### Glow on the Horizon

by Kitisonfire

#### Summary

Rey is angry. Furious at the world, at the braves who called her motherless like a rotten piece of meat when the Nora she saved only tried to say thank you, at the children who know nothing about her—

No more than she does herself—

But she thinks of Han’s bright eyes when he tells her well done with a smile as warm as the hearth and a piece of metal that let her save a boy’s life, and suddenly she’s something else too.
Notes

Warnings right off the bat hoo boy: angst, non-linear storytelling, exploring Finn's childhood as a child soldier, grief, murder... things take a sharp turn. I tagged this story 'Dark' for a reason, alright?

Keep that in mind.

Also, for Han to raise Rey, I had to muddle timelines a bit, so Ben leaves the Jedi temple when he's ten. Let me say now, definitively, without question, in this fic Luke does not pull a lightsaber on a ten year old.

Cool? Cool.
Enjoy!
It’s inside the walls of Meridian, solid stone built to last centuries and a mesa holding his feet steady and a sky close enough to touch, that Poe Dameron learns how to shoot a bow.

“I know how to hold it, Mother,” he protests on the very first day, the other hunters looking on in amusement as he ducks away from her.

“Oh yeah?” Shara Bey’s eyes are the colour of honey and light enough to rival the sun. “Why are you holding it upside down, then?”

He jerks his gaze to the length of pliant wood, where it’s woven in metal and detailed by starburst colour, and rubs his thumb over the arrow notch. Huffs with all the indignance an eight-year old is capable of. “I am not!”

He is, but that’s not important.

Poe is taught how to shoot a bow by his mother, a woman who gives her laughter as easily as breathing and isn’t disappointed when his aim turns out to be terrible. He’s taught by his mother and supported by his father. Kes Dameron shows him how to safely strengthen his muscles so he can pull the bowstring all the way back, gives him and his mother approval to spend hours away from the farm while Kes toils away in the heat and welcomes them home with a smile every time.

It’s a game, really. Something to fill in the time between morning and night; a goal to think of when he sneaks onto the roof of his home and reaches up to steal a star from the iridescent sky, space so wide and big above it feels like a dare. He hasn’t won a dare against the world yet, palms always empty when they come back down, but give it time.

(Meridian is bright, Kes and Shara are brighter, but light is what Poe was made for.)

And when there isn’t work to be done or time to play at killing machines, there are friends to be with, people as close as family that slip into his heart and stay for good. He runs with the other children, leads them more often than not, soaking in sunshine, always with a smile on his face and mischief in his veins.

Maybe a little chaos left in his wake, too. Depends on the day.

“There he is,” Luke Skywalker hums by way of hello. Poe is halfway across the bridge that leads to the palace when he meets the Jedi Master. Immediately, he adopts a perfected look of butter-wouldn’t-melt sincerity because the anarchy sounding from behind has absolutely nothing to do with him, thank you. “What did you do this time?”


On cue, somebody screams his name like a curse and a burst of yellow colour powder leaps from the Hunting Lodge’s door, billowing down the steps and catching the wind, sending everyone but the palace guards hastening into a screeching, strategic retreat. Luke pointedly looks at the swirling, multicoloured pigments staining Poe’s hands. Poe hides them behind his back.
“Were you visiting Ben again?” he asks brightly. “Is he Force-sensitive? Is he going to leave Meridian with you?”

“Why don’t you ask him?” Luke snorts as he turns and gestures towards the palace. “I’m rather fond of these clothes, so you’ll understand if I accompany you rather than delving into whatever it was you didn’t do that definitely didn’t involve colour powder.”

Luke’s good like that. He also used the Force to help Poe carry a dead Watcher off the farm once with his mind, which was amazing, and he has all the best stories about the rebellion. Well, apart from Leia, because she led the rebellion, but she’s also the Sun-Queen and Poe isn’t stupid. She has more important things to do, usually.

Well, technically so does Luke, but the man is good at making it seem like he doesn’t.

“Shara told me you’re learning to shoot,” Luke says, nodding to the guards as the pass into the cooler interior. The guards bow as he passes, practically bent down to Poe’s height. Poe stifles a laugh.

“I’m getting good! I hit a bullseye yesterday.”

“Mm, she mentioned that. She also mentioned something about you tripping and accidentally releasing an arrow, but I’m sure that isn’t related.”

Okay, well…

He still hit it.

“It’s only been a couple of weeks,” Poe mumbles, ears burning.

“I know,” Luke says, and when he touches Poe’s shoulder the boy relaxes the tension in his spine. “You’re doing very well, don’t doubt that. Precision takes time, consistent aim even more so. Just try to be patient. You won’t be shooting at real machines any time soon, anyway.”

He could, though. Not now, but when he’s good enough and needs a moving target, needs a challenge—

“Poe.”

And—

That’s where Luke isn’t so good.

“I’m not stupid,” Poe protests. “Don’t read me. Leia always says it’s rude to read people without asking.”

“Leia does indeed say that, though the usual form of address is Her Majesty.”

Poe trips over his own feet and would have fallen face-first into a wall if Luke didn’t stop him with a lazy hand motion. “I—Thanks, Master Luke, um, I didn’t mean—Your Majesty, I didn’t mean —”

“I’m joking, Poe.” Meridian is bright, and light is what Poe was made for, but Leia Organa was born from it. Even without her full Sun-Queen attire, she shines like the sun reached down and plucked her from the earth one day, like all the stars could go out and she’d still be enough to light up the world. She stands smiling—the kind of smile crinkles her eyes up and deepens her laugh
lines—and looks to her brother. “I thought you were heading back to the Temple.”

“I was,” Luke replies dryly. Poe hides his hands again. Leia laughs, and, from behind her, a dark-haired boy peeks his head out.

“Poe!”

Ben Skywalker races up to him, forcing Poe to reveal the evidence of his crime so he can catch Ben when the boy leaps at him. His arms are tired, but the grip is familiar as he braces the five-year old against his hip.

“Oof—Hey, Ben,” he chirps as normally as possible when he’s getting paint all over the Prince of Meridian’s clothes and Sun save him he’s actually going to be murdered. At least he has a hostage. “I swear, you’ve gotten taller again. How do you do that? It’s been like, two days since I last saw you.” He glances over at Leia in an attempt to gauge the manner of his death but—

Huh. He’s never seen her smile like that.

Ben wriggles in his arms, practically trying to launch them both into the air. “Did you hear, Poe?” The boy leans in and Poe makes an exaggerated show of turning his head, so Ben can whisper into his ear. Except Ben is five and hasn’t quite worked out volume control yet. Poe suppresses his flinch. “Uncle Luke said I’m going to be a Jedi.”

“All the best stories!” Ben twists round, dark eyes alight in the way only a child’s can be. “Can Poe come visit me, Uncle Luke? He has to. I’m going to be taller than him.”

Luke bites back a smile, the corner of his mouth twitching. “Of course, you are,” he says, voice rife with laughter. He smoothers a smile against his fist, coughs. “We’ll see, Ben. You’ll be staying here for a little while longer, so you’ll have plenty of time to grow taller than Poe.”

Poe blinks, opens his mouth—

“DAMERON!”

And whips round, all previous thoughts forgotten, because standing at the end of the corridor, smothered in every kind of colour powder Poe could get his hands on, is Han Solo.

Oops.

“Oh, look at the sun,” Poe squeaks as he sets Ben down, hastily backing away after an abysmal attempt at a bow. “I have to go, I have things to do—that I can’t do here, ya know, my Mother—um, Father probably wants me to, um, do... something.” Luke is leaning against a wall as laughter shakes him to pieces. Ben is staring at his father as the man comes striding down the hallway in a way that promises eternal suffering, the boy’s mouth open in utter delight, and Leia seems a second away from joining her brother—or her husband. Poe isn’t sticking around to find out. “Bye!”

“Boy! Get back here, you little shi—”

“Finish that word in front of our son, Han, and I will sew your lips shut.”

Shrieking laughter follows Poe back into the sun and the eventual scolding waiting for him is worth every note.
Poe grows up on tales of heroes and victory, of life winning out over death, of light breaking through the dark. The sun and stars watch and warm over every part of his life, no matter his mother’s warning calls to never stray too far off the trails, nor the deepening shadows under his father’s eyes. Not when Leia decides to end her Jedi training, or when Luke stops smiling as much as he used to.

Not even when Ben leaves and all he’s left with is goodbye.

(Stories, he convinces himself, young and clever and full of little more than star-bright grins, that’s all. Things old men and women speak of to make me behave.)

“I’ll be just as good as you, someday,” he tells his mother as they walk home one evening, spots of wild ember paste soothing the sore points on his fingers. The calluses will harden to be unbreakable soon enough.

“Know what I think?” His mother’s hand sinks into his dark curls, sending them spinning in every direction. He squawks, tries to duck out of her reach, then laughs as she picks him up and spins him around. Every word sounds like etchings in stone. “I think you’ll be even better.”

—

FN-2187 is four, the bow too large for too-thin fingers, harvest arrows skin-splitting sharp for all their bright, tufted feathers lighting them like children’s toys. The sun is a curse in the desert, no matter how they try to convince him otherwise, mixing sweat-soaked skin with blood along the bow string, slipping his grip, splintering his arrow against the sandstone wall behind his target. Concentric black-blue-red-yellow circles stare back. Eyes within eyes.

Always watching.

“Again,” Captain Phasma tells him, a woman’s voice behind a faceless helmet but—

Really, it could be anything at all under there.

“Get it right this time.”

But he can’t. He tries, because he’s young enough to think there isn’t any choice, but his hands shake and moisture blurs his vision and it hurts. Bones too soft, muscles shaking apart down to the fibre. The sky, the ground, his skin painted molten scarlet. On his left there are six other children. On his right there are eight more. The willow switch bites into his back and he bites through the inside of his cheek, teeth clacking together as he watches the sun-burnt girl at his side collapse. A puppet with her strings cut.

Nobody moves to help her.

And—

FN-2187 doesn’t remember his parents. As far as he’s concerned, he doesn’t have any, only recognises he must have come from someone, because when he isn’t shooting arrows, he’s learning about the war he was born to fight. A war started by the twin children of the thirteenth Sun-King. A war won by the wrong people.
So, he knows, in an abstract way, that nothing comes from nowhere, that mothers and fathers have sons and daughters but—

He doesn’t understand why it matters.

“Hey,” he whispers, voice cracked and broken and lost. He kneels, hand hovering above the girl’s shoulder, and says again, louder, “Hey.”

Parents are supposed to raise their children, but he doesn’t remember his, and maybe that means he was never supposed to.

“Weak.”

Nothing comes from nowhere, but the willow switch definitely takes him by surprise. He jerks his hand back. Clutches it as faceless walking armour slings the girl over its back like she’s a sack of potatoes. It nods at Captain Phasma. Leaves without a word. Captain Phasma stares and FN-2187 slowly rises, a hiccup aching in his throat.

“You are to be a Stormtrooper,” Captain Phasma tells him, then moves her gaze over the other children. Her armour gleams the same way a machine’s does. “You are the Sun’s chosen defenders. The shadow of thunder before the light breaks through. You do not flee. You do not falter. You do not fail.” And she pauses with an expectation, one FN-2187 knows better than he knows himself as he and the other children open their mouths to echo her next words.

“We stand together, or we do not stand at all.”

FN-2187 never sees the girl again.

There is a constriction to FN-2187’s life. A constant, nagging sensation in the back of his mind every time he looks to the azure sea above his head, sees it stretch and enfold, reaching out when everything down below tightens and chokes. Sometimes, when walking to the shooting range, he catches a glimpse outside of the Citadel, and while he can’t stare without breaking formation, his eyes linger. Sand starts where the sky ends, beating restlessly against the walls, slipping through every crack. It crunches between his teeth when he chews. But outside the Citadel is Shadowside, and the people down there don’t even have walls. Just tents and blankets and anything they can scrounge to dig themselves out.

The Citadel aids Shadowside where it can—after all, the people there are true loyalists. People who believed in Anakin Skywalker’s reign and absolute power. *Jedi* is whispered at night between FN-2187’s fellows, fourteen bodies packed into one tiny room, pressed back to front to front to back because there’s no room for anything else. *Sith* is the rebuke, hushed and even more secret, silence touching each of their heads in turn as they listen to the breaths and mumbles and cries from the rooms around them.

FN-2187 doesn’t sleep much on those nights.

(He doesn’t sleep much at all anymore.)

But he gets up when it’s time—we stand together, or we do not stand at all—and joins the other kids to eat, to be educated, to fight, to shoot, to sleep, to repeat and repeat and repeat again. Days stretch endlessly on before him, as constant and inevitable as the sun inching its way from east to west, burning everything it touches. Behind him, there’s—
Nothing. Time blurs. Mixes. A week is an hour is a day. Always returning to the beginning, reaching for something that circles a different path.

FN-2187 is four and it’s in Sunfall that he’s taught to shoot a bow by a woman who might not be a woman at all. He’s taught that the world is wrong, and it’ll be his job to make it right, and somewhere, deep inside, down so far he doesn’t know it exists, he thinks that might even be true.

The ground smacks into his back, picking at the half-healed scabs and sucking all the air from his chest. FN-2199 blinks down at him, waiting for him to move, but the sky is spinning into whorls of sun and sky and cloud, and for a second, he sees rippling green he sees falling white he sees a sunrise he sees a sunset he hears—

“Speak her—”

“I think you’ll—”

The ground is opening up beneath him and—

Then he coughs and it hurts and there’s really nothing more to it than that.

“Get up,” Phasma orders. “And get it right this time.”

And he gets up and he gets it right this time.

—

Rey is seven and outcast is the word she learns before any other, but simple definition isn’t tantamount to understanding. She’s alone, peering through the leaves as laughter rings between the children of the tribe, bright and effulgent. They’re gathering berries and there’s a basket held by a teacher who inspects every offering with a gentle smile and Rey can’t help but try. Piles of the berries fill the lines along her palms, bright spots of blue edging into purple, her own smile wide enough to ache.

But when she steps into their midst there’s only blank stares and cold shoulders and dark whispers, berries crushed to bittersweet sludge inside her fist as the teacher herds the rest away. The Nora are her tribe, but she doesn’t belong to them and it—

And—

Rey runs, doesn’t look where she’s going, doesn’t care, because she knows she should be used to it by now, but it stings and it wrenches and it hurts like nothing else to be so easily disregarded, to be shunned like her very existence is wrong.

It’s inevitable that she trips.

(It might even be inevitable where she falls.)

The earth splits beneath her and she cries out as she plummets into the abyss. Air stings her first, then water as she crashes headfirst into it, lungs shocked into emptiness. Base instinct brings her to the surface, but there’s little else, and when she pulls herself to dry land all she wants it to go home.

“Han!” she yells, voice echoing oddly behind her. There’s no answer. Sunlight streams down, rays broken by the murky shape of rocks and—something else. Something that glints like a machine
“Han, I’m down here! Han!” She can barely make out the slit in the rock that swallowed her, and her voice only reflects back and forth, a hundred lonely voices calling for help.

Nobody answers.

*It’s not*, Rey thinks dully as she turns towards the dark interior of the cave, *the most unfamiliar feeling in the world*.

Which makes it—not better, but easier, in a way. This isn’t the first time she’s been scared and alone and with nobody (“I’ll be back, stay here, stay safe.” *Days and days, keeping watch, keeping quiet, wondering how a sky so large can fit over a house so small*), and when she thinks of it like that, all that’s left is to put one foot in front of the other.

Curiosity fills in the gaps. Because it isn’t just a cave, and those metallic glints weren’t tricks of the light: she’s fallen into a ruin of the Metal World. A relic of the Old Ones.

Han is *actually* going to kill her.

