Summary

“Is it working, for you?” Maybe it comes out a little needy, but Rey tells herself that it’s only because of how low she has to pitch her voice to talk to him. “Or do you maybe want to fake-break up?”

Ben doesn’t answer for a second. Then, just as Doctor Phasma takes the mic to thank the speaker and ask the audience if anyone has questions, Rey hears him say, “No. No, I don’t want to fake-break up.”

They’re not dating for real. Right?

Notes

See notes at the end of the chapter for content warning (contains spoilers).

See the end of the work for more notes.
In Rey’s defense, he doesn’t seem to mind the kiss too much.

It does take him a minute to adjust—perfectly understandable, given the circumstances. It’s an awkward, uncomfortable, somewhat painful minute in which Rey is simultaneously smashing her lips against his own and trying to push herself as high as her toes can extend, so that her mouth is at the same level as his face and not, say, his chest. In that minute the kiss probably looks like some clumsy sort of headbutt from the outside, and Rey grows anxious that she’s not going to be able to pull the whole thing off. Hux, whom she spotted coming her way a few seconds ago, is gonna take one single look at her and at the guy she’s kissing, and know at once that they cannot possibly be two people in the middle of a date. He will call Rey on it, very publicly. He will provoke a scene. It will be mortifying.

Then, that agonizingly slow minute goes by, and the kiss becomes somewhat… yeah. Different.

The guy inhales sharply and inclines his head a tiny bit, which makes Rey feel a little less like she’s a macaque climbing a baobab tree, and his hands—which feel large and deliciously warm in the excessive AC of the hallway—close around her waist and then slide up a little, coming to wrap around her ribcage to hold Rey to himself. Not too close, and not too far.

Just so.

He’s not doing much with his lips except parting them slightly. The kiss is more of a prolonged peck than anything, but it’s actually quite nice, and for the lifespan of a few seconds Rey forgets a large number of things, including the fact that she’s kissing a random bloke; or that said bloke surely has no idea who Rey is, either; or that what originally drove her to put up this entire show was the hope to avoid another, more ginger bloke.

But that’s what a good kiss will do: make you forget yourself for a while—for a very little while. Rey finds herself melt into a wide, solid chest that shows absolutely no give. She slides her hands away from his jaw and into the hair at the nape of his neck, finding it surprisingly thick and surprisingly soft, and then—then she hears herself sigh, as if already out of breath, and that’s when it hits her like a brick falling over her head, the realization that—no. No. Nope, nope, no.

She should not be doing this. Random bloke, and all that.

Rey gasps and pushes herself away from him, frantically looking to her side. In the post-10 pm bluish glow of the labs’ hallway, Hux is nowhere to be seen. Weird.

Kiss bloke, on the other hand, is standing right in front of her, lips parted and chest rising and a weird light flickering in his eyes, which is exactly when it dawns on her, the enormity of what she just did. Of who she just—
FUCK HER LIFE.

FUCK. HER. LIFE.

... 

Doctor Solo is a known asshole.

This fact would not be remarkable in and of itself, as this is academia, and every position above the graduate student level requires a more or less high degree of assholery to be held for any length of time, with tenured faculty at the very peak of the pyramid. Doctor Solo, though—he is exceptional. He’s the go-out-of-his-way, life-alteringly horrible, outstanding type of asshole.

He is the reason Finn had to completely scrap his first two research projects and will end up graduating a year late, and the sole culprit for Snap being forced to postpone his thesis defense. He’s the one who made Rose throw up from anxiety before her comps exams, and Kaydel won’t say what happened in her last student advisory committee meeting, but Rey saw her right after and her eyes looked red and puffy. Lazslo, who used to be in Rey’s cohort and would take her to watch out-of-focus European movies with unreadable subtitles every Thursday night, was in Solo’s lab but decided to drop out six months into grad school for ‘reasons’. Jess is still here, but her hands always shake and she often looks like she hasn’t slept in a year.

He is mean and hypercritical and it’s obvious in the way he speaks, in the way he carries himself, that he thinks he’s the only person doing decent science within the department. Within the world. Even the other faculty seem to find him terrifying—because he is. A moody, obnoxious, terrifying douchebag.

Doctor Solo is a known asshole, and Rey just kissed him.

... 

She is not sure how long the silence lasts—only that he’s the one to break it. His jaw works a little, a movement that Rey recognizes from seeing him attend the departmental seminar, one that usually precedes him raising his hand to point out some perceived fatal flaw in the speaker’s work.

Ben Solo. Destroyer of research projects, Rey once overheard her advisor say.

It’s okay. It’s fine. Totally fine. She’s just going to pretend nothing happened, nod at him politely and tip-toe her way out of here, and then—

“Did you… just kiss me?” He sounds puzzled, and maybe a little hoarse. His lips look… God.

There is simply no way Rey can get away with denying what she just did. Still:

“Nope.” It’s worth a try.

Surprisingly, it seems to work.“Ah. Okay.” Doctor Solo nods and turns around. Takes a couple of steps down the hallway, reaches the water fountain—maybe where he was headed in the first
place, who knows, not Rey for sure—and she is starting to actually believe that she is off the hook when—

He halts and turns to her with a skeptical expression.

“Are you sure you didn’t...?”

*Fuck. Shit. Poop.*

“I—” Rey buries her face in her hands. “It’s not the way it looks.”

“You *did* kiss me, didn’t you?”

Rey nods into her palms.

“Okay. I... Okay,” he repeats slowly. Up close, he is even more intimidating than she remembered. And Rey’s not even looking at him. His voice, though—he sounds like he’s on his way to get mad. Like maybe he’s *already* mad. “What is going on, here?”

There is simply no way she can explain. Any normal person would find Rey’s situation odd. Ben Solo, who obviously considers empathy a bug and not a feature of humanity, could *never* understand. Rey lets her hands fall to her sides and takes a deep breath.

“Nothing.”

He snorts.

“I... listen, I don’t mean to be rude, but this is really none of your business.”

He stares at her for a moment, and then he nods. “Yes. Of course.” He must be getting back into his usual groove, because his tone has lost some of its surprise and seems to have gone back to normal—dry and laconic, apparently. “I’ll just go back to my office and begin to work on my Title IX complaint.”

Rey exhales in relief. “Yeah. That would be great, since—wait. Your *what?*

He cock his head. “I thought sexual harassment training was mandatory these days. Title IX is a federal law that—”

“I *know* what Title IX is.”

“I see. So you simply choose to willfully disregard it.”

“I—What? No. No, I don’t!”

He shrugs. “I must be mistaken, then. Someone else must have assaulted me.”

“Assault—I didn’t *assault* you.”

“You did kiss me.”

“But not *really.*”

“Without first securing my consent.”

“Oh, come on.”
He lifts one eyebrow, and for a minute Rey lets herself daydream of drowning someone. Doctor Solo. Herself. Both are great options.

“Listen, can we just forget that this happened?”

He studies her for a long moment, his angular face serious and something else, something that Rey can’t quite decipher because she is too busy noticing how bloody tall and broad he is. She knew before, too, from seeing him around the department or walking across campus, from sharing the elevator with him, but they’ve never interacted before. Never been this close.

Except for a second ago, when you almost put your tongue in his—

“Is something wrong?” He almost sounds concerned.

“What? No. No, there isn’t.”

“Because,” he continues calmly, ignoring her, “kissing a stranger at midnight in a science lab might be a sign that there is.”

“There isn’t.”

Doctor Solo nods, somewhat stiffly.

“Very well. Expect mail in the next few days, then.” He begins to walk past her.

“How—you don’t even know who I am!”

“I am sure I can figure it out, what with the fact that you must have swiped your badge to get in after hours. Have a goodnight—”

“Wait!”

Rey leans forward, and stops him with a hand on his wrist. He halts immediately, even though it’s obvious that it would take him no effort to free himself, and stares pointed at where her fingers are wrapped around his skin—right below a wristwatch that probably costs half of her yearly graduate salary. Or maybe all of it. “More material for my complaint, I guess.”

Rey jumps one step back and lets go of him at once.

“No, I—I didn’t mean to—”

"The kiss. Explain."

Rey bites into her lower lip, realizing that she has truly screwed herself over. She has to tell him, now. She doesn’t want to tell him, but she bloody has to.

She inhales deeply. "Hux. The red-haired man who was passing by. He’s a post-doc in the department—"

“I know Hux.” Doctor Solo’s tone is harsher than earlier.

“He has…” Rey briefly closes her eyes. This is where the story becomes a little embarrassing. Hard to tell. To anyone, but especially to this man. “He has asked me to go out with him. As in, on dates. Multiple times. And I really do not want to go out with him, for…so many reasons, I probably couldn’t even list all of them. Except that I—” have no conflict resolution skills and can be awfully unassertive in certain situations, which is why I will often prefer a white lie to a possibly
“hurtful truth” “—really need him not to hate me, since he’s one of the few people in the department who’s currently using optogenetics and who can help me out with my project. And I am not very good at rejecting guys, so I gave him my standard excuse, which is that I am dating someone else. And that I’d already made plans.” Rey swallows, even though her mouth feels dry. “Today. Today’s the day he wanted to take me out on a date.”

“Ah.” Doctor Solo’s lips are flat.

“But I’m not. Dating someone else. And I wasn’t planning to go out today. So I decided to come in to check on my mice and I noticed that Hux was here, too. Coming this way. And I thought that he was going to notice that I was in lab, alone, and I thought—well.” God. Rey wipes a hand down her face. “I didn’t really think.”

Doctor Solo doesn’t say anything, but it’s there in his eyes, what he’s thinking. ‘Obviously.’

“I just needed him to believe that I was on a date.”

He nods. “So you kissed the first person you saw in the hallway.”

“I—okay.” Rey winces. “When you put it like that, it wasn’t my best moment.”

“Wasn’t it.”

Rey ignores him. “But it wasn’t my worst, either. I mean, now Hux thinks that I was on a date with you and he won’t ask me out anymore and he won’t be mad that I—”

He snorts. “Yeah. No.”

Rey frowns. “What do you mean?”

“He’s going to hate this.”

“Why would he—”

“We… I don’t exactly get along, with Hux.”

“Oh.” Rey did not know this. “You mean… even less than with other people?”

He narrows his eyes, and—Oops. Rey has just put her entire bloody leg in her mouth, hasn’t she? She is really not going to make it out of tonight alive. That drowning fantasy of hers returns in full force.

“Listen, I’m… so, so sorry about the kiss.”

The line of his jaw hardens. “Are you.”

“Please, don’t sue me. I promise I didn’t mean to…”

Suddenly, the enormity of what she just did fully dawns on her. She just kissed a… a… a random guy, who happens to be most unpleasant faculty member in her department, without having ever exchanged one single word with him. Rey—she did that, and now he’s staring at her in that odd way, standing so close to her, and…

Shit.

Maybe it’s that it’s almost midnight. Maybe it’s because she hasn’t eaten anything since lunch and
her last coffee was sixteen hours ago. Maybe it’s Ben Solo looking down at her like that. All of a sudden, this is just—too much.

“Okay. Okay, if you felt in any way harassed by me maybe you really should sue me, because it’s only fair, though I really didn’t want to... not that my intentions matter, it’s more like your perception of...” *Fuck. Fuck shit fuck.* “I’m gonna leave, now? Okay? Thank you, and... I am so, so, so sorry.”

Rey takes a few slow steps backwards, trying and failing to tear her gaze away from his. When it becomes unbearable, she spins around on her heels and runs down the hallway, heading straight for the entrance.

“Rey,” she hears him call. “Rey, wait—”

She doesn’t stop. She sprints down the stairs to the first floor, and then out of the building entrance and across the pathways of the sparsely lit campus, running past a woman who is walking her dog and a group of students chatting loudly in front of the library. She continues until she’s standing in front of her apartment's door, stopping only to unlock it and immediately making a beeline for her room in the hope of avoiding Finn—and whoever he might have brought home tonight.

It’s not until she slumps on her bed, staring at the glow-in-the-dark stars glued to her ceiling, that she realizes that she never did check on her mice. She also ended up leaving her laptop on her bench, and her sweatshirt somewhere in the lab, and she completely forgot to stop at the store and buy the coffee she’d promised Finn she’d get for tomorrow morning.

*Dammit. What a shitty, shitty day.*

It never occurs to Rey, either that night or in the following months, that Doctor Ben Solo—a known asshole—called her by her name.

Chapter End Notes

Content warning (contains spoilers): In this fic, Rey kisses Ben without asking for his consent once. Moreover, she enters a fake-dating relationship with Ben because she is a victim of workplace sexual harassment (Hux has repeatedly asked her to go out with him and she does not feel comfortable reporting him/is afraid that he will retaliate if she turns him down, so she decides to pretend-date Ben instead). Sexual harassment in academia, and in the workplace in general, is an important issue, and this fic is NOT going to deal with it with the seriousness it deserves. Please, decide whether you want to read accordingly ❤️

If you have any questions, you can find me here.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

A few housekeeping notes, since I initially posted this anonymously:
1) Thanks a billion to monsterleadmehome for the beta! ❤❤❤
2) This is the first fic I post that I haven’t already completed (I’ll be posting as I write). It’s an experiment, and I have no idea how often I’ll be able to update or how long it will be (I’m aiming for 6-8 chapters). The fic might end up having huge pacing issues or continuity errors, so it’s kind of a read at your own risk situation! (Sorry, I promise to do my best!)
3) Thanks to Murakamism for the awesome prompt! I’ve been wanting to write a fake dating AU since I watched To all the boys I’ve loved before, and their prompt gave me the perfect chance to go ahead and do it!
4) I have added some content warnings at the end of Chapter 1, you might want to go check it out! (contains mild spoilers for this chapter)
5) This truly is garbage!!!!!!! ❤❤❤❤❤

Rey is a rising third-year Ph.D. student, in a department that houses over sixty grads and what often feels like several million majoring undergrads. She has no idea what the exact number of faculty is, but judging from the number of mailboxes in the copy room, she’d say that a safe guess is: too many.

She reasons that if she has never had the misfortune of interacting with Ben Solo in the two years before The Night (it’s only been a handful of days since… yeah, since the incident, but Rey already knows that she’ll think of last Friday as The Night for the rest of her life), it is entirely possible that she will be able to finish grad school without crossing paths with him ever again. In fact, Rey is fairly sure that not only does Ben Solo have no idea who she is, but he also has no desire to learn—and has probably has already forgotten all about what happened. While The Night was a horrifying ordeal, it is now mostly behind her, and there is a good chance that she’ll never see him again.

(Unless, of course, she is catastrophically wrong and he does end up filing a Title IX lawsuit. In which case, she supposes that she will see him again. In federal court.)

Rey figures that she could waste her time fretting about legal fees, or she could focus on what are undoubtedly more pressing problems. Like the fact that her knockout mice are exhibiting the exact opposite phenotype she had predicted in her research proposal; or that this morning Finn told her that he saw a cockroach scurrying under the fridge; or the approximately five hundred slides she has to make for the Neurobiology class that she is slated to TA in the Fall.

Or. She could also worry about Hux.

Hux who, it would seem, isn’t much convinced that that Rey is dating someone else. Rey has an inkling when she notices the distrustful way he’s glaring at her during a joint lab meeting, as if he suspects that she’s actively plotting Millicent’s demise (which, Rey would never). She has another when Snap mentions offhandedly that Hux has been asking around about her dating life—in particular if she is seeing anyone in the department. And yet one more when Hux smirks a little too
triumphantly as he overhears Rey tell Rose that yes, of course she’s available to dog-sit over the weekend—she *never* has plans, anyway.

The confirmation, though, comes when she ducks into the break room to pour herself a cup of coffee—hazelnut, truly the best of flavored coffees—and turns around to find Hux right behind her.

She startles so hard that she almost burns herself.

“*Jesus Christ!*” Rey clutches her chest, takes a deep breath, and holds tighter onto her Scooby-Doo mug. “Hux. You scared the shit out me.”

“Hi.” Hux’s mouth bends into one of his most horrid smiles. It's essentially a grimace.

Rey forces herself to smile back, hoping to look a bit more convincing. “Hi. I was just going to email you—there is something funky going on with my mice, and Holdo said that I should ask you if you—"

“The other night.”

*Dammit.* “—um, if you could help me out with the behavioral assays.”

“Ben Solo.”

*Dammit, dammit, dammit.* “Oh. Yes? What… What about him?”

“I saw the two of you together.”

“Oh. Really?” Rey’s surprise sounds painfully forced, even to her own ears. *Poop. Shit, poop.* Maybe she should have signed up for drama club in high school, instead of playing every single sport available.

“Yes. Here, in the department.”

“Oh. Cool, um, I didn’t see you but—”

“You didn’t?” Hux’s left eyebrow is so up high in his forehead, it’s basically meeting his hairline.

Rey switches her mug to her left hand, for no particular reason but to buy some time. “Um, no, I—”

“That is interesting. *Very* interesting.”

She swallows. “Is it?”

“Yes. Because maybe my mind was playing tricks on me—” Hux clearly does not think his mind *ever* played tricks on him “—but I thought I saw you look straight into my eyes.”

“I—I don’t think so. When did you—”

“Right before you kissed Doctor Solo.”

“Oh. Oh. Oh, *that.* That was just…”

Hux nods, as if to encourage Rey to finish the sentence. When it becomes obvious that she can’t, he continues for her. “That was by far the most… bizarre kiss I have ever seen.”

*Shit.* “I doubt that.” Rey retorts, albeit weakly. "Take the upside-down Spiderman kiss—that was
“It looked almost… what is the word? Ah, yes. Non-consensual.”

Calm. Stay calm. He doesn’t know. He cannot know.

Rey straightens, fighting the feeling of unease running through her. She inhales, reminding herself that she is very close to an exit point—which means that she is not trapped in here. With Hux. It’s late afternoon, but not so late that the department is deserted. She is fine. This is unpleasant, but she can walk out.

Well—she can’t walk out, because she needs Hux to help her on that bloody project. But she could. Technically. Maybe. Argh.

“I’m not sure what you mean by that,” she says, trying to keep her tone even.

He snorts. “Rey. Come on. There is no way the person you said you are dating is Ben Solo.”

“Well, I—”

“There is no way Ben Solo is dating you.”

That actually stings a bit. A lot. “Excuse me?”

“Come on, Rey. I am no fool. The show you put up on Friday night was for me, wasn’t it? You were trying to avoid me.”


This is what happens, whenever Rey lies. She ends up having to say more lies to cover her first lie, and she’s just horrible at it, which means that each lie is worse and less convincing that the previous, and shit. Poop.

There is no way she is fooling Hux—he is a pro at lying. There is no way he’ll help her on her project ever again. Rey’ll flunk out of grad school and lose her visa and her only source of income and will have to go back to the UK where it rains all the time and there is a monarchy and—

“No. No—Listen, I have no clue where you’re getting the idea. But… I promise it wasn’t. For you. It was for me. And for… For him. The kiss, I mean. And maybe it looked awkward, but it’s just that I’m not very good at it, so—”

There is almost no warning. Rey knows that something is about to happen because one second Hux is looking down at her with that condescending expression that is perennially pasted on his face, and next his head is tilted faintly upwards. Like there is something new in his visual field, a few inches above Rey’s head. Rey is about to turn around to see if maybe a giant bat has flown into the break room to save her from her own blabbering, when something large and warm is suddenly steadying her, a firm but barely-there pressure applied at the center of her lower back.

“Hey.”

It’s Doctor Solo.

No—it’s not, actually. It’s Doctor Solo’s hand. About two inches above Rey’s ass.

Holy shit.
Rey turns, and looks up—and up. And up. And a bit more up—at him. “Oh. Um. Hey.”

“Is everything okay?”

He says it in a low, intimate tone. Like they are alone. Like Hux is not there. He says it in a way that should make Rey uncomfortable, but it doesn’t. For some inexplicable reason it soothes her even though until a second ago she was freaking out, so maybe it’s just that two different types of unease neutralize each other? It sounds like a fascinating research topic. Worth being pursued. Maybe Rey should abandon biology and switch to psychology. Maybe she should excuse herself and go run a Pubmed search. Maybe she should die on the spot to avoid having to face this situation she put herself in.

“Yes. Yes. Everything is great. Hux and I were just… chatting. About our... weekends.”

Doctor Solo looks at Hux like he’s realizing for the first time that he’s the room, acknowledging his existence with one of those nods dudes use to greet each other. His hand slides a little lower on Rey’s spine—maybe half an inch?—just as Hux nods back stiffly.

“Did you need anything, Doctor Hux?”

He is good at this, Rey has to admit. Because she is sure that from Hux’s angle it looks like Solo is maybe groping her, but in fact he really is not, and Rey can barely feel his hand on her.

Just a little, maybe. The warmth, and the slight weight, and—

“No. I do not.” Hux’s tone is glacial. He really does not get along with Solo. Yes, even less than regular people. “I was about to leave. And Rey—it is possible that I owe you an apology.”

He is out of the room before she can respond to that. Which is good—because he’s gone—but also less good—because now it’s just her and Doctor Solo, standing way too close in a room that is completely empty and probably larger than any of the foster homes in which Rey grew up.

Rey would pay good money to be able to say that she’s the one who puts some distance between them as soon as the coast is clear, but the slightly embarrassing truth is that it’s Doctor Solo who first steps away from her. Enough to give her the space she needs, and then some.

God. She clearly wants this stupid Title IX complaint filed against her, doesn’t she.

“Is everything okay?” he asks again. His tone is still… soft.

“Yes. Yes, I just…” Rey waves her hand. “I… thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Did you hear what he said? About Friday and…”

“I did. That’s why I…” He looks at her, and then at his hand—the one that was warming her back a few seconds ago—and Rey immediately understands.

“Thank you,” she repeats. Because, yeah, Ben Solo might be a known asshole, but Rey is feeling pretty damn grateful right now. “Also, I couldn’t help but notice that no agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation have knocked on my door to arrest me in the past 72 hours.”

The corner of his mouth twitches minimally. “Is that so.”

Rey nods. “Which makes me think that maybe you haven’t filed that complaint.”
He doesn’t say anything.

“So thank you. For that. And… And for stepping in, right now.”

Doctor Solo stares at her for a long moment, looking suddenly more like he does during seminar, when people mix up the word theory and hypothesis or when they admit to using listwise deletion instead of imputation.

“You shouldn’t need someone to step in.”

Rey stiffens. Right, known asshole. “Well, it’s not as if I asked you to do anything for me, and I was going to handle it by—”

“And you shouldn’t have to lie about your relationship status,” he continues.

Oh.

“You shouldn’t have to endure anyone’s attentions, on your workplace or elsewhere. He is harassing you and—”

“I know.” Rey raises a hand to interrupt him. “I know, but I… I really need him. He is really good at his job, and my founding situation is very precarious, and I need this project to go well, and—I just need to finish the optogenetics part of it, and then my interactions with him will be over.” And I can finally tell him to shove it.

There is a muscle working in Doctor Solo’s jaw. “I am going to report him. It’s unacceptable that you feel as if—”

“He thinks we’re dating,” Rey blurts out. Mostly to distract him from this odd anger that he seems to be working himself up to on her behalf. And not to bring forward a piece of information that should be painfully obvious to the both of them. Still, saying it out loud has the effect of making it real, and—God.

The implications are too ridiculous to bear. So ridiculous that Rey doesn’t let herself contemplate them fully.

“Wasn’t that the point?”

“Yeah.” She nods, and then remembers the coffee in her hand and takes a sip from her mug. It’s still warm. The conversation with Hux can’t have lasted for more than five minutes. “Yeah. I guess it was. By the way—I’m Rey Sanders. In case you’re still interested in filing that complaint. I’m a Ph.D. student in Dr. Holdo’s lab—”

“I know who you are.”

“Oh.” Maybe he did look her up? Rey tries to picture him combing through the Current Students’ section of the department website. Rey’s picture was taken by the program secretary on her third day of grad school, well before she was fully aware of what she was in for. She had been smiling. A real, actual smile. “Okay.”

“I’m Ben Solo. I’m Faculty in—”

She actually bursts out laughing in his face. And then regrets it immediately as she noticed his half confused, half hurt expression. Like he seriously thought Rey could have not known who he is. Like he’s unaware that he’s one of the most prominent scholars in their field. Like he doesn’t know
that people talk about him all the time. Rey stops laughing abruptly and clears her throat. “Right. Um, I know who you are, too, Doctor Solo.”

“You should probably call me Ben.”

“Oh. Oh, no.” That would be way too… Their department is not like that. “I could never—”

“If Hux happens to be around.”

“Oh. Yeah.” Right. It does make sense. “Thank you. I hadn’t thought of that.” Or of anything else, really. Clearly, my brain stopped working three days ago, when I decided that kissing you to save my ass was a good idea. “I—If that’s okay with you, I’m gonna go home, because this whole thing was kind of stressful and…” I really need to sit on the couch and watch American Ninja Warrior for twenty minutes while I eat Finn’s Cool Ranch Doritos, which taste surprisingly better than you’d give them credit for.

He nods. “I’ll walk you to your car.”

Rey frowns. “I’m not that distraught—”

“In case Hux bothers you again.”

“Oh.” It is, Rey has to admit, a kind offer. Surprisingly so. Especially because it comes from Ben ‘I am too sexy for this department’ Solo. Rey knows that he is a dick, and can’t quite understand why today he just… doesn’t seem to be one? It’s probably just Hux. He’d make anyone look good by comparison. “Thanks. But no need.”

It’s clear from the expressions that pass on his face that he doesn’t want to insist, but also can’t quite help himself. “I’d feel better if you let me walk you to your car.”

“I don’t have a car.” I’m a grad student. I make 30 thousand dollars a year. My rent takes up two thirds of my salary. I have been wearing the same pair of contacts since May of this year and I go to every seminar that provides refreshments to save on meals, she doesn’t bother adding. She has no idea how old Doctor Solo is, but it can’t have been that long ago that he was a grad student.

“Do you take the bus?”

“I bike. And my bike is right at the entrance of the building.”

He opens his mouth, and then closes it. And then opens it again.

You kissed that mouth, Rey. And it was a good kiss. Eventually.

“There are no bike lanes around here.”

Rey shrugs. “I like to live dangerously.” Cheaply, she means. “And I have a helmet. And as I said, my bike is right outside. So I’m just going to go, and—”

“I can still walk you downstairs if—”

“No, thank you.” She says firmly. And then turns to set her mug on the first surface she can find—she’ll retrieve it tomorrow. Or maybe someone will steal it and she won’t. Who cares. Rey stole it from a postdoc who left academia to become a DJ, and she doesn’t even like Scooby-Doo that much.

For the second time in less than a week, Ben Solo has saved her ass. For the second time, she can’t
stand being with him a second longer. “I’ll see you around, okay?”

His chest rises as he inhales deeply. “Yeah. Okay.”

Rey gets out of the room as fast as he can.

…

Tallie is acting weird.

Which doesn’t mean much, since Tallie has always been a bit odd, but today she seems even weirder than usual. She comes into the campus coffee shop where Rey is trying to read an article that appears to have scooped her research, and then proceeds to stare at her for two good minutes. Three.

Five.

When it’s gotten ridiculous, Rey lifts her eyes from her monitor and waves at her. Tallie flushes a little, grabs her latte from the counter and goes to find a table for herself.

Weird.

Not twenty minutes later, Karé, who works with Poe Dameron over in Pharmacology, comes in, takes a seat next to Tallie, and things get even weirder. It looks like they’re whispering to each other and pointing at Rey, and any other day Rey would probably be concerned and a little upset, but it looks like this group of Danish scientists has not scooped her after all, and the wave of relief that washes over her doesn’t leave much room to care about… anything, really.

Maybe Karé and Tallie are commenting on the fact that Rey needs a haircut (and she does, badly). Maybe they love the Louise Belcher pin she put on her backpack. Maybe she has toothpaste on her face. Who cares? She’s in grad school. It’s allowed.

Two hours later, when she enters the TA meeting three minutes before it’s scheduled to begin, a sudden silence drops onto the room. From where she is standing in the door, Rey can see about fifteen pairs of eyes staring at her. Which—is not a reaction she is accustomed to receiving. Not at all.

“Uh—Hi?”

A couple of people say ‘Hi’ back. Most avert their gazes.

Very weird.

Rey looks around for an empty chair, telling herself that she’s probably just imagining things. Low blood sugar. She skipped breakfast, this morning.

“Hey, Rey.” A seventh year from Doctor Akbar’s lab who has previously never acknowledged her existence moves his backpack from the seat next to him. “How are you?”

“Good.” She sits down gingerly, trying to keep the suspicion from her tone. “Um, you?”
“Great.”

There is something about his smile. Something prurient and fake and predatory. Rey has almost made up her mind to ask about it when Geno manages to make the projector work and calls everyone’s attention to the meeting.

So weird.

After that, it all becomes… even weirder. Holdo stops by lab just to ask Rey if there is anything she’d like to talk about; Wol lets her use the PCR machine first, even though he usually hoards it like a fifth grader who bought it saving up his lunch money; the lab manager winks at Rey as he hands her a stack of blank paper for the copy machine.

So. Incredibly. weird.

And then—then she meets Rose in the bathroom, completely by chance, and suddenly everything makes sense.

“Holy shit, Rey!” Rose is yelling. But also holding her hands in front of her mouth, and looking at Rey like she just sprouted antennas. It’s… weird. “I’ve been texting you all day!”

“Oh.” Rey pats the back pocket of her jeans, and then front one, trying to remember the last time she saw her phone. “I think I might have left my phone at home.”

“I cannot believe it.”

“Why are you screaming?”

“I cannot believe you.”

What is this? “I don’t know what you’re—”

“I thought we were friends!”

“We are.”

“Like, good friends.”

“We are!”

“I cannot believe it, that I have to hear it from Jess, who heard it from Snap—”

“Hear what?”

“—who has it from I don’t even know who. Hux, maybe. And I thought we were friends!”

Something icy crawls its way up Rey’s back. Could it—? No. No. It can’t be.

“What are you—”

“I cannot believe it, that I have to hear it third hand!”

Oh, no. “Rose. Hear, what?”

“That you are dating Ben Solo.”
She would have gone looking for him in his office, but she has no idea where that would be, and her phone is probably buried somewhere between the cushions of her couch, two miles or so from campus. She could certainly look up his departmental page on her computer, but that would mean going back to lab to retrieve it, and possibly crossing paths with a handful of people who think that she is *dating Ben Solo*—which sounds as pleasant as eyeball acupuncture at the moment.

*Holy crap.*

Okay. It’s fine. His office is a no go, but Rey can look for him in his lab. She has never been there, but she knows how to find it simply because it’s the widest, most functional research space in the whole department, coveted by all and a never-ending source of resentment towards Doctor Solo. Rey has to swipe her badge once, and then once more to access it (she rolls her eyes both times). The second door opens directly onto the lab space, and maybe it’s because he’s as tall as Mount Everest and just as large, too, but he is the very first thing that she notices. He is peering at a Western Blot next to Alex—who is one year behind Rey and a total douche bro—but he turns towards the entrance when she comes in.

Rey feels herself smile weakly at him—mainly out of relief for having found him.

Now she’ll explain to him what Rose told her and without doubt he’ll find the situation categorically *unacceptable* and fix it for the both of them, because Rey sure can’t spend her next three years in grad school surrounded by people who think that she…

It takes her several second to realize that Doctor Solo is not the only one who noticed her when she came in. There are over a dozen benches in the lab, and at least ten people working at them, most of them—all of them—staring at Rey. Probably because most of them—all of them—have heard that Rey is dating their boss.

*Shit. Shit shit shit. Poop.*

“Can I, um, talk to you for a minute, Doctor Solo?” Rationally, Rey knows that the room is not furnished in a way that makes echoing possible. Still, it feels as if her words bounce off the walls and are repeated about four times.

Doctor Solo nods, nonplussed, and hands the Western Blot to Alex before heading in her direction, either unaware or uncaring of the fact that approximately half of his lab members are gaping at him. While the other half seem to be on the verge of a hemorrhagic stroke.

“Is here okay?” he asks, tone low.

Rey looks around. “Um… Probably better if we get a bit more…”

He nods again and leads her to a meeting room just outside the main lab space. Rey follows, trying not to dwell on the fact that a dozen people who likely think that she and Ben Solo are dating just saw them enter a private room. Alone.

This is the worst. *The absolute worst.*

“What did you want to—”

“*Everyone knows,*” she blurts out as soon as the door is closed behind her.
He studies her for a moment, looking puzzled. “Are you okay?”

“Everyone knows. About us.”

He cocks his head, crossing his arms over his chest. It’s been only a little over a week since they last talked—eight days, to be precise—but apparently it’s long enough for Rey to have forgotten his… his… presence. Or whatever it is that makes her feel like she’s small and delicate whenever he’s around—while she is well aware that she is nothing but. “Us?”

“Us.” He seems confused, so Rey elaborates. “Us, dating—not that we are dating—but Hux clearly thought so, and he told…” She realizes that the words have been tumbling out, and forces herself to slow down. “Everyone. He told everyone, and now everyone knows. Or they think they know, even though—there is absolutely nothing to know. As you and I know.”

He seems confused for a moment, but then nods, slowly. “And when you say everyone—”

“I mean everyone.” Rey points in the direction of his lab. “Those people? They know. Students in my cohort? They know. Cherie, the department secretary? She totally knows. Gossip in this department is the worst.”

He nods. “Yeah.” He seems strangely unbothered by this clusterfuck, which should maybe calm Rey down, but it only has the effect of driving up her panic.

“Why would he—Okay, I am so sorry this happened. This is all my fault.” Rey wipes a hand down her face. “But why would Hux tell anyone?”

Doctor Solo snorts. “Why wouldn’t he?”

Rey looks up. “What do you mean?”

“I am faculty and you are a student. This doesn’t look good for me. Why wouldn’t he spread a rumor that is potentially damaging?”

Rey shakes her head. “No way. He wouldn’t be that petty.”

“Really?” He lifts one eyebrow. “He wouldn’t? The same guy you’re afraid to turn down for a date because you think he’d retaliate by making your professional life—”

“Okay, okay. Point taken.” Rey takes a deep breath and starts pacing, trying to ignore the way Doctor Solo is studying her, and how serene he looks with his arms folded on his chest, leaning against the conference table. He is not supposed to be calm. He is a known asshole, with anger management issues. It’s unfair, that the burden of freaking out has to fall on Rey alone. “This is—we need to do something. Of course. We need to tell people that this is not true and that we made it all up. Except that they’ll think that I’m crazy, and maybe that you are crazy, too, so we have to come up with some other story. Yes, okay, we need to tell people we’re not together anymore—”

“And what will Hux do?”

Rey stops pacing. “Uh?”

“Won’t Hux start annoying you again, if he thinks we’re not dating anymore?”

She hadn’t thought of that. “I—maybe. Maybe, but—” It is true, that in the past week her interactions with Hux have felt less… threatening than before. Which Rey had attributed to him
thinking that she is in a relationship. But still. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Are you going to report him?”

Rey shakes her head. “No. Not right now.”

“I can do it if—”

“No. No, I…” God. Her stupid optogenetics project. “Maybe we can tell people that I broke up with you?”

“That’s very flattering,” he deadpans. Rey can’t quite figure out if he’s joking.

“Fine. We can say that you broke up with me.”

“That sounds credible,” he mutters drily, almost below his breath. Rey is not sure she has heard him correctly and truly has no idea what he means, but she is starting to feel very upset. More upset than before she found him. Fine, she is the one who kissed him first—God, she kissed Ben Solo, this is her life, this is who she is—but his scene in the break room the other day surely didn’t help matters. He could at least display some worry. There’s no way he’s okay with everyone thinking he’s dating a nobody with one point five publications—yes, that revise and resubmit counts as at least half.

“What if we tell people that it was mutual.”

He nods. “Sounds good.”

Rey perks up. “Really? Great, then! We’ll—”

“We could ask Cherie to add it to the departmental newsletter.”

“What?”

“Or do you think a public announcement before seminar would be better?”

“A—no. No, it’s—”

“Maybe we should ask the university to put it on the homepage. That way people would know—”

“Okay, okay, fine! I get it.”

He looks at her evenly for a moment, and when he speaks his tone is reasonable in a way she would never have expected of Ben Solo. “If what bothers you is that people are talking about you dating a professor, the damage is done, I’m afraid. Telling everyone that we broke up is not going to undo the fact that they think we dated.”

Rey feels her shoulders slump. She hates it, that he’s right. She hates him, a little bit. “Okay, then. If you have any better ideas to fix this mess, by all means I am open to—”

“We could let them go on thinking it.”

For a moment, she thinks she didn’t hear him correctly.

“What… What?”

“We can let people go on and think that we’re dating. It solves your problems with Hux, and it
sounds like from a... reputation standpoint—" he says the word ‘reputation’ rolling his eyes a little, as if the concept of caring about what others think of oneself were the dumbest thing since homeopathy “—things cannot get any worse for you.”

This is...

Of everything...

In her life, Rey has never...

It’s just...

“What?” she asks again, more weakly.

He shrugs. “Seems like a win-win to me.”

It so does not to Rey. It seems like a lose-lose, and then lose again, and then lose some more, type of situation. It seems insane.

“You mean... forever?” She thinks her voice comes out as whiny, but it’s possible that it’s just an effect of the blood pounding in her head.

“That sounds excessive. Maybe until Hux leaves? Until you’re done with your project and feel confident turning him down or reporting him? I don’t know. Whatever works best, I guess.”

He is... He is serious about this. He is not joking.

“Are you not...” Rey has no idea how to even ask it. “Married, or something?” He must be at least in his early thirties. He has a fantastic job, he’s tall and clearly smart, and yeah, he’s a moody dick, but some women wouldn't mind it. Some women might even like it.

He shrugs. “I think my wife and the twins won't mind.”

Oh. Oh. Oh, shit.

Rey feels a wave of heat wash over her, and she knows she’s blushing crimson, and then—she wants to die, die of this mess of shame and shock and disappointment and embarrassment, because this is who she is, she just forced a married man to kiss her and now people think that they’re having an affair or something and his wife is probably crying into her pillow and his kids will grow up traumatized because of it and—

“Oh, God. I... Oh my God, I didn’t—I am so sorry—”

“Just kidding.”

“—I really had no idea that you—”

“Rey. I was joking. I’m not married—no kids. No girlfriend.”

A wave of relief crashes into her. Followed by just as much anger.

“Doctor Solo, I don’t think this something you should joke—”

“You really need to start calling me Ben. Since we’ve reportedly been dating for a while.”

Rey exhales slowly, pinching the bridge of her nose.
“Why would you even—What would you even get out of this?”

“Out of what?”

“Pretending to date me. What’s in it, for you?”

Doctor Solo—Ben—opens his mouth, and for a moment Rey has the impression that he is going to say something important. But: “I really like the idea of annoying Hux, for one.”

“It seems like awfully little?”

He shrugs. “I'm a simple man. With simple needs.”

Rey snorts. “I doubt it.”

He lifts his eyebrow, but Rey ignores him. Funny, how she used to be scared of him. Now he’s the only person in the world who knows about her worst fuck-up ever, and it's hard feel intimidated. “What else?”

He looks to the side. “Not much. It seems like it would help you out.” He hesitates for a moment. “And I have my own reasons.”

She narrows her eyes. “Which reasons?”

“Reasons.”

“Is it—if it’s criminal, I’d rather not be involved.”

He actually smiles a bit to that. “It’s not.”

It’s clear that Rey is not going to get much more out of him. But then again—maybe it doesn’t matter. Maybe he is consistently hit on by someone, too. Maybe he just wants to see Hux crash and burn. Maybe he’s secretly having a torrid affair with Dean Kanata and wants to deflect attention. Who cares what his reasons are? Rey would be the one benefiting from them. Right?

No. Yes. No.

She is crazy for even considering this. She is certifiably mental. But:

“It would be complicated.”

“What would be?”

“To pretend that we’re dating.”

“Really? It would be complicated to make people think that we’re dating?”

Oh, he’s impossible. “Okay, I see your point. But it would be hard to do so convincingly for a prolonged period.”

Ben shrugs. “I think, as long as we say ‘Hi’ to each other if we meet in the hallways and you don’t call me Doctor Solo, we’ll be fine.”

“I don’t think people who are dating just… say ‘Hi’ to each other.”

“What do people who are dating do?”
It beats Rey. She has gone on exactly three dates in her life, the last of which mostly consisted of a guy talking about his grandmother’s hip replacement in frightening details. She finds the idea of repeating the experience appalling. Also, grad school and dating go poorly together, which is probably why Doctor Ben Solo, MacArthur Fellow and genius extraordinaire, is standing here at thirty-something, asking Rey what people do on dates.

**Academics, Ladies and Gentlemen.**

“I mean… things. Stuff.” Rey racks her brain. “They—they go out and do stuff together. Stuff they both care about doing. Like playing squash, or those Paint and Sip things.” *Which are so idiotic,* Rey thinks.

“Which are so idiotic,” Ben says, gesturing dismissively with those huge hands of his. “You could just *tell* Hux that we went out and painted a Monet. Sounds like he’d take care of letting everyone else know.”

“It’s more than that,” Rey insists. “People who date. They—they talk. A lot. More than just greetings in the hallway. They know each other’s favorite colors. And where they were born. And they… they… they hold hands. They kiss.”

Ben presses his lips together as if to suppress a smile, and then looks to his shoes.

“Well. We could never do *that.*”

Rey feels a fresh wave of mortification crash into her. “I am sorry about the kiss. I really did not think, and—”

He shakes his head. “It’s fine.”

He does seem uncharacteristically indifferent, especially for guy who is known to freak out when people make APA Style mistakes, or get the atomic number of Selenium wrong.

No, he’s not indifferent. He’s *amused.*

“Are you… Are you enjoying this?”

“Well. Enjoying is probably not the right word, but you have to admit that this pretty entertaining.”

Rey has no idea what he’s talking about. There is nothing entertaining about the fact that she once randomly kissed a faculty member in her department without asking for his permission, and now, as a consequence of that nuclearly idiotic action, everyone thinks that she is dating someone whom she has met exactly twice before today—

She bursts into laughter before her train of thought is even over, overwhelmed but the sheer improbability of the situation. *This* is her life. *These* are her choices.

When she can finally speak again, her abs hurt and she has to wipe her eyes.

“This is the *worst.*”

He is smiling. “Yep.”

“And it’s all my fault.”

“Pretty much. I mean, I kind of yanked Hux’s chain the other day… But yeah, I’d say that it’s mostly your fault.”
Fake dating. This guy. Ben Solo.

*God.* Rey would have to be a lunatic. A double lunatic. And she certainly doesn’t want to dwell on the fact that this whole scheme… it sounds almost bearable.

“Wouldn’t it be a problem, that you’re faculty and I’m a student?”

He tilts his head, going serious. “It wouldn't look great, but... I don’t think so, no. Since I have no authority over you. But I can ask around and figure that out.”

This an epically bad idea. The worst idea ever entertained in the epically bad history of bad ideas. Except that it really would solve all of her current problems at once. Every single one. In exchange of saying ’Hi’ to him maybe once a week, and making an effort not to slip and call him Doctor Solo.

It seems like a pretty good deal.

“Can I… Can I think about it?”

He studies her for a few seconds. “Of course,” he says calmly. Reassuring.

She didn’t think he’d be like this. After hearing all the stories, and seeing him walk around with that perpetual frown of his—she really didn’t think he’d be like *this.* Even if she doesn’t quite know what *this* even means.

“And thank you, I guess. For offering. Since there’s no way this whole thing would be as beneficial to you as it’d be to me. Ben.” She adds the last word like an afterthought.

Trying it out.

After a long pause, he nods. “No problem. Rey.”
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Three INCREDIBLE things happened:
- Both Sreyracha and sofondabooks made moodboards for this story. They are AMAZING. I am the luckiest person in the world and I ♡ them so much! Thank you thank you THANK YOU.
- Lilithsaur, one of my favorite artists whom I have been stanning to a probably alarming degree since my very first day in the fandom, made art for this story. It's been a bit of a life-changing experience and I have been spending most of my days staring at it since it happened, so, yeah, just leave me here to die, thank you very much ♡♡♡.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Rey may have never been to Ben’s office, but she recognizes it at once nonetheless. The student closing the door behind her and scurrying out with misty eyes and a terrified expression is a dead giveaway; not to mention the fact that Ben’s door is the only one in the hallway completely devoid of pictures of kids, pets, or significant others. Not even a copy of that paper he wrote that made the cover of Nature Methods, which Rey knows about from looking him up on Google Scholar the previous day. Just dark brown wood, and a metal plaque that says: Ben O. Solo, Ph.D.

Rey had felt a bit like a creep the night before, scrolling down his faculty webpage and going through the list of his ten million publications, staring at a picture of him that was clearly taken in the middle of a hiking trip and not by the University’s official photographer. Still, she had quickly quashed the feeling, telling herself that a thorough academic background check was only logical before embarking on a fake-dating relationship.

She takes a deep breath before knocking, and then another between Ben’s “Come in” and the moment she finally manages to force herself to open the door.

Show time.

Ben doesn’t immediately look up, and continues typing on his desktop computer. “My office hours were over five minutes ago, so—”

“It’s me.”

His hands halt, hovering half an inch or so above the keyboard. Then he turns his chair towards the entrance. “Rey.”

There is something, about the way he talks. Maybe it’s an accent, maybe just a quality of his voice. Rey doesn’t quite know what it is, but it’s there, in the way he says her name. Precise. Deep. It’s unlike anyone else.

“What did you say to her?” she asks, trying not to think about how he speaks.
Ben looks at her blankly. “To whom?”

“To the girl who was running out?”

It’s as if it takes him a second to focus on what Rey’s asking—on the fact that less than a minute ago there was someone else in the office. “Oh. She’s one of my new grads. I just gave her feedback on something she wrote.”

Rey nods, silently thanking all the gods for the fact that Holdo—whom she cannot imagine raising her voice—is her advisor, and begins to look around. He has a corner office, of course. Two windows that together must total seventy thousand square meters of glass, and so much light that Rey suspects that just standing in the middle of the room would probably cure twenty people’s seasonal affective disorder. It makes sense, what with all the grant money he brings in, what with the prestige, that he’d be given a nice space. Rey’s office has no windows and smells funny, probably because she shares it with with three other people even though it was clearly meant to accommodate two at the most. Though it might also just be because it’s located in a dilapidated wing of the building, that was deemed inadequate to house research animals and promptly palmed off to the grad students.

Hard to tell.

“I was going to email you. I talked to the Dean,” Ben tells her, and she looks back at him. He is gesturing to the chair in front of his desk. Rey pulls it back and takes a seat.

“What about?”

“You.”

“Oh.” Rey feels her stomach drop. She’d much rather the Dean didn’t know about her existence. Then again, she would also rather not be in this room with Ben Solo, or for the semester to begin in only a handful of days, or for climate change to be a thing; so, clearly, this has not been her week.

“Well, about us,” Ben amends. “About socialization regulations.”

What is permissible and what isn’t, in terms of faculty-students relationships, is slightly complicated. Rey knows, because she checked. To be precise, she checked when Hux first asked her out (and then continued to ask her out; and then continued some more) and going in search of a way to reject him without… rejecting him seemed to be her only option out of a pretty sticky mess. She was very disappointed to find out that post-docs are barely considered a step above graduate students.

“What did she say?”

“That there is no regulation against you and I dating, since I am not your PI.”

A sense of relief floods through Rey. It doesn’t surprise her: after all, she has come here for a very specific reason.

“However, there are some issues to consider. I won’t be able to collaborate with you in any formal capacity. And I am part of the program’s Awards Committee, which means that I’ll have to excuse myself if you are nominated for fellowships or similar opportunities.”

Rey nods. “Fair enough.”

“And I absolutely cannot be part of your thesis committee.”
Rey huffs out a laugh. “Well, that won’t be a problem.”

He blinks. “It won’t?”

“I mean… No offense. But I wasn’t going to ask you to be on my committee.”

He narrows his eyes. “Your work would benefit from the perspective of a computational modeler.”

“Yeah, but I also want to graduate. And possibly not to cry in a bathroom stall after each committee meeting.” He is still glaring at her, so Rey shrugs. “I’m a simple girl, with simple needs.”

To that, he ducks his chin into his chest, but not before Rey can see the corner of his mouth twitch.

“When he looks up again, his expression is serious.

“So… have you decided?”

Rey presses her lips together as he watches her calmly.

“Yes. Yes, I… I want to do it. It’s a good idea, actually.”

For so many reasons. It’ll get Hux off her back, but also… everyone else. It’s almost as if since the rumor has begun to spread people have been too intimidated by Rey to give her the usual shit.

Mitaka has given up on trying to switch her nice 2 pm TA sessions with his horrifying 8 am, Haddeen has stopped cutting in front of her in the line for the electron microscope, and two different faculty members Rey had been trying to get ahold of for weeks finally deigned to answer one of her emails. It feels a little unfair, to exploit this huge misunderstanding, but Rey hasn’t had very many advantages in her life, and has learned to grab whatever she can get away with. And if some—okay, all of the students in the department look at her weird because she’s dating Ben Solo… So be it. Her friends seem to be mostly fine with this, if a little bemused.

Except for Finn, who has been shunning Rey like she has the pox, and has avoided making eye contact with her for a solid week. But Finn is Finn—he’ll come around.

“Very well, then.” Ben is completely expressionless. Almost too expressionless: like it’s no big deal and he didn’t really care either way; like if she’d said no, it wouldn’t have changed anything for him. For a moment Rey wonders if he’s trying to hide something, but immediately dismisses the idea. She is positive that this whole mess is not nearly as relevant for him as it is for her.

Whatever his reasons are.

“Though—I have been thinking about this a lot.” He waits patiently for her to continue. “And I think that it would be best if we laid down some ground rules. Before starting.”

“Ground rules?”

“Yes. You know. What we are allowed to do, and what we are not. What we can… expect out of this.”

He seems to ponder it, and then nods slowly. “Yeah. That’s actually a good idea.”

His tone sounds vaguely complimentary, and Rey waves it off. “I think that’s pretty standard protocol, before embarking in a fake dating relationship.”

He tilts his head. “How many times have you done this?”
“Zero. But I’m familiar with the trope.”

“The… what?” He blinks at her, confused. Rey decides to ignore him and move on.

“Okay.” She inhales deeply and lifts her index finger. “First of all: this should be a strictly on-campus arrangement. Not that I am so conceited that I think you’d want to meet me off campus, but just in case you were planning to kill two birds with a stone: I’m not going to be your last minute backup date if someone else falls through, and I, like, won’t meet your family for Christmas or Thanksgiving or—”

“Rosh Hashanah.”

“What?”

“I’m more likely to celebrate Rosh Hashanah than Christmas. Actually,” he shrugs. “I am unlikely to celebrate either.”

“Oh. I guess this is something your fake girlfriend should probably already have known.”

The ghost of a smile appears on his mouth, but he says nothing.

“Okay. Second rule. Actually, it could be interpreted as an extension of the first rule. But.” Rey bites into her lip, willing herself to bring it up. “No sex.”

For several moments, Ben doesn’t move. Not a millimeter. Then his lips part—but still no sound comes out, and that’s when Rey begins to realize that she has just rendered Ben Solo speechless. Which would be funny any other time, but the fact that he seems to be dumbfounded by Rey not wanting to include sex in their fake dating relationship has her stomach sink.

After all, he did say that he had reasons to get into this arrangement—and never specified what those reasons were. So maybe these are the reasons. Maybe for some inexplicable reason Ben wants to have sex, with her, and she—she… she just…

Poop.

“Why do you look so surprised? Did you—did you think that we would—because if so, I—“

“No!” It seems to half explode out of him. “No. I am…” He casts around for the word for several seconds. “I am honestly shocked that you would even feel the need to mention it.”

“Oh.” Rey feels her cheeks heat at the indignancy in his voice.

Right. Of course he doesn’t expect or want to do that. With her. Of course. Look at his h-index—Look at him. Why would he? “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to—”

“No. No, it… It makes sense, I guess. I was just… surprised.”

“I know.” Rey nods, because… yeah, she’s a little surprised, too. That she is sitting in Ben Solo’s office, talking about sex—and not the meiosis kind of sex, but potential sexual intercourse between the two of them. This is your life, Rey. These are your decisions. This is all your fault. “I… yeah. Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” The silence between them stretches a bit, and after a few moment Rey notices that Ben is… blushing. If faintly. It’s just a dusting or red, but he looks so…so…

Rey can’t stop staring.
“No sex,” he confirms with another nod, and Rey has to shake herself out of inspecting the color of his cheekbones.

“No sex,” she repeats. And then feels a weird need to clear her throat. “Okay. Third. It’s not really a rule, but… I won’t date anyone else. As in, real-dating. It would be messy, and complicate everything, and…” Rey hesitates. Should she tell him? Is it too much information? Does he need to know?

Oh, well. Why not, at this point. It’s not like she hasn’t kissed the man. “I don’t date, anyway. I’ve never… I’ve never dated seriously before, not interested in it, so.” The last few words come out a little more defensive than she intended.

Ben just looks at her, and says nothing.

“But you can date, of course,” she adds hastily. “Though I would appreciate it if you could avoid telling people in the department, just so I don’t seem like an idiot and you don’t look like you’re cheating on me, and the rumors don’t balloon out of proportion—”

“I won’t.”

“Okay. Great. Thanks. I know lying by omission can be a pain, but—”

“I meant, I won’t date someone else.”

There is a certainty, a finality in his tone, that takes Rey by surprise. She can only nod at it, even though she wants to protest that he can’t possibly know, even though a million questions surface in her mind. Ninety-nine percent of them are incredibly inappropriate and not her business, anyway, so she forces herself to shoo them away.

“Okay. If you… Okay. Okay.” Rey notices that she’s wringing her hands, and places them firmly in her lap. “Fourth and last… Well.” This is the tricky one. The one she came in afraid he’ll object to. “We should probably… do things together. Every once in a while.”

“Things?”

“Things. Stuff.”

“Stuff,” he repeats dubiously.

“Yep. Stuff. Like… What do you do for fun?” God. He’s probably into something atrocious, like taxidermy or cow-tipping excursions or Japanese beetle fighting. Maybe he collects porcelain dolls. Maybe he’s an avid geocacher. Maybe he goes to vaping conventions.

“Fun?” He repeats the word like he’s never heard it before. Like Rey just spoke in Urdu.

“Yeah. I mean… what do you do when you’re not at work?”

The length of time that passes between Rey’s question and his answer is alarming in itself. “I… work at home, too, sometimes. And I sleep. And I work out.”

Rey has to actively forbid herself to face palm. “Um. Great. Anything else?”

“What do you do for fun?” He asks, somewhat defensively.

“Plenty of things. I…” Go to the movies. Though no, she hasn’t been since the last time Lazlo dragged her. Play board games. Though every single one of her friends seems too busy, lately, so
not that, either. She did participate in that volleyball tournament, but it was over a year ago, and so was Taylor Swift’s concert (not that going to a concert constitutes a hobby, but she could have spun it as ‘listening to live music.’) “Um. I work out?”

She would love to wipe that smug expression off his face. So. Much.

“Whatever. We should do something together on a regular basis. I don’t know, maybe get coffee? Like, once a week? Just for five minutes. At a place where people could easily see us, so that they won’t think that we broke up, or that we were faking it all along. I know it sounds annoying and like a waste of time, but it’ll be super short and it would make the fake-dating more credible, and ___”

“Sure.”

Oh. “Sure?”

“Yeah, sure.”

Rey thought this would take a lot more convincing. A lot more. “Okay. Um, what day of the week?”

“What day works for you?”

She forces herself to stop wondering why he’s being so helpful and accommodating, and tries to visualize her schedule. “How about Thursday?”

Ben angles his chair to face his computer, and pulls up a calendar app that Rey doesn’t recognize. It’s so full of colorful boxes that she feels a surge of vicarious anxiety rise up in her chest.

“Thursday’s a bad day. I meet with most of my grads, and there’s Grand Rounds, which I sometimes go to. And a biweekly committee meeting. And Seminar at night, but you have that, too.”

“Wednesday?”

He clicks on something and the monitor shifts. “It works before eleven am. And after six pm.”

“Ten?”

He turns his chair back to Rey. “Ten’s good.”

“Um. Aren’t you going to write it in your calendar?”

“I’ll remember,” he tells her evenly.

Okay, then. Rey makes an effort to smile at him, and—it feels relatively sincere. Way more sincere than any smile she thought she’d ever be able to muster in Ben Solo’ presence. “Okay. Great. Fake-dating Wednesday it is, then.”

A line appears between his eyebrows. “Why do you keep saying that?”

“Saying what?”

“Fake-dating’. Like it’s a thing.”

“Because it is. Don’t you watch rom-coms? Or read Young Adult novels?” Silence. “No
fanfiction?”

Ben just stares at Rey with a puzzled expression, until she clears her throat and looks down at her knees. “Um. Right.”

Not an AO3 fan, clearly. God, they have nothing in common. They’ll never find anything to talk about. Their five-minute coffee breaks are going to be the most painful, awkward parts of her already painful, awkward weeks.

But Hux is off her case, and in the end that’s all that matters.

Rey stands from the chair, stuffing her hands in the back pockets of her jeans. And then she thinks better of it and thrusts one out to him, figuring that every fake-dating arrangement deserves at least a handshake. Ben stares at it hesitantly for a couple of seconds, but then he seems to make up his mind and stands, clasping her fingers as he looks first at their joined hands, and then up to Rey’s eyes. Rey orders herself not to notice the heat of his skin, or how large he is, or… anything else, really. When he finally lets go, she has to make a conscious effort not to open her hand and study her palm.

Has he done something to her? It sure feels like it. Her flesh is tingling.

“When do you want to start?”

“How about next week?” It’s Thursday. Which means that she has less than seven days to psychologically prepare for the experience of getting coffee with Ben Solo. She knows that can do this—if she worked her way up to a ninety-seventh percentile on the Verbal GRE, she can do anything, or as good as—and yet, all of a sudden this seems like a horrible idea.

“Sounds good.”

It’s going to happen. It's happening. “Let’s meet at Food for Thoughts. It's where most of the grads get coffee—someone’s bound to spot us.” Rey heads for the door, pausing to glance at Ben when her hand is on the handle. “I guess I’ll see you for Fake-dating Wednesday, then?”

He is still standing behind his desk, arms crossed on his chest. Looking at Rey. Looking entirely less irritated by this entire mess than Rey could ever have expected. Looking... nice.

“See you, Rey.”

…

“Pass the salt.”

Rey would, she really would, but Finn looks like he’s already salty enough. So she just leans her hip against the kitchen counter and folds her arms across her chest.

“Finn.”

“And the pepper.”

“Finn.”
“And the oil.”

“Finn…”

“But only if we have extra virgin olive oil. I don’t want your grapeseed crap.”

“Listen. It’s not what you think it—”

“Fine. I’ll get them myself if you—”

“Can we please talk about this?”

“We’re talking.”

“No, you are cooking and I am just standing here, trying to get you to acknowledge the fact that you have heard that I am dating B—”

Finn turns away from the casserole he’s preparing, wagging his finger in Rey’s direction.

“Do. Not. Say it.”

“Do not say what?”

“Do not say that word in this house.”

“Which word?”

“You know which word.”

“Ben S—?”

“Do not say it.”

Rey throws up her hands, because—this is crazy.

“It’s fake, Finn.”

He turns back to the asparagus he was chopping. “Pass the salt.”

“Did you even hear me? It’s not real.”

“And the pepper, and the—”

“The relationship, it’s fake. We’re not really dating. We’re faking it, so that people think that we’re dating.”

Finn’s hands stop mid-chop. "What?"

"You heard me."

"Is it a… friends with benefits arrangement? Because—”

“No!” Rey takes a deep breath. “It’s the opposite. There are no benefits. Zero benefits. Zero sex.”

He stares at her with narrowed eyes. “To be clear, oral and butt stuff totally counts as sex in my—”

“Finn!”
He takes a step towards her, grabbing a dish rag to wipe his hands. His nostrils are flaring a bit.

“I am… afraid to ask.”

Rey nods. “I know it sounds ridiculous. He’s helping me out—pretending that we’re dating so that Hux gets off my back. And… other things, that are complicated to explain now. But it’s fake. We have met exactly”—Rey decided on the spot to omit any information pertinent to The Night—“three times, and I know nothing about him. Except that for some reason he was willing to help me handle this creep, and I jumped at the chance.”

Finn is making that face, now. The one he makes when Rey says that she’ll have vitamin gummies for dinner, or when people wear sandals with white socks underneath. He can be a little scary, she has to admit.

“This is… wow.” There is a vein pulsating on his forehead. Rey thinks about that neuroscience class she took in undergrad, and about all the possible scenarios that might lead to the rupturing of a weakened blood vessel. This situation seems like it could be one of them. Easily. “Rey, this is breathtakingly stupid.”

“Maybe.” Yes. Yes, it is. “Maybe. But it is what it is. And you’re my best friend, so—”

“Oh, isn’t Ben Solo your best friend now?”

“Come on, Finn, you know he’s not. He’s an asshole. But—he’s actually been pretty nice to me, and—”

“I’m not even”—Finn grimaces. “I’m not going to address this.”

Rey sighs. “Okay. Okay, don’t address this. You don’t have to. But… can you just not hate me? Please? You and Rose are the only ones I care about knowing the truth. But I can’t tell Rose because—”

“—everyone else would know in ten seconds.”

“—everyone else would know in ten seconds.” Rey finishes at the same time as Finn, and smiles.

Finn just stares at her, shaking his head disapprovingly. But his expression is softer, now. It’s her Finn.

“You know, I would have fake-dated you in a heartbeat. To spare you from goddamned Solo. I would have held hands with you, and given you my jacket when you were cold, and very publicly gifted you chocolate roses and teddy bears for Valentine’s day.”

It’s so refreshing to talk with someone who understands the trope. “I know. But you also bring home a different guy or girl every week, and you love it, and I really didn’t want to cramp your style.”

“Mmm. Fair enough.” Finn half-smiles and looks pleased—whether at the fact that he really does get around a fair bit, or at Rey’s thorough understanding of his dating habits, she has no idea.

“Can you, then? Please not hate me?”

He sighs, tossing the kitchen cloth onto the counter and stepping closer to Rey. “Peanut. I could never hate you. Not even for all the grapeseed oil in the world. Not even if you graduate before I do. Not even if you fake-dated Snoke.”
“Ew.”

He pulls her into his chest and hugs her tight. At the beginning, when they’d just met—she used to be constantly disoriented by how physical he always was. Now, this—this is her happy place. The safest she’s ever felt.

Rey leans her head on his shoulders, and smiles into the cotton of his t-shirt.

“Thanks.”

Finn just hugs her tighter.

“And I promise: if I ever bring him home, I will put a sock on my—ouch!”

Forty-five minutes later they sit on their minuscule couch, arms pressed against each other, and watch reruns of Bob’s Burgers while they eat a casserole that turns out to be extremely undersalted.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to monsterleadmehome and reylo-convert for beta reading! I ended up having to split this chapter in 2 because it was over 9k words long. I promise Chapter 4 is coming soon and that the fake dating shenanigans are going to start!

In the meantime, I wanted to take a second to rec my favorite fake-dating fic ever. It’s in the Trek fandom, but you don’t really need to know anything about Trek to read it and love it (and it has an academic setting). I wish I could articulate how impactful and important Psicygni’s writing has been for me, and how much of a role it played in my decision to begin to write. I remember finding her fics and being absolutely amazed that something could be So Incredibly Good and just... available to me. Anyway: the fic is called The Place Between, and believe me when I say that you want to give it a try ♡.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

On the first Fake-dating Wednesday, in the coffee shop there are three Biology grad students, one Pharmacology post-doc, and one undergraduate RA currently working in Rey’s lab—and they are all staring at them.

It is the middle of the summer, but it has been raining for over three days, and Ben shows up wearing a black Henley that looks like it was ideated, designed, and produced specifically with the upper half of his body mind. Rey is bemused. Not that his clothes fit him well, but that she is noticing what someone is wearing to begin with.

It’s not like her.

She has been seeing him traipse around her building for the better part of two years, not to mention that in the past couple of weeks they’ve met and spoken what feels like an inordinate amount of times. They have even kissed. Which is why it’s dizzying and a little unsettling, the realization that sinks over her as they get in line to order their coffee.

Ben Solo is handsome.

Not in the washed out, pleasant, mildly-good-looking way of most of the men Rey works and interact with on a daily basis. Ben Solo is really, really, really handsome, and she has no clue how it hadn’t registered before, or why what it took for her to realize it was for Ben to put on a twenty-dollar plain black sweater.

Rey wills herself to stare ahead and browse the drink menu—instead of his chest.

“So. How are you?” she asks—because it’s the thing to do.

Ben seems almost surprised. “Fine. You?”

