to the great calmness she was trying to display, her thoughts quickly got carried away, searching for a plausible explanation that wouldn’t involve her knowingly accepting to meet a stranger she’d only heard through an old earpiece she’d stolen in a laser tag a few weeks ago. If only she’d taken a few more seconds to abandon her equipment in the bar, she could’ve made up a lie about forgetting something last Friday: her bag, her identity card – anything. Unfortunately, everything from the jacket to her silence betrayed the complexity of her situation, which probably only increased Poe’s curiosity.

“I just had to ask,” he responded with a shrug. “Hold on a second.”

Without further questions, the mechanic jumped out of the car and ran to the still closed iron curtain his dog was patiently guarding and proceeded to open it, leaving Rey alone with the roaring sound of the two cars waiting to access the hangar. It took her a great deal of strength not to look out of the corner of her eyes if he was still there; of course he was, yet she still needed to check. Far from the moment of bold confidence she’d had in the maze not even ten minutes ago, Rey was now highly considering abandoning her car and walking back home. She could always join Rose on the sofa and forget everything about this disastrous morning while lazily commenting whatever show was playing that day. This situation was way more embarrassing than what she could’ve imagined. Sinking deeply into her seat, she’d started wondering whether she shouldn’t have left the maze or her bed in the first place when Poe’s voice echoed from the end of the hangar, waving at them.

“Ben, you go first!” He beckoned him with a hand, the other cupped around his mouth to amplify his voice.

Ben. She almost jumped at how he’d called him, only now allowing her eyes to linger on the other man. Voice. Stranger. Kylo. She’d called him with such various names she wouldn’t have expected his real one to be as simple as this.

“Rey, follow him!” Poe instructed her with a serious tone she’d only heard on Saturday afternoons whenever she settled in the crowded garage looking for a less lonely place to study.

Furtive shifty brown eyes met hers for a quick second before the grey Cadillac made its way to the spot Poe was pointing to while absent-mindedly tossing his jacket to the nearest chair, causing her heart to miss a beat for the umpteenth time this morning. Swallowing the lump forming in her throat she released her handbrake and directed her car to the second spot Poe was pointing to. Rey focused on his voice as she heard the sound of a car door slamming next to her.

_There was no way she was going out of that car_, she thought as she cut off contact; yet, her legs appeared to be way more obedient than her mind and guided her outside the vehicle. Terribly self-conscious of her unsteady strides, she gulped once again and made it a point of honor to keep her eyes focused on Poe as she felt the massive figure she’d cornered not long ago standing next to her. Suddenly aware of the two pairs of eyes staring at him, the mechanic raised his eyebrows as he tossed a long orange fabric over his shoulder.

“Sit down. I’ll be back in a minute.” Pointing to the chairs next to them with a brief motion of his head, Poe turned back and headed to the staff’s changing room – or at least that was what Rey had
always perceived the room behind that blue door to be. Before she could even think about holding
him up, the heavy door closed on him, leaving the two of them in an awkward silence.

Against all odds, he was the first to move and take place on one of the chairs, not even repressing a
grumble when his jacket hit the back of his chair. Curious yet discreet, Rey allowed her eyes to
leave the door Poe had disappeared behind to linger on the stranger- on Ben.

If anything, he was definitely not a serial killer. Far from the threatening dark figure she’d met
weeks ago, he now felt incredibly out of place. With the luminous jacket fastened around his torso
it looked as if it had been designed for a child. The chair he was sitting on wasn’t as impressively
small, yet she had a feeling he could probably not sink in it as she used to do whenever she visited
the garage. Hardly repressing a subtle smile, Rey took a deep breath and a few steps, taking a seat
on the edge of the nearest chair. Back straight, legs firmly planted on the floor, it only took her a
few seconds to succumb to the temptation and let her curious eyes catch a glimpse of the man
sitting next to her.

The first thing to catch her attention was his eyes; while he had been absent-mindedly staring at his
feet, his gaze remained the most intricate she’d ever seen. His dark, heavy eyes with a hint of
vulnerability in them were betrayed by the near imperceptible twitch on his left eyelid as he
gulped, obviously conscious of her gaze on him. Oblivious of her not-so-subtle silence, she kept
studying his face with more intense curiosity. The last days and nights of questionings rushed back
while she considered his lips for the first time. Even hidden behind his raven locks, their redness
didn’t fail to catch her attention; that was the mouth that’d been talking to her all this time.
Repressing a nervous smile she could feel blossoming at the corner of her lips, Rey brought her
focus on his fidgeting hands –pale, large hands nervously creasing the end of his t-shirt, reminding
her of her own behavior each time she stepped into a waiting room. After weeks of trying not to
picture him, she could only admit that his voice absolutely fit his appearance.

“Alright,” Poe exclaimed as he got out of the changing room, rubbing his hands together he
grabbed two pieces of paper from a shelf and two pens. “Just sign it so I can get started.”

Thankful for her friend breaking the awkward silence, Rey took the paper he handed her, and
started reading the general conditions and additions. Staring at it would have been a more accurate
term: unable to remain focused on a single word, she could now feel her silent opponent observing
her rather than his copy. Standing in front of them with his arms crossed against his chest, Poe sent
his dog to the other side of the hangar and patiently waited for them to read, and sign the forms.

He almost looked like a father scolding his children; Rey thought as she scribbled her usual
wobbly signature and handed it to her friend, remaining conscious of the brown eyes scrutinizing
her every movement. Truth be told, they probably did look like children, shamefully sitting on
separate chairs with their luminous jackets still on, waiting for their sentence to be pronounced. It
was probably the first and last time she would mentally refer to Poe as the responsible one. Once
both papers were signed, the mechanic abandoned them once again to greet Tallie, who’d just
arrived and brief her about their unexpected first task of the morning.

“Ben,” Rey thoughtfully murmured.

The sole mentioning of his name was enough to make him turn and stare at her, eyes wide open as
if no one had pronounced it for months. Their gaze met for the third time in less than an hour,
sending a cold shiver running down her spine. This time she paid no attention to the little voice
urging her to run away. She held his gaze long enough to notice the way his eyes couldn’t stay
focused on a point for more than two seconds, hopping from her eyes to her mouth. Feeling a knot
forming in her stomach she noticed his lips slightly parting as if he was about to say something.
She nearly jumped from her chair at the sound of a phone ringing that broke the uncomfortable silence her voice had settled between them.

Knowing deep down the ringtone wasn’t her phone, Rey still proceeded to look for hers, taking advantage of the sudden agitation to break eye contact. A few seconds and a sigh later, she heard the unmistakable voice of the bartender echoing from a phone.

"By any chance- you wouldn’t happen to know why our door is wide open, do you?” She heard another sigh escape him as she forced herself not to turn towards him. Both Poe and his dog turned at the sudden presence of the bartender’s voice echoing inside the hangar, raucous enough that the loudspeaker wasn’t needed.

“Probably the wind,” Ben mumbled as he got back on his feet and buried his free hand in the back pocket of his jeans. “I was about to come back.”

Gulping as she noticed the surprisingly confident tone in his voice, Rey stole a brief glance at his moving figure as he slowly took a few steps away, thoroughly avoiding the two pairs of eyes now staring at him with curiosity.

“I wanted a coffee,” he stated with a shrug his interlocutor obviously couldn’t see. “No, yours is awful.” Rey couldn’t hear the bartender’s words anymore, but still distinctly discerned the annoying accent she’d grown accustomed to every time she stepped into the bar.

A playful smile played across Poe’s lips as he reached the coffee machine, obviously pricking his ears up in hopes to catch a piece of the conversation. Joining him with an amused smile, Rey shook her head in a vain disapproval, slightly more at ease now that she wasn’t alone and that Ben was busy. Allowing herself to relax a little, she assisted Poe by handing him a small packet of sugar he politely refused, pointing at their guest as to signal the beverage wasn’t for him. Following his gaze, she realized they weren’t the only two anymore but three: Poe’s neighbor was back, about a meter away from her.

“Go,” Poe intimated with a warm smile as he handed him a hot cup of coffee. “You don’t want Hugs to go all crazy.”

His phone still in hands, Ben stared at Poe with an incredulous look as he helplessly accepted the drink before turning to his car.

“I’ll take care of that,” the mechanic assured before he could protest. “Come back tonight.”

Hadn’t she felt the cold breeze coming from outside to brush her skin, Rey without a doubt would have believed she was in the middle of a weird dream. Judging by the wary look in the tall man’s eyes, he was probably under the same impression. With a brief nod of acknowledgment, he remained still for a few seconds before turning to Rey, awkwardly holding a cup and a phone in each of his large hands. Their eyes met again. Apprehensively, she kept a close watch on his opening mouth. He was about to say something; she could feel his hesitancy. Holding both her breath and his gaze, she felt her teeth grit against each other as he shook his head with a wince before turning back and heading towards the exit.

She couldn’t honestly blame him; not when she’d literally ran away from him and spent the last ten minutes swaying between avoiding him and trying to catch his attention. Suddenly aware of Poe’s skeptical look on her, shenn pursed her lips. Slowly, she put the small packet of sugar back in the box she’d found it in, knowing it was only a matter of seconds before she was met with new questions.
“What the-” her friend started as soon as his neighbor’s footsteps weren’t audible anymore.

“You know him?” Rey hastened to ask, cutting him shortly before he could fully express the astonishment he’d been repressing for what seemed like an hour. Judging by the grin making its way on his lips, he wasn’t about to fall for her stratagem.

“I do,” Poe confirmed, crossing his arms against his chest. “Long story, actually- I’d rather hear yours.”

“Long story,” she elusively retorted.

She knew how stubborn he could be- but so was she, according to the entire dinner they’d spent months ago both refusing to lower their eyes after Finn had offered the last muffin as a prize to whoever would win a staring contest. None of them had won according to him, but the frustrated look on Poe’s face was way worth the tomato sauce she’d inadvertently decorated her cheek with. Despite her previous victory, Rey still didn’t feel bold enough to engage in a new contest at the very moment. She could feel her cheeks slowly turning red at the realization that no lies would convince her friend to turn a blind eye on the curious situation he’d sensed. Opposite to his usual playful behavior, the mechanic patiently waited for her to continue, observing every reaction crossing her face.

“Rose must be waiting for me,” she finally said after a moment. “I’d better go.”

Meeting her statement with a suspicious ‘hm’, Poe narrowed his eyes and followed her as she hastened to her car. The sound of his voice abruptly stopped her with an amused smile as she opened the driver’s door. “Rey?”

Not without a frown, she turned to face him, anticipating a new, more invasive question. Instead of that, he simply extended an open hand, meeting her inquiring look with a raised eyebrow. “I’ll take the jacket.”

If lying to Poe was obviously impossible, it appeared that convincing Rose she’d just went to a remote supermarket was easier than expected.

“Why not the one down the road?” The young woman absent-mindedly asked as she helped her unpack the groceries from the plastic bags. Still in her pajamas, she gathered her dark hair in a messy bun, wobbling at each of her movements, threatening to fall apart and blur her vision in less than a second.

“They were closed,” Rey lied with an ease that surprised her as she hid her face behind a closet door, stretching her arm with an effort so her hand would reach the last shelf. Thankfully, Rose wasn’t suspicious and accepted the explanation without any further questions.

Every Sunday she spent with Rose was mostly silent, only broken by the dialogues emerging from the TV they both stared at for hours until one of them decided to grab something from the fridge and satisfy their roaring stomach. This Sunday wasn’t any different, except for the fact that Rey remained unable to focus on anything else the morning’s events.

Twenty minutes. It’d only taken her twenty minutes to sneak into the maze all by herself, corner this stranger she’d been talking with for weeks and hit his car –not to mention her friend slash neighbor witnessing the whole scene and, of course, knowing said stranger. Poe rarely texted them, yet she couldn’t help keeping her ears and eyes open every time Rose received a message. There
was no reason he would text her about what had happened hours ago. Yet, she had to keep in mind their neighbor was a curious, tireless chatterbox.

It was almost three in the afternoon when Rey’s phone broke the silence, causing both her and Rose to nearly jump from the sofa they were deeply sunk into. Her drumming heart nearly deafened her as she glanced at the unfamiliar numbers appearing on the screen. Her hand instinctively landed on the small lump caused by the earpiece in her pocket; could it be…? Urged by Rose’s inquiring look, she gulped and hit the green button, waiting for whoever was calling to talk first.

“Rey Johnson?” A hesitant voice asked through the phone.

“Mr. Solo?” Of all the people who could possibly call her on a Sunday afternoon, the grumpy man was the last one she would’ve thought about. A joyous bark echoed behind him, covering his voice as he started to speak again. Alert, Rose frowned at the man’s voice and straightened up on the sofa, carefully listening.

“You’re not busy with your round, are you?”

“There’s no post on Sunday, Mr. Solo.” Rey patiently stated with a smirk.

“Oh, right.”

“Did you… need something?” Rey encouraged, breaking the awkward silence he’d fallen in.

“I do, yes.” A new series of barks covered his wobbly voice, causing him to momentarily stop and clear his throat. “Do you still have those tapes?”

A knot formed around Rey’s stomach, trying to ignore Rose’s inquiring look, she straightened up before answering with the most composed voice she was capable of.

“Yes, they’re in the car.” The lump she’d gotten rid of earlier in the morning came rushing back in her throat as she slowly realized what this conversation sounded like. “Do you want it back?” She asked begrudgingly.

“I’m just looking for one,” he hastened to rectify. “Anyway, you must be busy. I can call you later.”

She could almost hear the frown distorting his face in a wince. Even through a simple phone conversation, the man’s uneasiness was very much tangible. “Give me a minute,” she politely said as she got back on her feet under Rose’s suspicious eyes. Wedging the phone between her ear and shoulder, she grabbed her shoes and keys and walked outside the house, silently wondering what had driven the former owner to suddenly change his mind.

“What does it look like?” She asked once sitting in the passenger’s seat.

“It’s a blue one,” the man began to explain with certainty, “with stars on it.”

The glove compartment creaked open, revealing the huge collection of tapes she still hadn’t entirely listened to. Running her hands among the dusty cases, she tossed the colorful ones away and grabbed the few harboring blue colors, her other hand securing the phone against her ear.

“The Smiths?” She asked as she raised the first to eye level.

“No, it’s a playlist.”
A playlist. Putting another regular tape away, Rey glanced at the two remaining ones. “Dark blue, cracked on the side?” She asked as she playfully turned the small object between her fingers, examining it from each angle. Her heart missed a beat as she suddenly faced the small folded post-it glued to the plastic case: ‘Ben’s playlist.’ She swallowed with difficulty at the small letters staring back at her, beginning to seriously wonder if this whole day wasn’t a bad joke.

“Yes, this one.”

*Of course, it had to be this one.* Repressing a sigh, Rey threw the tape in her pocket and got out of the car, thankful for the cold atmosphere balancing the growing warmth on her face. *The coincidence was unbelievable*, she thought as she stepped into her house.

“I can give it to Poe when I see him,” She offered in a deliberately low voice, suspecting Rose was listening.

“Why not have that drink I promised, instead?” The not-so-grumpy-anymore man proposed as she sunk back into the sofa.

Meeting Rose’s wide open eyes, Rey considered the idea for a few seconds. She certainly didn’t have a bad feeling about him; he was Mayor Organa’s husband, which was enough for her to trust him. Nevertheless, she didn’t feel like going alone to an impromptus rendezvous for the second time of the day.

“Can I bring my roommate?” Judging by Rose’s raised eyebrows this wasn’t the kind of question she’d been expecting her to ask. Alerted by the way her roommate shook her head, Rey put a hand on the microphone to muffle the noise, mouthing a silent “please”.

“Sure,” he indifferently agreed through the device. “Would Cloud Coffee work with you?”

Silently consulting her friend, Rey waited for her approval to ask for the address and confirmed her arrival to be in less than half an hour, giving Rose enough time to grab her clothes and not rush to the car.

“That’s the elders’ coffee shop, right?”

Following Rose’s gaze as she parked her car next to the coffee shop Mr. Solo had chosen, Rey watched a few senior citizens silently sipping their coffee next to the window display. Forcing a small smile on her lips, she cut contact and shrugged as she considered their get-up: they were far from the plaid shirts and long skirts worn by the customers; both wearing tight jeans and colorful jumpers.

“Looks like we’re gonna be a blot on the landscape,” she approved before opening her door.

Leaning against the main door was the familiar grey-haired figure of Mr. Solo, looking as annoyed as usual with his arms crossed against his chest. His face slightly enlightened when the two girls approached him, pushing him to regain a more relaxed posture and open the door of the establishment.

“After you.” No elegant bow accompanied his gallantry, yet Rey couldn’t help noticing his obvious effort to not sound too cranky. Thanking him with a subtle nod, she let Rose enter before her and followed suit. Han joined shortly, closing the door a little too clumsily the noise caught a few nearby customers’ attention, making him wince.
Despite its weird arrangement, the place wasn’t nearly as bad as the girls had anticipated: the flowers-covered counter brought a light-hearted touch to the area, seconding the ambient fragrance of chocolate and coffee blending into that specific scent only found in specific places such as coffee shops and kitchens on a Christmas afternoon.

“Long time no see, Solo.”

All caught unaware by the feminine voice greeting the man, the small group turned to face a tall, expressionless woman distractedly wiping an empty cup while staring at them.

“El,” Han greeted her with a polite nod before casting a glance behind her back. “How are you?”

“Boss isn’t here,” the woman cut as if she’d heard his thoughts. “Hence the peaceful ambiance.”

She was both impressive and intriguing, Rey thought as she observed her with curious eyes. Everything from her dark bob cut to her red lipstick seemed purposely done to give the impression that she could kill them with a simple glare, which she probably could. Repressing a smile at the sight of her tank top on which a ‘80’s rebel’ inscription was displayed, she found herself wondering whether the laser tag’s bartender and her would be friends, or enemies if they were to meet one day.

“I’m just here for a coffee, actually,” he explained, reminding her of Poe as he negligently leaned an elbow against the counter. “But tell him I came by”.

Ignoring the bartender’s not-so-subtle sigh, Han turned to Rey and Rose, beckoning them to follow him as he started wending his way to an empty table to all sit around. Quickly uncomfortable about the awkward silence wrapping around them, Rey poked her hand into her pocket, grabbing the tape she’d found earlier she carefully put it face down on the table so the post-it wouldn’t be visible.

The subtle twitch under the man’s eye didn’t escape her notice as he picked the tape, reinforcing her doubts about the crazy theory she’d tried to chase away from her mind since she’d hung up her phone.

“I take it it’s this one?” Unable to hide her hesitancy, Rey focused on the man’s reactions as he examined the small object from every angle just as she’d done not long ago. Looking away as soon as his thumb rubbed the small post-it glued on the front she noticed his other hand nervously creasing the white, unfolded napkin in front of him, confirming with a nod.

“What’s your name again?” He suddenly asked as he turned to Rose, slipping the tape in an inside pocket of his leather jacket.

Looking behind her as if she were surprised to be acknowledged by the man, the young woman frowned and cleared her throat before shyly introducing herself. “Rose Tico.”

A small smile made its way to his lips as he nodded politely, clearly unable to keep a conversation going for very long without taking a few breaks. “Rose,” he repeated. “I think Poe may have told me about you.”

“Only good things, I hope.” Surprisingly more confident at this information, she thanked the waitress who’d just brought their coffees and took a sip under Rey’s surprised, yet proud eyes.

“A genius brain trapped in an angel’s face,” Han recited with a scoff. “I take it you study science.”

“I do,” Rose confirmed as she put her cup back on the table with a muffled noise. “My sister graduated from Kamino’s Law School two years ago - different kind of science.”

Even if she’s grown used to hearing Rose talk about Paige, Rey couldn’t help but frown at the
unexpected notion of her roommate's sister. It wasn't the first time she noticed Rose unconsciously
steering the conversation from her to Paige, erasing herself behind the shadow of the person she
admired the most. She was about to remind her friend about her own studies’ interest when the
man turned to her, a weak smile on his face.

“And what about Tenacious Rey?”

Repressing a laugh at the nickname Poe had secretly given her, Rey shook her head with a sigh and
took a small sip from her cup, welcoming the hot beverage into her dry mouth.

“History,” she replied as she cupped both her cold hands around the cup in an attempt to warm her
skin.

Despite all her efforts to focus on the conversations, Rey couldn’t help noticing some details in the
way the man behaved throughout the afternoon: from his forced smile to his fidgeting every time
the conversation stopped and drew him back to whatever place his mind was in at the moment,
everything in him screamed of anxiety and awkwardness in a way she’d already observed not long
ago. Her doubts vanished for good as she crossed his gaze for the second time since he’d started
talking about how he’d won the car that was now hers. Something in the way he got lost every
time he mentioned an old memory reminded her of the eyes she’d met in the maze a few hours
prior. Intense, worried eyes laden with what appeared to be a lifetime of regrets hidden behind a
veil of playfulness.

- - -

A yawn escaped Ben’s mouth as he stretched out in the wooden chair settled in front of his desk,
extending his legs far enough to hit the power strip settled directly on the ground.

What a day, he thought as he cast a glance at the small window on his right. Judging by the hints
of pink and orange starting to blossom among the cloudless sky, the sunset was near, meaning he
would soon be able to leave and go back home. Despite his considerable need to sleep, he well
knew his thoughts wouldn’t allow him to before the early hours preceding sunrise. Not after that
morning. Not with her voice stuck on repeat in his head, repeating his name with the same
incredulous tone over and over.

He’d seen her; in flesh and bone. He'd seen her, and hadn't been able to articulate a single word.

The shrill sound of his phone dragged him back to reality with a violent suddenness, causing him to
seriously consider ignoring the incoming call. Hux had probably reached a point where talking
through walkie-talkies wasn’t sophisticated enough for him, he thought as he reluctantly grabbed
the vibrating device, dangerously moving to the edge of his desk as if tempted to meet the hard
cold parquet. Ready to reject the call, Ben’s eyes widened with surprise at the sight of the name
appearing on the locked screen of his phone. Curious yet suddenly anxious, he hesitantly let his
thumb press the green button and raised the device to his ear, narrowing his eyes with anticipation
as a familiar voice echoed through the speaker.

“Answer your damn phone, kid.”

Feeling an incredulous smile forming at the corner of his lips, Ben remained silent for a few
seconds, trying not to yield to the temptation of a long conversation with the godfather he hadn’t heard about in years.

“I just did,” he finally retorted on a hesitant yet playful tone. Judging by the heavy sigh echoing from the other side, his interlocutor wasn’t in the mood for bantering.

“You know what I mean,” Lando scolded as a reply.

It was now Ben’s turn to sigh heavily, fully aware of what these words meant. Hadn’t his phone been trapped in his hand, he would probably have glared at its incessant flashing, signaling new messages. He hadn’t opened a single one; tired of his father’s attempts to reach him by whatever memories he’d found, doing his best to revival a childhood that his parents seemed to believe he’d enjoyed.

“I’ll think about it,” he assured with a bleak voice.

“I don’t want you to think, kid- I want you to act.”

Considering the day he’d just experienced, this advice sounded absolutely disastrous but still managed to deepen Ben’s crooked smile. This was something his father would probably have said; within his godfather’s mouth, the words sounded less abrupt and more caring behind his obvious annoyance.

“And come say hi one of these days,” He added on a still grumpy tone before hanging up with no further explanation. Slowly losing his smile, Ben sunk back into his seat, considering the small phone staring back at him from the crook of his palm.

Now was not the time to yield to the old man’s vagaries. Tossing the device back in his pocket, he took another look at the window where the sun had slowly begun to disappear behind the horizon. In less than a dozen minutes, the night would fall on Kamino and wrap the whole city in a coolness neither his light jacket nor sensitive skin was ready to confront. Glad he’d asked their intern to replace him for the night, he stretched one last time before getting back on his feet and plunged his arms into the cold sleeves of his black leathered jacket, ready to leave the small room that’d become way too narrow to shelter his thoughts.

“Good day?” Poe greeted him on a warm tone as soon as he reached the garage entrance. Hands deeply sunk into the depths of his pockets, Ben nodded as he stepped across the mechanic’s dog that’d started running around him, signaling his desire to play by joyously wagging his tail. The animal’s presence hadn’t failed to drive Hux crazy once again when their neighbor stepped into the bar a few hours ago, returning Rey’s jacket while pretending he’d begged Ben to play with him in ‘remembrance of the good old days’. The reason why he’d covered them remained a mystery to Ben, who warily approached Dameron, observing his every movements as the mechanic grabbed the Cadillac’s keys and tossed them without any warning.

“Thanks,” he mumbled as he caught the bunch in mid-air.

“It’s ok, that’s my job.” Poe replied with a nonchalant wave of his hand as if rejecting the acknowledgment.

“How much do I-”

“Nothing,” he calmly interrupted as if he’d foreseen the question to be asked. “Just give Baby the damn caress he’s begging you for.”
If someone were to step into the room, no one would suspect the strangeness in the mechanic’s casualness; nor would they understand the noticeable nervousness growing in Ben’s chest as he put a hesitant hand on the dog’s head, thanked by an affectionate bark, asking for more.

“Thank you,” Ben managed to articulate once the dog finally left.

“You already said that,” Poe remarked with an amused smile as he took the few steps separating them, hands firmly planted on his hips.

“I mean- the jacket.”

Not even hiding his nervousness as he held his gaze, Ben felt his lungs release the air he’d been holding as the other man nodded, suddenly more serious. Only now realizing the dangerous turn this conversation could take, he returned the nod with a nervous gulp and opened his car; unsure if he was ready for the silence and loneliness waiting for him back at his apartment.

“Hey, Ben-” Half covered by the familiar roar of the engine, the mechanic’s voice still managed to drag Ben’s attention from the wheel his hands had already gripped. Sticking his head out of the window with an inquiring look, he didn’t fail to notice the small smile playing across his lips. “Don’t be a jerk.”

The mechanic’s words didn’t leave his mind for the evening, nor did they for the three following days. Three long days spent fighting the impulse to grab his headset and call her as they’d grown accustomed to for the past weeks, wondering whether or not she was expecting to hear his voice. He’d even reached a point where he envied her; she had her friends, studies and a job to focus on while all he could think about was her, closely followed by the due date of Snoke’s commission dangerously approaching. Yet, he remained silent, staring at the headset until his alarm clock manifested itself, reminding him of the hours of sleep he’d been deprived of.

It wasn’t before the third morning of endless ruminations that he managed to gather what was left of his courage to pick up the device and hesitantly push the small button on its side, ignoring the little voice in his head screaming to abort mission. The familiar yet almost forgotten sounds signaling the connection echoed through his ears, seemingly more unbearable than any background music he’d been confronted by. After a few seconds of what seemed like an eternity of waiting, the signals stopped, making place for the familiar loud purring of a car.

He’d almost forgotten how his heart always missed a beat at the sound of her breathing.

“I’m an idiot,” he shamefully mumbled after a minute of silence.

“I think I was too.”

Her voice sounded less confident than what he’d heard until now, but no trace of anger as he’d feared. A lingering sense of déjà vu hit him as he repressed the need to contradict her earlier statement. This wasn’t the first time he called her to apologize for his behavior; but this could be the last. If he were to choose to end it here the last weeks could still be recalled as awkward yet good memories of that time he’d pushed a customer to steal an earpiece from the Briefing Room and prevented said customer from breaking his highest score. Sure, that silly game had led to a minor car accident on the parking lot, but both of them would have been wise enough to forget about it and go back to their regular lives. This sounded like a rather rational scenario: two adults admitting the foolishness of their behaviors, shaking each other’s hand and slowly losing sight of each other as the months went by.
But truth was Ben was far from being that wise. Aware of the knot forming around his stomach at the idea that this call might be the last, he cleared his throat and opened his mouth. No more speculations, doubts or guilt. *I don’t want you to think, kid- I want you to act* his godfather’s word encouraged him as he took a deep breath.

“Can we start over?” The tight voice he heard emerging from him betrayed the intensity of his hope, yet he didn’t stop talking for so little. “Maybe have a drink or something, like normal people do.”

Not even a mile from him, it took Rey a great deal not to stop her car in the middle of the road as she played what he’d just said on loop, feeling an incredulous smile making its way at the corner of her lips from which the words flew with surprising ease. “I’m free tonight.”

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“I’ll never learn,” Rey mumbled to herself as she took the first exit of a roundabout, doing her best to remain focus of the GPS dangerously settled behind the wheel, threatening to fall at any turn.

The parking lot she entered was a rather narrow one, full of various cars revealing how crowded the bar he’d suggested was. A nervous sigh escaped her as she noticed the grey Cadillac parked on her left, not far from the only remaining free spot. *He was already here.* Casting a nervous glance at the front door, she took a deep breath as she didn’t see him waiting for her and proceeded to park her car, careful not to hit the luxurious convertible next to her. Restraining herself to one bump per week would probably be wiser.

It took her a solid minute to cut contact, waiting for the end of the song while she looked down on her outfit: the same pair of jeans she’d worn the whole day, coupled with a white jumper hidden under her colorful coat. The idea that she could’ve wore something more fancy hadn’t crossed her mind until she’d crossed Poe’s suspicious gaze before leaving the house, pretending one of her sick classmates had asked to borrow her notes for the night. Against all odds, the mechanic hadn’t mentioned Sunday’s accident and judging by Finn’s usual behavior, he’d kept it secret. She could almost have thought he’d forgotten if it hadn’t been for the quizzical looks she sometimes caught him casting at her.

This was a problem for another day, she thought as she gathered all her strength not to panic as she got out of her car and started walking to the bar, highly aware of her heart threatening to leave her chest. She should’ve asked for his number. Was she supposed to wait at the door or search for him inside? What if she didn’t recognize him? What if he didn’t recognize her? Not paying attention to her surroundings, she felt her head violently meeting someone’s chest as she stepped inside the noisy place. Rubbing her forehead with a wince, she almost felt a chuckle about to leave her throat as she met the eyes she hadn’t stop thinking about for the whole day. Of course, if she had to bump into someone, it had to be him.

“Sorry- I saw you from inside.”

She could feel a nervous smile helplessly forming on her lips as she noticed his embarrassment. Relief hit her at the fact that he hadn’t bothered putting something special either: only black jeans and a grey jumper emphasizing the single daffodil his fingers nervously clung to, reinforcing the contrast between his massive figure and shy behavior. Without breaking eye contact, he handed her the flower in a both awkward yet touching abruptness.
“Thanks.” Unable to say something else as she accepted his present, Rey bit her bottom lip and followed him to a small table on which two glasses were waiting for them, one already half empty.

“I took the liberty to order for you,” he mumbled as they sat; both avoiding each other’s gaze as she took a sip from her drink. A wince crossed her face and she found herself grateful he wasn’t looking at her at this moment. Suddenly aware of the dangerous silence settling in, she turned to face him and both started speaking at the same time, sounding as one.

“So—”

A light-hearted giggle wrapped them, both conscious of the awkwardness of the situation. Seeing him laugh appeared to be rather pleasant, encouraging Rey to clear her throat and talk first. Normal people, she mentally reminded herself as she eased her posture on the wooden chair.

“How was your day?” She asked after a deep breath, doing her best to hold his hesitant gaze on her without blushing.

“Incredibly long,” he replied with honesty. “How was yours?”

And with that simple question, they both relaxed and engaged in a casual conversation as if none of them were trying to ignore their quickening heartbeats at every word of the other. Rey mentioned her classes and the particularly grumpy History teacher while he confessed his aversion for his colleague who used to be his friend back in high school. She wasn't even surprised to learn the bartender's name was Armitage; an old, pretentious name for a cold resentful man. They'd both finished their glasses when she took a look around and noticed the weird behaviors of the other customers: students hitting on each other without any subtleness, middle-aged couples out for the evening with stern looks and bored faces that reminded her why she didn't like going out in that kind of place.

“So this is what normal people do,” she carefully stated, playing with her empty glass as he followed her gaze and absent-mindedly nodded. Despite her growing joy as she realized she was finally spending time in his company, she couldn't help feeling out of place.

As if he'd heard her thoughts, Ben turned back to her and cleared his throat. “Can I suggest a change?”

Turning to face him with a curious smile, Rey raised her eyebrows, signaling he had all her attention.

“I’m all ears.”

She wasn’t expecting to step into a bowling alley, but understood his choice as soon as she let her eyes wander around the place: far from being as crowded as the bar, there were just enough people to keep the staff busy. Yet, the noise allowed them to barely hear the music playing in the speakers above their heads.

“I’ve only played once,” she confessed once they’d taken place on the lane they’d been assigned to.

Judging by the surprise in his eyes as he looked up from the laces of his colorful shoes, Ben had assumed she was familiar with the game. Definitely more relaxed than half an hour ago when she’d bumped into him, he let out a shrug and got back on his feet, patiently waiting for her to do the same.
“I’ll show you,” he offered as he stepped onto the parquet and reached for the lightest ball.

Once again, she appeared to be a quick learner. It took her a few turns to master the exact movement to lead her ball in a straight motion, and a great deal to remain focus on the game while he patiently guided her step by step, arms crossed on his chest and perfectly still as he remotely directed her movements. Part of her was glad they hadn’t fallen into the cliché where he’d help her from behind, guiding her hands with his- yet she couldn’t help noticing how cautious he was not to touch a single parcel of her skin, even when handing her the ball she’d chosen.

“Not bad for a novice,” Ben commented as she knocked down eight spins.

Unsure about if he’d been meaning to use the nickname he’d gave her, she stopped halfway in her movement to cast him an inquiring look. Judging by his raised eyebrows and slightly parted mouth, he was as surprised as her. Where there previously would have been embarrassment, they both embraced the confusion on each other’s face and let a chuckle escape their lips. Once the game was over, they both returned the shoes to the bartender and took the score sheet decreeing Ben’s victory.

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“Why Kylo?” Rey asked him once they’d reached the parking lot.

Meeting his curious gaze as she looked up from the paper he’d let her keep, Ben took a discreet breath for the umpteenth time before answering her question with the most relaxed voice he could.

“That’s a rather long story.”

“I don’t mind hearing about it,” she instantly replied with insistence and a smile that sent shivers from the base of his neck.

“Or I could tell you next time.” The words had escaped him before he could even hold them back, pushing him to stop walking as he noticed the surprise on her face. “I mean, if you’d like a next time,” he hastened to add.

A timid yet kind smile appeared on her lips as she stopped walking as well. “I think I’d like a next time,” she confirmed, closing the distance between them in a few steps.

Aware of her dangerous proximity and his maddening desire to take her hand, Ben plunged his into his pockets and gulped, doing his best to greet her affirmation with a composed smile. Something in the way she moved was refreshingly different from what he’d seen for the last few years: far from Hux’s stern looks or Snoke’s rapacious roaming, she only inspired him of calm and patience: something he hadn’t felt for a long time. It took him all his remaining composure not to succumb to the sudden temptation of leaning and, instead, take a step backwards.

“Have a good night, Rey.” He said before heading back to his car.

“Call me tomorrow?” She asked with a hesitant voice as his hand landed on the driver’s door. Knowing he wouldn’t be able to control his voice, Ben turned to her and nodded frantically before disappearing in his car. An incredulous smile crossed his lips the whole ride back home, only
faltering when he stumbled on a small package dropped in front of his apartment’s door.

The care freeness and peace of mind that had accompanied him through the whole evening made place to irritation and guilt as he discovered the small object clumsily packed, accompanied by a hand-written note: ‘Made me think of you - Hope everything’s alright.’ His stomach started tightening around into a knot as he turned the small object between his fingers, unable to ignore his name written on it as he found himself able to remember each song recorded on the tape his father had made for him years ago. He’d tried to ignore the calls and texts, but this was way too much for him to ignore.

Loosing every ounce of composure from his previous calm state, Ben grabbed his phone, dialing his father’s number he crushed the device against his ear, impatiently waiting for the communication to open.

“Kid!” A hesitant yet surprised voice covered with the noticeable sound of a car's engine echoed in less than two seconds. “I can’t-”

“Stop it,” Ben interrupted with a harsh voice. A sigh resonated in his ear, soon followed by his father’s voice.

“I take it you didn’t like my present,” the man assumed with an obvious disappointed voice.

“I didn’t.” Ben confirmed, nervously walking around his apartment. “You have to stop doing it, Han,” he articulated after a few seconds of silence only broken by the sound of his father’s car as he slowly walked to the window, still turning the tape between his fingers.

“Stop calling me Han!” Far from the hesitant tone he’d started with, his father’s voice was now very similar to the one he’d last heard of him: strict and impatient, taking Ben back to memories he’d been trying to forget. Communication had never been an easy thing between the two of them; one of the reasons why he kept avoiding these conversations.

“Stop calling me kid!” he retorted, almost screaming through the device.

“Just- I’m trying, ok? I’m trying to do something. Maybe you should, too!”

Another sigh echoed through the device, soon followed by Han’s slightly more relaxed voice.

“Listen kid- sorry, Ben.” He added with a sincere apologetically tone. ‘Your mother and I... We miss you, we-”

Before he could finish his sentence, the sound of shattered glass violently echoed through the phone, accompanied by a muffled noise then a heavy silent dragging. Ben backed from his tantrum as he gripped the phone with shaking hands, trying to perceive a noise.

“Dad?”

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry for this ending and for the length of this chapter, it wasn't supposed to be that long! I hope you liked it anyway, don't hesitate to tell me what you think ;)

Thanks again for all your comments and kudos, you're amazing readers ♥
It didn’t take longer than a few days for the news to spread around the town: Han Solo, the mayor’s husband, had had a car accident that’d led him to intensive care for a whole night until the verdict. He wasn’t dead nor alive, but in a comatose state the doctors were not sure he would ever recover from.

Despite the curious absence of Mayor Organa the following morning, Rey learnt the news from Finn, who’d been worried about Poe’s silence and absence and decided to go on an impromptus excursion into their neighbor’s house after she’d told him she hadn’t seen him walking Baby for a whole week. It hadn’t been pretty a sight, according to the student: mostly leftovers and dirty dishes piled up well suiting a floor covered with broken glass and tissues. He hadn’t mentioned it, but both Rey and Rose had come to the conclusion the man hadn’t left his house for the past few days, nor had he left his sofa. Recalling how close to Mr. Solo he had appeared to be Rey didn’t dare to visit him either, knowing how clumsy she could be when it came to serious talks. It was a thought that didn’t fail to remind her about another man she hadn’t heard from in days.

She’d first thought he’d overslept; but despite being rather sleepy during their usual morning conversations, he hadn’t been late once. Surprise made place to impatience, which became disappointment after a few hours before turning to worry and guilt a few days later when she heard about the car crash. Days became weeks, which soon led to a month of silence that only confirmed her high suspicions about the reason behind this silence, as well as Poe’s and Mayor Organa’s. Something in her chest had since been begging to explode; a combination of hurt and anger she hadn’t allowed herself to fully express. Her right hand instinctively brushed her pocket at the thought only to remember the small device was in her room. She’d made up her mind about a week ago, considering it was time for her to stop carrying it everywhere with the delusional hope it would ring again. There, the earpiece would probably become nothing more than a vague memory along with the other various knickknacks crammed inside the drawer of her nightstand- with the sole exception that she firmly knew the reason behind her attachment to it to be more than what she was willing to admit.

A prosthetic arm landed on her desk as a reminder of where she was, accompanied with the weary
voice of her Mythology teacher. Dragged back to reality, she glanced at Professor Skywalker with a wince and held his gaze until he retreated behind his desk to continue his lesson with the same defensive glare he’d been displaying for the past weeks.

“Someone really needs a break,” Rose commented in a whisper next to her.

Approving her friend’s statement with a brief nod and raised eyebrows, Rey looked back at their professor with more attention than usual.

Following Mr. Solo’s accident, Kamino’s population seemed to have been split in three categories: those who were like half the people she knew, didn’t really care or knew him; the ones who felt queasy yet not close enough to him, as Rose and her; and finally, those who suffered the most and remained absent. Considering his mood, her teacher was most likely part of the latter.

“Rey,” Rose called in another whisper, “you gonna be alright?”

Clueless about what she meant, Rey turned to her with an inquiring raised eyebrow.

“Tomorrow,” her friend added with a knowing look.

It took her a few seconds to remember: tomorrow was the day her roommates were leaving for a few days to spend Christmas with their family. Conscious of her mixed feelings about the celebration- and probably coached by Finn, Poe had gotten into the habit of spending Christmas Eve with her before leaving for his own family’s dinner the day after, ensuring she wouldn’t spend the night alone.

Regarding the mechanic’s current state, she hadn’t dared to visit him on Saturdays as she used to. No, she reluctantly spent her days at other crowded places such as shopping centers and coffee shops that only made her regret Takodana’s even more.

“Yeah,” she assured with a nod, “it’s only a week.”

The suspicious nod Rose gave her betrayed her concern as well as her insistence to spend the night all together once they came back home after a long day. True to himself, Finn arrived half an hour late and spent another thirty minutes under the shower before finally busying himself around the kitchen that was already smoke-filled due to his ridiculous insane use of hot water.

“And… here you go,” he mumbled while cautiously placing a circular plate on Rey’s lap. As he did so, the dish towel hanging from his shoulders brushed her cheeks.

“Burgers?” She exclaimed with disbelief as he sat on the sofa between Rose and her.

“Homemade burgers,” he corrected with a raised finger. “With real meat and real vegetables before you fill yourself with your awful things.”

A smile made its way to Rey’s lips at her friend’s benevolent attention; careful not to mention the dozen of ready meals she’d stocked into the fridge. She thanked him with an affectionate nudge and silently bit into the burger, allowing him to talk with Rose about the presents they’d chosen for their families and how impatient they were to see their hometowns again. It was only twenty minutes later that she noticed Finn’s concerned gaze upon her, leading her to realize she’d abandoned her usual smile for a neutral face as she stared at the TV screen while hardly listening to the conversation going on around her.

“Hey, look what I found yesterday.”
Intrigued by his sudden change of topic, both girls moved closer to the small screen of Finn’s phone and narrowed their eyes, waiting for something to appear as their friend kept scrolling through his pictures with a finger.

“Here-” he beckoned them to watch, putting the small device on Rose’s lap right after hitting the ‘play’ button covering half the picture.

The knot that had started settling around Rey’s stomach tightened at the sight of Poe and Rose both singing along Blondie’s hit into the Laser Tag bar with their empty glasses threatening to fall from the table Poe was drumming on. The smile on their neighbor’s face was both pleasant and painful to look at, as well as listening to the song crackling through the phone’s speaker.

“I didn’t know you recorded that,” Rey whispered as she stared at her own face smiling at her friends’ behavior. Had Finn been on the other side, she would probably have been able to see the small device placed in her ear.

“I miss him,” Rose mumbled as the video abruptly ended, plunging the room into an uncomfortable atmosphere.

“Me too,” Finn admitted after a few seconds of silence.

Following suit with a soft nod, Rey waited a few minutes and retreated to her room after brief goodbyes and last recommendations from Finn, reminding her to close the door at night and water the aromatic herbs hanging at the window. Once freed from her itchy sweater and tight jeans, she sunk into the depths of her cold bed, hoping tonight would be a dreamless night as she cast one last glace at the closed drawer next to her.

Repressing a sigh, she turned her eyes away from it to linger on the dead daffodil she hadn’t had the heart to throw away. Hearing the small beeps in her sleep was one thing; but holding on to the hope she hadn’t been dreaming was slowly making her wish she hadn’t allowed the hole in her heart to be filled by whatever felt to be missing right now.

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A few miles away, the sound of trailing fabric brushing the floor caused Ben to look away from the screen he’d been scrutinizing all evening. His attention turned to the doorway where Snoke stood with a grin curiously contrasting with the impatience reflected within his eyes.

“Good game, tonight.” He commented while entering the room.

Acknowledging the subtle thanks with a nod, Ben turned back to the screen to see his superior’s poker partners slowly leaving the bar. Hux was cleaning the table they’d been playing and spreading whiskey on all night, unaware of the invisible eyes watching them from afar and causing their defeat with a whisper in their host’s ear. Listening to the man’s roaming around the room, Ben took his eyes off the screen and turned around with a frown. He regarded the silence he knew the man had purposefully let fall in the room, waiting for whatever Snoke had been waiting to say.

“I had a look at your plans,” he finally declared with a casual tone. “I must admit I hadn’t seen such good work from you in years.”

Ignoring the guilt catching up to the pride blossoming inside his chest at the words, Ben cautiously
held his gaze, knowing the man could backfire at any given moment. Despite the possibility of seeing his works being ripped in half under his eyes once more, he knew Snoke’s words and harsh behavior to be nothing more than help- or guidance, as he liked to say. Glad to hear the weeks of sleepless nights and hard work had paid off, he nervously ran a hand through his hair. Silently, Ben thanked his boss with a nod which had been shortly replaced by a wince at the sound of an incoming text shaking his phone and desk. Before he could silence the device, the wrinkled hand of Snoke’s landed on it and shamelessly brought it to his narrowed eyes.

“Ah, family…” With a smirk on his face, he stared at the screen for a few more seconds before putting the phone back on the desk as if it had been toxic to his skin. “I take it your father isn’t back yet.”

Without waiting for an answer, he sighed and left the room with haste. His long winter coat wavered after him on the stairs in which led to the bar under their feet. Cautiously taking his glasses off, Ben risked a glance at the still open message waiting for him.

‘You’re welcome to join us on Sunday – Mom’

Not even considering her offer as a possibility, he gulped and put the device in his pocket. If he had to be entirely honest with himself, the plans had been a more than welcoming way to escape from the incessant calls and texts that had been invading his phone for days.

Alarmed by the blue lights reflecting on his windows and fire trucks sirens that followed the abrupt ending of his call, he’d only managed to remain silent. After deciding to skip work the two following days, Ben stared at the incoming messages from his mother, tirelessly attempting to keep him updated about Han’s state despite his absent replies. Once back to Starkiller after hearing about his father’s stable condition, it appeared everyone from Hux to the customers had heard about the accident. The unwarranted attention only gave him another reason to hide in his office and issue them the silent treatment. Not that it bothered the bartender any who -given the period of the year- was so busy with students coming nightly to celebrate the end of their winter exams they’d had to call their seasonal worker for backup on weekends and the more diligent weekdays.

After waiting a few minutes to make sure Snoke was gone for good, Ben grabbed his jacket and ran down the stairs, determined to ignore Armitage and quickly go back home. If it took him a moment to notice the voice betraying a customer’s presence, it didn’t take him more than two seconds to retreat back behind a wall as he recognized their neighbor’s voice struggling to catch the bartender’s attention.

“We’re closed, Dameron.” Hux growled while drying a glass with a towel.

“The door wasn’t,” the mechanic pointed out as he sat on one of the high chairs facing the counter.

This had been going on for almost two weeks: every night around seven, Dameron would sit there and drink beyond reason until closing time. Hux would always surrender to his not so subtle advances and drive him home, leaving it to Ben to close the establishment a few minutes later once the way was clear. Of course he could as well leave the bar and avoid witnessing the messy bits of conversations he couldn’t help overhearing. But regarding their neighbor’s behavior when drunk and his incessant inquiries about where he was, seeing Poe was probably far from being a good idea.

“At least you didn’t bring your mutt,” the bartender noted with a sigh while wiping another glass.

Oblivious of the man’s comment, Poe reached to grab the glass and a bottle to serve himself a shot under the bartender’s exasperated eyes. Once the glass was back to empty, he sighed and looked
A sarcastic yet nervous chuckle escaped Armitage, soon followed by a voice filled with disbelief as he studied the man before him.

“You really have no clue?”

“Not a fucking one, ginger.” Poe affirmed as he drank a second glass in one go.

“I don’t think this is a story you need to hear right now.”

“No, I’m all ears,” the mechanic hastened to reply with a flat curiosity. “Anyways, I’ll probably forget it,” he added after putting his glass down a bit more abruptly than necessary.

Silence fell again into the room, only broken by the lapping sound of liquid being poured as the bartender filled him another glass. Still hidden behind his wall, Ben held his breath as his ears perked with curiosity about where the conversation was going. After the umpteenth sigh, his colleague let go of his towel and leaned over the counter as well, taking him on a journey to their teenage years with his words as he reminded him of their first year at Kamino’s University while unconsciously dragging Ben in his memories as well.

For as long as he could remember, Poe had always more or less been part of the family. After having two parents as pilots in the air force it was both a pride and a curse to the little boy who -at the age of five- could easily brag about his last three babysitters' resignation due to his unbearable behavior as soon as Shara and Kes Dameron dared to leave the house. Driven by her kindness and need to fill a house that was more than left empty by her absent husband, Leia didn’t hesitate to offer her help to her neighbors and open her door to their son every time they had to leave. She had always treated him as the second child she knew she would never have, praying that Ben and him would eventually get along.

Truth be told, Ben never really hated Poe; first seen as a more than welcome friend –the first after his father's dog- his enthusiasm faded away as the years went by. The newcomer slowly, but surely had taken more ground than expected. It first started with school: as a popular kid, Poe never failed to be invited to every birthday party in which gradually led to forgetting about their traditional Sunday play dates in favor of the other kids. The years went by and so did the boy’s comings and goings: he would spend a week or two at the Solo’s and disappear for a few days, only to come back a week later with stories about his parents Leia would carefully listen to.

Stories that would soon become taboo, Ben thought with a wince as he remembered the first time he’d ever heard Poe cry. Despite the absence of his parents, he’d always been a strong and independent boy, which had only increased Ben’s bad feeling when muffled sobs had awoken him in the middle of an October night.

Poe was only eleven when his parents died in a plane crash. As their closest friends Poe introduced them how his ‘Uncle Cassian’ mentioned them during the funeral. Their story had at least ended as it had started: together, doing what they believed in.

Poe then disappeared from Ben’s life for a few years as he was sent to a boarding school by his maternal grandparents who, despite their love for him, weren’t in a good enough health condition to fully look after him. He didn't come back to Kamino until six years later, where Leia found a young man nervously standing in the doorway with a Mother’s Day card and puffy eye; both being there to announce his grandfather's passing and to seek comfort in a long forgotten house that once provided him everything he ever needed. While sitting next to his mother, Ben silently listened to his childhood friend retell the last years of his life while eating the lemon cake Leia kept insistently
pushing towards him. A few days and phone calls later, she and Han had officially become his guardians for the remaining months preceding his eighteenth birthday.

Making up for lost time after so many years hadn’t been an easy task for the now two official half-brothers, especially in such a hectic situation. While having been away for the week and back on weekends Poe spent his time home, working on his applications for the surrounding universities while Ben did the same; only with less enthusiasm about the choices he had. After being urged by Leia, Ben ended up in Architecture while Poe followed the Engineering path for a month before he realized University wasn't for him. Encouraged by Han, he quickly joined the Black Squadron Garage opened by the latter a few years prior under the distant eyes of Ben, helplessly watching his father bonding with a son he probably wished he'd had earlier.

“You were the first.” Hux articulated with a slightly cracked voice, dragging Ben back to the year he was referring to.

Contrary to what he’d planned, Poe had ended up living with the Solos for almost a year. He spent most of his time with Han while Ben mostly remained secluded in his room, and being visited from time to time by Armitage; whom he’d met in his History class.

Despite the occasional comments from the young man that caused him to raise a surprised eyebrow, Ben had grown to consider him as a friend who helped make the days a little less boring. Both head of their respective classes, the two students quickly made a habit to see each other on weekends, spending time either playing video games or studying together in silence. This was far from being one of those friendships people would sacrifice everything for. They didn't talk a lot except about studies or politics nor did they join the other students on spring breaks trips or New Year parties’ however, both appeared rather satisfied of each other's company. “Partners in hell” as they sometimes called it jokingly, referring to their school.

Yet, at the course of their second semester, Ben had noticed the sloppiness in his friend’s studies as well as a distance slowly establishing between the two of them. First thinking it to be a simple stress period as he usually had around exam periods, he hadn't bothered to enquire about Armitage’s state until the day he noticed his cheeks reddening at Poe’s casual greeting during an evening he'd stayed for dinner.

His suspicions had increased as the weeks went by, noticing how Poe always made sure to stop by his room and talk with them for a few minutes. The top of his orange jumpsuit that lazily hung behind him revealed nascent muscles blossoming on his previously frail arms. It had only been a matter of time before Armitage reduced their studying time. His absences coincided not-so-subtly with the evenings Poe asked to borrow Han's car only to come back in the early hours of the morning with a beaming smile spread across his face.

Summer came by, and with it the loneliness and bitterness at the sight of his two former friends disappearing together each night into a world he wasn't allowed to share with them. Jealousy dangerously settled, growing a little more each day until the one where everything went wrong.

Armitage had finally deigned answering Ben’s calls about joining him for one of their traditional video games afternoon. Summer was almost over as September approached quickly with the promise of a new school year where they would both be given more time together. The reunion had almost been perfect until Poe’s arrival, joyously suggesting taking his friend to a movie night. Rushed by the feeling of losing his friend once again, years of unsaid things and unexpressed jealousy burst out of Ben's chest in seconds. His sharpen words had been directly aimed at Poe who helplessly stood before him with wide, surprised eyes as his smile slowly vanished at each new accusation. Alarmed by the screams, Han hadn't been long to come upstairs and shout back at Ben
who finally free from his long repressed thoughts, had not been able to stop until everything had gotten out. His sentences quickly turned to rude designations by accusing Poe of stealing his family for years, and now his only friend.

Had he known about the consequences of his action, Ben probably would have kept it to himself a little longer. Filled with guilt, Poe moved out a month later, leaving them with an unresolved conflict none of them had been willing to solve. Han and Leia had both been convinced Ben was only been amplifying a childhood jealousy and disapproving of his friends’ relationship. They couldn’t help but wonder what they’d done wrong for their own son to behave like this.

“You really loved me, didn’t you?” Poe whispered with guilt as Hux finished reminding him about how he left him from one day to another.

“And now I just hate you,” the bartender affirmed with the flat voice that hadn’t left him since their sophomore year.

“So do I, right now,” the mechanic mumbled with the dizzy voice he usually earned two hours earlier after his sixth drink. “Guess we’re more alike than you thought.”

“Come on, you’ve drank enough for tonight.” Hux whispered after a moment of silence.

Snatching the glass from his hands and abruptly putting it away, he went around the counter and grabbed Poe’s arm before putting it around his shoulders to further ease their walk to the front door as he plunged his hand into the orange jumpsuit’s pocket in search of the mechanic's car keys.

Leaving his hiding spot, Ben watched them disappear with the bitter feeling of being left alone once again. Only this time, as he absent-mindedly let his fingers brush the headset settled around his neck, he realized he’d been the one getting away from the only person he’d enjoyed spending time with in years.

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Throughout the next few days, Rey did her best to find positive things about Christmas; if she had to meet a bloody pine tree every five meters anywhere she went, she may as well try to enjoy it even just a little. As part of her effort, she had dragged herself down to the city center and had wandered around the small shops for a few hours. Brandishing a seasonal spicy hot chocolate in hand she looked for presents to give Finn and Rose at their return, knowing that they would both have something for her.

If there was something she'd learned from their three years of cohabitation it was to accept a present. Being naturally generous, they hadn't missed an opportunity to cover her with anything completing her ongoing collection, from limited edition books to silly stuffed animals that never failed to bring a thankful smile on her face. Having lived with foster families until her eighteenth birthday, she'd grown used to not let herself get attached to people. She always gave very little information away about her tastes and hobbies to avoid getting emotionally involved. However, the last family she’d been entrusted to were respectful enough towards the boundaries she’d settled that she'd ended up accepting their modest presents each birthday and Christmas. They were usually nothing too personal since they didn't know a lot about her, yet always kindly offered.

Her rejection of Mrs. Johnson's affection had been one of the hardest things she'd had to do
throughout her teenage years. Despite the woman's obvious yearning to cover Rey with the love she'd been longing for her whole childhood. The very reason of her presence in this house had always reminded Rey about how cruel the world could be. People had children and abandoned them with nothing more than a name, shame, and distorted memories so blurred they might as well be remnants of dreams from numerous nights spent thinking about why they hadn't been good enough.

It wasn’t until the night everyone had been waiting for when Rey realized that as much as she wanted to appreciate it, Christmas would forever remain a day she hated. Slumped over the sofa, she’d spent her afternoon staring at the Christmas movies the main channels kept programming tirelessly every year, praising the Christmas spirit left and right to cover plot holes, and satisfy the lonely souls watching it instead of attending a fancy family dinner.

*Lonely souls like her,* she realized as ending credits scrolled before her eyes for the third time of the day. Instinctively, she glanced at the empty seat next to her, waiting for Rose to make a comment or grab the remote, only to be met with one of the bright orange pillows staring back at her as a sigh escaped her lips.

Feeling the need to shift her body, Rey got up and walked to the fridge from which she took one of her ready meals and put it in the microwave for a few seconds before heading back to the sofa with her Christmas meal in hands. Another jingling music resonated through the TV’s speakers while accompanied by a cliché title written in red on a tracking shot in a snowy town. It was soon followed by a voice-over proceeding to relate the story she was about to watch.

Just as she started pricking her fork in her plate, another familiar yet unexpected sound she hadn’t been waiting for echoed in the room, inciting her to look down on the earpiece she’d settled on the coffee table next to the sofa she’d been established on for the past days.

Staring at the small device before her, dumbfounded, she wondered if the cheesy movies she’d been fed with for days had finally infected her with their serenades about hope and miracles. Truth be told, she hadn’t really lost hope; but neither had she lost sight of the fact that a month of silence probably meant she had to forget about Ben and their routine she’d grown attached to. None of the playlists safely kept in the glove compartment were enough to cheer her up, but they at least filled the silence she feared every day as she started her car, her body still tired from restless slumber. Unfortunately, her mind had been fully awake: maybe more than she wished.

The signals stopped after a few seconds, making her wonder if she had only been daydreaming. Conscious of the lump settling in her throat, she kept staring at the device, holding her breath while all the conflicted emotions she’d been repressing for the past weeks came rushing back—both urging her to pounce on it and ignore the call to focus on the movie.

“Merry Christmas,” his unmistakable, remote voice hesitantly wished through the earpiece she hadn’t dared to touch yet.

The feelings of abandonment that had only increased throughout the last few days slowly vanished, making place to uncontrollable relief as Rey released the air she’d been holding inside her lungs. Silently, she reached to grab the earpiece and brought it to her ear where she cautiously placed it; warily waiting for him to speak again as she focused on the sound of his breathing to insure this was really happening.

“I’m sorry, that was stupid,” he added after a few seconds of awkward silence, “I shouldn’t have…”

“Are you ok?” she interrupted in a whisper, putting her own fears aside having noticed the
weakness of his voice.

Met with another silence as an answer, she let a sigh escape her as she tightened her grip on the device she hadn’t let go of.

“She didn’t mean to bother you,” he eventually babbled. “You’re probably with your family, I should let you-”

More resolute than earlier, his tone didn’t fail to give her the feeling that he was slipping through her fingers as quickly as he’d come back. It only urged her to cut him short a second time.

“No-” She hastened to articulate, both as a request and an answer. “No family, just… myself, a box of Cajun chicken and one of these stupid Christmas movies they play every year.” A sarcastic chuckle slipped through her parted lips as she risked a glance at the screen, only to see one of these unrealistic and happy families gathering around a Christmas dinner. “It’s ridiculous,” she added quietly. “I don’t think I’ve ever felt so alone.”

“Don’t tell me you’re eating one of your atrocities on Christmas night,” Ben uttered with fake disbelief after a silent moment.

A muffled giggle escaped her as she felt her eyes preparing to let go of the tears threatening to flow. Taking a deep breath and a few seconds to regain her composure, she let her legs disappear under the plaid blanket she’d abandoned at the other side of the sofa and curled up, only now realizing how she’d over shared her thoughts after less than a minute of conversation. Just as she was about to begrudgingly suggest hanging up to spare him her miserable complaints, it was her turn to be interrupted.

“You’re not alone,” he added with a more serious tone that sounded like a promise she didn’t know she needed until now.

And just with these few words, she felt a single tear streaming down her cheek as her last doubts about his sincerity flew away. Of all the days of the week, he’d chosen to call her on the one she’d dreaded the most, offering her a company to escape from the night that never failed to make her feel more than vulnerable. Wiping the tear just ending its race on her chin, she searched her thoughts with the best way to thank him for his words, guessing the reason behind his call was probably the same loneliness she’d been experiencing tonight.

“Neither are you,” she murmured with the most sincere tone she’d ever heard come out of her mouth.

A soft, small laugh that was more of a noisy smile echoed through the device, managing to draw a smile out of her. Mute for a few seconds, they both took the time to revel in the realization that they wouldn’t have to be alone tonight -both smiles unconsciously mirroring the other’s despite the distance between them.

“There’s a not-so-bad stupid Christmas movie on channel 4;” he pointed out after clearing his throat. Acknowledging his unsaid suggestion, Rey grabbed the remote and switched to said channel to catch up with the movie that had only begun a few minutes ago.