She keeps going. Somewhere along the way, it’s less and less for a way out, more and more just to look and see. Gloom clings to everything, rust and abandonment, the metal cold to her touch but solid all the way down. Strange contraptions hang from the walls, covered in fungi, framed by stalagmites and stalactites, as if nature itself is trying to consume the remnants of… well, Rey isn’t entirely sure. She knows the stories as Han tells them, but he also tells her she’s an outcast like the rest of the Nora.

So, maybe the Old Ones were terrible, blasphemous people with more machine than sense in their heads, but looking around the forgotten rooms, space stretching out, chairs and beds and devices silent and *waiting*—

It’s—

It just seems *sad*.

Han tells her these places are forbidden, corrupted, tainted. The tribe says the same thing about her and Han, and she knows that isn’t true, she *knows it*, and honestly—

Rey is seven. She knows a lot of things, and she knows what people look like when they *lie*. But definition isn’t tantamount to understanding and she isn’t really sure why Han would lie about it anyway, so she makes her own choice. If the tribe are right (*aren’t they* aren’t) there’s nothing this place can do to hurt her anyway.

She rethinks that thought when she comes across the dead body.

It’s crusty.

She isn’t really sure what else she expected.

The tide of nature has spilled into and out of it, reclaiming its broken child from the metal, and Rey steps hesitantly closer under the soft protection of wildflowers blooming blue-purple-yellow-orange-red and the cracks of sunlight seeping in from somewhere above. In the sun’s rays, she spots something that doesn’t belong.

Most of the shape has rotted away—which, ew—but Rey can still make out a human head, eye sockets, cheek and jaw bones reaching out to the back of the skull. Resting right next to the space where its ear should be is… a Thing. A Shiny Thing. Curiosity wipes away the mingling horror
and she reaches out to it, detaches it, jerks back onto her butt when the dead body twitches as if struggling to reclaim what she took. But—no, that’s stupid. It was just reacting to her touch.

Which, ew.

She wipes her hand on her leggings and turns the Thing between her fingers, feeling out its triangular shape, eyes reflecting down the soft strip of light running through the centre of it. There are no distinguishing features, nothing to explain what it does, but Rey can feel electricity beneath her fingers the same way she smells it in the air when Watchers pass too close. She eyes the dead body, then the device again, and places it on her head. Right next to her ear.

Light explodes in her vision. Immediately she tears it off.

Breathes.

Hesitates as she blinks technicolour stars from her eyes and realises she isn’t actually hurt.

So, she puts it on again.

The lights are less jarring the second time. In reality, they aren’t really that bright at all; simple, unobtrusive markers along the machinery contrasting too heavily with the underground darkness. Colours, acid bright and of every variety, glow against walls, inside the walls, mixing with the natural colours of nature into something fantastically impossible. It’s—

It feels right. Feels like answers and understanding and a world so much bigger than just what she can see.

She keeps it on.

Han doesn’t kill her. It’s a near thing, but he decides to teach her how to survive instead.

(They click and sync and rise in different ways, always moving forwards and up, heading to something they don’t yet know they need to find.

Give it time.)

“If you’re going to run off and fall down holes, you may as well be able to defend yourself while you do it,” he says, amusement tugging at his lips and rather ruining the glare he’s trying to give her.

He doesn’t say a word about the device. She knows he sees it. She knows better than to ask.

So, she doesn’t say anything about it either.

Rey is raised in the Embrace by a man who disappears for days at a time and—

Well, it’s easy to tell what his feelings on the matter are.

Still, he keeps his promises, and the next day he hands her a bow just right for her hands and takes her into the wilds to show her how to use it. Instead, she uses her newfound device to sneak through a heard of Watchers and Striders and saves a Nora only a handful of years older than herself. Rey doesn’t really remember what happens after—just that more members of the tribe
show up and Han stands in front while they spit vitriol he can’t ever make her unhear, and it hurts worse than ever because nothing has changed.

She runs. There’s no Han to stand in front of her when the boy throws the rock.

Blood drips from her forehead, a gash in her eyebrow, and as she raises her hand to touch it, her fingers brush the device. In her other hand is the rock and atop the ridge is a group of tribe children, the same who were gathering berries yesterday, their laughter raucous and offensive, and —

Rey is angry. Furious at the world, at the braves who called her motherless like a rotten piece of meat when the Nora she saved only tried to say thank you, at the children who know nothing about her—

No more than she does herself—

But she thinks of Han’s bright eyes when he tells her well done with a smile as warm as the hearth and a piece of metal that let her save a boy’s life, and suddenly she’s something else too.

*I’ve gone into the Metal World and lived. I know how not to be afraid of you.*

She knocks the next rock out of the boy’s hand. Her smile feels like a fox’s snarl—or something else, something she doesn’t have a name for yet; all sharp hard edges and sparks. The children waver, and when their teacher calls them away, Rey is glad to see them go.

Han finds her, familiar curses lining his tongue when he spots the retreating children and the blood trickling down Rey’s cheek. She lets him tend to it, but fire spreads and the one inside her chest has been burning since she was old enough to learn words. The device on her ear flickers.

“Why am I an outcast?” she demands. Han’s movements freeze. The rag he’s using to clean her face is pressed too tight and she leans into the burn. “Who was my mother?”

“Rey—” He pauses. Works his jaw. Removes the rag so he can peer into both her eyes. “I’ve told you before. I don’t know. The Matriarchs brought you to me when you were just a baby. They’ve never felt the need to explain their decision.”

(Han is angry. He’s always been furious at the task thrust on him so soon after the death of his own child, but that *does not* mean he will abandon a little girl who has never done anything wrong in her life. He isn’t sorry—not even when her eyes light up like Ben’s did, nor when her smile widens with a delight far too reminiscent of a Dameron.

It’s a good kind of hurt.

And with this girl staring back at him, so tiny, so fragile, but with eyes of steel and a Focus on her head worn like a birth right—

Suddenly he’s something else too.)

“But… there might be a way.”

(It’d serve the old hags right, really.)

“The Matriarchs know,” Rey says, catching on instantly. “So how do I make them tell me?”

“It won’t be easy,” he warns, going back to cleaning the wound. When she tries to duck away, he
grabs her chin and pointedly raises an eyebrow until she huffs and stays still. It’s hard. “And don’t think I’ll be nice to you just because of that. You want to do this, you do it. You train every day until you’re ready, and even then, it might not be enough.”

“You said I need to train every day to survive out here. I just need to train enough for this too.” She sticks her tongue out. “Are you going to tell me what this actually is?”

Han sticks out his tongue back. “I’m getting there, kid. I’ve told you about the Proving, haven’t I?”

“It’s how Nora become braves. You called it a ‘rite of passage’.”

“Yah, well, there’s something extra put aside for the one who wins the Proving. A boon.”

“Boon?” Rey rolls the word around her head. Blinks when a myriad of symbols draw up before her eyes and she impatiently brushes them away.

“A favour. Anything the winner wants, they get.”

And see—

The thing is—

There’s something about the way Han tells her. Something rooted in calm fact, a certainty in his actions that has little to do with his experience cleaning up Rey’s various scrapes and bruises. He didn’t question the device on her ear even after telling her never to go into metal ruins and he didn’t hesitate to let her try and save the Nora, didn’t even look surprised when she succeeded, and now he’s saying the winner, but it sounds an awful lot like you and—

And that’s all that really matters, isn’t it? Not that she proves anyone wrong—just that she proves Han and herself right.

Han, somehow, seems to sense her change of heart. His answering grin is nothing short of serrated when he pulls the rag away. “It’s going to take years, kid. So, we better get started.”

“Whatever it takes,” Rey agrees, and thinks she could get used to smiling like lightning is crackling between her teeth.

—

On his thirteenth birthday, Poe kills his first machine.

It—doesn’t go well.

He knows the stories, because if there’s one thing Poe Dameron knows it’s stories, but there isn’t a story in the world that could have prepared him for running through the woods, tsunamis crashing through him, twisting him inside out, tears stealing his breath, he’s drowning one second—

The next—

It screams when it pounces. Blind instinct throws him to the ground, sun-baked earth rumbling as he spins through an out-of-control roll and barely manages to end up on his feet. His bow is in his hand, arrows spreading between his fingers, mind a burning hot wash of panic, because he’s heard the stories, has seen the bandaged stump on the hunter who first faced this machine—

Sees eyes burnt red like an exploding nova pair and teeth built to separate muscle, bone and sinew, and he knows.
Machines are dangerous. Poe isn’t stupid. Like any prey, when they’re cornered they lash out, and an unprepared hunter will step right into the blow and it’ll be their own fault. Swipes from a Watcher’s tail, kicks from a Strider’s legs, the grinding teeth in a Scrapper’s mouth: injuries waiting to happen. Fight or flight. Die or don’t.

This? This is something else entirely. This machine is made to kill.

And for the first time in his life Poe knows what it means to be afraid.

(The thing is, the thing that saves him, is right at that very moment, for the first time in his life, Poe knows what it means to hurt too)

The Sawtooth growls, octaves deeper than any throat has a right to create, shaking Poe apart at the roots, and Poe thinks it’s your fault.

It’s your fault he isn’t here anymore. It’s your fault Han left and Luke disappeared and Leia is crying and Ben is—

Is—

And it.

Isn’t.

Fair.

The Sawtooth roars and leaps and Poe ROARS right back, years of practice built into every pore, and his precision arrow snaps off directly into its eye. Sparks cascade one way, the Sawtooth lurches the other. Poe stumbles, ground swaying back and forth, but he loads another arrow and he aims, and he fires.

He was taught by his mother and helped by his father and light is what Poe was made for. He knows how to make it burn.

His father finds him. Poe doesn’t notice at first. His ears are ringing, trembles shocking through his body in fractal patterns. He can taste lightning on his tongue, blaze seeping from the broken canister into his boots, and there might be blood on his hands, his back, his face—silver chips of metal sinking into his open veins. The surrounding area is a mess of broken shafts, cracked trees, earth churned into mud, and all he can think about is the noise. The noise when it screamed. The noise when it died. The noise as he rips the carcass apart with bare fingers that crack and swell and—

His father grabs him, and Poe nearly turns a broken sparker into a tragedy.

“Poe! Poe, look at me, look at me.” His father’s hands are large, calloused, dragging against Poe’s skin as one wraps around his arm and the other cups his face. Poe wrenches. His father holds him steady. “What were you thinking, running off like that? We thought—we heard the Sawtooth and we thought—”

Oh, Poe thinks as his father’s grip tightens enough to hurt and every lost word gets pressed into the bruises instead. Oh.

They thought I was going to die like Ben did.
It breaks all at once, opening him up like the fragmented Sawtooth, gutted and ripped apart from the inside. Pull it apart in the right way and maybe he can make it stop. Hurting.

“It’s sorry, Papa” he whispers, salt stinging his eyes, forcing them shut. “I’m s-sorry, I’m sorry. It was an accident—I didn’t mean—it came out of nowhere.” He’s falling, space opening beneath him, sending him plummeting with nothing to pull him back up. “I just—I didn’t want to run because Ben—he’s—they killed him, and it isn’t fair.”

(The news arrived three months prior. The Jedi Temple in ruins. Sawtooths and Tramplers and Snapmaws prowling, attacking anyone who tries to get close.

Bones beneath the rubble.

Nothing else.)

“I didn’t even get to say goodbye. I didn’t even get to see him again,” he wails, feels stupid and selfish and childish but the more he tries the more he can’t make himself stop. “They came out of nowhere and—I know the machines have been getting more dangerous but why him? Why any of them? There were so many kids and now—Ben and Luke and Han and Leia—”

“Oh, Poe.” His father pulls him in, hugs tight enough to make it seem possible to put himself back together again. “I know. I know it isn’t fair. And it isn’t fair on you either, to have to lose something like that—not at your age.” There’s a hand gently stroking through his hair and the pressure of a kiss on his crown and Poe just cries harder. “It’s a terrible, awful thing, but… you don’t remember them like this. It hurts, I know that. Believe me, I know. But you can’t let that be the only thing you feel. Because you knew Ben, and you loved him, and that’s what matters. That’s what you have to make matter.”

Poe presses his head tighter into his father’s chest, clings with bones that scrape together.

“All those stories you love—they don’t exist without loving something else first, you hear?” His father’s voice is shaking, and he doesn’t know if it’s because of him or something else. All those deaths Poe never thought about because at the end they won, and isn’t that the important thing? “That’s how you win. That’s how you keep on going. Not by tearing things down.”

“I’m sorry,” Poe cries, but he isn’t talking to his father anymore. “I’m so sorry.”

“Ssh, ssh. I’ve got you. I’ve got you, son.”

I’ve got you.

He’s grounded after his father carries him home. He has four broken fingers, six broken ribs, a fractured ankle, three gashes on his back, one down the side of his jaw, one along his palm, and everywhere else he’s bruised and battered and scraped raw.

He also has a Sawtooth heart hanging on his wall. It doesn’t make it better, but it does make it easier, in a way.

(Every night after that, when he reaches for the stars, he makes sure to grab one for Ben too.)
On his thirteenth birthday, FN-2187 kills his first person.

(That goes even worse.)

The worst thing—

The easiest—

The thing is, he doesn’t mean to do it. Not really. He knows he’s going to be a Stormtrooper and he knows that means he’s a soldier, and he knows that being a soldier means you have to kill (to live Emperor Snoke says as he gazes down at each and every one of them, eyes like a sinkhole dragging in the twisted, burnt sloughs of flesh that make up his face—dragging in FN-2187 until he may as well be a bottomless pit with nothing, absolutely nothing at all). But—

He isn’t like other children. He knows that. But he wants to be—and deep down in that place hidden safe from his own thoughts—and on the surface it twists and morphs and rows and rows of painted white metal feels an awful lot like belonging.

So, when he and FN-2003 are tidying up the pantry and the door slams open to reveal a man in rags, skin stretched over bone like ill-fitting clothing, mouth open wide and feral, FN-2187’s first reaction is to pull out his knife.

He just—doesn’t actually move beyond that.

“Kid,” the man rasps and FN-2187’s next reaction is what a strange thing to say. “C’mon, kid, lower the knife. You don’t know what you’re doing.”

He does, though it sort of wouldn’t matter if he didn’t. The First Order doesn’t skimp on Stormtroopers. The blade has the same serrated edge as a Glinthawk’s jaw, built to slice through any sort of metal left behind in the dust and sand.

A human?

That’s nothing.

(Absolutely nothing at all.)

“You’re not—” His voice cracks. It’s been doing that lately. “You’re not supposed to be in here.”

“No?” The man steps forward, shuts the door behind him, and there it is again. The world constricted to a single size and shape. “No, well, you don’t have to tell anybody, do you? I just want some food. That’s all. There’s nothing wrong with wanting a bit more food.”

“Eight-Seven,” FN-2003 whispers and the man’s attention jerks to him.

“What? What are those numbers, what are you saying?”

FN-2003 stumbles back, slinks behind FN-2187. The knife is steady in FN-2187’s hand, but his wrist aches and he can’t look away from the hollow concaves pulling the man inwards like he’s about to turn inside out.

“You’re not supposed to be in here,” he says again, and it feels like get up. It feels like get it right this time. FN-2003’s hand curls into the back of his shirt. “You need to leave.”

The man takes another step forward and he’s looking at the knife, looking at FN-2187 holding it but not moving, looking at FN-2003 hiding and saying nothing at all. “I will leave,” the man says,
soft and steady as he reaches for the shelves. “After I take what I need, I’ll leave, and we forget this ever happened, okay? I’m not looking to hurt a pair of kids.”

“We can’t let him,” FN-2003 breathes, so close to FN-2187’s ear he feels the vibrations more than the sounds. “Eight-Seven, you know we can’t.”

No. They can’t. Except—

“How did you get that thin?” FN-2187 blurts. The man pauses, hand clutching a full loaf of bread. “Why do you need to steal from us? Why are you here?”

FN-2187 is going to be a Stormtrooper which means he’s a soldier, and sometimes that means he doesn’t kill first. He needs to know which direction to shoot, after all. And this man—he can’t be from inside the Citadel, so he must be a Shadowsider, but—

Doesn’t that make him someone the First Order is supposed to protect?