“Fine.” It’s mid-morning, and there are at least eight people standing in line in front of them. It occurs to Rey that maybe, just maybe, she didn’t think this through as thoroughly as she could have. Because it appears that being seen together while standing next to each other in silence might not fool anyone into thinking that they’re blissfully dating. And Ben is… well. He is very unlikely to initiate any kind of conversation.

“Sooo…” Rey shifts her weight to the ball of her feet a couple of times. “What’s your favorite color?”

He looks at her with a confused expression. “What?”

“Your favorite color.”

“My favorite color?”

“Yep.”

There is a crease between his eyes. “I—don’t know?”
“What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“They’re… colors. They’re all the same.”

“There must be one you like better.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Red?”

“I don’t know.”

“Yellow? Vomit green?”

He narrows his eyes. “Why are you asking?”

Rey shrugs. “It feels like something I should know?”

“Why?”

“Because. As your fake girlfriend. If someone tries to figure out whether we’re really dating, it might be one of the first questions they ask. Top five, for sure.”

He stares at her for a few seconds. “Does that seem like a likely scenario, to you?”

Rey thinks about it. “About as likely as me fake-dating you?”

Ben nods, as if conceding her point. “Okay. Black, I guess.”

She snorts. “Figures.”

“What’s wrong with black?” He is frowning.

“Come on.”

“Black’s a good color.”

“It’s not even a color. It’s no colors. Technically.”

He huffs. “It’s better than vomit green.”

“Yeah. Well. It suits your personality.”

“What does that even—”

“Good morning, guys.” The barista smiles at them cheerfully. “What will you have today?”

It takes Rey a second to realize that the reason she looks familiar is that she was in one of the sections she TA’d last semester. Rey smiles back, and gesture at Ben to order first.

“Coffee.” He darts a glance at Rey before adding, sheepishly. “Black.”

She has to duck her head to hide her smile. When she glances at Ben again, the corner of his mouth is curved upwards. Which, Rey reluctantly admits to herself, is not a bad look for him.

She ignores all of it, and orders the most fatty, sugary thing on the drink menu, and asks for extra whip cream. She is wondering if she should try to make up for it by buying an apple, too, or if she
should just lean into it and top it off with a cookie, when Ben takes a credit card out of his pocket and holds it to the cashier.

“Oh, no. No, no, no. No.” Rey puts her hand in front of his, and lowers her voice. “You can’t pay for my stuff.”

“…no?”

“That’s not the kind of fake relationship we’re having.”

He looks surprised. “It isn’t?”

Rey shakes her head. “Nope. I would never fake date a dude who thinks that just because he’s a dude he has to pay for my coffee.”

He lifts one eyebrow. “I doubt a language exists in which the thing you just ordered could be referred to as ‘coffee’.”

“Hey—”

“And it’s not about me being a dude—” the word comes out as very pained “—I was actually thinking more of you still being a student. And your yearly income.”

Oh.

For a moment, Rey hesitates, wondering if she should be getting mad. Is Ben being his well-known asshole self? Is he being patronizing? Does he think she’s poor? Then she remembers that she is in fact poor, and that he probably makes five times as much as she does, and just shrugs, adding a chocolate chip cookie, a banana, and a pack of gum to her coffee. To his credit, Ben says nothing and pays the resulting eighteen dollars and thirty-nine cents without batting an eye.

While they’re waiting for their drinks, Rey looks around the coffee shop, finding that even though the RA, the post-doc, and one of the students are now gone, two of the grads are still sitting at a table by the door, glancing towards them every few moments.

Perfect.

She leans her hip against the counter and looks up at Ben. Thank God this thing is only going to amount to ten minutes a week, or she’d probably develop a permanent crick in her neck.

“Where were you born?”

“Uh?”

“Where were you born?”

“Is this another of your Green Card marriage interview questions?”

Rey just giggles, and he smiles a bit in response, as if pleased to have made her laugh. Though it’s certainly for some other reason.

“Netherlands. The Hague.”

“Oh.” Rey thinks about it for a moment. “Oh.”

He leans against the counter, too, directly in front of her. “Why ’oh’?”
Rey shrugs. “I don’t know. Yeah, I think I expected… New York. Or maybe somewhere in Indiana?”

He shakes his head. “My mother used to be a politician. And a US ambassador to the Netherlands at the time.”

“Wow.” It feels weird, to imagine. That Ben has a family. That he was a kid. That he was born in the Netherlands, and maybe speaks fluent Dutch. Maybe he likes to have fish for breakfast. Maybe his mother wanted him to continue her legacy and become a diplomat, too, but then his shiny personality emerged and she had to give up on her dreams. “What is she doing now? Your mother.”

“She’s still a politician.”

“You said ‘used to be’.”

His expression hardens, if minimally. “We don’t talk much anymore.”

“Here you go.” Their coffee appears on the counter. Rey tells herself that the way the blond barista smiles at Ben, and the fact that she so obviously checks out his ass as he turns to retrieve a lid for his cup is—absolutely none of her business. None at all. She also tells herself that, as much as she’s curious to know every last thing about his mother, how many languages he speaks, and whether he likes tulips, it’s probably information that goes way beyond this arrangement of theirs.

So she just clears her throat. “Well. This was fun.”

He looks up from his cup. “Is Fake-dating Wednesday over?”

“Yes. It’s over. Great job, team. You’re free until next week.” Rey stabs her straw into her drink and takes a sip, feeling the sugar explode in her mouth. Whatever she ordered, it’s disgustingly good. She’s probably developing diabetes as she speaks. “And, you know. Thanks for buying me three days’ worth of food.”

He hesitates for a moment and then nods, once. That thing he’s doing—he’s definitely smiling down at her. Not like a normal person would smile, but still.

“My pleasure.”

Hours later, as she listens to Taylor Swift and chews on her overpriced cookie while grading quizzes for undergrads who should probably not be Biology majors in the first place, she finds herself grabbing her phone to look for the Wikipedia entry on US ambassadors to the Netherlands.

…”

“Where were you born?” Ben asks her the following week, as they wait for their bagels be toasted.

The coffee shop is not very crowded today, but they passed Doctor Ackbar by the entrance, and Rey is almost positive that the flash of orange-red she saw in the distance was Hux’s hair. All in all, nothing to complain about.

“Liverpool,” she lies.

It’s a pretty white lie. Basically translucent. And to be fair, for all that Rey knows she might even
have been born in Liverpool. She would love to be from the Beatles’ hometown.

“When did you move here?”

“Six years ago. For college.”

“Why the US?”

Reasons. Too many to list. “I got a full ride.”

Ben fidgets a little with the cardboard cup holder. “Do you go back a lot? Home, I mean.”

Rey licks some whip cream off her straw, and is puzzled when she noticed the way he immediately looks away from her. “No.” Never. She hasn’t been back once, and it suits her just fine.

“Do you plan to move back home, once you’re done with your Ph.D.?”

“No. Not if I can help it.” And maybe even if she cannot help it. That is not my home, she doesn’t say.

Ben nods, seemingly satisfied, and takes a sip of his coffee. “Favorite color?”

Rey opens her mouth to tell him—tell him that her favorite color, it’s so much better than his. Hers is, in fact—

It is—

“Dammit.”

He looks at her knowingly. “Difficult, isn’t it?”

“There are so many.”

“Yup.”

“I’m gonna go with… Blue. Light blue. No, wait. I don’t like it that much.”

“Mmm.”

“Let’s say white. Okay, white.”

Ben clucks his tongue. “You know, I don’t think I can accept that. White is not really a color. More like all colors put together—”

Rey leans forward and pinches him none-too-gently on the fleshy part of his forearm.

“Ow,” he says, clearly not in pain at all. With a sly smile, he turns to grab their bagels from the barista.

…

The third time they meet it’s barely September, but it feels like early Fall. Rey takes a look at Ben as he comes inside the coffee shop and immediately knows.
He’s in the shittiest of moods.

A story Jess once told her comes to mind—something about Ben hurling a Petri dish at the wall and smashing it into a million pieces because his staining didn’t work out, or the electron microscope needed repairs, or something equally inconsequential. It’s all Rey can do not to duck under the table.

*It’s okay,* she tells herself. *This is worth it. Hux hasn’t asked you out in ages, but he’s helping on the project and not being too much of a dick about it; the first, and second, and yeah, even the third years are too scared of you to steal your reagents, which means that you don’t have to stuff them in your backpack and take them home over the weekend anymore; and you’re getting some grade-A free food out of this. It’s totally okay.*

She can take Ben Solo—even this shitty-mood Ben Solo. For ten minutes, at the very least.

“Ben,” she calls from her table when he doesn’t seem to notice her. “Here.”

He turns as soon as she calls him and walks over to her, practically *exuding* moodiness. As he approaches, Rey has to force herself to take a fortifying breath and quiet down.

“How are you?”

“Okay.” His tone is clipped, and his expression is a little more tense than usual. He’s wearing a red plaid shirt and jeans, and he looks so… so *big,* that Rey begins to wonder if he has to have his clothes custom made. His hair is… not *short,* but shorter than it was last week. It seems a little surreal, that she and Ben Solo are at a point where Rey is able to keep track of his moods—and of his haircuts. But here they are, and here he is.

Life choices, and all that.

“Ready to get coffee?”

He nods distractedly, barely looking at her. On a table in the back, Snap is glancing at them while pretending to clean the monitor of his computer.

“Did you have a good week?”

“Fine.”

*O-kay.*

“Uhm… did you do anything fun, last weekend?”

“I worked.”

As they get in line to order, it’s all Rey can do to stop herself from sighing. “Weather’s been nice, right? Not as humid as August.”

Ben just grunts in response, and keeps on staring straight ahead.

And really—this is starting to be a little too much. There’s a limit to what Rey will do for this fake-dating relationship—and even for a free mango jelly Frappuccino. She sighs before asking, “Is it because of the haircut?”

At least, it gets his attention. Ben looks down at her, a vertical line deep between his eyebrows.

“What?”
“Is it because of the haircut, that you are in a mood?”

“What mood?”

Rey gestures broadly towards him. “This. The bad mood you’re in?”

“I’m not in a bad mood.”

She snorts—though that’s probably not the right term for what she just did. It’s too loud and derisive, more like a laugh. A snaugh.

“What?” Ben frowns, seemingly unappreciative of her snaugh.

“Come on.”

“What?”

“Come on. You ooze moodiness.”

“I do not.” He actually sounds a bit indignant, which oddly strikes Rey as… endearing.

“You so do. You came in with that face, and I knew immediately.”

“I did not.”

“You did. You do. But it’s fine—you’re allowed to be in a bad mood.” It's their turn, so she takes a step forward and smiles at the cashier. “Good morning. I’ll have a pumpkin spice latte. And… that cream cheese danish over there. Yep, that one, thank you. And—” she points at Ben with her thumb “—he’ll have chamomile tea. No sugar. And he’ll also pay for the both of us,” Rey adds cheerfully. She immediately takes a few steps to the side, mostly hoping to be able to duck in case Ben whips a Petri dish out of his back pocket and decides to throw it at her. She is mildly surprised, when she notices that he’s calmly handing his credit card to the boy behind the counter.

Really. He is not as bad as they make him out to be, she thinks.

“I hate tea,” he tells her as he comes to stand next to her.

Rey beams up at him. “That is so unfortunate.”

“You brat.”

He is staring straight ahead, but Rey is almost certain that he is about to crack a smile. There’s a lot to be said about him, for sure—but not that he doesn’t have a sense of humor.

“So… not the haircut?”

“Mm? Ah, no. I... it was a weird length. Getting in my way while I was running.”

Oh. So he’s a runner. Like Rey. “Okay. Great. Because it doesn’t look bad.” It looks good. As in, really good. You were probably the most handsome man I’d ever talked to last week, but now you look even better. Not that I care about these things. I don’t care about these things at all. I’m not sure why I’m noticing you, or your hair, or your clothes, how tall and broad you are. I really don’t get it. I really never care. Usually.

“I…” He appears to be a little flustered for a second, his lips moving without making a sound as he seems to look for an appropriate response. Then, out of the blue, he tells her: “One of our grant
proposals wasn’t funded.”

“Oh.”

He nods. “We knew it hadn’t been funded, and it’s fine, but—we got the summary statement back this morning.”

“I see.” Though she doesn’t, not quite. She waits for him to continue, and then, when it becomes clear that he won’t, she asks: “And? That bad?”

“They are so… stupid. The reviews.” It’s edging his voice, how angry he is. Making his jaw clench. It has Rey wanting to say something, though she’s not quite sure what that could even be.

“Okay. I mean, that’s annoying but… it’s normal, right?”

Ben gives her an affronted look, suddenly looking exponentially more cross. Oh, boy.

“What I mean is… how many other grants do you have, anyway? Actually, don’t answer that. I’m not sure I want to know.” He probably has fifteen. And he also has tenure. And a million publications. And there are all those honors listed on his website, not to mention that she’s sure that she’s read on his CV that he has one patent or something like that. Rey tries not to focus on how much further ahead than her he is in his career, but it’s unforgettable, how good he is at what he does. How annoyingly good. “My point is, ultimately you’re fine, right? You’ll just turn the grant around and get it next time, probably.” Likely. Surely.

He glares at her. Clearly not a fan of rationalizing and working through his emotions, Doctor Ben Solo.

“Oh, you could stay mad, and we could go to your lab and throw test tubes full of toxic reagents at each other until the pain of third-degree burns overrides your shitty mood? Sounds like fun, no?”

Ben looks away and rolls his eyes, but she can see it in the curve of his cheeks, that he’s amused. Probably against his will. “You are such a brat.”

“Maybe so, but I’m not the one who grunted when I asked you how your week was.”

“You did order me chamomile tea.”

Rey smiles. “You’re welcome.”

A boy with purple hair who looks about thirteen hands Rey her danish, and she and Ben remain quiet for a few moments as she takes her first bite—sweet and tart and sticky. Once she’s swallowed, she looks at Ben and says, “I’m sorry about your grant,” finding that she really is.

He shakes his head. And then, surprisingly, he adds: “I’m sorry about the mood.”

“It’s okay. You’re famous for that.”

“I am?”

“Yep. It’s kind of your thing.”

“Is that so.”

“Mmm.”
His mouth twitches. “Maybe I wanted to spare you.”

Rey smiles, because it’s actually a nice thing to say. Because he is not a nice person, but he is very nice to her, most of the time—if not always. He’s almost smiling back, and staring down at her in a way that she cannot quite interpret, but that makes her think weird things. Is it that… Could he maybe—

The barista deposits their drinks on the counter, and for a moment Ben looks like he’s about to retch.

“Are you okay?”

He looks at her cup and takes a step back. “The smell of that thing.”

Rey inhales deeply. *Heaven.* “You hate pumpkin spice latte?”

He wrinkles his nose, and moves even farther away. “Gross.”

“How can you hate it? It’s the best thing your country has produced in the past century. Or ever.”

“Please, stand back. The smell.”

“Hey. If I have to choose between you and pumpkin spice latte, maybe we should rethink this fake dating arrangement.”

He eyes her cup like it contains radioactive waste. “Maybe we should.”

“Hey—I meant to ask. Are you going to the Fall Biosciences picnic?”

He holds the door open for her as they exit the coffee shop, taking care not to come too close to her drink. Outside it’s starting to drizzle, and students are hastily packing up their laptops and notebooks from the patio tables to head to class or move to the library. Rey has been in love with the rain since as far back as she can remember—admittedly, not very far—and she fills her lungs with petrichor as she and Ben stop right under the canopy.

“I have to.”

“Go to the picnic?”

"Yep."

"Why do you have to?"

“I’m on the Biology department’s Social and Networking Committee.”

Rey can’t help herself—she laughs out loud. “Why would you sign up for that?”

He lifts one eyebrow, and—*Ah. Shit.* She really can’t act like a normal person with him, can she? “Sorry—I didn’t mean to imply that you—”

He waves his hands. “Nah, I was forced to rotate into the position. For one year. Started in August.”

“Ah. That sounds… fun.” She winces sympathetically, and almost laughs again at his expression. “Well, I’m going, too. Doctor Holdo makes us all go, says it promotes bonding among labmates or something like that. Do you make your students go?”
“No. I have other, more productive ways of making my students miserable.”

Rey smiles. He is funny, in that weird, dark way of his. Though—why is he funny? He’s already handsome and smart, he shouldn’t be funny. Though he’s an asshole, too. There is that, at least. “I bet. Anyway, I’m going with friends, but if you’re going to be there, too, we should at least… I don’t know. Say ‘Hi’ to each other when we’re there.”

He nods. “I told you so.”

“Told me, what?”

“That saying ‘Hi’ to each other would be crucial to this fake-dating business.” He lifts his hand in goodbye and turns around, walking with long, unhurried strides in the direction of his office, uncaring of the patter of the rain on his hair and shoulders.

Rey just stares at his tall, broad back for a several moments, and feels herself smile when she sees him take a sip of his chamomile tea.

…

“… and three of my rats are not self-administering cocaine.”

“God, why?”

“Which means I have no data to write up. Zero. It’s like—not even a null finding. It’s nothing.”

“Ugh. That sucks.”

“And the deadline for the Society for Biology conference is in two weeks, and—”

“Oh, poop.”

Finn stops right outside of seminar and turns to look at Rey. “What?”

“SfB’s deadline.”

“You didn’t know? I’m pretty sure we got, like, seven reminder emails—”

“No, I knew. I just forgot.”

“Well. Holdo’s gonna shit a brick if you don’t submit an abstract.”

“I know. Shit. My optogenetics stuff is so messy—I have to come up with something.”

Finn groans in sympathy. “Me too. I hate conferences.”

“So do I.” Rey cringes. “Ugh. I don’t wanna apply for travel funds. And Boston is so expensive.”

“And I don’t wanna spend a week making a shit poster that no one will look at, either.”

“God.” Rey rolls her eyes, pushes on the mahogany door that opens into the seminar room, and—immediately bumps into Rose, who is standing at the edge of a cluster of about ten people. The air in the room is hot and humid, and it smells like sweat and swamp and… human.
“Why are you guys just standing here?” Rey asks. “People can’t come in if you don’t—”

Rose grimaces. “Can’t move anywhere else. Come,” she grabs Rey’s wrist and pulls her through the throng of students and post-docs crowding the entrance. “We gotta get to the attendance sheet or all of this will be for nothing.”

Rey turns to make sure that Finn is still with her, but the room is too packed with people, many taller than Rey, and she finds that she has already lost him. “God, why is it so crowded today?”

“Speaker’s a big deal, so they made the talk mandatory for us, Immunology and Pharmacology. And Neuroscience too, I think. And earlier I spotted D’Acy, who never comes to seminar, which makes me suspect that they blackmailed faculty into showing up, too. And it’s longer than usual—sixty minutes plus questions.”

“What?”

“I know, it’s the worst. And the speaker’s a protein crystallography dude, not even tangentially relevant to my research interests. Or yours. Or anyone’s.” Rose thrusts a pen in Rey’s face. “Here, sign. We should move all the way to left, it’s the farthest from the entrance. Maybe there are seats.”

There are no seats, of course—and even if there had been, they might not have taken them. There is an unspoken rule that Rey picked up on during her second week or so in the program, which states that the chairs on the left are reserved for faculty, while the right and center part of the room is where the students hang out. Rey spots Ben a few meters from her, deep in conversation with Doctor Dameron.

Maybe it’s the contrast between the person she thought he’d be and how he’s been behaving when they are together, or maybe it’s just the fact that they do happen to share a pretty big secret, but at some point in the past few Fake-dating Wednesdays Ben has managed to become a friendly face of sorts. When their eyes meet, Rey grins and waves at him. Ben doesn’t wave back, but his gaze seems to become softer and warmer, and his mouth curves into that tilt that Rey has learned to recognize as his version of a smile.

“Well. I guess we can just stand here for one hour and a half?” Rose sounds unhappy.

Rey turns to her. “At least there’s oxygen, here.”

“They should just cancel seminar to begin with. This whole situation should be considered a fire hazard.”

“It should. I can’t believe they didn’t switch rooms with one of the bigger auditoriums. There is not nearly enough space for—"

“Oh, no. No, no, no.”

Rey follows Rose’s gaze to see at least fifteen new people come through the door, and feels herself die inside a little. Immediately, the crowd starts pushing Rey towards the left side of the room. Rose yelps when a first year from Neuroscience—who clearly weighs about four times as much as she does—steps on her toe. “This is ridiculous.”

“I know. I can’t believe they’re making this mandatory for—”
Rey’s hip bumps against something—someone. She turns to apologize, and—it’s Ben, that she just walked into. Actually, Ben’s shoulder. He looks away from Poe Dameron and up to Rey.

“Hey—sorry. A bunch of new people just came in and apparently the space in this room is finite.” Rey gestures in the direction of the entrance. “I think it’s a law of physics, or something.”

Ben nods. “It’s okay.”

“I’d take a step back, but…”

Near the podium, Doctor Phasma takes the mic and calls for silence, beginning to introduce the guest speaker.

“Here,” Ben tells Rey, making to stand from his chair. “Take my seat.”

Oh. Oh. “Oh.” That’s actually nice. Really nice. Not fake-dating-to-save-her-ass-from-Hux, spend-20-bucks-on-junk-food-for-her-every-week nice, but still very nice. Rey cannot possibly accept. Plus, Ben’s a professor, which means that he’s older and all that. He’s gotta be at least thirty-something. He might look fit, but he probably has a bum knee and is only a few short years from osteoporosis. “Thank you, but—”

“Actually, that would be a terrible idea,” Rose interjects. Her eyes are darting between Rey and Ben. “No offense Doctor Solo,” she whispers, “but you’re probably three times larger than Rey is. If you stand, the room’s going to burst.”

Ben looks at Rose like he has no idea how interpret what she just said—and like he’s never seen her before. Rey wonders if he remembers that she briefly rotated in his lab. If he remembers being part of her comps committee. If he remembers asking her to rewrite a huge chunk of the second aim of her dissertation proposal because her power analysis was “shoddy, at best.” Probably not.

“But,” Rose continues, this time looking at Rey, “it’d be great if you could do me a solid and sit on your boyfriend’s lap, Rey. Just so I don’t have to stand on Dolores’ toes?”

Sound recedes a bit, substituted with an odd, prolonged ringing that appears to be stuck in her ears. Doctor Phasma is still presenting—“…got his Ph.D. from the Humboldt University of Berlin in 1976, and then moved to a post-doctoral fellowship at the Sackler institute, where he pioneered several techniques in the field of X-ray crystallography…”—and Rey can make out the words, but it’s as if they come from far, far away. Any other time she’d be worried about a stroke, or some kind of anoxic event, but here, now, she isn’t. Because there are a variety of perfectly acceptable of reasons for her brain to be farting, at the moment.

First of all, there’s the fact that Rose was clearly speaking to Rey, but the room is so jam-packed that Ben is maybe half a centimeter away from them, and there is no way he hasn’t heard Rose refer to him as… as… yep. Rey’s boyfriend. It’s not the first time Rey hears that, and Rose is not the first person to say the words, but it’s not something that usually happens when Ben is standing right there, and if Rey was wondering how it would feel, now she knows for sure: when openly acknowledged in both their presence, this whole fake-dating thing is… uncomfortable. As hell.

The second reason… well, the second reason…

“I—Rose, I actually don’t think it’s a… good idea?” Rey mumbles under her breath. Making very sure not to look at Ben.

Rose rolls her eyes, and lowers her voice even more. “Really, Rey—no one cares. And you’re taking up space we don’t have. That’s pretty selfish of you, since I can’t go and use Solo as a
For a moment, Rey tries to imagine what Ben would do if Rose decided to sit on his lap, and figures that it would probably end up involving someone being murdered and someone doing the murdering—Rey’s not exactly sure who would be doing what. The mental image is so ridiculous that she almost giggles out loud—until she notices the way Rose is looking at her expectantly, and it dawns on her that she might not be able to get out of this.

“Oh, poop.

“Rose, I don’t feel—”

“Please, just do it. Flor’s elbow is puncturing my right lung as we speak. I have about thirty seconds of air left.”


Rigidly, Rey turns to face Ben. Who is, very unsurprisingly, looking up at her. With that non-expression of his that Rey can’t quite decipher yet, except that his jaw is working, too, and Rey wonders if maybe this is it. The last straw. The moment he backs out of their arrangement. The moment he withdraws the protection of their fake-dating covenant because, really, it doesn’t matter how much Ben hates Hux and enjoys seeing him suffer. It simply cannot be worth having some girl he barely knows sit on his lap during the worst seminar in the history of seminars.

Is this okay? she tries to asks him with her eyes. Is it? Because it’s not okay for me and maybe this is a little too much more than saying ‘Hi’ to each other and having coffee together and—

He gives her a brief nod, and then—Rey, or at least Rey’s body, is doing it. Stepping into Ben, and gingerly sitting on his thigh, her knees tucked between his slightly spread legs.

This is happening. It has happened already. Rey is here. Sitting. On Ben.

This. Yep, this. This is her life.

“I am so sorry,” she whispers to Ben. He is so tall that her head is in line with his—her mouth level with his ear. She can smell the woodsiness of his shampoo, and his body-wash, and something else, too, dark and good and clean, underneath. It all feels familiar, and after a few seconds Rey realizes that it’s because of the last time they were this close. Because of The Night. Because of the kiss. “So, so sorry.”

For a moment, he doesn’t answer—just tenses his jaw and looks in the direction of the Powerpoint. Doctor Phasma is gone, and the speaker—who looks positively ancient—is yapping his mouth about β-pleated sheets, and Rey wouldn’t be interested in this talk on a regular day, but right now she just wants out of this room.

Then Ben turns his face a little and tells her, “It’s okay.”

He sounds a bit strained. He sounds like it's not okay—like he’s not okay. It can’t possibly be okay.

“I am so sorry. I had no idea she would say that, and I couldn’t think of a way to—”

“Sssh.” His arm slides around the waist, and his hand comes to rest on her hip in a gesture that should probably feel unpleasant, but is just reassuring. His voice is low when he adds, “It’s fine, Rey.” The words vibrate in her ear, rich and warm. “More material for my Title IX complaint.”
“Poop. “God, I am so—”

“Rey.” She lifts her eyes to catch his, and is shocked to find him… almost smiling. “I was kidding. You weigh nothing. I don’t mind.”

“I—”

“Ssh. Just focus on the talk. It’s supposed be awful.”

This is just—

This whole business, it’s completely—

It’s truly—

Comfortable.

Ben Solo’s lap is one of the most comfortable places on Earth, as it turns out. He really doesn’t seem to mind too much, having Rey sinking into him, and is warm and solid in a pleasant, soothing way. After a short while, Rey realizes that the room is truly too full for anyone to be paying attention to them—except for a quick glance from Poe Dameron, who studies Ben for a long moment and then smiles warmly at Rey before turning to concentrate on the talk—and stops pretending to be able to hold her spine upright for more than five minutes and just lets herself lean into Ben’s torso. He doesn’t say anything, but angles himself just a little, just to help her fit more comfortably.

Somewhere halfway through the seminar—after the speaker has been talking about psi-loop motifs for approximately seven years and truly, truly, grad school is the bloody worst—Rey realizes that she has started sliding down Ben’s thigh. Or, to be fair: Ben realizes, and he lifts her up a bit, straightening her in a firm, quick pull that makes Rey feel like she really doesn’t weigh anything. Once she’s stable again, he doesn’t move his arm from the way it’s snaked around her waist, and this talk has been happening for thirty-five minutes going on a century, so that really no one can blame Rey, if she leans into him a little bit more.

It’s fine.

It’s more than fine.

It’s really—

Yeah.

Nice.

“Don’t fall asleep,” he murmurs, and somehow she feels his lips move against the tendrils of hair above her ear.

It’s probably Rey’s cue to straighten a bit, but: “I’m not. Though you’re so comfy.”

His fingers tighten a little on her. Maybe to wake her up, maybe to hold her closer. It does feel like she’s about to melt off the chair and start snoring. “You look like you are about to take a nap.”

“I’m just dying of boredom.”

“Yeah. This is rough.”
“You should liven this up.”

Ben turns slightly to look at her. “Me?”

“You could ask a question. Something about the stats? Bitch about the experimental design?”

“There’s no stats here. Just blurry images and 3-D structures and… God, this is dull.”

Rey angles her head, so that she’s speaking in his ear. “I’m sure you can come up with something. Just raise your hand and make an observation with that tone of yours. Make sure to glare at him. I am eighty percent certain that it will give the speaker one of those transient ischemic attacks, and we’ll all get to go home early. Just take one for the team.”

His cheek curves. “You are such a brat.”

Rey looks back to the slides, smiling. “Are you still mad about your grant?”

Ben seems to think about it. “Nah. It’s fine.” He hesitates for a moment. “Has Hux been bothering you?”

“Nope. I mean, he’s being Hux.” Ben glances at her with full understanding. “But he’s helping me out. And he hasn’t asked me out in weeks.”

They fall quiet and listen to the last few minutes of the talk in silence. In the rows right in front of theirs, Rey can see at least two people taking a nap, and several surreptitiously working on their laptops. Next to Ben, Poe Dameron has been texting and playing something that looks like a newer, fancier version of Snake on his phone for the past half an hour. Rose has left at least ten minutes ago, and so have several of the students who were standing in the back of the room—rude, but very much allowed, since the talk has been stretching way past the usual time. Technically, Rey could stand up and leave Ben alone, now. Technically, she could even leave. Technically, there’s even an open chair somewhere in the third to last row.

Technically.

Instead, she brings her lips to his ear once more. “It’s working out well for me, I have to say. This whole fake-dating thing.” More than well. Better than she ever thought it would.

Ben blinks once, and then nods. Maybe his arm tenses a little around her. Maybe it doesn’t, and Rey’s mind is playing tricks on her. It’s starting to get late, after all. Her last coffee was way too long ago, and she’s not fully awake, her thoughts fuzzy and relaxed by now.

“What about you?”

“Mmm?” Ben is not looking at her.

“Is it working, for you?” Maybe it comes out a little needy, but Rey tells herself that it’s only because of how low she has to pitch her voice to talk to him. “Or do you maybe want to fake-break up?”

Ben answers nothing for a second. Then, just as Doctor Phasma takes the mic to thank the speaker and ask the audience if anyone has questions, she hears him say, “No. No, I don’t want to fake-break up.”

He really does smell good. And he’s warm and comfortable and funny in a weird, deadpan way, and yes, maybe a known asshole, too; but friendly enough to her that she can sort of ignore that,
about him. Plus, he’s spending a small fortune on sugar for her. Truly, she has nothing to complain about.

Rey settles herself more comfortably and turns her attention to the podium.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter took so long... Please, take a look at this stunning edit that sularae made, and at these wonderful moodboards that sreyracha made for both the fic and the song I got the title from. Thank you so much guys, I am so lucky you like my trash!♡♡♡♡♡♡♡
“So, what did Doctor Holdo say?”

“Nothing. Well” —Rey holds the door open for Kaydel, and waits until her friend has stepped inside the Rec Center— “initially she said nothing. Just that she understood, no big deal, SfB is not mandatory, you can skip for one year. Which was great, I thought. Then she emailed me again yesterday at, like, two in the morning. Really, I just wish faculty members didn’t do that. I’d feel less guilty for, you know… sleeping at night?”

Rey fishes her phone out of the waistband of her running shorts, presses the home button, and pulls up the email to show it to Kay.

From: Holdo, A.
To: Sanders, R.
Subject: Society for Biology - Submitting an Abstract

<Hi Rey,

I’ve been thinking this through, and considering that you’re a third year, I believe that
not submitting at abstract to SfB might be less than ideal. I am mostly thinking that you might be able to network and make new connections while at the conference. So, even if your data so far don’t look all that promising, my advice is to run your assays on a couple of mice as early as next week, and then write up what you have as preliminary findings.

Let me know if I can be of help.>

“Let me know if I can be of help.” Kay reads the last part of the message in a singsong voice, making a face and rolling her eyes.

“Right?” Rey shakes her head and hands her badge to the student worker, who unlocks the turnstile and lets her into the gym. “The mice won’t be old enough until next week, which means that I’ll barely have forty-eight hours to run the assays and to write the abstract.”

“Not to mention, co-authors will want to see it, too.”

“Ugh.”

“Sooo ugh.”

“Super ugh. And I don’t even want to go. It’s useless. And a ton of time and money wasted.”

Kay pats Rey’s shoulders comfortingly as they make their way to the third floor, where the treadmills and most of the free weights are located. Rey almost never comes to the campus gym, preferring to run outside when the weather allows it. Which, she reflects looking at the torrential rain pouring outside the window walls, is definitely not today.

“It’ll be fun to hang out, at least,” Kay tells her, trying to cheer her up. “Pretty much all the students in the department are going. We’ll all room together, skip two thirds of the conference, get free gadgets from the exhibit booths. You know, the usual. And at night we’ll go out for drinks without feeling guilty that we’re not holed up in lab running Southern Blots or doing lit reviews.”

“I guess.” It probably doesn’t make the hassle worthwhile, but it softens the blow considerably. “At least we’ll be sloshed.”

“So sloshed.”

“Do you remember at Human Genetics, when Riva got wasted and began to hit random passersby with her poster tube and—“

“Hey.” Kay elbows her in the side. “Look who’s there.”

“Who?”

“The boyfriend.”

“Who?”


Rey looks around, searching for dark hair and a tall frame. “Um. I...”
“Please tell me you don’t call him Doctor Solo.”

“No, I—”

“Though if you, like, role-play wearing school uniforms or something, I totally want to hear all about it. There, Rey. He’s over there.”

Rey glances in the direction Kay is pointing at, and—sure enough, there Ben is, standing between the kettlebells rack and the leg press machine, in that section of the gym that is always full of testosterone-fueled twenty-year-olds who for some some unknown reason seem to be compelled to grunt every time they complete a bicep rep. Ben is the tallest person on the floor, by a couple of inches at least, and Rey—now that she’s looking at him, she is not sure why she didn’t notice him before. It’s entirely possible that it’s only because his head is bending forward slightly, his black hair covering his forehead as he wipes the sweat from his eyes.

With the hem of his t-shirt.

He really should be investing in a towel, or something similar, because with the way his shirt is pulled up to his forehead, and with how low his shorts are riding, his torso is almost completely bare. Nothing indecent, but even from several feet away it’s almost impossible not to notice the fact that…

There are abs. On Ben’s body. Several of them, to be precise. Rey is not going to count them, because it would be inappropriate, and it would be creepy, and she… she is not Ben's girlfriend. And Ben is not her boyfriend. He is, in fact, just a dude in the free-weights area, minding his own business, doing his workout, and Rey likes to think of herself as the kind of person who goes to the gym to do her own workout, and not to ogle people.

Still. There he is.

Doctor Ben Solo, everybody. Looking good.

“You wanna go say hi?”

Rey whirls around, abruptly reminded of Kay’s existence. “What?”

“To Solo?”

“Go say…?” What? No. No. “No, I’m good, I…”

“Come on, go. I’ll be here, waiting for you.” Kay makes a half-hearted shooing motion and sits on one of those horrid wooden cubes that whoever furnished this place thought would look fancier than regular chairs.

“No, you don’t have to—”

“No more than 5 minutes, though. I gotta run a 5k in two weeks.” Kay is already scrolling through her phone, openly showcasing how little she cares about the fact that, at the moment, Rey really does not want to go say hi to her fake-boyfriend.

So much not. And yet.

Rey takes a deep breath and rubs her fingers into her eyes, heading in Ben’s direction before she can chicken out of this. It would be weird, if you didn’t go. Kay would get suspicious. And you’re technically on campus, she tells herself. This doesn’t break any of the fake-dating rules. It’s just
Ben is returning a kettlebell to its original spot and choosing another, larger one from the bottom shelf of the rack, when Rey finds herself within speaking distance. “Hey.”

He immediately turns around, and... He really does need a towel. Because for all that he was wiping his face a few seconds ago, his skin is still glistening with sweat, hair damp and cheeks flushed with exercise. His eyes are bright and clear and he seems... well, at least he doesn’t seem unhappy to see her. Not that Rey would necessarily expect him to be: they’ve been getting along pretty well, in the past few weeks, but there is the fact that she’s quite rudely interrupting his workout to consider, and getting angry and sullen is widely known to be one of Ben’s main hobbies. Still, all that happens is that his eyes widen a little and then go back to their original size, his expression bland but for a gleam of something that gives her a bit of pause. “Rey.”

“I… I wasn’t gonna bother you. But I came here to work out with Kay, and she insisted that—”

“Kay?” he asks.

“Kaydel. Connix? She’s a grad in Bio. Fifth year?” He just looks at her blankly. “In Doctor Sloane’s lab, exactly next to yours?”

“Oh.” It’s obvious that Ben still has no idea who Kay is—and he doesn’t even bother to look sheepish about it. Rey finds it a bit disconcerting, mostly because Kay is considered a bit of a superstar in the program. But then again, Ben appears to be like that—often alternating between being remarkably oblivious and sharply observant about the people around him. Rey really doesn’t want to know what he thinks of her, or of her research.

“Yeah. Anyway. She asked if I wanted to come say hi, and I…”

He nods. “Of course.”

It’s odd, seeing him in a place that is not a hallway in their building, or outside of what she’s begun to think as ‘their’ coffeeshop. They’ve been together often enough, and close enough, that by now Rey has gotten used to him, to his size, to his distinctive way of being in the same space as her. But here, with Ben looking sweaty and more casual than usual in his Harvard Mathletes t-shirt, things suddenly feel a little different.

“Is your friend blond?”

“Uh?”

Ben is looking over Rey’s head. “With her hair... Like a ponytail, but different? The way you do it sometimes, with the three...”

“Oh. A bun. Yes, that’s Kaydel. You recognize her?”

“No. But she’s staring at us.”

Rey sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose. “I just bet she is,” she mumbles.

“She is also pretending to look at her phone.” He tilts his head with a curious expression. “Though she’s not very good at it.”

“Yeah, well. That’s Kay for you. She’s probably texting everyone in the department about this. And her parents back home.” Rey shakes her head. “I’m gonna leave now. So you can continue…”
Doing whatever it is that you’re in the process of doing. Becoming even taller and stronger, probably. “Yeah. I just wanted for her to… you know. See us interact? Since we’re… fake-dating, and all that.”

Ben nods again, wiping sweat from his forehead with the back of his hand. “Right.”

Rey makes to turn, and then it occurs to her. “Should we…” She shrugs. “Hug, or something?”

“Oh.” Ben looks at his hands, and then at his feet, and then around him, until his gaze comes to rest on the kettlebell he pulled to his side earlier. It’s over 100 pounds—almost as heavy as Rey. What the hell is Ben even going to do with it? “I don’t know that you want to do that. I’m pretty gross at the moment.”

It’s probably a remarkably rude move and a giant faux pas, but before she can stop herself Rey looks at him from head to toe, taking in his thighs that resemble small tree trunks, and the patches of sweat darkening his clothes, and the way his hair is curling around his ears. He… he doesn’t look gross. He looks… Yeah. Not gross. Rey is really not a fan of dudes who look like they spend a double-digit percentage of their time at the gym, but even she cannot quite shake the image of what’s right under the hem of his shirt. Because Ben is… He is…

He is.

Maybe it’s better, if they don’t hug. Rey might do something egregiously stupid. Is likely to, actually. She should just say goodbye and leave—yes, that’s the thing to do. Except:

“Should we just kiss, then?” she hears herself blurt out. And then, instantly, she wishes a stray meteorite would hit the exact spot in which she’s standing. Because, really, did she just ask Ben Solo for a kiss? Is that what she just did? Is she becoming a lunatic? “I mean, not like a kiss kiss,” she hastens to add. “But like before? You know.”

He doesn’t seem to know. Which makes sense, because their other kiss was definitely a kiss kiss. Rey tries not to think about it too much, but it flashes in her mind every once in a while, mostly when she’s doing something important that requires her utmost concentration, like implanting electrodes in a mouse brain or trying to decide what to order at Jimmy Johns. Occasionally it’ll pop up during a quiet moment, like while she’s in bed and about to fall asleep, and Rey’ll feel a mixture of embarrassment and incredulity and something else, something that she has no intention to examine too closely. Ever.

“Are you… sure?”

Rey nods. Even though she’s not sure at all. “Is Kay still staring at us?”

Ben’s eyes flick up for a second. “Yes. She’s not even pretending not to, now. I… why does she care? Are you famous, or something?”

“No, Ben.” Rey gestures at him. “You are.”

“Right.” He looks mildly perplexed.

“Anyway—no need to kiss. I mean, it’s not like couples always kiss when they meet, right? I mean, I wouldn’t know, but… You’re right that it would probably be a bit weird, if we—”

“No. No, I didn’t mean that…” There is a droplet of sweat running down his temple, and he dries his face again, this time with the sleeve of his t-shirt. Somewhere in the catacombs of Pennypacker Hall, a dead nobleman who donated half his fortune to Harvard University is probably rolling in
his grave. “We can kiss.”

“Oh.”

“If you think that… If your friend is…”

“Yeah.” Rey swallows. “We don’t have to.”

“I know. But…”

“Unless you want to.” Rey’s palms feel damp and clammy, so she surreptitiously wipes them on her shorts—whose hem, it occurs to her, barely reaches her butt. Hopefully Ben didn’t notice. Not that he would care, anyway. Really, she needs to get new workout gear. “And by *want* to, I mean: unless you think it’s a good idea.”

“I—” he begins, and immediately stops and presses his lips together. “I don’t know.”

“Right.”

He looks past Rey, clearly towards Kay—who is probably busy doing an entire Instagram Story on them. “Maybe.”

*God. It isn’t. It so isn’t a good idea. It’s a horrible idea, in fact. Like all of Rey’s ideas. “Okay, then.”* 

“Okay.”

“What should we—?”

“I can…” He steps a little closer, and—he really is *not* gross. How someone dripping with sweat still manages to smell good, it’s a topic worthy of a PhD dissertation, for sure. Earth’s finest scientists should be hard at work on this.

“Why don’t I…” Rey inches into him a bit, and after letting her hand hover for a moment, she rests it over Ben’s shoulder. She pushes on her toes, angling her head up towards him. It helps very little, as Rey is still not tall enough to reach his mouth, so she tries to get more leverage by putting her other hand on his other shoulder, and—immediately realizes that she is basically *hugging* him, now. Which is the exact thing that he asked her *not* to do a second ago, and—*shit*.

“Sorry, too close? I didn’t mean to—”

She would have finished the sentence, even saying something completely rational and full of meaning, if he hadn’t closed the distance between them and just—kissed her. Just like that.

It’s little more than a peck—just his lips pressing against hers, and maybe his hand on her waist to steady her a little. It’s a kiss, but *barely* a kiss, and it certainly doesn’t warrant the way her heart is pounding in her chest or the fact that there is something warm and liquid looping at the bottom of her belly. Not unpleasant, not at all, but a little scary and confusing nonetheless, and it has Rey pull back after only a second, as the words *terrible* and *horrible* and *idea* flutter around in her head. She eases back on her heels, and it seems like for just a fraction of a moment Ben is following her, too. Trying to fill the gap between their mouths. Though by the time Rey has blinked herself free of the haze of the kiss Ben is standing tall in front of her, cheekbones dusted with red and his chest moving up and down in shallow breaths, and she thinks that she must have just dreamed up that last
Rey should avert her eyes from him, now. And he should look elsewhere, too. Why are they staring at each other, exactly?

“Okay. That, um… worked.”

Ben’s jaw tenses, and he doesn’t say anything.

“Well, then. I’m gonna go to… um…” She gestures behind her shoulders with her thumb.

“Kaydel?”

“Yeah. Yeah, Kaydel.”

Ben swallows heavily. “Okay. Yeah.”

They just kissed. They have kissed—twice, now. Twice. Not that it matters. No one cares. But. Twice.

“I’ll see you, right? Next week?”

He lifts his fingers to his lips, and then immediately lets his arm drop to his side. “Yes. On Wednesday.”

It’s Thursday, now. Which means that they’ll see each other in six days. Which is fine. Rey's fine. No matter when or how often they meet.

“Yep. See you Wed—hey, what about the picnic?”


Rey grins, for—a bunch of different reasons. Because he’s funny when he’s annoyed; because they just made it through this veritable mountain of a kiss and they seem to be still okay; because she’ll see him again soon, and it’s not as if she minds spending time with him. It’s kind of nice to have him around, maybe because of this huge secret that they’re sharing, maybe… maybe just because.

“It’s on Monday.”

He sighs. “I know.”

“Will you go?”

He looks at her, and it’s all in his eyes, what he doesn’t say: It’s not like I have a choice, even though I’d rather have every single one of my hair follicles extracted one by one. With pliers.

Rey laughs. “Well. I’m going, too.”

He nods. “At least there’s that.”

“I’ll see you there, okay?”

“See you there.”

Rey smiles, and waves goodbye, and then turns around and jogs up to Kay. She rubs the side of her
hand against her lips, as if trying to scrub her mind clean of the fact that she just kissed Ben—Doctor Ben Solo—for the second time in her life.

Which, again, is fine. It was barely a kiss. Not important.

“Well, then,” Kay says while standing up.

“What?”

“You really just made out in front of the entire gym, there. With Associate professor Ben McArthur Solo.”

Rey spots two free treadmills next to each other and grabs Kay’s wrist. “I’m pretty sure that’s not his middle name, and we did not.”

“I mean—you didn’t, but it was clear that you wanted to.”

Shut up. “Why were you looking at us anyway?”

“I wasn’t. I happened to glance up when he was about to jump you, and I just couldn’t look away.”

Rey snorts, plugging her headphones into the port. “Bye, Kay.”

“I’ll be honest—I didn’t get why the two you had a thing to begin with, but now that I’ve seen the way he stares at you it all makes much more—”

“I’m gonna listen to music very loud, now. To tune you out.”

“—sense.”

It’s not until later, the steam of the showers fogging the air around her and the smell of the apple shampoo she borrowed from Kay sweet in her nose, that she remembers something Ben said.

At least there’s that.

Rey ducks her head and smiles at her toes.

…

Zari is crying when Rey arrives to lab—which is unusual, but not too unusual. Grad school comes with a lot of crying in semi-public places, usually for reasons that, Rey is fully aware, would appear to be ridiculous to someone who has never stepped foot in academia. ‘They’re making me TA Intro to Bio for the fourth time in a row’, ‘I can’t believe my p-value is .051’, ‘The paper I need is behind a paywall and interlibrary loan won’t work’, ‘The centrifuge makes a scary noise at high speeds’, ‘I had a meeting with my PI and accidentally called her ‘mom’’. There are also other, subtler reasons for academics to despair, but they tend to lead to more private manifestations of distress—mostly staring at the ceiling and softly weeping in bed in the middle of a weeknight, or binge-drinking, or googling ‘alternative career options after PhD, do they really exist’.

Zari and Rey don’t quite not get along, but they have also never been particularly tight, for reasons that Rey probably should, but does not care enough to ponder. Which is why, when she comes in and finds Zari leaning her forehead against her bench, Wol gingerly patting her back with an
uneasy expression, she hesitates for a long moment before stepping closer and asking:

“What’s wrong?”

She really thought the answer would be something like ‘The production of my reagent has been discontinued’, or ‘Doctor Holdo said I have to graduate next week’, or maybe even ‘Grad school was a mistake, but now it’s too late to back out of it because my self-worth is unbreakably tied to my academic performance, and what would be even left of me if I decided to drop out?’ Instead, what she gets is:

“Your boyfriend, is what’s wrong.”

There have been enough Fake-dating Wednesdays by now, that Rey doesn’t even do a double-take anymore, when someone refers to Ben as her boyfriend. Still, Zari’s words are so unexpected and full of venom that Rey can’t help but answer, “Who?”

“Doctor Solo,” Zari spits out.

Ooh. “Oh.”

“He’s on her dissertation committee,” Wol explains in a significantly milder tone, without interrupting his patting.

Poop. Poopy poop. “Oh. Right.”

“He told me I passed my proposal with reservations.” Zari says ‘with reservations’ like she’s doing an impression of someone—though it cannot possibly be Ben, since his voice is not pitched high and he usually doesn’t wag his index finger when he’s speaking. “Which is a fancy way to say that I have to re-do two thirds of it, and that my research sucks.”

Rey bites into her lower lip. “I’m sorry, Zari.”

“I’m gonna have to spend weeks revising. This is going to set me back a lot. All because Solo had to go and nitpick—I didn’t even want him on my committee, Doctor Holdo forced me to add him. She’s so obsessed with his stupid computational stuff.”

Rey bites her lower lip, trying to come up with something meaningful to say, and fails miserably. “I’m really sorry.”

”Rey, do you guys talk about this stuff?” Wol asks out of the blue, eying her suspiciously. “About the other students. Did he tell you he wasn’t going to pass Zari?”

“What? No. No, I…” …talk to him for exactly 15 minutes a week. And okay, I’ve kissed him. Twice. And once I sat on his lap. But it’s just that. Just so Hux doesn’t annoy me. And Ben—he speaks very little. I actually wish he spoke more, since I know nothing about him—but... “No, he doesn’t. I think it would be against regulations if he did, and—”

“God.” Zari slams her palm against the edge of the bench. “He’s such a dick. I hate him so much. What a sadistic piece of shit.”

Rey opens her mouth to—to do what, precisely? To defend Ben? He is a dick. She has seen him, be a dick. In full action. Maybe not recently and maybe not to her, but if Rey wanted to count on her fingers the number of acquaintances who have ended up in tears because of Ben, well… She might need both her hands, and then her toes.
And maybe to borrow Wol’s, too.

“Did he say why, at least? What you have to change?”

“Something about power and sample size. And he wants me to change my control condition, and add another one, which is going to make everything about ten times as time consuming. And the way he said it, his air of superiority—God, he is so arrogant.”

Well. It’s no news, really. Rey scratches her temple, trying not to sigh. “It sucks. I’m sorry,” she repeats once more, at a loss for anything better.

“Yeah, well.” Zari wipes her cheeks dry with a tissue from the box Wol is holding out to her. “You should be.”

Rey freezes, sure that must have misheard. “What?”

“You are his girlfriend.”

“I…” Really am not. But. Even if she were. "And?"

"You are his girlfriend, and he's the one who failed me."

Rey frowns. “Zari, you realize that I am only dating him. I am not him. How would I have anything to do with what he—”

"You're fine with all of this. With him acting like that—like an asshole on a power trip. You don't give a shit about the way he treats everyone in the program, otherwise you wouldn't be able to stomach being with him.”

Next to her, Wol puts down the box of tissues and lifts his hands in a peacekeeping gesture. “Hey, now. Let’s not—”

"I am not the one who failed you.”

"Maybe. But you’re not the one who cares that half of the department lives in terror of your boyfriend.”

Rey feels anger bubbling up. “That is not true—I am able to separate my professional relationships and my personal feelings for him—”

“Because you don’t give a shit about anyone but yourself.”

“That is unfair. What am I supposed to do?”

“Get him to stop failing people?”

“Get him—Get him to—” Rey sputters. “Zari, how is this a rational response for you to have to Ben giving you revisions—”

“Ah. Ben, is it?”

Rey has to grit her teeth. “Yes. Ben. What should I call my boyfriend to better please you? Professor Solo?”

“If you were a half-decent friend to any of the students in the department, you would just dump your fucking boyfriend.”
“What—How—Do you even realize how little sense you are—”

No reason to finish her sentence, since Zari is suddenly walking out of the lab and slamming the door behind her, clearly uninterested in anything Rey might have to add.

“She’s not… she doesn’t really mean it. Not about you,” Wol says while scratching his head. A nice reminder that he was standing there, in the room, for the entirety of this conversation. First-row seats. Nice. It’ll take maybe fifteen minutes before everyone else in lab knows about this fight. Knowing him, he’s probably already live-tweeted it. “Zari needs to graduate in the spring, because her husband is, too. And they have to find post-docs together if they don’t want to live apart. That sort of two-body problem, you know.”

Rey nods, because while she didn’t know, she can imagine. She feels some of her anger dissipate. “Yeah, well.” Being a bitch to me isn’t going to make her thesis work go any faster, she doesn’t add.

Wol stands from his stool and walks around Zari’s bench, leaning back against it once he’s stepped in front of Rey. “It’s not… It’s not personal. But you have to understand that it’s weird, for us. Because Doctor Solo… I know he wasn’t on any of your committees, but you must know the kind of guy that he is, right?”

Rey does know. Or at least she believes that she does. She thinks about it as she runs her mice through her experimental protocol, and then later when she tries to figure out what to do with those two outliers that make her findings impossible to interpret. She mulls it over as she bikes home, the unseasonably hot wind warming her cheeks and ruffling her hair, and while she slowly eats two slices of the saddest pizza ever—because Finn has been on a health kick for what is now three weeks, and refuses to admit that cauliflower crust does not taste good and never will.

Without taking Finn into consideration (who knows about the fake-dating, and appears to alternate between finding the entire situation grossly appalling and immensely entertaining), Rose and Kay and the majority of Rey’s friends seem to have taken her relationship with Ben in stride. Rey hasn’t concerned herself with what other students in the program think—mostly because she has always been a bit of a loner, and focusing on people with whom she does not often interact seems like a wasteful use of her time and energy. Still, maybe there’s a glimmer of truth in what Zari said. It’s true that Ben has been anything but a jerk to her, but does accepting his help while he act horribly towards her fellow students make her a bad person?

Rey lays on her still unmade bed, looking up at the glow-in-the-dark stars. It’s been over two years, since she borrowed Finn’s step ladder and carefully stuck them on her ceiling; the glue is starting to give out, and in the corner by the window there is a large comet that’s going to fall off any day, now. Without letting herself think it through too much, Rey rolls out of bed and rummages into the pocket of her discarded jeans, until she finds her cell phone.

She hasn’t used Ben’s number since he gave it to her a couple of Wednesdays ago—”If Hux bothers you, just give me a call. It might be quicker than an email.” When she taps the blue icon under his name a white screen pops up, a blank slate with no history of previous messages. It gives Rey an odd rush of anxiety, so much so that she types the text with one hand, while biting a nail on the other.
Rey: <Did you just fail Zari?>

Ben is never on his phone. Never. Whenever Rey has been in his company, she has not seen him check his phone even once—even though with a lab as big as his, he probably gets about thirty new emails every minute. Truth is, she doesn’t even know that he owns a cell phone. Maybe he gave her his office number, and that’s why he told her that she should call him. Maybe he can’t even receive texts, which means that Rey is probably never even going to get an answer from—

Her palm vibrates.

Ben: <Rey?>

Who else, Rey thinks with more snark that he probably deserves—it’s been a long day, cauliflower sucks, her mice should be able to get through the Morris water maze by now, and she got yelled at because of him—but it suddenly occurs to her that when Ben gave her his number, she never once thought to give hers in return. Which means that he has no way of knowing who’s texting him at the moment, and that the fact that he guessed correctly reveals an almost preternatural intuition. Damn you, Ben MacArthur Solo.

Rey: <Yep. Me.>

Ben: <Who is Zari?>

Rey rolls her eyes, because—seriously?

Rey: <Zari. Bangel. You’re part of her committee.>

Ben: <Ah.>

Rey: <I ran into her this afternoon, after her meeting. She was very upset.>

At me. Because of you. Because of this stupid thing we’re doing.

There is a pause of a minute or so, in which, Rey imagines, Ben must cackle evilly at the idea of all the tears Zari has been shedding following her committee meeting. Then, when Rey has convinced herself that the conversation is already over and is just about to get herself out of bed and into the shower, he answers:
Ben: <I can’t discuss other students’ dissertation meetings with you.>

Rey sighs, and then exchanges a loaded look with the stuffed arctic fox Finn got her earlier in the summer for passing comps.

Rey: <I’m not asking you to tell me anything. She already told me what happened. About the revisions she has to do. That you basically failed her without failing her.>

Rey: <Not to mention that I’m the one taking the heat for it. Since I’m your girlfriend.>

Rey: <Well. “Girlfriend.”>

For several seconds, three dots appear at the bottom of her screen. Then they disappear, and then appear again, and then—finally, Rey’s phone vibrates.

Ben: <Committees don’t fail students. They fail their proposals.>

Rey snorts, half-wishing he could hear her.

Rey: <Yeah, well. Tell it to Zari.>

Ben: <I have. I have explained to her exactly what the weaknesses in the studies she designed are. She’ll have to tweak her proposal accordingly, and then I’ll sign off on her dissertation.>

Rey: <You, then.>

Ben: <Me?>

Rey: <So you’re admitting that you are the one behind it.>

Ben: <Behind what?>

Rey: <Behind the decision to fail her.>

Rey: <Or, whatever... To fail her proposal.>

Ben: <Yes, if only because aside from Amilyn I happened to be the only committee member who read the proposal before the meeting, and the only one in the position to give feedback.>

Rey bites the inside of her cheek, staring down at the phone in her palm and wondering if continuing this conversation is a terrible idea. If what she wants to say is just too much. For sure,
she’d have thought just a few weeks ago, but Ben has proven to be exceptionally tolerant of… pretty much everything that comes out of Rey’s mouth. Not to mention that, aside from Finn, he is the only person in the world with whom she is currently being honest about her relationship status. Holding back on something like this—it just feels weird.

So Rey says, “Fuck it,” out loud, and types:

Rey: <Okay>
Rey: <I see your point>
Rey: <But maybe you could have delivered that feedback in a nicer way.>
Ben: <Why?>
Rey: <Because if you had, maybe she wouldn’t be upset, now?>
Ben: <I still don’t see why.>
Rey: <Seriously?>
Ben: <It’s not my job to work on your friend’s emotion regulation skills. She is not in grade school. This is a PhD program. She will be inundated by feedback she doesn’t like for the rest of her life, and how she chooses to deal with is her own business.>

Rey runs a hand through her hair as she types her responses.

Rey: <Okay.>
Rey: <Still.>
Rey: <Maybe you could make an effort and try not to look like you enjoy delaying her graduation, then?>
Ben: <No, that’s exactly the problem.>
Ben: <The reason her proposal needs to be modified is that in its current state it’s setting her up for failure. She doesn’t have the statistical power or a solid experimental design.>
Ben: <With what she has now, whatever findings she gets, they’ll be worthless.>
Rey: <Why do you even care? She’s not your student. She’s just trying to graduate. Doctor Holdo didn’t care.>
Rey: <You fail more people than anyone else.>
Rey: <And your criticism is needlessly harsh. As in, immediately-drop-out-of-grad-school-and-never-look-back harsh.>
Rey: <You must know how students perceive you.>

Ben: <No, I don’t.>

Rey: <Antagonistic. And unapproachable.>

And that’s sugar-coating it. You’re a known asshole, Rey means. Except that I know you can not be, and I can’t figure out why you’re so different when you are with me. I’m absolutely nothing to you, so it just doesn’t make any sense, that you’d have a personality transplant every time you’re in my presence.

The three dots at the bottom of the screen bounce for ten seconds, twenty, thirty. A whole minute. Rey re-reads her last text and wonders if this is it—if she has finally gone too far, and he’ll choose to answer by reminding her that being insulted over text at 9 PM on a Friday night is not what he signed up for, and that there is a limit to what he’ll do—even out of hatred for Hux. And then, a blue bubble long enough that it’s barely contained by her phone screen finally appears.

Ben: <I am doing my job, Rey. Which is not to deliver feedback in a pleasant way or to make the department grads feel good about themselves. My job is to form rigorous researchers who won’t publish useless or harmful crap that will set back our field. The academic world is cluttered with terrible science and mediocre scientists. I couldn’t care less about how your friends perceive me, as long as their work is up to standard. If they want to drop out when told that it’s not, then so be it. Not everyone has what it takes to be a scientist, and those who don’t should be weeded out.>“>

Rey stares at her phone, hating how callous, and unfeeling, and mean, and—and…and…and how reasonable Ben sounds. She really has no idea how to answer to that—which is the exact reason why she goes for a response that is so immature, it’s almost fetal.

Rey: <Well, sorry, Doctor Solo>

Rey: <If we’re wasting your precious time while we’re being trained on how to do science>

Rey: <And we are unworthy of your precious guidance.>

Rey feels something hot and heavy in her chest, and it takes her a few moments to recognize it as anger. In fact, she is getting angry enough, and rapidly enough, that she’s about to toss her phone in her laundry hamper to avoid doing something stupid—like threatening him with bodily harm or sending him a vocal message of her screaming at him—when his answer pops up.

Ben: <I wasn’t talking about you, Rey>

Ben: <You’re a solid researcher and your work is outstanding>
Ben: <For what it’s worth, I think you’ll be a great scientist>

She has to read the last text at least five times, before its meaning starts to register. Once it finally begins to seep into her crabby, tired brain, Rey feels her cheeks heat. Ben’s probably just saying it to be polite. To placate her. What does he even know about her research? It’s not like he’s familiar with her work, and he skipped her colloquium talk last year—Rey clearly remembers the feeling of relief that flooded her when she scanned the crowd and noticed that most of the faculty weren’t present because of some last minute meeting.

Rey: <How would you even know?>

Rey: <It’s not like you’ve read my papers.>

It’s not until twenty minutes later, that Rey realizes that Ben is not going to answer her question. A warning pops up on the upper part of her screen, informing her that her battery is at five percent. With a sigh, she stands up from her bed, and looks around the room in search of her charger.
“Now go right.”

“Got it.” Finn’s finger flicks the turn signal lever, and its sound begins to click in the small space of the car. "Going right.”

“No, no, no—don’t listen to Kay. Turn left.”

Kay leans forward and swats Rose’s arm none too gently. “Finn—trust me. Rose has never been to the farm. It’s on the right.”

“Google maps says left.”

“Google maps is wrong.”

“Okay—what do I do?” Finn makes a face in the rearview mirror. “Left? Right? Rey, what should I do?”

In the back seat, Rey looks up from her phone and shrugs. “I don’t know. Try right, if it’s wrong we can just turn around.” She shoots Rose a quick, apologetic glance.

Finn grimaces. “We’ll be late. God, I hate these stupid picnics.”

Rey snorts. “We are, like—” she glances at the car’s clock “—one hour late, already. I think we can be ten minutes later than that.” I just hope there’s some food left, she doesn’t add, though her stomach has been growling for the past two hours, and there is no way people in the car haven’t noticed.

Rose sighs. “Just go right. We’ll get there eventually. If anyone asks, let’s just lie and tell everyone that Finn’s fruit flies escaped and we had to spend one hour putting them back in their tanks.” She glances out of the window. "Did anyone bring sunblock? The sun looks scary. I thought it was supposed to be fall.”

“Me!” Kay smiles triumphantly. “I have SPF 30. And 50.”

Finn grunts. “Why can’t your zebrafish have escaped?”

“For obvious reasons, I’d say?”

Finn grunts again, and the car turns right.

The picnic is in full swing when they arrive, and as crowded as it was in the two previous years, mostly due to the fact that it’s a semi-mandatory event for students in a bunch of different departments—Rey is not sure which ones, and doesn’t care enough to ask as she makes a beeline for the food table. Before she can reach it, her eyes meet with Doctor Holdo’s, who is sitting in the shade of a giant oak with a bunch of other faculty members that Rey barely recognizes. Doctor Holdo waves, no doubt extremely pleased to note that her authority extends to commandeering her grads’ free time on top of the eighty hours a week they already spend in the lab. Rey waves back and smiles weakly in a valiant attempt not to look as resentful as she feels, and then grabs a cluster of white grapes and pops one into her mouth, letting her gaze wander around the fields.
It really is uncommonly hot and sunny for September. There are students everywhere—some sitting on the lawn chairs scattered around the farm, others lying down in the grass or walking in and out of the barns. A few are eating from plastic plates on a cluster of folding tables close to the main house, but it’s clear that dinner time was over some time ago. There are at least three games going on—a weird version of volleyball with all the players standing a circle, a soccer match, and something that involves a frisbee and over a dozen half-dressed dudes.

“What are they even playing?” Rey asks Rose when she comes to stand next to her. She spots Snap almost tackle someone from Immunology, and then cringes as she looks back to table. Slim pickings, that’s what’s left by now. Rey just wants a sandwich. A bag of chips. Anything.

“Ultimate Frisbee. Or some version of it? I don’t know. Did you put sunblock on? You’re wearing a tank top. And shorts, so you really should.”

Rey bites into another grape—it’s not even sweet. It doesn’t even taste good. A travesty, this grape. This entire food table. This event. “You Americans. And your fake sports.”

“I’m pretty sure there are European tournaments of Ultimate Frisbee, too. Hey, you know what’s not fake?”

“What?”

“Melanoma. Put on some sunscreen.”

“Mmm, I will, mom. Can I eat first?”

“Eat what? There’s nothing left. Oh, there’s some cornbread over there.”

“Where—oh cool. Pass it over.”

“Don’t eat the cornbread!” Kay’s head appears between Rey and Rose. “Jess said that a Pharmacology first year sneezed all over it. Here, Rose, have the sunscreen. Rey, put on some, too—Where did Finn go?”

“Parking. Or something.”

