Of Particular Salience

by Dalzo

Summary

*Salience: the quality of being particularly noticeable or important; prominence.*

Rey Niima has always flown under the radar.

“What sort of demon possessed you to pose nude for some broke-ass artist?”

Until now, that is.

Notes

I mean, how good was TLJ? I'm still buzzing from last night's midnight premiere. Because of my excitement, here's my very first Reylo fic so go easy, fam. Cheers!

See the end of the work for more notes.
It was an odd notion. To pose nude for a complete and total stranger. To bare her body and soul to a
person she’d never met. To expose all her flaws and let it be documented.

It was an odd notion. And Finn told her as such.

“What sort of demon possessed you to pose nude for some broke-ass artist?”

Money, to be perfectly honest. She supposed it was a demon of sorts – it corrupted, possessed and
controlled young and old minds alike. But with Finn moving out in the coming months, she needed
the extra cash desperately. Rent was already tough, groceries always too expensive and if she had to
give up alcohol to save a buck, she’d have to give up her will to live.

She never told him that, though. She didn’t want to be selfish and didn’t want him to feel guilty.
She’d be a terrible best friend if she told him so truthfully. Instead, she opted the less honest route,
spouting out her ‘love’ for art rather than her greed; to hopefully be a part of something bigger than
herself one day.

Though, given how unremarkable she was, Rey Niima doubted that was very hard at all.

“Something on your mind, kid?”

Her head snapped up so fast her neck cracked, meeting concerned hazel eyes and full-frowning lips.
Rey winced and tentatively shook her head. He pointedly looked at the container sat in front of her,
holding last night’s leftover spaghetti (blessedly cooked by Poe since neither she or Finn could cook
a decent meal).
“It’s been ten minutes and you haven’t made a move to touch your lunch.” Rey avoided Han Solo’s eyes. “Spill it, gummy.”

“It’s nothing.” Her boss rolled his eyes and set down his plain ham sandwich with a huff.

“Nothing my ass. You’ve been quiet all day.” He bit out gruffly. “Usually I can’t get you to shut up for five minutes, let alone a whole day.”

She glared at him and, just to prove a point, twirled a heap of pasta ‘round her fork. “Happy?” she said through her mouthful.

Han only scoffed before eyeing her warily. “You have a date or somethin’?”

Rey let out a short burst of laughter. “What gave you such a ridiculous idea?”

“It’s a Friday night and you’re acting odd. Figured you were going out with Teddo again—”

“Teedo.” She interrupted stiffly. “And I’m never going there again.”

“Thank the Maker for that – he drove a fuckin’ Commodore.” Despite her irritation, she smiled. “What is it then? Come on Gummy, we don’t have all damn day.” He ducked down to look at his watch. “Fifteen more minutes, to be exact.”

“Maybe if you didn’t insult me I wouldn’t be so hesitant to tell you.”

Han snorted. “Not my fault your gums are bigger than my forehead, sweetheart.” She ignored his comment. “Look, I don’t care if you tell me or not – just don’t bring me down to your level of moodiness. I got a cranky wife at home to worry about, I don’t want to add you to the list too.”

“Okay.”

“Okay?” His brow furrowed at her sudden compliant nature. “Okay… what is it, women problems? Is that why you won’t say?” He blew out a breath, suddenly very interested with the ceiling of their
Rey groaned. She was not having this conversation with her boss. “It’s just this stupid thing I’ve got tomorrow.”

“Well that isn’t vague.” He quipped.

“It’s this modelling thing.” She elaborated after shooting him a dirty look. “Some artist’s big project or something. I’m posing for him.”

An uncomfortable beat of silence passed between the two.

“Do I want to know what exactly this modelling… entails?”

“All you need to know is that I’m getting paid and quite well at that.” He nodded, probably gathering enough information to figure out the details on his own.

“Right. Well, you’re free to choose how you spend your weekends, I guess.” He paused. “Are you sure you’re comfortable with this, kid?”

She’d already asked this of herself. Plenty of times, the question had popped up in her head, mostly at night when sleep seemed to be impossible; each time held a different answer.

Oddly enough, she was comfortable. Not because of the neat twenty-per-hour pay rate, or the chance of being a possible masterpiece. No, being naked had never truly phased her.

As a girl, she’d shared showers with the boys and girls in the group homes to conserve hot water – never mind the budding breasts and sprouting hair. As a teenager, when Jakku had been blessed with rainfall, she’d swam naked in the quarry with her friends, all because she couldn’t afford a bathing-suit and didn’t dare chance ruining her knicker sets. As an adult, she’d shared her body with a few men here and there, melding naked flesh together as one; she never insisted on turning off the light.

She was born into this cruel world bare. Why should the thought of it be so uncomfortable?
“Yes.” She finally answered, after a time, Han’s eyes searching hers for dishonesty. “Surprisingly, I don’t mind all that much.”

His eyes narrowed in, “Then what’s the problem?”

“Well, I don’t exactly mind the idea of it,” she lied quickly, though she wasn’t sure if Han actually believed her. “Just because I’m comfortable with it doesn’t mean I can’t be nervous about it,” she added. “That’s all it is, Han – nerves.”

It wasn’t that simple and Han’s face said he knew it, too. Rey was never one to put herself down aloud, for fear of seeming like a desperate attention seeker. But when it was just her, left alone to the jagged thoughts inside, she tore herself apart – bit by bit. She criticised her own actions, cringed at the sound of her own voice, cursed the sight of her own body.

It was the persistent fear that had her on edge; fear that the artist would take one look at her and turn her away. Fear that Kylo Ren would despise her as much as her own parents did.

“Han.” She breathed a silent sigh of relief to finally have his intuitive eyes in some other direction, settling on the large bearded face of his longtime employee at the sound of his rough voice. “Bala-Tik’s here.” Chewie briefly stuck his scruffy head inside the doorway to grunt out the news, shooting off a beastly grin in her direction before trudging back out.

“Fuckin’ Bala-Tik,” Han grumbled in response, reluctantly pushing himself onto his feet. “If he’s dinged up his shitty Corolla once again, I’ll personally slam his head onto the hood.”

Rey snorted, “You’d only ding it up more, old man.”

He stopped short of the doorway, fixing her with a hard stare. “When I come back, that container better be empty.” He pointed at her. “I don’t want lousy work because of your lack of sustenance. Eat up quickly; you got the gums for it.”

He swiftly exited the room before the flying fork could hit its target. Just for that snide comment, the petty side of Rey decided to pluck up his sandwich, happily choosing to ignore the fork that lay on the ground.
She decided to walk to the artist’s address rather than bike over, given that it was only thirty minutes away. She needed time to clear her head.

Poe had offered to walk with her. Finn had begged to come with her in support. Rey was quick to say no to both. Part of her wished she’d never told them, just to avoid Poe’s endless teasing and Finn’s constant worry. Still, none of their words or threats could compare to Han’s.

‘If he lays a hand or a single finger on you, I swear I’ll lay him out.’

That was about as reassuring as Han Solo could be, and, although it did nothing to quell her nerves, it still brought a smile to her face.

She continued her ambling pace along Takodana’s bustling sidewalks, passing by the busy cafés and restaurants, block after block. It was a cool, crisp morning that had Rey huddling into herself, gripping the straps of her well-worn backpack and making an effort to greet every stranger with a smile.

Some were happy to return the gesture; others only sneered.

It didn’t bother her either way. She’d always been a morning person, waking up to the rising sun, dressing to its ascent. If she didn’t, it meant a cold and soggy breakfast at the group homes. Early mornings were routine with Rey. For others, however, they were simply a curse.

She’d lived with Finn long enough to understand that particular preference. With that though on mind, she wondered if Kylo Ren was a morning person.

She’d reached the string of modern townhouses sooner than expected. All too soon, she was gazing up at the dark-brick two-story house that belonged to the artist, black Victorian-esque windows generously placed with a striking front door; dark-wood and sleek, a contrasting white design engraved into the material.

Rey’s mouth, on its own accord, fell open at the sight. One tiny glimpse at the building and she knew Kylo Ren was certainly no broke artist.
She was itching to see his car, but her eyes skimmed over the empty driveway with disappointment. It was probably some sleek, black beauty tucked away in the garage. She looked up at the house.

Rey took in a deep breath, taking two steps at a time leading up to the front-door, gripping onto the straps of her bag as if her life depended on it. Reluctantly, she raised her hand to press the buzzer.

She held her breath while waiting.

The door opened with a flourish and the first thing she noticed were dark eyes. Dark, unwavering eyes with matching dark circles beneath the pair. The next thing that came into view was his prominent figure, towering over her slightly taller-than-average height and a permanent pout on those pink, lush lips. His nose was protruding, slightly hooked if she looked closely, and his hair nearly came to his broad shoulders in thick waves.

He had all the wrong the features. And yet, to Rey, he was immensely attractive. Tall, dark and handsome indeed.

“Hello,” she chirped out, pairing it with a bright ‘gummy’ smile, as Han would say. “I’m Rey.”

His gaze wandered to her extended arm, continuing down to rake over her hips, thighs, and legs before meeting her eyes once more, “The model?”

Her smile faltered slightly as she nodded. She had yet to retrieve her arm. He had yet to shake it.

He hummed, cocking his head to the side. A singular thick, dark brow rose as he studied her once more. He snapped back quickly, moving aside to motion her forward.

Definitely not a morning person. That or just a loony.

“Would you rather I take my shoes off outside?” She watched his lips twitch upwards, ever so slightly. Rey shifted. “So I… I don’t dirty your carpet, or whatever.”
He paused. “If you’d like.” She nodded, shucking off the cheap slip-ons and brushing past him quickly. He closed the door behind him.

The small foyer was plain but effective; nothing too exuberant or fancy, holding a few fake plants and an expensive-looking candle A dark-timbered buffet table complete by the huge round mirror hanging above. No photos, no art – just the reflection of herself and the artist behind her, a full coat rack to the left and a pair of flip-flops beside the door.

She suddenly wondered what his feet looked like.

“Is this your first time?” Rey jumped, brows furrowing in confusion.

“My first time getting naked?”

“Your first-time modelling?” He clarified with twinkling eyes. Oh.

Modelling – she’d never really thought of it like that. She was no model; she didn’t have the height, body, or looks for it.

“Yes,” she answered slowly. “Is it that obvious?”

“Follow me, Miss Niima.” He said instead of confirming her nervous question, turning on his heel to walk into the open archway to her right. She took the opportunity to study him from behind. He was a clear lover of shades over colour, particularly black. He wore a black knit-sweater, clinging to his form – she idly wondered if he worked out – paired with snug-fit black jeans, dishevelled and ripped at the knees. She glanced over his backside quickly, noting he had a rather nice bum before continuing her way down. He wasn’t wearing shoes, but was organised in his choice of black socks.

She looked at her own feet, then – mismatched socks in colour, pattern and length.

When she looked up from the floor her eyes went wide. His living room was stunning, but it was the black-stone fireplace that took her breath away. Her gaze wandered to the painting above the mantel, various shades of red, white and black with a strange silhouette in the center, to the inviting fluffy white rug in the middle of it all. He had a decent-sized tv tucked away in the corner, with plush charcoal-black armchairs and a dark-grey loveseat, a deep red blanket thrown over top. It was simply gorgeous.
“We’ll be working in my studio for today.” She returned her attention to his back, following him
through another archway, leading her up the stairs. He had an open bedroom on the second-story, a
typical bachelor’s pad – she almost drooled at the sheer size of his bed.

He opened another door, revealing a bright small room with the morning sun streaming in. In the
corner were two plain desks, paint splattered and worn, an easel, and a stool placed behind.
Cupboards and shelves lined the very back of the room and, in the middle of the dark hardwood
floors, was a plain white chair.

She only took one glimpse to her right where a heap of torn-up canvases piled up in the corner
before he spoke.

“Would you like a drink before we start?”

She would very much like a glass of wine.

“Water, please – if you don’t mind.” He nodded and turned to exit the room.

“I’ll give you time to prepare.”

When he left the room, presumably to fetch her glass of water, she decided that she liked his voice.
Dark and rich, warm and inviting – like honey and chocolate.

She took one last glance around the room before shrugging off her backpack, placing it behind her.
Soon after, her blue jumper followed along with the loose-fitted light wash jeans. She was only
down to her knicker set when Kylo returned with the glass. He stopped abruptly.

“Leave them on.” He murmured, nodding at the sight of her. “The socks. Leave them on, please.”

“Okay.” She responded awkwardly after a few seconds of silence, taking the offered glass and a
tentative sip.
What an odd request.

He nodded, flexing his hands before padding over to the easel and canvas. He set down a mug of water and began prepping for the session, grabbing a cup of brushes and various large bottles of paint that probably cost more than her rent.

With twitching hands, she reached behind her and unsnapped the hooks of her plain white bralette, shrugging the straps down her shoulders; the material dropped to the floor and joined the growing pile of fabric.

Suddenly, she straightened. “Did you want me to shave?”

His dark eyes snapped to hers with the same cocked eyebrow. “Pardon me?”

“I was just wondering… it’s just, I haven’t been swimming recently so I haven’t bothered. You know, to shave.” His eyes never left her as she babbled on. “I never thought to ask if you had a preference—”

“Why would I ask you to do something with your body?”

Rey blinked at the sudden intensity of his voice. Her mouth opened and closed as she tried to formulate a sentence.

“Well, you’re paying me.” She blurted out. “To paint me – and, in this case, your preference would only extend to your art.”

Kylo cleared his throat. “If I wanted you clean-shaven, Miss Niima, I’d use my imagination. We were given one for a reason.”

Oh…

She watched his eyes slowly flit back to his previous task, his gaze never dropping below her neck, allowing her the privacy to remove the last bit of fabric from her skin.
She took her time in doing so, fiddling with the elastic band of her white cotton knickers. But eventually, after finally pushing the fabric down her thighs, they pooled at her ankles. Rey kicked them to the pile.

Suddenly, she was unbound and free; she was naked.

“Where do you want me?”

“On the chair, side-on and face the windows.” He recited quickly, never looking up from his task. “Would you please cross your legs for me and slump once seated.”

“Slump?”

“Only slightly.” He said softly.

She did as he asked.

“Good. That’s perfect.” And then he was looking at her – studying the sag to her awfully small breasts, the rolls to her usually-toned stomach, eyeing each mole, freckle or pimple that lay upon her skin. “If you need a break, all you need to do is ask.” He began quietly. “If, at any time, you feel uncomfortable and wish to pull out, you’re free to do so. Are there any questions before we start?”

Rey had a thousand questions she wanted to ask. Why the bad angle, why the socks, why her?

Instead, she shook her head and pointedly looked ahead, avoiding Kylo Ren’s heated dark gaze.

“Good,” he murmured.

It was the last word he spoke that session.

An odd notion, indeed.
Wow. Just wow.

The support for this has been so overwhelming and I can't thank everyone who read, kudos and commented enough. Thank you for the crazy amount of attention for this little story of mine. It truly does motivate to get a chapter out quicker.

Once again, thank you for the support and HAPPY 2018!

CHAPTER TWO
~ O C T O B E R ~

DARK EYES, DARK WORDS

"What'd cha think? The artist—how was he?

An in-thought frown drooped at Rey's mouth, eyes slowly moving off their curious gaze, drifting to scan the room. She knew that, sooner or later, Poe and Finn would want answers. She knew that the routine invitation to Kanata's was all a ploy to get said answers. There was just one problem, however:

She simply didn’t know.

To her, he was indescribable.

There wasn’t enough time in the universe for Rey to process their unforgettable session—it’d only been a day since and she’d quickly come to that conclusion. She knew so little, close to nothing with only physical details to reflect on; his freakish size and height, his sinful good-looks.

To her, he was just a dark-eyed mystery.

A moment passed and soon her eyes flickered back to the table of four, taking in the dark decorations to match the spookiest month of the year. It was rather fitting when thinking of Kylo Ren.

“He was nice.” Rey avoided the intense pairs of eyes locked onto her and shrugged. “He didn’t
really talk much. It’s hard for me to say.”

“So he never touched you, then?” Finn spat out frantically. “Never asked you to do something inappropriate or—or made a nasty comment?”

Glancing up to Finn’s loving boyfriend, the two shared an eye roll. “Nope. He was completely professional about the whole thing.” Rey took a pull from her beer before elaborating. “He—he never looked when he didn’t need to, you know? He was very respectful, offering me a drink before we started and making sure I had frequent breaks in-between and was comfortable in my position. He was…just nice.”

“Good looking, too?” Poe slipped in with his trademark ‘million-dollar’ grin, casually throwing an arm around Finn as he settled into the booth. “Imagine that; a dark brooding artist, with good hair and pretty eyes – serving up some Jack Dawson looks.”

Rose giggled and turned to fix her with a smirk. “Did he paint you like one of his French girls?”

“I wish.” She mumbled bitterly. “I bet it isn’t flattering at all—you should’ve heard what he requested.”

“What?” Finn’s eyes narrowed in. “What did he request? He didn’t make you do anything i, did he? He didn’t make you touch yourself--?”?

“Oh my god, Finn, draw a breath.” Rose huffed out with an eye-roll. “Let her speak!”

“He made me keep my socks on. Made me slump in the chair, undoubtedly showing every flawed part of myself.” Rey hushed out, leaning in to address her friends. “He even made me take-out my hair. You all know what my hair looks like when I take it out of my three buns. Certainly not art, that’s for sure.”

“What? Don’t be ridiculous.” Poe reached across and flicked her on the nose. “I’m sure it’s a real beauty.”

“Did he show you after you were finished?” Finn asked, gaze still wary. “The painting, I mean.”
"No, it was unfinished." Rey hummed, removing her lips from the bottle. "And even if he had offered, no way would I be interested in looking—I never want to see those paintings. Ever. It’s just… too weird, you know?"

"Fucking yes it’s weird. Stripping in front of strangers and letting them paint and display your body will always be too weird. I still can’t believe you agreed."

"I don’t think it’s weird," Poe interjected quickly, putting a stop to Rey’s snappy retort. "There’s something truly amazing about a naked body—almost like you’re baring your soul to the universe." He turned to his boyfriend, eyes flicking down to his full lips "Don’t discredit the art, babe; it’s something beautiful to behold."

Rose cleared her throat, eyes flicking between the two. "Well this just got oddly sexual."

Poe laughed at this. "Take it how you want to, Tico." He gave Finn a quick peck on the lips before settling his twinkling eyes back on Rey. "Also, don’t think I didn’t notice you avoiding my question. About Kyle being hot."

Rey bit her lip to keep herself from laughing. "It’s Kylo." She corrected light-heartedly, idly wondering how the man mentioned would react to the mispronunciation. "And I never got a good look." She lied. "He was always behind an easel and canvas."

"What, he just didn’t show himself at all? Not even when introducing himself?"

"He wore a lot of black." She scrunched her nose and pointed her beer in Poe’s direction. "Though, he did have really nice hair." With a marble-statue like ass, an intense gaze that could test Mr Darcy’s and model-worthy lips; pink, like a summer’s afternoon sky. "Scowled a lot. Well, from all that I saw."

Poe gave her a pointed-look along with a pointed finger. "You better get a proper look next time, Niima."

"Yeah, snap a discreet photo or something." Rose agreed before raising her glass high in the air. "I’m empty—keen for the next round?"

"Only if it’s on you, Tico." Finn remarked quickly before downing the rest of his own.
“I suppose.” She grumbled out to the group’s delight, who all whooped in agreement as the short feisty lady clambered over Rey like a stealthy cat, right before disappearing among the crowded bar.

“So when’s this next art session of yours?” Poe nodded in her direction.

“I don’t know, he said he’d ‘contact me in the upcoming weeks’.” Rey tried to imitate the stiff tone of Kylo Ren but found her vocal range simply could not drop that low… or smooth. She circled the rim of the bottleneck, absently wondering how his voice was so soothingly deep. “Won’t be for a while, I guess. At least not until he’s finished the first painting.”

“What’s it even for?” Finn questioned with a scowl. “Like, what’s the whole point of this project? Has he told you anything?”

“No, I…I never asked.” She didn’t even think to, even with all the emails; even as she redressed and was ushered out of his house with all the awkward pleasantries involved; even when she had all the time in the world to ask, sitting in silence for hours as he dipped his brushes in a wide range of shades; black, white, grey and everything in-between. “Something to do with different months, I guess.”

“Changing of the seasons?” Poe suggested before shrugging. “I mean, who really cares when you’re nearly getting paid two-hundred bucks—”

“—For virtually sitting on my ass.” Rey finished with a sigh. “For eight fuckin’ hours, slumped in an unflattering and uncomfortable position. Wearing fucking ugly socks, tits out and all, nearly freezing my nips off—oh, and I completely forgot to shave. It’s about as patchy as your beard down there, Dameron.”

Poe cackled and took the blow. “Free the nips, Rey! Free the flaps.” Even Finn cracked a grin at this, shaking his head as Poe ran a hand through his scruff. “And, excuse you, my beard is not patchy. I go to a very professional barber for this money-maker.”

“It’s looking a little grey.”

“Are you saying you have grey, patchy pubes, Niima?”
“Why do I love you?” Finn groaned out, pushing himself out of Poe’s embrace. “You’re so disgusting.”

“And devilishly handsome. Charming, too—I quite literally charmed the pants off you.”

“Don’t forget modest.” Rey quipped as Finn pushed his lover away, eyes rolling into the back of his head. “You’re just so humble and wise, Poe.”

“Don’t worry, Peanut, it comes with age.”

“First of all, fuck you. I’m only thirty-six.” Poe scowled, though it did nothing to diminish his devilish good looks. “Second of all, you can keep him Rey. I don’t want him anymore.”

“Fine by me.” Finn shrugged his response. “Rey’s always been more fun anyways.”

“Yay!” Rey cheered, bright smile and all.

“Wait! I was only kidding, you can’t have him.” Poe said quickly, shoving Finn’s head roughly into his chest, face mashed against his t-shirt, cradling him like a child. “He’s mine!”

“Nooo!” Rey drawled out dramatically. “Who’ll do the dishes?”

“You.” Finn deadpanned after escaping Poe’s tight hold with rosy cheeks. “Like the perfectly-abled adult you are.”

“Well adulting fucking sucks ass.” Rose appeared again, empty-handed, catching the clipped-end of the conversation. “And you can thank this adult-woman for scoring us free drinks, courtesy of Maz Kanata herself.”

She beamed at the group before turning to gesture at the small old lady, barely visible over the tray of drinks she held.

“A Bloody Mary to each of you for the bloodiest month of the year.” The short woman boomed,
cackling as she all-but slammed the tray on the table with a horsey grin.

“Thank you Maz— you’re an absolute angel.” Maz waved away the smooth compliment from Poe. “You’ve really gone all out this year. The place looks great.”

“Oh?” The old woman feigned surprise. “It’s just a few cobwebs and skeletons placed here and there, nothing special.”

Rey almost laughed at the severe understatement—the place was decked out in LED lighting, jack-o-lanterns, scary wart-faced witches and tasteful skeletons dressed in tuxedos. In a single day, Kanata’s had turned into a bloody haunted house; all due to Maz Kanata’s love for the seasonal holidays. She didn’t doubt that on November 1st, the room would be dressed with tinsel, wreaths and pine-needles – and just because she was cheeky, an unexpectedly-placed mistletoe or two.

“The place really does look great, Maz.” Rey agreed. “I try and convince Han to spice up the shop with a little decorating every now and then but he’s too bloody stubborn.” Rey grumbled.

“You send that old-fart here and I’ll straighten him up real fast. It’s been too long since he and my husband have dropped in for a beer.” Chewie would have a differing opinion, for sure.

“Will do, Maz.”

“Alright kids. Enjoy the freebies while I go charge my other customers.”

“Thank you Maz.” The group chimed happily in sync as she hobbled back to the bar, most likely to converse with all the other regulars.

“God, I love that woman.” Rose said in awe, Poe humming in agreement and Finn nodding absently.

“To Maz.” Poe suddenly plucked up his Bloody Mary and held it high in the air. “A woman who can run a *mean* fucking bar.”

They wholeheartedly agreed to the statement, whipping up their glasses to sloppily clink them together, a resounding 'CHEERS!' following the chime-like sound.
This was only the beginning to their night.

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“Who’s KR? Your damn phone hasn’t stopped dinging for the last two minutes because of this asshole.”

Smoothly rolling out of her position beneath the 2000 Corolla Hatchback with the faulty fuel pipe, resurfacing a whole lot greasier, Rey found herself suddenly staring up at Han Solo clutching her phone with its glimmering pink case. He looked down at her before his eyes returned to the phone, reclining his head to squint at the screen.

“Free for a session this Saturday, are you available?” He murmured and scrolled. “Same time, same pay—Christ, kid, are you a prostitute or something.” He joked as she slowly hoisted herself to a sitting position, letting the blood flow back to her head before she proceeded to stand.

“Oh, yes. Twenty-an-hour, he pays me.” She chirped, brushing her sticky hands on the back of her pants.

“You’re selling yourself short.” He muttered, holding out her phone. “Do me the honour of shutting him up, please.”

She laughed and took her phone. “It’s the artist I told you about, remember?” She explained as she took in the home screen of her phone, filled with texts from Kylo Ren. “The one I’m posing for.”

It was mid-October. The man had been eerily absent and silent for close-to-four weeks, until now. Obviously, she’d been an anxious wreck. It was a nice feeling for the tightness in her stomach to lighten.

“How could I forget?” Han grumbled, turning away to head back into the break-room, back to the documents and papers he loathed to do.

“I assumed you’d forgotten.” She replied, hot on his heels while she unlocked her phone. “You never asked how it went.”
“I don’t wanna’ know, Gummy. I don’t wanna’ know any of it.” She hummed, smirking as the man halted and set his hazel eyes on her. “But, just out of curiosity, he never did anything weird or… gross?”

She groaned. “No. No, for the thousandth time, no. He was perfectly professional and respectful about the whole thing.”

“Good. Good.” He nodded. “Because I’d hate to break a complete stranger’s legs—”

“Oh, fuck off.” She shook her head, ignoring his grin as she bent to type out her reply.

Saturday sounds good.

Got any preferences for this one???

“You know, this stuff isn’t uncommon. And with something as ‘out there’ as this, it isn’t a strange thought to cross a man’s mind, you know. Anything can happen.” Rey clenched her jaw. “I’m being serious, Gummy. You tell someone if this shit happens, okay?”

“You do know I can look after myself, yeah?” She snapped, avoiding the frowning face pointed in her direction. “I've done it my whole life.”

“I know.” He said softly. “That’s why I worry. Am I not allowed to worry?”

She’d been on her own for so long. It was hard to accept that people cared, sometimes—cared enough to ask if she was okay or how she was doing. It was so foreign that there were people she knew interested in her wellbeing and cared enough to worry.

And it was so easy to shut them out.

Her phone pinged in the silence of the break room.
“What did I say?” He said lightly, pointing a finger in her direction, the tense atmosphere disappearing just as quickly as it came.

No preferences or requests needed.

Just bring yourself.

She smiled.

All in black, probably. She wondered if he’d request she leave her socks on again. Perhaps she’d forgo them, this time—or maybe spend more than two minutes to find a matching pair until inevitably giving up.

“Knock, knock.”

Her head snapped up in the direction of the feminine voice.

Han’s wife stood in the doorway, looking as gorgeous as ever even with her soft brown hair, greying at the edges, and the wrinkles that began to stretch at the corners of her eyes; truthfully, it only amplified her graceful nature—age simply couldn’t take away beauty from Leia Organa-Solo.

“‘It one o’clock already?’” Han questioned, squinting at his wife.

She ignored the question, pushing into the room with the plastic bag of take-away in hand. “‘He hasn’t been irritating you too much today, has he Rey?’” Han could only gawp as she quickly swooped up all the documents, setting them into a neat pile off to the side – all in under five seconds.

“When does he not irritate me?” She gave Rey a warm smile before turning on her husband.

“You don’t still call her that horrible name, do you?”

“You mean Gummy?” He asked, earning a quick swat to the shoulder.
“You be nice.” Leia said sternly. “And you—sit and eat.” Rey was never one to disobey her firm orders, quickly taking a seat at the far end of the table as the middle-aged woman began to lay out the Indian food.

“Spicy?” Han whined. “Again?”

“Butter chicken is not spicy.” She said in a tired tone. “And it’s high time you got more cultured. You’re sixty-three years old and you’re fussier than a child. How do you put up with him for eight hours in a row, Rey?”

“You married me.”

Rey smiled softly at the couple.

It was all pretend. Despite her rants, she still happily plated his butter chicken with the Greek-yoghurt dip on the side, choosing the biggest roll of naan bread to place on his plate. And anyone could see the clear, utter devotion Han had for his wife. The bickering was a farce—underneath, there was a love Rey knew was near-impossible to achieve.

She never saw such passion coming in her own future but was more than just happy when Tuesday rolled around and seeing the lovely relationship every Tuesday; or, as Leia called it, Takeaway Tuesday. That or, unofficially, the day Han begged his wife to come in and ‘help with the legal-shit.’

“So what were you whining about to poor Rey before I saved her?” Leia smirked at her husband after retrieving Han’s stashed red wine, pouring out three generous mugs.

“We were actually talking about Rey, your royal highness.” Han grumbled. “And how that artist-boyfriend of hers won’t stop texting.”

Inwardly, she screamed. “Boyfriend?” Leia cocked an eyebrow.

“He’s not my boyfriend, I’ve literally only met him once.” Rey sighed before elaborating. “I’m posing for his upcoming art project; a series of paintings. It’s just a little extra cash on the side sort of thing, you know?”

“How lovely. Well he’s lucky to have such an excellent model” She said, smiling softly. “What sort
of posing?"

Rey flushed and remained silent.

“Oh.” Leia said softly. “Right. Well, I used to model for Han all the time, you see, though he was never an artist.” The old woman cocked her head. “Occasionally, if the night’s right, I’ll strike a pose.”

Rey cracked a smile, the embarrassment slowly fading away. Leia certainly had a way of brightening the mood, her words carrying a particular warmth that had no rival.

“What’s he like, then? Is he handsome?” She leaned in and ignored her husband’s scoff.

“Yes. Very handsome.” It was strange to finally admit it aloud—and why she couldn’t do so in front of Poe, Finn and Rose was still a mystery. She was almost compelled to tell Leia every single little detail; to describe the slight hook to his nose and the light flecks in his dark eyes.

“Did you feel vulnerable in that position?”

“ Weirdly enough, I didn’t.” She admitted quietly. “I felt as if—well, I don’t know how I felt. I still haven’t really come to terms with it all. I just know that it doesn’t… put me off.”

“Do you know if he’ll have a display once finished? A gallery showing of sorts?” She asked, taking a sip from her mug.

“I think so, yeah. In the advertisement for the project, it mentioned that it was intended to be put on show—he made it clear in his emails that he would try and find a venue, so…” Rey trailed off absently with a wave of her hand. "But, um, it’s a series of twelve paintings over twelve months so, uh, it’ll be a while.” She wasn’t sure she wanted to know.

“Well, when the time comes around, give us the name of the gallery and we’ll pop around to see—”

“Speak for yourself.” Han interrupted.

“Oh, come on. Don’t be a wimp.” Leia muttered. “It’d be amazing to see. The art will surely be gorgeous if our stunner is in it.”
“It’s too damn weird. She’s... she's my employee, Leia, and like a kid to me, I...” Rey stopped chewing, eyes searching the flushed face of Han Solo. "Just... wrong."

Did he really see her in that way?

When she was a little girl, back in Jakku, she’d imagined this way too often. Having an overprotective father who’d do anything to shield his baby girl from the horrors of the world. She’d constantly create this scenario time and time again—anything to take her mind away from the fear of being taken away again; the fear of being tossed around the broken system.

Even as an adult, accustomed to the ways of the world, she’d found herself comparing Han Solo to the father she never had. Not once did it ever cross her mind that maybe, just maybe, she was the daughter he never had too.

But that was a ridiculous thought. A stupid, naïve thought that belonged to the younger, more hopeful Rey. If Han Solo and Leia Organa wanted kids, nothing would’ve stopped them. Even if fertility problems were the case, Rey didn’t doubt they’d adopt or foster and god—if they had, if only they’d fostered her, they would have been the greatest.

But they didn’t.

To Han Solo, she was just his employee and nothing else. And what sort of person wanted to see their co-worker naked in a series of artwork? He was right – it was too weird. His words only expressed the level of discomfort it’d be if he viewed such work.

Leia and Han were their own family. A family she’d never be a part of it. And she was okay with that—truly, she was used to being alone.

“Top up, anyone?”

Rey painted on a smile and held out her mug.

~ * ~

It was the knickers he requested to stay on rather than the socks.

Simple, plain, dull blue knickers.
No fancy materials involved, just cotton.

He also changed up the setting, opting for the living room rather than his bright studio. She sat perched on her knees, straight and upright, eyes focused on the painting above the mantle—searching the silhouette amidst the red and black slashes—while sinking into his couch. It must’ve been the best couch she’d ever touched, the material instantly moulding to her shape.

Back arched slightly, head tilted and posture *far more* sensible than the last had her breasts perked upwards, nipples hardening due to the cool autumn weather.

She *hoped* he didn’t notice. But then again, that was *probably* the point.

Thirty minutes into their second session and still, he was a mystery; his project, his requests, his eyes—a big pretty mystery in every way possible.

“Where are you from?” Startled from her head, Rey looked away from her set position and met the warm and rich dark eyes of Kylo Ren. He *never* asked a single personal question during their last session. “I know you’re from the Western Reaches but I can’t quite place the accent.”

She hesitated. “Jakku.”

He cocked an eyebrow. “Jakku.”

She was quick to snap her head back in position, eyes back on the painting as he murmured the town once more.

“Did you like it there?” he hummed out, after a time.

Rey unintentionally scoffed. “Does anyone?”

Never in a million years did she expect to hear an amused snort from Kylo Ren. “I suppose not. Though I’ve never been. You don’t miss it, then?”

Not a single fucking bit. “…Not really.”

“What about your friends? Your family?”
“I suppose.” She didn’t need to look to know that singular, dark eyebrow would be cocked high into his hairline. He didn’t comment on her vague response, however.

“It’s okay if you don’t.” His cool voice drifted. “Not everyone has a perfect family.”

_Not everyone has a family._

“I could write a book on mine.” In the silence that proceeded, she wondered what to say. Turns out she didn’t have to say anything. “My father wanted me to carry on the family business.” He continued on bitterly, a sharp edge to his tone that had her body tensing. “Art was my passion, though, but he never could understand. Creativity isn’t practical to him.”

Rey tried not to furrow her brow. She didn’t understand where this confession was coming from. She certainly had no idea why someone like him would tell her this—particularly when he talked so little in their first meeting.

“My mother, on the other hand, doesn’t have a problem with my career choice. It’s academic, teaching young teens about the historic value art has—and cleaning up the mess after they’ve broken out in a clay fight.” He was becoming breathy as he talked, voice loaded and heavy; a low growl-like sound from within his broad chest. “Still, she never showed up to my art showings or my presentations. She did show up to my graduation, however.” His voice rose a little too loud. “Albeit late, but hey—at least she showed up, right?”

She held her breath, turning slightly to glance at the artist.

“And my uncle.” He laughed out loud, though it held no hint mirth. “My art was never good enough for him. Always too bland, too much, or just… just pathetic.” He seethed violent, shaking his head so viciously, wavy strands of hair bouncing behind the easel. “God, he was the fussiest nit-pick asshole when it came to my art; relentless in his desire to tear me apart—fuck.”

Rey sat frozen, rooted to the spot as his face relaxed into shock. “Fucking shit, I botched your nipple.” He murmured slowly, eyes flicking up to suddenly meet her eyes.

He stared and Rey didn’t dare look away, noting that, for first time unrelated to his canvas, his eyes flicked down her figure, no doubt taking in her flushed state.

He stared and Rey didn’t dare look away, noting that, for first time unrelated to his canvas, his eyes flicked down her figure, no doubt taking in her flushed state.

Before she could even blink, he was scooting back in his chair fast, nearly knocking his setup-stand of paints and clumsily standing to full height; looking off roughly to the side, not meeting her stunned gaze as a large hand ran through his soft-looking hair. “I’m sorry—Christ, I’m sorry for just… for all of that, I never…” He trailed off, shaking his head. “It’s his birthday today. My Uncle’s.” He clarified awkwardly. “My mother’s too—they’re twins, so… so I’m obligated to go and… as you can probably tell, I don’t really get on well with my family.”
“Oh.” She cringed. *Nice response, Rey.*

“We’re having dinner tonight.” He said softly. “To celebrate.”

A beat passed. “I get it.” She didn’t; not the slightest clue. “Every family is different.”

She’d lived with many different families and knew this to be true. But Kylo Ren *seemed* well-bred, as awful as that sounded—he grew up in a privileged manner, no doubt.

*Wealth doesn’t guarantee good parenting,* Rey reasoned, *but still; he has a family.*

“Sorry.” He muttered again. “I’m sorry. Let’s just… let’s forget this and get back in position, please? I need to fix this before it sets.”

She nodded, turned into position and stayed silent for the remaining hours to their session.

There were no more questions, no more rants and no more mistakes from Kylo Ren. Only the sight of the red painting to keep her focused.

He didn’t speak again until he announced they were done, allowing her to redress quickly and quietly as he cleaned up around his area.

“The money went through alright?” He asked as she shrugged back on her hoodie.

“Oh yes. Thank you for that.”

Kylo Ren suddenly smiled. Her jaw nearly dropped at the new sight, the small quirk of lips, lighting his eyes in a way she didn't think possible. “I should be the one thanking you.” He said softly. “Without you, I’d be *fucked.*”

Bowing her head to hide the smile and turning to retrieve her coat from the small entryway room, Rey wondered how such a filthy word could sound *so* lovely from his mouth.

“I’ll contact you once I’m finished with this one. It’s the little details that take so long yet add so much to the painting.” She nodded, shrugging into her old grey peacoat that had seen better days. “I’m sorry to keep you waiting.”
Rey shook her head. “It’s fine, honestly.”

“Right.” He said awkwardly, rubbing at the back of his neck. “I’ll see you next time, Miss Niima.”

She smiled, murmuring a 'cya next time' right back, turning to quickly open the door and—

Standing stiff and still, taking in the heavy droplets of rain that hammered onto the roads and pathways, she gaped at the view.

Fuck.

Rey bit her lip, scanning the dark clouds. This wouldn’t let up for a while, it seemed.

“Is something the matter?” He asked after a long thirty seconds of awkward silence, her blocking his open door.

“Oh, only just a slight problem.” She admitted, a blush working it's way up her cheeks. “I actually, um, walked here this morning. Would you mind if I just, you know, waited here and got an Uber or a taxi or something—”

He held a hand to silence her. “No need. I'll drive you.” She opened her mouth to protest, but he beat her to it. “It’s the least I can do. Truly.”

“It’s fine.” She blurted out quickly. “I really don’t mind paying for—”

“Follow me, Miss Niima.” His words had such a commanding edge. She was compelled to obey such a tone, just like when Leia ordered her to take a break from work or sit down and eat.

She trailed close behind as his tall figure walked back through the living room, into a hallway—she barely got a glimpse at the kitchen—and to the end of the narrow room. They passed the staircase and headed for the door leading to his garage, walking to the sound of her nervous heartbeat.

She nearly cried at the sight once seeing his car.

“This is the 2016 Ford TIE Silencer.” Rey muttered in awe, taking in the sleek black coupe model. “Oh my.” She whispered reverently, eyes wide and awe-struck, taking no notice of the way his own gaze curiously searched hers, choosing to hustle down the steps to get a better look instead. “Look at the rims on this beauty. What’s the engine?”
“Turbo 4-cyl.” He recited smoothly, cocking his head to the left while his arms crossed firmly across his oh-so-wide chest. She couldn’t help the ‘gummy’ grin when looking back at him. “With some modifications, of course. I take it you’re into cars.”

“Oh yes.” She chirped as he plucked up a set of keys from the hook next to the door. “Actually, I'm a mechanic, so it’s sort of required. I’d absolutely love to fix one of these. And, you know, follow up with the test drive. Then fixing cars would be an absolute breeze.” There was no doubting this statement—of course, working at Han’s was already quite enjoyable and Rey truly believe that she wouldn’t rather any other job. But sometimes, test-driving shit-box cars was a disappointment. Getting her hands in and on this sleek beauty would be a dream come true.

His forehead crinkled at this. “Wow.” He murmured. “Truly?”

“That wasn’t what I…” He trailed off and blushed. “Sorry. Your arms are just… you’re very little and skinny.”

“And strong.” She said fiercely, turning to glance back at the car. “My god, it’s just so lovely. I bet this cost four-times the amount of my whole life savings.”

The car unlocked with a click and she could barely contain her excitement, opening the passenger door. The interior was too good – black leather, the good kind that didn’t stick to sweaty thighs. She was glad to see it was a manual and fantasised about cracking open the sunroof so she could scream out into the world as they flew in the city, rain and all.

She buckled up once Kylo closed the door, with him following suit before twisting the key to start the ignition. The car roared to life and she gasped. She watched as he settled into his seat, fiddling with buttons that had the garage door rolling open. Shifting into first gear, he rode the clutch out onto the driveway as a radiating warmth went up her backside.

“Oh my God.” She giggled, mouth open in a mixture of awe and joy. “It has heated seats.”

He smiled softly at her before asking. “Where am I off too?”

“Left.” She said quickly, turning to look out the rain-speckled windows as he smoothly rolled out
and shifted into second, then third gear. He didn’t play music.

“You mentioned something about teaching?” She blurted out when they were stopped at the first set of lights they came across.

“Yeah, up at Illenium Catholic College.” Private schooling, she noted. “In the CAPA department—creative and performing arts, sorry.” he added hastily at her confused brow. "Mostly just the creative side with art classes; I’m not the most gifted performer, garbage actually, but I also teach English to a tenth grade class outside of my department. Art is my passion, however.” He paused as if calculating his words. “It’s a fascinating subject. The complete difference of teaching a senior class and a junior class is incredibly amusing.”

“Cleaning up clay fights.” She repeated and he hummed in agreement.

“Yes. That and constantly having to clean off anatomically-incorrect male genitalia off the desks.” He took off smoothly once the light turned green and continued. “But the seniors are actually interested and invested in the subject. Some of the work they produce is shockingly amazing. They actually inspired me to do this project.”

“Really?”

“We were studying the ‘Wheel of Emotions’ with my eleventh-grade Seniors. One of my more insightful students pointed out that some of the colours matching certain emotions felt off. I agreed.”

She didn’t bother asking what the 'Wheel of Emotions' meant.

“So this series is all about colour, then?” At his affirming nod, she prodded further. “What’s my body got to do with it then?”

“That’s a secret.” She frowned. “You’ll see at the showcasing, whenever that may be. I promise to explain it then.”

“Oh… I don’t know if I’ll even go to that.” She quietly admitted, wringing her hands together.
“No?” His brown eyes flicked over in her direction before focusing back on the road.

“No, I—take a right at the light—no, I don’t think I could look at myself like that.”

“Why not?”

She stuttered. “I-I don’t know, I guess it’s… ” She trailed off, chewing into her cheek. "Seeing a bunch of strangers reacting to my body sounds terrifying." She shook her head at the ridiculous thought. “Seeing all my flaws in, documented onto a canvas. And them seeing it as art? Doesn’t seem right or…or real.”

“True art-appraisers won’t just see a beautiful nude woman, Miss Niima.” Her eyes widened at this. “They’ll look at it and see a naked soul. Art is about arousing a certain feeling or emotion; carrying a particular message that some may or may not be able to understand. Much like music or films, art can tell a story—or maybe it is just something nice to look at, for certain people. But that isn’t me. And that isn’t what you're modelling for.”

She blushed. “I don’t think I’ll ever get that from art. I’m not the most creative person. I see things from a logical perspective. Believe me when I say don’t ever let me sing near you.”

He laughed. “I’ll make sure you understand by the end. Even if it’s the most difficult task of my life so far.”

She smiled. “I hope I don’t disappoint. Take the next left on this street.”

They rode out the next few minutes in a comfortable silence, nothing but Rey’s directions and the obscure music Kylo finally switched on (not that it was all that pleasant) to listen to. He parked outside her and Finn’s shabby apartment in half the time it took for her to walk, turning to her with a sheepish smile and a hand, once again, running through the soft dark waves of his hair.

“Thank you for this.” The rain hammered down onto the hood of the car. “You really didn’t have to, though—”

“Please.” He interrupted quickly. “It’d be rude of me not to offer.”
“Well, thank you anyways. I’ll see you next month, I guess.” She hesitated and turned to face him before she opened the door. “Oh, and I hope you have a pleasant dinner with your family tonight. Tell your dad that your new project has you staring at a naked girl for eight hours—that should brighten his view a little, no?” It was a little brash, considering she didn't know his humour, but thankfully it hit the mark.

Kylo snorted again, a grin brightening his whole expression; his eyes crinkled at the corner and sparkled with a cheerful glint. “I will. I’ll… I’ll mention that she’s very pretty, too.”

“Oh, good.” She laughed, refraining from letting out a giddy scream. “Hopefully we can forget about mentioning the hideous socks and the daggy knickers, then, yeah?” God, she could never get tired of hearing his laugh; warm, soft, deep. “You treat this like the Queen it is, okay?” She joked sternly, tapping the dash before reluctantly opening the door.

“Thank you again for today’s session, Miss Niima.”

“Christ, please just call me Rey.” She bent down to properly look him in the eye. “It’s too formal for someone like me.”

“Okay, Miss Rey.” She rolled her eyes. “Thank you for the session.”

“You’re welcome.” She said stiffly, though she secretly enjoyed the way her name rolled off his tongue. “Goodbye, Mr Ren.” She cut off his laugh by shutting the door, already half-soaked by the rain as she ran to the front of her building. Somehow, after learning much more about the man, he became so much more of a mystery.

It seems she has more of a chance understanding the concept of art over the interesting being that is Kylo Ren.
Beautiful, Ugly Things

Chapter Notes

Honestly, I can't thank you guys enough for all the support this has gained over the two chapters. The sheer amount of kudos, hits and comments make me want to cry!
Thank you, thank you, thank you!
Cheers guys -- enjoy the extra long chapter :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER THREE

~ N O V E M B E R ~

P A R T    O N E

Beautiful, Ugly Things

- 

Only one day into the new month and she’d quickly concluded that she was in for a doozy. Rey stated it simply: November is a hellish month designed to make every shitty aspect of my life that much shittier. Perhaps it was the head-spinning hangover,(she blamed Halloween at Kanata’s, Rose and the tequila shots), or the thick-headed prick that demanded she modify his Hilux with illegal parts. Either way, it was enough for her to state a claim.

It only took three days for her to realise just how annoyingly right she was.

The walls of her apartment had been stripped bare of cheap art prints and no more fake plants lined the windowsills to bask in the sunlight that streamed through. There were fewer mugs, cutlery and bowls in the kitchen cupboards; the tiny lounge-set shoved at the side was missing the Ikea rug underneath the makeshift coffee table she built herself and the ancient-looking tv was no longer hooked up to the Playstation. Instead, it was all to be packed in boxes, secured and taped up for Finn to make the move into Poe’s cushy house the following day.

To say November wasn’t her month was a severe understatement.

They’d been at it all afternoon, cleaning off the shelves and taking anything that personally belonged to Finn, setting it in a pile and packing it up tight for the big move. They’d been so set on getting it done that she was surprised to see a message from Kylo when pulling out her phone to connect some music to the speaker.
I should have the little details done throughout the week and will be free for a session by Saturday.

Are you free?

She furrowed her brow while taking in the text. It was awfully early, unlike the last time. And it’d been an hour since the message went through. She hoped he hadn’t changed plans.

“I left you two wine glasses from our only good set.” Her eyes snapped to the figure sat directly in front of her. Finn casually nodded to the unusually-thin and deep glasses in his hand. “One for yourself and one for when you have company.” He wiggled his brows at her before gingerly placing them in the padded box.

“Company.” She hummed, her attention quickly turning back to her phone. “What company?”

I’m free… saturday sounds good :)

Same time???

“Oh, stop it.” He retorted. “Don’t act like you aren’t the hottest thing around—”

She cut him off with a bubbling laugh, placing a dainty hand on her chest.

“It’s true.” His dark eyes went wide. “You’re a size-eight with a bright smile and pretty eyes – honey, you’re the dream. A cute, fiery Peanut.” She bowed her head, shaking it lightly. “Except for your hair. You should really spend more money on products, you know – that or stop putting it in those nasty-ass three buns all the time.”

“I like my buns.”

“I like the buns on your cute little bum but that’s it.” She smiled widely, opening her mouth and scrunching her nose.

Her phone lit up in her palm.
Same time, as usual. And before you ask, no I do not have any preferences for the session. Nothing else is required. Just you

Rey absently chewed her lip and contemplated her words, glancing at Finn who continued to load up the boxes. It was awfully warm for the usually crisp autumn weather.

So there's absolutely nothing you want me to bring???

no ugly socks then?? how about an ugly hat???

His reply came through seconds after she’d hit send.

As satisfying as that sounds, I’d rather be able to paint your face without some contraption covering it.

Unless it’s a tophat. I can always accept a top hat.

Did *Kylo Ren*, the dark mysterious artist himself, just make a joke?

Too bad I dont have one :P

Her eyes stayed glued to the screen, waiting and waiting for his response. She *should’ve* put the phone down the second she hit send and continued helping her best friend. But then Kylo Ren’s text came through and her heart all-but stopped at the words he’d sent.

Such a shame.

You wearing nothing but a top hat would surely be the next Mona Lisa.

A true masterpiece, indeed.
“Who are you texting, Rey?” Before Finn could blink she had locked her phone and pressed the device to her chest – like she was *hiding* a deep dark secret. His eyes twinkled with a mischievous glint, lips quickly forming into a smirk.

*Why,* she questioned herself in her defensive stance, *he doesn’t mean anything by it. There’s nothing to it but a light-hearted joke. You barely know him…*

“Who are you texting?” Finn repeated, eyes narrowing in on her flushed face. “You smiled, giggled and blushed like a teenager – all in a minute. *Who are you texting?*”

“It’s nothing. Just something Han sent me—”

“—Han can barely use a phone. Did you really expect me to believe that?”

Rey huffed, looking off to the side. “Why is it so important?”

“Why do you need to lie?” Finn snapped back quickly, the sly smile faltering slightly. “I’m your best friend. We tell each other everything.”

“Yes, we do. That’s *always* been our friendship Rey. You told me that I was your *first* true friend – that I was the first person you let in; the first person you opened up to. *We tell each other everything.*” His deep voice steadily raised in the small, confined room – a toxic atmosphere began to brew. “From the beginning, that’s what we’ve done. *Who are you texting?*”

She stubbornly shook her head and began to shove the remaining books into the box, forgoing the neat and orderly style she’d began with.

“I shouldn’t even bother asking.” His expression had morphed into a frown in a matter of seconds. “Obviously it’s some douchebag loser you’ve gotten yourself attached to. Some blue-eyed, athletically-built asshole who could charm the pants off you in two seconds flat.” Her mouth dropped. “And, what do you know – two months later he’s stopped returning the calls and shacked up with some other poor girl – it’s *always* the same with you, Rey.

“There’s *one* every year. You get attached too fast because they’re nice and attentive for a month.
Because they make you feel good even though they don’t bother to learn about your past. They don’t bother to learn anything about you because they don’t care. But why would that matter, right?” He deadpanned sarcastically. “Because maybe if he doesn’t know anything about your former lifestyle then you can act like it didn’t exist?”

She stared at her best friend in shock, eyes widening at the sudden attack. “Excuse me?”

“Don’t play dumb. You know you do it. You just ignore it, like everything else unpleasant in your life. You put on this perfect façade – this bright, shining smile. Nothing’s wrong; nothing’s broken, right?”

“So what you’re basically saying is that, because I have abandonment issues, I shag the first guy who pays attention to me?”

“That’s not what I meant—”

“Well, that’s how it sounded.” She interrupted quickly, breath coming in quick spurts as her voice levelled. “I’m an orphan and I just crave attention, yeah? The slag who doesn’t have any parents.”

“That’s not what I said!” Finn repeated loudly, waving a finger in her direction. “I never once said you acted like a slut – not once. I’m above that kind of behaviour and you know it; don’t put words in my mouth!”

She looked up and their eyes locked into position. His brow was heavily furrowed, eyes sharp and squinted. His full lips were set in an unusually thin line and his nostrils flared, like a bull staring down a red target. Any minute and he could stamp his feet and charge at her, full speed ahead.

“Enlighten me, then.” She commanded. “Tell me why you just automatically assumed I was texting my ‘rotten-flavour’ of the year, as you put it? It could’ve been a friend or maybe one of the few people in the world that cared about someone as meaningless as me – someone who was interested in me?”

A thick lump formed in the back of her throat as the words left her mouth. Kylo Ren was neither of those things. She didn’t know him well enough to call him a friend and he was above her in so many leagues (physically and mentally). She was just the girl he was paying to be apart of his project. And besides, Rey didn’t fancy him so it didn’t matter if he wasn’t interested.
Yes, she liked the idea of him – a mature, handsome, financially stable man. Yes, she found him attractive, but nothing beyond that point. They had a mutual understanding.

She blinked back the tears and swallowed the lump as her attention turned back to the conversation-at-hand. His twinkling eyes searched hers. “Can you honestly tell me right here, right now, that you believe what you just said? That this person’s a friend. That this person is on-board to learn about Rey Niima unlike the others?”

She looked down at her fidgety hands. A minute of thick tension passed in solid silence.

“Why are you being so secretive?” Why couldn’t she tell him? Why was it so hard to say she was texting the man paying her to pose for his art project about their next session. He made a few jokes that made her laugh. End of conversation.

“Secretive?” She questioned instead, her inner-conscious falling short as a bitter tone retook her voice.

“Yes!” He answered loudly. “Yes, you’ve been so fucking secretive lately. You’re always wrapped up in that head of yours. Always too quiet whenever we meet up at Kanata’s.” Finn sneered. “And now you’ve thrown yourself into this ridiculous art-project, throwing all caution to the wind and never stopping to allow a single rational thought to pass.”

“What is your obsession on this decision I made concerning my body?” She continued before he could retort. “I’ve had two eight-hour sessions. Both have been completely professional and respectful.” Except for the random family rant shoved in her face. “And I am perfectly comfortable in that setting. Why is that hard for you to accept?”

“Because you just throw yourself into things, Rey.” Finn returned hotly. “You’re not used to people advising you to not do something; I get that. But when… when something upsets you or stresses you out, you just repress it so deep into your mind and do stupid, irrational shit to keep it from resurfacing.”

“And what caused this ‘irrational’ decision of mine?” She demanded in a scathing tone.

“Me moving out.” He answered immediately. “Because I’m leaving you on your own and you haven’t been on your own for a while now. And anytime someone important in your life is away somewhere, in a different place, you shut down and fear they’re leaving for good.”
Rey vehemently shook her head, fists clenching. She stamped down the urge to *scream* in his face – to shout that he was wrong. That he knew nothing about her or the way her mind worked. But he knew her inside-out. Sometimes she thought Finn knew her better than herself.

“This *isn’t* like that.”

“Then what is it, then? What made you agree to an ad about nude modelling after three-seconds of deliberation? How is this *not* another distraction of yours? Please, convince me otherwise!”

“Because I need the money, Finn.” She exploded. “You’re right, I did it because you’re leaving. But it’s not a fucking distraction or a fucking coping method. It’s because my trade doesn’t pay all that well and paying my half has *always* been a struggle.” Rey shook her head. “I don’t *mind* getting naked and letting some stranger paint the image. Not when it’s in a safe and respectful environment and I’m earning twenty-an-hour for it.”

She couldn’t bare to look at his crestfallen expression as the clock ticked on. She squirmed in the sudden silent atmosphere, hands twitching and silently pleaded for him to *just say something.*

“Why didn’t you tell me?” She couldn’t look up, even at the soft tone to his eerily calm voice. “That you were struggling?”

“Because… *because, how could I?*” She blurted out quickly. “How could I ruin the start of your life with Poe?” She shook her head. “But that doesn’t anymore, does it? Because I just fucking did *exactly* what I promised not to fucking do.”

“But if you’re struggling— Rey, where are you going?”

“I need some air.” She answered vaguely as she got up from the floor and turned to walk out the front door. “I just… I need to clear my head.”

She plucked up her coat from the hook and hurried out the apartment, never looking back as she skipped plenty of steps on her way down the building. The cold filled her lungs the second after she burst out onto the street. She was quick to shrug her coat on and button it around her body before setting off with no particular destination in mind.
Rey didn’t stray from the pavement as the city bustled around her. With her head bowed and hands dug-deep into her coat pockets, she wondered how such a peaceful atmosphere could sour so quickly.

“If I had just told him.” She muttered aloud to herself in a hushed tone. She withdrew her hands and clenched them by her shoulders. “Maker, why didn’t I fucking tell him?” The corporate-looking lady gave her a strange look as she passed. Rey didn’t care, though – all she could do was curse at herself for being such a fucking mess.

She’d just ruined a huge milestone for her greatest best friend in the whole universe. It should’ve been a happy day, not a another miserable memory to store away and try to forget. To forget how she’d destroyed such a happy occasion for her best friend; Finn, who was her everything. He was the one who convinced her to leave Jakku and move to his tiny two-bedroom apartment in Takodana. He introduced her to Rose and Poe, the family she chose. He always picked her up from the ground and encouraged her to get out and show the world they were ‘missing Rey Niima’.

And this is how she repaid him.

She sighed and pulled out her phone to check the time.

*If you don’t want to walk, like usual, I’m perfectly happy to pick you up.*

*And don’t even thinks about paying for a fucking cab OR Uber.*

Kylo’s message finally pushed her over the edge as the tears spilled down her cheeks.

“You rotten, selfish bitch.” She cursed at herself loudly, ignoring the stares that came with it.

She didn’t deserve Finn. She didn’t deserve anyone. *No wonder her parents left her at someone else’s doorstep.*
The move went on without a hitch. Finn, along with everything he owned, was gone. And suddenly, after years of having company, Rey Niima was alone again—naturally.

When she’d returned from her miserable walk the night of their heated argument, they’d immediately hugged it out and exchanged profuse apologies. She sobbed into his shoulder, murmuring unintelligible words and how much she’d miss him. To commiserate the sad night, they shared a goon sack (the cheapest of wine, naturally)—drunkenly ignoring what just happened and not daring to bring up the topic again. Despite all this, the atmosphere between the pair was still as frosty as ice.

And he still left.

She’d almost forgotten how rotten it felt to be alone. But surely enough, the sleepless nights returned to remind her, as well as all the fear, anxiety and the racing mind that just didn’t know when to stop. The ragged appearance also returned; complete with dark bags underneath her eyes, ratty knotted hair for leaving it in buns and a sickly-pale complexion. It earned her a few concerned glances off Han, whose hazel eyes lingered a little too long and Chewie, ever the loveable giant, gave her more hugs than usual. Leia was the worst of them all, though. She took one look at Rey and pierced her very soul. She could see all the questions the fierce woman silently asked—‘are you okay, how are you feeling, what’s wrong?’

She didn’t dare look at her big brown doe eyes the whole time for ‘Take-Away Tuesday’, instead focusing on the plate of Chinese in front of her. She was like Medusa, Leia was—only, one look into those beautiful eyes would have her spilling her guts about everything.

Still, the words never came directly out her mouth. She was in the clear zone. Or so she thought.

“I told you to call me—Christ, you must be freezing.” She quickly shucked off her shoes and hurried inside for the warmth, avoiding his dark eyes and huddling into herself as Kylo closed the door.

It felt like light years just to reach their session. The week had been agonizingly slow. At one point, she thought time had stopped and the world was punishing her for being so selfish with Finn.

“I would prefer if my model didn’t die of hypothermia on the way to the session. Seriously, Rey… what were you thinking, walking in weather like this?” He shook his head, arms folded over his broad chest. “Clearly you weren’t thinking at all. I meant it when I said you could call and I’d come and get you—”
“I’m not one of your bloody students to lecture, yeah?” She snapped, watching as his eyes widened in shock at the bitter tone to her voice. Only then did she notice the fresh hair-cut, taking in the large ‘dumbo’ ears that slowly turned red. He’d also grew a thinly-trimmed goatee and moustache over the last two weeks. It only added to the attractive character, she thought. Her eyes slowly raked over the rest of him. He opted for a black-wool turtleneck, clinging to every muscle. Usual dark jeans and black socks – all so put-together when she was just… not.

“Are you feeling okay, Rey?”

Her eyes snapped back to his. He was the last person she expected to ask that. She was the last person she expected to care.

Rey swiftly turned her back on him, closed her eyes and felt a familiar prickle to her eyes. “Yes.” She answered hoarsely. “Sorry for snapping at you, I just… I’m fine.”

“If you’re not up for this today, that’s perfectly fine.” She reopened her eyes, confronted with her reflection with his tall frame in the background. His wary eyes were oddly familiar. Like they belonged to a person she knew. “I can drive you home right now, if you want to.”

Rey shook her head, shrugged off her coat and beanie to hang it on his coat-rack beside the door. “It’s good. I’m fine.”

“Are you sure—”

“I said I’m fine.” She spat out firmly, a glare pointed in his direction.

“Right.” He muttered out. “Um, okay… we’re working in the kitchen today. It’s a, uh… it’s a little odd.”

She nodded, bowed her head and stormed through the arch-way, weaving her way out of his living room to turn down the hallway and enter his kitchen. She froze at the sight, jaw dropping and frustration slowly ebbing away as she scanned the room. Sleek black-wood cupboards with pristine-white marble countertops, a gorgeous black and white splashback and a fridge bigger than her whole bathroom. She had to push away the childish urge to climb inside and see if she could fit.
“Oh my.” She gasped, spinning to take in every inch of the room – from it’s red, black and white modern-stools to the Victorian-esque wine cabinet that probably cost her yearly-salary.

“Is cooking a hobby of yours?”

Kind of.” She answered absently, glancing over her shoulder to see him with his usual cocked brow. “I’m more into baking, myself. But I’m rubbish at both.” She smiled up at him sheepishly. “Sounds a bit silly, now that I’ve said it aloud. I just like the process of it all – clears my head.” His eyes seemed softer than usual. “Do you cook?” She certainly hoped so, with a kitchen like this.

“I do.” He murmured softly. “I hope I’m not rubbish but I rarely get the chance to cook for anyone.” He cleared his throat. “Perhaps, one night, you could come over and be my judge?”

“I’m not a very harsh critic. I eat just about everything and think it’s lovely.” After the slop she was served at some homes, it was hard not to have that outlook on a home cooked meal. “That sounds very nice, though.”

She caught his lip twitch before he ungracefully ducked behind his set-up easel with the stand of paints next to him, nearly slipping on the tarp beneath it in the process. She was careful not to giggle at the sight, quickly turning away to hide her smile caused by his sudden clumsiness.

Rey gave the kitchen one last long look before she began to shuck off the layers. First the plain white hoodie, then the rainbow knit-sweater, then her lacy baby-pink bralette. She put them in a pile, off to the side before unbuttoning her jeans and dragging them down her thighs, kicking them away and proceeding to do the same with her matching-set knickers.

This part didn’t phase her anymore. It was odd to be so perfectly comfortable in this position, especially when it involved her naked with an intense set of eyes continuously raking over her body. Today it was different, however. She didn’t feel like a science-experiment, stripping to be studied. When she’d shucked off the last piece of fabric from her body, she felt as light as a feather – as if all her sins had bounded free, leaving her with a clear mind, body and soul. It was nice after the hellish week she’d had.

“Hair up or down?”

His eyes flicked to hers as he prepped the paint. “Up. Just like it is, please.” He murmured. “And I’ll have you up on the kitchen counter today.”
Rey stiffened. “On the bench?” He made a confirming noise. “You want my bare arse on your kitchen bench.”

On his kitchen bench, where he probably ate his breakfast or read the morning news or cooked the occasional meal.

“Yes.” He paused for a beat and cleared his throat once more. “I—I want you spread on the kitchen counter, propped up on your elbows. And... and I’d like for you to open your legs, Rey.”

Her confidence disappeared just as quickly as it came.

“In the kitchen?” She asked in shock, voice cracking.

“Yes, in the kitchen.” He cleared his throat, once again. “It’s symbolic, you see – we see a kitchen as a food source; where we store, prepare and occasionally eat our food.” Kylo hummed. “We also regard – depending on the person – a woman’s sex as food.” His eyes flicked up to hers, briefly. “To eat her out, as they say.”

Rey’s mind began to spin. Suddenly, certain insecurities that had never plagued her raced around in her head. Whether she had a short or long clit, or a funny-looking labia – what if her vagina, as the boys in high school put it, looked like a bad ham sandwich.

And, dear god, did Kylo Ren seriously just say ‘eat her out’? What in the wor--

“Rey?” Her eyes snapped to his. “Are you feeling comfortable with this?”

“I...” She stuttered, trying to find the words. Instead, she turned away from his gaze and, with a determined spurge of courage, began climbing the counter. “Oh, fuck that’s cold.” She yelped once feeling the cool marble on her backside. When she looked at Kylo, she thought she saw the hint of a smile before he disappeared back behind the canvas.

She breathed in deeply, propping herself up with her elbows, thighs clamped shut – ready to fall open. Rey closed her eyes. This wasn’t a big deal – he’d studied her naked body for hours and hours. It wasn’t sexual or romantic, just art. Her heart pounded loudly in her ears.
“Rey?”

She groaned internally. “Wait, wait. Just give me a minute, please.” She said softly, breathing deeply.

“It’s perfectly fine if you don’t want to do this—”

She let her legs fall open without a second thought. She watched as Kylo’s eyes went wide before she clamped them shut with a squeak.

“I can’t.” She cried out, dropping her head. “If you saw you’d understand why.”

“That’s fine, Rey.”

“No it’s not. Gosh, I’m so sorry, Kylo.” She muttered. “I’m sorry. It’s just… it’s really ugly – I don’t see how anyone could see this as art.”

There was an awfully long pause after she’d said the words that had her squirming on the hard bench.

“There isn’t a single ugly thing about you, Rey.” He said softly. “Nothing about you isn’t beautiful. And I don’t care what your vagina looks like – whatever the image, to me it’s worthy enough to be called art. And to be perfectly honest, all vaginas are ugly – they’re fucking ugly, beautiful things; the biggest oxymoron there is.” His gravelly voice had her struggling to breathe. “But it doesn’t matter that they aren’t flawless or a picture-perfect image. They are the instrument to new life. They represent pleasure and pain, in one.

“Look around you, Rey. The world is so beautiful; a perfect scenery that doesn’t quite mirror human behaviour. To me, a vagina is like a reverse parallel of that. It isn’t the prettiest sight, but it gives us some of the prettiest things. A stunning piece of captivating real-world art.”

She propped herself up, disappointed to see him still hidden behind the easel. “You really see it like that?”
“Yes.” He hummed quietly. “Yes, I do.”

“Oh.” She breathed out quietly, chewing on her lip as the urge to open her legs steadily increased. Slowly, but surely, she dropped her legs to the side and let them hang off the bench, shuddering as the cool air hit her privates. She closed her eyes, propped herself up and tensed. “Kylo?”

“Yes, Rey?”

“Distract me, please. Just do anything.”

“Tell me something about yourself.” He hushed out. “Something odd or that you keep to yourself, if you’re comfortable.”

He was a smart man. The thought process alone was enough to calm her down, muscles slowly easing as she searched her brain to find an answer.

“I’m kind of into horoscopes.” She could just see the eyebrow cock – no doubt he thought them to be complete rubbish. “I don’t believe in it.” She added hastily. “It’s all a bunch of bullshit that isn’t relevant to anyone in any way. But they make me laugh and smile. I don’t know why, I just really enjoy reading articles about horoscopes. Like how a certain sign has an air of royalty about them, like a Leo.” She breathed out a soft giggle at the thought. “How ridiculous is that, though? Like, who comes up with it?”

“People who earn too much money, I bet.” She rolled her eyes.

“Okay, mister cynical. What’s your star sign and let’s see if it matches the dark persona.”

“Dark persona?” He looked up and met her gaze, eyes sparkling with mirth. “Where’d you get that —”

“All you wear is black, you’re the mysterious artist type and you constantly spread your philosophical view on a variety of topics, such as nude-art and vaginas.” His abrupt laugh brought a smile to her face. “Star sign!”
At her quick demand, he snapped into thought. “Uh… I don’t know the dates.”

She tutted and snapped her fingers. “Birth date?”

“The eighteenth upcoming.”

She scowled. “You’re shitting me. You’re a Scorpio.”

“I don’t really see the shock value—”

“Scorpios are strong-willed and mysterious.” She interrupted him and began listing off the traits. “They’re passionate, stubborn and have the right mind to achieve their goals. They’re very assertive and alert in troubling situations. They represent the water element – swift and calm at times, but also violent and rushing.” She shook her head. “Kylo Ren, you’re a fucking Scorpio.”

“I thought you said you didn’t believe in it.” He huffed.

“Well, I’ve changed my mind now that I’ve found the living definition of a Scorpio, who is in fact, a Scorpio.”

“Well, what’s your sign then? Let me be the judge and see if it matches the persona.”

She fell silent before answering in a quiet voice. “Well, legally, I’m a Gemini. But there’s a chance I could be a Taurus, too.”

“I’m sorry?”

“I kind of don’t actually know my real birthday.” Rey dragged out the admission. “They put it down as the 30th of May, but there’s a possibility I was born either a week later or before that. It was just an estimation.”

He paused and she fidgeted.
“My parents left me on a stranger’s doorstep and disappeared. There was… there was no birth certificate, or a name given, just me in a cardboard box swaddled in a blanket. The assumption is that my mother had me outside a hospital – they were most likely homeless and young. Some people said they were just junkies and lousy drunks.” Her fists clenched at the memory of Unkar Plutt’s slimy smile. “Whoever owned the house found me in the morning and turned me into the system.”

“So, you’re an orphan then?” He asked, after a time of silence had passed

“Well, technically, there’s no knowing if my biological parents are dead but… yeah, I’m an orphan.”

“Oh god.” He suddenly muttered. “Oh, Christ I can’t believe – I whined about my family situation to you, without a second thought and you’re a…”

“It’s okay.” She blurted out quickly. “It’s really no big deal. Every family situation is different, right?”

“Were you adopted out?”

“No.” She answered his abrupt question. “I was passed around foster-families and group homes until I turned eighteen.”

“Christ.” He muttered once again.

“It’s really fine, Kylo.” She began to blabber. “Gemini’s are adaptable and learn quickly, so that helped with all the moving. And, as a Taurus, we’re practical and patient and responsible.” Very patient, considering she waited nineteen years in hope her parents would come back for her. “It fits considering I’m a mixture of both. I think I always leaned towards Gemini more as kid but, as an adult, I’ve slowly morphed more into a Taurus.” When he didn’t respond, she continued. “Although, I’d like to think I’m not superficial – I’ve never cared about appearances and such. And I’d never betray my best friend, like the Wandering Bull…”

She trailed off, mind casually drifting to her and Finn’s argument.

“Well, never intentionally anyways.”
Her legs began to get stiff and she shifted in the silence.

“I guess I can sort of see both signs in you.” He finally spoke and Rey almost sighed out of relief that her annoying word-vomit hadn’t pissed him off. “But it’s still ridiculous. The whole notion of it is ridiculous.”

Suddenly, she giggled.

“That’s such a Scorpio thing to say.”

His pointed glare only made her laugh that much harder.

~ * ~

Her legs were stiff and aching by the time the eight hours had finished, causing her to hiss as she pulled back on her light-wash jeans.

“Sorry.” He said, scrunching up his pretty face. “I know it wasn’t the easiest position to stay in for eight hours. I should’ve offered you more breaks.”

“Kylo.” She deadpanned. “It’s fine. At the end of the day, you’re paying me. I don’t mind being a little sore the next day.” She quickly clipped on her bra, throwing back on the layers of shirts before turning to leave the kitchen and retrieve her coat and beanie. “I’ll meet you in the car, yeah?”