“People aren’t born equal, kid.” The man shoves the bread down his shirt, the fabric bunched and folded and tucked to make it fit. “Isn’t your fault. Kinda will be if you stab me, though.” He looks at FN-2187. Tilts his head. “Seriously, put that away. You’re going to hurt yourself.”

“We’re going to get in trouble,” FN-2003 moans. “You know what that means, Eight-Seven.”

FN-2187 tightens his hold on the knife and still doesn’t move. The man shrugs, goes to grab more food, and FN-2187 watches and searches and tries to understand. Because hunger is natural, but starvation is made, and he can’t blame Meridian or Luke Skywalker when this man is in front of him, right in the centre of the entire world.

Neither of them notice FN-2003 moving first.

A warning cry sticks in FN-2187’s throat and the man swings round in time to catch all the weight of a soldier doing what he’s trained to do. They crash against the shelves, sending food crumbling to the floor, slipping underfoot, and FN-2003 is yelling and the man is reaching out and shoving FN-2003 back so hard he slams into another shelf head-first and crumples—

And—

And—

FN-2003 whimper, curls up, hands clutching his head and blood seeping between the cracks in his fingers. The man moans, long and low, shaking his head, saying, “No, no, no, I didn’t mean that, I’m sorry, I just want some food, please, I didn’t mean that.”

And he takes a step forward. Practically right on top of FN-2003. Hands outstretched, reaching, clenching, spasming. There’s red on the ground and on FN-2003’s fingers and the man is saying no, no, no and suddenly red is all FN-2187 sees.

“Get out!” he screams, darts in front of FN-2003. “Get away!”

(He doesn’t mean to.)

(He swears he doesn’t mean to.)

He just goes to shove the man away—

But—
FN-2187 is still holding the knife.

It takes him a long time to stop being sick in the corridor outside the pantry. It takes longer still to move again.

“On your feet, FN-2187.”

He gets up, wiping his cheeks, wishing he could blow his nose. He’s never been less presentable in front of an officer in his life and it—

It’s so wrong—

But he also couldn’t really care less. Funny, that.

“Captain,” he acknowledges, wonders how his voice manages to echo a hundred miles away from his mouth. His hands are wet. He puts them behind his back. “Where’s FN-2003?”

Captain Phasma considers him; a slight tilt to her helmet, a tap against her thigh. FN-2187 watches the movement, mesmerised. “Why do you want to know?”

“Because—” He chokes, shuts his eyes and breathes like he was taught to. He is a soldier, he is a soldier, and as long as that’s true he knows what’s expected of him. Soldiers kill. There’s really nothing more to it than that. Definitely not all that noise— “Because he was injured,” FN-2187 says a little too loud. “And I want to know if he’s—if he’s still fit for duty? He was just doing what he was supposed to, it’s not his fault he got hurt.”

There’s the thunk when FN-2003’s head hit the shelf and the— the noise when the knife—when it—it’s all mixing and beating inside his chest out of time with his heartbeat, knocking everything loose. He’s thinking of a girl lying on the ground and never seeing her again, and he’s thinking of FN-2003 who was scared but who moved anyway, and he shouldn’t—

It wouldn’t be fair.

“You think after being taken down by a starving thief that FN-2003 is still fit to be a Stormtrooper?” Captain Phasma asks.

Something desperate crawls up FN-2187’s throat but he doesn’t have anything left to throw up. “I only did it because—I was only able to do it because of him,” he says, hands clenched together so tight they stick together. It’s wrong. It’s all so wrong. But the man is dead—somewhere—and FN-2003 isn’t (yet? Yet?). “The man—the thief, he got lucky. That’s all. Just a lucky push. And that distracted him, so I could—”

(He didn’t mean to.)

Morbid curiosity drags his gaze to the pantry. The door is closed. Two Stormtroopers stand silently on either side of it. Nothing slips under the crack.

Absolutely nothing at all.

“I will consider it,” Captain Phasma says. “Clean yourself up and report to the shooting range. You’re late.” With that, she spins on her heel and walks away, perfect, silvered poise.

FN-2187 trembles. “Who was he? Why did he come here?”
The world has opened up and out again, but there’s a space in FN-2187’s mind where that room resides, and he has no idea how to shut the door. Captain Phasma pauses. Doesn’t turn around.

“I told you, FN-2187. He was a thief.”

And she keeps walking.

(FN-2187 has his own theories. They fill the space between him and his captain, sinking deeper and deeper until he forgets how to find them. Nothing comes from nowhere and losing something never means it’s gone forever. Just waiting to be found.)

He doesn’t sleep that night. Or the night after that. Or the next one.

On the fourth night, when it’s so late it’s swung right back around to early, the door cracks open and somebody slips inside. FN-2187 knows who it is even before they make their way over, because nobody but other Stormtroopers can pick their way through eight bodies in pitch darkness without causing chaos, and nobody else has come near him for three days.

FN-2003 folds himself into the space at FN-2187’s side. There’s a strip of bandage on the side of his head, pristine pure white, and his hand is shaking when he takes FN-2187’s.

He doesn’t say anything when FN-2187 starts crying.

He doesn’t let go either.

(The next morning, all nine of them are ordered out of the room they’ve slept in their entire lives. Instead, they’re given a barracks with separate beds and told, under no uncertain circumstances, that any form of touch outside of training will be met with severe consequences.

It was always going to happen. It still feels like FN-2187’s fault.)

—

On her thirteenth birthday, Rey kills both.

(Click.
Sync.)

It isn’t her first machine, not by a long shot. It’s Rey and it’s Han, and it’s Rey and Han against all the dangers the world has to offer. The Embrace is large enough for both, and as long as they don’t stray too close to the Nora villages, the worst the braves can do is glare. Rey’s taken to copying Han and just makes faces back.

They’re down by the Southern Embrace Gate—the one that’s hardly ever guarded—and slowly whittling down a herd of Striders because winter is fast approaching, and they need the spare blaze before things start freezing. Like their bodies, for example. So, they’re sitting on a ridge, taking turns to shoot, steady and methodical, and they’re competing to see who can get the highest score and Han is cheating, like always, and then—

It always seems to happen out of nowhere, these things.

The men who slink over the gate burn bright in the device’s view long before Rey can see them with her eyes, but it’s never lied to her before and she’s worn it non-stop for six years. “Han,” she
hisses, pointing out the shapes half-hidden by foliage.

“Oh, for—those bastards better not be doing what I think they’re doing.”

The bastards are doing what he thinks they’re doing. A whistle pierces Rey’s ears and an arrow hits the edge of the ridge a moment later, splinters spraying across her feet, and she instinctively yelps even as she flattens herself against the ground. Her fingers curl into the edge of her bow. This isn’t the first time her hunt has been stolen. It’s the first time someone other than a Nora has done it.

“Who are they? What are they doing in the Embrace?” she asks, watching the figures move through the device’s lens.

“Looking for an easy fix,” Han replies, sliding away from her before she can protest otherwise. “Stay here, don’t let them spot you. And I mean that.”

“Han—”

But he’s already gone and Rey fumbles with the device on her ear, tracking him as he goes to protect their bounty. On his way down, the scrape of falling rocks sends the Striders running, but Rey marks them as unimportant and focuses on the six human figures: blue for Han, orange for the other five.

She can see when Han stands from cover, can’t see his bow but knows in her muscles what that stance means, and she can see when Han ducks down again and—

And she can see when one of the orange lights goes out.

She flinches before she can check her reaction, blinking at the bright spot still seared into her pupil but rapidly fading away. Aftershocks. Nothing more.

… Oh.

Rey knows, in an abstract way, what death is. She knows she’s going to die, but Han will probably die first because he’s older. She knows the person she got the device from was dead—which, still ew—and she knows the other bodies she found were, well, dead bodies. She knows the other devices—cracked in a way hers isn’t—held messages that meant goodbye to people who would never hear them, and the ghost of the man telling his son happy birthday was probably the very last time he ever did. But—

Seeing a dead body is just seeing a thing. They weren’t moving before she found them, and they definitely won’t be moving now.

But seeing death? That’s an event. That’s cause and effect. That’s a living breathing human who now isn’t, and Rey just stares and stares and stares.

Which is how she misses the other orange light until it’s right on top of her.

She swings her bow out as the person’s head rises over the edge of her hiding spot, makes contact with a sharp crack. The person yells, swears, doesn’t fall, and their bruising grip is around Rey’s arm before she can snatch it back.

“Get off!” she yells, signalling Han the only way she can even as she reaches her free arm around to grab her spear, thinking only of breaking free—

The grip twists and Rey whines through her teeth as she’s dragged forward, forced to drop her bow
But her hand closes around her spear and the next second, she’s pushing, sending herself hurtling over the edge straight into the person, feels a whoosh of air go by as her forehead slams against their chest. Reality spins, sky mixing into ground until she could be scraping against either, falling —

Falling, and—

They won’t let go of her wrist—

It’s the speed and trajectory of their descent. It’s the way they roll, giving Rey the leverage to bring her spear around. It’s the way they land, Rey smacking into flat earth first and orangeorangeorange tumbling down after. It’s the breath knocked out of her and the imprinted instinct to fight because she’s training to win the Proving, she’s going to be the best hunter in the Embrace and Han has taught her for years how to do that, but he isn’t always there and—

In the end, it’s the spear raised and waiting for the person to fall right into it.

The light disappears and Rey—

She—

And it—

“Kid!”

And then Han is there, pulling the weight off of her, pulling her in and she—she can’t get her breath back. Her back aches and her hands are numb and there’s something wet trickling down her face, but she isn’t crying. Han’s outline somehow wavers in front of her all the same, skin buzzing bright cerulean blue. Rey blinks the setting away. The world goes dark. Han’s eyes stay bright.

“That’s it, keep your eyes on me. Just me,” Han says, slow and calm, voice rumbling through her ears. “Now, breathe. In and out. Copy me as best you can. Just focus on that.”

She can’t—she’s trying but she can’t catch her breath. Han doesn’t stop talking as he takes her hand, murmuring nonsense and spreading her palm flat against his diaphragm. Breathing in. Breathing out. Rey shuts her eyes and copies the movement. The same way she copies the way he climbs, the way he shoots, the way he fights. She doesn’t get it right first time, no longer expects to. It’s a balance of what works for her and what’s instinct for him, and in the middle of it, every time, she finds where it clicks and keeps drilling until it sticks.

Breath in.

Breathe out.

“That’s it. You’re doing great, kid. You did fucking great.”

In.

Out.

It’s snowing by the time they make it back to their cabin. Rey sits on the porch, holds snow against her swollen wrist and waits as Han tidies away their things. Usually, when she’s waiting for Han or
when she can’t sleep, she sinks down into the haze of her device and learns from that instead. She pulls apart machines, finds the patterns to the symbols and reads, delves through settings and discovers all the things the device can do to help keep her alive. But it’s always the messages she comes back to eventually. The words of the Old Ones, preserved in metal, audible only to her now.

Finders, keepers.

Before, it felt like rebellion. A little piece of everything that’s supposed to be wrong proven to be harmless.

Now, she knows how much of a thief it makes her.

She sits on the porch, and Han sits and wraps an arm around her, and together they watch the snow fall. Rey breathes in. Breathes out. Thinks about Han, warm and solid and alive. Thinks about all of that being gone, and someone else coming along and taking his last words for themselves. Thinks Han wouldn’t like that much either.

Those bodies in the ruins—they were never just corpses. She understands that now. She’s stolen their voices, the very last remnants of their existence—their fear and their pain and their loss—and she did it for no reason other than because she could. That isn’t fair. And it’s so much worse to look at their final words and hear their final messages and know they weren’t meant for her. The device on her ear has never felt heavy, but now it drags against her skin, prickling lightning underneath, stifling against her chest like the air before a thunderstorm.

“They were going to kill us,” Han says, breaking through the soft susurrus of snow. Rey looks up to find him looking back. “It isn’t right, and it isn’t fair, but if you want to survive in this world, you’re going to have to understand that there are people out there who are going to try and kill you. And they aren’t going to stop unless you stop them first.”

Rey swallows. Lights dance and flicker away from her eyes. “I didn’t want to do it.”

“Good,” Han says simply, and he leans down to rest his forehead against hers. She presses back, letting his eyes fill up her vision, blocking out the rest of the world. “You shouldn’t ever want to kill anyone. You don’t do it so you can kill. You do it so they won’t kill you. So that they can’t hurt you ever again.”

“It isn’t fair.”

“Never will be.”

The understanding comes so fast it’s like the sun has decided to rise instead of set. “But it’s better than giving up and letting everything end.”

Han blinks, carefully scrutinising her face. He knows better than to ask. “Yeah. It’s always better to keep holding on.” He shakes his head and snorts. “Has to be.”

Rey isn’t sure what to say to that, so she doesn’t say anything. Han said it like he was speaking to himself anyway.

So, she breathes in. Breathes out. Lets the lightning crackle and saves the energy for another day. The damage has been done. For better or worse, the blood is on her hands and the messages are hers. Without another working device, they can only be hers. And it must be better that they’re someone’s, at least, because maybe the messages were made in pain and fear, but that’s part of life just as much as happiness and love. Sometimes more so. The ghosts in her ear—they’re proof of existence, of living, breathing people and all the light that brings, and if nobody else can remember
then Rey will do it for them.

The Old Ones are gone, but Rey will make sure they’re never forgotten.

(Never cast out and almost lost along the way.)

She presses into Han’s side, stares up at the glistening flakes painting the land all around a gentle, pure white, and tucks the words down deep into her own heart. She keeps them safe there.

—

Poe is eighteen years old when his mother applies the ceremonial face-paint around his eyes and along his cheekbones. Her lips tremble from the weight of her smile, and she pauses briefly to cup his face before stepping back and whispering, “Here we go, little Star Bird.”

The ceremony to join Meridian’s Hunting Lodge isn’t really a big deal. Usually, the Hawk in question announces their intention to sponsor a Thrush, whoever’s present in the Lodge will toast and maybe there’ll be food passed around, but for the most part all the celebration is held between family. Unfortunately, the news that it’s the son of Shara Bey and Kes Dameron spreads, then people find out it’s the Sunhawk sponsoring him, and it all sort of devolves from there.

“To think this is the kid who hit his first bullseye by tripping over his own feet,” Wedge Antilles crows to the packed room, eliciting a roar of laughter and catcalls from the older hunters who were present to see it happen.

“I’ll have you know I’ve refined that technique,” Poe calls back in mock-offence. “It definitely took the Stormbird by surprise.”

The Lodge is heaving with light and laughter, fuller than Poe has ever seen it. People he’s never met before are slapping him on the back, shoving drinks into his hand, inviting him to take down Thunderjaws and Stormbirds, seasoned hunters comparing years of exploits and expertise to his own. He endures being passed around with his usual grin, jokes tripping off his tongue, the sweet burn of alcohol slipping between his nerves.

All eyes on him.

Every so often he runs into a reprieve: Karé and Snap huddled in one corner, his fellow Thrushes needling him relentlessly about the crowd until he’s sucked back in again; Muran on the balcony, his mother’s newest Vanguard snorting and handing him a handkerchief to drain the sweat away; Iolo, the idiot jumping in to declare his ceremony is going to be even crazier than Poe’s, stealing people’s attention long enough for Poe to slip away. It isn’t that he doesn’t like the attention, far from it, it’s just—

He took down a Stormbird, and he knows that without all these people telling him, but—

Wedge was with him the whole time. All Poe did was loose the final shot. It isn’t a very good story, is it?

That’s all.

“Enjoying yourself a little too much, Star Bird?”

The night air is humid, sticky, barely a reprieve from the cloying warmth of so many people pressed together. He sits on the steps before he turns to his mother, dizzy and strange, absently wondering why there seems to be two of her, her smile split sideways, stretching on to forever.
“I’m fine,” he says, settling his hands on the warm stone beneath him, trying to find his balance. Grins when he remembers a burst of yellow and half a city cursing his name. “I should have brought powdered paint.”