“Who?” Rey pouts, discarding what’s left of her sour, inadequate grapes. Her stomach is growling again. “Tell me who defiled the cornbread—I’m going to find them and make them pay.”

“Dunno, Jess didn’t say—Holy shit.”

Rey looks up from her perusal of the table, alarmed by the urgency in Kay’s tone. “What?”

“Just. Holy shit.”

“Yeah, what—”

“Holy shit.”

“You mentioned that already.”

“Because—Holy shit.”

Rey glances around, trying to figure out what’s going on. “What is—oh, there’s Finn. Maybe he found something to eat?”
“Is that Doctor Solo?”

Rey was less than a second away from heading towards Finn—mostly to find something edible and skip the whole sunscreen nonsense altogether—but as soon as she hears Ben’s name, she stops dead in her tracks. Or maybe it’s not Ben’s name—just the way Kay is saying it.

“What? Where?”

Kay points at the Ultimate Frisbee crowd. “That’s him, right? Shirtless?”

“Holy shit.” Rose leans forward. Apparently they all have great vocabularies, for their twenty-something years of education. “Is that a six pack?”

“Yup.” Kay nods. “Actually, it might an eight pack. Are those—are those his real shoulders? Did he have shoulder enhancement surgery?”

“Oh, yeah—that must be how he used the MacArthur grant. I don’t think shoulders like that exist in nature. God—is that his chest? Was that thing under his shirt all along? Even while he was ripping my dissertation proposal a new hole?”

“How—where did he hide that in the past few years? What is going on, here?”

“Is he—Rey. Rey. Rey. Why didn’t you say he was fucking shredded.”

Rey just stands there, rooted to the ground, arms dangling uselessly at her sides. Because I didn’t know. Because I didn’t think so. Because I had no idea.

Or maybe she did, a bit. From seeing him work out at the gym the other day—though she has mostly been trying to suppress that particular mental image, and even then, she couldn’t possibly know. She just… could not.

“Well—I gotta say, this whole thing between you and Doctor Solo just makes more and more sense. Here.” Kay grabs Rey’s wrist and pulls her hand towards herself, overturning it to squirt a healthy dose of lotion on her palm. “Put this on your shoulders. And your legs. And on your face, too—you’re probably at high risk for all sorts of skin stuff, Freckles McFreckleface.”

Rey nods numbly, and begins to massage the sunscreen into her arms and neck and thighs, feeling the smell of cocoa butter and coconut oil slowly envelope her—trying not to think about Ben and the fact that apparently he does look like that. Mostly failing at it, but hey.

“Are there actual studies?” Rose asks.

“Mmm?” Kay is pulling her hair up in a bun.

“On the link between freckles and skin cancer.”

“I don’t know.”

“Feels like there would be.”

“True. I kinda wanna know, now.”

“Hold on—do you think there’s WiFi here?”

“Rey, do you have internet?”
Rey wipes her hands on a napkin that looks mostly unused. “Um—I’m not sure. I left my phone in Finn’s car.”

She turns her head, away from Rose and Kay who are now studying the screen of Kay’s iPhone, until she has a good look of the Ultimate Frisbee group—fourteen men, and for some reason that Rey can’t quite understand zero women (though it might have to do with the general excess of testosterone in most of the Biosciences programs). At least half of them are faculty or post-docs. Ben, of course. And Hux. Doctor Antilles is there, too, and Doctor Dameron. All equally shirtless.

Though, no. Not equal at all. There is really nothing equal about Ben. There isn’t…

Yeah.

No.

Rey isn’t like this. She is not. She can count the number of guys she has been physically attracted to in her life on one hand. Actually—on one finger. And at the moment said guy is running towards her, because Alex, whom Rey never liked to begin with, just threw the frisbee in an outstandingly clumsy way, and it is now in a patch of grass approximately ten feet from Rey’s feet. And Ben, shirtless Ben, just happens to be the one closest to where it landed.

Fuck. Fuck poop fuck.

“Oh, check out this paper.” Behind Rey, Kay sounds excited. "Click on it, Rose.”

“Behind a paywall. But wait, why can’t I see the abstract?”

“Check Pubmed. Khalesi et al, 2013. It’s a meta-analysis. ‘Cutaneous markers of photo-damage and risk of basal cell carcinoma of the skin’. In Cancer Epidemiology, Biomarkers & Prevention.”

Kay fist pumps. “Here’s the abstract. Hey, Rey, are you listening to this?”

Nope. No, she’s not. She is mostly trying to empty her brain, and her eyes, too. Of her fake boyfriend, and of her cramping stomach, and… of everything else, too. Rey just wishes she were elsewhere, right now. That she were temporarily blind and deaf.

“Hear this: ‘solar lentigines had a weaker but positive associations with Basal cell carcinoma, with odds ratios around 1.5.’ Okay, I don’t like this. Rose, hold my phone. I’m gonna give Rey more sunscreen. Here’s SPF 50, it’s probably what you need.”

Rey tears her eyes from Ben’s chest—now alarmingly close—and turns around, taking a step away from Kay. “No, wait—no. I already put some on.”

“Rey,” Rose tells her, with that sensible, motherly tone she uses whenever Rey slips and confesses that she mostly gets her veggie servings from French fries, or that she washes her colors and whites in the same load. “You know the literature.”

“I do not know the literature—and neither do you, you just know one line from one abstract and—”

Kay comes to Rey’s side and grabs her wrist again, this time pouring about half a gallon of lotion in her right hand. There is so much of it that Rey has to use her left palm to prevent it from spilling over—until she’s just standing there like an idiot, her hands cupped in front of her as she half-drowns in bloody sunscreen.

“Here you go.” Kay smiles brightly. "Now you can protect yourself from basal cell carcinoma."
Which, frankly, sounds just awful.”

“I…” Rey would facepalm, if only she were still in control of her upper limbs. “I hate sunscreen. It’s sticky and it make me smell like a Piña colada and there is just—this is way too much.”

“Just put on as much as your skin will absorb. Especially around the freckles. And the rest, you can share it with someone.”

“Okay. Rose, then, you take some.”

“What? No. I already put on a ton.”

“Well, that’s the point! Me too.”

“Just find someone else. Where’s Finn?”

Kay snorts. “Hitting on Jude.”

Rose frowns. “Jude?”

Yep, that Neuro fifth year.”

“Oh my god. The MD-PhD?”

“Yup.”

“God. What a terrible idea. Wasn’t he dating that postdoc in—”

“Guys.” It takes Rey all she has not to yell. “I have no mobility. Please, fix this sunscreen mess you created.”

“God, Rey.” Kay rolls her eyes. “You’re so dramatic sometimes. Hang on—” Kay waves at someone behind Rey, and when she speaks her voice is much louder. “Hey, Doctor Solo! Have you already put on sunscreen?”

In the span of a microsecond, Rey’s entire brain bursts into flames—and then it crumbles into a pile of ashes. Just like that, one hundred billion neurons, a thousand billion glial cells, and who knows how many milliliters of cerebrospinal fluid, just... cease to exist. The rest of her body is not doing very well either, since Rey can feel all her organs shut down in real time. From the very beginning of her acquaintance with Ben, there have been about ten instances of Rey wishing to drop dead on the spot, or for the Earth to open and swallow her whole, or for a cataclysm to hit and spare her from the embarrassment of their interactions. This time, though, it feels as if the end of the world might happen for real.

Don’t turn around, what’s left of her central nervous system tells her. Don’t turn, pretend you didn’t hear Kay. Will all of this into non-existence. But it’s impossible. There is this triangle of sorts, formed by Rose and Kay in front of her, and Ben probably—surely—standing behind her, and it’s not as if Rey has a choice. Any choice. Especially when Ben, who cannot possibly know the direction of Kay’s thoughts, who cannot possibly see the bucketful of sunscreen that has taken residence in Rey's hands, says, with his voice:

“No.”

Well. Poop, then.

Rey spins around and there he is—sweaty, holding an orange frisbee in his left hand, and so very...
“Perfect, then!” Kay sounds so chipper. “Rey has way too much and was wondering what to with it. She’ll put some on you!”

Ben is looking at her, expression completely unreadable, and Rey would apologize, would crawl under the table, would at least wave at him—but she can’t, for obvious reasons. She and Ben haven’t talked since Friday night—since she basically texted him to yell at him and tell him how much of an asshole he is, and he answered explaining how little he cared about her opinions. Except that this doesn’t quite capture the complexity of their interaction, and Rey has been trying to be mad at him, but the truth is that Ben Solo is becoming a little hard to stay mad at, of late. He doesn’t seem angry, either, just thoughtful and a little confused as he looks between Rey’s face and the lake of white goop that now lives in her hands, probably trying to figure out if there is a way to get out of this latest shitshow—and then, just giving up.

He nods once, minutely, and turns away, the muscles in his back shifting as he throws Doctor Dameron the frisbee and yells, “I’m taking five!”

Which, Rey assumes, means that they’re actually doing this.

Of course, they bloody are. Because this is her life, and these are her poor, moronic, harebrained choices.

“Hey,” Ben tells her once she’s made her way to the end of the long table, where he’s patiently waiting for her. He’s looking at her hands, and the way she has to hold them in front of her body like some kind of supplicant. Behind her, Rose and Kay are no doubt giggling and elbowing each other, or something equally mature.

“Hey.” She’s wearing flip flops, and he’s wearing sneakers, and—he’s always tall, but right now he’s way too tall for her. It puts her eyes right in front on his pecs, and… no. Nope. Not doing that.

“Can you turn around?”

Ben hesitates for a moment and then he does, uncharacteristically obedient. Which ends up resolving none of Rey's problems, since his back is in no way less broad or impressive. Poop.

“Cay you, um… duck a bit?”

Ben bends his head until his shoulders are… still abnormally high—what did his ambassador mother feed him while he was growing up, exactly?—but somewhat easier to reach. As Rey lifts her right hand, some of the lotion drips to the ground—Where it belongs, Rey thinks a little savagely—and then she is doing it, this thing that she never thought she would ever, ever do.

Putting sunscreen on Ben Solo.

It’s not the first time that she touches him—she has kissed him twice, and she’s sat on him for a good seventy-five minutes, only standing when she absolutely had to because the people around them had begun to file out of the seminar room—so she probably shouldn’t be surprised by how hard his muscles are. By the fact that there is almost no give to his flesh. Rey remembers meeting him in the gym, imagining that he could probably bench-press twice her weight—and then orders herself to stop, because that’s not an appropriate train of thought for her. The issue remains that there is nothing between her hand and his skin now. He feels hot from the sun, his shoulders relaxed and immobile under her touch.

Even in public, close as they are it feels like something intimate is happening. Very intimate.
Definitely too intimate.

“So.” Rey’s mouth is dry. ”Maybe this is a good time to mention how sorry I am, that we keep getting stuck in these situations.”

“It’s fine.”

“I really am, though.”

“It’s not your fault.”

There is an edge of something, in his voice. “Are you okay?”

“Yep.” He nods as he says it, though the movement seems a little taut. Which has Rey realize that maybe he’s not as relaxed as she initially thought. Still, yes, unmoving. But also vibrating with some strange kind of tension.

“How much do you hate this, on a scale from one to ‘correlation equals causation’? You can tell me.”

He surprises her when he chuckles, though—yep. Still sounds a bit strained. “I don’t hate it. And it’s not your fault.”

“Because I know this it the worst possible thing and—”

“It really isn’t. Rey.” He turns a bit to look her in the eyes, a mix of amusement and that odd tension and reassurance. “These things are gonna keep on happening.”

“Right.”

His fingers brush softly against her left palm as he steals a bit of her sunscreen for his front. Which, all in all, is for the best. She really doesn’t want to be massaging lotion into his chest in front of seventy percent of her Ph.D. program—not to mention her boss, since Doctor Holdo is probably watching them like a hawk. Or maybe she isn’t. Rey has no intention of turning around to check on who is currently staring at them. She’d rather live in less-than-blissful ignorance.

“Mostly because you hang out with some really nosy people.”

Rey bursts out laughing. “I know. Believe me, I really regret befriending them.” Rey moves to his shoulder blades. He has a lot of small moles and freckles, and she wonders exactly how inappropriate it would be, if she played Connect the Dots on a few of them with her fingers. She just bets that amazing pictures would emerge. “But hey, the long-term benefits of sunscreen have been proven by scientists. And you are pretty pale. Here, duck a bit more, so I can get your neck.”

“Mmm.”

Rey walks around him to get to the front part of his shoulders. They are so huge, she’s actually going to have to use all of this stupid lotion. Might even need to ask Kay for more. “At least, you look like you’re having fun.”

Ben glances pointedly at the way her hand is spreading sunscreen on his collarbones. Rey instantly feels her cheeks burn. “No, not—I mean—not because I am… Playing. I meant, you look like you’re having a good time playing frisbee. Or whatever.”

He nods. “It’s better than sitting down and having to chat.” He makes a face. “With students. Or
“Oh, yeah. That makes sense. I bet that’s why you’re so fit. You played lots of sports growing up, because it got you out of talking with people. It also explains why now that you're an adult your personality is so—” Rey stops short. She truly has no idea, why she seems to be unable to spend time with Ben without inadvertently saying the most insulting things. One of these days he’s going to fake dump her. Or maybe just punch her, since she probably deserves it. “Um… I meant...”

Ben lifts one eyebrow. “Antagonistic and unapproachable?”

Poop. “I didn’t say that.”

“True.”

“I—”

“You just typed it.”

“No, I didn’t mean to—You know that—” She presses her lips together when she notices the way his mouth is twitches. “Damn you.” Rey pinches him lightly on the underside of his arm—he yelps and smiles wider, which gives her great pleasure—and wonders what Ben would do, if she retaliated by writing her name with sunscreen on his chest, just enough for him to only get a tan around it. For a moment, she tries to imagine his face after taking off his t-shirt, finding the three letters printed on his flesh in the reflection of his bathroom mirror. The expression he’d make. Whether he’d touch them with his fingertips.

Crazy, she tells herself. This whole thing, it’s driving you crazy. So he’s handsome, and you find him attractive. Big deal. Who cares.

Rey wipes her mostly lotion-free hands down the columns of his biceps and takes a step back. “You’re good to go. Mister Antagonistic.” He smells of sweat, and himself, and a hint of jasmine. Rey won’t get to talk with him again until Wednesday, and why the thought comes with an odd pang in her chest, she has no clue.

“Thanks. And thank… Kaydel?”

Rey smiles. “Look at you, learning people’s names. Like a good, approachable boy.”

He shakes his head, smiling back a little. “The things I do for my girlfriend.”

“Mm. What do you think they’ll have us do, next time?”

He shrugs. “Probably hold hands.”

“Or feed each other strawberries?”

“Good one.”

“Though maybe they’ll up their game even more. Maybe we’ll have to have a fake wedding.”

“You think they’ll have us buy a house together? Sign the mortgage paperwork right in front of their eyes?”

Rey laughs, and the way he looks at her, kind and curious and patient… she must be hallucinating it. Her head is not right. She should have brought a sun hat.
“See you on Wednesday, Rey.”

Rey tries hard not to stare at his back as he rejoins his team—which seems to be overjoyed to have him back. Clearly, one more thing Ben Solo is excellent at. Unfairly so. She doesn’t even have to ask, to know that Rose and Kay and …. Pretty much everyone else, really, has been staring at them for the past five minutes. Rey resigns herself to even more people gossiping about her and Ben, fishes a Capri Sun out of the nearest cooler, and then finds a spot under a maple tree next to her friends—all this sunscreen fuss, and now they’re all sitting in the shade.

She pokes the pouch with its straw and takes a sip. A little gross, but not as bad and she remembered. And will you look at that—Rey’s not even that hungry anymore. A small miracle, courtesy of applying sunscreen to her fake boyfriend very publicly.

“What is he like?”

Rey turns to Rose, who’s sitting right next to her on what looks like an old, tattered blanket. Beside her, Kay is trying to convince Finn that Neuroscience students are, as a population, lunatics, and that hooking up with one would be a terrible idea. Finn looks like he has no intention of listening to her.

“Mm?”

“Doctor Solo. I’m assuming he’s different with you than he is with the rest of us. Or does he also tell you repeatedly that the font for the labels of your x- and y-axis is irritatingly small?”

Rey smiles into her knees, because—she can totally imagine Ben saying that. She can almost hear his voice in her head. “No. Not yet, at least.”

“What is he like, then?”

Rey opens her mouth to answer, thinking it will be easy. Of course, it’s everything but. “He’s just… you know.”

Rose snorts. “Clearly I don’t.”

“Uh?”

“I mean… clearly there’s more to him than meets the eye. Because believe me, from what I know I would die before going anywhere near him. He’s so aggressive and negative and angry and—”

“He’s not.” Rey interrupts. And then regrets it a little, because it’s not entirely true. “Or—he can be like that. But he can not be, too.”

"If you say so." Rose nods, not fully convinced. “How did it even start?”

“What?”

“You two. Dating.”

“Oh.” Rey looks away, and lets her gaze wander. Ben must have just done something noteworthy, because he and Doctor Dameron are exchanging a high five. “Uhm, we just… you know. Talked. And then, um, got coffee, and then—”

“How does that even happen?” Kay interrupts, looking at Rey over Rose’s head. “How does one decide to say yes to a date with Doctor Solo? Before seeing him half-naked, I mean.”
You kiss him. You kiss him, and then, next thing you know, he’s saving your ass from Hux and he’s buying you scones and calling you a brat in a weirdly affectionate tone, and even when he’s being his moody asshole self, he doesn’t seem to be that bad. Or bad at all.

“He just asked me out.” Though it’s obviously a lie, because he would never. He would never ask me out. Someone with a Lancet publication and back muscles that defined would never ask someone like me out.

“So you didn’t meet on Tinder?”

“No!”

“Because that’s what people are saying.”

“I’m not on Tinder.”

“Oh—is Doctor Solo?”

No. Maybe. Yes? “Who is saying that we met on Tinder?”

Kay looks a Rose. “Actually, I’d heard that they met on Craigslist.”

“What?”

Kay shrugs. “Not saying that I believe it.”

“Who—why are you guys talking about us?”

Rose pats Rey on the back. “Don’t worry, we’re not as much anymore. We were, but then Doctor Ackbar and Doctor Sloane had that very public argument about people disposing of blood samples in the ladies restroom, and the interest in you guys pretty much died down.”

Rey massages her temple. “Did it?”

“Yes. Well, kind of. Hey.” Rose wraps an arm around Rey’s shoulder and pulls her in for an embrace. She, too, smells like coconut and jasmine. Stupid, stupid, stupid sunscreen. “Chill. I know some students have been weird about this, but Kay and Finn and I are just happy for you, Rey.” Rose smiles at her reassuringly, and Rey feels herself relax. “Mostly, that you’re finally getting laid.”
Chapter 7

Number 37—salt and vinegar potato chips—is sold out. Which is the most tragic thing, but also frankly inexplicable, because when Rey came in at eight PM she peeped into the break room to glance at the vending machine, and noticed that there was at least one bag left. She distinctly remembers patting the back pocket of her jeans for quarters, and the feeling of triumph at finding exactly four. She remembers looking forward to that moment, approximately two hours later, by which time she estimated that she’d have completed exactly a third of her work, and would thus be able to reward herself with the indisputable best among the snacks that the fourth floor vending machine has to offer.

Salt and vinegar potato chips. Baked.

Except that the moment has come, and there are no chips left. Which is a problem, because Rey has already inserted her precious quarters inside the coin slot, and she is kind of hungry. So she selects number 24 (Twix)—which is okay, though not her salt and vinegar potato chips by a long shot—and listens to its dull, disappointing thud as it falls to the bottom shelf of the vending machine. Then she bends to pick it up, and stares wistfully at the way the gold wrapper shines in her palm in the bluish light filtering from behind the glass.

“I wish you were salt and vinegar chips,” she whispers at it, a trace of resentment in her voice.

“Here.”

“Aaaah!” Rey startles and instantly turns around, hands raised in front of her body and ready to defend herself—possibly even to attack a little whoever just spoke. Except that—there is no one to attack in the break room. No one at all, really, except for Ben, sitting on one of the couches in the middle of the room, looking at her with a bland, slightly amused expression.

Rey relaxes her pose and clutches her chest, willing her racing heartbeat to slow down. “When did you get here?!”

“Five minutes ago?” He looks at her calmly. “I was sitting here when you came in.”

“Why didn’t you say something?”

He tilts his head. “I could ask you the same.”

Rey covers her mouth with her hand, trying to recover from the scare. “I didn't see you. Why—why are you sitting there in the dark? Like a creep?”

Ben simply lifts his drink—a bottle of Coke, which happens to have the name ‘Sandra’ printed on the label. For a moment, Rey doesn’t understand the meaning of the gesture. Then she remembers Jess complaining about how incredibly strict Ben is about bringing food and drinks in most areas of his lab, and nods.

“But why in the dark?” There is the blue, eerie light of the vending machine, and some more seeping in from the hallway, so that the effect is more like semi-darkness. Still, it’s not Rey’s fault, if she assumed that the room was empty.

“I tried to flip the switch, I think it must be broken. I’ll send an email to Cherie about it.” He grabs
something from the cushion, and holds it out to Rey “Here. You can have the rest of the chips.”

Rey narrows her eyes. “You.”

“Me?”

“You stole my chips.”

His mouth curves. “Sorry. You can have what’s left.” He peeks into the bag. “I didn’t have that many, I don’t think.”

Rey’s heart is starting to feel like it might not beat out of her chest, after all. Still, sitting down might be a good idea. She hesitates for a moment, and then makes her way to Ben’s couch and accepts the small bag as she plumps herself next to him. “Thanks. I guess.”

He nods, and takes a sip of his drink. Rey tries not to stare at his throat as he tips his head back, averting her eyes to her own knees. “Should you be having caffeine at—” Rey glances at her phone “—ten twenty-seven at night?” Come to think of it, he probably shouldn’t be having caffeine at all, given his baseline shiny personality. Maybe it would improve his disposition. And yet here they are, the two of them. Having coffee together every Wednesday. Rey is nothing but an enabler.

“I doubt I’ll be sleeping much, anyway.”

“Why?”

“I need to run a set of last-minute analyses. We have a grant due, the day after tomorrow.”

“Oh.” Rey leans back, finding a more comfortable position. “I thought you had minions for that?”

He smiles a bit. “As it turns out, asking your grads to pull an all-nighter for you is frowned upon.”

Rey smiles back. “What a travesty.”

“Truly. What about you?”

“SfB deadline is tomorrow.”

“Ah.”

“Are you going?”

He nods. “We’re being strong-armed into giving a symposium.”

“We?”

“Yeah—a few people from my grad lab and I. We all do similar research, but they’re at different institutions. Have a bunch of grants together.”

Rey has never been good at keeping up with academic family trees and the like, but she has a vague memory of someone—probably Finn, since she gets most of her information from Finn—telling her that Ben did about half of his PhD with Luke Skywalker before moving to Snoke’s lab. According to Finn’s sources, his exit had been fairly acrimonious, and the rumored reason Skywalker, who had once been considered a superstar in Bio, had ended up leaving academia. Then again: knowing Finn, it’s entirely possible that he has made up the entire story.

“At least you don’t have to bullshit an abstract on next to no data.”
He nods knowingly. “Is Amilyn making you do that?”

Amilyn, he says. Naturally. Because Ben’s a colleague of Doctor Holdo, and not her student, and it makes sense that he would think of her as ‘Amilyn’. It’s not the first time that he calls her that, and it’s not even the first time that Rey notices. It’s just that it’s hard to reconcile, when they’re sitting next to each other alone and talking quietly, the fact that Ben is faculty, and Rey is very much... not. Worlds apart, really.

“Yep. She’s being kind of unreasonable, forcing the whole lab to submit stuff. I mean—not forcing, but you know?” Rey rubs her temple. She can feel a headache coming up. And has a long night ahead of her. “Are you gonna tell her I told you that?”

“Of course.”

Rey groans. “Don’t.”

“Maybe I’ll also tell her about the kisses you’ve been extorting, and about the whole fake-dating scheme you’ve roped me into, and above all about the sunscreen—”

“Oh. God.” Rey bends forward and hides her face in her knees, her arms coming up to wrap around her head. “Oh, God. The sunscreen. The bloody sunscreen.”

“Yeah.” Ben’s voice sounds a little muffled, from down here. “Yeah, that was…”

“Awkward?” Rey offers, sitting back straight with a grimace. Ben is looking elsewhere, and Rey has no idea if she’s imagining it, the way he’s flushing.

He clears his throat. “Among other things,” he mutters.

Rey nods. “Yep.” It was other things, too. It was a lot of things. That she won’t mention. Because her other things are sure not to be his other things. His other things are probably terrible, and harrowing, and invasive. While hers… “Is the sunscreen going in the Title IX complaint?”

He smiles. “You bet. It’s gonna be right on the first page. Workplace harassment by sunscreen.”

“Well, technically we weren’t even on campus—”

“Maybe even in the title. Non-consensual Sunblock Application.”

Rey frowns. “Oh, stop it. I saved you from basal cell carcinoma.”

“Groped under SPF pretense.”

She swats him in the head with her Twix, and he ducks a bit to avoid her, though his eyes are mostly amused.

“Hey, you want half of this?” Rey holds out the candy bar. “Since I fully plan to eat what’s left of your chips.”

“Nah.”

“You sure?”

“I can’t stand chocolate.”

Rey stares at him for a moment, befuddled. Then she realizes that he is completely serious, and
shakes her head in disbelief. “You would, wouldn’t you?”

“Mm?”

“You would. Hate everything that is delicious and lovely and comforting.”

“Chocolate is disgusting.”

“You just want to live in your dark, bitter world made of black coffee and plain bagels with plain cream cheese. And occasionally salt and vinegar chips.”

“They are clearly your favorite chips—”

“Not the point.”

“—and I am flattered, that you’ve memorized my orders.”

“Well, it does help, that they’re always the same.”

He lifts one eyebrow. “At least I’ve never ordered something called Unicorn Frappuccino, brat.”

“That was soo good. It tasted like the rainbow.”

“You mean, like sugar and food coloring?”

“Yes—my two favorite things in the universe. Thank you for buying it for me, by the way.” Rey beams at him, and she can tell, that he’s tempted to smile back. “Would you like half a dollar, then? For the chips?”

“Keep it.”

“Great. Because it’s about a third of my monthly salary.”

She actually manages to make him laugh, and—it doesn’t just transform his face, it changes the entire space they’re inhabiting. Rey has to convince her lungs not to stop working, to keep taking in oxygen and not get lost in the little lines that appear in the corner of his eyes; the dimples in the center of his cheeks. “Glad to hear that grad stipends have not increased since I was a student.”

“Oooh. Did you use to live on instant ramen and bananas during your PhD, too?”

He seems to think about it. “For some of it, maybe. I don’t really like bananas, but I remember having a lot of apples.”

“Apples are more expensive, you fiscally irresponsible splurger.” Rey tilts her head and wonders if it’s okay to ask the one thing she’s been dying to know. She tells herself that it’s a terrible idea, highly inappropriate and not her business, anyway. She tells herself that she absolutely should not—and then she goes for it anyway. “How old are you?”

Ben doesn’t seem to mind the question. “Thirty-six.”

“Oh. Wow.” She thought younger. Or older, maybe. She thought he existed in an ageless dimension. It’s so weird, to hear a number. To have a year of birth—a whole decade before hers. “I’m twenty-six.” Rey is not quite sure why, but she offers up the information, even though he definitely didn’t ask. Ben doesn’t look surprised in the least at hearing the number. “It’s kind of weird, to think that you used to be a student, too.”
“Is it.”

“Yep. Were you like this as an undergrad, too?”

“Like this?”

“You know.” She bats her eyes at him. ”Antagonistic and unapproachable.”

His eyes narrow, but Rey is learning not to take his glares too seriously. “I might have been worse, actually.”

“I bet.” There is a brief, comfortable silence as Rey sits back and makes her way through her bag of chips. It’s… all she's ever wanted from a vending machine snack, really. Bless you, Ben Solo. “So, does it get better?”

“Mn?”

“This.” She gestures inchoately around herself. “Academia. Does it get better, after grad school? Once you have tenure?”

“Oh. No. God, no.”

He looks so horrified by the assumption, Rey has laugh. “Why do you stick around, then?”

He shrugs. “Unclear.” There is a flash of something in his eyes that Rey can’t quite interpret, but— nothing surprising about that. There is a lot of Ben Solo that she doesn’t know. He might be a known asshole, but he has unexpected depths. “Sunk cost fallacy, probably.”

“Mmm. It’s kind of depressing. I mean—I know grad school is supposed to be miserable for everyone, but it’s sad to see tenured faculty here on a Tuesday night, instead of, I don’t know, watching Netflix in bed, or getting dinner with their girlfriend—”

“I thought you were my girlfriend?”

Rey smiles up at him. “Not quite.” But, since we’re on the topic, Why exactly don’t you have one? Because It’s getting harder and harder for me to figure that one out. Except that maybe you just don’t want one. Maybe you just want to be on your own, just like everything about your behavior suggests, and here I am, annoying the shit out of you. I should just pocket my chips and my candy and go back to my stupid protein samples, but this—you… You are so comfortable to be around. And maybe I—

“Do you plan to stay in academia?” he asks. “After you graduate.”


“Right.”


The corner of his mouth curves upwards. “Is your lab-mate still giving you a hard time?”

Rey waves her hand dismissively. “Nah. I mean—yes. But it’s fine. She’ll get over it.” She bites into her lip. “I do get it, what you’re saying. About not wanting to form a new generation of crappy millennial scientists.”
“I do not believe I’ve ever used the expression ‘crappy millennial scientists’—”

“But. Just FYI. I thought I’d let you know that I still think that you don’t have to be that harsh, when you give feedback. We’ll get the gist of what you’re saying, even if you give criticism more nicely.”

Ben turns and looks at her for a long time. Then he nods, once. “Noted.”

“Great. Are you going to be less harsh, then?”

“Unlikely.”

Rey sighs. “You know, when I have no more friends and everyone hates me because of this fake-dating thing, I’ll be super lonely and you are going to have to hang out with me every day. I’ll annoy you all the time. Is it really worth being a dick to every student in the program?”

“Absolutely.”

Rey sighs again, this time while smiling, and lets the side of her head rest on his shoulder. It might be a bit forward, but it also feels natural, maybe because they seem to have a knack for getting themselves in situations that require PDA of some sort, maybe because of everything they’ve been talking about, maybe because of the hour of the night, and Ben—it’s not like he acts as if he minds. He’s just there, quiet, relaxed, warm and solid through the cotton of his sweater and under her temple. It feels like a long time, before he breaks the silence.

“I’m not sorry for asking her to revise her proposal. But I am sorry that she took it out on you. And that as long as this continues, it might happen again.”

“Well, I am sorry about the texts I sent,” Rey says. She really should straighten, now. “I didn’t mean to be quite that…” Aggressive? Confrontational? ”And you’re fine. Even if you’re antagonistic and unapproachable.”

“It’s okay. You were upset because she’s your friend, I’m guessing.”

“Yeah.” Not really. The thing is: I don’t have many friends. In fact, I am not exactly a sociable person. It usually takes very outgoing people, like Rose or Kay, for me to feel at ease. Even with Finn, my best friend in the whole world, it was weeks before we warmed up to each other after we first became roommates. Which means that this whole thing with you is a bit of an anomaly for me, one that I’d like to understand better, and—could you please tell me everything about yourself? And your friends? Do you have any? How many? What do you do together? And when exactly did you become the most interesting person I’ve ever met? “Yeah. Well. I should go back to the lab.” Rey sits up, one hand coming to massage the base of her neck. “My disastrous blotting is not going to fix itself.”

Ben blinks, and there is an edge of something in his eyes, as if he didn’t think she’d leave so soon, and if he’d like for her to stay. Except that Rey is becoming a pro at obsessing over each and every one of his facial expressions, and she is probably just reading too much into this. Reading exactly what she wants.

“Why disastrous?” he asks.

Rey groans. “It’s just—argh.” She reaches for her phone and taps on the home button, swipes away a couple of non-urgent sounding texts she received from Finn and Rose, and pulls up a picture of her last western blot. “See?” She points at the target protein. “This—it shouldn’t…”
He nods, thoughtful. “And you’re sure the starting sample was good? And the gel, too?”

“Yep. I think so, at least. Not runny, or dried out.”

“Mmm. It looks like the antibody might be the problem.”

Rey looks away from the picture and up at him. “You think so?”

“Yep. I’d check the dilution and the buffer. If not that, it might also be a wonky secondary antibody—come by my lab if it still doesn’t work, you can borrow ours.”

“Oh, wow. Thank you.” Rey immediately regrets how full of surprise her words come out, since—yeah, he has been nothing but incredibly nice to her since the very first day she met him. “Okay, now I’m actually a bit sorry that I can’t have you on my dissertation committee. Maybe rumors of your dickishness have been greatly exaggerated.”

His mouth twitches. “Maybe you just pull out the best in me?”

Rey grins at him. “Then maybe I should stick around. Just, you know. To save the department from your terrible moods?”

Ben glances at the picture of the Western Blot in her hand. “Well. It looks like you’re not going to graduate anytime soon.”

“Oh my God. Did you just—?” Rey half laughs, half gasps. “You monster.”

“Objectively—”

“This is the rudest, meanest thing—” Rey is laughing now. Holding her tummy as she waves her finger at him.

“I’m not saying it’s your fault, but—”

“—that anyone could ever say to a grad student. Ever.”

“Nah. I think I can find meaner things. If I really put myself to it.”

“We’re done. Seriously, this is the end of our fake-dating stint.” Rey wishes she weren’t smiling. Then maybe he’d take her seriously, instead of just looking at her with that patient, amused expression. “Seriously. Bye, Ben. It was nice while it lasted.”

Rey makes to stand and leave, all mock enragement, but he grabs the sleeve of her sweater and gently tugs at it until she’s sitting down again, next to him on the narrow couch—maybe even a little closer than before. She continues glaring at him, but he keeps looking blandly at her, clearly unperturbed.

“There’s nothing bad in taking more than five years to graduate,” he offers in a conciliatory tone.

“Right. How long did it take you?”

He hesitates. “Five years.”

Rey huffs. “You just want me to stay around forever. Until you have the biggest, fattest, strongest Title IX case to ever exist.”

“That is my plan.”
“I knew it.”

“Was my plan all along, in fact. The one and only reason I kissed you out of the blue, that night back in August.”

“Oh, shut up.” She ducks her face into her chest, biting into her lip and hoping he won’t notice that she’s grinning like the idiot she surely is. “Hey, can I ask you something?” Ben is just looking at her expectantly, like he seems to be doing most of the time of late, so she continues, her tone softer and quieter. “Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“The fake-dating. You said you had reasons. Can you tell me now?” Rey bites into her lip, and plays with the hole that is opening up on the knee part of her jeans. “I mean, we’re… we weren’t then, but we’re friends now. Right?”

“Are we?” Rey nods. Yes. Yes, we are. Come on. And then tilts her head. “Well, you did just break one of the sacred tenets of academic friendships, which is to never mention another’s graduation timeline. But I’ll forgive if you, as long as you tell me if you’re getting something out of this.”

“I am.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” He seems honest. He is honest. Ben is not a liar, Rey would bet her life on it.

“What, then? Except for sunscreen-mediated fondling, and the opportunity to donate hundreds of your dollars to the campus coffeeshop. And Hux hating you even more than he already does, that is.”

He is smiling faintly. And then he’s not smiling anymore. And not looking at her, either, but somewhere is the direction of the crumpled plastic wrapper that she tossed on the table a few minutes go. Rey can see him swallow. She can see his jaw work, she thinks.

“Rey.” He takes a deep breath. “Rey, I—”

“Ah—God! You scared the shit out of me!”

They both startle—Rey considerably more than Ben—and turn towards the entrance of the break room. Tallie is standing there, one hand dramatically clutching her sternum. “God, what are you doing here at this hour? Sitting in the dark?”

What are you doing here, Rey thinks, not quite graciously. “Lights are broken,” she says. Not really answering the question, because—what could she even say? We were just talking, about nothing in particular, even though I have a deadline tomorrow at Midnight EST and will probably not be able to sleep until then, even though Ben has his own stuff due that sounds even more pressing, even though we’re supposed to only meet on Wednesdays, for approximately fifteen minutes. We were just talking, because… because I like talking to him? And no, it’s not the way you think—we’re not even dating for real. I just like this guy. He’s fun and pleasant and he makes me laugh and I don’t like a lot of people, I’d be ready to bet that neither does he, and I’m not sure what is going on, here. Not at all.

“Well. You scared me,” Tallie repeats once more. A little petulantly, Rey thinks, considering that
she and Ben were just minding their own business. “Are you working on you SfB stuff, Rey?”

“Yep.” She steals a quick glance at Ben, who looks both motionless and expressionless next to her. “Just taking a quick break? Was about to go back, actually.”

“Oh, cool. Me too.” Tallie smiles, and points in the direction of her lab. It’s Doctor Tarkin’s, right next to Doctor Holdo’s. “I gotta go isolate a bunch of virgin fruit flies. Before they’re not virgins anymore, you know?” She wiggles her eyebrows. Rey enjoys Tallie’s sense of humor, usually. Now she just wishes... She's not sure, what she wishes. “You coming with, Rey?”

_No. No, I’m fine here. Next to Ben. Please, leave me alone._

“Sure.” Reluctantly, she stands. Ben does the same, gathering their wrappers and his empty bottle, and sorting them in the recycling bins.

“Have good night, Doctor Solo,” Tallie says from the entrance. Ben just nods at her, a touch curtly. The set of his eyes is impossible to decipher, again.

_I guess that’s it, then_, Rey thinks. Where the weight in her chest comes from, she has no clue. She’s probably just tired. Ate too much, or not enough.

“See you, Ben. Right?” Rey murmurs before he can head for the entrance and leave the room. Her voice is pitched low enough that Tallie couldn’t possible have heard her. Maybe Ben hasn’t either. Except that he pauses for a moment. And then, when he walks past Rey, she has the impression of knuckles brushing against the back of her hand.

“Goodnight, Rey.”
He is wearing sunglasses.

And black jeans, and one of his ten million black sweaters, which are all just a tiny bit different from the other and yet still manage to fit him in the most irritatingly perfect way. Black shoes, and even a black North Face backpack slung over his shoulders—possibly a clue that he’s only just getting into work right now, at the very late time of 8:46 AM. Out of his ensemble, the only non-black items are the two AirPods stuck in his ears, peaking through the dark waves of his hair.

Undergrads must be either dozing off in their early-morning classes or still asleep in bed, because for once that harried air of chaos they always coat campus with is missing. Only a few people are milling around—and as usual, Ben is the tallest, broadest person on the quad. By far. Rey cannot help but notice him the moment he turns the corner, and as soon as she spots him she feels her cheeks curve into a smile—trying to imagine what it is that he’s currently listening to. Probably Coil, or Kraftwerk. The Velvet Underground. A TED Talk on French Architecture in the 17th century. A podcast on water-efficient landscaping. Rainforest noises.

Rey would fill a million liquid nitrogen tanks in exchange for five minutes alone with his phone, just to mess a bit with his playlist. Add some Taylor Swift, maybe some Beyonce. Ariana, too. Broaden his horizons, and such.

“Hey,” she calls when Ben’s within earshot, but he keeps on walking in the direction of their building, and before she can work up a whole lot of anxiety over whether he’s ignoring her on purpose because he can’t stand her, Rey jogs up to him and tugs on his sleeve.

She can’t see his eyes behind the dark lenses, but she doesn’t really need to. His mouth curves as soon as he notices her, his smile slight but there, and he immediately stops.

“Rey.”

She still hasn’t figured it out, why the way he says her name is so unique. It’s like there’s something packed behind it, something that doesn’t quite make it to the surface. A sense of possibilities. Of depth. Rey wonders if it’s real, if she’s just hallucinating it, if he is aware. Rey wonders a lot of things, lately.

“Hey.” She grins, biting into her lower lip. “Good morning.”

“Good morning.”

It should be awkward, the way they’re just staring at each other. Smiling faintly like someone just said something subtly funny, like they’re sharing some sort of inside joke. It should be awkward, and yet it feels anything but.

“You going to your office?”

He nods. Without having access to his eyes, it’s no wonder that her gaze gets stuck onto his mouth, and the way he seems to bite the inside of his cheek before asking her, “Do you want to get
coffee?”

Which is… nice, of him. They’re not due for Fake-dating coffee until tomorrow morning—haven’t been together since last Wednesday, and there have been about thirty times in the past week when Rey had to forcibly remove her phone from her hands to avoid texting Ben things he cannot possibly care about. He doesn’t need to know that she submitted her SfB abstract with exactly thirty-three seconds to spare, or that he was right and the problem with her Western was the antibody, or that she read a paper whose stats was so bad that for a moment she almost wanted to send him a screenshot of the methods section. There is no way Ben would have answered her, if on Saturday at 10 pm, when she was dying to know if he was still in his office, she had sent that ‘Hey, what are you up to?’ message that she wrote and deleted twice. And she’s glad she ended up chickening out of forwarding him that Onion article on sun safety tips that made her chuckle on Monday morning. Except that now Ben is here, and he wants to have coffee with her on a Tuesday, and Rey feels like maybe she could have done all of those things, after all. Because—they are friends. Right?

“No.” Rey scrunches her eyes shut. “Yes—I want to. But I’m TAing at ten. Taking over for someone who’s out of town.” She’s regretting agreeing to it a bit, at the moment. A lot, actually. “And I have to go to Flu-chella before then. Have you already been?”

A vertical line appears between his brows. “To?”

“Flu-chella.”

“I am… afraid to ask what that is.”

“Flu-chella,” Rey repeats, though it’s clearly not helpful, judging from how the line bisecting his forehead only deepens, so she just points at one of the hundreds of signs that have taken residence on campus in the last month or so. ‘FLU-CHELLA: Flu vaccination is provided to faculty, staff, and students at no charge.’

Ben makes a face. “It’s called Flu-chella?” he asks, dubious.

“Yep. Mass vaccination. Don’t you get the university emails about this stuff? There’s been at least five.”

“I have a great spam filter.”

Rey frowns. “Does it block work emails, too? Because it shouldn’t—it might end up filtering out important messages from students and other faculty who want to get in touch with you, as well as—oh.” Ben is arching one eyebrow. “Right.” Don’t smile. Don’t smile—he shouldn’t know how much he makes you laugh. “Well—you should go get your flu shot.”

“I’m good.”

“Oh—you got one already?”

“No.”

“Because I’m pretty sure it’s mandatory. For everyone.”

The set of Ben’s shoulders broadcasts clearly that he’s not everyone. “I never get sick.”

Rey crosses her arms over her chest. “I doubt it.”
“You shouldn’t.”

“Hey. The flu is more serious than you might think.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“It is, especially for people like you.”

“Like me?”

“You know… people of a certain age.”

His mouth twitches. “You brat.”

Rey turns away to hide her smile. “Come on.” She leans forward, her fingers wrapping around his wrist, the ball of his ulna resting right under her thumb. They have touched—so much, at this point. In public, and alone, and a mixture of the two. It doesn’t feels weird. It feels good and natural and—allowed. They’re friends. Good friends. It should come with some privileges. “Let’s go together.”

Ben doesn’t free his arm from her grip—but he also doesn’t budge one millimeter. He just stands there, like the mountain of flesh and muscles that he is, looking down at her in a way that she can’t read through his dark lenses.

“I don’t have time.”

Rey tilts her head. “You just asked if I wanted to go get coffee. You must have some time.”

He shuffles on his feet a bit. Presses his lips together. Looks across the quad, towards… nothing. There is nothing to look at. “You should just go alone.”

Rey studies him suspiciously. “Why don’t you want to get the shot? Are you some kind of anti-vaxxer?”

Oh, if looks could kill. “Please.”

“Okay.” Rey furrows her brow. “Then why?”

Ben is… fidgeting with the hem of his shirt? Biting the inside of his lip? “It’s not worth the hassle,” he says, sounding stubborn and a little plaintive.

“But it is. Even if you think you don’t get sick, people around you might.”

“No.”

“It literally takes fifteen minutes.”

“No,” he repeats.

Rey’s hand is still around his wrist, so she tightens her grip and tugs at him. “You get there, they scan your university badge. They give you the shot.” His muscles tense under her fingertips as she says the last word. “Easy peasy, and best part is, you don’t get the flu for a whole year. Totally —oh.” Rey covers her mouth with her hand.

“What?”
“Oh my god.”
“What?”
“Are you—Oh, Ben.” She steps a little closer.
“What?”
“Are you afraid of needles?”
Ben goes—still. Completely immobile. Wow, Rey thinks. He’s… not breathing anymore.
“I’m not afraid of needles.”
“It’s okay,” she says, trying to make her tone as reassuring as possible.
“I know, since I’m not—”
“This is a safe space for you and your fear of needles.”
“There is no fear of—”
“I get it—needles are objectively scary.”
“It’s not—”
“It’s fine—you can be scared.”
“I am not,” he tells her, a little too forcefully, and then looks away, scratching the side of his throat.
“They just feel… gross.”

The temptation to hug him is almost irresistible. Rey makes do with patting him on the arm. “Aw.”
He pins her with a look that Rey cannot see, but would bet on all her mice’s lives is positively withering. “Don’t ‘aw’ me.”

Adorable. “No, really. Really, I get it. They are gross. Stuff poking at you, and then you bleed. The feeling of it—yikes.”

Ben is unconvinced. “Really?”

“Yep. They’re horrible.”

He seems a little distrustful. “They are.”

“And scary.” Rey wraps her hand around his elbow and begins to pull him in the direction of the Flu-chella tent. “Still—you need to get over it. For science. I’m taking you to get a flu shot.”

“I—”

“It’s non-negotiable. I’ll hold your hand, during.”

“I don’t need you to hold my hand. Since I’m not going.” Except that he is going. He could be planting his feet and standing his ground, and he would turn into an immovable object—Rey’d have no way of dragging him anywhere. And yet.

She lets her hand slide down to his wrist and looks up at him. “You so are.”
Ben looks pained. “Please. Don’t make me.”

He. Is. So. Adorable. “It’s for your own good. And for the good of the elderly people who might come in any proximity to you. Even more elderly than you, I mean.”

Ben sighs, looking defeated. “Rey.”

“Come on. I’ll buy you a cookie afterwards.”

“Will I be paying for this cookie?” He sounds mostly helpless. And resigned.

“Likely. Actually, scratch that—you probably don’t like cookies, anyway. Because you don’t like anything that is good in life.” Rey keeps on walking and chews on her lower lip, pensive. “Maybe the cafeteria has some raw broccoli?”

Ben sighs again. “I don’t think I deserve this verbal abuse, on top of the flu shot.”

Rey beams. “You’re such a trooper.”

“Rey.”

“Even though the big bad needle is out to get you.”

“You are a brat.” He rolls his eyes, but doesn’t resist when she continues to pull him behind her.

It’s nine AM on an early-October morning, and Ben’s sunglasses were a brilliant idea. The sun is already shining too bright and too hot through the cotton of Rey’s shirt, and suddenly wearing a windbreaker seems like a poorly-thought idea. The sweetgum leaves are still a deep green, showing no sign of turning. It feels different from the past few years, this summer that doesn’t seem to know how to end, stretched full and ripe past the beginning of the fall. Different, but not unpleasant.

As they make their way across the quad, Rey’s fingers slide down from Ben’s wrist and close around his palm. She smells the flowerbeds and hums a tune under her breath as they walk quietly, side by side.

…

Rey stares gloomily at one of her knockout mice, who has been hanging from a wire for a length of time that should be impossible considering the proteins it’s not expressing, when her phone lights up. The corner of her eye darts to its screen, and she is able to read the name of the sender (Ben FD, from ‘Ben Fake Dating’, to differentiate him from Ben Harrison, with whom Rey did a group project for org chem in undergrad, and Ben Lee, her current landlord), but not the content of the message.

It’s 8:42 on a Wednesday morning. Which means that...

Maybe he wants to cancel Fake-dating Wednesday. Maybe he thinks that because he let Rey pick out an oatmeal cookie for him yesterday after Flu-chella (which she may or may not have eaten herself), that they don’t need to meet today. Maybe she shouldn’t have forced him to sit on a bench
with her and tell her everything about the last two marathons he has run; and possibly she came out as annoying, when she started to tell him in great detail about this new running app she just downloaded. He seemed to be enjoying himself. But...

Rey glances at her gloved hands, and then back at her mouse. Who is still holding onto the wire.

“Dude, stop trying so hard.” She kneels until she’s at eye level with the cage. The mouse kicks around with his little legs, its tail flopping back and forth. “You’re supposed to be bad at this. And I’m supposed to write a dissertation about how bad you are. And then you get a chunk of cheese, and I get a real job that pays real money and the joy of writing Dr. as my title whenever I buy an airplane ticket.”

The mouse squeaks and lets go of the wire, flopping on the floor of the testing cage with a graceful thud. “There. That’ll do it.” Rey returns it to its cage and then quickly gets rid of her gloves, unlocking her phone with her thumb.

Ben: <My arm hurts.>

For a moment, Rey is convinced that Ben is working his way up to canceling their date—giving her a reason why he can’t meet up. Then she remembers waking up, and rubbing her achy arm herself.

Rey: <From the flu shot?>

Ben: <It’s really painful.>

Rey… giggles. She truly did not think she was the type to, but here she is, giggling like a fool in the center of the lab. Her knockout mouse is looking up at her, his tiny red eyes a mix of judgement and surprise. Rey hastily covers the cage and looks back at her phone.

Rey: <Oh, Ben>

Rey: <I am so sorry>

Rey: <Should I come over and kiss it better?>

Ben: <You never said it would hurt so bad.>

Rey: <Aw>

Rey: <Though, to be fair, it’s not my job to work on your emotion regulation skills.>

Ben’s answer is one single emoji: a yellow hand with a raised middle finger. Rey’s cheeks are
pulling at how hard she’s grinning, when—

“Ah. Young love.”

Startled, Rey looks up from her phone to find Zari standing in the lab’s entrance. She hastily locks the device and slips it inside the pocket of her jeans. “Oh. Good morning.”

“Good morning.” For a moment Zari just stands, leaning against the doorframe. Then she wipes her palms on her pants and takes a few steps forwards, carefully avoiding meeting Rey’s eyes. She doesn’t seem to know what to do with her hands—first in her pockets, then crossed over her chest, then dangling loosely at her sides. Rey braces herself for… something.

Zari clears her throat. “Do you have a minute? To talk.”

*God. Not again.* “Sure.”

Zari wets her lips and swallows. “I’ve been wanting to apologize. For the other day.”

Oh. Well. This is…unexpected. “It’s okay.”

“No. No, it’s not. I shouldn’t have said—” she waves a hand “—any of the things that I’ve said, really. Most of them.”

Rey nods, relieved that this conversation is not turning into another confrontation. “It’s fine. Dissertation meetings are so stressful. I’d have been upset, too.”

“Yeah, but you probably wouldn’t have taken it out on me.” Zari shrugs. Her eyes are suspiciously bright, though thankfully she doesn’t look like she’s about to cry again. “Don’t get me wrong. I stand by what I said about Doctor Solo. But you have nothing to do with the way he acts. And—” her eyebrows lift in what seems to be a blend of resigned incredulity “—I suppose that there are many sides to him.”

Yes. There really are. And I am baffled, too. “Apology accepted.” Rey tries for her best smile. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m actually happy for you, Rey. Really. I mean, I know we’re not… close friends, or anything. You always seem to be in your own world, and mostly wanting to mind your own business and be left alone, and I respect that.” Zari’s smile is sincere. “But I saw you guys at the picnic. When you were joking, after you…” She mimics something that looks embarrassingly like slathering paint on a huge building, and Rey feels herself die a little. Damn Kay, and damn her sunscreen lotion. Damn everything. “And it was so obvious, how in love you two are.”

Rey feels the muscles of her back stiffen and go completely still. “In… love?”

“Yeah. I mean—now, too. The way you were looking at your phone?”

“I—I was just…”

“Yes. There really are. And I am baffled, too. Apology accepted.” Rey tries for her best smile. “Don’t worry about it.”

“I’m actually happy for you, Rey. Really. I mean, I know we’re not… close friends, or anything. You always seem to be in your own world, and mostly wanting to mind your own business and be left alone, and I respect that.” Zari’s smile is sincere. “But I saw you guys at the picnic. When you were joking, after you…” She mimics something that looks embarrassingly like slathering paint on a huge building, and Rey feels herself die a little. Damn Kay, and damn her sunscreen lotion. Damn everything. “And it was so obvious, how in love you two are.”

Rey feels the muscles of her back stiffen and go completely still. “In… love?”

“Yeah. I mean—now, too. The way you were looking at your phone?”

“I—I was just…”

“With my husband—I love him a lot, but… God, it’s been years. Since high school. But I remember when it was like that for us, too. Texting. Wanting to be together all the time.” She’s smiling wistfully, now. Not really talking to Rey anymore. “Anyway. Again, I just wanted to apologize. Have a great day.”

With a small wave of her hand, Zari gives Rey one last smile and turns around, heading for the adjacent room to check on her own animals. For a short time, Rey stands frozen, watching her put
on her gloves and lab coat, and pull out cages to begin weighing her mice. Then she lowers her
gaze to the floor, slumps on the stool behind her, and covers her mouth with her hand—thinking
one single thing:

_Fuck._

…

It’s not the end of the world. These things happen. Even the best of people develop huge crushes
—_possibly fall in love, Zari said love, oh God, she said love_—with the person they are fake-dating.
It doesn’t mean anything.

Except that—_Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck._

Rey locks the door of her office behind her and plops herself into a chair, hoping that today won’t
be the one single time out of the entire semester that her office mates decide to show up before ten
AM.

It’s all her fault, in the end. Her stupid doing. She knew, she _knew_, that she had begun to find him
attractive. She knew almost from the very start, and then she started _talking_ with him, she started
_knowing_ him even though it was _never_ part of the plan, and—damn him to hell for daring to be so
bloody different from the way she expected him to be. For making her want to be with him more
and more. Just—damn him.

It was there, staring at Rey for the past few weeks, and she just didn’t—she was an _idiot_. She _is_ an
idiot.

_Shit, shit, poop._

Though, it’s okay. It’s _probably_ okay. It probably won’t last. Rey does this, occasionally. Crush on
people. Fancy herself halfway in love. For example, she once…

She…

She must have…

Okay. Maybe Rey has never had a crush before, but this doesn’t mean that this specific one is
meaningful. Ben is—God. _Ben_. And Rey… Rey…

_Oh, no._

She stands and digs into her pocket for her phone, immediately pulling up Finn’s contact.

_Rey: <We have to meet>_

Bless Finn, because it takes him less than five seconds to answer.
Finn: <k>
Finn: <Lunch?>
Finn: <I’m about to dig into the neuromuscular junction of a dozen fruit flies>
Rey: <No, I need to talk to you>
Rey: <Now>
Rey: <Immediately>
Rey: <Pls>

Finn is—Finn. There when she needs him to be, and Rey could cry right now. Maybe she will, actually.

Finn: <k>
Finn: <Where?>
Finn: <Ur lab?>
Rey: <No, not in the Bio building>
Finn: <Coffeeshop?>
Rey: <Yes, that’s fine. Food for thoughts.>
Finn: <k, see u in 10>

…

“I told you so.”

Rey doesn’t bother lifting her head from her arms. “You didn’t.”

“I so did.”

“I’m pretty sure I’d remember, if you had.”

“Well, maybe I did not say ‘hey, don’t do this fake-dating shit because you’re gonna fall for the guy’, but I did say that the whole idea was idiotic and a car wreck waiting to happen—which I believe encompasses the current situation.”

Rey pushes up from the cold surface of the table and presses her palms into her eyes. She can’t quite look at Finn, yet. She’s not ready. She might never be again. “How could this happen? I am
not like this. This is—this is not me. How could I—and Ben Solo, of everyone. Who falls for Ben Solo?"

Finn snorts and waves his hand. “Everyone, Rey. He’s a tall, pouty, sullen young man with a genius IQ. Everyone falls for tall, pouty, sullen young men with genius IQs.”

“I don’t!”

“Clearly you do.”


"Don’t be too hard on yourself. It’s not necessarily your fault.” Something is patting her head rhythmically. “He’s the textbook definition of a millennial sex symbol.”

Rey groans and lifts her face from her hands. “He is really not that sullen.”

“Oh, he is. Just, you don’t notice, because you’re halfway gone for him.”

“I am not—” Rey smacks her forehead. Repeatedly. “Poop, Poop, poop, poop—”

Finn leans forward and grabs her hand. “Hey,” he tells her, his voice pitched to a warm, reassuring tone. “Settle down. We’ll figure it out.” He even tacks on a smile, and—Rey loves him so much. Even with all the I told you so’s. “First of all, how bad is it?”

“I… I don’t know. Is there a scale?”

“Well—there is liking, and there is liking.”

Rey shakes her head, feeling utterly lost. “I just… like him. I want to… God, I want spend time with him.”

“Okay. That doesn’t mean anything. You also want to spend time with me.”

Rey grimaces and feels herself blush scarlet, because… “Not quite.”

Finn is quiet for a beat. “I see.”

“God.” Rey just wants to lie down on the floor and fall asleep. Go run a marathon. Start writing her dissertation proposal. Anything but dealing with this. “I have for a while, but I thought… it was there, and I didn’t figure it out, I just thought he was smart and attractive and had a nice smile and that we could be friends and—“ Rey presses her palms into her eye-sockets, wishing she could go back and erase her life choices. The entire past two months. Actually, make it two years—Grad school was not a good idea to begin with. “Do you hate me?”

Finn sounds surprised. “Me?”

“Yes.”

“No. Why would I hate you?”

“Because he—he’s been horrible to you, made you throw out a ton of data for no real reason. He is—I know how he is, but with me he’s not—”

“I know.”
Rey looks up. “You know?”

“Well. I don’t know, know. But yeah, I can believe he’s better with you than he was in my damn student advisory committee.”

“I—You hate him.”

“Yeah—I hate him. You don’t have to hate him because I do. Though, I do reserve the right to comment on your abysmal taste in men. Every other day or so.”

This is… not what Rey thought his reaction would be. “Oh.”

“And I’ve seen you guys at the picnic. He definitely wasn’t interacting with you like he does with me. Plus, you know,” Finn adds, almost begrudgingly. “He’s not... not hot. I can see why you’d hit that.”

Rey frowns. “Okay. All of this is not what you said when I first told about the fake-dating.”

“Hey, I’m trying to be supportive here. You weren’t in love with him at the time.”

Rey slumps forward again. “God. Can we please not use that word? Ever again? It seems a little premature.”

“Sure. Whatever.” Finn takes a sip of his PSL. “Way to bring a romcom to life, by the way.”

“I know. I hate this stupid trope.”

“Mmm. So, what are you gonna tell him?”

Rey sits up and massages her temple with her palm. “What do you mean?”

“Well.” Finn makes a large gesture with his free hand. “You have a thing for him. And you are friendly, you say. I’m assuming you’re planning to inform him of your… crush? Can I use the word crush?”

“No.”

He rolls his eyes. “Okay. Whatever. You’re going to tell him, right?”

Rey snorts out a laugh. “Of course not. I’m not—You can’t tell the person you’re fake-dating that you—” her brain scans itself for the correct word, doesn’t find it, and then stumbles on “—like him. It’s just not the done thing.”

“Rey.”

“It’s never a good idea, telling people stuff like this. And in this case, it’d be worse than ever.”

“Why?”

“Because I—because I actually care. I can’t tell him.”

“Of course, you can. That’s precisely why—”

“No.” Rey shakes her head forcefully. “No. He’ll think—he’ll think I orchestrated this. He’ll think I kissed him on purpose.”
Finn’s eyes almost bulge out of his face. “Wait—what? You kissed him?”

“Yes. That’s why this whole mess started—because I kissed him to avoid Hux. It was the stupidest thing—I thought he’d sue me for sexual harassment.”

Finn’s mouth is gaping. “You did not.”

“I did. I initiated this whole thing, which means that if I tell him now that I want to date him for real, he’ll think that I was after him all along.”

“Okay.” Finn shakes his head rapidly, as if trying to put the kissing bit of information behind him. “Okay. But what if he… likes you, too. What if he wants something more?”

Rey laughs, bitter. “There is no way.”

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“Because, what?”

“Because he’s him. He’s Ben Solo, and I…” She trails off. No need to continue. Nothing. I’m nothing.

Finn is quiet for a long moment. “Rey, you have no idea, do you?” His tone is mostly… sad.

“What?”

He leans forward. “You’re amazing. And there’s no way Ben hasn’t noticed.”

“No. He—Don’t get me wrong, I do think he likes me. But we’re friends. He thinks of me as a friend, and I… what if I tell him, and he doesn’t want to…”

“To, what? Doesn’t want to fake-date you anymore? It’s not like you have much to lose, here.”

Maybe not. Maybe all the talking, and those looks Ben gives her, and him shaking his head when she orders extra whipped cream; and the way he lets himself be teased out of his moods, and the texts, and how he seems to be so at ease when he’s with her, so noticeably different from the Ben Solo she used to be half-scared of—maybe it’s not much. Maybe. It still doesn’t explain how her heart sinks at the thought of giving it up. “I do, though.”

Finn sighs, enveloping one of her hands with his. “You have it bad, then.”

Rey presses her lips together, and blinks rapidly in an attempt to push back the tears. “Maybe I do. I don’t know—I’ve never had it, before. I’ve never wanted to have it.”

“But why?” Finn smiles, obviously trying to be reassuring. At the moment, Rey feels anything but. “Listen—I know how private you are. I know you don’t like to talk about your… love life. Or lack thereof. But—this, it’s not necessarily a bad thing.”

One single tear is making its way down Rey’s cheek, and she hastens to clean it with her sleeve. “This is the worst.”

“No—You’ve finally found someone you’re into. And, okay, it’s Ben Solo, but this could still turn out to be great.”
“It couldn’t. It can’t.”

“Rey—I know where you’re coming from. I get it.” Finn’s hand tightens on hers, warm and comforting. And there’s truth in what he’s saying: if anyone can ever understand her, it’s Finn. Rey can still remember how amazed she had been, to find out how similar their backgrounds were. The sense of belonging she’d felt. “I know it’s scary, but you can allow yourself to care. You can want to be with people.”

“But I can’t.”

“I don’t see why not—”

“Because when I care about people, then they leave!” she cries. And then immediately regrets it and softens her voice. “That’s... that's just the way it works.” There. It’s out. She has put it into words, and said it out loud, and it sounds all the more true because of it.

Finn exhales. “Oh, Rey.” His expression, a combination of sorrow and understanding and pity, is simply unbearable to watch. Rey looks elsewhere—the barista, the coffee cup lids stacked next to the counter, the Charlie Brown sticker on a girl’s MacBook—and slides her hand away from under Finn’s palm.

“You should go.” Rey attempts a smile, which feels a little wobbly. “Finish your surgeries. You know how Doctor Phasma is.”

Finn doesn’t break eye contact. “Rey, I care. And you care, too. We care about each other, and I’m still here. Not going anywhere.”

“It’s different.”

“How?”

Rey doesn’t bother answering, and steals one of the napkins Finn got with his drink to dry her cheeks. Ben... It’s different. He is different, and what Rey wants is different, but she can’t—doesn’t want to articulate it. Not now. “I won’t tell him.”

“Rey.”

“No,” she says, resolute. With her tears gone, she feels marginally better. Maybe she’s not who she thought she was, but she can fake it. She can pretend—even to herself. “I’m not going to tell him. It’s a horrible idea.”

“Rey.”

“How would that conversation even work? How would I phrase it? What are the right words?”

“Actually you should probably—”

“Do I tell him that I am into him? That I think about him all the time? That I have a huge crush on him? That—”

“Rey.”

In the end, what tips Rey off is not Finn’s words, or his panicky, horrified expression, or the fact that he’s clearly looking at a spot somewhere above her shoulders. In the end, what happens is something else: Rose chooses that exact moment to send Rey a text, which in turn lights up her
phone, which in turn draws Rey’s eyes to the numbers on the screen.

10:00.

It’s 10:00 AM on a Wednesday. And she is currently sitting in the campus coffee shop, the very same coffee shop where she has spent all her Wednesday mornings for the past few weeks.

Rey whirls around and—Ben is standing behind her. Close, behind her. Close enough that unless both his eardrums ruptured since the last time they met, he must have heard every single word that came out of Rey’s mouth.

Rey wishes she could just expire on the spot. She wishes she could crawl outside of her body and this cafe, melt in a pool of sweat and seep between the tiles on the floor, just vanish into thin air. But all of these things are currently beyond her skillset, so she fixes a weak smile on her face, and looks up at Ben.

“Um… hey.”

