Be Here Now

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Be Here Now

by Bluestem

Summary

Taking place directly after TFA, Finn comes to terms with his brutal First Order upbringing while trying to adapt to life on D'Qar. The one constant through it all is Poe, who helps the wounded ex-trooper find his feet again. As the two grow closer to one another, a surprising lead takes them on an journey towards the heart of the Dark Side.

Slow burn, patience required. Will eventually become quite adult.
Poe sat with his squadron, what was left of red and blue teams, in the uncharacteristically subdued messhall. It was a long, low ceilinged room with rough stone walls. Creeping roots from the plant life outside snaked through cracks in the ancient ceiling. Boxes and crates of supplies lay scattered about like piles of leaves after a storm had passed through. Scuffed, off-white tables stretched in rows from the entrance to the buffet line, leaving a wide aisle in between. Except for a few of the nocturnal species, most of the base was there, eating an early breakfast. There were low smatterings of conversation, but these were tremulous and unsure; now that the warm euphoria of victory had had time to dull, the absence of friends and comrades was keenly felt. Silence felt more appropriate.

Beside him Snap Wexley and Yolo Ziff sat hunched and quietly eating. Across from him sat Jess Pava, Niv Lek, and Bastian. Their eyes were on their trays of food. Jess pushed her meal around half-heartedly. Poe studied the conspicuously empty seats around them, where Ello Asty, Furillo, Merrin Tall, and many others should have been sitting with them. Poe pulled his eyes away from the painful gaps, his throat tight. He’d lost friends before; you couldn’t avoid it in this line of work—but never so many and all at once. Half the fleet, he mused morosely. Guiltiness swarmed icily through his chest, constricting claws digging into his heart. He was familiar with the sensation; as their leader, he felt he should’ve done more, somehow, to have assured their survival, even when in the back of his mind he knew that he had done all that he could.

A week previous, directly after their victory, General Organa had held an assembly to honor those who had given their last breaths to defend the galaxy and uphold the ideals of the Resistance. She had looked small, standing alone upon the stage before her podium, but as tough and fierce as a mother rancor, her eyes hard as steel. Not a person in the hall remained unmoved at the sight of her, their indomitable leader, she who had lost more than any of them, standing tall beyond her stature so it seemed that the high ceiling could hardly contain her, and the hearts of all within were filled with her strength. Poe felt as if a flame had been kindled in his chest. She had called out in a firm, unbending voice the names of the dead and each was honored with silence. Not even the name of General Han Solo could defeat her, though Poe had noticed her hands had clenched white upon the podiums edges. Posthumous medals had been awarded, ranks raised in death. Poe’s composure had nearly unraveled at the seams when Snap began crying into his hand; Snap and Ello had always played at a friendly rivalry, competing to see who would make it to the rank of Major first. Ello had beaten him in the end.

Poe and BB-8, his remaining pilots and their droids, Chewbacca, and the young woman Poe had briefly met and knew as Rey, stood apart from the assembled crowd. Poe understood that General Organa meant to honor them, and he had wished that she wouldn’t. He could never have done what he’d done without his team, and most had sacrificed more than he.

But one by one she had called their names and they’d found themselves lining stiffly up beside her, receiving medals of bravery and standing for applause. She had called Poe’s actions ‘heroically brave’, taken his hand in both of hers, had thanked him for firing the shots that had destroyed Starkiller Base, called him a ‘true and compassionate leader’. He’d been given the rank of Colonel. All those assembled had stood, saluted, and cheered for him, including Leia herself; his fellow pilots thumped him on the back with joy. He’d never felt such a potent combination of gratitude and grief in all of his life and for a long while afterwards he could not speak.

General Organa had extolled Finn’s role loudly, for most did not know him personally; from Finn’s rescuing of Poe from certain death and his role in bringing BB-8 back to headquarters, to the vital information about Starkiller base that he had given them, without which they would all be dead. She
praised his bravery in breaking free from the indoctrinated cruelty of the First Order. He proved, she said, that the inherent goodness in all life often only needed a chance to show itself. That the First Order had been unable to smother the light of even one man showed how truly desperate and fragile the regime’s grip upon the galaxy was. Pride had swelled through Poe’s chest upon hearing these words—he’d wished Finn had been there to share them, and to hear the thunderous applause and accolades that were due to him.

Rey had been honored, though none but the senior officers knew who she was or what part she’d played in the battle. Like Poe, Leia had pinned the gold medal of bravery upon her chest. She stood awkwardly before the crowd, overwhelmed with the praising acknowledgement of strangers, and blinking back tears. She looked as grateful as Poe felt when they were given leave to step down from the stage. She’d sat heavily with Chewbacca and her face was a study in worry and exhaustion. Though he hardly knew her, Poe admired her greatly. BB-8 had told him all that Rey had done for the droid; how she’d taken him in, protected him, fought off junkers and smugglers to keep the droid safe. How she’d left her home—her life—behind to get the droid back to the Resistance. And she was Finn’s friend. She had saved Finn. Poe owed her more than he could ever express, though she didn’t know it. He’d meant to tell her.

As the assembly broke and parted, and Poe had given “thank yous” and accepted hand-shakes and hugs from what felt like half the crowd, he’d seen Leia approach Rey and Chewbacca, and Poe had felt suddenly like an intruder in the midst of a family’s grief. He’d held respectfully back, watching, listening half-heartedly to the chatter of Snap and Jess. Chewbacca had stood, physically dwarfing the General, though he hugged her as gently as if she were made of glass and might shatter at the slightest touch. Leia had said something to him, nodding, and then she turned to Rey. The hand she’d placed upon Rey’s shoulder was motherly, full of the permission to feel and to be supported. She had led the young woman away, back to the General’s quarters, two solid forms fading together into the dim corridor. Poe had watched them go, understanding in his gut that there was some connection between the two, though he couldn’t put his finger on it.

And six days ago Rey had left aboard the Millennium Falcon along with Chewbacca and Luke Skywalker’s famous old astromech droid, R2-D2. It was, Poe had realized as he’d gathered with Leia and a handful of other officers to see them off, the Force that had drawn him to Rey, just as it had drawn him to Leia; a warm, enlivening, benign pull. He’d grinned as he’d watched the Falcon roar away into the clear blue sky, shrinking to a dust mote drifting silently on clean breeze. Because of all of their efforts and sacrifices, because of Rey’s innate connection to the Force, the Jedi would return. The galaxy would heal. The thought had cheered him for the rest of the day.

His cheerfulness had now dulled and fallen away like an old husk, as he sat with his silent friends in the silent messhall. Tension pulled at his neck and jaw. He wanted to be doing something, anything; reconnaissance runs, sex, ground work, packing—anything to get his mind off how helpless he felt while waiting for orders from above. It was a dangerous, fragile moment for the Resistance. The whole tangled spider web of planetary allegiances threatened to shatter into a million conflicting agendas, as government’s reassessed threats, relationships, and how their personal interests could be furthered by this new conflict. Poe knew it was only a short step back into the chaos of the dark times before the Old Republic. The Senate, Government, Fleet, and the star system that had sheltered the fledgling, but stable Republic, had all been obliterated. What remained in unity was now in hurried communication with the Resistance; Core worlds transmitted back and forth with such frequency and urgency that the communications crew had not slept for days.

The Resistance, the offshoot that the Republic had been hesitant to condone, would become the new rallying point for the rest of the galaxy. At least, for those members of the galaxy that did not condone mass genocide and the destruction of planets and systems. In the Republic that Poe had previously served, Leia had been slandered as a ‘damaged renegade’ or ‘warmonger’; at least, those
were the more polite terms that governmental elitists had used to publically denounce her. Now she stood elevated on high as the bearer of truth, the one who had argued, fought, and pleaded for the Republic to listen to her. People would flock to her now. Poe expected that the Resistance would soon have more new recruits than they’d know what to do with, once the senior officials had corroborated with their allies and put out the word. Poe rubbed his brow. If only they had listened. Poe fiddled with his food and then wished that he understood coding, translations, and encryption well enough to be of use for the communications staff. He’d spent most of his time over the past week with his crew or sitting at Finn’s bedside waiting for him to wake.

He jolted slightly in his seat as his com unit buzzed in his chest pocket, hopeful excitement coursing through him. He brought the small device to his ear.

“Poe here.” He said. Finally, something. He’d expected to hear General Organa’s voice, but it was instead the warm, often sarcastic tones of Major Kalonia. His heart leapt.

“Ah, Commander I—sorry: Colonel. I’ve got some good news for you.” Major Kalonia’s voice was a breath of fresh air, clearing out all the worry and tension from his mind like so many cobwebs. He knew what she was about to say before she’d had the chance and a wide grin stretched his face. His crew glanced to each other then and up at him in confusion, anticipating orders and more than ready to abandon the pretense of eating. He’d already risen from his seat as the physician carried on.

“I’ve decided that Finn’s condition has stabilized enough to bring him out of his medically induced coma. I thought you might like to be here—I’m sure he’ll have questions when he comes to, and you can answer them better than I.”

“I’m on my way, Major.” A laugh threatened to muddle his words. He slipped the com back into his pocket, his mood now as buoyant as it had been despondent.

“Well?” Jess was hovering off her seat, ready to spring into action.

“It’s Finn—Major Kalonia’s getting ready to bring him round.” He said, excitedly.

“Hey, that’s great!” Snap said with a stalwart nod. Jess and the others showed varying degrees of excitement and disappointment. Like Poe, they had been hoping for a mission to get them moving again. The news of their newest recruit coming round was, of course, heartening, but hardly enough to rouse their spirits.

“Keep an ear out; I get any commands, I’ll let you know.” Poe left the table and walked quickly down the main aisle. BB-8 detached itself from the motley cluster of Astromechs it usually talked with when Poe was engaged in what the droid called ‘organic matters’, such as eating, and rolled up alongside him. Poe returned a flurry of waves and nodded ‘hellos’ as he passed by his comrades; his dashing bravado and talent had always made him a popular figure within the Resistance. Now, after the award ceremony, he found himself riding an atmospherically high wave of attention. He’d never had so many people eyeing him or slapping him on the back in his life; he felt he’d soon have a permanent dent from it all.

BB-8 found itself fawned over as well. Women, especially, oohed and aahed over the little round droid, though BB-8 suspected this was only a ploy to get closer to Poe. Poe remained good-natured over the attention, though he found it somewhat wearying to hear his name springing out at him from all over base, as randomly as the flea-ticks that had once infested the place. He could hardly walk into a refresher unit without being ambushed with praise. Though it did have certain perks, the desire for popularity had never been why he took on the toughest missions he could get—with his skills, the legacy of his parent’s bravery, and the sacrifices of his comrades, he could never be
content with doing anything other than his best. That, and he loved the simple joy of flying.

[What’s going on?] BB-8’s warbling chatter drew him out of his thoughts as they descended a sharp-edged flight of stairs. The droid rolled it’s body forwards, thunked down one stone step, and then quickly pulled it’s head backwards to keep from overbalancing. Again it rolled forwards, dropped a step, and counterbalanced. In this awkward manner, the spherical droid was able to tackle what looked to be, for it, an impossible obstacle. Poe slowed his steps without thinking so that the droid could keep up with him.

“Major Kalonia just commed—she’s getting ready to wake Finn up.”

The droid bleeped excitedly. [Good! Finn will be glad to know Starkiller Base is gone.]

“Yeah, no kidding.” Poe agreed. He wanted desperately to hear from Finn what had happened to him on Starkiller Base. He knew only that he and Rey had faced off against Kylo Ren, and that Rey had, amazingly, defeated him. A shudder curled through Poe’s body as he remembered the searing pain of Kylo Ren forcing his way tortuously into his mind and thoughts. How Finn and Rey had managed to fight him, a beast who could freeze bodies and blaster-bolts in midair, was absolutely beyond Poe.

BB-8 was relieved when they reached the mercifully flat landing and hallway that led to medbay. The room was large and open, though dimly lit. There were few partitions, and these screened the beds of only the most grievously injured. Clear displays glowed gently from bedides, tracing the blue zig-zags of heartbeats, the steady flow of blood pressure, and the functionality of lungs. Poe walked quietly through the room, careful to avoid the tubes and wires that fed into life-support systems and patients alike. BB-8 took a longer path around, wanting to risk no hurt to slender wires in rolling over them. Poe found Dr. Kalonia peering into the display that stood to the right of Finn’s bedside. Her long, gentle face was ghostly lit from the wavering, but stable lines. Her dark eyes swept to Poe and she turned from the display, smiling.

“Good, glad you could make it, Colonel.” She bustled to a wheeled, metal tray and removed a rectangular device covered in buttons, and calibrated the neuro-reactor for Finn’s particular anatomy. Poe watched her fiddle with the device for a few seconds and then looked down at Finn.

He lie as Poe had last seen him, clothed in clean white and absolutely still upon his intensive care pod. The nature of his injury had prevented him from being submerged in a bacta tank—the unstable, free-floating movement could have snapped delicate, exposed nerves like old elastic bands. Because the wound had been cauterized instantly, Kalonia had been forced to perform the complex surgery of re-opening the gash and its severed nerves, veins, and blood vessels so that it could heal properly. Poe had felt sick when she’d told him that. After the surgery, the wound had been coated with a form of bacta-gel to facilitate the reconnection of nerves and tissue, and then tightly bound. Dr. Kalonia was unsure if the treatment would be successful—she had never before treated the victim of a lightsaber strike, much less a lightsaber strike to the spine.

Poe’s stomach tightened fearfully as he looked into Finn’s peacefully resting face. What if Finn couldn’t walk? What if he was paralyzed? He’d have to get some sort of cybernetic implants, and the rehabilitation would be long and horribly painful. Come on, buddy… Poe urged as if the other man could hear him, and as if it would do any good, come on, you’re gonna be alright.

Kalonia knelt forwards, bringing the neuro-reactor to Finn’s left temple. There was a soft buzzing and then Finn’s eyes slowly opened. Poe took a step forwards, his hand on Finn’s arm as the ex-trooper came blearily out of his coma. Finn groaned slightly as a dull ache worked through his back and joints.
“Don’t sit up, Finn. Just move your toes for me, if you can.” Kalonia said.

“Where am I?” Finn slurred thickly. It took a while for the dark room to swim into focus. It was like looking through a greasy pane of glass. He saw the ghost-pale form Kalonia standing beside him, carefully studying the glowing display. He thought dazedly about his toes, and why anyone should want him to move them, and what a strange request that was. But the command left his brain all the same, and first right and then left, he was able to do as Kalonia asked. He watched the doctor smile as if in slow motion. It took years for both ends of her mouth to lift. Finn felt a dull, squeezing pressure on his arm and turned his head as if it weighed a thousand pounds. Poe’s concerned face swam into focus like a dream, pale, and drawn, his dark eyes intense and frightened. A small, confused smile came to Finn’s lips. “Poe?”

“Hey, buddy.” Poe breathed in relief, his grip tightening on Finn’s arm. “How’re you feeling?”

BB-8 burbled a greeting, but the mechanical notes were lifted up and swirled and merged into the gentle beeps of life-support systems, and were lost in the depths of Finn’s mind. He closed his eyes again, caught for a moment in the dull, comfortable space between sleep and wakefulness. When he opened them, the blurriness had sharpened into concrete forms and shapes.

“Life-signs are steady and he’s coming out of it nicely. He’s a lucky man.” Kalonia smiled at the display. She turned to Poe. “I’ll leave you two to talk—but not for very long. He needs to rest up yet. And keep him from moving; he’s scarred over, but just barely.”

“Right, thanks Major.” Poe nodded as she wheeled her tray of equipment to the next patient. He pulled up the chair he’d been occupying off and on for the past week and sat near to Finn, watching as slow consciousness pooled in Finn’s dark eyes.

“Poe…what happened? Where am I?” Finn slurred, still feeling that he was half in a dream. His mouth seemed heavy, rubbery.

“You’re at headquarters, on D’Qar.” Poe answered. “Finn…we did it. We destroyed Starkiller Base.” He smiled then, so hugely relieved at Finn’s awakening and the destruction of Starkiller that he could hardly contain it. He found his eyes were glossy.

“We…that’s right!” Finn gasped suddenly, jolting into full awareness as if he’d had a vat of ice-water poured over him. He moved to sit up but cried out softly, grimacing as pain swarmed up from his spine. Poe was standing in an instant, gently but insistently pressing him back against the bed.

“Easy, Finn. You can’t move yet, you can’t get up.”

Finn’s face was twisted with wild worry, and the beeping of the display sped. “Rey, is she alright? Kylo Ren, he—”

Poe cut him off, taking Finn’s hand as he sat down again. “It’s okay—she’s fine.” He squeezed soothingly. “She defeated him. General Leia said she used the Force. She was strong enough to stop him.”

A shaking breath tripped out of Finn’s mouth. “Really? The Force? That’s…that’s incredible! I knew there was something special about her. But…where is she?” His eyes swept the room and there was a note of sadness in his voice, as if he’d expected her at his bedside awakening as well.

Poe forced himself to ignore it. “She left yesterday morning. You’ll never guess where she’s going.” He smiled.

“Where?” Finn asked, his eyes locked desperately on Poe’s.
“She’s going to train with Luke Skywalker. She’s going to bring him back to us, and become a Jedi herself.” Poe nodded, still amazed. “We’ve finally got some hope again.”

“Luke Skywalker,” Finn murmured in confusion. “But, I thought BB-8 only had part of the map?”

“He did, but Luke’s old R2 unit woke up and guess what he’d been cataloging for all those years he’d been in low power mode? The rest of the map he’d lifted from the Empire I don’t know how long ago.”

Finn’s mouth hung open, his eyes widening comically. “So…we did it? We really did it?”

Poe nodded with a knowing grin, squeezing Finn’s hand again. Finn could feel something welling up within him, and his mouth trembled. He was crying suddenly, a huge weight he’d never expected to be rid of suddenly falling from his shoulders.

“It’s gone,” He choked, raising a half-dead arm to wipe at his eyes. Poe watched him with pity and understanding. Finn gripped Poe’s hand tightly, as if it were an anchor he could moor to. The last shackle of Finn’s previous self had fallen free, the weapon that had represented fear, self-loathing, and the impossibility of escape or of true change. It was gone. Finn felt suddenly like a child, could feel the universe thrumming with limitless, bright possibility. All he had to do now was reach out and accept whatever version of himself he wanted to be.

A laugh burst through Finn’s sobs, and then he was laughing as if a fountain of mirth had surged free from a well deep within him. He laughed himself into silence, shaking slightly, heedless of the pain in his back, and he looked up into Poe’s grinning face. “We did it.” Finn breathed

“We did it.” Poe agreed warmly. “The General gave a huge ceremony when we got back—I wish you could’ve been there, Finn.” He shook his head slightly. “She gave a whole speech about you; about how brave you were to save me and escape the First Order, about how you and Rey helped BB-8, and how you gave us the intel on Starkiller base. It was good stuff—way more inspiring than what I just said.”

“Really?” Finn asked. This was more strange and alien than the removal of Starkiller Base from the galaxy. No one had ever made a speech about him; those traits that the Resistance extolled had been liabilities in the First Order. It was mind boggling to picture people cheering for him.

“Yeah. Also, you’ve got a few medals. We’ll get them for you when you’re up.”

“Medals?” Finn gaped.

“Of course. You’re a hero now, Finn.”

“Huh.” Finn looked away from Poe and up through the ceiling. “That’s crazy.”

“Me and Rey got a few of our own too.”

“Really? Well, of course you did, you’re a commander.” Fin smiled, yawning, tired in spite of himself. “But good,” he nodded, “I’m glad Rey got some medals too, after what she did.” He shook his head hollowly. “I thought for sure Ren would kill us both.”

“No on both accounts, thankfully. And it’s Colonel, now.” Poe arched a brow.

“Colonel? Nice! So—how’d it happen? I remember Solo…” he broke off suddenly, his eyes focusing urgently on Poe. “Poe—Solo—he died down there.”
“We know…Rey told the General everything.”

Finn nodded mutely, his mouth working. Solo had been gruff with him, but honest. Almost how he imagined a father to be. It stung to have lost him so quickly. “Did it help? Setting those charges around the thermal oscillator? It was his idea.”

“It saved the day. We must’ve done ten attack runs on that thing and we couldn’t put a dent in it.” Poe shook his head. “We were getting picked off like flies. Honestly,” he admitted for the first time, “I didn’t think we’d make it. But those charges opened up a hole for us. I got in took and it out.”

Finn huffed a laugh through his nose. “Of course it was you.” Finn yawned suddenly. “One hell of a pilot. The best…” His voice trailed off as sleep reached out for him.

Poe smiled, satisfaction coursing warmly through his veins. Finn’s easy praise blew all the accolades and medals he’d ever received out of the water. He was glad of Finn’s hand, glad to the depth of his being that Finn had woken up, and that he was whole. Impulsively, he leaned forwards, one hand on Finn’s shoulder; the other still clasped around the ex-troopers hand, and lightly he pressed his lips against Finn’s.

Nearly asleep, Finn felt the gentle pressure. It made him smile slightly and the thought that’s nice drifted hazily through his mind and then he was asleep.

Poe pulled away, his eyes sweeping over Finn’s face. He wondered if he should have kissed him. It had felt right to do so, but he worried that perhaps Finn would see things differently when he woke and had had time to think about it. If Finn remembered it at all. Well, too late now. He mused. He turned at the sound of light footsteps. Dr. Kalonia emerged, holding a datapad in her hand.

“I was just coming to split you two up.” She gave him a sardonic smile. “He’s doing alright, then?”

“Yes,” Poe met her knowing glance with uncharacteristic bashfulness, though he kept hold of Finn’s hand. “Pretty happy about the whole ‘Starkiller Base’ thing.”

“That should go without saying.” She motioned Poe away from his bedside, and pilot and droid followed after her as she led them back to her main station; a circular desk of monitors and display grids at which some of her aides sat hunched over delicate medical instruments or studying incomprehensible test results. Poe tore his eyes from them and looked up at Kalonia.

She held the slender datapad before them, and on it was a live image of what Poe realized was Finn’s skeletal and neural systems. What looked almost like blue static flowed from his skull down to his toes. It reminded Poe of vids he’d seen of blood cells coursing through a vein. “So far it looks like the electrical impulses are traveling freely through his spinal cord. It doesn’t seem that he will have any lasting impairments.”

“That’s good,” Poe breathed.

“He’ll always have a rather large scar, though.” Kalonia pointed out.

Poe shrugged, “I don’t mind scars.”

She grinned. “I didn’t think you would, Colonel. Shall I alert you when he’s up and about?”

Poe nodded, aware of a blush creeping hotly across his face and glad of the half-darkness. “That’d be good. How long do you think…?”

“In a few days, I’d imagine. I want to do one last check on his scar, and run him through some
routine sensory tests to make sure his nerves are functioning. After that, he’s free to leave—though the rehabilitation process may be lengthy.”

Poe nodded, biting his lip somewhat. “Thanks, Kalonia. I’ll see you later.”

“Until then, Poe.”
BB-8 whirred and beeped, the sound bleating into Poe's headset as Black One approached the gently glowing blue and green orb of D'Qar. Poe wondered just how many more times he'd make the same approach. He knew that General Organa was in communication with allies on Corescant, Naboo, Mon Cala, and Corellia; whether she was looking for a new base of operations or planning something else entirely was up in the air. None of them expected an instant retaliatory attack from the First Order, for it was surely in frantic disarray after the pounding it'd taken. But then, the Resistance and the Rebellion before it hadn't survived by laying back and hoping their enemies were catching their breath. Sooner or later, they would have to move. He would miss D'Qar and it's shadowy halo of asteroids; the lush, towering forests that ringed the base round had always reminded him of his childhood home on Yavin IV. He tried to etch the vision of it, peaceful, verdant, into his mind's eye.

It was good to be flying, even if it was only to release a few sentinel probes at the edge of the system. After days of sitting on his hands, ducking praise, and tinkering needlessly on his ship, General Organa had finally called him in. The mission was simple and pragmatic: Release all the probe, sentinel droids, and long distance scanners the base owned. They would know in a matter of seconds if a ship at light speed so much as sneezed the system over. The movement of flight, of being utterly in-tune with his ship also kept him from thinking about Finn.

BB-8's voice sounded again and Poe snapped out of his reverie. "Sorry, what?"

From it's perch directly behind the cockpit, BB-8 tossed it's head back in a droid version of an eye roll and impatiently repeated it's query. [It looks like a severe weather system is moving towards base from the east at 20 knots. I see a lot of electronic discharge. Do you want to alter our approach vector?]

"Oh, don't worry—we'll miss that by a mile. I'll just skim it and slip right under the radar." Poe grinned to himself. It was always a thrill to ride the top of a big storm, feeling the ship bucking around him on the edge of control. BB-8 groaned.

[Last time you did that the static knocked out half my sensors. Remember how badly Controller Dand yelled at you? Do you really want to risk that again?]

"Okay…okay," He sighed. "Get me the new coordinates."

[Already on your display.]

Poe glanced at the readout and adjusted course, swinging effortlessly round to approach the base from the west. The planet grew, swelling before him until it filled the canopy. He braced for the lurching pull of atmosphere; it tugged forcefully at the ship, bathing it in a sudden fiery-orange light, and he cut to sublight engines with reflexes even the droid admired. The light dimmed as the orange wash faded and the ship dropped speed. BB-8 had been right; the approaching storm drifted raggedly in from the east, shrouding the sun in dark tatters. Even at such a distance, Poe could make out small flashes of lightning arcing jaggedly between steely mounds of cloud.

As he dropped altitude, a wall of wind slammed into the ship, howling past the canopy and rattling Poe to his bones. "Yeesh!" He bit out as he steeled every muscle in his body against the stick to keep the ship level. "You said 'storm', not 'hurricane'." Even so, adrenaline coursed hotly through him and he grinned at the slight challenge.
A nervous voice crackled through his headset, organic this time. "Colonel Dameron, good—we were just about to comm you. We need you grounded in the next ten minutes."

"Don't worry—I'll be there in two. BB-8 already warned me about the storm."

"Yes sir." The runway tech confirmed.

*Black One* came dodging in fast, appearing almost without warning out of the darkening sky. He slowed hard over the low green mounds and short duracrete runway. Poe angled the ship over his usual landing bay, tripodal landing struts already extended, and settled easily into place. A small knot of runway techs stood huddled together against the rising wind, ready to hurriedly batten down, tow, and charge the ship. The canopy levered open and the lashing of the wind threatened to knock him bodily out of his seat. Gripping the support bars solidly, Poe climbed down to the runway and passed his helmet to a reaching Tarsunt aide. Quickly, he shrugged out of his life-support vest and unlatched the buckles of his flapping flight harness, passing these to the same aide.

He tried to shout his thanks but the wind shoved his voice back into his throat. Followed by a low roll of thunder, he turned and dashed for the sheltering hanger bay. BB-8 hadn't bothered waiting for him; the droid was freakishly afraid of rain and thunder. He spied it cowering behind a pile of crates near the long, low main entry.

"Hey…come on, buddy. Let's get further inside, huh?" He knelt down, placing a hand on the top of the droid's head.

A sharp, ear-splitting crack of thunder rattled man and droid alike. BB-8 took off as if it'd been kicked, pelting full-tilt for the mess hall. Poe followed after it, trying not to laugh. *He can handle getting shot at and bombs going off all around, but not a thunderstorm.* The tech crew entered, towing the black and orange x-wing behind them. The blast doors closed and the howl of the wind was cut off. Poe breathed a sigh of relief that they’d all made it inside without getting fried. He carried on after BB-8 and caught the popping, sputtering buzz of welding. Circling round the nearest X-wing he spied Snap lying flat out on his back, a welding mask pulled over his face as he tacked a seam near the boot of one of his ship's landing struts.

"Hey Snap. Have a wire come loose?" He asked, averting his eyes from the sun-bright glow of the torch.

Snap halted, cutting the torch and levering his mask upwards. He wiped a grimy hand over his face. "Yeah, I think some shrapnel or something nicked a wire back on Starkiller. Didn't have anything better to do, so I figured I'd take a look." He sat up, studying Poe. "Man, you look like your canopy got blown off coming in. Is it bad out there?"

"Yeah, and it looks like it's gonna get worse. If we don't lose power from this I'll be surprised."

As he said it, the hangar went black except for the softly glowing lights of a few droids. It became eerily silent without the constant hum of heating and cooling units and energy conduits.

"You were saying?" Snap said dryly. He made to stand, cracked his head on the wing of his ship and cursed.

"I'm prophetic!" Poe laughed into the darkness. Snap's groping hand smacked into his face. "Hey!"

"Sorry, that totally wasn't on purpose." Poe reached out to steady him and to keep him from hitting him again. They stood silently, Poe straining his ears expectantly. A subterranean grinding rattled through their feet as the Resistance's army of generators kicked on; like everything else at base, they
were either obsolete castoffs or cobbled together and rather suspect. The noise was horrible and Poe grimaced.

"Wonder how long this'll last?" Snap shouted as the lights flickered back on.

"Dunno. Hope it's not for very long. I wouldn't trust some of those old things to run an oven, much less the medbay." His thoughts jumped to Finn. If he hadn't been awake, surely the cut in power and the noise of the generators had woken him. Would he be nervous, sitting there alone, wondering what was going on? Might he misinterpret the storm for an attack? "Hey, I'm gonna go check on Finn." He half yelled to Snap who gave him a thumbs up and left for mess with his fingers in his ears.

He found medbay in some disarray; aides rebooting life-support systems that had crashed, dashing back and forth with their arms full of equipment. He saw Kalonia striding hurriedly to bed sides, counseling and inspecting her patients. He could see Finn, awake, half propped up on an elbow as he stared out at the chaos. Poe darted over to him, and Finn's face lit up as he saw him.

"Poe!" He said. "What's going on out there? The lights cut out. It's not an attack is it?"

"Don't worry, it's just a storm. The generators have kicked on, so we're okay for now." Poe took up his usual position at his bedside. Heat crept up his face as he looked at Finn, a tight constriction sweeping through his chest. Did he remember the kiss? He hoped he did. He hoped he didn't.

"How're you feeling? You were pretty out of it yesterday." He led.

"I feel a lot better. I can sit up now—and Kalonia says I'll be able to leave tomorrow. But she doesn't want me to try walking, not for another week." He frowned, eyes following the path of a tech carrying what looked to be half a mile of tubing.

"That's good though, you'll get to get out of here. I always hated being stuck down here."

"You've been hurt enough to have to stay?" The concern in his voice was touching and Poe tried to ignore it.

"A few times. She made me stay the night after I got back from Jakku. Ran me through every neurological scan in the book." He didn't add that this was because Kylo Ren had mentally tortured him.

"That is something I wanted to ask you about. You said you got thrown from the crash. How'd you manage to get back here?"

Poe settled in to his seat, grinning. He launched into the story of his trek through the scorching desert, of being picked up by a Blarina trader whom he'd subsequently saved, through some inspired flying, from a gang of thieves. After that, the grateful Blarina had given him a ride to the nearest town where he had contacted the Resistance for a lift. "Let me tell you, Kalonia was not pleased. Said I was 'deliriously dehydrated', like I'd done it on purpose."

"I know that feeling. I ended up drinking out of an animal's trough, I got so thirsty." Finn shuddered, recalling the horrid, sour taste. Then he found himself grinning. "I still can't believe we got off the Finalizer. I wish I could've seen Phasma's reaction."

"Phasma?"

"Yeah, I was transferred to her squadron just a month before we busted out. She's huge—towered over me, and she had this really glossy chrome armor. Unmistakable."
"I remember seeing her in Tuanul village!" Poe shook his head. "Nasty piece of work."

"Tell me about it. Solo and I, we took care of her though." Finn grinned devilishly. "We left her in a trash compactor on Starkiller base." He looked dreamily up through the ceiling, picturing bits of chrome plated armor drifting through space. "Doubt she made it off."

"Nice." Poe smiled. "Crushed into a tin can and then blown up. You don't do anything half-assed, do you?"

"Well, so far I've managed to fail at getting killed."

"Came pretty close though." Poe arched a brow. "When I saw Chewbacca carrying you off the Falcon I thought for sure you were dead." He reached out and placed his hand on Finn's arm. "I'm glad I was wrong."

A small smile tugged at Finn's lips and Poe remembered the feel of them, the soft way they'd parted beneath his mouth. Poe swallowed and withdrew his hand. "So, you must be getting pretty bored down here, right?"

"Really bored. Do you have anywhere you have to be? Because it's nice to talk. Dr. Kalonia chats with me every now and then, and so do some of her aides…but I don't really know them, and they don't have a lot of time, you know?"

I'm sure some of them would like to do more than talk with you. Poe had caught one aide, a slim young Zabrak, eyeing Finn yesterday. It made him feel protective and angry.

"Yeah," He shrugged, "we're on low power mode until the storm passes and we get back online. I've got plenty of time."

"Good!"

Poe walked back to his quarter's hours later. As a commander and now a Colonel, he was lucky enough to have a private room. It was small, a mere 10 by 10 box with a refresher unit crammed behind the rooms one partitioning wall, but he could at least be mercifully alone—unless he chose not to be. He'd had a string of lovers over his years in the Republic and Resistance. His longest relationship had lasted for many years, but had ended horribly. As the war had heightened and he had been called on more frequent and more dangerous missions, he'd taken to one night stands. There had been many, some of which he was not particularly proud of. But it was easier. There was no risk of getting hurt, no attachments. For a long while he'd convinced himself that a quick fuck was enough. He wondered who he was kidding; though he kept his body satisfied, the perfunctory physicality itself had long worn thin.

And now he found his mind full of Finn. Innocent, guileless Finn. What the hell are you thinking, Dameron? He sighed, undressing and sitting heavily on the edge of his bed. You don't even know if he likes men. Maybe he doesn't even know. And if he was actually into you, where would you take it? Who knows where we'll be stationed—or if he'll even want to join the Resistance. This is my life. Staying away for weeks at a time, almost dying, repeat. Why would he want in on that?

Of course…the First Order will have it out for him like no one else. He'll have to keep on the move too, and who better to do that with than someone who's fighting the same enemy? Maybe it could
work? Or...maybe I would lose him.

He rubbed his eyes, exhausted to his core. Even so, arousal flickered through him as Finn's lips swam through his mind, his earnest smile, his broad back. He was glad of BB-8's absence as he took his cock in his hand; not that the droid hadn't caught him in far more intimate acts. For a moment he thought of finding someone to fuck him—it would be easy to do; he was attractive, popular, and his predilection for one-night-stands well known. He could probably have someone in his room in under ten minutes. There was that tech, Tal Amir, down in astro-repair that had given him the familiar once-over that plainly promised free sex if he wanted it. But there was only one person he wanted right now. He pictured Finn as hepleasured himself. He imagined the other man stretching him open, filling him, and he could feel the release building. Poe came hard, body clenching emptily, needily, and surging hot on the heels of his winding pleasure was cold disappointment. He lay back, panting and deeply unsatisfied. Goddammit. He cleaned himself off and rolled onto his side. It took a long time for him to fall asleep.

The power kicked over from the generators sometime in the early morning. Poe had almost gotten used to their lulling drone and the sudden silence woke him out of a heavy sleep. The room was illuminated by a soft blue glow that showed BB-8 resting in it's charging station. Poe stood, having to piss now that he was awake, and trudged blearily into the refresher unit. He caught a look at himself in the mirror as he shambled past. He snorted a laugh at his tired, bedraggled appearance as he pissed. He hadn't shaved in days and his hair was a mess. Finished, he washed his hands and rubbed at his eyes. He'd just fallen back into bed and gotten comfortable when the comm on his bedside table went off.

With a groan he reached out and fumbled blindly for it. "Yeah, Poe here," He muttered thickly. "Colonel, it's Lenkai in medbay," Poe sat up immediately, sleep dropping from him like bombs from a fighter. Her voice was strained, urgent, "we've had something of an incident. Would you be able to come down here?"

Poe was already up and moving, pulling on his pants and shirt while juggling the comm from one ear to the other. His heart was hammering. Had Finn somehow taken a turn for the worst? BB-8 had woken, rolling from it's charging port and peering up at him in confusion. "I'm already on my way. What's going on?" He pressed open the door and sped down the half-dark hallway, BB-8 at his heels. The droid's superior hearing allowed it to easily eavesdrop.

"It's Finn. He began screaming in his sleep so one of our nurse's assistants went to wake him. He reacted violently." Poe hurriedly keyed a lift and stepped inside the claustrophobic box. He cursed it's slow, rattling descent.

"We gave him a mild sedative, but he is very distressed. You're the only person we know of that's close to him—we were hoping you could help calm him."

"Of course," Poe breathed as the lifts doors slowly slid open. "I'll be there in just a few seconds." He thumbed off the comm as he hurried down another hallway and down the short flight of stairs that led to medbay. He saw three assistants keeping nervously back from Finn's bed. Kalonia's head nurse, Lenkai, approached him and escorted Poe towards Finn. "He broke Soun's arm." She stated.

Finn was sitting upright, his face in his hands and breathing heavily. He was drenched in sweat. Poe
swallowed as he walked softly, slowly up to him.

"Hey, buddy…" He soothed.

Finn jerked at the sound of his voice as if he'd been hit. Poe was aware that Finn was crying, his shoulder's heaving. Pity stabbed though Poe like a knife. He knew what this was—he'd seen it before, and experienced it himself.

"Hey, it's me, Finn. It's Poe. It's okay…you're safe."

Finn shuddered and brought his tear-streaked face out of his hands. His face was tortured, confused. "Poe?" he gasped, staring up at Poe as if doubting he was real.

Poe nodded, his brows drawn. He wanted nothing more than to take Finn in his arms and hold him, soothe him until his shaking stopped. But he knew better than to touch him right now, when his hold on reality was so fractured.

"You know where you are?"

Finn looked around the room, as if seeing for the first time the frightened assistants, the gently beeping displays, and the other beds full of staring patients. His breathing began to slow. "The…the Resistance? Medbay." His dark eyes darted back to Poe, holding him as if he were the only real thing in the room, the one person in the galaxy that bridged his horrifying past and unsure future.

Poe reached slowly, hesitantly for him. Finn tensed at the movement but didn't lash out as he had when the nameless ghost had tried to hold him down. Poe took his shaking hand gently, rubbing and caressing his knuckles and fingers. "That's right. You're in medbay, Finn. The doctors won't let anything hurt you. I won't let anything hurt you."

Finn swallowed, his eyes closing heavily, weighted with exhaustion and old horrors. Slowly he came back to himself. "I'm sorry," he croaked.

Poe looked over his shoulder at the hovering assistants and nodded. Relieved, they moved away to other duties, though they glanced back often.

"Was it about the First Order?" Poe asked tiredly, hooking a foot around the leg of his usual chair and dragging it closer. He sat down, keeping his hand on Finn's.

Finn nodded mutely, unable to look at Poe. "I saw things…it was…it was so real. They had me again." He drew his free hand over his eyes, wiping away tears. Poe said nothing. He simply held his hand and tried to force all of his concern and unsaid feelings into his touch. "I dreamed I was back in my barracks…but there were other people there too, all g-gathered together in a circle, like the villagers were on Jakku. But it wasn't the villagers. It was you." He met Poe's eyes then and looked away hurriedly. "It was you, and Rey, Solo, Chewbacca…everyone I care about. They kept telling me to kill you all. I wouldn't and they...hurt me." Finn's hand twitched in Poe's, clammy with sweat.

"But I wouldn't, no matter what they did. And then he came. Kylo Ren. He was torturing you all and when he was done he made the other troopers sh-shoot you and he made me watch. And then they held me down—I think—I think that's when I woke up. The nurses were dressed in white—I thought they…"

"You thought they were Stormtroopers." Poe finished for him.

Finn nodded, looking as lost and ashamed as a little child. "Did I…hurt anyone?"
"Not badly." Poe said and then immediately wished that he'd lied as Finn's face crumpled.

"I'm sorry," he repeated, again digging the knuckles of his free hand into his eyes.

Poe couldn't stand it any longer. He released Finn's hand, sat on the edge of his bed and drew him against his chest, holding him tenderly. Finn's arms hesitantly wrapped around him, his face buried in Poe's neck. Poe could feel hot tears running down his skin and he rubbed between Finn's shoulders the way his mother used to do for him when he'd been scared.

"It's alright to cry, Finn," Poe whispered, and he felt Finn give wholly against him, his hands tight on his back. It felt easy to hold him, to comfort him and to have Finn's hands on him. A gentle and deep connection that had been missing from his life for too long, and entirely absent from Finn's. He held him until his shaking stopped and when Finn finally pulled away the ex-trooper looked like he could sleep for years. "I'll stay here tonight, okay?"

"Okay," Finn murmured as he sank slowly back on his bed.

Poe pulled the crumpled white blanket up to Finn's chest and sat back down. "I'll be right here." He took Finn's hand again and squeezed reassuringly.

Finn woke once, a few hours later. He felt something thick against his hand and looked down to see Poe's fingers interlaced with his. The pilot had fallen asleep, his head resting softly on his bent arm and his dark hair spilling on to the blanket. Finn's throat worked, unable to speak through gratitude so profound it threatened to make him cry. And there was something more than gratitude. It felt good to have Poe here, with him, his hand in his. The emotion was very nearly foreign and he lacked the vocabulary to express it even to himself. He just knew he didn't want Poe to leave. Not now, not ever. He sat up slightly, careful not to wake Poe, and reached out his right hand. He moved with comical slowness, as if afraid of what might happen, of what he might realize, if he touched Poe right now while the pilot was vulnerable and while his own emotions were so raw. Gently he placed the palm of his hand on Poe's forehead and then stroked back through his tousled hair. He'd done this to himself when he'd had headaches, and he'd always found the motion soothing.

Poe didn't wake, though he sighed. The exhalation was hardly audible, but Finn caught it and grinned to himself in the darkness. He lay back down, squeezed Poe's hand, and then willed himself to sleep.

AN: *Pats Finn on the head and gives him a cookie*  Thanks for reading! :)  Reviews are much appreciated! -Bluestem
Poe woke to find himself sunk back in a chair and wrapped beneath a thick white blanket. He blinked a few times, wondering where he was and why on earth his back felt so stiff. He heard soft voices and looked up; Finn was sitting upright on his own, his legs dangling over the edge of the bed as he talked lowly with Kalonia. He was dressed still in a loose white shirt and pants. Poe watched for a few seconds, dog tired and wanting to be in his bed and stretched flat against the mattress instead of kinked up in this chair, but he made no move to get up.

Kalonia's eyes missed nothing and she turned marginally from Finn with a smile. "Good morning, Colonel."

Poe nodded mutely, eyes still half-closed. Finn was grinning from ear to ear.

"Dr. Kalonia says I can leave."

Poe sat up, wincing, the blanket falling coolly into his lap. "Hey, that's great." He tried to sound as excited as Finn looked, but it was hard to do; his wretchedly uncomfortable sleep had left him feeling drained and in a rather foul mood.

"Now, you'll have to use the repulsorchair for at least one week, unless your therapy sessions go exceedingly well." Kalonia stressed as she turned back to Finn. "You are forbidden from lifting anything more than 10 pounds, you are not to stand for more than a few seconds at a time, no operating machinery; no bending, squatting, twisting,"

"I got it." Finn nearly laughed. "No anything that will mess up my back."

"That's right." Kalonia agreed sternly, though her eyes landed solidly on Poe as she said it.

Poe felt himself flush as he stared her down.

What, does she think I'm going to wheel him upstairs and bend him over?

Kalonia broke eye contact and he stood, stretching and grimacing slightly as his back caught. BB-8 warbled up at him and he smiled softly at the droid in surprise—he'd forgotten entirely that it'd followed him down to medbay. Picturing the loyal little droid hunkered down all night between his chair and Finn's bed sent a rush of warmth through him.

"Well, I'm assuming that you're claiming responsibility for him, Poe?" Kalonia asked.

"Uh…” He swallowed, eyes darting to Finn's hopeful and confused face. "Yeah, of course."

"His bandages can be removed at the end of the day, and he'll need this bacta-ointment applied to his scar in the evenings for the rest of the week." She held up a clear bottle of slightly pinkish looking gel and placed it into a bag. "Pain killers," she stated, taking a bottle from her wheeled tray and holding it up for his inspection. "One pill in the morning, one in the evening, with food. I want him back here in two days at 1200 to begin physical therapy."

"Right," Poe nodded as she plunked the bag of Finn's supplies and instructions down on the bedside. His stomach swam, pulse quickening at the thought of applying anything directly to Finn's bare flesh. He felt aroused for a moment before a wave of gruesome scenarios involving him ruining Finn's treatment and managing to cripple him for life took over. Don't mess this up. He told himself solidly.

Finn's brows knitted as a thought occurred to him. He had no bed, no room, no clothes, no… anything. He was practically a stranger on base. "Where will I stay?"
Poe listened in mild horror as he heard himself answer, "You can bunk with me. I'll have a cot brought up."

Finn met his eyes gratefully. "Thanks, Poe."

Poe nodded, afraid to open his mouth for fear of what he might invite Finn to do next. Kalonia smirked not unkindly and brought the repulsorchair to the edge of Finn's bed and level with the mattress. Finn eyed it as if it were a wild animal that might buck him off at the slightest provocation. He shifted his weight, mouth tight as he tried to scoot over to it. He looked up at Poe for help and the pilot melted at the lost expression on his face. He took Finn under the left arm, Kalonia hurrying to do the same with the right. Together they gently nudged him onto the repulsorchairs cushion. It dipped under his weight and Finn tensed, trying to save himself from a fall that didn't come. The motion sent a spasm of pain shooting up his back. He cried out softly, his forehead beading with sweat. Poe's hands tightened on his shoulder and chest.

"You okay?" Poe breathed.

"Nnn. Yeah. Just…don't want to do that again."

Kalonia stood. "The painkiller will take effect soon, Finn. Until then, move as slowly as you can."

"You don't have to tell me twice." Finn grunted. Poe handed him the bag of his supplies and the ex-trooper sat it in his lap. "Well, think you can handle a repulsorchair, best pilot in the galaxy?" Finn asked, gamely trying to recover his sense of humor.

Poe laughed through his nose. "I got you, buddy."

"So, where to first?" Poe asked as he wheeled Finn towards the nearest lift. BB-8 rolled along after them, humming a mindless tune to itself.

"How about the mess hall?" Finn answered. "I'm starving."

"Me too." Poe smiled. "Mess hall it is."

Finn sat in silence as the pilot keyed a lift and wheeled them inside. BB-8 barely had room to squeeze against Poe's calves as the door slid shut. They rattled slowly upwards in the half darkness of the cramped compartment.

"Hey Poe…" Finn's voice was soft, hard to hear over the noise of the rickety lift. Poe was afraid for his voice to be that soft. "You don't…have to take care of me, you know? I could probably just stay in medbay if you wanted. The nurses would do it. I shouldn't intrude on you."

"It's no problem, Finn. Compared to sleeping in the barracks, this is nothing. Besides, you said it yourself: Medbay is boring."

"Well, yeah, but," Finn protested.

"You're my friend, Finn. You saved my life. If you need a place to lie up for a while, I'm happy to provide for you. Also, that chair down there is really uncomfortable. At least this way I can get some sleep."

BB-8 made a sarcastic chuckling sound. [Yeah right.]

"What'd he say?"
"That he wants to be deactivated." Poe glared down at the droid, eternally grateful that Finn couldn't understand him. The lift opened and Poe guided the chair out into the broad hall that led past the main hangers and around to mess.

"Thanks for staying last night." Finn said as he was pushed past crates and boxes. "I…never had something like that happen. I can't believe I snapped like that."

Poe's face softened. "It happens to the best of us. It's called shell-shock. You see enough horrible things, you'll get it."

"Has it happened to you?" Finn asked, turning his head slightly to peer up at Poe.

Poe's lips thinned. "Yeah."

"What…do you see?"

Poe halted and was silent for a beat too long. Finn worried that perhaps he'd pushed past some unknown boundary. "Sorry, I shouldn't have asked that,"

"Usually I see my friends. My pilots. It's almost always the same dogfight—but I see everything more clearly than when it happened. No matter what I do, I can't get to them fast enough, can't guard their flanks. It's always just before I reach them when it happens. I hear them screaming over my headset."

Finn wished to the depths of his heart that he hadn't asked. "I'm sorry, Poe."

Poe quirked a brow and started walking again. "It's okay. It comes with the territory. Actually, I don't know many people who haven't gone through what you did last night. I'm just kind of shocked it hadn't happened to you before now."

Finn had considered this himself. "I don't think it did before because…well, it was all simulations before—it had all been fake. Jakku was my first mission."

That brought Poe up short. "Jakku was your first mission?"

"Yeah," Finn laughed sadly.

"How old are you, Finn?" He asked cautiously.

"I don't know exactly. But we were moved to different training regimens when we reached certain ages; physical combat starting at 7, weapons training at 10, simulation training started at 12…so that should make me 23?" He counted on his fingers. Poe's heart broke at the question in Finn's voice. Of course birthdays would've been considered superfluous to First Order operations. Who cared about the birth date of some kid you'd stolen from its parents?

"Oh." Was all Poe could bring himself to say. 9 years…I'm 9 years older than him. That's not really too much, is it? Stop it, Dameron! He was spared further thoughts as they entered the mess hall. It was crowded with the breakfast rush. The line for the buffet stretched halfway down the broad aisle at the middle. Idle chatter filled the low-ceilinged hall but it faltered slightly as Poe wheeled Finn inside. Some people craned their necks to get a better look at Finn. They'd all heard of him, of course, but few had seen him. The news that Colonel Dameron was spending most of his free time at Finn's bedside had traveled like wildfire through the base, and Poe saw knowing smiles break out across faces, and hurried whispers exchanged. Normally he could care less what people regurgitated back and forth about his storied private life, but this time he found it infuriating. Finn was a total innocent—it wasn't right for him to be painted with the same brush.
He glanced down at Finn as he angled them towards his usual table. Finn looked overwhelmed at the attention he was getting. He'd expected something of the sort, but this was worse. In the First Order, he'd been anonymous to a disposable degree. There had always been his helmet to hide him and even with it off, there had always been the distance of knowing that no one truly cared. Not only did complete strangers seem to care, but they seemed positively excited to gossip and stare. He swallowed.

"Just ignore it," Poe said above him.

Jess Pava glanced up from her morning caff, grinned and slapped Snap on his shoulder. "Look who it is!" Bastian and Yolo Ziff looked up from their bowls of porridge.

Poe smiled as he brought Finn to a stop before their bench.

"You're Finn!" Jess stood from her seat, reaching out a hand. She was tall, with dark eyes and long dark hair pulled back in a no-nonsense tail. Her face broke into an easy smile.

"Uh, yeah. Hi." Finn said lamely, taking her hand and shaking it.

"Yep, this is Finn." Poe smiled. "Finn, this is Jessika Pava, Temmin 'Snap' Wexley,"

"We met briefly," Snap grinned, reaching across Jess and also shaking Finn's hand, "good to see you, man." Finn recognized the bearded, heavy-set man from the strategy meeting the senior officers had held prior to the battle at Starkiller. It seemed like a lifetime ago.

"Hey," Finn nodded with an honest smile.

"This is Yolo Ziff, and this is Bastian." Ziff was pale and clean cut with dark hair and eyes. Bastian was wiry and a shade darker than Finn. They shook his hand as well, Bastian glancing at Ziff with a wry look. Finn caught it and wondered what it meant, like the two men had shared some private joke. "I'll get us some grub." Poe patted Finn on the shoulder. "Go easy on him, guys." Poe said sternly to his small crew as he left to join the line.

Bastian whispered something into Ziff's ear and the other man promptly cracked up, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter. A flush of anxious confusion swept through Finn; he felt woefully ignorant and exposed.

"So Finn," Jess asked, dutifully ignoring Ziff and Bastian, "what do you think of our little Resistance?"

"Well, I haven't got to see much of it yet. But after what you guys pulled off, I'd say I'm pretty impressed." He wished Poe would hurry back.

"There's not really much to see," Jess shrugged, taking a swig of her caff and pulling a face. "God this shit's bitter. I hope we wrangle another shipment of sugar soon."

Snap moaned. "I told Poe I would risk every blockade in the galaxy to go lift us some. Who needs ship parts? I want sugar."

"And beer." Ziff lamented.

"There's that stuff they've been brewing up in the civilian wing. Drift they call it." Bastian offered helpfully.

"That shit will burn a hole through your throat. And I'm pretty sure they brew it in old refresher units." Jess shuddered. "It's like…refined battery acid. Finn, if these guys offer you a drink, just say
"Right." He laughed nervously. He didn't bother to say that he'd never had a drink of anything alcoholic in his life. He felt different enough at the moment.

"So how long before you're out of the chair?" Snap asked.

"Kalonia says I've got a week. Maybe a little less if rehab goes well."

Ziff couldn't help himself. "Was it really from a lightsaber? Word around base was you fought a Sith."

"Sith aren't real." Bastian rolled his eyes.

"I don't know about any of that, but it was definitely a lightsaber." Finn shrugged.

"That is badass, man." Snap nodded.

Finn averted his eyes. It hurt to think of Kylo Ren. It made him angry and made his pulse race. For the millionth time he saw in his mind's eye Solo, run through with his son's blade, falling limply into the abyss. He was grateful when Poe returned to his side, setting a bowl of greyish porridge and a cup of black caff in front of him. "It's gonna be pretty bland," Poe explained apologetically as he sat down next to him. "We ran out of dairy and sugar a few days ago."

"So I heard." Finn tucked in ravenously despite that fact that the gluey slop tasted like wet cardboard. He ate in silence, marveling at the contrasting atmospheres between the First Order and Resistance mess halls. People here talked freely, animatedly. They got up when they wanted to, refilled their drinks if they desired more, slapped each other on the back, hugged, and some even kissed each other as they met or got up to leave. He blushed slightly, watching this. Contact between troopers had been strictly forbidden; he could count the number of kisses he'd seen on half of a hand. A strange tightness clenched his stomach as he became uncomfortably aware of how close Poe's leg was to his chair. He shifted slightly.

He watched Poe talk with his friends, his manner easy but tired, cracking jokes, each treading a well-known course around the other. It's like verbal dancing Finn mused warmly, his chin in his palm. He took note of the empty seats at their table. But some of the dancers are missing. He felt sad then and rather hazy, his stomach tight. It threatened to lurch, suddenly.

"Hey Poe," he said touching his arm, "I'm not feeling too great…I think it's the meds."

Poe turned to him in concern. Finn looked sweaty and exhausted. "You've been up too long." Poe stated and stood, taking the handles of Finn's chair.

"It was good meeting you," he heard Jess say as he was steered away from the table.

"Yeah, feel better, Finn." Snap's voice.

Finn waved in a half-dead motion, and let his arm fall limp against the armrest.

Poe keyed open the door to his room, pressed on the lights, and saw that a cot had been brought up. It had been shoved against the partitioning wall of the refresher unit. A narrow path two feet wide was all that separated Poe's bed from Finn's. Poe bit his lip. This was a terrible idea. But Finn was half out of it and needed his help. He backed awkwardly into the room, swiveling Finn towards the cot. He brought the chair parallel to the edge of the bed and raised its armrest.
"Okay buddy. Can you move to the left a little?"

Finn tried to lift himself with his arms and swivel his lower body to the cot. He groaned, his face tight. Poe leaned in, wrapping his arms under Finn's armpits, their chests flush. Poe felt the light brush of Finn's nipples through the thin white shirt and he set his jaw. Finn held him tightly, his hands clasped together just under his shoulder blades. Poe caught a whiff of sweat and something distinctly Finn's own. His nostrils flared as he breathed him in. It reminded him of tree bark, or sunlight—either way he found it delicious.

"Okay," Poe gasped in a strained voice as he levered Finn desperately onto the cot. If he touched him for one more second he would lose his mind entirely. Damn it, this was an absolutely terrible idea. Flustered, he lifted first Finn's left leg and then his right onto the mattress. The muscle was firm beneath his fingers. He tried not to feel how easily his legs had separated at the thighs, and he tried not to look at the gentle bulge beneath the thin white fabric. He was about to do something stupid. He could feel it. Fuck.

"BB-8, stay with him." He bit out. "If he needs help, comm me, but otherwise just keep quiet." He had a few hours before his next recon run. He turned and left the room, heading towards the tech wing.

"Fuck fuck fuck FUCK ME! Yeah!" Poe yelled throatily as Tal Amir plowed dryly into him. The astro tech had hardly prepped him at all, and that was fine with Poe. His ass clenched painfully, deliciously at each jerky thrust. He'd wanted it rough, wanted to feel him bucking in him hard enough to push every thought of Finn out of his body. He knew it would hurt, that his already sore back would probably go out, that he'd probably bleed, but at the moment he could care less. Tal had taken him up on his offer for a quick fuck immediately. He knew an old storage compartment a level down that was hardly used, expect perhaps for brief meetings like this. Poe stood with his legs wide, bent over an old crate of broken down servomotors.

"Ah, fuck, you are so hot, Poe Dameron." Tal grunted reaching around Poe's hips and wrapping a hand around his cock. He jerked lazily, his grip half-focused and slippery and apparently unable to put pressure on any one spot for long. Poe regretted the mindless touch, though he was hard as duracrete regardless. Tal didn't fill him as fully as he'd hoped, but the urgent thrusts were enough to get him going.

"Shit," Poe breathed, his head hanging between his arms and his hair lying in damp waves over his forehead. It was nothing he hadn't done before but a new and creeping sense of shame hovered at the edge of his mind. "Harder—ahn!" he groaned as if he could force it away, and Tal's body slammed into him, his balls smacking into Poe's ass. Tal's voice was strangely high and nasal as his pleasure peaked.

"Ah—ah—ah yeah, man."

Poe tried to ignore it. He brought a hand to his cock, batting Tal's weak grip out of the way. He squeezed, the pad of his thumb tracing the vein on the underside and slipping up over his slit the way he liked it. His brows drew together, body tensing as Tal continued his hard fucking. He angled his hips so the other man's cock hit him just right. Ah, god it was good. He bit his lip, legs shaking as he was spilled over.

"Fffuck! Ahhn!" Poe's voice strangled from him, his asshole clenching hard around Tal as he came, and his seed flying thickly to the scuffed, dusty floor. Tal's hands tightened on his hip and across the back of his neck and the sound of him coming a second later threatened to take Poe wholly from the
moment. The other man's voice was comically high in his orgasm—almost like he was going to cry. Poe spared him one disbelieving look over his shoulder. Well…he was nice to look at anyways. Tal finished inside him, as Poe had requested.

"Shit," Tal breathed, pulling out and grinning. He wiped himself off with a rag that he'd stuffed into his discarded work coveralls, and then he passed it to Poe.

"Thanks," Poe panted, wiping gently down his sore ass. Crimson blots of blood came away, smeared with Tal's cum. He strained, pushing out the load. He tossed the soiled rag into a likely looking heap of forgotten junk and then started to clothe. Tal did the same, still grinning as if this had been the best sex he'd ever had. Poe however, felt dirty, shameful in a way he'd never experienced. Instead of relief, he felt horribly tired and small.

"That was good. That was really good. You ever want to do that again, I'm game."

"Yeah, this was a one-time thing." Poe shrugged his shirt over his head and ran a hand through his hair.

"Oh…yeah. Of course." Tal said, failing to keep his voice absolutely casual.

"Thanks, though. I fucking needed that." Poe opened the door to the claustrophobic room. "See you," he said with every intention of never crossing paths with Tal again if he could help it. He stalked back to his quarters with a slight limp, pain blooming in his ass with every step, but he didn't slow his stride. Embarrassment tightened his chest, worried that somehow Finn would infer where he'd been and what he'd been doing. Shame made him sweat. He pictured Finn, laying half out of his mind on pain meds, trusting that Poe would be there for him. What if he'd woken, alone and disoriented? What if he'd cried out for him? What if he'd needed something, and BB-8 hadn't been able to help? What kind of jerk left a wounded friend alone to go have random sex?

Poe squeezed his eyes shut, grimacing as the lift rattled him darkly upwards. You are a fucking asshole, Poe Dameron.

He keyed open his door, his stomach swimming with trepidation. BB-8 had lowered the lights in the small room and had parked itself at Finn's bedside, just below his head, tirelessly watchful and loyal. Poe suddenly wanted to cry. Finn didn't seem to have moved, but that didn't ease the guilt that wormed through his chest. He knelt painfully at the bedside and whispered to BB-8. "Hey, buddy…thanks for keeping an eye on him."

BB-8 looked him up and down, and made no answer as it swiveled its head away from Poe in the closest approximation of a cold shoulder he'd ever gotten from the droid. Poe nodded to himself as he stood. Okay. I deserved that. He glanced hesitantly at Finn's peaceful, open face and then entered the refresher unit. He met his reflection's eyes and looked away, disgusted. He stripped and hurriedly showered, scrubbing more forcefully than was needed.

Okay, Dameron. Why do you feel so fucked up about this one? It's not like I haven't done that before. It's because of Finn.

So what do I feel for him then? He paused, letting the hot water beat down upon his aching back. I think I fucking care for him more than I have for anyone in a long time and it scares the shit out of me. And…look at me! I'm fucking strangers in storage closets! He doesn't deserve that. He doesn't know anything. He deserves someone clean and pure. An image of Rey flashed through his mind and he swallowed, nodding sadly. Yeah…someone like that.
His back straightened. He turned off the water, resolved to leave Finn alone for his own good.

AN: Poe dun fucked up. Also, I want Kalonia to be my doctor--she knows what's up! Imagine all the crazy shit she's seen. Thanks for reading. :(
Chapter 4

Poe's resolve was immediately tested.

BB-8 was warbling at the refresher door. For a mechanically generated voice, it managed to sound incredibly icy. [Finn needs you, Poe.]

"Okay," he said, hurriedly toweling off. He realized then that he'd forgotten to bring a change of clothes into the room with him. He eyed the soiled underwear and sweaty clothing that he'd piled on top of the sink; no way was he putting them on again. He wrapped a towel around his hips, gathered up his used clothing, careful to hide the underwear within his shirt, and opened the door. He walked hurriedly down the gap between their two beds and to the built-in shelving unit, trying all the while not to look at Finn.

Finn, however, watched him, his heart tripping over itself. He'd seen naked men in the showers before, but none of them had ever made his breath catch like this image of Poe; the white towel contrasting with tan skin, his dark hair lying in waves, his countenance harried and somewhat embarrassed. Finn glanced away, a confused flush crawling up his neck.

Poe gathered up fresh clothes and quickly turned back to the refresher room. "Hey, you okay?" Poe asked as he passed. "BB-8 said you needed help."

"Uh yeah…I just…just need help getting up for the 'fresher."

"I'll be right out." Poe said, closing the door once more behind him. He placed white-knuckled hands to either side of the sink and locked eyes with his reflection, shaking his head in disbelief. He took a deep breath, clothed, and exited the humid room. Finn was already sitting up. Poe approached his side.

"Okay. Like last time, alright?" Poe said as he bent down. Finn wrapped his arms around him and Poe heaved, hoping to all the gods in the universe that his back wouldn't go out after what he'd put it through today. Finn threw out a leg, swinging it over the edge of the chair. Poe levered him upright and Finn scooted solidly onto the cushion. Poe stood back. "There, see? We're gonna have this down to a science."

"Yeah," Finn nodded, winded. Poe climbed across the corner of his bed and stood behind Finn's chair, pushing him through the tight gap into the refresher unit and up against the toilet.

"You okay for the rest?" Poe forced himself to ask, turning to leave.

"I hope so," Finn muttered.

Poe waited outside the room, his hands behind his back and trying to strike a balance between listening hard enough to make sure Finn was okay but not so hard that he'd hear much else. He caught BB-8 staring up at him from the foot of his bed. Poe mouthed defensively.

What?

The droid said nothing; it only cocked it's head knowingly at him and rolled back towards Finn's bed. Poe suddenly heard Finn's stream hitting the water of the toilet and a jolt started in the floor of his stomach and wound up his body. He concentrated hard on a spider creeping across the ceiling, and the clenching pain in his back; the two combined managed to thoroughly batten down his arousal. He could hear Finn fumbling around. Water sloshed in the sink and then the door opened.
"That was awful." Finn panted. "I feel like I just ran a mile and all I did was move from one seat to another."

"It's not gonna be easy, Finn. Is it hurting pretty badly?" Poe asked as he wheeled him back to bed.

"No. Well…kinda. Yeah, actually."

They got Finn back into bed in under thirty seconds, though Poe's back was throbbing now.

"Whew," Finn breathed, "getting off is a lot easier than getting on."

Poe had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing.

Yes, that's true he thought, eyes crinkling up in a wry smile. "Do you want to go back to sleep?"

"I dunno. What else can I do?" Finn shrugged.

Poe thought for a moment and snapped his fingers, crossing to his closet and removing an outdated datapad. "You can use this if you want. I've got some old holovids on here, maybe a few movies. Lots of books and music." He handed the thick grey tablet over to Finn who held it in wonder.

"Wow, thanks Poe." He grinned at the device as if he'd never seen such a thing. Maybe, Poe mused sadly, he never had. Finn's face became suddenly serious as he clutched the datapad to his chest. "You've always been so nice to me. Even from the very beginning—you trusted me right off the bat. I can't tell you what that meant to me, Poe. No one had ever seen me as a person before."

Poe wished Finn had said anything else, that he'd punched him the face instead. He felt he deserved that much. To receive such heartfelt adoration from someone like Finn over such a simple thing was more than he could take. Pain lanced through his chest and he glanced away.

"You're a good man, Finn…" He nodded and then cleared his throat. "Hey, I've gotta head out for a recon run. I'll be back around 1700. You need anything before I leave? Water? Food?"

"Maybe some water?"

"Sure." Poe filled a glass at the sink and brought it to him.

"Thanks." Finn said, his eyes now glued to the glowing screen of the datapad. "Wow—what's this one?" He asked, pointing to an image of a gaudily dressed man, woman, and a raucously laughing Weequay.

"Oh," Poe snorted, fondly recalling the hours he'd spent curled up with his mother watching the ridiculous comedy. "That was an old holovid series I used to binge when I was a kid. It was really popular back on Yavin. But it didn't age well. Watch it at your own risk."

"I just might. I bet I can get through a few of them before you come back."

"Good luck," Poe laughed sarcastically. "BB-8's coming with me. I'm gonna give you my comm in case you need to call medbay for anything. You know how to use it?"

"Yeah." Finn nodded, taking the slender, finger-sized instrument from him.

"Okay. Well…just take it easy, alright?"

"Right, Poe. Have fun flying."

"I always do." Poe beckoned BB-8 out of the room.
Finn made it through exactly two episodes of *Where's that Weequay?* before giving up on it. He figured that you'd have to be a child to appreciate the bright, chintzy costumes, the goggle-eyed puppets, and the horrible, miming overacting. The first musical number nearly broke him, though he found it endearing to imagine Poe as a young boy, laughing his head off at it. He closed the program and continued to browse Poe's selection.

He scrolled through series after series. All of them looked long and involved and he felt too fuzzy-minded to focus on them. He toggled the screen back to its main display. The movies also looked too complicated for him so he settled on music. The only songs he could ever recall hearing in his lifetime had been the strange ditty that had played in Maz Kanata's castle, and old First Order anthems, full of brazen horns and strings. He shoved the notes from his mind like pieces of garbage and pressed a song that he saw Poe had listened to approximately 477 times over the years.

Sound drifted softly out of the datapads weak speakers. It was some sort of strummed string, earthy and resonant. It traced a gentle melody, folding over itself and then strengthening as another, deeper string accompanied it, striking on the offbeat. Sudden, snappy percussion pounded in to support the dancing strings. The tempo increased, horns—lively and bright instead of the intimidating tones he was used to—swarmed in, darting into the spaces left by the shaking drum-beats. It was so vibrant and catchy that Finn found his toes tapping against the edge of his cot. The song reached a frantic crescendo, the different instruments building on and supporting one another rather than muddling the sound. Goosebumps broke out over his arms and he grinned hugely; he'd had no idea that music could illicit a physical response. The song ended with three simultaneous blasts of sound and was carried out on the same gentle thrumming that had ushered it in. Finn laughed as silence returned to the little room, holding the datapad as if were a priceless treasure. He replayed the song five more times before he moved on.

He spent an hour listening to Poe's music collection, which varied hugely from that first song; ranging from frightening, uber-masculine vocals with hard, driving beats, to ethereal, dreamy little anthems that lingered in his ear and then disappeared with a breath. Some were sparse, led by raw, plaintive voices full of pain and some were so synthetic that Finn had a hard time distinguishing between vocals and instruments. Finn found it fascinating, addicting, and he felt secretly delighted to know these little touches about Poe. He felt that the music spoke for the parts of him that the pilot wouldn't speak out loud.

He was thrilled when he found out he could keep music playing in the background while opening other files. Poe's book collection was not quite as varied as his musical tastes. The first seven pages of choices consisted solely of ship schematics and readouts. *No wonder he knew how to fly that TIE,* Finn mused as he squinted at complicated blueprints. The next page showed a few history selections that recounted the battles of Yavin and of Endor. Finn resolved to read these at some point during his forced bed-rest; it would be interesting to learn the Rebellion version of what had happened. *No,* he corrected himself, *the true version of what happened.*

He backed out from the book selection, scrolled still further down and found a tab labeled 'photos'. Finn's mouth thinned and he glanced around the room, though he knew perfectly well that he was alone. He knew intuitively that he shouldn't, that if Poe wanted to show him photos than he would do so in his own good time. Finn swallowed, unable to help himself. He keyed the collection open.

The photos were small and arranged by date. Finn pressed the most recent, which had been taken nearly a year ago. The picture enlarged until it filled the screen. It was an image of Poe standing outside on the tarmac, *Black One* behind him and a look of joy on his face. Around him were clustered several people he recognized: Snap Wexley, Jess Pava, Ziff, and Bastian. There were strangers as well: five more humans, two Abednedos, as tall Duros, a short, brown-haired Zabrak...
woman, and a lanky, orange-skinned Twi'lek woman. All of them were wearing their orange flight suits, their helmets lifted triumphantly into the air, and their faces clearly showed that they had been cheering.

*This must have been his full crew.* Finn thought sadly and guiltiness swarmed through his chest for seeing it. Even so, he shrank the photo and kept on. There were more shots of Poe grinning with random members of his squadron. A candid shot of an angry looking Snap with his face stuffed full and food in his beard. There was a picture of Jess Pava and Poe with their hair in matching, stupid looking pigtails. Finn laughed out loud at that one. Jess looked alright, though she was pulling a ridiculous face, but Poe's short pigtails jutted awkwardly from his head like fuzzy horns. But Poe was laughing alongside her. There was a picture that had obviously been snuck of General Leia walking through command center. Poe's hand could be seen in the bottom left corner, giving a thrilled thumbs-up. There was shot after shot of BB-8; Poe was clearly smitten with the little droid and Finn smiled fondly. It was impossible, really, to dislike BB-8.

The next picture was of space; glittering stars and a hazy nebula that gave off tremulous blue ribbons of light. It was stunningly beautiful, and Finn wondered where it was located. He'd like to see it himself someday. The date showed that Poe had been there some three years ago.

The setting changed suddenly to a sunset shot of a towering skyline glowing coppery orange and coral pink, streaked with cool blue shadows. It was clearly a wholly different planet than D'Qar. Finn wandered if this was Corescant, the city-planet he knew had been the seat of the Old Republic.

The next was a shot of Poe in a different, grey flight-suit, standing before a traditionally marked blue and white X-wing. It was high noon and the city stretched on and on around, above, and below him. His arm was draped around the man standing next to him who wore a matching flight suit. Though small in comparison to the ship, Finn could see that both their faces were excruciatingly happy. Finn knew instinctively that they had not merely been friends. The other man had his free hand on Poe's chest and their heads were tilted close to one another.

He knew he was getting dangerously close to crossing a line, but Finn could not stop himself now. The next shot was a close up, obviously taken by one of them for their faces filled the entire screen. It was the same man that had been in the previous photo. Poe was smiling hugely, and the nameless man had been half in a laugh. He had a kind face, Finn thought; paler than Poe by several shades and with sandy brown hair and light blond stubble on his cheeks and chin. He contrasted starkly with Poe, yet they went together beautifully. Finn could tell just by looking at him that he laughed a lot; his face seemed made to curl into a smile.

Finn hurriedly pressed the next photo up. It was that man again, squatting by BB-8 with a bemused look. The droid had been wrapped in festive lights and ornaments for some sort of holiday. Finn zoomed out and scrolled the next few pages, covering years of time. He pressed a photo at random.

Poe had his face pressed against the same man's face, his eyes closed and kissing his cheek. Poe's arm was wrapped around his bare chest. Though Finn couldn't see the entirety of their bodies, he knew that they were naked and that they were lying in bed. The other man had obviously taken this shot. The lighting was dim and he was smiling gently into the lens.

Finn screamed at himself to stop—he'd seen far too much already, but his hands moved of their own volition. He saw BB-8 planted on Poe's chest while the pilot lay flat out, pinned to the floor, his face strained. A few other pilots had gathered about laughing. He saw Poe and that man again, years younger, flashing proud smiles and holding up their acceptance placards to the Republic Academy.

Finn closed the screen, backing fully out from the 'photos' tab. He found his hands were shaking and he stared blankly through the datapad. He'd seen too much; nothing explicit, but so deeply intimate
that Finn could hardly stand himself. What had he been thinking? He heard an echo of Poe's voice in
his ears: *I see my friends. My pilots. I hear them screaming into my headset...* Finn knew intuitively
that that was the central pillar of Poe's nightmare; not just the death of his friends, but the screaming
voice of the man he'd loved for most of his life.

Poe yawned as he walked stiffly from the baking tarmac towards the welcoming shade of the main
hanger. Snap trudged along after him, mopping at his brow; D'Qars' summer-cycle was in full swing
and it was the first truly miserable day of the season. Yesterday's previous storm still clung to the air,
the humidity so thick that even Poe, who had grown up on a tropical planet found himself wishing
for Ackbar-like gills. Snap threatened to melt as soon as he climbed from his cool, climate-controlled
ship, his face flushed rosy red. They unzipped the fronts of their flight suits as they walked, Snap
almost crying with relief as the breeze hit his thin, sweat-drenched undershirt. Poe's back was killing
him, and a jolt of pain fared in his ass with every step, both ailments further aggravated from sitting
for five uneventful hours. They disappeared into the wonderfully pressurized and humidity-free
hangar, passing by rows of resting X-wings, far fewer than there should have been, and headed
towards the main conference room.

"Man…I really hopped we would find something at Rattatak." Snap groaned as they exited a lift and
beelined for the conference room. Nestled just off of command center, the conference room was a
black hole of items and documents that were either just important enough to avoid being trashed, or
had been there for so long that no one could be bothered with them anymore. For many years, it had
been R2-D2's home. It was generally a quiet room, and good for intense tactical discussions.

"Yeah, me too. It was worth a shot—but if you ask me, we need boots on the ground at that
waystation. We're not gonna get much from hanging back watching it."

Snap nodded in agreement. "Our probes will record every ship that docks, listen in if they aren't
totally buttoned up, and plot their departure trajectories. That's something, at least."

"Yeah, but if their operatives have half a brain they're not going to use ships affiliated with the First
Order, they're *definitely* not going to call the First Order by name, and they'll hopscotch once they
jump from base." Poe countered. "It's just busywork unless we can get someone on the ground."

"Let me guess—you think that someone should be you?" Snap arched a brow.

"Yeah, why not? It's not much different than searching around those old Jedi Temples."

"Dude, next to General Organa, Ackbar, and Finn, you have *got* to be high on their list of 'incinerate
on sight'. They know your face and they know who led us against Starkiller. Better to send in
someone who has *no* known affiliation with the Resistance. And, no offense, but you don't look like
you could outrun a Hutt right now. Have a rough one?"

"Yeah," Poe grimaced. "It was a bad idea."

"Huh. Didn't think Finn was healed up enough for that yet. Guy looked like he was about to pass out
at breakfast."

"*What?* It—it wasn't—I" Poe sputtered, "Of *course* it wasn't Finn! It was just some tech down in
astro repair."

Snap slowed to a stop, a disbelieving grin spreading across his face. "I was just kidding, but...are you
blushing?" He tossed his head back, laughing. "Holy shit, man. You've got it for him bad. I haven't
seen you give two craps about anything more than a quickie in years."
"Will you shut up?" Poe bit out as Major Ematt strode by. The snowy-haired Rebellion veteran seemed wholly focused on the datapad in his hand and continued on as if he hadn't heard anything. Poe locked eyes angrily with Snap. "It's nothing."

"Colonel Dameron, Captain Wexley," They turned at the prim voice. C-3PO wove awkwardly in between display grids and communications terminals, his golden body reflecting patches of icy blue light. "The General is ready for you now." They allowed themselves to be ushered in by the fussy droid. Leia had said it was important for C-3PO to feel as useful as possible. Poe suspected this was a tactic she often employed to keep the droid from yammering to her nonstop.

General Organa sat near to the door of the conference room and to her right was Admiral Statura. Two chairs had been pulled out to face the senior commanders. Poe had always admired Statura's angular, clever features, his silver hair and neatly-trimmed goatee. It was something of a schoolboy crush, an idle fondness. He'd told himself more than once that if he lived long enough for his hair to go grey, he'd try to look as stylish as Statura so effortlessly managed. Poe would rather have been tossed into a Sarlacc pit and burned alive for a thousand years than ever admit it out loud. Snap and Poe took their proffered seats, Poe trying hard not to grimace as he sat and shifted uncomfortably.

While Statura favored a calm, detachedly scientific interest in his crew, Leia opted for an intense and personal involvement. It was one of the many reasons Poe loved her. She knew everyone on base by name; kitchen staff, launderers, spouses and children, sanitation crew, pilots, admirals—it made no difference to her. She saw the base as a living organism and believed to her core that each person, regardless of rank or status, played a vital role in keeping it alive. She trusted and gave tirelessly of herself. Whether she'd planned it that way or not, Poe knew that not a soul on base would hesitate to give everything they had for her.

"Well, as you're both in one piece, I'm assuming that your run went smoothly?" Leia prompted. She looked tired, Poe thought, though her voice was strong. He imagined that she had not been sleeping well since the death of General Solo. He could picture her, laying in the darkness, small and alone, and too proud to ask for help with her grief. The thought made his heart ache for her and he was reminded suddenly of himself. It was an upsetting realization.

"The probes were placed and there was no indication that we were spotted or traced." Poe stated.

"Excellent work, both of you. I'll admit it's not a strong lead, but out of the millions we've received and studied, this one seemed worth a look."

Poe shrugged. "It makes sense. If the First Order was trying to find Skywalker by searching for old Jedi ruins, it would follow for us to do the reverse. Rattatak's history is no secret. It seems likely that it would maintain some link to the First Order. I have some concerns though,"

"What is it, Colonel?" Leia urged.

"In my opinion, long-range surveillance ultimately won't amount to much, if any, useful intel. If there are First Order operatives utilizing that waystation, they won't be using First Order ships and they'll hopscotch as soon as they jump to hyperspace. Any trajectories we run from initial jumps will be useless."

Statura nodded, a hand brought pensively to his mouth. "I had the same fears."

"We need boots on the ground, General." Poe said.

"I agree with Colonel Dameron." Snap spoke up, surprising him with his agreement. "I suggest we utilize an individual or team that the First Order hasn't yet linked to the Resistance. There's not much
point in going undercover otherwise."

Poe shot Snap a swift, thin look, but Leia nodded her assent. "Agreed. What do you recommend, Admiral?"

"For now," he started carefully, "I believe we should observe the data we receive from those probes. We will get a feel for the types of ships and clientele that approach Sryin'ti Station, and be better equipped to spot any repetitions or anomalies. It is also possible that an operative may slip up and transmit sensitive information. If, however, we reach a dead end—I believe we should try Colonel Dameron's idea."

Leia nodded silently, digesting the information. "One week. If we haven't discovered anything remotely, I will scout for a likely operative to slip under their radar." She rose to her feet, and Poe, Snap, and Statura scrambled to do the same. "Dismissed."

Poe turned to leave with Snap but Leia stopped him. "Colonel, if I could have a word?"

"Of course." Poe halted, turning away from Snap's retreating form and staring down into Leia's depthless brown eyes. Something in them caught and held him, filling him with the warm sensation of being utterly known. It was almost as if Leia was inside his head, looking out—he could only compare it to what Kylo Ren had done to him, though their utilization of the Force could not have been more drastically different. Kylo Ren's torturous, violating intrusion had felt like a red-hot claw, tearing unstoppably through his memories, his fears, his hopes. Leia's gentle sweep of him left him feeling buoyed; held and supported, soothed. Poe had never been certain if Leia could control this wave of placid Force use—it had happened more than once to him and usually when she was concerned. Many others had told him of feeling something similar.

"Poe," She began, for she insisted on the dropping of rank when engaged in casual conversation, "I just wanted to tell you how proud I am of how you've handled yourself since our victory. I know it hasn't been easy for you to lose so many of your friends, and then to have to sit on your hands on top of it..." She smiled. "You're just like your mother—you can't stand doing nothing, and neither could she. It's wearing you out, isn't it?"

It was if she'd spoken his exhaustion into existence and he suddenly felt it weighing keenly on his shoulders, and the urge to confess to her precisely how wretched he felt welled up within him. Leia had made a point over the past several years to speak with him privately, and with care. His mother, Shara, had flown a long and dangerous mission with Leia, and the General had kept in contact with her ever since. She had come to his mother's funeral. He'd been only 8 at the time and obviously distraught; but he had a hazy memory of a woman dressed in white soothing him, peace flowing from her and into him as if from a river. Even now, 24 years later, he could not find the words to express to Leia how much that gesture had meant to him and he had long ago come to terms with the fact that he regarded her as something of a stand-in mother.

"Yeah…I just…I want to be out there fighting something. Something clear-cut and obvious. I can't stand much more sneaking around, General."

"I've asked you a thousand times to call me Leia, Poe."

He smiled wanly and shook his head. "Just sounds disrespectful to me, General."

Motherly annoyance flickered across her face at his polite refusal. "Well, we'll have time—believe me—plenty of time for dogfights and heroics. Give yourself a break while you can. Rest. Take care of yourself." Her mouth thinned. "You're always the last person you think about."
Poe arched a brow ironically. "I think everyone on base could say the same thing about you." And then his voice sobered. "General...how have you been?" He didn't need to go into the details, she knew at once to what he was referring. She glanced away for a fraction of a second, but it was enough to break his heart.

"I've been alright, Poe. We have to soldier on, don't we?"

"Not much choice is there?" He placed a hand gently on her shoulder and she took it for a silent minute, her watery gazed fixed on an old stack of files. It was the frailest Poe had ever seen the indomitable woman, and he wanted to hug her, to try and send to her some of the peace she'd once given to him. But she recovered before he could move and patted his hand fondly.

"Major Kalonia has informed me that Finn has left her care. How is he?"

Poe felt cagey about the change in topic and drew away his hand. "He's alright, all things considered. He's got full use of his limbs, though he can hardly move right now. He needs a lot of help, so he's bunking in my room until he can move on his own."

"Good." Leia said with a soft nod, and Poe knew she'd intuited far more than what he'd said. "That's good of you, Poe."

Poe could find nothing to say.

"I had a thought the other day...something that I could use Finn's help on. Do you think he's well enough to speak with me—not today, but perhaps tomorrow morning?"

"I'm sure he'd jump at the chance. He was getting pretty bored before I left."

"Good. No one on base knows the workings of the First Order like he does. There're some questions I wanted to ask him concerning the acquisition and training of Stormtroopers. It may be...difficult for him to speak about."

"He'd do it. For you, I know he would."

"Thank you, Poe." She squeezed his arm. "If he's able, bring him here at 0830 tomorrow morning."

"Of course, General."

"And Poe..." she said with sudden seriousness, "this is an order: Take better care of yourself."

He swallowed, nodded mutely and left the small room.

AN: I really do love pretending Poe has a school-boy crush on Statura. The guy is stylin'. Thanks for reading thus far, and please review. :) -Bluestem.
Finn jerked slightly as the door to Poe's room slid smoothly upwards into the wall. Unable to get up and return the datapad to Poe's closet, he'd slid it just out of his reach. It felt shameful to have it near him now. It's meager weight rested admonishingly by his thigh. BB-8 rolled in chirping cheerfully, with Poe in it's wake and Finn's insides squirmed as Poe walked up to him, two trays of food balanced haphazardly upon one another.

"Sorry, had a meeting that ran long—but here's some dinner. I figured you'd probably be starving by now." He said as he lowered a tray to Finn's outstretched hands.

"Thanks, Poe." Finn pretended to study the food to keep from having to look Poe in the eye. There was a brownish, unseasoned lump of protein, a fluffy mass of whipped starches, and thin, orange slices of some unknown vegetable drizzled in a yellowish glaze.

Poe sat stiffly on his bed, shoving his food around his plate disinterestedly. "The general wants to meet with you tomorrow at 0830, if you're feeling up to it."

Finn's eyes jumped from his food to Poe's face. "Really? What for?"

"She didn't go into the details—just said she wanted to ask you some questions about Stromtrooper training."

Finn nodded eagerly, bewildered and grateful that the Resistance General considered him of value to her beyond his intel on Starkiller. "Sure—of course I'll help! It'll be good to have something to do—if I sit around for much longer I'm going to lose my mind."

Poe grinned. "I pretty much told her exactly that. She'll be glad."

Finn smiled to himself and turned his attention back to his tray of food. He poked at a knobby orange stick suspiciously. "What're these orange things?"

Poe glanced sharply up at him. "What, the brill-roots?" he asked in disbelief. "You've never had them?"

"I've probably never had anything on this tray before." Finn shrugged, amazed at how continuously ignorant he found himself feeling in the world outside of the First Order.

"Oh. Right. Well, the meat is nerf and I think it's gross as hell but maybe you'll like it. The starch is gwallo from Corellia; it's actually really good if you've got some butter or cheese mixed in. It'll probably taste like puffed air, the way it is now."

Finn forked a sliver of brill-root and popped it into his mouth. "Hey, I like these!" He said as he chewed. Despite it's appearance, the vegetable was quite soft and left an earthy sweetness on his tongue. Poe found himself smiling, though it was tinged with sadness.

"You can have mine if you want."

Finn shook his head hurriedly. "No, those are yours. You need to keep up your strength."
"Seriously, I've gotten pretty sick of them." Poe insisted. He leaned across the narrow gap and tipped the pile of vegetables onto Finn's plate, giving him no time to reject the offer. "So..." Poe began uncertainly as he sat back down, "what kind of food did they feed you, back when you were a trooper?"

"HCPM's."

"A what?"

"High calorie poly-hydrate mixes. They were these different combinations of nutrients—they kind of look like bricks, but they're softer, kinda chewy. The black ones had the most protein, green had a lot of fiber, orange had vitamin C. I always liked the orange ones best, but I never realized how bad they were till I got out."

Poe had frozen with his fork halfway to his mouth, once again reevaluating everything he'd ever assumed about the man sitting before him. It was beyond horrible to him that Finn could be so pleased with such a bland, meager meal, that he'd never even had proper food. No name, no family, no possessions, no food.

"Finn...we get a food-shipment in, I am going to run you through the gauntlet. If you think this stuff is good, just you wait. Corescant has these things called frillions. I bet you would lose your mind. They're the saltiest, greasiest things in the galaxy. Oh! And mera-crisps—you'd like those."

Finn's guiltiness eased somewhat as he laughed. "I can't even imagine how many different types of food there are in the galaxy. You know, I'd never really thought about it when I was a Stormtrooper. I guess it was another way to keep us all in the dark."

Poe nodded, his eyes sincere. "Yeah. If they knew what they were missing, there's no way they'd lay down and take it. I feel sorry for them."

Finn glanced down at his plate. "I do to. I didn't like killing them. It almost felt like...killing myself."

Poe sat in silence for a minute, utterly unsure of what to say or how to comfort him, for he desperately wanted to comfort him. He shifted uneasily. "When I was a kid, and my parents would tell me stories about the battles they fought in, I never thought about Stormtroopers as people; they were there just so the good guys could beat them. Even when I was older...I never lost much sleep over killing Stormtroopers. It's the helmets; it's so much harder to kill someone when you can see their eyes; when you can tell that they're just people. And then I met you." He shook his head. "In a fight, I'll still pull the trigger...but I think about them now, afterwards. I think I understand why my parent's always kept quiet about that side of it."

BB-8 lowed softly, peering up with surprising expression for a being with no face to speak of.

"What'd he say?" Finn asked quietly.

"That this is a really sad discussion." Poe nodded. "So, did you manage to get through any of Where's that Weequay?"
Finn was taken off guard by the sudden switch of topic, and his guiltiness swarmed back to seething life. He glanced nervously at the datapad. "I got through two of them."

"Yeesh. Pretty bad, right?"

"Pretty bad. But I liked the colors. I can see how a kid could like it. But why do you even keep it on that datapad if you don't like it anymore?"

"Oh, I don't hate it. It makes me feel nostalgic. I still get some of those dumb songs stuck in my head—it's like they've been seared into my brain. I could probably forget how to fly and I'd still remember the lyrics to *Rancor Romp*."

"*Rancor Romp?" Finn snorted.

"I'm not singing it." Poe stated flatly. BB-8 burbled, launching into a strange, screechy jaunt. It's mechanical voice bounced from note to note, ending in a shrill musical trill that made both of them grimace.

[On Dathomir, in a forest deep
A giant monster snores in its sleep
Don't wake it up, walk softly as mice
Because if you're loud and it opens its eyes
The Rancor will romp! Romp and Stomp!
You better run now, as fast as you can
The rancor's reaching out a bumpy hand
If it catches you, let out a roar
The rancor will drop you to the floor
Now you can romp! You can Romp and Stomp!
The Rancor will romp! Romp and Stomp!
Romp and Stomp! Romp and Stomp!]

The droid looked up at Poe as if expecting praise. Poe stared back at BB-8 with a frozen smile and scratched awkwardly at the back of his head. "Sorry, buddy…it just…doesn't translate into binary very well."

Poe held the bottle of pink-tinged bacta-gel between thumb and forefinger, examining it in the light of the refresher unit. It almost looked crystalline, encased as it was. Kalonia's words echoed through his mind: *he'll need this bacta-ointment applied to his scar in the evening*. He tried to steel himself against the physicality of the action. He set his jaw and exited the room. BB-8 sat cradled in its charging port, watching attentively.

Finn sat stiffly upright on the edge of his cot, pensive. Poe regretted the look—it was entirely beguiling on him.

"Okay…well, take off your shirt and I'll get the bandage off."

"Right," Finn said as if on autopilot. He gripped the hem and moved to pull it over his head but stopped mid-motion with a wince. The shirt fell from his fingers and he glanced at Poe in embarrassment. "I can't even take this stupid thing off." His voice was tight with frustration at his own helplessness. He stared at the floor despondently.

"Here," Poe reached for him, his stomach clenching as his finger's brushed against Finn's flanks. Slowly, mindful of the angle of Finn's arms, he drew the shirt upwards, revealing lean dark skin,
round with gentle swells of muscle. Poe swallowed. He could see the start of the bandage darting down the left side of his lower back like a white arrow. "Okay, I'm gonna pull it over your head. Just keep your arms out in front of you. There."

Finn drew the shirt down his arms and set it aside. It felt odd to be exposed like this before Poe, to have him sitting on his bed so near to him. All of Poe's attention was pinned on the bandage; it covered an enormous stretch of Finn's back. *What the hell was Kalonia thinking, letting me take care of something like this?* He panicked. The edges of the bandage adhered to Finn's skin, marked off by a broken blue line. About Finn's middle were wound several strips of constricting cloth, both to help hold the bandage in place and to keep Finn from bending too far before the scar had finished knitting. Poe found the start of the strip and set to work unwinding it; pulling the gauze to the right, he passed the loose end up to Finn who drew it across his front and then back around to Poe. After six such rotations, Finn was free of the wrapping, which lay in a tangled pile on the floor like a giant snake-skin.

Both kept stoically silent as Poe worked away the adhesive edges of the bandage. Careful not to dig his nails into Finn's flesh, Poe pulled it free in one long, slow movement from top to bottom. He gasped at what lie beneath it. The skin was glossy and slightly raised, and colored dark, dusky pink overall. An oblong spot near the base of his spine was so pink it was nearly white. It was there that the saber had penetrated deepest and hot rage surged through Poe's chest at what Kylo Ren had done to Finn, at the thought of his blade lancing through his body in an arc of fire. He pictured Lor San Tekka falling beneath just such a strike, and he shuddered. He'd known, in an abstract medical way, that Finn was lucky to be alive. Only now did he really understand just how lucky Finn was.

He licked his lips and uncapped the bottle of bacta-gel, pouring a bit of the viscous ooze over his fingertips; he tried desperately not to think of it as lube. With utmost care he gently placed his hand at the base of Finn's spine and began to rub the gel across the scars taut surface. Finn jolted at the touch. "Cold," he breathed, though his reaction had been less from the temperature of the gel and more from having Poe's hand on him. He sat as stiffly as if he were carved of stone. Kalonia had done this to him for several days, morning and night, but it was different, *startlingly* different to have Poe touch him. He was shocked by the careful tenderness of his fingers. He didn't know what he'd expected, but it hadn't been this. It felt good to have Poe touch him. A stranger to arousal and, until recently, affection, Finn was slow to understand the need that clenched his body in knots. That Poe could make him feel this way only sharpened the edges of guilt in his gut.

Poe felt the tenseness in him and tried to be both thorough and quick for both of their sakes. Finn was being too determinedly quiet and Poe could hardly stand to think what that might mean. A smoldering flair of arousal licked through his body.

"Poe…” Finn said softly and Poe froze the circular motions he'd been making between his shoulder blades.

"Yeah?" His voice was rough enough to mortify him.

"I…I saw some of your pictures...on your datapad." Finn's hesitant voice was thick with shame.

And just like that, Poe's arousal vanished as if under a heap of snow. Finn agonized over Poe's still hand and his stretching silence.

"I'm sorry…I shouldn't have."

Poe said nothing, but he resumed the circular motions with a newly clinical air that would've done Kalonia proud. He wasn't mad at Finn so much as he was at himself. He'd handed Finn the device
and turned him lose. What had he expected? He knew that Finn had not rifled through the records of his personal life maliciously. It just wasn't in his nature. It had probably been idle curiosity. Finished, he let his hand fall from his back.

"Poe?" Finn could bear his silence no longer; he shifted as much as he could, twisting to look over his shoulder. "Listen…I'm really sorry. If you want me to go, I will."

"No," Poe said, his voice strangely indifferent. "No, it's okay…I forgot those were on there. I handed the thing to you so it's my fault, really."

"No, it's not. I knew it was private and I did it anyways. It was wrong of me." Finn said as if explaining to a child. It would've satisfied his guilt if Poe had yelled at him or gotten up and stormed out of the room. But he didn't. He simply sat beside him and after several uncomfortable minutes Finn dared to broach the subject. "What was his name?"

Poe leaned back with an exhausted sigh, resting against the refresher wall. He rubbed his brow. Finn slowly rotated where he sat so that he could look into his face.

"His name was Rhys Wenning." Poe answered finally.

"I'm sorry." Finn started to say, but Poe cut him off.

"Look, I'm gonna go to bed. It's been a long day." He stood from Finn's side, stripped mindlessly down to his boxers, and climbed into his own bed. He pulled the blankets up to his neck and rolled solidly away from Finn; he could not have been more thorough in his dismissal if he'd built a wall between them and Finn glanced away, sick to his core. BB-8 lowed softly and sadly as the lights were switched off for the night.

Poe had lain awake for several hours, painfully aware of Finn's breathing—it was clear the other man was feigning sleep as well. His breaths were too even and too light. Poe regretted his silence but Finn had thrown him more thoroughly than Kylo Ren's intrusion into his brain. Thought by thought, he stitched together memories he'd tried to keep from dwelling on, until he'd composed a frayed image he could hardly stand to hold in his mind. It was still too painful. For the past three years, he'd filled his time and thoughts with the most dangerous missions he could take, with all-consuming tactical meetings, with strategy sessions, with mindless sex, with moving constantly. He hadn't realized how thin it was wearing until recently, until Finn had entered his life and he'd caught a glimpse of how things had been and how they could be again. He couldn't bear to bridge that gap. His eyes welled unexpectedly and he dragged a hand across them. He stared into the darkness of his room and tried to think and feel nothing.

He didn't recall falling asleep but he must have, for he was jolted into full wakefulness by a loud thump, Finn yelping, and BB-8 bleeping in alarm. Poe switched on the lights and scrambled out of bed so quickly it was as if he'd been thrown from an ejector seat. Finn was lying on his side on the floor, his face screwed up with pain; the repulsorchair hovered a foot over from where it should've been.

"Finn!" He gasped, darting down to him and taking him by the shoulders. "Are you okay?"

Finn didn't speak as Poe gently levered him up to a sitting position, and this scared Poe more than any cry of pain. Finn gasped, his brow beading with sweat. BB-8 crept cautiously up to Poe, level with the pilot's chest.

"Finn," Poe began desperately, his fingers digging into his shoulders, "talk to me, buddy. Are you
okay?"

"I—I think so." He grunted.

"Can you move?" Poe's stomach had dropped to his feet. If Finn had wrenched his spine…

"Yeah—it just hurts." Finn breathed.

"What happened?"

"I was just trying to," he broke off grimacing again, "just trying to get to the bathroom."

"Why didn't you wake me up?" Poe shouted incredulously.

"I—I didn't want to bother you after what I…"

"Fuck, Finn. You could've really hurt yourself. Come on, hold on to me," Poe gritted his teeth as Finn's arms wrapped firmly about him. Squatting, he lifted him, taking Finn's full weight against him. His back protested mightily, but he knew it was nothing to what Finn must be going through and he kept his mouth shut as he maneuvered them towards the chair. Finn slid onto the seats cushion, breathing hard through his nose, his body as rigid as duracrete.

Poe stared intensely into his creased eyes, his face level with Finn's. Pity and something else worried at the back of his mind. "Do you want to go to medbay?" Poe asked. Kalonia would never let him live this down; crippling Finn after one day's sloppy care.

Finn shook his head and tightened his grip on the armrests, as if he could force his pain out and through the chair. "No…no, I think I'll be alright. Just…can you help me to the bathroom?"

Poe nodded, taking up his position behind the chair and guiding Finn into the tiny room. Finn eyed the toilet as if it were a looming mountain he'd have to scale with his legs tied. Shamefacedly, he glanced up at Poe. He was grateful he didn't have to ask; Poe saw his embarrassment and moved to help him, taking him under the arms once more and sliding him off of the cushion and onto the seat of the toilet.

"You…okay from here?" Poe asked.

Finn nodded, his eyes still closed against the pain. "I think so." Poe left the room, shutting the door and turning his back to it. He pinched between his brows, ashamed that he'd made Finn feel so upset that he'd felt unable to wake him.

BB-8 chattered softly. [Is Finn okay?]

"I think so. I hope so."

Even more quietly, it's voice a warbling whisper, [Are you okay?].

Poe swallowed, his eyes tightening. It took him a second to answer. "Yeah…yeah, I'm okay, bud."

BB-8 held his gaze solidly in it's singular dark lens, scanning below the surface for what Poe had left unsaid. Poe was well aware that the droid was excellent at detecting lies; an increase in body temperature or a slight aversion of the eyes was enough to tip off its highly sensitive programming. Algorithms flashed through the droids mind, comparing and contrasting truthful micro-expressions with those that broadcasted lies. After so many years together, it's catalog of Poe's expressions and body language was so extensive that Poe knew he hardly had to speak for the droid to understand
him. But it wasn't mere programming—there was genuine emotion and care shining within the droids eye. It was useless to deny anything and it gave Poe the painful freedom to feel; tears brimmed and he blinked rapidly, staring up at the ceiling until he'd composed himself.

"What am I gonna do, bud?" Poe whispered, squatting to the floor and holding out his hand. BB-8 rolled up to him, tilting it's half-domed head into the touch. He patted it fondly.

[You already know what I think; I was going to taze you earlier today, after you left Finn.]

Poe nodded, laughing softly and drawing a hand across his eyes. "I know. I'm surprised you didn't." His voice sobered as he continued. "It's just weird...weird to think of things being...normal again. I don't know if I can risk it."

[But Finn likes you too. His pulse speeds when you touch him. It sped a lot when you came out of the shower earlier. His body-temperature increased by 1.2 degrees.]

Poe arched a brow, both gratified and mortified on Finn's behalf, and shook his head. "Finn doesn't know what he wants. The guy never even had real food before he came here. How can he even—"

He broke off as Finn's voice carried through the door.

"Can you help me back onto the chair?"

"Sure thing." Poe opened the door and walked up to him. "Is the pain letting up at all?"

"Not really—in fact, it was getting worse even before I tried to get out of bed." Finn said through gritted teeth as he was helped back onto the repulsorchair. Poe pushed him into the main room, BB-8 reversing over the metallic rim of it's charging bay to give them maneuvering room.

Poe stopped in mid-step, his eyes suddenly wide. "Oh shit. Shit, this is my fault."

"What?" Finn asked.

"I forgot your pill!" Poe moaned. "Dammit, I knew there was something!" He dashed to his bedside table and shook a translucent pain-killer into his palm. "Here," he dropped it into Finn's outstretched hand and then re-filled his glass of water. "Take that—oh, you're supposed to have food with it." He snapped his fingers, manic energy at this gross oversight steamrollering any latent tiredness. He fumbled within his storage unit and pulled out a foil-wrapped ration bar. "It's not good, but it'll get the pill working faster."

"Thanks, Poe." He swallowed the pill dry and took a half-hearted nibble of the bar.

"Shit, I'm so sorry, Finn." Poe apologized as he helped the other man back into bed. Finn's mouth stretched tight as Poe eased him down. He sighed in some relief as the mattress pressed up against his back, taking on the burden of support.

"It's okay. It's my fault for upsetting you earlier."

Poe nearly laughed. It was insane that Finn was apologizing to him; he was one hundred percent certain that, had their situations been reversed, Finn would never have left him for a quick fuck, that he would've stayed and watched over him, that he would have made sure he had his pills on time. He shook his head. "Don't apologize, Finn. Just let me feel like a shitty caretaker for a moment."

"You're not a shitty—" Finn began to protest but Poe cut him off, holding up his hands.

"Just for a moment, okay? I earned this, trust me."
Finn bit his tongue, unsure of how to proceed and desperate for the pain killers to take effect. Poe was now thoroughly awake. He sat on the edge of his bed and fidgeted, studying Finn's face and body, as if he could peer through his skin and see his pain hovering in a dark cloud over his wound.

"You sure you don't need medbay?"

"Yeah, Poe. It doesn't feel like anything came... undone, I guess."

"I'm sorry I made you feel like you couldn't ask me for help."

Poe's expression, a mixture of shame and exhaustion, struck Finn deeply. "It's okay. We both feel like idiots, I guess. And anyways...I'm just not used to asking for help yet. It's hard." He wished suddenly that Poe were lying with him, that he was holding his hand again like he'd done in medbay. He didn't know how to ask for that either.

Finn kept talking, dispensing painful tidbits from his past as if that would make up for seeing too much of Poe's. "It just...wasn't condoned, you know? Whenever you asked for help, you were disciplined for not paying attention, or not doing something right the first time. They saw it as a personal weakness...and they'd stamp it out of you. After a few years of that, I stopped asking. We all did, I guess."

The way he said it broke Poe's heart; his voice was flat, emotionless. "Finn..."

A ragged gasp burst from Finn's mouth and he was crying; the care in Poe's voice had unlocked it. He brought an arm over his eyes. Poe got up and lay down beside him, squeezing between Finn and the wall and taking his hand, stroking the top of it in silence, too tired and upset to feel apprehensive at their closeness. Finn needed someone right now.

"You can ask me anything, Finn, anytime." Poe said once Finn had quieted down. It almost scared him, how natural it felt to lay beside him, their sides pressed warmly together down the length of the narrow cot. He could melt against that touch; he could stay near it forever. It was as if he'd been wandering through a storm that had been raging for so long that he'd accepted it as normal; and now he'd found shelter and a fire waiting for him.

Finn wiped away the last of his tears, his hand tight in Poe's. The question Finn desperately wanted to ask lodged stubbornly in his throat. "Poe..." He managed and then his voice drifted away, lost in the half-darkness of the little room.

"Yeah?" Poe urged.

Finn glanced to his side; just inches away from his eyes were Poe's, dark as earth, sincere.

"I...don't know how to ask you..."

Poe held his gaze with gentle intensity. He couldn't fight it any longer. Slowly, and with great deliberation, Poe tilted his head upwards and brought their lips together. He took his hand from Finn's, cradling it instead across the back of Finn's neck as he pressed him deeper into the kiss. Finn froze at the touch, amazed at the softness of Poe's lips, and their wet warmth; startled by the roughness of his jaw. A tender glow swept through his body, driving out the fears of the First Order. He wished he could roll over and hold Poe tightly against him. Finn was so relieved he could have laughed or cried, he wasn't sure which. His mouth opened to Poe's stiffly, uncertainly.

Poe relished the feel of him; Finn's lips were full, sinuous in the extreme. He wanted to taste him deeply, to slide over his tongue, to tug gently at the lips that had hovered needily in his mind for weeks. His heart thrummed and he could feel himself getting hot. He pulled away.
Finn opened his eyes. Poe was staring at him, his mouth half parted. "I hope that's what you were trying to say…"

Finn swallowed and brought a hand to his lips, delicately tracing the tingling ghost of Poe's kiss in bewilderment. He met Poe's eyes, nodded mutely and then grinned from ear to ear. Poe breathed a laugh through his nose, tucking his forehead against Finn's shoulder and wrapping an arm across his chest. This time it was Finn who took his hand and Poe had to clamp down hard to keep his emotions from bursting out of him in dry sob. Such a simple touch; holding his hand, lying softly together; he'd forgone such innocent, but necessary contact for so long that to have it suddenly back rendered him speechless. His arms tightened across Finn's chest, and Finn snaked an arm beneath him, holding him in half an embrace. Sleep pulled at Finn as his medications soothed his pain. For the first time in his life, he slept feeling truly safe.

From it's charging port, BB-8 rocked happily back and forth and then powered down for the night.

Chapter End Notes

AN: It literally took me weeks to come up with a name for Poe's old love. Rhys rhymes with 'trees'. I may do a one off about the two of them sometime once I get this story out of my system. Maybe I'll incorporate some of the Rhys stuff into this one with dreams or flashbacks or something.
Anywho-reviews are appreciated! :) -Bluestem
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Finn woke to find the space beside him cold and empty. He peered blearily about the small room. Poe's bed was vacant and he could hear no sounds from the refresher. Nonplussed, and half convinced that he'd dreamt Poe's kiss, he propped himself up on an elbow and jerked with shock as BB-8's head swam into view at the edge of his bed. How long the droid had been waiting, he didn't want to know. It was just a little disconcerting.

"Hey, BB-8." Finn said through a yawn. The chrono, embedded within the room's wired-in loudspeaker, showed the time to be 5 in the morning. He wondered if this was when the base generally came to life, if it ever slept, and if not, where Poe could be. He thought of his looming meeting with General Organa and his stomach clenched uneasily; he was eager to help in any way he could, but he did not relish the thought of explaining, in detail, First Order operating procedures.

BB-8 burbled and chattered at him and Finn turned his attention gratefully to the droid; he also made a mental note to have Poe teach him droid-speak. BB-8 flicked open a metallic hatch on its spherical body, revealing a small compartment. Finn reached out, fingers fumbling in the tiny space until he pulled out a folded sheet of flimsi. Perplexed, he smoothed it out and stared in some surprise—he'd never seen hand-formed writing before. Poe's script was blockier than the printed text he'd seen all of his life, and he placed more emphasis on the down-stroke. Finn had never considered that font could be personally unique within a standard alphabet and he felt simultaneously stupid and excited about this discovery. He forced himself to focus on the meat of the message.

Finn, out for a run with Jess. I'll be back around 0600. Use BB-8 to contact me if you need anything —I've got my comm. –Poe

Finn smiled tightly to himself as he lay back down, holding the note out to re-read it. He traced the letters clumsily with the tip of his finger, considering. "BB-8. Could you get me a sheet of flimsi and a stylus? A pen? Whatever he used, I guess."

BB-8 chirped what sounded like an affirmative and rolled around Poe's bed. A hydraulic gripping arm extended smoothly from it's body as it rifled through the storage unit. Clamping down on a notebook of lined-flimsies, BB-8 trundled back to him and dropped it briskly onto the cot. A second trip brought Finn a sleek black stylus. "Thanks, BB-8." He held the stylus uncertainly in his hands, unsure if there was a grip he was supposed to use or if he could simply wing it. Tongue between his teeth he pushed the stylus against the flimsi. A solid black line trailed his movement. He laughed to himself, delighted at the easy way the stylus glided against the flimsi. He drew a few loops, and then zigzags. Then a smiley face. He glanced at BB-8, who had resumed it's post at the edge of his bed. Pressing hard, he tried to draw a half circle on top of a larger circle. "Man..." he muttered, "circles are hard. Didn't see that coming." His BB-8 looked as though it had melted in a fire, but it pleased him all the same.

He turned back to Poe's note, flipping to a new sheet of flimsi. It gave him a flare of satisfaction to see how Poe's hand had formed his name. The name that he gave me. Finn smiled, writing his name for the first time. It was clumsy, difficult to force the shapes in his mind out through his hand and onto the paper; something was lost along the way, and his letters were wobbly and misshapen. Well...it's readable, I guess, Finn mused. He focused on writing Poe's name. It too looked as if he'd been having some sort of seizure as he wrote it. Undeterred, he decided to try and tackle Poe's last name. This was much more difficult without an example in Poe's writing to go off of. 'Dameron'
slanted and nearly ran off the page, but Finn was too excited to stop. He wrote the names of everyone he knew and cared for. It was a secret claiming of them, to be able to write their names in his own hand. Rey, BB-8, Han Solo, General Organa, Maz. Chewbacca's name defeated him and his stylus froze, stymied, over the flimsi. Instead, he copied every word of Poe's letter, over and over. Bit by bit he gained control over the wild lines.

"Come on, old man," Jess panted, a few strides in front of Poe as they ran their usual course around the perimeter of the base. What had been a slim, grassy trail was now a wide earthen path, beat stubbornly into the ground by years of determined feet. Each circuit measured about a mile and they had done 3 laps. Though the sun had only just crested the land in a bleary orange haze, the air swam with humidity; it trailed down their necks, pooled stickily across their backs and dripped from their hair with each foot-fall. Jess's ponytail swung back and forth, flicking sweat, and Poe spaced himself just far enough to keep from it.

"I'm 2 years older than you, Pava." He grunted. "That doesn't qualify as old."

"And usually you're neck and neck with me. What gives? Have a late night?"

"No—but my back's been trying to go out on me."

"Oh yeah? I wonder why. Who was it this time? I'd guess Finn, but he didn't look up to that yesterday."

"No one." He lied. He was in no hurry to rehash the details and annoyed that Jess had assumed precisely what Snap had.

"Uh huh. Come on—I know the 'I'm not in pain, Jess, but my ass is sore for some weird reason' run."

"Seriously, it's just from sleeping in that chair down in medbay. And helping Finn onto the repulsorchair over and over."

Jess glanced down at him, blinking sweat out of her eyes. This explanation seemed to satisfy her and she carried on, "How's he doing?"

"All right. You should see the size of his scar though—I can't believe Kalonia didn't keep him longer."

"Well, space is at a premium. You know how she is; if you can move, you can leave, and let some other poor sap have your space."

"Yeah, but you didn't see it, Jess. It's as long as my forearm."

"Even with the bacta treatments?"

"Yeah. I'm just relieved he can move his legs. Kalonia wasn't sure if he'd be paralyzed or not." He shook his head and they jogged on in silence. The sun crept over the towering hillocks of mist-shrouded trees to their east, lancing their eyes with clear rays of light.

"So…what's he like?" Jess squinted against the sudden brightness.

Poe arched a brow. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, there's something about him that's got you wrapped around his little finger. So what is it?"
"You mean besides saving my life, saving BB-8, and then giving us the intel on Starkiller?"

"Yeah, besides that. I think you spent more time with him than you did flying last week. And he wasn't even awake. That is not usual for you. Well, at least it hasn't been for a long time."

"Yeah." Poe mused softly.

Jess skidded to a halt at the sound of his voice and he nearly plowed into her. Her eyes were bright and a grin spread slowly across her face. The expression made him blush and he looked away.

"You love him, don't you?" She placed her hands triumphantly on her hips.

Poe scratched at the back of his sweat-plastered hair. "Maybe? Yeah…or…you know, getting close to that. It's been a while. But yeah."

"Thank the fucking heavens." She breathed as if she'd just shrugged off a huge weight. "That is so good for you, Poe. You deserve that. Also, Ziff owes me 100 credits." She cackled.

"Didn't I officially command you guys to stop betting on my personal life?" He smiled in spite of himself as they took up their stride again.

"Yeah, but who listens to you when you're on the ground? No disrespect, Colonel." She teased warmly. "Ziff was convinced Finn was gonna be a 'fuck and fly', like all the rest. And I was like 'You dickhead, when does Poe ever wait at bedsides'? Ha! 100 creds. He's gonna be so pissed."

Poe listened to her blithely, a small grin pulling at his mouth.

"So, a Resistance Colonel and a Stormtrooper?"

"Ex Stormtrooper." Poe corrected more forcefully than he meant to. She gave him a sidelong look.

"Right. Ex Stormtrooper."

"Sorry. It's just…you should hear the way he talks about the First Order. This is all new to him. Literally new to him. He'd never even had real food before, Jess."

"Huh. I never really thought about how they must be brought up. Pretty disturbing. So what did they feed their minions to make our slop seem like 'real food'?"

"I can't remember what he called them, but they're basically ration bars."

Jess grimaced, imagining the chalk-tasting emergency rations she kept in her ship. "Sick. So…wait. This is all new to him. As in…" Her head whipped around to him so quickly her ponytail smacked her in the face. She ignored it gamely. "Holy shit, Poe, is he a virgin?"

"Uh…I didn't ask him, but that seems safe to assume."

Jess laughed for five minutes straight, doubled over on the steadily warming trail. Poe watched her resignedly, panting, his hands on his hips. "I'm going to court martial you, Jess." He said dryly.

She tried to stand, met his eyes for one quivery second and then howled with renewed laughter, her hands wrapped about her aching stomach. "Oh my gods. Ohh, gods, this is too good!" She wheezed. "You are in love with a virgin!" She trailed off into hiccoughing giggles. Poe reached out a leg, shoving her easily off balance. She rolled onto her back with a satisfying thud.

"I don't even care." Jess grinned. She shakily put her mind back together, laughter threatening to dart
uncontrollably out of her mouth if she met Poe's eyes for any length of time. She kept her focus solidly in front of her as she got to her feet. "Does he even know how sex works?"

"I don't know, Jess." Poe was beginning to get aggrivated by this point. He didn't like hearing her laugh at something he knew would mortify Finn. "Seems like it might be an embarrassing topic for him, you think? 'Oh, hey Finn, just wondering what else the First Order never let you experience. You ever put your dick in someones ass before?' I'm sure he'd be thrilled to have that conversation." His voice dripped with sarcasm.

Jess snorted. "Well, you don't have to phrase it that way."

"I'm not going to bring it up at all unless he wants to talk about it. Or unless it just…comes up on its own."

"Fair enough. Sorry…it's just funny to think that after all your random hook ups you've—"

"I didn't always get off on fucking strangers, Jess." He snapped hotly.

She halted, her giddiness plummeting into horror. "I know, I know, I'm sorry Poe…that was stupid." She apologized softly. "Sorry. I didn't mean to imply—"

"So how about you? Any progress with that Zabrak in communications?" His voice let her know clearly to drop the subject.

"No, not really. She's pretty dense. I might have to actually talk to her soon."

"Ooo, don't strain yourself." He rolled his eyes.

Finn's stylus skidded across the page leaving an inky smear as the door to the room opened upwards into the wall. Poe smiled at him as he walked in, looking more like he'd gone swimming than running. His dark hair curled in loose, wet waves and his white tank clung to his chest, revealing every lean contour of his torso. Finn felt for a moment the same flicker of arousal that Poe's lips had woken in him.

"Good morning." Poe said as he crossed the short distance between them. Finn's heart tripped a beat as Poe bent, kissing him lightly on the forehead. He could smell the sweat on him. Finn had more questions than he could put words to, and the pilot's quick kiss had stoked them all.

"Morning," he managed lamely.

"I'm gonna take a quick shower—I'm fucking disgusting. You need anything?" Poe asked as he removed fresh clothing from his closet.

"No." Finn felt his vocabulary rapidly draining out of his head.

Poe disappeared into the refresher unit. BB-8 swiveled it's dark lens to Finn's wistful face, babbled and then made a noise that needed no translation. The droid was clearly laughing at him.

The way Finn's eyes had raked over his body turned Poe on unbelievably. He gripped his cock as the water slid over him in caressing rivulets, like hundreds of hot fingers. He was well practiced at keeping silent; sleeping in crowded barracks for most of his life had made it a necessary skill. He was willing to bet that everyone in the Resistance could say the same. He pumped himself hard, breath deepening. He felt Finn's lips against his mouth, imagined their thick pressure wrapping hotly around his cock. He came so quickly that it almost embarrassed him, and the shock of it nearly made him cry.
out. His mouth parted, brows drawn as his body shuddered in waves. His seed swirled down the drain in a thick white ribbon. He watched it, panting, imagining how much better it would've been if Finn had been inside him when he'd peaked. His ass clenched needily at the thought. He swallowed hard and then quickly lathered and cleaned himself.

Finn found it difficult to focus on writing, knowing that Poe was naked on the other side of the thin wall that separated them. He'd liked Poe from the moment he'd met him. He hadn't expected the other man to trust him at all—yet Poe had done so, immediately. He had cheered his shots as they'd escaped the Finalizer, he had named him, he had described BB-8 to him, him, a man who could have easily betrayed him, but Poe had trusted instead that if Finn found the droid, he would do the right thing. And Poe was carelessly handsome with his angular features, large, dark, heavy-lidded eyes, and wry smile; Finn had never really thought about himself as a sexual being—what he might like; what he might dislike. He loved Rey, of course, but he understood now that what he felt for her was in a wholly different category. Having never had two friends before, Finn was uncertain how he could love them in such different ways, and wondered if he was somehow doing it wrong.

He was surprised by how he reacted to Poe. He'd come to crave the warmth of his hand as he'd lain alone in medbay. The look of him, covered only with a white towel, had been the final nail in the coffin as far as Finn's sexuality was concerned; he'd understood then that he desired more than friendship from the pilot. But it was confusing, horribly confusing. When coupled with the barrage of new stimuli everywhere he looked, this burgeoning sexual need was too much for him. He thought his brain might shut down entirely. He almost wished for the simplicity of the First Order, when his life had been cleanly defined, his place known, and deviation from that set course had not been possible. There was none of this messiness. He shook himself then, disgusted that he could want anything from his old life back.

Poe exited the refresher, dressed in casual ground clothes—an off white shirt that gaped open distractingly at the neck, and brown pants. Poe cocked his head as he looked curiously down at Finn's bed.

"What's all that?" He asked, picking up a sheet of flimsi. Finn felt embarrassment flush his face.

"Just…practicing."

Poe sat beside him, rifling through the scattered pages. "Had you never written before?"

"No." Finn stated, beginning to get seriously agitated at his ignorance and wondering how many firsts waited that he had yet to even comprehend.

"You did pretty well, actually. Probably better than a lot of people here." Poe shrugged.

Finn glanced up gratefully. "Really?"

"Yeah. Not many people hand-write any more. Most just use datapads or print out what they want. Sometimes this is faster though. And I like it. I think it's more personal."

"It is." Finn agreed earnestly. "I didn't even think that people could have their own style of writing."

Poe snorted suddenly. "Is this BB-8?"

"Oh," Finn laughed. "Yeah. He kept staring at me, so I figured I'd try drawing him."

"He's a little…"

"Melted?"
"Yeah." The next sheet showed a few nonsensical scribbles followed by a spidery version of Finn's name. Poe was deeply touched to see that his name followed, scrawled hugely across the page. He swallowed. "How's your back?"

"Sore. Better than it was last night though."

Poe shook his head. "You scared the hell out of me, Finn."

"Sorry…but thanks though for staying with me. I liked that. It made me feel…I don't know—safe."

Poe smiled. Finn was entirely too beguiling in his awkward praise and Poe leaned in, a hand pressing into the mattress by Finn's lap. Finn tensed but his mouth parted, anticipating the softness and warmth once more. Poe closed his eyes as he brought their mouths together and Finn froze under the caressing touch. Poe's tongue slid into his mouth, and his eyes flew open at the sensation, electrified to his core. Fumbling, he dared to brush his tongue against Poe's and the pilot moaned into his mouth.

BB-8 chittered, its head at an angle on its round body as it considered this extremely organic display. Poe pulled away, a hand still at Finn's jaw. "Don't you have somewhere to be?" He asked the droid dryly. BB-8 tossed it's head in an eye-roll, it's voice rising to a scolding pitch. Finn was torn between wanting BB-8 to stay and stave off what Poe was making him feel, and wanting the droid to be far, far away. The pilot was staring disappointedly up at the chrono; it was nearly 0700.

Poe heaved a sigh. "He's right. We need to get ready for mess and then our meeting with General Organa. And, no offense, you need a shower and a fresh change of clothes."

"Oh. Right." Finn said, his arousal plummeting to land somewhere near his feet. He wondered just how badly he smelled. "But…I haven't got anything to wear other than this."

"Let's see…my stuff will be a little tight on you. I'll go down to the launderers and get you some; they've got to have some extras lying around. I've got your shoes at least—they were about the only thing you were wearing that didn't get destroyed. Kalonia sent them up."

"I didn't even think about my old clothes. Man…I'm sorry about your jacket, Poe."

Poe grinned. "It was your jacket. And don't worry about it. If it was between you and the jacket, I'm glad you're the one that made it back. Be back in a sec." Poe said as he headed to the door. He descended several lifts until he entered the maintenance wing, which encompassed everything from electrical and plumbing repair to tailoring. Each hallway in the housing wing far above contained one large, built-in chute. Into these, residents tossed bags of soiled clothing, labeled with their first initial and last name. The clothing would be washed and dried and then the owner commed to come pick them up. Poe regretted how many changes of sheets he'd sent them over the years, and he figured this was where most rumors about his sex life began. A blond, middle-aged woman whose name he thought was Bira sat at the facilities one desk, her attention torn between an extremely dramatic holovid soap opera and the gigantic pile of laundry she was clumsily folding; the housekeeping droid parked beside her outpaced her ten to one. Her eyes jumped to Poe as he approached and she hastily turned off her program, flustered. He tried not to laugh.

"Oh, Colonel." Bira looked about in some confusion. "Did you send us a bag?" She asked worriedly.

"No, I just wandered if you had any extra sets of ground clothes floating around."
"Should have some." She slid stiffly off her chair and beckoned him to follow with a jerk of her head. A closet five times larger than his room stretched out from the back of the wash room. It was piled with spare fabric, all manner of coveralls, overalls, gloves, pants, and shirts. Pay dirt, he grinned. "Help yourself." She shrugged and started to leave, but turned back with a serious expression. "Oh, and one more thing. Next time you get blood and other substances on your sheets, will you kindly soak them in cold water? The stains come out so much easier that way."

It took all of Poe's self-control to keep from sprinting from the room with a mortified yell. He swallowed, blushing to the roots of his hair. "Yeah. Sure thing. Cold water. Yep."

"Good. Well, good luck to you. Anything you find is yours."

Whatever she's getting paid is not enough, he thought to himself as he hurriedly piled shirts, pants, socks, and underwear into his arms, only half-looking at sizes. He strode quickly past the main desk, clutching the clothes to his chest as if he could ward off what he imagined must be a withering look from the launderer. He laughed to himself as the lift carried him upwards once more. Well, that was better than a cold shower. All he'd have to do the next time he felt overly-aroused around Finn was picture Bira's mouth forming the words 'stains' and 'cold water'. A shudder wound up his spine. He opened the door to his room with his elbow.

"Wow," Finn said. "I didn't expect that much!"

"I don't know how much of it will fit." Poe said, dumping the armful of clothes onto Finn's bed. "Anything that doesn't, I'll just send back down."

"Cool. Wow, I never had this much choice before. This shirt…or this one?" He placed a hand to his mouth, musing. "I'll figure it out later. Can you help me onto the chair?"

"Yep." Poe said. It was both easier and harder to touch him now that both their feelings were known. "Fresher?"

"Yeah." Finn managed to scoot onto the seat without gritting his teeth in pain, and hope bloomed in him that his body would one day get back to normal. Poe pushed him into the room and left as he had the previous few times.

BB-8 caught Poe's eye. Man and droid stared at each other in silence for several minutes before Poe cracked a grin. "Yeah, yeah, shut it." He laughed; the astromech had spoken volumes without ever making a sound. BB-8 tittered and rolled a tight circle.

[This is good, Poe. I am happy. Finn is good.]

"Yeah, he is." Poe's eyes crinkled up in his smile.

Finn sat upon the toilet regarding the shower stall with some dismay; its narrow, transparent door was far too thin to allow access for his repulsorchair. You are forbidden from standing, Kalonia's no-nonsense voice echoed through his ears. "Uh…Poe?" Finn called out.

"Yeah?"

"How…exactly…am I supposed to even take a shower?"

Oh. "Uh…I didn't really think about that. Can I come in?"

Finn hurriedly did up his pants. "Yeah."
Poe walked in, his eyes glancing from the chair to the shower stall and then back again. "I can see if medbay has a seat or something we could put in there. You definitely aren't supposed to stand for as long as it would take to shower."

"Okay." Finn nodded.

Poe was back in minutes, holding a short waterproof seat. "Here," he said triumphantly as he squeezed past Finn and sat the low seat on the wet floor of the shower. "Well…the repulsor chair won't fit past the toilet so…you're gonna have to lean on me, pal."

"Right," Finn said as Poe took him under the arms and helped him stand. Finn tried to take some of his weight on his legs for it was obvious that Poe couldn't hold him up for long. Trying to gently lower Finn, with control, to the shower-seat nearly destroyed Poe's back.

"Okay," Poe breathed against Finn's neck, a clenching spasm starting. "Okay, might've over done it."

"You okay?"

"Yeah…my back's just been acting up recently."

"And moving me around hasn't been helping, has it?" Finn said sadly.

"Don't worry about it. You'd do the same for me, right?"

Finn nodded stalwartly. A new, and more embarrassing conundrum suddenly occurred to him. "Can you…help me get my shirt off again?"

Poe swallowed, replaying his encounter with Bira over and over in his mind as he leant into the narrow space, his chest pressing against Finn's half-parted knees. Finn tensed as Poe's fingers brushed his sides and the feel of Finn's body going rigid beneath his touch nearly drove Poe out of his mind. *Stains. Cold water.* It wasn't helping. He drew the shirt over Finn's head and down his arms. *You've got to be fucking kidding me,* Poe groaned. There was no way Finn could bend enough to draw his pants down his legs. Finn seemed to have realized the same thing. His eyes jumped to Poe's. He was attracted to Poe, he wanted him in a way he didn't fully understand; but this was too much too soon as far as he was concerned.

"Pants too?" Poe's voice was rough and Finn wished he hadn't spoken.

"I'll try first."

Poe drew back and averted his eyes as if Finn were covered in radioactive material. He kept his eyes solidly on the toilet; it needed cleaning. Poe focused on the grime until he could think clearly. Finn shifted one side of his pelvis up and then the other, trying to scoot his pants off of his hips. He succeeded enough to pull them to his knees and then shook them off to his ankles. He nudged them out the shower door with a toe.

"Got it," Finn said and he was horrified to hear that his voice was strained. Not daring look at Finn, Poe fumbled for Finn's discarded clothing and piled them on top of the sink and left the room. He nearly collapsed against the door.

[Your heart rate is up 63 bpm from its normal rate. Your temperature has increased.] BB-8 pointed out smugly.

"Will you shut up?"
He was called back ten minutes later. Finn was sitting, the towel lying across his lap but otherwise naked in the steamy, soap-scented room. Poe was unable to help his open staring and Finn blushed under the heat of his eyes.

"Could you help me with that shirt?" He said as if he were asking Poe to do no more than get him a glass of water. Silently, Poe reached for the wadded up shirt and approached Finn. He sank down to his knees, level with him, biting his lip. Finn's bare legs glistened in the humidity, and at this angle he could almost peer into the dark gap beneath Finn's towel. He drew the shirt up Finn's arms and over his head. Finn pulled it down, his eyes anywhere but Poe.

"And…the rest?" Finn's voice was barely audible.

Poe exhaled hard through his nose and goosebumps swept up Finn's arms and chest. Poe grabbed the briefs and shook them open, sweat beading his forehead. Finn stepped one foot into them and then the next and Poe drew them slowly up his ankles, calves, knees. He halted there, his palms on the warm muscle of his thigh.

Finn dared to glance down and gulped at the expression on Poe's face. Poe wanted to run his hands up Finn's body, to take his cock in his mouth, to feel every inch of him and show him what pleasure was. He stared up at Finn, his eyes tight, caught between burning lust and the realization that he didn't want Finn's first orgasm with him to take place on shower tiles next to a grimy toilet. He didn't want it to be hurried and their meeting with Leia was fast approaching.

"I…I got it from here, Poe," Finn said thickly. Relieved and horribly frustrated, Poe tore his eyes from him as Finn pulled the underwear up his hips and set his towel aside. Poe grabbed the black pair of pants Finn had chosen and turned back.

"Shit, this is gonna be a long week." He said through clenched teeth as he took Finn's leg by the calf and guided it through the floppy pants leg.

"Yeah." Finn breathed. "I don't even know what this is."

Poe huffed a laugh. "This is Grade-A sexual tension, Finn."

Finn nodded and then considered. "How do two men even…?"

Poe's head whipped up so fast a vertebra popped in protest.

"It's just…you make me feel things, and I'm not sure—" Finn tried to explain.

"Let's not have this conversation right now. Okay? I will end up ripping these right back off if we have that conversation." He pulled the pants up to Finn's thighs and Finn took them, shifting them up around his hips and hurriedly zipping them.

"Okay. Later? Because I feel like I'm going crazy or something, and I don't understand."

Poe bit his lip. "Later." He seriously considered telling Leia that Finn was not well enough to meet with her. He could take all the time in the world then. He could lay Finn out on his bed and trail his mouth down his chest, inch by inch. He could answer Finn's questions with his body. But he couldn't. Duty before Booty the old Starfleet mantra echoed through his head. The needs of the Resistance far outweighed his desire, fierce as it was. He would never forgive himself if the First Order managed to gain even an inch of territory that might've been defended if Leia had only gotten to question Finn. He sighed, wrapping his arms around Finn's chest as he helped him to stand. Poe gritted his teeth. He'd have to ask Kalonia for some painkillers or forget sitting in his X-wing today; he thought the muscle in his back must've crumpled like a tin-can. The jolt of pain did have one
positive affect—it thoroughly batten down his need.

Finn felt him tense and sway, and tried gamely to take some of his weight. "Are you okay?"

"Nnn," Poe groaned as he gracelessly plopped Finn onto the repulsorchair, "my back just caught. Jeez, we're both gonna be hobbling around at this rate."

"Do you want to go to medbay?" Finn asked as Poe slowly guided them out into the hall. BB-8 chirped, rolling along ahead of them in its excitement to meet with its fellow droids; not needing food, many of the Astromechs used mealtime as social hour. Not for the first time Poe wondered what they talked about, and hoped the droid would keep his figurative mouth shut regarding he and Finn.

"No—it's alright. Standing isn't so bad, it's just bending."

"Bending is the worst right now." Finn agreed.

"This is pretty pathetic, huh?"

"Yeah." Finn grinned happily.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I sooo wanted something to happen in that shower. I so did. But I'm a jerk and decided to make them wait, mostly because I want to drive Poe totally insane. };) Also, I finished reading Aftermath, and whoops-Snap is from a tropical planet too. Unless he's just gotten used to temperature controlled ships and bases, he probably wouldn't as big a heat wuss as I made him out to be. Ah wells. Thanks for reading thus far and reviews are appreciated. :) -Bluestem
It was nearly 0800 by the time they entered mess and only a handful of personnel remained at their seats, hurriedly downing their meals before the kitchen closed to prepare for the lunch crowd. Poe saw BB-8 lurking off to the side of their usual table, bleeping animatedly with Snap's green and white astromech, R3-M1. Snap had heavily modified the droid, and, like Poe, he regarded it as sacrilege to wipe a droid's memory. As such R3 had developed a unique, if rather salty personality. The two droids got along famously. Snap looked exhausted, his cheek resting heavily on his palm. He stirred somewhat as Poe approached, maneuvering Finn around to the open end of the table.

"Hey, morning guys." Snap rubbed at his eyes. "Glad I'm not the only one who had a late start today."

"You okay?" Poe asked in some concern. Snap had dark circles under his eyes and had hardly touched his porridge, though his caff had been drained.

"Yeah. I ended up binging that holovid series Bastian was raving about. 3 seasons in one night."

Poe snorted a laugh. "You're such a massive nerd, Snap."

"He's just jealous he's never beaten me at Galactic Expansion." Snap explained smugly to Finn. His eyes opened clearly all at once. "Oh man…have you ever played Galactic Expansion?"

"No?" Finn hesitated.

"Yes! New player! I'll tell you the rules."

"Oh boy." Poe rolled his eyes and went to fetch their breakfast.

"Okay, so it's a board game." Snap began breathlessly, "really old school style. The goal of the game is to claim territory and resources, and the person who has the most planets, satellites, and ships at the end wins the game."

"Okay." Finn said awkwardly.

"But there's cards and dice too, and you roll the dice to see if you succeed on the card that you drew. And there's these little model ships. I painted mine Resistance colors, blue and white. Poe made all of his orange and black because he's a ten-year-old." He waved a thick hand dismissively.

"Right." Finn looked beseechingly at Poe for assistance; he had no idea what Snap was talking about. Poe grinned, setting Finn's tray before him. Grimacing, he lowered himself to the bench with the grace of an old man and then placed Finn's pain pill on his tray. He would not forget again. Finn tossed it back and tucked in.

"Is your back still fucked up, Poe?" Snap asked, idly spooning some porridge into his mouth.

"Yeah."

"It's from helping me get onto this stupid chair," Finn lamented sadly.

"Yeah, and from sitting in an x-wing all day yesterday, and from that astro tech busting your ass."
Snap chuckled.

Poe choked on his mouthful, his eyes darting to Snap in horrified disbelief. Finn's expression was carefully neutral, but there was a subtle tightness in his jaw that made Poe wish he could crawl into a corner and die.

Snap glanced back and forth between them, realizing his blunder too late. "Shit. Uh…I forgot to pull the wiring on my headset yesterday." He mumbled and excused himself shamefacedly from the table. R3 beeped a farewell to BB-8 and followed after the pilot.

"Finn," Poe began but Finn cut him off.

"It's okay." He stated.

"Fuck," Poe breathed, rubbing at his brows. "Look…I don't want you to think this is how I am, okay?"

"You don't have to explain," Finn said flatly, still not meeting his eyes. "We should get going or we'll be late to the General's."

They made their way to the conference room in tense silence. BB-8 rolled after them, perplexed at this sudden change when they had been laughing and smiling hardly twenty minutes earlier. Poe wanted desperately to explain to Finn that his quick fuck with Tal had meant nothing, and to simultaneously apologize for it because it felt too much like cheating. Part of him churned angrily and defensively, like a hurt child. *Fuck, we're not a couple, not really, so it's not like I went out on him yesterday.* The better part of him retaliated succinctly. *You knew you wanted Finn, you knew you were falling for him. You got scared and fucking ran. And now you've hurt him. Deal with it, Dameron.*

Finn was preoccupied with wandering why this information about Poe made him feel so hollow. He wasn't sure how relationships progressed, if Poe even considered them to be in a relationship, if who Poe slept with was any of his business at all, or if maybe this was all normal and he was simply overreacting. Mostly he was just tired of feeling like an ignorant child. Poe stared down at the top of Finn's head, opened his mouth to speak, swallowed, and then continued on in silence.

Poe found Leia and Statura sitting in the conference room just as they had been the previous day; they might have never left. Poe guided Finn's chair into the vacant space across from them and then he stepped awkwardly to the side, unsure if Leia or Finn wanted him here for this meeting. Leia stood from her seat, smiling gently as she took Finn's hand.

"I'm so glad you're alright, Finn. The Resistance, and what remains of the free Republic owe you more than we can ever give. But these, at least, are due to you." Finn felt something solid drop into his hand as she drew away. Opening his palm, he was shocked to see two golden, gleaming badges. His jaw dropped and he recalled what Poe had told him what felt like weeks ago. *You've got a few medals. We'll get them for you when you're up.*

"I'm afraid it's not much." Leia said sadly.

"No, it's…it's wonderful, ma'am. Thank you." A childish grin brightened his face as he picked up a medal and examined it in the overhead light. It glistened like fire in his hand, and stamped across its circular face was the emblem of the Resistance and the word 'bravery'. The only time the First Order had recognized him had been when he'd made mistakes. To be honored for doing something morally right eased his heart. He tucked the badges gingerly into his pocket and looked up expectantly at
General Organa and Admiral Statura.

"General…do you want me here? I can leave. I've got my comm on me." Though Poe had aimed the question at Leia, his eyes darted to Finn.

"Go ahead and sit, Colonel." Leia hadn't missed the look. "Until our probes turn up a lead worth following, I could use your help with this as well." She turned to Finn as Poe pulled up the seat next to him and sat gracelessly. His back twanged like a plucked string and he bit the inside of his cheek to keep from cursing out loud.

"Now Finn, did Poe tell you the nature of this meeting?"

"Yes, General," Finn nodded.

"Officially, you are a free civilian and under no duty to tell me anything. Though if you'd like to join us, Force knows we could use your help."

"Where do I sign up?" Finn said immediately.

Poe's brows rose with admiration. He'd hoped for this, though he hadn't dared to admit it. Leia smiled and Statura glanced up from his notes.

"Finn, you needn't decide so quickly. I don't want you to feel pressured into this." Leia consoled.

"No ma'am, this is what I want to do. All of you took me in when you could've imprisoned me. You could've tortured what you wanted out of me. The First Order would have, without hesitation." His eyes jumped to Poe; the image of the other man beaten bloody, defeated, strapped to Kylo Ren's interrogation chair flashed through his mind. He swallowed. "I've seen enough to know now that this is the side I want to fight for."

Leia nodded, touched. "If you're certain, we'll begin the enrollment process." She shifted in her seat, clasping her hands over her knee. "You may have noticed that we've been in something of a morass since the destruction of Starkiller Base. I've been in contact with every leader of every planet that still holds allegiance to the Republic—but all of our leads have been unable to pinpoint where the First Order is hiding. Am I correct in assuming that Starkiller Base was not the location of their central command?"

Finn's mouth thinned. "I think that would be right. Ma'am, General," he hurriedly corrected, "I was just a foot-soldier, so I never had clearance to know the particulars. I was stationed on Starkiller Base for five years, but beyond that I was always on space stations or Star Destroyers."

"Can you remember anything that could help us pinpoint the locations of any of those Space Stations?" Leia urged gently.

"There were no planets…no moons. Nothing significant. And I…I couldn't remember specific constellations if I tried." He apologized and reached far back into his memory, a finger to his lips. Poe watched silently, his attention torn between Finn and Leia. "I remember once, when I was little, a senior officer made a comment that a strong magnetic field was scrambling our computer systems."

Statura made a quick note of that, and Finn hurried on. "But that was years ago…I couldn't even tell you if that station was still operational."

"We'll do a search for any stars, planets, or spatial anomalies with an exceptionally strong heliosphere. It's a slim lead," Statura admitted, frowning down at his datapad, "there could be millions of such phenomena occurring naturally at any given moment throughout the galaxy."
Finn averted his eyes, unsure what Leia wanted of him. If she was expecting him to singlehandedly deliver the First Order to the Resistance, he was sorry to have to disappoint her.

"It was a slim chance, Admiral, but not the only one we have. Finn…could you tell us how you became involved with the First Order?"

Finn glanced at Poe and then back to Leia. "Well, like all Stormtroopers, I was taken as a child."

"Do you remember how old you were?"

"Little. Too little to remember anything before the First Order. But when I was four or five years old, I did see a room full of babies; none could have been more than a year old. I wasn't supposed to have seen it, either."

Poe's heart twisted in his chest. Leia however nodded as if a theory had been confirmed. "Was all First Order staff obtained in this way?"

"No. Most of the senior officers came from old Imperial stock or joined voluntarily. As far as I know, it was only the infantry that were taken as children."

"It makes sense." Statura said with obvious disgust. "If taken young enough, the indoctrination would be so thorough that only a small percentage would possess the self-awareness to rebel." He inclined his head in respect to Finn.

"So many," Leia murmured, "just one of those Resurgent class Star Destroyers must carry thousands of troopers."

"Eight thousand, actually." Finn supplemented. "There was a rumor that, all told, Starkiller base housed half a million."

"Do you know how many Destroyers their fleet contains?" Poe spoke up, his eyes tight on Finn's.

"The most I ever saw together at any one time was five. I'm sure they had more, and there were full complements on the Star Stations I lived on as well."

Poe shook his head. The First Order boasted still boasted 35,000 troopers at the absolute minimum. The Resistance had 15 pilots, and perhaps 100 ground troops to its name. Though he liked a challenge, he fervently hoped their recruitment efforts would shore up the odds a little.

"I'm assuming that the First Order, like the Empire before it, only tolerates humans?" Leia questioned.

"Yes ma'am. I never saw any species but humans for most of my life."

"If a trooper is badly injured, how does the First Order handle it? Is the injured given medical care?"

Finn snorted through his nose. "No. If you got yourself really hurt, they'd just let you die. We were disposable—for every one of them that fell, they had five more ready to take their place."

Leia's eyes hardened. "The sheer numbers of stolen children it would take to run this is mind-boggling. And that's where I want to start. That many missing persons have to leave a trail."

Poe cottoned on at once. "And they're just babies—even someplace like Nar Shadda couldn't have much market for children that young; they can't work, and they'd need round the clock care. Not profitable for most slavers. Which would narrow down the field a lot."
"People go missing every day on hundreds of planets," Statura pointed out.

"But how many of them are infants?" Poe countered. "The percentage has got to be pretty low, wouldn't you think? And focusing on missing human children would narrow the field down further." He was beginning to feel a flare of excitement; this could be the break the Resistance had been hoping for; one small misstep on the First Orders behalf that could fracture the whole foundation.

"Finn…this may be a difficult question for you, but do you imagine that the First Order, or their associates, would leave parents or other witnesses alive in the process of stealing children?" Leia's eyes held him in a strong, steady grip. He balked. It was a devastating thought and one he'd honestly never considered. As he'd aged and felt more and more uncomfortable with his training and the First Order's ideals, he'd held onto the childish notion that somewhere out there he had a family that had escaped the chaos that had followed him. He knew he'd never find them, but it had eased his mind as he lay alone at night, imagining for himself a mother and father, even siblings, who somehow lived a different, pleasant life.

But it seemed obvious to him now that if his family had been near him when he'd been taken, they would certainly have been killed. His breath caught for a moment and he saw Poe move in his chair as if wanting to get up. "No. No, General, I don't think they would." His voice was hollow.

Leia's lips thinned with pity but she carried on determinedly. "Then we'll focus especially on cases in which children were taken and witnesses killed. What can you tell me about standard Stormtrooper training regimens?"

For f**ks sake! Poe wanted to yell. He had to sit on his hands to keep from breaking protocol, getting up, and wheeling Finn right out of the room. Finn was obviously upset, and yet Leia spoke of murdered witnesses as if she were doing no more than discussing the weather.

"We began basic physical combat training at age 7. Melee combat training at age 9. Ranged weapons training at age 10 and simulations training at age 12. Depending on how well we scored in our simulations, we were sorted into specialized fields. Some went on to be pilots, some ground infantry, and some went on to handle specialized weapons or environments. We were also continuously showered with propaganda. From the time we were children, we were taught to see the Jedi, Rebellion, and Resistance as terrorist organizations. There was no way to know anything beyond what they taught us. I never really cared about the history classes…" Finn shrugged and trailed off awkwardly. He could feel the familiar fuzziness creeping over his senses as the painkillers took effect.

"We were…desensitized to violence early on. They'd bombard you with the noise of blasters and explosions until you stopped flinching, keep you in simulations that showed people dying in…awful ways…until it stopped bothering you. It was so real…you could feel the blood. Every few weeks, you'd go through those simulations again." He shook his head. "If we ever questioned where we came from, they always told us that Republic terrorists had attacked our families, and that the First Order had taken us in. It made most troopers grateful to them, and made them want revenge on the Republic. They were always reminding us how they'd saved us."

Leia studied Finn, trying to keep disgust from her face; something Poe failed at utterly. As a mother, picturing a child subjected to such cruelty filled Leia with rage. She took a calming breath, calling on the light to center her. "How were those that rebelled against the purpose and authority of the First Order dealt with?"

"They were reconditioned."

"What does that entail?"
Finn's eyes darted about the small room and Poe listened apprehensively as Finn spoke. "It…they…strapped you to a chair and sedated you. They would inject something into your arm," he reflexively touched the bend of his right arm, "I'm not sure what it was. It burned but it…it made things very vivid—realer than real, if that makes sense. They'd place you in a simulation and show the worst things you've ever seen—over and over. It got inside you, until you felt that all that was physically happening to you. And they would tell us that all those horrible things had been done by the Republic. By the time you left that room, you felt…like you'd do anything for the First Order." Finn stared at his hands in his lap. He wished he were asleep.

"Had you ever been reconditioned, Finn?" Leia asked softly.

Poe shot her a swift, venomous look.

"Once." Finn murmured.

To Finn's surprise, Leia smiled gently and took his hand. "The fact that you withstood such a cultish, merciless upbringing with your inherent goodness intact gives me hope for those still in the First Order's clutches. Reconditioning wasn't enough for you. It may not be enough for others." She sat back, thinking on Finn's words. Poe squirmed in his seat. He wanted to hug Finn to him tightly. It physically hurt Poe to imagine him as a child, alone, unloved and unvalued; a cog in a machine, to be used and then discarded; gentle, placid Finn forced to learn how to kill, forced to learn hatred, forced to see things Poe couldn't even imagine. He felt ill. He wondered in what slight way Finn had transgressed that had required his one reconditioning.

"Then our course of action is clear. I will set up a small force to investigate cases of missing human children under the age of four, with special attention paid to cases associated with murder. I'll also send out an alert to our droid operatives and see if they can't access criminal records across an interplanetary front. If we can pinpoint areas of heavy disappearances, we may be able to track active transport ships to their point of origin. We may find the head of the snake at last—and then we can put an end to this madness." Her eyes were intense and her jaw rigid.

"Finn, if you feel able, I would assign you to work on this project. If it's too personal…"

"No, General, I want to help. If…if there's a chance I could keep kids from going through what I did, I have to take it. And if you could help them…if we could stop the First Order—I'd do anything for that."

Leia nodded and glanced to Poe. "Colonel, until we have a clear lead to follow, would you be averse to helping on this mission in addition to your other duties?"

"Of course not. I'll help." Poe said earnestly.

"Finn, you don't have a datapad, do you?" Statura questioned as he finished typing up his notes from the meeting.

"No, sir." Finn stifled a yawn.

"We'll have one prepared for you. You'll be able to access our data systems for research."

"That's all for now, Finn, Colonel." Leia concluded and her eyes lit sympathetically on Finn as Poe and Statura stood. "Thank you for answering my questions. I know it wasn't exactly a pleasant conversation."

"It's okay, General. If it helps, I don't mind at all."
Finn's selfless nature struck Poe deeply just then; his torturous childhood had not crushed his spirit but tempered it. Poe felt a squirm of cold shame in his chest; he hadn't grown from his tragedies as Finn had—he had shrunk and diminished and been content with it. He knew Finn was embarrassed by his ignorance regarding life outside of the First Order, but Poe felt he could do with a page out of Finn's book.

Leia smiled warmly at Finn. "We'll have your datapad sent to Poe's room." She bid them goodbye and Poe steered Finn from the room in thoughtful silence, BB-8 burbling a fond farewell to Leia.

"Do you want to go back and sleep for a while?" Poe peered down at the top of Finn's head. Sleep sounded wonderful to Finn, but he caught himself replaying Leia's questions over and over. *Were you reconditioned? Do you think witnesses would've been left alive?* He couldn't stand the thought of lying in bed, needled relentlessly by her soft voice and by the miserable images it brought to mind. He imagined a house torn apart by Stormtroopers. He imagined a man and woman lying deadly still among the rubble.

"No."

"Where to, then?" Poe asked.

"I don't know. You know this place better than me. I just...don't want to sit around your room moping."

"We could go outside for a while. It's hot, but it's gorgeous. There's a path Jess and I take that has some shade."

Finn shrugged, his mood rapidly plummeting. He didn't care where they went, so long as he wasn't alone. Poe's lips thinned as he slowly wheeled him into the cavernous main hanger and opened the small, seven foot high door to the right of the massive bay doors. The heat hit them like a physical blow, Poe more used to it than Finn who screwed up his face against it, raising an arm to shield his eyes from the intense natural light. Poe ambled slowly to the edge of the duracrete tarmac and onto the marginally cooler earth path he'd ran down only hours earlier.

It was quiet but for the low whisper of far off trees rustling in a humid breeze. Insects chirped and whined from within bright green tussocks of grass, and bird-like creatures called in sparse, keening voices from such heights that Poe couldn't pick them out no matter how hard he squinted into the cloudless sky. He liked the heavy scent of the ground, and the naked sun warmed his sore back. The path wound into a cutting between two grassy hillocks and from here Poe guided them off track, down a lightly worn crease. One old sentinel tree, its shaggy bole as big around as a TIE fighter pod, loomed up on their left. Its canopy shivered in swells of heat and velvety shade pooled beneath its gnarled limbs. Poe parked Finn in the shade and then levered himself stiffly to the grass where he lay flat out, an arm flung over his eyes.

For a long while they sat in silence. Poe felt knots of worry let go, soothed into the background in the face of nature's vast indifference. It reminded him of home. Nostalgia welled in him and he wished for the childhood sounds his ear often strained to find, for plants he could name, and for the foods he'd never managed to replicate off planet. He lifted his arm from his face and cracked an eye up at Finn; his hands were tight on the armrests of his chair, and he craned his head upwards as if expecting a strike from the sky.

Concerned, Poe propped himself up on his elbows. "Are you okay?"

Finn nodded, dragging his eyes from the sky. "It's just weird to be outside. It's so open. It makes me
feel anxious."

Poe understood at once. Finn, having spent most of his life on space stations and ships, must have some measure of agoraphobia. "We can go in, if you want." He offered gently.

"No. I'm not a kid, Poe. I can handle it."

Poe recoiled, chastised. "I never said you were."

Finn didn't answer and Poe was left with a bitter taste in his mouth. He lay back down, hands laced over his stomach as he watched the leaves far above shimmering like light on running water. He swallowed. "Finn…I'm sorry about earlier. I feel like I've messed this up before it's even started."

Finn glanced down at him; Poe continued staring upwards as if he'd addressed the world at large. He shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "I said it was okay."

"Yeah, but you didn't mean it." Poe stated.

"I don't even know what I mean, Poe." He snapped in exasperation. "I don't know what's normal, how things like this work. That's been made abundantly clear to me since I got out. I didn't even know I liked men until I met you. And anyways, it's not like we're together so whatever you did before doesn't matter." Finn crossed his arms in front of his chest in embarrassed frustration.

The solid way Finn spoke silently crushed Poe. *It's not like we're together* echoed numbly back and forth in his mind. He wanted to get up, climb into his ship, and fly to the other side of the galaxy. He hovered in tense indecision, mortified by the raw vulnerability that gripped his lungs and swallowed his voice. Finn focused hard on a far off knoll of towering trees; they simmered in a rippling haze of heat. He felt badly for snapping at Poe, but his talk with Leia had simultaneously put him on edge and left him feeling bone-tired. The heat was making his head swim.

"Can we go back in? I feel like I'm going to pass out, out here." He said shortly.

"Yeah," Poe forced the word from his mouth as if he were a million miles away, half using Finn's chair to prop himself up as his back clenched. He felt horribly close to tears, but he was too well-practiced to let them fall. Poe took them blindly across the kiln of a runway and the rush of cool air washing over them as they re-entered the hanger made them feel as if they'd been dunked in ice water. Poe shivered against his sweat.

"Do you want to go back to my room?" He asked. He half expected Finn to say 'no'.

"Yeah. These pills make me feel so tired."

A small spark of hope quivered in his chest. He could salvage this. "Probably the heat didn't help."

Finn shrugged. They took the lift without a word and entered Poe's room to find BB-8 hunched over Poe's datapad, listening to one of the extremely electronic songs Finn had sampled the previous day. The droid bopped it's head to the beat and then jolted as it realized it had company. Poe focused hard on a far off knoll of towering trees; they simmered in a rippling haze of heat. He felt badly for snapping at Poe, but his talk with Leia had simultaneously put him on edge and left him feeling bone-tired. The heat was making his head swim.

"Hey buddy." Poe smiled, though he didn't meet the droids lens as he wheeled Finn up to his cot. He saw a new datapad and com unit resting atop the pillow for Finn's use. BB-8 cocked it's head; Poe's micro-expressions showed that he felt miserable, no matter what he was trying to project. Poe leaned into Finn, taking him under the arms and helping him onto bed. He was surprised when Finn didn't automatically release him, but clutched at his back, his head pressed into his chest.
"Finn?" Poe whispered. He sat beside him, Finn still clinging to him. "Hey…it's alright." He soothed, holding him and running a hand through Finn's hair. He could feel him shaking.

"Sorry…" Finn drew away, wiping at his eyes. He was sick of crying, but it felt so close to the surface since Starkiller's destruction; he'd had nothing but time to sit and think about the myriad ways in which the First Order had suffocated him. "It was just hard…harder than I thought it'd be; talking about all that."

Poe sighed as he held Finn to him. He felt like he could sleep for a week, and the day was still young. After several minutes, Finn pulled away. Finn made to speak and then dropped his gaze to the bed, too tired to discuss the questions racing through his brain; it was the longest he'd sat upright since Kalonia had woken him. He lowered himself to the mattress, cracked an eye and saw Poe hovering worriedly over him. The question came of its own accord. "Poe…would I be just another astro tech to you?" He murmured.

Poe's breath caught, devastated that he'd made Finn think he'd valued him so little. "No—no of course not, Finn."

Finn sighed, nodding marginally. "Could you…stay with me?" He asked as he drifted off.

"I'll stay with you for as long as you want." Poe said, but Finn gave no sign of hearing him. Poe heaved a sigh and then straightened out alongside him, kissing him once on the mouth and once on his shoulder. He curled against him, a hand resting gently on Finn's chest. He lay, dozing lightly, waking every so often and etching Finn's face into his memory; the sharp arches of his eyebrows, broad nose, and the way his lips curled up slightly at the corners. He closed his eyes, focusing now on the steady rhythm of Finn's heart and taking quiet delight in the soothing way his chest rose and fell beneath his hand.

An unbidden image swam before his eyes of Finn as a child covering his ears and screaming as noises erupted around him. He pictured him huddling alone in a simulation, surrounded by mutilated corpses and the howling, writhing injured. His hand tightened on Finn's chest. *I will never let them hurt you again,* Poe silently promised. Finn shifted in his sleep, managing to curl somewhat onto his side in spite of the tightness of his scar. His arm slid across Poe's flank, clutching him. Poe jolted at the touch and then closed his eyes, pressing his forehead into the hollow of Finn's throat.

BB-8 woke him nearly two hours later with soft, but repetitive beeping. Poe propped himself to his elbows, Finn's arm sliding from him, and blinked blearily at the droid.

"What's going on?" He muttered thickly.

[We have recon in half an hour. You should see Kalonia before we go so that your back doesn't get worse.]

Poe nodded, digging his knuckles into his eyes to wipe away the last traces of sleep. He sat and yawned; naps had never worked in his favor—they left him feeling disoriented and slightly nauseous. Finn felt the mattress shifting as Poe climbed off of it and woke. Unlike Poe, the quick nap had returned some his energy and taken the edge off of his hurt. He peered up and Poe caught the question before he asked it.

"I've got a recon run in a bit—and I need Kalonia to look at my back before I sit in that cockpit for the rest of the day."

"Oh." Finn nodded.
"Do you need anything before I go?" Poe yawned as he stowed his com in his breast pocket.

"Bathroom break, just to be safe." Finn said.