At his parting nod, she left the room reflecting on what just happened. Every time the conversation dawdled, he asked her another question. And every time, she gave an answer she that she wouldn’t give to some of her closest friends in a million years.

Like how she’d never actually been on a real beach (Takodana’s didn’t count since it was all rock
and the weather was always rubbish) or how she was slightly afraid of storms – she loved rain, admired thunder and was amazed at the sight of lightning. But, because it was still so foreign to her, the big storms could turn her into a nervous wreck – and told him all about how she met Finn.

She smiled the whole time telling it; His car broke down while passing through Jakku, she came across him and fixed his car for free (Unkar would kill her if he knew) and, in return, he treated her to lunch. Months later, he somehow convinced her to move to Takodana. It was the greatest decision she’d ever made.

She even told him all about their argument (minus the ‘who are you texting’ and the awkward ‘letting douchebags use her body to repress her past’) and how it was the first time she was truly by herself in years.

For a moment, she feared he’d confirm her own thoughts – that she was a selfish friend and only cared about herself.

“It isn’t selfish to want company, Rey.” He said quietly. “I’m sure your upbringing was lonely enough. It’s okay to feel like that.”

Her chest felt significantly lighter at his words. It felt good to finally share that with someone, even if it was only Kylo. He didn’t seem to mind, however. He listened to every word she spoke and constantly asked her more and more questions, effectively taking her mind off the fact she had her legs spread open on his kitchen bench and he studied every single detail of her vagina.

It was only after hopping into his beautiful car did she realise that the conversation had been all about her. God, maybe she really was a Taurus.

“I never asked how your dinner went.” She asked after he turned out of his driveway onto the bustling street. “With your family.”

He paused, shifting gears with a clenched jaw. “It was…alright.” He answered slowly. “It was mostly just my mother trying to keep the hostility down. She did all the talking, really.”

“Did you tell them about your project?”

“Ah, kind of?”
“What does that mean, exactly?”

“It means that I told them it was a project over two months surrounding my take on the ‘wheel of emotions’.”

“So, you didn’t mention me at all? Or that I’m naked in this particular project?”

He flushed.

“You’re embarrassed.”

“I am not.” He whined like a petulant child.

“You are so.” She teased lightly. “What’s the big deal – How old are you, like thirty, right?”

“Thirty-four.” He mumbled as they were stopped at a red light.

“I’m sure your parents think you’ve seen a naked woman by now.”

“Rey.”

“So they didn’t prompt you any further?” She continued with a smirk.

“I said I wanted to keep it a surprise. For the showing.”

“And when and where exactly is this showing?”

He squirmed. “At my Uncle’s gallery, sometime in August.”
“The uncle who says your art is pathetic?”

“It’s a set-up for failure.” Kylo scowled as his voice soured, slightly. “He never would’ve offered if my mother hadn’t been there.” He set his intense eyes on her. “And don’t even try and get out of going. I’ll drag you, if I have to.”

“Absolutely not.”

“You don’t have to look at the paintings if you don’t want to.” He reasoned as the light turned green. “You can just look at everything else.”

“But if I’m there, the temptation will be too strong.”

A beat passed.

“There’s an open bar.”

“Okay, I might go.” He snorted. “Well, your parents will be in for quite the surprise, then. Showing up to see a vagina on a canvas.”

He scoffed. “I don’t care about their reactions. I don’t care about anyone’s view except yours, really.”

“Why?” Rey furrowed her brow. “I’m not artistically inclined in any way, whatsoever.”

“Yes, but you already have this idea of how it’s going to look. You have this ignorant view of it all when you haven’t even seen the finished work yet; this view that it’s nothing more than a vagina or a pair of breasts when, in reality, it’s so much more than that.”

“Enlighten me, then.”
“I will.” He quickly smiled at her before his attention returned to the road. “At the showing.”

She groaned and pouted. “I’m not completely ignorant, you know. I mean, clearly, I know nothing about art but I’m interested enough to google what the fuck a ‘wheel of emotions’ is.”

It was the only alternative to her restless nights – either that or try to get some sleep while her anxiety was in full force.

“And what did you think?”

“I see where you’re from about how some colours don’t match. I guess it comes down to how you interpret it.” He hummed in agreement. “But I can’t quite understand how that connects through a naked woman.”

“You’ll understand once you see. I promise.” He surprised her by the soft chuckle. “Lucky you’re a Taurus – they’re patient, right?”

She only huffed and flipped him off when he turned to meet her gaze.

The rest of the drive went by seamlessly as Kylo turned up the radio and they sat in comfortable silence, occasionally bringing up pointless topics in the short fifteen-minute drive.

But, all too soon, and he was parked outside her building.

“Uh, Rey?”

“Yes Kylo?” She asked as she unbuckled the seatbelt.

“So, you mentioned your living situation before and I’ve been thinking about it ever since.” He paused, running a hand through his hair, (she was starting to think it was a nervous tick) “I’ve actually got a colleague in my department who’s trying to rent out her spare bedroom. I… I don’t know how much it’s up for but I can find out for you, if you want?”
“Really?”

“At the very least, I could organise an interview. I’m sure she’d be happy to give you a tour of the building.” He glanced out the window, scanning the graffiti and the stained pavements. “It’s in a better area than this, so it may be a little pricier.”

“Would you really do that for me?” She chirped out and continued at his nod. “That’d be amazing! Gosh, Kylo, I can’t thank you enough.”

“Okay.” He nodded, a crooked smile taking over his features. “Well, um… I’ll give you a call after I find out then?”

“Sounds good.” She reluctantly opened the car door. “I’ll see you next time.”

“Yeah, you too.”

“Bye, Kylo.”

“Goodbye, Rey.”

And then she was back to reality – microwaving boxed mac and cheese, watching a few garbage programmes on the telly while she cracked open a beer. All alone, of course.

It only was later that night, when sleep never came and her mind wandered, that she realised the compatibility match between Scorpio and Taurus. They were matched high in every branch; trust, certain values, shared activities and emotion – they were especially ranked high in sexual intimacy, using sex as a way to connect and bringing out the utmost pleasure in their partner.

Rey moaned into her pillow as a pair of dark eyes came to mind.

Yep, she was definitely more of a Taurus.
Here's the link to Scorpio and Taurus compatibility, if you're interested. It's very Reylo imo
It wasn’t quite the ideal Saturday night she had in mind. Working in the steamy Vietnamese restaurant, dishing out food and smiles while occasionally avoiding the rowdy runaway child; gruelling work that kept her occupied, constantly making back-and-forth trips to the kitchen while juggling a handful of plates. It was hardly ideal for anyone, she imagined, but Rose was in desperate need, practically begging her to come in after an employee called-in sick. And Rey was never one to refuse a cry for help.

Luckily, this wasn’t a ‘new thing’ for the young mechanic. In fact, it’d become quite regular over the last few months – all because holiday season had descended upon the world, once again. Ever since Rose and her sister had taken over their parents’ business, it became normal for her to pick up a shift at ‘Pho Tico’ when necessary. Tonight, it seemed, was no different.

She’d clocked on at five-thirty and immediately thrown herself into the kitchen, bustling around the tiny space to prep the vegetables and sauces while dodging hot pans and sweaty bodies. An hour in, when customers started to flood inside, Rey was pushed out front and forced to do the ‘rounds as families, groups and couples settled into the booths, tables and chairs. The place was absolutely swamped, not a free table in sight as the take-away line only grew in length. There was an abundance of impatient customers, a handful of hysterical children and the occasional rude person or two who walked-out without a hint of notice. It was unrelenting.

And yet, despite all the unpleasantness, Rey found the experience to be rather refreshing. The longs days at Han’s shop were often slow, with little-to-no talk and a stereo that only played his music. ‘Pho Tico’, on the other hand, kept her on her toes, pushed her to the limit by dealing with frantic situations and allowed her to socialize with those friendly or drunk enough for a chat. Oddly enough,
she found the experience to be quite enjoyable.

Still, with that being said, no complaints were made when the busy-nature of the place simmered down to a blessedly quiet levelled pace.

“God, what a nightmare.” Rose groaned, frowning down at the mess the large and loud family made before leaving. “How hard is it to keep food on a plate? And look at all this waste…”

They were an hour away from closing and the exhaustion had quickly started to settle in.

“This is why you should have paper tablecloths – that or the tarp-like material. Not only is it cheaper, but it’s more practical. These stains are never coming out.” Rey began to help gather the dirty dishes, careful not to spill anything as she loaded item after item.

“I’ve tried convincing Paige. But she wants this place looking like it has some class and elegance. I don’t particularly see how white tablecloths achieve this.” She trailed her feisty friend back to the humid kitchen, smiling as she passed the staff. “But, whatever – it looks nice, I guess.”

“Just because something looks nice doesn’t mean it’s automatically a good thing.” A pair of dark eyes popped to mind as the words flowed from her lips

“Right.” Rose agreed. “Like Jessika.”

“What?” The girl mentioned perked up at the sound of her name just as they began loading up the deep sink. “Was that an insult?”

“Maybe.” She answered vaguely. “Technically, it was a nice insult since I complimented your looks.”

Jessika beamed at this. “I suppose it doesn’t matter, then.”

“Wow, you aren’t vain at all, are you?” Rey snorted as Jess blew a kiss in the direction of a scowling Rose. “Who’s on dishes tonight – and if any of you even think about saying Rey, I’ll drop your asses. She’s done enough just by coming in.”
“Well there goes my suggestion.” Snap Wexley flinched as Rose grabbed a wet tea-towel and whipped it in his direction, a resounding ‘crack’ splitting in the air. A string of low ‘oohs’ followed. “Christ, calm down Tico – it was just a joke.” He quickly retreated, hands held up in surrender. “I did them last night. That excludes me, right?”

Rose narrowed her eyes.

“Maybe we should just invest in a dishwasher? I mean, how haven’t we already installed one – especially with nights like these.”

There was a three-second pause after the decent suggestion left Jessika’s lips.

“Alright Pava, step up to the sink.”

“What!” She perked up with a scowl. “What about DJ?”

The chef himself withdrew from the steaming pan to fix Jessika with a pointed look. Somehow, even with the hairnet, sweaty face and tired eyes, he managed to look intimidating.

“He cooks all the food and is automatically excused.” She opened her mouth to continue but Rose was too quick. “And Peet’s been here for eight hours. And dealt with that asshole who cussed the restaurant out. And her shift ends in five minutes—”

“—and I’m six-months pregnant.” The woman added tiredly. “With a husband to get home to.”

“This is so unfair.”

A familiar jingle rang loud and clear, a groan ripping from Rose’s throat at the sad sound. She turned to Rey with pleading eyes.

“If you go deal with those assholes and hand out the cute old couple’s food, you’ll be free to go afterwards.”
“Or, I could deal with it and she could do the dishes.”

Rey was quick to scurry out of the kitchen before she could witness Jessika’s murder. She smiled instead at the faint ‘crack’ that could be heard throughout the store and peered outside of the archway, scanning to find their new customers – or *customer*, it seemed. They were tucked away in one of the corner booths – a great, big looming figure hunched over, digging through their shoulder satchel bag. Rey watched as the customer pulled out a stack of booklets, along with a single-sheet of paper and a pack of pens.

Her brows quirked up, curiosity officially piqued, before she peeled away to fetch a pitcher of water and a couple of glasses (in case the mysterious stranger had company – though it didn’t look promising). She snatched up a menu on her way out, slowly approaching the booth with careful feet. Their head was bent, pen scanning the pages in front of them before occasionally scribbling something down with their red pen. She *wondered* what he was doing – it was *definitely* a he with the muscular build he was sure to have underneath those clothes. She approached closer, quickly plastering on her brightest face as she reached the corner of the room. The stranger looked up and Rey halted to a stop.

She *should’ve* recognised that dark, thick hair.

“Oh.” She breathed out the involuntary syllable. “Hello.”

Never in her life did she expect to see Kylo Ren in sweats – Black, no less, but *still sweats*. He looked just as startled at idea. “Rey.” He choked out, eyes widening while processing the image before him. “I…I thought you were a mechanic.”

“I am. My friend runs the store and she was down a worker.” She shifted on the spot. “And, uh, here I am.”

“Oh.” He murmured silently, eyes casting downwards to her handful of items. Before she could blink he was hastily scrambling around, his long arms shoving aside all the papers in front of him to the side. “S- sorry. I’m, uh, grading essays. They’re not due until after Thanksgiving break.” She ducked to hide her smile – it was rather endearing to see Kylo Ren caught of guard. He cleared his throat and settled back into the booth, allowing her to place the jug of water and glasses around the bamboo-placemats. “It’s, uh, good to be organised, you know?”

She laughed at this. “I’m afraid I don’t. I’m rubbish at organisational skills but I’m sure you already
know this with the whole odd socks and knickers, yeah?"

“I wouldn’t judge you on what you wear to our sessions, Rey. Especially since you’re only expected to get out of them – well, most of the time.” He hushed out quickly. “And besides, that point is futile considering your matching lace set last week.”

They both stiffened after the words set in. Did he watch her strip? The thought sent a shiver down her spine; Kylo Ren, ever-so-respectful, gazing lustfully at her body clad in a flattering knicker set while she gazed at his kitchen. Red patches bloomed in her cheeks. Surely not.

“Here,” She muttered, holding out the laminated-sheet menu in his direction. “I’ll come back when you’re ready to order.”

“Thank you, Rey.”

She nodded and hurried off into the kitchen, aware that his eyes followed her the whole way. It seems he wasn’t the only one caught of guard. It was odd, really. That she felt more comfortable unclothed in front of the man rather than the alternative. She didn’t have a clue as to why, either, but that still didn’t stop her frantic mind from running in circles. Perhaps he would see a different side to her out of their shared sessions – that he’d see the broken girl within; the girl that yearned to be accepted and loved, the girl that (occasionally) still stupidly hoped her parents would come back for her. Unbound, free and naked, she had let him in and explored a completely different side of herself that was unknown to her. A Rey that blindly trusted a man – no, a stranger – and shared the things she kept close to her chest. It was almost like he was her therapist with all the mopey sessions and advice he continued to share with her. And, eventually, the sessions would come to a stop and Rey would be okay to continue on, fearless. They’d part and never see each other again.

Ah. So it was a simple reminder that this would all come to an end, then. They weren’t meant to see each other outside his house. Because this wasn’t a lasting relationship (if you could even call it that).

Her stomach churned at the thought.

Despite this, however, she still put on her best face and served the sweet couple their food, staying to happily listen to the tales about their grandchildren, pride pouring from their beaming faces. Rey idly wondered if her real parents would be proud to see who she was today. She doubted it – she was just a high school dropout who took up a low-pay trade and now has to resort to posing nude and pop-up shifts to afford rent. Yeah, her parents would be real proud.
One last aching smile sent the couple’s way and she dragged her feet back to Kylo’s booth. “You ready to order, yet?”

“Forgive me, but I don’t usually venture into Vietnamese cuisine. I’m a little stuck.” She nodded and turned to leave. “Wait. I was just… if you were the one ordering, what would you get?”

Her eyes lit up. “Oh, that’s easy. The seafood claypot would be my pick. I’m a sucker for spicy food and prawns – Kriff, who doesn’t love prawns.”

“Prawns?”

“Shrimp.” She clarified with a smile. “I always forget the different names you lot have for everything.” His lips quirked upwards at her extensive eye roll. “Anywho, it’s got a bit of a kick and it’s only an entrée – but that fills me up plenty. If you’re not into it, the star dish here is the Pho Tai. It’s pretty mild, unfortunately, but holds a lot of flavour.” His eyes crinkled at the edges, warmer and light than usual. “Anything take your fancy or do you need more options, sir?”

He chuckled a deep rumble that heaved his chest, and shook his head. “Why not both?”

“Both?” Her eyebrows shot up. “Someone’s hungry tonight!”

“Quite literally a starving artist.” He quipped, earning an ugly giggle from her throat. “Something’s got to fuel me on to read this garbage. And you said yourself the claypot was only an entrée.”

“Yes, but a filling entrée.”

“You’re tiny. I bet you take three bites and claim you’re full.”

Her eyes narrowed. “I’m not tiny. I’m 5’7, thank you very much. I believe they consider that average for a woman.”

“Oh, you’re a woman?” She gasped in mock horror and, surprising herself, whacked him hard with her notepad. He only laughed. “I’m only kidding. I’ve seen enough to know you’re a woman.”
She pursed her lips, despite her rosy cheeks, and scribbled down his order. “Is that all for tonight or would you like any sides with that, sir.”

He smirked and looked down to scan the menu once more. “The mixed vegetables – the sauce, though. What exactly is the light brown sauce?”

“Hoisin.” His hard features softened at the pleased smile that took over his expression.

“Yes, thank you. That sounds lovely.”

She nodded and added it to the list. “Any drinks for tonight? There’s not a wide selection but alcohol’s alcohol, right?”

“Ah, no thank you. I don’t think it wise to drink and mark.”

“It’d make it bearable, no?”

“Oh, yes. But some people believe in a ‘code of ethics’ – and I believe myself to be a thorough man. I don’t half-ass things. Nice upselling, though.” He muttered dryly, an amused glint in his eye.

“I do try.” She smirked. “Is that all for tonight, sir.”

“Yes, thank you Rey.”

“Great.” She beamed. “I’ll run this out back. It shouldn’t be too far away now that it’s finally quiet.”

“Busy tonight?”

“Oh yes.” She moaned. “It was non-stop. And some people are just really rude, you know. I have the utmost respect for those who work in retail, now – never underestimate them.” She sighed and gestured to her notepad. “Luckily, I get to leave after this. It’ll be nice to finally put my feet up.”
“Oh.” There was something oddly familiar in his expression – one she wore too often and knew quite well. *Surely not.* “You’re leaving after this, then?”

She nodded and was bewildered to see a frown. *Was he really disappointed? That she was leaving? Did he wish for her to stay?*

“Yeah, I just need to wrap up your order and get it out to kitchen... so, um, I should *probably* do that.” He nodded faintly. “I’ll see you around, Kylo. Have fun with the marking.”

“Uh, you too – *I mean*... have a good night, Rey.”

She couldn’t help the smile at his grimacing expense. It was rather baffling to her – one minute, he conversed so smoothly and the next he was fumbling like he had something to hide. And seeing that side to the usually composed and confident Kylo Ren was definitely refreshing.

On her way back to the kitchen she plucked up the leftover dishes from a small group who’d left a *nice* big tip (Rose would be *over* the moon) and smiled at Jessika’s crestfallen expression when she added them to the pile.

“I’m out of here, guys.” She announced cheerily, handing the sheet listed with Kylo’s order to a flustered DJ. “Enjoy the rest of your night.” They all returned a half-arsed ‘goodbye’ as she dragged herself further outback, stopping by the office to see Rose off before continuing to the tiny, barely functioning break room where she stripped off the spare apron, folded it and propped it on the table.

As she *finally* moved closer to the back entrance, more-than ready for her citywalk home, Rey dug out her phone to see any missed messages. Only, instead of reading the message Finn had sent her eyes, of their own accord, wandered to the corner of her lit-up screen.

**Saturday, 18 November**

Her stomach plummeted, stiff-still with her hand locked around the door handle. Rey chewed on her lip, guilt tearing at her mind. She hesitated for a split second before she was all but a blur of movement, flying past the office and zooming out of the kitchen. She was quick to storm over to his booth. Kylo’s neck snapped up from the sheets, eyes widening in shock at her hasty entrance.
“It’s your birthday.” She blurted out, gripping onto the straps of her backpack. “It’s your birthday and...” *and I completely forgot despite having the conversation a mere week ago*, she thought bitterly. “And you’re here, marking essays. Alone.”

She watched him swallow. “I went out for lunch with my mother.”

“You’re alone, marking essays.” She repeated, plunking herself down in the seat opposite to him. “On your birthday. On a Saturday night.” She shook her head stubbornly. “You should be out with friends and having fun and getting stupidly drunk, or something. But you’re here, marking essays… alone.”

“Yes, you’ve said that *several* times now.” He didn’t meet her set-expression, opting to glare at the table. “I’m thirty-five, Rey – getting stupidly drunk isn’t exactly in my nature. Never was, really.”

“But, still. You should be out with friends and celebrating—”

“—Did it *ever* occur to you that maybe I *like* being alone? That I enjoy solitude and peace?” He snapped, eyes defensively narrowed at her. His tone was *biting* – one she was oh-so-used to from the likes of *Unkar* and greedy foster-parents. Rey shrunk under his heated gaze. It was odd to see them so black. “Did you ever wonder that I might prefer this? That, *unlike some*, I’m not this bubbly, socially-appealing person who thrives in the company of others? Did you ever think that, maybe, I don’t have all that many friends who’d willingly spend time with me?”

She opened her mouth and closed it, no doubt looking like an absent-minded goldfish. His voice was *so* harsh and everything she was used to growing up – but not him. Her eyes suddenly felt thick and heavy, her throat clamped up.

“Right.” She choked out, slipping out of the booth. “I’m sorry for bothering you, then.”

Maybe she *had* pushed too far. Everyone had their preferences. And Kylo was a great big mystery; who was *she* to assume how he liked to spend his nights.

“Wait.” He boomed, loud and clear in the quiet nature of the restaurant.

She halted in her haste to the front door and, against all better-judgement, turned to face him. He was standing, body tense, clenched fists and those big ‘dumbo’ ears slightly pink. She wrung her hands
together and heard the heavy sigh from his lips. “How are you getting home?”

Her brows drew close. “I’m walking.” She admitted.

“At this time at night?”

“I do it all the time.”

He snorted. “Was that supposed to make me comfortable with a young woman walking the city-streets late at night?” She shrugged and waited for him to continue. When he didn’t, she huffed and spoke quietly.

“I have no other way home and it’s really not that far.” He scoffed. “It’s fine.” Irritation flooded her tone.

“What type of man would I be if I let you walk home among leering drunks?”

“Just a man who believes this woman can take care of herself.”

“I know perfectly-well you’re capable of taking care of yourself Rey. I have no doubts in that matter.” She absently snaked her arms around her chest as he continued. “But that doesn’t mean I can’t worry. And the truth is I wouldn’t be able to just sit here comfortably knowing you’re out in the cold in that ratty jacket walking home after a long, tiring shift.”

Her breath escaped her in one giant puff. Rey looked to the side, ignoring the prominent prescience right in front of her. “What would you have me do, then?”

The silence seemed to stretch on like a galaxy after her snippy question.

“Join me.” That quickly brought her attention back to the mysterious man. “There’s plenty of food to share; the entrée is filling – you said so yourself. And I could drive you home after.” He looked down and raked a hand through his hair. “And since you’re so against my lonely state…you could spend the night with me so I wouldn’t be. Alone, that is.”
She wondered if this was a dream (similar to her clinging hope that her parents would return for her). If Rey were to pinch herself, would everything dissolve into a puff of black smoke? Or was this real? Did he really care about her wellbeing that much?

“Please?”

Her chest felt loaded and heavy at his pleading, desperate tone — or was she just delusional and yearning for something she’d never receive? “Okay.”

It took a good three-seconds to connect her mind and body. Oh-so-slowly, she made her way to the booth, tentatively gazing up at his now soft-expression. The smile he wore was one she’d yet to experience; a small, lopsided tilt that had his eyes lighting up with golden hazel-like flecks. Every single part of her felt warm and fuzzy as she took her seat opposite him.

Once more, his hand flew into his hair. She wondered if he was as nervous as she was; she wondered if he was questioning why because there was no reason to feel so anxious.

“I was going to call you tonight.” He said suddenly, voice level and calm with the low, hum-like rumble she was used to. It was a nice sound, Rey thought.

“Oh?” It was all she could muster.

“I talked to my colleague the other day. The one looking for a roommate.” He clarified. “She’s interested in meeting you; said she’d like to set-up an interview of sorts to discuss rent prices and show you around. I thought about ringing but then I realised that I was thirty-five and you’re so much younger. I concluded that you’d be out on this Saturday night, like anyone else in their youth. I never expected to run into you.”

She frowned. “Ten years is hardly anything, Kylo.”

He snorted humorlessly. “Rey, we run in different demographics. We grew up with different cartoons and different bands to idolize. You’re the age of social media and I’m the age of dial-up internet and email. Ten years is quite a lot.”
“You may be right. But you’re listing things I never had the luxury to experience in my childhood.”

“Right.” He muttered, pinkening slightly. “Sorry.”

“It’s alright.” She said softly, glancing up at him through her lashes. “I get to experience it now. And that’s all that matters. I’m discovering a whole new me, one Simpsons episode at a time.”

Her heart swelled as his face contorted, scrunching up at this. “You watch that garbage?”

She gasped in mock-horror. “What? You can’t talk about different demographics and then ridicule one of the few shows that resonate with every demographic.” He held up his hands, surrendering. “You’re such a Milhouse.”

He gaped at her accusation before his laugh echoed in the quiet room. “What?” She smirked and nodded as he ran a hand over his mouth. “Well, if that’s the case then I’m the Milhouse to your Lisa.”

She reciprocated the laugh and smiled brightly. “I’m honoured, then.”

The easy-natured conversation fizzled as Rose brought out the food. She was clearly confused and busting to ask many questions. She only kept smiling and delivering good customer service, setting down their dishes with a flourish and bidding them a good night. The glare, however, spoke volumes (the first vibration in her pocket was enough for her to know this was not something she’d take lightly).

The pho was delicious; noodles perfectly cooked, beef succulent and juicy just the way it was supposed to be and the broth was the type to crave on a cold, November night. The claypot had just the right amount of spice to make her eyes water and the fresh seafood flavour (Rose went to the market crazy-early every morning to get the best of the best) still came through despite the strong taste. Rey almost choked as Kylo gulped down water in such an undignified way that was so unlike him and laughed until her stomach physically hurt at his bright red complexion and sweat-drenched skin. She did warn him, after all.

It was a perfect meal for an otherworldly perfect night. One she was glad to share with Kylo.

They both silently made an agreement to stay right-up to closing-time, no words exchanged to come
to this decision. Like they needed this strange companionship to linger a little longer like they needed oxygen to breathe. It only made everything else that much more confusing. But Rey couldn’t bring herself to care.

She was too wrapped up in those dark eyes of his to question anything at this moment in time.

“Before. What I said before…about preferring solitude and silence. About enjoying my birthday alone.” He began uneasily, his large body shifting in the seat. “That was a lie. I don’t prefer being alone.” He grit out through clenched teeth, much to her surprise. “I…I tell myself that because it’s easier to accept that way. But it isn’t the truth and I pride myself on honesty – especially with you.

“I tell myself that too.” She reluctantly admitted. “I spent years, imagining a whole different life to the one that was real. That my parents were coming back for me – that they were kind and wealthy and would shower me with love and affection when they returned. But that was nothing but a lie; a mere fantasy belonging to a naïve, little girl. I’m not so stupid now. I keep up a guard around others because it’s strange to see people invest time out of their lives to talk to me. I pushed Finn away because I can’t tell the difference between concern and spite.” She looked down at her lap, unable to meet his heavy gaze. “Solitude is a lie – there’s no such thing. Loneliness, for most, isn’t a choice; it’s a curse that I’ve dealt with my whole life. I know exactly what you mean because all I’ve ever known is isolation. And it fucking sucks, Kylo.”

There was a certain static that spiked through the air – one that had her meeting his sad eyes once more.

“You’re not alone.”

Her heart stopped. Her hand twitched a fraction away from his own. Her eyes widened with an annoyingly familiar feeling; hope.

“Neither are you.”

It felt natural to take his hand in hers, to brush a thumb over his knuckles. To feel the warmth of his palm against her own. It felt right for his large hand to engulf her own soft, small hand – a bridge of understanding between two lonely companions.

And for the first time in her adult life, Rey thought this hopeful feeling could actually lead to something else entirely.
Something to yearn for; something to \textit{fear}.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was inspired by many shenanigans that go down working at McDonalds (aka hell).

So the next update may take a little longer. I go back to school next week so, depending on the workload, the updates probably won't be weekly. I know where I'm going with this for the most of the chapter (this chapter was a complete spring-up but aw well). Cheers guys!
First, let me apologise for taking so damn long on this. Life has been quite hellish atm with exams and whatnot. Also, this chapter has been a grade-a bitch to write -- to the point where I'm really not happy with the result. But, alas, I feel like I've put it off too long and, after all the lovely kudos and comments and support I've received on this, you guys really deserve it.

Anywho, thank you all for the continuous motivation -- I might fix it up (if i can) later, maybe. Tbh, I think it's too cliche and there's way too much drama in this one but... aw well. Enjoy!

Also, a big shoutout to all those who have followed me on tumblr, sent me personal messages and asks about this fic! I wish I could send you PHYSICAL hugs and kisses :))
Cheers!

EDIT (1/04/2018): finally fixed to my liking. There's no need for a re-read, it's just an expanded interview with Phasma & Hux and more depth to Rey's inner monologuing.

CHAPTER FIVE

~ D E C E M B E R ~

P A R T    O  N    E

The Winds Are Changin’

As November came to a crashing halt, blessedly rolling into the final month of twenty-seventeen, a certain change to the air had become very apparent to Rey Niima – and it wasn’t just the cool temperature drop. From the moment after Kylo Ren walked her to the door, large hand pressing warmly against the small of her waist, receiving an abnormally long ‘birthday hug’ before departing, it’d quickly become clear that their strictly professional relationship had developed into something so much more; something so close to be called a friendship.

And as strange as that sounded, she was quickly warming to the idea of that. A friendship with Kylo Ren.

Following November 18th, December brought forth a string of daily texts, involving rants and playful banter, as well as the odd late-night calls when sleep seemed impossible to the pair of them. She’d complain about faulty engines and squeaky brakes and in return he’d recount a conversation
between his seventh-grade class, a tale that had her in tears of laughter. It wasn’t all sunshine and rainbows, however, when both delved deep into their troubled childhoods and the long term fears it brought. It was a hard conversation to have with anyone, but Kylo listened to every word she babbled and maybe, just maybe, even cared to listen. It made her feel…less like nothing; it was a wonderful feeling – just as wonderful when the early hours of the morning became too much and his soothing tone, hoarse from the night, would slowly ease her into sleep like a soft lullaby.

It was a nice change. One that heralded good things for the new year.

“Ohmigod, ohmigod!” Rose screamed, dark curls bouncing as she bobbed on her short legs at the redecorated sight of Kanata’s. “It’s so festive!”

But first came Christmas. The silly, unrealistic resolutions, wants and hopes would come later.

“Alright, Tico, calm down.” Finn flinched at her excited flailing fists, quickly taking her by the elbow to guide her dazed form into a booth draped in golden tinsel, a red and green hue present from the overbearing lights.

“It’s beautiful.” Poe agreed in awe, eyes flicking to every corner. Blinking lights filled the dim room, brought to life with a huge tree too-tall for the room – draped in glittering ornaments, custom-made baubles with god-awful photos of Maz Kanata’s favoured regulars (The group were delighted to see they’d made it on, despite the terrible photo choice) and needles drooping from the sheer weight of all the tinsel. And right at the top, where a golden star blinked, was the insufferable sight of Han’s smug face.

He’d be filthy if he knew – Rey would have to tell him.

“She’s done it again.” Finn muttered, shaking his head softly. “Maz is fucking nuts.”

The understatement of the year, really. The usual dimly-lit bar was completely transformed into a bright, Christmas-themed wonderland – mannequin Santas and reindeers lined at the windows, staff all wearing funny shirts, (Maz was literally dressed as an elf), and the stage-area littered with white-powder; an artificial snow that had the guitarist whinging to the hard-arsed woman herself. She only demanded they suck it up and start playing some cheesy Christmas tunes.

“I love cheap-Fridays.” Rose moaned, eyes still wide with excitement. “We have to get wings – we’re getting wings. It’s my first night off in forever and I’m having some hot, saucy, barbecue
wings.”

“With a Corona.” Finn agreed, nodding solemnly.

“Don’t forget to add the lime.” Rey added, sliding into the booth corner.

“I was hoping for a chicken schnitz’, to be perfectly honest—”

“We’re getting wings.”

“Fine.” Poe glared at Rose. “But you’re paying.”

She beamed at this, popping up from the chair and grabbing Poe from his leather jacket. “I’ll happily pay for my wings.” She dragged him and disappeared among the crowded bar.

Friday nights at Kanata’s were always a frantic affair – cheap meal deals, friendly service, great (depending on the band) live music and the general thrumming atmosphere and weirdness of it all continuously pulsing throughout the night. Because of this, Rose and Poe wouldn’t be back for a while, leaving Rey and Finn sitting in a slightly uncomfortable silence.

“Hi.” He spoke first, his voice a little too high and forced to come off as natural. Rey couldn’t help but smile.

“Hey.” She returned. “It’s been a while.”

It well and truly had. It seemed their ‘little’ tiff had affected the both of them a lot harder than previously thought. The two calls per week, agreed upon Finn’s moving announcement, had lasted but a week. The usual witty texts involving her daily events went to Kylo instead. And, perhaps worst of all, the regular tagging in funny Facebook and Instagram posts had halted to a complete stop – it was if the two had forgotten all about each other.

Rey hadn’t, though; what she did to Finn – how she did it to Finn still replayed heavily in her mind. And, dear God, she had missed him terribly.
“Too long.” Finn agreed, their eyes finally connecting across the table; she saw the hesitation in his eyes, the calculation in his mannerisms. “How’s things? You know, with the artist and all – and work. Everything, really… how’s everything?”

Her grin widened, and Finn’s hard eyes softened to their warm-tone brown. “Things are good. I mean, a lot better than last month. Han’s a pain, like usual, and Leia’s taken on some super-huge case so her brother comes for ‘take-away Tuesday’ instead.”

“Oh yeah? What’s he like?”

“A little sarcastic and gruff but it doesn’t compare to Han’s attitude. He’s a weird sort-of bloke but also really nice so I can’t complain.” She bit her lip warily. “Things are good with the artist, too. Just the usual pose and be paid thing, you know. Nothing new there.” She didn’t dare mention that an explicit image of her vagina was heavily featured in the month of November and quickly scrambled to change the subject. “And there’s also a slight chance I could be moving!”

“What?” If Finn didn’t look nervous before he sure did now. Rey hated how her words had him guilt-ridden in a mere second.

“Some lady’s got a room up for rent down in D’qar. I’m going for an interview tomorrow to check out the place and discuss all the details. Scope out the whole area, you know, as well as meeting her to see if she’s…well, not a complete loony – and before you say anything, I know it’s probably a lot pricier, but I’ll pick up some extra shifts at Pho Tico if I have to. It’s worth it; I’ll have a roommate and it’ll be a sure step-up than our tiny shit-box. Also, closer to the shop. Less of a walk.”

Finn took one glance at her wide, gummy smile and frowned. “I’m really, really sorry, Rey.”

“Don’t!” She said firmly. “That’s all in the past and we’re here to have a good time.”

“Rey—”

“ Nope. I won’t have any of it tonight; you’ve already apologised enough and, really, it should be me apologising. So shut up and start telling me all about your own life events.”
Finn blinked blankly and began to fiddle with his hands, drumming at the table and intertwining his fingers. He scratched at the back of his skull, itched at his clean shaven chin and rubbed at his nose. She’d come to realise them as nervous ticks over the years. Her smile wavered in the long pause.

“Oh, me?” He blurted out. “You know I don’t get up to much. I mean it’s mostly just work, snuggling up to BB on the couch, sleep and repeat.” He let out an awkward titter as he finished his statement. “Also, lots and lots of arguments with Poe over the furniture – I mean the rug on his floor is just garbage; when has a white rug ever been a good idea, right? Never is the answer, but you know that cuz’ you’re messier than me and—”

“You’re acting weird. Like you’re hiding something from me.” He gave her a stern look at this and she flushed at the sudden memory of their harsh argument. “Okay, let me rephrase – something you want to tell me but can’t because you’re…afraid of my reaction.”

“Wow.” He muttered. “You’re very good.”

He blanched at her words, eyes flicking across the live-band as his hand returned at the back of his head. “Wh- what do you mean? Nothing’s wrong, everything’s fine – you said so yourself.”

“You’re acting weird. Like you’re hiding something from me.” He gave her a stern look at this and she flushed at the sudden memory of their harsh argument. “Okay, let me rephrase – something you want to tell me but can’t because you’re…afraid of my reaction.”

“Wow.” He muttered. “You’re very good.”

She smirked even though her chest tightened at the possibilities. “Out with it, Trooper. We’re no good at hiding things – it’s explosive.”

He sighed, full lips pouting downwards. His eyes swirled with a great bout of mixed emotions.

“Come on, Finn. I can handle it – I mean, it can’t be worse than the whole moving thing, yeah?” He didn’t respond, eyes flicking anywhere but her. “Oh, Jesus. Fuck. What is it? If it’s something I need to know, wouldn’t it be better to tell me now instead of leaving it ‘till it’s—”

“I’m spending Christmas at Poe’s parents up in Yavin!”

The words came out in a tumble, loud and clear over the bustle of the bar. Rey could only stare at her best friend and blink – Finn at Poe’s parents for Christmas? What did that mean for her?
“We figured since, you know, we’ve moved in with each other and settled down, we should stay for a week. It’s more than an hour lunch when they’re passing through and I’ll finally be a part of the family, you know?” Finn cleared his throat and finally looked her in the eyes. “You can come, if you want – Poe wouldn’t mind, really, and I’m sure his parents would be happy with it too.”

A beat of silence passed. Terrible, agonizingly-slow silence that stretched before them as time ticked on.

“Don’t be stupid.” Rey finally bit out, a little too snappish with her tone. At his flinch, she took in a deep breath and continued on with a heavy chest. “I, um… I’ll be fine. This is your thing, Finn. You and Poe are getting really serious and you should feel like you’re a part of his family.”

“And you’re a part of mine.” He murmured. “You’re practically my sister so they should probably get to know you too—”

“Finn.” She began tersely. “It’s fine. Don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine by myself – hell, maybe I could look after BB for you guys? I mean, it’ll give me some company and BB does love snuggles. I’ll even let him sleep in my bed.”

“Are you sure—”

“Yes, yes. I’m absolutely positive. I’ll be fine – happy, even. Really, Finn.”

But even with the reassuring smile and the reaching hand to grasp at his own, her happy charade did nothing to quell the deeply repressed memories of a lonely childhood.

The holiday had never been a happy affair growing up – there were no exuberant dinners or any presents underneath a glimmering tree. The group homes were kind enough to hold a Secret Santa for the children and, of course, not all those she fostered with were horrible. But even when she felt included in the festivities there was always that ever-present fear of being moved again. Moved to a family who only cared about the money that came through from the government and would treat her unkindly, even during the “happy” holiday season (the three years with Plutt could attest to this). It was a lacklustre event; overhyped and stupid.

And then she grew up.
She met Finn and moved to Takodana, experiencing a whole other side to the holiday. Suddenly, Christmas had become the sweet cliché displayed in every single holiday movie. It was warm and fuzzy, like a hot tea on a cold morning; comfortable and cosy, like staying in bed on a rainy day. Even if the food wasn’t perfect or the presents weren’t brilliant and even if she drank a little too much to remember all of it, Christmas was overcooking pork to get the best crackling possible, Christmas was belting out Michael Bublé with Poe failing at harmonizing, Christmas was just… Christmas.

Only this year, it wouldn’t be Christmas – not truly. Not alone. Rey would be a small child, yet again, waking up to a silent, cold atmosphere.

“I’ll be fine, Finn.” Fine. How many times had she said that now? Four – five times? She’d lost count. “Honest.”

And for a while, she felt fine, with Rose and Poe returning to the table bearing beer and hot wings, matching grins and all. Rey could easily repress the news while alcohol slid down her throat and worked its way into her system – she could happily laugh as stories were passed around, always with a drink in hand, be it a Great Northern or a sugary vodka-whatever. And with the help of those special beverages, it didn’t take long to reach the level of not caring – to get up and bust out the silly dance moves with Rose, jumping up and down to the slapping bass of a Red Hot Chili Peppers cover while screaming out the lyrics. She was in her own world, having her own sort of fun; hips moving, legs stumbling and hair messily whipping at her face. Completely free of embarrassment and shame, eager to forget the words that had come straight from her best friend’s mouth; she was determined not to be selfish this time around.

She was determined to have a good time.

And she was having a good time.

For a whole two hours, she was bursting with joy – hugging Finn and Poe close to her small frame, blubbering out how much she loved them and Rose.

And then she wasn’t.

As the hours went by and Kanata’s increased in crowd, Rey began to accept drinks from strangers. A gin and tonic, a mojito, fucking rum – any sort of clashing liquid, paid for with drunken flirting and a subtle hand on the knee; a gesture so unlike her it was baffling. It was only all downhill from there, leading her outside to the pergola to smoke a fag with a stranger (she hated smoking), fumbling her steps in dangerous high-heels and abandoning her natural behaviour by being generally loud and obnoxious.
Rey had to rely on the bodies of others just to stand, her vision was off and her head was airy-light and thrumming like a distant buzz of a fly. She was one-hundred-percent drunk – *messy drunk*. The kind of drunk at that party who everyone watches and pities for the rough morning they’re about to experience. The kind of drunk where you don’t need to remember anything to know it was bad and would cause a lifelong pain of cringing.

She was absolutely *fucked*. Fucked to the point where everything came rushing up with one single look at Finn and Poe. Dancing, laughing, kissing . . . happy. Together and happy, living their best lives as one.

Her eyes burned hot at the sight, welling with fat tears that spilled over and dribbled down her cheeks. Her chest heaved with sobs – ugly, racking sobs that made breathing difficult; a constant hitch as she laboured with her lungs and cursed at her self to stop crying.

She was a silent crier. Soft snuffles and quiet tears.

Rey was *never* a hyperventilator.

But here she was. Gasping for air.

It was an honest wonder she made it to the bathroom, tripping and stumbling as she did so. Her vision blurred with tears but even then, she could see how awful she looked in the mirror, shrugging off the comforting questions the surrounding ladies asked.

Rey dragged herself into a cubical, falling onto the toilet and slumping with dead-weight. Her neck fell back, connecting with porcelain, while her legs went limp underneath.

She was still sobbing when she pulled up his contact. Still fighting for breath when the call connected, hiccupping out small hitching huffs.

“Rey?”

She didn’t think his voice would be so…powerful. She was sobbing hysterically in an instant “Rey – *what’s wrong*?”

She couldn’t form the words and only gurgled out unintelligible nonsense.
“Rey. I need you to calm down so I can hear, okay sweetheart?”

Sweetheart? Only Han called her that when he was worried. No one else.

“Rey.” He repeated. “Are you okay? Are you hurt?” He paused. “Did someone hurt you?” She’d never heard such a menacing tone.

“No.” She finally croaked out. “No, s’ leaving me. A-lways… leave.” She bit her lip. “He does…n’t want me. No one does…”

“Who’s he, Rey? I swear to fucking Christ, if they hurt you—”

“Finn. I’s Finn.” She sucked in a trill of breaths, slobbering as she did so, right before launching into an unintelligible explanation. Finn and her always spent Christmas together. Finn was spending Christmas in Yavin without her. Finn was leaving her forever – her first real, true friend. Disappearing, like everyone else in her life.

There was no way he understood a lick of it. Still, he persevered.

“Okay, sweetheart, I need you to tell me where you are. Can you do that for me?”

Her head slumped forward, chin smashing into her chest and she nearly lost her balance perched on the toilet. There was a continuous knocking on the door to her cubicle, gentle voices asking if she was okay and harsher one’s demanding she name the motherfucker who did this so they could fuck him up.

She groaned. “I... what?”

“Would you like me to pick you up?” He was fully awake now, voice hard and firm – grabbing the attention of her hazy brain.

“Yes.” She whimpered.
“Where are you? Do you remember the address—”

“Kanata’s.” She breathed out, ready to mumble an apology because she couldn’t remember the street name.

“Oh, sweetheart, just sit tight. I’ll be there soon; I promise.”

She couldn’t move – her whole body felt far too heavy for it. So she did exactly as he said, not moving an inch from her spot in the cubicle. Over time, the crying naturally fizzled to silent, leaking tears. Her eyes felt so raw and irritated that she couldn’t resist the urge to close them.

There was an occasional sniffle, a gaggle of high-pitched laughter from the women outside and the distant thumping music that pounded in her head.

Something pulled at her consciousness, hands occasionally buzzing around her slim phone. Messages, probably. She should’ve looked but it was so hard to lift her arm for some odd reason.

Rey’s stomach began to churn at all the mixed alcohol sitting in her empty stomach.

A cry of outrage jolted her up.

“Rey?” A deep voice echoed in the bathroom, amidst all the protests.

It was enough to drag herself to her feet, unlock the door and spot his tall form amongst the volatile gang of women. In an instant, he was at her side. He didn’t bother supporting her weight – the height difference would’ve made that much too difficult. Instead, he scooped her up in his arms bridal style and barged out of the restroom dressed only in a sweatshirt and sweatpants, barefoot in a pair of white socks.

“Oi!”

They were just short of leaving the pub, her head buried in his neck and her arms hanging uselessly as Finn spotted the pair with Poe coming in as back-up.
“The *fuck* do you think you’re doing?! Put her down!”

Kylo turned and regarded her friends for the first time, a sneer coming to his face as Finn continued.

“What did you do to her?” He growled out.

“What did *I* do to her?” He bit back scathingly. “This is your doing. She’s been sobbing in that bathroom, absolutely wasted, for *forty minutes* because of you. And you’ve only noticed now?”

“Listen buddy, I don’t know *who* you are, but I suggest you put her down—”

“Or what?” Kylo said calmly. “You’ll take her home, put her to bed and leave her all by herself a few weeks later. Great friend, you are.”

Finn’s eyes flashed with hurt. He masked it quickly for unabashed anger, taking a step forward with clenched fists.

“If you *think* we’ll let her leave with a stranger just so you can take advantage—”

“Take advantage?” Kylo growled, hands tightening around her body protectively. “Don’t assume the worst when it’s *me* she called for help, not you. The only thing *I’ll* be doing is making sure she doesn’t choke on her own vomit – I actually care for her, unlike some.” His eyes pierced the two of them before he turned on his heel, making out for the door.

Kylo turned just before they exited the building, quickly addressing the gaping couple.

“Oh. And have a *lovely* Christmas together.” He spat over his shoulder.

Her consciousness slipped the moment the fresh air hit her face, falling into the warm broad shoulder of Kylo Ren.
The last thing she could remember was Finn’s horrified expression.

~ * ~

“Wow.”

One word. One syllable. One breathy gasp escaping her throat, eyes taking in the sleek-modern building before her very eyes. She turned to take in the surrounding scenery, gazing up at the intricate details to the buildings around, eyes widening at the sight of green shrubbery; a stark contrast against the metropolitan city streets. Colourful flowers bloomed prettily, shades of pinks, yellows and blues brightening the dreary weather, lining the street-corners and road-islands alongside the trimmed hedges. People dressed in fine winter coats walked the pavement, mother’s in active gear pushing heavy prams as they worked in an early-morning walk.

It was all so stunningly gorgeous - a stark difference to her current residential area.

Truthfully, it was a wonder she could take in everything after the night she’d just endured. Rey couldn’t remember much, only fragments and clippings of memories; calling Kylo from a toilet cubicle, having him pick her up and a standoff between him and her best friend that ultimately had her waking up next to the sight of a crouched Kylo, desperately trying to avoid dangling his feet over the edge.

And if those short flashbacks didn’t physically hurt enough, the memory of Kylo holding back her tangled hair as she spilled her guts in the toilet bowl certainly did. He didn’t complain once, however, and only continued to rub soothing circles on her back. (And, of course, Finn’s terrified wide-eyed expression. She’d never forget that).

It was absolutely mortifying. Rey had never felt so embarrassed in her life. Any semblance of a future friendship with Kylo was off the cards from that night alone, surely.

Still. Here he was, next to her – watching her awe-struck eyes flick around the city with a soft smile.

“Wow.” She repeated softly taking in the fancy design to the café across the street. Rich neutral colours, blending like whipped cream; the pergola scattered with people for their Saturday morning breakfast.
“It’s French.” Her gaze shifted to her right, staring up at the soft-expression he wore so rarely. “Means imaginary.” He paused, eyes dropping to meet her own. “L’imaginaire.” He hummed aloud, the rumble of his throat causing heat to bloom upon the apples of her cheeks.

There was just something so exquisite about the language – especially when he hushed it so fluently, rough and deep toned.

“Looks expensive.” She muttered wistfully as the scent of crisp pastry wafted in the atmosphere. She hadn’t had a lick of food, wary of her unpredictable stomach and distant thudding head. She wouldn’t put Kylo through any more pain – but, god if that pastry didn’t smell heavenly.

“It’s a little…indulgent.” He muttered, gracing her with the lopsided close-mouthed smile that gave a certain light to his usual-dark eyes, a golden-fleck shining within them like warm honey. “But it’s worth it. Not only will you taste the finest cakes and pastries Takodana has to offer, but also receive fantastic customer service. The owners are lovely. In fact,” he breathed out, lips widening a fraction more. “They were my first buyer.”

“What?” Her brows drew in confusion, eyes questioning his own.

“My art.” He clarified softly. “They were my first real buyers.”

She wondered what he meant by that; the ‘real’ buyer part with the strange undertone of bitterness that lilted his words. He changed the subject before she could ask, however.

“Am I right to assume you’ve taken a liking to the neighbourhood?”

“Like I said.” She muttered. “It looks expensive.”

“But do you like it?”

“Yes.” She moaned. “Yes, of course I like it. It’s so much…cleaner.” He snorted at this as they reached the intercom. “But don’t you think it’s way above my price range?”
“No.” He confirmed quickly before he pressed his thumb down hard on one of the buzzers. “Actually, I talked to Phasma about your…situation.”

“My situation?” She frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means that you won’t necessarily be paying half.” He smiled at her, something he clearly intended to be reassuring, but the familiar warmth that usually spiked in her chest from the sight only seemed to heat her blood. “She’s very well off, I assure you. You’re only paying for the room, not the apartment.”

She gaped at him. “Are you serious?”

His goofy, crooked grin returned. “Pretty great, right?”

The wind picked up with a cool gush, the dead leaves scraping against the pavement as Kylo Ren’s expression twitched in the silence. His brow bone slowly lowered down to his lids at her prolonged pause.

“No!”

“Pardon me—”

“Hello?” A heavy-lilted accent, similar to her own, crackled over the speaker and cut through his surprise.

Kylo stuttered, eyes flicking between her and the intercom. “Uh, yeah – It’s Ren.”

“Oh, right. I forgot you were coming.” The woman deadpanned – Rey could hear the eye-roll and would’ve laughed if she wasn’t so pissed. Instead she stood stiffly, arms wrapped around her chest with a firm pursed lip. “I suppose you want to come up.”

“That’s usually the point of a roommate interview.”
“Oh, I’m interviewing you? I thought it was your girlfriend who was interested in the room?” They both froze at this, Kylo opening his mouth and holding down the button to reply. Nothing came out, his pouty lips opening and smacking together like an absent-minded goldfish.

When it became clear he had no response, she continued dryly. “Are you really just standing there gaping like an idiot? Good God, Ren, get a grip and hurry on up. I don’t have all damn day.”

A sudden buzz interrupted the thick tension and the heavy front door clicked. Kylo, red-faced and pouting, swung the door open with a flourish and nervously nodded at her to go ahead.

She did so without a single glance given in his direction.

“Rey.” He said softly, dropping his hand so the door slammed shut. He followed her quick pace to the opposite-end of the lobby-room, grimacing as she slammed her palm against the elevator button. “I… forgive me my confusion, but why exactly are you so opposed—”

“Why am I so opposed?” She drawled out slowly, staring ahead with a steel gaze while waiting for the doors to open. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe because you discussed my financial situation with a complete stranger—”

“Phasma’s not a stranger—”

“To you, maybe. She sure as hell is to me—”

“She’ll be your roommate. You’ll have to get used to discussing your ‘financial situation’ with her soon enough—”

“My roommate?” She spat bitterly, reeling at his near-childish tone and standing on the tips of her toes to hiss the words right into his stubborn face. “It’s not a done-deal, Kylo. She might never be my roommate.”

“So you’d prefer to live in that dumpster apartment-building of yours then? You’d choose that? Over this? For a fair price?”
Rey could only scowl and scoff at his seething words. He practically growled them out through clenched teeth, bending over to glare right into her hard-set eyes.

“No.” She replied honestly. “But I’d rather not have a roommate who pities me because I can barely afford rent. And I’d also rather our private conversations to stay exactly that – private!”

“Well, you didn’t exactly have to tell me that, did you?” Her eyes narrowed. “I didn’t ask about your rent situation. Or your friend drama with Flynn or – or your fucking horoscopes.”

Oh, the absolute nerve of him.

“Well, if you weren’t so keen on painting my vagina maybe I wouldn’t have felt the need to be distracted.” She snapped. “I blubber when I’m nervous. And it’s Finn.”

“You didn’t have to do the pose, Rey! I recall myself saying that several times.”

“I – I…” She fumbled for words, flush creeping up from her chest to her cheeks. “You’re the one who asked to know something about me that only I know. So, by me telling you something this secretive in confidence, that should give off the impression that it’s a conversation to only stay between the both of us.”

With a clenched jaw, he looked away.

“I was only trying to do you a favour.”

“Well, don’t.” She huffed, ignoring the spurge of guilt that came with the flash of hurt in his dark eyes. “I don’t need favours. I’m fully capable of looking after myself.”

“Really?” He grumbled. “I seem to remember something quite contradictory to that statement last night.”
“Just shut up, okay!” She yelled. “I’m already embarrassed enough as it is. There’s no need to fucking rub it in, with your perfectly adjusted adult life and expensive lifestyle! Just shut the fuck up!”

- 

“Fine.”

“Fine.”

A beat of silence passed. The seconds ticked by as they turned to face each-other, once more.

Their faces were inches apart, their bodies radiating a bubble of warmth. Her eyes wandered down to his pouty mouth as it opened to spill out more bitter nonsense. Only, he was interrupted by a hurried rumble of someone clearing their throat.

Both eyes snapped to the sound-source, the elevator doors suddenly spread open with a middle-aged couple standing at the archway. They looked mildly uncomfortable and amused at their loud display – Rey could only cringe at the thought of them hearing a sliver of the heated exchange.

“Good morning.” The man muttered with a small smile. “Mind if we pass?”

It took about three seconds for the pair to spring apart, wordlessly nodding at the strangers as they continued to grin in mirth. “Thank you.” The woman chimed as they strolled off together, matching stride and all while exiting the building.

“Rey—”

“Don’t.” She snapped, storming into the elevator leaving him to trail on sullenly behind like a scolded child.

The ride up to the eighth floor was a silent affair, filled with worried side-glances and clenched jaws, hands drawn tightly to sides. By the time the elevator doors re-opened, it felt like a whole year had passed.

Rey followed his tense-form to the door, stopping at apartment 8B; he raised a fist and rapped three
times, a *lot* harder than necessary; knuckles white from clenching them so tightly. She only quirked an eyebrow at his petulant attitude, a scowl pulling at her lips before the door was wrenched open. And, of course, even Kylo’s friends would be literal giants; tall, beautiful and *undiably* intimidating people stuck together, it seemed.

She was an actual Goddess. Her remarkable height could *never* be unappealing with her short yet stylish platinum-blonde pixie-cut, paired with round sapphire eyes, a dusting of freckles and a heart-shaped face. Her bust was small but *undoubtedly there*, unlike Rey’s own chest, and the hips sensually rounded to inspire anyone’s desire. Her eyes didn’t stay for long, however, instead moving to focus on the tall pasty man hovering behind Kylo’s colleague. And, although he wore an expression of smelling curdled milk, he too was tall, beautiful and *very* intimidating. Hair ablaze with orange and eyes a deep shade of green with a face like carved marble – he was very classically handsome, a stark difference to Kylo’s unconventional beauty.

“Trouble in paradise?” Phasma drawled out dryly with a sparkling gaze that flicked between the two, one cocked eyebrow and all (they could also all seemingly control each eyebrow separately).

She could only *silently* curse her lack-of-ability to hide emotion. But then again, Kylo seemed to have the same problem given how he *huffed* and pouted like an angsty teen.

“Why is *he* here?” Kylo seethed, eyes connecting dead-on with the fair ginger.

“Why are you here?” He returned bitterly in a nasal-like tone.

“Now, now.” Phasma said clearly. “This is *about* me and your… friend, not your petty arguments over art history, okay?” She turned and gave her a slight smile – a small, brief thing but a smile nonetheless. “Shall we begin with introductions?”

“Oh.” Rey jumped into action, quickly pushing down the irritated frustration to put forth a bubbly first impression. “I’m Rey.”

“Phasma.” The tall lady drawled out with a small, smug smile – she reached down to shake her outstretched hand with a firm grip. “The sour-looking red-head behind me is Armitage—”

“Call. Me. Hux.”
“Unfortunately, he’s my partner, so you’d have to put up with that a lot.” Phasma ignored his scathing tone. “I’d do as he says, but you look like a brave one. Piss him off, for all I care – I think it’s rather attractive.”

“Gross.” Kylo grimaced as Hux’s pale complexion bloomed red.

“Sorry Ren.” Phasma’s voice dripped with unapologetic sarcasm. “You’ll have to get used to it if she takes the room. I can’t have you staying over all the time with this attitude.”

Rey blinked. “Oh, um… we’re not together. I’m just—we’re just…”

“She’s the model for my art project, Phasma.”

A minute of silence passed awkwardly. Phasma only nodded, smirking at the two. Hux’s cool gaze flicked between them.

“I thought you said she had nice curves.”

Kylo radiated a wrath completely new to her and, despite her ongoing annoyance with his actions, she reached across to casually wrap her hand around his thick wrist. His breathing increased to a barely-controlled panting level, skin hot to touch.

“You’re kind of a dick, you know?” Rey announced airily, and with one smooth movement she was gripping Kylo’s hand – a squeeze of reassurance that she had this and he needed to trust her.

And she did. Rey was used to such comments – she’d gone to high-school, even if she had dropped out after the tenth grade; it was still enough to experience the scathing words of nasty, insecure girls and boys who thought they were funny when remarking upon someone else’s body – and, of course, it still hurt. But she had endure far worse than a petty comment about her curves (or lack-of-curves, it seemed).

After a quick beat of uncomfortable silence, with Phasma’s gaze still piercing at their entwined hands and Hux slowly but surely relaxing out of his stiff position with a smirk, he spoke.
“So I’ve been told.”

“Good.” Kylo finally said eerily calmly. “Now watch your fuckin’ tongue.”

“Well then.” Phasma smiled. “Shall we get on with the tour?”

And with that, they were invited inside. Coats were shucked off, as well as shoes, before Phasma showed her around the small yet spacious apartment. First there was the kitchen – not quite on the level of Kylo’s, but it was certainly a step-up from her tiny shoebox. She was glad to see the one bathroom actually held a bathtub and the loungeroom didn’t consist of makeshift furniture.

It was all so pristine with touches of bright colours here and there – straight out of an interior magazine with its beige colour scheme, slight pops of yellows and blues on the couch-pillows with a light-patterned rug. Abstract pieces of artwork hung from the walls, prints of Picasso (even Rey knew his work) beaming under the light shining through the glass windows. It was undeniably a gorgeous setting, even if was all a little too modern for her taste.

The empty room is what had her really excited, though. It was crazy-big; bigger than any room she’d ever had, with plain walls to decorate with photos and memories and maybe even art (it’d certainly impress Kylo). She could invest in a desk and shelves for her small book collection. Perhaps she’d buy a cheap rug from Ikea and make it real homely.

Rey smiled at the thought of living in such luxury, even if it wasn’t a mansion with a pool and a home tennis-court – this was more than she’d ever dared to dream of.

“How much?” She asked bluntly, after the tour had commenced. “How much is it to pay an equal half? That includes groceries and necessities too.”

Phasma blinked and looked to Kylo.

“It’s four-fifty a week, right Phasma?” Rey scoffed at this. That was only fifty more than her own apartment.

She’d kill him if he continued this charade up.
“Don’t bullshit just to please him – I want this to be fair. And if I can’t pay, then I can’t pay; I’ll find somewhere else and make do there.”

“It’s seven-fifty per-week.” Hux spoke truthfully and she had no doubts it had nothing to do with pleasing her, but rather pissing off Kylo instead. And if looks could kill, he’d be buried under the ground from the intensity of Kylo’s dark eyes. He only smirked at the attention, stroking his cat (Millicent, as she’d come to learn. Phasma ranted about the ‘little devil’ for two minutes) with a Dr. Evil grin. “Add an extra thirty-five to forty for groceries.”

“Okay.” She nodded, biting her lip.

With Han, she earned about nine-twenty a week. She could get a few shifts at Pho Tico which would round her up to one-thousand. And of course, there was the monthly income of $160 from Kylo himself. It was possible – it meant a whole lot less spending money and, even worse, a whole lot less saving money. But it was doable.

“Okay.” Rey breathed out once more. “I’m going to need to think about this. Plus, I’ll need to sort out my own lease and all that.”

“Of course.” Phasma nodded. “I never expected you to agree straight away.”

“Great.” Rey breathed out. “It’s a really great place. I bet someone will snatch it up before I even make a bloody decision.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll let them know you’re a top priority.”

Rey beamed at this, the dry words from the intimidating woman brightening her morning, if only slightly.

They began to discuss the neighbourhood after all the ‘business’ had been dealt with. Rey learned all about the loud neighbour next door and how the whole floor could hear them going at it like animals; she learned about the woman in 8C who had three cats, despite the strict ‘no pets’ rule in the building. Phasma told her about the best bars in the district, which café had the best coffee and which shops to avoid.

After an hour of non-stop talking, all the while ignoring the glaring pair of men who occasionally
snapped at each other, Rey profusely thanked her potential roommate for all the information and parted off with a much-improved vibe.

Kylo, however, was quite the opposite.

“Maybe you shouldn’t take the apartment. It’ll save you from seeing that fucking moron’s uptight face.” He slammed his hand against the ground floor, sneering out the words.

“Are you finished?” Rey sassed, an eyebrow raising at his sudden temper-tantrum.

“Did you not see what he was doing – intentionally going out of his way to be a complete fuckwit. And what he said about you—”

“Was harsh. Other than that, thought, I thought he was rather nice.” Rey lied – his sneer said it all, really. “He was honest about the price, unlike some people.”

“Really?” He asked. “We’re going there again?”

“You’re the one who went there right in front of them.”

He sighed heavily, hand draping down his face. “I’m sorry, okay.” He muttered. “I just wanted you to have a good deal because I know this is a struggle for you. I want you to have a good… a good run at life, Rey. I’m sorry if I… overstepped.”

“Thank you. For apologising. I’m just so used to making it on my own that it’s easy to mistake help for… coddling, or whatever.” Rey flushed and shuffled her feet. “Also, may I just say that I’m really sorry for everything that happened last night.” She blurted out. “That was… ridiculous and I never should’ve roped you into it.” Rey groaned aloud at this. “And thank you for, you know, staying with me – making sure I didn’t die in my sleep and, god, helping me vomit.”

He laughed at this, much to embarrassment.

“Anytime.”
The doors opened to the lobby and, once again, his hand returned the small of her back. She could *really* get used to the feeling.

“No, really. Thank you, Kylo.” She mumbled. “I think you might be my only friend right now, after everything that happened.”

She watched the tips of his ears flush, cheekbones shifting as his jaw clamped tight. “They’re not true friends for leaving you alone—”

“No. No, they have their own life and I need to accept that instead of failing at repressing it and having emotional meltdowns. I’m just – I’m not very good at hiding my emotions. For very long, anyways.” She sighed and pushed a tendril of hair behind her ear. “They deserve a Christmas alone together, despite my feelings on the matter.”

Kylo made short work of opening the door for her, pulling her into his side as they exited the building.

“I’d never leave you alone.”

*Oh.*

The sheer intensity of his voice had her lips parting in wonder, head tilting to meet his black gaze. For a moment, she’d forgot how to breathe. A cool gush of wind whipped at their blushing cheeks, coats billowing. With his arm slung around her waist, their bodies unnaturally close together, her heart began to pound like a beating drum against her ribcage.

“You should…you should spend Christmas with my family instead.” He said softly. “It’d make it more bearable – I’d *really* enjoy your company there, in fact. And my parents…well, they may not be too pleased with me but they’d *definitely* like you.”

“I couldn’t possibly intrude.”

“You wouldn’t. They’d be overjoyed to have you there, really.” He paused and looked away. “I would, too. Extremely so…” He muttered softly.
It sounded wonderful – to be surrounded by a family dinner. And for a moment, she considered saying yes.

But part of her knew better. Part of her knew Kylo Ren would disappear as soon as his little art project came to an end. Part of her knew if she showed up to the table and got to know his family, there was no going back – even if they weren’t the best of parents.

“I can’t.” The flash of disappointment was enough to send her gaze to the floor. “I don’t – I’m no good with social settings and get really nervous. Family dinners; well, you know my upbringing, so it should be of no surprise that I’m rubbish at it all. And despite what you say, it’s too intimate.”

She didn’t deserve it either, after last night. After treating her friends so horribly; sending a three-word text to say she was fine and nothing else to ease their worry.

“Okay.” He finally said. “But…if you change your mind, the offer still stands. There will be a plate at that table if you want, Rey.”

“Thank you.” Her hand moved up to grasp his fingers with her own, a warmth spreading down her arm at the contact. And the soft smile he granted her made it all the worthwhile.

“Now, it’s been a long morning and I’m feeling a little bit peckish.” He smirked, pinkie slowly twining around her own. “You’re not too hungover for a croissant? My treat.”

“Of course not.” She smiled back at him, gummy grin and all. “But I’m paying. Don’t even think about arguing on this one, Ren.”

“Oh, but it’s what I do best.”

Her light, airy laughter rang out like a bell in the morning, his own deep chuckles joining in before he started tugging her in the direction of L’imaginaire.

They crossed the busy road, pinkies still linked together as one.
First, let me thank my wonderful, amazing, Beta Kylohhh who went far beyond my expectations and edited all 5 previous chapters in such a short time! Truly, you're amazing and mean the world to me - especially when you point out my mistakes, haha! Seriously guys, go check out her tumblr! She has some amazing little drabbles on there that are worth a read and follow ;)

Secondly, let me spew out my love for all those sweet, sweet comments on the last chapter -- I was feeling a little bit down (post-exam results blues lol) with it but your continuous support brought me right back up! I can't thank you all enough for your kind words!

Anywho, enough rambling and enjoy reading! I think y'all might like this one a little extra ;)
Cheers

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER SIX

~ D E C E M B E R ~

PART TWO

~ T W O ~

‘Tis the Season

“If another wishy-washy song about some festive spirit bullshit comes on, give Leia my love.” Han paused. “And tell her no funeral.”

“I will gladly honour your last request.”

Han turned slowly in his seat, giving his old-time friend a long scathing look.

“Don’t even think about talking to my wife after I’m gone.”

If someone ever told Rey she’d laugh along with famous F1 driver, the one and only Lando
Calrissian, she’d quickly call them out on their insanity. And yet, here he was; dazzling grin in place, just like in those YouTube interviews, looking incredibly handsome sprawled out on that patchy beige couch in the corner of the break room (and to think she was becoming used to walking into work and stumbling upon the aging rogue – life was truly a dream, sometimes).

“You know I would never insult your memory like that, right?”

“Correction:” Luke began dryly beside him, eyes still glued to the paper. “Leia would never insult his memory. Give it up, Lan – she is and never will be interested in you.”

Lando opened his mouth to reply but paused as the twinkling song on the radio faded out into yet another bluesy-bells tune about sparkling lights and jolly times. His face spread into a smirk, glimmering eyes settling back on Han’s irritated face. “We’ll see about that.”

Her eyes flicked between the two, a slow smirk spreading across her face. “If I keep him away from Leia will you give me the Falcon?”

“No. Absolutely not!.” He grumbled, side-eyeing Luke as he got up and happily turned up the radio’s volume. “But, say if I were to perish,” she rolled her eyes at the sheer dramatic value of Han Solo’s words – perish? God, and he said the ‘Skywalkers’ were a bunch of theatre nerds. “You’d definitely be a contender for the Falcon. Though, saving myself from this garbage is not really worth it anymore.” He side-eyed Lando, peering over his glasses with a scowl.

Rey was about to make some quip about him turning the damn thing off, but Lando cut in before she could open her mouth.

“You almost sound worried there, Solo.”

Oh dear.

“I’m not worried! Leia would never stoop that low.”

A beat of silence passed.
“She did with you.”

There was a solid three-seconds of silence, the joke taking it’s time to settle in. Once it hit, however, Lando and Rey howled with laughter. Luke’s face slowly morphed into a smug and prideful expression as Han angrily cursed under his breath. When it became clear he wouldn’t reply and the laughter from the quick jab subsided, the three troublemakers shared a look before returning to their previous tasks; Rey to her ham and cheese toastie, Luke to his paper and Lando back to…being Lando.

“Han told me something funny the other day; somethin’ about you, Rey.” He paused with a small smile. “Said you’d gotten yourself a boyfriend – which, if I’m being quite honest, you’re too young for; twelve-year-olds should be out playing in the mud, not kissing some brooding artist who doesn’t know when to draw the line at texting.”

She immediately stopped chewing, swallowing a thick lump of bread and cheese down her constricting throat and coughed from the effort.

“Why do you-” She broke off to quench her hoarse throat with the glass of water beside her, coughing some more. “Why do you keep telling everyone he’s my boyfriend?” It came out in a sputter, almost unintelligible. She cleared her throat hastily before continuing. “He’s not my bloody boyfriend.”

“Not your boyfriend? So he just stares at you nude for a whole day – kid has got game, whoever he is.”

“Lando—”

“We barely even talk!” Rey lied, cutting through Han’s stern tone as her cheeks went red.

Her phone pinged the short beat of silence. Everyone stopped. Han looked up from his calculator and the pile of bills. Rey glanced to the vibrating device on the table. Lando and Luke watched on like it was a five-set, six-hour gram-slam tennis match.

In an instant, his arm shot out and plucked up the glittery device, her hand slapping down on the table seconds after. He looked down through his reading glasses, squinting as he took in the message while Rey could only suck and cradle her stinging hand to her chest.
“Message from K.R. – that’s him; that’s the kid!” He hushed out to the others before returning to the screen. “Pick you up at six-thirty tonight . . . Is that alright with you?” Han read out slowly, pausing to catch every word carefully. “I’ll bring you a decent coat . . . so you don’t . . . freeze.” Han’s eyebrows slowly rose into his hairline, eyes flicking up to meet her flushed face. “What’s tonight, Rey? Where’s he takin’ you? Some place fancy, I hope – you deserve that.”

She stood up, pounced over the table and quickly snatched back her phone from his hands. “It’s nothing.” She grunted out through clenched teeth, furiously tapping away at the keyboard on her phone to tell him she didn’t need a bloody coat; her coat was perfectly fine, thank you very much! “He’s just – we’re just doing our Christmas shopping together. Nothing but moral support for the crowds.”

“Christmas shopping.” Lando drawled out slowly. “On a Thursday night?”

“The shops are always open late on a Thursday! And Christmas is literally three days away – it makes sense to get it done now rather than battling the Christmas-eve horde.” She also had a session with Kylo that day, but they didn’t need to know that. “It’s a whole other realm!”

The three men could only glance at each other, bafflement clear on their matching scrunched-up expressions. Not one of them dared to comment on it, however.

“Are you sure that’s all you’re doing?”

Rey pursed her lips.

“Of course not, Luke.” Lando didn’t even try to hide the laughter in his tone. “He’s bringing her a coat – wants to keep her nice and warm for later.”

While the other two men continued to titter at their shared humour, Han only ignored it all with a confused brow and set his concerned frown on her.

“What about Finn?” Rey froze at his sudden soft tone. “You always go shopping together – every year, if I remember correctly; always try and outdo each other with the silliest gift.” Han let out an amused snort. “You didn’t shut up about that giant plastic ear for Poe last year. According to Leia, it didn’t work; he still doesn’t listen.”
She looked down at her toasted sandwich, appetite quickly disappearing at the mere mention of Finn.