“I think at this point in the night it would only serve to exacerbate the festivities,” a dry voice interjects, and Poe swirls his head round to see two Leias standing next to his two mothers and wow he has had too much to drink.

“Oh, hello, I didn’t see you there,” he says stupidly.

Leia laughs, and Poe suddenly finds himself laughing too, their amusement bouncing off each other’s and multiplying until Poe is bent double, gasping between his knees.

“Definitely a little too much fun,” Leia says, and Poe looks up in time to see his mother roll her eyes, a smile tugging at her lips. It’s familiar enough to settle the anxious twist in Poe’s gut, quiet the little voice saying not enough. Ever since Han and Luke left and Ben—

Ever since Leia was left on her own, Poe has seen more of her than he ever thought he would. She’s the Sun-Queen, meant to embody the light and all that entails. The Sun Priests don’t even look at her for fear of being blinded, and while Poe gets where they’re coming from, he also thinks it’s kind of stupid. He’s glad Leia has his mother and father to confide in, that she has him to tell her stories now, even if they’re nowhere near as good as her own.

She has her stalwart bodyguard too, standing silently in the shadows, fondness shining in his eyes. Chewbacca—or Chewie, as most people call him—left when Han did, but he came back and never explained why—not that he speaks much anyway. Still, Poe knows that the man’s affection isn’t meant for him. He talks to the towering Banuk as much as he does Leia, but he’s pretty sure Chewie doesn’t like him very much.

It might have something to do with the time Poe pantsed him on a dare from Ben but—

He blinks and suddenly he isn’t smiling anymore. Of their own accord, his eyes drift up, searching out the familiar pattern of stars above him. They don’t shine brighter to match the roaring party behind him, but they’ve never needed to, and Poe can’t help but wonder if Ben ever saw the stars as something to be reached, to fly between, to move beyond.

Maybe. For some reason, he doubts it.

“… listening, Poe?”

“Hmm?” He tears his gaze back down to earth and blinks at his mother and Leia looking back at him.

“We asked if you wanted to accept your feather now,” his mother explains with that exasperated fondness all parents do. “While you’re still somewhat sober.”

“Sure.” He sways to his feet, blinking the lights out of his vision. “One of you better find Wedge, though. I’ll probably get kidnapped by another hunter if I go back in there.”

There’s no reason to do this part in front of the entire Lodge and Poe wouldn’t want to. Like Snap’s Ravager tooth moulded to his helmet and Karé’s Stalker claw running the length of her bracer, Poe’s Stormbird feather is decorative, purely ceremonial and, for the most part, meaningless. It just signifies the machine he took down to earn his membership. And it’ll look really nice braided above his ear, glittering in the light, alternating black and orange stripes rippling out from the stalk—the former as dark as Poe’s hair, the latter as bright as the burning fire of a sunset sky.
It was his father who suggested the colours, sitting beside Poe’s bedside in the infirmary after the
hunt, gripping Poe’s hand a little too tightly.

His smile had been strange.

“Is Kes looking after the farm tonight?” Leia asks, expression inscrutable as she gazes at Poe like
she knows where his mind is. She probably does.

“Yeah,” Poe says, voice breaking in time with his thumping heartbeat. He clears his throat and tries
again. “Yeah, the Snapmaws have been straying too close again, so he wanted to keep an eye on
things. Let us enjoy the night, you know? He’ll see it in the morning.”

It’s just one more time. One more time to come home to his father’s smile—his real smile, not that
jagged facsimile, glass-like in its transparency, slicing into his cheeks like a knife slipping from a
whetstone. That smile never reappeared, and before Poe and his mother left in the evening, his
father had hugged him like he always did; like the whole world could fall apart and it would still be
possible to put it all back together.

So, it’s fine, really. It’s fine that his mother goes in to find Wedge, somehow manages to extract
him with little fanfare and even catches Snap, Karé, Muran and Iolo while she’s at it. It’s fine that
all the people Poe’s closest to in the world are here, except for one. It’s fine that it’s Wedge’s
fumbling fingers instead of his father’s confident weave. It’s fine that it isn’t perfect.

It doesn’t mean anything.

(It means everything.)

—

FN-2187 is seventeen when he’s given his armour.

His entire troop, all ten of them, stand in the throne room shoulder to shoulder, backs as straight as
boards. Two more troops stand in front. Three more behind. FN-2187 breathes against his helmet
and fights to keep his head still, battling down the instincts of too close too small let me out
letmeoutletmEOUT—

It’s a helmet. The visor is pinched and a little dark from the see-through fabric covering his eyes,
but the rest of the world is still there beyond it. He thinks.

He wouldn’t really know with the helmet on.

Something taps against his right elbow and he inclines his head to get a look while General Hux
drones on in front of them. The helmet is moulded perfectly to his head, following the movement
without delay, pressing into his skull at all sides. From under a different helmet, Nines is looking
back. Probably. His helmet is angled towards FN-2187, at least.

Nines elbows him again.

FN-2187 elbows him back.

Nines’ helmet rolls in a semi-circle, like he’s doing the same with his eyes.

FN-2187 huffs out a breath and shudders when all of the heat reflects back into mouth, tasting of
sweat and something bitter.
Nines shrugs, elbows him once more, then faces the front.

It’s an imperfect system, ripe for misinterpretation even at the best of times, but years of use have cemented even the most basic gestures into fixed meaning. A system built on silence, on surveillance, on get up and get it right this time, and utterly unique to their troop. There are a few universal signs, but they’re First Order taught, and while FN-2187 is sure most of the officers are aware of the language the soldiers have between themselves, it’s doubtful they have any way of translating it.

They’ll have to rethink a few things now that their faces are permanently covered, but FN-2187 prefers that to constantly rubbing his jaw against the helmet while his mouth is moving.

He’s trying not to think about it.

Thankfully, a shifting on his left draws his attention far more readily than Hux’s words, the latter of which he really should be paying attention to, but as long as Hux doesn’t catch on to the fact he’s not completely enraptured, it won’t be a problem.

He’s definitely not thinking about what will happen if it becomes a problem.

FN-2003 is at FN-2187’s left side—Slip as they now call him. A play on his occasional lacklustre performances. Well, maybe more than occasional. He’s good enough to stand with them, but ever since that day in the pantry, Slip has been… different. Slower. Scattered. Staring into space or losing track of his position or lagging during training runs. He isn’t stupid, he just—misses the mark a little. And FN-2187 is always there to pick up the slack, anyway.

He shouldn’t be, he knows that, because we stand together, or we do not stand at all and sometimes that means letting yourself fall so others can continue on. But—

The thing is—

He didn’t mean to do it but—

He would do it again. The thief’s face has drifted to the back of his mind, a faded tintype softening the hard-edged lines of the man's face and muffling the noise he made when he fell. FN-2187 still remembers the blood in all its red dawn glory, presses the pads of his fingers into his palms and rubs to remind himself it isn’t there anymore, but time has dulled so much of the horror and he’s a soldier. That’s what soldiers do.

And if it means Slip stays at his side, alive if not completely whole, FN-2187 will be a killer any day. If he’d taken the thief down faster, if he hadn’t let himself get caught up in concave cheeks and soft words, if he’d been any kind of killer that day, Slip would still be just as good as any of them.

FN-2187 will be a killer, if that’s what protecting important things means.

(Watch me.)

Right now, Slip is minutely rocking back and forth on his heels, half on his way to fidgeting. FN-2187 carefully slides his foot out and presses it down on top of Slip’s.

Slip stops moving, but his fingers reach out to brush against FN-2187’s.

FN-2187 pulls his hand away and shakes his head.
Slip rolls his shoulders, then slumps them, head angled towards the ground.

FN-2187 keeps his foot resting on Slip’s and silently promises to make it up to him later.

He takes in what he can of the room to make sure nobody noticed their interaction and finds himself gazing past Hux to where King Snoke sits on his throne, silently observing. Dressed in gold to reflect the sun away, chin resting on his palm, politely interested but little else. The contrast between the king and the man at his side is startling.

Kylo Ren stands like a Stormtrooper and wears a helmet as well, but that’s where the similarities end. Where they are outfitted in blinding white, Ren wears almost entirely black, sucking in the light like it’s going to run out one day. FN-2187 doesn’t think he’s ever seen Ren this close before, and looking at him now is like—

_Sith_ isn’t whispered in the barracks anymore, but FN-2187 can still feel the weight of it on his tongue, solidifying and putrefying in the same breath, tasting of bile at the back of his throat. He swallows it down deep and pretends it never existed and tries to focus on Hux.

“…living in dark times,” Hux is saying. “Now, more than ever, what the Sundom needs is order. Starting today, you will be ones who enforce that order, by the light of the Sun and in the name of one true Sun-King. Starting today, you are Stormtroopers, and you will stand together, or you will not stand at all.”

Which sounds… strange, when Hux says it like that. More like an order, though FN-2187 isn’t sure how to follow it. Something that sits and sinks and tangles into a confused mess amongst his thoughts.

He tries not to think about it.

They’re led out after that, armour heavy in a way that has little to do with weight. They’re given brand new weapons—bow, spear and knife—and told to report to a brand-new place for their mission orders come the next day. The other Stormtroopers they pass salute them, or nod in recognition. FN-2187 watches it from behind his helmet and a million miles away, mind still upturned, struggling against something that shouldn’t be there. Or maybe isn’t there in the first place.

He’s a Stormtrooper now. It’s supposed to feel right. It’s supposed to feel like belonging. It’s supposed to feel like growing up.

(It doesn’t feel like anything at all.)

---

Rey saves another Nora when she’s sixteen. It isn’t exactly what she set out to do that day. She’s running the brave trails, slipping through the needling rain with practiced ease and waiting for Han to come back, and she hasn’t heard another person’s voice in days. So, when she hears the woman’s voice desperately calling out to the wilds, she finds herself going to answer.

“Please, Brom, come find me! It’s Olara!”

The sister of an outcast-no-more, of a murderer whose sentence ended without him coming back. Rey tries very hard not to think about that too closely; about a man killing another and being able to return to home, while a child who runs and laughs and lives like any other is condemned to
never have one at all. Instead, she promises to help, because Olara doesn’t spit or glare, and Rey doesn’t like seeing someone with eyes so big look so sad, and—

Well, why wouldn’t she?

(Nobody ever did for her.)

On her way to Brom’s camp—alone, because she’s faster on her own, wouldn’t know what to do with some Nora following after her, talking to her, looking at her—Rey thinks about the Forgotten. Lost spirits, Olara said. Blasphemers banished from All-Mother’s memory because they wouldn’t repent. She isn’t sure what to make of Brom supposedly hearing those spirits, but the idea of them existing at all seems... convenient.

It’s just another way to ignore the rest of the world, isn’t it? Not that Rey knows much about it, but she’s seen the sky every day, how it stretches from horizon to horizon, how the stars shift and disappear and spread (waiting for the right person to reach up and steal them). A sky that large can’t be made for one mountain.

Besides, blasphemer is just another word for person, and Rey knows the Nora have a strange definition of that. According to them, she definitely isn’t one, and—

She doesn’t think they’re right, she just—

It makes sense, is all.

At Brom’s camp, she finds exactly what Olara said she would: blood. The rain has washed most of it away, but Rey activates her device and watches the mud light up with speckled spots sunk too deep to disappear so soon. She follows the trail.

She finds a knife. A bucket full of blood. A desecrated shrine. She finds a dead Watcher and stolen supplies and those supplies then dumped, and she keeps following the trail until she finds the outcast-no-more standing at the edge of a cliff, and she doesn’t need her device to know he’s trying to convince himself to jump.

The Nora have rejected Rey since the moment she was born. They’ve insulted, glared, spit, and she’ll forever wear the scar through her eyebrow as a testament to their cruelty.

But—

Brom draws his bow on her, aims right between her eyes, but—

Terror, real and as devastating as a flash flood, surges through her, and her eyes aren’t looking at the arrow, they’re looking at Brom’s feet so close to the edge because—

“Get away! Get away from me, they’ll make me hurt you!”

Rey breathes. In. Out. Over and over until the wave trickles to a river trickles to a stream. Until her insides are washed clean and the familiar buzz of lightning in her veins falls back into place. It isn’t anxiety, definitely not fear—just the unstoppable urge to move.

“You won’t hurt me,” she says, soothing and calm. She can’t copy Han’s low rumble, but she has her own brand of comfort to give. “My name is Rey. Yours is Brom, isn’t it? Your sister sent me to find you. She’s worried about you.”

Brom jerks the bow down, the arrow clattering to the ground before rolling off the cliff edge. She
doesn’t hear it hit the ground. “Stop it,” he pleads, hand reaching up to drag across his face, leaving ragged marks where nails catch and split skin. “I can’t—I need to think. How am I supposed to think when everyone is shouting at me?”

The rain falls between them, a constant white wash of noise beating upon the earth. It’s falling now, and it will keep falling regardless of what happens next.

They’re alone.

“I’m sorry,” Rey says, quieter. “I’m not trying to yell. Step away from the edge, Brom, and I won’t have to talk so loud.”

His face screws up. “They say not to listen to you. They say I should—” The bow jitters in his hand. He shuts his eyes, then opens them wide enough bloodshot sclera surrounds the edges. “I don’t want to,” he whispers. “I don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“I believe you. And I know Olara believes that too.” Rey matches his volume, doesn’t dare move closer.

“Olara…” Something in Brom’s expression loosens, evens out, pulls free from the bloody lines of hurt etched into his face. “Olara… always said to never ignore a speaker I can see.” He nods, swaying in place. “A-Alright. I’ll come closer.”

“Thank you,” Rey breathes, pushing down a shudder that has nothing to do with the chill. “Now, tell me how I can help you.”

As it turns out, Olara followed her anyway. Rey can’t bring herself to mind when Brom, despite his fear, reaches out to his sister with a desperate kind of longing and Olara doesn’t hesitate to take his hand. A soft touch, gently enfolding the tips of his fingers. Something that speaks of love and trust and a thousand other things you can’t put words to.

Rey looks away.

“Brom isn’t ready to return to the Nora,” she says around the ache in her throat. “But I don’t think he’ll hurt you.”

(Shewonders, briefly, if the Nora believe that Han will be one of the Forgotten.)

“Thank you, Rey,” Olara says, and Rey blinks. She doesn’t remember the last time she heard her own name. “I’ll take care of him now. May you walk in All-Mother’s eternal memory and may the Forgotten leave you be.”

Rey nods and watches them go. Trudges home afterwards, training forgotten, and goes to sleep in an empty house with absolutely nobody around to see or hear. Dreams of hundreds of voices screaming out to a world that refuses to listen as it burns itself to the ground, leaving nothing but ash and an echo of the lost and forgotten who’d meant something, once upon a time.

(Shethinks she’d like that. Meaning something, at least.)

—

The droid is small, just barely coming up past Poe’s knee, its white chassis decorated with orange bands circling its plating and splashes of quicksilver marking its compartments. It’s—a ball, mainly, but on the top rests an extra half-sphere where its singular dark lens gazes up at Poe, the head(?) swaying back and forth, held to its body by very-much-not-simple magnetism.
Poe stares back. “Um.”

“Please, hold your enthusiasm,” Leia says dryly.

“Sorry, it’s just…” Poe kneels down to the machine’s height, carefully reaching out. The droid lets loose a series of beeps and rolls to meet his hand, cool metal and the gentle hum of electricity buzzing against his fingertips. “I guess I’m kind of overwhelmed? I didn’t think anyone would ever find anything like Artoo, and ever since he went dark…”

Leia looks over to the corner of the room, mouth twisted down at the sight of the dusty, silent machine. Poe has memories of R2-D2 rolling after Luke, but they’ve grown far too faint with time; dulled echoes smothered by everything that came after. Lost. He knows R2-D2 was found in a ruin, cajoled into reawakening by Anakin Skywalker’s tinkering hands, and that the droid had something to do with the Old Ones—some sort of personalised machine—but after Luke took ownership he was never able to learn anything more than that.