Poe nodded. The procedure was already routine and he had Finn back in bed in only a few minutes and with the minimum amount of tension. "Let me see the comm they gave you; I'll program my code into it so you can contact me." He pressed a few tiny buttons on the edge of the slender device. "Won't work while I'm in hyperspace, but…" he shrugged and handed the comm back to Finn. "I'll be back around 1800 again."

"Right." Finn nodded. His eyes landed on the datapad Statura had sent him. With a mixture of reluctance and determination, he picked it up and switched it on. It would be hard to delve into the cases of missing children, but at the moment it was the only way he had to fight the First Order. "I'll see if I can turn up any of those cases the General was talking about."

"Good luck," Poe said.

"You too."

Chapter End Notes

AN: This was a hard chapter to write-I didn't see Snap messing things up until I'd written it (I hate me sometimes) and then I spent several days trying to repair the damage. I probably wrote 10 pages of Finn and Poe talking and trying to reconcile, but it always seemed either too forced or too easy. Yeesh. It was also tough to research the ways in which child soldiers are taken and indoctrinated. There will be fun in the future (...after a teensy bit more not-fun)! Thanks for reading, and reviews are much appreciated! :) -Bluestem
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Poe and Jess drifted alongside one another in the swirling vortex of the jump-tunnel. Stars streaked by their cockpits at lightspeed, blurring into blue and white lines of fire and shrouding them in a ghostly pallor. Poe gritted his teeth, unmoved by the view. Kalonia had had one of her aides crack his back and roll the muscle of his lower spine until he'd thought he was going to bite a chunk out of the padded table he'd been pinned against. And then she'd patched him with a steroid injection. While he could bend and pivot without gasping in pain, the whole area now throbbed dully against his seat. And he still wanted to bash Snap's face in with a wrench; he'd sent the other man off with Bastion and Nien Nunb on a sweep of the Tamarin sector for enemy ships.

Snap, for his part, had apologized almost non-stop; as soon as they'd settled into their respective ships, he'd opened a private channel and started blabbing until Poe had been forced to angrily shout that he forgave him and that he'd better shut up about it. He was relieved when Snap's team had made the jump to hyperspace. He was even more relieved when his dash pinged an alert that they were approaching their destination.

"Switch to sublight on my mark." He announced and then flipped a switch to the left of the nav computer and throttled back. The ship dropped into realspace, appearing so suddenly amid a field of static white stars that it seemed to have popped out of nothing. Jess's white and blue ship popped into existence off his starboard wing.

The chaotic wreckage of the Hosnian system engulfed them immediately. Masses of planetary crust the size of Star Destroyers tumbled blindly end over end, bewildering in their hugeness. Smaller debris still radiated out from the initial explosion that had destroyed the system and all it's 12 billion souls. The fractured innards of the planet bashed together, colliding, fusing and shattering, and then hurtling away in a frantic dance of destruction. Ribbons of planetary dust glittered ominously in expanding nebulous bands. While their ships could withstand it, should any organic being come into contact with such a cloud, they would find themselves thinly lacerated into thousands of pieces.

Poe swallowed grimly. "Stay sharp, Lieutenant. This is about as unstable as it gets."

"Copy," Jess confirmed.

They kept silent as they wove and twisted through the wreck. Poe couldn't wrap his mind around the fact that, just a week and a half ago, 12 billion people had been innocently going about their lives with no idea that all of them would soon perish in a blast of cosmic fire. His stomach churned and he clenched his jaw. He and Rhys had been stationed on Hosnian Prime for 2 years after their graduation from the Academy. It had been a beautiful and diverse world. He thought suddenly of the kind old Twi'lek woman who had given him a bottle of her best prangi-berry wine just because he'd told a dirty joke in her shop that'd made her laugh. He remembered the tiny restaurant he and Rhys had frequented that had served the closest thing to real Yavin cooking that he'd ever found. All if now drifted coldly past him. His hand tightened painfully on the stick as anger coursed through him in waves.

Come on, he begged the universe, give me something. Where are the bastards?

He dipped beneath a berg of spinning rock, senses peeled though he knew BB-8's scanners would pick up anything long before he spotted it. Jess, far afield to his port spoke just as BB-8 pinged him.
His heart jolted in anticipation.

"Poe—I've got a reading on something over here. Inorganic—looks like it could be a ship."

Poe threaded a course through the debris until he was wing-to-wing with Jess. From its perch in the astromech socket directly aft of Poe's cockpit, BB-8 caught sight of the wreck, it's powerful photoreceptor scanning the dimensions and comparing them to a registry of every known ship-type. While Poe was still squinting to catch sight of it, BB-8 announced the model.

[This is a Durosii LT-Malda cargo ship.]

"Thanks, buddy." Poe caught sight of the long, low-slung ship. It was rectangular and deeply keeled with mirrored, triangular wings jutting out dorsally and ventrally. The large vertically slanted engines were long cold. As the searchlights from their x-wings flashed across the hull, a massive hole gaped out at them like an empty eye-socket. It almost looked as if a bite had been taken out of the ship and they could see no sign that any crew or cargo could possibly have survived.

"You think it got caught in the explosion?" Jess asked, though she knew that hadn't been the case. The dead ship drifting through the mass grave of Hosnian Prime unnerved her and she hung cautiously back.

"No—no way it could've survived that, and a hit from this debris would've crumpled the whole ship in. This too localized. That hole has a lot of plasma-scouring on the edges. Whatever hit this thing used a really big gun with a tight focus, and it did it recently—within the week." Poe pursed his lips.

"It's weird though…a cargo ship like this…why blast the cargo to bits and knock out the controls if you wanted to board it? And if they didn't want to do that, why bother hitting it in the first place?"

"I don't like this." Jess's voice was uneasy in his ears.

"BB-8, you pick up anything else out there?"

[No. I scanned the ship's registration code and patched the data to base. Someone there may know why it was here.]

"Thanks." He closely looped the dead ship once more, his brow furrowed. He could find no reason why the cargo ship would've made such a risky run through the debris field, nor could he understand why its attacker would have blasted it apart with nothing to gain. The hair on the back of his neck stood up with the cold suspicion that he was missing something.

As he prepared to pivot Black One from the wreck, two pebble-sized homing devices detached seamlessly from its battered hull, woken from their static state by the electrical output of Poe's ship. Firing quick bursts of pressurized air from micro-jets with incredible thrust, they split away from each other, trailing hard after Poe and Jess's x-wings. The advanced devices magnetized as they neared their targets, jutting forwards and all but welding to the durasteel of the ships. One latched onto the thin trailing edge of Black One's upper left wing panel, nearly indistinguishable from the bolts that held the wing together. The other nestled itself on the belly of Jess's craft, near the boxy engine compartment. Between the power readings of the x-wings engines and the interference from billions of particulates, neither droid picked up the quick magnetic pulses.

Finn sat with his back against the refresher wall, the datapad open in his lap and his legs dangling over his cot. It had taken him a while to access the Republic database—his credentials were new enough that not all systems had updated to give him clearance. After entering his password (FinnnotFN) six times, he was finally greeted with a bewildering array of files and tabs. A message
flashed in the upper-right-hand corner of the screen and he switched it open.

Finn,

All of the files we have complied thus far that have to do with the operation henceforth known as Trapper Core can be found in folder 1.1 on your start screen. Those cases marked with a red circle are already under investigation. Those marked with a green circle are open for any team member to investigate. After reviewing a case, please go to the open file labeled 'Cross map'. This will open a map of all known regions of space. Place a marker on the location where your case originated and be specific in your placement; planet, continent, city or territory, and address where applicable. Include within this heading all relevant information, no matter how inconclusive or coincidental it may seem. From the Cross Map you may cross-reference your case with all those that have been entered so far. If two cases seem to link up, you may draw a line between them, connecting them across the map. As we inspect more cases, we will hopefully begin to see patterns and areas of heavy concentration emerge. Do as much as you feel able. Your help and knowledge pertaining to Trapper Core are greatly appreciated. If you require assistance, comm code 51085.

Yours, Admiral Hidao Statura.

Finn closed the message and opened folder 1.1, his chest tense. He wasn't sure how he would react to reading reports of abducted children. 312 cases greeted him; all but 7 were marked with green circles. Finn was inwardly impressed that Leia's team had amassed so many in such a short span of time. He swallowed, steeling himself, and pressed the first unclaimed case. It was dated twelve standard years previous and two folders awaited him; one containing a written account and official documents, and the other a video lifted from the local news providers. Finn opened the video.

A woman dressed in clothes that looked, to his eyes, very oddly assembled, began the report with dramatic flair. Her voice was heavily accented and Finn had to concentrate hard to make out what she was saying.

You can see before me that the child-care center here at Bremilin Hosk is in complete disarray. Local enforcers have cordoned off the area, but Head Enforcer Pral Gortun has confirmed 13 casualties—most of whom were caretakers and support staff. Sadly, the bodies of five children were recovered. Names have not yet been released, though we have reports from several who live in the area of hearing blaster shots. There appears to be no trace of the remaining 21 children said to be in Bremilin Hosk's care at the time of the attack. All of were under three years of age. This is a suspected mass-abduction. Little physical evidence can be obtained from the scene of the crime—as you can see, those responsible set fire to the building. Enforcers are reviewing surveillance footage.

The video cut and Finn stared at the screen blankly for several minutes. 21 children. Swallowing, he opened the official reports. Brow furrowed, he read quickly through the document. The names, species, and genders of the dead greeted him along with a photo of each. A tiny Rodian baby stared up at him with huge dark eyes, his snout curled into a smile. Finn gritted his teeth as a horrible image of the baby lying shot and burned flashed through his mind. He tore his eyes from the photo and roved on to the next. It was of a round-faced little Togruta, so young that her montrals and head-tails were thumb-sized nubbins of striped flesh. For a moment Finn thought there was an error in the report, for the same child beamed up at him from the next photo as well. Oh…twins, he realized sadly. The comparatively long face of a young Duros girl was next. Last was a Zabrak infant, the smooth bumps on his hairless head giving no hint of the horns he would've grown.

Finn nodded darkly to himself; he was willing to bet everything in the Resistance that the children that had been kept alive and stolen were human. His hunch was proven right on the very next page. The faces of 21 human babies and toddlers stared out at him. Overwhelmed, he scrolled down the
list. The face of one little boy stopped him dead. The child had dark skin and closely cropped curly black hair. It could've been him. Was that boy, right now, being forced to learn how to defend himself? Was he being subjected to blasts of noise so loud that he would either be desensitized or driven mad? Had he been beaten for showing fear yet? Had he already forgotten that there had ever been another life for him?

Finn gasped, a sudden thought knocking the wind out of him. Might he, in the course of his research, come across a picture of himself in some old document, smiling and unaware, just as these children had been? Would he even recognize himself at such a young age? Any of the others Leia had picked to work on the case might find him and never even know it. Fear clenched his stomach in watery knots, terrified of the slim chance that he could find himself; his birth name, birthdate, parents, maybe even siblings. It was all possible. And so unlikely that he could hardly stand it.

Finn was startled back to himself as Poe and BB-8 entered the room. He looked up at clock; he'd spent five hours glued to the datapad, still as a statue and pouring over every detail of his chosen case. His dry eyes burned and his stomach growled, upset at being ignored for so long. Poe looked as exhausted as Finn felt; the pilot undid his boots, tossed them aside and fell limply into his bed with a groan; it felt sinfully good to stretch out after sitting, tense, for so many hours. His back gave comfortably into the mattress. Now that the throbbing of the steroid patch had subsided, he felt almost normal.

"How's your research going?" Poe asked, tilting the back of his head into the mattress and staring upside down at Finn.

"It's…well…it's not fun reading." Finn admitted.

"I wouldn't think so." Poe rolled onto his stomach. "You doing okay?"

"Yeah. Actually, it feels good to have something to do. I didn't even realize I'd been working on this all day. It is hard though…seeing the pictures of those kids."

"I bet." Poe agreed sadly.

"How about you? Recon turn anything up?"

"Yeah, actually. Jess and I did a sweep of the Hos—well, what remains of the Hosnian system and we found a derelict cargo ship. Had a hole the size of this room blasted through it."

"You think it was from the debris?"

"No. Someone shot it and left it drifting. We're running the registration ID now—hopefully something will turn up. Otherwise, no good solid leads on my end. Fucking disappointing. Oh!" He snapped his fingers. "While we were reporting on that ship, the General told me that Rey's supposed to make it to Ahch-To in three more days."

"Really?" Finn's face brightened, all the worry and anxiety he'd felt while studying the case melting from him in the warmth of Rey's name. The datapad slid from his lap unnoticed. It almost hurt Poe to see him that happy for Rey; he didn't think a single thing he'd said or done around Finn had caused him to look that joyous.

"Yeah. Man, that planet is way out there for it to take so long at lightspeed." He gave no hint at his petty jealousy.

"Wow, that's awesome! I wonder if we'll be able to contact her when she gets there. You think Luke
Skywalker will actually train her? He must be unbelievably powerful, if anything the First Order said about him was true."

"Oh he *is* powerful. My mom served a mission with him back in the day; helped him break into an Imperial outpost and everything. She said he moved like no one she'd ever seen, jumping around like a gorg in a skillet, almost *dancing* with that lightsaber. And he could use the force to move things; people, weapons, ships—it didn't matter. If Rey can use the force, and *he's* the one teaching her…" he shook his head. "Two people like that are worth a planet full of pilots."

Finn snorted. "Not if they're as good as you." He laughed suddenly. "A planet of Poes. Now there's a crazy thought."

BB-8 chittered brightly to Finn who automatically looked to Poe for the translation.

"He wants to know if there'll be enough BB-8's to keep track of all the Poe's on this fabled, magical planet. 'Fabled' and 'Magical' were my words, not his. Because that planet would be literally magical. The things I would do to myself…" He trailed off wistfully.

"Right…" Finn chuckled, arching a brow, and then said to BB-8, "Of course there'll be BB-8's for all the Poes. It'd be weird to see you guys apart." He recovered the thread of their conversation. "But that's amazing that your mom actually got to *serve* with Skywalker. Is she a pilot too?"

"She was." Poe nodded. "One of the best. She flew in the Battle of Endor. She never used to talk about her role in the war—she'd mostly just focus on her squadron, or the battle as a whole. After I got into the academy, I went through her files—she was *amazing* Finn. She was a triple ace pilot, earned the Bronze Nova…there was a lot of testimony from the people she saved." He cracked a grin. "Luke Skywalker *wishes* he could be as cool as she was." He rubbed a hand across his stubbly chin, musing. "My dad still has her old A-wing. I was meaning to use some leave and visit him, actually, but then the whole Starkiller thing happened."

"Oh. So she's…?" Finn ventured delicately.

"Yeah. Happened a long time ago."

"Sorry." Finn glanced away awkwardly.

"It's okay." Poe shrugged. "Stuff like that happens." He was so relieved that Finn seemed to have forgotten his earlier coldness towards him that he would've discussed every sad detail in depth if Finn had asked him. "Hey, you want to grab dinner? I'm hungry enough to actually want that crap."

"Yeah, I'm starving."

As Poe helped him onto his chair his eyes landed on Finn's datapad. "I'll have to get you some music or holovids for that thing. Did you find anything like you liked on mine? I can transfer them over."

"Oh. I did, yeah." Finn scratched at the back of his head, still ashamed. "There was one song I liked a lot. I listened to it five or six times. I can't remember what it was called though….Sowerta….Sowerta something."

"Swoweta Mandal?" Poe asked brightly.

"Yeah, that's it!"

"You've got good taste—that's one of my favorites." He grinned and started them down to mess. His comm pinged as they entered a lift and he brought it to his ear. "Dameron here." He listened to the
voice on the other end, his expression switching from professionally bored to enraptured in the space of a breath. "Oh, thank every god ever! That is some damn good news—I would raise your rank if I could. Thanks!"

Finn glanced up at Poe, bewildered.

"Food! Food shipment from Corellia! Holy shit, we are having a party and you are going to eat until you vomit. Have you had alcohol? You probably haven't. You may vomit. Oh man, Corellian Rum." He moaned and punched the air. "I need to comm Snap—he's going to weep."

Word of the arriving shipment crashed through base with all the subtly of a tsunami. Nocturnal species woke early, civilians flooded en masse from their quarters, and even some of the medical staff had managed to sneak away. The buoyant mob packed the mess hall and overflowed into the hanger bay, squeezing between ships and tech, cheering and laughing raucously, their collective spirits higher than they had been since Starkiller's immediate destruction. Those on the communications team happily shouted over the noise that the cargo ships (Ships! Ships plural! Someone screamed) would arrive planet-side in half an hour. The kitchens were fired up, the crowd watching like slavering nexu before a kill. Night staff joined the day crew, preheating ovens, gathering up every utensil they could find and hurriedly washing dishes left-over from the just-ended dinner rush. Civilians and enlisted officers who knew a thing or two about cooking offered their help and were eagerly accepted.

BB-8 was thrilled to see that most of it's friends had followed their pilots, and the Astromechs huddled together in a shrilly-bleeping knot, plainly excited even though they had no need for food. Some of the bases children darted about, trying gamely to shove the wobbly BB units over and then retreating with shrieking laughs.

The festivity jumped from person to person like a virus, and Finn grinned about in wonder as Poe pushed him into the throng. Poe was nearly mobbed by his pilots and more than a few strangers. With the promise of food and copious amounts of alcohol, the long overdue victory celebration could finally take place, and the heroes of the day found themselves the impromptu guests of honor. Snap jogged up to them and slapped Poe on the back so hard he nearly tumbled face-first over Finn's chair; his chest slammed into the top of Finn's head. Poe straightened while Finn rubbed his head, his anger with Snap vanishing on the spot.

"I'm so happy, Poe!" Snap yelled, pulling Poe into a bear hug and lifting him bodily off the ground. Poe was glad he'd gone to medbay earlier; Snap's hug would've crippled him for life otherwise.

"Beer!" Ziff appeared from nowhere, his eyes on the hangar doors as if he could will the ships to land.

A loud, gruff voice rose over their heads. "All right, clear up, clear up. You there, get those doors open!" Controller Dand strode thickly through the crowd, rounding up his ground crew who found themselves reluctantly drawn from the festivity to go to work. "Come on, get some sledges ready—where's Buford? Get that droid in here! I want that food off those ships and in the kitchen before it's had a chance to settle!"

Poe and several others laughed out loud. The Tarsunt's prickly efficiency was something everyone at base had scoffed at, at one time or another, but not now. Most the base followed the ground crew out onto the tarmac. The sky had darkened to a deep azure purple and D'Qar's sun swam in a hazy golden film above the black silhouette of the forests beyond. Poe guided Finn outside and shifted from foot to foot, peering up into the heavens. Cold pinpricks of stars glittered fitfully, emerging by degrees out of the darkness, but he could see no ship lights. Nien Nunb and a few other Sullustans
heard the far off rushing roar of engines, spread the alert to those not so aurally blessed, and base erupted into cheers as one organism; Dand had to yell himself hoarse to keep a space open as six Corellian cargo ships descended on them. They touched down with a hiss of hydraulics. The crowd parted reverentially as the small figure of Leia strode through, accompanied by an overwhelmed looking 3PO, Statura, and a grinning Major Brance. She approached the foremost ship and as the gangplank extended she offered her hand in welcome to the pilot and crew. She spoke a few words that Poe couldn't catch and then turned to face the eagerly waiting audience. In a carrying voice she called out, her face breaking into a smile.

"My apologies for the delay, but I thought you all deserved a little something extra for your recent efforts. I appreciate your tirelessness and sacrifices more than I can ever express. So, accepting that limitation and hoping that this will suffice for it, let me just say that one of these ships is carrying solely alcohol."

The cheers ratcheted up as if a bomb had been dropped at their feet, drowning Leia out in a roar of sound that buzzed and vibrated in Finn's ears. He'd never known that joy could reach a volume as deafening as the most violent battle.

C-3PO was forced to amplify his vocabulator until his dainty voice shouted politely over the noise. "Please! Please! The General hasn't finished yet!" He shook his golden head. "I just don't understand why-"

"Thank you Threepio," Leia smiled at him with gentle humor, a hand extended to his chest plate to keep him from carrying on. "Now, before we begin our feast, let me just say that routine shifts are postponed until 1400 tomorrow. Have a bit of lie in—I'm sure you'll all need it after this. You have clearance to keep the hanger open and sit out upon the tarmac if you'd like. If you feel you must venture beyond that for whatever private reasons…well, just use your brains please."

Laughter and cheers as Leia stood aside to let Dand and his crew take over. Crate after crate were unloaded onto sledges and paraded back to the kitchens as reverently as if they were famous holovid stars or foreign dignitaries; the Corellian crew might as well have been royalty—they were ushered in with applause and great praise. Finn watched with a huge smile as the kitchens sprang to fiery, crackling life and orders were shouted.

What felt like hours later, Finn found himself seated between Poe and Jess and surrounded by heaping dishes of tantalizing food. The varied forms, colors, textures, and smells had him salivating. Snap and Bastian had pushed two tables together so that the entirety of the flight crew could sit together. They laughed and joked back and forth to one another between mouthfuls of food. The volume of the excited crowd was enough to raise the roof, but no one cared. Once again, Finn was stuck by the stark difference between First Order mess and this…he decided this must be a party. For a long while he just basked in the glow of it, trying to listen to everything; every alien tongue, every bark and giggle of laughter, the clinking of bottles, the patter of children running about. He sighed, buoyed by the communal happiness.

Snap was torn between taking nearly orgasmic bites of whatever was in front of him and trying to painstakingly lay out the board for Galaxy Expansion, which he'd run back to his quarters to grab. "Nothing like beer, choco rinds, and table-top games, my friend." He'd said upon catching Finn's questioning look. "Who wants in? Got space for 8!"

Jess guffawed, pounding back her second Corellian rum and wiping at her mouth; a nervous but very pretty Zabrak woman sat beside her and Jess had eyes for nothing and no one else. "I will take that as a no." Snap said and then pointed expectantly at Finn and Poe.
Poe raised his bottle of Hellbrawn Ale. "I'm in! You might as well too, Finn—he won't shut up until you try it. Oh—have some of these," he broke off, grabbing at a dish of thin slices of something drenched in a caramel colored sauce.

"What is it?" Finn asked.

"Pera torte. They're really good—haven't had any of these in ages." He took a long pull from his ale as Finn piled a heaping spoonful onto his already groaning plate. He popped a forkful into his mouth and froze. It was so sweet and tart that it almost brought tears to his eyes and he looked at Poe in amazement as he swallowed.

"This is food?"

"There's more where that came from. Here's your painkiller, by the way." He passed it over to Finn and then stood to grab another armful of ales and rums. He felt eyes upon him and turned to see Tal Amir, tables away, following his progress. Poe frowned as he crammed bottles into the crooks of his arms and pinned still more against his chest. It annoyed him to be anywhere near the astro tech, and he tried to put the other man's expression out of his mind as he sat.

"Hey, grab some of these, will you Finn?"

"Yeesh. Are you gonna drink all this yourself?" Ziff asked as he tore off a hunk off a crispy, fried drumstick.

"No." Finn shook his head and picked up a fiery red bottle of Hellbrawn Ale. He sniffed at it; the biting, bitter smell caught in his nostrils, bubbly spray popping and stinging all the way down the back of his throat. He sneezed and then coughed hugely, his eyes watering. Ziff cackled, raising his bottle in a salute.

"You're gonna want to go easy on that—eat some food first of we'll be scraping you off the floor." Poe grinned.

"Right," Finn choked. He set the bottle aside and tucked into his mountainous plate. Poe couldn't stop smiling at him—the innocent and expectant way Finn carefully rolled each new food about his mouth, and then grinned delightedly over everything he tried made Poe want to kiss him.

"Okay, so we've got Finn, Poe, Bastian, Ziff, Nien and me. That's a pretty good crew." Snap rubbed thoughtfully at his beard as he studied the board. "Here's your ships, Poe." He shoved eight small but intricate models past a bowl of some cheesy slop and Poe gathered them to him, arranging them in a defensive chevron before his pile of dishes. Finn smiled tightly—the ships had indeed been painted black and orange, just like Black One, and it seemed the pilot had spent no small amount of time detailing them. Though Poe had earlier called Snap a giant nerd, Finn suspected this was a case of the rancor calling the nexu mean.

"What color do you want, Finn?"

Finn craned his head. "How about...those yellow ones?"

"Right."
The pieces were parceled out and Snap went on a painstaking explanation of the rules. Poe tuned out completely, downing his third ale in twenty minutes and finding everything extremely funny. Finn was solidly confused about the importance of trade routes (something that caused Snap great distress), and this amused Poe to no end. Finn's eyes darted to Poe, and once he saw why he was giggling into his hand, Finn devised a plan.

"Okay, but say I have a ship in this quadrant here. Can I buy a route over to that quadrant?" He pointed guilelessly to a section of map half a foot away.

"No, I told you: You have to have a settlement or ship already there to set up a trade route." Snap said patiently.

"But what if I have one set up over here? Can I link them up then?"

"If you've got a waystation or a ship on that tile. Dude, you gotta listen."

"What if I use someone else's ship or waystation?"

"I told you—in order to do that you have to either have that card on hand or roll a natural 10."

"What if I roll two fives instead?" Finn asked with exaggerated innocence.

Poe snorted, burying his face in his hands, losing it entirely.

Snap's mouth thinned dryly. "Okay, okay. I see what this is. We'll see who's laughing after I kick your asses. I'm not gonna take it easy on you just cause you're a beginner, Finn."

"Bring it." Finn grinned.

Finn found himself greatly enjoying the game, though he really didn't have a clue what he was doing. It was fun enough just watching Snap attempt to hold his extremely serious game face as the others laughed and argued over their rolls. Nien Nunb destroyed Bastion's green colored ships and left him stranded in the Outer Rim. Snap had put together a spider's web of blue trade routes and claimed six planets within the first ten minutes. After that, Finn contented himself with taking out Snap's waystations, pointless as he knew it would be, and with watching Poe; he was far more into the game than Finn would have expected of him. He liked watching him trace his lips as he considered his options.

Poe held Corescant. He sloppily took a drink, his eyes pinned to the board and sweat starting on his brow. He'd never won. He might win if he could hold onto the core systems. He had to hold on to the core. He rubbed a hand over his mouth, studying each of Snap's ships.

"Any time now, oh fearless Colonel." Snap grinned devilishly, his fingertips splayed together like a scheming overlord. Finn took an experimental gulp of ale; it sluiced down his throat like fire but it left a bittersweet taste on the back of his tongue. A reflexive shudder wound up his spine and he eyed the bottle as if it were something that might bite him. Cautiously, he tried some more, though his stomach was so full he felt dangerously close to exploding.

"Hey…you took like fifteen minutes." Poe countered Snap thickly. He was getting a nice buzz going on and damn it felt good after the stress and tension of the past week.

"Are you sloshed already?" Snap drummed his fingers on the board. A sudden squelching sound made them all look round. Jess and her Zabrak date were wound together like two rathtars going after the same piece of food.
"Heyyy!" Poe cheered, raising his bottle in a sloppy salute and the rest of the table did the same. Bastian and Ziff pounded their drinks on the table and catcalled until half the hall had tuned in and started cheering. Finn tried to smother an awkward laugh as Jess flipped them off and the two stumbled from the table and out into the open darkness of the tarmac. Finn's stomach flipped; Poe's eyes had locked onto his and were smoldering as if he'd like to do the same. Is this what people do at parties? It was one thing to have Poe kiss him up in his room, where it was just the two of them, and anyways, Poe's previous kisses had been tame compared to the sucking, gulping, ravenous thing Jess and her date had shared; it would be beyond uncomfortable to have Poe do that to him here, and now. Finn panicked and took a hasty gulp of ale. Now that he was used to the burning, it was rapidly growing on him.

"Poe. Calling Poe, do you read me, copy?" Snap broke in.

"Yeah, what? Gimme a card." He dragged his eyes off of Finn and back to the board.

"Your funeral, buddy." Snap handed him the top card from the deck.

"HA!" Poe barked as he flipped it over. It was just what he needed. "If I win this roll, I get Corellia too." He picked up the dice, shook it with pained expectancy, and let it fly. "Yes! In your big bearded fucking face, Snap!" He slapped a palm triumphantly onto the table, shaking their drinks and game pieces. Finn bit back a laugh; this loopy version of Poe was new to him and he liked it.

"Lucky roll." The game master was supremely unconcerned.

Bastian went out on his next roll to a well-played attack by Nien Nunb. "Damn, Nien!" He exclaimed, shooting a look of mock-venom at the Sullustian. "Well, I'm going to the tarmac. Looks like they've got a bonfire going on out there." He hoisted his drink in farewell.

"A bonfire?" Poe twisted in his seat. Sure enough, glimmering in the distance was a bright mass of flame, set just off the duracrete. He glanced back at the board, losing interest in the game as rapidly as a ship venting atmosphere. He wanted to go drink and sit by the fire with Finn.

"Your turn, Finn."

Finn pursed his lips. "I'm gonna be honest with you. I have no idea what I'm doing." It was as if a hazy curtain was being drawn over his mind; he felt tired, supremely relaxed, and dizzy.

"Wanna go hang out, out there?" Poe cocked his head in the direction of the bonfire.

"Aww, come on! You've actually got a chance this time, Poe. It's almost challenging!" Snap cringed as Poe stood. Poe had to catch himself—he was wobblier than he'd expected. Even so, he gathered several more drinks and piled them onto Finn's lap as he pulled the chair from the table. Finn clutched at them haphazardly.

"Have fun, you two lovebirds," Poe called over his shoulder to Snap and Nien Nunb as they left.

Nien Nunb shook his head disparagingly and babbled something rude.

"You said it." Snap agreed darkly. "Your roll."

Chapter End Notes
AN: Thanks so much for the influx of kudos and reviews! I really appreciate it. This chapter is a little long—there was just no good place to cut it. I enjoyed writing Snap as the Game Master; he was pretty much word-for-word based off of a friend of mine who takes his gaming very seriously (which makes it all the more fun to mess with him).

Thanks for reading! -Bluestem
The summer heat had blunted into a gentle coolness now that the sun had set. Fog hung in ghostly sheets over the inky forests and flowed down ravines, snaking out like pale fingers towards base. Stars blazed overhead in hazy curtains strung with diamonds. The asteroids that ringed the northern pole of D'Qar stood out against the stars in black voids, as if someone had punched a hole through space. Music with a quick, throbbing beat blared out of a speaker set that someone had hastily wired to a datpad, drowning out the high, gentle chorus of nighttime insects and amphibians. The bonfire flickered, wildly elongating the shadows of those who danced in its light into eerie, unearthly shapes. BB-8 and several other BB units rolled about in their own droid dance, bobbing their heads in time with the music. Older generations of astromechs rocked back and forth on their stiff, tripodal legs. A GNK droid had fallen over and wiggled feebly. A few people waved or shouted at Poe as he pushed them into the throng. He waved back, feeling pretty damn pleased with himself; the day had started well enough, turned to crap, and now showed every sign of ending on a high note.

He wheeled Finn off the runway to the far side of the bonfire and sat beside him in the dew-specked grass. Finn breathed deep, willing his head to stop spinning—the cool mistiness and the smoke from the fire was bracing, and the darkness soothed the unease he’d felt earlier in the day; he could almost pretend the glittering sky was a roof.

"Pass me another drink," Poe reached up expectantly and Finn rummaged through the bottles piled in his lap, squinting to read their labels in the firelight.

"Shandry Stout, Hellbrawn, or Corellian Rum?"

"Rum." He took the bottle from Finn, twisted it open and took a pull. He grimaced dramatically.
"Ahhh, god that burns. Good ol' Corellian Rum."

"Can I have a taste?" Finn asked.

"Sure." Poe passed the bottle up to him and Finn took a swig. If fire could be bottled, Finn was pretty sure this would be the result. He forced it down with a full-body shudder, turning to Poe in wide-eyed disgust. "Ugh! It's like drinking a lightsaber! How can you stand that?"

Poe laughed as Finn hastily handed back the bottle. He considered it idly. "They say you can strip paint with this stuff. I always meant t' test that, but never got around to it." Poe knew he was just a few gulps away from sliding from buzzed into a 'scrape me off the floor' drunken stupor. He didn't want to get totally wasted even with the lenient lie-in Leia had given them. He'd still have recon, and breaking atmosphere at 1,000kmp with a hangover was guaranteed to make him vomit—a hard lesson he'd only needed to learn once. For a long while he watched the fire swaying in hypnotic ribbons of light, nodding his head to the beat of the blasting music. Someone had cranked the speakers; he could feel the bass rattling up out of the ground and through the hollows of his body. He smirked. It wasn't an unpleasant sensation; in fact, it started to turn him on. Poe set the bottle aside, stretching, and glanced up at Finn. The firelight set an amber glow to Finn's skin, glittering in his eyes like stars. He seemed ethereal, like smoke and embers, liable to vanish into the night.

Finn followed the rolling 'dance' of the BB units, and then his gaze jumped to a Rodian doing a strange robotic jig with a gyrating Twi'lek, each laughing raucously. A small smile tugged at the corners of his lips; he'd never really had much chance or time to watch people just having fun and he
was surprised that the happiness of strangers could make him feel so at ease and relaxed.

"Man, I really want to blow you." Poe's voice came out of nowhere, muffled by the strobing beat.

"What?" Finn half-shouted over the music, cupping a hand to his ear. He tore his gaze from the dance and down to Poe. The smoldering look in the pilot's heavy-lidded eyes sent his heart racing to his throat.

"I SAID, I WANT TO BLOW YOU!" Poe yelled at the top of his lungs. This brought whooping and cheers from a group sitting off to their right.

"YEAH!" A voice guffawed out of the darkness, "BLOW ME, COLONEL!"

A gale of laughter broke out and Finn was glad that no one could see his confused blush; he had no idea what they were talking about, but Poe's eyes had left him in little doubt as to the gist of it. Poe grinned wryly, leaning backwards around Finn's chair to peer at his hecklers. He could just make out their fiery outlines.

"DREAM ON, BUDDY!" He mock saluted and, laughing to himself, he met Finn's eyes. "Hey, let's go back to my room. This ass is getting my grass wet."

"Uh…right." Finn said as Poe gripped the armrest of his chair and pushed himself up off the ground. The world swayed only slightly as he guided Finn away from the fire to whistles and cat-calls. Finn shakily recalled the way mess had done the same to Jess and her date. Is that what's happening? He swallowed and felt a tremulous thrill of arousal start in the pit of his stomach.

Poe plotted a winding path through the hanger, around knots of people in various states of drunkenness, and through musky clouds of tamarin weed. He had half a mind to bum a joint off someone, but he wanted Finn in his room more urgently than he wanted a smoke. Finn gulped as they entered a lift and the light from the hanger was cut off.

"Poe…what'd you mean out there by the fire?" He asked tensely; Poe's hand had just snaked onto his shoulder, running up the back of his neck and raising his hair in a way that made his whole body tighten.

"Hmm? Oh yeah, you wouldn't know, huh?" Poe said, idly leaning forwards so that his breath was warm by Finn's ear. A shiver started somewhere in Finn's lower back. "It means I want to suck your cock."

Finn choked, the arousal that had flared to life under Poe's dark eyes billowing into something far more potent. "Oh—uh—" His heart sped, and then threatened to stop entirely as the lift opened and Poe took them into the hall. He couldn't form a cohesive thought to save his life—he felt certain his brain was riding the lift back down to the hanger. Poe keyed open the room and Finn glanced up at him in confusion as he was parked not against his cot, but up against Poe's bed. Poe grinned in the dim light.

"More room to maneuver," He explained.

"Oh. "You—you know I've never done anything like this, right?" Finn admitted nervously.

"Mmm hmm." Poe nodded as he plucked the bottles of rum and ale off of Finn's lap. Finn squirmed at each close brush of his hand. "If you don't like it, just tell me to stop, okay?"

Finn hardly had time to offer his shaky 'okay' before Poe had taken him under the arms and slid him onto the mattress. Words abandoned him utterly as Poe's lips sealed around his, wet and hot, his jaw
rough as sandpaper against Finn's chin and neck. There was an urgency in Poe's kisses and his mounding, roving hands that Finn had never felt and his nerves melted away quickly as Poe's tongue glided into his mouth. He opened to him, brow's drawing together. It felt amazing, his mouth tingling pleasantly and hypersensitive to each deep flick of Poe's tongue. He jolted, lips fumbling, as Poe pressed his body up against him and snaked his hands under his shirt.

Poe's lips tugged away from him, landing now on the corner of his jaw as he pinched lightly at Finn's nipples. "Ah," Poe panted, "you have no idea how bad…" his lips brushed hotly down the taut tendons of Finn's neck, "I've wanted to do this…"

"Poe—" Finn squirmed at each pinching roll of his nipples. His face was scrunched with uncertain pleasure and Poe gulped at the expression. He wasn't sure he'd ever seen anything more delicious. He kissed at his clavicle, lapping at the hollow and then sat back. Finn's eyes parted in dismay at the sudden lack of touch and then his shirt was drawn hurriedly over his head and down his arms. Poe drank him in; Finn was softly muscular, the swells of his pectorals and abdomen murkily edged in the room's warm light. Tightly curled black hair dusted his chest, trailing down into the waistband of his pants. Poe wanted to eat him alive, every inch of him, all at once. His pulse pounded in his ears as he flung his shirt off. Finn gaped up at him. Poe was lean and fit, his nipples a dark almond color against his tan skin. Poe grinned, enjoying the feel of Finn's eyes on him immensely as he leaned hungrily over him, resuming his kiss-by-kiss exploration of Finn's chest.

"Nnn!" Finn gasped as Poe's mouth closed over his nipple, rolling the sensitive bud between his teeth, the tip of his tongue flicking the swell of flesh. The heat of the pilot's half-naked body made him pant as his head pulled back against the mattress; he'd had no idea his nipples could bring him pleasure and he could feel himself going hard. Another lash of Poe's tongue, the tickling trail of fingers gliding down his flanks and then a hard, jolting breath as Poe cupped and mounded his balls. He went desperately rigid beneath Poe's hands and the pilot stared heavily up at him, kissing just below his jaw.

"Still good?" Poe panted, tracing and massaging Finn's erection through his pants.

"Ahh—yeah…that feels good…" Finn breathed.

"Mmm, good," Poe leant back, all of his attention focused on fumbling with Finn's fly. Each brush of his fingers through the fabric was sheer torture. Finn's heart hammered as Poe's eyes caught and held his and his pants were slowly drawn down his legs.

_Oh gods finally, finally, finally._ Poe thought as he tugged them down around Finn's ankles and to the floor. He reached, stroking Finn through his boxers; a tremor, the barest hot nudge of a thrust against his hand and Poe smiled. "You like that?" he asked as he pressed just beneath the head of his cock, though he knew full well he was driving Finn mad.

"Nn…yeah…ah, Poe—" Finn's face was almost pained.

A shiver wound up Poe's back and his cock leapt at the breathy way Finn had gasped his name. He licked his lips, taking the boxers by the band and slowly pulling them down, revealing Finn's throbbing cock in tantalizing degrees. A cool wash of embarrassment stole over Finn as his boxers were dropped unceremoniously to the floor and he lay exposed. He glanced away into the shadows of the room for an uncertain moment and then hesitantly met Poe's eyes.

Poe's breath deepened as he drank him needily in. "Oh…you're fucking beautiful, Finn." Finn swallowed, his body shaking with desire and nerves, a suffocating sensation that was only aggravated as Poe got up from the bed and stood across from him; he could see the pilot's erection
tenting his pants. Poe hurriedly stripped and stepped from his pants and briefs, and then closed the distance between them before Finn could catch up. He felt like he was in a ship going down; everything was happening too fast to process and yet at the same time each sensation, each sound, each brush of Poe's skin and lips were magnified in the rush.

Poe slowly pulled his lips from Finn's, his left hand on his ribs and his right closing tightly around Finn's cock. Finn's body jerked beneath him in shock and then gave, his head pulling back with a ragged moan that shocked him; he'd never heard himself make such a sound. Poe smiled to himself as he nugged his legs apart. Finn stared down his heaving chest at the pilot's tousled hair, at his mouth closing over his nipple, at his hand bobbing up and down between his legs. Poe's mouth left his nipple, trailing electric heat down his stomach. He sank to his knees and Finn felt his breath against the head of his cock and then he was enveloped in wet, sinuous, heat.

"Ahh!" He gripped the bedclothes desperately as Poe sucked him, his head bobbing nearly to the root before drawing back to the head, his tongue caressing and then dashing across the slit in a flutter that rendered Finn unable to think or speak. He just wanted more of that. He needed more of that. Poe obliged him, one hand lightly mounding and squeezing his balls while the other took his own cock, pumping in tight waves.

Poe opened his throat and swallowed him. He gagged, his throat and tongue shuddering spasmodically around Finn's girth. He hated the sensation of gagging, but he knew how amazing it felt to be on the receiving end of it. He slid Finn's cock to the front of his mouth, took a breath, and did it again, holding for as long as he could stand. Finn groaned and squirmed against him, his hips bucking in small tremors. Tears sprang to Poe's eyes, saliva pooled in his mouth, and his nose started to run. His stomach lurched and he pulled hastily away, a string of saliva clinging to his lips. No, no, no. He prayed to every deity he'd ever heard of that he not vomit on Finn. Okay...deepthroating plus rum is a no go, he drew a hand across his mouth as he took a steadying gulp of air and then dove back in for more, sucking on the head of Finn's cock as if he were trying to take it clean off.

"Nnn!" Finn gasped. His fingers twined through Poe's hair as the pilot's head bobbed. Poe hastily let go of his own dripping cock; he couldn't stand much more, and he knew Finn wouldn't last much longer either. He wiped at his mouth, his eyes heavy on Finn's pleasure-hazed face.

"Ah…gods, Finn, I want you so bad…" Poe panted. "You wanna go further?"

Finn met his eyes in a state of dazed euphoria and nearly came at the pilot's desperate look. Finn could not begin to fathom what 'further' entailed, but whatever it was, he wanted it.

"Yeah," He managed.

Poe kissed him, and by this point Finn had gained enough confidence to wrap his arms around Poe's body; his hands splayed hotly across his back, amazed at the warm glide of his muscles beneath his fingers. A swell of emotion took him by surprise; now that he had someone to hold, someone who wanted him, he realized just how desperately lonely he'd been all of his life. He kissed Poe fiercely and Poe groaned into his mouth, pulling away to whisper into his ear, "Scoot up some for me, okay?"

Finn did as he was asked, walking back with his elbows towards the headboard. He watched Poe as if he were in some other person's dream; the familiar painkiller-haze started pooling at the sides of his mind, and he shook his head, trying to force the fuzziness away. Poe reached hurriedly into his bedside cabinet and pulled from it a small bottle. For one frustrated and utterly confused second, Finn thought it was his bacta-gel. You want to put that stuff on now? But no, it was colorless as Poe poured a hefty dollop into the palm of his hand. Finn jerked and squeezed his eyes shut as Poe again took his length, noisily slicking it until his cock glistened wetly in the half-light. His eyes parted as he
felt Poe's knees and lower legs pressing into the mattress at his flanks.

Poe was straddling him, his eyes catching and holding his as surely as a tractor beam; Finn could not have looked away even if he'd wanted to. He understood now what Poe meant to do and his body trembled beneath the other man. Poe felt the light tremors and leaned forwards, tilting Finn's head into a long, slow kiss, trying to soothe his nerves. Finn gasped into Poe's mouth as he felt the pilot's hand take him about the base, guiding his cock upwards. Poe drew away and sat up, his eyes once again locked to Finn's. Bracing a hand against Finn's chest, Poe lowered his hips. The head of him pressed in after a moment's tight resistance and Poe closed his eyes, his mouth opening wordlessly. Poe sank down with agonizing slowness, his body parting and clenching around Finn in waves.

A throaty breath exploded from Finn and Poe moaned, his head drawn back and his neck tight. He held for a quivering moment, his hands tight on Finn's chest, and then ground himself flush against Finn's hips. "Ahh, gods." He bit his lip. Finn filled him to the brim and his body tried to simultaneously reject his cock and draw him deeper into his bowels with a shuddering spasm that made Finn cry out. His hands flew to the pilot's hips, fingers tight, his body thrumming like a bolt of plasma. He was struck at Poe's face; he'd never seen anyone so exposed, so utterly naked, their expression so raw. Poe's eyes were clamped shut, his brows drawn, and his mouth caught between pain and pleasure. Finn felt momentarily floored both by the primal physicality of it, and by the trust that Poe had in him to show him his vulnerability. And then Poe began to rock his hips.

Finn threw his head back against the pillows. It was mind-blowing, the tight heat of Poe's body, the way he clenched as he drew up, the opening shudder as he sank back down. He didn't know what to do; he could only hold on and let Poe move.

BB-8 hummed to itself as it took the lift up from the hanger, ready to power down for the night. The droid had had a lot of fun dancing around the bonfire with it's friends. It had especially liked the last song that had played before it'd left; a bouncy electronic ditty with computer-modulated vocals that sounded almost like binary. It nodded it's head, trying to replicate the tune. It did an excellent job with everything but the lyrics, able to mimic the beat and the winding electronic melody at the same time. The lift lurched to a stop and BB-8 rolled out and down the dimly lit corridor, humming softly now. It approached the door to their room and then froze, it's sensitive aural-receptors picking up a combination of sounds it knew well after so many years with Poe: Moaning, heavy breathing, and the creaking of bedsprings.

BB-8 about-faced immediately, an embarrassed and relieved chuckle bursting from it as it sped back for the lift. *It took them long enough,* it mused. The droid found it endlessly ironic that a being with no sexual-self could see the tension and desire of two organics far more astutely than they could. BB-8 picked up the thread of it's song as it headed back towards the bonfire; the droid figured it would have time to listen to at least two more. Three to be safe.

"Oh gods…baby…you feel so good. Ahhn..." Poe groaned as he rode him. "You're so damn good."

Finn would never have thought that such simple words could send him to atmospheric heights of pleasure, but Poe's heavy, praising voice, the way he'd called him baby…Finn's body reacted on it's own, thrusting quickly up into his plunging warmth in a shiver of motion. A twinge of pain pulled beneath his scar, but he hardly noticed.

"Ah!" Poe jolted and froze; Finn had hit his prostate without even knowing what the hell he was doing. *Fucking. Perfect.* Poe melted, taking his dribbling cock in his hand and pumping tightly as Finn worked in him. He was close. "Ahh- fuck me just like that, ah—yeah, like that!"
Finn gripped Poe's hips tightly enough to bruise, his body shaking and his feet bracing against the mattress. It was too much. Too much to have Poe say the words 'fuck me'. He thrust jerkily and a muscular shudder wound up Poe's legs and through his core, his asshole clamping down so tightly that Finn could hardly pull back for another thrust. He lasted for four more hard, smacking pumps.

"Poe, I—I—" His voice strangled. Finn lacked any kind of sexual vocabulary, but he didn't need one; Poe could feel it coming in the quickness of his thrusts, in the sudden, tight shuddering of his body.

"Yeah, sweetheart," Poe breathed, reaching forwards with his free hand to stroke his face "come in me. Go ahead and come, babe."

Poe could've said that while standing across the room and Finn would have come at the sound of his voice alone.

Head pulled back and throat tight, Finn came in a pulsing wave with a cry. Poe felt the heat of his seed blooming deep in his body and Finn's last two emptying thrusts hit him perfectly. He gasped, his body winding up like an overdrawn gear about to spring. A few quick squeezes below the head of his cock spilled him over and he clenched like durasteel around Finn, his chest heaving and abs shuddering.

"Ahn! Fuck!" He cried out, every tendon in his throat tight. His cum streaked hotly down Finn's stomach and chest, bright against his dark skin. Finn's body jerked spasmodically beneath him, Poe's pulsing tightness wringing him utterly dry and revving his overstimulated cock past all endurance. *I'm going to die. My heart is going to burst.*

Poe squeezed out one last arc of cum and then let go of himself, slouching forwards, his head hanging between his shoulders as he panted. The curtain of post coital release drew heavily over his mind and he felt like he might simply fall to pieces on top of Finn like an unbolted droid. His ass pulsed hotly around Finn's shrinking cock, the warmth of it flowing up his back, to his fingertips, his jaw. Even his hair felt like it was standing on end.

The combination of his painkiller, alcohol, and the sure way Poe had piloted him to orgasm was too much for Finn to fight against, and the murky darkness at the edge of his mind reached comfortably out for him. He dully felt Poe's lips on his mouth and his hand at his jaw. He kissed him clumsily for several minutes and then Poe was pulling away and shifting his weight off of him. Finn slid from his body and the comparatively cool air of the room against his cock made him groan. He wanted Poe's heat all the time. He watched blearily as Poe took a few tissues from his nightstand and wiped down his cock and then the crack of his ass.

"Ah…you filled me up, baby." Poe sighed. "You felt so good." He wadded the tissues up and tossed them aside.

*Too much. Going to die.*

The whispering sounds of more tissues being drawn ghosted into his ears and then he felt Poe's hands rubbing down his cock. He groaned as Poe cleaned him, wiping the pilot's cooling seed from his stomach. And then the blankets were being tugged out from under him, Poe's body was sliding flush alongside him, and mindless sleep softly claimed him. Poe curled against Finn, his eyelids drooping as he drew the blankets up their bodies. Part of his mind wanted to clothe and leave, as had become his habit after sex. It was a thin and nebulous thought that drifted away on his next breath. He slept like a dead man.

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Poe woke a few hours later to a pounding headache. An arm was draped warmly across his
shoulders and he blinked gummily in confusion. "Rhys?" He murmured and then full wakefulness slapped him across the face. Of course it's not Rhys. He cracked an eye and peered at Finn with a grimace, horrified that he might've heard his blunder. Finn was still dead to the world, his face half buried in his pillow and drool gathering at the corner of his mouth. For a long while Poe lay in indecision; now that he was awake, he had to piss badly, but it was torturous to contemplate leaving the warm nest they'd created. Steeling himself, he sat up with a grimace. His stomach swam and goosebumps swept over him as he hastily doffed his blanket and started towards the refresher with his arms crossed in front of his chest. He stumbled noisily over the bottles of rum and ale that had been left, forgotten, on the floor. The bottles clattered and clinked together and he gritted his teeth, glancing hurriedly at Finn and hoping he hadn't woken him. Finn didn't move.

He navigated to the refresher in the soft blue charging lights of BB-8. Why did I drink so much? He mused ruefully; it felt like a bantha had decided to take a night-time trample across his skull, and switching on light did not help. He squeezed his eyes shut as he trudged up to the toilet and started to piss.

[I'm glad you're with Finn now.]

Poe jolted in shock, his stream arcing on to the seat of the toilet. "Jeez," he breathed, hastily regaining control of himself, "you scared the hell out of me, buddy."

[But I turned my vocalizer down.]

"I know, I just didn't expect you to be right there. I thought you were asleep."

[I was. You know…I almost didn't expect it to be Finn after all when I came back from the party.]

"No…" Poe said as he shook himself off and then knelt to mop up the mess he'd made. "I'm done screwing around. It's Finn for as long he wants me."

[Good.] The droid rocked back and forth in an expression of smugness. [Also, I figured you were probably too busy to remember Finn's bacta-gel. You forgot, didn't you?]

"Shit," he whispered tightly. He filled a cup at the sink and tossed it back, swishing the water around his dry mouth before swallowing. "I forgot. Thanks for reminding me."

[Sometimes, I'm not sure how you function, Poe. I remember all the organic things you forget, and I don't even have to do them.]

"Whoa, sassy droid tonight. Considering you literally can't forget anything, it's not that impressive, pal. Besides, I had other things on my mind." He hastily held up his hands. "That's not an excuse, I just forgot. Anyways," he continued as he searched for his bottle of light painkillers, "you have fun out there? I saw you rolling around—"

[Dancing.]

"Right, dancing," Poe rolled his eyes and tossed back the painkillers.

[Yes, I had fun dancing. I downloaded 53 new songs. We can listen to them later?]

"Sure thing." He drained another cup of water and willed his stomach to calm down. "I'm going back to bed. And yes I'll get Finn's bacta-gel."

[Good. Kalonia would kill you if you forgot.]
"Yeah, no kidding." Poe switched off the refresher light. BB-8 bumped back over the rim of its charging port and settled into place, blue light suffusing the room once again. Poe stared down at Finn. *He's so damn beautiful.* He crossed back to the other side of the bed, and slowly raised the lights to a low, lantern-like glow; even that sent a pulsing throb through his temples. He grabbed the bottle of bacta-gel and sat down near to Finn. Poe reached out, taking Finn lightly by the shoulder, struck by the soft way Finn's features were edged in murky crescents of light. His chest rose and fell gently, half covered by the quilt.

"Hey…Finn?"

Finn gave no reaction and Poe leaned in closer to his ear.

"Finn…wake up." He shook his shoulder gently.

Still nothing.

Poe did not want to wake him. He really didn't. He shifted and pushed him slowly upright, the quilt falling down into Finn's lap. The light of the room slid down his naked back, outlining each swell of muscle, arcing over the flare of his hips, and glistened like fire in the glossy surface of his scar before delving into shadow. Poe's breath caught. Finn's head lulled for a second and then Poe felt him stir.

"Hhun?" Finn's voice was thick, and his head turned marginally to Poe. His eyes were squeezed shut and he nearly nodded off as he sat, heavy against Poe's propping arms.

"I'm sorry Finn," Poe whispered, "I forgot your bacta gel. It'll just take a second, okay?"

Finn said something inarticulate and then his head drooped forwards. Poe hurriedly poured a line of the cool gel onto his fingertips and ran them over the taught scar. Finn's body shivered beneath his fingers as he rubbed him.

"All done." He moved his hands to Finn's shoulders and slowly levered him back against the mattress. Finn was asleep before his head hit the pillow; the quilt remained where it had fallen, lying in murky folds just below Finn's cock. *Easy. Easy, Dameron,* he counseled himself. *Finn is asleep and you're too damn tired for this.* Carefully he gripped the quilt and drew it up Finn's body. He crawled in alongside him, grinning like an idiot in spite of his headache, and switched off the lights.

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Chapter End Notes

AN: SMUT. So much smut. Writing "this ass is making my grass wet" made me chuckle like an idiot for, like, five minutes. Holy hell though, you have no idea how many re-writes this chapter took. I ended up writing a total of 40 pages of stuff that ended up getting cut. The story had started to take a wildly different turn and actually got pretty damn dark. It was weird and kind of out of character, so I murdered the hell out of it. Jesus, sex scenes are hard to write, so I apologize if this reads like a telephone book. I take my hat off to those of you who can write a really hot scene. Anywho, thanks for reading and reviews are much appreciated! All of you who have reviewed--you're the best!! Seriously, thank you!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Finn woke at 0800. After a lifetime spent waking up at a mandatory 0600, he felt momentarily bewildered and panicked. He could not imagine how he could have slept past roll call, or why no one had come to punish him yet. But no. He was in Poe's room, of course, and the pilot was still sleeping soundly beside him. Finn lay back down with a sigh of relief and edged closer to Poe as he replayed the nights events over and over in his head like a particularly addicting holovid series. Poe's lips, Poe's body rocking against him, his voice…Finn wanted desperately to wake him and try it all again, but he couldn't bring himself to rouse Poe out of such a solid slumber. He contented himself with studying Poe's sleeping face. 'Adorable' was the first word that came to his mind; likely more innocent than he had any right to look. He lay on his stomach, his hair a mess. He'd bunched the quilt over his mouth like some scruffy child with a security blanket. It was hard for Finn to comprehend or name the swell of love that made him laugh into his pillow and made his stomach flutter. He tore his eyes away from Poe, glanced to the side, and nearly screamed.

BB-8 had, once again, crept right to the edge of the bed, it's large dark lens reflecting Finn's startled face back at him. He covered his mouth with his hand and closed his eyes for patience.

"You gotta stop doing that." He whispered sharply.

BB-8 chuckled up at him and burbled something incomprehensible.

"Okay, okay, whatever. Just...keep it quiet, alright? I don't want to wake him up."

BB-8 nodded and Finn lay for a long while, considering the insane ways in which his life had changed. If someone would have told his past self that within one month he'd become friends with a jedi-in-training, help destroy Starkiller Base, fight Kylo Ren, and be waking up in a Resistance Colonel's bed, he would've laughed out loud at the absurdity of it all. He shook his head with a musing smile, glancing at Poe and then down to the patiently waiting BB-8. An idea occurred to him. "Hey...could you bring me my datapad?" He whispered. "I might as well work on that case some more."

BB-8 wobbled over to Finn's cot and gripped the slim datapad in it's hydraulic manipulator arm. Rotating strangely to keep the datapad level, BB-8 plopped it gracelessly down on the bed and then tittered softly. "Thanks." He switched on the device, his eyes flickering back to the droid as it waited patiently at his bedside. His mouth pursed, considering.

"So...you two have been together for ages, right? What do you think about this? Are you okay with me being...you know...around?" He tossed his head marginally in Poe's direction and then pointed at himself.

BB-8 would have blushed if it had been able; it absolutely loved it when organics asked for its opinion, especially in matters that concerned it's living arrangement. Poe had always treated BB-8 as a caring and sentient being with it's own feelings and personality, but the droid had met enough organics in it's life to know that such a viewpoint was certainly not universal. It was glad that the pilot only tended to associate with people who shared his feelings about droids, and Finn was obviously no exception. BB-8 nodded vigorously and launched into a long and thankfully quiet speech that Finn could only nod blankly at. He would've given his new datapad, clothing, and cot to know what BB-8 had said; whatever it was, it sounded heartfelt. He grinned at the droid.
"Well…that sounds good, I think."

BB-8 rolled forwards, inclining it's half-domed head into the side of the bed in an invitation. Finn stared at it, nonplussed.

"What're you doing?" Finn arched a brow, somewhat concerned.

Again, BB-8 nudged it's head forwards into the side of the bed. Lips pursed, Finn reached out a hand and patted the droid on the top of it's dome as if it were a metallic dog. BB-8 burbled brightly and rocked back and forth in a squirming dance. It chattered and Finn grimaced at the volume, bringing a shushing finger to his lips.

Poe stretched alongside him with a grumpy groan and then rolled over, dragging the blankets with him and leaving Finn exposed to the cool, subterranean air. BB-8 tittered as Finn shot it a glare and tugged unsuccessfully at the quilt. Poe had it wrapped around him in a death grip. "Nice job." Finn hissed as goosebumps crawled over his body. He scooted close to Poe, trying to absorb some of his bundled warmth. "You gotta keep quiet, remember?"

The droid nodded mutely, it's antennae wobbling with the motion. Finn smiled grudgingly at it and turned back to his datapad. He opened the Cross Map and set to work drawing connections between his chosen case and those that had already been entered. Already, several of them shared common threads; of the 8 that had been evaluated, 7 had taken place on outer-rim worlds far from the policies and practices of the Republic; all of the crimes had been committed in impoverished areas with little policing. All of the affected areas had also played host to societal upheaval in the form of class, drug, or species wars (or all three), governmental collapse, or economic collapse. Finn's brows drew together in disgust; the First Order was using the pain and chaos of the desperate to slip in and further its own purposes. If a few children went missing during a riot, who would ever think to chalk it up to First Order operatives? He lost himself in the depressing task for hours.

Poe stirred beside him near 1100 and Finn turned away from his datapad with relief; the pilot was staring warmly up at him and though the blanket covered his mouth, Finn could tell he was smiling. Poe lifted the edge of the blankets and Finn gratefully squirmed back underneath and up against Poe with a blush; even after the night's events it was still a strange, though extremely pleasant sensation to lie skin to skin with someone. Poe leant in, kissing Finn softly. His lips took his words away, and Finn brought a hand to Poe's side, pressing up between his shoulder blades. They held one another for several minutes. Poe grinned, breaking the kiss. "Good morning."

Finn breathed a laugh. "Morning."

Poe rubbed at his eyes, yawning. His hangover had died sometime in the night and he felt supremely well-rested, a sensation that had become all too rare. "What time is it?" He asked thickly.

"Almost 1100."

"Jeez…I haven't slept that late in years." He stretched hugely and caught Finn's eye. "So, did you have a good time last night? I mean, I don't want to answer for you, but you were so hard I thought you might snap."

Finn huffed a laugh. "It was amazing, Poe. I didn't know we could do that. Did…did you like it?" He asked earnestly.

A smile split Poe's face. "I came like a fucking pulse-cannon."

"…So that really felt good? Having me in you?" He seemed genuinely unsure.
"Mmm, you felt amazing, Finn." He planted a soft kiss on his lips.

Finn smiled, gratified to hear Poe say it though he still didn't quite understand. "Right. But why?"

Poe rolled his eyes slightly, though he smiled. "Anatomy 101, buddy. Your prostate will give you one hell of an orgasm. Best way to stimulate it? Right up the ass." He grabbed Finn's ass cheek and squeezed to emphasize the point, grinning wryly. Finn jolted.

"Yeah?" A nervous and excited trill of desire curled through him.

"Uh huh," Poe leant in, eyes closing as he brought their lips together again. Finn rolled onto his side, his scar pulling slightly at the motion but he hardly noticed; Poe had draped a leg over his hip, grinding their cocks together, and he could focus on nothing else. Poe could feel him going hard as he thrust up his length. _Ah, to be 23 again_, he mused.

"Ahh…Poe…" Finn gasped.

An ear-piercingly shrill wolf-whistle almost sent them through the roof; Finn's erection died so fast it nearly hurt.

"Dammit, BB-8, come on!" Poe yelled, sitting bolt upright with a scandalized glare at the droid.

[Just a friendly reminder that Finn has to be at Kalonia's in less than an hour. You both should refuel.] BB-8 casually tossed it's head.

Poe slouched with a sigh and rubbed at his forehead. "Right. Right..."

"I forgot he was there." Finn choked.

"Relax," Poe chuckled at Finn's mortified expression, "he's pretty much seen it all at this point. Sorry I got you all riled up for nothing, baby."

Finn grinned. There was that endearing word again. "That's okay—his whistle did me in."

"Yeah, he excels at killing boners. Once he rolled in here, zapped me square in my ass, and rolled right back out. Destroyed the mood. I think he gets a kick out of it honestly. Don't you, you perverse little thing?" He glared down at BB-8 who casually plucked Finn's boxers off the floor with it's gripping arm, examined them, and disdainfully tossed them aside like so much trash. Finn arched a brow.

[I don't know what you're talking about. I can't help it if human hydraulic systems are so tetchy.]

"…Hydraulic systems. Quit saying stuff like that." Poe shook his head, disturbed and amused as he wondered, not for the first time, what went through the droids head.

"You've got to teach me binary." Finn said, regarding BB-8 bemusedly. "He gave me a speech this morning and I had no idea what he was saying."

"Probably nothing good." Poe's eyes tightened suspiciously on the droids innocent lens. "But sure, we'll teach you. Come on," he patted Finn's arm, "we both need to shower before Kalonia's…" He broke off, eyes suddenly wide. "Oh shit!"

"What?" Finn asked in alarm.

"Don't tell Kalonia we had sex! She will cut my nuts off." He said emphatically.
Finn laughed, bewildered. "Why would I tell her? And why would she cut your nuts off?"

"Because you weren't supposed to do anything that might hurt your back and I rode you like a fucking ronto-wrangler. And you fell out of bed the other night." He brought his fingers nervously to his lip.

"I actually feel pretty good. The bacta-gel is really helping."

"She'll know though. I swear she's psychic. And I can't lie for shit—if she looks at me, it's over."

"I think you'll be fine, Poe." Finn smiled. "I mean—she's a doctor. She wouldn't actually hurt someone, would she?"

Poe laughed mirthlessly.

[She will kill him.] BB-8 agreed.

A heavy, languid stupor hung over mess as Poe guided them in. Heads nodded on to shoulders, a river of caff was being downed in copious amounts, and loud noises hurriedly shushed. Poe grinned obnoxiously at the puffy-eyed countenances that greeted him; he felt like a million credits; his hangover was gone, he'd slept like the dead, his back no longer felt like a bantha had trampled him, he was cleaned and shaved, and he had Finn.

Finn was simply grateful that everyone seemed too tired and exhausted to spare them much attention as they traveled past. He felt that he had a glowing holosign hovering above his head that exclaimed "Lost Virginity to Poe! Everyone Look!" He shifted slightly. "It's nothing to be embarrassed of, right?" He soothed himself. A sudden scent wafting through mess hall took him out of his nervous thoughts. It was thick; yeasty and sugary, with greasy undertones that made his mouth water. The smell was so solid he fancied he could take a bite out of the air. His stomach growled like an angry beast.

BB-8 chirped cheerfully as it saw R3 (or, as Snap referred to it, Tubbs) and rolled up to the green and white astromech with an emphatic babble. R3 wobbled back and forth and whistled. The noise went through the collective nerves of everyone in the hall like an ice-pick to the brain.

"Shhh...Shhhh…bad droids." Snap groaned, rubbing at his brow.

Poe grinned devilishly as he brought Finn up to the end of the table. "Good morning, pilots and sundry!" He announced in an annoyingly bright voice. Snap blinked up at him. Bastian and Liv Nek shot him twin glares. Ziff didn't bother lifting his head from the crook of his arm. Jess was nowhere to be seen and likely still passed out somewhere.

Poe could not resist. "Well, we all look like we've had a fine night. I thought we might do a few combat maneuvers today. You know, a few Skywalker Swoops to loosen up?"

Bastian brought a hand to his mouth. The thought of juking out of a breakneck dive made him want to vomit.

"Kriffing hell, Poe. You drank more than me. How are you so damn chipper?" Snap rubbed at his eyes.

"It's disgusting," Ziff moaned from around his arm.

"Lots of water and sleep. And a good fucking." Poe added as an afterthought.
Finn choked a mortified laugh, trying to hastily turn it into a cough. He met Poe's eyes in disbelief and Poe winked at him.

“You're such a delicate little flower, Colonel.” Snap leveled his brows, his chin in his palm. He glanced marginally at Finn. "So he got you, huh?"

"Uh…yep. I've been got." He scratched awkwardly at the back of his head.

[Actually, knowing Poe's preference, I would say that you got him. If you meant that in a 'who penetrated whom' kind of way.] BB-8 supplemented helpfully.

Poe snorted, taking that as his que to go fetch breakfast.

"I don't want to know what he said, do I." Finn grimaced.

"No," Snap confirmed with a sad shake of his head, "no you do not."

They left mess with three minutes to spare to get to medbay. Finn clutched at his stomach as the lift carried them down; he’d eaten everything Poe had put in front of him and some of Poe's food as well. The golden brown flatcakes slathered with dairy and caramelized sugar had turned him into some kind of slavering Hutt, and he'd been unable to refuse the crispy strips of fried bantha that had all but melted in his mouth. It would've been rude to leave out the fluffy yellow mounds of whipped eggs and cheese, so he'd polished them off as well. It was plenty enough to get his pain pill working.

"You know…maybe it was a bad idea to eat so much before rehab…” He mused.

Poe nodded. "I thought about that, but I couldn't tell you to slow down. You were so into it."

"If we pinpoint the First Order, we should just bomb them with food. All the troopers would switch sides like that." He snapped his fingers.

Poe arched a brow, considering. "That's almost not a bad idea. Almost."

Kalonia looked up from her workstation as they entered medbay, an armful of patient datafiles clutched to her chest. She passed the files off to an assistant and strode out from around the gently glowing terminal to greet them, brushing her hands together in a business like way. After his time away, medbay seemed somehow smaller to Finn and he peered around in interest. Several of the beds that had been occupied during his stay were now empty, and others boasted new patients. One appeared to be vomiting into pail.

Kalonia followed Finns disgusted gaze. "Got a fair few idiots in with alcohol poisoning last night." She shook her head. "I know General Organa meant well, but I could shake the life out of her; a shipload of alcohol, I ask you?"

Finn and Poe said nothing, though they glanced nervously at one another.

"Well, I trust you've been taking it easy, Finn? Not exerting yourself at all? No quick movements?"

"Nope. I've been taking it really easy." Finn said solidly. Poe was impressed at the easy way Finn had lied. Nice. I should get him to try Sabacc.

Kalonia studied Finn's carefully neutral face for a few seconds and then turned her piercing eyes to Poe, who froze like a mynock in a spotlight. Poe swallowed and hurriedly broke eye-contact. Kalonia’s mouth thinned.
"I'm sure the Colonel has been taking excellent care of you, Finn." She said in a suspicious voice that sent a chill up Poe's spine. "And I'm also certain he would never have allowed you to mix alcohol with your pain medications, thereby risking a potentially deadly combination of side-effects?" She placed her hands on her hips.

Fuck me sideways. "Nope. No, Finn didn't drink a thing. I did though. Enough for both of us so he wouldn't have to. Because that would've been dangerous and I wouldn't do that." Poe babbled.

Finn spared him a look of patient disbelief.

"Well, it's good that you've done everything exactly right." Kalonia said with a dangerous smile. "I trust you've at least applied the bacta-gel to his scar every evening?"

"I did! I honest-to-gods did!" Poe said, desperate for her to believe something.

BB-8 bleeped up from near the pilot's legs. [He forgot to last night until I reminded him, because he and Finn were too busy—]

Poe kicked the droid, a horribly forced smile plastered to his face and sweat starting on his brow. "Because we were too busy…uh…going over those cases the General sent us, right Finn?"

Kalonia arched a brow and Finn rubbed at his temples, shaking his head.

"Just…just stop trying, okay?" Finn said.

"Right." Poe nodded.

Kalonia sighed, though Poe thought he saw the trace of a laugh in her eyes. She beckoned them after her. "Well he appears to be in one piece, though really, Colonel, you couldn't have controlled yourself for one measly week?"

"No, I couldn't have, Major, thanks for asking. I love conversations like this, by the way, especially with all your aides around." Poe glanced about the busy room as he pushed Finn after the doctor, carefully avoiding wiring and tubing. Two women who had obviously been listening in caught his deadpan look and giggled, hastily turning back to their stations.

"Then you shouldn't put yourself a position to be having such conversations." Kalonia retorted tartly. She halted by a low, padded table. Long bars ran down either side and Finn eyed the set up tentatively.

"Or you could just keep your voice down," Poe muttered to himself as he brought Finn's chair up against the side of the table. Finn heard him and smothered a grin. Kalonia lowered the bar nearest to them with a metallic clink and she and Poe helped Finn onto the cushion. Kalonia's dark eyes darted to Poe's in a flicker of professional concern.

"Your back is doing better then?"

"Oh. Yeah, I feel fine actually. That patch did the trick."

"Good." She nodded and stood, her arms crossed in front of her chest. "Let's take a look at your scar, Finn."

"Okay."

Kalonia helped him out of his shirt and handed it to Poe who haphazardly folded it. He watched
nervously as Kalonia gently prodded the area around the glossy wound. She took from a tray a hand-sized bioscanner. It activated with a whirring buzz, beaming out a stuttering, icy blue light. Kalonia ran the narrow beam of light carefully up and down every millimeter of Finn's scar and then studied her readout. Poe waited anxiously.

"Good. Very good. It's fully knitted." She smiled at Finn and then her expression sobered. "Of course, now you get to begin the fun part. I won't lie, Finn. Rehabilitation is likely going to be quite painful."

Finn nodded. "I know. It's okay though—I'm ready to get out of this chair."

"All right. Shirt back on, if you want."

Poe helped him into it and Finn winced trying to raise his arms though the sleeves, something Kalonia made a note of.

"Lie back, please." The doctor instructed.

Finn did as he was told and Kalonia walked around towards his feet. "I want you to grip the bars at either side of you. I'm going to bend your knee into your chest and I want you to push against my hand. Try to keep your leg straight, alright?"

"Right."

Kalonia took Finn's foot and began to fold his leg inwards. A tight pain started in his lower back, intensifying and burning the closer his knee got to his ribs. He pushed out against the steady pressure and it was as if a live wire had been jabbed into his spine. He winced, his hands tightening like durasteel clamps against the bars. Poe watched, worry creasing his face.

"Really push, Finn." Kalonia urged.

"I am." He grit out. Slowly, agonizingly, he was able to push his leg straight. He let out the breath he'd been holding in a whoosh and collapsed against the table like a wet string.

"Again."

Finn swallowed and gave a determined nod.

Five times each she pressed first his left and then his right leg in towards his chest. Then he sat up and was made fold over his legs, reaching out towards his toes, Kalonia pulling him as far as he was able. The forward stretches hurt far worse than the leg exercises had and by the time the run of twenty was over Finn felt ready to throw up and pass out at the same time. But he made no complaint, his jaw set, his neck rigid, and his eyes determined. Kalonia worked with gentle eyes, well aware that Finn was in a great deal of pain and holding it inside. He lay back against the mattress, Kalonia instructing him to lift his arms straight up, fingertips pointing to the ceiling. Then she pulled his arms irresistibly back until his knuckles brushed the padding. Finn grit his teeth; the bit of scar between his shoulder blades screamed in protest. Again and again his arms were levered back.

Poe thought he would come out of his skin watching Finn bite back his pain. He wanted to help, somehow, but knew that there was realistically nothing he could do.

"I have a feeling this will hurt more than the rest—but after this we're done for the day."

"Okay," Finn breathed, both relieved the session was drawing to an end and dreading whatever
Kalonia was about to do.

"Hold the bars again and try to keep your upper body straight."

Finn did so, his hands sweaty and his body as rigid as stone. Kalonia gripped him behind his left knee and drew it slowly to the right until it pressed into the padding, twisting his upper body and lower body in opposition. A yell of pain burst from him spite of his bracing for it; a line of fire stretched across his back from hip to hip, as if his pelvis were coming apart at the seams. Kalonia held his knee in that position almost beyond his endurance and he felt, as if from miles away, Poe's hand tight on his shoulder.

"Good, well done, you." Kalonia praised softly. "The other side and then you're done."

Finn went slack for one dazed moment before he was gritting his teeth and bearing it again. By the time Poe and Kalonia helped him back onto his repulsorchair he felt like he'd been caught between a jackhammer and a pane of durasteel. At least I didn't vomit, he thought hazily. He half listened to Kalonia and Poe, his head nodding where he sat as he silently begged his painkiller to knock him out.

"I'll send the files for his exercises to his datapad. Make sure he gets them, Colonel."

"I will. I really will." Poe said earnestly. Seeing what Finn had suffered through today set a new fire in him to do right both by Finn and Kalonia; he felt patently ashamed at how lackadaisical his care had been; letting Finn drink, stressing his healing body with sex, forgetting his pill and nearly his bacta-gel. He swallowed as he took in Finn's exhausted face. He never wanted to hear him cry out in pain again. They left medbay in silence.

"Hey…you alright?" Poe asked quietly as the lift rattled them upwards.

"Tired." Finn said simply.

"Almost there. You did great, baby." Poe's hand landed softly on his shoulder and Finn squeezed his fingers.

"How many days of that do I have?"

"Uh…"

[Five days.] BB-8 supplemented.

"He said five days." Poe translated.

"He said five days." Poe translated.

Finn nodded drowsily as Poe guided him out into the hall and up the door. "That'll be rough. I feel like I could sleep straight through till tomorrow's appointment."

"Go ahead." Poe wheeled him up to his cot and Finn gave a him a questioning look. After waking up in Poe's bed, it felt strange to sleep anywhere else. "I'm gonna throw the sheets on mine down to laundry." Poe explained as he took Finn under his arms and helped him onto the narrow cot. Finn grit his teeth as the slight twisting motion sent a clenching spasm through his lower back. He lay gratefully flat against the mattress, happy to let something else support his body. Poe drew the thin quilt up to his neck.

"Thanks, Poe." Finn sighed comfortably.

"Uh huh. I've got recon coming up. You need anything? Water? Datapad?"
"Both?"

When both had been brought to his bedside, Poe knelt and kissed him gently. Finn knew he could never express out loud what that simple touch meant to him just then, as he tried to comprehend five days of painful rehabilitation. It was like a crutch to his weakened body, something to lean into that wouldn't give way beneath him or desert him.

"Your comm's with your datapad. Call medbay if you need, alright?" Poe said as he stood.

Finn murmured and then drifted off.

Poe wiped at his brow as he hefted his bundle of sheets down the laundry chute. He imagined the launderers below were running around like Si-hens with their heads cut off around an impossibly high mountain of soiled sheets. The mental image would've made him laugh if he hadn't been so preoccupied with Finn's rehabilitation. He started back for a lift down to the main hanger with his hands in his pockets.

[Will Finn be alright?] BB-8 chirped as it crowded in alongside him.

"Yeah, he'll be okay, buddy." Poe smiled fondly down at the droid.

[It seems like Kalonia made him hurt worse. I thought she was going to repair him?]

"She had to do that to him so that he could get better." It was difficult to explain organic healing processes to a being that could simply switch out broken parts. "Sometimes healing hurts."

BB-8 rolled thoughtfully after him as they entered the hanger. [I'm glad I'm a droid.]

Chapter End Notes

AN: I almost had too much fun with BB-8 in this chapter. It's primary function is SASS. The next chapter will be up soon! I've got a bit more written out before I've caught up with what I'm editing--chapters will likely come a bit slower after that, so I apologize in advance. Thanks again for all the kudos and comments, it really makes my whole freakin' day, you have no idea! -Bluestem
Chapter 11

Poe climbed into the cockpit of Black One and buckled in, watching as Snap, Liv Nek, Bastion, Ziff, and Nien Nunb did the same. BB-8 rolled beneath the belly of the ship and was magnetically hoisted into the astromech socket. The day was hot and towering mounds of grey-walled clouds let Poe know that more storms were brewing on the murky horizon.

"Black Leader, you are cleared for takeoff." The ground controller's voice buzzed to life in his ear and Poe grinned, starting the ignition sequence.

"Copy." He kicked the thrusters to life and Black One weightlessly lifted thirty feet clear of the tarmac before darting into the watery blue sky like a blaster bolt. He gunned it hard, the ground swooping away and shrinking until it looked like a fuzzy, emerald-green miniature set far below. Fanning out behind him in a wedge formation came the rest of his squadron. They peeled through a column of cloud, scattering it into wispy tatters that billowed out in their wake.

"Alright, sublight on my mark." Poe announced, though he knew they didn't need him to tell them; it was for protocols sake more than anything. The ships shuddered into the thin atmospheric barrier, each lighting in an orange flare that was instantly extinguished as they shot through to limitless space. The light of D'Qar's sun cleared and brightened, casting the X-wings in an even white glow and throwing heavy grey shadows. The limitless stars sharpened in the blackness until Poe felt he could simply reach through his canopy and touch one. He smiled to himself as he toggled to sublight and Black One's engines revved smoothly over with a low hum.

"Ughh…" Came a moan through his headset.

"You okay, Ziff?" He asked.

"Copy, Black Leader. Just trying not to vomit." Ziff answered in a watery voice.

"Dude, do not throw up on your dash. Dand will skin you alive." Snap called out.

"I would've drunk more if I'd known I coulda got the day off for it." Ziff said sourly.

Poe's mouth thinned. "Jess was in no state to fly. You're sitting upright and talking so pull it together, Ziff."

"Copy."

Nein Nunb chuckled.

"Okay, jump to lightspeed on my mark. We'll start our run out by the Alui sector and through New Cov. From there, we're jumping the Bolt. We've got a full sweep up through the Colonies. Maybe into the Core if we've got enough time."

"Another sweep of the Bolt? That's got to be 10 different jumps for a whole lot of nothing." Bastian shook his head.

"That's our mission." Poe said with no room for argument. "Lightspeed on my mark. And Ziff, keep your eyes closed in the jump-tunnel. Just let your droid keep you level."
Ziff moaned an affirmative. The six ships stretched into pinpricks of light and then vanished into the darkness.

Finn woke to a light tapping at the door. He sat up with a wince, perplexed; Poe didn't bother knocking to his own room and he couldn't imagine who else would be stopping by. The knocks were repeated insistently and then a voice hollered through the metal door.

"Finn, if you don't answer, I'm knocking this door down!"

He recognized the voice as belonging to Jess Pava. "Uh…Yeah, I'm here." He called out in confusion.

"Thank gods. I'm coming in, okay?"

"Okay?" He hardly had time to answer before the door was keyed open and Jess was striding into the tiny room as if she owned it. Finn thought she looked terrible; he hair was done up in a stringy tail, her eyes were puffy, and her skin was pale and clammy.

"I tried to comm you, like, ten times. I was getting worried." She said, plopping heavily down on the edge of Poe's bed and rubbing at her temples.

"Oh…uh…sorry. I was pretty out of it." He wanted to ask why she was there at all but thought it might sound rude. She was one of Poe's friends after all; perhaps it was normal for her to just bust in.

"No kidding." She met his questioning eyes. "I had too much of a hangover to fly, so Poe gave me the day off with the caveat that I check up on you—said rehab was pretty tough?"

Finn nodded, touched that Poe had been so worried about him. "Yeah, it wasn't fun."

"Was today the first round of it?"

"Yeah. Only five more to go."

"Rough. So—do you need anything? They're serving a late lunch in mess. I'm still afraid to eat, but I can go nab you something if you want."

"Oh. Sure—I could eat. Thanks." He smiled, embarrassed yet grateful to have someone he barely knew taking care of him.

"Be back in a second, if I don't vomit on the way."

He fidgeted while she was gone. Though the roofless world outside made him nervous, he was beginning to feel suffocated in the small box of Poe's room. He wanted to go or see someplace different, no matter how inconsequential or uninspiring it might be. A storage closet, the generator room, the communications relays—anything. His eyes landed on Poe's nightstand with sudden horror. The bottle of lube was still sitting out, along with several wadded up tissues.

No, no, no, no, no. He glanced at the repulsorchair. He was willing to chance destroying his back if it meant Jess wouldn't see those tissues. He'd made up his mind to do just that as the door slid back into place and Jess strode in with a tray of succulent smelling food. He blushed furiously as she set the tray across his legs and resumed her post at the edge of Poe's bed. She held a small packet of some crisp bready thing that she nibbled weakly.

"I wish I was hungry. That is genuine roasted brenu. They even got the herbs from Sullust."
“Right.” Finn tore his eyes away from the bottle to take in his plate. Though he'd stuffed himself silly at breakfast, he felt ready to give it another go. He cut into the slab of grey-brown meat and popped a cube into his mouth. It was so savory that his mouth flooded with saliva. He happily cut off another and much larger chunk.

Jess lay back, chewing idly as she looked around the room. "Ugh, gross." She muttered and Finn's head jerked up nervously. "He couldn't even bother to throw away his sex-rags?" She shook her head. "Guys are so much nastier than women, no offense. Of course, after vomiting all over my date, I guess I can't really say that anymore."

"You threw up on her?" Finn's eyebrows rose nearly to his hairline.

"Yeah…” Jess shrugged. "I don't think she had a very good time…when I woke up she was gone. Probably to go scrub my barf off her clothes."

"Ugh." He chuckled.

"Tell me about it. I'll never be able to go down to communications again. But—looks like you guys got it on all right."

Finn squirmed. Were all pilots so blunt, or was that just how normal people were? Jess arched a brow at his nervous silence.

"Hey, no need to be embarrassed. It's just sex. And believe me—a bunch of tissues are not the worst I've seen."

Finn wished desperately that she'd change the subject. She did not.

"So was that your first time?"

"Uh…yeah, it was."

"Good for you. You should've seen how worried Poe was about it. He didn't even know how to bring it up with you. Thank gods for alcohol: Lubing the gears of sex since the dawn of time."

"Wait—he was nervous?" Finn sputtered.

"Oh yeah. He hasn't really cared about someone since—oh, well maybe he hasn't told you."

"About Rhys?"

"He did tell you!"

"Well…not really. I kind of saw some pictures of them on his datapad." Finn admitted.

"Oh," Jess reached for Poe's datapad and shamelessly fiddled it on. Finn's mouth thinned somewhat, unsure if Poe would want her rifling through his files. "Yeah, Rhys was a good guy. A really good guy. It messed Poe up bad when he died. He almost got himself court-martialed over it."

"Really?" Finn's curiosity was piqued. It felt wrong, somehow, to be getting this information from anyone other than Poe, but he could not help himself.

Jess nodded. "Yeah—even though there was clear evidence of First Order involvement, his superiors wouldn't act on it. They were afraid of violating the Galactic Concordance and starting a war." She smiled grimly and rolled her eyes. "That worked out, huh? Anyways, Poe went off on them. They placed him on leave for a few weeks so he could get 'his head on straight' again. So he
called in a favor to a friend, borrowed their ancient ship, and blew the fuck out of the waystation where they'd been ambushed. I don't know how he made it out alive, he was so messed up. It was probably BB-8 that got him back in one piece."

"Jeez..." Finn breathed. "Is that why he joined the Resistance?"

"That was the tipping point, for sure. He tried to toe the line for a while, but you could just tell he was pissed. He lost another crewmate in yet another First Order ambush and was told to sit on his hands and...well...I'm sure you can imagine that he didn't. He would've been court-martialed for sure, but General Organa recruited him. Said the Resistance could use his 'brashness'." Jess grinned. "Me and most of his old team jumped ship with him."

"Oh." Finn said simply. He tried to picture Poe so out of his mind that he'd deliberately go up against a First Order outpost on his own. It was surprisingly easy to do, and it made Finn uncomfortable. It was the same bold recklessness that had made Poe break cover and shoot at Kylo Ren with little chance of success. Finn looked to change the subject. "So...how long have you guys been friends?"

"I've known him since we were stationed together on Corellia. So...maybe seven years?" She studied Finn's face, smiling softly. "I'm glad you two are together. He's been drifting for a—" She broke off as twin beeps filled the room. They perked up like startled animals. "Check your datapad," Jess urged, "Command's sending you guys an alert."

Finn hurriedly picked up his datapad, the shrill beeping grating on his nerves as he flicked it on. A red circle pulsed on the start screen and Finn hesitantly pressed it. A message opened, filling the screen. He glanced up; Jess was clearly doing the same to Poe's datapad.

*It has come to the Resistance's attention that the First Order has placed and/or updated bounties on the following individuals. If you are listed below, please take caution in your daily affairs. We are doing all that we can to keep our staff and crew safe. Do not hesitate to contact me with questions or concerns.*

*Yours, Admiral Hidao Statura.*

Finn scrolled down the message. With a flicker of light, a blue-white holopic shimmered and solidified into life above his datapad. It was an older image of General Leia, shot sometime before her split from the Republic. Her eyes gazed sternly out at the room. Text hovered to the right of the still image, showing a reward of 5,500,000 credits for her live capture. Finn gulped; it was more money than he could begin to imagine. He scrolled to the next image.

The goggle-eyed amphibious face of Admiral Ackbar swam into being. 2,000,000 credits for live capture. 1,500,000 for dead. Heart racing, Finn pressed the next image up. *No...*he thought hollowly. The room seemed to drop away from him and he was left with the glowing image of Poe, obviously taken while he'd been a prisoner onboard the Finalizer. His face was bloody and bruised, his expression defiant. 3,000,000 credits for live capture. 2,500,000 for dead. A breath burst from Finn as horror crept clammyly over his skin and pooled in his stomach. He could taste bile in his mouth. *Dead or alive.* He glanced at Jess. She was staring at the image with wide eyes as she silently mouthed the words 3,000,000 credits.

Numbly, Finn scrolled to the next image. His own face stared blankly out at them. He could see the white epaulets and chest piece of his Stormtrooper armor. Obviously, the First Order had no shortage of images of him; they had his whole life filed away like so much meaningless data. He thought he was beyond the capacity for shock, but the bounty listed beside his picture made his head swim.
Six million credits!" Jess gasped. "That—that's more than the General's!"

Finn brought a hand to his forehead, the meal he'd just eaten lurching around his stomach like a live animal. He would never go back to the First Order. He would die first. And Poe...he swallowed, his chest constricting painfully. *Live capture or dead. They don't care if they kill him. And it'd be the same for him...maybe even worse...if they took him alive.* He wanted to sprint from the room, down to communications, and send a message out to *Black One*. Finn suddenly could not wait for his next rehab session; he couldn't afford to be so helpless.

"Don't worry," Jess said and he jolted out of his thoughts; he'd entirely forgotten she was there. "They've probably got the message out either to *Black One* or BB-8."

"This is bad." Finn stressed, "I know the First Order—they won't stop until they've gotten us all."

"Then we won't stop fighting." Jess squeezed his shoulder.

"Boy. This is thrilling. 7 jumps and we haven't got a ping on anything, not even a regular old smuggler's ship." Snap sighed. The six X-wings spread out, drifting like dust motes in enormity of empty space.

"Your boredom is noted, Captain." Poe said dryly.

"Why are we out here again?" Bastian asked. "This is the second time we've made this run in two days. Are we missing something?"

"We're checking the route, obviously." Poe stated.

"Well, it looks lovely. Just like last time. So much empty loveliness."

Poe shook his head with a grudging smile. "The General let me know yesterday that we'll be hosting some high-and-mighty visitors at the end of the week. She didn't go into the details—just said that we need to keep an eye on this jump route."

Nien Nunb babbled excitedly in Sullustan.

"She didn't say, Nunb. Probably won't know who they'll be till we get closer to the big day. You know how stingy intel is. So, until then, we do what we're told—got it?"

"Copy." Snap said readily. "Good to know this isn't just busywork."

"I'm with you there." Poe agreed. BB-8's voice warbled electronically through his headset, making him wince.

[I have an alert from Base. Should I patch it through?]

"Yeah, go ahead. Take over controls and I'll check it out."

The droid bleeped an affirmative and Poe keyed up his communications relay.

*It has come to the Resistance's attention that the First Order has placed and/or updated bounties on the following individuals. If you are listed below, please take caution in your daily affairs. We are doing all that we can to keep our staff and crew safe. Do not hesitate to contact me with questions or concerns.*
Yours, Admiral Hidao Statura.

Poe’s mouth thinned. Well, this ought to be good. He was not at all surprised to see Leia’s face and outrageous bounty. Nor was he surprised to see Admiral Ackbar; the two had been engaged against the forces of darkness for longer than he’d been alive. He was, however, startled as his bruised and battered face materialized. He gasped as he read the amount he was worth to the First Order. Holy shit, they want me more than Ackbar? Dead or alive too, huh? I guess if they get Leia, they wouldn’t need anyone lower ranking for intel. He shook his head, perversely pleased that the First Order felt shaken enough to bother placing a bounty on him. Some people just can’t handle it when you blow up their genocidal murder-weapon. Shitty picture though—that's too bad. He rubbed his chin, musing and wishing he could somehow impose his Resistance profile picture onto the bounty. I looked hot in that one.

The next image hit him like a slap to the face, his humor evaporating like a drop of water on the sands of Jakku. Finn! It was totally disorienting to see him back in his Stormtrooper armor and it sent a lancing pain through Poe’s heart. Finn's eyes were distant, almost vacant. Though it was his face, it looked nothing like the man he knew. He could hardly stand to look at him.

"Oh, fuck." He bit out.

"Uh…everything okay, Black Leader?" Snap asked worriedly. The rest of the crew perked up their ears. It was not like Poe to curse or lose his head while on the clock.

"Not really. Just got an alert from Base. First Order's released some new bounties."

"How much're you worth?" Niv questioned eagerly.

"3,000,000 alive. 2,500,000 dead."

Several of them whistled in appreciative shock. Instinctively they bunched tighter around Poe as if expecting bounty hunters to pop in from all over the galaxy. "Damn!" Ziff exclaimed off his port wing. "They are really pissed at you."

"That's not it though—they want Finn alive. 6,000,000 credits. That's more than they're offering for the General." 

"6,000,000?!" Snap shouted. "Jeez! That's insane! That's got to be one of the highest bounties in history—maybe second only to Skywalker."

Not good, not good, not good. Why so much for Finn? A horrible thought occurred to him, tearing through his mind like a concussion bomb. He got out when no one ever had—that must've sent a shockwave through the troops. There's dissension in the ranks. He can't have been the only one who wanted out and now the others have a rallying point. He'd be a hero to them. If the First Order got him back…Poe balked, the idea too horrible to fathom.

[The next jump point is approaching, Poe.] BB-8 chittered softly. Poe didn't answer. [Poe?] it tried again.

"What? Yeah… jump on my mark, guys. Let's get this over with."

The ships lurched into the jump-tunnel as one organism, the kaleidoscopic blue and white star-streaks strobing past their canopies. Poe remained tensely silent as they emerged into the Kailion sector. Like the previous 8 sectors, this one seemed benign and empty. Poe hardly cared. He wanted to be back on the ground and with Finn. He wanted to know he was safe.
"Okay, fan out and sweep—you know the drill." He announced.

The ships did as commanded, radiating out from their starting point like the spokes of a wheel. For half an hour they flew in silence. Snap kept checking the location of Black One nervously—though Poe had tried to play off his own bounty, it put Snap on edge. R3 spoke suddenly into his ear.

[I've got a reading. Organic and inorganic at 4533.62.]

"Thanks, Tubbs. Black Leader, we've got a reading on something—patching the coordinates through."

"Copy. All craft, form up."

They converged at the point R3 had indicated.

"Well…that's great." Bastion sighed.

"Just a space-shit." Snap groaned. The bundle of junked parts, trash, and organic waste tumbled gently end over end before them in a sinuous stream.

"BB-8, you getting anything from this?" Poe asked cautiously. He couldn't say why, but something about it unnerved him.

"What's to get?" Ziff asked. "Someone shot their load before jumping to hyperspace. Standard procedure."

"Believe it or not, I'm actually aware of that." Poe answered sarcastically. "Scan it anyway, buddy."

BB-8 focused it's long-range scanners upon the jumble of disparate parts. [There appear to be the pieces of an old T-11 maintenance droid, various food packages and debris, urea and fecal matter. I'm not picking up anything strange.]

"Okay. Make a note of it. The Bolt looks clear but we'll check it again before our guests arrive. Let's go home."

The ships rotated away to open space. As they did so, seven miniscule beacons detached from the cloud of junk they had been enshrouded in. Bursting forwards with highly pressurized atmosphere, they magnetized and clamped down on their targets. Two adhered to Nien Nunb's ship. One each to Bastian's and Snap's. The remaining three latched on to Liv Nek's, Ziff's, and to Black One as it peeled off to the side. Black One darted forwards into the void, and the rest followed in a bright flicker of engine lights.

Poe fidgeted as he waited impatiently for C-3PO to lead him into the conference room. The droid tottered stiffly ahead of him and it took all of his self-control to keep from blowing past it. He wanted to speak with Leia badly, to hear her either confirm or deny his suspicions regarding Finn's incredibly high bounty. Workers sat hunched silently over their softly glowing terminals, parsing and translating code from all over the galaxy, following leads, and studying the visual and audio readouts from probe droids he and his team had placed over the past week. He envied their quiet focus—he often slipped into a similar state of razor-edged, primal tunnel-vision when engaged in dogfights—but right now his brain darted uncontrollably from one panicky thought to the next. The nearly four hour return flight from the Core had been unbearable; though the stars and jump-tunnels had flickered and strobed as brightly as ever, he had seen only Finn, blank-eyed and burdened under his Stormtrooper armor. BB-8 rolled mutely after him, aware of his agitation by the subtle tenseness in his carriage.
"This way, please, Colonel, BB-8." C-3PO said as if they did not know perfectly well where the conference room was. With a stiff little bow, it ushered them through the door and then turned away for other duties.

"Poe," Leia stood as he entered the room. She was alone and therefore dismissive of rank, Statura off helping with a glitch in a holoterminal. Her hair swept back from her temples in a soft grey braid, trailing in loose waves to the small of her back. Her hard eyes, however, belied her more casual appearance. "I assume you got our alert while on your recon run?"

"I did, General,"

"You'll have to take extra caution on your missions—at least two other pilots with you anytime you leave the planet, understood?"

"Yes, but I'm not worried about me—" He hurried but she cut him off.

"You should be—your bounty is enough for any hunter to retire on and live like a Hutt. And I'm sure I needn't remind you that you are wanted alive or dead."

"No, I know—it's just—Finn's bounty…" He trailed off, willing her to understand why this was so important to him.

She nodded, lips thin. "It is extreme."

"And they want him back alive." He stressed.

Leia sighed and nodded marginally at the table and chairs. Poe waited until she'd sat and then flung himself down. She looked suddenly exhausted, her gaze distant and sad.

"You're all so young." She shook her head, staring beyond Poe into deep wells of memory. "When the war against the Empire was winding down, we actually let ourselves think that we'd made the galaxy a better place. That our children would know different lives than ours—peaceful lives." She smiled ruefully.

"We weren't forced into this life, General."

"Weren't you? With your parents and their legacy, with your skills, could you really do anything else? Do you think you could leave for a quiet life in the Outer Rim, knowing what you know now?"

"…No."

"Our morality has forced us. I'd hoped, long ago, that we would one day be able to cease weaponizing our morality."

"General…" Poe was unnerved at her morose introspectiveness. It sounded too much like defeat, and he was too unnerved to realize that it was a sign of her trust in him to reveal it.

She straightened at his tone and gave a wan smile. "I'm sorry, Poe. 3PO threw me for a loop earlier—told an old story Han was fond of—set me to musing." She focused tightly on him, the rigid strength he was used to billowing back to life. "Now then, we were talking about Finn's bounty."

Poe's heart twisted, both at the thought of her missing Han and in fear of Finn's bounty.

"General, I was thinking…they want him back alive to prove a point, right?"
"Go on," Leia nodded.

"Well, he escaped them when no Stormtrooper ever had. If there were other troopers on the fence, he'd be their rallying point, wouldn't he?"

"I had the same thought. The idea of him, of what he represents, is far more dangerous to the First Order than he physically ever could be. Killing him would make him a martyr, but if they get him back and turn him...you can imagine what a powerful symbol that would be to all those who had ever thought of deserting."

Poe gulped. "Yeah..." It was the same thought that had tormented him all the long flight home. That Leia had reached the same conclusion made him feel ill.

She studied him for a moment. "Well, he's as safe here as it's likely possible for him to be in the current atmosphere. We'll know long in advanced if an unwelcome ship enters our sector, thanks to you and your team. Speaking of which, I'm assuming your run was uneventful?"

He nodded. "The only thing we got a reading on was a bunch of jettisoned trash. Nothing suspicious."

"Good. I'll ask you to make that run one more time, before our guests arrive."

"Yes, General."

She stood and he quickly followed suit.

"Dismissed."

Chapter End Notes

AN: Oh golly, shit's about to get real guys. Like. In a few chapters maybe. But it's coming. As always, thanks so much for reading, and reviews are very much appreciated! It has really been so incredibly heartening to read what you guys think, and it's keeping me revved to work on this!

Also, as an aside, the name for this fic was taken from the song "Be Here Now" by Ray LaMontagne, the gentle feel of which inspired huge chunks of this story. There's something so soothing about it, but at the same time it's also somewhat sad (especially that key change before the chorus). Both Finn and Poe struggle to let go of the hurt of their pasts and simply be present. I think it's part of why Poe loves flying so much--he's forced into the now. I don't even want to know how many times I've listened to that song in a row.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Finn flung down his datapad as Poe entered the room. He would've stood if he'd been able. "Poe—the bounties," he began.

"I know, I got the alert while I was out." Poe walked up to him, dipping down to kiss him. Finn's nerves were smothered beneath Poe's lips; he wanted to kiss him for hours and at the same time he needed to talk about the bounties. He drew away from his warmth sooner than he would've liked and immediately started babbling.

"They want you alive or dead, Poe. I know them; they won't stop until they've gotten us. There's no way we can—"

"Easy, easy," Poe soothed, sitting with him and taking his hand. "It's not like I didn't know this could happen—the only difference is now when I die, I'll make someone rich." He shrugged and smiled morbidly.

"Poe," Finn bit out.

"Shame they didn't have a better picture of me, though." Poe mused.

"Poe, this is serious!"

"Yeah, it's serious how bad that picture is—my face all bruised up."

Finn took him by the shoulders, his eyes wide, threatening to shake him as his panic mounted.

"Damn it, Poe, this isn't a joke!"

"I know, I know. But look…I signed up for this life. Your bounty is the one I'm really worried about. Six million credits..." He shook his head. "Man, if I didn't love you, I'd turn you in." He grinned.

Finn was so torn between Poe's casual utterance of loving him and the gravity of the situation that he sputtered wordlessly for several awkward seconds.

"You love me?" He managed.

Poe was brought up short by the look in Finn's eyes. It was an expression of amazement that bordered on pain, and realization hit Poe like a kick in the guts; it was the first time anyone had said that to Finn. It broke Poe's heart and he wished that he'd said it more romantically and with more meaning; that it hadn't been thrown casually in with talk of bounty hunters, but it was too late. "Finn—yeah—of course." Poe recovered lamely. He couldn't help but stare at him with adoring pity.

"Sorry...no one's said that to you before, have they?"

Finn thumped into him, hugging him tightly enough to wring the air from Poe's lungs. Poe breathed a laugh and hugged him back. "Sorry...no one's said that to you before, have they?" He murmured.

"No," Finn squeezed him. "Would you...would you say it again?"

Poe kissed his ear, smiling. It was such an innocent request. "I love you." He repeated, this time with the gravitas Finn was due; the words came so easily to his lips that it surprised him. He buried his nose in Finn's neck, trying to stifle the strange sense of panic that had flared behind his heart at their
"I love you too," Finn tripped inelegantly over the phrase, but saying it made his heart leap. He grinned from ear to ear as Poe's hands tightened across his back. Poe sighed, giving against Finn's body and allowing the painful relief to fill him up, willing himself to give in and ride it like an out of control ship. The old sadness twinged deeply and then changed, welling into expansive warmth that filled Poe to the brim and escaped him in a shaking laugh. Poe drew away, and Finn was surprised to find that the pilot's eyes were glassy.

"Sorry—this is stupid." Poe said somewhere between a laugh and a grimace. "I've been told 'I love you' a million times and *this* one punches me in the face."

"It's bad?" Finn was aghast, totally misunderstanding.

"No! No, it's not bad at all. It's really good." Poe wiped at his eyes, too buoyant to feel embarrassed.

"Then why?" Finn motioned to Poe's eyes, flustered.

"It's stupid. It's just, the last person who said that back to me died."

"That's not stupid." Finn said adamantly.

"It kinda is. I mean—no one's ever told you they love you, and you're holding it together."

"I'm a little misty." He grinned.

"Yeah?" Poe snorted a laugh, his lips fumbling over Finn's as he drew him into another kiss. His lips were desperate, urgent. Finn's breath came hard against Poe's face as he twisted closer to him. Finn's mouth tightened suddenly and he pulled back with a grimace.

"I wish I wasn't so sore." He grit his teeth in frustration.

"Gods, me too." Poe groaned. He wanted to strip him and ride him into oblivion, but, in a truly monumental display of restraint, he forced himself to remember Finn's physical therapy session and the way he'd cried out in pain. Finn had more of that in store for tomorrow. *Maybe another blowjob? A handjob? He wouldn't have to move much for that...* Poe took a huge, steadying gulp of air and sat straight. It would end with sex. He knew it. And Finn couldn't handle it. "Want me to go get dinner?"

"That is a huge change in topic." Finn accused.

"Deliberate. I don't want Kalonia chopping my nuts off tomorrow. Because she'll find out."

"Yeah, she will. You weren't kidding about not being able to lie."

Poe conceded to that. "Whereas you lied to her with a straight face."

"I spent my whole life lying, Poe." Finn shrugged with a small smile. "That's how I kept out of trouble. It's only now that I can actually tell the truth."

Poe wanted to tear his hair out. "Baby..."

"Don't call me that," Finn nearly begged.

"Why?" Poe asked, taken aback.
"Because it really turns me on, and everything hurts right now."

"You're killing me, Finn." Poe stood, pacing back and forth. While tame, it was the most sexual thing he'd heard Finn say and if they didn't leave the room soon he was going to break. "Come on. Dinner."

"Right." Finn agreed in the same robotic tone. Poe carefully eased Finn onto the chair and guided them out into the hall.

"Man! And BB-8 isn't even here to see this!" Poe lamented loudly.

"See what?"

"Me doing good! Me not 'falling prey to my base, organic needs'."

Finn threw a look over his shoulder. "He actually says that?"

"You are in for a rude awakening when you learn binary."

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That night, after making sure Finn had his pill and that he was slathered in bacta-gel, Poe lay awake listening to his gentle breathing. Finn was warm beside him and his face utterly at peace in BB-8's soft resting light. Poe was amazed at his continuing restraint. Granted, he'd opted to sleep fully clothed (something that had caused BB-8 to titter so hard it had nearly short-circuited) but he had to do what he had to do. Finn hadn't wanted to sleep on his narrow cot, and Poe hadn't wanted him to either. He made a mental note to have the cot removed the next day. He buried his face into his pillow and drifted off.

"Furillo's down!" Jess shouted urgently into his headset and Poe saw the searing brightness of his death out of the corner of his eye. He jerked Black One into a hard dive, a TIE scraping past his hull so closely he could see every bolt and rivet, and feel the hard wake of its passing in his bones.

The trench opened up before him and at the end of it was their one chance; a ragged, slender breach hardly large enough for his fighter. Perhaps it wouldn't be large enough. He had no choice but to chance it.

"Red Four, Red Six! Cover us!" He called out as he started his attack run, darting into the narrow trench like a needle into a vein.

"I'm on it!" Bastion confirmed.

"Rodger!" Ello's rough voice seconded. Cold grey walls streaked past Poe's wingtips in a dizzying blur and he knew that a mistake of a few feet in either direction would be fatal. He grit his teeth. Almost there. Just a little closer.

"I'm hit!" Ello cried out in terror and then the trench was lit with fire. Debris pinged against Black One's fuselage.

The terrain changed around Poe, shrinking, breaking apart and squaring into a line of boxy Republic cargo ships.
“Rapier Leader, ambush!” Karé yelled. Flashes went off in searing bursts, and a hail of red and green lazar-fire volleyed back and forth in a staccato spray between darting TIEs, RI Howlers, and the beleaguered cargo ships.

It was supposed to be a routine escort.

"Defensive action! All craft engage enemy fighters and defend those cargo ships!" Poe shouted. He quickly did the math; 14 TIES and Howlers. 8 X-wings. It was more than an even match for his crew. He dodged into battle, adrenaline, stress, and fierce joy flooding through him in equal measure. Finally, an excuse to fight them. With a predator's focus, he honed in on the nearest TIE and it burst as effortlessly before him as if he'd simply willed it to happen. So did the next.

Poe looped a cargo ship, twisting above its broad dorsal surface to drop in behind a slower Howler. The enemy ship mushroomed into a spectacular fireball and he passed through, momentarily blinded. Blinking against the brightness, he saw Rhys hard on a TIE, weaving after it with a nimbleness that made Poe grin proudly. A second TIE swam up from below like a monster out of the deep.

"Rhys, on your six!"

Poe banked hard, his thumb ready on the trigger, but it was too late. The green slivers of deadly light shot forwards and Rhys' ship buckled, the right engine exploding and the starboard wings shearing wildly apart like panes of glass. He heard Rhys' quick cry and then a concussive silence as the fire swept over him.

"Your mom's cool," The sandy-haired boy grinned, peering down from the mossy, half-tumbled stone that ringed the top of Yavin's most famous archaeological site, the ancient pyramidal Tak'al. The limitless tangle of jungle stretched away one hundred feet below them in a tapestry of dripping green leaves. "She's a really good pilot, huh?"

"Yeah, one of the best! You should see her real ship." Poe bragged, balancing dangerously on the rim before hopping down with a giggle.

"What's her real ship?" He asked, prying his eyes away from the misty canopy.

"It's way better than that old speeder she flew us here on. It's a RZ 1 A-wing interceptor!"

"A what?"

"A really cool ship. It's probably the fastest type of ship in the Republic."

"Cool!"

"I can fly it." Poe proudly jammed his thumb into his chest.

"Nuh uh. Can you really? All by yourself?"

"Well...not by myself;" He admitted with an embarrassed grin. "I'm still too little—but I know the ignition and landing sequences by heart and I can even break atmo."

"I always wanted to fly. Do you think she'd let me try it?" He craned his head, staring up through the late afternoon rainclouds as if he could see the stars beyond.
"I dunno..." Poe said skeptically. "She's really strict about it. But maybe she'd let you tag along?"

It had taken months of begging and whining, on both their parts and to both sets of parents, but eventually they had won out. Poe stood on the ground, shading his eyes against the bright, humid sun. They had been gone for nearly half an hour and were due back any moment. He heard the ship before he saw it, easily picking out the high, two-tone thrum from the jungle sounds that pressed in from beyond the perimeter fence.

"Here they come!" He smiled, running a few paces forwards. What looked to be a tiny speck far above their heads swiftly grew into the sleek, sharp lines of the A-wing. It shot to the ground like a lightning bolt and slowed with deceptive ease over the bare patch of earth near his father's work shed.

Poe ran up as the cockpit opened.

Rhys' ecstatic face popped over the rim of the ship, his eyes alight with wonder. He grinned ear-to-ear as he saw Poe.

"That was amazing!" Rhys cheered. "I want to do that forever!"

Poe jerked awake with a gasp, his heart hammering in his ears and his breath heaving. His hands were shaking. It took him a moment, as it always did, to understand where he was and what had happened and then the exhaustion crushed him. He placed his sweaty forehead in his hands, willing his breathing to slow.

"Poe?"

Finn propped himself slowly up, his puffy eyes tight on Poe's hunched frame. "Poe, are you okay?"

Poe tried to answer him but all he managed was a hard, shaking breath. Finn couldn't make out his expression in the minuscule light afforded by BB-8, but he understood well enough what must have happened. A nightmare like I had in medbay. He reached for Poe, worried that he may lash out as he had done. He decided to chance it. The unsure pressure of Finn's fingers on his shoulder nearly brought Poe to tears and he allowed himself to be drawn against Finn's chest, to be gently, but insistently, lowered back to the mattress. Wrapped in Finn's arms Poe tried to force the images, the sounds from his mind but it was like trying to throw a ship into orbit; they refused to budge. They'd likely be around as long as he was. Finn's arms kept that thought from being utterly unbearable. Finn traced slow circles on his back and Poe clutched at him, his face screwed up against the cry that wanted to burst out. He held it back, reciting tactical maneuvers in his head until his trampling heart had slowed.

It hurt Finn to feel him shaking. In fact, it almost frightened him; thus far Poe had been the solid one in his life, the one that remained steady when he'd fallen apart. Slowly, Finn's gentle hands eased the tension from Poe's body and he felt his light quivering dissipate and then stop altogether. Finn wasn't sure if he should ask him about it, afraid that voicing his concern would only throw fuel on the fire. He compromised by pressing his lips to Poe's forehead.

They lay together in silence for a long while, Finn growing drowsy and the soft pressure of his hand on Poe's back slackening. Poe sighed against him.

"Thank you," Poe's whisper melded into the benign hum of the ventilation system and was lost to the night.
Poe kept easily up with Jess as they made their second lap past the hanger doors. While not as swelteringly miserable as their last run, the humid air hung in misty curtains that parted reluctantly before them and closed behind them like a door so that they seemed to be adrift in a cloying grey sea. The sun had not yet risen to scald the fog from the land, but it hardly seemed to matter to the local bird life, which sang and whistled and screeched in a truly impressive cacophony. *Nesting season,* Poe mused, imagining the thousands, maybe millions of little beings that would come into existence within the next month.

“So…did you guys have a fight already?”

“Huh?” Poe asked, tearing his focus away from a strange, descending trill of birdsong.

“Did you guys have a fight or something?”

Poe huffed a confused laugh, arching a brow “No, why?”

“I dunno. You just looked kinda sad.”

“Nah. Just had a rough night.”

“Nightmare?”

“Yeah. Same as always.”

Jess wiped at her brow. “I had one of those a few days ago. Ello, over and over. And Karé.” Her mouth thinned. “I really miss Karé.”

“Gods, me too.” Poe commiserated heavily.

“So has the General said anything?”

“About?”

“About where the First Order is? Do we have any leads? Because I really want to bring it to them, Poe. I really, really do.”

Poe nodded. “Trust me, the General wants to kick their asses just as bad as we do.”

“But?”

“But we’ve got nothing.” He admitted. He felt some of the wind leave his sails just admitting it out loud and he hurried to add “Nothing yet. I’m sure we’ll find out more once our allies come in later this week.”

“I sure as hell hope so.” Jess grunted.

By the time Poe had finished his run with Jess, the sun had risen, the early morning fog had peeled back, and the raucous chorus of birdsong had lost most of its mad pre-dawn urgency. He shivered as the cool indoor air hit his sweat, and entered a lift back to his room. He found Finn laying on his stomach in the half-light, the blankets lying in folds at the small of his naked back, and his face lit from below by the pale glow of his datapad. The note Poe had written to him explaining where he
was lay unfolded on his pillow. Finn was so engrossed in his work that he didn't even hear the low hiss of the door sliding open and then closed; it was only when BB-8 bleeped a welcome to Poe that he looked up.

"Oh, morning, Poe." Finn reached out and pressed the lights on, squeezing his eyes shut against the sudden brightness. Once again, Poe looked as if he'd gone swimming rather than jogging. The dew and sweat coating his skin glistened, his dark nipples easy to see through his now transparent white tank, and Finn abruptly forgot all about the datapad in his hands.

"Morning." Poe flopped down next to him, considering; he'd caught Finn's roving look and his scant supply of self-control withered away in the face of Finn's bashful arousal. He pointedly studied the screen of Finn's datapad, which displayed four planets enmeshed in a complex spider's web of crisscrossing lines. "You find anything interesting?" His voice was supremely casual.

"Huh?" Finn swallowed and hastily recalled his brain from the depths to which it had sunk. He followed Poe's bemused expression back to his datapad. He had a tickling suspicion Poe knew precisely what he was thinking and was deliberately stringing him on. "Oh. Yeah, that. It's going good. Really good."

"Mmm, I'm glad." Poe grinned devilishly as he leaned in closer. He made no move to touch Finn, though his dark eyes nearly burned holes through the other man's head. Finn could feel the electric charge jumping between them and he realized that Poe was going to make him take the first step if he wanted anything at all.

Finn steeled himself as he leaned over Poe and he dipped his head down, his eyes closing as he pressed his lips to Poe's with all the speed and grace of a GNK droid. Poe held still, trying to quash the grin that threatened to tighten his lips away from Finn's; Finn was so careful, so timid in touching him. It took ages for Finn's hand to snake up between his shoulders, and Poe imagined the sun had probably set by the time Finn pulled him closer and opened his mouth. Finn, for his part, was horribly flustered. To have Poe ready in his hands, so warm and pliable, made him feel as if he'd been given a live thermal detonator that he had no idea how to diffuse.

Finn pulled away. "Am I doing it wrong?" He asked, unable to stand the uncertainty.

Poe was taken aback, saddened that Finn had automatically assumed he'd messed up. "No, baby…I just want you to get used to touching me. I want you to, you know?" Poe stroked his face.

"Whatever you want to do to me, you can do."

Poe might as well have pulled a blaster on him and set it to stun. Finn felt his mind turning to liquid and running out his ears as his pulse quickened. "I—I wouldn't even know where to begin."

"You could start by taking my shirt off."

"Right," Finn breathed, reaching for the hem. The cloth was damp to the touch and Finn was amazed that even after having sex with him, simply brushing his fingers against the skin of Poe's stomach could send a jolt straight through his body. Poe grinned as Finn pulled the shirt up and away with exaggerated care; it was excruciatingly endearing and he had to fight to hold himself still and let Finn move at his own speed. Lust and nerves waged a heated battle in Finn's mind as he drew Poe into another clumsy kiss. Poe reciprocated passionately, his tongue sweeping into Finn's mouth and his well-practiced lips tightening the seal as he brought a hand to the side of Finn's jaw.

BB-8's dark lens stared up at them, nonplussed. [Kalonia will be glad that you're digging your graves for her.]
Poe playfully flipped the droid off and then groaned, but this was due more to Finn running a hand up his chest and tentatively rubbing a nipple between his thumb and forefinger, than from his fear of Kalonia's rage. BB-8 trundled sourly to the door and saw itself out. Neither of them noticed.

"Mmm…yeah," Poe sighed, his lips dragging wetly across Finn's. Emboldened by Poe's eager reactions, Finn dared to move his mouth down his neck, tracing the taut edge of a tendon before smoothing into his clavicle. Poe leaned his head back, pressing his throat full against Finn's mouth. It was beyond thrilling to lay prone beneath him, to have Finn explore him like this, and each inexperienced drag of his fingers made him tense and pant. He ran his hands down the sinuous muscle of Finn's back, his fingers skating across the tough, smooth surface of his scar before dipping into the crack of his ass.

Finn leaned back from him, his eyes squeezed shut and the blankets sliding down onto his legs as Poe squeezed his ass cheeks together and then mounded them apart. Finn froze, his mouth dropping open.

"You like that, baby?" Poe's dark eyes knew the answer full well.

"Uh huh…" Finn breathed, his forehead resting heavily on Poe's throat. Finn tore himself out of the hot tremors that radiated out from Poe's fingers and shivered through his pelvic floor, kissing Poe's ear and his sandpaper-rough jaw. He trailed down his throat again; now that Poe had officially turned him loose, he wanted to feel every inch of him. His hand roved down the pilot's ribs and Poe watched him with a smile; Finn focused on his body with all the studious attention he would've given to learning the mechanics of a new weapon or simulation. He trailed his fingers across the gentle swells of Poe's abs, dipped into his belly button, and traced the dark line of hair that darted under his waistband. Poe gasped, body tightening with liquid hot anticipation as he helped him take off both his shorts and boxers, impatiently shifting his hips and kicking them off onto the floor. Finn's eyes fondled him and Poe spread his legs in an invitation, his heavy-lidded eyes full of wry warmth. Finn hesitated—he'd never touched any penis but his own and now that it came down to it, he was frankly intimidated at the prospect. Poe gently took Finn by the wrist and placed Finn's hand on his throbbing cock with a needy little sound that shivered through Finn's stomach. A breath ghosted past Finn's lips as he curled his fingers around Poe's length; Poe was hot in his hand and his hips bucked lightly against his him, the head of his cock bumping past his fingers. Finn tightened his grip, tugging down and squeezing back to the base. Poe groaned, his head pulled into the mattress. "Uh huh…just like that, baby. Wring me out, okay?" If he could lay like that with Finn's hand working him for a million years it wouldn't be long enough.

Finn was so hard it was if someone had hooked a live current through his cock, and Poe's heated voice heightened his need to a literally painful pitch. Of all the things he would never have expected of sex, one was the effect that his lover's voice would have on him. It was as if Poe's voice had caressing fingers of it's own, and they swarmed him with each sound he made. Poe's hand pressed between his shoulders, the other gripping his ass, as he dragged him down into a gulping kiss. Finn pumped him in a quick strobing motion, much as he'd done to himself, secretively and furtively in another lifetime when loneliness had gnawed at him in the endless nights. He glanced down; the glistening head of Poe's cock popping through the circular gap between his thumb and forefinger was nearly hypnotic. A heavy bead of clear liquid emerged from Poe's slit, and Finn felt rather stupid for thinking just like mine does.

Poe's hands tightened on him, his breath coming heavy. "Oh, yeah…Finn…" He moaned. Poe felt Finn's cock twitch against his thigh a second before Finn gasped raggedly.

"Poe—hnn…" He broke off, his teeth gritted and his hand frozen on Poe's cock. "I want to be in you again." Finn's rough voice shuddered through Poe's insides.
Thank fuck. Poe's eyes closed and his mouth parted in delicious relief. He kissed him deeply, propping himself up on one arm as he did so. "Lay down for me, sweetheart," he said against Finn's forehead. Finn released Poe's cock and rolled flat on his back, his stomach clenching and body trembling as Poe reached for the lube. The feel of his dripping fingers against his needy cock was almost too much, and the slick sounds... every muscle in his neck and back tightened, his back painfully, though he ignored it. Poe's knees pressed against his sides.

"Hold your cock up," Poe's voice was honey in his ears and he gripped himself around the base as Poe lifted his hips, his asshole brushing against the head of his cock. Poe pressed his cock and his balls tightly against his body, peering between his legs as he lowered himself onto Finn.

"Ahh—fuck..." He groaned as Finn pressed in. He sank down with a rolling squirm and Finn's hands tightened on his hips like vice grips. Finn's breath hitched as Poe's warmth enveloped him—he didn't think that he could ever get enough of that moment of penetration. "Grab my dick again." Poe panted and Finn did so without hesitation, resuming his constrictive pumping. Poe thought he might lose his mind entirely, and he dipped forwards onto his hands as he hurriedly began to rock his hips. Sweat dripped down his forehead, his heart thumping in chest. He felt like his joints were coming unglued; he was going to melt around Finn's cock.

His precum slicked Finn's fingers as he jerked the pilot's length. Finn was lost to sheer sensation; there was a rougher urgency in Poe's movements than there had been their first time and Finn thrust mindlessly upwards. Poe quaked around him and his hands tightened on his chest, but he slowed his rocking.

"You gotta keep still for me. Can you do that, baby?"

Sweat beaded Finn's forehead. It took everything in him to hold his next thrust at bay. Poe grinned hazily, proud of his immediate restraint, and he kissed at his ear and then his mouth.

"Good...ahh...let me make you come; I don't want you to hurt yourself..." He licked his lips as he resumed his tight, shuddering rocking. Finn battened himself down against the storm that was Poe's body. Don't move, don't move, let him move, he repeated over and over as if the words themselves could hold him still. One sweaty hand gripped Poe's hip and the other held as tight as durasteel cables around Poe's cock. He cried out as Poe clamped down and drew slowly up his cock, exposing his slick length, pulsing around the head and then swallowing him with one quick, grinding tuck of his hips.

Poe panted. Gods it felt amazing; Finn filled him perfectly, sliding deeply past his prostate. Again he drew up and swallowed him to the hilt. He exhaled hard through his nose as he bit his lip; quivering thrusts began trembling through Finn's body and into his. They were small and jerky, and as involuntary as Finn's galloping pulse. Poe smiled knowingly down at Finn's drawn face; he'd allow those tiny thrusts—surely they couldn't put too much stress on Finn's back. He ground quickly against him a circular wave.

"Fuck, baby...your cock feels so good...hmm—so fucking good,"

"Ahh! Poe," Finn groaned. The combination of Poe's smoldering voice and his circular dragging motions short-circuited Finn's brain and his restraint frayed like a snapping cable. He thrust hard.

"Hah!" Poe jolted on top of him, his shoulders tight. He'd felt that ramming thrust in his teeth and his mind abandoned him utterly for one hot, squirming second as he shuddered around him. He would've traded his X-wing to have Finn healed enough to fuck his brains out, but Finn simply wasn't physically capable of it.
Finn seemed to have reached the same conclusion, and a frustrated groan tore through each of them in unison. Poe breathed a laugh as their eyes met.

"I know, baby. Soon... *ahn*...soon you'll be able to, okay?" It was a promise. "I want it too," He ground down hard, pinching Finn's nipples as he rocked; they had seemed especially sensitive the first time Poe had toyed with them, and he wanted Finn to focus on something other than his need to thrust. Finn arched against him, heat rippling down his chest and into his cock, his face wound up with pleasure. His hand had frozen on Poe's cock and Poe leaned into it, riding the nearly painful tightness of his grip. Poe began to bob his hips, his hands splayed across Finn's chest, and Finn closed his eyes, his head falling slowly back against the mattress as Poe rode him.

"Keep jerking me," Poe breathed hotly. Finn hurriedly squeezed down his seeping cock, but his grip was less focused, his pleasure mounting like a star about to go supernova; he couldn't possibly contain the energy seething within him.

Poe knew he was close and he rocked against him as hard as he dared, shaking the creaking mattress beneath them. He arched his back slightly so that each deep penetration hit his prostate like a battering ram. Somewhere, in the few molecules of his mind still capable of thought, Poe wondered if he'd even be able to handle Finn when he healed. *He's going to turn me inside-fucking-out.* Poe bit his lip at the thought.

Finn felt it building deep in the root of his cock, and his quick, bleary glance at Poe's tight face was all it took. His hand flew reflexively from Poe's cock to clutch at the pilot's hips as his body began to shudder beneath him.

Poe's eyes cracked open. "Oh *yeah,* Finn—come in me!*" He panted. He ground against him while at the same time pinching his nipples, and Finn cried out as if Poe had electrocuted him.

"*Ahh—!*" His voice caught and strangled into a deep, winding groan as he came. He was as unable to stop his quick jerky thrusts as a ship set to autopilot. Poe held still though his legs shook and his asshole pulsed around Finn's plunging length.

"*Fuck* yeah, baby... *oh yeah...*" Each hot spurt revved Poe up beyond endurance. With one last heaving breath, Finn was emptied and collapsed beneath him as if he'd sprinted thirty laps around base in the blazing sun. He dazedly felt Poe's hand on his, drawing him back to the pilot's cock.

"Make me come, baby."

Poe's voice made his exhausted cock twitch. *This is insane.* He gripped him firmly, pumping in time with his throbbing pulse. Poe breathed hard out of his nose, closing his eyes. He willed every other sensation into the background with a predatory focus that he'd honed over years of high-speed dogfights. Nothing existed but Finn's wringing hand, and his body beneath him.

It took several minutes of pumping, and as the haze of his orgasm cleared, Finn wished that he'd been able to stay hard longer; that he'd been able to please Poe from the inside as well. Poe's breath came heavy, welling out from deep within. His mouth parted and his brows drew together. "*Hnn—yeah—I'm gonna come, babe—ahh—ah, fuck!*" His neck pulled tight and he groaned, bucking into Finn's hand; though Finn knew now to anticipate the shuddering tightness of Poe's body, he was still unprepared for it and it hit him like a proton torpedo. He jerked beneath him as the pilot's cock streaked onto his stomach.

"*Ahh... gods...*" Poe panted, as with one last, taut thrust he was emptied. Ecstatic relief lapped through his body like waves against a shore and then softly receded into a warm, utterly contented haze. He sighed against Finn's jaw as he slouched forwards. He pressed their foreheads together and Finn
wrapped his arms about him. For a long while they lay together in a disjointed, sweaty heap. It was incredibly comfortable to lie against Finn's chest, his calming heartbeat echoing back and forth between them. Poe would have nodded off if a gurgling sound like a dying animal hadn't erupted from Finn's stomach.

Poe glanced at him with a laugh. "It's like you worked up an appetite or something."

"I could eat a dianoga right now. Trash and all, I don't even care."

"Eugh. I think mess can do better than that." He threw a lazy look at the chrono. "Shit, we gotta hurry though."

By the time they'd showered and clothed, breakfast was nearly at an end and mess all but empty but for a few scattered civilians who had slept late. They wolfed down their less extravagant, though still highly satisfying meal (rationing was once again in order after their one day of gluttony), and braced themselves for medbay.

Chapter End Notes

AN: JESUS MORE SMUT. I didn't see that coming (coming! ha! I'm sorry-I'm so tired). Once again, I hate writing sex scenes and I can only hope that this is at least somewhat titillating (TITillating. I AM SO SORRY!). I thought some shit would be hitting the fan by now, but they decided they wanted to have sex and, you know, I couldn't blame them. So this happened. But the big bads are in the works, I promise. Just a bit more patience! There's gonna be a time skip next chapter-nothing drastic, but enough to get this beast moving along. Thank you so much for reading and I so appreciate your reviews! -Bluestem
Finn's legs shook and he gripped the parallel bars to either side of his waist with sweaty hands. Every muscle in his neck, shoulders and arms tensed, prepared to take his full weight should his knees give way. But they didn't. First one step, and then another. He stared down at his bare feet, carefully spreading and planting his toes firmly into the cool duracrete flooring; he felt as top heavy as an AT-ST, and liable to tip if he so much as breathed wrong.

Kalonia strode solidly alongside the therapy bars, her eyes scanning Finn's body as he moved. "Keep your back straight, Finn. I know you want to lean forwards, but that will only put more strain on your spine."

"Right," He grunted. He kept his gaze on his toes, as if his focus on them would keep him upright.

"Head up. Ears in line with your shoulders. Don't worry about your legs so much—they're weakened, not broken. Trust me, they're doing just fine. Keep your eyes forwards, it'll help you balance." Kalonia smiled reassuringly.

Poe watched from the far end of the bars. "Want me to do a striptease? That'd get your eyes off your feet." He offered helpfully.

Kalonia arched a brow. "I have a few assistants who'd be thrilled, Colonel. By all means." She dryly gestured as if ushering a dancer to the stage.

Poe playfully began to shimmy out of his jacket.

"Stop," Finn chuckled frailly, "I'm gonna fall over if I laugh. I can't even look at you." He stared determinedly past Poe's shoulder, at the benign bubbling of a bacta-tank.

Poe stood aside, grinning. "Just a few more feet, Finn." He felt sickeningly proud of him. Finn had powered through three days' worth of rehabilitation sessions with a single-minded focus and grit that had been almost frightening to observe. While being stretched and pulled in all manner of painful ways, Finn had gone senseless to everything but his desire to stand and walk. Poe had worried at first, that Finn was pushing himself too hard; for hours after rehab, he moved gingerly when preforming even the most simple of tasks, such as brushing his teeth, or lifting his datapad. But when he saw the deep focus in Finn's eyes, Poe had realized it would be pointless to voice his concerns; it was the same concentration he saw in his pilots—the kind of look that said 'I will do this if it kills me'.

And thanks to that focus, Finn had just walked ten feet. He reached the end of the bars, his expression brightening from stony determination to celebratory relief in the space of a heartbeat. He slouched forwards with a laugh, Poe taking him under an arm and easing him back down to his chair.

"Hey!" Poe cheered as he squeezed his shoulder "you did it! You're gonna be running with me and Jess in no time!"

BB-8 whooped, rolling a circle around them and butting it's head into Finn's calf.

"Yes!" Finn did a squirming victory dance in his chair. "Can I try it again?" He beamed up at
Kalonia.

She smiled warmly down at him but shook her head. "Not just yet. Though you did very well." She sobered, placing her hands on her hips and leveling her brows. "Now, be honest with me: On a scale of 1 to 10 how would you rate your pain while walking?"

"Uh…maybe a 3? It really wasn't bad, I swear. I think I'm good to do that again." He nodded fervently. He and Poe both stared expectantly at Kalonia, like children begging for a treat.

Her eyes twinkled. "Sorry boys. Not just yet, as I said. But," she hurried as Finn's face fell, "how's this? I give you permission to stand and walk as you feel able, with the caveat that you use some form of support; either a cane or,"

Poe motioned blatantly to himself.

"Or the Colonel. However, I do not want you walking or standing for more than 10 minutes at a time. Sit and rest for a half hour or so before you try again. Still no stairs, jumping, climbing or excessive bending. Understood?"

Finn nodded so hurriedly that Poe doubted he'd heard anything beyond the words 'walk as you feel able'. "Haha, chair!" Finn exclaimed to the repulsorchair as if it had personally wronged him, "Soon I won't need you at all!"

"Aw…" Poe mused remorsefully. "I kinda liked pushing you around."

[I'm sure there will still be plenty of pushing.] BB-8 chirped.

"Shh, buddy, indoor voice." Poe hushed.

Kalonia shook her head, patted Finn on the shoulder, and left for her next patient.

"Oh man, Poe—I'm so excited! Do you think I could walk around the hanger?" Finn felt ready to come apart at the seams, like he had the energy of a sun contained within him.

"I dunno, Finn. She did say for you to sit and rest for half an hour." Poe shrugged apologetically.

"She did?" Finn twisted to look up at him as he wheeled him out into the hanger.

[She did.]

"See, even BB-8's backing me up."

Finn slumped. "I don't want to go back upstairs. I feel like I'm going to lose my mind if I hang around your room all day again."

"Our room." Poe corrected gently. He paused in the middle of the hanger, leaning idly against the handle of Finn's chair as he considered. His dark eyes roved down the lines of waiting X-wings, across generators and miles of fuel-lines and cables. "Hmm. That's an idea." He mused.

"What's an idea?" Finn was completely nonplussed.


"Poe, what are you—?"
"I'll be right back. BB-8, make sure he doesn't get up, okay?" Poe called over his shoulder just as Finn tried to lever himself out of the chair.

BB-8 jabbed him in the leg. Finn glared at the droid but relented and sat back as Poe vanished down a flight of stairs. He crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Wait here," he echoed sourly. "Where does he think I'm gonna go?"

Poe found Controller Dand hovering over a group of techs who were busily reassembling a proton torpedo launcher. It looked to have been scavenged from a Republic era Y-wing and for a moment Poe nearly forgot the purpose of his visit; he wanted to jump in and talk ship; where was the rest of the Y-wing? What shape was it in? Could they, possibly, dream of dreams, have looted the thrusters too? If yes, could he try to jury-rig the thrusters of a Y-wing into the engine compartment of an X-wing? Would the fuselage need to be strengthened? What would the maximum output of such an engine be? Over 1,500kph in atmo? Point 3 past lightspeed? He shook his head, tearing his eyes off the launcher.

"Hey, Dand," he called out over metallic ratcheting clinks, and the static hiss of welding.

The Tarsunt turned his broad, blueish snout towards Poe, blinking his thin black eyes in shock at his unexpected visit.

"Colonel. Your team's recon run isn't for another two hours—everything alright?" He wiped greasy gloves across his work apron.

"Yeah, I just have a favor to ask you."

"A favor?" A crotchety tone snuck into the tarsunt's voice.

"I need clearance to prep Red for a planetary run."

"Red? Why? You have a pilot to train?"

"Not exactly. Well, maybe a bit of training. Look, it'd just be a quick jaunt."

Dand stroked the fringe of hair bordering his fish-like lips as he considered Poe's request. "Fuel isn't cheap, Colonel. Is this an official training session?"

"Yep. Very official." He held the tarsunt's eyes.

Dand's mouth thinned, not fooled in the least. But he knew that once Poe set his mind to something, it would be a waste of time to argue. "Alright, alright, I'll send word to flight control. You know how to prep the ship; have Buford tow it out. Your departure time will be slated as 1030. When will your arrival time be?"

"Shouldn't be more than an hour or so."

"Very well," Dand sighed, striding heavily away from his crew and fishing a smudged comm unit from a pocket of his work apron. Poe grinned as Dand called in his imminent departure.

"Thanks, Dand, I owe you one."

"Not if this is 'official' business, as you say it is." Dand replied drolly. Poe clapped him on the shoulder and turned, striding past cluttered workbenches and droids in various states of repair or disassembly. He was brought up short by Tal Amir who had slid away from his work bench and
now stood blocking Poe's path, his arms crossed before his chest.

Poe halted, already irritated.

"You've got a lot of nerve," Tal sneered.

"Excuse me?" He demanded.

"You're a goddamn cock tease, Dameron."

Poe laughed indignantly, his temper flaring. "It's Colonel Dameron, actually, and we fucked in a storage closet, pal. If you thought that meant something, I feel sorry for you." He pushed past him and mounted the stairs. "Oh, one more thing: Do your next fuck a favor and keep your mouth shut when you come." He disappeared up the short flight and into the hanger.

Finn sat with his chin in his palm, watching as a large, yellow, wrench-clawed droid rolled past him and into the depths of the hanger. He sat up and turned hopefully at the sound of approaching footsteps. Snap plodded across the scuffed floor, head at an angle as he considered his ship. R3 trundled along in his wake.

BB-8 bleeped an excited welcome and Snap turned, expecting to see Poe. Confusion clouded his face as he saw Finn, alone and looking quite bored. "Hey, Finn, BB-8, what's up?"

"I have no idea." Finn shrugged. "We were leaving rehab and Poe said he got an idea and ran off."

"And he just left you guys hanging, huh? He'd forget his ass if it wasn't attached to him." Snap shook his head as he joined him. "So how's rehab treating you?"

"Good, actually!" Finn's boredom evaporated, jittery energy filling him once more. "Kalonia says I'm okay to stand and walk if I keep taking breaks."

"Hey, that's great! Good job, man." Snap thumped him on the back and then recoiled as if he'd been burned. "Oh—shit, sorry—your back doesn't still hurt does it?"

"Not really."

"Good. The last thing I need is Poe chewing me out for breaking you."

Finn smiled to himself. After everything he and Poe had done, a slap on the back was nothing.

Snap cocked his head, peering into the corner of the hanger that the yellow droid had disappeared into. "What's Buford up to?"

"Buford?"

"That yellow droid over there. B-U4D, but we all call him Buford. Looks like he's…" Snap broke off, grinning. "Ahh, I think I know what's going on."

They turned as clipped footfalls echoed through the cavernous space. Poe walked quickly towards the generator where he'd deposited Finn, his hands jammed into his pockets and his expression dark. He brightened somewhat as he saw Snap.

"Morning, Snap. What's going on?" Poe greeted him.

"Thought I might take a look at my port engine intake. Tubbs said the efficiency was down .8
"percent on our last run."

"Good, get her running smooth; we've got a long trek up the Bolt today."

"Right," Snap sighed resignedly.

"It's the last run, buddy. Then we're all set for tomorrow morning."

"The Bolt?" Finn asked.

"It's a hyper-space lane; pretty much a straight shot from the core systems all the way out past Tatooine. It's the route most of our shipments come through."

"And the most boring flight you'll ever take." Snap beckoned R3 and turned away.

"Oh, hey!" Poe called after him. "If you get a chance before recon, go down to the tech wing— they've got an old Y-wing proton torpedo launcher. Like, Rebellion era—great shape, only a bit of carbon scoring."

"Nice." Snap nodded appreciatively. "I better get to work then. Have fun out there, guys" he tossed a wave and started for his ship, R3 beeping in farewell.

"Have fun out where?" Finn furrowed his brow.

"I thought we might take a little trip to keep you from going stir-crazy."

"Oh yeah?" Finn perked up as Poe took the handles of his chair and pushed them after Buford. "Where to?"

"All over." He halted before the last X-wing in line. It huddled in the corner nearest to mess and furthest from the massive bay doors, and Finn was not surprised that his eyes had previously drifted past the ship as if it wasn't there. It had an air of forlorn neglect about it; the overhead light fell muted onto a canopy thick with dust, and a tattered old black tarp haphazardly shrouded the engines. The body was primarily the same stony grey as the rest of the fleet, but its canopy and nose-cone were bright red even beneath their layer of dust. Buford worked about the ships front end, busily linking towing cables to hitches just behind the foremost landing strut.

"This ship looks a little…different." Finn tilted his head, squinting at it suspiciously.

"It is," Poe grinned, glad Finn had noticed. "It's an Incom T65 X-wing. An older generation. Older than me, actually. The Rebellion used these babies in the fight against the first Death Star. Man, the T-70's and 75's have really got the engines down to a science—see how the 65 has each engine in its own housing?"

"Yeah…" Finn craned his head.

"Creates a lot more drag. In the 70's and 75's they put in a variable droid socket and modular secondary weapon pods. It's beautiful. The newer models are way more efficient—redid the air uptakes and turbines too—but there's just something about the classic model, you know?" He sighed, hands on his hips.

Finn bit back a grin. "Whatever you say, Poe."

Poe looked away from the ship, arching a brow. "Did you just humor me?"

Finn blithely ignored the question. "So why's the Resistance have an old, outdated X-wing?"
"To train new pilots with. See? It's a two-seater!" He grinned. "They took out the astromech socket and extended the canopy. Granted, it's a rougher ride without a droid to distribute the power and you won't be making hyperspace jumps as quickly, but it gets the job done."

"You want me to fly this old thing?"

Poe's mouth thinned. "It's not that old; it's like...35. And I'll take us up. Once we're in the clear, you can give it a try if you want. And if you're awful at it, I'll take over, no harm done."

Getting Finn into the ship proved to be more of a production than Poe had bargained for; it took almost as long as Poe's checks on the X-wing's systems. They'd had to raise the repulsorchair to a dangerous height of 9 feet off the ground, Poe standing inside the cockpit, grabbing Finn and hurriedly dragging him off the unsteadily hovering repulsorchair and onto the pilot seat aft of his. Poe's eyes darted repeatedly to the lifts, expecting Kalonia to emerge at any moment and rain hellfire down on him for this decidedly unsafe maneuver.

[But what about me?] BB-8 whined pitifully up at them as they settled into place.

"Sorry, buddy," Poe called down. He pulled on his flight helmet, quickly toggling through readouts on the ships operating systems. "You know there's no room. Don't worry though, we'll be back in a little bit—why don't you go hang out with Snap and Tubbs?"

BB-8 lowed and then rolled off with a dramatic flair.

"Okay, Buford, we're good in here. Get us onto that tarmac." Poe shouted and pressed the canopy closed. It levered down with a solid hiss before sealing into place, effectively muffling the background noise of the base. Finn strapped himself in, awkwardly donned his helmet, and adjusted the receiver to his mouth. His heart started to race as he studied the truncated dash that sat before him in a patchwork of display screens, switches, toggles, and levers. The only instrument whose function he could readily identify was the control stick sitting dead center amidst the buttons. He didn't dare touch it and kept his hands carefully at his sides as the ship was slowly dragged forwards. A seam of light kindled before them as the bay doors parted and soon the hanger was flooded with bright, golden sunlight.

Excitement burned in the pit of Finn's stomach as the sky opened up above them and the Poe brought the engines to life with a thrum of power that rattled through their bodies. Finn realized then that he'd never yet flown for the simple fun of it; his first flights as a free man had been more terrifying than exhilarating; he would have enjoyed them more if they hadn't come close to ending in death at multiple points. Even the comparatively mellow trip to Takodana had been marred by the fear that the Millennium Falcon would fall apart beneath him.

Finn's hands tightened as the ground controller's voice jumped through his helmet.

"Black Leader, you are cleared for takeoff."

"Copy" Poe's voice echoed double in his ears and Finn grinned hugely. He flashed immediately to Poe's epic sweep over the ruins of Maz's castle, the same euphoria that had filled him then upon seeing a pilot at the absolute top of his game swelling in him once more.

"You ready, baby?" Poe called back to him.

"Let's do it!" Finn laughed.

Poe could not resist showing off. With an evil grin, he opened the throttle full out and the antique X-wing hurtled from the tarmac as if chucked by a giant hand. Finn was pinned almost painfully to his
seat while Poe whooped with glee. They tore through a thin layer of sun-pale cloud and Poe juked the stick hard to the left, twisting them into a spinning dive that made Finn scream. They shot towards the hazy tapestry of forest far below, jerking clear at the last possible moment so that the belly of the ship brushed the thrashing leaves of the upper canopy. The ship slowed suddenly and leveled out and Finn managed to pry his frozen hands from his face; he imagined his bladder was still somewhere far above. He unclenched with a wheeze, cracking open an eye and peering out of the canopy.

They swam above a sea of green, leaves rippling and tossing before them and thrashing wildly in their wake. The forest stretched on to a clear horizon and Finn smiled. All at once a thread of silver opened up in the greenery and Poe followed it's lazily winding course. The river widened, the sun glinting above and below them in a polished mirror, their ship a dark skipping shadow beneath them.

"Where are we going?" Finn asked.

"You'll see."

The river grew and rushed, gaining speed, frothing and leaping over its rocky bed, and then the world dropped away beneath them with the suddenness of a knife's edge.

"Whoa," Finn breathed.

The river plummeted over the sheer cliff with an all-encompassing roar that was audible even through their headsets and shielded canopy. Finn craned is head; far, far below, a sea of mist bloomed out from twisted spires of glistening rock, a rainbow hanging like a bridge between the jagged peaks. Poe angled them sharply down, racing the falls, streaking their canopy with weeping lines of shimmying drops. Finn gritted his teeth, shrinking back against his seat though he knew that of course Poe was utterly in control. Spray swamped the ship and for a moment they were flying blind. A looming shape whipped darkly past their port wing at breakneck speed and Poe twisted effortlessly to the right, weaving between the pillars of stone until they emerged from the mist above a broad calm bay and a low land of wavering reeds and ferns. Poe climbed then and turned and from this vantage Finn gasped at the enormity of the waterfall they had traced.

"Pretty nice, right?" Poe grinned over his shoulder.

"It's beautiful." He felt humbled before the ancient and unstoppable rush of the falls, yet at the same time full of childish wonder. He'd never seen anything like it when he'd been forced to study battle tactics for different terrain types; the First Order had not considered nature to have value beyond what they could take from it.

Poe took them steadily higher until the falls shrank into a thin breath of fog. "Okay, Finn, your turn."

"My turn?"

"Sure. Don't worry, I'll guide you through it. Take the stick—nice and tight, baby."

Finn could practically hear Poe winking and he huffed a laugh. "Should I stroke the trigger now, or later?"

"Ooo, saucy! Nice. No trigger-play just yet. Let's work at holding level for now."

A sudden thought occurred to Finn. "Hey wait…can Control hear us?"

"Mmm hmm. Hey guys, hope you're enjoying this," He said enthusiastically as if to a large audience.
"Black Leader, we are. Control, out." Came a woman's voice tight with suppressed laughter.

"Dammit, Poe…" Finn groaned though a smile split his face. "Okay, I've got the stick."

"Alright, just hold it steady and I'll switch control over in three, two, one," he flipped a switch and sat back at his ease. The ship dipped forwards as power transferred over to the secondary terminal. Finn gulped, the horizon tilting to meet them; the ship suddenly felt dangerously alive beneath his hands.

"Pull back a bit—there you go."

"Okay…okay…" Finn breathed nervously.

"You're holding just fine, Finn. Now, to control your thrust you want really clench your ass and work your hips,"

"Poe…" Finn warned.

"Okay, standard atmospheric flight speed for this model of X-wing is about 800kph. You can change the thrust with the levers to the left of your nav computer. See 'em?"

"Yeah."

"Mess around with them."

"What, just like that?"

"Sure! No better way to learn."

"Well…okay." Finn pushed the red-tipped lever towards Poe and the ship lurched forwards while simultaneously nosing down. Poe grinned as he heard Finn's hurriedly muttered curse, his arms crossed before his chest as they sped back towards the waterfall.

Finn overcorrected, ramming the lever back, and they shot into the air like a cork, the forest shrinking away to a bed of fuzzy lichen below them. "Easy, easy…level out. Breathe, Finn."

Finn hadn't realized he'd been holding his breath and he forced it slowly out while letting the stick back to a neutral position. Red leveled out.

"Try banking and turning. Don't worry; we're so high up there's literally nothing you could do to hurt this ship."

"Okay." He experimentally tilted the stick to the right and the starboard wing began to dip. And then it continued to dip. Finn froze, his eyes wide as the ship went belly-up.

"Whoo!" Poe cheered.

"Any help, Poe?" Finn said through gritted teeth.

"Just let the stick back to neutral."

The ship roughly righted itself, bouncing them against their restraints. A shaky breath burst from Finn.

"Want to do some trigger-play now?" Poe asked.
"Yeah. Yeah, sure, I guess." *Anything but flying.*

"Okay, there's a large lever on the far right. Push it all the way forwards and to the left. That'll lock your S-foils in attack position."

Finn did so and the wings separated on a hinge at the body of the craft, opening like scissor blades, the wind sheering through them like a hurricane.

"Now, grip the stick just below the head, and press really firmly with your thumb. *Really* firm, right up to the slit, baby."

*Godsdamnit, Poe."

"I'm sorry, it's too easy. Okay, press the button."

Quadruple bursts of lazarfire erupted from the turrets at the ends of the wings, strobing the canopy with red light before the deadly bolts disappeared into the sky. Finn laughed out loud. "Okay, *this* part I like a lot!"

"Yeah? You want me to take over flying? I can set you up with some shots on those clouds over—"

Their headsets crackled, alarms howling through their heads. Finn winced, clapping his hands over his ears. The same woman who had spoken earlier now yelled urgently over the cacophony.

*Black Leader, return to Base! We have been infiltrated! Repeat, return to Base immediately!"

Poe had already switched control to himself and wrenched the ship back around to Base, closing the S-foils and opening the throttle. "What's going on, Control?"

"First Order ships have jumped far into system—They are at our doors now. Probes show 2 Star Destroyers coming planet-side in three minutes! We are evacuating and your team has been scrambled."

"We're on our way!" Poe shouted over the noise. The old X-wing tore recklessly over the canopy at such speed that branches ripped free in their screaming wake. Finn's mind went numb. *No...* He knew beyond a shadow of a doubt what was coming; if the Destroyers entered atmosphere, the 3,000 canons on each hull would liquidize the Base. He quickly did the math; two destroyers would contain a total of 200 TIES. Hopelessness settled like ice in his stomach.

Poe gritted his teeth, his jaw tight. "Red Teams, Blue Teams, report!"

"Blue Three, copy!" Jess's voice.

"Blue Two, copy!" Snap.

"Red Two, copy!" Ziff.

"Red Four, copy!" Bastian shouted.

"Blue Six, copy!" Liv Nek.

Nien Nunb's hurried babble.

"We've got incoming Star Destroyers, eta three minutes, coming right at us! Scramble! Defend transports until they're away and converge at the rendezvous point!"
"Copy!" They answered in unison.

"BB-8!" Poe hurried on, willing the old ship to fly faster.

A tremulous warble answered.

"I need to you pilot Black One out; we won't make it back in time to switch over. Stick to the General's ship, do you hear me? We've got to get her out of here!"

BB-8 bleeped an affirmative.

"Poe, what kind of ground defense do we have?" Finn yelled, sweat starting on his brow and his hands going clammy.

"One ion cannon."

"That's it?"

"We're a little strapped for hardware if you hadn't noticed, Finn! What're we in for?"

Finn shook his head, a cold laugh bursting from him. "If those Destroyers enter atmosphere, we're done. At the very least we've got 200 TIES incoming."

"Shit." Poe fumed, his heart beating faster than a Toydarian's wings. The low grassy mounds of Base grew on the horizon, but slowly, much too slowly. *Come on baby, come on!* He urged desperately. He picked out one lumpy, Mon Cal style transport lifting hazily away, and then a second. He saw his squadron jumping into the sky, circling above base like birds on a thermal.

"Poe!" Finn yelled, "To the west!"

The sky boiled on the horizon and from the reek burst forth the dagger prow of a Star Destroyer. Lightening arced about the point in searing tendrils. The shadow cast from its massive bulk slid indomitably over the land in a deadly shroud so that it seemed a gash had been torn into the earth, the light crushed beneath its inconceivable weight. The Star Destroyer bore down from the sky like a mountain, stretching on and on. It was one thing, Poe realized, to see such a ship hovering in space with nothing to compare it to; but seen against trees and clouds, it became an impossibility. Finn was beyond thought. He could picture the interior in his mind's eye as plain as day; the cold light, the glistening black floors, the barracks, the simulation galley, weapons hall, the reconditioning chambers. Bile flooded his mouth. He wanted to wake up in Poe's room, to have Poe sooth him from this nightmare. But he was borne unstoppably towards it.

"All teams, enemy craft at point 53! Form up! We take the fight right to them, understood? Keep them clear of the transports!" Poe's hard voice rattled through their ears.

"Copy, Black Leader!" One by one, Poe's team darted to him, falling in line behind each wing, their engines bright against the falling shadow. They were laughably tiny; a flock of frail, hollow-boned birds aiming to dash themselves against a wall of stone.

A second prow ripped through the fuming cloud cover, the two behemoths closing before them like the jaws of a trap. From their flanks, a black cloud of TIE fighters swarmed like flies from a cold grey corpse. They bulleted towards the 8 X-wings with a hollow roar that drowned out all else.
AN: Oooh man. Sorry guys-the shit's hit. Next chapter is going to be intense, but there's gonna be a bit of a wait--I'm heading up to Lake Erie for my birthday and I have no laptop/tablet/smartphone or anything because I'm a secret luddite. Huzzah! Thanks for reading, and reviews are appreciated! -Bluestem
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Poe's breath calmed and deepened, his pupils dilating as his mind settled into the tight instinctual niche between thought and fear, between action and reaction. He heard his pilots steady, measured breaths, and the harried back and forth chatter of the fleeing transports; the brazen howling of the evacuation alarm; he saw the mass of TIEs growing before him, solidifying from an indistinguishable cloud of menace to a swarm of individual ships intent on one purpose—destroying them utterly. He took in and studied the massive prows of the incoming Star Destroyers as they shuddered ever closer to Base like arrows loosed from a giant bow. All of this he saw and understood in the space of half a second.

In another few seconds they'd be in range, but the TIEs had the advantage, he knew it.

"Evasive action! Split and engage!" He shouted and his team peeled away from his wings just as a volley of green laserfire seared through the shadowed sky. Poe jerked back on the stick, twisting them into an insane pirouette between two Special Forces TIEs, the thin edges of their wings passing so closely above the canopy that Finn ducked with a gasp. Poe fired without hesitation, almost without conscious thought. The nearest TIE tore apart with a concussive wave that shuddered through the old X-wing and blasted through their ears, but before he could engage the second he was forced into a rolling dive. Red had not been put through such maneuvers in decades and the rusty engines roared in protest. *Hold together, hold together,* Poe silently pleaded. Green splinters of light darted harmlessly between the S-foils as Poe wove through the fray; there was no lack for targets. An explosion flashed to his starboard side; Jess destroying her chosen prey.

Finn twisted in his seat, craning to look back at base; transport after transport shot into the sky. He wondered how many were left on the ground.

Shadows ghosted over their canopy as waves of TIEs passed them by, utterly unconcerned with the meager threat offered by 8 X-wings—they were engaged in a larger purpose. What did the loss of ten, twenty, even thirty TIEs matter in the end? The horrible realization stuck Poe heavily then, though he'd known it all along. *There's not enough of us.* There was no singular target they could focus on to bring the enemy to their collective knees; no chain reaction to start; no chance for a single ship to do anything more than try to stay alive.

Poe nailed another TIE, closed his S-foils, and threaded the gap between the broad, hexagonal wing panels of two flanking TIEs. He swept a tight loop and dropped, falling behind them and pulled the S-foils open again before the phalanx could break away. Poe fired succinctly, each blazing red bolt striking home. The TIEs knocked into each other before ratcheting into a fireball and raining shrapnel from the sky.

"Poe, they're gaining on Base!" Finn yelled through his headset. A potent mixture of helplessness, fear, and rage churned Finn's stomach and he clenched hard to the back of Poe's seat, bracing against each sudden, wrenching twist and dive. He would've given anything for a cannon of his own to fire.

"Climb! Climb out of it, guys! They're gonna keep us pinned down while they target the transports! Watch your backs and head them off!"

The shadow rumbled darkly above them, the heavy atmospheric weight of the Star Destroyers throbbing in their ears and rattling their teeth as they turned after the TIEs that had passed them by
for easier prey. A green laser bolt nearly as big around as their ship tore through the mess, scattering both TIEs and X-wings as a turbolaser cannon lazily opened fire. The air uptakes in their cockpit reeked of burning ozone.

"Watch for fire from those destroyers!" Snap shouted.

"I've got one on my tail! Point 22!" Ziff barked.

"I've got it—" Bastian began but was cut short as Ziff's yell echoed through their headsets and the noise of his channel stuttered into buzzing silence. Poe saw his shattered ship belching smoke as it spun end over end to fireball in the canopy below. He grit his teeth, a hard breath full of rage and agony wringing from his throat but there was no time to let Ziff's death in. Finn squeezed his eyes shut—he'd seen droves of pilot's die in the cold, cloudy sky above Starkiller Base, and he had regretted it. It had been horrible, of course, but how much more horrible it was now to have a name and face to go with the wreckage. He wondered if the TIE pilots understood what it was they were doing, or if they regarded this battle as little more than a simulation; as if a holoprojection could drive home the finality of death. He felt a moment's sickness for Poe.

Mouth thin, Poe put the X-wing through its paces, about facing with a suddenness that slung Finn against his restraints and into the side of the ship. He picked a TIE from Nien Nunb's fighter, rocketed upwards and bulls-eyed another. He jenked to the right, slamming the thrusters back and dropping as suddenly as he'd ascended as green flashes strobed overhead, searing dark streaks into the transparisteel canopy. Finn jerked; if the bolts had been a few inches lower, they would've been decapitated.

An icy blue light shot past them, lancing harmlessly past the control deck of the nearest Destroyer. The Resistance Base's one ion cannon pulsed and Poe's heart went out to the souls who had stayed behind to man it. As one, every turbolaser cannon studding the hull of each Star Destroyer swiveled toward the offending ion canon and fired in a flash of concentrated brightness and energy that blinded them, scrambling the sensors of TIE's and X-wings alike. Ventral cannons quickly followed suit and the resultant explosion shuddered through the dark earth of D'Qar.

No, Poe moaned to himself as Base all but vaporized before their eyes in a column of fire and tar-black smoke that plumed into the air. The tarmac split, fuel and machinery housed far below combusting and building, one onto the other, in a mushrooming mound of flame. Far below he could see the surviving ground crew scattering like ants across the ruined earth, and a transport torn open like a tin can used for target practice. BB-8 wailed, Black One sweeping past Poe's line of sight and raining bolt after bolt upon the endless stream of TIES.

Poe was, for one frozen moment, speechless. It's gone. They're gone. It was Finn's voice that roused him out of his horror. "That transport! Poe, on your starboard!"