“Finn’s up in Yavin. He’s, um . . . he’s visiting Poe’s parents for the holidays. They left yesterday.”

They never saw each other off. It was a simple short round of texts; one saying goodbye and the other promising a present when they returned. Since then it had been nothing but radio silence.

She tried not to think about it – the sudden loss of communication between the two was an awful feeling that left her dazed and miserable.

“Rey.” She squirmed. “You’re not spending Christmas by yourself, are you?”

What would happen if she said yes? Would he even really care?

She looked up, eyes widening at the familiar sight. For a split second, Rey thought she was gazing up into Kylo Ren’s eyes. They were so strikingly similar with Han’s dark orbs set so intently on her face, blazing hot in her direction as he waited for her to talk; *waited for a reaction.*

The crease to his forehead with his brows drawn tightly together, full-lips pulled down into a worried frown. The whole image was a reminder of that sweet, sweet night in Pho Tico; the night Kylo’s eyes never once left her face as they talked of loneliness. It wasn’t perfect, though -- It was a different shade of brown *and* a different shape of eye. But the similarities were so striking she ought to be creeped out.

“I should, um, get back to work.” She stuttered out quickly, jumping up from the chair and hurriedly plucking up the plate before her. “I really need to try and get this Camry finished before Christmas break.”

“Wha—Rey!” Han grumbled. “You haven’t finished your food!”

“I don’t... I’m not that hungry.” She dumped the plate on the counter beside the sink and turned to rush out of there as soon as she pocketed her phone. “Really, it’s fine.”

She didn’t let him get another word in after that, bolting back into the garage and putting in her earbuds to avoid any more speculation on Kylo and her (non-existent) love life. To escape the guilt that took over whenever *anyone* mentioned her best friend’s (ex-best friend. At least, that’s how it felt) name.
Rey threw herself into a frenzied work, determined to steer clear of the two humiliating conversations. Music exploded into her head while she inspected the loose gas pedal. It only took 10 minutes to adjust the bolts on the throttle cable; head under the hood of the car, raising the cable where it needed to be (not so much that it affected the throttle - just enough to tighten that loose centimeter) and essentially saving the owner a whole lot of frustration in peak-hour traffic.

Truthfully, it could’ve easily been fixed by anyone but, of course, Han was never one to refuse a quick, expensive buck (Rey would’ve outright refused and just taken the time to show them how easy it can be fixed). For this reason alone, she decided to check on a few other things; little, simple things that added so much.

Like topping up their water, checking the oil and brakes – basically giving them a ‘free’ service to avoid paying an extra sum. For the rest of the day, Rey worked on that shitty 2000-model Toyota Camry, making damn-well sure she was always busy, right up until ‘closing’ time. Although it was all to stay clear of Han and the rest of the boys, the day had been a productive one. And she was utterly exhausted from the effort.

“You’re not seriously thinking of walking?”

Rey froze in her haste to wrap a deep-burgundy scarf around her neck. Her back was rather sore, feet already cracked and aching, and the wind was howling in a fury.

“No.” Han didn’t let her answer. “Come on, Gummy, I’ll give you a lift home. You can have the passenger seat, if you like?”

Normally, she’d protest. But life had really caught up with Rey over the past few weeks and she didn’t exactly have the energy to object after so many sleepless nights. Besides, Han’s car was so bloody beautiful it would be a sin to decline.

“Fine.” She sighed out, successfully wrapping the scarf around her neck and trying not to read too much into the rare soft smile from Han.

They followed him out back after locking up, leading the group right to the sleek silver beauty that was Han’s 1976 Ford Falcon -- with a few modifications, of course. Anytime she laid eyes on the XA-XC coupe model, she’d always get that wondrous awe-struck feeling - like she couldn’t quite believe that a car like this existed. It was car built to be raced in the streets; a car to endorse illegal activity by the sheer thrill of it all.
For a moment, all her current dilemmas melted away. Just one look at the precious baby, with its pristine beige leather seats and clean-cut image (*no eating in the falcon!*, Han had screamed many-a-time), had her heart soaring and fingers eagerly gripping onto the passenger-door handle.

It was short-lived, though, with Lando instantly bursting into protest, claiming that he called shotgun that very morning and claiming that the *Falcon* was still his and would *always* be his, much to Han’s annoyance.

To say it was an interesting car-trip would be an understatement.

“Can we turn the radio on?”

“No.”

A sharp smack of flesh went up in the air, Han quickly batting away Luke’s wandering hand. “Do that again, and I’ll cut it off.”

They all sighed.

“So.” Han began slowly as they were stopped at a set of lights. “What did you say you were doing for Christmas again?”

“Smooth.” Luke commented under his breath as Rey stiffened in the seat, hands grabbing at her grease-stained jeans as Lando snickered.

“Han, please.” She whined. “I’d really rather not talk about it.”

“You spending it with your boyfriend?” Lando asked. “If I win this ham raffle down at Kanata’s, give me the address and we can all get to know each other over a sandwich.”

“I’m not spending Christmas with my boyfriend.” A slight beat of silence had her quickly adding, “And he’s not my boyfriend!”
“Whatever you say, button.” Rey tried not to grimace at the nickname; she really did.

“If it’s not with this KR, then what are you doing? You’re not spending it alone, are you kid? That’s… kind of tragic.”

“Han, I swear to--

“Okay, okay.” Han rushed out. “Listen, if that’s what you want – y’know, spending it alone – then I’ll accept that. But it doesn’t make me feel any easier about it; there’s just some days you should never spend alone.”

“For you, maybe, but not to me. I’m used to spending Christmas alone, even if the last few have been with company.”

“So was I.” Han said softly. “Growing up as an orphan in the fifties didn’t allow for many fun holiday times. And then I grew up and met these assholes, who forced me into spending it with them; and then Luke introduced me to Leia, who always insisted on creating a big affair out of it; setting the table up nice, playing those god-awful songs on repeat, getting a big tree and filling it with gifts and cooking a ridiculous feast that could feed a whole country.” He paused and snorted. “Although, I don’t know why; she’s a garbage cook. Luckily Ben ends up doing the most of it, if only to avoid socialising. But that seems to work out better if you ask me—”

“Who’s Ben?”

The silence that seemed to stretch in the car suddenly made her think she’d asked an insensitive question – that she was too nosey, trying put a face to a name that had never crossed his lips.

“Right.” Han said sadly. “I guess you wouldn’t know about him since, you know, I try to… you know?” His aimless stuttering trailed off, leaving her even more confused. Unease began to coil in her belly. And Han’s face -- truthfully, she’d never seen him more rattled. She was really starting to regret asking the question

“It’s better she doesn’t know – for your own sake, trust me.” Luke sighed out, turning to look at the buildings.

“Why?” She began bravely, “What’s so bad about him?”
Luke laughed at this. “What isn’t? He’s stubborn with a raging quick temper; treats us like we’re garbage and gets increasingly violent. You’d be sensible to stay away. And yet, *Leia* just can’t let it go.”

“He doesn’t – he’s not violent, Luke.” Han growled. “It was one time. And it was years ago. He’s past that little phase, and even if he wasn’t, how could we *ever* let go?”

“Who is Ben?” Rey asked once more, cutting off Luke’s sure-to-be biting retort. Han’s eyes glossed over as he turned to her once more, face bathed in a red hue from the bright traffic light as the sky steadily darkened.

“Ben’s my son.”

Her jaw went lose – Han and Leia? A kid? It didn’t make any sense – not once had their child been brought up. She’d been working with Han for almost three years now and…he never once mentioned his son.

He never once mentioned having a child. Her eyes pierced hard; how could any parent *not* mention their kid in three years?

*Your parents abandoned you,* the dark voice crooned inside, what makes him any different?

“Don’t give me that look, Rey. Please don’t… it’s difficult to explain. Ben is wild and unpredictable. He’s caused a lot of hurt in our family – especially for Leia. And, even though he’s overcome a lot of his… issues, there’s still a lot of hostility left from it all.” Han shook his head. “From both sides – I’ll admit, I’m not innocent when it comes to snapping at him. I can’t help it when he actively comes in looking for a battle.”

“He’s not a pleasant person, Rey. Which is a hard thing to admit for any family member, but it’s the truth. Just be wary.”

Luke’s eyes were a terrifying shade of green when she turned to meet his eyes, the car jolting to life once-more. It seemed he harboured a great distaste for his distant nephew. Everything about it was unsettling.
“Wary? I don’t understand.” Rey turned back to stare out the windshield. “Why are you telling me all this? I don’t know your son; I didn’t even know he existed until, like, a fucking minute ago!”

“Rey.” Han began quickly. “I’m sorry I never told you about my son. It’s just, well - it’s a touchy subject.” His knuckles tightened on the wheel, Han exhaling out a tired sigh. “After you rushed out on lunch, we had a little chat. And, well, I guess want you to know all this because I want you to come for Christmas dinner, Rey. We all do.”

“We need you to understand in case things go sour.” Luke added quietly. “And, when it comes to Ben, that can happen very quickly.”

She still didn’t understand – why wouldn’t Han mention him for three years? Was he truly that ashamed? And was Ben really that awful? She couldn’t imagine being a child of such a couple and treating them like garbage – that went against every fibre of her being.

But, then again, she was only getting one-side of the story. And she knew all about shitty parents…

“I know Leia would really love to have you there--”

“And me!” Lando interrupted. “We can belt out the songs just to annoy him.”

“And it wouldn’t be an issue. All you’d have to do is show up, Rey; have a good time with the Solo’s and friends.” Han paused. “Wouldn’t you prefer that to being alone?”

She would. Of course, that sounded like an absolute dream. A real, family Christmas dinner - nothing had sounded more joyous.

“Come on Rey. Just say yes.”

But she did turn down Kylo’s request. It would hardly be fair if she turned around and agreed to have dinner with Han’s family.

Only, she knew Han and Leia. Rey had no way of personally knowing Kylo’s parents and, truthfully, he hadn’t painted them in the best light.

Surely he would understand?
“Wouldn’t you like to see me crack on to Leia just to piss this one off?”

Her face scrunched up as she snorted, Lando’s smug grin sticking between the two front seats.

“Fuck off.” Han grumbled. “And put your damn seatbelt on—”

“Okay!” Rey announced loudly. “Okay, I’ll have Christmas dinner with you.”

A cheer went throughout the car. “Good. Because I’m not above dragging you and that would’ve got me a scolding from Leia.”

Rey laughed and her tight chest slowly loosened as the atmosphere settled back into an easy-going nature – maybe this wasn’t such a bad idea after all? It would be fun, with all the craziness around. This was a good thing.

Even if she had to put up with Han’s horrible son…

~ * ~

She was blushing. A flush of pink that spread from her cheeks down to her chest.

Rey racked her brain for excuses, blaming it on the new setting for Kylo’s next painting; lying on his lush rug, coffee-table moved to the side, right in-front of the crackling fireplace. It was just the radiating warmth, she thought, nothing more. But that was a terrible lie, even for her. And it was all because of his stupid, slightly-scratchy sweater.

His musky sweater, dwarfing her body in soft fabric – exposing her shoulder and, from her position on the floor, rising to show her bare thighs. It smelt of his natural scent and cologne. It kissed her skin, moulding to her braless chest and, oh god, irritated the fuck out of her ridiculously sensitive nipples. Anytime she moved, Rey would hiss at the relief that went throughout her entire body; she could only hope he didn’t hear her stifled gasps.
It wasn’t exactly how she envisioned spending Christmas Eve. It was a torturous experience and in no way was it a festive one. Never in her life had she thought of taking her nipples in-between her thumb and forefinger; never in her life had she desired to roughly pinch at them. But the way Kylo’s jumper draped over her areolas, the way he’d simply shrugged off his form-fitting sweater, undershirt slightly rising to give her a peek of something undeniably divine (he certainly worked out), handing it to cover her bare chest as she stripped . . . Rey had never blushed so much in her life.

“It’s too cold.” He’d offered as an explanation, like he hadn’t just done the most sensually-arousing thing Rey had ever seen.

He was starting to make a habit of dressing her up - first at the shopping square, where she’d been too cold to object as he draped his heavy-coat around her shoulders (‘if you insist on wearing that thing,’ he’d pointed to her grey peacoat like it was a vicious predator, ‘then take this. Wear it over your coat, if you must; just put it on before you give yourself hypothermia. Your lips are going blue.’), and now this; drowning in his oh-so-warm charcoal sweater. Both intimate actions had affected her greatly -- only, instead of wishing to hug him like she had at the square, Rey’s mind wandered into something more...vulgar (if only she could rip off that stupid, tight undershirt).

It wasn’t supposed to be like this. He was the one who should’ve been turned-on, with her naked all the bloody time; that’s how it went in the stories. Rey wasn’t supposed to have stiff nipples poking through his sweater, fully erect. Rey wasn’t supposed to have incredibly dirty thoughts of Kylo joining her on the rug, beside the fire - preferably naked (wouldn’t that be a Christmas treat). His easel didn’t make it any easier, either, facing off to the side. Those darkened glances thrown her way were quickly becoming too much.

She’d looked up to the painting above his mantel just to avoid it, after he’d claimed to be done with her face. It was more of a silent session today, unlike the last where she’d babbled for eight-hours straight. It’d been a silent affair while they shopped, too. Unfortunately for Rey, It only made her wicked thoughts that much louder.

But that strange, abstract painting, like always, was a welcome distraction. Her eyes flicked over the contrasting colours; red, black and white. They targeted in at the silhouette, swept over the striking slashes like the artist had physically tried to cut the canvas to pieces. It was an angry painting. The rage was there, splashed onto the canvas – it radiated like fire. And . . . and there was something quite off-putting——

“Is that a person?” her rushed question came bounding out as her eyes took in the silhouette once more.

“I’m sorry?”
She looked at him, then, quickly pointing at the gloomy artwork. “There. That thing in the middle – I’ve been trying to make it out for an hour now and . . . is it a person?”

“Ah.” He murmured in understanding, earning her curious gaze. “It isn’t quite a person – at least, I don’t see that way. It’s more of a…” He paused, head tilting in thought. “…more of a conscience, I suppose. A masked conscience.”

“Masked conscience…” Rey repeated softly, attention snapping back to the eerie painting. She stared long and deep, revealing a whole new sight. “It’s almost robot-like. Like his inner-conscience is controlled by something -- which is strange because, y’know, our conscience is what drives our actions. Good, bad and all that.”

When she turned back to face the easel, Kylo looked upon her with hungry eyes. “Exactly.” His hard and heady expression only seemed to increase, eyes gleaming as he continued. “Someone is controlling him; there’s no ability to decide his own actions. His conscience is a robotic-soldier following orders. There is no morality left.”

Her breathing hitched. The throbbing heat between her thighs was desperate for relief. She squirmed under his passionate gaze, like she was under a big bright spotlight, and quickly fumbled to change the subject.

“It’s very tragic.” She babbled out in a string of words. “A little too grim to hang in your living room, if you ask me. A masked conscious sounds terrifying, to be perfectly honest; a concept unlikely to process over a mug of tea—”

She cut herself off, flushing more, at the sound of his deep bark of laughter.

“Please tell me I didn’t just insult your painting?”

He knew so much about it. And it had that same portentous quality, matching the one painting he’d showed her in L’imaginaire. It would make sense if it were his work.

“No, not mine.” He smiled. “Only my grandfather’s.” She gasped and covered her face.
“No.” She moaned out. Somehow, that was worse. “I’m so, so sorry.”

“Don’t apologise – art, like music and film, is subjective. We all have different tastes.” Kylo relaxed in his stool, turning to address her head on. “And it is incredibly dark – an ominous piece of art that leaves the appraiser unsettled – can you relax back into position for me, please?”

She did as he asked, muttering a quick apology as she sunk back into the rug, watching as he returned to dipping the bristles into a thick paint, white bristles now a dusty shade of pink; his eyes flicked over at her once more before returning to the canvas, wrist gliding in action.

“It’s still beautiful.” She said after a time. “I mean, as unnerving as it is, there’s a real – I don’t know how to explain it exactly, but there’s just something there. A feeling or emotion.” he hung on to her every word throughout her rambled spiel. I’m not… well, you know I’m no artist. But this is something else. Like a Greek tragedy painted on a canvas.”

There was a prolonged pause before Kylo replied; nothing but the sound of the brush dancing across the canvas.

“In the late 1700’s, during the art period of romanticism, there was a particularly brilliant artist – Francisco Goya.” Kylo explained softly as he worked, Rey greedily taking in the way his lips moved as he spoke. “He was commissioned by a lot of royal families, often producing a bright and happy style at their request; pleasant paintings of joyful sceneries; peasants living in harmony, strong and abled just like the wealthy. They are, admittedly, stunning artworks.” He paused. Glanced her way. Returned to the painting. “But, later in his life, his work became more… depressing. An illness caused Goya to lose his hearing and, in his deafness, Francisco Goya began to paint the world only as he saw it.

“In the seclusion of his own home, he began murals of dark paintings, covering his bare walls – the Black Paintings. Grim images of poverty, illness and cannibalism. Traumatic experiences most can’t fathom. They are…awful to look at. And yet, many believe the series of works to be Goya’s best; many believe this to prove that pain breeds the best art.” Their eyes met in an intense stare. “My Grandfather was of that opinion.”

Pain breeds the best art.

It was a queasy thought, if true; one that had her mind wondering quickly.

Would the best art really be worth anything if it came from someone so deeply troubled?

“He painted that, right after the death of my grandmother.” Kylo continued to explain softly. “That beautiful artwork holding so much hurt in every stroke.”
Rey’s brow creased. “That seems so toxic.”

“It is.” Kylo agreed. “But, it gathered success. He actively sought out tragedy after that, according to my Uncle.”

“Why? What is success over love and happiness?”

“Some people can’t quite quench the obsession after a taste of triumph.” He shrugged. “He distanced himself away from his children as inspiration and, in the end, his unfavourable methods worked. It brought forth many more paintings, much like this one – it brought forth an unimaginable wealth to a man who’d struggled with money since his first breath. And what is happiness over wealth to a man who’d already lost so much?” Kylo’s eyes sought out the painting once more. “Still, many say that this is his best work – nothing was ever more painful than losing his muse.”

It sounded like a Shakespearean story – one that seemed to continue with Kylo, who held such affliction to his own parents; perhaps he held the same mindset. Perhaps it gave him reason to be so unforgiving with his own family.

“Many?” She questioned to rid herself of those dark assumptions. “Was your grandfather famous or something?”

Kylo gave her a sheepish smile. “I suppose, yeah. He was very outspoken with his style and his first mentor wrote all about his ‘methods’ in an autobiography – Benjamin Kenobi made sure the whole world knew all about Anakin Vader’s downfall and what caused it.”

Rey looked at the painting.

“How much is that worth?”

He suddenly looked embarrassed. “A six-digit number.” Her jaw dropped.

“You’re joking?” He shook his head. “And that’s the original?” He nodded. “How’d you get it – I mean, the only way anyone knows about this painting is if it got sold at some point, yeah?”
“Correct.” He murmured. “It was sold for fifty dollars to a greedy collector. And as the years passed, more and more greedy art collectors became interested, and suddenly the price had increased while the value quickly skyrocketed.” His face contorted into a menacing, disturbing grimace and, for a second, she imagined it to be a twisted face painted on the walls of Goya’s home, placed among the other Black Paintings. “My old mentor was the last to have it. And, as a gift, he offered the infamous Vader painting – it was the only reason why I agreed to work with him.”

For a moment, her breath left her in one final exhale. A fear settled deep in her chest, stomach dropping at the urge that rose up in her head.

“How do you think pain breeds the best art?” Rey asked quietly. “Do you believe pain breeds the best art?”

Rey’s heart pounded furiously against her rib cage at the stretching silence, awaiting his answer in an anxious state.

“For a time, yes. And, I admit, when I had so desperately craved to have the same success as my grandfather, I...” He paused and swallowed thickly. “It doesn’t matter what I once thought. I know it’s more complicated than that simplified belief. There’s many factors into what makes the best art -- and like any artform, it differentiates in each artist.” Her eyes went wide when his head snapped in her direction, eyes darkening to a potent black as they scanned her figure before him oh-so-slowly. “Sometimes, it’s simple; sometimes it comes down to finding those few things that just make everything seem... right.”

She froze in her spot, unsure of what to say or how to interpret his heady gaze set so intently on her body. Did Rey dare to believe that she was the cause of such a statement; that she was the subject of his best work? But those questions were so little compared to the strong desire to get up from the floor, sit on his lap and crush her lips to his.

Oh, how she longed to fist her hands through his soft hair and kiss him senseless – to be stained with his touch and marked with his tongue when he looked at her like she was ... more than just nothing.

How Rey Niima longed to just... be with Kylo Ren.

Maker help her, she wanted him – she’d never wanted anything more; it was such a strong desire that, for a moment, it had surpassed the dream of reuniting with her distant parents.

She was gone. Lost in a dream. Utterly submissive to her feelings for the man.
She didn’t just want to fuck him to forget herself, like Finn had so politely pointed out as her ‘thing’. She wanted him – every single part of him that listened and cared; to return the favour of listening and caring. Rey dreamed of waking up to him, to see his face first thing in the morning, a daring domestic hope that had her aching all over.

“Rey?”

One look into those soft eyes was all it took for her heart to swell with an unfamiliar emotion.

A daunting feeling that quickly had her fisting the soft rug beneath her. A realisation that had her cheeks heating up, one more time.

She fancied the everloving fuck out of Kylo fucking Ren. And nothing had seemed more terrifying than admitting that little fact to herself.

~ * ~

“You’re very quiet.”

She stiffened at his observation. After their little painting talk, she’d shut her mouth and didn’t talk until he’d announced that he was done. ‘

Truthfully, she was too wrapped up in her frantic head to speak. She fancied him… she fancied Kylo Ren.

She should’ve just listened to Finn…

“Is it about tomorrow?” He asked quietly. “You know the offer still stands, right?”

Rey blushed and looked away to hide her guilt-ridden face.

“Actually, um… my boss asked me if I’d like to come over for dinner, earlier in the week.” She paused and could feel his eyes on the back of head. “I said yes.”

“Oh, so you’ll have dinner with them but not me?”
“Please don’t be angry; I know them all, so it won’t be an uncomfortable setting.” She rushed out. “And don’t think it was because of you; I don’t know your family and, well, with what you’ve told me I’m not exactly sure how nice they would be.”

“Rey.” He finally spoke, voice a soft hum - a tone that quickly settled her anxiety. “I’m not mad at you. It was just a joke. Actually, I’m quite relieved to hear you won’t be alone tomorrow.” Kylo breathed out a sigh. “Also, it explains why you were acting so...odd Thursday night. I thought you still might have been angry about the whole apartment thing.”

“Oh.” She murmured, cheeks pink as Kylo turned right onto her street and parked at the curb beside her building. “No. I don’t think I could ever stay mad at you for so long.”

His smile was blindingly beautiful, a nervous hand running though his thick hair before resting back in his lap.“Have you, um, thought about Phasma yet?”

“I have.” He nodded and patiently waited for her to continue. “I think I’ll do it; it’s really quite scary, because I don’t know her much. But the place is gorgeous. And, even if I have to work more at Pho Tico to earn some spending money, it’ll be worth it.”

“I could increase your hourly rate if you like—”

“I will actually slap you.”

He laughed, holding his hands up in surrender. “Alright, alright; easy.” His eyes suddenly widened as she moved to get out of the car, hand jolting out to catch her wrist. “Uh, before you go – I actually have something for you.”

She eased back into the seat. “Like a gift?” He nodded. “Kylo.” She moaned. “You shouldn’t have got me a gift – or, at the very least, you should’ve told me so I could return the favour—”

“Open the glovebox, Rey.”

With a huff, she did as he commanded, eyes instantly narrowing in at the rectangular object wrapped up in reindeer paper. She was slow at grabbing it, turning it in her hands as if she could work it out
just with her blind touch.

“It’s a book!”

He rolled his eyes. “Open it and see then.”

Rey grinned wickedly, eyes flashing with a manic glint as she tore into the paper like a predator tore into its prey. The first thing she saw was pink; a pink cover with a pink flower on the front. If she looked closer, the flower almost looked like—”

“Loving your Lady Bits.” Rey read aloud, head snapping back to scowl at him. She flipped the thin book over. “50 healthy tips that’ll help you appreciate your special flower – you are such an arse.”

She backhanded his shoulder with the cover as he laughed. “What?” He said through his mirth. “It’s educational.”

Rey only raised a brow, studying the cover. With a determined huff, she opened the book to a random page and began to read the excerpt.

“One of the most important steps of learning to appreciate your vagina is to embrace pleasure – to learn the ins and outs, the dos and don’ts and the yes’ and nos’ with your own hand. Masturbation is the key to unlocking your shame and letting it all out; overcoming this will help overcome your initial embarrassment about your lady bits.” She took in his flushed cheeks. “Yes,” She added dryly. “Very educational – I’ll get on that right away.”

It was just a joke. But the way his eyes darkened sent a shiver down her spine. The way he was looking at her…

“Thank you for the gift. Even if it is a little sexist; you know, because you’re a male, giving me, a woman, an educational book on ‘knowing her ladybits’”

It was getting late and the car was still running. He hadn’t looked away.

“I thought it was funny.”
Rey sucked in a breath, clamping her thighs tightly together.

“Y’know, I was planning to make some biscuits for tomorrow.”

“Really?” He leaned in closer.

“Yeah. I guess I’ll feel bad if I don’t bring anything. But I’m not very good at it.”

“Right.”

His eyes flicked down to her bottom lip held roughly by her top teeth.

“Would you like to come up and help?”

The thrum of the car was cut-off in an instant.

Chapter End Notes

If you're interested in a very well put-together (follow him on youtube for great film, music and art vid essays! It's worth it) video on Francisco Goya's black paintings, go check out Nerdwriter1's video on the artist himself here.

Okay, a quick note here: the next update may take a little while as I am focusing on my Reylo Week project, which will hopefully be finished by the time it comes around but my head just won't quit adding lol. Anyway, be on the lookout for that when it comes later in the month!

I do, however, go on break for 2 weeks and will hopefully have a lot of free time. I also feel horrible for leaving you with that cliffhanger so I may or may not spend a few days on the next chapter -- you guys honestly deserve it! Only one more to go for December and then we'll finally be in the new-year! Get. Pumped! Cheers!
Okay, wow. The number of comments from the last chapter was CRAZY. Like, holy hell, the support this story has gathered is overwhelming and I can't thank you enough. I haven't replied to all of them yet, but hopefully, by the time the notification pings for the update, you'll have a response to go with it <3

First things first, let us all bask in the glory of ReyloCalligraphy's talent with this amazing, stunning, oh so bloody beautiful calligraphy piece she did for OPS. Go check it out and, if you love amazing Reylo content, give her a cheek follow -- she's such a big supporter of all Reylo content and constantly promotes others in the Reylo fam.
CHECK. HER. OUT!

Secondly, I have to give a big shout-out to my No.1, OG girl -- FangirlFiona! I don't know if she's reading this, since she's been a big supporter of my Gendrya fics, but the comment on STTH the other week made me all teary and, god, the fact that she supports my Reylo fics as well means the world to me! I am working on that STTH update, girl! Believe me, I am <3

And lastly, thank you to my lovely, amazing beta for always saving me with her fantastic edits. Kylohhh is also an amazing writer within the community, so give her a follow on tumblr and check out her fic, To a Degree.

On a quick note, I have to mention that, unfortunately, the upcoming dinner scene won't feature in this chapter. The mood shift was just too much and threw off the whole chapter. However, I have a feeling you'll still like the baking scene ;)

Cheers and enjoy the read X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER SEVEN

~ D E C E M B E R ~

P A R T T H R E E

To be Jolly

For a moment, Rey only felt pure bliss – he wanted to spend more time with her. It was a concept she couldn’t comprehend, her mind in a joyous dazed state as he huddled close next to her figure, at her side with each measured step across the road; a constant warmth behind her as she readily unlocked the building’s heavy door.

And then she reached her actual apartment door.
Of course, by now, Rey really shouldn’t have had any room left for embarrassment – the man had studied her body for hours on end, carried her out of a bar like a child, held back her hair while she spewed up her guts and knew all about the insecurities that plagued her conscience. Not to mention, he’d already seen her apartment. But she was drunk, at that time, and hungover the next morning – clearly, she was the messier of the two, so what did it matter if he saw her laundry piled high in a basket, set on the small two-seater couch in the living room, when he was too busy being weighed down by her boneless body? What did it matter if he noticed the dirty dishes that lay in the sink when he was preoccupied with the sound of her retching?

It only took her a few minutes after unlocking her door to realise that, for Kylo, it really didn’t matter. Despite her worries, he didn’t seem to care, nor did he make a single comment. Well, not at first, anyways…

“Rey.” He said impassively, a straight-face betraying his true feelings. His voice was slightly clouded; muffled from the chunk of biscuit in his mouth. Very slowly, with wide eyes, she watched him chew twice more – two incredibly loud crunches that quickly fired up the nerves deep within her belly.

“How is it?” She asked timidly, wringing her hands together.

“Rey.” He repeated once more, a thick swallow following shortly after. “I just…I can’t lie to you. I’m really sorry, but this is just—this is garbage.”

Her jaw dropped as he tossed the half-eaten choc-chip biscuit back on the counter.

“It’s ridiculously hard – like, break your tooth hard – and, to tell you the truth, it’s quite tasteless, too. I don’t really understand—”

“It’s your fault!” She exclaimed. “If you’d just bloody helped, like I asked—”

“Well, I was under the impression we were baking here, Rey.” He snarked. “And and pre-mixed, packeted choc chip powder is not baking. Most call that cheating.”

“Well, some of us aren’t brilliant at everything – nor do we have irrationally high morals that prevent us from making edible biscuits.”
He huffed out a laugh, leaning back into the counter, a small smile quirking his pouty lips upwards. “Why does it matter, Rey? Did they specifically ask you to bring something?” She shook her head with pursed lips, trying not to let her mind wander that the black material stretched across his broad chest had kissed the skin of her torso only hours ago. “So, who cares – and trust me when I say they’d be eternally grateful to not receive these.”

She scoffed. “God, you are such an arse.” With a determined glint of fierceness in her glare, Rey plucked up the same biscuit he’d tossed away only moments ago. “You’re probably just being a snobbish wanker, like usual.”

Her gaze never left his own as she proudly placed the biscuit between her teeth…

…before promptly spitting it out into her hand. “Gosh, this is rubbish.” Much to her annoyance, Kylo’s usually dignified expression morphed into a whole other sight – his face, scrunching in on itself; mouth wide as he let out a booming outburst of laughter that were so unlike his little huffs and puffs of amused chuckles. “This is your fault. If you’d only helped!”

He only laughed harder, hunching in on his large frame. “I just…” A deep breath followed by a trail of uncontrollable barks of laughter. “I don’t understand how you can just … how do you ruin premixed cookies?”

With a scowl, she advanced – right hand held high, wet with crumbs that still clung to her hand. He caught her wrist with ease, a smirk playing on his lips as he successfully dragged her to the sink and ran the tap. “You’re worse than my seventh-graders, you know that?”

She sucked in a breath, with his head bent so close to hers as he held her hand under a tap – safely away from the shiny locks atop his head. His cheeks were a rosy red from all that laughing, eyes a warm brown that sparkled with mirth.

“I thought it was a mature response.”

He hummed, deep from his chest and crooked his neck to the side. “Ah. It’s a shame I was too quick, then.” She pouted at this, an action that had his eyes drawn to her lips, taking in the slight puffed-out movement.

Suddenly, he was stepping back – finally letting go, leaving her to quickly dry her hand against the back of her jeans.
“Why are you so set on bringing something for this dinner if it’s not asked of you?”

“Because it’s the right thing to do.” She mumbled. “I mean, Christmas is a really intimate family celebration and they’ve invited me despite that. And that means a lot to me – they mean a lot to me. And if this is one way I can show my gratitude, then I’d really like to show it. Even if it is a pile of rubbish…”

Kylo shifted from foot to foot after she finished.

“Fuck,” he groaned out, before muttering some more unintelligible words to himself as he strode to the slim pantry in the corner of her too-small kitchen.

“What are you doing?” She perked up, watching him swiftly shuffle through her pantry.

“Helping you out, hopefully – flour, cocoa, sugar … sugar. Ah! – Please tell me you have eggs?”

“Yes…”

“And milk and butter?”

“Um, the milk may or may not be on the cusp of expiring—”

“It’ll do.” He nodded curtly, bringing over an array of cooking-basics. “Do you have a cake-tin?”

“Yes.” She stuttered out, brows drawn together as Kylo spread the materials across her bench before striding to her fridge, yanking open the door and quickly scanning for the butter and milk.

He squinted at the label before smiling. “We’re good.”

“Good for what, exactly?”

“The best chocolate mud cake recipe known to man.” He smiled down at her. “Well, known to my family – it’s a secret, I’m afraid.”
“Why are you showing me then?”

“I think I can trust you. Also, do you mind if I use that block of chocolate? It’s not the usual amount but it’ll add to the whole flavour.” He smirked at her nod, one large arm grabbing out the item from his standing position (she really needed a bigger kitchen). “I was being a snobby wanker, as you put it, and this is the only way I can think of making it up to you. I can assure it’ll impress – they’ll be the ones showing their gratitude.”

“You’re talking a big game here, Kylo.” She teased from her position on her knees, digging for another mixing bowl and a cake-tin in the counter doors. “You better not disappoint.”

She craned her neck to look behind her shoulder, eyebrow-raising as he very quickly flicked his eyes away from her backside to her face – so he can check me out fully clothed but not naked, she thought with heated cheeks.

“It’ll only disappoint if I let you do all the work, clearly.” She gaped at his sheepish smile. “Was that too harsh or just too soon?”

“Both!”

“Never you mind,” Kylo cooed. “I’ll let you stir the batter.”

With an exasperated huff, she returned to the counter and gave him quite the heavy stare. “Remind me why I invited you up here?”

He breathed out a small chuckle, rolling up the sleeves of that lovely black sweater and – oh god, were those seriously his forearms?

“Sorry, sorry,” He didn’t sound it. “I’ll stop now. Perhaps we should order some take-out; we might be here for a while. My treat.”

She smiled. “We can halve it. Though, I won’t compromise on pizza.”

“Ah, let me guess.” He smirked, eyes flicking to hers briefly before pouring a heap of flour into the
plastic bowl. “You’re a pineapple type of girl.”

“I can’t afford to be fussy.” She stated simply. “Though, I bet your opinion differs.”

“Not terribly.” He shrugged, giving the bowl a shuffle between his large hands to even out the flour. “It’s not horrible on pizza, to be perfectly honest – but I’ve always found the ingredient to belong in more… sensual dishes.” Her eyes widened. “It is, after all, believed to enhance the flavour of—well, it’s an aphrodisiac for many to put it simply. Is that what young women, such as yourself, find so appealing in a *Sex on the Beach*?”

Rey couldn’t contain the eye-roll and determinedly ignored the heat blooming in her cheeks. “I’m pretty sure there’s no pineapple in that particular cocktail.”

“Yes, well, it’s some sort of tropical fruit, no? With a whole lot of sugar to rot your teeth.”

“What if I said I was more of a beer girl? Not some sugary-sweet syrup drink girl – though, obviously, I do *enjoy* one or two on occasion.”

“Then I’d suggest you crack open that carton of *Coronas* in the fridge.”

Rey beamed at this, hopping off the stool while she let the site for *Dominos* load up on her phone. In no time at all, she was back on the stool after passing him a bottle, currently admiring his long neck; tilted back, adam’s-apple bobbing with each sip of beer.

“Okay, so we’re good for *Hawaiian* and *Meatlovers*, yeah?”

Kylo hummed as he swiftly cracked an egg, one-handed with no shells falling into the mix, “Sounds perfect.” She quickly put through the order as he cracked one more egg into the mix, pushing it in her direction. “Mix that in and I’ll start on the chocolate.”

After a few directions for pots and pans, Kylo set up a saucepan on the stovetop and began to work on melting the chocolate, adding the cocoa, butter and sugar. They steadily worked at their respective tasks, Rey’s arm getting a workout from stirring – *bloody Finn for taking the beater.*

It was still so odd to see Kylo cramped in her kitchen, eyes set so intently on his progress. The whole look of him, dressed head to toe in black, that ridiculously frustrating sweater – it was a view she’d
love to get used to. In a perfect world, he would be here every night; cooking exuberant dishes for her to try, a gesture that would make her whole heart melt.

But that was wishful thinking on her part. And for now, this was just enough to sate those horrible, giddy feelings that had begun to bloom in her chest.

It wasn’t long before Kylo had successfully combined the ingredients in her saucepan, a thick chocolatey mix joining her flour and egg mix. She happily handed over the stirring duties, admiring the way his muscles tensed as he whisked the bowl at a frenzied pace. He leaned over the counter, one giant hand clutching the plastic bowl and the other gripping the wooden spoon. Over and over, he methodically folded the thick batter, his eyes cast downward to focus on his task.

For a moment, Rey wished their positions were switched; if only she were the artist and had an excuse to stare at him all day, with his hair falling in thick waves around his face, cheeks flushed from exertion. She couldn’t look away, even as he started to pour the batter into the cake-tin, scraping out the leftovers with the wooden spoon and levelling it into a flat, smooth surface.

“Here.” He thrust the spoon in her direction. “What do you think? Am I all talk?”

Rey took the spoon with hesitant fingers, a tentative taste following after she very slowly brought the object to her lips. Two seconds in and she was humming around the wood, and the inexperienced child within her came out to play, quickly licking it clean with vigour. She must’ve looked absolutely wild; a wanton woman with no real manners. He should’ve been disgusted – a scowl should’ve been prominent on his handsome features. But when she finally looked up after finishing her treat, all she could do was meet his blackened gaze. His eyes were positively ravenous.

She quickly opened her mouth to apologise, stuttering on the ‘I’–

“You have chocolate here.” He mumbled, an accompanying gesture to his own mouth.

“Oh,” she whispered, cheeks flaring as she roughly wiped her hand over her lips. “Is it gone?”

“Not—” Kylo cleared his throat. “Not quite. May I?” he nodded to his own hand.

After her confirmation, she watched with wide eyes as he licked the pad of his thumb; with his long arms, it would’ve been easy to just lean over and reach for her face, but still, he walked around to where she sat. Just when she thought she was used to his insanely tall figure, he leaned down to level their faces, and suddenly Rey began to marvel at his height once again.
His thumb was hovering over her lips, softly brushing at the corner of her mouth with an unreadable look to his eyes. So gentle and warm. So goddamn arousing. She couldn’t be helped – Rey was touch-starved and this fleeting moment of theirs was enough to force her body upwards, uncontrollably arching into unfamiliar territory. *More*, her heart pleaded and begged, *I need more.*

Kylo’s whole body came to a complete stop, freezing as if someone had hit the pause button on *everything* except Rey. But he was blinking and breathing and, *Christ*, he was toying with those pink, perfect lips.

At this point, anyone would think he was *caressing* her cheek if they chanced a look at the pair. An indulging couple, treating themselves to some intimate gestures of affection. It didn’t help that he’d started moving again, gravitating closer as if they were magnets; hand moving to fully cup her cheek, thumb grazing gentle patterns onto her soft skin; bending his head ever-so-slightly, heady gaze unwavering.

Another step closer. Another arm on her skin, lightly gripping onto her shoulder. This was it.

He was *going* to kiss her – on the exact day she’d come to terms with her feelings, too; what were the chances? Only, despite her inner-commision (the mortifying realisation that, *yes*, she really did fancy the pants off Kylo Ren… *quite literally*), Rey had thought about this *long* before those particular feelings had developed. She’d thought about this since their first meeting; how could she not with such gorgeous lips? With such pretty eyes?

Such *pretty* fucking eyes that had now fluttered to a close, successfully stealing away her breath.

She could only follow along, raising her arms – ready and poised to link around his neck when he *finally, finally, finally* kissed her.

*Please*, she almost begged inside like a desperate, attention-starved little girl (Rey supposed she had *always* been that little girl), *please, please, please.*

**BZZZZ BZZZZ.**

The intercom buzzed.

The *fucking* intercom buzzed.

And Kylo Ren snapped back like an invisible force had physically pushed him away.

“The pizza.” Rey muttered, eyes set intently on her feet. “That, um, must be the pizza—”
“Yeah.” He breathed out. “That was really quite fast—”

“Really quick—”

“So quick.” He cleared his throat. “I’ll, uh, put this in the oven if you go deal—”

“With the pizza. Yes.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

They both parted ways with a furious blush.

~ * ~

Dinner was a quiet affair, with them sitting as far away as possible on her small, two-seater couch. They ate silently, regularly pulled at their beers and watched on as Kevin McCallister battled at being home alone for the holidays. Too fucking real, she thought with another side-glance at Kylo.

When she’d joked about that silly gift, he didn’t freeze up like an inexperienced boy. And when he’d studied her body relentlessly, he’d handled it calmly, respectfully and professionally; like it was the most natural thing in the world. But the second they almost kiss—

Unless… unless he hadn’t intended to kiss her.

Oh god, she thought in horror.

Had she conjured it all up in her head? Was it just another one of her silly fantasies that would never come true? Fuck.

“I hate this movie.”
The growl to his tone broke through her frantic mind, earning a curious look.

“It’s – the adults in this are just… It hits a little too close.” He shook his head. “They’re so ignorant about everything.”

Rey smiled at his short outburst, grateful for the distraction. “Let me guess: you’ve been left home alone before and had to fend off a bunch of bad blokes out to get you?”

He snorted, “Obviously not. But I was once left in a grocery store when I was six. I mean, not quite ‘left’, but I wandered away and got lost amongst the aisles.” Kylo shook his head. “I hid for most of it, under one of the shelves – my father was shouting my name like a deranged psychopath and, well, that was rather humiliating for me.” She giggled. “That’s a very traumatic memory for me, Rey.” She silently giggled. “I even cried.”

“I can’t imagine you crying.” It was true. He was a very emotionally-driven person, no doubt – but tears? That seemed impossible for someone so strong and tall and impossibly good-looking.

“Really?” He hummed. “Well, I’d appreciate if you didn’t tell anyone – especially Hux or Phasma, since you’ll be seeing them around a lot now – but I’m actually a big secret crier.” Rey truly didn’t know if he was being sarcastic or not.

“Oh, right. The whole tortured artist thing? Pain creates the best art – literal tears used as watercolours—”

He barked out a laugh. “I don’t use watercolour. And I already said I didn’t believe in that. I’m not my grandfather.”

“Yes, but you wanted to be.”

He fell quiet.

“You’re very observant. And maddeningly good at reading people.”
“Really?” She asked, scrunching her nose at the thought. “Truthfully, I feel like I don’t even come close to understanding you.”

He fiddled with the neck of his beer. “I feel as if you understand me better than anyone.” He paused. “Because you listen, I suppose. You listen to me prattle on about art history, you listen to me rant about my dysfunctional family and, well, you just generally listen. And I guess, after feeling so ignored, so… _alone_ for years and years, it’s nice to have someone that truly hears what I’m saying. Even if it is nonsense – even if you don’t understand me at all.”

Kylo shifted on the couch, turning to face her and shuffling a fraction closer. “You see, I _want_ to tell you all about my grandmother’s secret recipes – I want to lend you the whole book because, well, it _means_ a lot to me; just as much as that grim painting, hanging above the mantel in my living room.” He shakes his head. “Oddly enough, I connect to the both of them so, _so_ much; my grandparents and their story, _alone_ and together. Despite never having the chance to meet them, never hearing their voices or seeing their faces.” Kylo shook his head roughly and scoffed loudly. “If I even _brought up_ my grandfather’s name to my mother, she’d throw a fit. But with you, _Rey_… you’d hang on to every word, despite it being quite an odd thing to hear – me connecting to my dead grandparents, feeling closer to them than anyone else in my whole family – and you _wouldn’t_ even comment on it. I want to tell you _every_ meaningless little thing because you listen and you respond … and, correct me if I’m wrong here, because you actually _care_ to hear me talk about those meaningless, little things that don’t matter much at all.”

There was a lengthy pause where Rey could only stare in awe. She’d never heard him sound so… so _sure_ and yet insecure, all at the same time. The smile it brought to her lips was a wide and bright one.

“I like listening to you talk,” she admitted sheepishly. “I guess… well, _maybe_ I’m wrong, but I feel like I – _we_… I feel like we have a connection. Or something, I don’t know.” Rey was quick to take a pull from her beer, willing the blush to go away. “It’s just that…” A huff escaped her chest. “Well, I’ve never been so open about my life to someone. I feel like I could tell you anything. And you feeling the same way is sort of… _god_, it’s so stupid—”

“No,” His hand shot out, dwarfing her own small hand and bringing it down to the couch, entwined fingers resting between the pair. “No, no, I completely understand.” His voice was soft in her ear. “More than you could possibly know. I’ve never been so open about my life to another person – I’ve always been an honest man; I pride myself on it, and some may say I come across too brutal at times. But with you, honesty seems to pour out of me – like I’m _bound_ to tell you everything. Like I said before, Rey, _I want_ to tell you every little thing about me.”

“Don’t worry.” He muttered quietly, shifting just a little closer so their hands sat snug between their thighs. “_I feel it too._”

And _god_. _God_. It was _simply_ too much.
The overwhelming affection that coursed through her chest, after those short few words, was *too fucking much*.

She could only grip his hand a little tighter and pick up another slice of pizza.

Their hands didn’t move for the entire time they sat there, making comments about the cult-classic Christmas movie with bellies filled with pizza, right up until the end titles played out, (he was a little *too* invested in how Kevin heard his father’s voice from so far away, to be perfectly honest), and Bridget Jones’ Diary following.

Kylo only cocked a brow at the tv, “This is considered a Christmas movie?” She hummed a yes. “Strange.”

“Oh, shut it. It’s a *lovely* movie.”

“I’d consider the text it was adapted from ‘lovely’ but I’m not so certain about this.” She scoffed. “More like an insult, really.”

“And I *almost* forgot you teach a tenth-grade English class.” He chuckled at this. “As an artist, I *could forgive* you for being an art snob – ironically, I haven’t heard much with that subject. But God forbid someone use cake-mix and modernize an Austen novel—”

“You’re *never* going to let of that go, are you?” He said, the smile so clear in his tone.

“Nope.”

“Well, I would apologise – but having standards doesn’t really require one.” She could only gape, his smirk prominent on his features as he turned his head to look at his watch to check the time. It *unfortunately* lead to their hands parting, an action that left her wanting to pout like a petulant child. Rey *tried* not to show her disappointment.

“I better check on this cake.” He mumbled, pushing off the couch and standing to full height. When she moved to leave as well, he quickly shot her a smile. “You stay here and watch your silly rom-com. I’ll do all the hard work.”

When he sauntered away, she had the urge to throw a pillow at his head. Only, she was *quite*
distracted with his arse – a feature she’d never really been attracted to in males until Kylo.

Rey settled into the couch as Kylo dealt with the cake, ruffling through her pantry for more ingredients (presumably icing-sugar which, to be perfectly honest, Rey often ate by the spoonful) while she grabbed a blanket and curled into its warmth.

She would giggle and laugh at the movie, with the occasional outright-cackle because nothing, nothing, nothing could ever beat this kind of humour.

It was another ten minutes or so before Kylo returned once more, plopping himself on the couch while she snuggled under her blanket.

“It’s not very big.” She announced softly, nodding to the blank.

“Ah.” He mumbled, not moving a muscle. With quite a heavy eye roll, Rey shuffled up close and quickly spread the blanket over his insanely long legs.

The small smile on his lips was enough to make her heart pound.

He stayed until the end of the movie. And Rey was adamant she caught him smiling in some scenes, which was enough to earn her a win. By the end, it was safe-to-say they were on the brink of snuggling – perhaps it was the cold, or from being too invested in the movie to notice. Either way, it was quite nice to have his arm wrapped around her, pulled almost flush to his skin for such a long period of time.

So nice that she couldn’t help but pull him into a hug, standing on her tip-toes just to link her arms around his strong neck.

“The cake is so beautiful, Kylo.” She whispered, unwarranted tears pricking at her at her eyes. How on earth could she be so lucky? For Kylo to spend Christmas Eve at her apartment and do all her work – god, her heart had never felt so full. It was agonising. “Thank you so much!”

If she’d had any more beers, she probably would’ve dug in straight away – Han and Lando didn’t deserve such a heavenly treat after so much teasing. The icing glazed over, just begging for a prodding finger.

Looking at it only made her clutch him that much tighter.
“It was my pleasure.” He mumbled, arms sliding to clutch her own body close to his. The holiday spirit was certainly giving them some newfound courage. “It would really be a pleasure to cook for you sometime. Dinner and desert, at my own apartment one night. Like I promised, all those weeks ago.”

Rey hummed, finally letting go. “That sounds very nice. Though, really, I should be the one offering something since you technically just helped me out.”

He smiled crookedly. “Just bring yourself.” He ran a hand through his hair. “You… you wouldn’t happen to be around for New Year’s Eve?” A sigh escaped his lips. “I know you’re young and probably wish to go out, not spend the night with some old—”

“That sounds perfect.” She chirped brightly.

And it did. So much could happen from that one, perfect night – a happy transition into the new year, with Kylo’s lips finally on her own. God, perhaps more than kiss and, holy mother of God, that was a thought indeed.

“Great.” He muttered, eyes watching her every move as she plucked up his hand. It was easy to bend his wrist slightly and take note of the time. Easy to read that it was a few minutes past 12.

She met his gaze once more, accompanied with a cheerfully smile. Very quickly, she rose on her toes to press a chaste kiss to his cheek.

“Merry Christmas, Kylo.”

His dark gaze softened, a hand reaching out to push back a tendril of hair behind her ear. She’d never expected him to be so bold.

“Merry Christmas, Rey.”

New Year’s couldn’t come quicker.

Chapter End Notes
Okay, so I'm super, super excited for the next chapter, which should relatively be a quick chapter. I do apologise for not adding it to this, but it's such a significant point to the story that it needs its own chapter. Believe me, you'll understand ;)

Also, shameless plug here, but I wrote a super-short drabble and posted it earlier today. If you're interested, check it out here. I'm actually kinda really proud of this one since it's a little outside of the box for me.

Thanks for reading. I'll see you for the next update with the Chrissy dinner. FINALLY!
So, just a little note before you dive in, this chapter is like 12k overall but I decided to split it in two! The next update will come in a day or two -- three at the most!

Anywho, enjoy part 1. of Christmas ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER EIGHT

~ D E C E M B E R ~

P A R T    F O U R

The Cake is a Lie

Sleep was a futile affair. After the day she’d had – and the night she’d had – there was no way to calm the nerves and raging hormones, making her feel ten years younger than she actually was, all because she spent a little time with Kylo Ren.

The sweater incident, for example. Perhaps it was weird, or on the verge of being terribly creepy, but Rey loved that his smell lingered after wearing that piece of cursed fabric for eight hours straight; his natural warm and musky scent – which was quite a strange thing, in general, to think about – enveloped all of her senses. She couldn’t help but burrow in on herself, under the covers, and inhale it all in.

It was pure masculinity, of course. The scent that came from someone proud and strong and hard-working – it reminded her of the Takodana woods out west, the colour of a lush green with tree trunks a rich brown, tall and unstoppable; the dark earthy scent that came from mother nature. A smell that had her toes curling, Rey’s body reacting in ways that it professionally shouldn’t and…

No. No. She would not let her mind go there – not tonight. Not with Kylo. It would only lead to her acting like a complete moron in front of him, unable to forget her conjured fantasy of those impossibly large hands and what exactly those hands liked to explore, as well as his tongue and…

Rey groaned, turning flat on her belly to bury her head in the pillow and self-wallow for a few minutes.

If only that stupid pizza boy hadn’t interrupted. If only he’d come a few minutes later. Maybe she or he or they would’ve kissed and maybe it could’ve escalated into them spending Christmas morning together.
Well, there was always NYE for that. She could kiss him; do the cheesy little countdown, grab his face with two hands and pull him down for a lengthy snog. Or, better yet, she could start the New Year right – bouncing up and down the length of his cock, riding him on that bloody rug by the fire; literally come into 2018 with him (balls-deep, as Poe would say) inside her.

Now that was a thought. A horrible, inappropriate thought that drew forth another groan, a chill of desire, and a desperate need to get off.

It was all the pizza boy’s fault!

Joseph, was it? Jerry?

Perhaps she should put in a complaint.

Yes. Put in a complaint about a boy who was doing his job. That sounded reasonable.

God, she was awful. That boy could’ve saved her from making a big, big mistake; if Kylo wanted to kiss her, he probably would have by now. Christ, he’d stared at her naked and it didn’t even get a reaction.

Jerry probably had saved her…

Rey blew out an irritated huff, grabbing her phone from beneath the pillow and fumbling to type in her passcode. Since sleep seemed impossible, she’d have resort to the internet. Instagram proved to be uninteresting, so far – a lot of ‘festive’ posts, happy poses with lots of family and friends. Christmas Eve spent in the company of siblings, cousins, aunts’ and uncles’.

Even Finn had one.

Finn. Finn.

Rey must’ve stared at the picture for what felt like hours. There was Poe, holding BB8 high in the air like he was Simba from the Lion King, the fat corgi smiling wide with his tongue lolling to the side. There were Poe’s parents, who looked as charming as their son, arms wrapped around each other. Finn stood in the middle, hunched over and laughing, eyes away from the camera because he couldn’t take them off Poe.

Her thumb hovered over the screen, poised to press the little heart in the corner, but Rey was in a trance – it was like... it was like staring at a perfect family. So much love and warmth in one frame – and who was she to try and take that away from them?

She couldn’t look away. She couldn’t move. It was like she was stuck in a dream. Or a nightmare.

It wasn’t until the device vibrated in her hand that she came back to life. One text after another came
through, her hand a constant buzz as the messages struggled to stay on screen.

With one press of a thumb, she was transported to her long text thread with Kylo Ren himself.

She blinked once. Then twice more because… because…

**Are you awake?**

I can’t sleep.

I can’t stop thinking about tomorrow (today, technically).

Or NYE.

Or you.

Especially you.

Every night.

Every day.

Every minute.

I can’t stop thinking about you.

The second she processed the words, Rey was kicking her legs against the sheets and mattress, grinning like a fool. Her joy was immeasurable, chest pumping fast as she read the text over and over and over, smile nearly splitting her face in two.

But then she had to reply. And how could she reply to this? What was she to say? What did it all mean?

**ur all I think about**

Whatever possessed her to type and send that through had quickly left as soon as it delivered, horror overtaking every other emotion.

“Shit,’ she whispered, chucking her phone down the bed. “Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit!”

But then it started vibrating; lighting up the room, humming to be heard, with two bold letters coming to the screen: **KR.**
She should’ve just let it ring out. She should’ve ignored it.

Of course, that wasn’t the case, with Rey throwing off the covers in haste to crawl and grab the phone, accept the call, and press the device to her ear.

“…Hi.”

Kylo cleared his throat. “Uh, hi.” He paused. “I didn’t wake you, did I… with all the texts?”

“No, no. No, I was already awake.” She paused. “I can’t sleep either.”

“Ah. Right. That’s good. I mean, not good that you can’t sleep – good that I didn’t, you know, wake you.” He coughed. “I um… I can’t say why I called I guess I just… well, you sent that text and, uh, I just had this—this sudden urge to hear your voice.”

“Oh. Um.” She inhaled deeply, trying not look so deep into the words; what they meant, what they could mean.

She was failing.

“I’m glad you called.” Rey exhaled. “It might seem ridiculous but… recently, I’ve become kind of dependant on these phone calls. I mean – I don’t mean to make you feel, I don’t know, responsible for my sleeping patterns and I’m sure it’ll change when I’m living with Phasma but—”

“You don’t feel so alone.”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“I know the feeling.” Kylo’s voice was like a soothing wave of warmth washed over her, helping Rey relax into the mattress. “I’ve lived on my own for quite some time now. No roommate, no—no partner, not even a dog.” She laughed at this, soft and short. “It’s a feeling I’ve always experienced, you know. Feeling alone. But it never gets any easier.”

“Yeah. I know,” Rey said softly. “Why do I feel like we’ve already had this conversation?” She bit her lip to keep from smiling at the small huff her question drew from the man on the other side of a connected line.
“Maybe we already have. Maybe we’ve had plenty, in another life. Another dimension – loneliness is all we know.”

She cocked a brow. “You sound… insane.”

“Aren’t you the one who believes in zodiac signs and astrology?” He hummed.

“Yes, but you’re a Scorpio.” He groaned low and grumbly, a sound that had her thighs clenching, crossing quickly, just to quell the throbbing heat that pulsed in-between. “You’re supposed to be a cynic about these things.”

“I am.” He paused. “But that’s technically not helping my pessimistic case here.”

“Good,” she hushed out. There was a beat of deliberation on her part. “Want to know something interesting?”

“Always.”

“Well, it’s sort of crazy. The whole idea of it is silly but…” She blew out a breath. “Taurus’ and Scorpios are supposedly compatible. Relationship-wise, I mean; like, it could be a friendship or otherwise… you know, romantically, not that I’m implying—”

“It’s a good thing you’re legally a Gemini, then.” Rey gaped. Oh. Oh. So nothing would ever—

“Oh. I, um – yeah that’s—”

“Because astrology is a load of bullshit, Rey. And I’m – I like you because of you, not because of some made-up stories that come from the stars and planets and teen-gossip sites. And this just proves my point.”

What? What?

This couldn’t be real.

Rey should pinch herself.
“You... you like me?”

“Is that so hard to believe?” He scoffed out. “I just... you know, I clearly didn’t get my intentions for New Years clear. I wanted to – it isn’t just dinner to me. It’s so much more.”

“Oh,” she offered lamely, waiting.

“I just – I was actually thinking it was more of a... more of a date.” He paused. “Well, I want it to be a date and I didn’t... I didn’t want to say anything – or ask – because I was afraid you wouldn’t want that. Afraid that you’d reject me.”

How could he even—

“I don’t even...” he began quickly. “I don’t even know how I’m doing this, Rey. How I’m saying this – your text... that reply. It got me hopeful and now I’m rambling on, like a moronic...” He trailed off and must’ve pulled his phone away from his mouth, her ears picking up a muffled curse, barely audible. “It’s like – you’re so bewitching. Everything you do is just... fucking radiant and I need... I can’t go on like this anymore. I’ve tried to be professional, I’ve tried to be rational – but fuck rationality!

“I want you to come over. I want to cook you dinner. I want to – I want so many things, Rey. So many things that I shouldn’t want... so many things I don’t deserve.” Rey could only listen on as he rumbled out the words, deep from the chest; deep from his heart. “But most of all, I want you... I want to get to know you more; in a different way than what we’ve been doing. This – this connection you and I have is something more than just friends, isn’t it? Something more than just two lonely people who can confide in each other?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “Yes, I... I want that too. You’ve become... lately, you’ve become really important to me. I just never thought I’d be important to you.”

“Yes,” he whispered. “Yes, I... I want that too. You’ve become... lately, you’ve become really important to me. I just never thought I’d be important to you.”

“You’ve been important to me since the second you showed up on my doorstep, Rey. The second you opened your mouth and spoke, you were important to me. You are important, Rey. And I really, really love your company.”

There was a stretch of silence where they both let the words set in. A moment of tranquillity, of them finally coming to terms that they had each other. A person to confide in, a person to trust, a person to – one day, just maybe one day – a person to love.
“So, what do we do? What does this mean?” Rey finally asked. “I’ve never really experienced this before. Nothing like this, really.”

“I… I know the feeling,” Kylo admitted softly. “We can take it slow. We should take it slow. I want to take my time with you.”

She nodded, despite the verbal-only conversation, and almost palmed her forehead. “Okay.” Then laughed. “This is crazy. This is just… it doesn’t feel real.”

“Why not?” He asked softly – so, so softly, as if he was speaking in hymns. She wished she could see him; Rey wished she could see the soft look to his dark eyes. “You really have no idea how entrancing you are, do you Rey? How incandescent you are; your smile, your laugh, you. Everything about you is bright and bubbly and strong – everything you’ve accomplished, despite having no one to support you.

“How can I not find that desirable? How can I not feel something for you when you’re everything to me?”

“You can’t actually mean that—”

“Yes. I can,” he interrupted quickly.

“But… but you barely know me,” she protested weakly.

“Does that really matter?” He asked. “In the short time you’ve known me, what’s your opinion? What exactly do you feel for me, Rey?”

“I don’t… I’m not good with words.” Rey chewed on her lip, calculating her next words very carefully. “I just wish you were around a lot more. I… I wish I could see you every day.” She huffed nervously and fiddled with the sheet beneath her. “You make me feel good about myself; realise things about myself and be proud of that. You make me feel good.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes,” Rey replied unsteadily. “I really, really like you, Kylo Ren.”
Kylo laughed. “I know.”

“Don’t leave me,” Rey whispered. *Not like everyone else.* “Don’t hang up.”

She waited with bated breath for a response: validation of any kind.

“I’m not going anywhere, sweetheart,” he murmured, a slight tremor in his voice.

And there it was – the *sweetheart* part that had her buzzing with excitement. *Physically* buzzing, her whole body vibrating and…

And… and…

Nothing. One minute, there was a scene, a voice, a phone held to her ear and the next she was grappling with darkness. Rey shifted under the covers, very confused and disoriented because her hand was still buzzing.

It stopped as soon as it started.

Finally, she opened her eyes – squinting hard against the light, *still* not fully understanding what had just happened. She blinked quickly, eyes watering at the ungodly act of opening too soon, blearily looking to her phone.

Once Rey was semi-adjusted to the bright and cool morning, she settled back into the pillow and unlocked her phone – *maybe* she had fallen asleep. She’d done that *loads* of times; his voice was like warm honey in a mug of tea, soft and soothing in the dark hour.

Her brows furrowed at the sight her screen granted her. It hadn’t moved from Instagram; hadn’t moved from that cheerful picture of Finn enjoying himself with Poe’s family.

She hurried to tap out of the app and quickly pulled up her messages, *quickly* tapped on his contact and *very* quickly scanned the thread and—
Home safe. I really enjoyed our dinner tonight.

Thank you for a lovely evening.

It was all in her head. There was no long string of texts that had her heart pumping fast. No mutual confessions of wanting more.

Nothing. There was absolutely nothing.

Only a missed call from her best friend. And wasn’t that a bitter thought – when a missed call from her best friend was… just another missed call.

A missed call that should’ve had her jumping up to ring him back.

A missed call that shouldn’t have her so relieved.

For a moment, she wished she could sleep forever – stuck in a dream where nothing was ever wrong; stuck in a fantasy where Kylo returned her feelings.

Stuck in a life that would never come true in the real world.

~ * ~

Rey stayed in bed until midday that morning, borrowing into the mattress and pulling up some silly videos from the internet to… to feel anything. But while her eyes took in the scene – the individual frames flashing before her – her mind did anything but.

How could something so vivid, so real, be all a lie? Just a bloody fantasy that left her desperate and wanting so much. She was angry and sad all the same, wishing, wishing, wishing she could just… she could just own up to her heart and find the same result.

Why couldn’t life be so easy? Why couldn’t love be so easy?

But no – he probably thought her as a little sister; well, not quite because that would be… majorly disturbing, but – he protected her like one. He listened and advised as they bonded over shitty parents and trust issues. And, really, ten years was a big gap; realistically, no matter how much she protested, they were in different demographics.
Kylo had done so much more. He’d travelled around, he’d found his footing, he was financially stable (more than just financially stable, if his house was anything to go by). And Rey… she had—well, she hadn’t done much.

And maybe she could hope that he would show her the world—take her to exotic places and create a narrative together that she could cherish forever. But that was just wishful thinking.

Her dream proved that more than anything. It was just a dream.

It must’ve been nearly two in the afternoon by the time she’d extracted herself from bed, shuffling to the bathroom to have a well-deserved hot shower. Standing under the hot spray was a nice distraction from her wallowing (which, truthfully, wasn’t fair that she could become so morbidly emotional from a blood dream, especially right after their oh-so-amazing baking session the night before). She focused on just breathing, just standing, just taking a break from her fretful mind.

Years ago, she would’ve been scolded for wasting water. But at this moment, her usual childhood-engrained habits didn’t apply—Rey just needed to forget. If only for a moment.

Ignorance was bliss.

Peace and balance coming to her mind, brain blank and body warm.

It was nice.

It also left the second she stepped out of the shower, catching the sight of her nude body which—

Rey frowned at the reflection. She’d never been too worried about her body, growing up; there were simply bigger issues than the how she looked.

But now, it seemed… unattractive. Too skinny, almost malnourished despite her recent years of a steady eating pattern. Her ribs poked through, her breasts were small and near non-existent and her hips were so narrow she was basically a walking stick.

What did Kylo see? How could he possibly make art out of this?

This onslaught wave of anxiety was so much. She’d never been ashamed of her body so why now?

**Because he doesn’t want you,** her mind whispered, **and he never will.**
Rey swallowed the large lump in her throat, blinked her burning eyes a quick few times – like the shutter to a camera – and exhaled deeply.

And then she continued on, like she always did; wrapping a towel around her figure, dressing in her comfy sweats and beginning her Christmas in solitude. She thought of the dinner, a small smile coming to her face – she wouldn’t be *alone* all day, at least.

It lifted her spirits, if only slightly. A quaint change in mood that had her popping on some Christmas tunes, spreading out an array of wrapping paper with reindeers and Christmas trees to begin sorting out the gifts for the Organa-Solo dinner that night, a steaming mug of tea beside her.

Her gifts weren’t terribly brilliant – picking them out with Kylo had made it easier, though, having a second opinion. He’d helped her choose Leia’s scarf, weighing it in his large hands like it was a detrimental decision, and suggested she go for book of old-plane models for Han, many detailed descriptions of old warplanes to keep Han busy over his short break.

Lando, she picked all on her own; a clear key-chain with a photo of her own mug placed inside. A pizza snug between her lips, the background of the Cloud City VS Takodana basketball game behind – the *very* game her home team had smashed CC to a pulp. For Luke, she’d bought him a book – it was a gamble, for he could have already owned Benjamin Kenobi’s biography on his career with Vader, but she had the *feeling* Luke would accept with a smile and never make it known, if so. And for Chewie, *naturally*, she bought him the best brand of hair-gel she could afford.

Ben, *though*. The mysterious Solo son. Rey had *almost* forgone a present for him. *Almost.*

But then she’d turned to Kylo, a question brewing on her lips as he browsed through jewellery in search of a necklace for his mother.

“If there was a stranger you *had* to buy a gift for, what would you suggest buying?”

Rey remembered the pointed look he gave her at this. Head-turning, eyes narrowing in as an amused quirk came to his slightly upturned lips.

“Rey,” He’d begun slowly. “Is this gift really necessary—”

“Everyone deserves a gift!”

“You barely know this person – actually, *if* they’re a stranger, you don’t know them at all.” He’d taken her in once more. “You won’t let it go, will you?” At the stubborn shake to her head, he’d puffed out a quick laugh. “Right. Do you have any clue what this person might like?”
“I legitimately only found out he existed today.”

“Right.” Kylo had said abruptly. “That actually is no help at all. I um… well, music is pretty universal, you know. They don’t… he may have his own preference, like everyone, but he might appreciate it – an album of your choice, of your taste. Maybe he’ll already know it, maybe he won’t; maybe he’ll hate it, maybe he’ll love it. Either way, it’s likely he’ll give it a go.”

Rey looked down at the album in her hands at that very moment – turning it over in her hands, hoping he’d like it. This stranger she knew nothing about.

**Aromanticism**

It wasn’t exactly a mainstream album, but it was nothing tiny either. It was away from her usual taste – she didn’t care about brilliant lyricism or a perfect authentic artist; Rey was just happy to feel carefree while pulling off some ridiculous dance moves in the passenger seat of Finn’s car.

This guy, however – this incredibly talented man with the vocal range of a literal angel – was something else entirely. Of lovelessness and loneliness, how could she not feel something listening to such hymns? To such awe-inspiring music combined with deeply emotional words?

She could only hope Ben Solo would take a chance and agree.

For now, though, she put aside her worries to continue wrapping up the last few things, content in humming along to all the songs as she went about her task.

She was half-way through, mind blissfully at peace when her phone rang once more. Only, it wasn’t from Finn.

“Oh, no.” She flushed instantly, head-to-toe, remembering the very explicit and detailed call that took place in her dream just hours before.

**KR.**

She blew out a shaky breath, debating whether or not to answer – perhaps it was instructions on the cake. Or maybe, just maybe, Kylo had a sixth sense and knew she’d dreamt up some fantasy-version of their strictly-platonic friendship.

Time made a decision for her, however. The phone rang out. Rey blew out a breath of relief – it was a good thing, too; she doubted she could ever hear his voice without the memory of him admitting that she was his *everything*... well, not really him—
She jumped, the phone ringing once more with his contact popping up. “Oh, fuck it!”

She snatched it up and considered throwing it out the window – technology was overrated, anyway. But then her thumb was hovering over the vivid green accept icon, and she idly wondered if it were important enough to warrant a second call.

She snatched it up and considered throwing it out the window – technology was overrated, anyways – but then her thumb was hovering over the bright green accept icon, and she idly wondered if it were important enough to warrant a second call.

Without another thought, she swiped at the screen.

“How would you feel if we moved our dinner to tonight?” He blurted out.

She frowned, taking a hot minute to process his question.

“I—what?”

“How would you feel if we moved our dinner to tonight?” He blurted out.

“Tonight. You and me, at my place, dinner. We can do New Years, too, if you want… actually, that’d be preferable, if I’m being honest.”

“I don’t– I’m not really understanding here.” Rey shook her head. “I thought you didn’t care about me spending Christmas with my boss.”

“I don’t, I don’t.” He rushed out, and Rey thought she could hear loud, booming laughter that sounded eerily familiar— “I just… I want—”

“Are you with someone?” She asked, another loud laugh coming through the speakers.
“Uhh.” He stuttered out. “Yeah, kind of. It’s just… it’s just my family.”

“You’re already there?” Her brows furrowed in, hand fiddling with the hood of her jumper. “I’m really finding this difficult to get, Kylo. You’re already there, how on earth would we skip out on dinner and just… just abandon them and share Christmas on our own?” Rey huffed out. “I just – I need to help with the dinner because my mother can’t cook.” He paused. “Except no one will tell her that so I’m forced to… to make it all better, or something.”

Rey blinked at his scratchy tone that almost verged on nervous and frantic. What in the world was going on?”

She shook her head. “What about the cake? We can’t let it go to waste, after all that trouble.”

“We can eat it. Saves me the trouble of making dessert.” He paused. “And, you know, it’s actually garbage—”

“That’s your grandmother’s recipe.”

“It’s not exactly her baking, though.” He grumbled. “Let’s just… skip it all, Rey. Let’s just spend Christmas together.”

“Kylo, this isn’t… this isn’t making any sense. Why are you so set on this—”

“Because… because… because I don’t want to spend time with my family.” Rey scowled at this, his reasoning quickly becoming irritating. “Because Christmas with them is quite possibly the worst event of the year. And it’s suffocating, Rey — the way they act, the way they talk; they act as if ignoring what happened is best rather than, you know, resolving like most—”

“You know, they clearly want to spend time with you. You should be grateful you even have a family to spend time with—”
“I know, I know. I’m sorry. I didn’t… it’s still hard to ignore what they did. And, uh, I had a really good time with you last night.” Rey blushed, knowing full-well he only meant dinner but… well, how could her mind not wander to her insanely vivid dream? “I just – it’d be nice to do that for Christmas, you know. Where I don’t have to be on guard all the time; don’t have to face my fucking uncle. Uncles, really.”

“You have two uncles?” She absently played with her necklace, sliding the metal against the chain – back and forth while awaiting her answer.

“Uh, not really. He’s like an uncle… well, technically, I have two of those.” His sigh was deep and troubled. “My family is a complicated mess, Rey.”