Then Luke disappeared, and nobody could ever come close to doing what he could do.

“We’re lucky this one was found by our people,” Leia says, giving herself a minute shake most people would miss entirely. “More and more reports are coming in of First Order officers wearing Focuses, and while I can still understand binary, the easiest way to access their information is with a Focus. Who knows what the First Order could discover?”

Poe swallows away the sudden dryness at the back of his throat. “Yes, but… Your Majesty, I can’t accept this.”

Monumental effort keeps his hand from reaching up to fiddle with the feather braided into his hair, just above his ear. It’s symbolic in a different way now; no longer proof of membership to the Hunter’s Lodge, but a recognition of the last decade he spent battling machines that always seem to be bigger, sharper, more ready to kill. Fifteen years since the Derangement began and they’re no closer to discovering the cause. Only too many hunters—friends—lost along the way.

And then there’s the First Order, a derangement of a different kind creeping over the Sundom, throwing midday into dusk. Poe knows the stories. He was raised on those stories. It’s much different trying to live them.

Leia beckons him to his feet and takes his hand. The little droid chirps in a way that’s distinctly unhappy, pressing forward to nudge against Poe’s leg, which is… really fucking adorable, actually. “I know, Beebee-Ate,” Leia soothes, eyes twinkling at Poe. “He’s been asleep for a very long time. He’s excited to help you.”

“I’m honoured,” Poe says to it—him. BB-8 chirps and spins, jiggling back and forth.

Fuck.

He wants one.

“Poe, I’m offering him to you as a thank you.” Poe jerks his attention back to Leia, looking down but always, always sensing the way she towers over him in something that has nothing to do with simple body structure. Her hands are softer than his, still sharp in all the right places, laced with scars and calluses that dig all the way down to bone. He wants to feel that himself, someday. “We don’t know how the First Order have found so many Focuses, but it’s an advantage we cannot match, nor can we stand by and let it happen. The Vanguard needs Beebee-Ate. You need Beebee-Ate.” She radiates like a beacon. Blinding. Effervescent. A solar flare made flesh. “There are very
few I would trust with him, and of them all, you’re the only one still here.”

Poe has spent a long time on the edges of the sun, willingly orbiting its warmth in the hopes of one day receiving a piece to call his own. Hearing those words is more like being given every star in the sky. Supernovas burst in time to his heartbeat, setting his blood alight, burning through his skeleton, colliding and mixing and reshaping his being into something entirely new. Radiant.

(It’s what he was born for.)

He licks his lips, blinking away the wavering heat surging behind his eyes. “What—what about my mother?”

Leia’s smile twists in a way that’s frighteningly familiar. “I think she’ll have enough on her plate trying to keep an eye on you,” she says softly, squeezing his hands. “Don’t you?”

Poe knows the way a shooting star burns out as intimately as the stories carved into his bones. He pulls his hands away and shrugs, rocks back and forth on his heels. “She is my commander,” he mumbles, watching as BB-8 copies his motions, the droid chirping out a fascinated little trill.

“You know what I mean.”

Yes, he does. That doesn’t mean he wants to talk about it. Or even think about it. “It’s her job,” he says stiffly. “It has nothing to do with me being her son.”

(“You are, and always will be, far more your mother’s son.”)

Is he? His mother had never been interested in telling her stories when he was a child, and when he got older she claimed he’d heard most of them from other people’s mouths anyway, but Poe doesn’t know if that’s true. His father would know, but he isn’t around to ask.

Not anymore.

“Fear hurts people in a way I think too many forget,” Leia murmurs, but her eyes aren’t on him. They’re looking out the window, away from the setting sun, all the way east. “It isn’t about what makes sense. It’s about what could happen, and when you already bear the marks fear left on you before… those old wounds reopen, and you do whatever it takes to staunch the flow. Even if that means hurting people you care about.”

They don’t talk about this in the stories. They don’t talk about friends dying or fathers leaving either, and Poe knows those things happen, he isn’t stupid, but it never felt like it would happen to him.

You’re supposed to be here, aren’t you?

“Do you still miss them?” he asks, BB-8 blurring around the edges as the droid’s lens flicks between the two of them. “Han and Luke, I mean.”

It’s a question he’s never really asked before. A question he’s never had to hear the answer to, until now.

“Every day,” Leia whispers.

Silence descends over them, comfortable and warm like an old blanket. BB-8 rests against Poe’s leg again and seems content to stay that way, apparently picking up on the sombre mood and allowing it to run its course as a simple observer. The weight is solid, and Poe presses back,
wondering if this will be the thing that keeps him alive.

It’s been a long time since he made a dare against the world, but joining the Vanguard and fighting the First Order—

He knows that’s worth dying to win.

---

Something is different that morning when FN-2187 walks into the mess hall, Slip on his left and dreams haunting his steps. Lightning-sharp eyes and star-bright smiles. At first, he ignores the strain in the air, putting it down to the usual, unsettled ache in his chest neatly carving its way up to split against his skull. He lines up for his assigned food and sits at his troop’s designated table, fiddling with his bracers as unobtrusively as possible because the nervous energy has to go somewhere, and bouncing his leg attracts too much attention. Nines is glaring down at his food like someone spat in it. Zeroes’ eyes are flicking about manically, pausing on FN-2187 and Slip as they sit down, cataloguing their presence then moving on. Even Slip is glancing about uncertainly.

Tension swirls around their heads like ocean currents, interwoven and constant, a deeper layer of white noise stifling the air from below, twisting upwards into an all-consuming maelstrom. There are officers along the walls FN-2187 realises when he looks. They murmur amongst themselves as they scurry from one side of the massive room to the other, never sparing the Stormtroopers a passing glance. Never stopping to look up from knuckle-white grips on reports or escape the stares of the trained killers they walk amongst.

*Something is wrong.*

FN-2187 eats mechanically, habitually, ritualistically. Allowing the familiar motions to ease the late-night tremors, the stimulation to his senses ripping off any residual lethargy. Tried and tested. From under his eyelashes, he surveys the back-and-forth, searching for a pattern; specific officers, the size of their groups, their expressions, the directions they move, the speed they do it. He doesn’t learn much. There isn’t enough information, no experience of this to fall back on. He may as well try to discern a pattern in the shifting sands around Sunfall.

“Sev?” Slip mumbles into his hand under the guise of covering his mouth to chew.

FN-2187 nods, a slow, gentle tilt of his head.

Nines shoots him a *look*.

FN-2187 raises an eyebrow and shrugs.

Zeroes kicks them both under the table.

Slip finishes chewing and brushes FN-2187’s fingers as he reaches for his drink.

FN-2187 nudges him with his knee and shakes his head.

Their argument is interrupted when General Hux sweeps in, Captain Phasma at his shoulder, and if things weren’t weird before, now they’re positively *bizarre*. FN-2187 can’t remember ever seeing them in the mess hall. He still isn’t entirely sure that Phasma eats.

“Attention!” Hux commands, cutting through the tension like a lightning strike. Instantly, the room is destroyed by noise, chairs scraping against the floor and hundreds of bodies standing at once, reacting to the singular word without thought.
FN-2187’s heart rate jumps back up.

This is wrong, he thinks, world shifting in and out of shape. Then, more solidly, Something big is about to happen.

Silence claws its way back to the forefront, fully charged in the aftermath of Hux’s order, eager to break apart under its own weight. Hux and Phasma’s steps ring like the first pebbles of a rockslide. They climb to the top of the stairs that lead to a seldom-used balcony, stopping at the bannister and gazing down with the rising sun behind them. FN-2187 has to squint to keep their outlines in view.

“The moment has come,” Hux announces and FN-2187’s vision whites out. “For years you have trained relentlessly, fighting to protect our borders and our people. You have dedicated your lives to the Carja and the one, true Sun-King.”

But we never chose that, did we? FN-2187 thinks hysterically. The world is too bright, and echoes of another reality are tearing apart his head. He doesn’t want to go to war. He doesn’t want to kill anybody.

(But he would. He’d be a killer any day, for the right people.)

“Finally, our faith has been rewarded,” Hux continues, smirking like his mouth is the edge of a knife. “As you know, nineteen years ago, Luke Skywalker disappeared from Meridian. He abandoned his people, fled like the coward he is. He knew that one day we would come to make him answer for his crimes. Today is that day.”

FN-2187 blinks, working his confusion through his clammy palms, careful to keep his nails from catching. In front, he can see other Stormtroopers not fast enough to stop their heads tilting. Imperceptible twitches rippling down the rows.

“We have received word from the south that Meridian has located a map to Skywalker’s location.”

Wait, what?

“Whatever their reasons are for seeking Skywalker, we cannot allow them to make contact. We cannot not let that man continue to survive, in any circumstance. Not while the men and women he slaughtered go unavenged.” Hux’s eyes are wide open, devout, shoulders shaking with excess passion. Even half a room away, FN-2187 can see the whites of his teeth. “No longer. By our hand, by the Sun’s judgement, Luke Skywalker will fall!”

Troop numbers are called, detailing who will be getting ready for immediate departure to the savage east.

FN-2187’s troop is among them.

As they’re marching back to the barracks, Slip nudges his shoulder.

FN-2187 works his jaw a little. “I thought they were sending us to Meridian.”

In front, Zeroes missteps and Nines snorts.

FN-2187 jabs Nines in the back.
“Calm down, Sev,” Nines hisses, rolling his shoulders. “We know that’ll happen eventually.”

“It’s weird to think about, though,” Zeroes murmurs, risking a glance back, and none of them having anything to give in response.

Back in the barracks, FN-2187 finds himself dallying, taking in the room as if he’s thirteen years old again. It’s just as sparse as it was back then; five bunks pressed on the outer edges, a locker on each side for their armour and underclothes, a rack on the side of each for their weapons. A narrow slit on the west wall lets in too much sun in the evenings, and a lantern hangs in the middle for when the days get too short too early. Every bedsheet folded down exactly the same way. The floor always swept. The ashes always removed and fresh blaze topping up their light. Lockers closed. Weapons cleaned and sheathed. Static. Identical.

On bad days, it makes FN-2187’s teeth ache to look at. On days like today, he can’t help but feel like he’s the only part of this room that doesn’t fit. Like he’s a temporary fixture—like he was never supposed to be here in the first place. A placeholder for something else, something better. Temporary.

You aren’t supposed to be here.

It’s still the only home he’s ever known.

“You ready, Sev?”

FN-2187 startles when a hand slips into his own, squeezing gently. He double-checks, but no, he and Slip are the only ones still in the room.

He squeezes back and manages a smile.

“Yeah. I’m ready.”

He's surprised to find it's the truth.

—

A pair of gilded dice, painstakingly chained together, sit in Rey’s palm. Bumps and nicks and grooves scuff most of the surface, matching the scratches and scars and calluses that cover her hand; familiar, she always thought. Comforting. Permanent.

Right up until they aren’t.

It’s the day whatever it takes becomes reality and she’s standing across from the gate to Mother’s Heart, noise battering her ears, a pair of dice in her hand, the name Teersa in her head—

And Han walking out of her life forever.

(It’s not the most unfamiliar feeling in the world)

Han has always had a life outside of her—a life he never talks about despite her asking, days spent outside of the Embrace to somewhere she can’t follow. The older she got, the more she didn’t need to learn so much as she needed practice, constant drilling that didn’t need Han’s presence, even if the shining pride in his gruff smile always made her feel invincible. It only mattered that she got stronger, she thought, not that anyone was around to see her do it.

Need to. Have to. Going to. Concepts that seem very empty now that she’s alone, truly and utterly,
for the first time in her entire life.

“Han,” she calls, refusing to let her voice shake. The dice hang from between her fingers, swinging like a pendulum counting down each second. Han stops, but doesn’t turn around. “What you said, about finding something to fight for?” They’re her tribe, but they’ve made sure she’ll never be one of them, and one Sawtooth lying dead isn’t enough to change that. “Whatever I fight for, it’ll be something I believe in. Not what everyone else says I should.”

_Outcast. Tainted. Corrupted. Should never have been born._

She’ll make her own way. Han trusts the tribe to follow their own laws even though _he_ hardly ever did, but Rey trusts _him_, and maybe that’s enough.

Han shudders, a ripple through his entire frame, and when he turns around his smile is everything Rey remembers it to be.

“Fuck’s sake, kid,” he says as he moves back towards her, cups the back of her head and pulls her forehead against his. She lets him, focuses on his face until nothing else in the world is worth looking at. “Whatever you do with your life, you’re gonna change the world.”

There are voices in her head of people who died with hushed whispers that screamed their humanity, and the memory of a man clinging to everything that still made him kind even as monsters tried to tear him apart from the inside out. She sees a flash of orange going dark and Han stepping in front of her when the Nora got too close, thinks of _meaning_ something and realises she might finally understand.

She grins, all sharp hard edges and teeth. “Watch me,” she tells him.

“Every time I can,” he promises.

Han has a life outside of her that she knows nothing about. He took her out of the Embrace to kill a Sawtooth for the tribe, and now he’s leaving to face his own monsters. Rey can’t help him—just as he can’t help her win the Proving.

“You were there for me when no-one was,” she whispers. Clutches the dice and hard enough to imprint them into her skin. Han wasn’t always there. But he always came back. “I won’t forget that.”

Han huffs, warm air spilling over her chin, and though the device on her ear isn’t active, but Rey swears she sees his outline glowing the brightest cerulean blue all the same.

"...Thank you."

Where are you supposed to be?

Every step towards Mother’s Heart is a rip in her chest, a fresh hole through her heart, a clench in her throat and a new burn behind her eyes. Her vision wavers, steps faltering, air swirling around her lungs and going nowhere else—not out, not in. Han’s _thank you_ rings in her ears, blocking out the _noise_ of the Nora village, the dice still wrapped tight in her hand, and she thinks if she let go she’d plummet down into the earth with them, trapped and senseless, another voice down in the dark awaiting an end that was always going to be inevitable.
She thinks this is what it must mean to be a ghost.

(But not Forgotten.)

She keeps walking. This isn’t the first time. It certainly won’t be the last. And it hurts but she’s been dealing with the pain of isolation since she was born. All that’s left, all that ever remains, is to keep putting one foot in front of the other.

**Whatever it takes.**

The gates to Mother’s Heart rise above her and the braves guarding it snarl, threatening blood, but the dice in her palm send sparks skittering up her nerves, blooming in fractal patterns under her skin, and rather than fight or flight, Rey does what she’s been doing all her life. The first lesson Han ever taught.

She smiles.

*I’ve lived in the wilds my entire life. I know how not to be afraid of you.*

The braves take a step back, eyeing her uncertainly, and she’s all set to walk up to the gate and open it herself when someone calls them open. An old woman beckons Rey forward. The woman Han told her about—High Matriarch Teersa.

The one who let Han give Rey her name.

She takes one look back. She can’t see him.

*But I will again.*

Oh, she will.

(Watch me)

Nineteen years alive. Twelve years training. Two minutes completely and utterly alone. She lives in on borrowed time now, endless seconds of nothing stretching out ahead of her without Han to start the world turning again. Wisps of blue curl against Rey’s skin as she follows Teersa’s guiding hand, moving towards what should always have been home—

Ignoring the little voice that whispers passing through this gate will sign her death warrant.

Chapter End Notes

*CLAPS* SO

This is apparently what I'm doing with my life to cope in a post-TRoS world? Writing a 32-page introduction to a crossover fic?? I got feelings, okay.

I dunno how the rest of the chapters will pan out in terms of length, but I'll find time to do them between work and uni and sleep.

Also - all of the Nora are the original HZD characters. They don't factor into the overall plot enough, plus they aren't really, um, complimented often, so I didn't want to
go trawling through the extended Star Wars universe just to find a group that barely features and won't be looked upon very kindly anyway.