He twisted them to the right with a tight yell that hurt Finn worse than any physical injury he'd ever sustained. Three TIES clustered behind the last remaining transport and Poe rose behind them like a storm, tearing through them like a lightsaber through flesh. A bolt impacted the port wing, glancing off their minimal shielding and spiraling them into a wild dive. The world spun in a grey-green blur and Finn could only grit his teeth and brace himself as Poe steeled every muscle in his body against the stick and cut power to the starboard engine. They leveled out, and Poe slammed them roughly back to full throttle at the last possible instant; Finn could hear branches scrapping against the belly of the ship.

"Poe!" Jess shrieked.

"Don't focus on me! Keep on that transport!" He shouted harshly as they gained altitude. His hands
flew over the dash, redistributed all shielding to the rear deflector panels. "Once they're clear, jump immediately!"

Another barrage of turbolaser fire erupted from the two Star Destroyers, piercing through the thick column of smoke that boiled up from Base. Anything and anyone that had managed to survive could not have made it through this second attack; all that remained of the sheltering low green mounds and duracrete runway were atomized. Fire belched from the crater like blood from an open wound; it's stuttering flash lighting up the sky behind them as they doggedly trailed after the last transport. The roar of the explosion mingled with the hollow rasping howl of the pursuing TIEs until it seemed that the sound vibrations themselves would tear them apart. Green streaks of laser fire shot past them, as numerous as the stars above their heads. Live Nek screamed and then was gone, his X-wing exploding just aft of the transport. Can't think about it. Don't think about it. At last the lumpy patchwork ship jolted through the atmosphere, streaking away from the planet and then stretching into nothingness as it jumped to safety.

"All teams jump now!" Poe commanded and they did so, five ships elongating into the fathomless distance before vanishing into the dark. Another bolt rattled Red as Poe twisted and dodged in a spree of unhinged movement that would've made even seasoned pilots vomit. Finn clamped his eyes shut and gripped the edges of his seat, saliva pooling in his mouth.

"Finn, I need you to enter these numbers into the Nav computer." Poe grit out. It was nearly an impossible task split his focus between keeping them alive and forming a coherent sentence.

"Okay," Finn breathed, unbolting his fingers from his seat. His shaking hand hovered above the foreign screen.

"Press the green button and type: 1-275-45-333-1." Sweat dripped down Poe's forehead and ran down his neck, the muscles in his arms quivering against his tight grip on the stick. There was a new roughness in the ship that frightened him, but there was no point in voicing it and scaring Finn as well.

"Right." Finn punched the coordinates in, his eyes tight on the gently glowing screen.

"Press the green button again and then turn both dials at the bottom—" He jerked, nearly biting his tongue off as another bolt darted across their canopy and glanced off their weakening rear deflector panel. His calm voice belied the fear that rattled him. "Turn both dials to the right until they snap into place."

"I've got it!" Finn shouted. He tensed, expecting the now familiar strobing blue star-streaks to envelop them. But it didn't happen. "Poe?" He managed.

"No astromech—gonna, hnnng!" Poe jolted reflexively as a line of green fire just missed the nosecone, "gonna take some time!"

We don't have time, Finn realized with a hollow drop to his stomach. Rage and exhaustion filled him in equal measure. It wasn't fair. He wanted suddenly to thank Poe, to tell him that he loved him, but his mouth had frozen. He watched with downcast eyes as the ancient nav-computer slowly plotted its course. D'Qar glowed beneath them, a jewel of blue and green, all signs of their battle soothed into nothingness by the sheer virtue of distance. It really was quite pretty, Finn thought with a small sad smile. Though he'd lived there for only a few weeks, the planet had become home to him in a way that no place ever had before. Because of Poe, he thought. He was glad of that.

Poe twisted, all senses peeled utterly raw, cutting the engines again; his thrust and forwards momentum sent them arcing up and over the foremost TIEs and from this new vantage point, Poe
managed to take out five more of them before those in their wake realized their danger. Poe slammed
the engines back on and again a warning roughness rattled through the fuselage as they dove below
their pursuers. *Come ON!* Poe nearly screamed.

"*It's done!* Rotate to .493!" Finn's heart thundered in his throat. He couldn't believe it. Maybe, just
maybe, they'd make it out of this.

Poe jerked them about so hard that it knocked the breath out of each of them. "Press the lever to the
left all the way forwards!"

Finn rammed it towards Poe's seat while at the same time Poe slammed the S-foils closed. The
searing green net of enemy fire closed on nothingness as they burst into the jump-tunnel, the gentle
blue and white lights flowing serenely past their scorched canopy. The sudden stillness seemed to
mock the chaos they had just barely escaped. Finn slouched back in his seat with a ragged gasp,
adrenaline shaking him from head to toe against his restraints. Poe could not yet let up; he kept his
eyes solidly dead ahead, afraid that closing them for one second would break him. His body shook
with the force needed to keep the ship steady. His readouts showed a power drop by 5.8 percent in
his port engines; any more stress and they might lose an engine entirely—an event they would be
unlikely to survive while traveling at lightspeed. He swallowed dryly.

After a few tensely silent minutes, Finn spoke. "Poe…I'm sorry…"

"*Don't.*" Poe's brittle voice threatened to break.

Finn closed his mouth wordlessly, understanding at once, and kept his eyes on the nav computer. In
the silence Finn became aware of the roughness shivering through the left side of his seat. *This ship
is an antique…* he remembered suddenly. He'd entirely forgotten in the heat of the moment. *I can't
believe Poe got us out of there.* The computer chimed brightly as they approached their destination,
the sound horribly out of place in their ears and Poe dropped to sublight.

They found eleven of Bases 12 transports and Leia's small, mon-cal style capital ship hanging in the
glittering blackness before them.

"*Oh thank gods!"* Snap yelled while at the same time BB-8 burbled, and Jess gasped, "*You made
it!*"

"*All teams, report.*" Poe said and the brittleness was gone from his voice; he was back to being *Black
Leader.* He set his jaw, bracing for the voices that would not answer.

"Blue Two, copy." Snap said quickly.

"R-Red Four." Bastian managed and the thickness of his tone nearly undid Poe's control.

Nien Nunb chattered.

"Blue Three, copy." Jess answered.

[BB-8, copy.]

"*Black Leader,* report. What happened back there? We're missing a transport," The Generals voice,
hard and bracing as a cold breeze. Poe felt some of his energy flare back to life in the face of Leia's
strength.

"*Those Star Destroyers fired on Base with their full armament—there's nothing left, General. At all.*"
He shook his head, the words bitter in his mouth. "The last transport didn't make it off the tarmac. I'm sorry."

Several seconds passed before her reply came through their headsets. "So am I, Colonel. We'll run through a personnel check and—" She broke off as proximity alarms wailed to life onboard her capital ship.

The alert pinged across Poe's dash just as two more Star Destroyers lanced out of hyperspace, so closely and so suddenly it was as if they'd always been there. Their nearness sent a liquid hot thrill of fear through Finn's body; he felt that he might be swept through the force-fields of any one of the hangars that pitted the thin edges like feral, glowing eyes. He had just allowed himself to feel that he'd escaped certain death only to find its cold grey claws reaching out for him once more. "This is impossible." Finn murmured hollowly, his eyes wide as TIEs poured from the nearest Destroyer's flanks and the green fire started once more.

Poe did not allow himself even a second to be shocked. "All teams, form up!"

"All craft, jump immediately!" Leia's voice commanded.

"Transports, keep clear of the bow!" Poe yelled as his team broke apart to engage the screaming TIEs.

Four transports jumped. The fifth and sixth halted as if frozen. Slowly, agonizingly, they were reeled in, disappearing beneath the pointed bow of the nearest Destroyer to be drawn into its gleaming bowels.

Poe felt his control of Red slipping. It took all of his strength to keep it from listing to port and nosing down, never mind attempting the complex evasive maneuvers he'd earlier employed. He allowed the ship to drop as a wedge of TIE's nearly scalped them, and then twisted about to fire on their retreating forms. Three fireballed immediately, and the fourth and fifth split away to pursue Leia's capital ship.

No you don't. Poe thought savagely as he peeled after them. He swatted them from her ship as if they were little more than stinging insects. The second Destroyer loosed its fleet and space all but boiled with enemy ships and a blinding cacophony of crisscrossing laser fire. He saw a flash, and Snap's ship shot through the wreckage of his target.

"Black Leader, we can't keep this up!" Snap yelled unnecessarily.

"Just keep your eyes on those transports—as soon as—" He broke off, dodging and firing on a diving TIE. "As soon as they're clear, get to the second rendezvous point!"

He watched with some relief as Leia's ship neatly avoided the tractor beam that had snared a third transport and then streaked away into the void. Good—she's made it at least.

The last of the free transports safely jumped.

"Jump now, do not wait for us!" Poe yelled as a bolt glanced their port wing panel and rattled them to the bones.

"Poe, we can't just leave you in that old ship to-" Jess protested but Poe interrupted her fiercely.

"That is an order! Jump now!" He yelled. "Finn, hit the green button and type in these coordinates! 2-128-75-639-7."
"Okay!" Finn wrenched his mouth open and forced himself to breathe as he entered in the new jump point and twisted the dials as before. *Come on, please, just one more time,* he pleaded with the ship. First one X-wing and then another vanished into safety. Poe rotated about; if he couldn't jump along with the rest of them, he could at least cover their escapes. For the sheer number of TIEs swarming his tiny fleet, he felt that they should have been turned into shrapnel long ago; it was almost as if they were taking it easy on them, and the thought sent a flood of ice into his guts though he couldn't explain why. He picked a TIE out of Snap's wake, dodged and looped upwards to break up a phalanx heading for *Black One.* The s-foils on Bastian's ship closed, preparing for the jump, but twin bursts of green fire shattered his X-wing so immediately that he hadn't even had time to scream.

Poe breathed hard out of his nose, face tight. Snap and then *Black One* vanished.

"Poe! That Destroyer is coming about!" Finn yelled, pointing needlessly to their port. One of the mountainous shapes slowly swiveled up out of the darkness like a sea monster from the deeps of Kamino. Finn's eyes widened; it was a maneuver that would put them within the grasp of their tractor beam. At the same time, the TIEs surrounding them ceased firing with an uncanny suddenness. Finn understood with an intuitive clarity that raised the hairs on the back of his neck, "They know it's us!"
He shouted.

"That's impossible!" Poe retorted.

"Who else could fly this old ship like you are? I'm telling you, they *know it's us!* They're trying to save themselves from paying out a bounty by doing it themselves!"

"*Not* gonna happen!" Poe grit his teeth, diverting all power from their flickering shields to the engines. They were flying bare, but Poe preferred dying quickly in space to being tortured to death, if it came down to it, and he assumed that Finn would choose the same. But the TIE's remained conspicuously silent, drifting eerily around them like carrion birds waiting for a chance at a kill that was not theirs to make. The port engine shuddered, and *Red* began to list with such insistency that Poe could hardly keep them from coiling into a broad spiral. The Destroyer gained.

"Finn?" Poe asked tightly.

"Almost…almost there…" Finn bit his lip, his breath coming quick as he threw a look behind his shoulder; the Star Destroyer filled his vision. The nav computer chimed. "Now!" Finn yelled. Poe wrenched the S-foils closed just as Finn triggered them into the jump tunnel.

*Red* wobbled dangerously among the swirling lights, and Poe was hyperaware to every fluctuation in engine sound. Red lights sprung up across his dash like wildfires and Poe's hands danced across the controls, rerouting power in every way that he knew to keep them spaceworthy. Port engine functionality was down to 58 percent, and he was certain that an aileron on their upper port wing had been damaged. *Just make it out of this tunnel. That's all you gotta do, Red.* Finn had frozen to his seat once more, listening to the ship in the same way that prey listens for predators. He didn't need to be a mechanic or a pilot to know that the high whining that vibrated through the fuselage was not good. And they were low on fuel; *Red* had never been prepped to fly such a lengthy and dangerous course.

"Are you okay, Finn?" Poe asked while pushing his bodyweight against the stick. He needed to hear Finn's voice now, needed some distraction from the fact that *Red* was trying to quit on him.

"Yeah…yeah, I'm okay…" He couldn't bring himself to explain to Poe how badly the closeness of those Destroyers had unmanned him.
"I'm sorry, baby. This has been a rough ride—can't be good on your back."

"I'm fine, Poe. I would've been dead a million times if it had been anyone else piloting us." He felt embarrassed to have Poe worried about something as minor as his back when so many people had died. Poe's mouth thinned at Finn's praise—he didn't feel that he'd flown hard enough to deserve it. Ziff, Liv Nek, and Bastian were all the proof he needed of that. The nav computer chimed and he sent a silent plea out to the universe to let them emerge from hyperspace in one piece. He dropped from hyperspace into absolute madness.

Two Destroyers awaited them, and they did not have time to wonder whether they were the same two that they had just escaped or separate ships altogether. One transport burned, listing to starboard while smoke belched from a hole in its ventral panels. Poe tried not to see the bodies that had been sucked into the vacuum and now drifted eerily like dolls through the blackness. He heard Finn's horrified gasp as he forced them away from the grisly sight.

"We've been made!" Poe yelled as he honed in on a TIE. It mushroomed beneath two well-placed bolts and Red shot through the wreckage with a wobble that clacked their teeth together. "They're tracking us!"

Static buzzed in their ears. "…I repeat, jump randomly!" Leia shouted.

It was a slaughter. Poe saw it happening as if it were a slow-mo replay on a holovid. He drew power from their wounded engines and back into the shields, and Red screamed in protest. Finn's sweaty hands latched to each side of his seat as if he could hold the ship together with his grip. The transport directly below them was hit and sent spinning end over end out of control. Poe bulls-eyed three more TIEs but it wasn't enough as Nien Nunb's ship sheered too close to a sweeping phalanx and collided head-on with the leader. The explosion seared across their canopy and Poe hurriedly tried to blink the brightness of the Sullustan's death from his eyes before they met a similar fate.

"Damn it!" He heard Snap yell furiously as he dodged and dove for open space. Leia's capital ship took a hit but vanished into the jump tunnel only a second later. Another transport froze in its escape, dragged backwards into the stomach of a Destroyer, its engines revving red-hot in its desperation to escape the fatal snare. A green bolt glanced off their starboard wing. The remaining four transports leapt away.

"BB-8, starboard, starboard!" Poe yelled. Red refused to turn with the speed he needed and the orange and black ship buckled before their eyes. They just dodged beneath the explosion and Poe's involuntary cry hit Finn like a knife to his heart. "BB-8, come in!"

Silence answered.

Poe bit the inside of his cheek, his hands shaking against the stick. Jess's ship plumed past, trailing fire from her cockpit.

"Jess, eject!" He commanded desperately as he picked two TIE's from her smoke stream. A garbled voice thick with interference grated through their headsets. Poe grimaced, "Jess, I'm losing you! Repeat! Jess?!" Red bucked and Poe's face was lit suddenly with red from below. His display showed the port engine operating at 42 percent capacity. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Snap's ship still weaving about the perimeter of the fray.

"Snap get out of here! Jump, now!"

"No can do, Colonel! I'm not jumping till you guys do!"
"Godsdammit," Poe muttered. He'd committed the coordinates for their two rendezvous points to memory as soon as Leia had given them to him, but without an astromech to navigate for him, he had only two other planetary IDs memorized. Corescant was too far; they'd end up drifting through space on auxiliary power until they either froze to death or chanced to be picked up. C-3PO would have told him the odds of survival were 2,354,781 to 1. He shouted his only other option, the planetary coordinates he knew by heart. "Finn, get ready!"

"Okay!" Finn jabbed the green button. "5-108-56-364-3!"

"Got it!" Finn unglued his jaws; they had clenched hard at the sight of the torch that was Jess' ship. He waited on the edge of his seat, eyes darting to the back of Poe's helmeted head, to Snap's X-wing threading an insane course through the clouds of TIEs. He'd lost sight entirely of Jess and dared to hope that she'd managed to jump.

An explosion rattled them from above and the shattered remnants of a TIE wing went skidding off into space like a discus. "Thanks, Snap." Poe's arms were quivering by this point as Red fought his every move; he felt like his muscles had turned to water and would sluice out of his body at any second.

"How's she holding?" Snap peered down at the listing, drooping ship, sweat streaming down his forehead.

"...Good. It's fine."

"Shit." Snap was not fooled in the least. "Can you make the jump?"

"Got no choice. You better move out as soon as we do."

The port engine display glowed cherry red, searing the numbers 41% efficiency into Poe's eyes. "Hey Finn...how we doing?"

"Just a few more seconds." He answered, his eyes tight on the nav computer.

"Good, I—"

"Now!" Finn shouted.

Please...please just once more...Poe thought to himself as he closed the S-foils. There was no time to say goodbye to Snap; the jump-tunnel closed about them. Alarms filled the cockpit as the stars elongated and whirred past, and Finn was surprised by the strange calmness that bloomed through his chest. Perhaps the human mind could only deal with so many near-death experiences in a row before it shut down and refused to process any more information.

It was dangerous to adjust velocity while in a jump tunnel, Poe knew this beyond a shadow of a doubt. He could hear his mother and countless instructors beating it into his head to never attempt such a thing, but he had no choice; whether he willed it or no, the port engine was taking matters into its own hands. He cut power to the starboard engine and all deflector panels, and channeled that energy into the rattling housing of his port side. The star-streaks shuddered around them, flickering for a moment in a way that made Poe's stomach drop to his toes; they'd almost been torn out of hyperspace. They were a hair away from it happening again. And...he realized with a heavy tug of exhaustion, if we manage to make it out of the jump tunnel, there's still the planet's atmosphere to get through... A fierce need to speak to Finn overwhelmed him.
"Hey, remember back on the Finalizer, when you tried to tell me that busting me out was 'the right thing to do'?
" He asked lightly.

"Yeah?" Finn breathed, fear sparking through his stomach. This sounded too much like reminiscing in the face of defeat. Red groaned beneath them and rocked hard to the right as their port aileron twisted off and was immediately lost to sight.

"You were so full of shit." Poe grinned, though his arms and neck screamed. "You just wanted to save me for my hot ass, right?"

"Poe, don't…"

"Listen… baby…"

"No. No goodbyes, do you hear me, Poe?" Finn said so solidly that Poe swallowed his next words.

"Okay,"

"Tell me when we're both on the ground."

Poe held on in tight silence, his eyes focused on the blackness dead center among the icy blues and whites. "…It's gonna be rough, Finn." He warned.

Finn huffed a laugh. "What else is new?"

The nav computer chimed and Poe closed his eyes. Here goes nothing.

Chapter End Notes

I AM SO SORRY. Both for the wait in getting this chapter to you, and for the content. The shit hath well and truly hit. I didn't give myself a lot of time to edit this, because I wanted to get it up as quickly as I could, so I apologize for grammar/spelling mistakes. Jeeezz, this chapter has been in my mind for months and I both dreaded writing it and was evilly excited to finally get to it. Don't give up on these guys though-there'll be a few canon introductions next chapter that will make up for this slaughter, I hope. Reviews are super, super appreciated! Thanks for reading! (I'M SO SORRY!!).
Blackness stuttered and sharpened into cold hard pinpricks of light that spun end over end. Detailed star charts encased within the droid's memory banks allowed it to decipher constellations, and it latched on to these familiar celestial patterns to reorient itself in the directionless void. Thoughts booted and woke systems that had switched off into a state of protective hibernation, and as it powered up, BB-8's faultless memory very literally replayed the events leading up to its current predicament. It took two seconds for it to review the footage.

The Star Destroyers. Base is gone. Yolo Ziff is dead. Liv Nek is dead. Ambush. Red is damaged. Transports have been taken. Second ambush. Bastian is dead. Nien Nunb is dead. Many TIEs destroyed. General Organa jumped into hyperspace.

Poe's voice replayed flawlessly in it's aural receptors. "BB-8, starboard, starboard!"

Brightness. Extreme velocity and heat. Must have powered down.

System alerts pinged across an interior HUD that functioned as a mind's eye. The surface sensors that pitted it's body let the droid know that it had not escaped the explosion of Black One unharmed.

While it did not feel pain as it believed organic beings perceived it, it was aware of a kind of crumpled discomfort. Extensive damage to tool bay 3 and chassis plate 5. Nanopin data port nonfunctional. Accelerometer damaged. Cranial castors damaged; reduced functionality. Short detected in selenium drive.

[BB-8 woke fully, the spinning stars bright in it's glossy photoreceptor as it tumbled gently through space, a small white bubble in a vast ocean. It lowed as it scanned it's surroundings; while most organic eyes would see little beyond the two Star Destroyers hanging in the blackness, BB-8's keen senses allowed it to separate out and focus on the debris of the battle. Chunks of transparisteel slivered silently past like gleaming sheets of ice; twisted, sharp-edged curls of durasteel littered the vacuum of space, torn from unfortunate X-wings and TIE fighters alike. Crystalized fuel droplets glittered in the void like miniature planets. And there were bodies, some whole, some mangled to the point that only their component parts were identifiable. BB-8 moaned mournfully; it recognized some of the frozen faces from Base.]

After Rhys had died, Poe had tried to explain the concept of death to the droid, but BB-8 simply could not fathom how a sentient being could just stop existing.

[But where did he go?] BB-8 had asked.

"He...he's just gone, buddy."

[But how? If parts are damaged, bacta can repair him. If his housing was repaired, why couldn't he come back?]

"BB-8, no...People aren't like that. There...there's something special in a person, and once the body stops, that goes away forever. You can't just restart it, like a droid."

[Where does that special thing go?]

"I-I don't know. No one does, really. Some people say it goes back into the Force and lives on there;
merging with the whole, I guess. And some people say it vanishes...like it never existed."

[I don't understand.]

"...I don't either."

Horrified of their stillness, BB-8 tried to turn it's half-dome head away from the distant corpses, but it found that the damaged castors limited it's range of motion. It opened a port on it's spherical body, shot out a jet of pressurized air, and drifted slowly from the graveyard. If it had possessed a pulse, it would have been racing.

I don't see Poe or Finn here, it thought gratefully; it's circuity would've overloaded to see them drifting, there and yet not there in a way that it couldn't comprehend. I don't see any debris from Red. Maybe they got away. It opened a long-range channel keyed to Reds signature.

[Poe? I am damaged! Come in. Poe?]

A small whimper escaped the droid as silence answered it's plea. It's self-preservation protocols were second in operative power only to its intense loyalty subprogramming. Though it had been without Poe on many occasions, it's strongest urge was always to reunite. I hope that Poe is okay. Maybe he'll be mad that Black One was destroyed? No. Poe will be happy that I am operational. But how do I get to him? There were only two rendezvous sites. Where would he go?

The droid slowly jettisoned farther from the battle site, sparingly firing off jets around it's body to keep it traveling more or less in one direction.

Red has limited navigational programming. Poe has limited knowledge of hyperspace IDs. Red has limited fuel. From this vector, he was most likely to attempt a jump to Corescant or Yavin 4. Corescant may be beyond their reach. Yavin then.

How do I get to Yavin?

BB-8 contained a small supply of fuel for use in extra-orbital repairs. If needed, it could rocket away to a distance of up to 2 kilometers. Which left it approximately 113,000 lightyears short of it's destination. It pondered this conundrum as internal manipulators attempted to repair and realign the bent castors. The droid knew it was pointless; the dense durasteel housing had warped and would need to be wholly replaced; it was more of a nervous fidgeting than anything else.

The First Order was tracking us. How did I not sense the trackers? They must be a very new model, very small. I wish I could have sensed them. Is it my fault? It may be my fault. Survivors will have to find new ships. With new channels. How will I contact them? I must get to Yavin. How will I get to Yavin?

It turned it's head enough to study the now far off Star Destroyers. Narrow white searchlights sliced though the darkness like scalpels as they hunted for anything useful. BB-8 knew beyond a doubt that they would find a Resistance Colonel's astromech droid very useful. If I send out a distress beacon, the First Order will hear me. They will capture me. The droid all but shivered. But what else can I do? I can't make it to Yavin on my own.

For now, I will get as far away as I can and wait for them to jump. Then I will call for help.

Red lurched drunkenly back into realspace with a wounded animal roar. A fresh series of alarms blared through the narrow cockpit and Finn went rigid in his seat. A soft greenish glow bloomed against the flashing, red alarms, filling the canopy with a benign and calming light as the planet
swelled before their eyes. It hung like a marbled ornament of blue and green strung among a glittering tapestry of stars. A small, bittersweet smile spread over Poe's face at the familiar sight; he wasn't sure if he could put *Red* down in one piece, and a heavy wave of nostalgia washed over him.

He swallowed, banishing his sentimentality to the back of his mind as he plied the last of his arm's strength against the stick. It did little good; the controls had frozen to such a degree that only the hydraulic power of a lifter droid could turn the ship now. He ignored the various alarms and warnings that screamed for his attention; *Red* had flatlined and all the frantic beeping in the world could not revive it. The ship rattled so forcefully that Finn thought even his DNA might come unraveled.

The thin blue film of atmosphere glimmered like a veil around the planet's circumference and Poe aimed to pierce it at a shallow angle to reduce the friction of reentry and to keep from utterly destroying their upper port engine. They dropped lower and Finn could now make out individual land-masses and bodies of water beneath a scudding shroud of cloud.

Poe tensed, his breath slow and steady as the barrier approached. His left hand hovered over the controls that would drop them out of sublight. The planet loomed up to meet them and *Red* bounced atop the atmosphere like a smooth, flat rock skipping over the surface of a lake. They were knocked about so violently that Poe's sweaty hand threatened to slip from the stick. *Red* nosed insistently down and to the left. It was too steep a descent.

"Hold on, Finn!" Poe shouted and then they hit the atmosphere like a torpedo into a wall of duracrete, orange fire swarming the ship, gripping the port wings in a flaming hand that twisted them into a barrel roll. The sudden roar of friction and wind was taken up by the port engine which gave up entirely. It shuddered to a halt, belching out a thick plume of greasy black smoke that twined about them as they spun utterly out of control. Finn threatened to black out as his eyes were filled with sky and then ground over and over again. He had crashed multitudes of TIEs in simulations—but those experiences had not come close to capturing the stomach-churning terror of a true freefall. He could not even scream.

Poe held on to his wits, cutting all power to the engines and kicking on the reverse thrusters with such intense tunnel-vision that even the wailing alarms receded into nothingness. *Red* whipped hard to the left, shrieked to the right, dipped, and then leveled out. He pulled against the stick for all he was worth and the X-wing slowly lifted it's scorched nose cone out of the wild dive. Sweat pooled beneath his helmet, trickling down the back of his neck as he opened the S-foils in a desperate attempt to shed speed and heat. The reverse thrusters roared; normally they would never have been engaged in such a barbaric manner—they were used to gently ease a ship on and off a landing site, but Poe had been forced to muster them in his battle against gravity. The vibrations rattled through his numb fingers, up his arms and into his chest. Poe recognized the land as they shot towards it, and quickly mapped in his mind how far their crash site would be from civilization. They had already overshot the capital city of Merillo that he had been aiming for; if the control tower there had tried to comm him about his unorthodox entry he hadn't noticed, but surely the whole city had seen them; the smoke billowing from *Red* streaked across the deepening blue sky like a smear of ink on a clean white page. They could hardly have been more obvious.

A hard knocking broke through his focus and the ship bucked as if a concussion bomb had struck home. Finn screamed and Poe caught his breath as the port-engine wrenched free from the wing and fell like a stone. There was no time to react. The forest sharpened from a mass of green, to individual trees. He could see the branches. Each leaf. *Red* sheered down through the canopy as he kicked on the landing jets. Limbs cracked and snapped, boles the size of buildings whipped by at breakneck speed, and then everything went black.
Finn groaned, bringing a hand to his forehead and coughing against the acrid smell stinging in his nose. Dazedly he opened his eyes. At first he thought something had gone wrong with his vision; no matter how much he blinked, the image wouldn't clear. His dazed mind understood all at once that it was smoke clouding his eyes. Flickering light drew his attention and gingerly, he twisted in his seat. Fire danced across the rear of the ship, trailing through the interior circuitry, and Finn realized with a start of primal fear that whatever fuel was left would soon combust. He coughed, nearly gagging on the thickening smoke as tears filled his eyes.

"Poe!" He shouted as he hurriedly undid his restraints. The pilot didn't answer. Finn pressed his hands to the canopy, braced his feet, and pushed. It didn't budge. What the—? He tried again, shoving against it with all of his might, his back twanging against the effort and legs shaking. At last the canopy opened with a harsh, metallic screech. As he levered it back, he saw that the front half of the transparisteel had been shattered, the durasteel framing smashed inwards as if punched through by a giant hand. One of the jagged metallic struts was smeared with blood.

"Oh gods, Poe! Poe!" Finn's heart froze within him as he clambered over his short dash and straddled the space between their seats. Poe was slouched limply against his restraints, his helmet askance on his drooping head. "Poe!" Finn yelled tightly, horror of a sort he'd never known threatening to shake him apart at the seams, building in his chest until he could hardly breathe. He took Poe by the shoulder, drawing him back against his chair, and sending chunks of transparisteel clattering to the floor. Finn's breath caught at Poe's face. When the canopy had blown in, the top right metal strut had lanced a clean line through the right half of Poe's visor and gouged through the brow of the metal flight helmet.

Tears sprang to Finn's eyes. Blood poured wetly from the wound in Poe's forehead, dripping from his chin, running in rivulets down his shirt, and speckling his pants. Finn scrambled, half falling, into the thin space between Poe and the front of the ship. "Oh no, no, no, no, noo…" Finn moaned as he hesitantly brought his trembling hand to Poe's jaw. For several seconds he could only stare in shock, trying to process what it was he was seeing, his mouth working wordlessly. The sob in his throat had nearly clawed its way out when he became aware of a gentle throbbing beneath his fingers. A pulse. He's still alive! Relief made him wilt before it was immediately smothered by pure terror. Fire blossomed, reflected in Finn's wide eyes as it engulfed the entire rear of the ship with a greedy roar and crept forwards into the cockpit. Finn's hands flew to Poe's chest, unlatching his restraints and heaving him out of his seat in a surge of adrenaline-fueled strength. The ground was not as far as he'd feared; Reds crash was as open and obvious as if a giant machete had hacked through the greenery. Finn aimed away into the dense, unharmed jungle, keen to put as much distance between them and the crash site as he could. If the First Order had tracked them, he and Poe had drawn a map and lit a signal fire for them. Smoke hung hundreds of meters above the wreck, marking the spot.

Finn panted, unsteady feet slipping over mossy roots, wet earth, and hanging vines. Poe moved
against him and Finn glanced at his face; his dark eyes were open, but dazed. The air cracked and thundered deafeningly behind them and a wall of heat and force battered Finn's legs out from under him. They toppled to the ground, hot debris raining down around them. Finn covered his head and curled around Poe. When he felt it was safe, he tossed a look back at Red; the old ship had been blasted apart from the inside out, everything but the nosecone and wing-panels an unidentifiable, blackened wreck. Fresh gulfs of inky smoke gusted unstoppably upwards and fiery bits of wreckage smoldered and flickered from the forest floor before smothering beneath the moist foliage. Finn let out a breath he hadn't been aware he'd been holding. He tore his attention away from the bonfire as Poe gripped his shirt.

"Poe, are you alright?" He gasped, eyes tight on his face as he took him by the arm and helped him to sit up.

"Yeah..." Poe slurred, and he fumbled weakly with his helmet. Finn reached out to help and Poe dropped his hand, letting Finn carefully pull it free from his sweat-plastered hair and set it aside among the ferns. He felt Finn's fingers pressing delicately to his forehead as if he were miles away, though their faces were only inches apart.

"It's really deep..." Finn breathed. The gash was about three inches long, running at an angle above Poe's right eyebrow, and bleeding profusely. Finn's stomach clenched; Poe had narrowly avoided having his brain run through with a piece of durasteel. He glanced nervously back at the smoking wreck. "Can you stand? We need to get away from this."

"I think so. Yeah. Just...can you help me?" There was a thickness in his voice that unnerved Finn and he fervently hoped that Poe had not been wounded beyond what he could see with his naked eyes. When he had been a junior cadet, a girl in his trooper squadron had hit her head during physical combat training. She'd seemed fine beyond a scratch and some swelling, only to drop dead hours later. It had never left him, how suddenly she'd fallen...and how little any of the adults had cared.

Finn dutifully quashed the fear from his voice. "Of course. Hold on to me." He wrapped an arm around Poe's back and Poe draped an arm around his neck. Gritting his teeth, he pushed up from the ground as if his legs were made of porridge. Poe found his feet and helped, though he remained unsteady. They stumbled on, two wounded animals slipping into a sheltering sea of green.

They trudged on for twenty minutes until Finn's legs gave way and refused to carry him a step further. He fell to his knees, and then flopped onto his back like a boned fish. Kalonia will be so mad at me, he thought as he lay, puffing and blowing, against the leaves and ferns. And then he wondered if Kalonia was still alive and if he'd ever see her again. Mouth thin, he pushed himself upright. Patches of cobalt sky peeked between the gaps in the thick, wavering canopy that sighed above their heads. The sun was quickly setting; cool mist seeped into the air and shadows deepened murkily beneath bushes and trees, pooling and flowing into an early night. A sweet fragrance rode the subtle breeze, unfurling from a night blooming plant hidden from their sight. Insects began to rasp, and strange ululating calls echoed back and forth high above them. Poe sat quietly beside Finn, unmoving and unmoved by the sounds and scents he had earlier pined for. He hadn't uttered a word as they'd walked, and now he stared past thick mossy tree trunks into the darkness beyond.

Finn watched him carefully, still expecting him to snuff out like a light. Concerned at his silence, Finn took him by the shoulders and swiveled him to face him. Poe's eyes jumped to his and then away. He couldn't stand to look at the pity in Finn's face—it would unravel him.

"Here," Finn said softly, "we need to clean some of this blood off of you." He ripped at the hem of his shirt until he'd pulled free a sizeable sheet of the dark blue fabric, pressed it against his tongue to
wet it, and then gently began to wipe the blood from Poe's face. The gash had finally stopped bleeding, though Poe's face was now a red, congealed mess. Poe held still beneath his careful fingers, his eyes and chest tight. A deep breath shuddered out of his mouth. His head bowed beneath Finn's hand, his face crumpled, and a choked cry burst from him.

"Oh, Poe…" Finn's eyes welled as he quickly gathered Poe against him in a tight hug. He stroked through Poe's hair and the pilot broke down entirely, shuddering with hard, wracking sobs. "I'm sorry, Poe…I'm so sorry." Finn murmured against the top of his head. Poe wept until he was utterly wrung out and no more tears would come, and then he held tight to Finn until the shaking stopped.

Eventually Poe drew away, wiping at his eyes and nose, smearing the blood on his face into an even worse mess. He laughed mirthlessly and shook his head as he dragged his hands through the ferns to clean them. "Well…that was a fun trip out of Base, huh?" He looked up at Finn, his dismal smile holding only for a second before shaking apart at the seams. Finn swallowed, placing his hand over Poe's; it trembled beneath his fingers.

"Shit. Poe breathed hotly and he stood, sorrow writhing into burning rage that sent him pacing back and forth. He lashed out, kicking the smooth, fluted grey bole they'd taken shelter against. "Shit, shit, SHIT, SHIT FUCKING SHIT!" He yelled, each word punctuated with a savage kick and Finn winced. Poe stood, chest heaving, fists clenched, staring at the tree trunk as if it were personally responsible. Thunder rumbled lowly through the dark jungle and the calling animals in the canopy hushed. Slowly Poe's breathing evened and then his shoulders slumped, defeated.

Finn reached for him, hesitantly gripping his sleeve and Poe came back to himself with a start. He glanced down at Finn's shadowed form, sighed heavily and sat beside him, taking his hand and lacing their fingers together. Finn squeezed reassuringly. They sat in silence for a long while. The thunder remained far off though the air became so humid that Finn felt he would soon suffocate. His clothing clung to him like a second skin and insects began to whine and hum in his ears. He smacked at one irritably.

"What is this place?" He asked.

Poe turned to him though he could make out only the barest murky edges of his features. "This is Yavin. My home."

"Really?" Finn tried to appreciate it more, but the insects made it difficult.

"Yeah. Not the way I would've chosen to show it to you. We're south east of Merillo by—gods, I don't know, 50? 60 kilometers? The tower had to have seen us coming in."

"That's what I was worried about. What do we do? I've got my comm on me, but—"

"Our comms are useless now. They only had a range of about 500 kilometers out from the transmitter, and we're well past that. And anyways, they only respond to Resistance frequencies. We couldn't have made an outside call even if we wanted." Poe scratched idly at a bug bite. "The ship's probably not in one piece anymore, is it? I don't really remember what happened back there."

"The ship is gone. It blew as soon as I got us into the woods."

Poe realized all at once what that meant and his jaw dropped "Finn—shit. I'm so sorry, baby—you carried me away from the wreck? Oh…your back…are you okay?" He gripped him by the shoulder, fingers squeezing. Kalonia's words echoed through his brain: No lifting, or climbing, and walk only for ten minutes at a time.
"I honestly don't feel anything right now." Finn shrugged.

"You don't feel *anything*?" Poe's voice threatened to spiral into panic.

"No—not like that, not like that." Finn hurriedly soothed. "I think I'm just too full of adrenaline to focus on my body, like it's all been shoved to the background, you know?"

"Yeah, I know what you mean—but that can't have been good for you. And we don't have your bacta-gel anymore now. Shit." He wiped a hand across his mouth, trying not to think of what else they'd lost. He'd honed his personal possessions down over the years to a select few important or extremely nostalgic items. It wrenched him to have lost them, especially his datapad.

"I'm fine, I think. I'm just more worried about what we do now."

"Well, I was gonna say that if the ship hadn't blown, we could've used it to contact my dad. But that's a no-go. If BB-8 were—" He broke off as if a blast door had come down in his throat. He blinked rapidly and then continued on after a careful silence "So, either we stay here by the ship and hope the good guys find us first, or we keep going into the jungle and aim for Merillo. That'd take a week even if we weren't beat all to hell and back." He knew it would be murder on Finn's back and legs.

"We don't have any food or water either. And...are there animals in these woods? Like, dangerous ones?" Finn scanned the canopy that hovered and sighed like a dark cloud. Each foreign sound jumped straight to his nerves. Out of the blue, a cool, wet drip spattered against his hand, and for a moment Finn was perplexed. Rain. He'd once felt rain long ago in a simulation and he hadn't much cared for it then either. They tucked closer to the tree trunk, huddling tight against one another.

"There's predators, yeah, but they're not really common." Poe sighed. "I don't know about you, but I don't like the idea of just waiting by the crash site. The First Order was tracking us and none of our droids ever picked up on it. That means new tech. I don't think they tagged *Red* but I wouldn't want to bet on it. But at the same time, there's no way we're getting through the jungle on foot—especially in the dark. There's roots and vines, boulders, pits, quicksand..."

"So we just stay here?" Finn blinked the rain doggedly out of his eyes.

"At least for the night. I think we should stick close enough to the wreck to see if any officials from town show up, but far enough to keep hidden in case anyone else finds it. So this spot's as good as any. Of course," he mused, "if someone shows up with bioscanners, it won't matter how well we hide."

Finn's mouth thinned. It was a wretched situation all around. After a long silence he asked, "What's quicksand?"

"A patch of watery ground that swallows you up. The more you struggle, the deeper it pulls you in until you drown."

"...Oh." It was a horrible new concept—drowning in earth. Finn shuddered.

The strange, ululating calls wavered through the air again far above their heads.

"What're those?"

"Kerka howlers. Don't worry about them. They eat bugs."

"Be nice if they'd eat some of these. They're eating me alive." Finn swatted at his arm and then his
Poe smiled wanly. *They must not have had bugs in their simulations.* He kissed the top of Finn's head.

He woke suddenly at Finn's tense jerk on his shoulder. "Wha?" He breathed, stiff and sore as he sat up from the tree trunk. His head throbbed so badly he couldn't believe he'd managed to fall asleep through the pain. Nausea squirmed through his stomach and for a moment he thought he would be sick.

Finn slowly brought his finger to his lips and jerked his head towards the canopy. Poe strained, listening hard over the whining trills of insects, the chirping of amphibians and the howling of the kerkas. There was a dissonance layered beneath the natural noises, a low thrum that didn't fit. The sound of a speeder or a ship. He studied the noise and decided it was definitely a speeder. Headlights flickered through the canopy in starts and fits as the speeder drew near and then flashed quickly past. Whoever was piloting it was heading unerringly to the crash site. He stood, taking Finn's arm and drawing him up as well.

"What should we do?" Finn whispered, grimacing as his back and legs clenched.

"Nothing we can do. We've got no weapons and I don't think you're up for running."

"Then you should run."

Poe breathed a laugh of disbelief. "Yeah right, and just leave you behind?"

"I'm serious Poe, if they-"

"Shh," Poe halted the conversation with a quick gesture and craned his head, straining his senses. The sound of the engines had stopped. For a long while they heard nothing but the fall of the rain and their own strained breaths. They squinted hard into the darkness, expecting the ghostly shape of Stormtroopers to materialize before them at any instant. Finn went rigid, grabbing Poe's shoulder and pointing into the dark distance. A far off beam of light was wavering drunkenly back and forth through the thick, tangled underbrush. A voice shouted something, but it was too distant to make out the words. Poe's heart tripped a beat. *If there's just one, we might be able to take them.*

The crackling, rustling of leaves and branches being shoved aside shivered through their ears as the figure neared with unnerving accuracy. The voice yelled again and this time they understood the tight, panicked voice. "Poe!"

Poe's heart leapt to his throat and he threw out a hand to keep Finn still, for he was coiled and ready to spring.

"Dad?!" He shouted as he broke cover. He hardly dared to believe it, and as the beam of light darted blindingly towards his voice, he wondered if this was somehow an elaborate First Order trick. But no, he recognized the figure now running towards him, would have known him anywhere.

"Poe!" Kes burst through a patch of fronds, ran the light up and down Poe's body, and then pulled him into a crushing hug. "Gods, I knew it must've been you, I knew it." He whispered thickly.

"Dad—how? How did you find us?" Poe breathed.
Kes drew back, his hands on Poe's shoulders. "Wasn't exactly hard. Friend in Merillo let me know an old X-wing had come in hot. What with your bounty and the news about the Resistance, I figured it must've been you. That poor old X-wing's still glowing like a bonfire, and I found a bloody helmet 'bout a mile back. Force, boy, your head." Poe squinted against the light as Kes examined the gash.

"I'm alright. It just looks bad."

"I can't believe you put that ship down in one piece. I thought for sure I was gonna find you burned to a crisp inside it." Kes' voice shook with both relief and latent horror.

"And I would've too, but…let me introduce you to Finn." Poe stood to the side. He'd never imagined introducing Finn to his father in such a way, both of them exhausted and beaten to hell, standing in the rain with midges buzzing in their ears. He'd pictured it taking place perhaps a little later in their relationship, the two of them standing clean and expected inside his childhood home where they could sit around and talk at their leisure.

Finn had remained in the background, absolutely dumbstruck throughout Poe's reunion with his father. He'd been prepared to fight for their lives, and it was hard to batten down his burning adrenaline, even harder to believe that they were safe, at least for the moment. And he felt his ignorance keenly, certain that there was probably some verbal protocol to follow when meeting the parent of a lover. He had no time to ponder the matter as Kes' light jumped to his face.

"Wait…I know you…" Kes murmured, and his brow furrowed as he studied Finn's squinting features. "He was on the bounty list too, wasn't he?" Kes turned quickly to Poe. "Poe, this is the man that broke you out of that Star Destroyer? That Finn?"

"Yeah, dad, that Finn." Poe grinned, all the aches and pains in his body utterly forgotten as Kes embraced Finn. Finn froze in shock and then found a bashful smile creeping over his face. If this was what having a father was like, he quickly decided he liked it. There was an air about him that Finn couldn't name, but it reminded him distinctly of Solo; some paternal aura that radiated an unflappable security. He hesitantly hugged him back.

"That's twice you've saved my boy. I'll never be able to repay you." Kes said so earnestly that Finn blushed.

"Easy dad, he's still healing. Don't break his back." Poe cautioned.

"Sorry, sorry." Kes released him.

"It's okay," Finn scratched awkwardly at the back of his head.

"Finn, this is my dad, Kes Dameron. Dad, this is Finn."

"It's good to meet you, sir," Finn held out his hand. Kes broke into a huge grin, shaking Finn's hand and tossing a look at Poe who smiled warmly.

"Just call me Kes, son." He withdrew his hand and slapped Finn on the shoulder. "Come on—let's get you two out of the rain before anyone else shows up. Speeder's not far."

Chapter End Notes

Whew, that crash was crazy to write and I'm glad they're back on solid ground. I've
been wanting to get to these last few chapters so badly that I don't even know what I'm doing. My brain's like "Yay, we finally made it to Kes! Now, how to actually write this scene...Shit." There'll be another canon introduction next chapter involving BB-8's predicament (you know I couldn't kill off that droid). Thanks so much for all of your kudos and comments--I've been continually blown away by them! You guys are the best!!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Finn peered over the edge of the speeder as it shot above dark, lashing mounds of leaves and branches. Far off heat lightning flickered, illuminating massive towers of steely cloud. The rain howled past, pelting them like gravel and Finn tried to shield his eyes with his hand as he regarded Kes. The older man sat in front of them, his gaze solidly ahead and his focus utterly unbroken by the rain that cascaded down his lined face. Adrenaline still jittered through Finn's limbs and he was grateful for this; it kept his pain at bay, though it hovered at the periphery like a stalking nexu looking for a gap in a fence. The mile walk back to Kes' speeder had been torturous, even with Poe and Kes acting as crutches.

He glanced at Poe. He was sitting rigid in his seat, his eyes squeezed shut and his mouth thin. It was useless to try and speak over the thrum of the engines and the rushing of the rain, so Finn took his shoulder and squeezed. Poe cracked an eye open and saw the question on his face. He patted his stomach and shook his head, hastily clamping his eyes shut again as a surge of nausea welled in his throat. The rain had nearly scoured his face clean of blood, though reddish rivulets clung to his neck and brow. The gash on his forehead stood out black in the moonless night.

Mist steamed up from the jungle, thickening into a low-lying cloud that obscured all but the tallest tress, which twined and spiraled like living beasts in the wind. A low glow radiated out of the fog far to their left and Kes aimed towards the bloom, losing height all the while. As they neared, bright pinpricks of light hovered, flashing from the tip of a large, pyramidal structure which grew forebodingly before them. Finn could not have said why the structure unnerved him. Perhaps it was the silence that wreathed it round, or the solid darkness of it. It didn't seem to belong to this age; the tombstone of a long dead god. He looked to Poe for some confirmation of his unease, but Poe remained silently battened down.

Kes steered them away from the pyramid and Finn breathed a sigh of relief as it melded into the darkness. They flew on until the glow of the town receded to the horizon. An opening in the jungle appeared below them like a hole in the ground and Kes slowed, descending vertically to land next to a small rectangular structure.

It was a small lot, no more than an acre of grasses and ferns hemmed in by a towering wall of darkly sighing trees. The rain pinged and clattered off the metallic roof of the garage as Kes tucked the speeder into its tight bay and then opened his door. He seemed torn for a moment on who to help from the speeder first—his son, or Finn who clearly could not stumble one more step. He was spared having to make a decision as Poe flung open his door and lurched out into the yard, a hand to his mouth. Finn grimaced; they could hear Poe retching over the rain. Kes hurriedly helped Finn up and out of the tiny garage. He had to lean heavily on Kes; every step was agonizing, as if his muscles had turned to razor-wire in his legs.

They found Poe on his hands and knees on the muddy earth, panting heavily as his stomach heaved. It felt like ages since he'd eaten breakfast, but in reality it had only been four or five hours since he'd been seated with his team, trying to pump them up for another run down the Bolt. His face tightened. He couldn't stand to think about them. Not yet. He sat back on his haunches, letting the cool water clean the sickness from his mouth. He felt a hand across his back, wrapping under his arm and drawing him to his feet. He nearly wept at the touch—for a second he was a small boy, his father come to soothe him from a nightmare.
Kes stomped determinedly towards their low, boxy house. He felt his age keenly as he tried to support the flagging weight of two grown men, but he refused to bow to it. They needed him. His son needed him. It was as if he were a Pathfinder again, carrying wounded comrades through the forest of Endor to safety; he half expected blaster-fire to erupt from the dripping shadows.

Constructed from a durasteel kit, the house had, over the years, acquired a greenish patina that refused to be scrubbed away. Vines had all but welded themselves to the southernmost face, but Kes didn't mind these—they bloomed magnificently during the rainy season and filled the little home with a sweet scent. The building's hard angles had softened under the green hand of nature until it resembled more a large, shaggy boulder than a construct of man. For all of its wear, it retained its solid strength. Kes forced himself up the short flight of stairs, keyed open the door and battened them in against the night.

Finn and Poe were deposited on a low couch nestled against the wall to the right of the door. Kes pressed on the lights and they both squinted against the brightness. It sent a dull throb through Poe's head and for a moment he thought he might be sick again. He felt Finn's hand on his back and leaned into the touch as he listened to his father rummaging about a cabinet.

Kes kneeled before his son, a medical kit open at his knees. "You're lucky you didn't get your brain run through." He murmured as he poured an antiseptic onto a cloth.

"It feels like I did."

"This is gonna sting." He pressed the cloth to the gash above Poe's brow and Poe hissed, his hands tightening into fists on the couch cushions as fire seared across his skull. Finn watched, his mouth thin as Kes lowered the cloth and picked out an instrument not unlike the bioscanner Kalonia had used to examine his scar. Kes fiddled it on, and Finn realized with a start that the old man's hands were shaking. The sight hit him like a kick to the guts.

"Okay, hold still." He ran the clear, yellow light over the gash and then around his son's skull. He nodded, a small, relieved smile tugging at his mouth. "Good. You're in the clear—just a nasty bump. No blood pooled up under that hard head." Poe watched Kes peel the backing off a bacta strip as if he were a million miles away and then squeezed his eyes shut as Kes stuck the clear, squishy pad to his wound. Poe hadn't visited his father in over a year, and now that they were in the light he was struck at how much he seemed to have aged. Surely the lines in his brow and crinkling in the corners of his eyes hadn't been so deep last time he'd seen him. Surely his hair hadn't been so grey. Surely there hadn't been that many age spots dotting his temples. The hands that tended to him were the same, but the skin had thinned, dry as paper and glossy in the light. It made Poe want to cry; he felt like a horrible son for being away so long, no matter how much Kes would disagree with that notion.

"There now. In a few days you'll be good as new." Kes patted him fondly on the shoulder and turned to Finn.

"Now, Finn, as someone who knows the look of back pain, I'm willing to bet you pulled something in that crash, right?"

"Well...kind of, sir."

"Kes."

"Kes," Finn hurriedly corrected. Poe felt the strange inclination to laugh. At the end of this insane day, it was absolutely unreal to hear Finn nervously stumbling over his father's name while sitting in his childhood home. He wondered if he'd jumped into some alternate, holo-sitcom version of his life. Finn continued on with obvious embarrassment. "Actually, my back's been hurt for a while—since Starkiller base. Today was the first time I've walked in weeks."
Kes' brows rose. "You need pain meds." He snapped his fingers and levered to his feet, crossing back over to the small kitchen and searching through another cabinet.

"Kes, sir, you said earlier that you'd gotten news about the attack on the Resistance. Do you know what's going on out there?" Finn asked.

Kes filled a glass of water and brought it back to him. "Nothing good, I'm afraid." He sighed as he dropped a translucent pill into Finn's palm. Finn took it and gratefully drained the cup; he hadn't realized how thirsty he was. Kes refilled the cup and brought a pill to Poe as well. Poe watched him silently as he swallowed it and sipped at the water. There was an evasiveness in his father's eyes that would've rattled him if he hadn't felt so exhausted. "I'll tell you all about it in the morning. For now, you both need to rest, even if you don't feel like it."

Finn didn't like the idea of trying to sleep with his mind so full of questions, but he didn't feel he had the footing to argue the point. Poe could have slept right where he sat.

"Come on. You two get cleaned up and I'll get you some fresh clothes and get your room ready. That is, you…you both need just one room, right?"

Poe met Kes' eyes with a tender smile that would've made Finn melt if they'd been alone. "Yeah, dad. Just one."

Kes nodded, a watery grin quivering on his lips. "Good." He managed. He clasped Finn firmly by the shoulder and then started off towards the rear of the house. What was that about? Finn wondered. The old man had looked overcome for a moment. He met Poe's eyes and found that tender smile now directed at him.

"So, that's my dad."

"I like him." Finn grinned.

"He really likes you." Poe closed his eyes and drew him into a quick kiss. "Sorry—my mouth's gotta taste disgusting."

"I don't care," Finn breathed against his face. He couldn't get the image of Poe slouched in the wreck, blood pouring from his head, out of his mind. To be sitting here with him now when he'd been convinced he'd lost him forever was the warmest relief he'd ever known, like a fire had been kindled in the core of his body. Either the pill was taking effect with remarkable speed, or the relief itself had forced the pain to the background.

"Come on," Poe yawned and extended his hand. "Fresher's this way," He stood, clamping his eyes shut as a wave of dizziness hit him.

"You okay?"

"Uh huh. Just…gotta keep my eyes closed for a sec. Okay," He took Finn's hand and slowly pulled him to his feet. Finn gasped. He could not take much more movement, and his arms tightened around Poe.

"I'm sorry, honey. It's really bad, isn't it?"

"Nnn...yeah."

"Hot water will help," Poe could hear his father in his old bedroom laying out bedclothes, as he steered them into the refresher. It was just as he remembered it; the shower and bath stall ensconced
into the coral colored tile to his left, the sink dead ahead, and the toilet to his right. The same horrible coni-shell wind chime hung in the corner over the toilet, now covered with cobwebs. He felt a sudden flare of affection for the ugly thing.

"Just leave your clothes outside the door and I'll start some laundry." Kes called from the room over.

"Okay, dad." Poe answered as he lowered Finn to the edge of the tub. To him he said, "You've probably only taken showers before, huh?"

"Yeah."

"Oh man. You're gonna love this."

Finn lay awake listening to the rain drumming on the metal roof, and to the slow sonorous trill of amphibians that sounded as if they were stuck right outside Poe's bedroom window. The same sounds that kept him up had sent Poe into a heavy sleep almost as soon as his head had hit the pillow. He lay on his stomach, pressed up against Finn's chest. The heat of him was sweltering, but Finn couldn't bring himself to scoot away. The house itself felt every bit as hot and clammy as the bath he'd so enjoyed. No sooner had he toweled off than he felt he'd been dunked in hot water again. He flung the thin blanket off of his naked body. It did little good.

He found himself musing. *I wonder if Jess made it. And Snap, the General...everybody. Where are they all now?* His heart tightened. He tried not to think of the people onboard the transports that had been taken by the Star Destroyers. If they were not dead already, they were likely wishing for death. He saw with an icy clarity the bodies that had drifted like dolls through the blackness and he shivered in spite of the mugginess, glad of Poe's anchoring weight. *Poor BB-8...it's weird not having him here, not seeing his light. Maybe that's why I can't sleep—the light is all wrong. Poe must be heartbroken.*

He turned his head and studied his face. Even in his sleep Poe seemed somewhat tense—his brows slightly pinched. Finn reached out and lightly stroked his forehead, careful to avoid the bacta-strip, and ran his fingers though his damp hair. After a few such strokes, Poe's face softened and he sighed. Finn smiled in the darkness, endlessly amazed that in spite of his upbringing, he was quite capable of gentleness, of soothing someone; in fact, it came easier than the violence ever had. *I love him. I can't believe we're both still alive.* He sobered somewhat. *But what do we do now? We can't stay here—bounty hunters are sure to find out Poe's from Yavin, if they haven't already. Kes would be in danger as long as we stay. He thought of Rey suddenly. Maybe...maybe we could go to her and Luke? Gods, I hope she's doing okay. He missed her so much that it was a constant ache in his chest, and he would've given anything to be able to comm her. He wanted to tell her everything; how his life had changed, all about Poe, about music and food, about Snap's dumb game, about the attack, and about how powerless he felt right now as he lay in the darkness. The galaxy seemed cruelly huge.

Poe woke so thickly it was as if he were coming out of hibernation. He wasn't sure what had roused him until he heard a hard gasp from beside him. "Finn?" He said softly.

Finn didn't answer.

Poe reached out, muscle memory reminding him precisely where his bedside lamp was and he squinted as buttery light filled the room. Finn was sitting hunched up over his bent legs, a tight grimace on his face. He looked close to tears.

"What's wrong?" Poe whispered, sitting upright.
"My legs." Finn managed. "They keep cramping up."

Poe could see the muscle twinging beneath Finn's clutching hands. He swallowed sadly.

"Lay down," He said softly and Finn unclamped his hands, doing as he was asked. Poe reached out, running his hands down the muscle of his upper thigh. Finn grimaced, his body tightening and then giving beneath the solid, sinuous pressure. Poe's hands pressed long lines, following the contours of his muscle, kneading and rubbing over knots of tension until they unwound. His calves were the worst and Finn's legs jerked spasmodically as Poe rubbed them.

"Is this helping at all?" Poe asked. He was too tired and emotionally drained to feel aroused at Finn's gasps. It was a near thing though.

"Yeah," Finn said through clenched teeth. It hurt, but in a wonderful way, and he melted at Poe's touch.

"Can you roll onto your stomach?"

"Uh huh." He rotated slowly and lay flat out with a hard breath, burying his face in his pillow.

Poe worked the backs of his thighs and calves, took his foot and bent it in towards his buttocks. He moved up to his back, rubbing and squeezing the flare of muscle between his shoulders and neck, running his fingers in a 'v' beneath his shoulder-blades, and digging his knuckles into the valley of his spine. The small of his back was as tight as knotted cord beneath his scar and Poe's fingers pressed small circles about its tough perimeter. He paused; the beauty of Finn's body in the dim light struck him heavily, and after such a horrible day he was primed to be extremely appreciative of it. Poe leant in and leisurely brushed his lips against the smooth surface of his scar. Finn jolted—he hadn't expected or realized that he could be romantically touched there; had never imagined that anyone would want to touch his scar, especially not like that. He tried to peer over his shoulder as the pilot's lips dabbed hotly up his spine, Poe's hands still caressing the muscle at his flanks. Poe's mouth found the edge of his jaw and he turned into the kiss as Poe lay alongside him. Finn wrapped his arms about him as he kissed him back.

"Any better?" Poe asked with a small smile.

"Yeah," Finn sighed, "thank you." Though the deeper pain remained, the clenching spasms had released their death-grip. They kissed in the rainy heat for several languid minutes, sleep pooling gently at the edges of Finn's mind now that he was more comfortable. He drifted off with Poe's warm breath on his cheek. As Poe switched off the light, his eyes were caught by a thin sliver of brightness shining beneath his door. He knew intuitively that his father was sitting up guarding the house, and a sense of peace suffused the little room. He fell into a fearless slumber, lulled by the safety of Finn's arms and the unflinching watchfulness of his father.

Ozmyin Heil drummed his fingers across his dash as he studied the readouts from his preliminary scan. The battlefield had been abandoned for many hours, though he'd heard that no fewer than five Resurgent class Star Destroyers had earlier been gathered together in a tight huddle. He would've given his lekku to know what it was the First Order had been so eagerly trading back and forth among themselves, but he'd missed his window. Even so, where the First Order went, calamity tended to follow. There could still be a few scraps drifting about for the intrepid scavenger to snatch from the jaws of the rancor. But either the First Order had been especially thorough in their mopping up efforts, or other hunters had already made off with any valuable parts or information. He'd arrived late on the scene and his scans had turned up nothing but a few corpses drifting through space, and bits of metal and transparisteel.
He gripped the stick, bringing the circular cockpit of the *Brejiner* down level with the bodies. The ship was larger than one would expect a single bounty hunter to need, but Ozmyn had long understood the importance of visual intimidation when trying to subdue an enemy. The First Order and the Empire before it had utilized that particular weapon at every opportunity. It was a simple enough ploy: Project power and become powerful. The *Brejiner* reflected this aesthetic; it was storm grey and solidly rectangular, drifting vertically through space like an uprooted skyscraper. Turbolaser turrets bristled from mounts on the top of the ship and to either side of the cockpit. Twin engines stretched lengthwise down it's stem in narrow slits and gave off a searing red light as the massive craft approached the corpses near enough for Ozmyn to examine them with his naked, yellow eyes.

*Hmm…Resistance ground uniforms. Personnel. No one worth anything.* His mouth thinned as his scanners confirmed what he already knew: No matches to his facial registry. *Any of them might've been blown to bits in the dogfight. The First Order's probably already nabbed all the good ones.* He flicked back to the bounty board he'd memorized as he often did when at a loss, as if staring at the names and faces could draw his targets out into the open. Five faces stared back at him and he recited their names like a mantra.

"General Leia Organa, Admiral Gial Ackbar, Colonel Poe Dameron, FN-2187/Finn, and" he added as an afterthought, "Luke Skywalker." The 10 million credit bounty on Skywalker was going on 12 years old and as of yet not one soul in the galaxy had seen hide nor hair of the supposed Jedi. Searching for Skywalker was, as far as Oz was concerned, the equivalent of looking for a mythological creature. It was a waste of time. He preferred to stick to mere mortals.

He sat back, booted feet resting on his dash and his scarred lekku draped haphazardly over his shoulders, as he considered his options. He could hang around for a while longer and hope to find something the others had missed, or he could split off and follow up on the supposed sighting of FN-2187 that had been reported on Nar Shaddaa. He doubted the legitimacy of the report—it seemed like everyone with eyes felt that they'd come across the First Order's most wanted at their local eatery or work place. Just the other day some rube had sworn he'd seen Admiral Ackbar at a Corescanti strip club. Oz had wanted that one to be real, just for the sheer absurdity of it. But…if the Nar Shaddaa report was real, he couldn't risk missing out on it. He rotated the *Brejiner* away from the bodies and aimed for open space.

He'd nearly activated his nav computer when a light pinged on his dash, flashing green and then blue. *A distress call?* Interest piqued, Oz honed in on the reading. *115 kilometers out at .73. What're the odds?* It wasn't unheard of for Bounty Hunters, especially in the face of extreme payouts, to set traps for one another. The *Brejiner* was hardly inconspicuous, and he knew of at least seven other hunters who wanted him dead. He shrugged. *Might as well check it out.* The solid ship drifted eerily forwards and as he neared the source of the reading, Oz's face split into a horrible, sharp-toothed smile.

"Well, well, well! What've we got here?" He said gleefully as he eyed the BB unit. "A droid, eh? And still operational enough to cry for help." He activated the ships miniscule tractor beam and the droid was snagged like an insect in a spider's web. Oz slowly reeled it in.

BB-8 had waited for hours and hours to send out it's distress call, but it could wait no longer. Without the heat of an X-wing or similar ship, it's systems were rapidly cooling to the point of shutting down. It's motivator had nearly frozen, a problem that was compounded by the gaping damage to it's chassis. It had traveled far from the battle site and it's long-range scanners confirmed that the five Star Destroyers were now long gone. It decided to chance it. It had hardly sent out it's distress beacon before the call was answered. BB-8 stared out at the strange approaching ship, the rectangular shape stretching hugely in it's glossy lens. *A Wrukken XTS Freighter. Modified. Looks*
like the cargo bay has been extended. Looks like additional weaponry has been ported dorsally and to the...oh...it's drawing me in? BB-8 quickly scanned the ship. One organic. Male. BB-8 whined nervously, hoping this was a rescue and not a capture. It thought longingly of Poe.

The massive cargo doors slid upwards and BB-8 was drawn into the dark, unpressurized space. The door slammed shut, blocking out the stars and BB-8 tumbled into hard edges like a blindly thrown ball. The ship's engines thrummed and the droid understood that they had just jumped into hyperspace. Maybe he's scared of the First Order coming back too? It switched it's ocular display to infrared so that it could study it's surroundings. They were not pleasant. The boxy space was edged with prison cells of varying sizes, each solidly built and welded to the floor of the ship. Pale crescents lined the bars of every cage, evidence of desperate fingers or claws. The back wall of the cargo hold was lined with supply crates, lashed securely in place with a tight curtain of mesh netting. In the center of the room was a hollow core with a door built into it. The lift shaft disappeared into the ceiling. As the engines switched over to sublight, an alarm blared suddenly from overhead and BB-8 craned, twisting it's damaged head as far as it could to focus on the flashing red light. The ductwork hissed as the room was hurriedly re-pressurized. BB-8 dropped like a stone as the artificial grav was turned on, knocking hard into the edge of a cage with a shrill beep.

[Hello?] BB-8 warbled in an uncertain whisper as it righted itself.

The lift door shot upwards and a male twi'lek stomped into the room with a grin that the droid rapidly interpreted as dangerous. His thick lekku were draped about his neck like pale, ropy snakes. The left lekku appeared to have been blasted off three feet out from his skull and ended in a glossy mass of scar-tissue. Though not powerfully muscular, he had the wide build and broad carriage of someone well accustomed to fighting. Over a faded tunic of woven blues and oranges was layered a metallic chest piece and a belt loaded with weaponry.

BB-8 did not like the look of him; there was a hungry gleam in his yellow eyes that reminded it forcefully of the scavenger Teedo that had tried to make off with it on Jakku. The twi'lek squatted before it, still grinning.

"An orange and white BB unit." He shook his head. "Now surely, surely, this can't be the same little droid the First Order was so hard after a month ago. Luck doesn't turn that way, does it?"

[I am damaged...] BB-8 began carefully.

"I see that. And you're lost too, no doubt—left drifting. Good thing Ozmyn Heil picked you up, eh?"

[I need to comm my owner.]"

"Now there's an interesting request. I'm real interested to find out who your owner is."

BB-8 glanced away, focusing hard on the nail marks that lined the nearest prison cell. [I...I'm not sure if he's still alive.]

"Give me a name and I'll see what I can do, little guy."

The twi'lek's face broadcasted lies as plainly as if he'd shouted them. [My memory core is damaged...I can't remember his name.] BB-8 stuttered evasively.

Oz nodded, considering. "Well, that's mighty convenient, isn't it? Let's see...an astromech like you would be used to augment an X-wing. Which means Resistance. Which means you've got a world of valuable information locked away in that little dome, don't you?"

[My memory core is damaged...] BB-8 tried to scoot away, but a thick arm darted out, blocking it's
path. With his free hand, Oz plunked a stubby metallic cylinder to one of BB-8's tool bays. The droid realized with a start of fear what it was just as Oz activated it. A flood of tightening electricity coursed through it's servomotor and it found it's body would not obey it's commands; it was as if it's programming had shorted. Utter indignation and violation hit the droid like a physical blow. A—*a restraining bolt*?! Never had anyone placed such a device anywhere near it—Poe would never have allowed it. The Resistance didn't even own them. Though it forced every bit of it's power into escaping, BB-8 instead wobbled irresistibly forwards, following in Oz's footsteps as the twi'lek keyed open the lift.

[Let me go!] It bleated.

Oz arched a naked brow. "You know I can't do that."

The droid flung open a port and rammed it's arc welder into the calf of it's captor. Oz nearly jumped out of his skin, slamming hard into the side of the lift with a yell. He turned, a look of fury snarling across his face; it was the first honest expression BB-8 had seen, and that was not an encouraging realization. Oz shoved his thumb down on the control unit he kept clutched in his hand and BB-8 screeched, vibrating as blue arcs of electricity swarmed out of the restraining bolt and over it's chassis.

Oz nodded, smiling now, though his eyes remained cold. "*That* was a good one. We're gonna have a lot of fun together, little guy."

Unable to attack, BB-8 opted for some of Poe's more colorful curses, [*Let me go right fucking now, you cock-biting Hutt reamer!*]

Oz paused for a shocked moment and then threw back his head, guffawing. He forced BB-8 into the lift and started them upwards. "Oh, gods," he choked, wiping at his eyes, "it was worth picking you up just for that. *Hutt reamer.*" He shook his head, shoving the droid out onto the second floor of the *Brejiner*. The room was lower-ceilinged than the cargo hold and contained access to the engines, a messy work terminal, more supply crates, and two high-security force cages. BB-8 shivered to think about the unlucky souls that had been trapped within them. The droid was halted before the work terminal and Oz fiddled with his control unit, his eyes darting to the astromech as he worked.

"There now. Go ahead and try to shock me again."

BB-8 gave it it's all. Nothing happened.

Oz grinned. "Thought so. Well, seems how you've got a bad case of memory damage, I'll just have to see what I can find on my own. You sure you don't want to just tell me? Don't know what droids can feel, but this just *sounds* painful, you know?"

[I hope your dick breaks.]

"Ha! I like you." He reached forwards, a magnetic ratchet in his hands. Slowly, he worked about the perimeter of the droids half-dome head. Bolts clattered to the grated flooring and BB-8 dazedly watched as it's cranial cap was lifted free with a hollow *thunk*. It had always unnerved the droid to see itself being taken apart, and that was at the hands of people it trusted. To have it done by *this* man…it understood suddenly why organics sometimes vomited for apparently no reason. It could not exactly feel the twi'lek's fingers inside it's head, drawing out it's memory cortex, but that hardly mattered.

"Let's take a look at you," Oz muttered as he pulled free strands of hyper-conductive wiring and hooked them into ports on his work terminal. He booted the system up and BB-8 froze. It could not
think or form new thoughts. It could only see and instantly forget as the bounty hunter began to scroll through the flowing stream of it's consciousness. It existed in a state of paralyzed limbo.

"Whew. Never been wiped, huh? Gods, it'd take 20 years just to scroll through all this crap." It was like rewinding a holo-vid and Oz scrolled idly through his capture of the droid, through the battle that had taken place, watched as the Resistance scrambled in reverse to the threat of the First Order, watched as the droid hung about with an older model R3 unit and a bearded pilot, watched as the droid bantered back and forth with two men sitting in an old X-wing…

"Wait, what?" Oz gasped, his finger slamming the image into stillness on the screen. That face. Both of those faces. His heart raced as he took a still from BB-8's memories and ran it through his facial registry program. He already knew what he was looking at, but he had to have it confirmed by something that didn't make hopeful mistakes. Facial match 100% on both of them. He sat back, hardly daring to believe his luck. His hands were actually shaking.

I've got Poe Dameron's droid and FN-2187 is still with the Resistance. He glanced at the blank lens of BB-8 with wide eyes. He had the creeping sensation that he was on the edge of something big. Swallowing, he went back to the droids data banks. Yes, that's them without a doubt. Oz nodded. There they were in a medical setting, the defected Stormtrooper walking unsteadily backwards through a set of parallel bars as a doctor studied his movements. There they were eating together with a bunch of other pilots. There was Dameron, guiding FN-2187's chair in reverse out of a lift, back down a hall and into a room. The droid was obviously tottering idly around as Dameron appeared to help FN-2187 out his clothes, though in reality he'd been dressing him. The two shared a long kiss.

Oz felt as if he'd been whacked upside the head with a hydrospanner. It took a second for the enormity of his discovery to sink in. Not just traveling together. They are together. Two for the price of one. That—that's 9 million credits! He was glad he was already sitting—his knees would've given out. It was almost as much as the mythical Luke Skywalker bounty, enough to lodge his name firmly alongside those of such renowned hunters as Boba Fett and Cad Bane. And it was actually doable. With the droids unwilling help it could be very doable. He scrolled further back. He had to make sure that that kiss hadn't just been some strange, extremely friendly fluke. Yes, there they are lying in bed together. Holy shit. I'm the only hunter in the galaxy that knows this. Oz did not believe in higher powers, but goosebumps broke out regardless; it felt too much like divine providence and he hurriedly began to copy BB-8's lifetime of data to the Brejiner. The droid will know everything there is to know about Dameron, and so will I if I can just narrow down the field. And if I find Dameron, I find FN-2187 too. He laughed suddenly and for a long time he couldn't stop.

After three hours of studying the droid's memories, Oz forced himself to stand and move. He was shaking like a leaf. The droid had seen so much that he had a hard time compressing it all into manageable bites. He'd found that Dameron and FN-2187 were very much romantically involved (indeed, he'd seen an unfortunate eyeful on that front), that General Organa had started a task force to study the disappearance of children, that Dameron and the bearded pilot, Snap, had been sent to investigate Sryin'ti Station out in Rattatak space, that a girl named Rey had taken the famous Millennium Falcon out on her own, that Dameron had waited by FN-2187's hospital bedside for endless boring hours, and—Oz still shook to think about it—the droid had seen a map. A map to Skywalker.

Chapter End Notes

Oh man, so I have *no* idea how a droid's brain would even pretend to work and I'm
also technologically inept (at least when it comes to the machinery and parts involved),
so I just bullshitted all sorts of stuff there. I hope it sounds kinda believable. Also...sorry
for doing that to BB-8, but I was so freakin' excited to finally get to Ozmyn. He's a dick,
but he's fun to write--at least, so far he is. Hope you guys enjoyed/hated him? The
ending threw me for a loop and now I've got to scramble and rethink some things. I hate
and love it when a story starts going in a direction you weren't expecting. Really though,
I just want to write more of Kes and Finn awkwardly chatting. I'm gonna slip a dad-joke
in there somewhere. As always, thanks so much for reading and for your reviews!
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The quiet, flute-like calls of malin birds and the scent of politas flowers eased Poe out of his slumber and for a heady moment, he was a child again. Half-forgotten, dust-mote memories stirred, swirling about his skull and settling one on top the other like layers of sediment, building and reminding him of his foundations. He kept his eyes closed, soaking it in. Any second now his mother would wake him for breakfast. They would pile in front of the holovid, eating tomlettas and watching Where's that Weequay. Then he would help his father out in the garden, pulling up poisonous halba vines before they strangled their seedlings. Afterwards, he would play in the woods with Rhys.

But he was no longer a child; the illusion shimmered and broke as if someone had thrown a stone into the glassy surface of a pond. His mother was long dead, and so was Rhys. Halba vines had swallowed the tiny garden out back, and his father's face was now as creased as the furrowed bark of the tak trees they used to climb.

He opened his eyes with a sigh. The sun had not risen yet, but the sky outside had taken on a cool purplish hue in anticipation. Everything was the same, and yet not the same at all. The metal, paneled ceiling hovered above him. The posters of A-wings and Rebellion era ships had faded and curled somewhat over the long years, but otherwise remained right where he'd placed them in his teens. His father had lined the desk beneath the room's one long window with plants—he was surprised to find that his old model of a Liberty Mon Calamari Cruiser still kept the peace, peaking out from around billowing fern fronds. He made a move to brush his sweaty hair from his forehead and winced, his fingers dragging across the bacta-strip and reminding him forcibly of the crash.

Faces ghosted before his eyes; he saw plainly their eyes, their laughter, and their determination to do right no matter the cost. Ziff, Bastian, Liv, Nien...Jess. He swallowed hard, his eyes welling. He had no way of knowing about the others but he refused to think of them as dead—BB-8's metal body could withstand forces and temperatures that would destroy an organic being, and obviously the vacuum of space was no obstacle for a droid. He dared to hope that Snap had made his jump and managed to evade any pursuers. Leia had escaped so many similar attacks in her lifetime that it would be faithless of him to doubt her survival now. She was General Organa. Death just wasn't a concept he could place near her name. Poe thought suddenly of Kalonia, Dand, Statura; of the Base's civilians and children. He even thought with pity on Tal Amir. None of them deserved what had happened down there and guiltiness tightened across his chest.

Stop it! Poe forced the accusations into the background. He'd been down this road too many times to give his guilt free reign anymore. He drew a hand to his eyes and his arm brushed against the warm skin of Finn's shoulder. A breath of utter gratitude escaped him as he rolled over to face him; one of the few beings left in his life that he both loved and knew existed. Finn lay peacefully at ease, naked and bare to the troubles of the universe, his mouth slightly parted. Poe placed a hand on his chest, allowing the steadiness of his heartbeat to fill him up, to pulse into each of his cells and soothe him with the peace of sleep; but this only made him picture the hearts that had stopped beating. He kissed Finn's chest and sat up, unable to stand laying there with such thoughts in his head.

Poe stood, and stretching let him know that the crash had done more than slice him across the head; he found bruises subtly blooming in an 'H' across his chest where the seat restraints had dug in. He tossed another look at Finn; though slightly harder to see against his dark skin, the same pattern of
bruising was starting on him as well. He stiffly shook his head, a flare of indignant anger starting deep in the pit of his stomach. The First Order and the Empire before them, and all those who believed their cruel philosophies—how many lifetimes of pain had they caused? How long had he and those who had come before him been fighting this same damn fight? Was there even such a thing as victory, or was this a cosmic pattern of good vs. evil that no amount of mortal sacrifice could alter?

He couldn't allow himself to believe that the sacrifices of his friends and family meant nothing, though the thought nagged at him all the same. Mouth thin, he cracked open his door and found their clothing cleaned and folded on the floor outside. He gathered them up and deposited them on the foot of the bed, and stepped into his boxers. He left for the refresher, leaving the door to his room cracked so that he could hear Finn, should he need any help.

He found his father sitting on the couch, the open datapad on his lap projecting the Galactic News. On the end table a blaster was laid out in easy reach, facing the front door. Kes' dark, tired eyes lifted to Poe and he hurriedly switched the program off and patted the cushion beside him. Poe walked through the quiet room and sat back with a sigh. Kes studied his son's face. He looked as weary as Kes felt.

"You get any sleep?" Kes asked.

"Yeah. I don't think I moved." He cracked open an eye. "I know you didn't get any sleep. You didn't have to stay up all night, you know?"

"Sure, try and sleep with two of the most wanted men in the galaxy the next room over?" He kidded, trying to lighten Poe's obvious mood. "How's the head?"

Poe shrugged. "It's fine."

"Good." He sat straighter and sobered, his eyes locking on to Poe's. "I didn't want to ask last night but…what happened to BB-8?"

Poe glanced away, his throat tightening. "He was piloting Black One. The whole thing blew—I couldn't get to him fast enough. I don't know if he made it."

Kes regarded him softly. "…Tell me everything."

Poe launched into his and Finn's trip out in the training X-wing, of the First Order's attack, of the ambushes and homing beacons; of transports being hauled into Destroyers and bodies drifting through space. He hurried through the names of his fallen friends in one breath—if he'd have taken any longer than that he'd never have managed it.

Kes listened attentively, nodding his head or exclaiming in shock. He sat in silence as Poe finished, his brow furrowed and his chin resting on his laced fingers. "Nien Nunb…damn, that's a heavy one." He lamented. "Your mom used to rave about him, and I met him a few times after Endor. He was a nice guy. …I'm sure they all were."

"They were." Poe swallowed and met his father's eyes. "I don't know how you and mom dealt with it. I—I feel like I failed them, like I let everyone down. They were counting on me, dad, and I didn't have their backs, I—"

Kes held up a hand and Poe went silent, his glassy eyes falling to the floor. He regarded his son with such softness that Poe nearly began crying. "You're only one man, Poe. There wasn't anything more you could've done—deep down, you know that. I know it doesn't feel that way right now. But they
knew the risks—and they wouldn't have done a thing different." His expression warmed. "Doesn't make it any easier getting left behind though."

Poe took a huge, steadying breath.

Kes smiled at him, his chest all but swelling. "I'm so proud of you. You care so damn much—you truly are your mother's son." Poe couldn't speak for a moment and Kes drew him into a hug. Poe's arms wrapped around him like durasteel cables and his face tightened. "And I'm not just talking about the military side of things. I'm proud of you for…trying again. I know how hard that is." Kes nodded marginally towards Poe's old bedroom where Finn still slept. Poe felt a blush creeping up his face and he wiped at his eyes as he drew away.

"Jeez, dad, you're killing me." He said somewhere between a laugh and a sob.

Kes grinned. "So tell me about him."

Poe shrugged, trying to recompose himself. "I don't know. He…he's just good, dad. He has no idea how good he is. After everything the First Order did to him, he's so gentle. All of this…normal stuff..." he motioned to the room in general, "it's all new to him, but he jumps right in, he tries things." Poe smiled suddenly. "He's so excited by things I wouldn't even think twice about. He had a piece of cake the other day and I thought he was gonna cry. And music—he'd never heard music before, dad."

Kes was taken aback, his expression a mixture of happiness in watching the way his son's face lit up just talking about Finn, and a creeping unease regarding how Stormtroopers were raised. He'd never really thought about it before, but he had no time to dwell on the subject; he realized he'd missed the last few things Poe had said. "So how old is he?"

Poe looked suddenly sheepish. "Eugh…too young for me probably." He grimaced. "…23?"

Kes cracked a grin, delighted to have a chance to tease his son. "Cradle robber. My son's a cradle robber." He rubbed his stubbly chin, considering. "23, though eh?" He laughed. "I remember being 23. I don't even want to know what you two get up to."

"Yeah, not talking about that. What about you and…uh…what's her name. Ranadi? You guys on again or off again?"

"Off again. I think for good, this time." He shook his head. "She's crazy."

"Yeah, I've been saying that for years."

Kes laughed, patting Poe on his knee as he stood. "Come on—let's get breakfast started. We've got a busy day lined up."

"We do?" Poe followed him into the little kitchen. The sun had nearly risen and pearly light shown through the mist outside, glancing off the smooth countertop as if it were a sheet of ice. He leaned against the counter as his father gathered together skillets and pans.

"Well, you two need a new ship and supplies, and I don't think it would be a good idea for either of you to show your wanted mugs around town. So maybe I should've said that I've got a busy day ahead of me."

Poe huffed a laugh. "I don't know about you dad, but I haven't exactly got a mountain of credits stashed away. Definitely not enough to buy a ship with."
"Of course you don't, you poor enlisted grunt." Kes handed him a few yellow and orange speckled vegetables and set him to work dicing them up. "Even if you did, you shouldn't try using your Republic bank account; any Bounty Hunter worth their fuel will have an eye on it."

"So how am I buying a ship then?"

"Well," Kes met Poe's eyes and then glanced away, busily breaking eggs into a bowl, "I thought we'd sell your mom's old ship."

Poe nearly nicked his finger with the knife. "What?"

"I knew you wouldn't like it..." Kes muttered.

"We-we can't sell mom's ship!"

"Then how else do you propose paying for a new one? I don't have the money. You don't. I'm willing to bet that Finn doesn't. And anyways," Kes whisked the eggs to a froth, "it's a war antique and in great shape. We could get a lot for it."

"But it's mom's—"

"Poe, the sooner we can get you both off this planet, the better." He stood with his back to his son, the dish of eggs entirely forgotten. "You think Bounty Hunters have missed the fact that you're from Yavin?"

Poe remembered suddenly the blaster that was sitting out in the living room. "Dad...what happened?" he asked cautiously.

Kes stared though the long kitchen window to the misty green lawn. "Few days ago, one tried to break in. Big Nikto fellow." He turned and met Poe's eyes. "He learned the hard way not to mess with a war veteran."

"Shit, dad..." Poe felt as if the wind had been knocked out of him. "Does Central Control know?"

Kes nodded, taking Poe's vegetables and tipping the colorful cubes into the bowl of eggs. "They're keeping a close eye on this place—a patrol ship's been going over every few hours. Had a long chat with them last night actually."

"Oh, yeah?" Poe led. He had a feeling his father had been waiting to get to this point.

"Yep. They know the situation with the Resistance and that you're wanted. We've all agreed that the best course of action is for you to have died in that crash."

Poe sat down his cutting board, "...What?"

"I'd throw bounty hunters off your trail for a good while."

"You're going to have them announce that I'm dead?"

"Obituary and everything."


"Think about it, Poe. It's not just you that's in danger—how hard could it be for a hunter to find out you and Rhys were together? All they'd have to do is go through your Academy records. You want
a hunter to show up to Aynn and Brin's home next? His sister's house? It's all about leverage, Poe."

Poe stood, his mouth fallen open and his arms hanging slackly at his sides. "This is fucked up."

"You're telling me it is," Kes agreed. He poured the sloppy mixture of eggs and vegetables into a skillet. It popped at hissed as it hit the oil.

"But what'll you do?" Poe asked and Kes was glad that he'd warmed to the idea.

"Well, heartbroken to have lost his only child, your old dad will finally take that trip to Naboo he'd always talked about. After you two are safely on your way of course."

Poe had to grin; as insane as it was to imagine, it did make sense. "You've really thought about this."

"I had a lot of time last night. Grab a sheet of flimsy and write me up a list of specs you want in a ship, and any supplies you can think of." Kes motioned his egg-covered spatula to a pile of scrap flimsy setting beneath the house's wired-in comm unit.

"Jeez…so…we're selling mom's ship and I'm dead." Poe repeated flatly.

"Well, you're not dead yet and hopefully not for a long time. As far as the officials are concerned, the crash site is 'under investigation'. That'll keep from upsetting folk until after you're gone."

"Yeah, but you've got to tell Aynn and Brin that I'm okay, though. I mean—I'm like a second son to them!"

Kes paused, considering. "Which would be worse? For them to believe you're dead, or to tell them the truth and risk a Bounty Hunter torturing it out of them?"

Poe shook his head as he sat and grabbed a sheet of flimsy. "…Shit. This is awful dad. But…I'm grudgingly impressed." He tapped his stylus to his lips, trying to rally his mind to his list; it seemed like they'd need an endless amount of supplies. Rations, toiletries, sheets and blankets, clothing, detergent, utensils, new comms, and at least one datapad. He wasn't sure if he could bring himself to write down lube. He wanted to die a thousand deaths just picturing his father buying such a thing on his behalf. He wrote it down anyways.

Finn woke feeling as if he were being smothered alive by a giant raincloud. His back had all but melted to the sticky sheet beneath him and it clung to him as he tried to sit up. He glanced blearily around, wiping at his forehead and wondering for a moment where he was.

Oh yeah…Poe's room. He studied the warped star-fighter posters and the plants softly shining in the early morning light. He spied his clothing, cleaned and folded, sitting on the edge of the bed. He couldn't stand the thought of adding another layer onto his furnace of a body but he reached out for his boxers regardless. His back twinged.

Am I ever gonna get back to normal? He lamented as he dragged the boxers forwards and tried to scoot to the edge of the bed. I never thought I'd want that repulsorchair back, but I'd take it right now. "Hey, Poe?" He said uncertainly into the empty room; he thought he could hear voices beyond the parted door and figured that Poe and Kes were already deep in discussion. A savory scent wafted through the little house, waking his ravenous stomach and he realized he hadn't eaten since breakfast on D'Qar. He wondered what time it was—he'd adjusted to D'Qar's light and dark cycle, but Yavin's was many hours ahead and he felt totally out of synch. "Poe?" He tried again, a little louder. He heard footsteps in the hallway and Poe's form appeared in the gap and opened the door all the way.

Finn was relieved to see that he'd only bothered with boxers—maybe he could forgo the rest of his clothing as well.
"Hey," Poe smiled as he sat alongside him. He brought a hand to his jaw and tilted him into a kiss. Finn wrapped an arm around his back and found that Poe's skin was every bit as sticky as his own, though on him he didn't mind it. "Morning." Poe said with a soft grin as he pulled away. Finn's lips tingled and he closed his eyes for a second, trying to recall his brain to the rest of his body.

"Morning." He smiled and Poe felt a flare of warmth at the look.

"How's your back?"

"Sore. So, pretty much the same as ever." He smiled. "How's your head?"


"Ugh…clothes." He looked at his shirt and pants in disgust. "Why's it so hot in here? Doesn't this house have climate control?"

"Yeah, but dad would never actually use it. He claims it makes you soft and I'm sweating balls, so he's got a point there." He shook open Finn's boxers.

"Huh…I never really thought about it." Finn stepped into the boxers and Poe drew them up his legs. He caught the pilot staring and he huffed a laugh.

Poe winked at him "Come on, you should be able to take a little heat by now."

"I'm not sure if that's a euphemism or not…” Finn arched a brow.

"It's whatever you want it to be, baby."

Poe helped Finn into the refresher and, thankful as he was for the support, Finn longed for the day when he'd be able to get up and take a piss on his own. Though his legs ached as if he'd run non-stop for days, he could feel a deep and growing strength that gave him hope. He walked out of the 'resher mostly on his own power, though he leaned on Poe and allowed himself to be steered towards the open kitchen.

Finn studied the home as they walked; he'd felt too upended last night to give it much more than a cursory once-over. The kitchen and a circular table and chairs were placed opposite of the long, sunken living room. Everything had a worn in, comfortable look to it and he found personal touches of the sort he hadn't even seen at Base, which, compared to the First Order, had seemed like a haven of individuality. Random splashes of color jumped out at him like unexpected notes of music; threading a blanket folded on the couch, weaving though a rug, dancing across a vase. There were pictures, old fashioned books, little knick-knacks and figures lining shelves; and Finn could tell that all of them contained stories. Potted plants in earthen vases sat glowing like fiery emeralds in shafts of light thrown from the rising sun, and stringy wind chimes hanging in the widows clunked hollowly together in the mild breeze. Finn was transfixed by the many textures and colors that met his eye; it reminded him somewhat of the variety he'd seen in Maz's castle. He smiled, happy to know that Poe had been a child in this place; that he'd been surrounded by stability and beauty from the beginning.

Kes was standing before sizzling skillets of food Finn couldn't begin to name though he longed to taste them. He wore a thin white shirt and long, khaki colored pants—apparently totally unfazed by the heat. There was something in Kes' posture that reminded him forcibly of Poe and he had a heady vision of the pilot, decades in the future; not fighting or running for his life…just relaxing and making breakfast. It was a bittersweet image. Kes tore his attention away from the pot of tangy
smelling red sauce he was stirring to glance up at them.

"Ah, just in time. Good morning, Finn. You sleep alright?"

"Yes, sir," Finn nodded.

"Kes."

"Sorry…yes, I slept really well."

"Glad to hear it. Go ahead and have a seat and I'll bring the food over."

Kes jerked his head to the table and chairs that sat to the right of the kitchen. Poe turned them towards the nearest chair and Kes gasped.

"Damn," Kes muttered, taking a step away from the stove and squinting at Finn's back. Finn peered over his shoulder, perplexed for a moment. "You weren't kidding, Poe." Finn realized with an embarrassed flush that Kes was staring at his scar; he'd forgotten how gruesome it would look to someone unused to it. "You're lucky you can walk at all."

"Yeah," Finn said awkwardly as Poe helped him ease onto a chair. "Although, I don't feel like I'm doing too great on that front."

"Well, you're upright at least. You'll have to tell me all about it sometime. Poe gave me his version, but I'd like to hear it right from the source."

"Sure. But it's kind of a long story…" Finn said apologetically.

"Maybe after we get some food into you." Kes smiled at the younger man and then nodded at Poe who understood what was expected of him without asking. He joined his father in the kitchen, opened cabinets and gathered together plates and utensils, and laid them out on the table. Finn watched, both enjoying this domestic scene and also feeling quite useless. Kes carefully juggled a tray full of food and a steaming saucepan and Poe helped him unload it to the table. Kes sat beneath the tiny dining area's one window, his greying hair glowing like strands of silver in the sunlight, and Poe sat between he and Finn.

"Alright, tuck in." Kes grinned.

Poe flew into primal starving-animal mode, his arm darting out and plopping tomlettas onto his plate before Finn had even decided what to tackle first. Kes arched a brow at his son though he smiled and motioned for Finn to load up his plate next. Finn glanced quickly at Poe's plate and loaded the same number of the oblong, eggish things onto his. Cheese (something Finn had developed quite a liking for) oozed out of the folded ends and his stomach rumbled in anticipation. He studied the way Poe and Kes arranged the diced vegetables along the top of the breaded, fried eggs, and mimicked them exactly. Kes ladled a long line of the red sauce on top of his, and when Poe did the same, Finn mirrored him without thinking. He watched as Kes cut a square out of his meal and popped it into his mouth.

Okay. That's how I eat these. Finn thought triumphantly.

"Hey, be careful with—" Poe began, reaching out to stop him, but Finn had already taken a bite. Finn met their wide eyes with confusion; they looked as if they expected a bomb to go off. Had he messed something up? He'd done precisely what they had. And then it hit—molten fire sliding down his throat, crackling across his tongue, and searing every bit of moisture from his mouth. His eyes flooded, his nose ran, and he coughed hugely. He wanted to get up and run screaming around the house but he could only tense and curl his hands into fists.

Poe bit his lip to keep from laughing out loud and he exchanged a gleeful look with his father. Finn
could not quite process why something that looked and smelled so wonderful could cause literal pain. After five more dry coughs he managed to speak through the fire.

"What is this?" He choked in a reedy voice.

Poe lost it, dropping his fork to the table as he leaned back, shaking with laughter. He parted an eye at Finn who looked scandalized, and howled, bringing a hand to his face.

"I'm sorry," Kes chuckled, his mouth quavering, "I should've warned you—"

"I tried to warn you!" Poe laughed, wiping tears from his eyes.

Finn grabbed at his glass of water and chugged. Somehow, the cool water morphed into more fire.

"Ohgods," He gasped.

"No! No, don't drink water!" Poe guffawed. "Milk!" He stood, darting to the fridge, shaking so hard with repressed laughter that he could hardly manage to pour Finn a glass. "H-here, drink this instead."

Finn reached for it like a dying man and downed the glass in two giant gulps. It helped marginally. He looked warily at his meal as if it might reach out and punch him in the face, and then to Poe and Kes for some kind of explanation for this trickery.

"What. Was that." Finn demanded.

Poe threatened to come undone again at his betrayed expression. Gods, it felt good to laugh, really laugh, even if it was at the expense of Finn's mouth. "The jalpero sauce—I was gonna warn you to go easy on it."

"It's like I bit a sun."

"Here, scrape it off the tops and get some fresh vegetables," Kes offered, passing him the little bowl of diced cubes.

Finn hastily did as Kes recommended, scraping the lava-sauce into a gloopy puddle on the side of his plate.

"So, that's called spiciness." Poe informed him with a devilish grin.

"Well, I do not like spiciness." Finn mimed back in the same mock-patronizing tone. "No offence, Kes, sir." Finn added with an apologetic look.

Kes laughed. "None taken."

Finn dared to take another bite and found that, while some of the fieriness remained, he could now taste something besides pain. The vegetables added a crunch and zing that was actually quite pleasant and the bready egg and cheese mixture was immensely satisfying. It was utterly different than any food he'd been able to try at Base; refreshing and filling. Yavin cooking, when one was properly warned of the dangers, was actually very good. Between the three of them, they polished off every scrap that Kes had made. Finn sat back in a comfortable stupor, a hand to his stomach as he stared past Kes and out the window. It was hard for him to believe that he could feel so at ease when just yesterday he'd been certain that he and Poe were both going to die at multiple points.

"Okay, dad," Poe said, also sitting stretched from head to a toe in a 'full to the brim' posture. "You said last night that 'nothing good' was going on out there, and you've been dancing around it all
morning. Spill it."

Finn tore his eyes away from the sunlit leaves and looked between Poe and Kes.

Kes sighed as he arched a resigned brow and nodded towards the living room. "Let's sit somewhere more comfortable. I'll tell you all about it."

Chapter End Notes

Well, this ended up being a lighter chapter compared to the craziness of the last two or three, but I needed a breather (and so did they). Sorry, I couldn't fit BB-8 into this chapter, but his part wouldn't have been super thrilling anyway: Basically, Oz is downloading 14 years worth of data onto his ship and trying to figure out what to do with it. The little guy is KO'd for now, but don't worry! That droid isn't down yet. :) I had a lot of fun with the dumb breakfast scene. Poor Finn has *zero* spice tolerance. Thanks so much for reading, and reviews make my day!
Poe and Finn followed Kes into the living room. Finn was pleased to find that he only needed help managing the two steps that led them into the sunken space; otherwise he could cross the short distance on his own. He quivered like a blade of grass in a windstorm, but he made it. He sat heavily on the couch and Poe sat beside him, focused intensely on his father. Kes settled near them in a deeply padded chair and folded his arms in front of his chest.

"Well…where to start." Kes scratched at the back of his head.

"How about, how you knew about the attack on D'Qar." Poe suggested.

"Yeah, did survivors make it out to spread the word?" Finn asked hopefully.

"You made it sound like everyone on Yavin already knows." Poe added.

"The whole Galaxy already knows." Kes arched a brow. "The footage is on every channel in every system. I guess some Republic representatives were supposed to meet with General Organa yesterday, only when they showed up they found nothing but a crater where Base used to be. They surveyed the attack-site and gathered footage from probes that you guys placed in the system. Showed two Star Destroyers coming in hot and blowing the hell out of everything, and then transports and ships escaping into deep space. That's all anyone has seen…” He met Finn's eyes, "so it doesn't seem like any other survivors have come forward. Yet." He added hastily at the look on Poe's face.

Finn could feel Poe tensing beside him.

"Shit." Poe bit out, his eyes focused on anything but the bounty board. He stood, pacing jerkily back and forth.

"Wasn't anything you could've done, Poe." Kes offered.

"I know that!" He half shouted. He felt as if fire were catching in his chest, swarming up his throat. "I know there's not a *fucking thing* I can do about it because I've got no goddamn team, no crew, I've got no ship, I've got no General—" He bit back the rant that wanted to burst free and sat, gulping down a steadying breath, his hands clenched to trembling fists.

Finn hesitantly placed his hand over Poe's. The pilot turned his head towards the bookshelf to his right; he was a second away from crying again, and the care in Finn's face would set him off for sure. Finn broke the tense silence. "Admiral Ackbar was a war hero, right? If the Republic worlds know
he was captured, surely they're not just taking that without a fight."

"I'm sure they're not, but I'm not exactly in the position to be getting that information. But, even if they want to fight back," he met Poe's smoldering eyes, "they've got no idea where the First Oder is." He switched away from the glowing bounty board and to another channel that displayed news from the Core systems. Poe gasped.

"Is that Coruscant?"

It was chaos. Crowds were swelling like waves, and peace-keeping craft strobed with emergency lights, bobbing about the throng like buoys in a rough sea. Terrified people of a multitude of species were trampling one another in their rush to get away from the danger. Artillery and lazar shots were fired, homemade bombs thrown, and ground troops clashed with angry looking civilians. Smoke gushed from craterous wounds in the nearest buildings. Finn's stomach lurched as someone either fell or jumped in desperation from a blazing skyscraper, and he hastily looked away.

Kes met their horrified faces with a somber nod. "This has been going on all night—popping up all over the planet like wildfires. Old Empire loyalist cells and underground First Order fanatics have been attacking every landmark and Republic building they can get their hands on."

"But…" Finn sputtered, "Where are these fanatics coming from? I thought Coruscant used to be the seat of the Republic."

"It was," Kes sighed. "But that's not all it's ever been. For longer than you've even been alive, it used to be the seat of the Empire. And old loyalties die hard. I don't know if the First Order directed all this chaos, or if some loyalists thought the timing was right with the attack on D'Qar, but it doesn't really matter. Things are coming to a head."

He idly flipped a few more stations and Finn's breath caught. An antique X-wing was streaking through a darkening sky like a fiery dart, smoke pluming from it in a black arc.

"That's us!" He gasped.

"Yeah…" Poe said softly. It was unsettling to see it like this, shot hastily from some Control Tower camera. The freefall and the crash had been a blur of terror and pure adrenaline that he could thankfully remember little of. From the ground it looked slower, almost gentle, like a paper ship thrown from a child's hand. The X-wing lurched and then disappeared from view out in the green distance. The footage cut to a yellow-skinned Twi'lek woman speaking and pointing to a map of the area where Red had slammed into the earth.

Finn thought, at first, that he couldn't understand her because she was speaking so rapidly, but he quickly realized it was another language all together, full of rolling consonants and flowing vowels. He looked to Poe and Kes and found that if they were confused by this, they were doing a good job hiding it. Poe met Kes' eyes and nodded sourly.

Much to Finn's surprise, when Poe next spoke, the same language flowed from his mouth.

"What?" Finn gaped at him, dumbstruck.

"Oh, sorry—I hear Yavini and I just slip into it without thinking," Poe shrugged, switching effortlessly back to Basic. Finn had known, of course, that Poe understood several languages, but he'd only ever heard him speak Basic before. He also knew that it was neither the time nor the place for him to be feeling so aroused at the sound of it, not here in front of his father; not the face of such dire news. He bit the inside of his cheek and hoped neither of them noticed the blush slowing
creeping up his neck.

Finn cleared his throat. "So uh…what'd she say?"

"She said that a 'craft of likely Resistance origins crashed into the Baleñen jungle, and that the site is still under investigation. And that it's believed that any passengers died on impact.'"

"Oh…but…surely they'd know we made it out. I mean…there aren't any…any remains or anything." Finn's arousal withered and died at the thought of forensic teams scraping them into body bags.

Poe arched a brow at his father. "Dad came up with a plan last night and contacted Central Control about it. They're going to pretend that I died in the crash." He explained. "To keep Bounty Hunters from snooping around."

Finn, having never had a family or close friends until recently, couldn't quite comprehend the enormity of that pronouncement, of the ties it would sever and the relationships it would strain. "That's a good idea." He nodded his head, considering. "Should I have died in it to?"

Poe breathed hard out of his nose. He didn't like to hear Finn speak so lightly about his death, even if it was all a giant ruse.

"Well…I wasn't sure it'd be wise to even announce that you two were traveling together or that you were still affiliated with the Resistance. If someone figures out Poe made it out alive, they'd automatically assume you might still be with him. It'd double the pressure on you both." Kes stated.

"Hmm…I guess." Finn was surprised at his disappointment; he liked the idea of being involved in a governmental scheme.

"There's a bit more as well…" Kes continued on. "A few planets have openly declared themselves for the First Order."

"Let me guess: Korriban, Rattatak, Csilla,-" Poe began to sarcastically count across his fingers.

"Those, and Nal Hutta and Nar Shaddaa."

"What?" Finn and Poe said in unison. Finn had long known from his history lessons that the First Order and the Empire before it had disdained the careful neutrality of Hutt space. Hutts had held onto their autonomy with tooth and nail, though they possessed neither. "Why have they taken a side now?" Finn asked.

"Don't know, exactly," Kes admitted. He turned off the datapad and set it aside, placing his elbows on his knees and solidly meeting their eyes. "They aren't the super powers they used to be; once the Republic regained control, they knocked the legs out from under their crime syndicates. I imagine they feel a little bitter about that."

"Or they've got information that we don't." Poe pointed out.

"That's a possibility." Kes sighed. He sat back in his chair and Poe was once again struck by how old his father looked. He suddenly wanted to stand and go outside, far away from this conversation. "The point is—lines are being drawn. It'll come to open war soon, I think."

"Good." Poe said hotly. "The sooner they come out into the open, the sooner I've got a clear target to shoot at."
This unnerved Finn. He could very easily imagine Poe, fearless in his loss, diving recklessly into a hopeless battle.

"Well, you're not going to have anything to shoot with if I don't get into town soon." Kes stood, crossing back into the kitchen and gathering up Poe's list of goods and a stylus. "Here, Finn, look this over and see if you can think of anything else you two will need."

"For?" Finn questioned as he took the list from Kes.

"We can't stay here, Finn. One Bounty Hunter has already come by looking for me." Poe stated.

"I know we can't stay—but where are we going, and how are we gonna get there?"

Poe swallowed, averting his eyes for a fraction of a second, but it was enough to let Finn know how wretched he felt. "We're gonna sell my mom's old A-wing—should get us enough credits for a new ship and supplies. As for where…I have no idea yet."

"Oh…are you sure you guys want to do that?"

Poe's face softened, and he met his eyes with a gentle laugh. If it came down to a ship or Finn, there was absolutely no contest. "Yeah."

Finn nodded, and turned his attention to the list Poe had written up.

*Clothing (SM for me SL for Finn, shirts, boxers, pants—everything)*

*Toilet stuff*

*Food Rations*

*Eating utensils*

*Standard Med kit*

*Standard tool kit*

*Bed stuff*

*Detergent*

*New comms*

*At least one datapad*

*Lube (I'm so sorry dad)*

Finn gave Poe a look of wry disbelief. "Really?"

Poe shrugged indifferently, though he blushed like a setting sun. Finn cracked a grin and wracked his brains for anything else they might need. "Oh. Hey Poe, can you write down 'blasters'?" Though he could have written it himself, he would have been embarrassed for Kes to see how childishly sloppy his handwriting was, especially when set against Poe's tight, legible script.
"You don't have to worry about blasters," Kes said from the kitchen as he pulled on his boots. "I've still got a few in good shape. Not as sophisticated as the newest models, but they'll hold a charge for weeks. Can't beat that."

"Oh—thank you, Kes, sir."

"You're not gonna drop the 'sir', are you?" Kes gave him a lopsided smile.

"Probably not…sir."

Poe got up and returned the list to his father and Finn took the opportunity to stare around the living room. It had brightened with the dawn, though the light was still soft and watery, scrubbed clean by the night's storm. He'd caught a glimpse of a few hard photos sitting framed upon the bookshelves and he slowly stood and wobbled over to them. He was so tickled to be able to do so on his own that he hardly noticed Poe softly approaching at his side. There was a photo of Kes, younger by decades, embracing a woman with dark, wavy hair and a joyous smile. Finn was struck by her eyes. They were just like Poe's—dark as earth, heavy lidded, and full of barely concealed humor.

"Is that your mom?" He asked, not taking his eyes from the photo.

"Yeah." Poe said softly. "That's her. Her name was Shara Bey."

"She was beautiful." Finn murmured. The longer he stared at the image, the more he saw of Poe in each of them; in Kes' jawline and brows, in the bridge of Shara's nose, even in the subtle posing of Shara's hand on Kes' shoulder. His mouth seemed to be a compromise between the two of them; neither as full as Shara's, but not as thin as Kes'. It fascinated him, the fact that children were literally physical mixtures of their parents. He'd never considered this before, and he wondered suddenly if he had his mother's eyes or his father's, if he would recognize his grin in another person's face. He swallowed, his gaze dropping to the floor as the old emptiness twinged with a potent new pain.

Poe watched him carefully. He'd lost many loved ones in his life, but at least he had them to begin with. What must it be like, he wondered, to have started and grown with nothing. And to believe that was all there would ever be for you. His chest ached at the thought and he wrapped an arm around Finn' shoulders, squeezing him. You're not alone anymore.

Finn came back to himself and he forcibly focused on another photo. A smile jumped to his face and his sadness was shuttered quickly away. "Is that you?" He laughed. A wild-haired toddler with a gap-toothed grin was sitting on Shara's lap, a stuffed bantha clasped in his tiny hand.

Poe chuckled, removing his arm to scratch at the back of his head. "Pretty cute, huh?"

Finn picked up the photo with a laugh. "Yeah." He could see hints of Poe's adult face hiding beneath the baby-fat. Quickly he looked to another. Two children were sitting submerged up to their stomachs in a creek, the sandy-haired boy holding up a many-legged crustacean with an expression of both disgust and triumph, while Poe looked warily at it. Finn would've laughed, but he felt he'd had the wind knocked out of him. The boy was obviously Rhys. Even after his trip through Poe's datapad, Finn had had no idea that they'd known each other for so long. Pretty much all of his life… an alien sense of shameful jealousy and inadequacy coiled in the pit of his stomach. He'd never really thought about what it was that Poe had seen in him, but he suddenly felt that whatever it was could never hold a candle to what Poe had had with Rhys. That's not true…Poe said he loves you. Finn soothed himself. Yeah, but only because you asked him to say it, another, colder part of him answered.

Shaken, he licked his lips and looked to another photo, and was surprised to find that he'd seen it
before. There were Poe and Rhys as young men, proudly holding up their acceptance placards to the Republic Academy.

Poe followed Finn's gaze knowingly, and he stared hollowly at the image, and at the next that Finn moved to. It was a shot of his entire crew, shortly after he'd been made Black Leader. His throat tightened and he tore his eyes away as if he'd been scalded. Nearly everyone in that photo was now dead.

"I'm sorry," Poe stated in a voice of careful control, "I can't look at these right now. I'm gonna go outside for a bit." Finn felt Poe ghosting away from his side and he'd hardly turned to look at him before he heard the front door open and close. He set the photo of Poe's team back on the shelf, understanding all at once why Poe had left and feeling like an idiot. He's just lost a lot of friends...of course he wouldn't want to look at these. What was I thinking? He heard heavier, booted feet walking towards him and turned to find Kes staring fondly at his collection of photos as if they were old friends.

"You know," Kes carefully began, "after Starkiller Base, he commed me for two hours straight about you."

This caught Finn off guard. "Really?"

"Mmm hmm. Made me happy. I was worried he'd be like his old man and never really try again." He picked up a photo of Shara by herself, her fathomless brown eyes staring warmly past the boundaries of the flimsy and right into the old man's heart. "Shara died when he was eight." He shook his head. "Fell and hit her head—stupidest thing in the galaxy—but that was all it took."

"I'm sorry...Poe said she was a great pilot."

"She was." He clapped Finn on the shoulder. "She would've liked you." He motioned Finn after him, and held the younger man's arm in a wiry grip to keep Finn from stumbling on the short stairs up out of the living room. Finn leaned heavily against the counter as Kes gathered up a bag.

"Was it hard for you? Growing up under the First Order?"

Finn shrugged. "No...not really. I didn't realize how wrong it all was until I got out. I just thought that was how everyone was brought up, you know? It was normal for me."

Kes shook his head. "Did you ever know your real family?"

"No." Finn admitted and Kes was struck at the way Finn averted his eyes; he could see the lost child in him so clearly it was as if his adult self has simply fallen away like spent petals. "Seeing your family...it made me wonder what mine would've been like if...well...if I hadn't been taken from them. Poe looks a lot like Shara. It made me wonder who I look like, you know? I hadn't thought about that before. Every day it's like there's a new thing that makes me think oh, that's how it should've been."

Kes' mouth thinned with pity and he placed a rough-skinned hand on the young man's shoulder. "The First Order has more to answer for than I ever imagined. That's a lot to ask anyone to bear, but Poe was right—you carry it well." Finn looked away, embarrassed of his praise, and Kes squeezed his shoulder. "I know it's not the same, but...you're welcome in this family."

Finn couldn't speak, but Kes understood him anyways.

They found Poe sitting in the open cockpit of his mother's A-wing. The spade-shaped ship was
nestled up against the small garage and its sharp edges glinted like knives in the misty sunlight. Finn held a blaster at ease in his hand—Kes had insisted on his taking it, especially if he was going outside. He felt extremely foolish to be openly armed while wobbling around in his boxers, but even so, the blaster was a comforting and familiar weight. Kes wore a blaster holstered at his belt, and he carried a spare for Poe in his right hand. His left was steady at Finn's elbow as they slowly made their way across the uneven yard. Finn was amazed at his continuing strength and he felt buoyed from within; as if his literal trial-by-fire had forced the weakness to loosen its hold. Not even the creeping pain up his legs and back daunted him from the short walk.

Poe tore his eyes from the dash as they neared and he hurriedly doffed the snug flight helmet that had been Shara's. That at least, would not be sold. He wouldn't allow it. He had placed his hands on every switch, button, and lever as tenderly as if they were old friends. He wanted to thank the ship, though he knew it would sound silly to anyone else, but he owed his career, his passion to sitting in this seat as a child. He patted the dash. "Thanks...for everything." He quietly said, and he stood from the cramped space and climbed down to the ground below, his mother's helmet clamped under his arm.

"You ready?" Kes asked gently as Poe met them.

"Yeah…I guess so." Poe looked back up at the A-wing.

"Here, take this. Especially if you're going to be outside. You can't afford to be unarmed right now."

Poe took the offered blaster and stood with Finn as Kes disappeared into the garage. The low thrum of engines kicking on drowned out the birdsong and Kes brought the speeder around, backing nearly flush with the sharp nose of the A-wing. He stepped out of the speeder with a long magnetic towing cable in his hands and he fastened this to front of the ship with a solid thunk. Kes climbed back into the speeder and slammed the door shut.

"Poe, turn those repulsorlifts on and get the landing struts drawn up." Kes called over the noise of his speeder.

Poe quickly climbed back up the short ladder and leaned into the cockpit. The anti-gravity repulsors whirred to life and Finn could feel the displaced air gushing past his legs as the A-wing began to hover. The landing struts clanked seamlessly into ports on the ships belly. Poe pulled away from the cockpit and pushed against the open canopy. It slowly lowered with a hiss and Poe dropped the ground, joining Finn by the passenger side of Kes' speeder.

"It'll probably take me most of the day to get this ship sold and to find one that meets your specs. I'll call the house comm if I run into trouble. You two be careful, alright? Keep an eye on each other."

Poe nodded and Finn answered with a sincere, "Yes, sir."

Kes waved and then started the speeder forwards. The A-wing drifted disjointedly after it like a blind drunk. Poe watched the pair with a feeling of exhaustion that grew as they diminished, lost to sight around a green bend in the dirt road. He stared wordlessly at the spot from which they'd vanished.

Poe had few memories of his mother that remained undimmed in the 24 years since her death. When he tried to remember her, he instead found photos or holo-recordings parading through his mind under the guise of memory. He'd lost the truth of her, in most aspects. But whenever he sat in that A-wing, he could feel her guiding hands on his. He could hear her voice as if she were standing right beside him again, and he knew that those memories were truly his. Let the ship tell you what it wants to do, and then help it do it. You're overthinking things, Poe. A pilot acts on instinct. He felt Finn's hand on his shoulder and he came back to himself. He looked up and was anchored in Finn's dark
"You've been on your feet a lot today—how's your back?" Poe asked in such a casual voice that Finn was taken aback.

"Better than it was yesterday."

Poe nodded into the distance. "Let's take a walk. Not a long one," he added hurriedly. He took Finn's hand as he started slowly on a pathless course through the ankle-high grasses and ferns and Finn could hardly express his happiness at the simple touch. He squeezed reassuringly against Poe's fingers. Poe led them some fifty feet from the garage towards the edge of the fenced in lot and Finn halted, his mouth falling open at the sight of the tree rooted before them. He distantly felt Poe's fingers slip from his as the pilot sat with a heavy sigh, his back pressed up against the trees whirled, grey bark.

Though Finn knew little about trees and would've had trouble distinguishing one species from another, he was one hundred percent certain that this tree was something special. Perhaps even unique. He felt as drawn to it as a moth to a flame, as if he'd been magnetized to its sighing mass. Outwardly there was nothing drastically different dividing this tree from its neighbors, unless it was the nebulous blue light caught in its canopy, shimmering about the edges of its dark glossy leaves, forever rippling in a hypnotic, unpredictable pulse. Finn took a mindless step forwards, his hand reaching instinctively for the trunk.

"What is this?" Finn asked and a small smile tugged at Poe's mouth.

"It's a Force Tree."

"This…is the Force?" He said numbly.

"Well, the tree isn't, but that pull…the light you can see? That's it."

"Rey can use this?" His fingers pressed into the smooth bark and he felt suddenly as if the rest of the world had faded into the background, benign and thrumming with the same pulse that moved the tree, and he was so full of being and belonging that he could have wept; the aloneness he'd felt while trying to picture his mother and father was swept up in the tide and carried away. He was both outside of himself and so deeply connected that he couldn't quite tell where he ended and where the plants, animals, and Poe began. He removed his hand from the bark, and the sensation faded somewhat, though it remained rooted in the back of his mind.

Poe leaned against the bark as the same pulse eased his sadness from a crushing boulder of outsized human emotion, to a tiny grain of sand on a cosmic beach. "Yeah, this is what the Jedi can tap into. In a Force Tree, it's close enough to the surface that even people like us can feel it."

"It's beautiful." Finn managed.

"It is." Poe agreed. "Everything that lives or has ever lived—it comes from this. And it goes back to this. It's the source."

Finn understood now why Poe had needed to visit this tree and he was glad that such a thing existed. In the shade thrown from its leaves, death didn't seem so cruel. His eyes still caught in the swaying canopy, Finn sunk down to sit with him, their blasters sitting on the ground at their sides. He took his hand again and Poe held it.

"If the Jedi could use this—how could it have gone so wrong?" Finn asked at length.
"You don't have to be good to use the Force. Kylo Ren uses it too, remember? And so did Palpatine—all the Sith."

Finn shuddered. It was a violation to imagine such benign energy being twisted to violence and terror. "That's disgusting."

Poe shrugged. "Even if someone like Ren manipulates it like he does, it's also beyond him. It's not good or evil. It just is. We kind of...impose ourselves on it, I guess." He sighed, leaning back and closing his eyes. For a long while they sat in a meditative silence, allowing the flow of energy to fill them to the brim until Finn thought that their breaths and heartbeats had synched with the deep, living pulse of the Force. The dull pain in Finn's back was drawn out like venom from a wound and he suddenly felt impulsively happy, as if joy had been waiting just beneath the surface and the Force had set it free. A smile found his lips and he looked at Poe's peaceful face.

"Could you say something in that language again?" Finn asked.

Poe parted an eye and arched a brow. "In Yavini? Uh...okay, sure. What do you want me to say?"

Finn shrugged. "I don't care. Anything."

Poe bit his lip as he considered. When that rippling language came flowing from his mouth Finn found goosebumps scattering across his skin in spite of the rising heat. Poe fell silent and met his eyes with a vulnerable expression that made Finn gulp.

"What'd you say?" He dared to ask.

"Something really lame."

"Yeah?" Finn brought his head closer to him.

"Yeah. Something along the lines of 'I love you, and that you get me higher than flying.'" Poe's breath whispered across his lips.

Finn brought a hand to his jaw, his eyes tight on Poe's. "I love you. I need you." He didn't care that they were outside—in the cradle of the Force Trees roots he felt utterly protected. Their lips dragged across one another, as Poe drew him into a gulping kiss.

"It's gonna—nnhh—be pretty wild if we do it here," Poe managed.

Finn assumed Poe was referring to being out in the open, but he was too far gone to care about it. "Okay,"

Poe grinned. Oh, baby, you have no idea. He placed a hand on the back of Finn's neck as he leaned against the cool earth, pulling Finn down with him, their bodies flush against one another. Finn stared heavily down at Poe, his heart racing, riding the ethereal flow channeled through the tree. They ground together, and each touch and caress rippled outwards and returned in an echo of sensation until every cell seemed to vibrate. Though Poe's mouth had left his neck, Finn could feel the ghost of his lips there, could feel his tongue sliding down his chest even as his mouth wrapped around his cock. Finn's breath caught as Poe's head bobbed. It was as if every moment was held and continually experienced, frozen in time, and he dazedly understood what Poe had meant. He was somehow more than himself, could feel more than he should be capable of.

Poe cried out as Finn pressed slowly, carefully into him and he drew his knees to his chest. Dirt and leaves dug into his back but even the small life force in those only added to the high of pure sensation; it didn't matter—they were part of him as well. Finn moaned and shivered atop him; he'd
never taken Poe in this way, never held a position of such physical power over him. Even without the cascading energy of the Tree enveloping him, he would've have been aroused out of his mind at the way Poe squirmed tensely beneath him, at how desperately Poe clutched at his back and kissed him as if he were dying of thirst. With the Tree, it was more than either of them could handle.

Poe threw his head back as Finn began to thrust, his weight pinning him, rocking him, grinding against his cock. The world fell away, the leaves above him pulsed with life-light, and the line between he and Finn faded and blurred until he could not be sure if he was coming or expanding into everything; as if the lights that burned in them had brimmed over the vessels of their bodies and seeped into that greater stream while they both still lived. Poe could not even form words, and an inarticulate cry wound out of him as he was emptied. Finn groaned, Poe's orgasm quaking through him and inside him until he could hardly breathe, and his arms tightened around the other man, trying hold them both together. Poe felt it rocketing through Finn as if through himself and he rode that wave a second time as Finn came, and Poe thought for sure that he would die, that his body would simply dissolve away like sand in the sea. Finn collapsed on top him, his breath hot against Poe's sweaty skin, their hearts hammering through one another in time with the ancient pulse that flowed around them, over and over, unstoppable. They lay in the dappled shade, panting and gasping, trying to put themselves back together. In the humid breeze, the Tree gently swayed and the light danced.

Chapter End Notes

*Video Game Voice*
Sexual Achievement Unlocked!
New Ability: Trippy Force Tree Sex!
With this skill, you gain the ability to feel like you're orgasming with the freakin' universe. Use carefully.

Haha, I had to post this one on "World Sex Day", go figure. I set my self a challenge of writing a sex scene in three paragraphs rather than three pages (otherwise, I would've blown my brain out). Probably not the smartest idea to go at it out in the open when you're hunted fugitives, but sometimes the mood just strikes. This chapter was interesting to write; Poe and Finn both thinking some sad, deep thoughts, poor guys. I swear to Gandhi, BB-8 will be in the next chapter. Timing-wise, there still wasn't a good way to cut back to him.

As always, thank you so much for reading, and reviews are sweet manna from heaven. :)

:(
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Finn stood beneath the showerhead, cool water cascading down his back and trickling through his hair. He had been trying for the past 15 minutes to articulate just what it was he'd felt with Poe under that tree, but he'd only managed a few disconnected words. He thought he knew now what to expect when he orgasmed, but this had been almost frighteningly overwhelming. Too much to handle. Poe stood before him, soapsuds clinging together and sliding in groups down his glistening body, dripping from his cock. Poe had the washcloth to his face, and shell-shocked as he was, Finn couldn't help but ogle him. Though he'd only been in the Yavin sun for a little while, Finn fancied that Poe's tan skin had already taken on a deeper golden tone. Poe was being uncharacteristically silent, and Finn figured he too was having trouble expressing himself.

"That was…" Finn started for the tenth time. He trailed off, shaking his head and scattering droplets of water. "That was…"

"Like having sex with hyperspace?" Poe offered.

"You would have thought about sex with hyperspace." Finn grinned.

"Yeah, I would've." Poe laughed.

"It was…insane. I could feel everything happening to me, but I could feel everything happening to you too. Like I was you around me, and me inside you and…" He shook his head. "I'm pretty sure I even felt the leaves and grass. It's like I was everything." A shudder wound involuntarily up his spine. "I want to do that again right now, but I also never want to do that again. Does that make sense?"

"I told you it'd be crazy. Let me under for a sec," Poe slid past him into the falling water, his stomach and cock pressing wetly against Finn's. Finn groaned as he moved into the open space. Poe continued on as if he hadn't done a thing and Finn felt a flair of amused frustration. "But yeah—I'm good for a while on mystical universe sex. I feel like…like someone just shot a live current through my brain." He paused, considering, "and my cock." He tilted his head back, letting the water run down his face and neck and then he gave Finn a heavy-lidded smile. "Oh man, that was good though—having you on top of me. Missionary's always nice. You really took charge, baby."

"Yeah?" Finn breathed. The way Poe was looking at him made his stomach tighten, though he was so exhausted he could do little more than stand there.

"Mmm hmm," Poe said with half-closed eyes and Finn found himself suddenly pinned against the slick shower tile, cool water dripping from him and onto Poe. Poe rubbed sinuously up his body as he licked a swelling bead of water from Finn's nipple, his tongue tracing the clear cool line to the taut tendons of his neck. Poe's hands settled on his hips and Finn's cock twitched as Poe pressed them together. His whole body felt weirdly sensitive, as if all of his nerve-endings had been left raw from the Force. I can't take much more of this, Finn thought to himself, but he wrapped his arms around Poe's shoulders, his fingers flowing down the pilot's back like water as Poe kissed him. For several minutes they stood, kissing deeply, languidly.

Gods, his lips are amazing Poe thought as Finn's tongue twined into the back of his mouth and sent a pleasant shiver through his gut. He opened his eyes. The running water caught the room's overhead
light and glittered like lines of crystal down the warm umber of Finn's skin. He tugged gently on Finn's lower lip and was rewarded with a hot throb through Finn's cock.

"Ahn… Poe…” Finn breathed. Poe smiled as Finn's hands roved over the flair of his hips and dipped into the crack of his ass, spreading them apart, rubbing tentative circles around the tight ring of his anus but not yet daring to press in. Finn moaned against him—Poe's skin was so hot and plush he felt he could melt into it, and it pulsed beneath his touch. His heart began to race; he wondered if it would feel as tight around his finger as it did his cock. A breath caught in Poe's throat—though they'd had sex several times now, Finn had never explored him like this and it turned him on unbelievably.

Poe bit his lip, dropping his forehead against Finn's throat as he thrust his hips against Finn's fingers. Carefully, arms wrapped tightly around Poe, Finn pressed his middle finger inside of him up to his first knuckle. Poe's body clenched him, pulsing as if to draw him further inside. Poe's flushed lips parted wordlessly, but the heaviness of his breath urged Finn on. He pushed deeper into his velvety heat. Poe tensed around his finger with a quivering shudder.

"Ahh… easy, baby… I'm a little sore." Poe breathed at his neck, and suddenly Finn's finger was slipping from him. Finn gently held him to arm's length and he studied Poe's face with concern. Poe looked dazedly up at him, confused.

"Poe—did I hurt you? Earlier? I… didn't really know what I was doing and—"

"No," Poe laughed weakly. He was touched at Finn's innocent concern, and kissed him quickly before explaining with a soft expression, "You felt great, baby. It's just, spit isn't exactly the best lube in the galaxy. And we were really going at it out there."

"Oh no, I'm sorry," he hurried to apologize but Poe cut him off.

"Don't be. If I'd come any harder, I would've turned inside out." Poe kissed him tenderly, aware now that the water was quickly sliding from refreshingly cool to ball-numbingly frigid. He reached over and shut it off, disappointed at how quickly the mood had died, but also relieved. Though he wanted Finn constantly, he couldn't handle much more without a meal, some rest, and a lot of liquid. And, he thought dismally, they had more important things to be focusing on. "But— I could probably use a breather." He admitted.

Finn huffed a laugh and met Poe's eyes with a wry smile. "Then why all the nipple-licking and wet-body grinding?"

"I'm a cocktease, I guess?" Poe shrugged and grinned as he stepped out of the tub. He held his arms out, steadying Finn as the other man carefully lifted a foot over the shallow rim and planted it on the floor. His body had been fairly lenient towards him since the crash, but a twinge in the back of his thighs and calves warned him that he'd been pushing his luck with the day's exertions.

"What's a cocktease?" Finn asked, gripping his arms and then sitting heavily on the closed toilet. He had an idea, but wanted to hear it confirmed.

"Exactly what it sounds like: Someone who gets you all riled up and then won't put out, possibly resulting in a bad case of blue balls." Poe stood before the rooms short mirror as he rubbed a towel through his hair.

"Blue balls?" Finn likewise began to towel off. "Like… like a Duros, or something?"

Poe laughed so hard he had to sit down.
Poe opened the fridge, foraging around for something to drink while Finn lay back on the couch. Now that he was stretched out and clean, Finn felt almost like drifting off to sleep again. Already he was finding the sounds of Yavin, and more importantly, of Poe's home, to be comforting; the gentle hollow clanking of the wind chimes; the faint rustle of the plants sitting in the bright sunlight; the weird flute-like trills of birdsong and the sigh of the leaves swaying in the breeze. He would have been happy to call this place home if it hadn't been for the heat. They'd clothed as lightly as possible, pulling on their boxers and nothing else.

"Ugh, I feel like I just stepped out of the shower again." Finn moaned. He flung an arm over his eyes, disgusted at the sweat already beading his brow.

Poe hit a switch near the comm unit, and Finn heard machinery deep within the house clunking reluctantly to life. The heavy air dragged across his body as fans embedded in the ductwork picked up speed.

"That'll at least get the air moving," Poe stated as he patted Finn's shins. Finn drew them in towards his body and Poe sat down beside him. Finn stretched his legs back out across Poe's lap, delighting in the touch even as he regretted the added heat of him. "Here," Poe said and Finn removed his arm from his eyes; Poe was offering a sweating glass full of a cool mint colored liquid. He took it and the clinking of ice was like music to his ears. He'd almost tipped the glass to his lips when he froze, his eyes tightening suspiciously.

Poe laughed into his cup. "It's not spicy, if that's what you're worried about. It's sweet—you'll like it, trust me."

Finn arched a brow, clearly trying to decipher if Poe was leading him into another breakfast-style trap. He decided to chance it; the icy liquid washed over his tongue with a crisp honey flavor and left a citrus hint in its wake. He smiled approvingly at it.

"See?" Poe grinned. They sat comfortably together for several minutes and Poe found it disarmingly easy to forget that the Resistance had just been destroyed and that he had no idea what he was supposed to do about it. If he could keep it all in the background, he would've been happier than he'd been in years; sitting on the couch with someone he loved, sharing a drink, secure in knowing his father approved of the younger man. He would take Finn into town and show him the shops, buy him some Yavin desserts, take him around a few of the old ruins. But he couldn't shake the notion that his comfort and security were frail and passing things; an interlude in a chaotic song. He swallowed, eyes darting to his father's datapad that lay where he'd left it on the end table.

Finn carefully watched Poe's face as he sipped at his drink, aware of the subtle tightness in his jaw. He pulled himself into a sitting position, edging up against Poe's side as he draped an arm around his shoulders. Poe glanced at him with a smile that quickly faded.

"What are you thinking?" Finn asked.

Poe couldn't immediately say—it hurt him to admit it. His eyes dropped to the datapad. "That I don't know what to do."

Finn huffed a dry laugh. "Well, you're not alone there."

"Yeah, but I'm supposed to know what to do. Or to get orders from someone above me who does. I'm supposed to tell my…my team, and then get it done. I've never been in a position like this, Finn." He shook his head. "Even when I was captured or alone, I at least knew my team was out there somewhere; that the Resistance was still fighting the good fight. And now? I don't know."
Finn's face softened, though his arm tightened around Poe. For a long while, neither of them spoke. "You know," Finn began, "my first deployment was to a striking mining colony. It was supposed to be a discussion of terms to end the strike." Finn's eyes stared past the kitchen window and off into memory. "You should've seen those workers, Poe. That was the first time in my life I'd ever seen non-human species—and they were just skin and bones, cut to pieces. For a second I thought they looked pathetic. Afraid. Powerless. And then Phasma ordered us to shoot them."

Poe winced, though he was riveted.

"And I couldn't do it." A wan smile tugged at his lips. "I stood there and thought I don't know what to do. And then I was the powerless one. I was the one who was afraid. And I thought, afterword, that I'd failed because I did nothing. And then came Jakku, and you, and Rey and..." he trailed off. "I guess my point is, even if you don't know what to do, sometimes it doesn't matter. Sometimes it's not up to you, and things will just happen."

Poe stared at him, a lump starting in his throat. "Yeah—but you still chose not to pull the trigger. You chose to help me. To help us."

Finn smiled. "So when the time comes, do you really think you won't choose to do the right thing? Because you will—that's just who you are."

"Dammit," Poe wiped hurriedly at his eyes, Finn's quiet surety too much for him to handle. "Well, I hope it happens soon, because I kind of hate sitting here crying."

"I know."

"But...you must've been so scared when they told you to kill those miners. And the villagers. It must've been awful."

"It was." Finn agreed, "But—I just kind of shut down, I guess. Not the best reaction when you might get shot."

Poe gave a watery laugh. "Not much worse than what I do when I'm scared. I become a snarky asshole, which, for some reason, makes people want to shoot me even more."

"Yeah, I know. I couldn't believe you made fun of Kylo Ren's mask to his face."

"You heard that?" Poe asked, shocked.

"I was just a few troopers to the left of you."

"Huh." Poe trailed off with the creeping sensation that maybe there were powers beyond his control moving them like pieces on a giant game board. Maybe he and Finn had been destined to end up together. He pictured Snap shoving little models of themselves about a Galactic Expansion style board with glee, and his heart ached. "I know it's after the fact but...it makes me feel good knowing that you were so close." Poe glanced up at him.

"We'll figure something out." Finn assured him, and Poe's chest swelled with love for him. He kissed him softly, continually amazed that though Finn had been denied gentleness and hope for most of his life, he'd always been a gentle, hopeful man in spite of it. The First Order hadn't removed those traits—they'd only strengthened them.

"Gods," Poe breathed as he sat back. "If I didn't have you with me, I'd be losing my fucking mind right now."
Finn laughed. "I don't know *what* I'd be doing. I don't even know how the outside world works—like... money, buying things, flying a ship. I'd just be wondering around hoping Bounty Hunters didn't get me until I starved to death probably."

"Well, we definitely aren't clear on the Bounty Hunter front." Poe stared through the house, in the direction of Merillo. "I wonder how dad's doing out there?"

Finn followed his gaze. "I'm sure he's okay. I kind of get the impression he can handle himself."

Poe snorted a laugh as he returned his attention to the datapad. "Yeah, no kidding. The man can hack through fifty feet of jungle with a machete in three minutes. He could track a fart through the woods. In the fog. At night."

Finn laughed.

"And he's a good shot too. But," Poe leaned closer conspiratorially, "I'm a better one—I threw our last shooting match so he'd win. Don't tell him though." He winked, and then picked the datapad up and turned it on.

"I won't," Finn grinned, perking up as Poe began to flick through the channels. Coruscant was still reeling from one attack after another. Footage of the wreckage of D'Qar was shown, black smoke still boiling from the shattered earth where Finn had felt so safe, where he'd learned how to love, where he'd experienced so many firsts. His mouth tightened—he missed the small box of Poe's room more than he'd ever have expected, and he couldn't believe that just a few days ago he'd been wanting to get *out* of it, that he'd felt cramped and claustrophobic. He missed the blue light of BB-8's charging port. He missed Kalonia's sardonic smile. He missed the friends he had slowly been making out of Snap, Jess, Ziff and the rest, missed seeing Poe walk off the tarmac in his orange flight-suit, and missed peeling him *out* of that flight-suit. He dared to look at Poe's eyes and was surprised by the hardness of them as the pilot focused on the footage.

In the report, Leia was only mentioned in the context of her continued absence. Her bounty was still active, and this gave Poe some hope—whatever was happening, at least the First Order was just as clueless as to her location as they were. There were interviews with anxious family members who had not heard from their loved ones at Base. Poe hastily switched away from them; their shaking voices and desperate eyes were more than he could bear right now. He opened an entirely new screen. This was mostly blank except for an open box, with arrows to either side of it. Poe typed in a long string of numbers, pressed the arrow to the right of the box, and then waited.

A scree of static filled their ears.

"Damn it." Poe muttered.

"What was that?" Finn asked.

"That was the last emergency frequency the Resistance used. But it's switched up every few days to keep security tight—and the only way to get the *new* frequency is to have contacted someone through the *old* frequency. If anyone's left, we missed the window."

"So...what do we do then? Just keep trying new frequencies until you get a hit?"

"Pretty much." Poe sighed. "But there have to be a *billion* different channels just in the *Core.*" He heard C-3PO's prim voice in his head, telling him precisely how dismal his odds were. "It'd be like finding one particular grain of sand on a beach."

Finn's mouth thinned. "Is that the only way we could find them?"
Poe’s eyes went wide. "Shit—if I could just remember the code for the General's ship!" And not just that—I could try for Snap too...maybe some of the transports. For a wild second he looked around the room for BB-8. The droid would certainly remember the codes for every Resistance ship. And then his hope went out just as suddenly as it had sparked. BB-8 was gone. His mouth worked. "Well...I'll just do it the old fashioned way," he said in a carefully level voice that Finn was rapidly realizing Poe only used when he was trying not to cry. It made Finn's heart twist.

He wanted to comfort him, but at the same time he also didn't want to inadvertently push him into a crying jag. He took his hand and squeezed. Poe returned the pressure though he was unable to meet Finn's eyes. Poe stared hard at the screen and began the long task of finding one channel out of billions. Finn sat in silence, watching, hoping with each new frequency that they'd hear a familiar voice. But after half an hour, Finn's attention began to wane; he lay back against the couch and Poe hardly noticed. He blearily stared down his chest at Poe's hunched form, listened to the nearly obsessive switch from channel to channel. He fell asleep to the sound static.

Ozmyn tapped a finger to his teeth as he considered the disassembled astromech droid before him. He knew now that the droid went by the identification code "BB-8" and that it practically idolized Dameron. Even more importantly, Dameron's fondness for the droid bordered on paternal; in BB-8's memories, Dameron constantly asked the droid for it's opinion, checked up on it, unloaded his personal feelings on it as if it were a large, metallic diary, and referred to it as 'buddy' and 'pal' with sickening regularity. Of course, it seemed that Dameron called almost everyone he came across some variation of those two words.

Oz shook his head. He couldn't understand why any sane individual would waste so much time and effort on a droid—a machine. It was little more than a glorified navcomputer. Granted, it had shown some spirit down in the cargo hold, zapping his leg and then cursing at him—but that was simply creative programming. In any case, Dameron's and BB-8's mutual idiocy was something he could use to his advantage.

He stood from the Brejiner's computer terminal, stretching his neck from side to side and uncurling his lekku. He'd spent so much time parked before the terminal as the droid's 14 year's worth of data had uploaded that his body had kinked up. But he now felt confident that he knew Dameron better than he knew his own mother. The pilot was loyal to a fault and didn't hesitate to put his life on the line for a friend. Predictable hero-type. Should be easy enough to lure him out with the right incentive. And FN-2187 will follow after him like a lost pup. And then —bam—9 million credits.

He walked up to his cluttered work station. Kneeling, he pulled a metal crate out from under the table and unlatched it. His leg throbbed where the droid had jabbed it, and he shot a glare at the astromech, though of course it couldn't see with it's head half pulled apart and it's memory cortex strewn about the floor like colorful intestines. He smirked at the sight as he rummaged through the crate, past bolts, gears, and detonators until his fingers closed around a thin, square device about the size of an identification card.

Oz held it up to the light with a triumphant grin. The homing beacon was practically obsolete compared to the newest models on the market, but it was still adequate for his needs. He crossed back to the sad shell of BB-8 and reached into the open half-dome head, affixing the tracker to the boxy housing of a processor—an area the droid's internal manipulators would be unable to reach.

With the Resistance in tatters and flying an antiquated ship, Oz felt certain that if Dameron had escaped the slaughter, he would seek shelter on his home planet. And you, my little friend, will lead me right to him. He checked the Brejiners sensors; the tracking device was transmitting beautifully and the ship had locked onto the signal. Of course, the droid would sense the foreign signal, but it
would have to call for help if it hoped to do anything about it. And when it did, Dameron would come running. Oz left for his pilot's seat, and set course for Yavin IV.

Kes pursed his lips as he studied Poe's list in the bright sunlight. He'd found a buyer for Shara's ship that he imagined Poe would be pleased with—The Merillo Museum of the Republic—and, after scouring all of Merillo and neighboring Tax'aan, had settled on a ten-year-old SoroSuub Hyrotil light freighter. Hyrotills were fast ships with heavy shielding and sported a powerful set of forwards facing turbolasers. The slim, boat-keeled ship obviously had a storied past—it was pocked with scars along its narrow flanks and boasted an aftermarket installation that had made up Kes' mind: A gunner's turret had been grafted to the dorsal surface, and Finn had made it clear that he wanted a ship with a gunner's turret.

Kes had taken the ship into the air and tested it out. The Hyrotil seemed responsive enough to him, though he figured a pilot of his son's caliber would have higher standards. The navcomputer was fully functional, but in need of a software update. The lasercanons needed charging, but fired at his command. The satellite and sensor arrays had no trouble focusing on and identifying incoming ships. He'd jumped to hyperspace with the seller (who had understood the necessity of running a full diagnostic before purchase, though she'd looked ill all the same), and the engines had revved smoothly over from sublight to lightspeed and back again. He'd toured the inside, checked that the ships cramped kitchen could store and prepare food, examined the atmospheric filters and scrubbers, turned the compressed shower on and off, very dutifully tried out the toilet, peaked into the ship's two small sleeping cabins, and opened all the cargo bays he could find; he expected a few aftermarket hiding spots would turn up in due time.

It had taken most of the day to find, but the ship was just about perfect—except for the lime green upholstery in the cabin. It gave him a kick imagining Poe's disgusted face when he saw it. For an evil moment, he'd considered finding lime-green bedding to go with it, but figured it would take too much time, and he was tired. He could no longer pull an all-nighter with no consequences.

Now he stood on the main street holding Poe's list at arm's length and squinting to read his boxy script. Every few seconds he looked up and scanned the milling folk who walked and drove about on their day's errands. He was as eager to avoid friends as he was potential enemies; he didn't feel he could reasonably explain why he was in town buying a ship of all things, and stocking up for what looked like a societal meltdown. And friends were bound to ask him about Poe, and about the Resistance, and that awful incident with the Bounty Hunter. There was only so much he could say without arousing suspicion.

Okay…I think I got just about everything you could need for a kitchen. Got them a few sets of clothes—did I get socks? I'll have to double check. He tapped down the list. Got a medkit. Got the toolkit. Bathroom stuff—check. Bedclothes. New comms—check. Datapad—check. His eyes froze on the last item on the list.

Lube (I'm so sorry dad). He stared at it for few seconds, then threw his head back and guffawed in the middle of the street. Kes shook his head, grinning. That boy has balls the size of Yavin. Sheesh. He continued on with his shopping, chuckling to himself every now and again. He was getting ready to ferry his mountainous repulsorsledge of goods back to the new ship when his comm buzzed in his pocket. Quickly, eyes darting about the busy street, Kes pulled the comm free and checked the signal. His mouth dropped. It was an emergency ping from BB-8.

The droid woke in an alleyway. It quickly ran a diagnostic check as, for the second time in as many days, it's systems rebooted from a forced shutdown. Extensive damage to tool bay 3 and chassis
BB-8 came back to itself with a bleep of alarm, twisting it's head as far as it could to peer around the deserted alley. It caught just the tail end of a retreating figure; the white of his lekku stood out like fire in the bright sunlight as the twi'lek whipped around a bend in the street.

Twi'lek. Male. Bounty Hunter! Instantly it remembered being drawn into the huge rectangular ship, the violation of the restraining bolt, being brought before a computer terminal, and then…nothing. Nothing but this moment.

How did I get here? And where is here? It peered upwards, past the roofs of the buildings that hemmed it in; a murky redness suffused the blue sky, staining the bellies of the clouds with a bruised, purplish light. This suggested that it's current location orbited a red star or planet. Perhaps a gas giant. Yavin? Am I on Yavin?

[Hello?] It bleeped timidly and wobbled a few feet forwards across the uneven brick surface.

There was no answer, but the droid's sensitive aural receptors picked up the clattering of footsteps, the low hum of engines, and voices on the streets beyond. It held still, focusing hard on the flow of sound. They're speaking Yavini. This is Yavin. It tossed a nervous look in the direction the Twi'lek had disappeared.

The Bounty Hunter brought me here and…this signal…it's a tracking device. He wants me to lead him to Poe! It realized, aghast. Does that mean that Poe is okay? A low whine escaped it as it rocked uncertainly in place. I can't risk contacting him with this tracking device inside of me. Small, hinge-jointed internal manipulators unwound from their housings within it's cranium, reaching and stretching for the source of the signal. It was coming from just below a processor. No matter how it tried, it could not grasp the tracker.

Frustrated, BB-8 extended it's longest external arm and scrubbed at the smooth casing of it's head. Get out, get out of me! It succeeded in doing little more than further scratching it's paint. The droid buzzed like a hive of hornets, practically vibrating with anger. It clunked up to the foundation of the nearest building and repeatedly slammed it's head into the stone with a sound like a trash bin being kicked. The tracker held firmly in place.

What do I do? I have to get this thing out of me, but I can't contact Poe. And how would I contact him? His Resistance communicator is out of operational range. Maybe I could try Red? The house? No—the Bounty Hunter might trace the call.

I HATE that guy.

Well…if I can't contact Poe, maybe I could call Kes? The Bounty Hunter shouldn't even know who he is, and Kes could tell Poe what is happening. Kes could come take the tracker out of me, and then Ozmyn Heil couldn't follow me to Poe. If Poe is okay.

It tossed one more nervous look back at the alleyway and decided to move out into the crowd. Though the twi'lek could track him, BB-8 couldn't stand the thought of his eyes watching it from the shadows. It rolled unevenly out into the sunlight, thunking every few feet as it's dented chassis sent it lurching gracelessly forwards. BB-8 knew now precisely where it was—the main street of Merillo. The great pyramidal Tak'al loomed up to the south and air traffic buzzed about it's dark flanks. BB-8 had been through this city so many times it could've navigated it with it's lens turned off. It wobbled towards a pile of crates stacked up against a restaurant Poe and Rhys had frequented, and tucked behind their splinterly edges. It sent out an emergency call to Kes and hoped for the best.
Kes looked cautiously back and forth across the street as he picked up his comm. "BB-8?" He asked uncertainly.

The droid's tight whoop of relief and joy met his ears. [Kes! Are Poe and Finn okay?]

Kes strode quickly, all of his exhaustion evaporating into the humid air as he shoved the repulsorsledge up the ramp of the Hyrotil, exited the ship, and secured it behind him. "They're okay, but what happened to you? Poe said you blew up with Black One."

[I did but—I am in a predicament. A Bounty Hunter took me. He planted me here with a tracking device inside of me. I can't get it out on my own. There is a gap in my memory—I think he might have copied my data. He means for me to lead him to Poe. What should I do?] "What's he look like, this Bounty Hunter?" Kes reflexively felt for the blaster at his side.


"Got it. Where's the tracker located?"

[In my cranial housing, beneath a processor. None of my manipulators can reach it.]

"Okay. Where are you right now?"

[I am near the Halbin Day restaurant, facing Corellia street. Behind some crates.] BB-8 edged tightly against the building as a family of Rodians strode blithely by.

Kes paused, rubbing his chin. He'd need a magnetic ratchet to do anything for the droid. "Stay put for now. I'll be by in five minutes."

[But the Bounty Hunter…] BB-8 fretted.

"Don't worry about him—I've got a plan."

Ozmyn peered through the crowd, trying and failing to look casual and uninterested. Folk gave him a wide berth, though he'd put on clean clothing in an effort to blend in. It aggravated him, the way their eyes met his and then darted away as if he were beneath them. He checked his transceiver. The droid was still parked beside the restaurant he was standing across from, beneath the shade of an awning.

Come on, Dameron, come get your droid. Surely it's called for help by now.

He had just about decided to go and kick some urgency into the droid when he saw a human male approaching BB-8's hiding spot. The man cast a quick look about the crowd, and, though his eyes had lingered on him for no longer than anyone else, Oz felt certain that he had been marked. The man knelt beside a jumble of crates, momentarily disappearing from view. Oz made no attempt to hide his open staring as he wove through the shoppers. *This guy…I've seen him in the droid's memory. …Dameron's father—that's it!* He quashed the grin that threatened. *If anyone knows where Dameron is hiding, it'll be him. And if it turns out he's not on Yavin, then I'll have a valuable hostage.* He hung back as the old man stood and started back down Corellia Street with BB-8 wobbling along behind him.

Oz broke cover, striding as quickly as he could without drawing any more attention to himself. He rounded the edge of the restaurant and paused, flummoxed. They were gone. He stared wildly about
the houses and buildings, spinning on the spot before realizing that if anyone wanted a clear shot, he'd made himself into a nice target. He slunk back into the shadows of the crates that BB-8 had previously taken shelter behind, trying to ignore the reek of the restaurant's nerfs and si-hens. Had they gone inside though a back door, hoping to disappear in a crowd? Had they made a break for the jungle that bordered the village? Darted into a house? He held up his transceiver. He could see BB-8's marker moving steadfastly to the north. They were trying for the jungle.

He grit his teeth. He hadn't counted on a foot chase through wild terrain, but every second the old man spent with BB-8 was a second he could be using to warn his son. Oz figured he'd have the advantage—the man had to be in his sixties, and the droid was too damaged to travel at great speed. He cursed under his breath and started forwards, following quickly after the pulsing dot on his screen.

After what felt like half an hour of shoving his way through fronds and clinging vines, getting raked and stabbed with thorns, and eaten alive by insects, Oz was finally gaining on his prey. The reading for the droid was only 7 meters from him. The old man could be anywhere. He backed up against a rough barked tree and silently drew his blaster. Blaster-first, he edged out from behind the tree, senses peeled for the snap of a branch, or the rustle of leaves. He heard only a strange grinding sound. According to his transceiver, he was nearly right on top of the droid. He pushed through a bush covered in hanging blue flowers and stopped cold, his blaster falling limply to his side.

A shaggy nerf gazed back at him with limpid doe eyes as it browsed contentedly from the bush, blue flowers hanging from its mouth. BB-8's homing beacon pulsed gently from the collar around the beast's broad neck. Oz let loose a howl of rage.

Poe snapped out of his daze as the houses comm unit buzzed from the kitchen. His father's voice echoed through his mind: I'll call the house comm if I run into trouble. Fear slid like ice into his gut as he vaulted from the couch and darted into the kitchen, waking Finn who sat up with a gasp.

"What's going on?" Finn hurriedly grabbed the blaster that Kes had given him from off the end table.

Poe couldn't answer; his heart was in his throat as he saw that the call was indeed from his father. He picked up. "Dad, are you okay?"

Relief flooded Poe as his father answered him. "I'm fine—but you two had better be ready to get out of here as soon as I get back."

Chapter End Notes

Yay! BB-8 is back! I've missed that little droid, and it was hella fun screwing with Oz. That Kes is a slippery one. Also, Poe saying sexual things that Finn doesn't quite understand will never get old to me. Well, their time on Yavin is drawing to a close—I hope you all enjoyed it. :) As always, thanks so much for reading and reviewing!
Chapter 20

Finn and Poe waited silently in the kitchen, staring out the long window into the clouding sky above. It had been easy enough to gather up their possessions—they owned only the clothes that they’d reluctantly donned and the blasters they gripped in their sweating hands. Poe’s off-white shirt hadn’t come fully clean in the wash and sported a pinkish stain all down his neck and chest. It made Finn wince just to look at it.

The jungle outside had quieted in anticipation of the usual late afternoon rainstorms and the only sounds to be heard were the constant sighing of the leaves and the soft whirring of the houses fans. Finn fancied he could hear his heartbeat in his ears and he shifted nervously from foot to foot. Poe was still as stone before the window—only the blinking of his eyes and the wavering of his hair in the cooling breeze gave him away. He breathed deep—he could smell the fresh, earthy scent of rain on the horizon; could see its slow approach in the silvery lifting of the leaves in the humid breeze.

Finally, Finn could stand the silence no longer. "So he didn't say what happened to him?"

"No," Poe said without taking his eyes from the sky, "just said to be ready to go and that he'd be coming in on a Hyrotil."

"You think it was a bounty hunter?"

"Probably."

Finn tightened his grip on his blaster and redoubled his attention. The leaves and fronds swayed, swimming like fish in a darkening sea as the steely-walled clouds drifted ominously towards the little house. Earlier, Finn had taken comfort from the sheltering mass of trees—how could anyone hope to spot them beneath their tangled canopy? He now realized the opposite was equally true, and he began to suspect every dark gap of harboring unknown enemies.

He'd nearly opened his mouth to speak again when a far off thrum eased into his ears. The deep thrumming grew, layered now with a two-toned dissonance. A long, low-keeled ship appeared suddenly over the canopy like a giant grey bird and it swooped down, pivoting to tuck itself in the tight space between the house and the wild edge of the jungle. Poe sighed and turned away from the window with relief and Finn assumed that this ship must be the aforementioned Hyrotil. Poe held out his hand and Finn took it, and together they walked out into the yard. The engines of the ship cast a bright yellow light and long black shadows which danced wildly in the breeze. The light faded to a thin white wash and then disappeared entirely as the engines powered down.

They blinked the afterimages out of their eyes as the belly-keel opened and lowered to the ground with a hydraulic hiss. Kes exited, looking both harried and pleased as Poe and Finn hurried up to him.

"Dad, are you okay? What happened?" Poe said as he released Finn's hand and gripped his father's shoulder.

"Had a little run-in with a bounty hunter, but we gave him the slip, didn't we?" Kes smiled as he turned back towards the ramp.

"Who's we?" Poe's brow furrowed, and then his mouth fell open as an orange and white droid came
tumbling gracelessly down the ramp with a metallic screech of joy.

"BB-8?" Poe breathed while at the same time Finn yelled, "He made it!"

BB-8 bulleted for him and Poe fell to his knees, hugging the little round body tightly against him. BB-8 nudged it's head into his chest as it burbled and whimpered with happiness. Finn grinned at Kes, who nodded, and then started forwards.

"Oh buddy, buddy, I knew you'd make it," Poe's voice was tight and he was nearly embarrassed at how close to tears he felt. To have one friend back...it was more than he'd allowed himself to hope for. He sat back from the droid, his smiling face reflected at him in it's dark lens. Delicately, he reached out a hand and traced the contours of the craterous dent in BB-8's head and chassis. Metallic bits of shrapnel protruded from a warped tool bay, and the paint had been both seared and scraped off. "You got banged up pretty bad, though..." The concern tightening the corners of Poe's eyes, compared to the cold cruelty of the twi'leks gaze, made the droid feel as though it'd been dipped in a warm oil bath. It wobbled contentedly.

[It will take more than an explosion to shut me down! Although...I am sorry that I didn't pilot Black One effectively enough...]

"Don't worry about that—it's just a ship, pal. And it didn't matter how good you flew, there were just too many TIEs. It was all any of us could do to stay..." He swallowed and looked away, unable to finish his sentence.

BB-8 lowed sadly, understanding at once. [You are also 'banged up'.] It extended an arm and tapped at it's forehead, and Poe remembered his gash for the first time since he'd woken.

"Oh, don't worry, it's nothing." He brushed off the droid's concern, reflexively touching the bacta strip. "Could've been a lot worse—We had to make a crash landing."

[Red is destroyed?]

"Red is a pile of melted scrap right now. I would've gone with it, but Finn pulled me from the crash." He grinned up at Finn who smiled warmly down at him.

BB-8 paused, processing. It focused it's clear lens on Finn and, with an introspective little bleep, rolled uncertainly around Poe's knee and tucked itself against Finn's calf. It tilted it's head firmly into his leg. Finn raised his brows, shocked at the droid's outright affection. BB-8 had always been accepting enough of him, but he felt, in that instance, that the droid now considered him family. He looked from Poe to the astromech with a slow smile. BB-8 warbled up at him and Finn didn't need to understand binary to know the droid was thanking him.

"You're welcome, BB-8." He patted it's dome fondly and Poe thought he'd melt at the scene. Finn turned to Kes, who stood with his arms crossed before his chest, smiling down at the three of them. "How'd you find him?"

Poe sobered quickly.

"Apparently a Bounty Hunter scooped him up after the fight with the First Order. BB-8 says he took him onboard his ship, put a restraining bolt on him, and then...well, he doesn't really remember anything beyond booting up on Yavin. I found a tracker planted in him and disposed of it."

[He's a white-skinned twi'lek with yellow eyes. Missing part of his left lekku, and named Ozmyn Heil, and I hate him!] BB-8 blurted angrily.
"Ozmyn Heil, huh?" Poe's mouth thinned. "He must've copied your data over if you've got a blank spot on your memory...which means..." Poe shook his head, "that he knows pretty much everything there is to know about me." He met Finn's eyes significantly and Finn cottoned on at once.

"He knows we're traveling together." Finn said numbly. If the hunter kept this information to himself, that was one thing, but if the hunter sold that information, the pressure on them would increase exponentially.

"Which is why the two of you have got to get out of here soon." Kes stressed. "With any luck, that twi'lek is wandering around the jungle after a nerf, but he's bound to find out about your home here, and about the Wennings. We alerted Yavin Control to keep an eye out for him, and they should have impounded his ship by now—but those are just stopgaps. For all we know, he's wondering this way now."

"Good, there's three of us with blasters. I hope he shows up." Poe bit out, frowning at the shimmering jungle.

[I—I hope so too!] BB-8 tried for bravery, but tucked itself further behind Finn's leg.

"If he shows up then I'll be the one taking care of him. You three will hopefully be thousands of miles away by that point." Kes said in a tone that left no room for argument. "Come on. Get on board and have a look around." He placed his hands on their backs, ushering them up the ramp. He tossed a quick look over his shoulder at the silent trees and then followed after them.

Finn forced his attention away from the looming threat of the bounty hunter. "So this is a Hyrotil, you said?" Finn asked as he stood in the cargo and engine maintenance area. A repulsorseldge of mounded goods sat square in the middle of the space, leaving only the barest gap to edge around.

"Yeah. It's in pretty good shape, too. Good find, dad." Poe squeezed past the sledge and up to the access ports, studying wires and coolant lines, tracing them to the Isu-Sim SNN07 hyperdrive. It was a Corellian model—not the fastest in the galaxy, but reliable. With a few modifications of his own to the fuel lines, they'd be able to really move. Though the ship had obviously seen some wear, it had at least been well-cared for.

Pleased, he glanced back at Finn; the other man was leaning heavily against the handrail and Poe's chest ached for him—they'd done too much today and he felt guilty for not even trying to put a stop to it. He crossed over to him, wrapping an arm around his waist and taking some of his weight as they followed Kes up through the narrow hall that laterally split the ship in two.