Chapter End Notes

A million billion trillion thanks to the amazing LoveofEscapism for the wonderful beta♡♡♡ I have three more chapters of this fic written, and I should be able to post them soonish as I edit them and send them to Betas!♡

So. I usually try to answer all comments, BUT today was a case of having to choose between editing/publishing the chapter or replying comments, and I went with the former. I have two other fics to write in the next month, and I am the slowest writer to ever exist, so I might not be the best at replying for a while. (Does it sound like I suddenly feel that I’m too cool to reply comments?😢😢😢Because I really am not and I love comments, I am just VERY disorganized!!!😢😢😢) I promise I read and treasure what everyone says, and I will reply if I have something meaningful to say or if you have a specific question, so if you have any do feel free to drop it here on AO3, or on Tumblr, or on Twitter, which is my new favorite child! Ily guys♡♡♡.
“Did you, um… hear that?”

Rey barely waits for Ben to sit down before asking. Though at least she doesn’t just blurt it out while Finn is hurrying to clear the table of his stuff and muttering tightly, “Right, I was just about to go.” Or before Ben traces the back of the chair with his finger and pulls it back with a low, “May I?”

At least she manages to hold back until they’re sitting across from each other and she can see his eyes, flat and weary and closed off in a way that reminds Rey of the person she used to think Ben Solo was.

_Shit. Shit, shit._

“Yes,” he says, bland and even, and Rey feels like she is about to disintegrate into a million tiny pieces, here, in this exact spot.

She wants him to take it back. Wants him to say _No. No, I didn’t hear a single word._ She wants to go back to earlier this morning and rewind it all, this horrible mess of a day. Not look at the texts on her phone, not let Zari walk in on her mooning over her fake boyfriend. Not pour her heart out to Finn while said fake boyfriend is listening behind her.

Ben cannot know. He simply _cannot_ know. He’ll think that Rey kissed him on purpose. He’ll think that she masterminded this whole fiasco. He’ll think that she manipulated him into this situation, and he’ll hate her, and if he does—Rey’s not sure what she’ll do then. She has spent the last decade of her life trying very hard to not want anything for herself, and now she does and it’s—just as devastating as she thought it would be.

And so, she does the one thing she can think of.

“It wasn’t about you,” she blurts out. The lie rolls off her tongue like a mudslide: unpremeditated, quick, and bound to leave a huge mess behind.

_Huge._

“I know.” Ben nods, and—he doesn’t even look surprised. He just nods, and it’s so obvious that he really _did_ know. That it never occurred to him, even remotely, that Rey might be interested in him.

Except that it’s not possible. He must know, he _must_ know how—how—how… _everything_ he is
underneath this exterior of his that he wears like an armor. He must know—which means that maybe he suspects. Maybe he’s just trying to let her off the hook easily to avoid injuring her pride, and that’s… unbearable. Simply… no.

Rey wants to cry. A frequent state, this morning. Instead of doing that, she just vomits out another lie. “I just... have a thing. For a guy.”

He nods again, this time slowly. His eyes darken and the corner of his jaw twitches, but it’s just for a moment. Rey blinks and his expression is blank again. “Yeah. I gathered that.”

“This guy… he’s…” Rey swallows. What is he? Quick Rey, quick. An immunologist? Canadian? A giraffe? What is he?

“You don’t have to explain, if you don’t want.” Ben’s voice seems slightly off-beat, but also comforting. Tired. Rey realizes that she’s wringing her hands, and when she fails to stop herself after two attempts, she simply hides them under the table.

“No. I do want to tell you. It’s just that…”

“It’s okay.” He offers her a reassuring smile, and Rey—she cannot possibly look at him. Not a second longer. She turns to her left, desperately wishing she had something to say—something to fix this. A way to buy time, at least. Right outside the cafe’s window, a group of undergrads are huddling together in front of a laptop, laughing at something playing on the screen. A gush of wind has just scattered the stack of notes a girl was poring over, and she is scrambling to retrieve them from the ground before they’re blown even farther away. In the distance, Rey spots Doctor Dameron walking in the direction of the coffee shop.

“This… our arrangement.” Ben’s voice pulls her back inside. To the lies and the table between them; to the gentle, soft way he is talking to her. Kind. He has been so kind. I used to think… I used to think the worst, of you. And now… “It’s supposed to help you. When it stops doing so…”

“No.” Rey shakes her head. “No. I…” She inhales and forces her face into a smile. “It’s complicated.”

“I see.”

Rey opens her mouth to say that no, no, no, he cannot possibly see. He cannot possibly see anything, because Rey just made up all of this. This clusterfuck of a situation.

“I don’t—I won’t tell him.” Rey wets her lips, and it does nothing against the dryness of her mouth. “There is no need to stop fake-dating, because I won’t tell him that I… like him. Because he wouldn’t… he can’t possibly—”

“Dude.” A hand claps forcefully on Ben’s shoulder, something between a pat and a slap. “Since when can you be found somewhere that’s not your lab or your offi—oh.” Doctor Dameron’s gaze slides from Ben to Rey, and settles on her. For a second, he just stands by the table and takes her in, clearly surprised to find her there. Then his mouth widens into a slow grin. “Right. Hey, Rey.”

During Rey’s first year of grad school, Doctor Dameron was on Rey’s pre-assigned student advisory committee—an admittedly odd choice, given his absolute lack of relevance to her research and minimal interest in mentoring someone without a Pharmacology background. Even then, Rey has mostly pleasant memories of her interactions with him. During her committee meetings he was always the one who’d smile at her when she got nervous and stumbled over the descriptions of her methods, and once he even complimented her Bob’s Burgers t-shirt—and then proceeded to hum
the opening theme under his breath every time Doctor Sloane would start one of her rants against optogenetics.

“Hey, Doctor Dameron.” She is positive that her smile is not nearly as convincing as it should be. “How are you?”

Doctor Dameron waves a hand. “Pssh. Please, call me Poe. You’re not my student anymore.” He pats Ben on the back with relish. “And you have the very dubious pleasure of dating my oldest, most socially impaired friend.”

It’s all Rey can do not to let her jaw drop. Friend? Oldest friend? And—was Rey supposed to know that? Should Ben’s girlfriend know that? What’s her response supposed to be? Although, thankfully, Doctor Dameron—Poe? God. Poe.—doesn’t seem to require or want one. He turns to Ben, who appears to be unbothered by having been decreed to be socially impaired, and asks: “Did you see the readers’ comments for the PNAS paper?” His speech pattern changes a little—pitched lower and faster, more plain. Comfortable. They really are old friends.

Ben grimaces. “Yes.”

“They’re absurd.”

“Agreed.”

“We’re not gonna do all that.”

“For sure. We should write the Action Editor.”

“Or go higher.”

“Maybe.”

“Anyway, what I meant to ask—can we move tonight to tomorrow? I had… a thing. Come up.” His brief glance at Rey speaks volumes: I’d tell you what the thing is because it’s very interesting and possibly juicy, but your girlfriend and my former student is sitting at this table and I should probably spare her the lurid details of my life. “Last minute thing.”

Ben nods, unruffled. “Sure.”

“Cool. Sorry ‘bout that.” He pats Ben’s back once more, then turns to Rey with a broad smile. “He’s all yours tonight, Rey.” He follows the word ‘tonight’—already vaguely dangerous on its own—with a wink that has Rey blush. “Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do, kids.”

Ben is still rolling his eyes when the glass door at the entrance closes behind Poe. Fascinated, Rey follows him with her gaze until he’s walked past the cafe’s courtyard, and then turns to Ben, hoping against hope that her cheeks do not look as heated as they currently feel.

“Um… that was…”

“Poe for you.” Ben seems to be barely annoyed.

“Is it true? Are you two really old friends?”

“No. Poe’s an idiot.” He must notice Rey’s puzzled frown, because he sighs. “Yes. We grew up together. Well, in a way,” he amends. “Our parents were close friends.”

“Oh. I thought you grew up in Europe?”
He shakes his head. “I grew up all over the place. Wherever my mother’s job would take us.” He
presses his lips together. “Poe’s parents did similar work.”

Rey tries to recall the times she’s seen Poe and Ben interact. Granted, she’s only begun to pay
attention to Ben a couple of months ago. But Rey has definitely seen them together in several
occasions, and at the picnic they seemed to be having fun together playing that stupid game. Old
friends.

“You didn’t tell him. About us. That it’s not… real.”

“No.”

“Why?”

Ben looks away. “I don’t know.” His jaw works. “I think I just didn’t…” his voice trails off, and he
shakes his head before giving her a smile, small and a little forced. “He speaks very highly of you,
you know.”

“Doctor Dameron? Of me?”

“Of your work. And your research.”

“Oh.” Rey has no idea what to say to that. *When did you talk about me? And why? And do you
still? And what would he think of this ‘us’ that is not really an ’us’? What do you think of us, Ben?
“Oh,” she repeats uselessly.

Rey’s curiosity over the reasons that drove Ben to propose the fake-dating scheme has increased
exponentially in the past few weeks, but it’s only now, after seeing Ben interact with Poe, that she
wonders what the consequences might be for him. For the first time, it occurs to her that their
arrangement doesn’t only have repercussions on her life, but it impacts Ben’s, too. He is lying on a
daily basis to his colleagues and to his oldest friend. His students go to the lab every day believing
that he is dating one of their peers—do they think him creepy, or lecherous? Has his relationship
with Rey changed in any way their perception of him? And what about other faculty members in
the department, or in adjacent programs? Just because dating a grad student is technically allowed,
it doesn’t mean that it’s not frowned upon. And what if Ben meets—or has already met—someone
he actually likes? He said he wasn’t going to date back when they struck their deal, but that was
weeks ago. Rey herself was convinced that she’d never be interested in dating anyone at the time—
and doesn’t the thought make her want to laugh now, in a remarkably unfunny way?

The truth is that Ben offered to help her when she felt threatened by Hux for one single reason:
because he wanted her to feel safe. Because he is decent, and despite most people’s
misconceptions, kind. And Rey is repaying his kindness by getting ideas and developing feelings
that are sure to make him feel uncomfortable, and—

“Do you want to get coffee?”

Rey looks up from her hands. “No.” She clears her throat against the burning sensation lodged
behind her sternum. “No, I…” She shakes her head. The thought of coffee is making her feel
nauseous. “I think I need to go back to the lab.”

She bends down to retrieve her backpack with the full intention of standing and leaving
immediately, but halfway through a wave of *something* sweeps over her, and she finds herself
staring at Ben. He’s sitting across from her with a concerned expression, a slight frown creasing his
brow.
She attempts a smile. “We… are we… we are friends, right?”

His frown deepens. “Friends?”

“Yes. You and I.”

Ben looks at her for a long moment. Something new passes through his face, stark and a little sad. But it’s too fleeting to interpret, and maybe it was never really there to begin with. “Yes, Rey.”

Rey nods, unsure as to whether she should be feeling relieved. This is—not how she thought today would go. By no means. There is a strange pressure behind her eyelids, which has her slide her arms through the straps of her backpack that much quicker. She waves him goodbye with a tremulous smile and—she’d already be out of this bloody coffee shop, if he hadn’t said, with that voice of his.

“Rey.”

She pauses right in front of his chair and looks down at him and—it’s so odd, to be the taller one for once. What an odd, unsettling day.

Ben seems to be staring at a point past her shoulder. “I have no idea who he is, but…” his jaw shifts, and he blinks, keeping his eyes closed for a second. As if to collect his thoughts. “Rey. You are really… you are extraordinary, and I cannot imagine that he wouldn’t…” he trails off, and then nods. A punctuation of sorts, as his words and the way he said them bring her that much closer to tears.

She is about to cry. Rey is going to cry, and what she wants the most in the world is to not do it in front of Ben. She simply cannot. “I’ll see you next week, okay?” She doesn’t wait for his response and walks briskly towards the exit, her shoulder bumping into someone she should probably apologize to, but doesn’t. Once she’s outside she takes a deep breath, and then makes her way to the Biology building while trying to empty her mind, forcing herself to think about the section she’ll have to TA later today, the fellowship application she promised Holdo she’d send by tomorrow, the fact that Rose’s sister will be in town next weekend and has made plans to cook Vietnamese dishes for everyone.

Outside it’s cold, a chilly wind weaving through the leaves of the campus trees, pushing Rey’s sweater against her body. Fall has finally begun.

“…"

“I don’t know. I think so.” Rey stares at Finn’s hands as he sprinkles shredded cheese on the nachos, reflecting over the fact that this is her best friend in a nutshell. Rey doesn’t think that she could possibly love him more, and then he does something extraordinary like breaking a two-month-long healthy-eating streak to make her favorite dish, only because she had the shittiest of days. “There, in that corner. You missed a spot.”

“You think so?”

Rey remembers Ben sitting at the table, pressing his lips together and not quite meeting her eyes. ‘I
‘have no idea who he is, but…’ ‘Yes. Yes, I’m sure he did.’

“Well.” Finn shrugs and bends to put the nachos in the oven. “Well.”

Rey makes a jerky movement. “Just—don’t say it, please.”

Finn straightens. “Don’t say, what?”

“Well. When you’re thinking I am not doing ‘well’ at all.”

“Rey. This is not sustainable.”

“It is.”

Finn sighs as he sets the timer and moves closer to Rey. “I just think that lies this big are not tenable, not in the long run.” His hand comes up to rub Rey’s shoulders. “And even if they were—I’m not sure it would be for the best.”

“It is.”

“I can’t see how, when for the first time you’ve allowed yourself to feel something for someone and—”

“I didn’t!” Rey takes one step back. “I didn’t allow myself to do anything. It just happened.”

Finn tilts his head to the side, studying her with a faintly pained expression. “Rey, you need to let yourself—”

Rey has never been so relieved to hear an iPhone’s ringtone. She darts to the living room, where they both left their phones when they came home, picks them up and brings them back into the kitchen.

“It’s yours.” She squints to read the name. “Who’s Vanessa?”

Finn makes a dismissive face, but he also hurriedly goes to wash his hands. “No one. A girl.”

Mmm. “I thought you were seeing that MD PhD guy?”

“Who?”

“From neuroscience?”

“Ah. Nah, that was last week. Here—” he tosses the kitchen rag he used to dry himself on the counter “—I’ll answer.”

“I thought you hated talking on the pho—”

“Hello? Oh. Hey, Van. Nope, not at all.” Finn points at the oven timer until Rey nods, and then steps out of the kitchen while saying, with his most charming voice, “I always have time for you.”

Rey rolls her eyes and presses the home button of her phone, finding two texts from Wol (<Have you seen the multichannel pipette?> <Nvm found it. Thx.>), three from Rose (<what was Finn’s Netflix password again?> <actually I got in I had forgotten it was case sensitive> and then, later, <Hey, do you have an HDMI adaptor I can borrow for next seminar?>), one from Mitaka (<Is there any way you could take over my TA session on Friday? I’m happy to switch with one of yours.>), and one from—
Ben.

Rey taps on it immediately.

**Ben:** <You left quickly and I didn’t get to tell you, but I’m leaving town tomorrow.>

**Ben:** <I’ll be out for the next two weeks.>

The last text was delivered twenty-four minutes ago. Rey frowns and immediately types her response—almost before knowing what she’ll write.

**Rey:** <Where are you going?>

Three bouncing dots appear at the bottom of the screen right away.

**Ben:** <Baltimore for a study section, and then UCLA for an invited talk.>

It’s not that it doesn’t sound plausible. Study sections happen all the time, and it checks out, that a tenured faculty member would be asked to review a bunch of grants. And the invited talk… Rey has no idea how invited talks work, but Ben is Ben. He was on that ridiculous Forbes article about who’s who in STEM, the ‘Under 40’ edition, and all the awards he got, and his damn CV—of **course** people would invite him to come talk to them. Except that the timing feels somewhat off, and Rey thought that she had managed to convince him that her stupid declarations were directed at someone else, but maybe she was wrong. The suspicion that he’s actively trying to avoid her settles heavy on her chest, and Rey just can’t help asking.

**Rey:** <It doesn’t have anything to do with what I told you today, right?>

It takes almost an entire minute for the answer to come, and she spends it gripping her phone with an increasingly sweaty palm.

**Ben:** <You mean, did the the National Institute of Health arranged an impromptu study section because of what you said today?>

Rey exhales slowly. Clearly, she’s being paranoid. And unreasonable.
Rey: <Fair enough.>

Rey: <So I guess… I’ll just see you in two weeks?>

Ben: <Of course. If you still want to.>

Ben: <If Hux bothers you while I’m gone, let me know.>

Rey: <He won’t.>

Ben: <If he does.>

Rey: <He hasn’t bothered me in a while.>

Rey: <He’s probably channeling all that toxic energy of his into more productive endeavors, like yelling at people who work in customer service, or silently judging his roommates for not using coasters.>

Ben: <Sounds uncannily accurate.>

Rey should probably leave it at that. Ben told Rey what he needed to say to avoid having her wait for him in their coffee shop like some spurned, lovesick idiot for the next two Wednesdays, and that… that, is that. But clearly, she lacks the gene that enables leaving well enough alone.

Rey: <It sounds exciting, leaving for two whole weeks>

Rey: <But it’ll be weird not having you around>

Rey: <I mean, there are so many students to fail and belittle and drive to the brink of dropout. And Doctor Phasma and Doctor Sloane can only get so much done, you know?>

Ben: <Mm.>

Ben: <Rey, I meant to ask something.>

Ben: <About the fake-dating>

Ben: <(and I’m horrified that the term ‘fake-dating’ is now part of my vocabulary)>

Rey smiles faintly.

Rey: <You’re finally talking like the millennial that you are.>

Ben: <Am not.>
Rey: <Are, too>

Ben: <Rey.>

Rey: <Wait, what year were you born?>

Ben: <1982>

Rey: <Then you’re younger than Beyonce. Which means that you *so* are.>

There is a pause of several seconds, in which Rey enjoys picturing Ben tapping at his phone and scrolling down the Wikipedia entry on Millennials. She can guess the precise moment he finishes skimming the ‘Age range’ section, because:

Ben: <I reject that.>

Rey: <That is very unscientific of you.>

Rey: <You can reject it until cows swim in the Atlantic, but it’s a fact>

There is a long pause. And then:

Ben: <This is going in the Title IX complaint.>

Rey: <Aw.>

Rey: <♡>

Ben: <The heart’s going in, too.>

Rey: <♡♡♡♡♡♡♡>

Ben: <Brat.>

Ben: <What I wanted to tell you earlier is that if there is someone you’d like to… real-date, and if our arrangement is not what you need anymore, you only need to say it.>

Rey bites into her lip, feeling the anxiety of the day rush through her once again.

Rey: <No.>

Rey: <I don’t. Want to call it off. Because I’m not going to date him.>
Rey: <This is difficult to explain.>

Rey: <But.>

Rey: <He is not interested.>

He just… can’t be. And no, no, no, I don’t want to talk about it. I can’t talk about it, especially with you, and we should just stop discussing this, and—

Before Ben can ask her to elaborate any further, Rey quickly types:

Rey: <And you should have fun in Baltimore!>

Rey: <And California.>

Rey: <(Or as much as you’re capable of having fun.)>

Rey: <(Just try not to be grumpy the whole time, I guess.)>

Rey: <And ♥!!!!>

She is not surprised, when Ben never replies to her last few texts.

Chapter End Notes

I just thought this might be a good time to tell you guys that:
1) There will be a happy ending.
2) There will be copious boning.
3) ♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Um... hi? I know this took a year, but I promise I was writing other things and I mean well and pls don't hate me *cringes and crawls back under her desk*

So much gratefulness to LoveofEscapism and monsterleadmehome for the beta, and to LoveofEscapism for letting me go on and on about what is going to happen in the next few chapters. They have already beta'd chapter 11 so I should be... posting it soon???? *cringes and crawls, yet again*.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Campus feels strangely empty with Ben gone, even on days in which she likely wouldn’t have met with him anyway. It doesn’t make much sense—campus is most definitely not empty, teeming with loud, annoying undergrads on their way to and from class. Rey’s life is pretty full, too: her mice are old enough for the behavioral assays to be run, she finally gets back the reviews for a paper she submitted months earlier, and Doctor Holdo ropes her into giving a guest lecture in her place at a nearby small liberal arts college; the class Rey is TA-ing has a midterm coming up, and students magically begin to pop by during office hours, looking panicky and asking questions which are invariably answered in the first three lines of the syllabus. Kay and Rose drag her out for beers on Friday night, and they collectively daydream about leaving academia and finding a real job, one that pays proper money and acknowledges the existence of weekends. After Finn’s ‘thing’ with Vanessa doesn’t go as smoothly as he expected, she sits with him through a ten-hour long marathon of American Ninja Warrior—all episodes that they’ve already watched, at least four times.

Rey’s life continues as it always was—except that for the first time, there’s something else she’d rather be doing. Someone else she’d rather be with.

*So, this is having a crush*, she muses. Feeling like campus is not worth going to, because if he’s out of town, even the most remote chance of running into him has been taken away from her; constantly spinning around after catching a glimpse of jet-black hair, or when hearing a deep voice that’s sounds as rich as Ben’s—but really isn’t; thinking of him because Jess mentions planning a trip to the Netherlands, or when on Jeopardy the correct answer to ‘aichmophobia’ turns out to be ‘What is fear of needles?‘; feeling stuck in an odd limbo, waiting, just waiting, waiting for… nothing.

Ben will come back, and Rey will still have told him that she’s in love with someone else—and even if she hadn’t, the assumption that Ben could ever see Rey in any romantic light is just preposterous. In the end, all considered, Rey knows that she is lucky that he likes her enough to want to be her friend. Anything else… yeah. It’s better forgotten.

While Rey had anticipated that her third year of grad school would come with a whole host of new challenges, she’d thought they’d mostly revolve around picking a decent thesis committee, or controlling the heating effect of opsin in her experiment. Unrequited… unrequited whatever-this-is, was never supposed to be one of them.
On the Wednesday of the second week, her phone pings while she’s running on the gym’s treadmill. She picks it up, expecting a text from Finn, or the usual friendly reminder from Cherie that orange peel should not be flushed down the department’s toilets—when Ben’s name pops up at the top of the screen.

Rey jumps so her feet are resting on the sides on the treadmill, pausing to read the text. Except that there isn’t much to read. It’s mostly an image, really, a photo of a picture—a huge drink in a plastic cup, topped with what looks like a muffin. The bottom of the image proudly states ‘American Cherry Pie Frappuccino’, and below that, there is Ben’s text:

Ben: <Think I can smuggle this on the plane?>

Rey doesn’t even need to be told that she’s grinning at her phone like an idiot.

Rey: <Well>
Rey: <TSA *is* notoriously incompetent>
Rey: <Though, maybe not that incompetent>
Ben: <Too bad>
Ben: <Wish you were here, then>

Rey’s smile stays in place for a long time. And then, when she remembers the mess she’s in, it fades into a heavy sigh.

…

She’s carrying a tray of tissue samples to the electron microscope lab when someone pats her heavily on the shoulder, almost making her trip and destroy approximately ten weeks worth of research and several thousand dollars in federal grant funding.

“What—”

“Hey, Rey!”

She looks around and finds Doctor Dameron staring at her with that charming, boyish grin of his—like they’re best buddies about to go for a beer and have a jolly good time, instead of a PhD student and a former member of her advisory committee who blithely never quite got around to reading any of the paperwork she turned in.

“Doctor Dameron.”
His brow wrinkles. “I thought we’d settled on Poe?”

Had they? “Uh… sure. Poe.”

He smiles, pleased. “Boyfriend’s out of town, uh?”

“Oh? Um, I…”

“You going in there?” He points at the microscope lab with his chin, and Rey nods. “Here, let me get it.” He swipes his badge to unlock the door and then holds it open of her, making her life easier by a factor of a thousand while she sets the tray on one of the benches.

“Thank you.” Rey smiles gratefully at him, sliding her hands into her back pockets. “I was gonna get a cart, but I couldn’t find one…”

“I know—there’s like, maybe three left on this floor? I think someone’s bringing them home and reselling them.” He grins and winks at her. “Can’t blame ’em, to be honest. I’d have done the same in my grad school days. So, how’s life?”

“Um… good. Good. And you?”

Poe ignores her question and leans casually against the wall. “How’s it?”

“What? “Bad?”

“Ben being gone, I mean. Two whole weeks is a long time. Hell, even I miss him. That little shit.” He chuckles at his own words. “How are you holding up?”

“Uh. Um…” Rey takes her hands out of her pockets, crosses her arms in front of her chest, and then changes her mind and lets them dangle woodenly by her sides. **Yep. Perfect. Totally acting natural.** “Fine. Good. It’s fine. I’m doing fine. Busy.”

Poe looks genuinely relieved. “Great. Have you guys been talking on the phone?”

No. Of course not. **Talking on the phone is the hardest, most stressful thing in the world and I can’t do it with the nice lady that schedules my dental cleanings, let alone with Ben Solo.** “Oh… um, mostly texting. You know.”

“Yeah, I know.” He rolls his eyes. “Hey, however taciturn and buttoned-up and sulky Ben is with you, please know that he’s making an effort and he’s a million times worse with everyone else. Me included.” Poe sighs and shakes his head, but there is—a fondness, behind it. An easy affection that Rey can’t miss. **My oldest friend, he’d said, clearly not lying.** “And he’s actually gotten a lot better overall, since you. Well, since you guys started dating.”

Rey feels on the verge of a full-body cringe, and tries to stave it off by pressing her lips together. There is no way she can answer Poe in an honest way, which would entail explaining that ‘no, it’s not possible, you must be confused, because Ben and I are not dating and have never dated before, which means that any change you’ve noticed is either non-existent or due to factors that are unrelated to me.’ In the end, she settles for a simple, painful, awkward:

“Really?”

Poe nods, unaffected by the small cataclysm that is occurring inside Rey’s head. “Yep. I’m so glad he finally scrounged up the courage to ask you out. He mentioned that there was a girl at work that he… but he wasn’t sure…” Poe shrugs and waves his hand. “Anyway, I’m really glad it’s working
Rey’s brain doesn’t seem to be working at full capacity. Maybe it’s because of the awkwardness of the situation, maybe because of the assumptions Poe’s operating under—maybe because Poe used to be her professor, after all, and she can’t quite talk herself into adjusting her perception of him. Whatever the reason, her neurons are sluggish and cold, and it takes her several seconds to process what he just told her—Ben, wanting to ask Rey out for a while.

Thing is—it’s not possible. It just doesn’t make sense. Because Ben never asked Rey out. Ben had no idea Rey existed before two months ago, before she… before she Title-IXed him in the hallway that night—and even if he had, he most definitely wouldn’t have talked about Rey with Poe, which means that... it means that...

It means that Poe must be talking about someone else. Which, in turn, means that, at the very least Ben has feelings for someone. Someone he works with.

Rey’s mind, half frozen until a few seconds ago, begins to spiral with the knowledge of what Poe just revealed. Setting aside the fact that this is an utter invasion of Ben’s privacy, Rey cannot stop herself from listing the implications their arrangement has for him. If the person Poe is talking about is one of Ben’s colleagues, there is no chance that she hasn’t heard about Ben and Rey dating. It’s possible that she saw the two of them getting coffee together on a Wednesday, or Rey sitting on Ben’s lap during that catastrophic seminar, or—God—Rey slathering him with sunblock at that godforsaken picnic. Which—no matter how Rey looks at it, just can’t be good for his prospects, unless Ben isn’t even considering that because he is sure beyond any doubt that his feelings are completely unrequited—and doesn’t that seem tragically funny?

“Anyway.” Poe pushes away from the wall, his hand coming up to scratch his nape. “I think we should go on a double date one of these days. Well—if I ever have a boyfriend again.”

Oh, no. No, no, no. The weight that has settled in Rey’s stomach seems to sink even lower. “That would be… lovely.” She attempts a smile.

“Right?” Poe grins. “Ben’d hate it with the intensity of a thousand suns.”

He so would. For so many reasons. “Oh. Yeah, he… he might.”

“But I could tell you so many juicy stories about him, approximately aged ten to twenty-five?” Poe looks delighted at the prospect. “He’d be mortified.”

“You probably shouldn’t. Since—” Since he’s only faking a relationship with me and surely doesn’t want me in his business and he’s probably in love with someone else and—

“Oh, of course. I’ll wait until he’s present. I want to see his face when I tell you everything about his newsboy cap phase.”

Rey blinks. “His...?”

Poe nods solemnly and then turns around, closing the door behind him and leaving Rey alone in the chilly, semi-dark lab, to wonder how the fuck her life has devolved to this.
When Rey gets the email, she initially thinks it must be an error. Maybe she misread—she hasn’t been sleeping well, and as it turns out having an unwanted, unreciprocated crush comes with all sorts of scatter-headedness—though after a second look, then a third and a fourth, she realizes that her first impression was correct.

So maybe the mistake is on SfB’s side. Because there is no way—absolutely no way—that they really meant to inform her that her uninspired, shitty abstract was really selected to be part of a panel. It’s just not possible. Except that, when Rey logs into the conference website and downloads the program—yep. Her name is there. There, along with the title of her uninspired, shitty abstract, followed by two more titles and preceded by another two, under the heading in bold font:

**Section 3f: Advances in Optogenetic Research.**

Out of all of the speakers’ names, Rey’s is the only one not followed by any letters. No MD. No PhD. No MD, PhD.

_Poop._

She runs out of the lab, almost crashing into Zari as she marches down the hallway, holding her laptop in front of her chest like a shield. She storms inside Doctor Holdo’s office as soon as the “Come in,” reaches her ears.

“Do you have five minutes?” Rey closes Doctor Holdo’s door behind her and stalks to her desk.

“Sure. What is—”

“I don’t want to give a talk. I can’t give a talk. I’m not ready to give a talk.” Rey shakes her head, trying to sound reasonable but fully aware that she is coming across as panic-stricken and frantic. “I just—I can’t. Not on these data, for sure.”

Doctor Holdo bends her head to the side and staples her hands in front of her, projecting that same veneer of calm that Rey has always found comforting—and that now makes her want to flip the nearest piece of furniture.

_Calm down. Deep breaths. Use your mindfulness, and that shit Finn’s always yapping his mouth about. “My SfB abstract was accepted.”_

“Oh, congratulations. That is—”

“As a talk. Not as a poster, as a talk. A talk. Out loud. Standing. In front of people.” Doctor Holdo still looks a bit confused, so Rey shoves her laptop open and pulls up the .pdf of the conference program with a few aggressive taps that may or may not irreparably damage her trackpad. “See? I’m in one of the oral sessions.”

For a few seconds, Doctor Holdo’s pupils move as she reads the lines Rey is pointing at. Then she looks up from the monitor, turns to Rey, and—smiles.

_Hugely._

“This is wonderful news, Rey!”
Rey blinks. “It's—what?"

Doctor Holdo runs her hand up and down Rey’s arm in what she clearly intends to be a congratulatory gesture. “This is fantastic. Giving a talk will give you much more visibility than a poster, and two of the people on your panel are well-known scientists—you might be able to network for a postdoctoral position. I am so happy for you, Rey.”

Rey’s jaw drops. Because yes—it’s true that Doctor Holdo can be a little flakey sometimes, and that she’s not the most hands-on, involved mentor a student could have, but even she must be aware that—

“No.”

Doctor Holdo is still smiling. “No?”

“No. I—I cannot give a talk. It won’t be a good talk, so it won’t be a good opportunity to network.”

Doctor Holdo frowns. “But, why?”

“Because.” Because my project is a shitshow, my data is not coherent enough to support a story of any kind, and you, you are the one who forced me to submit it anyway. Fix this for me. Immediately. “I just… I don’t think I’m ready.”

“Aw.” Doctor Holdo tilts her head, in a way that would be more appropriate to reassure a child who’s afraid of a monster hiding under his bed than to comfort her twenty-six year old grad student who is panicking. Rey is very ready to reach up and pull at Holdo's stupid, ridiculous purple hair—and then immediately feels full of guilt over it. She’s always loved her hair. Or at least she thought she did.

“I… Doctor Holdo, I really don’t think I can do this.”

“Don’t worry, Rey.” This time, she puts both her hands on Rey’s shoulders. Rey snaps her laptop shut and hugs it to her chest like she would a life buoy in the open sea. “We have two weeks to get you ready.”

You say that. You say ‘we’, but I’m the one who’s going to have to stand in front of hundreds of people with my shitty data, and when someone asks a three-minute long question that is meant to get me to admit that deep down my work is poorly structured and useless, I’m the one who’s going crap her pants. “Okay.” She has to force her head into an up and down motion, and take a deep breath. Exhale slowly. “Okay.”

“Why don’t you put together a draft? You can present at lab meeting next week, and I can give some feedback.” Another reassuring smile, and Rey is nodding again, not feeling reassured in the least. “And if you have any questions, I’m always here.”

You won’t be at the conference, though, Rey thinks bitterly as she closes the door of Doctor Holdo’s office behind her. She slumps against the wall and squeezes her eyes closed.

Rey’s life has been... less than easy, and while her first seventeen years are not something she likes to dwell on, ever, she did like to think that they’ve made her resilient—and able to deal with throwbacks and inconveniences, and to take herself less seriously than most. Though, maybe that’s not true at all. Maybe she’s wrong, and she is in fact way more dramatic than she ever considered herself to be, because these past few weeks—and this mess with Ben, too, they have been overwhelming to a degree that—
“Rey.”

Her eyes spring open at the sound of Finn’s voice. He’s standing in front of her with Rose and Kay, studying her with a half amused, half worried expression. They’re all holding coffee cups with Food for thoughts logos, and the smell of spices and peppermint wafts over to her.

Rey’s stomach churns. “Hey, guys.”

Kay takes a sip of her drink. “Why are you sleeping next to your PI’s office?”

“I…” Rey pushes away from the wall and walks a few steps away from Doctor Holdo’s door, rubbing her nose with the back of her hand. “My abstract got accepted. The SfB one.”

Rose smiles. “Congrats. But that was pretty much a given, right?”

“As a talk.”

For a few seconds, three pairs of eyes just stare at her in silence. Rey thinks that Kay might be wincing, but when she turns to check there’s just a vague smile pasted on her friends face. “That’s… um… awesome? And… slightly terrifying?”

“Yeah. I thought you said your data was shit?” Rose is making a face.

“It was. It still is. I think they chose my abstract because it fits the theme of the panel very well, but…” She shakes her head.

“What is Doctor Holdo saying about it?”

“She’s just…” Rey rubs her fingers into her eyes. “The usual. You know. I… that it will be fine.” Rey waves her hand. “Hey, the conference is in two weeks. We should book the hotel room—or are we doing Airbnb?”

The air in the hallway immediately thickens with an uncomfortable sort of tension. Rey looks between her friends to see that Rose is biting her lip while studying the pattern of the sweater she’s wearing, Finn’s cup is frozen halfway to his lips, and Kay… well. Kay is openly cringing, now.

“About that…”

Rey frowns. “What?”

“Um.” Kay shuffles on her feet a little, and maybe it’s accidental, the way she seems to be drifting away from Rey—but Rey doesn’t think so. “We already have.”

“You have already booked something?”

Kay nods. “Yes.” Is she moving even farther? And why is Rose playing with the tips of her hair? And is Finn having a stroke? “The conference hotel. Last week.”

“Oh. Okay. Let me know what I owe you then, since—”

“Actually…”

Rey is sure that if she scowls some more her face will be permanently stuck. “Actually, what?”

“Well.” Kay fidgets with the cardboard holder of her cup as her eyes dart to Finn and then to Rose. It’s starting to feel more than a little weird, the way the three of them are flanking each other and
standing across from Rey. Like an odd, awkward stand-off. “It’s a double room, but there’s already six people in there. The three of us, and then Jess, Tallie, and Snap, which means that—”

“What—what?”

“—it’s probably best not to add someone else.”

“I—seriously?”

“Well.” Rose finds it in herself to lift her gaze from the hem of sweater, and shifts closer to Kay. “The beds are taken, and we’re probably not going to be able to fit more than two cots on the floor. It’s mostly a matter of logistics. And there’s a limited amount of oxygen in any given room, and we’ll be producing a lot of CO2 while sleeping, and… it’s just, you know? Science.” She ends her spiel with a tremulous smile that makes Rey wish she could just get—the fuck away from this entire conversation.

“I—Kay. When we talked about the conference a few weeks ago you said we’d room together.”

At least she has the grace to look sheepish. “Yeah. Yeah, but then Jess pointed out that you and Doctor Solo… you know.”

“I—no. No, I don’t know.”

“I mean, why would you want to sleep on a cot if you can… not?”

“But I don’t. I mean—I can’t not sleep on a cot. I don’t have a non-cot option. I only have an under-the-bridge option, at this point.”

Rose inclines her head. “Why aren’t you planning to stay with Doctor Solo?”

“Because.” Because. Because, because, because. “I just wasn’t.”

“Well—you should re-evaluate that. I mean—I’ll miss you and everything, but it’s not as if we’ll be in the room for anything other than sleeping. And if you stay with your boyfriend you’re freeing up space for someone else.”

Rose is looking at her with an expression that seems to say, “Sorry, but isn’t this the reasonable thing to do?” and Kay is nodding enthusiastically beside her, so it’s not as if Rey can conceivably respond with anything but:

“Right.” She presses her lips together, and adds. “Sure.”

Both Kay and Rose almost sag with relief. “Awesome.” Their smiles are genuine now. “And you and Doctor Solo are probably going to be staying in the same hotel, right? And we’ll get meals together, and all that.”

“Of course.” It’s all Rey can do not to sound bitter. As bitter as she feels.

“Okay. Great. I gotta go—the outreach committee is meeting.”

“Oh.” Rose’s eyes widen. “I’d forgotten about that. I’m in that committee, too.”

“But let’s meet this weekend to plan fun activities for Boston.”

Rey waits until Kay and Rose are distant enough that their chattering is almost inaudible, before stepping right in front of Finn.
“Thank you, by the way.”

"Oh." Finn looks confused. “You’re welcome.”

She glares at him. “That was sarcastic, asshole.”

“Fair enough.” Finn hangs his head. “Okay, first of all, they did all of this while I was monitoring that twenty-four hour experiment—I wasn’t even around. And after that—what was I supposed to do? Say that no, she’s not gonna stay with him because they’re not dating for real? Oh, but wait—they weren’t dating for real, but now she’s got a huge crush on him which means that maybe she’ll want to—”

“Okay, okay.” Rey flinches and lifts her hands defensively. “Okay, I get it. You still could have told me, though.”

“I was going to. And then Vanessa went crazy and she egged my car and it… slipped my mind?”

Rey exhales and shakes her head. “It’s fine. God.” She scratches her temple. “I’m gonna have to find some other place to stay.”

“I’ll help you,” Finn tells her eagerly. “We can look online tonight.”

“Okay. Sure. Actually, I think I can find it on my own.” Or not. Probably. Likely. Since the conference is in two weeks, and everything is already booked. And what isn’t is undoubtedly so out of her price range, Rey’d have to sell a kidney to be able to afford it. Which could be an option—she has two, after all.

“You’re not mad, right?”

“…” Yes. No. Yes. “No. It’s not your fault.” She hugs Finn back when he leans into her, reassuring him with a few awkward pats on his shoulder. As much as she’d like to blame him for this, she only has to look at herself. The crux of her problems—of most of them, at least—is her moronic, harebrained decision to begin this fake-dating sham. Now she’s giving a talk at this stupid conference, probably after sleeping at a bus station and eating moss for breakfast, and in all of this she can’t stop thinking about…

Yeah.

Whatever.

Laptop in her hand, Rey heads back for the lab, the prospect of getting her slides in order for her talk simultaneously daunting and depressing. Halfway through, she makes a detour to the restroom, and enters the stall farthest away from the door, leaning against the wall until the back of her head hits the cold tile surface.

For the first time in longer than she can recall, she just lets the tears fall freely down her cheeks.
I know this chapter was depressing, but the next one will end on a more positive note, I promise!

Also: the timeline of submitting an abstract for an academic conference/getting it accepted/the conference actually happening is way longer irl (months and months and months). I've made the executive decision that SfB is *special* (because they have to go to this conference asap, for reasons that I am sure everyone here understands.) :-*
There’s an Airbnb twenty-five minutes from the conference center—but it’s an inflatable mattress on the floor of a storage room, charging one hundred and eighty bucks per night, and even if Rey could afford it she probably wouldn’t spring for it, since one of the reviews states that ‘the host insisted on role-playing viking pretty much the whole time’ and another simply says ‘do not stay here under ANY circumstances’. She finds a more affordable one about forty-five minutes away by subway, but when she goes to reserve the room she discovers that someone has beaten her to it by mere seconds, and is very tempted to hurl her laptop across the coffee shop. She’s squinting at her monitor and muttering to herself like a crazy lady in a tinfoil hat, trying to decide what’s the worse option between Red Roof Inn and a very cheap couch in the suburbs, when something comes to stand between her and her main source of light.

Rey looks up with a frown, expecting to find an undergrad bro crowding her to steal her table, or maybe someone wanting to use the outlet she’s been hoarding, and instead finds that—she has to look higher. And higher. And—

“Oh.”

Ben.

Ben. Standing there with the pretty, late afternoon sunlight haloing his hair and shoulders, his fingers closed around an iPad as he looks down at her with a somber expression.

It’s only been sixteen days. Which is basically two weeks. Which is just a handful of hours and minutes. It’s nothing, considering that she has barely known him for a couple of months. And yet—it’s as if the space she’s in, the whole campus, the entire city is transformed by her awareness of his presence. Rey hates autumn and that feeling it always carries, that something good is about to end to make room for things that are colder and darker and all around miserable. But the shortening days and the reddening leaves suddenly don’t seem quite as disheartening.

Possibilities; that’s what Ben feels like, to her. Of what, Rey is not certain.

“You’re...” Her mouth is dry. Which is an event of great scientific interest, considering that she took a sip from her water bottle maybe ten seconds ago. “You’re back.”

“I am.”

She hadn’t forgotten his voice. Or his height. Or the way his stupid clothes fit him. She couldn’t have—she has an hippocampus, two of them. Two whole medial temporal lobes, fully functioning and tucked nicely inside her skull, which means that she is perfectly able to encode and store memories. She hadn’t forgotten anything about Ben, and she’s not sure why right now it feels as if she had.

“... I thought... I didn’t”—Yes, Rey. Wonderful. Very eloquent. Way to show off your cumulative twenty years of education. “I didn’t know. That you were back. Yet.”

Ben’s face seems a little closed off as he nods. “I flew in last night.”
“Oh.” She should have probably prepared something to say, but she truly didn’t expect to see him until next Wednesday. If she had, maybe she wouldn’t be wearing her oldest leggings and a tattered ‘Don’t get a crap attack’ t-shirt, and her hair wouldn’t be up in two hastily-done braids. Not that she is under the illusion that Ben would notice her if she were wearing a swimsuit or a gala dress. But still. “Do you, um, want to sit?”

Rey leans forward to slide her phone and notebook closer to herself, making room on the other side of the small table. It’s only when he hesitates for a long moment before taking a seat that it occurs to her that maybe—probably—Ben had no intention of staying, and that now he might feel forced to do so. He folds himself into the chair gracefully, like a big cat, his knuckles white as he grips the side of the table.

Great job, Rey. Who doesn’t love a needy person who hounds them for attention?

“You don’t—you don’t have to. I know you’re busy. You probably have MacArthur grants to win and students to brutalize and kale chips to eat.” Rey is wringing her hands, feeling really guilty about forcing him to hang out with her while he’d probably rather be anywhere else, when he—Smiles.

He smiles and suddenly there are grooves around his mouth and his face is completely altered by his expression and—the air at the table is thinner. Rey can’t breathe very well.

“You know, there is a middle ground between living off brownies and exclusively eating kale.”

Rey can’t stop grinning. Just—look at him. He’s here, with her, and he’s smiling. “That is a lie.”

He shakes his head, mouth still curved. “How are you?”

Better, now. “Good. How was DC?”

“It was okay.”

“And California?”

He grimaces. “The talk was fine.”

Rey finds the thought of Ben walking around LA infinitely amusing. “Well, I’m glad you’re back. No one in my lab was weeping into their agarose gel for two whole weeks, and I’m pretty sure the program’s dropout rates have seen a steep reduction. We can’t have that.”

Ben simply gives her a patient, put-upon look. “You look tired, brat.”

“Oh. Yeah, I…” She rubs her cheek with her hand, ordering herself not to feel self-conscious about her looks. Not to care what anyone thinks of them, just like she has always made a point to. Just because Ben is…it doesn’t matter. Whatever he thinks of her… it can’t be flattering, and it certainly would be a stupid idea to wonder what the woman Poe mentioned the other day looks like. Probably blonde. Probably someone who actually needs to wear a bra, probably able to apply liquid eyeliner without making a mess of herself. “I’m fine. It’s been a week, though.” She massages her temple. “A semester, really.”

“Has Hux—”

“No. Nothing like that. I… my friends are stupid. And I hate them.” Rey feels instantly guilty and makes a face. “Actually, I don’t hate them. I do hate that I love them, though.”
Ben’s lips curve in amusement. “Is this the sunscreen friend? Kaydel, right?”

“The one and only. And a couple more, too. The lap friend, Rose. And my roommate, who really should know better.”

“What did they do?”

“They…” Rey rubs both eyes with her fingers. “They booked a place to stay for the conference. SfB? And they didn’t include me. Which means that now I have to find a place on my own.”

“Why can’t you stay with them?”

“Because…” Rey briefly closes her eyes and sighs. “Because they assumed… they think that I’d want to stay with you. Since you’re my… you know. Boyfriend.”

Ben goes completely still for a couple of seconds. And then, “I see.”

“Yep. A pretty bold assumption if you ask me, but…” Rey spreads her arms and shrugs. Nothing she can do about it. Since this is her life now, and these are her choices.

Ben bites the inside of his cheek, looking worried. Or pensive. Or something. “I’m sorry you won’t get to room with your friends.”

Rey waves her hand. “Oh, no. No, I—that’s not it. I mean, that would have been fun, but to be honest, I usually start hating them by the end of the conference, since we tend to hang out during the day, too. It’s just that now I need to find something else nearby—and there are no affordable Airbnbs. Actually, scratch that—there are no nearby Airbnbs at all. Not only is SfB huge, but there are other events going on the same week, too. And the hotels are completely booked. I’ve tried to go on the student mailing list to see if anyone has an extra bed and needs a roommate, but I’ve had no luck so far.” Rey’s eyes fall on the screen of her laptop. “I’m thinking of booking this room that’s an hour away and just—”

“Won’t they know?”

Rey looks up from the poorly-lit, slightly shady-looking picture of the place she… yeah. Doesn’t really want to be staying at, truth be told. “Mm?”

“Won’t they know, if where you’re staying is different from where I am staying? Or if you’re staying with someone else?”

Oh. “Where… where are you staying?”

“The conference hotel.”

Of course. “Well. Yeah.” Rey scratches her nose. “It’s a possibility. I wouldn’t tell them, though. I don’t think they’ll pay too much attention to what I do or where I go, once the conference is over and we’ve had dinner.”

“But they’ll notice if you’re staying one whole hour away.”

“I…” Yes. Probably. They will notice, and ask questions, and Rey will have to come up with a bunch of excuses and even more half-truths to deal with it. Add a few blocks to this unstable Jenga tower of lies she has been building up for weeks, now. But it’s okay—she’s getting pretty good at it. “I’ll figure it out.”
Ben nods slowly, studying her with an odd expression. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, no. It’s not your fault.”

“Well.” He arches his eyebrows. “One could argue that it is, in fact, my fault.”

“Not at all, I’m the one who—”

“I would offer to pay for your hotel room, but I doubt there’s anything left in a ten mile radius.”

“Oh, no.” Rey shakes her head emphatically. “And I wouldn’t accept it. It’s not a cup of coffee. And a scone. And a cookie. And a pumpkin Frappuccino.” Rey bats her eyes at Ben and leans forward, trying to change the topic. “Which, by the way, is new on the menu. You could totally buy it for me, and that would make my day.”

“Sure.” He looks slightly nauseous at the thought.

“Awesome.” She grins. “I think it’s cheaper today, some kind of special sale, so—”

“But you could room with me.”

The way Ben puts it forward, calm and sensible, almost makes it sound like it’s not a big deal. And Rey almost falls for it, until her ears and her brain seem to finally connect and she is able to process the meaning of what he just said.


The first living space Rey could truly call her own was the apartment she began to rent when she started her PhD, at twenty-three. Which means that she knows full well what sharing quarters with someone entails, even for a very short period time. Sleeping in the same room means seeing embarrassing pajamas, and taking turns to use the bathroom, and just hearing it, loud and clear in the dark, the swish of someone trying to find a comfortable position under the sheets. Sleeping in the same room means—no. Nope. A terrible idea. And Rey is starting to think that maybe she has maxed those out, for now.

So she clears her throat. “I could… not, actually.”

Ben nods calmly. But then, then he asks, “Why?” and Rey wants to bang her head against the table.

“Because I couldn’t.”

“The room is a double, of course,” he offers, as if that piece of information could possibly change her mind.

“I… still. It’s not a good idea.”

“Why?”

“Because people will think that we…” Rey notices the way Ben lifts one eyebrow, and immediately hushes. “Okay, fine. It’s possible that they already think that. But.”

“But?”

“Ben.” She rubs her forehead with her fingers. “There will be only one bed.”

He frowns. “No, as I said it’s a double—”
“It’s not. It won’t be. There will be only one bed, for sure.”

He gives her a puzzled look. “I got the booking confirmation the other day. I can forward it to you if you want, it says that—”

“It doesn’t matter what it says. I know the trope.”

Ben stares at her, perplexed. “You know the what?”

Rey sighs and leans helplessly against the back of her chair. “Nothing. Ignore me.”

Thankfully, Ben does. “My symposium is part of a satellite workshop, the day before the conference starts, and then I’ll be speaking on the first day of the actual conference. I have the room for five nights, but I’ll probably need to head back the day after my talk for a grant meeting, so you’d have the room for yourself on night three, four, and five. And if you don’t plan to attend the satellite workshop—which I frankly cannot recommend—and only fly to Boston for the first day, then we’d only overlap in the room for one single night.”

Rey listens to the logical, methodical way he lists sensible reasons why she should just accept his offer, and feels a wave of panic sweep over her. “I… it seems like a bad idea?”

Ben is quiet for a moment. “That’s fine. I just don’t understand why.”

“Because.” Because I don’t want to. Because I have it bad. Because I’d probably have it even worse, after that.

“Are you afraid that I’ll try to kiss you without your consent? To sit on your lap, or fondle you under the pretext of applying sunscreen on you? Because you should know that I would never—”

Rey chucks her phone at him. He catches it in his left hand, studies its glitter amino-acid case with a pleased expression, and then carefully sets it next to her laptop.

“I hate you,” Rey tells him, sullen. She might even be pouting.

His mouth twitches. “I know.”

“Am I ever gonna live that stuff down?”

“Unlikely. And if you do, I’m sure something else will come up.”

Rey huffs, crossing her arms on her chest. And then—then, they exchange a small smile.

“I can ask Poe if I can stay with him, and leave my room to you,” he suggests. “But he knows that I already have one, so I’d have to be honest about why—”

“No, no, no. I—I’m not going to kick you out of your room.” She runs a hand through her hair and exhales. “You’d hate me.”

He tilts his head. ”What?”

“Well. You’d hate rooming with me.”

“Would?”

“Yeah. You seem like a person who…” You seem like you like to keep others at arm’s length, uncompromising and ever so hard to know. You seem like you care very little about what people
think of you. You seem like you know what you're doing. You seem equally horrible and awesome and just the thought that there is someone you'd like to open up to, someone who is not me, makes me feel like I can't sit at this table any longer. "Like you'd want your own space."

He is quiet for a moment, holding her gaze. "I think I’ll be fine."

“But if you end up not being fine, then you’d be stuck... with me.”

“It’s one night, Rey.” His jaw clenches and then relaxes, and he adds, “We are friends, no?”

Her own words, thrown back at her. I don’t want to be your friend, she is tempted to say. Thing is, she also doesn’t want to not be his friend. What she wants is completely outside of her ability to obtain it, and Rey—she needs to forget it. Scrap it—him—from her brain.

“Yes. Yes, we are.”

“Then, as a friend, don’t force me to worry about you using public transportation in a city you're not familiar with, late at night.” He looks away. “I’m already struggling with all the biking you do,” he mutters, and Rey immediately feels a weight sink into her stomach. He really is trying to be a good friend. He is kind and he cares for her, and instead of being satisfied with what she currently has, she has to ruin it all and—want more.

She briefly closes her eyes and takes a deep breath. “Are you sure? That it wouldn’t bother you?”

He nods, silent.

“Okay, then.” Rey wets her lip. “Okay.” She forces herself to smile. “Do you snore?”

Ben huffs out a laugh. “I don’t know.”

“Oh, come on. How can you not know?”

He shrugs. “I just don’t.”

“Well, that probably means you don’t. Otherwise someone would have told you.”

“Someone?”

“A roommate.” It occurs to her that Ben is thirty-six, and likely hasn’t had a roommate in well over a decade. “Or a girlfriend.”

He smiles faintly and lowers his gaze. “I guess my girlfriend will tell me after SfB, then.”

He says it in a quiet, unassuming tone. It’s clear that he’s trying to make a joke, but—the combination of thinking of the two of them sleeping in the same room, the low-pitched voice, and the fact that he’s calling her his girlfriend again...

It’s her fault. Now that she’s aware of her own... now that she knows, she can’t help but wish and imagine that...

Rey feels her cheeks warm, and can’t quite bear to look at him anymore. Instead, she picks at a thread on the sleeve of her cardigan, and searches for something to say.

“My stupid abstract.” She clears her throat. “It was accepted as a talk.”

He meets her eyes. “Oh.”
“Yeah.”

“And you’re not happy?”

“No. I—it’s not…” Rey massages her shoulder with her hand, feeling tense all of a sudden. “The data barely make sense. It’s hard to put together a coherent presentation. Especially if I have less than fifteen minutes to build a story.”

“I see.”

“It will be awful.”

Ben stares at her, and says nothing. Not that it will be fine, not that the talk will surely go smoothly, not that she’s overreacting and underselling what is in truth a fantastic opportunity. For some reason, his calm acceptance of her anxiety has the exact opposite effect of Doctor Holdo’s enthusiasm: it relaxes her.

“When I was a fourth year in grad school,” he says quietly, “my advisor sent me to give a symposium in his stead. And he only told me two days before. He didn’t provide me with slides or a script. Just the title of the talk.”

“Oh. Wow.” Rey tries to imagine what that would have felt like—being expected to perform something so daunting with so little forewarning. And at the same time, part of her marvels at the fact that Ben is self-disclosing something—anything—without being asked a direct question. It makes things, warm and tentative, bloom in her chest. “Why did he do that?”

“Who knows why Snoke ever did what he did?” Ben tilts his head back, staring at a spot above Rey’s head. His tone holds a trace of bitterness. “Because he had an emergency. Because he thought it’d be a formative experience. Because he could.”

Rey just bets, that he could. Snoke is well known in the field for being an excellent scientist—and for having the most brutal mentoring methods. “Was it, then? A formative experience?”

Ben shrugs again. “As much as anything that keeps you awake for forty-eight hours straight can be.”

Rey smiles. “And how did you do?”

“I did…” he presses his lips together. “Not well enough.” He is silent for a long moment, his gaze locked somewhere outside the cafe’s window. “Then again, nothing was ever good enough.”

It seems impossible, that someone might look at Ben’s scientific accomplishments and find them lacking. That he could ever be anything less than the best at what he does. Is that why you are so harsh in your judgement of others? Because you have been taught to set the same impossible standards for yourself?

“Did you like him? Your advisor?”

“It’s… complicated.” Ben rubs a hand over his jaw, looking pensive and far away. “No. No, I didn’t like him. I still don’t.”

Rey nods. “Doctor Holdo is…” She hesitates. “Maybe I shouldn’t talk with you about her. Since you’re both faculty.”

“You can, if you want.” The ‘and I won’t tell’ is unspoken, but there. And Rey—she trusts Ben, for
some reason.

“It’s just—she is great. Really. But sometimes I feel like she doesn’t really understand that I need more…” Guidance. Support. Some practical advice, instead of vague displays of blind encouragement. “I’m not even sure what I need, myself.”

Ben nods, and appears to choose his words carefully. “It’s hard, mentoring. No one really teaches you how to do it, and we’re primarily trained as scientists. Everything else—the students, the teaching, the service… it’s an afterthought. Whatever you think of Amilyn, I am sure that my students think the same of me.”

Rey snorts. “Oh, no. They think way worse.”

Ben smiles. “There you go.”

“They are terrified of you.”

Ben shrugs. “Fear’s a great motivator.”

Rey has never been a people-pleaser, but Ben’s attitude towards others’ perception of him is so cavalier, it’s almost fascinating.

“Don’t you care?” she asks, curious. “That your students might dislike you?”

“Nah. I don’t like them very much, either.”

Rey thinks of Jess and Alex and Lazslo, and of the other half a dozen grads and the post-docs she doesn’t know very well who Ben mentors. It really shouldn’t, but the thought of him finding them as annoying as they find him despotic makes her chuckle. “Why did you take them on, then?”

“It’s expected. And to be fair, I don’t like people in general.”


A millisecond of hesitation. “No. You’re a brat with abysmal taste in beverages.” He traces the corner of his iPad, a small smile playing on his lips. “Send me your slides.”

“My slides?”

“For your talk. I’ll take a look at them. And write me in an email which specific parts you feel insecure about, so I’ll know what to focus on.”

Rey tries not to gape at him. “Oh—you… I’m not your student. You don’t have to.”

“I know.”

“I mean, you really don’t have to—”

“I know. I want to,” he says, his voice pitched low and even as he looks into her eyes, and Rey has to avert her gaze because something feels tight in her chest.

“Okay.” The loose thread on her sleeve remains attached, no matter how much she fidgets with it. “How likely is it that your feedback will cause me to cry under the shower while listening to Adele?”

“Adele?”
Rey—God. Is she giggling? Again? “A British lady. She writes very sad songs.”

“Ah. In that case, it depends on the quality of your slides.”

“Don’t feel like you have to hold back or anything.”

“Believe me, I don’t.”

“Good. Great.” She sighs, but there is something incredibly reassuring about knowing that he’ll be checking her work. “Will you come to my talk?” She hears the words come out of her mouth without having really thought them through, and is as surprised by them as Ben seems to be.

“I… do you want me to?”

No. No, it’s gonna be horrible, and humiliating, and probably a disaster, and you’re going to pick it apart in your head. It’s probably best if you lock yourself into the bathroom for the entire duration of the panel. Just so you don’t accidentally wander in and see me make a fool of myself.

And yet. Just the idea of having him there, sitting in the audience... it curiously makes the prospect of giving her talk seem like less of an ordeal. He’s not her advisor, and he won’t be able to do much if she’s inundated by a barrage of impossible questions, or if the projector stops working halfway through the talk. But maybe that’s not what she needs from him.

It hits her then, what’s so special about Ben. That no matter his reputation, or how rocky their first meeting, since the very beginning Rey has felt that he was on her side. Over and over, and in ways that she could never have anticipated, he has made her feel like she was not… Alone.

She exhales slowly. The realization should be rattling, but it has an oddly calming effect on her. “Yes,” she tells him, thinking that this—this, is going to be fine. She might never have what she wants from Ben, but for now at least, he is in her life. And that will have to be enough.

“I will, then.”

Rey leans forward. “Will you ask a long-winded, leading questions that will cause me to ramble incoherently and lose the respect of my peers, thus forever undermining my place in the field of Biology?”

“Possibly.” He is smiling. “Should I buy you that disgusting… “ Ben gesticulates toward the register, “…pumpkin thing, now?”

Rey grins. “Oh. Yes! I mean, if you want to.”

“I really would rather buy you anything else.”

“Too bad.” Rey jumps to her feet and heads for the counter, tugging at his sleeve and forcing him to stand with her. Ben follows meekly, mumbling something about black coffee that Rey chooses to ignore.

Enough, she repeats to herself. What you have now—it will have to be enough.
I AM SO BEHIND WITH COMMENTS BUT I READ THEM AND I LOVE YOU 😍

LoveofEscapism and monsterleadmehome are the bestest. Please, do yourself a favor and check out this amazing insane asylum fic that monsterleadmehome has written, and the hottest coworkers fic EVER by LoveofEscapism.

So, next chapter we're going to the conference! I have it written and I'll try to edit ASAP, promise!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Guys, I am posting this from my *cough cough* sickbed. If anything in this chapter makes sense it's thanks to LoveofEscapism and monsterleadmehome, my perfect beta fairies.

I have a bunch of comments that I want to answer and I swear that I will I know I am the least trustworthy person in the world but I SWEAR, I SWEAAAARRR 🎤طفال 🎤طفال 🎤طفال

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There are two beds. In the hotel room.

Two double beds, to be precise, and as she stares at them Rey feels her shoulders sag with relief, and has to resist the urge to fist pump. Take this, you stupid trope. She may have fallen for the dude she began to fake-date like some born-yesterday fool who’s never heard of AO3, but at least she won’t be sharing a bed with him any time soon.

Given her disastrous past couple of weeks, she really, really needed the win.

Rey’s plane landed a little after noon, and in the midday traffic it took her almost one hour to get to the hotel. While it’s obvious that someone has already stopped by to clean the room and make the beds, it’s easy to tell that last night Ben must have slept on the one closest to the entrance. There are a number of little clues—a pair of black-rimmed glasses on the bedside table, and a book in a language that looks like German but that Rey doesn’t fully recognize, with a dinosaur skeleton on the cover; an iPhone charger is dangling from the power outlet, next to a thumb drive and the same iPad she has seen him carry on several occasions. There is a suitcase tucked by the foot of the bed, black and expensive-looking—one that probably wasn’t fished out of the Walmart bargain bin where Rey found hers.

“I guess this is mine, then,” she murmurs as she sits on the bed closest to the window, bouncing a few times to test the firmness of the mattress.

It’s a nice room. Not ridiculously fancy, with a golden chandelier and a Jacuzzi and an attached tea parlor, but Rey is willing to bet that it’s larger than the one her friends booked, and she is suddenly grateful for the way Ben just snorted and looked at her like she was crazy when she offered to pay for half of it. At least it’s large enough that they won’t have to brush up against each other every time they move around, and that staying in here together won’t feel like a singularly sadistic version of seven minutes in heaven.

Not that they’ll be here together much—Rey is going to give her talk in a couple of hours, then go to the department’s social, and then hang out with her friends until… well, as long as she feasibly can. Odds are that Ben already has tons of meetings scheduled—he’s gone right now, probably busy being fawned over by faculty from other institutions, or scaring the shit out of an unsuspecting PhD student who's put together a poster in three and half hours believing no one would show up to ask for a run-through.
It’s just one night, anyway. Maybe they won’t even see each other. Rey’ll be asleep when he comes back tonight, or Ben will, and tomorrow morning one of them will pretend not to wake up while the other gets ready. It’ll be fine. Harmless. At the very least, it won’t make things worse than they currently are.

If they can even *get* any worse.

Rey’s usual conference outfit is black jeans and her least-frayed cardigan, but a few days ago it occurred to her that the ensemble might be a little too casual for a talk; after staring at her closet for five minutes and sighing twice as many times, she decided to bring the black wrap dress that she bought on sale at Loft before interviewing for grad school, and black pumps that Kaydel insisted on palming off to her last year because they turned her little toe into a “purulent, gnarled blob.”

Either Rey has been growing in height since her early twenties, or the dress shrunk the last time she washed it. She realizes it as soon as she slips into the bathroom to put it on, that it doesn’t hit her knees anymore, not by… almost a couple of inches. But it’s still conference-appropriate—*probably?*—so she forbids herself from thinking about it any further, and focuses on curling the bottom of her hair, and then on fighting against her dried-out mascara and the dull point of her eye-pencil.

“This is what happens when you wear makeup once a year. And when you buy it at the dollar store,” she mutters to her reflection. It just stares back at her, the line on its right eye significantly straighter than the left.

She is thinking about her presentation, when she gets out of the bathroom and sets aside her dirty clothes. She regrets the lipstick that prevents her from chewing on her lower lip as she wonders if she should flip slides four and five—or maybe take out four altogether? It would save her forty-five seconds to a minute, which she could spend explaining those wonky electrophysiological results. Though if people really care about those they’ll still have time to ask a question in the end, and it would be a real softball for her, plus it’d take time away from other, more difficult—

It takes her a moment to place where the beeping sound is coming from. Actually, what it takes her is much more than a moment: it’s for Ben to enter the room, holding his key card and stopping abruptly as soon as he notices Rey.

He halts two steps in, and his mouth opens. And—

That’s it. It just stays open.

“Hey.” Rey forces her face into a smile. Her heart—it’s doing something weird in her chest. Beating a little too quickly. She should probably have it checked as soon as she gets back home. One can never be too careful when it comes to cardiovascular health. “Hi.”

Ben snaps his mouth closed, and clears his throat. “You’re…” He swallows. Shifts on his feet. “Here.”