They both mostly remained silent throughout the whole movie, sometimes laughing or gritting their teeth in harmony at the cheesiest scenes. Leaning against the mountain of cushions she’d pushed at the other side of the sofa, Rey surprised herself curling up a bit more against it every time she heard his chuckle echoing through the earpiece. Her heart missed a beat at the idea that only the little voice in her head had stopped her from inviting him to join her.
“This is silly,” she commented with a smirk when the two main characters started dancing inside a museum.

“Absolutely silly,” he distractedly approved.

When the closing credits appeared on the screen, Rey kept her satisfied feeling towards the predictable ending to herself and stretched out, making an effort to get on her feet as a yawn escaped her. Glancing at the clock hanging above the door, she felt a small disappointment at the realization that she was far past her bedtime and way too close to her waking time.

“I would gladly watch another one, but I should sleep.” She begrudgingly declared as she walked into her room.

“Isn’t it winter break?” His equally disappointed voice asked in which had only been similar to a kid deprived of his favorite game.

“It is,” she affirmed while closing the curtains framing her small window, “but I’m afraid there’s no break for Postal Service.”

“Oh, right.” A short silence fell between them as she looked for her night t-shirt, giving him time to acknowledge how late- or early- it was. “Holy shit, you should definitely have some sleep.”

Weakly laughing at his reaction, Rey tossed her jumper on the floor and sunk both head and arms through the loose yellow t-shirt used as a sleep shirt before wending her way under the cold yet heavy covers of her small bed.

“Rey?” he called her as she switched her light off, about to wish him a good night. Encouraged by her humming in assent, he took a deep breath and a second before saying the words that sounded like they’d been captive for way too long. “I’m sorry I didn’t call you earlier.”

“It’s ok.” She assured with a small smile before allowing her eyes to close and surrender to the sleep her body had been begging her for, having been ignored all night long.

Just as she’d hoped but hadn't been counting on, her earpiece rang the following day as she left the city hall, causing her to drop her bag on the passenger’s seat to grab the device hidden in her pocket and place it in her ear as quickly as she could.

“How was your night?” Ben asked with a very awake voice after she’d greeted him with an incredulous mumble.

“Short,” she replied with honesty. “Yours?”

“Probably longer.”

A small smile made its way to her lips while she started her car. Her hand remained on the brake while the other muted her radio in hopes to prevent the monotonous voice of the journalist to cover his.

“Look,” he started with a more serious voice, “I… I know it’s not the first time I screwed up and I would understand if you want me to leave you alone for good, but-“

Slightly alarmed by how this sounded like, Rey stopped the car at the exit of the parking lot and frowned, ready to feel her stomach twist again. “Ben, what is it?”
Only his heavy breath betrayed the effort it took him to word his request as she stared nervously at the windshield in front of her, waiting for his answer.

“I think I’d like to see you,” he hesitantly muttered.

Ignoring her beating heart, Rey felt a beaming smile take control of her lips and quickly agreed on meeting him in a public park after her shift, both afraid and excited at the sole idea of being within his real presence after the silent, yet comforting night they had remotely spent together a few hours earlier.

“What?” He asked her with an uncomfortable smile an hour later as he reached the bench she’d just sat on waiting for him.

“Nothing,” she shrugged. “It’s just nice to see you in the daylight.”

Unaware of the conflicted feelings she’d sent through his mind and body with these words, she took a moment to fully look at him for the first time in weeks: his hair had grown a little bit longer as well as a nascent goatee slightly aging him but surprisingly adding a little something to his already existing charm. Unable to not notice the shadows under his eyes and their redness, she wondered how many days had gone by since his last full night of sleep.

“No work today?” She asked as a conversation starter while she rose to her feet, beckoning him to follow her on the deserted walking path.

Confirming her statement with a slight shake of his head, he plunged both hands inside his leather jacket’s pockets. “It appears people are too busy to play Laser Tag on Christmas.”

“That’s crazy!” Rey exclaimed with a fake surprised voice. “Look at us: we would definitely be free to.”

Both stopping their walk at the same time as her words echoed between them, they turned to each other and shared a knowing smile that didn't fail to make both of their stomachs twist at the idea of going back there together.

“I can arrange that,” Ben needlessly said.

Far from December’s wind and Kamino’s streets, the two of them welcomed the maze’s warmth with unconcealed relief, abandoning their belongings in the Briefing Room in favor of the colorful equipment Rey hadn’t realized she’d missed until she felt the heavy jacket settling on her shoulders with ease. After less than ten minutes of running and unfair shooting at each other, they’d eventually surrendered and sat on the small bridge Rey always favored for her hiding tactics. Ben hadn’t bothered to even launch another game as they settled there for the major part of the afternoon, slowly forgetting about the game they’d come to play.

“So, how did you end up alone on Christmas day?” He asked after her long review of the movie that had kept them both awake the night before.

“I told you: no family.” Urged by his curious frown asking for more details, she eased her posture and shrugged, going for the most detached tone she was capable of when it came to this topic. “I never knew my parents; I usually spend Christmas Eve with a friend but… I think he had other fish to fry.”
For a few seconds, Rey remained lost in her thoughts as she thought about Poe and how he’d probably spent his evening. It took her a moment to notice the sympathetic nod her adversary gave her as well as the knowing eyes he was looking at her with.

“Please don’t do that,” she sighed almost immediately.

“Do what?” He asked, clueless.

“Don’t give me the pity look,” she explained on a softer note. A hint of guilt almost instantly hit her as she watched him do his best to remain impassive, his compassion still betrayed by his expressive eyes. Realizing her mistake, she cleared her throat and gave him a smile as an assurance that he hadn’t hurt her feelings before returning his question.

“Anyway, what about you? No family dinner?”

A forced smile curled his lips with irony at her inquiry as his eyes lingered on the maze under them, as if avoiding the question.

“I’m not close to my family, so… Christmas isn’t really at the top of my favorite celebrations list.”

Choosing to ignore the slight feeling of jealousy on the back of her mind at the idea of having a family and not spending such a familial day with them, Rey diverted their conversation to another subject. One question ended up leading into another until their growling stomachs brought them back to reality around seven in the evening. Begrudgingly, it dragged them to their respective cars parked behind the building, safe from prying eyes.

“You know, I was thinking…I should give you my number so you can call me when you want.”

Surprised by his suggestion, Rey turned back to him with a coy smile and took the few steps separating them to hand him her phone.

“Nice present,” she joked after he’d typed his number in her notes.

Opening wide eyes at her comment, Ben looked up from the device to meet her inquiring gaze with his, panicked. “Shit. It’s Christmas Day and I didn’t get you anything.”

“You did,” she retorted without letting go of her smile, "you gave me a great day.”

Glad to see his eyes relighting at her words, she cautiously took her phone from his stiffened hands and waved him goodbye before going back to her car, light-hearted with the unfamiliar sensation of butterflies in her stomach.

The following days felt a little less empty; starting and ending with his voice accompanying her through morning rounds and TV nights, as they settled back into a routine she wasn’t reluctant about. As promised, Rose and Finn came back in time for the last day of the year, noticeably relaxed from their stay with their loved ones and more than ready to start a new year.

“Maybe we could ask Poe to come tonight?” Rose suggested out of the blue after opening Rey’s present: an old video game she’d been talking about for months without ever buying it. “Thanks, I love it!”

Curiously glancing at her new treasure from his chair, Finn winked at Rey as a silent thank you for his own present he’d just unwrapped: a limited edition cap of his favorite basketball team.

“I haven’t seen him since last week.” Rey confessed as her fingers brushed the covers of the two
books her friends had offered her. “But we can try.”

Half an hour later, the three students left their house purposely all dressed up, as they headed to their neighbor’s. Rose firmly knocked on the door twice, before a remote answer soon followed by the sound of a key turning into the lock. The door opened to reveal a disheveled, unshaved Poe staring at them with incomprehension and surprise, a hint of inexplicable shame in the back of his dark eyes.

“We’re going to a party,” Finn articulated with a shy smile, “And we thought maybe you’d like to join us?”

“Actually, I’m-” the mechanic started, already closing the door.

“Go, I’m not staying anyway.”

All taken aback by the unexpected voice rising from behind him, they remained silent as a pale hand wrapped around their neighbor’s shoulder, soon followed by an arm and the body it belonged to. All remained attached to a face they had never have expected to see there. Unsure about how to react, they all watched the moody bartender moving from behind Poe without a single sign of affection except a slight brush of his fingers against Poe’s hand as he stepped out of his house without further explanation, ignoring the students’ gazes on him.

“Give me a minute,” a shifty-eyed Poe finally whispered before disappearing behind his door.

“Rey! Come dance with me!” Rose shouted from the dance floor she hadn’t left for the last twenty minutes.

The house hosting the party was way more crowded than what she’d expected: everywhere she went, it appeared to be impossible not to bump into someone or feel the unmistakable texture of heavily loaded cocktails being dropped on her legs.

Shoes by unknown faces belonging to incessantly moving bodies withheld her from finding a calm, secluded area to settle in and wait until her friend would be willing to go home; which, judging by Rose’s current state and Finn’s smile as he kept talking to his friends from the team, wasn’t about to happen just yet.

Drinking would have been more than welcome a few hours ago when an awkward silence had filled her car for the entire ride. Taking her eyes off the road to glance at her friends from time to time, she’d noticed both Finn and Poe’s efforts to avoid looking at the other while Rose kept trying to smile despite the obvious general tension.

“Rey!” Rose insisted, reaching to grab her hand in hopes of dragging her into the dancing crowd.

“Hey,” Finn articulated behind her, breathless as he diverted her attention from their roommate. “Have you seen Poe?”

“Not since we arrived,” Rey realized as she freed herself of Rose’s grip.

Judging by the concern in his eyes, neither had he. Following his gaze to the huge table where bottles of various sizes and colors were noticeably being emptied, she understood his worry and nodded knowingly.
“I’ll have a look around, keep an eye on Rose.”

Diving back into the sweaty crowd of students, Rey found herself regretting that she’d agreed on wearing the dress her roommate had insisted on lending her, the soft breeze rushing into the house from the opened windows brushing her bare legs and arms leaving painful chills on her skin. It took her more or less than twenty minutes to find the mechanic, sitting alone in a chair with an empty glass in hand as he absent-mindedly stomped his feet to the rhythm of the music. Thankful that their friendship had mostly relied on helping each other without having to go through the deep conversations people her age usually enjoyed, Rey sat next to him, welcoming the refreshing silence of the man compared to the loud giggles and screams of the other students.

Side by side, they stared at the dance floor where their friends hadn’t stopped dancing since she’d left them. Rose’s moves became a little clumsier with each step she took, nearly kicking strangers in the face every time she spun. After an umpteenth fall accompanied by her dizzy giggle, she finally took Finn’s helping hand to get back on her feet and, without any warning, planted her lips on his.

Far from believing what she just saw, Rey spit the content of her glass and narrowed her eyes to catch a better glimpse while more and more bodies passed in front of them, blocking the view.

“Did they just-“ She started, turning to Poe who’d already left his chair as he walked to the main door with his hands deeply sunk in his pockets.

Nervously biting her lip as she connected the dots, Rey gave up on trying getting a better sight of her roommates and hastily headed to the room she’d left her coat in to catch up with the mechanic. Poe had already reached the small path leading to the street perpendicular to the house when she finally caught up to him.

“Poe!” She called, out-of-breath while slipping her second arm into her sleeve. She was struggling to stay on her feet despite the ridiculously vertiginous heels on her feet that weren't hers. “Come on, I’m driving you home.”

“No need to,” Poe mumbled without turning back. “I called a chauffeur.”

A few minutes later, he disappeared inside a car driven by the bartender she’d seen leaving her friend’s house earlier, leaving her with the weird feeling of loneliness big parties usually brought as she stood outside. The remote music echoing from the house behind only served as a reminder of why she hated these gatherings.

Far from being enthusiastic at the idea of going back to a party that only brought her back to the same awkwardness she’d felt a week ago when faced with Christmas celebrations, she sat in the humid grass and, after a few minutes, mindlessly took her phone out of her pocket to dial the number Ben had typed into her note. In that moment she held on to nothing except the selfish hope that he wasn't busy partying with his friends. She reminded herself of his words as she patiently waited for his voice to interrupt the signals echoing in her ear: 

“So you can call me when you want.”

Just as her heart missed a beat at the sound of his voice greeting her, she realized hearing him might have been the only thing she’d sincerely wanted that whole evening.

“Are you doing anything right now?” She asked a bit more abruptly than intended.

“Rey? Are you drunk?” He retorted with a soft chuckle.
“Just bored,” she sighed as two strangers joined her on the grass, alcohol obviously blurring any notion of personal boundaries. “I’m at this party, and… let’s just say it’s just as bad as these Christmas movies.”

“Hey careful, I’m watching one right now.” Ben falsely scolded, unknowingly drawing a smile from her.

Getting up to move away from the two students who were now rolling on her - their breaths smelling of cheap vodka and orange juice almost sickening her- she waited a few seconds before the words decided to leave her mouth.

“Can I suggest a program change?”

It only took her twenty minutes to find her bag among the others and hop in her car. Her heart drummed faster at every mile as she drew closer to the place Ben had suggested before hanging up.

“I can’t believe you escaped from a New Year Eve’s party,” Ben scoffed as they both stared at the city before their eyes. “I would’ve killed to be invited at one of these when I was your age.”

“I hate New Year’s Eve,” she whispered as an explanation.

Sitting next to him on the hood of her purring car, she shrugged and closed her eyes as a breeze softer than the one she’d cursed earlier caressed her cheeks, sending strands of her wavy hair to brush her face. While wrapped in her woolen coat, she'd freed her feet of the high heels torturing her to allow the dry coldness of winter to get a taste of her skin. Knowing she would probably catch a cold, she nonetheless refused the jacket Ben had offered to lend her, both because of pride and shyness; it was something purely instinctive that had caused her to try and maintain a strong facade.

“I used to like it. I think it was one of these rare days my whole family used to gather and pretended loving each other.” He whispered as he eased his posture on the car, stretching his legs while he talked. “Christmas movies style,” he added with a near nostalgic smile.

“And now?” Rey curiously asked.

“Now… it’s more of a checkpoint.” He tacitly concluded while staring in front of him. His expressive eyes only betrayed the memories rushing back to him.

Remaining still, Rey observed him with one of those looks she would’ve felt embarrassed to feel upon her until the sudden silence wrapping them caught her attention. Without a word, she slid down the hood, a shiver traveling through her whole body when her feet met the humid grass as she walked to the passenger’s seat to reach the radio.

Now used to its odd functioning after months of team work, she pressed the button to release the Blondie tape they’d been listening to for the last thirty minutes and turned it to the other side. She was about to climb back onto the hood when the gentle notes of the first song stopped her halfway as a bold, tempting idea started blossoming in her mind.

“Hey.” Taking the last steps separating them, she waited for Ben to turn to her before enunciating her suggestion aloud, a smile balancing her hesitant tone. “Let’s be silly.”

First met with a frown and inquiring eyes, she took a step backwards and bit her bottom lip as she waited for the small spark of understanding to lighten his eyes. Half a second later, the
embarrassing look he gave her betrayed his comprehension of her reference as he moved to the edge of the hood with apprehension. “I thought you didn’t like it?”

Unable to respond with anything else than a weak shrug, she felt her heart threatening to tear her chest down at the sight of Ben slowly getting down from their makeshift bench to join her with hesitant steps as his arms awkwardly hung at his sides.

*Far from day, far from night; Out of time, out of sight-*

Ridiculously synchronized, the first words of the song echoed into the night just as she held his gaze. Without letting go of her equally embarrassed yet encouraging smile, she waited for a sign from him to know whether she was supposed to make the first move or wait for him. In the same movement, they both extended their arms, their slight chuckles sounding as one as they clumsily bumped into each other. After a brief adjustment in which he finally laid his hands on her waist with great caution, Rey placed hers on his arms since his shoulders were a little too high for her to comfortably settle on.

*If It hadn’t been for the thick coat she was wearing, his hands could have easily wrapped around her whole waistline,* she noticed as they both started spinning to the slow pace of the song. Feeling a blush overwhelming her cheeks, Rey chose to avoid his gaze and focused on the lyrics accompanying their quiet dance.

*Follow me, follow me-*

Distractedly, she allowed her fingers to brush the folds of his sleeves to keep her eyes from looking up. All while doing so, Rey didn’t fail to notice Ben’s unsteady breathing as his hand, previously only slightly holding her, subtly tightened on her waist. Surprised at the unexpected contact, she let go of her earlier fears and looked up to meet his gaze. Feeling her own breath leaving her, she gulped with difficulty as she noticed his tensed jaw muscles betraying the nervousness running through him as well. Allowing nothing more than her instinct to guide her, she slowed her movements as she felt her neck leisurely stretching out towards him.

*Only you, only I-*

True to the lyrics resonating from her car’s speakers, the whole world around them seemed to slowly vanish. Both began to ease off their movements until neither of them were dancing anymore, forbidding their eye contact to break.

Far from regaining a calmer steady of breathing, Rey held her breath as she watched him faintly lower his head to her level. Trusting the messy beatings of her heart, she let her eyes linger at his mouth as her face moved closer to his. She only became aware that she had closed her eyes at some point when she felt a lock of hair that wasn’t hers tickle her forehead. Feeling encouraged by his hand slightly dragging her closer, she soon let her heels leave the grassy surface to stand on her tiptoes as she tightened her grip on his arm, closing the gap between them with apprehension and excitement.

Her parted lips had almost reached his when a loud popping sound stopped them both, urging her to open her eyes with a start while he firmly wrapped his arms around her in a protective way. Both taken aback by what could have happened as the colorful lights appeared in the sky, they slowly parted from each other with a nervous laugh to watch the fireworks bursting above them.

"Happy checkpoint," Rey whispered with a smile as the last sparks of purple disappeared into the darkness of the night a few minutes later.
“Happy checkpoint,” Ben wished her back.

Silently, they sat looking at the stars and lights of the city until Finn finally called her in the early hours of the morning, asking her to come pick them up at the party that had just come to an end.

Chapter End Notes

It took me a long time, but I finally finished this chapter! I was so happy to finally write this little dance scene, I heard this song for the first time a few weeks ago and it sounded perfect for these two idiots. I hope you liked it, feel free to tell me what you think and once again, thanks for the kudos and kind comments on the previous chapter, each one warmed my heart ♥
‘You still haven’t told me about Kylo’

A small smile played on Ben’s lips as he read the text with a brief glance to the phone settled on his lap, far from prying eyes. Barely listening to Snoke’s never-ending speech about the year’s statistics and others numbers he had absolutely no interest in; nonetheless, conscious of his superior’s eagle eyes, he kept nodding every time a silence fell around the table.

Almost a week had gone since he’d last seen Rey, each passing day drawing them to become closer with each other. Despite the numerous texts being added to their daily morning calls, they’d both chosen not to mention what almost happened under the stars while lulled by Blondie’s voice.

Truth be told, this silence around their dance was both highly frustrating and reassuring. Questions and pictures kept rushing in, mixing memories and dreams together in a confusing blend of hopes and fears.

What if the fireworks hadn’t stopped them? A soft shiver traveled his body at the memory of her face getting closer and closer, bringing his hand to close on his own lap as he remembered the shape of her waist in the crook of his palm.

She terrified him, awakened something so far unknown in him that he'd never felt before and making his body respond in a way it hadn't in years. Just for a few seconds, sealing his lips with hers appeared like a possibility he was more than willing to explore, encouraged by the surrounding darkness and isolation.

Did her lips taste of amber and vanilla as the perfume he'd noticed when sitting next to her? One thing he was certain of from the numerous times he’d stolen a glance, they looked like the softest thing he'd ever seen. Saying he’d never thought about kissing her would be a pure lie; first being nothing more than a remote fantasy, the idea had quickly gained ground, increasing a little more each time he saw her. Lucky for her, his body was still under control of his mind, which never missed an opportunity to remind him of the numerous evidences of her non-returned interest.
A sigh nearly escaped him as he realized his thoughts had put a name on the feelings he’d tried to ignore until now: interest.

Of course there was no way holding on to this feeling would be of any good for him. She was obviously friendly, way too young to think about him this way and definitely out of his league. Having Rey as a friend was already far from anything he could have hoped for and he wouldn’t ruin it for anything in the world, even if it meant repressing the obvious attraction towards her he’d started to acknowledge.

She had filled a gap in his life in a way no one ever had before, giving him both a smile and a fear of losing her and being alone again. A part of him kept wondering if the nature of his captivation toward her was due to this loneliness: a question that kept vanishing every time his eyes settled on her face or on the texts she sent from her small apartment she’d described earlier as ‘narrow but cozy’.

“Now, about Eisley’s-

Dragged away from any daydream involving him trying to guess what Rey’s bedroom was like, Ben turned his attention back to Snoke and focused on his speech, curious about the project he’d been hearing about for months now.

“Chalmun is almost done with the paintings and found a head cook. He’s now looking for waiters and waitresses so he can open soon. I’m counting on you to spread the message among your acquaintances.”

Both Armitage and Ben nodded at the insinuated request without a glance for each other. Of all Snoke’s poker friends, Chalmun was the one that less inspired Ben in trust: tall, silent and moody. He was nothing like an aspiring coffee shop owner- an opinion he obviously shared with the bartender who was already trying to interrupt their boss.

“With all due respect, sir,” Hux started with hesitation, “do you think Chalmun really is qualified for this work?”

With one of these destabilizing sideways glances he mastered all too well, the old man raised an eyebrow and tilted his head with curiosity.

“I can’t think of anyone more qualified. Did you have someone in mind?”

Shamefully, the young man retreated with a shake of his head. Repressing a smirk he could feel begging to be released, Ben bit his lips and cast a glance at his colleague to savor the look of defeat on his face. Hux had hoped for a promotion since their first day in Starkiller, patiently waiting and engaging in a flawless behavior every time Snoke was around; even going as far as bravely serving his poker group drinks all night long, accepting their remarks and dirty empty glasses without a single groan.

“That’s what I thought.” Snoke concluded with a soft nod, a cold smile betraying his satisfaction at the sight of his employee’s silent disappointment.

With no evidence of remorse, the old man left the chair he’d been sitting on for the last hour and reached a hand to the inner pocket of his long jacket to grab an envelope for Ben.

“A thank-you card from Chalmun,” Snoke explained in response to his inquiring look, “for your help with the plans.”

Unprepared for any kind of acknowledgment from his superior or his friends, Ben accepted the
envelope with a suspicious frown that only tightened at the sight of what was waiting inside: another piece of paper that was slightly larger with soft colors, and a name on it preceding a number that seemed way too unrealistic for that kind of paper.

“I can’t-” he started, already sliding the check back into the envelope.

“Take that as an advance for his next request,” Snoke intimated with a benevolent wave of his hand.

“Next request?”

Not bothering to answer his question, the man disappeared behind the main door, leaving Ben with only more doubts about this project he wasn’t that interested in anymore with a colleague glaring at him. If jealousy could kill, he probably would’ve already been dead.

—

‘What do you want to know?’

Unable to repress her lips from curling into a small smile, Rey bit her bottom lip as she progressed through the kitchen. Both eyes riveted on the text she’d just received, she barely noticed the table that her hips met with a muffled noise and rounded it without looking away from the screen of the phone as her fingers started typing a reply.

‘Everything?’

Ignoring the voice in her head reminding her of the fact she never would have said that out loud, Rey pressed the 'send' button and scrolled up to the previous messages. Deprived of his usual presence accompanying her during her morning round because of a meeting he had to attend, she’d jumped on her phone as soon as she’d parked her car in front of the house. Ignoring both of her roommates, she stepped into the living room with a blissful expression stuck on her face.

“Rey?” Finn called from the sofa, almost causing her to jump away from the fridge she just opened.

Acknowledging her friend with a surprised yet inquiring look, Rey instinctively locked her phone and hid it in her back pocket, her other hand absent-mindedly closing the white door that sent a cold breeze against her legs.

“Did something happen while we were away?”

Doing her best to ignore the embarrassment threatening to color her cheeks pink, Rey tilted her head with a frown as she mumbled with hesitancy.

“No… nothing, really. Why?”

It wasn’t really a lie, she realized with bitterness as she held her friend’s suspicious gaze. Nothing had happened: nothing she wanted to talk about, at least. If she hadn’t been so secretive about the earpiece that started it all, maybe she would have confided in Finn about her doubts and the little things that never failed to leave her with a sensation of lightness. Rose would have been excited about that kind of story, while Finn would have been cautious and rational.

But were cautious and rational what she really wanted to be? Had she been slightly more prudent and wary, she wouldn’t have kept the small device –nor would she have entered the maze during closing time or accepted to meet this stranger. Now that she was thinking about it, none of these
choices had been wise. He could've been a creep, or else a psychopath who liked playing with his prey; yet, something in the eyes she'd met in Poe's garage had led her to trust him. It was probably the same thing that had brought her to forgive him for an abandonment she wouldn’t have forgiven anyone else: the same thing that had led her to call him a week ago in a moment of solitude and helplessness, looking for nothing more than a reassuring presence and far from the noisy party she didn’t feel like she belonged at.

Could this same thing justify the gesture she’d almost had that same night? If she was to be truly honest with herself, she had an idea about what had drawn her to yield to the so far unknown desire she’d suddenly felt that night.

She could always blame it on her loneliness and the lyrics that seemed fitting for them, but ignoring her attachment to Ben had become more and more impossible. They hadn't seen each other for a week and, despite their morning calls, she could feel the need to see him in person growing a little more each day.

“I don’t know,” Finn replied with a shrug, “You’re… secret?”

“And your phone’s always ringing,” another voice added from behind the backrest. “Are you seeing someone?”

Catching her off guard, Rose’s head appeared next to Finn just in time to see Rey frantically shaking her head with a frown.

Focused on her phone, Rey realized she’d almost forgotten the discomfort she felt every time these two were together. She’d actually never seen them apart from each other since the New Year’s Eve party, but never dared to ask what the current nature of their relationship was. Judging by Rose’s radiant smile and the way she never missed an opportunity to grab Finn’s hand, it was more than likely they were together; yet, Finn’s lack of enthusiasm never ceased to make her doubt.

Maybe she was a bad friend for thinking that, but she’d always imagined him with Poe. She could recall their long calls the girls were never invited to listen to, the way their neighbor looked at him and the way Finn always counted him for dinner while still trying –and failing- to keep a casual voice every time he mentioned the mechanic. She’d been so convinced of a hidden or oncoming relationship between the two men she’d probably missed a few hints predicting a nascent love between her roommates.

Still, the way they behaved around each other was awkward enough to lead her to avoid them as much as she could. If this was love, she certainly didn’t want to experience it.

“It’s just… you’re a bit distracted, these days.” Finn added, weighing his words as to not sound harsher than intended.

“I’m not,” Rey retorted, her frown tightening.

“Really?” Her friend asked with an amused voice, raising an eyebrow. “Then where are the groceries we asked you to pick on the way home?”

_The groceries._ Recalling Finn’s text from earlier, she placed a hand on her forehead and closed her eyes, forced to admit her absent-mindedness. Maybe they were right; maybe she was having difficulties organizing her thoughts, and especially getting a certain _someone_ out of her mind.

“I’ll be right back,” she mumbled as she started walking back to the corridor, thankful for not having taken her shoes off yet.
“And you better tell us everything!” Rose called out as the sound of another incoming text echoed in the room.

Taking advantage of the closed door to pretend she didn’t hear her request, Rey hurtled down the stairs leading to the entrance and stepped outside, welcoming the feeling of freedom along with the winter wind caressing the tip of her nose. She fumbled in the depths of her pockets in search of her keys. After a brief battle against her earphones and a few crumpled papers, she grabbed the precious object and extracted it from her coat, her eyes looking for the vehicle belonging to the metallic sharp item.

“Hey,” a familiar yet unexpected voice greeted her from a blind spot.

Staggering to turn and face her neighbor, Rey remained silent for a few seconds before returning the greeting with an incredulous smile as she scrutinized him, relieved to see him outside of his house. His hair was still a mess similar to the beard he hadn’t shaved in weeks and his smile inexistent, but where she’d last seen anger and sadness, his eyes were now filled with hesitancy. Far from his owner’s state of mind, Baby took the steps separating him from Rey and buried his head between her knees with one of the soft groans he usually saved for bad days.

“Happy New Year,” Poe finally babbled after a moment, staring at the dog to avoid looking at his friend.

“Thanks, you too,” Rey responded with an encouraging smile as she ran a hand through the Labrador’s golden fur. “How was Christmas?”

As an answer, Poe heaved his shoulder in a shrug and tilted his head, obviously not ready for such a long and detailed conversation. Assuring him of her understanding with a soft nod, Rey watched him take a few steps backwards and turn back to his house, a hand in his pockets and the other beckoning his dog to follow him.

“I missed you,” she suddenly added as his hand landed on his doorknob. As if he couldn't believe the words that had just crossed her lips, Poe raised his head and met her gaze with the same brown eyes she’d met earlier. Except these were now imbued with something more; something between sadness and gratitude.

Thanking her with a discomfitted nod, the mechanic looked away. Every parcel of his body screamed the need to disappear from her sight as he vanished behind his red door without a word.

- - -

‘Everything?’

Back in the small room under Starkiller’s roof, Ben kept staring at the last text he’d received nearly two hours ago, unable to decide what to reveal or not about the name Rey asked about for the second time.

Kylo. He’d almost forgotten about the true nature of this name: first used as a joke by his uncle during a family dinner long ago as a contraction of everyone’s last name. He’d first used the alias to sign the drawings he used to give his mother on Mother’s Day, gradually keeping it as a nickname for every game that required something else than the simple ‘Ben’ his parents had
chosen for him the day he was born. Nothing serious in itself; but certainly not something he’d ever told anyone outside of his family. Was he ready to give such personal information to Rey? Moreover - what would it mean if he did?

Just as he grabbed his phone to read her text once more, two symbols preceded by a name captured the entirety of his screen, signaling an incoming call he hadn’t been expecting. Feeling a lump forming in his throat, Ben stared at his godfather’s initials and pressed the green button with a gulp, fearing the worst.

“What did I tell you about answering your goddamn phone, kid?”

An apprehensive silence followed the rhetorical question during which Ben held his breath, on the lookout for any sign of sadness or joy in the man’s voice as he waited for him to reveal the true nature of his call. Probably realizing the memories and feelings his words brought back, Lando cleared his throat and continued: this time with a less harsh voice.

“Your mother. She tried to call you.”

A weird warmth wrapped his heart at the mentioning of his mother; both weighing the organ as if to turn it to stone and hugging it in an embrace similar to the ones Leia used to give him back in his childhood.

“The doctor said familiar voices could help him wake up.” Lando added, slightly less assured than he was seconds ago.

There it was: the real reason behind his call. Not bothering to repress the sigh escaping his mouth, Ben leaned back in his chair. His left hand tightened its grip on the phone as he articulated the first words that had crossed his mind.

“I think he was way more familiar with you than with his own son...”

Part of this statement was wrong, and he knew it; but as always a child’s disappointment was stronger than any adult’s words. How many times had he seen Han leave the house to meet his friend? He sure never failed to give the best presents, but not even the calligraphy set he received on his eleventh birthday could replace a father's presence.

Noticing a sigh echoing from the other end of the line, Ben considered the unspoken request for a moment. “Would it... would it really help?”

“I don’t know” Lando confessed with this honest tone he kept for rare occasions. “Maybe.”

Another moment of silence followed during which Ben stared at the ceiling, listening to the sensations wandering around his body. Apart from the knot tightening around his stomach, he could feel his heartbeat drumming against his temples. His muscles all seemed to melt at the idea of going to the hospital and running into someone he knew, like his uncle: or worst, his mother. Having to confront the sight of his unconscious father would already affect him way more than he’d like to admit; but seeing the disappointment and pain in her eyes would probably achieve to kill him.

“I don’t want to see-.” Ben started to whisper with guilt, quickly interrupted by his godfather.

“She usually leaves at seven.”

Uselessly nodding as a thank you and an unconscious way to fill the silence, Ben took a deep breath and closed his eyes as he felt the words making their way from his chest to his throat,
dangerously running to his lips. It was stupid, selfish and childish; but right now, it was all he needed to endure the task he’d silently accepted.

“Can you come with me?”

A soft chuckled echoed in his ear, betraying the incredulous smile spreading on his godfather’s lips.

“Of course, dummy.”

Of all the buildings in Kamino the hospital was probably one of those Ben never thought he’d ever step into. Acclimatizing his eyes to the sudden whiteness of the place, it took him a few seconds to see the man walking to him despite the bright yellow jacket on his shoulders. From the extravagant outfit consisting of a printed pink shirt coupled with a pair of blue jeans to the smirk in the corner of his lips, nothing had changed: Lando was still the man Ben remembered from his childhood, except maybe with a few more wrinkles and grayish hair.

“You haven’t changed at all,” he politely commented when their hands met in an awkward handshake- the first adult interaction they ever had.

“You sure have!” The man noted with a smile as he took a step back to properly examine his godson. “Last time I saw you, you were hardly taller than that ball of fur. What did they feed you with?”

Softly smiling at the mention of the family dog, Ben remained still and silent as Lando kept observing him: as if he was making sure the young man in front of him truly was the boy he’d last seen fifteen years ago.

Truth be told, Ben never thought he’d see him again: between Lando’s many trips worldwide and Ben’s choice to break off all ties with his family, the two of them never really had managed to maintain the relationship they’d built during his early years. Lucky for them, Lando was far from being as stubborn as him and had sent Ben a few letters at his return from Europe. Nothing too fancy or personal; just enough to keep in touch, remind him of his presence and –this was Ben’s theory- be able to update his parents if anything were to happen to him.

“Come on- I already told the doctors you were here.”

With a nod of his head, Lando beckoned Ben to follow him to the elevator where he pressed the third button with an ease that Ben wondered how many times he’d done this before. Did everyone come on a daily basis? Gritting his teeth to ignore the guilt seizing him, he waited for the doors to open after the small ‘ding’ signaling their arrival. Following his father’s friend through the corridors, his eyes curiously wandered around him.

An odd fragrance invaded his head as they turned into another sanitized corridor that looked exactly the same as the one they’d just left. Except, for the few posters glued to the windows, reminding everyone to ‘watch out for the symptoms’ described under the picture of an obliviously sick man grasping at his throat with a hopeless look in his eyes.

“It’s here,” Lando murmured as he stopped in front of a door identical to the others.

Looking away from the ridiculous posters asking him to wash his hands, Ben glanced at his godfather who’d already opened the door. Still not ready to step into the room, he let his eyes linger on the man in hopes of finding a hint about what was waiting for him at the other side of the
Attentively observing his eyes, Ben realized he was far from being the only one suffering. Nervously clenching his fists, he took a deep breath and cast a glance inside of the room.

The first thing he noticed was the small disappointment he felt as he noticed the absence of his mother, even though he’d specifically asked not to run the risk of seeing her. The second was the amount of seconds it took him to recognize the man lying in the bed settled next to the windows.

He definitely had more grey hair than he remembered. In fact, his head was covered with it. He’d lost a few pounds, but this was probably due to his current state.

Encouraged by a small pressure on his shoulder, Ben walked to the massive bed, not taking his eyes off Han. He almost looked like a robot: linked to noisy machines with a few tubes protruding from his arms and nostrils; but even a car accident hadn’t managed to get him rid of the small wrinkle between his brows. Gulping as he reached the small chair placed next to the bed, Ben opened his mouth, searching for some casual yet familiar words to say.

“Uh… hi.” He whispered, his eyes looking everywhere but at his father.

Awkwardly shifting his weight on his feet, Ben took a deep breath. They’d never been good at talking, even worse at small talks. Just as he turned to Lando to assure him he was far from being the right person for that, the man landed a compassionate hand on his arm while extending the other to the empty chair.

“Take your time. I’ll see if I can find some coffee.”

Without any more word, Lando left the room, careful to close the door behind him to ensure the two of them the privacy they needed -or more precisely, the privacy Ben needed.

Now surrounded by a heavy silence, it took him a few minutes to make up his mind to lay eyes on the unconscious figure above him. There was something weird in seeing his father like this: the man who’d always tried to hide his weaknesses now depended on machines that looked like they’d been imported from last century. Perhaps, was it due to the numerous needles planted in his arm or the few years he’d earned out of Ben’s sight, but Han looked frailer than ever.

A sigh escaped Ben as he sat on the chair. The sense of guilt increasing inside of him as he reminded himself of the thought that had hardly left his mind for the last month: he was the one to blame for this situation. He was the one who’d put his father in this hospital, and he hadn’t visited him once or even replied to his mother’s texts informing him of his condition. Of course, the idea had crossed his mind, but never enough to convince him to actually jump into his car and drive here.

Plunging a hand into his pocket to grab the tape that hadn’t left his jacket in weeks, he brushed the edges of the small object as he cleared his throat, ready to let out a few words. After a solid minute of hesitancy, they quietly left his mouth in a whisper, defying the invisible wall that had prevented them to pass for the last years.

“Hi, dad.”

Staring at the steady breathing heaving Han’s chest, he couldn’t help but feel a little disappointed at the absence of reaction. Of course, this was not a Christmas movie; miracles didn’t happen in real life, or he wouldn’t be here. After observing the monitor screen for a few more seconds, Ben hesitantly raised his free hand to slowly let it brush his father’s with the back of his fingers, as
cautiously as if the old man were made of glass. In a split second, he'd went back to being a helpless child begging for attention from the person he admired the most in the world, wanting nothing more than his protective arms around him.

“I’m sorry…”

The words had crossed Ben’s lips before he could realize it. Words he would probably never had said to a conscious Han. Words that even phone calls and regrets hadn’t managed to get out of him. Firmly holding the tape, he grasped his father’s hand and squeezed it with trembling fingers as he felt his vision dangerously blurring, the blue walls and white furniture blending until only one big grey stain remained.

The sound of a light object meeting the ground interrupted the monotonous beeps of the monitor, as well as discreet yet unsteady sniffing Ben vainly tried to restrain. Forgetting about his previous cautious gestures, he abruptly squeezed his father’s inanimate hand and surrendered, allowing his tears to fall and his head to rest on the cold blanket.

Despite the years spent convincing himself he’d made the right choice a craving he’d kept ignoring came rushing back at the feeling of the wrinkled yet soft skin his fingers kept brushing, unable to let go of the contact: an unfortunate ‘one way’ contact.

“I’m so fucking sorry…” Salty tears slipped through his trembling lips as memories passed before his eyes with as much energy he’d put into repressing them.

He was five, maybe six at the most; terrified and awakened by the thunderstorm raging outside, he’d nonetheless been silently sobbing in his bed for twenty minutes, too afraid to move and leave his room to join the parental bed. Awakened by the thunderbolts and violent wind leading the shutters to slam against the walls, Han hadn't been long to join his son and spend the night with him in his small bed. Offering his massive arms as a shelter to hide into while humming his favorite song, Han would stroke his hair until he finally fell asleep again.

One year later the thunderstorm was gone, but the nightmares had chosen to stay, keeping Ben awakened at an hour even his parents couldn’t resist to. Despite his early flight the following morning Han would carry a crying Ben out of the house for a midnight ride that soon became a tradition between the two of them.

Tired and mostly aware of his poor singing skills, he ended up replacing the usual classical music radio station with a mix tape including all of his son's favorite tunes. Lulled by the soothing voices of Cyndie Lauper and The Beatles, they both learned to take the time to appreciate the calmness provided by the night, each silent ride plunging them into a place where nothing mattered if not the shared feeling of comfort and understanding as their eyes caught sight of every little light emanating from the darkness on their way back home.

Ben’s mix tape remained a secret: a key to a world only his father and him were allowed to enter, to such an extent that even during the occasional ride they shared together. Han would play any other tapes but this one, saving it for their special time together. Every time one of his country songs played, Ben couldn’t help but look at this man and let a feeling of both admiration and sadness invade him. His father loved his family, but there was something in his eyes longing for something else: the eyes of a man homesick for a place only he knew about. A country he’d created in his head with the same easiness he’d helped Ben create his own.

The memories scrolled with more and more rapidity, dangerously approaching the one he’d been avoiding the most. The one that kept playing in his head every time Han texted him. The one that sent him waves of guilt every time he randomly ran into Poe on the parking lot and always led him
to question every choice he’d made since he’d left the family house. He’d almost started remembering how empty and silent the street had been that night when a firm squeeze on his shoulder took him back to the white and blue room.

“Coffee,” Lando casually announced as he sat on a second chair he'd probably dragged all the way from the corridor.

Accepting the warm paper cup he was handed, Ben quickly wiped away the tears moistening his face and cleared his throat as he straightened up. Accompanied by nothing more than the slow steady pace of the monitor screen transcribing Han’s heartbeats, the two men silently drank their beverage, careful not to look at each other while respectively burning their tongue.

“Is that yours?” Lando finally asked after a few minutes.

Pulling himself away from his contemplation of the bad pun printed on the side of his cup, Ben looked up to see his godfather leaning down to pick up the blue mix tape he’d left on the floor. Forgetting all about his own puffy eyes he’d been trying to hide, he only now noticed the redness and shadows framing the man’s usually beaming gaze.

Years may have been to blame, but the absence of a smile betrayed the fatigue hovering above Lando's head. Silently nodding and taking his tape back, Ben didn't take his eyes off him, slowly starting to picture how the last weeks must have been for the man who'd auto-proclaimed himself his uncle. Lando had probably been here a lot, supporting Leia both emotionally and physically while dealing with his own feelings while facing his unconscious best friend more than he probably wanted.

“So,” Lando sighed on an obviously forced cheerful voice, “What are you up to, these days?”

Surprised but thankful of how his godfather didn’t try to dig more into the emotional mess that his mind currently was, Ben shrugged and quickly muttered Snoke's name before skillfully, turning the question round. Less than an hour later, he knew everything about Lando’s life: from how much he missed traveling to how intriguing the waitress he'd hired a few years ago still was.

He turned back to the talkative man Ben had grown up admiring, filling the earlier awkward silence with anecdotes of which casualness helped both of them forget about the third person in the room and the reason of their reunion. When time came for visitors to leave, Ben was the last to leave the room, his eyes disagreeing to leave sight of his father.

“Thanks., Lando repeated for the third time when they reached his car: a bright red cabriolet he hadn’t sold in years. “For coming and… trying.”

Trying. The word echoed in Ben’s head as he nodded, unable to properly apologize for the complete failure this had been. As if he’d heard his thought, Lando took a step forward and gave him a gentle tap on the arm as he’d seen him do numerous times to his father.

“Call me if you need anything, ok?”

Still silent, Ben nodded once again as he watched his godfather walk away and disappear behind a tinted glass and start his car. Something twisted in his stomach as he realized his arms had automatically risen of a few inches towards the man, waiting for the usual embrace he would have been given almost twenty years ago. The little boy he’d been would probably have run after the car, begging him for one last hug; but things were different when you became an adult: you were given invisible barriers helping you to learn the strict unspoken rules stating that any physical form of affection was in the past- except handshakes and kisses.
Such rules would have been fair if people actually chose to grow up, but no one was ever given the choice. Yet, standing in the middle of this parking lot with a hand firmly closed on his mix tape, Ben hadn't felt so close to his child self in years: helpless and alone. Holding onto the small object as if his life depended on it, he watched his free hand grab his phone and automatically dial a number he now knew by heart before raising the device to his ear, listening to the endless connecting signals with greeted teeth.

“Ben?”

Another lump formed in his throat at the sound of Rey’s surprised yet joyous voice; she was the most reassuring thing he’d heard today, sending waves of joy and relief to fight against the growing anxiety threatening to explode inside of him.

“Your car-” he started, unable to control his quaking voice, “you can-”

“Ben? What’s wrong?” She interrupted, all trace of enthusiasm gone and replaced by concern.

Conscious of the tears threatening to fall at any given moment, he took a deep breath and tightened his grip on the phone before articulating with the most composed voice he was capable of while doing his best not to worry her more than she already was. “Your car… can play tapes, right?”

“I… Yes.”

A sigh escaped him at the realization of what he was about to ask her- or more precisely, of what he was about to do. Gulping with difficulty at the thought of sitting in the Falcon again, Ben leaned against the closest car and closed his eyes, waiting for the question to cross his lips.

“Can I see you?”

“Of course. Where are you?”

- - -

She’d almost forgotten how her heart always missed a beat every time she saw him.

The hospital was about twenty minutes away from her house. Lucky for him, Rey had been spending her entire afternoon at the university library catching up on work she’d kept postponing, and avoiding the awkwardness of her roommate’s nascent relationship and the silly conversations that came with it. The languorous looks Rose sent to Finn across the table at dinner, she could handle it. But compared to watching a movie next to them while not being able to put a blind eye on her wanderings hands, studying appeared like a more than welcome option.

Redoubling her efforts to not get distracted by the sight of Ben walking in her direction, she kept her eyes focused on the wheel between her hands and set the hand brake, unable to ignore the wild pace her heart had settled to. A few seconds later, the passenger’s door opened and she swore she felt the organ drop to her feet as she attempted to smile at the hesitant figure staring at the seat next to hers.

He was exhausted, she noticed as she observed him leaning down to sit, making the big car look
like a toy next to his imposing stature. Far from the calm and composed man she’d shared a dance with a few days ago. Unable to take her eyes off him, Rey patiently waited for him to speak, her lips curled in an encouraging smile. After three minutes of complete silence, his voice finally rose as he kept staring at his feet, shoulders bent as if he was waiting for her to chase him away.

“I was… I came here to-“

“You don’t owe me any explanation,” Rey hastened to say with an instinctive shake of her head to underline her statement.

As if taken aback by her words, Ben turned to her, allowing her gaze to meet his. Apart from the usual deep brown she bet she would never get used to, his eyes were full of disbelief and gratefulness, lingering on her with an expression that both warmed and broke her heart.

“Thanks,” he murmured with the shadow of a smile on his lips.

A new silence hung between them during which Rey kept staring at him, allowing her eyes to finally stop on every little detail she could catch a glimpse of. The sun had barely started to set, spreading an orange light that didn't fail to fairly enlighten the contrast between his pale skin and dark hair that was slightly longer than the first time they'd met. It was a mess, but she loved the way it fell exactly in the right way.

Letting her imagination run wild, she caught herself wondering how running her hand through it would feel and felt her cheeks warm at the idea. Unstoppable, her eyes trailed down to his mouth—a part of his face she'd always tried to avoid looking at until their last encounter. His lips were slightly shaking, unintentionally emphasizing that little something that had led her to come closer during their dance and give it a try.

Before she could ask herself if giving it another chance was a good idea, Ben took a deep breath and, without a word, grabbed a small object out of his pocket that caught her attention. Between his fingers not even a meter from her was the small tape she'd given Mr. Solo about a month ago, just before the accident. Speechless, she watched him slip it into her radio and held her breath, waiting for his reaction as the first notes of a well-known song started playing inside the car.

He’d always had an impenetrable mind, expressive eyes and revealing voice, but never enough to let her know what he was thinking about. A few songs played: all slow and peaceful. Despite the tranquil notes wrapping them, Rey still didn’t see any change in his posture: hands on his knees, eyes firmly settled on the radio, only his deep breathing informed her of his living state.

More and more concerned by his curious behavior and the all too many coincidences, she'd started to open her mouth when she noticed a single tear rolling down his cheek. Following its race until all was left of it was a small stain on his jeans, she let her eyes linger on his leg and to his hand now gripping his knee with so much strength she wondered if breaking your own knee was physically possible.

The song abruptly ended, leaving the two of them in a silence she hadn't been expecting so soon. Paralyzed by the fear of saying or doing something wrong, Rey remained still for a few seconds before noticing another stain on his jeans. His face was now probably voluntarily hidden behind the dark locks she'd observed not long ago.

Once again, her eyes caught sight of his now trembling hand then trailed back to his arm, taking her back to the moment the fireworks had erupted above them. He’d only enlaced her for a few seconds out of fear, but she was pretty sure she would never forget the sensation. Aside from her frustration, she'd never felt as safe as she'd been while wrapped in his arms: a feeling of safety she
wanted him to feel right now.

This time unable to repress her gesture, she placed her hand on his arm and waited a moment, ready to pull away at the first sign of reject from his side. Given the reserve he'd shown for the past days, it was now evident physical interaction was far from being something he liked.

Against all odds, all shaking immediately left his body and his head slightly moved, turning to watch her hand that looked incredibly tiny on him. Encouraged by the slow pace his breathing regained, Rey slowly let her hand stroll down his forearm and slide on his thigh, only looking at her gesture when her fingers finally brushed the back of his hand.

_They'd never had a skin to skin contact until now_, she realized as she felt his chest heave in unison with hers. Well too aware of her heart threatening to leave her chest, she slowly placed her hand on his, aligning her fingers with his in the most protective way the size difference allowed her to. She hadn't expected his skin to be so soft. Most of all, she hadn't expected him to intertwine his fingers with hers and tenderly hold it, sending a shiver down her spine.

Gathering her courage, she looked up to see Ben had closed his eyes and rested his head on the back of his seat with a calmer expression; his jaw had slightly relaxed just as his frown was starting to vanish.

An hour or two had passed - the only time indicator she noticed being the night slowly falling around them - before a notification from her phone broke the comforting silence they'd settled in. Begrudgingly, she let go of Ben's hand to grab the device and read a text from Finn asking her if she was coming back for dinner.

“Thank you,” Ben mumbled as he straightened up in his seat and pushed the button to get his tape back.

He’d already started to open his door as if leaving suddenly was a priority when Rey heard the question leave her mouth before she could weigh the pros and cons of asking it.

“How did you know about my car? The radio?”

Once again, Ben’s eyes seemed to get lost into the void. Stopping halfway, he leaned back into his seat and let out a sigh as he looked around him, an almost imperceptible smile making its way to the corner of his lips. Still turning the mix tape between his fingers, he finally shrugged before saying the words Rey had already guessed.

“It was my father’s.”

Incapable of doing anything else than nodding comprehensively, she watched him turn back to the door and step out of the car as she started making the links between the little information she’d unintentionally gathered for the past months. The two men sure had the same eyes, but now that she was thinking about it there was something in his calmness that reminded her more of Mr. Solo’s wife. Did this mean he was actually Mayor Organa’s son? Once again, the answer appeared naturally to her.

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“Are you coming tomorrow?” He suddenly asked while leaning down to the window’s level.

“Tomorrow?” Rey repeated, hardly focusing on his words as her thoughts kept circling around the previous revelation.

“You used to come on Fridays,” he affirmed, his brown eyes directly aiming at hers increasing the growing warmth tickling her stomach as she pointed out the fact he’d remembered the exact day.
“I’ll try,” she murmured before he left her with the same weak smile he’d greeted her with.

To Rey’s greatest surprise, Rose was the hardest to convince. It’d only taken two minutes for Finn to get up from the sofa and get his shoes while his girlfriend, still a bit disconcerted to see her movie night being delayed for the second time of the week, tried in vain to negotiate to go the day after.

“Look at all these people,” she pointed out half an hour later as they stepped inside the bar. “The maze is gonna be crowded and-”

“Is that Poe?” Finn distractedly interrupted while looking behind her with a frown.

Both following his gaze, the girls turned to the bar as well to see their neighbor slouched on the counter holding a glass filled with a golden beverage in a hand. His wild curls that could have previously given him an air of model now stressed out the negligence of his whole appearance from his unshaved beard to the crinkles of his shirt.

“He doesn’t look great,” Rose whispered as they silently agreed to approach him, their steps as hesitant as the ones of hunters tracking a beast.

Staying between the drunken students that had taken up residence here over the course of the last few weeks, Rey approved her remark with a shake of a head. She watched Finn beckon his friend to turn away from the bartender he was talking to with an affectionate tap on the shoulder, a smile already playing on his lips. Judging by Poe’s expression as he spun on his chair, the glass he was holding wasn’t his first.

“I didn’t think I’d see you here,” he confessed after a few blinks, raising his glass to greet them.

“Rey suggested we come back for a game,” Rose hastened to explain with one of these warm smiles that belonged to her, only met with an awkward one from her roommate. “You should come with us!”

Smiling back at her but with less enthusiasm, Poe opened his mouth to speak, already half-nodding when his eyes stopped on her hand firmly gripping Finn’s arm.

"Next time maybe,” he murmured with a shrug before turning back to the bartender who'd observed the scene with a raised eyebrow. "You got clients," Poe informed him while nonchalantly pointing at the trio at his back.

“Three players?” The bartender uselessly asked as he slowly walked to the computer at the other side of the counter.

As if synchronized, a succession of joyous notes played with a synthesizer echoing from the speakers above their heads, causing Rey’s heart to miss a beat once again. Half covered by the surrounding noises but loud enough to make both the small group and the bartender look up, the voice of the well-known singer from The Cure gently let out the first words of the hit.

_I don't care if Monday's blue, Tuesday's grey and Wednesday too-

All frowning then going back to their registration, none of them noticed Rey’s lips slowly curling into a smile as she kept listening to the lyrics. Her fingers slowly brushed the small bump in her pocket as she incredulously mouthed the lyrics of the song she’d heard a few times before.
Thursday I don't care about you, It's Friday, I'm in love-

“You can go,” the bartender dismissed after handing them three red badges with their number on it before quickly walking back to where Poe was sitting, listening to the song as well with a frown.

I don't care if Monday's black, Tuesday, Wednesday heart attack,

Thursday never looking back, It's Friday I'm in love-

Absent-mindedly finding her way to the Briefing Room, Rey didn’t notice her friends’ suspicious looks on her as she kept listening to every word coming out of the speakers that managed to wrap her in a bubble where nothing else mattered. The heavy doors finally closed behind her, cutting them from every external noise to plunge them into the dark world of the maze they hadn’t stepped into for weeks –at least, together.

“See? It’s crowded,” Rose pointed out as remote laughers echoed from the maze.

“Only more targets!” Finn retorted with a smile as he put on a jacket. Grabbing the blaster hanging at its side before running to the entrance, he was quickly followed by his girlfriend asking him to wait for her.

Finally alone, Rey took the earpiece she’d been dying to free from her pocket and placed it into her ear with trembling fingers. Feeling an excitement that didn’t have anything to do with the giggles she could hear, Rey stepped into the maze as well. Fastening the belt of her jacket, she waiting for the steady beeps to signal for the connection to stop and make place to the only thing she wanted to hear tonight.

“Novice,” Ben’s now familiar voice greeted her with an audible smirk after a few seconds.

“Voice,” she replied in a murmur, almost like a reverence.

“Good to see you here.”

Trying to ignore the words burning her lips, Rey started walking around the place with a small smile. Letting her eyes adjust to the new luminosity, she finally walked towards the other players she could hear from the other side of the maze.

It didn’t take her very long to get her old habits back: tracking, shooting, and hiding. She repeated the pattern a few times, shooting a stranger and hiding behind every wall she could find while proudly listening to Ben chuckle every time she deactivated someone’s jacket, only now realizing how much satisfying this game was. Seven minutes and 2,783 points later, Rey finally heard her thoughts turn to words and roll down her tongue after Ben congratulated her on her score.

“So,” she hesitantly whispered after making sure she was alone in this area, “This song… Interesting choice.”

“You liked it?” he immediately inquired, his faltering voice betraying the equal anxiety flooding him at the idea of where this conversation was going.

“Very much,” Rey assured in a breath.

The silence that settled between them had nothing to do with the numerous ones they’d already experienced. Neither embarrassment nor concern was felt - only anticipating the unexplainable feeling that they’d never understood each other more than right now. Both savored the unsaid as it became all the more obvious.
“Mind if I join?” Ben suddenly asked, breaking the silence.

“You think you can handle another defeat?” Rey jokingly retorted on an almost defensive tone, feeling her mouth suddenly going dry.

“We’ll see,” he retorted with that deep voice that never failed to make her shiver.

Not even a second later, the small beeps announcing the end of the connection echoed in her ear, throwing her back to the reality of the game when a complete stranger shot her in the back before running away with a giggle. Focused on her fast drumming heart she noticed how her mind was surprisingly exempted of the numerous questions she felt she should’ve asked herself.

She started walking away from the other players and headed to a more secluded area, tightening her grip on the blaster that hadn't left her hands since the beginning of the game. Just when the numeric clock projected on the ceiling announced only five minutes left before the end, she heard the unmistakable sound of footsteps to her right and stopped all movement, carefully listening and picturing the path he was following.

She could've headed to the bridge, she repeated herself as she started walking to the source of the noise, but winning a laser game sounded pointless now that she knew how close he was. Following the reflections of his jacket’s lights against the walls, she chose to ignore the knot slowly twisting in her stomach and slowed her pace when she saw the lights slightly moving towards her. Recalling the offensive techniques he'd used last time they’d played together, she cautiously bordered the maze’s fences while firmly holding her weapon in one hand, the other blindly groping around to ensure she was walking in the right direction.

Judging by the almost inaudible chuckles she could hear, he wasn’t far from her. On her tiptoes, she approached the wall she suspected him to be hiding behind and readied her blaster. Two seconds later, she jumped and shot in front of her with a smirk, only to realize no one was there. Distraught, she looked down to discover a jacket deprived of its player lying on the ground. She’d been taken in by a simple lure.

Before she could even turn around and keep searching for her adversary, Rey felt something firmly hitting the back of her jacket followed by a voice that achieved to tighten the knot around her stomach.

“Game over,” Ben announced on an amused tone.

Slowly, she raised her hands in surrender and turned to face him. Still aiming his blaster at her chest, his eyes met hers with hesitancy as if asking for her authorization.

“You win,” she admitted quietly, her arms still up.

Without breaking eye contact, he pulled the trigger and her jacket’s lights turned off in the spat of a second, plunging both of them in an almost total darkness. Oblivious of the small beeps emanating from her equipment as a countdown before the next activation, the two of them kept staring at each other: breathless and wide-eyed as if they'd just met for the first time.

“Can I kiss you?” Ben whispered after a solid minute of silence, his brown eyes still sealed with hers.

A wave of electricity travelled Rey’s body as she incredulously stared at him, wondering if she’d heard him well. After a few seconds that felt like minutes, she opened her mouth to voice her agreement and ended up nodding, not a single sound coming out of her.
Slowly, yet faster than the week before, she watched his face lean down to reach her level and draw closer, and closer. Wondering if he could feel the same magnetic force urging them to close this gap, she stayed still and held her breath as she now noticed his head slightly tilting to the side.

He was close; closer than he'd ever been. Suddenly, her eyes closed and the whole world seemed to disappear around her as she felt him softly brushing her lips with his.

Despite the fair amount of songs inspired by it, no words would have justly described the sensation that invaded her at this exact moment. It was hesitant, frustrating and relieving at once. Her whole body demanded more, but still remained motionless lest the slightest move would make him run away. Despite the countenance he showed, she could hear his unsteady breathing betray his equal desire to extend this moment, making it even harder for her not to move.

Ben had hardly started to pull away when she heard her blaster meet the ground in a muffled sound as her lips called his back to a deeper kiss, preventing the first to break. Showing less self-composure than him, Rey placed a hand on his shoulder as she stepped up on her tiptoes, determined not to let go of him as she drew a definite line on the little voice in her head beckoning her to remain composed and not ask for much.

A heat traveled from her chest to her throat then lips, as if something in her begged to be translated by the gesture. Seconds later, a hand landing on the small of her back drew her closer to him, leading her to smile and break the kiss to fill her lungs with the air they'd been deprived of for the last few seconds.

Not once removing herself from their messy embrace, she bit her lip before looking up. As their gazes met again, her jacket's lights turned back on, pulling an awkward laughter from the two of them before they went back to much more important matters: like making the most of the three remaining minutes of the game.

Chapter End Notes

I'm more than late for this update, I'm so sorry! Hopefully the ending makes up for it? Next one definitely won't take me so much time, I can't wait to write! And once again, thank you so much for all your kind comments, whenever I was having doubts about my writing I went back to read some and it really helped, thank you ♥

Also, if you're curious about the songs on Ben, Lando and Han's mixtapes, I posted a playlist on my Tumblr! You can find it at the beginning of this chapter just under the moodboard, I'll update it regularly so it follows the story ;)

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Contrary to any other morning, a smile grew on the corner of Rey’s lips when she woke up, her skin still full of memories from the night before. Stopping her phone’s alarm with a soft slide of her finger, she turned on her back and faced the ceiling for a solid minute. Pictures flashed behind her eyelids as she closed her eyes, waiting for the sensations to come back.

She’d been kissed before, but no one had ever had the power to make her head spin as it had back in the maze. It was warm and soft, contained but urgent; everything she needed and yet so far from all she was now allowing herself to imagine. Her back slightly arched at the feeling of Ben’s hand on there, pulling her closer with every passing second that drew them closer to the moment she would have to leave the building and go back to the outside world, and an incredulous chuckle escaped her.

It was crazy, crazier than everything she’d ever done; but for the first time in her life, she enjoyed the sensation of uncertainty and surprise that came with the butterflies invading her stomach every time she thought about his lips on hers. Still smiling, she turned her head to glance at the earpiece settled on her nightstand next to the dead daffodil she hadn’t had the heart to throw away despite its now brown pigmentation.