Get excited for future Han pov (and maybe BB-8 pov but you didn't hear it from me) and lemme know if you think this is worth continuing.
Red Red Sunset

Chapter Notes

Me, watching hours of Star Wars discussions videos instead of writing this fic: ...

*research*

Canonical character death in this chapter and Finn straight up Does Not Have A Good Time so watch out for that.

Also, I know I said there'd be no Nora-Star Wars characters, but apparently that was a lie. It's all for good reason, don't worry.

Also also, apologies if this chapter is slightly disjointed? We're at a point where events are very similar to both the beginning of TFA and HZD, and I really don't want to give a rewrite of what we already know. If I don't include something, assume it happened the same way as it did in the movie/game.

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Space is something Poe is intimately familiar with.

Living in Meridian means living on a plateau, and that means if you keep walking, eventually the land will fall steeply away then spread out all around you, dipping and curving and rising, the Sundom there in all its glory. The deep-rooted jungle creeping up on the farms at the edge of Meridian Village, stretching all the way south, a canopy made of the deepest kind of green hiding all sorts of secrets, treasures and wonders. To the west lies the lake, stretching north to a great river that separates the intermeshed life of wood and water from the golden Dustlands drying their way into desert. Quarries and crags, an empty divide between Poe’s home and the First Order that threatens it. No man’s land.

Most incongruous of all has always lain to the east, hidden behind mountains topped in perpetual snow, but even then, there’s the knowledge something lies beyond. Parts are hidden, and stories are there to fill in the gaps. Waiting to be explored.

Compared to all that, Nora territory is very… lumpy.

That probably shouldn’t be the word he uses.

Where mountains are a passing thought in the west, here they surround everything. Crouching giants surveying the activity between them, hemming it in the way a child plays with a beetle. Trees stand straight, rivers run fast, animals scurry and shift and slide—even the machines seem to pace restlessly, jumping at the smallest chance to bear their fangs. The trip down from Daytower seemed so simple in theory, but a few days in Nora territory made clear why the tribe has survived so long on little more than Guerrilla tactics and faith. Machines in the Sundom want to kill.

Machines here want to *fight*.

So, no, *lumpy* is not the right word. Uncomfortable, certainly. Discomfiting. Erratic.
Abusive.

If nothing else, it makes him pay attention. They *are* technically in hostile territory, weeks’ worth of travel away from home, and on a mission so important that—

Well, it doesn’t need description. Everything is sharpened down to this point, all eyes this way even if they don’t yet know what they’re seeing, and with so little to fill the gaps between, Poe can’t help constantly noticing the space whenever it shows itself.

Like the space by his side where BB-8 should be.

The space where BB-8 *isn’t*.

“You’re going to wear a hole in the ground with all that pacing, Captain.”

“Well, you know, it’s so nice here I thought I’d make myself a little ditch to settle down in,” he replies, but he makes himself sit because he actually is in danger of forming the foundations for his own hostile nation in the middle of Nora territory with all the tracks his feet have dented into the ground.

Next to him, Oddy inclines his head closer to murmur, “You’re making the priest nervous.”

Poe flicks his eyes over. Sure enough, the Sun-Priest is so pale he’s more likely to vomit on his speech than actually give it. “To be fair,” he mutters back, “He’s looked like that since we left Daytower.”

Oddy snorts in agreement, leaning back on his perch to survey the people passing back and forth, lost in the haze that so often overtakes him when he’s using his Focus. Poe lets him be, pours his restless energy into bouncing his leg and keeps one eye on the Sun-Priest to make sure the man doesn’t just decide to cut his losses and run all the way back to the Sundom.

It’s happened.

“Any news from Iolo about the little guy, yet?” Oddy asks suddenly.

Poe pulls on a stray thread uncurling itself from his jacket, frowning at the offending fabric as much as he is Oddy’s question. “Not yet.”

“It’s only been a couple of days. You should stop worrying so much. It’s going to give you wrinkles.”

Immediately, Poe smooths out his brow and Oddy laughs.

“Shut up.”

Oddy’s right—about the worrying thing, not the wrinkle thing—but it doesn’t stop Poe feeling uneasy. They’re in Mother’s Heart, in the *Embrace*, the pinnacle of Nora lands, a place Anakin Skywalker couldn’t even penetrate, and yeah, okay, Poe and his squad are here under much more peaceful circumstances than the Invader King ever was, but if there’s one thing the Nora have, it’s long fucking memories. And not all their hostility is undue.

To add to their luck, their trip has coincided with some sort of festival, which is great for attendance for the Sun-Priest’s message from Leia. Not so great for a small group of her Vanguard trying to find something without letting anyone know what they’re doing.
They’re currently sitting at the height of the festivities, the village sprawling down the hill beneath them, trembling from the weight of singing, dancing, laughter and light. Drums sound a constant beat for stamping feet to fall in time, voices yelling above each other until it’s all just discordant noise, but even that has a rhythm if you care enough to listen. Beside them sits a stage, ripe and ready for them to address the Nora, and the parallel isn’t lost on Poe. Staged. Performative. As true and heartfelt as Leia’s message is to the Nora people, their real goal is far more dangerous than a secluded tribe, and all these people means all the more chance someone will spot their foreign guests skulking in places they aren’t expected to be.

All plans go awry, as life decrees.

(And in four years, there hasn’t been a day Poe has separated from BB-8 without knowing where the droid is or will be with absolute certainty.)

So, yeah, he’s worried. Sue him.

“Captain Dameron,” a voice says and Poe nearly jumps out of his skin.

“High Matriarch,” he replies, leaping to his feet.

The old woman—Teersa, he remembers—smiles warmly at him. She’s the only one to offer any such sentiment since they arrived. Poe likes her. “I apologise for startling you—and for having to leave so abruptly earlier.”

“No need,” he assures. “I know events like this need a lot of attention in a lot of different places.”

“More sense than attention.” Teersa shakes her head, but it’s the kind of motion that exudes only fondness. Every parent Poe has ever known has the motion down to an art, and from what he understands of Nora hierarchies, being a High Matriarch essentially means being a grandmother. Teersa and her two fellows have earned the right to parent an entire tribe. “But I digress. You came here for a reason and now is the perfect time to attend to it before the Blessing begins.” She looks to their Sun-Priest, eyebrows twitching as the man sways to his feet, knuckles white where he clutches his scroll. “If that’s acceptable with you?”

The Sun-Priest only nods, slowly breathing in and out. Poe shares a commiserating look with Oddy—or tries to. The other man is too busy trying to mouth good luck at him.

Traitor.

He follows Teersa and the Sun-Priest onto the stage, carefully eyeing the crowd that’s gathered in front. Oddy stays back, keeping out of sight in case things turn hostile, which, if the eyes on them are any indication, is very much a possibility. Poe’s fingers twitch towards his bow. Instinctive. Battle-honed. He breathes and reminds himself these people aren’t his enemy. And it would really put a damper on Leia’s message of goodwill if Poe was standing aiming an arrow into the crowd the entire time.

Instead, he stands back, stands straight, stands like the second in command of the Sun-Queen’s Vanguard, because that’s what he’s worked to be for four years and he isn’t going to let some mission jitters jeopardise that.

“No! For thirty years, we have been at peace with the Carja!” Teersa announces, voice ringing out clear and strong despite what her aged frame might suggest. “We have waited long enough to ensure the atrocities of Invader King would not be repeated, and, finally, the time has come to restore our bonds of trade with Meridian.” She paces the length of the stage, forcing ripples of
movement from the crowd staring up at them. Swirls of blue face paint eddying across snow-pale faces. Turbulent. Teersa gestures to Poe and the Sun-Priest. “These envoys come to us under a banner of peace. On the eve of our Proving, as our children prepare to take flight into the world, let us be reminded of the one outside of All-Mother’s gaze seeking to make reparations for all we have lost.”

Teersa steps back, as much as invitation as any for the Sun-Priest to step forward. To the man’s eternal credit, he does so without hesitation.

He gets through six words before the crowd starts throwing tomatoes.

“Hey,” Poe calls out, stepping forward, ducking under the hail with his arms raised. A tomato bursts against his outstretched hand, juice splashing into his hair. “Hey! Nora, hold your fruit a sec!” He is really not in the mood right now, and it either shows on his face or in his voice, because the onslaught falters. “Look, I get it, alright? My parents are Oseram, not Carja—I was raised on stories of that murderous asshole. He raided my tribe just the same as yours.” His hands are shakings, nails digging into his palms. “My own mother was taken. She hated the Carja. And you know where I was raised? Meridian. Because Anakin Skywalker has been dead thirty years, and it’s all thanks to the current Sun-Queen. Not because she wanted power—she did it because somebody had to put a stop to him. Because it was the right thing to do.” Map to Luke Skywalker or not, he’s not going to let these people insult Leia or his home. “The message this priest means to read is an apology from that Queen, for the same exact reason, so, please, can’t you take a moment to listen?”

And—

The Nora are nodding, lowering their arms, not happy but willing. It’s—

A little weird, actually.

Poe steps away from their gazes, automatically running a hand through his hair and grimacing when he touches the tomato slime. At least they weren’t throwing rocks.

(A spot on his eyebrow tingles. He scratches the feeling away. But he’s already been drawn in.)

Being aware of space means being aware of everything in it, and Poe clocks the movement in the crowd before he’s entirely aware his eyes are tracking it. Anyone moving with purpose amidst the Sun-Priest’s words are doing so around the crowd or to get out of it, but this stands out because the person is angling to get closer in a very specific direction.

A young woman heading straight for Oddy. Poe blinks, craning his neck as subtly as he can to get a closer look.

When she reaches Oddy, it isn’t to single him out for more fruit-related target practice. Actually, Poe has no idea what they’re talking about from this distance, only sees the Nora tap the side of her head and Oddy’s eyes widen to comical proportions afterwards.

A sharp, percussive clap jerks his attention away. It’s Teersa applauding the speech, followed reluctantly by the rest of the crowd, and Poe makes himself grin as the Sun-Priest staggers off to hide.

When he looks back to the pair, ice bursts inside his blood and he’s moving before he has a chance to think, spurred to action because—

“Oddy! Busy making friends, are we?”
Oddy jumps—all makes some strangled noise with his mouth which sounds vaguely like, “Ebugh.”

“Okaaaay.” Poe peers closely at Oddy, searching for any sign of duress. “I know she’s a pretty one, but I didn’t take you for the stupid type.”

It’s the Nora’s turn to sputter, red sprinkling its way up her cheekbones. Poe’s grin loosens, sitting easier on his face, but Oddy doesn’t share his cheer.

“I—sorry, Dameron, I’ll be back in a moment.”

“Wait—"

“No,” he says, directly to the Nora. “No, we, uh, we can talk later.”

And then he’s gone, weaving his way through the Nora, one hand clenched tightly against the side of his head.

“That was weird, right?” the Nora asks slowly. “People don’t normally act that weird all of a sudden.”

“Must be more hungover than I thought,” Poe replies blithely, finally turning to look at the Nora woman. Really look.

She’s young, more girl than woman still, but she’s tall enough there can’t be more than an inch between them. Strong too, if he’s reading the right line of muscles underneath all those furs; the lithe kind meant for flexibility and speed. Her dark hair’s knotted back in braids, neat and practical, eyes a deep brown that makes him think of the tree he grew up climbing beside his parent’s farm, and she’s looking back at him looking at her and—

Poe shifts and glances away, unsettled without quite knowing why—

But his eyes catch a glint and suddenly there’s nowhere else his attention could go.

“Is that a Focus?”

“So I’ve been told,” the Nora replies, gaze returning to the direction Oddy sped off in, and suddenly she doesn’t look like a hostile Nora acting on a thirty-year long vendetta on the nearest available source. She looks small and uncertain and impossible young, shadows lingering deep in the recesses of her eyes. “I’m guessing they aren’t too common where you’re from either.”

It isn’t phrased like a question, but Poe can practically feel the curiosity radiating off her—and something else. Something that oozes like desperation, aching and bitter and so very, very lost. Honesty spills out of him before he thinks to check it. “Not common to see, but common knowledge, at least. Delvers find a lot of broken ones. Oddy just got insanely lucky when he found one still functional, and, you know, finders, keepers.” She glances sharply at him, and this time he holds her gaze. “But I thought the Nora stayed away from those things.”

“Yeah, well, they called me cursed and cast me out when I was born, so I’ve learned not to take what they say as the complete truth.”

Poe stares. “You’re joking.”

“Hilarious, aren’t I?” she replies dryly, arms crossed, words weighted with an expectation Poe doesn’t understand.
He came over here because he thought she was threatening Oddy, living up to some personal slight passed on from her parents, but he’s noticing the space that’s opened up around them now. The side-eyed glares from the other Nora directed at her, not him, disparaging whispers almost hidden under the festivities, wrapped around two words: motherless outcast.

“I heard the Nora did that,” he says carefully, uncomfortably aware he’s entered a conversation he has no idea how to have. He doesn’t even know her name yet. “Just seems cruel to me, leaving someone alone in the wilds to fend for themselves. Especially a baby. I mean, how did that even work?”

They’d run into an outcast on their journey to the Embrace, an injured man who seemed so baffled by their concern he left them looking more unbalanced than when he accidentally staggered across their path in the first place. He’d muttered something about Hunting trials, waved off any attempt to help, and blatantly warned that if they wanted to curry Nora favour, they’d have to ignore any other outcasts they came across. Like that was how it should work.

Like the world was built for someone to live in all by themselves.

“I had… there was someone who looked after me,” the Nora explains haltingly. “Another outcast. We aren’t normally supposed to talk to each other, but since I was so young…” She trails off, fingerling a small pouch on her waist.

“Huh.” He thinks about that for a second. “You two should have expanded. Made a super-secret outcast club the Nora weren’t allowed to be in. I mean, what are the Nora going to do about it? Double outcast you?”

And that, to his utter delight, actually gets a smile out of her. “I’m sure they’d find a way.” Her nose scrunches. “Maybe decree we aren’t allowed to wear clothes or something.”

“Now that’d be a sight,” Poe laughs, sticking his hand out, because nudity is as good a time as any to introduce oneself. “I’m Poe, by the way. Poe Dameron.”

It takes a second for her to accept his hand, her eyes wide and confused before she shakes it like she’s seen the motion done but never had the chance to try it out for herself. A pang shoots through Poe’s chest, working down his arm until he’s adding an extra, comforting squeeze, hoping she understands.

“Rey,” she offers, smile widening, dimples creasing her cheeks and eyes flourishing with a warmth that beats back the shadows until they may as well have never existed. “Just Rey.”

“Nice to meet you, Rey, Just Rey.”

“Oh, for—” She lets go of his hand, muttering something that sounds suspiciously like not another one, but she’s still grinning, and Poe stares and stares and wonders how anyone could ever look at her and think she was cursed.

(But that’s never been how stories work, is it?)

“You must be here to run in the Proving, then,” he says to stop himself saying anything else.

“Yes,” she says and her eyes flash to diamond-hardness. “I’m going to win it.”

And Poe laughs, because this Nora outcast has more potential sparking through her frame than should exist amongst a tribe determined to force her down into one shape, mountains pressing down to stop her reaching the sky. “I don’t doubt that,” he tells her, and then he does something so
incredibly stupid the universe will probably smack him for it later. “You should come to Meridian, if you ever get bored of this place. My mother would love you.”

“Come on now, Captain. I thought the whole point of being here was to apologise for taking so many of their people, not to steal more of them.”

Poe keeps his smile even as his insides turn to mush. “Nice of you to finally join the party, Iolo.”

“Fashionably late,” Iolo says, peering between him and Rey, expression indecipherable as he strides over. “You got a sec?”

Reluctantly, Poe nods, reality slamming back into him with all the weight of a Thunderjaw. He turns back to Rey. “Sorry, captain things to attend to. Good luck winning the Proving.”

Rey stares back like he just spent the last five minutes strutting around and chirping at her the way Watcher’s do. “Oh… thanks. Um, good luck with your… captain things.”