On their right was one small sleeping cabin, a fresher just large enough to house a shower, toilet and fold away sink, and then a marginally larger sleeping cabin. The left was taken up with one large storage area and an open, yet miniscule kitchenette. A narrow set of stairs led upwards in between the kitchen and storage room, curling back to end somewhere above their heads.

"Gunners turret is up there." Kes nodded his head towards it as he continued on.

"Yes, thank gods." Finn muttered. Poe arched a brow at him.

"If we're attacked again, I don't want to have to just sit there and hope for the best." Finn explained, "When we were in Red, I never felt so helpless."

Poe smiled knowingly though he disagreed at once. "You didn't just sit there. You saved my ass, you know? If I'd had to enter those nav computer coordinates while trying to fly that thing, there's no way I wou—" He broke off, his face falling as they entered the cabin. "...Damn, dad, that is green.
Like... *green.* His mouth thinned with disgust as he swiveled the pilot's chair towards him. The upholstery was searingly, violently lime green. The kind of green emergency workers wear. The kind of green that lodges itself in the eyes like a neon splinter. Finn leaned up against the green nav computer terminal, staring at the two passenger seats with a bemused smile.

"I thought you'd like it." Kes could hold back his laughter no longer—clearly he'd been waiting for this moment.

"I kinda *do* like it." Finn admitted and Kes cackled.

"Oh ho, baby, no," Poe lamented, "No, this green is *real* bad. Ugh—my eyes are gonna bleed just looking at it." Poe shook his head and turned to his father. "*This* is totally what sold you on this ship, isn't it?"

"It sure didn't hurt." Kes clapped him on the shoulder.

[Colors are all well and good but—bounty hunter? Shouldn't we be going?] BB-8 said in a tart tone.

"What'd he say?" Finn looked to Poe and Kes who seemed to have deflated.

"That we should be leaving." Poe said and the humor fell from his face as if it had never been there.

Kes stood between the two of them and nodded at BB-8. "He's right. You should be leaving." He met his son's eyes, squeezing his shoulder. The corners of his mouth worked and Poe wished on the Force that he hadn't seen that trembling edge of emotion. Kes swallowed, straightening as he marched rigidly back into the narrow hall.

"Well, I got everything you two could need—and then some. You've got about 2,300 credits left to tide you over for a while," he explained in a voice of forced nonchalance as Poe gathered Finn up and followed after him.

"Dad..." Poe began softly.

Kes halted in the cargo-hold and slowly turned to face them. "Now...I know I don't have to tell you, but I will anyways: You two be *careful.* Keep an eye on each other. Don't go *anywhere* unarmed or alone. And...give me a call as often as you can, all right? Because this old man is gonna worry himself half to death."

Poe's throat worked as he eased out from under Finn's arm and into Kes' tight embrace. His father's wiry strength seemed to flow into him and he tried to send the same strength back to him tenfold. For the second time in as many days, he felt the curious confluence of childhood and adulthood; he was at once a little boy in his father's sheltering arms, and an adult trying to comfort an old man who was close to tears. "Thank you, dad." He whispered and planted a kiss on his rough cheek. Kes kissed him back.

"Love you, kid."

"Love you too."

Finn stood to the side, wanting to join them and yet not feeling that he was familial enough to do so. Kes took matters literally into his own hands.

"And you—you too," Kes sniffed and motioned him forwards. He embraced Finn tightly and Finn hugged him gratefully back. The neglected part of him that had always longed for his parents found some peace at the touch. "You take care, Finn. When all this is said and done, you come back here
and we'll really chat, you and I. Okay?"

"Yes, sir," Finn smiled and held out his hand. "Thank you."

Kes took it and shook.

BB-8 nudged its way through the thicket of legs and pressed its head into Kes' shin. [Thank you for saving me.]

Kes stooped and patted the droid. "Of course, little guy. I want you to keep an eye on these two, alright? Don't let them get into trouble."

[They are always getting into trouble. That will be difficult.]

"I'm sure they are." Kes grinned. "But give it your best shot, okay?"

BB-8 whipped out its metallic arm and saluted. Kes straightened and gruffly cleared his throat as he started for the ramp back outside.

"Dad—don't do anything stupid, all right? Let Central handle the bounty hunter and then get off planet." Poe called from the hinge of the ramp.

"Don't worry about me." Kes answered from the ground. "The sooner you two hit the skies, the sooner I'm out of here. Take care, boys!" He waved with a quavering smile.

Poe and Finn waved back.

"Bye, dad!" Poe managed, and then he hit the controls for the ramp. It levered upwards and Kes was slowly blocked from view. It locked into place and Poe turned away with a heavy breath. Finn held out a hand and Poe took it gratefully, squeezing with an iron grip as they walked up and towards the cabin.

Kes stood back from the Hyrotil as the engines flared to vibrant life. He brought a hand to his brow, shading his eyes against the bright yellow glare. Ferns and grasses lashed against his ankles, and his clothes whipped about his frame as the repulsorlifts sent out a wave of cool, displaced air. The ship lifted vertically and then shot forwards into the graying sky, leaving an afterglow of parallel lines on his eyes.

He watched as the silvery-white ship faded into a mist of cloud. He watched until the sound of it had vanished and he was left only with the sighing of the trees. He watched even as the clouds opened up and the rain came down in curtains. Then he turned away towards his empty house. He would not have to pretend to grieve when it came time to spread the ruse that Poe was dead.

Ozmyn Heil burst from the jungle a puffing, sweating mess. Instead of the buildings and traffic of town, he was greeted with the sight of a misty, gently rolling countryside; crops of squash and red, curled vegetables sat mockingly before him in neat little rows and he tromped through them, aiming back towards the great pyramid that marked the center of town.

_Fucking droid. Fucking old man. Fucking nerf. Fucking jungle._ He savagely kicked a squash and it broke to pieces beneath his foot, tumbling down the hill like a pale skull. The sight calmed him marginally. Then the rain started and his anger surged back to life. Okay—think about this. The droid and the old Dameron are working together. The droid will have warned him about me, and if Dameron was here, then he's probably already jetted. Probably. His hands clenched to trembling
fists at his side and he grit his teeth as the rain blew into his face. *I have to make sure though.* He recalled vaguely the location of the house in his search through the droid's memory—but no way was he walking there. *They've probably impounded my ship by now…I'll have to lift something.*

Half an hour later he arrived on the outskirts of Merillo. He caught a glimpse of himself in a streaming window and grimaced; hastily he peeled clinging leaves, burrs, and vines from his sopping clothing. His yellow eyes roved from street to street—the crowds had thinned as the weather worsened, though a few determined shoppers clustered together under awnings, chatting and laughing amongs themselves. He tucked quickly behind the edge of the nearest building as an officer in uniform exited a supply shop and marched onto the main street with her blaster held at the ready. He didn't move until the splashing of her booted feet had faded into the distance.

Slipping out and across the broad avenue, he cast an appraising look about the shops and restaurants. He edged into the dripping shadows of side-streets, darting about until he found just what he was looking for—an unattended speeder parked up against a building. He glanced from one end of the ally to the other. No one was around and the sound of a holovid program drifted through the half-parted window above his head. He forced open the dash, grateful for the masking hiss of the rain, and hotwired it. The speeder kicked on with a low rumble and Oz gunned it, shooting like an arrow from the shadows and slipping from the misty city.

It had taken nearly half an hour, but Oz had eventually backtracked his way off of a puddling dirt road, up a weed-choked lane, and into a small clearing. He edged cautiously up to the open gap in the woods and squinted through the drizzling curtains. He could make out a low, rectangular home half covered in vines, and a smaller garage off in the distance. His eyes were snared by a sudden shimmer of blue; a singular tree stood like a pillar of wavering flame as it's dark leaves were jostled by the rain. He'd seen a snippet of that tree in one of the memories he'd reviewed. *A Force Tree. This is the place.* Oz grinned triumphantly and peered about the towering trees that ringed the lot in. *Good place for an ambush…nothing for it.*

The speeder crept forwards and Oz hunkered down in his seat, his blaster drawn and ready. He studied the ground as he inched forwards. The soft, rain-swollen earth showed several sets of prints as clear as day, and one long line of bruised grasses and ferns. *The droid.* He thought sourly. A large circle of vegetation lay bruised and blown about and three deep prints gaped out of the ground in a triangular shape. *Landing struts—damn it, they've got a ship.* He craned his head to the sky as if he could see the ship taking off and then an explosion of pain rocketed through his right lekku, inches from his skull.

Kes cursed from his perch on a flat twenty feet up a *tak* tree and quickly realigned for another shot, squinting into the sight and tensing his shoulders. Mouth thin, he fired, but the searing red bolt sizzled harmlessly against the retreating speeder as the twi'lek sped wildly back into the shelter of the jungle.

"Shit." He muttered, drawing a hand across his dripping brow. There was a time, once, when he would not have missed that shot. He sat up, pulling his comm from his pocket and punching in a code. "Control, the bounty hunter is incoming—he's heading out to the main drag on a N-5l speeder. Should be easy enough to hem him in."

The Hyrotil emerged from the jump tunnel like a fish leaping smoothly from the sea, and the stars shortened into bright pinpricks of light that glimmered across it's canopy. Finn sighed, loosening his death-grip on his seat; after their last venture through hyperspace, he had been understandably nervous about making the jump once more, but he'd had nothing to worry about. He glanced at Poe.
The other man's face was unreadable.

Finn cast about for something to say. *Don't worry, I'm sure he'll be fine,* seemed too trite and *we did what we had to do* rang cold in his ears. He turned downcast eyes to the canopy, staring out at… nothing. There were no planets, no space stations, no moons.

"Where are we?" He asked with a furrowed brow.

Poe rotated his seat away from the empty view with the finality of someone slamming a door shut. "Nowhere." He said simply and stood. There was no more buffer between them and the fact that he was at a loss—a bird without a flock. And he had run, just as his father had asked him to, knowing that there was a dangerous criminal on the planet he'd just turned tail from. He felt wretched.

BB-8 cocked its dented head as Poe squatted level with it. Even the droid could think of nothing to say.

Finn placed his hand over Poe's, and the other man's eyes slid reluctantly towards him.

"He'll be okay." Finn nodded with solid surety.

"I left my dad to a bounty hunter, Finn."

"You left to keep him safe from more bounty hunters."

"That doesn't change the fact that I...gods...he's old, Finn. What the hell was I thinking? I should've hung back—waited for something to change—I—" He broke off, staring determinedly at the door to the short hallway. "Come on, let's unpack."

"Poe..." Finn said softly as he carefully stood and held the pilot against him. Poe remained steadfastly rigid for several seconds and then gave against him. Even the warm sun-and-earth scent of him was comforting, unlocking the emotions that had forced their way forwards. He didn't cry, but it was a near thing, and his hands clutched at Finn's shirt desperately. "Do you want to go back?"

"If you're that worried, we could test out the communication's relay? Try calling him."

Poe laughed inwardly. How flighty he'd seem, calling his father in a panic after forty minutes absence. Kes would probably laugh at him. He found he didn't care. "Yeah, okay." He pulled away from Finn, sat back down in the pilot's seat and pressed open the communications grid. Onto its glowing screen he entered in the house's comm code.

A connecting tone pulsed in their ears as the signal was relayed across the gulf of open space. Each pulse tightened the knot of anxiety in Poe's chest. At last, the call was picked up. "You didn't wait long,"

"Don't. You did what your senior officer told you to do, kid. You two someplace safe?"

"More or less. I thought we might lay low for a while—hide out in the gaps until we get unpacked and come up with a plan. You have any trouble with that bounty hunter yet?"
"Well, he had a bit of trouble from me." Kes stated smoothly.

"What happened?" Finn piped up.

"He came snooping around here, but suffice it to say I got the drop on him. Shot him from the floor of your old tree-house, Poe."

"Ha!" Poe barked and he and Finn locked gleeful eyes.

"Don't get too excited—I uh…well, it wasn't a clean shot. I just hit one of his head-tails and he scarpered off pretty quick after that. But Control is on the trail, so don't worry."

"Are you getting ready to leave the planet?" Poe prodded.

"I was until you called me."

"Well, why are you letting me stop you?"

"Yeah, yeah. If I hear anything about the bounty hunter, I'll call you then. Otherwise I'll let you know when I'm off planet. Take care, Poe, and you too, Finn."

They bid him a second farewell, and Poe visibly unwound against his seat.

"Better?" Finn asked with a grin.

"Yeah." Poe leaned forward and Finn met him midway with a soft kiss. He scooted closer as Poe's hand crept up the back of his neck. For several seconds they held one another, lips slowly caressing.

[I see Finn has gotten better at kissing.] BB-8 peered studiously up at them.

Poe snorted a laugh as he drew away and stood.

"What'd he say?" Finn demanded, certain the droid had said something belittling.

"Nothing." Poe held out his hand. "Come on, let's go unpack."

Finn looked back and forth between the two of them with a suspicious glare. "Alright…" He took his hand, letting Poe do the work of pulling him to his feet. "But we're starting binary lessons tonight, okay?" A dull ache arced across his lower back; he was ready to lie flat for several hours, but he wanted to help go through the supplies Kes had bought for them, certain that there would be Yavini odds and ends he'd never seen before; things that Poe might take for granted and shunt aside before he could get a look at them.

"Okay, baby." Poe pressed open the door separating the cockpit from the rest of the ship and started them down the short, dimly lit hall. Finn looked around with a slow smile.

"You know? I like this ship. It kinda reminds me of your room back on Base."

"What, you mean claustrophobically small?"

"That and…I don't know…I get to be alone with you here. It's our own private little thing."

[Yes, by all means ignore me.] BB-8 said at their heels.

"Yeesh, buddy, lay off." Poe grinned. "You have a sass-deficit built up or something?"
"Okay, *now* what did he say?" Fin arched a brow, annoyed.

"That he missed us a lot." Poe's eyes were bright.

"Somehow, I don't think that's true." Finn shook his head as they entered the cargo hold and plodded down the ramp that led to the repulsorsled. They undid the ratchet straps holding the bundle together and set to work unpacking. Even BB-8 did what it could, pulling singular items free from the heap with its gripping arm and setting them on the floor in no particular order. Poe felt extremely happy just then, the three of them sitting and working through such a mundane task.

"Oh, what's this?" Finn asked, holding up a narrow item with a flattened, rectangular head.

"That, my dear, is a spatula."

"What's it for?" The look of innocent wonder on his face made Poe's stomach flip.

*I will never meet another person who will look at a spatula like that,* he mused. "Cooking."

"Oh." Finn set it aside in his kitchen pile.

Poe hit a seam of clothing and he tossed pants, boxers and shirts into a wrinkled heap. His hand brushed the corner of something hard and his face split into a broad grin. "Oh, ho! Dad is the best!"

He exclaimed with joy as he wrestled free a box nearly the size of BB-8.

Finn squinted at the label. "Kisin?"

"An old Yavini god of death," Poe hugged the box to his chest. "And now the best beer in the galaxy!"

Finn thought of the horrible burn of Corellian rum and gave the box a wary look. If it was named after death itself, he figured he'd avoid it.

"If I drink enough of this, my pants will *fall* off. This stuff knocks me on my ass."

"Nice. That part I'm okay with." Finn grinned. He pulled free packet after packet of freeze-dried meals and stacked them neatly next to his pile of eating utensils and pans.

[Too many boxers.] BB-8 moaned as it flung another pair into its growing nest.

"You can never have too many boxers." Poe said seriously. "Oh...here Finn. I asked dad to get you these." He scooted closer, a flat black tablet and a thin, hand-length box in his hands.

Confused, Finn took them from him. The tablet hinged open into a book of blank white flimsy pages. He set it on his lap and fumbled the box open. A gleaming stylus fell into his hand. He met Poe's eyes with a sincere smile as he popped the cap off and pressed the tip to the page.

"It's just...you were doing really well writing there for a while, and I thought maybe you'd want to keep at it. And your drawing of BB-8 made me laugh so...I don't know. It's kind of lame—if you don't want it, that's—" He broke off as Finn gathered him into a hard kiss.

BB-8 wolf-whistled, and Finn broke away with an expression of such deep love that Poe nearly unraveled in his arms. "Thank you, Poe." He squeezed his hand and turned back to the open book, scrawling an experimental line across the page. The ink flowed so smoothly it was like liquid glass. "No one's ever got me a present before. I mean you gave me your jacket and all...but I kind of took that to begin with so it's not really the same. This is great."
It almost hurt Poe that Finn could be so pleased with such simple items. I'm going to get him so many presents Poe thought, blushing as he watched Finn draw a few mindless loops. Smiling tightly to himself and feeling like something warm had taken wing in his chest, he turned back to the repulsorsledge. After pulling free a quilt and tossing it onto their pile of clothes, Poe suddenly let loose a sound somewhere between a howl of laughter and a yell of shock.

"Holy shit!" He screeched.

"What?" Finn gasped.

BB-8 turned so fast it's antennae wobbled.

"What—who even—I didn't even know lube came in bottles this big!" He sputtered and hefted up what looked to be a several gallon sized jug of clear, viscous liquid.

"Jeez…"

"Where the—where the hell did he even find this? Is there some novelty sex-shop I somehow don't know about? What—I mean—Is this for Wookies or Hutt's or something? Did he already know this existed? Why did my dad know about this?" He demanded with a horrified laugh.

"I…I kind of don't want to think about him buying that…” Finn grimaced.

"Fucking Force, that is a lot of lube." Poe threw back his head and laughed until he had tears in his eyes. "Well played, old man, well played."

Chapter End Notes

Holy hell! We've made it to Chapter 20! 100,000 words! Officially the most I've ever written in one pop.
So, thank you guys! Knowing people are enjoying this keeps me inspired to work on this beast.

Speaking of which, sorry for the late upload. I had a block about this chapter; I dreaded separating them from Kes, tried to tie together a bunch of plot-threads into something cohesive, and also felt kind of sad that we're entering the final arc. I imagine there's still another 100ish pages or so (super estimate is super estimatey), but we're definitely past the midway point. Also, I've just been in 'blah' mode recently and couldn't muster the energy to work on this or anything else.

I hope this chapter works at all, because it was like pulling teeth!

As always, thanks so much for reading and reviewing--you guys rock! -Bluestem
Finn lay flat out on his stomach across the freshly made bed, his chin cupped in his hands. He stared over the edge of the mattress at the waiting BB-8, trying to decode what it was the droid had said to him. Finn felt worn thin—they had, for the most part, stowed away all of the goods that Kes had bought for them. There had been a few more surprises hidden among the clothing, tools, and kits (though none as exuberant as the bottle of lube which now sat innocently at the side of the bed—it was too large to fit into the built-in drawers). They’d uncovered boxes of Yavini sweets that Finn was excited to try, and a mess of spicy crisps that Poe loved; Finn resolved to steer clear of those.

"Okay…say that last part again." Finn yawned.

BB-8 let loose a very human sigh. [This is going to take forever.]

Finn’s brow furrowed. "That sounded totally different to me."

"Because it was totally different. Come on, BB-8, stick to your lines, okay?" Poe lay alongside Finn, his dark eyes focused on the Galactic News program he was scrolling through as if it were in danger of going extinct. Coruscant was still a mess, and the chaos seemed to be spreading like a virus of hatred and violence; already Corellia and Ord Mantell were coming under fire from local First Order sympathizers and Imperial zealots. Poe’s mouth thinned.

[Hello, I am BB-8.] BB-8 said blandly.

"Okay…so is it the little lilt at the end that makes it BB-8?" Finn turned to Poe.

"Yeah, it’s kind of like writing in shorthand, but with sound. Dash-dash-and then that little 'bwoop' sound. That’s BB-8 in binary."

"I think I got it. So…then 'hello' is the garbled bit at the beginning, right?"

"Yep."

Finn shook his head. "I don’t see how you guys can just get what he’s saying, especially when he starts talking so fast."

"It’s all about tone, and the duration of each sound. I know it sounds complex right now, but once it clicks you’ll pick it up in no time." Poe tore his eyes from the datapad screen and gave him a reassuring smile.

"If you say so…still sounds like a lot of nonsense to me." Finn shrugged.

[I guess you would know about nonsense sounds, seeing as you make a lot of them when Poe puts your—]

"Okay, buddy, let's get back on track, huh?" Poe solidly interrupted.

Finn glared into BB-8’s dark, innocent lens. "So what did that mean?"

Poe grinned, his eyes crinkling up in the corners and Finn wondered if he really wanted to know. "That, in certain sexy situations, you make a lot of nonsense sounds yourself."
Finn huffed a derisive laugh. "I have never met a droid like him—you must've warped his programming."

"Anything sticks around me long enough will get warped. So you better watch out, baby." Poe winked.

Finn playfully nudged their shoulders together and turned back to the droid. "Okay, BB-8, how do I say 'Poe'?"

[Awesome Pilot of Perpetual Stubble.]

"Buddy…"

[He of the Orange and Black.]

"Come on…” Poe tried not to grin, though of course BB-8 picked up on it.

The droid let loose a quick chirp that ended in a split-second waver. Finn turned to Poe. "Did he actually say your name?"

"He actually did that time."

"Okay." He had BB-8 repeat Poe's name until he figured he'd be able to recognize the sound even in the midst of a sentence. "How do you say 'Finn'?"

[Not Poe.]

"…That sounded like you just said Poe again."

"BB-8, go easy on him." Poe leveled his brows.

The sound for Finn was roughly the same duration as the sound for Poe, but it concealed a lower tone beneath the higher warble. BB-8 cocked it's head expectantly.

"Really? That was my name? That's kinda cool." Finn grinned and tried to mimic the electronic sound, his voice winding up and shuttering quickly off, and Poe turned to him with a look of such warmth that Finn promptly forgot where he was and what he was doing.

"That was so cute." Poe said with a gleam in his eyes.

"It…it was?" Finn felt his brain rapidly sliding out his ears.

"Uh huh," Poe leaned to the side, planting a quick kiss on his lips and then drawing away with a smile.

[Poe loves it when organics try to speak binary. Once, Snap cursed in binary and I thought Poe was going to faint.]

"I was not going to faint." Poe retorted.

[You came close.]

Finn chuckled. "This is gonna be impossible. I'm getting half of a conversation and kissed out of the blue. How am I supposed to focus?"

"Yeah, BB-8, stick to the lesson-plan, buddy."
"Okay, how do I say 'Rey'?" Finn put in before Poe could respond to whatever it was the droid had said.

"BB-8, come on." Poe shook his head warningly.

The sound for Rey twined up and ended almost before Finn had caught it. BB-8 had to repeat it several times before Finn even understood what he was hearing. They progressed down a line of names, covering Kes, Kalonia, Leia, Han, Maz, Chewbacca, all of Poe's pilots, and then BB-8 began to repeat the names in random order. At first Finn was flummoxed, as if everything he'd just learned had evaporated into thin air. But eventually, out of the stream of sounds, Finn began to recognize the patterns, the subtle shifts in tone and variations in length that separated one name from another.

"That one was Rey. Chewbacca. Threepio. Poe. Solo. Me. Kes. Bastian. Kalonia…was that last one Leia?"

BB-8 nodded its dome and Poe ran an encouraging hand up his shoulder. "See, I told you you'd pick it up fast."

"That last one was just a guess." He shrugged.

The lesson carried on for another half an hour, until every noise the droid made blurred together into one massive run-on sentence and Finn could hold no more in his head. He yawned and wiped at his eyes. "Sorry, I can't do any more tonight."

"Running on fumes?" Poe asked, looking gladly away from footage of an overrun Coruscanti hospital.

"Yeah. I could fall asleep right now." Finn admitted.

"Let's call it a night then. It's probably 1100 on Yavin time anyways." Poe unfolded from the bed, shoving the datapad to the side, and extended a hand for Finn. He pulled him slowly to his feet, and smiled to himself as Finn's arm wrapped around his waist. They plodded down the hall and into the refresher that Finn had given the cleaning of a lifetime a few hours previous. Every surface in the cramped space gleamed.

"Sheesh, is this even the same room?" Poe asked as he walked up to the sink. He almost fancied he could see his face in it.

"If there's one thing I know how to do, it's clean a 'fresher." Finn stated in a self-satisfied kind of way. He hadn't understood the function or known the names of most of the kitchen items that Poe had put away, but at least in this, he was secure in his knowledge. "I had half a year of sanitation duty on Starkiller."

"Half a year? Jeez, who'd you piss off?" Poe exclaimed.

"Most of my superiors." Finn gave a glum smile that made Poe hurt.

"What'd you do?"

"I kept helping some of my squadmates who were falling back in our simulations or getting into trouble."
"But…helping your team is a good thing."

Finn shrugged. "Well, I know that now, but at the time I figured there was something wrong with me; I couldn't leave anyone behind, you know?" Finn met his reflections eyes in the mirror and then glanced away. But you left them all behind. You even killed some of them—even when you knew that it wasn't their fault…it was the First Order's.

They brushed their teeth in silence, Poe trying to imagine for the hundredth time just how confusing, terrifying, and belittling life in the First Order must have been for Finn; even if he hadn't understood it while under their thrall, the other man had surely internalized the hurt. Poe felt sick to his stomach and at the same time filled with a cold, quiet anger that was very different from the hot, reactionary brand he was familiar with.

He could see Finn's mood deflate as if he were a ship venting atmosphere; his tone became suspiciously light though his eyes were miles away.

"Hey," Poe said and Finn knew he was caught.

He turned with a wan smile. "Sorry,"

"Don't be sorry for what they did." Poe squeezed his shoulder.

Finn heaved a heavy breath; Poe's eyes were trained on him with the same focus he'd seen on the pilot's face during dogfights—not a flicker of emotion went unnoticed.

"What is it?" Poe urged.

"There's just so many of them, Poe…taken and brainwashed and abused and…what can I do about it? I thought I was helping with the mission the General gave me, but I don't even have that anymore."

Poe bit his lip and looked away. His hand slid down between Finn's shoulders, lightly tracing the borders of his scar, and he guided them slowly back into the bedroom. BB-8 watched them enter, backpedaling up against one of the rooms storage units as they squeezed past and climbed into bed.

"Finn…" he began, "why do you think your bounty is so high?"

"Because I'm a traitor and I helped take down Starkiller Base?" Finn scooted towards the cool durasteel wall that partitioned the bedroom from the fresher as Poe lay alongside him.

"I'm sure that's part of it but…the General and I had another idea."

"Like what?" Finn propped his head on his hand as he studied Poe's dimly lit form. The warm contours of his body lay like pale dunes swathed in darkness and his heavy-lidded eyes stared through a curtain of black, curling waves. He looked infinitely sultry and a flutter tightened across Finn's stomach; he sometimes found it hard to believe that Poe was with him. That he was his.

"Well, we thought that they want you back because you're a symbol, Finn."

"A symbol of what?" Finn forced himself to concentrate on Poe's words.

"Of change. Of freedom. You not only got away, but you showed the First Order that one person can stand up to them; can hit them right where it hurts. If you were a trooper that was on the fence, maybe questioning how things worked, and you got word of that…that's the stuff mutinies are made of. So, even if you don't feel like you're helping right now, for some people out there, you might be
"the only thing keeping them going."

"...you think the First Order is afraid of me?" Finn nearly laughed in disbelief.

"It's not just me—the General thought so too." Poe stressed.

"So they offer a fortune to get me back because I'm a symbol." He pursed his lips and scratched the back of his head as he considered. It seemed a dubious idea at best. People like the General—like Luke Skywalker—they were symbols. Him? He was just Finn—a guy who couldn't tell a spatula from a whisk. He couldn't buy into the idea that others could potentially idolize him. "What would they have to gain from taking me alive though? Why not just kill me?"

Poe hesitated for a long while before answering. He didn't want to upset him, especially not when Finn was already feeling upended. "Leia thought they might try to recondition you. Prove to all the other troopers that there was no point rebelling."

Finn winced. He felt the truth of that statement in his gut, so immediately it was as if it had bypassed thought and went straight for instinctual certainty. Poe drew him against him and Finn's arms tightened around his back. The idea of being taken, of being not killed, but changed—it was worse than anything Finn had considered. Or maybe, he realized, the thought had always been there but he'd kept it carefully locked away so that he could function.

"It'll be okay, sweetheart." Poe's voice ghosted warmly through his hair. "I won't let them hurt you again."

Finn's breath caught in his throat, stuck somewhere between a terrified sob and a hopeless laugh. He felt Poe's lips press against his forehead.

"You've got the best pilot in the galaxy on your team. And a Jedi out there, somewhere."

[And me!] The droid chirped from the floor near Poe's side of the bed.

"BB-8 says he's in the fight too. See? The First Order doesn't stand a chance." Poe smiled.

A keening pain went through Finn's chest. "I love you," he said as he held Poe in an iron grip.

"I love you too, baby, so much."

Poe woke with a groggy groan hours later. For a moment he wasn't sure where he was—the room lacked the blue light of BB-8's charging port, so he wasn't on Base—but nor was it as hot and humid as his home on Yavin. The sounds were all wrong. He brought a hand to his forehead, fingers brushing against his bactastrip. The gash had begun to itch as it'd closed and scabbed. He pressed his knuckles into it, wishing he could scratch the hell out of it like a nexu with fleas. Finn moved jerkily beside him and Poe woke fully, sitting up against the cool durasteel wall that served as a backboard.

Finn was moaning in his sleep, his hands knotting up the dark quilt. Poe watched him carefully and cautiously. A groan broke free into a full yell, and Finn's arms twitched. He grasped reflexively at the bend of his right arm, crying out as if he were being burned. Poe scooted to the edge of the bed; he knew better than to try and physically wake Finn from the nightmare.

"Finn!" He called out, his heart beating in his throat as the other man writhed. "Finn!"

Finn jerked upright with a wild swing that Poe only just dodged. He stood from bed, backing several paces away as BB-8 bleeped in alarm. Finn sat, gasping and shaking.
"Finn, it's me…it's okay, you're safe." Poe soothed.

"Poe?" Finn gasped. Poe stepped closer as if Finn were a bomb that may still detonate. With exaggerated care he reached for the light and pressed it on to a low glow. Finn blinked hard against the gentle light and wiped at his sweaty forehead with a quivering hand. His breath whooshed from him in relief and shame as he realized where he was. *I'm with Poe. I'm with Poe.*

"It's okay," Poe sat down next to him and Finn tensed. "Just breathe. In and out, real slow."

Finn closed his eyes, focusing on his breath until his heartbeat slowed from its frantic gallop. The muscles of his abdomen let go and he sighed. Rather than feeling rested, he now felt as if he'd been awake for days. "I'm sorry." He managed as he rested his forehead in his palm.

"It's fine, Finn. I've done the same thing."

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" He dared to peer up at him through his fingers.

"Nah. I've got fast reflexes." Poe tried to kid and then wished he'd said anything else.

"So I tried to hurt you?" Finn was horrified, a look of self-hatred and shame sliding over his face like a heavy mask.

"Hey, it's okay—"

"It's not okay! What if I really hurt you, Poe?"

"You didn't, so just relax."

"But—I—" He broke off and looked away, a sob throttling his voice.

"Baby…," Poe held him and for a moment Finn tried to pull away from his embrace; he didn't feel he could trust himself; didn't feel he deserved it. But then he caved and the sob broke free. "I'm sorry, honey," Poe regretted their earlier conversation regarding the First Order; Finn's subconscious had apparently latched onto it tooth and nail.

"I shouldn't sleep near you."

"That's stupid."

"But what if I—"

"What if I hurt you? What if BB-8 decides to electrocute us both while we sleep? What if the ship gets sucked into a black hole?" Poe smiled knowingly at him. "I'll chance it, Finn."

_But what if I can't chance it?_ Finn thought to himself, but he was too exhausted to argue. He nodded slowly as he lay back down—disgust played about the corners of his mouth; the sheets where he had lain were cold and clammy with sweat, and clung to his skin as he rolled over to face the wall. Poe watched him sadly for a few seconds and then lifted the sheets, sliding in alongside him and pressing his chest up against Finn's back. Poe curled around him, a barrier to fear and darkness. Finn could say nothing, but he gripped Poe's hand fiercely.

He woke to an empty room. Sitting stiffly up and rubbing at his eyes, Finn peered about for the datapad. He found it on the floor, picked it up and turned it on. According to Yavin time, it was 0900. He couldn't believe that he'd slept so late, and was shocked that he hadn't even felt Poe getting out of bed. But then, it had taken him a long time to fall back to sleep after his nightmare, and even in
the blankness of sleep he'd remained as tense and alert as a hunted animal. He flung off the quilt and
shivered against the ships cool canned air. Opening the storage compartments above his side of the
bed, Finn pulled out a shirt, pair of pants, and boxers, and quickly clothed. He started automatically
for the cockpit.

Electronic chatter filled his ears, and for once, he understood part of it.

"BB-8?" He turned. The droid was parked in the cockpit, half under the pilot's seat, a metallic
dataprobe jutting from it's chassis and linked into the ships interface. Finn walked up to it, stretching
his head from side to side. "Whatcha doing?"

BB-8 chirped brightly, going on a longwinded and pointless explanation. Finn nodded and waved a
hand.

"Okay, okay. Something important. Got it."

BB-8 burbled and Finn caught precisely one word: Poe.

"You said 'Poe'. Hey," he grinned, "I understood that!"

A sarcastic whistle.

"Well, it's something." Finn rolled his eyes and started back through the hall. "Poe?"

The metallic clatter of a tool falling to the floor rattled through his ears and then a quick curse. Finn
walked carefully down the ramp that led into the cargo hold and engine room. Poe's tousled head
popped out of a service duct in between the engines. "Oh, you're up. Hey, can you hand me that
wrench?"

"Yeah. What're you doing?" Finn slowly bent and picked up the greasy implement and handed it up
to him.

"Thanks." Poe squirmed back into the hatch. "I was checking the fuel injector—if we can score a
newer model, maybe a Duronai 9 or a SoroSuub Nexil, we'll be able to amp the efficiency by…
maybe 20, 25%?"

"Oh. Well, that's good." Finn tried to sound as excited by this discovery as Poe was. "What's BB-8
doing in the cockpit?"

"He's checking for the Resistance frequency; been at it for three or four hours so far, but no hits. He
also tried the codes for every ship in the fleet, but if anyone's left, they've already ditched their ships."
Poe grunted; the hatch was hardly tall enough for him to crouch in and he slammed his head on the
low rim while trying to reverse his way out and down the ladder. "Ugh...no more hits to the head,
please, universe."

"You okay?" Finn asked, steadying him as he stepped away from the ladder.

"Sure, yeah." Poe rubbed the back of his head, his eyes lifting to Finn's and holding him. The other
man looked tired, the whites of his eyes tinged an irritated red. "How about you? You get any
sleep?"

"A bit. I can't believe I slept so late."

"You needed to." He kissed him softly, then plunked his wrench down in an open toolkit. Wiping
his hands on a rag, he wrapped an arm around Finn and led them back towards the cockpit. "You
wanna talk about it?" Poe asked delicately.

Finn shrugged but Poe had the feeling he'd speak if given enough time. A small niche to the right of the kitchen concealed a seat atop it's hide-away drawers. Finn sat heavily atop it while Poe pulled out a few bowls and started a rather plain breakfast compared to the feast that Kes had prepared for them. He poured a packet of dry, flat grains into one bowl and then the next, topped them off with water and started them in the heater. Finn watched, absorbing every movement as if there'd be a test on how to make porridge. There had always been tests on everything, in his old life. He swallowed.

"It was the First Order. I dreamed they were reconditioning me."

Poe turned from the heater, leaning against the counter with his arms crossed before his chest. "I thought that must've been it…you were really grabbing at your arm." Finn bowed his head and Poe's mouth thinned. "Finn, can I ask you—you said to Leia that you were reconditioned once before. What was it for?"

Finn met his eyes and then glanced away. "I ignored a direct order to leave one of my squadron behind. The mission ended up failing because of me."

"But…it was just a simulation, right?"

"That didn't matter." Finn shrugged and the timer for their bowls of porridge went off, jolting each of them back to the cold hard ship. Finn swallowed and took the opportunity to change the topic as Poe removed the bowls. "So, what're we doing today?"

Poe wasn't fooled by the sudden switch, though he didn't press the subject. "There's a nearby planet we can stop at to get some parts for BB-8, and I want to look for a new fuel injector too. After that…well, it's not much, but there was an old Republic outpost the Resistance used to use as a waypoint on supply runs. It's been decommissioned for years, but—it's the only place I can think to check for anything."

"You think survivors might have stopped there to regroup?"

"Hopefully."

Finn smiled as Poe handed him his dull grey bowl of slop; even this miniscule plan lifted his spirits and he ate with relish. BB-8 suddenly let loose an ear-piercing beep and Poe walked quickly to the door.

[I've got something!]

"Yeah?" Poe breathed, hurriedly sitting down in the pilot's seat and keying up the display. "What is it, buddy?" Finn followed quickly after him, his heart tripping over itself in excitement.

[It's the Yavin news network—they think you're dead!]

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Poe's mood pulled a 180 so fast it nearly hurt, and his face fell as BB-8 replayed the program. A somber woman with rich tan skin and an outfit of patterned yellows and oranges began to speak over footage of Red streaking down from the sky and disappearing from view, and then of Yavini officials surveying the burnt and twisted wreck.

Yavin native and Resistance hero, Colonel Poe Dameron, was a confirmed casualty of the crash in the Baleñen jungle that took place roughly two days ago. He was 32 years old. Dameron, son of Rebellion soldiers Lieutenant Shara Bey and Sergeant Kes Dameron, graduated top of his class in Starfleet Academy and went on to attain the rank of Commander in the Republic Navy. Upon joining
General Leia Organa's Resistance, we now know that Dameron was instrumental in uncovering evidence of First Order involvement and corruption within the Republic. Dameron went on to attain the rank of Colonel, and delivered the shot that destroyed the First Order superweapon, Starkiller Base. I don't believe I need to overemphasize the debt of gratitude that is owed to Dameron's actions.

Those who knew him say that Poe Dameron was a brave and immensely talented man who stuck to his principles, and would risk anything for his friends, and for the cause of the Resistance in which he so believed. His father, Kes, could not be reached for this program, but we send our sincere heartfelt condolences as we pay our respects to a true Yavini hero.

The program ended with a shot of flowers that had been piled before the Yavini Republic outpost and Poe's heart twisted. A crowd of people were milling about, talking, maybe even reminiscing about him, and he caught sight of the Wenning's tear-streaked faces among them.

"Turn it off." He said so forcefully that BB-8 jumped.

Finn and the droid looked at him in unison.

Poe stood, running a hand through his hair. "Well, that's fucking horrible." He managed.

"I'm sorry, Poe." Finn said softly.

[There is some good news…] BB-8 piped up timidly. [Since that program aired, your bounty has been suspended. It hasn't been canceled, but it looks like the First Order is buying into Kes' plan.]

"Good for the fucking First Order." Poe snapped. "I'm gonna go take a shower." He left the cramped space like a storm. BB-8 looked up at Finn with a sad moan.

He reached out and patted it's dome fondly. "It'll be okay," he soothed, though he couldn't meet the droid's glossy lens.

The Hyrotil lanced downwards like a spear, shearing through the atmosphere of the blueish grey orb that loomed up to meet them. The cockpit was cast in a cold light that gave Finn and Poe a sickly pallor, and then a bright flare of orange brought them to vivid life again as they entered the atmosphere. Poe smoothly brought them out of sublight and into a cruising speed of 600kph. A vast frozen vista stretched on before them in a shivering tapestry of frosty grey, drifting white and deep blue shadows. Poe frowned.

"Aw no…I totally forgot this planet was in its winter cycle right now!" He moaned. "I bet you anything dad didn't get us cold weather clothes."

Finn grinned. He'd take the cold over the humid mugginess of D'Qar and Yavin any day.

"Hyrotil Light Freighter, we have you on our scanners. Please state that nature of your visit to Tanil." A heavily accented voice scratched through the ships communications array.

"Parts repair and supply stop." Poe answered.

"Landing coordinates have been sent. Proceed to landing bay 12—do not deviate from your flight path."

"Copy." Poe queued up the offered coordinates and angled towards the Tanil city of Brovash. It steadily grew from an indistinct pile of snowy lumps to a city that towered above them. The roofs of
the ice-coated buildings were steeply pitched—it looked for all the world like a city of frozen daggers. The storm grey sky cast an eerie light and shadow as deep as night. Finn knew that a sky like that threatened snow, and soon.

"Wow," Finn breathed. Frosted colors shone dully beneath a coating of grime and snow, and Finn imagined that in the summer, Tanil would have to be a stunning sight. "This place is amazing."

"This place is going to kill me." Poe arched a brow as he brought them over their open and circular landing bay. "Okay," he said as if to himself, "more clothes. Layers. Lots of layers."

"I'm sure it's not that bad." Finn laughed as he followed him into the bedroom.

"Finn, I'm from a tropical planet. If it's cold enough to snow, it's too cold for me. I will freeze solid out there and you'll have to drag my corpse back to the ship. Tell my dad I loved him."

Finn rolled his eyes as Poe pulled on three more shirts and two more pairs of socks. Finn layered one long-sleeved shirt over his and felt ready to make a point.

"Let's go. BB-8, you stay here, okay? We've got our comms on us—if we run into trouble, you know what to do. Keep an ear on their channels in case anything suspicious pops up."

BB-8 whipped out an arm and saluted.

They headed down into the cargo hold and Poe activated the repulsorsledge left over from Kes’ supply run.

"So let's see... I think five hundred credits should cover everything we'll need..."

"You'll have to handle all that—I've never bought anything in my life. I've never even seen money before."

Poe glanced up at him as he crammed finger-sized credit chips into a bag and stuffed it down his many shirts. "Hmm... I'll give you a lesson later." He took a deep breath and faced the ramp like a condemned man. "Ready?"

"Yep."

"Oh gods, it's gonna be so cold." He grimaced as he reluctantly hit the controls. The ramp levered slowly down with a hiss that was caught and drowned in a gust of wind so frigid that Poe felt it had climbed into his lungs and strangled him. He shrank against Finn's side as they walked down the ramp and into a fluffy layer of glittering snow.

"No, n-n-no, this is t-the worst!" Poe chattered, his arms wrapped around his chest and his hands tucked under his armpits. Finn laughed as he guided the sledge through the snow. While he certainly couldn't stay out indefinitely, he found it more bracing than anything.

The pilot's elbow was knocking into him. "Are you already shaking?" Finn barked a laugh and his breath steamed from him like a chimney.

"It's n-n-not funny!"

Finn couldn't stop laughing as they traversed the main street. Enclosed speeders lined the edges of shops and buildings, and air traffic darted about over their heads, draping them in sultry blue shadows. Finn smiled about him. He'd never been able to walk around a city before and he wanted to stop and look at everything; the goods on display behind a frosted window, the stretch-speeder
parked up against a fantastic smelling restaurant. He saw many humans, a green-skinned twi'lek with his head-tails tucked into knitted stockings, a few rodians, and several species he'd never even heard of before. One strange little being with a long, camelid face was walking about on it's arms, while carrying a bag in it's legs.

He nudged Poe and whispered, "Hey, what's that thing?"

"A d-d-d-dug."

"A what?" Finn nearly went into hysterics and it took all of his self-control to keep himself battened down. He brought his hands to his mouth with glee as he mimicked, "A d-d-d-dug?"

"S-shut up!" Poe elbowed him hard. "We're s-supposed to be k-keeping a low p-p-profile."

"Well, you're doing a great job at that." Finn smirked.

After several minutes of wandering around, they found a machinery shop and Poe darted inside, nearly sobbing with gratitude at the warmth of the cluttered building. A tiny being with a face that struck Finn mute came around a pile of servomotors and squeaked, whether in shock or delight Finn couldn't tell. It had a distinctly rodent-like appearance and was covered in thick, wispy brown fur. Large, inky black eyes gazed up at them, and it's flat spade-shape nose wavered two and fro. Huge, triangular ears jutted up a foot past the top of it's skull.

"Can I help you, gentlemans?" The voice was so high and quick that it went right over their heads. They exchanged nonplussed looks.

"Sorry, what was that?" Poe asked politely as he bent closer to the shopkeeper.

"Can I help you?"

"Oh, yeah. I need parts for a BB astromech unit. Mine is pretty banged up. I've got a list here somewhere…" He made quite a production of reaching around inside his multiple shirts for the sheet of flimsy. Finn grinned nervously at the creature, hoping this all seemed very normal. "There it is." Poe announced triumphantly and handed the list over to the sharp-clawed hand.

"Oh, yes, chassis. Tool bay. Nanopin dataport. Accelerometer. These I have. Follow me, please."

They edged around a display of sharp-edged bits and pieces Finn couldn't begin to identify. The half-lit space was lined with shelves that went nearly to the ceiling and on them were all manner of different droid parts. BB-8 would've been traumatized by the place. Photoreceptors hung about like ornaments, heads from a huge array of models sat in bins, staring vacantly out. Limbs, hands, and manipulator arms jutted like grotesque plants out of tubs and barrels. Even Finn felt uneasy.

Poe, however, poked about everything with great interest. "Oh cool! Look at that old Republic medical droid torso—the 2-1B model, I think."

"You know your droids, sir." The creature squeaked.

Poe shrugged. "It's a hobby."

They left with all the parts BB-8 needed, the tools to get it done, and a lighter credit-pouch. Poe hid behind Finn as they exited the shop. "L-little guy was k-kind of expensive." Poe lamented.

"Kinda creepy too. What was he? She? It?"
"She I think—hard to t-t-tell. That species is c-called a Chadra-fan."

"Oh."

"Shit, this the w-w-worst weather." He tucked so closely against Finn that he could hardly walk.

"Yeah, and it's gonna snow soon too, if those clouds are any hint."

"R-really? We g-g-gotta hurry. I f-fucking hate snow."

"You know?" Finn grinned warmiy down at him. "I don't think I complained enough on Yavin."

The found a parts shop with an adequate replacement for their fuel injector half a block further, and while Poe examined the part, Finn stared around the shop. It was similar to the droid shop, but far larger—and more crowded. A toydarian buzzed about, examining top-shelf items. Two duros browsed through towering clusters of hyperdrive motivators. A weequay appeared to be studying... them.

Finn stiffened, alarms going off in the back of his mind. Even as he turned to Poe he could feel the weequay's eyes on the back of his head. "Poe—that weequay over there—I think he knows who we are."

Poe looked up from the fuel injector in his hands and peered marginally over Finn's shoulder. The weequay was staring as boldly as a rancor. "Right." Poe whispered. "Time to head out." He flagged a salesperson and hurriedly paid for the injector, aggravated that the woman seemed intent on going on and on about the benefits of this particular fuel injector.

"Yeah, that's great, thanks." Poe cut her off, grabbed Finn's arm and started them forwards. Back out in the cold, Finn took the repulsorsledge handles and they headed quickly back down the street, tromping through wet, clinging slush, and bracing themselves against the snow-speckled wind. Poe pulled out his comm and contacted BB-8.

"Hey buddy, have the ship ready to fly. We're gonna be there in about t-two minutes. And—" he added as an afterthought, "it wouldn't hurt to have the c-c-cannons aimed down the main street."

They had just about made it back to their landing bay when Finn turned and saw a figure taking cover behind a short stone wall. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and before he even knew what he was doing, he'd shoved Poe down into the snow and braced for impact. The diffuse blue light of a stun shot whooshed over their heads.

"Shit," Poe breathed as he scrambled to get behind their repulsorsledge. He took Finn's hand, pulled him after him, and drew his blaster. Two gigantic red bolts lit up the street like a flash of hellish lightening and an explosion of vaporized rock rattled their eardrums. They peeked above the sledge to see the weequay sprinting wildly down the street in a full retreat. "Come on!" Poe yelled, yanking Finn to his feet. "Run, I got the sledge!"

Finn hesitated for a second and took off with Poe at his heels. He hit a patch of ice, and for a horrible moment he thought he would fall, but he caught himself with a painful twinge in his back. The ramp was down and waiting for them and they dashed up it. Before it had even closed, BB-8 had the ship lifting into the air. A few seconds later Poe had flung himself into the pilot's seat and the Hyroti1111l roared from the planet in a flash of yellow lights and an explosion of scattered snow, slipping through the grey clouds, and then vanishing into the safety of deep space.

Chapter End Notes
Whew boy! So, apparently it's just going to take me longer to get chapters out now, so I'll just go ahead and preemptively apologize for the wait on everything to come. This ended up being longer than I anticipated, but there was a lot of interpersonal stuff going on and I didn't want to truncate it. Cold Poe is my new favorite thing. I'm kind of playing the last arc of the story by ear. I had a plan, and it just was *not* heading in that direction, so I'm just giving up and letting it do its own thing. It was becoming way too hard trying to force it to my devious plans, so whatever. As long as it makes it to the ending I've got in mind, I don't care. :D Hope you like this'n, and thanks so much for reading and reviewing! -Bluestem
"Okay, easy does it—you're doing fine, Finn." Poe grinned, his hands behind his head and his feet propped carelessly up against the dash of the ship. Finn sat in the pilot's seat, sweat starting on his forehead as he focused on the glittering emptiness before them. The Hyrotil hung like a child's mobile, suspended weightlessly in a sea of darkness. The ship dipped forwards and the engines flared with a tentative yellow light. As it continued to nose down, Finn panicked; the red dwarf star that he was using as a horizon-line drifting further up the transparisteel canopy like a tiny bubble. He overcorrected, and the Hyrotil looped into a slow somersault.

"Shit, go up, go up." Finn cursed through gritted teeth. It was like trying to control Red, but faster and more responsive, and he hated it.

Poe watched him, an utterly unconcerned smile pulling at his mouth. "Relax—just let the stick back to neutral, remember? Don't overthink it—just aim where you want to go."

"There's no place to go." Finn pointed out dryly as the Hyrotil leveled out.

"So you can't really mess up, right? And out here there is no up or down. It's directionless—so just go with the flow."

"It's space—there isn't a flow."

"Overthinking things," Poe singsonged. "A pilot acts on instinct not reason." He stated and then halted abruptly; it was as if his mother had spoken through him—how many times she'd repeated that lesson to him. He smiled softly to himself. Finn remained tense, his jaw rigid and eyes tight. He has got to ease up.

Poe considered and then stood, stooping over the pilot's seat and placing his hands on the flare of muscle to either side of Finn's neck. Finn spared half a second to glance up at him and then refocused as if he expected the ship to slam into a wall.

"Relax," Poe kneaded the muscle of his trapezius, squeezing, pressing firmly between his bent thumb and fingers. Finn's breath immediately deepened, and, bit by bit, the rigidity in his body began to let go. "Better?" Poe bent his mouth to Finn's ear and Finn tried mightily to ignore the goosebumps shivering up his neck and down his arms.

"Yeah—better." Finn managed, but Poe kept massaging him anyways. It felt good, better than he would have expected something like that could feel—like heat was surging up from hidden springs and flowing through his neck and down his arms. Not exactly sexual, but full of the potential to get that way. If that isn't Poe, Finn shook his head with a tight grin that Poe quickly mirrored.

"Want any help?" Poe offered silkily.

With my cock? Finn nearly asked, but Poe reached forward and covered Finn's hand on the stick with his own. The pilot pressed to port and the ship rolled smoothly to the side, pulled back towards Finn and the ship began tuck into a broad loop.

"Give it a bit of speed."

"Okay," Finn mindlessly replied. He pressed his right foot down upon the pedal. Without other objects to compare themselves to, it was difficult to tell that the Hyrotil was moving any faster. Until
Poe sent them twisting into a quick barrel roll.

"Whoa." Finn gasped, his hand tightening beneath Poe's.

Poe smiled warmly at him, urging the ship into a frantic series of spirals, and loops and Finn was surprised at his calmness—in fact, he began to enjoy it; could almost think that he was making the Hyroti move so gracefully. Poe eased off the fancy maneuvers, settling into a slow rhythm. They glided effortlessly to port, then to starboard, port, then starboard, over and over as if the ship were tracing the beating of a heart.

Poe lightly took some of the pressure of his hand from Finn's; as he'd hoped, the other man had subconsciously begun to anticipate the movements Poe was making. Eventually Poe's hand was only a placebo, resting benignly atop Finn's as he flew on his own with the belief that someone more practiced was guiding him. Poe grinned, studying the reflection of the stars caught in the deep umber of his eyes, relishing the little gap between his parted lips. He dipped slowly forwards, brushing his lips up the side of Finn's face and kissing beneath the lobe of his ear.

Finn tilted his head against him, his dark eyes sliding up to meet Poe's with a sly gleam.

"You're doing great," The warmth of Poe's breath shivered down spine.

"You're the one doing everything," Finn closed his eyes, kissing at the roughness of Poe's jaw.

"Mmm…no I'm not. You've been flying this ship for the past five minutes." Poe punctuated every other word with a kiss down Finn's neck.

"Huh?" Finn breathed as he tilted his head back to give Poe full access to his throat.

"You're flying, Finn."

"Wait, what?" Finn sat up, focusing on their hands with a look of confusion.

"It's all you."

Finn met his eyes and then laughed, removing his hand from the stick and his foot from the gas as he hugged at Poe's shirt. Poe quickly moved around the chair and straddled his lap, smiling hugely as Finn's arms wrapped around him and drew him into a hungry kiss. He cradled the side of Finn's face, opening with a groan to the other man's tongue. The heat of him was amazing—like a little Yavin sun he could melt into. For several minutes they kissed, their tongues and lips getting sloppier as their need mounted.

Poe took Finn's lower lip between his teeth and lightly tugged while grinding against his half-hard cock. The combination revved Finn hard. His arms tightened around Poe's back and held him prone against his chest, kissing hotly at the hollow of this throat, sucking just over his pulse. Poe moaned, arching readily against him.

"Ahn, yeah that feels so good, baby." Poe loved having his neck sucked; the number of hickies he'd tried to hide behind his flight suit collar in his earlier years had been ridiculous.

"Yeah?" Finn breathed.

"Oh, yeah,"

Finn sucked greedily at his throat, his hands sliding down the furrow of his spine. Poe leaned back, hurriedly pulling off his shirt and flinging it to the floor with a gleam in his eyes before hooking his
fingers beneath Finn's shirt and doing the same. They pressed hotly together, kissing and stroking.

"Should we…you know…here?" Finn panted at the edge of his jaw.

"Yeah," Poe grinned, "my natural habitat." He gasped as Finn's hand slid under the hem of his pants and began to stroke his cock, rubbing just beneath the head. His left hand smoothed around his hips and dipped into the crack of his ass.

"Nnn," He pulled back, licking his lips. "Hold that thought." He stood from Finn's lap, stripped, and planted a quick, sloppy kiss on his lips. Finn's fingers ghosted down his flank as he started for the bedroom with his heart pounding in his ears. Gods, he could not get enough of him; every space in his body brimmed with heat, with the electricity of his touch. He paused in midstride as he entered the bedroom.

BB-8 was sitting in the darkness with it's face in the corner furthest from the door, the very picture of dejection.

"Uh…you okay, buddy?" Poe managed as he hefted up the bottle of lube from the floor near the bed.

[I don't like my new colors.] It moaned sadly. [I should be orange and white. Orange and white.] It trailed off into a pathetic silence.

Poe's mouth twitched, caught between laughter, worry, and a rampant need to get back to Finn. "Well…hang in there, I guess." I'll talk to him about it later. He strode out and back into the cockpit to find Finn stroking his cock in anticipation, watching his reflection mirror the movements in the transparisteel of the canopy. Poe tensed as if he'd been punched in the guts.

"Oh baby, that is a nice sight." He grinned as he approached with the lube balanced against his hip. Finn glanced up at him with an embarrassed smile, hastily letting go of his cock.

"Don't stop on my account," Poe nuzzled against his neck as he straddled him once more.

"I thought I was supposed to pick up where I left off?" Finn chuckled and immediately swarmed his hands down his spine and into the crack of his ass.

"Yeah," Poe breathed, arching against his hand, "that's good too. Lube. Lube it up, baby."

Finn reached for the massive jug and awkwardly tried to angle it into a position where he could pour a dollop into his palm without accidentally slopping it all over them. It was like trying to manhandle BB-8. Poe sat back, holding the end of the jug to keep it steady.

"This is fucking ridiculous," he laughed. "We need a smaller bottle or a pump or something."

"Whoa, whoa, that's enough!" Finn tensed as the liquid pooled and began to slide thickly down his wrist. Poe shook with laughter as he let go of the bottle and Finn quickly set it aside. He held out his hand, staring at the puddle of lube in dismay. Poe scooped some of the viscous liquid into his hand and held Finn's eyes as he slicked his cock. He bit his lip, eyes tightening as he pleasured himself.

Finn would've been less affected by a stun shot to the heart, and then Poe's hand was on him, slicking his cock as well, squeezing their slick lengths together and pumping them in unison. "Ahh… gods, Poe…" He watched through half-parted lids, hypnotized as their flushed, glistening heads slipped and stubbed past one another.
"You like that?" Poe asked heavily.

"I like everything you do." Finn murmured. He lay back against the chair, letting Poe work and thrusting against him. The slick sounds alone would've turned him on beyond endurance. He wrapped an arm around Poe's back and began to spread his ass cheeks apart. Poe removed his hand from their cocks and braced himself against the back of the chair. He tensed pleasurably as Finn's fingers glided down his crack and circled him, pressing, circling away, and pressing again in a dance of need and uncertainty. He gasped as his middle finger pushed slowly in and then curled in a curious stroke, exploring the tight, velvety heat of his body. Poe curled against him, his head dropping to the crook of Finn's neck. Finn was entirely lost in him, in the pulsing of his body, in the sweat that ran down Poe's back, in the feel of his breath on his shoulder.

"Does that feel good?" Finn asked, and Poe knew that it wasn't a playful rhetorical—he genuinely needed to know, especially after his fear of hurting Poe the last time he'd fingered him.

"You feel great, Finn. I love having you in me." Poe stared heavily through his lashes and clenched around his finger to make the point stick.

His voice flowed over Finn's body like honey and his arms tightened around him and he plumbed him, pulled out, and pressed in his index and middle finger together. The rim of flesh tightened around him, quivered, and then relaxed as Finn began to slowly thrust his fingers. Poe's breath deepened; each stretching pump coiling through his body like fire. Finn curled mindlessly towards the front of Poe's body, stroking through his slick heat, down his velvety walls and pausing as his finger skipped across a round bulb of firmer flesh.

Poe quaked atop him. "Nnn…oh, right there." He gasped.

Finn panted, experimentally dragging his fingers across the spot that had caused Poe such pleasure and was rewarded with a tight groan from his lover. Finn's stomach shivered and his cock leapt. It was an exciting discovery—Poe had, of course, told him about the prostate, but to feel it pulsing beneath his fingers like a heart, to be able to make Poe's hips shake like that, to be that close to him… Finn's chest ached with love and lust. He slowly pushed in his ring finger as well; lube dribbling from Poe and down his fingers. He thrust them in and out, lost in the rhythm of it and in the quick resistance that met him before opening with a hot glide.

"Ah…go a little slower, babe." Poe groaned.

Finn swallowed hard, so aroused he couldn't think, could hardly breathe. His free hand splayed out beneath Poe's shoulder so tightly it was if he were trying to sink through his body. He rubbed and circled his prostate. "Like that?"

"Yeah, hnn, yeah, that's good."

Poe half-lifted his hips and pressed back against Finn's hand, his head hanging between his arms and his face drawn into an expression that bordered on pain. He rocked his hips back, meeting Finn halfway with small thrusts of his own; his drooling cock rubbing hot lines up Finn's stomach as he moved. Finn gasped against Poe's shoulder as his body swallowed him and he twined the fingers of his free hand into Poe's sweaty curls.

"Ah…baby, I'm ready…I need you," Poe panted.

"I love you," Finn said roughly, as his fingers slid from him.

"I love you, too—hah—" He angled his hips, hovering above Finn's waiting cock and then pressing
himself flush against his pelvis with a tight, gasping breath. He held for a quivering minute, his mouth parted and brows drawn, his eyes locked on Finn's. "Hnn…I love you…I love this…” He bit his lip, Finn's arms tight around him as he began to rock his hips.

"Ahn! Yeah, honey—" Finn groaned. He forced his eyes open. Poe was staring at him, his loose, sweaty black curls framing his face, his eyes tender and deep, and behind him were the stars, millions of them stretching on and on into oblivion. Finn's heart ached; he was so beautiful. He wanted to etch the image of him into his mind forever. But even twined together, joined as solidly as two beings could be, he felt for a fleeting moment the frailness of it all, and how small they both were; two hunted little beings drifting through cold space in a thin skin of metal and air. He loved Poe with a fierce, mortal ache and he kissed him passionately as they rocked together. *I love you. I don't care what happens as long as I have you.*

It was sometime later when they entered the bedroom, showered and hand in hand. Poe pressed on the lights with a languid stretch, his eyes raking over Finn with satisfied warmth.

Finn kissed him, their flushed, tender lips gliding drowsily together. He pulled away with a start as he caught a glimpse of something odd. "Uhm…what's wrong with BB-8?" He asked quietly. The droid was snuggly tucked into the corner furthest from the door, it's head hanging so heavily it was as if the artificial gravity had been ramped up.

"Oh damn…I forgot," Poe's shoulders slouched, "he doesn't like his new colors," he whispered in an aside to Finn and then he walked up to the droid and knelt, placing a hand on BB-8's blue and orange dome. Finn kept an eye on the two of them as he quickly clothed; it was too cool in the ship to go naked for long, especially without Poe's body to warm him.

"Hey, buddy…I'm sorry you don't like your new chassis." He said gently.

[I shouldn't be blue and green and orange. And it is scuffed. Scuffed!]

Poe had to look hurriedly away from Finn's twinkling eyes to keep from laughing. "Would you rather have scuffed up paint or be dented so bad you can hardly roll?"

[Dented, and orange and white.] It bleeped flatly.

"Look, just think of it as a disguise, okay?" Poe urged. "We're gonna disguise ourselves too, so you won't be alone."

[Really?] BB-8 turned it's head marginally, sulking up at Poe like a child.

"Yeah, I'm gonna grow out my beard."

"You are?" Finn asked as he sat back on the bed.

Poe shrugged. "With the facial registry programs that are out there, it probably won't do much good, but I figured it couldn't hurt either. I mean…unless you wouldn't like it. I could think of something else."

Finn grinned, touched; Poe always carried himself so confidently that he'd never have guessed that the other man worried about how he may look in Finn's eyes. "No, that's fine. If it'll help at all, you should do it." He ran a hand through his hair, considering. "I guess I could grow everything out too, but my hair's so short right now it'd take a while. Maybe I could wear some kind of covering or weird hat or something."
"Unfortunately, I think we are fresh out of weird hats. We'll think of something though." Poe turned back to BB-8 and patted it fondly. "See? It's all good, buddy."

It let out a wheezy electronic sigh. [I guess so.] It looked between them severely. [Did you clean around the pilot's chair? I don't want to link into the interface if you left organic goo everywhere.]

Poe snorted. "We did not leave goo everywhere you perverted little thing."

"What is he talking about?" Finn asked with an incredulous look.

[You know I can see in different wavelengths, right? This ship is a mess. There are organic reproductive fluids on the seat and on the quilt, right there on the edge even though you thought you cleaned it, and on the—]

"Okay," Poe cradled his forehead in his hands. "Okay, that's enough. I got it. I'll clean everything."

Buoyed now that it had given Poe something to think about, the droid rolled out of the bedroom and to the cockpit to link into the Hyrotil. Poe waited, listening with a grimace as if he expected a bomb to go off. A beat passed and then a furious trill.

[It is EVERYWHERE!]

Poe sighed, gave Finn a look of resigned amusement and then stood. "Guess I'm on cleaning duty."

He clothed, dipped to give Finn a quick kiss and then walked out of the room.

Finn grinned, happy to lie down and let Poe clean. While he could now walk and bend without pain, and his legs were gaining strength every day, he still tired quickly. Sex left him worn out. He caught snippets of conversation between Poe and BB-8 and he smiled as if the sounds themselves had wrapped around him in a kind of aural hug. He could listen to the two of them all day and for a long while he just lie there, quietly basking in their back and forth and trying to decipher BB-8's binary.

They were three days out from their almost disastrous visit to Tanil. Now that they were back to lightspeed (after their quickly derailed flying lesson) they were well on their way to the decommissioned Resistance waypoint that Poe had said was called The Brick, simply because that's what it looked like. With the repaired BB-8 busy searching for the Resistance's frequency and the fuel injector installed, there wasn't much for them to do until they reached their destination.

Finn decided to take advantage of the leisure time and sat up, removing from the storage unit the pad of flimsy and stylus that Poe had gotten for him. He lay on his stomach, uncapped the stylus, and began to practice.

[On the side of the chair.] BB-8 chittered from it's station up against the dash.

"I already cleaned it."

[No, the other side.]

"I don't even see any-oh. How did it get there?"

[I wouldn't know, though that makes my disgust no less valid.]

Poe scrubbed at the horrible green fabric with a laugh as he met the droid's judgmental lens. "I missed you, buddy."
[I missed you too. And Finn. But I didn't miss the mess. If it's not skin cells, hair, and nail clippings, it's sweat and semen. Organics are very gross.]

"Yeah, well, we can't all be as perfect as droids."

BB-8 cocked it's head, considering. [That is true.]

"But we get to have a lot more fun." He winked.

[Well, you do seem to enjoy it. It can't beat an oil bath though.]

"Buddy I took an oil bath on a dare, and let me tell you, sex is a billion times better than that. Oil baths are gross."

[Wrong.] BB-8 bleeped flatly.

Poe shook his head with a laugh. "I think we're gonna have to agree to disagree, bud. And in the meantime, me and Finn will clean up a little better, okay?"

[Good. It's like rolling through a field of landmines.]

"Oh come on, we've had sex, like, twice on this ship. There's no way it's that bad." Poe shook his head and stood, carrying his bucket of cleaning supplies back to the kitchen.

[It is kind of bad.]

"Uh huh." Poe leaned for a moment with his back up against the narrow counter, staring out at the diffuse, wavering lines of blue starlight streaking past the ship as they surged through the jump tunnel. The strobing had the tendency to hypnotize him the longer they remained in lightspeed, and they'd been in the tunnel for nearly a day. He sighed comfortably and rubbed at his arms; even with Finn in another room, he could feel him; his fingers, his tongue, the warmth of him. He thought of the nervous rigidity in Finn's body the first time they'd made love, how comically still he'd held. Since then, he'd gained so much confidence in his body, and his ability to give and receive pleasure; he moved readily, and he'd even thrown out a pet name. He called me 'honey'. Poe grinned; it had been years since anyone had used any endearing little words with him, and his chest filled with warmth. Idly tracing his lips, he tore his eyes away from the cold starlight and back to the droid. "What's our eta?"

[3.27 hours.] BB-8 began and then stuttered into silence. [Oh! I'm getting a call!]

"From who?" Poe asked with nervous excitement as he hurried into the cockpit.

[It's your dad!]

"Put it through, put it through, put it through. Hey Finn, my dad's calling!"

Finn met him in the cockpit, sitting to the right of the pilot's seat. Poe sat down as BB-8 patched the call through, and immediately grimaced; though he'd just cleaned the cushion, he'd forgotten it was wet.

"Hello?" Kes' voice played out through the little room.

"Hi, dad! Everything okay?" Poe and Finn nervously caught each other's eyes.

"Hi, boys. Don't worry, I'm fine. Just wanted to let you know that I made it to the vacation spot I told you about."
"Nice. You have any more trouble with that bounty hunter?"

"I didn't, but he put up a fight with Control."

"Did they take him in?" Finn leaned forwards, closer to the communications relay.

Kes' second of silence answered well enough and Finn sat disappointedly back. "No. 'Fraid they didn't catch him. He shot the guards that had impounded his ship and blasted out of here hot. Took out a security cruiser in orbit and jumped to Force knows where. I don't think he'll be able to show himself on Yavin anymore, but you two had better watch yourselves—he knows you're together, and I wouldn't put it past him to figure out the make of your ship."

"We'll be careful, dad." Poe very purposely left out their close shave on Tanil and changed the subject. "How was the…uh…thing." Poe's voice sobered quickly. Finn immediately understood that he was referring to his mock funeral.

"It was rough. Really rough, Poe. Don't make me go through that for real, okay? I'll never make it."

"I'll do my best. Looks like my bounty's still suspended, so that helps on the whole 'staying alive' front."

"Good." Kes said with satisfaction. "Where are you two headed? No wait, don't tell me. Just…you're safe, right?"

"Yep. We're in the middle of nowhere. I was just teaching Finn how to fly this thing."

[And having sex while ignoring me and my horrible new colors.] BB-8 put in drolly.

Poe shoved the droid, blushing to the roots of his hair. BB-8 chattered a laugh and Finn brought both of his hands to his face; he may not be fluent, but he could take a guess as to what BB-8 had said.

"Hmm, well, that is one way to 'take the stick', I guess." Kes said with a vocal shrug, and both of them died inside.

"No, no, please don't say stuff like that, dad." Poe grimaced. Finn's cheeks grew so hot he was surprised he didn't combust. He couldn't even bring himself to look at the dash, as if Kes could peer at him through the relay.

"Hah. Bet my surprise came in handy, eh?"

Poe sputtered wordlessly for a second. "That thing was ridiculous! Where'd you even find a jug that big?"

"Reveal my sources? Never."

"Uhm… changing the subject," Finn stressed, "but thanks for those Yavini cakes, sir."

"Kes, Finn." He patiently corrected. "And you're welcome. Well, I just wanted to give you two an update. I'm off to see some of the sights around here. Be careful, okay?"

"We will, dad. You too."

"Yes, sir, Kes."

The older man chuckled. "All right. Love you, talk to you both soon."
"Okay," Poe muttered, as he levered the Hyrotil out of lightspeed. The stars shortened from elongated streaks into static glimmers. The sudden lack of the wavering lights made Finn dizzy for a moment; he'd never been in a jump tunnel for so long before and to be back in realspace left him upended. He clamped his eyes shut as Poe started them forwards.

"There's The Brick—gods, it has not aged well…" Poe said. The Hyrotil drifted slowly nearer to the giant durasteel rectangle. Where landing bays had once sat ensconced in its flanks were now gaping holes. Bits of shield generators and duracreep drifted about, pingng harmlessly off the chassis of their ship. Finn dared to open his eyes.

"Looks pretty picked over." He said, peering out at the ruined structure.

"Yeah, scavengers and pirates must've pulled everything good a long time ago. Hopefully no gangs are squatting here. Of course, unless they've got working life support systems, no one's gonna be staying for long. All the same, keep sharp, yeah?"

"Yeah," Finn nodded.

Poe brought them in so closely Finn fancied he could've reached out of the cockpit and touched the cold grey surface of The Brick. Poe scraped them over the corpse of the abandoned station as if the Hyrotil were a scalpel.

"What are we looking for, exactly?" Finn asked, his eyes darting over bent edges of rebar, old light casings, and shattered panes of transparisteel. He flashed suddenly to the bodies that had drifted like dolls from their ruined Resistance transport and shuddered. It was too easy to imagine something similar in this ghost-station.

"I don't know. A sign, a mark…anything." Poe said. Panicky desperation began to swarm across his chest. This was his one idea—if BB-8 couldn't find anything through frequency searches, and they failed to find anything here…He swallowed.

"Hey wait," Finn grabbed his arm as the ship prepared to loop to the ventral surface of the station. "What's that?" He pointed to a series of lines and marks about six feet by six feet across. Brow furrowed, Poe rotated them about so that they were facing the strange mural.

"Hmm…made with some kind of torch. It looks almost like…" a shaking breath ghosted past his trembling lips and his eyes widened. Suddenly he was laughing, standing from his chair and leaning forwards against the dash, head craned to get as close to the symbol as he could. "I don't believe it."

"What?" Finn stood as well, nonplussed. There was something familiar about it, but he couldn't quite place it. It was shaped like a faceted diamond, and the numerical for 2 was written on one of the panes.

"It's a fucking 10 sided dice. Finn, it's a ten sided dice!"

BB-8 bleeped and trilled excitedly, rolling a tight circle around the pilot's chair.

"It's a ten sided dice with a two on it!" Grinning ear to ear, Poe took him by the shoulders and shook him with joy. "Finn, it's Snap! Blue Two. He made it—who the hell else would come out here and put a game dice with his call sign on it? He knew we'd get it!"

The excitement leapt to Finn and for a several seconds they held one another laughing and jumping in place while BB-8 wobbled joyously about their ankles. "And those numbers beneath it—those have got to be for his comm or his ship!" Finn exclaimed.
Poe all but floated to the communication controls; he hadn't felt so elated since…well, since Finn had opened his eyes in medbay in what felt like another lifetime. To know that one of his team had made it…he wiped hurriedly at his eyes, torn between laughing and crying and Finn wrapped a knowing arm around his shoulders, his smile so bright that Poe legitimately lost his head. Background knots of worry and fear that he'd begun to get used to uncoiled all at once in a spree of giddiness.

"Come on, call him," Finn urged.

"Gotta put myself together," Poe breathed, sniffing mightily and then laughing some more. "Okay…okay, I got this." He pressed the code into the Hyrotills more powerful relay system and they waited with baited breath; every heartbeat thudded magnified in their ears; the low hum of the engines became a roar, and the shifting of their feet an avalanche. Poe began to sweat. *Come on...come on, pick up Snap, pick up.*

An annoyed voice met their ears. "This is Wexley,

Finn and Poe erupted into cheers, and BB-8 screeched so loudly they had to clap their hands over their ears, though they didn't mind in the least.

"What—who is this?" He demanded.

"Snap! Snap, it's *us*!" Poe yelled.

[Hello, Snap!]

"Hi, Snap!" Finn laughed.

"Wait—what the—Poe?! Finn!? BB-8?" He sputtered witlessly for several seconds before he could recover. "But—you're dead! I saw your funeral on the news and I'm on my way to Yavin 4 to—to pay my goddamn respects and—what is going on?"

"It's a long story, buddy. *Force*, it's so good to hear your voice!"

"Same, man—I really thought—" Snap broke off thickly, his voice thin. He was silent for a full minute and then carried on in a very peppy tone, "So...so you guys saw my little code, huh?"

"That was brilliant." Finn exclaimed. "No one else would've understood it at all."

"I have my moments," They could hear the pride in his voice. "I had Tubbs cut it into the wall and...then I heard about your crash and thought you both were goners. Shit, that is some Jedi-magic you guys just pulled."

"Dad-magic, really. Are you with the Resistance right now?" He asked hopefully.

"No...lost touch after we all jumped; Tubbs has been searching for the frequency though."

"Yeah, BB-8's been on it for days. Damn...that's disappointing." He trailed off, rubbing his chin. "Hey, where are you right now?"

"Somewhere between Taris and Yavin."

"Okay, we're gonna about-face and meet you midway. How about..." Finn scooted back as Poe edged over to the nav computer, fingers flying over the gently glowing screen. "Ah, The Wheel would be a good spot. Coordinates 5-231-22-755-8."

"The Wheel. Got it. We're on our way—look out for a piece of crap Corellian 33 Schooner."
"Pfff, a Schooner? Good score." Poe said sarcastically. "We'll be coming in on a Hyrotil."

"Ooo, nice! Guys, I'll see you all in about…nav computers got me at 27 hours."

"We'll have to stop for fuel, but we'll see you there, Snap. I'm so damn excited I could shit myself, really."

Snap laughed loudly over their speakers. "Me too, Poe, me too. Be careful, guys."

"We will."

Chapter End Notes

Holy balls! So, I had this chapter done, like, three days after the last one and just...didn't post it? Jeeez, that is lame. So here it is! Have some smut! And reunions and stuff. If you'd like to see the vaguely smutty chapter art I did for this, check me out on tumblr: bluestem10.tumblr.com Man, my ability to draw bodies has rapidly evaporated during my drawing hiatus. So, excuse any anatomical anomalies that may be going on.

As always, thanks for reading, and comments make my day!
Poe laughed as he and Finn crashed into a hard embrace. He rocked them back and forth, grinning from ear to ear. "He's okay." Poe breathed with a laugh.

"And I bet he's not the only one," Finn grinned as he set him to arm's length and kissed him on the forehead. Poe's arms unwound from his back as he wiped at his eyes. He met Finn's glowing face and looked away with a shaky laugh, hastily trying to recompose himself.

"Whew. Okay, we need to change course and top off our fuel." He plopped himself in front of the Nav Computer, his eyes tracing the slender glowing lines that stood for hyperspace routes and the planetary lanes that branched away like tributaries from the greater stream. One isolated dot floated in a sea of emptiness. He entered in the coordinates for the orb and hopped back into the pilot's seat, effortlessly swinging them away from the slowly rotating mass of The Brick and into open darkness. He levered them into hyperspace with a casualness that Finn wondered if he'd ever manage with flight. Poe kicked back, swiveling to face Finn and BB-8.

"Alright, BB-8, we need some music. Didn't you say you downloaded some songs you liked from Bases party?"

[I downloaded 53.]

"Let's hear 'em!" He stood, took Finn by the arm and started them for the kitchen.

"Are we having another party?" Finn asked with a grin and then jolted as a blast of electronic wailing and body-shaking wave of bass crashed through each of them.

Poe spun about with his hands clapped to his ears. "Buddy! Keep it at organic levels!" He shouted.

The droid tossed it's head and rolled back into the cockpit. A piercing note climbed to glass-shattering heights and then mercifully dropped. Finn and Poe exchanged stunned looks and then smiled as they slowly uncovered their ears.

"That actually hurt." Finn shook his head.

"What?" Poe yelled jokingly and Finn rolled his eyes as the other man slid open the door to the fridge and pulled free two of his prized cans of Kisin beer. He hadn't taken a single sip since uncovering Kes' gift; Finn knew he'd been saving them for just such an occasion, and he hoped that they'd eventually have reason to drink the box dry. If he could handle them. Poe tossed a can at Finn and mock saluted. "Bottoms up." He winked and gulped hugely.

Finn returned the salute with a laugh and then studied the strange font and demonic face that belched stylized flame across the label. "So, compared to Corellian Rum, how bad does this stuff burn? On a scale of lightsaber to Yavin breakfast."

Poe nearly snorted his drink out of his nose and he doubled over, a hand clamped over his mouth and his eyes squeezed shut as if the beer were about to burst out of every orifice. Finn cackled gleefully; he'd never made someone choke with laughter before. Poe forced the drink down with a shuddering swallow as he met Finn's eyes. "You rank my dad's home cooking as hotter than a literal beam of plasma? What, did you deep throat that lightsaber of Rey's?"
Finn chuckled at the absurd mental image. "I think I'd rather do that than eat that lava-sauce again."

"If it wouldn't be fatal, I would love to see you try. Lightsabers are pretty long, baby. I mean, not that I'm not an impressive specimen, but deep-throating a whole lightsaber…" He arched his brows.

[Are...are you both talking about fellating a plasma beam?] BB-8 rolled into the kitchen, its head at a concerned angle as if it couldn't quite believe what it had heard.

"In a strictly theoretical sense." Poe explained matter-of-factly, as if most people had pondered the logistics of such a thing. The droid shook its head and then began to bop along to the newest song. "And, to answer your question, baby, no this stuff doesn't burn. It might taste kind of bitter to you though."

Finn popped the tab and inhaled. An acrid spray of bubbles popped coolly against his nostrils and he scrunched his nose, trying not to sneeze. It didn't exactly smell pleasant, but nor did it send him into a gagging fit. He hesitantly sipped at it and immediately pulled a face as thick bitterness spread across the back of his tongue and down his throat.

"It's...not bad." He managed.

Poe shook his head with a grin, not fooled in the least. "It's okay to not like it."

"No, I think I can handle this stuff. It's just...an acquired taste?" Finn took another quick gulp to prove his openness to Poe's favorite beer.

"Okay...but if you decide you don't want any more, I'll drink the rest."

"You just want extra, now that it's open."

"Well, yeah. We can't waste a drop of this stuff—who knows when we'll be able to go back to Yavin to get more?" He proudly held up the can like a trophy, the flat overhead light edging its frosted sides in gleaming silver. "This is worth more than...more than our datapad and comms!"

"Then I'll just have to drink the whole thing." Finn grinned.

"Be careful though. This stuff is about 12 percent alcohol. I don't want to have to pull you out of a puddle of puke. Though I would, because I love you and all."

"Thanks." Finn took a giant pull from the can, determined to get past the bitterness. "I can take it."

"Yeah...okay." Poe shrugged. A new song featuring a throbbing beat and trippy synthetic melodies wound through the air and Poe perked up. He met BB-8's eye with a look of dawning joy. "Oooh, is this Supreme Chancellor?"

[It is.]

"Fuck yes! Finn, we are dancing!" He plunked down his drink and clapped his hands together.

Finn met his eyes, nonplussed. He'd never danced before but with Poe...why not? He'd hardly set his drink on the miniscule ledge of the kitchen counter before Poe had taken his hands and swept him into the comparatively open space of the hallway.

"Just follow after me, okay?"

"Sure. I've—I've never danced before." Finn said with a bashful smile. Poe's heart tripped a beat; Finn's timid admission was both wrenching and so adorable he could hardly stand it.
"It's easy. You just move with the beat. It's like sex only without the actual sex part."

"So…not like sex…"

"No, no, you got two bodies moving together, sweating together, touching and panting. There's power dynamics, like, who's in charge? Am I giving or taking, leading or following?"

"Jeez," Heat flooded his face and Poe caught the subtle bloom deepening across his cheeks.

"Uh huh, so just move your hips. Loosen up. Always good to loosen up." Poe threw caution to the wind and began to shimmy and sway to the winding, dropping beat. A modulated female voice bloomed across the high skittering electronic peals, singing in a quick, forceful cantor that Finn could hardly follow. The cadence of it got inside him and he began to move with Poe, swaying from his neck, into his shoulders and down into his hips. His feet began to move, and as Poe took a step towards him, he leaned back.

"See, you got this, baby!" Poe cheered as he swung his hips seductively and began to sing along. BB-8 warbled joyously and rolled over to the two of them, weaving in a figure eight around their ankles and supplementing the melody with an improvised harmony that worked surprisingly well. They both laughed out loud, Poe grabbing Finn's hand and drawing him into an awkward twirl. Finn giggled as he found himself clamped against Poe's chest and then just as suddenly unwound into a reverse spin. Warmth bubbled up, both from the drink and from the simple happiness of dancing. He hadn't realized how freeing just moving to a beat could be. Poe took his hand again and there was a slight opposing tension as each tried to pull the other into a spin. Poe relented and Finn twirled him in to his side, but Poe quickly dipped under his arm and shimmied up behind him, linking his hands in front of his chest. Finn clasped them and for long while they swayed together to the beat. Finn turned his head slightly and met Poe's heavy gaze. They kissed, the beat throbbing through each of them, dancing from foot to foot, rocking into the sinuous sway of shoulders and hips.

"I like dancing," Finn said comfortably.

"Me too." Poe all but purred.

The song ended on a hard crescendo, a wild earthen beat, and then a sudden silence. After the silence, a bubbly trill rang through their ears and ushered in a peppy, cheerful tune with a definite bounce to it. Poe and Finn jolted in unison and peered down at BB-8; the droid was tugging urgently at their pants legs.

[I like this song! Dance with me now!]

Poe gave Finn a look and chuckled, unwinding from him and kneeling down to the droid's height.

"Who do you want to dance with?" Poe asked with a soft look that Finn imagined one would use with a child. It made his heart swell.

[Both of you! Quick! There's only 3.1788 minutes left!] It flung it's shorter gripping arm at Poe and the longer manipulator arm at Finn and they took hold. BB-8 rolled backwards and they followed awkwardly after it. There was no doubt BB-8 was leading this dance and Poe stumbled, hunched almost double, giggling like a loon. Finn laughed from his higher vantage point, and then the droid began to spin in a circle and they knocked into each other before recovering and orbiting the droid like satellites. BB-8 quickly reversed and again they stumbled, clacking elbows and shoulders.

"Hey!" Finn laughed, but BB-8's happiness made his playful complaint die in his throat.

[Can we have another dance when Snap and Tubbs arrive?]
"Sure, buddy!" Poe grinned. After two solid minutes of spinning in a circle, Poe and Finn were left leaning against the walls with their eyes clamped shut.

"Eugh…I'm glad I didn't drink a lot of that beer." Finn grimaced as he clutched at his spinning head. He slid down the wall and landed on his butt with a solid thump. Poe managed to ooze over to the counter and he gripped it tightly, with no comment.

[Dizzy already?] The droid tutted loudly.

"We don't have orbiculate motivators, bud." Poe said dryly as he reached for his beer.

[You're right. Humans only have chochlea and vestibular nerves.] BB-8 bleeped with an air of superiority.

"Yeah, those." Poe rolled his eyes and then snorted with laughter as Finn wobbled to his feet. "You okay, honey?"

"Yep. No offense BB-8, but I like dancing with Poe better."

[Well, I like dancing with Tubbs, but we have to take what we can get.]

Finn looked to Poe for a translation.

"He's being sassy."

"Surprise, surprise." He staggered over to the counter and leaned against it with Poe. The pilot was nursing his drink with thoughtful warmth. He hadn't felt he could act with such ease and goofiness since their bonfire on D'Qar, and he suddenly missed every aspect of the Base with a potent ache. He missed the low, vine-covered ceilings, the cramped meeting rooms, and the casual chatter of mess hall; he missed walking through the main hanger and breathing in the smell of solvents and fuel, running his eyes down the lines of X-wings waiting like birds of prey. But most of all he missed the people. Every single one of them, and the atmosphere of home they'd made. He took a long pull from his can of Kisin, musing on their fateful last party as a team. As a family.

Finn, for his part, had split his attention between the newest song, and trying to decipher and name the different flavors he was beginning to pick up in his beer. It was altogether different from the fiery potency of Corellian rum, and dryer than the Hellbrawn ale he'd tried during their party. Between the music, the drink, and Poe's company, he felt supremely relaxed. He turned to Poe with a smile. "This makes me think of the party we had on Base."

"Yeah, I was just thinking about it too." Poe forced a smile onto his face.

"I can't believe you managed to drink as much of that rum as you did."

"I don't even remember," Poe said with a genuine laugh. "All I know is we were sitting by the bonfire, and then we were upstairs and I was peeling your clothes off." He grinned and shook his head. "How the hell did I get you in bed?"

"Well, it started with you yelling 'I want to blow you' for all of Base to hear." Finn smirked.

Poe's jaw dropped. "…I didn't."

"You definitely did. And I remember wondering what the hell you were talking about, but everyone else was whistling and cat-calling, so I kind of got the gist of it…"
Poe's eyes widened. "Oh my gods…that's horrible! That's like…slavering hutt levels of letchyness!"

He shrugged. "I was pretty obviously okay with it."

"Well…that's good." Poe shook his head.

[You were not subtle. Even some of the Astromechs were whistling at you two.]

"Shut it, BB-8." Poe glared at the droid, latently mortified and then stared off towards the cockpit. He drained his drink. "I always did say dumb things when I was drunk."

"It wasn't dumb. Just loud." Finn soothed. "I'm glad you did, because Force knows I wouldn't have made the first move. I was way too nervous."

Poe snorted a sarcastic laugh out his nose. "I am pretty intimidating."

"Hell yes you were. Walking around in your damn towel, all shower-misty and half-naked."

"Pfff, try trying to dress you in that shower! Pulling your briefs up your legs…that was pure torture. Like, Kylo Ren mind torture times 20."

"That was rough on my end too." He took Poe's hand. "So, I'm glad you drunkenly yelled about blowing me."

Poe rolled his eyes. "What a great story to tell about how we got together."

[Charming.] BB-8 agreed.

Finn stroked his hand for a few quiet moments and then glanced up at the recessed cabinets. "Can we have another one of those cakes your dad gave us?"

"The Tarrejas?"

"Yeah, those."

"There's not many left…"

"If we split one, there'll still be enough left for each of us to have one when Snap gets here." Finn explained and Poe laughed internally; the other man had obviously been thinking about the cakes all day.

"Sure, let's split one then. Kisin and Tarrejas—I'll make a Yavini out of you yet."

"With the desserts, yes. With the hot stuff, no." Finn shook his head.

They sat comfortably in the cockpit, eating their cakes and theorizing about where Snap had gone and how he'd acquired his ship, while BB-8 searched for the Resistance frequency. They'd turned the music down, but the droid's playlist still wafted gently from the ships sound system, like friends speaking in the background. Finn was glad of the extra noise; it kept him from feeling absolutely cut off in the depths of space.

He finished his cake and licked the sugary residue from his fingers, eyes idly tracing their hyperspace lane on the nav computer.
"So what's this planet we're stopping at like? Rhennac?"

Poe popped the last of his Tarrejas into his mouth. "It's alright. About the only habitable spot in this whole sector so they're used to travelers. We shouldn't stand out too much."

"Which reminds me…how exactly are we disguising ourselves?"

"We'll have to improvise. Wrap some shirts around our faces or something."

"That's going to look really stupid." He smirked.

Poe grinned. "Better than looking like our Bounty pictures, right? Oh, that reminds me—I meant to check on those—make sure the General is okay." He scooted closer to the dash and keyed up it's display. He pulled up the holonet and clicked the Board he kept at easy reach on the main screen. The image solidified before them with a flickering blue light; Leia's active bounty image shimmered brightly, while Poe's darkened portrait remained suspended.

Poe leaned back in his chair with a sigh. "That's a relief—I was afraid that weequay would sell his intel, but he must be playing it close to the chest." He stretched. "Well, we've got about six hours left before we'll be planet-side. You want to get some sleep?"

"Yeah."

Poe patted BB-8's dome as he stood and stretched. "Keep an eye out, okay bud?"

[I will. Have fun recharging.]

Poe tossed and turned beside Finn for what felt like hours, his thoughts zigging and zagging between excitement and unease like a ship through a sea of laserfire. He couldn't wait to see Snap again, to hear his voice and learn what he'd been up to in the days since the attack. That train of thought led, unfortunately, to the attack itself, which made him both nervous and angry. But most of all he needed to talk to Snap about the others; about Ziff, Bastion, Liv Nek, Nein, and Jess. Finn had liked them, of course, and had been forming quick friendships. But like him, Snap had known them as family for years. He could commiserate on the deeper level that Poe both needed and dreaded delving to.

He rolled over, straightening the blanket over his shoulders and pressing his face into his pillow with a frustrated sigh. At least he'll be here though. And BB-8 will be happy to see Tubbs. They can complain about his new colors together. Some of his unease thawed as he pictured the two droids rapidly conversing in binary. And then what will we do? Just keep running and refueling, hoping no one ever recognizes us? That's no life. That's not even fighting. And then he was stressed and nervous once more. Though he'd grown up with the singular desire to fly and to protect, he wished suddenly that he and Finn could be normal citizens on a far off world, with no worries beyond making ends meet and figuring out what to eat for dinner, and he felt extraordinarily selfish for wanting it. L'ulo forced mom to muster out. Did she feel this way too? He rolled over again.

Finn lifted his head marginally from his pillow and softly murmured. "Are you okay?"

Poe opened his eyes, though it was pointless to do so; without BB-8's resting light, the room was dark as a cave. "Yeah, I'm sorry. I'm keeping you up, aren't I?" He felt Finn shrug and then squirm closer to him, his arms wrapping blindly around his body. Poe snuggled against him, resting his head at the crook of Finn's neck, painfully grateful for the comfort of his touch. "I'm just excited. And nervous…especially after what happened last time."
Finn's lips pressed smoothly against his forehead and Poe sighed, losing himself to the softness of his lover's warmth and lightly tracing the jagged edges of his scar. "I wish things were different. That we didn't have to run and hide and I could show you around Yavin. That you could've really gotten to know my team."

"I know." He stroked through Poe's hair. For a long while, neither of them spoke. "Where would we visit first?" Finn asked at length.

Poe smiled into the darkness; not since his life with Rhys had he traveled for the fun of it--there'd been little point without someone to share the journey and experiences with. His heart swelled. "I'd take you to Espeyo beach on Yavin. The water's so clear you can see your feet in the sand like it's not even there. And at night, all the little plankton light up until the sea looks like it's full of stars."

Finn grinned. "Where next?"

"Corellia. They have a big ship show every year—millions of vessels from all over the galaxy—it'd take months to even see them all. And there's races! I always wanted to try a few of them."

"And then where?"

"Corescant. We could go to the top of the old senate building; it's so high up I hear you can get a nosebleed just standing there. And you'd love some of the dessert shops."

An expansive warmth flowed through Finn as Poe talked. Even in their current situation, he at least had things to look forwards to, things to hope for. There was a future waiting for him where once there had been nothing and it made all the difference in the galaxy. He inclined his forehead to Poe's. "We'll do all that, once this is over."

Poe found his mouth in the darkness and kissed him slowly, sleepily. Once all of this is over. Comfortably entwined in the deep silence of space, Poe focused on Finn's steady breathing until he finally drifted off.

The ship pinged what felt like minutes later and Poe sat groggily up, dragging a hand across his eyes. He could hear Finn fumbling about and winced as flat white light filled the room. In twenty minutes they'd dressed and eaten a hasty breakfast, and swept through the atmosphere of Rhennac. It was a planet of soft dunes and wispy grey green grasses. A limitless sky of steely blue stretched on uninterrupted but for the city swelling steadily before them. Softly rounded skyscrapers jutted from the earth like insect mounds, reflecting the natural palette that ensconced them, and dotted here and there across their flanks were lights like the little yellow flowers in the surrounding sea of grass. Finn peered about, fascinated, as Poe conversed with the control tower and aimed them over their landing bay outside of the main spaceport. A modest flow of air traffic drifted to and from the domed port and they softly settled into one of the circular bays.

"Okay. Time for disguises." Poe said.

They spent several minutes wrapping shirts about their heads and faces, fabric muffling their laughter.

"Hold still," Poe giggled as he tried to tuck a sleeve around Finn's neck in some semblance of a scarf.

"You look so stupid."
Poe snorted. "Thanks. You look like a head-trauma patient."

"Nice. No one should recognize us then."

"No kidding. I think this is about as good as it's gonna get. Once we meet up with Snap, we can have him pick us up something a little…"

"Less stupid?" Finn suggested.

"Yeah, that."

They’d picked out code names; Poe decided to go by Dand, and Finn shortened Snap's last name to Wex. They set BB-8 to guarding the ship and walked out into the city. There was a strange scent to the bracing air, like cinnamon and smoke, and Finn inhaled deeply as Poe levered free a thick hose from the fueling pump housed within their landing bay. Finn helped him maneuver it into the Hyrotils port and they stood back, satisfied at the heavy sound of rushing liquid.

Poe stared off into the expansive, cloudless sky and his chest lightened; while he loved ships, and loved flying to his bones, he had begun to feel trapped within the Hyrotils metal frame. It was good to hear natural sounds again, to feel the wind on his skin. He looked to Finn, grinning beneath the shirt that was twined about his lower face.

"We might as well restock some more food while the ship's filling up. Wanna take a walk?"

"Sure," Finn nodded and hand in hand, they started down the low ramp that led from their port and onto the smoothly paneled main thoroughfare. They kept close to the shops and stalls that lined the streets as speeders drifted past. Finn paused before a window stocked full of baked goods so colorful and glossy with sugar he could almost taste them. Poe's fingers tightened against his, and then he found himself standing inside the shop while Poe paid the Rodian baker five credits for two of the colorful little pastries. Finn stared about in wonder. So much sugar. His stomach rumbled with anticipation and he delicately touched glass bells and dishes that displayed treats he couldn't begin to name.

"Here," Poe handed him the bag of desserts and Finn clutched them excitedly as they exiting the shop and merged into the stream of shoppers and travelers. They wondered through several more stalls, Finn ravenously studying every new color, texture, form, and species that met his eyes. One sight stopped him cold, and he paused in midstep while the crowd flowed past him.

A man and woman strode happily together, their warm umber skin contrasting beautifully with flowing robes of dusky blue that seemed to be the going style of Rhennac. Skipping and chattering at their heels were two children, a little girl and her younger brother. Finn watched, transfixed as they giggled together, playfully nudging and poking, and then their mother stooped to pick up the toddler and nuzzle him against her nose with a maternal glow that painfully melted Finn's heart.

That could've been me… he thought with a pining ache. My mom could've looked like her… and my dad could've looked like him. Maybe I had a sister too? He watched the family heedlessly, and reached to tug on Poe's sleeve and point them out to him. But his hand met empty air. Poe? He came back to himself all at once, shocked to find that Poe was no longer with him. His eyes swept the crowded street with a flare of panic. Poe was nowhere in sight.

"Hey, honey, I wanna go in there and get a few more freeze-dried meals, okay?" Poe said over his
shoulder. Finn didn't answer. *Is he already eating those desserts?* Poe turned and came to a full stop, looking about in dismay. He'd lost him in the crowd. *Shit,* he cursed and started back the way he'd come, rounding the edge of the building he'd meant to enter. *We need leashes or something. BB-8 will never let me hear the end of—*

He froze suddenly as something hard pressed into the small of his back and he knew instinctively that it was the barrel of a blaster. He felt the figure sidling up behind him more than saw it.

"Freeze, Dameron." Came a rough voice from only inches away.

"You've got the wrong guy," He muttered evenly.

The pressure against his spine strengthened. "Hands up."

"I said you've got the wrong guy." He stressed, though he brought his hands to chest height and turned his palms out. A rough hand patted down his body, closing over the blaster at his hip and quickly removing it.

"Start walking."

The blaster nudged him forwards and down a sidestreet. He thought fast. "Look, I don't know what's going on, but you've got the wrong person, pal."

His captor laughed in a quiet way that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. He was led behind a building and pinned against a large trash bin. There was no one around. He was spun about and he found himself facing a white-skinned twi'lek with cruelly gleaming yellow eyes. *Ozmyn Heil.* Poe's eyes hardened and he noted with satisfaction the black strip of cloth tied over the blaster-wound his father had given the bounty hunter.

"Hands out, and no sudden movements or I blast a hole through your chest."

Poe swallowed, glaring fiercely as he stretched his arms forwards, and then lashed out with a savage kick at the twi'leks knee. Ozmyn staggered with a grunt of pain, and Poe dashed past him. He'd hardly taken three steps before he was knocked bodily off his feet. He twisted about like a nexu on the trash-strewn street, but the twi'lek outweighed him by fifty pounds and the knee rammed into his solar plexus doubled him over. His breath whooshed from him and he gasped raggedly. Before he could take a breath, a fist like a battering-ram connected with his skull. He slumped to the side, blinking stars out of his eyes, feeling as if from miles away cold binders snapping tightly around his wrists.

"I thought I said 'no sudden movements' you fucking praff." Oz hissed as he yanked Poe to his feet and leveled his blaster at his face.

"I'm a slow learner." Poe mumbled, tongue running gingerly over his split lip as a throbbing ache started in his cheek. The twi'lek's fingers fumbled about the sides of his rapidly bruising face, flinging the shirts aside as if he were unwrapping a present. A sharp-toothed grin spread over his face and he held up a hand-sized device that ran a wavering line of red light from the crown of Poe's head to his chin.

Oz studied his readout with a look of absolute joy. "Ha! Poe Dameron. 100% facial match. I know they say everyone has a twin, but what are the odds?"

"I dunno, but that Dameron guy must be hot as hell."

"Give it up, you're caught. Start walking or we do this the hard way."
Poe arched a brow as if considering. "I do like it hard."

Oz grabbed him by the shoulder and shoved him roughly forwards, the barrel of his blaster jabbed forcefully into his spine. "Speaking of which, where's your boyfriend, eh?"

"Who?"

"Quit playin' dumb. I saw enough in your droid's head to know all about your little fling with 2187."

"Yeah and that's all it was. A fling. We broke up ages ago, pal. I got no idea where he is." Poe bluffed and then his comm went off in his pocket. Oh no. Oz lunged for it, pulling it free and switching it on.

"Poe? Where are you?" Finn's panicked voice met both their ears, and Oz shot a triumphant look at the pilot. He'd heard the voice before, and had little doubt that 2187 was on the other end. "Poe? Answ-" He thumbed off the comm and Poe's mouth went dry.

"I'll be keeping this," he slipped Poe's comm into a pocket of his tunic and shoved him through back streets and vacant alleys, aiming all the while for the spaceport. "We'll give him a little call once we get off planet. Have him meet up with us away from the law. You think he'd turn himself in to me if he heard you screaming?"

Poe slammed himself backwards with a yell of rage, cracking the back of his head into the twi'lek's face and breaking Oz's nose with a wet snap. They fell in a struggling, cursing tangle of fists, and then electric pain swarmed through Poe's wrists, tightening up his arms and down his spine. He arched, unable to scream through his clenched jaw. Oz stood, puffing and panting, bright crimson blood streaming down his paper-white face. He drew a hand angrily across his mouth and spat, his yellow eyes alight with a strange gleam of pleasure in the challenge his prey was presenting him. I see where the droid got it. He switched off the remote for the stun-cuffs and Poe went limp against the ground, gasping for breath like a fish out of water. Again, Oz hauled him to his feet.

"Try it again and I shoot your spine clean through. Paralyze you. Got it?" Specks of bloody saliva spattered Poe's face and the pilot drew back in disgust. "The First Order won't care if you can walk."

Fuck. Poe looked around, desperate for some law official or civilian to see what was happening. He hoped to see Finn—surely he was looking for him by now. He was a good shot. He could take his captor out from such a distance he wouldn't even see it coming. But Oz had herded him far from the main street. He marched furiously forwards, Oz's blaster pressing like a knife between his shoulder blades. They entered the outermost ring of landing bays, nearly opposite the space where the Hyrotil sat innocently waiting. He was pushed towards a towering skyscraper of a ship; it's forebodingly rectangular form casting a long shadow over them as they approached. Poe eyed the Wrakken XT5 Freighter darkly.

"Jeez," he muttered with a mocking glare, "you compensating for something?"

The kick to the back of his knees was worth it. He grunted, trying to brace himself with his bound hands as he fell but succeeding only in scratching his palms against the scuffed ground. Oz's hand closed around the neckline of his shirt as if he were scruffing an animal.

"If I gotta pick you up one more time."

"You should probably stop knocking me down then." Poe said dryly. Oz casually backhanded him as he remotely opened the bay doors of The Brejiner. Wincing, Poe was shouldered up the ramp and then he stood dwarfed by the massive frame, watching helplessly as the doors slid shut and the light
of day was shuttered out.

Chapter End Notes

I'M SO SORRY.
But man was I excited to *finally* write out that scene between Poe and Oz. I've been wanting to get to it for months. He's such a goddamn smartass, even when getting the crap beat out of him. Also, I super apologize for the wait on this--once again I totally ran out of writing-steam over the past two weeks. Thank you so much for reading, and for commmennnts!! They give me much needed energy! -Bluestem
Chapter 24

Finn jabbed Poe's contact key into his comm, each connecting pulse driving a splinter of panic deeper into his heart. At last the call went through. "Poe? Where are you?"

Silence answered and his stomach dropped to his feet. Poe wouldn't play around with him, not like this. Which meant that he was actively being prevented from replying.

"Poe, answer me, what—" He jolted as his comm pinged him to let him know that his call had been dropped. Flustered, Finn swallowed down his panic. Panic would not help this situation. He breathed slowly in through his nose and out through his mouth, and for a moment he was in a simulation again. The city was a complex grid of streets that he did not have a map to, and he could not afford to waste time walking into dead ends. If Poe had run into trouble, he would try to get back to their ship at the spaceport. If Poe had been taken, a bounty hunter would have to do the same. Finn spun on his heel, trying to call him once more as he dashed off for the Hyrotil, but the signal could not get through.

It helped to think of it as a simulation, helped him to breath and focus, and made the stakes less monstrous. *I have to let BB-8 know what's happening.* He keyed in the droids communication ID and a concerned warble instantly met his ears. "BB-8, something's happened to Poe." He spoke forcefully over the droid's exclamation. "Only say 'yes' or 'no', that's all I'll be able to understand. Can you lock on to Poe's biosignature?" He grunted as he squeezed roughly through a queue of people waiting alongside a food speeder. They shouted and complained at his rudeness, but Finn hardly cared.

[Yes.]

"Okay, search for him. I've tried contacting him, but his comm was turned off. Focus on the spaceport—if someone's got him, that's where they'll be going."

[Yes.] BB-8 bulleted down the hallway and into the cargo hold of the Hyrotil, plugging hurriedly into the control panel, dropping the gangplank, and then shooting down onto the landing bay. It spun nervously on the spot, casting about for the very specific biological levels that made Poe himself. *This spaceport is huge—there's too much interference.* It warbled a worried note. A togruta...no, no. Three duros. A human! No...female. This one? No...low bone density...elderly male. A Sullustan...

It turned at the clatter of quick footfalls. Finn skidded to a stop before the droid, panting through the cloth wrapped around his face. "Have you got anything?"

[No.]

"Dammit." He muttered. He stood on his tiptoes as if that would help him locate Poe in a sea of ships and people.

Ships lifted slowly, almost drowsily, from their landing bays and BB-8 focused frantically from craft to craft; any one of them could be carrying Poe towards a horrible fate. *Where are you? Where are you, Poe?* It concentrated on and magnified ships on the furthest edge of the spaceport, peripherally aware of Finn shifting nervously behind it. The droid saw and recognized the Wrakken X5 Freighter in the same instant and it loosed a shriek of fear and fury that went through Finn like a knife.
"What?" He yelled, eyes darting between the droid, and the surrounding ships and crew.

[Poe!] Finn understood the name and then was lost in a bewildering jumble of panicky shrieks and beeps.

"Where?!" His heart thundered into his throat, desperate to understand BB-8, to see what it saw; the droid took matters into its own hands, bulleting up the Hyrotils ramp while repeatedly shouting Poe's name. Finn understood at once. *Whoever's got him is leaving now.* He darted to the fueling hose, slamming the lever off and dragging the pump from the tank, and then sprinting after the droid just as the engines kicked on with a rushing whine.

By the time he'd entered the cockpit, BB-8 had already plugged into the Hyrotils interface and lifted clear of the spaceport.

[Finn!] it yelled and gestured with it's longer manipulator arm, tapping on a display to the left of the navcomputer. As he watched, the astromech's flow of speech was transcribed into Basic across the screen.

-Poe is onboard a Wrakken Freighter—the same bounty hunter that took me. I will pursue, you man the guns!-

"Right!" Finn gasped, yanking off the shirts wound around his face as he turned on his heel. Behind him Rhennac peeled away into the blackness. He took the stairs two at a time, barreling up the narrow well and flinging himself behind the gunners turret. He gripped the trigger in a steady hand as the station pivoted about with an open view of the dorsal surface of the Hyrotill, and switched on his targeting system. The screen flickered to life, honing in on the nearest heat signature. He quickly slapped on his headset; though he could understand little of what the droid said, he didn't want to risk being cut off from it. The glowing green and tan orb of Rhennac shrunk rapidly above his head, giving him a split second of vertigo before his eyes landed on his target, and all nervousness and panic were forgotten in a cool wash of furious concentration.

"Is this the ship, BB-8?" His hands tightened on the trigger, eyes narrowing on the large tombstone-shape and it's glowing red engines.

[Yes.]

Finn opened fire.

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Poe grunted as he was slammed inside of a cell about the size of a small closet. The perimeter of the cage flickered with a pinkish light and then solidified into shimmering and impenetrable walls of energy. He knew better than to touch the force field—the burns would be agonizing. He backed away against the durasteel wall that formed the back of the cage and glowered up at his captor who was standing back with his hands on his hips, leering as if he'd just caught a magnificent trophy animal.

"Now then, I think I'll give your boyfriend a call. You better hope he turns himself in quick—save you a lot of pain." Oz removed Poe's comm from his tunic and spun it mockingly between his fingers. He opened his mouth to gloat and then jolted as a proximity alarm screeched and the ship lurched as if a bomb had gone off beneath their feet.

Poe thudded hard against the backing of his cage, though he grinned darkly up at his captor. "Well, now's your chance to have a nice face-to-face chat with him."
Oz spat a curse and disappeared up the lift that lead to the cockpit a story above Poe's head. Alone now, Poe licked his bloodied lip and edged around the glowing panels of his prison, trying to take in every aspect of the ship. A Wrakken X4? No, X5. Looks like he's modded it for more weaponry and heavier shielding. I've got to keep him from coming back down here—he'll kill me for sure and take the loss if it means he can get to Finn. He ran his bound hands about the floor and the back wall, but of course there was nothing within his smooth edged, glowing cell that he could use to escape. The ships computer terminal was about 15 feet from him and to the right of that was a cluttered workstation. Could be some tools there—maybe something to force these binders off…something I could use as a weapon. The ship lurched again and then about-faced so quickly that Poe was slung against the rightmost force-field panel; it burned through his sleeve, scalding his skin.

"Ah!" He jerked hastily away, clutching his arm and huddling low against the durasteel, his stance wide to keep from being tossed about like a ragdoll. An eerie silence stole over the ship and Poe figured that Oz was probably trying to speak with Finn. He nearly laughed.

Finn's comm buzzed in his pocket but he hardly noticed through the furious adrenaline pumping through his body. His eyes hardened around the Wrakken freighter like a rancor's fist, and he would not let it go. His first shots had struck home so immediately he'd shocked himself—he'd expected his aim and reflexes to be sloppy after more than a month with no practice. But no, he'd nearly worn through the shielding of the starboard engine. Against the glittering field of space, the Brejiner rotated to face them with an unreal suddenness and Finn inhaled hard, bracing for a returning salvo of laserfire. But the shots never came, and he jolted back to himself as his comm continued to buzz. Ungluing his hand from the trigger, he brought the slender device to his ear.

"You have my attention, FN-2187." Came a low, callous voice, and Finn was so torn between fury and primal horror at the mention of his old identifier that for a moment he couldn't react. He'd never wanted to hear that name again. "Now let me get your attention. Your droid can confirm it—I've got Poe Dameron onboard. You cease firing now, or I hurt him. Do you understand?"

"No, you listen to me," Finn bit out, "One more shot and your starboard engine is dead. You'll lose power, and when that happens I'm blasting straight through your cockpit. Do you understand?"

A dramatic sigh wheezed through his comm. "Do I have to make him scream? You're going to dock and hand yourself over to me, quietly and unarmed, or else I start breaking bones. Taking fingers. The First Order doesn't need him whole—"

Finn switched the comm off so forcefully he nearly broke it and he clutched desperately at his headset. "BB-8! Scan the ship—is the bounty hunter anywhere near Poe right now? Are they together?"

There was a moment of silence and then [No.] Finn watched the display screen near his controls as a longer explanation scrolled by in Basic: -There is interference around Poe—likely a force field.-

Finn considered this, his mouth thin. A force field cell. It needs energy from the ship—if I can disrupt it, Poe could get out.

"Okay. Is Poe alright?"

[Yes.]

"Get me in position; I'm taking out his engines. Hurry! And let me know the moment he gets close to
Poe."

[Yes!]

The Hyrotil swung a spiraling arc, circling the Brejiner like a shark, but the tall, narrow ship pivoted on such a small footprint that pulling up behind it was no easy task. Finn waited for his shot to line up, senses peeled. His comm buzzed again. He elected not to answer.

BB-8 would've been sweating if it was able. Using the Hyrotils exterior sensors, it could detect it's proximity and position to the Brejiner down to the micrometer. But it was unsure of Finn's plan, if he had one at all, or how taking out the engines would do anything more than drive Ozymyn Heil into a rage that Poe would likely bear the brunt of. A searing red bolt lit up the cockpit, reflecting in a shooting star across the droid's dark lens. It jerked and then bleeped with fury as it saw that the Brejiner was hailing it.

It patched the call through and a voice it despised violated the cockpit as if the twi'lek were standing right beside it. "Stand down or my next shot strikes home."

[Fuck you! I hate you! I hope you freeze to death in space and mynocks suck your eyes out!]

"Listen droid, you're out gunned."

[And you aren't going to fire on us. You can't risk it! You need Finn alive!]

"But I don't need your pal, your buddy Dameron alive. 2.5 million credits is plenty. Stand down or he dies."

BB-8 shook with fury, as if it's head were going to shoot off like a cork and spew molten rage about the cockpit. You better know what you're doing, Finn! It shot the Hyrotil past the sharp edge of the Brejiner, cut power to the engines and wrenched the ship in a hard arc that clattered it against the dash.

Finn's finger pulled at the trigger before he even realized how perfect a shot the droid had delivered. The bolt cleaved through the weakening rear shields like a searing green needle through a bubble. The Brejiner rocked, and Finn shouted triumphantly as the beacons and navigation lights across it's hull flickered and went dark, and fire bloomed into space from the impact site.

Again, Poe slammed hard against the back of his cell, this time knocked fully off his feet and narrowly missing having his face scalded off by the force field. He'd felt that blast in his bones and the bass of it rang in his ears and teeth. Easy, Finn! Don't take me with him. No sooner had he landed on his side than the glowing walls shorted and vanished with a cracking snap and then stuttered weakly back to life. The ship was floundering, its life support systems gasping at the damage Finn had wrought. The lights flickered again and Poe gulped; if he could time it right, he could pass through the gap in the force field. If he failed…well, that gruesome scenario didn't bear thinking about. The field flickered and Poe flung himself at it without hesitation, rolling clear just as the barrier re-solidified behind him. The wall of energy sheared off the heel of his boot and Poe backed shakily way from the cell with his heart pounding in his ears; he'd nearly been bisected. Life support alarms ricocheted back and forth, deafening him.

Poe darted for the lift, recalling as he ran everything he'd ever read about the Wrakken line of
freighters. He wrenched off the lifts control panel cover and tossed it aside, revealing a mess of wires, switches and data ports. He knew in his gut that Oz was seconds away from coming down and beating the hell out of him, doing whatever it would take to make Finn fall in line. *Okay, this wire…or…this one? Shit.* He swallowed, fingers hovering uncertainly in the pulsing lights over a yellow wire and a blue one. *This one.* He pulled it, and the corresponding chip below it and then stood back.

A yell of fury met his ears and Poe grinned; the lift was dead and his attacker trapped in the upper level. His satisfaction was short-lived; electric pain ripped from his binders and into his wrists on a jagged sprint through his body. He fell writhing to the ground.

BB-8 let out a scream that nearly blasted Finn's eardrums out. *He's hurting him! He's hurting him!* The words were seared into Finn's eyes as he read them.

"But—you said he's not near him!" Finn yelled in horror.

*-Shocking him! Through the binders!*-

"Shit!" Finn would've felt sick if he'd had time enough for it. "Is the bounty hunter still in the cockpit?"

[Yes!]

"Then let's give him something else to focus on." Finn leveled his turret at the dark canopy. He almost fancied he could see the pale form within, and fury curled through him like a living beast. Twin green bolts flashed and then struck either side of the Brejiners canopy. He saw the twi'lek dashing to his controls, and BB-8 edged the ship out of the way of a volley of red blasts, though the chassis groaned at their passing. *Come on, come on, line me up again.*

For a second, Finn wasn't sure what he was seeing. The top section of the ship was coming fully undone, and for a wild moment Finn thought that he'd shot clean through and had consigned Poe to a horrible death in the vacuum of space. His stomach churned, and then sense returned to him. *It's an escape pod!* He realized.

"BB-8, does he have Poe with him in there?"

*-No! Poe is in the lower levels. He is…okay.*-

"Right." Finn said with a cruel smile and he brought the small, squarish pod into his sights. The pain stopped as if a wall had come down and Poe lay like dead man, the ship screaming with a hollow, subterranean clatter of metal on metal that he felt more than heard. He sat up dazedly and then continued to sit up until he was drifting free from the ground. *Oh…he realized fuzzily, the artificial grav's out. Which means life support is out too.* Emergency lights running off a limited power supply lit the space with all the force of candle, and he floated weightlessly through the half-light. One persistent alarm wailed like a Dathomir banshee and he grit his teeth at the volume as he pushed off from the computer terminal and lifted shaky arms. Numbly he caught hold of the edge of the twi'leks' workstation. "You gotta have an oxygen mask somewhere, pal." He muttered and then winced as an explosion sounded from what felt like right above his head and then a hard ping lanced
through his ears.

Oh shit. Shrapnel from whatever had happened beyond the tomb of a ship had breached the unshielded hull and atmosphere began to vent out in a gossamer stream. Shit, shit, shit. Poe immediately forced all the air from his lungs as the room's atmosphere gushed towards the thumb-sized hole. It was not an explosive depressurization, but that could change if the breach widened. He had been trained for this. He'd gone through hypoxia training, hypobaric chamber training, and pressure simulations in the Academy, and had re-certified annually to keep his piloting credentials up to date. He knew his odds were shit.

Liquid-nitrogen cold began to seep into the naked freighter and it crept over his body like death itself. This was cold of an entirely different realm than the brisk winter he'd experienced on Tanil. This was the cold of nothing. Of void.

He pushed himself forwards, survival mode kicking in and reminding him of the times he'd reviewed a Wrakken's schematics. Airlock. Second level. Right of the engine maintenance hatch. For several horrible seconds, Poe drifted in the gasping darkness and then he bumped blindly against it, hands scrabbling at the wheel lock and hurriedly rotating it until the solid door levered open. He tucked himself inside and pulled the door closed, taking the interior wheel and sealing it shut. The rushing pressure ceased and he took a ragged breath in the darkness before forcing himself to breath sparingly; he knew his O2 saturation would begin to rapidly plummet. All the air that he had left was what remained in the tiny space between locks.

Finn cheered as his shots struck home; the right side of Oz's escape pod shuddered, bits of metal shearing off into space. He readied himself for another shot and then squeezed his eyes shut as the pods engines lit and streaked away into hyperspace.

"Dammit!" He pounded a fist against his terminal, furious at the hunter's escape. Maybe it wasn't a clean escape...maybe I damaged him enough that hyperspace will do the rest.

[Finn!] BB-8 bleated.

"What is it?" He clapped a hand to the ear of his headset, his eyes tightening on his display screen.

-The ship has been breached! It is venting atmosphere! I will bring us around to the Wrakken's airlock, but you must hold it steady!-

Finn gulped, flinging off his headset and sprinting down to the main level and into the cockpit.

"What do you mean it's breached?" Panting, Finn halted before the droid, his hands tight on the back of the pilots' chair.

-The explosion must have damaged it.- He read with a sickening drop to his stomach.

"Is Poe okay?"

The droid chattered tartly and the translation was not exactly heartening. - For now, but his temperature has dropped. Stop talking. I must concentrate. I will line us up with the Wrakken's airlock and then you take the controls while I pressurize it. -

Finn swallowed as the ship rotated dorsally and the broad flank of the Brejiner loomed up to meet them. Finn could see the circular hatch studding the rough surface of the enemy craft with his naked
eye and proximity alarms screamed to life within the cockpit. "Why…why don't I deal with the airlock?" Finn half-yelled over the noise.

-We do not know the exact atmospheric conditions of that ship. I am best equipped to deal with the cold and the lack of pressure.- There was a solid metallic clank as the ships nudged together, their hatches only inches apart. -Now, sit down and hold it steady until I can get us locked.-

"Right." Finn managed and he took his seat as the droid shot past. He heard it launching a cable and dragging itself noisily up the stairs and into the short corridor that led past the gunner's turret and into the lock. "Hold it steady. Hold it steady. I can do this." Sweat trickled down his neck as he gripped the stick with shaking hands. He tried not to remember that hardly ten hours previously Poe had been trying to teach him to fly from this seat, and they'd ended up making love instead. And now Poe's life depended on his ability to pilot.

Poe drifted, tucked up into the fetal position to conserve his body heat. The icy fingers of space had nearly pried the freighter apart; he could distantly hear crates and other debris clattering about as the atmosphere thinned just beyond the airlock. This is bad, I'm gonna freeze to death or suffocate on this piece of shit ship, part of him thought dismally, but another part of him answered in a more forceful voice. Not while Finn is out there. And BB-8. They won't leave me here. I bet they're out there right now trying to figure out a way to—his thoughts were interrupted at the scraping of metal screwing into place from the opposite end of the lock. Poe grinned in the darkness. And there they are.

He was eternally grateful that nearly all vessels used by humanoids employed a homologous docking mechanism; though the two ships could not have been more externally different, the airlocks were essentially the same. He tried to wait patiently, his shivering reaching convulsive levels, as the droid slowly aligned the hatches. His thoughts slurred, and a strange tunnel vision haloed around his eyes, hypoxia tugging at the edge of his mind, sleep reaching treacherously out for him with a cold, beckoning claw. No, don't sleep. Stay awake. Stay awake. He began to hum, mindlessly at first and then he realized that he was singing the old Rancor Romp song he'd loved as a child and a laugh of a sob burst from him. Easy. Relax. Don't lose it, you don't have enough oxygen left to get hysterical. Calm. Slow breaths. He centered himself, focusing on the deep, flowing peace he found in flight and in Finn's arms. He thought of the wavering lights of the Force Tree. This isn't so bad.

At last the end of the lock began to twist open and he rallied his mind to the present as if he were prying it out of quicksand. Light flared in a crescent seam about the edges of the circular door and then it was thrown open, with a fresh wave of bracing, mind-clearing oxygen. BB-8 drifted towards him, anchored with a cable to the Hyrotil, it's bright searchlight blazing across his face. The droid's bleep of joy and concern was music to his ears.

"H-hey, b-buddy." He managed through his chattering jaw. The droid grabbed him about the arm and began to reel them both through the tunnel made between the two ships and into the Hyrotl's well-lit lock. Poe drifted, bumping gently against the far door while BB-8 jetted itself back to the controls and closed the heavy door. With a hydraulic hiss and a low metallic growl, BB-8 released them from the ruined Wraakken freighter. It spoke directly into the Hyrotil, hoping Finn still had his eyes on the dash.

[I have him! We're clear!]

Finn brought them slowly away from the dark husk of a freighter, every muscle in his arms shivering tensely. Once they were a safe distance away, he bolted from the seat and back up the cramped
stairwell. He paused outside of the airlock, peered through its circular port, and nearly wept; Poe was curled like a wounded child. His face was bruised, swollen and bloody, and it took all of Finn's control to keep from catastrophically opening the latch and exposing Poe to fatal decompression sickness.

He pressed his hand to the wired in comm. "Poe! Poe, are you okay?" He said in a rush.

BB-8 drifted towards their internal comm and nudged against it.

Poe watched blearily, and Finn nearly collapsed with relief at the sound of his voice. "I…I've f-f-felt b-better."

"I'm sorry—I'm so sorry, I nearly got you killed, I—"

His babbling was interrupted by a furious string of warbles and beeps, and Poe's weak laugh. "BB-8 s-says to 'shut up' and that you s-s-saved me and held the ship l-level."

Finn bit his tongue; he could've reprimanded himself for hours, weeks. He'd be an old man and still hate himself for nearly killing him. He forced his anger outwards, to the bounty hunter instead. "He really hurt you, didn't he?"

"I've had w-worse."

BB-8 bleeped flatly.

"What'd he say?" Finn demanded.

"Nothing." Poe smiled softly.

It took nearly three hours for the pressure and temperature between the airlock and the Hyrotil to equalize, and for Finn it was nothing short of pure torture. He could see Poe, hurting and exhausted, yet was unable to comfort him. He waited outside the door, watching Poe and BB-8, turning agitatedly away and running a hand through his hair, and then turning back.

Poe breathed deeply, slowly warming to the Hyrotils interior temperature. As heat returned to his body, so too did the pain. His wrists felt as if they'd been shredded, his stomach ached where Oz had kneed him, his arm burned, and his face throbbed. Draped over all of that was a thick, confusing layer of exhaustion that was one part leftover oxygen deprivation and one part physical fatigue. He was grateful for it; he could doze beneath that numbing blanket.

[Are you sure you're okay?] BB-8 asked him for the tenth time.

Poe lifted his head from the wall he was resting against and parted an eye. "Yeah…I'm okay."

The droid wobbled silently back and forth, throwing concerned looks over it's metaphorical shoulder. [I hate that twi'lek. I hate him. He almost killed you, and then you could never have restarted again. He would have done it, too.] The droid rolled slowly up to him, pressing it's head into his leg with a whimper. It hated the fragility of them. It hated that they could not come back.

Poe swallowed, reaching out with his cuffed hands and running his knuckles fondly over the domed head. "It's all right, buddy." He soothed.

[Oh. Those binders. I think I can get them off.] BB-8 perked up.
"Yeah? That'd be great—my wrists feel like they're on fire." He sat up with a wince, his arms held out level with the droid. BB-8 inspected the manacles, turning it's head this way and that.

A scuffed tool bay slid open on it's chassis and a slender instrument with an embedded electrometer unfurled, unlatching a small port on the outer edge of the binders. BB-8 fiddled with the device.

"Thanks buddy, I can't—NNN!" Poe tensed spasmodically as electricity again shot through his wrists.

BB-8 jerked backwards with a horrified squeak. [I'm sorry! I must've hit the wrong circuit!]

Poe's heart thudded in his throat, eyes welling, and fingers quivering as if they were full of stinging bees. "That's—that's okay," he breathed, "Just…don't do that again."

Finn's voice buzzed through the airlock. "What's going on in there? Are you okay, Poe?"

Neither of them could press the comm control, so Poe gave a weak thumbs up and a bruised smile that nearly broke Finn's heart. Poe turned reluctantly away from Finn's worried eyes and back to the droid. "Try it again. You got this, BB-8."

BB-8 moved with agonizing slowness and Poe watched it tenderly, aware of it's fear and full of love for the little droid. He trusted completely that BB-8 would get it right this time. Sure enough, a satisfying click met his ears and then a merciful release as the binders slackened and clattered to the floor. He sighed, bringing his arms up and peering at his wrists with a grimace; twin burns gouged deeply into red-raw flesh on each wrist, to either side of his tendons. His fingers trembled with an old man's palsy. Please, just don't let my hands be fucked up, he wished on every deity he'd ever heard of.

[It looks bad.] BB-8 winced.

"It…it's okay, I think. It's not that deep." He swallowed and gave the droid a shaky smile. BB-8 was not fooled in the least; it knew Poe was close to tears. The droid had started to roll forwards, intending to give another 'hug', when the lock pinged with a green light; the pressures and temperature between the airlock and the Hyrotil had equalized, and before BB-8 could move Finn was in the room, falling to his knees and taking Poe by the shoulders. They stared at each other, and Poe's mouth trembled.

"Hey, baby." He managed. Finn reached out, his fingers running feather-light over the swelling bruise darkening his cheek, and over the bloody line of his split lip. Poe closed his eyes and leaned gratefully into the gentle touch.

"Oh, Poe." A breath shook from Finn as he gathered Poe gently against him. Poe's arms wrapped about him, and Finn hurt to feel the trembling in his hands. A far corner of his heart burned with a rage he would never have believed himself capable of; if he ever saw Ozmyn Heil again, he would kill him for this. He came back to Poe, too grateful to keep hold of his anger. They held one another with silent desperation, Finn's latent fear rushing to the surface now that it was over and he could afford to let it in. Tears gathered at the corners of his eyes. He couldn't even bring himself to speak.

Poe understood. "Shh…it's okay. I'm not going anywhere, sweetheart."

BB-8 watched, it's head at an angle. It wished for a moment that it's body could be soft and warm, so that it could properly hug the two of them, though it would never admit to such an organic desire. But then, it thought with a satisfied burble, they have each other for that now.
Rescue score!!
I've wanted to write this chapter for so freakin' long. Finn needed a chance to take charge and go after the baddy, and it was so fun writing his dialog with BB-8 and with Oz. Also, the 'science' in this super soft because, you know, I've never been in a partial vacuum, and google was kind of confused as to the effects on the human body. So...as long as it sounds plausible *shrugs*. :) I'm sorry for beating Poe up so badly, but he's gonna be taken care of. *wraps him in a blanket it and has Finn cuddle him*
As always, thanks for reading, hope you enjoyed, and I so appreciate your reviews! - Bluestem
Poe sat on the edge of their bed, stripped down to his boxers. Finn had just finished treating and bandaging the burn on his upper left arm, and he silently watched as Finn knelt on the floor before him. Finn found an antiseptic cream in the medkit Kes had bought for them, and took Poe’s quivering hand in his. His mouth thinned; the electrical burns glistened angrily and the warmth of his wrist pulsed beneath his fingers as if electricity were still swarming through it. For several minutes, Finn simply held his hand, trying to come up with some way to voice what it was he was feeling without bursting into tears. Poe’s left hand trembled through his hair and Finn choked back a sob, his eyes meeting Poe’s and then hurriedly dropping.

“Hey…don’t cry, baby…” Poe soothed, “it’s already better than it was.”

Finn drew his forearm over his eyes. “They almost got you.”

“They didn’t though—you both made sure of that. It’s okay.”

“No, it’s not. All of this…” he gestured to Poe’s battered body and the ship they’d been hiding in, “it’s not right! The First Order, the Bounty Hunters—they shouldn’t be able to do stuff like this! They—” He broke off and turned angrily away, biting his lips between his teeth to keep from breaking down.

Poe’s throat tightened and he shakily patted the mattress beside him. Finn stood from the floor and sat flush against him, Poe’s hand rubbing bracingly across his back. A disparaging laugh almost burst from him—Poe was the one who’d been captured and beaten, yet the pilot was comforting him. The reality of how close he’d come to losing him settled like a layer of cold lead in his gut, and he marveled at the combination of emotions tightening through his chest; rage and relief and terror and gratitude. He understood that he’d crept up to the edge of loss, and had even peered over that sheer precipice; how anyone could survive the fall to the bottom, he could not comprehend. He met Poe’s tired eyes. He did it, though. He survived it.

Poe smiled and squeezed Finn’s hand. “They got me before, remember? If they get me again, you’ll just have to break me out.”

Finn wanted desperately to kiss him, but he was afraid to agitate his split and swollen lip. He nodded with a watery grin, trying to stow away his righteous anger; Poe didn’t need to deal with that right now. “Yeah. I’d break you out. That’s my specialty: Getting people away from the First Order.” He laid Poe’s hands across his lap and lightly smoothed the antiseptic cream across the burns. Poe inhaled hard at the cool stinging and then sighed as the worst of the pain was numbed.

“Better?” Finn asked.

“Yeah.” Poe watched him, warmth blooming in his chest at how tenderly Finn tended to him, and how delicately he wrapped bacta strips across the raw, circular marks. “I love you.”

Finn’s hands slid from his wrists and then he was enveloped in him. Poe gave against his chest, wincing slightly at the deep bruising pain across his stomach. Finn held him as firmly as he dared. “I love you too.”

“You were amazing,” Poe murmured at his ear. “You saved me again.”
“No, I nearly got you killed, I—”

Poe drew back from him and solidly met his eyes. “No, you knew immediately what happened, you told BB-8, and gave me the chance to get out of my cell. If you hadn’t done that…” He swallowed, still rattled at what Oz may have done to him. “And you hit his escape pod too.”

“But I didn’t kill him.”

“You don’t know that. Traveling through hyperspace with a broken down ship is pretty rough, remember? With any luck he’s dead and drifting.”

“That’s too good a death for him.”

Poe glanced away; though he hated the twi’lek, he didn’t like to hear Finn speak about violence so vehemently. “People like that—they always get theirs, Finn.”

“How many people have to be hurt before that happens though?” Finn held his eyes.

Poe shrugged, too tired to argue theoreticals. “He won’t get a second chance. How’s that?”

Finn’s anger gave way to a grudging smile. “Okay.” He chuckled suddenly. “I think BB-8’d do him in, honestly. I didn’t know that droid could curse so well.”

Poe laughed and lay slowly back against the mattress. “Are you kidding? He cussed out a cave-spider back on Base with words I didn’t even know. I’ve never seen Threepio get so offended, and the General laughed so hard I thought she was gonna piss herself.”

“He’s scared of spiders?” Finn grinned and lay alongside him.

“To be fair, they’re big spiders.” Poe said and then yawned hugely. He grimaced, bringing a finger to his lower lip—he’d re-opened the split.

“Your poor face…”

“Hey, I’m still hot though, right?” Poe arched a brow and cracked an eye.

Finn breathed a laugh. “Yeah, you idiot.” He leaned in and kissed his forehead. “You should sleep.”

Poe sighed as he curled against Finn. “That sounds really good, actually.” He glanced up at him. “Would you…just lay with me for a while? Until I fall asleep, at least?”

The embarrassment in his voice touched Finn. “Of course, honey.”

Poe smiled softly at him and then closed his eyes, more exhausted than he realized. He was out almost as soon as his head touched the pillow. Finn kissed his cheek and stroked through his dark curls, and then sat up and turned down the lights. He snuggled back against him, and for a long time he simply studied the contours of Poe’s face, roving painfully over the swelling of his cheek and lip, lingering on the stubbly line of his jaw; watching the pulse softly throbbing on his neck. A cold hand of fear closed suddenly around Finn’s heart. You almost lost him. You almost lost all of this.

He was starting to realize that being in love was a dangerous business. Their time on Base hadn’t been without its worries, but now, after the crash and Poe’s abduction, he’d been forced to consider the fact that one or both of them may actually die; that he could be left falling off that cliff as Poe
once had, wondering what the hell had just happened and how he was supposed to put himself back together again. He didn’t want to think of a version of his life that did not have Poe in it. He swallowed, pain lancing through his chest. It really hadn’t been that long, the time they’d been together, but he couldn’t imagine going back to how he’d been in that brief lull between lost and found.

He could also better understand why it was that Poe had simply stopped trying after Rhys’ death, had been content with ‘drifting’ as Jess had put it. He smiled softly. Poe had tried again, and for him. And they would keep on trying, no matter if the whole First Order and every bounty hunter in the galaxy were on their tail. He sighed in the comfortable darkness and held Poe close, rallying his mind away from the numerous ways in which they might lose their fight.

Here and now, it’s fine.

Finn woke hours later. Poe had curled away from him and taken most of the blankets with him, and he shivered as he sat up. He leaned over Poe; his hands had clenched around the quilt, bunching it up around his mouth like a child with a security blanket. They still shook, but far less than they had in the airlock and Finn dared to hope that even those light tremors would eventually fade. For several minutes he listened to Poe’s slow, comfortable breaths, then dipped his head, kissed Poe’s cheek and climbed carefully from bed.

The shimmering lights of the jump tunnel stained the hallway an icy blue, and frigid firelight flickered in BB-8’s lens as it turned at Finn’s approach. Finn sat heavily before the nav computer and the droid bleeped a soft question. He patted it’s dome and glanced at the communications screen for the translation.

-Is Poe okay? I was just about to check on you both.-

“He seems okay. His hands aren’t shaking as bad anymore. He’s still out of it, and I was gonna let him sleep for as long as he needs to.”

-He definitely needs to recharge. Are you recharged, Finn?-

Finn smiled tiredly at the droid. “Yeah. I guess.” He lapsed into silence with the uncanny sense that the droid knew precisely how upended he felt. He swallowed and gamely changed the subject. “But I was wondering…could we practice Binary some more? Because if I hadn’t been able to read what you were saying, what happened back there could’ve gone really bad. And if it happens somewhere else, I need to be able to understand you.”

-I was going to suggest that. I…I will take this seriously too. No more cross wiring you.-

“Cross wiring?”

-Organics like to say ‘messing with’. Saying one thing when you’re supposed to say something else. Poe calls it ‘sass’.-

“Right.” Finn grinned and turned to look at the nav computer; they still had 6 hours before their rendezvous with Snap. “Do you think we should comm Snap and let him know what happened?”

-No. It would only make him worry, and there is nothing he can do about it. We will only be 50.233 minutes late.-

“Okay,” Finn trailed off and for a few moments he was lost, staring blankly out of the canopy, his eyes following the sinuous stream of starlight. What do we do after we find Snap? This? There has
to be something more. He felt suddenly that he was being watched and came back to himself; BB-8 was carefully studying him.

-How did you two get separated?- The droid asked. There was no accusation in it’s tone, but Finn squirmed guiltily all the same.

“It’s stupid…” He looked away from BB-8, “I saw a family who looked a lot like me. Their skin, their hair…and there was a little boy. We were in a crowd and I stopped to watch them because, I don’t know, that could’ve been me…if things had gone differently. He had a sister and parents. A family.” He shook his head. “When I looked up, Poe was gone. It was my fault.” His eyes darted hesitantly back to BB-8 as if expecting the droid to unload on him.

BB-8 cocked it’s head. –Organic beings are always so concerned about their makers, even if they’ve never known them. It hurts you, I can tell.-

“My ‘makers’? Yeah…that’s one way to put it, I guess.” He scratched at his hair. “Don’t droids care about their makers?”

BB-8 tossed it’s head in the equivalent of a shrug. –I came off an assembly line on Corellia. My makers were likely other machines, or organics that I have no memory of. As far as I am concerned, Kes is my maker.-

“Kes?” Finn asked, confused.

The droid nodded, and it’s tone warmed. –He bought me for Poe as a gift before he left for Starfleet Academy. He said a ‘great pilot needs a great astromech’, and that I had to look out for him. I have looked out for him for fourteen years. I don’t think Kes realized how hard the job would be. But Kes gave me ‘family’.-

Finn laughed. Kes accepted me as family too…He leaned closer to the little droid, his elbows on his knees. “Well, you do a really good job. I would never have gotten him away from that bounty hunter without you.”

-I couldn’t have done it without you. We make a good team?-”

“Yeah, we do.” Finn smiled.

BB-8 rocked on the spot with a happy noise that rumbled through Finn like a purr. -You make a good team with Poe, too. I’m glad that he has you. He has become much more happy, even with the First Order after you both.-

“He has?”

The droid nodded vigorously. -Yes. He tried to be happy and cheerful for his crew, but I could see sadness beneath his smile.

“After Rhys died.” Finn stated bleakly. His eyes darted uncertainly from the droid’s lens. “How long has it been since he…?”

-3.26 years-

“I can’t even imagine how awful that was. Almost losing Poe was bad enough.” He shuddered as a chill wound up his spine. “See? It’s still making me sick. And they’d known each other since they were kids.” He shook his head, his gaze resting numbly on the control panel.
BB-8 regarded him knowingly. –What is it?-  

Finn dragged his eyes back to BB-8. “I don’t know…it’s just…I’ve never had something like this, you know? And thinking that I’d lost him made me realize that I never want to lose him. But I feel like half the time I don’t know what I’m doing, and the other half of the time I’m just following his lead.” 

BB-8 actually laughed, it’s stuttering warble bouncing into Finn’s ears. –Believe me; if Poe’s not flying a mission, he generally never knows what he’s doing either. But he’s a good improviser. And so are you.-  

“Thanks,” Finn said with a dry smile that quickly faded. He rallied himself to voice the concern that had quietly gnawed at the corner of his mind like a parasite, ever since he’d seen the photo of Poe and Rhys as children on Yavin. “I just don’t see how I can measure up to what they had.” He admitted sheepishly. 

BB-8 tossed it’s scuffed head impatiently. –What does ‘measure up’ even mean? Organics are always saying things like that. You are 2.38 centimeters taller than Rhys. That is how you measure up.-  

“You know what I mean.” 

-You are two different people. There is no ‘measuring up’. BB-8 studied him so baldly that Finn was compelled to look away. –If it concerns you that much, you could ask Poe about it.-  

Finn rolled his eyes. “Sure, I’ll ask him about his dead boyfriend first thing after he wakes up.” 

-Husband- BB-8 corrected and Finn’s jaw dropped. "Wait, what?” He gaped. He felt suddenly more out of his depth than he had since trying to escape the Finalizer. “They were married?”  

-Is it really that surprising?- BB-8 bleeped with a vocal shrug. “I…” Finn shrugged helplessly. “I don’t know, maybe it shouldn’t be. See? This is what I mean: I have no idea what I’m doing.” 

- I recommend talking.-  

“How am I even supposed to bring something like this up? Is that…normal? Do people talk about that sort of stuff?” 

-Yes, but he doesn’t like to.-  

“Great.” Finn shook his head with a slouching sigh. “I guess I’ll give it a shot. I can’t believe I’m taking relationship advice from you.” 

-I can’t believe I’m giving it to you.- The droid said, not unkindly. -But don’t worry. You are both functional, and Poe told me that he thinks your smile is like sunshine. I would’ve vomited up my coolants if I could have. So, I don’t think that you can do much wrong as far as he is concerned.-  

“He said that?” Finn was too pleased to care about the blush creeping up his neck. 

-Yes. Poe tells me lots of things about you. Some of which I wish I could forget.- 

“Oh yeah?” Finn leaned forward, cautiously intrigued. “What else did he say?”
BB-8 wobbled, fidgeting slightly. -Well, that’s enough chatter. Time to practice Binary, I think.-

Finn glared playfully at the droid. “Okay, but I’m not dropping this.”

Ozmyn Heil sat in his dislocated pilot’s chair, his hands bloodless on the stick. He’d only just managed to put down in one piece. The escape pod had dug a trench a kilometer long into the dark earth of Mradon, blindly rolling and skipping like a boulder from a mountain, the durasteel paneling on his port side peeling back like a tin can. It was unlikely that the Brejiner had survived it’s confrontation with FN-2187 and the thought of it drifting, in pieces, made him grit his teeth so hard they threatened to crack. The ship was everything. It was his autonomy; his ability to strike and fade away, to live below the radar of planetary governments. Without it, he had zero ability to continue in his line of work, and Dameron, 2187, and the Droid had just necessitated their extermination at his hands. The humiliations and injuries he’d sustained at their idiotic luck could not go unpunished.

He hoped that the high voltage he’d forced through Dameron’s cuffs had left permanent damage. A little memento from me to him. The thought made him grin.

Though the engines were beyond repair, the lights in the pod still glowed weakly and he dared to hope that his communications relay was still operational. Dameron and 2187 had forced his hand. He hadn’t wanted to dole out his intel, not unless the Sabacc pot was well and truly empty.

Well...he mused as he sat strapped to his chair at a 140 degree angle to the ground. This is pretty fuckin’ close.

He keyed up the Brokers Liaison that handled all high credit and sensitive bounties. Through them, he would be connected to the First Order’s outside-hire representative. He had no idea who this officer was, or where he, she, or it, was located. He hardly cared, so long as they paid for his information.

After twenty minutes of getting the run around by droids and different security officers, a crisp voice with a definite curl to it met his ears.

“This is Representative Oran. I’ve been led to believe that you have information regarding two of the First Order’s most wanted?”

“Yes.”

“State your name and affiliation.”

“Ozmyn Heil, freelance. No guilds.”

“Very well,” The Representative drawled. Her voice made it clear that she expected zero useful facts from him. He could almost picture her twiddling her thumbs. “What do you have?”

“I have intel on Dameron and FN-2187. Dameron isn’t dead, and he’s traveling with 2187—I’ve got their last known location, and the make of their ship.”

“Indeed. Well, patch that information through and you’ll receive a payout in proportion to the usefulness of your intelligence, should it amount to anything.” She said dismissively.

“Now wait just a minute,” Oz’s mouth twisted. “I’m not some outer-rim rube you can scam. I know that Dameron was promoted to Resistance Colonel, that FN-2187 formally joined the Resistance and that he’s been assigned to study First Order kidnappings. I know they’re romantically involved. And if that’s not enough, you let your superiors know that I have a certain map in my possession.”
“I...am not sure to what you are referring.” Oz was pleased at the slight fracture in the icy voice.

“Then you'd better patch me through to someone who can appreciate the name ‘Luke Skywalker’.”

“Hold please.”

“I'd be glad to.” Oz grinned in the flickering darkness of his escape pod. It felt like half an hour had passed before a coldly imperious, metallic voice shivered into his ear. There was a haughtiness in the tone that let him know immediately that this was not someone he could intimidate. Indeed, instead of feeling in command and in charge of the conversation, armed with information as he was, he felt his stature take a nosedive.

“Bounty hunter Ozmyn Heil. I have been informed that you possess pertinent information regarding the traitor FN-2187.”

“That is correct.”

“I am warning you now: I have already traced the location of your call—if you are wasting my time you will regret it sorely. Understood?”

Oz's brow furrowed uncomfortably, a shivering thought pulling at the edge of his mind. “Who am I speaking to?” He asked cautiously.

“Captain of the First Order’s armed forces. Do you now understand your position, bounty hunter?”

_Fucking hell, Phasma herself?_ Oz gulped, reeling as if the escape pod were still flying end over end. “Perfectly.”

“Then speak, and do not disappoint me.”

[Navigation Computer.]

Finn bit his lip, quickly scrolling through the growing list of electronic noise he had memorized. Three quick bleeps with a woozy slur at the end. “Navigation computer.”

BB-8 nodded encouragingly. [Chair.]

Finn patted the neon green cushion beneath his thigh. “Chair...or seat.”

[Good. Canopy.] It made a broad sweeping gesture above it's half-dome head.

“Uh...cockpit? No.” Finn hurriedly corrected. “Canopy!”

[Very good! Door.]

“The door. That one’s easy, I like that one.”

[Eye.]

“Shoot...uh...” He scratched at his head. “Eye!”

[Good.] BB-8 praised and then carried on in a jumbled spree of noise that Finn could only partially decipher. He risked a glance at the display screen. –We will be arriving at the Wheel in about an hour. We should wake Poe?–
“Oh,” Finn said, surprised at how quickly the time had flown. It had always been that way for him—in his old life it seemed that a lesson or simulation had hardly started, and before he’d known it hours had passed by. “Okay. You know? I think I’m really getting the hang of this.”

[Good!]

He smiled at the droid and stood, stretching his arms out and rolling his neck from side to side. He walked into the hall, the slick metal cool beneath his bare feet, and pressed the door to their room open. It slid sideways into the wall with a light hiss. The lights were still on at a low, murky glow as he’d left them, and Poe remained solidly out. Finn paddled quietly up to him and craned his head. Poe was sleeping on his stomach, one leg stretched out along the mattress and the other bent in towards his chest and huddled arms. As was his rather annoying habit, he’d gathered all of the blankets around him in a cocoon so that only his hands and shaggy head were visible. Finn peered closely at Poe’s hands; though he could only see the tips of his fingers, he was relieved to find that their trembling had almost stopped. If he hadn’t been expressly looking for movement, he likely wouldn’t have noticed.

He climbed onto the bed, lying out alongside him so that they were facing one another. “Hey, Poe,” he whispered.

The other man didn’t move.

“Poe. Pooooee…you need to wake up.” He said slightly louder and gently shook his shoulder.

Poe groaned and only drew the blankets tighter around him, burying his face in his pillow.

Finn grinned, leaning in and kissing at his jaw and the bit of his cheek that was still visible. Poe lifted his head and blearily cracked an eye, though Finn knew he wasn’t seeing a thing.

“You gotta get up, honey.” Finn said, kissing him once more on the cheek. He could see consciousness returning to Poe with all the speed of a hobbled dewback.

“Hey,” Poe murmured with a drowsy smile.

“Hey,” Finn mirrored.

Poe stretched from within his cocoon and squirmed closer to Finn. Finn curled against him and wrapped his arms around his back.

“How do you feel?”

“Okay.” Poe was so comfortable he nearly nodded off again. He would’ve done but for a sudden alert screaming like a klaxon from his bladder to his brain. “Oh! Oh, oh, oh, let me up!” Poe winced as he struggled to disentangle himself from his blankets.

“What’s wrong?” Finn quickly withdrew his arms.

“I have to piss, oh gods, I have to-” He squirmed up from bed and shimmied awkwardly for the door. Finn turned the lights up and followed him, stifling a laugh as Poe’s stream hit the toilet like a pressure-washer.

“Ooohhh, thank gods, holy shit,” Poe groaned. “Force, how long was I out for?”

“About 14 hours?” Finn leaned against the doorframe.
“Whew, I didn’t think I was gonna make it.” He breathed and shook himself off, then pulled the fold-away sink down from it’s hinge and quickly washed his hands, glancing up into the mirror as he did so. The bruise across his cheek had darkened to a deep, turgid red, and had swollen enough to partially close his left eye. His lower lip had swollen a bit as well, though it had at least scabbed and sturdily closed. He traced the split, grateful that the gash to his forehead that he’d sustained in the crash had healed and left little more than a thin beige scar; otherwise he would’ve resembled a human punching bag.

Finn grimaced as Poe turned towards him in the full overhead light, and for a moment his rage at Oz and the First Order surged back to seething life and he couldn’t speak. Just looking at him hurt him. A bruise the size of BB-8’s head had bloomed across his stomach.

“Does it hurt?” Finn asked softly.

“No…no, it’s okay.” Poe said without meeting his eyes.

His mouth thinned. He trailed Poe back into their bedroom as the pilot began to clothe. Poe actually whimpered in pain when he bent to pull up his pants; it felt as if Oz had kneed him in the guts all over again.

“Poe?”

“It’s nothing. I’m okay.” He said nonchalantly though he sat on the edge of the bed and tried to hike up his pants as gingerly as Finn had done when his back had been killing him. Finn sat next to him and took his trembling hand. Poe was taken aback by the sudden seriousness in Finn’s deep brown eyes.

“You say ‘okay’ a lot, you know?” Finn began. “Look…I know before, you had to act like everything was okay for your team—because that’s what a good leader does. But you don’t have to do that. Not for me. Alright?”

Poe stared at him, stunned.

Where did this come from? How did he—? He met Finn’s eyes and hurriedly looked away, his gaze darting about the room like a ricocheting shot.

“When I was hurting, you were there for me. You helped me on and off that chair a million times—you listened to me cry and held me, and brought me food and dressed me. You rubbed my legs and my back when my muscles were sore.” He stroked Poe’s hand and held his fingers firmly. “So, I’ll take care of you too, okay? You don’t have to hurt alone, Poe. You taught me that.”

Poe took a painful breath. You don’t have to hurt alone. He knew, of course, that Finn would do anything for him; he’d said that he loved him, and anyways, that was just the kind of man that Finn was. But to hear it spoken so plainly, to see that adamant devotion in his eyes…It was almost like a proposal. I’ll help bear your pain, if you’ll help bear mine. He brought his thumb and middle finger to his eyes, trying to stifle the tears that had welled but a grateful sob of relief shook from him anyways. He turned to him, and then they were embracing, Poe’s head at the crook of his neck.

“I love you,” Finn said thickly, a hand tracing circles across Poe’s back while the other cradled the back of his head.

“I-I love you, too. Thank you—baby, thank you.”

Finn kissed him softly on his lips and then on the warm salt of his tears. Poe slowly drew away, wiping across his eyes and shaking his head. “You—you’re really good at this, you know?”

Finn laughed gently. “At what? Making you cry?”
“No,” Poe gave a watery chuckle and squeezed his hand. “No, at…I don’t know,” he motioned vaguely to the two of them, “relationshiping.”

“I am?” Warmth sprung through his chest.

“Yeah. I mean…before we really got together, I was afraid that jumping in so deep would be a bit much for you, because…”

“I hadn’t been with anyone before.” Finn finished for him.

“Yeah. But Force…” he shook his head, “You’re gonna make me up my game.”

“Oh yeah?” Finn grinned and leaned in to kiss the corner of his mouth. “Well, I’m glad you think I know what I’m doing—because I don’t.”

Poe glanced away with uncharacteristic bashfulness. “No one ever knows what they’re doing. But you can ask me whatever you want, Finn. I mean that. And…I’ll try to be more open. About things.”

“Okay.” Finn nodded, as secure and content as he had been upended. His chest felt weightlessly light, as if his heart were drifting free. “I’ll help you get dressed.” He knelt to the floor and grabbed Poe’s pants about the waistline, drawing them carefully up his legs. The view was pleasurable, to say the least, and the heat of Poe’s naked thighs thrummed through his fingertips. He looked up at Poe to find him softly smiling down at him in a way that made his heart leap into hyperdrive.

“Jeez…” Finn managed, “you were right. This is hard to do.”

“See?” Poe laughed. He wrapped his hands over Finn’s, slowly drawing them and his pants further up his legs, trailing them over the flare of his hips, the open fly tugging to either side of his thinly-covered cock.

Finn grinned wryly at him, slipping a hand under the band of his briefs and lightly stroking up his shaft. “Now I know how you must’ve felt when I was too broken to have sex with.”

“Mmm…that didn’t exactly stop me though, did it?” He leaned back, watching as Finn peeled his boxers down. “And I’m not that broken.”

“Why’d I even bother trying to pull these up?”

“Dunno, but I—ahh—I’m glad you changed your mind.” He tensed as Finn’s mouth closed over the head of his cock, his tongue dipping into his slit and curling up into the crease of his frenulum. Finn swallowed awkwardly, trying to keep pressure on Poe and also keep from gagging; a delicate balance that he hadn’t quite figured out, but Poe didn’t seem to mind; as far as he was concerned, Finn could practice on him all day. Finn sucked hard and Poe groaned, watching through heavy-lidded eyes.

Poe reached out, running his fingers through Finn’s hair and resting his hand on the back of his head. Finn’s lips glided down his shaft like a dream, full and flushed, so plush it was as if he were molten. Finn took him deeper, bobbing his head, Poe’s cock bumping ecstatically over the ribbed roof of his mouth.

Poe’s mouth fell open with a needy moan. It had only been a few minutes but his balls were throbbing. “Ahn…fuck…I’m already getting close, baby.”

[That’s good—we’ll be at The Wheel in 20 minutes.] BB-8 said from the doorway.
“Force dammit shit!” Poe sat up so quickly it felt like a bomb had gone off behind his bruise and Finn drew back as if he’d been scalded.

“Come on!” Finn wiped his mouth, mortified.

[Just thought you should know.]

“Message delivered, now get out!” Poe gestured frantically.

[Rude.] BB-8 sniffed as it turned on the spot and trundled back into the hallway.

“You’re rude!” Poe called after it, and then jerked as he was enveloped in wet warmth once more; Finn was wasting no time. “Oh fuuuck.”

Finn knew by now that the more Poe cursed, the closer he was. Already he could taste the salty thickness of his precum and he was inwardly thrilled that he was turning him on so hard. He took a breath and tried to swallow him. It did not work; he gagged nosily and hastily drew back, but Poe practically convulsed beneath him, his control utterly broken.

“Ahh! Fuck! Fuck…I’m gonna come!” He thrust lightly across the roof of his mouth, and the archway of Finn’s throat kissed him with a tightening pulse. His body went taught beneath Finn, his hands clenched into fists against the quilt; it hurt, deep in his wrists, but the pain twined into the sensations building at the root of his cock and spilled him over. “Hnn—ah! Ahhn!” He didn’t mean to come so quickly or in Finn’s mouth; he was so new to this, Poe worried that it might disgust him—but it was out of his hands now.

Finn knew he shouldn’t have been shocked by the hot semen that burst into his mouth, but he was. It was the texture of it—thick, and runny, sliding down his throat like honey—if honey tasted of salty copper. He wasn’t sure how he felt about it but Poe’s breathy moaning egged him on. He swallowed it, and then drew back, pumping him rhythmically, the next spurts sliding down his hand and shooting dribbling white lines down his neck and onto the collar of his shirt Poe’s body gave one last shudder and then he unwound with a winded sigh. He kept his eyes closed, panting and reveling in the pulsing relief of it; even the ache in his stomach was steamrollered beneath the euphoric wave. “Oh my gods…that was so good…”

He opened his eyes. The look of his seed dripping from Finn’s hand would’ve made him come again if he’d been able to. “Fuck.”

Finn grinned, arching a brow and wiping his unsoiled hand across his mouth. “Mission complete?”

“10/10, massive success. Medals are in order.” Poe sat up and leaned wolfishly forwards. He cupped Finn’s face, gingerly pressing his lips to his and opening his mouth; he could taste his seed on his tongue and his body shivered.

Finn smiled and sat back, plucking his sticky shirt collar away from his neck with a bemused look. “I think I better change shirts before Snap gets here.”

“And probably wash your hands.” Poe suggested with a laugh.

[And brush your teeth.] BB-8 called from the hall.

Poe took up his position in the pilot’s chair just as the nav computer pinged. He was distressed to find that his grip on the stick was unsteady and that if he tightened his hand, wiry pain again shot through his wrists. He grit his teeth and kept silent about it; it would only upset Finn, and he
couldn’t stand to see his face cloud over with anger and worry once more, even if he had told him he’d be more open with him. He leveled them gracefully out of hyperspace and Finn gasped at the sight that met his eyes and filled the cockpit with lush light.

A thin, discus-edged nebula stretched on and on before them, it’s hazey, tremulous form made up of the bright specks of new stars glittering in the deep pink and gilded orange mist that billowed out from its center. Wispy bands of gases and dust hung like halos about it, flickering here and there with far off sunlight. It gleamed like a faceted diamond of cool blues and greens, flaming to fiery life in it’s core.

Poe studied the humbling sight for several seconds, smiling slightly as Finn’s hand blindly took his and wove their fingers together. He turned to Finn; the other man’s face was bright with wonder, and Poe was struck at the way the light caught in his eyes and washed his skin a deep rose and fiery orange. “Pretty nice, isn’t it?”

“It’s beautiful.” Finn said, not taking his eyes from the glittering mass.