“Yes.” Rey nods, still smiling. This is… awkward. And a little painful. “I just arrived. My flight was on time, which was surprising.” Here. That’s a good sentence. Everyone hates airlines. And delays. And Ben hates everything, which means that he can probably find something to say to that.

Except that he doesn’t. Perhaps last night he got wasted with his multi-funded grad school friends, or with the mysterious woman Poe talked about, and he’s still hungover; or maybe he’s a bit jet lagged from his own trip, or his cardiovascular health is not faring any better than Rey’s. Because he just stares at Rey, silent for several moments, and when he speaks it’s just to say:
“You look…”

Rey glances down at her dress and heels, wondering if her eye makeup is smudged. She put it on three whole minutes ago, which makes it very likely. “Professional?”

“That’s not what I…” Ben closes his eyes and shakes his head. “But, yes. You do.” Something seems to click inside him, and suddenly he looks calmer. He smiles at her and walks into the sleeping area, tossing his keycard on the bed. “How are you, Rey?”

She thought the sweater look was a good one for him—but only because she’d never seen him wear a blazer. *He had a secret weapon all along*, Rey thinks, trying not to stare too hard. *And now he’s unleashing it.* Damn him.

“Good. Fine.” She looks down at her nails. “I mean, I sort of wish I was dead. But aside from that.” Ben huffs out a laugh, and moves a little closer. “You’ll be okay.”

“Agreed.” She pushes her hair back and smiles up at him. “After I die.”

“You’re fine.” He is smiling, too, now. “You have a solid experimental design, and your slides are good.”

“I think they were better before you made me change the Powerpoint background.”

“It was acid green.”

“I know. It made me happy.”

“It made me nauseous.”

“Doctor Holdo said it was fine.”

“Doctor Holdo has pink hair.”

“It’s actually purple—” Rey stops when she notices the look Ben is giving her, and presses her lips together trying not to grin. “Anyway. I did change the background into light blue. It’s all very dull, now. And thank you for helping me figure it out.” *Thank you for answering the one hundred and thirty-nine questions I asked. Thank you for taking less than ten minutes to reply to my emails, every time, even when it was five-thirty AM and you misspelled ‘concensus’, which is unusual of you and makes me suspect that maybe you were still half asleep. Thank you for telling me how to re-do the first two slides—it made my mess of a talk slightly less messy. And thank you for…*

“Thank you again. For letting me crash with you.”

“No problem.”

“Which bed…” Rey scratches the side of her nose. “I mean, I figured you were using that one, so I put my stuff here, but if you…” She gestures confusedly at the room.

“No. No, this… it’s where I slept. Last night.”

“Okay.” She is definitely not counting how many inches there are between the two beds. She really isn’t. “So, um… how’s the conference so far?”

“Same old.” Ben rolls his eyes. “Mostly useless.”

“Did you, um, see your grad school friends?”
He nods. “Some of them, last night. A few for lunch, today.”

Rey’s stomach rumbles loudly at the mention of food. “Oh.”

“You okay?”

“Just—I think I forgot to have lunch.”

His eyebrows arch. “I didn’t think you could do that.”

“Hey.” Rey glares at him. “The sustained level of despair I’ve been engaging in for the past two weeks requires a staggering amount of calories, in case you—what are you doing?” Ben is leaning over his suitcase, rummaging for something that he holds out to Rey.

“What is it?”

“Calories. To fuel your despairing habits.”

“Oh.” She accepts it, and then studies the protein bar in her hands, trying not to burst out crying. It’s just food. Probably a snack he brought for the plane ride and ended up not eating. He doesn’t need to despair, after all. He’s Doctor Ben Solo. “Thanks.”

He doesn’t reply, and the silence that spreads between them is not quite uncomfortable—but not pleasant, either.

“Are you…” The wrapping of the bar crinkles as Rey moves it from one hand to another. “Are you still coming to my talk?”

“Of course. When is it?”

Relief unknots something stuck inside her chest. “Today at four, in room 278. It’s session 3b. It’s kind of a crappy time, but the one good thing is that it overlaps with the keynote address. Which means that hopefully only a handful of people will show up.”

It speaks of how well she’s come to know Ben, that she notices the way his spine stiffens and his muscles tense. Because, as far as Rey can tell, he barely moves. He just stands there, looking like something just happened, when nothing did. Unless…

“Oh. Did you… were you planning to go to the keynote address?”

Ben wets his lips. “I…”

It’s entirely possible that her subconscious knew all along. Entirely. Because Ben’s conference badge was there, dangling from his neck the whole time, and it’s a small anomaly that Rey hadn’t noticed what it said. And a slightly larger anomaly that she chooses this exact moment to finally read it.

Ben Solo, Ph.D.

Keynote speaker

“Oh my god.” Rey looks up at him, and at least he has the grace to look sheepish. “You are—you
… how did you not tell me that you are the keynote speaker?"

Ben scratches his jaw, oozing discomfort. “I… didn’t think of it.”

It’s actually very kind of him to say that, because the name of the keynote speaker is sure to be printed in size three-hundred font in the program, and in all the promotional material, not to mention in the conference app and the emails. Rey must have had her head very much up her butt to fail to notice.

She makes to rub her eyes with her fingers, and then thinks better of it. *Damn makeup. Useless goop.* “Ben. I can’t be fake-dating SfB’s keynote speaker.”

“Well, there are technically three keynote speakers, and the other two are married women in their fifties who live in Europe and Japan—I doubt Hux would buy that you—”

Rey crosses her arms on her chest, and Ben quiets. She just *has* to laugh. “How did this not come up?”

“I… it’s not a big deal.” Ben shrugs. “It’s meaningless, really. And I doubt I was their first choice.”

“Right.” *Sure. Because a person exists that would refuse to be keynote speaker at SfB.* Rey tilts her head. “Did you think I was an idiot, when I started complaining about my ten-minute talk that will be attended by fourteen and a half people?”

“No.” He steps even closer. “No, not at all. Your reaction was absolutely justified.” He seems to think about it. “Though I do sometimes think you’re an idiot, mostly when I see you put ketchup and cream cheese on bagels.”

“It’s a great mix.”

He sighs, looking pained. “It’s really not. When are you presenting in your panel? Maybe I can still —”

“No. I’m exactly halfway through.” She waves a hand, hoping to seem unconcerned. “It’s fine, really.” And it is. Except for the fact that it reminds her, once more, of how ridiculously better than her Ben is. Ten years from now Rey probably won’t even be keynote speaker at her own D&D group. “That’s why you have a room for the entire length of the conference even though you’re not staying. Because you’re a big shot.”

He frowns. “I’m not—"

“Big shot.”

“Rey—”

“One might even say, a hotshot.”

He presses his lips together, giving her a flat look. “Rey.”

“Yes, hotshot?”

He sighs and walks to the bedside table, pocketing the USB she noticed earlier.

“I have to take my slides downstairs, brat.”

“Okay.” He can leave, it’s fine. *Totally fine.* Rey doesn’t let her smile falter. “I guess I’ll maybe
see you after my talk, then?”

“Of course.”

“And after yours, too. Good luck. And congrats, right?”

Ben, though, doesn’t seem to be thinking about that. He lingers by the door, his hand on the handle as he looks back at Rey. Their eyes hold for a few moments before he speaks. “Don’t be nervous, okay? It will be fine.” He smiles. “And if not, at least it will be over.”

It’s not until a few minutes later, when she is sitting on her bed staring at the Boston skyline and chewing on her lunch, that Rey realizes that the protein bar Ben gave her is covered in chocolate.

... 

It doesn’t go poorly.

It doesn’t go particularly well, either. She stumbles on the word ‘channelrhodopsin’ twice, like she doesn’t say it sixteen times a day on a slow week, and by some weird trick of the projector her staining looks more like a black blob than a putamen slice.

“Ehm. It looks different on my computer.” Rey turns to the audience with a smile. “Just—trust me on this one.”

Several people chuckle, and Rey relaxes marginally.

The room is not as full as she feared, and even those in attendance don’t seem overly interested in any of the talks on the panel. A few people are typing at their laptops; others surreptitiously check their phones every few seconds. In the second row, Finn fakes a fascinated expression and nods at all the right moments, while Rose and Kay just smile enthusiastically whenever Rey happens to look in their direction. The session is running late, and she ends up having time for only one question. The man who asks it refers to Rey’s mice as ‘rats’ three times in a row, but he seems satisfied when she explains the reason behind the 4 Hz oscillations, and thanks her politely.

Rey sits on her chair, grins at Finn when she catches him giving her the thumbs up, and pulls the hem of her dress lower down her thighs while considering that it could have gone much, much worse. She settles back to watch the last two speakers, and feels relief wash through her.

“You were so amazing,” Kay tells her when the panel is over. “Also, you look hot. And tall. Even more than usual.”

“You looked so faculty up there.” Rose pushes up to hug her. “While you were talking, I think I had a vision of your future in academia.”

Rey wraps her arms around her. “What vision?”

“You were a high powered PI, surrounded by students who hung on your every word. And you were answering a multi-paragraph email with an uncapitalized ‘no’.”

“Ohh. Was I happy?”

“Of course not.” Rose snorts. “It’s academia.”
“Figures.” Rey sighs.

“Okay, the social is in half an hour.” Finn leans in to kiss Rey on the cheek and squeeze her waist. When she’s wearing heels he’s just a tiny bit shorter than her, and she smiles thinking that she definitely wants a picture of the two of them side by side. “We should go celebrate the one time Rey managed to pronounce ‘channelrhodopsin’ right. With some free drinks.”

“You dick.”

He pulls her in for a tight hug, and whispers in her ear, “You did amazing, peanut.”

“How ‘open bar’ is this thing?”

“Probably not enough.”

“Will there be food?”

“There wasn’t last year.”

“Hang on,” Rey pulls away from Finn and looks into the conference tote bag. “I still have to get my USB from the computer. I’ll be right back.”

“Okay. We’ll wait by the entrance.”

Several people nod at Rey as she makes her way to the podium; she smiles back, feeling like a huge weight has been lifted off her shoulders, and that this mess of a semester will simply have to let up and get better, now. The last two panelists are still lingering by the computer, and Rey stops patiently behind them and waits for them to finish with whatever it is that they’re doing, thinking about what she’ll have for dinner, about when she’ll have a minute to email Doctor Holdo to update her about her talk; about whether she should text Ben to tell him that he was right, she is still alive; about asking how his keynote address went, whether his powerpoint acted up and he mispronounced words like ‘microarrays’ or ‘karyotyping’, whether he’s going to the department social.

And then—then one the panelists says something, and Rey tunes into the conversation.

“Who was the girl, by the way?”

“The girl?”

“The second… no, third speaker? Something Sanders?”

“Oh.” It’s not a normal ‘oh’. It’s an ’ah’ with subtext underneath it, that Rey doesn’t quite understand but that has a chill run down her spine nonetheless. “I think she’s a student of Amilyn Holdo’s.”

“Uh. Didn’t know she was doing optogenetics now?” There is something, in his tone. Something… something.

“I don’t think she is. Must be co-mentored, or a side project.”

“Well. That explains the quality of the talk.” The man who says it—he’s an associate professor at a state school Rey can’t remember now—Kansas, or maybe Arizona. Earlier, when she’d introduced herself, he’d smiled at her warmly and shaken her hand. “Great to meet you,” he’d said.
She feels her stomach sink, and her feet cement to the ground.

“A useless study. Derivative, and no findings of interest.”

“I was falling asleep.”

“Yeah. We all know why she was in the panel.”

“You mean, they needed a woman?”

A snigger. “Yep. Some diversity, ya know?”

“They really scraped the bottom of the barrel with this one, though.” The man fishes his phone out of his pocket and taps the screen for a few moments. “Shit. I have to go meet Alex. You coming?”

“Sure.”

“I think he said he’s in the lobby—”

They both turn at the same time, but Kansas—Arizona?—is the one who recognizes her first. This time, at least, he has the good sense not to smile: he just stares at Rey, a horrified expression on his face as he undoubtedly replays in his head everything he said in the past minute.

*Good, Rey thinks, bitter. I’ll be doing the same, asshole.*

“Excuse me,” she says, and how her voice sounds so calm, even when her heart is about to beat out of her chest, she has no idea. She just leans forward, extracts her USB from the computer, and then spins around, refusing to look either of the men in the eye and instead focusing on the grey carpet, on the the weight of her tote on her shoulder, on the clicking rhythm of her heels as she walks to the entrance.

She breathes once, twice, then once more.

And then her hands begin to shake, her palm cold and sweaty around her USB, a rush of blood to her chest and a heavy lump behind her sternum and—

She needs to get the fuck out of here. Immediately. Or—or—or she’ll—

“Okay, the place is five minutes from here.” Kay is looking at her phone. “Jess texted and it’s already almost full.”

“Shit.”

”We should go, like, now.”

“Yep, let’s just leave. Should I get us an Uber?”

"I have Lyft app pulled up. For four, right?"

“Rey. Rey, you got your thing?”

“I…” She just—she can’t meet Finn’s eyes. *Anyone* ’s eyes. “Actually, I forgot something in my hotel room.”

Rose looks up from her phone and frowns. “What is it?”
“Do you need it now? You should just go get it after the social.”

“If you forgot your wallet I can cover you at the—”

“I—I do. Need it.” Rey feels like her entire body is shaking, now. Like she’s about to lose it completely. Collapse, right here, right now. “I have to go.”

“Okay.” Finn—he is studying her suspiciously. “Just run up, we’ll wait for you—”

“No.” She shakes her head, clutches her hand around her bag, and begins to walk backwards toward the door. “No, I just—you guys go ahead.” She spins around. “I’ll see you at the social, okay?”

When her friends’ reply comes, she is already out of the room.

She tries to wipe her cheeks, when she hears the beep of the key card. She really does. And it would have probably worked, if only she’d bothered to look for some tissues. Screw that—even toilet paper would have been an improvement over the palms of her hands and the sleeves of her dress. Those usually do the trick when one only needs to dab a couple of tears—not when the crying has been going on for a solid twenty minutes.

Really though, it’s Ben’s fault. Rey was sure he wouldn’t come back to the room after his speech—positive he’d attend the opening ceremony, or at least the department social. Didn’t he say that he’s on the Social and Networking Committee? Rey knows he is. Which means that right now he really should be elsewhere. Socializing. Networking. Committing.

Oh, well. Ben witnessing all of this just enhances the poopyness of this poopy, poopy day.

There is the sound of steps coming inside—and then… nothing. Ben must have stopped at the entrance of the bedroom, and Rey—she remains sitting in the chair by the TV, and doesn’t look up or meet his eyes.

She is… a mess. A miserable, disastrous mess. A sad fact, from which she really should divert Ben’s attention. Maybe by saying something—anything.

“Hey.” She attempts a smile, but continues to stare at her hands. “How did your—”

“What happened?” His voice is calm, pitched low. Oddly soothing and comforting—or maybe not ‘oddly’ at all.

“How was your keynote address?” Rey’s smile is holding. Good. Good, that’s good. “Did you only just finish? Was it the Q & A that—”

“What happened, Rey?”

“Nothing I…”

She doesn’t quite manage to finish the sentence. And the smile—if she’s honest with herself, it was never much of a smile to begin with, but now it’s crumbling down. Now it’s not even there anymore, and—Rey hears Ben move and come closer, but doesn’t look at him—can’t, really,
since shutting her eyes is all that’s keeping the floodgates closed. And it’s not doing a good job of it, either. But it’s all she has, so she doesn’t look at him, and that’s why she almost startles, when she notices him kneeling in front of her. Right in front of her chair, his head on a level with hers, studying her with a worried frown.

Rey bends her face to her chest, and—Ben doesn’t let her. His hand comes up to her chin and lifts it up, until she has no choice but to meet his gaze. Then it slides up to her cheek, wrapping around it as he asks, again, “Rey. What happened?”

“Nothing.” Her voice—it’s shaking. It keeps disappearing somewhere, maybe melting in the tears.

“Rey.”

“Really. Nothing.”

Ben stares at her, questioning, and doesn’t let go. “Did someone buy the last bag of chips?”

A laugh bubbles out her, wet and not wholly under her control. “Yes. Was it you?”

“Of course.” His thumb swipes across her cheekbone, stopping a falling tear. “I bought all of them. Ate them, too.”

This smile—it feels better than the one she cobbled together a minute ago. By miles. “I hope you have good health insurance, because you’re so getting type 2 diabetes.”

“Worth it.”

“You monster.” She must be leaning into his hand, because his thumb is stroking her again.

“Is that how you talk to your fake boyfriend?” He looks so worried. His eyes, the line of his mouth. And yet—so patient. “What happened, Rey?”

She shakes her head. “I just…” She has to take a deep breath. Calm herself before she can continue. “I thought the presentation went okay. My friends said it did. But then…but then I heard people talking about it, and they said…” He really should stop touching her. She must be getting his whole hand wet. The sleeve of his sweater, too.

“What did they say?”

Rey really does not want to give Ben a summary. “Nothing. That it was stupid. And boring. And I was only there because I’m a woman. They just…” Rey shakes her head, because otherwise—this will never end. They—what they said, it was unfair. She knows that. She is sure of that. It’s just…

“Who? Who were they?”

“I—two guys. I was standing behind them. I don’t know their names. I don’t remember.”

“Did you see their badges?”

“No. I didn’t…I didn’t pay attention.”

“Were they on your panel?”

The question sounds almost uninterested, but there is something, underneath his tone. Something pressing that hints at violence and rage and broken bones. Ben’s hand is still gentle on her cheek, but his eyes have narrowed, and there is a tension in his jaw that wasn’t there before. Rey feels a
shiver run down her spine.

“No,” she lies. “I… it doesn’t even matter. It’s okay.” His lips are pressed into a straight line, and his nostrils are flaring, so Rey repeats. “I—I usually don’t care what people think of me—”

“Right,” he scoffs.

Rey’s perception of Ben has always been of a rather irascible person, so she’s not sure why she’s surprised to see him this angry. Maybe it’s because he’s never been quite like this, with her. “No, really, I don’t care what people say—”

“I know you don’t. But that’s the problem, isn’t it?” He looks at her, and he is so close, she can see how the yellows and greens mix into the clear brown of his eyes. “It’s not whatever they say. It’s what you think.”

“I—”

“It’s that you think they’re right. Don’t you?”

Her mouth is full of cotton. “I…”

“Rey. You are a good scientist. And you will become an even better one.” The way he is looking at her, so earnest and serious—it’s going to break her. “Whatever those jackasses said, it speaks nothing of you and a whole lot of them. Null findings and boring studies happen all the time—and we need them.” His fingers shift on her skin to weave through the hair behind her ear. “Your work is solid, and you are a good researcher.”

Rey—she doesn’t even think it through. And even if she had, she probably couldn’t have stopped herself. She just leans forward and hides her face into Ben’s neck, hugging him tight. A terrible idea, stupid and inappropriate, and Ben is surely going to push her away, any minute now, except that…

He mostly seems okay with it. His palm slides to her nape, almost as if to press her into him, and Rey just stays there for long minutes, feeling how grounding, how warm, how solid he is—under her fingers and in her life.

You just had to go and make me fall for you, she thinks, blinking against his skin. You absolute asshole.

He doesn’t let her go. Not until she pulls back and wipes her cheeks again, feeling like maybe—maybe—this time around she’ll be able to hold it together.

“I really am.” She sniffs, and he leans over to grab a box of tissues that was just on the other side of the TV. Of course. “Fine, I mean.”

Ben just sighs.

“Okay—maybe I’m not fine right now, but I will be.” She plucks a tissue and blows her nose. “I know that what they said—I know that they’re dicks. I know. I think I need a while to…”

Ben just studies her and nods, his eyes unreadable again.

“Thank you. For what you said. But mostly for letting me snot all over your hotel room.”

He smiles. “Anytime.”
“And your jacket, too.”

He keeps smiling, and looking at her.

“Are you coming to the department social? Or going to the opening ceremony?” she asks, trying to change the topic—and at the same time dreading the moment she’ll have to get out of this chair. Of this room.

*Be honest,* that sensible, ever-knowing voice inside her whispers. *It’s his presence, that you don’t want to be out of.*

“Are you?”

Rey shrugs. “I said I would. But I—I really don’t feel like talking to anyone, right now.” She dries her cheeks once more, but miraculously the flow of tears has stopped. Ben Solo, master of hydraulics, has worked his magic and accomplished the impossible. “Though, I’m torn. I feel like the free alcohol could really help.”

He stares at her pensively for a moment, biting the inside of his cheek. Then he nods, seeming to reach some sort of decision, and stands with his hand held out to her.

“Come on.”

“Oh—” Rey has to crane her neck to look up at him. “I think I’m gonna wait a bit before I—”

“We’re not going to the social.”

*We? What?*

“Come on,” he repeats, and this time—Rey can’t quite help herself. She takes his hand and stands. And then—doesn’t let go. She can’t, with the way his fingers are closing around hers.

Ben looks pointedly at her shoes, until Rey gets the hint and slips them on, using his arm to keep her balance.

“Where… where are we going?”

“To get you some free alcohol. Well.” He shrugs. “Free for you.”

Rey’s almost gasps, when she realizes what he means. “No, I—Ben, you have to go to the department social. Actually—no, you have to go to the opening ceremony. You are—you are the keynote speaker!”

“And I keynote-spoke.” He grabs Rey’s red duffle coat from her bed and pulls her towards the entrance. “Can you walk for a bit in those shoes?”

“I—yes, but I—”

“I have my keycard, we don’t need yours.”

“Ben.” Rey grabs his wrist, and he immediately turns to look at her. “Ben, you can’t. People will say that you—”

His smile is lopsided. “That I want to spend time with my girlfriend?”

Rey’s brain stops. Just like that. And then it starts again, and—
The world is a little different.

When he tugs her hand again, she smiles and simply follows him out of the room.

Chapter End Notes

Okay HIII, so, I made a tweet with pics of how I imagine Rey's and Ben's outfits/hair at the conference but totally ignore it if it's not your jam!!
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Hello, this chapter is brought to you courtesy of the two amazingest betas in the world, LoveofEscapism and monsterleadmehome

See the end of the chapter for more notes

People see them—so many people.

People whom Rey has never met before, people whom she recognizes from blog posts and science Twitter and other conferences, people who are in her department—who teach her classes. People who smile at Ben, who address him by name or as ‘Doctor Solo’, who nod at him and tell him, “Hey, great talk,” or “See you around.” People who completely ignore Rey, and people who study her curiously—her, and Ben, and the place where their hands are joined.

People who are Poe—the only one with whom Ben actually stops to chat.

“So, you guys skipping the boring shit?” he asks with a small, knowing smile.

“Yep.”

“I’ll make sure to drink your booze, then. And to extend your apologies.”

“No need to—”

“I’ll just say you had a family emergency.” Poe grins, and winks. “Perhaps future-family emergency, how does that sound—”

Ben rolls his eyes and pulls Rey outside the hotel. She has to hurry to keep up with him, not because he’s walking particularly fast, but because his legs are so long, one of his strides is worth about two of hers.

“Hey—I’m wearing heels, here.”

He turns to look at her, his eyes traveling down her legs and then rapidly moving away.

“I know. You are less vertically-challenged than usual.”

Rey narrows her eyes. “I am actually pretty tall.”

“Mmm.” Ben’s expression is non-committal.

“I—what’s that face?”

“What face?”

“Your face.”
“It’s just… my regular face?”

“No, that’s your ‘you’re not tall’ face.”

Ben smiles, just a smidge. “Are the shoes bad for walking? Should we go back?”

“Nah. They’re fine, but can we slow down?”

He feigns a sigh, but reduces his speed. His hand lets go of hers, and pushes against her lower back to steer her to the right. Rey has to hide a small shiver.

“So…” She stuffs her fist in the pockets of her coat, trying to ignore how the tips of her fingers are still tingling. “Those free drinks you mentioned? Do they come with food?”

Ben’s lips curve. “Why? Didn’t you have an entire protein bar only five hours ago.”

Rey leans into his side and bumps her shoulder against his bicep, and—it’s hard not to notice that there is no give.

He lifts his hand appeasingly. “I’ll get you dinner.”

“Perfect.”

“You’re not a cheap date, though.”

“I really am not. I fully plan to eat and drink my feelings.”

Ben’s smile is more lopsided than ever. “Where do you want to go, brat?”

“Mmm. What do you like? Aside from tap water and hard boiled spinach?”

He gives her a dirty side-look. “How about burgers?”

“Meh.” Rey shrugs. “I guess. If there’s nothing else.”

“What’s wrong with burgers?”

“I don’t know. They taste like foot.”

“They… what?”

“What about Mexican? Do you like Mexican?”

“Burgers don’t taste like—”

“Or Italian? Pizza would be great. And maybe there’s something celery-based that you could order.”

“Burgers it is.”

Rey laughs. “What about Chinese?”

“Had it for lunch.”

“Well, people in China have Chinese food multiple times a day, so you shouldn’t let that stop you from having it for—oh.”
It takes Ben two whole steps to realize that Rey has stopped in the middle of the sidewalk. He whirls around to look at her. “Why did you—”

“There.” Rey points to the red and white sign across the road. Ben’s gaze follows, and for a long moment he simply stares at it, blinking several times. And then:

“No.”

“There,” she repeats, feeling her cheeks widen into a grin.

“Rey.” There is a deep vertical line between his eyebrows. “No. There are way better restaurants we can—”

“But I want to go to that one.”

“Why? There’s—”

She moves closer to him and grasps the sleeve of his blazer. “Please. Please?”

Ben pinches his nose, sighs, and then puts his hand between her shoulder blades to guide her across the street.

…

The problem, he explains in hushed tones as they wait to be seated, is not the Sushi train, but the all-you-can-eat bit.

“It's never a good sign,” Ben tells her, but his voice sounds more resigned than combative, and when the server ushers them inside he follows her meekly to the booth. Rey stares at the plates traveling on the conveyor belt that weaves across the restaurant, unable to stop her open-mouthed grin. When she remembers Ben’s presence and turns her attention back to him, he is looking at her with an expression halfway between exasperated and indulgent.

“You know,” he tells her, eyeing a seaweed salad passing by his shoulder, “we could go to a real Japanese restaurant. I am very happy to pay for however much sushi you want to—”

“But will it move around me?”

Ben shakes his head and presses a hand to his mouth. “I take back what I said. You’re a disturbingly cheap date.”

She ignores him and lifts the glass door, grabbing a roll and something that looks like a chocolate donut. Ben mutters something that sounds a lot like ‘very authentic’, and when the waitress stops by he orders them both a beer, and then proceeds to either ignore—or genuinely not notice—the way the girl bats her eyes and tosses her long hair over her shoulder.

“What do you think this is?” Rey dips a piece of sushi in her soy sauce. “Tuna or salmon?”

“Probably spider.”

She pops it into her mouth. “Delicious.”
Ben looks skeptical. “Really.”

It’s not, in all truth. But it’s okay. And this, well, it’s so much fun.

“You.” Rey pushes the remaining piece towards him, silently daring him to try it. He breaks apart his sticks and picks it up, chewing for a long time.

“It tastes like foot.”

Rey looks around for something to chuck at him, but she is interrupted when the waitress arrives with their beers.

“Here.” She grabs a bowl of edamame from the belt. “You can have this. It’s basically kale.”

Ben brings one to his mouth, and actually manages to look like he doesn’t hate it.

“We don’t have to talk, by the way.”

Rey tilts her head. “What?”

“You said you didn’t want to talk anyone, back in the hotel room. So we don’t have to, if you’d rather be quiet.”

‘You’re not just anyone,’ seems like a dangerous thing to say at the moment. So she smiles. “I bet you’re great at silences.”

“Maybe. Is that a dare?”

“No.” Rey shakes her head. “I want to talk. Just… could we not talk about the conference? Or science? Or the fact that the world is full of assholes?”

Ben’s hand closes into a fist on the table, his jaw clenched tight as he nods. Rey doesn’t know what or who he’s mad at, and has to stop herself from reaching out to him. Instead, she just grins and tries to take his mind off it. “We could talk about how nice this place is—”

“It’s appalling.”

“—or the taste of the sushi—”

“Foot.”

“—or the best movie in the Fast and Furious franchise—”

“Fast Five. Though I have a feeling you’re going to say—”

“Tokyo Drift.”

“Right.” Ben sighs, nods, and they exchange a small smile. And then, then the smile fades and they’re just staring at each other, something thick and sweet coloring the air between them, magnetic and just the right side of bearable. Rey has to rip her gaze from Ben’s, because—no. No.

She turns away, and her eyes fall on a couple at a table a few feet to their right. They are the mirror image of Ben and Rey, sitting on each side of the booth, all warm glances and tentative smiles.

“Do you think they’re on a fake-date?” she asks, leaning back against her seat.
Ben follows her gaze to the couple. “Mm. I thought those mostly involved coffee shops?”

“Nah. Only the best ones.”

The man leans forward and knits his finger’s through the girl’s, who squeezes his hand and inches a little closer. For a long moment, Ben studies them without saying anything.

“Maybe it is. A fake date.” His voice is contemplative. Distant. ”All the cool kids are doing it, I hear.”

Rey bites her lip. “The newest Millennial trend.”

“And I have been informed that I am one.”

“You so are. Going from keynote speaker at the biggest conference in your field to a fake date in an all-you-can-eat restaurant is the apotheosis of millennial culture.”

He huffs a laugh. “Well.” Ben looks down at the surface of the table, and angles his sticks so that they’re parallel to each other. “I can definitely recommend it.”

Rey dips her chin to hide a smile—and then leans forward to steal one edamame.

…

In the elevator she holds onto Ben’s shoulder and takes off her heels, disastrously failing at being graceful as he studies her and shakes his head. “I thought you said they didn’t hurt?”

He sounds… curious? Amused? Fond?

“That was ages ago.” Rey picks them up and and lets them dangle from her fingers. When she straightens, Ben is impossibly taller than her. Again. “Now I am very ready to chop off my feet.”

The elevator pings, and the doors open. “That seems counterproductive.”

“Oh, you have no idea how painful—hey—what are you—?”

Her heart skips what feels like a dozen beats when Ben picks her up—and then makes up for it by drumming its way out of her chest and inside her throat. Rey yelps, and he carries her to their room like they just got married or something equally ridiculous, all because she has a blister on her pinkie toe. Without much of a choice, she closes her arms around his neck and sinks against him, trying to make sure she’ll survive if he drops her.

His hands are warm around her back and knee, his forearms tight and strong enough that she’s not really worried he’ll let go of her. He smells amazing. He feels even better.

“You know, I can walk, the room’s like, twenty meters away—”

“I have no idea what that means.”

“Ben.”
“We Americans think in feet, so—”

“I’m too heavy.”

“Oh, yeah. You really are.” The ease with which he shifts her in his arms to slide the key card belies his words. “You should cut pumpkin-flavored drinks from your diet.”

Rey pulls his hair and smiles into his shoulder. “Never.”

Their name tags are still on the TV table, exactly where they left them, and there’s a conference program half-open on Ben’s bed, not to mention tote-bags and the mountains of flyers and generic crap one can never avoid during registration. As soon as he puts her down, Ben gathers everything that is conference related and sticks it on the chair facing the windows, where it’s hidden from their sight, and—

Rey could hug him. She probably won’t—since she already did, earlier in the afternoon and then again about a second ago—but she really, really could. Instead, she just plops herself down on her bed, belly up, and smiles at the ceiling.

She actually thought that it would be awkward, being with him in such a small space for a whole night. She was convinced of it. And it is, a little bit—or at least it was when she first arrived earlier today, but now it’s happening again, the same thing that always happens when she’s with Ben. Rey feels calm and safe and relaxed, and—less anxious. Like the world, constantly hectic and messy and demanding, is slowing down. Easing up, just a bit.

*Have we done this before?*

The bedcover rustles under her head when she turns to look at him. He seems relaxed as he drapes his blazer against the back of a chair, then takes off his watch and sets it neatly on the desk. The casual domesticity of it—the thought that his day and hers will end in the same place, and the same time—it soothes her like a slow caress down her spine.

“Thank you. For buying me food.”

He glances a her, crinkling his nose. “I don’t know that there was any ‘food’ involved.”

Rey smiles and rolls to her side. “You’re not going out again?”

“Out?”

“Yeah. To meet other very important science people? Hang out with Poe? Eat another seven pounds of edamame?”

“I think I’ve had enough edamame for this decade.” He takes off his shoes and socks, and sets them neatly by the bed. His feet, Rey notes, are huge. But not out of proportion. “And I see Poe often enough back home. Mostly under duress.”

“You’re staying in, then.”

He pauses and looks at her. “Unless you’d rather be alone?”

*No. No, I would not.* Rey props herself up to her elbow. “Let’s watch a movie.”

Ben blinks at her. “Sure.” He sounds surprised, but not displeased. “Actually, we’d better not.”

“Why?”
“If your taste in movies is anything like your taste in restaurants, it’ll probably—”

He doesn’t see the pillow coming at him. It bounces off his face and then falls to the floor, making Rey giggle and spring off her bed.

“You mind if I shower, before?”

He is frowning. “You brat.”

She starts rummaging in her suitcase. “You can pick the movie! I don’t care which one, as long as there are no scenes in which horses are killed, because it—poop.”

Ben turns to her. “What?”

“I forgot my pajamas.” Rey looks for her phone in the pockets of her coat. It’s not there, and she realizes that she didn’t bring it with her to the restaurant. ”Have you seen my—oh, there is it.”

She hasn’t checked her messages in a few hours, and finds several unread texts—mostly from Finn, but a couple from Kay and Rose, too, asking her in an increasingly concerned tone where she is and if she still plans to come to the social, telling her to get her ass there ASAP because ‘the booze is flowing like a river’, and then, finally, just informing her that they’re all going downtown to a bar Snap’s cousin recommended. Finn must have been well on his way to wasted at that point, because his last message reads: <Clallif u want tp join❤us, panut>

“Poop,” she repeats, deflating.

“So, you actually use ‘poop’ as a swear word?” Rey looks up to find Ben staring at her with a fascinated expression.

“Why? You don’t?”

“Ah… no.”

“Oh.” She scratches her head. “Is it weird?”

He bits his lip. “It’s… charming.”

Rey’s cheeks feel suddenly warm, and she has to avert her eyes. “Anyway. I forgot my pajamas and wanted to see if I could borrow something from one of my friends, but I don’t think they’ll be back for hours. Though it just occurred to me that maybe Jess Pava didn’t go with them, let me text her and see if—”

“Here.” Ben sets something black and neatly folded on her bed. “You can use this if you want.”

She studies it skeptically. “What is it?”

“A t-shirt. I slept in it yesterday, but it’s probably better than the dress you’re wearing. To sleep in, I mean.”

“Oh.” Rey picks it up, and the t-shirt unfolds. She immediately notices three things: it’s large—so large that if she wore it, it would hit her mid-thigh or even lower; it smells heavenly, a mix of Ben’s skin and laundry detergent that has her wanting to bury her face in it and inhale for weeks; and on the front, it says in big, white letters…

“… Biology ninja?”
Ben scratches the back of his neck. “I didn’t buy it.”

“Oh. Did you… steal it?”

“I—no. It was a present.”

“Well.” She grins. “This is one hell of a present. Doctor Ninja.”

He stares at her flatly. “If you tell anyone, I’ll lie and deny it.”

Rey chuckles. “Are you sure it’s okay, though? What will you wear?”

“Nothing.” She must have been gaping at him a little too much, because he gives her an amused look and shakes his head. “I’m kidding, Rey. I have a tee under my sweater. And pajama pants.”

She glares at him and haughtily stomps into the bathroom, making a point not to meet his eyes.

It’s much harder, alone under the hot jet of the shower, to concentrate on stale sushi and Ben’s uneven smile, and forget why precisely he ended up allowing her to torture him for three whole hours. So Rey keeps it as quick as possible, distracting herself by reading the labels of his shampoo and body wash (something unscented and hypoallergenic and pH-balanced that has her rolling her eyes) and drying her body and hair as fast as humanly possible. She takes off her contacts, and then steals a bit of his toothpaste. Her gaze falls on his toothbrush; it’s charcoal black, down to the bristles, and Rey can’t help but giggle.

When she steps out of the bathroom Ben is sitting on the edge of the bed, wearing plaid pajama pants and a white t-shirt. He is holding the TV remote in one hand and his phone in another, looking between the two screens with a frown.

“You would.”

“Would, what?” he asks absentmindedly, without looking up.

“Have a black toothbrush.”

His mouth twitches. “You will be shocked to hear that there is no Netflix category for movies in which horses don’t die.”

“I know. Isn’t it an obscenity? We need one.” Rey crumples her dress into a ball and stuffs it inside her bag, relishing the idea of wearing Converse and jeans for the rest of the conference. “If I were American I would totally run for congress on that platform.”

"Should we fake-marriy? So you can get citizenship?"

Her heart stumbles a little. "Oh, yes. I think it's time we fake-move to the next level."

“Mmm.” Ben taps at his phone. “So I’m just googling dead horse, plus the title of whatever movie sounds good.”

“That’s what I usually do.” She pads across the room until she’s standing next to him. “What do you have?”

“This one is about a linguistics professor who is asked to help decipher an alien language and—”

He glances up from his phone, and immediately falls silent. His mouth opens and then shuts, and his eyes skitter to her thighs, her feet, her treasure map knee socks, and quickly back to her face.
No, not her face: some point above her shoulder. He clears his throat before saying, “Glad it... fits.” He is looking at his phone again, and his grip on the remote has tightened.

It’s a long beat before Rey realizes that he’s referring to his t-shirt. She grins. “Oh, yeah. Exactly my size, right?” It’s so large that it covers pretty much the same amount of skin her dress had, soft and comfortable like an old shoe. And Rey was able to restrain herself from rolling around in its scent before putting it on, which she chalks up as an astounding accomplishment. “Maybe I won’t give it back.”

“It’s all yours.”

“Thank you. Maybe when the conference is over I’ll stick it around a pillow and sell it to one of your students. For whenever they need something to punch after a meeting with you.”

Ben smiles. “Sure. I hope you make a killing.”

“Probably enough to quit grad school and have all-you-can-eat sushi every day.” She rocks on her heels, and wonders if it would be okay, if she sat next to him now. It’s only convenient, since they have to choose a movie together. “Can I really sleep in it, this week?”

“Of course. I’m leaving tomorrow, anyway.”

Tomorrow. “Oh.”

Rey knew that, of course. Had known for a while. She’d known the first time he told her, a couple of weeks ago; she’d known this morning when she boarded the plane, and she’d known mere hours ago, when she’d used that precise piece of information to comfort herself that no matter how awkward and stressful, her stay with Ben would at least be short lived.

Except that it’s not awkward, now. And it’s not stressful. Not nearly as the idea of being apart from him for three days. Of being—here, of all places, without him.

“So... how big is your suitcase?”

“Mm?”

“Can I come with you?”

He looks up at her, still smiling. And then he must see something in her eyes, behind the joke and the attempted humor. Something vulnerable and imploring that she must have failed to adequately bury within herself.

“Rey.” He lets go of his phone and the remote, setting them on bed. “Don’t let them.”

She just tilts her head. She is—not going to cry again. There’s no point in it. She is not like this—this fragile, defenseless person who second-guesses herself at every turn.

At least, she didn’t use to be.

“Let them?”

“Don’t let them ruin this conference for you. Or science. Or make you feel any less proud of your work.”

She looks down, studying the yellow of her socks as she buries her toes in the soft carpet. And then up to him again.
“And what if they’re right?”

Ben doesn’t reply for a long moment. He just stares at her, a hint of sadness and frustration in his expression, a thoughtful line to his lips as he considers who-knows-what. And then, voice low and even, he says:

“I wish you could see yourself the way I see you, Rey.”

And that, is that.

Maybe it’s the words. Maybe it’s the tone. Maybe it’s the way he took her hand earlier and saved her from her misery, a veritable knight in black armor. Maybe it’s none of it and it was always going to happen, from the very first moment someone informed her that she was in love with Ben. Maybe it’s all of this, and still—it doesn’t matter. All of a sudden, it just doesn’t matter, the why of it, the how. The after. All Rey cares about is that she wants to, right now, and that seems enough to make it alright.

It’s all so slow: the step forward she takes to come to stand between his knees, the rise of her hand to his face, the way her fingers cup his jaw. Slow enough that he could stop her, he could pull out of reach, he could say something—and he does not. He simply looks up at her, his eyes a clear, liquid brown, and Rey’s heart both jumps and quiets at the same time when he tilts his head and leans into her palm.

She hadn’t touched him yet, not there. But it doesn’t surprise her, how soft his skin is beneath the night stubble, how much warmer it is than hers. And when she bends, for once taller than him, the shape of his lips under hers is like an old song, familiar and easy.

It’s not their first kiss, after all.

Though, it’s different. It’s calm and tentative and precious, Ben’s hand light on her waist as he tilts his chin up to her, eager and pressing, like this is something he has thought of—like he’s been wanting it, too. It’s not their first kiss, but it’s the first kiss that is theirs, and Rey savors it for long moments. The texture, the smell of it, the closeness. The slight hitch in Ben’s breath, the odd pauses, the way their lips have to work a little, before finding the right angles and some form of coordination.

Him.

See? She wants to say, triumphant. To whom, she it not sure. See? It was always going to be like this. All along.

Rey grins into his lips. And Ben—

Ben is already shaking his head when she pulls back, like a no was waiting in his mouth all along, even as he was returning her kiss. His fingers close tight around her wrist, drawing her hand away from his face.

“This is not a good idea.”

Her smile fades. He is… right. He is completely right.

He is also wrong. “Why?”

“Rey.” He shakes his head again, and then his hand leaves her waist and comes up to his lips, as if to touch the kiss they just shared, make sure it really happened. “This is… no.”
He really is right. But... “Why?” she repeats.

Ben presses his fingers into his eyes. His left hand is still holding her wrist, and Rey wonders distractedly if he’s even aware of it. If he knows that his thumb is swiping back and forth across her pulse. *Mixed messages, Doctor Solo.* “This is not what we’re here for.”

She can feel her nostrils flare. “That doesn’t mean that—”

“You’re not thinking clearly.” He swallows visibly. “You’re upset and drunk, and—”

“I had two beers. *Hours* ago.”

“You’re a grad student, currently depending on me for a place to stay and to keep you safe from sexual harassment, and—even if not, the power I have over you could so easily turn this into a coercive dynamic that—”

“I’m—” Rey laughs. “I’m not feeling *coerced*, I—”

“You’re in love with *someone else*.”

She almost recoils. The way he spits it out—*someone else*—is that heated, that fierce, and Rey is reminded of the other Ben, the one she thought he was before she knew anything about him. It should probably put her off, drive her away, once and for all drill into her head how ridiculous this is, how disastrous an idea. It doesn’t, though. By now, that moody, ill-tempered asshole meshes so well with her Ben, the one who buys her cookies and checks her slides and lets her cry into his neck. There might have been a time when she couldn’t quite reconcile the two, but now—they’re all so clear, the many faces of him, and Rey wouldn’t want to leave behind any of them.

Not one.

“Rey.” He sighs heavily, closing his eyes. The idea that he might be thinking of *her*—the other one, the person that he... it flashes into her mind, and then instantly slips away, the thought too painful to entertain.

He really—she should tell him. She should tell him now, that there is no one else. Never has been. But she is terrified, paralyzed with fear, and her heart feels—so easy to break. So fragile. He could shatter it in a thousand pieces, and still be none the wiser.

“Rey, this is... how you’re feeling *now*. A month from now, a week, tomorrow, I don’t want you to feel like—”

“What about what I want?” Rey leans forward, letting her words soak the silence for drawn-out seconds. “What about the fact that I want this? Now? Though maybe you don’t care.” She squares her shoulders, blinking quickly against the prickling sensation in her eyes. “Because you don’t want it, right? You—I’m just not attractive to you, and you don’t want this, and—”

It nearly makes her lose her balance, the way he tugs at her wrist and pulls her hand to himself, pressing her palm flush his groin to show her that... oh.

Oh.

Yeah.

His jaw works as he holds her gaze. “You have no *fucking* idea what I want.”
It takes her breath away, all of it. The low, guttural tone of his voice, the thick ridge under her
digits, the enraged, hungry note in his eyes. He pushes her hand away almost immediately, but if
feels already too late.

It’s not that Rey hadn’t... the kisses they exchanged—they were physical, but somehow not sexual,
not to this degree, and now... It’s like something has been switched on. For a long time, she had
thought Ben handsome and attractive. She had touched him, sat on his lap, considered the vague
possibility of being intimate with him—she had thought about him, about sex, about him and sex,
but it was always... abstract. Hazy and undefined. Like line art in black and white: just the base for
a drawing that now is fully colored on the inside.

It’s so clear, in the damp heat pooling between her thighs, in his eyes that are all pupil, how it
would be between them. Heady and sweaty and slick. They would do things for each other,
demand things of each other. They would really be—incredibly close.

And Rey—now that she can see it, she really, really wants it.

She steps close—even closer. “Well, then.” Her voice is low, but she knows he can hear her.

He shuts his eyes tight. “This is not why I asked you to room with me.”

“I know.” Rey pushes a black strand of hair away from his forehead. “It’s also not why I
accepted.”

Ben’s lips are parted, and he is staring down at her hand—the one that was almost wrapped around
his erection a moment ago. “You said no sex.”

She did. She did say that. She remembers thinking about her stupid rules, and listing them, and she
remembers being certain that she would never, ever be interested in seeing Doctor Solo for longer
than ten minutes a week. “I also said it was going to be an on campus thing. And we just went out
for dinner. So.” Ben might know what is best, but what he wants—it’s different. Rey can almost
taste the debris of his control, feel it slowly erode.

“I don’t...” He straightens, infinitesimally. The line of his shoulders, his jaw—he is so tense, still
avoiding her eyes. “I don’t have anything.”

It’s a little embarrassing, the amount of time it takes for Rey to parse the meaning of his words.
“Oh. I—it doesn’t matter. I’m on birth control. And clean.” She bites into her lip. “But if you still
—we can do... other things.”

Ben swallows, twice, and then nods. “Right.” He’s not breathing normally. And Rey—she doubts he could say no at this point. That he would even want to. He does put up a good effort, though.
“What if you hate me for this. What if we go back and you change your mind—”

“Well, it won’t—-it... we’ll just leave it here. You don’t owe me anything, and we don’t have to
talk about it. Ever.” She steps—god. Even closer. She won’t think about after. Doesn’t want to—
can’t. “It will be like... like DNA splicing. We’ll just...” She smiles, hoping he’ll smile back.
“We’ll excise it from our genome. Like a protein we don’t want.”

Ben’s mouth remains straight and serious. But it scarcely matters: the next time Rey feels his touch
it’s on the slope of her hip bone, under the cotton of the t-shirt he gave her.
Okay friends I made another twitter post (which I guess is called a tweet? I am one of the cool kids, clearly) with the t-shirt, the toothbrush, and the socks!!
It’s as if a layer gets peeled away.

Ben takes off his shirt—the way guys do, raising his hands over his head, grabbing it from the back of his neck, and yanking it off in one fluid movement—and it’s as though the white cotton is not the only thing that gets tossed in a corner of the room. Rey doesn’t have a name for what comes off, not precisely; all she knows is that a few seconds earlier he seemed reluctant, almost unwilling to touch her, and now he is—not.

He is running the show, now. Wrapping his large hands around her waist, and sliding his fingertips under the elastic of her green polka dot panties, and just… kissing her.

He kisses, Rey thinks, like a man starved. Like he’s been waiting all this time. Holding back. Like the possibility of the two of them doing this had occurred to him in the past and he’d set it aside, stored it away in a deep, dark place where it’s grown into something fearsome and a little out of control. Rey thought she knew how it would be—they’d done it already, after all. Kissing. Except, she realizes now, that before she had kissed him.

Maybe she is being fanciful. This can’t be much more than a circumstantial lay for him, and what does she know about different types of kisses, anyway? Still, something in her belly thrums and liquefies when his tongue licks against hers; at the way he bites a tender spot on her neck; hearing the guttural noise in the back of his throat as his fingers cup her ass through her panties. Under her shirt, Ben’s hand travels up to her ribcage, and Rey gasps and smiles into his mouth.

“You did that, before.”

He seems confused, blinking at her, his pupils blown large and dark. “I—what?”

“The night I kissed you. In the hallway. You did it that night, too.”

“I did what?”

“You touched me. Here.” Her hand slides to her ribs to cover his through the cotton. She huffs a small laugh. “It’s probably creepy, that I remember.”

He shakes his head, looking up at her through dark lashes, and begins to lift a corner of her shirt, up her thighs and past her hip until it catches right under her breast. He leans into her, pressing his
lips against the lowest part of her ribs. Rey gasps. And gasps some more when bites her softly, and then licks across the same spot.

“Here?” he asks.

She is growing a little lightheaded. It could be how close he is, or the heat in the room. Or the fact that she is almost naked, standing there in nothing but panties and socks in front of him.

“Rey.” His mouth travel upwards, less than an inch. His teeth graze against skin and bone. “Here?”

She hadn’t thought she could get this wet, this quickly. Or at all. Then again, she hadn’t really thought much about this.

“Pay attention, sweetheart.” He sucks the underside of her breast, and—her knees. She has to hold onto his shoulders, or they’ll give out on her. “Here?”

“I…” It takes her a moment to focus, but she nods. “Maybe. Yes, there. It was… it was a good kiss.“ Her eyes flutter closed, and she doesn’t even fight it, when he takes the shirt completely off of her. It’s his, after all. And the way he’s staring at her, it brooks no self-consciousness of her part. “Do you remember it?”

He’s the one who’s distracted, now. Staring at her breasts like they’re something, something spectacular, lips parted and his breathing a little too quick and shallow. “Remember?”

“Our first kiss.”

He doesn’t answer. Instead he looks up and down at her, eyes glazed, and tells her, “I want to keep you in this hotel room for a week.” His hand comes up to cup her breast, and—it’s not exactly gentle. Just this side of too forceful, and Rey’s cunt clenches around nothing. “For a year.”

She doesn’t manage to tell him that yes, yes, he may, because he pushes his hand against her shoulder blades to make her arch towards him, and then he closes his mouth against her breast, all teeth and tongue and wonderful, delicious suction, and—Rey whimpers against the back of her hand, because she hadn’t known, hadn’t thought that her breasts would be so sensitive, not with how small and insignificant they are, but her nipples are tight and raw and almost sore, and if he doesn’t do something she’ll—

“You’re… edible, Rey.” He is stroking his cock—no, just gripping it, right around the base.

His palm presses against her spine, and Rey bows a little more. An offering of sorts. “That’s probably an insult,” she breathes out with a smile, “considering that you only like wheatgrass and chia seeds—oh.”

He can fit her entire breast in his mouth. All of it. He groans in the back of his throat, and it’s clear that he wants to, that he’d like to swallow her whole. Her tits, and maybe the rest, too.

Rey should touch him. She’s the one who asked for this, and it follows that she should make sure that being with her is not too much of a chore for him. Maybe put her hand back where he dragged it earlier and… touch? She has never given a hand job before, but he could instruct her on how he likes it. Maybe they’ve agreed that this is a one-time thing, that they’re never going to talk about this again, but Rey can’t help herself—she just wants him to like this, to like her, and—

“This okay?” She must have lingered too long inside her head, because Ben is looking up at her with a frown, his thumb swiping back and forth on her hip bone. “You are tense.” His voice, it’s a little strained, and his hand—it’s still cupping his cock, almost absentmindedly. Stroking himself
every once in a while—when his eyes fall on the hard point on her nipples, when she shivers, when she squirms on her feet to rub her thighs together. “We don’t have to—”

“No—I want to. I said I did. I asked you to.”

His throat bobs. “It doesn’t matter, what you said. You can always change your mind.”

She smiles. “You really need to stop showing off your Title IX skills.”

He blows out a laugh, and the way he’s looking at her, Rey is sure he’ll protest again. But he just rests his forehead on her sternum, his breath warm against the skin he just licked, and lets his fingertips coast the elastic of her panties; dip under the thin cotton.

“I think I’ve changed my mind,” he murmurs.

Rey stiffens. “I—I know I’m not doing anything, but if you tell me what you like, I can—”

“My favorite color must be green, after all.”

She exhales when his thumb presses between her legs, brushing against cloth that is already dark with her slick. She exhales in a rush until there’s no air left, embarrassment washing over her at the thought that now he must know—and at the pleasure of his finger, large and blunt, running against her seam.

Her cunt contracts.

And Ben—maybe he notices, because he looks back up at her, glassy-eyed and breathing fast. “Fuck,” he says, quiet. “Rey.”

“Do you…” Her mouth’s as dry as the desert, and she has to swallow. “Do you want me to take them off?”

“No.” He shakes his head. “Not yet.”

“But if we—”

He hooks his finger on the elastic and then pushes the cotton to the side, and—she is glistening, looking swollen and plump to her own eyes. Way too far ahead, considering that they have barely done anything. Too eager. This is a little… humiliating.

“I’m sorry.” There are two types of heat, here—the one curling tight at the bottom of her stomach, and the one rising to her cheeks. Rey can barely tell them apart. “I just… I am—”

“Ripe.” He isn’t really talking to her. More like to himself, marveling at the way his fingertip sinks so easily between the folds of her labia, parting them and gliding around her clt and then all the way behind, until Rey throws back her head and closes her eyes because the pleasure is streaming, stretching, thrumming through her and she can’t—can’t—can’t— “You are so beautiful.” The words seem hushed, ripped out of him. Like he wasn’t going to say them. Rey can’t look at him, because this, how much she wants this, how much she is dripping, it’s too—mortifying. She would die to know if he’s still squeezing the base of his cock, if his cheekbones are still flushed, if he—

“May I?”

It takes her several heartbeats to realize that he’s referring to his middle finger; to the way it’s circling around her hole and tapping at it. Applying a light pressure right against the rim. So wet, already.
Rey moans. “Yes. You can—anything,” she breathes out.

He licks her nipple, a silent thank you, and pushes—*in*.

Or at least, he tries.

Rey hisses, and so does Ben, with a muted, hoarse, “Fuck.” He has really big fingers—that must be why they don’t fit. The first knuckle feels just this side of too much, a pinching ache and the sensation of damp, uncomfortable fullness. She shifts on her heels, trying to adjust and make room, and then shifts some more, until he has to grip her hip with his other hand to keep her still. Rey holds onto his shoulders, and his skin is sweat-slick and scorching hot under her palms.

“Shh.” His thumb grazes her clit, and she whimpers. “It’s okay. Relax.”

*Impossible.* Though, if Rey has to be honest, the way his finger is curving inside her—it’s already getting better. Not so painful now, and maybe even wetter, and if he touches her *there*—

Her head lolls back, and she has to clutch his muscles with her nails.

“There? Is that a good spot?” Rey wants to tell him that *no*—it’s too much—*don’t*, but before she can open her mouth he does it again, until she cannot keep quiet anymore, all groans and whimpers and wet, obscene noises. Until he tries to get a little further inside, and she can’t help wincing.

“What is it?” His voice is… his voice, but a million times raspier. “Does it hurt?”

“No—*oh*."

He looks up, all flushed pale skin against dark waves. “Why are you so tight, Rey?”

“I…”

“You’ve done this before, right?”

“I—yes.” She is not sure what compels her to continue. Any idiot could see from a mile away that it’s a terrible idea—yes, Rey *included*—but it’s as though there is no room left for lies, now that they’re standing so close. It feels like she owes it to him, if not the whole truth at least a little bit of it. So she says: “Once. In high school.”

Ben goes *immobile*. Completely motionless. His muscles flex, coiled strong under her palms and—they just stay like that, tense and still as he stares up at her.

“Rey.”

“But it doesn’t matter,” she hastens to add, because he is already shaking his head, already pulling away from her. “I can figure it out—I’ve learned whole-cell patch clamp in a couple of hours, sex can’t be much harder. And I bet you do this *all the time*, so you can tell me how to—”

“You’d lose.”

The room—it’s chilly, all of a sudden. His finger is not inside her anymore, and his hand has left her hip. "What?"

“You’d lose it. Your bet.” He sighs, wiping a hand down his face. The other one, the one that was inside her, moves down to adjust his cock. It looks *enormous* by now, and he winces as he touches it. “Rey, I can’t.”
“Of course you can.”

He shakes his head. “I’m sorry.”

“What? No. No, I—”

“You’re basically a vir—”

“I’m not!”

“Rey.”

“I am not.”

“But so close to it—that—”

“No. No. That’s not the way it works. Virginity is not a continuous variable, it’s categorical. Binary. Nominal. Dichotomous. Ordinal, potentially. I’m talking about chi-square, maybe Spearman’s correlation, logistic regression, the logit model and that stupid sigmoid function, and…”

It’s been months and it still takes her breath away, the uneven tilt of his smile. How unanticipated it always is, the dimples it forms. Rey is left without air as his large palm cups the side of her face and brings it down for a slow, warm, laughing kiss.

“You are such a brat,” he says against her mouth.

“Maybe.” She is smiling, too. And kissing him back. Hugging him, arms draped around his neck, and she feels a shiver of pleasure when he pulls her deeper into himself. “But I want to do this.”

“Me too, Rey.” He sighs. “You have no idea.”

“Then please. Please, don’t say no.” She bites her lip, and then his. And then nips at his jaw. “Please?”

He takes a deep breath. “I don’t think I could, even if I…” He shakes his head, and Rey smiles and kisses the curve of his neck. His hand splays against her lower back. “But we should probably go about this a little differently.”

…

It takes her the longest time to realize his intentions. Not because she’s stupid, or oblivious, or that naive about sex, but because…

Maybe she is a little naive about sex. It’s just that she truly hadn’t thought about it for years, before Ben, and even then it was never quite in these terms—him above her, pushing her legs wide open with his palms on her inner thighs and then kneeling between them, sliding down, low, lower than she—

“What are you—”

The way he parts her with his tongue—it’s like she is butter, and he means to slice through her like a hot knife. He is slow but sure, and doesn’t pause when Rey’s thigh stiffens against his palm, or
when she tries to squirm away. He just grunts, deep and low; then runs his nose in the skin at the juncture of her abdomen, inhaling deeply; and then he licks her once more.

“Ben—stop,” she pleads, and for a moment he just nuzzles his face in her cunt like he has no intention of doing any such thing, but he also—he also seems to know that he should be listening to her. He lifts his head until his gaze meets Rey’s, eyes foggy, with the expression of someone whose flow of experience has just been rudely interrupted, but doesn’t quite want to show it out of politeness.

“Mmm?” His lips vibrate against her clit.

“I… you should stop.”

He seems to get sidetracked by the smooth skin of her labia. “Mmm. I don’t think so.” He bites her there, softly, and then her words must register and he goes still, his hand tightening around her thigh. “Have you changed your mind?”

“No. No, not about… but we just should do… other things.”

He frowns. “You don’t like this?”

“Yes. No. No, I—I’ve never…” The line between his eyebrows deepens. “But I’m the one who put you up to this, so we should do things that you are into, and not stuff that…”

This time it’s the flat of his tongue against her clit, pressing just enough to make Rey clench and exhale in a rush. The tip of his tongue is circling around it, which—such a small movement, but it sends Rey’s hand straight to her face, and has her biting the fleshy part of her palm.

“Ben!” Her voice sounds like someone else’s. “Did you listen to what I—”

“You said to do something I’m into.” His breath is hot against her cunt. “I am.”

“You can’t possibly want to—”

He squeezes her leg. “I can’t remember a moment I didn’t.”

It just—doesn’t feel like standard hook-up fare. Something this intimate. It’s obvious to Rey that he must be trying to be nice, to make this pleasurable for her, but all she wants is for him to enjoy tonight, too. Except that it’s hard to protest when he doesn’t look annoyed, or put-upon. He looks spellbound, staring at her, at her cunt and her legs and the rest of her body. His hand is large, open over her abdomen and holding her down, inching higher and closer to her breasts—but not quite close enough. Lying like this, Rey is a little embarrassed of how concave her stomach is. Of the way her ribs stick out. But Ben… for some reason, he doesn’t seem to mind.

“Wouldn’t you rather—”

A nip. “No.”

“I didn’t even say—”

He glances up at her. “There isn’t anything I’d rather do.”

“But—”

He sucks on one of her lips with a loud, wet noise, and Rey gasps. And then—then his tongue is inside her, and she moans, half at the surprise of Ben doing something like that to her, half at the
feeling of—Yes.

Yes.

“Fuck,” someone says. It’s not Rey, so it must be Ben. “Fuck.”

This feels—incredible. Otherworldly. The very best. His tongue, dipping in and out, circling and lapping, and his nose against her skin, and the quiet sounds he makes from deep in his chest whenever her cunt contracts, and Rey will—she—she is—she—

She is not really sure that she can come. Not with another person—Ben, Ben, this is Ben—in the room. Touching her. She has never done it before, so…

“This might take—a while,” she says apologetically, hating how thin her voice sounds.

“Fuck, yes.” His tongue swipes the entirety of her, a long, broad stroke. “Please.” Rey doesn’t think she has ever heard him quite this enthusiastic about anything, not even grant writing or computational biology. It kicks the whole thing just a few notches higher for her, and it gets worse when she notices his arm. The one that’s not cupping the cheek of her ass and holding her open.

He hasn’t—he hasn’t taken himself out of his pants yet, that Rey can see. And isn’t that unfair, since she’s all splayed up and open for him. But the way his arm is shifting, and how his hand is moving up and down, slowly, stopping to grip—that is just…

Unbearable. Rey arches further, her spine shaping a perfect curve that he might as well have scripted with an equation, and feels the back of her head hit the pillow. This is beyond bearing. No one could ever sustain this—

“Rey.” He leans back a few millimeters, and kisses the inside of her shaking thigh. Takes a deep breath with his nose, as if to hold the smell of her within himself. “You can’t come yet.”

His lips brush against her folds as his tongue dips in again, and she squeezes her eyes shut. There is a liquid, burning heat blossoming in her tummy, spilling all over her. Her fingers claw at the sheets, grasping for an anchor. This is impossible. Unmanageable. “Ben.”

“You promised. You said I’d have time.”

“I—I can’t.”

“Don’t. Two more minutes.” He sucks on—god, yes. There.

“I’m—sorry.”

“One more.”

“I can’t—”

“Focus, Rey.”

In the end, it’s his voice that ruins everything. That quiet, possessive tone, the hint of an order in the low rasp of his words, and the pleasure breaks over her like an ocean wave. Her mind snaps, and she is not wholly herself for seconds, and then minutes, and when she has a sense of the world again he is still licking her, except more slowly, as if with no purpose but to savor her.

“I want to eat your cunt until you pass out.” His lips are so soft against her skin.
“No.” Rey fists the pillow. “I—you can’t.”

“Why?”

“We need to…” She can’t think straight, not quite yet. Her mind is addled, stuttering. “This is not about—”

She almost screams when he pushes one finger inside. This time it sinks in like a rock into water, smooth and without obstacle, and her walls clamp on it as if to welcome Ben and hold him inside.

“Jesus.” He licks her clit again, and—he can’t. She is too sensitive. Maybe. “You are—“ he hooks his finger inside her, pressing against the roof of her channel, and the pleasure wells in her, washes against her edges “—so small and tight and warm, so fuckable—”

The heat floods within her once more, knocks the air out of her completely, leaving her open-mouthed, bright colors bursting behind her eyelids. He groans something that’s not quite coherent, and slides in another finger on the tail end of her orgasm, and the taut stretch of it, it’s ruinous. Her body blooms into something that doesn’t belong to her anymore, something made of bright, high peaks and lush valleys. It leaves her heavy and boneless, and she is not sure how long goes by before she can bear to raise her palm to his forehead and gently push him away to get him to stop. He shoots her a sullen look, but he complies, and Rey tugs him up—because he looks like he might start again any moment, and because it would be nice, to have him next to her. Maybe he is thinking the same: he lifts himself above her, leaning his weight on his forearm; his chest pushes against her breast, one large thigh lodged firmly between her legs.

Rey is still wearing her stupid knee socks and god, Ben is probably thinking that she’s the lamest lay he’s ever—

“Can I come on you?”

He says it, and then he kisses her, completely unconcerned with where his mouth was just seconds earlier. She wonders if she should maybe be a little put off by that, but—she’s still twitching with pleasure, her cunt contracting with aftershocks at the memory of what he just did, and she just can’t make herself care.

It’s nice, to kiss like this. Just… so nice.

“Mmm.” Her palms comes up to cup his face, and she begins to trace his cheekbones with her thumbs. They are red, and hot. “What?”

“Can I come on your stomach?”

Oh. Oh. He wants to know if he... Rey looks down, and his pants are still tented, straining with how hard and long he is.

“But we can… don’t you want to—?”

He sucks the base of her throat. “I just need to get the edge off.”