She rolled her eyes. “Sounds interesting to me, but yeah… complicated.”

She picked at her nails, the sudden silence excruciating.

“Are you—are you annoyed with me?”

“No,” she snapped.

“Wow. Very believable,” he deadpanned, earning a scoff. “Just have dinner with me—”

“Was that a demand? Did you actually just command me to have dinner with you?”

“No. No, it just came out wrong – or you perceived it wrong—"

“Oh, so it’s my fault? I have no idea what the concept of a question is, right?”

A beat passed. “You just asked one.”

Rey sucked in a breath. “I swear to fucking Christ.”
“Two, actually.”

“Do you get off on being an asshole?” He barked out a laugh. “And you think this is funny—”

“So you are pissed at me.”

“No, no I’m just… I’m not understanding anything right now. Not in the slightest.” Rey chewed on her lip. “I’m so confused, Kylo. Do you not get how late-notice it is to just ask me to drop everything and spend Christmas with you? Alone. Together.” But, god that sounded nice. “And, um, maybe it’s silly or stupid to think this, but I’ve always felt… I’ve always felt like they were the family I never had. It’s my first family Christmas dinner – you can’t possibly understand how much that means to me. I want to spend Christmas with them; it may be my only chance to experience the cliché Christmas experience. They’re my family by choice. And… and sometimes, I think they believe the same thing.

“They’ve always supported me, as long as I’ve known them. He once… well, my boss once said I was like a daughter to him, kind of, I guess. I was, uh, explaining our situation – me posing for you and—”

“They know about you posing for me?”

“Um, yeah,” she said slowly. “Why does that matter?” He cursed loudly, and her brow furrowed. “Why are you acting so weird?”

“I’m not. I’m fine. Everything is perfectly fine,” he sighed. “Just… just don’t bring the cake.”

“What the hell is up with you?”

“Rey, it’s… god, you don’t understand! I just… everything has just become one giant mess and I can’t do anything about it – nothing at all because I’m still trying to wrap my head around it. And if you would just have fucking dinner with me so I could explain it—”

“Or you could tone it the fuck down and explain what is happening right now before I hang up!”
“No, just… could you just trust me?” His tone became more and more frustrated, elevating the already-difficult conversation.

“I am having dinner with my boss, Kylo. End. Of. Discussion,” she sneered through her teeth. “Unless you give me a reason not to; you know, unless you explain…”

“Fine,” he growled. “Fuck, fine, do as you please. Just don’t bring the fucking cake.”

“Why? What relevance does the cake have to any of this? Are you embarrassed about giving me a family recipe?” Rey asked hesitantly. “You didn’t have to—“

“Just… just listen to me. You’re not listening – don’t bring the goddamn cake, Rey!”

“What the fuck is going on?”

“I can’t tell you here. It’s something… we should talk about this, face-to-face.”

“Or we could talk about it now—”

“NO!” He bellowed. “Fuck, Rey, just fucking listen to me – is that too much to fucking ask?”

Rey gaped at the explosive anger coming from the phone. She’d known him to be… volatile – their second session had proven this – but never with her. Never like this.

“If you won’t talk, you can’t convince me not to bring the cake.”

“Just, trust me,” he said in a much softer tone. “You’ll need to hear this in person.”

“Goodbye, Kylo.”

“Rey, please, just wait a minute—”
She was quick to press on that oh-so-vibrant icon; a violent red that symbolised how done she was with this conversation.

And for good measure, Rey switched off her phone, allowing no more room for any calls – not from anyone.

And with that, Rey went back to her mundane task of wrapping and cutting and taping – trying to focus on the task at hand and not question what exactly had just transpired over the phone.

Whatever it was didn’t sound good.

Whatever it was had her stomach tied in knots.

~ * ~

The dinner came around a lot faster than she thought. One minute, she was determinedly trying to forget the last twelve hours and the next, she was rushing around like a mad woman to get ready.

Swearing like a sailor while rushing around in heels, a basket at her side filled with gifts and the cake in an opaque orange Tupperware container; it was a chaotic but welcomed distraction from her long and tiresome day.

Soon enough, Han had pulled up in her driveway, honking the horn twice with his head right out the window.

“Merry Christmas, Gummy!” He shouted, a childlike-tone to his usual- grumbly voice.

Rey couldn’t help but laugh and rolled her eyes at the familiar behaviour. “Merry Christmas.” She returned quickly, grinning uncontrollably when Han got out to help with her handful.

He was quick to take the basket, securing it in the backseat of the car while Rey cradled the container to her chest.

“Any clues as to what you got your boss, kid?”

“No chance,” she murmured, eyes sliding back to the bright orange container that seemed to glow in the dark.
It was snatched out of her hands before she could blink— "Hey!"

“What’s this, then?” He teased, hand moving to open the lid. She smacked his hand quickly, snatching it right back.

“No peeking,” Rey huffed. “It’s just a chocolate cake – nothing special.”

But that was a lie. It was Kylo’s grandmother’s recipe. There was something terribly intimate and special about that fact alone – only, Han would never stop teasing if he knew. And these ‘boyfriend’ speculations were hard enough as is.

“Should I be worried – you’re not going to poison me, are you? I’ve heard too many stories of you and Finn in the kitchen together—”

“No!” She snapped, watching him retreat back to the driver’s side. But there was clearly something to be worried about if she were to heed Kylo’s warning.

Rey clenched her jaw – if it were so important he should’ve told her. He most likely just regretted sharing such an important recipe. And she got that; respected that even… but he didn’t say a thing, so how was she to know?

“Rey?” Han called from the car. “Get in before you freeze.”

She clutched the container tighter to her chest and stepped toward the car, hopping in the passenger seat and buckling in.

It was a rather short drive, with the roads mostly empty. She mostly just looked out the window, watching the world flash past with a content smile on her face. Her first family Christmas dinner… well, her first that really mattered, anyway.

It fired up the nerves as well as her excitement, her stomach feeling empty and chest feeling heavy.

Han filled the void with his voice. Talking about his day; of his son blessedly helping in the kitchen because of Leia’s woeful cooking skills, of his son getting annoyed by Lando’s endless teasing, of his son trying to get up and leave right before he came to collect her.

“He’s not a big people-person. Especially with women,” Han explained, a small smile gracing his
face. “We thought it best to drop the news of you coming today; you know, so he didn’t have a fit and refuse to come,” Han cringed. “Probably not the best way to ease him into it, but… I told him all about you. Thought it would help but it only seemed to make it worse—”

“Why would you tell me that?!” she cried out, sending him a vicious scowl.

“What? Is honesty really so bad?”

“In this case, yes.” She mumbled. “I don’t need to know your son already hates me. Especially with what I’ve heard—”

“Don’t listen to Luke. He’s just bitter. It was just a minor incident—”

“Like what?”

Han grimaced. “It's not really my place to say. I’m sure I know the full story, either – I never heard Ben’s side of things.”

“Oh.” She nodded. “Do you think he’ll like me, then?”

Han looked up and sent her a roguish grin. “Everybody likes you, Gummy! He won’t stand a chance.”

The rest of the drive was a blur, with Han soon pulling up to their house and parking it in the drive. When she hopped out of the car, cake under her arm, Rey quickly turned to the opposite house and squinted as something caught her eye.

A sleek black car, very familiar-looking – and if it weren’t for Han calling her name, basket of presents in hands, she probably would’ve walked over to inspect it at the curb.

Rey turned, however, and followed Han up the porch steps. “Leia’s been preparing a feast – well, Ben, but don’t tell her that.” Han opened the door, wiping his boots on the mat, and shrugging off his coat once inside the warm and cozy foyer. “She’s very happy you’re here. Lately, she’s been worried about you – but don’t tell her I said that.” Han pointed a stiff finger in her direction, closing the front door behind him. “I know how weird you get about these things, so you better not go running off to claim you’re fine or whatever.
“Now come on, let’s get this cake of yours to the kitchen.”

Rey nodded and followed him into the lounge where Lando, Chewie and Luke sat, beers in hand. They all raised their bottles (Luke his glass of red wine), cheering loudly when she appeared in the doorway.

“Rey!” Lando smirked. “Long-time, no-see. You get a nice present from that artist boyfriend of yours? Draw you a painting?”


“Fuck off, Skywalker.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” she sighed out, though they were too busy ripping on each other to notice her half-hearted protest.

“Han!” Lando called out while Chewie got up to pull her into a tight hug, bending down to squash her into his warmth despite the container between them. At the mention of his name, Han looked up from where he was bent over placing Rey’s presents under the tree. “Get us another beer, yeah?”

“Yeah, alright, alright,” he grumbled, Rey grinning up at Chewie before being pulled away, into the kitchen.

Her heels clacked against the hardwood floor, alerting her arrival to all – especially Leia who looked up from making up the salad, head turning to give her a warm smile.

“Rey,” she beamed, rushing over to take the cake from her hands and thrust it into Han’s, a quick nod to the fridge; a silent command that had him grumbling, but obliging all the same. “I’m very, very happy you decided to come. You’re very welcome here, anytime; and Christmas is such a special occasion.” Rey nodded, heart filling with warmth as Leia took her by the hands and pulled her into a long hug. “I hope the drive with that idiot wasn’t too awful.”

“Not too bad.” Rey joked. “Though, he didn’t let me touch the radio…” she trailed off, eyes scanning the kitchen to rest on a hulking figure in the corner, so insanely tall that he towered over the rest.

Rey’s mouth dropped, taking in the broad shoulders, the long lush waves of black hair, the arse that was so sinful on such a man and the dark, dark clothes. He was tensed – his whole body rigid and
straight and nervous.

But it couldn’t be. This couldn’t be him – he was at his family’s for Christmas, not Leia’s and Han’s. That was impossible.

There was simply no way this man – this very tall, indistinguishable looking man – was…

“Ben!” Leia called out softly, obviously taking in her distraction. “Stop sulking in the corner and greet our guest.”

Han and Leia’s son turned, so excruciatingly slow; pivoting stiffly, revealing his front.

Revealing a prominent nose, slightly hooked, sensually full lips and a furrowed brow. Only, she couldn’t look away from his eyes; pools of dark-depths, ringed with brown and golden flecks. Such pretty eyes on such a handsome face – a face she’d come to know and yearn for; a face she’d seen in her dreams.

“Hi,” he began softly, so softly she barely heard it – or maybe she just couldn’t hear anymore. Maybe every sense was blocked out because what the fucking hell was Kylo Ren doing in Han and Leia’s house on Christmas night?

She barely noticed him step forward, step closer; barely noticed the way he held out a hand, in greeting – as if they hadn’t already met before. As if she hadn’t known him for months, now.

Rey could barely register anything but the sound of her own thumping heart, stunned gaze never leaving his soft eyes that looked so… so emotionally gone in that moment. As if he knew this was coming – as if he wasn’t surprised to see her face!

The small stretch of silence was excruciatingly long. Finally, Rey looked down at his hand, completely oblivious to everything around her – Han, Leia. It was just her and Kylo.

Finally, he spoke once more – a deep hum that should’ve been soothing. That shouldn’t have sent a wave of shock over her whole body; drowning out every thought in her brain.

“I’m Ben.”

Ben? Ben, Ben, Ben, Ben, Ben?
As if on autopilot, Rey moved slightly; her mind not connecting with her body, reaching out tentatively to shake his warm, calloused hand – the handshake Kylo Ren had never gifted her on his doorstep, all those months ago. A handshake that should’ve felt natural and normal. A handshake that shouldn’t have made her stomach queasy.

Rey looked up once more, his soft eyes fleetingly meeting her hardened gaze before looking down at his feet.

“Rey Niima.”

She was the first to pull away.

Chapter End Notes

I know this wasn't the most interesting chapter, but the next part is where. it. gets. CRAAAZYYYYY haha.

**fun fact:** the dream sequence was originally a very NSFW dream but my innocent little heart felt it was the wrong time to introduce the smut. Also, it's probably the 'dirtiest' it'll get since Kylo is a big vanilla soft boi and we're in Rey's thirsty ass mind. However, if you're interested in seeing that alternative scene, let me know and I'll post it on tumblr @Dalzonii

Also, do be sure to check out this amazing album by Moses Sumney. Aromanticism is simply divine - a true masterpiece, vocally, musically and lyrically. Listening to it honestly feels like I'm floating above the earth.

And if you're EXTRA interested, check out this pitchfork article that dives in on the deeper meaning. Reading that might give you more of an insight of why I chose an album that, I believe, perfectly fits both Rey and Kylo/Ben's character!

Cheers for reading, as always! The dinner will be upon us in two-three days time >:))
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER NINE

~ D E C E M B E R ~

P A R T    F I V E

A Black and White Christmas

It was if the whole universe depended on this one interaction. Like this one revelation had broken everything.

Nothing made sense and yet… and yet, everything came together; fragments, all mixed and jumbled, swiftly connecting like it was right there in front of her.

And that was easily the most humiliating thing about the whole situation; that she was too bloody dumb to realise everything, despite the overwhelming amount of evidence that had always been right there in front of her.

Ben Solo, Han and Leia’s estranged and troublesome son, was… was Kylo Ren. Kylo Ren, who stayed up to the early hours of the morning on the phone, just to help her sleep. Kylo Ren, who came to collect Rey at her absolute worst after a drunken phone call, barefoot and in his pyjamas. Kylo Ren, who was so, so selfless when it came to Rey.

And… and Kylo Ren’s parents, said to be negligent and careless, were Han and Leia. Han, who had been nothing but supportive of everything she did, even if it seemed questionable at first. Leia, who was open and warm and caring, no matter how busy she got. The parents Rey had always hoped for.

And who was she to believe? Would they expect her to take sides? Is that why Kylo – no, Ben. His real name is Ben – initiated this… this façade; pretending to be complete and total strangers. Like she hadn’t met him all those months ago? Like she hadn’t already fallen for him…

Or maybe… maybe he was ashamed of knowing her. That seemed more likely.

Is that why he always offered his coat, out in public? Because he was embarrassed of her old and battered clothes? Or maybe he was disgusted with her eating habits - that night at Pho Tico would have been enough alone; last night, scoffing down pizza, would have been enough.

God, why didn’t she listen to him? Why didn’t he just tell her?
You turned off your phone, Rey’s inner-voice chirped, you never gave him a chance to explain.

Your fault, your fault, your fault—

“Rey?”

Her head snapped away from one pair of dark-brown eyes to another. God, they were so insanely similar it was laughable. Ky— Ben was the perfect match of both his parents. He even acted like them.

Rubbed at his neck when he was nervous, played with his hair when anxious, just like Han. And, goodness, he could command a whole room to silence with a single look, similar to Leia.

God, she truly was the most clueless person in the galaxy.

“Rey?” The voice repeated.

Her focus returned to Leia, whose gaze was curiously flicking back and forth between the pair. She could feel Kylo moving behind her, shifting on his feet under Leia’s— his mother’s— suspicious eyes. It was suffocating; her lungs were weak and the kitchen was far too hot. She needed… she needed fresh air. She needed to get the fuck out to fully process what the hell was—

There was an awful loud crunch interrupting the silence, all three pairs of eyes turning to Han who was lazily picking at the pork-crackle, smacking his lips together, licking his fingers; golden, crispy crackling, glistening under the kitchen light. From that one bite, he had grease leaking from his lips. He reached for another piece, oblivious to the tense atmosphere developing the whole room.

Rey would have laughed if she wasn’t so frazzled.

“What are you doing?” Leia snapped, smacking his arm so hard the resounding slap was enough to make anyone cringe. “That’s not ready, moron.”

“Then why’s it out, Princess?” He argued back quickly, a scowl pulling at his features as he rubbed his red hand.

“Because I was checking on it. Half the side hasn’t even crackled, Han!”
He was about to retort, but Rey was quick to interrupt.

“Uh, do you mind if I use your loo?”

Han shook his head fondly, stepping away from his wife with a warm smile. “You don’t have to ask permission to use the toilet, Gummy.”

“Gummy?” Christ, here we go. Of course he’s ask about the nickname - this humiliating nickname that had slowly but surely become a testament of love with Han and Rey’s relationship.

“She’s got big gums – huge chompers, really. What did Lando call them other day?” Han scratched at his head. “Was it… no—”

“Do you make it a habit of insulting your guests?” Kylo intoned fiercely.

“Relax, kid. I’ve known her for years. This is all just one big running joke—”

“Does she think that? Does she think it’s funny?” She felt his gaze move to the side of her face, but Rey refused to look.

“Rey.” Leia said softly, ignoring the two men beside her. “You can use the bathroom. You remember where it is?” Rey nodded softly. “Well, we’ll all be out in the lounge for presents when you come out; dinner won’t be too far away so there’s plenty of time to get presents underway.”

Rey really did try to return the warm smile Leia sent her way; instead, she only grimaced and rushed out of the kitchen, turning down the hall and speedily barging into the bathroom. Before she did, however, Rey heard Han’s reply.

“What’s this about, Ben? You don’t even know her;” he grumbled out. “Your mother has done a great job organising this whole thing and it’d be nice, for an occasion, if this went well.”

She shut the door behind her, back flat against the wood, and took a deep, deep breath in… …before moving to plump herself down on the porcelain toilet lid, breathing rather heavily – in and
out, hands coming to cradle her pounding head while the voice inside could only repeat questions over and over and over.

“*Oh my god,*” Rey groaned, hands moving to muffle the sound, chest heavy and tight, stomach so empty and yet… and yet she felt like she could throw-up at any given minute.

Everything was so… so weird – why didn’t he just… when he *knew*, when he figured it out or—*or* was told she was coming, why didn’t he just come out with it? What was the point in hiding something when it’d only become clear in the end, at his *stupid, stupid, stupid* art show.

Oh, *the art show.* It was already strange enough that they’d see her nude, in such controversial positions; now they’d *know* she was in such positions right in front of their offspring, spread open before his very eyes.

God, this night could not get *any* worse—

“What the fuc—”

Kylo held a finger to his lips as he swiftly entered the bathroom, closing the door behind him softly and soundlessly. She looked up at him with wide eyes, mouth agape, and recoiled as he got on his knees before her.

He didn’t say word, just knelt there looking sad and sorry for himself with his glossy brown eyes and pouty mouth. As if he was waiting for *her* to speak – to ask a question; to ask him to explain.

Rey was… she *didn’t* know what she felt, exactly. Angry, confused, annoyed, so fucking infuriated she could… she *should*...

She should’ve slapped him for making this more difficult than it needed to be. She should’ve slapped him for not being upfront to his family about who she was. She should’ve slapped him for lying about his family – *for* he had to be lying; Leia and Han couldn’t be bad parents, they *just couldn’t.* And he’d lied about his name, *his* real name given at birth; he’d lied about her, to his family. He was a *liar.*

But his eyes were so bloody sorrowful. It was infuriating. Annoying. So damn attractive…

Rey looked away.

“Your name is Ben.” She said stiffly.

“Yes.”
“Ben Solo.” She said coolly, once more, sounding out each syllable slowly. “Ben So-lo.”

“Yes, legally, that is my name. Professionally, however, I go by Kylo. As you know, artist pseudonyms are common—”

“I don’t – I don’t give a shit about artist names!” She whispered frantically, her pitch high and panicky. “I just… why didn’t you just tell me? On the phone?”

He scoffed. “Because you would’ve freaked out. Like you are now – and with no one there to help. I wanted to do it, face-to-face.”

“And this was face-to-face?” She laughed bitterly. “Yeah, what a nice fucking surprise—”

“Well you didn’t exactly give me any time to explain. You just hung up and shut off your phone before I could give up to go ahead and explain it, if need be.” He shook his head. “Look, I’m sorry for trying to be… trying to make this easy to digest; I’m sorry for wanting to be there when I dropped the news.”

“Oh my god.” She moaned. “Oh my god, you’re such an arsehole – making it out like it’s all my fault—”

“Well, if you hadn’t brought the cake—”

“Why are you so insistent on hiding it?” She growled. “Are you… are you ashamed of me, is that it? You don’t want me associated with your family because…” She trailed off, eyes beginning to prickle and god she wished she could just disappear. “I’m so stupid.”

It wasn’t fair.

“No.” Kylo growled. “No, I—” He took her cheeks in his insanelyhuge hands, thumbs softly brushing at the tears that spilled over. “I… I understand this must be a lot to process. I just… I’m still trying to wrap my head around it myself and – and you’ve probably heard a lot of awful things about me. I know I’ve said a lot of choice words about my family – and, well, I know you consider them to be the family you never had. You must be so… confused and conflicted and I’m sorry I didn’t just
explain it on the phone.” He sighed, taking her chin between his hands and gently tilting her gaze to his own. “But I am not ashamed of you. I could never be ashamed of you. Don’t ever think that for a minute, Rey. I just… I wanted to keep you separate from that part of my life; away from all that toxic bullshit. Away from all that drama.” He snorted dryly, sucking in his bottom lip with a shake of his head. “I suppose, that doesn’t really matter anymore.”

His words did absolutely nothing to reassure her nerves; it still didn’t give her anything to believe. It still didn’t prove who was in the right here – or… or if there were anyone in the right. Maybe they were just one big horrid family.

No. No. No. That wasn’t — there was no way…

“I-I don’t… then why…” Rey stuttered, sniffing quickly while calculating her words. “Why hide something that is bound to come out soon anyways?” She laughed wetly. “I mean, we can’t exactly hide it until your show – Han would have a heart attack.”

Kylo smiled, his thumb catching another stray tear at the side of her lips. “No, that wouldn’t be smart at all. But do you really think tonight would be a good night to announce that I’m the artist you’ve been posing for?” She blinked at him blankly. “Lando and Luke would be insufferable.”

“Oh.” Her cheeks warmed, mind insistent on reminding her that everyone – excluding Leia – thought Kylo was her secret boyfriend. And, although she’d protested, it hadn’t exactly been her strongest argument. “Yeah, that would be humiliating. But the cake—”

“Don’t worry about the cake.”

“But—”

“I’ll figure something out.” He ran a hand through his hair. “Just trust in me. Can you please do that for me, Rey?” His eyes were desperate.

Could she trust him? Could she trust Kylo or Ben or whatever name he went by?

It felt like a whole year had passed when she finally nodded her head, Kylo smiling at her before pulling her down to the cool tile, holding her close to his chest; as if she mattered, as if he cared.

And maybe he did care, but he’d never care in the way she wanted. The way she desperately craved; there’d be no late-night confessions of feelings with him. Just a series of canvases and nothing more.

Hugging him felt wrong. Wrapping her arms around his firm body, tucking her head into the crook
of his shoulder felt wrong. His arm, tight around her waist, his hand caressing the back of her head – it felt wrong. Because he was only doing this to comfort her, not out of need or want.

And she was still so confused. She had a thousand and one questions that needed answering. His parental descriptions weren’t adding up to Han and Leia’s character. And Kylo – Kylo wasn’t violent or rude… he was smart and professional and kind; at least, he was to her.

Who was she to believe? And what if they expected her to choose a side?

“I should slip out. Before anyone comes looking,” Kylo mumbled into her hair. “You should come out a minute or two after me, okay?”

“Oh,” she agreed numbly.

“Let me drive you home after this. My mother will probably demand it anyway. I doubt anyone else will be sober enough to take you home by the end of tonight,” he sighed out. “And, if it wouldn’t be too much to ask, maybe we could just… just sit and talk for awhile. Give me a chance to explain things better – rationally, I mean. Not some… impulsive rant.” His eyes roamed over her face, waiting for a clear ‘no’ – part of her wanted to scream it at him. “We can discuss how we want to announce this. Without Luke or Lando present. Hell, even Chewie. Alright?”

“Alright.”

“Alright,” he repeated, head bent and intent on staring her down, his thumb drawing lazy circles into her scalp that were so soothing and so nice.

Finally, he withdrew his arm from her waist and stood up. “I’ll, uh, see you out there.”

“Yeah,” she muttered from her place on the bathroom floor, watching as he sent her one more reassuring smile – a small curve of his lips that should’ve lessened the weight in her chest. It only brought forth a sense of dread of what was to come.

He closed the door softly, once more, leaving Rey on her own. Leaving Rey to the maze that was her mind. Leaving Rey to only grasp at ideas on how this could possibly happen.

And most importantly, leaving Rey to question how in the fuck were they supposed to pull this off?

~ * ~
She was on edge. The heart pounding, palm sweating kind of edge; the type of anxiousness that kept you from eating because your stomach was a volatile pit of acid that would reject any little bite of food, (this dinner wasn’t looking to great, in this moment).

Rey had never been so nervous in her life. That first day with Kylo was nothing compared to this; opening her legs for Kylo on his kitchen bench was nothing to this. In fact, she’d be willing to relive that one humiliating session for a whole lifetime if it meant she never had to find out the truth.

She inhaled and took a glance at the mirror before her – a little red in the face, hair a little mussed, but overall, she still looked presentable. Good. That was good.

Nothing would seem fishy, then…

Rey exhaled loudly, turning to the door in one swift movement, yanking it open to pace down the hallway and—

Kylo’s words were hardly calming at all when his whole family looked up at her arrival; all gathered in the lounge, ready to open the piled-up gifts under the tree. Her fingers played with the fabric of her dress, biting the inside of her cheek as she warily took in all six pairs of eyes.

Kylo was already seated, looking extremely uncomfortable squished between Chewie and Lando, nursing a glass of whiskey in his large hand. It was honestly a wonder he hadn’t cracked the glass with such a strong, knuckle-white grip. And when his dark eyes finally flicked to hers, she—

No, no, no, no – there was no way they could pull this off; absolutely not. She needed… she needed to leave, she needed to get the fuck out before it all inevitably went to shit—

“Rey!” *Oh god.* “We saved you a seat – bit of a tight squeeze, but we’ll manage. Right Ben?”

Kylo – or rather, Ben – moved to get up, only to have Chewie slam him back down, a hand tight around his shoulder. “There’s no room.” He sulked, trying and failing to escape his hold. “She’s… she’s a guest.”

“How gallant of you,” Luke commented in a dry tone, never looking up from his spot beside the tree, scanning and organising the presents.

Kylo only clutched his glass tighter, jaw clamping down tight.
“We’ll make room,” Lando insisted smugly after Kylo huffed. “You can sit on my lap, if you like – it’ll be like old times; little Benny sitting on his Unca Wanwo’s lap.”

“Jesus fucking Christ.”

“Hey!” Han pointed a finger at his son. “Don’t say the lord’s name in vain. Especially on his birthday.”

“You’re not even religious.”

“I’m celebrating Christmas, aren’t I?”

“Come on Rey,” Lando taunted with a smirk, interrupting the back-and-forth from father and son, and patted the very slim space beside him. “You can help Ben get over his fear of girls.”

Her head whipped around at every little separate conversation, back and forth like a tennis match. It was all so frantic and chaotic – near impossible to keep up. Rey wondered if this was what she’d missed her whole life; if this was every major family dinner.

“Let him go, Chewie,” Leia sighed out from her spot in the armchair. “We have to get through this quickly so I don’t burn the lamb—”

“You mean Ben—” Luke stopped abruptly when Leia cast a glare his way. Rey could only silently question how much food there’d be – ham, pork, now lamb? It was a damn feast!

“Sit wherever you like, Rey—”

“On Ben’s lap – make his ears all hot and flustered. You know, when he was little and used to run around nude everywhere, his butcheeks used to go bright red; even his little willy—”

Kylo leapt from the couch, muttering obscenity after obscenity as he rushed to the corner, right by the crackling fire – as it turned out, his ears were definitely red. And of course, the desperate woman inside was dying to know if his arse was the same story.
“Well, I suppose that made it easier,” Han commented dryly, leaning against Leia’s armchair, arms folded firmly across his chest. “But I don’t appreciate you calling my son’s penis ‘little’—”

“Oh, for fuck sake, are we ever going to get on with it?” Kylo seethed – it was very strange to see his long limbs tucked in; for once, he didn’t look like the intimidating thirty-five year old she’d come to know him as – in this case, he looked every bit like a sulking boy.

Rey blinked as the silence stretched on and cautiously took the seat between Lando and Chewie, an involuntary sigh escaping her.

“Don’t you worry, little starfighter.” Kylo grew impossibly more tense as Lando threw an arm around her shoulders, pulling her in close. She’d never seen him so…so alive with anger (even Hux hadn’t put him in such a sour mood); the violent sneer that he wore was honestly… well, there was something quite unnerving about it – or maybe it was just the uncomfortable position Lando had her in. “What’s between your legs is no matter to her. Rey’s got a boyfriend so there’s no room to impress.”

Oh god. Oh god, oh god, oh god, Jesus, fuck, why?

His eyes were on her in an instant – violently wide and searching her whole entire face, her whole entire body.

“Boyfriend?” Leia’s small smile went straight to her eyes. “You should’ve brought him around, Rey. This one wouldn’t be so brave, then.” Leia tipped her wine glass in Lando’s direction. “I’d also love to meet him.”

Rey opened her mouth to protest, fighting her way out of Lando’s hold.

“’Scope him out,” Chewie grunted, Han nodding in approval.

She stuttered out a few ‘I’s’, very aware that Kylo’s gaze was still burning hot.

“Yeah, I think it’s high-time we meet him.”
“I don’t have a boyfriend!” Rey snapped. “I’ve told you this multiple times, now… I *just – he’s not my boyfriend.* I don’t know why you’re all so… so *set* on the idea of me having someone. Because I’m *perfectly* fine on my own. Happy, even.”

A pause.

“You sure sound it.”

Naturally, her response was to grab a cushion from the lounge and hurl it in Luke’s direction.

“Are we *ever* going to open any presents?” Han grumbled. “It’s the only reason anyone celebrates this dumb tradition.”

Kylo muttered something about ‘hypocrisy’, glaring at his feet while Luke was forced into the vital duty of handing out the presents. Rey could only play with the fabric of her dress, trying to steady her breathing; trying to *level* her head and not question every little thing about her life, this situation or her whole bloody existence.

So far, it *wasn’t* working.

Kylo, however, seemed to be doing well. *Very* well, if his stony silence was anything to go by. As the presents were passed along and the room picked up in energy (blessedly *free* of teasing), he only kept to himself and the few presents he received; a small smile the *only* indication of any appreciation while unwrapping a set of… *pens.*

Strange. She didn’t see the significance of pens – sure, they looked *thicker* than usual but…

Rey’s eyes widened when his hand found her own gift. And naturually, that only brought his gaze up and onto her. What would he think? Would he like it, would he *hate* it?

“Rey.”

She froze as Luke suddenly blocked her view. One brief look over his shoulder had her stomach churning.
“Haven’t opened your gifts yet?”

His piercing blue gaze narrowed in.

“I, um… It’s just all really new. I’m kind of in a daze here.” Rey breathed out. “The whole atmosphere is different. It’s… a change for the Christmas I’m used to.”

“Ah,” he murmured. “I understand that.” He nodded. “Very interesting gift, by the way.”

Oh. Right. How could she forget? The book about his own shitty father abandoning his kids to fuel on his art. Interesting gift, indeed.

“I do wonder how you knew about Vader.” She almost choked. “He was… well, a brilliant artist – infamous amongst the art scene. The general public, not so much.” Luke paused. “Did that artist have anything to do with it?”

Yes.

“No.” Rey cleared her throat and shifted in her seat, wincing as Lando shouted something over her head at Han. “I, uh, googled artists of the twentieth century. He was on the list and, um, I thought you’d enjoy it. I just… it was an intriguing story.”

“Oh, yes. Nothing better than a tragic story to go with one’s art.” She winced. “I’m sure it’ll be an interesting read. A little morbid, but that’s to be expected. Thank you for such a thoughtful gift, Rey.” He glanced back, once more, taking in his nephew’s stoic actions. “Now open your gifts – a few of us are waiting on your reaction.”

She followed his line of sight, meeting the two faces of the people who were so very important to her. Han looking sheepish and Leia, straight-faced but with eager eyes that glowed in the light.

Rey picked up the first lumpy gift at her feet; a joint present from Chewie and Luke, it seemed, and began to slowly unravel it – doing her very best to keep the paper intact.

“Oh!” she gasped. “Oh, gosh, you shouldn’t have!”
“Chewie’s sick of hugging you to keep you warm.” Luke stated, watching on as Rey plucked up the new blue coat that was... god, it was so soft and warm and undoubtedly expensive. “And I was just offended by that rag you call a coat – so, we thought this would be appropriate.”

“It’s gorgeous!” She exclaimed, grinning wide as Chewie pulled her in for a bone crunching hug. “And way too much.”

After gushing over her coat, mumbling nonsense about how fluffy and warm it was while clutching it to her chest and squealing like a kid, Rey moved onto Lando’s present.

Of course, it made her laugh; a small bobble-head of himself, dressed in his race gear ready to go.

“All you need is a car and you can look at me every day.”

“Sounds like a bleak future,” she muttered dryly. “Though, since I’m on your keys, I suppose it’s fair.”

Finally, she moved to the last present, hesitantly placing it on her lap. When she looked up, both Han and Leia gave her an encouraging smile – and god, it was an instant rush of warmth that washed over her body; the uncommon feeling of love given freely to her – or maybe that was just her being hopeful. But for now, it soothed every little nerve in her body.

And that was all that mattered.

She opened it cautiously.

“Oh,” Rey gasped, fingers running down the red leather-bound scrapbook. When she opened the cover, her eyes instantly connected with the neat scrawl on the inside.

For Rey,

To forever cherish your loving family;

and, to hopefully expand, one day.

Han & Leia xoxo
It was a scrapbook. A scrapbook that had pictures of her and Finn and Poe and Rose, all huddled together at Kanata’s; dressed in their silly Halloween costumes from the year before.

There was a picture of her and Han, grease-stained; a picture of Chewie, squeezing her with warmth in one of his hugs – there were pictures of Rey and Rose prettying up BB, giving him a bowtie. So many pictures, so many people.

“I…” She stuttered. “This is so beautiful. I can’t – seriously, thank you so much. It’s…”

Han’s lips quirked up into a lopsided grin, moving to rest a hand on his wife’s shoulder. “I think she likes it.”

Leia laughed and followed to rest her hand on top – an incredibly intimate gesture that had Rey’s heart soaring; how two people could love each other so much; how lucky she was to witness that herself.

“It wasn’t just us. Finn helped out a lot; picking them out, helping us print them – we couldn’t figure out how to use that machine.”

“Oh.” She murmured, fingers skimming over a photo of just her and Finn – two big matching grins, one hand slung over the shoulder and huddled close. They joy was immeasurable... their friendship was immeasurable.

She should’ve called him back. Or texted. God, she had so much to tell him.

Rey truly was incredibly stupid to be so- so withholding.

“I love it.”

Rey’s eyes scanned over the pictures, the pretty design – everything. Her very big happy family; the one she’d made, all by herself.

But of course, it didn’t include everyone she cared for.

There were no pictures of Kylo. There should’ve been pictures of Kylo.

When she looked up, misty-eyed and touched by such a thoughtful present, her eyes went straight to him; clutching the very album that was meant for Ben Solo.
But he wasn’t Ben Solo or Kylo Ren anymore.

 Truthfully, Rey didn’t have a clue as to who he was.

 Right now, he was a stranger – an estranged child to the two people she considered to be the parental figures she was never privileged to have. But he didn’t belong to Han and Leia and he didn’t belong to her.

 The thought made her head pound all over again.

 “Well,” Leia began. “Shall we get dinner on the table?”

 ~ * ~

 They were facing each-other. Of course, that’d be the case – sitting opposite each other, right in front of the potato-bake and the salad. Though, he wouldn’t look at her directly in the eye, gaze set firmly on the tablecloth.

 Apparently Kylo preferred to keep his mouth shut, only moving his jaw to clench and unclench his teeth, grinding them to their breaking point, no doubt.

 Everyone else, however, seemed rather upbeat and happy; engrossed in their own little conversations as they patiently waited to dig in.

 Han nudged her with an elbow.

 “Would you like a drink, kid?” He gestured to his own beer. “I should’ve asked before, but I forgot.”

 “There’s a bottle of wine you might as well bring out Han,” Leia mumbled as she set the last platter of food on the table, completing the very large feast that quickly had her drooling, (though, eating did seem impossible considering how constricted her whole stomach felt).

 “What’re you after, Gummy? Feeling a beer?”

 *Something strong enough to kill her thoughts.*
“Maybe a glass of wine.” She smiled shyly. “It feels appropriate for this banquet.” Leia snorted her laughter.

Han moved to get up. “Alright—”

“I can get it,” Kylo blurted. “The wine, I mean.”

“No need, I can manage. Anyone else in need of a refill?” A few loud shouts went up throughout the room. “What about you, kid? Want a top-up?”

Kylo shook his head and refused to meet his father’s gaze. “No, I should stay sober enough for the drive home.”

“Home?” Leia questioned as Han shuffled out of the room. “I thought… weren’t you staying the night?”

“No.”

“Oh, well – well you could always stay. Your old bed’s all made up, nice and cosy—”

“I’m not staying, mom,” he announced curtly. “Why would I do that?”

“To spend time with your family, maybe?” Luke interjected.

“Oh.” Kylo looked up. “And you consider yourself family?”

Silence loomed over the table, a palpable energy that had her squirming in her seat. So this was a family disagreement.

It was stifling.

“I hope you like expensive red wine, Rey,” Han announced, hands full with drinks. “Only the finest vintage for the princess, over here.”
Leia scoffed. But there was no biting remark, like she expected. Just a shimmer of pain in those dark chocolate eyes – the very same pair that belonged to the man opposite her; a similarity that would never not remind her of how ridiculously clueless she was.

She cleared her throat. “Wine is wine. I’ll take anything.”

“Wise words.” Lando sent her a wink. “Pour me a glass, Solo – I’m feeling a little fancy, tonight.”

Han did the rounds, moving around the table to place another beer in front of Chewie; to top up Luke’s glass and fill Lando’s and her own before sitting down.

“Shall we say a word of prayer?” he joked.

“Just serve yourself, idiot,” Leia mumbled, pinching his elbow before turning to get a heaping of vegetables.

There was something so clearly off in the atmosphere, though everyone was desperate to ignore it as they went around the table; getting a serving of each different meat, choosing between salad and veggies and loading on the gravy or sauces.

Rey couldn’t ignore the bitter opinion that resided within, though – she couldn’t ignore the level of negativity in his voice when Kylo shut down his hopeful mother.

It was painful to watch – to see her eagerness fall to nothing; to watch her carry on as if nothing had happened; as if she didn’t deserve an apology for his snappish rebuttal.

And Luke. It was if there was nothing but resentment between the two. Seeing Kylo so quick to disown his own blood relative was… downright fucking infuriating.

It was all she could think about as idle conversation was passed around the table – Rey could only quietly chew her food and sip at her wine while mulling it all over.
There was so much to take in and too little time to properly react.

And, perhaps she was just being a little paranoid, but Luke’s eyes flicked between the two; as if he knew their little secret.

“So how’s this art project coming along, Ben?” Luke asked, an unreadable expression flickering in his eyes. “Still set for a September viewing, I imagine.”

“It’s good,” Kylo muttered, fiddling with a piece of ham using his fork. When he looked up and found all eyes on him, a deep flush began to creep up his neck. “It’s very time consuming, but a month is enough to finish it all off.”


“Actually, Ben, Rey here is modelling for an art project.”

A long pause. He looked up slowly, a twitch prevalent in his right eye.

“O-oh.” He huffed out dryly, clearing his throat. “What type of modelling?”

*Was he really so daft to ask that question?*

A laugh went up in the room with Lando barking it all out into his hand. “Wouldn’t you like to know, Benny.” He smirked at his ‘nephew’. “You could take a page from her artist’s book, you know. It might improve your mood, for one.”

“Lando, enough—”

“You know,” Luke began loudly, interrupting his sister’s scolding with ease. “I’ve been wondering about this project of yours a lot.” Luke ran a hand through his beard, the sound of cutlery scraping against ceramic setting every nerve in Rey’s body amuck. “This wheel-of-emotions. I wonder how exactly that fits. I mean, you must have a recurring theme or object or… or model, perhaps. Something that is always present, and yet – and yet has the ability to change; something to show emotion, of course.”
Kylo inhaled deeply. “I’d rather keep that secret. For the showing.”


“It will be.” Kylo seethed. “Believe it or not, this is some of my best work—”

“I’ll believe it when I see it, Ben—”

“You’re quite judgemental for someone who couldn’t quite pass the legacy of his own father. Always so quick to condescend when you never truly made it, did you?”

“Ben—”

“That’s what the whole industry says. Your art is good – Luke Skywalker is a good artist; talented and unique. But Anakin Vader was great with art that inspired raw emotion – like the greats before him, his art inspired the generations to come.” Ben let out a humourless snort. “You were so quick to condemn his methods; to prove that success could still be achieved your own special way—”

“It’s no surprise to see you following in his footsteps, Ben,” Luke remarked dryly. “To see you throw your life away; throw your family away, like we’re nothing—”

“You treated me like nothing—”

“And if that’s who you want to be, fine. You want to push everyone away, go ahead. There’ll be potential investors at this gallery opening – perhaps they’ll take an interest and you’ll finally take off – be rid of us for good, just how you want it.” Luke shrugged. “And you’ll only end up like your grandfather; a lonely drug addict with suicidal tendencies—”

“Stop it!” Leia boomed. “Would you just quit it. I don’t – he’s not to be mentioned in this house; not with me here. And if this petty, childish behaviour continues in my house, you can kiss art goodbye as a topic of discussion.”
Vader had... had he really...

“Can’t we just have a nice Christmas dinner? Just put everything behind you for a night? Is that too much to ask?”

She watched Kylo’s lip tremble; she watched his eyes morph into a thousand and one different emotions, his hands clutching his cutlery so tight it could’ve left welts.

“No,” he stated simply. “I can’t sit here and pretend to forget what he did.”


What? This was all so much. This was all too much.

From the way his lip curled down into a sneer, to the way he hissed out his next words.

Rey was in shock.

“You started it. You lied to me... you promised me—” His hand came down onto the table, rattling the whole floor, jolting the plates. His face was deranged, unsettling in every sense; it only took one look at his eyes paired with his heavy fist coming down with a bang to draw forth a wild flinch, elbow knocking over the fine (and expensive) wine glass, staining the intricate white cloth with a vibrant blood red.

“Oh shit,” Rey gasped at the shattering sound that broke through the intense argument. “Oh, shit – Leia, I’m so sorry. Oh, god—” She grabbed a wad of serviettes, folded so delicately only to be crumpled up uselessly as a desperate attempt to quell the stain. “Oh god, um – do you have paper towel? Oh, no, I promise I’ll pay for it—”

“Rey, it’s alright,” she hushed out soothingly. “It’s fine, don’t worry abo—be careful you don’t slice your fingers.”

“No, no it’s not alright. This is just...” a nightmare. She thought over and over, reaching for more serviettes with a shaky hand—
“Hey,” Kylo said softly, his hand covering her own. “It’s alright. I’ll clean it up.” She looked up, lips parting as his eyes reassured her anxiety. “It’s fine. It was my fault for scaring you.”

Luke suddenly laughed. An eerie, drawn out chuckle that spread goosebumps all over her body.

The smirk on his face was enough to have the whole table silent.

“That artist of yours, Rey; correct me if I’m wrong, but his initials are KR, yes?” She didn’t say a word. “And Ben – your art name is the same, isn’t it? What is it again… Kyle Ron? Kylo Ren?” He laughed again. “Yes, that’s it. It all makes sense, now.”

“What exactly are you implying, Luke?” Leia knew what he was implying – Rey knew what he was implying. Hell, judging by the way everyone’s eyes snapped to her, they all knew what was implied. Only Han was left to gape on and question what exactly was going on.

“Just… it’s just so typical you’d have to pay someone to ‘enjoy’ your company.”

It was almost like a physical slap to her face. And with the way Kylo recoiled; the way every muscle in his body tensed, gearing up to pounce… it had been as awful for him as it was to her.

In the long beat of silence, Kylo took a step closer.

“Did you just fucking suggest that?” He seethed quietly. “Did you really just fucking say what I think you did?” He began to shout. “Insult me all you want – I don’t fucking care, but don’t you fucking dare imply that she’s selling herself like that; don’t you dare suggest that I’m paying her to fuck me!” Kylo huffed out, his eyes as dark as night - narrowed in so thinly at Luke she expected him to attack in seconds. “She’s the model for my work. Nothing more.”

Nothing more.

Rey couldn’t breathe.
Kylo’s explosive words sent the whole world into chaos.
And Rey was present to watch every little reaction.
Lando started laughing. Loudly – big, chest-heaving, booming laughter that erupted out of him like it couldn’t be contained. “Wait…” he said in-between laughs. “You… you’re posing for Ben!”

Her whole body felt incredibly hot for such a cold winter’s night – heating up with every second with every single person looking at her.

Chewie was kind enough to muffle Lando’s ongoing laughter, one hand clamping over the man’s mouth as Leia shot her a pitying look.

But Han… Han was just staring at her blankly; mouth open, eyes moving between his son and herself quickly. Like he couldn’t believe what was happening.

“I…” He stuttered out, a finger pointing to her and then to his son. “KR is Ben. You… you’re posing for—”

She could cry. She could scream. She could hide away forever and never go outside again.

“Okay!” Leia announced brightly, though even her tone held a hint of fatigue. “How about we all calm down with some cake?”

“No!” Rey suddenly cried out. “No, please, it’s rubbish. I don’t— it’s awful.”

“Nonsense, Rey. I bet it’s lovely,” Rey could only open and close her mouth. “I’m sure it’ll… it’ll bring the level of energy down to a nice, quiet pace.” With horror, she watched as she slipped out of her seat – disappearing into the kitchen since her and Kylo could only watch on in shock.

It all happened so quickly. Luke was just staring, his eyes studying her every move and Han seemed to be in shock; like he couldn’t quite fathom what had just happened. Chewie wouldn’t stop shooting her worried looks and Lando… Christ, if Lando didn’t stop laughing she’d be tempted to stab a fork into his hand.

And then there was Kylo. He’d turned to face her, with apologetic eyes and a permanent furrowed frown.

The longer the seconds went by, the more questions she asked.

Why?
It all went so achingly slow and yet so incredibly fast. Everything she’d come to love was quickly dissolving before her eyes; the perfect family that was the Organa-Solo’s crumbled into something else entirely.

And Kylo was right in the thick of it.

Rey held her breath.

Leia returned with the Tupperware.

Han was still gaping at her.

Kylo wouldn’t look away – or was it Ben? She didn’t know anything anymore.

She lifted the lid.

“Here we—”

Her sentence faltered upon looking at the cake.

Silence rang out through the room.

“This is… this is my mother’s recipe.” Leia looked back to Ben. And then to her.

The final nail in the coffin.

“I think… I think I should go.”

It was all she could say before turning on her heel.

“Rey—”

It was his voice who called out. But she didn’t turn back. Rey walked right out that door, willing to brave it out in the cold just to get an Uber.

She forgot her coat. She forgot all her presents. She didn’t even get to try the crackle or the cake.

But there was no way in hell she was going back inside. There was no way she was facing Kylo.
“Rey.”

She turned hastily.

His eyes were ablaze – desperation present; a pleading question within. And he was so tall – he’d always been so tall, but now… now he was dark and imposing and intimidating. It was if they’d gone back in time with Rey standing on his doorstep. Waiting for a handshake that never came.

She took a step back as he advanced forward.

“Rey,” he said softly. “I didn’t… you didn’t need to see that. It was…” He trailed off, hand clenched by his sides as he searched for a word. It never came. “Let me – I can drive you home, now. We can go somewhere quiet and… talk. I think… we obviously need to talk.”

No. No. No.

“No,” she stated clearly. “No, I’m not going anywhere with you. Not now, not when I…” Rey shook her head, a persistent lump in her throat begging for the tears to flow freely. “I don’t… I don’t even know who you are. I don’t even know what just happened and I just… I need to process everything. I need time—”

“You do,” he insisted hotly, another step closer. “You do, you know me. Better than anyone else, better than they do. You know me, Rey.”

“No,” she whispered as the first tear began to slip down her cheek. “No, you’ve done—” She sighed deeply, biting down hard on her lip and rubbing that damned tear away with the back of her hand. “I don’t know what you’ve done but… but – you lied to me. Or-or withheld the truth.” She laughed – harsh and bitter on her tongue. “And just yesterday you were – you said honesty was easy with me; that it seemed to ‘pour’ out with me around.” She looked down at her feet as a spark of anger went throughout her body – the only thing that kept her from freezing in the cold. “And I didn’t even know your real name; I trusted that like a stupid, naïve girl; I blindly trusted you.”

The cold wind whipped at their faces under the dark sky, moon shining down to illuminate only half of Kylo Ren’s handsome face. One sad eye; a fraction of the frown to his lips and his prominent nose, cut straight down the middle, the other side nothing more but a blurred shadow.

How fitting.
“Right,” he said softly – eerily calm, eyes rounded in on her and only her. “Is that really it, Rey? You’ve picked your sides so easily.”

“They were right about you. You are violent and harsh and rude – you don’t care about them at all and yet… and yet they still try.” She exhaled loudly. “You push them away. Just like your grandfather. Just for your art—"

“My art is literally centred around you, Rey.” He ran a hand down his mouth, roughly, controlling or quelling something; anger, irritation, frustration – she didn’t know. She couldn’t get a single read on him anymore. Not after this. “I told you I didn’t agree with Vader’s methods. It has nothing to do with my family or their toxic bullshit – they don’t fuel my passion. Only you. Just you.”

It wasn’t fair. He… he couldn’t just say things like that.

“You lied,” she croaked out dryly,

“Is that really all?” he inquired softly. For the second time that night, he reached out caught the tears that fell. “Or is it something deeper? Because this is your family, no – Han and Leia, so loving and caring and… parental,” Kylo muttered softly. “Admitting that they’re far from perfect is hard. Admitting that they’re shitty parents would break you, wouldn’t it? Because you’ve finally found your place; you’ve finally found your purpose.” His hand moved across her cheek, down to tilt up her chin, forcing her to look him directly in the eye.

“But they’re nothing like what you thought, are they?”

“Shut up!”

“You think they care about you, Rey? You really think that when they didn’t care for their own son?” He paused, letting the words sink in. “You’re nothing to them, Rey.” The tears spilled over constantly, now – a sharp pain piercing at her chest with his words. “They’ll only disappoint you. And soon enough, you’ll realise just how little you matter to them.”

“That’s not true!” she insisted loudly, batting his hand away.

“And your so-called friends?” He scoffed. “You think they care as well? Leaving you all alone without a single thought for your well-being. They don’t care Rey. And the sooner you realise, the better off you’ll be!”
“Stop,” Rey protested weakly.

“You’re nothing to them,” he repeated thickly, once more. The words ringing in her ears like a distant explosion. “You’re nothing.”

He inhaled a shaky breath. He sucked in his bottom lip. His wet eyes searched her own.

“But not to me.”

Rey could only stare ahead numbly.

Finally, she shook her head. “You’re wrong.”

They do care. Finn loved her. Han loved her. Leia loved her.

“I am not nothing. They care, I matter!”

The Uber pulled up.

Rey backed away slowly, weak and boneless from his cruel words.

Kylo opened his mouth once more.

“Rey,” he hushed out. “Please.”

Give me a chance.

She took off down the porch steps, bolting to the Uber, nearly slipping in the process, and hopped into the safety of the car; desperate to catch her breath.

When she turned to look back at the stranger, her eyes were drawn to the flecks of white present in his raven black hair.

It was the first snowfall of the season.
and some of you actually thought New Years would go as planned... oh, it makes my evil heart soar with joy!

OKAY, FIRSTLY LET ME JUST THANK EVERYONE WHO READS AND COMMENTS AND BOPS THAT KUDOS BUTTON. You never fail at motivating my lazy butt, so really, thank you all -- especially since we cracked the big 2000 and I honestly can't even tell you how crazy that it. Never in my life did I expect to get over 200 kudos let alone 2000. That is freaking insane so seriously, thank you SO MUCH! I love each and every one of you!

Now, onto the goodies. The amazing, wonderfully talented @Selunchen did an absolutely stunning art piece of one of my favourite scenes! If you haven't seen it, I highly suggest you check it out right now! You can find that here

And the beautiful @rileybabe did a GORGEOUS moodboard that really captures the whole fic and I just can't. Both of these made me sob like a bubba so BE SURE TO CHECK THEM OUT and GIVE THEM SO LOVE.

Thank you so much, again. I apologise for the angst -- we're in for a patch of it, I'm afraid. These kids really need to get their shit together, lmao.

Also, I'm a bit behind on responding to comments. I try and make them detailed and lengthy and was 100% gonna do it after work tonight but it's 12:30am and I'm dead. I didn't think it'd take so long to post this haha. But they'll be good by tomorrow, I swear (technically today, I guess).

Cheers X

Also, for all the thirsty Reyl-hoes out there, here's that NSFW dream sequence hehe.
It was funny. Funny how she really thought she’d spend NYE in his arms. Funny how he hadn’t called or messaged or done anything in the short break between Christmas and now. It was fucking hilarious that, in actuality, Rey counted down the year sobbing into a pillow rather than moaning into one like she’d stupidly dared to hope.

Yeah. It was real funny.

Han had called, though. So had Leia. And the unknown number that appeared more than once, assumed to be none other than Luke Skywalker. She’d pressed down hard on that big, bright red icon, each and every time.

Rey was… well, Rey was a lot of things; her emotions coming in different stages. One minute she had the urge to scream at several people and the next she was facedown on the couch, comfortably numb.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

God, she could talk about it for hours; Rey could rant and rant for days; ramble until her voice became nothing more than a rasp and far too sore to speak.

“No.” She answered, voice dull and monotone, eyes never leaving the bright tv as vibrant colours flashed on the screen; a montage of fireworks, celebrating the new year.

“Well.” Rose was staring. She could feel those wide brown eyes, set so intently in her direction. And one look would’ve surely sent her spiralling again. “Well, I’m here. You know I’m always here, Rey.”
If only she’d spent Christmas with the Ticos.

“Sure.”

They don’t care. You’re nothing to them. You’re nothing.

Rey sucked in a deep breath and shut her eyes tight. She had Rose. Rose cared. Rose was here. She wasn’t nothing.

“Thank you,” Rey finally muttered, voice muffled from her position on the couch. “For answering. For being here.”

She felt and heard her shift. “You don’t have to thank me, Rey. You were… you are very upset. I just wish I knew what was going on.” Rose paused as if deliberating her words very carefully. “You’ve been… well, you’ve been very secretive lately. It has me a little worried.”

Rey stayed silent. Her fingers picked at the fabric beneath her, nervously pinching and twisting it.

“Does it have something to do with that guy?” Rose asked gently. “The guy who came to Kanata’s and just, you know, scooped you up like you weighed nothing; carried you out in his pyjamas.”

“No,” she blurted quickly, finally glancing over at her friend. “Yes.” Rey’s act began to crumble. “Kind of—there’s just a _lot_ to it. It’s… complicated.”

“Right.” Suddenly, her eyes lit up with mischief. “Are you and him a thing – you seemed pretty cosy at _Pho Tico_?”

_She’s the artist for my work. Nothing more._

Nothing more.

Nothing.
“No.”

“But you… you want it to be, yes?”

Rey opened her mouth. Several times, actually – closing it, struggling to find an answer because… because she didn’t know what she wanted anymore.

“He’s the artist.”


“Rose!”

“What?” She giggled. “He’s very – I mean, just look at him. He literally carried you out of a bar in socks, Rey – SOCKS!” Rey couldn’t help but smile at her friend’s excitement “What is he, six-foot-five?! Dude must be hung—”

“Oh, my God.”

“And, did you see that very, very tight t-shirt he was wearing. Maybe it was just the alcohol, but I’m ninety-nine percent sure he has bigger boobs than me. But, like, tits of pure muscle—”

Rey snorted, unable to hold in her laughter, Rose following right behind, joining in as they laughed and laughed and laughed. So much that her chest began to ache and breathing became difficult, and god at this moment, she was just… happy, finally – after five days of a consecutive negative mood, it was nice to finally smile; to finally breathe and laugh again and… and—

Rose stopped abruptly with a squeak upon noticing her tears. Her loud, chest-wracking sobs that shook her whole body.

“Oh.” She shuffled over quickly. “Oh, I thought I was cheering you up. God, Rey, I’m so sorry.”
“No,” she cried out, letting herself become enveloped in Rose’s warm embrace. “No, it’s not your fault. It’s just me… I’m just so incredibly stupid.”

Rose didn’t bother to shut her down on her self-pity, nor did she pry or prattle on and on with a rant. She just said three little words. And it was everything Rey needed to hear.

“I love you.”

She could only cry harder at the words; clutch at her t-shirt, head buried in her shoulder, as Rose rocked her gently on the couch. She didn’t shush or mutter anything else, only held Rey close to her chest – as if she was trying to squeeze all the bad thoughts from her body. Her fingertips soothed the tense muscles in Rey’s back, the embrace keeping her warm and wanted.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered, over and over – because Rose shouldn’t have given up a good celebratory evening for this. She should’ve wallowed in misery on her own like she’d been doing since Christmas. She shouldn’t have called Rose. It was rude and selfish; Rey was rude and selfish.

“I’m sorry.”

“No, Rey. You have nothing to apologise for.” A moment of shifting had Rey’s head in the other woman’s lap, her fingers drawing soothing circles into her scalp as she fought for composure; the tears dulling down to silent sniffles. “How many times have you helped me out, down at Pho Tico —”

“This is different—”

“You’re giving me your time, I’m giving you mine,” she said fiercely. “We help each other out.” Rose sighed. “I care about you, Rey. I feel sick to know you’ve been holed up in this apartment for however knows long, upset and alone. You should’ve called me sooner.”

“I didn’t… I didn’t want to take away your holiday.”

“You’re more important than a holiday, Rey.” Rey played with the material of her shirt as Rose spoke quietly. “You deserve to have someone at your side; to comfort you, however you need it. You deserve that and— I just… I’ve never seen you like this.”

She closed her eyes and breathed in deeply, the whole conversation morphing into a self-realisation
that was almost impossible to grasp. How guarded she was, even with her closest friends – people she’d now spent years and years with, never seeing her breakdown at least once. Never witnessing her so emotionally spent that she was numb and hollow inside.

But Kylo knew her, inside and out – he knew the delicate curves to her body, he could trace every flaw, he saw her fears and raised her hopes. He’d listened when she talked about Finn; when she talked about her past, which was always so hard to put into words. Kylo knew everything.

And Rey knew nothing.

“I don’t…” She huffed out quickly. “Can we change the subject? Talking about this is making me —”

“Guess what Paige got me for Christmas!” Rose hushed out excitedly, following her request without a single acknowledgement of it. “The whole H-P book set!”

“Don’t you already have the Harry Potter series?” Rey asked softly, brows scrunched together.

“No, no, no,” Rose argued quickly. “That site is wrong and I refuse to listen to it. Seriously, Pottermore is garbage – and believe me, I’ve tried to love it, I really have, but if JK thinks my Patronus is a beaver from a few stupid ‘which do you prefer’ questions…” Rose huffed. “I’m very obviously a—”

“A wolf,” Rey interrupted quickly. “You’re loyal and protect your pact,” Rey reasoned, deep in thought. “Also, you’ll cut a bitch if they cross you—”

Rose snorted. “Okay. I was going to say a dog – although, which breed I’m not sure – but I’ll definitely take wolf.”

A small smile spread across her face. But then, of course, naturally, her mind wandered back to Kylo Ren; particularly, what Hogwarts house he’d fit into, which was so ridiculously stupid – only, her shattered heart was insistent on Slytherin, because he was rude and mean and downright nasty with his words. Her brain, however, knew he was an impulsive Gryffindor with Ravenclaw insights – so, so, so stupid, why—
With a loud crack, both girls screamed as the door to Rey’s apartment burst open, practically scrambling to each other’s laps out of pure instinct. But then Rey’s eyes adjusted to the swift motion of movement, gaze widening ever-so-slightly as she recognised who had opened the door.

The only other person who had a key to the apartment.

“Finn,”

She couldn’t… no, Finn was in Yavin with Poe – but Finn was here and… and so was Poe. But why and how—

“Hi.” He said softly, hands buried in the pockets of his jeans.

A long beat of silence went and passed, her heartbeat the only sound thrumming loudly in her ears. Her stomach dropped, head light and airy – everything felt hot and cold at the same time.

“Hey. Hi. Hello.”

She could feel her heart pounding against her ribcage as they continued to stare at each other like a blink would cause either one to disappear.

“Okay,” Rose said brightly. “How about a drive, Poe?”

“I just spent seven hours in a car.”

“A walk, then—”

“You’re in your pyjamas, Tico.”

“Poe.” Finn spoke again, nodding his head in the direction of the door. “Just… just take Rose and yourself home and, uh, I’ll stay the night.” Finn paused, nervously looking back at her. “If I’m welcome, of course.”
She could only nod numbly.

“Okay, okay,” Poe sighed out, sending a terse nod at Rose. “But she’s buying me a McFlurry.”

Rose only nodded happily, jumping off from the couch, leaning down to press a kiss to her cheek before following Poe back out of the apartment door. Rey cherished the whispered ‘good luck’ close to her chest as the door slammed, leaving only her and Finn. Alone. Together, again.

“Hi,” He repeated breathily.

“How did you…” She bit her lip, stopping herself at the sound of such a whining tone. “I thought you were in Yavin.”

“I was.” He nodded and very slowly made his way across to the couch. “Rose called.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah. She said you were upset – more than upset; distraught, really. She mentioned that you’d been alone for days, just… wallowing in this apartment and I couldn’t… I couldn’t just stay there, knowing that you were like this because of…”

He breathed in deeply.

“No!” she shouted. “No, no, no – no! This isn’t… this wasn’t… this wasn’t related at all to you. In any way, it was—” Rey broke off shakily as another fresh wave of tears fell upon her. “It was Han.” She whispered wetly. “And Leia and Luke and Lando and Chewie.” She breathed out. “And Kylo.”

There was a beat of silence that her sniffles broke through, occasionally, Finn frozen still as his eyes narrowed in with each passing second.

“Wait, what? Kylo, as in the artist? Was he the one who carried you out of the bar.”

“Yes. Yes, that was Kylo; it was Kylo I was texting, too. That day, when we were packing up all
your stuff. It was just about our next session and I never told you it was him because I... I really like him; I really, really like him Finn; he listens and he cares and he’s so incredibly good to me. And he’ll never like me back and that’s so humiliating to admit,” Rey croaked out.

“Just, hold on a sec, Rey, slow down—”

“But then he... then I found out that Han and Leia had a son and he turned out to be their son. His name isn’t Kylo, it’s actually Ben and he has a really shitty relationship with his parents and I don’t know who or what to believe.” Rey rattled out. “And... and we tried to keep it a secret; god knows why, but we tried. Except Luke caught us out and then implied that I was sleeping with him for money and Han and Leia will never look at me the same again because they think I’m selling myself to their son and apparently I mean nothing to everyone in my life except Kylo – that no one cares or gives a shit and, god, it was like he could actually read my mind because I’ve thought that for the last two decades of my existence—”

“Rey!” He shouted, cutting through her nervous rant with ease. She watched as he tiredly walked over, rubbing his eyes with one hand. “Christ.” Finn muttered, dropping to the couch. “What have you gotten yourself into, Rey—”

“I don’t know.” She moaned as Finn’s arms wrapped around her and the feeling of home came rushing back instantly; she’d missed this. “It’s just... I’m so confused. I don’t know what to do. Han and Leia keep calling and Kylo hasn’t sent me a single text.” She sighed. “I’m just... I can’t.”

He hummed, his hand rubbing back and forth across her back, a comforting touch that had her melting into his chest.

“So this Kylo, the artist. You’ve been seeing him?”

“No.” She shouted quickly. “Did you not hear what I said?”

“You were talking pretty fast peanut. I didn’t understand much, to be perfectly honest.” She scowled at his soft smile, gifted her way. “But just... give me a second here. You have feelings for this artist, who is also the son of Han and Leia, but is estranged and distant and that’s why you never knew about his existence until now.”

“She nodded.”

“And Luke called you a prostitute? What the f—'
“Yes. In front of everyone.” She sighed. “But Kylo… he said such awful things and I – I can’t stop thinking about him, but I should because what he said was… I think it really fucked me up, Finn. I’ve always tried to repress my past – you know this better than anyone. But his words, they… God, it fucking hurt.”

“Fuck.” He hissed. “What a mess.” Finn scratched at his cheek, flushing slightly, his guilty eyes pleading with her own. “I wish I’d stayed. I shouldn’t have just left you here, without knowing you had a plan or saying goodbye. I’m such an ass, Rey—”

“No. Finn, please—”

“No. you deserve an apology,” Finn growled. “It was wrong.”

“No! No, you don’t have to. I’m the mess, Finn. Me!” She whimpered. “There’s no denying it. I have… I have issues. You finding love and happiness and home with Poe shouldn’t make me so… so upset – I should be fucking raving that you’ve found someone like Poe; that you’ve met your life match. But I… my mind instantly makes it out like you’re leaving me.” She was gasping for air; shuddering out her words as she explained what should’ve been said years ago. “I feel so clingy all the time and I need to let that go – I need to let you go.”

Finn didn’t dare speak. He only let her pour it all out – like a shaken soda bottle, finally popping from everything fizzing together and exploding for a breath of fresh air.

“But you were the first one who cared! You helped me out of a really shitty situation, you helped me move to a better place, you gave me a life to share. Through you, I accomplished so much; through you, I met so many people to… to grow close to.

“But you were the first one who stayed,” she cried into his chest. “And that makes me so scared. Because I can’t help it; I’ll always assume the worst. I’ll always think that there’ll come a time where you’ll leave me behind for good. Like my parents. Like my foster-houses. Like everyone.”

“Oh, peanut.” Finn murmured affectionately into her hair, his arms tightening to an inescapable hold. “You know deep down that I’m never letting you go, right?”

She laughed wetly into his shirt, grasping the material to steady herself.
“I love you, Rey. More than anyone and anything – sometimes, I think you forget that you were the first to care, too.

“You’re so strong and brave; resilient and fierce. You have no idea how talented you are, do you? How independent and willful you are. But you keep so much inside here.” He tapped her temple lightly. “And I need you to be honest with me Rey. To be honest with yourself, to try and be honest with me. I need you to try that, Rey, because you will never get better if you don’t try and help yourself.”

“I’m sorry—”

“No, don’t apologise,” He said firmly. “Never apologise for feeling this way. It’s only natural, after everything you’ve been through. But you will never move on if you don’t seek help for it, Rey. And there’s nothing wrong about asking for help.”

“How am I supposed to ask that? It’s so… hard. I’ve done everything on my own; why should I burden others now?”

“It isn’t a burden. You’re not a burden. You’re my best friend, and I’d do anything to make you feel… whole.” he murmured. “And, Rose, too. She was very happy to help you tonight, wasn’t she? And Poe was happy to drive a six-hour trip, packing everything straight away when I demanded to leave.” Finn grinned at her. “And you know I’m very much happy to help, Rey, in whatever way I can.” He paused, leaning back to look her in the eyes.

“I know.” She muttered. “I know.”

He hummed.

“I’ve missed you.” She cried gently into his chest.

“I’ve missed you so much. There’s so much to say. But I think we should start with you.” He brushed a strand of hair away from her face. “Because, Rey Niima, you are very much loved and adored around here and it is very important that we make you see the truth; that I’m here for good.

“And if we can’t help, then maybe we can consider some professional help. A therapist—”

“No. No, that will… that’ll never work!”
“You’ll never really know until you give it a try, Rey.” He taunted lightly.

“But it’s a stranger. I can’t open up to someone I don’t know. Christ, Finn, I can hardly open up to you.”

Finn pulled away, at this, turning to face her head on, crossing his legs on the couch and plucking up the mattress from the floor.

“You can practise on me, then.” He said softly, with a smile, draping the blanket over their legs. “Tell me all about this asshole Kylo. And Leia and Han and everything I missed these past four months. Spare no detail, Rey – I want to hear it all.”

For a second, she hesitated – what could she gain out of this, other than prolonging the memories that already haunted her nights?

But this was Finn; her Finn who had all but hopped in a car as soon as he knew that she was in emotional peril, journeying for six hours just to make sure she was okay.

And so she opened her mouth and began to talk; right from the very beginning, with an ad in the newspaper, looking for a nude model.

And he listened.

~ * ~

The next three days were far better than the last week she’d spent alone; Finn took her out to lunch, every day – sometimes, someplace fancy, other times around the KFC drive-thru to get the cheap nugget deal, which they’d eat in the car, the heat blasting through his Carola all the while they munched down their food to some old 90’s classics – and continuously went out of his way to say, yes, you very much do matter to me. She’d started light with a few Pho Tico shifts, relishing it (she was never one to sit still for too long; always working her butt off to make ends meet) and, after her emotionally-draining yet necessary conversation with Finn, finally called Phasma to discuss the apartment.

Over the past few days, they’d been texting regularly, with Rey offering updates on her few brief chats shared with her landlord, discussing on breaking the lease to move out as soon as possible. And so far, it was looking good – by the end of the month, to be exact.

Things were good. Or at least, better than it was.

Until now.
The first thing Rey noticed walking into Han’s shop that morning was the basket on the table in the break room. Her blue coat was folded neatly inside, with the scrapbook placed on-top including that stupid bobblehead.

The second thing she took in was the absence of Luke and Lando; the former, who was probably back at work, and the latter who had flown home. It was blessedly quiet.

The last thing that caught her eye, before the inevitable conversation took place, was Han; looking away as soon as her eyes turned on him, suddenly seeming very interested in the table.

She shifted on her feet and moved to place her bag on one of the countertops, heart racing fast.

“Han,” she said softly. “We should talk.”

When he didn’t respond, she heaved a hefty sigh, turning to face him – watching as he, yet again, quickly looked away. Was it truly that awful that he couldn’t even muster the strength to look her in the eye?

“I can’t work like this. We should’ve done this before, but…” She took a step closer, to the table. “Han, please—”

“Look, kid…” He began uneasily. “I don’t—I don’t know what you want me to say. I don’t—I’m still trying to… to get it.”

“Get what?” She scoffed. “It was literally discussed over the table, for everyone to hear. What’s not to get?”

He cleared his throat. “That, uh, whole night… is a little hazy,” he huffed. “I can’t really remember it all. Only pieces. Too much was going on and it was just…” He paused and finally glanced up, meeting her eyes for the first time that morning. “So you and my son, huh?”

“Yes,” she answered shyly.

“He… he paints you. And you g-get… you get naked for him—”
“Well, I wouldn’t quite word it like that—”

“Ben is KR. KR is Ben. You’re posing for Ben’s art project… naked. My son has seen you… nude. You…”

“Han, please – it’s not that big of a deal. He’s very respectful like I’ve mentioned many times before, and I’ve been doing this for months now. If you saw the positions he put me in, you’d know that we’re very comfortable—”

“Christ, Rey, don’t talk about positions my son puts you in—”

“Poses, then!” Rey shouts, scowling at the laughter that went up in the shop, echoing into the room. “It’s professional. It’s always been professional. Nothing inappropriate has happened, and if it was, that is my choice.”


“I understand,” Han said slowly, after a time. “I’m just – I consider you to be – I treat you like a daughter, Rey. You’ve become very important to me. And what was said at that dinner; what was implied – that never should’ve happened. I am so appalled at myself that I let that happen to you.” Han sighed. “We… well, we didn’t do anything to help.

“I should’ve attempted to stop that behaviour, from the second it started. I should’ve… I should’ve removed Luke from my house for even daring to suggest that about you. I shouldn’t have let you run out of my house. Not like that.”

“I’m sorry. Me and Leia, we’re both incredibly sorry. We tried to get in touch – but…but you seemed like you wanted to be left alone.”

“I did. I needed to get away from it all.”

“Right.” He nodded. “Well, we were wondering if you’d like to go out for dinner, sometime. Our treat. I think there’s a lot more we need to discuss.”

*Your neglectful parenting of the son you never mention?*
“Yes,” she agreed. “I’ll, um, think about it.”