The smile on her face slowly vanished as her eyes lingered on the hours announced by her alarm clock with blue numeric numbers: her round would start in about half an hour, and with it the traditional morning call. Were they supposed to talk about what happened? Confusion creased her brow with a frown as she sat, her covers slipping from her chest to land around her waist, revealing her bare arms to the cold surrounding air. According to the few dating experiences she’d had, a kiss usually declared both parties as partners, but this time was different; this time, she cared enough to wonder and hope.

Urged by the passing minutes, Rey threw her blanket on the side and left her bed, her feet skillfully avoiding the mess scattered on her floor as she walked to the wardrobe to select her usual morning
outfits and grab the uniform that consisted of a blue cap. A moment later, she stepped into the kitchen, fully dressed and so lost in thought that it took her a ridiculous amount of time to notice the voices of her roommates filling the room.

“I’m just saying this one’s not warm enough.” Rose seemed to repeat on a soft voice, a frown betraying her minor irritation.

After a few blinks and seconds, Rey turned to her friend and followed her gaze only to watch Finn frowning as well, a brown leather jacket in hand.

“It is, for me.”

Feeling her eyes adjusting to the light with difficulty, Rey tilted her head as she grabbed a mug and started the kettle, observing the scene from the other side of the room with surprise. Holding the jacket against his chest, Finn stared at his girlfriend as if she’d just insulted him. In the course of the last month, the jacket had become his favorite; to such an extent that neither Rey nor Rose had dared to borrow it as they usually did when taking the trash out. With Poe’s remoteness and obvious sadness, he’d only grown more attached to it, denying the need to use an actual winter coat and persisting to wear the thin jacket every day, freezing but sticking to his guns.

“Morning,” Rose greeted Rey when the sound of pouring water meeting ceramic turned her away from the dangerously approaching argument.

“You’re up early,” Rey remarked with a smile, dropping a tea bag in her mug.

“We’re going for a walk,” Rose explained with undisguised pride as she pointed at the bag on her back. “There’s a hill from which you can see the sun rising from behind the city. Paige used to take me there when we were kids.”

Both admiring and jealous of Rose’s relation with her sister, Rey nonetheless smiled at her friends; despite the awkwardness of the new couple, she couldn’t deny the level of happiness that seemed to fill Rose every time she saw her next to Finn—which had happened a lot, these days.

“The hill with the narrow road?” She asked, her mind drifting to the sunset she’d admired during the early hours of the first day of the year, barefoot and wrapped in her coat while sitting on the hood of her car. Her heart fastened as she recalled her desire to take Ben’s hand as they both silently stared at the sky above them.

“Yes!” Rose exclaimed with surprise, pulling her out of her daydream. “You’ve been there?”

Only now realizing she’d just sold herself, Rey felt her cheeks turn pink and opened her mouth, looking for her words as Finn raised an eyebrow at her unexpected discomfort.

“Yes!” she managed to mumble before she turned back to the kitchen counter, still feeling her friend’s penetrating gaze on her back. “You’re going to love it, the sight is beautiful.”

With a smile to complement her statement, she turned to see Rose’s delighted face at the idea of a romantic getaway and raised her mug to her lips, now looking for a way out of this conversation.

“And when exactly did you go there?” Finn asked, his brows suspiciously furrowed as he was now slipping his arms into Poe’s jacket’s sleeves.

Sensing the dangerous turn this conversation was taking, Rey shrugged and waited for her brain to properly word a lie, her mouth slightly opened as she placed her mug in the sink more abruptly than necessary. Self-conscious about her apparent discomfort, her movements became clumsier and
she bumped her hips on the table as she started walking to the corridor.

“I… Two weeks ago. You were both away.” She mumbled, doing her best to avoid their quizzical gazes.

“I told you, she’s seeing someone,” she heard Rose whisper as she massaged her hip with a wince.

An incredulous chuckle echoed in the room, quickly followed by Finn’s skeptical voice. “We would know,” he assured her before turning to Rey with a confident smile, “Right?”

“Yes,” she replied instantly with a frown. “Of course.”

Lying wasn’t a thing she was used to; but something in her felt the need to keep everything about Ben secret, at least until she could put a name on what was actually happening between them and – even if she wasn’t proud of it- in a selfish attempt to keep him for herself. Even after having grown up with very little belongings, she couldn’t recall ever being possessive –but the few moments she could share with Ben were just so precious she felt the need to protect what was between them at all cost.

With a small smile and a fast beating heart, Rey hurtled down the stairs leading to the entrance and hastily left the house before one of her roommates managed to ask her anything else. Her eyes glued to her phone as she dialed the number she now knew by heart, she didn’t notice Poe waving at her while she headed to her car, nervously gritting her teeth. Both anxious and excited, she sunk into the driver’s seat and bit her lips, letting a last second hesitancy invade her. What if he disappeared once again?

He’d initiated it, she reminded herself as she let her thumb reach the screen with uncertainty. Her heart jumped inside of her chest as she watched in horror an incoming call appear on the screen half a second before she hit the green button.

“Hey,” Ben’s voice blurted out with surprise.

“Hey!” Rey greeted him with the same surprise and a voice slightly higher-pitched than usual. “I was just about to call you!”

“Oh, great.” She could almost hear his embarrassment and picture a twitch sneak under his left eye as she heard him take a deep breath. “About yesterday…”

“It was a good game,” she hastened to assure, maybe too quickly.

A small silence settled between them before Ben spoke again, incontestably disappointed.

“Yes... a good game,” he echoed with a distant voice.

Suddenly realizing what she just said, Rey widely opened her eyes and mouth, tightening her grip on the phone and vainly shaking her head she mentally cursed herself for the poor conversational skills she was showing.

“I’m sorry, that’s not what I meant-”

“You mean it wasn’t good?” Ben mumbled with a voice that only achieved to make her feel like she should never have talked.

An incredulous chuckle escaped her as she realized the ridiculousness of the situation. They were clumsily kissing each other in a dark maze barely ten hours ago. Neither of them were able to pull
away from their tight embrace until the bell announcing the end of the game had rang, urging Ben to run back to whatever place he used to observe her from. Encouraged by the way he’d managed to set her heart on fire by a simple brushing of his lips, she opened her mouth once again and, this time, entrusted her feelings to speak for her.

“It was! It was fun,” she assured with a more composed voice than before. “I… liked the final stroke,” she hesitantly added with a smile.

“You… you did?” Ben asked after a few seconds, the disbelief in his voice drawing a smile on her lips.

“Yes. Very much.”

A new silence followed her words; this time lighter, filled with distant yet harmonious smiles they both guessed and displayed.

“I did too,” he admitted in a whisper after a moment, his voice distinctly more assured than before.

Feeling the tension leave her muscles and make place to a floating sensation, Rey slipped a random tape into the player and started her car with a light heart.

They didn’t see the hours pass by as they enjoyed each other’s company almost silently, listening to what appeared to be ‘Lando’s mixtape’ and asking each other random questions from time to time as they always did during her rounds; starting with meaningless questions such as ‘which season was their favorite’ or ‘what they would ask if they met a genie’. The game had gradually evolved to a point where their questions became fewer, but deeper each day.

“Your greatest fear?” Rey asked after telling him all about how walking outside on a rainy day always managed to clear her head whenever she needed to escape the craziness life could be, especially when approaching periods of exams.

“My greatest fear?” Ben repeated pensively, letting a small silence linger during which she turned on her blinker and engaged into Kamino’s main avenue with caution despite the little cars present this early in the morning. Just as she was starting to consider changing her question for a less personal one, his voice rose again, low but firm. “To disappoint.”

She shouldn’t have been surprised by his answer, she realized while taking a turn and engaging into a small parking lot. Judging by what he’d allowed her to see of him a few days ago after he’d requested her car’s tape player, Ben had a lot on his heart and probably just as much on his shoulders. Still, she hadn’t dared to ask about anything, even less about his father and this despite her growing curiosity: according to the state she’d found him in front of the hospital, their relation was probably not easy to live nor understand.

“What are you doing tonight?” Ben promptly asked, not giving her time to find something comforting enough to say about his answer.

“Nothing,” she replied with a shrug as she parked her car next to the city hall, her favorite spot under an old oak tree that was free as always. “Probably read a book or watch a movie, anything not to-”

“I mean, can I take you somewhere?” He added with the same uncertainty his voice always carried every time he was asking her something, as if ready to be turned down.

“Oh!” Oblivious of her hand missing the handbrake, Rey straightened on her seat and cleared her throat, her open mouth instantly turning into a toothy smile as she cleared her throat. The question
rolled on her lips before she could stop herself from voicing it. “Like a date?”

“Like a date,” Ben confirmed in a whisper that only made her smile grow wider. “Unless it’s too much for y-

“It’s perfect,” she hastened to assure, this time her turn to cut him mid-sentence.

If she needed something to reassure herself about his feelings and their current situation, there it was: an official date, outside of the entertaining yet impersonal maze they’d lately been used to. Finally cutting off contact with a sharp turn of her hand, Rey grabbed her cap on the passenger’s seat and put it on as she grabbed the few letters addressed to the mayor, delaying the moment she would have to hang up as much as she could. Ben probably understood, his voice rising to break the silence left by the car’s sudden standby.

“City hall?” He asked, now as familiar with her ride as she was after three full years spent exploring the city in the early morning.

Confirming his inquiry with a muffled humming, she remained silent for a few seconds, waiting for a comment or declaration to confirm her suppositions regarding his mother’s identity; Leia may have married Mr. Solo, but nothing could state that he hadn’t been married before or - even if she couldn’t believe it - cheated on her. The latter was by far the most absurd theory: she seemed like the kind of woman any man would be grateful to have and never let go of.

“Maybe I can pick you up? I mean- for the dat,” Ben offered, pulling her out from her musings.

A soft sigh escape her at his suggestion; her curiosity was diverting her from the delightful attention he kept giving her while obviously struggling to remain as soft as he could. Whatever it was that hit him back in the few moments she could catch a glimpse of pure sorrow in his dark eyes. He didn’t owe her any information about his life. If he happened to talk about it; it would only be when he wanted to, if he ever did.

“I’ll text you my address,” she finally promised before wishing him a good day and hanging up, now aware of how late she was.

Holding the letters close to her chest, she left the car and walked to the building with great strides, already preparing her apology for her lateness. Her mouth opened as she reached the vast hall. She stopped herself, unable to drop a single word when she caught sight of the secretary’s unusual expression. Without a word, she nodded towards the mayor’s office’s doors as to give her permission to go. Frowning at the evident confusion hanging in the air, Rey nonetheless moved to the wooden doors and hesitantly knocked twice, waiting for the familiar voice to croon a ‘enter’ and pushed the door open.

“Dear, you look radiant!” Leia greeted her with a weak yet honest voice.

Wishing she could’ve returned the compliment, Rey thanked her with a small smile as she took the few steps separating them and sat on her usual chair, not taking her eyes off the woman at the other side of the desk. Her grey hair (normally styled in elaborate braids or buns) was now loosely draped on her shoulders to such an extent that for the first time, Rey realized how long it was. She almost looked like a princess with her light blue shirt tucked out of her formal pencil skirt, except her expression was far from beaming. Between the bags under her eyes and her slightly trembling hands as she handed Rey her cup of tea, her lack of sleep was more than noticeable, just as the sadness shadowing her attempts to smile.
“You’ve got mail,” Rey announced while timidly giving her the envelopes she hadn't let go of since she’d left her car.

A low chuckle very similar to Ben’s escaped the woman as she gazed at the expeditors’ names and tossed the papers on the desk, creating a new pile of things on the already messy surface. Not daring to ask anything, Rey took a long sip of her hot beverage in hopes to hide the embarrassment that was slowly gaining her.

“I’m sorry, I should’ve cleaned a little,” Leia apologized with a small smile while clumsily organizing papers to clear Rey’s side so she could put her cup down.

Trying to ignore the tea burning both her tongue and throat, the young woman gulped and quickly shook her head to reassure the mayor, only easing her drink’s journey to her stomach and burning parts of her digestive system she wasn’t conscious of until now.

“Is everything alright?” She finally managed to ask, eyebrows furrowed in worry at the woman’s obvious exhaustion despite the reassuring smile she insisted on wearing under every circumstance.

“It has been quite a year,” Leia admitted with a sigh.

Her curiosity piqued, Rey nonetheless forced herself not to insist and quietly nodded. Joining her hands and calmly resting them on the cold surface in front of her, she waited for the woman in front of her to continue as a forced smile made its way to her tired lips.

“First Han, now Maz-”

“Maz?” Rey anxiously repeated, unable not to interrupt her as she felt her heart quicken with anticipation. Even without ever engaging in deep conversations with her, the woman had always been a soothing presence every time Rey had sought refuge in the cozy bar she owned. Whether it was with a warm smile or chocolate, Leia always managed to brighten her day and make her studying afternoons more bearable; Her establishment had turned into one of the few places Rey felt at ease in.

“She’s alright,’ Leia hastened to assure before lifting her white cup to her lips. Even fatigue and years couldn’t take her graciousness away. “But I’m afraid we won’t see her behind a counter before a long time.”

As to stress her point, she opened a drawer from which she took a newspaper clipping to hand over to Rey. Curious but also wary of what was waiting for her between the grey lines stretched out along the paper, she cast one last inquiring look at the mayor before finally allowing her eyes to linger on the article- something she instantly regretted as she read the first lines:

“A new bar to open in Kamino

After nearly fifteen years of good and loyal service, the owner of the beloved bar Takodana has found herself forced to close her door after the hygiene services reported disastrous conditions both in her kitchen and revenues, leading to an inevitable bankruptcy and shutdown. According to an anonymous source, the bartender Maz Kanata had turned a blind eye on these obvious facts long ago:

“She was well situated, but the lack of friendly atmosphere and newness was deplorable. She knew about it and never did anything to change; it was only a matter of time.”
It was, actually, only a matter of time before someone seized the opportunity to listen to the people’s demands and acquired the building with a promise to open a new bar that will be better than its predecessor, according to its new owner. “I want this place to feel modern and classy; a place where people can come knowing they won’t be bothered by noisy teenagers and feel welcome.”

The new bar, Einsley’s, should open soon- just in time to book a table for Valentine’s Day.”

An incredulous chuckle escaped Rey as she looked up from the column, meeting Leia’s knowing gaze with disbelief.

“I find it hard to believe…”

“It is,” she agreed with a firm nod while taking the clipping and putting it back into the drawer it was from.

Silent, Rey kept looking at the woman with curiosity: judging by the small crease forming between her brows, she wasn’t done talking but was visibly weighing the pros and cons of going further into this discussion. After a sigh and one last glance at the papers flooding her desk, Leia looked up with a sadden smile, increasing Rey’s curiosity as she started to speak with a lower voice.

“As the mayor, I’m not supposed to speak about it.” She started, her eyes drifting from a paper to another, clearly unsure herself about what her position was about this.

“I understand,” Rey assured with a polite and comprehensive nod.

A new silence settled between the two women, only filled with the steady sound of a clock ticking and tea cups being held and put down again. Despite her growing desire to hear more about this mysterious bar, Rey’s admiration and respect for Leia appeared to be stronger- at least, strong enough to repress her from asking further questions. Just as she was about to get up and wish her host a good day, she cleared her throat and leaned on her desk with a guilty expression, catching her guest’s attention for good.

“You do have suspicions, don’t you?” Rey asked in a whisper. Her question was met with a nod from the mayor.

“I do,” she carefully confirmed on the same low voice, accompanying her words with the umpteenth nod. Regardless of the noticeable hesitancy in her eyes betraying the fact that she was dangerously approaching the blurred line between professional and personal matters as she confided to Rey, Leia let a sigh cross her lips before she let her voice rise again. “I’ve suspected an old acquaintance for a time now.”

“Why don’t you denounce him?” Rey asked, her voice even lower than earlier.

A small, defeated smiled made its way on the mayor’s lips as she sighed heavily, her fingers absent-mindedly brushing the handle of her cup. “I’m afraid some may accuse me of subjectivity.”

Nodding comprehensively, Rey let her eyes wander in the room, scrutinizing every item she’d never really allowed herself to look at. Just as she started trailing on the piles of documents before her, she felt her heart miss a beat at the sight of a framed picture sitting atop one of the binders, threatening to fall at any given moment. Sitting on a wooden bench, a younger Leia was smiling at her from twenty years ago, an arm around her husband’s waist and the other on a small boy’s shoulders. Given his clothes and height, the child couldn’t be more than ten. A white shirt tucked
in grey Bermuda shorts revealed pale legs scattered with bruises and scratches, some covered with Band-aids. His dark hair, highly contrasting with his skin, achieved to confirm her earlier suspicions.

She would’ve recognized those brown eyes out of one in a million.

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_Tonight._ Ben had an official date tonight, for the very first time of his life.

Actually no, he’d been on dates before: once at the age of twenty one after Armitage encouraged him to ask out the other head of class and once at the age of twenty-eight. This time, he was only encouraged only by the intense feeling of loneliness that had filled him more than usual on a random October night.

The first hadn’t exactly been a disaster: he hadn’t moved when she’d taken his hand in the cinema nor had he opposed to the idea of walking her home. But as soon as she’d started to get dangerously close to him when time came to say goodbye, the only thing he'd managed to do was mumble a brief 'goodnight' and quickly leave before never talking to her ever again, both because of shame and lack of desire to go any further.

As for his second date, nothing about it could have actually been considered successful given how it had begun: late at night, struggling to fight the immersive thoughts that had been a bit louder than usual, he’ôd ended up zapping from one channel to another only to find more and more poorly written romantic comedies that only a tired brain would actually enjoy. It wasn’t until the ending credits had started to pass before his teary eyes that he’d acknowledged how empty his apartment felt. Not without a forced laugh at how miserable he must have been looking, his fingers quickly unlocked his phone and downloaded a dating application, knowing well too much this wasn’t a healthy way to cope with loneliness. But he’d let go of healthy behaviors long ago.

This was far from what he was comfortable with. After a solid hour of swiping right to any person who seemed careless enough to answer his desperate call, he’d ended up chatting with three people: 'Ziff', who stopped replying after two messages; 'Wexley', who he quickly identified as one of Poe's colleagues; and Ella, who was quick to reply and interested enough to fill the gap in his chest. One thing leading to another, he'd watched his hands type the message agreeing to meet her the day after knowing it probably was a bad idea.

Less than twenty-four hours later, he was standing in front of her in an apartment that definitely didn't feel familiar enough for him to relax, even less with the sight of her hands sliding from his shoulders to his chest, dangerously heading to the edge of his jeans. Loneliness was a thing- but it was definitely not worth closing his eyes while feeling a stranger's breath against his neck, wishing for it to be over as soon as possible. Following his gut instinct, he hadn't been long to quickly put his clothes back on and head for his car, doing his best to ignore her questions and surprised tone at his sudden change of mind.

Panic started to rush over Ben as he realized: How was he supposed to take Rey on a good date with so little experience? A sigh escaped him as he noticed the acceleration of his heart at the thought of seeing her again, noticing how both terrifying and pleasing the idea appeared. After the few minutes they’d spent together in the maze the night before, spending time with Rey could only be the promise that once again, his whole world would disappear to make place for the sweet taste of her lips against his. Sending him back to the state of pure ecstasy that’d invaded him from the minute he’d touched her to the moment his head had fallen on his pillow, Ben only wished for his
dreams to take him back to the moment he’d just lived. He’d kissed her.

Before he could begin to let his thoughts wander, the sizzling sound of a walkie-talkie being activated pulled him back to the reality of his small office in which was followed by Hux’s impatient voice informing him of five players entering the maze that were waiting for the game to begin.

“Copy,” he replied with the same monotonous tone that came with his voice every time he spent more than twenty minutes in this room.

After a few clicks to start the game, he tossed the device on one of the piles of drawings his desk was flooded by and leaned back in his chair. Slowly but surely, the surrounding silence started to vanish around him, replaced by his previous worries rushing back: he had a date in less than five hours and was now starting to realize how bad this could go.

Contrary to his previous experiences, Ben was ninety percent sure his instinct would never push him to run away from Rey, but with this idea came another one: he’d never learned what to do in a situation where fleeing wasn’t a necessity. Another sigh escaped him as he felt his stomach twist and form into a knot.

What if he disappointed her? She was entitled to expect some confidence and expertise from him, especially given the age gap none of them had bothered to mention so far. Judging by what she’d told him about her studies, Rey was somewhere between twenty-one and twenty-two, far from his thirty-one years of complete inexperience.

If he had had a father that he was close to, this was probably the kind of conversation he would have shared with him, Ben thought as he started to nervously drum his fingers against the wooden surface in front of him. Shifting from one item to another, his eyes finally lingered on the phone he’d grown used to putting next to his keys only to make sure he wouldn’t miss one of Rey’s messages in case she felt like talking to him during the day. Slowly, the solution appeared to him as clearly as the hour displayed by a red clock hung above his computer screen. He knew exactly who to call.

Slightly less reluctant than he would have expected, Ben let his thumb brush past the short contact list and select the name he’d been looking for. Focusing on taking deep breaths, he nervously listened to the acoustic signal beckoning him to patiently wait, his fingers drumming faster than before as he mentally cursed himself for being so helpless.

“This better be important, kid!” Lando’s voice echoed after what felt like an infinity.

“I need your help.” Ben articulated after a gulp, closing his eyes as he readied himself for the inevitable refusal he would probably be met with.

“Well, that’s a first!” The man exclaimed with an audible smirk. “What is it about?”

Both reassured and taken aback by his godfather’s relaxed reaction, Ben let a silence fill the air as he searched for his words, suddenly self-conscious of how ridiculous he was about to sound. Who on earth asked for dating advice at the age of thirty-one? Worse: who asked his godfather for dating advice?

“A girl,” Ben finally mumbled under his breath.

Of course Lando’s response wasn’t long to come, a loud relieved sigh preceding his amused chuckle.
“Thank God, I thought this day would never come!”

Over eight years spent working at Starkiller, and not once had Ben took the liberty to leave early or take a day off. Thanksgiving, New Year, Easter; none of these celebrations had stopped him before as work became way more pleasant to him than spending an entire day locked in his apartment knowing that everyone else but him was attending friends and families houses, gathering around fancy dinners and small talks. Not even his birthday had ever appeared as a good occasion to take a break; and yet, the perspective of spending an evening with Rey ever made him hesitate for a single second.

“Where are you going?”

Slowing down his pace, Ben turned to the bartender with a raised eyebrow. “That’s none of your business.”

“Yes it is,” Armitage retorted, “You still have five hours to-”

“I called Mitaka, he agreed to come tonight.” Ben explained calmly, not the least bit guilty for interrupting his colleague. Remaining polite and composed wasn’t an easy task when it came to communicating with Armitage, but the sight of a vein noticeably swelling on his temple was worth every effort spent.

“You can’t just leave like that,” he mumbled through gritted teeth.

Not even bothering to reply, Ben shrugged and turned away from the bartender, making sure each of his footsteps were calm enough to increase the man’s anger.

“I don’t think the boss would like it.” He added just as Ben had reached the door, his voice now more assured than earlier.

Slowly turning away from the handle he’d just gripped, Ben considered his old friend’s self-satisfied smile for a few seconds before a smirk made its way on his lips as well. “Then guess what he would think about what you did in the stock room on Monday.”

It was a cheap move, but it was enough to remind him of the reality of his position. They may both be under Snoke’s command, but Hux’s dreams of superiority were slowly getting to his head lately. Satisfied by the sight of the man’s silent surrender behind his glare, Ben cast him an insincere smile before disappearing behind the door, greeted by the light of a shy yet warm sun slowly but surely setting down in the horizon.

Less than an hour later, Ben found himself pulling the door of an establishment he hadn’t visited in years, not to say a decade. Both curious and nervous at the same time, he took a hesitant step into the hallway and let his eyes wander around and catch a glimpse of the coffee shop he’d spent some of his afternoon in as a child.

The place looked smaller: the small stage on which he could recall some musicians sometimes accompanying the clients with a soft jazz tune was far from the large scene he remembered. The tables, maybe a bit too close to each other, looked way more modern than the old wooden ones his father and godfather spent entire afternoons, teaching him how to join their card games from time to time when his book wasn’t a good enough distraction anymore. Apart from the configuration of the room and paints hanging on the brown walls, it seemed that the place had undergone a facelift.
“You sly little fox,” Lando snickered as he stepped out of the small door behind the counter leading to the kitchen.

Getting round the large desk, he walked to Ben with a large smile that only increased the young man’s embarrassment. Completely oblivious of the redness invading his godson’s face, the owner cupped his cheeks with both his hands and sighed with satisfaction before turning to the counter with one of his hands proudly planted on his hips while the other patted Ben’s shoulder.

“El, you probably remember Ben?”

A sigh echoed from behind the counter, beckoning Ben to turn his attention to the woman he hadn’t noticed until now.

“Of course,” the bartender answered as she lifted both her eyebrows as if she were analyzing him. “Han’s boy. You broke a lot of glasses.” She added with her eyes now planted on Ben’s.

A gulp almost escaped him as he met the woman’s gaze, slowly remembering what she was referring to: he’d never really enjoyed spending his Sunday afternoons here, even less hearing his father’s numerous promises that they would leave soon before ordering an umpteenth grenadine to help him wait. It had happened once or twice that, out of frustration and anger, he’d thrown full glasses on the floor when begging and crying weren’t enough to get his father’s attention.

“I… don’t do that anymore,” he assured with a voice he would’ve liked to sound less guilty.

“Great,” she commented, more as a warning than an acknowledgment.

Just like the place, the only thing that had changed in her was his perception: still wearing those dark tank tops and high-waisted ripped jeans, only a few wrinkles betrayed the years that had passed on her. Even the glower in her eyes still managed to send shivers down his spine, daring him to even try to break anything.

“You can close when Mrs. Nest is gone,” Lando informed her with one of these soft smiles only he could make in that kind of moment.

“Already?” The woman asked with a frown, her black bangs slightly covering her piercing eyes.

“Yes,” Lando confirmed as he walked back to the kitchen, beckoning Ben to follow him. “We’re closed tonight.”

Relieved to escape the woman’s suspicious gaze on him, Ben followed the man with a hint of curiosity as he realized he was about to discover the only room he’d never been allowed to explore. The bathroom, the storehouse- he’d already seen everything at the age of eight, including the small room Lando used as an office; but the kitchen had always been forbidden territory.

Excited to explore the room Young Ben had thought about so much, he couldn’t help feeling a bit disappointed as the door opened on a small and empty common kitchen deprived of every incredible thing he’d imagined it to be filled with. Instead of the big machines was a large refrigerator next to an extensive countertop that filled half the room, and, shining under the bright lights nearly blinding him.

“So,” Lando started as he leaned an elbow against the plain surface, “you got everything?”

Carefully, Ben plunged his hand into the bag he’d been carrying the whole time and, one by one, took the items out of it to place them on the counter one at a time. “Chicken, pasta, mushrooms, parmesan, garlic…” he enunciated as he emptied the bag under his godfather’s attentive eyes.
“Absolutely not.” Lando interrupted him and, without any warning, grabbed the garlic to throw it in the trash can.

Taken aback by this sudden and exaggerated reaction, Ben opened his mouth to protest but stopped instantly as he saw the man knowingly shaking his head with a small smile. Feeling his face turn red at the silent insinuation, he silently finished emptying his bag before turning back to his godfather who took a few steps closer with a hand on his chin as he considered the aliments before him.

“We only have two hours,” he mumbled under his breath as he started organizing the products with a logic that Ben didn’t understand but didn’t dare to contradict.

Apart from his old baby-sitter, Lando was one of the best cooks he’d ever known; discussing his decisions would be far from smart. Yet, a frown appeared between Ben’s brows as he mimicked the man, crossing his arms against his chest as he looked at the aliments staring back at him.

“Isn’t one hour enough?”

A chuckle escaped Lando and he shook his head once again before busying himself around the kitchen, grabbing knives and pans on his way. “Turn on the hotplates, kid!”

Cooking had never been a passion to Ben. He could easily tell and appreciate the difference between fresh and frozen meals but in the end, the goal was the same; eat, in order to survive. Yet (once again) thinking about spending the evening with Rey only make his motivation increase. More obedient than he’d ever been, he followed Lando’s instructions without battling an eyelid, cautiously cutting mushrooms and chicken in thin pieces before dropping it off into the plate his improvised instructor had previously buttered.

“Tell me about her,” Lando asked after an hour as he lazily stirred a wooden spoon in the sauce he was making.

Pulled away from the internal question that were slowly but surely starting to awake the worries he’d managed to shut down while cooking, Ben looked up from the icing he was carefully spreading on a cake’s surface to meet the eyes of his godfather who was studying him across the counter they shared.

“Her name is Rey,” he mumbled before quickly looking back down to what he was doing.

“Rey,” Lando repeated pensively as if deciding if he liked it or not. “How is she?”

Out of habit, Ben began to open his mouth and let him know this was none of his business when he noticed the warmth wrapping his heart at the realization of where this conversation was going. Lando had never had children; settling with the same person for a whole life wasn’t something that suited him and he never missed an opportunity to remind everyone about how he wasn’t made to have kids. Despite his firmness, Ben knew how great of a father Lando would have been. Maybe that was another trait he shared with his father: both weren’t made to have kids and had ended up taking care of him -although Lando was a little late.

As far as he could remember, he’d never talked about love with his father. He’d never been interested in someone; at least not enough to talk about it. Han probably never would’ve been interested in his son’s love life - not enough to ask. Had she known about it, his mother would have assured him he only hid behind a mask in order to not to let his emotions show, begging him to talk
to his father about this girl that made his heart beat a little too fast every time he saw her smile.

A nostalgic spark made its way to Ben’s eyes. Yes, this was a conversation boys most likely had with their fathers; however, for an unknown reason, something in him was glad that he was having it with Lando.

“She’s amazing,” he murmured as the corners of his lips curled into a small smile.

Forgetting about the boundaries he’d tried to establish for years between his family and him, Ben suddenly felt his heart warm as the urge to tell everything about Rey blossomed inside his chest. Just as he was about to tell him how they’d met, a small vibration echoed from the phone he’d placed on the counter, next to the bowl containing the red raspberry icing. His heart almost missed a beat when he saw the name above the message consisting of an address he’d never heard of.

“It’s her.” Ben announced with a low voice, his mouth suddenly as dry as the towel hanging on his left shoulder.

“Go, I’ll do the rest.” Lando offered with a wink.

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‘I’ll be there in fourteen minutes.’

A light-hearted chuckle escaped Rey as she read the message for the third time, nervously fidgeting and biting her lips as she felt the cold breeze caress her cheeks. He shouldn’t be long now; only one or two minutes left, according to the time he’d sent it. Way too aware of the nervousness growing in her chest, she looked up to the street then back to her phone, smiling again at how accurate and thorough he sounded.

Escaping the attention of her roommates had surprisingly been as simple as child's play. Both exhausted from their early walk, they'd both spent the day on the sofa split between the last essays they had to work on and the video games they hadn't played for weeks. Around eight o'clock, they'd both surrendered and fell into a semi-slumber she'd taken advantage of to sneak out of her room and into the corridor, relieved that no one would notice the slight touch of lipstick she'd dared to color her lips with.

Now that she was thinking about it, wearing lipstick wasn't the best idea she'd had: she'd only put some once or twice, only to discover the color tended to fade at the first words she pronounced. Just as she was considering going back inside to remove it, the sound of a car slowing down reached her ears, pulling her to look up from the device she hadn't stopped staring at. Parked right behind Finn's car, a familiar grey Cadillac flickered, a soft purring emanating from its hood almost calling her with impatience.

“Thirteen minutes,” Rey corrected with a smile when she opened the passenger door.

For her greater satisfaction, the ride had nothing to do with the awkward silent one she’d imagined. Amused by her first remark, Ben lost the nervous smile he’d greeted her with and adopted a softer one as he shook his head, refusing to tell her where they were going. This car was far from the old truck Rey had grown used to: the leather seats were way more comfortable than the one she had to sit on four hours a day, allowing her to fully sink into her seat and rest her head against the backrest without running the risk to sprain her neck.
“Nice lipstick,” Ben suddenly mumbled after a moment of silence during which they’d both stopped talking to listen to a song played on the radio.

Aware of the redness covering her freckled cheeks, Rey straightened in her seat with a coy smile. “Thanks,” she heard herself murmur as she felt her tongue instinctively humidify her lips, now glad that she hadn’t removed it. Looking for a way to hide her growing smile, she turned to the window and raised a surprised eyebrow as they entered a parking lot she recognized. “Cloud Coffee?”

“You know it?” Ben asked, surprised as he cut off contact and took his seat belt off before getting out of the car.

Recalling the Sunday afternoon she’d spent there with Mr. Solo, Rey heaved her shoulder with an elusive nod as she started following Ben; talking about his father could wait. Just as they approached the coffee shop, she felt his hand shyly take hers and looked up, only to see him shrug innocently as he pulled the heavy door with his free hand and invited her to enter first.

Contrary to the first and last time she’d come here, the place was incredibly quiet without a single customer in sight. In fact, all tables had been removed from the main room except for one left in the middle that was covered with a white tablecloth and two empty plates looking ready to be filled. Feeling her eyes opening widely at the view before her, Rey gently brushed Ben’s hand with her thumb and turned to him, an incredulous frown betraying her amazement.

“Did you privatize the whole place?” she asked in a whisper, both embarrassed and impressed.

Before she could even hear his answer, an unfamiliar voice drew her to turn away from him and face the man that had just entered the room, greeting them with a bright smile.

*He was probably the owner,* Rey thought as she scrutinized the bright colors covering him from head to toes to the beaming smile spread on his face. Everything in him automatically inspired her of the same feelings she’d had the first time she’d met Leia: strong yet warm personality with a very welcoming face.

“You must be Rey,” the man speculated as he extended a hand to her. “I’m Ben’s uncle.”

“Godfather,” Ben corrected dryly as the owner kissed the back of the hand she’d given him.

“But you can call me Lando,” he added with a wink.

Oblivious of the panicked look Ben sent him, Rey focused her attention back to the small table standing a few meters away from them as he beckoned them to settle, leading the way to the room that now looked way too big for the two of them.

It didn’t take long for Lando to replace their empty plates with full ones under the eyes of an amazed Rey who, unable to ignore her hunger any longer, didn’t even wait for him to leave the room to sink her fork in what seemed like a crusty piece of chicken surrounded by grilled mushrooms on top of a generous portion of pasta.

“Please, tell me this is better than your frozen dinners,” Ben inquired as he watched her go for a second bite, a small crease between his brows betraying his apprehension.

“It is,” Rey assured with her mouth full, rolling her eyes as to emphasize her statement.

The next hour passed with a surprising speed as they both fell back into the game they’d started that very morning of asking each other random questions, laughing or nodding at the answers.
“Meaning of your nickname?” Rey naively asked as she placed her fork back between her fingers, lifting her eyebrows in a playful way.

A sigh escaped Ben as he opened and closed his mouth, obviously not prepared for that question to come. It had almost become a sub-game: Rey would keep asking about ‘Kylo’, and he would ignore the subject with a smile and change the subject, slowly becoming aware of her curiosity. Only this time, there was no escaping: she’d found the best way to trick him.

“It’s a mix between my father and my grandfather’s last names,” he finally articulated after spending a few seconds silently thinking. “My turn,” he averted with a firmly raised finger to stop her as he saw her mouth open again, ready to ask another question. “Favorite movie?”

The victorious smile that had settled on Rey’s lips slowly turned into a nostalgic one as the answer appeared naturally to her, bringing back a few memories of the past Christmases spent with her friend. For three years now, this had become Poe and hers’ tradition: comfortably wrapped in woolen blankets, they would eat pizza and drink wine while watching the mechanic’s favorite movie that had inspired his dog’s name and, slowly but surely, become Rey’s favorite movie as well.

“Dirty Dancing,” she revealed with an almost imperceptible smile as she raised her fork to her mouth’s level, lusting after the piece of meat approaching her mouth.

“I’ve never seen it,” Ben commented with a shrug as he took another bite of pasta.

The tinkling sound of her own fork meeting the edge of her plate almost made her jump as she stared incredulously at Ben.

“Sorry- you’ve never seen Dirty Dancing?” She incredulously repeated, clumsily grabbing her fork back without taking her eyes off him.

“I know the songs. My brother always watched it,” he hastened to say with a panicked look that made her realize how abrupt she must have sounded. “Does it count?”

“You have a brother?” Rey inquired, now curious about this new revelation concerning his family. Of course, now that she’d just learned about his parents’ identity and met his godfather, a sibling had to appear out of nowhere.

“Half-brother,” he clarified with a wince that only made it seem like once again, family wasn’t a subject he was at ease with.

Not daring to ask anything about this half-brother or even word her wish to have one as she remembered how much she missed Poe, Rey straightened in her seat and allowed herself to better observe him, ignoring how warm her cheeks felt every time their gazes met. She would never get tired of the way his hair always fell in a perfect mess that seemed to be made to entice her into running her fingers through it.

“I never asked you,” he suddenly asked on a curious voice that pulled her away from her daydreams, “how come you have an accent?”

Confused by the question she hadn’t been expecting, she felt her mouth shape into an ‘O’ and her forehead stretch as she swallowed, silently searching for her words.

“I was born in England. Nothing really exciting—”

“No, tell me.” He encouraged her, settling his elbows on the table to lean his chin on his hands.
A small part of Rey warmed at the sight of him carefully listening to what she had to say, while a bigger one couldn't help feeling like the story would only make her look miserable and weak, if not lead him to run away. Nonetheless touched by the attention he was giving her, she let out a sigh and focused on a napkin she started to play with, avoiding his eyes as she started to talk.

“I grew up in an orphanage. I think it was called Jokku, or something like that.”

No- Jakku, she remembered, narrowing her eyes as she recalled the building she’d spent nine years living in. It was nothing like the movies and TV shows liked to depict: no haunted attic or dilapidated dark rooms. In fact, the place was pretty similar to a hospital: big corridors, white impersonal rooms and lots of adults running around, too busy to answer any questions the children tried to ask. A place that felt out of time and space with its own rules and logic shadowed by rumors and a sense of responsibility they all had to learn way too young.

“I had two foster families before a right-thinking one adopted me when I was twelve.” She continued, now twisting the napkin between her fingers. She could almost smell the sanitized scent of the car she’d traveled in way too much, listening to the promises and recommendations before meeting her ‘new family’. “They were nice, but I wasn’t exactly attached to them. I needed a new start, so I applied to a few universities and… here I am.”

Looking up from her nonsensical fight against the small piece of white fabric, she suddenly realized she’d talked more than she usually did about her previous life and shrugged nervously as she concluded, embarrassed. “See? Nothing interesting.”

“It is, to me.” Ben whispered in one of the low tones that always achieved to make her feel like he couldn’t be saying nothing but the truth.

Unable to repress herself, Rey allowed her eyes to meet his and felt her lips instantly curl into a thankful smile. His gaze always managed to make her head spin, but the look he was now giving her was more than that. Deep, intense; just as if all she needed to hear could be conveyed in a simple look.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she noticed his right hand slowly leaving his side of the table and crawl to hers, tenderly capturing her fingers between his in the most reassuring grasp a few seconds later. A spark seemed to light his eyes as he slightly squeezed her hand before letting go of it to change the subject. Thankful for how easily he understood the silence between her words, Rey couldn’t help but smile as she listened to him complain about the last Christmas movie he’d seen.

“I’m glad you didn’t hit my car!” Rey snickered as they walked pass the Falcon, careful as to not step on the neighbor’s lawn.

An amused sigh escaped Ben at the insinuation, yet she could still see him smile under the street lights. Hands firmly plunged into his pockets, his stooped figure made her feel incredibly tiny as he walked next to her on the small path leading to her house. She didn’t really need him to walk her to her door: it was only a thirty seconds walk from the spot he’d parked his car on, but she hadn’t been able to turn his offer down as she was more than happy to spend even one extra minute in his company.

“Well,” he started as they both stopped in front of the entrance, instinctively turning to each other, “I guess that's where I leave you.”
Suddenly, her heart forgot how it had managed to adjust to his proximity and missed a beat before it started drumming against her ribcage as she watched Ben lean down to reach her level. Her eyes naturally closed half a second before she felt his lips meet hers, slightly more assured than the day before. Craning her neck as she felt his body straighten up, Rey stood on her tiptoes and followed his move, drawing her body closer to his and momentarily breaking the kiss with a grin to fill her lungs with fresh air.

What was she supposed to do with her hands? As if he'd heard her thoughts, Ben placed a palm on her waist, noticeably careful not to seize her too abruptly. Listening to the urge to taste his lips she'd felt all evening long, Rey let her fingers grasp the front of his jacket and draw him back to her, calling him for another kiss - this time longer.

“Want to watch Dirty Dancing?” She heard herself blurt out as they slowly parted with his hand still on her waist.

Apprehensively, she watched him agree with a firm nod before rummaging into the depths of her bag, searching for the keys she victoriously brandished a few seconds later. With shaking hands, she opened the heavy door to a dark and silent house and took a step inside, beckoning him to follow her.

“It’s an old staircase,” she warned in a whisper. “Don’t step on the third and eleventh, and try to stay in the middle.”

Not without a creaking echoing around the house from time to time, they cautiously climbed the stairs and crossed the corridor leading to her room, rhythmic to the snoring of Finn and Rose who had apparently gone back to sleeping in their respective bedrooms. A sigh almost escaped Rey as she closed the door behind her, cutting them from the incessant ticking of the clock resonating from the kitchen.

“It’s nice,” Ben whispered as he looked around him, his imposing stature only making the room look smaller than it already was.

With a soft chuckle, Rey walked to her nightstand and switched on the bedside lamp as she grabbed her computer standing next to it, trying to ignore how seeing him in her bedroom made her feel.

“My roommates think it’s overloaded,” she said as she sat on the edge of her bed, unlocking her laptop as she watched him observe her decorations out of the corner of her eyes.

“I like it that way.” Ben shrugged as he kept scrutinizing the pictures and drawings hanging on the walls, a smile slowly blossoming on his face when he noticed the earpiece and dead daffodil next to the bed.

“Ready?” She murmured after opening the file she’d been looking for, casting an inquiring look at Ben who turned away from his contemplation of her desk.

A few hesitant steps and a nod later, he sat next to her and followed suit as she leaned her back against the wall, offering him one of the earphones from which the voice of the main character was starting to tell the story of the summer that had changed her life.

It was almost impossible for Rey to figure out whether Ben liked the movie or not. Every time she risked a glance, all she saw was how his brows creased every time he felt her eyes on him, as if
frowning helped him to stay focus on the screen placed between them. Knowing the movie like the back of her hand was definitely not helping her; far from his level of concentration, she couldn’t help let her eyes trail from his eyes to his parted lips, fighting the impulse to stop the movie and surrender to her growing desire to kiss him again.

“How old is he?” Ben suddenly asked as they watched the main characters train in the woods, dancing on a fallen tree threatening to fall at any given moment.

“I don’t know,” Rey admitted with a shrug. “Twenty-five, thirty maybe,” she added with narrowed eyes as she took a closer look at the protagonist now lifting the young woman above his head in the middle of a lake that looked particularly cold.

“He’s obviously older than her;” he agreed, the crease on his forehead intensifying as the dancers fell into the water once again. “I can’t really believe she loves him.”

“I do,” Rey murmured.

To say who had been the most surprised by the turn this conversation was taking would have been hard; but Ben was the first to turn his head away from the screen, staring at Rey with shiny eyes that made her realize what she'd just insinuated. To her own surprise, she wasn’t reluctant to the idea; it even stole a smile out of her as she drew closer to him. Satisfied, she let a sigh leave her as she laid her head on his shoulder; maybe love was the name of the feeling that was currently ordering her heart to let him in where no one had been allowed before.

It wasn’t until they reached the middle of the movie that Rey felt Ben’s hand fumbling its way to hers, his breathing louder than before as his fingers hesitantly intertwined with hers. As the minutes passed, his movements became more confident; in less than a quarter, his fingers had started trailing from the back of her hand to the middle of her arm, rhythmed by the music of the movie they both tried their best to keep their attention on shyly, ignoring the way their chests heaved in unison.

Rey managed to regain control of her breathing and steady her heartbeats after a moment, making a point of honor not to look away from the screen; she’d almost acclimatized to the feeling when she felt goosebumps blossoming along her bare skin. Only now noticing the absence of Ben’s hand on her arm, she broke her silent promise and instinctively looked down.

Her heart almost missed a beat as she saw the back of his fingers gently graze along the side of her thigh, and a new wave of shivers ran down her spine as she watched him move away from her lower thigh and dangerously draw closer to her hips. After a moment that seemed to last an eternity, she finally found the courage to look up and search for his eyes that she immediately found despite the darkness surrounding them. Just as it had the day before, what felt like a magnetic force made its way to her stomach, urged her to get closer to him. *The closest she could*, she realized as she closed the distance between them. In the blink of an eye, her lips captured his in a kiss that had nothing to do with the chaste ones they’d exchanged so far; it was urgent, demanding. After a few seconds of immobility, Ben seemed to wake up from a short blank and straightened up, not once breaking the kiss. Ignoring their need for air, they both deepened their embrace until Rey pulled away, filling her lungs as she kept staring at her guest with a dumbfounded expression, wondering how far she could go -or more accurately, how far she wanted to.

His response wasn’t long to come- and before she could wonder if she’d gone too far, Ben’s hand trailed from her hips to her waist, pulling her closer than before. Oblivious of their earphones falling on the floor, they both crushed their lips against the other in a messy embrace neither of
them had the courage to suspend and, instead, chose to intensify.

*They’d never been so close,* Rey thought as she let her hand grab the front of his shirt. In fact, she’d never been that close to anyone without a feeling of mistake or shame blurring her mind and pushing her to stop everything. Gently dragging him closer to her, she pulled away just enough to part her lips, allowing her eyes to open just enough to catch a glimpse of his trembling eyelids; he seemed just as shook as she was.

Barely giving him a chance to speak, she found herself gliding her tongue between his lips, opening a dance that suddenly let her acknowledge the soft pain blooming in her lower abdomen. She needed proximity—more than ever. Encouraged by her fast-beating heart and his hand now moving to her back, she tightened her grip on his shirt while moving away from her spot and, leaning on her knees, let her legs slide on either side of him.

A nervous chuckle escaped her as she straddled his lap, shortly cut as she felt a pressure she hadn’t been expecting against her thigh. Holding her breath, she looked up for Ben’s eyes, in which she only found a confirmation of what she suspected. She wasn’t the only one feeling the irrepressible need to press her body against his.

“Sorry,” he shyly whispered, immediately moving his hands away.

“Don’t—” she breathed out, her voice deeper than she’d ever heard.

His eyes met hers again, and, encouraged by the hand she felt back on her hips, Rey slowly adjusted her position. A gasp almost escaped her as she felt warmth awaken between her thighs just as she voluntarily placed herself against the emerging bulge taking shape under Ben’s jeans. And suddenly, it was as if a wave of electricity had passed between them.

Not once taking her eyes off him, she took a deep breath and, unsure of what she was doing, started rolling her hips against his at a contained pace. Her heaving chest screamed to go faster in desire while part of her tried to remain careful, looking for any evidence of discomfort on Ben’s face while also wishing she wouldn’t find any.

As she began to close her eyes, a deep breath incited her to check on Ben. Apprehensive, she opened her eyes to see his eyebrows furrowed just the way he did every time she caught him paying a close attention to something; a conversation, a movie— and now, her. *He almost looked in pain,* Rey thought as she slowed down her movements and placed a hand on the back of his neck.

Waiting for his shoulders and jaw to relax, she leaned down and gently kissed his lips, this time light and soft as she made sure not to press against his now evident erection. Carefully, she began to pull away when she realized her gesture hadn’t had the soothing effect she’d been expecting: instead of relaxing, Ben tightened his grip on her and dragged her even closer than before, so close than she could now feel her underwear turn wet against him.

It was hot, way too hot. Without second-guessing, Rey gripped the bottom of her jumper and passed it over her head before tossing it on the computer neither of them was looking at anymore. A small smile made its way to her lips as she realized Ben had grabbed the edge of her t-shirt to keep it in place; even now, he remained careful not to overstep her limits.

Thanking the darkness for hiding the blush she could feel invading her cheeks, she took a deep breath as his hands slowly curled the edge of the fabric they’d secured until now to reveal the bare, warm skin of her stomach. He paused for a moment, plunging his eyes into hers as if waiting for an approval that she silently gave with a nod, holding her breath with apprehension. A new wave of shivers caressed her skin as she felt the feather texture of her top glide along her breast, tickling her
back before passing over her head and being tossed away to join the earphones at the foot of her bed with a muffled noise.

Now half-naked before him, Rey felt more vulnerable than ever. Suddenly self-conscious of her ridiculously small breasts concealed behind a plain white bra, she opened her mouth to apologize and stopped herself when she felt Ben’s hand trailing up from her navel to her stomach, tracing large circles on her bare skin with the tip of his fingers. Bending her neck to watch his movements, she found herself wishing he would stop and touch the fabric he’d been purposefully avoiding so far and bit her lower lip.

As if he’d read her mind, Ben slowly moved his hand to the edge of her bra and, hesitantly, started to follow its outline with his thumb. A shiver traveled down her body when he reached the sensitive skin just above her ribcage. Rey took a deep breath and arched her back as she felt goosebumps emerging under his touch and ended their race at her nipples that she could feel hardening against the fabric of her underwear.

No one had ever looked at her that way, she realized as she caught him staring at her: there was adoration, longing, and also—which made her heart loop inside her chest—craving. Surprisingly, feeling more assured than a few seconds ago now that she’d lost a few layers, she straightened up on his lap and started moving her hips again. Almost immediately, his hands found their way to her back and in the blink of an eye, his arms wrapped around her waist. Quickly, he pulled her against him into a narrow embrace that definitively closed the small gap between them. A gasp drew from her parted lips when she felt the lump pressing behind his jeans hit her crotch.

Clumsily, their lips met again and Rey felt his back leave the wall, his whole body moving inches forward as if his goal was now for their bodies to melt into the other. Craning her neck to deepen the kiss, she placed a hand on his chest for support as she realized he was now straightening up and, while she let her tongue graze along his lips, tightened her thighs around his hips.

A chuckle escaped her when she felt his hands tremble against her and she found herself suddenly eager to touch his skin as well. Silently, she twisted the fabric of his shirt between her fingers and pulled away with a small smile, giving him enough space and time to realize what she was asking for. After a few seconds of silent inquiry, he took a deep breath and, under her curious eyes, unbuttoned his shirt and threw it across the room with an apprehensive look.

How could he look like this when, according to what he’d told her, the majority of his time was spent behind a desk? Amazed by what was now before her eyes, Rey took a moment to memorize every detail of his body lest sleep would take the memory away from her. Oblivious of the song distantly playing in the long forgotten earphones, she let her hands touch his bare skin and glide over his abdomen, her eyes following her movements with astonishment. Just as she landed her hands on his shoulders, Ben leaned down for a kiss she warmly greeted, a crease emerging between her brows as she felt her thighs squeezing around him again. Before she got a chance to pull away and catch her breath, the hand Ben had firmly kept on her suddenly trailed down from her waist to the inside of her thighs. She felt herself gasp through the kiss just as Ben's lips curled into a smile, as he slowly skimmed the surface of her jeans covering her groin, prodding her to arch her back once again.

Everything became a sudden blur. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she transferred her weight on her legs and, not once letting go of him, silently incited him to follow her as she let herself fall on her bed. A squeaking sound accompanying her move as her back met the mattress. Landing his hands on both sides of her head as not to crush her in his fall, Ben looked at her as if she’d just talked nonsense and he took a deep breath.
“I’ve never done this,” he confessed in a faltering voice.

“Me neither,” Rey murmured.

Letting her eyes linger on his now messy hair, she gave him a reassuring smile and craned her neck to capture his lips once more; trying to convey everything she wished she had words for. It’s ok. It’s just me. Almost immediately, their breathings fastened and she could feel his hand back on her, following an imaginary line from her knee to her thigh. Bolder than earlier, Ben let his fingers wander around her abdomen before grazing the insides of her thighs and, both suddenly and softly, reached between her thighs.

Surprised both by his move and the burning sensation his hand left on her core, Rey opened her eyes with a start and stared at him with perplexity. Judging by his wide open eyes, he was just as surprised as she was. After what felt like a whole minute of loud breathing, he started rubbing his hand against her, not once diverting his eyes from her as he adjusted to a gentle pace.

Of course, Rey had noticed how tall he was; but never had she dared to imagine his whole hand could wrap around her like that. Repressing the urge to twist under his grip, she gulped as she parted her legs on both sides of his waist, making room for him to settle correctly on the small bed that was definitely not made for two.

There were still too many layers between them, she thought as she felt his fingers press against her entrance through the heavy material of her jeans. Now only responding to her instincts and growing arousal, she found herself clumsily reaching for the edge of her jeans and undoing it with such haste that she could’ve sworn she heard the fabric crack under her fingers.

“Closer,” she whispered against his lips.

Dying to feel him touch her without any more barriers, she took his hand and guided it to the edge of her jeans as she slipped her way out of them, mentally cursing whoever had designed clothes so hard to take off without hands.

She couldn’t even remember which pants she’d picked the very morning; but contrary to her earlier worries about her bra, this time she didn’t mind. A shiver ran down her spine as she felt Ben’s fingers fumble along the thin fabric. His movements betrayed a curiosity that only widened the smile on Rey’s face as she held her breath, attentive to each and every one of his hesitant tries. After a few hesitant moves, his index brushed a spot that drew a gasp out of her lips. She felt her legs instinctively tense and before he had a chance to worry about her reaction, she tilted her head to place a kiss in the crook of his neck, assuring him that his hand was exactly where it needed to be.

Easing his posture above her, Ben seemed to get the message and closed the gap between them as he dug his elbow into the mattress for support. His fingers started rubbing small circles over her clit, his chest heaving against hers with more and more intensity. Unprepared for such a vivid sensation to hit her, Rey arched her back and neck and let her hands travel up from his shoulders to his back, tracing lines against his bare skin with the tip of her nails. If he really hadn't done anything like this before, then he sure was a fast learner. Feeling the urgent need to kiss him as his hand now came and went from her clit to her entrance with a delightful pressure, she crushed her mouth against his neck again, drawing kisses along his skin.

She wasn't sure which of her kisses or his pace had accelerated first; but in the space of a second, Rey found herself lifting her hips a few inches as his hand sneaked under the last layer separating them, aiming for the part of her that was already eager to collapse under his touch. A trail of chills rolled through her body as his fingers shyly started exploring her, and she felt her cheeks redden
when he discovered how wet she was for him. After a few seconds of immobility, he went back to
the movements they’d both grown accustomed to, only this time faster.

Feeling a moan threatening to leave her throat and pass her lips, Rey quickly smashed her lips back
on his neck, just in time to muffle the noise against his skin. Finn and Rose may have been asleep,
but she knew how thin these walls were. Taking a few seconds to regain her composure, she took a
deep breath that was shortly cut by a silent gasp when Ben's fingers brushed past a spot
dangerously close to her slit. Maybe he’d done it on purpose, maybe not; still, Ben stopped all
movement before slowly starting again, this time with more precision.

The kisses Rey left became more and more impatient, mirroring the dizziness she was
progressively succumbing to. Against all laws of physics, she felt her stomach both twist and drop
to her feet while her formerly steadied heartbeats accelerated with such speed that she started to
wonder if her whole body would ever manage to endure the game. She needed him; closer. As if
he’d heard her thoughts, Ben momentarily paused and looked down on her with an inquiring look,
as if silently asking for her permission. Not even thinking twice, she frantically nodded her
agreement, only now noticing how her legs struggled to remain stable while running a hand
through his dark hair she’d been itching to touch.

A moment later, her hand closed in a fist around a few strands of hair as she felt Ben shyly insert a
finger inside her. Feeling her throat threatening to release another sound, she gritted her teeth and
buried her face back in his neck, firmly closing her eyes as she felt her entire body shake under the
wave of pleasure that traveled her. Once again as a silent sign of approval, she dropped a kiss on
his skin and before she could even think about untangling her fingers from his hair, he pulled out
only to repeat the gesture a few times, hastening his pace just enough to make Rey wonder if she
would last any longer.

Unable to control her movements, she felt her hips twist against the mattress as her lips captured his
neck with more and more hunger, encouraging him to continue. One more time, and she would
collapse for good.

“I-”

The word died on her lips. Suddenly squeezing her legs together, she let her head fall back as a
groan escaped her throat, quickly muted by Ben's lips silencing her with a kiss.

After seconds of palpitations, she finally let out a sigh, her body slowly returning from wherever
it'd been to.

“You ok?” Ben asked in a whisper when she opened her eyes, the smile on his lips contrasting with
the anxious frown distorting his brow.

“Yeah,” she breathed under her panting chest.

As to emphasize her affirmation, she trailed the fingers she’d kept in his hair down to his chin, not
once allowing her eyes to part from his.

"Can you stay?” she asked as she cupped his cheek, her breathing slowly returning to a normal
rhythm.

Her lips curled into a smile as she watched him nod and, careful not to move too abruptly and wake
the whole house, they quietly tossed and turned in search for a position in which none of them
would be crushed by the other, nor in danger of falling on the ground at the first impromptus
move. After minutes of clumsy attempts, Rey finally landed her head against his chest while he
wrapped an arm around her, their legs timidly tangling. Slowly, their bodies adjusted to the other and they both relaxed, their hands quick to find the other and intertwine.

"Good night," Ben whispered against her hair.

She didn't reply, her mind already wandering to the place between sleep and awake; but the smile on her lips didn't die as the sound of his beating heart lulled her to sleep, assuring her that for once in her life, she was exactly where she needed to be.

Chapter End Notes

I was so happy and relieved to see your feedback on chapter 10 and the kiss that FINALLY happened, I hope you liked this one too!
I am so, SO sorry it took me so long to write this chapter, I tried to do it as quickly as I could but I didn't want to botch it. July has been quite a hectic month for me, but reading your comments really helped me get back to this story so once again, thank you so, so much for your kind words ♥
Also, a HUGE thank you to nite0wl29 who, in addition to being an amazing friend and beta-reader, has helped me a lot when it came to writing the last scene!
Chapter 12

The next morning, Rey woke up to a sensation that was far from the familiar sunlight piercing through her curtain to caress her face. Fighting her eyes’ plea to close again and go back to sleep, she winced before allowing her pupils to meet the day light. After what felt like an eternity, her brain seemed to follow suit and woke up just enough to realize what had dragged her away from the deep sleep she’d fallen into.

First, she wasn’t laying on her floppy mattress but on a rather hard surface that appeared to be none other than Ben’s chest –which drew a smile out of her as she remembered their evening together. Second, something was vibrating against the thigh she’d apparently wrapped around his waist during the night and didn’t seem to stop.

Allowing a few more seconds for her ears to adjust to the noise echoing under her, Rey glanced to the source of the vibration, realizing she was placed just above Ben’s pockets- probably on his phone. Frowning at the invisible device that had shortened her night, she let out a sigh, wondering what she should do. Sneaking her hand into his pocket would probably wake him with the most awkward sensation: regarding their current situation, gentleness was more than required.

Looking up, she felt her heart skip a beat as her eyes fell on a rather dark stain in the crook of his neck. It almost looked like a bruise she could’ve given him with an abrupt move in her sleep, but she had almost not moved since they’d fallen asleep. Feeling both guilty and weirdly amused at the sight of what she’d done to him in her dizzy state, Rey bit her lips and kept staring at the mark her mouth had left on his skin. The insane yet satisfying thought that she’d primarily claimed him as hers settled on her mind.

As if warned by her change of position, Ben frowned and took a deep breath that heaved his body, lifting her off a few inches before going back to normal. Distracted, Rey shifted her eyes to his bare chest and her lips curled into a smile as she now saw what the darkness from the night before hadn’t allowed her to see perfectly. In their haste and fatigue, they hadn’t bothered to sneak under the blanket; their bodies both warm enough to endure the night. Only partially covered by her, Ben’s body looked incredibly massive now that It wasn’t concealed under his usual dark jumpers and shirts. Repressing herself from letting her eyes wander along the muscles she was staring at, Rey glanced once again at the pocket that was still vibrating against her and hauled herself up a
few inches so she almost reached Ben’s level.

Of course, everyone looked younger and innocent while sleeping- but as far as she knew, never had someone looked half as fragile as he did now. Careful not to lean too much on him, she tilted her head and stretched out as much as she could. Still too far from his cheek, she crooked her neck and dropped a kiss between his jaw and ear, hoping the gesture would be enough to wake him. Only a few seconds later, a heavy sigh was followed by a pair of brown eyes meeting hers through fluttering eyelashes, an inquiring look highly contrasting with the beaming smile growing just a few inches away.

“I think you’ve got a call,” Rey whispered as she settled her head back down on his chest, not once daring to break eye contact.