“Yeah…beautiful.” Poe said softly to himself as he drank him in. BB-8 cocked it’s head at him. He caught it’s look and winked at the droid and then forced himself to study the ships sensors. A heat-source was jetting towards them and before he had time to grin, they were being hailed.

Poe quickly patched the call through.

“Hey!” Snap cheered. “You made it! I was starting to get worried.” A tiny speck of a ship resembling a grey coffin with stubby wings drifted out of the darkness and hung before them, close enough that they could see him waving through the Schooner’s hexagonal cockpit. “Man, that is a nice ship!”

“And that’s a crappy ship, Snap.” Poe laughed as he and Finn waved back.

“Where do you even sleep in that thing?” Finn asked incredulously; it seemed hardly large enough to stand in.

“Come on over and I’ll give you guys the tour.” Snap kidded.

“Nah, I’ll pass. How about you dock and get over here already, huh?” Poe grinned.

“You guys have an actual ‘fresher on that thing?”

“Yeah,” They answered in unison.

“Good—I haven’t showered in days. Fair warning.”

[Is Tubbs coming over too?] BB-8 piped up hopefully.

“You bet he is, little guy. He hates this ship.”

“We’ll get the airlock ready, Snap. Over and out.” Poe grinned, met Finn’s beaming face and the two of them hurried up the stairwell and past the gunners turret; BB-8 thunked along behind them as it reeled itself up the mountainous obstacle. Hollow metallic thuds echoed dully through the ship as Snap turned the Schooner on its head and aligned their hatches. Poe opened the lock and strode to its far end, extending the docking mechanism and latching on to Snaps ship and magnetically sealing them.

Finn watched, peering through the port at the grey durasteel of the Schooners hatch. A green light
flared above their heads; the atmospheric conditions between the two ships were nearly identical and no time needed to be spent equalizing them to one another. Poe gripped the circular bars of the wheel lock and began to twist them, and then gasped, drawing his hands away as if he’d been stung. There was no doubt about it: gripping hurt.

“What’s wrong?” Finn asked immediately. “Your wrists?”

Poe met his eyes. He wanted desperately to say that it was nothing and that he was okay. But he couldn’t. “Yeah, but we’ll talk about it later, okay?”

Finn held his eyes and nodded; there was no time to discuss anything—already he could see a very disheveled looking Snap striding through the lock chamber, the green-and-white Tubbs trundling along behind him. His face appeared in the circular viewport, smiling and giving a thumbs up. Poe grinned from ear to ear as Finn stepped in and twisted the lock door open.

“Yes!” Snap cheered before he even made it over the threshold, taking Finn’s hand, clapping him on the shoulder, and then pulling him into a hug within the space of a heartbeat. “Finn, good to see you, man. And look at you!” He sat him back and gestured vertically from his head to his toes, “you’re standing up and everything! Wow!”

Finn grinned. “Yeah, I kind of got a literal crash-course in walking and running. Definitely not Kalonia-approved.”

“Oh yeah?” Snap arched a brow, “I want to hear all about it. And, come here, Poe,” He turned with the intent of crushing him in a bear hug, but his face fell so fast it was as if the artificial grav had been ramped up.

“Kriffing hell, Poe,” His voice sobered and he looked from Poe to Finn and back again as BB-8 rolled by with a screech of joy that made all of them jump. It circled Tubbs like a moon around a planet and the two astromechs began to rapidly converse in Binary. Snap hadn’t taken his eyes off Poe. “What happened?”

Poe shrugged. “Been a rough couple of days, buddy.”

“Yeah…I see that.”

“Come on,” Poe jerked his head back towards the stairwell. “Let’s catch up.”

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit, that took ages longer than I thought it would! I'm sorry, guys!

This chapter ended up having *way* more going on behind the scenes than I expected it to—deep worrying, more backstory for BB-8 and Poe, some heart-to-hearts, and the introduction of Phasma. Originally the dialog was much too light for what they’d just gone through. It didn’t feel right. I haven’t had to edit this hard in about 100 pages, so I hope this reads smoothly. I got to the point where I was just like ‘post the damn thing already’. SO, hope you like it, and I really truly appreciate your reviews! -Bluestem
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Snap followed them through the narrow hallway past the gunner's turret and to the stairs. "Huh, is that aftermarket? I didn't think the base model Hyrotil came with heavy arms."

"Aftermarket. Finn's recommendation, and good thing we had it too." Poe said from the lead.

"It worked really well." Finn nodded.

Snap arched a brow. "You guys are stringing me on something fierce. What happened, huh?"

Poe opened his mouth to respond but a roaring sputter drowned out his voice as Tubbs fired off the rocket boosters installed just below its circular leg joints. The stairwell was flooded with blue light from the miniature jets and the stiff old droid drifted eerily and effortlessly down what could have been an impossible obstacle.

"Wow." Finn said from the hallway as Tubbs touched down without so much as scorching the durasteel flooring.

[Show off.] BB-8 muttered as it thudded down the last of the stairs and into Tubbs with an ungraceful wobble.

"Don't worry buddy." Poe patted BB-8 fondly as they fanned out into the kitchenette.

"Wow, this thing has an actual kitchen! This is nice!" Snap stood, hands on his hips and turning a slow circle as he studied the ship. "Cockpit, nice, nice. Guess those rooms are sleeping bunks or storage." He shook his head, rallying himself back to the matter at hand. "No, I'll check out the ship later. First, you tell me why you look like you picked a fight with a gundark, Poe."

Finn motioned Snap to the rooms one built in seat and the bearded man quickly refused.

"No, no, I'm okay. One of you guys take it—I've been sitting for 12 hours straight."

"And I've been sleeping for about that long." He turned to Finn with a grin. "All yours, honey."

Finn sat while Poe leaned against the counter. "Sheesh, where to begin?" Poe said uncertainly, scratching at his stubbly chin.

"How about from when you guys jumped, obviously to Yavin IV." Snap suggested.

"Right." Poe launched into the story, picking up with their crash in the sweltering jungle of Yavin, the way Finn had saved him from a fiery explosion, and how Kes had found them huddled like animals in the rain. Snap gasped and nodded along at all the right parts, interjecting with questions about Kes' health and the general state of things. When Poe came to his father's plan for his mock funeral, Snap shook his head.

"I will have you know I cried like a baby when I heard that announcement on the Galactic News." He said with a stern look at each of them.

Poe's dark eyes tightened with sympathy. "I'm sorry, Snap. I know it was already hard enough with…with losing everyone else. I'm sorry we put you through that." Poe placed a hand on his
shoulder and squeezed.

Snap gruffly cleared his throat and looked away; obviously it was still too much for him to speak about the deaths of his teammates. Finn's eyes dropped sadly to the floor.

"Yeah…well…no harm done, right? So your dad put out the word you were dead, and then what?"

Poe picked up the thread, going through the selling of his mom's old A-wing, the capture of BB-8, and their flight from Yavin. Finn's voice wove in and out of the narrative, interceding where Poe had forgotten something, or taking over entirely in the case of the Tanil bounty hunter and the discovery of Snap's clue. When they got to the subject of Ozymyn Heil, each hung on the other's words as desperately as a Tusken Raider to a water cistern, hearing for the first time what exactly the other had gone through. Finn felt sickened and enraged all over again hearing Poe describe his cruel treatment, but was impressed with his quick thinking regarding the lift and the airlock. Poe listened with pride and a swell of love as Finn recounted his calm instructions to BB-8 and the tidy way he'd hammered the twi'lek. BB-8 stepped in with it's journey through the airlocks to fetch the pilot. By the time they'd finished, Snap's brows had nearly disappeared into his hair, and a hand had frozen just beneath his mustache.

"So…not only did he capture you," he said to Poe, "but he was ready to take a loss of 500,000 credits to get to you."

He pointed to Finn and then shook his head. "Damn, that was a really close shave, even by Resistance standards."

"And I still don't know if I got him or not." Finn muttered angrily.

A sudden idea occurred to Poe. "Be right back." He strode into their bedroom and plucked the datapad off the floor, switching it on as he rejoined them. "Okay. So. If he made it, he's out a ship right? He might be desperate enough to sell intel on us, which means…" he bit his lip as he keyed open the bounty board. It sprang open and shivered in the air before them. His image, flanked by the blacked-out profile of Ackbar, and the shimmering image of Finn, had gone from inactive back to the bright, clear portrait of an active bounty. Finn groaned.

"Yep, they know I'm alive…which means that Ozymyn Heil must be too." His face fell in the blueish light while BB-8 let off a string of curses.

"And not just that," Finn spoke over the droid and stood, pointing at a line of new text beneath both of their images. Snap crowded closer, squinting. "Look! He told them we're traveling together and that we're on a Hyrotil! Dammit!" He turned angrily away, pacing the five steps into the hall and back. "I knew I didn't hit him hard enough!"

Snap leaned back, musing as Poe switched the device off with a sigh. "You guys need a runner."

"A what?" Finn stopped pacing after he nearly tripped over Tubbs.

"Well, you've stopped for goods exactly twice, am I right?"

"Yeah," They said in unison.

"And each of those times you've either been almost caught, or caught right out. Which means, you need someone to refuel and get supplies for you. Someone whose face isn't plastered all over the galaxy. I nominate myself." Snap jabbed his thumb into his chest and smiled.

"Snap, that's really nice and I appreciate it, but if you think I'm going to hide on this ship for the rest of my life and let you take all the risks, you might as well just shoot me now." Poe arched a brow defiantly.
"Well, that's a little dramatic." Snap rolled his eyes. "But until I buy you two some better disguises than…what were they, BB-8?"

[Shirts wrapped around their faces.]

"Right. Until I get you both something better than shirts, I think you need to stay in here."

"I will lose my mind." Poe stated flatly and Finn squirmed.

"Even I'm getting a little claustrophobic." He admitted. "And I was raised indoors."

"Relax. Once you've got actual disguises and Chaperone Wexley to keep an eye out, I think it'll be a lot safer for you guys to walk around. And you'll have two trusty droids to guard the ship."

[I am also getting claustrophobic.] BB-8 bleeped morosely.

Snap heaved a sigh. "Okay, whatever, there'll at least be a droid guarding the ship."

"Okay." Poe agreed. "But…Snap, if you hang around with us, it could get real dangerous for you real fast."

Snap barked a laugh. "Oh, right. Like taking up with the Republic and then the Resistance wasn't dangerous to begin with."

"But you don't have a bounty on you." Finn interceded softly.

Poe nodded in agreement. "Yes. That. It was different in a group, Snap. Right now, they're hard after us. If they ID you..."

Snap shrugged. "They'll shoot at me? Big deal. That's been happening without your guys' help for decades." He met both their eyes and gave them a twinkling grin, the kind that usually promised a bear hug. "You're my friends. You're in trouble. I'm not going anywhere, Colonel, even if you order me to."

Poe huffed a laugh and Finn smiled. It was still strange for him to hear anyone beyond Poe or Rey call him a friend, and he enjoyed the sensation immensely.

"Okay, pal. But you get the small room." Poe said dryly.

"Please, compared to that Schooner, any room on this ship will be a mansion." Snap waved a thick hand and then his stomach gurgled so loudly that all three of them froze, meeting each other's eyes with laughs quivering in their throats. "Sorry. Ration bars for two days aren't exactly satisfying."

Poe immediately turned towards the cabinets. "What'cha want? We've got frozen nerf, si-hen, these little packets of veggies, space-trays, still got some spicy crisps from Yavin left,"

Finn caught Snap's eye and emphatically shook his head in warning.

"And—oh yeah, we've still got some tarrejas left!"

"The cakes!" Finn's eyes lit up.

"Cakes? I'm all for it. But…I mean…I could use a little bit more than cakes." Snap patted his chubby waistline fondly.

"No problem. We'll have some Grade-F nerf, some veggies, and top it off with tarrejas. Oh. And
this is a kisin occasion if there ever was one." The droids rolled off to talk and explore the ship as they set to work; Poe layered slabs of grey nerf meat into a skillet while Finn dumped packets of colorful, frosty-edged vegetable cubes into a bowl and set them in the heater. Over the past few days he'd learned a great deal about food preparation and though he realized thawing vegetables wasn't exactly the height of culinary skill, he was pleased that he could now feed himself and name the items that surrounded him. Gone were his days of being intrigued by a spatula.

Snap stood by, watching them with a grin; happy not just with the prospect of actual food, but with how easily and casually they worked with one another. He'd learned from Poe that Stormtroopers had been brought up their entire lives to work as nameless cogs in a faceless machine. While that was a chilling thought in the context of the First Order, Snap wondered if it hadn't also primed Finn to work effortlessly with anyone on any task.

Of course, Poe makes it easy to work with him. It's probably no different living with him. He shook his head. "This is so domestic it's hard to wrap my head around."

"Yeah?" Poe grinned over his shoulder as the nerf popped and sizzled.

"Definitely. When was the last time you actually cooked, Poe?"

"Gods, years and years ago. I mean…there's kind of no point when you've got mess, right? How long has it been since you cooked?"

Snap shrugged evasively. "A while."

"Uh huh." Poe said knowingly.

"I've got you both beat. I never cooked!" Finn said, proud for once of his strange upbringing if it would give him the upper hand.

"You literally just cooked yesterday." Poe gave him a deadpan look.

"Well…you know what I mean."

They retreated to the cockpit, Poe sitting in the pilot's seat, Finn at the nav computer, and Snap dragging a crate out of the storage room to sit in the doorway. Poe raised his can of kisin and cleared his throat.

"A toast," He started, and when Snap raised his can, Finn quickly mirrored though he had no idea what a 'toast' was. "To friends here, and to those who gave their last breath fighting for what's right." Poe said sturdily.

"Hear, hear." Snap brought his can to Poe's and clanked them together and then each of them were reaching out to Finn.

"Hear, hear." He said, and quickly tapped his can against theirs. While he wasn't exactly sure what the gestures had to do with it, he wholeheartedly agreed with the sentiment behind it. They each took a long pull and then began to eat, Snap almost giddily so.

"Oh gods, this is so good." He all but moaned, his spirits rising with each bite he took.

"It's really not. These patties are mostly gristle." Poe said, holding up a cube of meat and studying it suspiciously in the misty orange light of the nebula.
"Don't care. Better than ration bars." Snap crammed another forkful into his mouth and squeezed his eyes happily closed.

"If that's all you've been eating for days...what happened to you after the fight?" Finn asked between sips of kisin. He was really starting to get past the bitterness now.

Snap wiped his mouth and exaggeratedly chewed, readying himself for his tale. "Well, the General said to jump randomly, and after you guys left that's just what I did. Tubbs entered the coordinates and I was too busy flying to even check where he'd taken me. When we got out of the jump tunnel we were in the middle of nowhere, and I had five TIES after me." He shook his head. "I expected those Star Destroyers to appear every second. Thankfully, the TIES were hardly firing at me and I think that meant they were hoping I'd jump again and lead them to some magical hideout of ours. I took one of them out and jumped again. The others followed me flawlessly—those trackers they used on us are insane."

"They are insane? What—did you find the one that was on your ship?" Finn asked, his brow furrowing.

"We found it—and it was just about welded to my port aileron. Tubbs has got it in one of his storage trays. Don't worry—" he quickly added at their horrified looks, "we deactivated it." He twisted back to face the cargo hold and cupped a hand to his mouth as he called out, "Hey, Tubbs. Come on up here, would you?"

A wheezy warble echoed out from the hold and the two droids returned, BB-8 with a white paper bag in it's gripping arm.

"What's that?" Poe asked as it squeezed past Snap and up to Finn.

[Finn must have dropped these. Desserts from Rhennac.]

Finn's mouth fell open. "I forgot about those!" he exclaimed, clutching the bag to his chest as if he couldn't quite believe it was real. Apparently, he'd had the package in his hand when he'd sprinted up the Hyrotils ramp in his wild dash to rescue Poe. He imagined that this was what a holiday felt like—being showered with unexpected pastries. Delicately, he unfolded the crumpled bag. "Do you think they're still good?" He glanced worriedly at Poe.

Poe watched him with a smile. He'd forgotten about them too, and was glad their comeback could make Finn so happy. "They're probably fine. Maybe a little stale."

Finn unwrapped a pastry from its sheet of wax paper. It glistened with frosting and was soft to the touch; even after being jostled and tossed to the floor, it was still perfect. His mouth flooded with saliva. "Here's yours, Poe."

"You can have it." Poe held up a hand, refusing.

"But—"

"I've still got to work through this tarrejas, and I think both of them together would give me a headache."

"Okay..." Finn was left awkwardly holding two of the most delicious looking desserts he'd ever seen. He met Snap's eyes and held the frosted mound out to him. "Do you want one?"

"No, man. I've got more than enough. I think you need them both."
Finn looked overcome. "This is the best." He reverently began to eat, conscious of Poe's twinkling eyes on him. "It's so good." Finn managed. "There's this—creamy stuff—oh gods."

Poe beamed at him as Tubbs trundled up to Snap, flicking open a storage tray on the front of it's carapace. Snap reached carefully inside and pulled out a circular bit of pitted metal smaller than one of their diced vegetables. He pinched it between thumb and forefinger and held it out for the others to inspect.

"That's a tracker?" Poe's brows drew together and he reached for the miniscule dot. Snap plopped it onto his hand, catching sight of the bandage covering Poe's wrist as he did so. He grimaced sourly. The tracker was cold against Poe's palm and surprisingly heavy, as if it had absorbed all the misery it had caused and condensed it into solid form. "How did it have enough power to latch onto our ships and transmit?"

"I have no idea." Snap shrugged. "We ran a plasma pulse through it and that knocked it out, but how it was working before that...anyone's guess. Tubbs said it's some kind of durasteel polymer, but he can't identify the other components."

Poe turned the device over, his finger quivering only slightly as he did so. Squinting, he brought it closer to his face. "There's some sort of mark on it. I can't make it out—could be a manufacturer's stamp or something." He held the tracker out to Finn who hurriedly wiped his sugary hands on his pants and took it. "Have you ever seen anything like that?"

Finn studied it closely. In his training, he'd been run through a gauntlet of weaponry and tech, but the tiny thing in his hand was utterly foreign to him. "No. This isn't standard First Order tech—Intelligence used the Ghost 00X and it was way larger than this. About the size of an ID card and lighter too." He turned the tracker this way and that in the overhead light, squinting at the shallow embossing. "I can't tell what that mark is either."

The older man shook his head darkly. "I don't like it. If they've got something like this, they might have a whole new line of weaponry in the works that we don't even know about."

"We'll figure it out, Snap; we took out Starkiller. We can handle this too." Poe said solidly, suddenly Black Leader again for both of their sakes. He gingerly resettled on his seat, crossing his legs and leaning forwards. "Okay, back to your escape. You had five TIEs after you. How'd you get away?"

"I took a trip home too. Remember how my mom got through that Imperial blockade they had around Akiva back in the day?" He grinned and Poe immediately mirrored it. "A Wexley Wipeout." Poe said dreamily.

"What's that?" Finn asked, looking back and forth between the two of them.

"There's this waterfall on my home planet that has a cave behind it and a tunnel hardly large enough to squeeze through. Has a few blind turns too. They were just about up my exhaust vents when I shot through. They tried to follow but by the time they'd shored up their wedge formation, the tunnel had done the rest. I popped out the other end in the clear. Made an emergency landing at my aunts' old house—they left it to me so I figured I might as well use it for something."

He continued on. "Tubbs and I went over that ship like a Hutt over a spice-shipment. Still took us about two hours to find the damn thing, didn't it buddy?" He patted the droids circular leg joint as if it were a shoulder. It rasped happily, it's eye trained on Snap's face.

"After that we tried contacting every ship in the fleet, but either they were out of range, destroyed, or
had been abandoned just like mine. Then I took out a loan and got that piece of crap." He jerked his head irritably up towards the docked Schooner.

"Why didn't you just keep flying your X-wing? I mean…you found the tracker, so it'd be safe right?" Finn shrugged.

"It might be. But...it might not be. I'm not gonna lie—that tracker freaks me out bad. I was worried there might be more of them that we just couldn't find. The X-wing's safe on Akiva until we can get back in action. And anyways, what the Schooner lacks in comfort it makes up for with firepower, so it'll do for now. Especially now that I have an actual 'fresher and someplace to sleep." He finished his plate and set it aside on the ground, brushing his hands together. "And well, you guys know the rest. We came out to The Brick, drew that nice ten-sider, and then got wind that you were dead. And now here we all are."

"Here we are." Poe nodded. "Now we just have to figure out what to do."

"I had an idea about that." Finn spoke up, his eyes still trained on the weirdly cold tracker shining dully on his palm. "I don't know about this thing, but I think I know someone who might."

"Oh yeah?" Poe swiveled to him, intrigued.

"Maz Kanata." Finn stated.

"The Pirate Queen?" Poe and Snap said as one. "I thought she was a legend." Snap carried on.

"No, she's the real deal and she's no friend of the First Order. She had all sorts of relics and treasures down in her castle, and she's seen a lot of weird things—maybe even something like this." He held up the tracker. "She's got connections." His eyes suddenly went round and he jumped up from his seat as if he'd been burned, instinctual understanding crashing through him before his brain could catch up. "Poe, she's got connections! Solo-Han Solo—that's why he took us to Takodana to begin with—he wanted her to get us in touch with the Resistance! There's no reason she couldn't do that now!"

Poe turned away to face his controls at once, a shaking laugh bursting from him. "Oh ho, baby, you're brilliant!" His hands flew over the dash as BB-8 gave an excited trill.

"Wait, hold up." Snap brought a hand to his forehead. "I hate to be the dianoga in the toilet, but we actually had a Base to get in touch with when you guys went to Takodana. Who's to say she'd have any idea where the Resistance is now that we're scattered? And anyways, wasn't her castle destroyed by the First Order?"

"She's got a network," Fin carried on, undeterred, as Poe squeezed in front of him and began to enter coordinates into the nav computer. "And she was alive when we left—I bet you anything she's still there."

"Okay, okay, but hear me out." Snap said loudly enough to make Poe pause and face him, his hand hovering over the controls.

"What is it?" He asked.

"Finn, you said you went there before to get help, right? And what happened?" Snap patiently asked.

"The…First Order attacked us." He answered leadenly.

"Right. Someone there saw you and ratted you out. Granted, someone also let us know—but
please…let’s stop somewhere and get you some disguises first. All right? The last thing we want is the First Order coming back there when we’ve got two ships to fight ’em with."

Poe looked to Finn, reluctant to quash the other man’s excitement. "He’s right, Finn. Disguises first—"

Finn visibly deflated.

"…and we need to get more fuel anyway, so we might as well kill two mynocks with one shot; Takodana isn’t exactly right next door, baby, but it’s a great idea."

Finn’s eyes slid to his with a reluctant smile. "I really think she can help us."

Poe pressed a quick kiss to his forehead. "I bet she will. And I’ve always wanted to meet her. The stories they used to tell about her in school…" He straightened up, rubbing his hands together and grinning. "Maz, the legendary Pirate Queen, flying circles around Jedi pilots and drinking wookies under the table. Stealing treasure and trophies from Grand Moff’s and Emperors."

Finn laughed. "She's something alright."

Snap stood with a groaning stretch. "I am excited, don't get me wrong, but I think I'm ready for a tour of the ship and a nice long shower."

"Sure. Lemme just get us on course for a pit stop." Poe keyed up a glowing map of the Kastolar sector of space. It hung above the dash like a spider’s web strung with dew-drop planets. "This one, Morvash—it’s supposed to be all right. Breathable atmosphere at least."

"I am all for breathable atmospheres." Snap nodded.

"Right," he sat down and gripped the stick. Wiry pain again slivered up his wrists and he sucked in a breath. Finn didn’t notice—he was too busy experiencing his very first sugar-crash and yawned at the exact moment Poe winced. The engines hummed smoothly into hyperspace and the familiar streaking starlight bloomed icily around the Hyrotol. "There we go. ETA 9.1 hours." He stood, clapping Finn on the shoulder and then sobered at his heavy look. "You okay?"

"Yeah…I'm just tired."

"You did eat about a pound of sugar."

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"I don't know the exact bio-chemistry of it, but something about insulin and blood-sugar levels and…" he trailed off as Finn blinked gummily at him. "Never mind. Just, take it easy on the sugar, okay?"

[If he shouldn't eat so much sugar, then why did you buy him so much sugar?] BB-8 said at his heel as they filed out into the hall.

Poe quickly changed the subject, gesturing grandly around them. "So this is the hall."

"Nice." Snap humored him.

"I know right? There's some storage panels there, and that one lifts off for electrical maintenance." He reached inside the open door of their bedroom and pressed on the lights. "Our room."

"Pretty big—not bad. Wait…is that…a five gallon jug of…"
"And the 'fresher's this way." Poe panic-shoved him bodily down the hall while Finn choked back a mortified laugh. Thankfully, the tiny room drove the jug of lube from Snap's mind.

"The shower! Oh man… I can't wait."

"Storage is in the wall there. Towels and everything." Poe motioned to the left and then carried on. He opened the door to the smaller sleeping cabin. "And this one's yours."

"Excuse me a moment." Snap strode in and flopped on the built-in lower bunk with an almost sinful groan. "Yessss."

Poe huffed a laugh. "Should we leave you alone for a minute?"

"Nah," Snap sighed, "just good to stretch out after sleeping in a stiff old pilot's chair for two days."

Poe showed him around the cargo hold and the engines, presented the water reclaimer and the atmospheric scrubber, and unveiled the cargo compartments he'd found hidden beneath the ramp to the upper level. Finn trailed behind them, half-listening as Poe began to explain in great detail the modifications he'd made to the fuel lines and SoroSuub Nexil fuel injector, and how the Isu-Sim SNN07 hyperdrive contained a redundant feedback loop of something he couldn't understand into something he couldn't understand and that that caused a .79 reduction in functionality to something and if he maybe re-routed some power from the something and spliced it to the…

"I think I'm gonna go to sleep, guys." Finn dragged a hand across his eyes.

Poe snapped out of his ship-spiel. Finn was wilting, his head hanging and his shoulders slumped. "Oh, you are crashing hard." Poe grinned. "Go ahead, I'll be there soon; we need to try and get back on some sort of sleeping schedule."

"Okay. Night, Snap." Finn waved as he turned away.

"G'night, Finn." Snap smiled, slightly relieved that the other man had interrupted Poe; he loved ships dearly and in other circumstances he would've been happy to shoot the breeze with Poe until they were both blue in the face. But he really wanted a shower. "Well, this was a good find. Your dad has a good eye."

"You're not kidding. It was wrench selling my mom's A-wing though."

"I know that feeling. When I was young and stupid, I ended up selling some of my dad's old tools to pay off a debt. I could still kick myself for it—they were just about the only things I had left from him."

Poe grinned. "Man…I'm glad you're here, Snap. People like us—we're not supposed to go it alone."

"We're pack animals, that's for sure. And…" Snap said with a knowing little nod up towards the sleeping cabins, "I don't think you'll be going it alone again, if he's got any say. You've really got something with him." It wasn't a question. "You go together like dura and steel."

A blush climbed up his neck and he glanced away with a small, slightly amazed laugh. "Yeah. It's kind of crazy, Snap, honestly. I mean…it's been fast, but it's…" he trailed off, struggling to find words to express the depth of what he felt for Finn. "You know when you're coming planet-side and the sun hits the atmosphere just right and turns everything golden? He's like that."

Snap's mouth twitched. "...That is really sappy."
"I know," Poe groaned, embarrassed and pleased.

"But that's good," The larger man nodded as he squeezed his shoulder. "I'm happy for you." He removed his hand and scratched awkwardly at the back of his greasy hair. "You know, we never really said anything, me and the rest of the team—we didn't want to add to what you were going through—but...we all worried about you."

Poe swallowed and glanced away. "I know. And I'm sorry I worried you guys—I really tried not to; you all had enough to focus on without me bogging you down."

"Hell, don't be sorry. I would've been more worried if you'd just carried on like nothing'd happened. No one can help that sort of thing, and we all deal with it in different ways."

Poe was silent for several seconds. "I just...didn't want to get hurt again." Poe looked small and ashamed for a moment, like a guilty child.

"Hell, come here," Snap opened his arms and proceeded to give the gentlest hug he could manage, which was still rather crushing. Poe hugged him back for a few moments and then drew away with a shaky grin.

"You're right, Snap."

"I am?"

"Yeah. You really do need to shower."

Poe slipped quietly into their room to find Finn curled towards the wall, breathing slowly and gently. BB-8 followed behind him—it had set Tubbs to searching for the Resistance frequency and though it hadn't tired of the task, it was happy to resume it's normal bedside post. It bleeped a soft 'good night' and powered down. The dusky blue glow pooling from it's resting lights affected Poe more thoroughly than any sleeping medication, and he stripped down and climbed into bed. Finn sighed luxuriously as Poe snuggled up against him and, half asleep, he rolled over to face the pilot.

"Hey," Poe's eyes crinkled up in his smile, Finn's hand settling mindlessly onto his waist.

"Hey," Finn murmured without opening his eyes.

"Goodnight, baby." Poe kissed him softly, tasting sugar at the corner of his mouth.

"...night...Poe..." His voice trailed off into the comfortable darkness as sleep reclaimed him. Poe watched him for several minutes, lightly caressing the peak of his scar before curling alongside him and resting his forehead against Finn's. His hand splayed out warmly between his shoulders and he listened drowsily to Finn's deep slow breaths, and to the muted patter of water rushing the room over as Snap took his shower. He fell asleep with a smile on his face.

Chapter End Notes

Catchey-upy chapter! Good to have Snap back so our boys can have someone else to talk to (much as I love it just being the two of them). And goddammit, that jug o' lube is the gift that keeps on giving. I'm seriously going to bring that thing up at every possible opportunity because I can't help myself and I have the sense of humor of a 14 year old.
Anywho, this chapter took a weird turn that I wasn't expecting with Finn's sudden thought about Maz, but I'm excited to see where this goes. Again, it's kind of doing its own thing and JEEESUS, it's taking forever to get them on their way towards the ending arc. It's gearing up for it, but I am honestly ready to sleep for five months straight. I didn't realize I've been working on this since February! This is easily the longest creative endeavor I've ever embarked on. So a HUGE thank you to all of you guys for reading and commenting over such a large span of time, and letting me know that you still look forwards to my updates--it's so wonderful and encouraging. You're all the best, and it seriously means so much to me--like, I'm walking on air for days. See you next chapter! -Bluestem
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Poe woke well before they were due to arrive at their stop on Morvash. After sleeping for 12 hours previously, he seemed to have hit a wall; his sleep reservoir was filled and his brain refused to shut off now that it was awake. Finn was tangled up with him, his leg flung over Poe’s calves, one arm buried beneath his pillow, and the other draped over his throat like a sweltering scarf. Poe breathed a laugh, gingerly lifting the dead weight of his arm off his neck and tucking it against Finn’s body. He sat up, yawning and carefully rubbing at his eyes. The room was quiet and cool, and BB-8 sat about three feet from the edge of the bed, its lens dark as the droid recharged. *That is the best droid in the galaxy,* he mused fondly.

Shivering slightly, he tugged a long-sleeved shirt over his head and slowly pulled on fresh boxers and pants; the bruise on his stomach flared so deeply at the movement that he caught his breath. *Wherever that asshole is, I hope he’s feeling that broken nose.* Thinking about the bounty hunter sent a thrill of anger snarling through his body and he had to focus on Finn’s peaceful face to keep himself from nosediving into a full on murderous thoughts rampage. He didn’t generally fall prey to them, but *no one* traumatized his droid or used him as leverage against someone he loved. He took a steadying breath, honing in on the fullness of Finn’s slightly parted lips, how his hands were curled adorably up against his chest, and the perfect way in which his ass was silhouetted in BB-8’s resting light. Poe grinned. *All better,* he thought to himself as he stretched and pressed open the small door.

He stood in the darkened hallway with his hands on his hips, listening to the low hum of the engines. There was something hushed and peaceful in being awake while others slept and for a while he reveled in the stillness of it, so glad of their resting presences that he could hardly stand it.

He walked quietly into the cockpit to check their progress on the navcomputer. Tubb’s cylindrical head swiveled to meet him with a low mechanical whirr. “Hey, Tubbs,” he whispered with a smile and the old astromech blooped happily at him. He woke the navcomputer screen and the brightness of it after the soothing darkness of the hallway hit him like a search beam. He slammed his eyes shut and then cracked them hesitantly open, square afterimages dancing before him like phantoms as he read their eta.

*Hmm…still four hours to go.*

He sat and turned on the datapad, propping his bare feet up on the dash. For nearly an hour he scrolled through news channels showing the same horrifying stories that he’d become accustomed to over the past week. *Coruscant in Chaos. Riots on Corellia. Governmental Overthrow on Ryloth.* A cold knot of anxiety tightened around his heart and lungs; there was only so much bad news he could take, especially when he was unable to do anything useful about it. He switched the datapad off and sat in indecision, twiddling his thumbs. A thought popped into his head like a ship into hyperspace. He smiled and left for the cargo hold.

BB-8 booted up at the sound of a far off tool clattering to the grated floor. Blue lights faded from their spherical ports as BB-8 looked about the darkened room. Infrared showed Finn as an island of warm reds and yellows surrounded by a sea of cool blues and blacks. Poe was missing, and his side of the bed was the same temperature as the air, which meant he’d been gone for hours. It rolled up to the door controls and pressed them open, trundling out into the hall. In times past, Poe’s empty bed
had usually meant that the droid would find him crying in the ‘fresher, out having sex, or doing needless work on Black One to keep from crying in the ‘fresher. As Black One was in pieces and he was clearly not having sex with Finn, BB-8 headed to the ‘fresher. The open door proved it’s hunch wrong right off the bat, and a quick scan of the cockpit turned it up empty but for the patiently silent Tubbs. The droid’s head swiveled 180 degrees on it’s spherical body as it rolled down the dark hall and into the cargo hold.

It found Poe sitting on the floor near the ramp, hunched over a crate strewn with wires it recognized as having come from it’s old carapace. It rolled up and cocked it’s head. Poe glanced up from the tangle of wires in his hands, smiling.

“Hey. Morning, buddy.”

[It is not technically morning—there are no relevant planetary bodies to—never mind. Good morning. What are you doing?]

“Making a thing.” He held up a line of woven wires and hexagonal washers. He found that if he held the wires lightly between thumb and forefinger, the pain in his wrists remained tolerable.

[Is that…a bracelet?]

“Yeah…” He blushed enough for the droid to understand at once who the recipient would be.

[Does Finn even like bracelets?]

“I don’t know…just something to do to pass the time and keep from watching bad news. And anyways, he likes yellow a lot, and you had a lot of yellow wire in that old shell.”

BB-8 shifted, daintily plucking a wire from the crate with it’s manipulator arm. [You do realize that it is slightly unsettling to see someone making accessories from your old innards?]

Poe met the droid’s dark lens with a guilty smile and a shrug. “But I’m using them with love.”

A light shudder went through the droid, an involuntary movement that Poe knew only happened when BB-8 was trying not to laugh. [Okay.] It settled comfortably alongside Poe’s outstretched leg, peering about the cargo hold, monitoring the thrum of the engines, the whisper of the atmospheric scrubber, and the soft metallic curl of a wire slipping through a washer. [I think Finn is right, though] it began after a long silence, [Maz Kanata is very good and very wise. She’ll help us.]

“I keep forgetting you were there. What’s her place like?” Poe said without looking up from his project.

[Now? It is rubble. Before, it was a bar? Restaurant? Museum? You would have liked it. The castle reminded me of some of the Massassi ruins on Yavin, and the forests are huge. She had many artifacts—even Luke Skywalker’s lightsaber.]

“Is that where Rey got it?”

[Yes, Maz gave it to her. She said this lightsaber belonged to Luke, and to his father before him, and now it calls to you.]

Poe sat up, remembering suddenly the strange feeling that had come over him upon seeing Leia and Rey walking sadly away together at the end of the Medal Ceremony, as if he were intruding on a family’s grief. “I wonder…” He said aloud to himself.
“Oh,” He glanced at the droid, “it’s probably nothing but…Luke and Leia are brother and sister, and they can both use the Force, right? What if Force use travels through families genetically, like freckles or curly hair? Maybe Rey’s related to them.”

[It did seem like Maz was insinuating that.] BB-8 nodded.

“Wow,” Poe rubbed at his chin suddenly grinning, a warm rush swelling through his chest. “It makes me feel...really hopeful that there could be another Skywalker or Organa out there. Maybe she’s Luke’s; I think the General would’ve told me if Rey was her daughter...I mean, we were pretty close.”

BB-8 inclined it’s head and pressed into Poe’s knee in a gesture of solidarity. [You are close.]

Poe set down his bracelet with a sigh. “I hope she’s okay, BB-8. She’s one of the toughest people I’ve ever known. I owe her a lot.”

[The galaxy owes her a lot.]

“That’s the truth.” Poe smiled and patted it’s dome. “If she hadn’t given me an out, I don’t know what I would’ve done, buddy.”

[Probably have gotten yourself discharged from the Republic Navy, and then drank yourself to death.] It said matter-of-factly.

“Yeah…probably.” Poe’s mouth thinned and he refocused on his bracelet.

BB-8 studied him closely, aware that Poe was aware of it's scrutinizing gaze, and unfazed by it. [Finn was asking me about you and Rhys, earlier.]

“He was?” Poe glanced quickly up, panic and interest flickering across his face.

[Yes. He seems to think that he can’t ‘measure up’ to what you two had, as you were together for so long. I told him that was a stupid idea.]

Poe groaned, setting his slender pliers down among the wires. “Damnit…I should’ve talked to him about all that before we even got together.” He pinched between his brows

[Yes.]

“Measure up?” Poe’s hands fell open indignantly to his sides, strangely angry at Finn for thinking he was in any way inferior to anyone. He wondered how long those thoughts had been festering in Finn’s mind, and how selfish it had been of he himself to keep the other man in the dark. “He can’t...you can’t just…it doesn’t work that way—”

[Maybe you should tell him.]

“Yeah,” Poe sighed, his shoulders slouching. “I did say I’d be more open with him about all this. He has no idea how much better every—” He trailed off as Snap’s door slid up into the wall and the other man trudged out, wiping gummily at his eyes. He disappeared into the ‘fresher.

Poe licked his lips and turned back to his project. “I’ll talk to him.”

BB-8 gave a succinct nod. [Good. I tried to counsel him, but organic brains are very stubborn. Full of loops and dead-ends.]
“Thanks,” Poe said dryly.

Snap exited the ‘fresher and ambled down the ramp into the cargo hold with his hands in his pockets. Now that he’d showered, his brown hair had fluffed up and his beard glistened with random copper threads. “Morning, guys.”

“Morning, Snap. How’d you sleep?”

“Like a dream. I feel human again.” He paused, squinting down at Poe’s work-crate. “Is that…a bracelet?”

“Yeah…”

Snap snorted a laugh. “Cute. When’d you learn how to make those?”

“A few years ago. Karé had me and Jess over to watch dumb holosoaps and drink and do crafts. I didn’t want to go, but after a few drinks I kind of got way more into it than I expected to. Jess’s bracelet ended up…” He trailed off. Saying their names physically hurt, and it clearly hadn’t effected just him—Snap’s mouth had gone thin as the wire in his hands.

Snap took a deep, unsteady breath and shook his head. “It’s rough man.”

“I know, Snap.” Heat flooded Poe’s face, completely undone at his watery expression. He shouldn’t have mentioned them. Don’t cry, he told himself sternly, Snap doesn’t need that right now.

Snap gestured helplessly. “I’ve been doing this practically my whole life. And…you just never get used to it. Bastian was gonna help me re-wire my auxiliary generator…I couldn’t even cover him… and…” He glanced away, his eyes glassy.

Poe stood and gathered Snap into a tight hug. BB-8 lowed sadly, its head drooping like a wilting flower.

“I h-hadn’t even dealt with the fallout from Starkiller, and then this?” Snap continued thickly.

It was no good; Poe drew back and started crying and that well and truly set Snap off. For a long while they stood there sobbing. Any time Poe had almost recovered, he’d catch a look at Snap and circle right back into it and vice versa. It got to the point that they had to sit down and Poe’s grief went through a strange transmutation in his body so that he was suddenly laughing; he knew they must look ridiculous—two grown men lying flat out hiccoughing and covered in tears and snot, their faces red and blotchy. Snap heard his strangled guffaw, cracked an eye at him, and then howled with laughter, kicking his feet against the floor like a giant toddler.

BB-8 rolled cautiously away from the two of them as if afraid it might catch their temporary insanity.

“Are you guys okay?!” Finn’s panicked voice sounded from above their heads. They looked upwards; the sight of him standing in his boxers, leaning over the railing with his face full of worry, sent them into full on hysterics.

Poe felt Finn’s hands on his arm, drawing him up into a sitting position. He met his face, tried to tell him that everything was fine, and then doubled over again at the concern in his eyes. Finn patted his
shaking back, absolutely bewildered. He looked to Snap for some sort of explanation but the other man let loose a roaring snort of laughter.

Even without feeling like a lunatic, Snap’s snorting laugh had always set Poe off. He tensed as if he’d been gut punched, wheezing now, his face wound up like an overdrawn gear.

“What the…?” Finn glanced at BB-8.

It gave an unconcerned warble.

“Oh ho gods, ohhhh gods, it hurts—” Poe gasped weakly as he clutched at his bruised stomach, “I’m gonna puke. Merdás em vie draños!”

“Don’t! Don’t!” Snap choked.

Laughter bubbled weakly out of them for another few minutes, Finn siting by with his chin in his palm, patiently wondering what was going on.

“Ughhh…” Snap groaned, lying flat out and panting as if he’d run a marathon. He flung an arm over his eyes.

Poe had to bite his lips to keep from breaking out again. He covered his face with his hands, willing himself back to sanity. He gave Finn a red-eyed, quivering grin. “M-morning, honey.”

“HA!” Snap guffawed, slamming his fist onto the floor.

Finn gave up on them.

Poe wandered out from the kitchenette, munching some of the spicy crisps he’d been forcing himself to ration. They’d planted themselves at the local space station on Morvash, and he, Finn, and BB-8 had remained onboard while Snap went to buy disguises and refuel. Though he was supremely confident in Snap’s skills, being left behind still rankled him; as the team leader, he felt he should have been the first out the door, though he understood the necessity of staying put.

He could hear Finn in their bedroom practicing binary with BB-8, and he paused just beyond the doorway, watching and listening. Finn was laying on his stomach, his chin cupped in his hand, focusing so intensely on the droid that Poe figured he’d gone deaf and blind to all else. BB-8’s glossy lens stared earnestly up at Finn, running him through a veritable gauntlet of vocabulary. Finn stumbled only once. Poe could hardly fault him; ‘magnetic flashback suppressor’ wasn’t exactly a phrase that cropped up in day-to-day life, much less in binary.

“Wow, you’re picking this up fast.” Poe said as he crossed the threshold, lay gingerly down alongside him, and stretched out.

Finn grinned, leaning playfully into Poe’s shoulder and then a sudden sharp crack of thunder turned all of their attention upwards to the sky beyond the ship’s protective shell. BB-8 chittered nervously, quivering from the lowest point of it’s sphere up through it’s antennae. Outside, the steely green sky of Morvash opened up above them, pelting the Hyrotil with huge cold drops of wind-driven rain that clattered against the durasteel like gravel. It sounded as if they’d parked beneath a waterfall and the ship shuddered as gusts of wind caught and pried at its backswept wings.

“Jeez,” Poe said without taking his eyes from the paneled ceiling. “That sounds more like hail than
“Do you think Snap’s okay out there?” Finn asked.

“Hopefully he’s inside a shop or something.”

Another shattering blast of thunder vibrated their bodies and BB-8 moaned, tucking against the edge of the bed and burying it’s lens in the overhanging quilt. Poe planted a hand on the droids covered head, “It’s okay, buddy.” He met Finn’s questioning look. “He doesn’t like thunder.”

“Huh,” Finn swallowed, placing his hand on top of Poe’s and also patting the droid’s head. This simple gesture touched Poe deeply; Finn had unknowingly done one of the few things absolutely guaranteed to send Poe through the stratosphere: Comfort his droid.

He brought their lips together tenderly. “You’re so sweet, Finn.”

Finn’s warm breath washed over him as he laughed. “Yeah?”

“Oh, I made you this-” He squirmed, reaching between their flush legs to pull a slender chord from his pocket. “Here.”

Finn took it with a slow smile, holding it up and examining the yellow wire, tracing how it wove around intermittent washers in the soft light. At one end was a short bolt, and at the other end was a loop of wire. “What is it?” Finn asked, his eyes rising to Poe’s with a grateful heat that made the pilot gulp.

Poe wondered if he would ever manage to give him a gift without his heart flying into his throat. It was Finn’s innocent excitement that tripped him up, such a pure enjoyment of the simplest gestures. “It’s a bracelet.”

“Ah,” Finn laid it across his wrist. The warm, deep tone of his skin made the yellow wire pop like sunshine.

Poe reached for Finn’s outstretched hand, taking the ends of the bracelet and threading the bolt through the loop. “There.”

Finn flashed one of his earnest, ear-to-ear smiles and Poe nearly melted. “Thanks, honey. I really like it.” He stretched out his arm, admiring the bracelet. Knowing that Poe had made it just for him, and had put his concentration and time into it made his heart leap. He leaned forwards, Poe’s fingers still on his wrist as he kissed him deeply, careful of the scab on his lower lip. Another rumble of thunder ratcheted through their ears and BB-8 whimpered. Poe broke away, his eyes falling to the droid and then lifting to Finn’s. He licked his lips evasively.

“So…BB-8 told me you were feeling kind of down yesterday…” He began.

Finn shot a look at the pathetically cowering droid. “Yeah, but I didn’t think he’d tell you that.”

Poe smiled softly. “I thought we ‘didn’t have to act like we’re okay’ around each other?”

The other man squirmed, his words coming back to haunt him. “I guess it’s easier to say than to do. Like…I don’t want what I feel to make you sad.”

“Baby, you won’t make me sad.”

Finn dropped his gaze, his hand resting gently on the top of BB-8’s head. He began with a note of
shame. “I just worry sometimes that I won’t be able to measure up to what you had with Rhys. When I saw that picture in your dad’s house of you and him when you were kids, playing in a creek…it just kind of hit me.”

Poe’s heart ached; it was such a simple fear. “Finn…you can’t measure the quality of a relationship based off of *time*. I know people who’ve been together for decades and they hate each other—they just stay together because it’s all they know. I had something special before. I know what that’s like, and I know I’ve got something special now with you. And…I’m sorry I didn’t tell you all this right from the start; I should’ve after you saw those pictures of us on my old datapad. I mean—you flat out asked me about it and I shut you down.”

Finn watched him silently, and BB-8 lifted it’s head, carefully listening through the blanket.

“I guess I didn’t want to make you feel uncomfortable or…scare you off. You were so new to everything Finn, and that’s a lot to unload on someone.” He put on a mocking tone, “‘Oh, by the way, I was married to my childhood best friend for seven years and I saw him die before my eyes and I’m kind of fucked up about it because I feel responsible’—I mean…*I* would’ve gone running if I were you. But really, I think I was just protecting myself because it’s…upsetting.”

“Poe—you don’t have to say anything.” Finn hurried but Poe shook his head.

“No, we’re past that point, Finn. I want you to know me. All about me. And…he was a big part of me. *But*—and this is important—I don’t want you thinking that what I had with him somehow devalues what we’ve got. Okay?”

Finn nodded, their dark eyes locked on one another.

“So…I guess I’ll just start at the beginning?”

“Oh, okay.”

Poe rubbed his chin, his eyes sweeping to the far wall of the little room as he reached back into hazy, sunlit corners of memory. “We met when I was five or so. His parents, Aynn and Brin were archaeologists from Corescant, and they’d moved to Yavin to study the old Massassi ruins. They hired my mom to fly them to some of the more remote sites, and my dad helped carve paths through the jungle. They all hit it off and when they discovered they both had kids about the same age, the playdates started. I don’t really remember it—I was too little; but apparently we both liked climbing trees and making things out of mud while they worked.” He broke off, a distant smile crossing his lips. “He thought my mom was the best, being able to fly like she could, so we begged her to take him up in her A-wing. And that was that. He became as obsessed with flying as I was. We ran my mom ragged with trips in her ship and drove everyone around us nuts—spewing facts about every ship in the galaxy, and reciting flight mechanics nonstop.

“When my mom died, his family was amazing; they were always taking care of me and dad—having us over for dinner or just stopping by to see how we were holding up. His mom kind of became my unofficial second mom, and she still is. When dad was having rough days he must’ve called them, because they’d come pick me up and Rhys and I would play, and I could forget how sad I was. We talked a lot then—I can’t remember what about, really, but he always listened to me.

“We got older, and the play dates segued pretty seamlessly into real dates. I don’t think anyone was shocked. And they weren’t shocked when we both applied to Starfleet Academy either.” He laughed suddenly. “He was so *determined* to beat me on the entrance exams. But I destroyed him,” he grinned at Finn. “When I was accepted, dad got me this guy,” he patted BB-8 who fondly chirped, “one of the best ideas dad ever had. So we left home and did exactly what we’d always
talked about: We piloted the fastest ships in the fleet, flew enough missions to really earn our stars, met a bunch of great people, and lived on three different planets. When I was 22, I asked him to marry me.”

Finn was surprised at the lack of jealousy he felt; if anything, he felt a growing sense of confidence and self-assurance in hearing Rhys casually described as just a person and not the mythic being he’d subconsciously turned him into, a looming, mountainous presence whose peak he could never surmount. He felt closer to Poe, that he trusted him enough to reveal all of this, and he was happy to hear of Poe’s past happiness.

“We got married on Yavin—a small thing, just some friends and family. Jess sobbed all over me.” He shook his head as the memories welled bittersweet in his chest. “Those were some of the best years of my life. Our squadron, Rapier, was on a routine mission to escort some weapons supply vessels from Ord Mantell to Coruscant—there’d been reports of pirates along the route, but nothing really worrying. And…that’s when it happened. The First Order attacked out of nowhere, but even so they were outmatched. We should’ve had them.” Finn could hear the long-lingering disbelief in his hollow voice. “But I saw it happening and I couldn’t turn fast enough, and…” Poe broke off, his eyes dropping to the floor. Distantly he felt Finn take his hand. “I—I’m sorry,” he said, wiping his free hand across his eyes and taking a deep, shuddering breath, “it’s still hard.”

“Poe…it’s okay…”

He remained silent for several heavy minutes, unable to look at Finn. “I watched him die. I heard it.” He trailed off again as if a wall had come down behind his eyes before picking up the thread. “I don’t know what I said or did afterward. I don’t even remember how we got back to Coruscant—BB-8 probably took over control; I just remember my team helping me up off the tarmac. As the Commander, I had to make the debriefing.”

Finn winced.

“Yeah,” Poe agreed, “not the kind of report you ever want to have to file. But what made it worse was that my superiors wouldn’t act on our evidence of First Order treaty violations—the recordings from our droids, the testimony of my team—it didn’t amount to anything. It didn’t matter, which made it seem like Rhys didn’t matter. They were willing to just…write him off. A ‘tragic incident’. I had to relive it in front of them, multiple times, and for nothing; they didn’t want to start a war even though the shots had already been fired. So…you can imagine I didn’t take that too well.”

“I can imagine.”

“I lost my head. I don’t know how I wasn’t discharged for verbally reaming a superior officer. They put me on three weeks leave to ‘mourn and move on’ as it were.” He shifted slightly, rubbing his hands together. “The funeral was on Yavin. I was pretty dazed throughout most of it, but I will always hear Aynn crying. And it gave me a much deeper understanding of what my dad must’ve gone through when mom died. I can’t believe he managed to raise a semi-competent human being while working through that kind of grief.”

He scratched at his chin, conscious of Finn’s arm wrapping around his back, but still unable to meet his eyes. “When I got back to our apartment on Coruscant…and it was so empty…I fell apart. I spent most of my leave drinking myself to the floor every night. Jess was really good—she’d come over and see if I’d eaten anything or bothered to shower. And…I got this idea in my head that if the government I’d dedicated my life to wouldn’t do anything about this, than I would. I knew where the ambush happened, and I knew the location of the nearest First Order outpost from there. So I convinced a friend to let me borrow their old ship and I flew out there high as an Arcona, and opened fire.
“It was really stupid. I did a lot of damage—a lot of damage—but I just about got myself killed. That was what I was going for, honestly, and I’m not proud of that; it was the lowest point of my life, Finn. BB-8 wouldn’t let it happen—he got me out of there in one piece. There was a military tribunal and everything to investigate what had happened and who had done it. That hurt me—they cared more about who had attacked the First Order than the fact that one of their own had been murdered by them. And everyone knew damn well that I had done it, but they didn’t have any hard evidence.

“When I went back to work, I doubled down. I flew the toughest missions I could get, the most horrible hours I could find. But it was so weird, not seeing him off my starboard. Whenever we’d land, I’d look up at the sky like why isn’t he landing? Where is he? And it would hit me all over again that he was never coming back. I went through this weird kind of delayed teenage rebellion—I drank too much, I tried all sorts of Spices, and…I started having a lot of nameless sex. I rationalized it as ‘this way I won’t get attached, and I won’t get hurt again’, and—this is a recent realization, Finn—it wasn’t until I met you that I realized that I was also subconsciously punishing myself, that I felt like I didn’t deserve that kind of closeness again. As his superior officer, his teammate, and his husband, I couldn’t save him—so who was I to have something like that again? The first time I had sex with someone else, I started sobbing right in the middle of it.”

Finn’s mouth thinned sympathetically.

“Yes, you want to talk about awkward…” he shook his head. “I got better with the alcohol and the Spice; I had to get clean so I could keep flying, and flying was the only thing that kept me going for a long time. But I kept up the casual sex. No attachments: Just a quick fuck to get off and get on with my day. Things became…kind of normal. Or at least, I could function anyways. And then I lost another teammate in another First Order attack, and they still wouldn’t act on it. I just about lost my mind—I couldn’t believe the New Republic would be so willfully blind. I took matters into my own hands again and I would’ve been court marshaled for sure if General Organa hadn’t stepped in and recruited me into the Resistance. She saved my life—she gave me something I could honorably fight for again. Jess, Karé, Snap, Iolo—pretty much my entire old crew—they jumped ship with me, and things were pretty good. Different, but okay. I had real work to do, actively fighting against the First Order.”

His eyes jumped to Finn’s. “Then I was captured on Jakku, and had resigned myself to the fact that I was going to die. I mean…Kylo Ren had tortured everything the First Order could need out of me—I didn’t have any more use to them, so execution was the next logical step. And then you broke me out of the Finalizer and I thought, who is this guy? I’d never heard of a stormtrooper rebelling.” A grin flashed across his face. “You were so cute and scared, telling yourself to stay calm, and…when you told me you were just a number…that was an eye-opener. Escaping with you, flying that TIE—I felt…alive again. When we crashed, I thought you must’ve died and it made me sad that someone brave enough to go against everything he’d ever learned—to think that maybe he deserved to be more than a number—should’ve gone out like that.”

Finn found himself smiling, touched to hear how Poe had viewed their first meeting. “The feeling was mutual.”

“I know,” Poe said with a twinkling grin, “and then you showed up on D’Qar having finished my mission, saved my droid, and…cutting a really nice figure in my jacket, I might add, and I thought, oh no…I’m feeling something for him. That shook me up. When I saw Chewbacca carrying you off the Falcon and I thought you were dead, I panicked, and when you woke up fine, I panicked even worse. When I realized I was falling for you, I ran out and…and slept with that astro tech—a last ditch effort to prove to myself that I didn’t deserve you, and save myself from potentially getting hurt again.” He smiled ruefully. “By hurting both of us, go figure. That was probably the most cowardly
thing I’ve ever done in my life, Finn.” He met his eyes in an unneeded apology. “But thankfully it didn’t work.”

“No, it didn’t.” Finn echoed.

“And...here we are. You brought me back out of it.” He met Finn’s eyes with a tired smile and then put his forehead in his palms with a bone-deep sigh. “What do you think?” It was a naked question.

Finn watched him softly. “I think I love you even more. Thanks,” he kissed him gently, his lips brushing up Poe’s nose and brow. “I know that was hard for you.”

“It was, but...” A sudden, nebulous ease swept over Poe’s body, as if a weight he’d been carrying for years had lightened, halved maybe in allowing Finn to take some of it. *I'll help bear your pain, if you'll help bear mine.* ‘Gods...that’s a load off...’ he mumbled in relief.

“Come here,” Finn’s hand flattened across his shoulders, rubbing him and drawing him flush against him. Poe rolled onto his back, blindly fumbling for Finn’s hand with his eyes on the ceiling. Finn turned onto his back as well and for a long while they lay together in one of the most comfortable silences Finn had ever known. The storm outside still roared and clattered, and it made their small shelter that much more safe and soothing, a little cave to escape the harshness of the outside world. Finn’s eyes dropped to the bracelet looped smoothly across his wrist. It seemed to have more heft to it now, weighted down with trust and vulnerability, the willingness to accept not just the joy of being loved, but the pain that may follow. He smiled, squeezing the pilot’s hand.

“I love you, Poe.” He said into the rain.

“I love you too, Finn.”

BB-8 kept silent beneath its blanket, but it glowed inside as if its motivator were overheating.

Though they were still lost—still hunted—Finn felt that just then, everything would be all right.

Chapter End Notes

Another ‘talking’ chapter, but there was quite a lot going on with this one: Snap and Poe letting themselves grieve for the Resistance, lots of backstory on Poe, and he and Finn just...being okay with it all. I’ve had all of that stuff with Rhys in my head from just about the beginning and it was so fun to *finally* air it all out. I didn’t realize how badly they needed to take that step—I feel like it may be a little easier to write the two of them going forwards. Not that it was really hard or anything, but I feel like we all crossed some sort of checkpoint in the story. Lol. Jeez, that’s so...'authory'.

And don't worry, Snap is fine. Just waterlogged. There was no way, thematically, to fit his return into this chapter. Next chapter, we’ll be at Maz’s! Huzzah! Thanks, as always, for your continued reading, and for your wonderful comments. -Bluestem
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Hyrotil popped out of hyperspace like a dart thrown towards the planet hanging in the glittering field of space. Finn recognized the lushly glowing blue and green orb at once: Takodana. Poe grinned as he angled them down to shear through the shimmering haze of atmosphere; he’d felt wonderfully light ever since his talk with Finn, as if a clean breeze had opened up his chest and swept an enlivening course through his body. He felt buoyant as a Mon Cal sub, even with the background unease of being hunted. Now, the prospect of finally getting out of the ship for a while cheered him even further. He couldn’t wait to feel the dirt beneath his feet and the wind on his skin. Taking a long walk with Finn would just about cap his day.

Finn sat beside him and Snap stood behind them both, his eyes sweeping the light cloud cover that furled past in pearly wisps.

The weather was perfect for flight, with hardly any headwinds—the Hyrotil could practically fly itself, weightless as a feather. It reminded Poe of his first visit to Takodana, when the faultless weather had aided him in one of the best attack runs of his life; 13 TIES in thirty seconds. He grinned sunnily at Finn, who flushed happily at the look. "You know, the last time we were here, I was saving your ass."

Before Finn could reply, Snap snorted, "Yeah, and now he's saving yours, if you know what I mean. Full circle."

Poe tossed the bearded man a look of mock scandal. Mood killer!

[You beat me to it, Snap.] BB-8 called from the hallway—it was simply too crowded with three humans crammed in the cockpit for the two droids to fit alongside them.

"That was pretty good." A reluctant smile crawled across Finn's face.

"I try." Snap gave a modest nod of acknowledgement.

A limitless land of green mountains and mist-filled valleys stretched on and on before them, and Finn was suddenly forcibly reminded of Rey; he heard her voice as if she were sitting before him in the Millennium Falcon's cockpit. I didn’t know there was this much green in the whole galaxy. His heart twisted suddenly, and he wondered again where she was and how her training was going, and if she missed him. Wherever she is, I hope it's someplace green, he thought solidly.

Poe brought them down low over a pristine lake of cold, azure blue, the Hyrotil's pale belly skipping and leaping below them in its deep mirror face and sending up a plume of misty spray in their wake. A mossy green rim of trees grew before their eyes as the shore neared, solidifying into evergreens and swaying, gold-tinted broadleaves. The Hyrotil lifted in a slow breach, circling the tumbled ruins of Maz’s castle in a cursory once-over.

Finn half stood from his seat, his palms flat on the dash as he craned his head. He could make out three other ships parked like toys in a crescent about the worksite, and one large bit of machinery he’d never seen before. From a rectangular base jutted a shockingly tall beam like a metallic tree. At its top, another beam was bolted, running parallel to the ground, giving the entire contraption the shape of a giant "T". Suspended from cables, a many clawed pad dropped down to the rubble below,
all but freezing in place across the uneven surface, and lifting a many-ton chunk of stone effortlessly into the air.

"Wow," He breathed.

"Yeah, looks like she's getting back on her feet, huh?" Poe said and Finn grinned hugely. Small as she was, Maz clearly was not letting the enormity of the task deter her. Poe lifted the ship and circled away from the castle, looping to settle about a kilometer back among the sheltering trees. They were tightly hemmed in with mossy boles and a shimmering blanket of green, gold, and dusky orange. Camo-netting could hardly have hidden them any better; the maw of the forest had swallowed them utterly.

"Why so far back?" Snap asked as Poe stood and brushed his hands together. "Everyone down there already saw our approach."

"Yeah, I know, but no sense giving them a closer look."

"So landing way out here like we've got something to hide is supposed to make them less suspicious?" Snap arched a brow.

"Okay, okay—I just want to take a walk. That's all. I mean...look at it out there." He gestured through the transparisteel to the sun-dappled woods. He'd begun to feel his inactivity keenly; by this point in the week, he would've covered over 40 kilometers with Jess in their early morning jogs. He missed her fiercely, but he hadn't expected to miss the motion of running so deeply as well; he almost thought he could see the muscle in his legs atrophying.

Snap sighed. "Well...it looks way nicer than Morvash was. I just about had to swim back to the ship."

"It'll be okay, Snap. I think anyone left with Maz will be on our side." Finn said with certainty.

"I'm sure Solo thought the same thing." Snap turned and headed out into the hall.

Finn laughed as he and Poe followed after him. "Pfft. No he didn't. He gave us blasters and told us to keep an eye out. But I think it'll be different now, after what the First Order did to them. Her castle was supposed to be kind of a safe haven, no matter what your allegiance was. 'No politics, no war'. I guess it worked for a long time until we showed up."

"So what makes you think the people there will play by the rules this time?"

Finn shrugged. "I dunno. Just a feeling, I guess."

"Well, hopefully my disguises will keep anyone from having to make the choice to play fair. Because when big money's in play, rules are not."

"Oh yeah, the disguises!" Finn's face brightened and he clapped his hands together, excited at the chance to go incognito, like a spy.

Poe's face fell. So much for feeling the wind on my skin. "Maybe I could keep the face part of it off until we get closer?"

Finn threw a look over his shoulder as he and Poe entered their bedroom to get ready. "Really? You're asking that after what happened last time?"

Poe slouched, opening up their shared shelving and pulling out the costumes. "I guess you're right.
Here, catch." He tossed Finn a half-folded wad of brownish fabric. He caught it and unfurled a high-collared, intricately embroidered robe. Swinging it over his shoulders, Finn wormed his arms down the deep sleeves, and fastened it before his chest. Poe arched his brows, nodding as he looked him up and down.

"Okay, never mind, I like these things. That's a really good look for you."

"Oh yeah?"

"Mmm hmm." Poe bit his lip. Finn's broad shoulders looked broader, and the high-collar and dark, draping fabric gave him an air of mystery, like some vaguely threatening Count in a fairy tale.

"Stop it, I'm not gonna be able to get dressed if you keep looking at me like that." Finn giggled.

"Will you be able to get undressed?" Poe led, closing the distance between them with a heavy-lidded smolder that made Finn's heart trip a beat.

"Snap is right out there." Finn managed through gritted teeth as Poe gripped him about the collar and began kissing at the edge of his jaw.

"Yes," a voice said from the room over, "and your door is open and he can hear every word you're saying."

"Ugh. Have you ever been told that you excel at killing moods, Snap?" Poe called out.

"Many times, mostly from my mother." He deadpanned.

Poe came to a halt, his brow furrowing. "I...am not sure what to do with that information."

"Mood killed." Finn nodded. "How about you get dressed huh?" He said to Poe.

"Yeah, okay, but later..." He trailed off and waggled his brows suggestively. Finn's heart raced in anticipation and his stomach swooped—suddenly he didn't care that they were at Maz's doorstep, that they may finally be reunited with the Resistance. He wanted Poe more than any of that. He leaned in and kissed him, relishing the velvety softness of his lips and the scratchiness of his growing beard. Poe's tongue slid into his mouth, and their arms wrapped around one another as they sucked and gulped. Finn's heavy breath brushed hotly up Poe's jaw, raising goosebumps on the back of his neck.

"BB-8, go shock them okay?" They heard Snap say through a pounding haze of arousal. They broke apart just as the droid entered the room with it's arc welder outstretched.

"Don't you dare." Poe said sternly as he wiped a hand across his mouth.

The droid regarded them silently before saying, [It's the high collar that did it, isn't it?]

Five minutes later they stood in the kitchen under Snap's scrutinizing eye. He nodded as he looked them over, straightening fabric here, or unfurling it there. "Nice, nice. If I didn't know who you guys were, I'd have no idea—and any facial IDers would have be right in front of you at exactly the right angle to get a reading on your eyes. You both look like proper Morvashi occultists." Snap grinned.

"My favorite kind of occultists." Poe's eyes crinkled up, though this was hardly noticeable from the slits through which he peered. Three long strips of burgundy cloth trailed from richly embroidered
brown caps; one hanging between the eyes and over the nose and mouth, and one to either side of the eyes. Starting just below the eyes and covering the lower face was a yellow wrap stitched with embroidered symbols Poe could not decipher. The high, squarish collar of the robes hid even their necks from view. Poe squirmed—between the quarter-inch long bristles of his beard and the scratchy thread of the face-wrap, one of them would have to go.

Snap rocked jauntily on the balls of his feet, pleased with his finds. "Right! Let's go meet the Pirate Queen." He turned and started off down the hall.

Poe stood for a moment, holding his robe out before him and examining the deep sleeves. "I feel like a Jedi in this thing."

"Oh, nice!" Finn said, looking at his robe in a new light, as if hoping it might impart magical powers to him.

Poe's arm suddenly lashed out, grabbed a whisk from off the counter, and thwacked it solidly into Finn's stomach with a poor imitation of a lightsabers buzz.

Finn jumped. "Hey!"

Their eyes met and held for a fraction of a second, but it was enough for each of them to know that a challenge had been issued and accepted. Poe turned on his heel and darted into the hall as Finn lunged for the nearby spatula and tore off after him.

"On your seven!" Poe squeezed roughly past Snap.

"Hey, what—" Snap began but was nearly knocked off his feet as Finn blew past.

"Sorry, Snap!" Finn called over his shoulder. Poe was halfway down the ramp—he could catch him. Poe's heart beat into his throat, thrilled with Finn's hard charge, each pounding footfall sending a combination of arousal and giddy play-fear through his body. Finn's fingers had nearly caught the flapping hem of his robe when Poe vaulted neatly over the railing of the ramp and landed on his feet in a crouch. Ooo, that hurt. He clutched at his bruised stomach, glanced behind him, and then scrambled hastily into a run; Finn was leaping after him without hesitation.

He'd made it to the water-reclaimer when he felt Finn's spatula arcing across his back, subconsciously mirroring the attack Kylo Ren had made on him. "Ha ha! You're dead!" Finn breathed heavily through his yellow wrap.

Poe spun about, backing into the corner for his last stand with his whisk raised defensively. "Never!" He whacked the whisk hard into the spatula and succeeded in tangling the two.

Finn tried to keep up his menacing glare as they struggled to pull free, each silently thrilled with the other's strength. Poe's wrists stung but he ignored it, determined to win.

"Give it up! I've fought with a real lightsaber!"

"And got your asssss kiiicked," Poe sing-songed.

"I'll kick your ass!" Finn retorted lamely.

"Shall I present it now, or later?" Poe cocked his head and Finn could just see the wry arch of his brow hidden beneath his cap.

Finn's lips trembled with the effort needed to keep from smiling—the whisk was bending under the
strain of their pulling and pushing, ruined now, but neither of them would back down. A laugh burst from Poe as one of the wires of the whisk pinged free and Finn's control broke just as surely—he tossed back his head, cackling. Snap strode resignedly past to hit the exit ramp controls. As the belly-keel lowered to the leaf-strewn forest floor, and Finn and Poe began to wheeze with muffled laughers, he looked to BB-8. "This is gonna be like herding nexu, isn't it?"

[Oh, yes.] BB-8 nodded.

The weather was, Poe quickly decided, about as close to perfect as he would ever experience. There was an autumnal hush to the sighing woods, and the air smelled of the cool clean lake, ripening berries, thick leaf mould and something unique to Takodana; something resinous but also somewhat acrid, like old-fashioned munitions powder. Glittering shafts of sunlight streaked down from the swaying canopy, turning them to patchwork men of light and shadow. Poe stood near the base of the ramp with his hands on his hips; breathing in the freshness and exhaling his tension and worry. Strange insects chirped softly from grasses and leaves, and far above a single bird called out with a brazen voice.

"This is nice." He sighed. BB-8 rolled down the ramp and spun several tight circles, relieved at the change of scenery and glad to leave guarding duties up to Tubbs. It pelted on ahead down a dirt path that led more or less towards Maz's castle.

Finn followed after and then halted, staring at a low hanging branch of hand-shaped leaves. "This is weird...are the trees dying?" He motioned Poe over to him and pointed at the discolored leaves. "I don't think they looked like this last time we were here."

"Takodana must be a seasonal planet. The leaves'll die as the daylight shortens and grow back again in the spring." Poe explained.

"Oh. Weird." Finn picked a flaming orange and burgundy leaf from the ground near his feet, studying the splotchy colors appreciatively. "Weird, but pretty. The planet Starkiller was built into was kind seasonal, I guess—but all the trees had little needles, like those," he pointed to a slim, triangular tree covered with a prickly black spray. "Those ones never changed color or fell off."

"Those are evergreens. They stay like that all time. The ones that lose their leaves are...decidicous...no...deciduous." Poe nodded. "That's the one."

"Huh. I guess there's a lot of outside stuff I don't know yet."

"Yet."

I always liked seasonal planets." Snap said as he strode past and stared about the canopy. "Nice to shake things up every now and then. One does get tired of constant summers. Or deserts. Or ice balls like Hoth."

"Tell me about it—this is way better than how hot Yavin was. No offense." Finn said quickly to Poe.

"No offense taken, baby." Poe took his hand and Finn grinned beneath his wrap, dipping to press a cloth-covered kiss to his cheek. They trailed through the woods, glad of their momentary freedom, glad at the lack of possibly hostile eyes. Poe wished they could stay for a week and just camp out, maybe go for a swim in the lake. "Hey, can you swim, Finn?"

"Yeah. We had to do training for water-combat. I bet it's a lot easier without armor and gear weighing you down."
Poe nodded. "And it's a lot easier with nothing on."

"Nothing?" Finn turned to look at him.

"Nothing." Poe winked.

"You guys couldn't handle the majesty of a skinny-dipping Snap." Snap said proudly.

"I don't know if I could handle all that hair. You're like a rug, man." Poe said.

"A majestic rug." Snap amended and then halted as a low diffuse boom echoed through the woods, quickly followed by high metallic whirring. Birds called out and then quickly hushed.

Finn's hand tightened on Poe's. "What do you think—"

"Probably just that crane lifting something heavy from the work site." Poe forced a casual certainty to his voice, but the bubble of safety they'd been walking in had popped under the needle of the outside world. As they neared the ruined castle, similar sounds met their ears, along with intermittent jackhammering and shouted orders. The trees thinned before them and bright sunlight shone through the younger boles. They found BB-8 halted at the edge of the tree line, impatiently waiting.

"How's it look, buddy?" Poe asked as they approached.

[Busy. There are 12 hydraulic lifting droids. One bothan manning a jackhammer, a blarina with a vibro axe, 2 humans helping to remove smaller bits of rubble, one trandoshan manning the crane, an artiodac handing out food and drinks, and of course, Maz. Everyone here seems to be helping rebuild.]

"Good. Sounds like they might not be too interested in us then." Poe said.

"Yeah, unless they want some more manual labor." Snap arched a brow, watching as a boulder half the size of the Hyrotil swung precariously over their heads and was deposited ten meters away with an earth-shaking boom.

"I'd be happy to help." Finn shrugged. "Come on. Let's go say 'hi'." He started forwards, Poe falling in line behind him, then BB-8, and Snap taking up the rear. He patted the blaster at his side for reassurance as dusty light blanketed their bodies.

Poe studied the work-site. The lakeside foundations seemed to be intact, along with a low wall of buttressed stone along its backside. Colorful patchwork tents had been erected over the gaping holes and rooms of the lower vaults. Finn realized that they had been sewn together from the many flags that had strewn the entryway. Heaps of rubble lay scattered here and there, the stone apparently arranged in order of size and soundness. They stopped cold at the sight of a giant, slightly withered stone head propped before the remains of the stairs. Tiny eyes rimmed in huge stone spectacles stared imperiously out, as if scrutinizing all who would dare approach. The statues broken-off hands were arranged to either side of the head, laid open with the palms pointed skyward in supplication. Piled in the hands were credits, supplies of food, clothing, fuel, and, strangely enough, flowers. Finn wondered if Maz had put them there for guests to use, or if guests had put them there to help Maz in her efforts.

Finn turned away, walking towards the heart of the construction site and fervently hoping they wouldn't get quashed beneath a misplaced stone. A grin jumped suddenly to his face. There was Maz, her back to them as she set down her small vibro-axe and lifted a drink from the misshapen Artiodac's proffered tray. She wiped a hand across her wrinkled yellow brow as she tossed it back and then turned towards them as if she'd been expecting them for days.
"There you are, at last." She grinned, picking a delicate course through the broken ground until she was standing only a few feet away. "Now, let's see who you are." Her eyes, hugely magnified in her dusty lenses, studied Snap, lingered on BB-8 who was rocking back and forth with excitement, and up to Poe's masked face. She held on his eyes for several silent seconds. Poe cocked his head—whatever he'd been expecting the Pirate Queen to look like, it hadn't been this. It was as if someone had breathed life into a sundried paricot fruit, slapped a pair of overlarge glasses onto it, and dressed it in a knitted blue blouse and burgundy slacks. The pilot tried to keep from giggling. *She's so small! She's so small!* Her dusky amber eyes met Finn's with a slow smile of dawning recognition.

"I know your eyes." She nodded, then threw back her head and laughed. "You have grown—look at you!" She reached out, taking his hand in a motherly fashion while Finn grinned. "And then this must be our BB-8!" She knelt towards the droid, though the motion was unnecessary—she was only slightly larger than the astromech. BB-8 wobbled up with an excited bleep and Maz patted it fondly, before straightening and regarding the three of them. "Come—let's move away from all this, so we can hear each other speak. Cookie!" She yelled back at the Artiodac. The broad, pig-snouted face swung towards her. "Get some more drinks for our guests, eh?"

He gurgled something and lumbered off.

She led them towards the lakeside and the low wall of stone that remained in place. A refreshing breeze swept off the lake and for a moment the little being stood, breathing it in with a sigh. "So, you've come for help, Finn?" She stood across from the rim and motioned them to sit. Finn settled down and Poe sat beside him, fairly bursting with questions and fanboyish excitement. Snap sat at Poe's left, his eyes watching Maz suspiciously.

"Yes, ma'am, we—" Finn began but Maz cut him off with a wave of her hand.

"I know all about what happened. The Base on D'Qar blown to pieces, and of course, your bounties." She studied him, nodding to herself. "FN-2187. That was your name."

Snap tensed and looked about, horrified that someone may have heard the ex-troopers old identifier.

"Don't worry, pilot—those who are left here are loyal to me. Not to their wallets." She turned back to Finn and then lingered on Poe. "This one, eh?" she asked Finn.

"This one…?" Finn led, looking between Poe and Maz.

"You've chosen this one as your mate. You've bonded tightly, haven't you?" She reached out, gently taking Poe by the chin and turning his covered face this way and that under a scrutinizing gaze. Poe held still, bewildered, as Maz looked him over. "Oof. He's a handsome one." She laughed flirtatiously.

"Thank you!" Poe blurted, blushing giddily beneath his wrap.

"Hmm, I wish I was 900 years younger." She winked, still watching him softly. "And—Poe Dameron—your eyes are…very interesting." She squinted, bringing a hand to the side of her goggles and switching to a lens that magnified her sunken eyes until they seemed to take up her entire face.

Poe nearly swooned.

"Born on wings, to a pair of warriors. You've traveled the depths of real loss. You've seen the edge of the Force."

Poe was taken aback, some of his excitement blunting under hastily rekindled caution. He shifted uneasily. "…Ma'am?"
"The living Force. You've seen it—you've felt the way in which it binds us all together." She stated. "And so have you, Finn. Hmm…this I would like to know more about. You cannot use the Force, can you Dameron?—but you've been exposed to it. Raised with it, almost."

Poe's mouth fell open. *How does she know all of this?* "Uhm. Well…my mom believed in the Force. And we have a Force Tree at my home on Yavin 4."

This seemed to be the first thing about them to shock Maz Kanata. She jolted and then childish excitement brightened the ancient face. "A Force Tree!" She clapped her hands together, beaded bracelets jangling on her thin wrists, her eyes focused on distant memories. "I haven't seen a Force Tree in over a century! Perhaps, when the dust settles, you'll take me to it?"

*Have the Pirate Queen come to my house? Dad would shit himself.* "Uh, yeah! Sure! Definitely!" Poe nodded fervently.

"Okay, I'm just gonna ask it." Snap butted in. "*How* are you doing that? How'd you know it was Finn right off the bat? How'd you know they were together, and who Poe was, and all about the Force and…are the disguises *that* bad?" He threw up his hands and Maz laughed gently as she switched her lenses back to a normal magnification.

"I know people, pilot. You live long enough, you see the same eyes in different people. And I have been around for a long, long time. You, for example: A child of dissent, first familial and then political. Trusted the mechanical over the organic for a long time. And now…a guardian." She smiled warmly as Snap's jaw dropped. She looked up at the sound of uneven footsteps—the Artiodac cook was shuffling up with a tray of drinks.

"Ah, thank you, Cookie. Tell the others to take a rest—but leave us to talk for a while more, will you?"

"Unng." He grunted and turned away. Poe and Finn gave each other a look as the strange man shuffled off. When the drinks had been dispersed, Maz sat before them on a low paver.

"Now then. You want to know where to find the Resistance." She began as she took a sip of clear orange liquid.

"Yes!" all three of them said at once.

She pursed her lips. "The Resistance as you knew it died that day on D'Qar."

Poe straightened as if he'd been slapped, his hopes crashing faster than *Red*. "What do you mean?"

Maz watched him with a sad shake of her head. "My poor children…the Resistance is gone. What remains beyond any doubt, remains in you three. These things," she hurried on for Poe looked on the verge of interrupting, "these things happen. I've seen it time and again, the battle between the light and the dark. One triumphs for a while, but the other is never truly vanquished. It rises again, and so the light flickers beneath the shadow. That is where you are now. You've flickered, but you haven't gone out. Whatever form the light retakes, it will not be under the guise of the Resistance."

"How can you be sure?" Finn asked.

"Because I have gotten no news. Nothing. None of my droid operatives, none of my spies have been able to turn up anything. Either your Resistance is gone, or in such deep hiding that they might as well be gone." She met each of their eyes gravely. "You must accept the fact that you are on your own."
Poe's breath froze in him for a moment and the three of them sat in stunned silence. A flair of panic kindled in the floor of his heart; a small thought unfurled mockingly in the back of his mind, and he realized he had always expected this. He dazedly felt Snap and Finn shifting uncomfortably to either side of him. "But…Leia…" He started.

Maz's eyes softened. "Her bounty is still active, that much is true. But that does not mean she still lives. Wherever she may be, she is beyond my reach. And hopefully, she is beyond the First Order's as well."

"I'm not giving up on the Resistance." Snap said solidly, as if daring Maz to contradict him.

"Of course not." The wizened head nodded.

"Then…what should we do?" Finn glanced nervously at Poe; the other man was staring past Maz Kanata, out towards the distant shore of the lake.

"That is for the three of you to decide. If you want, give me your contact information—either personal comms or your droid. If my network manages to find anything, then I will pass the information along. And," She cocked her head somewhat, "I hope that you will do the same." She cast her eyes about the piles of rubble and the prismatic, billowing, flag-stitched tents. "For a long time I've kept my nose out of the political and governmental conflicts that have sprung up beyond my doorstep. Fires are always starting and stamping themselves out, over and-"

"They're not putting themselves out." Poe interrupted with a hard voice. His eyes had tightened around Maz as if seeing her clearly for the first time, and he stood. "People die putting them out. Is that the only reason you care? Because now it's your doorstep?" Finn's hand landed softly on his sleeve, but Poe jerked his arm away and stormed off towards the lakeshore. BB-8 looked between them, lowed softly, and followed dejectedly after Poe. Finn's heart twisted. He made a move to get up, thought better of it and then sat back down though his eyes darted to Poe's distantly pacing form with concern.

"Hmm…perhaps not the best choice of words." Maz's mouth thinned and she studied the small shot glass clutched in her wrinkled hands. She looked wearily out at her construction project, old as if a veil had dropped, and then nodded—an internal debate ended. "This is not the first time I've rebuilt. But I think it will be the last." She met the waiting eyes of Finn and Snap. "For a long time…many hundreds of years, I fought against the darkness. But then a pattern emerged to me—the cosmic ebb and flow that seemed to have little to do with my efforts. I became tired, yes. I am…very old." She laughed weakly. "But…when the free worlds go to war, I think it will be time for the Pirate Queen's flag to fly among them again. Because," she grinned suddenly, "you had better believe this old woman still knows how to fight." She lifted her oversized, wrinkled head, staring up at the cloud speckled blue sky. "And I feel something…different this time. The light is growing."

Snap stood all at once. "And that's enough cryptic nonsense for me as well." He walked off to join Poe. They watched him go, Maz seemingly unconcerned. The tiny woman scooted closer to Finn, leaning conspiratorially closer as if she'd been waiting to get him on his own.

"It's Rey…I feel her light growing. And an old light is remembering its strength." Excitement flashed in her eyes. "When this comes to a head, and it will, this time none of us will have to rebuild again. It will be balance at last, or utter ruin."

A shiver wound up Finn's spine; strange and unsettling as Maz's words could be, he believed her utterly. He could not have said why. Perhaps it was because she had been so right about him, knew the fear that had lain in the depths of his heart, the fear that had nearly set him to running, and forced him to acknowledge it. She had a habit of dispensing unpleasant truths, but that did not make them
any less true.

"You can…feel Rey?" He whispered.

"Mmm," She nodded, "she and Luke—two bright candles on the edge of my mind. Where Leia's once was…I see only darkness." She peered sadly up at him and then paused. "You know…I bet you could learn to do it too, Finn."

"Do what? Energy? Like you do?" His brow furrowed.

"Yes. There's a new light. Small, just a golden pinprick among the others. Your light, Finn."

Finn sat back, his breath frozen in his throat.

"You were drawn to Rey, and you chose a man in tune with the Force, a man who has lived beneath it's light. I think it's been slowly guiding you for years."

He swallowed, eyes darting about the stone and wavering green, but seeing none of it. This was huge. Too huge to let in all at once. He licked his lips and forced a breath from his mouth. "I…I can use the Force?"

Maz laughed. "Use it? No! Not at all! But you can sense it. You end up in the right places at the right time, and with the right people, don't you? Coincidence is simply lining up with the flow of the force."

Coincidence. Just happening to be on Jakku at the same time as Poe. Managing to break him out of a Resurgent Class Star Destroyer. Meeting Rey on an almost abandoned planet and she just happened to have BB-8. We run into Han Solo, who knows Luke Skywalker and who's wife runs the Resistance. Poe and his pilots save us on Takodana. We manage to sneak into Starkiller and just happen to find Phasma—one of the only people who could've taken down that shield, and then we just run into Rey again in the middle of a planet-sized weapon? Just happened to be there when Solo was killed, just happen to survive, just happen to wake up to have Poe taking care of me, just happened to be on Red, just happened to find Kes, just happened to notice Snap's clue, just happened to knock out the power on the bounty hunter's ship, just…he gasped, leaning forwards and placing his head in his shaking hands. He was glad he was already sitting—his knees would've given way for sure.

Maz patted his back sympathetically. "Yes, it's quite the trip, eh?" She grinned.

"What…what do I do with it?"

"Nothing. It's not something to be used—not by people like us. The Force moves naturally towards harmony and balance. Just remain open. And calm, if you can—intuition rides the same current, and both are best heard in stillness. Trust yourself," she gazed out at the lake, focusing on Poe who stood beneath the shade of a rusty-edged bough, staring at the still water. "You haven't gone wrong yet."

Chapter End Notes

WOOP WOOP, Force-Sensitive Finn on board! Ohmygosh, writing Maz is such a trip! I freakin' love her. This was a really fun chapter to write, especially after the sadness of the last few. The boys are feeling pretty peppy (alone time will happen soon, I promise)
and it's good for them and me to get off of that freakin' ship for a while. For anyone wondering if this thing is just going to drag on for ever: Nope! The ending is nearing (although, I say that and watch it be another hundred pages). And it's gonna be epiiic. I can't wait to write it. As always, thanks so much for reading, I hope you enjoyed this chapter, and thank you for your comments! They really do make my day. :) 
-Bluestem
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The mirror surface of the lake shimmered with ripples that draped the inverted green wedges of the mountains in thin silver garlands. In the far off heart, a blue so deep it was nearly black pulsed through the bright patina of sky with an ominous stillness. In the shallows, the flaxen light of midday wavered and glistered in threads of silver and gold across the diffuse mud of the lake floor. A small cloud of fish-like creatures flickered about, brassy scales flashing and then shuttering off as they wove as one through light and shadow. Poe watched the little school, seeing them and yet not seeing them. In his mind’s eye the slips of fish morphed into the narrow prows of X-wings, following in the same faultless dance, mirroring the leader precisely, a group so tightly in tune with one another that they seemed to be one being.

The fish melded suddenly into the deeper shadows and seconds later Poe heard quick, crunching footfalls approaching. He came back to himself, shaken, but glad for the interruption. Snap brushed an overhanging bow of oblong yellow leaves aside and then stood by him, shaking his head wordlessly with his arms crossed in front of his chest as if trying to keep a rant from escaping. Snap’s eyes slid down to him and his mouth thinned.

“They’re still out there. Somewhere.” Snap said adamantly.

Poe’s eyes flickered away, back towards the lake. The little fish hadn’t returned. He licked his lips. “We knew this might be a possibility.”

“No! Don’t tell me you’re writing them off.” Snap stood, aghast.

“No! Of course not, Snap. But…she is right about one thing. Even if they’re not gone, we are cut off from them. So. That means we need to start acting on our own with the understanding that maybe we won’t find them.”

“She’s just a batty old lady!”

Poe smiled reluctantly though it was hidden beneath his wrap. “Yeah, maybe. But she’s also not wrong, and that’s why you’re pissed off, right? I mean, I know that’s why I am.”

Snap heaved a giant sigh and rubbed at his brow. “Look, Poe, don’t start playing squadron psychologist on me. We came all the way out here only to have her tell us that what we’ve been fighting for is finished?”

Poe couldn’t say why Maz’s words had both upset and unlocked him; something about them had lodged in his heart, steeling him against the hope of reunion so that he could move forwards freely. He chose his next words carefully. “We were never fighting for the Resistance. The Resistance was fighting for ideals, and we can do that under any name and with any number. I think that’s what she meant about the light ‘taking a new form’. Things have changed—we can’t wait for a General, or for orders, or for a squadron to back us up. But,” he hurried on, “that doesn’t mean we stop looking. We’ve still got the tracker to show her—she might know something. Enough to get us started on a trail.”

Snap stood, fidgeting with the ends of his beard as he often did when stressed. He ran Poe’s words though his mind, placated but still not happy about it. “Okay, but what then? We follow the trail to
the First Order and try and take them down, just the three of us?”

“5 of us.” Poe corrected with a fond look at the patiently waiting BB-8. “Don’t count out our droids.”

“Look…” Snap placed his hands on Poe’s shoulders and stared him dead in the eye with a pained expression. “You know I’d fly right up Snoke’s ass for you guys, but…these are not good odds. And yeah, I know we’re no stranger to bad odds, Poe, but we had an organization, money, intel, tools and fuel and weapons at our disposal.”

“I told you it’d be rough, pal.” Poe patted his hand and Snap nodded grimly, standing back from him with a frustrated breath. “What do you think we should do?” Poe asked with all seriousness. “You don’t want us to get caught by the First Order—which I totally understand. But you don’t want us to hang around doing nothing against them either, right?”

Snap sighed, his hands falling like leaden weights to his hips. “Man—this sucks.”

Poe laughed. “Yeah, tell me about it. But you know us: We’ll take it as it comes, step by step; refine the plan as we learn.”

“Well, the plan is gonna need a lot of refining as it doesn’t exist yet; not unless you guys have got something worked out that I don’t know about…” He trailed off as Poe’s eyes jumped over his shoulder. Finn was walking up, his gaze turned inwards as he moved through patches of sunlight and earthy shadow, his cloaked form guttering like a candle. Poe wished he could see the rest of his face—he imagined the little concerned wrinkle running at an angle above his brows, and his lips pressed into a line of concentration. Snap stepped away from Poe and BB-8 burbled.

Finn approached as if he were sleepwalking, and didn’t look up even as he came to a halt. Poe realized that more than concern had hollowed his gaze—this was something bordering on shock. “Hey, you okay, baby?” Poe reached out for him and Finn took his hand, coming back to himself as if surprised to see Poe and Snap standing before him. His eyes jumped gratefully to Poe’s, honing in on the deep russet that ringed his pupils like a flower before fading into tawny brown. Caught in his eyes, Finn was drawn out of his head and back to the real world as if through a wind-tunnel of ideas and energy.

“Oh. Oh, yeah. I’m fine.” He said in a voice of forced casualness.

Snap looked between the two of them, very clearly feeling like a third wing. “I’ll uh…I’ll take a walk around Maz’s. Keep an eye on them for me huh, BB-8?”

[I will.] It whipped out it’s longer manipulator and saluted.

Poe hardly noticed as Snap’s heavy footfalls dwindled away towards the ruined castle. Poe peered deeply into Finn’s eyes. “What is it, Finn?”

Finn held his silence for a beat too long before answering. “Nothing. Just…upset about the Resistance I guess.” His eyes hastily darted away, out towards the lake, though his fingers tightened against Poe’s, the tips pushing through the gaps and lacing them together.

He felt the need to hold on to the idea of him being Force Sensitive for just a little while longer. He needed time to understand for himself what exactly it meant before trying to explain it to anyone else, even to Poe. He felt a guilty squirm in his gut—he did not like keeping anything from him. With all of Maz’s talk of cosmic, eternal lights and evil shadows, he wanted Poe with a frightened-animal ache. He needed the real, solid, warmth of him; the way that every unnerving thought faded into the
background beneath his lips and his body. He pivoted slightly, and gathered him against him in a tight hug.

Poe held for a shocked moment, aware that something well beyond Maz’s confirmation of the state of the Resistance was bothering him, and then gave, pressing hard into his chest with a slow exhalation, tensing his arms and shoulders as he squeezed Finn. He nudged the side of his face against Finn’s neck, his hands rubbing up and down his scar in a way that Finn had come to crave. Though not erotic, it was such an intimate act; he knew others would look at his scar with pity, disgust, or at the very least, shock. Kes certainly had. But Poe always touched and stroked him there with tenderness, as if nothing could have pleased him more. The gesture was uniquely theirs.

“It’s okay, sweetheart.” Poe murmured through his wrap. Finn’s hands tightened across his flanks, the heat of belonging radiating out from his touch.

“I love you.”

“I love you too, but you’re kinda scaring me a little,” Poe admitted with a weak laugh, “Is it something Maz said? Something bad?” He led, unable to help himself.

“Yeah, but…it’s not bad. Not really. Maybe not at all. I just…need to think about it a bit.” He drew back slightly, leaning in to press a kiss to Poe’s forehead though his covered lips hit his cap instead. It was like kissing a towel. A frustrated breath ghosted through his nose, fluttering the band that hung between his eyes like a strip of ribbon. “These costumes are ridiculous.”

“Just an hour ago you were all about them.” Poe grinned wryly, but he brought a hand from Finn’s back and began to pull the other man’s wrap slowly down, his covered nose and mouth brushing tantalizingly against the full double arch of Finn’s upper lip. Finn tensed pleasurably; there was the warmth he needed.

[Maybe you shouldn’t-] BB-8 began, but it was too late; Finn tugged down Poe’s wrap and then they were kissing, slowly and deeply in the dappled light, Poe’s hands to either side of Finn’s face. [And you did it anyways. What’s the point of a disguise if you take it off?] it tossed it’s head back in a full-body eye-roll.

Poe’s smile tightened his lips from Finn’s, and he parted an eye at the droid. “Relax buddy,” he tried as Finn kissed adamantly at the corner of his mouth, “There’s no one around.”

“I was going to see if you two would like to stay for dinner—but it seems you’re already having it.” Poe nearly jumped out of his skin, and Finn jerked away from him so hard he stumbled backwards over a mossy root. Poe grabbed a handful of his robes to keep him from falling, but it was a near thing. They stared down in shock at Maz. The diminutive woman stood among the gold-flecked ferns with her hands on her narrow hips and a naked yellow brow arched in amusement.

“Jeez…” Poe breathed as he quickly pulled his wrap back over his face “you have a cloaking device or something?” He shot a look at BB-8. Obviously the droid would have seen and heard her approach—it had simply chosen not to warn them. It turned away from him with an innocent whistle, making a show out of looking about at the lakeshore.

“I’m small enough not to need one.” Maz grinned.

Finn perked up, the words small and device combining to remind him of the tracker. “Maz, there was something else we needed to ask you.” He turned to the astromech, “Hey, BB-8! Can you bring that tracker over here?”
It bleeped an affirmative and rolled up, damp leaves clinging to its scuffed chassis. [Here.] A small hatch flipped open revealing a storage tray. Finn plucked the cold, heavy device from the droid and held it out to Maz. The tracker dropped to her palm like a brick, her hand dipping under its dense weight. “Hmm…” Her lips thinned as she held the tiny thing before her, turning it this way and that in patch of flaxen sunlight. Bringing a hand to her glasses, she toggled between three different sets of lenses until her face had been wholly taken up with giant, glossy pupils.

“I’ve never seen a homing beacon like this.” She said carefully, and Finn and Poe, glanced at one another, their spirits managing to fall even further. “But,” Maz hurried on as they visibly deflated, “I know that symbol.”

“You do?” Poe leaned in with cautious excitement.

She nodded slowly. “I haven’t seen it in…120 years or so. It’s almost identical to the mark of Umbra Core, a crime syndicate that used to serve the Hutt Cartel in the days of the Clone Wars. They did a booming trade out of Hutt Space, specializing in surveillance and trafficking equipment.”

“Trafficking as in…” Finn began.

“Slaves. Collars, restraints, and the like.” Maz finished with a distasteful curl to her lip, and Finn’s stomach tightened sickly.

“And now it’s popped up again.” Poe muttered to himself. “And…and!” his hands went wide as if he were trying to catch a sudden thought before it vanished into the ether. He turned to Finn. “Hutt Space just openly declared themselves for the First Order!” Connections went off in his brain like a bomb.

Maz continued to squint at the shallow embossing. “There’s an additional…wing, to the symbol though. Something new. And as to that, your guess is as good as mine.” Maz shrugged.

Poe placed a finger to his covered lips, and Finn knew that the two vertical creases he liked to trace were trailing up from his brows. “This syndicate…do they have a base? A…I don’t know, recruitment office, or something?”

A warning flair went through Finn’s mind; Poe could not be thinking what Finn thought he was thinking. “Poe…” He began, but Maz’s mirthless laugh cut him off.

“An office?” She snorted.

“Yeah…I realized that was stupid as soon as I said it.” Poe grimaced.

“That, I couldn’t tell you. As far as I knew they’d been wiped out along with old clan leaders. But, as I have said—things morph and change with time; if not their ideals and goals, then at the very least their names.”

“But they definitely operated out of Hutt Space before.”

“In the old days, yes, from Nar Shaddaa. If that’s still the case…..” She shrugged and let the sentence hang.

Poe nodded to himself and then his dark eyes latched on to Finn’s. “It’s a start.”

Finn felt torn in two. The very mention of human trafficking made his stomach swim. He pictured the children he’d seen in the General’s case files, their innocent eyes staring out of his old datapad as if right into his soul, the children that had been taken and shipped away into the blackness like so
much cargo. And what if he was recaptured? A tendril of the old fear wrapped about his lungs like cold wire, but at the same time he pictured the three of them coming across those very slavers, stopping them, stopping the whole organization and saving countless innocents from a terrible fate. They’d be seen as heroes; he could almost hear people cheering for them. The gaudy image seemed ostentatious even in his mind and he doubted the reality would work out so flawlessly. By the time he’d tuned back in, he realized he’d missed several minutes of conversation.

“he’s one of the best forgers in the galaxy, and I’ll cover your fees...for a bit of manual labor.” She grinned up at Poe wickedly.

“Hmm…that’s not a bad deal. ID’s could come in really handy.” Poe nodded as Maz turned and motioned them back towards the Castle with a wave of her hand. Poe started after her and then stopped, feeling a vacancy by his side; Finn had remained behind, staring silently off at nothing with fathomless eyes. “Baby…what’s wrong?”

Finn swallowed. “I don’t know about this, Poe.”

Poe’s eyes darted quickly to Maz, who stood waiting beyond the smattering of trees, and then back to Finn. “What…the fake ID’s? I thought that was a good idea.” He said quietly.

“No, no,” he waved away the IDs, “Nar Shaddaa…you want to go there, but what are we gonna accomplish by doing that? We don’t even have a current name of that organization—much less an address.”

Poe understood all at once, and he felt like an idiot for not realizing it sooner. Of course Finn would be reluctant to go anywhere near a planet that specialized in illegal trades of very literally every kind imaginable. “We can talk about it later, okay? We’ll get Snap in on the conversation too…see what he thinks. But, it’s about the only lead we’ve got.”

He nodded hesitantly, thawing into motion only when Poe’s hand found the tough center of his scar and began rubbing slow circles, sparking warmth through his lower back, down his legs and through his core. He smiled at him and found it mirrored back in the crinkling at the corners of Poe’s eyes. His heart rose into his throat as if his personal gravity had been switched off. How can a few wrinkles do that to me? He wondered not for the first time. Poe’s hand slipped into his, his fingers tracing the bracelet encircling his wrist before settling in place against his palm.

They rejoined Maz who carried on without missing a beat as she led them across the dust-tumbled stone, past the old stairway and the commanding specter of her statues bodiless head and hands. “I owe you an apology, Poe.” She spoke without looking away from her course.

“Huh?” He tore his eyes from Finns, utterly bewildered.

“Earlier. What I said about ‘fires springing up’ and so on—it upset you. I’m sorry.”

“Oh, that.” Poe licked his lips, not an easy feat with the cloth over his mouth. Truth be told, he felt awkward about his outburst; he didn’t often lose his temper, much less with someone he knew so little about. “It’s okay…just…a sore spot.”

The sun had dropped from high noon, and the light glanced off her glasses as she cocked her head up at him. “You’ve lost a great deal of crew; friends and family both. I know that feeling. pilot.” She halted them before a patchwork tent that billowed fitfully from its latticework of rebar and durasteel struts; in the dark pit that it sheltered, they could hear the clattering of stone being moved about and voices echoing, morphed beyond all semblance of meaning. She crossed her reedy arms before her chest, still staring up at Poe in a way that made him feel naked, both inside and out. It was
so similar to the sensation he got from Leia, as if she could read in a glance what lay in the furthest reaches of his mind and heart. A homesick pain lanced through his chest. Maz nodded slightly, as if satisfied by what she’d seen, and carried on lightly.

“I was telling Finn and Snap that when the free worlds make their move, I will helm my ship again in the battle.”

“You will?” Poe gaped, and Finn smiled to himself at the feel of Poe’s fingers tightening against his.

“Pilot, while your ancestors were still learning how to walk, I was fighting the darkness,” she laughed and then sobered. "I have lost so many crewmates…so many friends in the centuries since—some from the fight, and some simply to the flow of time. Children they seemed to me, but already growing old before my eyes; blooming and wilting in the same breath. Like poor Han.” She sighed wearily and her dusky eyes fell like setting suns to the cracked stone beneath her feet. Poe suddenly felt like an ignorant toddler. It had been foolish of him to assume that she’d never lifted a finger against the darkness in all of her long years. *I can’t believe I yelled at her.* She caught both of their eyes suddenly with a tired, yet serene look. “I am over one thousand years old. My ship is nearly as old as I am—but we’re both still space worthy, I assure you.”

Poe’s jaw dropped. “A thousand—your ship…is it here?”

Finn huffed a gentle laugh. *Good thing that wrap is over his face—he’s probably foaming at the mouth.*

“Mmm,” She nodded as she motioned them forwards once more. “There’s a hanger in the lower levels—opens out on the other side of the lake. Perhaps you’d like to see it?” She grinned knowingly.

“Uh, yeah, I would. I really, really would love to see your ship. What kind is it? I’ve never heard of a ship that old even breaking atmo. Are we talking…6…7 hundred years? Jeez, what kind of fuel does it use? Are there—”

Finn grinned as Poe’s hand moved from his, gesturing broadly with the expanse of his interest. Maz humored him, patiently answering as much as she could before he tripped over her with more questions. Their voices faded pleasantly to the background of Finn’s mind. A sudden thought visited him. *Maz said I should be able to see and feel energy.* He held back a few steps as Maz led them to the edge of the pit, focusing hard on Poe’s form. *Okay…don’t think anything…be at peace…focus…*he forced his breath slowly out of his nostrils and breathed deeply. *Haha, he’s so into her ship, and he hasn’t even seen it. I love how he moves. His hands are graceful—like how he flies. I hope his wrists are okay.* *That reminds me, we need to change the bandage on his arm.*

**Dammit, focus, Finn.** He exhaled slowly, from the bottom of his lungs up. His mind remained clear for nearly two seconds. *See? You did it! Augh, but now you’re thinking again! Stop it!* He closed his eyes and recentered himself for another quiet second. He opened them to find that Poe had bent to peer down into the pit. *Yes, bend over. Oh my gosh, the sun is hitting his ass perfectly! That’s crazy. He’s crazy.* His brain screeched to a halt as he realized he was monologuing again. *This is impossible. Maybe I should start with someone I don’t want to have sex with. That would have to be easier.*

[Are you okay?] BB-8 chirped from his calves and Finn jolted as if the droid had been reading his every thought.

“I’m fine.” He said too quickly, and the droid cocked it’s head as Finn hurried off to rejoin Maz and Poe. He was glad the wrap hid his blush as Poe straightened and faced him with his hands on his
"Ready for some grunt work?" Poe asked.

"Yes." He answered very solidly, hoping Poe inferred much more than what he’d said. Poe, always on the alert for possible innuendo, perked up and then gave him a wink that giddily tipped Finn’s stomach. Poe swung his legs into the pit and disappeared down the ladder that bridged the gap. Finn quickly followed after him. Maz caught BB-8’s lens and gave it a look as if to say ‘ah, children’.

BB-8 tossed it’s head dramatically. [I know.]

They found Snap and two human women busy lifting chunks of stone onto a caged hoversledge, or picking up various odds and ends and examining their soundness. The late-afternoon sun cast only a wedge of light into the cool darkness of the ruined vault, but Maz had set up two floodlights that seared themselves into the retinas of anyone who dared to look directly at them. When set against such brightness, the underground shadows took on a deeper, almost solid hue, like black holes just waiting to swallow them up. They picked a careful course over the uneven footing towards the large, backlit form of Snap who hardly noticed their approach as he chatted with the two women. One of them was tall and slim with milk-pale skin and a severe, no-nonsense haircut. She nodded along with Snap, but offered little in the way of conversation. The other was her opposite in almost every aspect, round and curvy with tawny skin, and a halo of soft, fluffy black hair. She laughed appreciatively at each of Snap’s bad jokes, her honey-brown eyes more on him than the Devaronian war-god figure she had clutched in her hand. Poe caught his eyes and winked.

Maz dropped from the last rung of the ladder with cat-like softness and introduced them. “Boys, these are my friends, Merra and Hali, scavengers with a good eye for true antiques. They’ve liberated many from…underserving collectors, and always give an old woman a good deal.” She grinned wickedly.

“Hey,” Poe held out a hand, though only Hali took it. “I’m…,” he trailed conspicuously off, trying to remember their aliases, “I’m Dand, and this is Wex.”

Finn groaned inwardly as he shook her hand.

Hali snorted, not fooled in the least. “Sure, and I’m Luke Skywalker.”

They spent a dusty few hours lifting stones into the hoversledge, gathering together bits and pieces of old statues, relics, coins, and things they couldn’t begin to identify, though the three women knew precisely what they were and what to do with them. It was good to move, good to have something simple and physical to do with an end goal in sight. The atmosphere reminded Poe of the hangers and lockers back on Base, when each of them had been working simultaneously on their own projects, but talking and laughing together; like tributaries all flowing seamlessly into the same river. As usual when around many different people, Finn listened more than he talked, happy to absorb the general feeling of goodwill the group generated. Poe, however, got started with Hali on the best way to jury-rig a ship from sub-light to lightspeed and did not stop, aided and abetted by Snap. Again, Finn tried to focus on him and feel his energy but it was pointless with the noise and constant movement.

Poe found to his dismay that he couldn’t grip and lift chunks of stone weighing more than twenty or so pounds without his wrists flaring up. He shunted them self-consciously to the side and Finn, who
guessed the cause, focused on those without comment and loaded them into the hoversledge.

Nearly three hours later they were trailing back to the Hyrotel like shadows in the night, using the lake-path that Maz had recommended. The lake loomed to the left like a gigantic black inkblot, shining here and there with cold specks of starlight. The pitch-black canopy shivered and rasped above their heads, spindly limbs reaching out and snagging at their robes as they passed, and dry leaves pattering down to the dew-dotted forest floor. BB-8 rolled along behind them, as close as it could get to the backs of their legs without tripping them; the whispering darkness unnerved it and it stared anxiously into the deep blackness at the heart of the lake. Finn and Poe however, strode along at their ease, Poe finally winding down from a ten-minute gushing spiel about Maz’s ship.

After finishing their ‘shift’ Maz had taken them down five flights of stairs to a cavernous vault that housed the strangest ship Finn had ever seen. The floodlight they’d brought with them had illuminated something that resembled more a vast, jointed crustacean than any kind of traditional ship. The segmented body-panels met along a narrow dorsal keel—like a seafaring craft turned upside down. Flags soft with cobwebs hung in shrouds about its cockpit and stern like shed skin. Poe had gone spare over it, coyly orbiting for several minutes before swooping in and splaying his hands over every inch of the cold surface he could reach with an intensity that made Finn blush by proxy. They’d eaten with Maz, down there in the darkness where it was absolutely safe to reveal their faces, Poe hardly able to stop talking long enough to get food and drink into him. Snap, who’d opted to remain above ground, had come to check on them and then had nearly lost his mind over the Beggar’s Bone, which set Poe off again. The two pilots would’ve gone on for hours if Maz hadn’t shut off the floodlight as a signal to head out. They’d dawned their disguises, chatted for a while with Maz’s crew, and then bid them goodnight. After much bashful chatter with Hali, Snap decided he’d rather ‘hang out’ for a while; Poe’d given him an incredibly unsubtle wink as they left.

“Man…” Poe trailed off wistfully as they walked through the darkness. The look of starlit wanderlust on his naked face struck Finn like a blaster bolt. “I’d give my left nut to see that ship of hers fly.”

Finn snorted. “Why the left one?”

Poe caught his eye with a laugh. “It’s just a saying. Don’t worry, I’m pretty attached to it.” He wrapped an arm around Finn’s waist with a grin, his hand draping low on his hip and squeezing his ass.

Finn jolted and then grinned playfully. “Good. I like them both.”

Poe’s eyes latched onto him like a magnetic detonator—and Finn knew it would be only a matter of seconds until they went off. Poe was just so suited to the night—those heavy lidded eyes, so wide and dark, his lashes and brows smoothed and deepened in the shadows until he seemed as open as a limpid pool. Poe, for his part, was lost in the way the starlight caught in the dark glimmer of Finn’s eyes, in the way his brows arched as if he were always on the verge of telling a secret. The perfect way the angle of the bridge of his nose was mirrored in the width of his brows, like an hourglass.

Poe reached out, pressing the tip of his middle finger to the dusky rose of Finn’s lower lip. Finn let his mouth part, then wrapped his lips around Poe’s finger with wet, sucking heat. They held for one tremulous heartbeat, and then they were kissing so hard, so desperately, that they nearly fell to the ground.

[At least get to the ship!] BB-8 all but moaned, casting nervous looks back towards the lake.
It was all they could do to stumble the last five meters to the Hyrotils ramp, and even more difficult to make their way up it. They left a trail of clothes like breadcrumbs leading from the engine room as they staggered a few more mindless steps. Poe found himself suddenly pinned between Finn and the wall between their room and the fresher. Oh gods, he loved the way Finn was taking charge, the firmness in his fingers that wouldn’t let him move and held him prone beneath his mouth and his grinding body.

“Ahn…” Poe gasped, arms wrapping around Finn’s back and dragging down his spine as he began to tug his pants off his hips.

After the way Maz had upended him, Finn needed the anchor of Poe’s body, the sureness of his heat. Poe thrust up his half-hard cock, fluidly rocking his hips, teasing him with a knowing look.

“I need you,” Finn breathed as he pulled Poe’s shirt off and to the floor.

“Mmm…give me one minute.” Poe ran his tongue up Finn’s lips before taking a gulping kiss and then pulling coyly away. Finn swallowed the taste of him, his fingers trailing down his spine as Poe opened the door to the fresher and shut it behind him. “When I come out,” Poe called through the thin durasteel door, “I want you hard.”

Every muscle in Finn’s pelvis tightened and his cock bobbed before him like a divining rod. “I’m way ahead of you.”

“Good. Get the lube, baby.”

Finn might as well have transported to the bedroom and back in the same breath, and he set the lube on the floor with his heart sprinting in his chest, throbbing out through his fingertips and cock. He could hear the toilet flushing and then the shower running, and knew that Poe was cleaning himself within an inch of his life. “Tell me what you’re gonna do to me, Finn.” Poe said over the rushing water.

Finn choked—he’d never had to speak out loud of explicitly sexual acts—they simply did them. Poe was the vocal one. It was odd, at first, to form his mouth around the words and he knew he sounded clumsy. “I’m gonna…” he panted, “I’m gonna finger you.”

“Yeah?” Poe’s voice was breathy as he pressed a soapy finger into his asshole.

“And then…I want you to suck my dick.”

“Fuuuuuck.” Poe groaned needily, clenching around his finger, so aroused at hearing Finn actually say such a thing that he wondered if he’d last beyond the first thrust. He pressed in another finger, hurriedly stretching himself. “Keep going, holy shit, keep going.”

“I want you to suck me hard—gag, like you did back on Base.”

Oh. My. Gods. Poe could stand no more. He slammed the water off, ran a towel over his body at light speed and exploded out into the hall. Finn made a move as if to pin him again, but halted in his tracks; the bruise on Poe’s stomach showed a deep, purplish green.

I don’t want to hurt him.

Poe caught the look. “No. No, no, no, don’t you dare go easy on me.” He slid up against him, kissing under his jaw while his hands mounded the warm, round muscle of his ass. Finn groaned, his concern vanishing like a ship into hyperspace. Poe’s teeth pinched and rolled his nipple, his tongue sliding like lava down the hills and valleys of his ribs while at the same time he took Finn’s
cock in his hand and began to pump it. Finn’s back arched like a line of fire, Poe sinking to his knees before him and making good on part of Finn’s list. He gulped at his cock, holding him by the root while the other hand splayed across Finn’s ass. Slurping noisily, he rubbed his fingers and lips in a circular, dragging motion across the head of him before bobbing seamlessly to the root, his nose nearly brushing the tight coils of Finn’s pubes. He gagged, his throat convulsing around Finn’s girth, as saliva pooled in his mouth.

“Ah! Shit!” Finn gasped.

A flare of satisfaction swept over Poe as he leaned back and breathed—it was the first time he’d managed to make him curse with pleasure. Finn’s muscles tensed like wire beneath his hand and Poe repeated the motion hungrily, over and over, swallowing him, then pulling back and sucking so hard it was as if he were trying to turn him inside out. Finn squirmed beneath him, and when his hand landed on the back of Poe’s head, Poe went still. Go ahead, Poe willed him, do it.

Finn’s eyes parted blearily and he gazed down his heaving chest. Poe was staring steamily up at him, his mouth open around the flushed head of Finn’s cock, his tongue slipping back and forth just beneath the velvety flared edge. His cock twitched in Poe’s mouth just at the look of him. He thought he understood what Poe was giving him permission to do, but he couldn’t believe it. His hand tightened against Poe’s curls, tentatively pressing him forwards down his shaft. Poe opened his throat and relaxed his tongue, saliva flooding his mouth and dribbling down Finn’s balls as Finn’s cock pressed back into his throat. A ragged groan burst from Finn. “Oh my gods…oh gods, Poe!” He thrust forwards unexpectedly and Poe gagged. He loved that part of it—the unpredictability of his lover’s movements, having to remain open, taking a quick breath whenever he could. Finn thrust into his throat four more times before Poe pulled back, Finn’s cock sliding from his mouth to bob wetly before him. He grinned wolfishly up at Finn as he stood, Finn’s mouth opening expectantly as Poe cupped his face and kissed him. He could taste his arousal swimming in Poe’s mouth.

Poe lifted a leg and wrapped it around Finn’s hips, grinding their cocks together as Finn pivoted him roughly up against the wall. There was something extremely erotic in having sex in the open like this; while it was unlikely Snap would come back any time soon, the possibility of being caught lent a mad urgency to their movements. Finn dipped for half a second, uncapping the gigantic bottle and scooping a dollop of lube into his palm. His cock was already dripping with spit, but he slicked it further and then reached without hesitation between Poe’s legs.

“Ohh…fuck, baby…” Poe looped his arms around Finn’s shoulders, supported more by the wall than anything else and he quivered from his head to his toes as Finn’s middle finger pushed into his silky heat. He thrust mindlessly in and out a few times, pressed in his ring finger, and then pulled out to quickly stroke Poe’s cock. He widened his stance, dipping an arm under Poe’s thigh and lifting him almost wholly off his feet. Poe’s arms tightened against Finn’s cock, his tongue slipping back and forth just beneath the velvety flared edge. His cock twitched in Poe’s mouth just at the look of him. He thought he understood what Poe was giving him permission to do, but he couldn’t believe it. His hand tightened against Poe’s curls, tentatively pressing him forwards down his shaft. Poe opened his throat and relaxed his tongue, saliva flooding his mouth and dribbling down Finn’s balls as Finn’s cock pressed back into his throat. A ragged groan burst from Finn. “Oh my gods…oh gods, Poe!” He thrust forwards unexpectedly and Poe gagged. He loved that part of it—the unpredictability of his lover’s movements, having to remain open, taking a quick breath whenever he could. Finn thrust into his throat four more times before Poe pulled back, Finn’s cock sliding from his mouth to bob wetly before him. He grinned wolfishly up at Finn as he stood, Finn’s mouth opening expectantly as Poe cupped his face and kissed him. He could taste his arousal swimming in Poe’s mouth.

“I want you to fuck me. Hard.” Poe breathed in a deadly serious voice, and his words sliced through Finn’s remaining control like a lightsaber. He pushed into him in one quick stroke.

“Ahn!” Poe’s arms tightened around him, his luscious neck exposed as he tossed his head back. His asshole clenched and plunged and for a moment Finn worried that he’d hurt him. “Ohh, keep going, fuck me like that—yeah!”

It was all the permission he needed. Finn thrust into him without restraint, far faster and harder than anything they’d yet tried, either because he’d still been healing, Poe had been in charge, or Poe had
been healing. It was a profound relief to lose himself in the hard smacking rhythm, Poe’s gasps and jolting, staccato cries music to his ears. There was nothing else in the galaxy but this—no First Order, no bounty hunters, no lost friends; only Poe’s hot, writhing body, and the mindless pleasure gripping round his cock. Finn’s mouth fell open and his eyes closed, sweat starting on his brow as a he pumped in fluid waves, deep into Poe’s clenching body.

He pulled back, shifting his weight to wrap an arm under Poe’s other leg and lifting him fully off the ground. Finn tucked his hips and pistoned up in a hard, grinding thrust that Poe felt in his teeth. “Ahh—ah! Fuck-fuck-fuck!” Poe shouted, his arms tightening around Finn’s neck and the muscle of his back, and his legs clenched like cables around his hips. His spine and shoulders hit the wall hard with each thrust but he was well, well beyond caring. Holy shit, he’s fucking amazing! Nnn! Yes, fuck me till I can’t even think about the Resistance anymore. Fuck it right out of my head.

Finn felt the firm, aroused bulb of his prostate slipping past the head of his cock and he slammed back into it, again and again until Poe was crying out, his legs shaking spasmodically against him and his nails digging into his back; Poe was close, on the edge of utterly losing control. He gripped his cock and pumped quickly just below the head. “Ah! I’m gonna come, babe—fuuck!” Finn leaned forwards, kissing at his neck and then, his breath hot in Poe’s ear, lightly pinching his earlobe between his teeth. Poe exploded, yelling and convulsing around Finn in shuddering waves, his cum streaking up his sweaty chest and spattering runny white lines on the grey wall behind him. Finn watched in awe; he’d never seen him come so hard and the sight of it set off a chain reaction in his body. His balls tightened at each constricting pulse of Poe’s asshole.

“Oh! Ahh! Ahhn—!” Finn’s voice strangled in him as he peaked. He sped suddenly and then slowed just as quickly, slamming hard into him and holding for several hot quivering seconds, pulling out and slamming fully back in again, his seed spurting deeply into Poe. The pilot moaned disjointedly at the flushing heat, feeling as if he were regaining consciousness after a stun-shot. Finn slouched forwards, his face scrunched up as his body shivered in small pumping thrusts. With one last cry, he was emptied, and the strength seemed to slide out of his arms. Poe unsteadily took his weight as his bare feet pressed into the cold floor, Finn still buried deep within him. He kissed at Finn’s sweaty temple and then Finn turned into the panting kiss, drowsily fumbling across his lips and tongue. For several mindless minutes they kissed one another, Poe relishing the tingling glide of his tongue, and the way Finn’s heart seemed to pound through both of them until he could no longer tell who’s was who’s.

With a low purr of satisfaction, Finn stepped back, sliding thickly from his body with a wet smacking sound. The cool shock of emptiness swept up into Poe, and his hands tightened across Finn’s flanks, drawing him back against him. Finn’s cum ran hotly down his inner thigh, but he made no move to wipe it up. They stood, post-coital tenderness wrapping them tightly around one another. Finn kissed down Poe’s neck, sucking a line of Poe’s cooling seed into his mouth and lolling it about his tongue. Poe groaned. “Oh…gods, Finn,…that’s so fucking hot…” he breathed.

“Mmm…” Finn kissed his mouth open, passing part of the load over to him.

Poe breathed a laugh as he swallowed it. “I remember when you used to be innocent.” His dark eyes crackled with warmth.

Finn chuckled, and then they were laughing, loud and long. They haphazardly cleaned themselves up, gathered up all their clothing within easy reach, and fell exhausted into bed. Poe kissed Finn drowsily, his eyes half closed. “That was so good, baby.” Finn grinned at his praise, though he kept his eyes closed. He reached blindly for Poe and snuggled up against him, kissing his mouth and cheek. Poe fell asleep in his arms and Finn smiled softly to himself as he nestled his nose and lips into Poe’s hair and listened to his slow deep breaths. He felt utterly at peace and relaxed.
Brow furrowed, he propped himself up on his elbow and focused hard on Poe. He was too tired for any worry or extraneous thoughts to pop willfully into his head. He cleared his mind, focusing on the slow rise and fall of Poe’s chest, unconsciously timing his breaths with the pilot’s. He imagined his mind was as still and deep as the lake.

And then it happened—a small shimmer that at first resembled somewhat the afterglow of staring into a light for too long. He blinked, keeping his focus. The shimmer remained, brightening from an indistinct blur just beneath Poe’s ribs, into a stream of cool blues; the same blue he’d seen flickering at the edge of the Force Tree’s leaves. His mouth dropped open in wonder; it was as if a nebula were blooming through Poe’s body, sparkling here and there with pinpricks of pure white light so bright it was stunning. He was a constellation made physical. The shimmering grew, streaming now, he could see, from Poe’s feet up towards the crown of his head where it disappeared, as if Poe were simply a small stream in a river huge beyond reckoning, or a slender vein in a vast body. *It’s the Force…the bit of Force that makes Poe, Poe.*

“Oh my gods.” He gasped, bringing a shaking hand to his mouth. Tears welled in his eyes, brimming and streaming down his cheeks, and for a moment he was so overwhelmed that he had to turn his face into his pillow so that he wouldn’t wake Poe up. It was the purest, truest state of Poe. Of life. And it was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. The sheer force of emotion sweeping over him broke his concentration and the blue light faded into nothingness before his eyes as if it had never been. He reached out a panicked hand, pressing into Poe’s chest to reassure himself that Poe still lived, even though he couldn’t see his lights. His heart beat steadily beneath Finn’s palm. Too dumbstruck to let the full magnitude of his discovery in, Finn curled flush against his lover and buried his head in his shoulder. It took a long while for him to stop shaking.

In the furthest corner of the cargo hold, BB-8 cocked it’s head up towards the narrow hall, wondering if it was safe yet to turn it’s aural receptors back on. In the cockpit, a shell-shocked Tubbs wondered the same thing.

Chapter End Notes

Holy shit. I’m so sorry for the wait for this chapter! I’ve not been in a super-great place mentally these past few months, and it’s definitely draining my energy to do even basic things, much less write. I must have re-written this chapter four or five times before I felt good about what I had.

ANYWHO. SMUT. The boys needed some. Like, badly. And it was fun having Finn see his first real glimpse of the Force.

While I was struggling with this chapter, I decided to make a more concrete outline for the ending arc of this. Eee! I’m getting excited. Guh, I can’t wait to get there, but knowing me it’ll be another billion pages. :D Also, HOLY BALLS, we passed the 10,000 hits mark? Guys--THANK YOU. Thank you for sticking with this, reading, and commenting! You have no idea how much energy you guys give me. Also, if you want to follow my weirdness on tumbler, the name is bluestem10. <3 -Bluestem
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hey, that's my helmet. Sure you can wear it Finn, it looks good on you.

Poe rolled over, tucking up against Finn's back as his dreamscape changed from a looping race-track version of D'Qars tarmac, to a lush, towering forest.

That ewok stole my flight harness! What'd I ever do to him? I need a stick—I'll show him! Ow. Ow, quit poking me. Ewoks do not fight fair. He bunched the blankets up against his neck.

[Wake up.] BB-8 let out a frustrated groan as it jabbed it's manipulator arm into Poe's side for the fifth time. [Poe. Wake up!]

After three more insistent jabs, Poe finally stirred. "Wuh…" He propped himself up on an arm, his eyes squeezed grumpily shut and his hair sticking out in all directions as if he'd been electrocuted. The droid watched him tilt back towards the mattress in slow motion like a felled tree. BB-8 jabbed him again for good measure.

"Ow—what?" He rubbed his eyes and woke fully, reluctantly uncurling from Finn's warmth. "What's going on?"

[Kes is trying to contact us.]

Poe flung the blankets back and hurriedly pulled on a pair of boxers. Oh gods, please let everything be okay, oh gods…

"Poe?" Finn's sleep-thick voice drifted out of the darkness. "What's happening?"

"My dad's comin' us," he called over his shoulder and darted into the hall with BB-8 at his heels. He approached the darkened cockpit with his heart thumping in his throat. Tubbs turned, unlinking from the Hyrotils interface and reversing away to make room. Poe eyed the softly flickering lights of the instrument panel as if he were nearing a hospital bed, and was unsure what he might find—the blinking white of the communications array caught his eye. The droids watched as he flicked it on.

"Dad?" Poe asked apprehensively.

"Poe!" Kes' voice was tense, rough around the edges like a frayed thought. "Are you alright?"

Poe wilted with relief; it didn't sound like his father was in trouble at least, though he didn't understand why he sounded so frantic. Finn's bare feet whispered across the cool floor, and then the warmth of his hand settled across Poe's shoulder as he leaned in towards the dash. "We're fine. What's going on, dad? You scared the hell outta me."

"Oh thank the Force." Kes all but moaned with relief before regaining his agitation. "Why is your bounty active again? What happened that they not only know you're alive but that you're with Finn! And they know the make of your ship!"

Poe rubbed his brow. He looked like he would rather pilot the Hyrotil into the lake with them in it than answer his father. He remained silent for a beat too long and Kes took matters into his own hands.
"Finn, are you there?"

Finn jolted, his eyes darting nervously to Poe's. "Uh, yeah, Kes, sir. I'm here."

"It's just Kes, Finn. Maybe you'll tell me what's going on."

"Alright, alright," Poe pulled the pilots seat back and flopped down, aggravated that Kes had thought to pressure Finn to manipulate him into answering. "We had a little…incident."

A breathless silence filled the cockpit, the kind of silence that happens before a bomb goes off. BB-8 moaned softly.

"An…incident." Kes repeated dangerously. "Poe, do you know what I went through getting that damn funeral together, telling the Wennings you were dead? You guys made it not even a week and now they know even more than they started with! What kind of incident?" Poe looked to Finn for support and the other man shrugged helplessly.

"Just…a little run in with a bounty hunter." Poe said in as quick and nonchalant a voice as he could manage and then hurried on. "But I'm fine. We're all fine. How're you, dad?"

"Poe…" Kes' voice dropped like a bomb.

"I was captured, but it's fine. Finn and BB-8 rescued me—and, actually, it's better than fine. Remember Snap? We found him!"

"Oh yeah, Nora's boy! Temmin, right? How's he…" He began fondly and then trailed off as he realized he was being played. "Don't change the subject! What are you doing getting yourself caught? Do you have any idea how—"

"It's not like I did it on purpose!" Poe argued indignantly, tired and growing annoyed at being blamed for something that clearly was not his fault. "Oh hey, Mr. Bounty Hunter, please do beat the shit out of me and book me on a one-way flight of death. Sounds great!"

Finn grimaced, unsure if sarcasm was the best way to relate what had happened.

When Kes next spoke, each of them winced; the old man's voice was tight with barely suppressed tears. "He…he beat you?"

Poe scrambled to make repairs, his hands raised as if he could reach through the dash and take his father by the shoulders. "Hey, it's okay! I'm fine—you wouldn't even know anything happened!" He was extremely glad that Kes couldn't see the bruise on his stomach or the bandages on his arm and wrists. "And I smashed the hell out of his nose."

"Was it that twi'lek?"

Poe deeply regretted having to answer. He knew that Kes would blame himself for missing his shot. "Yeah…it was."

Finn didn't need to understand Yavini to know that Kes was cursing his head off.

"But Finn got some really good shots at him—wherever he is now, he doesn't have a ship. And… and Snap bought us some nice disguises, so there's, like, no chance anyone will know who we are going forwards." Poe hurried.

"They know your ship." Kes said after a tense silence.
"There's gotta be millions of Hyrotls in the galaxy." Poe soothed.

Kes' sigh nearly blew their eardrums out. "Finn?" He said after a heavy silence.

"Yeah?"

"That's three times now that you've saved my boy. And that's three times you've saved me too, though you didn't know it."

Heat sprang to Finn's face as if he were back on Jakku and Poe blushed by proxy—it was just about the cheesiest and most sincere thing he'd ever heard his father say. His heart swelled though as he watched Finn try to recollect his thoughts and awkwardly stammer a response.

"Sir—it's—I—you don't have to—"

"Thank you, Finn."

"O-okay." He managed and Poe laughed as he clapped him on the back.

"You're sure you're both okay?" Kes reiterated.

"I'm fine dad, really." Poe stressed.

"And I can walk and run now and everything!" Finn answered, touched that Kes wanted to know and happy to report in.

"Good, I'm glad to hear that, Finn." Kes said warmly and then lapsed in to silence. "Well, I guess the First Order finding out about you two can't be helped. I'll have to do some serious damage control once I get back to Yavin, though."

"You're going back to Yavin?" Poe asked cautiously.

"Mmm hmm, been thinking about it for a few days now. It just...hasn't sat right with me, me, a war vet, hiding away on vacation while his son is being chased and hunted. No, I'm going home and I'll deal with whatever happens. And...when you find the Resistance again, I want you to tell me."

There was an air of embarrassed determination in his last sentence that immediately aroused Poe's suspicions and he glared at the innocently blinking communications relay. "Why? You're not thinking about joining up again, are you?"

"And why shouldn't I?" Kes said defensively, and there was such a stubborn Poe-ness to his voice that Finn had to shake his head. "I'm younger than Ackbar and Solo, and they were still of use. I'm old, I know it—I couldn't keep up with the kids on the ground anymore—but I know tactics and I know weaponry. I just...can't sit on my hands much more knowing those bastards are after you. Hurting you."

Poe swallowed. But Ackbar and Solo are dead. He could hardly stand to think it; it seemed too prophetic to make that connection, to hear Kes name them specifically as his inspiration for getting back in the force. But Poe understood the emotions driving him; it was the same guilt he'd felt for surviving Rhys, for watching his team getting picked apart before his eyes; the worst sense of futile powerlessness he'd ever experienced. They, at least, were still alive. He could give his father the chance to regain some of his power and dignity by letting him act to protect them.

"Okay, dad." He reluctantly relented. "If we hear anything, we'll let you know."
Finn turned slightly at the sound of bare feet slapping against the paneled flooring. Snap stumbled up, hastily wiping sleep from his eyes. His hair was about as tangled as Poe's and he wore a worn grey shirt and boxers. "Hey—everything okay, guys?" He mumbled sleepily. Poe swiveled the chair to face him, wondering what time it was, and if Snap had hit it off with Hali. Probably not if he's back here... "Yeah, everything's fine. Dad's just checking up on us." He rotated back to the dash. "Say 'hi' to Snap, dad!"

"Oh! Hi there, Temmin! How're you doing?"

"Doing pretty good, all things considered." He tried to stifle a yawn. "Just keeping an eye on these two." Snap answered, but his eyes drifted over to Finn's naked back, tracing with shock the scar that shone dully from the band of his boxers up to the top of his right shoulder blade. Finn caught him and Snap hastily looked away. Finn wasn't sure what to feel about Snap's open, horrified shock. Embarrassment? Shame? Pride in taking a wound for a friend? He decided to settle on pride as he refocused on the dash.

"Well, I appreciate that more than you know. What time is it for you guys? You all sound pretty tired."

"Uh..." Poe glanced at the chrono. "Planetary time has us at about five hours 'till sunrise—so pretty much the middle of the night. Good job, dad; your timing is amazing."

Kes laughed softly. "Well, I've got a glorious sunset here. I won't ask where you are—if someone gets ahold of me, the less I know the better."

"Don't say that," Poe started.

"Well, it's the truth, isn't it? Anyways, Naboo is beautiful. If I could transport Theed to Yavin, I'd just about be set. You should see some of the gardens they have here—flowers the size of my head."

Poe caught Finn's eye with a tender smile. "We'll have to check it out someday. How about the swamps? You trek through any of them?"

"Nah—a guide told me about these blood-sucking worms about as big as my leg and I decided to pass. So you guys are planet side right now, eh?...keeping hidden, I hope?"

"Yeah, I've got us set down in a forest—you'd like this place, dad. It's seasonal and all the trees are starting to change—but that means winter, unfortunately."

"I'll pass on that too." Kes said, and Poe could see him turning his nose up in his mind's eye.

"But the company here is...legendary."

"...That's not a euphemism for anything, is it? Because I think you two have a pretty solid thing going on and don't need any outside—"

Poe flushed and clapped a hand to his forehead as he interrupted. "It's not a euphemism! Geez, dad—no, what I was saying was we just had dinner with, oh, someone you may of heard of. Just a little old lady by the name of Maz Kanata."

"You're joking. The actual Pirate Queen? She'd have to be a thousand years old!"

Finn nodded. "She's actually older."

"And pretty batty," Snap put in fondly.
"No shit! You guys actually met the Pirate Queen! Wow! Now that's something! I didn't even get to meet the Queen of Naboo…" He said with obvious disappointment.

"I told her about the Force Tree—she's really into the Force, dad. And guess what? She wants to-

Finn tuned out for a moment, recalling as if with a burst of light the life force he'd seen streaming through Poe in the quiet darkness. What do I do with that? I mean…there's nothing I can do—but…
gods, that was the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. Could I see it in animals? Plants? …I dunno…
rocks? He pursed his lips as Poe and his father chatted on. How do I tell Poe about this? He obviously knows about the Force but…it's a weird thing to try and explain. Maybe I should ask Maz before we leave. She said she could see Rey and Luke. How can you sense someone that far away? Well, maybe if I had a few centuries, I could do that too. He rallied himself back to the conversation.

"Have the Pirate Queen in our house? Damn, son! That'd be…boy, I'd have to clean up." He said with a self-conscious waver.

"Relax dad, I think she's a little too old for you."

"Didn't stop her from flirting with you." Snap grinned.

"She didn't flirt with me, she simply admired me. And I mean…come on. Who wouldn't?" He kidded with a wink.

"Well, hey, I'll let you guys get back to bed—I just needed to make sure you were all okay. Be safe. Don't take your disguises off anywhere."

Poe tried to remember where their disguises even were and realized they were lying in crumpled heaps in the cargo hold where they'd been flung aside like so much trash.

"Keep your blasters on you, and-

"And comms, and droids, and Snaps." Poe finished for him. "Got it dad. We'll be careful, I promise. You be careful too, especially if you're going back to Yavin. Let me know how it all…goes."

"I will. Love you, Poe."

"Love you too, dad."

"Finn, take care, okay?"

"I will—Kes." He managed with an effort. "You too."

"There we go! No ‘sir’ that time. Snap—good to hear from you. Thanks again for keeping an eye on them—you watch out for yourself too."

"Hey, it's no problem. They're my pack—we gotta stick together. Talk to you later, Kes."

"Alright. Bye, now." Kes said and then the connection went blank and the communications relay went dark.

Poe leaned back against his chair with a sigh and brought his hands to his temples. "That's a relief."

"He's a pretty cool old man, you know?" Snap said as Poe stood and they started for the hall.

"I am aware." Poe smiled. "So uh…no luck with Hali? I thought that was a shoe-in—she seemed really into you." He halted before the door to their bedroom and Snap stood with a slightly glum
"Well...I dunno. It was kind of confusing. We talked more than anything. Kissed a few times though, so that was nice. She said if I was ever back this way, we'd have to make a day of it."

"Well, that's good at least. Right?" Poe urged.

"Yeah, it was fine." Snap glanced evasively away and down the hall and Finn realized with an embarrassed drop to his stomach that half of their clothing was still scattered up the ramp. Snap had obviously noticed all that on his return trip to the Hyrotil. "Looks like you guys had no problem though. Force, I walked in here and thought you'd both evaporated into thin air—clothes freakin' everywhere. You should hang the robes up at least—they're gonna wrinkle really bad."

Finn's stomach dropped still further as a new detail caught his eye, and his horror burst out in a bark of a laugh. He ducked into their bedroom with his hand over his mouth. "Night, Snap." He chortled.

"Uh...night, Finn." Snap answered, nonplussed. Poe arched a brow, glancing between Finn's retreating form and Snap in confusion. The bearded man shrugged.

"Yeah well—see you the morning. Goodnight, Poe." He clapped him on the shoulder.

"Night, Snap." He watched Snap disappear into his room with a wistful look. "Man...he needs someone great in his life. Who can I fix him up with? I wonder if—no she's married. Maybe L'ullo's niece? She's freaking hilarious...but I don't know if he's into duros like that. Hmmm. He entered their bedroom with a sigh and left the door partially open for BB-8, who remained in the cockpit quietly burbling and chittering back and forth with Tubbs. Finn was sitting on the bed with nervous grin.

"What was that all about?" Poe queried.

"It's on the wall." He sputtered and then began laughing again, covering his mouth with both of his hands.

"What is?" Poe's brow furrowed as he sat alongside him and pulled the blankets up.

Finn snorted. "Your semen—it's all over the wall."

"Oh, fuck. It is?" Poe gaped before a slow smile curled his lips. He lay back and pulled Finn down alongside him. "Ah, oh well. I'm too tired to clean it up."

Finn curled playfully against him, his left hand sliding down his ribs and resting over his hip. "BB-8 will be mad." He grinned, their faces inches apart.

"He likes having something to get mad about." Poe disclosed, punctuating every other word with a light kiss. "It gives him a sense of superiority—something to lord over me."

[That is true.] BB-8 bleeped from the doorway as it trundled into the room. [You won't be making any more organic messes tonight will you? Can I power down safely?]

"I dunno...I'm feeling kinda turned on all the sudden..." Poe began wryly.

"You are?" Finn sputtered weakly, his arousal struggling to drag itself out of the nice, warm, comfortable nest it had bedded down in.

[No, his heartrate is the same. He's just being...sassy.] It settled into place at it's normal spot near Poe's side of the bed. [Good night.] It chirped.
"You got me buddy. Night." He looked back to Finn. "Sorry, Finn. Back to sleep?"

"Back to sleep." He seconded with relief.

Poe chuckled and leaned in, kissing him slowly and softly, and then pressed the lights off. BB-8's blue resting-light bloomed weakly through the room, softly edging Poe's dark, bundled form in slivers of ice.

"Hey, Poe."

"Yeah?" Finn felt the breath of his answer running warm across his cheek, and he smiled into the darkness.

"I'm glad Kes is okay."

Poe sighed. "Gods, me too."

"He asked me how I was. It always surprises me when people ask me that. Not you, of course," he hurried to say, "but...it's nice."

Poe's hand tightened over his, pity and adoration warring in his heart. "He cares about you, sweetheart. He really does." He gathered him into a tight hug. "No one could get to know you and not care about you."

Poe's words seemed to wrap around his soul, a buffer to a lifetime of being taught that he was unimportant. He felt the bracelet resting gently across his skin. "I love you," Finn murmured.

"I love you, too." Poe's lips pressed blindly to his forehead and then his mouth.

They lay comfortably entwined in the darkness, Poe beginning to nod off in Finn's arms.

"Hey, Poe."

"Yeah?" He asked with a drowsy softness.

"I...Maz...told me something earlier. About myself."

The hesitancy in Finn's voice caught hold of him and Poe was reluctantly dragged away from the welcoming haze of sleep. "What'd she say?" He whispered.

"You know the Force?"

"Mmm hmm."

"She...she said that I'm Force Sensitive. Like her." He glanced away, even though he knew Poe wouldn't really be able to see his nervousness.

"Force...sensitive? What is that?" Poe asked.

"She said it means that I'm open to the Force and that I can feel it...like intuition, I guess. I can't use it like a Jedi could though. She said that if I'm calm and quiet, then it can help guide me. And I can see things."

"Things like what? Visions or...energy? Like how it looks in the Force Tree?"

"I don't know about visions, but the energy looked a lot like the Force Tree!" Finn said and now
excitement barreled past his nervousness, as if he were seeing it all over again, his heart rattling into his fingertips. "Only, it was with your whole body instead of just the edge of a few leaves."

Poe had a hard time wrapping his head around Finn's sentence. He propped himself up on an elbow. "Wait…when you say 'with your whole body'…do you mean my body?"

Finn pulled back on his excitement, cautious of the fact that this may be too much for Poe. "Yeah… before I went to bed, I…cleared my mind and I just focused really hard on you. And I could see it."

Poe swallowed, intrigued but somewhat unsure. This was big news. He'd always known about the living force—you couldn't grow up climbing a tree full of it without understanding that it flowed through and connected everyone. But to know that it could be seen, just like that, in mortal bodies… the implications from an existential standpoint were staggering. "Well…what'd it look like?"

Finn paused for a moment. *He's not even doubting me. I love him so damn much. It was beautiful. I…I can't explain it. I'm glad you were asleep because I started crying, it was so beautiful.*

"You did?" Poe grinned, touched and enamored for the thousandth time by Finn's gentle heart.

"It was like…a river. And it shone out of your chest, right there," he pressed a hand just beneath Poe's ribs. "And then it grew. Like…like a river full of stars. And it flowed from your feet, to the crown of your head, like it was just passing through on the way to something bigger." He shook his head breathlessly. "It was *wild.*"

*Just passing through.* Poe exhaled shakily, a shiver crackling like ice up his spine. "You could really see all that? Is it…happening now?"

"No. I mean yes—it's got to be happening now because you're alive. I'm just not focused enough to see it."

"Finn…that's….that's really amazing. I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. It's enough that you believe me."

"Of course I believe you. So…Maz can do the same thing?"

"She can do it way better. She said there's lots of people in the galaxy that can do it. I guess they all had to hide it and go underground when the Sith and the Empire took over. She can see it all the time, in everyone. She can see Luke and Rey's energy way out on the edge of the galaxy."

"That…is insane."

"I know. I think I'd go crazy if I couldn't turn it off. It's beautiful…but it's overwhelming. At least, right now it is. I was going to talk to her tomorrow. Tell her what I saw, and see if it matches up to what she sees."

"Like a river full of stars." Poe repeated to himself, and a twinge of emotion tugged unexpectedly at his heart. He could picture his mother piloting through that ethereal stream, could picture Rhys, as bright as any sun. Could picture his team riding that wave like a hyperspace route, laughing and talking as they had done in life. Perhaps they were only streams of light and energy, but at least they were still there in some form. The old questions pulled at him, woken anew at Finn's revelation. Did consciousness follow energy into the bigger flow? Did that mean that some part of them remembered? He took a hard breath and nodded. "That's beautiful, Finn." He freed his arm out from under Finn's and wiped at his eyes. "Thank you for telling me."
"I'm sorry…" Finn's fingertips rubbed across his cheek, wiping away the tears that had spilled over. "I didn't mean to make you cry. It's a lot to process, huh?"

"Yeah. But it's comforting too. It really is." No matter what happens…we're never truly gone. He studied the darkened curves of Finn's cheek, the murky blue swell of his shoulder, the blue light falling like water down the lines of his forearm; how unique and perfect he was, and how he never wanted it to end. He brought his fingers to Finn's temple, stroking his forehead with a feather light touch, horribly conscious of the fact that they were both passing things. I hope he lives forever.

Finn nudged his forehead against Poe's, smiling as the pilot's hand moved back to smooth through his hair.

"I like that." Finn murmured sleepily. As a child, he'd often tried to soothe himself from sleepless nights with just such a motion. It was far more effective when done by someone who loved him. He fell asleep quickly under Poe's touch. Poe however lay awake for a long while, running Finn's words through his head and listening to the softness of his breath.

The morning found them walking past the bright, opalescent mirror of the lake. Mist lay above it in a clean white blanket, fluttering here and there as the water lapped against the shore. The air was fresh, cool but in a way that enlivens, and Finn breathed deep as the small group started back towards Maz's castle. He and Poe had once again donned their disguises, glad now of the bit of warmth they gave them. Snap seemed unfazed by the chill daybreak.

"I've got built-in insulation." He kidded.

Poe grinned, his hand comfortable in Finn's, and his eyes tracing the leaves that swayed and fluttered above their heads like slips of flame against a sky of painted blues and coppery pink. Damp, dew-spotted leaves clung to their feet and to the hem of their robes.

They talked animatedly, about Maz's ship, about the weather, and made up ridiculous tours for Kes on Naboo.

"I bet there's a Queens Wardrobe tour." Snap snorted. "That'd just be right up his ally."

"I bet there's a 'see if you can hold your breath long enough to get to a Gungan city' tour. He'd try it too—the challenge would excite him."

[Help.] BB-8 bleeped plaintively. Poe paused, turning to look back at BB-8 and then guffawing loud enough to send a few bird-like creatures skittering into the air. BB-8 was coated in damp leaves, twigs, and dirt. It was hard to tell where droid ended and the forest began.

"Buddy," he broke off with a laugh as he knelt down to the droid and began to scrape the detritus off of it's chassis, "you look like a big ball of nerf poop."

[I do not think I like autumn.] It lamented while Finn and Snap chuckled at the bedraggled droid.

"Hey, you ever tried this, Finn?" Snap asked, waving the other man after him as he walked to the shoreline and knelt to pick up a flat stone. Finn watched quizzically as Snap flung it out into the mist with a quick, horizontal jerk of his arm and a snap to his wrist. Have I ever thrown a rock before? Uh...that's kind of dumb—his thoughts were interrupted by seven wet smacks and then a plop as the stone sunk into the water.

"Wow, how'd you do that? Was it bouncing on the water?" Finn took a few steps closer.
“Yeah, it’s hard to see with the mist though,” Snap stood happily. “Just find a flat stone and then you have to try and throw it so that it hits the water, flat, like this.” He mimed the rock by smacking one palm against the other with a bouncing motion.

“Okay,” Finn began a hunt for the perfect stone, aided by an obvious master. “This one?” He asked as he pulled a muck-dripping rock from the shore.

“That one.”

Finn gave it a try only to have it *ploosh* like an anvil straight through the mist. “Hmm.” His mouth thinned.

“Round two.” Snap announced and they began another search. Snap’s eyes darted to him off and on, and then he cleared his throat as Finn stood with a handful of likely candidates. “Hey. So…sorry if I made you feel weird about your scar, Finn.”

“Oh,” Finn glanced at him, caught totally off guard; he’d completely forgotten the interaction upon waking up. “That’s okay.”

“It’s just—I mean, I knew it must’ve been pretty bad, what with you having to stay in medbay for a solid week. But jeez—I didn't realize just *how* severe it was.”

Finn smiled softly beneath his wrap and then threw another stone out into the mist. "I kind of forget too, now that I can move and walk again. There was a while there where I wasn't sure if I'd ever get back to normal."

Snap shook his head. "And it really was from a Sith?"

"Uh huh. He'd hurt my friend and…and I had to protect her. I was too mad to be scared—but I was afterwards, when I had time to think about it." He threw another stone and perked up slightly as it plopped twice before going under.

Snap clapped him on the shoulder, looking him dead in the eyes. "You really are a brave man."

"Thanks," Finn smiled. Poe walked up with his hands covered in dirt and clinging grit.

"He is a brave man." Poe agreed with a warm look that made Finn's heart flutter. "You get one to skip?" He asked Finn as he dunked his hands in the lake and began to scrub them. The water was icy to the touch.

"Yeah."

They found Maz sitting like a perfect miniature before her sun-gilded statue, adrift in a sea of mist and half-guessed spires of stone. The image gave Poe a slight chill—it seemed almost otherworldly, as if she were a guardian before an ancient tomb, appearing by degrees but never truly solidifying. The old woman's eyes were closed and her legs crossed beneath her as the sunlight brightened her peaceful face and sent warmth into creaking joints. A smile flickered across her mouth as she both heard and felt their approach, unfolding from her meditative stance like a blooming flower and walking out to meet them. BB-8 chittered happily.

"I thought you might be getting an early start to the day." Her amber eyes studied each of them, resting for a long while on Finn. She nodded to herself. "If you’re still interested we can get your fake ID’s in order now—with my associate's set-up, it will only take a few minutes to draw up the proper documents."
"That'd be great, thank you." Poe nodded.

Maz laughed as she beckoned them through the quiet construction-site. "No, thank you. You were all such a help last night—and I enjoy listening to you kids talk and laugh. We need more laughter, you know. It really does help. Laughter and drink." She grinned.

"That's a plan I can get behind." Snap nodded.

Twenty minutes later, Finn and Poe were standing outside the ship of her associate, a somewhat twitchy Bothan named Choth'ka, with their new ID's and documents clutched in their hands. Poe examined the thin rectangular card, pressing into the raised silver embossing just below his two dimensional image. A holo-image sprang to life above the card, giving a 365 degree view of his disguised face, along with his alias, age, gender, weight, origin, and so on.

"Wow…these are the real deal. If I didn't know it was fake, I'd have no idea." He nodded, and the Bothan ruffled his splotchy, apricot colored fur appreciatively. They turned back towards Maz's castle as the other workers began to wake and file back to their unfinished projects.

"Hey…uh…I'm gonna go say bye to Hali. You guys okay?" Snap asked with both excitement and apprehension as he picked her and Merra out from the mist.

"We're fine; we've got the Pirate Queen chaperoning us. Go say bye to her." Poe smiled and looked at Finn. His eyes were unreadable as he studied his ID. He sighed disappointedly and then tucked the plasticine card into his robe.

"Go figure. My first real ID as a free man is a fake one."

Poe's stomach dropped. "Hey…just for now. When things go back to normal, we'll get you a real one."

He nodded silently and nearly walked into Maz, who had stopped before him with a piercing look of raw excitement.

"You've seen it, haven't you, Finn?" She said breathlessly.

Finn knew at once what she was referring to, and his sadness over the ID vanished as if it had never been. "I did see it! Maz—you were right—it's amazing!"

She nodded her head towards Poe. "Was it his?"

"Yeah. I did what you said—I let my mind go blank and just focused and…it's like it bloomed out of him."

"Starting at the chest, then running from the toes to the scalp." She gestured gracefully upwards, miming the direction of the flow.

"That's right!" Finn exclaimed, so excited to hear it verified, to know that he hadn't somehow tricked himself, that he could hardly hold still.

Maz grinned proudly and then looked warmly to Poe. "He has a beautiful stream. Everyone does, really, but his islands are especially bright."

"Islands?" Finn asked.
Maz nodded and took his hand as if she were about to predict the future. "I call them islands." She pressed just above his wrist. "Here is one. Other's call them wheels, flowers, gems, soul-prints—you get the idea. Those are the lights that stayed still as the stream swept by, and the pattern is unique to every individual. They're what makes you you. And when you die, those lights let go and follow after all the rest." She raised her head to the sky, peering off into the heavens with a sad smile. "It's quite something to see." She murmured.

Finn's heart raced and Poe spoke up from beside him. "You've seen that, Maz?" His eyes were deep with wonder.

"Many times, child."

He and Finn locked eyes, and for a moment, none of them could speak. "There was a really bright one on Poe." Finn began suddenly. "Just behind his,"

"Right eye," they finished in unison and Poe yet again felt an otherworldly chill flow up his spine.

Maz smiled. "Yours are beautiful too, Finn, and you should have seen your friend, Rey's." She shook her head. "Less like a stream, and more like an ocean of fire."

"Is that what all Jedi look like?" Finn asked.

"For the most part, yes."

"Then…what about the Sith?" Poe ventured.

"Just as beautiful. But darkened here and there, as if there were dams in the body, stagnant areas blocking the flow from moving freely. Some old scholars believed that the Sith harnessed that pooled energy in bursts of tremendous power. It's how they could attack so ferociously…but it left them weak in the long run. The body isn't meant to be used that way; it's like forcing too much current through a wire. And they could never connect as deeply."

"Maz…can you see it in animals and plants too?"

"Oh yes. The whole world breathes with life-light. From plant to plant, water to rock, human to animal, planet to nebulae and star. It's a big galaxy." She met both of their eyes seriously then, her small wrinkled hands squeezing theirs with a wiry strength. "You must tread carefully when you leave. An operative of mine reported last night that many bounty hunters are now forming into guilds and packs to better their chances. You must listen. You especially, Finn."

Poe's mouth went dry and he glanced to Finn. "We'll be careful, Maz. And I'll keep practicing." Finn promised.

She stepped back from them, nodding silently. "Good." She started again towards the statue where they'd first found her. The rising sun shone in a seam of molten gold that burned away the last shrouds of mist. She breathed deeply, her hands on her hips as she again stared skyward as if reading an ancient map. Maz turned to them with a broad smile. "Goodbye for now, Finn, Poe, BB-8."

"Goodbye, Maz."

The Hyrotil lifted clear of the sheltering leaves, rippling like a great fish over the glassy surface of the
lake before fading into the pale blue sky. Finn silently watched as the lake and the ruined castle dwindled away into a swath of cloud and then were lost. His hand tightened on Poe's.

Chapter End Notes

HOLY SHIT 30 CHAPTERS! This was a fun, catch-up and chatting chapter, and also the last one where they are going to be unequivocally safe for a while. I hope that came through in this; they all knew it even if they didn't expressly say it. We're going to be entering more dangerous waters now. It was so nice to get back to Kes for a little bit and also just let the boys laze around and talk. Gah, how am I still so obsessed with them? It's been literally 10 months since the movie came out and yet ye ol' stormpilot ship is still going strong. :D Hope you guys enjoyed, and thank you so much for reading! Comments are super appreciated! <3 - Bluestem.
The Hyrotil hung silently in indecision, the speck of Takodana glimmering against the darkness far, far to their port. The engines shone in static yellow smears as the craft drifted. Onboard, Finn sat listening to Poe reiterate for the tenth time why he believed they should next go to Nar Shaddaa. He was silent, chin resting on his laced fingers, though his heart was hammering in his chest.

“Well, I don’t know what else we’re supposed to do guys.” Poe shook his head, his hands thrown open. “We’ve got one lead and that is that the symbol on that tracker was manufactured on Nar Shaddaa.”

“But we don’t know that.” Snap patiently pointed out.

“Come on—she said the symbol was almost identical to the Umbra Core, who used to operate—”

“Used to operate out of Nar Shaddaa. Used to.” Snap held up a finger to make his point.

Poe sighed, his patience wearing thin. They had been going back and forth for nearly forty minutes by this point and were no closer to action.

“Okay. But if we get to Nar Shaddaa, we can slice into one of their city terminals and find—”

“Find what? Maz said they’d been gone for a century—”

“If you’d let me finish, we could try and search for any time that phrase has turned up in media or sales, maybe narrow the field to a certain part of the city.”

“And then we just waltz in and say ‘hey! You guys are bad! Where’s the First Order?’”

“Yes, Snap. We do exactly that.” He volleyed sarcastically.

“And how are we slicing into a planetary system? The defenses on their net would have to be second to none. I mean…I’m good, but it would take time to turn up any usable results.”

“So we cause a diversion.”

“You guys are not in a position to be causing diversions.” Snap pointed out dryly.

“I think,” Finn spoke up suddenly, and the two of them froze as if Finn had paused a holovid, their arguments lodged in their throats. “I think we should go to Ahch-To. We should find Luke and Rey.”

Poe’s face fell. “Finn, we can’t go to them.”

“Why not?”

“Uh,” Poe laughed as if it should be obvious, “I don’t know if you’ve noticed that we’ve had bounty hunters on our tail.”

“So how is going to Nar Shaddaa gonna be any better?” Finn gestured in dismay.
“Because then it’s just on us! We…we cannot risk leading bounty hunters, and therefore, the First Order, to the last Jedi in the galaxy. We’re not worth that.”

“How would they possibly follow us through hyperspace?” Finn demanded.

“Maybe the same way they followed us through hyperspace before? I still don’t know how they managed to tag us with those trackers to begin with. We could get tagged again refueling, and lead them right to Rey and Luke. Are you willing risk that?”

“But they could help us.” Finn stressed.

“Look, I know you miss Rey.” Poe began.

“That has nothing to do with this!” Finn retorted, getting hot in turn. Snap’s eyebrows crept slowly up his forehead, he and the droids awkwardly watching their back and forth as if they were tossing a live detonator.

“Of course it does! After what Maz said, I get it. You’ve got questions and-”

“Poe, I don’t care about that right now, I just want us to link back up with someone who can help us.”

“We would put them at risk.”

“You don’t know that!”

“And you don’t know that we wouldn’t!” Poe half-shouted.

“So we should go off on some half-baked trek to a planet full of people who’ll probably want us dead? That’s your plan?” Finn snapped.

“The tracker was your idea, in case you forgot! Otherwise what was the point of going to Maz?” Some part of his consciousness seemed to hover over the conversation, noting with dread that not only were they having their first fight but they were having it in front of Snap, but he was powerless to reign himself in now.

“She admitted that she doesn’t even know for sure! And I didn’t hear you giving any better ideas!”

“I’ve been giving one for the past hour! Kriffing hell, do I have to pull rank on this?”

“You don’t have rank anymore.” Finn said. He didn’t mean for it to sound so horrible. He was certain that he didn’t, yet there was a molecule in the back of his mind that was pleased to see that he’d managed to shake him. He felt disgusted with himself.

Poe took a step back, swallowing mutely, his hurt swirling into righteous anger as his chest swelled.