“But if you—”

“Please.” He breathes it against the shell of her ear, and—it’s not as though she can say no. As though the wants to. She nods her permission and reaches for his cock, but he beats her to it and pulls down his pants, closing his fist around it.
He is—

Bigger. Larger than she thought he’d be. Than she thought anyone could—

“Thank you. It’ll be just a moment.” He kisses her on the lips, soft and chaste, and Rey’s mind almost whites out at how incongruous it feels, to have him look at her in such a sweet, grateful, polite way while he rubs against her, leaking warm and sticky over the skin of her belly. And he doesn’t lie: it’s no more than a handful of seconds. He is groaning against her throat before Rey can cobble together the courage to offer to do something for him, babbling something that sounds like yes and good and fuck, exhaling her name over and over into her skin. He doesn’t slump on her, but she can still feel his heart pounding rapidly against her chest as he comes in long, drawn out waves, thick and liquid between them, and Rey wraps her arms around his neck thinking that this—this—is good. Tacky and messy and—they are glued together now, but as filthy as this is she cannot help but love how close he is, how heavy and solid, how—

She really must be naive about sex. Because she doesn’t expect him to—maybe she hoped they’d kiss some more, or that he’d keep touching and holding her, but she definitely didn’t expect to look between them and see him stroke himself, using his semen like it’s some kind of glistening lubricant before angling his cock down to her and nudging the head against her opening and—

Oh.

Rey is lax, now. And pliant.

And still not loose enough.

“Ah.”

It doesn’t quite hurt, but it’s uncomfortable. Nearly too much. Not… definitely not easy for her. And yet, that sensation, the push of him against every part of her—it holds a promise.

“You’re so big.”

He groans into her neck. His entire body is vibrating with tension. “You’ll be fine.”

“I know,” she tells him, voice reedy, and her breath catches halfway through the second word. It’s true, she does know. Women give birth, and Rey’s sixth-form classmates would talk about engaging with hefty produce all the time, so she knows that there is no such thing as too big.

Except that maybe there is something wrong with her. Because he is… not in, really. Not even half. And there is just no more room.

Rey looks up at him. His eyes are closed, dark half-moons against his skin, and his jaw is tense. “What if I can’t—what if it’s too much?”

Ben lowers his head to her ear. “Then…” He attempts a thrust, and maybe it is too much, but the friction is lovely. “Then, I’ll fuck you like this.” She squeezes her eyes shut when he hits a place that makes her whimper. “God, Rey. Your cunt.”

Her entire body is pulsating. “Am I… is there something I should…”

“Just…” He kisses her collarbone. Their breathing is erratic by now, loud in the silence of the room. “Be quiet for a moment. So I don’t come, already.”

Rey cants her hips, and he’s rubbing that spot again. It makes her thighs tremble, and she tries to
open them wider. To invite him inside. “Maybe you should.”

“I should?”

Rey nods. They are too dazed to kiss with any kind of coordination by this point, but his lips are hot and soft when they brush against hers.

“Yes.”

“Inside you?”

“If you—” Ben’s hand comes up behind Rey’s knee and angles it just so, spreading her legs in a way Rey simply hadn’t thought of. Firmly holding her open. “If you want to—”

Her insides open to him without warning. They welcome and pull at him until he bottoms out, until he’s wedged deep and stretching her to a point that should be breaking, but just makes her feel filled, sealed, feel—

Perfect.

They both exhale. This is—

Rey lifts a hand. Closes it shakily around Ben’s sweaty nape. “Hey.” She smiles up at him.

He smiles back, just a little. “Hey.” His eyes are opaque, like stained glass. He moves inside her, just a hint of a thrust, and it makes her entire cunt clench around him, until she can feel his cock twitch and pulsate inside her, like a drum.

Her head falls to the pillow, and someone is groaning, something guttural and out of control.

Then Ben pulls out and pushes back in, and they annihilate the no-sex rule.

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**Chapter End Notes**

***dubcon warning: While Ben is going down on Rey, she asks him to stop (mostly because she feels like she should be doing something for him, since she's the one who initiated the sex) and Ben doesn't immediately comply***

refractory period? i don't know her.

Guys please check out [this stunning art](thehighpriestess) thehighpriestess made of HoF’s Ben and Rey, she captured their personalities soooo well 🤗🤗 And, because I am very classy, [stuff from this chapter](https://www.fanfiction.net)!
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Hi ☺️ Watch out for the change in POV, and last chapter's dubcon warnings carry over to this chapter! Feel free to message me on Twitter or CuriousCat if you have questions about that! Also this is... very E rated?

Thanks to LoveofEscapism and monsterleadmehome for being amazing! ♡

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

After the first time, once the sweat on his skin has cooled and the tempo of his heartbeat has slowed down somewhat, he pushes himself out of bed and pads to the bathroom to get her a drink. He turns on the faucet, avoiding his reflection in the mirror. There is the jet of water he can focus on, and its purring sound as the glass fills up. Once it’s full to the brim he makes to return to the bedroom, but stops in his tracks and leans against the doorjamb. He lingers there for a minute, staring at Rey as she dozes in the center of his bed.

She is on her side and half on her stomach, slumping bonelessly with one knee drawn up to her hip, and—he can see everything, absolutely **everything**, because she is naked, a long expanse of freckles and flesh only interrupted by her loose hair and those stupidly cute, ridiculous socks, and Ben… The things he would do for her. The things he would do to her. He’d never believed himself a good person, but at least—better than this, he’d thought. He’d hoped.

The light is dim in the room, but with the corner of his eye he can see his phone on the desk, the notification light blinking rhythmically every few seconds. Ben ignores it and returns to the bed, sitting next to Rey as gingerly as he can. The mattress dips under his weight nonetheless, and she slowly blinks awake, her eyes soft and disoriented.

Maybe she was sleeping more soundly than Ben thought. Or maybe not, because she immediately smiles up at him, her hand reaching out to touch his thigh through the pants he never quite managed to take off. It reminds him of the first time he ever saw her, when she’d grinned at him with misty eyes and trembling hands, and he’d had to take a deep breath to make the world stop spinning.

“How long did I sleep?”

“How long did I sleep?”

He is useless, around her. Not himself. Better than himself, mostly, but also… hopeless. Truly hopeless.

“How long did I sleep?”

“Just a few minutes.”
“Mmm.” She stretches a bit, arching in perfect slopes of freckles and golden skin. “Is that for me?”

Right. Yes. The water. He nods and hands her the glass, trying not to stare at her tits—or God forbid, even lower—as she props on her elbow to drink it. At least she is smiling up in thanks at him, that smile of hers that is blinding and a little disarming, that is next to impossible to look away from.

“Are you in love with her?” Poe’d asked a few weeks ago, after noticing how often Ben’s eyes had strayed to his phone, rather than remaining on the football match on the screen. Ben had shaken his head and thought, What a useless question. A useless word, too. Love. His parents and Luke had used it all the time as an excuse, an apology of sorts, something to hide behind when faced with their mistakes and fuck-ups. And yet, there had been very little of it to go around. Ben has never bothered to think in terms of love, and meeting Rey… really, it hasn’t changed much of anything.

“I just need her to have what she wants,” he’d told Poe, who had nodded and smiled knowingly, and Ben had been the closest to punching him since they’d left high school.

Rey returns the empty glass and leans back against the pillow, her head much closer to him than it previously was. “Do you want to go to sleep? I can move to my bed.”

He settles for shaking his head, because he’s not quite sure what’ll come out of his mouth if he allows himself to speak and say that no, no. No. He doesn’t want her to go. Anywhere. Ever.

“You sure? My plush toy tells me that I’m a cover hog.”

She would be, wouldn’t she? Seizing. Grasping. Rey is always hungry for something, and Ben hates to wonder why that is. “Do all millennials sleep with Teddy bears, these days?”

“Hey. I resent that. It’s an arctic fox.”

Ben smiles and files away the information, almost automatically. It’s what he’s been doing for a while, after all. Making room for her in his head and in his life. “It’s fine. I usually run warm.” He brushes a strand of hair from her forehead, even though he has no right to touch her. “And according to someone, I look like I might snore.”

Rey gasps, all faux indignation. “How dare? Tell me who said that and I will personally avenge you—” She yelps when he holds the icy-cool glass against her neck, and then dissolves into laughter, drawing up her knees and trying to twist away from him. How beautiful she is—it confuses him. It’s a constant pressure that doesn’t let go.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry. You don’t snore. You sleep like a fairy!”

“Damn right.” He sets the glass on the bedside table, appeased, but Rey remains curled into herself, cheeks flushed and lips curved in a smile.

She smiled like that into his neck, earlier. Against his skin, and it was—

“I’m sorry about the socks, by the way.” She winces. “I know it’s a somewhat... controversial topic.”

Ben looks down at them, the yellow and blue material stretched around her long, supple calves. “Socks?”

“Well, not socks per se. Just, keeping them on during sex?”
Sex. Because they had sex. He has fucked her and he is—he truly is inexcusable. Vile. “Is it? Controversial.”

“Majorly so. At least according to this issue of Cosmopolitan I read while waiting for Autumn to cut my hair at Great Clips.”

He lifts one eyebrow. “I had no idea.”

“Maybe you’ve been reading People Magazine, while waiting for Autumn to cut your hair at Great Clips.”

She is—such a brat. “Is hating socks another millennial thing? Like fake dating and eating nail polish?”

Rey laughs. “Tide Pods.”

“Mm?”

“It’s Tide Pods that we eat.” He must be frowning, because she is giggling now. “But, like, not really. It’s mostly some kind of overblown Buzzfeed story that…” She shakes her head. “Anyway. Point is: sorry about the socks.”

He shrugs. It’s possible that telling her that he’d still want to fuck her if she were wearing thermal underwear and a parka is not the classiest move at this point, so he just says, “Why would anyone care one way or the other?”

“Well. I, for one, have horrible, disfiguring toes.”

“Do you?”

“Mm-hmm. Truly grotesque. Circus worthy. They’re antithetical to sex. Basically a built-in contraceptive.”

She—she does this, every time. Make him want to laugh. “Rey. I’ve seen you wear flip-flops. Multiple times. Which, by the way, are not exactly lab dress code compliant.”

She frowns. “You must be mistaken.”

“Really.”

“Yep. I don’t like what you’re insinuating, Doctor Solo, because I take the environmental health and safety guidelines very seriously—and—what are you—”

She is so little, he can hold her down with one hand on her smooth belly as he wrestles her out of her socks. She puts up a good fight, and maybe he’ll have a couple of bruises tomorrow, but when he finally manages to take them both off, Rey is out of breath from laughing. Ben caresses her small, perfect feet, and nods. “Well, you were right.”

Chest heaving, she looks at him curiously.

“Your feet are pretty hideous.”

“What?” She gasps as she frees herself and sits up, pushing at his shoulder with so much strength that he ends up on his back under her. She weighs nothing. She is—so small, and yet so huge in his head. “Take it back.”
“You said it first.”

“Take it back. My feet are cute.”

“In a hideous way, maybe.”

Her laugh blows warm on his cheek. “That’s not a thing.”

“It is. There’s probably a German word for that. Cute, but also exceptionally ugly—”

She bites his lip in a way that is just this side of painful, and Ben—he only does what he does best around her, which is lose control completely and demand more, more than he has any right to, more than she’s probably willing to give. He flips them so that she’s under him and turns that bite into a kiss—or maybe the latter is Rey’s doing, given that her tongue is licking his lip exactly where she made it sting.

He should ask for permission. If this is okay. He is planning to, but it’s easy to get sidetracked when her arms loop around his neck and pull him down, when she is so warm and soft, glowing, smelling like a mix of her and him and the most out-of-this-world, mind-bending fuck he’ll ever have. He thought he’d had just enough sex in his life to know with the utmost certainty that he wasn’t interested in having any more of it, and then, over a decade later—Rey.

He hadn’t known anything.

She is sticky, and it’s all his doing. He should carry her to the shower and wash her, take care of her, but he finds that all he wants is to keep her like this. To make it worse. He wonders if she’ll let him fuck her again; if she has any idea that she feels so good to him, he could come inside her ten times in a row and still be unable to hold it together for more than five minutes. What a humbling experience it has been, inviting Rey Sanders into his life. What a clusterfuck.

“You weigh a ton.” He really does. He makes to move up and away from her, but she wraps her legs around his waist, holding him to her. “No, I love it. Stay, please.” She grins up at him and—she must know, how hard he is. How out of his mind she sends him.

“You are a cover hog.”

She has a way of kissing him, half cautious and half unrestrained and all blooming smiles, and Ben can’t quite figure out why he used to think of kissing as such a boring, aimless activity.

Can I fuck you again? I want to fuck you again.

“I am.” There is a spot at the base of her neck that he found earlier, a spot that tastes sweet and makes her sigh and arch up and melt a little into the pillow. It’s his new true north. “I should go clean up.”

She says the words, but she doesn’t make a move, so Ben slides down—just a couple of inches. Just enough to get distracted by her collarbone, and then by the curve of her breast. He had thought about it, how her tits would look, both in and out of his hands. He had thought about it and then he’d reminded himself that she was a student, that she was ten years younger, that she trusted him to keep her safe, not to take advantage of her, not to think of her like that. He’d been ashamed and frustrated and angry at himself—and in hindsight, almost comically stupid. Look how low he’s stooped, after all.

“Ben.” Her hip bones jut out, and so do her ribs. He wants to take her home and feed her, keep her warm and safe. The skin of her belly—he will think about it years from now, bring himself off to
the memories of each soft freckle; he needs to store them up now, while he still can. He needs to have all of her in his mouth. “I’m all… I need to clean up.”

She squirms a little, and… he shouldn’t, but his palm comes up to her ass to keep her still.

“Ssh. I’ll clean you up myself.”

There is something to this—putting his fingers inside her and finding her wet and slick with his come. The satisfaction of having made a mess on her—inside her—of knowing that she’d let him. She tastes of his semen, but also like her, and Ben licks the skin between her thigh and abdomen and loses himself to the low moans and gasps she lets out, to the way her fingers grip his hair. She is bright pink and clean by the time she comes, slow contractions that seem to swell in large waves and have her thighs shaking under his hand.

That’s when he finally asks, even though he has no business: “Can I fuck you again?”

He’s not sure what he’ll do, if she says no. Maybe he’ll be able to slump to his side, or perhaps on the other bed, and go to sleep. Maybe he’ll beg for a moment, to bring himself off on her soft skin once again, on her ass or between her legs. Maybe something else that he doesn’t want to contemplate, especially as she looks up at him, flushed with her orgasm and biting her lip in a way that he cannot equivocate.

He needs to get off her. He needs to keep his hands to himself. He needs to not crowd her, and get a grip, and—

“I want to. I really…” Her hand comes up to touch his arm, the one he’s suspending himself on, and his body stills. “It’s just… sore, I think, and I—”

“Hey.” He bends down to kiss her, because the prospect of telling him no seems to fluster her almost as much as the idea of giving that stupid talk did, and this is exactly the type of situation he wanted to avoid. Would have avoided, if he weren’t so greedy and undisciplined and just gone for her—

“I do want to—”

“Rey.” He lowers himself to her side and curls around her, trying not to rub his erection against her lower back. “You’re right. Let’s go to sleep.”

“What? No.” Rey sits up, frowning down at him. “I don’t want to go to sleep.”

He shouldn’t be staring at her. Just because she happens to be naked. “Your flight was early this morning, and you’re probably jet-lagged—”

“But we have one night.” She looks at him while she says it, and it’s so hard, when her eyes are this big and earnest, not to fool himself into thinking that the reason she came onto him goes beyond some desperate desire to forget the terrible day she just had; or that comfort was all that was in his mind, when he accepted.

“Hey.” He reaches up, pushing her hair behind her shoulder. It’s mostly straight again, and as stupefied as he was by the waves and her makeup and that nearly-too-short dress, she’ll never be more lovely to him than with her face scrubbed pink and those ridiculous buns. “You don’t owe me anything. Let’s get some sleep and—”

“You said one night.” He feels the press of her hand on his chest, and less than a second later she is straddling him, her cunt warm against him even through his pants. “I want the whole night.”
“You don’t—”

Her hair is like a curtain around them as she smiles down at him. “Come on, Ben.” She leans her forehead against his, and it would be so easy, to grip her waist and fuck inside her. She’d part on him like water. “I know you’re old, but you can’t go to sleep just yet.”

“I—” His voice is scratchy, and he has to clear his throat. “I thought I was a millennial?”

The last word comes out half choked, because her hand is sliding inside his pants, small and warm and not quite deft, and—if she keeps that up for more than a few seconds, maybe he won’t need to fuck her, after all.

“Maybe an old millennial.” She needs to stop sliding down his body. Or tugging at his pants. And he needs to stop letting her take them off of him, because—she’s not going to do something like that to him. He won’t allow it.

And then she pulls her hair back and sits on her heels between his thighs, and… he can’t look away. “You are so beautiful.” He doesn’t particularly want to say it—no need to state obvious facts, or to sound like the besotted idiot he is—but it just slips out, loose and unbidden. Out of his control, just like everything else about this.

“I have never done this.” Her smile is not quite shy.

“No. Come here.”

“So it probably won’t be any good.”

“You—Rey.”

She tilts her head to the side and smiles at him, looking beautiful and happy. “Yes.”

“I don’t… you don’t have to. You shouldn’t.”

“Noted.” She presses a kiss against his hip, and he thinks that this is—beyond anything. “But if you have any special wishes.”

Don’t do this. Not this, because you will ruin me.

“Rey. I don’t want you to—” She is running her nose on the skin of his abdomen, and all the blood rushes away from his brain.

“I love the way you smell.”

Rey. There will be nothing left. “Rey.”

Slowly, precisely, she wraps her hand around the base of his cock and studies it from beneath her eyelashes. The head is shiny already, and—it would take nothing, really. He can’t imagine anything more erotic than her parted lips, the dusting of red on her chest and cheeks. He is vaguely surprised that he hasn’t come yet, just by looking at her looking at him.

“Someone has done this to you, before? Right?”

Ben doesn’t trust his vocal cords, so he just nods.

“Good.” She seems unsurprised. “So you can tell me, if I mess it up.”
The last word, she says it against the shaft, and it feels as though his insides turn scalding and liquid, his spine threatening to melt into pleasure. He is oscillating, vibrating at some short-wave frequency that will burst and shatter when she touches him for real. And this would have been good—it would have been too good for him—but before parting her lips on the head of his cock she looks up at him and gives him a trusting, sweet smile that has him groaning and twitching and reaching down to hold the base of his cock, trying to push the come back down.

It couldn’t be more obvious, that she has never done this. And it couldn’t turn him on more. He tells himself not to thrust forward. He tells himself not to thread his fingers in her hair, not to press her head down until her throat is tight around the head of his cock. He orders himself to stop grunting, to stop talking, to stop catching her eyes and be fascinated by the way she’s looking up at him. He ends up doing half of these things anyway, and then all of them, his words slurred and raspy as he mumbles, Rey, yes. Lick the... Take it just—deeper. Make me come. He hears praises and endearments come out of his mouth—how good she is, how lovely, how perfect; obscenities about her mouth and tits and eyes, and he’d probably be more decent, more embarrassed when it comes to this, if it weren’t for the pleasure spilling rich from him and overflowing his brain.

As it is, it feels natural to ask for what he wants. To watch her try to give it to him.

Tell her you’re about to come. Tell her to move away. “Can I—?” Her teeth graze the underside of the head, and for a moment he thinks it’s all over. He grunts. “In your mouth.”

She actually—she smiles at him. And—shit.

It’s merciless, the pleasure. Nuclear. Pounding through him and washing over his entire body and tearing him, white-hot and just shy of painful. Rey’s still sucking gently when he is in control of his limbs again, and looks up at him with glazed eyes as he cups her cheek.

“Open your mouth,” he rasps. She blinks at him, confused. “I want you to open your mouth, and show me.”

She is so hesitant, as she complies. And he—he will go insane. Later, tomorrow, she will want to walk out of this room, and he will not let her. They will have to physically restrain him.

“The things I want to do to you. You have no idea.”

This time he lets her swallow, his hand massaging the back of her neck as his thumb caresses her jaw.

“I think, maybe I do.” She licks her lips. “Some, at least.”

His brain has not completely re-solidified yet, but he’s fairly sure that she cannot know. He strokes the corner of her mouth, wondering how he’ll manage to be done with her in a few hours. He refuses to accept that he simply won’t.

“I doubt it.”

Rey leans forward, hiding a smile into the crease of his thigh.

“You can, you know.” She nibbles on the hard plane of his abdomen and then looks up at him, her eyes simultaneously dead serious and impish. “Do them.”

She is still smiling when he pulls her up to his chest, and for a few minutes they manage to sleep.
It really is a nice hotel room, Ben supposes. The large windows, mostly, and the view of Boston past sunset, the traffic and the clouds and the feeling that something is happening out there, something he doesn’t need to be part of because he’s here. With her.

He is staring at the play of the street lights across the river when she speaks.

“What language is the book in?”

He’d thought she was asleep. Maybe. He can’t quite look at her face, not with the way her head is nestled under his chin, so he continues to draw patterns on her hip with his fingertips, and asks: “Which book?”

“The one you are reading. With the dinosaur fossil on the cover.”

Ah. “Dutch.”

She hums against his chest, like she expected the answer, and her presence vibrates through his flesh. “Is it hard? To learn?”

He inhales her glorious, spectacular smell, and tries to remember. “I’m not sure. I think I always knew it.”

“Was it weird? Growing up with two languages?”

He shakes his head a little. “I don’t think so. I remember mostly thinking in Dutch until we moved back here for the first time.”

“Mm. How old was that?”

Ben truly never thinks about this. “Nine, I believe?”

“Did you speak it with your parents?” She might be smiling, he thinks. From her voice.

“Not really.” He hesitates before elaborating. “There were… au pairs, mostly. A lot of them.”

Rey pushes herself up to look at him, resting her chin on her hands and her hands on his chest. She is—she is always beautiful, always so beautiful, in a way that most of the time he cannot quite comprehend; but naked like that, in the soft, warm light, looking at him like she knows him, with her hair loose and her skin still flushed and that mark he left at the base of her throat, now she is just—

He would always die for her, but for this Rey of the witching hours, he might even kill.

“The only thing I can say in Dutch is ‘ik hou van jou.’” Rey’s pronunciation is so tentative and poor, for a long moment Ben doesn’t quite understand what she is saying. Then he does, and his heart skips a beat. “My college roommate had a poster with ‘I Love You’ written in every language,” she explains. “And it was right across from my bed. It was the first thing I’d see every morning after waking up.”

God. Her smile. “And at the end of year four you knew every language?”

“End of year one. She joined a sorority as a sophomore and we never talked again—which was for
the best. Allie and I needed to part ways, because she had the terrible habit of coming home at three AM completely wasted and eating my stash of Reese’s cups.”

He huffs out a laugh. “I can’t believe you spared her life.”

“Me neither. I guess I was young and soft-hearted. And I did get my revenge by stuffing cream cheese in her deodorant stick—”

Somewhere in the room, a phone begins to vibrate against a hard surface, and continues for one, two, several seconds.

“I think it’s yours. Should you get it? ” Rey makes to get herself off him, and Ben—he can’t. Let her go. He just can’t, so he presses his hand on her lower back and holds her tighter to himself. “Maybe it’s important?”

“No.”

Rey blushes, which—it seems a bit late for that, but it’s a lovely sight and he could watch her forever, if left to his own devices. Probably will.

She lowers her gaze, nuzzles her face in his chest for a moment, and then looks back up at him. “It’s pretty stupid, if you think about it.”

“Stupid?”

“Who needs to know how to say ‘I love you’ in every language? People barely need it in one.” Her hand comes up to smooth his hair back. “‘Where’s the restroom’, on the other hand…”

“Mmm,” he agrees. Her touch is cool and soothing. “Waar is de wc.” Rey just blinks at him, so he continues, “That would be ‘where’s the restroom’. “

“Yeah. Yeah, I figured. Just… your voice when you speak in…” She stops, and clears her throat. “Anyway. That would be a useful poster.”

“Maybe you should make one.”

“Right? Drop out of the academe. Open an Etsy shop. YOLO it up with Toilet posters. Make a profit.” He has no idea what Rey just said, but that’s not unusual. And not wholly unwelcome, either. He is smiling when she brushes her finger against his forehead. “What is this from?”

“My face?”

“Ben. The little scar. The one above your eyebrow.”

“Ah.” He tells himself not to tense. To stay relaxed. “Just a stupid fight.”

“A fight?” She chuckles. “Did one of your students try to kill you?”

“Not that I know of. Though I can see a few of them pour acetonitrile in my coffee.”

“Oh, totally.” She nods in agreement. “Who, then? The fight?”

The problem is—he doesn’t want to lie. Not to her. Which is in direct conflict with something else he doesn’t want to do—talk about Luke.

“My uncle. Years ago.”
Rey’s smile fades as she studies him for several heartbeats, and Ben is scared that—she’ll ask. She’ll ask about it, he’ll have to tell her, and it will be a mess. She’ll ask for sure.

Or maybe she won’t.

“I have one, too. On my forehead. Kind of.” She pulls her hair behind her shoulder and shows it to him, a small, half-moon shaped line right next to her temple. He wonders what she’d say, if he told her that he already knew that. That he noticed weeks ago. That at night, when he closes his eyes, it’s her face that he sees.

It would probably be a terrible idea. “What happened there?”

She shrugs. “I don’t remember. It’s always been there.”

He could ask what always means. He could ask her whether her parents know. He could ask why she never refers to the UK as home, why she never mentions anything about her life before moving to States; why, when she was joking about having eaten an expired yoghurt, she’d let slip that her roommate is her emergency contact. He really could ask, but he can see it in her eyes, the same thought that was blaring in his head a moment ago.

Don’t. Just—don’t.

So he stays silent, and spends long moments stroking her scar with his thumb, until she says: “Ben?”

“Yes.”

“What time are you leaving tomorrow?”

He is not planning on sleeping tonight, not for real. It would be such a waste. “Early.”

“Okay.” She leans forward, and buries her face in his throat. “You don’t have to wake me up, when you leave.”

He doesn’t even need to ask why. “You mean, you’re not going to carry my bag downstairs?”

She laughs into his neck and burrows further into him, and this, Ben thinks, this—it’s a perfect moment.

…

She’s the one who begs him to fuck her again in the end, over and over, which is what softens the guilt a little. At least until he takes note of how the muscles in her back have tensed up under her long hair, the sharp hitch of her breath, the way her fingers are digging into the sheets, broadcasting discomfort and maybe even a little pain. He makes to pull out, but she pleads him not to.

“It’s just—not small, and I’m still a bit sore, so…” She’s flinching.

“We don’t have to—”

“No. No, please, I want to. Just—it’s so deep, and—let me just…” She shimmies her hips a little—
as much as she can, since he seems to be unable to stop himself from pinning her down against the mattress—and Ben gets lost in how the light plays on the smooth grooves of her lower back and perfect ass. “Oh.” She arches her spine and fucks herself onto him—once, twice, once more, and his control just pours out. He makes a crude noise and begins to thrust, hoping he’s not hurting her, at least not too much. Hoping she is getting something out of this.

“You have to tell me, if you like it,” he rasps. “What I’m doing.” He wishes he were good at sex. He wishes he’d been interested enough in it to learn something about it. For Rey. He wishes he didn’t keep losing control and slipping out of her, having to nudge his cock back inside; he wishes he could focus on getting her off, on making it last. On something that is not how good it feels, how all-eclipsing, how smoothly he can slide in and out.

“I do.”

“Mmm?” It comes out as a grunt, because she is sighing and canting her hips, clenching around him and sucking him in.

“I like it.” She turns a little and smiles up at him. She didn’t use to smile at him—not ever after their first meeting, not for years. And even back in the summer, when they’d only just began this mess, she’d look at him with an odd mix of distrust and hostility. And then things had changed and he’d thought—

He’s not sure what he’d thought. He shouldn’t have been thinking about her, anyway. “I love it.”

“Okay. Okay, then.” He leans forward over her, and bites her shoulder as he fucks her harder.

…

“You’re making this up.”

“Nope.”

“It’s not possible.”

“It’s a fact. A scientific fact. Like climate change, or the safety of GMOs and nuclear power, or—”

“How do you even know?”

“How do you not know? Everyone in the department knows.”

“Clearly not everyone.” Ben rubs his eyes, and pulls Rey closer. “Phasma and Bazine?”

“Yep.”

“Jesus. I had no idea.”

“I’m worried about you. This is a degree of obliviousness that doesn’t behoove a MacArthur Fellow.” She presses a soft, nibbly kiss on his jaw. “But you did know that Doctor Akbar and Dean Kanata had a thing last summer, right?”

“What?”
He cannot stop touching her, cannot take his hands off her, and when the dawn breaks, he lets his fingers slide to her cunt once more.

“Yes?”

Rey arches back, a silent, eager assent.

He brings her off with his thumb, slow, barely-there circles that tip her over the brink and make her smile wide. The he slips in and fucks her once more while she is sleepy and soft and quiet, and she just lays there, happy, arms and legs open and just—taking it, taking it, taking what he needs to give. Ben has never felt more welcome. It takes him less than ten thrusts to come, his face buried in her neck to avoid saying the words.

You, he thinks. If you knew the lengths I would go to, for you, to fuck you one more time. You would be scared.

A few minutes later, when her breathing becomes light and even, he stands up and gets ready to leave.

Chapter End Notes

I know we have been at this damn conference for 17 chapter and I promise we're leaving now!! So: marvelous things have happened:

- Selunchen made this frankly life-threatening art for chapter 14, and almost killed me.
- Then, Yamstrange colored the art and finished off the job, murdering me completely.

Seriously, this art is so beautiful and flawless and I AM NOT OKAY 😢😢😢

Also: please check out the moodboard that Meg_sailorscout made. I am sniffing.
His car is in the airport long-term parking lot, in the exact same spot and state he left it in two days ago, and Ben is not entirely sure why he just stands there, staring at it for several minutes. It’s not as though he’s surprised by it.

Boston was much colder than home, so he stuffs his coat in the trunk, together with his backpack and suitcase, and opens the window as soon as he gets into the driver’s seat, hoping that some fresh air will clear his head.

His body is buzzing. It has been for quite some time, and Ben wonders if it will still be vibrating two, three, five hours from now: as he takes care of his friends’ pets, as he prepares for his grant meeting, as he answers the dozens of emails that have undoubtedly accumulated in the past fifteen hours. As he moves on with his life.

He refrains from leaning his forehead against the steering wheel, because that’s the precise sort of dramatic Skywalker shit he’s been trying to avoid for years now, but he allows himself to rub his eyes for a few moments, and then sighs and grabs his phone to turn off airplane mode. The little red number on the right upper corner of his email app instantly climbs to ninety-six, but Ben resolutely ignores it. Instead, he wades through unanswered texts from grad school friends and colleagues he’d promised he’d meet on his final night in Boston, quickly scrolls through his lab’s Slack (a heated discussion between his postdocs, which appears to be centered around the usage of the centrifuge and involves a surprisingly high number of Snoop Dogg gifs), and finally taps on the WhatsApp icon to read the message Poe sent only a few minutes earlier.

Poe: <So.>

Poe: <I have a question.>

All of a sudden, Ben really wishes he had smashed his head against the driving wheel.
Ben: <The answer is probably no.>

Poe: <Dude, it’s not a yes or no question>

Ben: <The answer is still no.>

Poe: <And glad to see you landed safely>

Poe: <How was your flight?>

Poe: <Pretzels or cookies?>

Poe: <Man I love those Delta cookies. What’s in there anyway?>

He totally should have smashed his head against the steering wheel. Or Poe's, preferably years ago.

Ben: <What’s the question?>

Poe: <Right. So.>

Poe: <The whole fucking a student thing>

Poe: <How does it work?>

Ben sighs. He starts the car, pulls out of his parking spot, and makes the less-than-smart decision to call Poe. Which, in hindsight, is without a doubt exactly what Poe was aiming for.

“Hey, did you know that they’re vegan? The Delta cookies?” Poe sounds obnoxiously chipper, considering the hour of the morning. Then again, it’s later in Boston. It makes sense that he would be up and about by now, although it’s early enough that it's entirely possible that Rey is still—“I bet you love that.”

He frowns. “I’m not a vegan.”

“It’s okay, bro. You can come out of the closet. This is a safe space.”

“I’m not—”

“I know you like tofu better than you like me.”

Ben snorts. “You might want to can it, since your dog is at my mercy for the next three days.”

Poe chuckles. “Poor BeeBee. Okay, important matters: fucking a student—how does it work?”

“This will surprise you, as I myself find it hard to believe—” Ben merges onto the highway “—but graduate students are, in fact, Homo sapiens and not a separate species. Therefore, not only are they biologically compatible with us, but their reproductive systems do—”
“You asshole. I meant, with admin. Paperwork and shit. There are frat regs, right? I can’t just, you know… fuck a student and not tell anyone about it? Correct?”

Ben freezeses, and slows down the car. He should probably not be driving at eighty miles per hour for this conversation. “Why?”

“Who did you talk with when you—”

“Why?”

A pause, filled with some static noise. “Just… because.”

“Poe. What have you done?”

“Hey, where did you go last night?”

Ben’s hands tighten around the steering wheel. “Where do you think I went.”

“Mmm. Hope you had fun. I mean, it’s nothing you don’t get on a regular basis, but hotel sex is always—”

“Poe.”

“Luke was there, by the way. At the opening reception.”


“Yeah. We were all really surprised. He must have seen you, too, because he asked how you’re doing. Who the girl with you was. Seemed sorry and contrite, and all that.”

Ben presses his lips together. Poe has never made a secret of anything, least of all the fact that he thinks Ben would be better off burying the very hatchet he’d like to stick up Luke’s ass. Ben, on his end, has never made secret of the fact that he wishes Poe would just shut the hell up.

“Why did you ask me about frat regs?”

“No reason.” Poe clears his throat. “Unrelated: did you wait for the Dean’s approval before having sex with Rey of Sunshine?”

Unrelated. “Tell me it’s not someone at our—”

“Come on, Ben. You know it is.”

“Of course it is.” Ben exhales. “In your lab?”

“No.” Poe has the gall to actually sound offended.

“My department?”

“Nope.” He pops the p sound. "Yours.”

Ben’s not sure if that’s better or… the very worst. “Poe.”

“What can I say? Biologists are my kink.”

Ben turns on the AC and massages his temple. He will need to get some sleep, at some point. Though he can’t imagine having any time for that before tonight. Or a bed, for that matter. “I have
no idea. If it was a one night stand, with someone who’s of age and not even in your department…I
don’t know. Maybe you’re good. Maybe you don't need to tell admin.”

“Well. I sure hope it was not a one night stand, since I’m already halfway in love. I think he’s a
friend of Rey’s, by the way. Finn Storm? I’ve seen them together before.”

Shit. Just… shit. Ben closes his eyes briefly, and then remembers that he’s on the damn highway.

“Yeah.” God, out of everyone. Poe sure can pick ’em. “He’s her roommate.”

Poe laughs. “Oh, no. No shit.”

“Well.”

He laughs harder. “Amazing. God, now I really hope this thing works out. It will be like back in
grad school, before you left Luke’s lab for Snoke’s. Roommates once again. We should definitely
institute some kind of door-sock system.”

“Poe.”

“How do mornings work? Who showers first? You shower first or I shower—”

“Maybe I’ll just drown you in the toilet.”

“Oh, yeah. Just like the good old days.”

Ben pushes up the turn signal lever, reflecting that just-laid Poe is as extraordinarily punchable
now as he was fifteen years ago. “I don’t know that there was anything good about them.”

“It was glorious. Hey, is Rey okay?”

Ben frowns as he takes the next exit. “Why do you ask?”

“I don’t know. Finn said something about her looking very upset last night. Even though she gave
her talk, and apparently it went fine.”

“Did he say why?” Ben breaks and slows down the car to match the downtown traffic. “Why she
looked upset?”

“No, just that she was talking with some of her co-panelists, and when she got done she looked
upset. And changed her mind on hanging out with her friends pretty abruptly. He was very
worried. God, look at us Ben, doing two people who happen to be best friends. If this ain’t some
Jane Austen shit.”

Her co-panelists. “Which ones?”

“I dunno. Pride and Prejudice?”

“No, I mean—can you find out from Finn which co-panelists she was talking with, exactly? Before
leaving.”

“Why can’t you ask Rey yourse—Ben.”

He continues to drive, and says nothing.

“Ben. Do you remember in your sophomore and my senior year, when you got suspended for two
weeks for throat punching that guy who thought that the Large Hadron Collider would destroy the planet.”

“Sure. He insisted that cold fusion is real. Do you remember getting suspended for the same length of time, for being right there with me and helping?”

“Oh, yeah. Yeah, I do.” Poe is unperturbed. “Anyway. I’m not sure what my point is. Do what you have to, but maybe don’t go beat up people for being asses to your girl. I hear it’s frowned upon. Outside of your family, anyway.”

I should beat myself up, Ben thinks. Since he might just be the worst thing that ever happened to Rey. “Just, find out from Finn, okay?”

Poe sighs audibly. “Sure. So, who do I talk to, if I actually want to date this guy?”

“Your department head. And Dean Kanata. And you might want to avoid mentioning that you… what already happened.”

“Sure. Ehm... what about the fact that he’s supposed to pick me up in fifteen minutes to go to brunch, and later on the Freedom Trail. Can I mention that?”

Ben doesn’t even feel guilty, when he hangs up on Poe.

…”

BeeBee is not particularly happy to see Ben.

He races to the door the second he unlocks Poe’s apartment, barking and wagging his tail happily until he notices who exactly his visitor is. At which point he flattens his ears, whines a little, and hesitates for a long moment before following Ben inside the kitchen, sullen and moody.

“For the next three days, I am the only thing standing between you and starvation,” he tells BeeBee when he catches him staring suspiciously at the food he just poured in his bowl. “But by all means, suit yourself.”

BeeBee makes a disgruntled sound and reluctantly starts nibbling on his kibble. He must be satisfied that Ben has better things to do than poison him, because he begins to jump around energetically the moment Ben picks up his leash, a cloud of orange and cream running in circles around his feet.

“Calm down, or we’re coming back inside the second you’ve peed.”

BeeBee ignores him and sprints ten feet ahead, pulling at the leash to get out of the door. Left without much choice, Ben rolls his eyes and simply follows along.

His skin is prickling. It’s as if his blood is boiling lightly in his veins, rushing places in little bursts of activity, and—it’s not unpleasant, but it’s odd. Unusual. It’s not control, which is what Ben usually likes to go for. Then again, he has, without any exaggeration, had more sex in the past twenty-four hours than in the last fifteen years. He supposes it’s something that would throw the most homeostatic of physiological systems.
There is no point in thinking about Rey. About whether she is still in his bed, still sleeping, still smelling like flowers and seawater, still breathing evenly against her loose fist. About whether his come is still deep inside her.

Splicing, she’d said.

Time to splice, then.

Once they reach the dog park BeeBee brings Ben a stick, and then stares at him expectantly. Ben shakes his head, but then he throws it once, and once more, and again and again, reflecting that—one way or another, this situation will have to be fixed. This mess. It’s unconscionable to think of the previous night as anything but a mistake, but his mind is too tired, his brain too liquid to fully hold the implications of what he has done.

What he has done to Rey.

She has no idea. She calls him her friend, and she truly doesn’t know that he—how much he—and it’s better, to keep it this way. The only option. He is not willing to step out of her life and leave her at the mercy of Hux—or of anyone else, for that matter. Which means he’ll have to keep on seeing her in the hallways; get coffee with her on Wednesdays, and pretend that he doesn’t remember how tight her cunt is, how lithe her body under his, how bright her eyes when she comes. Pretend that he’s wanted something in his life as much as he does her.

BeeBee brings the stick back one last time and slumps to the ground, tongue lolling out between his teeth. Ben gives him a few minutes to recover, and then guides him back to Poe’s apartment, letting him in and refreshing his water bowl. He is almost tempted to pat him on the head before leaving, but he’s aware that it would jeopardize the respectful hostility they have worked years to achieve, so he just nods briefly. BeeBee does something that looks a lot like bobbing his muzzle in agreement, and goes to curl up on Poe’s prized leather couch, which should be categorically off limits. Ben remembers that Poe is currently having brunch with the roommate of the only woman he’s cared about since childhood, and leaves BeeBee there out of pure spite.

Nine, Phasma’s cat, is far happier to see Ben. She twines gracefully between his legs and comes to cuddle up to him as soon she’s done eating, her soft, black fur vibrating under his hand as she purrs herself to sleep. Ben recalls what Rey said yesterday—no. Earlier today—and looks around Phasma’s kitchen, searching for signs of Bazine’s presence, without quite knowing what they would even look like. Then he remembers something else—Rey on top of him, right after she’d finished telling him who is fucking who among Ben’s colleagues, her eyes closed and her hips moving up and down in a slow, choppy rhythm, and Phasma’s sex life loses any interest to him.

His phone vibrates right as he’s getting back inside his car.

Poe: <It was panelists number 4 and 5 that Sunshine was talking to before leaving all of a sudden.>

Poe: <This according to Finn. He’s not sure if they were both involved. Or only one.>

Ben: <Can he ask?>

There is a pause of a few seconds.
Poe: <He says he’s not your snitch>

Poe: <And he wouldn’t betray Rey’s confidence>

Poe: <He says that you should ask her yourself>

Poe: <But also that she probably won’t tell you>

Poe: <Hey, did you know you were in Finn’s student advisory committee? Sound like you were a real ass, too>

Poe: <Finn has TONS of opinions about you>

Poe: <All pretty hilarious to hear>

Poe: <The expression ‘moley bastard’ has popped up once>

Poe: <Or thrice>

Ben sighs. Because while he truly has no memories of being part of Finn’s student advisory committee, he doesn’t doubt that if he was, their interaction could conceivably have gone… less than smoothly. He doesn’t bother answering Poe, and instead downloads the conference app and searches for the schedule of Rey’s panel. Both names and institutional affiliations are easy to find, and the academic CVs are just a Google search away.

Taking care of her—this, at least, is one thing he can control.

He exhales slowly and begins to think.

…

He’s been awake for thirty-two hours, and—he’s been writing grants on ridiculous deadlines for almost two decades, which means that this is certainly not the first time, nor the longest he’s been without sleep. Now though, now he is much closer to forty than to twenty, which means that he can feel every awake hour pounding on his bones. Hell, he’s closer to forty than to thirty, which is probably why his head feels like it’s swimming in some sort of hot, thick soup, and his muscles are tense and tight, and he’s massaging his neck as he squints at his screen, trying to figure out if Mitaka deliberately labels his x- and y-axes in the smallest possible font, and whether it constitutes a fireable offense. It shouldn’t be as frowned upon as it is, forcing grad students to drop out for being annoying little shits. Academia needs weeding, after all. The entire world does.

He is so tired that even his text notification sound feels shrill and too loud, piercing his brain and making him flinch. The knock on his door comes at exactly the same time, and Ben just sighs before flipping his phone around and calling:

“Come in.”

At least it’s not a student. And at least it’s Doctor Sloane. Out of all his colleagues, she is the least likely to drone on and on about inconsequential matters, and the most likely to actually have a good
reason to be here to see him.

“Rae.” He stands, and it feels like more work than it should for his musculoskeletal system. He really does need to sleep. Or at least eat something—something other than coffee. “Did you need anything?”

Rae closes the door behind her, and leans her hip against a filing cabinet. “Are any of your students graduating soon?”

“You mean, grads in my lab? Or undergraduate RAs?”

“Grads.”

Ben scratches his head as he thinks about his mentees. “Jess is a fifth year, and she will probably be done in the next couple of months. Alex is a fifth year, too, but he could finish up later than that, depending on how his project goes. Mitaka is a fourth year, but his trajectory is… unclear. Everyone else is more junior.”

Rae nods. “Who’s Jess, again?”

“Jessika Pava. She’s on my molecular information theory grant.”

“Ah, yes. Dark hair?”

“Yep.”

“Do you like her?”

I don’t like anyone, he almost blurts out. Though, that’s not quite true. Is it? “She’s a good grad. Pretty independent. Learns quickly, and when she doesn’t she’s smart enough to ask instead of fucking up.” Ben’s thoughts are soaked in fatigue, and he can’t readily imagine why Rae would be interested in his opinion on Jess. “Why?”

“Is Jess planning on sticking around after she’s defended? Maybe she has family here? Her partner?”

Truthfully, Ben has no idea where Jess is originally from, whether she is in a relationship or has any family, or what her plans for the future involve—aside from computing the average information in the DNA binding sites of a genetic control protein and extending this to the analysis of its individual sites. He has never cared about his students’ personal lives, and finds that he still doesn’t. Not very much. “I can ask.”

Rae nods. “Okay. That would be great. My postdoc has left a bit abruptly and I’m looking for a replacement ASAP.”

Ben frowns. “Abruptly?”

“Yeah.” Rae rolls her eyes. “He’s doing some kind of stupid Program Officer fellowship, I don’t even know. With NIH. A waste of time, if you ask me.” Ben—he really should have slept. Because as far as his exhausted brain can remember, Rae only has two postdocs. Bazine, who is very much a she, and— “So I have this postdoc position written into a grant, but it’s only for about one more year, and I really don’t feel like bringing someone external in, you know?”

Right. Makes perfect sense. Ben opens his mouth to say so, and instead what comes out is:
“Hux?”

Rae tilts her head; gives him a curious look.

“Hux is leaving?” he asks, and it’s astonishing, how even and indifferent his voice sounds.

“Hux has left, already. Didn’t even put his reagents back on the shelves.” She rolls her eyes again, but shrugs at the same time, and it’s clear that over the years she has come to expect this and far worse from her mentees. “Let me know what Jess thinks, and what her timeline would be. I can be pretty flexible.” She lifts one eyebrow. “Since I don’t exactly have a choice.”

It takes Ben a long time, once Rae leaves, to sit back at his desk. He really is not certain of where the minutes go: maybe they stretch around his inability to fully grasp the implications of what she just told him; maybe they get lost in the silence; maybe—maybe he just needs a break. To sleep. To sleep this away.

When his eyes fall on his phone, the notification light is blinking red, and Ben turns it around. There are three messages on the lock screen.

Rey: <Hey, in case you were looking for it: you left your phone charger here.>

Rey: <I’ll bring it to you once I’m back, ok?>

Rey: <Also… I hope you had a good flight.>

Ben runs a hand down the side of his jaw, and breathes out slowly.

He doesn’t answer Rey that day, nor any of the following.

Chapter End Notes

Housekeeping n bvu7
(sorry, my cat typed the line above; let's try again)

Housekeeping notes

- Several amazing people have made moodboards for the fic. I am beyond honored and grateful 🙏🏼❤️️

- Alhena made NOT ONE, BUT TWO stunning pieces of art for this fic. GUYS. IT’S SO GOOD. SO SWEET. 🎨

- Accidentalreylo commissioned PandaCappuccino this stunning art for the scene in which Ben comforts Rey in their hotel room, and anyway, look at the details, I am
deceased. I am truly dead. Goodbye.

- Yu-miou made this gif of Ben being a Dramatic Idiot and it's SO. PERFECT. I cannot deal.

- I think the current chapter count is really the final one. The story should end at chapter 20, with 21 as the epilogue. Also, I'm gonna try to post chapter 18 and 19 at the same time, or very close together, because they're really related.

- Chapter 17 is written! I'm gonna edit it on the planes to/from SWCC and post it next week, promise!

- EVERYTHING WILL BE ALRIGHT. I PROMISE A HAPPY ENDING!

- In case you’re interested, this is how I picture BeeBee and Nine 😃
“So.” Poe’s ass hasn’t even touched the chair yet, and he’s already yapping his mouth in Ben’s ear. “I’m in love.”

“My felicitations. Have you signed the attendance sheet?”

“Shit.” Poe bounces right back out of his seat, and Ben—he is just relieved to have two extra minutes of peace. They’re all back, the students and faculty members who’d been gone for SfB, and after the past few days of relative quiet the department seems too small, the hallways too crowded, the chatter at this stupid mandatory career development seminar too loud. Ben just tries to tune it all out, to pretend he’s not really there.

He silently observes Phasma as she enters the lecture hall; she nods at him, and then takes a seat as far away from everyone else as possible. A few minutes later, Bazine slips in from the same entrance and finds a spot on the opposite side of the room.

It’s funny, almost. Or—maybe not funny, but definitely ironic. That Phasma and Bazine appear to be in a relationship and yet try to hide it—the exact opposite of what he and Rey are doing. Have been doing. Were doing. Before that mess that—

“Which one did you get?” Poe slumps in his chair, and gestures to Ben’s complimentary lunch. Ben’s not entirely sure why they insist on providing mediocre free food for seminars that are mandatory for faculty, anyway. It doesn’t make having to attend any less annoying, and it seems like the department could use the money for something more useful. Like scholarships. Toilets that don’t clog once a day, or new light bulbs in the Biology break room. Plant a couple of flowerbeds, maybe.

“I don’t know. The first one I saw.”

Poe leans too far into Ben’s personal space and rummages inside the brown paper bag. “Avocado toast.” He winks. “How very millennial of you.”

Ben slams a door shut inside his head, because—he has been doing great, or at least—he has been doing well, almost well, not thinking about—

“Anyway. As I said. I’m in love.”

Ben presses his lips together and looks ahead. The title of the talk—Dealing with difficult people in the workplace—is written in eye-cancer green, and not fully centered on the monitor. “Poe.”
“I gotta say. When I first heard about you and Rey—I did judge you a little bit. She’s what—ten, twelve years younger? What do you even have to talk about? But after the past week—”

“Poe.”

“I get it, I have to say. It doesn’t even matter that when they were still learning how to walk we were teens, fapping frantically to the Spice Girls—”

“God.” Ben pinches his nose. At least Poe is keeping his voice down.

“I am talking to the Dean. Next week.”

Ben turns to him, lifting both eyebrows. “What?”

Poe smiles. “You heard me.”

“About—”

“About Finn.”

“You’re talking to Dean Kanata. About Finn.”

“Yup. That’s what I said.”

“You’re going through the proper channels?” It’s not something Poe usually bothers with. He doesn’t do well with authority. Or with rules. Or with anything that might come between what he wants and his ability to obtain it.

“Yep.”

Ben studies him, and—there’s something, there. Beyond the usual cockiness. He looks happy and hopeful and maybe even…serious. Impossible.

“Does Finn know?” The last thing Ben wants is to nurse Poe through another broken heart. But maybe…

“Yep. He’ll be there with me.” Poe leans forward and peeks again inside Ben’s lunch bag. “Nice, white chocolate chip. Shit, mine's oatmeal raisin. Can I have your cookie?”

“Sure.”

“You don’t want it? What’s wrong with you?

He truly has no idea where it comes from, people’s obsession with cookies. Rey seems to be eating them by the dozen, too, so many that it would make Ben’s teeth ache, with how sweet and chewy they—

“Ben? You sure I can have it?”

“Yeah. You can have the sandwich, too.” Ben lowers his voice. “Were you aware that Phasma and Bazine have been…seeing each other?”

Poe scratches his head. “Who’s Bazine again? Is she Rae Sloane’s postdoc? The one who constantly looks like she wants to kick my ass and steal my fluorescent microscope and my breakfast?”
“Yes.”

“Then, sure. They’ve been doing it for ages. Everyone knows.” His green widens. “Why, did you only just realize it? Ben, that’s a huge cognitive milestone for you. You must be developing social awareness and interest in your surroundings. Rey of Sunshine is so good for you.” Poe claps his hand on Ben’s shoulder. “Can I have your chips, too?”

Ben’s gaze slides down to what’s left of his lunch. As it turns out, it’s just his chips. They’re salt and vinegar.

“No. I’ll eat those.”

He opens the bag right as the seminar begins.

…

He knows it’s her the second he hears the soft knock.

Which, to be fair, is hardly proof of the existence of ESP, or similar sixth sense shit. He knows Rey has returned from the conference today, ridiculously early in the morning—he remembers her telling him about her red-eye, mostly because he’s been worrying about her flying at night, whenever he’s not too busy worrying about…pretty much everything else that has to do with her, really—and she is currently in possession of his phone charger; willing to go out of her way to return it, too.

She texted as much.

Even though Ben has the expensive habit of sitting down with his phone in his back pocket, and dropping it on concrete, and once even flushing it down a toilet; he has accumulated a veritable mountain of phone chargers, and really he doesn’t need the one he forgot in a hotel room in Boston. Which he could have told Rey. And would have, if he hadn’t wanted to see her in person. For…many reasons.

**Excision. Like gene editing.**

He doesn’t tell her to come in. It’s what he usually does with his colleagues, or his postdocs, or his students, and Rey—Rey is not like them at all, is she? Rey is unlike anyone.

So he just closes his eyes for a moment. Then he inhales, and exhales slowly. And then he stands to go open the door. By the time he can see her she’s already walking away, a few steps down the hallway, her back slim and straight and a white phone charger clutched in her hand. She whirls around as soon as he calls her name.

And then she’s studying him for the longest time. First serious, worrying at her lower lip, as if to appraise him. And then with a large, unfurling smile.

That weight, the one that has been pressing into stomach since Ben spoke with Rae, sinks just a little heavier.

“Hey.”
The smile holds. “Hi.”

She walks towards him a little shyly, and—she looks so young. So beautiful. She looks like she is from another world. Like Ben should never have presumed to touch her.

“I brought you your charger.” She takes a couple of steps towards him and holds it out for him; Ben grabs it from the cable end, making sure not to touch her.

“Thank you.”

“It was behind that chair… the one next to the window. That’s probably why you forgot it.” She presses her lips together in that impish way that could so easily become his religion. Already has, probably. “Or maybe it’s your old age. Maybe dementia has already set in. All those amyloid plaques and neurofibrillary tangles.”

He glares at her, and she tries not to smile, and then she’s giggling, and he wants to roll his eyes, he wants to call her a brat, and—

Here they are. Doing this, again. He’s fucking this up—again. But he just—he just can’t keep off of her. After being a master at keeping off of everyone his entire damn life.

He fists his hand around the charger, and tries to close off his expression. “How was the rest of the conference?”

“Oh. Fine.” Rey shrugs.” It was okay. I mean—you know. One interesting talk out of… I don’t know, approximately seventeen? And the heat wasn’t really working on the third day, in the conference center. So that was fun.”

Ben nods. “Did you get to spend time with your friends?”

“Yes. Yeah, we went out for drinks a few times. And to the pier, and an improv show. And Rose and Jess slept with me in your….” She bites her lip, flushing a little and hesitating before continuing, for reasons that become glaringly clear the moment she says: “In our room.”

It’s a bit like a punch in the guts. Just three little words, but—maybe it’s how painfully intimate they sound, a reminder of a slice of time when a ‘we’ existed. Maybe it’s the avalanche of images they bring with them—spreading Rey’s legs open with his palms and sinking his fingers in the hair at her nape and her sharp little teeth on his bicep when she tried not scream and the way she laughed, when he told her that the freckles right above the curve of her ass looked a little like a hydrocarbon side chain—which is precisely what Ben has been trying to push out of his head since the second he stepped out of that fucking hotel room. Maybe it’s that Rey’s skin is getting redder, like she’s thinking about the same things.

Maybe it’s just that she exists in the same time and space as he does, and Ben hasn’t gotten over that, not quite yet.

“Oh.” He exhales carefully. “Good.”

She nods. And then pauses, as if hesitant to add something. “My friend Finn—my roommate, really. You know of him, right? Finn Storm. Back in Boston, he…he met Doctor Da—Poe. He met Poe, for the first time.”

Ben lifts his eyes and takes in the hallway. It’s deceptively deserted, but three offices down he can hear Gial talk with someone on the phone, and Phasma’s door is ajar, as usual.
Ben points behind his shoulder. “We should probably go inside.”

They’ll need privacy, anyway. For the conversation they’re going to have. The one he is going to have with her.

“Ahh. Right.” Rey nods and smiles, something sweet and conspiratorial, before turning around and preceding him inside his office.

Ben has to force himself to follow her.

“So…how bad is it?” she asks as soon as the door is closed.

“Bad?”

“This thing between Finn and Poe?”

“Ahh.” Ben leans against his desk, trying to look calm. Normal. Trying to shrink himself and take up as little of Rey’s personal space as he can. God knows he has overstepped enough. “I don’t know. I think it can be very good. For Poe, at least.”

Rey’s eyebrows rise. “You mean…have you guys talked about it?”

“He hasn’t shut up about it in days.” He rolls his eyes. “Have I mentioned that Poe is secretly twelve?”

She laughs. “So is Finn! He’s usually…good, at managing expectations. Very casual. But this thing with Poe—it’s like he can’t stop thinking about it, or something. This morning I was minding my business and making a jelly sandwich and he randomly volunteered that Poe is allergic to peanuts. It wasn’t even a PB&J.”

“He’s not allergic. He just fakes it, because he doesn’t like the taste.” Ben sighs. “And Poe texted me at three am the other day to let me know that his dog’s feces were almost shaped like an F.” He massages his temple. “He sent a picture.”

Rey winces. “God. They are…”

“The worst.” Ben shakes his head. “But I think Poe might need it. Something to focus on, something like this. Someone to care about, who also cares about him.”

Rey nods. “Finn, too. I just—I was concerned that Finn might want more than Poe is willing to offer, you know?”

“Believe me, that’s not case. I think Poe is very ready file taxes jointly, if Finn isn't opposed to it.”

“Good. I’m glad.” She smiles a beautiful smile. And then the beautiful smile fades, just as quickly. “One-sided… one-sided things are really… not good.” She’s looking at her shoes now, and Ben knows, just knows, that she’s thinking about him. Whoever he is.

It’s a weird kind of ache, this one. The jealousy. It’s confusing—unfamiliar, and not something he’s used to. It’s half slicing, half disorienting and aimless—different from the isolation he’d felt growing up, or his family’s constant rejection, or that sense of being a fraud, of not being good enough that had accompanied him throughout grad school. All of those—Ben had known how to use them, how to funnel them into strengths to achieve better states—distancing himself from his parents, cutting off ties with his family, being perfect at what he did.
The jealousy, though. There isn’t anything Ben can do, if Rey is in love with someone else. The misery of it, it’s not something he can harness to obtain something, and doesn’t come with any gain. Only restless thoughts, wet dreams that make him feel like he’s fifteen again, and something squeezing at his chest whenever his mind turns to her.

Only Rey, beautiful and unattainable.

“No.” Ben ducks his chin into his chest. “No, they’re not good.”

Whether the ensuing silence really is tense, or simply feels awkward because Rey is starting to suspect Ben’s feelings for her, he cannot tell. Not that it really matters, at this point. This, now, this is the coda. Only a few more minutes, surely.

“So.” Rey begins to wring her hands, and then seems to catch herself. “I’m gonna get going. Check on my mice. I guess I’ll see you on Wednesday?”

Look. Couldn’t have gone better. She’s giving you the perfect segue.

And yet, Ben has to first swallow to be able to answer. And for more than just a fraction of a second, his mouth just won’t open.

“Hux has left, Rey.”

For a long time, she just stares at him. Like what Ben said wasn’t loud enough, or not a sentence, or not in a language she speaks. Then she blinks rapidly, and finally asks:

“…left?”

He nods. “Industry position. He resigned last week.”

“He…” More blinking. “Hux?”

Ben would laugh. If this were—literally any other situation. “Yes. Armitage Hux.”

“I didn’t…” Rey takes a step back, as if to physically retreat from this new piece of information. “He didn’t tell me.”

“Yeah. Sounds like he didn’t tell Rae, either. Not that he was looking for something outside of academia, either. So you probably shouldn’t take it too personally.”

“Right. Right.” Rey hugs herself, hands stuffed under her armpits, and Ben just wants to—pick her up and bring her home. He wants to—he does want to fuck her. A lot. More than she could probably take. But right now, he mostly wants to keep her in his lap and feed her that shit that she so likes to put inside her body and fall asleep while watching movies with her. Movies in which horses don’t die. “Shit.”

“Will your project be okay, without him?”

“Yes. I…” She takes a deep breath. “No. I don’t know. I’m pretty independent by now, I think, but it’s nice to be able to run stuff by someone when things go wrong, and now…” She shrugs, still looking worried. Ben has to grip the edge of the desk to avoid reaching for her. “Shit.”

He nods. “I’ll put you in touch with someone I went to grad school with.”

She looks up at him. “Who?”
“Someone who started in bioinformatics, but went on to do optogenetics. From what I hear she’s pretty good at it. Her name is Zorri. She is faculty in the UK now, and—”

“Zorri Bliss? At UCL?”

“Yes. She’s a close friend. I’ve already explained your situation and asked her if she can mentor you, however informally. She said she’ll be happy to—it’s not ideal, of course, since she’s on the other side of the world, but at least you’ll be able to ask your questions to someone who is familiar with the technique.”

Rey just looks up at him, lips parted. “Ben.”

“Would that help?”

She huffs, and then smiles. “Yes. Yes, of course it would help.”

“Good. I’ll write her an email and CC you, so you guys can be in touch. No need to include me as you go back and forth.”

“Right. Okay.”

“And if there’s anything you need—equipment, or funding, or anything that fell through because Hux is leaving…just let me know, okay? There are a bunch of grants I have, that are related enough to your study and that we could use. I’ll make it work.”

“Okay. Thank you. I… Thank you so much.”

Ben lifts up from his desk and straightens. Like people usually do when conversations are wrapping up. Because this one—and everything that came before—needs to wrap up, too. Right now.

“I’ll let Amilyn know. And you have my email, of course, so you know how to get in touch if anything comes up.”

Rey bubbles out a laugh, and cocks her head. “Of course. I also have your phone number. And I see you every Wednesday, too, so—”

Ben can tell, just from the way her smile falls, the exact moment it occurs to her. That there is a chance that she won’t see him this Wednesday. Or the next one. Or the following.

“I don’t think we need to tell anyone,” he continues. He rubs his eye with his index fingers. He’s tired. This… this is exhausting. “People will not see us together, and after a while they’ll think that it didn’t work out and that we broke up. Or they won’t.” He shrugs, because it should fit the moment. It feels like Ben shouldn’t care one way or the other. Right? “Hux is gone, so it doesn’t matter. Correct?”

He can hear her throat work. “Correct,” Rey says. She is staring down at her blue and white chucks, and she seems…smaller. Subdued. “It’s correct.”

Ben nods, even though she can’t possibly see him. And pushes away from his desk. “Okay, then. If there’s anything you—”

“Though we could still meet.” Rey looks up at him, and takes one step closer. ”No?”

“Still meet?”
“On Wednesdays.” Her eyes are liquid and her cheeks flushed. She is talking quickly. “We could still meet. To hang out. I mean, I can’t exactly get through grad school buying my own coffee, can I?”

Ben smiles. “No. Definitely no. See, I would be happy to get you a gift certificate for the campus coffee shop, but it would probably be exclusively used to purchase pumpkin-based products, and as an educator I feel like I should take a moral stance on—”

“With you. I want to get coffee with you.” The words come out in a rush. Like she can’t keep them in. “I think I’m this close to convincing you that pumpkin spice latte is amazing—”

“You’re not.”

“—and to try flavored cream cheese—”

“Rey. I’ve tried it.”

“—and enjoy it, which is important for my mental health, and I—I like to hang out with you. I want to hang out with you.” She is smiling hopefully at him, and—she really is young. And she has no idea. “We’re friends, no? We can still be friends? Even if Hux has left?”

She actually seems—sorry, about this. Distressed that it might end. Which in a way doesn’t surprise Ben—she was honest and direct from the very start, making no secret of the fact that she disliked him when she did, and never hesitating to let it show, once she begun to enjoy their time together. The problem is...

“We can still be friends.”

“It’s complicated, Rey.”

Rey laughs, strained and nervous. “But it’s not. Not at all. Being friends is not complicated. Certainly less complicated than fake-dating, and we pulled that off pretty easily.”

Ben is not sure he’s ready to admit it—that there is very little that is easy about having Rey in his life. So he just remains silent, holding her gaze and watching her come to terms with his unsaid no.

It only takes a few seconds. She presses her lips together, and a vertical line appears between her eyebrows as she asks, half hesitant and half sullen: “Why? Why can’t we be friends?”

Ben closes his eyes.

Because, Rey. Because last night I woke up with come on my sheets, and I’m almost certain it’s from dreaming of licking your cunt. And friends don’t do that with their friends.

“This is complicated.” He tries to sound reasonable and kind. To make sense to her. “I took advantage of you in a potentially coercive situation, and—”

“What?” She frowns. “What coercive situation?”

He has to take a slow, deep breath. “Rey.”

“I don’t know what you’re… oh.” She seems to flush and pale at the same time, and presses her fingers against her lips, as if to keep the words from spilling out. “No.” She shakes her head, so vehemently that her hair ripples on her shoulder. It’s shiny, and Ben knows what it feels like, now. To weave his fingers through it as he holds her down. He is—revolting. Simply revolting. “It
doesn’t matter. We said… we said nothing would change. We said we wouldn’t talk about it after it had happened.”