“Good. That’s, uh, good.” He hummed. “There’s also – well, Luke is keen on meeting up—”

“No.”

“A separate meeting. Just the two you. To apologise in person.”

“He humiliated me in front of everyone I care about,” she huffed out. “Why should I give him my time?”

“Just an apology, Rey. That’s all. And you’ve known Luke for a while, now. People… say things and make mistakes. I’ve made plenty – just ask Leia.”

“I saw a different side to all of you that night – how you treat each other. How you treat your son. That isn’t the family I knew.” Rey warily glanced back to his soft eyes, and quietly admitted, “I don’t know what to believe anymore; I just want to move past it.”

“Just… think about that, too.”

She sighed.

“Okay. I’ll think about it.”

Silence over washed the room once more, causing the pair of them to squirm – clearly, sharing deep and meaningful conversations was rather out of place for them.

“So…” Han began once more, drawing out the word with a continuous tap of his fingers. “You don’t really expect me to go to this gallery showing now?”

She rolled her eyes and left the room, ready to start the day with some long-overdue hard work. Chewie sent her a cheek wink with a reassuring grin, easing the ever-present nerves that had settled
in her belly since December 25th.

She blew out a cool breath and walked over to the old Bug in dire need of a service.

*She could do this.*

~ * ~

It was *almost* a daunting sight – looking around the campus, students of all different ages idly walking around either in search of coffee, their class or the Uni Bar. It was… *odd,* for sure. And standing here, at the University of Takodana, could only make her wonder how different things would be if she’d stuck out her senior years – if *she* had applied to college.

Maybe she’d be an engineer or an architect – hell, *maybe* she’d have become a nurse or a lawyer; to help those in need. She’d *always* been good at fixing things (if only she could fix herself).

Though, had she gone down that path, Rey *probably* wouldn’t have ended up meeting Han. Or Leia. And even Kylo, for that matter.

But, then again, maybe that would’ve been best.

“Rey.”

She froze in her position, the buildings fading from focus after hearing his voice. Slowly, she turned, arms automatically moving to cross against her chest as Rey’s eyes found a familiar shade of blue. Luke had his hands buried in his pockets, back ramrod straight in his bland professor’s clothes.

She anxiously awaited his words.

“Thank you,” he said tonelessly, accompanied with a nod of his head. “For meeting with me.”

A gust of cold wind kicked up. Rey shivered. Though from nerves or the recent snow, she couldn’t tell.

“I can’t stay for long,” she said slowly, after a *whole* lifetime of silence had passed. “I’m, uh, on my break.” She *could’ve* stayed longer – Han was the whole reason for this, anyways. Though, the longer she stayed, the higher the chances of punching him became.

Rey swallowed thickly and nodded, slowly sidling up next to him to begin their slow pace on the path.

He didn’t talk for a time. Only walked on, hands buried deep in his pockets, occasionally looking up at his surroundings – never her, however.

“Firstly,” he began once more, voice crisp and… almost practised. “I should apologise. For my behaviour.” He paused. “My words were insulting and humiliating; for that, I am deeply sorry.” Luke’s frown deepened. “Ben has – well, he’s always inspired the worst of me. Brought out a temper that I thought only Leia possessed. I pride myself on being calm and open-minded, but with Ben… God, with Ben, he just knows where to push.”

“That doesn’t excuse it,” she stated firmly. She needed to be firm.

“I know.” He nodded softly, suddenly sounding breathless. “God, Rey, I know. What I say or do will never be enough to make up for that night. And I am so very sorry for that.”

“I… thank you. I don’t – I can’t say I particularly like you, at this moment, but… thank you for trying; for admitting that.”

“You shouldn’t be thanking me—”

“Ben hasn’t even called,” Rey blurted. “Or messaged or visited or anything. Nothing.”

He snorted. “He’s starting to show his true colours, then. I did warn you—”

“Don’t,” she snapped. “Don’t do that – you sound so condescending; like I’m this clueless little girl and you have no right. You…” She broke off, annoyed as more tears formed in her eyes. “You basically implied that I was… sleeping with him. For money.” Rey shook her head and huffed. “Not that there’s anything wrong with sex work, in the first place, so for you to say it like it’s so…” Rey clenched her jaw. “You don’t get to make me feel like absolute garbage about my decisions; what I do with my body is no one’s business but mine. And yet, you assumed – you just assumed that I was selling my body; sleeping with him to earn a paycheck, like it’s dirty.”
“Are you?”

A bubble of shocked laughter escaped her chest, eyes wide and alert after processing the words. “You’re fucking kidding me...” She muttered lowly, shifting on her feet to storm away.

“wait!” He caught her by the wrist. “Wait, that came out *horribly* wrong.” He sighed. “I only meant to ask if you are, or *were*, in a relationship with my nephew? Romantically, I mean.” He awkwardly shuffled his feet forward, gesturing for them to continue their work. “There was this connection between you and him – it was through your interactions, though little I know, I saw something.”

Finally, she breathed. “No.” *God, why did it hurt to say that so much*? “No, I’m not. What we have is strictly professional and I can’t particularly recall you wording it like that on the night—”

“I was too deep in my anger. *I wasn’t* thinking and, shamefully, I admit I was out to… *to* provoke Ben—”

“Your own nephew.”

“You don’t know the *truth*, Rey. There’s a history. A long and complicated past that is completely unknown to you.” Luke sighed. “I didn’t ask you to come here just to apologise. And I can’t say sorry enough, Rey, truly – I *ruined* something very important to you. *I’m* sorry.

“I care about you. I worry about you and I – I think it’s be best for you to stop this project between you and Ben. To *stay* away from him.”

She was almost ready to strike – to raise a hand for having the *absolute* nerve to suggest that; to think he had a *fucking* say in her decisions.

And so she exploded.

“I know! I know about your complicated past – I know all about how you criticised him and insisted he wasn’t good enough; that his art was *nothing.*” Rey hushed out, the words a violent hiss on her tongue. “I know all about Han and Leia’s distant parenting. He *told* me.”

Luke’s face darkened, a sympathetic gaze set in her direction.
“And yet, he withheld so much.” Luke took a step forward, eyes set on searching her own gaze. “Rey, there’s so much you don’t know about Ben. He’s rash and impulsive – he’s committed things that you couldn’t think him capable of—”

“So, this meeting was really just for you to push your opinion onto me, then?” Rey scoffed. “You don’t regret a single thing you said, do you? You don’t even care about how dirty you made me feel, do you?”

“That was inexcusable of me. I can’t – there’s nothing I can do to take that back,” he huffed. “But I can try and help you understand.”

“There’s nothing to understand.”

“Did Ben tell you he was a student of mine, once?” Luke asked swiftly. “Did he tell you about the graduation gallery?” She froze on the spot, every muscle tense as the words rolled off Luke’s tongue. “Did he mention his little ‘tantrum’? Although, most would consider it a crime.”

“Wh—I don’t—”

“Of course you don’t, Rey. Why would he admit to slashing the selected few artworks that made it into the gallery, which would bring many art-appraisers and promo-opportunities, all because he weren’t up to standard? Just because his art wasn’t chosen.

“Do you know how much damage-control that took? How much money that cost me and Leia, just to keep him from charges. Do you know how many up and coming artists that potentially ruined – some of them never got an opportunity like that again, to my own knowledge. Their dream; crushed. All because Ben was jealous and selfish.

“And then he ran off, got himself involved with some horrible artist with lower morals than his beloved Vader and disappeared for seven years without so much as a letter. His absence tore Han and Leia’s marriage apart for quite some time. But he probably never mentioned that, did he?

She could only stand still and blink. This whole family – they were a packaged mystery and there were so many more layers to unwrap. She thought she knew them; she thought they were the perfect example of what she missed, growing up.

Seven years – he willingly didn’t talk to his family for seven-fucking-years?

And Han and Leia... they were perfectly in love; surely not. Surely this was all just one giant lie.
"Is that really the person you want to be involved with, Rey? Sexual or otherwise?" Luke asked, tone so calm and eery it had her squirming on her feet. "He was so obsessed with being the next Vader. It polluted him; mind, body and soul – he only has himself to blame." Luke sighed. "I know he’s made changes. And, truthfully, seeing him so… gentle with you that night has… well, it’s a sign of Ben I haven’t seen in decades. But that doesn’t make up for the countless of mistakes he’s made and… and ignored."

“He’s never – Kylo’s always been so calm and collected with me. He wouldn’t… he couldn’t.” I’m the mess, she wanted to shout, he’s got everything together. “It doesn’t make sense. Any of it, all of it, it’s just so… so fucking confusing,” she rushed out, a cool hand pressed to her forehead. “I don’t know who or what to believe. You all expect me to choose a side.” Rey was quick to shake her head. “I don’t want to pick a side. I want no part in this.”

“I know,” he replied quietly. “I know. I’m sorry. You don’t deserve this.” Luke moved to take her hand in his. “But you need to know the truth, before choosing to move forward.”

Rey shut her eyes tightly, screwing them closed, blood pumping loudly in her ears. Her face was ridiculously hot – almost faint-like.

“I should…” She began weakly. “I should go. I need to—to get back to work.”

“Right.” He muttered. “Just… I have something that I think you should read.”

“I don’t want anything from you—”

She stopped abruptly when her gaze landed on the book he pulled out; her own gift.

“I’m sure Ben mentioned that Vader was his grandfather.” Very tentatively, she nodded. “And you know all about his toxic journey through his career?”

“I—some of it, not extensively.”

“Good.” His hand extended, the cover picturing a horrifying robotic mask; the mask of the painting in Kylo’s own living room. “Kenobi knew he better than anyone; except for my mother, maybe, but… well, you’ll find out.”
“What will this really accomplish, Luke?” She asked quietly. “How will this help?”

“Just read the book, Rey.” He tucked it into her hands and moved to stroll off, back toward the buildings. “Please, just… do yourself a favour.”

She watched him stride away, leisurely making his way to wherever he was needed next, leaving Rey to stand alone and eye the eerie cover of Benjamin Kenobi’s acclaimed biography. Staring into the sunken eyes of a dark, ominous mask.

And the more she looked, the more she began to question:

Was Kylo Ren just a mask, too?

Chapter End Notes

Okay, firstly, that response to the last chapter was absolutely incredible. YOU GUYS ARE INSANE! I am so very grateful for each and every comment I receive and am very glad you’ve taken a chance on this fic. As for this chapter, I apologise for the lack of Ben/Kylo, but it was needed.

Now, onto the ABSOLUTE goodies! The ever-so-talented, wonderfully amazing (my absolute favourite person in the whole world) @reylocaligrphy made FOUR amazing calligraphy pieces that are absolutely stunning and I CAN’T THANK HER ENOUGH for it! They're so beautiful so go give them some love, please!

Also, a huge thankyou to the wonderful @youtoreyourdress for creating such a goregeous moodboard that honest to god captures the fic so, so, so well! THANK YOU SO MUCH, I LOVE YOU ALL SO MUCH.

And lastly, my endless thanks to my brilliant beta @Kylohh for always doing an amazing job on each chapter! Thank you so much.

(oh, and a big shoutout to FangirlFiona. And an apology. And a big ILY -- I'm garbage with STTH, I know, but knowing you read this honestly makes my whole heart. THANK YOU).
“I don’t think I’ve seen you do anything except read that book of yours tonight.”

Rey lazily lifted her gaze from the page, cocking her head to meet Rose’s sparkling eyes. Very pointedly, she pivoted to scan the empty dining room.

“It’s not exactly busy at the moment.”

“Yes, well, it’s not exactly clean at the moment, either.” Rose laughed at her grimace and squeezed her shoulder while passing. “It’s alright. I’ll do all the work. You just relax, read your book and get paid doing it – God, that literally sounds like my dream job. Wouldn’t that be great?!?”

Rey could only hum and return her attention to the book in front of her, leaning into the counter as the words overtook her once more. She wasn’t all that far into it, despite possessing it for a week; she was quite content to ignore it – whatever Luke wanted her to see was for his benefit and no one else’s.

Only, sometimes it felt as if the mask watched her from afar, when passing; begging to be opened and understood.

And, god, Anakin Skywalker was no easy man to read.

‘For a young child, his art was profoundly real; each intricate stroke, the contrast present in his sketches – every little detail connecting to evoke a certain emotion. His early sketches, conveying the lonely, dark childhood he endured.

The sight provoked a sense of eeriness, with a quality that engaged an appraiser’s eyes. I couldn’t look away.’
With a furrowed brow, she paused and reread.

‘conveying the lonely, dark childhood he endured.’

With a deep exhale, Rey pushed down the undeniably similar memories of her own background and read on – it wouldn’t do her any good to relate to Vader, of all people.

‘A fellow colleague and personal mentor of mine, Qui-Gon Jinn, was also present when we discovered young Skywalker and his talent in Tatooine. And naturally, due to us teaching at a prestigious Art school (Coruscant’s Jedi Academy for Performing Arts), we were entranced. Another young mind to teach; another kindred soul, to show the extensive history of art. It was only the beginning.’

“What sort of book is it?” Rey jumped as Rose reappeared by her side with a handful of crockery. She eagerly peered over her shoulder, eyebrows raised in search of a genre. “Looks kind of sci-fi-ish with that mask. Or…” A wide grin spread quickly over her features. “Or something risqué, perhaps – BDSM. That mask is just a lot; kinda hot, I suppose, if you’re into it—”

“It’s a biography,” she cut in quickly. “About art.”

“Oh,” Rose said, cheeky smile fading. “Well, that isn’t as fun. Though I do have to wonder who turned you onto it—”

“It’s about a famous artist,” Rey elaborated, ignoring Rose’s pointed smirk. “With a rather controversial career. And childhood, apparently.”

“Interesting.”

In the short pause, Rey cocked an eyebrow at her friend.

“You could literally not give shit.”

Rose giggled. “It’s not that – I think it does sound fascinating but…” She screwed up her nose. “Real life is so boring and often really sad and, you know, just all too real. But reading about other worlds, where magic and dragons and passionate romances exist – that is so much better. I like to escape and go on adventures!”
“And write raunchy fiction about these already-established characters—”

“I told you that in confidence.” Rey threw her head back and laughed. “You know, I could just as well reveal your secrets?”

“And what, exactly, would they be?”

“Well, I think you opening your legs for eight hours straight is a good sta—mmph!” Her eyes widened as a hand clamped down on her mouth, Rey scowling.

“I told you that in confidence.” Well, technically, a night at Kanata’s wasn’t exactly a quiet evening where hushed whispers were passed around – Rose didn’t stop giggling for the whole night after Rey had drunkenly admitted to the pose, Finn flushing so violently, unable to look her in the eye while Poe could only make food/sex/please don’t go there or I might combust-related puns that had Rey downing her beer with vigour. “You can’t just casually mention that.”

Rose began to giggle, muffled by the pressure of her hand. Rey only glared and pressed down harder.

“Stop laughing.” She laughed harder. “Seriously, it’s not funny – my arse literally bruised from that position. And I was sore and stiff for a week!”

Rose finally broke free, unbound cackles ringing out into the room. She was hunched over, plates still clutched to her chest, as she continuously laughed. Her face bloomed a vibrant shade of red, the vein in her forehead popping from the sheer volume of her amusement.

Her jaw clamped as she waited for the laughter to stop; it never came.

“Do you…” She paused, regaining her breath. “Do you even know what you're saying – what it sounds like?”

“What the hell, Rosie?”

Both of them froze, slowly glancing over at the source of the voice.
Paige’s slender neck peered out from the back, an arched brow raising high into her hairline as she frowned. “Tone it down or the customers—oh, great, there’s actually no one here.” She sighed and stepped into the room. “And during rush hour, too. Did she scare them away?”

Paige nodded to Rose, who crisply replied, “No, just your crappy designing skills, probably.” Before sending a face-splitting grin at her sister.

“Oh my god,” Rey whispered, eyes flicking between the two sisters. “Both of you are way too lethal.” She could only gape as Paige and Rose snorted together.

“What time do you clock off again, Rey?”

“Uhh…” Rey lifted her wrist to check her watch. “Soon-ish. Fifteen minutes. I can stay back, though, if you need—”

“Oh no, don’t even try and get out of this dinner.”

“But, if you guys are busy and need help, I’m very open to staying back; I’m sure they wouldn’t mind postponing, if it meant helping out the shop—”

“Rey.” Paige deadpanned. “Look at the place. It’s empty. And sad. On a Saturday night.”

“It could perk up,” Rey chirped. “It’s not even seven yet—”

“Exactly. And it’s dead. Do you see the problem here?” Paige narrowed her eyes, her arms folded firmly across her chest, slender neck cocking ever-so-slightly. “What’re you trying to avoid?”

“A dinner with the parents of that artist she’s posing nakey for.” Rey could barely contain the eye roll – of course, Rose would say ‘nakey’ in a serious sentence. “Who also happens to be her employer.” Paige furrowed her brow at this. “But she didn’t know that until, like, three weeks ago.”

“Oh. Interesting.” Paige nodded. “So you’ve been legitimately getting paid by the same family
without knowing it?"

Rey sighed. “Yes.”

“Ah. That is pretty crazy.”

“Right?”

“You don’t seem too pleased by it.”

“It’s a very long story. A tiring one, at that.”

“Sounds fun.”

“Oh, yeah. Very enjoyable.” Rey breathed out, contemplating. “Did you know Rose writes erotic fanfiction about ‘Thilbo Bagginshield’”

She smirked.

“And Dramione, and Drarry, and every Harry Potter ship under the sun.” Her smile faltered. “Plus, now that she’s devoured the whole Game of Thrones series—"

“A song of Ice and Fire—”

“She’s got all these ideas about too many weird names involving too many weird kinks—” Rose gaped at her sister at this. “—that she likes to share over the phone at 3am.” Paige turned her dark eyes back to Rey, and smiled softly. “So yes, I do know all about ‘Thilbo Bagginshield’ – it’s excellent blackmail material.”

Rose pouted. “Both of you suck. Like, you just tried to out me.” She glared at Rey before pivoting to face her sister. “And you continuously threaten to out me, just to get your way.”
Paige shrugged. “Better you do the rostering than me.” She looked at her watch, before glancing at Rey. “You can clock out now, if you want – get changed for this dinner, unless you intend to show up in your sauce-splattered shirt.”

“Really? You sure I can’t stay back and help pack up—”

“Oh my god, Rey.” Rose groaned. “Go! Now. Before I kick you out.”

“Okay, okay,” she muttered, before walking out back to grab her bag, regretfully placing the book inside and taking out the items she needed.

She’d changed into a sensible cream sweater and a pair of black jeans in the very cramped break room, damn near breaking her ankle as she jumped into her jeans and whacked her head on one of the cupboards (an echoing cackle that drifted into the room informed her that, yes, Rose had definitely heard the loud thump and curse of pain). Not long after she was saying her goodbyes to the whole crew, throwing on her fluffy blue coat to brave the cold.

Naturally, being stubborn and stupid, Rey refused to get a lift.

And sure, maybe it would’ve been sensible to Uber it out on such a cold night, but Rey appreciated the scenic view that snow could offer and the cold wind that could clear her head.

It was a splendid sight, each and everytime the winter season came around in Takodana; a truly awe-inspiring view, to watch the white specks gently flow down onto the asphalt, frosting over the faded-black road with an ethereal thing that had always seemed so… foreign and fake.

But looking up at the night sky, spotting the flecks amongst the stars – nothing could beat it. Even if it could only make her think of the melting flakes in soft dark curls.

Maybe she should’ve been mad that all her thoughts always circled back to him; a week ago, she would’ve been a whole array of mixed emotions. Now though, it was almost – well, it was clear, really. No calls, no messages, no sign of any attempts to contact. It was all too crystal clear.

He didn’t care.

And she didn’t need a book about some self-loathing artist to figure that out. She could do it damn well on her own and could damn well accept it. Sure, it hurt, but Rey was well acquainted with the feeling of no one caring – truthfully, it was more shocking that Finn and Rose and Poe cared, as they’d proved time and time again over the past few weeks.
Idly, as she walked past bright neon lights and a pack of drunken men, Rey wondered if he’d even message her about their session. And would she respond? If so, what would be her answer?

She huddled into the soft and inviting coat more, a frown contorting her face.

*So much for that clear-the-head walk.*

Her hands were awfully numb and cold upon reaching the quaint Alderaanian restaurant, and despite being too stubborn to admit a lift would’ve *certainly* served her better, it did nothing to stop the long sigh of relief at the immediate warmth the building provided.

There was a hostess waiting by an archway with a pretty painted-on smile, and Rey didn’t miss the way her eyes raked down her front – scanning, processing her cheap clothes and no doubt questioning why she just walked through the door.

*Ah. So it wasn’t ‘not too formal’ then. She should’ve known Leia’s standards of formal were on a whole new level.*

“Good evening, miss.” The hostess spoke brightly. “How can I help you, tonight?”

Rey sucked in a breath. “I, um – I’m *actually* meeting a group of people here.”

She nodded, the smile that didn’t *quite* reach her pretty blue eyes widening ever-so-slightly. “Name of the table?”

“Oh…” Rey blanked. “Um, Solo, maybe? Han? Leia—”

“Organa?” Rey was quick to recall the name of Leia’s firm: *Holdo, Organa (Dameron, in Poe’s partnered-idled dreams).*

“Yes.”

“Great,” the young blonde murmured, looking at the monitor in front of her. “*Ah, okay,* table for three – alright, follow me and I’ll show you to your seat.”

Rey obliged, although it wasn’t necessary. The second she stepped through the spacious-with-an-
intimate-feel dining room, her eyes *instantly* found the tattered brown leather jacket Han wore everywhere, accompanied with Leia’s fancy updo.

At their fast approach, with Rey trying to keep up with the blonde’s quick strides, the pair looked up.

Han sent her an uneasy, crooked smile – a tell-tale sign of his nerves, she’d come to learn – while Leia only looked away, the short glimpse of her wide chocolate eyes giving her *no insight* on her current state of emotion. Then again, Leia had *always* been significantly harder to read than Han.

“Hello, Rey—”

“Thank you for coming,” Leia interrupted Han’s lazy greeting. “I wasn’t sure you would.”

Rey’s soft smile faltered. “I said I would.”

“I know.” Leia said impassively. “I just like to convince myself that things I *don’t* deserve won’t happen.”

Rey opened her mouth to speak—

“Are you all interested in seeing the menu, now? We *also* have a few Saturday night chef specials, if you’re wondering—”

“Yes, please,” Leia cut in sweetly, giving the hostess a tight smile. “That’d be lovely.”

“You gonna’ sit down, Gummy, or stand there all night?” Han asked gruffly, after the girl pleasantly excused herself.

“Oh, um—”

“*Han.*” Leia warned lowly.

“What?” Han exclaimed. “She’s *okay* with the name.” He glanced at Rey as she moved to settle in
her seat, a sheepish smile present on his face. “Right, Rey?”

“Yes,” she said slowly. No one had even give her a nickname – well, besides Finn with *Peanut*, but… it was nice to take all the power away from a ‘flaw’ – or at least, what she *saw* as a flaw. “I just…” *Only, she did wish*— “Maybe don’t use it front of people I don’t know very well.”

*In front of Kylo*, she should’ve said, *although there probably isn’t a chance for that to happen again anyways.*

“Oh,” he mumbled, deflated. “I’m – sorry, I shouldn’t have assumed that it didn’t offend—”

“It doesn’t… offend me.” She was quick to reassure. “I like it. But, I – it *does* draw attention to my teeth and when it’s just us, I can smile about it but with other people in the picture it’s… a little embarrassing.”

Rey turned her gaze downward, onto the table, and awkwardly began to shuck off her coat while the couple processed her words.

“Okay.” Han breathed out softly. “I’m sorry—”

“You don’t need to apologise—”

“But I should, if I was just honest about these things—”

“Just accept the apology, Rey.” Leia said, clearly amused by the exchange.

“Okay.” She huffed. “Thank you.”

“Speaking of apologies,” Leia began curtly. “I believe a very strong and thorough one is due about a certain Christmas dinner.

Rey blinked.
“I thought we weren’t going to bring this up—”

“No, that was just you.” She interrupted her husband curtly. “I think, if we’re ever to move past the – the complete mess that was Christmas, we need to discuss this.”

Leia moved across the table and covered Rey’s hand with her own, brown eyes shifting into something more wet and sympathetic. A gaze she’d seen so much in her son’s eyes. The similarities were striking.

“I’m so incredibly sorry about how things were handled, Rey. About what was said and done and how my family acted in front of you – how we treated you,” Leia said slowly and seriously and Rey caught every word. “Clearly, the two of you wished to keep it private and… and I wish Luke could’ve respected that. It… I have no words for what happened, I’m just – appalled. Appalled at Luke and at my son and mostly myself for letting that happen and – and making to just brush over it, like you hadn’t just been insulted under my own roof.”

A high flush rose creeped up the older woman’s neck, spreading to her cheeks. “I’m absolutely… mortified.” Leia continued hazily, breaking their shared gaze to look at a wandering waiter. “And I can’t apologise enough or do anything to make this better except… try and understand.”

“I… what do you mean?” She exhaled.

Leia trained her eyes back on Rey, eyes narrowed into slits of determination. She seemed to contemplate something for a time, lips pursing that little bit more while Han cleared his throat and looked anywhere but at the two women seated at the table.

“Are you seeing my son?”

Her jaw involuntarily dropped the slightest of fractions.

“Alright, I…” Han stood up quickly, chair creaking and threw his arm in the air to point at something. “Bar,” he croaked before rushing off.

“I – seeing him?” Rey finally cried. “I’m his model for the project – the art project, and nothing else, not the… not Luke’s assumption—”
“I didn’t – no, I never meant it like that, at all!” Leia said quickly, stumbling in her haste, which was a strange sound – she was always so sure of her words. “I just have to wonder if you and Ben are… involved, in some other way.”

“I don’t—I’m not…”

“Alrighty guys, here we are with the menus!”

Both women snapped their gaze to the hostess, who returned with a bright smile, handing a menu board to each of them before leaving just as quick as she came.

Rey sat still, hand gripping the board tightly.

“Luke asked the same thing—”

“Sorry?”

“If we were – are …together.”

“And are you?”

Rey sucked in a deep breath.

“No.”

And exhaled.

“Okay. I’m sorry for prying. He’s my son. And you’re like a daughter to me, Rey.” She looked away, then. “I guess – well, I’d like for the both of you to be happy; to find someone, maybe settle down. And at the dinner, well, I knew from the second you walked in the kitchen that you were his model – it all just… clicked.
“But… when that glass broke and I saw how softly he treated you; spoke so calm and collected, despite Luke’s words riling him up – I began to think there was something more.” She shook her head lightly. “And the cake.

“It was my mother’s recipe and… well, Ben was always very fond of her recipes. It was one of the few things we bonded over, when he was little.” A sad smile slowly spread across her face. “He wouldn’t – well, I can’t speak for him, but I imagine he wouldn’t give that away easily. So I just thought – that, maybe, you two had something more; beyond professionalism and friendship. A partnership.”

Rey could only listen. Heart hammering beneath her ribs, having to constantly remind herself to breathe, she could only listen.

“He, ah – we spent Christmas Eve together.” Leia’s eyes widened in surprise at her stupid explanation that very well could’ve been interpreted in another way. “As… as friends, I guess. Helped me bake, to show my appreciation for the invite. That’s… that’s it.” She swallowed the lump in her throat. “There’s nothing like that between us.”

For him.

Leia’s eyes narrowed in further at Rey’s quick clarification.

“Alright.” She murmured. “And you didn’t know?”

“If I had, I would have cancelled.” Rey sighed. “Kylo warned me but,” She laughed. “I mean, clearly I didn’t listen. And this… it never would’ve happened.”

Leia watched her carefully, once more. And then sighed loudly.

“You know, we haven’t heard from Ben since Christmas.” She admitted quietly. “We’ve tried calling and texting – we waited outside his house for an hour. Nothing.”

So it wasn’t just her.

“Oh.” She reacted lamely.

Another long pause.
“Have you seen him?” she asked, voice barely there and brimming with so much emotion that Rey—“Has he called, or messaged or anything Rey. Please, I just—I need to know.”

Rey frowned.

Don’t cry, don’t cry, please don’t cry.

“No.”

Leia deflated in her seat, and yet she continued.

“I don’t know if I can see him again.” Rey said brutally. “I don’t know if I can even speak to him again,”

Oh, but she wanted to. She wanted an explanation, she wanted a reason, she still undeniably wanted him.

“What did Luke say, Rey?”

Rey shook her head.

“Did he apologise?

“Yes.”

“Was that all he said?”

“He apologised. And he gave me a book – the Vader one I bought.” Rey breathed out. “I had no idea that you two were, um, related.”

Leia scowled for split second. “For a time, neither did I.” Leia muttered. “How much do you know? How much has Ben told you?”
“Just that he was… a very lonely man; that his pain inspired his art and he actively sought it out.”

“Yes. Great father of mine, right?”

“I think I can understand that.”

Leia sent her a soft, reassuring smile and Rey found herself easily returning the gesture. It was always so… startling, just how well Leia could ease her into a setting, like this.

“And was that it? Just a book, just an apology?”

Rey bit her lip. “Luke said that he… he destroyed paintings that were not his, because he was jealous. That he left and ignored his family for seven years. That he ruined your marriage—”

“Luke said what?!”

A few other patrons turned to glance as Leia screeched.

“Oh, I’ll kill him. I’ll actually murder my brother—”

“So it’s not true—”

“No!” Leia cried. “Ben never – we would never blame our split on Ben. That was all on us and no one else. Sure, having a child put a strain on our relationship – especially being so, so young.” She huffed. “I was eighteen, Rey. Eighteen and pregnant in the 80’s with a man a decade older than me, just as women began to regularly soar in their careers, finally granted the rights to reach their full potential.

“But I was pregnant. A college drop-out. And everyone high and mighty were quick to judge me. My determination to prove them wrong was strong – I have my own law firm now, Rey, partnered with a dear friend of mine that is a very big accomplishment. And yet, that determination was a bitter obsession – and I… I was a horrible mother, because of it.”
Rey could only sit in a stunned silence.

“Ben leaving for seven years was a very big wake up call for Han and I. Although we drifted apart, we found each other again. We acknowledged our faults and mistakes, particularly with our own son. And for the first time, we really began to try with him.” Rey watched her lip tremble, just the slightest of movements. “But I can’t lose him again. I can’t…”

In the minute-long silence, Rey watched as the woman slowly but surely composed herself.

“So he did leave?” she questioned quietly. “For seven years. Just… disappeared.”

“Yes.”

“And the paintings? Did he… did he really destroy someone’s work?”

No. He couldn’t. That wasn’t like him, at all.

Leia frowned. “I think… I think that’s something you should ask him, Rey.” Leia hesitated. “You should also ask about his old mentor. I think… I think you should hear that from him, and no one else.”

Her gut clenched.

“Alcohol, anyone?” Han returned, carrying a tray of beverages.

“Yes, please.” Leia sighed.

Rey couldn’t agree more with that sentiment and together, they began to scan their menus; the start of a new dynamic.
“This is—just, wow, Peanut.” Finn glanced around the room, mouth slightly parted in awe at the shocking amount of space. “Can you believe it?”

Rey laughed. “No. No I can’t.”

“Did you ever think there was this much room—”

“Nope.” She cut off, taking a well-deserved sip of her beer; partly because she was a little flustered from taking her bed, mostly because last night’s dinner with Han and Leia had been an absolute blast once they’d ordered their food and kept the drinks coming— the morning after, however, was definitely a tricky one.

“And, like, wow, the kitchen is so clean—”

“I know.” She sighed wistfully. “Kind of sucks I won’t be able to drop my porridge in the sink and deal with it after work, now. Be a respectful roommate, and all that.”

“Or maybe it’s a good thing.” Finn teased, earning a hard swat from Rey.

“Hey!” Poe shouted. “Watch it. We can’t have another fight in here, like the last time.”

“Fuck off.” They both chimed, before meeting each other’s amused gaze. Finn threw and arm around her shoulder, taking in the empty cardboard boxes and the items surrounding them; a look into the task before them.

She turned back to her best friend; her partner in crime, with his all-knowing eyes.

“It’s kind of sad.” She admitted softly. “My whole life has been in this apartment. The moment I finally began living was right here, with you. It’s…”

“Terrifying.” Finn cut in with a small, comforting smile. “But you took a chance on me and look where we are.”
A slow grin spread across her face. She always wondered if she’d have ever left Jakku, had she not met Finn – however, right now, Rey didn’t care for an answer. This was all she needed.

“Well – shall we start?”

“Yes.” Rey groaned, slowly plonking herself on the ground to begin the hard-run of moving.

Slowly, but surely, they began to fit all her possessions into the boxes, background music to keep them at least a little sane – a truly draining activity that left her questioning just how much stuff she had when, all her life, she’d had so little.

It was a welcomed reminder of her growth, however, since leaving Jakku.

“So,” Finn began, sorting her clothes into two separate suitcases (and totally taking the opportunity to throw out some of ‘oldest rags’ that had seen it’s days). “How was the dinner?”

“Good.” Rey admitted. “Really good; cleared the air and – I don’t know, I can just see that they’re perfect; Or, never were, really. Which is healthy, I guess, for me. To acknowledge that they make mistakes, like anyone else. Big ones, too and – it was just… really nice.” She suddenly giggled. “I’ve never seen Leia drunk, before.”

Poe hooted at this. “You should see her at the firm’s Christmas party. I swear, she turns into the ‘Queen of Thorns’ from Game of Thrones – so damn savage, out here roasting everybody.”

“Oh, yes!” Rey slapped a hand on her knee. “Han got absolutely annihilated from her drunken wit. But he was quite the sight, too – can’t hold his drink very well.”

“Sounds like you had a really great time, Peanut.”

“Yeah,” She replied quietly. “It was very eye-opening. And terribly fun. They’re bad influences on me, I swear.”

“I’m so proud of you, Rey.” She did her best not to roll her eyes; though, hearing it made her heart swell just that little more. “I told you it’d be good for you. A really great start at improving your lifestyle” He paused. “But—”
“And here comes the lecture.” She shared a look with Poe.

“—you still didn’t look into that therapist I recommended.” She sighed. “I’m serious Rey, she’s been—well, really good. She has family separation issues too, you know, and is really honest about how she still struggles with it.”

“Finn, I just don’t think it’s for me.”

“You promised me you’d look into it—”

“I said I’d try—”

“And this is trying, is it?” She glared and poked her tongue at him. “She’s been very good for me, you know.”

“Good for you.”

A sigh filled the silence.

“You’re infuriating.” He deadpanned.

“You love it.”

“I mean, that’s very debateable—”

“OHO!” Poe erupted from the other side of the room, a manic grin present on his face. “Finn, babe, look at this!” He laughed loudly, before presenting the viciously pink cover, the bold lettering causing Rey to flush a violent shade of red. “Loving Your Lady Bits.” Poe read aloud. “What does that even mean—”

“Dameron, I swear I will actually roundhouse you—”
“Like you even could—”

“Well I can sure as hell try!”

Poe looked at her seriously for a short few seconds. Before shrugging and popping open the book, finger scanning the index before—

“Oh, this is too good—”

“Poe!”

He hurriedly flipped through the pages, before settling on one, clearing his throat. “While this step may genuinely seem stupid and unhelpful at first – and daunting, of course – sometimes, a good way to truly appreciate your feminine body is to look at yourself. Really look at yourself in the mirror; study the intricate details of your womanhood with a picture—okay, I swear they’re just ripping this off Sex and the City – oh, shit!”

Poe was quick to retreat once she launched off the ground and chased him around the room, Finn’s laughter booming off the walls.

Maybe, when looking back at this moment, it’d be a wonderful memory to remember her first apartment by. Her and her best friends, all together.

After retrieving the book, ordering pizza and taking a break to dance the butts off to some old RnB hits, the next hour tamed down as they set to work; successfully packing everything into their boxes, taping them up and loading them into Finn’s truck and Poe’s BMW.

Poe and Finn left her to take one last look at the place that had thoroughly shaped her life; to say goodbye, one last time.

Closing the door was bittersweet; locking it was oddly cathartic.

The key felt heavy in her clutched fist as she climbed down the steps of her building one last time; slowly but surely making her way over to her mailbox, dropping it in and parting ways from the building for good.
“You good?” Finn asked as she hopped into the truck, buckling in quickly as he started the ignition.

“Yeah.” She beamed. “Yeah, I’m really good.”

“Great.” He returned the smile, before pulling away from the curb while she shot the text to Phasma – it was happening.

Traffic was slow that early Sunday morning, seemingly taking forever. Or maybe it was just her nerves, she couldn’t tell.

Finn calmed her by singing terribly along to every song that flicked on the radio.

It was good. Life was good.

While the wait seemed like an eternity, eventually, they arrived at the building she’d come to adore so much, with its nice neighbourhood and the wonderful café across the street.

“Jesus, peanut, can you even afford this?”

“Barely.” She admitted with a wolfish grin, eagerly getting out of the car the second Finn parked – rushing across to the building, hitting the intercom to her brand new apartment building and—

“Finally.” The dry voice on the other end intoned. “I thought you might have crashed. Or skipped out.”

“No!” Rey said brightly. “I’m here! I brought some friends to help out with the boxes.”

“So did I.” She returned quietly. “Alright, then. Come up – the quicker we get this done, the sooner I can take a nap.” The buzzer sent a jolt through her whole body, and she was quick to wrench the door open and hold it still while Finn and Poe carried the first few boxes in.

Rey followed them into the elevator, heart thumping in her ears as she pressed her brand-new floor, steadily rising up to her brand-new life.
“This is really something else, Peanut?”

“Yeah.” Poe nodded. “I’ve never been in an elevator that has actually smelled nice.”

She laughed as the elevator came to a smooth stop, the doors opening to reveal a sight she could revel in for years to come.

Rey led the way and stopped at the door.

Lifting her hand, she knocked three times.

A few seconds of waiting. The rattle and click of a lock. A sweeping sound of a door getting pulled open.

Phasma’s tall figure came into frame, looking as gorgeous as ever with her shimmering blue eyes, platinum blonde hair and high cheekbones.

Rey opened her mouth to give a cheery hello, just as something caught her eye and—

She faltered, eyes widening – taking in every little detail about his appearance. The shaggy quality to his hair, the deep and heavy bags under his eyes, the sickly-pale look to his skin.

And those eyes were unmistakably dark.

“Kylo?”

She heard the very soft breath escape his lips; watched as his eyes narrowed intensely in on her. His lips parted slowly in the long stretch of dead silence, everyone shifting from the sudden thick atmosphere.

“Hi.”

~ * ~
She should slap him. Or yell at him. Or say something because he very nearly broke her and… and it was nothing but silence since – no apology, no words, nothing.

However, after his oh-so-brief greeting, all the while he stared, and stared – looking all sad and sorry for himself, pouting and slouching like a petulant child – Rey ignored him.

No returning greeting no wave of acknowledgement, just a cold hard glare before fully turning her back and proceeding to greet Phasma with a wide smile, extending an extra warm welcome to Hux. She could practically hear his teeth grinding together.

The silence continued all afternoon, even though he often trailed behind her, carrying box after box, bag after bag of everything she owned. Even as they rode the elevator together, alone, her gaze was set firmly on the doors, desperately willing them to open.

It was annoying and infuriating, all the same – especially after Finn and Poe left, with everything unpacked on the floor of her new bedroom. Especially after Phasma and Hux left to get take-out.

Alone.

Together.

In her new room, as she began to put together her bed frame and he laid out all the pieces for her new Ikea desk.

With no one else around.

The silence was deafening.

Though, occasionally, she’d hear him grumble to himself – reading the instruction as he toyed with the screws.

She’d hear her own shaky breath.

She’d hear the movement of Kylo ruffling his hair or scratching his scalp.

Most prominently, she could hear the loud, mocking tick-tock of the clock, all the way out in the kitchen.
It was painful, to be quite honest. With so much to say and do and not act on it was… torturous.

But he wasn’t interested – so why should she?

And the fact that he had the NERVE – the sheer never to show up and ‘help’ with this move, after everything that had just happened—

“Fucking piece of shit, fucking fuck.”

The violent hissing turned her head, watching as he sneered down at the object in front of him.

“They didn’t put enough fucking screws in the fucking packet – what does that fucking accomplish? This whole thing is bullshit and just—”

He slammed a clenched fist on the hardwood floor.

“Stop!” She shouted. “Would you just fucking stop!” She scanned the room, flushing under his freshly-earned attention, and moved from her spot, crawling her way over to him. “If you calmed down for a second, you could think rationally. Now get up.”

He blinked.

“Pardon me?”

“Get up!” She shrieked, watching as he scrambled to his feet and—

Aha. The missing screw.

“You were sitting on it—”

“Yes, I can see.”

He took the screw gently from her hand.
“Thank you.” He added softly.

Rey didn’t reply and dove straight back into work. After a time, so did he. It didn’t take long for him to finish.

“Where would you like it?”

She scowled.

“I can figure that out later.”

“Oh, fuck off.”

“You want me to go?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You know why.”

“I can’t be sure without confirmation.” He snarked. “So tell me, Rey. Say it. What’s on your mind?”

She fumed in silence.
“Say it,”

Nothing.

“Say it!”

“Why did you leave your family for seven years?” She asked. “Why did you destroy those paintings?” She sucked in a breath. “Why did you say all those nasty things?”


“At least he apologised!” Rey fired back. “You said I was nothing – that no one cared or gave a damn about me – oh, except for you, yeah?” She spat. “Real fucking nice, Kylo. To rub in what I already think and believe!”

“That wasn’t my intention!”

“Then what was?”

“I do care about you—”

“Do you?”

“Yes!” Kylo shouted. “Yes, I care about you – how could I not, after everything I’ve shared and everything you’ve told me. Of course I fucking care about you, Rey.” He huffed.

“More than I should” He added softly.

She scoffed.

“More than you should?” She repeated. “So, I don’t deserve your attention, then? Caring about me is a burden to you, is it?”
“That’s not what I mean.” He took a step closer.

“No?” She questioned further, voice rising, blood heating, eye viciously searching the face of Kylo Ren. “You don’t care about anyone. Not your parents. Not me. Not even yourself. “Just like Vader—”

When she moved to turn around, Kylo grabbed her wrist and spun her right back.

“Don’t ever,” He began, voice strained, cracking against his throat as he leaned in close, eyes fixed intently on her, wild without restraint. “Call me that. Don’t ever compare me to him again.”

She took in a shuddering breath, for courage.

“Why did you destroy those paintings?” Rey asked quietly, barely a whisper, with his face so close and the grip on her wrist loosening to a mere brush of fingers. “Were you jealous? Because Luke didn’t pick you?”

“No.” He stepped back. “No, no, no, Rey, he’s feeding you lies – I was picked!” He growled. “I was chosen – to be featured, among all the rest and yet—and yet when I showed up, it wasn’t there.

“He promised me. My mother and father, for the first time in years, showed up for this and – it wasn’t there.”

“So why’d you do it?” Her voice was unnaturally high.

“I was angry—”

“That doesn’t excuse it.”

“I know.”

“You ruined their opportunity to succeed—”
“I know, Rey. Christ, I know – and I can’t do anything to take it back!”

She looked away, a hand coming to her mouth as her eyes began to prickle.

“You ignored your family for years.”

“Yes.”

“You chose to do that.” Her lip quivered. “You have no idea of what it’s like not having a choice. To physically have no one.” Her stomach dropped. “And you chose that.”

“I was wrong—”

“Why did you do it?” She moaned.

“And so alone—”

“How could you do it?”

“I was angry and humiliated—”

“Who made you do it?”

He froze.

“Was it your mentor? The one who gave you the painting?”

Rey turned around, shocked to find his eyes unusually wet, brimming with unshed tears.
“What did he do, Kylo?”

He never answered. Phasma and Hux had returned with the food, before he could. And so Rey had bolted away, escaping from his hot and heavy gaze, leaving him to her room.

He didn’t follow her to the kitchen.

And when he finally came outside, an hour later after they’d finished eating and clearing up the plates and put their feet up for a rest, it was to storm out of the apartment without a word of goodbye.

The room was finished, when she returned.

The bed was built and made, her shelf packed with books and belongings with the desk tucked neatly into the corner.

The only thing he hadn’t touched was her clothes.

A flash of pink caught her eye. Placed on her bedside table was the gift he’d bought her, all those weeks ago; it lay face down, spine up, and she was quick to turn it over.

On the very last page, had he placed it on; and the sight tore a gasp, straight from her chest.

There was a sketch of her face. Her three little buns, spilling from their ties, her lips parting in a soft smile, her eyes reflecting a joy she wished she could replicate. And beside it, in a neat and flourished script was—

**Imagine feeling free.**

She took in a shaky breath – so he had listened to her gift, then. The album that she so heavily related to and… and healed to. He listened.

And further beneath the delicate lines detailing her profile, were another two words.

Words she craved so desperately, from his own lips.

*I’m sorry.*
Oof, this was a DOOZY.
I'm not sure if I'm entirely happy with how this turned out but I'm going to be awfully busy these next few months, so cranking out this chapter seems like a good decision haha.

Cheers for reading, as always -- it's late and if there was a lot of mistakes this time around, I do apologize. I'll fix them up soon, I swear haha!
Calm and Collected

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

CHAPTER TWELVE

~ J A N U A R Y ~

P A R T  T H R E E

Calm and Collected

She'd always hated waiting rooms. It was all too mocking for the little girl within; the child who waited years for her parents to finally show up and take her away from Jakku – or stay. She'd have been happy to stay, really, if they were by her side.

But they never came back. And so here she was. Awaiting her first appointment with Dr. Cassian Andor.

Her therapist.

After years of avoidance, months of enduring Finn's lectures, and a few long weeks of emotional revelations, Rey was finally standing up to face the real issue:

Herself. Well, her past, more like.

Funny how it only took a few short words from Han, after coming into work the day following her and Kylo's tense confrontation and blubbering (ranting, to be perfectly honest) everything, much to his shock. He could only blink with a slack jaw as she talked and talked.

'Rey, please, go see someone to talk about these...things. Hell, I'll pay them myself – anything to not hear about the book my son bought you for Christmas.'

And suddenly, the advice clicked.

She'd rung the lady Finn had suggested, Dr. Jyn Erso, that very same afternoon; sitting on her bed, Hux's orange tabby Millicent snoozing beside her while the couple did their own thing, braving the question. Instead of receiving an appointment, however, Rey was recommended to another – her husband of all people – with Jyn insisting that it would be a conflict to take on both her and Finn.

It only took a pass of a phone and she was speaking to said husband; his voice a soft rasp, so calm and collected it soothed the tight weight in her chest. Next thing she knew, Rey had an appointment set for Friday.
She heaved out a sigh of relief when the clicking of the lady next to her came to an abrupt stop as another doctor within the clinic called her inside and scrolled through her social media absently; never really taking *anything* in unless it was some stupid meme that had her snorting out loud.

"Rey?"

Rey stood quickly, eyes down at her feet while forcing herself to walk toward the man as he held the door open for her. He shut the door behind her, softly, as she looked around the small room.

It wasn't anything special; rather bland, actually. A bookcase in the back of the room, not an empty space to fill, with strange art-like figures placed among the books lined on the shelves. There was a desk at a corner, laptop propped open, beside a large coffee mug and a photo frame of himself and his wife. The carpet was firm under her feet, the walls beige and bare save for a decently-sized clock, ticking just beside the door.

She looked to the middle of the room; a couch and two arm chairs, arranged in a circle-like shape, facing each other. There was a wooden coffee table in-between, a small fake plant sitting atop the surface with a thick journal to its side.

Though, what *truly* took her notice was the sudden noise; like a constant rolling wave, breaking against the shore – or *maybe* it was just static. She couldn't quite tell.

"What's that noise?" She didn't look at him while asking the question, stepping further into the room; eyes taking in every inch.

"White-noise; it can be distracting and soothing to some."

"This is soothing?"
"Also, ensures no noise comes out that door."

"I couldn't hear any noise; voice or otherwise."

"I can turn it off, if you'd like? Though, you get used to hearing it after a while – very effective with infants and sleep."

Rey shifted on her feet, toying with her bottom lip. "I think I'd like it off please."

"Of course, Miss Niima."

"Please," She started softly, glancing over her shoulder. "Rey is fine."

He nodded, a smile gracing his features. "Cassian is fine, too." He murmured, fiddling with his smartphone briefly before the sound came to a stop. "Truth be told, I don't like to be called Doctor. Doesn't suit me well." He gesture to the couch. "Please, have a seat; comfort is key."

She hesitated, slowly moving to the set-up in the middle, feeling his eyes on her like a target. Carefully, she sat in the couch—

"I know." He smiled at her grimace. "Not too comfortable."

She shrugged. "I've had worse."

His eyes narrowed in, never leaving her face as he took his own seat cross from her, in one of the muted blue armchairs.

"How are you today, Rey?"

She huffed, settling deeper into the couch. Crossed and uncrossed her legs, propping herself up; restless, from the whole situation.
"Good."

He nodded, smiling. Pausing. Waiting.
She glanced to his eyes briefly before they moved to her hands.

"I'm alright." She huffed under his scrutinising gaze. "A little tired and sore."

"You're a mechanic, correct?" She confirmed with a nod of her head. "Ah. That must take a toll."

"It's, um, tiring. But in a good way. I like working, it's... rewarding. And I've, um, always been good at fixing things."

She watched with rapt attention as his fingers drummed against the arm of the chair, the silence stretching to two seconds then to five then to what was surely a minute.

"I, um, also help out at my friend's restaurant. Just a few shifts a week, nothing extreme."

He hummed, a finger resting beneath his lip.

"Do you do any other activities?" He finally asked. "A sport of some sort?"

"I, um, I gym sometimes, though I usually stick to runs in the morning."

"That's it?"

"Yes--" She halted, mouth closing. She crossed her arms across her shoulder. "I, um, I also pose for this art thing."

"Busy?"

"A little, yeah." Her brows furrowed, back straightening. "Well, actually, I-I posed for an art thing;
I'm not quite sure I still do."

His head tilted slightly. "Why's that?"

It was strange – the lull to his tone; the soft quality it possessed along with his dark eyes. In a way, it reminded her of Kylo; he was quiet and he seemed intent on listening.

But Cassian had at ease while Kylo seemed to alight every nerve in her body with a simple look. The intensity was missing; the brutal conversation they'd share was not present within this room.

She licked her lips, lightly.

"I um… I'm not sure."

Cassian reclined in his chair.

"Did you like posing for the project?"

She blinked. "I– yes, in a way it was…" She huffed. "I don't know, it's hard to explain."

She gripped the fabric to the cushion beneath her.

"It feels… I don't know, to be considered 'art' makes me feel…"

"Wanted?"

"Yes. Sort of" she huffed. "Like I'm worth something. It's a…feeling I'm not very fond of." Rey watched as he nodded once, crossing one leg over the other while his eyes kept on listening.

"Empowering, in a way. There's a certain freedom from it - a place where I can, I don't know, forget myself…if that makes sense."

"Why do you feel the need to forget yourself, Rey?"

"I-I don't really forget myself, not really." She stuttered. "It's just…" Rey huffed. "I can escape all my issues there. For a short while, I can pretend everything is okay and believe it."
"But now it's become the problem?"

Rey sat back in the seat, bewildered. "Yes." She answered honestly, a breathy gasp escaping her lips.

He hummed, a small, soft smile sent her way.

"Why is that?"

"It's, um, complicated."

"Most things are." He quipped.

"This is more complicated."

He chuckled lightly. "Okay. More complicated than complicated. I'm intrigued." He breathed in deeply, gazing roaming her face. "Tell me more about this 'project'?"

"I don't know much about it, to be perfectly honest; the artist was intent on it being a surprise, explaining it at the showing, whenever that is. All I know is that once a month, I'm required to strip off all my clothes and pose around his house."

A pause.

"Right." He murmured. "And this is definitely over?"

"He hasn't contacted me. The artist." She explained.

"We, um, had a…" Rey looked at her feet.

"It's complicated." She said once more.

"Would you like it to be over?"
Her eyes moved from her feet to the clock near the door. She watched the hand make its way 'round, chewing on her lip as her mind went rampart; ears focusing on the faint 'tick' that went throughout the room. Cassian didn't push, only waited patiently.

"I'm not quite sure." Rey answered quietly. "Part of me wants to go back; part of me thinks it'd be better to let it go. It's confusing."

"And complicated?"

She smiled. "That too."

"Okay." Cassian spoke clearly. "Shall we work this out?" Cassian picked up the journal, plucking a pen from his pocket. "We can see the pros and cons of each."

She frowned. "I'm sorry, I didn't... I thought we'd talk about other things." She said softly. "Like... what's wrong with me. Not, you know, making lists."

"And yet, it's what you decided to tell me." He mused. "We don't have to dive in so quickly, Rey. Something tells me you wouldn't be ready for that, just quite yet."

"And this will help prepare me for that?"

"Maybe." Cassian mused. "Or perhaps it will only clear up your confliction."

She watched, with wide attentive eyes, as he drew a line straight down a lined page.

"What would you gain from letting this 'project' go?"

A minute passed once more.

"Okay." Cassian. "Should we start with the pros--"

"Look, the thing is... I..." Rey stumbled on the confession. "I don't think I could return. Even if I
wanted to; even if it was best for me. What if there's no going back?"

"Do you truly think there's no going back?"

She didn't quite know.

"I don't... I don't think we could ever go back to the way it was." She admitted carefully. "I don't think we can fix this."

Cassian never questioned her on the sudden 'we'. He didn't push for a further explanation nor did he remark on the vagueness of it all. He simply sat and listened, giving her the time to process it all for herself.

Not another word was uttered until she returned from her head.

"Do you think I can fix this?" She asked; a vulnerable side she'd always loathed shining through.

He smiled. "You said it yourself, Rey." His eyes were all-knowing. "You've always been good at fixing things."

It was strange; how her words from his lips could fill her with such hope. How with that soft, inviting smile; so faint it was almost not there, she could open up. Confess all her fears about going back to the sessions. To say that she wanted to go back to them aloud; back to him.

And Cassian listened and wrote. Despite knowing nothing of the situation; of the complexity that drove her mind mad, he took in every word.

It was nice,

Nice for someone to listen.

Maybe Kylo needed somebody to listen, too.

And just like that, list of pros and cons in hand, messily scrawled against lined paper, Rey pulled up Kylo Ren's number.

~ * ~
It was strange – posing for Kylo, once again. Quiet and awkward, like the very first time all those months ago; standing on the doorstep, waiting for him to answer. It was all too strange.

And yet, she waited, slightly breathless from the cold, rocking back and forth on her toes while the nerves coiled in her empty belly.

Suddenly, the door opened with a light swoosh. Rey froze on spot.

“Hi.” He murmured, hand braced against the edge of the door – holding it open with white knuckles. He looked, well, the same as the last time.

Heavy bags, dark eyes drooping from exhaustion, stubble sprouting on his usually clean-shaven face and his hair, all sad and lifeless. His clothes were wrinkled, his skin all too pale, everything about him just looked...tired.

It was like looking into a mirror.

“Hey,” She returned quietly, no smile to be given.

“I, um, I wanted to thank you – for still sticking this out. I mean, after everything—”

“It’s fine.” She cut in swiftly. “I mean, it’s what I signed up for. Just a job”

His lips frowned a fraction. “Right.” He choked out, moving out of the frame to let her enter. “Just a job.”

She walked into the warmth of the room, a small sigh escaping dry lips as the drastic temperature change enveloped her, body and soul.

Rey moved to remove her coat—

“Uh, hold on – I can…” Kylo helped her shrug out of her coat quickly, turning to hang it on the hook. “Do you, um, like your new coat?”

“I do.”

“Nice. Good. I’m, uh, glad.” He breathed out, eyes casted at the floor. “Um, I – did you get my—”
“Where do you want me today?”

He paused, gaze moving up to meet her own. He toyed with his lips before answering. “Up in the studio.”

She nodded, inhaling softly. “And how do you want me?”

Rey exhaled and wondered if the twitch to his eye meant anything. She wondered if the quirk to his lips meant anything.

“I, uh…” He cleared his throat. “I’ll have you naked – I mean, you’ll need all clothes off, for this pose.”

She sucked in a shaky breath, heart increasing because…because damn his words, that’s why.

Though she refused to dwell, turning away from his heady eyes and quickly began to march her way through the living room. Which was, in itself, a sight to be seen.

Kylo Ren, the permanently uptight and organised arse, had a basket of laundry dumped on his couch. Papers, presumably to be marked, littered the coffee table with empty mugs piling up.

How the tables have turned, she thought, moving into the hallway without so much a second glance. Rey trudged up the stairs, Kylo following close behind, wordlessly passing his unmade bed and into the studio.

“I’m sorry it’s so cold.”

Rey shrugged.

“You’re paying me – it’s fine.”

A pause.

“I wish you’d stop saying that.” She froze, right in the middle of ripping her jumper from her body, the fabric obscuring her view. “I wish you’d stop…stop referring to this as just a job.”
Slowly, she peeled off the jumper, vision clearing to meet his gaze narrowed in right on her.

Breath erratic, heart pounding; it was two annoying factors of the nerves she wanted banished away.

The silence was deafening.

“What else am I supposed to call this, Kylo?”

“I don’t know,” He muttered, glancing away. “But it’s not just—you’re not just my employee who I’m paying.”

“Then what am I?” She turned to face the window while reaching behind to unhook her bra, shrugging the straps down her shoulders and shucking the item into the ever-growing pile. “Someone to ignore for weeks?”

He stood there, jaw tensed, hands visibly clenched. Seconds passed before he wordlessly pivoted and moved to the easel in the corner.

Rey huffed out a bitter laugh,absently shaking her head as she rushed to unbutton her jeans and shove them down her thighs, knickers coming with them. She angrily kicked them off to the side, the whole act a distraction; before she could do something drastic like punch him or throw something at his head—most likely her underwear.

“Can you move to the window, please.” Pursing her lips into a thin line, Rey complied. “And, uh, face it—please. Closer, too—”

But people—”

“They won’t see.” He murmured. “Trust me.” There was a long awkward pause, as if he expected a motion of agreement. Or a response. As if he thought she could easily say ‘yes, I trust you’, after everything that had just happened. “It gives your body a nice hue.” He explained quietly, after a solid few seconds of piercing silence. “Enhances your edges; your soft curves and, uh, the glow to your skin, it’s… truly an enchanting sight.” She huffed out an unsteady breath, totally not noticing the slight quiver to his low-timbred voice or the way it sent a chill up her spine. No. She hadn’t noticed that at all. “The sky is so bright, today and to not use the natural light would be… a missed opportunity, I suppose.”
Her shoulders were already locked in place, unnaturally firm and stiff. Every muscle in her body was tight and tense, and the feeling of his eyes raking over her back, her legs, her whole naked body was... more intense, than usual.

Rey could feel her breath catching in her throat and wondered if he could, too.

She turned her attention to the view in front – a crisp white scenery, watching the flakes float down from the sky. He was right; it was awfully bright, today and rather cold – though she couldn’t tell if she was shivering because of the chill or something else.

Rey pressed a hand against the glass, watching as a frosty glow edged around her fingers.

She inhaled a shuddering breath, the cold surface seeping into her numbing palm.

Her eyes fluttered to a close.

She exhaled.

“Why didn’t you say it?”

A creak when up in the air after voicing her question – perhaps he’d shifted in his chair or maybe stiffened. She couldn’t tell.

And Rey refused to look behind her.

“Say what?”

She scoffed. “Don’t act like you have no idea—”

“I have an inkling though I’d prefer to have the whole picture from your lips.”

She huffed at his low words – drawn out and mumbled, as if his attention was elsewhere.

“You seem intent on avoiding my questions.” She spoke clearly, counting the seconds that passed after.

He didn’t reply; the room so silent she could hear the bristles of his brush dancing across the canvas, the creak to the floorboards as she sifted from her position. It felt like a whole century had passed.
“Widen your legs, only slightly.” She bit her lip at his sudden demand and obliged. “And arch your back – leave your hand where it is.” She pushed out her chest, breasts now close to brushing the glass, bottom sticking out proudly. “Thank you.”

The seconds passed, the snow slowed to a light fall and still her heart continued to race; a pounding rhythm drumming against her ribcage as Rey focused on a steady breathing pattern.

“Why didn’t you say sorry?”

There was no response.

“I – I get that you drew it, or whatever but you ignored me for weeks—”

“You didn’t pick up the phone either, Rey—”

“Oh, gee, I wonder why?” She laughed, shrill and unkind to her ears. “And then you just show up randomly to Phasma’s, out of the blue, and throw a hissy fit over furniture and…and be all vague and I just…” She trailed off, shutting her eyes. “You’re so incredibly frustrating, sometimes.”

He breathed in deeply.

“So I’ve been told.” A soft murmur.

And exhaled.

The room fell silent once more; Rey shivering in the cool room. Her breath came out hot, a mist of steam following suit.

She shifted on her toes, curling them into the wood.

Her and pressed into the glass.

“I’m not – I’ve never been all that good with words. They don’t… they don’t come easily and…” He huffed, the sound of something clattering shooting up behind her. “I’m an artist Rey. I express myself, my words, my feelings – it’s all in my art.”
“Don’t you also teach an English class? Tenth grade, no?”

He paused. “I do but that’s… that isn’t the point, okay, I’m just – literature is different. Language devices, poetry, essay writing; that’s completely different to being in a real-life situation – this fucked up scenario where there’s this crushing weight because you’ve fucked up and you make it worse because you’ve always made things worse, like it’s in you blood to fuck up more fucked up shit.

“I didn’t… I mean, Christ Rey, look what I said; look what happened, Christmas night. I fucked up. My words made everything that much worse and I – god, I never wanted to do that with you. I didn’t want to fuck up with you.”

“I can’t apologise for the way I feel about my family. And ‘sorry’ won’t fix my past mistakes – but just… I am so incredibly sorry for the way I acted; for what I said to you, that night.” Her body stiffened as he continued to talk, brain overworking to process every word that left his lips. “You’re not nothing. Not to me – not to anyone. You’re so much more. So much more, Rey, and I… I can’t tell you how sorry I am that I suggested anything less – I wasn’t thinking straight, I know that and I —I never wanted you to pick a side, but I pushed you to and that was wrong.”

Don’t look back, she thought with burning, don’t turn around.

“I never – I never wanted to hurt you or to ruin your first family dinner. That was – it was all entirely my fault; for not reaching out to you in the following weeks, for my pathetic excuses and— I’m sorry.”

Rey released a long breath, the heavy weight in her chest loosening – if only slightly.

“I’m sorry, too.” She said slowly. “For – for projecting my own issues onto you; about your parents; about Han and Leia.” She licked her lips, the cool air stinging them slightly after. “I don’t know what happened and I shouldn’t assume – I was just confused and… everything was just a mess.”

She heard him scoot back in his chair, the legs scraping against floor that had her grimacing.

“Would you let me take you home?” His voice. Strangely breathy. “After we finish, could I… may I take you home?”

His chair scraped the floor, once more, and the thundering sound of a giant rising to his feet following a few split seconds after.

“Actually, no, I don’t just want to take you home. If you’d allow it, I’d really love to take you out to dinner Rey. To…to explain myself, to answer your questions – to extensively and thoroughly
apologise in every way I can.” Her fingers curled into the glass, knuckles flat against the surface.

“Please Rey – I know I’ve…I’ve really missed my opportunity to make it up to you—if there even was one—but give me this. Just…just give me this, please…”

She sighed, even as the footsteps approached closer, and still set her eyes outside; never passing the window frame. “It won’t fix anything.”

He still said those things. Luke still said those things. Leia and Han still did nothing about it – how was she to get over that, so quickly? To just blindly trust them again when it’d taken so long to do so in the first place?

“I know.” He murmured, so close to her; right at her side. “But I can make a start.”

Slowly, she turned; hazel eyes meeting the unreadable expression of Kylo Ren. His throat bobbed, gaze intent on her own.

“Okay.”

Rey watched his face flicker for the briefest of seconds; his lips, quirked into a strange shape, eyebrows drawing in close and—

He blinked, eyes scanning down her body; up and down, pausing at her torso.

“Uh, we should—” He paused, turning around to choke out the words as he was quick to rip off his thick wool jumper off, struggling when it came to his head. “Take a break—” He huffed, finally extracting himself from the fabric, hair mussed as he held the material out to her. He didn’t dare look at her, eyes set intently above her shoulder as his face slowly turned red. “You… you must be cold.”

“I have my own jumper—”

“I’ll grab you a glass of water.”

“Okay.”
He nodded, face flushing violently while Rey clutched the jumper to her chest. “Yep.” He muttered, turning on his heel swiftly and hightailing it out of the room.

She stood there, slowly processing everything and—

In the sudden solace of the room, Rey allowed herself to smile.

~ * ~

He forgot to bring back the glass of water. Rey didn’t question it. They returned to their usual routine.

There wasn’t much talk for the rest of the session, excusing the occasional command from Kylo – the promise of conversation later that evening was enough to sate her needs. And still, it was quiet and a little cold between the pair; talking took effort, now, unlike before when it seemed so easy to lay herself bare (quite literally) and talk on and on for days.

Part of her hoped there’d be a good outcome after the night came to an end; another demanded she stay mad at him until the end of time.

It was petty of her – she knew this. But the way she felt, the feelings within her, they were… all too consuming.

“I um – I never thanked you before; for agreeing.” She looked up, a furrow coming to her brows as she re-hooked her bralette.

He never usually stayed in the room, when she redressed. It was good, normally; always giving plenty of time to compose herself before hopping into his car.

"I really appreciate you taking a chance on me."

"I'm just hungry." She swallowed thickly as his eyes widened, clouding over at her brash words. "And um… I've wanted to really get to know you for a while now; answer a few questions, so..." She trailed off, looking away to pull up her jeans; jumping into them, right in front of him.

"You do know me."

"Not like you know me." She sighed, hooking the button and zipping them tight. "It feels like I've told you my whole life story and with you – it's almost like I know nothing about you."
"Well, uh, we can fix that." He muttered, cautiously walking past her to pick up his own discarded sweater. "I'll tell you anything you want."

"So if I ask for the naked baby photos Lando was talking about?"

"Absolutely not."

"Why not? It's only fair." She quickly pulled her long-sleeve t-shirt over her head. "I've been naked in front of you for eight hours, standing in a cold room while posing at a window. I think I deserve this, don't you?"

"I'm paying you." He said quickly, clearing his throat. "Next question."

She tried not to think about it too much.

The familiarity of it all; the easy conversation, the playful attitude she could assume while Kylo shut her down seriously. Only, he usually smiled. And she usually laughed.

But the wall between them was too thick to break.

"Where're you taking me tonight? It's not formal, right?" Rey threw on her jumper; black and plain, not at all something appropriate to wear to dinner.

"Where would you like to go?"

"A pub feed would be nice." Rey said softly, rolling her shoulders and neck, stretching out the stiff muscles. "And beer."

"Yes." Kylo muttered. "Alcohol would be nice. Kanatas?"

She grinned at him. "What are we waiting for?"

Like old times, she followed him to the car; once again, admiring the sight of the sleek beauty he had the privilege of driving and the heated seats she was a little too obsessed with.
Just like old times. Only, now with this awkward tension filling the space.

"So, uh," He began uneasily, stopped at a red light. "How are you?"

"How am I?"

"I never asked. On Sunday. And today."

She laughed.

"Right. Stupid question." He sighed. "Sorry. I'm… nervous. Don't want to fuck this up again."

He rode the clutch in first gear as the light flicked to green. They didn't talk until the next red light, five minutes later.

"I liked the drawing." She said suddenly. "It was nice, even if it was my face."

A pause.

"You're very beautiful—"

"You listened to my gift—"

They both stopped talking, gaze moving to meet the other. Rey's heart began to pound faster.

The honk behind them made them both jump, Kylo fumbling with the clutch and stalling once, cursing under his breath, before taking off once more. His cheeks were pink.

"I don't think I tell you that enough. That you're beautiful."

"Thank you." She whispered.
"And your gift was very beautiful. The lyricism was — I could relate to it, I suppose."

"Me too." Rey crossed her arms against her chest. "You organised my books wrong."

"Huh?"

"Yeah… I mean, I appreciate the alphabetic structure but, I don't know, I've always sectioned all-time favourites together, you know."

"Yeah."

She shifted in her seat.

"I, um, I have it." He announced abruptly. "The album. I've been listening when, uh, driving to work. Or to get groceries. Or anywhere, really." He cleared his throat. "I can put it on?"

"Yeah. That'd be nice."

"Right."

For the rest of the ride, they only listened. No more words to be spoken.

Just the shared connection the pair had with the artist.

It was good, though, clearing up the brewing tension, the ride seemingly melting away as they parked at the bar.

The sooner she got beer, the better her night would go, Rey thought.

"I haven't been here in years." He admitted sheepishly, after cutting off the ignition. "Besides picking you up, that one night."

For a second, she was caught off guard. But it was just another firm reminder of his parentage; there
should've been no shock to it, at all, with Han and Chewie regularly visiting the bar.

"My dad, he uh, took me here, on my twenty-first." He continued, a slight crooked grin coming to his lips. "I didn’t really have any friends, so 'hitting the clubs' wasn't exactly an option. So he forced me down here, bought me my first legal beer." He huffed out a short laugh. "One turned into two then five then suddenly they were countless. We got... Christ, we were so drunk. Somehow ended up in a brawl, I don't remember how. Maz had to kick us out and call my mother."

"You got into a fight?"

"Yeah." He confirmed with a wide, boyish grin; one that spoke of happy memories. "I blame my father. Him and his incapability to shut up in situations when you're supposed to shut up."

She rolled her eyes at this. "You realise you're not one to talk, right?"

"I know." He quipped. "That's why I can blame it on him; his fucken' genes, and all."

"Fair enough." She agreed. "Want to get a beer now?"

"Please."

They both hopped out the car, Kylo locking it shut behind them, slowly sidling up to each other as they approached the bar's entrance.

Upon entering, a few things were noticeably different. The instant warmth, the increase of noise and chatter, and the shitty live band playing woeful renditions of Oasis.

However, what truly took her notice was little Maz. The way her gaze flicked to the entrance, with more patrons coming through, eyebrows rising to her hairline (if she had one under that hat) and eyes widening open.

"BEN SOLO!"

She was quick to make her way over, the comical height difference a little too endearing as she craned her neck to look him dead in the eye.
"Long time since you've come to my bar." Hands on hips, penetrating gaze narrowing in on a nervous Kylo. "Last time, you broke a few chairs and knocked out the guitarist."

"I am very sorry for that. Incredibly sorry—"

"And why is it that this is the first time I'm seeing you in over a decade?"

Rey watched his throat bob at her harsh words.

"I've been busy."

Her glare hardened, taking a step closer to the hulking giant. "Too busy to come see me?"

"Exactly."

Kylo's relief was palpable when the older woman stepped back, sighing. "Alright, what'll it be kids?"

"Just, um, two coronas for now, yeah?"

Kylo confirmed with a nod.

"Alright, take a seat and I'll bring 'em out. Also, don't think I won't come back to understand why you two are here together, alone—"

"It's not like that, Maz." Rey said quickly.

"That's what they all say." She turned away from the stunned pair and began her walk to the bar. "I'll get it out of you by the end of the night." She threw over her shoulder.

"She's, uh, a little kooky."
"So I've learned."

Kylo smiled sheepishly at this before gesturing to the booths. She nodded and followed him to the spot, taking a seat across from him while they awaited their drinks.

They sat in a comfortable silence before a waitress finally brought them over with great wide grin, greeting Rey with a cheery 'hello', asking how she was doing while Kylo could only rub the palms of his hands on his jeans.

When she left, neither knew what to say.

They both took a pull from their drinks.

"So, uh, where do we start?"

Rey pursed her lips, eyes scanning the rest of the room. Of groups laughing together, the lone few that sat at the bar. She hesitated, for the slightest of seconds.

"Why did you leave your family?"

She watched as he hastily took another sip from his beer, eyes looking everywhere and anywhere, but never herself.