“So we should just keep running away and hiding?” Poe bit out defensively. Stop there, he urged himself, but he could not. “That’s what you do best, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Finn stood “that is what I do! Saving your ass, and escaping a genocidal cult—that makes me a coward all the sudden?”

“That’s not what I said!”

“That’s what you meant!”
“Look,” Poe began with an air of icy finality, “you don’t understand. The First Order-”

“I don’t understand?” He jabbed his finger into his chest with a scandalized look. “I don’t understand the First Order.” He stood back, dragged his eyes furiously from Poe with a small nod. He felt sick, as if something had broken inside of him. Poe grimaced and opened his mouth to try to make amends but before he could, Finn turned and stormed out of the cockpit, stomping up the stairs towards the gunner’s turret. Poe hollowly watched him disappear, his chest heaving and a sour taste creeping into his mouth. BB-8 moaned softly.

A crushingly awkward silence suffused the small room, Snap and the droids staring at Poe as though waiting for an explanation.

“Nicely done.” Snap said drily.

“Fuck,” Poe breathed as he ran a jittery hand through his hair and then stood back like a live wire. “That’s not what I meant!” He turned to Snap. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

Snap shrugged. “Maybe you oughta tell him that?”

“I’m too mad.” He walked angrily into the hall. “Godsdammit.” Why the fuck did you say that, Dameron? He stalked off to the engine room with his hands jammed into his pockets.

Snap’s mouth thinned as he listened to Poe setting noisily to work on something, the clattering of tools echoing coldly throughout the ship as if through a cavern. “Well guys,” he sighed to the two droids who had parked themselves by his knees like frightened children, “looks like we’re staying put for a bit.”

Finn sat limply in the gunner’s turret, his eyes staring out at the far off, glimmering blue dot of Takodana. The silence was interrupted periodically by the hard metallic clanging of Poe working through his anger on some unfortunate part of the ship, and Finn’s eyes dropped to the controls sitting darkened and inactive before his hands. Good. I’m glad he’s mad. Calling me a coward? Saying that I don’t get it? He crossed his arms, his feeling of self-righteousness curdling in his chest. He rubbed his brow. But why did you have to say that about ranks?

He wasn’t sure what to think. He wasn’t entirely sure what had even happened beyond the fact that he felt hurt and angry, with himself as much as Poe. He could not reconcile the fact that not even a day had passed since they’d been having wild sex, and discussing the flow of the Force with excitement and tenderness. Where did that come from? Is...is that normal? He’d had arguments before...but these had been petty and trifling things; he’d never felt sick to his stomach over spats for who got what weapon during melee training, or who got to be the first in line for mess. Because none of them really knew me, he realized. They hadn’t possessed the power to get under his skin, but Poe...Poe could set a sun to burning in his chest with just a glance, or, as he’d just found out, leave him feeling like a shriveled up husk.

He sighed. I shouldn’t have said that...any of that. But...he shouldn’t have either. Emotion welled in a thin line down the front of his chest, and then sparked into sudden dread. What if he doesn’t love me anymore? What he wants to leave me? That frightened him more than any careless word flung at him ever could. He pictured the lights flowing through Poe’s body, the way he looked when he
peaked, the feel of his hand resting in his—simply knowing that he was nearby. He pictured himself waking up alone; tried to imagine never hearing Poe laugh again. He was too inexperienced to realize that he was overreacting, and a shaking breath ghosted past his lips as he half-stood from his seat, meaning to go to Poe and talk to him. _And say what?_ He held for a moment in crackling indecision and then settled back down, as leaden as a storm cloud.

For over an hour Finn had sat in silence (Poe’s clattering had long gone quiet), replaying every word of their argument and trying to figure out just where it had jumped the rails, and why he’d felt so defensive; searching for the holes in his own viewpoint as if it were a leaking oxygen tank. _I do want to see Rey again, and maybe that is clouding my judgement. But…I don’t know where else we could go and expect to be helped. It feels like a good idea. But what if we are tracked again somehow? It’s a long trip, and we’d have to stop for fuel three or four times; plenty of opportunity for someone to mark us._ He sighed. _I don’t want to bring all this down on Rey’s head._

Footsteps sounded suddenly from the stairwell and he snapped back to himself with a plummeting feeling, as if he were in free fall once more. He knew instinctively that it was Poe, and he swiveled reluctantly towards the narrow doorway, his heart leaping into thundering action in his throat. Again, his mouth felt dry. _What is this?_ He’d never realized that a verbal fight could illicit the same reactions as physical combat. The steps flattened as they reached the landing, and Poe appeared in the thin gap, covered in grease from whatever he’d been doing to the engines and looking distinctly disheveled. They met each other’s eyes for one moment and then glanced away in unison. Poe broke first, sighing and sliding down to sit in the small space between the gunner’s chair and the doorway, his back pressed against the switch-covered paneling of the wall and his eyes on the curve of the gunner’s panel.

“Hey.” He started softly and Finn felt the icy air fracture.

Finn glanced down at him. “Hey.” Another fracture.

The silence built for a few awkward moments and then Poe spoke. “I’m sorry, Finn.” He began. “What I said…I didn’t mean it. I know you know the First Order better than anyone. And…you’re one of the bravest people I’ve ever met.” His eyes caught hold of Finn’s tightly, willing him to understand. “I…I just said that to get a cheap dig in. I knew it’d hurt…I’m sorry.”

Finn swallowed and nodded, his eyes hovering to the left of Poe’s face, for he couldn’t look at him directly yet. Not without apologizing in turn. “You only said it because of what I said about your rank. That was awful. I…I don’t know where that came from. I’m sorry too.”

The atmosphere thawed and they each breathed a little easier, Poe slumping so that he was lying flat out on the cold grated flooring, his eyes on the half-domed, bubble of a ceiling and the stars beyond the arcing durasteel struts. He blindly reached a hand out towards the armrest of the Finn’s chair, extending the proverbial Globe of Peace, and when Finn took it a weight slid off of his soul. He sighed. “Yeah…well…you weren’t wrong. I guess I really don’t have rank anymore…” Poe subconsciously rubbed just over his heart, where the badge proclaiming him a Colonel had once shone.

“That doesn’t make what I said right.”

“Arguments like that aren’t really about right or wrong.”
Finn paused, looking down into Poe’s dark eyes. “What are they about?”

“Both of us being stressed the hell out and trapped on this ship and taking it out on each other. Honestly though, all things considered, I’d say we’re doing really well.”

Finn nodded softly, his thumb brushing gratefully back and forth over Poe’s grease-smeared knuckle, a tentative, hopeful gesture. He chuckled sadly. “I didn’t know you could love someone, and still get pissed off at them.”

Poe laughed, reminded again of Finn’s inexperience and feeling like a heel, as if he’d led his innocence into a quagmire. “Baby, if there’s something every couple or group in the galaxy can say, it’s that they’ve fought. Bad sometimes. It’s normal.”

“It is?” Finn asked with a note of dread. He didn’t like to think of this happening every few weeks.

“Well, I mean, it shouldn’t become the norm, but…you can’t live with someone and not disagree and fight about things every now and then. That’s just how it goes. Some people even say it’s healthy.” He grinned suddenly. “Rhys and I once had a spat over where to eat that turned into this big, ridiculous thing where we didn’t talk to each other for days.”

Finn rotated towards him, Poe’s hand still clasped in his. “Yeah?” He smiled softly, somewhat heartened to hear that a relationship he considered to have been extremely solid, had had its share of off notes. I guess if the overall song is great, those bad notes just fade away.

“Uh huh.”

“Huh…I guess this is another first. I don’t really like this first though.”

“Me neither. We’re gonna say dumb shit to each other sometimes—that’s just a given. But…I love you, you know?”

“I love you too.” He sighed, his dread uncoiling like a dianoga from his gut. He felt silly now that he could ever have thought that a few misspoken words would have made Poe leave him; could have made Poe stop loving him. He squirmed out of his seat and lay alongside him, cramming himself between the pilot and the knobby, wiry base of the chair. For several minutes, they lay together in silence. Poe met his eyes and smiled, and then suddenly laughed.

Finn arched a brow. “What?”

“I just realized something. Remember what our very first argument was about?”

“I thought this was our first…” he trailed off, an image playing before his mind’s eye as if from another lifetime; a panicked Stormtrooper and a bloodied pilot flying for their lives onboard a stolen TIE fighter, one arguing for Jakku, and the other arguing for open space. He joined Poe’s laughter then, and was pleased at how easy and natural it felt. It was as if the whole argument had never happened, the tension flowing out of each of them like air through a hull breech. “We couldn’t agree where to go then either! But we also weren’t a couple then.”

“Yeah, well, I’m still gonna count it.” Poe grinned. “Maybe that’ll be our thing—always fighting about where to go. Vacation planning is gonna be rough.”

Finn snorted. “Seems how I’ve never been on one, I will literally go anywhere. But…we still need to figure out where to go now. I was thinking…and I do understand how valuable Rey and Luke are…and that we shouldn’t risk bringing the First Order down on them.”
“Okay…” Poe began cautiously.

“But… I just have a bad feeling about Nar Shaddaa.”

Poe softened, and he felt like a monumental prick for getting riled up rather than seriously listening to Finn’s concerns. He lightly stroked up Finn’s temple. “What kind of bad feeling?”

“I don’t know.” Finn leaned into the touch. “Just a feeling. Not enough to build an argument on.”

“Is it…like… a Force kind of feeling?”

Finn shrugged, his shoulders pressing into Poe’s. “I don’t know. I don’t really know how to tell the difference between what I’m feeling and what the Force is telling me yet.”

Poe studied Finn’s eyes and then glanced away, his mouth thin. “2 days. If we can’t turn anything up in two days, then we’ll call it quits. And if it’s obviously too dangerous for us to be there, we head out, no questions asked. How’s that sound?”

Finn swallowed. It can’t be coincidence that Hutt Space has joined the First Order at the same time this symbol reappears. Maybe… maybe we will find something. “Okay.”

Ozmyn Heil stood with his hands on his hips, slowly stalking about the perimeter of the ship he was considering as a replacement for the Brejiner. It riled his stomach to even have to think of replacing such a perfect craft, but, with the First Order’s payout for his intel, he could afford nearly any ship he could possibly desire. Indeed, once Phasma had confirmed the validity of the map, he’d been made richer than he’d ever been in his life, richer, probably, than all of his ancestors combined. He could afford another Wrakken freighter, if he lucked into finding one on the godsforsaken world he’d been forced to put down on. He could afford 10 of them.

However, he suspected that the shipyard he’d been reduced to combing through would turn up no such gem, and even if it did, he’d have to spend a great deal of time modding it out to meet his standards. He did not have the luxury of time; his intel had been broadcast far and wide by the First Order, who wished to maximize their odds of capture. He’d expected such an action, but had not looked forwards to it. The hunting field had been leveled—he now possessed little upper hand, beyond his knowledge of the extent to which 2187 would go to for Dameron, and some small personal quirks. And now the Guavian Death gang is getting in the game—the stakes have been upped… everyone and their godsdamned mother is joining forces. His mouth thinned sourly. None of them deserves this payout. They haven’t had to deal with a fraction of the shit those praffs have put me through.

He rubbed his chin, focused more on his thoughts now than the ship, and the salesdroid waiting on him hovered nervously at his peripheral. I’d even split the payout, so long as I’m the one to hand them over to the First Order. There’s a few old dregs floating around that might still work with me. Some might even be useful. Hell… they’d expect a double-cross though. Ah well, I’ll see who I can round up. This hunt had become personal for him in a way that no other had before. He looked forwards to those delicious few seconds that happened in every hunt, when his prey was sighted but remained blissfully unaware. It would happen with them. He couldn’t explain it even to himself, but he had to see the looks on their faces once they realized they were done for, and that it was because
of him. A thrill went up his spine at the very thought. It almost made the money negligible. Almost. A grin split his face and he winced, his broken nose stinging in a line of cold fire into his sinuses, and the wound to his lekku throbbing dully. Fucking Damerons.

He turned the corner of a broad wing and halted before the engine outputs. The Corellian YV-700 light freighter was common, derisively common. In fact, he’d first passed the ship by without a second glance to focus on showier models on down the line, but for whatever reason, he’d felt compelled to take another look at its front-heavy, rectangular sprawl. Perhaps it was because it was so common. If his eyes had glossed right over it, probably countless others had done the same. Perhaps his marks would make that fatal mistake. It was a solid craft, heavily shielded, with forwards facing turbolaser canons, and decent speed. Not quite as fast as a Hyrotel, but sturdier by far.

He wrapped his knuckles against the cold breastplate of the salesdroid, which jolted to attention. “Open it up. I want a tour.” The droid hurried to do as it was asked—it did not like the look of this customer one bit. A rust-red side-panel unhinged and lowered smoothly to the earthen floor. The cargo hold was decent enough, though he’d be compelled to add containment cells to it. Shame they don’t come standard, he smirked as he poked about the murky interior. A half hour tour convinced him. It went against his dramatic sensibilities, but everything onboard was in good working order, and it’s sheer mundanity would function as adequately as a cloaking device. And anyways, after I hand them in, I’ll be rich enough to buy myself a fuckin’ moon—never mind a ship.

“Alright droid, make me a deal. A real good deal.” His hand slid dangerously close to his openly displayed blaster, and the droid would’ve gulped if it had been able. Though it was programmed to haggle, it had the strangest feeling that it was about to get fleeced.

The consensus had been made, Snap agreeing to Poe’s plan with some hesitancy, but admitting that he didn’t have any better ideas. They were on route to refuel at a space station in the Tacuni sector, midway between Takodana and Nar Shaddaa. It would take nearly a day to get there, and another few hours after that to reach their destination.

Finn and Poe had been perhaps a little warmer to one another for the rest of the day as they made dinner and chatted, a bit more mindful of the effect they had on one another. Snap was heartened by this, but also felt about as obtrusive as a rancor at a wedding, and he spent a good deal of time either in his room or the engine rooms, studying the backup compressor that Poe had dismantled and rebuilt for no reason other than that he was angry and needed something to do. If the way Poe had been eyeing Finn at dinner was any indication, it was now clear that Poe intended to do something else.

“Hey, Tubbs.” Snap lay sleepily on his bed and gestured the droid over to him. It wheezed happily as it wheeled up and bumped against the edge of the cot. “You haven’t seen any headsets lying around this thing have you?”

[No. There is the wired in pair in the cockpit and in the gunner’s turret.]

“How about that?”

[Why?]
“Because I want to sleep, but if I know Poe, there’s gonna be some making up going on and I don’t want to—“

[Oh no! Oh no! I will shut off my aural receptors again!] Tubbs spun a frantic circle and then came to a hard halt, very literally battening down the hatches.

You lucky bastard. Snap chuckled. Well...hopefully they’ll keep it down.

Finn panted roughly as Poe rode him, his hands tight over his hips and his eyes squeezed shut in the dark room. He managed to smother the passionate cries that wanted to burst out of him at each tight grind, each dragging dip, but it was a near thing. Poe was having a much harder time; he’d long ago perfected the ‘quiet come’ while living in barracks, and during furtive trysts after Rhys’ death, but being with Finn—it was like flying blind; there was no way to anticipate the raw passion that spiked his blood and burst through his mind and body in wild cries. He was keenly aware that Snap was barely five meters and two walls away, but that knowledge seemed less important as Finn’s arms linked across his lower back, pulling him down chest to chest, forcing his legs to open wider. Finn’s eyes opened to his, liquid dark, brows drawn and mouth parted as he began to thrust hard. The look sparked through Poe’s heart and he arched wildly, hands fisting the sheets to either side of Finn’s head, his breath coming in gasps, sharp and hot as fire in Finn’s ear. Poe could not move, couldn’t even reach between his legs to jerk himself off, but each thrust shook him hard enough to rub his pinned cock deliciously back and forth between their sweaty bodies. He could come like that. His lips found Finn’s neck, his jaw, and then dabbed hotly onto his mouth.

“Fuck, baby,” he panted, and the breathy softness of it blew Finn’s mind as he hungrily kissed him. He could not believe Poe was still managing to keep himself quiet. “Fuck, I love you.”

Finn opened his mouth, swallowing Poe’s words, groaning as he peaked. “Uhn...Poe—I—” His hands seized across the small of Poe’s back. To keep from crying aloud, he buried his mouth at the crook of Poe’s neck, teeth grazing across his collarbone and raising goosebumps all down Poe’s spine. Finn came with a groan so deep it was almost subterranean, more felt than heard and it rumbled through Poe like an avalanche. He crumbled quickly beneath it, each pumping thrust of Finn’s winding him tighter and tighter until,

“AHh! AHH! FU-UCK!”

Poe could not have been louder if he’d screamed directly into the ships speaker system. Finn’s last groan twisted into an unwound, heady laugh, and as soon as he was finished he was breathlessly giggling into Poe’s neck like a loon. He felt Poe’s cum dotting his stomach and running like hot tears down his flank, as the pilot moaned and gasped. Poe collapsed against him panting, and then his mouth stretched into a quivering grin, each of them shaking with silent laughter.

“You think...Snap heard?” Poe wheezed.

“How could he not have?” Finn was too unglued and glowingly satisfied to feel abashed as he took a breath and yelled out towards Snap’s room, “SORRY, SNAP!”

Poe twitched, smacking him on the shoulder in gleeful surprise. “Don’t! Gods, he’s gonna—”

“GODSDAMMIT, GUYS.” Snap’s muffled voice shouted back. “THINK OF THE POOR DROIDS!”
They laughed until they were nearly sick, and then Poe rolled limply off Finn to lay on his back alongside him, gasping for breath. He met Finn’s eyes with a sidelong glance, laughing out of his nose as his hand found Finn’s and wove their fingers together. For a long while they lay limply, reveling in the release of it. Finn grinned up at the ceiling, as content and secure in their relationship as he had felt upended. It was as if they were now somehow stronger, like a bone that had healed over the line of a fracture, welding them together. He felt Poe’s eyes resting softly on him and rolled over to face him with a nuzzling kiss.

“Are we good?” Poe asked with a languid smile.

“We’re so good, honey. I love you.”

“Mmm, I love you too.” Poe’s eyes closed, his lashes tickling down Finn’s cheek in a way that made his heart trip. “I like it when you call me that.” He murmured.

“You do?”

“Uh huh,” he breathed, “it’s sweet.”

A self-satisfied flare went through Finn’s chest at Poe’s praise; it gave him an anchoring sense of belonging, like coming home. Poe is my home. Wherever we go, no matter how bad it gets, it’s okay. I’ve got him. He smiled softly, but creeping patiently up beyond his satisfaction was the nervousness he’d felt in his gut at the looming prospect of Nar Shaddaa.

He rubbed a hand absently across Poe’s ribs as he hesitantly began. “Poe…what’s Nar Shaddaa like? Is it really as…lawless as the First Order made it out to be? To them, it was like the opposite of everything they stood for.”

“Oh yeah,” Poe nodded, rousing himself out of peaceful thoughts that had bordered on sleep, “it’s a disgusting place.”

“So you’ve been there before?”

“Twice. Don’t get me wrong—it can be kind of exciting in a ‘will I get a disease from this’ kind of way, but there are a lot of awful things going on, sometimes right in front of your face.”

Finn’s eyes held him cautiously. “What kind of things?”

“Well…” Poe began reluctantly, “there’s slavery. Every kind you can imagine and it’s everywhere—it’s one of the cornerstones of their economy. And, as much as you want to stop it, there’s just too much; it’s like trying to run up an avalanche. Galactic Rights groups have been all over that planet for centuries, but they haven’t been able to turn the tide. There’s people selling sex at every landing, probably half of them underage or leased out from their owners; and there’s drugs—not just the spices I used to use, but some hard drugs—people out of their minds, kids getting high and foaming at the mouth on street corners…that kind of stuff. There’s good things too, art and music and food, but it’s hard to keep all of that in mind when you look down an ally and see a kid giving head to a Devaronian.”

Finn closed his eyes, trying to force the image away with a shiver of disgust. “That…that’s awful.” He managed.

“It is awful.” Poe nodded softly.

“Why would anyone live there?”
Poe shrugged, his fingers once again lightly tracing the borders of Finn’s scar. “I dunno. Some people don’t have a choice; they might be too poor to get out, or indentured, or owned by someone else. Some might’ve fallen into the gangs, and that’s all they know. And lots of them are just normal people trying to make ends meet in a bad situation. But if you’re an entrepreneur with no morals, a masochist, or both, Nar Shaddaa is your dream planet. I can see why the First Order wasn’t too keen on Hutt space—it’d probably be pretty, uh, corrupting for their innocent troopers.”

Finn was silent for a long while. He wasn’t entirely sure that he wanted an answer to the question that next spilled from his mouth, “Why’d you go there, Poe?”

Poe gulped and licked his lips. Though he’d told Finn that he’d taken a downward spiral after Rhy’s death, he wasn’t sure if hearing the details of some of his exploits would make him think badly of him. “First time was…a few months after Rhys died. We were supposed to be tracking a possible Republic traitor, and heard reports that they’d been using a club on Nar Shaddaa as a neutral “meeting place” with First Order ops. Snap and Jess did most of the work…while I woke up on the floor of some dive I don’t even remember walking into, with two Zeltrons and a hangover the size of Bespin.” He grimaced apologetically.

“Yeesh.” Finn breathed with concern, and Poe was so grateful to receive sympathy, rather than scorn, that he nearly melted.

“Yeah…it was not my proudest moment. Thankfully, my team covered for me to my superiors, with the caveat that I got clean.” He scratched at the back of his head as if he could brush those memories away into the darkness. “Second time was a covert mission for the Resistance. We were trying to find an old ally of Grakkus the Hutt who had information on Lor San Tekka.” It took Poe a moment to carry on; he would not soon get the image of that kind old man slumping to the sand, brave and dignified to the last, out of his head. “Anyway, turns out she’d been merced—First Order intelligence had beaten us to her. So, thankfully, that was a shorter visit.”

Finn sighed heavily, pressing his forehead into Poe’s cheek. “I am not looking forward to this, Poe.”

“I know, sweetheart. But, it might be worth it in the end.”

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Finn swallowed as Poe levered them out of hyperspace and a grimy, grey-brown orb popped into being in the blackness like some giant blemish or ulcer on a medscan. Dotted across its murky surface were pinpricks of light as numerous as the stars; it was a strange study in contrasts—a pile of shit rolled in diamonds. A halo of dirty orange light ringed the planet round, light pollution bathing the surrounding space in a never ending dusk. Finn tensed, his feeling of unease growing as the planet filled his eyes. Poe glanced over at him and placed a comforting hand over his. He felt heavily the responsibility of this plan; Finn was scared, but was going through with this because he believed in Poe. If something went wrong, it would be on him. His eyes tightened on the greasy brown haze of the polluted atmosphere. If he was honest with himself, even he felt some nervousness. Nar Shadda was dangerous enough for a normal citizen—much less the First Order’s most wanted. And…he was sure that Finn would see things, upsetting things, on the surface. He wished that he could protect him from that inevitability, but there was simply no way around it. Murky orange fire-light swept over the Hyrotil as it sheered through the atmosphere, a clean grey bird darting into a garbage heap. Well…Poe thought to himself, here goes.
The droid stood, black, still, and solid as the pillars that camouflaged it beneath a seldom used landing some three kilometers up from the wretched pit of Nar Shaddaas foundations. A truly enormous spaceport stretched on and on before it like a dilapidated hive, craft lifting and descending in such a bewildering number that no organic eye could ever have kept track of them all. Indeed, even the planetary ‘authorities’ had long since stopped trying to catalog and direct the non-stop traffic. The smattering of red, arachnid like eyes dotting the droid’s tall cylindrical head had no such problem, scanning thousands of heat-signatures and ship makes at once, registering them, and committing them indefinitely to memory. For five days it had stood, unmoving at this spot, the intermittent acid rain sliding harmlessly down it’s skeletal chassis to pool beneath it’s magnetically gripping, triangular feet.

It was a creature of naked gears, a mockery of a humanoid shape, with not even the imitation of organic softness that one might find in a protocol droid. It lacked any features but the eight glowing eyes, it’s face a blank, emotionless mask. The cylinder head connected to a stiffly rectangular torso. Broad shoulder joints gave it’s two and a half meter height a menacing bulk, and the hands jutting from it’s long durasteel arms were little more than hydraulic clamps. Laced across it’s chest was an impressive array of armory; a line of thermal detonators, a heavy assault blaster, and a canister of explosively launched vibro-netting. Welded-on holsters carried DR-2 blaster pistols at each naked hip joint, and concealed along the bare rods that made up it’s femurs, were two vibroblades.

IG-00 was a study in cold, calculating patience. With no bodily functions to perform, and no concept of discomfort, pain, or boredom, it was freed of the tethers that held it’s fellow bounty hunters back. It was superior. As such, it would have little problem with the bounties that had somehow eluded the First Order for more than a month.

Sub-programming pinged an alert across it’s internal HUD, five of it’s ocular units zooming in all at once on a long, low keeled ship darting in towards the spaceports furthest edge, about seven kilometers away. **SoroSuub Hyrotill light freighter.** As soon as the make of the ship had been announced, the droid had updated it’s sensitive scanners to alert it immediately to any such vessel within it’s range. And then all it had to do was lurk outside of a likely spot—such as this massive spaceport. The Hyrotill was just beyond the reach of its bioscanners; the last Hyrotill to come in had belonged to a family of Gran, and the droid had not bothered wasting it’s time on them. But it could not risk leaving this Hyrotill unchecked. It took a solid step forwards, dropping the ten feet to the walkway beneath it and scattering a frightened group of Hassk thugs who snarled as they darted away into the darkness. The droid marched purposely forward.

Chapter End Notes

This was a hard chapter to write--I didn't see their argument happening until it was *happening*. Nar Shaddaas promises to be...interesting. I can't wait to write the next chapter. Also, it was fun getting back to Oz for a second. He's such a damn drama queen.

Thanks for reading, and please let me know what you think! I truly appreciate your comments! <3 -Bluestem
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The three men and two droids huddled in the engine room before the ramp of the Hyrotil, adjusting blasters, straightening disguises and going over their plan. BB-8 resented that Tubbs would be accompanying them, but the older model droid had been heavily modified and was the best equipped to handle slicing into a planetary system. BB-8 bleeped sourly as Poe began.

"Okay. We want to get a good ways out from the spaceport and away from the crowd. As much as we can at least. City computer terminals should be stationed outside of every bank and transport stop. We hit one fast, take what we can and get out. We'll decrypt once we're off planet. Snap, you've got the distraction, right?"

"Got it." Snap lifted a bottle full of glittering magnetic paste, fuel, and a wired in electro pulse trigger. His eyes flashed devilishly. Though his specialty was building droids, he was no stranger to jury-rigging explosives and was happy to dip his toes in the water once more.

"Okay. Let's go. BB-8, keep an ear out, alright? Be ready to fly."

The astromech warbled, it's dark lens glistening in the overhead lights with obvious concern.

"Stick close, Finn, the crowds are gonna be pretty intense right out of the gate. And…” Poe's eyes fixed on Finn's for one tense moment. He wanted to apologize already for dragging Finn out here, for what he'd inevitably see. Finn understood his concern without speaking and nodded softly, his hand closing over Poe's, squeezing a solid strength through the both of them.

Poe hit the controls and the ramp lowered down with a hiss that was immediately swallowed up in a cacophony of roaring engines, sirens, and thousands of voices. The noise swirled together, solid as a wall and Finn winced beneath its vibrating onslaught, tucking momentarily closer to Poe with a hunted animal urgency. There were people, swells of people of a variety he'd never imagined, a tidal wave of color and limbs and voices that dazzled him, pressing against him from all sides as they squeezed through the never ending throng. A cauldron of smells curled into his nostrils; food and fuel, incense and perfumes that did not quite mask the rampant reek of condensed body odors and trash. Finn wrinkled his nose, his eyes drawn to the domed roof of the spaceport spread above him like an inverted planet, large enough, it seemed to him, to house a moon. Landing bays such as theirs lined the structure, as numerous as pores in a grimy grey skin. Shadows of coming and departing ships slipped over their forms, strobing the hazy ambient light. The sheer number of craft, some of them Hyrotils themselves, would hopefully disguise their arrival.

His stunned eyes slid past a bedraggled, dirt stained duros who reached towards him with a cup, the stump of his free arm gesturing desperately. A cry met his ears and he turned to see a group of twi'lek women being herded onto a transport. Collars. They have collars. Slaves. His mouth went dry, his heart thundering as he struggled to comprehend what was taking place before his eyes. He caught one haunted look at a tear-streaked face and wide, terrified eyes, before the transports door slammed down and the 'cargo' was blocked from view. Around him, other travelers continued talking and laughing. How...how is this happening? Doesn't anyone care? The ship lifted lazily to the air before he could do more than take one furious step forwards. "Poe!" He gasped raggedly and Poe's eyes slid to him with an agonized look.

"I know. I know, baby." The slack in Finn's arm went taught as Poe's fingers tightened against his,
dragging them hurriedly through the stream that led out from the hive. Bass shook through their feet and legs, throbbing into their hearts and lungs and Poe tried to shuffle them past the sex club and the prostitutes or slaves who lounged outside, wearing little more than smoky expectations and disappointment. Finn got more of an eyeful than he'd ever received outside of his experiences with Poe. He wasn't even sure what some of the…appendages…he'd glimpsed were. Snap walked solidly at their rear, acting as a bulwark and, from this position, better able to scan the crowd for anyone who made a dangerous move towards his friends. Tubbs kept close to Snap's heels, leery of the tangle of limbs and feeling as if it were constantly in danger of being tripped over.

Poe spared one pained glance at a weeping Abednedo woman who sat hunched before the lift terminal he was so doggedly making for. Finn felt as if he were being suffocated; it was simply too much stimulation, too many emotions, and it was all too close. He could not tell if it was the sheer life Force of the place that overwhelmed him, crackling through his senses like a tunnel of lightning, or if it was the physical stimulation itself. Everywhere he looked, he saw something or someone completely new to his experience, and when they crammed into the mercifully empty lift he let out a sigh that nearly dropped him to the floor.

"We're almost out." Poe soothed over the electronic voice that advertised the many different attractions they could find at their location. He and Snap exchanged concerned looks.

"Okay." Finn nodded.

The lift emptied them onto one of the many skyways that crisscrossed the city like neurons in a gigantic brain, and Finn's eyes went wide as Nar Shaddaa opened up around him. The abstract knowledge he'd absorbed in distant history lessons had not prepared him for the reality of a city-planet. It was one thing to see it on a datapad, one thing to see it from the air—but it was quite another to stand among it and feel the crushing weight of the buildings towering around them, stretching so high that craning his head to their peaks caused a wave of dizziness. Many lifted to the stratosphere, disappearing into clouds of smog and shadow, their lights glimmering in a parody of stars. These literal skyscrapers were cities unto themselves, self-sustaining, with their own social structures and cultures; the well-kept higher levels slid into disrepair and grime as one neared the bottom, in a fall from gratuitous wealth to poverty. Finn was both amazed and horrified; he wondered how what was left of the organic planet could sustain such immense tonnage. Walkways, lifts, landing bays, and taxi pads dotted and lined almost all available airspace, though that didn't seem to stop drivers from pelting recklessly through the gaps. He ducked as an air taxi flashed over their heads without warning, zooming down into the vertigo-inducing depths.

Hand tight against Poe's, he followed after the pilot in a daze, his eyes landing on a flickering sign for the **Outer Rimjob Cantina**, darting to a storefront that specialize in black market weaponry, sliding to the fist-fight that had started outside of a casino, and then to the velvety pink woman who seemed to have materialized out of thin air in front of them.

"Hey sugar," she ran a long finger down Finn's chest, towering over him in highly arched heels, "take off the mask—80 creds, anything you want."

"Paws off," Poe brushed her impatiently away from Finn who looked mortified.

"Oh, it's like that eh?" Her amethyst eyes swept down to their clasped hands. "Then come on in." She purred, her breasts heaving. "we got some new boys, never been popped, all you-"

Poe blew past and out of earshot with his heart thumping in his chest. He did not doubt for a moment that the Zeltron had truly meant 'children' and not 'men', and his jaw tightened in disgust.

Finn felt as if he'd been bashed over the head. Please let us find a terminal and get out of here right
Poe turned a corner, leading them further from the pumping heart of the spaceport and Finn's sense of dread increased exponentially. He'd expected it to loosen its grip as they distanced themselves from the chaos, but panic shivered at the edge of his mind. *What is this?* Sweat gathered beneath his cap and ran in rivulets down his neck, his eyes darting about the thick slabs of shadow that gathered in alleyways and beneath skywalks. They entered an area with broad, trash-strewn streets and smaller buildings jutting upwards out of the main structure like a never-ending fractal. Poe's eyes landed suddenly on what he'd been desperately scouting for—a city terminal outside of a rundown shop with mercifully few pedestrians and little overhead air traffic. He nudged Finn and pointed it out, then fished through his robes for his comm. "BB-8, you read me?"

"We've found a terminal in quadrant…AO1-22-5. Keep sharp, alright?"

"I will."

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The droid studied the two masked and robed men that exited the spaceport, still and silent in the shadows thrown from a nearby taxi pad and indiscernible from the metallic struts that supported it. It's ocular units zoomed in and sharpened upon their bodies until it could have picked out the different threads weaving through their brown robes. They walked hand in hand, and the pigments of those hands matched the skin tones described in the bounty boards. Their covered heads turned frequently. Perhaps too frequently for men that did not expect an attack. In any case, it made proper facial identifications difficult to ascertain.

*Humans, confirmed.*

*Males, confirmed.*

*Hyrotil, confirmed.*

*Targets FN-2187 and Poe Dameron? 79.3% chance.*

IG-00 did not feel 'excitement' in the way that most organic beings, or even highly programmed droids experienced it. Instead, it felt compelled to prove it's data either right or wrong, to complete it's task accordingly, and to update it's algorithms. It marched smoothly forwards, it's posture ram-rod straight, and it's red eyes fixed unblinkingly upon the two men. Pedestrians scattered out of it's path like leaves before a gust of wind.

After another few minutes of stalking, it understood that a third man and an R3 astromech were somehow involved with it's potential targets; though they hung back, they followed faultlessly after the pair. The droid scanned the pale, bearded man's face, running the image through a registry of every bounty hunter it had ever catalogued. *No known matches. Another second's observation convinced it that the man and droid were guarding the other two. This was suspicious. It's matt-black chassis melded into the shadows.*

Finn bent towards Poe's ear as Tubbs closed the gap between them. Snap hung back, his hand resting inside his jacket over their 'distraction', his eyes darting into the dark gaps that winged them round. Finn's heart was twanging like a plucked string and his mouth had gone dry. He could ignore it no longer.

"Dand," he hissed Poe's codename, "*something's wrong. Something's—*"

Blaster fire erupted, flashing like red lightning and the two of them slammed together behind the
scant shelter of the computer terminal, drawing their blasters as Tubbs screamed. Poe poked around the edge of the terminal blaster first, pupils dilated, breath slowing, as he readied himself to fight. The homeless who'd been loitering outside of the grocer's went flying in all directions.

"Snap!" Poe yelled out and felt a moment's relief as he saw the other man tucking up against a trash bin, his blaster drawn and eyes wide. Bolts slammed repeated into the thin metal surface, punching through dangerously close to Snap's skull.

"GO!" Snap shouted over the din, and with one fluid motion he blindly tossed the pulse bomb out into the dark alleyway from which the blaster fire had pelted. The bottle clattered into the shadows. There was a moment's horrible stillness before it went off with an earth-shaking boom. A searing cloud of vaporized duracreet funneled out from the alleyway and billowed around them in an impenetrable shroud, debris clattering and pinging blindly down on them from the sky.

"Get out of here!" Snap yelled tightly from somewhere within the cloud.

Poe froze, his frantic eyes darting back and forth trying to pierce the haze. Solid metallic thudding sounded from the darkness as if from the beating of a giant, mechanical heart and Finn's hand tightened across his sleeve. A skeletal shadow materialized within the gloom, wreathed in a death shroud of smoke which billowed away in ragged tatters as it moved unstoppably forwards, Snap's blaster fire pinging harmlessly off of it's chassis and ricocheting into the shop and alleyway. Poe realized what it was just as the 8 red eyes swiveled and landed mutely upon him. He grabbed Finn's arm with his heart in his throat, tearing them away from the computer terminal as a circular halo of icy blue light fizzled against it. A stun shot. They could not hide—the droid would simply rip the terminal from the ground to get to them.

"RUN!" He yelled needlessly and he felt Finn thundering along beside him. He had no idea where they were—their path back to the spaceport was now off limits. He could only lead them forwards. They sprinted around the corner of the grocer's shop, another stun shot ghosting past the hems of their robes and smattering against the far wall. They turned hard, running up a side street bordered by sheer building faces, two womp rats caught in a gigantic maze with a Nexu on their tail. The metallic feet slammed like anvils into the duracreet behind them, ramping up to a thundering pace that throbbed in their ears. Poe could feel the assassin droid gaining on them, expected a stun shot to burn like fire into his back at any second. Finn yanked Poe into an alleyway, narrowly avoiding the explosively launched vibronetting that closed in with a hissing rush on the darkness they'd just vacated.

They pelted blindly down the alley, breath coming in ragged pants, weaving in a serpentine around bins, information terminals, and light posts, their robes and masks flapping in the hard wake of their sprint. Breath and heart beat in time with their pounding footfalls. No, no, no, I'm not going back, I'm not going back. Finn's mind screamed in a desperate refrain as he ran, conscious of Poe's heaving breaths from just beside him. He knew what this was; he'd seen a creature very like it in lessons involving the old Empire's hunt for Rebellion traitors. An IG assassin droid. They did not have time to fight it, and in any case, their blasters were useless against the magnetically sealed chassis. Hiding was not an option; it would sense them through ship and building, kilometers away.

They zigged into another alleyway, more narrow than the last so that the grimy towers around them sheered up like mountains and threw wedges of shadow as dark as night. IG-00 sprinted smoothly as their legs weakened, for they were fueled now by pure adrenaline. Finn shot blindly over his shoulder though he knew it would do no good. He caught a glimpse of the circular red eyes flashing towards him with a start of primal terror and forced all of his strength into his legs, never more grateful in his life for the fact that he could run; if the droid had attacked them two weeks ago, he could not have crawled away.
They darted to either side of a wrecked and looted speeder. The droid batted it aside with a battering ram arm, as if it had done no more than toss a can down the street. The wrench off muffler of the craft skidded forwards and nearly knocked Poe's legs out from under him in a scree of sparks. He stumbled and the droids next stun shot seared past the top of his head. He recovered in the same breath, but it was enough to chill Finn to his bones. They screeched a hard left into another alleyway, careening down its fetid darkness only to skid to a stop in gaping horror.

A dead end.

*Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck,* Poe swiveled on the spot, his blaster raised and chest heaving as he stood shoulder to shoulder with Finn. His eyes cast frantically about the enclosed space—there was a blast-shielded door to their right and a rickety exterior staircase leading up some 20 stories to the top of the nearest building. He made a step towards it and froze as the droid's bulk rounded the corner. Adrenaline jittered through him like wildfire, but his hands were steady. The droid marched with menacing purpose, slower now and obviously confident that it's prey were trapped. It raised it's blaster.

Poe reacted immediately, dragging Finn in front of him and pressing the barrel of his blaster to his lover's temple in one fluid motion. Finn froze in shock, going rigid beneath Poe's iron grasp and the cold metal ring of the blaster that rammed against his sweaty skin. Poe was almost completely hidden from sight; only his hand and the hard, desperate gleam of his eye could be seen peeking out from behind Finn in the darkness, daring the droid to act.

IG-00 halted, perplexed, it's cylindrical head tilting slightly as it regarded this display. Now that it's targets were facing it plainly, it finally had the opportunity to scan their eyes and compare them with the registry. Light flared within it's arachnid eyes as if glowing coals had been fanned into open flame behind them, and red light ran in a seam down their bodies.

*FN-2187 100% match.*

*Poe Dameron 98% match.*

This was confusing—the data it had received said that the two were traveling together as a couple. The droid understood little of organic emotion beyond the standard fight or flight response that was typical in 95.7% of its hunts. It knew that a pair bond was supposedly something very powerful; that generally it could threaten harm to one of a pair to cow the other. But sometimes, prey reacted irrationally.

"One more step and I pull the trigger!" Poe's voice, pained and defiant. Finn stared through hooded eyes at the droid, his jaw tight but countenance calm.

IG-00 remained silent and still as stone, though they could *feel* it's malevolence bearing down them like a gravity repulsor. *Dameron would kill FN-2187 to keep him from the First Order? Perhaps. Risky to engage.* It calculated the chances of pulling off a successful shot without causing damage to 2187, whom it must have alive. The average rate of human neuron transmission from brainstem to hand was approximately .2 seconds. Dameron could pull the trigger and destroy it's bounty in the amount of time it would take the droid to fire a stun shot. The odds of success were 5,792:1.

Sweat ran down Finn's neck and Poe's body shook against him. He understood. Pride swelled through his chest, driving away some of his fear. The pilot had bought them time, though it would likely end in…his thoughts trailed off as a deep, two-toned dissonance thrummed into his ears.

*The Hyrotil!*
The ship hovered gigantically in the narrow gap above their heads, its narrow cockpit swinging down to point at the droid like an admonishing finger. IG-00 hunkered low, its skeletal limbs spread as it cast about for cover.

"MOVE!" Poe shouted, shoving Finn suddenly towards the foundation of the nearest building. The droid lunged for them and the ship opened fire, the concussive crash knocking Finn and Poe to the ground. They scrambled to their feet, coughing and half blinded by the dust, their hearts pounding over the ringing in their ears. Finn felt the metal bars of the naked stairwell before he saw it and he sprinted up with Poe at his heels. First one flight and then the next, their legs thundering up and down, up and down, their breath throbbing in their throats. Finn staggered, the stairwell swaying dangerously from below, nearly wrenched free from its supports as the assassin droid burst through the cloud of dust in a fifteen foot leap and latched onto the rails like a monstrous insect. One leg had been blown off in the explosion, but that hardly seemed to hinder it. It skittered disjointedly upwards with inhuman speed, the gripping clamps of its hands twisting free struts and bolts as it tore its way after them in a violent cacophony. Finn sprinted with his heart in his throat, his legs burning and his breath wheezing. The stairwell shook beneath their feet as they wove back and forth, one flight after another, the droid climbing the exterior armature like a cage, its unblinking eyes nearing with each pained gasp of air they dragged into their lungs.

The Hyrotil lifted carefully, trained on the desperate race to the top and dipping to hover just above the landing of the stairwell, the ramp lowering close enough to brush the pebbly roof. Poe burst from the last flight with a ragged gasp, gathering the last of his strength to sprint into the Hyrotils welcoming arms. Snap was there, holding on to the hydraulic leg of the ramp, hair whipping in the wind as he frantically motioned Poe forwards. As Poe stumbled onto the lip and Snap caught hold of him, Finn thundered onto the landing, and Poe watched with horror as the droid rose behind him.

"HURRY!" Snap yelled as the ship began to ascend and the ramp to close. Poe scrambled, grabbing Finn's outstretched arms and heaving him onboard through the narrow gap just as the droid leapt, its clamping fingers spread wide. Horrible, grating metallic claws screeched against the hull of the ship and then a creeping silence fell as the ramp sealed shut.

Finn and Poe waited in a gasping heap, their senses peeled utterly raw as the Hyrotil lifted clear of the city and shot for the safety of space, half expecting the droid to rip through the keel beneath their feet. Tense seconds passed and then a roaring explosion rocked the ship, tumbling the three of them into each other like rag dolls. Alarms wailed. Snap pushed himself up and then ran for the cockpit, and Poe dazedly heard him shouting "Ignore it! Ignore it, just go!"

The alarms were shut off and seconds thudded through them like hours. The shaking started almost immediately, winding out from the core of their bodies into their fingers and each throbbing fiber of their legs. Poe looked to Finn. He was laying on his side, his fists clenched against the pain and his breath so hard it seemed he would turn himself inside out with the force if it. The sprint up the stairs had been more physical strain than he'd endured since waking up in medbay, and his legs felt as if they'd been shredded to the bone. Poe's eyes tightened, tears starting. "I did this to him. He reached for Finn, gathering him against him in a pained hug. Finn allowed himself to be drawn up and he clutched Poe tightly.

"I'm sorry." Poe gasped. "I'm sorry."

Finn's fingers brushed up his face, pulling away the sweat-drenched cap and wrap and revealing a look of agony.

"You-you didn't want to go." A tear trembled and then spilled over. "I made us go, I should have listened to you, I—"
Finn removed his disguise, kissed him into shaking silence, and then simply held him. Poe bit back the sob that wanted to crawl its way out. A low metallic whirring met their ears and fear spiked through Finn, jolting him away from Poe. He expected the monstrous, skeletal form of the assassin droid, but it was only BB-8. He let out the breath he'd sucked in, amazed at what a different being this droid was from their attacker. The astromech wobbled slowly up to them, its large round eye glossy with worry as it inclined it's head to Poe's leg, and then to Finn's with a moan.

[The assassin droid did not catch hold of the ship.] It said in a warm, reassuring tone. [Are you okay?]

"Yeah," Finn wheezed, with look of sad reassurance to Poe, "we're okay."

While Snap ran a diagnostic on the ship to check for damage from the explosion, Poe supported Finn up the ramp and into their bedroom. He lowered Finn down to the edge of the bed and the other man's fingers dug into his arm—it was as if wires had been tightened spasmodically through his calves. Finn tried to keep himself quiet, but Poe caught the tense exhalation. He turned his head from Finn as if his pain had slapped him. His mouth went thin as thread and his eyes swam.

"Poe…" Finn's hand landed lightly on his arm. "It's not your fault. We all agreed to this."

Poe could not meet his eyes. There had been a time when he would've been excited at such a narrow escape, would've been filled with bravado—but those feelings withered in the face of Finn's pain. "I'm not good at this anymore." He began leadenly.

Finn's brows furrowed. "Not good at what?"

"Leading people, I—everything I've done over the past month has hurt people. Gotten them killed. My team, my Base, and now you're hurting and it's all my fault, and we all nearly—"

"Poe, shut up." Finn sighed.

Poe was stunned into silence; even though he had said it without rancor, Finn had never spoken to him like that, and Poe was dragged out of his inner spiral of defeatism. He was, for once, at a loss for words. He sat mutely down beside him, his hands clasped in his lap and his eyes staring through the floor.

"You didn't ask for any of that stuff to happen. You didn't build Starkiller, you didn't put those trackers on your ships or ask for that droid to hunt us down. You think you're as big as the First Order? You really think your friends weren't giving it their all? That's selfish, Poe. They didn't need you to hold their hands—they needed a Colonel who would fight for them, and that's what you did. That's what you do. You...saved me."

It was both a reprimand and a consolation, and Poe was too shocked to respond.

"That was quick thinking, taking me hostage like that," Finn continued.

"It was a gamble."

"And it paid off."

Poe heaved a breath but did not retort. He leaned heavily against Finn, resting his head upon his shoulder. Finn wrapped an arm around him and kissed his sweat-damp hair. They sat in silence for several minutes, listening to the throb of the engines and Snap quietly chatting with BB-8 as they went over the ship.
That was close. We could be on our way to the First Order right now. Finn wondered for one morbid moment if his life with Poe was only a small, bright spot on a map destined to lead him back into the darkness. He swallowed, sitting up evasively. He had to ask Poe a question, and he knew the pilot would find it repulsive. He licked his lips and cautiously began. "Poe…would you do anything for me?"

Poe nodded immediately. "Of course, Finn, anything."

"…Would you pull the trigger?" He asked softly.

It took a moment for his words to penetrate Poe's bewildered mind. It was too much. He must have heard him wrong, though he knew in his gut that he had not. "What?"

"If it came down to it…would you pull the trigger for me?"

Poe choked, bile flooding the back of his mouth. Finn could not seriously be asking this. "Finn…" he broke off with a dry gasp that was almost a heave, "you…you're asking me to murder you."

"I'm asking you to save me from the First Order."

"No. No, I won't do that."

"Poe,"

"It won't come down to that!" He stood, crying freely and furiously now. "I won't let it! Gods, Finn, I—" He turned and stormed out of the room, shutting the door behind him and so disgusted he could hardly think. How could he ask me that? Me! I can't lose someone else, I can't go through that again. I'd rather die than hurt him. Fuck the First Order. Fuck them. FUCK THIS.

He crossed into the kitchenette, filled a glass with water and drained it with shaking hands. For a long while he stood, his hands clenched white-knuckled against the counter and his head hanging between his arms. Terror crept over his anger in a slow, icy tide. He saw in his mind's eye the eight red eyes of the assassin droid swiveling towards him; pictured Finn sitting in a containment cell, on his way back to a life of torture and erasure. He saw Finn's bounty portrait, and the hard emptiness that had lain in his eyes. He could not blame Finn for asking his question. It sickened him that he understood.

"Hey, you okay?" Snap asked from the hallway and Poe jolted, hastily dragging his hand across his eyes and clearing his throat.

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine." He said as he turned to meet him.

"Finn's okay?"

Poe nodded mutely, biting the inside of his lips. "He's fine. Sore. His-his legs still weren't at one hundred percent—those stairs were rough for him. I was gonna get him some meds. "Finn is not fine. He just asked me if I would mercy-kill him. He moved swiftly to the storage unit hidden beneath the rooms one seat and hauled out the medkit they'd stashed within it. It was conspicuously light—they'd run through a fair amount of medical supplies in only a few weeks. Gods, at the rate we're going there won't be anything left to heal. "Are you okay, Snap?"

"I'm alright. A little shaken up, but then, silent murder-droids tend to do that to you." His brow knitted as he studied Poe's red, evasive eyes. "You know this isn't your fault right? This was our one lead, and we did need to check up on it, so-"
Poe held up a hand like a wall. "Just—just let me feel shitty about this for, like, five minutes."

Snap squared his shoulders. "Alright. But only five minutes, and then you're Black Leader again, got it? And Black Leader doesn't wallow."

Poe shook his head, his eyes sweeping up to Snap's with reluctant admiration. "Godsdammit." He found it strange that sympathy could sometimes dig his sadness into a deeper pit. Snap had a knack for chucking a ladder into that pit and yelling, 'climb out and deal with it'. Poe sighed, pinching between his brows. "Well, that was pretty much a clusterfuck, huh?"

"Close, but I believe a true clusterfuck requires no survivors. So…could've been worse, right?"

"Yeah. It could've been a lot worse. You guys saved our asses—another few seconds and that droid would've had us for sure. Speaking of which," he glanced into the cockpit where BB-8 rested, jacked into the Hyrotils system, "how much damage did it do to the ship?"

"Could've been worse?"

"Not good, eh?"

"Well, nothing that's going to keep us from flying, but we're gonna want to go easy on the water. Whatever that droid chucked at us damaged a waterline. All we've got left to use is what was in the reclamer at the time. We'll need a new downstem and adapter."

Poe rubbed at his lips. "Shit, that won't be cheap."

"I'll help out."

"You don't have to do that."

"Uh, yeah I do. I like being able to drink water and take showers. So, I'll cover a third of what it ends up costing. Fair's, fair right?"

Poe gave him a tired smile and clapped him on the shoulder. "You're the best, man." A sudden realization crashed into him—there was a vacancy at Snap's side. He glanced around the kitchenette and cockpit as if he'd somehow missed the astromech. "Where's Tubbs?"

Snap avoided his eyes and that was answer enough.

"The assassin droid got him?" Poe asked, aghast.

"No. But…he couldn't keep up with me when I ran back to the spaceport. He's still on Nar Shaddaa."

"We can go back-" Poe began, but Snap cut him off with a laugh.

"Like hell you guys are going back. This ship might as well have a giant target on it after the show we put on down there. No, I'm going back on the Schooner. Only that IG droid knows my face, so it should be no problem. I'll dart in, pick Tubbs up, and head out. That's, that. Don't look at me that way, you are not coming."

Poe nodded reluctantly.

"I was gonna head back in an hour or so—give it time for the authorities to do their thing and clear out."
Poe sighed. "Alright. Hey, I need to get these to Finn," he held up his handful of painkillers and nodded back towards the bedroom. "Let us know when you're about to leave, okay?"

"Right."

Poe opened the door to their room with Finn's voice echoing in his ears. Would you pull the trigger? He found him lying on his back with an arm flung over his eyes. He didn't move as Poe sat beside him. "Hey...you'll need these." Poe said softly.

Finn lifted his arm and peered up at him, and Poe's heart twisted until he was breathless; Finn had been crying.

"Oh...baby..." He sat the cup and pills aside, squirming down to lay with him. It struck him then just how much younger Finn was than him, and that he was frightened, lost in a swell of emotions that he'd never been allowed to experience or learned to process. Poe wrapped him in a tight hug and kissed at his temple and his tear-streaked cheek.

"I-I won't go back to th-the First Order, Poe. I'd rather die." Finn shook against his chest.

"Shh," Poe ran his fingers through his hair, his heart breaking. "You're okay. We're all okay. I won't let them get you, I promise."

"You can't m-make that kind of promise."

"I'm going to anyways. I won't let them hurt you." He repeated solidly. "And I won't hurt you either." He slid a finger under Finn's chin, tilting his face up so that they were eye to eye. "I absolutely won't do that, do you understand me? That's giving up, Finn—calling it quits before the engine's run dry. I will never give up on you."

Finn could not speak. He sniffed mightily, dropped his head to Poe's shoulder and clung to him until the adrenaline and fear gave way to the nothingness of sleep.

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IG-00 skittered down the ruined stairway, hinged joints pivoting and gripping in ways that no human could manage. The foot it had left touched down upon the grimy duracreet pavers and then it hunched forwards, dropping to its arms and loping away like a beast into the shadows as sirens wailed in a two-tone shriek, signaling the arrival of no-doubt corrupt officials. It wound away from the scene of it's failed attack, coming to rest in an abandoned warehouse where it tucked itself invisibly against a dark supporting beam.

It was not disappointed. It was very much incapable of feeling disappointment. Instead, it went through it's data, updating and reviewing the information it had compiled from the encounter. Hyrotile Identification Number 47-310-200-15. It scrolled through the biological scan it had performed on Dameron and FN-2187, possessing now the unique chemical thumbprint of their bodies that no robe or mask could ever disguise.

It replayed their encounter millisecond by millisecond across it's internal HUD. There was Dameron, pressing the barrel of his blaster to 2187's temple. Would he have done it? Was it a bluff? The droid was forced to concede that it could not tell, that it's faultless processor had been bettered by a panicked and unpredictable organic mind.

An alert pinged across it's eight eyes. Call from Ozmyn Heil. This was curious. Ozmyn did not often interact with others—the droid understood that many mercenaries and bounty hunters disliked the twi'lek. They would call him brash, quick to anger, and double crossing—though it had found him to be a hunter who got results. It accepted the call and the twi'leks voice boomed out as if he were
"Standing inside it's skull.

"Zero, it's Oz. Got an offer to make if you're interested. Could use some...help on a special case."

"What is the case?" It asked in a hard, toneless voice.

"Dameron and 2187. I've had them in my sights twice now and they've given me the slip."

"I encountered them. They escaped."

"That so? Where'd you find them?"

"Confidential information."

It heard Oz muttering *fucking droid* under his breath. "So how'd they manage to get away from you?"

"Dameron took FN-2187 hostage. Could not risk fatal harm to target."

Oz laughed, the rough sound bouncing around the droids mind like a sandpaper ball. "You idiot droid. Listen, you may have a steel trap brain, but you understand normal folks about as much as taking a shit. See, now this is why we should team up. I know the two of them, better than any other hunter you're gonna find. I can fill in the gaps of your logic. And I'm willing to bet you got a full bioscan on them, correct?"

"Correct."

"And their ship?"

"Identification number obtained."

Oz all but cackled. "The two of us combined should have no problem rounding them in, and that's still 4.5 million credits apiece. Think of it! We'll even draw up a contract—no stiffin' each other. What do you say?"

The droid considered for .35 seconds. It was a sensible offer. It's targets had eluded it. They had eluded Oz. They had eluded the First Order. "Offer accepted."

Chapter End Notes

Happy Halloween, everybody! Have a murder-droid! Oh man, I was so excited to finally get to this scene—it's been in my head for a quite a long time. I hope you guys liked it. Also...I want to give Finn and Poe both a hug. This was not a fun venture for them. Thanks for reading, and please let me know what you think! Your comments make my freakin' week! -Bluestem
Chapter 33

The Hyrotil shuddered with a low echo as the Schooner disengaged from the airlock, turned for open space, and vanished into the jump tunnel that would take Snap back to Nar Shaddaa. Poe stood slouched, alone on the ships second level; Finn had wished Snap luck on the main floor—he’d been unable to attempt the stairs to see him off. Poe understood conceptually why he and Finn must remain behind, but his heart was having a harder time of it; he wanted desperately to turn the ship after him, to guard his back as Snap had guarded theirs. An image of the assassin droid ripping through Snap’s little ship flashed before his eyes and he shuddered. *It’s okay.* He soothed himself. *Snap’s run way more dangerous missions than a planet-side pickup.* Poe slapped his palm against the controls that wound in the Hyrotils docking arm and then descended the stairwell.

He stood for a quiet minute in the hallway, staring out at the smoky glitter of the nearby Berani constellation. His tired eyes slurred from star to star, lost for a moment in their unblemished brightness. The sureness of them somehow managed to both ease his mind and make him feel overwhelmingly inconsequential. He rallied against that feeling of powerlessness. *We might be little specks, but we managed to destroy a weapon that could’ve snuffed out those stars.* A wan smile tugged at his lips and all at once he was filled with bittersweet pride for his team, the kind of pride that sometimes washed over him in crushing waves. *I miss them.* The ache welled in his chest for one pining moment before a low grunt of pain and a muttered curse shoved his nostalgia to the back of his mind. Finn needed him.

He entered their room to find him struggling to get up out of bed. BB-8 was parked nearby, it’s gripping arm out and ready to catch Finn should he fall, no matter that Finn was three times it’s height.

“What d’you need, honey?”

“I just,” he grunted, trying to scoot to the edge of the mattress, “want to change shirts.” He stretched out an arm, his fingertips still inches away from the storage unit.

“I’ll get it. Just relax, okay?”

Finn heaved a sigh like a typhoon then flopped back dejectedly, his arms spread wide. Poe rifled through Finn’s neatly folded clothing and pulled out a deep blue, long sleeved shirt. He passed it to Finn who simply held it to his chest with his eyes trained on the ceiling panels. “I thought I was done with being so…so…” he motioned to his body, “helpless.”

He did not expect Poe’s chuckle and quirked a brow as the other man shut the storage door and sat down beside him. “We just flat out sprinted up twenty some flights of stairs thinking we were about to die. Believe me, my legs are sore too.”

[Legs are such a hindrance.] BB-8 shook it’s head as if Finn would be better off without them. [I’m glad I am a sphere.]

“Buddy, I’d like to see you tackle that many stairs with an assassin droid after you.” Poe stretched out, his hair lying in tickling waves across Finn’s arm.

[Two words: Towing cables.]
“Yeah, well, legs make for better dancing.”

[I dance just fine!] BB-8 chittered indignantly.

“The figure eight does not a dancer make.”

Finn remained conspicuously silent throughout their exchange and Poe knew that he must be replaying the attack in his mind’s eye, was perhaps rephrasing his earlier request to make it seem somehow less viscerally appalling. Poe’s mouth thinned; if he couldn’t help Snap, then he would damn well help Finn. “Hey…” He turned his head with a sidelong glance.

Finn’s eyes slid to him and for a moment the exhaustion in them broke Poe’s heart. He scrambled to come up with something light, something pleasant to say—something that had nothing to do with missing friends, bounty hunters, or the First Order; topics that had now dominated their conversations for the majority of their relationship.

“What do you wanna do when all of this is over?”

“You mean…when we find the Resistance again?” Finn asked.

Poe’s eyes crinkled up and he waved an airy hand. “Even further past that. I mean, when the war’s over and things are normal again.”

“Normal.” Finn echoed to himself as if he’d never heard the word, his eyes once again staring at the cool grey ceiling panels as a hazy, colorful image formed like a mirage in his mind. It loosely resembled Poe’s home on Yavin, (the only familial home he’d ever been in) and there were the two of them standing in a bright kitchen, simply eating and talking, BB-8 resting by their legs. There was no one waiting to hurt them in the green light outside. He could imagine Rey popping in to show off her new Force skills and talk ships with Poe, Kes relaxing with his datapad, and there was Snap too with his games. Maybe even Maz. People have friends over, don’t they? It was too wonderful a picture to hold for long.

He rolled over to face Poe, fingers lightly running down the angular line of his jaw as Poe’s arm curled across his ribs. Gazing into the russet brown of his eyes was like gazing into the future, and he liked what he saw there. “Whatever normal is, I want to do it with you.”

Poe was not prepared for that—he’d been expecting something more along the lines of ‘go to a restaurant’ or ‘sleep for a week’. He dragged him into a kiss.

Snap clapped a hand to his headset as the Schooner blasted roughly through the dirty ring of brown air that wrapped Nar Shaddaa in a fetid embrace. He cut to sublight and darted in low, the boxy craft weaving between the frosty peaks of buildings that grazed the atmosphere and then disappearing for a moment into a plume of drifting smog.

“Tubbs, you read me? Repeat coordinates, I am en route.”

Silence but for the rushing wind outside his canopy. He slipped from the haze of smog and the city opened up beneath him in a dazzle of lights and holosigns, buildings stretching on and upwards as far as he could see. The spaceport loomed low like a wart in the distance. He’d never cared for the planet, beyond the incredible droid parts one could sometimes score if they knew where to look; he hoped that Tubbs had not fallen prey to the scavengers that manned such shops. They’d never appreciate his mods.
“Tubbs, repeat, come in.”

A buzzed and broken warble cracked through his ears. [Trouble. Coordinates incoming. Five thugs have—] The connection stuttered and went out.

“Tubbs? Tubbs?” Snap slammed a fist against the dash. “Ah, dammit! It’s never easy.” I am not telling Poe about this. No matter what had happened to the droid, it had at least managed to patch it’s location through to the Schooner. Trouble, huh? The only folks who’d want that dented up droid have got to be parts dealers or intel hunters. He rubbed at his beard as he adjusted course. Shit, that droid has a lot of intel, too. Ah well, he can handle himself. Five of them vs me and Tubbs. Should be fun.

He set the Schooner down on a rickety landing pad and took stock of his supplies, rummaging through the narrow space behind his seat that passed for a ‘living quarters’. Rations bar…no, sleeping bag, no. Aha! Spare fuel canister. A slow grin crawled over his face as he lifted the small jug of high octane fuel and tucked it into his jacket. He opened the canopy and climbed down, batting away a Jawa who ran appraising, and very grubby fingers over the craft. “Come on, at least wait till I’m out of eyeshot. That’s just lazy.” The Jawa spat a curse and stomped off.

He started forwards, airtraffic darting in a long hissing line overhead, and the shadows stuttering with blinding, multicolored holosigns. He tried not to think of the assassin droid materializing out of one of those dark gaps. Okay. Okay, Tubbs should be two buildings ahead, .5 kilometers to the right. He decided against drawing his blaster, opting instead to try a more Poe-like approach; stride right on in and ask if they had any droids for sale—magnanimous to a T. At the very least, they might bring Tubbs out for him to inspect, and the two of them could go from there.

Snap halted before an unmarked door of dented and tagged durasteel. This is the place. His mouth thinned. No sign. Doesn’t look like a shop so much as nest. Oh well. He knocked on the door, his hand resting on the butt of his blaster. A large, bulky Gran who was missing his left eyestalk opened the door, a blaster already aimed at Snap’s face. “What you want, chakaaf?” He growled in broken basic.

Let it slide. Snap plastered a grin to his face, his hands raised to show he meant no harm. “Hey, guy back on the taxipad told me you guys sell droids and parts. This the place? If not, I’ll just move along.”

The Gran paused, his leaden expression showing clearly that he was not buying it. “This look like shop for you?”

“It is pretty rough, I’ll admit.” He could just peek beyond the armored bulk of the Gran’s shoulder. Tubbs was there, half behind a counter. A cybernetically enhanced Zabrak woman, and a human woman with a prosthetic arm loomed over it. A quick sweep of the narrow room revealed three other shadowy figures. “Well…I guess I’ll try another place. Shame though. Sure you won’t think twice?”

“I will take your eye. I gut you!” The Gran’s finger tightened upon the trigger and a snarl curled his mouth.

“Okay, okay. Too bad…all these credits were really burning a hole in my pocket.” He lashed out, slamming the heel of his foot into the Gran’s knee. As he crumpled with a bleat of pain, Snap whipped out the fuel canister and chucked it into the dive, then yanked the blaster from the Gran’s meaty hand and took cover. He heard a snapping crackle from Tubb’s arc welder. The explosion lit up the street and shook the building in a dusty wave and a gush of smoke. Ears ringing, Snap
peaked out from behind his arm to see Tubbs shooting as quickly as it could from the flames and out into the street.

“Alright, let’s go!” Snap yelled as he ran up to the droid. “Follow me!” He took off back down the street.

“Get him!” The gran coughed as he staggered up on his good leg. “Kill that fucker!”

Oh shit. Snap knew he was leaving Tubbs in the dust again. But the Schooner wasn’t far—if he could get into the cockpit, he’d have the ships turbolaser cannons at his disposal. Blue light flashed behind him as Tubbs fired off electrical bolts into the creeping smoke of the explosion, but red and green volleys answered, shooting blindly out all across the street and pinging uselessly against the Schooner’s scuffed hull. A bolt sizzled into the durasteel near his hand as he climbed into the cockpit and pushed it closed.

Figures emerged from the smoke like ants from a ruined hill. One, two, three…more and more. Eight, ten, fifteen. Snap did not wait around to count any further. “Come on Tubbs, give it some bounce!” Snap yelled, his hands flying across the dash. The engines kicked on with a low thrum and the repulsors throbbed to life. The droid was close. Jets fired from it’s tripodal feet and it shot into the air like a cork, thudding down and then trundling magnetically across the Schooner’s durasteel as it aimed for the astromech socket. Good enough! Snap thought.

He pulled back on the stick, noting that many of the figures that had been chasing him had doubled back. He had the funny feeling that it was not a retreat. I think we’re gonna have company up here. He gunned it, the Schooner leaping forwards, and Tubbs letting loose a scream that was part victory screech and part terror at the sudden velocity.

He swept through a few narrow streets, dipping into shadow and smog wherever he could, like a storm-fox trying to throw off a pack of vornskr. Tubb’s voice whistled suddenly through the cockpit; the droid had secured itself in it’s socket.

[That was fun. My paint is scorched though.]

Snap laughed. “I’m glad you got my hint.”

[It was very obvious. It’s a good thing that gran was not entirely fluent. Oh…speaking of which, we are being followed.]

“I was afraid of that. How many of them are after us?”

[15 vessels.]

“Fifteen? Damn!”

[They are closing distance.]

“Rear deflector shields up! Here we go!”

Poe spun an achingly slow circle in the pilot’s chair, limp as a ragdoll. He was dying. He was fairly certain he was dying. “It’s been forty five minutes. He should be back by now.”

“I’m sure he’s okay. He said he’d comm us if he ran into trouble.” Finn said calmly from beside
him. He had the datapad open on his lap, searching through galactic news sites and trying in vain to pick up the threads of his old investigation into kidnapped children. His stomach grumbled but they’d seemed to have reached an unspoken agreement: they would not eat until Snap was safely back with them.

“What if he can’t get to his comm?” Poe asked for the tenth time.

“Then Tubbs would contact us.” Finn answered as he had done before.

“Ughhh.” Poe stood, pacing back and forth, running his hands through his hair until it had bushed out to twice its normal volume. “Can we listen to some music or something? I’m gonna lose it just sitting here doing nothing.

“But we need to be able to hear incase Snap comms us.” Finn pointed out.

Poe flopped back down with a dramatic sigh. “This is the worst.”

BB-8 cocked it’s head up at him. [Hmm…maybe you’re right…]

He cracked an eye marginally, “Right about what?”

[Legs would come in handy for overly dramatic fits. It’s hard to flail properly without them.]

“Yeah, and they’re good for this too”. Poe reached out a leg and shoved the droid, who wobbled and blatted rudely.

Finn kept his eyes on the datapad, though a smile tugged at his lips. “How do you handle flights where you had to sit still for hours?”

“Either I zone out and think Deep Thoughts, or I start singing my favorite songs with BB-8 on backup.”

“Oh yeah?” Finn snorted. “I’m sure Control must’ve loved that.”

“Ohh, no, they did not. Sometimes my team would join in to really—”

The dash pinged, the white light of the communications relay flashing to life. Poe jerked upright and slammed his palm into it as Finn closed his datapad and sat up.

“Snap?” Poe asked.

“Hey, so I’ve got Tubbs back.”

“That’s great!” Finn smiled, as BB-8 cheered.

“Also, I’ve got some company of the unfriendly sort.”

“The assassin droid?” Finn’s face tightened with horror.

“Nah, just some thugs.”

“How many?” Poe asked, switching from mopey drama-king to Black Leader in half a second. It would’ve made Finn laugh if he hadn’t been so focused on Snap’s plight.

“Oh, I think we’re down to 12 now. Ships are all slap-craps, none of them are real pilots, but I uh…pissed them off and they’ve got numbers. I was thinking a Blind Break. What do you say?”
A grin spread devilishly across Poe’s face. “Sounds great.”

“Okay, coordinates at 193-65-973-71-4. I’m about seven minutes and twelve seconds out, so if you can time it to that, it’ll be flawless.”

“We’ll get the timing down. See you in a bit. Fly tight.”

“Always do.”

Poe swept the Hyrotol about before the comm light had blinkered off, and in the next breath they were cast in blue from the jump tunnel. The pilot’s rougish smile sparked a flair of excitement through Finn’s chest, and it also made him want to drag Poe back to the bedroom. “Want to man the guns?”

“In many different ways.” Finn winked as he pushed himself up out of the chair, and Poe very nearly swooned. He was certain he’d never seen Finn wink before and the effect was devastating, as if a mini-Starkiller had fired out of his eye and detonated Poe’s insides. He rallied his mind.

“Oh ho, baby, we mop up these scumbags and I think we’re due for another party!” He turned suddenly away from the swarming lights, a sudden thought occurring to him. “Oh—the stairs. You need help?”

“I’ve got it,” Finn smiled and wobbled stiffly to the lowest step and forced himself up, gripping the railing and lifting his weight with his arms as much as he could. It hurt, but he was ready for a fight that he had more than a snowballs chance on Mustafar of wining. An unstoppable assassin droid was one thing, but a bunch of thugs in patchwork ships? He grinned, ignoring the clenching, thready pain that swept up the back of his legs as he fell gracelessly into the gunner’s chair.

Grabbing the headset and settling it over his ears revealed Poe mindlessly singing, “oh yeah, gonna kick their asses right into space,”

“Gonna ram this ship right into their face,” Finn joined in and Poe laughed.

“Nice.”

“So what’s a Blind Break?” Finn asked.

“We’re going to emerge from hyperspace at the coordinates Snap gave us. Snap will be leading them to that point and then he’ll break away in a hard dive, hopefully right when we appear. So, where once was friendly, open space there now will be...”

“A pissed off Hyrotol.” Finn finished with relish. “We are literally gonna ram this ship into their faces.”

“You got it.”

Finn could hear him grinning through his headset.

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Alright, you little shits, you are about to all be very unhappy. Snap mopped at his brow, juking back into a tight roll that dropped him behind the rearmost of the twelve ships. Nar Shaddaa rapidly shrank away behind him though it’s dirty light stained all of their ships in a swampy glow, lit now with a sudden burst of orange fire and tar-black smoke that instantly suffocated in the void.
Another one down. Come on guys, give it up already! The loss of another ship only enraged his pursuers further and they swerved about, trying to get behind him or sideswipe him in clumsy arcs. Tubbs faultlessly redistributed shielding to deal with their reckless attacks, though none of them came close to actually hitting Snap. “I almost feel bad for them. They can’t even hit me and they’re gonna be up against Poe.”

[They are not nice. They had it coming.] Tubbs scoffed coldly.

“Morbid,” he grunted, spiraling to his starboard and easily evading the crisscrossing lines of red fire, “but probably true.”

[Ten seconds to rendezvous point, adjust course accordingly.]

“Got it.” Snap slammed the gas and the blocky ship leapt away from its pursuers like a thoroughbred gualama in the last leg of a race.

[Four, three.]

Snap cut the engines and slammed the stick hard towards the dash. The ship dropped like a stone and proximity alarms screeched to life as the Hyrotil popped hugely into existence in the space he’d just vacated.

“Yes!” He punched a fist into the air and swung about as the Hyrotil opened fire.

Finn’s hand closed about the trigger and the hard jolting light pulsed away from the cannon, striking a ship so closely that it’s mushrooming debris swept over him in a fiery curtain. He felt more explosions as Poe let loose with the forwards turbolaser cannons, Poe’s voice cheering in his ears. The ragtag group of ships panicked, darting this way and that; a cloud of midges faced with a sudden flyswatter. They had nowhere to turn. Snap had looped around behind them, and the Hyrotil cut through the swarm with precision strokes. It had hardly been three seconds, and already seven ships were vaporized and the rest were fleeing wildly, all the fight gone from them. Poe didn’t bother pursuing—it would be like shoving a kid’s face in the dirt at this point.

“Hahaha! Yeah, run away!” Finn’s voice laughed over his dash, and Poe joined him.

“Hey, how you doin’, Snap?” Poe called out.

“That was a perfect Blind Break, man!”

“I gave myself goosebumps!” Poe exclaimed.

[Modest as always.] BB-8 said without rancor. [Tubbs is alright?]

[I am fine. But my paint is scorched.] Came the other droid’s wheezy warble.

[Now you can look as awful as I do!] BB-8 chirped excitedly.

“Okay, docking now! See you guys in a second and then we can get the hell away from this sleaze-ball planet.” Snap announced and then cut the channel.

Finn pulled off his headset with a broad smile and stood, Poe’s footsteps thundering up the stairwell. He’d hardly made it to the door before Poe had pinned him against the wall and was kissing the life out of him. Finn’s arms reacted on their own, clutching him hard and kissing passionately back.
“Mmm,” Poe breathed, his heart thudding giddily in his chest, “that was some good shooting, baby.”

“Same,” Finn managed as he dove back in for more. The dull echoing of Snap’s ship aligning to the Hyrotol wound up their legs and they pulled away from one another. Poe helped Finn into the airlock and they stood, so relieved and exhilarated from their little victory that they could hardly stop laughing as Poe extended the docking arm. BB-8 thudded up the stairs and joined them, rolling quick circles about the little room and threatening to knock them both off their feet though they didn’t mind.

Snap strutted a victory dance through the lock tunnel. As Poe twisted open the solid hatch, Snap exploded out, dragged Poe into a crushing hug and then lunged for Finn and did the same. Finn wheezed a laugh as the air was wrung out of his lungs, and then Snap slapped him on the back hard enough to knock him to his knees. Poe chuckled as he took Finn by the arm and helped him back up.

“Ha! Resistance 1, thugs 0!” Snap pumped a fist.

[And there’s more.] Tubbs announced as it entered the Hyrotol to a welcoming trill from BB-8. [I managed to slice approximately 13 zetabytes of information.] They faced each other for one utterly silent moment and then it was if a bomb had gone off, the three of them cheering and thumping each other on the back and hefting Tubbs wholly off the ground.

[I am…not sure how much will be useful.] Tubbs tried to speak over the jubilation, but they were too far gone to temper their joy.

Music pumped through the ships sound system and the air smelled of sizzling nerf and spicy vegetables. They popped cans of Kisin, toasting one another and the droids who stood bemusedly by, linked together and working in tandem to process the information that Tubbs had lifted. They parsed their search to key words such as Umbra Core, slavery, slave collars, First Order, headquarters, and so on. Already BB-8 had compiled a list of seven possible stops.

Several lightyears away from Nar Shaddaa, their human companions were now fully focused on taking it easy, ‘partying’, and BB-8 had to admit that they needed the release; though all of them had tried to ‘fly casual’ as Poe called it, the accumulated stress and tension of the past month had lurked in subtly tight jaws; in elevated heart rates, and flashing microexpressions of distress and worry that vanished almost as soon as they had appeared. It was relieved to see them truly laughing and smiling as they ate and traded stories.

“I think that was better than the Break we used back on Malastare, remember?” Snap jabbed a forkful of nerf into his mouth.

“Oh yeah, easily. I think I was off by about…2 seconds? Almost popped out right in the middle of their ship.” Poe finished off his bag of red hot crisps, tossed back his can of Kisin, and looked longingly at the 10 remaining beers. “Ah, what the hell? Want another, Finn?”

The other man sat relaxing on the small seat in the kitchenette, his sore legs stretched out before him. Finn’s head lulled towards them as if his center of gravity had slid to the left. A heavy smile
bloomed across his face. “Yeah, okay. Why not haf’another?”

Poe guffawed. “Are you drunk? Are you actually finally drunk?”

“I dunno?” He asked then a laugh burst from him. He could not explain why he was suddenly so overcome, and that only made it worse, the laughter spiraling back over itself in a mobius strip of unhinged giddiness. He covered his face with a hand, blushing to the roots of his hair.

“Finn’s drunk! Finn’s drunk! Get him more! Get him more!” Snap chanted, slamming his drink against the countertop in time with the beat of the newest song.

“More!” Poe cheered, popping a can and crossing over to him. He flopped down on his lap and Finn’s arms looped around him. Poe tilted the can to Finn’s lips, and as soon as their eyes met it was all over. Finn snorted his gulp out his nose in a choking laugh, coating Poe in a fine spray of beer and spit. Poe froze, torn between disgust and absolute hysterics. Snap howled, clutching at his stomach as if he were going to implode. Finn cracked his streaming eyes open long enough to take in Poe’s dripping face and then lost it entirely, wracked with near-painful coughing and laughter.

The droids looked to one another and shook their heads.

Ozmyn Heil piloted the Corellian light freighter that he’d nicknamed *Comeuppance* down through the greasy shine of Nar Shaddaa’s atmosphere, unmoved and uninterested in the nighttime sprawl that he’d seen now countless times. The chunky freighter looped the broad, light-dotted flank of a skyscraper and then nosed down, dropping in the space of a few breaths past the landings of the rich, to the squalor that spread unchecked in their shadows.

His yellow eyes picked out the dilapidated frame of an old warehouse. Parts of it looked to be inhabited, broken out windows lit here and there, and skittering with tiny dark figures. He set down near a tangled mess of durasteel struts, trash billowing and tumbling as the repulsor lifts eased *Comeuppance* to a stop. He dropped from the cockpit, mulling over the setting with distaste.

Fucking droid would feel at home around a bunch of trash. Never did have any taste.

Oz sensed more than heard a figure detaching from the shadows and creeping up behind him. He spun about, leveled his blaster and shot the ancient E19 blaster rifle from the hand of a clearly stunned human male. He advanced like an avalanche until he was right up in the man’s face. He was younger, gaunt and stringy, with dirty blond hair. His baggy grey clothing hung from his frame like sails from a bare-bones mast. Junkie lookin’ to mug a few coins probably. “Kid, I’m lettin’ you off easy. You touch that ship though, and I take your hand.” He lashed out and grabbed the teens fingers in a vice grip. The young man staggered backwards with a yelp, struggling to free himself.

“Hey, man, I just—” Two dull cracks sounded through the flesh of their hands and the young man screamed.

“Now get lost!” Oz barked and the teen turned with a whimper and ran back into the shadows with his broken hand clutched to his chest. “Dumb kid.” Oz muttered and shook his head, striding confidently into the darkness of the gaping factory complex. Lines of pipes and chutes hung shrouded with greying, dusty cobwebs, and assembly line belts lie frozen and forgotten, gears and valuable wiring stripped long ago. His footsteps echoed dully out into the cavernous space.
“Alright, Zero. Come on out—I know you’re watching me.” He called into the darkness, hands on his hips. His rough voice echoed round and round and them fell muted to the dusty floor. Off to his left, eight red lights swiveled silently in his direction. Oz’s lip curled. Hardened as he was, it was not exactly a pleasant sight. The lights dipped low, accompanied now by the whisper of metal on metal. Something was off though—the droid moved close to the ground, splayed out like a beast and as it edged into the murky light Oz saw why. It’s left leg had been blasted off right below the naked hip joint.

“Gods, those praffs did that?” Oz’s brow furrowed.

The droid did not answer, and that was answer enough. “Ozmyn Heil. You have arrived.” It’s voice was like gears clipping dryly together.

“Yeah no shit. So they stopped by Nar Shaddaa of all places.” He shot a swift glare at the droid. “If we’re gonna team up, we’ve gotta share intel. Where’d you try and bring them in?”

“Approximately 5.3 kilometers away.” The assassin droid rose smoothly to it’s full two and a half meter height.

“How long ago?”

“4.26 hours—”

“Enough with the ‘points’. Just round up or something, alright?” Oz placed a finger to his lips. “Hmm…4 hours ago…they could be anywhere by now.”

The droid motioned to an old computer terminal built into the assembly line. “I have been watching. Reports have come in of a disturbance in sector M83-12-98.”

“Kan-Jun territory, right?”

“Correct.”

“What else you got?”

“Surveillance cameras on the upper levels show a ship identified as a Schooner pursued by 15 Kan-Jun craft. A Schooner was earlier docked with our target’s Hyrotil.”

“Ah, they’ve picked up a mynock eh? Could be another Resistance hanger-on.” He tilted his head, arching a naked brow and nodding to himself. “Could get some extra credits for another Resistance head. Think it’s the same Schooner?”

“Inconclusive. Poor quality footage.”

“Then I think we oughta pay our friends in the Kan-Jun sector a little visit. See if they’ve got any intel we can help them remember.” He cracked his knuckles and turned away.

“Agreed.” The droid followed after him.

Chapter End Notes

Wheeewww, jeez that was a long time between chapters.
Sorry guys--this election kicked my ass and I just couldn't work up the energy to focus on this when so much awful shit was/is happening in the real world. But you know what? We need stories of inclusiveness, teamwork, and love more than ever right now (not to toot my own horn or anything--everyone's work is going to be even more valuable going forwards. Keep making your art!). I received several nice messages on tumblr from some peeps (ardentlittlefire, purelyoscar, honorreid, nekosmuse--thank you) and I just want to say, you guys really helped me sit back, take a deep breath, and get back to work.

This chapter was difficult from the word go. Though I've had the armature for all of these chapters in my head for months, I had no idea how the political arena would effect how I worked with it. Last chapter our boys were trying to escape from something cold, unfeeling, and unstoppable. They were grappling with being the targets of a massive, violent political organization, and asking some tough questions, which I realize now was partially me trying to hedge sane a path through this toxic campaign season. Then Trump fucking wins and I was like...shit (to put it mildly) what now? But I had a good cry, volunteered at a food pantry, made plans to march and protest, backed up some of my charities--and that helped me to write the boys rallying, coming together to get a little win, and they're gonna keep on fighting.

Anywho, thank you for reading, and being so patient and encouraging. If any of you needs to talk, feels frightened or angry about what is happening out there, or have cool ideas or tips on how to organize and protest, you've got an ally in me. Take care of yourselves and know you're not alone. Hit me up on tumblr: bluestem10.tumblr.com

Also, comments are much appreciated! <3
Chapter 34

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Poe was sitting beside him, a small BB-8 cradled in his lap and his arms crossed atop the little dome. His happy smile swept over Finn like a warm beam of sunlight, brightening his chest and leaving him weightless. Finn's gaze dipped into the creases radiating out from the corners of Poe's eyes, arched over the curve of his heavy lids, followed the strong line of his nose, traced the wry curl of his lips. He scooted closer to him, only to find that Poe was suddenly feet away on a couch that had no business being so long, his expression guarded. Frustrated and worried, Finn tried to scoot closer again. Poe was now a small form in the murky distance, his face fallen sadly. In the swarming darkness behind him, eight red eyes flashed like lightning.

"Poe!"

Finn tensed awake with a jerk, sweat beading his brow and his breath heaving. He sucked in a slow inhalation, his stomach churning. Panicked eyes landed across the lumpy, blanket-bundled curves of Poe sleeping softly beside him. The light in the room was the usual misty blue glow of BB-8—not the hellish red glare of the assassin droid. He fell back against his damp pillow with a sigh of both relief and lingering terror, his head spinning.

Ugh. I feel sick.

Bile flooded his mouth and his eyes popped open. I do feel sick! He flung the blankets off of him and clambered gracelessly out of bed, bouncing the mattress and waking an extremely groggy Poe. Pain clenched up his legs in winding knots, but the lurching of his stomach kept him on his feet. Flailing for the fresher in a panic, he dropped to his knees before the toilet only just in time and heaved, hands clenched across the cool polyporcelain as hot bile dripped from his mouth. What...what is this? Can nightmares actually make you sick? His shoulders tensed, the floor of his stomach clenched as if it had been kicked, and his dinner made a horrible and noisy reappearance. He drew back, panting and shaking, wiping a hand across his mouth. The lights came on in the hallway, though Finn didn't notice with his head in the toilet.

A soft hand settled upon his heaving back and he dragged his eyes towards Poe as if his head weighed a hundred kilos. The buttery light sent a throb through his temples and he squinted against it. "I'm sorry, Finn," Poe said thickly as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes, "we shouldn't have given you beers."

"Thanks," Finn said dryly.

"Here,"

A cool glass was shoved into his free hand and for a crazy moment he thought that Poe was trying to give him more beer. He dreaded the smell of Kisin so forcefully that he heaved again and Poe hastily snatched back the cup of water. Poe winced at the sound of him retching and wrinkled up his nose, though he stayed put, lightly stroking the back of his neck.
"Just let it all out." Poe soothed.

"Ugh…” Finn clutched at his head, eyes clamped shut and heart racing. He spat disgustedly into the toilet.

"All done?"

"Yeah…I think so." He leaned his head back and took several slow breaths.

"Water." Poe placed the cup in his hands. "Drink all of that. Got a headache too?"

"Uh huh." Finn gulped at the cool liquid, fearing for a moment that his stomach would toss it back up, but it fell like ice over a pool of lava.

"Aww, this is your first hangover! I'm so proud!" Poe gave his shoulder a little shake, grinning from ear to ear.

Finn grimaced. "Glad someone's happy about it."

"Heh. Be right back."

Finn caught a bleary look at his face in the mirror as he turned to load up his toothbrush and scour the sourness from his mouth. His hair was longer than it had ever been, curling tightly away from his scalp at a thoroughly non-regulation height of about 6 centimeters. It gave him some pride, like vengeance from afar, to let it grow after being forced to keep it cropped. The only problem was that his hair now started to noticeably flatten when he slept on it. The look of it combined with his currently weary eyes and sickly pallor made him snort a disparaging laugh. Poe's half naked form entered the reflection, moving up behind him with a pill in his palm.

"Take one of these—ibroxin. It'll help with the headache."

"Thanks," Finn murmured. He refilled his glass, tossed the pill back, and sipped delicately at the water.

"Ah-ah." Poe watched with an eagle-eye. "Drink the whole cup."

"Again?"

Poe steered him back to their bedroom with a huge yawn. "Trust me—I've been here many times. The more water you drink, the better you'll feel in the morning."

Finn staggered along beside him, eyes squeezed closed, stomach tense as a drum, and head throbbing. The darkness of the little room wrapped around him in a soothing embrace, and he flopped down like piece of wet string. Surely a mattress had never felt so good. **Ahh…**

"Did you finish your water?" Poe asked as he slid alongside him and pulled up the blankets.

"Nnn…” He groaned pathetically.

"Do it, or I'll turn the lights allll the way up."

Finn reached blindly for the cup, drained it, and thunked it back down. He was asleep before his head even hit the pillow. Poe grinned, shaking with silent laughter for a few seconds; he really did feel proud. It was a universal rite of passage, to be down on your knees, embracing a toilet while vomiting up everything you owned, praying to all of the gods to make it stop. *He did pretty damn well*. Poe checked another first off of the mental list he'd titled 'things for Finn to experience'. Then
he snuggled close, planted a kiss on his cheek, and drifted off.

Finn woke feeling surprisingly okay. Refreshed even. BB-8's resting light was gone, leaving the room fully dark and he wondered what time it was. Reaching out for Poe, he found only cool emptiness at his side. *Poe's up too?* He tensed as he turned on the lights, bracing for that 'wrench to the skull' feeling he'd experienced during his bout of sickness, but the brightness had no effect; his headache had drifted away with the night. His legs were still sore, but that was simply an ache—nothing like the twisting pain of rehabilitation. He stood and clothed, tried for a moment to fluff his hair out from his scalp and then left the room. The nightmare that had awoken him in the deeps of the night was utterly forgotten.

The spicy, greasy scent of shaak sausage curled delightfully into his nose but he was surprised to find the tiny kitchen empty and dirty dishes piled in the half shuttered sink. *Did I actually miss breakfast? Why didn't anyone wake me up?* He peeked around the edge of the door into the cockpit and found Tubbs and BB-8 peering back at him, linked both to one another and to the Hyrotl, their smooth chassis glimmering in the jump-tunnel like fish beneath a rippling sea. They bleeped [Good afternoon] in unison.

"Afternoon?" Finn's brows furrowed.

[Well, according to standard galactic time, yes.] BB-8 nodded.

"...How long did I sleep?"

[Not counting your midnight trek to the refresher, about 11 hours.]

"Wow...uh..."

Soft chatter drifted into his ears and he turned away from the cockpit, following Poe and Snap's voices into the engine room. Poe was sitting beside the bulky canister of the water reclaimer, hands on his knees and his head poking into an access panel, while Snap hovered overhead, datapad open to display the ships schematics.

"Yeah, you can see how the downstem just kind of popped there. Shoot, look at how the durasteel is pinched up—no way that happened just from the droid." Poe sighed. "It must've been messed up before we ever got it; the explosion just helped it along. Man, this whole thing is a mess—it's been leaking for a month!"

"Think it damaged any wiring to the heat exchange radiator?" Snap asked as he leaned forwards.

"Well, we haven't had any shorts turning up, but I'm sure it's just a matter of time. Maybe that assassin droid did us a favor—now we know we have a problem, anyways. I'll take out that floor panel before we stop—make sure the wiring's okay. If not...I guess we'll just add it to the list." His shoulders slumped.

"Morning." Finn yawned and the two of them looked away from their project as he walked stiffly down the ramp to join them.

"Morning," Snap straightened up with a knowing grin. "Heard you had a fun night."

Finn arched a nonplussed brow at Poe, who turned back to the reclamer with an innocent whistle. "Yeah, you could say that. Dinner tasted better the first time."

"I know that feeling." Snap commiserated.
"How's the stomach?" Poe levered to his feet. A devilish thought sparked through Finn as Poe leaned in for a quick kiss. He tensed and heaved as if he were about to spew everywhere—Poe backpedaled at lightspeed, his shocked expression sliding into playful outrage once he realized he'd been had.

Snap guffawed and Finn met Poe's eye's with an apologetic grin.

"And to think I made you breakfast." Poe turned a cold shoulder and resumed his post before the reclaimer with his legs folded rigidly beneath him, though an unseen smile crawled across his face.

Finn's stomach growled, ravenous after tossing out its supper. "Breakfast?" His eyes darted hopefully from Poe to Snap. "There's still some left?"

"Guess you'll just have to go see." Poe shrugged and then reached into the access panel up to his elbow.

"Thanks, honey," he knelt and kissed at the side of Poe's scruffy face. Poe grinned and winked at him.

Finn reentered the kitchen, buoyantly pleased that Poe had made him breakfast, deeply touched to think of the way he'd caressed his back and brought him water as he'd been ill. It was a wondrous thing, being cared for; he didn't think he would ever get over it. Humming lightly, he pressed open the cooler and found a dish wrapped in parifilm sitting atop their shrinking pile of frozen foods.

"Yes, flatcakes! That was—" his cheerful exclamation died. A mocking face was looking back at him from the golden-brown surface. Prangi berry eyes were surmounted by worried sausage eyebrows. The berry-dot mouth was open in the shape of an "O", and from it was drizzled a mess of syrup.

The cake was clearly vomiting.

Poe helped Finn straighten his robe, eyes raking across his shoulders, his chest, hovering above the top of his woven cap; he was unable to look him in the eye. They'd halted for repairs at an out of the way moon named Ubrikkia, a small violet orb with a shimmering atmosphere of wavering blues and greens strung over a glowworm cityscape. Compared to the overcrowded toxicity of Nar Shaddaa, the gently rounded towers and halls, and glossy black trees seemed a veritable oasis.

And it was, from all that Poe had ever heard, a more or less safe place to dock. The local people specialized in tourism and were therefore very inclined to keep their patrons out of harm's way. The never-ending auroras sweeping curtains across the cobalt sky kept citizens from all over the galaxy spellbound as they relaxed on black basalt beaches. Even so, Poe couldn't help the nerves that roiled about his stomach. He would not have been so on edge if he had been going with them, but he would be busy pulling the reclaimer and dissembling it, while Snap went to fetch the parts so that they could finish repairs as soon as possible. Finn had wanted to go with Snap, and Poe couldn't exactly blame him; the way Finn's face had lit up at the sight of the blooming sky had made all of Poe's arguments moot.

"So, you're sure you don't feel anything bad out there?" Poe's eyes finally landed on Finn's, holding him solidly within the liquid dark intensity of his gaze.

Finn's heart ached, understanding his concern at once. "I don't know if it works that way…but I think we'll be fine, Poe. Before, with Nar Shaddaa, it was like having a splinter in my mind, and I think that's because the droid was already waiting for us. But I don't feel anything like that here." He shrugged.
"Yeah, well don't let your guard down just because it looks nice, okay?" Poe placed his hands to the outside of Finn's arms and squeezed.

"We'll be careful. And we'll be right back—I just want to look at the lights; they kind of remind me of the way the Force moves." He smiled, a boyish brightness dancing in his eyes and Poe nodded, unable to argue against a sight that he himself had seen in what felt like another lifetime. Finn wrapped him in his arms and hugged him tightly, rocking him to and fro, inhaling the earthy sweet scent of Poe's skin. "I love you."

"I love you, too." They kissed slowly and softly, Poe trying to force the fears he'd left unsaid into his touch. Please just come back to me.

Tubbs and BB-8 met them in the hall, bumping and rolling along in their wake as they walked down to the engine room. Snap was patiently waiting at the ramp, counting finger-sized credit chips and slipping them into an interior pocket in his jacket. "We good to go?" Snap asked. "Got your blaster and your comm, Finn?"

"Yep." Finn pulled up his wrap, covering all but his eyes from view as the ramp lowered down and a balmy breeze swept through the ship, driving out the stale air.

"Okay, be careful guys. If you take more than an hour, I'm going to ram this ship up your asses. Got it?"

Finn huffed a laugh. "Got it." He pressed a quick cloth-covered kiss to his cheek, Snap waved, and then the two of them headed out into the diffuse twilight. Poe stood as if he were carved of stone, watching them go with a tightening feeling in his chest; he realized then that he and Finn had not been willingly apart since the attack on Base more than a month ago. The shrinking form of Finn turned his head to the sky and was bathed in a teal glow from an arcing aurora, and he knew that Finn must be smiling. It was too easy to see Rhys; too easy to imagine the worst case scenario after all that he and Finn had gone through.

His pants leg jerked twice just below the calf and he jolted from his state of apprehensive longing. BB-8 was peering up at him, blue light skittering across it's dark eye. [It's okay, Poe.] It bleeped gently.

Poe looked back out at the velveteen landing bay, but already Finn and Snap had disappeared from sight. He licked his lips and nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, it's okay." He spared one glance to the deepening sky, his face lit with blue and pale purple, and then disappeared into the Hyrotil. He set to work with a tunnel vision so intense that not even his considerable worry could push through his focus.

"Wow," Finn breathed as he stared about in wonder. Roundly organic windows blazed with amber light, looking more like little suns than any man-made fixture, and above him the sky shimmered and flowed like a stream of cool ink. Voices wove around them, but it was not the crushing cacophony of fear, indifference, or hedonistic shouting of Nar Shaddaa's spaceport; there were no slaves or slavers here. The many different species that strode past all moved at their own pace, minding their own business, or gathering about vendors and street performers. Many wore smiles as they pointed to the sky, or showed off handmade trinkets. Finn absorbed the overall atmosphere of contentment like a sponge. "This place is incredible."

"Yeah," Snap agreed at his side, eyes sweeping this way and that. If possible, he was more on guard here than he had been on Nar Shaddaa, well aware that he would never be able to face Poe if something happened to the younger man while on his watch. Tubbs wheeled along at their heels, it's
superior senses peeled utterly raw. "I've never been here, but my aunts used to come on holiday. I thought they were making it up about the sky."

"I could watch it for hours." Finn said with his hands on his hips.

Snap shook his head and arched a brow. "No can do—remember, Poe said he'd fly the ship up our collective ass if we stayed out too long. So, start looking for a parts shop, Wex."

Finn strode happily along, finding it both odd and pleasant to be with Snap. He'd not had much of a chance to get to know him away from Poe, not that he begrudged Poe's presence. But it was hard for him to start a conversation with Snap on his own footing, knowing that the other man and Poe already had a solid friendship to stand on.

"When'd you join the Republic Navy, Snap?"

"Hmmm, officially, I joined it when I was seventeen. Unofficially, I flew my first dogfight in the battle of Jakku when I was sixteen."

Finn slammed to a halt, sputtering for an indignant moment. "Jakku?! You fought on Jakku?"

Snap turned to him with a bemused smile. "Yeah. Why?"

"Why is it always Jakku? That's where I met Dand and—and quit my old job." He finished cryptically, hastily remembering that they were surrounded by ears. "And my friend and I had a big dogfight through a lot of those old wrecks."

"They're not that old." Snap huffed a laugh. "It was, like, 25 years ago."

Finn gave him a look.

"...Kriffing hell, that's older than you, isn't it?"

"Yeah," Finn laughed. "Why? How old are you, Snap?"

"Ancient, apparently." He waved a hand morosely, beckoning towards a likely shop.

Finn noticed two figures standing to the side of the storefront, and his eyes darted to the spellbound faces of an elderly man and woman, their wrinkled expressions bright as youth in the diffuse light of the aurora. It made his heart swell to see them, and he wondered if he and Poe might one day make it to that point and still find happiness in a night sky. He wished that Poe were walking with him, hand in hand, and that he could see the sparks of blue and teal flowing like fire in his dark eyes. The moment passed, and Snap was leading them through an arched doorway into a cluttered machine shop.

Fifteen minutes later they were wheeling out a brand new adaptor, downstem, a roll of hydrotape, and a thick coil of reactor cabling. "That actually wasn't as expensive as I thought it'd be." Snap mused as he guided the small sledge carefully through the meandering nighttime crowds. Finn looped the reactor cabling mindlessly around his arm, once again lost in the sights that surrounded him. Through the amber gauze of windows, he saw all sorts of items he'd never before seen, clothing of shapes and colors that dazzled him, trinkets and souvenirs, food that made his stomach groan.

Snap grinned to himself as he watched the enthusiasm of the younger man, and it struck him forcefully then just how sheltered Finn's life had been that a handful of shops could bring him such happiness. Sadness clenched around his chest—he himself had had free reign to explore and create for the entirety of his life, but Finn had been locked into one way of performing a narrow range of
duties, none of which he'd been free to choose. He understood intuitively that Finn had never been allowed to explore. To play. He really has adapted fast. The thought sent an uncomfortable shiver down his spine. Could other Stormtroopers turn out like him, if they had the chance? He saw all of those featureless, dead-eyed helmets as innocent people suddenly, and it made his breath catch. How many had he killed in his lifetime of fighting? How many could have been rehabilitated and shown the pleasures of a normal life? The First Order had done it's troopers a great evil in brainwashing them and using them for violence. And it had done the Resistance a great evil in forcing them to kill them.

"Wow…what's this place, Snap?"

Snap came to, to find Finn halted before a window, peering up at a stack of model ships, games, and other odds and ends.

"Oh…uh…" he scratched at the back of his head, "looks like a hobby shop."

"Huh. Do you think we have enough time to go in?"

Snap smiled. It was a simple enough desire, and what harm could come of it? "Sure, man."

Snap realized at once that he may have made a mistake. Finn drifted from one display to another as if magnetically pulled, his eyes bright with childish glee. He'd never seen so many things. There were softly glowing globes that displayed a perfect miniature of the swirling heavens outside, rotating spirals of galaxies suspended in glass bells like disks of ice, small robotic animals that moved and jumped with an uncanny imitation of life, 'build your own droid' sets, and games of a bewildering variety. Finn kept circling back to the globe, clearly smitten with it, and Snap dreaded to think of its price, for he didn't feel he'd have the heart to let Finn leave empty handed.

Then his brain derailed entirely as his eyes landed on a familiar box. "Oh man," Snap groaned. Galactic Expansion was there, just waiting for him. Which edition is it, which edition is it? Oh gods, I don't care how much it costs, I'm getting that!

He turned at Finn walking up to him. He'd set the globe back on its shelf and now clutched a small box in his hands. "Hey…do we have enough left over credits to get this?"

It was a perfectly detailed RZ-1 A-Wing Interceptor. Snap understood at once and he was stunned at Finn's selflessness. Poe's mom's ship. He's got the chance to get something for himself, probably for the first time in his life, and he picks something for Poe. He smiled warmly, even as he noted the price; he'd have to forgo Galactic Expansion, but he found he could not have cared less.

"He'll love it." Snap nodded, and a smile leapt to Finn's eyes.

Poe mopped at his brow as he wrenched free the last of the bolts holding the adaptor solidly in place. He'd cut the flow to the pipe, but braced anyways as he yanked the heavy lump of cast durasteel from its housing. Sure enough, a spray of leftover water gushed all over him.

"Gods…dammit," he sputtered as he rolled the adaptor out of the hatch and wiped a greasy hand over his sopping face.

[Everything alright?]"Gods, I'm fine," Poe didn't mean for his voice to sound so rough as he squeezed and contorted out of the tiny space. His sleeve caught on a sharp edge and he froze, forcing himself to take a deep breath before his blood pressure sent his head shooting off like a cork. "You gotta be a fucking Ugnaught to
fit in here! Who—ernng—designed this thing?” He dragged himself from the hatch, dripping and wheezing as if he'd just been born.

[Ugnaughts, probably.]

Poe shot the droid a droll glare and it shimmied in a shrug. He leaned back against the cool wall and surveyed his work. The reclaimer was ready now for it's new adapter and downstem to be installed, and he'd pulled back the grating over the water-damaged radiator cables, unlinked and unspliced them, and set the damaged mass of wires in a heap. "How long has it been?” He asked.

[38 minutes.]

Poe rubbed at his brow. He hated this very thoroughly.

[I'm sure they're alright. Tubbs would have contacted me if anything happened.]

"I know, I know—I just-" He broke off at the dull clunking of the belly keel unlocking and hissing open. A grin of utter relief leapt to his face and he stood, striding to the ramp to greet them. They were proceeded into the ship by their sledge of goods, and Poe was pleased to hear Snap and Finn chatting idly among themselves as they boarded.

"How'd it go out there?” Poe asked, clapping Snap on the arm and kissing Finn on his cheek.

Finn peeled off his wrap and removed his cap. "It's amazing! I wish you could've gone with us—the sky's like a river, and the buildings have this really cool glow to them. And everyone just seemed...happy."

"It was alright," Snap deadpanned. "Got the reclaimer ready to go?"

Finn snorted a laugh as he took in Poe's sopping, grease-smeared face and hands. "You look like you made out with it."

"Yeah? Take off the robe and join in. Then we'll see how nice you look." Poe grinned, his heart as light now as it had been tense.

"Well," Snap stretched and made for the ramp to the upper level, "I don't wanna be a third wing, so I'll leave you guys and the reclaimer alone for some quality time."

"Oh-ho no you don't." Poe caught him by the sleeve. "You can help splice those new wires together while we work on this. The sooner we're in the air, the better."

Snap sighed, his bluff called. "I can't argue with that." He arched a brow at Tubbs and shrugged. "Feel like soldering, buddy?"

It bleeped, wobbling back and forth on it's leg-struts in a full-body nod. Snap and the droid set to work, disappearing into the floor compartment to re-link the damaged wiring, and soon the acrid smell of soldering flux drifted heavily in the air. Finn slipped into his and Poe's room to fold his robe and hide Poe's present, then returned to the engine room with a smug grin as he settled down alongside the pilot. He held the new adaptor steady as Poe lined the fittings with a green sealant gel. Poe felt Finn's gaze tracing over him with all the subtly of a tractor beam, and he glanced up at him and back to his work with a small laugh.

"What're you so happy about?"

"Nothing." Finn answered with a warm glow, a secret fire burning in his chest.
Poe yawned, pulling off his shirt and sitting on the edge of the mattress. They were finally, mercifully clean of Nar Shaddaa's filth, and what was more, the repaired water reclaimer was chugging along without a leak to be seen. An electrical diagnostic showed current flowing smoothly through the wiring to the heat exchange radiator. Newly whole, the Hyrotil rested soundly in the cradling arms of nameless space, some five lightyears out from Ubrikkia.

Finn opened the built-in storage at his side of the bed and folded away his shirt with a military crispness, fingers brushing across the gift he'd stashed. "I want to go back to Ubrikkia someday, Poe."

"Sure, baby. When all of this is over, we'll add it to our list of places to revisit."

"Okay." Finn stood for a long while in quiet anticipation, his back to Poe and the paper-wrapped box clutched in his hands. He ran the three words he'd been practicing though his head for the millionth time, praying on the Force that he not stumble over them. He'd never before given a gift to anyone, and his heart fluttered with the same nervousness he'd felt the first time they'd kissed. What if he doesn't like it? The yellow bracelet looped over his wrist caught and held his attention for a moment, and he stiffened his resolve. Swallowing, he held the box to his chest and rounded the bed to face Poe. The pilot watched him bemusedly, somewhat perplexed at Finn's stiff evasiveness.

Finn cleared his throat and held out the box. "Here."

"What's this?" Poe asked with a dawning grin. He took it from him, glancing from the package to Finn's rapidly blushing face. Settling the box on his lap, he hooked a finger beneath the paper and pulled the wrapping loose. His eyes slid across the labeling and landed upon the shape of a ship he'd have known anywhere. A twinge of emotion pulled through the center of his chest like a harpoon, unexpected and deep, and for a moment he was not in the room at all; he was a child sitting on his mother's lap, gazing out at a sea of stars, her guiding hand upon his. An RZ 1 A-wing interceptor.

Mouth dry, he pulled back the flap of the carton and delicately removed the model ship. The cast metal was cool and heavy in his hand as he turned it this way and that, watching the buttery light slide over the tiny cockpit and gild its sharp edges.

Finn could stand his silence no more. "What do you think?" He squirmed, "I—I thought maybe, because you had to sell your mom's ship, that…maybe you'd like a little one to—" Finn was dragged into a crushing hug, and gratitude filled him to the brim like a cup full of gold. He likes it. He smiled against Poe's neck, hands splaying out across the warm muscle of his back as he gave against him.

"Thank you," Poe kissed him slowly, "thank you, baby. I love it." He drew back, a shaking smile on his lips. "That was…that was really nice. Unexpected."

"I saw it in a shop and, you know, I've never been able to get a gift for someone before." He shrugged, "well, I guess technically Snap bought it. I still need to figure out how to handle Republic change."

Poe laughed. "I'll teach you, it's easy. But thank you, Finn. This…this really means a lot to me."

"You really mean a lot to me." He smiled, took a steadying breath and held Poe to arm's length. His mouth felt dry as desert sand. Don't mess this up. He spoke as seriously as if he were giving a report to a superior officer. "Poe, ey vie amrau."

The words washed over Poe like shockwaves from an explosion, his mouth falling open in surprise. He was certain his heart had stopped. Emotion left him drowning in a liquid hot sea of desire and aching gratitude. Only Rhys had ever said those words to him in his native tongue, and to hear them
spoken so earnestly from Finn's mouth was more than he could process. He was left silently short-circuiting like an overloaded droid.

He dredged his voice back to his mouth as if dragging it from quicksand. "Did...did you just speak *Yavini*?" His heart went leaping into lightspeed to make up for the beats it had missed.

"I hope I said it right." Finn scratched awkwardly at the back of his head, oblivious to Poe's screaming internal monologue. "I've been learning on the datapad and practicing with BB-8. But It's been hard to do it without you noticing so-"

"You said it *perfectly. Mellacor, per ey amrau míadis mas! Coso horosin ey teña aprendis?*"

"Uh...I'm...not fluent." Finn grinned apologetically.

Words would no longer suffice; Poe pulled him to the mattress and smothered him in a gulping kiss. Some things were the same in any language.

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Finn's hand tightened against his as they rocked slowly, passionately together in the darkness, his breath running like fire up Poe's neck before dabbing into a sucking kiss just over his pulse. Poe gasped, squirming, hips shaking as he peaked and his fingers digging into the tough edges of Finn's scar. Finn's low groan shuddered through the floor of his pelvis, up through his chest, into his nipples, and tingled across his scalp like a cool breeze. Finn buried his face in the crook of his neck, pumping slowly, deeply until Poe felt he was opening to the very core of his body. His blood pounded in his ears. He panted, brows drawing together and his flushed lips parting needily. Finn's mouth found him, sealing tightly, his tongue gliding a tingling arc about his and then slipping away like a dream. Finn pulled wetly back with a rough breath, and Poe could feel his tenseness radiating out of each solid thrust through every fiber of his body.

Blearily his eyes opened to find Finn staring down at him. The raw, tender passion in his gaze struck Poe like a blast of laser fire to an unshielded hull; he could hardly contain such a look. His balls tightened and his hand darted for his cock, squirming and moaning against Finn's stomach.

"Ahh!" He gasped, "Finn!" He arched hard beneath him, his free hand clutching tight to Finn's undulating lower back and his legs spread wide. He dragged a stomach-deep breath and came in a wave, gripping Finn so tightly he could hardly pull back for another thrust. Finn froze as Poe's body shuddered around him, and the pilot's hand whispered back and forth like a fluttering wing against his lower stomach. Poe managed to keep himself more or less silent as he finished, and Finn would have been impressed but he could spare no brainpower for it—he was lost in Poe's pulsing heat. Poe's head fell back against the pillow, his exposed neck pale and sinuous as a moonlit stream in the dusky light, and Finn traced the shadowy valleys of his throat like a man dying of thirst. Poe's dark eyes opened to his and Finn came at the heat that flickered within them.

He cried out softly and lowly, hunched over Poe's chest, Poe's hands linking about his lower back and his mouth sucking at his throat.

"Yeah..." Poe groaned as Finn pumped jerkily into him with gasping breaths, "yeah...*uhn*—just like that—ah *gods* yes. Let me feel that load, baby," Poe's honeyed whispers coursed through him like fire; he could not say why, but hearing him egg him on as he came, urging him, praising him for ejaculating...it turned him on beyond endurance. Poe's hands tightened across his back, his chin pressed into Finn's shoulder as he gritted his teeth; each dripping stroke past his over-stimulated prostate threatened to make him scream. He arched and breathed rhythmically into it, calling upon the focus that guided him during intense flight to keep him level. And then Finn was collapsing against him, chest heaving, shaking lightly from his head to his toes. Poe leaned back, cradling him
against his chest and nuzzling into his hair to kiss the top of his head. Finn scooted up, dipping in to a winded kiss. Poe's hands landed softly at the side of his face, and Finn opened his eyes.

*He's so beautiful.* "Ey vie amrau míadis." Poe purred into his ear.

Finn breathed a laugh against his sweaty chest. "Ey," he panted, "ey vie amrau míadis mas."

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Poe blearily woke with the primal certainty that he was being watched. Edged in BB-8's resting light, he rolled over to find Finn focused on him with unnerving intensity. His hair was traced in diffuse blue, and his face was a map of dark shadows and soft blue pools. Icy slivers of light glimmered in his unblinking eyes. "Hey…s'everything okay?" Poe murmured, still half asleep.

"Oh," Finn jolted back to himself and then smiled, reaching out to stroke Poe's forehead. He gazed into his shadowed face and the dark wells of his eyes. "Yeah, everything's fine." Poe's eyelids drooped under the soothing touch and he was nearly asleep when Finn continued with, "I was just watching the Force."

"Okay, baby…” Poe's words were swallowed up by his pillow and he was out again within a breath. Finn grinned, leaning in to kiss him and then settling back down with a sigh. It was getting easier and easier to coax the life-light into bloom, so long as he could keep from blinking too often, or from moving about. It looked to him, just then, as if he'd wrapped his arms about a constellation of white diamonds submerged in a blue stream, flickering and glimmering here and there in the radiant pools that Maz had called islands. Slowly he was committing the complex pattern of Poe's soul to memory. He closed his eyes and forced himself to try and rest, but it was difficult to keep the starlight from shining through.

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Chapter End Notes

Whaaat? An update within a week? What madness is that?

I hope you liked this chapter--I honestly had a lot of fun with it. I found a song that really helped me get this one off the ground: Catkins by Soundician. It's minor key, but still lovely. It perfectly captured the bittersweet feel of comfort and beauty coexisting alongside intense worry. I hope the sense that everything could all fall apart came through with this, even while they were happy. There may be a bit of a wait for the next chapters as we go into Holiday Season™; I've got several presents I need to devote some time to, so this will have to take a back burner for a little while.

As always, thank you so much for reading and for commenting! ❤ You make my day! - Bluestem
Chapter 35

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Poe hummed to himself as he strode through the Hyroti, gathering up trash and tucking odds and ends back into cupboards and storage units. He'd had a near argument with Finn over the state of their cramped living quarters, asserting that not every surface of the ship needed a slick mirror-shine to qualify as clean. Finn had mutely pointed to the toothpaste-spattered sink and it's sprinkling of beard-trimmings.

"Oh come on, it's not that bad."

"Look at the toilet! That is not standard." Finn had said with his arms crossed before his chest.

"It's a private ship! Military standards don't apply!"

[Never mind that—the toilet has become a legitimate bio-hazard.]

"Poe?" Snap had called out. "Are these your boxers in the cockpit? …I'm not gonna ask why."

He had grudgingly swallowed his pride and admitted that maybe he could be a bit of a slob if left without Base's housekeeping droids, which BB-8 had tartly reminded him that it was not. He realized also that he had been unfairly taking advantage of Finn's need for cleanliness by allowing things to get to a point where Finn would eventually break down and do it himself. Finn's way more thorough. Might as well let him, he had thought.

He felt rather ashamed of himself as he tossed an armful of kitchen waste into the solar-powered incinerator, shut and latched the hatch, and pressed it on. The machine flared to roaring life and then quickly shut off. That wasn't so bad. He brushed his hands together and entered their room. The line dividing his area from Finn's could not have been more obvious; even Finn's half of the bed was made, while Poe's had purposely been left a bundled mass of blankets. Yeesh…I must be driving him fucking insane. He picked up his dirty clothing, folded away those that still had a few days left in them and straightened the sheets.

As he tugged at the quilt, a rectangular item laying open caught his eye; Finn had left his pad of flimsi out while he went to use the freshly cleaned 'fresher. Poe's lips pursed, and he glanced hurriedly over his shoulder. It wouldn't really be prying if it was already open, right?

Cautiously, Poe sat on the edge of the bed and took the notepad in his hands. His jaw dropped—there was a dark drawing in human-shape, better than any stick-figure Poe had ever managed to coerce from the tip of a stylus. In fact, Finn possessed some serious artistic skill; every part of the body was in proportion, and there was a rough edged style to it that was very much Finn's own. But that wasn't what struck Poe. It was the flowing lights moving through the body, the haloed circles of white page shining through here and there in a seemingly random spray, as if holes had been punched through the little figure.

Finn walked in, stretching, and Poe tensed, his eyes jumping to Finn's with guilty amazement.

"Finn—is this? Is this what the Force looks like?"

"Oh," Finn realized what it was that Poe had cradled in his hands and a grin leapt to his face. He settled down beside him, peering at the page with both pleasure and the harsh eye of self-criticism.
"Well, it's supposed to be, but I can't capture it. Not yet, anyways."

"Poe shook his head, "Then...is that me?"

"Uh huh."

"So...these little dots..." The tip of his finger danced from star to star.

Finn's eyes swept up to his. "They're what makes you you."

"Wow." Poe breathed. "Wow, that's insane. There's really a light like that under my eye? And...hah, my nipple?"

"Yep," Finn grinned, pleased with Poe's burgeoning wonder.

"There's so many. That is really something. And," he met Finn's eyes with an impressed arch to his brow, "you can draw, honey. Like, this is really good!"

Finn turned away with a bashful smile. "It's not that good."

"It is!" Poe insisted. "Can I flip through?"

"Sure. But...well, obviously, they get less good the further back you go."

Poe turned a page back. There was a sketch of his face. Kind of. Closer than he could ever manage, anyways. And there was BB-8. And the horrible cylindrical head of the assassin droid, with 8 blank voids for eyes. A sketch of a heavier body, inked in black and full of a different pattern of white dots. It wasn't quite finished and, judging from its roughly placed lines, it looked as if it had been hurriedly laid down.

"That's what Snap's life-force looks like. I haven't really got his down yet—it's...kind of weird to stare at him for that long."

"Wow! Look at the one in his hand—that's crazy! Have I said this is crazy yet?"

"A few times." Finn smiled.

Writing was scattered here and there in a tall, narrow script; annotating little sketches or weighing down entire pages. Poe didn't linger on the writing—it felt too invasive, even with Finn's permission; these were clearly his innermost thoughts and his coping mechanism. He flipped back ten pages, and it was if he'd passed back through years of development; Finn's handwriting and drawings had reverted to a looseness and lopsidedness that kindled a warm glow in Poe's heart. He'd seen him hunched over the pad of flimsi many times, especially before bed, but he'd never wanted to break through Finn's intense concentration and ask to see what he'd been working on. He had clearly improved leaps and bounds from where he'd been. He has in so many ways, Poe realized. He flipped back to the very first page. There were the large, childish blocks of letters that he'd seen and admired long ago, back on Base, when Finn had first realized that he could literally write in his own hand. He loved the shaky lines and the way the letters grew as they lifted towards the corner of the page, like inky ships taking off into a white sky.

One of the first things he'd written was: Finn loves Poe Dameron.

A little pain tightened behind Poe's heart as if the words had lodged there like wonderful splinters. It was too sweet, too uninhibitedly pure. He smiled at the page, nodding softly. "I like that."
Finn snorted, though a blush deepened across his face. "It looks really bad though. I was actually gonna tear out all of that older stuff—it's kind of embarrassing."

"No! Don't do that." Poe urged.

"Why?"

"Because its…like a map. You don't really have anything about yourself that you can look back on. Trust me, ten years from now you'll wish you hadn't tossed it."

Finn smiled to himself, touched and slightly confused that Poe was so adamant about something he hadn't given a spare thought to. "Okay, I won't get rid of it."

"Good. In that case—can I have this page? Just that little bit of it."

Finn's eyes roved over the misshapen letters, and he grimaced. "Well, yeah, but I could write you a better version now."

"Nope. I like that one."

"Alright…" Finn said as if Poe were crazy to want such a thing. He took the pad from Poe's hands and delicately tore out the section of page with his writing on it, then passed it over to Poe.

"Thanks, Finn." Poe leaned in and kissed him softly on the forehead.

"You're welcome. Jeez, I would've skipped that model A-wing if I'd known you'd like a scrap of flimsi so much." Finn kidded.

Poe winked as he stood and tucked the writing into his wallet alongside his fake ID card. "Well, this is the only flimsy thing from you I'll accept."

"Oh yeah?" Finn grinned, reaching out and tugging him back down by his belt loops. Poe's heavy lidded look throbbed through him.

"I thought I was supposed be picking up?" He nuzzled against his face, lashes tickling across Finn's brows, and licking small kisses up his upper lip. "Or am I supposed to be picking up something else?" His hand slithered up between Finn's legs and cupped at his balls, tracing to either side of his cock.

"Mmm," Finn groaned, tensing pleasurably. "That's good too."

"You're remaking the bed though—I just made it."

Finn cracked an eye and arched a wry brow at the wrinkled, rather lumpy quilts. "This is made?"

Poe squeezed a little more forcefully than was needed.

"Okay, okay, it looks great!" Finn squirmed with a breathless laugh.

Poe leaned over him with a smoky gaze, fingers slipping beneath the band of his pants and wrapping hotly around his cock. A deep breath wound out of Finn and his head pulled back into the mattress. Poe's eyes wandered the luscious curves of his parted lips; he could get lost in that moist gap. He pumped until Finn's silky length went hard in his hand. I wonder…he wanted to see that look of unexpected pleasure flash across Finn's face like lightning, wanted to see his eyes fly open to his in ragged disbelief and hunger. Keeping scorching eye contact, he pressed with his middle and ring fingers up into the hot, firm flesh between his balls and anus.
"Ahn!" Finn went tense as braided cord, a pulse of pleasure radiating out from deep inside of him. This was completely different than the localized satisfaction he knew from his cock—this was a blooming, expansive heat that throbbed through every fiber of his pelvis. "Oh my gods!" His hands fist ed the hardly straightened quilt.

Poe grinned; there was the look he wanted. He let off the pressure, gave him a second to try and recover, and then pushed slowly upwards into the meat of him again.

"Nn!" Finn grit his teeth.

Arousal licked a slow flame through Poe's body. That high keening gasp—he hadn't been prepared for that. Finn was responsive—more responsive than he'd honestly expected.

"What is that?" Finn gasped, his eyes fixing on Poe as if he were some sort of all-knowing god.

Poe loomed over him with an air of control that wound a thrill up Finn's spine. The air vibrated between their bodies.

"That," he kissed, "my dear," another kiss, "is your prostate."

"Holy shit."

"Uh huh." Poe's eyes crinkled knowingly.

The pressure ebbed then and returned as if Poe were physically pushing a wave of pleasure from his core clear through to the crown of his head. His cock strained against his fly and then suddenly the warmth and delicious pressure of Poe's hand ghosted away, slipping back out of his pants and Finn nearly lost his mind at the cool lack of him. But Poe was leaning back with a smile, his fingers going for Finn's fly as if he were about to unwrap a gift.

In the front of the ship, ensconced within the cockpit, they could dimly hear the droids whistling and chirping and thought nothing of it until the sharp clatter of knuckles against their door tensed them apart.

"Coming in!" Snap's excited voice announced and then the door shot open.

They'd hardly had time enough to pull away from one another.

"Dude! Some warning, maybe?" Poe straightened up with a scandalized look. Finn, however, was ready to fling himself out into the void of space. Mortified, he hastily pivoted away and crossed his legs, hoping that the bulk of his thigh would hide his erection.

"I knocked! Sorry, anyways, the droids are done compiling all the data that Tubbs lifted! They've got a list ready to go!" He jabbed a thumb back in the direction of the cockpit.

"Alright!" Poe forgot his indignation, face brightening as he stood. "Let's take a look!" He hurried after Snap, all thought of romance leaping from his mind like ships into lightspeed. He paused at the door and glanced over his shoulder—Finn remained seated, battened down with a somewhat pained look on his face. "You coming?"

Finn shot him a droll glare and forced a slow breath through gritted teeth. "No, unfortunately I am not coming. Give me a sec."

The snarky grin that curled Poe's lips made Finn want to both throttle him and simultaneously rip all of his clothes off. He shook his head as Poe turned and disappeared into the hall with a ringing
"So do any of those names mean anything to you?" Snap asked as Poe approached with a smug look.

Poe leant over the dash, eyes scrolling down the glowing list of 17 planets, moons, and colonies. He rubbed his lips, brow furrowing. "Well, I've heard of them all. But they don't really stand out to me, other than being in the middle of nowhere."

[These were mentioned in conjunction with Umbra Core with the highest frequency. But we were unable to pinpoint a singular location.] BB-8 spoke up.

"Hmm…would make sense for them to operate out on the fringes…” He turned and snickered as Finn walked up, still looking slightly frustrated though he'd obviously managed to get himself under control. Poe patted him fondly on the back as he edged around BB-8 and peered down at the display screen.

"What about you, Finn? Any of those set off a charge?" Snap asked.

Finn's aborted desire vanished as his eyes darted back and forth down the line of names. "Yeah. Yeah, actually! That one, Rothana, " he pointed at the third name on the list, "that's from the first case I was studying on Base! And…that's from one too! And that one!" A shaking grin bloomed and he brought a hand to his mouth. "Almost all of these were singled out in the General's files!"

Snap and Poe shared a quick, excited look and then turned in unison to Finn.

"Finn—that cinches it!" Poe took him by the sleeves as if Finns arms were railings that could keep him from flying off the handle, fairly vibrating with the possibility that they had discovered something big. "Umbra Core is supplying the First Order with children for troops from those planets, and surveillance equipment. Which means-

"If we find Umbra Core working there, we can trace them to the First Order!"

They went off like corks flying from champagne bottles, crashing into a hard embrace, dragging Snap into it, even turning and hugging the droids. BB-8 wobbled happily, patting Tubbs on it's canister head with it's manipulator arm.

Snap grinned and nodded, but he could not quite muster the level of excitement the rest of them attained; he worried that perhaps he'd become too much of a cynic as he'd gotten older. He gave them a few minutes and reluctantly brought up a major concern.

"Yes, it's great we've got this information—but…"

"Oh, here it comes." Poe rolled his eyes. "Come on, be happy for five minutes, Snap."

"I am happy!" He plastered a grin onto his face. "See? Very happy and elated."

[No you're not.] BB-8 chortled.

"Okay, but just say that we find out something on one of those planets. Say we find out exactly where the First Order is operating from. Then what? That's the same problem we keep running up against."

"Let's just take this one step at a time and see where it leads." Poe cautioned.
"Yeah, we're the only people who know about this connection, so we've got to act on it. And who knows? We could still find the Resistance." Finn spoke up and Poe found himself endlessly grateful for his continued optimism. "If we get that far, we could join up again and really let the First Order have it."

Snap thawed. He could not bring himself to dim the brightness in their eyes and smiles with his level-headed caution. "Yeah," he relented, "it could happen. So then, where do we start first?"

Finn moved out of Poe's embrace with a beaming look, his eyes roving down the list of names. He could picture clearly the faces of the 21 missing human children, and those of the 13 non-humans who'd been left for dead like so much trash. "Rothana." His expression hardened. "I want to start there."

Poe nodded. "Then that's what we'll do." Within moments the ship had vanished into hyperspace.

Oz slammed the cartridge into his newly cleaned and reassembled BlasTech T-6 heavy blaster pistol. The blocky, hard-edged weapon gleamed in the Comeuppance's overhead light. He turned it this way and that, admiring its strong lines, pressing his eye right up to the deadly hollow of the barrel, and then he shoved it aside across the dash. Leaning back in his pilot's chair with his arms crossed before his broad chest, his eyes wondered distastefully over to the assassin droid standing still and seemingly lifeless as a block of durasteel. A rather imposing block of durasteel, as it took up nearly all the space in the little room. For three days the droid had been silently processing the data that they had beaten out of the sorry remains of the Kan-Jun gang. It was a fair trade; the R3 droid had copied the information from the city computer, the gang had copied it from the droid, and now they had copied it from the gang. Plugged into the Comeuppance's powerful onboard computer, IG-00 had not budged nor spoken unless Oz questioned it directly.

It was, quite frankly, driving him mad. It galled him to have to rely on the droids superior data-processing abilities, it galled him that it seemed to possess no sense of urgency, and it galled him to have Zero on his ship. The droid's ship was absolutely uninhabitable to organic beings, unless they were being ferried as cargo—only the hold had the ability to be pressurized. The droid's ship, which possessed no name, also possessed no living quarters and no life support systems—such things were superfluous to a mechanical being. The cockpit was simply a shielded socket that Zero inserted itself into, like a cartridge into a blaster. When fully integrated, it was nearly indistinguishable from the skeletal ship. Oz had to admit that it ranked high on the intimidation scale.

He could have simply let the droid use it's ship and been free of the aggravation of playing host, for it's computers were every bit as powerful as his own, but he refused now to be parted from Zero; he did not trust that the assassin droid would not simply take the information and run—it was what he would have done, had he not needed Zero's processing power and ability to identify his mark's bio-identities.

"Grakt are you making any headway at all, or are you just taking up space, Zero?"

The head rotated silently towards him, eight blank eyes casting his paper-white skin in a hellish red glow. "I am 99 percent finished."

"Well thank gods for that. You do realize they could be anywhere in the fucking universe by now, right?"

The droid did not answer, and Oz quietly bristled.

They remained parked outside of Zero's empty warehouse hide-out, and the homeless that frequented
the area had given their two ships a wide berth. Oz liked to think that the young man who's hand he'd broken had spread the word to keep clear, though it was more likely that the spot was well known as a lair for a droid with no emotions, and no qualms about killing.

Oz stared out at the smog-smeared buildings that loomed like mountain walls, punctuated here and there with lamp-light and blaster-fire. It was a skyless realm, as if they'd been dropped into a sheer chasm of duracrete and filth. A mangy Corellian scavenger rat the size of his torso nosed about in a pile of trash some six meters away. Lazily he reached for the blast controls. A pulse of red light leapt away from the ship and detonated with a flashing bang, vaporizing both creature and trash. Oz smirked.

"I am finished." Zero's hollow gear-grinding voice announced.

"Finally." Oz swiveled towards it. "What've you got?"

"The man onboard the Schooner lifted information pertaining to an organization known as Umbra Core."

"Umbra Core? What the fuck do they want with Umbra Core?" Oz's brow furrowed.

"Inconclusive."

Oz leaned back, a finger to his lips. "Umbra Core…specialize in slave trade tech and transport, right?"

"Correct."

"Hmm…" He sat back, thinking hard. *What do they care about the slave trade? Why aren't they trying to find their allies? Or the First Order? Why some shitty crime syndicate?* His eyes popped open, a memory from Dameron's droid screeching into his head with such suddenness that he was struck momentarily mute. He could picture it clearly, though at the time it had seemed unimportant; Leia Organa giving FN-2187 a mission. A mission to find stolen children in the hopes of following the trail back to the First Order.

"That's it." He breathed.

"What is it?" IG-00 asked flatly.

"Umbra Core! 2187! He's—they think that Umbra Core is supplying the First Order with troops! It was a mission Organa gave to 2187, and he's trying to complete it!"

The expressionless cylinder-head of the droid cocked slightly. "Why would 2187 care that the First Order utilizes Umbra Core?"

"Because they're dumbass hero-types, droid. Probably hoping to trace their supply lines back to the First Order and take 'em on single-handedly. And," he broke off, another piece falling into place with obvious perfection, "of course 2187'd take that case personally—that must've been how they got hold of him too! So if he can keep other kids from their hooks, boy," he shook his head, "I bet that'd give him a nice, self-important rush."

The droid was quiet for a moment; it could not comprehend why a man should feel personally affected by something happening to others half-way across the galaxy. "What would Dameron, 2187, and the unidentified male hope to do should your assumption prove correct?"

"Who knows? I bet you anything *they* don't know either. But I guarantee you they're gonna act
anyways, and that means we do too.” He turned back towards the computer. "What kind of information, exactly, were they searching for on Umbra Core?"

"Sales records. Suppliers. Bases of operation."

"Any planets mentioned?"

"Several."

Oz rubbed at his chin. "Narrow it down to the top ten."

Twenty seconds passed in silence. "Done. I have compiled a list of ten planets in order of frequency of mention."

Oz's eyes narrowed upon the first name of the ten.

"Ylesia. That's the closest one out from Nar Shaddaa—could be they'd go there first." He clapped his hands together and grinned. "It should be our first stop too."

"Agreed."


Kes pressed the call closed and then stood in his half-lit kitchen, staring blankly through the cabinets. As he'd promised, he'd called Poe as soon as he'd gotten back to Yavin IV from his trip to Naboo. 

Gods…it was good to hear his voice. The relief of it was short lived and warred silently with his indignation that, as a father, he had to constantly fear that perhaps he would never hear his son's voice again; that each time he spoke to him may be the last time. It was there in the back of his mind every time he closed the connection. Will he pick up next time? Where is he now? Is he okay? Have they caught him?

The years weighed upon his shoulders like leaden stone as he stood there alone in a house that had once been filled with life. Dust had settled onto his belongings since he'd been away, and his potted plants had withered and browned. It was so silent, silent enough that he could pretend that perhaps his family were all in their rooms, softly sleeping. He could pretend that he could crack open Poe's room and find him there, a little boy again, bundled up in his ship-quilt, his hair dark and curly as his mothers. He could pretend that Shara would be lying in bed, welcoming him down with a kiss and a smile and she would tell him about her day.

"Oh, Shara. What am I doing?" He murmured quietly.

He filled a cup with water, sipped at it, and gave the rest to the nearest plant. Passing by photos full of ghostly still faces, he walked stiffly for his bedroom with Poe's voice echoing in his ears.

We're really okay, dad. We stopped by Ubrikkia a few days ago, and we're gonna go back once all of this is over—Finn really liked it there. You and mom went there years ago, right? It's freakin' gorgeous. Anyways, I'm glad you made it back home alright.

What's home without the people who made it home? Sometimes I think the memories are more real than this place. It was as if the house could not exist outside of the context of his family; alone, it was just a shell and he tried not to apply that metaphor to himself. He stretched out on his bed. A balmy breeze drifted in through the open window, carrying with it the slow sonorous trill of amphibians and insects and the far off rumble of the usual nighttime rainstorms. Moonlight shone in a pale wedge across the ceiling and he stared at it for a long, long while as his mind wandered through decades of
hazy, bittersweet memory.

Childish laughter bright as sunshine rang in his ears. He could hear it plainly. He was stomping down the hallway, pretending to be a rancor, his hands stretched out like gnarled claws. There was Poe, screeching with laughter as he darted gleefully ahead on little legs and ducked into his room.

"I'm gonna catch you! I'm gonna eat you up!"

"No! Heheehe! No rancors, daddy!"

"Raaar! Here I come!"

A painful smile tightened the old man's mouth. *When did he get so big? When did I get so old?*

He rolled over and the memory welled and morphed into Poe, a few years older with tears running down his cheeks. How it hurt him to remember that little face.

"Dad, I miss mommy. Can I stay in here tonight?"

"Oh, Poe...come here, buddy. I can't sleep either. Let's go sit by the tree instead for a little while, okay?"

The lights had swayed overhead, rippling and fluttering in the sighing wind, as he sat back against the smooth bark with his son cradled against his chest. Nighttime ringed them round but the tree held them in a hazy circle of blue.

"There now, it's not so bad out here, is it? It's almost like she's with us."

"...But I want her back for real." Poe sniffed.

"I know, baby. I do too. But she's not really gone—not all the way. You see those lights? Your mom believed that that's the energy inside of us." He pressed a hand over Poe's chest. "That's what makes us who we are and it's all around us, all the time. And her energy is in you too. Even when someone is gone, that energy keeps flowing, and we can be closer to it here. Energy can't be created or destroyed. Did they teach you that in school yet?"

"Yeah."

"Well, it's the truth."

"But...I can't hug energy."

You can't hug energy, Kes mused with a sad shake of his head. *He was a smart kid. He knew even then that it's not enough.* He thought for a moment of getting up and sitting out beneath the Force Tree. He had done so often enough after Shara had died, and then still yet more once Poe had moved out. Some men talked to their dearly departed at their graves—Kes talked to Shara beneath the tree that they had planted together some thirty years ago. He'd caught Poe sitting beneath it more times than he could count, especially in that first week following Rhys' death. ...I never wanted my boy to feel that kind of pain. He thought of Aynn and Brin, of the agony they had gone through in losing their son; it had been bad enough for him—he could not imagine being on the other side of it, though he had morbidly pictured that scenario many times, as if that would somehow ease his devastation if it came to pass. *Please, don't let me ever find that out.*

Gods...just let him be happy. Let him and Finn be happy. Let them grow old together like I couldn't do with Shara. I don't care what happens to me, but let those kids make it.
Thanks so much for reading everyone! We're really buckling down for the ending arc here--I clearly have no concept of how long it takes me to do what I intend to do, but I can *feel* it. The ending is nigh! I'm enjoying these last few chapters that have given the boys some time to themselves without anything actively bad happening to them. It was also really nice to write something from Kes' perspective again, even if it was kind of somber. I love that old dude. I hope the feel of this starting off light and then ending rather ominously came through.

Anywho, have a great holiday if that's your deal--and if not, have a great December! I don't know if I'll get another update done this month, so if not, I'll see you in the new year!

-Bluestem
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Hyrotol light freighter, you are cleared for docking bay 38."

"Copy. Proceeding to bay 38."

Finn glanced at Poe's yellow-tinted face as he guided them down through the filmy atmosphere towards the main landmass of Rothana. It was a planet of sulfurous yellow and thick ocher; dried seas and bleached, crumbling mountains. The dusty air swirled and roiled about like the mist of a bubbling cauldron, buffeting and prying at the Hyrotol's backswpt wings. Poe steeled his grip, feeling still a small twinge deep within his wrists. Easy...easy, baby, he willed the ship.

The sunlight faded and deepened as a wall of dust enveloped them and for a moment they were flying blind, Poe relying wholly on the instrumentation to keep them level and on course. Grit skittered abrasively across the hull, rough as sandpaper in their ears. BB-8 lowed softly, looking up at the canopy ceiling as if it expected it to be sheared off. Then, just as suddenly, they were through the choking haze. A desolate cityscape opened up in a tangle of pipelines and rust.

Naked struts and beams leered above them as they angled down, every bit as large as Nar Shaddaa's tallest buildings, but unsettlingly off-kilter; grasping skeletal arms that had clawed their way through the scorched earth below. The Hyrotol drifted, small as a midge amidst the armatures that supported Rothana's massive mines and refineries. Smokestacks loomed here and there, the greasy, sulfurous plumes mixing into the ever present wind and further shrouding the light of day. The mining sledges and digging equipment far below looked as small and innocuous as Poe's model A-wing, though Finn knew from the muted shadows stretching across the land that they must be as big as corvette cruisers. As they neared, he could make out the long, low shapes of dwellings. There were no skyscrapers here, perhaps because the sky was not worth touching.

The spaceport, if it could be called that, consisted of one control tower, vacant, earthen lots and a few weakly blinking guide lights.


"It all looks the same," Finn squinted through the bleary light.

"Just pick a plot—ten credits says they wouldn't notice." Snap shrugged, though he too was trying to pierce the haze.

"Oh, there it is. Empty patch number 38, here we come."

The Hyrotol touched down, the reverse thrusters kicking up a cloud of dust that once again shuttered out the light. Poe's mouth thinned. "Well...this place looks wonderful." He didn't want to say it out loud, but privately he wondered if a life of hard labor in Rothana's mines wouldn't be just as awful as forced servitude to the First Order. Finn held still as stone as Snap turned away to get ready, his eyes glued to the hypnotically swirling dust with a tense expression. He was lit with earthy yellow so that almost he seemed molten. Poe watched him for a silent second, wondering what it was that he was thinking. Does he feel something bad out there? Or is it knowing that kids were taken from here to go through what he had to go through.

"Hey..." He reached out and softly touched Finn's arm, and the other man snapped to attention as if
shocked to find himself planetside. "What is it? What do you feel out there?"

Finn glanced away from Poe's concerned eyes, back towards the thirsty cityscape. He couldn't name for sure what it was that he was feeling. It was not a warning—more like a memory of sadness that was not his; a cry that had never ceased. Though he knew that Poe wouldn't think badly of him, he didn't know how to explain it without sounding insane. "I don't know." He said simply.

"Is it…something bad? Like the assassin droid?"

He shrugged and moved away without eye contact, a silent wall thrown up in his wake. Poe watched him disappear into their room and tried not to take Finn's dismissal personally. *Maybe he really doesn't know what he's feeling. It's got to be confusing having the Force nagging at you all the time.*

They donned their disguise in a matter of seconds; already they'd become like a second skin to them. As they made their way into the hall, a terse cacophony of chirping and blatting screeched into their ears. Poe peered down into the hold and arched a brow—the droids appeared to be arguing. Snap was standing by with a look of shocked bemusement.

[No, you went out on Nar Shaddaa and on Ubrikkia! It's my turn to go out!] BB-8 rolled forwards and shoved Tubb's solid canister body. The green and white droid barely budged.

[I went out because I'm best equipped to slice and eavesdrop! Therefore, I would be best equipped to go out again!] It jabbed BB-8 with it's outstretched scomp link arm. For a spherical being with no expressions, BB-8 managed to draw itself up in a righteous huff.

[You are slow! You are so slow you got left behind and put everyone in danger!]

Tubbs wobbled back and forth in a rage. [I managed to slice all the information we're using now! Have you done?]

BB-8 thwacked it twice with it's manipulator arm. [I only managed to save the map to Skywalker, and outrun rathtars and a bounty hunter, and help rescue Poe, and-]

"Okay, okay, guys! Let's all calm down, huh? We're all friends here." Poe marched between them, his outstretched arms gently prying the droids apart. BB-8 whipped out it's arc-welder and Poe shot it a look of dire warning. "Buddy, if you shock me with that you are grounded on this ship for a month." Poe said sternly.

BB-8 quivered in indecision, then sulkily withdrew the welder, Tubbs tittered and shot it a rude raspberry. BB-8 lunged forwards again and it took Snap stepping in to get them apart. Finn found a slow smile crawling across his face.

"Okay, that's it!" Poe wiped a hand across what was visible of his brow as he laid down the law. "Tubbs, BB-8 is right—he has been stuck on the ship for a while, so it's his turn to go out—ah-ah! No arguing!"

"Fair's fair, Tubbs." Snap shrugged. "You can link up and keep looking for the Resistance, alright?"

Tubbs rolled off in a huff, and it was BB-8's turn to burble with laughter.

Poe nudged the droid. "Don't be a sore winner, buddy. Nobody likes that."

Snap snorted a laugh as he hit the ramp controls. Contrary to what Finn had expected, the air was surprisingly chill—and sourly noxious. He wrinkled up his nose against the sulfurous reek.
"Oh man…” Poe coughed as they walked out into the gusting, dust laden air. He tucked his hands well up within his voluminous sleeves and hunkered down. They could feel more than hear a constant low, grinding, as of machinery gnawing through solid rock far below their feet. BB-8 hesitated on the ramp; the desolate landscape and wind-driven sand seemed suddenly much less appealing.

[I changed my mind. Tubbs can go this time—I want to stay on the ship.]

"No can do, buddy. You asked for this, so now you gotta suffer with me." Poe grinned evilly behind his wrap, walked back up the ramp, and nudged the droid down to the scorched earth.

[Yay.]

"It's not that bad, guys." Snap turned around with a sardonic grin and Finn forgot his strange sullenness. A laugh burst mindlessly from him; the other man looked as if he'd had a bag of flour tossed into his face—each strand of his beard had been dusted yellow. Poe cackled.

"Man, I never thought I'd be happy to wear these dumb wraps."

Finn patted him on the shoulder and started forwards, anxious to get the search underway. His eyes traced the pipes running overhead from one refinery to the next, like the bars of a cage. Fire burst in deafening flashes from sooty flare stacks, looming ominously above them in swaths of ash. The ground, crusted with salt, sand, and frost, crushed beneath their feet. The overall impression of the place was of a creeping, mechanistic lifelessness. It rankled Finn even worse than Nar Shaddaa had—at least there, there had been life. Here, everything seemed coated in a dusting of misery. He imagined that if he focused, he'd see hardly enough life-light to fill a space cruiser.

Poe tucked up alongside him, his eyes tracing the ominous metal struts and using him partially as a windscreen. "So, if an organization is ferrying kids around, this…spaceport…would be their most likely operating spot. Unless they have someplace under the radar."

[There are many places under the radar.] BB-8 chirped from behind. [There is enough particulate interference over some areas to render them invisible to long range scanners.]

"Not to mention what's gotta be going on in those mines. There could be underground hangers." Snap added, drawing his shirt up over his nose to filter out the dust.

"What do they mine here, anyways?" Finn asked over his shoulder.

[Dedlanite, I believe—it's used to power blasters.] "Sounds great." Poe said sarcastically.

They saw no air traffic and strangely few pedestrians as they walked towards the heart of the city. Those they did come across walked as though bent with a heavy load and passed them by in a hurry to get out of the wind and dust. Finn couldn't blame them; even with the wrap over his face, he felt certain his lungs were being scoured.

He stopped dead as they rounded a corner. There was the shell of a building that he recognized. Parts of it were scorched black, while other areas showed comparatively fresh duracreet and plaster. It was low, ringed in with run down, sand-blasted housing. Poe walked into him, and Snap into him. They stood back.

"What is it?" Poe asked.
Finn could hear the newswoman as if he'd opened the report only yesterday. *You can see before me that the child-care center here at Bremilin Hosk is in complete disarray. Local enforcers have cordoned off the area, but Head Enforcer Pral Gortun has confirmed 13 casualties—most of whom were caretakers and support staff. Sadly, the bodies of five children were recovered.*

"Bremilin Hosk. This is the place those kids were taken from." He answered leadenly.

Poe looked about. If it had once played host to children and their caretakers, there was now no sign of it. The only obvious thing that he could make out was that a fire had swept over it.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." Finn nodded, starting forwards. They stalked about the perimeter of the vacant building, Poe and Snap unsure what it was they were supposed to be looking for. Finn reached out, and as his fingers touched the frigid duracreet, a burst of fire roared from a flare stack. The sound and lights morphed in Finn's eyes and ears, and suddenly he was within the building and fire danced before him, flames licking so closely he could feel the searing heat. Menacing, shadowy forms moved in the twining heart of the inferno and from them blaster fire erupted in a sharp, staccato spray. Plaintive cries echoed in his ears, children crying out in terror and pain. He jerked away as if he'd been burned, coming back to the present with a ragged inhalation.

"Finn! Finn, what happened?" Poe asked, taking his arm and drawing him back from its foundations. The building sat with a heavy, brooding silence and Finn turned away from its empty eyes. "You went all…still."

"I—I don't know." He gasped. He licked his lips, glancing in embarrassment from Snap to Poe; each of them looked deeply troubled. He wasn't sure how long his vision had lasted—it could have been seconds or hours. He would have felt less awkward had it just been Poe alone; he hadn't told Snap that he was Force sensitive and he worried that he'd be scoffed at, as Snap had done to Maz. But there was no getting around it. "I had a vision." He managed. He held tight to Poe's eyes.

"A vision?" Each of them asked at the same time, though Poe's was a tone more of concern than of confusion.

"Yeah—that—that's never happened before."

"What do you mean, 'a vision'?" Snap asked, his brows furrowed.

"Just what it sounds like. I could see what happened in there—the fire, the kids. I could hear the blasters and…crying." He took a deep breath, Poe's eyes the only thing holding him steady.

"But…how could-" Snap began but Poe cut him off with a hurried and rather curt explanation.

"Finn can sense the Force, Snap. He can't use it like a Jedi, but he can feel it and see it." He said as if daring Snap to contradict him. When Snap kept silent, Poe rubbed Finn's back and glanced about the gravestone of a building. "So this is the place, huh." It was not a question. Finn was so grateful for Poe's unquestioning acceptance that he wanted to hug him to him for minutes on end.

BB-8 bleeped a quick alarm and each of them spun around. A bundled, backlit form was silently watching them from the grimy doorway of a nearby building. The figure started forwards through the drifting dust and ash, a mute specter, and Poe's hand hovered above his blaster. Finn, however, focused on the form with hesitant curiosity; just as certainly as he had heard cries from the past, he knew that this being did not intend to harm them.

Dry, cracked orange hands removed layered scarves from a lined face of orange and patterned white.
A Togruta, Finn realized. She peered up at them with wonder and an edge of caution.

"Who are you?"

The three of them glanced at one another. Poe offered hurried introductions. "I'm Dand, ma'am. And this is Wex and Snap."

She searched their faces for a while longer. "Why are you here? At this building?"

Finn felt moved to partial honesty. "We…we're studying cases of missing children that have fallen under the radar. This is Bremilin Hosk, isn't it?"

Her mouth went thin. "You Enforcers?"

"No, ma'am." Poe shook his head. "Are Enforcers the local security?"

She nodded, green eyes darting quickly back and forth across the street. "You come with me."

"We actually need to get going," Snap began, but Finn took a step forward and the woman led him back towards the dark metal apartment from which she'd come. Poe looked to Snap, shrugged, and followed after him.

"Why do I have a bad feeling about this?" Snap groaned to BB-8.

The woman's apartment was barren and pocked with poverty. A single light shone above a circular table empty but for a cup of watered down caf. It all had a distinct air of disuse and clipped functionality; though it was inhabited, it could not have seemed more empty, as if a laugh had not been uttered under its roof in years. She threw a quick look back out at the dusty street, and shut the door solidly behind her. As she turned towards them they saw that she was younger than they had initially thought, and that a life of hard labor had aged her prematurely. Her face was lined and creased from squinting against the bitter wind, her striped headtails hung thinly down her chest, and her cloth-draped body hid the wiry edge of malnourishment. It was as if the sand had scoured away all softness and superfluous joy until only this hard being was left.

She began at once. "You're detectives? With galactic rights groups?" The dim overhead light and cramped setting gave the conversation the uncanny feeling of an interrogation.

"Uh..." Finn looked to Poe for support.

Poe swallowed; he couldn't bring himself to lie outright, but nor did he feel he could give away the whole truth of their visit. "No, not exactly, ma'am. We're working for an independent organization—we came across a report on the incident at…" he trailed off conspicuously.

"Bremilin Hosk," Finn supplemented.

Poe hurriedly nodded. "And thought it might tie into other cases of the same nature."

"Of the same nature?" Her white, naked brows leveled, obviously suspicious that Poe had forgotten the name of the old center.

"You...lost someone there. Didn't you?" Finn said gently and then realization flooded him with a wave of pity. "There were two togruta girls—twins. They were yours."

She could hardly have looked more stricken if Finn had punched her in the guts. Her weary eyes brimmed and for a heavy moment she looked away. When she turned back to them, her eyes were
hard and dry as the earth outside. "You've done your research. I...I didn't think anyone in the galaxy cared. It wasn't a gas explosion, was it?"

"An explosion?" Finn's brows furrowed.

"Yes, a mining accident—they happen all the time." She moved conspiratorially closer, her tall montrails throwing dagger shadows over her face. "But I never believed them. First they told us it was an attack—an abduction; but then they changed their story. Said it was just a mining accident and to leave it be."

A somber silence fell and their host shifted uncomfortably.

"Oh, I'm forgetting myself—we so seldom have visitors to Rothana. Sit, please." She motioned them to the room's small scuffed table with an embarrassed flush, as if she'd forgotten her poverty until they'd arrived, comparatively well dressed and well fed. "I—I don't have much to offer."

"No, no," Poe quickly assured her, "this is plenty. It's nice enough to get out of the wind—don't go through any trouble for us."

"Won't you take off your masks?"

Finn and Poe glanced at one another and Poe thought fast. "They're religious—it'd be improper to take them off before a woman we're not related to."

"Oh," She nodded and then hesitantly met their eyes. "You said there were...other cases?"

Finn nodded. "Several, mostly on outer rim worlds like this where people can fall through the cracks. There's a common theme—human children are taken, nonhuman children and witness are killed."

She swallowed deeply, fierce tears quivering just below the surface. "I knew it. I knew it wasn't an accident."

Snap stood from the chair she'd offered him and motioned her to sit. She sunk down mindlessly.

"I'm sorry," Finn said softly, though Poe sensed fury beneath the words. "Can I ask...what's your name?"

"Lymira Soh."

"Lymira, I know this has to be hard to talk about but...has anything like that happened on Rothana before?" Snap asked.

She shrugged limply. "Years ago—there were explosions, accidents...that sort of thing—and people would go missing. It's a mining city, after all; it's always been dangerous to live here, but there always were a strange number of children disappearing or getting hurt. There hasn't been anything like what happened to my girls...not in a long time."

"Do you know why that is? Has something changed?" Poe asked, leaning forwards.

She laughed despairingly and motioned to her shabby apartment as if it should be obvious. "The mines are drying up. They have been for the past decade. No one comes here for work anymore; the only people left are those who are stuck here. Like me. And it's gotten more dangerous; you have to go deeper to get a fraction of the ore, and Magistrate Neldin has replaced most of us with droid laborers." Her eyes flicked sharp as a switchblade to the sphere of BB-8. It tucked behind Poe's calf with a mournful warble. "You don't have to pay droids. And they don't care about working
conditions."

"So the attacks stopped once the mines started to go bad?" Finn pressed.

"Yes, more or less. I hadn't really drawn that connection until now, but that is how it's been."

Poe sat back, his arms crossed before his chest. "So when the initial reports came out about the incident at Bremiln Hosk, you were told it was an attack."

"Yes."

"And then they switched it to an accident. Do you know why?"

"Because…the reports went to the Magistrate." She said with a look of long suffering fury. "I've always suspected he had a hand in whatever it was that happened. The Enforcers always changed their stories to suit whatever he wanted, but I could never prove it. None of us could."

Finn stood. "This Magistrate—does he live here?"

"Yes, a few kilometers to the north, up on the bluff. The air's clearer there. You can't miss it—it's a nice house." She looked between the three of them. "Are you going to arrest him?"

Poe's mouth thinned ruefully. "We don't have that authority, ma'am, but we can get this information to the people who do." It wasn't exactly a lie; he fully intended to make good on his word if they ever found the Resistance.

"Do you think…was he selling the children?"

"It sounds like he may be linked to a slavers ring operating in this part of space."

"Who are they? What's their name?" She asked with cold venom in her voice.

Again, they traded looks.

"It might be best if you don't know. If they find out that you have information on them—" Snap began but Lymira's high, mirthless laugh stopped him cold.

"What more could they do to me?" She opened her arms wide, as if inviting the universe to take a shot. "The mines took my husband. Slavers took my girls. I'm not afraid."

A tense silence stretched and then she stood, haunted eyes meeting and lingering on each of their faces. She reached out, took Finn's hand between palms rough as stone, then did the same to Poe, and to Snap. "Thank you. It's been 12 years…but I think of them every day. Every day. It's good to know that I wasn't wrong…that I wasn't losing my mind. It's hard though, knowing that they were just…collateral."

Poe's heart twisted. He knew that there was no way to rank one person's loss over another's, but he knew that even in the worst of his grief he had had the privilege of care; a family and friends to look out for him, easy access to food, water, heat, and clothing. "I'm sorry, Lymira."

They stood from the table, thanking their host for the information and for opening her home to them. As they walked out into the gritty wind, Finn turned back with a sudden thought.

"Lymira…were there many parents killed in that attack?"

"No, none. We were all in the mines when it happened, but most have either moved on or gotten
themselves killed down there."

Finn nodded to himself, a strange, bitter hope growing in his chest. "Thank you. Thank you so much."

She met his eyes, some understanding passing between them like a spark of electricity; a childless mother sensing the kindred pain of a lost son. "Will you make them pay for what they've done?" She asked him lowly.

"Yes." He said with blazing determination. "I can promise you that."

Finn streaked ahead of them on quick, clipped strides, his robe billowing ominously behind him in the cold breeze. Poe walked quickly to keep up with him, nameless worry skittering through his chest. He'd never seen Finn so single-mindedly furious—he could feel his righteous anger radiating from him like a sun, and it frightened him. He felt that they were moving unstoppably towards the edge of a cliff, that Finn was in danger of doing something that would go irrevocably against the goodness that lie at the heart of him. He jogged a few steps and caught at the flapping edge of Finn's sleeve.

"Finn—Finn, I know you want to go up there, but maybe you should let me and Snap question him," He began.

"No, Poe." Finn jerked his arm away. "I have to do this."

"We need to come up with a plan." Snap pointed out, his shirt once again pulled over his nose. "There'll be guards—droids probably, judging from what she said about him."

"I don't care. I broke into Starkiller—I can break into a house."

"Finn," Poe tried, but Finn spun about with a look that bordered on agony.

"I'm going Poe. Stay here if you want." He bit out.

Poe stood for a second, his arm falling slackly to his side as Finn hurried on without him. "Yeah, like hell." He muttered. The dusty stone road beneath their feet began to twist and turn back upon itself, winding in a serpentine up a crumbling hill of rust-red stone. At its rounded top was a structure set completely apart from the mechanistic squalor below. It was, for one thing, a bright, clean white and trimmed in glossy metal that reflected the ochre dust of the mines without actually coming into contact with it. A flat, orange tiled roof glimmered in the dull sunlight. While any Coruscanti aristocrat would have scoffed and called it 'quaint', it seemed a veritable palace compared to the barrenness it presided over.

"BB-8 are you getting any readings? Organic or otherwise." Poe said in hush.

[One organic form in the upper story, rightmost wing. And I am getting several electrical readings. 12 droids, four at the main gate, the rest are stationed within the building.]