He gives her a grin and a lazy two-finger salute, then follows Iolo further into the village, letting the noise beat back any residual anxiousness. Much easier to have a private conversation in a crowd when nobody has any reason to pay attention to you.

He makes himself not look back.

“Where’s Oddy?” is the first thing Iolo asks.

“Oh, I don’t actually know.” Poe frowns, stepping out of the way of a drunk Nora yelling something about—sausages? Who knows. “He took off earlier. I thought Rey had done something to him, but she seemed as confused about it as me.”

“Rey’s the Nora girl, eh?”

“Don’t start,” Poe says, rolling his eyes, ignoring the uncomfortable pull in his gut. “She had a Focus. I think she was trying to ask Oddy about his, but he freaked out for some reason and left.”

“Huh.” Iolo scuffs at a dirt clump, trailing his eyes around, and it’s a mark of how important this mission is that he doesn’t press about Rey any further. Well, for now, probably. “Speaking of Focuses…”

“You found Tekka?”

“Youp,” Iolo confirms, popping the ‘p’. “BeeBee-Ate’s with him right now.”

And Poe—

Really, he just takes a second to breathe.

When Luke left, all those years ago, it wasn’t on a whim. He lost his pupils and his temple and his nephew in a single act of unmitigated violence nobody could understand, so in the aftermath, he went searching for answers. Everything he knew about the Force he’d learned from the Old Ones, from scattered glyphs in ruins, ghosts talking to him through the lens of his Focus. But there isn’t some simple rulebook explaining how the world works. Just bits and pieces of a larger picture nobody can see, obscured by arguments and opinions and people who don’t know what they’re talking about in the first place.
It must have been maddening.

Poe runs, scrabbling across the unfamiliar terrain with his heart in his throat and fire in his veins. He runs because Luke didn’t disappear into the wilderness, he left to find something, but when he was searching for the direction to go, he wasn’t alone.

Lor San Tekka. An old delver and even older friend of Luke’s. The only man in the world who can show them where to find Luke Skywalker, the path to their only hope tucked safely away in the savage east for nineteen years, hidden inside a Focus.

*Tekka’s Focus.*

Poe doesn’t know much about the Force, but he knows the stories, has seen what Luke can do, and if the rumours are true and the First Order has anyone that can do the same—

He doesn’t think. He runs.

Iolo is back in Mother’s Heart along with the rest of his squad, keeping up appearances, lies ready on their lips to explain his absence. Poe doesn’t like it, but if the Nora knew what they were looking for, well—they already have to hide it from the First Order. Nobody wants to piss off another tribe in the process, and the Nora aren’t exactly known for letting go of what they think belongs to them. Tekka isn’t even waiting in a Nora village; it’s another settlement, one too close to a broken mess of ruins for the Nora to dare going near. Devil’s Thirst. Appropriate, if nothing else.

BeeBee-Ate is waiting for him. They’ll take the Focus and make their way back to Daytower, then all the way to Meridian and Leia, and whatever they find on the device will—

Will—

Poe doesn’t know. The details sit in some fogged future that hasn’t been written yet, a story waiting to be told. They’ll find Luke and they’ll defeat the First Order and nobody else has to die. That’s how it works.

That has to be how it works.

*(Please.)*

So, he runs.

—

The device on her ear is called a Focus.

The device on her ear is called a Focus and the outlander who told her is called Oddy because he also has a Focus, and for some reason this means he wants nothing to do with her.

The device on her ear is called a Focus and the outlander who told her is called Oddy because he also has a Focus and for some reason this means he wants nothing to do with her, and the other outlander is called *Poe, Poe Dameron,* and he stayed and he talked and he looked at her, said *outcast* is synonymous with *cruelty* and glared back at the Nora glaring at her when they thought she wouldn’t notice, because Teersa’s keeping an eye on her now and she’s allowed to run in the Proving so there’s nothing else they can do, and she’s going to *win it* and Poe said *I don’t doubt that, you should come to Meridian, my mother would love you*—

Rey might be losing her mind.
Just a little.

She’s wearing the Nora furs made for her as a gift, because Teb made them and he’s the boy—man, whatever—she saved when she was seven, he remembered and thanked her, and Teersa made her a lantern for the Blessing, because mother’s are supposed to make those, but Rey doesn’t have one, so Teersa did it and for the first time Rey got to join everyone else, sending the light off into the sky with a whisper of Han’s name, and she found Oddy again but he wants nothing to do with her, just told her to enjoy her night with a smile so sad it still hurts—

Rey is definitely losing her mind.

She’s standing behind one of the cabins at the edge of Mother’s Heart, out of sight and far enough away from the festivities that she hears the echoes of drums and voices more than the actual sounds themselves. They bounce around inside of her, less potent from this distance, but no less overwhelming, juddering apart all the little pieces that make her Rey until she’s clinging desperately to herself, afraid she’s about to split apart at every seam.

It’s—too much. Too many people-voices-sounds-thoughts-feelings all in the one place. A hurricane with no centre, gale-force winds with an indomitable pull in a million different directions. A tangled, irreversible mess. She doesn’t know how anyone can stand it.

Wood scratches against her back as she slides to the ground, hands clutching her arms with bruising force, holding herself together, listening to the beat-beat of her heart and the constant whoosh of air in and out of her lungs. The sun is setting, a blistering burn in magenta that splits the sky between rose gold and bruise-purple, the first hint of stars peering down curiously at her as she fights to get her thoughts in order. She’s okay, she just—

It’s the first time she’s been around so many people. There’s so much noise and she can deal with that, but she never, ever expected anyone to be kind.

She didn’t count on Poe Dameron, either.

Rey snorts softly, dropping her head into the dark haven of her arms. Teb made her outfit for saving him. Teersa—she’s a High Matriarch so while some of it’s true kindness, too much of it is obligation. Poe, though, is an outlander from somewhere Rey’s never even heard of. He had no reason to talk to her, to try and make her smile while he smiled back, open and unassuming, curious without taking, offering without expecting anything in return. And, yah, okay, she’s pretty sure he thought she’d threatened Oddy or something, but as soon as he realised she was as confused about it as him, he’d been nothing but friendly.

People don’t do that to Rey. They don’t treat her like—

Well—

Like she’s—

Yeah.

A tilt to gravity, a spark beneath her skin, a churn in the air; whatever it is, something shifted, changed the world in a split-second of crystal-clear clarity so bright even the sky seemed transparent. Now, she doesn’t know how to turn it off.

One hand drifts down, her forehead bumping uncomfortably against her knee without the support, so she lifts her head as her fingers brush against the pouch holding Han’s dice. He would be laughing his lungs out if he were here.
He’d like Poe.

The thought makes her smile.

(She doesn’t know, because she has no basis for it, doesn’t exactly have anyone around to ask so she can double-check, and the meeting was so fleeting and she might not see him again anyway, but she’s pretty sure she just made her first friend. Ever.

And if he isn’t a Nora, well… that isn’t exactly a ground-breaking turn of circumstance, considering.)

Connections are strange. She supposes everyone else is used to the conflicting sensations of so many people running on such high emotion, whereas she’s only ever had Han (had had Han. Whatever). It helps, putting a name to it, because it means she knows what to look for when she’s losing herself in amongst it all. The familiar lightning in her blood crackles all the brighter for it.

She gets to her feet, bouncing the feeling back into her toes before heading out from behind the cabin back into the village. The force is still there, but it’s less a hurricane and more a snapshot of wind that steals her breath as it twirls past. A playful greeting. She activates her Focus—another gleeful spark jumping between her muscles—out of curiosity, grinning at the explosion of multicoloured lights that greets her, bumping and spinning and trailing behind every motion. Life in long exposure.

*You should come to Meridian, if you ever get bored of this place.*

Rey doesn't know. But she wants.

There’s a brave standing guard by the door. She doesn’t recognise him, and she’d definitely remember if they’d crossed paths before. The man is big. Atrociously so, clothes stretched painfully over distended body parts equally likely to be fat as muscle. He’s holding a spear, but even standing parallel it doesn’t match his height, and Rey knows the weapon is purely for show. His heaving, grotesque body is where the real danger lies, the asymmetrical mess of his face twisted deeper into a frown that nearly stops Rey entirely when those beady eyes fix on her approach. It’s like looking up at a mountain. A bulging, fleshy mountain.

“So, you’re the little outcast girl everyone’s been talking so much about.”

Rey doesn’t quite wrinkle her nose. “So I am,” she replies warily, eyeing the distance between her and the door. He isn’t standing in any threatening way, but Rey’s used to looking at someone—looking at Han—and knowing exactly what he meant whether he was looking at her or not.

That’s the thing, in the end, isn’t it? Because Teb and Teersa and Poe all smiled, but they did something for her too. Their actions made up for all the yelling and beating and singing swallowing up everything else, speaking their intentions loud and clear, proving they their smiles were the truth. Han never smiled unless he meant it, but who knows how other people do it? Oddy smiled, but all he did was try to get away from her. This brave is smiling, but how does she know he isn’t planning to act different when the right moment comes?

“Unkar Plutt,” he grunts, and it’s a long moment before Rey realises he’s given his name, not just embellished a particularly guttural burp. “Looking forward to seeing what you’re capable of tomorrow, little outcast.”
If ever there was a reason for hairs to stand up on the back of her neck, this man is it. She swallows
down a shiver, offering nothing more than a shrug and a weak smile as she passes into the cabin.
Unkar watches her the entire time, right up until she shuts the door. Orange all the way down.

The sharp crack of wood on wood rings in the confined space, and when Rey turns around,
blinking lights away, sixteen faces stare back. Silent. Unreadable. Like there’s absolutely nothing
going on inside at all.

Rey always knew what Han was thinking even when he didn’t say it out loud, but how are you
supposed to know in amongst all the other noise?

How are you even supposed to be anything?

“Well, look who came in from the wilds. The motherless outcast,” a voice drawls from the
opposite end of the room. He’s older, exactly twelve years older, but Rey recognises the boy who
speaks instantly. The scar cutting through her eyebrow tingles. She knows what he means, at least.

“Thank All-Mother you reminded me of that,” Rey says right back, moving further into the room.
“I might have forgotten if you hadn’t bothered to point it out.” She isn’t a seven-year old girl
scooping up berries anymore, mush stained too deep into the lines of her palms, dampened by
something darker, something that still tastes of rust.

Bast (that’s his name, “Well done, Bast,” well done, I want that, why don’t I have that?) laughs as
she comes closer. Most everyone else watch silently. A few are tucked deep into their bunks, but
Rey can feel them listening, filling out the hollow space inside. “Are you kidding me? You even
try to dress like a real Nora. It’s pathetic. Those clothes barely even fit.”

Why do you care what clothes I’m wearing?” Rey asks, baffled.

“What? I don’t—that isn’t the point!” Snickers ripple around the room. Bast snarls, hands
clenching and unclenching, jaw fluttering. “You’ll never be one of us, outcast. You belong in the
wilds, and you’ll prove that all by yourself tomorrow when you fail the Proving. I don’t know what
trick you used to get in here, but there’s no way I’ll let you taint my tribe.”

And that—

That’s different. Frustration wells up, burning the back of her throat and hollowing out her
stomach. Outcast is the word she learned before any other, the very definition of her existence—
she knows what she is—but that has nothing to do with Bast. Nothing to do withany of them; not
Teb, not Teersa, not Oddy, not Unkar, not even Poe, Poe Dameron. It isn’t a trick and it’s barely a
choice. It’s not a bet on kind words or a dare that maybe the world is a little softer than it seems to
be. Rey is an outcast and she’s going to win the Proving anyway, and all of that is on her.

Whatever it takes.

Joining the tribe has never been her aim. Just answers, reasons—meaning something in amongst all
the muck and anger. The Nora say everything they do is right, but wreck everything that belongs to
Rey. Every gem of happiness, they steal. Every step she moves forward, they shove her back. Bast
says one thing but he’s really thinking another, and Rey can see it as clearly as if it were spelled out
in her Focus. Glass splinters through her bones.

“Are you going to throw a rock at me again, Bast?” she asks quietly, locking eyes with him.

Bast falters, mouth opening and closing before twisting into a grin. “You remember.”
I remember a nasty little boy who threw a rock at a girl when no adults were around and ran away
the moment you knew you were outmatched.” Something shifted, tilted, sparked, rose when she
talked to an outlander who smiled at her for no reason other than because he could, and it makes
sense in Rey’s messed up head now, because the only thing people are afraid of is what they don’t
understand. Rey isn’t, but—

Well—

… Yeah.

“I branded you that day to mark your shame,” he snarls.

“I get it. The only way you can feel brave is to make someone else afraid. You’re a bully, Bast,”
she says and Bast isn’t smiling anymore. “You think you can hurt me worse than nineteen years in
the wilds did? Or do you just want to see me bleed again? Is that what’ll make you feel better?”

“I’m not afraid of you,” Bast snaps, far, far too quickly. “I’m not afraid of anything!”

“Shouting something loud enough doesn’t make it true,” Rey replies coolly. “So, try and keep it
down. The rest of us want to sleep before tomorrow morning, not deal with your fragile ego.”

She walks away then, moving to the single bed squashed in amongst all the bunks, because it’s the
only one of its kind so it must be hers. Nobody tries to stop her, and Bast doesn’t follow. Doesn’t
say anything either. Rey’s glad. She’s shaking—shaking from the charge to her blood at being
confronted so openly, so viciously. Shaking from the unfairness of it all, the rage that dwindles but
never quite goes away.

One foot in front of the other. Breathe in. Breathe out.

Angry or not, she keeps her promises.

“You managed to get Bast to shut up. You’re something else.”

Rey turns as she unshoulders her bow, looks down at the dark-skinned girl laying on the bunk

The girl either doesn’t get the hint, or just ignores it. “I’m Vala,” she says, sitting up and sticking
out her hand the way Poe did. Rey hesitates. Shakes it quickly. And if she’s wishing for a larger,
more calloused hand and the gentle weight of a forehead pressed against her own—

That’s nobody else’s business, either.

“I’m Rey.”

“Oh no, the competition is who you are.” Vala leans back into her bedding, reaching under her
pillow and producing a handful of blueberries from—somewhere. She offers one, but Rey shakes
her head and Vala shrugs before popping them in her mouth. “Suit yourself. Word of advice,
though? Bast might talk too much, but he’s good enough to back it up. Most of it, anyway. It’s
going to be down to the three of us to win tomorrow.”

Rey places her weapons down carefully before sitting on her bunk, running her fingers through the
soft furs. It feels like she’s going to sink right through them. “Don’t take this personally, but I
already know who’s going to win tomorrow.”

“Ha,” Vala laughs, but it doesn’t sound like a laugh. “Ha, ha. Never celebrate a victory before it’s
earned, girl. My mother taught me that.”

Good for her, Rey doesn’t say, no matter how much it burns the surface of her tongue. What comes out instead, at shorter notice but infinitely more honest, is simply, “Mine didn’t.”

Vala doesn’t say anything to that. There’s too much packed into those two little words, splinters that pierce and stay no matter how hard you try to dig them free. Bast’s stinging contempt might not push them deeper, but the opposite is true of Vala; the skin scarred over them far too long ago to change that without blood as payment.

Rey doesn’t know what she’s supposed to do.

She lays down on her bed, sucking in enough air to keep her afloat. The cabin is small, barely enough room for every bed, bodies pressed close enough together the air swells with wisps and whorls of heat. There’s a smell to it too; wood and the familiar tang of fire, and something else. Something deeper, permeating, drifting off each person and mixing into its own unique thing that clings back until they all carry the same scent. Tangible belonging.

It’s a strange thought.

—

FN-2187 has been dreaming about them for as long as he can remember. Not every night, and sometimes they barely feature at all, but whenever they do, it always leaves him feeling… off. Unbalanced. Cracked open and with nothing to seal him closed, just ill-fitting fragments pasted over the rift to keep him standing, moving, breathing.