"It wasn't— I never intended to." He said softly. "But it was a mix of things, Rey. Of them never being there and..." He sighed. "My mother was always working and my father was... he was so scared about being a bad father that he distanced himself and was a bad father." Another sip, eyes flicking to hers for the briefest of moments. "So I was with Luke, more times than I can count. He, uh, introduced me to art. A whole other world that I could escape to; this all-consuming passion of mine that became a fear of my parents because I was different; because I expressed my emotions with art and that reminded them too much of Vader."

She listened carefully, watching as he toyed with the neck of his bottle.

"I didn't find out I was related to the infamous artist until I was much older, just before college. So then I started questioning it myself — if I was mad, like Vader; if I was the real reason for my loneliness, like actively seeking it out just so I could... draw some fucking art. And all these self-questions reflected in my shitty behaviour and attitude and it became harder to control my temper, leading me to spiral for three years into this hole of self-deprecation. And then Luke promised that he'd hang my piece at his gallery. My parents said they'd come. But the art was never there."
Rey stayed silent for a minute, waiting for him to continue on only to watch him take another pull from his beer.

"Why?"

"I don't know." Kylo muttered bitterly. "You'd have to ask him that."

Rey frowned.

"It was just…" He continued. "It was the first thing I felt I'd accomplished in years. And my parents came; my parents, who never came to anything because they were so immensely busy and immersed in their professional lives. I was just…hopeful, which was so rare — that I could actually make it as a modern artist."

"But it wasn't there."

Kylo sighed, his hands moving to drag down his face; as if scrubbing off the irritation. "I just… I didn't understand why and I was so hurt from it all; that'd he'd promised my artwork to be there only to rip it away, like some cruel fucking prank."

"Have you talked to him?"

"No. Not about this." Kylo's mouth twisted, jaw clenched.

"Maybe you should."

"It's… you saw how volatile our relationship is, Rey. Beyond repair."

"He's your uncle."

"I know." He said softly. "And that's why it's so…so painful." He closed his eyes, wrenching a hand through his shaggy hair. "Please, just… don't judge me on this. I know you have it far worse, when it comes to family, and that it's… it's incredibly selfish of me to act this way but I can't. Not yet. Maybe
never.

"I've managed to patch things up with my parents, for the most part, but—"

"Were you involved with your mentor before you left your family?"

He stared at her, jaw slack, eyes wide; processing the abrupt question.

"We were talking."

"Talking."

"He wasn't my mentor but we'd met."

"How did you meet?"

"I, uh, had a website; for my art. It was encouraged in our classes and he, um, found me through that. So, we hadn't exactly met, but we were talking."

"About?"

"Me." He huffed. "My problems, mostly. He seemed to understand; he made me feel validated — like I wasn't angry for nothing."

"And?"

Rey exhaled softly, watching as Kylo retreated in on himself; face morphing into an expression of pain and regret.

"Please, Rey, can we— can we not do this here. Not now. It's… it's hard to talk about. Humiliating; really, just… fuck." He let out a shaky breath, hands moving like crazy. Always tapping at something, scrunching in his dark curls. "Just, not now. Another time, I swear, but please, I—"
"Okay." Her hand reached out, wrapping around his wrist, his sad eyes meeting hers once more. "That's fine. We can… I didn’t realise it was like this."

"He just he did a lot of things. Manipulated me, toyed with my emotions — it's just too hard to explain, right now."

"That's okay."

"I'm sorry."

"Please." She hushed, thumb rubbing across his knuckles. "Don't. I'm… I'm really happy that you're telling me this Kylo. All of it."

"And I'm really sorry Rey. For everything, I'm just… I'm sorry."

He graced her with a small smile. His hand flipped beneath hers, fingers combing through the gaps to entwine with her own.

"Any more questions? I know there's a lot to explain so we should—we should try and—"

"Can we get some food?"

He stopped, brow furrowing. "Food?"

"Aren't you hungry?"

He nodded quickly. "Yes." He said loudly. "Food, yes, we should… we should definitely get some food."

Rey smiled at his fumbling words. "Great."
As the opening strum to *Wonderwall* struck up in the background, with their hands joined over the table, Rey wondered if anything has changed.

She still had issues. She was still reeling from the words he spoke so harshly.

But sitting here, in the bar, with everyone around them singing the words in unity, Rey thought there was hope in the days to come.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Hey guys, it's been a HOT MINUTE haha. Sorry for the lack of updates, truly, life has just been crazy atm. In the words of an Aussie, *fucken hectic, aye.* But really, all the support on this means the world to me and I love each and every one of you and am SEVERELY behind on comments that I'm steadily making my way though. So yeah, if y'all get some late-ass responses from chapter nine, you know what I'm doin haha.

Now, ONTO THE GOODS, the AMAZINGLY wonderful [reylocaligraphy](http://example.com) did a moodboard for this fic and gahhhsfdhf, SO AMAZING.

![Moodboard](image-url)

THANK YOU SO MUCH!!

THANK YOU FOR READING. ALSO, I HAVE TWITTER NOW AND NOT MANY FRIENDS THERE BC I DONT KNOW HOW TO USE THE APP, COME TALK TO ME THERE [@Dalzonii](http://example.com)

Cheers y'all X
CHAPTER THIRTEEN

~ F E B R U A R Y ~

P A R T O N E

With January rolling into February and the winter winds dying down to a light frost, Rey had taken her nights outside to the balcony. While Phasma and Hux spent their time in the living room, watching yet another reality TV show to laugh and mock those who sobbed in their confessionals, Rey was quick to escape outside with a steaming mug of tea in one hand and the biography of Anakin Skywalker in the other.

Occasionally she'd be joined by Millicent, no doubt hiding from Hux as she snoozed on her lap; other times, Phasma would sit beside her and smoke a fag, a rant rolling off her sharp tongue because Hux had pissed her off again. But for the most part, Rey spent her nights alone. Well, in presence.

There were certain messages keeping her company when Millicent and Phasma couldn't. Messages that made her grin like a loony and had her all too eager to reply. And while their texting wasn't as regular as before, there was a slight difference to the words Kylo typed out with his fingers. She couldn't quite explain it – Rey couldn't really explain anything anymore – but these occasional string of texts were something else.

Less about the mundane lives they lived, more about each other – like they talked of nothing. Nothing of importance or relevance and yet every syllable filled Rey with some heavy-hearted emotion like there was some revelation behind their casual back-and-forth; a deeper meaning to their banter; a fantasy Rey thought she tampered down into extinction weeks ago.

It only left her confused; still conflicted with everything said. Even if it was only occasional, Rey could only wonder if it meant anything. Had they really made up so quickly? Had she forgotten everything said and done after a week of normalcy?

What they were, after their shared night at Kanata's, was a question she'd repeatedly ask herself when sleep was a distant dream away. Not friends; not strictly professional; no labels in sight.

Just… different than before.
A nice different.

"Rey?"

A less-than-perfect Kylo Ren.

"Hey, Rey? You're not seriously still reading that book?"

The real Kylo Ren.

"Rey Niima."

Rey hummed, the words jolting her back to 'real life', damn near spilling her tea over Millicent in her lap.

"Yep." Finn commented dryly. "You're reading the book."

"I'm a slow reader; I like to absorb the words, sue me." Rey snapped, cheeks heating at her little white lie – better he think that than know her mind had immersed itself with Kylo again. "And it's a good read."

"Right." Finn deadpanned. "Do you think it's weird that our calls are pretty much ten percent talking, ninety percent silence?"

Rey huffed. "Is that why you decided to interrupt me?"

"We're still on the phone. How can I interrupt you when you're consenting to talk?"

“It’s weird. And a waste of credit. Also, can I just ask why because… why?"
Rey smiled. “Hi Poe.”

A pause.

“Hi, Rey.” He responded tonelessly, undoubtedly looking over a case in bed while Finn giggled at old memes next to him. "It's weird.'

"Well, I don't think it's silly. It's our routine which doesn't involve you, Dameron."

"And yet, here I am." He sighed, a shuffle of papers in the distant.

"I just like having you present with me… but I also like reading. Like you're physically here with me, you know; at that stage of night where we go off and do our own thig. Just like old times." Rey frowned at the sudden silence. "Am I being clingy?"

"No."

"Yes."

"Great.” Rey huffed.

"Look, Peanut. I don't care that you call me every night; you know I enjoy your company. I love and miss you very much. I just, you know… wish that we'd talk a little more." Finn said carefully. "I want to know what's going on with you. Like how's the new apartment? Are you settling in well?"

Rey smiled as Millicent shifted in her lap, taking a sip from her mug as she pondered the question.

"It's… an adjustment." Rey admitted quietly. "I mean, I'm in a wonderful spot – it shows in my savings account – and I've got space to myself. But it's strange and hard to get used to. I'm, um, you know I'm not used to change." She picked at a loose thread on her trousers, shivering slightly as a gust of wind picked up. She chewed into her bottom lip to stop her teeth from chattering. "But it's nice. I'm very lucky to be where I am; never thought I'd be living in a pricey city apartment when I
"I'm glad you're settling in. Truly, it's... I'm very proud you're stepping out into the world." Rey laughed, a light an airy tone that could melt the frost-coated grass. "How's your roommate? Is she treating you nicely?"

"Finn was terrified of her Rey." Poe chimed in. "He'd cower at one look."

"Did you not see her height? Or her shoulders? Or her legs? She could crush us with a light squeeze —"

"Phasma is lovely." Rey cut in quickly. "I mean, yeah, she's a bit intimidating but... she's got this really dry sense of humour and likes cheap wine." Rey paused for a second. "Or anything, really. Not at fussy at all unlike her boyfriend — who, by the way, is over all the fucking time."

"The ginger who was in serious need of a hug?"

"Yes." Rey answered Poe's question with a snort. "Hux. Kind of a dick. Kind of tolerable, on a good day. He's just such a pretentious wanker sometimes, you know. He named his cat Millicent."

"He has a cat named Millicent?"

"Yep." Rey ran a hand through the tabby of topic, relishing in the warmth and the purr that vibrated within her palm. "Though she's terribly cute. And smart. I think she likes to escape from Hux as much as I do, to be quite honest."

"I thought you didn't like cats."

"No. I just never knew any cats. And this little one is quickly taking my heart."

Rey smiled down at her lap, careless of the orange hairs that stuck to her trousers or the claws that dug into her thighs; Millicent seemed so content, snoozing away and keeping Rey warm and protected from the winter chill still present.
"It sounds like you're doing better than you think, Rey." Poe said after a time. "Living with a stranger, in a whole new part of the city; I think you should give yourself more credit for that. Believe me, it ain't easy."

"Yeah, Peanut. You're doing really well. Going out and seeking help, taking your time with everything that happened at Christmas — that takes some serious tits Rey."

With her head thrown back, Rey cackled high into atmosphere, shutting her eyes tight, the imprint of bright stars and a crescent moon on the back of her eyelids. "Something I'm seriously lacking in the physical department—"

"Well, when it comes to tough situations, your tits are huge. You could knock a bitch out with your metaphorical tits—"

"Okay, okay, enough." Her tone was bright and brimming with the taste of laughter.

"Seriously though, Rey. I'm really, really happy you decided to trial it out. With the therapist, I just — I'm glad you gave it a go."

"Me too." She confessed quietly, fingers curling into Millicent's fur. "He's good. Nice. Easy to talk to." Rey huffed. "I thought it'd be different, you know. Almost like a blunt interrogation but… Cassian is kind and patient and gives me time to think. I like that."

"How was your last session?"

"It was good. Continued the topic of… well, we continued on the art situation—"

"The Kylo situation?"

Rey scowled at his all-knowing tone. "Yes, the Kylo situation."

"And how is it?"
"Better." She answered slowly. "We're talking. He's, um, shed light on a few things that kind of clear a lot up — it's just… a work in progress, I guess. Not just with Kylo, but with the whole family. Everything is so different." Finn hummed his acknowledgement. "But it's, uh, nice to know they have imperfections. I was so set on this ideal family, you know — no flaws, no issues, it was all just bliss. And they fit every detail in my head up until that dinner. It just… it makes sense, I guess."

"No family is perfect. And it isn't a bad thing."

"Yeah. Exactly." Rey huffed. "I just wish they'd been honest with me. I mean, I've known Han and Leia for nearly four years and not once did they mention a son."

"They can't change that; neither can you. And maybe there's reason, you know — too painful to talk about. I mean, they lost him for seven years — who's to say it won't happen again."

In that moment, Rey wondered if Kylo had seen his family since Christmas; if he'd even contacted them, after everything that had happened. The question only had her recalling the broken tone of Leia asking if Rey had seen her son; the wilted pleading of not losing him again.

She hoped he had. For his mother's sake, Rey hoped Kylo had called his mother.

Leia didn't deserve that fear anymore.

"Yeah." She spoke absently, the sudden urge to text him strong on her mind. "I, um — it's kind of late and I'm a little sleepy. It was, uh, a pretty big day. I know it's only my second time, but sessions with Dr. Andor coupled with work is, um, a lot."

"I understand — though next Friday, we're hitting the clubs like old times."

"The clubs?" Rey whined. "Why can't we go to a pub; because, you know, food and live music."

"Oh, and the live music is actually decent?"

Rey smirked. "You know, there's actually a real fancy pub by my apartment. I went with Phasma once after Hux did something to piss her off. The music was actually really lively and fun — not just a good laugh, you know. They did requests and played more than one band and, oh my god, the barbecue ribs there. Finn, you would've died."
"Okay, fine." Finn drawled out dramatically. "We'll go to your fancy neighbourhood and eat barbeque ribs."

"Much better than the clubs, see." Rey grinned. "Alright, you two. I'll let you get back to whatever — and no, I don't need any details."

"Wait, hold up one little second, Rey-Rey." Rey paused, finger hovering over the red button on screen. "I have a proposition for you."

"Oh no." She whispered. "Finn. Whatever your boyfriend is doing, stop it. Right now."

"Valentine's Day is coming up, did you know."

Rey raised a brow. "People still celebrate that?"

"I have a friend." Poe continued, ignoring her quip. "He's nice. And single. Attractive, if I do say so myself — but not as hot as you, honey." She rolled her eyes, sighing and sipping from her mug; she didn't even care that the tea was cold. Anything to stop her from yelling at him. "Oh, and he's also an artist."

She blinked. "Are you fucking pulling my leg right now?"

Finn sighed. "He's dead serious."

"I mean, not like that artist you go to — he's more into, like, comics and stuff. I don't know, he's a nerdy dude; you'd really like him, I feel."

"Poe. I am not going on a blind date. I have enough trust issues as is."

"C'mon, Rey, I already promised you were coming."
"Don't you dare guilt me into this—"

"And he's really excited to meet you—"

"How much money should I bet on this being all lies?"

"And he also said he's okay with you picking the restaurant."

Rey fell silent, battling with her own conscience.

"I'll buy you your favourite bottle of wine."

"Okay. Fine. But we're eating at Pho Tico's — and I guarentee you, I'm only there for the food and wine; nothing else."

"Yes." Poe hissed loudly. "You're gonna' love him Rey; really, really love him and then you'll be thanking me for the rest of your—"

Rey pressed down hard on the vibrant icon with a satisfied grin, the sudden silence like music to her ears.

She should've said no. A blind date sounded terribly annoying, at this point. But entertaining Poe was the only way to get him to stop, sometimes.

A sigh left her lips, Rey looking out to the city lights, contemplating quietly.

Her gaze slowly but surely moved to the phone still in hand. A second later, Rey brought up Kylo's contact. A minute of impulse had her typing it out with numb fingertips; a spurt of courage lead her to press send:

**You should call your mother.**

Before she could dwell, Rey heaved out a loud sigh and plucked up the book beside her once more, shutting off her phone for the night as the moon continuing to rise high and Millicent kept on sleeping peacefully in the comfort of her lap.
Kylo never replied.

She didn't know if she was mad or disappointed. Both, maybe. Though, whatever the case, she was undeniably frustrated with him.

Ignoring his problems didn't fix anything; had he not learned that by now?

However, Rey tried not to think about it over her weekend — she was set on a relaxing weekend to prepare her for yet another busy week. Instead, she immersed herself in Vader's biography; the life of Anakin Skywalker sucking her in, word after word.

And with each new chapter, suddenly Rey understood why Luke insisted on her reading.

It was confronting. It lead to questions. It completely fucked up her idea of a relaxing weekend.

'Padme Amidala was of the History department when Skywalker entered his Junior year; a substitute filling in for a position until a permanent replacement could be found. Only, to Anakin, she wasn't just his teacher. She was his muse.

An obsession that continued outside of school, after Skywalker's graduation, and a soon-to-be flourishing relationship — hidden away, out of sight to the public eye.'

It was captivating; Padme Amidala and Anakin Skywalker's whirlwind romance. The slight discomfort to it, the scandal (although, Kenobi insisted it began outside of Anakin's school years) in how it began, the passion between the two. Rey could only re-read over the text, eyes scanning across the page from top to bottom, left to right; taking in all of it. ’

'The beginning of the end', Kenobi called it. 'A relationship filled with good-intention, at first, Padme quickly becoming Anakin's salvation; his saving grace with the sudden death of his mother. Though, the pain his mother's passing inspired brought forth a canvas of brilliance. When it was presented to me, I was stunned.

Only it was the look in the young man's eyes that left me awed. The beginnings of a mask slowly moulding to the eager-mind; Vader's first appearance.'

Reading the ominous passage only had her picturing the painting that hung in Kylo's own living room and the death ahead that inspired it. And despite the strange hold Kenobi's writing had on her, suddenly there was a fear to continue. What would she discover when Vader peaked in his career after the death of his wife? What would she see in his intent to stay away from his children?
It was a line of questioning she wasn’t particularly pleased to ask. But Rey needed clarification. And there was only one person who could show it to her, excusing Benjamin Kenobi himself:

The son of Vader.

Luke sounded unsurprised to receive her call early Sunday night; like he was expecting her to come running with questions — after all, that was his intent, no?

But her questions went beyond his parents and their romance presented in Kenobi’s words. He still had Kylo to answer for; of the two sides — the two different versions to the same story, each one conflicting the other. It kept her up all night. It had her mind far away from work that Monday morning. And she was desperate for closure.

So Rey did the seeking this time, agreeing to meet him at the same spot during her lunchbreak, carefully crafting each sentence in her head on the way that would surely disappear when the time to confront came; absently thinking up the outcome to each scenario, each one with a bitter ending.

Upon her arrival, every nerve within her body was alight. Her steps felt light and uneasy, her stomach empty and unaccepting, eyes moving about to take in the campus; the old buildings, the people who walked in unknown directions, the countless paths that she’d never take — yet another reminder that she could’ve been more if she wanted, had she not dropped out all those years ago; to indulge that little girl inside who always had an interest in the stars and planets; the physics of the universe.

You’re happy, Rey reminded herself, feet carrying her offabsently to the park-bench by the old mulberry tree, what you do is enough.

And it was true.

She was far away from Jakku. She had friends by her side and a family to count on. She was free.

"Rey?"

She halted her walk, at the sudden sound of her name. Warm hazel eyes met an icy blue pair. Rey released a shuddery breath, a hot fog escaping parted lips.

Luke Skywalker wore an unreadable expression, face impassive to emotion, sitting all too straight in the park bench; hands sprayed against his knees, back vertical against the surface, head held up proud.
"Luke." She said slowly, tongue thick and troublesome. On instinct, her hand tightened around the spine of the book, clutching it ever-more-so tightly against her hip.

His eyes followed the movement, like her hand was the target.

"Thank you." She said quietly; subtle words against the strong wind, an extra chill to the wind that had her hugging limbs. "For meeting me."

Her took in her expression with a calculated gaze, eyes roaming over each freckle, the flush from the chilly wind, every imperfection that showed through.

Slowly, on palm moved from his knee to pat the seat next to him.

"Have a seat, Rey."

She eyed the empty space for a few long seconds before following through with his request, easing her tensed limbs into the seat. She stayed close to the edge.

For a moment, it was silent, both content on letting the air between them sit as they looked up at the sky, watching the wind circle through the bustling leaves on spindly branches. Rey began to count the fallen mulberries, a ripe purple splash on bright concrete; like a splattering of paint.

One, two, four, seven.

"So you read the book?"

Nine. There were nine.

"Still reading."

"I see." He murmured softly, shifting in his seat ever-so-slightly, reaching down to his feet where his shoulder bag sat upright. After a minute of shuffling, he pulled out a container, lifting the lid and pulling out one half of a sandwich. He offered the piece to her — ham, lettuce, tomato, hopefully some mayonnaise.

She bit into her lip, eyeing the offered treat, before gingerly taking it.

Rey wasn't one to refuse food.

"So, you have some questions then?"
She took a small bite, Luke taking out the other half beside her.

"Yes." She chewed slowly, pondering her next words while he patiently waited. "I...I don't know if I can continue."

A pause. "And why is that?"

"Your parents." She answered softly. "It's — their tragedy. I know how it ends. I don't think I can push on to read about it in-depth."

She heard Luke sigh beside her, a deep sound coming straight from the chest. "It was hard for me, too; I think it's hard for anyone to fathom." He dropped his head, eyeing the book between them. "But I never got to meet my mother. And it's the only thing left to give me a glimpse of what... what she was like, who she was."

She breathed out uneasily, the pang in her chest reflecting just how much she could relate to a few words. If she had something of her parents left — anything to show her just a hint of them — she'd treasure it close to her chest and never let it go.

"To see her kindness through Kenobi's writing. To picture her smile, next to my father; to read of her achievements, of her powerful voice; her determination to stand up for her beliefs. It's nice to know. People, they only talk of her beauty, as if that were her only quality. But she's so much more."

"Yeah." She whispered, breathlessly.

"My father was...he was a deeply troubled person. And my mother took a chance on that. She saw the light in him, when no one else could." Rey watched his eyes droop close, hunching over to pinch the bridge of his nose. "Perhaps she was naïve to think she could save someone so hopelessly gone. Or maybe it was just a testament of her love for him. Either way, it doomed her."

"How did she pass?"

"Complications of childbirth. Though, many say it was the cause of a broken heart." Luke scoffed out a laugh, sudden and loud. "Leia says it's all bullshit. Out mother was strong — no broken heart would stop her from living for her children. Silly superstition, she calls it."
"Kylo… he mentioned that Leia doesn't talk much about it."

"Ah," he murmured. "I don't know if she'd ever forgive him. Even in death, she seems to hold a grudge. I suppose she has every right to."

"I…I get it." Rey murmurs. "For years, I believed my true parents would come back for me; that I'd been left on a doorstep for a reason and, in due time, they'd come around to take me home." Rey placed the half eaten sandwich in her lap, craning her neck to take in the grey, overcast sky. "But they never did. And they never were. And when I realised that, anger was the only thing that I felt. So I understand why she wouldn't wish to see him or talk about him. I don't know how I'd react, if I ever saw my parents. Not really."

He regarded her seriously, for a moment; a sympathetic gaze present that she wished would stop.

"It's a different process, for everyone." Luke agreed solemnly. "For me, I needed to see him. To try and forgive him, for all his mistakes and bad decisions for the sake of his career. And I feel… I feel free for doing so. Like a weight off my conscience has been removed."

In their short bout of silence, after Luke's quiet confession, the contrast between the twins became more apparent through his words.

A shiver went up her spine.

Her mind was an endless cycle of question after question.

"Is it true?" She asked abruptly. "Did he really do it?"

Luke sucked in a breath, eyes all-knowing to her question despite not asking outright.

"No one knows, for certain." He answered, after a time. "If he intended to take too much or was just addicted to the escape, I… I don't know. But that doesn't matter; people can speculate all they want what Anakin Skywalker did in his final moments. He's at peace now - their words mean nothing. The truth isn't necessary."

Rey paused, stomach lurching at the mere thought, hesitating at the sudden urge to question him further. "What… do you think?"
Luke sucked in a breath, eyes cold and distant as he scanned the area before them. "I think it was a choice to regain his freedom. Breaking away from the mask. Retaking Anakin." He turned to her, mouth set in a grim straight line. "This is why you should continue, Rey. To understand that Vader's decisions weren't entirely his own. That his mentor had a heavy hold on his actions and mind—"

"His mentor was Kenobi—"

"Not always." He leaned in further, plucking up the book to smooth his palm over the cover. "This is an ode to his captivity. Read more." Luke held out the book. "If you wish to know more about it, you can only read ahead."

She took the book lightly, clutching to her chest as a small scowl formed at her mouth. Luke stood without another glance her way, striding forward with a few steps.

"Perhaps it'll make you see a few things. About Vader. And Kylo, too."

She scoffed silently, and before he could so much as take a step, she was on her feet.

"I don't get it." She admitted quickly, running a hand through her hair to soothe the irritation that pounded within her skull. "This sympathy, this understanding. Where was it Christmas night?" At his furrowed brow, Rey huffed and began to elaborate. "You talk of needing to see your father, to help him, to forgive him or…or whatever. So why can't you help Ben? Why can't you forgive Ben?"

The name was foreign on her tongue; to speak his real, given identity and not some art pseudonym. A reminder that this family had so many secrets buried within that she wasn't privy to.

"It's like… it's like you think they're one and the same, sometimes. Your nephew and your father. Though, unlike Vader, you refuse to see past your transgressions. You refuse to forget the past and make up. Why are you so unforgiving with him?"

"Because Ben never had a reason to turn away from his family!" Luke shouted. "He had a family who loved and cared for him who would do everything for him!"

"Really?" She questioned. "So you didn't promise his painting to be shown? You didn't lie and embarrass him, in front of Leia and Han, by taking that promised opportunity away from him — the chance to attract clients and customers?" Her chest heaved with the power of her words, rapidly breathing in and out to accommodate her quick speech. "Do you have any idea how humiliated he is, after all these years?" She watched his head bow down to his chest, shifting his hands into the pockets of his coat. Rey sneered. "And you can't even manage an apology."
"You don't understand, Rey." Her stepped closer. "He didn't tell you the full story."

"And did you?" She snapped. "Because you seemed to miss some pretty important details." She took a step forward. "Just admit you did wrong, Luke."

"Okay." He murmured. "I messed up. I went about it the wrong way, I know that." His eyes narrowed in at her own. "My methods — they may not have been the best. I can say that with honesty." Luke met her with another step, closing the gap between them.

"So why did you do it?"

"Because Snoke was coming. Did you know that? That man he was venting online to — his old mentor — he was coming to the show." Luke spat. "And I knew exactly who he was; a prolific art collector, Vader's pieces making up the large amount." Luke frowned. "I knew what he was looking for. And I wouldn't… I couldn't let Ben get himself involved in it."

She couldn't quite process his words. And after a minute went by, and Rey thought she understood, she wasn't sure she could trust it. Why didn't Kylo tell her that, if true? Why were there so many minute details to everything and why did no one ever mention them.

"I know I did wrong." He continued slowly. "I might be stubborn to admit it, but I'm no idiot." He paused for a second, as if constructing his words carefully. "But I didn't do it out of malicious intent.

"I thought I could help him. And I was wrong. I made a mistake. And I'm paying for it." His eyes darkened the slightest of shades.

Rey breathed in.

"You can still apologise."

She exhaled.

He laughed; sharp and bitter against the cool wind that whipped at dry skin.

"I think it's too late for that. It's been over a decade, Rey. Ben will never see me as family again."

"You haven't tried at all!" She cried out. "All he wants is to feel loved and respected; to feel like he's a part of his own family. If you can… if you can just stop with the self-pity for five minutes and try to talk it out with him, you might be surprised."
"You're so naïve, Rey." Luke said softly. "It's going to get you hurt with him. Be careful."

She opened her mouth to reply, only to have no sound follow out. With a slack jaw and stunned eyes, Rey watched him turn his back on her and stride away with purpose.

And just like that, she was left on her own in the foreign setting that felt so mocking; a bout of new questions quickly forming in her mind as his figure retreated into the dark grey distance.

A storm was brewing.

~ * ~

When the storm finally came, it hit hard. Rain slapped against the pavement, the wind whistling lowly as it whipped against the building, thunder rattling the whole shop as lightning lit up the sky with vibrant streaks, branching out across a bruised and blotted purple canvas.

Perhaps she could admire the natural beauty it possessed had she been used to such violent acts of nature, but the loud clap of thunder continued to reverberate in her chest, nerves exploding at every new round, every flash of light, every rumble that had the shop creaking.

"Hurry Gummy, we need to shut this place up fast."

Her eyes quickly snapped away from the storm and moved to follow Han bustling around the garage, rushing to shut the roller doors before the rain flooded in.

After a moment of hesitance, she found her feet and moved to help shut everything up. Side by side, they worked together to close up shop.

"Everything okay?" Han asked quietly after successfully locking the roller doors.

Rey scuffed her boot against the concrete, frowning. "I'm just tired. It's been a long day." She admitted softly. "This storm isn't helping, either. They always put me on edge a little."

"Ah," Han nodded seriously, grimacing and glancing to his left. "You, uh, want to talk about it?"

She laughed shortly. "No. I'm good, thank you. I do have a favour to ask though, if it's alright."
"You don't have to ask for a lift, Rey." He rolled his eyes. "You know I'm happy to offer every afternoon. And it's pissing down hard out there."

A small smile flickered at her mouth, her gaze returning to his own. "Thank you." She muttered softly. "I really do appreciate it."

"No need to thank me, let's just get goin' before the roads get flooded."

"What about clean up?"

"Not worth the risk. Wouldn't want to get stuck in this storm." He smirked at her. "'Specially with you."

She scoffed, glaring at the sight of his back while hastily following him to the door.

"Here," He thrust the keys in her direction. "Run out, get the car started and blast that heat. I'm about to freeze and I want that car nice and toasty after I lock up."

She grinned at him. "Are you letting me drive?"

"Absolutely not. Not five seconds ago did you tell me you were on edge and now you think I'd let you drive my car?" He laughed with a shake of his head. "'let you drive my car' — pfft, good one, Gummy."

With a deep scowl, she snatched the keys from his fingers, poking out her tongue before turning to the door, hand wrapping around the handle.

She took a deep breath before wrenching the door open, leaping out into the hammering rain and bolting to the car with a new speed unknown to her, though it only took a few split seconds to have her drenched which she hopped to the car on light feet. The buns atop her head began to droop and unravel, loose strands sticking to the back of her neck as while her clothes clung to her skin.

Jamming the key in the lock, Rey was quick to twist and yank open the passenger door, throwing herself inside and slamming the door behind her.

Only then did she allow herself to breathe; a deep shuddering rasp as Rey leant over the console to
start the ignition, car humming to life while Han stood in the rain a ways away, locking up behind him.

Her hands fiddled with the dials, making sure to honour his request with the heat slowly but surely warming the car before wandering fingers found the radio tuner; Rey smirked as she quickly tuned into the pop station.

"What is this garbage?"

"Not sure," Rey answered, giving him a bright toothy grin as he hopped in the car and grumbled about wet seats, hair plastered to his forehead; looking thoroughly battle worn. "Pretty catchy, though."

"Yeah, no." He snarked, buckling into his seatbelt and reaching out to switch it back to whatever CD he already had playing, an old familiar rock tune starting quickly as he reversed out of the park.

She couldn't complain, however, as they began their perilous drive to Rey's apartment. It wasn't too flashy or daringly loud, soft and simple chords that eased her racing mind to something more tolerable.

Her conversation with Luke had been physically and mentally draining — topped with a long day of work and a foray into the storm, Rey was all but ready to have a long hot shower and call it a night.

But there were so many questions circling within, the urge to ring Kylo was strong.


Bed. Probably bed. Lord knows she needed it.

But… but she needed answers, too.

About Snoke. About the seven years Kylo spent away from his family. Answers about their own relationship — an actual definition to what they were.

She'd been so certain her heavy feelings for him had completely fizzled after everything that had happened; certain that she was content on a small friendship or…or strictly professional — hell, it was probably best for them that way, with Han and Leia now in the picture.

But she still cared for him like crazy. She still wanted him like crazy and, fuck, this storm was clearly driving her crazy with every strike of lightning and round of thunder.
Yeah, *definitely bed*, Rey thought absently as they came up to her apartment, fat droplets still drumming against the roof of the car; wipers working overtime to keep the windscreen as clear as possible.

Han parked as close as possible, leaving the car running so the heat could warm their numb *nearly-dry* bodies, though the distance between would be enough to get her soaked again.

"We can wait it out, if you want."

Rey frowned, watching the beads of water race each other on her window. "No," she answered, eyes set on the winning bead. "I can brave it for a shower."

"I can run with you, then. Make sure you get inside."

"And watch an old-man slip?"

"*Old?*"

"You heard me."

He scowled, reaching over her to pull at the handle and force open the door. "Better hurry before I push you out, *Gummy*."

She laughed, a cackle escaping the confines of her chest while she slipped off her seat-belt and skipped out of her seat, sprinting to the door with her back-pack with a laugh on her tongue as Han shouted himself hoarse when she refused to shut the door behind her. At once, she was instantly wet, fishing out her keys from the pocket of her thick trousers, struggling to unlock the heavy door with so much wet strands in her face.

Rey could only sigh in relief when *finally* the door came free and she stepped into the warmth of the lobby.

She wasted no time by stepping into the elevator, slamming the button as she continuously shivered in her wet clothes. Quickly, she rose up to the floor; doors opening, Rey stepped out and shuffled
down the hallway to the apartment door, opening it with a heavy groan on her lips and a hand in her wet hair, buns now completely demolished, soothing the impending headache.

"You look like a drowned rat."

She grinned, not turning to meet Hux's scowl as she toed off her shoes, waiting for the hard slap that would inevitably be thrown his way—

"Hux," A deep solid growl had every muscle tensing, stilling at the familiar voice. "Enough."

She whipped around, lips parted in shock to find Kylo sitting at the table.

Slowly, her gaze dropped to truly take him in.

He looked… well, incredible. He'd had a haircut, for one, his ebony hair not limp and lifeless as it had been previously, but now back to it's usual shiny waves. He was clean-shaven, clothed unrumpled and ironed perfectly; he was undeniably the most attractive man she'd ever laid eyes on and, god, how was that fair?

Slowly, her eyes panned away from him (it was a hard task) to the table they sat around, papers covering every inch of space with pens scattered around them, each having a glass of red wine before them.

"Um, hi." Rey finally found her voice.

"Hello." His impassive eyes found her own. "We, uh, have a performance night to prepare for. For the school."

"Ah."

"Yeah." Kylo murmured. "There's, um, also a little showing; student art, and… musical items."

"Nice."

"It will be, I hope. Stressful but… good, I think."
Rey shifted on her feet, chewing on her bottom lip, deep in thought and—

"I should shower…”

"We're just about to order take-away…”

They trailed off, Rey still wet and dripping.

"You should shower." Hux agreed suddenly, a permanent sneer present on his pale face.

"Alright, I'm going. Don't you work yourself too hard, Armitage." She said, laughter ringing in her tone with her hands held up in surrender. "Just, uh, order whatever. I'm not fussy."

"Sushi is good?" Ben asked quietly.

"Sushi is great."

"Great."

A pause.

"I'm going to shower." Rey announced once more as she hustled along to the bathroom. Rey closed the door behind her, a deep sigh leaving her lips as she leant against the surface.

Her eyes found the mirror.

"Fuck,"

She really did look like a drowned rat.

~ * ~

After a long hot shower, a change of comfort clothes and quite possibly the most uncomfortable
dinner she's ever experienced — it was damn-near mortifying using her fingers while the others all knew how to use chopsticks (Ben was kind enough to demonstrate, but alas; no luck) — Rey turned to the balcony once more, leaving the three to their work while she settled down to continue reading the last few chapters of *Vader*.

The storm had tamed into a light drizzle; a calming pitter-patter of sound that created a rhythm to the steady rising breaths within her chest. The cool wind washes at her cheeks, a thick blanket drawn across her lap with the book open on top.

Palpatine took an interest in Skywalker; like a stack of clay to sculpt, he could mould Anakin into the artist he wanted, holding an influence over the young mind like no other.

Seek the pain, deeply rooted within — show the world that an experience can be crafted into a masterpiece. Slowly, but surely, dark whispers into eager ears birthed a new vision:

* A new artist, attracted to the shadow casted from light.*

She reread the passage, over and over. To the heartbeat of the rain, the distant sound to the faint roll of thunder, her eyes found itself in a loop. The situation sounded familiar; a day, spent before a fire. *Was Kylo the same to Snoke?*

The thought sent a chill up her spine.

"Rey," The sliding door barely gave her any detail of the incoming intruder, jerking in her seat and whipping away from the passage to a pair of pretty eyes. Kylo stood tall, sheepishly smiling with two full glasses of red in hand. Slowly, one extended to her.

Rey took it with hesitant fingers before whipping back around to face the city lights. "You never replied to my message."

She heard him shift behind her. "I had a busy weekend."

"It was a simple question; either yes or no. Not that hard to type."

"And tell me, would you not have called had I answered either? Would you not have commanded me to elaborate further?"

"Well," She scoffed softly, flushing slightly as made his way around to sit in the chair beside her
own. "You don't have to answer."

He laughed; a short outburst of quiet joy that made the corner of her lips twitch. "And we'd be here, having the same conversation on why I didn't answer."

She frowned.

He was right, of course. But she wasn't going to tell him that.

Instead she remained silent, gripping the book tighter and shifting it on her lap while her eyes found the passage once more.

"I have." He said, after a time. "Called my mother." Her brows furrowed. "Not as soon as I should've, but, I did."

"Good."

In the brief pause, a rush of wind breezed through the balcony.

"It was before your text, by the way; if you were curious."

"I wasn't." She was itching to ask.

"Yeah." He muttered, humour in his tone. "Yeah, okay." The feel of his hard and heady eyes on her face was unbearable; the cool, outside air melting away into a blistering heat that lit her cheeks alight with red. "What are you reading?"

She plucked up the book, turning the cover to his line of sight.

"Ah." He huffed before taking a deep sip from his glass. "Do you…do you like it?"

"it's confronting."

"Yeah." He muttered. "Yeah, it is."
"Your grandmother seemed like a wonderful woman." Rey confessed.

"I think she was. I wish I could meet her; just the once. My grandfather, too. I mean, I can’t completely trust the words of Benjamin Kenobi, you know? Everyone has a different perspective. And Kenobi felt betrayed — that has to leave a lot of room for bias, right?"

Rey watched what looked to be a regular internal-battle unfold before her eyes.

"It's...I know he wasn't a good man. I know he struggled with a lot. Still, I just... I can—"

"Relate."

"Yeah." He nodded at her interruption. "Yeah, exactly. That struggle, that ambition. The taste of triumph for a bitter form of art, it's... it captures everything. It's hard to break free from."

"Harder when there's someone else influencing your decisions." His shocked eyes slowly turned to face her. One moment of hesitation before she met him head on. "I saw Luke today."

He breathed out, chest deflating with the long, suspended breath. "Right."

He was bitter. She didn’t like that. She didn’t like that one bit.

"I... I've been reading this and have a lot of questions that need answering so I just...I went to him. For answers—"

"I'm quite happy to answer your questions, Rey."

"You didn't answer my text; you had a busy weekend. How would you have had the time?"

"Really? You're bringing up the stupid text again?"

"No, I just..." She trailed off, raising the glass to her lips and gulping down the vinegary wine until it drained. "Luke met him. Luke is the only person to know him, other than Kenobi. So yes, I went to him for questions."
He toyed with his lips, pouting them sideways before snapping his gaze to the view before them.

"I was just… confused and needed some clarity. And I know…I know it's not my business, but I…I also had to ask about the art thing—"

"The *art* thing?" he groaned. "Oh Christ, Rey."

"I'm *sorry*, I know I should've asked first—"

"Yeah, you should've." He snapped, slamming his glass on the ground so hard she was surprised it didn’t break.

"I'm really sorry, Kylo." She said softly. "I was just… mad that he did that to you; promised something for you only to snatch it away and…"

"And you wanted to make sense of it." He hissed through clenched teeth. "Because *god forbid* Luke do something like that, right? He can’t *possibly* be so cruel?!"

She flinched as he leaned in closer, teeth barred and eyes blazing hot. His words set heavy weights on her chest and had her fumbling for words.

Slowly, he eased back into the seat; anger simmering down slowly, though it did nothing to settle her nerves.

"You're *infuriating*, you know."

"Yeah, well, you're not perfect yourself, *Ben*!"

After saying his birth name aloud, he rounded his eyes on her for a brief second; shaking his head softly, side to side, almost in wonder, before looking away once more.

Rey squirmed in her seat.

Beside her, she heard another loud sigh leave his lips. He picked up the wineglass from his feet, taking another deep sip.

"I'm sorry.″ He heaved out suddenly, raking a large hand through his soft waves. "For snapping like that. I shouldn't…I *shouldn't* take my problems out on you." Another sip, the glass nearing on empty.
"I've been told I do that a lot. And I've been working on it for a long time now, but *fuck Rey*, Luke sets it off like nothing else."

She paused, toying with her empty glass. Passing it between her fingers, like it weren't delicate or easily breakable; like it wasn't *as* fragile as her own bloody self.

"He admitted he did wrong. When I asked him about it, at first he was… well, a little defensive, but after — he *knows* he has a big part in this." Kylo didn't acknowledge her words, nor make any move to reply. Tentatively, she reached out; fingers folding over his own hand, so warm and inviting beneath her own cold palm. "He thinks *there's no point* to apologising. He thinks you won't forgive him—"

"Well, it'll take a *lot more* than an apology."

"You owe him an apology, too. This goes both ways."

Suddenly, he looked at their joined hands, and *just like* that night at *Kanata's*, he flipped his palm to lace his fingers with her own.

"*I could* forgive him. I think, I don’t…I'm not sure." Kylo muttered. "It wasn't just him, it was… it was just the last straw of many things."

He squeezed her hand tight.

"He thinks it's too late."

"Maybe it is." He echoed quietly.

"Do you want it to be?"

He looked at her, then. Eyes softening as they landed on her curious hazel gaze. No answer given.

"Kylo," She said thickly. "Why was *Snoke* at the showing?"
"I think you know why, Rey."

"Dark whispers." She said softly, watching his eyes twitch.

"He was my Palpatine." Kylo answered. "But in a… it was different. Vader only had to tap into his darker memories whereas… Snoke, he — he brought them." Rey watched, in horror, as his eyes narrowed in and the grip on her hand became painful. "He manipulated me. Emotionally, mentally, physically; I was his toy. His fucking experiment."

"Like what?" She breathed out, barely a whisper.

"Like a…like fake friends, a fake relationship — everything I thought I'd done without my family was fake. Set up by him, to create the perfect artist, the perfect reveal to have me in my anger!"

She could only silently gape, barely processing anything that came from his mouth.

"And it worked. It fucking worked, Rey — he…he made sure I followed in my grandfather's footsteps, he kept me on track and despite leaving, despite not seeing him for years… I can’t shake that. I still get in that headspace, I was in that headspace after Christmas and I-I…” His voice cracked, head drooping as the tears spilled down his cheeks. "I don’t want to be him; I don’t want to become the next Vader."

In an instant, she was out of her seat, clambering into his seat, climbing into his lap to wrap her arms around his neck and press her face into his broad shoulder. In a short time, he returned the gesture, chest wracking with silent sobs as her jumper became soaked from his tears.

She wished she could fully understand; wished she could make him elaborate but right now, he only needed comfort. And so she held on tight, pressing herself as close as possible while the years of hurt and manipulation left his body.

There would come a time for answers.

She couldn’t say exactly how long they sat entangled in each other’s limbs, sharing each other’s warmth. A half-hour, maybe, perhaps even more. But even when the tears stopped and they sat up straighter, she never left his lap. When Kylo had recovered enough to lift his head from her shoulder, red-eyed and drained, he’d reached for the blanket next to them and draped it over their huddled bodies while they sat in silence.

With her eyes closed and head rested against the firm warmth of his chest, Rey was quite content to stay here forever.
To feel the rhythm to his breathing, the steady rise and fall to his body, neatly tucked under one arm, squished so tightly into a single-seat chair.

An eternity of this simply wouldn't be enough.

"There's a gallery." Kylo spoke suddenly, voice hoarse and croaky. "Here, in Takodana, on the outskirts. Paintings of… Anakin's, not Vader's, and Kenobi's — old and perhaps simpler, but still beautiful. I'd like to show you them."

She nestled in closer. "I'd really love that." She turned to look up at him, a small smile sent his way. When he gifted one in return, her heart soared high within her chest.

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

"Would you be free this Saturday?" She nodded against his chest. "Then it's a date."

Rey knew he meant nothing about it; nothing about the way his fingers delicately danced against her arm, brushing her every-so-lightly it had her heart pumping that little bit faster.

Still. The words. Date.

Naturally, she could only freak out a little inside.

Though, the movement beneath her quelled it all too soon. "I should… I should head out."

Do you have to? "Yeah it's, um, pretty late."

Reluctantly, she shuffled forward to stand on wobbly feet, Kylo following her a moment later.

"Thank you." He said softly. "I'm… very glad to have met you."

"I'm… I'm super glad I met you."
"Yeah?" He asked sheepishly, rubbing the back of his neck.

"Of course." She rolled her eyes. "Moron."

He smiled, turning to slide open the glass door, pausing to look over his shoulder again. "Hey, Rey?"

"Yes, Kylo?"

"Would you mind… can you call me Ben, from now on?" He shifted, once more. "I like to hear my real name, with you."

The wind shifted. Rey walked forward, standing on the tips of her toes to pull him into a tight embrace. With her lips at his ear and his arms slowly snaking around her waist, she grinned.

"Goodnight, Ben."

Chapter End Notes

PROGRESS IS SWEET. A KISS IS ON THE HORIZON.

Thank you all so much for your sweet comments and, WOW, 2.8k kudos is truly insane. Thank you all so, so much for the constant support. I love you ALL so much!!

(also, for those of you worried about that 'blind date', the only thing that'll come outta of it is a neat new friendship and a jealous mwahaha -- devoted reylo, here).
Honesty is Key

Chapter Notes

Hi, hey, hello! I'm backkkkk! I cannot apologise enough for how long this took, life has been kinda insane and damn.... blocks are nasty business. But here we go -- finally, I bring another chapter. Cheers for waiting so patiently! Enjoy <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

~ F E B R U A R Y ~

P A R T    T W O

Honesty is Key

"You're quiet today."

An observation; just three simple words and a husky voice that lulled her out of a thick, heavy trance -- pulled away from her own thoughts; yanked from Kylo 'call me Ben' Ren.

Ben Solo.

Rey looked up, startled -- eyes meeting Dr. Andor's soft gaze, black obsidian glazed over. Eyes that had some strange force, compelling her to spill every little secret; every morsel of truth that she'd locked down years ago… until Ben, of course.

What was it about dark eyes, she wondered idly.

"How can you tell? It's my third session -- that's not exactly enough time to…to already know my usual state."

Cassian nodded, a small smile playing on his lips. He lifted his left hand, flicking the wrist slightly, head bowing to follow the motion. "It's been ten minutes," he muttered, never glancing away from his watch. "In a thirty minute session." Rey sunk into the couch. "Busy week?"
"A little. Yeah." He hummed. "It's just been… a lot's happened that I never thought would, you know?"

"And what would that be?"

She shifted. "It's complicated."

"Life often is."

"Do you always have reply to everything I say?"

"That depends."

"That's not vague at all."

She blinked in surprise when he chuckled quietly, eyes crinkling at the corners. "So is 'it's complicated', Rey."

Only then did she realise how familiar this conversation sounded -- a permanent cycle between her and Cassian, it seemed, coaxing out the honest thoughts that plagued her very mind so often.

Silence fell upon the room; dead-quiet except for the faint tick from the large clock. She watched it go around once before sighing.

"It's hard to explain."

"We have twenty minutes." *Nineteen.* "We can sit here in silence, if you wish; thinking out the complicated is a good way to work through it. Thinking it out loud can help too. It boils down to preference -- if you believe talking this out with me can benefit you, my ears are open."

Rey shifted. "It's nothing… important, really. Compared to all my other issues, this really… isn't one -- I mean, it's just a silly hope that I can't banish and..." His careful eyes said everything without a single word uttered aloud, urging her to continue with a heady glance. "It's just… a feeling -- a
really, really strong feeling that I've never really… experienced. And at times, it feels like it just… takes over and it's a lot and I don't -- I'm not really…" Rey sucked in a breath. "I'm just scared. Of it. I think."

Cassian nodded slowly, piecing every jumbled sentence together in the sudden lull of quiet. "And does this feeling involve a person?"

"...yes." Rey frowned. "But, um, I don't think this person… returns this feeling. Quite certain, actually but -- well, then something might happen and it'll just spur right back up and I just… I don't know how to get rid of it, or lose it or whatever but it needs to go because I-- I can't keep doing this."

"Doing what?"

"Hurting myself. Making it more difficult than it already is by subjecting myself to this stupid art job. Because every time I look at him it becomes all too clear." The words tumbled from clumsy lips, chest rising and falling with a familiar ache of wanting something unattainable so badly. "He'll never want me back, he'll never see me in the way I want him to. And just when I start to realise this, he'll say something nice or he'll listen and I'll... I'll be right back where I started." Rey sighed. "And now he's started opening up to me and I can feel that pull, that uncontrollable force like a -- like a fucking leash around my neck -- it's just tightening, and it keeps growing stronger and I want -- I just need it to stop."

With short breaths, she tried to regain composer, fingers buried in the fabric beneath her; anything to make her shoulders still, anything to lift the heavy weight off her chest.

"And I'm trying, I'm really trying. I don't know what this is, it's never happened so strongly -- I mean, I've had certain… feelings of course but this is different. Something I can't really label or give a word because I don't know!" She groaned with clenched fists. "Is any of this making sense?"

She looked up, wide eyed and nervous, preparing for Cassian to roll his eyes at her naivete or question her maturity; how a grown adult woman could be so afraid of something so small and meaningless, even. But upon first glance, Cassian didn't seem to judge at all -- as usual, his eyes were warm and true to his word. His ears were open. And he was listening with all his attention.

"How could you know that this person doesn't return these specific feelings? You say that he's opening up to you and is attentive. And just two weeks ago, you were worried there'd be no hope of returning to these certain sessions. But here you are, proclaiming something much different in a very short time-span."

"I've, uh, actually had these feelings for some time now."
"I gathered that. From our first session, actually."

"Great." Rey puffed out, flushing bright red.

"Does that embarrass you?" When she didn't answer, he continued. "For most of us, it's a natural part of living -- particularly when we age and puberty kicks in. We're *suddenly* bombarded with these strong connections and it is frightening. There's no denying that, Rey. But allowing yourself to feel these emotions; to admit them to yourself and the people that surround you -- that's nothing to be ashamed of. It's daunting. And when unrequited, it's… extremely disheartening. But *never* put yourself down on something you can't control. Never try to forcibly stop something that simply can't be stopped instantly. It's okay to allow an attraction to someone and, ultimately, it's up to you and your companion if it's something to pursue. But you will *never* get that chance if you push these feelings down and continue on like nothing has changed."

She sniffed at his soft words, feeling a wave of tears ready to spill over. A few deep breaths, body tight and tense, she'd managed to tamper them down -- holding them at bay, repressing it deep within. It was what she was good at, after all. "There is no chance." she'd always been excellent, understanding her worthlessness. "So what's the point?"

"Have you been honest with him about these feelings." Very slowly, Rey shook her head. "And have you asked him if *he* has feelings for you?"

"No."

Cassian smiled and raised his hands. "So how can you know?"

Her teeth sunk hard into the soft feel of her bottom lip, hands wringing together uncomfortably as her leg jittered up and down; quick and fast, heel raised while she flexed her toes.

"He doesn't react." A whisper from her lips, barely audible, though judging by the way his eyebrows raised in interest, he'd definitely heard. "When I… in our sessions, when I'm naked and just… there for a long period of time, he doesn't react. How can he be attracted to me if he doesn't get… hot and bothered when I'm nude." Rey huffed. "And some of the positions he puts me in are -- well, they're *really* sexual and explicit and -- and even *when* he explains the… the metaphor or symbolism or whatever it is, it's extremely sexual and *erotic* but it's just… he's so calm."
Cassian inhaled loudly, tapping his fingers in quick secession on his knee, taking in every insecure word of her confession.

"Some people are more attracted to the mind and the soul, Rey -- more sexually tuned to the personality than the curves to a body. Perhaps he is most reactive to the words and opinions you speak. Or it could just be a mask of professionalism; this is a job and, in those sessions, he is your employer. Not to mention the societal stigma such a job can have."

"Or maybe he just doesn't like me that way."

"Maybe so." Cassian agreed passionately. "Maybe he doesn't, maybe he does -- there's no way I can give you this answer, Rey. The only possible way for you to discover this truth is to admit these particular feelings to this man and ask if there's any chance of him returning your affections."

"You say that like it's easy."

"It's not easy."

"He could reject me."

"He could."

"I don't… it could ruin everything; our working relationship, our… real friendship. And if I did, I don't know if I could handle another rejection. It could -- it would break me." Rey shook her head. "And even then, even if he does like me like…that, there's his family to worry about. What if we do pursue something but it ends bitterly and -- and leads to his family hating me when they've been the one family I never, ever had. What if they abandon me, just like my parents because I'm not their real daughter and… fuck." Rey's head lolled into the palm of her hands, dragging them down her face with a force to will away the stab of pain that shot through her chest at the mere thought of losing everyone she cared about because of her unyielding heart.

A sigh escaped her chest; one giant heaving sigh as she straightened back in her seat. "It's really… It's just--"

"A complication."
A laugh bubbled from her throat. "Yeah. A really complicated complication." A groan ripped from her throat, sweaty palms wiped on stained jeans. "What would you have me do?"

He clicked his tongue, a small smile pulling at his lips while a hand scratched at the patchy scruff prickled upon his jaw. "I'd have you do what you think is best. As I said before, this isn't my decision -- and you've got to trust your instincts on this one, Rey, because you know him far better than I ever will. With our sessions together, I deeply hope they'll make you see your shining self-worth; just how much you matter in this world and to the people who surround you. To know that it's important to be honest with yourself -- particularly when times are tough and you require a helping hand or an ear to listen. These sessions aren't designed for me to tell you what to do, but to show you that you can make these decisions on your own."

Rey contemplated the words just for a moment, eyes sparkling alight to a golden hazel. "Is that your sneaky way of telling me to be honest with him?"

Cassian laughed deep from the chest, that familiar crinkle at the corner of his eyes settling what little nerves she had left of the previous conversation. "Or maybe that's just your subconscious." She rolled her eyes at this, though a wide grin stayed from the lingering low chuckle that sounded in the room, the steady ticking clock giving the tune-like sound some rhythm. "Though, to be very blunt, honesty is key. And to push past that fear of rejection with your years of neglect -- now that would truly be something, Rey."

She looked up to the eyes so like Ben's and yet so different -- soft and warm, open to any and everything she said -- thinking of everything that occurred the past week. His own honesty, her conversation with Luke, reading the tragic end to his grandparents lives and--

*Call me Ben.*

--their upcoming date that couldn't possibly be a date but... maybe, just maybe, there was the smallest chance of it being so.

That maybe, just maybe, Ben Solo had feelings for her too.

~ * ~

Padme Amidala was beautiful. Which came as no surprise, really – Leia was the definition of natural beauty, Ben inheriting the same striking features that made everyone stop and just look. Anakin's 'muse' was no exception, of course.
Long chestnut-brown ringlets cascading down slim shoulders; a golden tan to smooth skin, full lush lips and round brown eyes that had Rey looking to her right, taking in her very grandson sporting the same, gorgeous features.

And it was strange – that studying Ben viewing a painting of his grandmother was a whole artwork in itself.

"Do you notice the difference?" He asked suddenly, a soft hush to his voice, eyes never leaving the displayed canvas upon white walls. "The softer strokes, the colours, the overall tone and mood to this piece compare to the one in my living room? It's like a whole new artist."

Rey took it in once more. The bright, sunny smile on Padme's face, eyes lit up like a sky.

"I like this one better than the other."

"I thought you might." With his hands shoved deep into the pockets of his jean, Ben turned to glance at her, cocking his slightly left. "It's simpler. There's no denying it, but looking at it… it's like peering through a glass – into the nature of my grandparents relationship. Before Palpatine, before it all dissolved into one giant mess."

"It's beautiful." Rey agreed, scanning over the portrait. "She's beautiful. You have her eyes."

"I do?"

Looking up into the deep rich brown, golden sunshine flecks highlighted within; soft, warm and inviting – so many emotions shining through the glaze. The sight was breathtaking and telling, always listening to the ever-changing expressions people wore.

"Yeah."

At her confirmation, his handsome face broke out into a rare, crooked grin – one she adored dearly and could marvel at for a lifetime. "Glad to know I'm not completely like my Grandfather."

Rey hummed. "I don't think you're like him at all."
"No?"

With one long step forward, a large force of warmth at the small of her back, turning her straight and guiding her on, they set down the hallway – passing all sorts of art pieces, each one capturing her attention for a glimpse before they were naturally drawn to the heat of his gaze.

"I finished the book. I read all about his descent into darkness, your grandmother's passing, your mother and Uncle being passed to someone else while he turned to alcohol and drugs." Rey shook her head. "How could you think you're anything like that?"

He frowned, taking two more strides before stopping at another painting, turning to another canvas of colour. "Perhaps I'm not anymore, or at least as much, but… I was once very much like him, Rey. There's no denying it – I abandoned my family, I turned to toxic people and substances, I… I lost myself, just as he did."

"But you found your way back."

At her fierce claim, he turned to take in her determined stare; a soft smile present on his face, a slight tilt to inviting pink lips, not quite reaching the heart of his eyes. "I don't think I'll ever really find my way back." The hand resting at her back left, and with it a piece of her joy, falling lip at his side. "How you know me now, or even before Christmas… I'm different, Rey. Ask my father, ask my mother – hell, even ask Luke. They'll tell you the truth."

A heavy breath left her lungs, watching as he took in the painting once more.

Layered black, angry strokes lain against the canvas, in rough directions; left and right, down and up, all over. A bitter background that spoke of pain and fury. But in the middle – right in the centre, like a beacon of light–

"A lotus flower, blooming bright in a field of darkness." Ben explained, voice strong and thorough against the hushed atmosphere. "Also known as a Padma flower; a sacred symbol of beauty and purity to many religions. Buddhism, Hinduism, a few more that my Grandfather couldn't care less about. He was no religious man – unbelieving that anything like it could 'save his soul', make him a better person after the world had treated his past so violently."

Rey took in the gleam of pink to the petals, his voice a soft honeying warmth as she studied the ethereal light that rimmed around the heart of the canvas – the heart Anakin Skywalker held so close to his very own beating pulse. "Padme." She said suddenly, scanning over the soul that lit up another's life.
"She was his religion. The one to right his path." Ben paused, a heady sadness within his gaze. "I've always wondered if she liked this painting. "Some say it's a strong declaration of love; others say it's the beginning to a very toxic relationship. But this… this painting was never meant to be displayed – it was only meant for her. And I can't help but wonder what side she leaned to. If she found it to be a grand romantic gesture or an insane amount of pressure – like her only purpose to their marriage was to save a husband from a violent nature."

The question immediately churned inside her mind, burning up a chunk of her attention as the though overcame all senses – it was an extremely valid question and not for the first time, Rey wondered how their relationship began in the first place. Padme Amidala, in the position of power. Older, employed at a good school, teaching youths; coming from old money, two loving parents and a good home. Not for the first time, Rey wondered how on earth those positions ever flipped.

"Before all of this, before Snoke when I first read this debate within the art community, I was set on the first. And then I went down that exact same path and suddenly I was looking for that exact same thing – a relationship that might make me… see sense of anything. And maybe that's why I'm here where I am now, because I never found that woman and when I thought I did, it was all just some elaborate lie to make me more… Vader. Maybe I got out of the depths because I did it all on my own; because I started to look past a 'saviour'." He heaved out a loud sigh, large chest heaving from the act. "So maybe she despised this painting and it's meaning; maybe she rued the face that she was seen as his only love or maybe that's just my feelings, my anger when people say she died of a broken heart because… because she failed her 'designed task'. And it's an answer we can only guess at because we'll never know and it just… I can't help but wonder." Slowly, his gaze dropped to the floor, voice hoarse from his thick confession. "Nevertheless, it's a striking piece of art and a symbol of devotion. Even if it wasn't made to last."

Much like the lotus that bloomed against a twilight black, three specific words shined through her conscience: honesty is key.

Slowly, Rey reached out – with a bold heart of stone, her fingers searched for his; inter-twining, sliding together like fitted joints; a missing puzzle piece finally, finally, finally found and placed at home. She looked up at him with wide eyes, his impassive eyes meeting her own once again.

Honesty is key.

"You say you're different now, like it's a bad thing. And maybe I didn't know you before, I never had and never will have the chance – but has it ever occurred to you once that maybe you changed for the better?" Her grip tightened like a vice, a reassuring squeeze of hope. "Before those seven years, before we met… from what you just told me, it seems like you never questioned your Grandfather's actions until after Snoke; you never questioned the methods to his path. And you told me that you once believed pain to be the best source of inspiration; that session where you had me on the rug, by the fire." She watched with fascination as his eyes narrowed in, pupils widening ever so slightly at her words.

"But now you don't – now, you find other emotions to be just as powerful. And maybe that's why you're doing that colour wheel, or whatever it is; to show exactly that!" His lips parted a fraction, the
close positioning of their bodies creating a bubble of warmth that radiated from their joined hands. Very slowly, her face split into a beaming smile; one that brought colour to her full cheeks, a golden sunshine to her squinted eyes, and Ben Solo's grip to loosen weakly. "That's it, no? That's the meaning behind your project, what you're trying to achieve–"

His abrupt laugh cut her off, somehow proving the impossible by widening her grin. "You won't get to know until the reveal." With his hand still in hers, he quickly tugged her away from the painting – away from the past he worried about so much.

"You're really going to drag me there, forcing me to picture all my flaws, just to find out." For the first time ever, she witnessed an eyeroll – an action so unlike him, when he was all sneering scowls and frowning brows.

"You're beautiful and flaws are a natural part of you." This time, it was he who sent the reassuring squeeze. "And perhaps I'll be able to make you see that at the showing."

She hummed. "So optimistic…"

He snorted, the sound of his footsteps in time with her like a soothing beat to her soul. "That's a rare descriptor for me."

"Maybe I just bring it out of you."

His head snapped left, a crooked grin with hooded eyes gazing down. "Maybe you do."

How could three simple words leave one so breathless? Rey was still trying to catch up when they stopped once more, Ben looking at her with an irritating smile (as irritating as a smile from he could be, so not really), as if knowing something she didn't. Which, technically, was all of it.

Looking away from his smug expression to the canvas, she peered closer and eyed the image.

An array of reds and oranges wisped like wind; flames licking up, a sheen veil over two outstretched hands. On the right presented stubbed fingers, alight and burnt black while the left lay untouched – reaching out to save the other, amidst embers and the pool of an onyx darkness that the damaged arm outstretched from.

"It's different." She muttered.
"It's Kenobi's."

"Oh." She gasped, appraising the colours. "It's… a bit grim."

He hummed, as he was so wont to do whenever she made a statement. Part of her thought he was agreeing, the other just thinking it was his way of validating her opinion even if it weren't necessarily right in the name of art. "Painted just before my Grandmother's death, just after Anakin began to bend to Palpatine's vision, and according to Kenobi, seconds after he and Vader severed all ties; mentorship and friendship, turned to ash."

"Artists are so bitter." Rey remarked slowly, a frown to her face as she glazed over the swirling design to the fire that consumed the piece.

With another huff of laughter, another crooked smile, Ben spoke calmly. "Yes, well… we're all socially inept and need some form of outlet to deal with our feelings. Better than, you know, violence and other forms of physical pain that many tend to do." His eyes glimmered, teeth sinking into the bottom of one plump lip as his free hand reached to rife through his hair. "Would you like to see the painting that began their mentorship?"

"They're both here?"

"Of course. Look right beside it." Following his line of sight, her gaze landed on a canvas of clouds; fluffy and white and stark against the baby blue sky and atop the shapeless yet elegant blobs, a figure walking as if they were a solid mass to stand on. It was so strikingly bright, so indescribably different to every other painting, she could barely comprehend how it belonged to their angsty collection.

"Skywalker." Ben said, a faint fond smile reaching his eyes. "Head in the clouds, mind full of dreams… Kenobi was awed the moment he saw it displayed in the art room. He was so… so optimistic, despite everything. Makes you wonder how it all caught up with him."

"I remember this. I saw it in the book but… it looks so different, in person."

"Yeah?"

"Like an Elton John song."
A long beat of silence passed. "Right."

"Why are you smiling?"

"You just…" He trailed off, those incredibly large hands lifted to rest over his heart. "you have a way with words, describing art–"

"Hey!" She shoved at his shoulder – and god, it was so huge and strong, she should've just kept her hand there! "Comparing it to an Elton John song is a high compliment."

"Is it really?" He nodded, voice a low rumble from his chest. "I wouldn't know. Elevated music taste, and all that." At her gaping jaw, he chuckled loudly.

"You're so entitled and rude and rich. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"Why do you think I have such little friends?" He snorted, stepping a little closer than considered friendly, hands still lightly twined together. "I'm surprised you manage to put up with me."

"Mmmh, you pay me well." His brows shot up at this, a giggle bursting from her throat as his eyes went wide and gleamed with amusement.

"You're so, so cruel." His smiled faded slightly, face resetting to something more unreadable while the tips of his fingers danced across the surface of her palm, tingles shooting up her arm with a shiver at the feeling.

A feeling that brought up a familiar question she'd done so well avoiding all day; the question if there was something more to this shared day together, some deeper meaning that could bring clarity to it all. And although she'd talked everything with Cassian the day before, the path to blurt out an honest truth so personal and terrifying took time and steps to reach.

And the confession within her heart… now, that could take a lifetime. "How about we go outside? Unless it's too cold for your Western blood."

"Nope." Rey tugged at her fluffy coat. "This'll keep me nice and toasty."
He nodded, hand placed at her waist once more, huddled closer than what would be considered 'respectable' as he guided her through the museum to the back exit; passing many beautiful, awe-inspiring artworks on the way, with Ben pointing out the history behind some of Takodana's own ancient artefacts before reaching the doors, opening it to a sight that compared to no other.

The view behind the gallery was a stunning presentation of Mother Nature's true beauty – with a staircase leading to a secluded area, the forest at the other side of the all-too clear lake; the scent of pine and earth in the air, trees towering into the sky and shrouding the great outdoors into something much more intimate. A winter's beauty.

"It's not frozen over." She observed, scanning the scenic atmosphere with wide eyes, head permanently fixed to the left while Ben safely helped her down the stairs. "So clear, too. Is this part of the museum?"

"Yes. Just a nice area to rest for a bit, I suppose – come out for some fresh air."

"It's gorgeous."

They trudged through the grass, all traces of snow melted away, heading for the lake. Reluctantly, Rey broke away – to the water's edge, steps unsteady against the pebbles and rocks, taking in the glimmer reflected from the sun that broke through scattered clouds. The wind kicked up, licking at dry lips and cheeks, Rey tilting her head just the slightest of inches to kiss the breeze. It was chilly, a shiver going up her spine, but being so unused to the beauty of green and blue, growth and nurture… she didn't care.

"So, what did you think? Of the book?"

When she turned, Rey discovered him bent over, hand buried in the pebbles in search. "It was… sad. And what comes after… it's just really sad. For everyone involved." Standing to his feet, Ben quickly glanced at her before studying the rock he's selected in hand.

Rey wrung her hands together, hesitating.

"Was Snoke really like Palpatine?"

Ben sighed, looking up from his palm to the calm lake waters, face as still and impassive. Like a flick of a switch, Rey flinched at the sudden quick movement of his arm – one stiff throw, the pebble skimming the surface once, twice, three times. A moment after, Ben clenched his fists.

"He was, I suppose; the manipulation and all that… they were one and the same."
She breathed out, a mist of fog following the action. "How'd you get out? What made you finally... I don't know, just want to leave?"

"I mentioned before of looking to a relationship, to a woman; Bazine." He swallowed thickly. "I was in love with her, or at least... I think, maybe it was just the idea. She was my...my firsts for a lot of things, intimate things and – and I was... well, she was the only one person in my life that I cared about. And after a year of dating, after a whole year of terrible decisions on my part, I asked her to marry me."

It was strange. That weird, thick feeling that settled in her gut at the news. Rey watched as he shuddered out a heavy breath.

"She told me it was all fake. No answer, no smile just a face of guilt and...and the revelation of it being set up; everything, all of it; her love, her smiles, fuck, our sexual connection, it was all fake."

Speechless, heart hammering in her chest as she processed the horror to his words, Rey watched him pick up another rock and throw it fast. This time, it splashed and sunk upon first impact.

"Worst of all, I begged her not to leave. I begged her to stay, I said I could forgive her – that I still loved her, despite it all, despite her being paid to pretend to love me back. I was so pathetic."

"No, no, you were... that's a serious violation Ben. You could sue them for that, no?"

"No, I don't want to go back. I'm away from it all and bringing it back – that'd only do more harm than good. I'm just glad to be out."

A whoosh of air left her lungs when he turned to look at her with hollowed eyes, empty and devoid of any detectable emotion. "I'm sorry that happened. All of it, that's--"

"Humiliating." He interrupted softly. "In a way, I'm... glad it happened. Watching her walk out after I begged her to stay, looking at myself in the mirror after all of it – it made me confront the truth of the situation, the truth of it all. It made me reach out to my family, to my father, my mother, after ignoring them and hurting them for so many years and...and for that, I'm grateful. For that, I can move past what happened and since meeting you, it's been so much easier to ignore it all, to put it all the past, to simply just... let it all die."

"But you can't just... ignore it. I've learnt that in the worst of ways."
He smiled at her confession, the twinkle to his eye confirming that he knew just how bad bottling up her problems affected everyone. "Poor choice of words on my part. I have a therapist who I discuss this with quite regularly."

"Me too." Rey admitted quietly. "Just recently."

"And is it helping?"

"It's early on." She took a step forward. "But so far, yes."

"Good. Good." He nodded, cocking his head slightly with his eyes narrowing in. "Have you ever skipped a stone before?"

She laughed, a bubble of giggles from her chest. "No, I haven't. Nice subject change, though."

"Well, I was trying to keep this day relatively light and enjoyable."

"You took me to a museum to show me paintings of your grandfather's art feuds."

Ben raked a hand through his hair at this, a slow smile spreading across his face as he looked away. "You make an excellent point. Nevertheless, that was the goal."

"Ahuh, okay." Another step forward. "Now, how do you skip a stone?"

"Alright, first things first, you need to find a worthy stone; you want is as flat as possible, both sides, preferably spherical." He did the hard work for her, scouring the ground for a few moments before settling on a few stones, handing one to her and holding the others.

"Now," She shivered at the feel of Ben's hot breath at her ear, drifting over her neck and warming her all over with him so close. "It's all in the shoulder and the wrist. The shoulder drives in the force, giving it the power to go far, but the wrist is key to it skimming." His hands came around her shoulders, correcting her hold on the stone with deft fingers. "You want to make sure it flies flat, no
turning over. Just a little flick to the wrist, nothing to heavy or you'll overshoot."

His fingers retracted and drifted to her shoulders, settling there for a moment while she calmed herself down from the sight of his giant hands dwarfing her own. "Are you ready?"

"Not really."

"Great. As your teacher, you're making me very confident in your abilities."

She glared before shrugging him off, turning to the side–

"Ah." He hissed, hands suddenly gripping at her hips, forcing her back and stilling her straight. They lingered, grip tight and very welcomed as all air left her lungs. "When you draw back your shoulder, these--" he accompanied it with a squeeze that left her light-headed "--should naturally turn. You want to shift you left foot a little forward. Turn your other outward, just a bit, and widen your stance." Only after she did as told did he remove his hands, taking a step back to give Rey room. "Good."

Rey took a breath, cheeks still warm from the surprise of his touch, exhaling loudly before raising her arm and throwing with all her might.

The stone plopped with a loud splash.