"12? Sounds like someone's paranoid," Poe muttered, drawing his blaster.

"Can you tell what type?" Snap asked quickly; Finn was moving on, reckless in his anger.

[Arakyd Security droids. C 7 models.] BB-8 chirped as Poe hurried after Finn.

"C-7s, C-7s," He murmured, his mind scrolling through the encyclopedia of knowledge he'd been
compiling on droids ever since he was a kid. He darted forwards. "Poe, that model was discontinued a long time ago—weak plating over the servomotors. If we can get a shot in on the abdominal plating, it should short them out."

"Right," Poe had hardly spoken when blaster fire opened up not ten meters ahead. Poe sucked in a breath, sprinting forwards with his heart in his throat. He found Finn unharmed and tucked behind a slight ridge of sandstone, one grey, humanoid droid lying in a sputtering, twitching heap as the remaining three crept cautiously closer.

"Finn!" Poe yelled over the sharp blasts of plasma searing into the rock all around. "Aim for the stomachs—it'll short them out!"

Finn nodded, his blaster held up and at the ready. He darted out from behind cover, fired twice, and dropped one of the three while at the same time Poe and Snap took care of the remaining two. The droids hit the ground in unison, the acrid scent of fried electronics sparking into the breeze. BB-8 edged timidly around the quivering metallic limbs.

Poe spared one glance at the upper stories of the house and then darted to join Finn behind his ridge of sandstone. He took him by the shoulder and shoved him back against the rock, angry and unnerved. "What the hell are you doing?" He hissed.

"I'm getting in there." Finn growled and tried to shove past, but Poe pinned him once more.

"And we will help you do that, Finn—we will—but we have to do it as a team, do you hear me? Going in alone is a good way to get killed."

Snap edged up, BB-8 squeezing against the stone as well.

Finn took a hard breath, his eyes steady on Poe's. He could not explain why, but he did not want them with him on this. He managed a stiff nod of agreement that Poe did not entirely trust.

"BB-8 says there are 8 more droids at intervals within the house—and one organic on the upper right floor. We need to look out for fire from those windows and—Finn, godammit!"

The other man broke away and sprinted into the open with Poe hard after him, confident that Snap was covering them from behind. Even Finn wasn't sure where this surge of brash rage was coming from—he only knew that if he held still for too long, he'd combust. He had to get into that house, he had to look that man in the eyes for himself. Deeply ingrained training led him automatically to places of cover, spots that would give him the advantage while hindering potential foes, and then he was at the main doors. Scattered red bolts lanced down from the upper level, and Snap's blaster answered. Poe slammed up alongside him, his back pressed against peeling stucco, breathing hard with a look of fury in his eyes.

Finn wanted to apologize, but he couldn't. Poe seemed to have expected that, though Finn didn't doubt that he intended to lay into him once all of this was over. Poe nodded towards the door. "Cover me!" They traded places, Poe removing the plate to the door controls and hurriedly hotwiring them. The heavy durasteel slabs opened with a well-oiled hiss and a spray of blaster fire welcomed them. They tucked hard to the edges of the door, Poe painfully aware that there was absolutely no cover to be had in this position; he could only hope that Snap would pick them off.

Two droids marched quickly from the cramped space, and they reacted immediately; Finn and Poe dropping them while Snap sniped the two that still remained within the foyer. The noise fell silent, and Snap ran across the gap with BB-8 whirring at his heels, skidding to a halt at the opposite edge of the doorframe.
"BB-8," Poe jerked his head towards the vacant entryway, "what's it look like? And," he took Finn's shoulder in a painful grip, "don't you dare rush in there."

BB-8 looked back and forth between the two of them, obviously unsure of what was going on. [There are four remaining droids. All seem to be mustered on the upper floor, near our target's room.]

"Okay, BB-8, you head in and get upstairs."

It bleeped in surprise. [Alone?]

"We'll be right behind you. Hopefully you'll distract them enough that we can get the drop on them. Snap, cover us, alright?"

"Right." He nodded gruffly, sweat running in dark lines through the dust that coated his face.

"BB-8, when you get up there, scream really loudly, and that'll be our cue to bust in."

[Well, that part will come naturally enough.]

The droid wobbled backwards half a pace as if girding it's nonexistent loins and then bulleted forwards over the lip of the door and into the shadowed house. There was the sharp thwack of it's towing cable being fired and repetitive thumping as it reeled itself upstairs. It screeched like a Dathomir banshee and Finn and Poe exploded into the house, Snap tucking in alongside them and fanning out to get a better view of the stairwell as they pounded up it. Red flashes lit the upper hall like lightning, BB-8 dodging and spinning like a top. The house was full of cobwebbed busts and plaques, furniture draped in white cloth, and floor tiles lying muted beneath a carpet of dust; the droid's tracks showed clearly as prints in fresh snow. Poe noted all of that as he ran, dropped to one knee, and opened fire. One dull grey body fell. Finn ran into a rolling dodge, popping up on the opposite side of the hallway and dropping the next two. He was almost disappointed; compared to the assassin droid, these obsolete machines were laughably ineffective.

[One left—it must be in the room with him.] BB-8 rolled around the shining metal carcasses and paused outside of a large, nicely trimmed doorway. Plugging it's scomp arm into the doors control panel, it fiddled it this way and that while it's three companions took up their positions. The door shot upwards, the last droid fell beneath their concentrated fire, and a plainly organic yelp scurried into their ears. Finn marched brazenly into the room without a second thought, and with one smooth motion he shot the small AT-3 blaster from the hand of a cowering, pudgy, older man.

"Ahh!" The old man shrieked, clutching his singed fingers to his chest and backing away with wide eyes. He stumbled over the twitching leg of the security droid, his eyes locked onto Finn's as the man advanced like a storm. "No, no please!"

Finn took him just below the neck, hefted him off of his feet, and slammed him into the far wall hard enough to rattle paintings in their frames. The man was perhaps a few years younger than Kes, but could not have been more physically different. He had pale, yellowed skin flecked with liver-spots and rheumy, watery eyes that flooded with tears as Finn's grip tightened across his thin collarbone.

"Are you Neldin?" Finn bit out in a voice that sent a chill up Poe's spine as he approached tensely from behind.

The old man's eyes darted across the room, landing for a moment upon Poe before he was shaken back to attention. He jerked and whimpered as the barrel of Finn's blaster pressed against his wrinkled forehead, his body going tense beneath Finn's hand.

"No, I mean, yes! Yes, but, p-please, whatever you want—I can get it for you! Money! You want
money, right?” He asked with pitiable hopefulness.

"You worked with the First Order. You worked with Umbra Core."

"I—I'm sure I don't—"

"You sold your own people!"

The old man's breath caught, and his silence fell like a guillotine. Finn's finger tightened on the trigger and the warm smell of urine seeped into the air as Neldin's bladder let go. Finn distantly felt Poe's hands upon his arm and realized with a start that he was trying to stop him.

"He deserves to die!" Finn yelled and Poe swallowed. "He's disgusting!"

"Please! Please—" Neldin whimpered, "I didn't know they worked with the F-First Order—I—I never had any—"

"You let them murder children!" Finn roared. "You tore families apart!"

"Y-yes, I admit, I've d-done some bad things! M-m-made some poor business choices, but—"

"POOR BUSINESS CHOICES?!" Finn's fury threatened to light the room on fire.

"He's not worth it!" Poe tugged at his arm as Neldin gasped for breath. "Finn, he's not worth it!"

His wild eyes met Poe's and the fear and sorrow in them fractured his resolve. It was as if the whole world had slammed to a halt and his breath caught in horror and revulsion; never in his wildest dreams had he imagined that Poe would look at him with fear. He rallied almost at once, focusing again on the cowering old man in his grip to stoke the fading embers of his anger. But then, as he stared with hatred into those grey, streaming eyes, a nebulous blue glow started just beneath Neldin's ribs. It widened and blossomed in to a gossamer stream, flowing from his shaking feet up through the crown of his head. Pure white spots bright as diamonds flickered and solidified in a beautiful tapestry of life-light.

No…no, not that. Finn's lips trembled, his breath coming shallow now. His arm shook, the barrel clattering against Neldin's temple, and then the strength dropped from him. He turned away with a ragged gasp, Neldin collapsing to the floor in a sniveling heap and scurrying like an animal to put distance between himself and Finn. But he needn't have bothered—Finn had closed off as if a blast door had come down.

Poe watched Finn for a few tense seconds and then rounded on Neldin; the Magistrate was reaching for the fallen droid's blaster. "Not so fast, old man." He kicked the firearm aside and Neldin froze, bringing his hands up as if he expected to be hit.

"Please—let me go! It-it was a long time ago—I-I never—"

Finn could not stand to listen to the words tumbling from his mouth like bile; if he heard one more pathetic excuse he might well and truly snap. He turned on his heel and stormed out of the room.

Poe met Snap's stunned eyes, jerked his head towards Finn, and gave him a plaintive look. Snap got the point and followed after the younger man. Once Snap's footfalls had faded, an unsettling silence fell. "Now then," Poe leaned back with a venomous look, "you're going to tell me everything you know about Umbra Core and their ties to the First Order."

"I—I don't-"
"And my droid friend here can spot a lie from a lightyear away." BB-8 rolled up, it's arc welder out and at the ready. "I suggest you tell the truth, or my friends come back up and finish what they started. You don't want that, do you? I don't think I could stop him again."

Neldin's chest heaved, his eyes darting back and forth about the tumbled room as if hoping for some sort of miracle. But there was only his masked captor, a blaster aimed at his head, a droid ready to electrocute him, and the threat of worse to come. His face twisted pathetically.

"Alright—Alright, just promise you won't k-kill me."

Poe walked down to the droid-scattered foyer where Snap and Finn stood, his mind full and his heart heavy. BB-8 wobbled slowly from stair to stair, reading plainly Finn's elevated heart rate and an increase in stress hormones.

"Let's get out of here." Poe said in a tired voice.

Snap turned towards him. "You get any intel?"

"Yeah—but…not much that can help us. BB-8 fact checked everything he said, but it didn't seem like he had any idea who he was selling to. He was only after the money and didn't look much further than that."

Finn kept a solid silence, unable to look at either of them, hardly able to focus on anything Poe was saying. Something horrible was welling in his chest.

"BB-8 hooked into the house computer and went through his files. I'm sure it was Umbra Core, but they didn't give that piece of shit anything to trace them by—every transaction was paid for with hard credits, all under the table. The ships had never been scanned in or out at the control tower; he must've bribed them to turn a blind eye. And Lymira was right too—he confirmed that there hadn't been any shipments for about a decade, ever since people stopped coming to work here. The most I got out of him was that they'd used Kuat Wayfarer transports to move the kids."

Snap sighed; Wayfarers were some of the most common transport ships in the galaxy. "Well, we knew this could be a long shot. Come on—let's get out of here before he sets his Enforcers on our asses."

Poe arched a brow at the bearded man. "He's going to find that hard to do. I stun-shot him and tied him to his desk."

[And kicked him in the guts.]

"And that."

They started back for the desolate spaceport, Finn either a few steps ahead or a few steps behind, quiet and withdrawn and steadfastly not meeting their eyes. Poe watched him, brows drawn with worry, his anger at the way Finn had rushed the attack vanishing as if it'd never been. *What do you say after something like that?* He hesitantly reached for Finn's hand and though Finn let him take it, there was no reassuring pressure; his hand was cool and distant as the far off clouds. Poe stroked over his thumb and squeezed. *I'm here. I love you.*

The protective numbness that had settled over Finn threatened to slip at that soft, sure touch. His breath remained shallow, and an aching pain tightened like lightning down his chest. They reached the Hyrottil without incident, and Tubbs had the ship in the air in a matter of minutes.
Finn wandered into their bedroom without a word and shut the door behind him, leaving Poe and Snap standing in the hall with worried expressions.

"I'm gonna go talk to him." Poe said softly, pulling off his wrap and cap and shaking out the sand.

"Good. He didn't say a word the entire time you were questioning Neldin, and I tried, man. I'll get us out from the planet." He patted Poe on the shoulder and then squeezed past for the cockpit.

Poe pressed open the door to find Finn sitting upright, his costume laying in a dark mass upon the bed, and his hands clasped in his lap. His eyes darted to Poe's and then away with a pregnant silence. His mouth worked, and Poe waited for him to speak. When he did, the words seemed to pop out of nowhere.

"Poor business choices." Finn shook his head with an empty laugh. "Do you think that's what I was to someone? A poor business choice?" He looked up at Poe, his face a mask that threatened to slip at any second.

Pain washed over Poe as he crossed the short distance and sat with him.

"He deserved to die." Finn continued in a harsh voice that he didn't quite feel. "Why did you stop me?"

"You stopped yourself, Finn, and I'm glad you did."

"Why?" Finn asked, and there was more implied in that question than Poe could ever answer. Why was I taken? How many credits was my life worth? What gave them the right? How could they? Why shouldn't I have killed him?

Poe leaned in and wrapped him in his arms and Finn's breath shuddered hotly out of him, angry tears gathering in his eyes as if his face were melting. He gripped him tightly back, his cheek pressed into Poe's neck. "I wanted you to stop because you're not a cold-blooded murderer, Finn. The whole First Order couldn't turn you into one—don't let them make you one now, when you're finally free of them."

"I don't know if I'll ever be free of them," Finn croaked.

Poe kissed his hair, his ear, his right hand tenderly tracing the borders of his scar. "Baby…the bad things that've happened to you— to me—to anyone—they never go away, not really. But they don't have to define you." He set Finn back from him, fingers softly trailing the warm curve of his cheek. A tear streamed down, chasing after his fingertip and Poe brushed it away, his eyes tight on Finns.

"You—you were scared of me." Finn reached the point that had caused him such horror, the worst part of a wrenching day. He burst into tears.

"Oh…no, no baby." Poe's throat tightened as if he were being choked. "No, I wasn't scared of you! I was scared you'd do something you'd regret." He held him again, scooting towards their pillows and drawing Finn down alongside him. Finn clung to him, crying in earnest and it broke Poe's heart. It was several minutes before he trusted himself to speak without sobbing. "Nothing you could ever do would make me scared of you."

Chapter End Notes
Rough chapter, but Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays! I hope you've all had a great
day!

So uh...lots happening in this chapter. I apologize for the length, but there was just no
good place to cut. It was so, so fun to write an enraged Finn; I think the last time he was
hella pissed was when I had him up against Oz like, ten chapters ago, and I think he
managed to be more pissed here. There's something just so exciting in setting him loose
and seeing what he does, because Finn can really bulldoze his way through a problem
and take charge when he needs to. Hopefully it makes sense why he'd want to kill that
dude, and also why Poe would try and stop him. Definitely interested to see what you
guys think of this one, and that smattering of OCs. This was a hard chapter for
everybody, but the next one will be lighter; Poe has a rather interesting idea for how to
make Finn feel better. *cackles*
(Yes, it's exactly what you think, but with his own unique...flair?)
Thanks so much for reading, and I so appreciate your comments--they literally make me
do happy dances!
-Bluestem.
Finn woke as if he’d never fallen asleep, his mind picking up right where it had left off; whirring with thoughts and energies that had not calmed with rest. He lay on his back, staring up through the dark ceiling and conscious of Poe’s anchoring weight pressed against his flank. In his ears echoed still the bitter acceptance of Lymira Soh’s weary voice, and the whimpering, sniveling cries of Neldin. A low undercurrent of anger boiled in the pit of his stomach and he rolled over, facing Poe and willing it to stop. For a long while his mind went mercifully blank as he studied his sleeping face. The life-light started of its own accord and instead of calming him, the luminous beauty of it only added to his consternation. _Neldin’s was beautiful too. How can that be?_ His mouth thinned, and he sat away from Poe’s warmth; he could not stand to lay motionless with such thoughts in his head.

He quietly clothed, his legs flashing dark past BB-8’s resting light and waking the droid. As Finn strode into the hall, it looked back and forth between the low shape of Poe and Finn’s retreating back. With a soft whimper, it booted up and rolled after him.

Finn stood for a moment in the hall, unaware of BB-8 waiting quietly behind him. The low thrum of the engines and the never-ending wisp of the atmospheric scrubber wormed into his ears, and the monotony was almost too much for him. He pressed their door closed and walked mindlessly for the cargo hold. BB-8 followed and halted a few feet away as Finn paused once more, staring blankly at the ramp controls.

_What am I feeling?_

His heart began to race.

*Backs straight.* Announced a cold voice from his past. _You will remain at attention at all times._

A hot breath ghosted through his nostrils. He could see the roomful of cadets as if he’d never left it.

_Form one!_ The voice commanded, and was immediately surmounted by the echoing clatter of jointed armor shifting into battle stances. _FN-2003—you posture is sloppy. Careless. Widen your feet—you will not be reminded again._ The sharp sound of a reprimand striking home. Another cadet broke form, taking a cautious step towards the beleaguered FN-2003. The cold chrome skull sensed softness and swiveled towards him.

_FN-2187. You will maintain form._

_Yes, Captain._ A young voice answered and fell obediently back.

“No.” His older, surer voice muttered as he sunk easily into forms that lurked still just beneath the surface. His breath steadied and he levered back, kicked, and shifted into low crouch. He threw a punch, lifted and spun about into a high roundhouse, anchored his left heel to the cool grating and threw a quick one two punch. Seamlessly he retreated a pace and swept a low kick in a semicircle. He stood, shifting his weight from foot to foot, warming now. Within his eyes he could see it all—the gleaming black floors, the clean, straight lines, cold lights of white and red, and the Stormtroopers as numerous and characterless as the MSE droids that scurried about their spotless boots. There could be no individuality for individuality led to chaos. Yet, there had always been that light in him,
a difference that at first he had taken to mean that he was somehow defective—the urge to help, the inability to leave another behind, the inability to pull the trigger.

Neldin’s blubbery face appeared in his eyes once more and anger surged hot through his veins. *I couldn’t pull the trigger. And he deserved it.* A quiet yell raked his throat and he lashed out, punching the naked air as if it were the fabric that had suffocated him for all of his life, but for these merciful few months of freedom. As his fist fell slackly to his side, he became aware of BB-8 staring up at him. He heaved a sigh, regaining his form though some of his anger had dimmed at the sight of the droid.

[Who are you fighting?] It bleeped softly.

“No one.” He fell into a repetitive motion. Punch, punch, kick, punch, punch, kick. “Everyone.”

[Who is everyone?]

He shot the droid a tight look and then turned back to his invisible foes. “The First Order. Neldin. Slavers…all of them.”

[Oh.] It wobbled in place, studying the pattern of Finn’s movements. [I could help you.]

Finn fell from his stance with an unsure laugh. “You want to spar with me?”

[Sure! I’ve already analyzed your forms. I could give you a better workout.]

“I don’t know, BB-8. It’d be…kind of weird fighting such a little guy.”

[Oh, I guess you’re right.] It nodded, glancing nonchalantly away. [But then, with all the weight you’ve put on, I’m sure you probably are out of breath.]

Finn snapped indignantly back to himself. “I haven’t gained weight!”

BB-8 managed an incredibly smug look. [Then I guess those extra 2.8 kilos must be all of your cares and worries.]

Finn’s mouth twitched, a smile forcing its way through. “Alright, droid. Bring it.”

Poe yawned as he opened the door and headed for the ‘fresher. He was slightly concerned that Finn had gotten up before him—normally Finn was the last one up, and Poe had never blamed him for sleeping in after a lifetime of mandatory 0600 rollcalls. But he’d felt him tossing and turning all night and wondered if he’d managed to get any sleep at all or had just given it up as a bad job. As he washed his hands and opened the ‘fresher door, a clipped bleep and thundering footsteps rattled into his ears. His brow furrowed as he turned towards the cargo hold. Peering over the railing, he watched with shock as Finn and BB-8 wove a strange kind of dance around one another; Finn kicking out as the droid shot backwards and circled with it’s manipulator arm out and at the ready. It bobbed beneath Finn’s low punch, pinching him on the thigh as it did so.

“Ow, hey!” Finn chortled as he spun about.

Poe quickly brought a hand to his mouth and stifled the laugh that wanted to burst free. *Are they… training?* He leaned against the rail, watching with a broad grin and admiring the contrast between
Finn’s determined focus and BB-8’s non-threatening wobble. After a few minutes, he could stand it no more and walked down the ramp with his hands in his pockets.

Finn’s eyes jerked up to him and he nearly tripped over BB-8, recovering in the same breath and drawing back with some embarrassment.

“You know…” Poe began as he linked his hands above his head and stretched from side to side, “I think I might be more of a challenge for you.”

Finn paused, somewhat shocked. “Really? I thought you were more of a…you know…ship fighter. Not a hand-to-hand fighter.”

Poe gave him a scandalized look. “I had Navy combat training!”

[You haven’t sparred for nearly five months…]

“Ah,” Poe waved an airy hand. “It’s like flying a speeder—you never forget.” He planted his feet in a wide stance, bent arms raised before his chest and his elbows held closely against his flanks to guard his ribs and liver. Finn had to admit it was a pretty solid position. Still, he hesitated.

“I don’t know, honey…I don’t want to hurt you…”

"Pffft. What, you think I’m less of a threat than BB-8?” He threw an apologetic look to the droid. “No offense, buddy.”

[Some taken.]

“I can hold my own.” He continued and grinned at Finn who’s heart tripped a beat. “So come on.”

“Okay…” Finn said with an air of ‘on your own head be it’. He mirrored the stance, and Poe appreciated anew the soft curves of his biceps and deltoids, the broadness of his back—while he was no featherweight, there was no escaping the fact that Finn had him outmatched on pure strength. 
And he’s about a decade younger than me. And also probably more limber. …Maybe this wasn’t the best id—

He just managed to dodge as Finn closed the distance between them in two hard paces and aimed a blow to his ribs. Poe reacted instinctually, deflecting the edge of Finn’s hand with his forearm while twisting to the left.

[Fight! Fight! Fight!] BB-8 cheered.

Finn spun quickly about, bringing a knee to Poe’s solar plexus, but Poe’s hands struck hard onto the top of his thigh, sliding up towards his groin. Finn’s stance broke and he staggered backwards. His mouth went thin as thread as he ran a reassessing gaze over Poe.

Right. Fighter Pilot. Fast reflexes. Hmm….this might be tougher than I thought. I have to get him into a position where he can’t use his speed.

Poe darted in, feigned left and struck with his elbow towards Finn’s ribs. Finn pivoted on the ball of his foot, Poe’s elbow grazing across his chest as Finn jerked his left knee upwards. It caught Poe in the stomach and he could feel the softness of his breath rushing from him. Finn felt a moment’s disquiet at having actually struck him but Poe gave him no time to worry about it. The pilot slipped back, resuming his protective stance.

“That was pretty good, baby.”
Finn winked at him, not realizing that that in itself carried all the weight of a physical blow. They clashed again, Poe seeming to anticipate his movements before he made them, calling on his acute attention to the littlest details; the slight roll of the shoulder that broadcasted a punch, the tensing of his claves when about to kick, the exhalation before a dodge. Poe darted beneath his arm, came up behind him and smacked him hard on the ass.

Finn spun about with a frustrated blush while BB-8 blatted with laughter.

It was Poe’s turn to wink.

They orbited one another for another few minutes, and though neither of them could land a solid hit, Finn began to sense victory; Poe moved faster, but tired faster, and that, combined with Finn’s superior strength, would bring him down. Finn came in high, dropped low and swept the pilot’s feet out from under him in a spinning kick.

Oh shit. Poe thought as he fell and landed hard on his back with a grunt. His legs shot out, wrapping around Finn’s trunk in a tight embrace and momentarily immobilizing him. Finn staggered as Poe tensed and pulled, determined to drag him off his feet and using every muscle in his legs to do so. Instead, Finn leaned over his body while backing his hips away and pressing high into his feet in a kind of triangle pose. He brought his left knee in, pressed between Poe’s thighs and sat down, breaking Poe’s guard in one fluid movement.

Son of a bitch! Poe scrambled for a chokehold but Finn beat him to it, sliding up against his back and wrapping his legs about Poe’s torso and his arms around Poe’s neck in a grip of steel. Poe squirmed like a Mon Cal eel, bringing his free arm round and trying doggedly to pull at his shoulder and roll him off of him but Finn quickly slipped his arm under Poe’s armpit and wrenched backwards. Poe choked, unable to find any leverage. He was utterly at his mercy.

“This…” Poe grunted, “shouldn’t…be turning…me on…”

“You give up?” Finn panted.

“No!” He braced his feet on the floor and tried to push back, but Finn tightened, putting pressure on Poe’s twisted shoulder joint. “Nng!” Poe hated losing, though this really wasn’t a bad way to go about it. “Okay! Okay, okay, okay!” He patted Finn’s arm lightly and the pressure evaporated from him. He dragged in a panting breath and sat up, rubbing at his neck. A resigned grin crawled over his face.

[Finn wins!] BB-8 cheered.

“I didn’t hurt you, did I?” Finn asked as he sat up with a look of concern.

“No,” Poe huffed a laugh. “Just my pride.” He reached out, caught Finn by the shirt collar and drew him into a kiss. “That was actually pretty fun.”

“What, the losing part?” Finn arched a wry brow and Poe smacked him on the shoulder.

“The having you wrapped around me part.”

“I liked that too. And the whole winning thing.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Poe rolled his eyes, scooting back to lean against the cool metal plating of the ramp to the upper floor. Finn joined him, and BB-8 rolled up alongside Finn’s leg. Finn took Poe’s hand and the pilot smiled, opening his palm and lacing their fingers together. For a long while they sat in a comfortable silence as their pounding hearts and breaths slowed to a normal resting pace. Poe would
have been completely and utterly satisfied if not for the threat of bounty hunters, and their continued isolation. He studied Finn’s features and was saddened by the exhaustion that dragged at his eyelids, and the slight worried crease that sprang up between his brows like an exclamation point announcing some inner conflict. Poe squeezed his hand.

“You didn’t get any sleep, did you?”

Finn’s eyes parted reluctantly as he sat up. “No…” he admitted.

“I didn’t think so. I could feel you tossing and turning all night.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to keep you up too.”

Poe shrugged. “It’s alright.” He wondered if he dared to broach the subject of Rothana; after his initial breakdown, Finn had remained solidly mute on the subject for the rest of the night. He and Snap had felt as if they were walking on eggshells and had resolutely steered all conversation to more benign subjects. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Finn’s eyes lifted slowly to his and then his gaze dropped to the floor. He fiddled with a thread on his pants leg. “It won’t change anything.” He said in a voice of quiet defeat.

“What won’t it change?” Poe led. He knew by now that if he started a conversation and gave Finn space, that he would eventually answer in his own time.

Finn shrugged and held his silence for a stretching minute. “It won’t bring my family back to me. It won’t give me back the 23 years the First Order stole from me. It’s all just…gone.”

Poe rubbed his back and kept quiet. This was not an area where he could respectfully commiserate—never had he experienced anything like what Finn had gone through. All he could do was lend a sympathetic ear.

“When we were down there, I started wondering if Rothana might be my home.”

“Finn…”

“It could be. There’s no way to know. Any of these planets we’re going to might be my home. We could walk right by where it happened to me and never even know it.”

“I don’t think that’d happen, baby.” Poe said carefully.

“Why not?”

“Because…Finn, you sensed something that happened twelve years ago and to people you’d never met just by touching a building. You felt them. I think that if we did end up on your home planet…the Force would let you know.”

A timid spark of hope flared in Finn’s earthen eyes. Some of the tension in his body unwound as if a clean breeze had swept through him. He’d been so overwhelmed with the anger and disgust he’d felt towards Neldin, and the memories that had been triggered in the wake of that confrontation, that he’d forgotten the vision. A smile started on his face. “Maybe I would know. And,” he hurried on quickly, “Lymira and all of the other parents survived. So maybe mine did too!”

“Maybe,” Poe agreed.

Finn stared distantly through the far wall of the cargo bay, painful happiness swelling in his chest.
He nodded softly to himself. “Even if I never find them…it makes me happy thinking that they might still be out there.”

“That’s what we should believe.”

Finn leaned back, a bittersweet smile tugging at his lips. Ever since General Organa had brought the idea into his head that the First Order would have killed all witnesses to an abduction, he had mercilessly stricken down the hope that his family might live. He’d dutifully buried it in his mind and heart alongside the childhood he could have had. He had not allowed himself to mourn; he had convinced himself that there was no point. But only now, as that hope took hold of him again, did he realize just how badly the loss of it had hurt him. His eyes brimmed and he wiped hurriedly at them. “I love you.”

Poe drew him in and held him. “I love you too.” Though he’d been lucky enough to enjoy a loving family for all of his life, he knew how it felt to wake up at night crushed beneath the idea of what might have been; a small body in the aching darkness, swallowed up by loneliness. He inclined his head and kissed him softly.

“I can’t bring back everything they took from you, but…I hope you’re okay with just us as your family for now.” He offered and BB-8 seconded the sentiment with a bright warble.

Finn embraced him tightly. “It’s more than enough. It’s more than I ever imagined.”

“Good,” Poe grinned into Finn’s kiss, “cause I’m gonna make your next 23 years amazing.”

“Oh yeah?” Finn huffed a watery laugh.

“Mmm hmm,” he lapped at Finn’s mouth. “I’ve got plans.”

Finn’s hand crept up into his sweaty hair, and Poe’s mouth opened hungrily. Snap’s door hissed open in their ears and they pulled regretfully away. Finn turned, glancing upwards to see Snap’s back disappearing towards the ‘fresher accompanied by a huge yawn.

“He really does have bad timing.” Finn muttered.

Poe winked and patted his arm. “Come on. Let’s get breakfast started.”

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Two hours later they were on route to refuel and restock at a small outer rim moon called Rinn. While Poe showered, Snap was sitting stock-still in the pilot’s chair with Finn planted before him, his pad of flimsi open on his lap. Snap tried not to follow the back and forth movement of the stylus, tried not to lean forwards and peer at the page that glowed blue in the flowing jump-tunnel lights—but it was next to impossible. Tubbs sat near Finn’s leg, studying the smooth glide of the black ink and looking from the drawing to Snap with an appreciative bloop.

“So you really can see it? Right now?” Snap asked for the tenth time.

“Yep,” Finn smiled. He’d gotten the outline of Snap more or less done—now was the hard part of filling in the intricate pattern of large, shimmering lights and tiny pinpricks.

“That is so cool! Why didn’t you say anything earlier?”
Finn glanced quickly up and back to his page. He shrugged uncomfortably. “I dunno…I guess I just thought you didn’t believe in the Force.”

“What?” Snap’s brows furrowed. “Why’s that?”

“Well, I mean…you didn’t seem to take Maz very seriously, so I just assumed…”

Snap chortled a laugh. “Come on, you’ve gotta admit she’s kind of batty. It’s nothing against the Force, I just can’t stand it when people talk in riddles, trying to sound all mystical and stuff. And after all—I can’t not believe in the Force after seeing the tree at Poe’s dad’s place.”

“You’ve seen it?” Finn looked up from the block of ink he was laying down.

“Yeah, years ago.” His eyes darted towards the closed ‘fresher door. “I was at Yavin for Rhys’ funeral.”

“Oh.” Finn nodded sadly.

“Yeah, but it was a beautiful tree. Weird to think of light like that actually inside of me. Like, right now.”

Finn grinned. “It is happening. Like, right now.”

“Haha, that’s cool.” Snap smiled, staring off past Finn’s shoulder. “The General can sense the Force too, you know? You could actually feel it with her though, like she was inside of your mind, lifting you up.”

“Really?” Finn asked, intrigued. Could I learn to do that?

“Uh huh. It always made me comfortable, like she really knew me.” He broke off, shaking his head wistfully. “Look at me, using the past tense like she’s gone. She really knows me, and even if she sees bad stuff in me…it doesn’t matter. She still cares about people and fights for them.”

That admission eased Finn’s heart. If General Organa can sense the Force too, she can probably see people’s life-light. I bet…I bet she wouldn’t have pulled the trigger on Neldin either. “Poe checked the bounty boards again last night—hers is still active, so she’s got to be out there somewhere.” Finn said surely.

“Good.” Snap held his silence and his position for a long while. Aside from the patter of rushing water, only the light scratching of Finn’s stylus could be heard. Snap’s eyes bounced like balls, up and down, tracing the movement and eager to see the finished result. He worried though, that Finn had felt the need to keep this aspect of himself quiet. Maybe it’s a holdover from his First Order days, playing things close to the chest. “So…you know you don’t have to worry about what I think, right? You’re Force sensitive, and that’s awesome. You don’t have to keep things under wraps. I mean, unless you want to, which is cool too, but you’re Poe’s boyfriend and, I mean, we’re friends and all so you can say whatever you want, and—”

Finn chuckled. “Thanks Snap.”

“Sure.” He nodded, grateful that Finn had gotten him out of his awkward monologue—he had the tendency to ramble himself into the ground when being heartfelt. He gruffly cleared his throat and changed topic. “Is it looking good, buddy?” he asked Tubbs.

The droid tilted up on it’s pyramidal feet, focusing intensely on the drawing. [It’s very good.]
“Alright. This is pretty cool. I’ve never had someone draw a portrait of me before, much less one of my energy.”

Finn squinted, turning his head this way and that and then staring long and hard at Snap, his eyes focusing on shimmering pools of light that Snap could only guess at. “Well, it’s not the best, but here.” He turned the pad about and Snap’s eyebrows drifted towards his hairline. He met Finn’s vulnerable expression incredulously.

“Not the best?” He snorted. “Are you kidding me? It’s awesome! Can I hold it?”

“Of course.” Finn smiled, a warm feeling billowing in his chest; though he knew Poe loved his drawings, being praised by someone he had no romantic ties to felt somehow more genuine. Snap gingerly plucked the pad from Finn’s outstretched hand and studied it closely.

His dark eyes lingered on the bright white spot shining like a sun from his right hand, fell to the constellation hovering above his liver, traced the string of pearls running just to the right of his spine. He didn’t expect to feel so touched—he was, admittedly, a man whose passions lie in the mechanical, in gears and metal—but this most organic portrait of his own living body managed to choke him up. He nodded.

“You can keep it, if you want.” Finn offered awkwardly.

Again, Snap cleared his throat. “Thanks. Thanks, this is really something.”

“That’s what Poe said too.” Finn laughed.

“Well, he’s not wrong.” Carefully, Snap tore out the page and passed back the pad. “Hey, have you seen your energy? Like in a mirror or something?”

Finn’s eyes widened. “How have I never tried that?” Excitement coursed through him. He made to stand and then his face fell. “Ah, Poe’s still in the ‘fresher.” He sank back to his seat with disappointment.

Snap cupped a hand to his mouth, “Hey POE!” he shouted to the door.

“What?” Came Poe’s muffled reply.

“Hurry it up in there! We got an experiment to try!”

“…An experiment in the ‘fresher?”

“Yeah! It’s science!”

“…uh…okay? Just as long as you clean up whatever it is.”

Finn laughed and caught Snap’s eye. “Oh, I don’t have a drawing of my energy…yet,” he added with a look at the ‘fresher, “but here’s Poe’s!” He folded back a page and presented it to Snap.

“Wow, it’s totally different than mine!” He placed his drawing alongside the blacked-in image of Poe’s body. “Huh, look at that big one by his eye. And that’s pretty cool too, that little group by his knee. Not as cool as my liver-stars though.”

“Liver stars.” Finn snorted.

Poe exited the ‘fresher, his hair lying in damp waves and his face momentarily smooth, a towel looped over his shoulders like a scarf. Finn’s breath caught—he’d gotten so used to seeing him...
scruffy that this clean-edged version was more than he could process. He’d almost forgotten just how sharp his jaw was, and how smooth the line of his cheekbones were. It seemed to make his eyes larger and darker.

“You shaved!” Finn managed.

“Uh huh.” Poe said with a sly smile. He could all but see Finn’s brain sliding rapidly south. “It was itchy as hell under that face-wrap, and there wasn’t much point using it as a disguise beneath a disguise. You like?” He asked needlessly.

“Yes.” Finn nodded and reached out, and Poe leaned his face into the touch.

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“Yes.” Finn nodded and reached out, and Poe leaned his face into the touch.
“And it just happens to be ball-breakingly cold. You guys are really gonna make me go out there on my own?” Snap gave them a leaden look that they deflected guiltily onto one another. “And I swear on the Force, Poe, if you say I won’t freeze because I have some fat on me, I will chuck you into a snowdrift.”

Poe closed his mouth.

“You want to borrow our robes, Snap? They’ll help keep you warm.” Finn offered.

“Yeah, give me the damn robes.” He turned into the hall. “You guys owe me for this.”

Poe squeezed past him and into their room, gathering up his and Finn’s robes and their credit pouch. After nearly a month and a half of refueling, repairs, and restocking, it had become conspicuously lighter and Poe dreaded to think what they would do when it ran out. They couldn’t exactly hold down jobs while wanted by the First Order, and even emptying his Republic account would only keep them in the air for another few months. He fished out two-hundred credits and tossed the pouch back onto the bed with a clatter.

Snap waited in the doorway, and Poe spied Finn idling behind him in the kitchenette.

“Hey,” He leaned in with a conspiratorial whisper and Snap joined him. “I know we don’t have a lot of credits left, but could you get Finn some sort of dessert? Yesterday was pretty rough on him.”

“Yeah, I’ll find him something. And I’m going to get me something too if I have to freeze alone.” Poe grinned. “You’re the best, man.”

“Tell me something I don’t know.” He straightened back up and pulled on first one brown robe and then the next, until he was as bulky as an overgrown ewok. “Okay Tubbs, let’s get this over with.”

The droids had been loitering near the cockpit and Tubbs straightened as if it had been slapped, looking between them all as if it were the subject of a massive joke. [What?]

“It’s your turn. You wanted to go out so bad yesterday, and now’s your chance.”

[I give my turn to BB-8.]
[No way!] BB-8 shrilled.

“Doesn’t work that way, Tubbs. You gotta suffer with me.”

It visibly deflated and it took all of BB-8’s power not to cackle; it and Tubbs hadn’t quite gotten over their earlier spat.

[Alright…] Tubbs wheezed and trundled reluctantly forwards. Poe and Finn saw them to the ramp with many thanks, but once the ship opened to the frigid air Poe more or less vanished on the spot, like a bird flying to warmer lands.

“Be careful, Snap!” He called from the upper ramp.

Finn snorted a laugh, then turned to Snap. “Thank you, Snap.”

“Don’t mention it. We’ll be back soon.” He waved and crunched through ankle-deep snow towards the massive fuel pump, Tubbs muddling his prints with long lines. Finn smiled and shut the ramp, rubbed his hands together, and started back for the ‘fresher mirror.
Poe walked about their room, picking up and folding away his clothing before it would have a chance to aggravate Finn and then he stood, rubbing his smooth chin as he stared at the little model A-wing sitting out on the shelf near his side of the bed. He felt slightly guilty for sending Snap out into a blizzard. *He’ll probably be safer without the two of us near him though,* he rationalized sadly. He pulled the quilt up and towards the pillows, jostling the bag of credits and spilling a few onto the blanket, where they shone brightly against the deep blue fabric. He paused, eyes lingering on the softly rounded, finger-sized chips. *Oh, I still need to teach Finn how to use those. Boy, that’ll be thrilling for him. Boring, but useful, I guess.* He picked one up. It was about as thick as his little finger and cool to the touch. Wholly outside of his control, his eyes fell as if magnetically drawn to the gigantic bottle of lube sitting innocently near the corner of the bed. A slow, devilish grin crawled across his face, unsure of where this sudden idea had come from, but silently amazed and dismayed.

*Don’t do that. Without a base, without a trace. That is really stupid, Dameron, don’t do it,* the sane part of him pleaded.

His grin only grew.

*Oh, I'm doing it.*

Finn stared into his reflection's face with such determination it was as if he were trying to draw it out of the mirror and into the real world. His hands clamped tight to either side of the sink. He’d caught only the briefest flash of blue light and then it had vanished, like an old holovid viewed at a bad angle, but it had thrilled him. Since then, he’d tried peering at himself from different angles, holding his breath, turning off the lights—but nothing had really worked. *Come on, come on…he urged,* just appear already! *Shhh…quiet your mind. You have to be blank.*

He tried for a moment to be as still as the lake outside of Maz’s castle, the image he often used to center himself, but his growing frustration made it impossible. *Gah, come on! How come I can see everyone else’s but not mine? That’s not fair!*

“Hey, Fiinnnnn,” Poe’s voice sing-songed and Finn’s concentration broke. He gave it up, though he glared at his reflection as if it were personally responsible.

“Yeah?” He called back.

“You wanna learn about Republic Credits?”

It didn’t sound like the most thrilling option in the world, but he was clearly too aggravated to see his life-light in the mirror, if such a thing was even possible.

“Okay, I guess so.” He sighed. Giving himself one last glare, he turned out of the refresher and into their room to find Poe sitting on the bed wearing only a towel and a wry smile. Pleased as he was by the sight, Finn was also confused; this was a strange start to a lesson.

“Where’m the credits?” Finn asked.
Poe glanced away nonchalantly—he would’ve given himself a medal for managing to keep a straight face; the laugh quivered like an earthquake, just below the surface. “Oh, they’re in here.”

Finn’s brow furrowed as he looked about the tiny room. All of their scant belongings were in their usual places and there were clearly no credit chips lying about. Nonplussed, he looked again to Poe.

“They’re in here.” A slow grin curled Poe’s lips. Understanding went off in Finn’s brain like a bomb as he put it all together—the lube sitting a foot closer than it had been, Poe’s up-to-no-good smile, the towel draped over his hips that he now shimmied seductively. Poe wished he could have recorded forever the moment Finn’s face slid from confusion into incredulous amazement.

“You didn’t.” Finn’s mouth twitched.

“I guess you’ll just have to find out.” Poe shrugged.

“Poe, you didn’t.” He leaned over him, his face splitting into a genuine, ear to ear grin that Poe thrilled to see. His hand flattened warmly down Poe’s stomach, fingers tickling against his pubes as he undid the towel and laid it aside. His breath deepened at the look of him, his cock lying half-hard against his lower-stomach, his lean body freshly scrubbed and hot beneath him. Finn’s pulse began to race; all of the worry and anger that he’d been subconsciously carrying around immediately retreated to the far, far reaches of his mind. His fingers traced down Poe’s cock, slid beneath his balls, and pressed over his anus. Poe groaned at even that teasing touch, and Finn’s eyes jumped to his in giddy disbelief—the pilot was already wet with lube. “You did.”

“The bank of Dameron is open for business.” He spread his legs wide.

Finn held Poe’s eyes for one quivering second and then erupted with laughter as if he’d had a surplus built up behind a dam. Each deep peal went through Poe like fire and he found himself joining in. They laughed until they were unsexily wheezing and wiping tears from their eyes.

“You’ve been waiting to say that, haven’t you?” Finn choked.

“Yes, I have.” Poe managed. “Now hurry up and get them outta me—I don’t want them to get stuck!”

“Things can get stuck?!” Finn nearly shrieked, the bed shaking with the force of his laughter.

“Yeah they can!” Poe snorted. “ Seriously, get them out!”

“Oh my gods, you are crazy and I love it.”

Finn wasted no time, flinging off his shirt while Poe undid his fly and tugged his pants down his hips. He loomed over Poe like a mountain, pressing hotly along his stomach and chest and grinding against his cock.

“Ah yeah…there we go, baby,” Poe reached around his head and drew him into a gulping kiss. Finn’s mouth slid to the newly smooth edge of his jaw and down the tendons of his neck, and Poe arched, tightening as Finn sucked below the flutter of his quickening pulse. His tongue and hands roved lower and lower, dipping into his navel before licking teasingly at his stomach, hot millimeters away from Poe’s throbbing cock. Poe groaned and cracked his eyes open to find Finn staring up at him with a knowing smile as his tongue moved closer, closer…

“Ahn! Mmm, fuck…” Poe arched again as Finn’s lips closed around the head of his cock, and the credits within him jostled unpredictably against his prostate in an echo-chamber of pleasure. Finn reached blindly for the lube, scooping out enough to coat his fingers and then he sank down on his
knees before the mattress with Poe laid out before him like a buffet. His slick middle finger traced a slow circle about the glistening rim of Poe’s asshole, while with his free hand he tilted Poe’s cock back into his mouth and sucked hard.

Poe had hardly cursed before Finn’s finger was pressing into his gripping heat; he tried to remain open and loose, tried to keep from clenching and drawing upwards. This was such a stupid idea. He forced his breath low and full into his stomach, torn between all-consuming arousal and the heckling worry that he may have made a mistake. He tried to keep the image of a medical droid pulling a credit out of his ass from playing before his eyes. BB-8 would never let him hear the end of it. And if the droid told Snap…well, he’d have to fling himself into a sun and be done with it, no question about it.

Finn was wholly oblivious to Poe’s aroused dread, and he breathed a laugh against his cock as the top of his nail nudged the solid curve of a credit chip. I can’t believe he actually did it. He curled towards it, trying to draw it down, but it only slipped to the side, pressing against Poe’s prostate. “Hah—oh gods—this was the best ide-AH!” He yelled as Finn pressed in his pointer finger, gripped the slick credit chip, and began tapping it repeatedly against the throbbing swell of his prostate.

Poe’s dread evaporated immediately. Worth it! Worth it! “Oh fuck!” His legs jerked and a clear bead of precum bloomed from the tip of his penis. Finn stroked it absentmindedly, wholly focused now on removing the credit chip. It was difficult to do with the lube coating his fingers and the hot pressing of Poe’s passage, but Finn was nothing if not tenacious; slowly, blood pounding in his ears, he worked it down. Each slight movement rippled through Poe like a shockwave, which only caused him to shudder with pleasure and start the whole process over again. “Easy,” he panted, “don’t make me come before your lesson’s over.”

“The lesson shouldn’t involve your ass, then.” Finn grinned wolfishly as he pulled the credit free from him and held it up. “It’s a twenty.” He announced. The white chip glistened wetly in the light, the bottom edge colored orange and embossed with the golden numerical for twenty.

“Twenties are nice. I fucking love twenties.” Poe breathed weakly and Finn barked a laugh at his winded enthusiasm. Poe propped himself up on his elbows, the mischievous twinkle in his eyes flowing through Finn like fire. He scooted back towards the headboard, eyes closing momentarily at the shifting of his pelvis, and patted the empty space beside him. “Get up here, baby.”

Finn tossed the credit aside on to the towel and stood, his cock bobbing before him as he clambered onto the bed. Poe reached out, cupping his balls, and a groan wound out of Finn as he joined him in a sucking kiss. Poe lay on his side and motioned Finn to do the same, which he mindlessly did. “Ah, ah,” Poe shook his head as Finn settled chest to chest with him. He spun his pointer finger in a circle. “I want the other end.”

Finn grinned, understanding at once with a thrill of excitement. He shifted and stretched out lengthwise down Poe’s body, his head now pointed towards the foot of the bed and lined up beautifully with Poe’s cock. He lifted his leg to give Poe clearance, and Poe mirrored the move. Finn wrapped his arms about Poe’s hips, dragging him closer just as Poe’s mouth closed over his cock. His back arched like a wire gone taught, scar glimmering dully in the warm light. It was beyond erotic, sucking and fondling one another in this position; unable to see what the other was planning, they had no choice but to experience it blind, and it lent a bucking wildness to their movements. Finn reached between Poe’s legs and pressed into him once more, while simultaneously sucking the tense orb of his left testicle into his mouth.

Poe choked around him and Finn shuddered over him in a volley of pleasure. Blood roaring in his
ears, the smooth edge of another credit chipped ghosted past his delving fingers and he caught at it and slowly pulled it free as Poe’s mouth left his cock. He’d hardly held it up to the light before an exquisitely shocking new sensation jolted the chip from his hand—Poe’s tongue gliding over his anus.

His arms tightened as if a bolt of pure electricity had crackled from his spine to the crown of his head. “Ah! Oh gods, Poe!” His toes curled against the mattress.

Poe grinned, once more pressing up into that firm, hot space beneath his balls as his tongue delved about his tightly shuddering rim. Doggedly, Finn dragged enough power back to his brain to move his fingers, but he couldn’t quite muster his earlier enthusiasm, not with what Poe was doing to him. In that silky space, he felt another credit chip, and after a few slippery fumbles he pinned it against his prostate and pulled it free. But now his moans rivaled Poe’s, his breath heaving and cock leaping at each, slow, insistent press upwards as that deep pleasure caught hold in the floor of his pelvis. It washed through his legs and abdomen in a warm wave that drowned out everything but Poe’s lapping tongue.

He wasn’t sure he’d ever properly appreciated the man’s tongue, for he was turning to liquid beneath him. He gripped his hips as if Poe were a buoy and he were lost in a wild sea. Then Poe’s finger joined the fray, slowly circling.

“You okay, baby?” Poe breathed, his breath washing cool over the wetness of his asshole.

“Yeah…ahh…”

“…you want me to?” His finger pressed hotly against him, leaving him in little doubt as to what he intended to do.

“Nnn…yes…yes, I want it,” he managed.

The neediness of his voice made Poe more lightheaded than his hypoxia training had ever done, and for a moment he swooned, cock twitching against Finn’s throat. Then he pressed slowly against that tight resistance. Finn was tense and rigid as carven duracrete and his body opened reluctantly to Poe’s insistent middle finger. And then Poe was past the clenching rim and into his untouched heat and he moaned along with him. While Finn was new to this, Poe was in familiar territory, and he curled his finger forwards, finding almost immediately the firm spot of his prostate. Slowly, gently, he brushed over it.

Finn shivered, his upper leg shaking against Poe’s shoulder and his head pulled back in uncertain pleasure. His eyes squeezed shut and his mouth dropped open with a heavy breath.

Five minutes later each of them were nearly out of their minds. Finn had managed to find three more credit chips, and they lay glistening in a hastily deposited pile. The feeling of Finn’s fingers working in him, dragging the smooth chips past his prostate had Poe right on the edge of orgasm. Finn shook like a leaf as Poe massaged him both inside and out, circling and tapping his prostate while pumping his cock. His hips bucked, and the credit he had hold of slipped free. Half in a fever-dream, he caught hold of it again and pulled it free of Poe’s body as the wave within his own built to an intolerable degree.

“How many have you got?” Poe gasped.

Finn tried to rally his mind into remembering unimportant things like ‘numbers’. “Six. Nnn…there’s
“Thank gods…that’s all of them.” Before Poe had finished speaking, Finn’s hips were shifting away from him, and then suddenly Finn was on top of him, pushing balls-deep with one fluid stroke. “Ahh! Fuck, yes!” Poe’s hands clenched like claws across his back. Poe withstood only a minute of Finn’s hard thrusts before he came with a winding yell, and then fell back against the mattress like a boned fish, gasping and shivering. Finn followed right behind him, his abdomen shuddering in a wave as he groaned. Poe vaguely felt the heat of his seed slicking him deep within, but he could hardly react to it.

Finn collapsed on top of him, and for a moment they could not even kiss one another. They simply lay there, panting.

“That was…the best idea…” Poe heaved.

“Yeah. Yeah…that was…really good.” Finn agreed instantly. Finn’s eyes roved over the rumpled quilts and landed upon the pile of credits. “Though I still don’t know…anything about making change.” A laugh shook free and the bass of it vibrated through Poe’s stomach until he too was laughing.

“You feel better, honey?” Poe asked, and Finn’s dark eyes swept up to his.

“Mmm, much better.” He propped himself up on his elbows and kissed him slowly. Poe’s arms curled around his back, tracing his scar, pleasure still pulsing through their linked bodies. “That was amazing. I didn’t know it’d feel that good. Now I see why you like it so much.” He grinned.

Poe’s hand slid down the sweaty furrow of his spine, rubbing just above the crack of his ass. He chuckled against his neck. “Baby, if there’s one thing I can find, it’s the prostate. In fact,” he considered, “if the Resistance were a prostate, I would’ve found them by now.”

Finn snorted a laugh at the ridiculous visual, deeply grateful for his continued humor, especially in the wake of yesterday’s events. He stroked Poe’s sweaty hair from his forehead. “Gods, I love you.”

Poe kissed at his cheek, his mouth finding his lips and tongue. “Mmm, I love you too.” They kissed, hands still roving and caressing. The languid minutes stretched and the gently glowing embers of Finn’s desire caught into a greedy fire. His kisses became rougher, his hands sliding urgently over the gentle curves of his ribs and down the line of his groin.

“Ahh…baby…” Poe panted.

Though Finn had slid from Poe’s body, he began to go hard once more against his inner thigh, and pleased disbelief brightened Poe’s face. “Fuck, really? Oh my gods, I love him.” Finn ground against him, and Poe’s brain and body struggled to catch up; it was as if he were trying to pilot a complex ship after being stun-shot. Never had evidence of Finn’s youth been more apparent to him—anymore he needed a good fifteen minutes to get hard again after ejaculating, but Finn was clearly way ahead of him. He thrust up his flaccid cock, kissing just beneath his jaw, settling his weight back into his hips to dip forwards and suck at his nipples. Poe’s finger’s wove through his hair—thankfully, his nipples were still highly receptive, even as his cock struggled to get back in the game, and the pleasurable jolts rocketed south as if on a hyperspace route. “Nnn…ah…”

Finn’s breath deepened. “I want you again,” Finn’s rough voice dragged up his spine and then suddenly his hands were on Poe’s hips, rotating him onto his stomach and lifting his pelvis. Poe realized dazedly what was about to happen. He groaned, settling his weight onto his knees and
forearms. Finn’s eyes slid down the incline of Poe’s back, tracing the long, low line of his spine, the ‘v’s of his shoulder blades, and the muscle dimpled up beneath them; the flair of his trapezius, and the smoldering sliver of his eye peering through dark lashes over his shoulder. His heart tripped a beat—he’d never taken him like this before, and it was a strangely powerful position—primal, animalistic even. He rubbed the flushed head of his cock down the crack of his ass, smearing the bit of his seed that had dribbled out, and lubing him further. Then he was in and thrusting as if his life depended on it.

Poe fisted the blankets beneath his hands, every muscle in his abdomen tensing in a wave. It was almost too much stimulation, and his head hung limply between his shoulders, eyes closed and riding that sharp line between pleasure and pain that he so enjoyed visiting. His spine prickled, hips shaking as Finn smacked into him. Finn gripped him tightly, losing himself in the hard, quick rhythm and in Poe’s gasps.

Glossy precum swung in a pendulum arc from Poe’s bobbing, half-hard cock and Poe felt orgasm looming like a thundercloud. He was too out of his mind to do anything but breathe and try to hold himself together. He existed in the space between heartbeats, as he did when flying in life-or-death dogfights, each sensation arriving on a razor’s edge. His balls tightened and he understood, far in the back of his mind, that he was about to come. Without touching his cock. He could count the number of times he’d managed that mythical feat on half a hand and yet here it was, and oh gods, he couldn’t take it, he couldn’t survive that, he couldn’t— *Breathe, breathe into it, --fuck—!!*

He saw stars. He knew he sounded obscene, but there was literally no controlling anything his body was doing at the moment. He was hardly even aware of Finn crying out a second time, or of the two of them sliding back to the mattress in a disjointed, sweaty, gasping heap. That had been one of those ‘higher plains of existence’ orgasms that left his poor mortal mind and body ready for a hot shower and an utterly satisfied week’s long sleep.

“Holy…fuck…” Finn panted—he felt as if he’d burst through with starlight as he’d peaked, or else he’d caught a glimpse of Poe’s life-light, or perhaps their energies had momentarily merged, as they had under the Force Tree.

Poe wasn’t sure how long they lay there, but eventually the nagging sensation crept into his mind that he was forgetting something. Somehow, they dragged themselves through the ‘fresher door and into the shower. They cleaned themselves like droids on autopilot, half asleep and blazingly content, pausing every now and then to drowsily press their tender lips together. It wasn’t until Poe was pulling on a fresh pair of boxers that realization hit him like a gundark’s fist out of the blue.

“Ohmygods, where’s Snap?!” He flung on a shirt, forwent pants, and wobbled into the hall as quickly as his unwound body could carry him. “BB-8, has Snap tried to comm…BB-8?” He stared about in confusion—the cockpit was empty. He and Finn glanced towards Snap’s room—the door was open and the little space vacant. *How long were we fucking? Oh my gods, what if he’s frozen to death? What if someone caught him while I was busy shoving credits up my ass?* Rattled, Poe walked towards the cargo-hold and nearly leapt out of his skin.

Snap was sitting cross-legged before the water-reclaimer, their robes lying like a blanket over his lap, and the droids arranged about him in a loose circle. A large sledge of food packets and cans was parked off to their right. The three of them paid he and Finn no mind; they appeared to be hunched over something. BB-8 burbled and Snap shook his head.

“That was a good play…” he muttered, rubbing at his beard.

“Snap…how—how long have you been back?” Poe asked with creeping horror. *If he heard any of that…*he mentally prepped himself to fly the ship into a sun.
Snap didn’t answer, and it was then that Finn noticed the dark headset clamped over his ears. Tubbs saw them first and waved a greeting with it’s manipulator arm, which seemed to be gripping a handful of cards. The movement alerted BB-8 and Snap, who pulled off his headset.

“So.” He began icily. “You guys finally see fit to see if I’m still alive, huh?” He shook his head and shared a dark look with Tubbs. “Good thing we didn’t freeze to death out there, huh buddy?”

Tubbs blatted rudely.

“Uh…how long have you been back?” Poe repeated cautiously.

“Like, half an hour.”

“What?!” Poe and Finn gasped in horror.

“Relax—that’s why I got these babies!” He held up his headset. “Noise cancelling! BB-8 met us at the ramp and warned us there were hijinks going on, so I went back out and got a pair. Been meaning to for a while now, actually.”

[And we turned off our aural receptors again!] BB-8 chirped brightly.

Finn could not speak. He wanted to evaporate, and heat rocketed up into his face like a volcano. Poe, however, now seemed totally at ease.

“Oh, okay, good.” He slouched with careless relief. “Because Force, we were not being quiet.”

“You seldom are.” Snap lamented.

“What’S THAT GAME YOU’RE PLAYING?” Finn blurted, elbowing Poe and changing the subject with all the subtlety of a bantha in a ballroom.

The game totally diverted Snap’s aggravation. “Oh, this is chop-sabacc. Not quite as complex as true sabacc, mind you, but just as fun.” Snap opened his hand of brightly colored cards. Holographic numbers shimmered at their top right corners, and a few changed value and suit before Finn’s eyes. If he hadn’t so desperately wanted a glass of water and ten hours of sleep with Poe, he would’ve been interested to learn the rules. “And don’t worry,” Snap added, “I know we’re running low, but the headset and the game both were only about twenty credits.”

Finn and Poe held a careful silence.

“I fucking love twenties.” Poe’s voice quivered, and Finn snorted a laugh through his nose. Their eyes met and it was all over; they laughed so hard Finn felt he might be sick, and Poe wiped at his eyes.

Snap gave a concerned look to BB-8. “Do I want to know?”

[It’s always safe to assume that you don’t.]

Chapter End Notes

**Disclaimer** DO NOT DO WHAT POE DID, PEOPLE. Don’t put small, random things up your ass! Flared bases, that’s what you want! Believe me, I’ve read some
horror stories while researching things for this fic. Researching…yes, that’s it… Not entirely realistic that they’d manage to get them all out with no mishaps, but meh…artistic license. I wrote the original version of this scene like, six months ago, and I’ve been dying to actually get to it! I hope you got a chuckle out of their stupid shenanigans!

Also, maaaan, we're past 200,000 words and 400 pages! Insanity!

This is pretty much the last chapter for the boys to be able to have a day without anything bad going down, and I'm sorry that it ended up being a reeeallly long one. I debated about splitting it in two, but figured it'd lose some flow if I did that, and also, I wanted them to enjoy it. Going forward, if I end up with another massive chapter, do you guys prefer that I split it up, or just dish it out in one big chunk? Lots of little parts I really loved writing in this chapter--BB-8 taunting Finn about gaining some weight being at the top. (Poor guy needed some good food and lovins!) Please let me know what you thought of this one (and all that smut--good lord!). I so love your guys' comments! <3 Thanks, as always, for reading!
Chapter 38

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Poe stretched his neck from side to side, peering through the narrow space between his face wrap and cap at the desperately busy city streets before him. The clatter of forklifts sliding home and wrenching free crates the size of their ship, the warning beeps of reversing freight droids, the hissing rush of air speeders and airtaxis, and the shouts of hungry street-vendors bombarded their ears. As usual when in a place of swarming activity, Finn kept cautiously close to him, his hand going instinctually for his and gripping him tightly. BB-8 kept as close as it could to their legs without tripping them up, and Snap hovered some fifteen feet back, his dark eyes roving over every face and droid as if they might pull an unexpected blaster.

Baraab was a planet of rusted, durasteel-sided slums, and narrow streets hemmed in by old and peeling towers. Beneath a washed green sky, electrical wires crisscrossed from building to building like vines through mildewing trees. The air smelled of exhaust, mould, and greasy foodstuffs and Poe felt the urge to cough growing every minute they spent in its atmosphere.

As part of the Triellius Trade Route linking the notorious Spice mines of Kessel with Nal Hutta, Nar Shadda, and Gamorr, Baraab was generally rife with illegal activity. They had passed no fewer than fifteen ships armed with cartel guards who wore their insignias and heavy blasters openly and with a dangerous swagger. The tons of refined Spices their recipient drug lords ferried would fetch price enough to pay out the bounties on their heads twice over. Most of those working the spaceport and surrounding docks were there for the meager credits they could scrape together doing the hard manual labor of loading and unloading the constant influx of goods, and the three of them fought hard to look absolutely unfazed and at home in the hard-edged environment. Finn’s skin crawled; the knowledge that their ship model had been broadcasted galaxy wide and was now parked near such rough vessels did not sit well with any of them, but they had little choice about it if they wished to continue their search, and Baraab had been mentioned many times in conjunction with Umbra Core. Landing outside of the city and walking in would have drawn ten times the attention as simply taking a pad at the spaceport.

Finn’s skin prickled as they squeezed away from the hub towards the more open market streets. He wasn’t certain if his nagging unease was generated from ill-will directed specifically at them, or his dislike of chaotic crowds. Maybe that’s all it is? Am I nervous or is the Force actually trying to tell me something? He hadn’t yet learned to differentiate between the two. Regardless, he kept his senses peeled.

They had agreed to take up positions near to the spaceport, to watch for Wayfarer transports or any sign of Umbra Core insignia. BB-8 had insisted that it was just as capable of slicing a city terminal as Tubbs, and as they searched for an out of the way spot to observe the goings on, BB-8 wove about looking for a grungy port to surreptitiously link into. It found one within their line of sight, tucking up behind the rusted orange portal and wobbling innocently as it’s complink arm whipped out.

One eye on BB-8, they settled into a vacant space up against a stack of crates and near a street vendor hawking some greasy meat concoction. His high, reedy voice called out over and over, though few pedestrians seemed to take him up on his shouts of “Moran curry, five credits! Authentic! Moran curry in a hurry!” Poe watched as Snap casually took up a position at the opposite street corner.
Finn’s eyes roved over the constant stream of people, following the waddling run of an Aleena, a Devronian cackling at something his Trandoshan companion had said, a dangerous looking group of humans. Amongst all the comers and goers, there were smatterings of people who obviously called the city home. They looked continually harried and on edge, hurrying about to finish their shopping and trying to avoid the most thuggish spacers. A small four-legged creature caught Finn’s attention as it followed along after a young girl and her mother. The girl stooped and scooped it into her arms where it happily wagged it’s tail and licked at her face.

He gently nudged Poe, and the pilot tore his eyes from a fistfight that had broken out ten meters away.

“Hey, what’s that?” He inclined his head towards the creature.

Poe followed his gaze. “What, the corell dog?”

“I guess? The little animal that girl’s carrying.”

“Yeah, that’s a corell dog.”

“Oh. It’s kind of cute, huh? Does it…like to be around people?”

There was a wistfulness to Finn’s voice that made Poe smile. “Yeah, lots of people keep them as pets—there’s about a million different breeds.”

“Oh.” Finn watched until they were out of sight. “What’s a pet?”

Poe jolted. Finn’s questions about the outside world had become fewer and fewer as he’d adapted, but every now and then one would pop out that reminded Poe of just how sheltered he’d been.

“A pet is a domesticated animal. People keep them for…uh…for companions, or hunting, food, or guards—all sorts of stuff, really.”

“Huh.” Finn knew of domesticated animals only in so far as their uses as battle-mounds or guard animals, like the tauntauns or dewbacks he’d learned of in his lessons on the old Empire. He’d never considered the possibility that there were classes of domesticity, and that some may truly enjoy contact with their owners.

Poe grinned behind his wrap, warmth blooming in his chest. When all this is over, I’m getting him one.

For nearly an hour they watched. Craft lifted and descended with all the regularity of a heartbeat, but so far they had seen no Wayfarers, and no groups of slaves being ferried about. A few homeless beings had come begging for credits. Poe had looked to Finn—they’d divvied up some money between them, and Finn had been itching to try and actually buy something. Finn nodded and quietly handed out a few ones; while it wasn’t exactly a purchase, it did make him feel good. Still, unease tugged at his mind and he tried to remain vigilant and open to the flow of the Force. After another hour, BB-8 came weaving through the crowd and bumped up against their legs.

“Hey, buddy. How’d it go?” Poe bent and patted the droid fondly on it’s scuffed, domed head.

[I sliced 4 zetabytes before people started getting suspicious.] It bleeped quietly.

“That’s great. Think anyone followed you?”

[No—I took a long way here.]
“Okay…but we should move soon anyway.”

“Can we get some food? I’m starving.” Finn muttered, his eyes lingering on the nearby stand of Moran curry. Even its greasy scent had started to seem appetizing, and the man’s nonstop shouts of ‘curry in a hurry’ were becoming hard to deny.

“Sure. You wanna order? It’d be a good practice run with credits.”

“Yes.” Finn’s eyes brightened with excitement. He’d watched enough people buying the stuff that he had the routine memorized, and felt confident in initiating a transaction.

They walked up to the ramshackle stand. The man halted in mid-shout, his eyes sweeping over their clasped hands with a distaste that Poe immediately noted. His hackles raised. Finn, however, was completely oblivious as he fished around in his robe for ten credits. He held the chip out. “Can I get two curries?”

“Twenty credits.”

Finn paused, conscious of Poe’s fingers tightening against his hand. “But…you said they’re five credits apiece.” He trailed off uncertainly.

“The price went up.” The man’s lip curled.

“But that doesn’t make any-”

“Oh, you know what? I’ve got this, baby.” Poe motioned Finn to keep his money. He removed a handful of credits from his pocket and passed over the required twenty. The vendor grudgingly took it from him, and shunted forwards two cups of greasy meat and rice. Poe gathered them up with dripping gratitude. “Thank you so much,” he said obnoxiously with a hard gleam in his eyes, “we really appreciate it.” They turned and strode away, Finn holding his curry with a perplexed look, as if the whole exchange had taken place in another language.

“Why did the price go up?” He asked.

“Because that guy’s an asshole, that’s why.” Poe’s voice had a caustic edge to it that Finn had never heard.

“He did seem rude.” Finn ventured.

“Don’t worry.” Poe’s eyes crinkled devilishly about the corners. “I paid him with my ass-money.”

“You what?” Finn choked, his eyes wide.

[I hope you cleaned them, at least.] BB-8 shook it’s head.

“Of course I did—don’t be gross!” Poe arched a scandalized brow. “Still…it makes me happy. It’s the little things.” He sighed while Finn laughed beside him. They pulled up enough of their wraps to free their mouths, walking and cautiously eating, holding the cups before their faces to keep hidden as much as possible. “Hey, buddy,” Poe said softly without turning to the droid, “is Snap following us?”

The droid’s head swiveled behind it as it rolled forwards. [Yes. He got curry too.]

“Right. Let’s take a walk while we eat—keep an eye on the spaceport. If we don’t see anything by the time we’re done with these, we’ll go back to the ship and you can start decrypting what you
Poe hated to admit that the curry was actually pretty good, but then, a month and a half of mostly nerf and freeze-dried vegetables had primed him to be extremely appreciative of literally anything else. Finn halted alongside him with a wracking cough and Poe paused.

“I know, this air’s disgusting—I’ve been trying not to cough the whole time.” He commiserated.

“No—it’s not that,” Finn straightened, his eyes streaming, “it’s spicy. Oh gods, why? It’s expensive and spicy?”

Poe guffawed and slapped him on the back; he’d hardly noticed the spice. “It’s not that bad, is it?”

“No.” He sniffed mightily, his sinuses kicking into overdrive.

“Oh my gods,” Poe grinned. “If you can’t finish it, I’ll eat it. We’re not throwing away twenty credits.”

“I can finish it.” Finn straightened gamely, shoving another spoonful into his mouth. Poe watched him carefully, his mouth quivering as Finn chewed exaggeratedly and forced the bite down with a full body shudder. “See?” He rasped.

“Sure thing, honey.” Poe chuckled.

Finn lasted another three bites before admitting defeat; Poe happily took the proffered cup and tucked in, his eyes following the drowsy lifting of a blocky Sullust 3-Ram cargo ship and the steady stream of pedestrians. Though the atmosphere was by no means pleasant, he was endlessly grateful for a sky to look at; for solid ground beneath his feet and sunlit warmth easing through the fabric of his robe. The Hyrotil had begun to seem unbearably claustrophobic. He caught Finn’s eye with a crinkling smile and Finn mirrored it, once again taking his hand and squeezing.

A warning thrill swept up Finn’s spine just as a sharp crack of blaster-fire erupted out of the blue. They jerked and scrabbled for cover, their cups of curry clattering to the ground as they whipped quickly behind the corner of the nearest building and drew their blasters; the casual happiness that had brightened their chests left a void of gaping fear in its wake. BB-8 peaked out from the edge of the mouldy wall in time to see a human man crumpling to the ground with a sizzling hole in his back, a blaster rifle clutched in his gloved, unmoving hand. The crowd parted before Snap, who loomed at the end of an avenue of staring faces with his blaster drawn. Several gawkers edged hesitantly away, while others turned and carried on with their business as if nothing had happened.

Poe and Finn cautiously stood and merged back into the crowd, hearts hammering in their ears, eyes scanning frantically from face to face. Snap jerked his head and they hurried over.

“We need to leave.” He muttered as he turned on his heel and started back around for the spaceport at a quick clip.

“What happened?” Finn breathed, throwing a look over his shoulder at the dead man.

“He pulled a blaster on you two—I got him before he could fire, but who knows if he had allies.” Finn’s stomach churned, “You killed him.”

“Yes,” Snap bit out, “of course! Unless you’d rather he woke up later and told gods knows how
many people that you were here?”

“It’s fine, let’s just keep quiet and pick up the pace, eh?” Poe motioned them forwards through the spaceport’s main gates and down the scuffed street that led towards the landing bays.

Drug cartel ships loomed darkly up to either side, bristling with armaments, guards patting their blasters with dangerous gleams in their eyes. Finn was not even surprised at the lack of fear he felt—facing down a sith on a planet-sized weapon and outrunning an unstoppable droid had tempered him to the common thug, and Poe and Snap had come across so many of them over the years that they regarded them as part of the landscape—a potentially dangerous part of the landscape, but nothing to panic over. Snap pulled out his comm and sent a hurried message to Tubbs. “Hey, get the ship ready to fly—we’ll be back in a few seconds.”

[Right!]

The Hyrotil swam into view around the edge of a Devron1 5D cargo ship, the ramp lowering to the scuffed duracreet beneath their feet and the engines igniting with a flash of yellow light. Their revving two-toned roar nearly drowned out the shouts that burst into the air behind them. “That’s them! That’s the ones that shot Levik!”

As Finn glanced over his shoulder, the cartel ship nearest to them shuddered to roaring life, its thorny crown of laser cannons swiveling towards their ship. Blaster-fire pocked the ground near their feet and lanced off the Hyrotils hull. “Tubbs, forward shields up!” Poe shouted into his comm as they sprinted up the ramp. The cartel ship let loose and the Hyrotil shuddered from prow to stern. Tubbs shrieked.

“Get us in the air, get us in the air!” Poe yelled over wailing alarms, dashing for the cockpit with Finn at his heels. Finn peeled off, taking the stairs two at a time and flinging himself into the gunner’s turret as the ground beneath them shot away. He slapped his headset over his ears in time to hear Poe’s hard-edged commands.

“Reroute! All power to rear deflector shields!” Poe yelled, his hands flying over the controls, cutting the alarms, and opening the throttle full out. The familiar split second of vertigo upended Finn as Baraab shrunk rapidly away beneath him. His targeting system showed three ships coming in hot and his hand closed tensely about the trigger as above his head the cannon swiveled with a low, metallic hiss. Poe wasted no time with fancy maneuvers—though he was confident that he could outfly them, he also knew that their ship was massively outgunned, and they could not afford to make extensive repairs. I hated that planet anyways.

Red splinters sliced through the darkness with deceptive delicacy, streaking past the transparisteel bubble of the gunners turret near enough to momentarily blind Finn. Finn squeezed his eyes shut against the searing afterimage, took a slow, calming breath, and closed his hand upon the trigger. The cannons pulsed twice, and he felt more than heard the shot striking home and rattling up through his seat.

“Fucking great shot, baby!” Poe cheered through his headset and Finn blindly grinned, exhilarated that he had managed it without the use of sight.

“Navcomputer is…done! Rotate to .992!” Snap said from Poe’s right, his eyes tracing the slender, glowing veins of hyperspace routes.

The ship swung a high arc and then vanished with a stretch. The stars blurred and elongated and the swarming blue haze wrapped the Hyrotil in the embrace of limitless space.
An hours-long diagnostic showed superficial damage to the front of the Hyrotil—the alarms had been more proximity alerts than anything else. While the clean grey durasteel was now charred an ugly, blistered black on the port half of the cockpit, the ship was as sound as it ever had been. Tubbs carried itself quite proudly as Poe, Finn, and Snap praised it for its quick action in getting the forward shields up. BB-8 grudgingly patted it with its manipulator arm.

Snap leaned heavily back in the navigator’s chair, rubbing his brow. “What a day.”

Finn nodded mutely. He wasn’t sure how to thank Snap for having their backs, for taking the burden of killing onto himself to ensure their safety. Poe had been with him through enough horrible situations to know exactly what was going through his friend’s mind.

“We owe you, Snap. If you hadn’t been there, that guy would’ve had the drop on us for sure.”

Snap cracked an eye and gave a tired smile. “You’ve had my back in enough dogfights—I think we’re continually even.”

“Nope. We owe you for sure.”

“We really do,” Finn seconded.

“Alright, alright.” Snap waved away their thanks though a pleased flush glowed through his beard. He sat up, rallying himself to the business at hand. “So what’s the next planet on the list?”

Poe edged in front of him and toggled up a map of Hutt space. “Well, Altor is the next closest, but honestly I’d feel better if we got out of this sector for a while. There’s no way those guys didn’t ID our ship, so I’m sure we’ll have a few drug lords after us now too.”

Finn shook his head. “That’s all we need.”

“Yeah, no kidding.” They stood for a moment, in an awkward silence. “But hey, that was a damn good shot.” Poe grinned at Finn, eager to bring the positives of the day to light.

“I couldn’t even see it—it felt like it connected though.”

“You couldn’t see it?” Snap’s brows furrowed.

“No—one of their shots kind of blinded me.”

Snap and Poe shared a loaded glance.

“You…fired blind.” Snap stated.

“Yep.” Finn’s smile lit up the room.

“Did you…focus on the Force?” Poe asked, a hesitant shiver starting in the base of his spine.

“I guess so. Really, I just tried to go blank and fired when it felt right.”

The shiver let loose into a full body tingle. He is magical. Poe mirrored Finn’s smile, arching his brows at Snap. It was a heady thing, to feel that perhaps the flow of the universe was on their side, subtly guiding the actions of those open to it. “You know…I think things’ll be alright.”
Poe lay on his stomach, staring at the datapad open on his pillow. The positive euphoria that had seized him upon Finn’s miraculous blind shot had withered now that he was without a team to bolster, awake and alone within his mind while Finn and Snap slept. The greenish glow radiating from the rectangular screen cast his face in a sickly pallor. As had become his nightly routine, he toggled through news sites that acted as an anxious upper, then stupid videos to try and calm himself down, then one last look at their bounty boards to assure himself that Leia still lived. Tonight however, he seemed caught in a loop—endlessly checking the same news programs over and over; each compulsive click tightening the claws of helpless anxiety about his ribs. His eyes burned and he rubbed mindlessly at them.

Finn’s hand landed softly on top of his, drawing his fingers away from the datapad. The spell was broken and he turned to find Finn staring up at him, traced with greenish light as if painted by an artist’s brush. His eyes shone like still pools as he stroked across his knuckles. The look of him and the simple touch swept pleasant goosebumps up Poe’s arm.

“You should sleep.”

Poe sighed. “I know. I know I should, it’s just…”

“Just what?”

Poe shut the datapad down and set it to the floor, then curled against Finn. The darkness of the little room, and the warmth of him loosened the feeling of helplessness from his chest as he buried his face in Finn’s neck.

“What if we never find anything? No Resistance…no First Order…nothing.” It hurt him to admit that fear. “What if we’re just revving on empty this whole time? What if we run out of credits, or someone actually—”

Finn kissed him into silence, nuzzling his forehead against Poe’s.

“We’ve got the list. We’ll go down it, planet to planet, and see what happens. Maybe we will find something. And if we don’t…we’ll figure it out from there.”

Poe huffed a hopeless laugh that worried Finn, giving way at last to the grain of pessimism he usually kept buried deep within. “Yeah, we’ve been doing great at that so far. I feel like it’s a 50/50 chance we’re going to get shot at anywhere we set down.”

[That’s…actually optimistic.] BB-8 spoke up from the bedside.

“Good to know. Thanks…” Poe muttered sarcastically. “And anyways, we’ll probably run out of money before we make it through that list.”

“Maybe we could go back to Maz’s and borrow some. She’s so old, she probably has tons saved up.” Finn tried to kid and lighten the mood, but his comment did not have the intended effect.

“I don’t want to beg credits off of people. I don’t want to keep living on this ship, Finn. I don’t want Snap to keep getting shot at for us. I…I don’t want to make this about me, but this is wearing me out.” Poe held a quavering silence, the pain that lie at the heart of his consternation bubbling suddenly to the surface. “It’s just…I miss everyone…” his voice was naked, vulnerable as a child’s.

“I miss Ziff and Bastion, and…Jess—” He sniffed suddenly, throat tightening until he could not speak. An embarrassed sob broke from him onto Finn’s chest.
“Oh…Poe…” Finn grimaced, holding him tightly and rubbing his shuddering back.

Poe freed a hand from under Finn’s arm and wiped at his eyes. “I’m s-sorry,”

“You don’t have to be sorry…not to me. Not for caring.”

“I—I don’t want anyone else to die,” he quietly cried.

“We won’t.” Another soft kiss to his forehead. “We won’t, honey.” His heart broke. It was the first
time since their crash landing what felt like years ago that he had seen Poe cry for his friends. He
knew that Poe was referring to more than those that he’d lost in the attack on Base; he meant Rhys,
of course, and his mother, and Finn wondered how many others had slipped from him in his
dangerous line of work.

Poe cried himself into silence, both embarrassed and relieved. Finn’s fingers stroked through his hair
and he dragged a hand across his eyes. He could not fight that soporific touch and he allowed
himself to ease into the warmth and comfort of the bundled blankets and Finn’s body. “You’re so
good, Finn…”

Finn huffed a warm laugh against his damp cheek. “So are you, you know?”

“But you really are.”

“So. Are. You,” Finn insisted, punctuating each word with a kiss.

A reluctant smile started on Poe’s lips. “I love you.”

Finn sighed. “I love you too.”

Nearly three weeks later, tensions were running high and supplies were running low. BB-8’s data
had expanded their list by another 12 planets. They had searched, or tried to search, five more of
them, but on two planets they had been unable to so much as land; ground fire from unfriendly ships
suspicious of the Hyrotil's wanted make had forced them into full retreat with the bare minimum of
fuel. They had limped to a space station in the Merel sector, thrown some of the last of their credits
into the tank and immediately jumped back into deep space.

It was on Drexel that a solid link between all of their formulations emerged. While scouting the
spaceport, Tubbs bleeped an alarm that it had spotted a Wayfarer class transport. What they’d seen
had hit all of them like a kick to the guts, but none more so than Finn. A thin line of scraggly
children were being herded up the ramp and about their necks were collars similar to those worn by
slaves in Nar Shaddaa but for one detail, a detail that Tubbs superior senses easily recognized—the
small, circular symbol of Umbra Core stamped into the metal. Finn had streaked away from them
with a shout of anger and horror but the ship had drowsily lifted before his outstretched hand and
leapt away into the greying sky. It had been a rough few days since and Finn was still not quite back
to himself, falling often into an empty silence that worried Poe even more than the fact that they had
only 120 credits left between the three of them.

They seemed to have reached an unspoken agreement that they would not discuss how precariously
thin their lifeline had become and instead went on about their business in what had become a routine
of distraction; endless games of chop sabacc, listening to BB-8’s collection of music, watching dumb
holovids, giving Finn requests to draw, and telling stories.
Poe sat to the side, a spectator as Finn and Snap finished up their round of chop sabacc—after BB-8 had pointed out that he’d lost 98 times consecutively, Poe had lost his enthusiasm for the game. He listened half-heartedly as Snap complemented Finn on an excellent bluff; most of his attention was focused on how insane he felt. He wanted to go for a run so badly he felt his muscle would burst out of his skin and go sprinting madly around the ship on its own. And he wanted tomletta’s and wine, and Corellian rum, and anything that was not nerf. He wanted to take Finn out to a nice restaurant and watch his eyes light up at dishes he’d never imagined. He wanted to take a leisurely stroll with him down a vibrant street somewhere and not have to constantly worry that they might get shot at. Of course, for any of that to happen, he’d need the First Order scrubbed out of the universe. He sighed and tuned back in to find Snap chortling with glee.

“Ha, that’s ten to three!” He rubbed his hands together.

“I thought for sure I had you this time.” Finn tossed down his cards and shook his head. “Ah well. You want in on the next round, Poe?” He gave him a hopeful look that Poe was sorry to quash.

“Nah, that’s okay. It was more fun the first five hundred times.”

“Yeah, even I’m getting tired of winning.” Snap admitted.

“Hey, I’ve beaten you plenty of times.” Finn pointed out indignantly.

“I will admit, you are definitely more of a challenge than Poe.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Poe stretched and stood. “You guys want to start dinner? I think we’re gonna be out again after today. There were two nerf patties left.”

Finn’s face fell. He never imagined he would get tired of ‘real food’, but he was dangerously close to wanting to vomit every time he looked at the greyish slabs of meat or inhaled their thick, cloying scent.

“I was thinking about that.” Snap began, “we’ve got enough credits to refuel and get a bit more food, and then that’s that, right?”

“Yep,” Poe nodded heavily. “That’s that.”

“Okay, so, I’ll sell the Schooner.”

“You’re gonna sell your ship?” Finn exclaimed.

Snap shrugged. “Sure. It’s not doing much good hanging out on top of the Hyrotil, and it should get enough to keep us in the air for three or four more months.”

Poe wanted to scream, but the horrible idea of living on the ship for that much longer struck him momentarily mute. He recovered quickly, gratitude steamrollering his claustrophobia. “Snap, I will pay you back. Somehow, someway, I am going to pay you back.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it.”

“No can do. When this is over, you’re getting an all-expenses paid trip to…wherever you’d want to go.”

“Hmm…better make it someplace expensive then.” Snap rubbed at his beard. “Oh, a trip on one of those Corellian gaming yachts! That’s what you can get me.”
“You’ve got it.” Poe grinned.

Finn held a thoughtful silence as Poe walked over to the nearly empty cooler.

“But…then what?” Finn asked the question they’d all tiptoed around for weeks. “I…I want to find Umbra Core, I want to stop them from taking kids to the First Order but…we’re not getting anywhere. We’re not stopping them, we’re not finding any kind of headquarters. All we’re doing is risking our lives just trying to stay one step ahead.” Finn slouched and that heavy emptiness entered his eyes again. “I wish we could go back to Maz’s or your dad’s.”

“I know, honey, I do too. I really, really do.” Poe’s hand landed upon his shoulder and squeezed.

Snap watched them sadly and then cleared his throat. “Hey, I just remembered something. Be right back.” He stood from their pile of sabacc cards and strode into his room. Finn cocked his head as Snap fumbled around through his storage compartment. A plastic crinkling sound met their ears. “Aha!” He turned back to them with a large, brightly colored bag.

Poe’s voice leapt an octave. “Choco-rinds?!”

“I got them ages ago and kept ‘em tucked away. I figured we might need a morale booster somewhere down the line.”

“Oh my gods, you’re the best!” Poe clutched the offered bag to his chest in a cellophane hug. “I could cry!”

“Are those the things we had back on Base?” Finn asked.

“Oh!” Poe exclaimed. “Hey, let’s fry up the last of the nerf and cap it with these. It can be the galaxy’s saddest party!”

Snap waved a hand as if catching a wayward thought, “And we can watch a movie! Tubbs has got an extensive collection.”

Poe met his eyes with an expression of incredulous disbelief. “You…you’ve had movies this whole time?!” He nearly tore his hair out. “Why didn’t you say so before?”

“Petty vengeance.”

“Vengeance for what?” Poe exclaimed.

Snap crossed his arms. “Do you know how many times I had to listen to you guys going at it before I bought that headset? Movies were my one solace.”

Finn blushed like a nuclear dawn, but Poe barreled on without a care.

“Oh!” Snap staggered as if Finn had decked him. He blinked, shaking his head. “You…you’ve never seen a movie?”
“Well,” Finn shrugged, “I mean, I’ve watched some of those dumb holovids Poe likes and I saw a bunch of First Order propaganda films, but those probably don’t count.”

“No they sure as hell do not! Oh man. This is big.” Snap placed worried fingers to his mouth, glancing away under the burden of his responsibility and running a hand through his hair. “I—I wasn’t expecting this.”

“Relax,” Poe laughed. “It’s not like you’re taking his virginity.”

“But I am!” Snap said with wide eyes while Finn’s blush intensified. “I’m taking his movie virginity! Oh man…which one should it be…Nebulae Expanse? Love Among the Dunes? The Wampa Man?” He straightened as if a bolt of lightning had shot through him. “Aha! I know which one he has to watch first! The Tunneler.” His voice curled sadistically.

“Dude, we don’t want to scar him for life!”

“Why? What’s wrong with it?” Finn perked up, intrigued.

“That movie messed me up. Rhys and I had to sleep with the lights on for a week when that came out.”

“It’s not that scary.” Snap snorted.

“I seem to recall you saying the same damn thing.”

“It was three days, max.”

“I can handle it!” Finn threw out his chest, eager to prove himself.

Poe met his eyes with a look that said clearly you don’t know what you’re getting into. “Okay…”

“Yes!” Snap grinned devilishly and clapped his hands together.

Snap sat on the floor beside Tubbs, his back leaned up against the side of their bed and his wide eyes trained on the figures moving like ghosts across the paneling of the wall. Finn and Poe lay on their stomachs, stretched out across the mattress and mindlessly shoveling choco-rinds into their mouths. Poe tore his eyes from the movie, both because the upcoming scene made his spine want to crawl out, and because he wanted to see Finn’s reaction to it. Finn’s eyes were round as shining moons in the flickering light, and his hand crept steadily over his mouth in horror. He’d been subconsciously edging closer and closer to Poe who was grateful for this as it spared him from having to do it himself and lose face in front of Snap. One of the films heroines slipped past a dark crevice, outstretched hands groping blindly about the dripping walls of the tunnel. Poe tensed, waiting for her blood curdling scream to erupt from Tubb’s embedded speakers.

It sliced like a knife through the air and Finn jerked and clutched at Poe, not taking his eyes from the movie for a second. “Why did she leave the group?” He whispered quietly.

Poe smiled. As the movie progressed, Finn managed to curl into an ever tighter ball, as if he were slowly imploding. He’d tugged the blankets out from under them and huddled beneath them with only his eyes peeping out like saucers. Poe gladly welcomed the chance to do the same. Even Snap pulled free a corner of the quilt and held it like a flimsy shield before him.
Finn had gone as rigid as duracreet by the time the heroes of the film had met their demise or been driven wholly mad by the ancient subterranean horror. But he hadn’t closed his eyes once. Poe could not say the same, and he was proud of Finn for making it through such a demanding first movie.

Snap pressed on the lights while Tubbs tittered nervously. “So? What’d you think?” He eagerly asked the huddled mass of Finn.

“I…don’t think I like movies…” Finn muttered.

“Great, see? You’ve ruined him.” Poe shook his head while Snap laughed.

Finn snuggled close to Poe and pulled the blankets up to their necks as they bedded down for the night.

“How long do we have before we reach Onatos?”

“Nav computer had us at…9 hours?” Poe yawned.

“Good. Think we’ll actually be able to land this time?”

“Gods, I hope so. I’m gonna to lose my mind if I have to spend another day stuck in here.”

“I know. I think I’m about to hit that point too.” He sighed as Poe’s hand ran it’s usual course about the edges of his scar. They fell into a drowsy silence. Despite his comfort, as Finn closed his eyes scenes from the movie crept into his mind like a disembodied hand. He shivered.

“Hey, honey?” Finn breathed against his neck.

“Yeah?”

“Can we leave the lights on?”

Poe’s laugh ghosted hot through Finn’s hair, secretly relieved. “Yeah we can.”

BB-8’s scream hours later nearly sent Finn through the durasteel above his head and out into space. He flailed completely off of the mattress, convinced that the Horror was after him, while Poe jerked upright with a gasp. Finn had hardly picked himself off the floor before BB-8 screeched again, this time accompanied with the words,

[I’VE FOUND THEM! I’VE FOUND THE RESISTANCE!]

Chapter End Notes

Holy great Gandhi, I am SO SORRY FOR THE WAIT!!! I totally ran out of energy for this as the political world has spiraled out of control. Every time I’d sit down to write, I’d
end up online reading horrifying news article after horrifying news article (that bit of Poe getting stuck in a bad-news loop was very much me), and then feel like I was going to panic. Because, good lord, shit is crazy.

ANYWAY, I hope you liked this chapter! I ended up re-writing it about three times all told. At one point it was my least favorite thing I'd ever written, but hopefully I turned it around. And the Resistance! It has been found!! The boys are going to go flippin' nuts next chapter--they needed that break. Please let me know what you guys thought of this chapter (I'm still not sure I like it, but that could be because I've stared at it for twenty days straight). Thanks so much for your patience with me, and for your continued reading!

Bluestem
Chapter 39

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It took a moment for the reality of the droid’s cheering screams to make it through their shocked heads; it was almost too much to believe that after months of running and searching they could finally go home. Poe and Finn silently locked eyes, the dying ember of hope they’d carried within them sparking off like fireworks and sending them into a whirlwind of movement and noise. Poe leapt from bed with a joyous shout, scooping Finn off of the floor where he’d landed, each of them bouncing in place in a tight embrace, laughing and cheering incoherently. Snap charged into the room, unnoticed until they found themselves being crushed in a hug any Wookie would have been proud of.

[Hurry up!] BB-8 chortled loudly and they thundered into the cockpit, a mess of nerves and giddy excitement, and gathered around the blinking communications relay. Even now, Poe half expected it to be a trap; a brilliant plan by a bounty hunter though he could not make sense how they could’ve done it. He reached for the relay with shaking anticipation, and Finn and Snap went dead silent, hardly daring to breathe.

Poe swallowed. “Hello?”

A split second of silence passed like an eternity, and then a warm, wry voice answered.

“Colonel Dameron. About time you reported in.”

The voice washed over Poe in a literal wave of relief, sweeping through his chest and nearly dropping him to his knees. He closed his eyes and sucked in a hard breath, doubling over as if weights had dropped from his shoulders. Emotion strangled his voice and he buried his face in his hands while Snap and Finn exploded into wild cheers. Finn’s hand rubbed bracing circles across his back, and Poe struggled to put himself back together. He sniffed mightily and straightened, glassy eyes falling to the softly blinking light as if he could see her face shining through.

“General,” his voice shook, “it’s good to hear your voice again.”

Snap let loose into a full messy sob, turning away and rubbing his arm across his eyes. Finn gave a weak laugh, falling into the navigators chair with a relief so profound he felt he could have slid to the floor and slept for a year.

“Sounds like you’re not alone, Poe. Is Finn there with you?”

“Yeah, General, yeah, he’s here, and Snap is too. We’re all still here.” Poe wiped hurriedly at his eyes, grinning so hard he felt his face might split.

“Finn, Captain Wexley, I—I’m so relieved.” There was a quaver to her voice that set Snap off into a fresh sob.

“Not as much as we are, General.” Poe sat, taking Finn’s hand and squeezing while Finn struggled to find his voice.

“I’m afraid my worry outranks yours. And Finn?”

Finn cleared his throat and turned towards the relay, painful happiness welling in his chest. “Yes,
ma’am?”

“How is your back? I’ve worried about that ever since the ambush.”

He glanced away and bit his lips; to know that Leia Organa had worried about him as the organization she’d formed had crashed around her feet was more than he could take. He tried to imagine her lying awake at night, including him amongst all of her other cares and worries. The First Order wanted him erased—the Resistance wanted him whole. Poe watched his face, all but glowing with understanding. “It’s—I’m fine, ma’am. I’m fine. I’m more than fine.” His watery laugh nearly got Poe started again.

[Hello, General! I am glad that you’re still operational!]

“Ah—and that must be BB-8. Good—Threepio will be glad you made it. And so am I.”

“General,” Poe’s voice took on a solemn tone, “what happened?”

“It’s a long story I’m afraid. I’m sure you could say the same.”

“Yes, we definitely could.”

“I tell you all the details face-to-face, but suffice it to say things got a little out of control. I was… injured during the attack. Thankfully, one of Kalonia’s aides was onboard or I would not be talking to you now.”

They listened with wide, rapt eyes. “We’ve set up Base on one of Mon Cala’s moons, Ithil, and Statura has been in communication with our allies. I think you’ll all be pleased with the interplanetary force we’ve mustered—when we find the First Order, we’ll actually stand a chance.”

“We can help on that front, General.” Poe was happy to report, feeling like his old self for the first time in months. “We’ve been following up on the case you gave to Finn, and it turns out that the First Order has been utilizing an organization called Umbra Core to capture children. They’re based out of Nar Shaddaa, and we have a list of planets they’re affiliated with. With Mon Cala’s resources, I bet we could narrow the trail right to the First Order’s doorstep.”

Leia’s laugh made them all smile. “Even while being chased by bounty hunters, you kept on that mission? You three have done the Resistance proud.”

A sudden thought occurred to Finn. “Ma’am, we got some help from Maz Kanata. She wanted us to contact her if we found the Resistance. She wants to join up—her and her allies. Is that alright?”

“Maz Kanata?” Leia gave a heavy breath, “things have really come to a head if she’s entering the game. I’ve patched our coordinates through. By all means, we could use her support.”

“And that reminds me—my dad wants to join up again too. Can you spare a seat for a war vet?”

Leia laughed again. “Another old man in our ranks, eh? I think we can find him a new uniform though I regret to inform him that he’s past his prime for ground combat. He’ll have to sit on the sidelines like the rest of us old timers.”

“He figured as much, but he’ll be happy to be back, General.”

“Where are you all now?”

“Uh, we’re…”
Finn’s eyes fastened on the nav computer. “About two hours out from Onatos. Coordinates are 9.58.999.653.21.1.”

“We’ll stop there to refuel and jump to Ithil as soon as we’re done.” Poe nodded stalwartly. “It’ll take a few days, but we’ll be there.”

“I’m glad.” They could feel her smile as if a warm light shone through the ships dash. “Poe, Finn, Snap…it’s good to have you all back.”

“Thank you, ma’am.”

“It’s good to be coming back,” Snap grinned.

“Once you’re in orbit, contact Ithil control and give them the code I’ve patched through. They’ll raise a landing pad for you and escort you to our hanger.”

“Copy, General.” Poe smiled from ear to ear. At last, he had orders, and he was eager to act on them.

They gave her giddy, soppy farewells and then the connection was closed. Poe stared for a moment at the dimming relay light and then rotated to face Finn with a happily bewildered expression. “Did that just happen?”

Finn breathed a laugh and shook his head, his eyes shining. “It happened. It really happened.”

“Oh man, I’m gonna fuckin’ cry againnn,” Snap choked thickly.

“Don’t!” Poe’s throat tightened and before he knew it he was laughing and crying, and Snap started on a fresh jag. A second later Finn joined in, laughing through tears and clutching at his stomach. Suddenly Poe was in his arms and they were kissing as if they’d never before kissed, so full of excitement and passion they could hardly keep on their feet.

“Get…a room.” Snap wheezed,

Poe broke away with a shout of a laugh, and punched the air triumphantly. “BB-8! Music! We need music!”

[Right!]

“Yes!” Snap cheered as a staccato burst of electronic horns and keyboards throbbed through the air. “Do we have any Kisin left?”

Finn’s eyes went wide as he twirled Poe into his side in a clumsy dance. “No! No Kisin!”

They were so punch drunk on happiness that they hardly needed beer to reach that same level of giddy stupidity. They laughed and danced about in their boxers as BB-8 and Tubbs spun around one another, their lingering resentment quite forgotten. Poe and Finn scraped the last of the porridge into bowls and set it to heat. For once, they hardly minded the tasteless, gluey consistency of the grey slop. Poe could’ve eaten a handful of dirt and given it five stars, he was so elated. He sprawled across Finn’s lap, happily eating while Finn’s arms looped around him. Finn wanted nothing more than to get Poe in their room and go full throttle, but that was clearly not an option as he was in mid conversation with Snap. Regardless, he guffawed as Snap detailed the first time he’d gone out on a
solo mission for *Black Squadron* and ended up with a bad case of food poisoning while trapped on an X-wing in deep space.

Poe laughed along, wolfishly conscious of Finn’s fingers rubbing pointedly back and forth on his thigh and half-tempted to try a *very* subtle lap dance. *Don’t do it. Subtlety is not your forte.* For once he managed to reign himself in and glanced down at a poke to his calf. BB-8 was staring up at him.

[You told Kes you’d call him once you found the Resistance.] The droid reminded him.

“Oh, right!” He patted Finn’s arm and plunked a kiss on him before standing and striding light as air into the cockpit. He turned down the music, keyed in his house code, and waited, giggling softly to himself as Finn and Snap talked.

Five pings later, his father’s concerned voice met his ears.

“Poe? Everything okay?”

He burst out laughing, which instead of soothing Kes, only alarmed him.

“Poe? Force, boy, what’s going on?”

“Dad, we found them!”

“You found—” There was a silence so profound Poe could all but see his father’s jaw hitting the kitchen floor. “*You found the Resistance?*”

“Yes! BB-8 found their frequency!”

A great bark of laughter nearly blew his ear out though he didn’t mind. “Ha! Yes, oh—oh, that’s the best news I’ve had in months! Gods, I’ve been so worried about all of you.”

“I know, dad. The General said they’ve got a force mustered together from all of our allies. And with what we’ve dug up, we might actually have a real shot at taking the First Order down!”

“Are you all en route?”

“No, we’re stopping for fuel at Onatos—should be there in about forty minutes. And then we’re on our way.”

Kes sighed hugely. “Okay, well, I know I don’t have to tell you to be careful, but *be careful.* Did you remember to ask Leia about me joining up?”

Poe nodded as Finn paddled up and joined him at the consol. “Yeah, she said that’s fine, but that you have to sit on the sidelines like all the other old folks. Her words not mine.”

“I’m sure.” Kes said sarcastically.

“Hi, Kes, sir!” Finn grinned.

“Finn,” Kes chuckled, “if you call me ‘sir’ one more time…But how are you?”

“I’m really good, especially now.”

“I bet so! Well, you two be careful at your pit stop and patch me the coordinates for the Resistance, will you?”
“Right, BB-8’ll send them over. And we’ll be careful, dad.”

“Good! Tell Temmin ‘hi’.”

“Hi!” Snap shouted from the kitchenette.

“Ha, hi, Temmin! Anyways, with any luck I’ll see you all in a few days!”

“Right, dad, I can’t wait!”

“See you soon, Kes!”

“Alright, love you.”

“Love you too, dad.”

“Bye bye.”

Poe held his breath as he levered them out of hyperspace. He was anxious to get the ship fueled, nervous that they may, once again, be unable to land, and filled to the brim with bubbling excitement at the prospect of seeing Leia, Statura, and he hoped many more. The cocktail of emotions had him fidgeting like a womp rat with fleas. He nearly passed controls to Snap so that he could go sprinting down the hall and round the cargo hold fifty times in a row while joyously screaming his lungs out.

Finn huffed a laugh, his hand settling firmly on Poe’s bouncing knee and slowly easing it into stillness. “I think you’re shaking the whole ship.” He grinned.

Onatos set a light teal glow to the three men and two droids as they neared, shining like a faceted gem and haloed in a glittering ring of dust from an ancient meteor impact.

“Wow, this place doesn’t look so bad.” Finn smiled, half standing from his seat and squinting down at the tapestry of greens, blues, and scudding clouds streaking by below.

“Yeah, don’t get too comfortable. Onatos has been at war with itself for decades.” Snap said levelly from his perch behind the two of them.

The Hyrotil peeled through puffy columns of cloud, losing height and sharpening the landscape from patchy smudges of green to vast, sheer-edged plateaus of tree speckled earth. What had looked like motley clusters of pebbles grew to cool grey buildings gathered at the center of each landmass and throwing long, finger-like shadows in the late afternoon light.

“What are they fighting about?” Finn turned to Snap as Poe brought them lower. “This place looks like it has everything.”

Snap shrugged. “I dunno. Some kind of religious argument, I think. One side believes this, one side believes that and they routinely blow the hell out of each other for it. Let’s get some fuel and food, and leave them to it, I say.”

“Seconded, though maaan, look at that waterfall! I bet they’ve got some nice trails around here.” Poe said longingly. He could almost smell the fresh plant-laden air sweeping into his lungs, and feel the cool spray of the falls on his skin.

“Yeah, if you like your jogging spiced up with landmines.”
Poe’s face fell slightly but before he could respond, they were being hailed.

“Hyrotil light freighter—state your allegiance and intentions.”

“Uh…” Poe glanced at Finn and Snap, “Independent—we’re travelers. Just here for refueling and restocking.”

“Proceed to bay 6 in quadrant 12. Deviation from your flightpath will not be tolerated.”

“Copy.”

Finn arched his brows—the air controller’s harsh voice was completely at odds with the serene natural beauty of the planet. As they descended into the blocky grey city, signs of warfare leapt out like a disease beneath a medscope; a blown out wall, a cordoned off street, shattered storefronts, and trees with blasted off limbs. 

*Man…it’s a shame they can’t stop fighting; they’d have it made,* Finn mused; the cleanly lined architecture and scraps of gardens gave hints of what must’ve once been a rich and beautiful culture. *And of course, wherever there’s problems, the First Order sticks it’s nose in and starts rounding people up.* He wondered just how many had disappeared from this city over the decades.

Poe was so pleased that they hadn’t been shot at that he hardly noticed the artistry buried beneath the rubble. “Phew. Okay, looks like we actually get to refuel!” He stood with a blazing smile that smacked Finn upside the face and sent his stomach into a freefall. “And then it’s on to the Resistance.”

“Yes, let’s get out of the ship.” Finn eagerly joined him, scooping him into a side-armed hug. As had become usual, Snap was the one to lay out the dangers facing them.

“You guys should probably stay on the ship. Tubbs and me can get the fuel and food.”

Poe looked as if he were trapped in trash compactor. “Are you kidding me? Look at it out there! It’s a bright beautiful day and no one shot at us coming in! Anyways, it can’t be any more dangerous than the other shitty planets we’ve stopped at.”

“Yeah, and the Hyrotil is as wanted we are. Even if we stay on board we won’t be safe.” Finn pointed out.

Poe nodded at lightspeed. “See?”

Snap leveled his brows.

“We’ll be really quick! Food, fuel, and we’re on our way.”

Snap sighed, defeated by their claustrophobia. “Okay. Tubbs—stand guard. We’ll be back in fifteen minutes.”

[Right.] Tubbs saluted as BB-8 wobbled onwards towards the ramp.

Finn and Poe disappeared into their room to don their robes but Poe had hardly taken a step towards their storage compartments before Finn had tugged him into his arms and wrapped his lips about his. The pilot melted easily against him and reciprocated giddily, his tongue gliding past Finn’s with a moan.

“Mmm,” Poe’s heavy lidded look throbbed through him, “it’s a three day trip to Ithil—once we’re in hyperspace, I think we outta stay in here the entire time. Have our own private party.”
Finn grinned, hands rubbing up and down his flanks. “I like the sound of that.” He chuckled suddenly. “We’ll make Snap really appreciate that headset.”

“It’s a date.” Poe winked and pulled away with a seductive caress down Finn’s chest. “Good thing too, because I’ve got plans.”

Finn snorted as he tugged his robe over his head. “Last time you said that, you shoved credits up your ass.”

“And you loved it.”

“I did.”

“So…I was thinking…” he began with an uncertain tone that caught Finn’s attention at once, “maybe you’d be down for…I don’t know, switching things up?”

“Switching things up how?”

Poe was glad the wrap he was layering over his face hid his blush; it was an awkward thing to ask no matter how intimate the relationship. “Maybe…would you want to try having me inside you?”

Finn froze in mid wrap, heat rushing to his face until he felt he’d combust, while at the same time his breath caught and a spark leapt through the core of his pelvis. His body clenched without his leave. He’d been expecting something like this—the last few times they’d made love, Poe had spent a great deal of time fingering him and he’d come from sheer prostate stimulation for the first time only a two days ago.

Poe watched him carefully. He’d been wanting to ask him this ever sense he’d felt and seen how eagerly Finn’s body had reacted to him, but it was always difficult to start the conversation with Snap around; he seemed to have a sixth sense for when Poe wanted to slip off and have a private talk and would come barging in with a holovid they just needed to see, or wanting a game of sabacc. But now, with the prospect of some kind of stability and perhaps even some real privacy, he finally felt secure enough to bring it up. That and the fact that the idea of penetrating Finn was legitimately driving him insane. He didn’t often feel the need to top, but when it took hold of him he became absolutely captive to it until he could make good on that desire.

“I mean…you don’t have to decide right away.” He hedged, “it’s just something I’ve been wanting to try—if you want to try it. I think you’d like it, and I’d make it feel really good.” There was the familiar wry look in his eyes, but beyond that Finn saw a vulnerability he hadn’t expected. It touched him deeply, as he realized Poe was actually embarrassed.

He swallowed. It was intimidating, arousing, and utterly new. But…Poe trusted him with his body in every way. He wanted to do the same for him. And anyways, Poe’s fingers did feel good. He didn’t doubt that Poe could make good on his word. “Okay,” Finn said, and he was shocked at how breathless just the idea of it had him, “okay…yeah. I think we could try that.”

“Really?” Excited relief flashed across Poe’s eyes.

“Only…I mean…obviously I’ve never done that before and…” He shrugged self-consciously, “what’s it feel like at first?”

“Uh…” Poe reached far back in his mind, flashing to two teenagers fooling around in his old bedroom while his father was out. “Well, it could feel a little weird.”

“Like what?”
Poe grimaced slightly. “Kind of like you constantly need to take a shit?”

Finn gave an uncertain laugh. “Really?”

“Well, it did for me at first. But it gets way better—really it does. It’s just...different. It’s fuller and expansive—you have to just let go and let it happen. But,” Poe scrambled, “if you decided you didn’t like it, then we’d stop—no big deal.”

A grin tightened Finn’s eyes and he took a slow step forwards, nuzzling his covered face against Poe’s. “You’ve been thinking about this for a while.”

Poe’s hands linked around the small of his back and he closed his eyes against his neck. “Ever since the droids finished up with Tubb’s data.”

Finn’s laugh rumbled through him. “You should’ve said something sooner.”

“I did! With my fingers!” He winked. “Those were test runs.”

“I figured they might be.”

“You did? Well then,” he sputtered, “why didn’t you say something?” Poe smacked him on the shoulder.

“Because it was awkward,” Finn shrugged.

“Yeah, tell me about it, you jerk.” He laughed, but it was all relief now. Finn slowly pulled his wrap down, aiming for a languid kiss, but the low metallic roll of BB-8 grew in his ears. The droid peeked around the doorframe.

[Snap says, “while we’re young”.

“Now he’s interrupting us from a distance!” Finn shook his head.

Poe chuckled and finished up with an entirely unsatisfying peck to the lips. “Come on. The sooner we’re on our way, the sooner we can start our party.”

Finn took his hand with a loaded look that sent Poe’s heart tripping all over itself as they strode down the hall and into the cargo hold.

“About time. And here I thought this was supposed to be a quick pit stop.” Snap stood with his arms crossed before his chest.

“Hey, we were having an important adult conversation that needed to happen.” Poe stuck up his nose.

“Well, food needs to happen soon or I’m gonna resort to cannibalism.” Snap hit the ramp controls. It lowered with a hiss and Poe could have cried for the warm, fresh air that washed against his face like a sunlit cloud. He squeezed Finn’s hand, grinning a blue streak as their feet met solid, earthen ground and the walls of the ship dropped away from them into wonderful openness. The city streets were pocked here and there from artillery fire, but even so, citizens strode about undeterred from their daily lives. Poe greatly appreciated the plant life spilling like emeralds and fiery opals from awnings or window ledges, bursting from cracks in the pavement as if in defiance of the sentient warfare that seemed intent on snuffing it out. His eyes roved over Finn as he placed nearly the last of their credits into the fuel pump and levered the thick hose into the Hyrotil. His heart swelled at the way the sunlight fell like a golden mantel across his shoulders, the sure way Finn’s hands worked in
attaching the hose to the ship, and the easiness of his posture.

Poe felt happier than he had since their early days together back on base, happier by a wide margin. When they rejoined the Resistance, now they would do so as tightly bonded as two beings could be. The soul-deep wound of Rhys’ death had lost its dagger edge, and though he knew he’d never be ‘over it’, he now looked forward to the future with an optimism that had been waiting to burst free. He could really start a new beginning; a whole new phase of life. Life with Finn. The possibilities nearly sent him floating from the ground.

He giggled to himself as the four of them started away from the ship towards a shop to spend the very last of their money. Finn caught his eye, nudged his shoulder playfully against his and tried to batten down the unease that had gripped him now at every planet they’d visited for the past two and a half weeks; it had become as synonymous as the air they breathed and something he now expected. Now it warred with relief and giddiness. This would be something new. On Base, he hadn’t been able to so much as walk, hadn’t known about food or writing or music, or how exactly to live a normal life. While their months on the Hyrotil hadn’t exactly been ‘normal’, it was as close to it as he’d ever come. He understood now far better just who he was on his own terms, and his confidence in his own ability to learn and handle whatever changes came their way had grown throughout the challenges they’d faced down.

They entered a supply shop with one window boarded up from a recent blast and hastily chuckled fifteen freeze-dried meals into a small sledge. Finn’s smile faltered as Poe handed over their last credit. His giddiness morphed and tightened into a knot of anxiety as they exited to the street and aimed back toward the Hyrotils distant landing pad. The anxiety spiked into pure terror as he lashed out and mindlessly shoved Poe and Snap off their feet.

“Ow, what the-” Snap began but the stun-shot searing over his head answered his question immediately. BB-8 screamed through the crackling hiss of the blue light burning into the supply shop. Snap drew his blaster and pushed up to his hands and knees, then jerked as the icy halo swept across his body. He vaguely heard voices yelling as he crumpled, thoughtless, to the street.

Finn spun about in time to see eight red eyes swiveling towards them, unseen by Poe who scrabbled to Snap, taking him under the armpits and dragging him towards cover. The next shot came almost within the same breath and from the opposite direction, and Finn’s mouth fell open in a soundless cry as it caught Poe in the shoulder. The pilot fell limply to his back, so still it was if he were made of stone, and Finn’s horror threatened to devour him whole. The world rang in his ears as Ozmyn Heil emerged from a pocked alleyway with a wide, sneering grin. Rage he’d never have believed himself capable of smothered his fear. Finn hefted his blaster but as he hunkered protectively before Poe, the blue light burned over him and the shot from his falling hand went far wide as darkness settled over his senses.

BB-8’s head whipped frantically back and forth between the quickly approaching assassin droid and Ozmyn Heil. It raised it’s arc welder, wobbling as menacingly as it could and letting loose a fierce shriek as it guarded it’s fallen family.

[Stay back! STAY BACK!]

“Not this time, droid.” Oz grinned and leveled his blaster, and BB-8 spasmed beneath the stun shot, all of it’s electrical components overloading at the crackling surge of plasma. It shut down at once, smoke curling from it’s tool ports and vents, it’s half-domed head sliding limply back to rest upon the cobbled street. Oz kicked the droid aside like a tin can, throwing a quick look about him; though the whole exchange had taken only a few seconds a sharp-eyed shop keeper darted away from a window into the shadowed recesses of the nearby building. Oz knew without a doubt that the
woman was likely calling for security. “Come on, Zero, make it quick.” He bit out, dipping to haul Dameron’s dead weight off the street. He slung him over his shoulder and braced himself, widening his stance. “Come *on, get them up!*”

IG-00 levered forward from the pelvis at an inhuman ninety degrees, effortlessly pulling first Finn and then Snap into the bare struts of its arms. The added weight affected the droid not at all, and it started silently forwards at a quick, smooth clip that Oz struggled to match. He puffed doggedly along in its stark shadow, sweating and cursing Dameron’s weight that threatened to throw him off balance and keenly aware of sirens wailing in the distance. *Come on, come on.*

They ran through the open circular landing pads towards the low, blocky shape of *Comeuppance*, and Oz fumbled for his remote. The side hatch lowered, he ducked painfully beneath the broad wing and darted inside. He dropped Poe at once, letting him thud like a sack of meat to the floor as he dashed for the cockpit. “Get them bound and in cells, Zero! We’re leaving hot!” The roar of the engines drowned out the approaching screams of security vessels and *Comeuppance* leapt forward as if catapulted, sending the three unconscious men tumbling like ragdolls. Zero’s clamp-like hands closed across the binders lying within a supply crate and it strode easily towards its captives, its magnetic feet holding it steady as *Comeuppance* climbed at a steep pitch. Its cold manipulators squeezed their forearms like vice grips, latching binders across first 2187, then Dameron, and then the unidentified male who’s monetary value it had yet to assess. The ship lurched as a shot impacted a rear deflector shield, but Zero felt no fear—only a numerical certainty that it was fulfilling its programming.

It carried the three men towards the crude, barred prison cells that had been hastily welded within the cargo hold some five feet from the engine terminals and deposited them to the grated flooring one by one. It shut and locked the cells with a hard clang and then stood, a mute and unmovable guard, its flaring red eyes missing nothing. *Comeuppance* leapt into the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

An update in under a week? Sorcery!

So uh...that happened. Sorry folks, these next few chapters are gonna be rough with a capital "R". I am actually a monster. I'M SO SORRY, this has all be down from the beginning.

Looking forwards to what you guys think of this one! Please lemme know and thanks for reading!

-Bluestem
Blackness stuttered with sharp flashes of blue and then held, solidifying into an open, cloud-speckled sky. Protective hibernation gave way to a system-wide diagnostic check. Electrical damage to tool bay 3 nanofiber linkage, surface sensors 2, 3, and 6. Short detected in selenium drive. Short detected in telemetry chip. Short detected in propulsion jet 3 and 2. Blue sky—yellow dwarf sun. Thoughts booted, looping into a millisecond of confusion before it’s memory banks replayed Poe slumping to the ground, Finn raising his blaster and then collapsing beneath a rush of blue light. Ozymn Heil’s sneering, sharp-toothed grin filled the droid’s interior HUD. BB-8 jerked it’s head off of the cobbled street with a yelp that scattered the three children who had curiously gathered around it’s still body. [Poe!? Finn!??] It looked frantically back and forth, but there were only the giggling children and the spilled sledge of food. Comparing the current angle of the sun with that which existed in it’s memory shortly before shutting down, the droid realized with relief that only a minute had passed and it cast a broad net of focus before it’s bioscanners. There! It bulleted forward with all of the speed it’s motivator could produce, it’s body a spinning blue-green blur as it whipped around the edge of a building and out onto the broad, war-pocked lane that led back to the spacestation. It rushed forwards in time to see the closing side-hatch of an extraordinarily common vessel of rust brown. There was no doubt that Poe, Finn, and Snap were onboard. The boxy engine outputs flashed like lightning across the droid’s lens as they flared to life. No! It was not close enough.

It pelted on with a desperate bleep as the ship lifted from the scorched duracreet. No, no, wait! BB-8 screeched to hard halt in the ships shrinking shadow, flung open a tool bay, fired off a pressurized cable, and latched onto the barest edge of the port stabilizer panel. As the YV-700 freighter roared upwards at maximum speed, BB-8 was yanked from the ground with such force that it’s machinery was nearly ripped from it’s casing. The droid spun and twirled like a kite in its searing slipstream, all the paint on it’s spherical body bubbling and dripping away like wax to the planet’s surface now far below. Inch by inch it reeled itself closer to the belly of the ship. If it had possessed lungs it would have been heaving for breath, but at last it tucked itself up against the cold brown durasteel, latching on with a magnetic clamp like a miniscule parasite. It shuddered as a line of fire swept over it and then they were free of the dragging atmospheric friction and into stark, open space. It bounced, cracking against the stabilizer panel hard enough to fracture it’s holoprojector lens, as behind it a planetary security craft opened fire. The freighter stretched and the stars blurred and warped into a twining jump tunnel as they left Tubbs and the Hyrotil behind.

BB-8 did not know what it could possibly do to help it’s family, but it would not leave them to face their fates alone.
Poe stirred weakly, his temple throbbing against a bed that was strangely cool and hard. The world faded and blurred into shadow and he rolled onto his side, nausea welling in his throat. His senses returned as if being dragged from tar, meaningless sounds creeping slowly to his ears and whispering away into nothingness. Thoughts began to form, foremost of which was _why am I so cold?_ His stomach squirmed and he came dazedly to. He dragged his head from the floor as if it weighed a hundred kilos, struggling to understand why the blurry room looked and felt so wrong. Even the sounds were wrong—instead of the Hyrotils light, two-toned thrum, a low continuous growl rumbled up through his fingers. It struck a primal chord of fear within him that he could not make sense of.

“Nn…” He brought a clumsy hand to his temple and sat up. The world swam into focus, solidifying into dark vertical lines before a stark white orb. _A moon?_ He blinked a few times and the fuzzy edges sharpened into prison bars and a pale, leering face. Poe stared for a shocked second as his mind caught up with his eyes, and then he jerked backwards with a gasp, trying to steady himself with a hand and falling instead to his side. He understood all at once what was happening. His hands were clamped in biting stun cuffs, and Ozmyn Heil was studying him with malicious joy.

“Finn!” Poe whipped frantically to his right and saw him lying unmoving upon the floor of a cell separate from him by some two feet. His face looked peaceful and soft. He might’ve been resting in bed beside him on a lazy morning were it not for the stun cuffs about his wrists, and the scabbed scratch across his cheek. Fear crept like frost over Poe’s heart. _No…I have to get him out of here. I promised him. I promised him._ “Finn!”

“Well, well, look who’s finally woken up.”

Though the voice crawled up his spine in a hateful shudder, Poe did not deign to acknowledge his captor—something that rankled the Twi’lek at once. Instead, he scrunched up against the bars parallel to Finn’s cell and flung out his hands to try and reach him, but the cuffs about his wrists clanged into the hard metal and blocked him. He could not so much as touch him, and Oz barked a laugh.

He missed entirely whatever it was that Ozmyn Heil next said; he’d gone deaf to everything but the roaring rush of blood pounding in his ears, and the panic fluttering like a bird within his ribs. _Don’t hyperventilate. Breathe. Breathe slowly…slowly in…slowly out. Think. We got off his ship before. We can do it again. Just breathe._

_He has Finn._

_Breathe. Test the cell. Step by step. Test the cell._ He pushed to a wobbly stand, linked hands reaching forwards like a blind man as he ran numb fingers methodically up and down each solid durasteel bar. Logically, he knew there was no way any organic strength that he possessed could force an opening through them, but he had set himself a mission and he intended to see it through.

Oz shook his head as he watched Dameron’s silent desperation. “Go ahead. Feel it up, Dameron, it isn’t gonna do you any good. I could let you out and uncuff you right now for all the good it’d do you.”

“Yeah?” Poe arched a brow without looking at him; he didn’t have the stomach to look at that pitiless face. “I’ll take you up on that.”

“What d’ya say, Zero?” Oz threw a cocky grin at the mountainous shape standing within the murky shadows of the cargo hold. “Should we give him a tour?”
Poe’s stomach dropped. His stunned eyes had glossed right over the still and silent skeleton of the assassin droid. Oz was right—while he may have stood a chance against the twi’lek, there was nothing he could do against a killing machine with his bare hands. Regardless he kept on testing his cell, roving now to the front. He gripped and jerked the locked door with all of his strength, but it did not so much as rattle in its frame.

Again, Oz let loose a rough laugh. Then he levered back and kicked, the flat of his boot slamming into the knuckles of Poe’s left hand with an audible crack. Poe whipped his fingers back from the bars with a cry of pain, while another voice yelled angrily from his left.

“Knock it off, you fucking asshole!”

Teeth gritted against the sharp, throbbing pain, Poe turned to his left to see Snap sitting upright in a separate cell, as far from Oz as he could manage. A look of quiet fury darkened his face, building like a storm cloud.

“Snap…” Poe whispered. He closed his eyes, devastated. No…no, not him too…

“So you can talk.” Oz rounded on Snap. “You know, we’re still mulling over whether or not we should keep you alive or just jettison you. Ain’t a bounty on you.”

“There is a high probability that the First Order will pay for Resistance allies.” The droid spoke in a flat, cold clatter that leapt up Poe’s spine.

Oz’s yellow eyes narrowed upon Snap as if he were prospecting the value of an unknown stone. Snap met the glare evenly and then turned icily towards Poe, dismissing the bounty hunter without a word.

“Is Finn still out?”

“Yeah,” Poe tore his eyes from his broken fingers to Finn’s still form, fiery determination burning through his heart like fuel through an engine. He knelt to the ground, lay flat out upon his back, and kicked against the cell door. The durasteel latch held firm as he jackhammered furiously against it.

Oz watched with a humorous shake to his head. “And what d’you think you’re gonna do if you knock that door down, huh?”

“Knock your teeth down your throat for starters. Then deactivate that droid and take over your shitty ship.” He slammed his feet into the door once more. “Nice replacement by the way. Strapped for cash?”

“Hmm. You know what? That reminds me of something.” Oz reached out, unlocking Poe’s cell with a clatter. Poe quickly scooted back and levered to his feet, sensing a trap and readying himself to spring the moment the door was thrown wide.

“Prisoners should not be released.” The droid spoke without moving.

“Relax. Just thought of something I owed this guy.” He took a bullish step into the cell, and Poe’s dark eyes flashed dangerously. He did not wait for the twi’lek to strike first, lunging forward and ramming his shoulder into Oz’s chest, then linking his bound arms about the back of the twi’leks’ head. But before he could wrench him down and knee him in the guts, familiar electric pain sluiced through his wrists like glass. He tensed uncontrollably and Oz tossed him to the floor.

“This is pointless, you realize that right?” He grinned as Poe writhed, every muscle in his neck tight.
Snap stood, watching with a radiating fury, his hands clenched and trembling within his binders. He looked around for something, anything to throw. The idea came to him at once—he yanked off his boot and chucked it clumsily through the bars. It went wide, smacking harmlessly off of Oz’s shoulder, but it diverted his attention away from his remote, and Poe went slack, gasping raggedly and trying to cobbled his brain back together.

“Cute.” Oz picked the boot up from the floor, arched an unimpressed brow, and tossed it aside. “Anyways, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted…” He dipped, yanked Poe from the ground by his shirt-collar and punched him solidly in the face. Poe’s nose broke with a wet snap and slivery pain shot through his sinuses. He fell back with a coughing yell, blood streaming down his face.

“You fucking son of a bitch!” Snap snarled.

Poe curled protectively, coughing against the blood running down his throat. It was not the first time his nose had been broken, but he fervently hoped it would be the last. He shot a dagger glare over his shoulder, rage gathering itself within him like a nexu before the pounce.

“Course,” Oz stood, brushing his hands together, “that’s not the only thing I owe you.” He tapped the black shred of cloth wrapped about the thick base of his right lekku. “I believe I owe you a blaster shot to the head.”

“There is a 98.9% percent chance of fatality, and a loss of 1.5 million credits.” Zero’s blazing eyes cast Oz in a hellish light. Oz stood back, arms crossed before his chest with satisfaction.

“You’re lucky the droid’s here, Dameron. But I don’t have to shoot you—maybe, after I hand you in, I’ll take another trip to Yavin 4. There’s an old man I need to have a conversation with.” He patted his blaster.

Poe huffed a laugh, blood spattering little dots on the floor before his face. He doesn’t know dad’s on his way to the Resistance right now. “I’d love to see you try it. I think a rematch would make his year.”

“Good to hear, good to hear,” Oz stepped back and relocked Poe’s cell.

“You okay, Poe?” Snap asked, though it was obvious that he was not.

“Yeah… guy punches like an ewok.” He sat up, delicately running his sleeve across his face and trying desperately not to wince.

A low groan caught all of their attention as Finn goggily came back to himself.

Finn’s mouth swam as his head cleared and the dark room faded in and out of focus in time with his slow, steady breaths. Distantly, a voice he loved eased into his ears like the notes of a half-forgotten song, but he couldn’t quite make out what it was saying. He groaned, rolling onto his side and squeezing his eyes shut against a sudden hot flood of nausea.

“Uhn…”

“Finn? Finn, are you okay?”

“I don’t…” He heaved, bile dripping from his mouth. He could not comprehend why he felt so
wretched. Had he drank too much again? But that didn’t make any sense—they had run out of *kisin* weeks ago. Maybe he’d eaten something off? But no…they hadn’t restocked their supplies so…

Restocking.

*We were restocking and…*

“It’s okay—it’s okay; coming out of it can make you feel sick.” There was a thickness to Poe’s voice that threw Finn.

“FN-2187—nice of you to join us.”

His eyes snapped open with a full-body twitch, exploding into consciousness like a bomb. He saw in a fraction of a second a scene that lodged itself into his heart like a dagger, and stretched for an eternity. *Bars, the droid, Ozmyn Heil, Snap…*

“Poe…” The blood that stained his face and dripped down his shirt stood out like a neon gash as all else faded into shock. Already the pilot’s face was bruising and swelling, and the bridge of his nose had shifted somewhat to the right, pushed of kilter as if he were made of clay. The emotions within Finn hit at a rapid-fire pace that he could not process, one after the other, and his heartbeat leapt into lightspeed; horror and shock dueled in panicky spikes, helplessness warred with a determination to save Poe and Snap; and fury detonated as if a small Starkiller base had fired within him. Not at Phasma, Kylo Ren, or Neldin had he ever felt the caliber of rage he now directed towards Oz.

He lurched to his feet and staggered towards the front of the cell and Oz laughed, “What’re you gonna do? Barf all over me?”

Finn shook with the violent rage coursing through him. He could not contain this. Ozmyn had hurt Poe. He had hurt him. He had captured Snap. And Finn was not going back.

“I will find a way to hurt you.” Each syllable trembled. It was almost too easy to imagine the combat forms he’d practiced over and over again as young man parading through his mind. He could disarm Oz with a cuffed slam down upon his forearms. He could incapacitate him with a precise blow to the kidneys. If he could get hold of something sharp, he could kill him. Easily. Quickly. Fourth lumbar down to the abdominal aortal—instant hemorrhagic death. He could choke him until he went limp beneath him, watching as that cruel laugh faded and his yellow eyes went dull.

“Well, you find a way out of those cuffs and that cell, and we’ll talk.” Oz spun the remote for the binders mockingly before him. “You’re big money, 2187; I’d hate to have to damage you too much.” He leaned back with carless pride. “You two led us on quite the chase, I have to say. I don’t usually have to team up.”

“Go figure, the only thing that’d work with you is literally dead inside,” Poe muttered under his breath, but Oz carried on unperturbed.

“Gonna make it that much nicer to hand you over. I know they’re just chomping at the bit to have you back. Word is, Phasma’s got some new drugs to test out on you, 2187. Mind control, they make it sound like.”

Finn half expected the durasteel within his grip to bend beneath some sort of superhuman power, but it did not. Instead, another power, something that had revealed itself to be both a blessing and a curse, billowed to life before his furious glare. The glow started beneath Oz’s ribs, rushing out like a tide on a beach full of luminous light. Finn turned away as if scalded. He could not see that. He could not.
“Finn, I’ll get you out of this, I promise,” Poe scooted as close to Finn’s cell as he could.

Finn was torn in two—he wanted desperately to rage at Oz, but knew that it would amount to nothing. He sank down, determined now to ignore the hunter, as he focused all of his attention on Poe. His lover’s eyes struck him mute—so determined and…apologetic. It broke Finn’s heart and he reached mindlessly for him only to draw back, stymied by the bars that blocked his hands. He wanted desperately to wipe the blood from his face and to set his nose; to get him out of the cuffs that were undoubtedly mangling his wrists all over again.

“Poe…your nose…”

“It’s fine—that guy couldn’t punch his way out of a bag of plastifilm.” Poe tried to grin and then jerked as a short burst of electricity bit quickly through his arms. “And apparently,” He carried on with a look of disgust, “he’s got really thin skin.”

“And you clearly don’t know how to shut up.” Oz shook his head and then grinned. “But, nice as it is to chat with merch, I’ve got a few more calls to make. Keep an eye on them Zero,” Oz said over his shoulder as he turned for the cockpit.

“Affirmative.” The droid spoke and Finn shuddered—he’d not known the thing could speak and it was just the chilling kind of voice he would have expected from it. He glowered hatefully up at it, but it gave no reaction—still and silent as a tombstone.

He tore his eyes from it. “Poe,” he gulped, “what’re we gonna do?”

“Well…I’ve tested my cell out and it’s pretty solid. Really solid, actually. And, there’s also that little thing to worry about.” He nodded his head towards the assassin droid.

Finn’s mouth thinned, “Yeah…there’s that.”

“And I’m fresh out of ‘surprises’.” Snap opened his arms apologetically.

“Maybe if we all slammed into the far side of our cells at the same time,” Poe began but Snap snorted a laugh.

“What, we’ll rock the boat? You know this thing has gotta weigh about 20 tons.”

“I’m brainstorming man, come on.”

“Hey…your hand! Did—are your fingers broken?” Finn exclaimed, shooting to his feet like a volcano going off.

Poe didn’t know what to say. It was no good denying it, and there was clearly no need to confirm it. Saying ‘it’s fine’ would not cut it for much longer, but he could not help but sooth him from his anger and worry.

“I’ll heal. I’ll heal, Finn—it’ll be fine.”

“It will not be fine!” He shouted, tears gathering in his eyes. “No one knows where we are! They—they’ve got us!” He held up his bound wrists as needless evidence. “And when they get us—” He licked his lips, eyes falling to the floor as nausea squirmed in his gut. Something within him crumpled. I can’t go back…I can’t go back…he tried to picture a life of cruel erasure once more, tried to imagine eating HCPM’s again, becoming a number…losing Poe. I will never be a number again. And if they kill him, I’ll go too.
He choked, but managed to hold the tears at bay.

“Finn,” Poe gasped; it was as if a knife had been lodged into his sternum, “Finn—I promised you I wouldn’t let them hurt you again. And I’ll keep that promise. But don’t give up on me, okay? Okay?”

Finn gave a watery nod. “Okay.”

“We’ll figure something out,” Snap said solidly, as close to Poe’s cell as he could get. “They have to unload us and transfer us—no way is the First Order going to let these assholes right onto their base or military outposts. We can try something once we’re on the ground, and—”

“Escape will not be tolerated.” The droid’s words fell like a guillotine, striking them all mute.

BB-8 held tightly to the exterior of the Corellian freighter as it shot through the jump tunnel, carefully monitoring the life signs of those within. Good…they’re awake and…well, they are awake. It’s grip was tenuous; normally it would have been ensconced securely within an astromech socket—it calculated that there was a 40 percent chance of being dislodged while sweeping through the fiery grip of atmosphere. It hoped desperately that wherever it was that Oz was taking them, it would not be a planetary body.

It had been nearly an hour since they’d jumped to hyperspace, and the droid hoped that the energy output of the engines would mask the call it was about to make. If the assassin droid realized it was hitching a ride…BB-8 shook it’s head in a shudder. But there was nothing else for it.

It sent out a long range signal keyed to Tubb’s receptors. It took several minutes before the older astromech responded in coded binary.

[BB-8! Where are they?]

[They’re captured! They are onboard a YV-700 Corellian Light Freighter.]

[Where are you?]

[I…am also onboard. I have attached to the exterior of the ship.]

[Can you sabotage it?]

[Unlikely—I’m barely holding on.]

[What should I do?]

An idea formed in the droid’s mind, and it was silently horrified that it had even occurred to it. BB-8 ran it’s idea through every conceivable algorithm. If it were a being of cold, heartless logic, the decision would have been instant and easy. But it was not. It’s sophisticated programming now held it prisoner, caught between kindness and loyalty to those it considered family, and responsibility to the entirety of the galaxy. It had the singular possibility of ending the First Order once and for all. If it called Tubbs in to attempt an attack on the ship, there was a high chance that several of it’s friends would die anyway. But…if it let Ozmyn take them to their destination, it could then transfer the location of the First Order to the Resistance. It was a horrible hope. A desperate chance. If it could have, it would’ve vomited.
It moaned to itself, and though it was free of gravity it felt suddenly as if carried the galaxy upon it’s dome. *I’m sorry, Poe…but…I think that you will understand.*

[Go to the Resistance. Tell them what’s happened. I will stay onboard this ship, and once we reach the First Order, I will transfer the coordinates to you. You *must* tell General Organa to have her force standing by!]

[But—they might be killed by the time the Resistance gets there!]

[…I know. If it comes to that…I will do what I can. I won’t leave them.]

Finn had tested every inch of his cell, tried reaching Poe, and then sat with his side pressed up against the bars closest to him. He settled, closing his eyes and steadying his breath, trying to picture the lake outside of Maz’s castle and hoping to fall into that peaceful gap between thought and being. Millions of horrible thoughts buzzed about his skull like a hive of Mandalorian hornets. He willed his mind to quiet and be calm. But the mirror lake made him think of howling TIE fighters destroying Maz’s castle, of Poe and his old team racing across the water to save them. *There’s no one to save us now.* His eyes opened, drawn automatically to the red orbs of the assassin droid. He looked quickly away to find Poe softly watching him.

Gods, he had never wanted to touch him so badly in all their time together.

“*I’m sorry, baby.*” Poe said quietly.

“*It’s not your fault. It’s theirs.*” He inclined his head towards IG-00.

“I know, but…”

“How’re your fingers? And your nose?”

“Sore. I’m just not gonna touch either of them for a while.”

“…I wish I could touch you.”

Poe’s eyes fell to the floor of his cell and he nodded miserably. “Me too.” He didn’t need to tell him that he wished they were onboard the Hyrotil, on their way to Leia and his father. “What d’you think we’re in for?”

Finn huffed a hopeless laugh through his nose. “The First Order will separate us all. You and Snap would be taken to prison cells. Tortured. Interrogated. I…I don’t know for how long. Me…well, it’s like you said. They’ll try to recondition me.”

Poe swallowed, forcing down the hope that had flared so recently within him. He fought to keep fear from his voice for Finn’s sake. “Sounds like I’ll have to do an old-fashioned prison break, then. Though, I’m not doing too well on that front right now.” He glanced over his shoulder at Snap. The other man was sitting upright, his head heavy and his eyes blinking gummily. “How’s it going Snap?”

“Well…my ass is pretty cold. And I’m hungry.”

“…I’m sorry we got you into this.” Poe continued dourly. “We should’ve stayed on the ship like you said. If we’d just stayed—”
“Then that droid would’ve ripped through the hull to get you guys and I would’ve had to come running like a hero, and I would’ve got myself caught anyways. So don’t worry about it. The last thing any of us need to do is to start slinging blame. I knew this was in the cards as soon as I joined up.” Snap smiled, and Poe’s heart tightened. He gave a watery grin back.

“Right.”

Time crept by like a Sandcrawler. Oz reappeared every so often to needle them with words and smugness, sometimes sitting and eating while their stomachs howled, sometimes discussing loudly with the uncommunicative IG-00 exactly what method the First Order would use to torture them. Eventually, Oz disappeared and Poe figured that he must’ve gotten bored and gone to bed. Bed…His head nodded to his chest and the quick motion sent a throb through his face. He scrunched his lips against the itchy flakes of dried blood and fought to keep his eyes open. There wasn’t much point in wakefulness, but he did not intend to be caught off his guard should Oz come back with the intent to beat him.

“You should sleep, honey.” Finn whispered drowsily from beside him.

“I don’t know if I can.”

“We all need to. Like Snap said, once they try transferring us, that’s when we’ll have to fight back. You’ll need all your strength.” He lay down upon the hard metal floor and curled towards Poe with a wan smile. “Come on, lay down with me.”

Poe stared at his shadowed face, tracing the soft swell of his cheek, and the curves of his nose, the full arch of his lips. The liquid dark of Finn’s eyes held him, filling him to the brim with warm belonging. He wanted suddenly to cry but he held it in.

“I love you. Finn…I love you so much.”

“I love you too. No matter what happens, I love you.”

“Dad, it was so incredible—I can’t believe he actually managed it. While I was onboard that Star Destroyer, I thought for sure they were going to execute me, but this trooper turned on them! He busted me out!”

“How’d he manage it?”

“Just marched in and told them their superior wanted to see me, ballsy as could be. And then he shoves me into this little hall and says he’s trying to rescue me. I had no idea what was going on; at first I thought it was some kind of double cross—like they’d pretend to release me just hoping I’d lead them to BB-8. But he was so earnest about it. He kept asking me if I could fly a TIE fighter, and he was scared—too scared to be acting. So we hijacked a TIE and blasted out of there. It was really something, and those things can move. It’s a shame mom never got to fly one—she would’ve been unstoppable. They tagged us though, on the way out, and we…kind of crashed on Jakku. I thought he must’ve died, because when I came to there was no sign of him.”

“I can’t believe you even made it that far! What was his name?”

“He didn’t have a name. The First Order just gives them numbers. That’s pretty fucked up, right?”
“Right.”

“Well, he was called FN-2…something. I decided to call him Finn. He seemed pretty okay with that.”

“It’s a shame I can’t thank him for saving your life.”

“Ah-ah, the story’s not over yet. Guess who shows up on D’Qar with BB-8?”

“You’re kidding.”

“No! He’s still alive dad, even after Starkiller. He gave us all the intel, went back in with General Solo and Chewbacca, and disabled the shields. If it wasn’t for him, all of us would’ve died down there. He got hurt pretty badly though.”

“Blaster shot?”

“No—lightsaber strike.”

“…a lightsaber? Like what Luke Skywalker used?”

“Yeah, right down the spine. Kalonia’s taking care of him—he’s kind of still out of it, but she said he’ll survive. I just hope he’ll be able to walk…”

There was a knowing smile in his father’s voice. “He sounds like a good man.”

“He is! He really is, dad. We talked for a while before the recon run came in on Starkiller. He’s just genuinely—”

Metallic clanging startled him awake, and Poe jerked up from the floor of his cell, fingers and nose throbbing so badly he couldn’t believe he’d managed to doze off.

“Alright boys, no time for sleeping. We’ve got a trade to make: Your sorry asses for some cold hard credits.” Oz slammed the butt of his blaster rifle against the metallic doorway, the gong-like sound reverberating through the room. The engines had gone silent and Poe realized that they must have reached their destination. A lump tightened in his gut. Okay…okay, this is it. Oz drew his blaster and removed the stun cuff controls from a pocket of his frayed tunic. “Now then—we’re going to let you out of your cells, and I know you’re thinking ‘now’s our chance’, so let me lay this out for you. If any of you make a move—running, fighting—hell, if you blink the wrong way—he will pay for it.”

He pointed at Poe, and Finn’s eyes narrowed murderously.

“You know, I’m beginning to think you have something against me.” Poe said dryly.

“Let them out, Zero.”

The droid moved for the first time in a day and a half, covering in one smooth stride the distance between it’s shadowed corner and the front of Finn’s cell. It unlocked the solid door and levered it open, and Finn tried desperately not to let his unease of the thing show on his face. He kept his eyes on Oz as he stepped out, studying his every move with the ferocity of a krayt dragon. The droid next unlocked Poe’s cell and Finn hurried to his side, brushing his fingers bracingly up against Poe’s arm.
I'm here. I'm not going anywhere. Poe met his eyes, his heart thundering. This was their chance and they all knew it—there was no contest between getting electrocuted now, by Oz, or being tortured to death by the First Order.

Snap fell in line at Finn’s heel, horribly conscious of the assassin droid looming darkly behind them as they filed out of the ship and into a cavernous space station. It was hard lined, solid grey, and bare-boned, but none of them spared more than a half-seconds glance about them, waiting for the exact moment when the droid had left the ship but the hatch remained open. IG-00 ducked beneath the low frame and straightened, and as it did so all three of them sprung, dogpiling upon Oz in a mess of cuffed fists, kicking feet, and snarled curses. Oz yelled and twisted about like a rabid womp rat as they tried desperately to find and wrench the cuff controls from him. The scuffle lasted only a moment before Poe was on the ground, jerking and spasming, and Finn and Snap were yanked bodily off their feet by the droid and crushed within arms like a metallic straight-jacket.

“Poe!” Finn yelled, wrenching his arm back and forth as he tried to free himself. He didn’t know what he’d do first—kill Oz or comfort Poe.

“Enough!” Oz shouted, his face contorted with rage. “How many fucking times do I have to do this, huh?”

“Stop it!” Finn yelled, his eyes filled with Poe’s pain.

“You are doing this to him—not me. You Resistance grunts just don’t get it. It’s over!” He let off the controls and Poe very literally could not react. He lay as if all of his muscle and bones had vanished from his body, and what was left felt that it would simply slide away like a stream down the path of least resistance.

“Poe—Poe, are you okay?”

“Mm fine. Fine…” He said disjointedly. He dazedly felt Oz jerking him to his feet and he thought for a moment that he might pass out, but there was no time to catch his breath or his balance. They were herded forwards, the droid marching purposely between Finn and Snap, it’s vice-like grip digging into their upper arms like the jaws of a beast until Finn thought his bone might crack.

Unseen by any of them, BB-8 lowered itself quietly to the scuffed floor of the hanger.

The hangar stretched on and on, Finn’s dazed eyes darting from detail to detail without taking in a molecule of his surroundings. He could not get enough air, he was smothering in disbelief and shock. He watched Poe stumbling along in front of him as if he were in a nightmare that he couldn’t force himself from. The reality of the situation pooled at the edge of his mind like water behind a cracking dam; if he gave it any thought at all, it would burst free and drown him.

He dragged in a shallow breath, vaguely conscious of his arm going numb in the assassin droid’s grip, of Snap’s footfalls sounding from beside him, of the way the hard overhead light glossed off Poe’s hair in little dips and ripples.

And then they stopped. Finn carried on for half a step as if he were sleepwalking, but the droid’s immovable arm jerked him into stillness. He looked about him and his stomach fell to his feet. He could have cried, but he was too horrified. They’d entered a small, private hanger and sitting square in the middle of the sparse space was an unmarked, rectangular vessel. Few would recognize it who
had not grown up knowing the makes and models of First Order ships, but Finn knew it was a long
defunct Sienar-Jaemus PTV. He noticed also that three men strode now at their sides in a half circle
with a military crispness that belied their lack of insignia. Finn bristled at their nearness and tried to
edge closer to Poe.

The hangar door behind them closed off with a rushing hiss and they were left facing the ship and
the open void of shielded space beyond. The droid halted near to Oz, and Finn was able to press up
alongside Poe. The pilot’s eyes swept to his, dark and tense. He ran the fingers of his good hand
over Finn’s and that touch swept through him like a bracing gust of fresh air. Bravery kindled in his
heart again.

One of the men halted outside the loading ramp for the PTV and removed a comm from his breast
pocket. “The room is secured, and the prisoners are at hand. Yes, sir.”

The ramp levered smoothly down and Finn knew just at the sound of the footsteps who it was that
would bring him in. Breath left him in a gasp of disbelief that took the strength from his legs. It
shouldn’t have been possible. She should have died on Starkiller, but the hulking form striding
purposely towards him could be no one else. Phasma’s armor glistened like liquid silver as she
moved, and in her wake followed ten Stormtroopers. Somehow, the sight of them struck Finn far
more forcefully than the presence of his old Captain. He felt there was only a thin veil separating
him from being on the other side of that armor again, and he remembered it perfectly. Knowing now
how it felt to move about unhindered by its weight and tightness, the thought of wearing it nearly
drove him into a claustrophobic panic attack. Poe’s fingers tightened against him, his eyes roving
over the troopers that had ringed them round with blasters drawn and at the ready.

“Well, this is just slightly overkill,” Poe muttered sarcastically and Snap snorted a dry laugh of
agreement.

Phasma’s empty eyes landed purposely on Finn, and turned marginally to Poe. Snap might as well
have not existed for all the attention she gave to him.

“Phasma, Captain Phasma. Your most-wanted,” Oz gestured needlessly to his prisoners, sweat
beading his paper-white brow. “And an extra—probably a Resistance sympathizer if he’s been
hanging around with these-”

“I have no need for ‘extras’, bounty hunter.” Phasma interrupted carelessly. “The First Order will
compensate you and your associate for the capture of FN-2187 and Dameron, and no more than
that.”

“Of course, but you know, we figured it couldn’t hurt to-”

“Escort Heil and the droid from the hangar. Your fees will be transmitted through our broker to the
accounts listed. The First Order thanks you for your service.”

Oz gave a curt and entirely uncharacteristic little bow, his yellow eyes bright with cruel happiness.
“Pleasure was all ours.” He cast one last, satisfied look across his prisoner’s faces and turned away
at the gesture of two Stormtroopers. The door hissed quickly open and closed and the troopers
returned to their post.

Phasma held them for a moment in a haughty silence and Finn could all but feel Poe quivering with
indignation and the need to say something, no matter if it would get him beaten. He squeezed his
hand in a warning.

“Get FN-2187 and Dameron onboard and secured. Dispose of him.” She nodded her head towards
Snap. Arms closed over Finn and Poe as an orange-pauldroned officer lifted his blaster.

“No! No!” Poe yelled desperately.

“No, Poe, Finn, I don’t regret an-”

There was a flash of red light and Snap crumpled, dead before his body hit the floor. Poe screamed, but Finn could only stare at the charred-edged hole in the center of his friend’s forehead, and the blue light lifting from his body like mist billowing up into a much higher stream. One by one the soul-spots that had shone in a pattern all Snap’s own unmoored and drifted after the life-light like luminous blue stars in a darkening sea. And then he was empty, vacant and still, and Finn realized he was sobbing. The ringing in his ears gave way to Poe crying, cursing, flailing like a madman against his captors, his tear-streaked face blazing with fury and anguish. And then they were onboard and the door was sealing shut, and Snap was left far beyond their reach.

Chapter End Notes

... ... ...
I'm *legitimately* sorry for doing that. It's been down since the beginning, though I tried for nearly eight months to find a way to get Snap out of that scenario. So, uh, tune in next time to see what happens to our remaining heroes? And...lemme know what you think! *braces for impact*
One pair of rough, gauntleted hands patted down Poe’s arms, flanks, and thighs, while another held him about his shoulders in forceful stillness. He could not see Finn, though he could hear his ragged breath behind him, hear the sob caught deep in his throat. Tears streamed hotly down his cheeks and his heaving breath rushed hard through his broken nose. He jerked, trying to look back at Finn.

“Don’t touch him!”

“Silence.” The modulated voice of the officer who had shot Snap. Poe’s head whipped towards the approaching officer as if he’d scented blood.

“Fucking make me, you piece of shit!” He knew it was stupid—that he was in no position to act on his fury—but that didn’t matter. The man stepped forwards with his gauntleted fist raised.

“Poe, don’t-” Finn began and then he grimaced at Poe’s muffled yell and the clatter of him falling to his knees.

“We will have compliance.” Phasma spoke, interrupting the scuffle and striding past them for the helm of the small ship without a second glance. “Get them in standard binders and in cells.”

“Yes, Captain.”

Poe was wrenched up off the floor, and Oz’s cuffs removed from his wrists; already his fingers had begun to tremble though he could not be sure if this was from the electricity that had reopened the damage to his tendons, or from the adrenaline coursing like wildfire through his body. Fresh, First Order binders were clamped down and ratcheted tight against his raw wrists and he was pulled forwards by them like a reluctant corrol dog. He dug in his heels, twisting over his shoulder.

“Finn!”

Their eyes met for a fraction of a second, but the looks on their faces spoke volumes. I love you. Don’t give up. I’m scared. I hurt. Fight them. Don’t leave me. Stay with me. And then Finn was shoved into a compartment and he was herded into his own cell some five feet distant.

“Poe!”

The door slid down, blocking out Finn’s cry and leaving Poe trapped in a bare, closet-sized room. He stood panting for a moment, and it was a long while before he could react to anything, even his own pain. The image of Snap falling to the ground flashed before his eyes. Tears welled and he swallowed raggedly. Okay. Okay. He took a deep breath. Okay. Like last time. Check the cell. Check the cell, Dameron, do it. He blinked back his tears and moved about the tiny, rectangular space, the trembling fingers of his good hand tracing the shallow seams in the cold metal plating that not even the edge of his nails could dig into. One panel lifted up to reveal a simplified toilet, and he supposed he should’ve been grateful that he wouldn’t be reduced to pissing in a corner. He tried for a few minutes to pull the panel free—the sheet of metal could be useful as a weapon, but it refused to budge. Straightening, his gaze was drawn to a singular glossy dome. It stood out like a black, disembodied eye mounted just above of his reach. A security cam. The sight only solidified his resolve; he wouldn’t give them the satisfaction of seeing him break down, nor would he hand them further ammunition to use against he or Finn.
Okay. They have us. They have us for now. It casually amazed him how quickly his mind switched into acceptance and survival mode. Don’t waste your energy trying to break out of this room. You know you can’t. You can’t help Finn if you’re a sleep-deprived, crying mess. Play along and rest so that you can be alert later. Again, Snap flashed before his eyes. Don’t think about that. Don’t think about it. He wiped the back of his hand across his eyes, tears rolling down in spite of himself. Don’t think about it.

“Poe! POE!” Finn hammered against the door to his cell until his shoulders and knuckles ached, but it was like trying push a ship into orbit. He stood, chest heaving and tears flooding his eyes and then he sunk down to his knees, unable to breathe. They’re going to kill him. They’re gonna kill him. Just like Snap. Oh gods—The ship shuddered, rocking Finn gently against the door and he knew that they had now jumped to hyperspace and far from any hope of rescue.

He strained all of his senses, hoping to hear Poe’s voice through the metal of his cell, but there were no sounds beyond his gasping breath and the hammering of his pulse in his ears. Horror that bordered on helplessness numbed him like a blanket of snow, freezing him from the inside out. White helmets bloomed out of the darkness within his mind’s eye, sliding over his face and muffling his screams. There was Snap falling to the ground, over and over again like a holovid caught in a loop. It was too easy to imagine Poe falling like that, his beloved eyes dull and unseeing in the hard overhead light. He nearly vomited.

Stop it! He stood, manic energy jolting through his legs and sending him pacing round and round the small, featureless space. If they wanted to kill him, they would’ve done it already. So…so that means they want information from him. What if they’re interrogating him now? What if they’re hurting him? What if they get what they want and kill him and-

He stood for a quivering moment, all of his horrible thoughts colliding head on into a mess he could not handle. He dragged his sore knuckles over his eyes and wept.

Silence ensconced the droid as it bobbed softly against the PTV, a little bubble tethered by a gossamer strand. Space opened up around it, strangely serene beneath a net of glittering stars, cool and indifferent as the eyes of far off gods. BB-8’s glossy lens shimmered in the starlight, and it watched mournfully as behind it Sryin’ti Station faded benignly into the darkness. Goodbye, Snap…

It did not understand. The same questions that had plagued it after Rhys’ death sprouted anew within it’s processor. But where did Snap go? He is still there…but gone. Finn talks about the Force…the life-Force, but I can’t sense it. Not with any of my equipment. Maybe droids can’t understand because we don’t have it. But…we’re still alive. Why can’t they live without it?

Tubbs will be so sad.

A surprised bleep jolted from it as the PTV lurched into lightspeed. It’s magnetic clamp slipped and the towing cable twanged like a plucked string, yet still it held on. If it fell off now, then Snap’s death was for naught, and it would lose Poe and Finn forever. It reeled itself snug up above the starboard engine compartment, it’s now paintless grey body excellent camouflage against the hide of the ship. It wished that Poe could pat it on the dome, for it felt keenly that Snap’s death must be it’s fault; if it had only given Tubb’s their coordinates, maybe it could have stopped this from happening. But then the First Order would have remained undiscovered, hidden away in the deeps
of space like a monster in a cave. All it’s hopes now lie in the ship delivering it right to it’s enemy’s
doorstep.

It knelt it’s half-dome head against the freezing metal, focusing it’s bioscanners on the little bubble of
air and life within the PTV’s hull. It shifted it’s attention from body to body before it picked out
Finn and then, a meter from him, Poe. They’re still alive. Heart rates were elevated, and it could tell
that Finn was wondering about the parameters of his cell, while Poe was sitting against the wall
nearest to his lover. Please stay alive. Don’t go still like Snap. It remained keyed into their biosigns
with razor-edged focus as the ship swam through the jump tunnel.

It was difficult to judge the passage of time, but Poe tried. He’d managed to doze for a little while,
curling on the cold floor up against the wall, before waking in a state of absolute confusion and
panic. Remembering where he was and what had happened did not help to calm him.

Troopers entered his cell at even intervals with water that he grudgingly accepted, but he was given
no food and his stomach howled emptily. He tried to remember the last thing he’d eaten. Oh…the
porridge after we talked with Leia—he shut the thought off. No use thinking about that now. He
judged from the regularity at which he was given a few meager mouthfuls of water, that 18 hours
had passed. He’d not been touched or harmed; he hadn’t even been spoken to. This unnerved him
greatly.

The last time he’d been taken prisoner, it had been a quick flight from the surface of Jakku to the
Finalizer, and he’d been strapped to an interrogation table almost as soon as his boots had hit the
polished floor. He could not understand why someone as high-ranking as Phasma was not
questioning him. He added that to the kilometer long list of things that were worrying him.

Regardless, this was not something he was entirely unprepared for. He was a Resistance soldier, and
as such this outcome had always been a possibility. He had gone through training for this, and once
his shock had worn off, he’d followed the steps methodically, just as he had during those endless
hours he’d spent onboard the Finalizer—before Finn had saved him.

Finn…

Poe stood and started pacing about the cell, reciting ship diagnostics in his head and trying to guess
the engine make that now ferried him across limitless space. He’d spent a great deal of time doing
that—walking laps about his cell, and doing lunges, stretches, and situps to keep his sore body from
locking up. He often sat and hummed to himself and softly sang his favorite songs, replayed pleasant
memories through his mind, and tried to send mental messages to Finn.

I’m okay, Finn. I hope that you’re okay—don’t waste any energy worrying about me, alright? I
know you will anyways though. I hope they aren’t hurting you…I hope they’re giving you food. I
haven’t had any yet, but whatever. I love you. You’re so brave—I know you can make it through
this. This has got to be like nothing, compared to breaking away from them the first time. And I’ll
help you get out again. I don’t know how, but I will. Stay brave, okay baby? I love you.

He knew it was unlikely that Finn could hear his thoughts, but then, as far as he was concerned, Finn
was a magical person. Finn could see lifelight flowing like rivers full of stars, he could sense danger,
and see things that had happened far in the past. Who was he to put mind-reading past him? It
didn’t matter that he wouldn’t be able to hear him back—so long as he could tell him he loved him.

Sorrow lanced down the front of his chest and he crouched to the floor and began to do another set
of situps—his guts ached where the Officer had punched him, but he was glad of it; the pain distracted him and lent fuel to his anger. Anger was useful—it led to action. The last thing he wanted right now was to fall into self-pitying apathy.

He was midway through a word-by-word recital of his favorite movie when the door slid open and a trooper bearing a small and precisely measured pitcher of water entered. *I bet it’s the exact amount a human needs to stay alive. Leave it to the First Order to keep you right on the edge of fucking dying.* The Trooper handed it off with the same warning he’d given the past six times.