Only now reacting to the vibration he apparently hadn’t noticed until now, Ben looked down at his jeans with a frown. Slightly rolling on her side to give him better access to the pocket, Rey noticed a hint of apprehension quickly shadowing his gaze as she felt his hand rummaging in search for the device. Finally lifting the phone to his eye level, he let out a soft chuckle before turning the screen to her direction.

“Just my alarm,” he explained in an apologetic tone.

Narrowing her eyes to get a better glimpse of what he was showing, Rey felt her heart fall to her stomach as she saw her name written under the time the alarm was settled on -6:50am. It took her a few more seconds to recognize the song associated with her: a certain Blondie hit beckoning him to call her. Unable not to smile at the small yet significant detail, she let a soft chuckle escape her as she felt her cheeks reddening at the realization that her name was the first thing he laid his eyes on every morning.

Suddenly pulling her out of her daydream with a firm push on the central button, Ben allowed silence to fall back on the room and stretched out slightly. After what felt like a long minute, Rey felt his chest heave again under her head, this time deeper than before. Instinctively, her eyes fell back on his bare skin, sending back memories from the night before that she wasn’t ready to forget.

“What are you thinking?” Ben mumbled in a half-sleepy half-apprehensive voice.

The small smile that had settled on the corners of her lips only grew wider as she searched for the words to properly express what her mind had drifted to. Two days ago, she wouldn’t have dared to approach him closer than what they’d both grown used to lest he would run away. There was something in his eyes similar to that glimmer in a wild animals’, something that always made her feel like she was facing an untamable spirit.

And now -now, she was thoroughly lying on him, not the least afraid of the state of vulnerability she’d allowed him to see of her. Allowing herself to place a hand back on his chest, Rey gulped as she stared at her fingers now hesitantly tracing invisible lines on his bare skin.

“There’s no way you’d never done that,” she whispered with disbelief.

A silent chuckle slightly shook his body, beckoning her to look up just in time to meet his look of embarrassment fixed on her.

“I swear, you’re the first,” Ben mumbled with a voice that sounded halfway between shame and satisfaction.
A short moment later, his hand landed hesitantly on Rey’s back and in the spat of a second, her whole body was covered with goosebumps. Unable to ignore her heartbeats fastening under his touch, she eased her position on him, another wave of shivers running down her spine as she remembered how lightly clothed she was.

Doing her best to ignore the nervousness growing in her stomach at the idea of the night’s darkness not concealing her half-naked body anymore, she took a deep breath and focused on her hand now trailing from Ben’s chest to his face. She took a moment to lightly brush the love bite she’d noticed earlier, a satisfied smile growing on her mouth as she felt Ben holding his breath.

“I should shave it,” he conceded almost as an excuse as she now ran her fingers to the edge of the scattered beard that had barely grown in two weeks.

Still smiling, Rey shook her head as she kept caressing his chin with the back of her fingers. “I like it.”

A new silence lingered between them, only interrupted by a deep breath from time to time. Not taking their eyes off each other, they slowly began to fall back into the ease from the night before and allowed their legs to intertwine as well as their fingers, a nervous chuckle escaping now and then.

“You could’ve taken these off,” Rey pointed out when she felt the coarse fabric of his jeans rub her bare skin.

Unconscious of the double meaning of her statement, she first didn’t understand Ben’s flushing as he stared at her with wide eyes and blinked before casting a dumbfounded glance at his apparel.

“I didn’t want to wake you up.” He babbled; his eyes now looking for a place to linger that wasn’t her.

It was soon Rey’s turn to feel her cheeks redden as she noticed his eyes drifting to their tangled legs. Not even a second later, she felt a noticeable bulge grow against her thigh and widened her eyes, memories from their abbreviated movie night rushing back once again, this time more intensely.

“I’m awake, now.” She murmured, another shiver traveling her body.

Slightly more assured than the day before, she bit her lips and gripped his shoulder as she rolled on her stomach. Now fully laying on him, she let her legs glide around his waist before casting him a shy smile. His reaction wasn’t long to follow: first staring at her with a dumbfounded look, Ben almost instantly returned her smile as his hands found their way back on her skin, holding her with the most contained grip while everything in his body and eyes betrayed his desire to pull her closer.

Oblivious of her morning breath, Rey crooked her neck of the last remaining inches separating them and crushed her lips against his. Finally, she felt his palms fully covering her skin as hers remained cemented on him, determined not to fall from the small bed. Just as she pulled away from him, Ben lifted his head from the pillow to claim her lips back, drawing a soft chuckle out of her.

She could hear the springs squeaking under their combined weights, but she couldn’t care less. Only listening to her ascending arousal, Rey leaned on her knees as to not lose her balance and let her hands leave Ben’s shoulders to trail back down his chest to the edge of his jeans where she grabbed the metallic button with haste.
Never before had she thought about doing what she now had in mind, but after what Ben had done to her, all she wanted was for him to see as many stars as she’d caught a glimpse of under his touch—to let him feel how much she wanted him.

“What are you—”

Before he could even finish his sentence, she lively removed her hand from his zipper and pressed it against his mouth. Alert, she froze all movements as her eyes slowly turned to the wall common to the kitchen from which she could hear the unmistakable noise of someone running the coffee machine. Lucky for her, Ben seemed to understand and held his breath as long as she remained silent, her ears pricked up; scrutinizing Finn’s routine she’d heard numerous times.

Once she heard the main door close, Rey emptied her lungs of the air she’d been holding all along and freed Ben’s mouth of her hand, relaxing the muscles she’d inadvertently tensed up.

“Roommate number one, I presumed?” Ben asked under his breath with an amused smile.

“Finn,” she confirmed with a brief nod while keeping her ears open, waiting for her friend’s car to let out its usual roar indicating he’d left for good.

Slowly, both by reluctance and desire to stay silent, she straightened up just enough to feel her back crack at the newfound vertical position it’d been deprived for the last few hours. A shy smile made its way to her lips as she realized she was now sitting on Ben, her legs still on either sides of his waist.

“Number two won’t be long to follow.” She added with a noticeable hint of disappointment in her voice as they both kept staring at each other.

“Rose?”

Surprised by his good memory of her friends’ names, Rey silently confirmed his assumption and took another handful of seconds to memorize the view before her. Ben—the mysterious voice from the maze who had drove her crazy for weeks, not to say months—had gone from ‘stranger’ to something else in so little time she hadn’t even bothered to label what was between them. It seemed that in their haste, they’d skipped the “friends” stage— but truth be told, she’d never considered him as a friend; no words were strong enough to do justice to the atypical relation they’d built far from prying eyes.

Prying eyes.

“Shit, she can’t see you here!”

Unconscious of the puzzled expression falling on Ben’s face at her words, Rey quickly climbed over him to leave the bed. Unaware of his gaze on her as she picked up her clothes from the floor, she let out an embarrassed chuckle at the sight of the laptop they’d completely forgotten about and put it back on her desk before turning to Ben, a frown creasing her brows.

“You didn’t even see the end of the movie.”

“I’ll watch it at home,” he shrugged from the other side of the room.

Now sitting at the edge of her bed, he leaned down to pick up his black shirt and proceeded to turn the sleeves upside down before slipping his arms into it. A blush soon colored his cheeks when his eyes met Rey’s, who silently observed him while putting her clothes from the night before as well. After a few seconds of intense struggling with her tight jeans, she looked up to see a fully clothed
Ben walking to her, a ball of grey wool in hand.

“Thanks,” she whispered with a coy smile as she accepted the jumper he handed her.

Seconds later, her head popped out of the cold rough fabric, a little more disheveled than she already was. The smile on her lips only grew wider as she realized Ben had taken the last step separating them, his eyes lingered on her lips. Letting go of her worries for a moment, Rey stood on her tiptoes to catch his lips with hers. Faster than usual, she felt two hands pulling her closer until their chests met, the kiss deepening with every passing second.

“I’ll walk you to the door,” she whispered, begrudgingly breaking their embrace sooner than she’d hoped.

Not giving Ben time to watch her with one of these looks that would’ve changed her mind, she unraveled from his grip and walked to the door, determined not to look behind her as she heard him follow suit in the same discreet pace she’d adopted.

*Never had the corridor seemed so long to cross,* Rey thought as she passed Rose’s door on her tiptoes.

Not hearing the usual snores of her roommate, she quickened her pace lest the worse would happen, watching Ben out of the corner of her eye the entire time. Deciphering what was on his mind was almost impossible; even through the darkness of the house, she could see his face had gone back to this impenetrable expression she’d seen him wear numerous times, his gaze too neutral not to betray his preoccupied mind.

“Third and eleventh,” he recited with a knowing look before climbing down the stairs, Rey needlessly nodding as she avoided the ones he’d just mentioned.

“Tell me what you think about the ending,” Rey babbled when they reached the door.

Taking his hand away from the doorknob he’d just grabbed, Ben gave her a crooked grin over his shoulder.

“I will.”

Turning on his heels, he leaned down to drop a peck on her forehead. Mirroring his smile she could feel against her skin, Rey was almost startled when she heard the sound of a door opening at the superior floor, immediately followed by footsteps coming into their direction.

“Call me tomorrow,” she whispered with haste as he hurried outside the house.

Just as she saw the door close on him, Rose's sleepy voice echoed behind her, making her heartbeats fasten with anticipation. “Rey?”

“Sorry, I thought I heard someone knocking!” She explained while quickly joining her friend up the stairs, making a point of avoiding her eyes while displaying a false assured smile. “You’re up early for a Sunday.”

“I wanted to see Finn before he leaves.”

Noticing the melancholy in Rose’s voice, Rey looked up from the floor she’d tried staring at and examined her face, one eyebrow suspiciously arched up.

“He already did,” she pointed out futilely. An awkward silence followed, during which she swore
she’d heard the young woman sniff. Putting her own worries aside, Rey risked another glance at her friend, this time longer. “Is… is everything alright between you two?”

As if she’d been waiting for the question to come up, Rose tilted her chin and shrugged helplessly, her eyes slightly shinier than usual. A sigh escaped her and she bit her upper lip, obviously repressing the tears threatening to fall.

“Actually… I think I’d like to talk about it,” she managed to articulate.

Her stomach twisted at the sound of her friend’s quavering voice. Rey immediately felt tension leave her muscles as she guided her to the living room, her thoughts now focused on her roommate’s preoccupations rather than her fear of Rose running into the massive man she’d managed to sneak out of their house just a few minutes ago.

“So, what is it?” She asked as they melted into the sofa occupying the middle of the room.

“It’s just…” Rose started, biting her lips once again as she seemed to ponder over the words to use. “He seems distant,” she added in a whisper.

Despite the frown she could feel distorting her brow, Rey did her best to keep a straight face as she gave Rose a moment to breathe and gather her thoughts. Living with a couple was one thing- but witnessing your friends building a relationship that felt more than wavering was another level of awkwardness. Even though she missed the time where they would simply relax and play video games or watch movies all together, Rey had made it a point of honor not to interfere in her roommates’ nascent love story and respect it, whatever her opinion about it may be.

“And we still haven’t… you know…”

Caught unaware by the topic Rose was suddenly approaching, Rey felt her face turn red and blinked twice as she eased her posture on the sofa, buying herself time to find the right words. Even though she considered Rose as one of her closest friends, they’d never had that kind of conversation. She’d never had that kind of conversation with anyone, now that she was thinking about it.

“But you’ve been sleeping together the whole week-” she started cautiously, weighing her words as to not cross the thin line that already felt blurred.

“It was so awkward!” Rose blurted out, cutting her mid-sentence with such a distressful look in her eyes that Rey couldn’t resist any longer. Repressing a sigh, she promised herself not to get involved more than she already was and walked to the coffee machine, ready to hear all the concerns Rose had apparently been keeping for herself for way too long.

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The week that followed left Ben in a state of frustration he hadn’t felt in a long time.

With winter break coming to an end, seeing Rey was quite a feat: apart from their traditional morning calls, they hadn’t had the chance to see each other since the night they’d spent together. Of course, Ben knew her days were filled with classes and her nights with homework, but it didn’t stop his thoughts from diverting to a disconcerting idea that hadn’t left his mind for the last days.
What if she was avoiding him? Everything from the way she’d kissed him and the sorrow in her voice when she’d refused his offer to go out tonight indicated that she was just as eager to see him as he was. Still, the idea didn’t seem to disappear- such a simple yet strong happiness was too good to be true.

Shaking his head as to clear it of these automatic thoughts he knew to be wrong, Ben sneaked into the elevator just in time, thanking the nurse who’d kept the doors open with a brief nod before lingering his eyes on the poster next to him. Dental cavities had never been his cup of tea, but neither was small talk. Purposefully avoiding the woman’s gaze he could feel on his back, he kept staring at the poor drawing of a tooth fighting what looked like giant angry mosquitoes until a familiar ‘ding!’ informed him he’d reached the third floor.

Silently thanking the nurse when she wished him a good day, Ben almost ran into someone as he hastily made his way out of the metallic box.

“Sorry- ,” he mumbled while briefly glancing at the man who had hardly groaned an apology as well.

His heart almost missed a beat when his eyes met with Poe’s. Glaring at him behind a few curls hanging in front of his forehead, the mechanic remained silent, his red eyes betraying the tears and lack of sleep he’d endured for what now looked like an eternity. Taken aback by this unexpected encounter, Ben held his gaze until the doors finally separated them, leaving him with nothing but a sense of guilt.

The feeling didn’t leave him as he walked along the white corridor he now knew by heart, his head slightly bent as if he could still feel his old friend’s eyes on him. Of course, Poe would hold him responsible for the accident. From what he’d understood, the mechanic had spent Christmas Eve with his mother and uncle, who’d probably made a point of honor to find someone who could fit the culprit role. And who better than the only one who hadn’t shown up for eight consecutive years?

He was actually rather surprised Luke hadn’t sent a private detective or something after him: the investigation may have come to the conclusion that it was nothing more than an accident, but they’d probably had a look at Han’s phone and found his number to be the last one he’d called.

Trying his best to ignore the shame slowly invading him, Ben took a deep breath before plunging his hands into the pockets of his leather jacket- a stupid idea, he realized a few seconds later as he hauled one out with difficulty to knock on the door he’d instinctively walked to.

Useless, he realized as his fingers went down to fumble with the doorknob he managed to open after a few seconds, revealing a room as quiet as usual.

The walls were as pale as the day before, barely enlightened by the weak day light piercing through the still closed curtains. Repressing a sigh, Ben made his way to the chair he’d spent his previous mornings on and finally allowed his eyes to linger on the unconscious figure of his father.

“Hey…”

A nervous chuckle escaped him; the first words were always the most awkward. Giving himself a few seconds to get used to the uncomfortable ambiance, he grabbed the book he’d taken with him and opened it on the page he’d stopped at the night before.

“Alright,” he announced in a vain attempt to delay the reading and fill the silence. Clearing his throat with anticipation, he took another deep breath and started to recite the words before his eyes.
Truth be told, Ben had always had a hard time believing unconscious people could hear anything. Ironically, Han would have thought the exact same thing; he would probably have added that these were just legends used to reassure visitors and keep them coming. However, Ben kept reading every morning with the hope that maybe, maybe these weren’t just legends and that for once in his life, he would be happy to be proved wrong.

Of course, Lando didn’t know about these visits he wasn’t invited to. He was far too proud to admit that he hadn’t lost hope. Ben had been careful to come when both his godfather and mother were supposed to be working, giving him an hour of one-to-one conversations each morning even though he was the only one speaking.

Well, speaking wasn’t really the way to describe it: knowing how bad he was at small talk and how awful his father was at listening to it, Ben had settled with the only book he’d ever seen him read. Real conversations appeared to be too hard to maintain after so many years apart. Besides, the doctor had only mentioned familiar voices— not the topics he was supposed to approach.

And yet, today, Ben found himself unable to stick to the words of others.

“I met a girl,” he announced in the middle of a paragraph even he hadn’t been listening to.

Looking up from the pages, he closed the book with a muffled noise and let his eyes linger on the gray hair brushing the man’s eyebrows.

“I think you’ve met her too,” he added with a somewhat more confident voice.

Playing with the book cover, he let another silent settle around them while searching for his words. How exactly was he supposed to talk about Rey when he was the most surprised about the turn their relation had taken? What was he supposed to call her? She definitely wasn’t just a customer anymore, yet something in him felt like he couldn't allow himself to call Rey his girlfriend.

“She’s incredible,” he breathed out after a minute of silent reflection.

She really was. Every day that passed since he’d first heard her voice echoing in his headset he felt lighter, as if freed from the invisible burden he’d been feeling on his shoulders for years. Just like the spring chased winter winds away, she’d unknowingly dropped his guard and made her way to a place no one had been allowed for years, awakening emotions he thought had been long gone.

“I think she likes me.” He continued with a crooked smile. Letting the words leave his mouth without thinking twice, he looked up to the man he hoped was listening to his incoherent story and bit his lips as he felt his heart twist. “You better wake up; I can’t let Mom meet her if you’re not here to calm her down.”

Mom. It wasn’t the first time she’d crossed his mind; but never before had he thought about the possibility to see her again. Had he said this just in hopes to provoke something? Risking a glance at his father’s heart monitor on which constant lines kept lulling him with their steady beeps, Ben felt a hint of disappointment hit him right in the throat.

Yet, the thought didn’t leave him when he left the room twenty minutes later nor did it when he jumped into his car. It wasn’t until he stepped into the familiar building topped with neon letters reading ‘Starkiller Laser Tag’ that he felt all trace of joy leave his soul. Not bothering to close the door behind him, Ben held his colleague’s gaze as he walked to the counter, wishing the door leading to his office wasn’t so far from the entrance.

“You’re late,” Armitage snarled with a satisfied grin on his face.
Rolling his eyes as a response to the snarky remark, Ben opened his mouth to retort something he knew would shut him down when he noticed another pair of eyes staring at him not far away, observing the scene from one of the tables.

“Almost an hour late,” Snoke hissed as he left his chair.

With the ends of his long coat snaking behind him, he silently approached the counter until his face was only inches away from Ben’s. Despite his instinctive wish to hold the malicious gaze, Ben stared at his shoes and, shoulders bent, waited for the words to snip. At least none of his drawings were within his reach, this time - only the glasses that Hux kept wiping and lining on the marble surface, glancing to the scene before him from time to time with a satisfied smile he didn’t even try to conceal.

“The hospital, again?”

Surprised to hear a honeyed voice emanating from the old man’s mouth, Ben felt his eyebrows flinch as he looked up and met his piercing eyes. Even after years spent believing no magic of any kind existed in this world, he still couldn't help feeling as if, with a simple look, Snoke could read his mind. Either he had sent some of his friends to spy on him, or he was an excellent reader of human behavior. Whatever the answer was, one thing was sure: his omniscience in his life was starting to feel just as wrong as he’d been warned about.

“They called me,” Ben lied while glancing at the door he now wished he’d reached faster.

“Oh, they did?”

An awkward silence fell on the room, pushing Ben to look back to the man standing in front of him. Following his gaze, he looked down to see a wrinkled hand extended towards him and gulped. Phone inspections hadn’t happened in years; the last time had actually been due to the destruction of his computer during one of his old tantrums, when his mother would still try to call him every day. It was just another silent punishment to remind Ben ‘where his loyalty was’.

“I forgot it,” Ben simply replied to the silent question.

To say if Snoke believed him or decided to pretend was just as hard as holding his suspicious gaze. After what felt like too many minutes, the owner of the bar cleared his throat and walked to the door, only the sound of his cape-like coat brushing the floor echoing in the empty room.

“Well done,” Hux commented with an audible grin as soon as the skeletal figure of their superior disappeared behind the door.

“Oh, get lost,” Ben whispered between gritted teeth as he walked to the stairs leading to his office.

He was a disappointment.

It wasn’t anything new; for as long as he could remember, he’d always disappointed everyone around him. His teachers, his parents, his friends; everyone seemed to inevitably end up frustrated by who he was or what he did- sometimes even both. For years, Snoke had appeared to be the last person left who seemed to believe in him enough to trust him with running the maze he’d designed; and for years, it had been enough.

Sinking in the uncomfortable chair, Ben let out a sigh as he looked around him. He’d never liked this room: the plain walls similar to the ones staring back at him during his sleepless nights felt just
as impersonal as everything he’d been given since he’d decided to accept his old teacher’s offer. Plain office. Plain car. Plain apartment.

*Plain, plain, plain.* The word kept spiraling in his head until its very meaning escaped him, leaving nothing but an acid taste on his tongue as he repeated it out loud while staring at the wall in front of him. The room suddenly felt too small for him. Closing his eyes in surrender as he recognized the sensations now invading his whole body, Ben swallowed vainly, his mouth now as dry as his empty coffee mug.

A minute passed; an hour maybe. Time had become nothing but a blurry notion, to such an extent that he hadn’t heard his walkie-talkie buzzing under the pile of papers it was buried under. Barely listening to Hux’s annoying voice, he activated the maze and equipment with a few clicks on his screen before leaving his chair to walk to the small window at the other side of the room.

He didn’t know how much time he spent staring outside; neither did he know when his eyes diverted from the bright blue sky to settle on the façade of Black Squadron Garage. All he knew was that he needed the comfort only one person was able to provide him.

With clammy hands, he grabbed the phone he’d kept hidden in his pocket and let his fingers dance on the screen as he dialed the number he’d called no more than a few hours ago.

One ring echoed, then two. The third almost sounded like a ‘maybe’, but all hope left him with the fourth, followed by the basic voicemail encouraging him to leave a message after the tone. Repressing the urge to crush the device within his hand, Ben took a deep breath and waited for his heartbeats to steady to a normal rhythm before opening the conversation he’d shared with Rey for what was now a few weeks.

*They hadn’t sent that many texts,* he thought as he realized the last one was from Saturday night, when she’d sent her address. The perks of talking mainly by phone or face to face was that he got to hear her voice every day; but of course, he wasn’t able to read her words again when loneliness came rushing back.

*I miss you*

The words had appeared on his screen just as he’d thought of them; and before he could refrain himself, his thumb hit the ‘send’ button.

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“Rey? You ok?”

Stopping in the middle of the vast corridor, Rey turned on her heels to face Rose who’d been chasing her since the end of their last lesson.

“Yeah,” she lied with a nonchalant shrug.

If she was to be honest with herself, *ok* wasn’t exactly the word she would’ve used to define how she was feeling at the moment. *Frustrated* felt more appropriate. *Angry,* maybe.

Of course, she should’ve expected nothing more from their moody professor than a gratuitous remark about her rather disappointing grade on the last test; but warning her about her decreasing
grades in front of the whole class was a cheap move she hadn’t heard him do to anyone before.

“I’m sorry, Skywalker is just a-”

“No, he’s right,” Rey cut impatiently.

Even though she’d always had the capability to memorize her professors’ speeches, this semester had already proclaimed itself to be one of the hardest she’d ever faced: and this was in less than a week. Between her morning rounds, Finn and Rose’s confessions and the colossal amount of work, it seemed like twenty-four hours weren’t enough to fit in a whole day. As if it weren’t enough, every evening seemed to be filled with just enough homework to keep her from sneaking out of the house and meet Ben.

It had only been six days since they’d parted, yet she could already feel his absence. Of course, their morning calls helped her get a glimpse of what she was missing, but sometimes a voice just wasn’t enough. Taking advantage of Rose’s silence as they walked to their next class, Rey grabbed her phone from her bag and scrolled down the notifications hiding her background –a picture of Rose, Finn, Poe and herself all smiling to the camera, half their faces covered by an orange fur that belonged to Baby. A smile made its way to her lips when she came upon the most recent notification.

‘I miss you’

Biting her lips as if the gesture would prevent her heart from beating faster than necessary, she read the text again and again before typing an answer she knew she shouldn’t have thought about.

‘Hill? tonight?’

To hell with homework, she thought as she tossed the device back into her bag.

The smile on her face only grew wider when, a few hours later, she parked her car next to the grey Cadillac she’d seen Ben drive a few times. Mirroring her expression, he slammed the door behind him without taking his eyes off her, walking so fast that she wondered if he would stop.

“Hey-”

Before she could even finish her word, Rey felt two hands engulf her cheeks, soon followed by the lips she’d longed for, crushing on hers with both haste and softness. Not in the least dissatisfied with the warm welcome, she let the corners of her mouth curl into a timid smile as she instinctively crooked her neck. The last time they’d been on this hill, she’d spent the end of the night wondering how his lips would feel against hers. Today, she knew the answer to it- and she knew her past self would’ve been more than pleased with what was waiting for her.

“I missed kissing you,” Ben whispered, his voice filled with relief.

The confession, coupled with the next kisses he couldn’t stop dropping, drew a giggle out of her that sent butterflies into Ben’s stomach as he noticed the delicate scent of toothpaste escaping her mouth.

Freeing her face after one last kiss that he made sure lasted longer than the others, Ben plunged his hands into his pockets, soon followed by smaller ones that twisted into his. Adjusting his position as to give Rey enough room, he felt his heart drum against his ribcage as their fingers naturally intertwined. Silently, Rey broke the eye contact to close the gap between them and sunk her head
against his chest, the rest of her body following as if her aim was to melt into him. Smiling at the feeling of her warm figure crushing against him with a force he hadn’t suspected of her, Ben rested his chin above her head and remained silent for as long as he could, enjoying the moment.

“Did you eat?” He finally asked, not even opening his eyes.

With a firm movement against his chest that he took for a no, Rey removed her head from its initial position and looked up with a gaze betraying her tiredness.

“I’ve been avoiding my roommates all week,” she explained as a justification for her starvation. Encouraged by Ben’s silence, she took a few seconds to gather her thoughts and words, then continued. “They’re sort of breaking up, but none of them are speaking.”

“So naturally, you started a hunger strike,” Ben concluded humorously as they both heard her stomach growl.

Shaking her head with a grin, she rested her forehead against him once again, plunging them both back into the silent yet soothing state they’d just left. Smiling into her hair, Ben felt his heart make a loop as he smelled a puff of the vanilla fragrance he’d already noticed the first time they came here.

“I brought sandwiches,” he announced after a few seconds of memorizing her perfume.

Lured by the mention of food, Rey tilted her chin with such haste that she almost hit his head. Amused by her reaction, he let out a soft chuckle as she stood on her tiptoes, bringing her lips to his cheek as a way to thank him. A wave of shivers rolled down his body as he felt her mouth trail down his jaw to his neck, brushing his skin where she’d left her mark a few days before.

“You could come sleep with me tonight,” he suggested casually half an hour later.

Their stomach full and their bodies tired of the week they’d just had, both of them had flopped down on the wet grass, not worrying once about spreading out a blanket under them. Her back leaning against his chest, Rey tilted her head to meet his eyes, an amused smile growing on her lips.

She’d been absent-mindedly brushing his thighs while staring at the sight the hill offered them, curled up between his legs he’d outstretched to give her enough room and comfort. Unaware of the way each of her gestures sent a stack of butterflies to his stomach, she shook her head as if he’d just said a very good joke and rested her head on his shoulder.

“My roommates would wonder where I am,” she sighed while keeping her eyes on the stars above them.

“What about dinner?” Ben hasted to add, trying to ignore the twinge in his chest. “Tomorrow?”

Not willing to be turned down once again, he cleared his throat and eased his position, wrapping an arm around her stomach and dragging her closer. Encouraged by the chanting sound of her laughter, he buried his head inside her neck and smiled against her cold skin, returning her gesture from earlier. Such proximity wasn’t something he was used to; yet, everything came naturally when she was around.

“Nothing fancy,” he hastened to add. “I’m just… seeing two friends from college, but I’d like you to meet them.”
The twist in his stomach had nothing to do with the hand she placed on his cheek. The kiss she planted on his inanimate lips only increased the sense of guilt that slowly started to invade him as he realized what he’d just said—worse, what he’d just invented.

An uncomfortable smile settled on his lips when she asked him about his mysterious friends’ names, curious about these people he’d never mentioned before.

“Phasma,” Ben blurted out, surprised by his own choice. “And Armitage.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm late again, sorry about that! I've been working all summer and had the good (no) idea to start another story, but I haven't forgotten about this one, I wanted to take my time to write this chapter so it would be just as I wanted. Hopefully, I'm gonna go back to a better update schedule now!

I was absolutely amazed by all the kind comments on the last chapter, thank you so, so much! I hope you liked this one too ♥
“I’m just saying, spending time with Rey would be a good idea too!”

“And I’m just apologizing for not being enough to you!”

“What are you even talking about?!”

It had been going on for nearly half an hour, now. After an entire day of silence and awkwardly ignoring each other, Rose had finally made up her mind and asked Finn to talk. Despite her imploring look, Rey firmly shook her head before disappearing into her room, asserting she had homework to finish and a book to read. But even with her desk covered with essays and open notebooks, she hadn’t been able to ignore the way her friends’ voices gradually raised.

“Do you always insist on bringing your friends when you’re on a date?” Rose continued, apparently not about to drop the topic.

“Rose, she’s our friend!”

“And I’m your girlfriend!”

Wincing, Rey let out a sigh and dropped her pen on one of the open books facing her. It was definitely impossible to focus on anything other than the unbelievable number of times her name had been mentioned. Truth be told, she was starting to wonder what their dates had been like so far. Had it been only about Finn suggesting they invite her, as Rose’s outburst implied? No, she sure seemed over the moon for the first days of their relationship: Rey would’ve known if Rose had a problem with her. They’d spent too many Sundays together for the topic not to be approached.

“Can you just- can you calm down so we can talk, as you wanted?” Finn tentatively added after a moment.

Another wince crossed Rey’s face as she heard the silence following his words. ‘Calm down’ weren’t the words he should’ve used- but truth be told, she wouldn’t have been any better if she
had been in his shoes. That said, she probably would’ve fled after the first few minutes of the awkward discussion that seemed to have started hours ago now.

“I am calm,” Rose murmured with the voice of someone trying hard not to break something.

The sound of someone sitting on the sofa echoed behind Rey’s door, soon followed by the sound of the other’s steps and a second flop when they both sunk into the floppy surface.

“Good,” she heard Finn breath with relief.

He was obviously embarrassed by this whole situation: the argument, the fact that Rey could hear them despite the door separating them and, of course, Rose’s anger. In his defense, Rey had never heard Rose this mad in three years of common life. A bit annoyed, sure- but not to the point where she would scream at them. Rose didn’t do angry.

“Do you like her?”

The silence that suddenly fell on the room was the most mortifying of the five preceding ones since this discussion had started.

“Who?” Finn finally asked, definitely clueless and confused.

Not even bothering to pretend she was working anymore, Rey quietly turned her head to the door and felt her heartbeats quicken at the unexpected question. Something twisted in her stomach; something she tried to ignore, just as she tried to ignore the awful idea of what was now on Rose’s mind.

Her eyes closed as soon as she heard her name being pronounced again, this time in a whisper.

“Are you out of your mind?” Finn slowly articulated, his voice sounding everything but friendly.

To be fair, his annoyance was understandable: he had only been home for less than an hour after an entire day of training -which, according to what Rey had understood, wasn’t going very well lately. And now, Finn had to deal with a conversation he probably never planned on having.

“She’s like a sister to me,” he stated after a minute of silence. “She’s my best friend- she’s your best friend. We’re all supposed to be-”

“Best friends,” Rose finished with a tone harsher than what Rey had ever heard of her.

She was practically glued to the door, her heart racing and hand hesitantly extending toward the handle as she kept listening, careful not to make any sound.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Finn announced as he left the sofa, the sound of creaking floorboards following him until he disappeared into the corridor, leaving nothing but a silent living room behind him.

Nothing about it had been a good idea, Rey realized as she considered opening her door. She should’ve stayed out of the situation instead of encouraging Rose to talk. Biting her lips, she started to wonder if she’d done it for her friends or for herself: she promised she wouldn’t let her opinion influence her behavior towards their relationship, but the ambiance of these last weeks had been way too heavy for her to stand it very much longer.

Besides, as Finn had said, they were best friends. Best friends helped each other, no matter what.
Even if it meant having to watch them suffer at first.

“Hey,” Rey whispered timidly as she sneaked out of her room.

Listless, Rose looked up from the sofa she was still sitting on and cast her a coy smile highly contrasting with her sullen face. Leaving Rose for the night suddenly felt like a faux pas, but spending a night with Ben after a whole week apart –if she forgot about the picnic of the night before- felt more than needed, especially after hearing such a conversation. Being mad at Rose would’ve been easy; but the wet eyes that met her only reminded Rey of the distress her friend had shown a week ago, while finally confessing about her fears and doubts. A hint of guilt passed on Rose’s face, betraying her realization that, maybe, she’d had heard the whole conversation.

“Can I borrow your black skirt?” Rey heard herself ask.

The guilt made way to a surprised look in Rose’s eyes as she straightened up on the sofa, not taking her eyes off Rey. She couldn’t blame her: after years of categorically refusing to wear any clothes that didn’t feel as comfortable as her usual jeans and jumper combination, her request must have been slightly unexpected.

“Sure,” Rose babbled after a moment. “Help yourself.”

Thanking her with a brief nod, Rey quickly made her way to her friend’s room and repressed a sigh as she realized she now had to wear said skirt. Rolling her eyes at the poor inspiration she’d shown, she carefully stepped into the still-enlightened room and closed the door behind here. A few things were scattered on the floor (mostly t-shirts and sheets of paper), forcing her to watch her steps as she progressed to the wardrobe adjacent to the unmade bed surrounded by fairy lights.

“Great,” she muttered between gritted teeth as her hands closed on the woolen fabric of the skirt Rose had offered to lend more than once.

It wasn’t as if she couldn’t use a nice outfit- maybe this would actually help her feel at ease during the dinner she was supposed to attend. Taking her time to scrutinize the room she’d barely visited in three years, Rey almost jumped when the sound of the bathroom bolt echoed in the corridor, soon followed by wet steps trampling across the corridor and a door being closed. Not long after, the unmistakable lighter steps of Rose increased as she approached, before timidly knocking on her own door.

“Find it?”

“Yes,” Rey babbled as she walked to the door, clumsily holding the skirt against her chest as she stepped over another t-shirt. “Sorry, I was...” Vaguely pointing at the wardrobe, she let the words die on her lips and walked to the door under her friend’s gaze before any suspicions regarding her plans for the night could cross Rose’s mind.

Not a question followed her as she left the room, careful not to cross her friend’s curious gaze, but one remained in the corner of her own mind, its weight increasing as she risked a glance to Finn’s room. It had been an eternity since she’d last been in it; not since he’d gently offered to help her with the Philosophy exam during her first year.

It suddenly occurred to her, as she retraced her steps that she hadn’t heard about Finn in weeks. Of course, he would always greet her with a warm smile and insist on cooking something instead of letting her microwave one of those ready-prepared dishes he hated so much, but she couldn’t remember the last time they’d had a real conversation.
Not since the New Year’s Eve party, actually. Repressing a sigh at the realization that she’d let the situation escape her, Rey stopped in front of the slightly open door and knocked twice. A deep, remote sigh echoed at the other side of the room as a response, encouraging her to draw her face closer to the door.

“It’s me.”

The sound of a creaking mattress almost immediately echoed, followed by a few strides before the door opened, revealing Finn’s nervous face concealed under a white hooded sweatshirt he’d sunk into.

“Can I come in?” she tentatively added while noticing her friend’s suspicious eyes lingering on the skirt she was still holding.

With a brief nod, Finn opened the door and stepped aside as she entered the room. It hadn’t changed much: some of the posters that used to cover his walls had disappeared, making room to pictures perfectly aligned with each other in chronological order. A smile made its way on Rey’s lips as she recognized some of the shots she was in, or had taken: Finn, Poe, Rose and herself laughing in the middle of a park; Rose and her hugging Baby; the four of them eating pizza in front of the TV, gamepads in hands and smiles from ear to ear. Her lips seemed to feel lost as she kept retracing the last years according to the pictures in front of her, a feeling she couldn’t quite name slowly blending to the nostalgia invading her. Finally, her eyes stopped on a picture of the two boys laughing at something off camera, Poe’s elbow nonchalantly landed on Finn’s shoulder. She remembered taking this one; but more importantly, she remembered their smiles at the sight of their portrait.

“I miss him,” she absent-mindedly admitted as Finn joined her side.

He didn’t add anything, yet Rey noticed the way his eyes were looking everywhere but at the picture she’d stopped by. Finally taking hers off the wall, she glanced around the room in search of another topic and noted the gym bag next to the door, obviously full but still closed.

“How was today’s training?” She asked in a falsely casual voice while walking away from the pictures.

“Coach threatened to fire me again,” he stated with a shrug. “Said my head wasn’t in the game.”

Wearing a small smile on her lips, Rey walked to the empty bed and flopped down on it. “Where was it?”

Finn’s eyes shifted to the wall separating his room from Rose’s then to his feet. Avoiding her inquiring look, he coyly joined Rey on the bed and took a deep breath before allowing his eyes to linger on the wall again, this time a little bit longer.

“I’m not sure I know how it happened,” he murmured after a moment.

Not feeling the need to ask him what he was talking about, Rey eased her position on the mattress and remained silent for a few seconds, observing her friend’s defeated look and not once looking away from the wall. A guilty feeling invaded her as she started to realize the meaning behind his silence. Even though she’d never saw Finn in a relationship before, she knew he wasn’t the kind of person to take it lightly, even less run away from an argument.

“Maybe the question isn't how,” she pointed out carefully, “but why.”

It sure had been a long time since they had such an open-hearted conversation. A frown creasing
his brows, the young man turned to her with a dumbfounded expression and shrugged. 

“Because we wanted to, I guess.”

“Did you?”

Another shrug shook his torso, speaking much more than any words he could’ve said.

“Finn, are you happy right now?”

Hesitantly, his head moved from one side to the other before turning to her. If she hadn’t known him any better, she could’ve sworn he was about to cry.

“I have to do it, right?” The question slipped from his mouth in a whisper, full of shame and worry.

It was now Rey’s turn to shrug. Remembering why she’d initially chosen not to interfere, she bit her lip and followed her friend’s gaze to his fidgeting fingers nervously tangling the cord of his sweater. Repressing a sigh, she extended a hand and placed it above his, ceasing all movement as she captured his fingers.

“I think you have to do what feels right,” she articulated slowly, choosing her words with great care, “for both of you.”

Looking away, she squeezed his hands with hers while pretending not to hear his sniffing. It seemed, after years of being the shoulder to cry on, Finn was just as clueless and lost as she could be sometimes- except he was apparently best at hiding it.

“You going somewhere?”

Taken aback by the unexpected question, Rey looked at him then at the skirt he was looking at, a raised eyebrow underlining his surprise.

“Just a dinner,” she hastened to explain, “with some friends.”

Quick to forget his own worries, Finn straightened up and scrutinized her as if he’d just been entrusted with a case to solve.

“Friends?”

Unable to not betray her thoughts with every passing second, she settled for a simple nod and tightened her grip on the black skirt.

“You hate going out,” Finn added after a few seconds.

“I’m gonna be late,” she babbled, her cheeks warming up at a crazy pace.

Not giving him time to pursue his sudden interrogation, Rey stood up and walked to the door after murmuring a brief goodbye, eager to leave the house and escape what promised to be a rough evening.
To say that convincing Armitage had been a nightmare was an understatement: after promising to pay for the whole dinner, Ben had accepted to work more hours than a week could hold and replace him behind the bar for at least one night a month. If Phasma had been easier to convince, she’d nonetheless been as surprised as Hux by the unexpected invitation. True to herself, she’d been straight to the point and had asked enough questions about Ben’s mystery guest to put an identikit up, leading him to regret this whole plan as soon as the words “should be fun” had been pronounced.

Quarter to eight. She shouldn’t be long, now. Glancing at his phone for the umpteenth time of the evening, he heard himself sigh at the absence of texts and went back to his contemplation of the computers’ screens.

The maze was surprisingly empty, for a Saturday evening. After the family of five that had occupied it for the whole afternoon, a few teenagers had entered the game for an hour, joined by another family and a few students who (judging by their behavior) were obviously here mainly for the cocktails. Only three of them were still running across the hangar, the rest of their group were busy filling the bar with loud laughter and jokes he could hear from his office.

The sound of his phone vibrating against the wooden surface of his desk almost made Ben jump. Feeling his heart fall to his stomach, he quickly grabbed it only to feel a hint of disappointment invade him at the name displayed on the screen.

‘I’m on my way but I’ll be late – Mitaka’

Just as he was about to delete the notification, another text appeared above the one before, followed by another jump of his heart.

‘Turn the earpiece on’

His lips curled into a smile as he read the words again. Failing to ignore his heart drumming against his chest, he grabbed the headset that had been forgotten behind a pile of papers and placed it above his head, his fingers fumbling with the switch connected to Rey’s earpiece.

“Hi,” he mumbled as soon as the signals preceding the connection stopped.

Rey returned the greeting almost instantly, her gentle tone sending a shiver down his spine. Not even their daily morning calls could compare to the sounds of her voice echoing in his headset, filling the room and his heart with something he couldn’t put his finger on.

“Where are you?” He managed to ask after a moment, helplessly smiling.

“Here,” she admitted sheepishly behind what sounded like a nervous chuckle. “I didn’t know where to find you, there was no one at the bar and the door was open.”

Not even bothering to wonder where Armitage was, Ben turned to the screen connected to the maze’s security cameras and felt his smile grow wider at the sight of her familiar figure sneaking inside.

“You should’ve called me,” he stated as he watched her progressing through the dark walls.

“I sort of did.”

Another chuckle escaped him, accompanied by the usual warmth settling in his chest every time she made him laugh. “I meant with your phone.”
“I wasn’t sure phones were allowed here,” Rey grinned before adding, slightly less confident, “Also… I missed hearing your voice.”

An incredulous frown following his smile, Ben leaned on the desk, his gaze fixed on the screen as if that would help him catch a glimpse of her facial expressions.

“You hear my voice every morning.”

“Not like… that.”

Her tone was now far from the usual cheerful one, increasing his curiosity as he felt like he’d missed a point. “Like that?”

“It feels… closer?”

A silence fell between them, short yet long enough for Ben to scrutinize her as he kept wondering what she meant. And suddenly, he did. “Oh.”

A nervous laugh echoed through the headset, confirming Ben’s thoughts. Straightening on his chair, he cleared his throat and silently observed Rey’s progression, searching for the words her innuendo had robbed him of.

“I like your skirt,” he finally managed to mumble as his eyes stopped on the piece of clothing he’d never seen so far. He’d never been a big fan of short clothes, let alone during winter. But ignoring the way the fabric perfectly emphasized her legs appeared just as impossible as repressing his smile when he noticed her arms crossing against her chest as they did every time he risked himself to a compliment.

“Thanks,” she mumbled with a shy smile. “It’s not mine.”

“It suits you,” Ben insisted, a shrug accompanying his statement.

“I don’t really like it, it’s kind of itchy.”

As if trying to prove a point, she started nervously pulling the fabric until it covered a few more inches of her thighs, leaving the sweater she’d stuck inside the skirt to lazily poke out.

“Might not be the best place to take it off,” Ben mused as he noticed a player approaching the wall she was still hiding behind.

Another one of those giggles that never failed to send a shiver over his body escaped her lips, drawing a smile back on his face.

“Yeah, probably not,” she agreed in a murmur. Another silence fell between them, filled with invisible smiles. “Can you… I still don’t know where you are.”

Only now realizing she had stopped moving around the maze, Ben blinked and adjusted the headset.

“Yes,” he babbled while standing up, his eyes scrutinizing on the screen as he tried to memorize her location. “Yes, I’ll be there in a minute.”

“Don’t keep me waiting.”

The audible smirk accompanying her warning should’ve lowered her credibility, yet Ben wasted no time. Walking down the stairs with haste, he quickly snuck into the Briefing Room without a single
glance to the counter his colleague supposedly deserted and made his way to the maze. Oblivious of the loud music surrounding the players, he absent-mindedly brushed the switch of his headset with a finger as his legs guided him to the spot where Rey was waiting for him.

His heartbeats seemed to hasten with every step, as if a radar had been implanted in his chest. Soon enough, a hazel gaze met his eyes around the corner of a wall and his heart missed a beat before drumming even louder than before.

“Fast enough?” He asked with a grin.

Rey wrapped her arms around his neck as a response, beckoning him to come closer. Not the least bit displeased by the idea, Ben leaned down the few inches separating them and let her lips capture his with the softness she’d accustomed him to. Still smiling through the kiss, he felt his skin warm up at the sensation of her fingers tangling into his hair and allowed one of his hands to land on her waist, pulling her closer.

“Itchy,” he approved after slightly parting his lips from hers, just in time to let her smile turn into a soft chuckle as she nodded. Taking advantage of the break to fill his lungs with air, he let his hand leave the woolen skirt and took a step back, his eyes detailing the rest of her outfit with a frown. “No jacket today?”

“I wasn’t really planning on playing.” Rey pointed out with a nervous smile.

_Of course she wasn’t_, Ben thought as he remembered the initial reason of her presence; yet, he couldn’t ignore how every parcel of his skin would rather spend the entire evening here with her rather than in a pub he didn’t even like with people he’d begrudgingly invited.

“So?” Her voice called him back to reality, brushing every thought of Armitage or Phasma aside.

“So?” Ben repeated, clueless.

“Are you showing me your office, or do you want me to grab a blaster and break your record once and for all?”

The playful grin that settled on her lips should’ve awakened his competitiveness, but all he could do was let out a sigh as his hand found hers at the back of his neck. “Let’s have a look at this office,” he approved while intertwining their fingers together.

Visibly satisfied, Rey followed him as he guided her to the exit. Tightening his grip on her hand, he quickly crossed the main room of the bar to the small door leading to the staircase he’d hurtled down only minutes earlier and beckoned her to go first, making sure no one (including Armitage) saw them disappear behind the ‘staff only’ sign.

Not once letting go of her hand, Ben held his breath in anticipation as they climbed the last stairs separating them from the small room he hated so much. Of course, he hadn’t minced his words when describing the place during one of their first morning calls. After so many years locked in such a narrow space, not only weariness but also disillusion usually crept their way into the routine, so much that he didn’t understand Rey’s amazed expression when she opened the door. Before he got the chance to ask anything, her hand slipped away from his and she walked to the desk, her eyes fixed on the pile of papers covering his keyboard.

“You did these?”

The electric wave that traveled through Ben’s body ended its race at his stomach, tightening it into a knot as he saw her fingers moving a few papers aside, revealing older drawings as she cautiously
rummaged through the mess that was his desk.

“I did,” he admitted under his breath.

Truth be told, he hadn’t shown his drafts to anyone for years. Snoke had caught a glimpse of the sketches a few times, but mostly ignored their existence when he wasn't in the mood to throw things across the room. His fingers had sometimes searched for them under the numerous notebooks and devices scattered across the surface, but nothing like the slow, precautious way Rey went through the pictures before her eyes: as if the papers brushing her skin were made of glass.

“You never told me you could draw.”

Saying how his passion had gradually declined would’ve been honest, but something in the way her eyes shone with delight drew Ben not to ruin this moment and, instead, settle for an altered version of the truth, something far from Snoke’s harsh comments and his dissatisfaction at every line his hands had traced in the last years.

“I used to be better,” he mumbled while nervously tangling his fingers together. “These are not that good.”

Rey shook her head with disbelief at his words, not even looking away from the source of her amazement. She kept observing the drawings under Ben’s nervous gaze for another few minutes until her eyes seemed to open slightly wider than before.

“I love this one,” she murmured after a few seconds of immobility.

Anxious yet curious about which one of his old drafts had caught her attention, Ben took the few steps separating them and slipped behind her, his head just above hers as he narrowed his eyes to get a better look at the paper between her hands.

He actually remembered drawing this one: it was only one of these landscape drawings she could’ve seen anywhere, except he’d, for once, let his imagination guide his pencil along the paper and slightly modify what had then been before his eyes. Instead of a single moon appearing behind a hill, two moons were proudly standing in a starry sky: one light, the other darker. Wondering if she’d recognized the hill they’d claimed as their own, Ben bit the inside of his cheek as her smile grew wider.

“Keep it,” he babbled with a voice that sounded way less assured than what he’d expected.

The drawing still in hands, Rey turned to face him, her eyes as wide as if he’d just offered her one of his kidneys.

“Really?” she breathed out, her eyes never stopping to grow wider.

The smile she gave him coupled with the glimmer in her eyes would’ve pushed him to say yes to anything.

“Yes,” he assured with a shrug. “It’s not my best but-”

An unexpected kiss, brief but meaningful, cut him mid-sentence.

“I love it,” she repeated as she pulled away. “Thank-”

Cutting her as well before she could finish thanking him, Ben bent his neck just enough to catch her lips back for another kiss, deeper than the previous one. Quicker than usual, his hands found
their way to her waist and his palms met the soft fabrics covering her skin. Before he could convince himself to break their embrace and check the time, Rey’s hands fumbled behind her and quickly came back between them, gripping the edge of his shirt with even more eagerness than what he’d just shown.

“You’re too tall,” she murmured against his mouth.

Not even bothering to repress his chuckle, Ben leaned down just enough to let his arms wrap around her, his mouth trailing down her ear.

“Hang on,” he warned with a smile.

Ignoring her inquiring look on him, he quickly slid his hands under her thighs and, careful not to let his hands slip too far, lifted her of a few inches until he felt her weight shift from his arms to the desk. With a small gasp, Rey searched for his eyes from her new height, her hands trailing down his shoulders she’d firmly grabbed during the ascension.

“Your drawings,” she murmured as the sounds of crumpled papers echoed under her with every move.

“They’ve seen worse,” Ben shrugged as he absent-mindedly let his hands wander on the wooden surface, looking for hers.

Just as his fingers brushed the back of her hand, she moved it away to his cheek, cupping it as she leaned down for another kiss, softer than the last one. Ceasing all movement, Ben followed her lead as she drew him closer, her warm vanilla fragrance slowly revealing itself as every lock of her hair slowly dropped from her shoulders to caress his face. Eyes firmly closed, he barely noticed the desk before his hips hit the wooden surface, drawing a giggle out of the pink lips leaving his mouth.

“Now I’m too tall,” Rey whispered with a grin as she straightened up, a hint of pride shadowing her impish gaze as she towered him for the first time.

“I can work with that.”

The room’s temperature had increased at an unbelievable pace. Not taking his eyes off her, Ben finally allowed his hands to leave the wooden surface of the desk and hesitantly placed them on her thighs. A shiver almost immediately traveled down her legs and he quickly retreated with a start, only to feel her hands recapture his. Before he got the chance to wonder if he’d gone too far, Rey slightly opened her legs and tugged on his arms, beckoning him to fill in the space she’d left for him. Not sure if she was guiding him or not, Ben felt a gulp go down his throat as he saw his hands land on her waist once again. Feeling slightly bolder and encouraged by the smile on her face, he gave way and let his fingers brush her pullover as he crooked his neck of a few inches.

Her smile seemed contagious as her lips met him halfway and, in the blink of an eye, he found himself deepening the kiss with an eagerness he hadn’t seen coming. Just as her tongue started entering the dance, Ben felt his heartbeat accelerate and his jeans become significantly tighter. Vainly ignoring the frown creasing his brows as he focused on not biting his lips or Rey’s, he straightened up and, in an attempt to calm down his growing arousal, instinctively squeezed his legs together.

A gasp immediately escaped Rey’s mouth as he realized, too late, that her left leg was still between his. Mortified, he began to pull away as shame reddened his face, when her hands tightened their grip on his shirt. After what felt like more than a few seconds, Ben looked up to see her eyes
searching for his, a hint of curiosity twinkling in her hazel irises.

“Come here,” she intimated in a whisper.

“I’m here-”

“Closer.”

This word, in her mouth, sounded exactly as it had a week ago: scary, yet inevitably stimulating. Surrendering to the memories his mind had now gone back to, Ben let her drag him back to her, his eyes wide as he noticed the way she was biting her lips. A wince crossed his face when her knee met his now evident erection again, this time firmly.

Slowly, his jaw relaxed as well as the rest of his body and he took a deep breath. They’d been close to each other before and had seen way more skin than what their respective clothes were currently hiding, but this- this was new. Repressing the need to press his body against hers, Ben focused on the rough fabric of her skirt itching under his fingers. He’d almost managed to regain control of his breathing when Rey’s knee moved a little further, drawing him to hold his breath at the new sensation.

“Is it- is it ok?” she babbled; her whole body straightening under his grasp.

Knowing his voice would probably fail to conceal his nervousness, Ben briefly nodded before going for another kiss. His lips were quick to open, eager to discover what Rey’s tongue had to show him as he felt her leg stretch out a little under him. Cautiously, her barely covered skin started pressing against his crotch with a back and forth movement, pausing from time to time when she parted her lips from his to catch some air.

After what felt like hours of wet kisses and deep breathing, Ben finally felt his heart settle to a normal rhythm and allowed his hands to wander along Rey’s ribcage, brushing the woolen fabric of her pullover just where she’d let him caress her skin a few days ago. The gentle pace she’d settled on then accelerated slightly, causing his thighs to instinctively twitch again around her leg.

A soft giggle escaped Rey as she noticed his jolt. Not giving him time to recover from the sensation she’d sent through his body, she firmly held his mouth hostage with hers as her hands left the strands of hair they’d gripped to trail down his neck. Smiling through the kiss, she started exploring the collar of his shirt, twisting it in a way that only made Ben wish he could close the gap between them for good.

Slowly, the tip of her index brushed the fabric away and she slipped her fingers under it. Shivering at the contact of her skin against his, he made a great deal of not resigning to the little voice urging him to close the door and selfishly cancel their plans. Her fingers kept trailing down his skin as her other hand, grabbing the nape of his neck, persistent on drawing him closer and closer.

Now fully engaged in whatever she’d decided to do, Ben didn’t withdraw when her other leg wrapped around his waist- instead, his hands tightened around her. Another smile broke their kiss as he filled his lungs with fresh air before going back to their hurried embrace. Her fingers kept trailing down his chest and stopped their race on the first button of his shirt, making his entire body shudder under her touch.

She didn’t seem to notice: her fingers were already traveling down his shirt, dangerously approaching the sensible area her leg kept gently brushing. Feeling his stomach twist at the realization of what she intended to do, Ben slightly pulled away and held his breath in anticipation. Faster than what he was expecting, her fingers reached the edge of his jeans and he felt his blood
boil.

Not now.

Before he could find the words to express his blurry thoughts, she lifted his shirt of a few inches and slipped a finger behind his belt. His entire nervous system was too far gone.

“Rey-”

The legs, the fingers, the lips; all movements stopped in the blink of an eye as soon as he whispered her name. Taking a moment to catch his breath, Ben begrudgingly pulled away from the desk under Rey’s concerned gaze, his chest heaving under the flow of emotions blending inside his chest.

“Sorry,” Rey hastily mumbled with a guilty voice. “Did I…” The word died on her lips as Ben frantically shook his head, casting her a reassuring smile while searching for his words.

How was he supposed to explain what a single brush of her fingers had done to him? Wondering where on earth he’d found the will to break this moment in favor of a dinner he had no desire to attend, Ben let out a sigh and shook his head a second time, his hand making its way to the one she’d placed back on the desk.

“Maybe… maybe we can stop by my apartment before you leave?” he suggested, intertwining his fingers with hers. “Watch the end of Dirty Dancing?”

Her cheeks reddened at the mention of the movie. Ben would probably have laughed if he hadn’t felt his face warm as well as he realized what he’d just insinuated, given how their first attempt had turned.

“Great idea,” Rey whispered as she squeezed his fingers between hers.

A nervous chuckle escaped them simultaneously, and he swore he could’ve felt his heart miss a beat. Not only had he grown used to the joy filling him every time she was with him, but he’d also reached a point where he didn’t feel afraid to let her see every single part of him. The joys, the fears, the dreams: she could have it all, and even more. Before he could think about it, three little words he never thought he’d feel the need to say shyly made their way to his mind, running to his mouth at a pace he didn’t feel like stopping.

“Rey, I…”

“Yes?” Rey breathed out, encouraging him to finish.

Their eyes met again and, as quickly as they appeared, the words vanished halfway on his lips. *She* was meeting his ‘friends’, and not the reverse. As far as he was concerned, she never mentioned the possibility of a future meeting with her roommates. She never mentioned any future, now that he was thinking about it.

“We should go,” he finally breathed after a few seconds of silence.

Moving aside to let her get back on her feet, Ben freed Rey’s hand of his grasp and seized the jacket he’d hung on his chair before turning back to her, his stomach slowly twisting again as he realized what he’d dragged her into.

“They can be weird, don’t let them intimidate you,” he advised as his arms slipped into the leathered sleeves.
“I can endure an awkward dinner if it means I get to watch Dirty Dancing again.”

Unable not to return the smile she cast him, Ben waited for her to quickly comb the hair he’d slightly disheveled a few minutes ago to take her hand and guide her back to the commotion echoing from the bar below them, the knot in his stomach tightening with every step they took.

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Rey hadn’t been to many dates, let alone accompanied by strangers- but she was absolutely certain it wasn’t supposed to be like what she’d just experienced.

First had come the awkwardness of officially meeting Armitage other than behind a counter or in front of Poe’s house: obviously not the least pleased to spend a few hours with her, he’d mangled her name so many times during the evening that she’d ended up wondering if he was doing it on purpose or if the numerous glasses of wine he’d ordered had finally gotten to his head. Lucky for her, they’d both been careful not to mention Poe or the visit she and her roommates had interrupted a few weeks ago, settling for a more than formal tone every time the conversation forced them to address each other.

On the other hand, the gigantic blonde woman who joined them perfectly on time caught Rey’s attention to such an extent that she’d found herself stuck between admiration and fear for a good part of the evening as the woman –who introduced herself as ‘Phasma’- kept maintaining a conversation to fill the silence left by the two men who barely looked at each other.

Of course, Rey wasn’t expecting more of the man who’d silently stared at her after Ben had introduced her earlier when they’d left his office and joined him behind the counter he’d returned to, a raised eyebrow underlining his lack of interest. After days of dealing with an almost-breaking-up couple under her roof, two silent persons sitting around a table while two others struggled to find new topics of conversation wasn’t something that scared her.

Except when the topic of Phasma’s profession made its way to the forced conversation, Rey’s heart sunk to her feet at the realization that it wasn’t the first time she’d heard about the woman.

“Teacher,” she’d groaned with a roll of her eyes. “Coach, actually.”

The rest of the evening had mainly consisted of Phasma complaining about her team, pushing Rey to join the men in their silence. The night had reached its peak when a man Rey presumed as the new owner of the bar that’d been Maz’s for years came to shake Ben’s hand and thank him for his help, drawing a groan out of Armitage’s mouth and an uncomfortable smile on Ben’s face, who’d been quick to let go of the hand she’d tentatively slipped into his.

“I… didn’t expect them to be like that,” she commented as they reached the parking lot after the most awkward goodbyes she’d ever witnessed.

His hands deep inside his pockets, Ben shrugged and kept walking by her side, ignoring her inquiring gaze for what felt like the hundredth time of the evening.

“I didn’t know you helped create this place,” she added tentatively.

Another shrug shook his shoulders, soon followed by his sheepish voice. “Just the main plans, actually. Nothing big.”
Yet another secret, Rey thought as they passed the last few cars separating them from Ben’s Cadillac. Nothing in the choices he’d made tonight felt true to what she’d seen of him so far; from the decision to visit the bar that had replaced her former favorite coffee shop to the way he’d silently stood next to her all night, almost withdrawing every time she’d risked a gesture toward him when not less than an hour ago her hands were eagerly exploring him.

They remained silent for the rest of the walk, Ben looking anywhere but in her direction as Rey cluelessly felt the emotions she’d concealed the whole evening rush back. Her strides became firmer as she recalled the way the woman had mentioned her students, not the least bit ashamed to affirm her methods were harsh but effective when one of them tended to be behind.

Head in the game, as she’d said. Another sigh almost escaped Rey as she remembered Finn using the exact same terms a few hours earlier. Before she could direct her mind to other thoughts such as the awaited second part of the night Ben had promised her, memories of Finn coming home with a defeated face and blaming it on his coach made their way to her brain and she heard the words slip from her mouth, unable to swallow them.

“Did you know that your friend Phasma threatens her students?”

Her dry tone seemed to alert Ben who, finally, turned to her with an inquiring look.

“She’s not my friend,” he mumbled under his breath.

“And that Armitage is playing with my friend’s feelings?”

Maybe it was the way she’d emphasized the man’s name, or maybe she’d gone too far- but just as she finished her question, Ben stopped walking, forcing Rey to turn to face him as she stopped as well.

“Poe isn’t—” he started to articulate, weighing his words as if trying not to kindle her obvious growing irritation.

“You know Poe,” she realized out loud before he could finish what he’d started to say.

Of course, she remembered the day she’d ran out of the maze after facing him for the first time. But for some reason, her brain had given Poe’s questions and comments a miss, preferring to register every piece of information she’d managed to grasp about Ben. Did he do anything to you? Poe’s first reaction slowly made its way back to her memories, almost covering Ben’s voice as he spoke again.

“Believe me, Poe isn’t the innocent victim in this situation.”