"Wow… you really just pegged it straight at the water, I can't even--" He trailed off into a chuckle.

"It was a good effort." Rey turned, defending with a cry, scowling at the way his brows went high into his hairline. "It was my first attempt, I wasn't going--"

"Alright, okay." He laughed, hands help up in surrender. "If you say so."

"I do say so."

Slowly, his face softened from amusement to something more unreadable – warms eyes, bright and inviting, lips quirked upwards as he took a step closer.
"What are you doing Wednesday night?"

A shaky breath in, held as she processed the question. "Why?"

"Well, I believe I promised you a dinner months ago. At my place, dinner and dessert – maybe you'll get to finally try my Grandmother's cake. Good wine, of course, none of that cheap stuff your drink…" He trailed off, crinkled eyes setting her nerves ablaze. "And yourself."

And here it was – the moment where Ben, who was just being friendly, just being nice, just searching for a friend influenced her hope, her wish, her desire.

*It's not a date, It's not a date... it's on the fourteenth. A cycle, over and over, it's on the fourteenth, it's on Valentines, he doesn't even know valentines, it's not a date,* plaguing her mind.

"I'd…" love to, she thought. "I…" *already have a date.* "I can't." She said quickly, grimacing. "I already have plans."

He looked at her, the soft touch to his eyes dimming slightly. "Plans?" A strained grunt left his lips.

"Yes, it's this…" *Honesty is key.* "A date. A blind date, set up from Poe at Pho Tico – for Valentines, but I mean, who even remembers that exists nowadays, yeah?" Rey rambled quickly, word spewing after word, each one darkening his expression a little more. "But maybe we can do it tonight. We have time to organise, right? Or tomorrow, even–"

His hand fell away from hers, one step back following another. "No, I… no we…" He looked away, a red flush to his high cheekbones. "I think I should take you home."

"Take me… but we haven't finished looking through the–"

"No, I've showed you all I needed to show you." He said swiftly, not daring to look at her as she shrunk from the tone of his voice. Why was he angry? She didn't understand – nothing made sense. "All these… paintings. There's no more."

"Why are you being so weird?"
"Why are you being so clueless?"

She gaped up at him, brow furrowed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Never mind… let's not argue anymore. There's been enough of that and I… I'm tired and want to go home."

"I don’t understand."

"How can you…” He trailed off, turning his back. "I just thought something but… you clearly don't and – just never mind… I have papers to grade and you have a date to prepare for–"

"It's on Wednesday. Ben, what–"

"Just drop it, Rey, please." He snapped roughly. "Let's just go home."

Standing still, breathing heavily, she could only watch his back rise and fall in horror.

For the first time, Rey began to question that deep sated hope of what this day might've been… and perhaps if that hope had been a truth all along.

Naturally, she'd just ruined it all.

Honesty is key, honesty is key, honesty is key.

"Fine."

Honesty is impossible.

Chapter End Notes

Nothing like some jealousy to kick some things off. Honestly, It's been a while, so im not sure how pleased I am with this, so please forgive any mistakes or if it feels off, Imma look back over it tomorrow to make sure everything is g.
ALSO, WOW, THANK YOU ENDLESSLY FOR 3K KUDOS THAT IS ABSOLUTELY INSANE, I AM SHOOK. I love y'all with all my heart, thank you so much for sticking with me.

Please, please, PLEASE go check out this awesome callig piece here from the amazing reylocaligraphy in honour of hitting 3 k. She's the absolute sweetest in the fandom, give her some love y'all <3

stay tuned... i promise, the slow burn is VERY close to an end. Thank you for reading
Bright blue eyes, tight caramel curls and a winning, million-dollar smile; a glimmering gaze, hair effortlessly perfect in that messy uncaring way, two rows of straight pearly whites.

He was boyishly handsome, alight with energy the moment he looked up and noticed her, a hand stretching out in greeting as he stood to lean over the booth – tall, but not freakishly so, slender but quite lean, broad-shouldered with an accompanying wide chest, but not in that 'built like a house' way as his torso narrowed into his hips.

To put it simply, Rey's date was the complete polar opposite to Ben Solo.

"Rey, right?"

She shouldn't have compared – at least not two seconds into their date, but… his voice was so different, his appearance, his manner; how could she not think of that morning on Ben's doorstep when he'd ignored her own hand in favour of studying her body? How could she not picture an array of browns and specks of shining gold, dim when moody, warm when pouting pink lips parted, giving way to a crooked smile?

"Uh, yes. Yep." She exhaled in one breath, blinking rapidly as the image of Ben dissolved into reality, Rey quick to grip his hand in a light shake. "Rey Niima."

"Yolo Ziff – and just to be clear, I was named before that term came out." He chuckled, releasing her hand to back down into his seat once more, watching as she did the same opposite him. "It's a little weird, I know; blame my parents and whatever drugs they put my mother on when birthing me. Though, I guess it's fitting now, all that 'you only live once' shit – even if it has ruined all chances of me being taken seriously."
She forced a smile. "Well, Rey isn't exactly a girl's name and some people refuse to believe it's real, so I get it."

"Assholes."

"Yeah."

"Anyways, most people call me Ziff – whatever you choose I'll happily accept. All I'll mention is my grandma and mum being the only two who call me Yolo. And my ex-girlfriend, so… take that as a bad omen." He frowned. "Oh shit. I've mentioned the ex – you're not supposed to do that, righ–"

"Okay, okay, okay," She said in a rush, huffing out a genuine laugh. "Ziff it is."

"Wonderful."

He made it easy, or he would have, had she been interested; had she not harboured feelings for another person who had only ignored her for the last few days.

Fine, she had said, fine, she had accepted. But Rey was not fine.

Not with the silence of their journey home and not with the silence now.

Maybe she should have pushed harder. Maybe she could just go for it and say it out loud, like Cassian suggested. Maybe she should just give up all together; on the hope, on the sessions, on Ben Solo himself.

Then again, perhaps that had already been decided.

Ziff cleared his throat, Rey slow to look up for fear of seeing such a friendly face and breaking down right then and there. Nevertheless, she braved it; one deep, deep breath in to control the mass of mixed emotions that swirled inside her weighted chest. "Nice place you chose, by the way – I'll be honest here and admit to never trying Vietnamese cuisine but I hear it's spicy and I am up for that challenge."

Another slow inhale to control the shakes that would undoubtedly control her voice. "I can…" She paused, breathing out quickly. "I can, um, vouch and say that it's very… tasty here. I could also be biased though, with my friend running the place and giving me a couple shifts a week."
His eyes narrowed once processing the jumbled words. "Wait, what?" Thick brows furrowed, head leaning into the conversation in question. "You work here? I thought you were a model?"

"A model?" She laughed. "Why on earth would you…" She trailed off, face faltering. "Poe."

"Ah. So he lied. I expected one or two, so no worries here~"

"No, he didn't lie… well, not… a full lie, exactly." She grumbled out, slouching in her seat. "I have three jobs or… I don't know if you can call the third a job, really."


"Uh, yeah and… yeah." She nodded, wringing her fingers together and dipping her gaze to the table. "The first two are more permanent. I mean, through Monday to Friday, I'm a mechanic with the occasional Pho Tico night shift here and there – that's more casual work, so they're not set shifts. And the um, modelling thing…" She huffed a sigh, frowning. "I wouldn't exactly call it modelling, but I, uh, pose for some artist's project. Like, he'll um… paint me in different positions, different spots around his house."

"Oh, nice."

"…um, usually in the nude too. I just thought – well, I should be honest, right? People might not… agree with that. You, I mean, and I get it. It's… not exactly conventional, no?"

Rey looked up boldly, finding Ziff to be smiling brightly. "Well, as an artist, I can say I have no issue with this at all. Although, my area of art has moved from all that to comic books, unfortunately." He sighed. "No more naked models for me. What's this project about?"

"Um, I don't really know? The colour wheel on emotions, or whatever… something like that. But, it's his personal take on connecting colours to emotions. I'm not sure what I have to do with it, really."

"Interesting." He nodded. "Maybe he's perceiving the emotions you give off?"
"I… yeah, but why naked?"

He laughed. "I don't know. For added flair, beauty, a natural element?" He paused to think. "Or it could be… well, he's put you in such a vulnerable position, with you being nude; these poses, they could bring out emotions you might guard close to your chest. Show off what you're feeling in that exact moment; the naked truth, so to speak." He was animated with his hands as explaining, eyes wide and open; excited by the mystery that had plagued her since mid-September. "It exposes muscles that might tense up, skin that might react with colour, a stance that could literally give everything away, like you're conversing with your body."

"Oh." She breathed out, because what if he was right?

"How many sessions have you done?"

"We have our sixth this month – there's, um, twelve in the collection and it's a monthly process." Her brows furrowed in surprise, a frown twisting her lips because how had six months of knowing Ben gone so quickly?

"Have you seen any paintings?" She shook her head, still in a daze. "Ah. Well, what about colour – can you remember any particular session where you were feeling one specific emotion that could be connected to a colour."

"I…" she trailed off in thought, minutes passing as she went back to that day in his living room when he'd kindly offered his sweater and– "Fuck." Rey hissed, recalling the fire; the orange, the red the varying shades of pink all different gradients she'd seen his brushes dip into. Recalling the strong flame of desire that burned within her chest, the heady scent of his jumper that had her flushing violently, the urge to take his lips with her own. "You don't really think he could… you don't think that's it, right?"

"I mean, I can't know for sure, I'm only guessing here." He shrugged. "Though, I do wonder what made you react so… strongly to it–"

"None of your business."

"Ahuh." He nodded with an irritating grin. "Something sinful, right? Perhaps… a strong emotion toward your artist?"
"I… no, I–"

"Evening guys, hope you're having a pleasant night." Whipping her head to the left at the sudden interruption, Rose's beaming smile immediately came into sight. "Here is some menus, we have our nightly specials on the back as well as drinks; take a long look and I'll be back in a minute." Rose sent a wink her way while placing the laminated sheets down before spinning perkily to stride away.

"Wait, one second, I – you're shirt?"

She turned quickly, big grin fading a hint, "Oh, um, we do have a uniform; mine unfortunately met its end on the line today with the rain, so I had to–"

"Oh, I don't… no, I'm just – well, it's a Starfighter Corps tee, right?"

"Yes." Rose said brightly, standing straight as dark eyes lit up the whole room in excitement. "Yes it is! Are you a fan? It's, like, one of my favourite series at the moment – there's something so alluring about the main character's arc; it could go either way with a redemption or descent into complete darkness and I like the whole 'what if' to it, you know?"

"Uh, yeah I… um." a bubble of nervous laughter left Ziff's chest as he shyly ducked his head and rubbed the back of his neck. "I, um, actually illustrate it."

For five seconds, Rose stood still; nodding her head absently while the gears within her mind turned until her eyes went wide, the perfectly shaped eyebrows rising so high into her hairline, lips parting in shock. "I'm… excuse me, I… what?" She stepped closer to the table. "You illustrate Starfighter Corps?" Ziff could barely nod before she was rounding in. "Uh, wow. Okay. Um, so that means you know everything about the next issue. I will literally not charge you if you tell me what happens, like, right now–"

"Rose." Rey chimed in gently, smiling, though the short bubbly woman took no notice.

"I mean, you left it on such a huge cliffhanger and haven't updated us in a year on what's going on with the release, which is pretty much a crime and should be illegal, so this is penance on your part. Is he dead? Is he not dead? Is he dead on the inside because he's so emotionally ruined from his past? I need every answer." She said fiercely, lips pouted in determination. "Maybe not now, but write it on a napkin. Or three. I have a lot of questions."
"Uhh, well–"

"And if not, I'll charge you double the price."

A smile was quick to spread across Ziff's boyish face. "That's illegal."

"My store, my rules. I can bump up the prices for the night."

"Yes, but your menus state the price quite boldly. You'd be deceiving your customers."

"And leaving a comic on an important cliffhanger isn't deceiving?"

"Rose."

"What?" She growled, finally turning her attention on Rey while her date flashed his pearly whites. "Oh, right." She muttered, cheeks blooming a pretty shade of pink. "Sorry, um… your menus. I'll… come back… to order. Yep."

As Rose shuffled off quickly, Rey watched Ziff eyeing her departure with keen interest, following her behind the counter until she disappeared out back to the kitchen. "You do love to gloat, don't you?"

His ocean eyes snapped back to hers in surprise. "Well, as a comic book artist, I can say that the opportunity doesn't come up so often; especially with such a babe." Slowly, he looked away, coughing awkwardly. "Well, just, she's adorably awkward and fierce and uh… I probably shouldn't have said–"

"I don't care that you find my friend attractive." Rey cut in swiftly. "To be frank with you, I'm not interested. In the slightest." With a bitter huff, Rey couldn't help but wonder where this brutal honesty was hiding with Ben at the museum.

"Oh, um… wow." He murmured. "You could've really just cut me deep–"
"Did I?"

He silently smirked, slowly shaking his head. "No. You seem… distant. Like you'd rather be anywhere else, really. And I think it's obvious that Poe forces us both for his own selfish pleasure."

"What?" She perked up. "I thought I was being receptive."

"You were silent for a full three minutes before." He deadpanned, plucking up the menu and turning his attention to reading. "And it seems like you're invested in someone else… just an observation of mine. I could be wrong." Silence followed his words, Ziff contently scanning the menu. After a two-minute period, a thick eyebrow quirked up along with his gaze. "Are you gonna confirm, or…?"

"Um. No."

"Why not?"

"Because I… don't know you?"

"But in saying that, you kind of give the answer away, right?" He sniffed, flipping over the menu to glance at the specials. "Look, your face says it all. Whatever the meaning behind the art project, you truly are the perfect model for it. I mean, you just… your face says it all; every, tiny little detail to whatever emotion you're feeling, it's just… So visceral, you know?"

"What?"

"You're amazingly easy to read." His gaze flicked back up to land take in her knotted brows and parted lips, cocking his head slightly study her like an open book. "Right now, you're annoyed – because I'm right, of course – and a little… embarrassed, because you know I'm right and you know that this artist friend, or whatever else he is, can read you just as easily, if not better." He paused. "And now you're mad."

"I…" She stuttered, shaking her head in protest, hands flat against the table slow to clench. "I don't understand how Ben comes into this."
"Ben?"

"The artist."

"A-hah." He nodded, leaning back into the booth. "Well, I'll say it again: you're easy to read. And hiding a strong emotion, such as... attraction, lust, a crush -- which is a bad word for it, I know, but it's the only..." He trailed off, rubbing at his neck once more. "When you were talking about him; discussing the project and what it meant, if you could only see your face and how drastically it changed within the few minutes.

"Short and fleeting, switching from one side to another; eyes wide and alert before drooping into something else entirely, something far more... sad." Ziff cleared his throat, frowning. "It's hard to explain or to... to detect the specific emotion you were experiencing at the time because it changed so frequently. Which, overall, tells me you're confused and... maybe having a little trouble with this dude." Rey deflated in her seat. "But like I said, it's all just... an observation. And, um, I usually like to know if I'm right or wrong. Just... putting that out--"

"It's really becoming clear how you're friends with Poe." She sighed out, slumping in her seat and begrudgingly picking up the menu to shield her face -- shielding her mind and feelings too, apparently.

"Is that a yes, or..."

"For someone so confident in his abilities, you sure crave a whole lot of validation."

"Yep. Indeed. No shame in it, really."

Groaning internally, Rey set aside her irritation to focus on the words in front; her mind so frazzled and messy, she'd only pick out particular words -- Pho and spicy and all types of seafood mixed in with fine and clueless and Ben, Ben, Ben.

Always Ben.

Always fucking Ben.

"Fine." She growled, slamming down the menu. "I like him, and that's actually quite terrifying to admit for me so if you rub your... rightness or victory or whatever in my face I'll probably kick your shin." Her eyes narrowed at his twitching grin, the spark in his eyes saying it all. "But here's the thing -- I'm not sure if he likes me but I'm pretty sure he just confirmed that he does like me because he asked me out for dinner at his place, on Valentine's day no less which apparently adults still do
and I… I fucked it up, because Poe forced me on this date and *instead* of saying I just had other plans I mentioned this stupid date because my therapist suggested that honesty is key but I don't think… I think I was honest about the wrong thing. I think he's… mad at me."

A minute of silence followed her breathless rant, Ziff not moving an inch nor saying a single word.

"Wow." He finally breathed out. "You're… how old are you again?"

She scowled. "This is all very new for me."

"Yeah, no kidding." He laughed, turning his attention to the menu. "What would you recommend on this?"

Her jaw dropped.

"Seriously?" He didn't respond. "You… you wanted this and now you're asking me what to order?"

His eyes flicked back to the counter. "Rose will be back soon, I want to look confident." He looked up, sighing at her pursed lips and silence. "Why do you think he's mad."

"Because… because he was short with me, he called me clueless, he hasn't texted *all week* besides a command for another session this Saturday." Rey frowned. "And before he asked, he was… touching my hips, holding my hand and just being kind of – flirtatious, I think."

"Yeah. He likes you. He was *clearly* asking you on a date." Ziff rolled his eyes.

"You're just saying that because you have to."

"And you're making up excuses to permanently *blind* yourself to the truth that is right in front of you. He asked you out to his house – he definitely wants to fuck you. And considering you've been talking for, what, six months nearly and there's still six months to go… I'm thinking the connection runs deeper than just sexual attraction."
"But–"

"No buts. You said it yourself, he was flirting with you, touching you, invited you to dinner so I'm gonna take a wild guess and say that yes, he does like you! Probably has for a while, probably thought he was on a date when he asked you and you probably crushed his heart. So yeah, you fucked up. " He huffed out, eyes glancing to the counter once more. "Now, would you please just suggest something, I have no idea what I'm… what the fuck."

His gaze hardened, eyebrows drawing in as his face set in stone, cautioning Rey to snap her head around and take in whatever had finally made him silent.

Her lips parted at the sight, a silent gasp escaping her chest.

There they were; the brown eyes she'd been picturing all night, oozing intensity and glaring right at her. They widened once noticing her attention; like a deer in headlights, he froze. Muscles tense and stiff, feet planted to the ground. A minute passed, or maybe two, and still he stood there, unmoving.

Only when his eyes began to blink, only when they glided a fraction behind her, undoubtedly taking in Ziff again – only then, did his joints unlock; nerves firing up again, the numb expression scrunching in on itself to form a harsh and bitter picture of rage.

Lips pulled down in a vicious sneer, eyes blazing hot, pale complexion brewing redder by the second.

He wasn't just mad. He was furious, if the clenched fists were anything to go by, if the heaving chest and taut shoulders were enough hints to piece the puzzle together.

Maybe that would have been the perfect moment. To scramble out of the seat, while he was a statue of rage, and confess right then and there, like she should've at the museum, like she should've all those weeks ago on Christmas Eve.

But it bubbled inside her, too – the anger, the blistering, white-hot fury setting fire to her veins, boiling her blood to a fearsome, simmering mess of emotions.

What right did he have, to be angry? What right did he have over her to be so… so… jealous?

Why should she confess when he'd yet to make one at all; why should she be the one to instigate when he'd be hopelessly unclear on his intentions with dinner, his intentions with her?

What made him so entitled to feeling rejected when he'd made no offer at all?

And maybe that all showed in her expression; maybe her all-consuming anger connected to her eyes,
her lips, her flesh, just as his – an open book, for him and all to read.

And the words written down, the words *underneath* – it was enough to send him fleeing.

In an instant, he was turning on his heels; spinning so fast, walking so quickly and pushing the door open so *violently*, it was all just one black blur; a shadow that betrayed light and left, becoming its *own* thing.

But unlike him, her fierce demeanour lingered; eyes scanning away from the spot he'd previously taken to Rose, half-way around the counter to chase him down and hand the change for *whatever* meal he'd bought in excuse to see her – *to spy on her*.

It was *enough* to prickle at her eyes, tears blurring her vision.

Slowly, she exhaled out her aggression, turning back to face her 'date'.

"So…” Ziff began cautiously. "What’s Pho like?"

With as much malice as Rey could muster, she sent one more feeble glare his way.

~ * ~

"Should I call him?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you're angry. You already broke a plate because you're so *in* your anger. You'll just make things worse."

"But… but *he just*… he can't just…”

"Rey." Her head snapped to the soothing, feminine drawl; a contrast to the bubbling, sweet tune to Rose's reasonings. "Breathe."
She exhaled at Paige's command, a deep breath in following seconds later, the cycle repeating.

"You have a right to be mad." She continued. "But don't let it take over. Rose it right, it'll only make things worse."

Paige was patient, shooting her a comforting smile while holding out a glass of water.

Rey took it in two, shaking hands; cradling it close to her chest, not daring to raise it to her mouth.

"What do I do?" Rey moaned. "I mean, how am I… can this be fixed?"

"It's not your job to fix it – it involves two people, therefore it takes two people." Paige guided her to a booth, forcing her to sit down while Rose dug into cleaning tables and stacking chairs. "You calm down and talk, like adults. It's just one big… misconception. Which happens. These things take time and the will to be ready. It's not an easy thing to do; clearly, for the both of you, it's near impossible."

Rey frowned, drawing her knees tight to her chest, squishing those insecurities into a tight bubble that squawked within. "Do you think he'll forgive me–"

"There's nothing to forgive." Rose interrupted hotly. "And if he thinks so, then he's no good."

"But… he thinks I rejected him–"

"And gave you nothing to reject." Paige said softly, always so calm and wise; always so attentive, listening as she'd babbled on and on about her recent encounters with Ben. "And if he thinks he did with the dinner, still – you offered another time, you had previously-set plans–"

"Yes, but it was a date, that… that shows that I'm not interested – or, at least, it does to him. Right?"

Paige got down on her knees, a hard mask set in her expression as she laid her hands upon her knees, fierce gaze intently matching her own. "Wrong." She spoke firmly. "He may think that, Rey, but you can show him the truth. Have a real conversation about all of this, have a real conversation on whether this is all truly worth pursuing. And he'll listen, if you give him the chance."

"But he… he came here, he came here to spy–"
Rose giggled, interrupting her bout of annoyance, only stopping at her sister's deadly glare. "You should hear yourself, Rey."

"Rose."

"What?"

Paige sighed, turning back to face Rey. "You're… a mix of emotions, right now. Wondering if he'll forgive before switching into the anger directed at him."

"Oh." She breathed out. "I don't… I don't really know how I'm feeling right now."

"And that's okay. You'd be surprised how common this actually is." Paige smiled again, smoothing out the insecurities once more. "People… when it comes to love — and I'm not suggesting you're in love at all, but… well, when we have such strong feelings for another, it becomes a part of you. It can change you; make you do things you never used to; care about things that you wouldn't have looked twice at before.

"Don't think this is… rare or a problem only you have. It's difficult to navigate, particularly when — when this person can be so frustrating to you."

"Shit happens." Rose chimed in.

"Yes." Paige smiled, shaking her head by her sister's antics. "Things happen, it gets more complicated than it already is and it's… nothing can be perfect, Rey. For some people, the take-off might be smooth but relationships take work; eventually, that period will end and something tricky might come up that'll challenge it. They're taxing, emotionally and physically so. But generally, talking is a good start to get to the bottom of it all."

"Or sex. That can work too."

"Don't listen to her, she reads too much romance novels." Paige cocked her head. "But yes, sex can… open a doorway to a conversation, but an honest talk is best. Keeping it bottled up is no good, either. When this happens, it's nice to talk it out with someone."
"I talk to my therapist… only the once, but–"

"You have friends who you don't have to pay for advice." Rose said quickly. "And, we've known you longer and also have our own personal experience with this that may not be, you know, professional of a therapist to give. A different perspective can enlighten so much more." She grinned then. "And I've read many a romance novel–"

"Rose, no."

"And believe me, you're almost there – this is the final storm you have to weather before the rainbow comes–"

"Please stop–"

"Miscommunication is a common trope and, boy, do you two do a lot of that."

"Rose." Paige laughed, Rey giggling along with her. "God, you really need to focus on your own life instead of those fictional worlds you care about way too much."

Rose hummed, a spray bottle in one hand, the other shoved deep into her apron pocket. "Well…" She began with a smirk. "I got comic book man's number, so I just checked both those off." She waved the napkin around, proudly presenting Ziff's number and doing a little jig.

Poe would be an insufferable pig about it all, no doubt.

"She's cutting your grass, Rey–"

"Oh, come off it." Rose sneered. "She's in love with her grumpy, old-man artist–"

"He's not old." Rey cried in protest before reclining at their interrogating eyes. "and… I'm not in love with him." She added weakly.

Rose nodded her head mockingly while Paige studied her once more.
"But you very well could be a few months down the line." Rey glared at Rose while her sister spoke in her all-knowing tone. "So, *when you* see him on Saturday, what are you planning to do?"

Rey paused. "Chat?"

"Yes. An *honest* chat." Paige and nodded. "And no anger. If you're angry, don't even touch on it – be civil, have a nice, calm and collected conversation. No yelling, no shouting, *no fighting* – just a two-way street adult conversation. You got that?"

Rey breathed out, vigorously shaking her head yes.

"Yep. *Got it.* No exploding – I think I can manage that."

~ * ~

"*Why were you there?!*"

The second he'd opened the door, dressed in a plain white-tee and black trousers, the outburst had poured from her lips. He blinked blankly as she rushed inside, brushing past him roughly before spinning on her heel to glare up at him, repeating the question – only, this time, louder, a growling edge to her tone.

"Rey." He said tersely. "We are *here* to work, not talk about *whatever* personal issue you have with me–"

"Why won't you answer the question?"

"Because It's obvious." He seethed through clenched teeth. "Just like *every* other customer, I was there to eat–"

"Oh, so that's why you left before Rose could even hand you your change, right?"

"Let's *not* get into this, right now–"
"Then when?"

"After the session."

In response, Rey whipped off her coat and hung it on the rack. "Then let's just get it over with. Where do you want me?"

He swallowed thickly, jutting his chin up in a flicking motion. "Upstairs."

"Where upstairs?"

"On the bed."

She faltered in her step, turning her head to take in his unreadable expression; gazing out his reaction, seeing if he was serious – If he seriously wanted her on his own bed, naked.

"What?"

"I want you on my bed today, Rey. Fully stripped." At the minute-long silence, he continued. "There's a towel laid out for you to… yeah."

"Oh." She huffed and set on her way, making her way through the house as usual; climbing the steps, Ben much too close behind her, leaving no room to take a breath at all from the warmth that radiated from his oh-so-large mass.

Reaching his room, she glanced around the room. To the easel, already set up and the grey towel thrown over the end of the bed and, gosh, just how huge the bed really was.

She should've asked Ben why here, why today, what made him choose it – but he seemed intent on avoiding her questions, so why bother.

Slowly, Rey began to shuck off her thick cardigan and unbuttoned her blouse as Ben disappeared into the studio to finish setting up, returning with red and nothing else once she was down to her
undies. Hooking her thumbs under the waistband of her knickers, Rey rolled them down her thighs – kicking them to the side.

"You shaved." He announced suddenly, loud and clear; filling the silent, constricting room.

She'd never known him to be so bold, eyes dragging down her covered breasts to the smooth, bare skin of her pubis. Slowly, they flicked back to her face; a smouldering gaze that had the hairs on her arms standing up.

With a deep breath in, she held her chin high; reaching around to unclip her bra while holding his eyes, not daring to look away.

"And?"

"And it's winter."

"So what–"

"So you've never shaved before, not once for our sessions–"

"You said at the start that you had an imagination – has that suddenly disappeared?"

He ducked his head, pouring a thick glob that skimmed at his hands; she smiled bitterly at the irony. 

*Caught red handed.*

"It's not… I'm just wondering why you'd do that – why you feel the need to change your body for someone else–"

"Who says I'm changing it for anyone? And… and it's hair, it grows back–"

"Because… because you're so conveniently bare three days after your date–"

"Why do you care so much about a date!"
"And you shouldn't just… just sleep with anyone you see!"

Time stopped, the balance of the room shifting off kilter as Rey breathed in and out, slowly; heavily.

"I didn't sleep with him." She growled after at time had passed, the floorboards creaking underneath Ben's giant feet. "And… and for you to just assume over fucking body hair – and… and to make it out like a bad thing, to make it out like I'm some… some dumb, naïve girl slagging around–"

"That wasn't what I was implying." His voice croaked, one hand wrenching through his hair – reddening black strands, a star contrast of the colours.

"Well that's how it comes off!" She bit out, fists clenched as she stared him down. "And it hurts you'd just think that–"

"I don't think you're a slut, Rey." He sighed. "I'm only… I just want to make sure you're safe." He muttered slowly, standing as stiff as stone, one giant fist scrunching into his trousers. "I have this urge to always – I like to know you're okay. And I'm sorry… for overstepping, for jumping to conclusions.

"And even if you did, I don't… it's not my place to judge. What you do with your body is your business and… and I shouldn't care–"

"Why do you care?" He looked up at her sudden interruption. "Why do you care what I do with my body?"

Clearing his throat loudly, wrenching another hand through his hair, spreading the red, Ben's lips parted in a silent answer. "I… you're my employee; my friend. A… a sister-figure, I suppose, and I… well, I'd like to think I look after my friends."

Like a busted balloon, Rey deflated. "Oh."

A sister-figure – that explained it all, really. The over-protectiveness, asking her 'round for dinner, always listening and making sure she was good; she was safe. And really, how could she not see this – they fought like siblings, too, and were connected through his biological parents and the couple she looked up to as the family she never had the privilege of growing up with.

Oh.
"Maybe we should start. I, um… could you please lie on the bed for me, Rey."

She nodded her head shortly, lips forming a thin line because – because how could she be so stupid? With drooping shoulders, Rey turned to hop up on his oh-so large bed; the one she'd never get to sleep in, or god forbid, fuck him in because he didn't like her.

"On your side for me, please." She turned, as he asked. "Bring your left leg up, just a little." Following his command and grimacing at the discomfort between her thighs while doing so; because of course their heated words had set fire to her nerves; of course she was aroused by the mere sight of him. "And, ah, curve your back – yes, perfect. Beautiful. Thank you."

Staring blankly ahead, she heard the shuffle as he took his seat; squirming in her spot, trying to get comfortable in a place she didn't belong – it was a cruel joke from the universe and she only had herself to blame; her hope and anger meddling together and ruining the little common sense that swirled within her, urging Rey to make responsible decisions.

Even then, as time ticked on, it did nothing to quell her feelings. On the contrary, they bloomed stronger – or perhaps it was just the sting to his curt words that made the emotion flare so violently within her chest, beating something bloody against her ribcage with a pounding rhythm that hurt so much; rattling her bones, shaking her body, making it impossible to lie still and pretend like everything was fine, everything was okay.

And despite all this, still Rey couldn't stop picturing his eyes; how warm they shined when he smiled the crooked, imperfect grin that would always be perfect in her eyes. The way his long fingers held the brushes in his hands; an instrument to art, dancing across the canvas, painting something unworthy to be risen to that status. His lips, the teeth that bit into the soft flesh in concentration or chewed at his cheek, screwing up his pretty face into something far more endearing.

She liked all his quirks. How he twisted his mouth, how his eyes twitched, the strong impression of his brows.

She liked him. A lot. Despite the anger, despite the issues, despite what happened in December – Rey liked him.

And now, finally, the truth had come; Ziff was wrong, Paige and Rose too – there was no need for an honest conversation when it'd only break her heart.

"Rey."
When he'd only reject her, like everyone else.

"Rey."

It was her legacy, after all.

"Rey."

The last sigh of her name caught her attention, sympathetic brown meeting a sad and dim hazel, the light within fading quickly.

"Do you want to do this anymore?"

She reclined slightly. "What?"

"Do you want to stop posing for me? Do you want to opt out of the project? Because right now, it seems you'd rather be anywhere else."

She shifted on her hands, pushing herself up to sit straight on his mattress, hitting him with a confused glare. "Are you firing me?"

*Open book*, her mind chirped, Ben probably well-read on all her thoughts, feelings and insecurities.

"No." He shook his head suddenly, peering behind the easel. "No, I'm not… I'm just offering you an out?"

"Why?"

"Because lately… lately, you just… you've shown up and it's not the same; you're not enjoying this, which was never intended but… no one should be miserable while working. So yes, I'm offering you an out." Ben spoke clearly, nodding his head vigorously with each word. "Because I don't like
seeing you like this, I don't *like* that my project upsets you…"

"It's *not* your project that upsets me!" Rey shouted, twisting her body to plant two feet on the hardwood floor.

"Then what is it?" he replied thickly, *red* still so vibrant in his hair and *god* did she want to wash it out. "Why are you acting like this? You used to be.. When you started opening up, *you* were lively in these sessions, you asked questions and *right now* – right now, you look…"

"Stop." She interrupted, shaking her head in disbelief. "You're just… you're trying to replace me, yeah? Because I've become too difficult, or whatever, because I *question* you on your shit, which you *never* answer." Rey stood, bending to grab at her discarded clothes. "So why not find what you were originally looking for? Someone who *isn't* a 'sister-figure', but just a beautiful model to show off to the world."

"Rey, *what the fuck* is going on with you?"

"With me?" She cried. "How about you, hm? So *confusing* and sending all these… these bloody mixed signals – not telling me the truth, not *telling* me who you are, interrupting my dates, *getting* frustrated when I already have plans, treating me *like* a fucking sister but talking about sexual metaphors like they're *nothing*." She trailed off, laughing bitterly. "Oh, and, *tossing me away* because a session isn't going so great." She plucked up the last of her clothing, placing the bra on top. "So go ahead, find your little replacement – find *whoever* to make your project that much better. I'm sure you'll be much happier without m–"

"Enough!" He growled, standing so suddenly his chair screeched it's protest against the floors. "*Stop it.*" He commanded, taking a heavy step toward her. "You're being ridiculous." Another step forward, loud and clear, reverberating In the rhythm to her pounding heart. "When will you get it?!"

"Get what?"

"That I *don't* want that, that I don't want any of this – I want you to fucking stay because… because I can't so this without you, Rey." He looked away, raking his hair once more, painting black red. "And if you were to leave, *if you were* to decide you didn't want this then *fuck* the project – there'd be no use to continuing something when the… *the* centre of my focus, the *true* eye-catcher just disappears. How could I ever *continue* something when the main *artistic* element is no longer present?" One more step forward, forcing her chin to flick up and catch his scalding gaze. "If you *left*, I would not replace you; not for someone prettier or curvier or *any description* you can say under the sun." He breathed out deeply, chest heaving with the effort. "To me…. Well, to me, you are
Her mind was slow to catch on what was said, to make out what he was saying. And when it all finally processed; when the information clicked within her mind, Rey stood silently still.

A minute passed. Maybe another or two. Perhaps an eternity had passed before Rey decided to react – naturally, in a fit of anger.

"Fuck you." She threw her clothes at him, the fabric hitting and falling from his chest, doing no damage at all. "You… you're… I don't understand." Rey turned away from him then. "You call me a sister-figure, you call me a friend, you treat me like an employee but then you say all of this and make me feel special." Rey blabbered on, fist pressed to her naked chest to keep the heavy emotions at bay. "Make me feel… wanted and liked in a way that isn't professional, in a way that we shouldn't… feel. And you do this all the time – asking me to dinner, teaching me how to skip a fucking stone, showing up on the one stupid date I had with another guy and I... God, Ben, I can't take it anymore. I can't do this anymore; can't pretend that I don't like you because you keep on sending these… these mixed messages and I need some fucking clarification here.'

She huffed, eyes turning to the ceiling.

"So do you like me or not? Please, please just answer this one question, for once. Don't give me something vague or tell me later. I'm sick of guessing and I'm over waiting, so please–"

At the warm grip at her wrist, spinning her around and stunning Rey into silence, she had about two seconds to see the sheer, unequivocal passion blazing hot in his eyes before those lips – those sweet, oh-so-sinful, soft-looking lips – descended toward her own.

Unmatched to wide dark look in his gaze or the hard grip on her wrist, his other hand, stained with red, smearing paint over her jaw as he caressed it so incredibly gently, his lips testing the waters with a featherlight force, melding softly to her bottom lip. A cautious brush of contact, lingering to take in just a hint of what it could be.

Tingles at their connection, a jolt of electricity surging at the intimate gesture; tasting of coffee and mint-toothpaste, the aftertaste of chemicals because of his clumsiness with red pain but she didn't care – not one bit. Not from the way his strong, prominent nose she'd dreamed of tracing with light fingertips bumped at her own, nuzzling into her further and further, deeper and deeper at the simplest, softest, barely-there kisses at all.

And despite it feeling like an eternity, despite her desire to kiss him for all of eternity, Rey hadn't even fluttered her eyes closed and it was already over.

He held her close, though. Nose to nose, eye to eye; one tight grip on her wrist, the other smearing blood red into her cheek as he connected the freckles with the pad of his thumb.
"Have dinner with me," a whisper, hot breath mingling with her own, his lips breezing against her own with each syllable. "Please, just… we should talk, we should discuss this and I'd love if I could do that tonight. I'd love if I could spend the night with you, Rey."

She blinked slowly, barely believing what had just happened; barely believing that they'd been screaming at each other for one minute and kissing the next.

But he was right – they needed to talk.

Only, now, her answer didn't require any words; only a slight nod to her head, a stretch of toes, hands raising to thread through soft hair excusing the few crusty red strands, planting her lips against his own; moving together, in time and tandem, like an orchestrated two-instrument band.

Chapter End Notes

I did say soon, didn't I?

but like, THEY GOTTA HAVE A HARD conversation. That comes next ;)

Cheers for reading X
Ben Solo was a filthy good kisser.

Like everything else, he was passionate, thorough and unforgiving – lips moving against her own with a tracing tongue and quick, light nips to the sensitive flesh that left her gasping into his mouth. And everywhere, all over, she felt red.

Red with his paint, red with her flush, red from his touch; magical hands, the instrument to creating his art, smoothing over soft bare skin, keeping her close to explore her with breathless, open-mouthed kisses – wet and obscene, so deliciously sweet she could only link her arms around his neck and press her body closer; an act that seemed to encourage the ferocity of his affection, tongue gliding with her own, the room singing with occasional moans because he was just... a dirty, good kisser and all too eager to prove it.

He seemed to thrive off her reaction too; emboldened by her determined response to show him that yes, she could keep up. She could skim his lips with her teeth, tango with his tongue to earn the sinful sound of a low groan that reverberated throughout her whole body. She could drive him just as crazy, with those long fingers skimming her back, a shiver gliding down Rey's spine along with the rough, calloused pad of his finger. They pressed into the dip of her waist, arching her back that little bit more as bent his head to ravage her senseless; bruised lips meeting quickly for more, more, more, hand inching down to span at her hip, fingers curling to a tight grip, stepping closer.

On instinct, she went with the current; backing up, allowing more room for another step, again and again until her back was flush against the white walls.

She looked up at him then, chest heaving; up and down, panting heavily from his constant ministrations, constant touch. One hand left her hip, rising to plant just beside her head, his body hunching down to really take her in: Rey's mussed mop of hair, wide hazel eyes, pupils dilated, lips full of colour and puffy from his own perfect mouth.
Further down, he looked, scanning impossibly slow to rake over every inch of skin, stopping on every smear of red; the print of his own touch, darkening his eyes that little more to a stark, inky black.

"I like you like this." He muttered then; nodding his head absently, the hand at her hip sliding around to feel the soft flesh of her ass, eyes following the stream of red that blemished her skin. Quickly, his eyes flashed back up to her mouth, bending low to crash his lips against it.

"I like." his lips brushed her cheek, three quick kisses to reach her jaw. "leaving." another two mouthed down her neck, opening wider on the third to suck at her pulse point, beating hard and fast to the rhythm of his frantic touch. "my mark." a whisper on skin before pulling away to see the red that bloomed from his mouth, his tongue, his teeth. "especially on you."

Ducking his head down, Rey gasped and combed itching fingers into the soft curls of his hair, holding him still as he sucked a trail of marks down her neck to shoulder.

"This paint will come off, right?" She voiced hoarsely, eyes fluttering to a close as he nipped a particularly sensitive area.

"It's oil." He croaked.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning it'll take time to get off." She squeaked at the sudden arm that snaked around her waist, tugging her bare form flush to his clothed (god, how was it so wide and firm?) chest. "You should let it dry."

She huffed out a laugh, scratching lightly at his scalp; a feeling he very clearly liked, judging by the way his lips faltered and he pulled her close that little more tighter. "You're a possessive man." She stated clearly. "That's why you came by Pho Tico, ah-"

"Only concerning things that are mine."

Rey quickly broke away from him, levelling him with a stare. "Oh, so I'm your property."

"No." He grinned crookedly, gravitating toward her. "But no one else is allowed to touch you."
"Really." She drew her hand away from his chest to her own. "Not even me?"

With a wicked glint to her hazel eyes, Rey began to drag her hand down her torso – through the valley of her breasts, spanning out at her stomach, turning downwards once reaching her pelvis, fingers curling that little bit–

"Fuck." He growled, quick to interlock his fingers with her own before she could dip into the wet heat between her thighs, repeating the same with the other to raise them up and plant them high above her head against the wall. "You're… Christ, Rey, you're killing me here."

"You kissed me first."

"I had to make my intentions known."

"And what are your intentions, hm?"

That crooked grin worked his lips, his gaze dipping low to her own mouth before taking in the golden light to her curious gaze. "I thought I answered your question quite thoroughly–"

"Yes, but not verbally."

"Ah," He murmured, fingers flexing into their joined grip. "You want a verbal confirmation."

She nodded, teeth sinking into the bruised, vibrant pink flesh of her bottom lip. "To be absolutely clear. Do you like me; not as a…employee, or a friend or… or a sister figure–" He barked out a laugh, head dropping to her shoulder, groaning into her soft, freckled skin.

"Definitely not that. I think I've made that very clear." The soft murmur to his words had her shivering; those sinful lips brushing over sensitive flesh with each syllable uttered.

A smile spread across her face, cheeks aflush, her whole body running hot from all his attention, his lips, his words; a drastic mood change, creating a desire for this one, single moment to last until the end of time. "So what do you like me as, then?"
Ben glanced up, then, hunching down and stepping closer, her neck moving in time with the motion.

"I like you. As my model, as my friend and as someone I can share everything to, even though I… I struggle to open up." He swallowed thickly, eyes narrowing in slightly. "I like you as someone I can… hold." He flexed his fingers again, tight grip bringing them forward to rest her hands on his broad shoulders while his palms found her hips, once more. "Someone I can kiss."

Standing on the tips of her toes, Rey met him with another soft brush of lips; a taste of how it all started before lust and passion and the a touch of red took over.

"I like you." He admitted once more, whispered lowly at her ear. "A little too much. You're all I can think about, Rey."

"Is that so?" She voiced softly, barely audible from the thick clot of wonder caught in her throat. "I thought… well, I could never fully convince myself that you did. Like me, that is."

"I… I thought the same of you. You'd look at me and I'd… see something in your eyes but I always put it down to my own reflected hope." She watched his jaw move. "Which is why I never asked you out or made it clear that… that this is what I wanted. This is what I want."

He she breathed in shakily. "You want me?"

"I do." He nodded, face impassive and stony, unyielding of the mixed emotions stirring within. "But we should… we should talk first before we make any decisions or do anything rash. About us, about… everything that's happened and about everything that could happen." A shot of thrill spiked through her at the mere thought of a future together, faltering her smile as fear and insecurities broke through the fragile surface. "And we, ah, have a sessions to finish – a sessions to start, really."

"Oh. Right." she nodded minutely. "The art session." He chuckled at this, hesitantly stepping away and removing his imprinting touch to rake a hand through his hair once more, much to Rey's disappointment. The thick tension dulled at their loss of contact, leaving Rey with the realisation that she was very much naked, aroused and dishevelled from the prominent man standing in front, fulling clothed and eyeing her with a closed-off expression; full lips parted and pulled in, gaze slow to scan down with clarity now that their hurried, near-frantic actions had dissolved.

On instinct, Rey moved cover her chest.

"You know," He began, turning his head to meet her eye and nothing else. "I've seen it all before. For hours, I've studied you like this; just are you are."
"Yes, but…" She shrugged absently, wriggling her toes as an excuse to look away. "You've never looked at me like that."

"Like what?"

"Like… all those times, with the sessions, it's always been… professional. My body wasn't meant to please you then, at least not in a… a way that should inspire lust but now – well, I'm too skinny and my bones poke out and, um, my boobs aren't exactly much."

He blinked, standing still after she babbled nervously, shrinking under his dark, penetrating eyes. Only a minute after did Ben move, quick on his feet, hands on her shoulders and guiding her to the corner of the room; forcing Rey upon herself, looking into her own very eyes as she was met with a mirror.

Ben stood straight behind her, holding her in place and radiating heat.

"Take a look." He said shortly, nodding at their reflection. "What do you see, Rey?"

Red. She saw red; red lips, red skin, red. Her hair was a matted mess, paint smeared into her cheeks, her waist, her hips, her shoulders – some outright showing the print of those oh-so-large hands. The hazel in her eyes were wide and bright, skin positively glowing; blooming from the touch behind her. She was a mess – a ravaged, dishevelled, red-hued mess, all because of him.

Soft lips found her shoulder once more, Rey stepping back to delight in the sensation only to discover a whole other sensation, pressing hard against her lower back. He hissed in her ear, easing his hips away quickly.

"See what you do to me? How you look, how you act, everything about you brings on a reaction." She sighed softly, unabashedly and unintendedly. "I very much desire you. Just the way you are, no changes required." Glancing to their reflection once more, Rey couldn't help but revel in just how fitting they looked together like this "And if you knew exactly what I thought in these sessions, believe me Rey, you wouldn't call them professional." His fingers massaged into the tight knots coiled in her back muscles. "Like right now, in our session, I can't help but appreciate just how… fucking good it is to see you like this; finally touch you like this."

Rey hummed, closing her eyes, a short, strangled moan escaping her throat as his hands worked at stiff joints. "Mmh, we could always put off the session and… ah… continue this."

"Talk comes first, Rey." She huffed loudly, earning a low chuckle straight from his chest. "Patience, Sweetheart."
She frowned. "Tonight."

"Tonight." He agreed, the heel of his hand hitting a nerve that had her back arching with a gasp. "But for now… our session."

"What about the paint stains?"

"Leave them. I like them there."

"But… you said it's hard to get off."

"Coconut oil does wonders. Trust me, this happens all the time."

"Will you personally rub me down and get them off, then?"

He laughed. "You know what… I think we'll take a quick water break to calm down before we jump back in."

She spun away from his wandering hands, staring up at him before curious eyes moved down to the obvious (and quite frankly, very proportionate it seemed) tent in his trousers.

"I can help you calm down—"

"Rey."

"What." She whined, a cheeky grin at her lips. "You can't work to the best of your ability with that."

"And if I said I've done it before? Multiple times?"
She groaned. "You're a monster."

His eyes darkened, a sinful smirk at his lips. "Yes, I am. Now get back on the bed."

~ * ~

Rey would be lying if she said it wasn't hard, lying there on Ben's bed while his dark, searching eyes lifting from his work to scan at her body; observing the parts he'd touched, sucked and licked, leaving his mark into her skin. With his rumpled, red-streaked hair and the concentrated pout to his delicious lips, she was a goner; still thrumming from the strong current to his hands, always squirming, always being told off to lie still and his terribly soothing tone that only seemed to increase her wriggling.

The effect he had on her… Rey didn't think it could get any stronger; particularly from a few uttered words and the taste of his tongue.

How she made it without passing out was a miracle.

"Your water pressure is amazing." Dressed in one of his large white tee-shirts (who knew the man owned white fabric) and an old pair of boxers with stars printed into the black, pulled tight, rolled up and still hanging low at her hips, Rey took a seat at one of the stools to his kitchen bench as Ben shifted around the kitchen; one hand in her hair, combing through the wet, knotty strands. "And, uh, I hope you don't mind but I used your shampoo. You got paint in my hair, so…"

"It's fine, Rey." He said quickly, turning his gaze over his shoulder to smile softly at her. "Did you get it all out."

"Mostly." Rey hummed, setting the jar of coconut oil on the bench, turning her elbow to observe a fleck she'd missed. "Some help would have been nice; it was awfully hard to reach some spots—"

"I did your back before you went in."

He did. Made her lie face down on that towel up in his room after announcing he'd finished, one knee resting into the mattress as he rubbed oil into the traces he left; thumbs digging into aching muscles, deft fingers working at the knots and stiff joints from a day stuck in one single position. It was terribly nice and, ironically, felt terribly dirty despite the intention.
"Yes, well, you left a hand print on my arse that was rather tricky to get off."

"How tragic." He muttered dryly, setting down a chopping board before gifting her a smile. "You want to help me, now? My hands are washed and I'm about to prep the food."

"You want me to do your hair?"

Crossing his thick arms across his oh-so-broad chest, Ben leaned down against the bench, levelling her with his unusually bright eyes. "Please. Before I have to shave it all off."

Rey laughed at this. "If you do that, I might not kiss you again."

He hummed, cocking his head. "You might not do that again after tonight, so what's to lose." Maybe he was joking. Maybe the falter to his smile was just a coincidence.

"Wow." Rey muttered. "How ominous."

"Sorry," He said softly. "I'm just trying to be honest an there's, ah, a lot to get into; a lot of questions that I think should be, you know, given a period of time to think about and really… contemplated, I guess, is the word." His grimace was telling, instilling a surge of nerves and an array of unrealistic scenarios that all ended in turmoil.

"Right." She breathed out, an uncomfortable feeling in her belly beginning to brew as she took the jar in her hands, shucking off the cap and digging in to scoop it out. "Come here then. Regardless of kissing, I like your hair too much to see it go."

Ben smiled, leaning in that little bit further over the counter before bowing his head toward her. She got to work quickly, carding her hands through his soft tresses; working at the vibrant red strands, massaging into his scalp, gently fisting her fingers through his for-once unruly mop of hair, much to his pleasure.

Up this close, Rey watched his eyes flutter to a close; face relaxing, body moving to the back and forth of her hands. Up this close, Rey could only list the little things that made him… Ben. The small dark moles doted on his face, the slightly-hooked nose because he broke it in a bar fight with his father, thick long eyelashes that would’ve spiked envy within her had she not been so enamoured by the sheer state of peace that oozed and enveloped all around them; the change of atmosphere very welcomed, Rey relaxing right along with him.
Slowly, the oil worked into a red paste, effectively lifting the colour from his hair but leaving a tint he'd have to wash out lady.

"Your hair is so lovely and soft." she admitted softly, threading through it in a state of wonder as he hummed so very softly under her touch.

"It's all in the shampoo."

"Will it magically fix my split-ends?"

He snorted, arms still braced against the marble counter-top while her fingers slowed their actions. "Only a hair cut will do that. But it'll make it shiny and soft. And you'll smell like me." He was hesitant in pulling away, but he did so after a long time of Rey intently studying his scalp. With his hair slicked back, exposing his terribly cute ears, she could see them tint to a red flush at the top of his lobes. "You should never get out of my clothes, either."

"Never?" she raised a brow, watching those ears turn a deeper shade of red, making her bite down a giggle. He didn't respond, merely turning on his heel and opening up the fridge, shifting through the shelves. "That'd complicate a few things for your project."

As he leaned closer into the fridge, bending forward, he snorted at her statement. "I... you're not wrong there."

She grinned, eyes drawn to his hunched form, eyeing the stretch of skin showing as his t-shirt raised. "So, what are you cooking tonight?"

"Spaghetti. And meatballs." He answered swiftly. "Quite dull, I know, but I didn't, uh... exactly have time to prepare for it all. Well I mean, I didn't really expect anything to happen tonight, so I hope you're not too disappointed."

"Meatballs." She repeated, drawing out the word.

"Rey."
"What?" She asked innocently when he narrowed his gaze on her, quick to place the mince, milk and carton of eggs on the bench. "I just... really love meatballs. And I'm not disappointed in the slightest."

He only stared at her, shaking his head lightly before moving off to the pantry. "You know, you're making it very difficult to work in here efficiently. It's already hard enough when all I can think is of you spread on my bench, right here."

"Thinking about sexual metaphors?"

"You are... so frustratingly quick with your witty responses."

"You must be rubbing off on me." He stiffened, straightening from the pantry before turning to hit her with a look of awe and amusement and what she hoped was arousal of some sort.

"Christ, Rey." He marvelled. "You just don't quit, do you?"

"Consider it payback for all the stress you've brought on this month."

"I've brought on stress?" He laughed, setting down breadcrumbs and tomato paste alongside the other ingredients. "You told me you had a date after I asked you out on a date on what I thought was already a date--"

"Which you never actually clarified." He grimaced at this. "We could have avoided a lot of stress had you just properly asked me out on a date."

"True." He muttered. "But... artist's aren't good with words--"

"Benjamin Kenobi could paint a pretty clear picture with words in his book."

"--and you could've always asked too." Rey watched his hands as he started unpackaging the mince, a mixture of pork and veal into a rather large bowl, those terribly long, thick fingers scrunching through the meat without hesitation. "You didn't... well, you never made it clear either. Little signs here and there made me curious and hopeful, but never enough to be so bold to straight up ask."
"And yet, you still considered it to be a date."

He laughed, eyes down on the task before him as his face lit up, Rey far too intrigued by the way he flicked his hands into the bowl. "I'd like to think myself as a rather… intelligent man. But I can say with assurance that if it involves any… social interaction, common sense disappears."

"Oh, I've noticed." Rey quipped, relishing in the ever-blooming smile on his face that never seemed to as he took an egg from the carton (and god how small it looked in his palm) It really shouldn't have surprised her that he cracked an egg with one hand in ease; eyes wide and alert, always on him and everything he did; a glimpse into something so domestic it'd surpassed everything Rey thought she'd get to have, one day.

As if sensing her awe, Ben looked up.

"When I was little – too little to really help with anything else – my mother would let me crack the eggs. That and lick the bowl clean after whatever she was baking was safely in the oven, much to my absolute delight." Rey bit back a smile, a weight in her chest lifting at the happy childhood memory; vicariously living through it, taking it in and replacing the sour taste of her malnourished, isolated past. "The cakes were always dry, cookies always cracked and crumbling; sometimes burnt far too much to be considered edible but… I'd always eat it." Ben explained this all so quietly as he withdrew a fork from a draw, sleeves rolled up to his elbows exposing the muscles that twitched as he mixed in the egg, face animated with each word; eyebrows moving, lips quirking through his pauses, shoulders rolling with each pressing push of his arm. "Because it was something I'd made; something I'd contributed. And because she'd let me help, despite getting shells in the mix or cracking too hard. It was… the one thing we shared when she… she wasn't busy or handling a case.

"And I remember when Han would make a comment on the taste; a joke, an honest review, anything. I'd go out of my way to eat it all. And in return, she'd give me a smile and push my hair back to show off my ears… and I'd let her." He looked up then, he tried for a small smile – the effect of the old memory showing in the way his eyes glazed over. "So, uh… I got pretty good at cracking eggs." A forced huff of short laughter followed his words before he cleared his throat, adding a drizzle of oil before continuing to mince it together. "Would you mind helping me with something – nothing extreme, I just need you to pour in the breadcrumbs and stop when I say so."

"…Fine." Rey muttered. "But if I spill it everywhere, it's on you. Or over-pour."

"Stop over-thinking. You won't over pour." He chided gently as she reached for the box, beginning to pour in the crumbs as an incessant question churned in the back of her mind.

She poured slowly, hesitantly, chewing her lip as Ben lifted his hand to get her to pour a little faster and—
"Why do you call your father Han?"

Silence. Dead-silence for a solid minute.

"Shit." He broke through, quickly yanking the box upright.

"You were meant to say stop!" Rey yelped, watching the box spill to the floor.

"Yes, but… your question just caught me off guard." He sighed heavily. "I guess we're having the hard talk now."

Rey sat up straight in her chair, watching as Ben plucked up the box before setting it on the bench again.

"I call him dad, too." He answered after a time. "It's just… an old habit to call him Han sometimes. For so long, I believed he didn't deserve the title." He began mincing, once more. Only his movement was more slow and calculated; deep in thought, crafting his words. "My parents used to argue a lot. I told you this already, but… whenever there was a big fight, whenever it was so loud it felt like the house was exploding, he'd leave. Pack his bags and get the hell out of town. Funny how it took me to pack my bags and leave for good to make him stay."

Rey paused. "Are you… trying to say it was your fault? For him leaving."

Ben shrugged. "The arguments were often about me; my behaviour, how I acted out in school, if I… if I had a problem, if I was like Anakin."

"Ben… they wouldn't do that—"

"See, Rey, this is the problem!" He snapped. "They would do that, they did do that. But you've got this image of them that will never be ruined and… and that could really complicate things."

She huffed, folding her arms firmly across her chest. "I didn't mean it like that, I just… you weren't the sole reason for Han leaving. I… just didn't want you to blame yourself when he's the only one who can make that decision."
"Sorry." He muttered. "I'm just... scared. About this, about us." He admitted quickly. "And I... I can't help but come up with reasons that could complicate everything; complicate us being together. And I really should've... I shouldn't have kissed you this morning or... done anything that I did in that session today because it was... wildly inappropriate."

Rey reclined back quickly, as if she'd been pushed. "You regret kissing me--"

"No. No, not at all I just... I wish I'd waited until we talked. Because... because it was so good, Rey, and it felt... so right--"

"So why does it sound like you're having second-thoughts?"

"I'm not having second thoughts. I'm just... thinking it out logically."

"Meaning?"

"Meaning that the timing for us... it might not be right." Ben huffed, pushing the bowl to the side before meeting her gaze. "Like I said before, you have this completely different image of my family. And I'm working on it, I'm working on our relationship together, but there are times where I'm angry and bitter; times where I remember the worst." Another loud sigh left his lips as he deflated across the bench, hunching over once more. "You said yourself they're like the family you never had and that's... it leaves room for potentially damning disagreements. You might think me unreasonable for the way I treat them sometimes, but it's taking a lot of time and... work to reconnect."

Rey inhaled, clenching her fists. "I get it now, Ben. Since Christmas I've started... well, I've started realising that I'm not the only person to be... imperfect. They're not flawless, they make mistakes -- big ones, just like you and I. I get it, Ben."

"Yes, but what if we really take a shot; we really do this and it's so smooth, there's a lot of people involved; my family is involved? What if we break up and it's... it's toxic, it's explosive, it's exactly like my parents--"

"We can't know that until we give it a try--"
"What if that… what if it tarnishes everything I rebuilt with my family? What if… what if it loses you the family you made for yourself, Rey?"

"That won't happen. They wouldn't… it'd just be bad for us, they'd never choose sides."

"Yes, but would you want to be reminded of me every time you go to work? Would I want to remember what we had while… while eating my mother's fucking terrible cooking?" He rattled out, eyes blazing wide. "And even then, there's this to consider; you being my employee, you posing for another six months. It's… unprofessional of me and… and again, if it goes wrong, it could complicate things—"

"Why are you so set on this ending before it's even begun?" She snapped, heart hammering loudly in her chest as the silence ticked on, the only sound of his heavy breathing alerting to movement in the room.

"I'm not." Ben reassured loudly. "Believe me, I want this – I want you. I'm certain of this. But I want you to know of the complications. I want you to really think about this; for us to really take this slow if we're going to do this." His fingers tapped against the counter. "I want you to be sure that you're ready."

"I am ready, Ben. I… I really fucking like you and I can't not… do this. Not after today, not after this morning."

Ben nodded.

"I'd still like for you to… to take a week to think about this some more."

"I know my own mind."

"I'm not saying you don't, I just… we shouldn't be impulsive, we shouldn't rush into it."

"Well there's a first." She quipped bitterly, pouting.

"Please don't frown Rey – I just… we should be sure before we rush into things." He nodded.
"Look, I… we needed to talk about this, but that doesn't mean – we can forget about it tonight. I don't… I don't need you to make a decision tonight, I don't need you to consider anything tonight."

"Then why bring it up right now?"

He smiled, then.

"So I can continue making you dinner and you can sit and watch and occasionally help; so I can tell you the few fond memories of my parents that make me smile and listen to your own, if you wish to tell me. So we can eat on the couch and we can watch whatever shitty movie's playing on tv. So I can maybe kiss you some more before you have to really think about all the complications; so I can give you a good first official date and drive you home; hopefully leave that gorgeous grin on your face, long after I'm gone."

Rey felt warm all over; a surge of happiness thrumming through her body. "So it's finally a date then?"

"Yes. Finally."

"A date where I can taste your meatballs."

"Wow."

"You love it." Rey replied cheekily, relishing in his small shake of head.

"Yeah." He whispered lowly, looking at her like she… mattered. "Yeah, I do."

Looking at her like she was bright; salient.

Chapter End Notes

So there's that... NO SMUT, and I do apologise, but Ben is being... sensible? for once in his life? who knew.

I TOTALLY FORGOT TO MENTION YOLO ZIFF IN MY END NOTES LAST
TIME and I'm sorry -- he's a genuine SW character and after reading about him on wookieepedia, I kinda fell in love. Also... I just want Rose to have a hot nerdy boyfriend so they can geek out together... I ADMIT IT SHAMELESSLY.

Cheers for reading, as always. I really loved writing this chapter and promise the smut is not far off AT ALL.

For updates, be sure to follow me on tumblr @reyloner and I'm SLOWLY becoming more active on twitter, so be sure to hit me up on there @dalzonii
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

I am not gonna lie, this chapter is pretty messy buuuuuut in about a week or so, I'll be away on holidays and going through the whole story and cleaning EVERY LITTLE THING up. Then I'll go in and outline it all and, hopefully, get you an accurate chapter count :)  

so yeah, sorry for the general mess of this chapter X

See the end of the chapter for more notes

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

~ F E B R U A R Y ~

P A R T    F I V E

What If?

It took a whole day and a half for Rey to realise that Ben might have had a point, as irritating as it was to acknowledge.

Through late Saturday night to early Monday morning, she was indifferent; stubborn and wielding a mind of stone, Rey's opinion was set. Why wait more when we've already waited so long, she thought over and over, like a broken record, why delay the inevitable?

The confessions had been made and sealed with sensual kisses, the evidence blooming from her skin with the shapeless purple slowly fading along her neck and shoulder.

Why make it harder when they'd already made it impossibly so since December?

"Morning Gummy."

And just like that, it hit; the worry, the pros and the cons, the weight of their developing relationship and what it'd be to the people surrounding them—all of it flooding in with a racing current of fear and anxiety.

What if this and what if that, each what if more damning than the last causing Rey to shrink in on herself; deeper and deeper into a hole crowded with insecurities.
And Ben… *Ben* was being his stupid self, as usual; taking it far too seriously.

"We shouldn't talk this week." He'd said between kisses, parked outside her apartment building. Rey straddling his hips in the driver seat of his car and grinding against him with hot little pants into his mouth. "We should, uh… think about this, mmph… carefully. Okay?"

"What?" She'd pulled away, brows drawn. "What are you on about Ben?"

He'd swallowed thickly; her eyes instantly drawn to his adams apple and the sheen to the stretch of pale skin, the urge to *lick* the spot striking within like a hurricane.

"Don't call me this week. Or text. Let's, uh, have a break. To, you know, really contemplate the consequences—Rey, what are you doing?"

"You're an idiot."

Slamming the car door in his face was nice. Being able to call him, however, would have admittedly been much nicer.

"What's that on your neck, gummy?"

But truthfully, *he* did have a point.

"Leave her alone, Han."

"What? I'm only curious as to what is on her neck—and who's been leaving them." Rey methodically kept on dipping the tea bag into a mug of hot water that felt cooler than her skin. Red faced and full of shame over the recent fantasies she'd been dreaming up of their son, she thought it best to *not turn around*. "Valentines go well, then?"

"What?" She voiced instantly, shoulders stiffened. *Was he teasing? Did he know? Did Ben tell them—*but why would he tell them if they were the main reason to his concerns? *"What do you mean?"*
"You've been weird all week. Smiling to yourself—while lugging around engines, might I add. Mumbling to yourself. Not looking me in the eye, now Leia too." Han explained dryly, undoubtedly reading the paper as he did so. "Going by those marks, I'm guessing it's boy related."

"Or maybe she's just sick of working with you—I don't know how she does it."

"You live with me."

"I don't know how I do it." She smiled at Leia's quick response, a short laugh of relief bubbling out of her chest, grateful for the attention being on a different subject. Leia was good at that; sensing a topic she wasn't comfortable with and swiftly changing it in ease.

"You love me, that's how"

"Mmhm, true. How'd that happen?"

"I wooed you good."

"Wooed?" Leia scoffed out an abrupt laugh as Rey added a smidge of milk and half a teaspoon of sugar. "I remember you irritating me until life would be strange without it."

"See how she treats me, Rey? Her poor, caring husband—"

"Oh, stop it." She stirred her tea once, twice. "Rey, sit down already."

"Oh, I'm almost—"

"Ahuh, you've made your tea, now sit and eat." Leia cut in firmly. "You're doing hard, heavy work and need sustenance."

"And KFC is the perfect healthy meal to help with that—"
"Would you rather a peanut-butter sandwich?" A loud huff followed. "Always complaining, never satisfied—"

"Oh, c'mon, that was no complaint. Just a joke; calm down, Princess—"

"Don't tell me to calm down, you know I hate that—Rey, come sit."

With a last hopeful wish of a face unflushed, she obeyed and took a seat across from Han. He was, as predicted, casually reading the paper—eyes glued to the words even as their back forth got heated, Leia doing much the same; working at her husband's paperwork without a fuss as they threw out words.

To Rey, their dynamic would always be of great interest; never a dull moment between the two. It was hard to imagine a time where they'd been apart.

"You," Leia looked up suddenly, gaze piercing right at her own head. "Eat."

Happily, Rey thought as she loaded up her plate with chicken—so much chicken—and thick fries.

"So, work's finally settled then, yeah?"

"Thankfully, yes." Leia replied, watching her as she selected her food while Han began to obnoxiously dig into his food. "Well actually, it never truly settles, but it's certainly calmed down. I've missed these lunches of ours."

"Me too," Rey admitted with a smile. "He's a handful on his own, especially without Chewie—"

"Me and Chew' say the same thing about you, Gums'."

"Mmh, I'm sure he listens." Rey hummed.

"Or maybe he just blocks it all out, you do yap a lot." Leia added with a small smirk.
"Okay; you two can stop siding up with each other. You know, it’s my birthday soon—"

"Soon being the key word—"

"And you better be good or I won't get you a present." Han gaped up at Leia, finally lifting his head. "Or organise your dinner—"

"I said I never wanted a dinner."

"Well you're getting one. Maybe Lando can even come—"

"Oh, so he can crack onto you? I don't think so."

"You are so dramatic; Lando flirts with everyone. And I was going to invite Rey, so she'll steal his eye."

"Wonderful." Rey joked with a bright smile. "Maybe I can actually get a piece of cake this time."

She could see, in their minds, the guilt that churned—it was a harmless quip, said with humoured energy that only fell flat at the table. And yet, unintentionally, she'd brought it all up. They made the effort of smiling, a hesitant laugh with shared pointed looks. I'm over it, she wanted to say, that was months ago.

But that would have been a lie. And Cassian had urged her to be honest, especially with herself.

"Actually, Rey, we should… there's a few things we should discuss before the dinner. A question I should ask before calling him and—" She stopped short, pursing her lips. "I don't want a repeat of things, so just to check in, I wanted to know—"

"How are you and Ben?"

She blinked.

Rey had been expecting Luke. Why had she expected them to say Luke?
"Ben?" She repeated blankly, a furrow to her brow.

"Well we don't know where the two of you stand, um… and Ben's been a little distant since. We're talking but it could be a touchy subject. So um, I just wanted to make sure—"

"Before we give Ben a call—of course, wouldn't be necessary if I had my way on my birthday; no dinner, no need." Han gave her a wink, trying to make the conversation more… natural. But Rey could barely process the information.

"Of course, there's no guarantee he'll even come because of Luke, but…" Luke. It should've been Luke. "I just want to avoid any, um… problems and issues."

"And Ben is the issue?" Rey suddenly snapped as a all-too familiar feeling course through—only, never for the need of someone else. No, the urge to protect on another's behalf seemed… odd. And thrilled her nerves to no end. "He's the problem, your own son?"

"Ah, maybe we worded this poorly…" Han interrupted, the calm cracks to his façade cracking. "We're just checking in on you, kid, making sure you two are on better terms. We just want to make sure you're comfortable—"

"And if not, then what?" Rey asked bitterly. "You won't invite your inappropriateson to your birthday? For my comfort?"

"No, Rey, we were never—"

"And what about him, will he still get the same check in? About me? When really, it should be Luke—he's the one who suggested I was… that Ben was paying me for sex-work, like it's this… this terrible thing, going out of his way to humiliate him in front of everyone—"

"Rey, that wasn't—"

"But it's Ben. Ben, who will make me uncomfortable when I've been my most vulnerable self with him in our work, in his art. Ben, who I…" Rey stopped short of revealing the nature of their relationship, the intensity to her feelings for him; how much she cared, how much it hurt to see his
parents unknowingly being so careless to his emotions.

Her chest heaved from the volume of her words, the speed they left her lips; fingers digging into the surface of the table.

"We are… on good terms. To answer your question. So go ahead, invite him."

She glanced them in the eye, then; spotting the concern and quickly looking back down.

How weird… to see concern in their eyes. She wondered, for the first time, if they ever wore the same look with Ben (which was ridiculous, she knew they did—they did. But in this moment, it was hard to see).

"We were always going to invite him, Rey." Leia said softly, after a time of stark silence had passed. "I just wanted you to know he could be there. I… I should have checked with Luke, too."

"Rey, I'd never not… want to spend my birthday without my son. I already did for seven years."

"Oh…" It was all she could say. "Right. Um, I should… I should get back to work."

Ben was right—this was all too complicated.

~ * ~

"Thirsty, Rey?"

Rey wiped at her wet lips, slamming the glass a little too hard against the table after she downed her pint in seconds. You have no idea, she thought along with the memory of perfect pink lips.

"It's just… been a week, you know?" Poe nodded knowingly, despite not knowing a thing—why bother telling him of Ben when there was a chance it'd never happen? And it simply wasn't worth the piss-taking if she were to mention concealing hiccys from her potential boyfriend's (is that even what he wanted?) parents.

"Oh yeah." Poe groaned, relaxing into his seat with a grin. "That it has. Winning cases can be… so tiring—"
"And humbling, too."

"Naturally. I'm nothing but humble."

"It really shows."

"Just a humble wingman. And my matchmaking skills—they are on fire." Rey rolled her eyes as he laughed in disbelief. "Look at em—aren't they cute." Rey followed his line of gaze, smiling at the sight of Rose and Ziff laughing and dancing to the live-bad. They were cute (and blessedly Rose kept Ziff distracted and away from asking certain questions).

"It was unintentional, so it doesn't count—"

"Yes it does—"

"And actually, I chose to eat at Pho Tico; without me they'd have never met. So really, I'm the matchmaker here."

Poe cocked his head in thought. "You're right, Niima. We do make a great team—together, we could probably set you up with someone real—"

"No. No more set-ups!" She stated firmly, raking a hand in her hair before glancing over her shoulder, lips pursed as she searched for Finn in the crowd.

"You're five-wheeling right now, Niima—"

"Dameron, I swear—"

"Unless, you're not actually; unless you're, you know, hooking up with the dude who barged in on your date like a fucking romantic-drama cinematic masterpiece!"

Rey’s gaze snapped back to his eyes, alight with amusement, finger swirling arrogantly over the rim of his pint. "I can't believe Rose told you."
"Nope."

"Fucking Ziff."

"Bingo."

"And have you told Finn?"

"Actually, no." Poe interrupted quickly, his grin widening ominously. "But Rose told him. And then Finn told me and I had to pretend like I didn't really know, so I'd appreciate if you didn’t say anything about that." Rey glared at him, rolling her shoulders with a sigh. "But seriously, was Kilo wearing shoes this time? Was he in his pyjamas? Was he heaving that big chest of his all righteously—'away from my woman, you wretch' way?"

"Fuck. Off." Rey snarked. "Fuck all the way off."