“No sudden movements or—”

“-Or you shock the hell out of me. Believe me—I’ve got it, pal.” Poe answered emotionlessly as he fumbled the cup towards his dry mouth with a wince; his broken fingers had swollen and the slightest touch crawled like fire through his bones. When he’d drained it, he set the cup slowly to the floor. No sudden movements. The trooper picked it up and turned from the cell but before he’d left Poe asked,

“Hey, no chance of getting any nerf is there? Or maybe some Sullustian agradu pasta? I really wouldn’t say no to—”

“Silence.” The voice came down like a blast door.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” He muttered to himself. The trooper left, the cell door was closed and secured, and he was once more alone.

Did they bring Finn water too? He’s more valuable than me…maybe they’re even feeding him. He shot a glare at the door as if he could see the Stormtrooper beyond. *I bet that guy didn’t even know what nerf is. Finn didn’t.* The thought both softened and saddened him. If the man who brought him water were suddenly free of the First Order, would he even recognize his freedom? Would he prove as adaptable and capable as Finn had, or would he be so overwhelmed that he’d run back to the only thing he’d ever known? It disquieted Poe, and it made it harder for him to hate the trooper. He stood and started pacing again.

Hours later, the same routine was repeated. He was well and truly ravenous by now; it had been nearly four days since he’d eaten. Thoughts of food warred for supremacy in his mind against thoughts of Finn, and it was getting harder and harder to distract himself. He felt exhausted and twitchy—disjointed, as if his tendons had turned to rubber bands. He needed a full meal and uninterrupted sleep. *Well…food I’m not getting, so I might as well try and sleep some more.*

He curled up to the wall closest to where he imagined Finn to be, knowing that he was held to his right. The floor was cool and he’d broken out in a fine sheen of sweat. *Hey, probably you can’t hear me, but I’m not taking the chance. I’m going to try and sleep. I hope you’re okay, baby. I wish I could be with you—I wish you were with me…* His chest tightened. He wanted to hold him close, warm and comfortable, and for each of them to fall into a long sleep without a care in the galaxy. Almost he could imagine that he felt Finn’s arms wrapping about him. The illusion vanished bitterly. He curled tighter, fought off tears, and willed himself to sleep.

Finn had long given up escaping his cell. Having studied this model of ship as a child he had known it was a pointless venture as soon as he’d begun testing every panel and seam. He had paced, and tried in vain to sleep, and he’d practiced his Yavini; it was still clumsy on his tongue, but trying to nail the pronunciation was especially diverting.
The first time water had been brought to him, he had pushed up from the ground and slammed his bound hands into the trooper, sending both the cup and the man clattering to the floor. As he’d raised his fists for another blow, the trooper’s thumb had closed over the cuff controls and he’d tensed spasmodically, jerking as electricity bit through his forearms. The pain had let off, and by the time he’d picked himself off the floor, the trooper and the water were gone and he was left alone and very parched.

He sat now, deepening his breath and settling his weight down into his hips. He urged the peace of the living force to fill him up. The mirror lake poured into the still basin of his mind. The sighing of the trees whispered into his ears; leaves fell like slivers of gold into glassy rings of silver. The image retreated from the heart of the lake to the lapping shore, where Poe stood beneath a bough of rusty orange. No…no matter how he tried, he could not keep Poe from his mind and he could not bear it, not while he was unable to touch or see him. And then there was Snap, teaching him how to skip a rock across the water. A shaking breath hissed through his nostrils and he doggedly forced down the pain that bubbled like a stoked cauldron. A memory of Maz’s voice whispered into his ears.

"Two bright candles at the edge of my mind"

The thought struck him forcefully, shattering his mental image like a stone tossed into the lake. Maz can see people’s life Force no matter how far away they are! Maybe she could even find us! If she’s gotten to the Resistance, they’d have to have told her that we haven’t shown up yet! And…if she can do it, maybe I can too! Hope flared within his chest—it wasn’t all lost yet. And there was a chance that he might be able to see Poe, no matter what physical barriers separated them. He unfolded and scooted about so that he was facing the leftmost wall of his cell, and focused like he never had before; all of his mental powers beaming from him like a searchlight as he cast about for Poe’s life Force.

For hours on end he tried so intensely that he hardly noticed the next time the Trooper entered his cell to bring him water. He drank it without putting up a fight, determined now to keep his mind operating at peak performance—something easier to hope for than to do, especially with his stomach roaring like a wampa. He had never been so ravenous in all of his life. Had one of the First Order’s HCPM ration bars been sat before him, he would not have been able to turn it down, which he suspected was the point of this starvation; they had to know that he would not willingly go back to them, not after eating real food for the past three months. I hope they’re feeding Poe, he thought miserably to himself, though he didn’t for a moment believe that they were.

He dragged his mind from the clenching pains within his stomach and refocused on the wall. He thought of everything he loved about Poe—his wry, heavy lidded eyes, his strong nose and stubby jaw; the waviness of his hair, the heat of his body pressed against him in the night; the feel of his hand in his…but the wall remained steadfastly blank. He sighed and closed his eyes. Maybe I’m focusing too much on the physical…after all, the soul spots are the truest state of him. Bodies change, but that won’t. Okay…okay…so what’s the truest state of him?

The hazy, sunlit feel of laughter and heat suddenly filled him to the brim. Security wrapped around him like a hug, and for the briefest of moments unblemished joy coursed through his heart. At the same time blue light flickered before his closed eyes as if candles were guttering in a darkened room. He knew the pattern intimately—for a split second he’d seen through flesh and metal.

His eyes flew open, and though the image vanished he found himself grinning from ear to ear. A laugh shook free and he scooted to his left so that he could be directly opposite Poe. He could have cried with the relief of knowing that he was okay. “I saw you! I saw you, honey. I’m right here.” He pressed his forehead to the cool durasteel. For the first time in his life he felt immeasurably powerful; nothing the First Order possessed could truly separate them. Nothing but death… Finn’s
face fell. As quickly as his confidence had bloomed, it now withered before that most ancient of fears. *I won’t let them.*

He fell asleep against the hard metal of the wall, and in his dreams were sunlight and water, and soft touches.

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BB-8 lurched as the PTV shot out of hyperspace. Dully reflected within it’s frosted lens was a structure that defied it’s programming. It loomed deathly white in the thin light of a far off dwarf sun, growing so slowly that it seemed the little ship was hardly moving though it was hurtling forwards at some 600kph. It pierced the darkness of unnamed space in a great icy dagger, as if a Star Destroyer large enough to eclipse the sun had been turned onto it’s narrow base. From that base emitted a red glare that spoke of immense power; engines large as moons that could shake a ship to dust in their throbbing wake. Arching away from the base and jutting straight up were four massive pillars, giving the whole structure the shape of an upturned, grasping hand. BB-8 zoomed in on the towers and bleeped in shock; what it had at first taken to be jagged edges now revealed themselves to be Star Destroyers docked up and down each ‘finger’. Ten lined each pillar like pointed teeth in a jawbone, and another seven hovered like dust motes before the triangular heart of the station. It would have been excited by the discovery if it hadn’t been so horrified.

*This is it!* It wasted no time, immediately sending out a long range signal and terrified to it’s core that it was now too far out to reach Tubbs. They had entered a region of space it had never encountered, and though it had logged the coordinates of every jump the small vessel had made during its three day journey, it still had no idea of precisely where it was. The signal stretched on and on, far into the deep black, and all the while the PTV drew closer to the space station. BB-8 whimpered as a cold grey shadow thrown from one of the massive towers sliced across the PTV.

Shielded hanger bays glowed in blue specks all about the complex hide of the space station, and the PTV nosed sharply downwards until the droid could see nothing but durasteel.

Tubbs voice stuttered into it’s receptors. [*BB-8! Where are you?]*

[Coordinates are 00-019-008-90-40. You must tell the General to gather all of her forces. This is a massive station—you should be receiving video shortly. If it isn’t the entirety of the First Order, it has to be close to it. I count 47 Resurgent class Star Destroyers, and we have passed 63 turbolaser mounts so far.]

[I will tell her. But, are they okay? Everyone here is very worried.]

BB-8 paused for several seconds; never had it dreaded having to speak so badly. [Poe and Finn are okay. But, Tubbs…Snap was killed. He was shot. I…I am sorry.]

A stretching silence met it’s announcement. […]Tubbs? It gently urged.

[I will tell the General. We will arrive in force.]

The connection closed abruptly, and BB-8 knew that emotionally, the old astromech was unable to speak any further. Doubtless, it was facing now the same confusion and pain that BB-8 had felt many times. The steady vibration of the engines dulled as the craft slowed and a gleaming blue hanger loomed before them. A cool wash of electricity swept over the droid as if it had popped through the shimmering skin of a bubble, and the hard angled walls of the hanger closed around them. BB-8 held deadly still from it’s perch just over the engine output as landing struts extended
from their housings. The PTV touched down with a venomous hiss and the roar of the engines stuttered into a low whine. The droid moved it’s focus from Finn and Poe and cast it’s bioscanners about the vast, echoing space.

Two rectangular blocks of Stormtroopers stood at attention to escort Phasma and her prisoners, and a smattering of humans stood importantly apart from the common foot soldiers. BB-8 figured that they must be higher ranking officers and commanders. It listened with dread as the ramp lowered and those within began to file out.

Poe slurred into wakefulness as the engine tones dropped from the stressful growl of lightspeed to the lower, easier whirr of sublight. A lump formed in his throat. He stood and faced the door with dark expectation, the aches and pains in his body fading as he tried to mentally ready himself for what was to come. There was a light, pulling resistance to the ship, and Poe knew that they had passed through a force field—he’d memorized the feel of it in his bones. He rocked back and forth as landing struts nosily extended and then all went still and quiet. We’re here. Bare minutes passed and the door shot up into it’s frame. Four Stormtroopers filed in and surrounded him, their blaster rifles up and at the ready. Poe huffed a laugh—he felt so weak he could hardly have knocked over a toddler, much less fought off four armed and healthy guards.

“Move,” A voice bit out, and a blaster barrel shoved mercilessly into the small of his back.

“I’m moving, I’m moving.” His voice curled with distaste as he started forwards through the open door and into the narrow hall. Before him were a group of six Stormtroopers, and Finn was struggling in the middle of them.

“No! No, I’m not going back!” He shouted and Poe’s heart broke. He jerked forwards as Finn fell to the ground, writhing.

“Finn!” Hands closed about him. “Stop it, goddammit!” He yelled to the officer who stood calmly by with Finn’s cuff controls in hand. Armored arms linked around his chest, restraining him as he thrashed and lifting him wholly off the ground. He jerked backwards, shoving the man behind him off balance and the trooper fell to the ground with all of Poe’s weight on top off him. It amounted to nothing though, as Poe was shocked and then jerked upright.

Finn gasped, hands quivering lightly as the electricity finally let up and he was hauled roughly to his feet. He’d heard Poe through his pain and he twisted about to look behind him. Poe’s face, battered and bruised, hollowed with exhaustion and dread, was nevertheless an oasis to his desperate mind, and he reached for him before being shoved forwards.

The clanking of metallic footsteps marched into the hall way and Phasma swept past them with glacial indifference. Finn glared at the glossy armor only to find his own face reflected back at him, monstrously twisted and distorted—an echo of what he could become. He looked away as if scalded. The ramp lowered down and he entered a world that had always existed deep within his subconscious as if he had never left. Hard angles hemmed them in like the bars of a gigantic cage, and his feet stumbled across a floor so pitch black and glassy he felt that he would sink through into a pool of suffocating night. Stormtroopers turned to figures of bone and ice in the cold seams of light that shone from each jointed angle of the vaulted ceiling and Finn felt small beyond reckoning. Phasma shone like a spearhead at the front of his group, and when she turned to face him, he felt his fate falling like a guillotine blade. He wanted to fall through the floor, to vanish entirely from this—but not without Poe.
The troopers halted before the assembled squadrons and uniformed commanders, and Finn found himself separate from Poe by only a few guards. Their eyes locked, each struggling to rejoin like magnets that had been pried apart.

“Hnn,” Poe tried to wrench himself from his captors hands. “Finn!”

Phasma turned to face them. “Take Dameron to block 1.”

“No, Poe!” Finn forced all of his strength into his legs, breaking free for one second. Poe reached for his outstretched hands with a desperate inhalation—the tips of their fingers brushed together and then he was dragged backwards, while at the same time Finn was reclaimed as well. Poe fought them like an animal though he had little strength left for it, and fingers tightened against his arms and shoulders with bruising strength. The gulf between them widened. He sucked in a breath and quickly yelled,

“Finn! Finn, don’t worry about me—ahn!” He doubled over at another punch to his stomach, though when he next looked up his face was drawn with an agony that had nothing to do with bodily pain. “Don’t let them change you!”

“Get off me!” Something inside of Finn was breaking—he couldn’t withstand this. The pain cracking down his chest took the strength from his legs, and he staggered, though the crushing hands about his upper arms kept him upright. Tears gathered in his eyes while shock hollowed the edges of his mind until he felt he was drifting outside of himself, watching this happen to another person. He was held in furious stillness as before his eyes Poe was taken from him.

“Poe! POE!” Poe was dragged into a lift, and Finn caught the barest flash of his eyes. ”Finn, I lov-” he began, but the door cut him off with a death knells finality.

“Poe…” Finn gasped and he was so stunned that by the time he realized Phasma was speaking, her speech was nearly over. He listened as if concussed, heart rattling in his throat. Slow tears slid down his cheeks.

“-the brainwashing of the Terrorist Resistance will be undone, and FN-2187 will retake his place among us as a-”

“I will never be part of this again!” The words burst from him, firm and strong in spite of his horror, and his voice echoed round the cavernous space until it seemed he filled all the room. A few Stormtroopers shifted uncomfortably in the utter silence that met his proclamation. Light slid across Phasma’s helmet as she turned slowly towards him and spoke in a voice of deadly quiet meant solely for him.

“You have no say in this matter, FN-2187-”

“My name is FINN!”

Silence rang and Phasma straightened imperiously. This adamant individuality was dangerous. “Get him to his cell.” She bit out to the Officer at his side. The Officer started forwards with his hand clamped across Finn’s forearm, and three other Stormtroopers fanned out in their wake. Aisles of blank, faceless masks loomed up to either side of them and Finn passed them by with his head held high. Never before had he felt so separate, so uniquely himself. He was not sure where this surge of confident strength had come from; he was too modest to realize that it had always been there. Now, when faced with his greatest fear, he found that he was above it.
Once again, I apologize for taking forever (and this wasn't even a super-long chapter)! I always have trouble with these transitional chapters, and it was difficult to keep this one from getting repetitive, and figuring out just where to break between their POV’s when they've mostly been together for so long. I had originally thought that the ending of the chapter would go a little differently, but Finn surprised me with being so damn "I'm not taking this shit". I love that dude so much. There's really not that many chapters left and it's filling me both with excitement and dreaaaad. Like, will I be able to get the ending across as well as I want to? Gah! I hope so!

Anywho, thanks, as always, for your patience and continued reading, and please let me know what you think! <3

Bluestem
The room Poe was brought to was not all that different from the one he’d found himself trapped in while onboard the Finalizer, and that realization did not exactly lift his spirits. It was smaller by half—barely large enough for the interrogation table that loomed like a tombstone before him. He eyed the contraption warily as he was shoved forwards and then roughly patted down once more.

“What, didn’t get enough the first time?” He bit out snidely.

“Silence.”

“Is that the only word you guys know? Gods, no wonder Finn wanted out so bad—he’s actually got a fucking brain—ahhn!” He fell to his knees as electricity jolted quickly through him. “And enough with the shocking already!”

The only thing he had on his person, his wallet, was deftly removed and rifled through and Poe bristled at this slight intrusion. He didn’t know why it should bother him so much—they had kept him from his father, killed his dear friend, and taken his lover from him…what did a small rectangle of cloth matter? His ID wasn’t even real. Yet he glared as it was removed and hastily discarded. And then he saw the slip of flimsi that he’d folded away behind the card and nearly forgotten about, and somehow his heart managed to break all over again. As the Trooper held it up to the cold overhead light, childishly blocky letters shone in reverse through the thin white sheet. Finn loves Poe Dameron. He swallowed raggedly, his anger giving way to something close to desperation. He wanted that back, just that little bit of Finn to keep him company.

“Hey,” he began, and his tone was so radically different that the Trooper actually turned and looked him full in the face. “Maybe don’t throw that away? I mean—it’s not important to you guys—it’s not gonna help you out. It’s just a bit of flimsi, so…” He trailed off and the Trooper crumpled the words within his gauntleted glove. Poe’s jaw tightened and he looked away with a hard breath.

When he was deemed to be free of any weapon or obvious hard information, he was shoved back against the interrogation table, and as his spine straightened reluctantly against it he became aware of diodes pressing at intervals against his vertebrae. A metal band was lowered tight across his chest and beneath his armpits and fastened with a hard clanking noise that went through him in a bolt of panic. He pictured suddenly within his mind’s eye needled and pain, and Kylo Ren ripping through his memories. He struggled, but it did no good. His arms were taken in an iron grip, the stun cuffs were unlatched though they were left separately about each wrist, and his arms were pinned at his sides about the forearm and bicep. The same was done with his ankles, and then with a low metallic whirr, the table was levered back 45 degrees until all the he could easily see was the blank ceiling and the cold white figures now looming above him. He knew it was basic psychological warfare, but he could not help but feel excruciatingly vulnerable; it was if he lay within the jaws of a beast that only awaited it’s master’s command to tear him apart. He sucked in a slow breath and tried not to stare at them, tried to keep from shaking though his hands did of their own accord. A small panel lit up just to the left of his field of vision and he caught the quick up and down jig of his racing heartbeat like a streak of white lightning. Great—they can know if they’re actively killing me or not. Handy.

The two troopers stood at attention to either side of his table and Poe waited. There was no good way to judge time, and no pattern had arisen that he could use to guestimate. He knew only that he
was thirsty and painfully hungry. The wave-like contractions that had wracked him during the first few days without food had now given way to an aching emptiness. He stared hard at the ceiling, noting immediately the glossy orb of a surveillance camera. He couldn’t muster the energy to glare at it—he had the distinct feeling that he would need that energy when the questions came. He anticipated the black, faceless masks and draping black robes of the Extractors—they had hurt him onboard the Finalizer, and he dreaded to imagine what they’d do to him now. He swallowed dryly and girded himself.

Time stretched on and on and Poe became aware of a thousand separate discomforts brought about by the table. The little nodules pressing into his spine gained potency by the minute and no matter how he shifted his weight, he could not be rid of their insistent digging. The restraint about his chest seemed cold as a block of ice, and one of his legs had fallen asleep. His arm itched like mad but he couldn’t so much as blow on it. Turning his head too far in either direction sent a shock through his temples and he did his best to keep his gaze resolutely forwards—but he was tired and after unguessed hours of stillness he began to nod off in spite of his fear and anger. He woke with a stab of pain to his temple like a momentary migraine and his eyes flew open. Nothing had changed—two Troopers remained at either side of him, and still there were no questions. He broke out in a sweat. Why haven’t they questioned me yet? Is this some form of intimidation too? He hated to admit that it was working—though he dreaded the pain that would come with his refusal to answer, at least it would be something.

Another dark span of time passed, and then the Trooper to his right moved. After so much stillness, it was like watching a human jump into lightspeed. The trooper nodded and spoke. “Yes, Captain,” and Poe hardly had time for fear before electricity was eating him alive. He could not scream—his jaw had tightened like a steel trap, and his head pulled back into the metal of the table, spine taut against the diodes that shot fire through his body. He jerked against his restraints, setting off the neural pulsars at his temple and then he screamed. It let off with such suddenness it was as if a wall had come down in his mind and he gulped for air. And then it was back, but it was worse, worse, worse—so much worse, and he was not aware of it ending.

The next time his eyes opened, he found a single Trooper now standing at his right and it was several dazed minutes before he realized that he’d passed out. He felt thick and gluey, and full of splinters, and his eyes dragged up to the blank white mask and the empty triangle of an eye. Confusion rattled through his head like a struck bell. “Finn?” He slurred. Some far part of his mind had lit with hope; this was surely Finn come to save him from this nightmare. The helmet would be doffed and Finn would be there with a smile to light up the sky…but something was off. This person was too short to be Finn. He studied the Trooper for a few heavy seconds, and then his eyelids drooped.

He woke at yet another pulse through his temples as his head nodded to the side. A frustrated groan threatened to burst from him, but he held it in. Screams of pain he couldn’t help, but he’d be damned if he gave them the satisfaction of watching him come apart at the seams. He began to hum to himself, mindlessly at first and then it wound into Swowerta Mandal, one of his favorite Yavini songs. It wasn’t until he’d finished it that he realized he hadn’t been snapped at to be silent, and he peered uncertainly up at the Trooper, who remained still as stone and just as uncommunicative. Poe’s brow furrowed and he thought for a moment that he might try speaking to his guard, but the door to his cell slid up and Phasma seemed to fill all the space within, truly gigantic from his lowered vantage. He steeled himself, each metallic footstep tightening around his heart.

She regarded him for a silent moment and he didn’t have the energy to be pissed.

“Where is the Resistance Base?”
An idea popped into his head and he grinned suddenly. “Ey sin mueto? Ey vie *somenenta* ñao entendes.”

Stark silence answered him and he could practically see the gears turning beneath that expressionless façade. He wanted to cackle.

“You will answer me in proper language. Where is the Resistance Base?”

“*Veu bocina verden?* Merdas! Vie devemas aqueli veritisia!”

The fist that met his stomach wasn’t exactly unexpected, but he had to admit it was worth it to goad her. He coughed, though a laugh fluttered behind it.

“I *know* you speak Basic, Dameron. You carried on loudly enough after the execution of that terrorist.”

Poe spat upon the glossy face, his humor vanishing so suddenly it was as if it’d never been. The rage burning from his eyes would have made lesser beings quail, but Phasma only regarded him with cool disinterest and drew a gauntleted hand across the shining metal.

“We have ways of loosening your tongue, Dameron. Permanently, if needs be.”

“What, Finn wouldn’t give up the goods so you gotta come crawling to me?” He snarled with burgeoning pride. Realization dawned on him like a sun and a cruel grin crawled across his face. “That’s just it! You can’t risk hurting him!” He laughed, and the sound was so foreign in the little room it seemed to give him power, as if he had grown and they had shrunk. He looked up at the Trooper waiting silently at his right. “It’s already happening, isn’t it?”

His eyes darted gleefully back to Phasma. “You’re *scared*. You just brought an explosive into a fuel tank—this place is ready to blow. And if this doesn’t work, it’s on you.” He shook his head. “I bet your superiors aren’t too happy after how bad you fucked up on Starkiller. This is probably your last chance before the firing squad. And Finn’s not cooperating, or else you wouldn’t be here.”

“You have already convinced him to cooperate several times.”

Poe’s mouth went dry as desert sand as the wind left his sails. It seemed painfully obvious now—his primary role was not intel—one the First Order had learned the nature of their relationship, he had gone from being a mere terrorist to an insurance policy—an insurance policy that they could abuse to their heart’s content.

“Hold your tongue if you will—one of you will break. It’s simply a matter of time, and you’ll come to wish that you had less of that.” Her tone was one of utter indifference, and as she turned away Poe’s eyes fastened on the blank black oval of an Extractor lurking like a shadow in the hall beyond. His stomach dropped.

“Await my command.” Phasma spoke, and the Extractor’s voice, modulated of all humanity answered.

“Yes, Captain.”

The door slid down and Poe was left alone with his guard.

“*Cadesa*” He muttered.
A routine began to reveal itself. As had been done aboard the PTV, Poe was brought meager amounts of water every eight hours. Twice a day he was let up from the table to use the reduced toilet hidden away within the paneling to his left. It was embarrassing and unnerving to try and take a piss with a blaster barrel jabbing into the small of his back, and he could hardly do up his fly with the shaking fingers of his good hand. Guards seemed to rotate out on eight hour shifts as well, each coming in with water and leaving at the approach of the next Trooper. There were three distinct guards that Poe now recognized. One was the slightly shorter Trooper that Poe was convinced was a woman by the almost unnoticeable difference in her stride; a gravity that rested about the hips. One was taller and unfortunately sadistic, and Poe referred to him as simply the ‘Bad Trooper’. The third was absolutely indistinct. He or she seemed to be a perfect Trooper in all regards. They were not cruel without orders to be so, but they were quick to tell him to be silent if he started rambling.

Things continued for over a day before the shadow that lurked within the hall entered. Poe tensed. He was now sleep deprived enough that he seemed to have lost the ability to buffer his emotions; he was raw as an exposed nerve, and the fear that spiked him had no outlet. But mingled in with that fear was pride. If they were hurting him, it surely meant Finn was resisting them, and it made it easier to bear. Fight them. Fight them, baby. Sweat broke out across his brow, and the peaks and valleys of his heartbeat went off like a seismograph as the blank form moved to his side and cocked it’s head, a vulture perched at the edge of a deathbed.

A hand reached out from the black fabric that draped in shrouds from the featureless mask. The interrogation table was an instrument and the Extractor a virtuoso musician. Spidery fingers moved deftly across buttons and levers. The discomfort started in a pianissimo crawl, jumping into staccato peaks of pain and building into a fortissimo crescendo of wrenching agony. Everything went black.

He came to, to find that his chest was burning as if full of lava. His muscle jumped and twitched, and the small screen at his left skittered irregularly. Words beat like hammers into his ears, though the Extractor was speaking softly.

“Yes, Captain—I have recovered him. Shall I continue?”

Poe was so bathed in sweat it was as if he’d gone swimming and he could not remember what had just happened. He had been hurting and then…what? Had he passed out again? He could not lift his head from the table. The Extractor straightened and he was too disoriented for fear. The man left the room.

The Bad Trooper entered at the next shift and Poe’s eyes latched onto the small bottle of clear water in his hands. He followed every glimmering ripple, each shimmying bubble, with razor-edged focus. Water. Water, water, water, water, water. As soon as his previous guard had left, the taller man crossed over to the refresher panel and dumped the water into the toilet.

Poe could’ve cried. He was so tired. He wanted to sleep for years, and he hurt in ways he hadn’t imagined. He was certain several of his ribs had broken and his arms felt as if they’d been flayed to the bone. His nose throbbed and he could smell the reek of sweat, body odor, and old blood upon his body. His spine felt as if it were separating now at each vertebra as the diodes dug in. Worst of all was the guilt lurking in his empty gut. The Extractor had not returned, and that could only mean
that Finn had told Phasma what she’d wanted: the location of the Resistance’s new Base. Poe felt responsible. They had used him to hurt Finn, to turn him against his morals. It sickened him. He wished that he himself had been able to hold out against the Extractor, that he hadn’t screamed like that. He couldn’t blame Finn for breaking—if he had seen him in such pain and been able to stop it, he was not sure how long he could have held out.

Time stretched on and as he was let up from the table to use the toilet, the strength slid from his legs and the next thing he knew, he was on the floor. He was endlessly grateful that the Bad Trooper was not with him at the time. It was the smaller Trooper—Nice Trooper. He was hefted to his feet without abuse.

Sleep came in starts and fits, but it was never for more than a few minutes at a time. Well before he could enter any kind of REM cycle, his head would slur to one side or the other and his temples would pulse as if a dagger had been jabbed into them. His ability to focus had rapidly deteriorated, his vision shaking to and fro as if his skull were vibrating. His weight pulled at his restraints, and his body shivered; without movement to make heat or calories to burn, the cold metal of the table had insidiously leeched the warmth from him. Inner monologues became outer dialogs without him being able to tell the difference, something the Bad Trooper took advantage of, beating Poe when his commands for silence were unwittingly ignored.

The Extractor had not returned, and he thanked every deity in the galaxy for that—he would have lost his mind entirely if he’d had to see that blank black oval of a face again. At one point during the Nice Trooper’s shift, he heard a sound that bypassed conscious thought and activated every joy neuron in his brain: a warbling, worried garble of Binary. The tone was soft as a blanket and for a brief second he was comfortable and safe.

“BB-8?” He panted. “BB-8, buddy, are you here?” He squirmed weakly against the table but he could not twist far enough to look behind him, where he was sure the noise had come from.

[Don’t worry.]

“Oh—buddy,” he choked, “I’m so glad. I’m so glad…I don’t feel very good…and…” He trailed off, his focus leaping to the far corner of the room, which reminded him of the corner of his room on Base, and wouldn’t it be nice if he could lay down on a soft bed? Why was he on this table again? Was he at the doctors? Couldn’t they tell that he needed a nice soft bed with a bunch of blankets and a lot of sunlight? A lamp full of concentrated sunlight. 200 percent sunlight. Would that burn my skin off? Finn’s really warm.

The astromech sounds did not return and the Nice Trooper gave no reaction to suggest that she’d heard anything out of the ordinary. Poe licked his chapped lips. I’m losing it. I think I’m going crazy. I hope Finn gets out soon…I’m really hungry so maybe we’ll have dinner with dad and that ship,”

His mind shut off as if a switch had been flipped, his body taking matters into its own figurative hands and sending in him into a desperately needed microsleep, as it had now for the last two days. But somehow the sleep stretched on and on, uninterrupted by that horrible icpick-to-the-brain sensation that had become normal. He woke hours later feeling slightly more sane, and he could at least focus on details without his vision trembling like a leaf. His tired eyes dragged up to find the Nice Trooper standing still and silent as she had every time she’d appeared at his side. Had she turned the neural pulsar off so that he could rest?
His eyes latched on to the skull-like visage with piercing desperation, his mind momentarily clear. There was potential safety to be had with this one and that hope sent his emotions into overdrive.

“Hey…” he chanced.

The cold mask turned marginally towards him, and it was as if he’d been recognized as a human. Heartened, he barreled on as if a plug had been pulled from a geyser.

“You…you know this is wrong, right? What they’re doing to me? What they’ve done to you? It’s not right. Things—things aren’t like this in the real world. Finn—I guess you’ve only heard him called FN-2187, huh? And that’s wrong too—you’re not a number—you deserve to have a name. But he got out and he saw how different the galaxy is. It’s not what you’ve been taught. I’m not—the Resistance isn’t either. There’s music! And food too, I bet you’ve never had real food—not those HMCP’s or whatever they’re called. Finn hadn’t either and you should’ve seen him when he had real food for the first time.” Poe laughed weakly, the image of Finn’s beaming face passing before his eyes like phantom. The recalled happiness quivered in his throat and his chest ached. “He likes sweet foods the best…he—he—”

The cry shuddered from him, throttling his words. He had no more strength left to fight it. He wept, tears sliding hotly down his bruised face, dripping from his nose and chin to fade in dark circles on his grimy clothes. His chest heaved and he held the empty eyes of the Nice Trooper. “Please,” he sobbed, “please just don’t h-hurt him…don’t hurt him.”

The Trooper said nothing. But she didn’t tell him to be quiet either.

Another few changes of shift, another few gulps of water, another few trips to the ‘fresher. Nothing changed. He lie against the table, aching in every cell, his muscle shivering and twitching restlessly, dozing off only to be shocked back into horrible wakefulness.

Whenever he’d imagined dying, he’d always thought that it would happen quickly—a flash of fire into the void of space, the same way most of the people in his life had gone; dead before they’d even known it. He’d never in a million years dreamed that he might slowly die of abusive neglect. He had not eaten for nearly a week, and he was running on a grand total of seven scattered hours of sleep.  

_I hope you’re okay Finn…don’t worry about me…I hope you’re okay. If I don’t make it out of this, I love you. Those few months with you were worth it. But…what will dad do if I die? Then he’ll be all alone—it’d kill him. I can’t die and leave him._

_I’m so tired._

_Dad would be so sad if he had to really bury me. Or what if he “never found out and just went on and on wondering what happened to me?”_

_“Silence!”_  

_You’ll make it out of this though. Maybe you can tell dad what happened. Dad likes you a lot, and you don’t have a dad, so maybe that’d work out okay. _The idea made him feel a little easier about the whole situation._

The door slid up into the wall to reveal three Stormtroopers, and the orange pauldron draped across the Officer’s shoulder lit like fire in his eye. Rage coursed through him, though he had no way of knowing if this was the same man that had killed Snap. The Officer reached for the table controls and Poe jerked, succeeding only in sending another shock through his temples. The bindings about his arms, chest, and ankles sprang open and he slid to the floor as if he were made of putty.
Confusion swarmed him as he was hauled to his feet. *Why so many to help me to the ‘fresher? Oh!* *I bet they’re gonna kill me.*

Damn.

*I wish I could give Finn a kiss.*

The Officer pulled out not a blaster but a flat rectangular device that shot out a hard beam of red light. The line wavered across his battered face, rippled down his filthy clothes, and swept over his feet to the floor. And then as quickly as it had happened, Poe found himself back on the table and the Troopers had left.

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A tiny rancor was waddling dangerously close to Bad Trooper. It snuffled about, wearing a brightly polka-dotted shirt and one mitten. Beady eyes stared plaintively up at him. He regarded it with concern.

“Hey…don’t go over there, little guy. That’s Bad Trooper. He’s *bad.*” Poe warned.

“How many times do I have to tell you to be silent?”

Poe tensed and the electricity came and went like a freight train, but he was more or less beyond it’s affects, as if his pain receptors had been fried away. His eyes squeezed shut until the spasms passed and then he glanced back to the floor to look for the tiny rancor. It had vanished as if it’d never been. Several blank seconds of dismay crawled through his brain.

*Haha…oh boy, I’m hallucinating. I’m like my own holovid program!*

Things kept to their cruel schedule, and his uncontrollable microsleeps came more and more often, and he woke to find himself more and more disoriented. The acute frustration brought about by lack of sleep had him teetering on the edge of a full psychiatric break. He was coming out of his skin, like a toddler having a meltdown. His battered body was as restless as a bag full of ants. Not even his need for Finn could top the absolute necessity for sleep. He would’ve told the First Order *anything* if they would have only let him off his table to sleep on the floor for a solid eight hours, but they had not questioned him since Phasma’s visit early on in his captivity.

He’d started rambling to Nice Trooper. The amount of nonsense and dead-end stories had increased exponentially over the past two days.

“How many times do I have to tell you to be silent?”

“Nice Trooper, NT? I’m gonna call you NT. NT, sometimes I hear my droid talking to me. You really don’t hear it? I’m going crazy. Have you seen Finn? If he’s not okay, I’m gonna fail my entrance exams and then I can’t. …I don’t feel good, dad…”

She made no answer, though the helmet fixed on him with an intensity so close to worry that Poe was completely undone by it. Even the illusion of sympathy was a welcome relief. He teared up, head nodding to his chest for a brief second before snapping back up. The gauntleted hand reached out for him and he jerked like a beaten correldog at the end of it’s leash. The hand halted in uncertainty and Poe’s exhausted eyes held the Trooper’s, each hedging towards the quivering borderline of trust. She seemed to make up her mind and reached for a small switch at the top right of the table. There was a descending whine as something near his sweat-plastered hair powered down.

“Sleep.” Nice Trooper spoke for the first time since she’d been assigned to him, and her modulated
voice landed softly in his ears like an enchantment. Wonderful, pain-free darkness gathered him to it and he slept like a dead man.

He was awoken with a quick, painless jab to his upper arm. His eyelids peeled open as if they’d been glued shut and before he could register more than sleep-smeared white and orange blurs, the restraints were lifted from his body and he’d slumped to the floor. There’s a lot of them again...are they gonna kill me now? Rough hands yanked him up and he yelped as muscle twinged across the edges of his broken ribs. His wrists were taken and the binders reattached in front of his body and he was prodded forwards into the low, gleaming hall beyond. Even in his dazed state of mind he felt dirty and small compared to his immaculate surroundings and the Troopers who stood at intervals on guard. He felt that he were being paraded around on display. ‘Look at this disgusting Resistance dog, everyone!’ His legs shook, joints weak as butter as he stumbled along in front of them. “So, is there a range or something?” He said in a tone of ‘let’s just get this over with’.

“Silence.”

He huffed a laugh through his nose, defiant humor propelling him more than his quivering muscles. “Or what, you’ll shoot me?”

He expected to be shocked, yet nothing came and it unnerved him. The hallway seemed to lengthen, stretching on and on like a line of black ice and it was driven home to him just how mortally exhausted he was; it was as if he were slogging his way through a moat of tar. Gods...they gotta make me work to get myself killed? He was brought before a lift, shoved inside and ringed with Stormtroopers. The awkward silence in the cramped space was simply too absurd, like something out of a perverse holovid and he cackled with laughter, aware that he was about a breath away from losing it entirely and very literally unable to reign himself in.

The lift came to a smooth halt that nonetheless nearly tipped him off his feet, and he was led down a hall that opened up into an assembly space so vast he could’ve landed fifty X-wings within it and still had room to spare. He looked around in shock, not entirely certain that he wasn’t hallucinating. Light shone in cold slivers between ebony struts. Hundreds of Stormtroopers stood at rigid attention to either side of the broad isle, reflected double in the glossy floor. The spectral figures flashed by in his periphery like lightening as he was driven towards a platform raised above the crowd by five sharp-edged steps. The silence was suffocating, his stumbling footfalls and the clipped boots of his guards clattering like gunfire in the open space. Panic crimped about his lungs and he wanted to bolt, regardless of how pointless the action would be in a hall packed with enemies. Every fiber of his being knew that he must not reach that clearing. He was past pride and dignity; now that it came to it, he just didn’t want to die.

His heels dug in and he levered back reluctantly as they neared and he saw Phasma standing upon the platform, an executioner of silver and crimson red. Adrenaline cruelly cleared his head and eyes for the first time in days, and he noted now every detail with the kind of hyper-focus that he could only muster in life-or-death dogfights—the blasters resting at hips, hundreds of blank black eyes following his every move, officers and commanders standing at the head of regimental formations with proud chins held at attention. Finn...Finn...I’m sorry. I’m sorry, where are you?

He stepped onto the first of the shallow stairs as if he were walking a gangplank and his heart beat furiously in his ears. He couldn’t make sense of this—yes, he had landed the final blow to their superweapon, and of course the First Order would want him dead, but surely his execution didn’t warrant a full assembly. Had they done this to Ackbar as well?

Phasma did not say one word to him; he was very clearly beneath her attention and he tore his eyes from his stunned reflection at the sound of approaching footsteps.
Entering now down the main aisle was a group of five Stormtroopers and Poe knew with a bone-deep certainty the man at the head of the formation was Finn, though he couldn’t see his face. It was written in the carriage of his shoulders, the solid stride, the subtle way in which he held his blaster-rifle close to the chest like a hand of sabacc cards. Poe’s tired mind understood all at once. He couldn’t believe he hadn’t realized it sooner—he had been kept alive for this.

_They’re gonna make him do it. I’ll be the proof that he’s been reconditioned._

His exhaustion crushed him then and he simply wanted to disappear, to be done with it all. The small group turned with precision and marched up the steps, and he was closer to Finn, or to the person who had _been_ Finn, than he had been in days. Even in his fear, he wanted to go to him to pull off his helmet and look him in the eyes and hug him. He wouldn’t blame him for this—there was no point.

Phasma moved forwards and her magnified voice rang out across the assembled crowd.

“FN-2187, you will remove your helmet.”

The foremost trooper halted across from Poe who held his breath as the white mask was lowered. The face that stared back at him was hard, vacant. There was no warmth or heart within the eyes that stared at him without seeing, as if Poe were simply a window pane to be looked through. As if he held no importance to him at all.

“Loyal soldiers of the First Order—you see before you the one called FN-2187, now willfully restored to his place among us. Let him serve as an example to all of those who have caught the whispers of terrorist propaganda, for though he may have been misled, FN-2187 has now seen those lies for what they were. He has seen the filth and chaos of the galaxy, and understands now the righteousness of the First Order’s noble cause. He has given us the location of the remains of the Resistance, and in our mercy we have-”

Poe could not focus on her words. His eyes narrowed, studying every line and curve of Finn’s face and desperate to see the person he loved within this façade. His hair was regulation length again, and there was a bruise deepening about his left temple. _He did fight them, at least._ Even so, the features that he loved seemed suddenly alien, as if a different being were piloting something that _looked_ like Finn. Poe’s surroundings vanished; he was alone in a room with a stranger. “Finn…”

The hard gaze did not waver and Poe’s breath left him as if he’d been kicked in the guts. This hurt far worse than anything they had done to him physically. He’d failed the brave young man whose laughter and innocence had shone so brightly in his life that he’d been pulled out of his own destructive orbit and into the light of a sun. He bit the insides of his lips and looked to the floor, tears beading his lashes and his breath quickening in his chest.

“To prove the depth of his allegiance, FN-2187 will now execute the terrorist responsible for the destruction of Starkiller Base, Poe Dameron. On my command.”

Poe held Finn’s eyes as the other man lifted his blaster and it whined to sinister life. He felt strangely calm and accepting as the barrel leveled with his eyes.

“It’s okay.” Poe said in a voice of soft understanding, just for Finn.

“Fire!”
So, I guess I should always just preemptively apologize for the wait between chapters. I had a huge amount of anxiety leading up to this one. First off, it being just in Poe's POV was weird, though that was how it was always going to be. Every time I'd open the document, I'd just freak out and not touch it. These last few chapters have been in my head for so long that I'm not sure I can do them justice. So...yeah, it was a fight, to say the least. Thank you for your patience, and I regret leaving you on yet another cliffhanger! As always, I will *try* to get the next one up in a timely fashion!

Yoda: DO or DO NOT. There is no try.

Me: ...........*runs away*

Anywho, if you want to know what Poe was saying to Phasma here it is: "I'm sorry? I just can't understand you." and "Your vagina is *green*? Gods! You should get that checked out!" and "Bitch"

...I'm so easily amused. :D I based Yavini off a mixture of Spanish, Portuguese, and a smidge of Latin. And then I jumbled them into a misspelled mess. Weee!

Please let me know what you think! Your feedback helps to give me the energy I need to push through to the end of this thing! -Bluestem
In another lifetime, Finn would have been thrilled to find himself in the tiny room he’d been brought to. Compared the crowded barracks he had once slept in, the thought of a private bed and toilet had been lofty dreams achievable only by attaining rank. Though the cabin he’d shared with Poe onboard the Hyrotil had been roughly the same size, it had been theirs—he had lived and loved willingly within it, even set up some personal touches of his own. This room was a cage, no matter how the First Order tried to pass it off. It was an Officer’s quarters, and dark confusion clouded him as he was shoved inside. He’d not been expecting this, and he tried to hold on to the lofty strength that had filled him as Phasma had spoken. He tried not to picture Poe’s face, or the torture that must be awaiting him if he was not already being harmed. That was what he’d expected for himself. An interrogation table. Extractors. Not an Officer’s room.

The Troopers who had accompanied him did not enter with him and he was now locked alone with his thoughts. He would’ve given anything to have Phasma face him right now, while his rage and confidence still burned white-hot. Gone was his obeisance, his childish belief that she was somehow superior to him because of her station; that she possessed qualities beyond that of the average being. She had more in common with a blaster than her own humanity.

He paced the room, noting immediately the low bed, the recessed toilet, and the storage compartment. His confidence stuttered and he slowed to a stop before the shining black panel. The armor would be in there. He could all but feel it’s cool weight closing about his skin. He pressed the compartment open with baited breath, but the sleek black panel revealed only an ominous empty space that managed to set him even more on edge.

He tried for a long while to focus on Poe’s life force as he had onboard the PTV, but he was too angry and anxious, and there were so many other people that it was like trying to pull free a string from a moon-sized knot. He sat upon the bed and placed his head in his hands. Stillness gave him time to think, and thinking was precisely what he did not want to do; it dulled his anger and opened the door to a million horrible scenarios that he could not control.

What if they’re hurting him? His chest tightened. I can’t do anything about it from here! He stood, trying to wrench the metal bedframe free, but it was welded solidly to the shining floor and the thin padding atop it would hardly function as a mattress, much less as a weapon. He beat against the door for a few mindless minutes, his sore knuckles opening and leaving bloody smears across the formerly spotless surface. It pleased him in a petty way, to mar the order and cleanliness.

Hours crept by and Finn had never felt so trapped in all of his life, not even within the literal cage onboard Oz’s ship. At least there he had been close to Poe, and Snap had been alive, and…Stop it! He had tried, deep in the night when worry had kept him awake, to picture something like this happening, to play the worst case scenario in his head over and over again; what he might do and say, how he’d best be able to protect Poe and Snap, how he would react to sliding that helmet over his face again. He would hold his breath—feeling that suffocating weight as if it had never left him. He thought he had prepared himself. He was wrong.

This was worse, far worse than his wildest imaginings. They’d taken Poe from him right before his eyes and in doing so had shuttered off the sunny future he’d allowed himself to hope for. The gaping wound of Poe’s desperate face took the breath from him if he lingered on it for even the barest second and he had to forcibly turn his mind to anything else.
In spite of himself, he dwelled on Snap’s life-lights leaving his body. He couldn’t reconcile the beauty of that flowing stream drifting into the ether with the trauma of the gaping hole in his head. Bile rushed into his mouth. *It’s quite something to see,* Maz had said, and he imagined that when followed by a peaceful death, it would have been. But for a life to be cut short so coldly, so callously... His breath choked in him and he stood once more, pacing, trying not to imagine the same thing happening to Poe. *Please don’t hurt him, please don’t hurt him.*

The door whooshed up without warning and Finn spun about to find Phasma marching purposely towards him. He bristled like a cornered animal, his heart thundering in his ears as adrenaline sprinted through his body. The door lowered leaving him alone with her. She regarded him for several tense seconds and Finn sweated. He wanted to think of something biting, something horrible to say to her—but he was not fooled; he knew that any impertinence on his part was likely to be felt by Poe. He would play along as he could, and act when the time was right.

Phasma took a step forwards, closing the distance between them with one stride, and then backhanded him to the floor. Finn winced, spitting blood from his mouth as the side of his face quickly began to swell. Her hand closed about his shirt collar as she yanked him up off the floor and nearly off of his feet.

“You have cost me greatly.” Phasma’s low voice came through gritted teeth, and Finn was perversely pleased by the anger that radiated from her.

He met her dark gaze with blazing fury. “Then why don’t you kill me? I’m a traitor, aren’t I?”

She did not answer immediately, and almost Finn fancied that there was a wariness to her stance; a hesitancy to come near him—as if he were now infected with outsider ideas and knowledge that might spread like a plague. He heard in his mind something that Poe had said long ago, something he hadn’t been able to take seriously at the time.

*You’re a symbol, Finn. Of change, of freedom. That’s the stuff mutinies are made of.*

“I don’t need to kill you.”

His defiant retorts withered and died upon his tongue as goosebumps swept down his spine.

His horrified silence satisfied her. “Now that you understand your position, you will tell me the location of the Resistance Base.”

Finn gulped. They would hurt Poe, perhaps even kill him if he did not answer. But trying to save Poe would doom Kes, the General, and so many countless others. It could undo the very thing Poe had dedicated his life to. He felt as if he were being ripped in two.

“This is the last time I will ask you, FN-2187. Where is the Resistance Base?” Phasma pressed.

“I don’t know,” he answered with such desperation that it nearly passed for sincerity. But it was not enough to convince Phasma.

“Screen up.” She seemed to announce to the room at large. A black panel on the leftmost wall flickered as the embedded holoscreen shimmered to life. The image that formed before Finn’s wide eyes wrung a groan from him. There was Poe strapped to an interrogation table, beaten and bruised and obviously exhausted. Two troopers lurked to either side of him. He took a mindless step forwards, drawn to the bright rectangle like a moth to a flame, fingers brushing against the smooth surface as if he could reach through and comfort Poe. He threw a panicked look over his shoulder at Phasma. “No-don’t hurt him, I-”
“Administer charges at 3 second intervals.” She said into her helmet’s receiver.

“Yes, Captain.” The guard to Poe’s right moved, activating a panel on the side of the table and Poe went rigid against his restraints.

“Stop! Stop, please!” Finn yelled.

“Increase voltage.”

Poe screamed and the sound of it tore through Finn like a living beast. His breath leapt from him and he clutched at his temples as if he could force the sound from his head.

“Where is the Resistance Base?” The empty pits of Phasma’s eyes held his.

Finn stole one tortured glance at the screen. Poe was jerking as if he were on fire and a sob caught in Finn’s throat. “I don’t know! I don’t know! We couldn’t find them! We-we were searching forever—just stop!”

I’m sorry. I’m sorry, Poe, I’m so sorry. I can’t do it, I can’t. He held tight on Poe’s agonized face, desperate for him to understand why he could not answer. His heart broke within his chest. He can’t take much more, oh gods, he’s going to die. He flashed to Poe’s beaming face as he laughed at something BB-8 had said; felt his fingers softly tracing about his scar; saw him lying naked beneath the Force Tree’s lights, bathed in ethereal blue. And now, before his eyes, he was dying.

He wanted to scream, to be done with all of this; it was more than he could bear, weighing the life of the man he loved against the lives of so many others. In a stroke of cruel mercy, he was spared from having to answer when Poe’s voice cut off as if he’d been behead. Finn watched in shock as Poe went limp against the table. Silence rang, echoing through Finn’s body, clutching about his lungs with talons of ice. For several seconds, Finn could not believe what he was seeing. He could not breathe. He could not think. Nothing existed but Poe lying still and silent. Minutes seemed to stretch for an eternity before he realized that Poe’s life-light had not let go, and that the monitor to the right of Poe’s head still showed a heartbeat. It was rapid and somewhat irregular, but it was there. He’s not dead. The lightspeed switch from horror to relief nearly dropped him to his knees.

Phasma turned from the screen with cold disappointment. “Screen off.” The panel flickered and went out, resembling nothing more than an innocuous patch of glossy black wall, though it now loomed over Finn with a brooding presence. Phasma inclined her head towards his as he gasped for breath and said in a soft voice, “He is still alive because I find it useful for him to live. But you will tell me the location of the Resistance Base. He can be kept alive through much worse pain, I assure you. When he comes too, we shall test his limits.” She straightened and turned away, facing the room’s door.

“You’re a monster.” Finn said quietly.

“A childish concept. You’ve seen the greater galaxy, FN-2187. You know the chaos and depravity of it all far better than any of your fellow troops. One man’s life is a small price to pay for order and stability.”

He nearly blurted what about billions of lives but he held himself under control. It would not change her mind and he did not want to waste anymore breath or time with her. He simply wanted her gone and if his seeming compliance would accomplish that, then so be it.

“Enter.” Phasma spoke aloud into the receiver within her helmet, and the door opened to reveal three Stormtroopers, their arms loaded with what looked like piles of gleaming bones. Finn stiffened,
eyeing the face of the mask with a primal start of fear. He was fast running out of reserves to process his emotions. Not this. Not this.

“You will remove all non-regulation clothing.” Phasma calmly intoned.

His breath caught. He feared he would lose himself the moment that mask slid over his face. And there was the embarrassment of the act itself. It had been uncomfortable enough knowing that he’d been naked around Kalonia and her aides—doctors who had wanted nothing but his well-being. The thought of being so exposed before enemies rankled him. He stared back and forth at the three Troopers who had closed around him as if hoping for some sort of understanding and privacy but he received nothing but silence.

He pictured Poe, slackening as if dead against his restraints. Quickly he shrugged his shirt off. If it came between his fear of resuming the physical appearance of his old life, and hearing Poe scream in pain, there was absolutely no contest. He undressed, stepping from his pants and boxers, and hurriedly pulling on the black underclothes that had been provided.

“You will remove all non-regulation clothing.” Phasma repeated.

He paused for a moment, desperately hoping that she would not misinterpret his confusion as defiance. He did not understand. The clothing that Kes had bought for him now lay in a pile on the floor. There was nothing left to remove.

Phasma’s hand closed suddenly about his wrist in a grip of iron and he could not help but recoil from the touch. As she held his hand to the light, his eyes landed on the yellow bracelet that he’d entirely forgotten about, looped like a band of sunshine about his wrist. Phasma tore the bracelet free in a mess of wire and washers. He watched numbly as they clattered to the floor, rolling away like little droplets of silver in the overhead light. Heat sprang to his eyes.

Slowly, he began to layer his armor over his shins and forearms, then the codpiece and thighs, the upper arms and chest piece. It amazed him how immediately the routine returned to him—memory that lie bone deep. He recalled the placement of every fastener, the way the gauntlet needed to be rotated into place before latching it. His shaking hands last closed over the helmet and only once it’s darkness had masked his face did he allow his tears to fall.

Phasma’s voice rang with cruel satisfaction. “We have compliance.”

Some fifteen minutes later, he was steered out into a hall that resembled every corridor he’d ever stepped foot in while onboard First Order stations; broad, low-ceilinged, gleamingly black, and lit with cold white. Their similarity made them extremely difficult to plot, yet he did his best to commit his path to memory. Right from my cell, straight along the hall, third corridor on the left, lift one floor up. He didn’t anticipate the chance to break free, but he would be ready when the time came. He repeated the directions over and over in his mind, building a mental map with every step he took. It was a useful distraction, and he would do anything to keep the sound of Poe screaming from breaking into his head.

He wondered about the size of the structure he found himself onboard. He was not so adept as Poe in differentiating between the feel and sound of engines and what that might reveal. It could be a Star Destroyer, a space station, or something else entirely. He hoped desperately for the Star Destroyer option; he knew the basic floorplan of such ships, and where the prison blocks were located. If he were on a space station, it might be so massive that Poe could be kilometers away from
him, and never mind trying to find the hangers.

They took a lift up three levels, and turned into a room that sent Finn’s heart to his throat. Immediately he drew back, instinct telling him to run, no matter the cost. There was nothing outwardly frightening about the small dark room. It consisted of one rigid chair, a tall pole set off to it’s right, and sheer, glossy black walls that made the room feel as if it were submerged in a deep well.

“No,” Finn gasped, but the hands that had closed about his upper arms drove him mercilessly forwards. “No, don’t do this—don’t do this.”

He was slammed down into the seat and before he could propel himself back up, straps were tightened about his arms. A bag of clear liquid was hung upon the pole to his right, a thin tube snaking from it like a tentacle. His heart leapt into lightspeed, and his breath burst shallowly from him as the gauntlet was removed from his right forearm and the black sleeve beneath rolled up. A tourniquet was pulled tight about his upper arm until his vein bulged.

“No,” he managed, but the needle slid into his flesh and the IV catheter was pushed in. Heat flooded the bend of his arm, burning as if a flame were being held to his skin. He jerked against it, terrified tears brimming in his eyes. *I don’t want to be changed! I don’t want to disappear! Poe, help me!...I...don’t...*his thoughts slowed to a crawl, his pupils dilated, and suddenly he was free of fear and worry and pain, free of all demands of personality and personhood, free of *everything* and it was bliss.

A voice spoke through speakers lining the perimeter of the room, and the words fell like colors in his mind, bypassing thought and melding with the truth of him. He could not focus on them, but he felt them, felt them more strongly than he had ever felt anything in his life. This must surely be the height of truth. It was orgasmic. He would do anything those words asked him to. But who even was he? There was no longer a separation between he and them. He belonged to this greater thing, this all-consuming *knowing* that was the First Order.

But there was another truth.

Deeper.

Old as life itself.

It pulsed within his body, brightening in the deep pools of radiance he had never managed to see in himself. The heat faded into something manufactured and disgustingly false. Pure light flowed over the petty drug and in that heightened state the world bloomed around him. Never had he seen anything so spectacular in his life. There were *billions* of lights, each shining forth from rivers of bodies that moved and slept, ate and trained, and there was the deeper stream, pulsing through each of them, binding them as one in a web of luminous being that stretched on beyond comprehension.

It was exultant, brilliant enough to stun, and there, far from him yet part of all of them, were Poe’s lights. Peace flowed over him and he knew no more.

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He woke in darkness, aching in every joint, nauseous and shivering against his cot. The thin pillow beneath his head was drenched with sweat. “Poe?” he said into the small room. He reached for him, but his knuckles clattered into the cold wall at his side. He felt dazed, as if he’d hit his head, and he couldn’t recall where he was and why Poe wasn’t with him. He tried to prop himself up on his arm, but the strength slid from him, and the room faded back into nothingness.
Hours later, sense slowly returned to him. First it was as if he were in a tunnel of darkness, but slowly dim light formed in cold halos, bleeding into the slab of the wall that he had tucked up against. Fear sparked through him and he jerked upright, staring frantically about the little room with his heart pounding in his ears. He expected to see Stormtroopers ringing him round, but he was alone. His armor had been removed and he wore only his now sweat-drenched underclothes. He fell back against the mattress, his left hand feeling tenderly about the crook of his right arm. The flesh was swollen and bruised and something within him pulled, reminded of the words that had wormed into his brain like a cancer and very nearly swayed him. But there had been something else.

The light!

He couldn’t recall much more than a sense of absolute belonging and beauty beyond even what he’d experienced beneath the Force Tree. It was as if he’d been staring into the fiery heart of a nebula; a spring connecting him to an infinite ocean. And there had been Poe’s life-light, shining among so many others, tied to him even while separated by kilometers. Sudden hope bloomed in his chest; the reconditioning procedure hadn’t worked. It hadn’t changed him. Something within him had surged to his defense and he could still feel it now, tingling in his toes and rushing up through the crown of his head like water through a suddenly undammed river. He placed a shaking hand to his chest as an unsure smile flickered across his lips. Peace and a feeling of power filled him to the brim and he closed his eyes. He focused on Poe, and it was as if his mind were traveling through a hyperspace route; he found him immediately, effortlessly untangling him from the surrounding life-light. For a long while he studied it, letting the familiar beauty of the pattern soothe his fear and aches. Almost, he could imagine that Poe was with him. He’d nearly nodded off where he sat when a new thought occurred to him. If he could now find Poe so easily, could he hone in on any of those that he cared about?

He rallied himself and imagined Kes, for he wanted desperately to somehow let the old man know that his son was alive. There was the barest shimmer in the darkness behind his lids, like a blue aurora rippling across dark water, and then it was gone. No matter how he tried, he could not cross the vast gulf of space. Disappointment rankled him for half a second before another thought leapt into his mind. What if it’s someone who’s strong in the Force? Maz said that Rey was like an ocean of fire! Maybe she’s bright enough that even I could find her now!

He smiled giddily as he focused on her, imagining her excitement as they’d escaped TIE fighters through the wrecks of Jakku; her vulnerability as she’d begged him to stay. They’d shared a kindred since of loss; two lonely souls without family or friends, and through that loss a searing, golden light leapt to his eyes. He could hold the connection for only a second; it was like staring directly into the sun and he jerked his mind away as if he’d been burned. He half expected the after-image to dance before his eyes as he opened them with a breathless laugh. Maybe she felt me. I hope she could. Possibilities now bloomed before him. What about Maz, and Leia?

With little focus he was able to pull their lights free from the darkness, and his ability shocked him. It was as if the drug he’d been injected with had triggered an inverse reaction—rather than erasing him, it had amplified him. The lights swam before him. They were different than Rey’s and Poe’s, a strange mixture of the two; sun-spots of golden light flickering within a crystalline blue river. Though they were less powerful than Rey, their very accessibility made them somehow more beautiful. The hair stood on the back of his neck. Is this what my lights look like? He wiped at his closed eyes, hurriedly refocusing his attention on them. Maz and Leia appeared to be near one another, if there was any way to properly judge distance while riding such a stream. They must both be at the Resistance Base. The lights flickered suddenly and then faded away into the distance and he came back to himself as if waking from a dream. The solid world surrounded him once more, and with it came bone-deep exhaustion, as if he’d run a marathon with weights tied to his legs. He’d traveled too far.
Panting, he fell back against the cot. The First Order seemed suddenly very small, though their capacity for pain was enormous; a tiny insect with a powerful sting. But insects could be swatted. The image made him smile as sleep reached out for him. He thought of Poe, and his ease faltered. He wanted him with a primal ache, wanted his arms wrapping around him, and the heat of him, and his lights burning like fire. He wanted him to be safe and unafraid. As he drifted off, he found Poe’s lights and held them within his mind as if they were a fire he could curl against. The energy itself was a poor proxy for his lover, yet the familiar pattern soothed him into sleep. *Hold on, honey. I’m still here. Somehow, I’ll help you.*

Finn woke at exactly 0530, as he had done for nearly all of his life, save for his time with Poe. He rose from the thin cot with aching joints, used the tucked-away refresher unit, and walked to the small storage compartment to his left. As he’d expected, he found his armor stacked within and he quickly layered the plates onto his body. His fear of the armor now seemed silly to him; it would not change him, just as reconditioning had not changed him. He stood at attention, for he knew that Phasma would come to him. She would expect him to be a perfect soldier, and he would not disappoint her.

At 0600 on the dot, the door to his cell shot upwards and Phasma entered. She regarded him in silence. “What is your identifier?”

“FN-2187.”

“Your purpose?”

“To serve the First Order.”

“What will you do to serve that purpose?”

“What I must.”

She seemed momentarily satisfied. The readout of her subordinates life signs upon her HUD showed no fluctuation in heart rate or blood-pressure; physiological signs that accompanied lies. “Then you will tell me the location of the Resistance Base.”

His heart rate tripped, a slight fluctuation of 89 bpm to 92.

“I don’t have that information.”

“You will comply. That is an order.”

“I don’t have that information.”

His heart went thudding to 117 bpm and Phasma’s eyes narrowed upon the numbers. While there was a slim chance that he might truly not know, there was also the chance that the medication had failed and that he was lying. The cocktail he’d been injected with was still in it’s preliminary stages, though it’s testing trials had showed it to be wildly successful when coupled with subliminal aural and visual messaging. Eight of the ten troopers it had been used on had morphed into exemplar soldiers. But there had been anomalies that had required further treatments. FN-2187 likely fell into that category. There was a way to tell for certain.

“Screen up.” She announced and as it flickered to life FN-2187’s heart rate skyrocketed to 139 bpm. *Yes, he knows exactly what’s coming. And if he still cares for that Resistance terrorist, then he has*
not been reconditioned properly.

Finn looked desperately back and forth between Phasma and the holoscreen. A figure in draping black approached Poe’s side and Finn broke into a terrified sweat as Poe recoiled. **No, no, not an Extractor…oh gods, oh gods.**

“Begin procedure.”

The black figure move with strange gentleness as it reached for the controls lining the edge of the table, softly turning dials, and extracting embedded scalpels. Finn’s breath caught.

“I don’t know!”

Poe went rigid against the electricity, and as the Extractor adjusted the controls of the neural pulsar, he began to scream. Finn doubled over as if he’d been kicked in the guts, clutching at his stomach. Now it came to it: He could condemn all those within the Resistance Base to death, or he could watch and listen to Poe die, and as his screaming intensified, Finn found tears running down his face. Kes had been so nice to him, so accepting. So had Maz and Leia. They had trusted him.

He heaved a ragged breath, unable to look away as part of the metallic restraining band across Poe’s chest was disengaged and tightened down. At the height of Poe’s agonized yells, the extractor produced a syringe and slid it easily into his forearm. The screams that burst from him were beyond enduring, wild, animal cries of pure torture. On the small screen near Poe’s head, the line of his heartbeat went wild and then stopped altogether. Finn’s wide eyes watched the neon green line crawl flatly across the screen, saw the ghost of fatal pain still held within Poe’s unseeing eyes. The world tilted beneath his feet.

“…no…” he gasped in shock as he fell to his knees.

“Resuscitate.” Phasma said as if she were doing nothing more than ordering a ship inspection.

The lights within Poe shifted, the stream hurrying towards the crown of his head, and the islands beginning to unmoor. Finn sobbed. He could hardly see through his tears as flat pads were stuck to Poe’s chest. Poe’s body arched, and the screen stuttered, and the light held, gaining potency as it drifted back into it’s vessel. Some of the islands remained in their new place, floating momentarily with death before holding firm as Poe arched against another burst of electricity. His heartbeat leapt into the normal up-and-down dance of life though he remained unconscious.

“Yes, Captain—I have recovered him. Shall I continue?” The Extractor’s voice softly questioned. Poe began to weakly stir.

“He was a pilot, was he not?” Phasma asked with an idle glance at Finn, but he was too stunned to answer. “Remove his hands.” She announced.

“No!” Finn shot to his feet, eyes wide as the Extractor moved towards a tray of cruel looking instruments and removed a thin, gleaming-edged saw. “Ithil! They’re on Ithil!” He yanked off his helmet and dropped it to the floor, burying his face in his hands.

Phasma was too satisfied to rebuke him for removing the mask. “Halt procedure. We have compliance.”

Finn shook violently as the Extractor turned from Poe and mutely gathered his tools.

“Screen off.”
Finn hardly heard her leave. He sank down to his cot and broke down completely as the screen went dark. The sight of Poe dying would haunt him for the rest of his life. Help us! He screamed internally, someone help! Rey! Kes! Someone help! He sobbed for a long while.

He felt dead as he was lead back to the reconditioning chamber, and he did not fight as he was strapped down, and the needle pierced his bruised skin. Insistent heat flooded his arm and again he found himself free from worry, fear, and pain. He welcomed it in. The words started and he felt them deeply. The First Order was everything. The light stirred within him, but it was weaker, a candle in a sea of welcoming darkness. His hold on himself began to slip. He wasn’t sure if he cared.

I have to save Poe.

The Resistance are Terrorists. They killed my family.

I have to save Poe.

He whimpered against his restraints, head lolling. A surge of light dredged up from reserves he hadn’t known he carried, and it doggedly forced the confusion back. He slid into nothingness.

He woke to full-body chills, muscle cramps, and a desperate thirst. Where am I?

Home. A robotic part of him answered.

No, a cell.

An Officer’s room. An honor. Came that strange voice from within.

A cell. A cage. The truer part of him retorted.

He shook his head, nausea lurching in his empty stomach. He was too weak to climb from bed, and he rolled to his side, heaving bile onto the glossy floor. He groaned as he lay flat against his damp bedclothes. He felt stretched thin and desperately confused. He wanted someone to hold him and comfort him, to tell him that everything would be okay.

Poe.

His mind cleared and tears sprang to his eyes. He wiped at them. I’m sorry, Poe. I’m so sorry. Even if he got him out of this, how would he explain that he had broken and sent the First Order after his father? I couldn’t do it. I couldn’t do it. I should’ve died. He curled towards the wall, fresh sobs breaking free and raking his dry throat. A soft sound met his ears, almost too quiet to hear, and his eyes snapped open. It couldn’t be.

[Finn. Don’t speak. Give no reaction.]

The warble came from a panel near his cot and he sat up, staring wildly around for BB-8.

[Give no reaction. I’m onboard. Hold out a little while longer.]

“I don’t know how long I can last.” He said aloud, for that was the truth and if any guards heard him
they would think he was simply raving to himself. “I hope he’s okay.”

[He is alive. You’re not alone here. I have been in contact with many troopers. We are rallying.]

Finn held his silence, not entirely sure that he wasn’t making all of this up.

[There will be an assembly in three days. They expect you to execute him.]

He had to bite his tongue to keep from exclaiming out loud.

[I have reprogrammed several MSE droids—I am speaking to you through one now. You must play along. Everything depends on that. In three days we will spring our trap. There are hundreds of troopers on your side, Finn. When Phasma tells you to ‘fire’, that is when they mutiny. My droids and I will lock down our level and we will escape.]

His head spun. Perhaps the drug was still affecting him.

[Do you understand me? Speak softly.]

“Yes,” he said so quietly that he could not hear himself.

[Don’t worry. A trooper that is on our side is with Poe. She said that he is okay. He is worried about you. She will help him, but we cannot tell him anything. He is too disoriented and may ruin the plan without meaning to.]

Tears sprang to Finn’s eyes, disbelief warring with potent gratitude. In spite of the torture he’d gone through, Poe was worried about him. He could not love him more. He nodded gratefully into the half-light.

[Do what Phasma tells you to do. Be perfect. I have to go now. You…you are very good, Finn.]

“Thank you…” he whispered, but only silence answered. Hey lay, thinking about the droid’s words for several hours, clutching the thin blanket to his chest in a mockery of a hug. He could not believe BB-8 was here, and yet he didn’t think that he was truly losing his mind yet. That is the best droid in the galaxy. He forced himself to try and rest—he was not sure what tomorrow might bring, but he would meet it as a perfect First Order Stormtrooper. He curled around Poe’s life-light within his mind. I lost you. For a second, I lost you. I’m so sorry—but we’ll get out of here. I’ll make sure of it.

The city that surrounded him was subtly wrong. There were none of the smells he’d come to expect when visiting a metropolis crammed with beings; sewage, smoke, body odors, food. The humans that strode past were reserved, intently focused on getting from here to there. There were no insects to bother him. There was no rust on metallic surfaces, no random bits of trash, no touches of personhood. He squeezed through the placid throng and crept cautiously down an alleyway, his blaster up and at the ready, taking note of areas of cover and high vantage points that may hide snipers. He dropped behind a bin just as a blaster-bolt shot past his head. Hunkering low, his HUD showed him terrain and environmental data. Sparks rained down and smouldered harmlessly upon his armor as another bolt impacted a meter to his left. Judging from the angle from which the bolt had come, his attacker would have to be perched far above him, and there was only one such place that he had seen. He popped up from behind cover, quickly shooting twice at the support struts of an awning some 12 meters up. The structure collapsed and from it a man fell screaming to crumple on the tiled street below.
Finn did not spare the broken body a second glance, hurrying out into the ally and towards his target building. Turning a corner brought him face to face with a civilian obstruction in his path, built of spare beams and patched-together metal plating. Several of the men and women were armed only with blunt instruments, though two had blasters pointed at him. He shot those two first, and then callously turned upon the others, mowing them down as they screamed. He wrenched free a piece of the thick metal plating from its flimsy housing and ran further, tucking up against the side of the building. He blasted the locking mechanism from the door, held his makeshift yet highly effective shield before him, and charged the room. According to his HUD, his objective was in this room. He was not alone. Four humans rushed him, one with a vibro-blade, and three with blasters. He lashed out towards the man with the vibro-blade, grabbing his arm and pulling him in front of him just as another opened fire. The man he held jerked twice as the bolts sizzled through his flesh and Finn flung the body at his assailant while bashing his metal shield into the skull of the next nearest. Before the two that were left could do more than stumble backwards, he shot them square in the chest one after the other.

There was the computer terminal, and the information he needed. He walked over the twitching bodies and slipped the datachip into its port. As the information copied over, he performed another scan of his environment. His attackers biosigns had fallen to nothing. Then a cry met his ears. He spun about, blaster raised. A child was cowering in the corner of the room—tears dripped from his wide green eyes as he clutched a small stuffed animal to his chest. He had been commanded to leave no witnesses within the target-area. Finn shot him immediately, turning away before he could see the little body fall. The terminal chimed, and he pulled the datachip from it.

As he did so, his surroundings seemed to buzz, vibrating about the edges and then vanishing into nothingness. He was standing in a large room of bare grey tiles. He stood straight trying to regain control of his breathing and slow his heartrate as the simulation generators wound down and shut off entirely. The grey door opened upwards and Phasma entered. "You have done well, FN-2187. Another successful mission. You will now report to your quarters and await further orders."

"Yes, Captain."

He left the room, escorted as always by an Officer and two guards. Already he had the path from the simulation chambers to his room memorized. He kept himself carefully blank as he followed after the Officer. He entered his room, the door was shut behind him and he stood alone. robotically, he removed his helmet and armor, cleaned them of scuffs and stowed them away. Then he faced away from the rooms small camera and allowed a shaking breath to escape him. Though they had not been real, the faces of the civilians he’d just killed swam before his eyes. He felt ill, and he knew that he would see them that night in his nightmares. Even striking down the image of a child was more than he could bear. But he’d done it. He had been the perfect First Order soldier.

The past two days had been full of solitary drills and simulations, all of which had been both nightmarish and useful. He’d become rusty as he’d sped around the galaxy, and he relished the physical combat training—it was something he hoped to turn against them soon. It was that thought that kept him going as his muscles ached and worry for Poe and for the Resistance stalked about the edges of his mind. He threw himself into the training with a dedication that had nothing to do with orders and everything to do with survival.

He ate his HCPMs alone in his room, showered alone in a separate Officer’s stall, and trained alone. Verbal or physical contact with any Stormtrooper beyond those who escorted him to and from training was strictly forbidden, but he’d see them sometimes, as he walked the glossy halls. More than a few had craned their heads to get a look at him and he’d smiled behind his helmet, hearing BB-8’s whispers of mutiny in his head. Phasma was clearly still frightened of the effect he may have on them, and the thought pleased him.
Regardless of how thoroughly he exhausted himself during the day, sleep was hard to come by. He
could not help but see Poe going slack against his restraints, his eyes open and unseeing, and the fear
of what they were doing to him would go through his chest like a knife. He wanted him so badly he
thought he’d come out of his skin. And several times he’d awaken with a start, reaching for him
only to have his hand meet the cold emptiness at his side. Then his mind would jump to Snap and
that sorrow would drive the knife still deeper into his chest. He pictured Kes and Leia and hoped
that they were safe, and that the First Order had not gotten to them yet. He’d cry then, torn out with
fear and need. Tonight was no different. He wrapped his arms around himself in a hug, desperate to
feel Poe’s fingers tracing down his scar, and to hear him sleeping softly beside him. Two days. Just
two more days. Hold on, honey.

[Finn? Don’t react.]

He jolted, uncurling towards the panel near the head of his cot. Another soft warble sounded from
behind it.

[Poe is alright.]

He heaved a breath he hadn’t been aware he was holding. “I wish I knew if the Resistance was
alright.” He said in the barest of whispers.

[They left three days ago to the coordinates I gave them. Tubbs told the General what had happened
—they had their forces standing by. I just hope they will get here in time…we are very far out.]

Finn’s heart leapt and it was all he could do to keep from jumping from his cot with a whoop of joy.
He clamped his hands over his mouth and settled for a squirming dance of happiness. Things were
coming to a point, and it just might be in their favor.

[I must go. Be ready.]

“I will.”

He sprinted down a tumbled street in Hutta gang territory after the man who had stolen valuable First
Order intel. He had to get it back, and he could not let it come in contact with anyone else. He was
not to take prisoners. Everyone around him was an adversary—already he had shot a gran, two
rodians, and four humans. His breath pounded in his chest. An old man lurched out of the shadows
and Finn dropped him quickly. He followed after the retreating back of his target, barreling down
the slip of an alley only to nearly smack into another man standing in the shadows. He brought his
blaster to his head and had nearly pulled the trigger when he realized what he was seeing. The
blaster fell from his hands and clattered to the street, his mission utterly forgotten.

Poe’s weary eyes met his, and Finn was stricken mute by his bruised and battered face, by the blood
that dripped from his fingers and stained his shirt. He looked liable to fall over at the slightest
breeze. Tears filled Finn’s eyes.

“Poe—oh gods, honey. Here, come here. Your wrists—” as he reached for him, the world
shimmered and vanished and Finn was left facing an empty grey room. His hands fell slackly to his
sides in amazement and he realized too late that he had failed this simulation in the worst way
possible. He wasn’t real. He wasn’t real. They scanned him.

The door shot upwards and Phasma entered with dangerous disappointment. He was led back to
reconditioning without a word. The higher dose burned like fire, and his own strength quailed
against it. The light within him flickered and he felt himself fading away into nothingness; a blank program to be rewritten, and then, from far away, strength entered him like wind into a slackening sail. He did not know where this power was coming from, but he opened himself to it. The drug was burned from his body though he gave no hint of it.

He was run through multiple simulations that day, and in each one Poe would appear at random. A quick, piercing glance at his simulated body showed no life-light, and though Finn knew that it was just the image of him, killing that image was the most traumatizing thing he’d ever done in his life. *It’s not real. It’s not real. It’s not real,* he repeated over and over in his head. But the shocked betrayal in Poe’s eyes looked real, and his body crumpling limply to the floor sounded real, and he wanted to scream and cry each time his finger tightened against the trigger. It went against every fiber of his being. But he did it and he kept himself under careful control as he did so. It was like a horrible game of sabacc; he must bluff his way to success without ever giving a hint of his hand. He did not so much as hesitate.

The ninth time he’d killed Poe, he was given leave to return to his quarters. Phasma seemed satisfied that the higher dose had worked—he’d reacted quickly and with no uptick in heartrate or blood pressure.

He lay on his cot, willing himself not to breakdown entirely. He shook violently, his hands clutched to fists against his chest as he saw Poe die, over and over, because of *him.*

[Finn, everything is ready for tomorrow.]

He nodded silently. A thought occurred to him. “BB-8, tell them to use stun shots, okay?”

[Why?]

“Because those other troopers…they never had the chance for anything but this. If things had been different…I might still be one of them.”

[I don’t think that’s true. But…I will tell them.]

“Thank you.”

He awoke early, carefully layering on his armor and checking the charge on his blaster. This was it. If everything BB-8 said was true, then he would soon find himself at the center of a massive mutiny. The Officer and four guards appeared at his door at 0600 and at first he thought he was being ushered to another reconditioning session and he nearly wilted; he knew he did not possesses the strength to fight it one more time, and he could not count on that strange power coming to his aide again. But they turned down the opposite hall and entered a lift. He breathed a silent sigh of relief though adrenaline jittered through him. His palms sweat in his gloves. He would see Poe soon. For good or ill, he would finally have the chance to fight.

They entered a broader isle, and large bay doors loomed ahead of him. He steeled himself, marching with all the sureness of any First Order trooper, secure in their mission and position. The Officers moved to his side and his guards fanned out behind him as they entered a hanger vast enough to hold D’Qar’s base twice over. Hundreds of Stormtroopers stood in formation, and they shone like fangs
in a glistening black mouth. At the center of the hanger was erected a platform and Finn’s heart nearly twisted from him. There was Poe standing in bewilderment, cuffed and disheveled and pitifully small as Phasma towered to his left. Finn swallowed deeply as he neared the clearing, his hands tightening against his blaster. He was ready. A slow breath blew through his nostrils and calmness filled him like a still lake. He marched up the shallow stairs, drawing level now with Poe.

The look on his lover's bruised and swollen face nearly shattered his façade. He could tell that Poe knew it was him, and that he expected the worst. He wanted nothing more than to gather him to him, and to hold him for hours on end. But he must not. The time was not right.

“FN-2187, you will remove your helmet.” Phasma’s magnified voice rang out over the assembly. Finn did so, keeping himself as distantly neutral as he could. It was impossible to look into Poe’s desperately searching eyes without breaking, so he stared past him, into the lights that glowed like suns, the lights that had caught hold of him and driven the darkness from his life. The island that had glimmered behind Poe’s right eye had move slightly at his death and resuscitation, shining now just above his eyebrow. It was still beautiful and potent, flaring like a blue diamond in the sunlight. He focused on it as Phasma spoke.

“Loyal soldiers of the First Order—you see before you the one called FN-2187, now willfully restored to his place among us. Let him serve as an example to all of those who have caught the whispers of terrorist propaganda, for though he may have been misled, FN-2187 has now seen those lies for what they were. He has seen the filth and chaos of the galaxy, and understands now the righteousness of the First Order’s noble cause. He has given us the location of the remains of the Resistance, and in our mercy we have cleansed him of their corruption.”

“To prove the depth of his allegiance, FN-2187 will now execute the terrorist responsible for the destruction of Starkiller Base, Poe Dameron. On my command.”

Finn quickly leveled his blaster, aiming at the brightness.

“It’s okay.” Poe said with soft understanding.

“Fire!”

Finn spun on the spot, his shot searing a gaping hole through the glossy metal over Phasma’s stomach. She fell with a clatter and a grunt of pain. The hall erupted into absolute bedlam, blue halos of stun shots taking out six or seven troopers at a time as those who mutinied turned against their squadrons. An alarm screeched overhead, echoing back and forth within the giant hall with deafening force. Poe’s jaw dropped. This was too much and he could not be sure that any of it was happening. But then Finn’s eyes met his and he saw in them recognition and love and fear. And then Finn jerked and fell backwards to the ground, revealing Phasma’s raised hand and sizzling blaster. Poe could not process it, it was happening too fast, and Finn…

“Oh gods…oh, no…”

Phasma lurched to her feet with a roar as Poe dropped to his knees beside Finn, deaf and blind to everything but the hole in his upper right chest. The alarm stuttered into silence. Finn’s face twisted in pain and anger, and he forced his blaster up just as Phasma took aim at him. A sharp crack tore through the air and Phasma fell limp, shot through the neck, blaster fire bursting in fireworks of blue and red in the reflection of her armor.
Poe's cuffed, ruined hands scrabbled over Finn's armor, tears dripping from him to roll off the white plates. "Finn," he gasped over shouts and continued fire. Bolts impacted dangerously close and showered them with sparks, but he could not move from his exposed spot. "Finn, baby, say something... say something to me,"

Finn groaned, his breath bursting uneven from his chest. "...Poe... ahn!"

A sob shook through Poe's shoulders; he could not go through this again. "You're gonna be okay, sweetheart, we can fix this. Okay? We can fix this," he stroked Finn's sweaty forehead. He did not notice that the hall had quieted but for hurried shouts and clipped footfalls. Suddenly troopers were ringing them round and Poe spun about with animalistic fury though he had no strength left to fight them.

"Get away from him!" He screamed as they approached, and he lunged for Finn's blaster. One Stormtrooper detached from the throng, motioning the others to stay back. Slowly, hands raised, the figure climbed the stairs. Poe's blaster shook like a leaf in a windstorm, and his breath burst raggedly from him. He could not understand this. Finn coughed, and he spared an agonized look at his lover's pained face.

"It's okay," the trooper spoke, a woman's voice that caught Poe's attention. She brought her hands to her helmet and slowly removed it, revealing a tan, freckled face and buzzed brown hair. Understanding leapt between them, and within her rust-flecked eyes was the semblance of trust. "We can help him."

"Nice Trooper?" He murmured in slow understanding.

"Yes. That's right Colonel Dameron."

His head spun at hearing his old rank come from her lips.

Finn's breath was thick, gurgling. "Poe... s'okay..." he managed.

"You must let us help. Quickly." Nice Trooper urged.

"O-okay," Poe breathed dazedly. His blaster lowered and then fell limply from his hand as one by one the Stormtroopers who had survived the shootout took off their helmets and stepped forwards. The faces that met Poe silenced his fear of them—they were simply people, and all of them looked equally frightened. There was even a uniformed Lieutenant, and two Petty Officers among them, glancing nervously about the hall. Three troopers rushed forwards, one carrying a bulky case that he set quickly to the floor besides Finn and flung open. The other two hurriedly unlatched and removed his chest piece and Poe groaned at the sight of the open wound on Finn's heaving chest. He did not even feel Nice Trooper unlatching his cuffs. As they fell to the floor with a clatter, scabbed, ruined flesh was pulled free with them.

Tears slid down his face, his unbroken hand tight against Finn's as they pulled off Finn's shirt and began to smear the singed edges with raw bacta. Another man with a long nose and harried dark eyes pulled free a syringe from the case and held it to the light, depressing the plunger to remove any air.

"What—what's that?" Poe gasped, his eyes following the needle as if it were a dagger.

"Epinephrine albumin." Nice Trooper said lowly as the needle pierced Finn's flesh just above the rough-edged hole. "It will keep him from internal bleeding for half an hour or so, and it will stop him from going into shock. We use it often in the field. But he will die without real medical care."
She glanced at his freely bleeding wrists. "You also need treatment. And we don’t have much time.” She threw a nervous look over her shoulder at the closed hanger doors, then reached for a length of bandages, hurriedly tying them about Poe's forearms.

“Help me hold him up,” said the pale man who had given Finn the shot.

Poe gripped him beneath the shoulder and slowly levered him up. “‘Nnn!’ Finn grit his teeth. His eyes had cleared when they next opened, the medicine pumping through him to quick effect.

“It’s okay, Finn. I’ve got you.” Poe said at his ear. He flashed suddenly to helping Finn with his lightsaber wound what felt like years ago, unwinding layer after layer of bandages from him.

“Okay…I’m okay…” Finn mumbled.

He dazedly felt something soft pressing against his chest, and he peered down to see a pad of bacta being stuck to him and then a thick bandage. Two tight layers of wrapping were wound about his chest, and then his impromptu healers stood. “We have to go,” said the taller of the two.

Nice Trooper nodded.

Worry tightened across Poe’s chest, and he held desperately to Finn’s eyes. “Can you stand?”

“Yeah…I…I don’t feel so bad now…” he answered, and it was true; his chest was entirely numb, though no less wounded, and there was a gumminess to his breathing that frightened Poe to his core. Finn was helped to his wobbling feet, Poe’s comparatively good hand bracing against his back, his fingers brushing up and down his scar. Finn could have cried to feel that soothing touch once more. As they stepped carefully down from the platform, Poe appreciated for the first time just how many Stormtroopers had joined them. They parted like a white sea before the bow of a ship and closed protectively behind them, revealing in starts and fits the multitude of bodies that lie stunned and dead, and the hundreds of blaster holes that pocked the room like voids into space. Poe’s head swam, but adrenaline kept utter shock at bay.

“They should have this floor locked down. Regardless, we should take up positions,” said one of the Petty Officers.

Who should have this floor locked down? Are there more of them? Poe wondered. A line of Troopers formed defensively before them, willing to shield the symbol of their freedom with their lives. Blast doors slid heavily open with a low whirr, and then the main doors shot up into the high ceiling. There was no one to bar their way, and the group started forwards as quickly as Finn could manage. He and Poe stumbled along, their wearied senses peeled utterly raw. A sudden cacophony of running footsteps grew like blaster-fire in their ears, and they were met in the broad hallway by an entirely different group. When Poe saw who was heading it, he nearly passed out. It did not make sense. I’m hallucinating again. BB-8 shrieked in welcome, and standing behind it’s wobbling round carapace were some twenty troopers, a handful of caretakers and seventy staring, frightened looking children.

[My droids have this floor secured—but we must go now!] The astromech wove through the white forest of legs, peering up at Finn and Poe with singular worry in it’s glossy black eye.

“BB-8?” Poe breathed incredulously.

The droid nudged into his leg and then Finn’s. [I missed you. Now, come on. Follow us!]

Chapter End Notes
So, I guess I shouldn't say anything about when I can get a chapter done--it always takes me five million times longer than I think it will. I AM SO VERY SORRY FOR THE WAIT!! I ended up having to totally redo the first few pages of this one three times before I was satisfied and able to move on. I hope Finn vacating between feeling powerful and helpless came through in this. And I also hope that the more 'out there' drug-Force trips were somewhat understandable. There will probably be lots of spelling and grammatical errors in this and I apologize. I will edit tomorrow--I just wanted to finally get this out there, and I'm too tired to make good editing choices right now. We've got two to three chapters left! Oh man, what a ride!

Thank you all so much for your patience, and please let me know what you think of this chapter!

<3

Bluestem
Alarms blared from above and below, and the hallway stretching out before them flashed from deep darkness into hellish red in time with Poe’s panicked breaths. Half supported by Nice Trooper, he stumbled forwards, raw to the clatter of their hurrying feet and the scalding hiss of cutting torches burning through meter thick blast doors. He could focus on no one thing for more than a few seconds, save for the roughness of Finn’s breath as he staggered jerkily alongside him. Poe stared tightly at him.

The pained determination on Finn’s face was an expression Poe knew well from his rehab sessions. A hazy memory leapt to life before his eyes, and for a moment he was back in the rehab room at Base, watching as Finn gripped the therapy bars to either side of him, shakily placing one foot before the other until he had made it to the end and into Poe’s waiting arms. He had been so proud of him for walking those ten feet. He had done so well. Pain lanced down the front of Poe’s chest, his hand rubbing warm across Finn’s back as if he could ease the pain from his body. Finn’s focus did not move from the distant hanger doors, though the corners of his lips trembled.

Nice Trooper’s voice echoed through Poe’s ears. *It will keep him from internal bleeding half an hour or so.*

How—*how long has it been already?* Poe was no longer aware of his own ruined weakness, of the fact that he could not actually feel Finn’s flesh with his trembling hand, of the fact that Nice Trooper was bearing more and more of his flagging weight. Finn’s face was the only thing keeping him from slipping from his own skull. The red lights pulsed overhead, blazing like fire within terrified eyes and across skeletal struts of armor.

“This way,” One of the Troopers yelled over the din. “Form 2!” And before Poe had even comprehended what he’d said, the Troopers had shifted into a defensive chevron about he and Finn, the children, and their caretakers. Two teams of ten separated, tucking to either side of the hanger doors with their blasters raised and at the ready. BB-8 bulleted forwards and linked into the control panel. Poe understood vaguely that the droid might be shot at once the doors opened, and he reached silently for it. *I just got you back—don’t go.*

The scalding hiss of torches grew behind them, and a deep resonant booming shuddered through the nearest doors and up their legs. At each hammering boom, several of the children jerked and bunched closer together, and it struck Poe with a mortal ache just how small they were, how unfair it was for them to be in this situation. They should’ve been safe with their parents, wherever that might be—not here, wondering what in the hell was happening and trusting that the adults would see them through. Poe wanted desperately to tell them that it would be alright, but he could not. It felt too much like a lie. He glanced again to Finn; he was still focused solidly forwards, as if the force of his concentration could wrench the hanger doors open.

BB-8 chittered triumphantly and the doors shot apart.

“Go, go, go!” The foremost troopers shouted as they filed into the hanger. They found little opposition—most of the Stormtroopers had been summoned to Phasma’s doomed assembly. Only a handful had remained behind as guards. Poe winced as blaster fire broke out, but it was over almost before he’d opened his eyes again. Nice Trooper helped him forwards, and the Trooper at Finn’s right took him firmly by the arm to keep the other man steady. BB-8 shot over to them as they
hurried inside, then quickly about-faced and jacked into the control panel once more. As the heavy hanger doors slid down, there was a deafening clatter of metal thudding to the floor in the hall beyond and a sea of sparks; one of the locked doors had been breached. The hanger shut just as the Stormtroopers beyond opened fire. The bolts sizzled harmlessly into the durasteel. The group backed away and Poe turned about to take in his surroundings.

8 low, rectangular Atmospheric Assault Landers sat before them, fuel-lines snaking into tanks that Poe desperately hoped were already filled; he could hear cutting torches blistering against the hanger doors at their backs. Scattered here and there among the AALs were the bodies of those who had remained behind. TIEs sat neatly within the staggered receptacles lining the rightmost wall, the operating lights on their bays shining like white stars. A handful of Troopers ran about, disengaging fuel lines and dragging hoses from tanks.

Poe swallowed. “What’re we up against? This station’s pretty big, yeah?”

Nice Trooper answered without taking her eyes from the nearest AAL. “It is approximately 29 million square kilometers. There are currently 30 Resurgent class and 7 Dreadnaught class Star Destroyer’s docked.”

Poe laughed in naked disbelief. “We’re f*cked.”

Nice Trooper’s eyes jumped to him, unnerved. “Sorry,” Poe swallowed, “I thought I said that in my head. Okay. So what’s the plan?”

[Speaking] “I tried to short the docking arms to the Destroyers, but there’s no way to tell if that was successful until they try to disengage.”

“What’re the exterior defenses?”

“I…” Nice Trooper trailed off but one of the Petty Officers took up the thread. “2 ion cannons and 15 turbolaser cannons on this surface panel. The same numbers are spread across each panel of the station. There are 417 panels.”

We are f*cked.

“Okay…so…the plan?” Poe stressed.

“We jump to hyperspace.” Nice Trooper nodded.

“And go where?!! Where even are we?” Hysteria pranced madly at the edges of his mind. He could feel Finn’s weight flagging against his shaking arm and his continuing silence frightened him to his core.

“This…this sector is unnamed, but your droid has the route you took to get here plotted. We will follow that path.”

“That is not a plan! It took us days to get here!” Furious tears brimmed but he was too worn to care. “Finn—Finn needs a doctor now!” He sucked in a hard breath and closed his eyes for patience, bringing his hands down as if he could literally hold the situation together. They had no other option but this. “Okay…okay…how many of you are pilots?”

17 stepped forwards and Poe balked.
“That’s it?” He nearly tore his hair out.

[Poe…the Resistance is coming.] BB-8 tried to soothe.

“When?”

[I don’t know…] It recoiled, abashed though it had done all that it could. [They left three days ago.]

“We can’t count on their help.” Nice Trooper admitted, while behind her shoulder Poe watched as the children and remaining Troopers sprinted up the ramps into their respective AALs. Oh gods… those kids are gonna die. Oh my gods, oh gods. A full-fledged panic-attack hovered behind his broken ribs as one by one the ships roared to life. Finn’s hand landed suddenly atop his shoulder and squeezed, and with that pressure, some measure of sanity returned to him.

Poe met his ashen face, nodded silently, and then turned to the 17 who waited for orders. “Alright, everyone listen up.” Poe announced and for a moment he sounded like his old self, a clear-headed Colonel sure and confident of his orders. “As soon as we leave, we are going to face heavy fire. Transports should put all shielding on rear deflector panels. Do not separate—there’s not enough of us to cover you. Once we’re out of the stations gravity well, we jump to the nearest habitable sector.” He shrugged off Nice Trooper’s bracing arm and started shakily towards one of the waiting Special Forces TIEs. The other pilots took their cue from him, racing past and to their ships.

“Poe,” Finn gasped. “Poe, you can’t.”

Poe turned back to him with an agonized look, his numb hands closing about the rungs of the TIEs curved ladder. “Finn, we…we don’t have a lot of options and…” He willed him to understand. This was what he was made for. If they were going to die, he would make sure that he bought Finn as much time as possible.

“You haven’t slept,” Finn’s voice choked into a thick cough that sent fear sprinting through Poe’s body. There was blood in that cough, and it shone in scarlet droplets upon the white of Finn’s gauntlet. He carried on with a rasp, “you—you haven’t slept in a week…your wrists…”

Poe nearly cried. He brought his hands up, all but begging. “You have to get to a transport, baby—I’ll protect you. Okay? I’ll-”

“I’m going with you.” The pain in Finn’s face solidified into determination and he took a step towards the TIE.

Nice Trooper stared between them with wide eyes. “Neither of you should be flying. We will protect you both and—”

Another explosion shook through their legs and into their hearts.

“There’s no time! Finn—I love you—please, please get to a transport!” Poe pleaded.

Finn brushed past him and started to pull himself up the ladder, sweat breaking out across his brow as his chest throbbed from deep within.

“No, Finn…” Poe was too weak to stop him, and the screeching of metal against metal ground into his ears. He whipped about to see sparks shining in a molten seam as a doorway was cut through into the hanger. Finn dropped gracelessly through the hatch and into the TIE’s cramped interior, and Poe scrambled after him. Just before he slid through the hatch, he caught a plaintive electronic cry. Peering down past the spherical body of the TIE, he found BB-8’s shining lens staring up at him. Man and droid held each other’s gaze for one pained second. Poe’s eyes tightened. He nodded, and
then he slid down into the pilot’s seat and kicked the engines to life. The TIEs hollow, roaring whine shivered through their seats as his numb fingers fumbled across the controls.

BB-8 looked away from the TIE and sped up the waiting ramp of the last AAL. It sealed shut with a hiss, and the droid found itself crammed against Nice Trooper’s legs and a sea of children, some of whom were hardly taller than the little astromech. It heard their confused whimpers and fearful chatter, but it could not focus on them; across it’s internal HUD, Poe’s face played over and over. Though he had not opened his mouth, Poe’s micro expressions had said clearly that he did not expect to survive this. He had said goodbye. BB-8 moaned as the ship lurched forwards.

“Finn, you shouldn’t be here—this is too much for you, you shouldn’t be doing this,” Poe rambled as the TIE lifted and spun about to follow after the AALs. Finn panted, the red lights of his gunner’s controls shining in molten crescents about the edges of his sweat-drenched face. His eyes tightened on the burst of flame that had erupted from the hanger doors. Stormtroopers surged inside, taking aim with heavy blaster cannons while others quickly set up tripod ground to air missile launchers.

Neither…should you…” Finn coughed as bolts sizzled past them. His hand closed upon the left most toggle, switching the TIEs armaments from laser cannons to mag pulse warheads. With his right hand he squeezed the trigger just as Poe opened the throttle. They punched through the blue film of the atmospheric shield just as the missile detonated, turning the hanger and their enemies within into a pile of slag.

The TIE screamed forwards, a dust mote drifting from the flank of a cold grey mountain. Poe could not see the looming edge of the First Order station, but it filled all of Finn’s eyes, stretching on and on in every direction and flashing as if a storm of green lightning had opened up. They were lost in a hairline sea of laser fire. The ship rocked, bouncing hard enough to knock Poe’s head against the closed hatch—he had been unable to latch his restraints with his ruined hands. He clenched his teeth with a gasping breath, the lights pulsing so rapidly that he could not focus. His eyes jumped from flash to flash, catching the golden light of a transport as it spiraled about like a miniature sun and shattered into nothingness.

A voice yelled over the ships comm. “We have incoming!”

Screaming clouds of TIEs spilled through hanger bays that gaped like wounds on the body of the station, weaving through nets of laser fire, their own sharp green bursts searing like needles into Poe’s raw eyes. He juked sharply down, spiraled them up around the edge of a transport and dropped them behind a phalanx. He opened fire, slamming his thumb into the trigger over and over again. Seven TIEs mushroomed into debris, but it was not enough, not nearly enough. Another transport shuddered, and Poe caught the quick cry of those within before the silence took them. A hard breath rushed through his broken nose. Seconds stretched into desperate minutes.

Finn held tight to his controls. His mind was fuzzing out like a weakening radio signal. His chest throbbed, and he felt small and lost. He wished that there was no backing to his chair; that he could curl against Poe and have him soothe him from his fear and pain. His hand tightened across the trigger, more a spasm than a conscious decision, but his warhead hit the leader of an arrowhead formation and sent it tumbling into those who’d followed in its wake, taking out eight ships at once.

Poe lurched away from the lancing shrapnel and spared a look at the dash; the numbers shook in his eyes before solidifying into sense. They were not yet far enough out to jump to hyperspace. Why aren’t we in the clear? We should’ve left the gravity well ten seconds ago! And then he realized that the station itself was moving, each Star Destroyer docked upon its branching arms lighting its
engines in tandem and acting as gigantic thrusters. The wall loomed up behind them, vibrating with sheer mass and crushing energy, gleaming pure white in the light of space even as it threw them into starless shadow. Fear thrilled into Poe’s heart.

As Poe’s attacks ramped desperately up, Finn’s began to slacken. His breath shallowed, body slamming against the sides of his seat as Poe jerked them evasively this way and that. He gripped his controls with a weakening hand; each push of the trigger swarming up his arm and twinging into his chest. He felt as if his restraints were pulled too tight. He could not breathe. The cold hand of shock trembled through his extremities, dilating his pupils until it seemed that all before him was a sea of nebulous green light. It frightened him—this wasn’t the blue and gold light of the Force. This was a man-made bastardization, a light of death and destruction. He moaned—a small, terrified sound that went through Poe like a knife.

“Finn?” Poe called, tensing against his seat and wrenching them upwards with such force that his wrists began to bleed through their bandages. His heart thundered in his ears. “Finn!”

“…Poe…” he wheezed.

“Oh gods, please…stay with me—ahh!” A bolt lanced through their starboard wing and for a moment they tumbled about like a blindly tossed ball, green fire spiraling past their viewport at breakneck speed. The G forces pinned Poe to the recurved wall, and he strained, reaching forwards with a shaking arm to slam the engines off before being tossed into the opposite wall. With a grunt he activated the reverse thrusters. The TIE wobbled and then shivered forwards. “Finn?”

“save…them…”

Poe hunched over his controls as if his heart had been torn from him, his face screwed up against a wracking sob. “No! No, don’t you say goodbye to me! Finn!” He did not answer and Poe froze, his streaming eyes fixed unseeing upon a far distant star and the blackness beyond.

Then, in that distance appeared ship after ship after ship, Mon Cal Cruisers and Corvettes, Corellian Dreadnaughts and Starfighters, Sullustan barges, Ord Mantelli Stingers, Kashyyk Frigates, the largest fleet that Poe had ever seen. A shaking breath ghosted past his lips.

I’ve lost my mind.

He blinked but the ships remained. They’re…real? Within that dazed second, hope lit within him and he barreled forwards with everything he had. The handful of surviving friendlies and transports took off after him like a flock of beaten birds, a fragile V flying desperately towards safety while behind them the storm darkened and lightening flared. Enemy fire bogged them down as the transports and TIES wove this way and that. From within one transport, the sound of crying came over their dash. Yet Poe was streaking forwards, outpacing and outflying them all in one last spree of strength and clarity. The gulf between Poe and the rebelling Troopers widened.

Finn’s voice gurgled suddenly from behind him but Poe could not unclamp from his controls to look back; he had spotted the long, wasp-waisted body of a medical frigate and he could focus on nothing else.

“…go…back…”

Poe’s heart leapt with fragile joy. Finn wasn’t yet dead. “Finn—Finn, don’t talk baby, you’ll only hurt yourself—just hold on—”

“Go back!” Finn broke off into rough, thick coughs.
Poe mutely shook his head. The Frigate was still too far, even as the Resistance fleet rocketed towards them.

“Poe, go back to them!”

“You’ll DIE!”

“GO! BACK!”

Poe’s hands tightened against the controls, his teeth grit as he squeezed his eyes closed. If he did this, he would lose him. He stared furiously at the medical frigate, a man dying of thirst at the edge of an oasis. With a yell of agony he turned his back on the Resistance and reengaged. He danced about the enemy TIEs like a madman, slamming his thumb into the trigger over and over again while he listened to Finn wheeze. Space pulsed about them in bright starbursts of light. But the Station crept nearer. Five Star Destroyers had now unmoored, and the dagger-prows aimed towards them like spearheads. It would be only a matter of time before their tractor beams dragged them in.

The single-man fighters of the Resistance fleet neared, but they were not yet in range. Two more rebelling TIE’s exploded, knocking into one another and nearly shearing the port wing-panel from Poe’s ship. He ducked needlessly, eyes wild. “We need support! We need support! This is Resistance Colonel Poe Dameron!” His voice shook in his ears. “8 friendlies and 6 transports at 0-25-679-53-1. We need support!”

A voice crackled through his dash.

“Copy that, Colonel. I’m on it.”

Poe staggered as if he’d been decked. It couldn’t be, but he knew that voice and he could see the ships now as they raced to bridge gulf between the two armies. “Jess?” He mumbled through tears.

“Get out of here, Poe—we’ve got this!” She called back with fierce joy. The blue and white T-70 X-wing led a squadron of twenty, and as it zoomed past he caught a glimpse of a white and red flight helmet and a quick thumbs up. They sheered into the fray with all cannons blazing. Behind them were wave after wave of X-wings, A-wings, Sullustan skippers, and one ancient, segmented ship shimmering with colorful pirate flags. Maz, Poe realized in amazement. And there was the welcome shape of the Hyrotil, piloted by a furious Tubbs. The ship sliced through the battle like a lightsaber, everything in its path detonating in starbursts of gold and red.

Poe laughed through tears as he tore about and pelted towards the medical frigate. “Finn—it’s Jess! It’s Jess!”

Stark silence met his giddy shouts.

“…Finn?”

The silence stretched, and the world seemed to stop. He could not feel the ship at his fingertips. He could not breathe. He could not think.

“Finn?” He choked. “Finn! Stay with me! Stay with me!”

The capital ships grew slowly in their circular viewport. But it was taking too long, and battle raged behind them as Destroyer after Destroyer unmoored. A bolt slammed into their rear deflector panel, knocking the breath from Poe as he was hurled into the dash like a ragdoll. His broken ribs pinched inwards and he nearly passed out at the pain. Alarms screeched to life within the tiny cockpit. Poe shakily pulled himself back into his seat. FUCK. FUCK FUCK FUCK FUCK!!
In the vacant space off their quivering port wing-panel, a thin, saucer-shaped ship appeared with sudden hugeness, and Poe jerked them into a nosedive. The *Millennium Falcon* hung like a disc, supremely unconcerned with the laser fire that streaked past its venerable flanks. Poe watched it, stunned, as he raced onwards. And then something happened that defied all logic.

The battle stopped.

Red and green fire froze in their paths like streaks of vibrating lightening. Destroyers and TIES slowed to a halt as if the space around them had turned suddenly to ice. The massive station ceased its forwards march. The *Falcon* drifted serenely before them all, the blue of its engines shining like a crescent moon against the blackness. Onboard, an old man and young woman stood in the half-domed cockpit, staring out at the field of battle. Their uplifted hands held firm on the Force that flowed in the space between ships and through the bodies of First Order troops. Their closed eyes followed that light, gently keeping hands from triggers and control panels, holding ships in their bays, and soldiers in midstride. The Wookie in the pilot’s chair grumbled with satisfaction as Resistance ships darted about their frozen enemies, mopping up TIEs, destroying shield generators and disabling Star Destroyers with precision strikes. Luke smiled softly down at his pupil. “See? It’s only different in your mind.”

Poe shot beneath the draping shadow of the *Falcon* with wide eyes, knowing that he had finally gone crazy.

The Medical Frigate neared and he sent out a desperate call. “I need Medical crews on hand! I have wounded, repeat, I have wounded!”

“Copy that. Proceed to Bay 12.”

A white light flared above one of the blueish ports and Poe went for it at breakneck speed. In his terror, he kicked on the reverse thrusters almost too late and the TIE punched through the force field like a bullet. Its wing panels screeched across the floor, sending up a wave of blinding sparks and scattering the medical teams that had gathered. The TIE bounced like one of Snap’s skipping stones, and by the time it came to a halt it had nearly pummeled through the furthest hanger wall. It rocked back into a creaking halt, its fuselage popping and pinging angrily. The twin trenches it had dug with its wing panels glowed cherry red. Poe lurched up and scrambled to peer over his seat, terror beating like a drum within his chest. The sight that met his eyes shook through him until he could hardly stand, and for a moment he did not know what to do. Finn lay limply against his restraints, his features soft and peaceful despite the blood trailing in thin streams from his nostrils and mouth. Poe’s shaking hand reached for him and then halted, afraid that touching him would somehow make this real.

“Oh,” Poe choked, “Oh…no,” A last wave of adrenaline sent him into sudden, frenzied action. He twisted opened the hatch above his head and threw it wide, then bent over their seats. He strained, jerking Finn’s restraints apart and trying to haul him up, but he was too weak. Yelling through gritted teeth, he took him under his armpits and pushed down through his legs until he thought his spine would burst. Finn’s limp weight lolled against him. He could not lift him through the hatch and helplessness scratched about his heart. He jerked his head through the circular port to see a medical tram and white-clothed personal running up to the craft. “Help! Help me—I—I can’t lift him!”

Repulsorlifts kicked on and the red tram slowly floated level with the TIEs hatch. Poe hefted Finn as high as he could manage and passed him off to two reaching men. He watched with desperate eyes as Finn was pulled gently away from him and laid flat upon the tram. Shock flooded him as the tram
began to pull away without him. “Wait,” he gasped as he heaved himself through the hatch, clinging to the ladder with all the strength of a newborn. As his feet hit the floor, aides rushed to him with outstretched arms.

“Please, wait, sir! You’re hurt. Another tram is coming for you—”

He staggered past them, raw as a flayed nerve. Finn was disappearing from him, and he knew with an animal certainty that if he lost sight of him now, then he would never see him again. But he had no more strength.

“Finn…”

The world tilted beneath his feet and he crumpled to the floor.

Poe shifted against the flat table, groaning. The cuffs were too tight against his wrists, and Stormtroopers loomed over him like ghosts. The Extractor detached from the darkness of his mind, reaching for him with a spidery hand. “No…” he jerked, tears gathering in his closed eyes. The hand touched his forehead, but it was rough-skinned and light. It soothed back and forth across his brow, gentle as a bird’s wing and the nightmare faded into nothingness. A voice spoke, meaningless but warm and soft, and it wrapped around him in a blanket of security. A new image formed in his mind, of sunlight and tall trees, and birds flying high. He sighed.

After an unguessed time, the voices began to make sense to him. He caught words now.

“Can’t believe,” and “lucky” and “be alright?”

He knew that voice, and as he woke he became aware of aches in his joints and the dryness in his throat and eyes. His eyes parted as if they’d been glued shut. An unfamiliar ceiling appeared above him, softly lit by the display screen to his right. The thin, white lines reminded him of orbital arcs and for a moment he thought that he was staring at a nav computer. Numbers flashed, mildly fluctuating up and down. He caught the word ‘stable’ which he thought was an odd way to describe the functionality of a ship. His eyes followed the up and down bounce of one jagged white line and for several slow minutes he tried to figure out what kind of diagnostic used such a pattern. It’s like a heartbeat. He thought as his eyelids drooped. The mattress below him was soft, so wonderfully soft.

But it confused him. He opened his eyes again, staring down his blanketed chest at two blurred shapes. He blinked rapidly, trying to focus, and one of the figures started.

“Hey…there he is,”

The hand reached for him again, squeezing gently against his upper arm. His father’s face swam into focus, lined with lingering dread, fresh happiness, and week old stubble.

“…dad?” Poe croaked. “…what…?” He stirred, trying to sit up though his stomach twinged painfully.

“Easy, now. You need to keep still for a while longer yet.” Said a woman’s voice.

Poe looked to his left. “Kalonia?” He murmured in pure bewilderment. He stared straight ahead for a few fuzzy seconds. “…am I dead?”
“No,” Kes shook his head, beaming though his eyes had welled. “No, you gave it your best shot though.”

A bright warble bounced into Poe’s ears and he strained to peer over the edge of his bed. BB-8 was scuffed and dented, but it was there. It’s lens all but swam in the half-light. [I’m so glad you’re functional, Poe!]

“BB-8?” His brow furrowed and then he jolted, his torture, the assembly, the battle all racing through his head at lightspeed. He sat up as if he’d been kicked, his eyes wide.

“Easy—easy, Poe,” Kes’ hands landed on his shoulders, keeping him from flailing off the bed.

“Finn! Where’s Finn?!?”

“He’s right here—he’s okay. He’s okay.” Kes stepped aside and motioned and there was Finn, lying on a medical bed three feet to Poe’s right. His eyes tightened on him, roving like a searchlight over his face and chest, looking for the slightest sign of distress. Finn was free of the blood that had trailed nightmarishly from his nose and mouth, and the white blanket over his gently rising and falling chest gave no hint of the blaster wound that had nearly killed him. An IV hung from a pole near his bed, and the display to his right glowed with the strength of his vitality, yet Poe could not let relief into his heart. He didn’t trust his eyes. If he could hallucinate the Millennium Falcon stopping a First Order army, he could hallucinate this.

“You…you both scared the hell out of me.” Kes shook his head, rubbing bracing circles across his son’s back. “When I saw you in that bacta tank, I—” He broke off, blinking rapidly. “Well. You’re okay now. My brave, brave boy.”

Poe was too dazed to process what his father was saying. The longer he stared at Finn, the more real their safety became and it began to crack through his wall of protective disbelief. Looming behind it was a sea of anguish. He sucked in a tight breath. Kes could see tears coming from kilometers off and he glanced at Kalonia who nodded and strolled away.

Poe’s shoulders heaved as the sob broke free and then he was gathered into his father’s arms. He leaned into his anchoring weight as his body shook.

“Shh…I know…I know,” Kes whispered as he cradled him against his chest. “You’re alright.” Never had he been so grateful in all of his life; the week that had passed without word of his son or Finn had made him literally ill with worry. His worst fear as a parent had come so close to passing. His hands tightened across him. “We’re alright.”

“They k-killed Snap,” Poe sobbed, “they sh-shot him right in front of me.”

BB-8 moaned sadly, stretching out it’s manipulator arm though it could not reach Poe’s hand.

“I’m sorry—I’m so sorry, Poe,”

“And—and they shot Finn and—”

“It’s okay…” He ran a shaking hand through Poe’s hair, “you’re both safe now.”

He held him until he’d cried himself into an exhausted silence and then he levered him back against the mattress and straightened his blanket. He tenderly stroked his forehead as if Poe were a child again and had woken from a nightmare. Poe went to wipe at his eyes and then froze, noticing the casts wound about his forearms for the first time. He held his arms before him, turning them this way and that and realizing with a sinking feeling that he could not feel his hands.
“Can…can I still fly?” He gave his father a red-eyed, pleading look that broke his heart.

“Kalonia says you should be able to, after some physical therapy of course.” He shook his head darkly as he imagined Poe screaming from the pain they must have caused him. “They had to do surgery to fix up your tendons and nerves. Might be a while before the feeling comes back to them.”

Poe nodded and fell silent, still too raw and dazed to do much more than stare. Kalonia reappeared with a bowl of broth, and Poe’s stomach roared to life. Never had anything smelled so delicious, and the scent cleared his mind of all lingering dread. He focused on the meager meal with ravenous attention. She set the tray on his lap. “BB-8 said that you haven’t eaten for 8 days. I’m afraid we’ll have to ease your digestive system back to solids.”

“I don’t care,” Poe breathed, reaching for the spoon and then pulling back in some dismay—the cast made feeding himself impossible. So Kes spoon-fed him, and Poe felt very much like a helpless infant though he was too ravenous to care. At one point their eyes met and Poe nearly snorted his broth out of his nose. They laughed as quietly as they could, and Poe reveled in it—it felt like ages since he’d genuinely smiled. The warmth of the broth in his stomach, and the comfort of the blankets and his painkillers had him nodding off in minutes.

“Go ahead and sleep if you can, alright? We’ll be right here.” Kes retook the seat that he’d planted between his and Finn’s bed, and Poe was so touched to know that he’d been watching over them that he could hardly keep from crying again.

He nodded. “I love you, dad.”

“I love you too, kid.”

Finn woke to a room that was nearly dark save for the bright light of biosigns dancing on a clear panel to his right. Bleary confusion dragged over him. His mouth swam and he made to roll over, but a deep tenderness flared through his chest and held him in place. He mumbled incoherently, clamped his eyes shut and swallowed his nausea down. For a long time he listened to the subtle sounds that bloomed one by one in the darkness; an insistent beeping from the display, rough snoring, and the feather-light patter of footsteps going to and fro. Consciousness pooled slowly in his mind. His mouth was so dry he had to unglue his tongue from the roof of his mouth. “Poe?” His whisper drifted away into the darkness and was lost.

He squirmed, the discomfort in his chest growing as he woke. As he propped himself up, another indistinct pain flared in the crook of his arm and his eyes landed on the IV catheter with a start of pure terror. He flailed upright and yanked at the thin tube. He hardly noticed as footsteps came running towards him, glancing up from his bleeding arm only as hands closed about his shoulder.

“Finn—Finn, I need you to hold still, alright?”

He tensed, peering up in confusion at a long, worried face and deep dark eyes. “…Kalonia?”

Before she could answer, two other figures joined her and the whiteness of their medical jackets morphed within his mind into Stormtrooper armor. He jerked back against his bed in terror, but weakness kept him from lashing out. He curled protectively inwards, his face drawn up in a silent cry. He could not go through reconditioning again. He could not. “Finn, it’s alright—let me see your arm,”
Confusion and terror tumbled blindly one over the other in his head, and the beeping of his pulse skyrocketed. Another voice joined Kalonia’s.

“Finn. Hey—easy there. It’s okay…you’re safe, son.” He knew that voice too but he could not make sense of why it should be here, wherever here was. The last thing he remembered was walking up to a Special Forces TIE fighter. His panicked eyes landed on Kes and the sight of the old man sent a wave of steadying calmness through him. He breathed slowly through his nose and the sprinting line of his heartbeat began to steady.

“Kes?”

“That’s right—it’s okay.”

[It’s alright Finn! We are with the Resistance.] BB-8 chirped from a spot near his bed that he could not quite see.

Something moved from beyond Kes’ shoulder and Finn gasped as Poe sat up from his bed. He’s alive. He’s alive! He hardly felt the hands of Kalonia’s aides bandaging about his arm and reinserting the IV catheter. Poe’s face was deeply bruised, and bacta pads covered the bridge of his nose and his temples in thick white strips. He seemed pinched, as if his skeleton had drifted closer to the surface of his skin. Yet Finn had never seen anyone more beautiful in his life. Poe gave him a battered smile, his eyes brimming and Finn forgot his pain and his fear. Nothing existed but Poe.

“Finn,” Poe shakily breathed, and he reached for him. He could not contain the joy of seeing him, awake and alive and whole.

Finn squirmed towards the edge of his bed, every molecule in his body desperate to go to Poe and wholly oblivious to the hands that tried to keep him from hurting himself further.

Kes watched bemusedly. “Here,” he said to the struggling aides, “let’s just shove the beds together.”

The two looked to Kalonia for instruction and the older woman nodded. Kes scooted his chair out from in between them and together they shoved the heavy wheeled beds flush. Finn and Poe crashed together, holding each other with shaking arms and wiry desperation. Finn inhaled him, reveled in the warmth of his scruffy face pressed up against his neck. His relief wound into a shuddering cry that Poe mirrored. They were home.

Kalonia patted Kes on his shoulder as she stood back from them. “Come on. They’ll be alright. Give them a minute.”

Kes nodded mutely, his heart aching to see them crying but understanding that he was not needed in this instance. Bittersweet happiness swept through his chest. He turned away and followed after her.

For a long while Finn and Poe held one another, trembling and quite unable to pull apart, as if doing so would make the other vanish. Eventually, they found that the thin bedrails that separated them could be pushed down. Wrapped together, they sank to the mattress and snuggled close. For hours they did not speak; the grief and fear were still too close and too raw. It was enough simply to be held and to know that the other existed. Finn stroked through Poe’s hair, studying the hunger-hollowed edge of his cheekbone and the bruises about his tired eyes. He kissed him softly and Poe
brought a numb hand to Finn’s jaw.

“I—I missed you,” Poe murmured, his eyes tight on the deep, shining umber of Finn’s.

Finn nodded, his fingers wrapping tightly about his flank. “I missed you too.” His shuddering breath shook through Poe. “I was so s-scarred,” he sniffed.

Poe’s mouth trembled. “I was too.” He clumsily traced about Finn’s scar; it was like being patted with a chunk of plaster but Finn all but melted against him regardless. “It’s okay now, sweetheart. It’s okay.”

Finn nodded, kissing him slowly, trying to force all of his gratitude into the touch. Poe nearly moaned; he had missed the feel of him so badly. He snuggled tightly against him, burying his forehead in Finn’s neck. The thudding of Finn’s heart eased into his body and he wiped at his eyes. He had nearly lost that. He fell asleep with Finn’s breath ghosting hot through his hair.

Finn stayed awake for a while longer, long enough to hear Kes softly approaching and settling silently down in his chair. Gratitude billowed through Finn like warm sunlight. He called me ‘son’. He smiled tightly to himself. He studied the old man’s darkened silhouette and it bloomed to vibrant life before his eyes. Blue stars shone in the flowing stream, their pattern similar to Poe’s yet different. He too had a bright gem shining from behind his right eye. The sight calmed Finn and he looked down to Poe’s sleeping face. His lover’s lights flared and Finn lost himself in them, traveling from star to star while Poe’s heart beat steadily into him.

Finn woke at a rough, tearing sound. He rubbed at his eyes and scooted gingerly back against his bed. The horrible sound erupted again and he glanced down; Poe was snoring loudly enough to crack duracrete. He listened bemusedly as Poe snored on and on. Poe was normally a quiet sleeper. It must be because of his poor nose, Finn mused. Regardless, it was plenty annoying. He survived so much only to have me smother him.

“I’m surprised you slept through that racket as long as you did,” came a sudden voice. Kes was sitting up, a datapad open on his lap. “I didn’t have the heart to wake him up and get him to roll over.”

“Oh, morning, Kes—sir.”

Kes shook his head with a small grin. “Finn. It’s just Kes. Or ‘old man’ or…or dad, or whatever you want to call me.” He looked awkwardly away. “Well…maybe that’s too presumptuous. But no more sir, alright?”

Finn smiled, a pleased flush crawling up his neck. “Okay.”

Kes set his datapad aside and propped his elbows on his knees. “How’re you feeling?”

“I…I feel okay. A little sore still.” He stared distantly past the curtain that blocked them from the rest of medbay. He saw Snap falling, Poe screaming against the hands of the Extractor, and a needle piercing the bend of his arm. His throat worked. “Tired,” he added simply.

Kes nodded, understanding at once the pain that Finn had left unsaid. “You went through a lot, you two. It’s alright to be tired.”
Finn’s mouth tightened and he blinked back tears. It was just so paternal a thing to say, and even the proxy of a parent was enough to unravel him. He shifted, dragging his sleep-numbed arm out from under Poe’s head and wiping at his eyes. There was safety with Kes, permission to fall apart without judgement if he needed to. Regardless, he felt embarrassed and flustered. Kes stiffly stood and crossed around to his side of the bed and his nearness seemed to boost Finn’s emotions into overdrive. He sniffed hugely, and Kes’ hand landed thickly on his shoulder with a bracing weight.

Finn turned suddenly towards him and into Kes’ embrace. “It’s alright. It’s alright, son.”

Finn dozed off and on, listening with quiet happiness to the voices of aides talking and laughing together, to the sound of Poe snoring, and the gentle beeping of medical instruments. Kalonia reappeared every few hours to check their biosigns and to change bandages. Finn was shocked to see that the hole in his chest had closed into a pitted, fragile scar. Poe stirred for a few groggy moments as she peeled the bacta pads from his temples and studied the irritated red flesh beaneath and then he quickly fell back to sleep. Finn was hard pressed to keep from smiling.

He talked softly with Kes and BB-8, though when he questioned them on what happened and how they had ended up with the Resistance they both kept evasively quiet, saying that they would tell the whole tale to both of them once Poe woke. Finn tried to be satisfied with that answer, but he could not. He fidgeted, playing around on Kes’ datapad, practicing Yavini with the old man (who was tickled to help), and trying to subtly trick he or Kalonia into telling him what had happened. He was not as subtle as he’d hoped, and they deftly steered conversation to more benign topics.

Poe woke after nearly 16 hours of solid sleep and Finn was so delighted to see his earthen eyes trained softly on him that he grinned from ear to ear and leaned in for a kiss. After Poe had been helped to the ‘fresher and back into bed, Finn quickly demanded that Kes and BB-8 tell them what had happened. Kes launched into the story of how Tubbs had received BB-8’s coordinates and alerted General Organa, how the fleet had been scrambled and leapt into a three day journey to the deep blackness at the edge of known space. BB-8 filled in with the role it had played in reprogramming MSE droids and listening for signs of dissent among Stormtroopers. It had then approached those troopers, and they had coalesced into a full mutiny. Poe listen in awe—he had been too addled to understand much of what had been happening as he’d been strapped to the interrogation table. There was one point though, that none of them could fill in: How the Millennium Falcon had managed to appear in the midst of the battle, when no one had been in contact with the ship for months. Poe was simply gratified to know that he hadn’t lost his mind, and that everything had literally been frozen in place. When they had asked all the questions they could think of and had been fed, Kalonia stood across from them with her hands on her hips.

“Well, now. You two have visitors waiting to see you. It’s been all I could do to keep them back while you rested.”

They looked to one another, shocked and pleased.

“I’ll let them in in small groups.”

She disappeared for a few minutes, and as she rejoined them they found three figures walking quickly in her wake. Finn’s breath caught in his throat as Rey rushed up to him with wide eyes and open arms. He held her in tight bewilderment. “Rey?” He breathed needlessly. Poe was so pleased at Finn’s happiness that he could not believe he’d ever felt anything like jealousy towards the young woman. And then his eyes landed on the General, and he gave a clumsy, smiling salute.

[Rey!] BB-8 cheered and Rey looked down at the beaten up droid in shock.
“BB-8!” Her smile faltered as she looked at the banged-chassis. “Your…your antennae’s really bent.” She knelt to fix it and the droid burbled in happiness.

“Welcome back, Finn, Colonel Dameron.” Leia grinned.

Poe sucked in a hard breath as she rounded to his side of the bed. “General—” he broke off, biting his lips to keep from breaking down before her. She squeezed his shoulder with a fond smile.

“I missed you so much, Finn. And I saw you—” Rey carried on joyously, “I saw both of you in my mind. And I heard you calling for help. We came as quickly as we could.” She smiled shakily as she drew back, motioning to the third figure of their group. He had hung respectfully back and as he moved forwards into the light above their beds they saw that his worn face was framed in greying hair and a thick beard. He was clothed in a simple grey tunic and robe, and Finn’s eyes fell automatically to the skeletal hand that shone metallically from his wide sleeve. A shiver swept up his spine; there was something elemental emanating from him, and Finn felt for a moment that he was standing near to that deep wellspring of power that had come to his aide as he’d been reconditioned.

Poe’s eyes went wide, his plaster-wrapped hand thwacking mindlessly into Finn’s in mute excitement. He understood who this must be; he’d heard stories of him since he’d been a small boy, had sat beneath the Force Tree that this man had given to his mother; had searched for him for a long, painful year. He gasped. “Luke. Luke Skywalker?”

“Luke Skywalker!” Kes mirrored, shooting to his feet and looking quite unsure of the protocol one should use when meeting a Jedi Master. He saluted awkwardly.

The Jedi chuckled as if he didn’t quite deserve their praise, though he nodded. “Rey has told me all about you two.” His eyes fixed on Finn as if he were following the crackling edges of a flame. After several studious seconds he spoke. “You can see it too, can’t you, Finn?”

Finn gulped, though Rey smiled triumphantly. “I knew you could. You started lighting up in my mind.”

“Yeah—yeah, I can see it. I can feel it too.” he nodded dazedly, “I saw you, Rey—and General Organa, and Maz. I even saw Kes…a little bit.”

Kes’ brow furrowed, utterly confused. Poe smiled up at him. “Finn’s Force-sensitive, dad. He can see energy in people—kind of like what we can see in the Force Tree.”


Hearing her name from Luke’s lips staggered Poe and Kes.

“Yes.” Kes answered in shock. “Yes, we planted it. It’s gotten huge.”


They talked for nearly an hour, General Organa relaying their escape from D’Qar and subsequent reformation on Ithil. Poe and Finn filled the small group in on their escape and harried journey from planet to planet. As the conversation turned away from serious topics, Leia drew back and bid them farewell. Luke gave them a skeletal wave as he followed after the sister he had not seen for years. They began to talk softly together as they walked, and Poe was struck by the weariness and sorrow on their faces.

Shaken, Poe watched them out of sight and then tuned back in to Finn and Rey. His unease quickly vanished in the light of their excited babble. He rapidly warmed to her; there was such sincerity and
hope in her bright brown eyes and wide smile, such radiant joy in seeing her friends again, that he could not deny her. Finn told her all about food, and his favorite songs, and that he’d found out that he could draw. Rey told them of her training, and the joy of flying the Millennium Falcon. Poe hopped into the conversation then, and for a long, long while they could not stop talking ship. Though he hardly understood a word they were saying, Finn could have burst with happiness. To see the man he loved so enthusiastically chatting with his dear friend filled him with warmth. He scooped them both into a gentle hug. By the time Kalonia had ushered Rey out, Poe felt that he had gained a quick friend and Finn was all but swooning.

The next group consisted of exactly one person and as Jess Pava thundered up to their beds, her black ponytail swinging in her wake, Poe thought once again that he had lost his mind.

“Poe, goddammit, look at you!” Her voice broke and she dragged him into a throttling hug.

“Easy-” Finn and Kalonia cautioned in unison.

“Jess?” Poe croaked. “I—I thought I made that up!” He shook and the two pilots started sobbing as if a switch had been flipped. Jess reached blindly for Finn and yanked him into their messy hug.

“I’m so happy!” She wailed as she crushed them to her.

“I thought you died!” Poe exclaimed through a mouthful of her hair.

She drew back, wiping at her eyes. “No—back on D’Qar my droid got hit—messed up my cockpit really bad—I had to use my life support mask to filter out all the smoke. And it was rough going without an astromech.”

“Tell me about it.” Poe agreed.

They spent a joyous and emotionally exhausting few hours meeting friends and people they had never expected to see again. Chewbacca and R2-D2 came to see them, and Finn had his hair lovingly yet violently mussed by the Wookie. Admiral Statura stopped by for a quick update and chat, and Poe was so obviously embarrassed by how horrible he looked in comparison to the sharp older man that Finn had to roll his eyes; he doubted Poe was hearing a word Statura was saying. Maz and her ragtag group of pirates entered, and they cheered at the sight of each other. Poe gushed about her ship, the Beggar’s Bone, and when Maz offered to let him fly it Poe leapt painfully from his bed and had to be gently restrained. Finn and Maz talked for a long while about the Force; its visions and colors, its warnings and gentle nudges. Poe listened, in awe of Finn and how much he had grown. He smiled tightly to himself, continually amazed that someone so magical was his.

Last of all to visit was Tubbs, and sorrow fell like a blanket of cold snow over the little room. The old astromech trundled up to them and parked at the foot of their beds in heavy silence. Their hearts broke, and they reached forwards to pat at it’s half-dome head. BB-8 rolled up and embraced Tubbs with it’s outstretched manipulator arm, gently rocking them both back and forth. There was nothing that could be said to balm that hurt.

After so many hours of talking and crying and laughing, the two of them felt ready to sleep where they sat, and when a frazzled looking Kalonia pronounced visiting hours over, they were secretly relieved. They curled against one another in thoughtful silence.

“You know?” Finn said into the dim blue of BB-8’s resting lights.

“Hmm?” Poe said sleepily, his face nuzzled against Finn’s chest.
“I just wish we could’ve gotten Ozmyn Heil and that damn assassin droid back. It’s…it’s their fault that Snap…”

“I know…” Poe commiserated.

BB-8’s sudden cackle jolted them against one another. They stared down at the droid in shock. [Oh, you don’t need to worry about them anymore.] It said with relish. If it had possessed hands it would’ve been rubbing them gleefully together. [When we landed at Sryin’ti Station, I rerouted the current from their hyperdrive into to the fuel injector. When they tried to jump to hyperspace…] It faultlessly mimed the sound of an explosion and then squirmed, cackling evilly.

Finn and Poe looked to one another and back at the droid and then erupted with laughter.

The next day was a blur of physical examinations, long visits with Rey and Jess, meetings with the General, food, and sweet, painless rest. They were deemed healthy enough to leave medbay if they so wished, and as Kes helped them gather up many of the gifts and well-wishes that had been left for them, Kalonia took them aside.

“There’s a few more people you need to see before you leave the frigate.” She said with a secretive kind of smile. She beckoned them after her and they fell in line, BB-8 wobbling along at their ankles.

“They’ve wanted to meet with you both so badly, but for practical reasons it was best to wait until you could go to them.” She said. Poe was pleased at the way his strength had returned to his body after a few nights of solid rest and food. His plaster-covered hand nudged against Finn’s as they walked, and Finn gripped it with a smile. She took them into a lift down several levels and through a winding maze of halls. Compared to the First Order, the white hallways were brightly lit and much more organic shaped, made for people rather than mindless automatons.

She halted before a broad door, her sparkling eyes landing on Finn’s and Poe’s. She keyed it open and Finn gasped at the sight before his eyes. A makeshift barracks stretched out before him in rows of beds and blocky cabinets, and the gigantic crowd of people who had been standing about turned and rushed suddenly towards them. They were dressed in Resistance leftovers, and their regulation-length hair shone in a multitude of colors in the overhead lights.

“It’s Finn!” Some of them cheered.

“Finn and Colonel Dameron!”

“The droid! BB-8!”

“They made it!”

Finn found himself swarmed with eager eyes and unsure smiles and he understood that these were his brothers and sisters. Hands patted across his back and shook his hand. Voices swept through him like sunlight. He who had been without family now found himself with more than he could have ever dreamed of.

“You freed us. You gave us the courage to do it.”

“Colonel Dameron, you saved our transport!”
“You saved us.”

Nice Trooper detached from the throng, and Poe was struck by how much smaller she looked without her armor—or perhaps it was the overlarge blue shirt draping over her like a tent. In spite of her stature, the others clearly regarded her as their leader and they hushed respectfully as she spoke. “Finn…Colonel Dameron…thank you.”

Poe quickly closed the distance between them and hugged her, and she jerked with shock at the foreign gesture before timidly thawing and hugging him back. He set her to arm’s length, unable to express his gratitude for the simple human kindness she had showed him in the midst of his torture. “We should be thanking all of you.”

The former Stormtroopers stood suddenly at attention, looked the two of them in the eyes and saluted.

Finn wiped at his eyes with a shaking smile, conscious of Poe’s hand rubbing thickly across his back while the other man laughed. Never had he felt such happiness in all of his life.

Or so he had thought until, an hour later, when Kalonia led them to another room. It was smaller, cozier, and within were 71 children ranging in ages from 2 to 8. Already they had acquired little toys and knickknacks—gifts that those onboard the frigate had scrounged together. A few were clearly experimenting with play and happiness, running around with great shouts of laughter, toy ships and animals clutched in their hands. The majority, however, stood about or sat on their cots in silent confusion. The hollowness in their eyes struck Finn like a physical blow and it was suddenly as if there was no distance or time separating him from them. He had been that child, sitting still and silent, waiting for orders while wanting only to play and to be held. Distantly, he felt Poe’s fingers brushing across his.

Kalonia carried on without noticing Finn’s aching mixture of joy and sadness. “I don’t want to disturb them just now—they’re getting ready to bed them down for the night, and I thought, used to schedules as they are, that it would be useful to keep to that aspect of their old lives. But I thought you’d like to see them.” She smiled through the circular port as white-dressed caretakers walked about with blankets and water. “Some of them are adjusting quickly, as you can see. But most are rather…upended. I imagine it’s a bit of a lifestyle switch, coming here from the First Order. They’ve been mostly uncommunicative.”

Finn swallowed. “It’s because you haven’t ordered them to speak.”

Kalonia and Poe regarded him sadly.

“It’ll be a lot of work to rehabilitate them. But I think eventually they’ll forget their old lives. Children are remarkably adaptable.”

Finn nodded, sucking in a reedy breath. A little girl reached timidly for one of the nurses, a hesitant longing for something she’d never experienced. The Askajian woman scooped her up and snuggled her against her chest, then laid her back on her cot and tucked her in. A slow smile spread across the child’s face. Finn managed to hold himself together until Kalonia led them back into the hallway and then he burst into tears, turning quickly into Poe’s chest in embarrassment. Poe wrapped him in his arms, his own eyes brimming as he rubbed his back.

“You did it, honey—you did it.” He kissed the top of his head.
“W-we did it.” Finn corrected him.

Kalonia smiled. “It might please you to know that this is just a fraction of the people you two helped save. So far, our transports have ferried about 5,000 children from that station. And another 21,000 troopers have surrendered to our side. They’re being vetted now, but I imagine that they’ll soon join those that you escaped with.”

Finn staggered as if the world had quaked beneath his feet and he sank to the floor with his head in his hands. The numbers were too large to comprehend. Suddenly, the grief and loss that he had carried within him thawed into unfettered joy. A quivering smile stretched across his face as that weight slid from his soul, and suddenly he was laughing through his tears. For a long while he could not stop.

“Here, hold your arms up—there you go,” Kes murmured, pulling a fresh, military order shirt over Poe’s head. He brought a hand to the side of his son’s face—thanks to the bacta pads and three nights of uninterrupted sleep, the bruising and pinched weariness had loosened its hold on him. He looked almost like himself again. He was free from his bandages, though the casts had to remain around his forearms and hands for another few days before he could start physical therapy. “You ready?”

“No.”

“It’ll be quick. Just a few words from the General and some medals, and then you can sit around and eat and talk.”

Poe nodded stiffly, his eyes averted. There was sadness in his gaze and he had been strangely quiet since returning from their visit to the former troopers and children.

“Hey—what is it?”

Poe swallowed, his eyes lifting heavily to his father’s before falling away, abashed. “…I don’t deserve this. Back there I…I left them all behind.” His mouth thinned. “I wanted to save Finn so bad. Kids and all, I just left them. Finn made me turn back. He’s the one who deserves medals.”

Kes leveled his brows, his hand tightening upon his shoulder. “Poe, come on. You were tortured within an inch of your life, starved, sleep-deprived, and you’d just watched him get shot.” He jerked a thumb towards the closed refresher door where Finn showered. “Of course you wanted to save him. You think if I’d seen your mom like that, that I wouldn’t have dropped everything and everyone to help her? And anyways—you did turn back. That was your choice. So I better not hear you beating yourself up about it.”

His scolding had Poe torn between humorous aggravation and grateful tears. “Yes, sir.”

“Pff…sir.” Kes rolled his eyes and helped him into his new leather flight jacket and straightened the collar. He stood back with an appreciative smile. “There. That’s better than those hospital clothes, huh?”

He nodded. He was just grateful that the sleeves hid his casts.

[He doesn’t look as good as I do.] BB-8 wiggled happily. Rey and the ships tech lab had quickly restored it to it’s usual orange and white self, and it gleamed brightly in the light. Poe smirked; the droid had been eyeing itself in every reflective surface it had come across all day.
“Yeah, all the other astromechs are gonna to be sooo jealous,” Poe said in a sarcastic tone that BB-8 happily ignored.

Finn exited the fresher dressed in his new clothes; stone grey pants and an off white, v-necked shirt. Poe abruptly forgot how badly he felt for nearly turning tail on the people who had needed him. His heart tripped a beat, and he wished now that they did not have to go to the assembly for a very different reason.

“You all clean up pretty well.” Kes said.

“Ooo, I like that jacket.” Finn gave Poe a loaded smile. “And wow, BB-8, look at you. You look nice again!” Finn grinned, patting the droid on it’s smooth, shining dome. BB-8 rolled a wiggling strut as they started forwards.

“Don’t encourage him. If his head gets too much bigger he’s gonna overbalance.” Poe laughed, weaving his arm through Finn’s. “You ready, baby?”

“Yes,” Finn plunked a quick kiss on him as they followed after Kes and BB-8.

The assembly took place on Leia’s capital ship, the Beacon, a Titan-class Corellian Corvette. The hall was jam-packed with so many different species and droids that Finn’s confidence began to stutter as he sat in the front row of seats beside Poe, Kes, and Rey. He felt that he had a spotlight trained upon him, though he’d not yet been called up to the stage where Leia now stood addressing them all in a strong, clear voice, with Threepio shining like a golden flame behind her. He just wanted to chat and walk around with his friends and lover. Praise was still an uncomfortable thing for him to manage, though he’d learned to accept it from Poe. The fact that he would shortly be praised by General Organa, in front of hundreds of soldiers, dignitaries, military leaders, ministers and heads of state was enough to make his legs feel as if they were made of water.

“We…we don’t have to say anything, right?” Finn nervously asked Poe for the twentieth time since they’d been seated.

“No,” He chuckled and patted his hand. “Just hold still and she’ll pin a medal on you, and then you stand there real awkwardly while everyone claps.”

“That part I can do.”

[Poe’s a natural at standing awkwardly.]

“Shh.”

Finn listened dazedly as Leia extolled their bravery and skill, how they had continuously placed the needs of others before themselves. Poe squirmed uncomfortably. As usual, he did not feel that he’d done as much as others had to earn such praise. Snap…Snap put us first over and over. He should be up there. He swallowed thickly and then jolted as Leia called out, “Colonel Poe Dameron.”

He stood and mounted the shallow flight of stairs that led to Leia’s podium. How different it was from the last assembly he’d been to. Awkward as the whole thing was, at least he didn’t have to fear that he would be executed. Leia’s eye’s lifted brightly to his, and Poe forgot some of his discomfort. It was impossible to feel badly when those bright brown eyes looked at you with joy. Once again, he felt the familiar sweeping sensation that often accompanied her focus, as if her wry, bittersweet mirth were shining throughout his body like a sun.
She turned from him, the light shining off her looping braids like a coiled silver crown. “Finn,” her magnified voice echoed around the chamber. Poe could not smother his grin as Finn moved from his shadowed seat and joined him in the brightness.

“In light of your service to the Resistance, your bravery, and the many lives that you have directly helped to save, it is my great honor to bestow upon you both the highest honor that I can: The Bronze Nova.”

Finn felt Poe tensing beside him and heard the hard breath that whooshed from his nose. He glanced over at him without moving; the pilot’s eyes were glassy, and Finn realized that this medal must be something rare indeed.

Leia’s hands pinned the shining gold and auburn star first to Poe’s chest and then to Finn’s and then she stood back from them. Finn smiled at the happiness in her eyes, his chest swelling proudly.

"Finn, I have one additional award to present to you: The rank of Captain." His eyes went wide, and he vaguely heard Poe’s joyous shout and his hand thumping him on the back as he swayed.

"Th-thank you, General." He stammered.

The audience clapped and cheered and Finn could not focus on any of it. He felt exquisitely pleased and very foolish, and mostly he just wanted to run back to his chair so he could cry for a moment. He caught a quick glimpse of Kes who was mopping at his eyes, Rey cupping her hands to her mouth while she cheered, and Jess punching the air. Chewbacca’s rumbling roar climbed above all the rest, and he saw Maz clapping, standing atop her chair yet hardly level with the Wookie’s hip. He closed his eyes, thankful to the depths of his soul for all of them. Suddenly Poe’s hands were at the sides of his face and he’d been swooped into a deep kiss.

“Th-thank you, General." He stammered. Please don’t let me pass out. The audience clapped and cheered and Finn could not focus on any of it. He felt exquisitely pleased and very foolish, and mostly he just wanted to run back to his chair so he could cry for a moment. He caught a quick glimpse of Kes who was mopping at his eyes, Rey cupping her hands to her mouth while she cheered, and Jess punching the air. Chewbacca’s rumbling roar climbed above all the rest, and he saw Maz clapping, standing atop her chair yet hardly level with the Wookie’s hip. He closed his eyes, thankful to the depths of his soul for all of them. Suddenly Poe’s hands were at the sides of his face and he’d been swooped into a deep kiss.

“I say!” C-3PO exclaimed in prudish offense. “A very inappropriate gesture for such an occasion! It would have been much more proper to wait until after the ceremony to-”

“Hush, Threepio.” Leia elbowed the droid’s shining chest.

Whistling and laughter joined the cheers and Finn blushed to the roots of his hair though he laughed against Poe’s lips. As they straightened, Poe gave him a wink and Finn shook his head with a broad grin. Once the crowd had finally settled, Leia faced them. “Now then. I have a few more honors to award. I’m going to break protocol here, but I believe that anyone who knows this droid’s commitment and capabilities would agree that he’s earned it. BB-8, would you come up here?”

Poe gasped like a shocked parent, whipping about to look at his droid. Never had he heard of a droid being awarded a medal, and his heart sprinted proudly in his chest. BB-8 stared back and forth, stunned, as the audience craned to get a look at it. It wobbled forwards in a silence deep as space, trying to process what it was feeling. Pride? Gratitude? Shock? It shot off its towing cable and reeled itself clumsily up the short flight of stairs with a loud thwack, thwack, thwack that made most of the audience giggle. It rolled into the spotlight, directly in between Finn and Poe.

Leia knelt, her rosy yellow gown brushing the floor in deep folds. “BB-8, it is my honor to present to you the Bronze Nova.”

BB-8 looked for a moment as if it were going to short-circuit and Poe met Finn’s eyes with a spark of joy. The magnetized medal was stuck to it’s dome and as the audience cheered for it, it tucked it’s head into Poe’s leg, obviously overwhelmed.

Leia waited for the crowd to quiet, and her face sobered somewhat. “The next award must unfortunately be given posthumously. It is my sad honor to raise the rank of Captain Temmin “Snap” Wexley to that of Major for his service and sacrifice to his friends and to the Resistance.”
Poe sucked in a hard breath, trying mightily to keep from sobbing while on full display before hundreds of people. Thankfully, as Leia called both Rey and Tubbs onto the stage for medals of Valor, the focus slid from he and Finn. Rey gave them a trembling smile, and Tubbs quietly blooped it’s thanks. With a few closing words, Leia ended the ceremony and the light was dimmed from the stage. Finn’s arms closed about Poe and the pilot breathed deep. He couldn’t fall apart yet—there would be people waiting to congratulate them, drinks to have, and all manner of hobnobbing that he’d rather do without. Thankfully, the time passed quickly, and with Finn and his friends and father with him, it turned out to be an enjoyable, if tiring evening.

Only as they were getting ready to leave the assembly did Poe realize that they had no place to go. They had been discharged from Medbay. When he voiced his concern, Kes looked about in confusion.

“Well, the Hyroti’s waiting in a hanger on the medical frigate. I just assumed you’d both stay there until we get home.”

Poe’s brow furrowed. “Why would we be going home?”

“What, you think you’re going right back to work? You haven’t even been cleared to fly yet, Poe.”

Poe looked outraged. “But—” He spun about, quickly finding Leia as she chatted with two senators from Mon Cala.

“General Organa,” he said quickly, conscious of Finn joining him at his side. “Sorry to interrupt, but—”

“Excuse me for one moment,” Leia inclined her head and the senators moved respectfully out of earshot.

“Yes, Colonel?”

“We need a room on the Beacon.”

“Request denied.” She answered without a second's hesitation.

“…what?” Poe stood for an utterly bewildered moment.

“You have not been cleared to fly-”

“I can do other things—help train new recruits, ship maintenance, filing reports—anything.”

“I can help too,” Finn quickly nodded. “Whatever needs doing, I can do it.”

“You need us, General.”

Leia arched a brow. “No, I need you both whole. And that is why I placed you on two weeks leave. Go with your father. Rest. Heal.”

“But, General! We can’t do that—there’s a whole government to rebuild! We still have to find Snoke! How can we take it easy while everyone else is-”

Leia held up a silencing hand, and Poe fell immediately quiet. “Poe,” she said with sudden tenderness, “do you really think that I never took a break? After Alderaan and my father? I would’ve gone mad. Yes, I came back to it, but I came back ready to fight. You’re not ready yet, neither of you, even if you think you are. And so your orders are to rest so that when I do need you
both, you can get the job done without falling apart.”

Poe swallowed his retorts. It was an order after all.

Leia looked at them both fondly. “Your leave starts now. And when it’s over, we’ll see about military housing.”

A grudging smile started on Poe’s lips. “Yes, General.”

Finn grinned. “Thank you, ma’am.”

Kes led them out of the lift and into a spotless hanger. The Hyrotil was waiting for them, clean and sleek as a windswept cloud. It looked beautiful, yet they dreaded the sight of it. They approached it slowly, and Finn’s chest tightened with each step he took; the last time they’d been aboard it, Snap had been with them. His cabin and his belongings would still be there, broadcasting his loss with their very presence. Poe halted before the lowered ramp, staring up into its darkened engine room with a tight face.

Kes hung back as the two of them and BB-8 disappeared into the belly of the ship. They walked mutely, eyes landing on the water reclaimer, and the small sledge that had been tucked up against the ramp to the upper level. Their consternation grew the closer they got to Snap’s room. Finn paused outside of it with Poe at his side and after several heavy minutes he pressed on the lights. Things had been tossed about in Tubb’s furious piloting during the battle at the First Order station. Snap’s headset lie in a corner of the little room and Poe picked it up with tears beading his eyes. Finn’s eyes landed on the mess of chop sabacc cards lying like fallen leaves across the smooth metal flooring. The quilts were half tossed from the mattress, as if Snap had just flung them aside and gotten up. Then he saw the drawing proudly stuck with magnets to the wall just to the left of the cot. It was the black, inked-in shape of a body, the white page shining through here and there in the stars of Snap’s life-light.

Finn’s throat tightened as he reached for it. He held the page in trembling hands and then sank to the mattress, crying. Poe saw what it was that he was holding and sat down beside him. They cried until their bodies ached.

Eventually Kes joined them, and they set to work picking up and tucking away all of the odds and ends that had been slammed out of storage and tumbled all over the ship. Entering their bedroom, Poe found to his dismay that the cap had popped off the gigantic bottle of lube. It looked as if a Hutt had slimed the entire room. His miniature A-wing, while unbroken, was covered in viscous liquid.

Kes had laughed fit to burst.

It had taken hours to get everything back in order and scrubbed clean, and by that point Poe wanted to curl into a ball and sleep for a week. But there were goodbyes to say.

Their friends had met them in the hanger. Finn hugged Rey so hard that he lifted her off the ground. She’d laughed and then done the same to him with the Force, and Poe had shouted with glee at seeing him floating as if he’d had repulsor lifts in his feet. She’d promised that they would see each other soon. She had training to complete.

“Next time we see each other do I have to call you Master Rey?” Finn kidded.
She shoved him playfully. "What, will I have to call you Captain Finn?"

"I really like the ring of that." Poe said with a saucy wink before sobering slightly. "Rey, come see us on Yavin, okay? We’ll put you up in style."

“Yeah,” Finn nodded quickly, “you’d like it there—there’s so much green.”

“I will, I promise.” She gave them each a quick hug and dipped to pat BB-8.

[Goodbye, Rey!]

“Goodbye for now, BB-8.”

Jess had nearly squeezed the life out of Poe and Finn, and Poe had to hurriedly remind her that his ribs were still technically broken.

“We’ll be flying together soon, Jess.”

“Copy that. And Finn—don’t let him do anything too stupid, alright? Like trying to fly that ship with his hands in casts.”

Poe’s mouth thinned. He’d been planning on doing exactly that.

Tubbs and BB-8 burbled softly together.

[You’re sure you don’t want to come with us?] BB-8 whined quietly.

[Yes.] It nodded. [I…I think I’ll stay with Jess. Her astromech was destroyed when we were escaping D’Qar. I can be useful again.]

[…]you were useful to us.]

Tubbs reached out it’s metal arm and patted BB-8 fondly.

[I’m sorry that I…that I couldn’t save Snap.]

[That is the First Order’s fault. Not yours.]

BB-8 nodded. Finn and Poe approached, patted Tubbs on it’s dome and thanked it for all that it had done, and then the three of them climbed the ramp and joined Kes. The engines kicked on with a yellow light and a high, two-toned dissonance. The Hyrotol leapt forwards through the shining blue of the atmospheric shield and off into glittering space.

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Poe lay awake, staring up at the familiar ceiling. He knew that Finn was awake too—his breathing was too light and too soft for sleep. It was odd laying in the little cabin again, the familiar whoosh of the atmospheric scrubber and the low thrum of the engines whispering into his ears. Nostalgia welled in his chest. The feeling reminded him of the old photos his father kept about the house; the frame was the same, yet the image within had changed. He tried to plot the winding course that his life had followed over the past four months, but it was like trying to fly while blindfolded. Though
the wounds of his old life still twinged and the new losses ached deeply, he understood that there would be new memories to make and frame, to look back on with wistful smiles. Rolling to his side, his eyes landed on the small shelf to the left of his pillow, where his little A-wing shone like a blue-edged dagger in BB-8’s resting light. He smiled slightly at it. *Mom…I got a Bronze Nova. Just like you.* He wondered if somewhere, deep within the twining lights of the living Force, she could hear him. The thought made him smile. Finn shifted warmly against him and Poe was drawn out of his bittersweet musing, anchored back to the present. Gratitude welled within him like a spring.

“…Finn, are you awake?” he asked quietly.

“Yeah.” He whispered.

Poe rolled over to find Finn staring softly back at him, his features gently outlined in cool blue and deep, liquid dark shadows. He reached out, lightly tracing the curve of Finn's cheek with the tips of his fingers. They drew closer together, Poe’s lips brushing over Finn’s in a feather-light kiss before bringing their foreheads together. “I love you.”

Finn’s heart ached as he held him close. “I love you too.”

Poe kissed him slowly, deeply, curling flush along his naked body. Finn’s heart leapt. How he’d missed this, how he’d missed everything to do with him. Their lingering fear and sorrow twined into a passion that beat with a mortal haste, the knowledge of how close they’d come to death setting a desperate fire in their hearts. Finn’s hand tightened around Poe's back, sliding down his spine and over the flare of his hips.

“…Finn…” Poe breathed, arching against him and then sucking at his neck with molten heat. He kissed down his throat and then paused; softly he pressed his lips to the bandage that covered Finn's blaster-wound. Finn watched him tenderly, touched at Poe’s loving acknowledgement of his pain and his desire to soothe it. He gently unwound Poe’s arms from him, kissing the tips of his fingers and the length of his casts, and tracing the scars that stood out ghostly white across his flanks. Poe shivered beneath the touch. “I need you.”

They made love gingerly and quietly, each acutely aware of the other’s lingering weakness and wounds. Finn panted while Poe gasped against his neck, raising goosebumps with each heavy breath. Their glassy eyes locked together, as if blinking would cause them to lose one another again. Finn thrust slowly, careful not to put too much of his weight onto Poe’s ribs, each movement deeply mindful. Poe gripped him desperately as he peaked, the heat of Finn’s body beating through him until it felt that they had merged into one person. He shivered, arching, his fingers digging into the hot muscle of Finn’s shoulders before dragging down his scar in an electrifying wave. His head pulled back into his pillow, and Finn’s teeth grazed up his throat before closing over Poe’s mouth in a passionate kiss.

Poe’s body ratcheted tight and his voice strangled into a silent cry of pure pleasure. Finn watched his face draw up, watched his mouth fall open and the tendons in his neck tensing like rope. The wave within his own body crested and he hunched over him, pumping quickly with a low groan that shuddered through Poe’s insides. Finn held him close, his face pressed into the crook of his neck as he finished. Poe moaned softly, canting his hips and taking Finn deeper. Finn jerked, raw with pleasure. After a moment’s throbbing stillness, he opened his eyes to find Poe smiling mistily up at him, his fingers once again tracing down his face. Finn leaned into the touch, and then dipped forwards into his languid, unwound kisses. They remained wrapped tightly around one another, kissing and stroking and then rejoined in the embrace of sleep.
Finn breathed deep. The rain-tinged breeze rippling over the jungle canopy opened his lungs with fresh, bracing energy. The spicy scent of Kes’ cooking drifted over from the blooming, vine-covered home that waited for them. He sighed and leaned his head back against the Force Tree’s smooth grey bark, letting the pulse of the living Force, of Poe, fill him to the brim. It beat like a heart within him, pure and bright, and full of possibility. He watched the ethereal lights wavering above him, listened to the sigh of the leaves and the far off calls of birdsong. Poe’s hand curled against his, and he cracked an eye open with a lazy smile.

“You okay, baby?” Poe asked.

Finn nodded, leaning into his waiting kiss. Poe’s arm draped about him, and he rested his cheek in the pilot’s tousled hair. They sat together, reveling in the peace of one another’s presence. “Yeah,” Finn smiled, “everything’s fine.”

THE END

Chapter End Notes

After one year and four months, Be Here Now is finished.

It’s done.

I don’t even know what to do with myself. I have to admit I cried a little bit as I wrote that last sentence. This has been the longest sustained creative endeavor of my life, and I have learned so much throughout the process of writing this behemoth. There’s the technical things, like grammar (I still have a bit to learn on that front), formatting, editing, and working on plot pacing and dialog--and then there’s the more emotional side of it all: Placing yourself in these character's minds and bodies, trying to feel and imagine what they would do in a given situation, understanding the ups and downs of my own creative process, and the confidence I've gained in my own ability to create something that can bring about an emotional response from someone else. That is why I did this--not just to get my own ideas and emotions onto paper (while hopefully telling a fun, compelling story in the process), but to make people smile, laugh, and maybe even cry. To help people identify and work through some tough things they’ve experienced in their own lives, because believe me--there was a lot of self-therapy involved in this. If I've accomplished that for any of you, then I feel like I have done my job, and I am so
grateful to have done it.

I'll never be able to thank all of you that have clicked this story and read even two sentences of it. If you have commented, critiqued, given kudos, bookmarked, made fanart, and recommended this story to others...well, THANK YOU, THANK YOU, THANK YOU. There are some of you that have been there from this story's beginnings back on Fanfiction.net ( :) I'm looking at at you). I will try to thank all of my regular reviewers (here and on tumblr) now. Please forgive me if I leave anyone out and let me know--I love you guys, and many of you have become friends with me.


Thank you all for taking the time to comment and letting me know what you think (and offering some sound advice and encouragement). Even if I lost some of you along the way, I could not be more grateful for you input and giving this a chance. Your words helped push me to work on this through some major depressive breaks, and there is literally no way I could have done it without you guys.

Now, onto this ending. It's a long chapter, as you may have noticed. I could have split it up, but I felt it would lessen the emotional impact of this ending spree. I feel like I kind of pulled a "Return of the King"--there's so many endings! But! I am very satisfied with it. Hopefully, I tied up some loose ends and answered some lingering questions. I hope someone out there cackled along with BB-8 upon learning that the droid freaking destroyed those bounty hunters. I hope the reveal of Jess made you punch the freakin' air. I hope the Millennium Falcon showing up brought some happiness. I hope Kes calling Finn 'son' brought out some feels.

And most of all, I hope our boys sitting beneath the Force Tree, happy and comfortable, could make you smile.

This won't be the end of my stories, though it may be the end of this particular one (barring an epilogue--you guys know I have to do a quick epilogue for this, right?). I have several original ideas that have been gestating that I'd like to focus on and maybe even publish. Please keep in touch here or on tumblr at bluestem10.

Thank you all for the wild ride. (And lemme know what you think!)
Please **drop by the archive and comment** to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!