“Right.” What about thinking about it? Can I think about it? What if it’s all I think about, Rey?
“Well. Things are more complicated than that.”

Her mouth sets, stubborn. “We said we’d pretend it never happened—”

“You said that.” The words come out harsher than Ben meant for them to be. And yet. “Rey. This is far more—”

“Complicated. Right?” There is a hint of bitterness in her voice, but she mostly sounds…

Yeah. Sad. Her shoulders slump, and her eyes are lucid, and he can’t remember seeing her this defeated before. Not quite.

“Yes. Complicated.”

Rey nods, subdued. “Too complicated for friendship?”

“I am your friend, Rey.” He sighs. “And I really care about you. I just think that some… distance might be best. For now.”

“For now.”

He sighs, and—he’s not sure how long the silence lasts. Ben just stands there, looking at her while she seems to come to terms with his words. Still, he’s almost startled when she nods again and asks him:

“So… So this is it?”

“Yeah.” He wants to give her what she needs. Everything her heart desires, more than anything, since the very beginning. But being friends… this one thing, he might just not be able to do. Not even for her. “Yeah. I think so.”

Rey takes a step back and rocks on her heels. From behind the door, an iPhone rings, and a few seconds later someone bursts into laughter.

“Thank you, then. For everything. And not just for helping me get rid of Hux. I…” He has seen Rey tear up, even cry before, but this looks different. This breaks his heart, which is a paradox of sorts, since before her Ben wasn’t even sure that he was equipped with one. “I felt so alone, and you…” She looks away, and wipes her cheek with her palm. “Thank you, Ben.”

What hits him first is her scent.

Well before he registers that she has moved closer to him, that her heat is close to his own, it’s her smell that jolts him alert. Flowers and salt, subtle but familiar. Rey is, after all, the person Ben has touched the most, and most willingly so, in his entire adult life. His brain has mapped her out, stored her away across all senses. Eyes to her smile, hands to her skin, the scent of her in his nostrils. So it fits that it’s her smell that hits him first, as she pushes up her toes, presses her fingers against his bicep, and kisses him gently on the cheek. It’s sweet and warm and a little ticklish; unexpected, but not unwelcome.

What is less acceptable is the fact that Ben's hand comes up to Rey’s lower back, pushing her into his body and stopping her from sliding back on her heels; or the way his head turns, until her lips are not brushing the skin of his cheek anymore, and he feels a hitch in her breathing, warm and soft against the corner of his mouth; or the deep pleasure that runs through him as he closes his eyes and lets himself just be, be there, with her.

Quiet. Still. One last moment.

Time passes; it unbends and stretches out, an amount of it that Ben doesn’t care to measure as he stands in his noiseless office, holding Rey to himself for a few more seconds. And then, when he feels almost unknotted, almost at peace with what’s to be, then Rey opens her mouth and turns her head and breathes against his lips:

“Please.”

He has no true awareness of what happens after that. He doesn’t know who closes the space between them, who pushes the other against the desk, who reaches first for strips of skin to uncover, for flesh to touch under their clothes. He does know that Rey is chanting please, please, please, all of a sudden breathing hard and digging her fingers in the muscles of his shoulders, and his mind simply snaps.

Utterly blank, and empty of coherent thought.

He has no memory of it, but he knows it must be his doing when he sees her bent over his desk, her elbows flush to the wood and her forehead a couple of inches from a stack of post-its, from the stupid phone charger he tossed there earlier. His heart stutters the second he realizes that he is holding her down. That his hand is splayed in the center of her back and keeping her still.

That he is doing the very thing he told himself he… fuck. Fuck.

And yet, he doesn’t move. Instead he presses harder, and leans further into her.

“Stop me,” he tells her. An order.

Rey lets her forehead fall and touch the desk, and shakes her head. “Please.”

“Rey.” She is wearing leggings. She is not even wearing real goddamn pants and she is begging him to fuck her and he is—he is a fool and he is mindless and he is ruined. Collapsed. “Tell me to stop.”

“Ben.”

Her voice is thick and he has no choice—he pulls her shirt up and her pants down and there is a thong underneath, framing her beautiful, fuckable ass that he’s spent years trying not to notice and the things he could do to her now that he has her like this—the things he would make her enjoy, the things he would make her ask for—

“Please.”

He shouldn’t think of her like this. He shouldn’t want this with her, from her—bind her to him and store her in his house, in his closet, to take out and use when it suits him in ways that are probably debasing, keep her wrapped up and protected and safe, fuck her in every which way and just—own her. He shouldn’t feel this for the woman he loves, this twisted, chaotic, greedy mess.

“Please, Ben—”
“Settle down.” He leans forward and nuzzles her nape, pressing a kiss into the curve of her neck. She arches into him—his mouth, his back, his cock; her hand slides towards his on the desk, and her thumb comes to brush against his own, as if asking for more. “It’s okay.”

“Please, just…” Her perfect ass is rubbing against him, and—he doesn’t need this, not on top of everything else. “Can you…”

“It’s okay.”

“Please,” she whimpers softly into the wood of his desk, and he’s not completely sure what she’s asking for. She’d like for him to fuck her, that is for sure, but it seems like it wouldn’t be nearly enough. Like they’d both want more, afterwards. “Do it.”

“Yeah,” he exhales, covering the back of her hand with his palm. I’m here. I’ve got you. I feel it, too. “Let me just—I need to make you ready.”

“No, just—please, Ben.” She sounds plaintive now, in pain, like she can’t bear this. It feels like—it feels like this, them, is so close to being over, and she’s asking him to show her that maybe it won’t be.

He wants nothing more than to give it to her.

“I need to—I can’t just fuck you, like this. There is no way you…” There’s no way she’s wet enough. Even if she’s gasping at his words, forehead touching the surface of his desk with a frustrated grunt. “Let me get you there.”

He’s almost on his knees, can almost taste her cunt, when he parts her with two of his fingers and —

Shit.

Just, shit.

“Fuck. Rey, fuck.” His tone sounds quiet and reverential, even to his own ears.

“Please.” Ben can’t see her face, but he wishes he could. He thinks she might be crying. “Please, will you do it? Will you—”

He doesn’t even take off her underwear. He just hooks them to the side and pushes in until he can’t go any further, and she is pliant and wet and too small, but it’s already nothing like their first time together. A tight fit but perfect, and it’s like after one night her body, her cunt, has already remolded to suit him to perfection.

It’s frightening.

He will never get enough, and it’s frightening.

So he breathes deeply and stops. He holds his hand against her hip and feels the jut of her bones and stays still for a moment, a long moment to stave off the surge of pleasure, sharp and cruel and exquisitely, breathtakingly painful.

He will be patient. He will be controlled. He will say goodbye, after this. He will be decent, for the first time in his fucking life.

Ben bends down and sucks on her throat, half bite and half lick and half kiss.
“Too much?”

She doesn’t answer, except for shallow breaths and a squeeze of her cunt that has him groaning. But her pinkie—it’s her pinkie, now—wraps around his thumb, warm and small.

“I’ve been thinking about this.” Her voice is barely there.

He nods in her hair. “Me too.”

She turns her head, and there is surprise in the glass of her eyes.

“You have?”

She is way too tight. He is going to need to move about five seconds ago. Though he might come anyway, just smelling her heat and staring at her. “Yeah.”

“It was good, wasn’t it?”

She means the sex. Why his brain wants it to mean something else—the sunscreen, the stupid questions about his favorite color, the complaints about academia, her saying ik hou van jou, the foul-smelling coffee—he isn’t sure.

“It was.” His voice sounds too deep to be his own, and he braces against the desk to begin to move. “It was good.”

He has to pull out after a few thrusts to avoid coming, and then again just a couple of minutes after that. Rey moans plaintively when he does, shaking with pleasure and frustration, so he slides one or two fingers inside her, and keeps her full while he tries to wind down, painfully hard against her hip. He does that again, and again, and again, heedless of the late-afternoon light pouring in through the windows, of the unlocked door, of the muffled voices in the hallway. And then, when she is so swollen and raw that one single thrust is enough to bring her off, then he finally lets the pleasure curl inside him and take him under. He empties into her, until there is nothing left; until he is nothing at all.

Rey is crying softly when he kneels behind her, pulling up her pants, biting his lip as he tries to ignore his seed beading her thighs. He straightens her body and her clothes, kisses her soft skin, turns her around in his arms and smooths down her shiny hair; he kisses the tears off her cheeks, and rubs her back and holds her to him until she’s quieted down, until the highs and lows of them are blended into a flat line.

Neither of them is breathing quite normally yet, but this is probably as close as they’ll get. So Ben presses his lips against her forehead, and tells her gently:

“You have to leave, now.”

When he hears the click of the door closing behind her, it’s as if he’s falling from a great height.

Chapter End Notes
Okay so. Since my last update the EPIX teaser trailer has come out (THAT BACKFLIP 😎😎), as well as the title (THE RISE OF SKYWALKER 😎😎) and my Reylo heart is beating stronger that ever. (I wrote a one shot about the trailer should you be interested, and check out the entire collection that Jeeno put together 😎). My friends and I really want to watch TRoS with other Reylos, and are organizing an East Coast/Southeast meet up. If you're interested in joining us, pls take a look at this survey, or get in touch with me on Twitter.
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Guys, at this point it's been so long that I'm not even sure anyone is still reading this but if you're still interested here's the new chapter, and the next one is almost complete!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

She turns around as soon as she hears feet shuffling on the floor, ready to remind Finn that rent is due in two days and their landlord has threatened a fifty dollar fine if they’re late one more time. She turns around, and then...

Then she instantly turns back to her cereal. Because the sight of Doctor Poe Dameron—Associate Professor of Pharmacology; formerly part of Rey’s student advisory committee; member of the editorial board of Pharmacological Reviews (impact factor: 17.099)—casually strolling inside her kitchen wearing baby-blue briefs and visibly scratching his ass is not something Rey can handle at seven AM on a Wednesday morning. Or ever.

“Yo, Sunshine. Good mo—”

Rey figures that Poe meant to finish that sentence, but then got busy yawning his jaw off. The loudest, airiest, most dramatic yawn to ever be performed, and it’s here, courtesy of this disheveled, hickey-covered man currently gracing her kitchen.

Hashtag blessed.

Rey runs a hand down her face, thinking that if Ben was able to withstand thirty-something years of Poe, then she must strive to endure the approximately thirty months that separate her from graduation.

And then there’s that pinching sensation in her chest, the one that reminds her that she’s not supposed to think about Ben.

“—morning. Woah.” Poe smiles. The yawn seems to be over, for now. “You got coffee, over there?”

Rey nods, pours him some in the first clean mug she can find (the cellfie one, with the prokaryotic cell taking a selfie) and tries to hand it to him without looking at his bare thighs. It turns out to be impossible. Because Poe… Poe, he makes Finn so happy. And he’s a really nice guy. Devoted. And handsome and funny and thoughtful and kind. And...

Naked.

Naked all the bloody time.

“Is this hazelnut?”
“Caramel.” Rey averts her gaze. It falls on Finn’s favorite mug. ‘Who gives a flock?’ on a background of pink flamingos. “Um, did Finn want some, too? Coffee, I mean.”

“Nah. He’s still asleep.” Poe yawns again and moves closer, opening the fridge and bending forward to rummage inside. And there it is: the buttcrack that Rey has come to know and love. “I don’t think he has anywhere to be until ten or so. Hey do you have any—”

“Milk?” Rey pushes it over the counter in Poe’s direction, hoping he’ll straighten just a little a bit. Though he doesn’t, of course. “And there’s creamer, too. Middle shelf.”

“Ah—awesome. You’re the best.”

Why, thank you. And you, Doctor Dameron, renowned scholar, former professor of mine, one of three people who could have failed me out of grad school, are currently standing naked in my kitchen. But I guess this is my life, now. “Uh, so… are you going to campus, this morning?” Any time soon? Please? Will you ever wear clothes again?

“Yes. Have to. Need a ride?”

“Ah, no, thank you. I’ll just bike. While the weather is still nice, you know.”

“Ha. Haven’t had the energy to bike in years. Man, it’s brutal, dating a younger guy.” Poe sighs, leans against the fridge door, and begins to scratch his belly. Rey can’t help staring at him, horrified. Fascinated. Horrinated. “Finn is like—a sex machine. Almost kept me up until dawn. On a weeknight.”

Oh, God. “Um.” Rey looks down to her bowl, and picks up a rainbow-shaped marshmallow with her spoon. Too soggy to eat, by now. Though maybe it’s just what she needs to filter out Poe’s sex life. “Um, I think I gotta get—.”

It’s hard, to be thirty-eight. Let me tell you.” He is—yeah. Yep. Still scratching his happy trail. “Get ready, because your knees give up on you and maybe even your back and suddenly you can’t breathe after barely one flight of stairs. You eat Advil like it’s Tic Tacs. And then you need at least eight hours of sleep, just to function like a human being and avoid running over your neighbor’s dog when you’re pulling out of your driveway. But your hot as fuck younger boyfriend wants to try new things at one AM on a Tuesday night, and what do you tell him? You can’t tell him no. I mean, I guess you could, but…”

Poe smiles blissfully and stares into his mug, and Rey—

She mostly just wants to drown herself in her bowl of cereal. But since that might be physically impossible, she’d settle for Poe shutting up and putting on something. Anything. A shirt, a robe. Paper towels.

“Right. Ehm, maybe I should—”

“Do you do that to Ben, too? Is it like, a thing you millennials do? An elaborate ploy to get rid of us older people? Murder by weeknight sex. Is Tuesday the new Sunday, or something?” He chuckles, waving a hand as he snorts into his coffee; he doesn’t seem to notice how rigid Rey has gone all of a sudden. “Who am I kidding, though? Screw Ben. That asshole can probably go at it all night long, with all the wheatgrass and chia seed smoothies he’s been chugging since high school. Bet he takes short breaks to answer work emails between bouts, too. Hey—” he looks up at Rey, eyes instantly wide and happy “—has he told you?”

She swallows. Against whatever it is that’s stuck in her throat now. “Um… told me?
“Yeah. Has he?”

Rey has no idea what Poe is referring to, but—it’s likely that Ben hasn’t.

Very likely.

Because Ben and Rey haven’t talked in a month. Well—Ben and Rey haven’t talked in three weeks, four days, and fourteen hours, and it sucks, it sucks, it sucks so much to still be counting. It sucks in a piercing, painful way that time doesn’t seem to be able to dull; no matter that Rey is positively drowning in work, that five of her knock-out mice weighed too little to be included in her experimental group, that the deadline Doctor Holdo has set for one of her manuscripts is coming up in less than two weeks. No matter that Rey’s best friend has been too taken with his new boyfriend to sit down and have a decent conversation with her in ages, that her landlord has let them know that they’ll need to find a new apartment for next year, that she was rotated to chair of the outreach committee of the Graduate Women in Science Association without even being consulted before; no matter that her bike is falling apart so bad that she had to put it back together with duct tape, and she’ll somehow have to scrape together the money for a new one real soon.

No matter that she’s been unable to sleep through the night since Boston.

Rey has so many real, actual problems, that it almost makes her laugh, the sharp feeling constantly lodged in her chest that makes her numb to all of them.

So, no. Ben probably hasn’t told her, even though Rey has seen him in the hallways, at seminars, even at Jess’ dissertation defense, since… since that happened. Ben hasn’t told her because he’s mostly been ignoring her—if one doesn’t count the one time they’d passed each other in front of the Tissue Culture Lab, when he’d been walking with Doctor Heckers and Rey’d been waiting to use the CO2 chamber.

That time when he’d nodded and said, “Hi, Rey,” in a kind, low tone before going back to his conversation about walk-in-hoods or something of the like, and Rey had felt so sure that that was it—that her heart was going to splinter and break her open from the inside.

And yet. Here she is.

She clears her throat. “Told me about what?”

“The grant? We heard yesterday. We knew it was a good percentile, but we weren’t sure about the payline.”

“Oh. Oh, yeah.”

“It’s amazing. Though he’s the worst co-investigators I’ve ever had. Please tell him I said so.”

Rey smiles—mostly because Poe is grinning at her like that’s the response he expects—and tries not to look too surprised. It’s been… God, it’s been weeks now, and she has no idea why Ben still hasn’t told his oldest friend that he’s not seeing Rey anymore.

Then again, Rey herself hasn’t quite been able to bring herself to tell Finn about what happened in Boston. Or in Ben’s office. So.

“Right. That is... amazing.”

“I know. Such a cool grant, too. All that in silico stuff, can you believe it? I’m almost excited to go to work.”
“I bet.” Poe looks so enthusiastic, Rey would walk up to him for a hug. If he weren’t her former professor, that is, and mostly naked. “Congrats, really. You must be over the moon.”

“I am. Hey, we should all celebrate together, no? The four of us. When—”

A surprisingly timely, undecipherable shriek comes from the direction of Finn’s bedroom. Poe and Rey turn towards the door at the same time.

“What was that?”

“I don’t know. Do you think he’s—”

The voice comes again, only slightly more intelligible.

Rey frowns. “Is he… yelling for coffee?”

Poe smiles, loopy and besotted. “God, he’s the least morning person I’ve ever met.”

He hums to himself as he grabs the flock mug and pours coffee in it, fills it with the precise amount of sugar and cinnamon creamer Finn desires, and then heads out of the kitchen.

“Hey Rey, just an FYI. Things might get loud in a few minutes.” He winks at her. “You might not wanna be around for that.”

“What do you—”

Poe is already gone.

Rey sighs. And sighs. And sighs once more.

Then she stands, pours what’s left of her cereal down the garbage disposal, and picks up her backpack and bike helmet before letting herself out.

…

Jess says he has been unusually nice.

Or—not nice, precisely. The word she uses is ‘reasonable’, when she explains to Rey about how understanding he’d been when Jess’d cried in her office because she was panicking the day before her defense; how he’d awkwardly held out a box of tissues to her, and told her, a little stilted but ultimately reassuring, that he was confident everything would work out; how his comments on her manuscript drafts are still brutal but have shifted a little, from ‘wrong. redo.’ to ‘you might want to take a second look at this paragraph.’

“It must mean that he’s happy,” Jess tells her, looking mystified as she chews on the end of her straw. “It must be your doing. Can’t explain it otherwise.”

Rey takes a sip of her watermelon lemonade, and changes the subject to the new climbing wall they just installed at the rec center.

Zorri, Ben’s friend from grad school, who is funny and brilliant and probably who Rey wants to be when she grows up, asks her how Ben is doing, and if he still spends all his time out of the lab
running marathons and playing chess.

“I remember when he’d get all excited about the World Championship, or whatever it’s called. Made me watch it with him once, while we were waiting for the centrifuge to be done. Most boring shit ever.” She rolls her eyes, but her smile is fond on the grainy Skype image, and Rey’s admission that no, she is not quite sure whether Ben’s still a chess fan, has to be squeezed out through a wall of thick, ugly jealousy.

Poe, who stays for dinner… every day, really, unless Finn’s the one sleeping at his place, Poe lets tiny bits of Ben leak continuously, almost distractedly.

That time they’d backpacked in Southeast Asia for an entire summer; how he’d initially wanted to major in engineering; the fact that they’d had to go to prom together, because Poe hadn’t been able to find a date but hadn’t wanted to go alone.

Rey finds out, when Poe explains it to Finn while she is washing the dinner dishes, that Ben’s actually Luke Skywalker’s nephew, that the reason he left his lab for Snoke’s was a completely unfounded accusation of research misconduct on Luke’s part, and that it lead to him becoming estranged from his family. Rey has to bite her lip to stop herself from asking a million questions, since it’s clear that Poe assumes that she already knows. And then, once she’s alone in her room, she has to throw her phone in her laundry hamper and cover it with three days worth of workout leggings, just to stop herself from texting Ben how sorry she is about all of it.

That she has been betrayed by her family, too, and she is alone, too, and if only there weren’t this other woman Poe once told Rey about, if only he were interested…

It was nice, being alone together. Wasn’t it?

The bits about Ben—Rey soaks it all up, like droplets of water in a drought. And at night, when she looks up at the Ursa Major glowing on her the ceiling, the tip of the handle of the Big Dipper a little too skewed to the right, she takes all the large and small things she knows about him, unwraps them, and turns them around in her head.

Treasures them.

And like the fool she is, she thinks that maybe; possibly; despite all of this; maybe, if she could go back in time, she would still choose to fall for him.

Ph.D. students are allowed upwards of two unjustified absences from seminar each semester. What happens if those are exceeded (remedial papers, expulsion from the program, death by rat poison) is as yet unclear to Rey, but each prospect sounds unpleasant enough that for the past two years she has been dutifully abiding. Still, she likes to hoard both free passes as long as she possibly can, and then spend the last two Thursdays afternoons of the semester holed up in the lab and pretending that she is a real scientist and not an indentured slave to the senseless, arbitrary whims of a diabolical academic hellscape.

This year, though, she must have done it wrong. Because on the second-to-last Thursday of the semester, at three forty-seven PM, Rey gets a terse, vaguely threatening email from Cherie, the department secretary, and finds herself having to rush to the other side of campus. She spends the
trek muttering to herself and trying to figure out how exactly she managed to accumulate two unexcused absences. Okay, there was that one time the freezers of the undergrad cafeteria had broken, and the staff had decided to give out free soft serve to whoever would show up. Rey remembers that unexcused absence very fondly and regrets absolutely nothing, but the second one is not—

“That damn bird,” Finn mutters falling in step with her. She has no clue what he’s talking about.

“What bird?”

“The one with the broken wing. We found it next to the immunology building before seminar and sat outside until—”

“—the wildlife rehabilitator came to collect it. Dammit. That should count as an excused absence.”

“Should, but I dunno.” Finn shrugs and holds the door open for Rey. “Cherie was probably the one who snapped the poor bird’s wing in the first place.”

“Can totally see that.”

The room is almost empty. Almost. There are free seats all over the right side of the room, courtesy of the students who were wiser than Rey and Finn and managed to save up their absences; so many free seats that it’s hard to believe how only a few months ago she’d had to sit on someone else’s lap just to fit inside the room. The faculty side on the left is just a little more crowded—mostly bioinformatics people, which means that today’s seminar is likely on computational something or other, which in turn means that Rey is going to wish she was literally anywhere but here about five minutes into the talk.

Which is a regular occurrence, anyway. And it has nothing to do with the fact that Ben is sitting right there, behind Doctor Phasma and Doctor Sloane, who are turned back in their seats and talking to him about something that is making them all smile.

Biology is Ben’s department, anyway. He’s everywhere, all the time. Rey sees him, and he sees her, and all that seeing that they’re both doing is always civil and amicable and very mature and...

It’s all in the past, anyway. She can be in the same room as Ben and still focus on a talk on…

“Ugh. Molecular chaperones.”

“My God. We should never have disturbed the circle of life.”

“That bird probably deserved to die.”

“Maybe we should have skipped the soft serve.”

“But they had black cherry.”

“I know. And amaretto.”

“It was so good.” Finn sighs as they find seats that will allow them to look at their phones for at least eighty percent of the talk. “I just hope the bird is happy. Otherwise all this misery—” he gestures towards the podium, where Doctor Canady is currently wrestling with the laser pointer “—will have been in vain.”

“What’s in vain?” An arm drapes heavily over Rey’s shoulder, right as the smell of Poe’s cologne
wafts up to her nostrils. It’s easy to recognize, because that’s what the bathroom in her apartment smells like pretty much every morning of late. “How are my two favorite people under thirty?” Poe is leaning over, arms wrapped around Rey and Finn over the back of their chairs, as if there’s absolutely nothing weird with a tenured professor being this handsy towards graduate students in the middle of a seminar room.

Then again, there probably isn’t. Since everyone knows about Poe and Finn, anyway, and according to Kay there is at least one circulating rumor that the three of them and Ben are in some sort of polyamorous relationship.

“How horrible,” Finn and Rey answer at the same time; they exchange a look and a small smile.


He straightens with a pained expression, letting his hand trail down Finn’s spine—a light, intimate gesture. Finn bites his lower lip, and Rey—she has to look away. She wants to.

“Will I see you tonight?” Poe’s tone drops a little lower. Clearly not meant for Rey’s ears—not a secret, not quite, but something Rey is not exactly part of.

“Sure.” Finn tries to sound nonchalant, but he mostly looks happy. So happy, in that understated, quiet way of his. Unassuming, like he doesn’t quite believe it yet, this thing with Poe. And Rey is—she really is glad for him. That he has this. Poe’s a good guy. If a little too naked, at times. “We can have dinner at my place. Order in, maybe.”

“Mmm, why don’t I take you out?” Rey is starting to wonder if she should just move a few seats away and leave them some privacy, when Poe pokes her on the arm. “You, too. Let me use some of that sweet NIH money to feed you, Sunshine.”

Rey smiles and shakes her head. “Oh, no. You guys should—”

“Yes, Rey.” Finn pokes her, too. On the side. “I feel like I barely get to see you, lately.”

“We see each other every day. When I evict you from the bathroom after you’ve been in there for forty-five minutes.”

“Come on. Lately you just eat and then go to your room. We never get to properly hang—let’s go out for dinner. It’ll be fun!”

It feels like it might not be. Fun. It feels like it might be work, and maybe a little uncomfortable, possibly just… sad, to watch Finn and Poe being so clearly in love with each other when she….

Well. She is just as clearly in love, except not as happily.

“I don’t know. Maybe you guys need some privacy.”

“Oh, come on. We’re not gonna fuck over the restaurant table.” Poe waves a hand dismissively. “And even if we do, it’s not like it’s anything you haven’t walked in on befo—”

“Poe,” Finn chides, and it’s fascinating how stern he manages to sound towards someone who’s over ten years his senior; how Poe grins mischievously, but follows Finn’s signals. As he always does. “Rey, please? Let’s hang out. Outside of campus. Or the apartment.”

Rey sighs. Because—it feels like this might turn poopy very easily, in a depressing way. But only minorly poopy, all considered. And it could even be nice. Take her mind off things.
“Okay. No making out, though, or I’ll order three lobsters and a steak.”

“You got it, honey. No making out on your side, either.” Poe winks, and bounces away before Rey can ask if he thinks she’s going to make out with the waitress, or with a French fry. Finn hugs her close as soon as he’s gone.

“I don’t know, I feel like we haven’t properly talked in a while.”

*That’s because we haven’t.* “It’s okay.” Rey squeezes him back, and—maybe it’s not home, but it’s as close as it gets, for her. “It’s just—being in a new relationship. The honeymoon period. It’ll be over when Poe asks you to pop a pimple on his back.”

“Ew.”

“Okay, but really. Joking aside, I don’t mind.” The smile on her face feels like it should at least *look* sincere. And—Rey means it. For the most part. “I’m happy for you, really.”

“Are you happy for you, though?”

Rey frowns, and checks her phone. Twenty-three percent battery. Dammit, she’s gonna have to *listen* to this talk. “Yes. Of course.”

“Because—I don’t know. You seem…” He shakes his head, at a loss for words. “I don’t know. Tired, maybe? A little distant?”

“No. No, I—” She smiles again and pats Finn’s thigh, a little awkwardly. “I’m fine, it’s just the opto project wrapping up. Hux’s gone, and I have to run all these assays at five AM, and…” She shrugs.

And everything sort of fell apart, but it’s okay. Or it will be.

Finn studies her for a long moment. “Are things with… Things with Solo are fine, right?”

“Yes.” No. “Yes, of course. Just same old, but the whole thing is really… tapering off. My crush on him, I mean.”

Just to prove her words—just because Rey is smart that way—she lets her eyes wander to where Ben’s sat. Poe is next to him now, showing him something on his phone, and Doctor Sloane and Doctor Phasma are talking between themselves.

“If you say so.” Finn doesn’t sound particularly convinced, but he follows Rey’s gaze. “Does he ever say anything? About… about Poe?”

Rey blinks, and tears her eyes away from Ben. “About Poe?”

“Yeah. I mean, sort of. I have no idea why Poe hangs out with him to be honest, but they’re really close, so maybe Solo would know…”

“Know what?”

Finn seems… flustered. Not overly so, but… “I don’t know. How Poe feels about…”

“About?”

“You know. About us?”
Rey barks out a laugh. And then realizes that Finn is being serious. “Wait—for real?”

Blushing. Finn is—soo blushing. “Listen, I just wanna know where he stands on us being together—”

“He is over the moon about you guys being together. He is grossly, disgustingly in love—”

“He hasn’t said it, though!”

“But it’s obvious. It’s in every single thing he says to you and the way he looks at you and the fact that he sleeps on your crappy twin bed most nights to be with you and then wakes up ridiculously early to go walk that amazing dog of his and—”

“But has he—” Finn stops short, and runs a hand down his mouth. “Has Ben said anything?”

Rey presses her lips together. She really shouldn’t smile, now. “Ben, is it?”

“Well—” Finn averts his eyes “—Poe calls him Ben, and he’s fake-dating my best friend, so I can hardly call him Doctor Solo when I—”

“He said that Poe would probably be ready to file taxes jointly with you, if you wanted to.” Rey waits for Finn to looks back at her before continuing. “And I believe that to do so you need to be legally married, so…”

Finn grins, wide and handsome and Rey loves him so, so much. She can’t help but grin herself.

“Did he really say that?”

“Yep.”

And then he said other, less happy things. And he did other things, to me, things that I asked him to do, and then he asked me to leave.

So I left.

“Like… for real?”

“Finn.”

“You’re not making it up—”

“The talk is starting.”

“—just to be nice, because—”

“I would like to learn about the role of molecular chaperones in proteostasis, if you please.”

Finn swats her arm and rolls his eyes, but at least he shuts up.

…

The talk is even worse than Rey imagined, for a combination of factors—her battery dying approximately ten minutes in; Doctor Canady’s droning voice, which has Rey wondering when
was the last time even he was excited about his own research; the fact that protein folding is fundamentally, supremely, aggressively boring. All in all not a good mix, not for someone like Rey, who’s been trying not to be in her own head too much; not when he is in the room with her, just a glance away, clearly absorbed in a very dull monologue about the TCP-1 Ring Complex.

But it is what it is. Even if at the moment what it is is a little… poopy.

When the talk is over Rey arches back and stretches in her chair, hiding her yawn in her palm as everyone stands to leave.

“Do you wanna get out right away?” Finn is rubbing his eyes, like he just woke up from a chaperonin-induced deep sleep. “‘Cause I sort of need to check on my flies.”

“Same. Well, my mice.” They head out of the room, weaving between the people who made it till the end of the talk. It’s really just a handful.

“Let’s just ask Poe when he wants to—Oh, Poe. Just the guy we wanted. About tonight.”

Rey is not surprised Poe's there. For real, she cannot possibly be surprised to find Poe standing right outside the very seminar room he was in just seconds ago, in the middle of what looks like a very involved conversation. And—

Really, she is not surprised to see that the person Poe is talking to is Ben, either. No matter that her heart slows down to a sluggish thud, and then immediately picks up again, racing, swelling way too fast for comfort. Really, she is not surprised. She’d seen him in the seminar room looking all serious and handsome and interested and smart and he works in the building and he’s been Poe’s best friend for longer than Rey has been alive and it’s not even the first time she runs into him since his office happened and there is absolutely no reason for her palms to be sweating like—

“Oh, guys. Tonight? Right, we gotta decide. You wanna head out now?” He pats his belly, surprisingly flat considering that Rey has seen him stuff his face with Peeps at eleven PM at least twice. “I could eat.”

“Rey and I need an hour or so. To check on animals.”

“Aw. Too bad you don’t you have grad students you can offload this shit onto.”

Finn glares at him, and Rey—she should be glaring too, in sympathy, righteously indignant over the fact that Poe makes ten times as much as they do even though he never has to wake up at four in the morning to clean up mouse poop. She should, but she doesn’t quite have the energy for it, not with Ben standing there.

Looking at her, just like she’s looking at him.

Their eyes meet. Hold for a moment, and he smiles a little: a small affair, something kind and warm that has a wistful quality Rey cannot place—does he know? Does he pity her? Does he regret her?

Then she looks away, because she can’t figure out the answer, and with the corner of her eye she can see him slipping his hands in the pockets of his jeans and take a small step back.

The movement gets Poe’s attention, and he turns towards Ben.

“We’re going out for dinner.”
“Have fun.” His voice—Ben’s voice is—his voice. His voice.

“You’re coming, too, right?”

It’s really—a stupid question. Well, not stupid—unfortunate. For… pretty much everyone involved, except maybe for Poe. Because Rey can feel the instant tension coming from Finn’s body, who probably doesn’t want to sit across from Ben and relive the trauma of his student advisory committee meetings for an entire meal; and Ben has gone stone still, lips slightly parted and eyebrows raised as he parses Poe’s question; and Rey—Rey hopes no one can tell, how she feels. To just hear about the possibility of her and Ben being—

“I’m busy,” Ben says. Tone perfectly even.

“Ha. No you’re not, dude. Since Rey’s coming with. It’s not like you have a life.”

“I have a job.”

“It’s five.”

“I have revisions due,” Ben replies, without skipping a beat.

Except that maybe there is something to be said for being someone’s best friend for over two decades. Because Poe cocks his head, angles body to exclude Rey and Finn, and asks:

“Grant?”

“Manuscript.”

“Which one.”

“You’re not an author on it.”

“But which one?”

“I’m not sure I told about—”

“Current Opinions?”

“No.”

“The Neuron paper?”

“Nope.”

“The PNAS one, then.”

Ben huffs, and his chest and biceps seem to expand under the dark gray of his Henley. Poe doesn’t seem intimidated, but Rey and Finn exchange a wide-eyed, worried look.

“Are you my secretary?” Ben crosses his arms in front of him.

“Basically. I have access to your Trello and your Google Calendar, asshole. And I know your revisions are not due until next week. So if you don’t want to hang out with me you can just be honest about—”

“I don’t want to hang out with you.”
You little shit. And on my birthday."
Ben recoils slightly. "What? It’s not your birthday."

"Yes it is."

"No. Your birthday is April 10."

"Is it, though?"

Ben closes his eyes and scratches his forehead. "Poe, we have talked daily for the past twenty five years—"

"Means nothing."

"—and I have been to at least five Power Rangers themed birthday parties of yours. I believe the last one was when you turned seventeen." Ben squints at Poe as Finn attempts to cover his laugh with a cough. "I know when your birthday is."

"You always had it wrong, I was just too nice to tell you." He clasps Ben’s shoulder. "So, where are we going to celebrate?"

"Can it just not be Thai?" Finn interjects, mostly talking to Poe, mostly ignoring Ben. Rey can’t really blame him. This is... confusing.

"What? I thought you loved pad thai?"

"I do—but just for one night, we could have not Thai. Just one, babe."

"What then?"

"I don’t know—literally anything else."

Poe makes a whiny noise and says something about red curry and larb that Rey would normally be very interested in hearing, except that—

Ben is looking at her. From above Poe and Finn’s heads, Ben is looking at her with an expression that is half apologetic, half annoyed, and... all intimate, really. Something familiar they’ve shared before, and Rey...

She was panicking until a moment earlier. Afraid of what horrible things could come of this encounter. But now, now she feels something inside her melt, and has to suppress a smile.

It’s fine, she mouths at him, while Poe and Finn are busy arguing about whether Vietnamese is different enough from Thai, and then wonder if they should just try that new burger place.

Are you sure, he mouths back, barely parting his lips, and she smiles reassuringly.

They’re not even talking, not for real. But it’s nice, it’s—elating, to be sharing something with him again, even if he would probably rather spend the night reading up on voltage-gated ion channels. It has Rey feeling euphoric—and miserable. But she has missed him so much, and he is here, as large in real life as he’s been in her mind for all this weeks, and—

Poe is going to be obnoxious, he mouths, looking resigned and put-upon and just so amazingly Ben, that Rey cannot help but burst into laughter.
Poe and Finn stop arguing, and turn to her.

“What?”

“Nothing,” Rey says, and the corner of Ben’s mouth—he is smiling, too.

Just enough.

“Why are you laughing, Rey?”

She opens her mouth to deflect, but Ben beats her to it.

“Fine. We’ll go.” He says ‘we’, like—like he and Rey are a ‘we’, like they haven’t ignored each other for over a month, like it wasn’t all fake after all, and her breath is caught in her throat for long moments. “But I am excused from any birthday related outings for the next year. Actually, make it the next two years. And veto on the new burger place.”

Poe fist pumps—and then frowns. “Wait. Why veto on burgers?”

“Because,” he says holding Rey’s eyes, “burgers taste like foot.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to LoveOfEscapism and Monsterleadmehome for being splendid betas, as usual, and to Trixie and everyone else for helping me figure out when Poe’s birthday would be.

Eyreheights has made a beautiful moodboard and a FANTASTIC playlist for the fic. I discovered sooo many amazing new songs through it, I'm speechless. Please go check it out, it's spectacular.

And Situationnormal has made The Best Art for the sunscreen scene. I am thinking of tattooing it on my left butt cheek.

I'm gonna try to give myself a deadline for the next chapter (say, June 10 at the latest?) in the hope I actually come through and update like a normal person for once ❤️

You can find me on Twitter!
Ben is not there yet when Rey gets to the restaurant, but Finn and Poe are already crammed in a booth that looks like it’d be better suited for two people rather than four, grinning loopily at each other between kisses a touch too deep for a public establishment. Rey thanks the hostess who shows her to the table, and then slides across from them, trying to make as much noise as possible. It’s acoustically impossible for Finn and Poe not to hear her, not with how she clears her throat and coughs theatrically as she stuffs herself on the small bench, but they still continue to make out like they are sixteen and under the bleachers, and Rey—she has no idea what she was expecting, anyway.

She sighs. Loudly. And then rolls her eyes.

“Finn, how’s that cold sore of yours?”

Rey gets a straw wrapper thrown at her, but at least they break apart.

“Where’s Ben?” Poe asks her with a happy smile. Like she would know. Like she should know.

Because, as far as he’s concerned, she absolutely should.

“Um…” Rey looks out of the large window. It’s been sunny all day, all week, really, and now for some reason there are dark, ominous looking clouds that have her feeling slightly uneasy. What an odd fall this has been. “On his way, I think.”

“You didn’t drive together from campus?”

“No, I…” She lifts her bike helmet and lets it dangle from her index finger. “Had to ride my bike. You know. They get stolen, if you leave them on campus overnight.”

“Ah, right.” He leans forward, and dips one complimentary fried wonton strip in an unidentifiable red sauce. “I can’t believe we haven’t done this before.”

“This?”

“The four of us.” He’s chewing with his mouth open. “Hanging out.”
“I can,” Finn interjects.


“Ben is a dick.”

“Well, duh.” Poe winks a Rey, who studies the sauce a little bit harder. “But a harmless one. Mostly”

“Solo told me, and I quote, that my experiments were so sloppy they were a betrayal of the scientific method.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t personal.”

“It felt personal.”

“Nah. He was probably just having a bad day.” Poe shrugs. “Maybe one of his students had split an infinitive in an email, or his arugula salad wasn’t organic enough, or—”

“Hey.”

The three of them, they all look up—up, up so high—when they hear Ben’s voice. But they probably shouldn’t have bothered. Because he barely hesitates, just a quick look around the table, before folding himself into the booth and sliding in the only seat available—the one next to Rey, of course. The cheap red faux-leather creaks and groans under his weight, and Rey scoots closer to the wall to make room for him, but—

This booth is really small. Too small, one might say, because Ben’s half hanging off the edge of the seat and still his knee is brushing against hers, and she can tell how he’s trying to keep his elbow glued to his torso to avoid taking up half of her space.

Then again. Maybe it’s not the booth. Maybe it’s just Ben, being his giant self. There are dark splotches on the grey cotton of his henley, and he smells faintly of petrichor. The clouds must have kept their promises, then.

“Perfect timing. Ben, will you please tell Finn that you don’t hate him?”


Rey just watches it all unfold, wondering if she should take out her phone and film this.

“What?”

“Apparently you called him a traitor of the scientific method. In his student advisory committee meeting or whatnot.”

“Ah.” Ben nods. To his credit, he seems to own it. He doesn’t even look sheepish.

“So you admit it?”

“I have no recollection of it, but it sounds likely.”

“Great. Now tell Finn it wasn’t personal, so we can move on and have fried rice.”

“Oh my God,” Finn mutters. “Poe, please.”
“I’m not having fried rice,” Ben says.

“Then you can have raw bamboo while we have fried rice. But as of right now my boyfriend thinks that his BFF’s boyfriend and my own BFF has it out for him and it’s sort of cramping my double-dating style, so please.”

Ben blinks again, this time more slowly. “… BFF?”

“You know what it stands for, and you love it.” Poe points at a grimacing Finn with his thumb. “Now, please.”

Ben sighs heavily, but he nods and turns to Finn. “Whatever I said or did, I am sure it was not personal. I have been told that I can be needlessly antagonistic. And unapproachable.”

Rey doesn’t see Finn’s reaction to that. Because she’s busy studying Ben and the slight curl on his lips—the one that becomes an almost-smile when he looks at Rey and meets her eyes. She is smiling too, after all, even though she really has no reason to, and for a second, the brief second she holds Ben’s gaze before he looks away, it’s just the two of them. And this sort-of past they share, and their stupid jokes, and the way they’d tease each other in the late-summer sunlight.

“Perfect.” Poe claps his hands, and it feels intrusively loud. “Spring rolls for appetizers, yes?”

Rey truly doesn’t hate this. This night, this table, this moment. This. It could be awkward and unpleasant and just plain painful and—maybe it will be, maybe she will hate it when it’s over, but for now it’s the way it’s always been between Ben and her. Like slipping inside an old dress, forgotten for years at the bottom of her closet, and finding that it fits as comfortably as it used to. Maybe Rey can’t reach out and flatten Ben’s cowlick—his hair is too long, too thick again—or press her fingertip into the raindrops on his shirt, or lean her knee against his under the table. But there’s nothing new with that, after all.

“I’m cool with spring rolls,” she says. “Finn?”

“Sure,” he mumbles. He still looks a bit mortified.

Rey turns to Ben. “I’m gonna take a wild guess and assume that you hate spring rolls, just like everything else that’s good in the world.”

He lifts one eyebrow and mouths ‘brat’, right as the waitress brings over their waters and sets the menus on the table. Three menus, to be precise. Poe and Finn each take one, and Rey and Ben, exchange a loaded, amused look and grab the remaining one to share.

It works perfectly, really. Ben angles the menu so that the veggie section is on his side and all manner of fried entrees are on hers, and it’s serendipitous enough that Rey lets out a laugh.

“What?” Poe asks.

“Oh, nothing.”

Ben taps his index finger at drink section. “Look at this abomination,” he murmurs. His lips are close to her ear—a chuff of hot hair, intimate and pleasant in the blasting AC.

Rey grins. “No way.”

“Appalling.”
“Amazing, you mean.”
“I really do not.”
“This is my new favorite restaurant.”
“Rey. You haven’t even tried it yet.”
“It will be spectacular.”
“Will it, though.”
“I’ll come here every day.”
“Mmm. Maybe they’ll give you a part time job.”
“Maybe I’ll drop out of grad school altogether. Work here full-time, get an employee discount.”
“Sounds like an excellent life plan.”
“Why, thank you—”

A throat is cleared, and she and Ben instantly turn away from each other.

Right. They’re not alone. Finn and Poe are both staring at them—Finn with a shrewd, suspicious expression, and Poe with a knowing smile. “What’s all that about?”

“Oh.” Rey’s cheeks warm a little. “Nothing. They just have pumpkin spice bubble tea.”

Finn pretends to gag. “Ugh, Peanut. Gross.”

“Shut up. It’s gonna be awesome.”

“I think it sounds great.” Poe smiles and leans into Finn. “We should get one to split.”

“Excuse me?”

Rey tries not laugh at Finn’s horrified expression. “Don’t get Finn started on bubble tea,” she tells Poe in an exaggerated whisper.

“Oh, shit.” Poe clutches his chest in mock terror.

“This is a serious matter.” Finn lets his menu fall on the table. “Tapioca balls are Satan’s eggs of evil, harbingers of the apocalypse, and they taste like ass—not in the good way.”

Next to Rey, Ben is nodding slowly, as if highly impressed with his rant. “Right,” he says, just under his breath.

"The contain cancerogenic substances—there is peer-reviewed research on this, look it up.”

Ben keeps staring at Finn with something very similar to admiration. Poe meets Rey's eyes, and tells her conspiratorially: “Our boyfriends have so much in common.”

“Totally.” Rey ignores the pang in her heart.

“We should have them take that personality test, the one with all the letters? They’ll probably both turn out to be INTPs.”
“The type whose main character trait is juicing? And viscerally hating an entire harmless family of foods?”

Finn points his finger at Rey. “The Myers–Briggs Type Indicator is not valid, reliable, or evidence-based, and tapioca balls are not harmless, they are radioactive choking hazards and they get stuck in whales’ intestines for all we know. And you—“ he turns his finger to Poe “—are on thin ice.”

“What? Why me?”

“I can’t date someone who doesn’t respect my stance on tapioca balls.”

“Okay, to be fair it’s not a very respectable stance—” Poe notices Finn glaring at him and stops short, lifting his hands defensively. “I had no idea, babe.”

“Well, you should have.”

Ben clucks his tongue, amused. “Yes, Poe. Do better.” He leans back against his seat, and his shoulder brushes against Rey’s.

Poe gives him the finger.

“Hey, if Ben knows and respects Rey’s stance on hamburgers, and they’re not even—” whatever Finn had been about to say, he has the sense to stop himself. “Well, if Ben knows, you should know about the tapioca balls.”

“Wasn’t Ben a dick until, like, twelve seconds ago?”

“How the turntables,” Ben murmurs. Rey reaches out to pinch him on the side, but he stops her with a hand around her wrist.

‘Evil’, she mouths at him. He just smiles, and studies Finn and Poe a little too gleefully.

“I mean, come on. It’s not even comparable,” Poe is saying.

“It totally is.”

“But Rey and Ben have been together for years. We met, like, four weeks ago.”

The direction this conversation is going—it could turn poorly very fast, Rey thinks. For a variety of reasons. So she tries to intercept it. “Guys, can we just agree not to talk about tapioca balls for the rest of the—”

“They have not,” Finn says, and Rey has seen that expression on his face before. It’s that matter-of-principle look he gets when Rey points out that it’s not the end of the world if a tiny bit of toothpaste ended up on the bathroom mirror, the one that screams that he’s not gonna relent, not now, not ever. So she just leans back and spares a glance at Ben, who seems intrigued and maybe a little fascinated.

His fingers are still curled around Rey’s wrist.

“Yes, they have.“

“Just a couple months more than we have.”

“Guys, can we just decide what to order, and—”
“But they’ve known each other for years,” Poe insists. “Ben was into her for ages, so he probably secretly studied her eating habits and compiled seventeen databases and built machine learning algorithms to predict her culinary preferences—”

Rey bursts into laughter. “He did not.” She takes a sip of water, still smiling. “We only just started hanging out. At the beginning of the fall.”

“Yes, but you knew each other. From earlier.” Poe is frowning. Stubborn. “You two met the year before you started your Ph.D. here, when you came for your interview weekend. No?”

Rey shakes her head and laughs, turning to Ben to share her amusement. Except that—

Ben is studying her already, and he does not look amused. He looks… something else. Something Rey has never seen on him—worried maybe, or apologetic, or resigned, and—

Just like that, the restaurant is silent. The pitter-patter of rain on the windows, people’s chatter, the clinking of silverware—it all recedes; the floor tilts, shakes a little, and the AC is suddenly just this side of too cold. At some point, Ben’s fingers have let go of her wrist.

And Rey—Rey remembers.

“Yes,” she says. She is not smiling anymore, but Ben is still holding her gaze. “Yes. We did.”

…

Two years, eleven months earlier

There are tears streaming down her face, fat and salty and so bloody wet, and to make it even worse, someone chooses that moment to enter the stupid bathroom.

Poop. Her. Life.

Rey straightens and tries to dry her cheeks as best as she can, but the material of her wrap dress is cheap and plasticky, not half as absorbent as real cotton, and the blazer she bought last month from the consignment store next to the diner where she sometimes waits tables is… who knows where she left it? Probably in the department break room. Or back at the hotel.

Oh, well. Doesn’t matter. Rey found a restroom isolated enough that no one involved in the recruitment process should be wandering around, and whatever random chick just came in, she’s hopefully gonna ignore Rey and proceed to one of the stalls, or do her makeup, or whatever it is that she—

“Are you okay?”

Rey squeaks. She jumps, scrambles back towards the walls, and—she really wishes there were a more dignified word to describe the noise that comes out of her mouth, but it’s a squeak. High pitched and slightly humiliating, too, but it’s not her fault because the person who just spoke is—

“Are you a man?” She turns towards the voice and tries to open her eyes. And she manages to—except that it’s only barely, and probably for nothing. Her entire field of view is blurry, and all she
can see is a watery outline—someone very tall, dark-haired, dressed in black, and… that’s it. Really, that’s it. That’s all Rey can see before having to close her eyes again against the burning sensation on her cornea. “What are you doing in here?”

“I need to—” He stops short. “What are you doing in here?”

His voice is deep. So deep. He is definitely a dude. Unless—shit.

Shit.

Unless he’s not. Rey is—she is assuming, which is bad and sort of gross, she has yelled at people for doing that, and—

Poop.

“I’m sorry. I—um. Is this the ladies restroom?”

A pause. Silence. And then:

“I don’t believe it is."

“But there was a girl in here. When I came in."

“It’s… gender neutral?"

“Oh.” Oh. “Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Because it didn’t say so. On the door.” Though, to be fair, Rey’s reading abilities hadn’t been at their peak.

“Yeah. But it is.”

“How do you know?”

“Because this is my lab’s bathroom.”

Well. He has her there.

“Oh. Do you need to… ” She gestures towards the stall. Or—where she thinks the stalls are. She hasn’t looked at them in a while. And her eyes sting, even now that they’re closed, and she has to scrunch them shut to dull the burn just a little.

“No, I just need to pour this reagent in the sink.” A pause, in which she doesn’t hear him move. Though maybe it’s because she’s blocking the sink. Or maybe he’s just standing there, staring at Rey and thinking that she’s a terrifying weirdo and that he should probably call the campus police on her. That would put a quick end to Rey’s Ph.D. aspirations, wouldn’t it? “We don’t use this as a restroom much. Mostly just to dispose of waste.”

Oh. God. “I’m sorry. I thought…”
Poorly. She’d thought poorly, as is her habit and curse. Rey sighs.

“Did something happen?” He must be tall. Really tall. Because his voice sounds as if it’s coming from ten feet above her.

“No. Why do you ask?”

“Because you are crying. In my bathroom.”

*His bathroom.* Rey would roll her eyes—if they weren’t currently on fire. *More like your PI’s bathroom.* “I’m not crying. Well, I sort of am, but—it’s just tears. You know?”

A pause. “No. I don’t.”

Rey sighs and slumps against the tiled wall, beginning to massage her eyelids. “It’s my contacts. They expired some time ago and they were never that great to begin with. They messed up my eyes. I’ve taken them off, but…” She shrugs. Hopefully in his direction. “It takes a while, before they get better.”

“…what?”

This dude, he doesn’t sound very smart. “So, my contact lenses, the expiration date has passed, but I still—”

“You put on *expired* contacts?” He sounds personally offended.

“Yeah. But just a little expired.”

“What’s ‘a little’?”

“Oh, I don’t know. A few years?”

“What?” His consonants are sharp and precise. Crisp. Pleasant to listen to.

“Only just a couple, I think. I’m not sure.”

“A couple of *years*?”

“But it’s fine! Expiration dates are for the weak.”

A sharp sound—probably some kind of snort. Maybe derisive, though Rey can’t quite decipher it. “Expiration dates are so I don’t find you weeping in a corner of my bathroom.”

*His* bathroom. As *if.* “Oh, it’s fine.” She waves a hand. “The burning usually only lasts a few minutes.”

“Usually?”

“Yeah. Then my eyes get better and—”

“You mean you have done this before?”

Rey frowns. “Done, what?”

“Put on expired contacts.”

“Of course. Hey, contacts are not cheap.”
“Neither are eyes.” There is something in his tone, but it’s a little hard to tell what precisely without seeing his face. Rey tries to peek at him, but her eyes protest and begin watering even more. “Are you an undergrad?”

“No,” she answers, indignant. “I’m a Master’s student.”

“Ah. Well, then.” He says it with just a hint of condescension, like there isn’t much of a difference anyway. He must be a Ph.D. student—thinking he’s better than everyone else just because he has the dubious privilege of working eighty hours a week in exchange for crappy health insurance and a few throwaway insults from his advisor. They are all like that—though that’s not what Rey is going to be like when—okay, if—she starts grad school. She’s not going to get into pissing contests and she’s not going to put master’s students down in order to feel more impressive and she’s definitely not going to refer to the lab’s bathroom as hers.

Or maybe she will. Because she just cannot resist, and adds: “Not here, though. I’m just interviewing here, actually. For next year’s Ph.D. cohort. Biology.” She made it to the on-campus interview round of a top tier program in the country. That should score her some points, right? God, her eyes burn. “What about you?” she asks, pressing her palms into her eye-sockets.

“Me?”

“How long have you been here?”

“Here?” A pause. “Six years. Give or take.”

“Oh. Are you graduating this year, then?”

“I…”

Rey picks up on his hesitation and instantly feels guilty. “Wait—sorry. You don’t have to tell me. I know it’s the first rule of grad school. Don’t ask about other students’ dissertation.”

A beat. And then another. “Right.”

“Sorry,” God, she wishes she could see him. She’s not good at this social-interaction thing to begin with; the last thing she needs is fewer cues to go by. “I didn’t, um, mean to channel your evil uncle at Thanksgiving. Or something.”

He exhales, and—he’s laughing. If softly. “You could never.”

“Oh. Bad uncle?” Rey smiles.

“And even worse Thanksgivings.”

“That’s what you Americans get for leaving the UK.” She holds out her hand in what she hopes is his general direction. “I’m Rey, by the way. With an ‘e’. Rey Sanders.”

She is starting to wonder whether she has just introduced herself to the drain disposal when she hears him shift on his feet and step a little closer. The hand that closes around hers is dry, and warm, and—so large, he could probably just envelope her whole fist. Everything about him must be huge. His height, his fingers, his voice.

It’s... not entirely unpleasant.

“Ben.”
“Ben.” It’s a nice name. And—he seems nice, too. If a little full of himself. But that probably comes with the territory. “We didn’t meet last night, did we? At the recruitment dinner?”

“No.”

“You didn’t go?”

“No. Not really my scene.” He lets go of her, and Rey realizes that she was still gripping his hand.Oops.

“But the free food?”

“Mm. Not worth the small talk.”

He is very wrong. But Rey won't tell him. “Well, if you happen to talk with anyone who’s in the admission committee, would you mind not mentioning my contacts debacle? I feel like it might make me seem like a less than stellar applicant.”

“You think so?” he deadpans.

She would glare at him. If she could glare. Though maybe she’s doing a decent job of it anyway, because he laughs again—just a huff, but Rey can tell and sort of likes it—and asks: “Who did you interview to work with?”

“Doctor Holdo. She is amazing.”

“She is a good scientist,” he says, and it sounds a little like he’s making a concession, which is a bit rich for a sixth year Ph.D. student who’s clearly still in the data collection phase of his dissertation. Yep, full of himself, this Ben. But nice enough, probably. “Do you think you’ll get in?”

Rey shrugs. “I don’t know.” But she and Holdo—they really hit it off during the interview. And Rey’s GRE scores are almost perfect, she has the research experience and one pub under review, and a 4.0 from both undergrad and her master’s. “I think so. Maybe. I hope I do.”

“Will you enroll, if you get accepted?”

Yes. Of course. She’d be stupid not to. It’s the best program—the best biology department, really. The biology department. But it’s a slightly odd question to be asked—every other person Rey has talked with in the past two days has acted as if it’s a foregone conclusion that she’ll accept if she’s offered a position, and being given the option—it throws her off a little. Because grad school…that’s what she’s supposed to be doing. Everyone says so.

“Probably.” She bites her lip. Her eyes are slowly getting better. At least, they’re not watering like fountains anymore. “Why? Would you not recommend it?”

He seems to hesitate. “It depends. Why do you want to get a Ph.D.?”

“Well, I’ve always had a very inquisitive mind, and I think graduate school is the ideal environment to foster that. It will give me important transferable skills, and—”

He snorts, ever so lightly, and Rey stops herself. “What?”

“Not the line you found on a GRE prep book and gave Amylin Holdo, or the five other places you interviewed at. Why do you want to do a Ph.D.?”

“But it’s true,” she insists. Maybe a little weakly. “I want to sharpen my research abilities—”
“Is it because you don’t know what else to do?”

“No!”

“You sure?”

Yes. Sort of. “I could go into an industry position—some people in my cohort are, but industry is not the same.”

“No. But you can sharpen your research abilities and gain important transferable skills in an industry environment, too. And with way more funds at your disposal.”

It makes her flush, the effortless way he’s parroting her words. But it also has her trying to think up a decent response, and—it doesn’t come quite as easily as she’d like.

Ben moves then, stepping next to her to pour something down the sink, and Rey can smell a whiff of eugenol, and laundry detergent, and clean, male skin.

It’s a good combination, weirdly enough.

“But with less freedom. Industry, I mean.”

“You won’t have much freedom in academia, either.” His voice sounds closer, like he hasn’t quite stepped back to where was standing earlier. “Since you’ll have to fund your work through ludicrously competitive research grants. So, why a Ph.D.? Why grad school? Why not choose to make better money in a nine-to-five job that actually allows to entertain the concept of weekends?”

Rey frowns. “Are you trying to get me to decline my offer? Is this some kind of anti-expired-contacts-wearers campaign? Because—”

“Nah.” She can hear his smile. “I’m gonna go ahead and trust that the expired contacts business was just a misstep.”

“I wear them all the time, and they almost never—”

“In a long line of missteps, clearly. Why do you want to get a Ph.D., Rey?” he asks again, and it’s odd to hear him say her name.

But strangely not that odd.

“Because all my advisors, and my professors, and my friends, too—they all told me I am good at this.” Here. Done. This must be the answer. “It’s the one thing I’m good at.”

“What is?”

“School. Research.”

“The one thing.” She feels the air shift, and realizes that he’s now leaning against the sink.

“Yes.” Her mouth feels a little dry. Her voice a little weak. “It’s what I am.”

“What you are,” he repeats, thoughtful. “Is that so?”

Yes. Maybe. What else? God, these are—scary questions, dangerous thoughts to have in the presence of someone she just met, in the darkness of her closed eyelids. So Rey cracks them open; her vision is still blurry, but the burning is mostly gone.
He—Ben—is looking at her. A little fuzzy around the edges, perhaps—but so very there, waiting patiently for an answer.

He has dark, beautiful eyes.

“It’s… what I’m good at. What people notice me for.” The one constant thing about her, really. Rey doesn’t have a real last name, or a birthday that wasn’t made up by some overburdened social worker in the British child protection system, or any memories from the first ten years of her life. She doesn’t want weekends, or a decent salary. She just wants… a purpose. Identity. “Yes. Yes, it is.”

Ben’s shoulders lift with a sigh; he nods, but says nothing as he straightens and takes a few steps towards the door.

“Is it a good enough reason?” Rey asks his back, hating how eager for approval she sounds. It’s possible that she’s not quite ready for him to leave.

“I don’t know.” He shrugs, and looks back at her. “I’m still trying to figure it out.” He is smiling, Rey thinks. Smiling, or something like that. Though he’s not amused, that she knows. “Good luck on your interview, Rey.”

“Thanks.” He is almost out of the door, already. “Maybe I’ll see you next year,” she blurts out. “If I get in. And if you haven’t graduated.”

“Maybe,” she hears him say.

And then he’s gone.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to LoveOfEscapism and Monsterleadmehome for the super quick beta ❤️❤️

Please take a look at the beautiful moodboard Eyreheights has made for the fic I am not worthy 😸わかって

You can find me on Twitter! ___


Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

You've already won me over, in spite of me
And don't be alarmed if I fall head over feet
And don't be surprised if I love you for all that you are
I couldn't help it
It's all your fault

When the waitress begins inching closer to their table, Poe is halfway through a highly embellished tale of the August he and Ben were sent to that overnight camp near Ghent, the one with the soul-crushing survival training and intensive leadership classes in three languages.

“—and I’m awakened by this… this waterfall pouring down on me—”

“It was a drop.”

“—and I’m asking myself how the fuck it is possible that it’s raining inside the cabin, when I realize that it’s coming from the top bunk and that Ben, who was like thirteen at the time—”

“Six. I was six. And you were eight.”

“—had pissed the bed, and the piss was seeping through the mattress and onto me.”

Rey’s hands fly up to cover her mouth. If she meant to hide her laugh she doesn’t quite succeed—though it’s entirely possible that it wasn’t her intention at all. This is hardly the first less-than-flattering story about their childhood that Poe has disclosed tonight, and she has been very vocal in her thorough enjoyment of every single one of them.

Ben should be upset. Or embarrassed. Downright mortified, probably, but the truth is that a laughing Rey is always a good thing—much better to have her know about that time a Dalmatian puppy bit his ass through his jeans, or that he was voted ‘most likely to make people cry’ in his senior yearbook, than to see the stricken expression she’d had after Poe had opened his big mouth and reminded her of their first meeting.

She’d immediately excused herself: put up a fake smile while Poe and Finn kept arguing about cassava roots, and then she’d touched Ben’s arm lightly, her hand a warm, delicate weight through the cotton of his shirt; her voice had been soft when she’d asked him to stand for a second and let her slide out of the booth.

“I need to use the restroom.”

Ten minutes later she’d come back in the middle of a heated conversation about CT scans and the
radiopacity of bubble tea pearls, and she’d been—fine, actually. Smiling, maybe a little shakily but for real this time; joking with Finn and Poe and even with Ben, eating her weight in noodles in that voracious, lush way of hers that always has him spellbound and wanting to put more food in front of her, and—

Ben just wishes her thigh weren't brushing against his. Not so often, at least.

“Man. Six years old.” Finn is shaking his head and wiping his eyes.

“I was sick.”

“Still. Dude, seems kind of old to have an accident, no?”

Ben simply stares at him until he lowers his gaze and clears his throat. “Maybe not that old,” Finn mutters.

“So—don’t mean to kick you out, but we’ll be closing in ten minutes.” The waitress, a girl who manages to look at once eerily familiar and disturbingly anonymous in a way people in their early twenties often seem to, smiles at them uncertainly. “What should I…” She waves the check and looks around the table until Poe points at Ben with his index finger.

“He’ll pay.”

Finn tilts his head. “Babe, weren’t you going to buy dinner?”

“I was.”

“…and?”

“And then someone really loaded decided to come along.”

Ben closes his eyes and pinches his nose. “Poe.”

“No, seriously. This dude’s college trust fund could have bought the university he got his degree from. And there still would have been a lot left. I never pay when I’m with Ben, and neither should you.”

Ben rolls his eyes, but he nods at the waitress and hands her his credit card. He can feel Rey’s eyes on him as Poe and Finn debate whether it would be technically possible to buy a private Ivy League; it seems wise to ignore her, ignore all of them, and just take the last swig of his beer.

Someone is already mopping the floor at the back of the restaurant, so they make their way out as soon as Ben scribbles a fifty-percent tip on the receipt—a silent apology for Poe’s general idiocy and the fact that he changed his mind on appetizers three separate times. As they walk towards the entrance, Finn pulls at Rey’s hand until she is leaning against his side, wrapping his arm around her shoulders. Ben stares at the back of their heads, at the easy way they hold each other and laugh under their breath. It speaks of years of real intimacy, of a familiarity that—

It’s not quite jealousy, this. Not really. It’s just a sharper edge of the ache he’s been nursing for a while now. It was… for lack of a better word, it was nice, tonight, to pretend again, to have her close and hear her voice and smell the scent of her skin—god, he’s pathetic and inappropriate, too—but it’s time for the evening to end. For Ben to go home and do that not-quite-sleeping thing that he’s been perfecting since Boston. Distance helps, he’s found. A little.

At least, he hopes it will, eventually.
“Did I fuck up?” Poe asks in a whisper, uncharacteristically quiet. Rey and Finn are several steps ahead now.

“Not sure what you’re referring to, but the answer is probably yes.”

“Rey. She looked like…” Poe sounds almost guilty. Sorry. A first for everything, clearly. “Like maybe she didn’t know you’d been thinking about asking her out for a while and—”

“I never thought about asking her out. You extorted the whole story from me while I was drunk and then tried to pressure me into—”

“Oh my god. Guys.” Rey lets go of Finn and spins around on her heels, a huge smile on her lips. Ben’s heart skips a beat. He has kissed that smile. That smile has kissed him, in places that—

“Fortune cookies!” Rey dips her hand in the large bowl by the register and fishes out four plastic packages. “I love fortune cookies.” She hands one each to Finn and Poe, and holds out another for Ben. There is a mischievous sparkle in her eyes when she meets his gaze. “You hate them, don’t you?”