A sour chuckle escaped her before she could restrain it as she thought about Poe’s vacant look, soon followed by the thought that hadn’t left her mind since they’d stepped into the bar.

“I just… didn’t expect your friends to be like this, I guess,” she added after a moment.

“They’re not my friends,” Ben repeated on the same weary voice, avoiding her eyes.

An uncomfortable silence followed his words, during which Rey realized what he’d just said. Her stomach seemed to twist as the whole evening played back in her head, a sensation she couldn’t quite name creeping its way inside her chest as she crossed her arms, suddenly wishing she hadn’t accepted the invitation.

“What do you mean they’re not your friends?”
Another shrug shook Ben’s shoulders as he looked away from her, increasing the frown she could feel settling between her brows.

“Ben,” she articulated after a deep breath in hopes to calm down her heartbeats she could feel speeding up inside her chest. “What’s going on?”

Almost causing her to jump, his eyes suddenly left the pavement they’d been fixing for way too long before lingering on her with a look that had nothing to do with the ones usually sending shivers down her spine.

“What am I to you?”

A wince crossed her face at the unexpected question, joined by another twist in her stomach. Suddenly, the whole parking lot seemed to disappear, leaving only her, Ben and the words echoing in her head as she tried to ignore her growing nervousness at the idea of answering.

“That’s not the question,” she articulated after a few seconds as numerous possible answers churned around in her head to such an extent that she failed to continue.

“That IS the question.” Ben’s voice echoed a little louder than before, drawing her to wince at the unexpected tone as he opened his mouth again. “You want questions? I have one: why am I a secret?”

Another wince shook her eyelids, and her heart settled back to a furious drumming she was sure he could hear.

“What do you mean you’re a secret?” she murmured, slowly realizing what he meant.

“A secret, as in you hide me from your roommates and I never met your friends,” Ben explained with a trembling voice.

“You’re not a-”

“Do they know about me?” Ben continued; his voice more accusatory with each word that crossed his lips.

"Ben-" 

"Do they know about me?"

Guilt seized her entire body as Rey closed her eyes, as if the gesture would lower the significance of the word she was about to say. “No.”

She had, indeed, tried her best not to blend whatever they’d built to the awkwardness that was her life within their house’s walls. To say she’d never felt the need to confide to one of her friends would be a lie. But something in her, stronger, had always superseded the need to talk in favor of keeping this to herself, in the safety of the invisible walls she’d built around them. Every kiss, every rush of adrenaline that came with their secret meetings had always pushed her to postpone the moment a change would have to come. To such an extent she’d found herself hiding these thoughts in the back of her mind behind the conviction that this -whatever it was- was enough.

“What am I to you?” Ben repeated under his breath.

“You’re...”
The one who always managed to light up her days with a single word. The one who had the power to make her heart jump and stop at the same time. The one whose disappointed eyes were currently breaking her heart.

“You’re hiding me from everyone,” he continued with a faltering voice that only added to the churn of emotions flowing through her.

“It’s not true,” Rey whispered, knowing full well it was.

“You are,” Ben retorted. “It’s almost as if you were ashamed, as if-”

“I’m not ashamed,” she babbled, her voice now as uncertain as his.

“Then why couldn’t I meet your friends?!”

Swallowing the lump that had settled in her throat, Rey gritted her teeth as she felt her vision blur. Her hands started shaking and she grasped the edge of her sleeves, wishing for the umpteenth time of the evening that she’d never approached the topic as she wondered how long Ben had been keeping these thoughts for himself.

“Why is that important, all of a sudden?” She managed to ask after another heavy silence.

“Because I-”

The words seemed to die on Ben’s lips as he gulped, before clenching his fists and looking away from her.

“Ben, why-”

Realizing a little too late that maybe she shouldn’t have encouraged him to go on, she watched him exhale before turning back to her, his voice as harsh as the shadow in his eyes. “Because I love you!”

She should’ve felt happy, she realized as the words echoed in the deserted parking lot. Her heart should’ve missed a beat before exploding into a million sparkles, tickling her stomach the way almost every song described it. Instead of that, the organ only sunk to her feet as another silence fell between them, only broken by Ben’s heavy breathing as she scrutinized him.

“Forget it,” he mumbled under his breath.

He looked nothing like the Ben she knew. Something in his eyes and the way his jaw had tightened felt wrong. It suddenly occurred to her, when she caught a glimpse at his still opened mouth that he’d never yelled at her before.

“Why would you say it like that?” Her voice was nothing but a murmur.

His face seemed to soften just as tears started to roll down her cheeks. Slowly coming back from whatever place he’d lost himself to, Ben took a step towards her and pulled a hand out of his jacket, but Rey took a step back before he got the chance to reach her.

“Rey, I’m-”

“Don’t,” she cut him before he could apologize.

Another wave of tears blurred her vision and she surrendered to the messy combination of anger and regret running through every parcel of her skin.
“Let me drive you to your car,” Ben murmured on an almost pleading tone. “We can just forget about tonight and…” A sigh escaped him as she took another step back, avoiding another attempt of his hand to wipe the tears away from her face. “Please-”

“I’ll call a friend,” she managed to mumble, running one of her itchy sleeves on her cheek.

They both stood silently in front of his car for a few minutes, Ben’s gaze on her before she finally grabbed her phone and started scrolling down her contact list.

“I’ll call you tomorrow?” Ben tentatively offered, hesitantly walking to his car.

Doing her best to resist the temptation to look at him, Rey kept staring at the small screen between her hands until he finally closed the driver’s door behind him. It took every ounce of sheer will not to say something as she heard the engine start and the wheels turn behind her, signaling his departure. Feeling a new series of tears becloud her eyes, she took a deep breath before finally making up her mind to call someone and sat on the nearest bench, her legs shaking under the weight of emotions and the coldness of the night.

By the time Poe’s car entered the parking lot, she’d managed to dry her cheeks and regain control of her breathing. Ignoring his concerned look when she hopped onto the passenger’s seat, she fastened her belt and muttered an almost inaudible ‘thank you’ before turning to the window, not in the mood for another interrogation.

“What happened?” Poe finally asked after five minutes of silent ride.

Unable to give him a proper answer or trust her voice not to falter, she kept her eyes fixed on the road and shrugged.

“It’s Ben, isn’t it?”

Her stomach tightened for the umpteenth time of the evening and she bit the inside of her cheeks, repressing the tears threatening to fall as she weakly shook her hand.

“Just drive, please.”

Chapter End Notes

I. am. beyond. sorry. I swear it had to happen, and I swear it won't last long, but trust me, I hate myself for writing that last scene aahhhh! I can't promise another update before at least a week, but I sure need to post next chapter soon, I can't leave these two idiots like this.

Again, thanks for all your kind comments on the previous chapter ♥ Every single one keeps making me so happy, I still can't believe so many of you are still reading this story and I'll never thank you enough for your support.

Also, thanks to CartoonJessie from TWD for this amazing moodboard!
Just as Ben had anticipated, Rey didn’t pick up when he called the day after. She didn’t pick up on Monday either, nor did she answer his multiple texts and calls for the rest of the week. After two weeks of complete silence during which he’d tried to connect his headset to her earpiece, Ben finally accepted his defeat. It wasn’t the first time he’d screwed up, nor was it the first time they’d stopped talking for more than two days. But this time felt like the ultimate one. Not a call to explain that the connection was bad or that a sink had leaked; not a text asking to meet her at the hill or saying that she missed him. This time had been the last, and he hadn’t even enjoyed it as much as he should’ve.

For the first time in months, the sound of his alarm clock waking him in the early hours of the morning didn’t make him smile. Refraining himself from instinctively grabbing his phone, he let out a groan and turned back in his bed, the weight of a short night’s sleep hitting his head with strength as the first lights of the day pierced through his windows. The dark sheets wrapped around his waist felt way too tight, and a sudden need to rip them up tickled every inch of his skin along with a growing irritation that only seemed to get stronger with each passing day.

He couldn’t possibly blame it on the itchy sheets; nor could he deny that he was irrefutably, dangerously angry. Angry at Hux, for his continuous complaints about how he would rather have spent his evening at home. Angry at Phasma, for obviously being guilty of what Rey had accused her of. Angry at Rey, for not giving him what he’d let himself hope for. Angry at his father, who still hadn’t woken up. But mostly, angry at himself for being stupid enough to fall in love and believe the feeling could’ve been shared.

Letting out a groan of frustration, Ben turned on his back and removed the blanket with a firm kick that instantly threw the sheets to the floor. The cold air of the room immediately seized every inch of his bare skin that was soon covered with painful goosebumps. Ignoring the alarm he still hadn’t turned off, he took a deep breath before heading to his wardrobe where he picked the usual
combination of jeans and shirt he’d settled on for the last two weeks, covered by a black sweatshirt almost blending with the hair hanging above his shoulders. It wasn’t exactly the kind of outfit Lando would approve of, but he’d made it very clear during their last common visit to the hospital that he wasn’t about to start wearing yellow shirts or red jackets as his godfather had recommended.

It had now become a habit for them to meet at the hospital every morning. The cafeteria’s muffins were floppy and their coffee deplorable, but it seemed that apart from the two of them, no visitors dared to tread upon the white corridors at such early hours. Of course, Snoke had found out, as he always did. It had raised some questions from him, mostly concerning Ben’s ability to focus on his work, but he surprisingly hadn’t suffered any other consequences yet.

“So, how are things with Rey?” Lando asked with a playful voice half an hour later as they finished their first coffee.

A wince crossed Ben’s face at the sound of her name, and he dove back into his coffee cup with a shrug. Bad, he thought. Things were bad, and non-existent. And over.

“Oh, that’s not good,” Lando commented with a frown.

Unable to contradict his godfather, Ben shrugged again as he placed his cup on the small table placed between them, his shifty eyes searching for a point to linger on that wasn’t the worried gaze he could feel on him.

“I don’t think she wants to see me again,” he mumbled sheepishly.

“Are you such a bad kisser?”

Suddenly shifting his gaze on the man now nervously smiling at him, Ben rolled his eyes and let out a sigh as he sunk deeper into his chair, wondering why he hadn’t come up with a lie instead of the ugly truth.

“Sorry,” Lando immediately added, an empathetic voice making up for his previous smirk. “I’m sure you’re… perfectly fine. What happened?”

Considering the few options he had, Ben bit the insides of his cheek as he realized he had no idea what exactly happened. He’d made up a dinner with his so-called “friends” to impress Rey and push her to present him to her own friends, before accusing her of being ashamed of their relation and confessing his love in what had been more of a scream than the romantic declarations those stupid Christmas movies loved to use at every opportunity. Putting it that way, the evening sure didn’t sound exactly pleasant. Maybe he actually was a bad kisser, but the thought only dragged him back to the fact that not only did he miss Rey’s laugh and presence; he also missed her lips.

“I guess I needed to talk, but she didn’t.”

A short silence fell between them, soon broken by Lando taking a deep, disapproving breath. “Needed to talk as in… to talk?”

Frowning at the in comprehensible insinuation, Ben started peeling the cup’s edges with the tip of his fingers, covering the table with scraps of brown paper covered by coffee stains.

“As in I told her I love her,” he grumbled nervously.

He would’ve expected his godfather to laugh, gasp or exclaim that it was one of these unwritten rules Ben had never understood not to say that kind of thing. Instead of that, one of his hands left
the cup he was holding to land on Ben’s in a reassuring gesture, his eyes as warm as his palm.

“Love can be tough,” he murmured after a few seconds of silence.

Nodding in agreement, Ben looked up only to see the man’s mouth hesitantly open then close immediately. Besides the usual calls to remind him to reply to his texts and the first time he’d accompanied him to the hospital, Lando wasn’t someone who was at ease with serious conversations. In fact, the first serious conversation he could remember having with him had occurred after Ben decided to leave the family house: his godfather had been the only one he’d accepted to talk to after an entire week of ignoring his parents’ calls.

The memory appeared as clear as if it’d happened last month: sitting in one of these old chairs in his restaurant, Lando hadn’t asked him once to come back or talk to his family. Instead of that, he’d insisted to fill his cup of coffee more than twice and made sure he had a place to stay and enough to eat, along with the promise that he would reach out to him if the need presented itself. Lando was many things, including an incorrigible joker and seducer, but he definitely was the best godfather his parents could have chosen for him.

“We should get going,” Ben mumbled as he removed his hand and got up.

The walk to the elevator was a silent one, same as the ride to the third floor. A brief yet firm jolt twisted Ben’s stomach as he heard the familiar ‘ding!’ announcing the opening of the doors, narrowing his eyes in search of any sign of life behind the metallic doors. He’d run into Poe twice since Rey had stopped answering his calls. Not a word had been exchanged, but the look in the mechanic’s eyes had been enough for him to know that Rey had probably spoken to him, and probably not in a good way. Lucky for him, Lando hadn’t lingered more than necessary, exchanging a few polite words without once forcing Ben into a conversation he didn’t want to have.

The room was as silent as every day, the purring of the respiratory assistance lulling Ben to a calm state of mind as he claimed the armchair settled next to the bed.

“What’s up dad?” he said with the most casual voice he was capable of as Lando greeted him as well, sitting on the chair next to Ben’s and throwing his jacket on its back.

After weeks of daily visits, the awkwardness they’d first felt while talking to the unconscious Han had finally left, giving way to a weird facility to maintain conversations without ignoring the third, silent person in the room. If Ben still found it easier to read whenever he came there alone, his godfather made the mornings surprisingly easier by talking about the last shenanigans his waitress, Ellie, had been up to lately and telling Ben about the things he and his father used to do before he was even born, or when he was too young to remember.

Day after day, he’d discovered a new Han through these stories: a cunning, rough yet loyal friend who’d never hesitated to follow him in whatever Lando had been doing during his youth and still refused to talk about- far from the image of the cold-hearted and absent father Ben had accustomed himself to. He hadn’t spared himself of the stories about his father’s panic at the announcement that his mother was pregnant, nor had he skipped the details of his old friend’s struggles during the first few weeks of his life with whatever being a dad involved. First reluctant to hear about this, Ben had gradually found himself amused yet surprised to hear that Han had always been the one to get up and end his night on the sofa, his son and dog both laying on his stomach in the middle of the living room.

“God, I wonder how you didn’t kill him,” Lando chuckled after telling Ben about the time he’d been so well hidden during a hide-and-seek game that Han ended up calling the police, only to find
Ben deeply asleep in the doghouse half an hour later.

The small smile that’d reached Ben’s lips slowly faded at his godfather’s words. Careful not to alarm him, he took a deep breath and bit his lips as he swallowed the lump that was quickly settling in his throat.

“I’ll go get some coffee. You want something?”

With his eyes still fixed on his hands, Ben shook his head and remained silent until he heard Lando’s steps echoing in the large corridor. As soon as he knew he couldn’t be heard, he allowed himself to inhale deeply and focused on his breathing, trying not to let his emotions submerge him.

_Deep breath, hold, release._ The words quickly echoed inside his head as his hand gripped the edge of the bed. The words Lando had said were just a joke, he definitely didn’t mean it - yet, they were slowly starting to join the mantra and engulf it, sounding louder and louder. Feeling his heartbeat accelerating and his chest heaving quicker than seconds ago, Ben tightened his grip on the bed. His knuckles turned as white as his face and he soon felt his nails dig into his palm, the sharp pain nearly dragging tears from his eyes.

_He’d almost killed his father._ The little voice, the one who never failed to remind him how much harm he’d done, came back with a vengeance as he tried to focus on the mantra that was supposed to calm these moments, but the voice only grew louder and louder. _He’d ignored his mother, even though she’d never stopped inviting him over to every Christmas dinner. He’d disappointed his boss, who (despite his harsh) words had offered him everything he needed and promised him success._ His vision started to blur as he felt something warm drip from his palm and sneak under his nails.

Gritting his teeth, Ben released his grip on the bed’s handle and let his hand crawl to his father, in search of his. It still felt odd that after years of quarrels and absence, he only felt the need to hold his father when the gesture couldn’t possibly be returned. Sneaking his fingers around the tepid ones of his father, he surrendered to the need he’d felt for what seemed to be years and firmly squeezed the motionless hand.

“You’re never here when I need you,” he whispered as he looked up from his feet to stare at the frozen face of his father.

There they were: the words he’d firmly kept from crossing his lips every time he found himself alone in this room. Fearing another outburst as the first time he’d visited him, Ben had always cautiously settled for reading instead of talking about his day as the nurse had suggested. Life wasn’t a Christmas movie, and he was sure his father would’ve hated to have people crying their eyes out on his hospital bed while shaking a souvenirs box under his unconscious nose. He sure would’ve hated it, yet Ben couldn’t stop himself from releasing the words that were now begging to be set free, almost burning the tip of his tongue.

“I’m here now,” he continued on a faltering voice. “I’m here, and I need you.”

His cheeks were becoming wetter with every word, his fingers trembling as he tightened his grip on Han’s hand once again.

“I’ve been reading you this stupid book for weeks, and I still don’t understand why it’s your favorite. I don’t know why you would like such a sappy thing, and I’m tired of being mad at you.”

Suddenly, it was as if the words had completely taken over his mouth, easily flowing to such an extent that all his thoughts bumped into the others to end in the rambling discourse he couldn’t
stop.

“The coffee here is awful, I screwed everything up again and I miss you,” he croaked. A new wave of tears streamed down his face as the old ones snuck between his parted lips, leaving a salty taste on his tongue as he kept articulating, his breath following with difficulty. “I fucking miss you. Why won’t you wake up?”

The last words echoed in the room as Ben realized how sharp they’d come out. Swallowing with difficulty, he took a deep breath and exhaled slowly, focusing on the hand he still hadn’t let go of.

“Yell at me,” he murmured pitifully. “Tell me I was stupid, anything, but fucking-wake-up.”

His teeth still gritted from the anger that’d joined his demand, Ben rested his forehead against the cold bed’s handle, giving himself a few seconds to process the flow of emotions that’d submerged him in less than a minute. He knew deep down that coming here every day wasn’t a good idea. His heart couldn’t handle another deception, nor could he allow himself to hold on to the hope that he would be able to talk to his father one day, and apologize for way too many things.

Just as he raised his free arm to wipe his tears away, a brief, weak squeeze made him cease all movement. Not certain if he’d made it up, Ben remained motionless, waiting for another sign before allowing his heart- that had already started to drum against his chest- to completely go loose. After a few seconds, the fingers trapped under his hand slightly moved and clenched around his, squeezing him again.

“Dad?”

Not fully believing what was happening under his eyes, Ben risked a glance at the monitor: the lines were dancing quicker than usual, accompanied by a steady beep that didn’t seem aware of what was happening. Just as his eyes lingered back on their hands, his father’s chest heaved higher than usual.

Now, his heart missed a beat.

“Lando?” He called with a wobbly voice.

Not taking his eyes off the monitor, he called his godfather again, this time louder. After a third call, he finally heard Lando’s hurried steps approaching the door, soon followed by his eternal playful voice slightly shadowed by a hint of blame.

“Keep screaming like that and you’re gonna wake him,” Lando warned with a smile as he stepped into the room.

Shifting from Ben to the bed, his inquiring gaze finally lingered on the monitor on which the lines kept waving faster than they ever had. After a few seconds of silently blinking, his eyes grew wider and a loud ‘pop!’ echoed in the room as the coffee he’d been holding began to spread on the floor.

“I’ll call Leia,” Lando murmured absently as he started rummaging through his pockets, oblivious of the beverage dangerously crawling to his shoes.

“No-”

Ben’s heart seemed to stop and hasten at the same time, his breathing going back to the unsteady pace it had settled on a moment ago. Momentarily looking away from his phone, Lando considered him as if weighing the pros and cons and slowly shook his head, a smirk on his face that only increased Ben’s bad feeling.
“Yeah, you call her.”

Finally letting go of his father’s hand, Ben firmly shook his head continuously as he stood up, eye-imploring his godfather not to press the button his thumb was almost brushing. “Don’t-“

The words died on his lips. His face split between a smirk and a frown, Lando raised the phone to his ear, taking a step back as Ben attempted to take the device away from him. Unfortunately, it appeared that being tall sometimes wasn’t enough: faster than him, his godfather swiftly avoided his arm and walked to the other side of the bed, the eternal beeps echoing in the room as Ben reached him, a look of defiance on his face as he silently beckoned him to stop the call before it could even start.

“Leia!” Lando exclaimed as soon as the tones stopped.

Ben’s heart missed a beat. Only a few inches away, the distant voice of his mother echoed in the device, saying something he didn’t understand.

“Hold on.”

A grin on his face, Lando tempted another step towards Ben who shiftily took one back, furiously shaking his head as Lando beckoned him to come closer. A silent fight then began and, within seconds, the two grown men disappeared, giving way to what seemed to be two children chasing each other around the room. The scene was probably the most ridiculous one that’d ever occurred in the hospital. Desperately pushing his godfather’s arms away while the man kept waving the phone towards him, Ben kept shaking his head, his eyes widening every time his adversary managed to gain ground.

“Hello?” Leia remotely asked at the other end of the line as he removed his arm from his godfather’s grasp.

The sound of her voice made Ben’s stomach take another twist and loosen his grip for a second. It was just enough for Lando, who set his arm free from his godson’s hand and stuck the phone to his ear, deafening him for a few seconds.

“Hello?” Leia repeated, slightly firmer than a few seconds ago.

Swallowing with difficulty, Ben took a deep breath as he grabbed the device in his own hands, ignoring Lando’s victorious smile. Gritting his teeth, he felt his chest heave significantly as his eyes lingered back on his godfather, encouraging him with a thumbs-up and a soft smile.

“I-“ the word didn’t make it entirely out of his mouth, which had turned incredibly dry in a short time. Tightening his grip on the device, Ben cleared his throat before finally allowing the only words he could think of to cross his lips, cautiously articulated with a voice that sounded like the one of a stranger. “He… he’s waking up.”

“Ben?”

Biting the insides of his cheeks, Ben held his breath in anticipation as he felt his heart sink to his feet. A heavy silence followed the unspoken question, during which he considered handing the phone back to Lando. But his godfather had already made his way back into the corridor in search of a nurse, leaving Ben alone with his thoughts and the fear that the call would end abruptly, forcing him to face the obvious anger that his mother had every right to feel.

Instead of that, a sigh echoed in his ear, followed by a soft voice that he hadn’t realized he’d missed so much.
“I’m on my way.”

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‘What’s your real name, Baby?’

‘Frances. For the first woman in the cabinet.’

Mouthing the lines in unison with the movie, Rey didn’t notice Finn’s worried look on her as she dipped her banana in a pesto jar for the umpteenth time since she’d settled on the sofa. On another day, he would’ve scolded her about the weird things she’d been eating for days and confiscated the sauce- but it’d been a week since he’d last made a comment. He hadn’t even had the strength to stop her from eating one of those ready-prepared meals he hated so much, too busy trying to avoid Rose every time she joined them for dinner.

It had been two weeks, now: two weeks since Rey had burst into the house in tears, only to find Rose in the exact same state. Without a word, the two girls had spent the majority of the night holding each other, letting the tears roll down their cheeks as the movies played on the TV became less and less elaborated as the hours passed, until one of them finally remembered that they both had to wake up in a few hours. None on them mentioned this night, yet she noticed that Rose didn’t join her the Sunday after for what used to be their traditional movie day.

Being unable to help a friend was a thing, but seeing a three-year-old friendship turn to ashes within the thick walls of a shared house was something Rey hadn’t been prepared for. As if this wasn’t enough, her own mistakes never ceased to echo inside her head along with a strong feeling of loneliness and guilt every time she found herself unable to reach out to one of them and talk about what’d been twisting her stomach and keeping her awake at night. Where was she supposed to start, after hiding Ben’s existence for so long?

“Rey, what’s going on?” Finn asked for the third time this week.

Barely repressing a sigh, Rey turned her eyes away from the screen to glance at him with an inquiring look. Slumped at the other end of the sofa, Finn kept staring at her with a frown, an arm nonchalantly placed above her legs that he’d moved to his lap when he’d joined her.

“I’m just tired,” she replied with a shrug, dragging another sigh out of him as his brows creased even more.

“Rey…” The pleading tone murmuring her name pulled her to turn back to him as he straightened in his seat, clearing his throat before he spoke again. “You’re my best friend. I know there’s more.”

After another twist of her stomach, it occurred to her that Finn was right: of course there was more. Even though she’d never really had healthy sleeping habits, staring at an earpiece for hours waiting for the signals that she kept ignoring hadn’t helped. She’d never been late at work, yet she managed to wake up late twice in a week, which had obviously led to being late in class and facing the disapproving gazes of her teachers. As if it wasn’t enough, her grades hadn’t stopped decreasing, to such an extent that she was starting to wonder if she would ever make it to the end of the semester.

“I don’t even know why you love that movie so much,” Finn murmured.
Pulled out of her daydream, Rey followed his gaze and looked back at the screen where the two main characters were now walking in the woods. ‘Fight harder, huh?’ Johnny articulated with anger. ‘I don’t see you fighting so hard. I don’t see you running up to daddy telling him I’m your guy.’

Just as a look of realization dawned on Baby’s face, Rey felt her own face straighten. Even after watching it a dozen of times, the scene never failed to send her back to the moment she, like Baby, hadn’t been able to talk about nor deny the idiocy in which she’d sunk. Holding back the tears threatening to break free, she gritted her teeth and took a deep breath, focusing on keeping her voice as casual as possible as she answered Finn’s question.

“I used to watch it with Poe,” she explained with another shrug.

Like every time their neighbor was mentioned, Finn shuddered and blinked twice before turning back to her, visibly looking for the right words to say as he hesitantly opened his mouth.

“Is that… why you’re…?” he evasively started, tilting his head as if his statement had been obvious enough not to finish it.

Ignoring the obvious uneasiness in his voice, Rey gulped and nodded quickly. Saying she missed Poe wasn’t exactly a lie. But the truth was Dirty Dancing now had a whole different place in her heart: a place that Poe, Finn, or Rose would ever be able to fill quite completely.

“Yeah,” she murmured before turning back to the screen, a guilty feeling pressing on her chest. “Yeah, that’s why.”

She remained silent for the rest of the movie, the iron taste of blood tickling her tongue every time she had to bite the inside of her cheeks. How ironic that the only thing left from one of the best nights of her life appeared to be linked to one of the worsts as well. But lucky for Baby and Johnny, they didn’t stay apart for very long. Everyone was allowed a happy ending in movies, which usually arrived quickly when said movie was less than two hours long.

A soft, shy chuckle escaped Finn about ten minutes before the end, along with a nostalgic smile as he turned to Rey right after one the most iconic lines in cinema history.

“Do you remember when Poe said that? At the bar?”

Of course, she remembered their first night at this place. Forcing her lips to curl into a smile, she nodded and waited for Finn to draw his attention back on the movie to let her mouth relax. Looking away from the last scene she now knew by heart, Rey grabbed her phone she’d placed on her stomach and unlocked it to access her text messages. It took her a lot of strength not to open Ben’s conversation and scroll down their old messages as she opened the one she’d shared with Poe, surprisingly more recent.

**You** 07:03 Thanks for last night. Sorry

**Poe** 07:38 No problem

**Poe** 12:24 I’m here if you need to talk

It wasn’t the first time she’d stared at the last words, wondering why, out of everyone, Poe suddenly seemed to be the only person she wanted to talk to. She usually turned to Finn whenever something was weighing heavily on her or when she needed advice, but she could already hear the young man reprimanding her for the imprudence she’d shown and for keeping this all a secret. Of
course, Poe wasn’t in any better situation than Finn, but she knew the mechanic wouldn’t judge.

Slowly, her fingers started to brush the keyboard, typing the words she knew she wouldn’t have been able to say out loud—even less with Finn sitting next to her.

**You 09:18 Can I see you tonight?**

Just when she locked the phone and placed it back on her stomach, the device emitted a weak signal inciting her to grab it again and not disturb her friend who suddenly seemed rather involved in the dance scene. Silently unlocking it again, she felt her jaw relax at the sight of the single word displayed on the screen.

**Poe 09:19 Sure**

After months of making up excuses to sneak outside the house without revealing her plans, admitting she was paying a visit to their neighbor was incredibly satisfying. All wrapped up in one of these loose woolen jumpers she liked to disappear in, Rey crossed the lawn separating the houses in a few strides, focusing on her breathing and doing her best not to think about anything else. Of course, she failed miserably.

*He knows about Ben*, she remembered as her hand knocked three times on the wooden door that was almost similar to theirs; except for the Halloween decoration that hadn’t left the frame in months. A few barks and hurried steps later, the door opened on the familiar yet estranged face of Poe who quickly stepped aside, his free hand holding back the joyous Labrador who couldn’t stop wagging his tail, his eyes fixed on Rey.

“Hey you,” she murmured while caressing the top of the dog’s head.

Taking her time to show the dog how much she’d missed him, she finally stepped in after a few seconds of silence during which she felt Poe’s eyes fixed on her, patiently holding the door and waiting for her to come in.

“Sorry, I didn’t know who to…” Rey started as soon as the door closed behind her, turning to face Poe.

“Don’t be sorry,” he mumbled with a shrug.

Another silence settled between them. Realizing that this was the moment she was supposed to say why she’d asked to see him—but also realizing she’d rather not talk for now—, Rey looked around her. She hadn’t visited Poe in months, yet Finn had told both Rose and her how the whole house had seemed to be shaken by a tornado when their neighbor fell into the sorrow that’d haunted him for the last few weeks.

Remembering the desperate look on Finn’s face when he’d mentioned bottles and clothes covering every inch of the house’s floor, Rey felt a wave of relief as she noticed that the living room she’d just stepped in was far from what her friend had described. Maybe he’d just cleaned a bit, knowing she would come. But the result was still a satisfying and reassuring one.

“How, uh… how are Finn and Rose?” Poe hesitantly asked, breaking the silence.

Finally allowing herself to look at him, Rey felt the weight of the last two weeks spent stuck in the house lowering her filters and patience as she crossed her arms with a shrug.
“Bad,” she replied without any management. “It’s awkward.”

“Yeah, couples can be a pain to live with,” Poe casually agreed with a forced smile.

Visibly doing his best to maintain the expression on his face, he took the few steps separating him from the kitchen’s corner and opened a cupboard from which he grabbed two mugs: one red and the other blue. Silently observing him from the hallway from which she hadn’t moved, Rey realized that the long, messy beard he’d worn all winter had disappeared, giving his face its youthful features back. He almost looked like Poe again, except for the playful smile and mischief had disappeared from his eyes.

“Tea?” He asked, already filling her mug with water.

“They broke up,” Rey heard herself blurt out.

Mug still in hand, Poe looked up from the sink to look at her with an unreadable expression. An indescribable range of emotions seemed to pass on his face as he blinked a few times, his mouth twitching twice before he finally realized the water had started to overflow and wet the sleeves of his jumper.

“Oh.” Closing up the tap, he messily brought the mug to the microwave before clearing his throat and repeating his question. “…tea?”

Nodding, Rey took a place at the sofa he’d beckoned her to sit on. Careful not to point out that the mug was already in the microwave anyway, she watched him busy himself to the coffee machine, his face looking as if it was struggling to know which emotion to settle on and display. As if alarmed by the sound of coffee slowly being poured, Baby left the doormat he’d sat on and trotted to Rey, his eyes a mix of excitement and sadness.

In three years of daily visits from Poe and his dog, Rey had never once seen an ounce of sadness shadowing the canine’s eyes. Feeling her heart twist at the sight of it, she slightly moved aside and patted the spot next to hers, beckoning him to join her. Not needing to be asked twice, the Labrador bent his back just as he did before a jump and climbed the sofa with ease, his tail wagging more than ever. Landing an arm on his back, she felt her lips curl into a smile for the first time in days when his hairy, warm head rested on her lap. Baby’s brown eyes remained looking up at her as she kept petting him.

“And how are you?” Poe asked after a few minutes, cautiously approaching the sofa with their mugs in his hands.

Moving a few cushions to give him enough space to join them, Rey shrugged. “I’m ok. It’s a bit weird because they’re both my friends, but—”

“No,” Poe cut before she could go any further. “How are you?”

Alone, she wanted to reply. Alone, stupid and helpless. Many other words crossed her mind as she shrugged for what felt like the umpteenth time since she’d gotten there. Selfish. Embarrassed. Alone, again. Unable to find one that would accurately describe what’d been going through her mind lately, Rey remained silent, her muteness speaking more than anything else. A timid “thank you” crossed her lips when he handed her a mug filled with black tea, almost giving her a smile. Being the only one in their group of friends who’d succumbed to theine instead of caffeine, she’d been more than touched the day she realized Poe kept a box of tea in his kitchen especially for her, even though he was more often at their house than they were at his.
Neither of them said a word for the next ten minutes, both staring at the brimming bookshelf in front of them. Slowly sipping her tea, Rey let her eyes roam on the familiar DVD covers she’d seen way too many times, brought by Poe every time he felt like showing them one of his favorite movies. It’d rarely been a success, but she couldn’t blame Finn nor Rose: Poe sure had interesting tastes in terms of cinema. Her lips slightly parted as she noticed the white and pink cover of Dirty Dancing. For a few seconds, she considered suggesting a catch-up screening of the traditional Christmas one they’d missed, but the request died on her lips as she realized she’d watched it way too much as of lately. Besides, she wasn’t sure she wanted to wash it of the memory the night she’d made Ben watch it with her.

“What happened, this morning?” Poe asked after finishing his coffee. “When I found you in the parking lot?”

It wasn’t as if her heart hadn’t been acting wild lately- but this question, even though she’d been prepared to hear it, didn’t fail to make Rey’s heartbeats accelerate. Her first instinctive response was to stay silent and ignore the question, but something in her suddenly seemed to stand up. Maybe she shouldn’t. Maybe she actually didn’t want to stay silent anymore. Maybe she was tired of listening to her fears and letting them consume everything around her.

“I was playing laser tag,” she murmured without taking her eyes off the wall.

It wasn’t technically a lie, even though she kept beating about the bush.

“ Alone?”

Her fingers started to nervously brush the edge of her mug and she gulped. Poe obviously knew the answers to his questions, yet his insistence felt surprisingly helpful. If she’d learned something in the past few weeks, it was that her instincts were not to always be trusted. Shaking her head, Rey bit her lip and took a deep breath as she finally let the words cross her lips.

“With Ben.”

A wave of relief instantly brushed her as she heard her croaky voice finally admitting what she’d been hiding for so long. Taking another deep breath, she risked a look at Poe, who was now thoughtfully nodding while absent-mindedly petting his dog.

“You didn’t seem to know him, did you?” He asked after a few seconds.

“I… sort of did,” Rey replied cautiously.

“Sort of?”

A sigh escaped her as she closed her eyes, realizing that putting the whole story into words would be far worse that what she’d feared. As if he’d been reading her thoughts, Poe took the mug from her hands and walked back to the kitchen, giving her a moment to gather her thoughts while he grabbed another tea bag. A few minutes later, a warm cup of tea landed between her hands, accompanied by an encouraging nod from her friend who sat next to her, patiently waiting.

The words finally came, hesitant at first. Between small sips, she started to explain, reluctantly, how it had all started: the earpiece, the games, the morning calls. Her thoughts gradually became clearer as she kept talking, her tongue almost burning as she realized how much the words had been begging to get released from her chest. An almost imperceptible smile curled Poe’s lips when she reached the morning he’d asked about, but faded as soon as she mentioned the period of silence that’d followed their first date.
Of course, she omitted the details of their conversations as well as the movie night. She omitted how it had ended, but begrudgingly admitted chasing Ben out of the house in the early morning, causing Poe to wince. Not once interrupting her, he kept nodding silently throughout the whole story, taking a sip of his coffee from time to time. When she finally reached the disastrous dinner as well as the conversation they’d had on the parking lot, Rey felt a lump settling back in her throat and stopped after retelling the poor final words that had been exchanged.

“That’s… quite a story,” Poe commented after a silence that felt like an eternity.

That, Rey couldn’t deny. Feeling both exhausted and relieved from having said it all out loud, she glanced at the clock that informed her she’d been talking for no less than forty minutes. After so much time spent talking, she would’ve expected the knot around her stomach to disappear or at least loosen, but it appeared that the fear of her friend’s judgement only tightened it.

“He’s not bad, you know,” Poe added with a shrug. “Stupid, but not bad.”

“But I was,” she retorted under her breath.

Shaking his head, the mechanic eased his position on the sofa to better face her.

“Just because you did something bad doesn’t mean you are. You made a mistake. We all do,” he assured, his hand moving from his dog to her arm. “I’m not sure I would’ve done half the things you just told me.”

Not without a frown, Rey looked up and met his gaze. “Do you mean it in a good or a bad way?”

“Both, I guess,” he replied with another shrug. “Bold of you to walk into the lion’s den without knowing who he is.”

“At least my lion isn’t a grumpy bartender.”

She probably shouldn’t have said it- but now that they were into confessions territory, admitting that she didn’t appreciate Armitage seemed way easier than everything she’d just said. Taking a deep breath, Poe bit his lip as if he’d just been caught red-handed.

“I guess I should put an end on it,” he sighed. His foot nervously tapping on the floor, he gulped and looked at his dog who’d remained silent since they’d started talking, returning his inquiring look.

“You should,” Rey confirmed. Gently moving his hand, she placed hers on his arm as well and gave him the most reassuring look she felt capable of. “There are plenty more lions in the sea.”

Despite his reluctance to look her in the eyes, he let out a soft, almost inaudible chuckle. “I’m not sure that’s the expression.”

“Don’t ruin the moment.”

Something between a laughter and exhalation escaped him this time. It was far from the usual sound of Poe’s laugh, but it was still better than the look of sorrow she’d grown use to seeing in his eyes for the last months. Repressing the temptation to ask him about this unexpected relation he’d more or less hidden as well, she cleared her throat and allowed her thoughts to drift back to their initial conversation.

“So… how do you know Ben?”
Saying his name out loud, to someone else, still felt odd- but also very liberating. Visibly surprised by her question, Poe looked back at her, a frown betraying the complexity of whatever the answer was.

“I… god, this is a weird story actually.”

“Who am I to judge,” Rey mumbled.

The hint of a smile crossed his face at her words. Rubbing the back of his neck as he seemed to search for his words, Poe straightened on his seat and cleared his throat under Rey’s curious gaze.

“We were childhood friends,” he started hesitantly. “Neighbors, actually. His parents took care of me when mine died.”

It was now Rey’s turn to nod patiently, slightly frowning at the last words. Poe had only mentioned his family once or twice, but it’d been enough for her to understand this was a sensible topic. Knowing words or gestures of affection would only accentuate whatever feeling had invaded him, she remained silent for a moment, shifting her eyes back to the shelves weighed down with the impressive DVD collection. Once again, she glanced at the pink and white cover and, suddenly, a realization crossed her mind.

“You wouldn’t happen to be the half-brother, would you?” She murmured with disbelief.

Raising both eyebrows at the unexpected question, the mechanic gave her an amused look, an incredulous grin on his face drawing him closer to the Poe she knew.

“He said half-brother?”

Closing her eyes, she let out a sigh and nodded. Probably taking pity on the embarrassment she could feel reddening her cheeks, Poe claimed it his turn to talk and started telling her what she need to know, and more.

She soon realized that she didn’t know anything Ben’s past except that he’d been to the same college she was currently attending. Of course, she would’ve guessed that he’d been a lonely child, just as she’d assumed that he wasn’t close to his parents anymore; but nothing had prepared her for the real story. The Ben he described her was both different yet similar to the one she’d learned to know, keeping a lot to himself while also constantly looking as if he was on the verge of an implosion.

She wasn’t exactly surprised at the mention of a phenomenal outburst from which mainly jealousy and accusations of stealing his friend and family came out. In fact, she felt like she understood; despite his lack of bad intentions, Poe’s presence had probably increased Ben’s feelings of loneliness, something she out of anyone could easily imagine.

She grabbed a few random facts as Poe kept telling the story, a few things that didn’t have anything to do with the main story but that Poe casually dropped from time to time under her suspicious yet curious gaze. Learning new things about someone was always something she’d loved, but this time felt different. Split between the desire to know more and the fact that this wouldn’t help her to forget him, Rey did her best not to encourage Poe and kep a straight face. Still, she couldn’t help noticing how her heartbeats accelerated every time Ben’s name was mentioned.

It was almost eleven when Poe finally ran out of stories –or maybe just realized he’d been talking for a very long time. Not after a few final caresses to Baby, Rey silently walked back to the
hallway, closely followed by Poe.

“Thank you for sharing it with me,” he mumbled while holding the door for her as she stepped out of the house.

Turning on her heels to face him, Rey felt her lips curl into a small smile at his words.

“Thanks for listening,” she returned.

A playful grin appeared on Poe’s lips as he opened his mouth once again. “That’s what family’s for.”

Before she could realize she was blushing, Rey felt her body temperature increase significantly as she crossed her arms, a frown on her face at the insinuation. “We’re not…”

The words died on her lips as she remembered that the joke was far from being accurate. Spending time with someone she’d missed and hearing so many stories about Ben, she’d almost forgotten she would probably never see him again.

“Never say never,” Poe whispered with a shrug.

Gritting her teeth, she still managed to give him a smile as her fist gently met his arm. An incredulous look on his face, Poe frowned at her gesture and, all of a sudden, started giggling. It wasn’t one of those sour, muffled chuckles he’d let out a few times this evening but a sincere, amused laugh as she hadn’t heard from him in months. Feeling something warm inside her chest, Rey then heard her own giggles join his: soft and uncertain. It was a light, nervous harmony- but they were laughing.

Encouraged by the joy of the moment, she let out a sigh and wrapped her arms around her friend’s waist. Holding him tightly against her, she took a deep breath and pressed her head against his chest, firmly closing her eyes as if to fully enjoy their embrace. After a few seconds, Poe finally wrapped his arms around her as well and planted a kiss on her forehead, which she felt a tiny yet existent smile.

Maybe they weren’t exactly family, but Poe sure was the best fake brother she’d ever had.

- - -

“I can’t stay here,” Ben murmured for the umpteenth time that evening.

“You can, and you will,” Lando replied just as firmly as the previous dozen times.

Unable to postpone an important meeting, Leia had texted Lando twenty minutes after his call to inform him that she would only be able to leave her office after 7pm. Of course, Lando had been convincing enough to lure Ben into leaving work early and come back, not once considering it necessary to inform him about the pending arrival of his mother.

Truth be told, Ben hadn’t been able to think about anything else for the whole day. Stuck between the four walls of his narrow office, he’d been replaying the events of the morning again and again, reliving the incredible range of emotions he’d experienced in so little time. Despite his instinctive reluctance to see his mother after years apart, he hadn’t been able to ignore the disappointment that’d hit his chest at the announcement that she wouldn’t join them as planned. If only reunions could happen without a single word being said, he probably would’ve been way happier when his
godfather had casually announced that she would join them soon.

“She hates me,” Ben added under his breath.

Firmly sat in his usual armchair, he kept staring at the wall in front of him with wide eyes. His heartbeat had significantly increased when Lando’s phone rang not once, but twice, announcing two text messages that made him frown and put the device back into his pocket.

“She doesn’t-”

“And she’s absolutely right,” he continued, his hands now nervously gripping the edge of the seat.

Letting out another sigh, Lando rolled his eyes and turned to him; interrupting the coming and going he’d devoted himself to for almost five minutes now. “Will you just calm down, kid?”

Kid. The word seemed to echo in his head, with a voice that wasn’t his godfather’s.

“It’s my fault he’s here,” Ben breathed out.

“It’s not-”

“It is,” he continued, his chest heaving more with every passing second. “He…”

A wave of shivers ran through his body, shaking him like a leaf as he swallowed with difficulty. The familiar lump in his throat seemed to grow bigger than ever, blocking the words that were now pushing and shoving in a hope to make it to his lips. After seconds of intense struggle, they seemed to all rush to his throat and push every barrier holding them back.

“I called him. I told him to stop and he- and his car-”

Panting, Ben stopped himself right before the explosion that’d been threatening to happen for weeks and looked up to Lando with a dumbfounded look. The need to scream had finally come, and right when he was about to free himself of the thought he’d been carrying for way too long, his voice was letting him down. Gritting his teeth with frustration, Ben firmly closed his eyes as he felt his chest shaking under his unsteady breathing, a few tears rolling down his cheeks for what was now the second time of the day.

“Hey, calm down, breathe,” Lando murmured as he joined his side. “Breathe.”

It was the first time in years that Lando touched him for something other than a firm handshake. Pressing his palms against his chest, the man kept asking him to breathe with a soothing voice he’d forgotten, far from the playful one he liked to use.

“You weren’t the idiot who ran the priority and hit him,” Lando asserted while trying to lock eyes with him, “ok?”

The salty taste of his own tears on his lips seemed to increase as he opened his mouth again. “But he was talking to me. I’m the last thing he heard.”

“And now he’s waking up,” Lando hastened to point out. “Thanks to you.”

Glancing at the monitor, whose lines hadn’t stopped dancing, Ben swallowed with difficulty and nodded. Just as he felt his breathing slowly decrease, another text signal echoed from Lando’s pocket and his heart twitched again.

“I’ll be back,” the man promised while glancing at his phone. “You stay here with him and calm
down, ok?”

Vainly nodding, Ben took a deep breath as he watched his godfather leave the room. A few steps, lighter than his, echoed in the corridor and stopped in front of the closed door. After a few seconds of silence that felt like an eternity, a feminine voice rose, asking inaudible questions from which he still managed to grasp nervousness rather similar to the one tickling his throat at the very same moment.

Silence. Incoherent babbles. Another silence. The scheme kept repeating itself for what felt like an hour, despite what the clock hung on the wall assured. Despite his inability to slow down his breathing, Ben was soon able to stop the few tears he’d let his eyes release and glanced at his father’s inanimate body for the first time of the evening. Just as he was about to open his mouth, two soft knocks echoed from the other side of the door, causing his heart to stop and jump at the same time.

The silence that followed the unspoken request was by far the heaviest of the whole evening. Not sure about what to do, Ben remained cemented on the armchair, his eyes fixed on the door that opened slightly after a moment.

A familiar face crowned by greying hair cautiously snuck inside the room, soon followed by the rest of her body. Holding his breath, Ben watched is mother progress inside with a frown, his fingers nervously tangling together as he noticed every detail of the woman he hadn’t seen in years. A few new wrinkles had appeared on her face, accentuating her tiredness but not once taking away the sweetness of her features. When her eyes finally lingered on him, Ben felt his lips part to release the air he’d held so far.

Silently, Leia let her handbag glide along her arm and sat it down, not once taking her eyes off him. His chest still heaving with shaky jolts, Ben watched her approach him with slow, cautious steps then kneel. Carefully, her hands landed above his and he felt his whole body being washed by a wave of relief that seemed to have been waiting years to manifest.

“Deep breath,” she murmured patiently.

Despite her obvious struggle to maintain a firm voice, Ben could still hear a hint of uncertainty. Nodding, he gulped and inhaled deeply.

“Hold,” she instructed.

Her fingers gently rubbed the back of his hand as he obeyed, blocking the air he’d just captured.

“Release.”

Guided by her soothing voice, he repeated the exercise a few times, nodding at every instruction. Finally, his breathing seemed to go back to a normal pace along with his heartbeats and, gathering what was left of his courage, Ben allowed his eyes to meet his mother’s.

“Hi mom,” he mumbled with a shameful voice.

With an incredulous look in her eyes, Leia removed one of her hands from his and placed it on his cheek, a tender smile curling her lips. “Hi honey.”

Chapter End Notes
Han is finally awake! I know many of you wanted the reconciliation to happen, but very soon, I promise ;) 
Huge thank you to the girls from TWD for the many sprints that helped me to write this chapter faster than usual! ♥
The days that followed Han’s awakening were some of the most awkward Ben had lived so far. In less than two weeks, what used to be a duo became a trio: Lando and he were joined by Leia who, doing her best to postpone her many meetings, accompanied them for their traditional morning coffees and visits.

Contrary to what Ben had seen in movies, people didn’t wake up all of a sudden from a coma: apart from the deep breathing and spasms that would sometimes make them jump, Han still looked very much asleep which, according to the nurses, could last from a few days to years. The information was frustrating, yet Ben couldn’t help feeling slightly comforted at the idea that he still had time to apprehend the day they may get to talk to each other again. In the meantime, the room was silent enough to allow him to make up for lost time with his mother, who despite her carefulness not to ask too many questions appeared to be surprisingly interested and calm as she inquired about his life.

Ben hadn’t even winced when she asked about his work, contrary to Snoke who wasn’t as calm and composed when it came to Ben’s regular visits to the hospital. Not once asking about his father’s state, the man made it a point to come every day and check if Ben wasn’t late; asking how his mother was, or what they’d talked about. Nothing, Ben would reply every day, feeling like the honeyed voice accompanying the questions was nothing but another mask his boss wore right before any of his explosions.

The mornings spent with Lando and his mother made the days in this place a little more bearable, each ending with the promise of a few smiles and embraces in a few hours. Only the nights were still filled with regrets, endless wonders and memories he wasn’t ready to let go of. Memories that managed to make their way to his mind even in day time, usually due to the smallest details: a novice entering the maze, a voice on the parking lot or, worse, certain songs echoing through the radio speakers that never failed to make his heart twist.

Today, it was a piece of paper.

It had come out of nowhere, sneaking out of one of the messy piles on his desk when he’d threw his headset after another boring novice who hadn’t stopped screaming in his ears. Brushing its
surface with the tip of his fingers, it took Ben a few seconds to remember why the drawing had caused his heart to jump—but when he remembered, the organ only seemed to sink inside of him.

It wasn’t as if he hadn’t thought about Rey today. Truth be told, he hadn’t stopped thinking about her since the day she’d entered the maze for the first time. Even a month after their argument and her inevitable silence, he could still see her smile and the freckles scattered around her nose and cheekbones. But today was Friday. And she always came on Fridays.

A sigh escaped Ben as he folded the paper in two before putting it in his pocket, promising himself to keep it in his apartment, far from this place he’d hated more than usual as of late. Out of all the places he went, his apartment was the only one she hadn’t filled with physical memories. The bar, Lando’s restaurant, the bowling alley- even his desk was hard to look at, full of memories of her hands traveling down his body and the sensation of her lips on his.

The whole day had been filled with these memories and a sheer disappointment every time someone walked into the bar. There was obviously no chance that Rey, or her friends, would ever come back here, but it seemed like his heart wasn’t fully convinced, still holding onto the hope of seeing her step into the place with a bright smile, earpiece in her ear and voice ready to make his heart miss a few beats. Unable to resist the temptation, Ben still risked a glance to the screen, only to see a bunch of strangers sitting on her table, drinking and gesturing as they talked. Scanning the rest of the tables, Ben frowned as his eyes stopped on a rather familiar figure sitting in one of the high chairs alongside the counter.

Poe hadn’t been here in days. Of course, Ben still noticed his car every morning when he entered the zone shared by their buildings. But the mechanic hadn’t spent a lot of time in the bar, lately. The strongest side of Ben, the same one that was trying hard not to let his thoughts flood his mind, didn’t want to think anything about it- but the other, the honest one, had been slightly reassured to know the bartender wasn’t filling Dameron’s glass until either the bottle or his legs surrendered.

At first, he’d thought the two had finally put an end to whatever was between them- but this was obviously not the case, since they appeared to be casually talking. The conversation must’ve started at least an hour ago: the mechanic’s glass was already half empty and his movements uncertain as he grabbed it again. Contrary to any other night, Armitage wasn’t as detached from whatever Poe was saying: eyes fixed on him, he’d stopped wiping the glass he was still holding and listened to a speech Ben couldn’t hear, but kept observing anyway.

When Poe finally stopped talking, Ben first thought the camera had momentarily broke, until Armitage shook his head and took a bottle from behind the counter. Ignorant of the other man’s silent refusal, he kept filling his glass, imperturbable. A few seconds passed, then a minute, before Poe finally emptied the glass with a sigh. Whatever was happening on the floor below wasn’t like what Ben had observed numerous times in the past months. Repressing a sigh, he grabbed his jacket and left the room without even turning the computers off, his feet guiding him through the narrow stairs leading to the bar. Just as he opened the door, Armitage’s voice achieved to confirm his doubts, hissing and stiff.

“It’s actually a relief; I didn’t know how to get rid of you.”

Something in Ben’s chest seemed to tighten and grow at the words, just as the desire to punch the bartender grew bigger than usual.

“So… we’re good?” Poe asked, a hesitant tone in his voice.

An exaggerated chuckle escaped Armitage as he shook his head with disbelief. “Yeah, as long as I don’t have to see you cry anymore or act as if I was sorry for-”
“Enough,” Ben blurted out.

In a same movement, the two men turned to him, their faces crowned with raised eyebrows betraying their surprise.

“He’s had enough,” he added as he took the steps separating him from the counter.

Careful not to cross eyes with them, he simply took the bottle away from his colleague’s hands and placed it a few inches away, out of his reach. A sour, mocking chuckle echoed from behind the counter, soon followed by Armitage’s voice

“You better behave if you want me to save your dates again.”

A brief, cold shiver washed over Ben at the mention of the dinner. “No need,” he grumbled as he felt Poe’s eyes land on him.

“I was leaving anyway,” the mechanic said after an awkward glance at the bartender who, visibly upset, mumbled something none of them understood. Just as his foot met the ground, Poe’s leg almost surrendered under his weigh before Ben narrowly caught him.

“You can’t drive like this,” he mumbled as Poe vainly tried to get on his two feet by himself. “I’m taking you home.”

Indifferent to the man’s silent protest, he wrapped one of his arms around his torso and let him lean on his shoulder. Bending of a few inches to meet his size, he almost missed Hux’s snarky remark, breathing with as much sarcasm as he would’ve expected from him.

“Brothers solidarity, now?”

Pivoting on his feet with difficulty, Poe let out a sigh. “We’re not-

“Oh shut up,” Ben cut, faster than the man he was struggling to drag to the exit.

Taken aback by the rudeness, the bartender remained silent for a moment, his face as red as the napkin hanging on his shoulder before he finally seemed to find his words. “I’m sure the boss would love to hear about that!”

“Make sure you tell him about the free drinks!” Ben said as he stepped outside, one hand keeping the heavy door open while the other tried to keep Poe in place, despite his insistence to go back to his own car. After a brief fight during which Ben mostly blocked Poe’s floppy punches aiming into nothing, the two of them let out a few awkward chuckles, weak smoke leaving their lips and tangling together in the coldness of the night.

“I’m not drunk,” the mechanic finally articulated. “I stopped that.”

Despite the smile he was trying hard to display, shame was audible behind each of his words. He sure wasn’t as inhibited as he’d been for the last few weeks: his voice wasn’t shaking and his eyes seemed rather focused on him as he shrugged, patiently waiting for Ben’s final decision. Something in him had changed, beside the beard he’d finally shaved; something that pushed Ben to let go of the icy tone he’d used with him for years.

“I know, but let’s not run any risk.”

Just as he said the words, the memory of his father’s voice being interrupted by a crashing noise through a phone made its way back into Ben’s mind. He’d already lost way too much. Quick to
focus on his breathing before the memory seized him, his eyes met Poe’s and, without any words, he understood the same idea had crossed his mind.

“Whatever you say,” he agreed in a whisper.

Relieved to know he wouldn’t have to carry Poe all the way to his car, Ben loosened his grip on his wrists and nodded nervously before leading the way to the parking spot he’d used for years. Distant from the rest of the cars, the grey Cadillac greeted them at the corner adjacent to the emergency exit. With a quick squeeze on his keys, Ben unlocked it and opened the passenger’s door to Poe and walked around the car, sinking in his seat as well.

“I’ll need your address,” he mumbled while buckling his belt.

Ignoring the sense of deja-vu as he typed the street name into his GPS, Ben settled his phone on the dashboard and glanced one last time at his passenger. Far from the confident Poe he’d grown up with, this one seemed closer to the child he’d heard crying for nights, sheepishly staring in front of him as to avoid eye contact. For the second time that night, something in Ben felt the need to protect Poe, or at least give him a reason to smile.

“He woke up,” he said in a rather composed voice.

Visibly surprised as well by his tone, Poe raised an eyebrow. Slowly, a small smile made its way to his lips. “I know.”

His lips slightly curling as well, Ben looked away and nodded nervously as he started turning his keys into the ignition and guiding the car away from the parking lot they’d both seen way too much as of late. The whole ride was spent in silence, only the sound of raindrops crashing against the windshield dragged them out of the steady roaring of the engine. Not once taking his eyes off the road, Ben started to wonder if he’d already visited Poe in the past and forgotten about it as he realized he had barely looked at the GPS, venturing between the residential streets that Poe pointed at.

When they finally took the last few meters separating them from the red dot on the map, Ben felt his heart drop to his feet at the realization of where they were. Doing his best to focus on parking his car into the last free spot of the street, he still couldn’t help glancing at the house next to Poe’s from time to time, swallowing with difficulty. Of course, they had to be neighbors.

Probably alerted by the loud heartbeats Ben could feel drumming against his temples, Poe turned to him with a knowing smile. “I heard you’re a regular here.”

“Was,” Ben corrected after a brief hesitation. There wasn’t any point in lying or hiding it anymore, especially since the man was obviously in the know. Dragged back to the memory of the first and last time he’d been here, Ben let out a sigh and leaned against the back of his seat. A few seconds passed, weighed down with a silence that meant enough for Poe to use a more cautious voice as he broke it.

“She misses you, you know.”

Of course, Ben would’ve loved to let his brain absorb the information and digest it the way any other regular brain would’ve: smiles, shivers- maybe even butterflies in the stomach. Instead of that, the sound of Rey’s voicemail echoing in his apartment rushed back, along with the look in her eyes the night he’d left her in the parking lot.

Avoiding Poe’s eyes he could still feel on him, Ben shrugged and opened his door. Just as he cut
off contact, the bitter coldness of the night met his face and exposed arms, pulling an almost inaudible fuck out of him as he walked around the vehicle, rubbing his hands against each other in a vain attempt to warm them.

“Keys?” he asked in a breath as he opened Poe’s car, a huff of smoke escaping his mouth as he spoke.

After a brief rummage through the pockets of his orange jumpsuit, the mechanic tossed him a bunch of keys Ben barely caught mid-air. Gritting his teeth at the new cold contact, he closed the car with his free hand and offered his shoulder for the second time of the night to a rather staggering Poe who, unstoppable, kept talking as he leaned on him.

“I can’t believe he used the brothers argument against us,” Poe said as they crossed the lawn. “It’s not like it’s been years.”

Remaining silent, Ben still glanced at him with a frown as the words slowly made their way to his brain. Careful not to look at the other house on his right, he focused on the way leading to Poe’s doorway, trying not to step on the flowers as his free hand reached the keyhole. Stumbling among the many keys, Ben let out a sigh of relief as he finally found the right one.

“We’re still brothers,” he mumbled as the lock clicked, allowing the door to open of a few inches. A chuckle echoed in his ear, pulling him to finally look at the owner of the house.

“We’re not,” Poe retorted. Lazily, he shoved the door fully open with his elbow and snuck in, revealing the inside of a house Ben had heard of many times, but had never seen from his own eyes.

The living room was typically what he would’ve expected the man’s house to be like: not quite messy, but still very much betraying the fact that the majority of his time was spent here. The walls were almost indiscernible, concealed behind band posters and shelves threatening to break under the weight of the many DVDs and books placed on them. Before he could continue his observation of the room, a golden Labrador Ben had only ever seen through the screen linked to the security cameras ran to them, pushing a few objects out of his path.

“Hey,” he muttered as the dog hastily sniffed his hands.

As if warned by his voice, the Labrador rose on his back legs and landed his massive paws on Ben’s chest, which narrowly caught him before the two of them fell in a messy, slimy embrace. Lucky for him, Poe mumbled something that immediately calmed the dog and made him trot to a basket he slumped in. Almost simultaneously, his owner risked a step towards the sofa, immediately pulled back by Ben.

“Careful,” he warned. Cautiously, he helped Poe sit on the sofa, only letting go of him once he seemed settled enough not to fall or risk anything.

Not without a deep sigh, Poe stretched out and nonchalantly placed his legs on the armrest. “You would’ve come for Christmas and gave me a fucking present if we were brothers.”

Taken aback by the sudden accusation, Ben looked up from the blanket he’d grabbed from the floor and let out a small chuckle. “I’m not sure I would’ve been welcome,” he started to explain with a forced smile.

Of course, he would’ve been: the texts he’d received from Leia and her recent confessions about missing him were enough for him to know it. But sitting on a table while knowing full well he
would’ve filled the void left by his father after—even accidentally—sending him to the hospital wasn’t something he’d been ready to do. And truth be told, he absolutely didn’t regret the way he’d spent his Christmas night.

“Alright,” he whispered with haste in an attempt to chase the memory of Rey’s voice from his mind. “You should sleep. And drink water.”

“Yeah, I know how it works,” Poe mumbled.

Even though he hadn’t reached the peak of his drunken capacity, Poe still had this irritated frown distorting his face in a way that never failed to age him by more than a few more years. Biting his lips, Ben stood up, his eyes not leaving the sleepy man as a sigh escaped him. “You should also stop drinking anything else.”