"And please tell me he scooped you up in his arms, took you home and dicked you down, because you're in need of one."

At this, Rey slumped in her seat. "No. No dicking—possibly never. We've just talked and… and kissed a little after a whole lot of arguing and he told me to—to give it a week, think about it; contemplate the consequences."

"Seriously?" Poe barked out a laugh. "Man, this asshole really loves to sabotage himself—"

"Yes. He does." She agreed quickly, thinking back to the cake and Christmas and his inability to make a decent apology. "He really, really does, but…" Rey huffed, pressing the heels of her hands into her eyes as a groan tore from her throat. "I mean, I see his point. The more I think about it, the more I see where he's coming from—and… and he's made it clear that he'd be willing to do this, whatever this is, but he's making sure I know all the… the—"

"Consequences."
"Yes."

"How boring." Rey rolled her eyes at his typical response. "What's he so concerned about, anyways—like man, it's not that difficult? You give it a try and see if it wor—"

"His parents are Han and Leia, who he has a really testy relationship with, sometimes irrationally so. And, I mean, we still have six sessions to go and it could all go horribly wrong." Rey sighed, slouching in her seat. "I have so many issues with… family and it constantly wedges it's way between me and their whole family. Not to mention the first interaction you and Finn had with him, I—God, it's just messy. And possibly… possibly better to not pursue."

There was a beat of silence where Poe stared at her blankly, a slight shake to his head. "Wow. You really have been thinking about this a lot."

"I thought he was stupid for insisting but… It's all I think about now." Rey huffed. "That and his lips, because fuck, he's… he's really good. Like, really, really good; I've never felt so alive from someone's mouth, but Ben—"

"Dear god woman, pull yourself together. You're drooling all over yourself."

She groaned at this, bending and dropping her head to the cool table with a dull thunk. "Feelings are gross."

"Amen to that." Poe whooped loudly, earning a weak amused snort from herself. "They suck, they're rude and just completely barge in at the worst possible times but you will never get over them if you don't take a shot; give it a real hot go, you know? Keep it simple, don't tell his family while trialling it out—just for a little while, until you know."

"Are you…" Rey paused, lifting her head to stare at him cautiously. "Are you actually giving serious advice right now?"

"Believe it or not, this is something I know all too well. Before I met you, I was… I mean, I was struggling to admit who I was as a person. My sexuality—coming to terms with it while having to tell my family. And when I met Finn and our feelings brought it all up, I wanted to give up too—ignore it all, ignore who I really was as a person, ignore him. To contemplate the consequences, thinking of what I'd lose if no one accepted me."

It was hard to imagine that; Poe, always so self-assured and confident, confused with his identity;
silencing himself for others. It didn’t seem possible.

"We all have our own mountains to climb, Rey. That was mine but Finn helped me through it and I—well, if I hadn't, then I'd have missed out on a whole lot in life—it's cheesy but, the 'love' of my life, for example." He sheepishly grinned at her, pushing a curl from his face in a rare act of shyness. "Take a chance—you'll never know where it could lead."

But he was right. She took a chance on leaving Jakku to Takodana and it still stood as the best decision she’d ever made. Maybe they could try it out. And maybe it'd just end up topping that number one risk from all those years ago.

"Do you think—well, hiding it from Han and Leia might be a good thing but… but I have to be honest with Finn and—would he support it? Even after the whole awkward bar moment?"

"Finn cares about your happiness most of all. If this… dramatic ass, sad-boy artist makes you happy, then he'll accept that. Also, that was months ago and, y'know, inviting him out to give a better impression with us might actually help with that."

"Yeah. Yeah, that… would be a good start." Rey blinked and straightened in her seat. "Did we really just have this conversation?"

"Shocking, right?" Poe smirked. "Blame it on Finn. I'm feeling… I don't know, just happy. And I want you to be happy."

"This is so weird."

"Plus my matchmaking skills really are unparalleled, so I reserve the right to set you up with your mopey artist—"

"And we're back."

"It comes and goes in short bursts."

"I've noticed." cocked her brow at him before contentedly looking elsewhere with a lingering small smile; observing the lives around her, the energy that surround them all—happy couples, loud chattering groups, stressed bar staff and two blokes who really shouldn't discuss the football for their
own safety and quick tempers. Scanning the small excuse of a stage, taking in the drunken band that made little to nothing from their work but the joy alone was enough to keep going, inspiring Rose to dance around Ziff while he stood still and watched in unmistakable awe.

The whole place was full of emotions and smiles; the biggest and brightest belonging to Finn as he bounded over, beer in hand.

"Man, that line took forever."

"And you're smiling about it?"

"On the house. Thanks to Maz, of course."

"Nice work." Poe cheered. "Look at my fiancé go; so talented, working that cute face of his."

Rey laughed, nodded and agreed. Finn gaped at Poe, a look of annoyance flickering upon his face. She blinked.

_Fiancé._

"Wait, what—"

"We said we'd announce it together—"

"Did I mention that I proposed to Finn last night?"

"What the actual fuck—"

"Poe, you are infuriating—"

"You're getting married?" Rey shrieked.
Finn turned to smile at her sheepishly. "Uh, yeah. Yeah, we are—you're not… you're okay with that?"

"What do you mean am I okay with that, of course I am!" She shouted, a beaming grin taking hold of her face as she leapt out of her seat to wrap Finn in a hug.

"Hey, the beer—" It fell with a shatter, sloshing over her clothes and Finn's too as glass scattered into pieces. "So much for free beer—"

"I'm so happy for you guys! And you waited this long to tell me—"

"We wanted to tell you together." Finn cut in quickly, still wrapped in her embrace. "Away from Rose and Ziff, but Poe had other ideas—"

"You were here when I said it—"

"Why am I even marrying you?"

"So I can be your bridesmaid!" Rey screeched. "We need more drinks—and you need to tell me everything!" She pulled away, only to turn around and reach for her bag. "Oh my gosh, I can't…" She trailed off with a shake of her head, digging for her wallet to pull out a wad of cash, throwing it at Poe. "This calls for campaign, get us a bottle."

"I… why me?"

"Because I need to hear how my best friend got engaged, now quick."

Another quick, hard embrace before Finn insisted on fetching something to clear the broken glass, a moment of solitude allowing Rey to process everything that had just happened.

How outraged she'd been when he'd asked if she were happy about it. But of course he'd be nervous, given her previous reactions.

Only this time around, at this monumental moment for her two best friends, it didn't make her feel
alone.

Because they'd always be there for her and she, them. Because there were other people in her life who cared and would listen, just as they always had; someone worth taking a chance for.

~ * ~

She waited, just outside the bar; drunk and happy—certain of one and many things.

She'd eagerly listened to Finn and Poe's story, drunk off their inevitable love and the alcohol that warmed her chest; drunk off the silly dances with Rose after they squealed their shared happiness, drunk off the way she cornered Ziff and told him exactly what she was certain.

"We're doing it."

He'd nodded, as if it'd made any sense. But it was enough for her, and maybe he did understand.

No more what if's? What if's didn't prove that it'd happen—they were what if's for a reason, and Rey hated not knowing. She'd been patient enough.

Patient, with her parents; patient with her feelings. For once, she deserved to indulge in impatience—she deserved to feel happy from the company of another that weren't friends or father figures or work-mates. Fuck professionalism, fuck the consequences.

She'd rambled this off to Finn in parting; ignoring the confusion to his face, ignoring the questions in his eyes as she hugged him one last time for that night.

"Rey." He'd cut in. "You're really happy, right? You're doing okay?"

"I'm happy. I'm figuring my shit, I'm... yes, I'm happy—I'm so fucking happy."

And it was the truth. She hadn’t stopped smiling since.
Not when the rain poured down, not when she shivered from the cold. Not even when she slipped on the drain when running to his car, landing on her arse before flopping to the ground; shaking with silent laughter.

She was soaked down from the weight of rain and happiness and nothing had ever felt so right!

"Rey, fuck… are you alright."

And he was at her side in seconds, brown eyes looking down in familiar concern to his parents, meeting a blindingly bright, drunken grin as she reached up, linking her arms around his neck to pull him down with her.

"You should've stayed in the car—"

"You didn't hit your head?"

"Where it's warm, you shouldn't have left—"

"Did you hurt yourself?"

"No, no."

"Are you sure you're okay—"

She interrupted him with a kiss, the last muffled words meeting her mouth as the rain continued to slap at the pavement, a large warm hand pushing at the hair sticking to skin as he reacted to her affection. He held her close, pulling her up to a sitting position just to hold her close, wet sloppy kisses franticly searching for what they both craved.

"Why'd you disappear for a week?" She asked through the short breaks in-between pecks of passions. "I missed you—"

"I missed you." Ben repeated, breaking away completely to press his forehead against hers. He
sighed, those beautiful eyes fluttering closed as she continued to study his angular face in a way she never had.

"I want you."

"Are you drunk?"

"Yes." She giggled. "But I'll still want you, alcohol-free. You're a good kisser."

He laughed at this, opening his eyes and reclining slightly. The hand at her cheek dropped to brush droplets away from her lips before he leaned in for a deep, lingering kiss.

Sighing, she melted into his warmth.

"You're worth the risk." Rey said suddenly, in his arms. "You're worth taking a chance."

He clutched her tighter, one hand burying into the wet strands of knotted hair.

"So we're doing this then?" He asked softly, a soothing deep hum to the chill in her bones. "We're really doing this?"

Rey smiled, crooking her neck into his shoulder where it fit so well.

"We're doing it."

Consequences be damned.

She'd want to protect Ben and she'd want to protect his parents; perhaps that'd complicate things. But they were all a family.

And if there was one thing she learned from Christmas, it was that no family or person was perfect.

"We're really doing it."
Sorry for being VERY absent in December. I took part in two exchanges and, working in retail + summer holidays + christmas and new years = a whole lot of hours on my feet, forcing me to ACTUALLY sleep at a reasonable time. How rude, honestly, people should know that I only write at inappropriate times XD

But for real, I just want to say a quick thank you to everyone who has read this baby of mine over the past year I've been writing! It was only meant to be a wee 12 chapters but it has expanded into so much more and, truly, I can not be more grateful for everyone who has made my year writing these chapters -- 2018 had a lot of downs, but a constant up was the amazing support from this fandom! Happy New Year, reylos; i love you all <3

For updates and mindless ramblings, follow me on twitter @dalzonii

Also, one last thing, I think y'all might like the next chapter concerning a certain 'S' word ;)  
Particularly SomeAssemblingRequired haha

#LetThemHaveSex20182019
"How are you, Rey? Eventful week?"

Five days. Two dates. Countless text-messages and Ben Solo forever on her mind (like he hadn't already been the main attraction in her head for the past three months). Everything else was a blur, anything else a distraction to what was really important.

"We're doing it." She'd said, full of confidence; full of clarity—ready to take on the world, together.

And it had consumed her entirely since.

"Good." More than good, actually, but with Ben on mind, she was a woman of few words.

"And the verdict?"

"Sorry?"

"Last week, you were a little conflicted with Ben." Cassian smiled slightly. "I assume you two have made your decision."
"Oh, um, yeah." Rey smiled absently, tucking a wayward piece of hair behind her ear as a flush spread across her skin. "Yeah, we uh… we're testing it out. Being together, I mean."

"Ah." He nodded, sliding his palms against his knees. "And how goes it?"

"It's very… new." He hummed, leaning in slightly and raising an arm to rest at his stubbled chin, finger smoothing against his lips. "But we've talked a lot. And, um, went out twice together. And we've agreed to keep it hidden—keep it just to ourselves. Just for a while."

"From your friends?"

"Um, no, well—not them intentionally, I still haven't mentioned it, but more his… his family."

"And he's okay with this?"

"Yes. More than okay, really. We don't know how they'll react—"

"Because you're close with them." He interrupted. "And because… he isn't. Correct?"

"I—yes. Yeah, but… also if it doesn't work out in this first month."

"And you'll tell them if it does?"

"Maybe?" Rey questioned herself, brows drawing into a crease. "I'm not… we haven't thought about it that far."

"Would you want to hide it any longer than a month?"

"If it's needed—"

"But there will come a time where you'll have to tell them. You spent Christmas with them, you
know them on a deeply-personal level; there'll be times where you'll be together, in the same room. All of you. That will be hard to keep secret."

"We know that, we understand that, it's not… a forever thing. It's just… if we get them involved and we don't—"

"Work out." Cassian nodded seriously, twice, before leaning into his seat again. Still, that finger ran across his lip; as if in thought—as if this agreement of theirs stumped him. "I understand why, Rey. But… having this mindset, this 'in case we don't' thought… it makes you think about not working out. And with that constantly on the mind, always there disrupting your pleasant moments, you'll start looking for signs—the mind is funny like that."

"But—"

"I'm not suggesting anything." He quickly cut in. "I think you should keep to yourselves for a little while, but I have little to no say in how and what and why you decide as a couple. Just be cautious—holding things in for a long period of time… well, we know what happens when we do that."

Rey swallowed thickly, flexing her hands. "We'll… we will tell them soon, it's just… nice to have no one else involved. It's so new, we haven't even—" Rey quickly cut herself off, glancing up. How had Cassian made her so ridiculously comfortable that she'd almost casually mentioned that they'd yet to have sex—or anything in that regard.

She glanced up, lips pursed together as her face flashed hot.

"Um… it's just really fresh."

"Ah," He hid his wide, amused smile behind his hand. "You know, you're allowed to talk about sex, Rey—you don't have to. But if you feel it necessary—"

"Oh, no, I… I don't think… yeah." She trailed off, gaze moving sideways.

"So no concerns in that area?"

"Concerns? I…" She coughed. "Not really."
"Not really?" he echoed.

"I don't see how... it's just something... I don't know." The pause hung heavy in the air, like a silent weight pressing on her chest. "you're just... you're staying silent until I say something, yeah?"

"Of course."

A huff escaped her lips as she slipped down into the couch. "It's nothing. I just—we haven't done anything more than kiss really, a-and I know we will, eventually, but..." Her hands came up to cover her face. "It's stupid." He let her wallow, eyes undoubtedly studying her intently as the clock ticked on in the background, giving her all the time to explain. "I..." Rey began unsteadily, voice hoarse before clearing her throat to continue. "I've never really done anything with someone I have feelings for. Sex has always been... a distraction for me. I can forget about my issues for a while with someone I don't know, but with Ben... well, he knows me inside-out."

"And you're worried it'll be different, less... immersive?"

"Sort of... I don't really know why I'm bringing this up."

"Ahuh. Any... guesses as to why?"

She chewed into her bottom lip hard, surprised by the sudden wave of nauseating emotion washing over her; leaving her hot and clammy—that sticky, light-headed way of feeling feint. To her shock, tears prickled painfully in her eyes, a hard lump forming in her throat so thick it was simply too difficult to swallow down. "I don't..." He voice cracked. "I don't know why, I'm... I'm so happy—" Rey broke off quickly, rough in the act of wiping away the tears—angry, that she was crying; angry because she had no reason to cry at all.

"Our past has a way of affecting us like nothing else. It's buried in so deep within your consciousness, you'll recall it without even knowing."

She sniffed, looking up, red-eyed. "I don't think this is about my past—"

"It is."
"But sex—I... I've never had any issues, I've never—"

"Had feelings; never connected the two. And realising it has triggered that deep, violent scar inside. You wonder if it'll be different, less immersive—*or more*, perhaps—and start that questioning, dark thoughts unbidden to the mind. Because sex and an emotional connection is a step closer to love. And love... now that frightens you."

"I...I." She stuttered unintelligibly, shaking her head.

"You haven't talked about this, you haven't worked through any of this yet Rey. We've been taking it slow—our sessions, they've been focused on your ability to be honest to others, to surround yourself in healthy social engagement."

His words were spoken quickly, one after the other, articulated so well, making her head spin.

"But now I think it's time to address why you're *really* here, Rey."

~ * ~

"You're quiet tonight."

They hadn't planned this. It was impulsive of Rey to call and ask to come over but she'd left Cassian's office in a daze; exhausted to the point she hadn't thought possible, a mixture of physical labour, pouring work into cars and old emotional trauma, pouring tears from her eyes.

"*Do you think you're ready for a relationship this deep, Rey?*

After an extensive, incoherent conversation touching on the subject that hurt most, that was the question he left her with.

Rey could barely think after that. And Ben *knew* something was off from the moment she spoke on the phone.

"I'm tried." She croaked, head nestled into his shoulder, one arm thrown around her and tugging her closer into his side. Empty take-away noodle boxes sat on the coffee table of his living room, a man droning *on* about some artistic period in a documentary Ben was to go through with his students in the upcoming week, monotone voice pressing hard on her eyelids.
"Me too." The words were a deep hum, rumbling from his broad chest—a soothing vibration shooting through Rey as they left his lips. "It's been a long week."

She burrowed in deeper, stretching her legs to the end of the couch, wishing she could sink into the warmth that already enveloped her.

"I don't want it to end." A quiet admittance, soft and barely-audible. Rey didn't know if it was strictly the week she was talking about—or something else; something deeper, now that reality had hit harder than ever. "It's been nice."

Two, long fingers gently lifted at her chin, pulling her hazy sight his way. Straight into his darkened eyes. "You're so beautiful." He ducked his head, soft black hair suddenly brushing at her cheek before his lips moved over her own; a gentle, lingering caress—lightly sucking on the bottom lip she'd damn near broken into with her teeth, soothing the irritation she'd caused as Rey sighed contently into his mouth.

Her eyes shuttered to a close, the warmth of his hand pressing at the small of her waist, arching further into him like they were right in the middle of a magnetic field. The hand at his jaw relaxed into the smooth skin, lightly tracing back and forth into his cheek as he broke away.

"I don't…" He trailed off, slowly shuffling to wrap both arms around her waist and pull her closer; in-between his legs, curling up to his solidness like a koala. "I don't like seeing you upset."

Ben's chin came down to rest on her head, one hand smoothing up and down her shirt.

"I'm not upset." She lied. And it showed in her hesitance. "Just… tired."

"You can talk to me." Ben whispered softly in her ear. "If it helps, I'll always listen."

Rising up, Rey moved to look him in the eye again, overwhelmed by the swirling emotions inside before clashing into him—mouth clumsily searching his own, arms locked around his neck, never intending on letting go.

"Rey." He murmured, in between sloppy, rushed kisses. "Sweetheart..." His hands gripped onto her hips tight as her tongue dared to swipe at his neck in an all-too slow motion. Reaching his jaw, she nipped at loose skin—soothing it with her lips suctioning softly at the mark. "Rey—"

"Please," She begged, suddenly, wet kisses placed around his pulse point. "Let me forget." A
whisper against salty, heated flesh, his heavy sigh a welcomed response. "Please, Help me forget."

He didn't ask what she was forgetting—he didn't question her at all—and maybe it should've concerned her, for treating him like all the others; asking him to make her feel so good she couldn't remember her name, her story; couldn't remember that she was nothing. But in the moment, she couldn't scrape up a thought or care. He was doing exactly what she asked. And Rey was eternally grateful.

Her desperation, her pleading, all so potent, forcing the hands at her hips to tighten their hold before breaking away to embrace her close again; lips descending into a more forceful, calculated dance—tongue sweeping at the seam, Rey widening her mouth to let him sweep inside. She lost herself to the feeling, the repeated method as his hand tugged at the tie, hair dropping to curtain around her face, thick fingers scrunching into the strands.

Her sharp nose squished against her own, pressing deeper into her lips than she thought possible; bruising, pulling with a rough tug of teeth before coming in to repeat it all again. Minutes passed, the droning in the background like white noise; they were the only two who mattered right now.

Rey broke away, lidded eyes and half-smile across her face, skin suddenly too hot for her own body as she relaxed down onto her knees reaching down and, in one fluid movement, whipping off the thick jumper; tossing it away carelessly.

His eyes tuned in; narrowing on the new expanse of skin, like he hadn't seen it before; like he hadn't seen every inch of her—the flaws, the scars, the moles, the freckles; the barely-there breasts and the unique details between her legs. They were dark, smouldering into each cell as he scanned her slowly, a sudden heated knot pulling taut in her stomach; muscles tightening, tense from the sudden need that pooled at her thighs.

He leaned in, dipping his head, bits of hair sticking to his brow. "You have no idea just how entrancing you are, do you?"

Rough words, growled into her throat before his lips traced into her skin. Those hands skimmed over her, everywhere, before taking a hold of her hips, a flurry of motion following quickly after, flipping her with ease. Just like that, she had her back pressed hard against his front, his arm moving slowly up her torso—then across, just below her breasts, keeping her still. The other was gently scraping at hair, pushing it from one shoulder to the other, exposing her neck; presented to him, for him.

He was light with his fingertips, stroking the dip to her neck; from chin to shoulder, trailing a hot path in his wake until he surprised her; ducking down, a wet stripe following his touch—just as she had done.

Her skin erupted into goosbumps, shuddering at the ticklish feel, dissolving into hard, sucking kisses that were sure to leave marks for days.
Rey melted into the feeling, head falling back as he continued to hold her tight and ravish at her skin. She squirmed and shifted, flustered by their shared warmth, arm reaching round to tug at his hair. "Ben." She moaned, scratching into his scalp as his nimble fingers returned to trace her shoulder, rising over the strap; back and forth, head dipping to nestle into the crook, nose skimming her skin alight. "Ah," she sighed—eyes squeezed shut. "Please."

A thumb hooked under the strap, lifting and easing it down her shoulder, three kisses following its lead.

Another five minutes passed before the next strap followed; like a routine, he'd repeated *exactly* every little detail to the opposite side. The lave of his tongue, the ferocity to his kisses, leaving Rey to squirm in-between his legs and press hard against his hard length, so stiff she could feel it's slow pulsing rhythm against her tailbone; like a heartbeat—the heartbeat she inspired.

The arm keeping her in place moved suddenly, tracing at the underwire of her simple nude bra."*May I?*"

"Yes!" She cried out her answer, hips bucking. "*Yes, please.*"

In response, Ben's other palm flattened against her back—easing her forward before both retracted entirely to work the clips free, springing open and loose, Rey quick to shove it off and sling it across the room.

"*Do you like sitting in my lap, Rey?*" Low at her ear, lips brushing at the shell, the words making the soaked feeling of discomfort, itching for relief, apparent as a fresh wave of desire coursed through her veins. "It seems like it."

Ben rested his hands against her shoulders, fingers digging into the sore muscles that had Rey arching her back, groaning at the sensation before they moved slowly down her arms. One reached her hip, the other flattened *just* above her pelvis.

The hand at her hip was gone, though she could barely recognise it. All of her felt so hot, *so* unbearably hot, that it took her a moment to realise his hand cupped her breast—and *then* he his fingers pinched and rolled her nipple, without warning, accompanied with a roll of his hips into her ass; feeling his throbbing length with a soft, strangled gasp.

Torturously slow, he rolled it again, hips following the motion, before flattening against her breast to massage at the tissue. Roll, smooth and repeat—his other hand still tight at her abdomen, Ben hissing in her ear.
Turning her head, she met his eye, pure black, craning to kiss him when both hands cupped each breast. Quick and messy, shuddered breaths leaving chests. "Ben." She sighed, his teeth still tugging at her bottom lip—so slowly. "Please."

"Please, what?" He asked, mouth skimming her own as she swallowed thickly, consumed by the rough pad to his thumbs as they brushed against her nipples.

"Please." she begged. "Touch me."

His nose pressed against her own, capturing her lips in a gentle barely-there kiss as his right hand moved down away from her breast, smoothing down her stomach to the hem of her jeans. With one hand, he managed to unbutton her jeans, eyes staring heavily into her own as his thumb and forefinger unzipped her fly.

A breath escaped her, panted against his own, eyeing each other down as his hand slipped beneath the denim. Two thick fingers, pressing into her cotton knickers, sliding down to her slit and—

"Christ." He groaned, slotting his lips against her own roughly, swallowing her instant cry as relief shot through her. "You're so wet." Back and forth, her rubbed at her slit slowly through the soaked fabric, Rey glancing away for the tiniest of seconds, down to where his incredibly large hand disappeared under her jeans and fuck if that wasn't the most erotic sight she'd ever had the pleasure of seeing. "And this is all for me?"

"Yes."

"All mine."

"Yes, yes, please just—fuck." She bucked into his hand. "Please Ben, I—ah."

With a yelp, the hand yanked from her jeans, while the other massaging her breast moved down; two strong hands, suddenly lifting her off so he could scuffle from under her and scoot off the couch. Now he was the one between her legs, kneeling before her, hands ripping at her jeans; tugging them down her thighs and off her ankles before she even had the time to blink.

Instinctively, her thighs fell apart wider as he leaned in closer, eyes looking up while fiddling with the hem of her undies. She nodded, understanding the silent question, holding her breath as he pulled them away from her hips; lifting her ass so it could roll down her thighs, bunch at her knees, hook at her ankles until they were just another thrown item of clothing.
Right there, in that moment, with Ben fully clothed and Rey naked as the day she was born, she couldn't help but be reminded of their sessions—only tonight, she was his canvas to paint with his searing touch.

His arms snuck beneath her legs, wrapping round her thighs to tug her down the couch; closer to him, closer to his face as he pushed them wider, even. And then he stayed still; stiff and staring, leaving Rey to squirm.

"You know, I'm well-acquainted with this pretty cunt of yours." Her mouth dropped to hear such a filthy word leave his mouth. "You're all shy and embarrassed—over this. Don't you remember what I said?"

Rey nodded. "I do." She watched intently as his hand smoothed up her thigh, finger slowly tracing just outside her folds. She groaned in frustration.

"And do you believe it?"

"I…" She trailed off. "I just don't understand how you can… look at me that way."

Ben looked up fiercely. "A whole lifetime in this position wouldn't be enough." He murmured. "Here, I get to see; I get to touch." His thumb pressed lightly against her clit, drawing slow circles, legs dropping wide as far as possible as she chased the feel with her hips, breath hitching. "I get to taste."

He leaned in, tongue broad against her sex, a flat slow stripe from entrance to clit, earning a low moan from her lips as her hand reached out for his hair.

"I get to see your reaction; how you fall apart." He murmured, words vibrating against the bundle of nerves before his lips descended to suck and graze at her nub, hips spasming at the sensation, crying out into the room. "I get to see you do all of this, because of me."

His tongue laved through her folds, flicked against her clit in quick strikes before moving down to add pressure against it, sucking and slurping—the sound obscene to her ears with the mix of wet tunes and her loud cries. She scratched at his scalp, tugged at his hair while Ben buried his head between her thighs like a man starved.

His hands dug into her fleshy thighs, pulling her closer; nose squished against her pubis as he dove in deeper, swirling all throughout her cunt with his talented lips and tongue.
He released her with a slick pop, pulling away slightly just to tease her entrance with a long, thick finger.

"Please." She whispered, just before he eased into her; twisting before crooking upwards. The arm not buried in his hair threw across her eyes as she sunk into the couch, another finger joining the first —finding that special spot with ease as she sputtered out moans, biting on her tongue to keep quiet when his mouth found her clit once more.

Curses left her lips in an unintelligible string, the tight feeling in her stomach drawing even more so, the heat between her legs increasing as she ground down into his face, onto his fingers.

"Ben, I..." She was going to tell him she was close but the words slipped her mind as he continued his expert touch, the feeling building; inch by inch, in her thighs, in her pelvis, in the way her clit throbbed under his tongue—her lungs becoming more labour, skin more flushed, thighs shaking with the effort of holding on, rutting against him like a wanton animal.

It was his groan that did her in, at the end, while he thrust into the couch, searching for friction; the way it hummed against her flesh, breaking the tight string with a cry of his name, one last buck of her hips as she rode the aftershocks of her orgasm.

She became boneless in her position, desperate to catch her breath as Ben licked lazily at her, fingers withdrawn; each stroke earning a sensitive jolt.

Minutes must have passed when she realised he'd stopped, hands on her thighs, watching her intently.

"You're so beautiful." He murmured for the second time that night.

"That was..."

"Amazing. You're amazing."

She flushed at the sight of him, still between his thighs; his lips slick and plump from too much attention, hair wild around his face from her pulling fingers.

She rose up, reaching for him, reading to tug him from his jeans—
"I already finished." He admitted sheepishly. "You… made me come in my pants like a fucking teenager Rey." He rose up on his palms, leaning in to kiss her lips. "I… I should feel embarrassed but that was the hottest thing I've ever seen. Fuck, you are so… hot."

She sighed contently under his touch. "I want to fuck you." she announced boldly.

"I don't have any protection—"

"Just pull out, then—" If only she was on birth control.

He laughed, shaking his head lightly. "That… is not a good idea. It's alright. We don't need to rush this." She pouted before a yawn took over, earning another amused chuckle. "Stay there." He commanded before moving away, out of the lounge room, a telltale creak of stairs.

Still in her terribly vulnerable position, Rey absently thought of nothing and everything; overwhelmed by how satisfied she felt—exhaustion settling in even deeper than before, only one she could bear.

Ben came back, kneeling before her again to gently wipe at her attentively with a wad of tissues, changed into trousers and a t-shirt, handing Rey the same. He helped her dress, pulling the trousers up her legs; throwing the shirt around her head.

"Thank you." she murmured, as his strong arms lifted her from the couch, Rey nestling against his chest, revelling in his lips pressed softly against her forehead. "Thank you." She repeated.

He treated her so good. He was so attentive and always listening, so good at making her feel happy; more than just the lonely girl she'd been raised to be. Up the stairs, tucked into bed and snuggled up to his chest, nothing has felt greater or more right.

It was perfect.

"Do you think you're ready for a relationship this deep, Rey?"

Until it wasn't.
Chapter End Notes

Thanks for reading. We FINALLY made it... only took 100000 words lmao (also, the ending that kinda eludes to bad times coming... that's pretty far off). From here on out, to the end, it's mostly fluff and smut and feels with lil bit of self-growth (or lack of) being the only obstacle.

But we good, we good -- also ben solo is all about safe sex (i mean, mostly. not all the time. it's actually rare with Rey, let's be honest).

Come say hi on twitter @dalzonii :)
It was strange how a few words could change so much.

A simple sentence echoing over and over—stuck in some endless, four-walled loop; the tone, the syllables, the vowels, bouncing from surface to surface within Rey Niima's mind.

The first she experienced was a simple introduction: 'I'm Finn' paired with a friendly wide grin—a genuine, happy greeting she'd never expected. A joke followed next: a 'can I call you gummy?' joke that turned into something so profoundly unrealistic to her, a nickname now uttered with actual affection. An odd command was the third: The socks. Leave them on, please.', strange and confusing to her ears even as a whole lot more followed with Ben—his words, his advice, his voice describing things in a light she didn't know existed; the beauty of vaginas, a simple cake, Vader and his muse.
All of it—

"Do you think you're ready for a relationship this deep, Rey?"

—all of it swallowed by one question.

It echoed endlessly, finding no escape. And she was clawing for a way out desperately.

"Rey?"

Judging by the foreign look in his eyes, Ben knew it too.

"Can you... can you, uh, turn your head? Side on, please."
She obliged, unconsciously wrapping her arms around her belly protectively, swallowing thickly. He made no comment on her wandering hands and she hardly noticed a thing.

Her gaze absentilly flickered to the left, taking in the clear view of his impressive profile; the strong nose, the chiselled chin, his eyes moving from canvas to body. She couldn’t pick an image on the blank white, only multiple shades of blue and purple blended with yellow and orange.

It was as if a large pretty bruise had formed. She'd not once thought a bruise to be pretty before.

"What do those colours mean?" Her voice sounded distant, even to her own ears. She wondered if he picked up on it—wondered if he was studying her as intently as she studied him moments before she’d returned her gaze to glance out the window.

"A lot of things." The vague, ungiving answer fell flat in the room; falling along with the pit of her stomach, plummeting low.

A lengthy pause pursued before a swish of bristles swept upon a canvas. Pause, swish; repeat.

Time ticked by. The colours formed into a purple-berry shade, blotted carelessly. Was her heart as loud for him as it was for her?

"You know," He spoke softly, the bristles a back-tune to his low, melodic voice. "We never got around to talking last night." Rey froze, not daring to look. "You were very…upset. I don't—it's hard to see you like that and not know why."

Her hands tightened around her abdomen. "I, um…" She trailed off as the question echoed again.

"Rey." He murmured, low and concerned. "Is… are we okay?" Her teeth sunk into her wobbling bottom lip, the sound of his shaky tone unnerving in every way. "This morning you were distant."

"I… It's not you, it's not us…" The words formed in fumbled sentences, barely coherent to her own ears. "It's me, just me. I'm a mess."

"Wha—" he stuttered, chair creaking as his massive frame shifted on the tiny stool, the unrelenting swish stopping altogether. "No," Ben cooed quickly. "No, no, no, you're—"
"No, I am. I am and you—you don't understand because you don't know!"

She heard a clattering sound of his brushes leaving his grip. "Know what?"

Rey breathed in. "I should've told you before—before last night, before you…" The words jumbled together and whipped off her tongue before she even had a chance to think. "I should've told you that I, um… I'm seeing someone; a therapist, or uh… counsellor. For myself, my issues."

"Oh." He sounded out, short and relieved. "That's…that's good, right?"

"You don't think it's weird? You don't…think that I'm damaged, or whatever?"

"Damaged?" He laughed. "Jesus, Rey… you forget who I am; the fucked up moron who hurt himself to paint a goddamn mediocre picture."

A long silence followed his attempted reassurance, his sigh long—another sound that echoed in her head.

"I don't think you're damaged." Ben admitted quietly. "I think you're…incredibly brave for seeking help. And you shouldn't be ashamed of that."

"I'm not—I'm not." She huffed. "That's not what I'm ashamed of."

"What are you ashamed of, then?" Frustration began to bleed through, the muscles in her stomach tightening that little bit more.

"Just…fuck." She huffed, the lump in her throat choking her words. "Just how I dealt with it."

"Dealt with…your past?" He clarified, asking slowly.

"Yes." Rey closed her eyes and recalled the night before—his lips, exploring every inch of skin; the gentle press of a tissue, cleaning up her sex; the bridal-carry to bed and falling asleep in his arms; waking up to the breakfast he made. "God…" She dropped her head to her hands, moaning loudly. "Finn was right. I am a slut."
"He called you a what?" Ben boomed.

"No…no, that wasn't—those were my words, he just… pointed out that I needed help and that I—*that what I* was doing wasn't healthy, he didn't… he wouldn't call me that ever—"

"Then why are you calling yourself that?"

"Because… because I've never been in a relationship until now." The confession tore from her chest, arms gesturing wildly as Rey launched into a rambled vulnerability. "*I've never… I haven't felt this way, only… I've only had these sexual flings, I guess, to… to forget myself—*"

"There's *nothing* wrong with that; I don't judge you for that—"

"And I think I did that with you." Rey blurted out, interrupting his raised voice. "*I… last night, I think I did that with you.*"

Her hands moved to grip the stool, the studio feeling much bigger than it did five minutes before—so open, with her sitting in the middle for every twitch of muscle to be seen; every flicker of emotion, every tense, every *single* motion to be transferred into a story on canvas.

"*I… what?*"

"It was like… I didn't even think of you, I didn't even… even *know* you, you were just there to make me feel better, make me oblivious to everything."

"Rey, I'm… really not following you here."

"And then… and then he asked if I was ready and I went and did that—he… he said that sex is *emotional* for couples, that it can be a mix of both and—"

"Rey." Ben cut through harshly, commanding her attention. "Breathe." His eyes were narrowed in concern, scanning over her face as she nodded and followed his advice; deep breath, in and out, over and over.
Rey held his gaze throughout, steady and unwavering as the minutes ticked by.

"Now… slowly. Take your time."

"Okay. Right, um…" Rey exhaled shakily, nodding once. "I, um, attend therapy sessions every Friday afternoon. It's still… recent and I only started after, um, the Christmas thing—which was all we really talked about together; uh, helping me accept that families aren't supposed to be perfect and that I…had some unrealistic ideals about you and…and Han and Leia." She cleared her throat. "But yesterday, it turned into… well, about me. A lot about me, with my past and my parents and it kind of just…everything just shattered when he brought it up."

There was a pregnant moment of silence as he process her words, face unbetraying to whatever he felt. "Shattered how?"

"A lot. I've realised so much." The heavy weight on her chest pressed and pressed, the repeated question circling its cycle as words began to form on the tip of her tongue. "I've been so happy with you this last week but… but now, I'm starting to realise how much shit I have to work through—like everything I already worked through was… was nothing compared to this." Rey sighed. "I'm starting to think that hiding this maybe…maybe isn't a good idea. I'm starting to understand that I care about you in a way I haven't cared about anyone and…and then I went and treated you like every other guy I've been with last night—"

"It didn't—" He broke in, hands palming his trouser-clad thighs, Rey noting how strange and domestic this felt unlike the other sessions, noting his pyjamas. "It—it didn't feel like that for me. Well I mean…it did, but only because you were unhappy and I wanted to make you feel better. You weren't interested in talking and you… I was trying to help." He blew out a breath. "If I'd know that this—"

"It's not your fault."

"I… sorry. I know, I wasn't…" Ben played with his lips, shifting his jaw to the side. "Yeah."

The silence was sickening; the churn in her belly discomforting, the knock of her heart against a brittle ribcage distracting. She was hot and clammy, despite the cool weather, head light and airy as everything burned.

"I don't… know, Ben." She mumbled weakly. "I don't know what I'm doing with… this. What I feel, what I want—it's all so new." Or maybe old and far too familiar. "I don't know."
"Rey, I—" He began hoarsely before toying with his lips again. "We're both inexperienced to this. You're not alone."

She hesitated for a moment, taking in his expression. He was so hard to read—why was he always so hard to read?

"Does it… are you scared?"

"Fucking terrified." He deadpanned, her shocked laugh echoing in the room—bouncing off those four walls; a replacement for the question, almost forgotten. He smiled at her reaction, eyes softening at the flash of bright, gummy teeth. "I feel it too, don't you worry sweetheart."

"Good to know." Rey repeated absently, caught up on that one, singular word: sweetheart.

His voice enveloped the two syllables, titled it to her personally and that felt…that felt like a… new feeling, strange and unfamiliar. Something she didn't quite understand—something that was sharp in her chest but also warming every inch of her skin.

"Rey," he said suddenly, eyes blackening into two hard opaque marbles. "I just…I want you to know that, regardless of the subject, you can tell me anything. I'll always listen and I'll always support because…because I—" He huffed, eyes glancing to the floor at his bare feet before returning with a smouldering intensity that shrouded every little thing around them. "I want to be there for you. No matter what, I'll be there for you."

She couldn't thin; couldn't breathe. His words, his voice—they were intoxicating.

"Promise me that when you feel this way—when you think these things. Please, Rey… say you'll tell me." Her heartbeat was loud and heavy in her ears, blood rushing. "Can you do that for me?"

Honesty is key.

Sweetheart.

Do you think you're ready—

"Yes." She answered quickly. "I can—I can do that."

His small responding smile was worth the lie—Rey had no idea if she could do that.
But she could try.

She expected the nerves and the nerves hit hard, fluttering like crazy in the depths of her stomach; pulsing like mad in her heart. She expected it and still it was hard to even breathe from the power of Rey’s anxiousness.

It’d been a long, long time since visiting the Solo household. And her last visit…now that was a dinner to remember.

"This looks lovely, Leia." She forced out through a fake smile, seated right in front of the culprit who demanded they 'trial' it out. Wearing yesterday's clothes and relying on tangled hair to cover the countless blotches of berry hickeys on her neck, it was only natural for Rey to be 'freaking the fuck' out. "Is this Han's favourite?"

Glancing to her left, she found him staring at his plate, red faced and unable to meet her eye. When arriving with Ben at her side, they'd explained their shared art session—apparently, Han had yet to recover.

"It is." Leia answered, handing her a glass of red before seating herself at the table. "Ben's too."

Rey raised a brow at this, finding his gaze across the table. "Really?"

"It's the only think Leia knows how to cook well—"

Luke snorted from the end of the table. "It may be your birthday but you can't get away with everything, Han."

As Han threw a retort, Ben turned to his mother. "It looks great, mom."

*Chicken soup. Who'd have thought.*

The evening was undeniably tense, a lingering side-effect of the chaotic Christmas that took place
months before. Ben was on edge—eyes cautiously flicking to his uncle every few minutes, head bowing whenever they made eye-contact and the flexing hands or twitch of lips showing signs of his discomfort.

In these moments, Rey wished they were just honest—not for the stress of hiding it or the fear of being caught, just so she could touch him. Cling onto him, like she selfishly wished; squeeze his hand whenever his eyes found Luke's.

To be with him unapologetically.

"It does." Rey agreed quietly, shifting her leg forward to entangle in-between his two large feet, drawing a small smile to his perfect, pretty lips. She took a long sip of her wine to hide the obvious joy.

"I'm surprised you could make it tonight, Ben." Luke piped up, interrupting the quiet moment, the liquid bittering to linger on her tongue. "You usually skip out—"

"We usually have an early breakfast together." Ben cut in coolly. "My class schedule is a lot busier with finals around the corner and the annual performance night—"

"How's that going?" Leia interjected with a calm façade.

"Terrible." He answered bluntly. "A whole fuckin' lot of them can't sing for shit."

Rey almost sprayed her mouthful of wine, choking down a swallow. "You're so harsh." Han chuckled. "But I remember the good ol' school performances—"

"Yes, 'cause you attended so many."

"And that band you were in—" Han turned to Rey as he rambled on. "He was an absolute garbage guitar player, and... and with the straightened hair, the whole look... lord, the eyeliner—"

"You can stop talking now."

"Oh my god." Rey murmured brightly, pitch rising. "Do you have photos?"
"Of course, it's excellent blackmail material—"

"Han!" Leia cried, but the grin spreading slowly couldn't be contained. She glanced at her son who's large form lumbered in his seat, hunching over as a flush spread across his cheeks. "He was so desperate to hide those ears—"

"Please." Ben grit out.

"They turn so red when he's all shy and embarrassed—"

"Or angry." Han chimed in with a snort.

"His little flat ass, too—"

"That is the second time you've mentioned my 'red ass' in front of Rey over two separate occasions, this is…this is…" He wrenched a hand through his hair while Luke smirked at the volatile reaction. "This is so unprofessional."

"Rey's family to us—"

"She's your employee."

"I'm your employee too and you've seen my ass. Multiple times." Rey smirked, biting her lip before — "Does it turn red too?"

The table was shocked silent. Then—

"You're absolutely right Ben, we should move on." Luke said quickly while Han sat open-mouthed and Leia cackled out a gale of laughter Rey'd never heard before. Ben looked up sheepishly, a disbeliefed huff of laughter escaping his chest.
"I…” He trailed off, the look he sent her way foreign but *oh-so-warming.*

"Please don't answer that, *kid—’”

"You have to!" Leia croaked. "You have to, please—"

"I don't *look* at her like that." He finally said, smile still present as he took a relaxed sip of wine. "She's my model, I have to respect that."

"A gorgeous model."

"Yes." He agreed. "Yes, she is."

"You know," Luke began thickly as Rey ducked her head from the sudden positive attention. "I'm eager to see this project of yours in September. We can start advertising in August, open it up maybe twice depending on the reaction. I'll invite *investors* and *appraisers* to come see, maybe it'll lead to some pretty expensive buys…” Luke trailed off, eyes narrowing on Ben's faltering expression. "You *do* still intend on having a showing?"

A pause. "Of course."

"And they'll be up for bids?"

His jaw flexed. "Yes,"

"Ah." Luke's eyes moved to Rey then. "Still think it's your best work?"

"Without a doubt."

Rey pursed her lips, a fire flaming inside that demanded she *say* something—call him out for his vague, condescending attitude that surrounded the table.
"So, Rey," Leia turned to her. "How about Finn and Poe?"

And there it was—the glare that shot Luke down; a mother's warning, earning Luke's embarrassed silence while Rey jumped on the question, eagerly describing the joy and happiness she felt for her two best friends and their milestone. She relayed the drunken night at Kanata's, earning Ben's secret smile as he knew just how blind she'd been that night being the one to drag her stumbling arse home, and laughed with the others as Han chimed in about Maz and Chewie and the infamous bar fight with Ben.

The animation in his hands, the shared smirk between father and son as he recited the tale like a valiant hero's journey, the rant Leia followed up on Ben's broken nose and Han's idiocy—from that point on, the conversation flowed with ease—no uncomfortable interruptions, Luke surprising settling into his position, weathered face relaxing as even he joined in.

The wine continued to flow as the bowls cleared, Han eventually demanding a switch-over to rum as he and Luke left for the living room, leaving Ben and Rey to shoo Leia away as they began the clean-up process together. It was a long-winded argument, but finally, the stubborn woman relented.


"I usually leave when the rum comes out," Ben admitted in the stark silent atmosphere—a blunt change to the loud, over-speaking table she'd left. It was similar to Christmas, in that way; raised voices, fighting to be heard. But the mood…the mood was blessedly the complete opposite to the toxicity that fateful night reeked of.

Rey looked up while raking her hand through the water, bubbles sudds rising. He was leaning against the counter, watching as she bustled around the kitchen, looking composed and calm; arms loosely crossed against his tight-sweater covered chest. He was so casually good looking without even trying—and still, she'd yet to see him unclad of clothing. Life truly was cruel sometimes.

"What's wrong with the rum?" Rey asked, smiling as he threw his head back and groaned.

"God… everything." He sighed out. "They get so emotional. I remember finding them sprawled on a mattress, having some—some kind of weirdly emotional conversation, red-eyed and slurring—"

"A D-and-M." Rey nodded.
"A what?"

"Deep and Meaningful," Rey muttered, watching his brow crease. "Oh my god, stop being so old —"

"Old?" His hips pushed off the counter, sauntering in close as she wrenched the tap closed. Large hands found her hips, gripping tight, pulling her against his solid chest. "That's not very nice, Rey."

She hummed, head lulling into the warmth of his shoulder. "Ten years is a big gap—"

"I said that one time." He said through a laugh. "On my birthday. When I was feeling old."

"It's okay, old man." She turned, hands gripping the countertop smirking up at him. "I still like you."

"I know." Ben murmured, eyes finding her mouth. "You proved that quite loudly last night—ow!" She shoved his shoulder, turning right back around to start cleaning the crockery.

"You've got some mouth on you—"

"Wrong words to say in the moment, Sweetheart." His hands smoothed up her hips, encircling her waist while leaning down to rest his chin comfortably on her shoulder. "And you're terrible at pretending like you don't enjoy this."

She shifted her head, gaze finding his own. Under the warm-toned brown staring her down with those pouty lips set in a firm line, she breathed in a much-needed breath.

"Did you enjoy tonight?" She asked, tucked into him nicely as if they weren't in a kitchen supposed to be cleaning.

"I…" Ben hesitated, eyes rolling around to scan the room once. "Yes. I… I did, actually."

She smiled then. "Me too."
A grin worked at his lips. "It was nice. And I've never been so grateful for Lando to be away."

"Oh god," Rey giggled. "Can you imagine?"

"My personal nightmare." Ben muttered, shaking his head at the thought. "Especially with the little stunt you pulled."

"Stunt?"

She turned in his hold again, innocently gazing up. "Don't play dumb with me." His hands palmed down the small of her back, over the curve of her ass, resting a hand on each cheek. Squeezing softly, Ben leaned in—"Your ass was so red last month in my bed with my hand-print." Her jaw dropped. "And the time you wore my sweater and nothing else—you'd shift sometimes and look at me, give me that perfect view of ass, flushed red—"

"Should we tell Leia?"

Together, they halted—processing the words, wondering if they were real or not. Eyes wide, they looked into each other's eyes.

How did they get so stupidly complacent? Rey blamed it entirely on a civil dinner.

Ben turned then, Rey following his line-of-sight. Luke stood in the doorway, the corners of his eyes crinkling from the small, fond smile on his face.

"You kids are so obvious."

Ben swallowed loudly, tongue darting to wet his lips.

"We haven't... we haven't told anyone."

"I've gathered." Luke murmured, moving to the fridge as Ben nervously stood, stiff and still—a testament to who had control.
"And we don't…" Ben trailed off, jaw tensing. "We want to keep it quiet. Just to ourselves." He sighed, working his lips in that strange quirk she'd come to adore. "That was the plan."

Luke nodded in thought. "You want me to keep it a secret." He stated.

"We'd appreciate it." His voice strained through clenched teeth and Rey clutched him tighter.

They watched in the tense silence as he opened the freezer, ignoring them completely as he retrieved a tray of ice cubes, slowly shutting the door and turning to face them again.

"I can do that." Ben didn't seem convinced. "Your mother's sharp, though—if I picked up on it at the table, then she already knows."

"She won't say anything."

"She will eventually, if you leave it long enough."

Rey released a long breath, stuck in a conversation between two feuding men. It was stifling.

"I don't… I want to tell them, and we will soon but…” Ben trailed off. "It's so new and it's…it's barely been a week, I just—I don't want to complicate it yet. I don't want their opinions yet."

Luke frowned in thought. "Their opinions on Rey being too good for you?"

Rey gaped, jaw slacking as Luke's cool eyes searched his Nephew's with a strong intensity.

"Yes." Ben rumbled from his chest, the kitchen falling to another heady silence.

They stood staring, Rey feeling like an outsider—trying to find her voice, trying to interject her thoughts on this strange conversation but falling short. She could only watch as they side-stepped each other, spoke in reserved tones and acted like she was off in some other room.
"She is." Luke suddenly said. "Too good for you, I mean."

Rey blinked, reeling up to tell him to _fuck off_—

"I know."

The air shifted, Luke relaxing and nodding, Ben doing the same.

A minute passed and Luke turned and left the room.

Another minute passed and they went back to cleaning—this time in a stony silent mood, guilt swallowing Rey whole as she scrubbed at squeaky-clean dishes. Trying to wash off her own shame.

_I'm not too good for you,_ Rey thought as she ran the sponge across the ceramic plate, _you're too good for me._

~ * ~

He drove her home not a moment after they'd finished cleaning the kitchen—quick goodbyes rushed out, blue eyes watching them from afar as Han and Leia _begged_ them to stay for a drink. _I'm busy,_’ Ben had explained curtly before pulling her outside, making quick work of the distance between the porch and his sleek _tie-silencer._

A quiet ride was in store; no music, no talk, just the lingering words of Luke drowning their minds at far too many red lights.

Now, they were parked outside her building. Sitting in silence, unwilling to be the first to say _goodbye._

Rey fussed with the hem of her jumper, squirming in her seat. She’d glance outside to her building, then to Ben's impassive face, then back down to her jean-clad thighs. Over and over, in the passing minutes.

Slowly, she breathed in.
"Would you…would you like to come up?"

Then exhaled.

Ben cleared his throat, the loud heave of his rising chest filling the vacuumed air.

"I don't think that'd be a good idea." Rey frowned, shifting in her leather seat once; the sound of the scrape, loud and ugly, alighting an embarrassed flush to dance upon her skin. "What you told me earlier today, about your…the past partners you had, or…or lack-of. We should take this slow. I want to make sure you're ready for this—"

"I am ready—"

"What was said today doesn't sound like it." He cut in tersely before letting out a long, heavy sigh. "March is…busy for me. I've got exams to prep for, this performance night to plan—it'll be hard for us to find time together. I don't want to…I don't just want to fuck you and be unable to see you for weeks because I'm too busy with work. You're too special to me for that, Rey."

Rey nodded softly. "I'm sorry—"

"Don't apologise…don't say sorry when there's nothing to be sorry about—"

"But there is!" She cried. "With Luke, I didn't say a thing—"

"Because you didn't need to." He murmured.

Rey sat and fiddled with her fingers, his gaze searing hot into the side of her head. "I, um…I guess I should probably go up now."

"It's late." Ben agreed. "Goodnight, Rey."

Unbuckling the belt, she opened the door and slipped out. Almost closing the door. Almost.
"Ben," She said softly, watching his eyes trickle back up to her as she leaned down into the door frame. "He's wrong. Luke, what he said… he's so wrong."

His eyes widened. "I…" Ben's mouth clamped shut, looking away, looking back. Mouth opening and closing, unable to form a single syllable. "I'll text you when I get home. To say that I, uh, got home safe."

"Oh," She breathed out. "Okay. Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

She shut the door, the tinted windows obscuring his face before she regretfully turned and walked away.

*You're too good for me,* she thought with each shaky step. *I don't deserve you.*

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was really wholesome and soft, I SWEAR. Rey's insecurities somehow just hijacked it at the end... AND LUKE. how freaking wude.

Also, can YOU believe it -- that updated chapter count, oooohhhhh... can Ruby finish OPS this year? Guess we'll find out.

Thank you for reading and for the endless support I've received on this up-and-down roller coaster of a fic. I really appreciate all the comments I've been blessed with.
Without a single doubt, Rey had never been more happy for a month to end.

While January and February came and went relatively quickly, seemingly blending together as one damn eventful month, March was almost never-ending; a repeat of the same night, over and over, routine slowly bleeding into boredom as the days passed slowly. It was funny like that — one month over like a flick of the switch and the next feeling like a whole damn decade had gone by.

A severe lack of Ben could do that.

Being so busy with exams, grading and this bloody school concert, it left little time to come together aside from the short phone call every other second night and a constant thread of text-messages.

Naturally, Phasma and Hux were just as busy, which lead to many a lonely night with both Finn and Poe and Rose and Ziff in their own respective little bubble.

In conclusion, people were busy and she was not. And it sucked.

Days consisted of work, nights consisted of the occasional Pho Tico shift before home to bed; a bag of take-away and either a shitty reality tv-show or cute romance novel to keep her company. And of course, this current Friday night was no different with pizza in the belly, body buried beneath blankets in bed with her nose stuck in the very book Ben had gifted her months before: Loving Your Lady Bits.

She'd scoffed at the idea of reading it seriously at first. Now it was almost…empowering; refreshing to read something that inspired body-confidence — self-confidence. Just earlier today, Cassian had
made it clear it was what she needed; self-positivity.

And maybe she could pretend when reading this. *Just for a little while.*

God, but *if* Ben ever saw—

"*Wow.*"

Rey jumped, eyes flicking up to her open-doorway at the unexpected shock — absently scanning how his frame filled the *whole* space, tight white button-down like a second skin over the ridges of muscles his body *blessedly* harboured, those wonderous thick thighs crammed into grey dress pants (*oh my god*) with his hair slicked and combed back, clean-shaven face currently studying the book in hands.

"You're… you're actually reading it."

Rey froze for the briefest of seconds. One, two, three—taking in his ear-to-ear grin, his squinted bright eyes, his *whole* uplifted body.

Then she hurled the book *right* at his face.

Ben, much to her frustration, caught it with ease, dropping his jaw to give her a surprised look before smiling that *fucking* knee-weakening smile again. "I can't believe you just threw the book I gave you—"

"You deserve it!" She grumbled, frantically flinging the covers over her head.

"Do I?" God, how she *hated* and *adored* the amusement in his low town, quick to sink lower into the mattress as if trying to disappear altogether. With the sight of him gone, her ears pricked up not missing the sound of a door close with a soft click and approaching, heavy-set steps.

"Yes. You're all smug about it. Total wanker—"

"Mmmh, the *things* you turn me into—"

"I hate you!" Rey cried out, stiffening as she felt the mattress dip beside her.
"No you don't." He hushed out softly, strong hands ripping the duvet back over her head, though she kept her eyes shut tight. "I got you nuggets."

She perked up at this. "You did?"

"Mnhm. We didn't have a chance to eat before the performances started and McDonald's was the only thing open by the time we'd packed it all up. The salads there are… surprisingly alright—"

"You got a salad from McDonald's?" She opened her eyes and sat up then, delighted in the lovely sight of Ben Solo perched on the side of her bed. "You're so weird."

"Yep. No nuggets for me, I'm afraid." There was a soft smile to his lips as he presented the bag. "Also they're probably—" She snatched it instantly "…cold."

"Thank you!" She gave him her brightest grin before digging through the bag, pulling out one shapeless chicken McNugget from the open six-pack. "You even remembered the sauce."

"Of course." He mumbled as she ripped off the sweet n' sour seal, placing it precariously on her duvet-covered stomach. "I'm guessing there's already a whole lot of crumbs through your bed so it's pointless in recommending a plate?"

"Correct." Rey nodded before shoving one, deliciously-cold nugget into her mouth, cheeks bulging. Her eyes fluttered at the flavour before moving up to take in his disgust. His eyes had her stop, mid-chew.

Ben's expression could only be described as soft — so heart-achingly soft, half-lidded eyes watching her filthy eating habits with genuine fondness. It made the rhythm in her chest pick up quick, a hard knock to brittle bones; a hard knock to a broken girl.

"What?" She finally mustered, swallowing the lump of food with great difficulty from her lack-of-chewing and the emotion building in the back of her throat.

"Nothing." He murmured, shaking his head softly. "You're just… incredible."
It always felt so weird when he made little comments like that; a flare of emotion surging through her insides: happiness, self-doubt, confusion. Because really, it was incomprehensible that Ben could say those things with such… conviction.

How was she to react? How was she to not be reminded of their last in-person interaction — a tense conversation in a car; a revelation that didn't make sense.

It was tricky. Even more so with his eyes still narrowed in on her face, seated on her bed, an unreadable look to his expression that sent a shock of fear plummeting down with her stomach. And Rey… Rey had no idea how to respond.

"How long has it been since you've had a nugget?" She blurted out, reaching for another to wave under his nose which only prompted Ben to wrap long fingers around her wrist before she whacked him in the nose.

"Not long enough."

"So you need to have a bite—"

"Nope."

"It'll be good for you."

"It's a cold nugget."

"It's not that cold."

"It's still cold."

"I bet a cold nugget is better than that salad you had."

"I…" He laughed, trailing off with a shake of his head. "You're crazy." She only nudged the nugget closer, earning a roll of his eyes even as Ben relented.
He looked at it for a short while, scrutinising its feel before popping the whole thing in his mouth, chewing slowly.

"Good?"

Still chewing, he shrugged.

"Better than a salad?"

Rey watched him swallow, toying with his plump lips as he tried to hide a spreading smile. "Maybe a McDonald's salad."

"Hah!" She grinned. "I told you so."

"Still not that great, though."

"Liar." She accused boldly, shuffling onto her knees. "You're a filthy liar — admit that a cold nugget is better than most mmph—"

Ben's mouth kissed her into silence, slow and languid, his large hand coming up to cup her jaw gently; warm on her cheek while his lips met hers softly, eyes closed as he pulled her closer, suddenly seated in his lap straddling one thick thigh.

He reluctantly pulled away from her, only to rest his forehead against her own, no intention of leaving with one forearm snaking around the small of her waist. The act made her heart swell.

"I've missed you." He whispered softly, compelling Rey to open her eyes and take in his face with it so wonderfully close. His brown eyes, flecks of gold; light and warm, staring so intently into her own. His lovely nose that always inspired a need to press her lips against the slight hook. His flexing jaw, the hair that fell into his gaze.

If she were the artist, she'd damn-well be painting this view every day.

"I..." she trailed off, nuzzling in deeper. "I missed you."
He exhaled.

"I'm sorry for dropping in without a word. I just wanted to see you—"

"I'm glad you did." Rey cut in swiftly. Chewing on her cheek, she hesitated before— "Are you staying?"

A pause. He fiddled with his lips again.

"Would you like me to?"

She swallowed her nerves.

"Yes."

"Alright." He murmured, the arm around her waist pushing her further into his embrace. "Alright." He repeated once more before his lips found hers again; tongue tracing the seam of her bottom lip, teeth sinking and tugging away, a content sigh falling from her open mouth before they met again. The hand at her jaw wound into her messy hair while Rey linked her arms around his neck, pressing in tight to his broad chest.

Her fingers twisted and pulled at his hair, the pale expanse of his neck far too enticing to not explore with her mouth.

"I…" He broke off, the word drying in his throat as she began to tease his earlobe between her teeth. "I should shower." She rocked against his thigh in response, her core grinding against his pants, a soft whimper falling from her lips. "Let you… let you finish your food — god, you are relentless."

She settled in his arms, pulling back to meet his eyes. "Would you like me to get you a towel?"

"That would be nice." He smiled. "Wouldn't happen to have any clothes I could burrow, too?"

"You could ask Hux." Rey giggled at the disgusted noise ripped from his throat. "Or Phasma — she has pretty silk bottoms. I bet they'd feel nice. There definitely won't be a shirt big enough for you to
fit, though. It's a shame, really."

"Oh," He hummed, smirking as an amused brow arched high into his forehead. "Is it?"

"Yep. Terrible shame, seeing you shirtless — I feel like I've earned it, though. How many times have you seen my tits?"

"Not nearly enough."

"Plenty enough." Rey cried. "You're very greedy, you know. They get cold in your studio."

"Then I'll make sure they're warm next time." The arms wrapped around her waist retreated, slipping under the front of her nightshirt, palming up her skin until they rested just beneath her breasts. "We can have intervals." Ben continued, slowly moving to cup one in each hand. "So that your tits are comfortably warm and toasty."

"Booby breaks? I like it." He scoffed out a laugh, fingers beginning to massage the rounded tissue. "Is this how you'd keep them warm?"

"More or less."

"What if you have paint on your hands?"

A few seconds after voicing the question, she was propped up against the pillows, her shirt being pushed up to her collarbones with one hand while the other carelessly dropped the bag of food to the floor. Rey was quick to pitch in by tugging the material over her head and flinging it across the room. The dark gaze that narrowed in on her bare breasts sparked a sudden urge to cover herself — it was weird, with the lights so bright and his face so clear; so close up.

With him tucked behind his easel out of sight and much further away, Rey had no idea what reaction she elicited. Even on the couch in his living room, it'd been so dark and her mind was so messy… there was no way to take it in; to really think or see or process the new expression.
Lust. Disgust. Sometimes, Rey couldn't distinguish between the two.

"You're... god, you're a vision like this."

And somehow, Ben knew exactly what to say in the moment; shuffling closer to the middle of the bed, large hands dragging up her bare legs to the fleshy inner-thighs, gently prying them open so he could settle in-between. His fingers found her hips then, twiddling with the band of her shorts — head descending, kissing up her abdomen, nose trailing up her sternum.

His tongue traced the underside of her left breast, bridging it to her right; he nipped at the soft flesh, sucked his mark into her skin — teased her nipple with his teeth, soothed it by wrapping his lips around her areola. Back and forth, he gave attention to them both.

"You have the cutest tits." He'd say before sucking the rosy peak back into his mouth; a pleased hum rumbling from the back of his throat sending a vibration straight to her sex, nipples tightening almost painfully, body so desperate for release and relief.

"Cute?" She asked in a strangled tone.

"Cute. Arousing. Fucking hot." The words were growled upon her body — the sensations of his mouth and the tone to his voice burning her all over.

"I want to see you." She gasped out, hissing at a particular rough nip, fingers twisting at the soft head of hair. "Please, please, let me see you."

She urged him up, both rising to sit straight on the mattress, Rey taking him in — his messy hair, the erratic pattern to his breathing, lips plump from his actions. She kissed him chastely, then — rushed and sloppy, full of unrestrained lust before fast fingers clumsily worked his buttons free.

One by one, she hurried down the line, revealing more and more skin until the last, eventually falling away to—

"Oh my fuck." Rey sounded out slowly, greedily drinking him in. "This is actually unfair."

Ben's laugh was breathy, increasing as she hurriedly pushed the material off his broad shoulders — yanking it until free, chucking it away in haste to get the complete view.
"God... you're built." She rose on her knees, clambering into his lap. "I can't believe you've denied me this for so long—"

"Denied?" He asked, amused as her hands slowly raked over his pecs. "You never asked."

A glare proceeded his accusation before she continued to feel him up. "Wow, your tits... maybe we can both have booby breaks in the sessions."

"Mmmh." He considered this, his hands coming to cup her breasts again, pinching and twisting as she writhed in his lap. "Sounds very distracting."

"A good distracting." Rey squirmed.

"True. But you're already too much of a distraction."

"You're a distraction."

He chuckled at her childish retort and Rey smiled at the rumble she felt in his chest.

"How was your therapy session today?"

"And now you're distracting me." He didn't reply. "You can't ask me that with your hands on my boobs." This only resulted in a whine as he removed his hands. "How was the concert?"

"Rey." Oh. His reprimanding tone... now that was something else.

"You know, you're very sexy when cranky." She watched his jaw harden, body tensing underneath her touch. Finally, she deflated; head drooping into the radiating heat of his bare chest, arms moving to slip under his arms and wrap around his torso. "I'm sorry."

Rey settled there for a moment, trying to steady the loud beat to her heart. A minute must have passed before Ben moved, arms returning the gesture and pulling her in; cradling her close.

"I won't be good at this." She admitted quietly, muffled against his skin. "It'll take time."
"Just tell me how it was." Ben urged on softly. "I don't need specific details; don't need what was talked about. I just want to know how you're feeling — how it went, for you."

One hand began to drift up and down her spine.

"It was tough. But I think I'm learning a lot about myself. It… it can hurt, but I'm starting to believe it could be worth it."

A soft kiss lingered at her forehead.

"And I'll be here for you." He whispered into her hair. "Always, when you need."

_Aways._

It was such a _huge_ statement; an unsaid promise, but one nonetheless, showing a long road ahead when she'd only _ever_ met dead-ends.

"Rey." His hands came to cradle her face, forcing her eyes to meet his own. "Always." He repeated slowly. "Always."

She nodded, a flurry of emotions overcoming her sense, her mind, her heart — _everything._ It urged on a soft kiss, incited a need to bury closer into his embrace, prompted a desperation to touch and feel and take all that he offered.

The unfamiliar terror to her feelings, the aching fear of losing herself to _love_ simply lay forgotten when her tongue slid against his own; the overclouded thoughts clearing with Ben easing her back down onto the mattress, the weight of his body pressing down on her own a reminder of his nonsensical support; blanketing over her, creating a heat she'd always been too scared to crave — lust coursing through her veins, alighting her nerves, right alongside her beating heart.

She never thought arousal and affection could ever mix. But here she was — one hand raking through his hair, his lips doting on her freckled shoulder, eyes closed as she relished in the new sensation.
"Always." Rey repeated the vow, using her strength to force Ben on his back and flip their positions, admiring the way his hair fanned across her pillows; loving his big, spacious body in her too small bed; thrilled by the feel of him, hardening in his slacks.

She smiled as his hands fiddled with the drawstrings of her shorts. "These are very short. I don't see the use for them."

"Pants are overrated." Rey agreed. "I think we should both get rid of them."

He smiled up at her. "Are you sure?"

"I really like you. And I really, really want to ride your cock." She giggled as his eyes widened, steadying herself by holding onto his broad shoulders. "Don't look so shocked."

"I… just — hearing you say that." Ben's eyes burned black, his hands returning to pinch her nipples. "You have no idea what it does."

"You could tell me."

"Yeah?" He flipped their positions again, one hand skimming up her leg, reaching her thigh and lifting — up, up, knee suddenly aside her chin. "Right now, I want you stripped bare — rip these silly shorts off so I can see your cunt."

Cunt. God, how could such a filthy word sound so good from his lips?

"I love your cunt." He continued. "I still haven't got the taste of you off my tongue yet, you know. I could eat you out for hours — days. I wish I could."

His hand cupped her sex through the shorts.

"Get them off." She demanded, pushing her hips off the mattress as his hands loosened the strings, tugging them down her legs right along with her undies.
"Spread your legs for me — *that's it.* Nothing beats this view." He sunk lower, levelling himself with her open legs. "You're *glistening.*) With one torturous finger, he traced the outline of her folds. "What do you want, Rey?"

"I want you!" She answered immediately, releasing the held-in breath.

"You want this?" His thumb pressed down on her clit, pressure far too light for her liking. She bucked into him. "More?"

"Yes."

"Ah." He rolled his thumb frustratingly slow against the bundle of nerves. "How's that?"

"Not enough." She groaned.

"How about this." One finger eased into her entrance, sinking to the knuckle, before retreating. When he repeated the act, he added another think finger all the while his thumb pressed down harder.

"*Oh, god.*" She moaned, throwing an arm across her face.

"You're so wet for me right now. Do you hear how wet you are?" His low voice accompanied with the lewd noise of his fingers fucking her slowly did nothing to dull the sensation building in her nerves. Her belly coiled tight. "How about another finger?"

At the added stretch, he moaned with her — long and low, straight from a fucking porn video.

"Mmm, you're *so tight* but you take it so well."

"Please, Ben."

"Please what?" He coed.
"Please, please, fuck me." She begged.

"Look at me." She whimpered, grinding against his hand, doing as he demanded. His fingers crooked inside her one more time before he removed them all together, raising them to his mouth, sucking them clean.

She pounced on him then, so overcome in the mood, unzipping his pants — together, they hurried to have them off; his briefs too, pulling them down over the large bulge until he sprung free.

He was long — perfectly in proportion. Thick, too, curving up; the head of his dick flushed and leaking pre-cum.

"You have such a beautiful, ugly dick." He barked out a laugh at her confession; smiling at the reminder of their third art session on the kitchen counter.

"Thank you." He mumbled, watching closely as she studied his cock. Slowly, she raised her palm to lick her hand, wrapping it around his length, thumb spreading the pre-come up and down then up again.

Slowly, she inched closer into his spread legs — licking up the underside of his cock with one, broad lick. Ben barely had time to react when her mouth closed around the head of him; tongue swirling around the tip, taking him into the back of her throat — as far as she could.

"Fuck, Rey. I..." He trailed off as their eyes met, another groan following. "Sweetheart, if you do this, I won't... I want to fuck you."

She pulled up with an obscene pop, turning away from him and reaching for the draw to her bedside table, quick to grab out a condom.

It didn’t take much time at all to rip the foil and roll the latex down his hard length, settling back into the bed as he lined himself at her entrance.

His eyes found hers, seeking permission. Rey kissed him. "Please."
With a quick nod of his head, he began to push in slowly — inch by inch, easing into her cunt; the stretch a nice burn until they were flesh with him buried to the hilt. He froze, allowing her to adjust to the huge size of him.

Rey’s arms linked around his neck, her legs opening wider, rising up her knees to allow him in even deeper.

"Fuck." Ben cursed, head dropping to her shoulder. "God, you feel… You’re amazing." He began to move, slow at first; thrusting in, pulling out, then back in again — cautious and careful.

She cried out, raising her hips to meet his, urging him to pace it up. It was wonderful, to feel so full of him — a strange act that satisfied her, made her feel cared for; made her feel safe and so unbelievably gone to him with his touch.

Somehow, they eventually moved; Rey settled in his lap, the sound of skin slapping and breathy, escaped moans filling the room as she sunk onto his cock and he pummelled into her, hips meeting; foreheads together, skin flushed and shining with a sheen of sweat, clinging onto each other tight.

His hands were hot against her back; her own, raking at his shoulders.

The feeling in her abdomen returned, constricting and tight, seeking release.

Together, they chased it, crying out in pleasure as the white-hot feeling radiated their bodies.

And together, they reached it.

It was bliss. Pure, unadulterated bliss.

Later, as she dozed off in Ben’s familiar hold, Rey felt truly loved for the first time in her life.

And there was no greater feeling; daunting as it was.

*She could do this. They could do this.*

Chapter End Notes

Wow. Who knew I could do fluff AND smut with little to no angst in a chapter?
Certainly not me (*cough* truth be told, y'all deserve it for the later upcoming chapters *cough*). Also yes, im trash for the snape/lily always line, BUT ITS LESS ANGSTY AND IT FIT, OKAY, lmao!

Thank you to everyone who waits so patiently and for your lovely feedback -- I am eternally grateful for the immense amount of support on this -- I really hope I can get my shit together and produce a faster update next time around. So thank you for that X

Thank you again for reading. You can find me on tumblr @reyloner and I'm on twitter @dalzonii. Feel free to come say hi and talk reylo, I love a good chat

Thanks again X

End Notes

Comments and Kudos are worth a hundred Rian Johnson's (bless his beautiful reylo-shipping soul).

If you're keen for updates and the occasional rant, chuck me a cheeky follow on tumblr @reyloner

Cheers!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!