He shrugs, but accepts the cookie. “I wouldn’t say I hate them.” Though he does. He’d rather have styrofoam than eat one—they taste the same, and they probably have similar nutritional values.

“You so do.” Rey gives him another smile and slips out of the door, into the chilly humidity of the early night.

It’s not raining anymore, but the street is slick and shiny in the lamppost light; a soft breeze has the leaves rustling, stray drops of water still scattering to ground. It’s not quite cold, especially for November, but the air is pleasantly fresh in his lungs, even more so after the sticky atmosphere of the restaurant. Rey extracts a crumpled green cardigan from her bike helmet and puts it on with a graceful twist of her shoulders, covering the Zoo Run Run Half-marathon tee Ben had been wanting to ask her about. Her hand brushes against his abs as she pulls up the sleeve, and she smiles up at him, playfully apologetic.

Ben looks away.

“He who laughs at himself never runs out of things to laugh at.” Poe pops a bit of fortune cookie in his mouth, blinking at the message inside. “Is that shade?” He looks around, indignant. “Did this fortune cookie just throw shade at me?”

“Yep,” Finn and Rey answer at the same time. They exchange a look, chuckling.

“This must be a bad batch of cookies.”

“I think it’s perfect,” Ben murmurs. Rey elbows him a little, and Poe frowns.

“Bad batch, for sure. Finn, what does yours say?”

A noise of crinkling wrapper, and of something dry being snapped in two. And then Finn snorts into his hand.

“Why not treat yourself to a good time instead of waiting for somebody else to do it?”

“No way.”

“Wow. Babe, so much shade.” Finn shakes his head, clearly trying not to laugh. “I wonder if I
should just follow the cookie’s advice and go back to my place alone tonight—”

“Hey. This is evidently a terrible batch. I bet they are in the process of recalling it.” He points at Ben and Rey, looking slightly panicky at the idea of Finn going home and treating himself to a good time—whatever that means. Ben is not sure he wants to picture it. “What do yours say?”

Rey is already opening hers, nibbling on a corner as she pulls the paper out. Ben can’t make out the individual words—only that it’s one single sentence. One short enough that he doesn’t quite understand it, why it takes her so long to read through it; or why her smile fades and her lips press together and her eyes soften as they move left to right and then back a few too many times.

She looks up at Poe after a long moment. “Mine’s normal,” she informs him.

“Impossible.”

She shrugs. “It is.”

“You’re lying.”

“Nope.”

“What does it say?”

She is clutching the paper in her fingers, and said fingers are currently fist at her side. But it’s okay, because she obviously doesn’t need to read it again.

“The belonging you seek is ahead. Just this.” She shrugs again, and turns to throw away the plastic wrapper in the trash can just outside the restaurant entrance. With the corner of his eye, Ben notices her slip something inside her jeans’ back pocket.

“Babe, give up. It’s personal. Fortune cookies hate you.”

“Never. Ben, open yours.”

“Nah.”

“Come on.”

“I’m not gonna eat a piece of cardboard because it hurt your feelings.”

“You’re a shit friend.”

“According to the fortune cookie industry you are the shit boyfriend, so—”

“Give it here,” Rey interjects, stepping in front of Poe and holding out her hand to Ben. “I’ll eat it. And I’ll read it.”

Ben sighs, but does what he always does when Rey’s around: as he’s told.

“Don’t take it personally. You know how Ben is,” she tells Poe placatingly as she opens the cookie. “He hates all foods that aren’t cauliflower, and all things that aren’t computational biology, especially if they’re fun or amusing. His dedication to being miserable at all times is frankly a—”

Rey stops. For several seconds. She remains silent, and stares at the white slip of paper in her hands. And then she exhales a soft laugh.
“—admirable.” Her voice is husky. "It’s frankly admirable.”

“So, what does it say?” Finn asks. He sounds a bit bored—tired, maybe. Like he’s just finished yawning.

“This one’s normal, too.”

“Normal?”

“Well—it does say ‘Poe Dameron, PhD, is a loser’ but aside from that—”

They are infants. *Infants.* Poe tries to pluck the message out of Rey’s hand, who laughs and jumps back, starting to run away. Poe chases her, and she ends up taking shelter behind Ben’s back, pushing the paper in his palm for safekeeping as Finn tries to pull them apart and chides them with an exasperated eye-roll. “Behave, children.”

Ben can’t remember the last time he liked a boyfriend of Poe’s this much.

“Okay—I think that’s enough conspiracy theories for tonight.” Finn grabs Poe’s hand and tugs him towards the parking lot, baby-talking at him. “It’s time for this paranoid babe to get his beauty sleep, before he starts talking about the moon landing and lizard people.”

Rey waits until Poe is too busy touching Finn’s ass to glare at her, and then follows them. After a few steps, she looks back at Ben.

“Hey. You coming?”

“Yes. Yes.” It’s over. This night—as nerve-wrecking and soul-stirring as it might have been, now this night is over. Which is for the best. But—for however little, Ben definitely shouldn’t be alone with Rey. He has learned his lesson by now. “I’ll be right over. I just—” He lifts his phone, hoping she’ll think that he needs a moment to check his emails, or play Ruzzle, or something equally unimportant in the grand scheme of things. Rey nods, and jogs to catch up with Poe and Finn.

The strip of paper, when Ben finds it, is crumpled and almost torn; nearly forgotten in his palm. To be able to read it, he has to twist it around, and lift it up an inch from his eyes; angle it just so, to steal what’s left of the light filtering through the restaurant window.

*The belonging you seek is not behind you.*

…

The parking lot is completely empty, save for Ben and Poe’s cars. And the bike tied to the rack just between them, which looks cheap and rusty and decades old, and therefore must be a grad student’s. Ben is fishing his car keys out of his front pocket when he hears the curse—or whatever passes for a curse word in Rey Sanders’ peculiar world.

“*Fudge muffin.*”

He turns around to find her poking at the bike saddle with her index finger, an odd grimace on her face.

“What’s wrong?” Finn asks from the passenger side of Poe’s car.
“The seat of my bike. It’s drenched.”

“Don’t you have a plastic cover for it?”

“Yeah. In the lab somewhere.”

“Ah. Did it come with instructions, when you bought it?”

“What? I don’t know. Why?”

“Because maybe it’s not as self evident as the manufacturer thought, but you’re supposed to put the cover on the bike seat if you want to keep it dry.”

Rey hisses at Finn, and does something that Ben can’t quite see but probably involves giving him the finger. The she bends to unlock the bike. “Whatever. I’ll just walk it home. It’s less than ten minutes, anyway.”

“No.”

The word is out of Ben’s mouth, firm and sharp, before he realizes that he has no right to it. He would love to be able to take it back, but it’s too late: Rey is looking up at him, surprised, and so are Finn and Poe. “It’s dark,” he adds, trying to soften his tone. “It’s dangerous.”

“Yeah, not the best neighborhood for an evening stroll, truth be told.” Poe scratches his chin and looks between his car and Ben’s. “Maybe we can fit your bike in Ben’s trunk. Actually, mine’s probably roomier. And then I can drive you home.”

“No. Not worth it.” She shakes her head, and buckles her helmet to one of the belt loops in her jeans. “The tires are muddy and gross and it’s dripping water. I’ll just walk. It’s less than ten minutes, anyway. And I can take care of myself.”

“I’ll walk home with you then, Peanut. Instead of going to Poe’s. And Poe can go to his place, walk BeeBee, and then drive back to ours.”

“Oh—no. No need for that. That’s a pain.”

“Nah.”

“It is, though”

“Nope.” Finn winks, and pushes away from Poe’s car. ”The fortune cookie said I needed some time away from my loser boyfriend, anyway. To take care of things.”

“Shut up.” Poe says, mildly. It’s obvious that he doesn’t mind being teased. A good sport, really. Always has been. “Okay, I’ll go hang with BeeBee and be back in half an—”

“Actually,” Rey starts, and then immediately stops. Even though the momentum of the word clearly suggests that she has more to add, she remains silent for a moment; wetting her lips and looking to her right—where Finn and Poe are—and then to her left—to Ben, who’s still standing next to his car like an idiot, a loose fist around his keys as his palm begins to grow clammy. Something passes through her face, something determined but not quite decipherable; it lingers for a fraction of a second, and then fades quickly as she finds Ben’s eyes. “Actually, Ben will walk me home. Right?”

She smiles. Not while she says it, but right after. Both tentative and purposeful, still fixing him with
her gaze, she smiles at him in a barely lit parking lot that smells of rain and grease and night, and Ben swallows.

It’s a poor idea. The last time he was alone with her he bent her over his desk and fucked her until there were white spots behind his eyes and not a lick of breath in his lungs. The time before, he—he bent her over a bed, and fucked her into a mattress for eight hours straight. She annihilates his discipline and he simply cannot be trusted around her, not ever and not now, after she’s been sitting next to him for the better part of three hours, laughing softly and teasing him and eating outrageously disgusting foods; and there’s the fact that she knows, too, now that Poe has shared things that weren’t his to share, and Ben cannot imagine how she could feel safe being alone with him, which only brings this to full circle: It’s a poor idea.

But. He’s not about to let her walk home alone in the dark.

“Of course,” he says calmly, holding her eyes. He slips his keys in the pocket of his jeans, takes a few steps towards her, and—

Ten minutes. Fifteen, tops. He can do this. And they will be in public. It should be easy not to touch her. Or maybe not easy, but achievable. If he tries. Hard.

“I mean,” Poe’s telling Finn, “he is her boyfriend. It’s sort of his job.”

Finn doesn’t reply. Because Finn knows, without a doubt, that Ben is very much not. Really—this entire show, this night, faking their way through an entire dinner, was exclusively for Poe’s benefit. And wouldn’t Poe just love to know that the whole act was staged exclusively for his viewing pleasure?

“Which way is your apartment?” Ben murmurs once he’s next to Rey, taking the bike’s handlebar in one hand. It’s wet and cold, which is for the best. Some discomfort can only help.

Rey points silently. “But I can walk my own bike, you don’t need to—”

“Goodnight you two, thanks for dinner!”

Poe and Finn are already disappearing inside their car, the doors shutting close as they bicker about who’ll get to hold BeeBee’s leash. Rey waves happily at them, and then follows Ben as he maneuvers her bike in the direction she indicated.

“This way, right?”

She nods, and falls into step with him as he heads out of the parking lot, silent except for the helmet bouncing against her thigh, the soles of her Converse catching on the wet concrete. Poe’s car starts, pulls out of its spot, and passes them by a few seconds later with even more hand waves. And then...

Then it’s quiet. Really quiet. In a way that shouldn’t be possible pretty much anywhere except for an anechoic chamber, let alone in a decently trafficked street just past sundown. Rey is walking next to him, her bike a safety wall between them, and it shouldn’t feel that hard to open his mouth and just break the silence before it becomes painfully uncomfortable. Ben has grown up in embassies, for fuck’s sake. He knows how to make small talk.

But, no. Not, no, he can’t, but no, he doesn’t want to. It seems cheap, to say something inane about the unusually warm weather of this season, about the recent mayoral elections; to ask her how her experiments are proceeding, if she’s working on something new. It seems cheap, and Rey is… not that.
“Thank you,” she says, voice soft but not shy. “For walking me home. And for dinner.” She pushes her hair back behind her ear and looks up from her feet to smile sweetly at him. Like she actually likes him, like she’s happy to be here, with him. Which should not be the case, not after recent and less-than-recent events.

“You’re welcome.” It’s not that he doesn’t enjoy it at some primal, visceral level—having her next to him, so physical and undeniable, the drugging haze that always comes with her presence. It’s just—he mostly wants to be sure that she has some self preservation. That when he’s out of her life she’ll still be safe, taken care of. And that would require actively avoiding people like Ben—not finding herself alone with them.

“You were right, by the way.”

He almost never is. “About the pumpkin sludge?”

“Excuse me, that was amazing.” She makes an offended face. “About Poe. He is—he’s really insufferable.”

“Ah. Yeah. Well, he grows on you. After a decade or so.”

“Does he?”

“Nah. Not really.”

It’s nice, to pry small, huffed laughs from her. Familiar. Like taking up an old hobby after a long break.

“He is—I know he means well, but he’s so intrusive. He keeps asking why you never sleep over at my place.”

“I know.” Ben has been on the receiving end of that, too. Once during dinner, and he’d been so tempted to plant his butter knife inside Poe’s skull. Just the tip; maybe nick a meninx or two.

“He just—he won’t stop. I had to make up a million excuses. Let him think that I’m with you when I’m actually at my friend’s place.” She shakes her head. “Who is like that?”

Ben will not let himself wonder who Rey's friend is. “I know this is… inconvenient.” To put it mildly. ”I’ll tell him the truth. Soon.”

“The truth?”

“Not all of it. I’ll tell him... something. That we’re both too busy. That we broke up.” So, yeah. He won’t tell the truth at all, as it turns out. “Maybe tomorrow.”

“Mmm.” Rey bites into her lower lip and smiles, mysterious. There is a gleam in her eyes, Ben thinks, but he can barely catch it before she turns away—let alone understand it. It’s like a small fracture, just the surface of deep currents he will likely never get a good look at. “Poor Poe. He’ll be heartbroken.”

Probably. Worried, too. “Good.”

She snorts. “Evil.”

“I’ll make sure Finn is nearby, maybe,” he concedes. “It should offset the pain.”

“Oh, it sure would. When exactly did you realize, by the way?”
He glances at her. “Realize?”

“That I didn’t remember our conversation. The one in the bathroom.”

Ben stiffens. And his step falters for a split second. Not long enough for Rey to notice: she continues to walk by his side, relaxed, unperturbed, as though she hasn’t just asked...

It’s not that it isn’t perfectly within her rights to broach the topic, but she hasn’t seemed furious, or confused, or hurt, which'd had him hoping that maybe…

Well.

He takes a deep breath. “I wasn’t sure. For a long time.”

“Mmm. How long?” She simply sounds curious, and Ben shrugs.

“Years, maybe?” They are being so calm about this. So civil, so polite. Maybe it’s the starless sky, the faint yellow night lights that afford them the privilege. “I wasn’t sure until you introduced yourself, after… This fall. I realized this fall, I think.”

He had wondered, before. The first time they’d passed each other in a hallway in Biology and her eyes had glided over him as if he were a piece of furniture; when she’d been in line in front of him at the department research symposium to collect her name tag; after holding open a door for her and watching her duck under his arm with a chirpy, impersonal, “Thank you.” He had wondered if she didn’t recognize him, if she didn’t remember their conversation, or if she’d just heard of his less-than-pristine reputation and decided that not acknowledging their meeting might be for the best.

Mostly, he’d tried not to think about it. About her.

“You didn’t need to lie, you know,” she says, not accusing in the least. Even though Ben deserves all sorts of accusations, which is probably why he answers with another blatant lie:

“I didn’t.” He lifts her bike, and carries it for a few steps to avoid a puddle.

“Well. You sort of did. By omission, at the very least.”

At the very least. “Are you…” Ben has to consciously relax his jaw. “Are you upset?”

He’s not sure why he asks, or why he cares about the answer. They are—going separate ways, anyway, from tonight onwards. It doesn’t matter much, if she’s upset at him. It’s not as if he’ll get to hold her, or fuck her, or look at her and listen to her talking, even if she isn’t upset.

“Ben, it’s… It's really not that bad a lie.”

“It’s not?”

“Mm-mm.” She nibbles on her thumb nail for a moment. “I’ve said much worse, myself.”

“Still, if you feel—”

“I am not upset,” she says, gentle but final. She is looking up at him in an odd way—like there is something he should understand. Like she’s trying to peel a layer off of him. Like she has realized something, and is waiting for him to follow suit. “I'm not. I am… other things.” Another smile. “I’m glad, for instance. That you remembered me, from that day.”
“Yeah, well.” There is a place, on the bike’s handlebar, where the paint has chipped in the shape of a star. Ben traces it, the rust damp under his finger. “You are very memorable.”

“Ha. I’m not, really. I’m no one. I was no one—part of a huge incoming cohort, made of people with way more experience and talent than me.” She snorts, and then looks down to her feet. Her steps have to be just a little quicker than Ben’s, to keep up with his longer legs. “I hated my first year. I hated it so much. I thought… I thought I couldn’t do it. I just couldn’t.”

It’s not uncommon, Ben should point out. *Attrition rates are very high, especially before the candidacy stage.* Instead, he hears himself say:

“Do you remember your first seminar talk?”

“My first year project?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah, I do. Why?”

Ben feels his lips curl. “Your elevator pitch—you called it a turbolift pitch. Put a picture from The Next Generation on your slide.”

“Oh, yes. Yes, I did.” She lets out a low laugh. "I can't believe you remember that."

Memorable, Rey. "I do."

“I didn’t know you were a Trekkie.”

“Mmm. I had a phase.”

“Is it… ongoing?”

“Perhaps.” He gives her a side glance. “And that year’s picnic. When we got rained on. You were playing freeze tag with Canady’s kids. For… God, hours, it felt like. They wouldn’t leave you. He had to physically peel the youngest off of you to get him inside the car.”

“Yeah.” She is looking at him curiously, now. A light breeze rises and ruffles her hair, but she doesn’t seem to mind. “I didn’t think you liked kids. The opposite, actually.”

He lifts one eyebrow. “I don’t like twenty-five year olds who act like toddlers. I don’t mind them, if they’re three.”

He’s not sure why he’s telling her all of this. Why he’s ready and willing to list the countless times she’d cropped up in his life in the past two years, careless and unheeding, only to disappear right as Ben gave himself permission to study her, to learn her; to puzzle out what it was exactly that tugged at him, that intrigued him so much about this girl who’d seemed too young and too beautiful. Poe is wrong—he always is, but for real, he was so mistaken to imply that Ben had been lovelorn and longing, pining away for Rey since the day he’d met her. He hadn’t. He’d barely known her.

But he had noticed. And noticed, and noticed, and noticed. And that, in itself, had been a first.

“The fact that you knew me, already. That you knew who I was. Did it have anything to do with your… reasons?”

“Reasons?” he asks. As though he doesn’t already know.
“For pretending to be with me. For helping me out.”

It’s so difficult to explain. That yes, Ben is fundamentally a base, selfish being, but he truly didn’t think anything would come of their arrangement. There was no master plan, no scheming. He just wanted to protect her, and… maybe, also a chance to study her undisturbed. To science the mystery of her.

He’d never presumed that… never. Never.

“I wanted to keep you safe, Rey.”

“I know.”

He nods, relieved.

“I know that,” she says once more. Her fingers come up to her mouth to rub against her lips. “I know. But was that all?”

He swallows hard. “No.”

This girl. And the truths she manages to pull from him, every time.

“No,” she repeats, pensive. And then her eyes widen: “This is my place, by the way.”

She points at a tall brick building—old and a little worse for wear, but not as bad as it could be, at least considering what grad students are paid these days. The entrance is sandwiched between a pet store and a funeral home, and Rey must notice Ben’s eyes jumping between the two signs, because she bites the inside of her cheek.

“Whatever joke you’re about to make, I’ve probably already heard it ten times.”

“Right.” He looks around. So this is goodbye. “Should I carry your bike upstairs?”

“Oh, no—outside’s okay. It’s already wet, anyway. I usually just tie it over there.” She motions to a small rack, right next to a lonely birch that must have seen healthier days.

“It won’t get stolen?”

“Nah, not here. There are better options. Like Finn’s bike, which has two whole functioning brakes.”

“The height of luxury.”

He considers, as he kneels down to lock it and secure it to the rack, that he could easily get her a new one. A good, solid bike, one with more than two gears and chains that don’t look like they were rescued from World War I weaponry, that will last her until the end of grad school at the very least. Maybe he could just buy it and bring it here—cut through her flimsy lock with his shears and get rid of this hunk of junk; substitute it with something better, and leave a small sliver of himself in her life. Or he could just ask Poe to give it to her, make up a story that will make it seem like Ben’s not involved. Yes, that’s what he’ll do.

“Ben,” he hears her say, and when he looks up she is wearing that expression once again. Contemplative. Immersed. Like she’s been inside her head, staring out at him for a while. “You’re different. From anyone else.”

It seems like an odd statement. Vaguely non sequitur. He’s sure Rey doesn’t mean anything by it.
“Isn’t everyone different? Genetics and epigenetics, and all that.”

“Right. True.”

He straightens, slowly coming to a stand, and now—Rey is the one looking up, now. There’s no more bike between them: just the fresh breeze and whatever distance Ben can force himself to keep. “Isn’t everyone a beautiful and unique snowflake?”

Rey smiles, tight lipped, and his heart hitches. “Maybe I was wrong, then. Maybe it’s not that you’re different. Maybe it’s that you’re similar.”

“Similar?”

“To me.”

He could tell her that they are as different as night and day, the two of them. He could. But it tastes like a lie, and it’s not even in his mouth yet.

“Rey—”

“The thing is, I was wrong.” She plays with a lock of her hair, and then lets her hand drift down to her stomach. “I am wrong a lot, as it turns out.”

“I wouldn’t say a lot.” Ben tries to keep his tone light, but she doesn’t laugh. She just stares at her upturned palm, paying no attention to him at all, absorbed in whatever is happening inside her head. “Rey, what do you—”

“It’s just—Type I error. It’s scary. Scarier.”

He frowns. “Type I error?”

“A false positive.”

“I know what Type I error—”

“Yes. Of course. It’s just—it’s terrifying, to me. The idea that I could misread a situation, convince myself of something that isn’t true. See something that isn’t there just because I want to see it. A scientist’s worst nightmare, right?”

“Right.” He is not sure he’s following. “That is why in your analyses you set a level of significance that is as small as—”

“But the thing is, Type II error is bad, too.”

Her eyes are bearing into his now, somehow hesitant and urgent at once. Like she is frightened of what she’s about to say, but still determined to get it out. It seems like a matter of importance to her, but also…


“Yes,” he agrees, slowly. “False negatives are bad, too.”

“That’s the thing of science. Of grad school. You—you quantitative people—you keep drilling into our heads that false positives are bad, but false negatives are just as terrifying.” Rey swallows. “Not being able to see something, even if it’s in front of your eyes. Purposefully making yourself blind, just because you’re afraid of seeing too much.”
Ben—he really does not follow. “Are you saying that graduate education doesn’t place enough focus on statistical power?”

Rey exhales a laugh, and buries her cheeks in her palms. She is flushed, even in the coolness of the night, even in the dark. Her eyes are bright, shiny. “Ben. I think… I think graduate education has done a number on me.”

“Rey.” He doesn’t want to step too close, to crowd her, but her lips are pressed tight, and there is a crease around her mouth. So maybe just an inch? “Are you okay? Is there anything I can do?”

“Academia has fucked me up, for sure, but also… other things. That have happened before—before I even started uni. I’ll tell you if you want, but I think…” She takes a deep, shuddering breath. There is a perfect, spheric drop sliding down her cheek, leaving a straight, glistening trail. It slices Ben in two, like a surgical blade. “I think I forgot that I was something. That I forgot myself, somewhere along the way.”

She’s the one who steps closer. The one who puts her hand on the hem of his shirt, who tugs gently and holds on to it, and—Ben is not sure what is going on. Why she is crying, but also smiling at the same time. Why she is touching him.

“There are two things I want to tell you.”

“Rey, what can I—”

“Please. Let me.”

He just—can’t. Stand there and look at her, eyes wet and blinking fast and welling fuller and fuller. He feels useless, his hands dangling stupidly at his sides, and she is—

Still the most beautiful thing he has ever seen. Still the beginning and end of his every thought.

“The first thing is that I lied to you.” Her tears are spilling free now, and he has to set his teeth. He wants to touch her, to pull her into himself. And he must not. “And my lie was—not by omission.”

“Rey—”

“It was a real one. A bad one.”

His hand is cupping the side of her face. Somehow. “What lie did you—”

“But that’s not very important.”

“It’s not?”

He just wants her to stop crying. He wants her to be at peace. He wants to lose it, this stupid battle with himself, and pick her up, kiss her forehead, tell her that it doesn’t matter—whatever it is that is making her cry, he will fix it for her. He will solve it all. He is not good, has never bothered to be, but if she’ll let him take care of her he will ask for nothing in return. It’s okay, he wants to say. I can love you for the both of us.

If he tells her all of that, she might stop crying. It might be worth the risk.

“No. Not really.” She smiles, blinding him, making his heart stutter, and meets his eyes again. “The second thing, that’s what really matters.”

He wasn’t going to. He really didn’t mean to. But she is so close, her scent and her warmth, and his
hands are cradling her face; his thumbs swiping back and forth to dry her cheeks.

“Rey.” He sighs. A mind of its own, his heart. “What is the second thing?”

She smiles even wider. And her eyes shine even brighter. And when she says it, it’s in the worst accent he has ever heard.

“Ik hou van jou, Ben.”

Chapter End Notes

You can find me on Twitter!
“So... should we mention that I make more money than you?”

Ben gives Rey an indulgent side glance, and squeezes her hand before walking to the check-in counter. Rey watches him fondly as he introduces himself, shows his ID, and fails to return the receptionist’s smile; then she finds two seats in the crowded waiting room, and begins to flip idly through a nine-year-old copy of Vanity Fair.

“No,” he tells her the moment he sits next to her.

“No, what?”

“No, we shouldn’t mention it.”

It takes Rey a second to catch up. “But why?”

“Because you do not make more money than me.”

“Okay,” she concedes, “but I do make more money than you did at my age.”

“At your age I was an assistant professor. Everyone makes more money than an assistant professor.” His hand finds her knee, and Rey can feel its warmth through the dark-grey jeans. “There’s no need to be nervous.”

“I’m not.” She squirms in her chair. It’s old, and plasticky, and egregiously uncomfortable. “I just think it might be valuable information to put forward.”

“How so?”

“Because then they won’t believe that I’m, you know? A gold digger?”

He frowns. “I don’t think that’s quite the issue at stake—”

“Ben Solo?”

They both look up, to a middle aged woman with long grey hair and a friendly smile. She is standing a few feet away, with her name tag angled awkwardly, and Rey cannot quite make out the writing as she and Ben get to their feet.

“You must be Ben. And you must be...” She frowns. “I’m not sure how to pronounce your name, is it—”

“Rey.” She smiles and leans a little into Ben’s hand, which has trailed down to her lower back. “Rey Solo.”

“Rey. What an unusual name. Beautiful, too. I am Ms. Tano. If you will follow me? The previous
appointment is running late and the interview room is busy at this time, but my office is just this way.”

Her office is, in fact, just nowhere. Ms Tano leads them through at least three different hallways and a staircase, all remarkably alike with their off-white walls, gray name plates, and slightly musty smell. Once they get there, though, the atmosphere is far more welcoming. There are plants, for one, plants that look alive, with actual flowers; and pictures on most walls, mostly of Ms. Tano doing athletic things in breathtaking landscapes. There is a wrap in rainbow colors tied around her desk chair, and a half-eaten orange next to her keyboard. The place smells like citrus, and like the pine-scented candles lined on the windowsill.

It’s a nice, informal environment. Rey finds herself relaxing her shoulders, finally able to stop gripping Ben’s hand. She sits on the guest chair next to his and exhales slowly.

Okay. So maybe she was a bit nervous. Earlier. But now she’s not. Anymore. And Ben can stop looking at her with that amused-but-reassuring, I’m-here-with-you expression. She’s just fine, and —

“The primary goal of this meeting,” Ms. Tano begins, and there is a rehearsed quality to her words, like she has been repeating them several times a day for a few too many years, “is to assess the authenticity of your marriage. I will ask questions on the history of your relationship, your daily activities as wife and husband, and your plans as a couple. If I am sufficiently convinced that the marriage is not fraudulent, then I will approve Rey for a green card.”

“Yes,” Rey says, even though no question was asked. With the corner of her eyes, she sees Ben nod, once.

She’s not—she really is not scared, or anxious, or whatever about this. But maybe she does wish she hadn’t pulled her hand out of Ben’s just yet.

“Fantastic.” Ms. Tano smiles, warm and friendly. She looks down at her tablet, and swipes her finger up and down for a few moments. “Let’s get started, then. So, the two of you first met… how many years ago?”

“Six,” Ben replies.

Just as Rey says, rather enthusiastically: “Four.”

The room falls instantly silent. Ms. Tano looks up from the tablet with wide eyes, and clears her throat as Ben and Rey exchange a look, half amused (Ben) and half terrified (Rey).

Her dread, she notices, seems to add a great deal to Ben’s entertainment.

“You seem to…” Ms. Tano gestures vaguely with her hand. “Disagree?”

“We first met six years ago, when Rey came to interview for a graduate student position in the department I’m affiliated with,” Ben explains, taking pity on Rey. “It was… very brief. And we didn’t interact again until about four years ago.”

“I see.” Ms. Tano nods, seeming almost convinced. “And you began going out together at that point?”

Rey and Ben exchange another look—this one softer. More intimate.

“We were… friends, at first.” She smiles a little. “For a few months. And then we started dating.”
Ms. Tano scribbles something with her stylus, and asks, “And where did you go for your first date?”

“Restaurant. Chinese. With friends.” Rey looks at Ben’s hand. His long fingers are curled around the edge of the armrest, white and pale against the dark wood. “And then home. It was very… simple.”

\[...

“Don’t go.”

She is not fully awake, he thinks. She barely stirred five minutes ago, when he’d gotten up to get dressed; even now she looks mostly unconscious, like she might doze off again at any moment.

Ben smiles.

He walks to the bed and sits on the side, leaning forward until he is bracketing her shoulders with his arms. Sleepy like this, with her hair fanning messy over the pillow and her dark eyes not quite open, she looks even younger than he knows her to be.

He runs his thumb over her lower lip.

Maybe this is a mistake, after all. The two of them. Rey deserves better, for sure, but Ben knows—he just knows—that no one could ever be good enough for her, anyway; and he is certain that nobody would take care of her as well as he can. Plus, she thinks—well, she said that she wants this, too.

So, nothing. He will just have to spend the rest of his days making sure she doesn’t change her mind.

He taps his thumb on the tip of her nose.

“I have to.”

“Mmm.” Rey’s arms lift and tighten around his neck, pulling him deeper into her body. She is—deliciously warm. It’s almost shocking to him, how much he enjoys touching her. “I don’t think you do.”

“Sweetheart.” He buries his nose in the scent of her, nuzzling the hollow of her throat. This… it feels so different from Boston. From their other night together. He is rested, for one. They have slept, if only just a little, and there is a sense of—time. Spaciousness. Promises, pulsating sweetly between the two of them.

“Poe will probably come over later. For sure.” She yawns, and her breath is a warm chuff against his cheek. “Think how pleased he’ll be to see you here.”

Ben shakes his head. “I have four separate meetings. On campus. In half an hour.” Probably even less than that. He wouldn’t be surprised to find out that time runs at a different speed in Rey’s cluttered, colorful bedroom. That last night, while he spent a few precious hours kissing her and fucking her and trying to stop himself from babbling love words over and over, centuries passed in the outside world.
“What meetings?”

“With my postdocs. And a conference call.”

“Cancel it—all of it.” She smiles, impish and breathtakingly beautiful. “Your postdocs will love it. It will make their day.”

He laughs softly. “My postdocs don’t deserve to have their day made.”

“Then make my day.” Rey’s smile softens, but it lingers on her lips. “Don’t go. Please.”

“Rey.”

“Please?”

Ben sighs. And sighs again. And then shakes his head, but it doesn’t mean much, it doesn’t mean anything at all, because he pulls his phone out of his pocket and composes a brief email to his lab, just as Rey begins to nibble on his jaw.

... 

“That sounds lovely.” Ms. Tano smiles politely, with the expression of someone who has heard recounts of hundreds of first dates and finds Rey and Ben’s entirely unremarkable. “What about your second date?”

“Coffee,” Rey says. “We just got coffee together.”

“Oh. Anywhere special?”

“Nope. Just at the on-campus coffee shop. We’d been there together, even before we started, um... dating.”

... 

“I feel... weird.”

“Weird?”

“Weird.” Rey shrugs, leaning against the counter. “Like—I’m not even sure. Anxious?”

Ben glances at the barista, who is busy preparing her drink. “You’re afraid that the Tie-Dye Frappuccino might not meet the expectations of your refined palate?”

“No, not about that. About...” She lets her gaze drift away from him, and when she speaks she sounds insecure, needy and petulant even to her own ears. “What if you end up not liking me? When you get to really know me.”

I t’s—she can’t be like this. Not if she wants to make this work for real. Ben is older and handsome
and smart and a million other amazing things, and no matter how he feels now, he won’t want to stay with her if she’s a whiny brat. She needs to look cool and sophisticated and self-assured. And she feels anything but.

“What if you don’t like me when we actually date?” It just seems like a concrete possibility. Especially now that they’re not in her bedroom but here, in the same cafe where they used to meet all the time. In real life, in the daylight, surrounded by actual people.

“Rey.” He’s doing that thing. That thing where it’s obvious that he’s laughing at her, and yet he’s not even properly smiling. “That is unlikely. Given that we have already dated.”

“Not for real, though, and—”

“Yes.” He folds his arms on his chest and leans back against the wall. “Yes. For real.”

His tone brooks no argument, and it should probably annoy her, but it has just the opposite effect. Rey feels something warm unfurl inside her chest. It’s been there since the other night, and she’s starting to think that it might never cool down.

So she leans forward, her palms coming to rest on his forearms, and lets her smile turn wide.

“Maybe you should be concerned. What if I don’t like you, then?”

She mostly means it as a joke. And Ben must know, because his eyes gleam in that amused way again. But when his gaze slides down to where she is touching him, his tone is quiet and serious.

“That’s okay. I like you enough to make up for it.”

... 

“I see. What about your third date? Do you remember what you did for that?”

Rey does. Remember. And judging from the way his fingers briefly tighten around the armrest, so does Ben.

“I think we just stayed in.” She scratches her neck, looking down to her knees. The jeans are a little frayed, especially on the right side. “Watched a movie at Ben’s place, maybe?”

“Oh. Can you remember which movie you saw?”

She shakes her head. “Nope. Something with explosions. And...” she looks at Ben. Could I get some help here, please?

He clears his throat. “Car chases?”

“Yeah. Yeah, car chases, too.”

“Sounds like a good one.” Ms. Tano nods, non-committal. “Do you usually enjoy action movies?”

Ben presses his lips together. “We enjoyed that one, I seem to recall.”
She is starting to think that he has a thing for it. Or—in all honesty she’s not really thinking right now, but a couple of minutes ago, when her brain cells had still been able to produce an action potential, she’d told herself that he definitely was into this.

Having her at his mercy, just a little. Making her body do things.

She had really wanted to watch the movie. She’s the one who chose it, after all; the one who bought it (using Ben’s Prime account, but still), and the one who settled herself on the couch between Ben’s thighs, with her back against his chest, fully planning to enjoy two whole hours of terrible acting and mind-numbing fights. She really, really hadn’t thought that they’d last less than fifteen minutes before his hand slid down her panties, or less than twenty until her shorts got twisted around her thighs and her breasts spilled over the cups of her bra.

On the TV, someone is free-climbing a skyscraper without even breaking a sweat. Deep in Rey’s cunt, two long fingers curl and begin to rub against that spot, the one that he found or created inside her. They make her arch up, force a whimpering gasp to spill from her mouth. It’s embarrassingly loud in the room, even louder than the attack helicopter suddenly appearing on the screen.

“One more? Can you?”

Rey’s about to shake her head—no, no, no, she can’t take one more, she can’t give him one more—and close her hand around his wrist to push him away, but the heel of his palm begins to press against her clit; the rocking motion is so so so different from the delicate tracing of his fingers up and down her slit, the one that extracted the previous orgasms from her, ever so gently. The one that got her to drench his jeans, and maybe even the couch.

Rey comes like a dam bursting, her thighs and lips and even her heart shaking and shuddering in large, wet waves.

“One more? Eh, Rey?” he asks again, licking up the lone tear that has made its way down her neck, and when she actually manages to shake her head that no, no, for real this time, he kisses her sweetly and smiles at her. “Then I’m going to fuck you. Okay?”

It’s nice, to be pliant. To let him arrange her on the couch, to remain boneless as he cups her breasts and runs his nose over her ribs, to watch him lazily as he takes out his erection that looks just—painful. Red, a little angry, way past ready.

He covers her with his body and twines their fingers above her head, lightly, and then they gasp in each other’s mouths as he slides in, slow, in increments, with difficulty. Gentle. He is still too big, like this. The pressure feels so good, it’s insane.

“You’re going to have to get used to it,” he murmurs by her ear. “To me.”

I know, she wants to tell him. I will. But she can’t remember how to talk. So she just reaches up to strokes sweaty strands back from his forehead, and when he begins to move she opens her legs as wide as they’ll go.

...
“Rey?”

“Oh, um—yes?” She realizes that she’s chewing on her thumbnail, and lets her hand fall back on her thigh.

“I was saying—you were a student in Ben’s department when your relationship began. And he was an Associate Professor. Did this cause any problems for you?”

Yes. “No. Well,” she amends, “there was some weirdness. Some comments. But we were open about it from the beginning. Went through the proper channels. With a few exceptions people didn’t seem to care one way or the other.”

“Right.” Ms. Tano nods. “What about you, Ben? Any issues on your end?”

His shoulders lift under his black sweater. “No. Both the Dean and our Department Chair were aware, and I was never involved in any of Rey’s academic activities. And no one at work ever really mentioned Rey to me.”

“Of course,” Rey mutters, “because they’re scared of him.”

"Yeah. Yeah, I can see that.” Ms. Tano writes down a few notes. “But you have left academia now, Rey?”

“I have.”

“And you work for—”

“Industry. I’m an outreach specialist. I work for this really cool company whose mission is to change the structure and culture of academic science, and to communicate the value of research to the general public. My role in particular is to make sure that populations who are traditionally underrepresented in the STEM field become—” Rey notices Ben’s smile and Ms. Tano’s curious expression, and bites her lower lip. Her cheeks feel a bit warm. “Anyway.” She scratches her ear. “Yeah, not academia. But it’s a really cool job. It feels like… like it means something. And like I’m good at it?”

“I bet you are,” Ms. Tano says. Beside her, Ben is quiet, but Rey can read him well after all this time. The soft smile, the straight gaze. He is proud of her.


“So, it wasn’t a hard decision to leave?”

Rey closes her eyes, and thinks about it for a moment. “No. No, surprisingly not.”

“Will you think any less of me?”

Ben scoffs. “I’ve seen you chug pumpkin spice bubble tea by the gallon. I can’t possibly think any
“You will. You will think less of me. You already do.”

He lifts one eyebrow. “I do?”

“Yes.”

“Is that so?” He finishes cutting an apple, and then pushes the small plate over the counter, towards her. “What else do I think?”

She frowns and picks up a slice. She’s in a mood, one of her many, and there’s nothing he can do or say at this point to coax her out of it, not until he knows more about what the hell this is. So he just grabs a kitchen towel and wipes his hands, waiting patiently while she chews with a sullen expression.

“I feel like you will. Think less of me. If not now, then eventually, because you stayed, and I’m—not following in your footsteps, or something.”

“My footsteps.”

“Yes. Like—like you’ll feel that it’s a criticism to you. That I don’t respect you.”

He knows by now that laughing at her would be a remarkably unwise move. So he tries to keep his expression neutral, and he tells her:

“There is nothing you can do that will make me think less of you. Nothing. But if there were, it certainly wouldn’t be you making personal or professional choices that are different from my own.”

“I just don’t want you to feel that—”

“Hush.” He sighs, and then leans forward, taking the hand that is not holding a slice of apple and bringing it briefly to his mouth. “You’re going about this all wrong. Rey, how would you feel about leaving academia?”

... 

“Was—your decision to leave, was that before or after your wedding?”

“Mmm. Shortly after, I think?”

“Okay.” The stylus moves on the tablet for a few seconds. Then Ms. Tano eyes Ben, clearly addressing the following question to him. “So, when did you two decide to get married?”

“After a few months of dating, I believe.”

“A few months?”

Ben scratches his neck, looking a little sheepish. “About, um, nine?”
blank again when she asks: “Was there a specific reason to do it so early in the relationship?”

“No, I don’t think so. I just... asked. And Rey said yes.”

“I see. Was there a noteworthy proposal?”

Rey looks down to her left hand, to the rose gold and aquamarine ring around her finger. She toys with it, and hears Ben says:

“No, not really. Just a simple… conversation.”

...

“What do you want?”

He wants…

He doesn’t even know what he wants. Not quite for her to stop. But maybe for her to go faster. Yes, yes—he wants her to go faster. But her expression up there, as she arches her neck and circles her hips on top of him, her expression is just so beautiful—the dark half-moons of her closed eyes, the flush sweeping her cheekbones and chest, the soft noises; teeth digging in her lower lip, strands of long hair brushing softly against her tits, sticking to pointy nipples. She’d been leaning against him when they’d first started, her palms on his pecs as she lifted herself up and down in a too-slow rhythm, but now she has found something else she likes, and her arms are wrapped around her waist, as if to contain the pleasure within herself.

Ben is…struggling. Mostly trying to keep still, but he thinks he heard the sheets rip when he grabbed too hard a minute ago. He might be sweating through the mattress, or dislocating his jaw. He feels as if his come will just begin to leak out of him if she keeps this on, but she looks so lovely, trying to figure out what feels good and then proceeding to repeat it approximately ten times in a row, using him for her pleasure because she trusts him to let her.

It’s his fault. He shouldn’t have made her come before starting. Now she is calm—well, maybe not calm, but certainly unhurried—and Ben is… not.

“Mm, Ben?” Her eyes are still closed, and her abs ripple every time her hips move. It’s pornographic. Mesmerizing. Pure sex. “What do you want?”

His mouth is dry. Possibly the only dry thing about him at the moment. “Nothing,” he husks, voice so thick that he has to swallow. “Just… continue. What you like.”

“Ah.” She tilts her pelvis and grinds against him. The new slant has him gasping for air. “You sure?”

No. He’s not. But he nods.

“Should I turn around?”

“Turn… around?”

“Mm-hmm—Oh.” The angle of his penetration changes minimally, and they both exhale. “Maybe you’d like that better?”
“Better?” Jesus. He is dying.

“If I turned around. A better view, maybe?”

His fingers unclench from the sheets, fully meaning to reach for her and grab her ass, to pull her lower and harder and faster onto his cock. At the last minute, thank God for small graces, he’s able to change their trajectory, and brings them up to cup and squeeze her breast. If a little too forcefully. Rey moans, and—

It’s an odd miracle, that he hasn’t come yet. But this is also not enough stimulation, not nearly, and he fears that he’ll be stuck on this brink forever, eternally walking along a thin wire, deprived of pleasure until the very end of him.

“You just—God, this is so—mmm, Ben. You just don’t seem… happy?”

He grunts. Like an animal. Feral, that’s what he’s reduced to.

“Maybe if I give you a better view, you’ll like it more?”

He is in so deep, and—those are not even thrusts, she is just grinding, rubbing against him now, all round curves and tight muscles and slick, obscene noises. It’s torture—exquisite torture.

“I like this—enough,” he croaks. He is rocking a little inside her—not for real, not like he wants to, but he is desperate. For friction. To touch her harder.

He is just desperate about her.

“You sure?” What little she was moving stops as she opens her eyes, brown and liquid and huge, looking down to meet his gaze.

He was horny before, but being the sole focus of her attention all of a sudden—it cranks him up to a dangerous level.

His hands tighten at her waist. “Rey.” He is shaking. Maybe. And his vision is blurred, and his thoughts, even his own thoughts, are muddy and slurried in his head. “Rey.”

“If you tell me what you want,” she says, breathless, earnest, “I’ll do it.”

“Rey.”

She leans forward, until her chest is flush with his, and—fuck, it makes her cunt flutter even tighter. “You always look like that.”

“Like—like what?”

“Like you need something.”

He could maybe come, like this. Maybe.

“Something that maybe I could give you.”

Or he’ll just go insane. Maybe. Likely.

“And if you say it—If you say what it is that you—”

Something snaps in his head. It breaks in two like a twig and wipes his mind blank for a few short
moments, and Ben is not even fully aware that he has flipped them around, that he’s angled Rey’s knee so that he’s balls deep inside her, that he’s pushing in as far as he’ll go.

He’s certainly not aware of his words before they come out, or of where they might rush from.

“I want you.”

Rey exhales sharply, but she arches into his thrust and lifts her arms to his neck.

“I want you to stay—” another thrust “—I want you to live here—” another “—I want you to marry me.” He presses in to the hilt, and then pushes even further, just to make her feel it. “I want you to take my name, since yours only makes you sad, I want you to wear a fucking ring, and I want you to stop biking at night, and I want to know things about you and for you to—”

“Okay.”

It’s as though her voice breaks through the weird haze in his brain, to remind him that—she’s there, she’s under him, she’s listening to him. That the words are not just in his head, that he spoke them out loud, to Rey, and that now she is—

Looking up at him, laughing. And a little tearful.

He blinks. “… okay?”

He can’t—he can’t even thrust anymore. Because she said—

“Yes. Okay.”

He can feel his lips move, but no sound comes out. Until she curls up and licks a drop of sweat from the side of his face.

“You will do it?” he asks. Now that he has this—he is going to keep it. He is going to hold on to it.

“Yes.”

“All of it?”

“Yes.” Her smile. “Yes, yes, yes. Yes. Well, maybe not the biking, but the rest. Yes.”

He’s not sure what precisely has him this dazed—his words, her answer, the wave of relief that washes over him, like finally undoing a too-tight knot. It doesn’t matter, in the end.

So he turns them around until she’s on top again, feeling calm, feeling placated, and lets his hands fall back to his side.

“Okay,” he says, looking up at her. “So we will…?”

She nods, and leans over to kiss him softly on the lips.

And then she straightens, and her hips begin to move again.

...
“And the ceremony was…” Ms. Tano swipes the tablet again. “The following summer?”

“Yes. In June.”

“Ah, yes. Here is the date. And there is a picture in the file, too.” She stares at it for a minute, and then smiles gently. “You looked lovely, Rey.”

“Thank you.”

“Was it a Jewish ceremony?”

She must be looking at the candid shot Rose took; the one of Rey and Ben under the chuppah, with Ben looking entirely too somber and unsmiling while he touches the flowers in her hair, and Rey laughing at something he’d just said. Resting edgelord face, that’s what Poe calls Ben’s expression. And Ben usually gives him the finger, even though Rey privately suspects that he doesn’t even know what ‘edgelord’ means.

It’s Rey’s favorite picture of them. Her favorite picture in the world.

“It was,” she replies.

“Was it large?”

“No. Kind of small, too. Just my friends, and Ben’s closest grad school friends flew in, too. Ben’s mother. It was very quiet, as well.”

...  

“Okay,” Finn whispers, his arm twining around Rey’s. They take the first step towards the chuppah—towards Ben, though he hasn’t turned around to look at her. Yet.

He hasn’t even seen her dress.

“Be honest with me, Rey. Is that a real rabbi?”

“Of course.”

“And is that Ben’s real mother? She can’t be. Way too short. Is she a paid actor?”

“Finn,” Rey chides. She’s starting to feel a bit anxious. Her palms are sweating around her daisies; she grips the stems tighter, and their sugary smell lifts and clouds her nostrils a little more.

“No, for real. If you’re just fake-marrying him because you don’t know how to end this charade, just tell me now.”

“Finn...”

“I’ve got you, Peanut.”

“Finn.”
“Blink twice if you need an extraction.”

“Finn, I don’t—”

She never even finishes the sentences. Because Ben turns around, his eyes meet Rey’s, and the world disappears.

...

“Quiet weddings are the best ones, aren’t they?” Ms. Tano doesn’t wait for an answer before continuing. “Very well, let’s move to a few questions about your life as a couple in these past four years. Is that alright?”

At some point, while she wasn’t looking, Ben’s little finger must have inched closer to Rey’s on the armrest. She closes the remaining distance and nods. “Of course.”

“Let’s see. Rey, what do you and Ben eat for breakfast?”

“Oh... Ben doesn’t have breakfast beside coffee, I don’t think. I’m not positive, though. He wakes up so much earlier than I do.” Ben shakes his head, as if to confirm her answer. “I’ll have whatever’s around, usually toast or cereal.” She shrugs. “Unless it’s a special occasion.”

...

“Are those... chocolate chips?”

Ben clears his throat and rubs the nape of his neck. “Blueberries.”

She shouldn’t laugh. She really must not laugh at how dark and burnt these ’blueberries’ look. It’s clear that he put some effort into this, and it’s the least she can do to show some appreciation.

“Mmm.” She nods, noncommittal. “I love blueberries.”

He stares at her while she pours the syrup, while she cuts into the pancake, while she chews the too-dense bite. And then he asks:

“Is it good?”

Rey smiles. “Nah. Not really.”

“Dammit,” he says without heat.

Rey laughs and leans forward to kiss him. “But you are. You really are.”

...
“Next: who takes care of household finances?”

“Neither, I think,” Rey answers.

Ms. Tano lifts one eyebrow. “No one takes care of your household finances?”

“I do,” Ben interjects, with a look at Rey.

“What? No, you don’t.” She meets Ms. Tano’s gaze. “I mean, maybe he’s the one who bought a new dishwasher when the old one broke, but it’s not like we have, you know, investments to take care of.”

A beat.

“We do, in fact, have a stock portfolio,” Ben says.

Rey turns to look at him him. “What? Really?”

“Well—it’s not really a question normal people think of asking.”

“It’s also not something normal people think of volunteering.”

“I mean, I think it should be on you to mention it if you’re, like, running a hedge fund in your spare time—”

A rhythmic sound—Ms. Tano, tapping her stylus on her desk.

Rey sighs, shooting Ben a narrowed look.

“Okay—maybe Ben takes care of… of household finances, whatever they are. But we each have our own money,” she hurries to add.

“Mmm.”

“I mean, I contribute to the budget. I buy groceries and stuff. And—electricity. Sometimes. When I remember to check the online portal,” she continues. “And I pay for Netflix. Though Ben pays for HBO. Or was it vice versa? But, like, it didn’t play a role in my decision to marry him. That he would pay for HBO. Or his… his stock portfolio. Not at all. Since I didn’t even know that he…”

Ms. Tano is staring at her, unblinking. And Ben is coughing lightly.

And Rey panics a little.

“I make more money than Ben did at my age,” she blurts out a tad too loudly, and Ben hides his laugh in his hand.
“A villa? Why do you own a villa?”

He shrugs, turning on the blinker. “I don’t know. I didn’t buy it.”

“Who bought it, then?”

“Unclear. Maybe my grandmother?”

“Okay—why did your grandmother own a villa?”

He shrugs again and merges into the highway. “Old money.“

Rey frowns. “How much old money are we talking about here?”

“A lot.” Ben’s profile looks a little pained. “I don’t know precisely. There are people. Whose job is to take care of the Skywalker-Naberrie estate. My mother oversees them, I think, and my uncle’s involved to some extent, too. They get in touch with me when they need a signature.”

Rey snorts, indignant. “I cannot believe they gave you a MacArthur grant. You had absolutely no need for it.”

“Well, the conflict of interest intrinsic in using your own funds to produce scientific knowledge is exactly why the grant systems were put in place—”

“Yeah, yeah.” Rey rolls her eyes. “Well. Now that I know that you’re loaded, I sort of feel better about the eight-dollar pumpkin spice lattes I’ve been extorting from you.”

“Oh, you shouldn’t. You should feel horrible about them. And about that nutmeg crap, too.”

She bops him on the arm. “So, what are you gonna do with all your money?”

He smiles at her, and then reaches over to take her hand. “I don’t know. What do you wanna do with all our money?”

They’ve been together for less than six months. Hell, they’ve been together for less than three.

Rey’s heart swells, and she smiles back. “I’ll think of something.”

... 

“I’m sure that works for you.” Ms. Tano nods, looking a little skeptical. “So, do you two argue a lot?”

Ben and Rey exchange a quick glance. And then another.

“No. Not really.”

“Not a lot.”

“Sometimes.”

“Yeah, sometimes.”
“But rarely.”


“Stop treating me like a child!”

“Then stop acting like one. You don’t know enough about this to make an informed—”

“Just because you are older it doesn’t mean that you do know!”

“Rey—I’m trying to help you here.”

“Well, you’re not! God, Ben, sometimes...” She makes an unintelligible noise and throws her hands over her head. “Sometimes I really hate you!”

Ben turns away, away from her, and doesn’t look as she tosses the remote on the coffee table and storms out. He’s massaging his eyes with thumb and forefinger, taking deep breaths and trying to make himself count to a reasonable number before going after her, when he realizes that she’s still in the room. Standing by the threshold and giving him her back.

Her shoulders are rigid, and she is gripping the doorframe so hard that her knuckles are as white as bone.

“That’s not true, by the way,” she mumbles stiffly.

Ben nods. And then remembers that she’s not looking at him.

“I know,” he says. And then he’s really alone.


“Well, every couple does. I should know.” Ms. Tano smiles, conciliatory. ”Okay, what's next... Ah, yes. Who goes to bed earlier?”

“Oh, me. Always me.” Rey smiles, and pokes Ben's hand with her little finger. “Since he sleeps approximately three hours a week.”


She is at a pet shop, and they’re having a sale on bumblebees. Except that these bumblebees are large, as large as kittens, and their fur is just as soft, soft everywhere but for that place on their backs where three black and yellow tentacles protrude, slimy and writhing but oddly cute. The sign says that they can buzz in haikus, whatever that might mean, and Rey wants to buy one, she is sure that Ben will love owning a haiku-buzzing pet, but the store will only accept Turkish liras.
“There is a currency exchange shop behind the corner. But watch out for the lava,” her sixth-form chemistry teacher tells her with a toothy smile, except that she looks exactly like Mitaka and that simply cannot be.

“What’s happening?” she asks. “What is—”

“Shh. You fell asleep at your desk.” She feels a chuff of warm air on her cheek, and—oh no, the bumblebees are almost gone. Rey’s got to hurry. “I’m carrying you to bed.”

“Ben.” She burrows in his arms. He is so warm. He’s gonna be a great pet daddy. “Can we call her Beetrix?”

“Beatrice?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

“The bumblebee.”

“Ah.” He nuzzles her hair. “Of course, sweetheart.”

“Mmm. Thank you. You’re coming to bed too, right?”

“Yes.” He presses a kiss against her temple. “Keep sleeping, Rey.”

... 

“Ben, do you remember what your spouse got you for your last birthday?”

Rey doesn’t. She has to think back for several seconds—was it a book? No, that was the previous year. Was it a water bottle? A jersey? What is—nothing at all? Shit, did she forget Ben's birthday?

And then it comes back to her, and her cheeks heat all of a sudden.

Next to her, Ben magically manages to keep a straight face as he answers:

“Clothes, I believe.”

... 

“That’s not the way it works,” she yells through the closed bathroom door.

Ben finishes taking off his shirt, and then balls it before throwing it in the hamper in the corner of the bedroom. “Mmm?”

“It’s just... It’s the exact opposite.”

“Why so?”
“You don’t buy me presents for your birthday.”

“I didn’t.”

“Well, you sort of did.”

“You asked me what I wanted. I told you.” He starts unbuttoning his jeans. “No take-backs.”

“No, no take-backs. I just hope you’re not... disappointed.” Rey’s voice is suddenly closer, and Ben spins around to find her standing in the door.

He stares at her.

And he stares, and stares, and stares, and stares, and—

“Are you?”

He realizes his mouth is gaping wide, and closes it with a snapping motion that has is teeth hurting.

“W—sorry, what?” His head is cloudy.

“Are you disappointed?”

Ben takes in her golden skin once more, the way it's not quite covered by green lace and black silk; the gentle curves, the clusters of freckles. And then he can’t stay away anymore.

“No,” he says, going on his knees in front of her. “No. I’m not.”

... 

“What kind of clothes?”

“Ah—”

“Socks,” Ben replies, just before Rey can turn this interview into a total disaster.

“Ah, yeah. Socks are always useful, aren’t they? Next question: have you ever dressed up as a couple for Halloween?”

“Yes,” they say in unison. With vastly different tones.

“Well,” Rey amends with a grin, “it wasn’t exactly as a couple.”

...

“I refuse to accept this.”

Behind Rey, Poe plays with his direwolf plush toy, trying to balance it on the faux fur coat of his
shoulder. “You don’t have to accept it, dude,” he explains. “Just let her do your hair and shut up.”

“Why does he get to be Jon Snow?” he mutters, only for Rey’s ears. Except that Poe, nosy asshole, must have heard him, too.

“Because I’ve got the hair. And the height. And because I called it first.”

“Then why can’t I—ouch!” Ben gives Rey a dirty look, but she keeps combing gallons of gel through his hair, unbothered. “Why can’t I be Bran? I have the nose.”

“But not a stuffed three-eyed raven and a bowl-cut wig. Finn’s already Bran, Ben. What now, do you want to steal Rey’s costume and be Sansa? Look how pretty she is. You’d break her heart.”

“I don’t want to be Sansa,” he grits out. “But there are other options—Robb, or even Rickon—”

“Rickon’s barely a character,” Finn points out. “And we said we were going as alive Starks.”

“I never agreed—”

“Rey agreed for you.”

“—and Jon’s not even a real Stark.”

“Oh, come on, he so is!” Poe whines. “He’s Lyanna’s son, what’s this patrilineal bullshit you’re spouting all of a—”

“Okay, I’m done.” Rey finishes slicking back Ben’s hair, and then tugs at his hand until he stands up with a sigh. “Beautiful.”

He doubts it. “Rey,” he tells her. Pleading. It seems fitting, given how stunning she is in her Queen-in-the-North outfit.

“Here you go.” She hands him a long, thin plastic sword, and then turns to Finn and Poe. “Gentlemen and Gentlemen, I present to you: Arya Stark.”

...“Interesting. And who are Finn and Poe?”

“Oh, they’re our closest friends.”

“I see. And they are a couple, too?”

“Yes! They’re getting married this September—Ben and I will be witnesses.”

“Oh, that’s fantastic.” Ms. Tano, Rey has to give it to her, is very good at pretending to care. “Just a couple more questions on my list. What do you usually do on New Year’s Eve?

They both shrug. “Not much, really.”

“Yeah, we’re not fans of the festivities.”
“We usually just stay in and watch a movie. Often go to bed before the fireworks.”

“I get it.” Ms. Tano smiles. “I do the exact same.”


He groans. And then he asks: “Does it hurt?”

“No. Not really. You?”

He laughs. And then he has to bite the soft spot between her neck and shoulder, just to keep it together.

“What are you thinking?”

“So many things.” He used to be able to breathe. Before this. “You don’t want to know, Rey.”

“But I do.”

Ben slides a hand under her tummy, and—He's thinking that he's fucking her ass. He's thinking that she's—wet, how is she so wet. He's thinking, thank God she jerked him off earlier, or this would already be over. He's thinking that he needs to get started, or—

Outside, a loud hissing is followed by a booming explosion.

“Happy New Year, Ben,” Rey murmurs.


“I have… let’s see, one more question. We made good time.” Ms. Tano looks up from her tablet and smiles, clearly eager to move on to something else, something not work-related.

Rey glances up at the clock: it’s almost five PM on a Friday. The weekend is ahead, the weather outside is beautiful, and Rey feels a frisson of contentment at the thought of the next two days.

“What did you do for your first anniversary?”

Ben tilts his head. “What kind of anniversary? Marriage? Or first date, or…?”


“Stand there. You were standing right there.”
“Was I.”

He’s humoring her. A little. Mostly giving her long-suffering looks, with that deliciously put-upon expression that’s become Rey’s favorite.

“A little closer to the water fountain—perfect.” She takes a step back to admire her handiwork, and then winks at him as she takes out her phone to snap a quick picture. “Just stand there and say ‘Title IX.’”

He rolls his eyes. “What’s your plan if someone comes in?”

Rey glances around the Biology department. The hallway is silent and deserted, and the dim after-hours lights makes Ben’s hair look almost blue. It’s late, and summer, and the weekend to boot: no one is going to come in.

“Maybe Hux will show up. To help us celebrate.”

Ben snorts, and Rey laughs as she glances down at her phone. Happy. She is so happy, and she doesn’t even know why.

“Okay. In exactly one minute.”

“You can’t know the exact time.” His tone is indulgent. “Not to the minute.”

“Wrong. I ran a Western blot that night. I looked at my lab logs for that, and I reconstructed both the when and the where down to the error bars.”

“Mmm.” Ben folds his arms on his chest. “It’ll be great info to add to the Title IX complaint.”

“See? That’s the spirit.” She grins. “What were you doing here, by the way?”

“What do you mean?”

“A year ago. Why were you walking around the department at night?”

“I can’t remember. Maybe I had a deadline. Or maybe I was going home.” He shrugs, and turns to study the hallway until his eyes fall on the water fountain. “Maybe I was thirsty.”

“Mmm. Maybe.” She takes a step closer. “Or maybe you were secretly hoping for a kiss.”

He gives her a long, amused look. “Maybe.”

She takes another step, and another, and another. And then her alarm beeps, once, right as she comes to stand in front of him. Another intrusion of his personal space. But this time, when she pushes up on her toes, when she wraps her arms around his neck, Ben’s hands pull her deeper into himself.

It’s been one year. Exactly one year. And by now his body is so familiar to her, she knows the breadth of his shoulders, the scratch of his stubble, the scent of his skin, all by heart; she can feel the smile in his eyes.

Rey sinks into him, lets him support her weight, and then moves until her mouth is level with his ear. She presses her lips against its shell, and whisper softly into his skin.

“May I kiss you, Doctor Solo?”
***PSA: If you liked this fic, or any of my fics, and are thinking about maybe rereading them, please download them! I have been daydreaming more and more about editing the crap out of them and turning them into original stuff, and while I have no concrete plans for it, maybe one day I’ll be not-lazy enough to do it (okay, unlikely, but still). If I pull anything I’ll definitely say so beforehand! ***

Yes, I spent approximately 20 hours of my life googling wedding rings, bouquets and dresses because I wanted to find the perfect ones for Rey.

AAAAAAAND SELINA MADE THE BEST POSSIBLE ART OF THE WEDDING SCENE SO YEAH I'LL BE HERE IN A CORNER DYING FROM THE PERFECTION OF IT.

AAAAAAAND SIMONE MADE THIS PERFECT DRAWING OF THE TWO OF THEM GETTING COFFEE AND BEING UTTER IDIOTS.

ALSO PLEASE WILL YOU LOOK AT THIS POST FLUCHELLA + BOBA ART POSEY MADE? IT'S THE BEST I AM DEAD SO DEAD!! BEN'S FACE!!!

AND LIGHTKYLO MADE THIS STUNNING EDIT FOR THE FIC THAT IS JUST PERFECT!! IF SOMEONE MADE A HoF MOVIE IT WOULD BE EXACTLY LIKE THIS!!

Some acknowledgments

First of all, thanks to Murakamism, who prompted the fic. After watching To All the Boys I’ve Loved Before I fell in love with the idea of a fake dating AU, but if House Dadam from TWD hadn’t given me the opportunity to be part of their exchange I likely never would have started to post this fic, and the idea would have died on my cloud, like so many others before. The initial outline ended up growing into a much different, much longer fic, but I regret nothing. (Okay maybe something.)

Thanks to everyone who read this and stuck with it even though I suck balls at maintaining a decent update schedule (I promise I’ll stick to posting pre-written stuff from now on). Really, I can’t even articulate how much your enthusiasm for this trash means to me; this fandom has the best readers and the best people

Also, thanks to all the people who made or commissioned art, moodboards, edits, gifs for this fic, or who commented, made posts about it, sent me CCs, and recommended
it to others: I don’t even know how to repay you for how happy you’ve made me.

Infinite thanks to my betas, Becca and Alannah, who have powered through pages and pages of typos and stuck by my side for all these months, and really helped get this story in shape.

I was amazed by the number of people who commented or reached out to tell me that they saw themselves in Rey, and that they recognized their own academic experiences in what I described in the fic. I don’t think I originally set out to write self-insert, but a lot of my everyday life as both a grad student and a postdoc, as well as a woman in STEM in a position of very little power, made it into the fic (minus the office sex with hot dudes, ofc). In a way, it was very therapeutic to give a humorous spin to the sense of helplessness, inadequacy, and failure that has been my constant companion since I started my PhD 😔. For this reason, this fic means to me way more than a PhD dissertation or peer-reviewed publications ever could. So please let me pull one last Pretentious Academic Move™, and dedicate Head Over Feet to my comrades in pain:

To Kate, Caitie, and Mar (and to H., who will likely never even know that this fic exists). My friends: your presence in my life in the past few years has made the academic hellscape bearable, and I can never, ever thank you or love you enough for it. May we find happiness just like Rey did, despite our poor life choices ❤️

End Notes

You can always find me on Twitter!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!