Raising both eyebrows, Poe let out a sarcastic chuckle as his eyes lingered on Ben, obviously struggling to stay open. “You can’t suddenly come back into my life and fix everything.”

“I know,” Ben replied with a shrug, “but I can tell my mother.”

Almost immediately, the smile he’d displayed left Poe’s lips and he blinked twice, his eyes searching for any hint of lie in Ben’s. When it became obvious after a few seconds of silence that his unexpected guest wasn’t bluffing, the mechanic dramatically threw his head backwards and nodded, a deep sigh heaving his chest.

“Ok,” he grumbled.

Oddly satisfied, Ben nodded as well and felt his lips curl into a small smile he couldn’t help being surprised about. Talking with his mother was only just starting not to feel weird, he wasn’t sure he would ever find the right moment or words to tell her about something she probably already knew about— but Poe didn’t need to know that. After one last glance to the kitchen to make sure no bottled were waiting for Poe, Ben stepped over the dog that hadn’t left his spot over the last few minutes and took the few steps that separated him from the main door. The night may be young, it was a miracle they hadn’t engaged further on the topic of his absence, or Rey and, apparently, Poe’s knowledge of what she was to him.

Gritting his teeth as he kept thinking about her only being a few meters away from him, Ben hunched his shoulders and plunged his hands into his pockets. As if the whole evening hadn’t been enough, his right fist met the familiar texture of creased paper, causing his heart to miss a beat. Eyes closed, he took a deep breath and, slowly, allowed his fingers to brush the drawing he’d almost forgotten. Of course, it was only paper, but he could’ve sworn something in it was burning the tip of his fingers.

“Does she really?” he heard himself ask in a murmur. “Miss me?”

He didn’t need to turn around to know Poe was looking at him. “More than she’d like to admit,” he assured with a softness Ben hadn’t heard from him in years.

Brushing the edges of the drawing again, Ben instinctively nodded as he felt his thoughts tumbling out, all converging to the same insane idea he certainly couldn’t surrender to.

“Hey, Ben?” Poe called him as he grabbed the handle. In the blink of an eye, Ben turned on his heels and gave him an inquiring look, his heart hastening as he met the mechanic’s smile. “They gave me a spare key,” he said while pointing at the shelf next to the door. “Blue one, on the left.”
Cleaning up had never been Rey’s cup of tea, yet she’d spent most of her afternoon following Finn’s advice. In a few hours, what first felt like a torture that only increased the already high level of mess in her room was finally starting to look like what her roommate had promised her: a pile of old memories she was almost eager to throw away in the morning. First afraid she would only end up keeping everything just as she always did, she’d found herself oddly satisfied by the idea of getting rid of all the things she didn’t have any use of anymore. Clothes, notebooks, books: almost everything had been meticulously scrutinized and sorted, giving her a new satisfaction as the place felt somewhere between new and fresh. Only a few things had remained hidden in a small shoe box, far away from Finn’s X-rays he called eyes.

Sitting on the uncomfortable chair facing her desk, Rey yawned for the second time that night. It hadn’t even been an hour since she’d started rummaging through the old memories she’d concealed in the cardboard, yet it felt like she’d been reading for years. One after the other, greeting cards and birthday wishes passed before her eyes, all written in the perfect handwriting her foster mother had always fascinated her with. Opening the box again had sure felt weird, but reading years of the one-way wishes Mrs. Johnson had tirelessly kept sending her brought many feelings Rey wasn’t sure she needed right now. Guilt, mostly— but also shame.

These feelings hadn’t really left her for the past month, and even increased every time she looked at the earpiece she hadn’t had the heart to move away from her nightstand. Glancing at it at the thought, Rey abandoned the box she’d been studying and let out a sigh. If she was to completely follow Finn’s advice the device should go inside the box along with Mrs. Johnson’s cards and the few objects she didn’t want to throw away but didn’t need to keep close at hand; yet, she wasn’t ready yet to say goodbye to these memories. Turning back to her desk, she closed the box and let it meet the floor with a muffled noise, soon followed by her chair creaking as she left it for her wardrobe. Jumper, jeans, socks. One by one, the items flew across the room to fall around her bed, giving her room its usual messiness back. It didn’t take her long to slip into the large T-shirt she used as a pajama and flopped onto her bed, the sound of squealing springs accompanying her fall.

_She really needed to change this mattress_, Rey thought as her body bounced against the cold blanket. As if to confirm her thoughts, a hesitant knock echoed on her door, making her suddenly aware of the commotion she’d created for the past minutes. _What time was it, actually?_ Biting her lip, she got back on her feet and walked to the door, a hand pulling the edge of her T-shirt in an attempt to hide her thighs as the other opened the door with all the delicacy she was capable of.

“Sorry,” she mumbled, searching for Finn’s scolding look, “I was—”

The words died on her lips as she met two eyes that weren’t Finn’s or Rose’s, but two brown irises she would’ve recognized in a million. Two wide, expressive eyes staring at her with such intensity she felt her heart make a loop then crash to her feet as time seemed to stop around them.

“Ben?” His name almost inaudibly left her lips, meeting a puff of air she gasped with difficulty.

She wasn’t exactly sure how long she stood there, staring at him as if he was a hallucination. Truth be told, she almost thought he was: after weeks spent wishing something similar would miraculously happen, seeing Ben standing in her doorway almost felt unrealistic. Wishing to see him again was one thing, but suddenly finding herself in front of him was enough to render her speechless, with eyes as wide as the many CDs she’d thrown away earlier that day. She was probably having a very lucid dream.
He still had this jacket she’d refused multiple times, too proud to admit she’d love wearing it despite the significant size difference. Slightly shorter hair- and he’d shaved.

“You forgot it.”

As if awakened by his voice, her heartbeats immediately settled to an insane rhythm and a wave of shivers traveled down her entire body. This was definitely not a dream, she thought as her lungs took in a generous amount of air. Following his gaze, Rey looked down at his pocket from which one of his hands emerged, firmly holding a folded piece of paper. Mouth dry, she took a deep breath and gave herself a few seconds before extending her hand as well. Slightly shaking at the contact of his fingers brushing his skin, she took the document and slowly opened it.

She blinked and felt her mouth open slightly as she took in the drawing she recognized as the one that’d caught her attention a month ago. The hill –their hill- lightened by two moons that almost seemed taken out of a picture and glued to the page staring back at her, long enough for her eyes to get used to the darkness surrounding them. For a second, it seemed like her bedroom disappeared, bringing her back to Ben’s office and to their last moment before everything went wrong.

“Thanks”, she whispered, uncertain about her capacity to speak coherently as she let her fingers brush the drawing for a few more seconds, eyes fixed on her movements. When it seemed like she couldn’t resist any longer, she looked up and felt her heart miss a beat as her eyes met Ben’s once again.

“Can we… talk?” His voice was hesitant, a frown betraying his nervousness.

Talk. The word echoed in her head as she nodded and stepped aside, her eyes not once leaving him as he entered the room.

Nothing had really changed since the last and only time he’d visited the place except for the few shelves she’d lightened earlier, but the tension slowly growing in the air was nothing like the one she’d felt between them during his last visit. Harder than before, sensations of shame and guilt tickled her stomach and she glanced back at the drawing she was still holding.

“How… how did you get here?” she finally managed to babble after a moment.

Closing the door behind him, Ben threw a thumb over his shoulder, nervously pointing towards the corridor. “Third and eleventh stairs,” he recited sheepishly. “Also, Poe gave me his key.”

Suppressing a sigh as well as preventing many questions to cross her lips, Rey nodded. Desperate not to hang stupidly on her side, her free hand joined the other and grabbed the drawing in hopes for the shakings to cease, vainly. She didn’t deserve a gift, let alone this one. She didn’t even deserve Ben’s presence after what she’d done- or, more accurately, what she hadn’t. Gathering what was left of her courage, she risked a glance to his direction.

His eyes were still fixed on her, nervous yet patient. She didn’t deserve him.

“Rey, I…”

“I’m sorry,” she breathed out.

Just as she spoke, something in Ben’s gaze softened. Still frowning, he took the step separating them and opened his mouth, but no sound left it. Silent, he took a deep breath and slightly shook his head, releasing a puff of his scent that enveloped her.

“It’s ok.”
As if to stress his affirmation, his hand came to cup her cheek with a tenderness that made Rey wince. Reluctantly, she pulled away, her brow creased with frustration. “No,” she stated, avoiding Ben’s hand as he tried to reach her again. “No. I don’t get to be forgiven that easily.”

“It’s ok,” Ben repeated, looking at her with a guilty expression.

“It’s not.” Suddenly, all the emotions she hadn’t been able process properly since his arrival decided to explode, throwing her heart up and down her throat as her stomach seemed to knot tightly on itself. As if it wasn’t enough, the guilt that’d only grown wider in the last few minutes started to form a lump in her throat as she caught sight of Ben’s saddened expression. Maybe she didn’t deserve him- but he certainly deserved an explanation.

Begrudgingly, Rey turned away and put the drawing on her desk with a sigh. Glancing back at Ben, she sat on her chair and cleared her throat, silently asking him to listen to whatever she would manage to say. Visibly getting the message, Ben leaned against the door and nodded, crossing his arms with a frown betraying his anticipation.

“I’m sorry for hiding you,” she murmured after a minute of silence. Waiting for the words to organize themselves, she planted her eyes onto Ben’s, looking for any sign of anger or sadness before continuing. First looking as if he wanted to say something, Ben settled for a clumsy shrug, which she took as an encouragement to continue. “Finn and Rose… they’re the first family I ever had. I didn’t plan on them to happen, but they did.” Allowing her own words to sink in, she paused briefly and felt a timid chuckle escape her, more of a breath than a laugh. “And so did Poe.”

“Yeah, he loves doing that,” Ben commented with a soft chuckle as well.

Now that the conversation had started, Rey felt slightly lighter and allowed herself to take a deep breath, twisting her hands together. “I didn’t plan on meeting you,” she added sheepishly. “And I didn’t plan on needing you so much and so fast and I just… hadn’t prepared myself for the day you would leave when you see how fucked up I am.”

The final word came out weaker than what she’d intended, swallowed with the tears she was trying hard not to set free. Of course, she’d had days –weeks- to think about it; but saying it out loud, admitting it, was harder that what she’d imagined. Feeling her vision starting to blur, she bit her lips in a vain attempt to hold back the tears threatening to fall.

“Rey…” Unable to stay away any longer, Ben cautiously walked to the desk and kneeled in front of her, searching for her eyes. “I think I can already see it.”

Giggling through the tears streaming down her cheeks, she sniffed as his hands rose to cover hers. She didn’t deserve his forgiveness, nor did she deserve the tenderness with which he was now caressing her palms, doing his best to calm her shudder. But more importantly, he didn’t deserve the selfishness she’d shown over the last few months.

“I wouldn’t have known what to tell them,” she added with a creaking voice. “Because they would’ve loved you, and I don’t think I wanted to think about that day, I just wanted to enjoy what we had without-”

Sniffing, Rey tightened her grasp on his hands as if to make sure he wasn’t lying. Slowly, she felt the shivers shaking her chest settle to a steadier pace, allowing her to regain a semblance of control. Still on his knees, Ben kept massaging her hands, patiently waiting for her heart rate to settle down.
“Maybe we went too fast?”

Surprised by her raspy voice wearing the remnants of her tears, she gritted her teeth as soon as she saw the effects of her words. Blinking, Ben ceased all movements and looked up to her with an unreadable expression. “You think we did?”

Regretting her question, Rey swallowed with difficulty. “I don’t know, I’m just… trying to see where it went wrong.”

An uncomfortable silence followed her statement, her guilt increasing with each passing second.

“Maybe we did,” Ben agreed in a breath. Abashed, he seemed to think for a moment and planted his eyes onto hers again, his creased brow betraying a worry he was obviously struggling to articulate. “I’m… sorry, if you ever did something you didn’t want to do.”

It took Rey a few seconds to understand what he meant—but only the blink of an eye to shake her head firmly.

“I don’t regret anything,” she hastened to say.

She did, actually. She did regret not going to Poe sooner, and not confiding into Rose or Finn. She regretted not kissing Ben the first time she’d had the chance to, and not letting him stay the last time he’d been inside of this house. But now was not the time to dwell on previous mistakes. Inhaling deeply, she considered him for a moment, one question burning the tip of her tongue.

“Maybe we should… try not to rush into things,” she stated cautiously.

Almost immediately, Ben’s gaze seemed to lighten up. “No rushing,” he agreed with a nod. Slowly, he seemed to relax and continued to massage her hands with soft, cautious movements of his fingers, not once breaking eye contact. “I’m sorry I yelled at you,” he added after a moment, his voice dropping a few octaves.

“It’s ok,” Rey dismissed with a shrug.

“No, I shouldn’t have. It won’t ever happen again.” Frowning as he spoke, Ben sheepishly looked down, focusing on his movements.

Truth be told, the memory of him raising his voice was something Rey had tried not to think about for the last weeks- yet, the shame in his eyes and her full trust in him allowed her to focus on the words he’d used, and the way they’d just warmed her heart. *Again.* As in seeing each other again, and going back to their daily conversations she missed so much. Swallowing with difficulty, she squeezed his hands with hers. Some things still had to change, starting with communication and secrets. As if alerted by her sudden grip, Ben looked up and met her eyes again. Encouraged by his inquiring look, Rey took a deep breath, ready to ask what she should’ve asked months ago.

“So… what are we, now?”

Biting his lips, Ben slowed the circular movements and, after a few seconds of visible reflection, looked up. “Whatever you want us to be,” he cautiously articulated as his eyes locked with hers.

“Would… together be ok?” It'd been more of a whisper than a question. Ben’s hands suddenly stopped moving, making her heart miss another beat.

“Yes,” he murmured with a nod. “Yes, more than ok.”
Repressing new tears from blurring her vision, Rey still allowed a short sigh of relief to leave her mouth. Biting her lips, she squeezed Ben’s hands once again, harder this time, as if his answer hadn’t fully reached her brain yet. *Together.* It almost sounded ridiculous how much she’d avoided that question, when the answer made her feel so much lighter and fuller. A slight pressure around her fingers pulled her back from her whirling thoughts, pushing her to fully lay her eyes on the face she’d missed so much.

Keeping her mind full and hands occupied had been way easier than what she’d imagined, but never had she thought trying to forget someone could be so difficult. She’d heard his voice every morning of the past month, every time her car had stopped on the city hall’s parking lot. She’d seen his smile in his mother’s every time she greeted her with a warm cup of tea, as well as his gentleness every time Leia wished her a good day. She’d missed his nervous chuckles, the warmth of his hands and the way he frowned whenever she hugged him a little too tight. She missed him more than what she’d ever allowed herself to.

“Can I kiss you?”

The request escaped her before she could even think about it, dragging a small, surprised smile out of Ben who kept nodding, not once looking away from her as he whispered: “Of course you can.”

Smiling back at him, Rey took a deep breath and felt her face redden. Slowly, she freed one of her hands and extended it to his cheek. His skin was still cold from his walk. Swallowing with difficulty, she leaned toward the few inches separating them and closed her eyes right before their lips met.

It wasn’t as if she’d forgotten how kissing him had felt; yet, nothing had prepared her for the wave of shivers that came with the contact. Slightly pressing her palm against his cheek, she moved her other hand to the back of his neck, pulling him closer lest the kiss would prematurely end. Following her lead, Ben rose up a little, beckoning her to raise her chin. Moving from her bare lap, his hands landed on either sides of her, using the weak desk chair for support as his height aligned with hers.

Second after second, the kiss deepened, causing Rey’s heartbeat to hasten as she tightened her grip on him. *She’d missed him*- she’d missed him so much she was finding it harder to surrender to her basic needs and pull away to fill her lungs with much needed air. Hardly letting her catch her breath, Ben rose a few more inches and caught her lips again. Surrendering as well, his hands made their way to her waist and, before she knew it, Rey was in the air, her legs wrapped around his waist as his arms held her close.

It all came back quickly and easily- her hand running through his hair while her tongue grazed his lips, begging for the access he immediately granted her. Staggering between familiarity and discovery, she could feel her heart drum against her ribcage with haste, highly contrasting with the nervousness of her movements that were becoming hastier. Her eyes still firmly closed, she barely realized Ben’s breathing had aligned with hers. Not once breaking their embrace, Ben pivoted on himself and, seconds later, her back met the door with a muffled noise.

Not even the possibility of her roommates being awakened could stop Rey from kissing him. Tightening her thighs around him, she felt a gasp threatening to cross her lips as a sensation she’d almost forgotten awakened in her- more precisely right where his sweater touched the thin fabric of her underwear. *They were definitely rushing*- but all guilt had disappeared from her mind, leaving her with nothing less than the feeling that she was floating, wrapped in a warm bubble preventing anything to affect her current happiness.

Anything, except maybe the familiar sound of paws remotely trotting around.
Breaking the kiss, she remained silent for a few seconds, ignorant of Ben’s frown on her when she pulled away. “Baby?”

“Oh… yes?” Ben hesitantly replied below her.

Shaking her head with a smile, Rey motioned to the door, silently beckoning him to put her down. His grip loosened around her as she let her legs run down his sides, goosebumps appearing on her skin where she brushed the zipper of his jacket. Luckily, he didn’t totally let go of her, accompanying her descent until her feet safely landed on the floor. Gliding along his shoulders, one of her hands grabbed the door handle while the other found his. Intertwining their fingers, she curiously opened the door of a few inches and held her breath.

“And I know it’s probably too late,” Poe’s voice echoed from the other side of the corridor. “I mean, both literally and- I’m sorry, I just… I thought it couldn’t wait.”

A surprised, satisfied smile appeared on Rey’s lips as she heard Finn’s voice rise too, sleepy. “No, sure, go on. What’s happening?”

“I was just thinking-”

Before Rey could know what exactly Poe had been thinking about, the door slowly started to close before her eyes.

“I think it’s between the two of them,” Ben explained as she turned back to him with an inquiring look.

On any other day, she would’ve argued and fought to get another glimpse of this conversation. But today, her curiosity was focused on something else; something worth nodding and letting Ben grab the handle, his hand closing around hers as he shut the door behind her.

Their lips weren’t long to find each other again, but this time, they skipped the first chaste moves that usually opened the dance. Guided by her growing excitement, Rey grabbed his jacket and clenched her fists around the thick fabric, beckoning him to turn. A smile curled her lips as she felt Ben do the same the moment he wound up trapped between her and the door. Just as their tongues began to brush, something she’d always known yet never voiced grew inside of her. It dried her mouth and sealed her lips, stopping Ben halfway in his move. It pushed her to tighten her grip on him as the words ran from her chest to her throat, burning everything on their way, begging to be released.

“I love you,” she confessed in a whisper.

A gasp escaped him, tickling her skin. Before she could begin to wonder if now had been the right time to say such a thing, she caught sight of the look in Ben’s eyes, soon followed by an incredulous smile she wished she’d never forget. “I-”

She didn’t let him finish, eager to stress her point. A wave of relief washed over her as she kissed him again, this time tenderly.

“I love you,” she repeated against his lips, more confident than before.

The smile on Ben’s lips only grew wider in response. “I could get used to it,” he murmured, his grin quickly vanishing as she frowned. Holding her breath, she remained silent until the words finally left his mouth on a serious, soft tone. “I love you too.”

Letting out a sigh of relief, Rey closed the gap between them, not giving Ben enough time to notice
the redness invading her cheeks. Shivering at the contact of his hands back on her waist, she remembered how little she was dressed up and smiled. Standing on her tiptoes, she captured Ben's lips again, her hands clumsily reaching his shoulders in an attempt to get him rid of his jacket. The same idea had probably crossed his mind: in the blink of an eye, the heavy coat fell on the floor.

Far from breaking the kiss, Rey immediately grabbed the tip of his itchy sweater as she began to walk backwards, fiercely wishing for her feet not to stumble upon something. Following nothing more than her instincts, she sat on the edge of her bed, one of her hands briefly moving behind her for support while Ben’s landed on either side of her as he bent down, doing his best not to break their embrace.

“Is this rushing?” he murmured as she lied down, gently dragging him with her.

“I don’t know,” she replied between kisses. “Maybe?”

The mattress sunk under their combined weight as she pulled him even closer, the need to feel him against her stronger than ever. Following her lips with his, Ben removed one of his hands from behind her head and placed it at the crook of her hips. Timidly, his fingers snuck under her large T-shirt to graze her skin, drawing a heavy breath out of Rey as she slightly arched her back. Without delay, he engulfed his hand in the small space, a trail of goosebumps emerging under his touch.

“You’re freezing,” he noted as his fingers brushed her skin.

“Cold hands,” Rey pointed out with a nervous chuckle.

An apologetic look in his eyes, Ben made a slight movement to remove his hand, quickly stopped by Rey. Her fingers seemed incredibly small around his wrist; yet, he surrendered immediately and fully wrapped his arms around her as she did the same, her fingers tangling behind his neck.

Slowly, the kisses slowed down until they became longer, softer than the previous ones. Ignoring the shivers traveling down her body, Rey began to take some of these deep breaths filled with serenity as she enjoyed the moment, only beginning to realize what was currently happening.

“I love you,” she murmured for the umpteenth time of the night. Never had these words been so easy to say; this time not a confession, but a promise.

“Yeah, you mentioned that,” Ben chuckled as he rose of a few inches to look at her.

Smiling back at him, Rey bent her neck to catch his lips again, her hands trailing down his shoulders in search of the edge of his sweater. When she finally found it, she twisted the fabric between her fingers. “You could take that off.”

Not without a smirk, Ben straightened up, leaning on his knees while his hands grabbed his sweater by its back. A soft giggle escaped Rey when he emerged from the messy ball his sweater had become, his hair looking as if someone had placed a banger in it. Throwing it aside, he wasn't long to come back above her, shutting her giggles with another kiss she warmly accepted.

His chest wasn’t as cold as his hands, but she could still feel his skin warm up under her touch as she let her hands wander along his ribcage. Taking her time, she couldn’t repress a smile when she felt his breathing hasten as her fingers approached his ribs. Craning her neck, she planted a kiss on his jaw as the tip of her fingers kept going down. Before she could reach her goal, Ben snuck his hand under her T-shirt again, causing her to cease all movements. He wasn’t that cold anymore, but she could still feel her skin shiver under his touch as his palm made its way to her stomach, quickly moving up to the base of her sternum to stop right under her breast- so close that it only took her a
small wiggle to get his hand to fully cover her.

His reaction wasn’t long to follow: looking up at her with both eyebrows raised as he realized she wasn’t wearing a bra, Ben swallowed with difficulty. Just as nervous as he was, Rey gulped as well, her eyes not once looking away from his as she kept absent-mindedly brushing his chest with the tip of her fingers. After what felt like a few minutes, his hand finally moved again, hesitantly grazing her skin with as much caution as if she were made of glass.

Not a moan or gasp escaped her as she would’ve expected, but feeling herself under his grasp sure made her heart drum faster. After a few hesitant moves, his fist closed on the thin fabric covering her, slowly pulling it up and over until she accompanied his movement, sneaking her arms and head out of the T-shirt. A few seconds later, a soft breeze brushed her skin as the clothing joined Ben’s sweater on the floor, leaving her more exposed than ever.

Suddenly self-conscious about her appearance, she wiggled under him with a frown and grabbed his shoulders, pulling him back to her just enough to hide from his sight.

“Everything ok?” Ben asked with a frown.

Reluctantly, Rey nodded, and the words escaped her with a sarcastic tone “Yeah, just… not much to see there.”

A few seconds passed before Ben seemed to understand what she meant, his eyes lingering exactly where she didn’t want him to look. Nervous, she sunk a little more under him and his gaze softened, tinged with surprise as he kept looking at her. “But you…”

The words seemed to die on his lips. Disconcerted, he let out a sigh and leaned down of the few inches separating them. Patiently waiting for his lips to reach hers, Rey closed her eyes, only to open them a second later with a shiver. Head buried in the crook of her neck, Ben dropped a few kisses on her skin, his hands tenderly grazing the bare skin of her arms. A trail of goosebumps emerged under his lips as he moved to her shoulder, a few locks of his hair brushing her cheek.

She could’ve smiled- even giggled- but the pulse she felt between her thighs as his hand reached her back only drew a small, inaudible gasp out of her. Tenderly, Ben kept pulling her closer as his kisses continued, going down until his mouth reached the limit of her cleavage. Holding her breath, Rey rose her head just enough to see his inquiring look, waiting for her approval before going even further- and how could she possibly refuse him anything when he was looking at her like that?

Taking another deep breath, she let go of his shoulders, allowing him to fully look at her. Instinctively, one of her legs made its way between his and her thigh brushed his crotch. Almost immediately, Ben looked away from her chest to plant his eyes onto hers.

He was just as hard as he’d been that day in his office, if not more. Biting her lips, Rey continued to move her leg against him. Holding his gaze while doing so, she let her hands go lower until one reached the edge of his jeans, the memory of their brief stop in his office rushing back as she noticed Ben clench his jaw. Encouraged by the sound of his shaky breathing, she let her fingers continue their race, timidly brushing his growing erection through the heavy fabric. Above her, Ben was visibly struggling not to crush her, his arms starting to tremble around her as she kept grazing the denim’s surface with her nails. No roommates waking up or dinner to attend, this time. Slowly, she opened her hand and pressed her palm against him.

This time, not only did Ben stop breathing: he also closed his eyes, firmly. Rey pulled away, her fingers going up to the button of his jeans as she nervously called him. “Ben?”

Barely opening his eyes, he gave her a nod, his chest heaving. Gulping, Rey tilted her head so that
she could see her fingers fumbling around his zipper which, after a few clumsy tries, she finally managed to undo. Slightly trembling as well, she slowly parted the jeans away to reveal plain black boxers, already deformed by the growing bulge she’d intentionally caused. Before she asked, Ben straightened up once again and extricated himself out of the jeans with a groan.

Enjoying the sight above her, it took Rey a few seconds to realize they were now both as undressed as the other. Smiling, she snuck her hands on his back and crushed her lips against his as soon as he came back to his initial position. She could feel a spasm shake his body as she seized the elastic of his underwear, making it roll down his hips. She had absolutely no idea what she was doing, or more accurately, how she was doing it. When her arms weren’t long enough anymore, Ben took over; deepening the kiss as he clumsily shoved the fabric off his legs, almost falling from the bed in his haste. Doing her best not to giggle, Rey grabbed his shoulders and guided him back above her.

It was now her turn to gulp as he joined her back on the mattress, allowing her to fully catch a glimpse of him. It wasn’t as if she had anything to compare it with, but… God, he was huge. Biting her lips, she extended a hand and let her fingers run along his hips, timidly eyeing him. What exactly was she supposed to do?

“I never…” she started, her heart drumming in her chest as their eyes locked again. “Can you… show me?”

“You don’t have to-”

Craning her neck, she interrupted him with a kiss, long enough to keep him silent when she pulled away. “I know,” she murmured against his lips.

Either her kisses were extremely convincing, or Ben wasn’t able to refuse her anything. Not even bothering to protest any longer, he took her hand in his and guided her, lower and lower. Her eyes not once diverting from his, Rey held her breath as her fingers timidly wrapped around his cock, soon followed by his larger hand. Both her eyebrows rose in surprise at the sensation; he was both soft and hard, in a way she couldn’t possibly begin to understand. Cautiously, she began to follow his movements as he guided her hand back and forth along his length, slow enough for her to adjust to the new sensation. Slightly more confident after a few moves, she tightened her grip on him, ready to hasten her pace. A muffled moan escaped Ben and he suddenly closed his fingers around hers. Preventing her from moving her hand further, he moved it away, struggling to catch his breath.

Before she even got the chance to ask if she’d done something wrong, Ben buried his face in the crook of her chest and planted a warm, hurried kiss on her skin. And this time- this time, she felt something. Twisting under the wave of pleasure that seized her, Rey almost threw her hands on him, searching for a grip among his messy hair as his mouth kept dangerously approaching her nipples she could feel hardening despite his warm breath brushing her skin.

Another trail of shivers emerged, this time along her legs. Delicate yet impatient, Ben’s hands began to wander up her thighs; aiming for the part of her she could feel pulsing with apprehension. Faster than expected, he brushed the fabric of her underwear and stayed there for a few seconds, searching for her sensitive spot. A gasp escaped Rey as she felt the tip of his fingers tickling her clit and she clenched her fists, slightly pulling his hair. For a moment, she could’ve sworn she felt Ben’s lips curl into a smile as his fingers began to rub small circles over her clit.

He clearly hadn’t forgotten how to drive her crazy. With every movement, Rey felt her thighs twitch, her pleasure on the verge of ache. His brow creased with concentration, Ben took a brief pause and snuck his hand under her pants that she helped him take off. Smiling in response, Rey
tightened her grip on him as he continued to explore her with his fingers, bolder than the last time. After a few seconds, she surrendered to the growing arousal she couldn’t deny anymore and parted her legs around his waist, kissing him harder.

“Wait I- I don’t have anything,” Ben mumbled, vainly attempting to pull away from her grasp.

It took Rey a few seconds to realize what he was talking about. “I’m on the pill,” she whispered hastily.

She could’ve gone further into the explanation, but now was not the time to tell him about her acne problems as a teenager. The matter didn’t seem to bother Ben more than that, and he slipped his arms behind her back once again. Just as he did so, their bodies crushed against the other and Rey felt his erection tickle her lower abdomen. Shivering at the new contact, she tensed her legs around him and moved her hands to his shoulders, beckoning him to come closer.

“You’re sure?”

A wave of warmth traveled down her spine as she looked up to meet Ben’s quizzical glance. She’d never been one to know what she wanted, but she was sure of one thing: she’d never felt safer than right now, in his arms, where she could feel his heart drum against hers. Nodding in approval, she took a deep breath and relaxed as much as she could. Equally nervous, Ben stared at her for a moment, his bottom lip concealed between his teeth. Swallowing with difficulty, he eased his position above her, tickling her thighs once again as he aligned his hips with hers.

After one last glance, he shut his eyes and began to move against her. Holding her breath, Rey felt her pulse increase as the movements hastened, leading to a pressure against her entrance. There they were. Something twisted in her stomach.

“Wait-” Her legs fell back on the mattress and Ben immediately pulled away from her, studying her face with apprehension. “Can you… maybe a little more…” she babbled, her hands squeezing his shoulders as she searched for the right words to express her request.

“Sure,” Ben murmured after a few seconds.

It appeared, as his hands left her back, that she didn’t need to say more. As if he’d read her mind, Ben gently grazed the curve of her waist with one hand, the other firmly planted above her head for support. In the blink of an eye, his lips found hers again and the knot tightening her stomach disappeared. His free hand kept wandering along her skin, slowly approaching her abdomen. Encouraged by her steady breathing, his fingers ran down her thighs and went back to exploring her with a curiosity she knew she would never get tired of.

With each caress, she felt her arousal increase and her heart drum louder. Progressively, her legs made their way back around Ben’s waist and their gazing met, dizzy. Following her instincts, she grabbed his hand and moved it away under his inquiring look. Not giving him enough time to speak, she moved her hips of a few inches and tightened her thighs around him. His reaction wasn’t long to follow: wide eyed, a spasm shook his shoulders as his cock brushed her entrance again.

“Just take your time,” Rey asked before dropping a soft kiss in the crook of his neck.

Added to her words, the gesture seemed to be enough for him to understand. Cautiously, Ben began to roll his hips against her, slow enough to send a new wave of pleasure travel down her body. She hadn’t expected it to feel like that. Quicker than before, she felt her groin twitch as the frictions continued, until, finally, she felt the need to ask for more. Dragging him closer, she brushed his lips with hers, nodding her approval for him to go further.
Trembling with eagerness, Ben nodded as well, his erection harder than ever against her. Noticing his nervous frown as he eased his position above her, Rey moved her hand to the nape of his neck, a reassuring smile on her mouth. Timidly, his lips curled into a smile as well and he plunged inside of her.

It wasn’t exactly painless, but definitely worth the feeling of fulfillment invading her. Following her earlier request, Ben remained careful to keep a moderated pace. Despite his precaution, she couldn’t help wincing, her hands slightly squeezing his shoulders every now and then when she needed him to pause briefly. After a few seconds, she took a deep breath and loosened her grip on him. Relaxing her jaw and tensed thighs, she continued to take deep breaths as the pain left, making way for a new sort of delight she hadn’t tasted yet. It wasn’t like what they’d done so far, curious and immediate. Despite the awkwardness and hesitancy, what they were currently living felt insanely intimate and loving. Slightly more assured than earlier, Rey let her hands wander along his ribs as she arched her back of a few inches to ease Ben’s progression. Just as she did so, the adjustment allowed a new sensation to wash over her and she shut her lips, muffling a moan.

Alarmed by the sound, Ben ceased all movement and turned to her. “Did it-

“No,” she tried to articulate between gritted teeth. “No, it’s- keep going.”

Not after searching for any trace of discomfort on her face, Ben nodded and returned to his initial movements. Eyes closed, Rey bit her lips as she felt him retreat slowly before coming back, this time with less difficulty. He repeated the motion, sending a new wave of shiver down her body as she outstretched her legs a little more, throwing her head back. Almost immediately, his lips landed on her neck, encouraging the growing warmth between her thighs to break free.

It was like torture- sweet, maddening torture. Abandoning all hope of control, she wrapped her arms around Ben’s neck and crushed her mouth against his. It was now his turn to let out a moan as she beckoned him to go further, eagerly tasting his lips with the tip of her tongue. So many words were begging to be said, all at the same time. Closer. Here. I love you. Please. More. None made its way to her lips so, instead, she slid her tongue between his already parted lips and kissed him harder, hoping this would convey all the words she couldn’t release.

Wet and hazy, the kiss became messier with each of his thrusts. Following his fastening pace, Rey felt her body twist under his as their flesh seemed to melt together, teasing her more than allowed. One thing was sure; she wouldn’t be able to endure it for much longer. Before she got the chance to see it coming, one last spasm shook Ben and his hips twitched. A second later, something tickled inside of her and she felt every parcel of her skin tense up. Euphoric, she tightened every grip she had on him, palpitations tickling her abdomen with an exquisite ache. His shoulders, his hair, his hips- she captured everything she could between her hands, legs, and teeth, suddenly letting go.

It was quick, unexpected, electric. Panting, she remained immobile for a few seconds before her trembling legs fell back on the mattress. As fast as they’d appeared, the palpitations that traveled her body vanished, leaving her wide eyed and breathless as Ben cautiously rolled on his side, doing his best not to fall from the small bed.

“I think we may have rushed a little,” he murmured coyly after a moment.

An incredulous chuckle escaped Rey as she gradually came back to earth. Regaining control of her body, she rolled on her side as well to face him, ignorant of the springs creaking under her move. “We may have,” she agreed in a whisper.

Running her fingers up and down his chest, she hung a leg over his hips as his arm engulfed her shoulders. Her lips weren’t long to find his, planting lazy kisses as they both sighed with
satisfaction.

“You’re beautiful,” Ben murmured against her lips.

As if to stress his point, his fingers delicately grazed her skin, traveling from her hips to the base of her chest. Shivering, Rey pulled away just enough to bite her lips as she considered him with a small smile. “Stay for breakfast.”

Ceasing all movement, Ben blinked twice, his eyes widening as the corners of his mouth turned into a shy smile. “Really?”

“Really,” Rey repeated before reminding him of their earlier agreement on a lower voice. “Together.”

Smiling in return, Ben ran his fingers through her hair while his other hand drew her closer and, in a soft move, she was on him, their lips meeting again with the promise of a sleepless night.

Chapter End Notes

_He touched the butt!!_ I'm so glad we've finally reached that part eheh, I hope you liked reading it as much as I liked writing it! Also, thanks for your kind comments on the previous chapter ♥
A groan escaped her lips when Rey heard the shrill sound of her alarm echo under the bed, urging her to wake up. Refusing to open her eyes, she threw the blanket above her head and buried her face into the closest thing she could find, which happened to be Ben’s chest.

They hadn’t slept a lot, maybe an hour or two. None of them had been willing to let go of the other, sharing one story after another. In just a few hours, she’d learned more about Ben than she had within a few months, asking him almost everything she could think of- and for once, he’d generously shared.

He’d told her about his childhood- the afternoons spent with Poe, the Sunday mornings with his godfather, and how his father had never once let him face a night of insomnia alone. He’d told her about college, about the passing of Poe’s parents and his conflict with his own. But more than once, he’d told her he missed her, and everything else he’d wanted to say during the month-long of silence. He’d cried a little, but so had she; both at the joy of learning about Han’s awakening and at the realization of how much he’d been keeping to himself.

A smile curled her lips as she felt his hand land on her back, caressing the surface of the T-shirt she’d thrown on before falling asleep. Now that she was awake, it occurred to her that it probably wasn’t hers; the T-shirt she usually slept in wasn’t as heavy and didn’t have a chest pocket. Slowly, Ben’s hand sneaked under said T-shirt and lazily grazed her skin, causing her smile to widen. It probably tickled him, and a soft chuckle echoed above her head.

“You’re awake?”

She didn’t say anything, preferring to nod slowly against his chest. Visibly satisfied by this answer,
Ben tilted his head just enough to rest his chin above her head and dropped a kiss into her hair, his hand still exploring her bare back with the same tenderness he’d shown during the night. Allowing herself to enjoy it a little more, Rey let out a contented sigh and crooked her neck as she opened her eyes, searching for his. His gaze was already on her; thoughtful and loving.

“I could stay like this forever,” she murmured while grazing his skin with the backs of her fingers.

She wouldn’t have been surprised if her eyes had turned into the shape of two hearts. She could feel her soft expression and the naivety in her voice, but she couldn’t have cared less; she’d never felt as safe as she was now, crushed against him in a bed definitely not made to welcome two adults, without any fear or secrets to hide from him.

“But you shouldn’t,” Ben said with a small smile, “or you’ll be late.”

Hadn’t she been floating on cloud nine, she would’ve groaned at the remark. Instead, she furrowed her brows and buried her head into the crook of his neck, refusing to accept that the night had come to an end. “Just five minutes.”

“One.” Despite his serious tone, his arms wrapped around her waist, pulling her closer. Her smile came back.

“Two,” she asked in a whisper.

He didn’t agree, but didn’t refuse either. Grinning at her victory, Rey shifted, careful not to fall as she turned her back to Ben. She searched for his hands for a few seconds, intertwining their fingers together as soon as she found them; before guiding his arms back around her as she crushed her back against his chest.

They may have talked a lot, but the silence was more than welcoming. Just their breathing and, sometimes, accompanied by loud heartbeats, filling the air with something insanely soothing that she couldn’t name. If this was what she’d promised him- what they’d promised to each other-, if this was love, then she was absolutely convinced this was true and about to last. Sighing with satisfaction, she let her nails trail along his arms, causing a few shivers to emerge under her touch.

“Two minutes,” Ben announced after a moment.

Once again, the temptation to groan was there; but she opted for another strategy. As swiftly as she could without breaking the bed, she wiggled between his arms until her face was in front of his and brushed his lips with hers, smiling innocently. His reaction wasn’t long to follow: shifting as well, Ben made way for her to join him and laid on his back as she began to wrap a leg around his waist, deepening the kiss. In just a few seconds, her hands were on him, one on his chest while the other found its grip in his hair.

“You’re gonna be late,” he tentatively murmured against her mouth. His breathing was already unsteady, accompanied by a growing erection she could feel against her thigh, highly contradicting his scolding.

“I don’t care,” she said as she bent down for another kiss.

“My boss will care.”

He wouldn’t. Within three years of experience now, she had only seen him twice: the day of her interview and once at the supermarket in the alcohol section. Shaking her head, Rey moved her hips just enough so that she was now straddling him. Oblivious of the fact that her roommates would get up any minute, she claimed his lips once again, conveying all the emotions and words
she wanted him to feel in a long, soft kiss. Not a single word left Ben, this time; just a gasp and a smile as his hands found their way back on her, slowly traveling from her shoulders to the small of her back, memorizing every parcel of her skin on the way.

She really could stay like this forever: happy, with him, and without many clothes. Unfortunately, Ben was right: she had things to do, which included getting out of bed and turning the damn alarm off. Begrudgingly, she pulled away with a sigh and rolled onto her side, doing her best not to crush him as she snuck out of the warm sheets. She fumbled for a few seconds among the pile of clothes they’d abandoned the night before, wondering how her phone had even ended up there. Just as she grabbed it and silenced it, Ben joined her at the edge of the bed and grabbed his clothes. After a few seconds, during which she watched him struggle with his boxers and jeans, Rey walked to her wardrobe and started to get dressed as well.

The world outside the bed was cold, more than usual. Shivering, she grabbed the thickest sweater she could find and a pair of black jeans she knew would keep her warm, despite the low temperatures. She’d just begun putting it on when Ben’s voice echoed behind her.

“Did you see my-.”

The word died on his lips as a smile appeared on hers. “T-shirt?”

Without looking at him, she took it off and put a brassiere on before she turned around- for whatever reason, the idea of her chest being exposed in the day light still had her slightly nervous.

“Thanks,” Ben murmured as he caught it in mid-air.

His head disappeared under the fabric, giving Rey a few seconds to stare at his chest one last time before she followed suit, plunging into the green pullover she’d chosen. Behind the door, a few noises indicating human presence in the kitchen began to sound. Nothing loud or annoying- but enough to make her heart miss a beat as she remembered her promise from the night before. Not far from her, Ben turned to the door as well, his wide eyes betraying his nervousness. The coffee machine began to purr, and their gazes met.

“I can wait here,” Ben said as he left the bed to join her. “It’s ok if you’re not ready.”

She shook her head and took a deep breath. “No. Let’s do this.”

Instinctively, she grabbed his hand and squeezed it as her other hand closed on the doorknob. Saying she was entirely ready for this would’ve been a lie, but as ridiculous as it was, she had a feeling nothing bad would happen as long as Ben was with her. Swallowing with difficulty, she laced their fingers together and cracked the door open to peek her head outside, immediately meeting the three sleepy faces staring at her.

“Morning,” Poe said with a little smile.

Her heart almost missed a beat at the sight, and she felt her lips part slightly. Even after months of absence, seeing the mechanic in the middle of her kitchen felt like the most natural thing. For a moment, she could’ve sworn she’d noticed a wink. But before she could react, Finn greeted her as well. “Morning, sleeping beauty. Look who joined us for breakfast!”

All her efforts to focus on not babbling or saying something weird had vanished, and repressing a smile became the hardest thing. “What a surprise,” she murmured as her eyes drifted back to Poe.

Sitting next to him, Rose gave her a timid smile, visibly happy to see her friend was finally awake. Returning her smile, Rey suddenly felt something squeeze in her chest as she remembered the
conversation she’d half-heard the night before. Even though the two men had visibly agreed not to mention Poe’s late visit, she would probably notice the furtive grins they kept exchanging across the room.

“Tea?” Finn asked from the counter, pulling her back to reality.

As innocent as the question was, this sounded like the perfect opportunity to make her announcement. “Yes please,” she babbled. “And, uh… a coffee?”

A frown appeared on the two students’ faces, highly contrasting with Poe’s widening grin. Biting her lips, Rey completely opened the door, gently pulling Ben by the hand as she stepped inside the kitchen. There was no going back now, but, contrary to what she'd imagined, the nervousness she'd expected to increase started vanishing, making way to a smile she couldn't repress.

“This is Ben,” she announced under two incredulous pairs of eyes. “Ben, this is Rose, Finn and… I think you know Poe,” she added, pointing at her friends as she introduced them.

“Sleep well?” Poe asked, this time with a noticeable wink.

A short silence followed his words. A mug in hand, Finn had ceased all movements, staring at the unexpected guest as if he’d just seen a ghost. As for Rose, she was blinking incredulously, all trace of tiredness gone.

“I told you she was seeing someone,” she suddenly murmured very-not-discreetly to Finn.

A chuckle almost escaped Rey as she watched the scene. Since their dramatic breakup, her two friends had barely talked to each other outside the usual awkward small talks she’d witnessed during dinner or breakfasts. Weirdly enough, she found herself smiling even more at the scene; just for a few seconds, her best friends were back. Next to her, Ben was starting to tense up, tightening his grip on her hand. Significantly reassured, she squeezed his hand and started tracing small circles on his palm with the tip of her thumb.

She’d barely managed to decipher Finn’s expression when Rose broke the silence, visibly curious and enthusiastic. “How long has it been going on?”

“Uh-,” She turned to Ben, then to Rose, and shrugged. “A moment, I guess.”

“How did you meet?”

“Yeah Rey, how did you two meet?” Poe repeated with the same enthusiasm. It was obvious he was enjoying the situation, and teasing him about his own situation suddenly felt very tempting. But she kept her mouth shut. She would kick his ass later, without any witnesses.

“We…” This was indeed a very good question: how had they met? Was it during their first earpiece conversation, or the day she’d run out of the maze? Unsure about what to say, she turned to Ben, who seemed as speechless as she was, if not more.

“Maybe, uh… you’d like your coffee?” Finn finally asked.

Almost letting out a sigh of relief, Rey turned to him and nodded. She could’ve proposed to him right here and now and, maybe, this would even be a good enough revenge towards Poe. Instead of that, she silently thanked him with a smile that she immediately lost as she remembered what time it was.

“I’m late actually,” she mumbled. “Maybe next time.”
This wasn’t what she’d planned. Not that she’d actually planned anything, but this sure wasn’t what she’d expected this conversation to be. Giving Finn a coy smile as an excuse, she started walking to the door when Rose’s voice echoed in her back, polite and warm. “Are you late, Ben?”

His hand squeezed Rey’s again, this time a little tighter. Rey hadn’t been expecting Rose to say anything either, let alone this. But she knew her friend and her natural ability to make people feel at ease. Giving Ben an encouraging smile, she bobbed her head just enough for him to see, beckoning him to reply.

“I… no,” he mumbled with wide eyes drifting from one girl to the other.

“Good!” Finn exclaimed, “You can stay for breakfast!”

Not giving him time to reply, Finn started rummaging through a cupboard, struggling between falling cookie cutters and rolling pins to get his favorite frying pan. It was the one he used every time they had something to celebrate, and Rey was ready to bet her life that he was about to make pancakes.

This would be alright. As long as Finn was there to contain their friends and feed everyone, no more questions would be asked. Significantly feeling less nervous, she felt bold enough to brush a lock of hair from Ben’s eyes and slip it behind his ear.

“You alright with that?” he murmured as her hand lingered on his cheek for a few seconds.

Silently approving, she nonetheless felt her heart miss a beat as she caught sight of a dark mark on his neck that sure wasn’t there the day before. Biting her lips with a mix of amusement and shame, she cleared her throat and let go of his hand to arrange the collar of his sweater so that the love bite was more or less hidden. Frowning, Ben kept looking at her with curiosity until he realized what she was doing, and a small smile made its way on his lips. “What do I tell them?”

After one last check to make sure his skin was conveniently concealed beneath his hair and clothes, Rey shrugged. “What you feel like telling them,” she said before adding, in a lower voice, “Except last night.”

His timid smile turned into a grin and he nodded, yet remained frozen. Brushed by a sudden access of confidence, Rey gripped his jacket to drag him closer and planted a kiss on his mouth, staggering on her tiptoes in a vain attempt to reach his level. A light, warm trail of shivers ran down her spine as she felt Ben smile against her lips. It was a genuine, heartfelt smile that inevitably broke the kiss, but managed to convince her that this was probably the best decision she’d made in weeks.

“You like pancakes, Ben?” Finn called from the back of the kitchen.

“Go,” Rey encouraged him as she pulled away, her hands still on his chest. “They’re gonna love you,” she added when she noticed a slight spasm shaking his left eye, betraying his nervousness.

Smiling despite his obvious stress, he nodded again and bent down to kiss her on the cheek. Ignoring Poe’s umpteenth wink from across the corridor, Rey gently patted Ben’s chest and pulled away for good, turning back a few times on her way to the stairs to make sure he’d gone back to the kitchen. Just as she reached the main door, Finn’s voice echoed from afar, asking Ben how many sugars that he wanted in his coffee. Zero, she heard as she stepped outside. The answer brought a smile on her face that quickly vanished as she ran to her car.
Lucky for Rey, the traffic was as bad as it always was on every Saturday, giving her a good excuse for when she showed up to the post office, almost a half hour late. Welcoming her with the same expressionless face every morning, the receptionist gave her the usual amount of letters and packages and the coldest ‘Have a good day’ she’d ever heard. But even that didn’t stop her from smiling at every single person around her. Even the reckless driver she almost bumped into on the main street didn’t manage to ruin her morning.

Around 10 o’clock, she finally got to stop her car, welcoming every noise that weren’t those of a roaring engine with a sigh of satisfaction. The Falcon may be as speed and tough as its previous owner had promised, the fact remained that this car was the loudest she’d ever driven. Even her old Honda -Carcass, as Poe liked to call it- had never been that temperamental. Slowly, she took her keys out of the ignition and risked a glance at her phone: no missed calls, and just a text from Finn that simply said ‘wow’.

Biting her lips with apprehension, she threw the device in her pocket and took a deep breath. Now was not the time to start wondering how things were going without her— not when she was just about to see Leia. Swallowing with difficulty, she grabbed the blue cap wearing the post office logo and crushed it to her head, ready to leave the car and face the mother of the man she’d just spent the night with.

“What a beaming smile, dear!” The mayor exclaimed a few minutes later when Rey passed through the large doors of her office.

Just as always, a warm cup of tea was waiting for her on the large desk. Taking her cap off, Rey walked to the visitor’s chair and trapped the recipient between her cold hands, taking advantage of its temperature to warm up her frozen fingers.

“Thanks,” she murmured, giving a small smile that significantly betrayed her happiness. A few seconds had passed, during which the mayor looked as if she was waiting for more and for a moment, Rey almost wanted to spit out the truth. For a moment, she wanted the whole world to know and hear how much she loved Ben, and how much he seemed to love her in return.

Before she got a chance to say anything, Leia narrowed her eyes, a knowing expression falling on her face. “Oh, I know this look. Those are the eyes of a girl in love.”

Where she’d seen curiosity and questioning in her friends’ eyes, Leia’s look only gave her a sense of polite enthusiasm. Instinctively, Rey bit her lips and nodded twice, unable to repress the smile growing on her lips. “I am,” she murmured sheepishly.

Just like Finn earlier, the woman raised both eyebrows, betraying her surprise. Smiling as well, she opened her mouth and closed it immediately, shaking her head with a chuckle.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to… It’s none of my business.” She remained silent for a moment, her eyes drifting to the picture that Rey had noticed a few months ago. “My son never brought anyone home, I never got the chance to be the embarrassing nosy mother.”

It was now Rey’s turn to open and close her mouth; struggling with her own reactions as her brain processed the information she was given. In just one night, Ben had told her about his initial conflict with his parents, and his mother’s tireless efforts to stay in touch despite his silence. Hadn’t she learned about their reconciliation from a few weeks ago, she probably wouldn’t have been able to keep her mouth shut. Despite her growing desire to spread her happiness and assure the mayor that her son had, indeed, more or less brought a girl home, her lips remained sealed. She
had the opportunity to choose when and how to tell her friends; it was only fair that Ben had the same chance when it came to his mother.

“Oh.” It was all tat she managed to say, praying that the blush she could feel creeping on her cheeks wouldn’t betray her thoughts.

In front of her, Leia’s smile slowly began to fade and she cleared her throat, motioning to the cup she hadn’t touched yet. “I’m sorry, I’m probably the last person you want to talk to about it.”

There it was again: the loud, heavy sound of a thought bouncing inside her head, begging to be voiced. After three years of these daily morning conversations Rey had become attached to the mayor, enough to feel like she might be the closest thing she had to a mother-her and Finn, of course. Sure, the tea was nice and she always had a box of chocolate on her birthday but, more than that, Leia always seemed to notice her changes of mood. And always took the time to listen to her, even as childish as her preoccupations might’ve sounded. The memory of her outburst on the eve of her first exams came back, bringing a new smile to her lips. Even then, the woman had been nothing but welcoming and patient, allowing her to cry as much as she needed, not letting her leave the building until she was sure she’d eaten enough biscuits for a whole year.

“He’s great,” Rey heard herself blurt out. Across the desk, the mayor looked up from her cup, the smile on her lips encouraging her to continue. “He really is.”

Her tongue was burning with so many other things that she wanted to say, but this would do for now. Focusing on her smile and voice in hopes to maintain a detached expression, she almost didn’t see Leia’s hand land upon hers, accompanied by a knowing look in her brown eyes.

“I’m happy for you, dear.”

More than happy, she sounded sincere. Mirroring her smile, Rey took a deep breath and raised the cup to her lips, allowing the warm beverage to flow down her throat. Earl Grey, with a hint of orange- her favorite.

“I was your age when I met my husband,” Leia added pensively.

It was a miracle that Rey hadn’t been drinking at this moment- the odds of choking on her tea would’ve been insanely high. Managing to keep a somehow straight face, she let out an almost imperceptible “oh” again, trying not to overthink this information. "How is he?"

“He woke up,” Leia said after a sigh, “but these things take time.”

Nodding politely, Rey glanced at the clock hanging on the wall and took another sip. Ben must have left the house by now; probably even arrived to the hospital for his own daily morning visits.

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Finn’s pancakes were, indeed, delicious. Sure, eating seven of them had certainly not been a good idea, but a full mouth had been a good excuse not to answer every question he’d been asked.

He hadn’t been asked that many, actually. Despite her curious gaze on him, the girl, Rose, had been the most evasive, asking about insignificant things rather than his relation with her friend. Poe, on the other hand, hadn’t been able to contain himself, introducing Ben as his half-brother and
staring with a smirk that had probably already betrayed his own implication within the situation. Lucky for him, both Finn and Rose seemed either oblivious or polite enough not to notice, and seemed to make it their mission to feed him until his stomach felt like a massive boulder. Two coffees and a few curious looks later, the alarm of his phone finally reminded him that he, too, was about to be late. Not after thanking Finn for the breakfast and promising to come back for dinner, he’d managed to leave the house right before the second alarm, closely followed by Poe, who had reminded him that he was in need of a ride.

For the first time in weeks, Ben didn’t join Lando at the hospital. Accompanied by a very enthusiastic Poe, who made it a point to negotiate his Cadillac against a ridiculous amount of money, he drove across the city, resisting the temptation to turn on the radio and avoid any conversation. It turned out, as they reached the parking lot they’d left the night before, that he didn’t need an escape. Surprisingly enough, Poe was of very good company when he wasn’t giggling inside his coffee mug, while Ben tried not to look directly into Finn’s eyes.

For the first time in years, he didn’t bother hiding his car behind Starkiller’s building and parked right in front of the garage.

He hadn’t set foot here for years. Well, he had, but he’d been too busy not looking at Rey to actually risk a glance around him. First hesitant then curious, he followed Poe out of the car and stepped inside the garage, hands plunging inside his pockets while his eyes curiously searched around him for anything familiar. With the exception of the ‘Black Squadron’ sign hanging above the door, nothing had changed: the hangar was still surrounded by numerous shelves threatening to collapse under the weight of many things that’d gathered through the years. Tools, books, files, and even a few vinyls that he recognized to be his father’s: dusted but still standing here and there.

“Thanks for the ride!” Poe said as he slipped his orange jumpsuit on.

Behind his back, other workers Ben that recognized (but didn’t remember the names of) were already getting down to business, their greasy foreheads betraying their prior tasks as they hesitantly waved to him. Suddenly self-conscious about his presence there, Ben awkwardly waved back at them before turning to Poe, slightly confused. “Sure. Anytime.”

A short silence fell between them, during which his eyes drifted back to the shelves that had caught his attention earlier. Slowly, the memories came back, accompanied by the familiar scent of iron and gasoline. Afternoons in which he’d spent watching his father working with cars that he cherished more than anything, playing with the dog or doing his homework in silence. A small smile made its way to his lips as he noticed the small desk that’d initially been settled for him was still there, being weighed down with many binders and boxes.

“Uh- coffee, maybe?” Poe asked hesitantly as he zipped up his uniform.

The reasonable answer should’ve been no, yet, Ben nodded with a shrug, mentally preparing himself for the overdose of caffeine waiting for him as he followed the mechanic to the other side of the hangar.

The morning went on, rhythmmed by the noises of clinking metal muffled by an old-fashioned playlist Poe kept whistling to, interrupted from time to time by a co-worker. It was almost soothing- so much that Ben quickly found himself leaning on the chair he’d claimed earlier, closing his eyes in hopes to make up for the short night he’d had. The sensation of his phone vibrating in his pocket dragged him back to reality, and a smile immediately appeared on his lips at the sight of Rey’s name.
'Did they kill you with embarrassing questions?'

Repressing a chuckle, Ben pondered for a moment, and then typed his answer.

‘Just with pancakes.’

‘Good.’

A quick glance to the clock confirmed his suspicion: she’d probably just come back from her round. Already thinking about something to reply, Ben stopped in motion, his thumbs hovering above the screen. If he remembered correctly, she usually spent her Saturday afternoons alone, studying. The best reaction would be not to bother her and remain silent unless she texted him again- yet, his fingers were already typing. The date of his last message –January 15th, was still staring at him above their current conversation, taking him back to the night prior to the long month. Eager to erase the bad memory with new and happy ones, he pressed the send button, maybe more firmly than necessary.

‘They didn’t ask anything, but Finn wants me to come back for dinner.’

The answer wasn’t long to appear under his.

‘Come back, then ;)'  

He didn’t repress his smile this time, grinning at the device with a look he knew to be one of an idiot.

“Hey,” Poe called him from the car he was working on, “no sexting in my garage, Solo!”

“I wasn’t—” Realizing what Poe had said, Ben stopped himself mid-sentence. “Your garage?”

Almost instantly, the mechanic seemed to freeze on the roof of the white Honda he’d been fixing for the past hour. “Oh! Shit, no- sorry.” Nervously biting his lips, he stared at Ben for a moment and then spoke again. “I mean- I’m in charge for now, but I guess it’ll be yours one day.”

It was now Ben’s turn to remain speechless. Even though being raised by a father who was keen on cars and mechanical had significantly left traces on him, it’d never been a passion. Sure, he could fix a minor issue and thus avoid a visit that would come with an insanely high bill, but taking over his father’s business had never been something he’d thought about. Poe, on the other hand, seemed much more appropriate for the role.

“I think he’d like you to have it, actually,” Ben said with a shrug he hoped would make him sound casual.

Poe had stopped what he was doing, wrench still in hand. Frowning, he cleared his throat and looked away with a nervous smile. “You’re his son—”

“So are you.”

In the blink of an eye, Poe turned back to him, his smile making way to a bewildered look. Holding his gaze, Ben realized what he’d just said; more so how easily he’d say it. Suddenly, it was as if the years of jealousy and bitterness had vanished for good. Not left for a moment or hid somewhere- vanished. Blinking with disbelief, Poe cleared his throat again. “Anyway,” he mumbled with a small smile, “He probably wouldn’t like us to plan his inheritance when he’s still barely awake.”
“You’re kidding,” Ben murmured with a chuckle. “He would organize a race or something and give the garage to the winner.”

Mirroring him, Poe let out a giggle and shook his head. His smile widened, revealing his teeth as he spoke again, his shoulders shaking under his laugh. “Remember that time when whoever would take Chewie for a walk would get the Falcon?”

Ben definitely remembered. They must’ve been seven, eight perhaps. It’d been raining for the whole day, forcing the two boys to take refuge in the Organa-Solo’s kitchen where no raindrop or wind could vandalize the school project they’ve been working on for the past week. They’d been able to concentrate on their work for nearly two hours when the family dog nearly destroyed everything, excitedly running around the house while his owner was being held responsible of the mess by a very not amused Leia. After the umpteenth heated argument that he’d lost with flying colors, Han had decided to join the boys in the kitchen, away from his wife who could still be heard grumbling in the living room. *Wanna win a car?* He’d asked with a smirk that’d gotten Ben and Poe interested in the blink of an eye.

“Yeah, and that was really worthwhile,” Ben said with irony.

More silence fell between them, shortly cut by the two men bursting into laughter as soon as their gazes had met. It almost seemed ridiculous, after years of silence and glaring at each other from one side of the parking lot to the other. It was a bit awkward, too, but Ben didn’t care. All he knew was that, for the first time in many, many years, he couldn’t think about anything going wrong in his life.

“Hold on,” Poe interrupted. Still giggling, he raised his hand in surrender, silently asking for a few seconds to catch his breath. “I’m not even sure Rey ever took Chewie for a walk. Should we sue her?”

Shaking his head, Ben let out a shrug with a grin. Hearing her name out loud was still on the list of the awkward things he still wasn’t used to, but he didn’t mind making it a habit.

Returning to the solitude of his office after spending the morning surrounded by people was by far the worst thing he’d had to do that day. His arrival had, of course, been noticed by Armitage, who didn’t miss the opportunity to call him out on his lateness. Instinctively ignoring it and the many other remarks about his frequentations that the bartender kept dropping all day through the walkie-talkie, Ben only noticed the sun had settled down when Rey texted him around 7pm to make sure he was still coming. He’d just sent his reply when the device buzzed between his hands, the screen illuminated with his godfather’s name.