It’s a man and a woman, though if pressed to describe them, FN-2187 wouldn’t know what to say. Their features are clear in the dreams themselves, crystallised in startling clarity, colours saturated to the nines. The moment reality seeps back in, they fade, drain, hazy and indistinct. No matter how intense the dream or visceral the nightmare, the man and woman always fade, and it’s only years of exposure that’s branded them into FN-2187’s memory at all.

A pair of eyes, brighter than his own, spun gold in the right light, molten metal in the wrong.

A dimpled smile, sometimes soft enough to warm him to his very core, sometimes sharp enough to split skin at a glance.

And they—they do smile at him, these people, whoever they are. They run at his side, lift him over obstacles, point him the right way when he’s lost, stand behind and in front and always always wait for him to catch up. When endless noise is the only thing creating the ground he stands on, when he’s plummeting through space, drowning in malignant reds or spiced oranges, bleeding out sweet sapphire blues, skimming over lavender painted waves, burning alive over yellow scented candles. When he’s wandering an empty world, behemoths rumbling beneath his feet. When he’s pressed in on all sides by people and machines and a mix between the two, condensed, crushed, lost. Even in his most familiar night terror.

They are always on his side.

FN-2187’s dreams are vibrant and loud, deafening in more ways than one. The colours scream at his senses, leave him gasping, tangled in his sheets, trapped counting his breaths over and over until his heart rate settles and he can close his eyes without being blinded by the residual hues seared into the backs of his eyelids. He doesn’t go back to sleep, but it’s better that nobody finds out he never sleeps enough.
Slip knows. He won’t tell anyone, though, so FN-2187 isn’t too worried. However much empty space Slip floats through, struggling to pull his thoughts together, he never forgets the important stuff.

But FN-2187 never speaks of the people following him through his dreams. He might have done, once—it’s the only reason he would know it isn’t normal—but for twenty three years the wraiths have belonged to him and him alone, and as more time passes he swears their images are getting clearer. Closer. Reaching—

And then he wakes to blank eyes and empty earth and a sky always the exact same shade of blue, reality muffled by the faceless helmet moulded to his head, and—

He just—

He isn’t sure why it matters. Why any of this matters.

He doesn’t think he’s ever really known.

Routine is integral to FN-2187’s existence, a carefully laid out path swept free of dust and rocks and weeds, easy to follow and comforting in its predictability. Get up, eat, learn, train, sleep, repeat; a schematic for choice when more and more he’s losing track of what choice actually is. Travelling, as it turns out, is just another kind of routine. Liminal space from one point to the next filled with everything and nothing, transitional motion over sand then dust then brush then grass, and while he’s aware of the importance of their mission, he grew up being told the fate of the world would be down to him and his fellows. Just because he’s walking more doesn’t mean he’s going anywhere different.

He spars with Nines most evenings because the other trooper is the definition of restless energy and it’s just easier for everyone if he has an outlet, and FN-2187 always enjoys trying to get Nines to smile during them anyway. He argues with Zeroes about whether a Sharpshot bow is better than a War bow when it’s their troop’s turn to craft arrows—the answer is yes, obviously—and is entirely too smug when they have to take down a herd of Grazers and Zeroes only manages to down one compared to FN-2187’s three. He keeps his eye on Slip, nudging him back on course whenever he strays and listening to whatever titbits Slip picks up about their environment from the other troopers, because people tend to talk more around Slip when they think he can’t actually listen.

(Dumbasses.)

So, he learns they have Pitchcliff under order, but they’ve held off taking Free Heap for some reason, which is why they had to take that detour through the river before making it to Dawn’s Sentinel. The higher they go, the colder it gets, pearls of frost sitting atop the grass in the mornings and swathes of dove-grey clouds occasionally dousing them in hours of rain. FN-2187 has never been this wet or muddy in his life.

He barely understood mud was a thing.

But there are other whispers as well, sliding away from Captain Phasma’s chrome gaze in muted gestures and sidelong glances. Hushed speculation that has nothing to do with Luke Skywalker or the Nora or what they’re actually supposed to be here for.

“Why would they need to dig for machines, Slip? Machines are everywhere,” Nines grumbles as he
flicks his foot to get the icy river water off it, little dark specks spitting onto the foliage beside the bank.

“It’s a new kind of machine, they said,” Slip replies with a shrug. “The kind of machine that can control other machines.”

It’s just the four of them, the other members of their troop further down the river, all of them cleaning their armour in preparation for tonight’s attack. Darkness has long since fallen, a crescent moon grinning ghoulishly at them as it drips quicksilver light down the sides of the mountains, woods and water. Shadow and metal. The perfect time to strike armoured in white amongst snow.

And showing up covered in mud and road-grime wouldn’t be nearly as threatening, FN-2187 supposes.

“They’ve got dig sites all over the Sundom,” Zeroes says thoughtfully, trying to tie his shin guard back in place with trembling fingers. There’s no point offering help. None of them have felt warm for days. “They must be looking for something.”

“Yeah, but, a machine controlling other machines? How are they going to control that machine?”

“Focuses, maybe,” FN-2187 offers. “Nearly all the officers have one now.”

“I wonder why they can’t control regular machines with them, then,” Slip hums. He’s got his knees pulled up to his chest and his arms wrapped around them, head tilted back to watch the moon rise with a little smile. His helmet sits beside him—the only part of his armour still to be put back on.

“Must be made up differently,” Zeroes says, standing and wriggling his leg around to make sure the armour sits comfortably. “They just do their own thing as long as nobody comes close, right? Maybe the buried machines were made to work for people instead.”

“Maybe they were buried for a reason, then.” FN-2187 wipes a hand across the face of his helmet, fingers aching in the chill. His helmet stares back at him—the only part of his armour still to be put back on.

“We still don’t know if it’s even true,” Nines mutters.

“No,” Slip agrees. “It’s just what I heard. It’s what all the troopers heading to Devil’s Grief kept talking about. Imagine if you could fight beside a Thunderjaw—or a Stormbird.”

They all pause at that—Nines in the middle of putting on his boot and Zeroes holding his helmet and FN-2187 staring into the dark depths of trees surrounding them on all sides. The silence is deep, as if the whole world is pausing to listen in, waiting to steal the thoughts spilling into the air around them, forming metal giants in the shadows and storm clouds rumbling beneath their feet. Utterly devastating.

(He doesn’t think he’d like that world very much.)

Nines whistles, long and low. “That’d be something. Meridian wouldn’t stand a chance.”

FN-2187 swallows his fear and puts his helmet on. “Come on,” he says, offering a hand to help Slip up. “We’re going to be late.”

Slip smiles and takes his hand and FN-2187 can only wonder why his mouth tastes like ash and dust.

Too many dreams.
When the ground beneath FN-2187’s feet threatens to break apart, routine steadies his footing. It keeps him alive through all the things he’s made himself forget.

He’s a soldier. He’s led hunts on machines and chased down enemies for capture and guarded caravans through endlessly shifting dunes. He exists to protect, and while he hasn’t killed another person since the thief, he absolutely would do it. Will do it.

Marching up to the village doesn’t feel different from any other mission he’s ever been on. He falls in with his troop, bow in hand and arrow knocked—because he will do it, watch him—and keeps moving even when yells and screams start rising from the village. Arrows spit out of the gloom, thudding into the earth, cracking off frost-bitten stone. Through the thin lens of his visor, FN-2187 watches the shadows atop the watchtowers contort and fall. Puppets with their strings cut.

Nines and Zeros are somewhere out in front. Slip is at his side. They run over the uneven earth, shooting at anything attempting movement, using offence to keep them safe without cover. Fires spurt upwards over the meagre huts, orange hues lighting the open land, and for a moment FN-2187 can see the other troops attacking from the opposite side, Captain Phasma blazing amongst them. Already in the village as planned. Slaughtering anyone who dares to resist.

Like they were trained to do.

And FN-2187 falters. Just for a moment. Just to clear the flares from his pupils. They’re almost there and it isn’t any different, they’re here to do exactly what they’re supposed to, they—

A woman goes down in a spray of blood, falling in front of a man on his knees clutching a lump of blankets to his chest—

A teenager charges, spear in hand, screaming as an arrow plunges into their thigh and they keep running—

A man with his hands raised, pressing back a group of people behind him, protecting them with every inch of his body—

It’s just a moment—

He only pauses for one second—

Doesn’t see the arrow flying through the space his head should have been—

But he does see it go into Slip’s neck.

Ten paces from the village, Slip crumples, tumbling down in splashes of scarlet and silver. FN-2187 follows, heart lurching, bruising against the inside of his ribcage, knees skidding over dirt as he grabs onto Slip—like he always does, holding on to keep Slip from getting lost. Slip spasms in his arms, flailing arm jerking against his quiver, sending arrows clattering uselessly to the side, blood splattering across them—

Blood. Pouring over Slip’s breastplate, sliding slick and wet over both their hands as they paw uselessly at the arrow. Knee-jerk. Numb desperation.

FN-2187 is very, very cold.

“Sev?”
It’s a cough, a choke, a retch. There’s a clawing in FN-2187’s throat threatening to bring up the same, but when he opens his mouth nothing comes. He can’t—there’s nothing he can do? The other troopers have moved away and the yelling from the village is a distant thought. No more arrows fall. Slip spasms and bleeds and gurgles. Ghostly in the pale moonlight. Slipping away no matter how tightly FN-2187 holds on.

*This is what you are meant to do,* FN-2187 thinks blankly. *We stand together, or we do not stand at all.*

“S—ev?”

Slip stops fumbling with the arrow, reaching out instead. His hand bumps against FN-2187’s helmet, slides down, twitching uselessly. Bitter iron stings FN-2187’s nose. Splinters through him.

“Slip,” he says and nothing else. “Slip.”

And he moves, the name spilling off his tongue like saying it will make it real, make Slip *stay.* He’s fully prepared to drag Slip all the way back to Sunfall even if kills him because *fuck,* he is not going to let Slip die in some stupid village because of some stupid old man because Slip *deserves better.* He deserves to *live* and FN-2187 has no idea what that actually *means* but he wants Slip to do it anyway, wants anything other than *this*—

Slip is lying on the ground, hands at his sides, shuddering once, then unmoving. Helmet staring sightlessly at the moon.

Lifelessly.

All FN-2187 can see is red.

—

*My Poe is hurting again.*

*He’s always hurting, but this is one of the worse times because he isn’t smiling to try and hide his hurt. He’s running and I’m following, and we’ve been running for [02:18:03] and my Poe is very tired.*

*We’re going the wrong way because [First Order Bastards] are all over the place when they shouldn’t be. This is not their territory and they shouldn’t be stealing it. Every time we try to get away to [Daytower] they’re there, filling up the space, and we have to backtrack and find another way while they search for us. It’s night now, but it’ll be dawn [approx. 0734] and humans see far easier in the light. We have to run. We cannot let them catch us.*

*My Poe is hurting, because he’s always hurting, he’s been hurting ever since I got him, but now he hurts even worse because of all the people he had to leave behind. It doesn’t matter that he didn’t know them. They helped and my Poe is certain they’re now gone.*

*He’s breathing too unevenly/erratically/irregularly. Heart rate [83%] higher. Body temperature [100.1 °F].*

*But we cannot let them catch us.*

[“We should just go south. Nora don’t know shit about the map.”]

*“Yeah, but they’ll be pretty fucking curious as to why a member of a royal delegation is skulking*
about their lands instead of in Mother’s Heart,” my Poe says, overbalancing/sitting beside an outcrop of rock. He rests his head on his knees, panting. “Really don’t want to have to explain that one.”

[“‘Better explaining than dying.’”]

“They might not even give me that chance.” He scrubs at his face with his jacket. His eyes are suffering extreme irritation. “Shit, okay—just give me a sec. I just need to breathe for a sec.”

[“‘You’re right about that. Let’s not run anywhere for the next year after this.’”]

My Poe doesn’t laugh, but he does huff/snorl a little. I let him breathe then and scan the area for any approaching threats. We’ve circled a long way. The village is close again. Striders are nearby, but they haven’t been disturbed recently. Or maybe just didn’t record the event. Striders never pay attention to anything.

Other than that, it’s very quiet, the quiet that always comes with night time, and though there’s nothing nearby that can hurt my Poe, there’s nothing that can help him either.

I will, but he’s too busy trying to protect me. He cares about me, and he cares about the map, and it hurts him. So, I will protect him, because he never thinks about himself and never lets anyone else do it either.

“I think… I think you’re going to have to get to Daytower by yourself, BeeBee.”

[“What? No! I’m not leaving you!”]

I rock back and forth, run up against his shins and stay there. My Poe looks at me. Rests a hand beside my sensor.

“Hey, it’s not forever. Not for long at all, okay? But you can roll right past the machines and we need to keep that map safe. If we don’t, there was no point to any of this at all.”

I don’t care about the point. I don’t care about the map. I don’t care I don’t care ĩ¬q’ou’s‘f¬c’ç’ô¬t¬è’

[“I don’t care! I’m not fucking going—I don’t care—I’m not leaving you by yourself, you’re hurt and they’ll kill you if they find you—I don’t care—”]

“Whoa, calm your speech processors, little Beep.”

I don’t care. I want my Poe to stop hurting, I want to keep him safe, because he never lets anyone else do it, but I’m here now and I’m going to keep him safe.

“Of course you are. You’ve always got my back,” my Poe is saying. I press against him tighter. “You’re right about heading to the Nora. It’s our best bet—my best bet. I don’t know how they’ll react to you. It’s just for a little while longer—you head to Daytower, I’ll head south and find Karé and the rest of them, and we’ll be together again in no time.”

[“I don’t care. I don’t want to go.”]

My Poe’s face tightens that way faces do when they’re upset/frustrated/scared. He rubs my chassis and I feel static gravitate to his touch. “Please, BeeBee,” he says quietly. “I won’t make it an order, but… please. This is important to me, okay?”
I'm hurting him. I'm hurting my Poe by staying but I’ll hurt him by leaving, but if I get caught he’ll never forgive himself, but if he’s all by himself anything could happen.

So, what’s the right answer?

[“I don’t think I like Luke fucking Skywalker very much.”]

“Oh my god, BeeBee, please don’t set that as his name.”

[“I’ll stop calling him Luke fucking Skywalker when we’re both back in Meridian.”]

“Deal.”

My Poe is smiling. I don’t know if it’s a real smile.

But he smiles and I roll back and he stands and he doesn’t shake anymore. We aren’t running, it’s too quiet for running, but we do fast walk around the rock outcropping and head down towards a little patch of trees. We are heading south. Soon I will go west.

Right now, I’m looking at my Poe, because he is tired and scared and angry and hurting, and I don’t want to do this. I want to keep him safe. But my Poe says he’ll be back and I believe him because my Poe keeps his promises. He will come back.

He will come back.

And we make it to the trees and my Poe is saying, “Keep an eye out for Snapmaws,” like a joke and he is making me leave and the Striders are calm but they are very far away now and we come up over a little rise and it’s dark and I’m looking at my Poe and suddenly right in front of us—Someone is standing there.

Someone is standing there.

And he is not wearing armour but I see his weapon, I see his face. He already knows he is a threat. I already know he is a threat. I already know he is a threat. I already know he is a threat.

Chapter End Notes

BB-8!!!! I think he's my favourite character to write so far. It's fun exploring how a droid might think and messing around with formatting to reflect that. One(1) smol boi love his one(1) idiot human

Rey is trying. And also not trying. It's a mixed bag when you try to integrate amongst people who've shunned you your entire life. But she likes Poe and Poe likes her so it isn’t all bad.

Slip is... not okay. Yah. I regret nothing.

There’s a couple more things I’ve got to set up, but all of them should happen next chapter, and then we are INTO it. I am EXCITE... though I’ve got a bunch of
assignments due soon so I don't know when the next chapter will be. I'll do my best to get it done soon.

Let me know what you think!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!