“Hey kid!” Lando almost screamed as soon as Ben unlocked his phone, “I think you should come here.”

In the blink of an eye, Ben felt his heart drop to his feet and his legs turn into jelly. “Is- is he ok?”

“A sight of relief escaped Ben, his whole body coming down from the rush of adrenaline that’d just boiled his blood. “Go straight to the fact, next time,” he mumbled under his breath. “Please.”

“A chuckle echoed in his ear, followed by his godfather’s apologies. “Sorry, I was just- the nurse said it’s great. You should come.”
Slowly, his heart regained a slower rhythm, every beat resonating against his temple as he processed the information. Talking to his unconscious father was one thing, but showing up under his very open eyes was highly different from the uncertainty of being heard. Biting his lips, Ben glanced at his phone’s clock and placed it back to his ear. “Visits end in half an hour.”

“Then be quick,” Lando replied with an audible smirk. “Tell me when you’re here.” Before he could answer, a tone informed him that his godfather had hung up, leaving him in a complete silence.

HALF AN HOUR. Trying hard to ignore the anxious voice in his head, reminding him of all the scenarios where this reunion wouldn’t go well, Ben went back to his conversation with Rey and typed as fast as his trembling fingers allowed him to. ‘I’ll be a bit late, sorry.’

If there was something he’d learned from the night before, it was that taking the risk of being rejected was sometimes worth it. Easier than expected, his legs dragged him to the door and, within minutes later, he was down the stairs. Fumbling with the sleeves of his leather jacket, he didn’t bother looking at Hux who’d called him from behind the bar. Gone were the days where his colleague could affect him. No more snarky comments, blackmail or-

“Are you going somewhere?”

Two steps away from the door, Ben froze. He hadn’t been expecting to hear this voice. Not tonight; not today. Swallowing with difficulty, he risked a glance above his shoulder then turned around, slowly and carefully. Standing in the middle of the room, Snoke stared at him with a piercing look, his frown adding a few wrinkles to his face. Behind him, half a dozen of men mirrored his expression. Garmuth, Chalmun, Hutt- they were all there, sitting around their usual table, whiskies in hands and cigars hanging from the corners of their mouths.

“The hospital,” Ben articulated once his voice came back. “It’s sort of an emergency.”

A look of concern immediately crossed the man’s face. “Oh, no. No, you can’t.” Not letting go of his frown, he walked towards Ben with that slow, predatory pace and crossed his arms. “We’re playing tonight.”

“I’m… not playing,” Ben murmured. A few meters away from them, the others were starting to give him suspicious looks, only increasing his heart rate and anxiety.

An incredulous chuckle crossed Snoke’s lips, immediately followed by a sigh. Not without a careful glance to his friends, he turned back to Ben and spoke again with a knowing, insistent look. “Well, I recall you had some work to finish.”

“No.”

The word had escaped him before he could even think about it. Just as he was wondering if he’d actually said it out loud, Ben watched his superior’s face turn livid and his eyes widened with surprise. A few seconds passed, during which they both stared at each other, silently waiting for the other to do or say something.

Finally, Snoke took a deep breath and broke the silence, speaking through gritted teeth so that only he could hear. “Don’t be ridiculous and get back up there.”

“No,” Ben repeated sharply.

This time, he was utterly conscious of his words, his voice more assured than before. Something in him seemed to shake and warm up at the same time, dreading the man’s reaction while still feeling
proud of his opposition. Realization of what he’d just done began to creep in, followed by a wave of guilt tightening his stomach. Noticing his superior’s face distorting a little more with each passing second, Ben gulped and took the steps separating him from the exit.

The sounds of his steps echoed in the room, and he realized everyone had stopped talking. Slightly trembling, he grabbed the doorknob, his heart drumming inside his ribcage with such force that it almost hurt. Before he could open the door, the sound of furious steps resonated behind him and a callous hand landed on his, cold and brutal.

“If you leave now, don’t you dare come back.”

His voice came out as a hiss, tickling Ben’s ear in the most irritating way. Wincing at the contact, he remained motionless, his eyes fixed on the glass separating him from outside. He could feel Snoke’s glare on him, almost as much as the overwhelming smell of his cologne.

“My father woke up,” he murmured after a moment.

Once again, the man let out a chuckle that only fueled Ben’s growing rage. “Since when do you care about him?”

“Since when do you mind?”

Just as it had before, all trace of amusement left Snoke’s eyes. Feeling his hand trembling under his, Ben gritted his teeth and held his gaze, prepared for whatever the man was about to say.

“I was here for you when he wasn’t,” he whispered with the same wheezing voice.

The words instantly drove Ben’s heart through an umpteenth loop. Split between sadness and anger, he considered the man before him as memories from his college years came rushing back. Just for a moment, Snoke was this man again— the empathetic, caring professor he’d admired and seen as his savior when nothing was right, the only one to believe in him.

How many times had he heard his uncle disapprove of his colleague’s methods? “Art isn’t about being gifted, it’s about work,” Luke would keep repeating every time he got the chance, which— despite Leia’s hatred towards the subject- included family dinners. It seemed disturbing how family relations could utterly change within years. After spending his childhood waiting for his uncle’s visits to show him his latest drawings, Ben had come to discover another side of Luke as he grew up; one that favored discipline and work over amusement and instincts. Time passed, swallowing the very remnants of their complicity until Ben finally attended his class during his freshman year.

Suddenly, it wasn’t a game anymore: rules were added, limits and instructions that only contributed in making Ben doubt about his choice and orientation until, finally, he started doubting the talent he’d managed to believe he had. Of course, he knew very well the reasons behind his uncle’s strict teaching. He’d heard this story enough to retell it eyes closed. Everyone in this profession knew about Anakin Skywalker who, besides being a renowned painter and teacher, also happened to be Ben’s late grandfather.

One could think having a famous ancestor had its perks, but turned out it sounded way less glamorous when said ancestor wasn’t as good in life as he’d been with brushes. At the age of thirty-three, Anakin killed his wife in an outburst of anger, which condemned him to a maximum prison penalty he didn’t complete as he killed himself no less than twenty years later, making the topic a taboo in the family. From what he’d heard, Luke had chosen to meet him regardless of his sister’s reluctance, curious about whom their father was. A passion-driven man, he’d once told Ben
when he brought up the topic. Lonely and likely ill, but passionate. Despite his questionable work ethics and views on life, he remained the best artist Ben had ever heard of and chose it as his thesis subject, to his uncle’s greatest disapproval.

Of course, this had driven the whole family mad. And of course, this was the moment Snoke chose to take him under his wing.

On this, Snoke was right: he had been there when no one else was. Afternoons spent in an empty class, praising his work with such passion that’d restored Ben’s self-confidence, just enough to let him think he was actually good enough to achieve anything he’d ever wanted. For a moment, Ben almost felt guilty for his earlier words, but a glance to his superior quickly reminded him of all the promises that hadn’t been kept.

He should’ve known after the first year when, instead of a contract, he was given an apartment, when his old car had been replaced by a brand-spanking new Cadillac. Phone, trips, with every year a new gift appeared, silencing his questions and increasing his doubts until nothing remained, except disillusion. Deep inside, he’d actually known for quite a while. The façade had already started to fade over the last few months, but now the remnants were falling right before his eyes as Snoke’s face turned red with anger, making his honeyed-voice even more repellant as he spoke again.

“You don’t need him. You have us.”

A wave of shivers ran down Ben’s spine at the word. Us. Trembling slightly less, he risked a glance at the others, only to meet the curious gazes of men he’d been trained to betray once a week and the satisfied, mocking look of Armitage, gauging him behind his counter. They were all far from the warm, welcoming eyes he’d woken up to a few hours ago.

“Ben.” This time, it was a warning.

The door smashed open. In a split second, a soft breeze caressed his cheek.

“Ben.”

The severe intonation tightened the knot around his stomach, but didn’t stop him. Teeth gritted and eyes fixed on his car, Ben plunged his hands into his pockets and stepped outside.

“Ben, come back!” Snoke called behind him.

Deep breath, hold, release. The walk to the parking lot wasn’t as short as he’d hoped, but he knew the man would never bother to follow him outside. Even if he did, he couldn’t care less. His legs seemed to have awakened from their absence, guiding him with an energy he hadn’t suspected from him.

"You can't leave me,” Snoke hissed from the door. “You couldn't live without me.”

There was something almost liberating in hearing his voice depraved of any trace of sympathy. Only a few meters away from his car, Ben stopped walking and turned back to his former professor.

We’ll see. The words didn’t cross his lips, slightly curled by a forced smirk that only increased the noticeable rage on the man’s face. It wasn’t the first time he’d tried to stand up against his boss, but this time would be the last. Not without a final glance to the man he’d once seen as a mentor, Ben turned back, Snoke’s piercing eyes following him until he slammed the car’s door.
In the confinements of his pocket, his phone kept vibrating, increasing his already rapid heart rate. It could’ve been Rey, or Lando, but something in him was convinced Snoke was the one behind the calls that he kept ignoring. After a few minutes of silent driving, a thought crept among the others, almost causing him to brake in the middle of the road. He knew where he was going; and he knew why. In less than a second, Ben felt his heartbeat speed up and bit his lips at the sight of the hospital parking lot.

No. Seized with doubts and panic, he turned the steering wheel in the opposite direction. A red Ford almost bumped into his trunk, and his hands left the wheel for a second. The driver of the other car passed next to him, glaring in his direction with a raised finger he didn’t even bother responding to.

Lando would have to wait, and so would his father. Barely aware of the furious horns blasting around him, Ben made his way through the holdup in traffic he’d created and drove towards the main road, trying hard to ignore the device still vibrating against his thigh as he crushed the accelerator pedal all the way to his apartment. He needed a shower. Just a quick, cold shower to wash away these memories before he joined Rey and her friends. She deserved to end her day as well as it had begun and, maybe, he deserved it too.

Focused on maintaining steady breaths, Ben almost bumped into a small group of men in the staircase. Middle aged, silent, trapped in black suits; they looked just like the kind of people Snoke would’ve invited to his poker nights. He wouldn’t have been surprised if the building actually belonged to one of them. Moving out would definitely become a priority as well as finding a new job, and finding a good locksmith also. Frowning, Ben looked down at the key he’d just inserted into the lock and gave it another try. Once again, it remained stuck, refusing to turn. Gritting his teeth, he took a step backwards and studied the door, starting to wonder if he’d stopped at the wrong floor. 735. The number was the same as usual. The door, on the other hand, had visibly been changed a few minutes ago.

You couldn’t live without me, Snoke’s voice echoed in his mind, clearer than ever. It followed him on his way back to his car and on the road until, finally, his hand landed on the heavy door of the house he’d left in the morning and knocked twice. A few seconds later, the door opened by a talking, laughing Rey, whose smile faltered as soon as her eyes lingered on him.

“Ben? What happened?”

He almost smiled, realizing how thankful he was for her to say his name with that voice but his lips remained sealed, fighting against the lump he could feel settling in his throat.

“I- can I stay here tonight?” He mumbled after a few seconds of silence.

Frowning, Rey nodded immediately and took a step closer. “Of course, you… yes.” She bit her lips before adding, hesitantly, “Everything ok?”

No. Unable to speak, Ben took a deep, shaky breath as he kept staring at her. She wasn’t smiling anymore, studying him as if his face would somehow reveal the events of the evening. After a moment, her hands landed on his arms, gently caressing him through the thick sleeves of his jacket. Instinctively, Ben wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in her neck, just in time to hide the tears that broke free.

“Eh, what’s wrong?” Rey murmured against his cheek.
It was ridiculous, how her voice could soothe him with such ease. Slowly, one of her hands left his back, traveling up his head where she started to run her fingers through his hair as he firmly closed his eyes. His grip tightened around her and his legs surrendered, bending of a few inches. Careful and patient, Rey guided him to the stairs and sat there, allowing him to rest his head on her lap as she continued to stroke his hair, making him wish that she would never let go of him.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter ended up being more difficult to write than I'd expected, but here it is! I'm not entirely satisfied with it, but I hope you liked it anyway. I'll try to be quick writing the others, but on the other hand, we're about five chapters away from the end..! I feel like I keep saying it every time, but thank you so, so much for all your nice comments. I'm very attached to this story and accidentally ended up putting my heart and soul into it, and such kind responses are only encouraging me to keep it going and give these idiots the happy ending they deserve <3
For someone who’d always thought he was destined to live a lonely life, Ben found himself rather happy living with other people. The first days of his stay appeared to be the best he’d had in months, if not years. Waking up next to Rey –or more accurately under her - was worth every inconveniences caused by his departure from Starkiller.

First, it had been his apartment: as soon as he’d told Rey, her face had turned into something between angry and sad, then just pure rage. Holding her back had been a challenge; he hadn’t expected her to be that strong, nor had he ever thought her capable or violence. Even though she’d promised she wouldn’t talk to his former boss and coworker, she’d nonetheless tried picking the new door’s lock- unsuccessfully.

Then, it had been the Cadillac. Not even a week after his resignation, he’d been awakened by the sounds of a tow truck. He hadn’t realized how much he’d liked this car until he’d seen her being dragged away, the hissing brake echoing a long minute after she’d disappeared. His salary probably would’ve disappeared, too, if he had one.

Leaving Snoke hadn’t solved anything. Sure, he didn’t have to see him anymore; but it quickly turned out that the illusion of safety he’d been given all those years hadn’t prepared him for what the real world was like. Paperwork, money management, job hunt- never in his life had he been confronted with this. Of course, Lando had offered to host him as soon as he’d learned about his situation, but Ben had refused. With a little insistence and promise of weekly visits, he’d managed to convince his godfather not to tell his parents about it. Leia didn’t need more bad news, and – even though he never admitted it- he wanted to see the pride in her eyes the moment he would tell her Starkiller was now just a bad memory.

Now, his days were mostly spent either in Poe’s garage -or Rey’s room, when he didn’t feel like being too close to his former workplace. Her roommates were the most welcoming people he’d ever met, despite the obvious tension every time Rose entered the room. Some days, it was just awkward silence- others, she would say a few words with a harsh voice that highly contrasted with her angelic appearance. But on the thirteenth day, the tension reached its peak.

Ben had just finished pouring water into his glass, when it happened.
“Uh-sorry.”

Blushing, Poe pulled away from Finn with a nervous smile. It hadn’t lasted long, just a split second- but nobody in the room had missed the soft kiss he’d casually dropped on Finn’s mouth. Just as red, the student bit his lips and silently scolded the mechanic, his eyes wide open.

It shouldn’t have been a surprise, really. Despite not officially living there, it seemed like Poe was used to spending most of his time at their house- a theory that Rey had confirmed a few days after Ben’s arrival. None of them had mentioned the bit of conversation they’d heard a couple weeks ago while accidentally eavesdropping, but the way the two men were smiling to each other had said enough without words, and had given Ben a good idea of what had happened between the two. Glancing at Rey, he noticed the same knowing smile on the corner of her lips as she quickly looked away from her friends, doing her best not to smile too much as they both chuckled nervously.

“Well?” Despite her attempt to sound surprised, she still had that little smirk in her voice that never ceased to make Ben’s heart miss a beat.

It took the two men a few seconds to finally look at her, guilty yet amused smiles on their faces as they both shrugged and interlaced their fingers together. Ben heard a satisfied sigh escape Rey as his own lips curled into a small smile. He had never seen Poe- his brother, since they’re agreed to call each other like that- so happy. He’d never been one to refuse displays of affection or stay in the shadows, but what he was currently witnessing was different. Within thirty-one years of friendship, Ben had only seen Poe’s vulnerable side once- but today, no tears were shed.

Well, at least not by him.

The sound of a creaking chair broke the silence, followed by a flash of black and yellow and hurried steps. Before Ben could understand what was happening, a door at the other side of the corridor was slammed, followed by the unmistakable jingling of a bolt being locked echoing across the house.

“Fuck.” Finn’s eyes were fixed on the corridor where Rose had disappeared, all trace of joy gone from his face. Frowning, he let go of Poe’s hand and began making his way to the door, immediately stopped by Rey.

“Maybe you shouldn’t,” she murmured with a brief shake of her head. Still frozen on spot, Poe hunched his shoulders and bit the insides of his cheeks, obviously remorseful and embarrassed.

“But I-” Finn started, another vain attempt to step outside abrogated by Rey.

“No.” Her voice was firm, surprisingly –so much that Ben almost felt guilty as well. The effect was immediate, and Finn took a step backward, his hands raised in surrender. Not before she’d made sure to block the exit, Rey crossed her arms and let out a sigh. “I know,” she added as her friend opened his mouth to speak again, “but I don’t think she needs you right now.”

Heaving another sigh, Finn admitted his defeat with a sheepish nod.

For sure, Ben hadn’t expected for a second this would happen; but now that he was thinking about it, Rose’s reaction was actually understandable. Even though they’d insisted he considered this house as his now, he couldn’t help feeling a little out of place whenever the four of them were laughing or talking about some memories he didn’t share with them. Even though the room wasn’t currently filled with giggles, Ben could definitely feel that odd sensation seizing him by the stomach. Instinctively, his eyes searched for Rey’s and found her crunching her nose as she usually
did when something seemed to bother her. Before he could think of something to say or do, she turned on her heels and headed to the corridor.

“Rey—” his voice lowered as she disappeared. Guided by his legs which were just as reluctant as the rest of his body at the idea of staying here without doing anything, he left the table where Finn and Poe were whispering hastily and sneaked outside the kitchen. The corridor was still dark, only a small figure in front of the bathroom door in sight.

“Rose?” Knelt on the floor, Rey glanced at him as he joined her then turned back to the door that was still sealed shut. “Can I come in?”

“Go away.”

It was predictable. Still, she pursed her lips and shut her eyes. “I just want to talk.”

“Bit late for that,” Rose snarled.

Even though Ben hadn’t really talked to her since he’d arrived, he still felt for Rose. The girl he’d been living with for almost two weeks now was far from the beaming, thoughtful friend Rey had described months ago. Sure, she hadn’t said a lot; but even with the little information he’d had, he’d always pictured Rose as that enthusiastic friend, sometimes maybe a little clumsy, but never offensive. Nothing like the person currently locked up in the bathroom.

Rey let out another sigh, slightly frowning. “What do you mean?”

Regarding the look in her eyes, she knew what her friend meant— but Ben refrained himself from saying so. At the other side of the door, Rose’s voice rose again, slightly trembling.

“Now I’m worth your attention?”

“Rose, what do you…” Rey’s voice lowered, and so did her gaze. She bit her lips, swallowing the end of her question as her eyes lingered on the white surface separating them. If Ben didn’t know her any better, he would’ve thought she was about to surrender. But if there was one thing he’d learned about her in the last few months, it was that she never gave up.

Which, right now, was not what they needed.

Carefully, Ben crouched down to her level, a hand on her shoulder. “Go eat something, I’ll stay here.” Just as he’d expected, she shook her head.

“No offense Ben, but I think it’s a girls’ talk.”

“Maybe… maybe that’s why it isn’t working,” Ben stated cautiously. “Let me try.”

After a few seconds of visible hesitation, Rey gave him a brief nod and rose to her feet. Lazily, she let her hand wander along his arm and shoulder then stopped momentarily to run her fingers through his hair. After a few strokes he took as a silent thank you, she walked to the kitchen, turning to give Ben a smile he returned before turning his attention back to the bathroom’s door as Rey disappeared in the kitchen.

Even though they hadn’t exchanged more than a few words, he’d felt something familiar in Rose. Insecurity, for sure— but also terrible, apparent loneliness. He could see it in the way she watched her friends with envy instead of joining their laughter, or when her gaze remained fixated on an invisible point during dinner. It was always short-lived, almost invisible, and this in itself said more than anything.
A few minutes passed before Ben finally heard the familiar click of the old lock. The door creaked open and he jumped to his feet, almost falling in his haste. Before he could adjust his eyes to the light provided by the bathroom, the handle moved by a few inches and the light diminished significantly.

“No-

Alarmed at the sight of the door closing again, Ben threw his foot in the way and bit the inside of his cheeks at the impact. The memory of his mother telling him not to keep his shoes inside the house rushed back to his mind, and suddenly, he wished he hadn’t been such an obedient child. Wincing, he maintained his position and even risked sneaking his head inside, just enough to be able to withdraw in case Rose felt like beheading him. She didn’t seem like the kind to kill people, but then again, he didn’t exactly know her that much.

Even with her arms crossed and disgruntled expression, it was clear she’d been crying. The moisture in her eyes betrayed her, so did her red cheeks from the friction of the tissue in her hand.

“No-”

“Rose, wait.” Gathering what was left of his strength between his crushed toes and his struggle to keep the door open, Ben softened his expression. Of course, he was probably the last person she wanted to see. He wasn’t really her roommate, let alone even her friend, but maybe those two things were not what she needed. “Please.”

She considered him for a few seconds, her frown slowly softening. Ben swore that he felt her pull on the door had stopped, but chose to ignore it. After another moment of silence, Rose let out a sigh and looked away.

“I don’t want to go back,” she mumbled sheepishly. Even though she was trying to look angry, the sadness in her eyes was far more visible.

“Oh,” Ben said with a shrug. “Let’s have a walk, then.”

Carefully, he opened the door a little and beckoned her to follow him. Suspicious, she risked a glance outside and stepped in the corridor, her arms still crossed over her chest like a shield. Silent, she pursed her lips and gave Ben an inquiring look. Right- he still owed her a walk. Just as he made his way towards the coat rack, another idea made its way to his mind- better, definitely better than a walk.

“Just give me a minute.”

Praying for Rose not to change her mind, Ben gave her a pleading look as he walked backward to the kitchen, keeping an eye on her until his back hit the door, beckoning him to turn away. Finn and Poe were still on their respective chairs when he opened the door, talking to an attentive Rey who kept nodding absent-mindedly. Their conversation stopped as soon as Ben peeked his head inside the room, waiting for Rey to acknowledge him.

An incredulous smile crossed his lips when she did, pushing the question to leave him prematurely. “Can I borrow your car?”

Judging by the dumbfounded look in her eyes, she was just as surprised as he was. “Sure- of course.” A frown creased her brow, silently asking if everything was ok, to which Ben responded with a brief nod. Giving her another smile, he returned to the corridor where Rose was (luckily) still waiting, nervously twisting her fingers.
“Can we go?”

Despite her frown, something in her voice was lighter than before. Nodding again, Ben grabbed his jacket and the keys he was way too familiar with and beckoned Rose to take the stairs first, allowing her a few more seconds of privacy to dry her tears.

Driving his father’s old car wasn’t something Ben had planned on doing. Sitting in it had already been a challenge in itself, but Rey’s company usually helped, gradually making it feel casual again. But driving- it was a whole other thing. The shifter was rusty, moving in fits and starts with a sound that was definitely not a good sign. How Rey could drive this piece of junk every day and not go crazy was a mystery. He didn’t remember the engine being so loud; let alone so stressful. Sure, the other times he’d been in here weren’t exactly relaxing: they’d been long, silent rides, the silence sometimes interrupted by his father’s voice, asking something that would only increase the already tangible tension between them, eventually resulting in an umpteenth argument until their last ride together. No, he definitely preferred his childhood memories: the car had then been a shelter, lulling him to sleep far from night terrors in a weird combination of the engine’s purrs and songs playing on the radio.

The radio.

“Mind if I put on some music?”

The question seemed to surprise Rose, who hadn’t said a word since they’d left the house. After considering him for a few seconds, she just shrugged and turned back to the window, her chin in her hand as she watched the road. The tears on her cheeks had dried, but her eyes were still heavy with whatever emotions she still hadn’t released. She didn’t seem ready to speak, not yet wanting to look in his direction- but then again, she didn’t know him that much. Repressing a sigh, Ben risked another glance in her direction.

His mother would know what to say; she’d always been good with words, while his father knew how to stay silent when being calm was required. Ben was still new at this: opening himself to others, talking and listening. Even though Rey had her own issues she was working on, she’d been a great help for Ben. His relationship to Poe had significantly changed since he’d moved in, and Finn and he were slowly but surely on the track of becoming friends.

“Can you…” Waiting for Rose’s eyes to land on him, Ben took a deep breath. If his father could do it, so could he. Once he got her attention, he motioned briefly to the glove compartment. “There should be a black tape somewhere in there.”

She still looked a bit suspicious, but nonetheless opened the box and fumbled inside for a few seconds. “Rolling Stones?”

“No, the other.” There’d been trace of disappointment in her voice, one that Ben could only understand. The Stones were great, but he would never have suggested something like this to change her mind. He didn’t even remember the Stones being part of his father’s collection, but maybe Rey had added a few of her own.

Just as he was wondering if the tape had disappeared, Rose’s movements stopped and she cleared her throat. “The Blasters?”
A small smile crossed Ben’s lips as he nodded. Still dubious, Rose opened the case and cautiously inserted the tape into the player. Ben realized she must’ve done this before when she absent-mindedly pressed the right buttons before sinking back into her seat, lips pursed and arms crossed as the music started.

They spent the next fifteen minutes in shared silence, both focused on their own thoughts as the songs echoed inside the car. Ben found himself rather surprised at how well he remembered the lyrics, silently mouthing the words as they came. With each song, the car appeared a little easier to tame, a satisfying feeling of familiarity fulfilling him. Even though it’d almost been ten years, he could still guess the first notes of the next song. When the fourth one started, Rose turned to him, both her eyebrows raised in surprise.

“Did they just sing my name?”

Humming in assent, Ben remained silent for a few seconds. “Red Rose,” he added once the chorus ended.

“Red Rose,” she repeated thoughtfully. Her eyes weren’t filled with anger anymore but surprise, a soft frown creasing her brow as she kept listening to the lyrics. “I’ve never heard my name in a song before.”

“Really?” It was now Ben’s turn to be surprised when she nodded. “Poison? Simon and Garfunkel?”

“The darkness guys?”

A soft chuckle escaped Ben. “Yeah, Sound of Silence. They wrote a very beautiful song, Rose of Aberdeen. I think you’d like it.”

“Maybe.”

She didn’t turn away this time, her eyes fixed on the radio and her arms loosening. Feeling her slightly less tense, Ben cleared his throat and tightened his grip on the wheel. “So… You wanna talk about it?”

“I don’t think it would solve anything,” she replied with a sarcastic smile.

“You’d be surprised.”

She’d almost turned back to her window when Ben shrugged, his eyes still fixed on the road yet noticing her skeptical gaze on him. After another brief silence, she let out a sigh and let her hands fall on her lap, her fingers nervously twisting around the hems of her sweater. “I guess I’m just… tired.” A nervous chuckle crossed her lips, followed by a sniffing sound betraying new tears. “It’s ridiculous, I’m sorry. It’s just- stupid.”

“It’s not-” Cutting himself mid-sentence, Ben bit his lips in search of the right words. “Don’t apologize. You just… have emotions.”

“Yeah, that’s the problem,” Rose murmured. Another sniffle echoed, muffled by the sleeve she ran over her face.

Ben knew what she was talking about: her red eyes in the morning, the awkward conversations and her obvious disappointment every time her propositions of movie night fell through. “Still better than not feeling anything,” he added tentatively. “You just have a heart.”
Poor choice of words: despite her enthusiastic nod, Rose’s tears only doubled, wetting her cheeks even more as she tirelessly scrubbed them with her sweater. Maybe his mother was great with words, but right now, Ben felt closer to his father’s confused ramblings. Careful not to talk too fast, he cleared his throat once again, praying for a sudden inheritance of his mother’s wisdom.

“Maybe… maybe I can understand. I think I could.”

Rose seemed a bit dubitative; still, her gaze softened and she took a deep breath, twisting her sleeves between her fingers as her voice rose again, almost in a murmur. “It’s like I’m not even here, sometimes.”

“From what I’ve seen and heard, you’re very important to him,” Ben whispered, trying to stay at the same level she’d settled.

“It’s not just about Finn. It’s… I just feel like I’m not enough.”

Her voice was still weak, the words whispered with a hint of shame. Silent, Ben gave her a brief nod as to assure that he was still listening. He wasn’t a great speaker, but listening was definitely something he was confident he could do.

“I’m Rose the good friend,” she continued, “nice but not exceptional. My teachers remember my sister, and my friends…” Another pause, during which she seemed to gather her thoughts. “They’re great. They’re the only thing I have right now, I don’t even deserve them, I shouldn’t, I-”

Whatever she was going to say disappeared in an inaudible mumble, flooded by a heavy sigh in which Ben could’ve sworn he heard another sniff. She’d obviously been keeping heavy things to herself, and for way too long. Quickly, the sound of her crying covered the song none of them was still listening to.

“Bullshit,” Ben said after a moment. He’d been careful to keep his voice low, but his vocabulary seemed to shock Rose, who took a strangled breath as she turned to him with surprise.

“You don’t know me,” she murmured with a shake of her head.

“I don’t,” Ben agreed as he turned the wheel, guiding the car into a turn. “But I know one of your friends, and she’s only told me good things about you.” He was back into dangerous talking territory, yet he still let the words flow as they came to him. “I know you can fix anything, listen to your friends all night and sometimes even come back from your vacation when they feel bad.”

The hint of a smile crossed Rose’s lips, encouraging him to continue. Of all the things Rey had told him about her, this was by far his favorite anecdote: Rose coming back from her hometown a month earlier than planned after a call from her friend mentioning how she felt lonely and hated summer. “You may not feel exceptional, but I can tell that you are. You have the friends you deserve, and they love you more than you think.”

“Why didn’t she tell me about you?”

Ben hadn’t expected the conversation to take this turn, let alone without Rey to give her own explanation. He hadn’t been here the day she’d explained the whole situation to her friends, which had been a relief for him. Significantly less confident than seconds ago, he bit his lips, nervously drumming the wheel with the tips of his fingers. “I think she was afraid it wouldn’t last,” he said after a few seconds.

A sigh echoed next to him, followed by Rose’s voice as she shook her head. “She could’ve talked to me… I would’ve helped. Or listened.”
“She should’ve,” Ben approved, his eyes still fixed on the road as Rose continued.

“I knew there was something going on. I thought she didn’t trust me, and I also thought Finn loved me, and… apparently, I was wrong.”

There they were: the reproaches she hadn’t voiced until now. Once again, a wave of tears left her eyes and rolled down her cheeks, and Ben could only feel his heart tighten at the realization of how Rose must’ve felt all this time. He didn’t know about heartbreak or treason, but loneliness- that, he knew. “She trusts you.”

An incredulous chuckle escaped Rose, and Ben gave her a moment to calm her sob before he continued. “And Finn loves you. Just… differently.”

“I know.” Her voice had dropped a few octaves, betraying her fatigue. “Do you mind driving a little more? I like the music.”

Ben nodded hastily and turned the volume up, wrapping them both in silence as they both focused on the songs bursting from the radio. There was something odd, but also satisfying in driving across the city at night. No traffic, no commotion; just a few pedestrians and the impression that the city was half empty, significantly less oppressing than it was in the daylight.

“This helps,” Rose murmured as they passed a red light. “Thanks.”

Ben shook his shoulders in response. “My father used to drive me around our block whenever I couldn’t sleep. The night, the music- it helped me.” The car, the confession, the tape- the whole thing seemed to bring back old memories to Ben. When he’d previously tried to forget them, he now held onto those scraps of the past, smiling as he recalled a detail. “He made a mixtape for me.”

“Can I see it?” Rose asked curiously. “The mixtape?”

For some reason, Ben didn’t refuse. She’d shared her fears and anger; it was only right that he shared something as well. Besides, Rose sounded like someone he wanted to trust. He was about to agree, when something he hadn’t realized yet occurred to him. “I left it in my office.”

“Starkiller, right? Maybe they still have it?”

A chuckle escaped Ben and he shook his head, a sarcastic smile on his lips. “If they didn’t burn it with the rest of my things.”

“What kind of things did you keep here?”

Despite her soft gaze, there was something suspicious in Rose’s voice. “Some clothes,” Ben said. “And my drawings.”

Saying he hadn’t thought about getting them back would be a lie. Even after years of hating every single one of his projects, Ben had still grown attached to the partially finished sketches scattered over his desk. They’d been good company over the years, accompanying him through the long, boring days spent alone in the office. He didn’t really care about the clothes; although he could use an extra pair of jeans and a few more hoodies. But the sole thought of his drawings being thrown away was enough to make him grit his teeth.

“We’re going there,” Rose stated firmly.

“It’s not-”
“We’re going.”

Going back to Starkiller really was the last thing he wanted to do tonight, but Rose suddenly looked just as threatening as his mother- and God knew no one should never argue with his mother when she used that kind of tone. Eyes wide open, Ben nodded vainly and he took the next turn, his heart drumming with anticipation.

It didn’t take them more than ten minutes to reach the parking lot. Guiding the car to one of the few remaining free spots, Ben set the hand brake and stopped the music as he turned to Rose, breaking the silence they’d settled in.

“We don’t have to, really-”

Not even listening to him, Rose unfastened her belt and burst out of the car, striding to the building with haste. With a bad feeling squeezing his stomach, Ben left the car and followed her closely, almost running to reach her level of haste.

“Rose?” he asked hesitantly- maybe too hesitantly for her to hear as she opened the door, Ben on her heels. “Rose, we should just go back to the car.”

“Hello, my friend here would like to get his things back.”

A sudden terror hit Ben as he heard her words echo in the room, soon followed by relief when he realized the bar was nearly deserted. Only a few customers turned to them, raising their eyebrows before going back to their conversations or whatever fancy cocktail they’d ordered. A few feet away from them, a familiar face frowned in their direction, considering Rose from behind the counter.

“Staff only,” Hux hissed, an irritated spasm shaking his left eyebrow as he spoke.

“Then go there for him,” Rose retorted.

She’d reached the counter, her arms crossed over her chest. Not even bothering to hide his irritation, the bartender rolled his eyes and turned to Ben, barely acknowledging Rose’s presence. “You thought bringing a teenage girl would soften me?”

“I’m not-”

The protest died on Rose’s lips as Hux turned to her, silencing her with an index over his mouth. Smirking, he shook his head and brought his hand to her cheek, sarcastically patting it. “Sorry, the grown-ups are talkin-”

Before Ben could even react to his former coworker’s behavior, a loud crack echoed across the room. All conversations stopped again, immediately followed by a few gasps and whispers as the bartender’s face turned red, both with anger and pain. Breathing deeply, Rose kept her eyes fixed on him as she wiped the area where his hand had touched her, making a point to show her disgust. Even though the perspective of seeing Hux being slapped again made him insanely happy, Ben stepped between the two of them and cleared his throat, recovering the use of his voice.

“I’ll be quick.”
Ignoring the glare Hux gave him, he made his way to the stairs leading to the second floor and climbed them promptly, keeping his ears open for hints of another slap. Once upstairs, he opened the door with a brief nudge. The room hadn’t changed much: apart from the new shelves, it was still the same small, plain room he’d spent several years in. To his greatest surprise, coming back didn’t awaken any sort of nostalgia in him; only relief at the realization this was the last time he would ever come here.

“Hi.”

Dragged away from his thoughts, Ben turned to the man he hadn’t noticed until now and gave him a brief nod as he recognized the young Mitaka. “I’m just here to take my things.” Ignoring the student’s nervous gaze on him, he walked to the other side of the desk where he started to gather the few loose sheets he recognized as his.

His clothes appeared slightly harder to find, all concealed in a small box behind the door. After a few seconds of nervous fumbling through every jacket’s pockets, his fingers closed around a familiar rectangular-shaped object, and his heart made a loop in his chest. Only for a second, his eyes closed with relief and he released a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding.

“They said you weren’t feeling well,” Mitaka began to explain, a hint of guilt in his voice. “I just-They told me I could get the job.”

“It’s ok,” Ben assured as he put the tape in his jacket and threw the box under his arm. “I never liked it anyway.”

The young man mumbled a few incoherent excuses that Ben dismissed with a wave of his hand. He thought about telling him to leave, warning him about the implications- but the thought left him as he reached the stairs, nodding in Mitaka’s direction as a silent goodbye. Neither Rose nor Hux seemed to have moved since he’d left, both staring pointedly at the other in silence.

Repressing a laugh at the bartender’s embarrassment, Ben put a hand on Rose’s arm, gently dragging her away from the place. “Let’s go.”

Luckily, she nodded and followed him across the bar. She didn’t look back, but Ben couldn’t resist looking one last time for the sole pleasure to see the red mark on Hux’s cheek: five distinct fingers spread apart, belonging to the small woman walking in front of him, for whom he now had eternal respect.

The house was silent when they came back, all lights still on despite the late hour. Three pairs of eyes landed on them when they opened the door of the living room, all worried and inquiring. Judging by the cold meal left on the table, none of them had had the heart to eat. Just as Finn got up from his chair, Rose took the steps separating them and threw her arms around him, squeezing him in a tight embrace as her shoulders started to shake again.

Poe joined them a few seconds later, hesitant. Tightening her grip on Finn, Rose wrapped an arm around the mechanic’s shoulder and Ben felt a sigh of relief cross his lips. Leaving her chair as well, Rey glanced in his direction and mouthed a silent thank you before joining the hug too, her eyes still wet as she plunged her head between her friends’ arms. A muffled chuckle echoed from the small group, followed by a few sniffs and more chuckles.

Quietly, Ben made his way to Rey’s room, giving the four friends the privacy they probably needed.
So, this update was late again and I'm sorry! This was a chapter I was very excited to write, but it wasn't as easy as I thought it would be. Anyway, this is the end of Rose's pain <3
Speaking of the end, just 3 more chapters!
“Happy Birthday.”

Slowly awakening from his slumber, Ben felt a smile curl on his lips at the words that were murmured into his ear, followed by a brief, soft kiss. Stretching out cautiously, he opened one eye then the other, gradually acknowledging the presence of Rey lying on his chest, pressing another kiss to his cheek.

With his voice still full of sleep, he stretched out and took a deep breath. “How did you know?”

“Poe told me.”

The sensation of her warm breath against his skin only made his smile widen as she moved to his jaw, then below his ear where she knew he was more sensitive. Despite his usual reluctance to wake up, it only took Ben a few seconds to open his eyes, with the assistance of Rey’s lips lazily trailing down his neck. Just as she reached his shoulder, his arms seemed to come alive as well and his hands found their way to her cheeks, gently pulling her face back to his; and their lips hastily met again. Letting out a contented sigh, Rey wound a leg over his then rolled onto him completely, her thighs straddling his waist as she kissed him more. Ben could already feel his cock tighten inside the boxers he’d slept in.

They hadn’t gotten to spend much time together since he’d arrived, at least not alone. Eager to know him, Finn kept organizing big dinners, which afterwards they all proceeded to engage in video games tournaments or movie nights, for Rose’s greatest pleasure. Even though there still were some days Ben could see some sadness in her eyes, Rose’s mood had significantly changed since their conversation. In just a week, the small group had managed to go back to what they’d used to be, or at least something close enough that everyone seemed satisfied with it. Having friends was a notion Ben was still adjusting to, but he found that spending time with them was actually enjoyable. For the first time in years, he considered himself happy - and the woman currently straddling him had a lot to do with it.
They’d had a few moments to themselves in the confinement of her room when she wasn’t studying for a test or writing an essay- but the fear of being heard by her roommates was enough that they hadn’t had the chance to fully relive the night of their reunion. There were a few nights Finn had spent the evening at Poe’s house; but leaving Rose alone hadn’t been an option and they’d found themselves watching whatever movies the girls had agreed on. But truthfully, watching Rey fall asleep in his arms wearing a large sleep t-shirt was just as perfect as feeling her naked, sweaty body trembling against his.

“What are you doing?” He knew perfectly well what she was doing, but hearing her say it was definitely one of his favorite melodies. Rey smiled in response, tickling the skin of his neck that she had been focusing on.

She’d started doing it since his first week here: waking him with brief, warm kisses whenever she was in the mood for morning cuddles. As the weeks passed, it appeared that she actually liked it a lot. Unable to resist, Ben never protested and always let her hands creep under the covers with his following suit, both exploring the other with more and more confidence as the days passed. More than once, they’d tried to escape their friends’ attention- but they’d quickly given up on trying the day Rey had joined him in the shower, soon followed by Poe, who was just looking for a razor. Of course, it ended up with confused screams and Poe leaving the room giggling.

“Giving you your present,” Rey murmured as her mouth moved to his chest, causing him to twitch under her touch.

“Rey?”

Her kisses were now dangerously traveling to his stomach, forcing her to arch her back as she descended lower and lower, strands of her hair following and tickling his skin along the way. With her arms firmly planted at either sides of him, she looked up with a smirk on her lips, eyeing him inquisitively. “Hm?”

Ben gulped, her innocent tone highly contrasting with her current position. “What kind of present?”

Her smirk widened at his words, and really, this wasn’t helping his growing erection. “Stop talking and you’ll see.”

That, he could do. Silently agreeing, Ben took a deep breath and relaxed a little, keeping his eyes on Rey as she returned to where she’d stopped, that was to say exactly above his navel. In a brief motion, her head was submerged beneath the blanket, only the crest of her hair visible as her kisses dangerously approached his now overly sensitive erection. Closing his eyes, Ben let his hand find its way to her hair as her fingers began to roll his boxers down his hips, tightening his grip as she deposited a kiss on his cock.

A not-very-subtle ‘fuck’ left him, and his fingers tangled a little more through her hair. How she could make such a moment so delicate, Ben had no idea. But with each kiss, he found it a little harder not to clench his fist in her waves. It wasn’t the first time she kissed him lower than his neck, but that was all it’d ever been. And even though they were keeping a slow pace with these things, Ben felt like even just kissing her would’ve been enough; except the moment her tongue grazed his cock, he could swear she was undeniably good at absolutely anything she did.

Just as a repressed groan escaped him, a chuckle echoed from beneath the covers and she repeated the motion again, this time a little more eagerly. Slowly, her mouth opened and her lips closed around him, and it took Ben an insane amount of self-control to remain silent. Gritting his teeth, he threw his head back into the pillow, his breathing unsteady as Rey’s hand joined her lips, making him dizzier with each passing second.
One, two—her five fingers wrapped around his cock, accompanying the action of her tongue. With each movement, Ben could feel a familiar warmth growing in his abdomen, increasing with every turn that her tongue took. He’d been delighted with the feeling of her hand around him, but her mouth—that was something else. As if she’d heard his thoughts, her head tilted slightly, her lips following with the movement. Suddenly, Ben’s hips jerked and he could hear her faint chuckle echoing from under the blanket again, the only thing keeping him from laughing being the feeling that he wouldn’t last much longer if she kept moving her lips that way.

“Rey—” Her name died on his lips, muffled by a moan he couldn’t hold back. “Rey, wait.”

A subtle, curious hum emanated from where she had settled, followed by the frustrating sensation of her lips releasing him. She didn’t move for a moment, giving Ben a few more seconds to catch his breath before he spoke again. “Come back here.”

The mattress moved a little, soon followed by a series of squeaking springs as Rey emerged from under the blanket. Wearing a mischievous grin on her lips, she positioned herself onto Ben’s lap just as he straightened up, almost falling in the process.

“Your fucking bed,” he mumbled as Rey instinctively grabbed his shoulders. Keeping him in place, she settled her thighs around him and another wave of shivers rushed over him at the sight of her: she was smiling, slightly disheveled, and he suddenly wondered if he was supposed to feel a little more in love every day.

“I wasn’t done.” As if to stress her point, she glanced at the small space between them, her frown just as teasing as the finger trailing down his bare chest.

“Neither was I.”

Returning her smile, Ben grabbed the T-shirt she’d slept in (one of his, he noticed) and gently gave it a tug, waiting for her approving nod to pull it up and over her head. In a split second, the T-shirt was on the floor and Rey straightened up between his arms with a grin. She wasn’t wearing anything except plain underwear, her chest completely bare for his greatest pleasure. She no longer seemed nervous at the idea of letting him see her like that, even allowing him to stare a little more than he should’ve every time she undressed in front of him. Smiling at the thought, Ben bowed his neck just enough to reach her collarbone and dropped a kiss there, waiting for her usual reaction which followed shortly after.

Taking a deep breath, she hummed in delight and ran a hand through his hair, encouraging him to continue. Not needing to be told twice, Ben ducked a little more, leaving a trail of kisses as he made his way to her breast. Another stream of shivers caused Rey to tremble under his lips as his mouth closed around her nipple, dragging a gasp out of her. Careful not to move too abruptly for the poor bed underneath them, he moved one of his hands to cup her other breast; her reaction was, again, quick to follow, and Ben couldn’t help but smile as her grip on his hair tightened the moment his tongue grazed over her nipple.

“How is your hair always so soft?”

A brief smile crossed his lips as he stopped, murmuring against her skin. “Conditioner.”

He hadn’t used one in weeks, actually, but the answer seemed to please Rey. Careful not to crush him, she pulled away for a few seconds, urging her underwear down her legs with haste. Before Ben could consider helping, she positioned herself above him and caught his lips with hers again, her body slowly melting into his.
A shuddered gasp escaped him as she closed the small gap between them, pressing herself against him in a way that could only be intentional. The smile he could feel through their kiss quickly confirmed that. Reveling in the pressure of her center rubbing over his cock, Ben took another deep breath, his fingers grazing the skin of her waist.

“Sorry for waking you up,” she whispered while wrapping her arms back around his neck.

Surprised by the sudden apology, Ben opened his eyes, only to find hers already staring at him. Her face was close enough that he could count the freckles scattered over her nose and cheeks, emphasized by that smile that hadn’t left her lips since she’d come back from her brief trip under the covers.

“You’re not really sorry.”

Releasing another chuckle, she kissed him again, shaking her head. “You like your present?”

“So far so good.”

“Good.”

Another kiss silenced them both, longer than the previous ones. Oblivious of the sounds emanating from the old mattress under them, they began to rock against the other, their embrace tightening at each gasp breaking the kiss. Lips swollen but hungry, Ben repressed the urge to grit his teeth as her tongue joined his, only intensifying the fire that’d begun to grow inside of him. Instead of that, he tightened his grip on her hips and felt his buck helplessly, begging for more as her thighs squeezed him again.

After what felt like minutes, Rey pulled away, breathless, her eyes dancing between his lips and eyes before she spoke again. “I was thinking about a big present, actually.”

“A big present?” Ben repeated, just as breathless.

She nodded in response, ceasing her movements against him. Only her fingers were still moving, gently stroking his hair as she kept staring at him with that little smile in the corner of her lips.

“Big present,” she confirmed. “Mind if I give it from here?”

With an incredulous chuckle, Ben shook his head, his smile wider with every second. Of course he didn’t mind. He wouldn’t mind her staying like this forever if it meant he could stay too. He would never get tired of feeling her warm skin against him, whether it was in the middle of the night or during those messy mornings.

“Great,” Rey murmured before kissing him again; and before Ben could think about deepening the kiss, her hands moved to his shoulders and she hauled herself up a few inches, moving her hips just enough for him to feel her entrance graze his cock. Without once breaking eye contact, she let one of her hands trail down his chest then between them, where she timidly wrapped her fingers around him. For a brief second, Ben could’ve sworn he’d seen her lips curl into a smile; and a few more seconds later, he was certain the whole house had heard his groan as she lowered herself onto him.

Even though they’d only done it once before, Ben realized he’d missed the feeling that came with it: satisfaction doubled with agony as she took him inch by inch, faintly moving her hips to ease his progression. He’d missed her breathing, too; shaky, sometimes interrupted by a gasp and her hands clenching around his shoulders, holding onto him as if she was on the verge of falling over. And maybe she was, because her hips were slightly trembling between his hands. He was about to ask if she was ok when her hand came behind his neck and pulled him closer. Rather abruptly, their lips
crushed against the other and she started to roll her hips against him, the softest moan leaving her mouth as she did so.

“This is the-- best birthday I’ve ever had,” Ben breathed as she rose a few inches before settling onto him again, taking him in a little more with every swing of her hips.

“It’s only nine,” Rey pointed out, her voice somewhere between amusement and delight.

She wasn’t wrong; still, Ben couldn’t think of a single year where his birthday hadn’t been either boring or chaotic. Aside from the few children’s birthday parties his mother had organized for years despite his only guests being Poe and Lando, he’d never celebrated his birthday. Now that he thought about it, he was certain he’d even forgotten it last year.

Probably sensing his thoughts drifting away, Rey let go of his shoulders and folded her arms around his neck, silently calling him for another kiss. Happy to oblige, Ben wrapped his arms around her, gently holding her close as she continued rocking her hips against his. Even though her face was half-concealed behind a cascade of hair, Ben caught sight of the hint of a smile right before she closed the gap between them, just enough to capture his lips with hers again with a contented moan.

He could’ve stayed like this forever, her body moving above his and quivering under his touch- but just as her hands lazily slid along his back, a firm knock echoed behind the door, followed by Finn’s voice.

“Breakfast!”

Mortified, Ben held his breath, his eyes wide open as Rey’s face fell to his shoulder, a silent giggle shaking her. Once she got her breath back, she cleared her throat and turned to the door, her voice still shadowed with amusement as she spoke. “Coming!”

“Indeed,” Ben grumbled, his voice slightly strangled as Rey resumed the pace she’d settled into.

Biting her lips at his reaction, she accelerated her movements, silencing his incoming groan with a kiss. Immediately forgetting about the interruption, Ben followed her rhythm, his hands on her hips as her legs began to tremble around him. There was no way her roommates couldn’t hear them at this point: repressing his moans was becoming harder with each swing, and the springs had never squealed as much. After a few more seconds, Rey suddenly straightened her back in his arms, eyes wide open then closed. Hands firmly planted at his shoulders, she gasped for air then bowed her head, her walls pulsing then clenching around him. Once again, her fingers tightened their grip on him and she released a deep breath, an incredulous chuckle crossing her lips.

“Indeed,” she repeated; and the sole sensation of her voice tickling his ear was enough to make Ben grit his teeth as a wave of electricity traveled down his body, releasing the fire each of her motions had ignited. His face buried into her neck in a vain attempt to muffle his groan, he felt the shock wash over him, relieving his body of the sweet agony that’d faintly jarred him. Holding her chest still flush against his, Rey shifted on his lap, her fingers patiently stroking his hair.

“Happy birthday,” she murmured before planting a kiss on his trembling lips.
How Rey could walk into the kitchen with a beaming smile on her face ten minutes later, Ben had no idea. Despite her guarantee that the coffee machine was loud enough to cover whatever noise they’d made, Finn had a knowing smile that made him think he knew exactly what he’d almost interrupted. Sitting next to him, Poe gave him a wink and disappeared behind his mug, increasing the blush Ben could feel settling on his cheeks.

“Morning!” Rose’s voice echoed behind him as she stepped inside the room. “Happy birthday,” she added as she walked past him. “Liked your present?”

Before Ben could ask how on earth she had known about this conversation, a scoff followed her question, immediately escorted by a loud cough as Finn choked on his coffee. Oh, he’d definitely heard them.

“He just woke up,” Poe said as he tapped his boyfriend’s back. “Right, Ben?”

Finn’s coughing only doubled, this time joined by Rey’s laughter as she walked to the window, followed by a rather enthusiastic Rose. Once Finn regained control of his breathing, he and Poe joined them, a grin on their faces as they turned to Ben, who couldn’t feel more lost than he currently was.

“We didn’t have enough wrapping paper,” Finn explained, “but… Happy Birthday?”

Just as he started to think he’d never heard those two words so much in so little time, Ben noticed the big package cleverly wrapped with the curtains behind them and felt his mouth open and close, slowly realizing what it meant. “But…"

“Come on open it,” Poe urged, and for a split second, he looked as excited as if it’d been his own birthday. Nervously, Ben took the steps separating them and cautiously unwrapped the package, only to discover a small sticker in its center. Now even more lost than he’d been seconds ago, he narrowed his eyes, deciphering two small words that only confused him a little more.

“Double bed?”

“We thought it was about time you officially joined this house,” Rose explained when he turned to them.

“And Rey’s bed is awfully noisy”, Finn added. “It’s more like a gift to ourselves, actually.”

A few more chuckles echoed around the room, including Ben’s as he turned to Rey, a dubious smile on his face. “You knew about that?”

“They asked me if I was ok getting rid of a few shelves,” she shrugged, her answer only causing his smile to widen.

“That’s… thanks. Thank you.”

As if to emphasize his words, his eyes reverted to the giant package and he nodded. Truth be told, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d received a gift. Biting the inside of his cheeks, it took him a moment to realize the others had settled back around the table, Rose’s voice pulling him away from his thoughts. “So, anything planned for today?”

Nodding once more, Ben walked to the table and claimed the last remaining chair, careful not to let them hear the emotion in his voice “My mother said I could drop by the hospital for lunch,” he said, pouring some coffee into the mug that Poe had slid in front of him.
“Oh.” A blink crossed the mechanic’s face, both his eyebrows raised in surprise. “You said yes?”

“Yeah, I’ve always loved vending machine sandwiches.”

Sitting next to him, Finn snorted again and Poe dramatically carried his coffee away, causing the two girls to roll their eyes with amusement.

“I can drive you,” Rey said while reaching for a pancake. “I need to gas up.”

Her eyes met Ben’s and he bit his lip, the words parting from his mouth before he was able to think of a better way to phrase them. “Actually… I was thinking you could come with me.”

It was now her turn to raise her eyebrows, her movements slowing as she blinked a few times. “Oh. I mean- sure. Yeah, let’s do this.”

A small smile made its way to her lips, soon mirrored by Ben. Judging by the nervous look she gave him, he knew they were thinking about the exact same thing: the look on his mother’s face when she would realize Ben had brought a guest, who happened to be none other than the girl she had drank tea with every morning.

“We better hurry then,” Poe stated with a mouth full of cereal. “This bed isn’t gonna build itself.”

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From what Rey had heard, meeting your in-laws was supposed to be a stressful experience. She’d seen it in movies, read about it in books and even heard some of her classmates talk about it over Thanksgiving. Everything seemed to be important, from the outfit to the first impression. But what were people supposed to do about the second one?

It wasn’t like she didn’t know who she was dealing with: Leia was a wise woman and someone she’d known for years, and Mr. Solo… well, from what she’d heard, he’d been true to himself, his first words being a torrent of finely selected insults towards the nurse who’d made the mistake of being the one assigned to check on his response action that day. According to Ben, his mother had been a mixture of shame and relief.

“It’ll be ok.”

Dragged away from her reflections, Rey turned to Ben and nodded, maybe a bit too firmly. They’d just stopped in front of a door after endless zigzaging between the chairs and carts that seemed to have been planted in every corridor just for the sake of making them more late than they already were. Even though she rarely ever set foot inside hospitals, Rey suddenly remembered why she didn’t like those places: the large, plain corridors just the same as every other floor’s, making the whole place look like a waiting room between worlds. A very sterilized version, obviously, with some posters reminding visitors to wash their hands and not use their phones outside the rooms.

“They’re just my parents,” he added in a murmur. “Besides, you already know them.”

A smirk crossed his lips at the statement, and Rey briefly returned it, shaking her head with disbelief at the ridiculousness of the situation. As if he’d sensed her feelings, Ben took her hand in his and waited a few more seconds to knock on the door, which opened almost immediately on a face that Rey knew but hadn’t been expecting to see again.
“Well, look who’s- oh, look who’s here.”

An awkward silence fell in the doorway as Rey gave the man the most polite smile she could conjure, broken by Ben’s solemn voice. “Lando.”

Blinking rapidly, the man turned to his godson and shook his hand hastily, a skeptical smile on his face. “Uh, come in,” he babbled after a few more seconds of shaking Ben’s hand while glancing at Rey. “Everyone’s here.”

“Everyone?”

Feeling Ben tense at the word, Rey squeezed his hand and followed him carefully into the room. Honestly, she wasn’t much prouder than he was. Taking advantage of her boyfriend’s large figure, she remained half hidden behind his arm, scanning the room with the same nervousness she’d felt building in her stomach over the entire ride. A few words were exchanged, mostly greetings she only heard remotely as her eyes kept searching for those of the woman she’d seen no longer than a day ago. Finally, her gaze lingered on the familiar face that was already staring at her and she felt her heart miss a beat when she noticed a small smile on the mayor’s lips.

“Rey, what a surprise!”

Holding her breath, Rey found herself unable to neither speak nor move. Gently, Ben squeezed her fingers between his and she felt her lips turn into a smile mirroring the woman’s, who she caught glancing at their hands with a knowing look.

“A surprise indeed,” another voice added. Suddenly remembering her initial curiosity at who ‘everyone’ encompassed, Rey turned to the source of the voice and almost let a chuckle cross her lips.

“Uncle Luke.”

Despite the politeness in his voice, Ben didn’t give a single smile to the man standing next to the window. Arms crossed over his chest, Mr. Skywalker nodded politely. There was no way this could’ve been any more ridiculous- yet, life apparently always found a way to make every situation worse than Rey expected. Of course, her History teacher, who she’d called a douchecanoe no more than two days ago during dinner, had to be Ben’s uncle. Forgetting about her own nervousness, Rey risked a look at Leia who closed her eyes with a sigh mirroring her son’s.

“Hey, you’re the car girl!” Han suddenly exclaimed from his bed. “My son wasn’t included in the package, you know.”

Weirdly enough, Rey felt the tension leave her body at the man’s spontaneity, a soft chuckle escaping her as his wife gave him a firm tap on the hand.

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Where she’d initially been afraid to feel out-of-place in what she’d expected to be an awkward family reunion, Rey found herself rather surprised at how quickly the tension had dropped once Mr. Skywalker left. While she was not sure about whether or not Mrs. Organa and Mr. Solo were still married or not, the two of them kept laughing at random memories about their son, who seemed split between embarrassment and a genuine happiness she could see behind his eyes.
They weren’t exactly the type of family she’d been dreaming of for her entire childhood: no hugs or grand displays of affections were shared, and some conversations didn’t feel natural, but as Ben and Han fought over the last ham and cheese sandwich, Rey realized she would’ve given anything even just for an argument like this one.

Gradually, the tension seemed to leave the room as they all finished eating. With a sort of ease that she hadn’t expected of him, Ben began to tell his parents about his week, making sure to mention his daily job search and the waiter position he’d been offered a few days before. Despite his enthusiasm, the information didn’t seem to please Leia whose frown only increased. Just as she opened her mouth, Ben’s godfather turned to him hastily.

“You could always come help me at the shop. El says she wants to leave.”

“She’s been saying that for years,” Han grumbled with a mouth full of crisps.

It was enough to keep the two men busy with a trip down memory lane -busy enough for Rey to take advantage of their momentary distraction and turn to Ben, her voice low and covered by the two men’s laughs.

“I’ve been thinking about Starkiller.”

Silent for a few seconds, Ben turned to her with a frown. “What about them?”

Even though the topic wasn’t taboo, he’d made a point of not focusing on it and moving on, searching for a job that would be different enough not to remind him of the past. Still, Rey couldn’t help thinking about the unfairness of the situation every time Ben found himself confronted by the harsh reality of what his previous job had been: a pure scam, doubled with years of emotional abuse. There had been time she had caught a hint of it in his eyes, particularly on bad days.

“They never gave you anything.”

“I know.”

“But they should’ve,” she added in a murmur. “And that’s a crime. People get punished for crimes.”

Another high-pitched laugh echoed around the room, highly contrasting with the expressions that crossed over Ben’s face. Narrowing his eyes, he leaned over a few inches and planted his elbows on his knees, almost whispering as his gaze met hers again. “You mean…”

“I’m talking about justice,” she confirmed. Her voice dropped a few octaves when she noticed Mrs. Organa walking toward them. Noticing a look of curiosity similar to her son’s was in her eyes, Rey quickly looked away.

“I’m not…” His voice lowered significantly as well when he caught sight of his mother approaching. “Taking my former boss to court won’t solve anything. I don’t think I could--”

Whatever he was about to say disappeared behind a smile as his mother reached them. Nodding her understanding at his silence, Rey cleared her throat and looked at the woman who had just taken a seat in front of them both, eternal kindness in her eyes as she returned her son’s smile.

“Pardon my interruption, but there’s something I wanted to ask you,” she said as her husband let out another loud chuckle behind them. “No need to leave, dear,” she added as Rey began to stand up, “it’s nothing you haven’t heard about.”
Helplessly smiling at the woman’s words, Rey gave her a firm nod and straightened up in her chair with a fast-beating heart. It was nothing, really- but being accepted rather than tolerated wasn’t something she’d grown used to. Still a bit nervous, she felt her breathing deepen as the mayor spoke again, fully focused on Ben who seemed just as tense.

“Maz and I are still working on her case. We did some digging and saw a name coming back on some documents- Chalmun. I couldn’t help noticing his name was also associated with-”

“Snoke,” Ben finished in a whisper.

Something between curiosity and worry tightened her stomach at the mention of Mrs. Kanata’s situation, soon replaced by disgust at the other name. Even though she’d never met him, the way Ben hadn’t been able to sleep for days after he’d left his former boss had been enough to make her hate the man. A brief silence fell between them, allowing Rey to notice the shared panic in their eyes. For a moment, she could have sworn the two of them were having a silent conversation until Mrs. Organa spoke again.

“I was wondering if maybe you knew him.”

Ben gave her a nod, slow and careful. “I do.”

It took Rey a few seconds to realize she was listening as carefully as Leia, narrowing her eyes with each passing second. Even though she’d learned about Ben’s past, she’d never asked more questions than he seemed willing to answer; something she now regretted as she realized she might’ve missed some important details.

“They have this poker club,” he added after a moment. “It’s not just poker, they talk… a lot. About some things.”

“What kind of things?” Rey heard the words cross her lips before she could think of stopping them, but Ben didn’t seem to mind and continued, his eyes focused on his fidgeting hands.

“Money. People. But mostly money.” A deep sigh raised his shoulders and he looked up, his eyes dancing between the two women. “I was there to help him cheat, but I could hear everything.”

“How did you…” Just as she asked, Rey realized the answer was right under her nose- or more accurately hidden in the drawer of her nightstand. As if he’d heard her realization, Ben gave her another nod followed by a knowing look.

“Earpiece and cameras,” he confirmed before turning back to his mother. “They did mention Takodana’s a few times.” Suddenly, his gaze drifted back to his hands and he bit his lips, his voice even lower than before. “I helped them… I drew the plans.”

A strangled snort echoed behind Rey, accompanied by another series of anecdotes she wasn’t even listening to. Biting her lips as well, she was about to say something, anything to ease the obvious regret that had taken over Ben, when his mother took his hands between hers, her eyes planted in his.

“If you want to- and only if you do- I could… investigate further into this, with your help.”

Another nod shook his head, drawing a small smile on Rey’s lips as she heard his answer. “I… yes. I guess I could help.”

“Think about it.” Letting out a relieved sigh, the mayor straightened up in her seat and added, plunging a hand inside her purse: “I almost forgot- happy birthday.”
Taking it as her signal to give them a moment of privacy, Rey left her chair to join Han and Lando in what seemed to be a disagreement about who’d best-worn jumpsuits back in the old days. Even though she quickly found herself as a newly appointed judge, she couldn’t help glancing at Ben from time to time, her heart warming up at the sight of his mother handing him something shiny before dropping a kiss on his forehead.

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“I’m never gonna find you in the morning,” Rey murmured when they stepped into her room a few hours later.

She had agreed to it, and surprisingly didn’t mind such a big change; still, coming back to a room that was half filled with a bed twice the size of the one she’d had for years was certainly something else. Following suit, Ben dropped his jacket on the desk chair and flopped on the bed with a satisfied, tired sigh. “Oh, I think you will.”

Not bothering to get rid of her coat, Rey shook her head with amusement and joined him. “We should inaugurate it,” she suggested as her back met the mattress—silently, she noticed.

“Yeah, I can’t see how.”

Not giving her time to process the sarcasm in his voice, Ben rolled onto his stomach to capture her lips with his—and in just a few minutes, Rey forgot about her previous doubts. Being able to toss and turn on a bed without the fear of waking the entire house or falling on the floor was a luxury that suddenly seemed worth the change. Soon enough, her jacket ended on the floor, followed by her sweater and Ben’s shirt.

“So— you liked your birthday?” she managed to ask between kisses.

Just as breathless as she was, Ben nodded firmly. “I loved it,” he murmured, his lips brushing hers. “When’s yours?”

It’d probably been his hands on her waist, or the way his voice dropped an octave every time he seemed to reach that careless, playful side of him, but Rey could feel a wave of shivers travel down her body as her own voice seemed to lower as well. “I had to guess yours,” she reminded him with a smile.

“Is that a challenge?”

It wasn’t—she’d just never been fond of the idea of celebrating without her parents—yet, she raised her eyebrows suggestively and shrugged, causing Ben’s eyes to widen. Before she could manage to say anything, his fingers closed around her wrists and her hands were pinned above her head.

“This is new,” she breathed as Ben shifted above her with a grin.

“New bed, new things.”

As if to emphasize his statement, he wiggled his eyebrows, drawing an uncontrollable giggle out of her. Quickly realizing it, she closed her eyes and bit her lips; Rose and Finn wouldn’t appreciate their sleep being disturbed, but more importantly, Ben’s face was now buried in her neck, shivers emerging everywhere as his warm breath clashed against her cold skin.
“It’s in June?”

Eyes still shut, Rey felt the hint of a smile threatening to cross her lips and shrugged again. Almost immediately, the pressure on her wrists disappeared and Ben’s hand landed on her side, his fingers absent-mindedly grazing her skin. Wriggling under his touch, she let out a frustrated chuckle. “That’s unfair.”

“Sounds fair to me,” he said before dropping a kiss on her collarbone. “July, then?”

It took Rey a lot of efforts not to let her body betray her growing arousal as she shook her head again. Unperturbed, Ben went dangerously lower, his mouth covering each parcel of skin on the way. “August?”

Another shrug.

“September?”

For a moment, she almost forgot when her birthday actually was: his lips had now reached her stomach, making it difficult to focus on his words. Just as it came back to her, she felt Ben’s hands move to her jeans and her hips twitched in response. Instinctively, she tilted her head and crossed his gaze, amused yet questioning.

Even while fumbling with a button, he still looked incredible. Clumsy, impressive, but incredible. A yelp in protest almost escaped her as the jeans rolled down her hips along with her underwear. For some reason, something in the way that Ben proceeded gave her the impression of venturing into unknown territories, which was soon confirmed by the smile he gave her as he laid on his stomach, his head dangerously close to her legs.

“October?”

A shiver that had nothing to do with the thought of Autumn seized her again, followed with the unmistakable feeling of wet kisses planted along her thigh. “Ben?”

“Hm?”

His lips vibrated against her skin, only increasing the conflicted feelings raging inside her mind. He’d never been that close to that part of her- well, not like that. Still, Rey felt her heart miss a beat as his breath caressed her sensitive skin; and suddenly, she was rather ok letting him win this challenge if it meant she got to come for the second time that day. “Just… don’t feel like you have to.”

Just as she spoke, Ben emerged from between her legs, his brow creased in a frown. “I don’t.” A smirk on his lips, he bent over a little and kissed the inside of her thigh. “I want to-” another kiss “- if that’s ok?”

It was ok; more than ok. Unable to hold it in any longer, she let out a deep sigh and nodded, her hands slightly trembling as she reached for his hair. “Absolutely,” she murmured, and she knew from the weakness in her voice that she was already gone.

Within seconds, Ben was back to where he’d stopped, his smile widening with every kiss. If not for her struggle of gathering her thoughts, Rey would have happily reminded him of his earlier investigation, but words failed to leave her throat as his lips closed around her clit, sending a wave of electricity through her entire body.

“So?” Ben murmured, “October?”
The vibration only increased the tickling sensation growing inside her abdomen. Barely repressing a strangled moan, Rey closed her eyes and shook her head. Of course, this could only feel good— even a simple peck on the cheek always managed to drive her crazy. Maybe Ben heard the way her heart was drumming faster; gently, he wrapped his hands around her legs, spreading them a little wider. Just when she thought she’d gotten used to his lips being there, his tongue joined the party, barely grazing her entrance. Once again, her hips twitched.

His tongue pressed against her clit, then circled it with a calmness she couldn’t share. Aware of her chest heaving with each breath, she bit her lips and let her head fall back to the mattress. Repressing the need to squeeze her legs, she tightened her grip on his hair with trembling fingers. Another chuckle echoed; and this time, the moan exited her mouth.

“Sixth of May,” Rey heard herself blurt out when Ben caught her clit again between his lips.

She was close, insanely close; even with the best will in the world, she wouldn’t have been able to last much longer if his tongue kept tickling her like that. “My birthday.” Taking advantage of the short break she was given as Ben looked up, Rey caught her breath before she spoke again. “Sixth of May.”

With a victorious smile on his lips, Ben nodded and, without another word, burrowed his face back between her legs again, his kisses even hungrier than before.

Chapter End Notes

I'm repeating myself here but thanks for all your kudos and nice comments ♥

Also, check out this cute little art cielo-chii made for the first chapter!
It had been a few days since Ben stopped accompanying Rey on her morning rounds; and even though he’d assured that he just wanted to spend more time with her- well, their friends, she highly suspected him of taking advantage of her absence to sleep in and enjoy having their new giant bed to himself.

She couldn’t exactly blame him: the one night she’d spent alone in it had made her feel like a queen, especially when she knew Ben was slouched on the sofa in the other room, utterly wasted from a night out with Finn and Poe.

_A night out with Finn and Poe._ A small smile made it to her lips at the realization of how things had changed in just a few months. A realization that hit her again when she opened the door of the apartment to see Ben and Rose both staring at the TV with intense looks in their eyes, slumped on the floor with their backs against the sofa.

It had become fairly common for her to come back to the sight of these two either laughing or gritting their teeth to characters they loved to hate while eating cereals in bowls that looked ridiculously small in Ben’s hands. Today was no exception: none of them noticed her until she cleared her throat, still smiling incredulously at the scene before her eyes.

“Poe will join us for lunch, if that’s ok.”

From the approving smiles on their faces, it was. Still, Rey couldn’t help but double-check Rose’s expression and wait for her to nod.

Things had gotten way better for her too. After the long, difficult yet necessary conversation that followed Rose’s breakdown, they’d all made a point to spend more time with her and made sure not to repeat the same mistakes, which had actually been beneficial for everyone. Communication had never been so easy within the group, and Rose finally looked like she was herself again. Her conversation with Finn had probably been the most difficult, but from what she’d told Rey, it had all made sense: Finn hadn’t had it in him to break his best friend’s heart, whose feelings had been distorted by an impressive lack of affection they all held themselves responsible for. Seized by that hint of guilt that still showed up every once in a while, Rey joined them on the floor and took her
friend’s hand as she rested her head on her shoulder, a relaxed sigh crossing her lips when Ben’s hand came to rest on her leg.

They barely talked for the rest of the day, the dialogues echoing from the TV filling the silence as the girls buckled down to the revisions they’d been postponing for the last few days. With their final exams approaching, they needed to study more than ever; and Ben needed to give his uncle an answer regarding his work offer. Concealed behind the many binders and books splayed on the table between them three, Rey glanced at him from time to time with a frown she couldn’t repress: for someone who’d always been so easy to read, Ben certainly seemed stoned-faced, today.

Finn eventually came home around six, exhausted and irritable from what she could only guess had been a long day of intense training.

“I’m never gonna make it until next year,” he said as he slumped on the sofa, a loud bang echoing across the room when his body hit the pillows.

“Your coach?” Rose asked without raising her head up from the notes she’d been scribbling for an hour.

A groan of complaint echoed from the sofa as a response, causing Rey to look up from her own notes and search for Ben’s eyes. Even though they hadn’t talked about the first and last time she’d met Finn’s coach, Rey hadn’t forgotten the woman: just as odious as she’d been impressive, confident smiles scattering doubt and softening every biting comment that had left her mouth. A hint of guilt seized her again when Ben’s eyes finally met hers: this was part of his past, of everything he’d tried so hard to put behind. Just as she was about to shake her head, Ben turned to where Finn’s legs hung over the armrest and cleared his throat.

“She hates spiders.”

Not even a second later, Finn’s head popped from under the pillows he’d piled up on himself, an incredulous look on his face. “Phasma fears nothing.”

“Trust me, she does,” Ben retorted with a shrug. “It might even be the only thing.”

For the first time today, something close to a grin appeared on his lips, soon mirrored by Finn.

“Spiders,” the student repeated on a low voice. Smiling at himself, he got back on his feet and thanked Ben with a brief nod as he trotted out of the room and to the bathroom.

As soon as the lock echoed through the entire apartment, Rey looked back at Ben who gave her a coy smile as an excuse. Unable to repress her own smile at the sight of his, Rey nonetheless rolled her eyes with amusement and closed her notebook rather abruptly, causing Rose to wince.

“I’ll go make dinner,” Rey said, rising from her chair. Still not taking her eyes off her book, Rose gave her a vague nod, barely acknowledging Ben leaving his seat as well and following Rey to the kitchen, where she turned the stove on and proceeded to look for a pan.

“So,” Ben started just as she found one, “I’ve been thinking about it, and… I talked to Mitaka.”

“Oh?”

The question, or more likely reaction, crossed her lips with a surprised tone. It’d only been a week since Mrs. Organa had asked for her son’s help, and Rey had been careful not to ask about it, patiently waiting for him to bring the subject up first. Doing her best to contain her smile, she gave him an inquiring look as she reached for the flour jar.
Ben nodded once, then twice. “I’m seeing him on Thursday,” he murmured, something serious in his voice until a frown narrowed his eyes. “Why are you smiling?”

“I don’t know,” Rey replied with a shrug. “It’s just nice seeing you helping your mother.”

A similar shrug shook Ben’s shoulder at that, followed by this neutral-yet-embarrassed voice he used whenever she complimented him. “It’s the least I can do.”

A pinch of flour missed the pan, covering their feet and dragging a desperate sigh out of Rey. Ignoring Ben’s amused look on her, she grabbed a bottle of milk and some eggs that she proceeded to break and add into the pan. Just when she was about to blend the mixture, Finn’s head popped in between them, followed by a distinctive sound of disgust. “What are you doing, exactly?”

“A cake?”

Ben was the first to chuckle, immediately joined by Rose and Poe. “Rey, you…”

Whatever he was about to say was cut by another chuckle that turned into a frank laugh as Finn mumbled something none of them understood.

“I saw it on the internet, it works!” Rey protested. “People do it all the time.”

Maybe it was the internet argument or the fact that anything she’d ever cooked had always burnt, but Finn gave Rey the most devastated look as she hesitantly poured the milk into the pan. Thankfully, Poe was quick to come and grab his boyfriend and drag him away, giving Rey more space to cook in peace.

“You’re doing great,” Ben observed a few minutes later when the preparation started to look like an appropriate batter.

A tranquil atmosphere had fallen back on the room: the sound of a video game Finn was currently winning was almost lulling Rey to sleep, along with the sweet smell of food. The hands that had just landed on her waist, though, woke her up a little. Biting her lips, she raised her eyebrows. “I am?”

“Hm-hm.”

Fast yet gentle, Ben trailed his hands down her hips. Oblivious of the other people in the room, he bent a few inches and buried his face into her neck, causing Rey to giggle as a few kisses were planted along her skin. If not for her friends being less than two feet away from them, she would’ve dragged Ben straight to her room; instead, she let the spoon sink into the pan and turned on her heels, where she was greeted with the kiss she’d been waiting for all day.

In the blink of an eye, the silent, distant Ben made way to the one she’d gotten to know over the last months. Something in her chest tightened, then warmed up at the sensation of his smile breaking their kiss as he slightly pulled away. Smiling as well, she tugged at his shirt and captured his lips for a longer, deeper kiss that seemed to surprise Ben, who let out a small moan she hadn’t been expecting.

“Hey, don’t burn my dinner, you horny teenagers!” Poe protested from the other side of the room.

An embarrassed chuckle broke their embrace, followed by Poe’s satisfied snicker as Ben’s face went through various sheds of red. Holding back her own laugh, Rey turned back to the pan, praying that their minute of inattention wouldn’t cost them another cake.
Luckily, it didn’t; and twenty minutes later, the group was gathered in front of the TV with the addition of Baby, for Rose’s greatest pleasure, who turned to them the second silence fell on the group.

“Oh, I forgot,” she said as the dog stole another bite of her burger, “Paige said she would drop by this week, if that’s ok?”

Both Finn and Poe nodded frantically; yet, her eyes searched for Rey and Ben’s. In truth, Rey had learned not to rely on Rose’s sister after the many false hopes her friend had suffered, but something in the haste with which Ben nodded made her a little less reluctant. Which made her realize…

“It’s actually very ok.” Each word crossed her lips with caution, earning her a frown from both Ben and Rose. “We might need her for something.”

If Rose didn’t seem very curious about that something, Ben gave Rey an inquiring look she dismissed with a brief shake of her head. Luckily, Poe’s voice rose from the other side of the sofa before Ben could say anything, calling her enthusiastically.

“Rey!

Eyes wide with excitement, the mechanic pointed at the TV where italic, pink letters appeared on a black and white shot, accompanied by a song she knew way too well.

So won’t you, please

Be my, be my baby, Be my little baby

My one and only baby

An instant smile crossed her lips at the sight of the opening credits of her favorite movie and the many memories that came rushing back with it. Christmas nights spent on the same sofa she was currently slouched on, with her neighbor, his homemade pizza and their favorite wine. A less pleasant Christmas, too, spent without Poe or anyone, until Ben’s call. And, finally, memories from a more recent night where she’d deprived Ben of the last half of this very same movie in favor of…

According to the way he was looking at her, she wasn’t the only one remembering that night. Biting the inside of her cheeks, Rey straightened up and casually took Ben’s hand while Poe turned the volume up, causing Rose and Finn to look at each other with those eyes that screamed amusement and defeat at the same time. Focused on Jennifer Grey’s voice, Rey watched the old car progress through the countryside as another song played, nonetheless noticing the way Ben’s chest heaved when she rested her head on his shoulder. Soon enough, his body seemed to relax and his fingers tentatively brushed hers.

None of them said a single thing for the entire movie, but the way he kissed her as soon as the door of her room closed behind them said it all.
Thursday arrived faster than Ben had hoped, and with it the realization of what he was about to throw himself into.

The regular ticking of the clock seemed louder than it’d been for the last twenty minutes, only adding to the growing anxiety he’d felt settling in his chest all morning. Fighting the impulse to reduce the piece of bread staring back at him to shreds, he wrapped his hands around his mug and focused on the warmth spreading against his palms.

A distant noise echoed next to him, followed by the feeling of a cold hand covering his. Swallowing with difficulty, Ben looked away from the door he’d been staring at and turned to Rey. She seemed way more confident than he was, yet not as much as she usually did. Not without a brief sigh, she gave him a compassionate smile and started to patiently caress the back of his hand.

Rey had been many things since he’d met her, but strong was by far the first adjective he could think of. Sure, she’d had her moments- they both had- but in the end, there hadn’t been a single obstacle she hadn’t overcome. And if Ben was being honest, he’d come to realize how much he’d learned from her.

“You’ll be ok,” she murmured. “Breathe.”

Breathe- that’s what he’d forgotten. Following her advice, he took a deep breath, held it and released it. His jaw relaxed a little, and tension gradually left his shoulders as he focused on his breathing and the way Rey’s fingers kept tracing circles on his skin.

“He’s a bit late, isn’t he?”

Both Rey and Ben turned to the sofa in the same movement, where Paige gave them a reassuring smile.

Even though she’d only been here for a few days, Ben already had a lot of sympathy towards Paige. It wasn’t that hard to like her; she inspired instant friendliness, but a different kind than what her sister was. Where Rose was easy-going and talkative, Paige remained discreet and observant. Never in the way, but not invisible either; perfectly balanced, just as her little sister had described her. What she’d told Ben about her personality was true: Paige seemed like a confident, young woman without actually intimidating those around her.

“He is,” Rey agreed after a brief glance to her watch. “Maybe he-”

A series of uncertain knocks cut her mid-sentence, and the three of them froze. If not for the distant sound of traffic, everyone would probably have heard Ben’s heart jumping in his chest, vainly trying to escape. If that was what a few knocks on a door did to him, the whole conversation they were about to have would kill him.

“I’ll get it,” Rey murmured.

Before she could leave her chair, Ben rose from his and shook his head. “No, I will.”

Her tense jaw betrayed Rey’s nervousness as she nodded, following him with this concerned look that hadn’t left her eyes since this very morning. Nodding as well, Paige left the sofa for the chair next to Rey’s, her face suddenly covered with a serious expression Ben had no doubt was her “lawyer face”. Rose had told him about her sister’s seriousness when it came to justice, but seeing it himself was the reassurance he needed right now.

His first walk through that corridor was nothing compared to how long the walk to the door felt right now. Ten seconds of intense stress, coupled with a dozen greeting options and the constant
need to remind himself that this was just Mitaka. A hello would do. Maybe a handshake.

Ben was trying to remember the few times they’d greeted each other in the past when he opened the door on a pale, visibly exhausted young man who clumsily waved at him. “Oh. Hi.”

“Hi.” A brief silence followed, promptly cut by Ben’s hesitant voice. “Uh, come in.”

The walk back to the living room was definitely quicker. None of them talked until Rey greeted Mitaka and introduced herself, followed by Paige. A few minutes of awkward silence later, four cups of coffee were placed between every pair of hands, slightly decreasing the general tension.

“So, uh… you wanted to ask me something?” Mitaka asked timidly.

Both Rey and Paige turned to Ben at that, who bit his lips for a second before speaking. “I do. What… How’s work?”

Various expressions crossed the young man’s face, from fear to embarrassment. Letting out a sigh, he grabbed his coffee with trembling fingers and took the longest sip Ben had ever seen.


A hint of guilt seized Ben at the words. Hadn’t he quit, Mitaka wouldn’t have been stuck in any of this. Mirroring the young man, he took a sip of his own coffee and swallowed with difficulty. “More hours?”

His former colleague nodded sheepishly, the lighting emphasizing the shadows under his eyes. “Yours and mine.”

For the first time since the conversation had begun, Paige gave away her thoughts. Sitting still at the other side of the table, she gave Mitaka a concerned frown and joined her hands, only reinforcing her seriousness.

“They’re paying you, right?” Ben asked with the most casual voice he was capable of, hoping for the answer to surprise him.

The question seemed to trigger something in Mitaka, who put his mug down and pinched his lips together. One, two-- four seconds passed before he looked up from his hands, swallowing hard as his eyes met Ben’s. “Not yet, but… they said they would soon.”

Right on the mark.

“That’s illegal,” Paige began to explain calmly. Both Mitaka and Ben turned to her, waiting for her face to emerge back from her mug to continue. “He’s facing a heavy sentence by not paying you.”

Despite her soft tone, the information seemed to scare Mitaka more than anything. Looking from one of them to the other, it took him a few seconds to find his voice again. “I don’t want any problems.”

“And you won’t have any,” Rey hastened to assure. “Those are just questions and… information,” she added with a hesitant look to Ben.

There it was: the constant fear that came with Snoke’s presence, with the feeling that you couldn’t trust anybody. Not unless you had proof, tangible proof, that they wouldn’t hurt you. Not unless they dropped their guard and trusted you as well. Taking a deep breath, Ben closed his eyes for a moment, giving himself some last few seconds of calm before the storm he was about to summon.
He knew what he had to do; he’d thought about it for days, if not more.

“I think there are more than unpaid employees issues and dubious deals going on,” Ben articulated. “My... the Mayor has every reason to think Snoke and his friends are responsible for a series of frauds that have happened these last years. Like Takodana’s.”

A new silence fell on the room, slightly different from the previous. Once again, various expressions crossed Mitaka’s face; but this time, he didn’t try to avoid Ben’s gaze. Once their eyes met again, realization seemed to hit the young man, whose mouth open slightly then closed a few times.

“What do I have to do with that?” he asked after a moment.

And for the third time that day, Ben felt guilt grow inside of him as he heard the words cross his lips. “I guess you’re familiar with their poker nights?”

The slow, hesitant nod Mitaka gave him was both a relief and something he wished he hadn’t seen. Nodding as well, Ben spared Mitaka from any other questions and turned to Paige. “Would it be illegal to record one of those meetings without Snoke knowing?”

“Yes,” she replied tit for tat. “He could sue you.”

“How about only listening?”

Paige seemed to consider this new idea for a moment then folded her arms with a frown. “It’s not like we can use the old wiretap trick, this isn’t some NCIS episode. You need to open a case in order to be allowed to do that, and these things take months.”

“We might not have months,” Mitaka pointed out in a low voice.

The statement earned him a frown from both Paige and Rey, but Ben nodded knowingly. He’d seen Snoke and the way he and his associates never seemed to talk some other way than whispers whenever someone else was around. He’d seen the furtive looks behind their charming smiles from the confinement of his office; even fine-sounding words couldn’t compete with the security cameras arranged around the bar. If Mitaka sounded the least bit nervous tomorrow, Snoke would be quick to dispose of him, and with it their last hope.

“An officer can’t refuse a complaint, right?” The question seemed to please Paige, who nodded slowly. Noting the look of understanding she gave him, Ben continued. “What if one of us asked to file one? We would have a live proof.”

A short silence followed his question, during which Paige seemed to weigh the pros and cons of this plan. Under the table, Rey’s hand slipped inside his, her grip strong as her thumb stroked his skin nervously.

“It could work,” Paige announced after a few seconds of reflection. “We’ll have to use phones and make sure we--”

“Oh we could use my earpiece.”

Ben felt a wince cross his face. Instinctively, his fingers tightened their grip around Rey’s, who gave him the saddest smile he’d ever seen on her lips—but her eyes were what he stayed focused on. Her look was worth a thousand words; and just by planting his eyes on hers, Ben knew they both thought about the same things. The night he’d helped her win her first laser-game, and the night she’d come back. Weeks of awkward flirting, fears, and confessions, all thanks to one tiny
object that’d brought the two of them together in the most unusual way.

Certainly not something he wanted to get rid of.

“They’re meeting tomorrow night,” Mitaka specified, breaking the silence. “I’m… helping him with their game.”

And just with that, Ben realized how futile his attachment to an object was compared to what Mitaka was currently doing. Not only was he about to lose the job he’d just got, but he was about to get involved in a case he hadn’t asked to be a part of, with people he barely knew. Slightly tightening his hold on Rey’s hand, he cleared his throat and turned back to the young man.

“If any of this is too much… just say it. We’ll find another way.”

They wouldn’t, but Mitaka had every reason to withdraw.

“No, I want to help. I’ll do it.”

And maybe it was the fact that the young man’s voice had never sounded so confident, the idea of making his mother proud or the need to be over with Snoke once and for all, but Ben felt something awakening in his chest as he gave Mitaka a thankful smile and extended his hand for a firm shake that sealed their agreement.

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Exactly seven hours had passed since Mitaka had left. Seven hours of casual life, as if they hadn’t just come up with a plan to catch Snoke red-handed and get rid of him once and for all. Seven hours during which Ben kept thinking about the worst case scenario, and everything it involved.

The last hour, at least, had been dedicated to something else.

Bent over Rey’s tiny desk, Ben turned the clumsily assembled pieces of plastics between his fingers, feeling even more helpless as the minutes passed. For someone who’d spent years repairing broken earpieces and headsets, he’d certainly lost his touch. A few wires dangled from the many gaps, obviously mocking what, so far, was an utter failure: the result was far from looking like a functional device, let alone an earpiece.

“The bed is a bit too large for me alone, you know.”

Shook by a jolt at the realization that Rey had joined him, Ben looked behind him apologetically.

“I’ll be back in a minute,” he assured with a forced smile. Not wanting to face her expression, he turned back to the desk and proceeded to dismantle his last attempt, trying hard not to surrender to the desire to crush it.

“Ben… please.”

Before he could give in to his impulsivity, one of her hands landed on top of his. Any destructive idea immediately left his mind, making way for the initial panic that had brought him to leave the bed at almost midnight, with the urge to knock up a replacement earpiece he didn’t mind giving Snoke.
The reason he’d shown earlier had vanished the minute Rey had fallen asleep. Within the last weeks he’d lived with her, Ben had grown to understand her attachment to the various objects she refused to throw away. As silly as the idea of a lucky charm sounded, he’d come to see what she meant by “alternative pictures”: the mixtape he safely kept in his jacket was worth a thousand photo albums of the memories he shared with his father. But to anyone else, it was nothing more than an old scratched tape with faded stickers on it.

Even though she’d never said it, Ben saw the way Rey cautiously put the earpiece in her nightstand at night, and the way she slipped it in her pockets in the morning when she thought he wasn’t watching. The earpiece was her mixtape; something that shouldn’t ever leave her, let alone to be used by Snoke.

“I can do it,” he murmured between gritted teeth.

“I know you can.” As discreetly as she’d snuck out of bed, Rey took the plastic pieces and wires out of his hands and leaned against him from behind, wrapping her arms around him as she rested her head on his shoulder. They stayed like this for a few seconds, cheek to cheek, before she spoke again. “We can still cancel, you know.”

“No,” Ben retorted with a shake of his head. “No, we need to get it done.”

A sigh left Rey, tickling the skin his shirt failed to cover. Silently, she nodded and pressed her lips against his neck in a tender kiss that almost lulled him enough to come back to bed.

Gradually, his heart rate seemed to return to normal, accompanied by the soothing rhythm of Rey’s breathing echoing against his ear. “Hey,” she murmured after a minute, “you’re not alone.”

Smiling for the first time since what felt like forever, Ben placed a hand on her arms, reveling in the warmth of her skin. “I know.”

“Then trust me.”

As gently as she’d approached, Rey removed her arms from him and walked around his chair until her eyes met his, warm and comforting. Cautiously, she kneeled in front of the chair and took Ben’s hands in hers, giving him a lingering sense of déjà vu as she began to speak. “Now, tell me why you want to do this.”

“You know why,” he murmured.

“I want you to say it.”

Oh, could she be persuasive.

“I just… I just want to move on,” Ben articulated carefully. Rey didn’t flinch, which only encouraged him to continue. “And I want him to be punished for what he did.”

“Why?”

“Because… that was wrong.”

“Why?” she repeated.

It took Ben a few seconds to find the words she was waiting for; and for the first time, he realized how much he meant them. “Because I didn’t deserve this.”
“Exactly.” A small yet triumphant smile on her lips, Rey squeezed his hands between hers. “You can always change your mind, none of us will be mad at you. But if you need a kick in the ass, I’ll gladly do it.”

The hint of a smirk instinctively shaded his eyes. Smiling playfully, Ben perked an eyebrow, earning a little laugh from Rey as she rolled her eyes.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Just the encouragement I needed,” Ben assured.

Thankfully, this earned him another smile from her as she rose up a few inches to capture his lips with hers. “Now come back to bed before I freeze to death,” she whispered through the kiss.

It was all Ben needed to abandon the desk and follow her to bed. His body relaxed significantly as he dove under the fresh covers, freed from all the tension he’d accumulated all day. Seconds later, Rey snuggled into him until her back met his chest, warm and comforting.

“I have to do it, right?” Ben asked after they turned off the lights.

The rustling of Rey turning over broke the silence for a second, followed by her deep breath. “You don’t have to,” she stated calmly. “You don’t owe anything to anyone but yourself.”

“Be my own savior, that kind of thing?” Even though he couldn’t see her, Ben felt Rey nod next to him. She was right, as always; just as she’d been earlier about the earpiece, and before about his right to demand justice. With this in mind, he took another deep breath and shifted slightly to wrap his arm around her. “I’ll do it.”

“You can think about it tomorrow,” she reminded him with a barely repressed yawn.

It was now Ben’s turn to nod against her head. Even though he silently agreed with Rey, he knew his decision had already been made.

“I’ll do it,” he repeated in a murmur, to which Rey replied with a soft snore.

Smiling to himself, Ben kissed her forehead before adjusting his head above hers, accepting sleep with a little less fear, knowing he wasn’t alone for what was waiting for him. Tomorrow, he was going to the police station. And tomorrow, the man who had stolen so much from him was going down.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry this update took so long, uncool real life happened. I needed time for myself, and to make sure I wrote this chapter as enthusiastically as I always have ♥ If you're still here, thank you!

Next chapter will be the last, and even though I will miss this story, I can't wait to post it!
“Hey, Ben? You might want to read this!”

An inquiring hum resonated under Rey as she opened her eyes, followed by a second knock on her door. Instinctively, she reached out for her phone. Another hum –*surprised*, this time- echoed as she realized she’d accidentally smacked Ben right on the face. “Good morning to you too.”

Her hand moved with his lips’ movement, his warm breath tickling her palm. “Sorry,” she mumbled with a chuckle as she freed his mouth.

In the few months that followed the acquisition of the double-sized bed, they hadn’t spent a single night too far apart from each other. The first days of summer had sure been a challenge when the temperatures got high; but with a little less clothing and an open window, the two were able to maintain their habit and stay interlaced through the nights.

“Rey, let him out!” Finn called from behind the door with a new series of knocks.

“As if you were captive.”

Ignoring Ben’s amused laugh, Rey untangled her legs from his and carefully rolled to her side of the bed. Her skin shivered at the sensation of the cold sheets caressing her back. She hadn’t bothered to put anything on- the nights were hot and so was Ben’s body. Smirking at the thought, she cast a glance to the wardrobe where he’d moved and let her eyes wander along his bare back. Even after months of a relationship and countless nights running her fingers along his skin, she never got tired of that sight.

“Rey?”

“Hm?”

“I said I’m opening the door.”
The words called her back to reality and with that the fact that she was still lying in bed, completely naked. “I’ll put something on.”

“That might be a good idea.” Behind his chuckle, she didn’t miss the way Ben bit his lip as she left the bed and took her time, reveling in the way his eyes followed her moves.

Minutes later, the two of them walked out of the room and into the kitchen, fully dressed. Sitting behind a pile of toast, Finn greeted them with a huge smile and waved his newspaper at Ben. “Page four.”

Silently, Rey claimed the chair next to him and grabbed one slice of bread. She knew very well what Finn wanted him to read: she and Ben had known for a few days now but swore not to say anything until it was officially published. So, naturally, the entire flat knew about it. Out of the corner of her eye, she cast a glance at Ben, who already seemed rather captivated by the article in his hands.

“After months of trial, Jury finally settled on a sentence for Henry Snoke, who got accused of various felonies such as embezzlement, slander and drug trafficking in late April. Sources say no less than six individuals pressed charges against him, including Mayor Organa and Maz Kanata, owner of Takodana, which was closed earlier this year due to Mr. Snoke’s schemes. The coffee is set to reopen soon, just in time for the start of the new school year.”

“All’s well that ends well,” Finn concluded with a grin.

Smiling in return, Ben handed the newspaper back with a nod. “Just in time for our game.”

Once again, the two men exchanged a knowing smile that Rey could only share. After months of patience and with the help of a great lawyer, Ben had been compensated with a rather fair amount of the money Snoke had owed him for years. The man had quickly lost all of his rights to Starkiller, which had fallen into the city’s hands. Luckily, being the mayor’s son had its perks; and for less than half its worth, Ben had managed to buy what was left of the establishment. He wasn’t about to take up the reins, but the laser game had proved itself to be a great place to go to whenever one of them felt in the mood for a games night.

Just as Rey was trying to get another one of Finn’s slices of toast, Poe appeared out of nowhere and sat next to her, giggling. Before she could ask anything, Finn let out a snort and intimated her to stay quiet. With a devious grin, Poe brought a phone to his ear and cleared his throat under his boyfriend’s amused perception.

“Yes, I’d like to speak to Mr. Hugs, please. It’s about his mother.”

As the new owner, Ben’s first move had been to fire its last employee, which of course hadn’t pleased Armitage, who’d promised him hell and reprisals. This had inspired Poe’s greatest prank calls, which didn’t fail to make Rey and the rest of the flat laugh bright and early.

“Give the poor man a break.” With a pink towel wrapped around her hair, Rose emerged from the bathroom and joined them around the table, carrying a fruity scent with each of her movements.

Rose had always been a sophisticated person- at least in Rey’s eyes. Without being too focused on her appearance, she did appreciate pampering herself every now and then and had a rather large wardrobe. Still, something in her current outfit caught Rey’s attention: the floral dress hugging her figure had something more audacious than what she usually wore, and so was the way she’d styled her hair. Probably noticing it too, Finn narrowed his eyes and gave the young woman a smirk.

“Does it mean you have a second date?”
The blush that colored her friend’s cheek immediately alerted Rey, who almost dropped her cup of tea. “Second date? I didn’t even know about a first date!”

“That’s because you weren’t supposed to,” Rose muttered. Glaring at Finn, she grabbed the closest cup of coffee and took a long sip.

In all honesty, Rey hadn’t been very talkative about her first dates either- but that was almost a year ago. Things had changed drastically. She had changed- except for the curiosity she could feel growing inside her. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“He’s, um… older.”

“Like I care.”

“No but… older older.”

As if she’d suddenly realized the information she’d just dropped, Rose opened wide eyes and hid behind her coffee cup, her cheeks as red as the earrings hanging from her ears.

Something was up, and Rey wasn’t about to drop it. Just as she looked up to Finn, his eyes diverted to the back of a cereal box and remained fixed on it. Her next option was Ben, who shrugged as soon as she turned to him and gave Rose a curious look before giving it a try too. “Like… a teacher?”

If she didn’t say anything, Rose’s expression definitely betrayed her thoughts. As red as a beet, she made a point to avoid Ben’s gaze on her and proceeded to unwrap her towel. Freed from their confines, her long dark hair cascaded to her shoulders, their wet tips leaving a few stains on her dress.

“It’s ok,” Ben added sheepishly. “There’s nothing wrong about that as long as it’s not your teacher.”

A brief sigh crossed Rose’s lips as she untangled her locks. There was something odd in the way she briefly nodded at Ben’s statement but refused to look at him- something shameful that enlightened Rey on something she never expected but could see now and dragged her to speak again.

“Oh my god, you’re seeing Ben’s uncle.” The words left her in a murmur but were loud enough to plunge the entire room into a deep silence.

That would’ve explained a lot, starting with the fact that Rose had signed out of their History class for this new year. Even though Mr. Skywalker wasn’t the most talkative person she knew, Rey had to admit he had a certain charisma: his social skills were certainly questionable, but he had an impressive education. He was rather self-confident, too; Rose probably liked that. Now that she was thinking about it, it actually sounded more and more logical: no one their age could ever be mature enough to match Rose’s witness. Biting her lips, Rey chose her next words wisely.

“So you’re… seeing him today?”

“Yeah,” Rose mumbled. “I should get going actually, the coffee shop is opening at ten and he needs to-”

“You’re seeing Lando?”

If the revelation hadn’t made Rey nearly choke on her tea, she probably would’ve joined Finn, who
burst out in hysterical laughter. Next to him, Poe dropped his phone and smacked a hand over his mouth, his wide eyes betraying his surprise and amusement while Ben remained silent, his eyes wide open and staring at Rose.

“Ok, I’m leaving now,” Rose stated as Ben opened his mouth to speak again, “and don’t you dare say something.”

Despite her unequivocal tone, Rey noticed the hint of a smile on her friend’s lips as she left. Dumbfounded, Ben followed her with his eyes until she closed the door, looking just equally lost and amused. “This family is getting weirder every year.”

“Speaking of,” Rey said after she emptied her cup, “we’re gonna be late.”

Silently agreeing, Ben finished his coffee and mirrored her as she got up. “See you after?” he asked from afar as they reached the corridor.

Both Finn and Poe responded positively from the kitchen, bringing a smile on Rey’s mouth as she grabbed her keys. Just as she did, Ben’s hand closed around her wrist, stopping her mid-movement.

“Wait.” Delicately, he opened her hand and took the keys. “I want to go somewhere, first.”

A genuine smile blossomed on Rey’s lips when she felt the engine shutting down. “Are we there yet?”

“Yes,” Ben replied next to her. “You can open your eyes, now.”

She didn’t need to be told twice. Despite her curiosity, she had kept her promise the entire ride, resisting the temptation to sneak a peek of the road between her eyelids. She’d had time to make up various scenarios in her head- some more eccentric than others- but nothing compared to what appeared before her when she finally opened her eyes.

A simple hill. Their hill.

Even though they hadn’t had much time to come here over the course of the last few weeks, the place looked just as familiar as it always had. A contented sigh left Rey and she turned to Ben, who was already smiling at her.

Since the very first day, this place had always been their refuge: whenever life seemed too fast or overwhelming, the two usually ended up having an impromptu picnic on the bench overlooking the city, most of the time accompanied by the sound of the various tapes Rey had kept in her car. This was their happy place; the one that had seen just as many tears as smiles. The place that always brought them a break away from everything else. The place that made her feel like home whenever belonging felt like a foreign concept.

“Come on, I’ve got something for you.”

Before Rey could react to what he’d just said, Ben left the car. Stopping a few feet away, he glanced at her from behind his shoulder and she swore she saw him smirk. Oh, he knew how to pique her curiosity- and it worked. Intrigued, she slammed the door behind her and joined him in
just a few strides, the smile on her lips mirroring his.

“Something like a gift?” she asked when she reached him.

A short silence followed her words. “You could say that,” Ben murmured.

With a frown that made him look slightly concerned, he stopped right in the middle of the grass and plunged a hand in his pocket, visibly looking for something that he got out seconds later.

Rey’s heart stopped for a moment, then doubled its beats as she took in the object concealed between his fingers. Something small, and white- something she knew very well and didn’t think she would ever see again.

She’d been attached to many objects before, but this earpiece had always had a special place in her heart. For a long time, it’d been her only connection to Ben. A reminder that this man wasn’t a dream, that she hadn’t imagined him over another lonely night. Letting it go hadn’t been easy, but seeing Snoke cuffed had definitely been worth it. Even more worth it had been the look of relief on Ben’s face the moment he’d watched the man disappear inside a police van.

“How?”

“Lots of smiles,” Ben replied with a shrug. “Mostly my mother’s.”

A soft chuckle crossed Rey’s lips. Slow and hesitant, she brought her hand on top of Ben’s and brushed the earpiece with the tip of her fingers. Even though she’d thrown it into the depths of her bag multiple times, the small device had never seemed so fragile and precious to her.

Still, she couldn’t close her fingers around it. For some odd reason, the earpiece seemed to be distancing itself from her, and so was the hand holding it. It took Rey a moment to realize what was happening- but in a matter of seconds, Ben was kneeling before her, his eyes planted in hers, the earpiece still in his hand.

“Ben?”

“Don’t freak out, I’m not-”

A nervous chuckle left him, giving Rey a split second to be submerged by conflicted feelings. Was he, though? Why wasn’t she panicking like she should be?

“I’m not proposing,” Ben continued from his spot. Another little laugh left him, followed by a deep breath that made his chest heave significantly. “Ok. Rey… This last year has been a rollercoaster, and I have no idea how I survived, but… actually, I do. I thought my life was ok, but meeting you made me realize it wasn’t, because there’s no way I could ever have a happy life without you in it.”

He took a brief pause, allowing Rey to give him a frown as well as a smile. “Are you sure you’re not proposing?”

“Not yet,” Ben assured with a slightly more reassuring voice. “But… that’s what I wanted to say. I can’t imagine my life without you. I’m not proposing today, but one day I will. So, Rey…” With trembling fingers, he transferred the earpiece into Rey’s hands, never once breaking eye contact. “The day I ask you to marry me, will you say yes?”

Rey’s heart sunk to her knees, just in time to let her deliver the most incredulous laugh. “That definitely sounds like a proposal, but… yes. I will.”
“I see it more as a pre-proposal,” Ben mumbled as he got up.

His jeans were stained from the grass, but she didn’t focus on that. His smile was worth a million stained jeans, and those endearing eyes of his- she could never get tired of them. She could never get tired of him.

“I can’t wait for the actual one,” she murmured before biting her lower lip. Just as she did, Ben bent down a few inches; just enough to let her meet him halfway and seal their lips together in a long, yet soft kiss that had her forgetting to breathe. Who needed air, anyway?

“Rey?”

“Hm?”

“I love you.”

Taking advantage of the small gap between them, Rey let out a chuckle and pulled him back for another kiss. Ben laughed as well, and it didn’t take long before he was following her movements, his lips quickly dancing with hers. Yes, he loved her- and she loved him too. She couldn’t see her life without him either, but Ben was way better with words than her, and so she chose to rely on her gestures to deliver the message.

The entirety of the last few months washed over her as his fingers dug into her hips, and she felt her arms throwing themselves around his neck, holding onto him with strength. She didn’t even know when she’d started loving him. Maybe she’d always had.

Eyes firmly shut, she let the tips of her fingers trace an imaginary line somewhere between his collar and his neck, reveling in the shivers she could feel emerging under her touch. Ben’s reaction wasn’t long to follow: as if shaken by a spasm, he pulled her closer and tightened his grip around her hips.

“Get in the car,” Rey managed to whisper against his lips.

A brief questioning hum echoed, followed by one of those Solo-signature frowns, but Ben didn’t protest. His hands still on her waist, he proceeded to walk backward, his amused eyes locked onto hers as she guided him impatiently. Seconds later, he flopped onto the passenger’s seat, shortly joined by Rey who made her way onto his lap with little effort before slamming the door on them.

“I love you,” she murmured after another brief kiss. “I love you so much.”

Tears started to prick at her eyes when she crushed her lips against his one more time. There was a time when such simple words hadn’t been so easy to say. She would’ve covered them with shields of doubt before drowning them far from sight. Loneliness, isolation- these things were nothing more than a bad memory, now. Ben had made his way to her heart in the most unexpected way; and now, he was making the promise to stay.

“Then why are you crying?”

His voice was so full of concern; Rey hadn’t realized her cheeks were now wet. “I just never want you to leave,” she murmured sheepishly.

It wasn’t really fear- at least not a rational one. She’d learned to trust him, just as much as he’d learned that she needed reassurance from time to time. After endless nights spent talking and loving each other, it was clear Ben wasn’t going anywhere- still, the idea did rush back every now and then, taunting her like an old acquaintance.
“I can’t,” Ben pointed out with a shrug, “I just proposed.”

A genuine giggle slipped out of Rey and she bit her lips, swallowing some tears as she whispered, “Ask me again.”

And in that moment, the smile Ben gave her was all she needed. But he was a devoted man, and she didn’t the additional reassurance, so she didn’t interrupt him as he cleared his throat and looked her in the eyes.

“Rey Johnson,” Ben said softly, putting a strand of hair behind her ear, “will you marry me? One day?”

“Yes.”

The word died on her lips as she leaned forward for another kiss. If kisses could convey promises, this one would seal the one she’d just made. She’d nearly forgotten the reason for her request, but her hands sure hadn’t: they had already trailed down Ben’s chest and found the zipper of his jeans. Just as she began to unbutton it, Ben pulled away with a frown. “Here?”

Her fingers still on his jeans, Rey shrugged and nodded at the same time. His frown turned into a grin. “And I thought I knew you well.”

“Oh, you do,” Rey retorted with a smirk.

“I do,” Ben agreed before claiming her lips once again.

Their embrace hadn’t taken long to heat up, this time; within seconds, Rey’s fingers were back on him, hastily fumbling with the metallic button. A frown and a groan later, she managed to undo it and moved on to the zipper. She’d barely reached its middle when Ben suddenly leaned forward, an arm firmly wrapped around her waist while his other hand seemed to grab something behind her. Seconds later, the radio started playing a song she’d heard too much and yet not often enough.

_I’ve been meaning to tell you_  
_I’ve got this feeling that won’t subside_  

“Oh, you love me.”

Oh, she did. So much that she didn’t bother arguing more. Letting go of the many banters she could’ve retorted with, she shook her head with amusement and moved a hand to his cheek, cupping his face tenderly. Cliché was okay as long as it was with this man.

His hand moved, too. From her back to her shoulder, its warmth spread over her skin and she swore she could’ve melted under his touch. No one else had ever looked at her this way- not with such reverence and wonder. A trail of shivers emerged on her skin as he slid the strap of her dress away.
One look at you and I can't disguise
I've got hungry eyes
I feel the magic between you and I

The shivers followed as the fabric fell, exposing more skin as Ben kept undoing the string securing her dress. Where she’d been hurried before, she now had all the time in the world. Silent, she watched as he threw her clothes on the driver’s seat. Here it was; that *something* in his eyes whenever he gazed at her chest. Just the little boost of confidence Rey needed to grip his shirt and help him get rid of it in no time. His jeans quickly joined the pile of clothes, while their underwear disappeared somewhere in the backseat.

“We’re in a car,” Ben articulated between kisses.

The same incredulous laugh left them as Rey pulled away. “With tinted windows,” she reminded him.

The fact seemed to reassure Ben, who didn’t seem that worried as he pulled her closer. She could feel him grow harder against her core, and the temptation to lift herself up and just take him in was becoming more and more difficult to fight. His hands on her hips weren’t helping; nor were the kisses he had started planting in the crook of her neck.

He always knew exactly where to tease her; and with just a few nibbles, she could feel her nipples hardening. Ben did, too: patient, he grazed it with the tip of his finger, his body temperature only adding to the surge of sensations washing over her. Swallowing back a moan, Rey tightened her thighs around his waist and bit her lips when she felt his erection brush her. A strangled moan left Ben, who immediately closed his mouth around the skin of her breast. It wouldn’t take long before she surrendered; she needed him closer. As usual, Ben seemed to have read her mind. Releasing the nipple he’d taken between his lips, he placed his hands at either sides of her hips and helped her rise up of the few inches needed before she finally sunk down onto him.

I want to hold you so hear me out
I want to show you what love’s all about

A groan echoed in the car, but Rey wasn’t sure whose it was. She was too focused, yet too lost in Ben to even think about anything else. The hill could crumble under them, she wouldn’t mind—all she cared about was the sensations running over her, and the relief of finally, finally feeling him inside of her.

They’d had months to learn, yet every time felt just as perfect at the one before. *He* was perfect. Her fingers tangled into his hair, Rey began to roll her hips over him. The sweat beading on their foreheads, their chests glued together, the steady rhythm they had settled to; it was all perfect. Just when she was starting to wonder if the narrow space of a car had been a good idea, Ben’s hips jerked in an unexpected way, sending a wave of shivers down her spine.

“I love you,” she let out in a shaky breath.
“Who’s a walking cliché now?”

She didn’t reply, her voice no longer functional. Gritting her teeth, she tugged at his hair and let him guide her with his hands as she lost herself in the moment, the song playing around them their only spectator as her vision blurred.

I need you to see

This love was meant to be

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Rey’s smile was just as wide as the blush creeping on Ben’s cheeks when, an hour later, they sat around a large table covered in plates and glasses.

His mother hadn’t lied when she’d said family lunch: his uncle had joined and with him the odd, bald dog he’d been dragging around for years. He wasn’t even sure where exactly he’d found it: the poor thing had always looked old, his color somewhere between green and brown. Luke liked to pretend he’d rescued it during a trip in Europe, but both his sister and brother-in-law rolled their eyes whenever the story was being told again, increasing Ben’s suspicions. Chewie seemed to like him, though, which was enough to not worry too much about Yoga or whatever his uncle had named it.

Even though they’d mastered the art of covering their necks, Ben couldn’t help feeling like the dark marks Rey had left on him were piercing the collar on his shirt. The stop to the hill had been a little longer than what he’d expected, but definitely way more interesting. Had it been worth the look on his mother’s face when they’d arrived twenty minutes late? Definitely. If it hadn’t been for Rey’s protests when she’d seen the time, he would’ve spent more time on the hill. He would also have skipped this family lunch, yet here he was, serving Rey a generous portion of his father’s notorious apple pie as she laughed to whatever his mother had just said.

For the second time today, this was something else than what he’d expected. It wasn’t as if he’d expected dishes to fly across the room, but there was something unusual about sitting all together for the sole purpose of enjoying each other’s presence.

He’d come back a few times in the last few months -he’d met with Luke, had dinners with both his parents- but something about being all together felt... new. They hadn’t done this in years, and never with such simplicity. For the first time in forever, resentment wasn’t on the table; only light conversations and a half-emptied bottle of wine.

“So, Rey,” Leia started as Han began to clear the table, “how did your exams go?”

Despite the slight tension that Ben felt in the hand brushing over his, Rey remained unshaken and replied with a confident voice. “Good, I think.” The shadow of a doubt seemed to mingle with her positive tone and she turned to Luke with a shy smile. “I hope.”

Her teacher didn’t say anything pas a nod, a reassuring expression in his eyes.

Of course, not everything had changed: Ben’s parents still argued about everything, to the point
that he wondered if they’d grown to like it. Luke was still the silent, grumpy man he’d always been. But every now and then, like today, the glimmer was back in his eyes; and when it was, Ben could see a glimpse of that fun, caring man his uncle had once been, begging to come back. And every time, Ben nodded briefly, a knowing smile on his lips. These things took time, but patience was a virtue he’d learned to appreciate.

“One last year,” the man added. Nonchalantly, he plunged his fork into an apple. “If you ever need help with your options after that—”


And here she was: the only person that could stop Luke Skywalker.

“She’s a grown girl,” Leia continued. Her voice was soft, but her strict eyes made Ben feel slightly guilty even though he knew he didn’t have to. “She probably knows exactly what she wants.”

It shouldn’t have been a surprise how Rey had immediately been accepted into the family. Chewie had instantly loved her and there wasn’t a thing about her that his father didn’t admire, but his mother—this was something else. They’d known each other for years and somehow seemed to have grown even closer than before, with a sort of relief that Ben didn’t quite understand. The good part was that Leia didn’t scare her; and so, Rey shook her head as she replied, her voice always so confident.

“I don’t, actually. I mean, I do— but I need a break. We both do,” she added with a smile toward Ben, who smiled back at her.

She’d never stopped planning—her entire life had been nothing but a succession of plans to survive. Between her studies, her rent and, more recently, an entire judiciary case, she’d never had the occasion to just sit and enjoy what she had so far. She’d never thought about her actual dreams, at least not until Ben had asked her in the middle of a sleepless night. ‘Seeing,’ she’d said. And so seeing it would be.

“We’re thinking about traveling,” Ben stated calmly. “Well, not just thinking—we’re actually getting organized for next year.”

The smile on his mother’s lips disappeared at the last words. Thankfully, his father was faster and way more enthusiastic: “That sounds great, kid. I could lend you my old van, I drove it all around the states back in my days.”

They would need a bit more than a van for the destinations they’d thought of, but Ben prevented himself from saying so: his mother was probably about to faint, and the smile he was sharing with his father was worth all the omissions right now. Detailed plans could wait—even though Luke’s piercing eyes seemed to read him like an open book even from the other side of the table.

“Alright, we’re gonna be late. Thanks for the lunch—”

“Wait. You promised.”

Damn. He did promise.

“Alright.” With a fake sigh of defeat, Ben motioned to the staircase in the corridor, ignoring his father’s amused look on him as he followed a rather excited Rey.

The smile on her face grew wider as they climbed the stairs leading to the second floor. The voices downstairs diminished as they progressed; and when the smell of sweet potato was only a vague
memory, Ben felt something tighten his stomach at the sight of a certain door.

In all the things he’d accomplished in the last year, entering his old room hadn’t been the easiest one. It hadn’t happened until his fourth visit, and even then, it had been rather brief. It’d seemed like the room had remembered all those of rumination, and was just as reluctant as he’d been to meet again. The second time had been slightly more welcoming; and here was the third, weighed with anticipation and curiosity.

The second he nodded, Rey opened the door.

Nothing had moved since the last month, but something did feel different. The entire room was bathed with sunlight, its blue walls brighter than ever. It still smelled like dust, but with a hint of something sweet and comforting. *Vanilla*, Ben realized when Rey passed in front of him. A touch of amber followed, confirming his theory. Guided by her perfume, he followed Rey as she walked around the room, scanning the shelves as if she was trying to memorize every object placed on them. *Novels, comics, pictures*—even his old D&D board game was still there.

“Oh, Classy. You could wear that at work.”

A ruffle echoed behind him, followed by a chuckle. Standing in the middle of his closet, Rey was brandishing an old T-shirt Ben recognized as the one he’d won in a camp long ago, when astronomy had sounded like the most interesting thing in the world.

“I don’t think Lando would like it.” A small smile crept on his lips as she slipped the T-shirt above her dress; of course, she could fit in something he hadn’t worn in ten years.

His smile only increased when he realized how, despite the ridiculous message written on her chest (“*Sirius Astronomer*”), she still looked gorgeous. Apparently noticing the way his eyes lingered on her, Rey cleared her throat and looked around once again, a small blush on her cheeks.

“How does it feel? To have your own room?”

The tone in her voice had changed, the seriousness and wonder highly contrasting with her new apparel. Not bothering to remove the T-shirt, she walked around the room once more, her fingers brushing the walls along the way.

“Lonely,” Ben replied after a moment of reflection. *Scary*, he could’ve added, but he knew her nights must’ve been scarier.

“How with all these toys?”

At that moment, the wonder in her eyes was enough to let him see the little girl she’d been. If memory served him, the little Rey he’d seen on a few pictures had three buns perched on top of her head, a freckled nose and some large overalls. Briefly, he tried to picture her in this same bedroom, side by side with a happier version of his child self; and damn, they would’ve gotten along so well.

“Especially with the toys. They helped pass the time, but—” Something stopped him mid-sentence as he realized what he was about to say. *Who* he was about to say it to. “Sorry, that— I probably sound like a spoiled brat.”

“You don’t,” Rey replied with a shrug. “I would’ve loved this one, though.”

She hadn’t taken her eyes off his old desk, and Ben understood the moment he followed her gaze. Of course, the big red car-robot had caught her attention—she would’ve loved it. He’d spent numerous afternoons playing with it himself, even using it as a model for his early sketches.
Carefully, Ben took a hand out of his pocket and grabbed the toy from its shelf.

“It’ll look better in your room,” he explained while handing it to Rey.

“Two gifts in a day,” she commented with a suspicious smile. “What did you do?”

The words crossed his lips before he could stop them. “I fell in love.”

Even though she rolled her eyes, Rey couldn’t repress a grin as she pushed herself up on her tiptoes, beckoning him to bend. Happy to oblige, Ben met her halfway, her lips always so sweet against his-and for the first time in forever, he could’ve spent his entire day in this room.

“We’re really gonna be late,” she murmured while pulling away.

A chuckle left Ben, breaking their embrace. “Yeah, better not do that twice.”

Ignoring his reminder of their hectic morning, Rey nodded and followed him out of the room, her hand in his, the other holding onto the precious car-robot.

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“In your face!”

Hurried footsteps echoed around the maze, mingling with the distant music playing in the other room.

It wasn’t the first time the five friends were having the entire hangar for themselves. Being the new owner of the building certainly had its perks, Ben thought as he threw himself against the nearest wall. Finn passed him in a rush, not even noticing his presence. Not even a second later, Poe’s laugh echoed behind a wall, followed by a series of shots and a curse. Rey’s giggle joined his, and with it another series of shots.

Between the investigation and Ben’s personal visits, numerous nights had been spent there. It’d first felt strange and uncomfortable, but his friends had quickly joined him; and over a few weeks, what had started as a task had ended up in some of the best nights of his life. Of course, the alcohol and food had all been seized by the authorities, but no one had thought about the laser tag equipment; and to everyone’s surprise, Poe hadn’t been the one to suggest using it.

It wasn’t the first time they had played together, but it certainly was the last. The demolition notice had been signed a week ago. There was no going back, but Ben couldn’t care less. Even his earliest visit to what had once been his office hadn’t affected him: he didn’t have room for bitterness anymore and was ready to move on. Old things had to die, starting with this building.

“Got lost?”

For the second time today, Ben turned to the source of the voice and met Rey’s curious eyes staring at him. Her head slightly tilted, she pointed her blaster at him and winked.

The last time he’d seen her with this lighting, there hadn’t been anyone around; she’d worn fewer clothes, too. Slowly, Ben motioned to his weapon, a smirk mirroring hers. Buildings got destroyed every day, but memories stayed, and he would never forget the first time he saw her passing the
door of the maze. The day he fell head over heels for that sassy stranger with the British accent and an eagerness to beat his precious score. She’d beat him a long time ago, now.

A new shot fired in the distance. Clumsily, Ben grabbed his blaster and fired, but she was too fast and disappeared in the darkness of the maze.

She wasn’t hard to follow, though; the sounds of her footsteps betrayed her direction just as much as her heavy breathing. She kept laughing heartily, taunting him as he kept chasing her down the maze they both knew by heart.

Soon enough, Ben stopped hearing her sneakers hit the ground. No laughing was guiding him anymore, but he knew the way. Breathless, he jogged to the last corner before the bridge – their bridge - and turned on it until he saw her.

She was breathless too, but had that little smile that meant everything. She’d been there before: months ago, with way less confidence than she had right now as she looked directly into his eyes. Slowly, Ben walked to her, his weapon in one hand while the other landed on the wall behind her back.

“Game over,” he murmured when their jackets bumped into the other.

“No way.”

On last shot echoed between them, deactivating his jacket. In the brief moment of full darkness, Rey managed to toss her weapon onto the ground and threw her arms around his neck, crushing her lips against his. Ben’s blaster joined hers seconds later when his hands found their way into her hair, pushing her against the wall for one long, passionate kiss.

And to think it all started with an earpiece.

Chapter End Notes

Well... it has been a rollercoaster, but here we are! I can't believe this is the end, I'm just as sad as I'm happy and proud. This story was very important to me and I'm glad I got to share it with you guys. Thanks for the comments, the kudos, and to you too, silent readers- I see you. All the encouragements helped me so much, and your reactions were gold to me. Thank you for sticking with me until the end, for your patience whenever the updates were a bit long to come and for all the kind words. I hope you like this ending! See you ♥

A huge, infinite thank you to my amazing beta nite0wl29, who helped me so, so much ♥

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